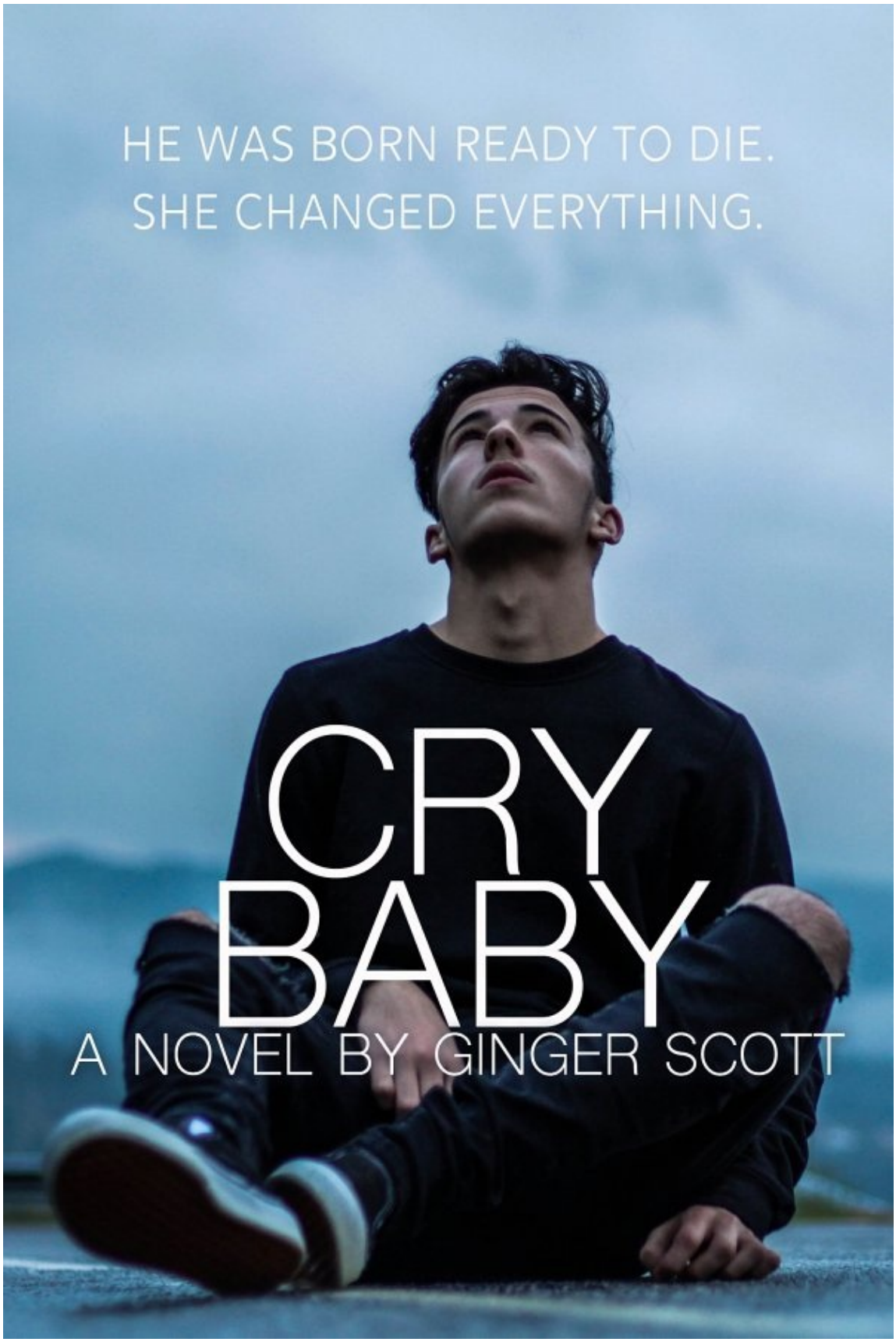

HE WAS BORN READY TO DIE.
SHE CHANGED EVERYTHING.
CRY BABY
A NOVEL BY GINGER SCOTT


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Ginger Scott

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For Tim.
Because you believe in me something fierce.
Must be the love talkin'.

PROLOGUE

People don’t question a kid. Even if they did, I’m not really who they’re worried about. They’re worried about the guys with tats on their faces and angry eyes. Funny thing: those are the last people they should fear around here. It’s the smiles they should be afraid of. I’ve seen men laugh while they kick someone’s face in—just so they could steal his car.

I thought I almost got caught last weekend. There was an older lady sitting on the bench next to me waiting on her husband to get out of the bathroom at the theater. She asked me if I liked the movies, and I shrugged because Dub doesn’t like me to talk too much.

I should have talked to her, though…said something that scared her, maybe, because she kept watching me after that. Dub knocked while she was still sitting on the bench, and when I stood up to open the exit door, I felt her body shift to stop me. One look at the boss and the crew, and I saw her hand fall away. Lady didn’t step off fast enough, though, and Dub…he got all up in her face, staring at her while she walked backward in her ugly shoes. Ha. She almost backed up into the men’s room. We all laughed about it on our way into the movie theater, but later that night, he pulled me into a corner right outside the mall and grabbed the center of my T-shirt collar in his fist, twisting until it started to cut into my neck, and told me to make sure nobody was watching me work next time.

Dub’s like my dad, only he isn’t my dad. My dad’s in prison. Dub says he did something stupid and got caught, so everything he teaches me is to make sure I don’t end up there like my pops. I don’t mess up much; not like my friend Paul.

He gets in trouble a lot, so everyone quit giving him important things to do. He got caught shoplifting the last time he worked the movie theater door with me. He stole candy because he was hungry. I told him not to, but he never listens to me. Dub burned the top of his hand with a cigarette the next day, said it was so he wouldn't forget. Paul just laughed and laughed the whole time his skin was melting away. He didn't cry until he hid in my room after. That's when they started calling him Joker, because everything's funny to him. That's what he wants them to think, at least.

I let Paul help me sometimes, because I feel bad and I can tell he wants to prove that he can do things without messing up. He only does the little things with me, though, like when we have to watch houses or make sure that The Tribe guys don't sell on our basketball court. The Tribe takes up the other side of Sixty-First Street, but they don't have a park or a good place to hang out. That's their problem, though.

Dub says I was born to take over his crew one day. When I do, I'm going to make Paul someone important. He would never stab me in the back. I trust him like a brother. That's how Dub trusted my dad. He says that my dad is good at keeping his mouth shut. I asked him what that meant once, and he said that my dad's in prison because people want to break up our gang, but they can't do it if my dad doesn't tell them how. He's never coming home because of his love for all of us. He'd rather die there then get us in any trouble.

I'm just like him. I would die there too.

