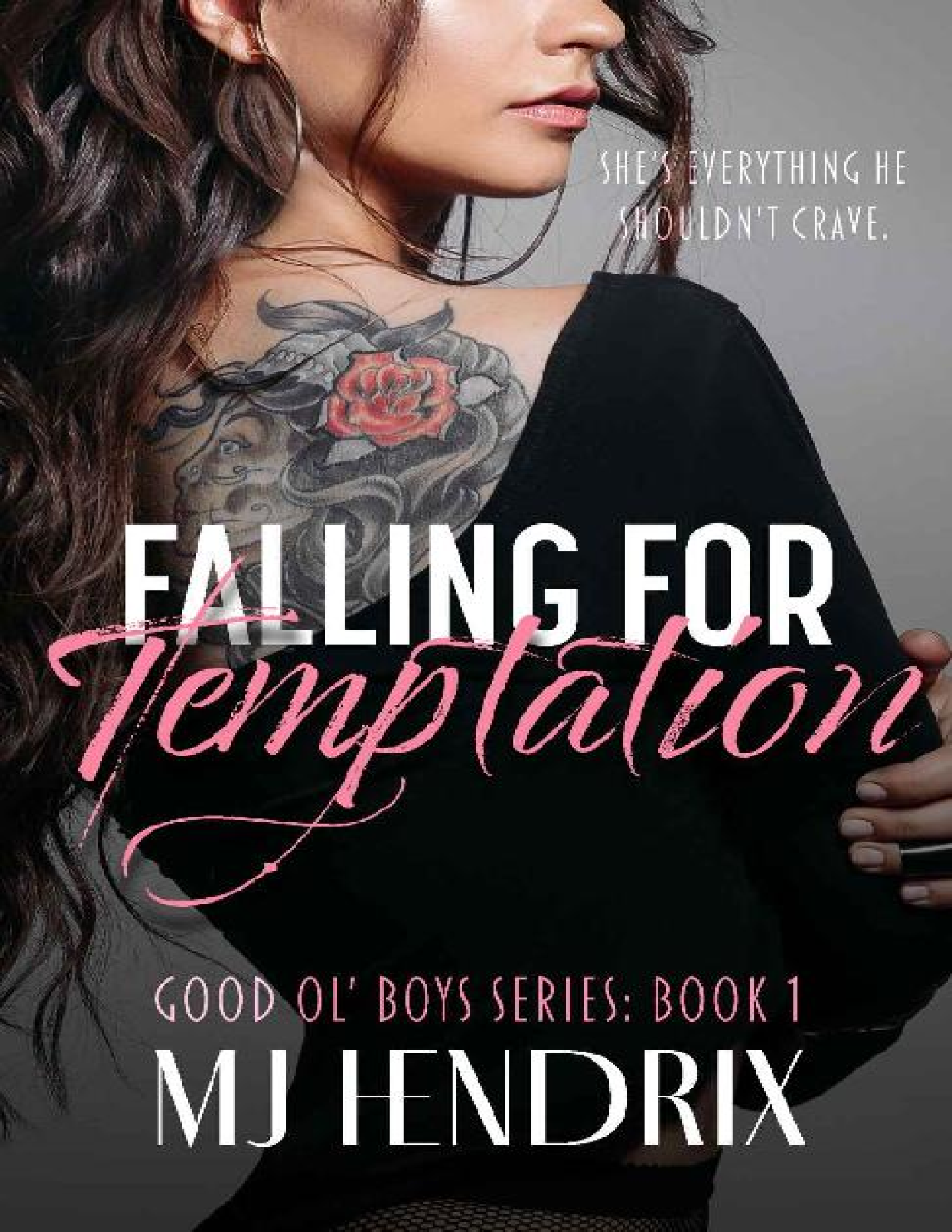


A woman with long, dark, wavy hair is shown from the chest up. She is wearing a black, off-the-shoulder top. On her left shoulder, there is a large, detailed tattoo featuring a red rose, a grey elephant, and a grey face. She is also wearing large, dark, circular earrings. The background is a plain, light grey wall.

SHE'S EVERYTHING HE
SHOULDN'T CRAVE.

FALLING FOR *Temptation*

GOOD OL' BOYS SERIES: BOOK 1

MJ HENDRIX

Falling For Temptation

Mj Hendrix

Mj Hendrix Publishing Ltd Co.

Copyright © 2021 by Mj Hendrix

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law or for brief quotations to be used for a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Any names, characters, places, or incidents are products of the author's imagination and used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual people, places, or events is purely coincidental or fictional.

Edited by Jovana Shirley, Unforeseen Editing.

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[1. Harley](#)

[2. Adam](#)

[3. Harley](#)

[4. Adam](#)

[5. Harley](#)

[6. Adam](#)

[7. Harley](#)

[8. Adam](#)

[9. Harley](#)

[10. Adam](#)

11. Harley.

12. Adam

13. Harley.

14. Adam

15. Harley.

16. Adam

17. Harley.

18. Adam

19. Harley.

20. Adam

21. Harley.

22. Adam

23. Harley.

24. Adam

25. Harley.

26. Adam

27. Harley.

28. Adam

29. Harley.

30. Adam

31. Harley.

32. Adam

33. Harley.

34. Adam

35. Harley.

36. Adam

37. Harley.

38. Adam

[Epilogue](#)

[Also By Mj Hendrix](#)

[About Author & Social Links](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

Harley

My head is down, covered by the worn, oversize gray sweatshirt I stole from my foster sister. Victoria, our foster mom, doesn't allow me to wear things that conceal too much of my body.

The lights from the station are a beacon of hope and the potential for escape. As my pace quickens toward the terminal, seeing buses with the signature skinny gray dog on the side makes me worry one is already headed to Greencity, Texas. *I can't miss the chance to get out tonight.*

All I have on me is \$247. I send up a prayer that it's enough to cover my fare, or I'll be left to beg or pickpocket a stranger. It's too easy now that everyone stares at their screens constantly, but if I get caught stealing again, I'll be stuck here in jail for the night.

There's no line as I step up to the teller.

"What'll it be?" the balding man asks me, his impressive stomach taking up the entire stall.

"Ticket to Greencity, Texas, leaving tonight." I attempt to sound confident, like I'm meant to be here.

He doesn't look at me, stabbing his computer keys with chubby fingers.

"One leaves in forty minutes. One hundred and sixty-two dollars. Cash or card?" he drones, his shift clearly nearing the end.

“Cash.” I hand over the appropriate bills, thankful I’ll have enough to last me for food until I can get a job.

He completes his end, shoving the ticket toward me and directing me to the correct bay.

I find my place in the waiting area, avoiding eye contact with the others itching to embark on the nearly thirty-five-hour trip in close quarters with strangers.

We start to take our seats, and I secure a window. A woman with greasy hair and a nauseating smell that rivals a restaurant dumpster collapses next to me.

I breathe a sigh of relief as we take off, the tires overloaded with the weight for the long journey ahead. My side hurts, but it will heal in a few weeks.

Not a soul knows about my scholarship to Ole Tex University. I applied at the public library months ago. I’ll never forget the moment I got the acceptance email, and the bleak future I had anticipated was shattered with the possibility of a new beginning.

A new life, fresh city, different people, and the potential to craft an untainted reputation for myself have me feeling hopeful, maybe for the first time in my life.

Adam

“It’s hot,” my brother, Daniel, remarks from the top of the hay bale stack. He leans on an itchy square to wipe his sweating brow.

The Texas heat is already sweltering even though it’s only May.

“We’ll take a quick water break.” I grunt as I toss another fifty-pound bale onto the trailer, motioning for my sister to stop the truck.

The screeching halt of the old brakes fill the air, followed by silence.

Our pastor’s son, Silas, grabs a few jugs of water from the bed of the pickup and tosses them around. He’s got a great arm, especially for throwing baseballs.

“So, how are y’all feeling about tonight?” The Southern drawl of his deep voice breaks into the gulps of cold water.

Levi, the quiet one, looks down at him warily, his eyes shifting around to each of his friends. He takes another long drink and glances at my brother.

Tonight’s plan was Dan and Silas’s idea. They’ve instigated the entire scheme. I’m cautiously optimistic. Levi wants it more than he’s ever wanted anything, but he’s doubtful of the possibility of it actually happening.

“If we can all stick to the game plan, it’s our best shot. Maybe we should do a run-through,” Dan suggests.

My brother has banked hard on the possibility that our parents will concede, but I’m skeptical.

My eyes travel over the surrounding fields, and I can barely make out the tip of the steeple belonging to the 1890s white church we were raised in. We've always been homeschooled, and our parents see little value in higher education.

There was once a school in Bonnet Valley, but it closed when I was young due to dwindling enrollment. The public school system was infected with liberal ideas that were dangerous to our growing minds.

"We gotta finish loading these bales, Dan." I'm the driving force of the group, always pushing them to finish the work in record time. Being the oldest comes with responsibility.

"Come on, real quick. It'll just take a minute." Dan rushes in. He's typically the one trying to push boundaries. "Go ahead, Adam."

I sigh in defeat. "Fine, if we do it quick." I clear my throat, beginning in my best adult voice, "Levi, Silas, Dan, and I have all applied and been accepted into Ole Tex University, just a couple hours east. We know this is not what you had planned for us, but we've thought of a way to give you peace of mind."

"Stand up a little straighter," Dan interrupts.

I shoot him a glare, straightening to my full height before continuing.

"The dorms are set up to house four boys in one suite. Dan and I can be in a room that's connected to a bathroom with a room on the other side with Levi and Silas. We can keep each other out of trouble and avoid the crazy college experience that is so detrimental to the youth of the nation. We—"

This time, Silas is the one who interjects. "You sound bored. I don't think you're selling it. Maybe you should bring up the church sooner?" he suggests.

I sigh, squinting up at him in the glaring sunlight. “We’ll go to church every Sunday and Wednesday,” I say, my tone slightly mocking at this point. “We can have weekly Bible studies in our dorm—maybe we’ll even get the guys in our hall to join. I want to study agriculture, so I can come back and help increase our revenue on the farm.”

In truth, I would love to pursue a degree to increase the potential of our multigenerational family farm. We make a good living, an outstanding one, but I know there are technological advances that could only propel us further into the future.

Dan puts on his practiced innocent face. “I want to become a veterinarian to help with the birthing calves and such.”

Silas and Levi follow up with their degree plans.

Dan starts clapping loudly. “Bravo, bravo! Then, I’ll follow up with how much we hope they’ll pray about it, how we will miss our home every single day, and how grateful we are for them. If that doesn’t do it, then I guess we’re stuck here forever.” He tosses a water jug back into the truck bed.

Silas does the same. “You really think they’ll go for it?”

I don’t answer. I’m twenty-one years old, but I’ve never left this farm for longer than a family vacation. Going to college has been in the back of my mind since I was about sixteen, but I think I’ve been afraid of everything we’ve been warned can happen on a campus full of hormonal young adults. The high levels of teen drinking, fornication, and overall lack of good morals seem to be real issues.

I can’t help but wonder what the girls will be like. There aren’t many around here, and I’m blood-related to about seventy-five percent of the ones my age. The kids I’ve grown up with all really feel like family anyway

since we've known each other since we were in diapers. I've barely laid eyes on any girls that I'm attracted to.

Are there any nice girls at OTU who are interested in being with a farmer?

"We're asking on a Wednesday at church, so they can pray over it. I think it's our best shot." Levi wants a college education more than the other two, who really just want to get out and experience life beyond Central Texas.

I know what I want is to help grow our farm's profit, but I would be lying if I didn't admit to myself that a small part of me is curious to see what life beyond the cornstalks is like.

"Well, here goes." I bang on the trailer to let the driver know that our break is over.



I can hardly believe it, but they agreed to let us go. I never really expected to leave our tight-knit, wholesome community in Central Texas. Excitement licks through my veins at the prospect of increasing the revenue of our farm. I could be the first one to secure a college degree that could exponentially benefit the business.

Our parents set up a meeting with the resident assistant to discuss the dynamics of our dormitory. They weren't pleased to hear that girls were allowed in the boys' dorm.

"We enforce a strict open-door policy. The only reason they're allowed to is because the students need to work on group projects together, and the library meeting rooms will fill up," the RA reassures my stern-faced parents.

I breathe a sigh of relief as they nod at each other. The explanation must suffice.

Next, they visit the local church, and Silas's dad sets up a lunch with the pastor and his wife. They are enthusiastic to learn about the potential of four new college-aged students interested in the young adult ministry. We promise to be present for the Wednesday meetings.

I'm walking with our group of twenty-one on the tour of the campus. Because of our family taking up thirteen spots, the only other members of the group are Silas, Levi, and their families. We seem to be of particular interest to the students milling about the grounds.

"Oh my!" my mother audibly gasps as a thin, dark-haired girl with tattoos, wearing a crop top and the shortest shorts I've ever seen, walks by us.

I hope the girl doesn't realize we're all staring at her. My younger brother turns to follow her with his eyes, and I smack the back of his head. I might want to look, too, but I know better.

We all stop in at the cafeteria to eat lunch. My sisters can cook so much better than this, and I'm a little disgusted at the greasy-looking gravy for the chicken-fried steak. I'll never complain about it out loud, but it seems like for the price of the meal plan, the food should be better quality.

The tour finally completes, and our family piles into the fifteen-passenger blue van, sans two of its usual occupants. With as many as possible links with the adults in the community, our parents bid us good-bye with a prayer of blessing.

My mother is teary-eyed. "Don't forget to call me tonight before bed, boys. Let us know when you are all settled in, okay?" She sniffles as I shut her door.

Dan and I wave until they're out of sight. We're left standing on the pavement as Levi and Silas stroll up to us.

"We should get back to the dorm to unpack," I suggest after a long silence.

They nod in agreement.

Levi is the only one who doesn't want to get out and meet people, more comfortable with his eyes on a textbook than anywhere else.

Dan and Silas are both itching to engage with the other students. Their eyes follow the pretty girls walking by while mine stay trained ahead. It's going to take a while to get used to living here without the guidance and overhanging authority of our parents. I'm a grown man, but living on my own isn't something I've truly ever desired. I make a good living, working for my father and his brothers, and I enjoy my life. Farming the land is a riveting occupation.

We finally reach the dorms, embarking on our elevator journey upward. We spend our first hours of freedom trying to blend in with a foreign crowd we know very little about.

Harley

There's a siren going off. I smack my hand around, trying to disarm the offensive object. Blissful silence finally greets my ears. I worked till closing at the bar last night, and now, I have an eight a.m. class because I'm masochistic. In Illinois, you have to be twenty-one to bartend. God bless Texas.

My strawberry-blond roommate turns on a hair dryer. Her ringlet curls are something you would expect to be fake but apparently aren't. I squint open my eyes, deciding if she really needs to do that this early or if she's just that annoying girl who doesn't care if people are trying to sleep. She turns to smile at me and shuts it off.

"Sorry! I have to set the mousse. It'll just be a second! When's your first class?"

I groan and flip over. I hate talking before I have caffeine.

The leafy babies I got at the nursery last week are bathed in sunlight on the windowsill. I need to check their soil for moisture.

"Eight," I grumble.

"Oh, me too! Wow, I'm so envious you can just roll out of bed. It takes me ages to get ready."

I hope Goldilocks doesn't think we're going to be friends. After another few minutes of the hair-dryer sound, I decide I might as well make the most

of my time. It won't hurt to look good on the first day. As my friend Sal at the bar advised me, you never know when you'll get a pervy professor who goes easier on the attractive female students.

I get up with a sigh, do the necessities, and run through my detailed makeup routine. A scarlet lip tint feels right for the first day. My hair is always a little grunge, which I like. A cheap wand defines the thick raven mess of hair. I survey my closet, thrilled to be attending a school without a dress code. I select a red lacy bralette; a strappy, low-cut black tank; and my high-waisted black denim cutoffs. The ensemble is completed with my white high-top tennis shoes. I grab my backpack and open the door.

"Wait! I'm almost ready!"

I sigh and check my refurbished phone screen. I need coffee before class, or I won't be able to focus. Mondays are the only nights I'll close at the bar and have to get up four hours later.

"Hurry, so I can stop by the café." *Can't she tell by my voice that I need coffee?*

"Oh, yes, great idea. I could really use a venti Americano," she yells from inside the closet.

When she finally joins me, I'm impressed. Blondie cleans up nice. She's got on shorts like mine, only whitewashed denim, and a white tank with a hot-pink sports bra poking out of the top. Except for the stupid chunky white headband stuck in her curls, she looks good. Maybe I'll raid her closet. We sort of create a yin-and-yang effect together. The light splatter of freckles across her nose gives her a much more innocent look than my body art gives me.

"What's your first class?" she asks as we walk.

“Principles of Horticulture.” I try not to let the excitement in my voice be too evident. Living, leafy things are my passion.

“Oh, that sounds interesting. I wonder if there will be any cute guys in a class like that.”

I have no reply, so I stay silent.

“My first class is Behavioral and Social Science.”

“Cool.”

We reach the café, and the line is out the door.

“Shit.” I look around.

Everyone else seems to be chatty and not at all concerned about how late they’ll be to their first class. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t be either, but I actually am interested in learning what will be taught in this one.

“Oh, I think Shaun is working! Let me go see if he can get us a few cups on the fly.”

My roommate disappears, and I hold our place in line. If Blondie can pull this off, I vow to remember her name.

Only a minute later, to my surprise, she rejoins me with two steaming paper cups. She even has little packets of sugar and creamer pods.

“Damn, girl, you’ve just proven yourself worthy of keeping around.” I accept the java gift, and we rush off.

“This is my building. See you at twelve thirty for lunch in the caf?” she says as she turns to stride up the red brick steps.

“Sure.” I guess I owe her for the coffee stunt, and it isn’t so bad, hanging with Blondie since she’s one of those girls who likes to hear the sound of her own voice.

I’m still a little late to class, but I slide into a seat up front and proceed to dress up my drink as the professor is making his introduction. He’s an

adorable little man with suspenders and a bow tie, a scratchy-looking gray beard, and thick, round glasses. The top of his bald head shines in the fluorescent lights. The class isn't too overly packed, which I'm thankful for. He begins, and I zone in. I handwrite as many of his words as I possibly can.

As his lecture wraps up, I pack up my notebook and pens. Most of the students have laptops, but I can't afford one yet. My goal is to make enough at the bar for a refurbished one. I'm eternally grateful for the rich scums who deposit theirs every time a new model is released.

I finally make my way out of the row, one of the last ones. I see ahead of me someone tossing a throwaway cup toward the trash can at the door and missing. The jerk just keeps walking.

A tall, broad-shouldered guy with buzzed sandy-blond hair a few people in front of me bends over and picks it up. It draws my attention, and I notice he's wearing a green plaid shirt, worn-out jeans, and boots. His clothes don't stand out too much, considering this is Texas, but the jeans look like they are actually worn, not bought brand-new with holes pre-scratched into them. It reminds me of the modern-day *Little House on the Prairie* family I saw on the campus tour yesterday.

I head to my next class.

I survive until lunch on just the coffee, but by the time twelve thirty rolls around, I'm starving. It's a feeling I'm accustomed to but don't enjoy.

Once I'm inside the cafeteria, spotting the head of my roommate is easy. She stands out like a buoy.

I get in line for a salad and see that Plaid Shirt is a few people behind me. He's nailed down that sexy Southern-boy vibe, broad shoulders and head

held high. The short buzz cut works for him, revealing his immaculate bone structure.

I realize he's looking at me, but when I meet his gaze, he rips his stare away and tinges a deep pink. I smirk and turn back around to make my salad.

Why is he so embarrassed? I know I stand out. Not many college freshmen have as many tattoos as I do, especially in Texas. I used to be bothered by it, but the continual stares are just par for the course at this point.

"Harley! Over here!" My roommate is about as outspoken and attention-seeking as they come.

I march toward her, drop my tray, then head for the drink station.

"Hey, grab me a sweet tea, please!"

I roll my eyes. *Could she be any more predictable?*

I get her sweet tea and my Fanta, returning to the table. I sit and toss my salad, taking a bite of the brownie I picked up for my appetizer.

"Thanks, babe. This is Raelynn, Maya, and Riley." My roommate makes the introductions.

I glance up and nod a hello at the group of girls.

Giant eyes and agape mouths greet me.

The redhead recovers quickly and speaks first. "Wow, I am obsessed with your look. You're like the hot, scary Barbie. I bet guys go nuts over your vibe."

She isn't wrong.

"Thanks," is all I say. I shove a forkful of lettuce into my mouth to avoid having to talk to them.

The dark blonde pipes up next, “Why do you have so many tattoos? I mean, do your parents not care?”

I think this one’s name is Raelynn. She’s nervous to be asking me this, but apparently, she doesn’t care if she offends me.

I shrug and finish chewing before answering, “They don’t give a shit.”

Her eyes widen, and she looks over at my roommate, who just laughs.

“Isn’t she the best? I wish I had her attitude.” She stops abruptly and gasps. “Oh my gosh. It’s that guy. Look toward the drink station,” she excitedly instructs us.

“The one from your Chem class?” asks the bitchy redhead.

“Yes! Ugh, hot nerds just do it for me every single time. I don’t know what it is...maybe the Clark Kent-ness of it. He’s so built but so shy, and I just love it.”

We all turn our heads.

“Oh my gosh, not all at once!” she nearly shouts.

Half the cafeteria looks over at us, and the four of them dip their heads into a fit of giggles. I attempt not to roll my eyes but fail.

“I get it—a hot nerd is leagues above a man-slut,” I say.

“Yes! I don’t get why people think it’s so attractive for a guy to have slept with half the state, but of course, if a girl did it, they would all vomit. Double standards suck,” Blondie takes a sip of sweet tea and nibbles on a baby carrot.

“Think about how awkward it would be if he kissed you though. He wouldn’t know what to do,” Redhead interjects. “Bleh.”

I look up at the “hot nerd” in question. He is a Clark Kent doppelgänger. He has dark hair with a slight curl, thick-framed glasses, and a build as brawny as the plaid-shirt guy from my Horticulture class. His blue T-shirt

has a faded *4H* stamped on it. He's walking toward his table, and I see that he's actually sitting with the guy I noticed from my class.

What are the odds of that?

There's four of them together, not talking, but observing the students moving around them. Plaid-shirt guy looks like he might have a twin. The twin is wearing the exact same shirt in red but has slightly darker blond hair.

"Oh my gosh, there's an entire group of them. Is that your wet dream come true, Kenna? You could be the center of a sexy-nerd sandwich!" Maya, the redhead, jokes.

I've finally picked up her name. My roommate, Kenna, nods her head vigorously as the others laugh, and I attempt to not roll my eyes again. I peer up at their table, and once again, I see Green Plaid Shirt looking at me. He jerks his gaze away with a blush.

Adam

Never in my life have I seen so much female skin. It's a little overwhelming, making my skin heat. My reaction is embarrassing, but keeping my eyes averted is a constant battle within myself. I had no idea worldly girls dressed like this, but I understand now why my dad enforces such strict modesty rules on my sisters. This is more distracting than a bleating goat giving birth to twin kids.

The four of us have split up, and Levi and I are walking to the library to spend our two-hour break. He glances up from his staring contest with the sidewalk. There are three girls walking in front of us. They look like the beginning of one of the jokes an old man from our church back home always tells—because it's a blonde, a redhead, and a brunette. The dark-haired girl is the one my mother gasped at on our first day during the tour. She even has tattoos on the back of her thighs, near the bottom of her shorts.

As we reach the library, Levi leans toward me and whispers, "It's the girls from Gerald's jokes."

I burst out laughing at his observation since it's exactly what I was thinking. The curly blonde one turns around to look at us, and I immediately break off my laughter. She smiles and turns fully around.

"Are you boys here to study too?" Her accent sounds Texan.

She's stunning with big emerald eyes offsetting her bright, bouncy hair. In the sun, it actually looks a little red.

There's no doubt in my mind that Levi cannot speak to this gorgeous female stranger, so I answer, "Yeah, we have a two-hour break."

She perks up. "Perfect! I'll get us into a study group room. We need at least four people to qualify, so this is great." She steps up to the desk. "Hi, we need a study room to work on our group project."

Did she just lie?

The clerk looks up at us, then hands her a key, and shoves a clipboard across the desk. The girl signs her name and leads the way.

The room has a rectangular table with six cushioned chairs, three on each side. I sit in one corner, and the redhead sits beside me. The brunette takes the chair beside her. Levi sits across from me, and I can see the anxiety etched onto his face as the pretty blonde one sits down next to him instead of leaving an open chair between them. I know my introverted friend is going to need me to introduce him, and my momma raised me to be polite to strangers.

I turn to the redhead. "Hi, I'm Adam."

I extend my hand. She looks down and grabs it.

"Maya."

"Nice to meet you."

The girl with all the tattoos is digging through her bag on the floor, so I look at the blonde next, reaching my hand out as I stand.

"Adam. What's your name?"

She smiles wide and shakes my hand. "I'm Kenna! So nice to meet you, Adam."

She sits down and looks at Levi. He avoids her gaze and starts unpacking his notebook with shaky hands.

She hesitates for a minute but then extends her hand in view of his downturned face. He swallows and looks up, finally grasping her outstretched hand a second too late.

“I’m Kenna. What’s your name?” she asks him sweetly.

Levi is the most socially awkward out of the four of us. He’s an only child and uncommonly intelligent. His parents isolated him to study for up to ten hours a day.

“Levi,” he responds quietly. He looks at her face for a split second before returning to his book, cheeks stained.

I have no doubt that he’s never spoken to a girl he wasn’t raised with. His only friends besides me and the guys are his books.

I turn back to the other girl. She’s looking down at her notes.

I clear my throat. “Hey, I’m Adam.”

She lifts her head up. Pale blue eyes that remind me of the color of the gas flame pouring from a burner meet my gaze. Her deep ruby-red lips are overly plump. I remember my mother telling me that red lipstick is for “women of the night.” I hope she’s not one of those because she’s the most beautiful creature I’ve ever laid eyes on. I’ve been unable to stop staring at her since she sat in front of me in my first class of the day.

She’s the first woman I’ve seen with tattoos. I know it’s sinful to mark your body up, but I still wish I could touch her skin and see what it feels like with all that ink.

“Harley.” Her voice is unexpectedly raspy.

I have to take a breath when I realize I like the sound of it—a lot. To avoid looking like a total starstruck moron, I get out my notebook for

horticulture. I notice she's using the one she had in class.

"I've never heard that name before. Do you know where it comes from?" I ask her, the words barely making it past the lump of nerves.

She keeps her eyes on the notebook as she replies, "Yeah, my birth mom said I was conceived on a Harley-Davidson behind a 7-Eleven."

I try to control my outward reaction at her admission, remaining completely still, even as my neck heats. This is the first time I've ever heard someone reference fornication so casually. *Is she being serious? Parents don't name their kids after motorcycles, do they?*

Laughter breaks out between us as I see Maya, the redhead, with her head thrown back in hysterics. After about thirty seconds, she regains composure.

"Wow, you're a trip, Scary Barbie," she says.

I feel like she's being mean, but I'm not sure since I thought they were friends.

Kenna speaks up from across the table, "I think it's beautiful, and it really suits you." Her voice is kind and reassuring. "I bet your mom just made that up as a joke. What did your dad say?"

Harley looks up at her and smiles. "Nah, she was serious. My birth dad was just a random trucker."

The entire room is buried in silence. I'm speechless. I've never met someone with a past like this. There's a sick feeling in my gut when I look at her face and realize she isn't making this up. *What kind of a life did that create for her?*

Levi is staring a hole into his chemistry book. I doubt he even needs to look at it. He's been flipping through and memorizing the pages since he

got it on the first day. He has a photographic memory with a brain function in line with the smartest minds in the world.

I look back over at her. “I’m sorry you never got to meet your dad,” I say softly.

Her eyes snap to mine, darker than before. “Why? He was a piece of shit. I’m glad I never met him. He’s just one less miserable creep I’ve had to deal with.” She snaps the notebook closed. “Kenna, didn’t you say there was a freshman party going on, on Friday?”

Kenna perks up, and I get the feeling Harley is changing the subject due to her own discomfort.

“Yes, girl! We are going too. It’s a beach party. I have the cutest bikini for it.” She looks at me and Levi, grinning. “You guys have to come with us! It’s at the Kappa Betas’ house. I’m rushing, but my cousin Lexi is a member, so she said I’m a sure thing,” she animatedly tells us.

“Ugh, you are so lucky. You have to swear to put a good word in for me. I will not rush for any, except for the Kappa Betas or the Alpha Phis. I refuse to be a part of any others,” Maya whines with a pouting face.

I have no earthly idea what they are discussing. It sounds like some kind of club. I’ve never heard of a bikini, but since she said “beach party,” I’m assuming it’s a bathing suit. My sisters always wear T-shirts and long shorts when we swim in the tank on our farm. I’m betting a filthy, cow-manure-filled water hole in the ground isn’t the location of this college party.

I look at Levi, whose head is still downturned, but his cheeks have reddened.

Kenna looks back up at dark-haired Harley and says, “Please tell me you are going! I need you there. They will totally dig your look. I need to be the girl with the badass, tattooed friend. The guys are going to swarm you, for

sure. You should wear a red bikini—that's your best color." Her eyes are on Harley, begging.

I look over at Harley, who shrugs and says, "I guess. I don't have work."

Kenna claps her hands and excitedly looks at me and Levi.

"You guys have to come. I swear they'll go crazy over y'all too," Kenna insists.

"I, uh, if it's a beach party, I didn't pack a swimsuit." I don't want to admit that I don't own one. We always just swam in shorts.

"You came to a university in Texas without swim trunks?" Maya looks doubtfully at me.

"I just didn't think there would be a tank anywhere around...on campus."

I know I sound like a stupid hick. I feel like not owning swim trunks would be worse for some reason.

Kenna giggles, "Well, the good news is, you're a guy. Just wear your jeans without a shirt."

I can't imagine wearing that to a party, but I nod in agreement. I glance at Harley and notice she's got pink cheeks.

Harley

On Friday evening, my phone dings as a text comes in.

Unknown: baby come back, let me fix it. it'll be different this time

I immediately block the number with shaky hands. *How did he get my new one?* I take several calming breaths as Kenna walks into the room. I will not panic. He still doesn't know where I am. *Does he?*

"Here it is, Har. Wear this body necklace too."

She tosses a tiny crimson bikini at me. I see her lay the shimmery gold chain on my small desk. Since when did we become friends who lend clothes? I would protest verbally, but since her side of the closet is stuffed to the brim and mine is nearly empty, this can only benefit me.

She's wearing a sexy leopard-print one-piece with triangle-shaped cups and high thigh-cut bottoms. Most of the sides are cut out.

"What happened to the bikini?" I question as I strip off my clothes. Usually, I'd rather lie in bed, watching *Dexter*, but for some reason, I feel like going tonight.

She's braiding her hair up into two matching French braids down the back of her head.

“I, uh, well, since Levi is so shy, I thought, you know...maybe a little less skin would make him feel more comfortable, talking to me. It’s probably stupid,” she confesses.

I try not to let my face show my amusement. I tie up the side of my bottoms over my hip.

“I mean, yeah, maybe. I think he’s just really shy. You still look hot in that suit. Who cares what guys think, right?” I’m trying to console myself too.

Adam doesn’t seem like the type to want the girl in the tiny red bikini. Which I find strangely appealing, but I’m still wearing it. I don’t want him.

She’s studying herself in our full-length mirror on the back of our door. Our dorm is basic and small with all our stuff divided down the middle. She has her desk under her bunk. It’s all a total wreck of clothes and books. Mine is tidy and bare in comparison. I shop in clearance bins. All her stuff is designer.

“I don’t know...I guess you’re right. He either likes me or he doesn’t, right? I’m going to have fun regardless!” she says.

“That’s the spirit,” I say halfheartedly.

I’m applying more scarlet-red lipstick and touching up my face. I throw my long hair up into a full, messy bun on my head. The shimmery body chain goes over my head, and I turn to survey myself in the mirror.

“Damn. If you weren’t already my friend, I would despise you on sight. You look incredible! All those tattoos just work for you,” Kenna observes from behind me before she dips her head toward her mirror and applies some shimmer to her eyelid. “By the way, how do you have so many if you’re only eighteen? Did your parents sign off for you to get them younger?”

I freeze as I'm slipping into my high-tops. I dread this question.

"Yeah, my, uh, foster mom's cousin had a tattoo shop." I'm hoping that satisfies her curiosity. I was just starting to like her—before the twenty questions.

"I mean, don't get me wrong; I really love how they look on you. It just seems like a lot to get in, like, a year, ya know? When's your birthday?" Kenna sprays her head with hair spray.

Why is everyone so nosy?

"Yep. It was just my thing for a while. You ready?"

The sooner we leave this room and conversation, the better I will feel.

She looks over at me and grins. "We are so hot. I love being the yin-and-yang girls! You're Bad Barbie, and I'm Classic."

She grabs her matching wallet wristlet, and we move out the door. Several people do a double take at us on campus in our swimsuits. I realize we should have probably worn cover-ups, but it's too late now. People gaping at me is my existence.

We arrive at the Kappa Betas' party just as it's getting dark. Scantly clad students are pouring into the large yellow house.

Once inside the mansion of debauchery, Kenna grips my hand and propels me forward to get a drink. There are three guys in hot-pink swim trunks with painted Greek letters on their chests serving drinks. We get our Solo cups filled with mystery liquid and tiny, colorful umbrellas. There are beach balls being thrown around, and the song blaring on the radio says something about "feet in the water, hands in the sand." Even though we are miles from the coast, the vibe is pretty compelling. Beautiful, nearly naked humans are surrounding us, gyrating to the beat of the music.

"Do you think they'll come?" Kenna shouts over the noise.

I shrug, already wishing I were back at the dorm, under the covers.

A guy with gaudy yellow-striped swim trunks and an impressive six-pack struts by us, giving me an approving once-over. He swivels in our direction, a conceited smirk on his face. His wavy blond hair screams wannabe surfer.

“Damn, sugar, you must be a freshy. I know I would’ve remembered that sweet ass if I’d seen it before.” He gets close enough that I smell his overpowering cologne—an automatic throwback to every jock in high school after practice. His gaze licks over me hungrily, and I tense up. “I’ll be in serious pain for the rest of the night, looking at this body.”

His gaze resembles a hungry bear, and I’m a skinned cow, hanging in a meat locker.

“Guess I’ll save you from suffering by walking away then.” I’ve known too many bears.

I grab Kenna’s hand, jerking her toward the front porch. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Hey! What’s wrong? Kyle’s a douche, just ignore him. Let’s find Lexi,” she pleads with me when, suddenly, a bright smile touches her face.

“Hey, guys! So glad you could make it.” She’s scanning behind me, so I look back over my shoulder.

Adam is standing on the porch with the other two guys from the cafeteria, but Levi isn’t with them. I reject the tiny flutter of excitement in my belly at seeing him here. They’re dressed in ripped-up jeans and faded T-shirts, looking uncertain about entering the house. Kenna walks over to them, her body swaying. I see the dark blonde guy’s eyes widen as she approaches.

“Are y’all coming in? Where’s Levi?”

She looks behind them into the darkened street, searching for Clark Kent's twin. I trail out onto the porch, a chill in the air touching my skin. Goose bumps prick my arms, and I hug them to my bare stomach.

Adam clears his throat and speaks, gaze trained at the top of my head, "He, uh, couldn't make it. I'm sorry, he's not big on gatherings." He gestures at the other guys. "This is my brother, Daniel, and this is our suite mate, Silas. I hope it's okay that I brought them instead."

Daniel is clearly related to Adam, just a fraction shorter with darker hair. His eyes are trained on the interior of the party, ready to go in. He's chomping at the bit. Silas is big and handsome, just like the others. He screams athlete with pale green eyes and wavy sandy-blond hair. They all have suntanned skin.

Daniel smiles at Kenna, reaching out his hand. His blue eyes are bright with excitement. He's the shortest of the trio, but he still reaches at least six one.

"Hi. Nice to meet you. Hope it's okay that I tagged along." His Southern twang is just as pronounced as Adam's.

"Oh, of course! Definitely. We should have a smaller thing at our place. Maybe Levi would feel more comfortable with less people." Her smile is forced.

Adam turns toward me, and I look up into his amber eyes.

He licks his lips and swallows. "Hey, Harley. Nice to see you again."

He's keeping his eyes above the interesting bits, and I applaud the effort he's putting forth. *What kind of guy refuses to check you out in a tiny red bikini?*

"I think you forgot the rules." My voice is playful, but it sounds a little husky.

His gaze pinches. “Wha—”

A loud voice breaks in over him from behind us. “The rules are strict here, gentlemen! No shirts allowed. Take them off now or leave!” A beautiful girl in a hot-pink one-piece with high-cut thighs and a deep V-neck extends a skinny arm over Kenna’s shoulder.

“Kenna, I can’t believe you invited rulebreakers to the first party of the year! What a shameful way to introduce my baby cousin to the sisters.” The newcomer has a dark fake tan, long artificial lashes, and bleached hair.

“Lexi, hey! They are not rulebreakers. They are taking them off now. Let’s go get some punch. I want to introduce Harley to the girls. Isn’t she a hottie?” Kenna beams at me as she and Lexi pivot around to walk back through the front door.

Lexi’s gaze trails over me. “Hell yeah, she is. Stay away from my man, Jon. I’ll cut you.” She winks in my direction as they sashay off.

I turn my gaze back to the guys. “You guys coming?”

I catch Adam’s eyes shooting back up to my face as his cheeks heat with guilt.

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

He lifts his shirt up, and it’s my turn to blush. Ridges hovering over a defined V-shape remind me of the men’s underwear packets on the Target shelves. Low-slung, tattered jeans barely hanging on bless my eyes. I try not to count, but wow, eight perfect, thick squares flex as his arms raise the stretching cotton over his head. Blue veins decorate his chest and thick, muscular arms. My jaw is somewhere in the vicinity of my kneecaps. Attempting to regain some coherent thoughts at his unexpected torso reveal, I nod and turn to walk inside.

Breathe in, breathe out. I try not to gawk but fail miserably, like every other woman in the room.

Adam

Red on creamy tan skin etched with black lines is my new favorite color. When God created the female body, he spent extra time on Harley. My eyes are rebelliously trailing over her retreating form.

I know she must be a wild, unsafe girl. Her hips are everything I never knew how badly I wanted. Her thighs are stamped with symbols, scales, and words I can't read as she walks. Legs, long and smooth, saunter seductively over the creaking wood floor. I pretend that's why I keep studying her body. I want to learn everything embossed into her skin.

How does a beautiful young girl like her end up with all this ink? Did she really go into a tattoo shop and ask for a lotus flower and a blue heron between her shoulder blades? Her waist is tiny, flaring into a perfect arch up toward her shoulders. She twirls back to glance at us, and thankfully, my gaze was on her back and not lower. My heart rate is a rocket, thundering toward the moon.

"You want a drink?"

She stills as I approach. Stopping a safe distance away, I notice a large, dark shape on her side. I look down at it, seeing a woman's face with full hair spilling out, twisting around her.

"No, thanks," I mumble.

I wanted to look back at the strange tattoo, but it's too close to her breast. She's gazing up at me with her oversize blue eyes. Her crimson lips are parted as she blinks and looks away.

"It's too loud in here. Let's get some air." She weaves through the crowd effortlessly as I attempt to follow without bumping into anyone.

A blonde girl reaches out and grabs my arm.

"Hey, sexy, which frat are you in?" Her voice sounds funny, like she's half-asleep and delirious.

I try to extract my arm. My head swivels around to see if Silas or Dan will jump in and help me, but I see them across the room at a long table with red cups all over it. A swarm of flesh and bikini straps has them trapped. I'm dealing with my own issue, or I would try to help them.

Flipping back to the small girl, I say, "I'm here with Harley."

I smile and try backing away, but she grips me tighter, her nails digging in.

"Who the hell is Harley? This is my sorority house. I could give you a tour." She leans toward me, her sweaty body pressing on my arm.

My heart rate picks up at the contact. I've never felt a woman's breast.

"Hey, back off. This one's mine." Harley reaches over and literally pries the girl's fingers off of me.

She yelps in surprise or pain.

"Hey! Who are you? You aren't allowed to just barge into a party like this!" The blonde's voice is rising, and she's drawing attention around us.

"Bite me, bitch," Harley snaps at her, tugging me along after her to the back of the house.

I don't have time to process her blatant use of profanity and the unexpected claim on me. My eyes are glued to her flawless, marked skin.

Trying not to look at her nearly naked is an Olympic feat I'm inadequately trained for. The shape of her body reminds me of an old Victorian corset I saw on a museum tour once. I've never seen anything more enticing in my life. Sweat beads on my lower back from the effort.

We finally emerge through the open back door onto a surprisingly quiet deck. There are a few couples scattered around and a distinct smell of skunk. I'm thankful for the darkness to conceal how unaccustomed to seeing girls in bikinis I am. My physical reaction is unbelievably embarrassing. I have to force my gaze up.

"I can't believe that girl. What's wrong with these sororities? Kenna wants to join one, and frankly, it's embarrassing that..." She trails off, taking in a gulp of air and blowing it out slowly.

"Are you cold?" I ask.

She flips around, her face forming into a frown.

"Why would you ask me that?" Her voice is cautious.

"I just...you look like maybe you're cold," I stammer like a moron. "I'm a little cold, and you don't...have much on. So, I thought maybe you're cold." *Stop talking about her lack of clothing if you want to be able to rejoin the people in the light, idiot.*

She blinks at me silently for several long seconds before nodding her head, piled with thick black hair.

"Yeah, I guess so. We can go back in if you want." Her raspy voice is not helping the situation below my waist.

"No, no. I was just going to offer you my shirt if you want to...be more comfortable." I hold my breath, thinking I might have possibly offended her in some way.

The shirt is in my hand, and she looks down at it. Realization crosses her face, and I turn a shade resembling a tomato ripe for picking.

“Um, sure, I’ll wear it. Thanks.” She looks up, biting on her lip.

I hand it over and turn around to give her privacy. She’s putting more clothes on, but it still seems inappropriate to watch her do it.

I feel a tap on my shoulder. Thankfully, my embarrassing state has ceased slightly due to the conscious effort of keeping my eyes up. I turn around to see that my favorite soft green John Deere T-shirt envelops her beautifully, like it was made for her to wear. Anything would probably look that way on her sinful shape, but my chest squeezes a little, seeing her in my clothes.

She’s clutching the bottom of it in her fingers, her head slightly turned away as she peers at me sideways. “I don’t think I’ve ever met a guy like you.” Her arms cross over her chest.

“What makes you say that?” I shove my hands into the pockets of my jeans.

She licks her eyes over me, and I’m feeling warmer under her stare.

“Most guys would rather a girl be cold, so they could see her nipples,” she observes casually.

Heat crawls up my neck as my eyes widen. I don’t know what to say to such a crass statement.

Do all worldly girls talk like this? It seems like something not even a husband and wife would say to each other. I’d love to see them, but she has to know I would wait for marriage to ever look at that part of a woman. I’m frozen, trying to find a suitable response, when she starts to laugh, an attractive, throaty sound.

“Wow, okay! I can’t believe I’m even out here, having this conversation. You seem like a nice guy, really. So, don’t waste your time with me. I

promise even the one who tried to maul you would be a better choice.”

She starts to walk back into the party before I stop her with my hand in the velvety crease of her elbow.

“I’m not really looking to pursue a woman. I just came to get my degree in agriculture, so I can use it on the farm. I’d love to study with you for our Horticulture class...if you want.” That’s all I want—to study with her.

She smirks at me and nods her head. “Sure. Why not?”

Honestly, being in her presence feels strangely inevitable.