There were a few people hanging out near the bench tonight, so I started to hold my stomach, moan and pretend like I was going to get sick. The people around me were all on dates, waiting for their movies to start—rich white kids with their own cars and shit. They had plans, and a ten-year-old with old clothes and brown skin was not worth their time; so they moved away and pretended they didn't notice me. My plan worked, because nobody's been around my area but me for the last five minutes.

My palm on the exit door bar, I roll my other hand over to check the time on my phone. We don't send texts—no record that we were ever here. Dub picks a movie and gives us all a time, and everyone does their job. If someone doesn't,

then they're out. And nobody wants to be out of the Fifty-Seven. Not when we come from this neighborhood. People who are out die young and broke. I know that at least if I'm in, I've got my brothers to watch my back.

I count the seconds—six, five, four…

Pushing the bar in slowly, I open the exit enough for Dub to hook his fingers inside and slide his body through the small opening. It's just me and him tonight. We don't speak, but he presses his hand on top of my head, pushing my hat lower over my eyebrows. My mouth rises on one side as I push the brim of my hat back up and meet his stare in response. That's his way of telling me I did good this time.

My real name is Tristan Lopez, but Dub calls me Cry Baby. He says it's funny because I never really cry at all, which is true—I don't. I was afraid when he started calling me that last year that the others would make fun of me, but Paul said nobody would dare, because Dub gave me the name. He was right.

I follow him into the theater, just a kid going to the movies with his big brother. That's the story we tell people by the way we look—smiles, eye contact with people, as if we paid to get in here just like they did. My baggy jeans sag like his, but where his arms are marked by black, twisted numbers and letters, mine are covered by my dad's old flannel shirt. It hangs long over my knuckles, covering my fingers completely. A cigarette burn stains the front pocket, a charred hole like a bullseye in the center.

We pause at the back of the theater, behind the seats, so Dub can find the right row. He looks for less crowded spaces, no "extra eyes" to watch him work, but public enough that if anyone sees something they won't want to believe it.

"Drug deals don't happen right here in the open like this. Not in Brookfield."

The money comes in, and the bags go out. People get what they pay for, and if they don't pay enough, some of the other guys on the crew find a way for them to make it up.

I learn things when I watch him work.

The screen is bright with gunfire, a preview from the next Jason Foreman movie.

"Look at that fool hold a gun like he knows what to do with it," Dub

whispers, leaning into me and bending down. I can smell the alcohol on his breath. Faint, probably from yesterday.

I laugh and watch as two cars roar down an alley on the screen, one of the guys hanging from the passenger window and firing at the tires of the car in the front. It flashes to a scene where Jason Foreman—who's supposed to be some tough crime boss in New York or Boston or wherever—has the detective dude on the ground, begging for his life. He kicks the guy and lets him leave, his Glock pointed down at the guy's feet while he runs back to his car.

A real man wouldn't let him leave. He wouldn't point his gun down at the ground either. He would show him who the boss is and make him stare at the dark hole encased with metal and wait long enough for him to imagine the smoke that could spill from it with just…one…*click.*

Dub's elbow brushes mine again, and I turn to him. His arm lifts slowly, and his lips crease on either side as they stretch into a tight, straight line. His finger pointing at the millionaire on the screen, one of his eyes squints. As his arm straightens, his fingers curl. If he were holding his piece right now, Jason Foreman would be dead.

Dumb fool. Nobody does gangster like Dub Lewis.

CHAPTER ONE

SEVEN YEARS LATER

Tristan

Joker's been throwing that stupid racquetball against our garage door for twenty minutes straight. He's pissed because I won't let him smoke out here, but my mom doesn't ask for much and honestly, that shit's so bad for him anyhow.

The repetitive sound has lulled us both into a trance. At least three cars have driven by my house, and I don't know what color any of them were. That's dangerous—not noticing details? I snap from my hazed state and snag the ball mid-air just before it dents my already-broken garage door one more time.

"Come on, man. That thing's busted anyways. It won't even shut all the way." He rolls his eyes a little and his tongue pops out a short tick.

"That sound is like death," I deadpan before tossing the ball into the neighbor's yard.

Joker winces then rolls his head until his eyes meet mine.

"You're a dick."

I don't respond. My ass is numb from sitting in this metal chair. Dub told us to wait out front for him, but he was supposed to be here almost an hour ago. I don't think he's coming.

"Just text him, man," I say, leaning forward and resting elbows on my knees.

Joker palms his phone and runs his fingertips in circles over the screen nervously.

He’s turning eighteen in three days, which means he gets jumped and becomes official. It doesn’t have to happen on his actual birthday—just near it. I could tell when he showed up at my front door this morning that he thought it was going to happen today. Dub wouldn’t pull up with a crew here, though. My mom sees too much, and she doesn’t trust him.

She shouldn’t. Those drugs she went to rehab for when I was eleven came from his crew. They strung her out for most of my life, and it took her years to break away from the pull. When my dad died in prison, she found God. I stayed with my uncle Alonzo until she came home from the rehab joint. She’s been clean for six years. Goes to church every single day. Works there, even. I know a part of her wants to try to save me, but she can’t. I sold myself to this life when I was a kid, blinded by these criminals I idolized and the stories they told me about my dad. The only way I can shield her from this part of my life is to draw this loose line where I keep the bad stuff outside of our home—sometimes, keeping it out feels impossible.

I’ve got five months until I turn eighteen, but the beating is a formality for me. I’d give anything to trade places with Joker. Not because I want to hurry to my fate, but because he still has a choice. It’s a faint one, but it’s more than I will ever have. If he wants out, all he has to do is survive the worst and wear a brand. My only way out is to die. There are tougher lives than mine, though, so whatever.

The thump announces Dub’s car before it rounds the corner, and Joker’s face flushes with relief that he didn’t send a text. His nervous ticks are all still here though in anticipation, but his shoulders relax when he counts only two guys in the car. When they beat someone, there are a minimum of seven members who participate. Those are the rules, and nobody knows why. Young men made them up years ago just to prove how tough they were. Nobody questions it. If someone does, they just take a beating.

The passenger window on his Camaro rolls down as his wheels slow, and Dub leans over the center console, into the guy sitting next to him. I don’t

recognize him, but he must be someone important to be with Dub. He's covered in tats, some scribbled over older ones, like a messy story fighting to be rewritten. The dude's high; I can tell. I've read his story before. It's tragic and boring.

"What are you pussies up to?" The guy sitting next to him coughs out a mixture of pot smoke and laughter. I breathe the scent in. I don't smoke it, but the smell always soothes me. I'm sure I've been smelling it since I slept in a crib.

"Just waiting on your ass is all," I bark back. Joker hates it when I talk to Dub like this, and the tension crawls right back up his spine, shortening his neck.