Harley

As I lie in bed after ditching the party, my mind cannot rest. My body is tingling, and I keep replaying the night in my head.

I bummed a few hits off of one of the stoners in the yard before leaving. It helps me relax, but it also makes me think too much. Tonight, Adam's look of surprise is what I can't forget.

Of course he would never "pursue" a girl like me. He's a straitlaced farm boy, apparently. He's probably on the hunt for a virginal innocent, not a tattooed foster kid, years past virginal status. I feel like a moron for even assuming he would be interested in me. Well, interested in anything more than sex—they all want that. He seems different, but he's still a guy, thinking with one head at a time. If I know anything for certain about the male species, that's it.

Whatever it is that's so different about him, I will not waste my time with it.

That body though...

The door bangs open, interrupting my impure reverie.

"Harley," my roommate whisper-yells, "are you awake?"

I briefly consider pretending to be asleep. She tiptoes into the room, sneaking over to her side of the tiny space.

"Back so soon?" My voice is raspier than usual.

She freezes, her head turning back to look at me.

“Oohhh, yes, I am back. I did not—did not drink much at aaaall.”

Wow, my four-year-old foster brother was a better liar than her.

“Hmmm.” I snicker as she trips on a stray heel on the floor, falling into her bed.

“Ouch! Dad-blam-it!” She groans, gripping her shin.

“Watch your language, would you? I have sensitive ears,” I deadpan.

She bursts out laughing. “I’ve literally heard you use the F-word!”

“Yeah, well, that’s less offensive than whatever the hell you just said.” I roll over on my back as my phone pings.

It’s a text from my mom.

mom: hey, sweetie, missing you! been saving up to come see my baby bird. would love if you could send me some cash for the ticket by next week. I want to celebrate your birthday with you. sleep tight, honey, xo

I cringe at the message. Gotta love when your mom forgets when your birthday is. My phone reads one a.m. I’m surprised the writing is legible at this hour. Maybe she’s so strapped for cash that she can’t afford her preferred “self-care.”

“Is that Adam?” Kenna has propped herself up on her elbow, an excited tone in her voice. “Y’all are such a hot couple.”

“No, my mom,” I correct her as I roll over so my back is facing her.

She doesn’t get the hint.

“Your foster mom?” she asks.

“No, my birth mom. I don’t talk to my foster momster,” I clip.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Well, do you and your real mom get along?”

Do people not understand body language anymore?

“If by ‘get along,’ you mean, she asks me for money and pretends to love me, sure.” I take a brief pause before adding, “I’m tired.”

Long seconds tick by, and I think she’s given up.

“Harley...I’m really sorry. That’s so awful. I can’t fathom not having a mom who really cares about me.” Her voice is quiet. She pauses, debating on how far to pry. She’s already gone about as far as most people care to.

“Do you...do you ever want to talk about it?” She doesn’t sound how people usually do who find out about my birth mother—full of pity. It’s sadder, which makes me feel full of the sadness I can usually keep out.

Silence is my answer.



Billy’s Pub is on the strip downtown. It was the first place I stopped after my twenty-three-hour bus ride from Carbona, Illinois. It’s on Seventh Street, which is party central for the college students and young adults in Greencity, Texas. The uniforms aren’t my favorite, but they do help with the tips.

I tie back the little black apron over my mini denim skirt. The white tank with *Billy’s Pub* written in red cursive script draws quite a bit of attention even though I’m only a small C cup. Billy hired me on sight. I guess I fit the vibe. My foster sister’s old ID didn’t hurt me landing the job.

Thankfully, I’ve made a work friend, a woman in her thirties named Sal. She has new baby-daddy drama to blab about every shift, allowing me to silently nod along. Sal’s curly black hair forms a perfect, fluffy circle at her

nape. Her voice sounds like a girl I knew in high school who was from Brooklyn.

“This fool came home without a damn clue we had even broken up. He says to me, ‘Sally, ohh, Sally baby, come on and get up on it for me.’ I said, ‘Fool! Get your drunk, cheating ass outta my house! We done broke up, and you’re too shit-faced to even remember all the mean shit I said to you!’ ” She shakes her head, puffy ponytail bobbing. “Made me so damn mad. Thankfully, he passed out on the couch, and I left to take Marley to school before he so much as rolled over. Can you believe I put up with that shit for seven years? Seven years of my life.” She tosses a broken glass into the trash bin, nodding her head at it to emphasize what she thinks of those seven years.

“Although I got my sweet little Marley. You got any kids?” She’s washing shot glasses, preparing for the Saturday night crowd requesting lemon drops and tequila shots.

I shake my head, which is all the encouragement she needs to go on.

“Well, that’s a blessing. Keep it that way as long as you can, sugar.” Her tone is secretive, like she’s sharing profound nuggets of wisdom.

“I’m never having kids.” There’s not a hint of doubt in my voice. Someone like me wouldn’t know the first thing about how to take care of a child. I only know what you shouldn’t do.

“Aww, we all say that at some point or another.” She laughs at my cliché conviction.

What does someone with two “mom” failures and a grand total of zero “dads” know about parenting?

She’s moved down the bar to serve a customer, and I notice the influx of patrons. I tie my dark hair back and look up to serve the group who has just

approached my section of the bar.

“Well, well, is this the engraved beauty from the Kappa Betas’ beach party?”

The speaker’s eyes leer down over what he can see above the bar top, which is really only a sliver of skin between my skirt and top. His tongue peeks out between his lips as he swishes back his surfer-boy hair. He braces himself up with one elbow on the bar. It’s the asshole with the unimpressive pickup line and the gaudy yellow shorts. His collared golfing shirt is the same color tonight.

“Didn’t catch your name, sweetheart?”

His buddies are all leering the same way he is, and unfortunately, I can’t dismiss him the same way I did at the party.

“What can I get you?”

It doesn’t mean I have to engage him any more than my job requires. My face is apathetic as I wait for them to order. Unfortunately, it might be encouraging this type.

“You can get me...your name and a night out...or in.” He smirks. “Your choice.” He says it slowly as he leans farther over the bar, narrowing his suggestive gaze on my mouth.

“Harley, you gotta full bottle of José?” Sal shouts from the other side of the bar.

I reach under the counter and meet her halfway.

“Harley, damn, I didn’t think you could get any hotter, but I can admit when I’m wrong.”

Swiveling back to my customers, I see all four pairs of eyes on my backside.

“Yep, I’m the bad girl of your dreams. Can I get you a drink, or will it just be the riveting conversation?”

Another guy with a long beard walks up to the bar, and I refill his glass with the foaming beer.

“Nah, just a round of Natty Light and your number should do it.” He smirks, glancing around at his companions.

His buddies all holler at his boldness, clapping him on the shoulder. He winks at me as I hand over the cold mugs.

“Open or closed?” I question.

He hands his black credit card over. “I’ll be open all night, baby.”

My eyes roll at the line.

The rest of the night completely sucks because they stay almost until closing. My skin crawls as I walk home in the dark, glancing back over my shoulder at every sound.

Adam

When I walk into Principles of Horticulture early on Monday morning, I see Harley sitting in the front row. She's bent over her desk. Her hair is pulled into a high, messy bun, revealing her inked skin around the thin blue straps of her shirt. I take a steadying breath before deciding that sitting behind her will be far more distracting than just choosing the seat next to her.

"Mornin'."

Her head lifts up, and I catch my breath as her wide lake-blue eyes snap into mine.

Maybe behind her would be a better choice.

"Hi," is all I get before she looks back down at her notebook, opened to a blank page.

"Mind if I sit here?"

She doesn't seem thrilled to see me, which bothers me more than I care for.

"It's open," she mumbles.

Awkwardly standing in the aisle isn't my favorite pastime, so I claim the chair. I have sisters, so I'm not completely dense as to when a woman isn't happy.

"How was your weekend?" I ask.

She doesn't look up. "Fine."

Definitely not thrilled to see me.

"What did you do?"

I'm racking my brain for when I may have misstepped at the party. *Was it the shirt thing?*

"Work," she replies.

I should give up.

"Where do you work?"

I like the raspy sound of her voice too much.

"Bar on Seventh."

"What? How old are you?"

Her gaze meets mine again. "Eighteen. Why?"

"How can you work at a bar if you're only eighteen?"

I probably sound like a moron.

"That's the law in Texas," she says, like it's a well-known fact.

A few seconds crawl by.

"Well...do you like it?"

I shouldn't be here, talking to her. Her heart-shaped face is tilted to the side as she chews on her pen.

"The tips aren't bad. Hate the uniform and some of the customers. Hours are shitty." She's all about facts, straight to the point.

I turn my face toward the front as the professor walks in.

"What's so bad about the uniform?" I whisper, leaning toward her. I pick up on a subtle green apple scent as she leans in my direction.

"Miniskirt and a little T-shirt. You'd love it."

I turn to see her smirking at me. My cheeks tinge pink, and I hate myself for picturing her in it. Nothing could be worse than the red bikini. When did

my mind start to digress to such a low level of debauchery? *Is this her effect on me? Or is it my own failure to focus on my degree and find a suitable girl to start getting to know?*

“What are the hours?”

I should shut up since the professor is about to start the class. He greets us all as more students stumble in with tired eyes.

Harley takes out her pen, writes something down, and pushes it toward me.

6 to 2:30

She must mean two in the morning. That means, she got off work less than six hours ago.

you must be tired

I push the notebook back and start to jot the date on my own. We're the only two students I see with pens and paper instead of laptops.

a little. what did you do last night?

I should be taking notes, but talking to her is a lot more interesting than soil composition. I know all of this information by heart anyways.

just played cards with my roommates

She doesn't respond for a while. I don't mention all the time I sat and tried not thinking about how bad I felt for what I'd said at the party about only wanting to be friends with her. It's true, but for some reason, I feel like it sounded like I thought I was too good for her, which I don't.

We continue to take notes on the lesson, which feels endless with her sitting so close to me. Every so often, I catch her intoxicating scent of green apple. It must be in her shampoo, and now, I'm remembering the long, sunny days spent picking them in the orchard a few miles from home.

"I suggest you all find a study partner for the upcoming test. I'll give you a few minutes to turn to someone near you and set up a time to meet." He begins wiping down the board, and the students around us are exchanging contact information.

I want to ask for her number, but the words are stuck in my throat. She's packing up her stuff. I pull out my phone.

"What is that?" She stares at the flip phone in my hand.

I look down, confused. "My phone?"

"Umm, you mean, your grandpa's phone?" She lets out a throaty laugh, and I'm instantly addicted to it. She doesn't laugh enough.

"What do you mean? I bought it a couple years ago."

Her face sobers up. "You're kidding. That's your real phone?"

I'm genuinely perplexed at her questions. Everyone in my family has a phone like this.

"What kind of phone do you have?" I ask, desperate to keep talking to her.

Her crystal-blue eyes draw me in, twinkling.

"A normal one?" She pulls a smartphone from her jean shorts pocket.

"Those break too easily, and they cost a fortune."

Most people don't realize what a frivolous investment smartphones are. I didn't realize they'd become the normal type to have.

"Well, how do you get on TikTok and Twitter with that thing?"

She pulls her backpack on and turns to walk out the aisle. We're some of the only students left in the room.

"I don't know what that is. I use the internet on the laptop I share with my brother. We got it when we came here for papers and research."

It was difficult to convince my parents. They were worried about lewd websites. After installing protective search barriers, they allowed it.

"You don't have any social media?" she asks incredulously.

I'm a little embarrassed to be so naive about what most people my age use the internet for. Growing up on the farm, nobody really uses it, except for emails and extended weather reports. My uncle keeps the books for the farm on a website, but we simply don't need a computer for anything else.

"No, I guess not. Calling and texting sometimes are all I really need."

We emerge out into the September morning. The sunlight reflects in Harley's eyes, bringing out the golden rims around her irises. She is breathtaking. I realize belatedly that I'm staring, so I look down at my worn boots. *Who knew there was something in creation more beautiful than a sunset during harvest?*

"Well, I have another class. Do you want to exchange numbers to study later?" she asks.

My heart beats a little quicker with the prospect of seeing her again today.

"Sure." I rattle it off from memory.

She laughs, handing me her phone with a touch keypad on the screen.

"Just enter it."

I do, handing it back. A second later, my text tone sounds.

“Now, you have mine. See you later, Farm Boy.”

The excitement I feel overshadows the guilt. It’s only studying.



Adam: What time would you like to meet tonight?

I send my very first text to Harley, my hands a little shaky. The screen stares at me until it pings a few minutes later. My stomach does a flip as her name appears.

Harley: I’m in Bailey Hall. Meet me out front at seven?

I’ve passed the dorm, so I know where it is.

Adam: Okay. See you then.

She doesn’t reply.

Three hours crawl by like ants. I shower and put on some clean work jeans and a fresh T-shirt. My blonde hair is always cut short, and I pull a faded Stetson’s Feed cap over my head. I’ve had it for years, but it’s too comfortable to part with.

The bathroom door opens as I’m brushing my teeth.

“I thought you didn’t work Mondays,” my brother, Dan, says as he walks over to the toilet. His urine hits the bowl a second later.

“Meeting someone to study for my horticulture test.”

“Who?”

I cringe as soon as he asks. “Just a girl from my class.”

He finishes and zips up his fly. “It wouldn’t happen to be the one with all the tattoos in the red bikini?”

My chest heats at his description. I don’t answer.

He chuckles. “Hmmm. Well, have fun, big bro.”

He slaps my back as he walks by. My jaw clenches, and I close my eyes. I will not hit him for this. He was just describing her to clarify who it was because he didn’t get her name. Blowing out a calming breath, I swing my backpack on and leave.

Why do I care if my brother looked at Harley that way?

I arrive at her dorm a few minutes later, right on time. She’s sitting on the steps, but she doesn’t have her books.

“Hey.” She stands and smiles as I approach.

My stomach feels tight. Her shorts barely cover anything.

“Hi.” I smile back. “Where are your books?”

She turns to walk up the steps, and I immediately avert my eyes down to my shoes.

“In my room.” She uses her key card to open the door.

“Oh, okay. Well, I can wait while you get them.”

“Well, how are we going to study if you’re down here and I’m up there?” She juts a hip out.

I freeze in place.

I clear my throat, glancing over my shoulder.

“We could go to the library,” I suggest, hoping she agrees.

“You have to have a group of four to get a study room, and you can’t talk at the tables.” She turns to walk into the dorm, but my feet stay rooted to the cement.

I cannot go up to her room.

She looks over her shoulder. “Listen, I promise I won’t steal your chastity belt. Come on.” She waves a hand, gesturing toward the entrance.

Another girl walks up behind us, passing by to get in. Feeling a little ridiculous, I follow her. She’s right; we’re just studying. This is probably the best place to do it.

My heartbeat is so loud in the elevator that I’m embarrassed, thinking she can hear it. We finally step onto her floor, and I follow her over the gaudy red carpet to a door with a number thirty-four on it. Her room is a disaster on one side with an unmade bed and clothes and shoes strung everywhere.

In the center, beneath the window, is a variety of thriving plants. I notice an ivy and a monstera from here, but the others I can’t name.

The other side of the room is tidy but less colorful. She sits on the clean bed with a muted purple comforter. I begin to pull out a chair, only to find it covered with a mountain of clothes. The item on top is a tiny green triangle of silk and straps. My mind immediately places it on Harley, contrasting with her skin and ink beautifully. The heat in my face is painfully obvious, but she doesn’t acknowledge it.

“Sorry, I need to do laundry. Just sit on the bed.”

She’s sitting near the middle with her back against the wall, her legs crossed and a notebook in her lap. I slowly sink onto the very end. This is my first time alone with a girl I’m not related to.

“So, I thought what he said today about regions and the different compositions in—” She looks up at me, her voice cutting off. “What’s

wrong?”

“Uh, nothing. Why?” I slide my backpack to the floor and take out my notebook.

“You’re clinging to the edge like I have some kind of disease,” she says.

She’s changed since class into a tiny pair of soft-looking pink shorts and a gray zip-up hoodie, open to her navel. Her green sports bra is showing underneath, revealing her flat, tanned stomach. She’s unbelievably attractive, no matter what she has on.

“I’m not used to...being alone with girls.” The admission slips past my lips.

I don’t want to see the look on her face, so I busy myself, digging for a pen.

She responds after what feels like hours, “Don’t be embarrassed, Farm Boy. I can teach you everything you need to know.”

My head jerks up, my eyes widening at her words. She starts laughing, and I realize it was a joke. I chuckle nervously at her blatant reference to fornication—again.

“Why do you keep calling me that?” I have to change the subject, or my face will never return to its normal color.

“Please tell me you’ve seen *The Princess Bride*. I know you were raised in the sticks, but it’s a classic.”

“Is that a movie? I don’t watch much TV.”

“Ugh, you’re killing me!” Her head drops back against the wall. “Okay, we have to watch it. I can’t be friends with you until you’ve seen it.”

I catch a sparkle in her eyes as she looks back down at her notebook.

A smile breaks over my face at the prospect of spending more time with her. I attempt to stamp out the fire of excitement. Surely, just being friends

with her is okay.

Harley

Kenna and her non-bitchy friends are visiting me at work Thursday. They blend in with the crowd, but I told them I would only serve them as long as Billy wasn't around.

"Harley! My girl, you are the best roommate that I could've ever wished for."

Kenna's face is curved into a grin, eyes lit up. She's a combination of adorable freckles and a rack that draws attention from men everywhere she goes.

"You coming to the Kappa Betas' dance tomorrow night?" Raelynn asks me.

Her perfect, upturned nose, large aquarium-blue eyes, and short bob are drawing looks from the male customers. Pretty much every man in the room is watching their table from the corner of their eyes.

"Eh, I'm not much of a dancer."

I look around for my manager for a second before sitting down at their booth. The seats are old cracked leather, exhausted from holding up thousands of patrons over the years.

"Well, you should, and I already have the perfect dress for you to wear. You have cowboy boots, don't you?" Kenna asks, leaning over the wooden table.

“Do I look like I own cowboy boots?” I quirk a brow at her.

“You can borrow mine! I have a million extra pairs. My mom insists on buying them for me every Christmas even though a two-step is the only place I’ll be caught dead in them,” Raelynn says as she stuffs her mouth with a fried potato wedge. Her parents own a cattle ranch worth millions, according to Kenna.

“Cool. If I go,” I look up to see the bar getting more crowded.

“You have to go! Adam will be there.” Kenna wiggles her eyebrows. “I saw him on the way to chem and invited him.”

“What about his roommates?” I accuse, standing up to go rescue Sal and the other bartenders from the pack of sorority girls crowding the bar.

I walk away before she has a chance to respond. A hand reaches out to grip my elbow.

“Hey, what’s the rush?”

I rip my arm away, my chest tightening at the unexpected contact.

“What?” I shriek.

I hate being touched without warning; it brings up foul memories. The unwelcome sight of wavy blond hair and dark eyes appears in front of me. I’m struck with the realization that he resembles Adam with longer hair. Except that he’s dressed like a wannabe pro golfer, like he was at the beach party.

“I have to get to the bar, Kyle.” I turn, but he grabs my arm again. My heart is racing, fear spiking in my veins.

Don’t panic.

“Well, you can get me a drink then. I need a shot of something sweet.” He lets out a low-pitched laugh at his own joke, releasing me with a squeeze.

I rush to the safety of the bar. My phone starts to ring, and I duck into the storage room. Drawing in a calming breath, I look at the screen.

It's an unknown number, so I ignore it. I need to get back out there and help the other bartenders. After a few more slow breaths, I will my legs to carry me to the bar top.

"Harley!" My name is called, propelling me forward to avoid getting canned.

I need this job, so I can get a car and a laptop and a million other things I can't afford.

My phone pings with a text.

Adam: Hi, how are you tonight?

I can't help but smile at the message on my phone. I begin to respond when my name is called again.

"Harley! We need more Grey Goose! Are you alive back there?" Annoyance tinges Sal's voice, so I quickly type my response back.

Harley: At work. Call you when I'm off?

I don't wait for a response, grabbing the glass bottle and rushing out.

The rest of the night is a blur of spilled alcohol, catcalls, and fake smiles. I groan in relief as the last patron exits. Locking the door, I grab the broom to start sweeping under the tables.

I pull out my phone to see if Adam responded. I notice the unknown caller left a voice mail.

The text draws a curve on my face.

Adam: Sure. I'll wait up.

Suddenly, my finger is touching the call button, and the phone is pressed to my ear. My breath catches as his gravelly voice answers.

"Hello?" He sounds like he just woke up.

"I'm sorry. You said to call. Did I wake you up?" I whisper, the phone clutched between my shoulder and ear as I sweep up crunched receipts and straws. *Why did I even call him?* I start to say good-bye. "I'll see you—"

"No, I'm glad you did. I just dozed off. How was work?"

His voice sends a tiny swarm of butterflies through my stomach, and I chastise myself. *Just friendly horticulture enthusiasts studying living things together.*

"It was the usual—grabby customers and decent tips. How was your night? Did you start on the study guide?" I respond.

I walk toward the back, waving at Sal as she completes her closing work behind the counter.

"Bye," I say as I walk out onto the street.

"Oh, do you need to go?" Adam asks.

"No. I was just saying bye to my coworker. Why are you up so late?"

The streets are nearly empty, but I'm still surveying my surroundings with wariness.

"Uh, I was working on a paper and...just waiting for you to call, I guess." He pauses, and my stomach flips. "Hope that's okay." The uncertainty in his voice is endearing.

“Sure, it’s fine.” More than fine if I listened to the increase in my heart rate. “I hate the walk home alone. Having someone to talk to is nice.”

I wish I could shut up. He wants to be friends, and so do I.

“You’re walking home? From the bar...at two a.m.?” His voice is distressed, and I hear the rustling of fabric and grunting.

“Uh, yeah. It’s only two miles to campus. I do it all the time.”

I hear a door slam.

“Did you say the bar is on Seventh? Are you still on the same street?”

His breath is a little heavier, and I realize he’s running.

I laugh. “Are you going to run here? I’m fine, really. I’m used to walking. No one’s even out this late.” My heart is not thumping harder at his concern.

A car door slams over the phone, and a loud engine roars to life.

“Adam, seriously, I’m okay.”

“Please tell me where you are, Harley. It’s the middle of the night. I can’t believe you’ve been walking home all this time.” He sounds calm, but I sense a little bit of desperation in his tone.

“I’m on the corner of Seventh, and you should really go back to the dorms, Farm Boy.” I cannot let him rescue me. I don’t need help.

“Did you know that the crime rate skyrockets after midnight?” he asks, his voice desperate.

“No, but I do now,” I reply, looking around the mostly deserted street. My steps quicken.

A diesel engine is getting louder, and I realize it’s physically approaching. The streetlights reveal a faded blue-and-white classic Chevrolet pickup pulling up beside me on the sidewalk.

“Please let me drive you home.” He’s still talking to me through the phone, but now, I can see his face, square jaw clenched. Amber eyes are piercing into me. His muscled arm is resting on top of the vintage-style steering wheel, the other gripping his old flip phone.

For a moment, I feel transported back to a time when men were more attentive and romantic gestures were the norm. Before the age of Tinder, Snapchat, and hook-up culture.

Is this really happening?

“I’m okay. I can walk.” My voice lacks conviction. I’m still talking into the phone, standing still and facing his window.

His eyes plead with me, widening to puppy-dog-begging size. “Harley, I really can’t let you walk home alone at this hour. It would be my pleasure to drive you.” He puts the single cab into park, opens the door, and steps onto the street.

A car drives by, honking at him. His eyes stay on me, phone pressed to his cheek.

“Why would you come out here to get me?” I ask him.

“You need to...I need to make sure you’re safe.” I hear his voice echoing into the receiver.

We put the phones down together as he reaches me.

“Why do you care?” I’m whispering now, my voice scratchy.

He takes another step, swallowing as he gets closer to me, not quite touching.

“Why don’t you want me to care?” His voice is low to match mine.

“I—I thought we were going to be just friends?”

He takes a deep breath and reaches out a large hand to brush a stray hair out of my eyes. He trails it down my cheek, gazing at my lips. I can feel

what he wants to do, but somehow, I know he won't.

"I can't stop thinking about you," he whispers, like his voice being lower gives him boldness to say such things.

"You said you didn't want to pursue a woman."

I step closer, my hand reaching out to hold on to his forearm. The sensation of peace and safety seems to ooze from his pores. His fingers lightly wrap around my elbow, and the touch sends rhythmic tingles up to my chest. We make twin gasping noises, our breath mingling in the few inches of air separating our lips. His eyes drop down, gaze laser-focused on my mouth.

A car driving by beeps its horn, and we both jerk.

He clears his throat, the moment shattered.

"Please get in. I'm already here." He opens the door to the pickup.

The lamp above his head casts his face in shadows, his bones flawlessly formed together. He should be a model for toothpaste, so the camera would have to focus on his jawline.

I step into the slightly lifted truck. His seats are a soft gray fabric upholstery that's been well maintained but is clearly old. The radio is a classic style that only plays stations, no CDs. A manual gearshift sticks up from the floor. He climbs into the driver side, slamming the door shut.

We drive in silence, the air between us tense. Slightly labored breathing is the only sound. We pass a homeless man pushing a grocery cart.

Adam gives me a side-eye that says, *I can't believe you were going to walk all the way back.*

"It's not that bad. I've always had to walk alone on the streets at night. You think my foster mom gave me rides after work?"

Apparently, I can't help spewing truth around him, but I vow to keep a lid on the sob story. I notice the tendons in his driving arm flex as he pulls up to my dorm.

"Well, she sounds like a terrible mom. Will you call me next time, please?"

He turns to face me, the intimacy of the street immediately returning. I'm not going to melt at this show of concern.

"Doubtful. You aren't my chauffeur...or my boyfriend."

He blinks in surprise but quickly recovers.

"Do you...do you have a boyfriend?" His voice is a little strained as he asks it.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" I ask, although I'm pretty certain of the answer.

"No, I...I don't date. I've never had one." His blatant honesty is refreshing.

"Well, you could probably have the pick of the litter with this whole chivalry-wrapped-in-muscles thing you got going on." I smile out the window. "You just need to pick a more suitable object for your attention." I click open the old-fashioned door handle. I could get used to being picked up in this truck.

"Why are you so against me...us maybe...being more than friends?" He holds his breath. He seems to be looking for a reason...maybe he needs me to reassure him that I don't feel that way about him.

I lean across the narrow cab, my breasts brushing against his chest and my mouth a hair from his ear. His breath hitches, and I detect the light scent of cedar.

“You couldn’t handle me as any more than friends,” I breathe into him, his body tense.

I don’t care what he wants to hear. I slam the door on my words.

Blowing out a breath, I tell myself it’s for the best to shut him down before he gets his hopes up. Damaged isn’t something a sweet, innocent guy like him needs.

I’m in the elevator before I remember the voice mail. I pull out my phone, and my finger hovers over the delete button. It could be the financial aid office. My blood is cold when I hear a familiar voice on the recording.

“Harley, I’m glad I finally found you. The way you left things was...unacceptable. You can’t breach a contract in the middle of the terms. I trust you’ll get back to me before I have to involve the police. You have one week to call me and work this out before we seek legal action.”

Bile is rolling up my throat, and my hands start to sweat. They found my number...*did they find me?*

Adam

“**L**evi, you can go to the dance without actually dancing. Kenna said not to worry about not knowing the steps. We can stand on the sidelines and hang out. It’s not a sin to...watch dancing.” My voice fades a little as I realize it could be a sin, but I’m not sure.

Dan sees the doubt on my face and rushes to reassure me. “If you called him, Dad would want time to consult Pastor Ray, and then we would miss it.” His eyes are wide, pleading with me.

Levi looks up from his laptop, black-framed glasses slipping down his nose. He pushes them back up. “You guys go ahead. I need to work on this genetics paper. I want to get a head start.”

We all know he’s not even challenged by his advanced classes. We are the extent of his social circle, and he’d rather write a textbook than meet new people.

“You ready?”

I’ve got on my Sunday-best jeans—the only ones without rips—my black button-down shirt, and leather boots. Dan is dressed the same, except that he’s wearing a green button-down. Silas has a baseball game tonight.

“So, you and the tattooed—” Dan begins as we get into my ’72 Chevy.

“Her name is Harley,” I clip.

“Okay, Harley. Are you and her like, ya know...”

Apparently, giving a girl a ride home at two a.m. means you’re in love with her.

Dan and I were never allowed to date. He's gone off and kissed a few girls behind the classrooms at church, out of view of the parking lot, but we're both inexperienced with relationships and intimacy.

"We're just friends." I pause. "Not that I owe you an explanation." I can't explain it to him if I don't understand it.

A few minutes pass by, and we pull up to the dance hall the sorority rented out.

"Ha, I just keep picturing Mom's face if you ever tried to bring her—"

My hand slams the steering wheel. "Would you shut up about it? Damn." I focus on looking for a space, taking deep breaths.

"Oh, she's really rubbing off on you. I've never heard you curse. Not even when your hand got caught under the combine blade."

His face is turned toward me, trying not to laugh. Thirty-four stitches left a jagged scar on my left hand. I flex it at the memory.

As we walk toward the dance hall, there are men in cowboy hats stationed outside, asking for IDs. One marks Dan's hands with Xs. I get a pink bracelet around my wrist.

The interior is dimly lit, revealing a saddle, glittering with mirrors and diamonds, suspended from the ceiling. A stage light is trained on it, causing light to bounce all around the couples dancing in the center of the floor.

I start to recognize a few faces from my classes and the dorms as we make our way toward the swaying bodies. Most of the girls are wearing little dresses with cowboy boots, which I've never seen before. The guys are all in a variation of what Dan and I have on.

"Where's your girlfriend?" my brother says to me, loud enough to be heard over the blaring Texas country band.

“Not my girlfriend,” I mumble under my breath, searching the sea of skin for one marked up with ink.

“Hey, boys, so glad you could make it!” Kenna approaches us in a little black dress that has a lacy part over her stomach and a pair of white boots.

Her face falls a bit as she approaches, but she’s still smiling.

“Where’s Levi?” She looks behind us toward the entrance.

“He, uh, needed to write a paper,” I say.

Her wide green eyes peer up at me. She hesitates but finally speaks, “Does he not...well, is he gay?” She rushes out the last part.

My mouth drops open.

“No, no, he’s not gay. Why would you think so?”

Dan is simply listening in, as perplexed as I am at her question.

She rushes to explain. “Well, he just didn’t really even give me a chance, you know? I guess I was just hoping it wasn’t...me.” She brushes a hand through her straight blonde hair and glances over her bare shoulder.

“Yeah, I, uh, I think he’s just shy. It’s not you. He’s never really dated anyone.” I realize I’m not helping clear up whether or not he likes girls, but honestly, I’ve never even thought about it until now.

“But you’re sure he isn’t gay?” She seems doubtful, her forehead scrunched up as she looks between us.

Dan finally chirps up, “Nah, he ain’t gay. He’s just...super smart, and he’s nervous around women. His parents kind of kept him locked up and made him do calculus and whatnot all day. He’s real nice, just quiet.” He flashes her a grin, his dimple appearing.

She laughs and reaches a hand out to touch his forearm. “Okay, well, if you say so. I guess I’ll just have to let it go. You gentlemen care for a drink?” She holds up her glass as she asks it.

“No, thanks. We don’t really drink.” My eyes are sweeping the room, hoping Harley shows up tonight.

Kenna giggles, “Oh, right. I think I remember from the beach party. Okay, well, who wants to dance?” She interrupts our chance to respond with a wave, her voice raised. “Harley! Over here!”

I slowly turn my head to watch her approach. Her ebony hair is splayed out around her, straighter than I’ve ever seen it. She has on a light-blue denim dress that hangs off of her shoulders, leaving them bare. The short hem grazes the tops of her thighs. The tall black cowboy boots she’s wearing have intricate white designs cut into the sides. They add a few inches to her height.

As she gets closer, my stomach starts to tighten. Her eye color has never been bluer, enhanced by the denim. Her plump lips are shiny, her face almost angelic. Without a doubt, she’s the most enticing being I’ve ever come in contact with. She stands out among the college crowd with her numerous tattoos, and I feel the sudden urge to run my fingertips over her skin and trace all the shapes.

“You are...breathtaking.” The words slip from my mouth before I have time to think about them first.

Friends don’t call each other breathtaking. Her mouth starts to curl upward as she looks down at her boots, thick lashes brushing her cheeks, almost like she’s shy.

Dan saves the day. “Hey, Harley, I’m Dan. Adam’s brother.” He stretches out a hand, and they shake.

“I knew the chambray would be perfect on you, babe. You are stunning.” Kenna smiles, perfect teeth flashing.

“Thanks. I’m glad I decided to come.” She’s looking at me as she says it, and I want more than anything to kiss her, like on the street and in my truck.

My new, constant state is wanting her, and it happened fast. I have no idea if she feels the same. My intuition tells me she does, but this is unknown territory for me. I know I shouldn’t give in to this urge, but the pull I feel toward her is magnetic.

“Do you dance?” Harley’s raspy voice asks.

She’s standing close by me, and I want to reach out my arms to wrap around her shoulders. I cross them over my chest instead.

“No, I don’t really know how. Do you?”

She nods. “I love to dance.”

I hesitate in telling her what I’m thinking, but I feel like it’s a point worth making. I’m curious about how she’ll respond.

“It’s kind of...well, it’s a sin really.”

My parents and our church always taught us that. Dancing is somewhere up in line with fornication.

“Says who?” she challenges me. Her tone isn’t mocking, thankfully.

“Well...it just, you know, can lead to...other things that are wrong.” My breath is held up in my lungs.

If she didn’t already think I was a freak, she does now.

“Dancing is not a sin. They dance in the Bible.” She says it matter-of-factly.

I stare at her, contemplating her words.

“Well, yes, but the point is just that it...can lead to impure thoughts and actions.” I’m beginning to doubt the solidity of the memorized reason. Maybe I’m forgetting part of it.

“How do you know? Have you ever done it?” Her hand is on her hip, her face turned up to look at mine.

I look out at the dance floor. The twirling couples seem to be having fun.

“No, but—”

She cuts me off, “No *buts*. My favorite Bible verse is about dancing—*You have turned my mourning into dancing*. It’s in the Psalms. You can look it up. There’s more, ones about having a time to mourn and a time to dance. Anyways, the point is that it’s not a sin.” She’s not smug about it, but she is confident.

My mouth falls open. I’m shocked to learn she reads the Bible and knows what it says. She doesn’t seem like that type of girl. Color bleeds up my neck as I realize how harshly I’ve judged her.

“Well, I guess maybe...I was wrong then.” My voice is hesitant, embarrassed at my own unfair assumptions.

She laughs, a bright, delightful burst of color in the dark room.

“Okay then, Farm Boy. So, are you gonna ask me to or what?”

She starts walking toward the dance floor backward, eyes lit up. My feet follow of their own accord.

“Well, I will...but I don’t know how.”

The upbeat song ends. I didn’t even notice that Kenna and Dan had drifted to the other side of the room. A slower tempo starts to pour over us, isolating us from the other couples. I haven’t heard much country music, but I instantly like it. We only listened to hymns at home.

She’s on the edge of the floor where the couples have slowed down to a gentle sway. Her eyes are drawing me in to her, lashes fluttering. My hand stretches out, and she takes it, leading me out.

The music is enveloping us as she takes my hand and places it on her small waist. Hers reaches up to grip my shoulder. Our height difference is usually almost a foot, but with her heeled boots, our faces are closer. She guides our feet, mumbling the count of the two-step. I stumble several times over her feet.

“You sure do smell nice,” she comments, looking up at me.

“Oh yeah? You smell like green apples.”

I lick my lips, and her smile fades as she watches the action. She looks away, lowering her lashes.

“It’s just my shampoo.”

“I like it.”

She’s playing with the collar of my shirt. My arms instinctively pull her closer, nudging her just near enough to not be touching. It’s difficult but necessary.

“It reminds me of an orchard back home.”

Her mouth parts a little as our gaze meets again, but she doesn’t speak for a while. Her eyes never leave mine.

“I, uh...thanks for the ride. I think I forgot to tell you that.” She bites down on her bottom lip, blinking.

“I’d really like to drive you again, if you’d allow me to.”

“I won’t stop you, but I’m really okay on my own.”

Her voice isn’t annoyed, but she sounds indifferent. If she won’t let me drive, I’ll have to try walking her home. If I have to prove that I’m serious, I will. She could get hurt out on the streets at night.

I won’t be able to sleep, knowing she’s out there alone.

“What days do you work?”

“Let’s talk about something else. Do you work?”

She can't change the subject like this. I feel an animalistic need to protect her, and the strength of it scares me. Slowly releasing a breath, I tighten my hand on her waist, reaching it toward her lower back. I've finally gotten the steps down because of how slow she's set our pace.

"Yes, I work at the Tillery Street Plant Nursery."

"What? You get to work with plants all day?" Her eyes sparkle with excitement. "Please tell me it's awful and you hate it. Or I will die of jealousy."

"You should meet me there sometime. Lately, we've been getting all the seasonal shipments of trees." *And I need to keep seeing you even though I know you're not good for me.*

She groans, the sound increasing my heart rate. "I would love to, but it's too far to walk."

I hear my own voice, talking without my permission. "I'll pick you up. I only work from seven to noon tomorrow. I can text you when I'm off." *Do I sound desperate and pathetic? What if she doesn't want to?* "But if—"

She blesses my ears with a laugh, tossing her hair. "I'd love to, Farm Boy. It's a friend date."

The song is still playing, and I tune into the lyrics about an angel with broken wings. Am I crazy for getting close to her? I know what my family would say, and my whole life, I've lived like they wanted me to. I've never had a reason to deviate from it. Now, I'm wondering if we've had it wrong all along. Is Harley the promiscuous woman who's going to lead me down a path of destruction? I've been warned about the "woman of the night" since before I was old enough to understand what it meant. She certainly appeals to my base instincts, and I want her in ways I've rarely thought about until now. My brain is fogged up with her skin and her smell.

The music stops, and I suddenly need to get some air. She's too alluring in my arms. It causes me to lose my train of thought, wanting what I shouldn't.

Releasing her is difficult, but my arms finally obey. She takes a step back, a question in her eyes.

"I need to...find Dan."

The hurt in her eyes stabs me in the chest.

"Okay..." She slowly pivots and walks away from me.

I stumble in the other direction, searching for the men's room. The stick figure on the door leads me in. I step to the sink, splashing my face with cool water. She makes my skin feel like it fits too tight.

Looking into the mirror, I see another guy step in after me. He's about my height with longer hair. His shirt is bright pink. Standing up straighter, I grab a paper towel to dry my face.

"I get it, man. She breaks me out in a sweat too. You should see her bend over to get you a beer at Billy's." His tone is lewd, and he steps up to look at himself in the mirror.

My muscles tense. *He sees her at work?*

"Yeah, she's one of those that's good for serving drinks and bending over," he answers, almost like he heard my thought. "I've been wearing her down for a while, but the dance was a smooth move. I forget girls love that shit." He laughs, running a hand through his long hair.

I still haven't said anything. What I really want is to shove my clenched fist through his nasal passage for talking about her like she isn't a human being. I toss my paper towel in the trash, intending to walk away before I end up in jail tonight. My parents would love that.

He grabs my arm as I start to walk out. I look down at his hand on me, and he withdraws it. He holds his hands up in front of his chest.

“Hey, man, no need to get pissy. Just letting you know I’ve already laid a claim to that ass. She’ll need a few days to recover from me, but then she’s all yours. You seem like the type to deal well with the...hurt feelings.” His face is smug as he struts out the door.

Minutes crawl as my blood pressure eventually returns to its normal range and my breathing doesn’t sound like I’ve been sprinting. Slowly walking out the door, I’m determined to find Harley and ask her if she really is going to...be with that jerk. Does she know he intends to discard her? Is she okay with it? Is it a habit of hers to go through guys quickly?

Do I have any right to even begin asking her these questions?

My seething anger dies down as I catch a glimpse of Harley talking to Kenna’s blonde friend near the back wall. There’s a chance she doesn’t even like him, but doubt crowds my mind. He was a good-looking guy, and he clearly has more experience. For a moment, I’m overwhelmed with my lack of knowledge on dating and women. I know my parents love me, but the reality of my inexperience is crushing me. I feel like I’ve been deprived of the chance to make my own mistakes and learn when people are being honest or not.

My deliberate steps slow to a halt as I see the pink-shirt guy walk up to say something to her. They talk for a few agonizing seconds before the other girl walks away. He’s laughing, but her face is turned away, so I can’t see what her response is. He catches my eyes watching them from across the room. Reaching down, his hand grabs a handful of her backside, underneath her dress.

I'm frozen in place. My gut reaction is to run toward them and throw him against the wall, my hand against his throat. My fist would reach around and fulfill my earlier fantasies of forcing his nasal bone further into his skull.

But she doesn't move. His hand stays under her dress, revealing the tattoos at the back of her thighs. My heart sinks as I realize how stupid I am. Shame and embarrassment roll over me, sending color up my chest and neck. She's wanted to be friends all along, and I'm the idiot, assuming there might be a chance we could have more than that. She wants a guy who actually knows how to be charming and has the guts to kiss a woman.

I turn away, unable to keep watching. Dan has walked up beside me, observing the scene against the wall.

"You ready to go, brother?" He claps a hand on my shoulder, concern in his eyes, lips pursed.

I nod, slowly walking out with him. The sick feeling in my gut is what I get for making assumptions.

Harley

My breath is coming in gasps, the thrum of my heart the only sound. The fear in my veins is ice-cold. Memories flash through my mind—of prying hands as I lie flat on a red leather chair, my bare skin sticking to the seat, and the sound of buzzing. Suddenly, my nightmare has come back to life.

“You gotta quit holding out on me, sweetheart. This hard-to-get game is driving me crazy for you. Come over tonight.” Kyle’s suggestive, grating tone wrenches me back to the present.

His hand on my ass suddenly registers, and I shove him off. My lungs are compressed, oxygen barely seeping in.

I’m safe in Texas. Illinois is a thousand miles away.

The race in my chest is finally beginning to slow. Panic attacks are a new development in my life, and they paralyze me. A voice blurs into my mind, growing louder through the haze.

“Harley...Harley! What’s wrong? What happened to her?” Kenna’s voice is suddenly blaring in my ears.

I physically jolt as she grabs my arms.

“Are you okay? Kyle, what did you do?”

Her wide, panicked eyes are inches from mine. I feel a tear slipping down my cheek.

It’s not real.

The room expands in my vision as I realize I'm not back there. I got away, and a handsy jerk like Kyle has no control over me.

"I didn't do anything. I have no clue what's wrong with her," he says, eyes narrowed at me with mock concern.

My hand materializes and slaps at the stupid grin on his face, smacking it to the ground. The sound is drowned by the music, but the red mark on his cheek is proof it happened.

His face morphs into a brute glare, eyes cold, mouth forming a hard line.

I don't wait for his response, fleeing instead with Kenna into the crisp, chilled air. I gulp, tears still falling from my eyes.

"Harley, I'm freaking out. What happened? What did he do? I saw you all starry-eyed with Adam. Then, the next thing I know, you're in the corner with Kyle, and he had his hand—"

I cut her off, "I know, okay! I didn't—he just grabbed me and—I just—" My words are a jumble of choked sobs, and I hate myself for losing control.

The past few months have been an awakening. Finally breaking free from the nightmare of my life has steadily allowed the reality of my circumstances to drip in, slow and agonizing.

"Take a few breaths, Harley. Breathe in." She pauses. "Breathe out." She mimics the slow, deliberate pattern until I'm under control.

Exhaustion overcomes me. I look up to realize we're standing by her cherry-red Jeep Wrangler. She opens my door, and I climb in. The window rolls down, my head resting back on the cold seat. By the time we reach the dorms, I feel raw and exposed. All I want is to hide in the comfort of my bed.

"If you need to talk about it, I'm always here. I know how a panic attack can take it out of you, and you don't have to explain anything if you don't

feel like it..." Kenna's voice is quietly soothing as we ride the elevator up to our room.

My insides feel hollow. A nod is all I can manage. It'll be a miracle if I can ever comprehend these feelings. Voicing them seems like a towering, distant mountain I could never climb.



The dawn finally comes, and I'm reminded of my "date" at the plant nursery with Adam. Despite my fretful, broken sleep, the anticipation brings a lightness to my belly.

When twelve thirty rolls around, I still haven't heard from him. Kenna asks if I want to go to lunch at the cafeteria. I'm already dressed in a yellow floral sundress with tiny white flowers on it. She insisted I wear it on our not-a-real date. It's something I would never wear normally, but I feel like breaking free from my old shell. Adam is having a weird effect on me. Also, with all the dessert I've been eating, some of my shorts won't button.

I'm debating if I should wait for him here or go with her.

"He can just pick you up from there when he calls," she says with a smile.

I nod. Of course she's right. I'm being ridiculous. He's just a friend, taking me to my favorite place, where sunshine gives life to all the green things.

We stroll in the October air, the temperature still warm. Illinois is probably already cool enough for a light jacket. As we step into the air-conditioning, I go save us a seat. I'm too nervous to eat anything. Kenna brings me over a glass of water, and I mumble a thanks.

“So, what’s got you all twisted up into a ball of yarn? You should be excited! He really is the sweetest and so handsome. I don’t usually go for short hair, but with a jawline like that, it would be a sin to hide it. Also, his eyes look like a pot of warm honey. Mmm...” She does a little shoulder shimmy, and I laugh.

It didn’t take her long at all to break down my defenses. She’s the type of genuine that’s impossible to be guarded around. Her beauty is inward as much as it is outward, emerald eyes popping.

“He is. I just can’t tell if he really is a good one or just good at acting like a good one. You know?”

I’m eternally grateful that she hasn’t brought up my panic attack from last night. We somehow bonded through the experience.

She nods her head in understanding, taking a bite of her grilled sandwich. The silence encourages me to go on.

“He says he only wants to be friends, but it’s like we both secretly want more. I can’t tell if he’s just nervous to admit it or if he’s fighting it because he thinks I’m...dirty or something.” I’m not usually one to open up, but I need to talk to someone about it.

She waves a hand like that thought is ridiculous. “Oh, he is definitely just nervous to admit it. He’s probably never even seen a girl as hot as you. He was raised out on a farm, totally isolated from the world. They didn’t even know girls like us existed. At least, I keep telling myself that’s why Levi doesn’t want anything to do with me.” She’s trying to comfort me and herself at the same time. A weak smile curves over her lips.

“Sorry about Levi, by the way. I know you liked him.” I feel like a bad friend. All we’ve talked about is my boy problems. The realization we are friends now hits me. *When did that happen?*

She shrugs, adjusting her glasses. She looks adorable even though she rolled out of bed roughly ten minutes ago.

“I asked Adam and Dan if he was gay last night. They seemed pretty certain he’s not, so...I guess that means he just doesn’t like me. I’ve invited them all to two parties, and he hasn’t come to either. Oh well.”

I can see the hurt on her face. She looks up and attempts another smile, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

“He would be insane to not like you, and he probably is just into guys. You can’t help that you were born with a hoo-ha.”

I’m expecting a laugh, but instead, her face goes white as she looks behind me. She dips down, staring at her tray.

“Of course, the one day I look like a garbage can...” she mumbles.

“What is it?”

I turn around to see Levi, Dan, Silas, and Adam sitting down to eat a few tables behind us. *Maybe he plans to text me after?*

He’s still in his work clothes—a dirty gray T-shirt and worn jeans that hug him perfectly. We make eye contact, and I attempt a smile and a little wave. His face changes from longing to embarrassment, pink gathering in his cheeks before he quickly looks back down at his tray.

“What the hell? I’m about to go over there and—” Kenna starts to stand up, but I grab her hand.

“It’s fine. Please don’t. I’m just gonna go back to the dorm. Hey, look. It’s Riley. Can she sit here with you? I’m sorry. I need to—” My voice chokes a little as I stand to leave. I’m going to be sick.

Riley walks up with a salad and a Diet Coke, saving the day. She takes one look at my face, and hers creases with concern.

“Hey, what’s the matter? Are you sick?” She’s talking so loud that I want to slap her.

My head nods as I flee.

Adam

My heart sinks into my shoes as I watch Harley run from the cafeteria. I loathe myself. I've been trying to send her a cancellation text all morning, but I couldn't think of how to phrase it without lying or sounding like a jerk.

How can she expect me to watch her let another guy feel her up right after I held her in my arms on the dance floor? My heart was racing with emotion until it crashed and burned. *Why don't I understand women at all?*

"Let it go, man. You can't help that she picked that bonehead." Silas is trying to reassure me, and I realize Dan must have told them what happened.

"We're just friends." I shrug with indifference.

They all look at each other and back at me, obvious concern on their faces. Yeah, yeah, I'm delusional. I pick at my burger, my stomach rejecting the thought of food entering it.

A blonde head is weaving toward us. Looking up, I see Kenna marching up to the table, her teeth bared and a flush in her neck. She stabs a finger into my chest, leaning down toward me.

"You really are a prick, you know that? The only thing that's worse than a guy like Kyle is one who *pretends* to be all nice and sweet before hurting someone who deserves better! You're *pathetic*." She leans back, huffing out a breath and surveying the table of gaping mouths and raised eyebrows.

She zeroes in on Levi for half a second, opening her mouth and then closing it. She shakes her head and stomps off.

No one moves for at least thirty seconds, the scolding having shaken us all.

“What did you do?” Silas finally mumbles.

They’re all waiting, and I don’t know what to say. *Did she expect me to take her to the plant nursery still? Did I imagine the intimacy of the dance while she was truly only wanting a friendship?*

My face falls into my hands as a groan escapes my lips.

I wish I could say this out loud, but they would never understand. *I can accept that she wants him and walk away, but how am I supposed to be friends with her, knowing she’s going to be kissing him, sleeping in his bed?*

I shake my head, convinced there’s no way I can handle it. She can be with him if that’s what she chooses, but I can’t watch, even as a friend.

“If you want her, you should tell her. You never even told her you wanted to be more than friends. Maybe she’s having the same doubts?” Levi speaks up, surprising me with his words.

Hearing someone else voice what I’ve been unable to is liberating.

Dan interjects with reality, “yeah, okay, maybe. If she was a girl you could bring home. I’m not saying she isn’t worth it, but you do realize they will never accept her.”

My brother is referring to our family and hometown church. He’s right, of course. If I choose to date Harley, I would be battling harsh disapproval from my father and most likely tears from my mother. They might eventually accept her, but it would be a fight. Simply because of her physical appearance and background, they would assume the worst about her.

Is that what I've been doing?



I've typed out at least one hundred messages on my plastic keypad, but I haven't been able to hit send on any. How do you put into words that you're sick to your stomach with desire, self-loathing, doubt, jealousy, and the physical need to be near a girl who seems to want another man? It's certainly not something appropriate for a text.

I find myself outside her dorm like a stalker around one a.m. A girl starts to walk in and holds the door open, smiling at me. The trusting gesture concerns me, but I go in anyway. Anyone could walk in here at night. Once I reach the third floor, I think I know what I'm going to say, if she opens the door to let me speak.

I reach room thirty-four and stare at it for at least five minutes. *What if Kyle is here? What if they're in there right now?*

I'm turning away when the door swings open, and Kenna screams.

"Adam! What the hell are you doing, standing outside my door like a freak?!" She slaps my chest with her hand, her face red with anger.

I rush to explain, holding my hands up in defense against another slap. "I'm sorry. I came to talk to Harley, but it's okay. I was—" I turn away again, but she grabs my arm.

"Harley's at work." She lets out a sigh, shaking her curly head. "Look, if you really are sorry, you should go see her there, but only if you mean it and you aren't going to screw it up again. She's been through some shit. She doesn't need any more baggage. If you like her, you get a pass, just this once, for cold feet or whatever it is you're dealing with." She finishes with a pointed look.

I groan in frustration. What she's saying doesn't make any sense to me.

I start to ramble incoherently, "I just...we said we were just going to be friends, but I really started to...then I talked to Kyle..." I reach a hand up to rub the back of my neck. Remembering Kyle and what happened at the dance makes me doubt my presence here.

Kenna scoffs, "Okay, wow, you have to go talk to her. She will want to know what you're thinking. I promise she has no idea." She shoves me out of the doorframe. "Seriously, go to Billy's Pub on Seventh. She'll be getting off soon."

I nod, unsure of why she's so insistent on it after her earlier disapproving speech at the cafeteria. She shuts the door, walking down the hall. I meander back down to the parking lot, finding my truck.

I drive around for forty-five minutes before finding myself at the pub. I put it in park, trudging up to the oversize wooden door. I try to talk myself out of it before taking a deep breath.

I open it and step inside.

"We're closing, sor—" Harley's weary voice breaks off at the sight of me.

"Hey," is all I can manage, a lump crawling up my throat. I shove my hands in my jean pockets.

"You don't drink," she clips, looking away to resume her cleanup around the tables and leather booths.

She's wearing a skimpy uniform. I've seen her in worse, but somehow, her being required to wear this to work at a bar makes my skin crawl. Last time I picked her up, she had an oversize hoodie on. An apron is tied around her tiny denim skirt. The too-small white tank top with the pub's name printed across her chest reveals some of her tanned stomach. Her hair is up

in a thick, high ponytail, her neck exposed. Every aspect of her body is divine. Why is it so difficult to be around her and think clearly?

I clear my throat, “I wanted to...make sure you had a ride home.” It’s only a partial lie.

She looks me up and down, rolls her eyes, and turns around. She walks through a door into the back. I run my hand over my head, debating whether or not I should take the hint and leave. I can’t let her walk home alone...

She emerges several minutes later with a small black purse and no apron. She ignores me and walks out the door. I pinch my nose, following her out.

“Listen, if Kyle had the decency to drive you home, I wouldn’t be here.” My tone is harsh, but it gets her attention.

She stops in her tracks and flips around, eyes blazing. “Why the hell would I want that creep to drive me home?” she grits out.

I take a step back, shocked at her words. “So, he can feel you up, but driving you home is too intimate?” I’m nearly shouting in the deserted street.

She raises up to her full height, stepping toward me. “You think I enjoyed him feeling me up? You think I asked for it? You think I’m a whore, so of course, I just *enjoy* random men groping me in public? Is that it, Adam?” She’s shouting back at me, her hands gesturing along with her words. “Cool. Got it. Glad I finally know what you really think of me.” Her voice cracks at the end of her speech.

Her words sting my insides.

She flips around, facing the opposite direction of the dorms, and begins to march away, arms folded over her chest.

Was he playing me this entire time, and I was too naive to read into it?

My feet run toward her. I catch her, gripping her shoulders.

“Harley—” I plead.

She peers up at me, tears brimming her bright blue eyes. Her lip is quivering, causing my heart to shatter.

“He said you were...he made it seem like you were a thing...and then I saw him grab you, and you didn’t—you never pushed him away.” I’m stumbling over the words, trying to make sense of what I saw. “I watched, and I thought that...I thought that I was stupid for wanting to be more than friends if you were really with him. If you were going to sleep with him, which is what he told me,” I finish, tilting my head to the side and pleading with my eyes for her to understand my confusion and embarrassment.

Her mouth drops open, blue eyes wide.

“He said we would be...sleeping together?” she whispers the words. “He’s just a pervert that hits on me all the time. He never takes no for an answer...” She presses a hand against her forehead and closes her eyes.

I take another step toward her, craving the feel of her under my fingers.

“Okay, okay...I believe you. Why would you...why did you let him put his hands on you?” My teeth clench as I remember the act and how intrusive it was.

She scoffs, “LET HIM? Again, I will say, do you really think I enjoyed it or asked for his hands up my skirt?”

I close my eyes. “You could have—”

She cuts me off, throwing my hands off of her, “I did, Adam! As soon as I survived a panic attack, I came to my senses and slapped his cocky, smug face! You have no earthly idea what it’s like to be taken advantage of, to be used and touched and—and you just freeze up—and—and—”

She breaks off into a sob, sinking to the filthy sidewalk, her hand clamped over her mouth to muffle the sound.

I follow her down, gripping her shoulders and pulling her into my chest. I pray my touch is comforting, but I can't just let her sit here, crying without consolation.

I reach under her knees, lifting her effortlessly into my arms. She immediately presses her face into my shoulder, the sobs shaking her body.

Harley

The feeling of being lifted into strong, muscular arms is euphoric. The scent of earth and cedar is overwhelming, and it reminds me of that rare sense of peace and security, which I've only ever had tiny glimpses of.

My body is being placed into the warm, comforting seat of his old pickup. The tears have subsided, so I wipe my cheeks with the backs of my hands. As I suck in several deep breaths, my heart rate slowly returns to normal.

The door closes, and another reopens, the vehicle shifting with his weight. The engine roars to life, loud and masculine. I open my eyes as he lifts me up again, shifting me over to sit next to him, his arm around me.

"Careful. I might get used to this," I mumble, resting my head against his shoulder.

He sighs. "Please do. I want nothing more."

He removes his arm to shift the gear into drive. I feel a chill on the skin he vacated.

"Where are we going?" I ask. My cheek on his warm shoulder is heavenly.

"I wanna take you somewhere." His voice is steady.

I reach my hand up to loop it under his elbow, resting it on his thigh. He tenses up momentarily before relaxing into my touch. I get the sense he's never sat so intimately with a girl.

“Okay, take me away, Farm Boy.” I sigh contentedly, suddenly feeling drowsy.

He chuckles. “Whatever happened to the movie night I was promised?”

As he speaks, he reaches his gear-shifting hand down to gently graze his fingertips on the inside of my left knee. Shivers shoot up my leg at the contact. His large hand wraps around the inside of my thigh, a respectful distance from my lady bits. He sighs indulgently, relaxing into the seat.

“You’ll get your movie night,” I mumble into his shoulder.

My lips curl up slightly, and my mind is fuzzy as we drive. My eyelids droop down as the rumbling of the engine puts me to sleep.



I wake to silence and something firm and warm under my face. I jolt up, unsure of where I am.

“Hey, it’s me.” Adam’s husky voice washes over me, calming my fear.

His face is shadowed inside the truck. The air feels thick as his gleaming eyes look over me.

“Where are we?” I ask shakily.

“Come see.” He opens the door and steps out into the night, then holds out his hand.

I reach out and take it, crawling out of the truck. He doesn’t let go.

Leading me through the moonlit trees, he starts to explain, “We came out here to dig up some trees for the nursery. During the day, it wasn’t much, but I figured at night, it would be worth seeing again.”

He points to a freshly dug-up hole in the ground.

“You’re not a serial killer, are you?” I tease.

He stops. Still holding my hand, he reaches his other one up to caress my upper arm. "If you are ever uncomfortable with me...just tell me, and we can leave. Okay? I want you to feel safe." His voice is somber, fingers still brushing over me.

My heart squeezes. "Adam, I feel entirely safe and comfortable with you. I was only teasing because of the holes." I tilt my head up. "But your touch drives me...insane," I say with an exhale. Confessing my feelings to him is terrifying.

His mouth falls open. He hesitates for a moment.

"Insane in a...good way?" His voice is strained.

I laugh. "Yes, a *very* good way. Also a way that makes me all tingly." I squeeze his hand.

He licks his lips. His fingertips are trailing up my arm, over my collarbone, and onto my jaw. He slowly caresses it for a moment before he leans his head down. My breath hitches at the unexpected contact. His is coming out raggedly. Just before his lips touch mine, he turns his head and presses a tender kiss to my cheek. Lifting his head, he pauses for a moment, gazing into my eyes.

"You are so beautiful." His voice is a hoarse whisper.

I've never felt so cherished in my life. How have I wasted any time with another boy when a man like this exists in the universe? His gentle touch on my jaw has drifted back down as he explores the shape of my collarbone. I can't take much more of this without him kissing me up against a tree, much less gently.

"Were you going to show me something?" My tone is breathy and uneven.

A smile lifts on his mouth. “Yes. I’m sorry; I just want to touch you. Your skin is like velvet. I wondered...” He trails off, leaving me curious. “This way.”

His hand is still holding mine as he leads the way. Less than a minute later, we break through the trees, and I see an enormous structure in front of us. As we approach, I realize it’s actually three separate round cylinders. They’re all rusty with chipping paint.

“What are they?”

I saw something like them on the side of the road on my bus ride to Texas.

“They’re old silos. These most likely held grain ages ago. We still use them on the farm. Come around here.”

He directs me around to the back side of them, which opens up to a wide field. I pull out my phone, turning on the flashlight.

“Wow, that’s cool. Maybe I do need a smartphone,” he says, surprise in his tone.

I laugh. “Well, I’m a little afraid there’s going to be a snake in the grass.”

“Hmm, it is copperhead birthing season.”

My heart stops at his words. “You’re kidding me. Let’s go back. Seriously, Adam.” My voice is shrill.

He starts to chuckle. “Hey, hey, I’ve got you. People rarely ever die from snakebites anyways, okay?”

I can barely make out the smile on his face. “*Rarely?* Okay, I don’t exactly want to take any chances!” My city-girl bones run deep.

His smile fades. “Well, if you really want to go back, we can, but we’re almost there.”

He waits patiently for me to decide as I survey the grass around us.

“Ugh, okay, only because you have me curious.”

I’m genuinely willing to risk a snakebite just to spend more time with him.

“Okay, let’s go. Here.” He lets go of my hand, but before I can protest, he sweeps me up into his strong arms.

I make a little *EEK* sound, surprised and delighted to get spoiled twice in one night. “Okay, seriously, if you keep spoiling me like this, I’ll be ruined for every other man,” I joke.

My hand clutches his shirtfront as he easily carries me over toward the silos.

“Hmm, I like the sound of that,” he muses as we get closer.

My flashlight reveals a rusty ladder.

“Okay, so usually, these ladders are made well enough to withstand the elements, but I want to test it to make sure, okay? I’m going to set you down. We would’ve scared away any snakes, walking up.”

He waits for me to approve, so I nod. He lowers my feet down to the ground.

“What if you fall?” I ask, concern etching my tone.

“Then, I guess you’ll have to call an ambulance with your fancy phone.” He winks at me, reaching his thick arms up to grip the bar. He lifts himself onto the high ladder effortlessly, starting to climb. He pulls on each ring before going up.

Once he’s gone all the way, he comes back down, jumping to the ground.

“Okay, it’s good to go. You ready?”

He’s got a big grin on his face, and his excitement fuels me.

“Okay, but if I die, they’ll say you brought me out here for nefarious purposes and dug a hole to bury me, you know.”

I turn off my flashlight, shoving it in my back pocket.

“I’ll have to give you a boost,” he says.

I look up to see the first rung is about equal with my eyeline. He comes up behind me, kneeling down in the grass on one knee. The pose completely catches me off guard, and I stare down at him for a few seconds.

“Umm...what are you doing?” My mouth is agape. Surely, this isn’t some strange backwoods tradition of...

“I’m giving you a boost. Put your foot on my knee and climb up,” he says, confusion pinching his brow.

I let out a sigh of relief, my hand pressing against my chest. “Okay, cool. I got this.”

I step up onto his knee with my no-slip black work shoes, reaching up both hands to grip the bottom rung.

“What did you think I was doing?” he asks, grunting as he does most of the work, lifting me up onto the ladder.

“Uhh, nothing. Just confused.” I step on the creased edge of the silo, using it as a foothold to climb all the way onto the ladder.

“Okay...” he mumbles under his breath as he stands up.

I climb a little higher before I hear him grunting and look down to see him hoisting his body up onto the ladder. His shoulder muscles flex with the effort, and I feel a little warm. Once he’s on, he looks up at me. His smile fades, and he jerks his eyes away.

“Uhh, Harley...maybe you should climb up, and I’ll...just go up after you,” he mutters, keeping his eyes off of me.

“What? No way! I’m terrified of falling. Can you get closer, please?” My voice rises with panic. “I’m slightly afraid of heights.”

He doesn’t move, but I can hear him blow out a breath.

“Okay, uh, I would, but...you’re wearing a short skirt, and I, uh...” He clears his throat. “I can see your...your...I can see up it.”

I can’t see his face, but I would bet it’s as crimson as the thong I’m wearing.

“Oh...well then, what color are my panties?” I ask casually.

He doesn’t respond for a few seconds.

“I can’t tell...it’s dark. I just saw the bottom of your...” He doesn’t finish, apparently waiting for me to relieve his discomfort in the situation.

“Listen, I really am afraid of heights, so can you just please climb a little closer?” I’m about to burst out laughing, but I hold it in.

He slowly starts to climb, his face trained on the rungs in front of him instead of above. He reaches up to my calves and stops.

“Okay, are you ready?” His voice is strained, his eyes glued to the silo.

“Can we go together, please? At the same time?” I plead.

He nods his head, apparently not wanting to speak.

I start to ascend up the side of the enormous structure.

Adam

My favorite work jeans have never been so uncomfortable. I saw right up under her skirt, and she has to be joking about her panties because I only saw bare skin. My lower back is sweating, and we're only about halfway up. I feel like this was a terrible idea, considering her fear of snakes and heights.

Great job, idiot, bringing her out in a field to climb a silo.

We're nearing the top when she gasps, and I jerk my head up.

Her butt is directly in line with my vision, and I nearly lose my grip on the ladder as my hands start to sweat.

I've never seen such a flawless, round body part in my life. Her shape couldn't be more perfect if I had dreamed it into existence. Realizing that I've been leering like a pervert, my face heats as I jerk it away.

"Are you okay? What's wrong?" I ask in a husky voice.

In the corner of my eye, I see the lights. Turning my face further, I'm met with the view I hoped we would see up here.

The Texas hill country is a rolling, mountainous area with small hills and valleys stretching for miles. The lights of Greencity are glittering in the distance with smaller ones dotting the countryside beyond. It's difficult to determine where the land meets the sky. The night lights stretching across the land mirror the stars shining above. A sliver of the moon is a crescent above us.

"Wow..." Harley breathes. "This is literally breathtaking."

The ladder leads me up a few more spaces until I'm standing on the one directly under her feet, my arms stretching around her body. Her delicious green-apple scent wafts toward me, mixed with beer from her work.

"Now, you know what I meant." I hope she remembers my similar description when I saw her at the dance.

She turns her head toward me fully. "You seem...too good to be true," she whispers.

Our bodies are flush together, and I'm worried she can feel how much I want her through my jeans.

"What can I do to make up for not taking you to the plant nursery? I was ignorant and horrible, and I'm so sorry. I hope you can forgi—"

She butts in, pressing a finger to my lips, "Please don't. You had a right to be angry. You didn't know. I'm sorry you felt so...betrayed." She smiles faintly. "But next time, just ask me, please." She grabs the ladder again.

"I hope there's never a next time," I say. "It would be bad for Kyle's health if there were a next time."

She laughs, her beautiful, melodic voice drifting out into the night.

My eyes focus on her pink lips. She instantly quiets, the silence of the night keeping any distractions from the moment. I wet my lips, so ready to taste her that I could burst with desire. She tilts her head to the side, our faces only centimeters apart because of my place on the ladder. Her eyes close, and I know it's an invitation. As I edge closer, our breath mingles before I finally put my lips against hers.

Our first kiss is my first ever, and she's so much softer than I anticipated. I risk my life by letting go of the ladder with one hand to reach around and grab the back of her neck. My fingers splay over her. The taste of her mouth

is sweeter than homemade syrup. I move my lips gradually over hers, setting the pace torturously slow because I want to savor every drop of her.

She makes a soft moaning sound, and my natural instinct is to press further into her, intensifying the kiss with my own animalistic groan. Her tongue is petting over the seam of my lips. I part them slightly, and she slips it inside my mouth. My response is a primal need to know her in every way.

The gravity of my desire terrifies me, and I break off from her suddenly. My hand grips the bar again as I heave in gulps of the night air. My head is spinning, my mind in a fog. Her lips are close to my ear, and I hear that she's almost as out of breath as I am.

As I pull back to gaze into her blue eyes, the look she's giving me is disbelief.

"I thought you weren't...experienced?" She's still a little out of breath.

I smile at her question. "Oh yeah, what makes you say that?" The satisfaction in my voice is impossible to mask.

She chuckles, placing a delicate hand on my chest.

"You kiss like you know *exactly* what you're doing." She sighs indulgently, peering up at me with fluttering lashes.

My ego is rivaling the size of Texas right about now.

Harley

Adam is sitting in a booth at Billy's Pub. Every time he looks at me, a stupid, ridiculous grin breaks out across my face. His does the same, and then his eyes change, burning over me before guiltily looking away. I'm overheating in my skin-baring uniform.

"Where did the Hanes model come from?" Sal asks me, smirking.

"He, uh, we're friends." Even I don't believe it anymore.

"Ahh, yeah, I had a friend like that once. Not as pretty as him though," she muses.

It's a slow Monday night, and we only have a few regulars to serve besides Adam and Dan. They brought books to study, and they both ordered root beer. I know Adam is twenty-one, but I've never seen him drink.

"Well, you might as well go talk to him. He's about to stare a hole clean through this bar. I'll holler if I need ya." She's smiling and shaking her head.

I've been forcing myself to stay back here and work, but now that I have the green light, I have to keep my speed walk from turning into a run. His face brightens as I approach, and I suddenly feel shy.

"Hi," I squeak, standing at the edge of the booth.

I feel like I'm in high school and I just got asked to prom by the football captain.

He leans toward me, trying to conceal his grin. "Hi," he breathes, eyes immediately training on my lips.

My mouth is cherry red tonight. Without a doubt, he wants to taste it, just like I hoped. Heat is crawling up my chest and neck, and I notice that he is just as flushed.

Dan clears his throat, and our trance is broken.

“Hey, Dan,” I say brightly, turning to smile at him. “What are you studying for?” I take a seat in Adam’s booth.

“Biology. It’s almost as complicated as what you two have going on.”

He sure is a blunt one.

Adam kicks him under the table, and he grunts in pain.

“I was kidding, geez.” His eyes look mischievous.

I’m thinking he likes to screw with his brother. I cackle at the harsh glare on Adam’s face, directed at him.

“It’s fine. I can take a joke,” I reassure him.

I loop an arm under his, and we join hands under the table. His eyes are darkening as they focus on my lips again. I’ve created a monster, and I think it needs to be fed.

“Is your boss okay with us being here? I don’t want to get you in trouble.” His voice is a rumble as he leans closer toward me.

“Yeah. Billy isn’t here on Mondays. Just me and Sal. She thinks you’re an underwear model.” I’m teasing, but he still blushes.

His hand in mine lifts from the booth, and he puts them both on the inside of my thighs, his thumb brushing my skin. Tiny, little electric bolts shoot up my legs, and I breathe in.

“I’m going to get a refill,” Dan mumbles as he exits the booth.

“Should I—” I start to move, but Adam interrupts and grabs my other hand.

“No, stay.” His thick lashes flutter down over his honey eyes, our faces close enough to almost touch.

“I missed you today,” he says, our shoulders brushing.

“I missed you too. I looked for you at lunch.” There’s a question in my voice.

“Yeah, sorry. I had a meeting.” He doesn’t elaborate.

It’s almost one in the morning, but I have to close down the bar.

“You’re so sweet to come visit me. Do you want to come over and watch *The Princess Bride* after I get off?”

It’s a big step out of our comfort zone. We have yet to be in a bedroom since our new, suddenly addictive dynamic. I don’t tell him Kenna went home for her mom’s birthday.

He grins, nodding his head.

“I’m going to take Dan back, then come get you, okay?” His voice is low and intimate.

My response is a nod, and we are both frozen. The moment is hinging on whether or not we are going to kiss in front of his brother at my place of work.

He settles with lifting my hand to his mouth and softly pressing his lips to my knuckles. Thousands of butterflies are migrating through my stomach.

An hour later, I walk out to his pickup, idling under the streetlights. He steps out and gestures for me to get in on his side. I’m perched in the middle of the row seat when he sits back down and closes the door. After shifting the gear, his arm moves around my shoulders. He plants a kiss on the top of my head.

“Everything go okay after I left?” he asks.

He smells divine, like his usual cedar and a fresh shower. My stomach tightens at what this might mean for tonight.

“It was dull and boring without you there to watch me.”

I’m pressed up against his side.

“Maybe I’ll just have to be there more often to keep you entertained.” His voice is playful, and I laugh.

“Sounds like a plan, Farm Boy.”

I scoot away as we pull up to the dorms, and he shifts the gear and parks.

We’re walking side by side into the orange brick building. He respectfully opens the door after I unlock it with my key card.

“Such a gentleman,” I observe as we get into the elevator.

Another girl is on it, holding a bag of books. He stares straight ahead of us. Once we get to my door, he’s noticeably silent.

Is he having second thoughts?

We walk in, and I flip on the lights, revealing my roommate’s absence. He ventures in behind me, looking over at her side and back at me, swallowing.

“She went home for her mom’s birthday.” I shrug. “Do you care if I shower off really quick?”

I’m already grabbing my PJs and heading for the en-suite bathroom.

“Okay,” he says quietly.

I smile and close the door. Rushing through my shower and nighttime routine has me debating whether or not I should leave my makeup on. I decide against it. I don’t look drastically different without it. I don’t wash my hair, but I do spray a little vanilla perfume on my wrists.

My nicer pajamas are some buttery-soft emerald-green shorts and a thin gray tank top. I put on a low-impact sports bra even though I usually sleep

without one.

I emerge from the bathroom roughly eight minutes later to see Adam sitting with his ankles crossed, no shoes, on the foot of my bed.

His eyes rake over me and back up to my face.

“How does everything look incredible on you?” His voice is a little hoarse.

My fingers twiddle with the hem of my tank. It’s not that I’m not used to attention from men, but he’s different about it. Like my body is the pretty wrapping paper, but he wants to open it up and cherish the inside too.

“I, uh, thanks. You too though. I’m constantly checking your ass out in those old jeans.”

His mouth pops open, but he doesn’t speak.

This is the first time I’ve seen him wear track pants. I grab the tablet from Kenna’s desk. She has a laptop, too, so she lets me use it. After pulling up the movie, I position the pillows into a reclining backrest and motion for Adam to join me.

He blows out a breath before crawling over toward me and sitting on the outside edge, not touching me. His face is completely blank.

“Are you not a cuddler?” I ask, tapping the screen.

He hesitates, so I turn to look at him. He’s looking at me with guilty eyes.

“I’m just...afraid of what I might do. You smell so good,” he mumbles the words as he reaches a hand out to trace over the vine on my arm.

“We don’t have to do anything. Let’s just watch the movie.” It’s not what I want, but he seems to need some reassurance. “There’s nothing sinful about that, is there?” I quirk my brow at him with a smirk touching my lips.

His warm breath grazes my shoulder as he studies the many different pictures on my skin.

“Which one is your favorite?” he’s looking up at me with big eyes.

No one has ever asked me that, but I don’t have to think about it.

“Umm, this one.” I lift up my tank to show him the half-finished Medusa on my rib cage.

He inspects it carefully, fingertips trailing over her. We’re both breathing a little heavy. His touch is both soothing and unnerving.

“I saw it at the beach party. Is it someone you know?” He’s still tracing the unfinished snakes. The heads weren’t added, so it almost looks like thick cartoon hair.

“No, it was supposed to be Medusa. I left in the middle of the session to come here.” I really don’t want to talk about it, so I grab his hand and interlace our fingers. My tank slides back into place.

“Do you want popcorn?” I stretch my leg over him, climbing off the bed.

“Sure,” he manages on a shaky exhale.

I pop a bag in our little microwave. I feel him watching me but don’t look. The memories piling up are giving me second thoughts. He deserves someone better, someone without such a checkered past. He’s composed and good, and I’m...a disaster, a storm brewing, ready to blow in from my former life.

The beep sounds, and I take my time, dumping the contents into a bowl, trying to calm my shaky hands.

“Do you want me to go?” Adam asks quietly.

He’s standing near the bed, uncertainty creasing his features. His thoughtfulness warms my chest. He’s naive about some things—that’s obvious. He’s also perceptive and caring.

“No. I’m sorry. I guess I’m nervous too.” I try a faint smile, and he returns it.

We sit back on the bed—this time, with his arm around my shoulders. We start the movie.

“Oh, now, I get it,” he says when Buttercup calls Westley Farm Boy. “If I’d seen it, I would’ve said the next line.” He looks down at me, his smile fading as the moment suddenly turns intimate.

“Well, you can try it next time I ask you something,” I murmur.

All he does is nod, eyes heated.

I don’t waste any time, giving him the opportunity.

“Kiss me,” I challenge. A whisper is all I can manage.

He licks his lips and leans his head down, a breath away from my mouth. His voice matches mine, barely audible as he quotes the famous line with his own twist. “If you wish.”

Our lips crash together, the buildup of tension, doubt, and desire creating a monsoon of emotion. We’re hungry for each other, fighting to set the pace, which only increases it.

He’s either led me on about being innocent or he’s just a natural when it comes to this. His mouth is soft and pliable, sliding over mine like it was always meant to be there. We could stay like this, here in this twin bed forever.

I press my tongue across his lips, willing him to let me in. He slowly opens up, and I tentatively reach in to taste him. He groans in pleasure, taking control of my body. Pushing me gently until I’m flat on my back, he looms over me, a hand reaching down to pinch at my waist.

Our tongues meet, get acquainted, and trade places. We’re communicating with probing fingers and tiny gasps—*Tell me what you like. I like it soft and then hard, desperate to feel your desire for me.*

My teeth scrape over his bottom lip, sucking it gently in between my lips. It's too good to be true, a fireworks display is in my head.

His body and mouth tense up, and he jumps off of me without warning.

When I open my eyes, he's on the other side of the room, forehead pressed against the wall. His back is pulsing up and down, trying to catch up with his heavy breaths.

The cool air stings my fevered body as I sit up on my elbows.

"What's wrong?" I ask, my heart galloping inside my chest.

He sounds like he just competed in a two-hundred-yard sprint. Several long seconds tick by. He lifts his head up, turning toward me and adjusting the front of his pants. *Is he mad at himself for being turned on?*

"I don't understand," I say, sitting up. I press my thighs together; the ache is agonizing.

He's staring at me, still across the room. The lights are off, the only source being a smidgen of moonlight shining through the window and the movie still playing.

"You deserve to be treated with respect, not mauled in bed before we even go on an official date." He stands up straighter, arms at his sides. "I've been telling you I want to be friends and acting completely different." He pauses, slowly stepping toward me. "Let me take you out to dinner. Please." His voice is surprisingly composed.

My throat squeezes with the tenderness of his concern even though I wish he would stop respecting me for a few more minutes.

"Okay." My voice is hoarse.

I realize that a guy has never asked me out to a dinner date before. They usually see me as the disposable, one-night kind of girl. That's how I've always seen myself too.

“Can we finish the movie?” I bite my lip, nervous he’s going to leave.

He looks down at me, clearly at war with himself.

“I can get under the covers, and you lie on top,” I suggest, strangely fearful of being alone.

He nods, and I slide under the blanket as he lies down on the edge of the bed again. I press play on the movie. Twenty minutes later, he reaches his hand over, and I place mine inside it. The gentle contact of our fingers is the only thing I can focus on. A sigh escapes me, and my eyes drift closed.

Adam

Doubts begin to flood my mind around noon the next day. I woke up in utopia, Harley wrapped in my arms. Her sleeping face is angelic. She murmurs unintelligibly in her sleep.

Nothing about her resembles what I expected to find when I went to college. If anything, I never once worried about meeting a girl like her. Someone so gorgeous and worldly should have been a flashing red light, signaling danger and destruction. Instead, she called to me like a siren from a Greek fable, but my ears weren't covered.

Am I making a mistake?

My phone begins to ring, and I see *Dad* flashing on the screen.

"Hey, Dad. How's the crop growing?" I answer, trying to clear Harley's face from my head.

"Hey, Adam. It's flourishing this year. The Lord has really blessed us. How are you and Dan?" His kind voice is usually soothing in my ear, but for the first time, it makes me anxious.

He can't read my mind, I remind myself.

"We're good. All As, going to church. Dan's in the shower, but he'll be out soon." I want to pass the phone off to my brother.

"That's okay. I was just calling to tell you we'll be coming down for Family Weekend this Saturday morning. We found a discount campsite for RVs to stay in Saturday night. We've been wanting to go to church with you

boys.” My father is a millionaire, but he’ll never spend money on a hotel. All nine of my siblings will be laid out on pallets on the floor of the RV.

“All right, sounds good. Anywhere specific y’all wanna go?”

My throat is feeling tight as I debate whether or not I should tell him about Harley. *Would she want to meet them?* I want her to, but at the same time, I know what the reception would be like.

I feel like I might be sick.

“Well, son, I guess we just want to get an idea of what your new city life is like. Your mother is a worrier, so we are thankful the university has organized this weekend for us to come down and experience your college days. We know you’re making good choices.”

His last statement rings ominously in my ears. I know for a fact he wouldn’t be saying that if he knew where I slept last night.

“All right, well...see you Saturday. I’ll tell Dan.”

We say good-byes and hang up.

My younger brother walks out of the shower, wrapped in a towel.

“Was that Dad?” he asks, rummaging through his drawers.

“Yeah. They’ll be here Saturday for Family Weekend.” My attempt at sounding nonchalant is an epic failure.

“Ahhh, so that’s why you sound like you’re about to throw up.” His voice is what nonchalant should sound like.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I grit out, my voice threatening.

“Hey, did I say anything? You know where we should take them?” He flips around. “What’s that place with the *delicious* root beer?” He pretends to rack his brain.

He jumps back as I take a step toward him, murder in my veins, fists clenched.

The adjoining suite door opens, and Levi peeks his head into our room.

“Hey, are your—” His eyes widen at the death glare on my face. “Whoa, what’s going on?”

He swings the door open, and Silas also pops his head into the room.

“What’s happening?” Silas says, curiosity in his tone.

Dan’s face breaks into a shit-eating grin. “Nothing, just super excited for Mom and Dad to meet my big brother’s girlfriend. I think it’s gonna go well. Harley fits in so well with all the tattoos, the short-shorts...”

He’s attempting to hold in a laugh, and I lunge for him, seeing red.

“Whoa!”

“Hey!”

Silas and Levi both exclaim as my fist makes contact with Dan’s jaw. His body crashes into the dresser, sending his Bible and some textbooks flying to the floor. Before he has time to react, I’ve got him on the carpet, straddling his body. Red-hot anger is in my blood, and I raise my fist, crushing his smug face with it. The contact hurts, but I barely register the pain. My left hand is holding his arm as I rear back for another punch.

A hand materializes from thin air and yanks my cocked fist back. Strong hands push into my chest, forcing me off of my brother.

“Cut it out, Adam! What the hell is going on?!” Silas roars at me, finally letting go of my fist to lean down and help Dan to his feet.

Blood is gushing from his nose, eyes blazing.

Levi is the one pushing against my chest, and I shove him off. He’s freakishly stronger than he looks for a genius with thick glasses.

“This is none of your business,” I roar at my friends, storming out into the hallway, slamming the door.

Part of me knows I'm overreacting, but a bigger part doesn't care even a little.

"Whoa, man, you good?" a passerby in the hall questions me as he rushes past.

I ignore him, pressing my forehead to the cool cinder-block wall painted a dingy gray. My arms rise up, and my fingers join together, resting on the back of my neck.

What am I going to do about this weekend?

What am I going to do about Harley?

Minutes drag by, and my thoughts are a blur.

The door to our dorm opens and shuts, and I pray it isn't Dan. I'm not ready to apologize, and I don't want to hit him again.

"You ready to talk about this?" Silas's voice breaks through my hazy thoughts. He pauses for another minute before saying, "Dan's in my room. Come on."

I attempt to control my breathing before reluctantly turning around and following him through the door. He's standing with his arms crossed, Levi next to him with a worried expression.

"All right, so what's going on?" Silas drawls.

He sounds bored, but I know he cares about Dan and me.

I start to explain, "Nothing. It's got nothing to do wi—"

"Cut the BS. We're not morons. We've known you our whole lives. You never came home last night, and you've been hanging out with the tattooed chick." Silas is stoic. He's a stubborn one.

I sigh, mentally exhausted. Maybe they'll have an insight that could help me. They won't tell my parents. I feel confident that I can confide in them.

“Her name is Harley. She isn’t...what she seems. I mean...she isn’t pure or untouched, but I don’t care about that. She’s...addictive. I can’t stand to be away from her.” I peer up at them, desperately hoping I’m making sense.

“I know she doesn’t look it, but she’s sweet, and smart, and...I don’t expect y’all to understand. I want to be with her. Hell, I’m supposed to be taking her out soon.

“Now, my family is coming here for Family Weekend, and Dan’s talking...mess about it. Baiting me to introduce her to our parents, knowing what they’ll think. I don’t see her as something I have to keep secret, but at the same time, I know what they’ll say if I bring her around.” I sigh in defeat, dropping down to sit in my desk chair. “I don’t want her to get hurt, but it seems like either way...she’ll be the one who’s rejected. Either by me or them. I don’t see a way to avoid it.”

My eyes plead with them to help me, but they both look shocked, eyebrows raised.

They glance at each other, then back down at me.

“Uh, well, we had no idea you...were this serious with her. I mean, we kinda thought you liked her, but...I didn’t know you actually wanted to be with her,” Silas responds, scratching his chin. “She is gorgeous though.”

My blood heats at his last statement, and I send him a warning glare. He bursts out laughing.

I try to make them get it. “It’s not about her being gorgeous. It’s...she’s different...” I trail off, unable to explain what I’m feeling.

We were all taught the same thing, growing up. To find a good, pure woman to marry and start a family with her. Girls in our church were told to hold on to their virtue. It’s the gift they offer up to their husbands on the

wedding night. Of course, us boys were taught to respect women and treat their bodies like temples of the Lord.

Where does that leave a girl like Harley? I don't see her as less valuable than any other girl, but I know my parents wouldn't want me to be with someone who isn't pure.

Levi speaks up, "Yeah...if you really like her and you think she isn't... bad news"—he means a whore—"then I think you should go for it. Introduce her to your family and give them a chance. They could surprise you. They're great people. Maybe they'll see her like you have. A bad past, wanting to do better in the future." He finishes his speech with a reassuring nod.

I contemplate his words for a minute before replying, "Are y'all sure... you really think I should introduce her to my family? This weekend?"

I'm doubtful, but a glimmer of hope has flamed up inside my chest. Maybe they're right. Maybe my family will want to meet her. They could dismiss the tattoos and provocative clothing, seeing what's truly underneath, like I have.

Levi and Silas look at each other and back at me.

"Yeah, man, really. If you're serious about her, the sooner, the better. Your family is one of the best I know," Silas says. He smiles, clapping my shoulder.

"You should, uh, see Dan's face," Levi mumbles. He tries to cover a grin with his hand.

I groan, "Ugh, is it that bad? I still think he deserved it." My voice is full of conviction.

They both laugh.

“Yeah, he did, but now, you have to explain that *and* Harley to your parents,” Silas says with a smirk.

Harley

“I promised myself that when I moved here, I would only go to Crumble once a month. You have to hold me accountable. I refuse to gain the freshman fifteen,” Kenna states as we wait in a ridiculously long line on the sidewalk.

“What’s so special about these cookies that we have to wait in line for them?”

The dingy sidewalk is filled with customers like us, all waiting our turn to go inside the tiny bakery in the downtown area of Greencity.