Dub's lip ticks up, his eyes hidden behind black sunglasses. The bottom of the cross tattoo next to his eye peeks out from underneath the side of the rims. He's nineteen years older than me, but he still pretends he's my age. Mentally, we're probably switched. He wears the same baggy clothes he's worn since he unofficially adopted me when my dad went away. He's obsessed with hats, always flat-brimmed and cocked to the side. His initials—DL—are stitched on the right. Today's hat is white with gold lettering. The diamond on the front is his own design. He said it means riches, which is funny because he's constantly broke and in need of money fast.

"How was school, preppy?" He teases me as he throws the bag of weed at my chest. I catch it like a poorly thrown football and awkwardly slide it into the front pocket of my hoodie.

"Same," I shrug.

It wasn't the same at all, really. I was too good somewhere along the way, and it got me noticed. By ten o'clock, I found myself in my counselor's office—I didn't even know I *had* a counselor. Sheryl Beaumont must be one of those teacher types I've seen in the movies that take jobs working at shitty schools like mine because they want to inspire kids at the bottom to do better and "pull themselves up by the bootstraps" like every politician says they should. She's a pretty, blonde, white lady in a school filled with every color of poor and some of the most violent fights that break out in the city. She called me in to talk about college, because apparently, I can go. I don't know how she hasn't had her

BMW jacked yet.

“You think you can move that shit by Friday?” Dub must need cash. He only gives me a deadline when he needs money for something.

I roll my head side to side.

“I dunno, maybe?” I can feel Joker turn his head to look at me. If it was him that Dub threw the pot at, he would have said “yes” no matter what. He would have been lying, though. We can’t deal at school anymore. There are cameras everywhere since someone shot a gun in the main hallway. They ripped our lockers out, so we have to carry our shit with us wherever we go, and there are random bag checks all the time. We sell at the courts, but the serious buyers don’t come around until Friday and Saturday nights. Crowds are better places to hide.

“I need half by Friday night. You think you can do that?” Dub must be desperate.

“Yeah, we got this,” Joke pipes in without giving me a chance to be real. I hate it when he does this, and he knows I’m pissed. He takes a casual step out of my reach after he speaks.

“Good. See you after hours.” Dub nods once, like a period on his sentence, then pulls away.

I wait less than a second after he turns to slap the back of Joker’s neck.

“What? I’ve gotta prove my worth, man. I don’t want to have to do it some other way.” He rubs the pink spot on his skin with his palm as he sways on his feet and puts more distance between us. All I can do is shake my head and spit on the ground.

“Fuck,” I mumble to myself as I move toward the house.

Joker actually thinks if he cashes out a couple thousand dollars in pot for Dub in four days that he won’t have to do all of the other things they make the new initiates do to prove their loyalty—like stabbing rivals or narcs with hunting knives and dropping them off at busy street corners to fight for their lives. I don’t tell him how many times I was in the backseat of the car when Dub put someone through the test. And I know he can’t handle the reality of what happens when it all goes wrong. Joker likes the fantasy of playing gangbanger.

The minute he has to help bury the body of some dude who bled out before the crew could drop him on a corner is when his eyes will be totally clear. I can't warn him. The reality of our world is something he just has to see to understand, and by then, it'll be too late to run.

Unless you're me, and your dad and his best friend started this gang, so you grew up with your eyes wide open. Sometimes there really isn't much difference between a gift and a curse, I guess.

"Come on, we'll just go to the courts every night. We can skip after lunch, too." My friend sounds like a child trying to talk their parent into taking them to the circus. He has no concept of responsibilities and consequences.

"And then they'll report us, and Larry will have to come to our houses," I respond automatically. Larry's the school resource officer. He's armed more than most, and he's been given a lot of authority because of the problems at South High.

"Ah, it's just once. We haven't skipped in two months," Joker says as he trails me inside and to my room at the back of the house. I don't answer him immediately, and I know that's making him anxious. It should. He should have been anxious before he opened his big, fat mouth. It might have kept him from promising something that I'm going to end up having to work my ass off to make happen.

I grab my drawstring bag and push my basketball in as I stumble around the messy, clothes-strewn floor of my bedroom to find my Jordans. If we're going to get two grand to Dub by Friday night, then we can't waste any time. We've gotta live at the courts until the lights go out. When I finally spot my shoes under the clothes I wore yesterday, I pull my Vans off with the front of each foot on the heels and glance up to meet my friend's excited eyes.

Yes, Joker. Daddy is taking you to the circus, but we're not going your way.

"I'm not skipping class," I say, and his smile loses some of its brightness. "That's the only way I'm helping, and you know you're the one who's on the hook for this. You made the promise, and you know how that works with him."

Joker nods, his lips hung open, wanting to beg me to skip one more time, but he knows better. And he knows he can't do any of this without me.

I hold out my fist for him to pound because as pissed as I am, I still love him like a brother. His knuckles hit mine as I wriggle my left foot into my untied basketball shoe.

"I'll meet you there," I nod at him as he backs out of my room. He does the same in return then takes off on foot for his house to change out of his jeans and meet me for ball.

Sometimes I wonder if Joker wants out of this—if he regrets making friends with me in third grade. The Fifty-Seven probably would have had him anyway. He's got two things they recruit—he lives here in Miller County, and his last name is Contreras. The Fifty-Seven doesn't openly discriminate—other than requiring members to be male—but if someone's Latino, they've got a better shot at moving up and being a force in our neighborhood if they're part of the gang. It's mostly respect for my dad, Dominic Lopez, who was sent here from Honduras as a kid to escape the gangs that were forming. He grew up and made his own. *Joke's on my grandparents who thought they were setting him free.*

Dub's mom was white and born and raised in Miller, like mine, and his dad was from Chicago's Southside, where he ran one of Cook County's most notorious Black gangs by the time he was fifteen. His dad was shot and killed during a robbery gone bad, so his mom ran back to Miller, thinking a suburb in the Midwest wouldn't hold much trouble. It was pretty quiet here until the factory shut down and home values plummeted. The Fifty-Seven was destined to happen: ripe conditions and two bored and angry teenaged boys was all it took.

The drug dealing didn't start until they'd been operating on the streets for about a year. The goal was never being rich—it was about power. Those of us who live on streets like ours, where the city doesn't bother to fix gaping holes forming down the center, it's hard not to look for power somewhere else. Even now, Dub has us bring in enough to pay the bills and keep him—and us—out on the streets and to keep others away from what's ours. I try not to let myself think about it because when I do, I realize how meaningless it all is.

Somewhere, outside these invisible walls, is a great, big world where people invent cures for disease at the same time others threaten to wage wars with bombs that can wipe out continents. We play with knives and put bullets into

cars and walls. What's the point?

My ball feels like home in my hands. Our school team sucks—not that I could ever try out for a sport. Sometimes, when I let myself really go there, I realize how much I'm already in prison, living like this. There are so many things I can't do. It took everything I had not to burst out in laughter when the school counselor told me I could go to college.