“You will see for yourself soon, and then you’ll understand the once-a-month rule.” We shuffle forward a fraction of a step. “So, did anything exciting happen while I was gone?” Kenna asks, tapping on her phone with sharp baby-pink acrylic nails.

“Adam stayed over last night,” I confess, running my chipped, short nails through my tangled hair.

Her eyes widen as she looks up at me. “What?! We’ve been together the last two hours, and you’re just now mentioning this?” She clicks her phone shut and shoves it in her crossbody purse. “Tell me everything! How many bases?” She grins, lifting her brows suggestively.

“We just...made out a little, but he was...damn good at it. He wants to take me to dinner,” I admit, lowering my eyes.

It still seems surreal that he wants to take me out on a real date.

“Aww, that’s so sweet. I was hoping for second base, but I guess this is better. He seems like the type to wine and dine a girl. So, do you, like, think y’all might start dating?” She tilts her head to the side, watching me.

I shrug. “I don’t know. He keeps saying all this stuff about wanting to respect me and doing things right. Which I never thought would actually happen to me. I don’t really know how I feel about it.”

It’s sad but true. Girls like me don’t get special attention from nice guys, apart from the sexually motivated kind.

We move forward in the line again, finally getting close enough to see the register and a display of enormous, thick cookies.

“Well, guys like that are basically one in a bazillion. Hot, sweet, and respectful? It seems almost...too good to be true.” She sighs, watching a motorcycle roar past us on the street. “You should snatch him up before some other ho does.”

I cross my arms over my chest, toeing my worn red sandal over a blade of grass breaking through a sidewalk crack.

I finally gain the courage to speak. “My concern is just that he...he’s like that sweet guy who wants to go back to the farm and raise a family. He wants kids and some barefoot, pregnant girl to bake him apple pies on Sunday. That will never be me. I guess I’m just seeing where it goes because...yeah, he’s incredible. I’ve never in my life met a guy like him. If he’s for real—which seems unlikely, but if he is—then yeah, I would totally snatch him up.” I pause, debating my next words. “I guess I just...don’t know how he’ll feel about...some things from my past that aren’t exactly pleasant. He’s so innocent. Honestly, it’s not a bad thing, but...he doesn’t even know what social media is,” I confess, knowing she’ll be as shocked as I was.

Kenna gasps dramatically.

“No way!” Her mouth is an O. “Wow...that’s some pretty impressive sheltering.” She lowers her voice to a stage whisper. “Is his family, like, in a cult?”

I lift my hands, palms up. “I have no idea. He hasn’t said much about them. I know they’re super religious,” I say, thinking of the dancing-is-sinful conversation. “I get the feeling he was raised in a really strict home. Which is the exact opposite of how I was. I don’t know...it seems like our differences could be insurmountable.” I sigh, discouragement creeping in.

My mom basically abandoned me when I was seven, leaving me for days at a time on benders. I bounced between foster homes the next eleven years with essentially no rules and few expectations. I never had anyone to answer to—until Victoria.

“Oh, don’t say that! Love doesn’t care about background or upbringing. You can love someone who grew up different than you as long as you can agree on how you want to raise your kids,” she says confidently.

We are finally only two people away from the front, and the sugary chocolate smell is wafting through the air, watering my mouth.

“I don’t think I want kids, so...I guess I need to ask him if he does. That could be a deal-breaker.” I pull out my wallet, fishing around for a few dollar bills I made in tips.

Kenna laughs. “Yeah, that’s a conversation you should have before he falls completely in love with you.”

We climb into her Jeep ten minutes later, digging into the melty, phenomenal bakery cookies.

“These are sinfully delicious,” I say around the steaming bite of a double dark chocolate morsel.

“I know, right? Told you. Only once a month—I mean it.” Her voice is a little desperate for me to agree to the timeline.

“Mmm, let’s go back tomorrow...” I moan dramatically.

“Harley! No! If I get fat because you keep forcing me to—”

I burst out laughing at the seriousness of her tone, and she looks over at me with a grin.

“Ugh, you’re the worst,” she says, shaking her head and trying not to laugh.

Her freshly highlighted hair is blowing in the wind coming through the open windows as we cruise.

My phone pings with a text. Looking down, I see an unknown number.

Unknown: Harley, where are you? What makes you think you can steal my money, then run off and hide? I’m not dealing with Lenny and Seven on my back about where you are anymore. You created this shit storm, now face the consequences!!!

My bloodstream slowly freezes as I read the message. Victoria is so sweet to check in on me, considering I ran away a month ago. With trembling fingers, I block the number.

Looking up, I see the university coming into view. My heart is thundering in my chest as I try to take a few discreet, calming breaths. We make our way up to our room, and I immediately curl up in my bed.

“Hey, Riley just asked if I want to go tanning. You in?” Kenna asks, checking her hair in the mirror.

“No, you go ahead. I need to study,” I mumble.

“Okay, see you at dinner.” She skips out the door.

I’m paralyzed by my thoughts for at least an hour, debating how much Victoria knows.

Has she found me? She said I was hiding, so I would assume that means she has no idea where I am. I haven’t been getting texts from Seven ever since I blocked him. He’s probably still been trying to contact me.

Why can’t he get over it and find someone new to torment?

My phone is giving me anxiety, so I turn it off and drift into a restless sleep.



I wake up to a light tapping on my forehead.

“Psst, sleepyhead. You gonna eat dinner?” Kenna whispers.

I crack an eye, seeing her lilac hoodie and white Lululemon shorts. She smiles.

“It’s, like, seven thirty. You’ve been in a coma, and I’ve been starving for over an hour now. If you wanna go back to sleep, I’ll—”

“No, it’s fine,” I croak, my voice half-asleep. “I’ll come.”

I sit up, registering that I’ve still got on my black athletic spandex and loose white T-shirt from earlier. After tossing my hair into a giant bun, I step into my slides. We head to the cafeteria.

We’re exiting the dorms when she asks, “You gonna meet Adam?”

I sense a hint of curiosity in her voice, possibly relating to his potential companions.

“Oh shit, I forgot my phone. I turned it off.” I stop on the sidewalk, debating going back for it.

“Nooo. Please, let’s grab a quick bite. Then, we can...” She trails off as we see four strapping, tall, muscular forms walking toward us.

They look like the beginning of a lumberjack *Magic Mike* show, all dressed in plaid and denim, clomping their boots. Adam stands out in the front, his jeans hugging his muscular thighs deliciously.

“Geez, how are they not being swarmed twenty-four/seven? If my sorority sisters knew this group existed...” She shakes her head, toying with the end of a curl.

Adam sees me, his face breaking into a grin that lights my insides up. His step quickens, and mine increases in his direction at a new speed. He’s still a block away, and I can’t reach him fast enough.

I start to jog, unable to wait for him. My nerves are on edge, and he’s the soothing balm I need to feel on my skin. He laughs, holding out his arms. Someone else entirely possesses my body, and I’m running. Seconds later, I crash into him, and he lifts me into his arms. My legs wrap around his waist as my forearms cross behind his neck. I’m breathless as he supports my weight, holding me to him with his strong, corded arms.

“Hey, beautiful,” he says, eyes sparkling.

“Hey, handsome. You got plans for dinner?” I flirt.

“Mmm, hopefully something that involves you,” he smirks.

I’m about ninety-nine percent sure he has no idea he just made a sexual innuendo, but I still get heated, picturing it.

“That can be arranged. You in the mood for something sweet?”

His eyes focus in on me, darkening. *Maybe he does get it...*

“Kiss me,” he commands.

“If you wish,” I respond breathlessly.

I bend down, and our lips meet, my hands on his jaw and roaming through his hair. His hands are trapped under me. He lets my tongue in, groaning quietly. We play with each other's mouths for a few more seconds, lips slicked and hungry.

"Get a room!" someone shouts.

"Or don't. Can I film?" another responds, followed by raucous laughter.

Adam tenses, ending the kiss. His honey eyes look up at me, and he licks his lips, tasting me. He slowly lowers my body to the ground, wrapping me in a hug.

"Sorry. I got...carried away," he murmurs, pressing his mouth to my ear.

His breathing is uneven, matching mine. I turn my face up to him, wondering what I would do for him and realizing, probably anything.

"I like when you get carried away," I whisper, brushing my fingers over his stubbled jawline.

He closes his eyes, breathing in heavily.

"Y'all are literally the most adorable thing I've ever seen. Please do that every time you see each other from now on." Kenna has caught up to us and is grinning from ear to ear like a dork.

She's holding her phone like she just took a picture.

Adam releases one arm, keeping the other wrapped around my shoulders so we can walk.

"Have you had dinner?" he asks me, leaning in and sending shivers down my neck with his breath.

"No, that's where we were headed. You?" I peer up, licking my lips and looking at him again.

"Stop, or I'll never be able to stop," he whispers, his eyes reading mine.

I laugh, biting my lip. He shifts uncomfortably.

“Are we ever going to eat tonight? Hey, Harley, do me a favor and answer your phone, so I don’t have to wait so long for dinner,” Dan walks by us.

“Hey,” Adam barks, grabbing his arm roughly. “Try that again.”

Dan swivels to me, a plastic grin on his face. “Good evening, Harley. How are you?” he says sarcastically, jerking his arm out of Adam’s grip.

“I’m wonderful. What’s your problem?” I question. I haven’t done anything wrong, so I’d like to know what his deal is.

He startles, eyes blinking up at Adam, then back down at me. I look up at Adam to see him glaring at his brother.

“What?” I question, the anxious tone spiking in my voice.

“Nothing,” Adam grits out.

Dan storms ahead of us. I step out of Adam’s embrace.

“You’re not going to tell me what his problem is?” I ask, my voice low. Heat is beginning to crawl over my chest.

He sighs, looking up at me. “He’s worried about...me being with you. Not because he has a problem with it. Look, it’s hard to explain and...” He trails off, rubbing his eyes, forearms flexing.

My heart is beating out of my chest.

“Try. Try to explain it to me. What’s the issue?”

He doesn’t even know the worst parts about me yet. If what he does know is too much...he’ll never be able to handle the rest.

He reaches for me, his finger brushing over my wrists and pulling me toward him. “Hey, hey...don’t be worried. It’s nothing you’ve done, okay? Please know that. This is a problem with him, not you. We were raised... differently. To believe that girls should look and act and...dress a certain

way. You don't fit that description, and he doesn't get it." His eyes are pleading with me.

"I want you...so much. You are not what I expected—in the best way possible. You've thrown my world into a free fall, and I'm on the edge of my seat with the excitement. I don't care who says what. You're mine...if you want to be." His fingers brush over my cheek, trailing into my hairline. "Please let me prove that to you. I don't care what anyone thinks, not even my stupid brother." He finishes with his forehead pressed to mine, our bodies flush.

I back away enough to see into his eyes. "Are you sure you...really want me? You don't even know much about my past—"

He cuts me off, "I don't care what you've done. I don't care who you've been with, how many, nothing. You're perfect in every way." He's convinced, no shadow of a doubt.

I sigh, relieved.

"I believe you, and that's enough for me. I just don't get what his problem is. Is it the tattoos?" I ask, voice timid.

"Partly, yeah. You just have that...sexy bad-girl thing. Which is exactly what I'm addicted to, so..." He smirks, looking over me. "Are you, uh, wearing pants?"

I laugh. "Yes, they're spandex." I lift my oversize shirt to show him the volleyball jersey-type shorts.

He gulps, focusing on my legs. "They look like panties. Which I'm at least glad you have some of those on today," he says.

I laugh, trailing my hand up to his chest and leaning up to whisper in his ear, "Are you sure you don't prefer me without them?" I lean back, licking my lips.

His gaze is glued to my mouth, and I notice a film of moisture has formed on his upper lip.

“Yeah...maybe so. But I shouldn’t...I still need to take you on a date,” he mumbles, finger trailing up my back over my shirt.

“Well, we were about to grab dinner, weren’t we?” I turn around, suddenly remembering Kenna was waiting for me.

She’s gone, as is Adam’s group. They must have gone in ahead of us.

“The school cafeteria doesn’t count,” Adam scoffs, threading his hand in mine and leading me inside.

Adam

Harley's legs could be the entire focus of a portrait session. One time, my mom made us take family pictures, and I remember the photographer snapping away hundreds of times when we were in the same position.

That would make sense if the camera was trained on her golden legs. I could flip through photos of her for hours even if they all looked the exact same.

"That shirt is gigantic," I say as we get our food and find our group.

Kenna is chatting with Dan and Silas easily while Levi silently pushes food around on his plate.

"It's a double XL. I stole it from my ex, but it's too comfy to give up," she says casually.

My body stiffens as I feel heat drifting up my neck. The temptation to rip it off of her body overwhelms me. She glances up at me while she sits next to Kenna, and I sit across from her.

She laughs. "Don't look so constipated. I'm never giving up this shirt."

She takes a bite of a strawberry with a sly smile, and I watch her, enraptured by the way her tongue touches the red fruit. Looking down, I remember I have on an old, worn button-down in navy plaid.

"What if we traded?" I start to unbutton it, hoping she agrees.

Her eyes laser in on the expanse of chest I've revealed. She licks strawberry juice off her fingers, watching me.

“Are you suggesting I take my shirt off right here in the caf?” she says, starting to stand and lift the hem.

“No! What? Of course not. Let’s go to the bathroom,” I suggest.

Thankfully, she sits back down.

“Hmmm, interesting proposal...” she drawls, tapping her chin with a delicate finger.

I watch her debate for a few minutes, whispering to Kenna, who laughs out loud at what she says. My gaze turns to my friends, and they all shrug like they don’t know how to interpret the whispers either.

Finally, she turns to me, standing up. “All right, Farm Boy, let’s do this.”

She’s got a challenging glint in her eyes.

I stand with her, suddenly unsure if this is a good idea. I’m not about to back down now.

“Great. Let’s go.” I start to follow her into the bathroom.

In the corner of my eye, I catch Dan shaking his head, Silas and Kenna laughing, and a blushing Levi.

She really does look like she’s naked under the shirt as I trail behind her. I drag my gaze up to the back of her head, unable to continue watching her walk. My stomach is tightening like the front of my jeans, the closer we get to the bathrooms, and I know this was a very bad idea.

She stops in front of the family and wheelchair-accessible bathroom instead of going into the ladies’. She pushes the door open and gestures that I enter.

“Uh, okay, I guess I’ll take mine off, and you can...” I stumble over the words as I walk in.

Before I can protest, she follows me, letting the heavy door click shut behind her. She locks the dead bolt and turns back around, hands on her

hips.

“You first or me?” Her head cocks to the side.

I slowly start to unbutton again, feigning confidence despite the sweat breaking out on my lower back.

“Let’s do it together,” I suggest. My voice is hoarse, giving away my distress.

She grabs the hem at the top of her thighs, lifting it marginally. She keeps lifting with each button I undo. Our faces are twin statues, zeroed in on the new skin being revealed. Goose bumps prick my arms, and I notice her thighs look the same. The pace is torturously slow.

We make eye contact right before I get to the last button, and she pulls the shirt over her head. My last button comes undone at the same time I do.

Her skin is covered in ink, which I saw at the beach party. The intimacy is increased a hundredfold because we are alone...and she’s wearing a scrap of a violet bra. It’s made of a thin, lacy fabric that doesn’t seem to be big enough to properly cover her. My oxygen supply is much lower than it should be as I gape embarrassingly at her tantalizing female anatomy. I can’t force my eyes away, my self-control crippled. The image over her breasts is an antique pocket watch with vines running through the chain.

My eyes burn over her skin, trailing down to her flat tan stomach. The half-finished tattoo of the girl with cartoon hair is the most predominant one, the other side of her torso bare.

The air is suddenly thicker and harder to breathe.

She steps toward me, and I blow out a breath. My shirt is still on my shoulders, and she pushes it off of me, resting it on my elbows. Her cornflower-blue eyes are boring into mine as we both survive without air.

Her eyes drop to my chest as she reaches up to press her delicate hands against my pecs. She rubs them down, torturing me, and I suck in a breath.

“What are you—” I breathe out, nearly losing my control.

“Just checking the size,” she says, her voice a rasp.

Her hands ignite my skin everywhere they touch, fingers exploring the ridges of my stomach. She pauses at the waistband of my jeans, slung low on my hips. She bites her lip, debating her next move.

I’m about to pass out from the anticipation.

She suddenly removes her dangerous hands, pulling her shirt back over her head, covering herself. I blow out a breath.

“I changed my mind. I don’t wanna trade,” she says, pulling my shirt up over my shoulders, doing the two middle buttons, then turning to unlock the door.

Words won’t form in my mind as I recover from the whiplash. *Was she messing with me this whole time?*

“Come on.” She grabs my hand, pulling me out into the hall.

A guy walking by gives me a fist bump. “Damn, that never happens to me.” He looks over Harley approvingly.

I wrap my arm around her shoulders, using my other hand to adjust myself before we’re out of the hall. She laughs and sticks her hand into the back pocket of my jeans.

“Come over,” I blurt out, looking down at her pink lips.

She smiles, nodding.

“You’re still not getting this shirt,” she leans in to whisper as we walk up to the group.

“Hey, Kenna’s coming over to watch a movie. You in, Harley?” Dan asks as we approach.

Kenna is smiling. Levi looks like he might be getting sick.

“Sure,” Harley replies, squeezing my hand.

We all go to return our trays, and I take Harley’s with mine.

How am I ever going to resist her when she looks and smells and sounds the way she does? She’s walking ahead of us, arm looped with Kenna’s as they giggle and whisper to each other.

Silas slides up next to me.

“So, that was...interesting,” he says low enough to not be heard.

“What...happened back there?”

“Uhhh, nothing really. She changed her mind.” It’s not a whole lie, just a partial one.

“Well, you came out, looking like she’d made you eat a cockroach.”

I almost feel like that would’ve been easier to recover from.

Adam's dorm is the same size as mine and Kenna's, but it's definitely tidier. The others are starting *Man of Steel* in Levi and Silas's adjoining room. We're supposedly making popcorn.

His and Dan's beds are stacked like bunks with their desks on the opposite side of the room.

"Are you the top or bottom?" I ask as we walk in.

"Bottom. Which do you prefer?" he asks, toeing off his boots.

"Hmm, I like to switch it up," I say, nibbling my lip.

His face scrunches in confusion as he looks over at the bunks.

"I'm not talking about the bunk," I say on a laugh.

He sits down on the bed, face pensive as his thoughts seem to churn. I walk up to him, pushing on his chest lightly. He leans back on the pillow, his wide honey-brown eyes focused on my lips. I climb up onto his lap, straddling his hips and pulling a gasp from him. My shirt rides up, and his eyes follow the movement. His trembling hands reach for my calves, lightly tracing down toward my ankles.

I reach for the hem, pulling it up over my head. Adam swallows, but his eyes lock into mine—so respectful.

A group walks by in the hall, laughter drifting through the door. The sound of our labored breathing is the only noise after they pass.

My hands move from the bottom of his shirt up, pushing the tiny buttons through the slits of the fabric. I glance up at him after each one, and his

eyes begin to roam over my pebbled skin, sending shivers down my back.

I finally reach the top one closest to his throat. He gulps as I spread the fabric, revealing the toned, muscular ripples of his stomach. The dusting of blonde hair in the center of his chest moves as his breath rises and falls.

I lean down to kiss the hollow point at the base of his throat, feeling his speeding pulse under my lips.

His hands suddenly seize my waist, and I gasp at the unexpected contact.

He's done letting me control this, apparently. One hand reaches up to hold the back of my neck, gently forcing my head down.

Our mouths are as close as possible without touching when he speaks, "I get what you meant about being on top..."

His lips claim mine with an unhinged passion, revealing his desire for me. Things are different this time. My chest is pressed to him, and we kiss like it's our sustaining life force. My hands are running through his hair as I grind on his hips.

I suck his bottom lip in, and he boldly moves both hands under my butt. He squeezes, breathing heavily into my mouth. This is a borderline mauling, and he grunts, lifting me up to rise onto his knees and lay me down on the bed. A part of his weight settles over me, but he holds most of it up.

He's in full control, demanding my attention to where his hands are exploring my outer thighs and butt. He won't stray to the good parts, not even my chest. His mouth starts to trail over my ear and neck, using his tongue to taste my skin. I'm on fire everywhere, senses overloaded. I'm itching for him to touch me.

My hand reaches over his jeans to get a better idea of what he's working with. The change in him is immediate as his entire body locks up.

“What?” I whisper, my hand still holding him.

“I...I can’t...” His breathing is getting worse even though we stopped.

“I want it,” I rasp, bold and honest.

“I...you have no idea how badly I want it too...” He’s choked up, barely capable of forming words.

His body is still completely tensed up, and I wiggle underneath him.

“Keep kissing me,” I beg, “please.”

“Harley...you’re the greatest temptation I’ve ever faced.”

Panting and desperate, he reaches a hand to remove mine.

“Then, what’s stopping you?” I question, placing my hand on his bare shoulder.

He rolls off of me, breathing like he just swam underwater for ten minutes. I lean up on an elbow, tracing his pectorals with a finger. He tilts his gaze to mine and reaches up to press a thumb to my bottom lip.

His voice is barely audible when he says, “You’ve never been treated right. You don’t have to say it—I know. I’m not joining the line of Kyles who have just taken you to bed. You’re going to know I’m different. I’m going to show you that you’re more than...your body and your beauty. I want this part first.” He presses a hand over my heart, eyes meeting mine with intensity.

Suddenly, I know that he’s the most dangerous man I’ve ever met because he won’t settle for my physical being.

He wants it all, body and soul.

If I was ever going to give my heart away, it would be to him. *Can I possibly risk it, knowing he could crush me in the end?*



The rest of the week is a whirlwind of classes, work, and passionate late-night make-out sessions, where Adam insists we keep our clothes on. He hasn't mentioned the date again, and I'm waiting for him to make the first move on it.

On Friday, my World History teacher is droning on, but thankfully, I'm getting little twinges of excitement every time my phone vibrates.

Adam: I can't stop thinking about your eyes. How'd they get so blue?

I try not to let my face show too much happiness. There's nothing to smile about when you're learning about Hitler.

Harley: How'd you get so muscley? Hey, will you send me a shirtless pic??

I doubt he'll do it. He's such a good boy. Inspiration hits me, and I run to the bathroom so fast that everyone probably thinks I'm having diarrhea. Luckily, tattooed skin is automatically a little sexier in pictures, and the emerald-green silk cheeky panties I'm wearing don't hurt. I snap one from the side of my hips and butt, just barely revealing enough.

He texts back right as I hit Send.

Adam: I'm in class right now...

A second later, he texts again, four times in a row.

Adam: You're making my pants uncomfortable.

I never knew tattoos could be so sexy.

I saw those panties the first day I went to your dorm...

You are trying to kill me.

I smirk as I sit back down in my seat, thankfully hearing the professor assigning the homework.

Harley: Meet at my dorm?

I send back as everyone starts to pack up.

I walk and check my phone six times without a response. It's lunchtime, but I want to take my backpack back to my room before meeting Kenna at the cafeteria. Maybe he's waiting for me there.

My steps quicken, and I take the stairs, unwilling to stand and wait for the elevator. Rounding the corner, I see a tall male figure, and my heart beats faster.

Then, it crashes at my feet as I realize it's not Adam.

It's someone I never wanted to see again, someone I've been running from.

Someone who's found me.

"Hello, beautiful." His face curves into a sly grin as his gaze leers over my form. He licks his lips. "Been looking for you, baby."

"Lenny," I say, opening the door and letting him in.

I pray Adam doesn't stop by.

Adam

I decide to walk to her dorm. I'm incapable of looking at my phone without staring at the picture my brain has already memorized.

My nerves are shot. Harley has no idea how badly I want her, how I've been picturing it for over an hour. In reality, if I'm honest with myself, I've been picturing it with her since the first time we met. Each subsequent interaction has only given me more material to add to the perverted recesses of my mind.

I've never been with a girl, and I know she has experience. It's only normal for me to feel inadequate about it—I hope. I don't love that she's been with other guys, but it doesn't make me see her as any less desirable. What makes her beautiful and perfect and her has nothing to do with her past experiences.

As expected, a girl lets me into the dorm as I approach. I'm tempted to tell her it's a terrible idea for them to just allow any man who wants inside to walk in here. Why even have a lock on the door? Maybe she's seen me around campus and knows Harley and I are...friends.

On the elevator, the girl keeps smiling at me and playing with her hair. The women at Ole Tex are all really nice, much nicer than the guys.

I walk down the hall, hearing raised voices. It's a man's voice, and I get concerned for whoever he's screaming at.

Then, I'm in front of the door with the number thirty-four, and I realize the shouting is coming from behind it. My heart rate accelerates as my

entire body tenses. I don't bother knocking, barging through it.

Harley is sitting on the bed in a tight ball, knees pulled to her chest. She looks surprisingly younger than usual, almost like a child.

A middle-aged man is standing over her bed, and he turns to face me as the door bursts open.

"Who the fuck is this?" he spits at me.

His dark eyes are wide, the whites standing out. He's wearing a black suit that looks cheaply made.

"Who the fuck are you?" It's the first time the F-word has passed my lips, but I don't stop to think about it.

His mouth forms a sinister grin as he runs a hand over his stringy hair.

"I'm Lenny, her agent. You're interrupting a meeting with my client. We'll be finished soon," he says, dismissing me and turning back to her.

She's looking up at me with wide blue eyes, her lip trembling. Anger rises inside me, my fists clenching.

"Leave. Now," I grit out through my clenched teeth.

He laughs, facing me more fully.

"Who exactly are you? This isn't some game, pretty boy. She's a great actress. Has she told you about her contract? The one she breached?" he asks, his face turning to stone.

"I don't care about whatever it is. Get out. Now." I take a step toward him, my worn cowboy boots toe to toe with his leather dress shoes.

I stand at least five inches taller than him, and I stare down into his black eyes. My mouth forms into a hard line, chest puffed out.

After a few tense moments, he begins to laugh out loud, his shirt pulling against the belly hanging over his waistband. "Ah shit, Harley, got this one

all wound up about you, eh? All right, well, I'll be back, sweetheart, so we can discuss business without this little Chihuahua nipping at me."

He grabs a gray fedora off of the desk, placing it on his head sideways. "You know, we could try to work something out where Victoria won't be getting a cut. Better for you, baby."

He licks his lips, looking over me one last time before quietly walking out and shutting the door. My blood is boiling, and I'm on the verge of following him out to make sure he leaves when Harley makes a sobbing sound.

She's buried her face in her hands, collapsing sideways on the bed. I sit down next to her, completely unsure of how to help or comfort her. My heart rate is steadily returning to normal, but I still feel the rush of adrenaline in my veins.

Sitting next to her on the bed, I reach over, instinctively pulling her into my arms. Her body is cold, trembling against me. The moisture of her tears dampens the front of my pale blue T-shirt. I don't know how long I hold her for, but my arms go stiff.

She pushes back to look at me after a while. My brow is creased in concern, and I reach for her hand.

"Are you okay?" I ask, unsure of if I should voice all the other questions sprinting through my mind about her visitor.

Her thick lashes rest on her cheeks as she looks down at our joined hands.

"That was...my modeling agent," she says quietly, gripping my fingers tighter.

"You're a...you're a model?" Relief washes over me, and I realize yet again I have assumed the worst about her.

She lets out a slow sigh. “I was before I came here. My foster mom got me into it when I was fifteen.” She’s looking at me again, a question in her gaze.

“So, you...quit, and now, your agent is mad at you?” I question, attempting to understand what the big deal is for an eighteen-year-old girl to go to college and quit modeling.

She looks around the room, chewing on her lip. “Yeah, I guess. He wants me to come back. I sort of quit in the middle of a...session, and he wasn’t happy about it. The company I modeled for wasn’t happy either. I’d already been paid half,” she finally says, looking back down.

“Well...if it’s money you need, I have—”

She puts a finger to my lips. Her shoulders straighten. “No. I appreciate it, but I don’t need your help. I’ve got it. Lenny’s right. Maybe if I go back and finish the session, this will all go away...”

Her lip is still trembling, and I get the feeling there’s something she isn’t telling me.

Lenny made my skin crawl. He was the kind of person you didn’t want to turn your back to. The way he had her huddling on the bed made my blood boil. I wish I had heard what he was saying to her before I barged in.

“You can...tell me anything about your past...you know that, right?” My voice is calm as I attempt to get her to open up.

How do you help someone trust you when they’re so closed off?

She nods her head, attempting a weak smile. “Thanks, I know. I...I just hated modeling. Like, hated it. It made me feel so...like a bug under a microscope. All those cameras on me, always having to...anyways, it wasn’t for me, but I know it’s the right thing to finish what I started. Don’t you think?” She asks it like my answer is the only thing that matters.

I hesitate because I do think if you were paid for a job, you should finish it. At the same time, I don't trust Lenny. She was obviously afraid of him.

"I mean...you seemed to really be nervous around—"

She interrupts me, "Oh no! No, no, no...I just was scared because I knew I'd quit and taken the money and...yeah, he was just mad. Lenny was...so great." She's nodding her head, like she's trying to believe it.

"Will you let me go with you if you go to finish it? I could drive." I know that's a big step for our relationship.

Her face pales, and she shivers. "No way. I already feel so exposed. Yeah, no way, ha-ha." She stands up from the bed, walking over to her desk, keeping her back to me. "So, how was your day?" she says casually.

Why is she changing the subject?

"It was fine. Are you sure you shouldn't take someone if you go back to finish the shoot? Maybe Kenna could go and—"

She whirls around. "Look, I said no, okay? I don't like people watching me. It's really no big deal. Could you let it go?" She smiles and crosses her arms over her chest. "Is your family coming for Family Weekend?"

"Uh, yeah, they are. I was going to ask if you...wanted to meet them."

I hold my breath after rushing out the last statement. It's too soon. I know it is. She'll think I'm crazy. Especially after pushing too far about the photo shoot.

Her eyes widen a fraction, but she recovers quickly.

"Umm, like, as a friend you mean?" She's studying me as she speaks.

"Well...as a friend that I want to take out on a date next weekend since this weekend, they'll be here." I stand up and walk over to her, brushing my fingers through her ebony waves. "I know it's a big step. I just want them to get to know you a little bit. We can leave out the date part, if it makes you

feel better.” My stomach is tight, and I can’t decide if I want to leave it out or not.

“Yeah, sure, whatever you think. Maybe that’s best.” Her eyes close as my hand caresses her scalp, and she leans into the contact.

I lean forward to press a kiss to her forehead. She sighs, wrapping her arms around me.

“Will you stay with me tonight?” she murmurs against my chest.

I wish I had the willpower to resist her.

“If you wish,” I whisper, turning her face up to kiss her mouth.

Harley

“I just realized something,” I say, walking toward Kenna’s Jeep the next morning.

“What’s that?” she asks, clicking the unlock button.

She roped me into wearing another girly dress, insisting that if I’m meeting Adam’s family, I should look more “feminine.” I asked if she had any long-sleeved turtlenecks, but she didn’t think it was funny. The blush-pink ruffle around the bottom edge feels a little short as it bounces in the wind, but the longer sleeves help me feel more comfortable.

Why do I care what his family thinks?

“Texas feels more like home than anywhere else ever has,” I confess, my voice a little thick.

“Awww.” She stops as we reach the Wrangler, engulfing me in a floral cloud. “I’m so ecstatic to hear that! You make Ole Tex feel like home to me too.”

She extends the hug a beat too long, which I allow because she has turned out to be a good friend. She pulls back and grins at me, green eyes popping against the mint-colored sundress she’s wearing.

She drives just over the speed limit as we make our way to *the* brunch spot in Greencity’s downtown area to meet her parents.

“My mom will absolutely love you. She was one of those wild childs who was swept up by a sweet guy. She always says my dad made an honest woman out of her.”

I can tell she's obsessed with her family by the way she brags about them, voice lit with the smile on her pretty face. I wonder what it's like to have people in your life who you can always depend on.

"He just laughs and says he couldn't resist the urge to tame her! Ugh, I miss them so much, it's insane."

I notice she increases our speed a little in anticipation. A Stop sign looms ahead, but she guns straight through it without a second's hesitation.

The blaring sound of a siren makes us both jolt in the tan leather seats.

"Oh shit. Shit. Shit. Shit." She panics. "Stay calm, Harley. Stay calm. Don't even worry about it."

The enormous Jeep screeches to a halt on the edge of the street. She's nearly hyperventilating, wide eyes darting from her wallet to the rearview as she scrambles for her license.

"Hey, it'll be fine. You didn't see it so—"

She breaks into my words with a shrill voice, "Oh no, no, no! It will not at all be fine!" She starts to cry, tears trailing through her foundation.

I put a hand on her forearm, stilling her frantic movements.

"Let me talk to him. Just sit there and smile," I attempt to reassure her as the blue uniform struts up to the vehicle.

"Hello, Officer," I begin in a high-pitched voice, bending over enough to let my cleavage show. Flashing my best coy smile, I let my eyes drift down and back up at a calculated speed slower than a normal blink.

He clears his throat. My eyes take in his thinning hair and a beer belly, fingers nervously scratching his neck. *This shouldn't take but a minute.*

"Uh, miss, are you aware that you just ran straight through a Stop sign?" he asks Kenna, his voice a little tight.

I laugh, tossing my hair over my shoulder. “You are kidding! Did she really? Wow, I was so caught up in her story about the hot-tub bubble party at the Kappa Betas last night that I didn’t even notice!” I turn my eyes to Kenna, hers widening at me. Leaning in toward her ear, I whisper loudly, “He kind of looks like Robert Pattinson.” Glancing up, I bite my lip just to nail the coffin shut.

He physically jolts, closing his mouth and wiping his hand over it.

“Uhh, you girls go to Ole Tex?” he stammers, swallowing.

Kenna has finally regained control of her emotions and caught on, contributing to the cause. “Oh, yes, we are freshmen this year! Wow, this Texas heat sure is no joke. I can hardly stand to wear anything but a swimsuit most days.” She’s masked her obvious Southern accent, thankfully, by mimicking my Northern one pretty well.

His face is the color of the Stop sign she ran, and Kenna’s smile widens.

“We really are in such a hurry though. The girls needed us to run out and grab more...tampons.” She stutters a bit, and I hope she hasn’t ruined the entire charade.

If possible, his color deepens as he starts to back away from the vehicle. “Well, uh, I understand how pressing these...issues can be. You ladies have a nice day.” He nearly sprints back to his cruiser.

She starts to inch out of the space, barely breaking the twenty MPH on the speedometer.

“Tampons? Really?” I ask, starting to laugh.

She burst out in hysterics, her body shaking with laughter. “Oh my—oh, I will *never* forget the look on his face!”

We’re looking at each other and laughing, remembering his nervous jog back to his police car.

The laughter dies out, but she's still driving like a granny and snickering.

"When in doubt, I always bring up tampons. Men can't handle it. It's like they want to pretend the female anatomy only has one purpose."

She shakes her blonde head as we begin to pull into a narrow space. Ten minutes later, she's finally managed to squeeze her giant car into a miniscule parallel parking sliver. The interior has most likely never heard such inappropriate speech from its owner's mouth.

"Gahhhhh," she screeches as we finally make our way toward The Yolk. "Parallel parking can suck my—Daddy!" she screams, deafening me.

A tall, handsome George Clooney look-alike approaches. An equally attractive golden-haired woman, who can't possibly be old enough to have given birth to Kenna, smiles beside him.

"My sweetums! You look ravishing, as always," her father greets her, bending down to press a kiss to her flushed cheek.

After a hug to her mother, they part, and a little boy who must be around eight or nine jumps into her arms.

"Kens! Kens!" he chants as they laugh, embracing.

I stand as still as a telephone pole, shifting my feet awkwardly as I observe their reunion. Awkward and envious, if I'm being honest. A lump has formed in my esophagus, and I wonder why I bothered to come.

"This is my roommate, Harley! She's the best person I've met at OTU."

They all turn to beam at me, her mother making the first move to reach out.

"My dear, you are something! What beautiful skin and hair! I always secretly wished I could be a dark-haired vixen."

She approaches with a kind and approving smile, drawing me in for a hug—like mother, like daughter.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I croak as I attempt to combat the emotions welling in my chest.

Her father is smiling widely at us, arm draped around Kenna.

“We are so thrilled to meet you, Harley. You’ve been such a close friend to our Kenna.” He reaches out a large hand to grip mine.

“You’re hot,” her younger brother blurts out.

Kenna laughs out loud while his mother scolds him.

“Mom, Harley doesn’t care. Please let’s go in and eat! I’m famished.” She loops her arm through mine as we lead the group in.

This is my first family brunch. Ever.

Adam

We've been showing my family around to where our classes are all morning. This afternoon is supposed to be when they meet Harley, but they just know her as "a friend." The pit of my stomach feels like it could combust, sucking me in like a black hole. I need it to be over with, so I can eat and breathe fully again.

"Adam, you wanna play Red Rover at the campsite?" my four-year-old sister, Rebecca, asks me.

Her eyes are nearly the same color as Harley's. She smiles at me, and I notice one of her front baby teeth is chipped. No doubt the result of her wild little farm girl life.

"I don't know, Becks. Let's let Terrence the tosser decide." I pick her up in my arms, throwing her up into the air.

Her giggles fill the campus parking lot, blonde curls bouncing around her shoulders in the October sun.

"Grrrr. All right, Terrence says yes." I set her feet back on the ground, her cheeks pink.

"Again, again!" She jumps up and down.

"Can't. Terrence's arms might fall off," I say, attempting to maintain a serious tone.

My ten siblings, including Dan, are all starting to pile into the fifteen-passenger van when Kenna's Jeep blazes into the parking lot, finding a space several cars down from us. The lump in my stomach flips over as

Harley gets out, her inked golden skin contrasting with the pink dress she's wearing. I wish it were longer. I know what my mom will think when she sees it.

Harley waves good-bye to Kenna, turning toward me. My black tee suddenly feels like it doesn't fit as she walks over. Heart pounding, I step toward her.

"Hey. You look beautiful." I try to smile casually.

She returns it, but it's not as bright as usual when she sees me.

"Hi. Thanks." She looks behind me, staring in amazement at the navy-blue van.

It's almost completely full. Children, ages four to seventeen, are crawling around, fighting over window spots inside. My parents are already seated up front, buckled in.

"We, uh—I figured we could take my truck." I gesture behind her to where it's parked.

She nods, speechless. I rub my hand on the back of my neck, debating if I should introduce her now or wait until we get to the RV and start cooking hot dogs over the campfire.

"Do you, um, do you want to meet them now or..." I stammer out, hating how flustered I feel.

"They're...already driving away," she observes.

I flip around to see the filthy back doors of the van getting smaller as it reaches the edge of the parking lot. It merges into traffic, a set of hands pressed to the windows.

"Okay, well, let's go. Do you, uh, want to change first?" I look down at her legs, so much smooth skin on display.

She crosses her arms over her chest, shaking her head. "I'm good." She strides toward my Chevy.

I wonder if I should tell her we'll most likely be playing volleyball or that there will only be a few lawn chairs and everyone else will be sitting on the ground. She's already at the truck, so I jog up next to her to open the door.

"You know we're going to a campsite?" I sputter. *Please want to change.*

She buckles in. Looking firmly ahead, she nods. I shut the door and walk around to the driver seat. *This should be interesting.*

We drive through the city with the windows down, her jet-black hair blowing around her. Finding out she was a model didn't really surprise me. She's picturesque and gorgeous all the time. I find it hard to inhale when she's around, like I have to remind myself I require oxygen.

"So, how was brunch?" I ask after we merge onto the highway.

"Fine," she says, not elaborating.

She seems upset, and I wonder if it's because of her visitor yesterday.

"Are you...okay? You seem upset about something," I finally ask.

She doesn't respond. Looking over to see if she heard me, I see that her elbow is propped on the door, supporting her chin as she stares out the window.

She finally answers, "I'm good." Her voice is quiet.

The lie slips past her lips effortlessly, and I grip the steering wheel. *Is she always going to shut me out like this?*

The last few minutes, we don't speak, the tension in the cab palpable. She gets out of the truck when it comes to a halt, pausing to wait for me.

"Look," she begins, blue eyes sweeping over the rowdy group setting out buns and digging through ice chests, "maybe this is a bad idea."

Her eyes turn back to me, wide and glassy. I grip one of her elbows—the one the group can't see.

“What’s the matter? Please tell me why you’re upset.” I plead with my gaze, fingers brushing her arm.

She stares down at the dirt, not responding for a few seconds.

“I just—I don’t—” she stutters. “I’m not used to families. Happy families, where everyone laughs and hugs and doesn’t hate each other’s guts, just—it just reminds me that I have no one. No one wants me for anything besides...” She trails off, breathing in a giant gulp of air and rubbing her eyes.

I abandon the pretense that we’re just friends I was trying to adopt for my family’s sake, wrapping her in a tight hug. She presses her face into my chest, body slightly trembling.

“My family is huge and loud and definitely overwhelming, even to people who are from a loving family. They talk a lot, and yes, they all love each other. You deserve to know what that’s like. I’ll take you back if you want,” I say, turning my mouth down to kiss the top of her head, “but I hope you’ll stay and give it a chance.”

Pulling back from her a few seconds later, I give her hand a squeeze. She slowly nods, and we start walking toward the cluster of people. Unfortunately, most of them are staring at us, a few mouths gaping at Harley.

My sister, Eden, approaches, a smile on her face. Her long golden hair is in a braid that stretches down to her waistline. Her face is makeup-free. I’ve never seen any of my sisters or my mother wear it. Their clothes are loose, all a bit oversize and plain.

“Hey, I’m Eden. What’s your name?” She extends a hand to Harley.

Harley grips it, a timid smile forming on her lips. “It’s Harley.”

Eden looks down at our joined hands, then back up at me, her gaze unreadable.

“Come meet everyone, Harley. I hope you’re hungry.” She turns around, leading us toward the group.

My family is plain and a little unusual. I wasn’t aware of it until recently. Now that I’m scrutinizing them, trying to see what Harley might be, I realize they’re all dressed in worn, ill-fitted clothes and old tennis shoes with unruly hair and baseball caps. At first glance, they probably look poor, which they aren’t at all. I’ve only been away from them for a few months, but my world has been expanded to an extent that I didn’t even realize was possible.

Eden leads Harley up to my mother, who is busy preparing the hot dogs and laying out buns on plates.

I clear my throat. “Hey, Momma. This is Harley.” I feel the urge to let go of her hand, and I’m such a coward for it.

My mother is the kindest person I know, giving up her time and her life daily for her eleven children and her husband. She’s a hard worker and an active member of our church. She donates homemade canned goods to charity every season we have an abundance.

But I know she’s going to judge Harley; there’s no doubt about it in my mind. From her tattooed skin to the low-cut front of her dress and the short hem. She’ll judge her sultry mouth, and if she knew the things we’d done in her bed and mine...

“Marley? Is it Marley?” she says, speaking loudly over the ruckus of children. She’s looking over Harley as she says it, her smile a little pinched.

She's a plain woman, but I've always thought she was beautiful. Her face is wrinkled, gray hair beginning to edge out of her hairline. It's tied back in a long, loose ponytail at her nape. She's a little heavyset, but her mouth is almost always turned up in a genuine smile, except for now.

Harley stumbles a bit. "Uh, no—no, ma'am. Harley, like a motorcycle," she says, blinking and attempting an awkward smile with her hand outstretched.

She's met with a cold perusal, eyes zeroing on the short hem of her dress. My mother takes in all the ink, the low cut of the front, and it's painfully obvious that she does not approve. I inwardly cringe, wanting to pull Harley back to the cab and take her somewhere she won't be analyzed like a beast at a sale.

She tugs down the hem of her dress, but all it does is make the front show more of her chest. Finally, the cold inspection ends, and my mother's eyes reach up to Harley's.

"I'm Bethany. Do you have a class with Adam?" She briefly shakes her hand, turning back to open plastic packets of food.

My mother is always Beth, never Bethany, when she's speaking with people she likes. The discomfort I've been feeling in my abdomen all day is getting worse, but there's not a single thing I can do about it.

I squeeze Harley's limp hand, trying to tell her I'm sorry she's being received with such coldness. *Does she sense it?*

"Yes, we have horticulture together. He's been helping me study," she says, her voice strained as she continues to wear a smile.

My mother looks up at me, and the smile I know so well is finally on her face. She reaches out to rub my arm with her hand. "My Adam, always such a giver, almost to a fault. He'd help any soul in need. We taught him that."

She grabs a paper plate with a bun and a cold hot dog. Her mouth in a line, she focuses on Harley. “Here, have a hot dog. There are sticks to heat it over the fire. We’ve got plenty.” She gestures to the group of children with suspended sticks over the flames.

Then, she turns away, walking toward the RV.

This is the first time I’ve ever thought of my mother as ugly.

Harley

S omehow, the fact that being around Kenna's family made me uncomfortable at first makes me want to laugh now. I would give anything to be with them laughing over mimosas while her little brother stared at me, making kissy faces when her mother wasn't looking. Kenna and her dad thought it was hysterical.

"Hey, Harley. I'm James." Adam's dad approaches me with a grin as I wait my turn to roast a hot dog.

The source of Adam's good looks is also becoming clear as I glance through a time machine twenty-five years. Brad Pitt is this man's twin. His faded plaid shirt is almost identical to the green one Adam had on the first time we met.

I wanted to jump at the chance to leave with Adam to get firewood, but there are only three seats in his truck. The young blonde kids, whose names I will never get down, were overjoyed to get alone time with their big brother. It's painfully obvious he's the favorite of the group, especially among the children and his mother.

"Hi, I'm Harley, Adam's friend," I say quietly, reaching out to grab the hand he's holding toward me.

"Well, I heard that. You two just doing homework together?" he says casually, but I sense it's an interrogation.

All I do is nod. I'm not playing a game with him. If he wants an explanation, he can talk to his oldest son—or the second one for all I care.

He smiles at me, no teeth, while spearing my hot dog on a stick and handing it back to me. He gets another one for himself.

“We sure do trust Adam. He’s always been a good boy. He’s one of those who will do anything for you, no questions.” He’s smiling into the fire, the light reflecting in his eyes. “He’s also a leader. I know when he takes over the farm, he’ll run it well. That’s why he wanted to go to Ole Tex. Get a degree that’ll help him in the new world of business, ya see.”

He rotates his stick, and I do the same.

It’s enrapturing to listen to a proud parent droning on about the child they believe so strongly in. Unconditional love is a concept that fascinates me. As uncomfortable as I am here, I’m glad Adam has a family that loves him.

A little boy runs up, dirt smudged on his cute face. He’ll probably grow up to be a heartbreaking farmer like his older brother.

“Hey, Noah. This is Adam’s friend from college,” James says, smiling as Noah stands near him, hand on his knee.

He stares up at me with big blue eyes.

He looks back at his dad. “Dad, what’s a harlot?”

James looks completely taken aback. Noah appears to be maybe five years old.

“Uh, well, son, you’re a bit too young to understand what that means. When you get older, I’ll tell you.” He smiles reassuringly, bringing his stick in to pull the hot dog into a bun with a stream of mustard inside it.

Noah contemplates this answer, his little forehead scrunched up.

“What’s a Harley?” he asks.

James laughs. “Well, this here is a Harley, this young lady. But it can also be a motorcycle—a dangerous vehicle some people drive.” He looks over at me, a twinkle in his eye.

My stomach is cramped, a sinking feeling forming inside it. My skin feels itchy. I pull my hot dog back and follow James's lead with the bun.

Noah blows out a breath, wheels still churning in his mind. "Well then, why did Mom tell Eden that we have to pray because Harley is Adam's harlot?" he says, picking at a little scab on his knuckle.

The air in my lungs disappears, my entire body turning to ice. I don't need my limbs—they'll never move again.

James's face pales a bit as he glances nervously at me.

"Well, son, like I said, that's a topic we can discuss when you are around eight or nine, okay? Run along and play." He pats his head, and Noah runs off, completely unaware of what he's done to affect my emotional state.

James says nothing. He simply shoves his hot dog into his mouth and walks over to the ice chest, rummaging through it.

I close my eyes, forcing the air to move in and out with my diaphragm.

I can survive this. I will survive this. Much worse things have been said to me, much harsher, more hateful things. This is a blip on the radar of the abuse I've withstood in my lifetime.

People I don't know don't like me. So what?

These aren't just any judgmental people, passing me by on the street. This is Adam's family, and they think I'm a whore, trying to drag him down to a pit of sin.

Shakily forcing my legs to support my weight, I stand and start to walk out of the campsite. Nobody says anything. Not a word is spoken to me. I trudge in the direction we came from, mindlessly trekking as far away as I can. I know it's too far to walk, and once my fingers are functional, I'll call someone to come get me. The dirt stirs up in the wind around me until I reach the area with grass.

My body jolts as my phone vibrates with a text in my hand. I look down at it.

Kenna: Hey, Riley's having a party tonight. Do you and Adam want to come?

Kenna's name on my screen sends a wave of relief through my aching chest, and I hit the Call icon. She picks up right away.

"Hey, I thought you were having dinner with Adam's family?" she asks, the background noise loud with chatter.

"Can you come pick me up, please? I'm at a campsite outside of town," I say, my voice hoarse.

I hate asking for favors, but this is an exception.

"Uhh, yes. What's wrong?" she asks, wariness in her tone.

"Nothing, just—please just come get me. I'll send you my location," I say, suddenly feeling the urge to cry as reality sets in. My steps falter.

"Okay, yeah, sure. I'm just finishing up a pedicure with my mom, but I'll skip the polish. On my way, okay?" she says, her voice softening. It's her turn to reassure me.

I mumble a thank-you, hanging up. After sending her my location in Maps, I keep walking. My steps are slow. A truck full of high schoolers passes me, and the boys inside yell, asking if I want a ride.

After about ten minutes, I finally see the exit for the campgrounds in the distance. How big is this place?

A familiar blue truck is driving toward me, so I step off the road, praying he doesn't see me somehow.

Adam slows the old Chevy, his face creased in concern.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Why are you walking?” he says, worry in his voice. He hops out of the vehicle, leaving the door open. He walks up to me, stopping a few paces away.

Why does he have to be so damn good-looking?

“I’m leaving. Kenna’s coming to get me,” I reply, setting my jaw and walking past him.

“Wha—what happened?” he asks, reaching for me. “Why are you leaving?” His amber eyes are boring into mine, clearly distressed.

“It’s not going to work, okay? Let’s just admit, we knew this from the start. I’ve been lying to myself, and so have you. This is just—it’s ridiculous that we even tried. It’s stupid.” My voice cuts off as I jerk my arms out of his grasp, folding them both over my chest.

His hands drop to his sides like he was stung, lips parting. He stares at me for a few seconds before responding. “Why—did something happen? Did someone say something? You knew we had our differences. I did too,” he forces out, his voice higher than usual. “We can make it work, Harley. I wanted to take you out. I have a whole day planned—”

I cut him off, eyes blazing, voice loud, “No! Okay? No! I don’t want your stupid, perfect, nice-boy date. I don’t want your purity, and I don’t want your wholesome life.” I lower my rising voice, feeling surprisingly calm. “I don’t want to live on a farm or even have kids. I don’t need your stupid charity. My life is dirty, and it always has been. Find a nice girl, someone who’s...someone that’s not damaged. Someone you can take home to momma. I’m not that girl.” I shake my head. “I never was.”

My eyes fill with tears, one slipping down my face. The past I can’t control is choking me, but reality is what it is.

He's devastated, mouth hanging open, eyes squinching together as he stares at me. His chest is rising and falling quickly with his breath.

"I—why are you—why would—Harley, I don't understand..." He's stuttering, voice cracking. His honey gaze is glassy, searching my face.

A Jeep Wrangler pulls up in the corner of my vision, a flash of red to the rescue. I back away from him.

"It's over," I say quickly. "I don't want to hear from you." My voice is rasping the words.

He starts to panic, looking at the Jeep, then back at me. "Harley, don't—let's talk. I'll take my brothers back, and we can go to the silos."

He's begging me. His hands that have been clenched in fists at his sides rise up, roughly mussing through his short blond hair. His muscles flex, his face desperate, teeth biting into his lip.

"Please don't leave like this." He's walking after me, and I turn to open the door to Kenna's Jeep, stepping up into it. "Harley...please..." His voice trails off.

He's standing, shoulders back, in the middle of the road as a huge black truck approaches, horn blaring at him. He doesn't even notice, eyes staring into my soul.

"Go, Kenna, please," I beg her.

She starts to protest, mouth open in shock, "Maybe you should—"

"No! Drive, please. I don't do breakups," I insist, my face pleading with her to leave.

She looks out at Adam, her wide green eyes clearly filled with guilt.

"Okay..." she mumbles, shifting into park and turning the Jeep around.

He becomes a blip in the rearview, and I lie back on the plush seat, telling myself it's better this way.

He needs someone his family will accept. Someone who's still a sweet, innocent virgin like him. Someone with clear skin that isn't peppered with memories of the dark days in her past.

If there's anything I learned from running away from my foster home, it's that I'd rather be alone than surrounded by people who hate me.

Adam

It's a muggy Monday morning, and the only reason I forced myself to get out of bed is the hope that I'll see her in our eight a.m. class.

I arrive early and sit up front, where we usually sit beside each other, passing notes.

My night was restless, miserable, and lonely, just like the last few nights have been. *When did holding her become necessary for me to go to sleep?*

My thoughts have been tormented with her memory, her smell, the way her skin and lips felt under mine.

Students are trudging into class, most dressed in hoodies to ward off the unusually chilly air. October mornings in Texas are unpredictable. I peek around to watch the entrance, shamelessly searching for marked skin and lake-blue eyes.

As the class fills, my stomach sinks a little with each head that appears.

Then, I see her, hair a messy tangle on her shoulders. She's wearing a faded black hoodie that swallows her petite frame. Her eyes look hollow, face makeup-free and exhausted.

Is she having trouble sleeping like I am?

She's still the most beautiful girl in the room. My arms ache to feel her in them. I need her warmth like I need the air in my lungs.

But she doesn't even look at me. Her eyes stay lowered as she slithers into the room. She takes a seat on the back row as the professor steps up to the podium.

The organ in my chest is cracked open, numbing me with the pain of rejection. This must be what heartbreak is. It's devastating, raw agony.

I had this stupid hope that when she came in, she'd sit by me. Maybe even bless my eyes with a smile. Then, she'd lean toward me and whisper some joke about how I stare at her too much, and I'd blush. There would be no point in denying it because she'd be right—I love to look at her.

She's training her eyes straight ahead as if I never existed. I force myself to turn back to the front as the old professor in suspenders starts his lecture. My head drops down, and I write. I write everything I wanted to tell her that I couldn't form into words with my mouth. My pen knows what my heart wants and exactly how to say it.



I've been sitting in my Chevy outside the bar since ten p.m. Water is pelting the windshield as my knee bounces. I struggle to focus on my textbook for business math. The equations are jumbles of words and letters, like I've suddenly forgotten how to read English. The stereo clock reads 1:10.

I'm here because I can't be anywhere else. That's the only explanation my mind can form. She doesn't have a car, and the streets downtown are completely unsafe for a woman walking alone at night. Anyone knows that, even a hick like me raised on a farm.

I could go in and sit, order a Coke and French fries. She'd have to serve me and talk to me. Maybe I could give her the letter. *Would that be cruel of me?*

Dan insists nothing happened after I left to get firewood. He said Harley talked to my dad for a little while, then suddenly got up and left. I know my

father. He's a kind and loving man. He would never say anything to hurt her.

Even so, I asked him about it. I asked what they talked about and if anything was said that might upset her. He said all he talked to her about was our class together. I have no reason to believe he would lie to me—he never has. His voice was tinged with concern, asking me if she got home okay after walking out.

But I have to know why. I have to understand. Did she get overwhelmed, being around so many little kids?

Was it the happy, loving family thing? I can't imagine how that must make her feel, considering she was in foster homes, growing up. She told me a little about it, but she didn't give a lot of details. It seems painful for her to talk about, and I get a little sick when I think about what kinds of things she must have experienced.

I reach for the handle, the old, creaky door groaning as I step out into the rainy street. Deliberate steps take me up to Billy's Pub, and I pull on the heavy wooden door. Stepping through the entrance, I see only three patrons scattered around the interior. Leather and wood give it a classy, antique vibe. It's the only bar I've ever been inside, but it's a comfortable atmosphere.

The dark-haired woman who Harley works with looks up at me from behind the bar top, thankfully giving me a smile.

"Hey, handsome. She's out back." She gestures for me to follow her.

I breathe out a sigh, grateful they aren't kicking me out.

"Thanks. Is it Sal?" I ask, remembering her name from one of Harley's stories.

She smiles and nods, eyes roving over my damp clothing.

“I hope you can cheer that girl up. She’s been sulking all night. You gotta brother?” she asks as we walk through a storage room of bottles and crates.

“I have seven brothers,” I respond.

She halts her steps, mouth agape.

“Shit.” She looks over me again, eyes wide. “God bless your momma.” She shakes her head. Gesturing to a dingy black metal door at the back, she says, “She’s out there, having a smoke break.” She smiles and winks at me, walking back out front.

This is the first time I’ve heard about Harley smoking. She’s never done it in front of me, which makes me wonder how much I really know about her.

Pushing the door open, I step out. There’s a small two-foot overhang right outside the door to stand under and avoid getting rained on. I don’t see Harley. There’s a square wooden crate with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter resting on it.

Looking around, I see a large dumpster to the right side, a tall fence behind it. I drift in the other direction, where there’s a dark alley. As I turn the corner, I see her.

She’s sitting on another wooden crate, face turned toward the street. The rain has slowed to a drizzle, but it’s still coming down on her.

“Harley,” I say, still a few steps away.

She doesn’t turn toward me, just sighs.

“Adam,” is all she says. Her voice sounds tired.

I glance up to see what she’s looking at. She has a clear view of my truck, where it’s been parked the last three hours. I gulp, heat crawling up my neck.

“What are you doing out here?” I ask hoarsely, taking a step closer to her.

“Just watching you watch me,” she responds, eyes still turned away from me.

I get to her, tentatively reaching out toward her shoulder. She flinches at my touch, jumping up.

“Don’t,” she pleads. Her face looks over me, clear eyes rimmed pink. Her hands are clenched in tiny fists at her sides.

“You should come inside, out of the rain.” As I say it, the drops flow harder, and we really start to get soaked. Neither of us moves toward cover.

We both have on white shirts, hers beginning to show the black lacy bra underneath, the edges revealed as it soaks in the moisture. I feel mine sticking to my torso.

“Why are you here?” she shouts over the rain that’s now pouring down.

My steps lead me closer, and I have to look down at her, our bodies inches apart.

“Why’d you leave?” I ask, my voice throaty.

She laughs. “Oh, so he didn’t tell you?” Head going back, neck exposed, she cackles into the dark sky, almost like she’s deranged. “Why am I not surprised at all?” she finally gets out, still smiling.

My eyes narrow, muscles tensing as I grab her arms. “Tell me what? Nobody told me anything. They’re not liars, so maybe you should fill me in,” I say through clenched teeth.

My grip is firm, but she doesn’t struggle. Instead, she looks at my lips, licking hers.

“Let’s do it—right now. In your truck. Come on. I’m ready,” she insists, tilting her head to the side. Her lashes are heavy with water.

“Wh—what? What are you talking about?” I question incredulously, blinking at her like she grew horns.

She smiles again, but it's cruel and harsh, almost a grimace. "That's what I am, baby. That's what I've always been. They saw it right away, even in Kenna's stupid pink dress. Couldn't fool your holy family. They can sense a witch. You're just too naive and gullible to catch on. Distracted with my face, my body—all the things that draw you in blind you to what I am."

She jerks back from me, and I release her arms like she caught fire.

"Let me show you what I mean. I only need about two minutes." She whirls around, stomping toward my truck.

My body is frozen for about three seconds, mouth gaping, before I recover and sprint after her.

"Hey! Stop!" I scream, several feet behind her in the alley.

She freezes, slowly turning.

"Don't talk about yourself that way. Why do you do that?" My voice is quiet, barely audible over the noise of the rain. My heart is thumping like I ran for miles.

She turns her face up into the sky, eyes closed. She lets the water wash over her for several beats before shifting her eyes to me.

"It's true. I'm the harlot, the bad girl sent to steal your virtue. You fell right into the trap." Her eyes are dead, lifeless. "Now, go, before you're too far in to get out."

She slowly inches toward me, eyes capturing mine. She reaches me. Lifting a hand up, she grips the back of my neck and pulls me down.

My breath catches as I expect her to kiss me. Heart racing, I lick my lips in anticipation.

She's my fresh air, my lifeline.

Her lips don't touch mine; instead, they hover over my ear. "You know I'm right. Deep down, you've been lying to yourself. Make your mamma

happy and pick one that's not such a whore."

She blows out a breath, tingling my ear. "I'll only hurt you."

Her breathy whisper sends chills over me while crushing my lingering hopes. I turn my face to her, our gazes clashing. It almost looks like she's crying, her eyes red, but it could be from the rain. It's impossible to resist the urge to lower my gaze. My mouth is gravitating to hers like a compass pointing north. Her eyelids droop, and temptation overcomes my willpower. I get close enough to feel her exhale, and she is my oxygen supply for a moment as our lips meet.

The second we make contact, she jerks away from me.

"I said, go! Get away from me!" She's screaming hysterically, eyes demon-possessed with rage.

She shoves my chest with her hands, forcing me back. My heart is cracking open at the devastated look of pain in her expression. Her eyes are creased, lips sneering.

"I don't want you," she grits out. Her face is stern, but her bottom lip is trembling.

My arms feel heavy, and I drop them to my sides. I close my eyes, running both hands over my head, scratching my scalp harshly, trying to feel pain somewhere besides my chest.

She runs past me, the door creaking open and slamming shut again with a loud bang.

It's the nail in the coffin of us, and I know it's over now. The finality of it is a concept I can't fully grasp.

She has become the most vital part of my life. Her face is the only one I look forward to seeing every day.

I take the letter out of my pocket, tearing it to shreds. There are no words to express how broken I feel as the emptiness overwhelms me.

Harley

The sky is overcast, reflecting the dull, gray aching in my chest.

I walk home from my shift in the sticky, dark night. The clouds are threatening to release another downpour, and I almost wish they would.

When I reach the dorms and open the door, the soft rev of an engine purrs past.

My sleep that night is disturbed with frequent wakings. Lurching up from my pillow, I think Lenny is at the door, forcing me to come back to Carbona. When I realize it's only a dream, I release a sigh. I look at the clock to see it's nearly four, which means I've barely slept an hour. I dig through the back of my desk drawers for the emergency stash of weed I've had hidden since I arrived—another souvenir from my foster sister.

Cracking the window to the room, I light it up. Kenna is out cold, and I'm hoping no loud Texas trucks blaze by.

A few hits are all I need to calm the unease in my stomach. My head gets a little fuzzy, and I recline back on the pillow, accepting the sinking feeling that overcomes me, making my limbs feel heavy.



The week drags on, and nearly every night, I crack open the window to smoke a joint. I found a dealer easily enough by reaching out to the guy I'd bummed off of at the beach party. There isn't a student on campus Kenna doesn't know.

One night, the creak of the window woke her up, and she was completely terrified someone was breaking in. She started screaming like a lunatic before I could explain it was me.

After the realization, she was curious about the weed. Apparently, she had always wanted to try it. After only one inhale, she was doubled over, laughing hysterically. The rolling of my eyes was surely going to stick, but I couldn't resist.

She's just repeated her unbelievable feat of coffee-fetching despite the endless line as we make our way to early classes on Monday morning. My stomach is tied in knots, knowing I'm about to see Adam again after the agonizingly long week.

We haven't bumped into each other once, not even at the cafeteria. He misses lunch most days, or he must go late to avoid me. I've seen his brother and roommates there multiple times.

Today, my hair is curled, lips harlot red. I don't need to change myself for the approval of anyone.

Kenna's voice breaks through my internal rant. "Okay, so I planned this a while back, but this weekend is our dorm party—well, it's sort of turned into a hall party because Maya and the girls all invited more people, so there's really not enough space in just our room." She smiles at me apologetically.

"Okay..." *Maybe I can pick up a shift.* A party is the last thing I want to be at. "What night?"

She turns to me, grabbing my arm, eyes desperate. "Please, please, come. I know you...aren't in the mood for socializing, but I'll feel terrible if you get kicked out of your own room! It will be fun, I promise. I already told Kyle he is *not* invited. I know you're sad about Adam, but—"

“I am not sad about him,” I lie through my teeth.

We’re about to pass by Silas and Dan, and Kenna stops to talk to them.

“Hey, guys, are y’all coming to the dorm party on Friday? It’s not sorority-related, and it’s super exclusive.” She beams at them, wiggling her eyebrows.

Dan returns the grin, ignoring my presence, while Silas stares at me.

I glare back at him.

“Yeah, we’ll be there. Are we allowed to wear our shirts?” Dan asks, a hint of humor in his tone.

Kenna laughs. “Hmm, maybe. Show up, and we’ll see.” We start to walk past them, and she lifts a hand to wave. “Make sure you tell Levi it’s basically just us, super intimate!”

She whirls back around to me. “Ugh! I’m so sorry. I’d already invited them all before you and Adam broke up! Surely, he won’t show.” Concern creases her brows, mouth frowning.

“It’s fine, really. I’m going to pick up a shift at the bar anyways,” I say, discomfort in my chest. “He can go if he wants.” My apathetic tone is a betrayal to the longing in my heart to see him again.

“I just want Levi to come so bad. If I could talk to him, I know I’d be able to peel back his shell. If you want me to cancel the whole thing, I totally will,” she says, assurance in her voice.

My chest squeezes at her concern. It’s nice to have a friend who actually cares.

“Kens, it’s really okay. I hope Levi shows too.” My lips curve into a weak smile.

She sighs, hugging me. “Men are wretched. If he doesn’t show, I’m giving up. We can live together forever, and everyone will say we’re

lesbians. We won't care because then all the men will leave us alone. We can buy a big Victorian house, paint it blush pink, and host spa days on weekends. Okay, maybe I want to do this even if he does show up." She giggles at herself, and I can't help but join in.

"Okay, deal, except for the pink house. Let's buy a vineyard. That's what I want to do for real," I say.

She nods her head vigorously, curls bouncing. "What about a pink house on a vineyard? Compromise?" She laughs, waving as we split directions.

I'm still smiling when I walk into Horticulture. I don't see a blonde head sitting on a broad set of muscles. Maybe he won't be here. Even if he is, I can sit where I prefer. Claiming my old seat on the front row, I start to unpack my notebook and pens. Maybe I'll go price refurbished laptops this weekend during the dorm party.

The adorable professor walks in front of the class, and I can't help but smile at his red-and-white polka-dot bow tie complementing his usual suspenders.

Someone walks up beside me, claiming the seat connected to mine on the right. My skin prickles as I smell the familiar cedar and earth. A flush begins seeping over me, nerves lit up like hot coals in a breeze.

My eyes stay trained toward the front.

After ten minutes, I can't take it anymore. I release the pressure tensing my muscles, leaning back in my chair. I haven't taken any notes the entire class, but I begin scratching my pen over the paper, nearly cutting through it. I shove it to my right.

did you have to sit right beside me?

Eyes still trained on the board on the wall, I feel him leaning over the desk, then the paper is pushed back to me.

no.

My gaze zips to his face, and I lose my train of thought.

Honey eyes, dense lashes, and a razor-edge jawline are facing the speaker up front. He looks like he's been in the sun, skin a shade darker than last week. He's got on the T-shirt I wore at the beach party, a soft emerald green, molded to his muscled form like icing on a birthday cake. He flexes his jaw, not looking at me. The action sends a bolt of lightning through my body, and I feel an overwhelming urge to touch him...with my tongue.

I bend over the paper instead, scribbling.

then why are you sitting here?

He takes his sweet time responding, apparently enraptured by the lesson about pruning trees. Ages later, he calmly writes on my paper, slowly pushing it over.

because I want to.

Focusing on keeping my breathing under control, I count all the way to one hundred, like the social worker taught me after the first time I had a "violent outburst."

why?

He must be messing with me, or he genuinely is engulfed in the techniques of treating oak wilt.

A thick, corded arm finally reaches over for the paper, eyes staring at it for a while, before writing. This time, his pen scratches for several endless minutes. He pushes the paper toward me without hesitation.

It's at least five more minutes before I have the courage to read it, and the professor has just announced next week's test, gathering his materials to leave. Students are rambling around us, feet shuffling down the aisles.

I like being near you, I like the way you smell, and I ache to feel your body heat. Your skin is magnetic. All I want to do is touch you, but since I can't do that, I'll take any opportunity I have to be close to you. I'm addicted to your eyes, your hair, your ink, your mind, your words, even your rejection because at least you still feel something for me. All I do is hurt, knowing you're not mine. But I can't force myself to stay away from you. So, if I get the chance to sit by you, I'm always taking it.

My mind is a jumbled tangle of incoherent thoughts.

If I owned one of the smart watches fitness freaks wear, it would show me pitter-pattering into an explosion at any second.

Who spews their feelings out like this, especially after my cold rejection in the alley? Is it truly only the physical desire, or can I believe that he isn't

like every other man who's attempted to get close to me?

He's still sitting beside me, and we are the only two left in the room. Head cradled in his hands, elbows resting on his knees, shoulders steadily rising and falling with his breath, he portrays the ultimate picture of vulnerability. I feel overwhelmed with the power I have over his emotional state.

As difficult as it is to admit, his parents are right about one thing. He has the right to be with someone who isn't running from a past that's starting to catch up.

They weren't right about me being a whore, but they pinned me straightaway as a sinking pit of sand, only capable of dragging him down.

The problem lies with the fact that I'm not strong enough to fully resist him, not when he's so beautifully unguarded.

My hand slowly reaches out to rest on his back, and he sighs into the contact, slowly lifting his head. Gorgeous eyes focus intently into mine, longing etched into the tiny flecks of gold.

Licking my lips to begin speaking tears his gaze down, and he swallows.

I force the words out, "I...I need to be honest with you. We said it before, but then we acted...completely different. We have to stay friends this time—actually, only friends. No more...kissing friends."

His eyes flick up to mine, darkening as his cheeks heat.

I push through despite the tingling in my belly. "You might not understand why I want it this way, but I'm confident you will eventually. If you can agree to that...we can try to be friends again." My voice slightly wavers near the end, but I get it out, releasing a breath.

He waits a few seconds, staring at me. His expression gives nothing away.

“Okay, if that’s what you want,” he finally says, voice a little husky.

I nod. “Our friends are friends, and we never even officially dated so...it shouldn’t be hard for us to re-establish boundaries,” I say with more confidence.

His face is still a blank mask, refusing to reveal his thoughts.

“So...as friends, are we allowed to study...alone...for the test together?”

The test is next Monday, so I guess that’s why he’s asking. His body hasn’t moved an inch the entire conversation. I begin slowly packing away my stuff as the next class starts to filter in.

“Uh, sure, I don’t see why not. Friends can study together,” I respond, trying not to imagine him sitting on my bed and utterly failing. Shirtless study sessions could be a thing...among friends.

He stands up when I do, and we make our way through the opposing sea of people.

“What about...eating together in the cafeteria?” he asks as we emerge from the building.

I wore my skintight high-rise jeans with a fitted red V-neck, but it’s warmer than I anticipated. Texas fall mornings are deceptive.

I smile up at him, which is a bad idea because his mouth parts and he sucks in a little breath.

“If it’s something friends would do, yes, I’m okay with it,” I force out, trying to sound casual.

He only looks ahead, walking alongside me.

“When’s your lunch today?” he asks after a minute of silence.

“My class ends at eleven forty-five, and then I usually meet Kenna at the caf.” I resist tacking on that he’s never there at that time on Mondays.

He squints into the sun. “Okay. Well, I might see you then.”

He struts off without another word, and my heart sinks, only a little.

Adam

After canceling my noon appointment, I make my way to the cafeteria. Harley's insistence on us being "friends" has filled me with a tiny sense of cautious optimism.

I can't help myself. I meant what I wrote in class—being near her is better than being anywhere else.

Her ruby-red mouth was all I could think about in my last two classes, and the second she comes into view, it's the first thing I see. My eyes drift over her, taking in her sensual shape and decorative skin. She's unbelievably alluring in the red on black.

I have to pause and take a steadying breath before resuming my steps toward her, gripping my tray hard enough that it begins to make a creaking sound. She's seated alone, but I see Kenna near the drink station.

Taking the seat safely diagonal to her, I place my food down, releasing my backpack to the floor. She glances up, sending a jolt through me with her ocean eyes. She smiles tentatively. Kenna steps up, and I force my eyes away from Harley to greet her.

"Hey, Kenna."

She's nervously shifting on her feet, looking from me back to Harley.

"Uh...hi," she begins, her eyes a little wide.

Harley looks at her, shrugging. "I told Adam we should just move on and be friends. Do you care if they sit with us today?" Her tone is casual.

She's tossing a salad while eating a chocolate chip cookie. I can't help but smile, remembering her affinity for always having dessert first. I relax a little, taking a bite of the greasy burger on my plate.

Kenna slowly takes the seat by Harley, whispering in her ear. Harley shrugs, poking at her food. I'd give anything to read her thoughts.

Dan and Silas are approaching, warily observing the occupants of the table. My brother's face is frowning in disapproval, but I ignore it.

"So, what are you up to this weekend, Adam?" Kenna asks, taking a bite of a disgusting-looking mountain of strawberries and lettuce sprinkled with pecans.

"I don't have any plans other than work at the nursery Saturday," I say, noticing Harley perks up at my words. My heart sinks a little at the memory of our would-be date.

"You should come to our dorm party Friday night," she says as Levi approaches our table.

He stumbles a bit before setting his tray down at the opposite end of where Kenna sits.

"You guys are all invited," she says again, a little louder, before shoving a bite into her mouth.

I look over at Harley, attempting to judge her opinion on the issue. Her head is dipped down, one elbow on the table, her hair a black curtain, blocking her face from me.

"Yeah, maybe," I respond noncommittally.

If Harley's at work, I'll need to get there by one to trail her home, like I have been all week. Sometimes, she gets off by one fifteen, and other times, it's not till two thirty.

Leaning both my elbows on the table, I look down and blow out a breath. Being near her is harder than I thought it would be with her ignoring me.

She doesn't look at me for the rest of the meal.



"I just don't get what your plan is. Why would you even go tonight?" Dan questions as he dips his finger in a little tin, rubbing it in his hands and then through his hair.

It's longer than I've ever seen it. When he's done, he looks like a city boy.

"What are you doing? Since when do you fix your hair?"

My hands are on my hips, eyes surveying him. I don't give a shit what he does to his hair, but I'm sick of him questioning my every move.

He laughs. "What, I can't fix my hair? You're sneaking around with some—"

I take a step toward him, my menacing glare causing him to step back.

"I would watch whatever it is about to come out of your mouth." I seethe.

His face hardens. "I was gonna say, some girl—that's it." He turns his back to me, finding a shirt to wear. "Even though you won't believe it, I actually don't have a problem with Harley. I just know she will never, ever be accepted by them." He walks back out of our tiny shared closet. "So, you're either going to have to choose your family, the farm, everything you've ever known or her. And I hate to see you walking down a road that's either going to separate you from everyone in your life or hurt the girl you're starting to really care about." He's pulling a collared shirt that looks new over his head.

“We’re just friends,” I murmur, the heavy truth of his words an impossible burden. *Why do I feel such an unquenchable thirst for someone I can’t have?*

Silas joins us to walk to the dorm party, but Levi, unsurprisingly, bows out.

“Man’s insane. Kenna Davis is, like, the girl almost every guy on the team is after,” Silas says, shaking his head as we emerge from the dorms.

“Ha, he wouldn’t have a single clue what to even begin to do with a girl like that,” Dan scoffs.

“And you would?” Silas retorts, shutting down the snicker.

“Okay, fine, but I did kiss Scarlett behind the church when we were—” Dan starts to say, getting interrupted by Silas.

“You what? You kissed her?” he asks, a hardness to his voice that surprises me. He’s turned toward Dan, his jaw clenched.

Dan holds up his hands. “What? Why do you care?”

They begin to bicker back and forth.

I tune them out, focusing on how to survive the night if Harley is talking to another guy. *She wouldn’t, would she?*

I’ve learned not to assume the worst of her, but my fears are difficult to push down. What will I do if there’s a guy there who she’s...with? I decide not to dwell on it as nausea rides in my throat.

It’s still early as we step onto the girls’ floor, but there’s already a significant amount of students littering the hallway. Loud, pulsing hip-hop music fills the air. The “small, intimate” gathering looks a lot more like an actual party starting off.

We’re pushing our way through when I see a guy with a shaved head, absolutely every inch of his skin covered with tattoos. He’s got more than

I've ever seen on a human body. I see another one who could be his twin, only shorter and heavier.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up as their shifting eyes roam over the scantily clad young crowd of mostly girls in the hallway. They're too old to be college students, so why are they here? Either one is definitely not a student's father.

I'm about to approach them both to ask them what they're doing here when they push through the crowd, straight through the open door with the number thirty-four.

Lunging after them, I panic as the door shuts. I don't even think. Alarm bells start sounding in my head like sirens.

Get to Harley now. Right now.

I try the handle, but it's locked. Dan and Silas have caught up to me, both with stunned looks on their faces. I take a long stride back, moving a girl out of the way.

"What's wrong?"

"What happened?" they say in unison.

I ignore them, raising my foot in the air and breaking the door down. It cracks open, the latch and knob hanging on by a splinter as it swings wide, thudding against the wall. Everyone close by turns to stare with open mouths, but the music masks most of the sound. I step into the room.

The taller, bald man is on Harley's bed. She's huddled in the corner once again, but he has his hand resting high on her thigh. Her face is ash, but she jolts as I break into the room. The bigger guy steps toward me, nearly touching my chest with his.

"Hey, get the fuck out," he barks at me.

I turn my face to him, the adrenaline still rushing as I shove his chest hard, and he stumbles. I feel Silas and Dan enter behind me, thankfully both big and muscular from our long days on the farm.

The taller one looks over at me with a cold smile as his hand drags off Harley's thigh. I take several long strides toward the bed, red beginning to rim my vision.

"Touch her again, and I break your fucking hand," I growl, barely restraining myself from reaching over and doing it anyways.

I'm trying to handle the situation without murdering someone, but it's difficult. I can't let her get hurt.

He snickers at me, looking over at Harley's frozen form, then back at me.

"We only just met. How do you already know my biggest weakness?" his slithering voice responds. He surveys me from his position on the bed, reclining his head back on the wall like it's a normal Friday night.

Harley is a statue, a dull, hollow expression on her face.

The bigger man is standing where I shoved him, unsure of what his boss wants him to do next.

I glower at the tattooed man.

"Either get up and leave now or I will physically remove you," I threaten him, ready to carry it out in the next three seconds.

He turns to look at Harley, then back up at me. He decides he wants to live another day without being permanently crippled.

"I'll see you soon, Harley, to finish this up." He stands up from the bed, rising almost to my height but not quite. He grins. "I like the new toy."

They both walk out casually, and I turn to Silas and Dan.

"Make sure they leave. Alert the campus police that there are two older male non-residents roaming the girls' dorm and give them physical

descriptions.”

They both nod, turning to follow the men.

I slowly face Harley, yet again unsure if I should reach for her or refrain. She doesn't look at me, just continues to sit like a sad, pretty painting on the wall.

I see the edge of a dark green bag sticking out from under the bed. Reaching down to grab it, I swing it up onto the edge of the mattress. Going through her drawers, I grab everything I see and shove it in. They are surprisingly bare, and I realize she wears a lot of the same shirts and shorts or Kenna's clothes.

At the sink in her bathroom, it's easy to tell which side is hers because it's neat but sparse.

I collect the toothbrush, toothpaste, and a half-open box of tampons in the drawer. The release of tension in my shoulders at seeing them makes me momentarily weak. *She's not pregnant with his baby.*

Harley's gained a little bit of weight in the last month, but she was tiny when I met her. She looks healthier now.

Stepping back in, I see that she's finally moved, and she's attempting to pull open the window.

“Do you need help?” I ask quietly.

She doesn't hear me, still struggling with the window, hands shaking. I reach over her, grasping the frame and easily lifting it up. I stay right behind her, unsure of her intentions.

She reveals a brown cigarette hiding with a lighter inside the crease of the window. I don't want to see her ruin her health at such a young age, but she must be addicted.

She struggles to light it, a breeze floating in fighting her efforts. I grip her hand, slowly extracting the lighter and blocking the air with my body.

The tip of the cigarette glows orange, and she breathes out a long sigh.

“I know you want to know what’s going on, but I don’t think I’m ready to talk about it all,” she says after a few moments of staring into the darkness.

“You don’t have to tell me anything,” I say quietly.

Someone gasps, and we both turn to see Kenna walking through the broken-down door, her mouth dragging the floor.

“What happened? Oh my gosh, Riley came and got me and said that...” She trails off, stepping closer to us. “Are you okay?” she asks Harley as her eyes narrow with concern, brows pinched together.

Harley nods, taking another drag on the cigarette.

“I’m good.”

She doesn’t elaborate on the splintered door, and Kenna turns back to look at it in disbelief.

I begin to explain, “I had to—”

Harley cuts me off, stubbing out the skunk-smelling object, “We’ll stay with the guys until it gets fixed. Maybe Levi will get his head out of his ass.” She pats Kenna on the shoulder as she walks into the bathroom and closes the door.

Kenna’s eyes are green balloons, and she clearly expects me to give her some kind of explanation of what the hell happened. I wish I knew.

I lower my voice. “Two men came in here, bald and covered in tattoos. Have you seen them before?” I ask her, glancing up at the closed bathroom door.

She shakes her head, fear entering her gaze. “Who were they? You think...you think she’s in danger?” she whispers back.

I grit my teeth, flexing my jaw. “I don’t know, but I don’t think y’all should stay here even if the door does get fixed. Not until she tells one of us what’s going on and we can make sure they won’t be back.”

I breathe out a sigh, rubbing my forehead with my hand. I’ve always known, theoretically, there were lots of evil people in the world. Over the years, our church has contributed funds to halfway houses and assisted various people who came by, asking for help. But those men were a new brand of evil for me. The way Harley huddled in the corner, clearly terrified, has my blood slowly returning to a boiling point.

She walks out of the bathroom with a little blue bag, and I see that her face is brightened up with lipstick, her skin a little smoother.

“Pack a bag, roomie. We’re having a coed slumber party.” She smiles, wiggling her brows.

Just like that, the mask is back on.

Harley

I haven't fully processed everything that happened to me with Seven. Seeing him again put me into shock. My entire body locked up, and I felt paralyzed. I was hoping I'd never lay eyes on his eerie, fully inked skin.

Looking at Adam's rigid posture, I know he must be thinking the worst, and I need to tell him I wasn't raped.

The problem is that I'm not sure if I was.

We're stepping into the boys' dorm as he starts to speak, "I was thinking Dan and I can sleep on the floor in Silas and Levi's room. Give me one minute."

He walks to the dresser and pulls out two clean fitted sheets. Kenna and I gape at each other. They're probably the only guys in this entire building who even wash their bedding, let alone have extras.

He starts to pull off the old ones, and I admire his perfectly worn jeans as he bends over to put the new one on. I wonder if I can convince him to stay with me tonight.

"We should watch *The Princess Bride*," I hear myself say to his back.

He rises, turning to smile at me. "Okay."

My stomach does a somersault. *He's so pretty.*

The door opens, and Dan and Silas step inside. They both nod at Adam, who returns it.

Kenna speaks into the awkwardness, "Okay, last time I was here, y'all had never seen *Man of Steel*. I think *Batman Begins* is up next."

Silas simply nods, but Dan lights up like a Christmas tree. *How have I missed this little development until now?*

There's no TV in Adam's room, so they all shuffle into the adjoining suite. Before closing the door, Kenna watches Adam step into the closet before giving me a wink. I peek at him, seeing a sliver of delicious, shifting back muscles as he changes into a gray T-shirt. A heavy sigh escapes me.

We settle on his bed with Kenna's tablet between us, propped up by the kickstand. It feels cozy, being trapped under the upper bunk, like our own cocoon of safety. He's at least three feet away from me, our backs against pillows on the wall.

All I want is to be held. His legs are crossed at the ankles, honey eyes trained on the screen.

Wesley and Buttercup are rolling down the hill before I decide to scoot next to him, repositioning the tablet. I lay my head on his steel shoulder, sighing softly. I can feel his body rise and fall with his breath, and the emotional exhaustion begins to overwhelm me.



Warm skin envelops me as I gain consciousness. My body is trapped, restrained by strong arms. Panic begins to rise before I smell cedar and another delicious, indescribable aroma. I relax again, slowly opening my eyes. Warm, rich honeypots suck me in. Lips part, and we both watch.

"You can't kiss me," I whisper.

He gulps, nodding.

"Because I have morning death breath," I continue, clamping my hand over my mouth.

He licks his lips, a tiny smirk forming.

“How did you sleep?” He matches my whisper.

It’s my turn to wet my bottom lip. “Terrible. You snore.”

He shakes his head against the pillow. “That was Kenna.”

I laugh out loud, clamping my hand over my mouth so I don’t wake her up.

He’s snickering at me, pulling back slightly.

“I want to take you somewhere today.” He’s got that sexy, scratchy morning voice that sends jolts down into my belly.

“It’d better not be somewhere high up,” I respond. My voice is always a little raspy in the morning.

I’m suddenly aware that down near my upper thigh, there’s a hard, very male shape, and my eyes go wide. His cheeks turn the color of my favorite harlot lipstick. He tries to pull back, but I reach a hand under the covers to wrap around his torso and pull myself closer. His body tenses, eyes dark, breathing a fraction above the normal range. His lips are just open enough to fit my tongue through, but I resist. He tries again to pull away, and this time, I let him, so I can crawl on top of him, our bodies flush together in all the right places.

His neck is corded, straining as he struggles with where to put his hands. Mine are braced on either side of his head, knees pressed into the mattress near his hips. I lean in, my mouth releasing a breath into his ear, the long shape growing.

“What should I wear?” I rasp.

He doesn’t respond for at least thirty seconds. I would check his pulse, but that’s highly unnecessary.

“Maybe, uh, something that’s...uh, you look good in red,” he finally chokes out. His hands that were on the mattress have finally begun to drift

onto my backside, over the blanket.

“Hmm, what are you going to wear?” I ask, nibbling at his ear.

“I didn’t know the guy was supposed to wear anything,” he replies, voice wheezing a bit.

I lean back, finding a comfortable place where we fit. He’s winded, like a marathon runner near the finish line.

“I meant, to wherever we’re going today.” I quirk a brow at him.

He grabs my hips, hard, twisting us around in the blankets, pushing me onto my back. “I know exactly what you meant, buttercup,” he whispers, his teeth grazing over my neck for a brief moment before he lifts off, strutting toward the bathroom.

I notice the front of his athletic shorts is stretched out.

I lie breathless for a moment before muffling a laugh with the pillow.

I feel the top bunk shifting, and a mass of blonde curls starts to crawl down the ladder on the side. She lies beside me, eyes closed.

“Are y’all back together?” she mumbles sleepily.

I roll onto my back, staring up at the slats holding the twin mattress up.