Like hell I can. My college is here, under Professor Lewis and his hunting knife and automatic rifle and shallow graves out in the woods where bodies rot, somehow still not found by authorities searching for them.

"You're leaving again? You just got home." My mom punctuates her words with the clanking pans she's pulling from the bottom cabinet.

"I've been home, Ma. Paul was here, so we sat outside." I wish I had something to busy myself with so I didn't have to meet her stare right now—the one that sees right through me.

"You should have asked him to stay for dinner," she says in a raspy voice, her eyes drawn in just enough to show the worry.

"He'll eat at home. Ma, I gotta go. We're meeting at the courts in five." I reach forward and grab an apple from the bowl she keeps on the counter, but before my hand retracts, she grips my wrist.

"What?" I hate the way I sound; like a moody teenager caught in a lie. That's exactly what I am, though. It's all so fake—she knows why I go to the courts at night, and I know why she wants me to invite Paul inside. She will never stop trying to save us.

It's a Bible study night. Within the hour, our crappy living room—yellowed by mismatched lamps and burnt-orange tinged carpet—will be filled with moms from the neighborhood all brimming with hope that they can pray the sins of their husbands and sons away. I don't make fun of her faith. I envy the good in it. It's saved her life for sure. I just can't be in this house to witness it. It's like pouring holy water on the Devil.

"You should let me make you a sandwich," she says, recoiling her hand. I read all of the things she didn't say in her eyes, and that pinch in my gut strikes a familiar pain. I let her down every time I leave this house.

“I’ll be fine. Besides, I love apples.” My teeth crunch through the skin and juice sprays on my chin. I wipe it away with my forearm, then lean toward my mom to kiss her cheek. It trembles, and I’m never sure if I imagine that or if it’s real when I feel it. I think maybe it’s both of our nerves manifesting.

I tuck my ball against my hip, drape my earbuds over my neck, and shove my house keys in my right pocket along with my wallet and phone. The front door slams to a close behind me, and I push the security gate in until I hear it *click*. My mouth covers half of the apple as I round our house, and I chew down a large bite as I kneel into a squatting position behind the air conditioner. This thing rattles to the point that it’s worked half of the screws loose on the panels. I should probably find a new hiding place for my gun before my mom has a repair guy out. I wrap my hand around the metal and make a mental note to stash this somewhere else when I get home tonight. For now, though, it’s safely tucked against my lower back in the band of my shorts.

Four more bites of apple and I’ve reached the core, so I toss it into an open trash bin at the end of the street. I pull my earbuds loose from my T-shirt collar and poke the ends in my ears. My fingers glide into position on the ball out of habit, and without pausing, I begin to dribble between my steps, music pounding on the off-beats, my fears perfectly captured by the rap lyrics spilling out.

Empty streets make me nervous, and it’s still and quiet out today. Garages roll down as I walk by, like a post-zombie-apocalypse world. *The sun is almost down so time to go into lockdown mode, people!*

My shadow is long. Sometimes I wonder if it’s trying to run away from me.

I’m lost in the rhythm of my steps, the slap of my fingertips moving the ball down toward the sidewalk. I don’t see her coming. That’s probably what saved her from me. Also, I need to snap out of this, because I can’t *not* see people coming. That’s dangerous.

My mouth hangs open as the fire burns up my belly with that knee-jerk rage that’s been bred inside of me. Thankfully, my gaze glides up her body first, to my ball now gripped between her palms, held against her chest where a well-worn T-shirt drapes over one shoulder and thick brown hair falls over the other. Her lips are moving. She’s speaking, and her eyes—fuck, those are blue like

water—they're waiting for mine to react.

You gotta shoot the rats that tell, or you'll be next, motherfu…

I yank my earbuds loose before the lyrics go on. Those words don't match this face in front of me.

All I can do is stare at her.

"I. Need. Your. Help." She probably spoke to me a few times when I was in my trance and blasting sound in my ears. The way she mocks me, though, speaking slowly…it's ballsy and…well, it's cute.

I glance down at my ball then back up to her eyes.

"Uh, can I have that?" I leave my hands down at my sides while I ask because I want her to give it to me. Maybe a part of me is a little annoyed by the way she asked for help.

She rolls the ball along her fingertips, the weight moving from hand to hand a few times while her tongue presses inside her cheek. Eventually, she pushes the ball into my chest and holds it there until I grab it. I don't know who this girl is, but she's going to get herself in trouble if she treats other people in this neighborhood like that.

"Help? Now?" Her eyebrows lift and her feet shuffle a step or two backward.

I continue to stare, a bit amused, but I also take in the shape of her as she creates more distance between us. Black jeans hug long, toned legs and her gray shirt rides high against her ribs exposing sun-kissed skin and a silver belly-button ring.

"I like your shoes," she says, nodding toward my unlaced Jordans before she turns around, knowing I'll follow.

Thanks doesn't leave my lips, but I think it—and I follow her toward an old pickup truck weighed down with boxes. Half of the truck is a green primer and the other half is gray, either a work in progress or a piece of shit bought at the auction. My mom's car is one of those. Actually, it's *both* of those: a nineteen-year-old Ford that was supposed to be something I worked on with my uncle. We changed the oil once.

"I promised my dad I'd have most of this unpacked by the time he got home, but the bench is in the way and it's heavier than I thought it would be." She

grunts in the middle of her speech as she steps up onto the open tailgate. It's impressive, her stretch. I tuck my ball between two of the boxes on the ground and take a short running start to jump up next to her. Her mouth twists, unimpressed, and she turns her attention toward a stack of weights and a bench press tucked along the right side of the truck bed.

"I can get back here if you can just help me wedge that part out." I wait for her to maneuver her way to the back of the bed then grip one of the bench supports.

"It's heavier than you think, so don't feel like you have to…" I jump down before she finishes and lift my end of the bench in front of my chest. She's right—it's *a lot* heavier than I thought it would be, but I will never admit that out loud.

She shrugs, I think maybe a little impressed. I walk backward lifting most of weight until she's run out of space in the truck. She rests it on the edge of the bed as she leaps down, then we both lower it to the ground a few feet away.

She's panting a little. My forearms are burning. We both walk in small circles to catch our breath, a truck still filled with heavy things looming nearby. It gives me a reason to stay, and I pull my phone from my pocket to check the time. I hate that I have somewhere to be—that there's a time limit right now because my friend wanted to impress a guy that could give two shits about him. Dub won't remember the fact that we got him a few hundred bucks fast. He'll forget it by Tuesday when he needs us to do something else.

"You just move in?" I squint a little, my head cocked to the side trying to look at her against the dipping sun.

Her lips pucker at my question, and I breathe out a light laugh.

"Yeah, I mean *obviously,*" I say, shaking my head.

She climbs back into the truck and lifts a bench press plate in each hand, carrying it toward me. Twenty-five pounders. I can't leave her with all of this on her own, so I take them in my hands and walk toward the center of her oil-stained driveway.

"These going in the garage?" I ask.

"Yeah. Just stack them wherever," she says, two more already propped up at

the edge of the truck for me when I'm done with these.

We work like this through more than a dozen weights, and without even questioning it, we move on to boxes until those are all stacked in the garage too. She flips up the tailgate on the truck when we're done and holds my ball against her hip.

"Whoo!" She wipes away the sweat from her brow and twists her body so our eyes meet again. I can tell her lips are curving up, but I'm so stuck on her eyes that I can only imagine what her smile looks like.

I chuckle again, because I'm nervous, and we've been quiet just a little too long while staring at each other.

"So you ball, yeah?" She's the first to break away our gaze, and her hands nervously shift my ball back and forth again, like she did when we first met—not that I know her name or where she came from. I just know she arrived in this hell. She does not belong here.

"Yeah, but just on the courts two blocks over—right by the playground. I don't play for a team or anything." I shrug, and look from her hands to her face, just as her eyes flit up to mine. She freezes the ball between her palms at my look.

"So, you're like just a rec player, or whatever then?" She starts spinning the ball now in her palm, and her eyes move back to her hands. Her mouth smirks, and I think it's because she knows calling me a rec player is going to dig at that male instinct that lives in my chest. She's right. It does, and I shift my feet and puff my lungs to look a little bigger.

"I guess…I mean we all are. My friends, I mean. We're good, though. Not rec." Despite my stammering, I feel my chest inflating like a fucking peacock, like I have something to prove. But the longer she moves my ball around in her palm with her lips pressed together tightly, hiding a bigger smile, the more I feel like an idiot.

"Yeah, I get it," she says, finally letting me off the hook. Her eyes are still trained on her hands and my ball. She spins it again, this time on the tip of her middle finger, then tosses it up and lets it fall to the ground, bouncing twice before she pushes it toward me. She must play, too.

“Tristan,” I nod in introduction, finally. It takes her a few seconds—a few *very long* seconds—to reply, and that weird feeling takes hold of my chest. I push through it and hold her stare until she speaks again.

“Riley,” she says. “New girl.”

She adds this head waggle and looks up and off to the side after she speaks. I take a glance at her smile this time. Her lips are glossy, and her gum snaps when her tongue presses it into the roof of her mouth.

When her eyes settle on mine again, her cheeks redden—only a little. Before mine do too, my phone vibrates against my thigh. I hold up a finger and answer Joker’s call, dropping the fantasy right here in the driveway that there’s room in my world to even be friends with a girl like this.

“Yeah, I know. I’m on my way,” I say, hanging up before he has a chance to say a word.

A rollercoaster sensation tugs at my insides as I glance up again. Sometimes I just wish…

“I gotta go.” My right shoulder lifts. I shuffle my feet backward, finding it hard to turn around and just leave without…I don’t know…*something.*

“I’ll see ya around,” she says, making it easy.

I nod and feel regret creep up my throat the moment I turn my back to her and begin dribbling with my steps.

“Hey, Tristan!” I gnash my lips and wince, wishing I could just enjoy the sound of her calling out my name. She should know my name.

I keep moving, but I spin on my feet and walk backward.

I should have pretended I didn’t hear her.

“You play guys play up there every night?”

My steps continue. I’m far enough away that I don’t think she can sense the twitch of my eyes and lips, but there’s nothing I can do about the slight pause I make in my response. She wants to come watch, and the courts are not a place for her to be. They’re not a place for anyone, other than me and the regulars and the people who come there to take care of business. I’m supposed to deter her now, to say something that doesn’t make her feel welcome.

Instead, I don’t utter a word. I shrug and nod, my twisted brain somehow

convincing my conscience in this brief second that because I didn’t speak, I didn’t just royally fuck up. But I did. I invited the prey to come play in the lion’s den.

And I did it with a grin.

CHAPTER TWO

Riley

The only chair we have that I can bring outside is the rolling one from my dad's desk. I push it through the back door and sink the wheels deep in the loose dirt to steady it long enough for me to climb up and peek over the brick fence.

"And you're always saying I'm the one with dumb ideas." I laugh to myself and wave my hand behind me to my dad.

"I just got home from school. I've been dying to see what kind of dog it is that they have next door," I say, pushing up on the tips of my toes to try and see the barking beast just on the other side of the bricks. It's barked, pretty much nonstop, since our moving truck rolled in four days ago. "Come give me a boost."

I kick away from the chair before my dad has a chance to talk me out of it and wriggle on my elbows until my weight is held by my shoulder muscles.

"Who's the stubborn one," he says as I feel his hands form a platform under my right foot.

"Thanks," I grunt out, edging my way over the wall just enough to look down and see a fairly muddy poodle.

"Huh," I say with a slight shake in my chest.

"Cujo?" my dad asks.

I twist my neck and nod for him to lower me back to the ground, and I push

off from the wall with his hands at my sides to brace my landing.

“Hardly. I think that dog would like to go to a salon. It’s a poodle,” I say, brows raised high.

“Seriously?” My dad squints, puzzled, then grabs the back of his chair and shakes it loose from the dirt. He wheels it over the rocks and concrete patio, and I help him boost it over the footing of the door until it’s back in the kitchen, near his desk.

I run a paper towel under the sink and clean off the dust from the mess I made; my dad pulls a clean shirt from the top of the laundry basket.

“You don’t have to fold all of this every time,” he says, lowering his eyes to make his point.

My dad’s always been happy to live like a bachelor. My mom was the one who ran the house like an adult—laundry folded, bills paid on time, dishes done right after meals and beds made in the morning. I try to fill that void now that she’s gone, because *I* miss it. My dad hates those little reminders, though, almost as much as he hates her ever since she walked away from our family more than two years ago.

“Last night go okay?” I grab the box of Chex from the cupboard and sit in the all-purpose chair I just dusted, pulling my knee up so I can slouch and twist myself in half circles.

“It’s a job. Pretty much just like the last one,” he says, bending down for me to fix the collar of his shirt. He grabs a handful of Chex from the box in my lap when I do, and I tug down the crinkle in his front chest pocket so his name reads straight.

MICHEAL ROJAS

“How was school?” He mumbles through the dry cereal.

I shrug.

“I spent most of the day at the front office, then with the counselor. They wanted to bus me for some of the classes, but I can’t play sports if I bus. Wouldn’t be back in time.” My dad stares at me, expressionless. He won’t question me, even though I sense his silent lecture about putting grades before basketball. I distract him before he starts.