“I hope so.” I pause, biting into my lip. “I was pretty awful to him when we...cut things off,” I admit, thinking of my angry screaming in the storm behind Billy’s Pub.

She doesn’t hesitate. “He’ll forgive you, Har, but you have to forgive yourself too. You deserve a good one. I hope you know that.”

I gulp at my friend’s words. *Do I?*

The good guy in question walks out of the bathroom, going to the dresser and selecting fresh clothes.

“Either of you want to jump in the shower before I do?” he asks.

“Harley could just jump in with you to save the hot water for the rest of us,” Kenna blurts without hesitation, the smile in her voice evident.

His wide shoulders tense.

I laugh, laying my head on her shoulder.

“She’s kidding,” I breathe out through the giggles.

He turns to us, strategically placing his bundle of folded clothes in front of himself. “Maybe you should, Harley, to preserve the...hot water,” he challenges.

Our chuckles halt, and I sit up in bed. “All right, Farm Boy, you’re on.”

We don’t back down. The shirt challenge set the stakes.

I hop out of bed and walk toward the bathroom. Pulling open the door, I wait for him to follow. He does, slowly clicking it shut. I’m struck with a sense of *déjà vu*. He reaches over me, our eyes tied together as he locks the opposite door into Silas and Levi’s room.

He already started the water, the steam swirling around us.

Friends. Friends. Friends. I chant to myself.

I clear my throat. “Well, are you gonna shower with your clothes on?” I ask, indicating his shorts and T-shirt, like a total hypocrite.

He looks over my equally clothed body.

“Only if you do,” he says, his voice a little weaker than in the bedroom.

I lift the hem of my shirt over my body, tossing it on the floor. I’m wearing a thin black bralette. He sucks in, slowly expelling his breath. His eyes drink in my covered breasts that are slowly moving with my lungs. Then, he quickly removes his own shirt to reveal his muscled torso. I want to get on my knees and thank that old farm for having so many heavy things to push around.

I bravely step out of the denim shorts I fell asleep in, noting he must have gotten up to change before choosing to crawl back in bed with me. He removes his, and we're both down to our underwear. Our eyes are slightly wide, breathing a bit labored.

Someone from the boys' side bangs on the door, and we jolt. I wrap my arms around my torso, gripping my elbows.

"I'm taking a shower. Use the one down the hall," Adam barks out, checking the lock.

"Hurry up!" Dan's muffled annoyance leaks under the door.

Adam doesn't reply, and I look down at my chipped toenail polish, suddenly feeling less brave. I won't be the one to back down.

Without thinking, I jump under the stream, still wearing my lacy bralette and black thong. The water is scorching, and I'm sticking to the wall, fiddling with the knob.

He steps in, still wearing faded blue boxers, an obvious tent situation in the front that heats my cheeks.

His hand covers mine, pushing the single knob in the correct direction to bring the water down to bearable human temperatures. I study his face, dark brown lashes dripping water down his cheekbones. His mouth is perfection, shaped equally on top and bottom, that perfect shade of pink. His jawline rivals every male model I've ever seen in a cologne ad.

His hand reaches up, and I hold my breath. He doesn't touch me, just presses his large palm into the cold tiles above my head to brace himself. I must be losing my mind. I keep assuming what's about to happen and being completely disappointed.

There's a tiny green sliver of soap on a ledge behind him. I reach for it, my mouth nearly meeting his shoulder but not quite. I begin to lather it

slowly, debating whether or not I dare touch him.

The status quo is suspended in the unknown. Can we reasonably suggest that friends actually shower together, albeit clothed?

His eyelids are hooded, my lips the only thing he can look at, other than my entire dripping, etched body. I begin to wash myself with slow, deliberate movements, white suds forming over my exterior. His eyes are lasered into every fraction of skin he can see. I want so badly to remove the thin cloth barriers between us, but is he ready?

Wouldn't he make the move if he was?

Adam

The agonizing predilection I feel for Harley is disturbing. Granted, I've never showered with a girl, but her roommate is pretty, and I wouldn't want her in here.

There's something about Harley that makes my entire body ache with pure, burning need—one part far more than the rest. I feel like I'm the drug addict my parents warned me about as a child, desperate for one thing and willing to destroy anyone to get it.

She's cleansing herself, and I'm desperately addicted to her hands gliding over the ebony pictures on her skin. She reaches under her black bra to wash her breasts, and I have no choice but to turn away, groaning in agony. She's in grave danger of me aggressively pouncing on her, and I don't know what her emotional state is after last night.

I'm facing the opposite wall of the tiny shower, my forehead pressed to the cold gray tile. My focus is on anything outside this world of steam and regaining control of my breathing. She reaches around me to lay the soap back on the ledge near my knee. I'm still breathing out in ragged, uneven puffs.

I finally gain the courage to grab the green bar, turning it over in my hand before obscenely rubbing it on myself. I clean my face first because I'm a sick, perverted man, in love with a woman that I'm inadequate for. I imagine her while I do it because in my head, the desire I feel has no limits or bounds.

“You can turn around now,” a soft voice speaks from behind me.

I obey instantly, continuing to wash my body. It’s her time to watch me, crystal-blue eyes zeroed in on my hands. We’re both in need of oxygen after several minutes of the typically mundane ritual.

Someone with a death wish bangs on the door.

“Geez, Adam, I get you’re all frustrated, but that means it shouldn’t take so long.” Dan’s voice breaks through, saving us from the inevitable.

Harley lets out a raspy laugh, a beautiful smile on her face.

“We’re almost done,” she yells, rattling us out.

Silence is the response, and I doubt my brother will try to hurry us again.

I smile down at her, shaking my head. I guess him finding out where this is going sooner is...better.

“You’re so bad,” I say hoarsely, stepping dangerously closer to her.

She smiles up at me, but it slowly melts off as her eyes drop down, focused only on my mouth. I have no choice now. What she wants is obvious, and who am I to deny this woman?

My head descends, mouth capturing hers, the water licking over us with approval. She’s so sweet, the most delectable, rich dessert at the potluck. The one everybody wants and you race toward it to get the last piece. My mouth is desperate, lips hungry and viciously devouring her. She reaches up a hand to grab for my neck, the desperation in her clear.

We have to do this now. She wants it. I want it. *Why shouldn’t we have it?*

A feminine moan fills our perfect haven, her leg hitching up over my hip. I instinctively grip her knee. I’m pressing into her, so desperate for contact that I can’t fathom not having it. Our tongues are scraping over teeth, sucking, overwhelmed with the sensations. I strangely feel like I won’t be

able to survive outside of this shower, like life without a nearly naked, writhing Harley suctioned to me is unfathomable.

We don't fight it; giving in without resistance isn't even difficult. I've never been educated with how this works, but my instincts are leading me to the ideal place. I'm pulling down her strappy underwear with my fingernails, greedily searching for the pot at the end of the rainbow. I have to have it.

I've waited twenty-one years, but I will not wait another moment. I don't care about her secrets, my parents' disapproval, none of it. She's mine—forever. I'll fight until the end of my days to claim her, protect her.

Suddenly, delicate hands stop my frantic movements to position myself between her legs.

"Adam," she says, voice shaky.

"Wha—baby—what?" I manage to voice through the haze of lust. I'm pressed up against her, ready to make it happen any second.

"Let's—let's wait," she says. Her voice is firm, but I sense a hint of reluctance.

"Wha—what?" I barely form the words, gripping myself hard enough to cause pain. *Does she not want it?*

"I just—I don't want you to...regret anything."

I look down into her blue eyes, searching for the source of her hesitation. "I—I won't. I won't regret it," I gasp. "Will you?" Now, I'm hesitating. I don't want any part of this if she doesn't.

She seemed so into it just moments ago...

She lifts a hand to my face, cradling my jaw. "Oh, baby, I do. I want you. I just want it to be right. You have...convictions. I don't want to be the one

that makes you...neglect them. We haven't even talked about...our beliefs," she murmurs, staring up at me with vulnerability.

She wants to know if this is what I want, and I smile at her concern for me.

"Yes...yes, I want this. I do. I want you...more than I've ever wanted anything in my entire existence," I confess, tilting my head down to hers, our heads gently touching, breath filling the gap. I can't lie to her.

"You want it...now?" she asks. Her hands around my neck tighten, her flawless form cradled in my arms.

I open my eyes to study her, trying to determine what she's getting at.

"I've wanted you from the first moment I met you," I say softly, my eyes trying to communicate how sincerely I mean it, desperately searching hers.

She closes them, breathing in. Several beats pass before she opens them again to look up at me through the downpour.

"You're every perfect thing I ever thought existed. You're like a fairy tale in real life. I know I'm the bad girl, but...I don't want to ruin your hard-earned state of purity," she confesses, taking a small step back from me.

My arms release her, feeling the emptiness overcoming me.

Reality crashes in, and I suddenly feel despicable. She's just been visited by some vile man from her past, who clearly took advantage of her.

Now, I've got her in the shower, about to have sex with her when we haven't even been on a date yet. *How am I any different from that scumbag?*

I stand up straighter, pulling the curtain back.

"You're right. I'm sorry," is all I can manage before stepping out into the cold, grabbing my towel to dry off. I'll do better. I'll prove to her she has infinite, immeasurable value to me.

“Adam, come on,” she says, stepping out of the shower in her underwear, soaking wet.

The animalistic urge to claim her roars inside me again, and I have to turn away.

“Please get dressed. We have somewhere to be,” I clip, my voice sounding much harsher than I intended. I hand her a dry towel from under the sink.

“Yes, sir,” she mumbles, and I have no idea why I like it.

She walks back into the room, still wrapped in a towel. I take much longer to get dressed than necessary, but I really need her to have clothes on, so my jeans will actually fit right.

I eventually swing open the door to see her in tiny cutoffs and a shirt with only one shoulder covered and several inches of stomach exposed. I will never get through this day, seeing so much leg and no bra strap. I take in several deep breaths as I watch her dab a dark red lipstick on her plump lips. It’s a riveting sight, and I wonder if she wants me to stop watching her.

Kenna sneaks past me into the bathroom. I’m standing in the center of the room like a statue, staring like a perverted old man. I scrape a hand over my scalp.

“I’m gonna go wait in the truck, okay? No rush. Wear good shoes,” I grab my keys.

She nods at me in the mirror.

Walking down to the truck, I feel like my head clears up a bit. Being around Harley is a physical need, but I feel like it mentally cripples me.

I look up at the sky as I walk out of the dorm, shooting a prayer up for some kind of clarity of how I can help her. She’s in danger, and the

helplessness I feel is making me antsy. Something catches my eye around the skyline, and it's like a light switch flicks on inside my brain.

Once I climb into my truck, I drive over to the campus police station nearby. I run in, hoping she still needed a few more minutes to doll herself up.

"Can I help you, son?" the small man in a black uniform at the front desk asks me. He's older with thinning white hair and a large nose.

"Yes, last night, some men showed up in the girls' dorm. I was taking care of my...friend, so my buddies came in here to report it," I say.

"The tattooed fellas?" he questions, bushy brows squinching up.

I nod, holding my breath.

He bobs his head. "Yep, we got the report. Ain't seen any of the likes of them though. Not much else we can do," he says, sipping on a Styrofoam cup.

"Yes, sir, I understand. I actually wanted to know if you had security tapes though—maybe of the parking lot outside Bailey Hall?" I know there are—at least I saw the cameras high up on the light poles.

He squints at me, slowly setting the cup down. "Well, I guess we might." His eyes twinkle. "But I can't just go around, showing security footage to every young man who asks for it. This wouldn't happen to be about a little lady, would it?" He grins at me, clearly in need of some motivation to help me.

I sigh longingly. It's not fake.

"Yes, sir, it is. My...well, she's just a friend really"—that lie is getting old—"but she's in danger. Those men are from her past, and I think...I know they hurt her. I need to see if I can get their license plates to find out

who they were and”—I blow out a breath—“I have to protect her.” I plead with my eyes, rubbing my hands together.

His gray eyes are focused on me, drawn into every word. He reaches a wrinkled hand out to pat my shoulder. “Well, son, if that isn’t the sweetest thing I’ve heard in a minute.” He shakes his head, eyes going distant. “I lost my wife...too many years ago. She was a wild little thing, and...she’d been hurt before meeting me. I was just a young police officer back then...”

I shuffle my feet, thinking of Harley wondering where I am.

“I answered the call to her—” He cuts off, looking back at me and smiling. “Ahh, I know you must be in a bit of a rush; it’s always that way with a woman. Let me say this.” He looks around tentatively, leaning forward and lowering his voice. “I’ll check back over the footage and see if this old retired blue can dig through like a pro again, eh? Our secret.” He winks at me, pushing a little yellow pad and pen toward me.

I write my name and number and the time when I saw the intruders.

“This is when I saw them, but they’d already been there long enough to find her hall,” I set my jaw at the memory of it. “Thank you so much, Mr. —”

He smiles again, taking the notepad. “Call me Russ; they all do.” He folds the paper up and places it in his breast pocket before patting over it, making me smile.

“Russ, thanks again. Please call me if you find anything.”

We shake hands, and he raises his arm in a good-bye as I rush back to my date with a siren.

Harley

If he abandoned me on a date once again, I will do serious damage to his...something. I will find something he loves and...his truck.

I will go Carrie Underwood on his sweet, little baby-blue Chevy, and he will have to grovel on his hands and knees through the wreckage to—

There it is, pulling up with a sexy baby Brad Pitt in the driver's seat. He hops out, rushing toward me and grabbing my hands.

"Baby, I'm so sorry. I had to..." He trails off, looking down and sighing. "I went over to the campus police and—"

I rise up on my toes to press a quick kiss to his lips. "I forgive you, just don't do it again. I thought you had abandoned me," I say. The mere mention of the police makes my stomach cramp from bad memories.

Walking up to the truck to pat the hood, I silently apologize for my threats of headlight-smashing violence. He runs ahead of me to open the passenger door, watching me climb in. I breathe in the old-car smell.

Once he's back on the driver side his muscled forearms flex as he starts to manhandle the gearshift. I'm squirming in my seat, and I lean up to adjust the AC. He's wearing the jeans with natural worn holes and a white T-shirt with a faded yellow deer jumping on the front. I wonder if farmers also hunt, and I realize I know very little about his former life.

"I will not ever abandon you," he says with conviction, bringing my thoughts back to the present.

His eyes are studying the road, and mine are studying his skin.

What would it be like to have someone in my life to depend on?

“So...where are we going?” I ask, attempting not to sound too overexcited to spend the day with him.

He grins, making my heart trip over itself. “Are you hungry?”

I nod vigorously. “Yes, please, food and caffeine first.”

He reaches over the seat to grab for my hand, intertwining our fingers and resting them on the polyester seat. I sigh, leaning my head back, hair lifting up around me in the fresh morning air. The windows are down, and the sky is blue. I’ve never been happier.

We’re the youngest patrons in the tiny Mexican restaurant. We both order the same giant egg, bacon, and cheese burrito, but Adam has to finish mine off. We act like we’ve done this a hundred times. The coffee is subpar, but the company is superb. He swipes for the check as soon as the waitress drops it off.

We’re back in the truck, driving along the busier streets, headed somewhere I’ve never been. He’s a beautiful portrait, hanging in some rich rancher’s house. Classic country boy wearing white and denim, driving an old, beat-up pickup. I’m leaning back against the passenger seat, watching him take control. I don’t have to worry about anything; the map is in his mind. Our fingers are playing with each other the way we wish our whole bodies were.

It’s like we’re past talking now. We both know what we’re thinking and feeling. The sounds of traffic and the mid-Saturday city bustle is just enough to keep us from losing our heads from the tension.

We finally pull up to our destination, and I squeal embarrassingly at the sight of it.

“Ahh, finally!” I jump out of the truck, not waiting on him to open my door like he has been all day.

He bellows a laugh, following me in through the open doorway. The interior is a rainforest; every shade of green that God created is speckled through the rows of plants. My favorite color, obviously. I adore the ones so rich they almost glow. I’m obsessed with checking magazines to read about the species of plants still being discovered to this day.

He follows me through the nursery, silently shadowing my obsessive evaluation of each and every one. I take time to read about their care, where they originated from, and what climate they thrive in.

“Why do you love plants so much?” he asks curiously. He bends over to pick up a discarded Styrofoam cup on the ground, throwing it in a nearby garbage can.

“They have to be cared for just so, or they die. But some of them don’t; they’re resilient to the elements. Like succulents. They go so long without water you’d think there’s no way they could survive. And yet...they do. They don’t need much. Others need just the right amount of sun, water, fertilization...I guess you know all this,” I say, turning away in embarrassment.

He gently grips my arm, turning me back. “I just think of them as something to grow to make a living. I’ve never thought of them as something to love.”

He lifts my hand to press a kiss to it, eyes trained on me. It starts out innocent until his mouth hovers over my hand, and it suddenly feels intimate.

“Well, they’re...it’s...” I suck in as he starts to kiss up my arm, slowly pulling me toward him.

We're in the back part of the nursery, the display of leafy ferns concealing us from most of the light-filled greenhouse. He's pulling me closer, never breaking eye contact. I feel like I'm underwater, unable to take in oxygen. His gaze has darkened. His lips are half-kissing, half-sucking on my sensitive skin. He pulls my hand all the way around to rest on his lower back, positioning me right where he wants me, flush against his solid body. His other hand reaches up under my loose hair, cradling the back of my head with strong fingers.

"I'm going to kiss you again," he says, voice husky.

Please do. I nod.

Footsteps start to shuffle toward us, and we hear a startled gasp to our left.

"Oh my! I'm so, so sorry to, um, interrupt. I—"

We jolt, stepping back from each other quickly, like toddlers caught going for the cookie jar.

"I just wanted to look at the, er, ferns, but I can—" the older woman goes on, her hands clasped in front of her face, trying to conceal a smile.

We must look picture-perfect, kissing in the foliage.

"Actually, would you, uh, take a photo of us real quick?" I blurt out, fishing my phone out of my back pocket and handing it to her.

She smiles, nodding with bright eyes. "Of course. You two are just so adorable. Okay, stand back like you were."

She raises my phone, her cheeks round from the enormous grin she's wearing. We obey, Adam clearly stiffer now that we have company.

"Put your hand back on her neck like it was before," the woman instructs, taking her photographer role quite seriously.

He obliges, and I give him a little peck for encouragement. He zeroes in on my lips, wanting more. I laugh, and he pulls me forward again.

“Just like that. You two are naturals.” She must be clicking away, moving around us like the paparazzi.

Adam presses his forehead to mine, inching closer, breathing heavier. I press up on my toes, lips meeting his anxiously.

He keeps it PG even though I attempt to drive him up a notch. He won't let me push my tongue through, but I can feel how much he wants it. I suck on his bottom lip, and he pulls back, panting. I smile innocently as he lets me go, turning to the woman with stars in her eyes.

He reaches out for the phone. “Thank you, ma'am. We appreciate it.” His voice is a tad deeper than usual.

She nods, actual tears wetting her cheeks. “I wish you two a life full of happiness together!” She wipes away the moisture, sniffing.

“Um, thank you, miss,” he says, and I follow him out of the aisle to leave her alone with the ferns.

His hand is still clutching mine, but he turns back to give me my phone.

“You can't help but be bad,” he murmurs, his face not at all conveying disappointment as he stares at my lips again. “Let's go to the truck.”

I think he must mean to pick up where we left off, so I agree, nodding enthusiastically. Once we reach the Chevy, he pulls me toward the driver side.

“Do you know how to drive a standard?” he asks, opening the door.

“I don't know how to drive anything.” I reach up to wrap my arms around his neck.

“You've never driven at all?”

I shake my head as his eyes dip toward my lips.

“Well, would you like to learn?”

I nod, a tingle crawling through my belly. He gestures for me to get in, slamming the door shut and walking to the passenger side. The vehicle moves with his weight.

“So, I leave mine in first gear while it’s parked, so if you’re not careful turning it on, we’ll lurch forward. That down there is the clutch.” He’s pointing at a little pedal. “The middle one is the brakes, and right side is the gas. In an automatic, you won’t have a clutch.” He shifts a little closer, smelling divine. “You want to press the clutch and the brakes down while you turn the key.” Now, he’s pointing at the stick coming up from the floorboard.

“This pickup used to have a three on the tree, up by the steering wheel, but I modified it to be down here in the middle,” he says.

“Okay, you lost me,” I say, placing my hand on the gearshift.

“Sorry...doesn’t matter. So, you need to be pressing on the clutch and the brakes while you turn the key, then you’ll slowly lift from the clutch while pressing the gas.”

I stare at him blankly, looking back down at my feet. “I’m going to kill us and everyone in this parking lot if I try to do whatever you just said.”

He laughs. “Okay, let’s switch places and drive out to the silos, where it’s a deserted road.”

“Sounds like a plan, Farm Boy.” I scoot over, turning to face him and straddling his hips. I plant a quick kiss on his jaw before flipping back around to sit in the passenger seat. “Let’s get this show on the road, but stop for food on the way.”

Adam

The date's going exactly like I planned. Harley is everything I never knew I wanted and so much more. I always thought I'd marry a girl from my hometown, someone quiet and demure. Then, she came blazing into my life, setting fire to my expectations of what I want in a woman. Now, I know why no one I knew back then ever tempted me. Sometimes, I used to wonder if I would get married.

My fear is that she doesn't want to. I think that's why she left the campsite.

She's curled up next to me, her tattooed hand wrapped around my waist, face pressed to my chest. The truck has slowed to a leisurely pace as we make our way down the back roads leading to the silos. I want to prolong the perfection of this moment with her.

She sits up as I pull to a stop, cutting the engine.

"Is it my turn to drive now?"

"In a minute," I respond, stroking my thumb over her upper thigh.

She stills, turning her baby blues up to stare at me.

"Are you going to be mad if I wreck your truck?" she whispers. Her lips are stained from the color she put on this morning in my room.

"No. But let's try not to do that." I press a tiny kiss to her forehead, my mind returning against my will to the shower we shared this morning.

She laughs. "Okay, let's do it! I'm ready to manhandle this baby."

She slaps the dashboard. Then, she moves toward me, sitting directly on my lap in front of the steering wheel.

“Uh...you...” My brain short-circuits.

She wiggles, torturing me. “I think it’ll make more sense if you can show me like this. I’ll put my feet on yours, and you can show me as we go,” she says, her raspy voice not helping my depraved thought process.

There’s no safe place for my hands.

“Hmm...I don’t think...” I start to say, clearing my throat. “I can try,” I finally get out.

We’re going to die.

Several seconds tick by as I try to remember how to drive the truck I’ve owned since I was fifteen. She waits patiently.

Blowing out a breath, I lean forward, my lips nearly connecting with her bare, inviting shoulder.

“So, you want to start like I said before. The truck is already in first gear. Press the clutch and the brakes while you turn the key.” I start to demonstrate, but she stops me.

“Hold on a second,” she kicks her shoes off and places her feet on top of my boots, her hands covering mine.

Her legs are split apart, butt pressed to my groin.

Sweet baby Moses, how am I going to keep us alive for this?

I have to focus. I clear my throat again, hoping it clears up the fuzzy part of my mind.

“So, it goes like this.” I follow my instincts since my thoughts aren’t connecting right, and the old engine roars awake.

“Okay, got that part. How do we go? Push the gas?” she says excitedly, bouncing a little on my lap.

This has to stop, or we actually will die. I focus all my energy on how to keep the truck from moving, but my blood doesn't want to redirect to my brain.

"Adam?" she asks after several beats of silence.

"You...if you could try to not move so much, I think I'll be...better able to teach you this," I finally say.

"You know, it's okay for you to be into this, right?" she says, turning back to look at me. "I'm into it too." She's whispering now, which really isn't helping.

"I want to respect you, always," I say hoarsely.

"You can respect me and still want me." A smile ghosts her lips. "We've officially been on a date now." Her eyes twinkle as she says it.

It dawns on me that she might be more into this than I realized. My hands lift off the wheel, squeezing around her waist.

"I like you...so much. I haven't told you that, have I? I want to be with you," I confess, swallowing over the lump of more vulnerable truth stuck in my throat. I can't overwhelm her now.

She blinks at me, licking her lips. "I like you too. I want to...keep learning how to drive and talk more about this after." She kisses my lips quickly before turning back around. "How do we go forward?"

I heave a sigh, forcing my mind back to the driving lesson.

"So, next, we have to let go of the brakes but keep the clutch down. Since we're already in gear, you slowly release the clutch while pressing on the gas. You want to balance them like a seesaw."

She mimics my movements, like we're glued together. Our bodies are formed as one, skin flushed and lightly sticking in a way that speeds my heart up.

We start to move forward, and I press down more on the gas. The engine gets louder.

“You hear that? Now, it’s time to shift into second.”

She nods, her soft ebony hair tickling my cheek.

“Press the clutch again and let go of the gas, then shift the gear to the two.” Our arms move as one, the stick shift beneath my hand and hers on top of mine. “Let go of the clutch and press the gas again,” I say into her ear, her green apple scent overcoming my already-overloaded senses.

She’s not responding, but her fingers are interlaced with mine on the steering wheel, her legs overlaid on my knees. My mouth is near her cheek, and I lean in to kiss her.

“Do you want to try it by yourself?”

She shakes her head, and I’m shamefully grateful. I need to touch more of her. She must feel the same because her back presses into me, our bodies like skin and a skeleton. I demonstrate shifting into third and back down into second as we get back to our spot.

“You hungry?” I ask once we are in silence.

She doesn’t respond at first. Her face is pressed into my neck, my body resting against the seat. I cradle her against me, my arms covering hers. She’s caressing my palm with her fingertips, and I see a tear slip down her cheek.

“I want to tell you about Seven.” Her voice is hoarse.

I don’t move, waiting for her to continue.

“I have to start before I met him for it to make sense.” She lets out a shaky breath, bringing a hand up to wipe under her eye.

Then, she begins, “I was put in foster care when I was seven. My mom was always gone, but it was worse when she was home. Finally, she left and

just...didn't come back. I ran out of food, but the apartment manager found me when they came to evict us." She shifts her body, letting out a shaky sigh.

"Anyways, I got put in foster care. Sometimes, it wasn't bad. At least I always had food and clean clothes. When I was nine, one family even kind of loved me, I think." She smiles. "They had this tradition where they had family night every Friday. They made junk food, and we binged kid or superhero movies until midnight. It was awesome. That's why I love *The Princess Bride*. We watched it the first Friday I lived there. They were from Texas."

I'm holding her so tight, and I force myself to relax my muscles, so I don't accidentally crush her.

"Then, the dad got a job here, and they couldn't take their foster kids with them to another state. It sucked. I'd lived there almost a year. The best year of my life. I think that's what made me apply to Ole Tex." She grips me tighter, pausing for a few seconds.

"The next family wasn't bad, but then the mom got pregnant. Once you hit twelve...the nice families just don't want you. They think the older kids are going to hurt theirs or pull a knife at school. One would lock me up after I got home from school. They'd have peanut butter and crackers in my room, but I just had to sit in there alone." She's telling the story like it's about someone else now, like the memories aren't hers. It feels like she's reading a book to me, and she's bored with it.

"When I hit fourteen, I went to the worst family yet. The dad would stare at me...all the time. He finally came to my room one night, but he just sat there and watched me sleep. I ran away the next day, just got off the bus with some girl I'd made friends with in the lunch line. She let me stay the

night at her house, but then I slept in playground slides for two weeks. This young mom found me early one Saturday and called CPS. That's when... Victoria picked me." Her voice goes cold.

"She was a former pageant queen, but she was over fifty and washed up. She's the closest thing to a real mom I ever had. She...entered me in contests. At first, they were for big stores, but I was so shy. I hated the camera on me, hated having to smile at it. She'd get so angry...then she put me on this diet. She always wanted me to be skinnier, to fit into size zero jeans. I ate a few cubes of cheese and grapes every day."

She's playing with my hand, bending my fingers down gently, then spreading them back out. She traces the jagged scar I got from the combine blade.

"The weird part was that I wanted to do it for her. She would buy me designer clothes, jewelry, take me to get my hair and nails done. She constantly raved about my complexion and my eyes and how beautiful she thought I was.

"Then, she met this guy at a modeling agency, and he was looking for a tattoo model. His client wanted 'fresh skin,' he said. They made some kind of deal, and I signed a contract. I was fifteen when they started on me. The first artist refused to do it when he saw me—he knew I wasn't old enough. Of course, with Victoria's permission, it was technically legal, but he still didn't want to. I was so relieved when we left, but she was fuming. She thought it was because I wasn't pretty or skinny enough."

She sighs, pausing for several long breaths. My head is pounding as the story continues. The discomfort in my chest gets worse with each passing moment.

“Anyways, I didn’t eat for a week. That’s when the agent, Lenny, found Sev. Sev was just out of prison, but apparently, he was the up-and-coming artist of Carbona. He needed a fresh model to brand. So, he did. The problem with Sev was...” She trails off, struggling to continue.

My stomach is tight, and I force the nausea down. I don’t want to know, but I know she needs to talk about it.

She lets out another sigh. “He would do ten-hour sessions with short breaks. I would always pass out around hour three, then wake up around five, pass out again. Victoria said it was just because I was anemic. He paid well, I guess.” She pauses for a second, and I adjust my hold on her arms.

“At first, he didn’t talk to me much, but then it was like he got...really invested in it. He’d hold me everywhere while he was working on me, his hands always...roaming...”

She breaks off, snuggling her nose into my chest, and I kiss the top of her head. My hands are shaking, my insides burning like a house fire.

“I applied for Ole Tex at the school library computers, but I never told Victoria. I didn’t know if I would even go. Once my body was covered in ink, what would they want with me? I did so many photo shoots, but I knew eventually, there’d be no new canvas to color on. Then, it happened. He tried to have sex with me one night while he was working on the Medusa.”

She lifts up her shirt to show me the woman with the thick cartoon hair.

“I said no, and he told me he knew I was in love with him too. It was like he’d created some idea of us being together in his mind. He...I think he was going to force it, so I ran while he was outside, smoking.

“Now that I’ve been gone, it’s like little fractions of truth light up in my head every day. Victoria didn’t love me; I made her money. Sev was just obsessed, but he never saw me as a real person, just an idea of the one he

wanted. Lenny wanted money too...but now, they've found me. I broke off the contract, and they want me to come finish it. I don't even know what the legal side of things is...but I had already been paid for the first half of the session, and they never got the photographs. Most of the money always went to Victoria and Lenny. I barely got anything. Victoria's saying I stole from her—they all are. I don't think Sev cares about the money. He just wants me back."

She forces out a long sigh, and I loosen my hold on her. She sits up a little, pressing her forehead to the steering wheel.

"You don't have to go back, Harley. You know that, right?" My voice is surprisingly controlled.

My emotions are a whirl of rage, sickness, and compassion. My gaze is intense on her face. I have to help her understand that she doesn't owe them anything. I want to hold her, keep her safe for the rest of time.

I also want to tear several men limb from limb with my bare hands.

She looks back at me, her eyes red-rimmed. "But I broke the contract, and they won't leave me alone until I do. They know where I am, and there's no way he'll give up." She's crying more now, the tears forming trails down her cheeks. "I don't know what to do, Adam." She hiccups, crying more and shattering my heart with her words. "I'm s-so scared."

I draw her to me, and her face presses into my shoulder as her body shakes.

"You will never be alone again. I'm going to protect you. You have nothing to worry about anymore. I'm here, and I'm not leaving," I murmur into her ear, rocking gently. My hands brush over her head as I plan my next move.

Harley

“**H**e’s dangerous, Adam. Sev has been to prison. I think he was in a gang.”

I pull back after crying all the moisture from my body. I reach for the bottle of water in the bag of food, gulping it down.

“I’m not going to go fight him, although that is tempting.” He flexes his jaw, looking out the window at the darkness. His voice softens. “Thank you for telling me...I know that wasn’t easy.”

His honey gaze swings back to me, immediately calming my nerves. I know he can’t heal my trauma, but he is helping me learn to cope with it by being trustworthy and a good listener.

“I’m still learning my own...history. It’s all I’ve ever known, and almost every day, a new bad memory surfaces that I didn’t think about before as... bad.”

I bite into my lip, overwhelmed with my vulnerability. He thinks for a moment, looking down at our hands.

“It will probably take a while to heal from it all. You can talk to me about any of it, but maybe you should see someone who...knows how to help you heal. I think my church has counselors.” He’s squeezing my hand. “If you want me to, I’ll ask about it.”

I nod. I don’t think I can talk to a stranger about this.

His lips curve slightly. “Let’s start trying to...fill the space with better ones,” he suggests, his voice unsure.

“You’ve already been doing that, almost every day since I met you.” I lean in as my eyes dip down to his lips.

A tiny groan escapes him. “Let’s hold off on that, or we’ll never get to the next part.”

He smiles, opening the door.

I climb out, my legs stiff after sitting so long. “What’s the next part?”

I stretch my arms overhead. He leans into the truck, turning the key enough to play the radio and shine the headlights into the darkening field. He tunes it to a station claiming to play the best Texas country.

“Okay, you ready?” He grins, holding out a hand to me, biceps flexing under his T-shirt sleeves.

I grab it, really not sure where he’s going with this.

He twirls me around, my body crashing into his with a fit of laughter.

“Whoa! Sorry, I’m still learning. Follow my lead, okay?”

One of my favorite Chris Stapleton songs starts to play. Kenna forces me to listen to country music in her Jeep, but it has grown on me.

Adam gently guides me through the steps of a dance I’ve never done. He starts in a two-step but throws in all kinds of moves he definitely didn’t know at the sorority social. I’m twirling around him, the headlights stretching our shadows out like stick figures.

“Where did you learn how to do this?” I exclaim, breathless as he dips me down, my hair brushing the ground.

“I started taking lessons during my lunch breaks,” he says, pulling me closer.

“You’re kidding...that was your mysterious ‘appointment’? Dancing lessons?” I laugh out loud, throwing my head back. “Why?”

He hesitates for a moment, a gentle tempo bringing us back to the simple, slow dance. He holds me tighter, hands gripping my lower back.

“You said you love to dance.” He looks down at me, eyes focusing in on my mouth.

My heart does a little leap. “You took dancing lessons for me?” I whisper. He presses his forehead to mine, the music swirling around us.

“I...I guess I hoped I’d get another chance to hold you like this.” His deep voice is barely audible.

We sway in the headlights. A new song plays, then another after that. My arms tighten around his neck, my head cradled on his shoulder. I sigh into the blissful sensation of being held, cherished by strong arms.

Will he really be able to protect me from my haunting past?

I push the intrusive thoughts aside, refusing to let them spoil this night.

We finally make our way over to the cab, and I drowsily climb in. I’m drifting in and out of sleep before we even pull onto the highway.

The sensation of being lifted, my body suspended and moving over the ground, is all I feel. Cedar fills my nostrils, my cheek pressed into warm cotton. Something dings, but I can’t force my eyes open to see what. My legs briefly press against cool stone, but then a door clicks open, darkness enveloping me as I’m gently laid onto a soft bed.

“Stay.” I fist the cotton, pulling it toward me.

“I will, baby, always.” He lies down next to me, arms caging me into a sanctuary.



Momster: You'd better be here for your appointment with Seven. He's willing to overlook the late fees for the scheduled shoot, which is a blessing, Harley. After all I've done for you, I can't believe running away is how you repay me!

Unblocking Victoria was a mistake.

Why can't she leave me alone to live in peace? Is it really so crucial that I let Sev finish the Medusa? I told him I would pay him back, but he insists I have to finish the session. My skin crawls when I think of having his hands on me again, but I feel like it's the only way to leave my past behind me once and for all.

Adam nuzzles my neck from behind, his sleepy grunts making me smile. It's early morning, and I feel his stubbled jaw rubbing over my skin.

"Come to church with me," he says, his breath warm on my sensitive ear.

I try not to let the tensing of my muscles be obvious. Several moments of silence crawl by as sunlight begins to stretch in through the window.

"I don't really fit in at church," I say quietly, holding my breath.

I tried going the first week I was here, hoping they'd have some kind of free meal afterward. The family I'd lived with from Texas had gone to church, and sometimes, they would have food. I was gawked at by nearly everyone, and several older women shook their heads. No one spoke to me.

"You don't have to go, but I think you would fit in at our church. There's some other people with tattoos, actually." He kisses the inked outline of a skull on my shoulder.

“I...I have a relationship with God. When I was with that family that cared about me, they took us every Sunday. I’ve never felt peace like that anywhere else. I know I’ve done a lot of bad, but I know...I’m forgiven.”

I wiggle around to face him. He’s beaming at me, a smile so big his face is nearly split in half.

“What?” I ask, mimicking his smile on my face.

He looks down, intertwining our fingers. “I just...I didn’t know. I’m so glad. It’s important to me...you’re important to me.”

He brings my hand up to pepper my knuckles with kisses. It’s surreal to be in this bed with him. I wish I had a camera in my mind to snap an eternal memory of us twisted in the sheets, fully enraptured with each other.

A head of tangled blonde-red hair flips over the side of the bed, pink cheeks beaming on an upside-down face.

“You guys are so adorable. If I didn’t love you so much, I’d hate your guts for being so annoyingly happy.” Kenna flashes us a grin as wide as her face.

“You’ll be here soon enough. We’ll crack his shell. I have an in now.” I wiggle my brows at her, and she groans dramatically.

“Ugh, I wish.” She rolls her eyes, her face getting redder as she hangs upside down. “I’ve given up.” She flips back out of sight.

Adam looks at me, brow creased. “Crack whose shell?” His fingers draw up my arms, leaving tiny sparks in their wake.

“Mmmm, you really don’t know?” I ask, quirking a brow at him as Kenna climbs down the side of the bunk.

“Okay, Adam, now that you and my bestie are official—wait, you guys are official now, right?” she asks, sitting cross-legged at our feet.

A pang of anxiety stabs me in the belly as the word *HARLOT* flashes in my mind. Adam still doesn't know why I left the campsite.

He squeezes me closer, a kiss from his soft lips on my ear tingling down my neck.

"She's mine. I'll never let anyone hurt her," he says, confidence and a hint of violence in his tone.

Kenna squeals, clapping her hands. "Okay! That's what I needed to hear. So, Levi"—her tone is immediately serious, green eyes wide—"what's the deal? Is there, like, a girl back home I need to know about? You said he's not gay, but seriously, why won't he give me even just a tiny shred of attention? I know at this point, it's just the appeal of what I can't have, but I'm going *insane*." She blows air from her lungs like she just gave a speech at the Oscars.

I try to conceal the smirk wanting to spread over my lips. She's got it bad.

Adam is wide-eyed, lips parted. He looks down at me, silently begging for an explanation that I am not going to give him. I look back at Kenna, biting into my lip to hold in the laughter.

"I...uh, he...I don't think there's anyone back home. For Levi? No, definitely not. He's never even talked to a girl. He's less experienced than... any of us." He stumbles over the words, finally coming to a halt.

I take pity on him. "Okay, so is he really not gay? Who wouldn't want to be with Kenna, baby? She's a doll," I question him, softly running my hand over his arm as goose bumps prick up on his skin.

His eyes zero in on the movement, lids dipping down. "She—yeah... she's great. I don't...I don't know, I guess. He's not gay."

He forces air into his lungs. His hand under the covers grips my hip so hard it hurts, but I can't say I don't like it. I bite into my bottom lip, this time for a different reason.

"So then, what's his deal? Is he"—Kenna's voice lowers to a whisper as she glances at the adjoining door to the suite—"is he, like, asexual?"

Adam looks at me, then back at her. His face gives nothing away.

"Why don't I...talk to him about it?" he hedges, waiting to see what her reaction will be.

His face is stiff, but his fingers are still claiming my hip, and I'm trying to rein in my breathing.

She seems to be satisfied with this, nodding. "Don't tell him...you know, that it's me asking," she rushes out, hopping off the bed.

She turns back to confirm his agreement, but his attention is elsewhere.

I've dipped my face down into his cotton-covered chest, breathing in his scent. He's all man, a big cocoon of testosterone and muscles. The last few guys I slept with were mostly scrawny, always smelling like smoke. His skin is glowing with health, and I know not a single nicotine stick has ever touched his lips.

I hear the faint click of a door in the distance, and we are alone. The air is thicker, our hearts beating too fast for a normal Sunday morning.

Callous fingertips are grazing over my skin, tracing every dip and curve, memorizing me. His mouth is on my collarbone, lips and teeth nibbling. I want to crawl further into the bliss of this moment.

"All I want is your skin," he says, voice deep and husky.

The temperature under the sheets is scorching. My thigh is squeezed right under the knee, then pushed upward. The sensitive space is filled with his hips pressing into me, his hardness right against my soft.

“You can...take it all, Adam. I’m ready,” I whisper, my hands equally violating his form.

His panting breath is on my bare shoulder, and I know he wants it more than anything. His body is stone—everywhere. He seems to need a nudge from me to be able to fully commit.

I pull back from him, and his eyes are wide, swirling with emotion. His breath is coming out in tiny, short bursts. I stare at his hungry eyes as I sit up enough to remove my shirt. I didn’t sleep in a bra last night, and his breath sucks in at the sight of me. This must be his first time to see a woman topless, and I love that I get to introduce him to this part of life.

That does it. He takes the reins from me, and I gladly relent. Work-strong hands are gripping my flesh. Damp underwear and shorts are pushed down. His shirt is nearly shredded from his torso with jerky movements, and I’m reminded that he looks like he was chiseled by a Greek deity in an old fable. Muscles flex on top of me, delicious golden skin shiny with a hint of sweat in the morning light.

A switch has been flipped, and he’s not hesitating at all.

We let out twin sighs as he begins. I immediately feel the relief of tension, the turning point of our dynamic into lovers, and the joining of our bodies and hearts as one. My skin is pale and inked, contrasting his golden and pure.

I’m deliciously overwhelmed by his weight, and his face is indescribable ecstasy. He watches me, our eye contact never breaking. Sweat is beading up on his skin, and I love the feel of it.

I’m not sure how I’ve ever done this with anyone I didn’t trust like I do Adam. This vulnerability with a lesser man would be repulsive.

He draws my ear into his teeth, pausing to gently suck on my skin. He reaches a hand to cup my breast, fingers pinching the sensitive tip that sends a beacon of excitement straight down. My body is quivering underneath him, and I've never felt so undone and treasured at the same time. It's never been this way before.

He's exploring, discovering all the joys of what he can do with me in this position. He's taking care of me, even through this monumental first experience. He's whispering in my ear, checking on me, asking me what I want. I tell him, and he overenthusiastically complies as his thumb finds my center. He gapes at my immediate, open-mouthed response.

"You're such a beautiful creature, Harley, the most incredible sight I've ever laid eyes on," is just one thing he whispers, strong hands driving me wild as they grip my thighs while he moves over me.

His abs flex with each movement, and I'm unable to look away.

His strength and stamina are fully unprecedented, but I'm not complaining. His amber eyes are wide, focusing on my face. His lips capture mine, our tongues dancing. He's commanding my attention, moving my body where he wants it. We're one, molded together. He bites my earlobe harder this time, drawing a moan from my lips that only encourages his movements.

We're in a capsule on another planet, worshipping each other.

He retreats and pauses for some reason, and I take the opportunity to flip over. He doesn't press into me again, and I turn around to see him staring at my backside, a look of complete awe on his face.

"What?" I ask.

He looks up at me before saying, "Like this?"

I nod, encouraging him to keep going. He complies; after a few awkward positioning moments, he finds his rhythm again, and I know he's happy about the switch. He leans forward as he grips my hips, fingers exploring me. I hitch out a moan as he makes contact with the right place.

I realize at the last moment that it's too late. *I'm in love with him.* I have to swallow the words down, forcing myself not to tell him.

In the next moment, he brings me to the brink of sanity, tipping over and falling into a state of bliss. It lasts for several endless seconds, and I'm overwhelmed with the sensation, my heart racing inside my chest.