“You get the dinner I packed in the fridge?” I ask.

My dad’s eyes light up and his grin lifts his pencil-thin mustache. That’s maybe the only chore I picked up from my mom that he still likes—cooking. I experiment when I can’t sleep late at night. Nothing gourmet, and pretty much everything on a budget, but my meals are big and they always revolve around his favorite things. Last night I made meatballs.

“Oh my god, Riles.” His words are mumbled because he took a cold bite. He waves his fork over the half-opened Tupperware lid and finishes chewing. “This is your best. You can just make this every day.”

“You say that about every dinner I make.” I laugh, and he joins in as he closes the lid and tosses his fork in the sink. With a quick glance at the stovetop clock, he moves toward me and bends forward to kiss the top of my head.

“I’ll try to be quiet when I come in,” he says, winking.

I nod as he dashes out the door, but I hope he’s loud when he comes home. My dad works as both a night security guard for the school district main building and a part-time janitor for some apartments on the other side of town. We basically see each other in this little overlap when I get home from school and he wakes up from sleeping away the day. Sometimes, I get to catch him when he comes home in the mornings and on those rare unicorn moments when he has a day off. I don’t tell him this, but I set the alarm on my phone most nights just to make sure I don’t miss him.

A lot of our things are still in boxes, including half of my clothes. Our old house was bigger than this place, and when the bank took it away from us, we tried to hang on to all of our stuff under the illusion that we’d get it back one day and put everything exactly where it was. It’s been two years and four apartments. We still have most of our things—minus some major pieces of furniture that we sold to get our belongings down to fitting in one small moving truck and the pickup.

It takes me a few tries before I guess right and find the box where my basketball shorts live. I feel around for my favorite black pair, then slip out of my jeans and swap out my T-shirt. I test the spot where my dad glued the back heel down on my shoe, and after a dozen or so strides and some hard stops side-

to-side, I'm satisfied. I stuff the house key back into the space on my phone case and grab my ball from the garage—where I still haven't completely set up the weights. I hit the close button on my way out, ducking my head and stepping over the sensor.

The sound of my dribble seems lonely at the end of my driveway. I stall there for a couple of minutes, looking to the other end of my street where Tristan came from. I'm hoping he'll hear the pounding of the ball, and maybe it works like it did when I was younger and someone heard people outside playing. Kids just jumped in, and there was this instant friendship formed. Things haven't worked like that since we were evicted, though. The boys I grew up with knew me. There wasn't this weirdness to overcome. I'm not a kid anymore, and boys who don't know me see something other than a baller. They don't want me to be that girl that they hang out with, and they don't like me on their court.

I think Tristan saw who I am though. He was…nice. He gave me an invite, telling me where to play. I hope he's there. It's easier when knowing someone. I think it works that way if you're a boy or a girl, but it's just a little harder for us chicks to get accepted. I haven't seen a lot of girls my age around the neighborhood. I haven't seen a lot of anyone, really. Maybe they're all at the courts.

Drawing in a full breath, I pull out my phone and open my playlist, turning the volume up high so I can hear it from my pocket. I washed my earbuds on accident before the move, and they pretty much melted into tiny shards of plastic and metal. I kinda like being able to hear, anyhow. My dad lets me go anywhere I want; he trusts me to use my judgment. That means I probably need to hear trouble coming. This neighborhood is a little tougher than our last one. I can tell by the graffiti. There's a difference in what people write on things. I can tell when it's just some kid writing a bad word on a dare. These are initials and numbers. This is territory. I live here too, though—so fuck it.

I make it to the first corner and squint to look down the street. Houses fade into storefronts, then chain-link. I walk a few driveways in to get a better look. It's only an empty dirt lot, though, so I keep on moving down my street until I get to the next corner. The line of houses ends at about the same place here, but

this time I can see patches of grass and one of the hoops inside a fenced area. My steps pick up instinctively, and the closer I get, the less alone the sound of my dribble is. The familiar trash talk hits my ears, and I smile when someone shouts back at his haters after draining what I'm pretty sure was a three. It's not easy to see the lines yet, but he was pretty deep. The court gets clearer with every step I take until the only thing in my way are some passing cars and a two-way road.

I pull my phone out and turn my music off, my steps slowing when Tristan's eyes move my direction. I lift my hand to wave and start to smile but he turns away and slaps hands with some guy behind him before pulling his T-shirt up over his head.

There's a small opening in the fence where I step through and find a spot on the bleachers to set my phone and tuck my ball while I rest my right foot and tighten the laces on my shoe. My heart is pounding more than normal. It's due to a mixture of reasons—I'm new here; Tristan didn't acknowledge me; Tristan took his shirt off; it was kinda hot when he did that; and there's a group of girls sitting a few feet away from me staring at me like I'm the new girl.

Which I am.

"Hey," I say without even flinching as I look up and send my foot back to the ground. Their eyes, all three pairs of them, were waiting for me, as were the judgmental mashed lips, pulled tight at the corners to hold in the thoughts they share inside their heads.

"Who the fuck is this chick?"

That thought comes out a little too loud from the one on the end. It stings, but whatever.

"Riley. I go to South. Just moved here," I say, climbing up to sit on the second tier next to them. Their eyes all flare a touch. This is why I push myself out of my comfort zone, because people want to put others in a box no matter who they are, and when someone refuses their labels and expectations, it shocks the hell out of them. And that…it's fun.

I hold my hand out across the two closest to me, toward the girl on the end who probably wishes she didn't utter that question out loud. She's dressed like one of the girls who works retail at the mall, and her caramel-colored hair twists

in these perfect shiny spirals to her shoulders. Her eyes dip to my palm and she puffs out a laugh before biting the inside of her cheek and shaking her head.

“Lauren,” she says, eyes squinty above bright red lips. She’s amused by me. I don’t fit in her box.

“You go to South?” I focus on Lauren, but I can see the other two looking at one another in my periphery. They had their chance, but Lauren stepped up. Lauren gets to be my friend.

“Sometimes,” Lauren says. Her lips stretch slowly into a broad smile that I match with one of my own.

“Right. Well, nice to meet you, Lauren. Maybe one of the days you’re there, we can meet up. You can show me the shortcuts and give me the scoop on who not to piss off by being late to class.”

She laughs a little louder, and my pulse starts to even out as I get more comfortable.

“Girl, there are no shortcuts at South. It’s just one block of prison cells next to the other, with whiteboards and desks is all. And as for pissing people off, everyone at South is pissed; so you’re screwed. Teachers are pissed they got placed there; students are pissed they have to be there. Even the smart ones who give a shit about what comes after South hate that there’s nowhere better to go.” A short sigh escapes her when she’s done, and I’m pretty sure that means that last bit she told me is personal. Lauren’s one of the smart ones, and she’s pissed.

I like her.

I pull my ball up from the gap between the second bleacher row and the first, rolling it along the metal between my feet with my fingertips. My eyes follow the game, which isn’t very organized but the play is pretty decent. They’re playing four on five, so there’s room for me to step in. I just need to find the open.

Tristan makes a few shots, and more than once, his eyes glance my direction. The first two or three times, I nod and smile, sometimes lifting my hand, but the more the game continues without his acknowledging I’m here, the less I react to his presence until it feels like I never met him at all. In fact, after about thirty minutes of sitting on my ass and watching him and his friends trade poor shots

and insults, a part of me starts to hate him. Not the bare-chested, muscular part with low-hanging shorts and the band of his boxers peeking through. Or the part where his dark hair falls into his eyes just before he slicks it back with his fingers; it looks kinda soft and maybe a little wavy. Or the part of his mouth that leaves this *C*-shaped wrinkle on both cheeks when he laughs. But the rest of him —the part that refuses to say hello—I'm starting to hate that part.

I begin to dribble the ball along the metal, and it shakes the bleachers enough that it drives Lauren and her two friends to their feet and out onto the court. It breaks the game up, which gives me my shot; I stand and move the ball between my stride a couple times before holding it against my hip. Tristan stays on the other end of the court, talking to some guy whose head is shaved and whose shoes actually look older and more worn than mine.

While everyone grabs water bottles or waits at the fountain—lips close to the metal as they try to suck the water out—I dribble out toward the three-point spot where I saw Tristan make a shot a minute or two before. I pause there for a few long seconds, dribbling and waiting until Tristan glances my way again. I pretend not to notice, giving my attention over to the rim and the chains that dangle heavily underneath.

My shot is always smooth. My dad taught me the right touch when I was strong enough to get the ball up ten feet in the air, and there is no panic or rush in my body as I take my time and feel the rhythm in my hands. I jump just enough to get the perfect angle and sink the ball effortlessly through the rim without the clanking echo from the boys' game before.

I want to smile, but I play it cool and jog toward my ball, expecting to see everyone paying attention. They all must be so impressed.

Glancing up as I dribble back out, though, the only eyes on me are Lauren's. Tristan has purposely positioned himself with his back toward me, which twists that place between my ribs where I feel…something. I think I'm mad. There's a word on his neck, inked in some swirling font, but not a professional tattoo because the letters are uneven. It starts with an *A*, so I guess it's ASSHOLE.

I get to my spot a little quicker this time, and I don't pause before shooting. The ball sinks through again, the chains rustling like a windchime. My shot is so

pretty, yet none of these assholes care. They start to meet up again in the center of the court, so I move in with them—like I belong.

“Hey, we’re switchin’ it up. Tristan…Paul, you got Mikey and DJ.” The guy talking is the tallest on the court, but I watched him take a dozen shots and miss every single one.

“Man, Paul sucks!” someone says, waving his hand at the guy with the shaved head, the one who Tristan stood with in the corner during their break.

“Fuck you, DJ,” Paul bites back, flipping the other guy off as he takes a few steps backward.

Tristan’s back is still to me, but he’s close enough I could tap his shoulder. I start to, but then my intuition kicks in. That rotten feeling settles into my stomach. He’ll just pretend we never met—right to my face. It will be embarrassing.

I pull my hand away and roll my ball in my palms, building my courage.

“You’re one short. I’ll play,” I say.

The guys continue to move around the court, making jokes and ripping on each other. The Paul guy pulls his shirt off, and when his back turns, I catch a glimpse of the letters scorched into his skin, just like Tristan’s tattoo. I’m pretty sure it says JOKER, but the lettering is so strange it’s hard to read.

“Hey, I said I’ll play!” My voice raised, I ready myself for their reaction, but they move around me—and at one point, the tall guy rests his hand on my shoulder and nudges me off the court.

“'Scuse me, sorry,” he says, as if he bumped into me on accident. I slap his hand away, and finally—for the first time in almost an hour—everyone’s eyes are on me.

The sore spot in my chest shifts into fire.

“I’ve been here for almost an hour, waiting. I get in the next game.” My teeth are knocking together with an angry shiver, and my fingertips have gone numb in an instant. Adrenaline is funny that way—it makes people brave.

It makes people stupid.

I look at most of their faces, at least the ones looking back at me, and their reaction isn’t much different from the ones on the girls’ faces when I first walked

up. But I won Lauren over. She was first. These guys—they're next.

My chest rises with a full breath, and my skin feels hot from the rush of emotion as I let my eyes move from one blank stare to the next, ignoring the laughter from the tall guy who thought he could touch me.

"Next game then. We've already started." I blink and my head jerks with a tiny jolt of shock. I turn enough to meet Tristan's eyes, and it's like he's wearing a mask. This is a different person than the one who helped me empty my truck three days ago.

His eyes slant in a way that says "come on, stop it," and his gaze falls from mine the minute someone else tosses him the ball. I don't look away immediately, though, instead staring at him with an intensity that may catch fire. If he's going to make a statement about whether or not I belong here, then I'm going to make one about him. I dribble a few times to my side, and I watch him work hard at ignoring me, something that seems to come a lot easier for his friends. I know he feels my eyes on him, because his jawline twitches involuntarily. He's gritting his back teeth.

I turn as he moves, and when he rushes toward the hoop, I hold my ball still and wait for what I know is coming. Testosterone makes boys stupid. He takes too many steps, and his approach is awkward, even though his hand gets well above the rim. Every bit of his motion is out of whack, and the ball careens off the rim in a failed dunk that he tries to laugh off as just him messing around.

I know better.

It's time to make my statement. I wait for his body to shift as his feet stumble and he laughs. His eyes catch mine again, and they roll slightly. He's about to remind me they've already started, or some other demeaning or rude response to make me go away. I'm already leaving. Just one thing before I go.

"Fucking rec player."

His cheeks sag, and the smile dissipates, quickly replaced by that stone-cold expression guys wear to save face in front of others. A few of them cackle at my dig, and one guy yells "Burn!" I roll my eyes just like Tristan did, and I pick up my dribble and grab my phone from the bleachers on my way back out the gate.

I hear their game start again by the time I'm in the middle of the street. I

don’t look, and I don’t expect Tristan to come running after me to apologize. He’s just a local punk asshole like every other guy in every other neighborhood we’ve lived in since *home* home. I guess my old friends were punk assholes too, they were just mine so I didn’t have to deal with their egos.

I haven’t played real ball in so long, I’m starting to worry that I’ll forget how. When I started high school, I had this fantasy of playing in college one day. It drove me to practice every day, and those habits didn’t just change when my mom left. The urge is still there, but there’s just nowhere for me to take it. Our last two apartments didn’t have a court, and the one at the place before that wasn’t lit, so I had to bear the heat in the middle of the day or bully my way through a nearby crowded court packed with small kids at night.