He gently pulls away before he collapses next to me, silent for several long seconds. Our skin is damp and hot a second before it starts to cool. We're both breathless.

He lifts up on his elbows, cheeks flushed, mouth slightly open. "I...can't believe how incredible that was," his lips press a kiss to my jaw. "How do you feel?"

I laugh, tears stinging my eyes.

This is usually the part where they leave, saying, "Text me."

I roll onto my side, clutching the blanket to my chest.

"I feel amazing...are you sure that was your first time?" I ask, choking down what I wish I could say. *How does this man exist in the world?*

He carefully traces the side of my face with a finger until his thumb is pressed into my bottom lip.

"I wish we could stay in this bed for the next five years," he says in a serious voice, and I laugh.

He smiles at me, pulling me closer. My head is on his bare chest, and I'm listening to his steady heartbeat. Several quiet moments of bliss pass by us,

and words are useless. The thought enters my mind that we should've used a condom, but it's too late now. *How did I forget that?*

The bathroom door creaks open.

“Psst, guys...I’m so sorry to interrupt. I can’t stay in here anymore,” Kenna whispers. “I tried to hang out with the guys, but...anyways, I’m just going to sneak up, okay?”

She starts to climb the ladder, and I reach out to grab her ankle.

“Stay down here, you weirdo,” I say, stretching down to the floor for Adam’s faded green T-shirt and pulling it over my head.

“Finally,” he says, gathering a ball of the fabric in his fist. “How do you make every piece of clothing look so...” He trails off, pressing his face into my side, groaning.

I can’t help myself from gently scraping nails across his scalp.

“Adam,” a cold voice says from the door.

We all three turn to see Dan standing in the room, arms crossed.

“Don’t just barge in here. She wasn’t dressed,” Adam growls at him, tucking the covers around my waist.

“I didn’t. The door was open,” he defends himself. His eyes are taking in the state of the bed we clearly did not just sleep in.

“Could you come in here for a sec?” Dan’s tone is icy as he stalks back into the boys’ side.

My stomach is tied in knots.

“I’ll go to the closet while you get dressed,” Kenna jumps up.

Adam kisses my forehead, and I notice he has a trail of hickeys on his neck and left shoulder beginning to form. His body is an absolute work of art. It should be frozen in carbonite and put on display in a gallery.

He stands to put on shorts, and my eyes are blessed with a flash of pale cheeks.

“I’ll be right back.” He leans down to kiss me good-bye.

I can’t think about what his brother has to say, but I know it’s not in my favor.

Adam

I collapse into the desk chair on Silas's side of the room. My body feels heavy and weightless at the same time. I want to eat a giant sandwich and take a nap with Harley. I make a mental note to do that later. I can still feel her all around me, and I ache to be closer to her. The thin wall between us is too much.

"What's up, D?" I ask, unable to stop smiling.

My brother's mouth is gaping open. He looks over at Silas and Levi, who are both conspicuously preoccupied with their fingernails. Dan's face turns back to me.

"I guess I'd like to know what your goal is here. Are you going back to the farm after your degree? Has your whole life plan altered because of a girl?"

His accusatory tone doesn't mix well with my good mood, and my smile drops as I stand up.

"I'd like to know who you think you are to question every move I make. I've already got two overbearing parents. I don't need another one."

My fists clench at my sides, and I force them to loosen as I focus on breathing in and out.

Dan takes a dangerous step closer to me, raising up his hands in defense. "Listen, brother, I'm just worried about you. This girl—"

"Her name is *Harley*," I interrupt, my voice low and harsh.

“Harley...seems to have a rough background. Nothing wrong with that, okay? There’s nothing wrong with her. I’m concerned about what’s going to happen when you try bringing her home.” He’s close to me now, only a step away. “I want you to be happy, and I know what you have always wanted is the farm. To work on it and develop it into something great. Our hometown doesn’t accept girls that look like her. They just don’t. You remember Scarlett?”

Silas’s head pops up at the name drop, and we both turn to him. His cheeks turn pink as he looks back down at the blank notebook in his lap.

“What about her?” I ask, folding my arms over my bare chest.

“She...basically moved away because she was always going to have that kind of...reputation. She was the *bad* girl, and we all knew it. She would’ve never been able to marry one of us and settle down. You know Harley has that same...look and vibe. You don’t have to *know* her to know—”

My forearm comes up to grind against his windpipe, and he struggles to finish, “I just—meant—that’s what people will—think!” He shoves me back, his eyes darkening as he rubs his throat.

My chest is heaving with my breath.

“Despite what you think, I don’t care if you’re with her.” He raises his hands with his voice, and I almost believe him. “If she makes you happy, I’m happy. What I don’t believe is that you’ll be happy without the farm. And I *know* that even if she wanted that life, that life doesn’t want her. *They* don’t want her.” He pauses, shaking his head as he looks down at the floor. “I talked to Eden, but I’m guessing you haven’t.” He looks back up at me.

“What?” I grit out. I’m about to walk out without listening to the answer. *I don’t care what they think.*

“Basically...Mom thinks Harley is...the woman of the night, just distracting you. She’s got the whole family praying for you to see the truth and find a good girl.”

My stomach is full of lead. I can tell he doesn’t agree, eyes full of pity.

“I don’t know her well enough, Adam. I don’t know her at all. I know we all make mistakes, but I don’t get why you’d want to take on...so much baggage. It’s already changing you.”

His voice is quiet now, his face creased in concern for me. He’s worried I’m throwing away my future for the girl I can’t take home to Momma. He doesn’t get it. How can he?

If the roles were reversed, would I be giving him the same speech?

“I love her.” Words have never felt so right, and I speak them with full conviction. “She’s not...what they think. She’s had a bad life. She’s made mistakes, like we all have. Mostly, she’s just been treated...horribly. She hasn’t led me down some destructive path. I’ve chosen my way. I haven’t done everything right, but as soon as she’s ready, I’ll ask her to marry me. If our family can’t accept her”—my heart sinks at the possibility of having to neglect the only life I’ve ever known until the last few months—“then I’ll just have to start a new one with her.”

Dan’s face has softened as I speak, and he reaches a hand to clap me on the shoulder. “You won’t lose me, brother, and I want to get to know her. We’ll talk to them together; maybe they’ll see reason. They might just need some time.”

He flashes me a devilish smile. He’s a handsome son of a bitch, and I’ll bet he’ll understand better once a girl waltzes into his life.

“So, is it worth the wait?”

Silas and Levi both jerk their heads up again, suddenly okay with revealing their obvious eavesdropping.

“You will never, ever be the same.”

I match his grin, shoving his hand off of me to go hold on to my girl.



Monday is a perfect day of sunshine. I talked to my dad on the phone this morning, and he was pretty concerned about how I’m spending my free time. I know I should just be straightforward about it with him, but I was vague instead. At this point, I know I won’t be giving Harley up, no matter what the obstacles in our relationship are.

I knew when I met her that she was inevitable.

What Dan said is true. I’ve always wanted a life on the farm. I love working the land and growing new things every year. It’s something Harley and I have in common. I want to take her to the orchard down the road from us to pick the green apples.

We’re sitting in Principles of Horticulture, and her foot is wrapped around my leg underneath the desk.

what’s your favorite color?

She scribbles on my paper, leaning over to my side. She’s nearly sitting in my lap, but the contact isn’t enough. I need more of her skin. I purposefully sat us in the back row this time, hoping we could get away with more touching.

red on black. what's yours?

She smiles, scribbling back. Her ocean eyes are sparkling as she looks toward the front of the classroom.

that's two colors. cheater. mine's green.

I don't hesitate to write back as the professor begins to assign homework to go to a plant nursery and discuss seasonal harvesting of the plants they sell. I guess I have a leg up on this one. I know Harley won't have time to respond, which gives me the confidence to say it.

*it was the red on your inked skin at the beach party. when I
fell in love with you.*

I don't wait for her to respond as I begin to pack up. She's motionless, reading the paper for a very long time. My pens and notebook are put away, backpack swung over my shoulder. I'm surprisingly calm despite the increase in my heart rate.

She slowly begins to fold up the paper, pushing it into her jean shorts pocket. She's actually wearing a low-cut red tank top today, dark hair up in a big, tangled bun on her head. She belongs on the cover of a magazine, the one my mom would frantically turn over in the grocery store line when I was twelve. Now, I get to stare at her without anyone to stop me.

She's packing up her stuff with robotic movements. We're the last students in the classroom again. I wait on her, a cloud of nervous energy surrounding me as I shuffle on my feet.

I wish I had let her have time to respond. Not knowing what she thinks about my confession is worse than a rejection...maybe.

She leads the way toward the door. I step ahead of her to push it open, watching her face as she follows me through.

Her pale blue eyes almost glow in the morning sun, but she's quiet as we walk. I reach for her hand, interlacing her fingers. She holds me tight, and it's the only confirmation I need. The tension in my neck and shoulders relaxes. I can wait until she's ready.

"What are you doing for Thanksgiving?" I ask.

My old plastic phone starts to ring before she can respond. I pull it out, not recognizing the number.

"Hello?"

A wet cough sounds on the other line.

"Hello? This Adam?" an older voice speaks, and I remember the thinning white hair of the old man at the campus police.

"Yes, sir. Russ?" I respond, speaking louder.

"Hope I didn't wake you. I know you youngsters like to sleep in these days." I hear him sipping loudly into the receiver.

"No, sir. I just got out of class."

Harley looks up at me with a smirk. *So polite*, she mouths.

I smile back.

"Well, do you have a minute to spare in your schedule today?" he asks. His voice gives nothing away, but I still grip the plastic tighter.

"Sure, yeah. I can be there around noon?"

“All right. Bring some coleslaw.” He coughs into the phone again before the line cuts off.

We’ve reached the spot where we split our ways.

Harley turns to me with a question in her eyes. “Who was that?” She’s still lightly holding on to my fingers.

“Campus police. He wants me to come by around lunch.” My fingers graze over her shoulder. I’m drawn to her like a fly to honey.

She looks down at her worn black tennis shoes, chewing on her lip.

“Guess I’ll see you later then,” she murmurs.

I tried to bring it up with her, but she doesn’t seem to want to deal with the officials, concerning what happened at the dorms.

I tilt her chin up with my finger while pulling her toward me with my other hand.

“Save me a seat. I’m sure it won’t take long. He probably just wants to show me some blurry security footage from that night,” I try to reassure her.

I’ll do whatever it takes to protect her, but I’ll be smart about it.

She nods her head, plump pink lips pressing into my mouth. I breathe her in, needing her essence in my lungs. I pull her closer by her shoulders, and she leans into me with her hands on my chest.

She pulls back, attempting a weak smile as she walks away.

Harley

My head is swirling.
Adam loves me.

I took Adam's virginity.

Adam's family thinks I'm a harlot.

Adam is going to watch the security tapes from when Sev came to see me.

Adam loves me.

I'm a zombie as I mechanically walk to my next class. I sit near the back, not hearing a word of the lecture.

I'm a whore. I defiled the nicest boy I've ever met. He doesn't know I already agreed to let Sev finish the Medusa and go through with the photo shoot. My stomach is churning as my mind flashes with all the memories of my modeling career.

Cold leather, cold hands, needles pricking my skin.

Hours of pain, passing out, waking up, repeat.

The black eyes of Seven always searing into me.

Posing nearly naked in front of a room of people. My body contorting to whatever new seductive pose Victoria or the photographer could dream up. There was never enough skin showing. The scraps of lace and silk and leather would barely conceal my teenage body.

Seven's eyes still on me. His eyes were always on me, but his hands waited for us to be alone.

I shiver in my seat, deciding impulsively that I have to go now and get it over with.

Adam is good, the best thing to ever happen to me. I feel like a kid at the fair, winning the grand prize, but nobody knows I snuck in without buying a ticket. I'm not giving up my prize.

He can't see the things that have been done to me. He'd absolutely try to step in because he's always tried to protect me, but who knows what could happen? Seven is dangerous.

What's worse is that Adam wouldn't look at me the same way ever again. He knows I'm not innocent, but if he were to witness even a tiny glimpse of my ugly past, how could he want to touch me again? Would that visual plague his mind, like it does mine?

If I let Seven finish the Medusa and do the photos, I can put it in my past. Maybe my foster sister will meet me there. We were never close, but Jess and I always had a mutual understanding that our lives just sucked. She had her own struggles, but I tried to tell her being ignored by Victoria was a much better fate. I wonder how she's been doing in the two years since I saw her. After she turned eighteen, she moved out.

My books are stuffed into my torn backpack, and I'm rushing out the door. A few heads pop up to watch me walk by, but I focus my eyes ahead. I can do this, and I'll be able to put it all behind me for good. Running away was a temporary fix, but it helped me realize how badly I want a different life for myself. A life with Adam, if he forgives me for this.

I pull out my phone to text Sev.

Harley: can you get me red-eye flight to Carbona? let's do this tonight.

His response dings in as I reach my dorm to see a maintenance man replacing the door.

Seven: 12:30 p.m., confirmation in your email. See you soon, angel

I don't respond, but I text Kenna to let her know she can come back to our room finally. I snap a picture of the new door as the workers start to pack up their tools.

Harley: guess what?! (image)

I go in and empty my books onto the bed, so I can pack in my school bag. My duffle is still in Adam's room. I only need one or two changes of clothes. I left some essentials at Victoria's that I can swing by and get.

I don't let myself think about it. I just do what has to be done to get to the airport. My leafy green babies each get a drink of water with a sprinkle of plant food.

"I'll miss you," I tell them as I crack open the shades to give them more light.

They look so vibrant. My neon ivy has grown since I was here a few days ago. So much has changed in the last seventy-two hours, and hopefully, in

the next, it will be back on track.

I have a future. I'll finish my degree, and I'll find a job, working with living things every day.

As I walk back out the door, I nearly collide with someone.

"Shit, sorry," I say, looking up.

"Hey! We have a home again!" Kenna says at the same time. She's smiling and admiring our new, generic brown door.

"Uh, yeah, good as new. No more sharing a toilet with four guys," I say absently, typing on my phone. I'm letting Sal know I have caught a nasty bug I would hate to give to her and Marley if I saw her at the bar for my shift.

"Well, not for me. Are you and Adam going to stay there or here tonight?" she asks, pulling out her phone.

Sal responds with condolences, offering to bring crackers and Sprite over. I tell her not to bother because I have an awesome roommate taking care of me.

"Uh, what? No, I'm going home for the night. I'm flying out in a few hours, so I gotta catch the bus."

I pocket my phone, my gaze meeting wide green eyes. Kenna is looking at me like I grew another limb.

"What?" I ask.

She hesitates, brushing her hair behind her ear. "Umm, why are you going home all of a sudden?"

I put on my thick black sunglasses, my foster sister's hoodie in my arms for the flight.

"You went home last week. What's it matter? I'm going to see my foster mom and sister," I say, a fake smile spread on my lips. "If Adam asks, just

tell him I'm sick."

She reaches out to grab my elbow as I start to turn away. "Harley! You're not going to tell him where you are? Why not?" Her mouth is open, face a little pale.

"Look, he's...I think he'd be worried. I told him some stuff from my past that was...questionable. He wouldn't understand that I just want to put it all behind me. I left some things open-ended with my foster family that I need to sort out. I just need to do this on my own, then I'll come back and explain it all to him. He wouldn't get it." I smile again, glad she can't see my eyes through the dark lenses. "Please just cover for me? Tell him I'm...vomiting and I can't lift my head out of the toilet."

I give her a quick hug.

"I...I really think you should just talk to him. He's so sweet, and I bet he'd be more understanding than you think." Her voice has risen an octave, her Southern twang more pronounced next to my ear.

I pull back, laughing. "I would, but I don't have time before my flight. I'll text him and say I just want to stay here tonight because I'm feeling a little icky. Save the vomit story for if he comes by with a medical kit and some nursing student to the rescue."

I smile, patting her shoulder, even as my stomach muscles contract. I'm such a liar, and I hate myself for it.

She slowly nods, her face still pinched. I turn to walk away quickly, this time toward the danger and farther from safety.



I turn my phone on as the plane lands at four p.m. I text Sev to let him know I'm here, but I'm assuming he's already waiting. The reality of where

I am isn't sinking in yet. I feel like I'm watching someone do something stupid from outside myself. A girl with black hair and inked skin is walking back into a pit of snakes, but I can't tell her not to go. She has to go through it; it's the only way to reach the luscious green meadow on the other side.

My steps are robotic as we shuffle out of the narrow aisle and stale air. I don't breathe any easier as I step into the airport of my home city. My skin is clammy, palms sweaty. The headache that started after takeoff is still pounding inside my skull, an intense ache I can't escape. My stomach is full of bile, and I'm praying it doesn't erupt while I'm on the escalator toward the exit.

A few hours in his chair is nothing, I tell myself over and over.

My phone has been vibrating continuously since I powered it on, but I don't want to look at it until I'm ready to call Sev.

I know who it is, and if I hear his voice, I won't be able to follow through with this. He'll either understand and forgive me or he won't. It'll be better for him if he doesn't, but selfishly, I want him to.

My steps halt briefly as a familiar black-and-chrome Harley-Davidson comes into view. A tall, inked form is leaning over the bars, parked in a loading-only zone. His sunglasses are perched on his forehead as he stares at me. He doesn't speak as I approach, and I climb onto the seat without a word. He waits for me to wrap my arms around his waist before pulling out into the traffic.

The familiar ritual is second nature to my body, but my mind is screaming. I don't want this, and I'm realizing, back then, I didn't either. He used to pick me up at school like this for our sessions. The longer I'm away from him, the more the reality of how distorted everything was bleeds into my mind.

I'm only here for a couple of nights. We'll finish the tattoo, take the photos the day after tomorrow, and be done. The muffler is roaring with loud pops as he pulls the bike into Hades's Playground. I already know the owner of the shop and the other artists are gone for the day. Mondays were their early quitting days and the nights I always got inked by Sev.

I climb off the seat, legs stiff from the long ride. He leads me into the dimly lit studio, the crimson walls and black decor reminding me that this place really is hell. My body seizes up when I see his chair. The red leather is shiny, ready to stick to my skin as I pass in and out of consciousness.

All the panic attacks I've had over the last few months since I ran away seem to hit me like a ton of bricks, and I start to vomit, barely making it to the trash can. He watches me silently. I'm dry-heaving because I knew if I ate, it would take longer to pass out.

Why am I here? All the reasons that seemed completely logical before are so cloudy I can hardly remember them.

My body is shaking, the fear of the ritual getting to my nervous system.

He reaches out toward my arm, and I shrink away, crawling backward on the cold cement.

"What's wrong, sweetheart? I thought you wanted this." His eyes are black, holding me in place.

He's terrifying, a nightmare come to life. I've had horrifying dreams almost every night since I ran away, re-creating this exact scenario. I pinch myself, trying to wake up.

It's not real.

It's not happening again. It can't.

I can't go through it again.

I chant it over and over in my mind.

The phantom pain is already vibrating through my skin, and I start to sweat. *What's he going to do to me when I pass out this time?*

His body moves toward mine, reaching out to grab my arm. He jerks me up, pulling me closer. He presses his face against the side of mine, inhaling a lungful of me. My muscles are rigid, skin clammy. He's shaking against me, and I know he's been desperate for me to come back. I'm going to get sick again.

Then, the doorbell starts to ring. It rings and rings, over and over. Usually, it's just a single bell ding, so someone must be repeatedly pressing it down. Sev slowly backs away from me, letting go of my arm.

He lifts a finger to carefully trace the shape of my lips, leaning forward to whisper, "Don't go anywhere, angel." I shiver at the familiar nickname. "You'll never go anywhere again."

The blood in my veins freezes at the threat, and I know he means it. Running away the first time was a temporary fix, but he'll never really let me go. *I'll be his plaything as long as he wants.*

I have to fight this now. I've never fought back to those who have used and abused me, but it's time.

He exits the room to presumably bark at the disgruntled customer. I creep toward the door, peeking my head out to see if I can make a run for the back door. If I go that way, he'll mostly likely be able to follow me down the alley on his bike. I know the streets well, but after I disappeared last time, he'll be more likely to chase.

I decide to look for a weapon instead, searching through his studio for anything I can defend myself with. A memory from deep inside my mind surfaces as I stare at the red leather, and I move toward the seat, sliding my

fingers under the edge. The hidden switch bubbles under my skin, and I push it over. The seat clicks up.

I lift it to see what I think I remember from a brief moment of consciousness. Shiny metal gleams in the fluorescents. I've never shot a gun, but the thought of aiming one at Sev gives me a tiny rush of excitement.

As I reach for the smallest one, a commotion sounds at the front of the shop. Someone is slammed into something, followed by a loud crash. I grab the gun, praying it's loaded. I back all the way into the corner, my vibrating arms doing the best they can to hold it aimed toward the door.

I'll kill him. I have to. I'd rather go to prison than ever let him touch me again. I grit my teeth, preparing for the inevitable.

Footsteps approach, and I nearly drop the gun as a shorter man with gray hair in a red-and-yellow Hawaiian shirt appears. I don't recognize him, so I keep the gun up. He doesn't look like one of the guys Sev always had hanging around, but I still don't know him.

His eyes are wide, flitting from my face to the gun. He lifts his hands up defensively.

"Are you Harley?" he asks, his voice surprisingly kind.

I lower the weapon slightly.

"Who are you?" I ask, my voice raspy and high-pitched. I clear my throat. "Where's Seven?" I ask in a stronger voice, lifting the gun again, waiting for him to appear behind the man.

"I'm Detective Riggs, Harley. I'm a friend of Russ's from Greencity. Seven is in the back of a squad car in handcuffs. You're safe now, okay?"

He looks back at the gun, and I lower it down to point at the ground. *He's arresting Seven?*

“I don’t know anyone named Russ.” The adrenaline flow is beginning to slow.

Seven can’t touch me. He’s locked up.

“Russ is an older guy, white hair? He works as a campus police officer at Ole Tex. Don’t you go there with Adam?”

I nod, the pieces slowly beginning to mold together. They got something on Seven from the video feed. *What could he have done in the parking lot of the dorms?*

“Yes...but why are you here?” My arms begin to shake again, and I slowly lower the gun to lay it on the floor, backing away.

Detective Riggs approaches the opened chair with the firearms laid out inside of it. He looks from it to me, a smile forming on his face.

“I came to perform a random check on a probationer. That check has revealed some interesting things.”

He doesn’t touch any of the guns but leans down to look at one in the case. Standing back up, he walks around the chair toward me.

My body is visibly quaking with the rush of panic, adrenaline, and shock crashing through my bloodstream. I see him jump toward me as I crumble, the world fading to black.

Adam

*H*arley is in danger.

Harley went back to Carbona to see her family, supposedly.

Kenna told me in tears as soon as I went to their room after I met with Russ. She said she was worried, but Harley asked her to tell me I was sick. That part made me question everything, but even if she's changed her mind about us, I still have to make sure she's safe.

Russ had gotten the license plate from Seven's motorcycle, and did a search in the database. He's a forty-two-year-old ex-convict, on probation for another six years. He was in prison for attempted murder, drug dealing, and selling illegal firearms. He was also suspected of gang activity.

The flight to Carbona lasted an eternity, my knee bouncing, head spinning. The woman next to me kept trying to talk to me, and I couldn't even register her face or words enough for more than a few grunts of agreement.

When my plane landed, I got a heart-stopping voice mail from Detective Riggs, telling me that Harley was rushed in an ambulance to the Carbona Lakeshore Hospital. He said she was "okay," but that's a relative term.

The first taxi ride of my life is agonizingly long.

My hand grips the door handle harder. "How much farther to the hospital?" I ask the driver.

"Ten minutes," he replies, his tone tinged with annoyance at my continual request.

Russ has a multitude of contacts after having been on the police force in different cities for over forty years. He called an old friend in Carbona to inquire about the bald tattoo artist, whose real name is Tyler Donniver. Turns out, Mr. Donniver is suspected of continuing his arms dealing. His place of work is also under surveillance. Lots of felons like to get “tatted up” at Hades’s Playground, according to Detective Riggs. He agreed to pay the probationer a random visit as a favor to Russ.

The car finally inches under the awning in front of the enormous off-white structure. I shove cash at the driver, not waiting to hear the amount. I slam the door of the yellow car, racing inside the open automatic doors.

“Hello, miss. I’m looking for my friend Harley Kain. She was brought in an ambulance and—”

“Adam!” a voice calls from a few feet away.

I turn to see an old man in a bright red shirt with yellow flowers. He smiles at me, walking up.

“Thought that was probably you. You look like you’ve seen a ghost, boy. She’s all right.” He claps me on the shoulder, his face still grinning like it’s a holiday.

“Where is she?”

I stand up straighter, trying to remind myself this guy helped lock up a dangerous man, but his nonchalant attitude is grating on my ability to maintain polite behavior.

He starts walking, waving me after him. “She’s really okay. Had to call the ambulance because she passed out and knocked her head against the counter. They have her under observation. She was a little dehydrated.”

The elevator takes an eternity but eventually opens up.

“She sure is a brave little thing though. Held a gun straight at my head before I told her who I was.” He smirks at me as my stomach drops.

Why did she have a gun?

“Don’t worry; that part won’t make it into the report.” He winks at me as we finally reach the fifth floor.

“I’m heading to the station to start on this paperwork, but she’ll need to make a statement before you two head back to Texas. Can you bring her in tomorrow?” He’s leading me down the hallway, finally reaching her room.

I nod, my hand already pressing on the door handle. I force myself to let go, stretching it instead toward him. He grips it, both squeezing hard like real men do.

“Thank you, Detective.” I’m suddenly choked up, thinking about what could’ve happened if Harley had a gun when he arrived.

He nods, winks again, and turns on his heel, heading back toward the elevator.

I click open the handle, stepping into the dark room.

Her raven hair is fanned out on the white pillow, a needle stabbing into a butterfly wing on her arm. Her eyes are closed.

Seeing her alive after so much worry and fear brings on a sudden, intense wave of relief. I’m weak with emotion as I stumble toward her, leaning down to press a soft kiss to her hand.

“Thank you, Jesus. Thank you,” I whisper, cradling her delicate fingers.

I don’t want to wake her, so I resist pulling her entire body into the crushing hug that I desperately need. I lift the chair from the corner and place it as close to her bed as possible, sitting down next to her.

This is the first time I’ve gotten to look at her and truly study her. I’ve always been drawn to her, ever since the first moment she crossed my path

on campus. I resisted looking at her, like I have a lot of beautiful women. I was taught to never view females as objects for my own gratification. My parents aren't perfect, but the value of women was something instilled in me as a young boy. It's something every parent should teach their sons.

Harley was no exception, but at the same time, *not* looking at her was nearly impossible. Once I started to really know her, I was gone. She was so...sad. She feigned indifference, but somehow, I could sense her lack of joy for life. I kept finding myself wanting to catch her smiles and hold them in my fingers, so I could look at them whenever I wanted. She was always radiant, but when she smiled, she was the essence of light, blinding. Even from a distance, her smile could make my heart leap.

Now, her face is relaxed, full peach lips slightly parted as she breathes. Her dark lashes lie on her cheeks, pale and beautiful. Her neck is inviting, and I know if I leaned in to whisper in her ear, I would smell sweet apple pie.

When I saw her at the beach party, I nearly had to physically run from her. I was at war within myself, questioning my own motive to get to know her. In my mind, the only feasible reason a girl could be so beautiful was for destruction. Young men weren't meant to drink from a honeysuckle, lest they get stung.

Yet she was my siren, beckoning me closer each time we were in the same vicinity. I'd never wavered from the teachings from my youth, but even now, as I still believe most of it, I know there were great faults within the instruction.

Her body is not a stumbling block. Her body is a temple, and I want to worship it every day for the rest of my existence. That fact alone riddles my mind with guilt, but then I remember that's not all I want.

Her laugh is my favorite sound.

Her scent is a blessing that overwhelms me.

Her thoughts, I crave to know.

When she left me today...I nearly broke in half. My heart was shattered, and I'm still wavering on the uncertainty of why she did it. I swore that if she told me to my face that she no longer wanted me...I could walk away. But I had to see her safe. I know he hurt her, but she was so young. Even when she told me the sickening story of her tragic childhood, she seemed confused. Like she didn't want to paint Seven or Victoria as the demons they clearly were.

I'm in love with her, and I told her in a stupid letter. This morning in class seems like an eternity ago.

Or was it yesterday? I know it's nearly midnight or past it.

It must have terrified her. She slept with me, and I have no real idea how it went for her. Then, I went screaming my love in her face the next day.

She ran from me, and I can't blame her. I wish there were someone I could ask about sex, but aside from Harley, anyone else I trust enough to broach the subject with is less experienced than I am now.

Was it so bad that she would literally rather be with an abusive ex-convict who's twenty-four years older than her?

I'm beginning to panic as my thoughts spiral down. I rise, so I can pace the room.

Several minutes later, I abandon my agitated circling and sit next to her motionless form. I lay my head down on her hand again, pressing it to my skin as I drift off to sleep.



It's still dark in the room when I lift my head. I see round windows of blue sky staring at me.

She lets out a raspy sigh, a tear dripping over her cheek.

I instinctively reach over to wipe it away, and her hand reaches up to hold mine to her face. She presses a kiss to my palm.

"You came," she whispers, more tears trailing down.

I start to feel hope again at her words. I lean toward her, caressing her cheek with my thumb.

"Of course I came." I swallow over the lump crowding my esophagus.

She reaches both arms out, and I immediately crush her to me, careful not to pull on the IV. She snuffles on my shoulder for several seconds.

"I love you too, Adam. I'm so sorry I left," she breathes the most beautiful words into my ear, all my fears melting away.

My heart is leaping inside of me, and if I thought sex was incredible, this moment is absolutely euphoric.

"I love you so much, Harley," I choke out. I pull her even tighter before slowly releasing.

She wipes her tears, lips slightly curving upward. She scoots over on the bed, and I sit next to her, my arm over her shoulders.

"I thought I could fix it. I thought if I let him...finish the Medusa, he would leave me alone," she says quietly.

I bring my finger to her lips. "You don't have to explain anything. He's gone now. He'll be put away for a long time." I'm caressing her cheek, incapable of not touching her skin. "But if you...want to talk about it, I'll always listen. I...if he hurt you, I think I might need to ask for a moment alone with him."

If the authorities let me, I would absolutely rip his body to shreds.

She quickly shakes her head. “The cop got there before...before we even started. I was...panicking, and I knew where he kept the guns. Actually, isn’t there some kind of charge for holding a gun on a detective?”

It’s my turn to shake my head. Her hand is grabbing at my waist, but the small physical contact isn’t nearly enough.

“No, he said it won’t be in the report. You were defending yourself.”

I pull her toward me, and she must feel the same because she abandons her place on the bed, crawling out of the covers to straddle my lap. I sigh indulgently, reaching around to grab her waist before I realize the hospital gown is slit up the back.

My finger makes contact with her warm, bare skin at the top of her butt cheek, and I suck in a breath.

Her smile is devious, like she knew it would happen. She leans into me, dipping her face down. The positive reaction from her fuels my action, and I indulge in the feel of her backside in my hands fully. Very few things feel better than this, and the ones that do all involve Harley.

She’s a breath away from me now, and I press a kiss to her lips. She’s delicious, opening to me immediately. My tongue is exploring her mouth in the next moment, and her fingers have started tracing my earlobe.

My hands are still gripping her from behind, the rest of her body flush with mine but separated by too much fabric.

After a few more seconds of sliding tongues and hungry lips, I pull back, panting.

“I cannot have sex with you in a hospital bed,” I say, forcing myself to move my hands away from her butt and close the gown around her.

“Why not?” she asks, leaning down again to try to resume the kiss.

“Because...”

She changes course, finding my earlobe instead. Her teeth scrape over it, sending shivers through me. I grip her tighter.

“Because you...you were...hurt,” I finally get out as she continues to tease me with her torturous movements on my lap.

All I can think about is the moment with her body writhing under me in my dorm room, and I’m about to give in when the door opens, flooding the room with light.

“Moving on already, darling?” an amused female voice speaks from the threshold.

The change in Harley is instant, her body turning to ice. She doesn’t move off of me or turn around.

“Hello, Ma.”

Harley

Adam's eyes widen a fraction as he looks behind me at the door. He's never one to dismiss or treat anyone without kindness and respect. He looks back into my eyes, his hands having strayed respectfully to my waist.

He watches me closely as he eases me off of his lap onto the side of the bed. Victoria has stepped farther into the room, laying her black Hermès handbag on the bench to the side. She's dressed to perfection in slimming leather pants and a flared red wraparound top.

I see she's adopted yet a new look, a persona that I'm sure won't last more than a year when she reinvents her image. She looks like one of those ridiculous women who can't accept her age gracefully, always fighting for the youth that has already spoiled.

Her face is fuller than the last time I saw her, but it's not from weight gain, as her legs are as pencil thin as ever. The taut skin on her forehead shines in the light she flicked on when she barged into the room.

"What are you doing here?" My voice is cold.

Adam has slowly risen from the bed, approaching my foster mother. She looks him over, raising her eyebrows as much as she can.

"I can't come see my daughter in the hospital? Well, well, well," she coos, stretching out a hand, palm down, like she's some kind of royalty, "who might this handsome devil be? You're like...the star of a country

music video, if it was porn.” She laughs at her own joke as Adam shakes her hand slowly.

“My name is Adam,” he says, but I notice he doesn’t tack on the usual *it’s nice to meet you* bit. His back is tense.

“Adam, I’m very pleased to be meeting you. How long have you been screwing my daughter?” she quips.

I rush to speak before he has time to respond. “What’s up? Why are you really here?” I purposefully insert annoyance into my tone.

Adam has turned back to me, his face hard.

Victoria’s hands go on her narrow hips, her face morphing into one that is far more familiar to me—cruel. “Well, you’ve gone and had Seven thrown back into jail, I hear. Lenny is throwing an absolute fit, demanding his share of the profits from the photo shoot that hasn’t happened yet.” She matches my tone now, dropping the act of feigning any concern at all for my well-being.

“Well, it can’t happen, seeing as the tattoo was never finished,” I snap. My patience with her long run out. “And Lenny can go have himself poked with needles until he passes out for all I care. So can you.”

I cross my arms over my chest, turning my head out the window. Adam is standing by the bed, his hand reaching out to hold mine on the sheets. I grip it until my knuckles go white.

Then, it happens—she morphs once again. She slowly approaches the bed, and I feel Adam gripping my hand tighter. My fight-or-flight instincts ignite, but I force myself to be still.

“Oh, darling, I’m really only worried about you here. You signed a contract. Lenny is demanding his cut. He could sue you. My share as your guardian is really irrelevant. I’m just concerned for your future.”

She dares to reach out a hand to awkwardly pat my arm, but I shrink away from her toward Adam.

This is how she does it. Any possible way to scare or manipulate me into complying is fair game. She once threatened to send my four-year-old foster brother back to his abusive family, and I was young enough to believe she could do it. I lived in the shadow of fear from her manipulation for so long. I couldn't see it until I was out. It's like a veil has been lifted from my eyes.

I turn toward her, my jaw set. "I've hired a lawyer. Adam has money, plenty of it. His family owns a huge farm in Texas. Lenny can try whatever he wants, but I'm not a scared little girl anymore. I'm not your whore, getting nearly naked to pose and expose my body to the world. You can go to fucking hell." I nearly spit the last words at her face, and she jolts back.

I've never spoken to her that way. After the first time I tried to push back at her insistence for a photo shoot in lingerie when I was fifteen, she starved me for three days. It was during the summer, so I didn't even get a school lunch.

I can't say it's all me, although I can feel the strength and determination I've grown since being away from her. Adam standing behind me and grasping my hand is helping to fuel my fight against the monster who raised me.

Her eyes are wide, her expression hard to read with all the work she's had done.

"You...you can't do this to me, Harley. I won't have enough income without your modeling! When you ran away, I had to start *selling* my handbags. People don't even understand their worth and—"

"Ma'am, you need to leave now," Adam finally says, his voice authoritative. "She said what she needed to say to you. Now, it's time for

you to go.”

He starts to walk toward Victoria, who begins backing away from his much larger frame.

Her voice turns desperate as she pleads with him, backing toward the door in her stilettos, “You don’t get it. I took her in when no one would. I fed her, clothed her, started her in a thriving business as an *orphan* with nothing!” She turns to me now, her face completely turned to malice, eyes blazing. “You’re an ungrateful little whore!”

Adam physically herds her out the door, slamming it once she is finally out. He pivots back to me, slowly approaching the bed. Without a word, he climbs in next to me, gathering me into his big, strong arms, and holds me tight against him.

I let him cuddle me with his addictive warmth and cedar scent. Tears begin to trace a path down my cheeks. I don’t know why they’re there, except that maybe the only mother I’ve ever known is finally out of my life for good.

I’m glad she is, but at the same time, my lonely orphan heart is still cracked open and bleeding.

He doesn’t say a word, and I’m so thankful. What could possibly be said after that? She’s a true monster, abusing and controlling children for her own selfish gain.

I finally feel the ability to speak returning to me. “When are we going back?” I’m ready to be home.

He leans back slightly, looking at my face as he brushes my tangled hair back from my face with care. “We...have to go to the police station, so you can give a statement. If you want to wait another day...”

I wave him off. “No, no, I’m fine. Let’s go get it over with.”



The orange brick exterior of the police station in Carbona brings back unpleasant memories. I've been brought in here for petty theft a few more times than I'd like to admit.

I glance at Adam, and he's cool and relaxed. He's probably the first boyfriend I've had who hasn't seen the dashboard of a cop car from the backseat.

We climb out of the taxi after he insists on paying for it.

"Let me take care of you today, please?" he says as he reaches for my hand.

We're both exhausted after a night in the hospital, but at least I got to shower this morning.

I give him a side-eye as we climb the steps.

"What if they arrest me?" I pull to a stop, letting go of his hand and crossing my arms.

He looks back, his forehead creased. "He said he wouldn't worry about it. You were defending yourself—"

I cut him off, "I wasn't talking about the gun. I was talking about all the petty theft charges and..."

His eyes widen a bit as he gapes at me from the step above.

"I'm technically still...maybe...a runaway." I pause.

He starts to speak, "But you're—"

"Seventeen." I hold my breath after the admission, watching for his reaction. I signed the e-forms for the dorms and my classes with Victoria's signature. I stole her social security and driver's license numbers. The rest was a cake walk.

He jerks back slightly, looking over my mature body littered in tattoos, face in absolute shock, eyes wide.

“Maybe they’ll...arrest me,” he chokes out.

I bark out a laugh. “Why would they arrest you?”

I take another step back, my head beginning to ache. I press a hand to the tender spot on the side, hidden under my thick hair.

“Are you okay?” He steps closer, reaching a hand up to touch me, doubt clouding his eyes.

“Well, hello, you two. Glad to see you could make it in here today. How are you feeling, sweetheart?” Detective Riggs booms from behind us, and we both start.

Adam straightens, reaching out a hand to the man in a blinding turquoise-and-white tropical shirt.

“I’m fine. Can we make this quick though? Got a headache,” I mumble as they shake hands.

The detective squints at me in the mid-morning light.

“We’ll do our best, okay? I have some questions for you, seeing as you’ve been...working near Tyler Donniver for some time.”

I swallow over a lump as he turns to walk inside. My stomach is cramped, and I think I might get sick. Adam practically force-fed me eggs this morning, but now, I’m afraid I’m going to see a rerun of my hospital breakfast.

We step into the smell of coffee and sweat. The police station in Carbona is an enormous establishment. Our city isn’t known for being filled with law-abiding citizens.

We follow the tropical shirt through the halls, past sad-looking, scantily clad women and rough men with shaved heads in orange jumpsuits.

Adam's face is tinged a little green as he observes the scene, and his gaze turns to me. He clenches his jaw, reaching for my hand to squeeze it.

We finally reach a little office with a glass door, and my heart plummets as I see Victoria and Lenny both already inside on the dingy fabric chairs. Her face is smug as she sips on a venti Starbucks cup.

Detective Riggs holds open the door, and Adam and I shuffle inside.

"All right, since we're all here, let's get to it. Sorry I'm late. I had to do a little homework."

He makes his way behind the cheap metal desk, taking a seat in the office chair. He looks up at the four of us as he sips on a to-go cup. He smiles, motioning for Adam and me to take the folding chairs that were clearly brought in to seat us.

"So, I guess I'll start with you, Lenny." Riggs looks down at his papers. "Are you the agent representing Miss Harley Kain for modeling?"

Lenny nods, clearly uncomfortable in the presence of law enforcement. "Yes, sir."

"How long have you been representing her?" Riggs asks, leaning back in his chair and interlacing his fingers.

"About three years." He shifts in his seat. His dark eyes flit over me, then back to the man behind the desk.

"I see, and when did you meet Tyler Donniver?"

He stammers, looking over at Victoria, "Uh, we, uh, we met...a while back."

"Would your previous meeting happen to have been when you were incarcerated together?"

Riggs's face gives nothing away, his body still relaxed in the chair. If you saw him through the glass, you'd think he was asking Lenny what his new

puppy's name was.

Lenny's mouth is agape, beady eyes shifting over me and Victoria.

My foster mother gasps belatedly. "What?! I had no prior knowledge of this, Detective! He lied to me about—"

He cuts her off, "Ms. Kain, I would like to ask you to remain silent until I am finished or I address you." He smiles, which I'm beginning to realize doesn't always convey his true thoughts.

He turns back to a sweating Lenny. "How did you end up connecting your client with Donniver?"

Lenny wipes an arm across his brow. "He, uh—he wanted a new model, and I happened to know Victoria and Harley were looking for work." He uncrosses his legs, sitting up straighter.

Riggs consults the papers again. "Lenny...Garbocia? Garbisha? Am I getting that right?"

"It's Garbicia," Lenny offers, squirming a little under the detective's gaze.

"Okay. So, being Harley's modeling agent, would you say that you handled the legal aspect of things?"

"Uh, yes—yes, sir. I got the contracts and everything signed by both parties."

Riggs smiles again. "What about the letter of intent to hire and work permits?"

Lenny's eyes widen a fraction. "The, uh...what now?" He stammers.

"According to Illinois Child Labor Law, every minor must obtain a letter of intent to hire, take it to their school district, and then obtain a work permit. Did you handle that, or did Ms. Kain?"

“She, uh, she did that part. I just worked out the contract negotiations between the modeling agencies and—”

Victoria interrupts, “That is a blatant lie! He was hired and paid *very well* to handle all legalities of Harley’s career. If he skimmed on things, I had absolutely no knowledge of it.”

Detective Riggs ignores her outburst, focusing on the man shrinking in his chair.

“Just one more question, Mr. Garbicia. For what purpose did you hire a private investigator a little over three months ago?” He cocks his head to the side, studying Lenny.

He doesn’t hesitate to answer this time. “Victoria asked me to find Harley after she ran away.”

He looks over at her, clearly glad to be able to shift some blame. I guess that’s how they found out I’d forged my foster mother’s signature and enrolled at OTU.

Again, Victoria gasps. “I was worried about her! She fled without a word to me about where she was going. I thought she was in danger.”

Her face is flawlessly pinched with concern. She even wipes an invisible tear away with her manicured finger. My eye roll could compete in the tumbling competition at the Olympics.

Riggs nods his head, and I feel a pinch of fear in my gut.

Is he actually buying this?

“Why would you be worried about her if you signed her release form to enroll at Ole Tex?” He holds up the document. Her name is scrawled across the bottom electronically.

I shrink back into my seat.

Victoria's eyes cut to me, her lips curling cruelly. "I didn't sign that form. She forged it. She's a liar. I do my best as a foster parent, harboring orphans and even providing them with lucrative opportunities that could propel them into vibrant futures. In the modeling industry, no less! The competition is fierce, and she fought me tooth and nail the entire way. Ungrateful..." She blows out a breath, steadying herself with her hands on the armrests. "Nevertheless, I will take her back in and do my best to find us a new agent without such a checkered past."

She begins to rise, but Riggs is smiling again and motioning for her to sit. She complies slowly, eyeing me warily. She thinks I've got something to do with this, but I have no idea where it's going.

"Did you receive financial compensation for your modeling, Harley?" The detective turns to me this time.

I nod. "A little." *I'm losing this. He's taking her side.*

"How much did you receive per month, would you say?"

"Two hundred for a good month."

His smile drops, and he looks back down at his documents. "You received two hundred dollars per month for the modeling you were doing?" he asks, his face no longer amused as he looks at Victoria and Lenny.

They're both squirming, attempting to talk over each other.

"She—"

"It was—"

"That's all I need to hear." He holds up a hand to stop their rambling. "These are some impressive numbers. I had no idea a teenager could make this kind of money, modeling for tattoo magazines, clothing stores, makeup companies..."

He begins holding up glossy pictures of me. One's a before and after of a tattoo being covered by foundation. The naughty parts are covered, but I'm clearly naked. I had little stickers over my nipples. Another is of me in a yellow bikini on the cover of *Inked Goddess*.

I'm mortified that Adam is seeing this. His eyes are wide, surveying the stack of magazines and printouts on the detective's desk. He swallows, looking over at me with that horrifying expression of pity you never want a guy to wear. I shrink further into the chair, looking down to study the scratched yellow-tinted linoleum.

"Ms. Kain, were you present and did you give consent for each of Harley's tattoos?"

I sit up a little straighter in my chair, genuinely curious to know Victoria's answer.

"Why, of course. I would never have allowed her to get something like that done *illegally*. She actually got to choose each one before it was inked into her skin. She, of course, always took breaks whenever she needed." She smiles at me through the lie, her face a little pinched.

"Hmm, you must not be aware then, Victoria, that it's illegal in the state of Illinois for a minor to get a tattoo, even with parental consent."

Her head snaps back to Detective Riggs, who's leaning back in his chair with a knowing smirk on his face.

She shoots up from the chair. "This is outrageous! I demand to have a lawyer present if I am to be questioned like a *criminal*!" She turns on her heel to march out, but she's stopped by the next words.

"That's fine. The social worker for Harley should be here in about ten minutes. You can call a lawyer, if you please."

Her back stiffens. An uncomfortable mass begins growing in my stomach.

No. Please don't make me go to another foster home. Don't bring in the social worker, who's a nice older woman with way too much work to do and very little resources.

I start to protest, "I—"

Riggs holds up a hand. Victoria's face has paled to match her white handbag.

"If you would rather...Harley could continue her education at Ole Tex University, considering you already signed her enrollment paperwork. I'm sure the social worker would be pleased to know she's seeking higher education at a well-known state school. Not many foster children have the support to do so, especially at seventeen." His eyes are narrowed on the thin woman, who is glaring daggers at me.

"That's what I would like to do," I say, turning my eyes back to the detective.

Victoria is silent for another few seconds, all eyes on her. "I...I guess she should do whatever it is she wants then," she forces the words out through clenched teeth.

"Excellent. I'm glad to hear both parties have reached an agreement." Riggs stands, and we all follow suit.

"Harley, I'd like to speak to you alone for a moment." He smiles at me.

I turn to look at Adam's blank face. He walks by, squeezing my hand and continuing out the door.

Victoria is frozen, eyes flitting from me to the detective. She finally walks out, and we are alone.

“Harley, do you know about the Emancipation of Minors Act?” His smile is gone, replaced with a concerned crease in his brow.

“I, uh, yes. I’ve heard it’s difficult to get if you...have a habit of breaking the law.” I don’t exactly look the part of a responsible teen, nor does my record show it.

“Well, you’re living on your own and supporting yourself. If you apply, having a friendly ear is always helpful. I happen to play eighteen holes with Judge Matthews every other Sunday.” He winks at me, handing over a stack of pink papers. “You should have no issue with being emancipated six months before your birthday when you’re already in school. After the fact, we can report everything to the social worker, preventing Victoria from housing any more foster kids.”

He walks around the desk, standing in front of me.

“I...I don’t know what to say,” I mumble, gripping the papers.

“You say, ‘See you in a few months for my court date.’ ” He hands me a card with his name and contact information. He’s grinning again. “Also, you can tell Russ he’s a quitter for retiring and going into that easy campus police work.”

Adam

“We should get some lunch at the airport,” I say to Harley as we walk out of the police station.

The taxi is pulling up to the curb. I look over at her face, pale and withdrawn.

“Harley?”

She looks up at me, a tear slipping through her lashes.

“What’s wrong?” I reach for her hand, but she’s already moving away.

She shakes her head, stepping toward the cab to open the door. She slides in, and I follow.

“Airport, please,” she tells the driver, staring out her smudged window.

We don’t speak as the car idles in a long line of exhaust and rubber. Her arms are folded over her stomach, and I can’t figure out why she’s closed off from me.

I really think she should see a counselor, but I have no idea how to broach the subject without sounding like I think she’s screwed up.

I don’t think there’s anything wrong with her, but I am afraid for her, afraid she’ll always feel like she’s only valuable because of what she can offer people—namely, her body.

How can I show her that’s not all I care about?

I reach over, gripping her cold fingers with mine. She doesn’t resist me, but she doesn’t hold them back either.



It's nearly Thanksgiving, my favorite holiday. My grandma makes the best homemade apple pie in the state, and our enormous extended family gets together in the barn for a meal and games. We fry four turkeys, and someone always brings a baked ham. I have enough cousins to populate a small town.

The past few weeks with Harley have been...strained. She's constantly looking over her shoulder, and I think she expects Victoria to show up and drag her back to Carbona. I've said everything I can to reassure her, but she merely nods and doesn't respond.

I met with a counselor to figure out how I can help her better, but the woman said just to listen and be supportive. I thought about making an appointment for Harley, but I was advised to allow her to make that decision for herself. At this point, I'm just praying constantly.

She won't talk to me about the age thing either. It doesn't matter to me, but I am worried that she felt she had to keep lying to me. *I get why she did it in the beginning, but does she still not trust me?*

"Hey," I say as I lean over to press a kiss to her jaw.

It's Monday morning, and we're sitting back up front in our horticulture class. She's been staying in her dorm, and I've been in mine since we got back from Carbona. I ache to hold her close again, but she's as distant as ever.

She looks at me as a half-smile ghosts across her lips. Then, she faces back down.

How can I get her smile to be real again? I pull out a fresh notebook sheet.

do you want to come home with me for thanksgiving? :)

She waits a few minutes to respond.

I told Kenna I'd go with her.

My chest feels tight as I debate how to respond.

Are we together? Is she trying to pull away, so I'll break up with her? I don't know what about our trip caused this sudden change in her.

I can't imagine how she must feel after everything that happened, but I'm losing my mind, trying to figure out what's brought on this new dynamic between us.

I miss you already.

She doesn't reply for over half the class, and my heart sinks further into my stomach with each passing minute.

have fun. I'll miss you too.

Once again, I'm floored with my lack of experience with dating relationships. Am I being too pushy if I ask her why she doesn't want to go on dates anymore or come hang out at my dorm?

I've offered to take her to the plant nursery, tried to surprise her with breakfast burritos, and even signed us up for a dance class together. She

said she's focusing on her classes and doing her best to keep all As. She picked up more shifts at the bar, but unless I go sit up there in a booth, I don't see her much at all.

I feel crushed, completely hopeless, and lost. *What do you do when the person you're in love with keeps extending the distance between you?*



"Mom, this is phenomenal. How'd you get to be such a great cook?" I ask over a mouthful of sweet potato pie, sprinkled with pecans and cinnamon.

My mother beams at me, patting my shoulder. "Your grandmother taught me, of course. Every young woman should learn how to take care of a man, starting with his stomach."

She takes the open seat next to me, the rest of the family already moving on to start on the tradition of board games after the meal. Tomorrow is the big reunion, so today is just the thirteen of us.

"I wanted to tell you, honey, there's a pretty new face at church. Her name is Michal. She's the sweetest thing. She's only sixteen, but she looks older. Her family moved down here from Missouri."

I still at her words, gripping my fork a little tighter as she continues, "I invited their family to the reunion tomorrow. She's very sweet but a little shy. I think you'll like her."

She pats my shoulder again, and I swallow the tasteless bite in my mouth.

"Uh, well, I don't know if that's the best idea. I'm..."

I want to tell her I'm dating Harley, but I actually don't know if I am at this point. She hasn't returned any of my texts or calls in four days. After

the last few weeks, I'm going insane, trying to figure out what's going on with her.

"Oh, I know, you're off at college, but it's only two hours away. You can easily start visiting home on the weekends and take her to church. Her mother, Abigail, has already said they'd love to see you for dinner this Sunday."

Her smile is even brighter now as she takes my empty plate to the sink. My father has meandered into the kitchen to hear her last statement.

"That's wonderful, honey. Michal sure is a sweet girl. You'll like her, Adam. Her father has been very involved in the church since they moved here."

I feel bloated with shame as they chat among themselves about the new family with eight kids, another on the way. Michal is the oldest, already primed and ready to start her own journey of eternal reproduction.

"She loves the farm life too. She and Eden have been out at your grandmother's orchard all week long, picking fresh apples for the pies tomorrow," my mother continues on as she starts washing dishes.

I get up and excuse myself, saying I want to check on the baby goats that were born before I moved away. My parents don't say anything, glancing at each other with that silent communication only a concerned husband and wife can interpret.

The ringing in my ear is echoing from the phone pressed against it.

Please answer.

"Hello?" Her voice is raspy when she finally picks up.

"Hi," I say, a little surprised she answered. My heart rate speeds up.

"I can't talk for long."

I hear a door closing on her end. I'm walking out into a field, aimlessly wandering around the grassy pasture.

"How...how's it going there?" I ask like a coward, avoiding what really needs to be said.

"It's good. They're great people. They like me." Her voice holds a hint of defensiveness that I barely pick up on.

"Are you..." I trail off, blowing out a breath. This can't happen over the phone. "Are you doing anything fun tonight?"

"Yes. Kenna got us tickets to a concert."

"Oh, okay. Glad you're having fun," I force out over the mass in my throat.

She's silent for a minute.

"Thanks. I gotta get ready."

"Okay, well...bye," I reply, and the line cuts off.

I survey the luscious expanse of green stretching as far as my eye can see. My family owns hundreds of acres in every direction from where I'm standing. I know that if I'd never gone to Ole Tex and met an inked goddess, I'd be perfectly content to stay here and marry a sweet girl, never venturing from the place of my birth.

Harley

If he doesn't break up with me soon, I'll lose my ability to be cold toward him. He's been home for four days, but I'm guessing my name hasn't come up yet. If it had, he'd either be breaking up with me or leaving home. I can't imagine that a conversation about me would go well—unless he agrees with them and is waiting to do it in person like a gentleman.

My belly is tight as I stand up from the side of the tub in Kenna's enormous house. I'm staying in one of four guest suites on the third floor. It's decorated in a modern style with neutral accents.

The bed is an actual cloud Mrs. Davis lassoed down from the sky, I have no doubt. I guess the oil business isn't a bad one to be in.

"Haarleey," my roommate singsongs from the hallway. "You almost ready?"

She appears in my open doorway as I start putting on my worn Steve Maddens. She's in a violet lacy crop top and high-waisted black jeans, appropriate for Texas in November. Her curls are enormous, and I feel like since we are in her hometown, she's wearing them bigger than usual.

"Yep. Is this okay?" I ask.

She insisted, as usual, I wear something of hers to the music festival. She observes my ensemble of a white off-the-shoulder top and distressed, high-waisted acid-wash jeans. We are once again yin and yang, and we start to laugh.

“My parents just left for dinner. We’re just gonna take my Jeep since we’ll be splitting off afterward.” She’s looking down at her phone, a tiny smile on her face.

“Who are you texting?” I ask, grabbing my phone and some cash.

She jolts, clicking the screen off.

“Just some friends we’re going to meet up with.” She beams at me. “You should go with a bold pink lip. Oh! Hold up.” She races back to her room.

“I’m fine with these shoes!” I grumble, knowing what she’s going to bring back.

She ignores me, returning with a tube of fuchsia lip stain and perfectly matching suede heels that look painful already.

“Ugh, I wanted to dance and feel my toes.”

She nods vigorously. “These are SO comfortable! You won’t believe how magical they feel on your feet. Just try them, please. Put them on when we get there, and leave your flats in the Jeep.”

She’s impossible to deny, so I nod begrudgingly. Her cheeks look like they should be in pain with how big she’s grinning.

It’s easier with Kenna because she knows nearly nothing about what happened in Carbona. She got a broken version of events where I basically told her that my foster mom wanted me to finish a modeling shoot, but I couldn’t because the artist wasn’t available to do the tattoo. I left out ninety percent of the embarrassing details.

It helps that her family treats me like I’m their long-lost daughter. Her mom insisted on taking us for mani-pedis on the first day we arrived in town. She presented us each with a new Kate Spade handbag “just because.” Every day since then, they’ve coddled us with anything we could

even dream of asking for. Kenna got a haircut and highlights, insisting on me getting a much-needed trim.

I've begged them to let me pay for things, but they will hear none of it.

Dinner is phenomenal. We just finished a gourmet meal of roasted lamb and au gratin potatoes. I would've preferred brownies, followed by a burrito, but I'd never say it. We're sitting near a roaring outdoor fireplace that's heating our backs.

"Thank you so much for the meal. It was amazing," I say to Mr. and Mrs. Davis as the server clears the last of the dishes.

"You have no choice. We've adopted you." Mrs. Davis smiles warmly at me, her husband squeezing her hand.

I nod, my voice trapped.

Kenna saves me from having to give a choked response. "You're my sister, no arguments. Well, we're going to be late if we stay too long. Love you. Bye." She stands, and I follow, still holding in the emotion.

"McKenna, you call an Uber if you decide to have a drink," her father reminds her, concern in his tone.

"They won't let us drink there, Dad," she reassures him, leaving out the part about her fake ID.

She bends to give them hugs. I wave as we leave the restaurant, several men at the bar following us with their eyes. I check my phone, wishing I had a text and feeling a stab of disappointment that the screen is blank.

I've got to get over it.

He's probably talking to a sweet, little country girl while I pine over him. *No, he wouldn't do that to me. He's not that guy.*

He is, more likely, listening to his mother give him warnings about all the dangerous prostitutes that lure you in on college campuses.

We're already on our way to the concert when I turn to Kenna. "Can you just take me home? I really don't feel like it tonight."

Lying on the cloud bed pouting is all I want to do. I can't fathom dancing right now. My whole body feels heavy.

"What?!" she exclaims, taking her eyes off the road a second too long. She jerks the wheel back, and I grab for the door handle. "You can't bail! I told all my friends about you, and they can't wait to meet you." She chances another peek at me with wide, pleading green eyes.

"I don't feel good..." I trail off, looking out at the pink sunset over the flat desert.

"Are you missing him?" she asks.

She's hardly questioned me about the distance between me and Adam, but I know she isn't oblivious to it.

"Yes, but I feel like he's probably going to break up with me when we get back." I sigh, leaning back against the leather.

I see her shaking blonde curls in my peripheral vision.

"No way, absolutely not. He's obsessed with you." She pulls up to a red light, turning to face me. "I know something happened you aren't telling me."

Guilt twinges my gut.

"And I'm not going to lie and say your sadness lately doesn't make me worry about you." She hesitates, chewing on a nail. "You can share anything, in your time. Adam is one of the good ones, and I have no doubt in my mind about it."

The green flashes in front of us, and her red Jeep accelerates.

"I just...I guess the real issue is his family. Yeah, my whole ugly history coming to his attention wasn't my favorite thing, but it just reminded me

how...tarnished I am. A good portion of the Midwest has seen me in lingerie, and his mom called me a harlot, so..."

Kenna slams on the brakes, and a horn blares behind us.

"What the hell?! Are you kidding me?" she screeches, slowly letting off the brakes and continuing at a slower speed. "That is disgusting. What a whore," she spits, checking the rearview.

I wish I hadn't told her. It's embarrassing enough that my boyfriend's family sees me like trash by the side of the road on a Wednesday morning, waiting to get picked up.

"It's whatever. I just think in the future, it's going to be a major issue. I think he secretly wonders if we can make it work too. I know he cares about me, but..." I sigh in defeat, the situation feeling insurmountable.

"You are full of self-doubt, and it's completely toxic. You are such a bad bitch, in the best way. He sees that, or he wouldn't have been trying so hard to cheer you up lately. We talked about it, and—"

"You talked about it?" I interrupt, facing her.

"Well, I mean, he asked me if I had any ideas to help him show you how much he cares. I really think he would tell his whole family *sayonara* for your love."

She smiles at me, but all my heart does is sink further down. Several long seconds pass by.

"I don't want him to have to do that..." My voice is barely audible. "All I've ever wanted is a family...and he has one—a judgmental one, sure. But they are obsessed with him. He's clearly, like, the beloved firstborn son. Then, I walked up, covered in tattoos and wooing him into my web of seduction." I shake my head. "He shouldn't cut off ties with them to be with

me. That would be completely unfair to ask of him. I shouldn't have gotten back together with him in the first place."

My head is drooped to the side, pressed against the cold window. Kenna is silent for a few more moments as we begin pulling into the crowded parking lot. She finds a space but doesn't turn off the engine.

"Look, if you really want, I will take you back home. I think you should try to get out and forget about it all for a few hours. Use your fake to have a few drinks and put Adam and his bitch mother out of your head. If you go home, it'll just overwhelm you. You need a mental break." She looks at me, tilting her head to the side, waiting on my decision.

"Ugh, I'll try."

I kick my flats off, replacing them with the pink suede heels that probably cost more than everything in my wardrobe. I flip down the mirror and apply the matching lip stain, combing my fingers through my loose waves.

Kenna is on her phone again, presumably texting the group we're meeting. She clicks it off, smiling at me once again. "Ready?"

"I guess."

I'm trying to drum up some enthusiasm for the evening. Maybe she's right; if I drink a little, I might relax. I hope her friends aren't too chatty.

We make our way to the entrance, and I hand them my fake ID. It was a gift from Kenna to cheer me up. The bouncer eyes my etched body and wraps a neon-green bracelet tightly around my wrist.

Kenna gets one, too, and we saunter through the gate into the enormous outdoor venue. There's an opener already strumming an acoustic guitar on a stage with a giant screen displaying the band's picture.

It's teeming with people of various ages, mostly college students home for break. Kenna is recognized within seconds, and I'm introduced to an innumerable mass of humans I don't even attempt to remember. They all survey me like I'm the new girl in a freshman English class who just said she wants to try out for the cheer team. They're wondering if I somehow blackmailed Kenna into being my friend, and I'm over it after about ten minutes.

"I need a drink. Be back in a sec," I mumble into Kenna's ear as she giggles with a gorgeous, tall redhead.

She latches on to my elbow. "Okay. I know the DJ, so meet me in the booth, okay?" She smiles widely.

I nod, not surprised at all, and go searching for a bar. The line is longer than the exit off the highway you need on Friday afternoon, so I pull out my phone while I wait.

Nothing.

He's so done. He met a new girl. She's perfect, a virgin. I bet she knows how to make mouthwatering homemade rolls and has already changed a thousand diapers. He'll teach her how to have sex, and she'll fucking love it because he's a natural. He'll do that delicious thing that he must've just wanted to do, and I shiver at the memory.

"You cold, babe?" a disgusting familiar voice asks me.

I look up at a smirking face, boring brown eyes eating me up.

"Nope," I say coldly.

I take a step forward in the line, and Kyle falls in beside me.

"Wow, I had no idea you owned clothes that could cover so much." He laughs.

"What do you want?" I hope he can smell the disdain.

“Same ole, same ole. I thought I made it clear before.” He leers at me again, and I roll my eyes with the boring ritual.

“Blah, blah, you want me to stroke your tiny, hairy balls, and you’ll tear me down eventually—got it. Can we skip to the part where you run off and find someone easy?” I fold my arms over my chest, not at all in the mood to be polite to the jerk who groped me. “Why are you here anyways?”

“My dad runs this place. I get to pick the opener for shows when they don’t have one already,” he boasts.

I imagine that line works with way too many girls.

He continues with one-liners all the way to the bar. He attempts every ploy in the book, but I ignore him with ease. He’s just another Chihuahua barking at me on the street. I’ll only respond to the soft, sweet lion with a quiet roar.

When I get to the bartender—a girl with more tattoos than me—I order my usual lemon vodka and club soda with lime. She nods, mechanically making the drink.

“Bourbon, on the rocks, Jade,” Kyle orders with a wink. “Put ours on the tab,” he says.

I’m poor enough that turning down a free drink isn’t in my wheelhouse, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to thank Kyle’s dad for it.

He follows me as I search for Kenna.

“So, did it ever go down with you and that farmer?” he asks as we weave through warm bodies.

I’m not in any mood to discuss my relationship, so I don’t answer. He interprets my silence as an opportunity.

“Ahh, well, that’s too bad. You know I’ll make it better for you than he ever could.” He smiles, leaning into my ear as he says it.

He smells like Marlboro Reds. He looks like the sleazy version of Adam with longer blond hair and darker eyes. I guess he'd be sexy if he was someone else and not a total prick. My blood turns to ice as I realize that he's a type I would've eventually settled for—before I experienced what it felt like to be cherished.

I want to back away, but the crowd is pushing me in. We finally reach a small clearing, and I step a safe distance from him. A man with long hair and a beard is on the stage now, beginning to strum on an acoustic guitar as the crowd cheers.

“I don't want you. Leave me alone,” I say without remorse, setting my jaw.

He throws his head back in a laugh, running a hand through his conditioned waves. “They all say that at first.” He steps closer, his hand reaching for my waist. His smoker breath is in my ear as he whispers, “You'll come around. I'll make you scream.”

I jerk back from him, raising my hand to slap his face again.

A tan, muscled arm splits us apart, grabbing Kyle's wrist. We both start, and I look to my right into a stern, handsome face.

“She said she wants you to leave her alone.” Adam's voice is fierce, a nonsense tone I wish he'd use when I'm naked.

He shoves Kyle's wrist down, causing the drink in his other hand to spill.

“Whoa, I thought y'all were split up, man. I swear.” He backs away, clearly not invested enough to get into an altercation over me.

“Well, we're not. Go,” Adam grits out, the veins in his neck popping out.

The announcer tells us that Chris Stapleton is playing “What Are You Listening To,” and Kyle shuffles in the other direction. I watch him leave, my mouth slightly agape.

Then, I'm staring up into stunning amber eyes. He won't touch me even though I'm begging him to with my eyes. *Doesn't he know how much I want it?*

"What...what're you doing here?" I choke out, my voice cracking.

He licks his lips, eyes burning over me. "Look at the screen, please."

My eyes travel to the stage, and I suck in a breath, my hand covering my mouth.

The bearded man is playing onstage, and a video of me and Adam is flashing on the display above him. I'm wearing an oversize shirt, and it looks like I don't have pants on. He's in his trademark torn jeans and a flannel shirt. I'm running toward him, and he scoops me up with an enormous grin. My legs wrap around his waist, my head above his as our lips lock.

We're in front of the cafeteria at Ole Tex. Kenna's contented gasp can be heard in the background. Moments later, we were undressed in the bathroom, but I know that won't be on the video. As it ends, the screen changes to a recording of us kissing in the ferns when the older lady accidentally took a video instead of a picture. Adam's face is serious, his hands in my hair. I'm smiling up at him like he's the center of my entire universe. It could be a movie trailer, the kind with the ending you want to dream about.

He's right next to me, and the people around us are giving us side-eyes, like, *Isn't that y'all?*

"How'd you do this?" I say, breathless. *Is he really trying to announce to all these people that we're together?*

His eyes have been focused on me the entire song, never straying to the screen.

“I...Kenna helped me,” he admits, sucking on his lower lip like I wish I were.

I remember how my roommate knows everyone, including the DJ. My hand reaches up to hold the side of his whiskery face, and he closes his eyes, indulging in the contact shamelessly.

“You’re breathtaking,” he says, eyes blazing with emotion.

“I’ve been horrible,” I confess, sick of the charade. “I’m so...so sorry.” My voice is racked with guilt, desperate for forgiveness.

He’s a modern-day Prince Charming, and I’m a stepsister, evil and conniving.

He pulls me closer, hands tightly gripping my lower back, teasing the top of my jeans.

“Harley, I’m...hopelessly in love with you. There’s nothing to forgive. Just tell me you want me, and—”

I cut him off with a desperate, hungry kiss.

Our mouths were made to be welded together in a crowd of drunk people. The cheers that erupt around us are blaring. His tongue is in my mouth, and I suck it in like I’ll starve if I don’t taste every part of him.

He’s miserable without me, and only I can satisfy his craving. His hands are groping my butt. The good-boy persona was left in the truck. Tongues are licking, teeth are scraping, and our hands are violating each other like this isn’t a very public venue. A few hoots and whistles bring us back to the present, and he slowly releases me. We’re breathing like the top contenders in the Olympic swim competition, but we both fought for the gold.

Adam

Her hand in mine is the only thing keeping me sane. I'm dragging her through the crowd, out onto the sidewalk. I had to park far away because I got here late after the five-hour drive. She's jogging after me, and I force myself to slow.

I need her—now. Right now.

Talking is useless when desire is your fuel, and neither of us bother wasting the breath.

My Chevy is finally in sight on the very back row under a tree, but none of the tension in my shoulders is released. I jerk open the door, waiting for her to climb in. She pauses for a moment, staring up at me in the moonlight. I sense that maybe she wants some type of explanation for my presence, but I'm not giving it unless she asks.

She doesn't, obediently climbing into the single cab. I breathe a sigh, following her.

When I turn back to her from closing the door, she's already removing her top, followed by her bra.

I draw in a breath, taking in her upper half. She's all shadow and shapes. I can't make out any colors in the near dark. The sight of her breasts is like being welcomed home after an extended absence. I'm hopelessly obsessed with her body. I want to lay her down under a lamp and inspect and memorize every skin cell.

"You are ravishing," I exhale with a sigh.

She leans back, lifting a heeled foot toward me.

I obediently undo the clasp, slipping a shoe off of her delicate foot. She's staring at me as she switches her feet, so I can remove the other heel. I comply again, my fingers selfishly caressing the velvet skin of her calves.

The light catches her etched skin, and I feel the urge to taste it.

She's still watching me in the full moon, her eyes never straying from mine as she wiggles her skintight jeans down her hips. My open mouth is nearly dripping, but I can't make myself care. My pulse is shooting into the night sky like a rocket.

I begin to slowly undo the buttons from my shirt, but she stops me with a hand before dropping it down to the physical desire in my jeans. The contact is the ultimate high, but I know it's about to get even better.

I hold my breath as she slips the button through the loop, motioning for me to pull them down. I do, just enough to get myself out.

I lean forward to open the glove compartment, pulling out a box that I stopped to buy—very optimistically—at a gas station on the way.

"I...got these just in case."

She doesn't reply, but her lips part as I roll it on.

I'm sitting in the passenger seat, and she crawls over me, still wearing her thong that she slides over. My entire body is tense with anticipation. I need her like I need air.

I steady her with my hands on her waist, guiding her over me. The few seconds of finding the right spot nearly drive me mad.

My thoughts short-circuit in the next few minutes, my head falling back on the seat as she moves over me and our bodies collide in the best way. Words fail me when I'm with her like this.

She's irresistible, everything I've ever craved, as she brings me to the most incredible place in this world. I'll never be the same; she's wrecked me. Twenty-one years was every bit worth the wait.

"You fit me," she breathes in my ear.

I'm nearly losing my mind, but I force myself to focus on keeping it together. Her body and face are unmatched, and I'm unraveling underneath her.

"Next time, it's my turn to play," I whisper, biting into her ear.

I feel a smile against my neck.

"Bring it on, Farm Boy," she breathes out, her body still moving over me.

I decide I can play a little bit this time. I fulfill my earlier fantasies as my lips meet her chest, drawing on the delicate peak of her breast. She gasps at the wet contact of my tongue.

I'm constantly focused on her reactions to me, overly concerned with her satisfaction. I'll never settle for lying back and enjoying the moment unless I know she is too.

"I love you, Harley," I choke out, unable to contain the words.

She stills for a second at the words.

"I love you more," she whispers, and my world explodes. The bomb extends for miles, desolating all coherent thoughts and movements.

She reads my mind, audibly expressing the same feelings with sounds of euphoria until she slows, muscles relaxing on top of me.

It's the most indescribable sensation to be physically connected in this way with her. I didn't know sex would increase our emotional connection, but it's like the strings lacing us together are being stretched and tightened every moment our bodies are fused.

She slowly lifts off of me, collapsing on the driver side.

As I come back down to reality, I reach down onto the floorboard for her clothes, worried she'll be exposed to strangers as the concert starts to end.

"So, why are you here?" she asks, not looking at me as she grabs the bra.

"I...my parents tried to set me up with someone." I'm zipping myself up as I talk.

She continues wiggling into her tight jeans. "And?" she asks.

I sigh, the ugly feeling in my chest growing. "And...I didn't meet her, but I knew I wouldn't like her." I stretch my arm over the back of the seat, turning to face her. "Because she's not you."

She's leaning back, looking out the window as people start to filter into their cars.

I reach down to grab her ankle, placing her foot on my knee. Her shoes don't look comfortable, so I fasten the strap across the top loosely.

"Aren't you afraid of what your parents think of me?" Her voice is small as she slowly faces me.

I pause, the other heel in my hand. "They're...they aren't horrible people. But they're wrong about you. I can't fathom how you felt, facing their judgment. I'm so sorry you had to deal with that. I swear I didn't know they said anything."

I start to strap the other shoe on, holding her feet on my lap. Guilt twinges inside me.

"I...I knew what they'd think, seeing you. This is horrible to say, Harley, and I hate myself for it. I judged you when I first met you, too, unfairly, and I'll never be able to tell you how sorry I am."

My hands are wrapped around her ankles, my thumb caressing the skin.

I can't look at her face as I continue, "You're nothing like what I first thought. I'd been taught...I've always thought beautiful girls like you were

just a stumbling block. A seductress trying to pull me under dark waters into sin. And I have stumbled...but it's not your fault. You can't help that I'm enraptured by you. I'll never only want you for one thing—I swear that to you. And if you give me the chance, I'll spend the rest of my life proving that your worth is so much more than skin deep.”

Her eyes have been studying me in the shadows. “Your mom...thinks I’m a harlot,” she says, and I’m not surprised.

I grip the edge of the seat, taking calming breaths. “We...I talked to them. I told them we were together. They don’t...approve. But they don’t really know you. They don’t deserve to.”

I finally tilt my head up to face her. Her eyes are shining in the headlights of the line of cars pulling out. She licks her swollen lips, eyelids drooping down.

“Well...nobody’s perfect...” She leans her head to the side, resting it on my arm stretched over the seat. “I just...I can’t take you from your family like that.” She turns her face to kiss my forearm. “I also can’t let you go.”

Her legs are still stretched over my lap, but I nudge her closer.

“I can’t let you go either,” I whisper as my hand comes up to cradle her cheek. “Don’t make me...stay with me. Forgive me, forgive them. I don’t have to work on the farm if I can’t have you. We don’t even have to go see them for holidays. I want you to be my family.”

She whimpers, a tear threatening to spill over. “But I’ve been horrible to you.” Her voice cracks.

“You can never do anything to make me stop loving you. Ever,” I quickly reassure her, drawing her even closer. She’s nearly in my lap now.

“I know you’re in pain. I know you’ve lost the only family you ever had. You aren’t going to lose me.” I struggle to find the words to say, hoping

she'll understand my ramblings.

“My world was shattered when I met you. You made me...weak. From that first moment, I was gone for you. Your smile makes me feel like...like existing without you would be worse than death. The draw I felt toward you scared me more than anything. But now that you're mine, I'll never be able to move on from you. I know that for a fact. I'd give up anything to make you love me even a tenth of how much I love you.” I heave out a sigh, relieved to have finally spilled my guts to her. “Giving up my family, the farm—none of it means anything in comparison to what it would do to me to give you up.”

Staring at her while I tear my heart from my chest and hand it to her, she doesn't move. Then, she's leaning forward, pressing a wet kiss to my lips.

“In that case...I guess they're gonna have to get used to having me around.” She smiles, and it's the brightest, most stunning sight in the world.

Epilogue

Adam

Four Months Later

The sky is my favorite shade of blue, reflecting my love's eyes. She's clinging to my arm as the first warm breeze of the spring floats into the open windows of my truck. She's got a smile on her face, lashes resting on her cheeks. We're cruising down an old country dirt road about an hour north of Ole Tex.

When the signs for Oak Hill, Texas, start to flash by, I nudge her with a kiss. "We're here."

She wasn't really asleep. She sits up, observing the luscious fields of emerald and violet.

"This is the winery capital of Texas. There are vineyards stretching for hundreds of miles, and they supply wine to the entire state and most of the surrounding ones." I can't help but smile, looking down at my beautiful girlfriend.

Her eyes are wide, but she doesn't speak.

My side is aching, but I don't touch it. We finally pull into our destination, a field of bluebonnets stretching for acres around us.

"Let's walk for a bit," I suggest, unable to stop grinning.

She turns to me, shaking her head as we get out.

"We don't even know who owns this," she says, stretching her legs in a perfect, dainty cream-colored sundress. It's shorter than I would like, but that just means I get to look at more of her legs.

"I do," I say, reaching out my hand for her. She grabs it, following me into the field of violet.

My phone starts to ring, and I curse myself for not silencing it. The screen shows my dad's name flashing, and I'm about to deny it when Harley waves at me.

"Answer it. You've been dodging him too long."

She walks ahead of me, and my stomach sinks. This isn't how this moment was supposed to go.

"Hey, Dad. I can't talk long," I say into the old plastic.

He clears his throat. "That's okay, Adam. Your mom's here."

Her voice sounds a little quieter. "Hey, honey. It's Mom."

"Hey, Mom," I say, hoping they make whatever it is quick.

"Son, we...wanted to invite you and Harley over for Easter Sunday lunch in a few weeks."

As soon as he finishes, my mom pipes up, "Yes, we'd love to have you. If you come a day early, we can take her to pick apples in the orchard on Saturday."

My mouth is open as I watch her floating through the state flowers, like a dream suspended over violet water.

“I—I’ll have to talk to her about it. Thank you for the invitation,” is all I can manage, but a tiny burst of hope has flared inside my chest.

Maybe they’ve come around. Maybe they want to get to know her.

“Tell her we want to meet her again. Tell her...please just tell her we want her to be here. With you, Adam.” My mom’s voice is a little strained as she says it.

I force out a response, “I will, Mom. I’ll tell her. Thanks for calling.”

I flip the phone closed, looking up to see that she’s disappeared. I run forward, panic licking my veins. Seconds later, I see a squished section of the flowers. My heart rate starts to slow, a smile forming on my face.

I lie down next to her, nuzzling her neck. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Her fingers are playing with the collar of my flannel.

I stare into her electric-blue eyes for a few blissful moments.

“How’s your side?” she asks, pulling up my shirt.

The ink is dark, my skin bleeding slightly. It’s a type of Medusa, but instead of snakes for hair, she has green vines curling around my rib cage. Tiny butterflies in a rainbow of fuchsia, lilac, and blue are fluttering throughout them.

“It’s fine, a little sore. What about yours?”

She smiles at me, closing her eyes. “I’ve gotten a bazillion of these, Farm Boy. A few vines and butterflies were nothing. I was glad you were there to hold my hand though.” She lets out a sigh of contentment, ebony hair fanning out among the flowers, making her look like she has them woven into her dark tresses.

“Guess what.”

“Hmm?”

Her eyes are still closed. I know her counselor advises her to spend as much time with nature and Jesus as she can. She's made miles of progress with her panic attacks.

"We were invited to Easter lunch." I hold my breath waiting for her response.

Her ocean eyes pop open. "By...your mom?"

I nod slowly, watching her.

"Well...I guess I'll have to learn how to make deviled eggs." She starts to smile, which turns into a laugh.

"Guess what else," I reach into my pocket. I can't wait anymore.

"You brought brownies?" she jokes, grabbing my arm and sitting up.

My girl can hardly go a few hours without a sugar fix. Her laughter fades as the diamond shimmers in the sunlight.

"Harley Kain, I want to see you smile for the rest of my life. Will you spend the rest of your life with me?" I hold up the little violet velvet box, matching the flowers we're surrounded by. "Also, to sweeten up the deal, I bought you this vineyard," I tack on, just to make it harder for her to say no.

Her eyes couldn't possibly get wider as she drops her jaw. I've made good money, working on my family farm since I was twelve.

"It has three fields of flowers like this one. It has a cute little windmill and a creek that flows during the rainy season. We could name it Buttercup's Vineyard or—" I stop as she tackles me, pushing me back onto the soft ground.

She starts to pepper my face with frantic kisses, trailing up and down my neck and jawline, finally reaching my lips. Her hands are roaming all over me, and I do the same to her flawless form.

“You never...answered,” I force out, trying to keep her still as she straddles me. The excitement growing below my waist is impossible to hide.

She finally stops moving, biting into her lower lip and trying not to smile.

“Yes,” she whispers, her eyes drawing mine in.

“Yes?”

“Yes! Yes, yes...” She’s reaching for my zipper.

I try to move away from her hand, but she’s determined.

“Now?” I ask, even as my skin starts to heat.

“Now. Right now. I love you so much.”

I finally let her, and she’s dipping her head lower.

“I...I love you more.” I suck in a breath as she drives me insane.

She pauses for a moment.

“What about kids?” she asks, and I briefly wonder why we have to talk about this *now*.

“Uhh, do you want kids?” I ask.

“I think...with you, I could have a few. But not, like, ten.”

I laugh out loud as I sit up, cradling her face in my hand. “Okay, deal, way less than ten,” I say, pulling her in for another kiss.



Also By MJ Hendrix

Falling For Temptation is my debut novel!

If you're interested in Book 2 of the **Good Ol' Boys Series**, Levi and Kenna's Story, you can find the pre-order link for it [here](#) or on my website.

Refusing To Fall publication date is anticipated to be sometime in Nov-Dec 2021 (the date in Amazon Kindle is a placeholder until the official date can be announced).

Here's the blurb:

Orbiting a million miles out of my league, popular Kenna Davis is the last girl on the planet an invisible guy like me can ever be with.

I'm a science nerd with exactly zero experience with women, especially ones that can reel in every single guy on our college campus with her perfect smile and intoxicating personality.

What happens the first time I get a glimpse of her flawless skin is something I hope no one ever finds out about. After *the incident* I'm certain her opinion of me is not favorable.

It doesn't help my growing desire that she's dating my

roommate/best friend. He's a better match for her anyway, considering my issues with socializing and her penchant for sorority events. I'm not the guy for Kenna.

I'm just her tutor.

But something tells me if I refuse to fall for her, I could be in for a lifetime of regret.



If you're reading this after September 2021, there is already a book out in another series filled with romance, intrigue, and a touch of mystery to hold you over!

Click [here](#) to pre-order my next release, **BIGSHOT: A Billionaire Ex-Navy Seal Romance**, or on find it on my website under the **Take A Shot Series** tab under **Books**. It will be available in ebook and paperback format.

Here's the blurb:

I needed a night out to forget my troubles after I got fired. I never would've hooked up with a stranger if I'd known he'd be my billionaire boss two days later.

The worst part is that he doesn't remember my name...or face, apparently. I'm just a girl who wanted a drama-free gig grabbing coffee for the big shot CEO.

Right when I thought it couldn't rain any harder on my parade, a tall, sleek supermodel waltzed into the office with

a tiny iceberg on her left hand, talking about wedding plans with Mr. Bigshot.

Honestly, I don't ask for much. I just needed a job to pay the bills, support my wine habit and my little green pet, Speckles.

The next few weeks drag me through a fight for survival after a masked man breaks into my apartment and tries to *kill* me. I wasn't that girl who grew up craving excitement. My dreams have always been simple- become a children's book illustrator, and live happily ever after with a nice guy, preferably with a steady job.

Getting mixed up with billionaires, supermodels, assassins, and government secrets labeled CLASSIFIED wasn't in my five year plan.

I can't tell you how, but I can assure you this is a no-cheating HEA ending story.

You can find all my books on my [Amazon profile](#) or my website, www.mjhendrix.com.

About Author & Social Links

Mj Hendrix is addicted to cheap wine and books with happy endings.

She loves when a strong, sexy hero is brought to his knees by an independent woman he never saw coming.

Mj began crafting love stories when they kept crawling out of her head, needing an eternal place of rest. She does her best writing while sipping on a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon and listening to Christ Stapleton.

There's a rumor that she read so many hours a day as a child that her parents would have to ground her from her books. As an adult, her reading time is only hindered by writing and her two mini humans.

She resides with her family in a big white house in Texas.



You can keep up with Mj and her writing/publishing journey through social media.

She's most active on [TikTok](#) and [Instagram](#).

Search @mjhendrixwrites on both platforms if you are reading this in print format.

Find Mj's books on [Goodreads](#) to add them to your TBR list.

To subscribe to her mailing list for major updates like a new book coming out, click [here](#). Or go to www.mjhendrix.com/connect.

View her website at www.mjhendrix.com.

Join her reader group [here](#), or search 'Mj Hendrix Wino Readers' on facebook.

Acknowledgments

If I could choose only one person to mention here, it would have to be my husband. Without his constant reassurance and encouragement, this story would never have been finished. When I decided to write a book, he was the first one to deflect every negative feeling and inclining of self doubt that plagued my mind. It was a big job, almost as big as writing the book itself.

Thank you for your love, your listening ear, even your attempt at helping me brainstorm (which was really just me rambling until I worked it out). Thank you for letting me sneak away to type words on a page in solitude for so many hours. Thank you for listening to me rant and whine about how hard it was and how no one would ever read it, never failing to respond with a, 'you're going to be succeed, I know you are'. I love you to the ends of the earth and back again for all you have done to be my behind-the-scenes pit crew. I love you most.

Next up is my sister, AKA my eternal hype man. She was always my first call when my anxiety began to take over and dominate my confidence. She was the one to say, 'you'll never succeed if you never try'. She was the one to combat the voices trying to bring me down, inside and out of my head. She wasn't only a supporter, she was a fearless defender of my dreams, never once doubting my ability.

Thank you, sis. I never would have had the guts to hit 'publish' without your Theodore Roosevelt quotes and bad review comedy skits. Your belief

and insistence that I can't please everyone but that doesn't mean my voice shouldn't be heard, was a key aspect of my determination to continue fighting for this dream. Of all the voices, some good and some bad, your voice was the loudest. Your voice propelled me forward to become not only a writer- but a published author. I love you five.

When I began this writing journey I quickly realized that those in my life that loved me and had good intentions would not be enough to see me through to my success. I needed other writers to come alongside me and tell me the hard things that needed improvement, ultimately making my book the best version of itself that it could be.

Jenn and Lisa, that was y'all. Your critiques, alpha-beta-developmental reading was the ultimate kick start for me. You are both incredible writers yourselves. Working with you to pull each other through the slow parts, the parts that felt like my feet were suctioned in a pit of mud, was not only enjoyable but also critical for my book to be ready for the eyes of my readers. Thank you for you the impromptu zoom meetings that always went on longer than expected. Thank you for your time, your honesty, and the motivation you filled me with almost daily. You are more than my writing group now, you are my close friends.

This book would be nothing without my editor, Jovana. Thank you for working with me to whip this book into shape! Your attention to detail is incredible.