When I saw Tristan, I had hope that I was back, that I had found that place again. The place is there, it’s just the people I need to change.

“Hey, wait up!” I turn at the sound of Lauren’s voice. She looks both ways and stands for a car to pass between us, then jogs across the street toward me.

I wait for her to catch up to me then start to walk home again. Our steps get in sync, and I glance at her when she snaps her gum.

“Want some?” She holds out a pack of mint gum and I take a strip.

I pull the paper away and stuff it in my pocket, then fold the gum in half to chew. It’s brittle, and most of it breaks away and falls to the ground.

“I got it at the dollar store. I think it’s probably pretty old.” Lauren shrugs then offers me another piece.

“I’m good,” I say, spitting out the small bit that made it into my mouth.

We walk one of the full blocks in silence, and I start to wonder if she’s just seeing me home safely or if she’s one of those nosey girls who likes to stir up drama. I’m about to ask, bluntly, when she reaches her arm across my chest and halts my step to cross the intersection—just in time to keep me from getting my toes run over by a car.

“Damn, girl. You are pissed off if you didn’t see that!” She lifts her arm like a bridge guard rail, and I breathe out a heavy sigh.

“Thanks, and…sorry,” I say, looking her in the eyes again.

Lauren is beautiful. Her hair looks like ribbons and her skin is like velvet.

She wears makeup like a movie star, and her skinny jeans, short boots and half shirt look like one of those outfits I've seen in magazines asking who wore it best.

Lauren. Lauren wears it best.

"So DJ, the one they were making fun of? He's my cousin. And Lotus, he's the tall quiet guy who should learn to keep his damn hands to himself, he's my brother. I hang out at the courts because my friends all have crushes on my brother, but that is the *only* reason I'm there."

She slows down our pace as we cross the street, and it makes it impossible not to meet her questioning stare.

I shrug without words.

"You said you're new here. And for whatever reason, I like you. So let me give you some advice," she stops at the corner, and I take an extra step before turning to face her, my ball hugged against my hip with my palm.

"You don't belong there."

My face pinches enough that I feel it. I was expecting her to give me some tip about the guys being assholes or about not liking her brother because he's a player or some advice about Tristan or that Paul guy. Standing here—looking pretty much eye-to-eye into the face of a girl who, other than the clothing and the makeup, looks a lot like me—hearing I don't belong just doesn't seem to register.

"Why not?" I challenge her.

She laughs and begins to walk again.

"You live up here?" She nods down the street, and I respond with a nod back, waiting for her to explain her open-ended warning to me.

"Tristan's house is that way, too." She smirks, which irritates me.

"So."

My response irritates me more. I start dribbling through my legs in an effort to ignore what I know she's insinuating. Eventually, she breaks into laughter again. My mouth tightens and I slowly draw in air through my nose, a trick I learned online to keep my heartrate in check when I feel the need for an emotional explosion brewing. I'm not like her friends; I didn't go to the courts

for a boy. I went there for me—because I've been searching for a place.

"I'm good. I've got it from here. You can go." I'm insistent that she leave, but she's insistent to stay, the sound of her boots keeping up with my stride. After we pass a few more houses, she reaches in, snagging the ball from me mid-dribble. Her hands are quick, and now I'm left with nothing to do with mine. It makes me uneasy, so I push them in my pockets. I miss the tinny sound of my music from the phone speaker.

Lauren starts to dribble, but she has to watch the ball. I'm intensely calculating the timing to get my ball back when she switches hands, moving it to the other side of her body. I open my mouth in frustration, but she shuts me up fast with her words.

"You like him," she says, her focus still on the ball.

I know who she means, and it starts to occur to me that she's doing all of this to make some point about Tristan being hers, or that he's off limits or whatever. I know the drill.

"I don't date." It's not a lie. And it's not because my dad is strict, or because I'm not allowed. I don't want to date because I have too many things I want to do for me. And after three high schools and a broken family, I've accumulated enough personal to-dos without adding a crush in the mix.

"Okay," she says, pushing the ball down harder until it kicks up above her head and she catches it at her chest. Her nails are glossed and long, the tips white like I tried to do to mine once. She clearly doesn't play at the courts. If she did, her hands would look wrecked like mine.

"That's me," I say as my house comes into view. Lauren rolls the ball from her hand into mine.

"Tristan lives on the other corner," she says. I lift by brow in sync with both shoulders, and her eyes hover on me for a few long seconds, like a test to see if I really don't care.

"Most of those guys out there…they will cut you open just to prove they're better than you." My head tilts slightly as I hold her stare. Her lips fall into a flat line, and her long, thick lashes blink slowly, her eyes opening right back up on mine. She shrugs.

“That’s what I meant—you don’t belong out there.” Her head shakes slowly, for emphasis I assume, and her eyes remain serious, even when they dim.

“Nobody’s cutting me open, and the next time I go out there, they’re going to pass me the ball.” I say the words mostly to show off, but a little as a mantra to myself. I’ve gotten good at pushing myself beyond barriers. The last two years have been constant lessons in living life the creative way—whether its borrowing from one debt to cover another or finding ways to stay relevant on the college scouting website without having a steady place to show off my skills.

Lauren hums, and her eyes crinkle slightly at the corners during a short stretch of silence between us.

“Just leave when the lights go out,” she says, holding her phone out toward me in her open palm. I hover on her smirk for a second or two, then look down at her palm.

“Put your number in and then I’ll text you mine,” she says.

I take the phone from her and add my number to her contacts, feeling a little bit like I passed some sort of test and earned her approval. I hand the phone back to her and wait while she opens her messages to send me a text. Her lips twitch when she reads my contact details: RILEY DOES NOT DATE.

“You know, putting it in print doesn’t make it fact, but I hear you. When you have trouble with that, though, don’t get mad at me when I shove your own words in your face,” she says, taking a screenshot and sending it to me in a message. I have had zero boyfriends, and two awkward kisses, both on dares. If I had money to bet her right now, I would. Again, not that I’d ever need to pay up.

“Oh, hey Tristan!” Her eyes jet over my shoulder and the ball slips from my hands while I stumble to regrip it. There wasn’t time to take in the slow breath, so my heart jets a hundred miles per hour, only to sink the second I turn around to an empty sidewalk and street.

“You might not date, but you crush hard, girl,” she giggles. I roll my eyes as I glance back at her.

“You scared me. That’s all,” I say. I lie. That’s a stupid, fricking lie. Gah!

“Mmmm hmmmm. Okay,” she smirks, bending her fingers around her phone as she holds it up to wave goodbye. “I believe I’ll be attending South tomorrow,

so I’ll find you for lunch.”

I nod, my chest a giddy mess over maybe making a friend and getting caught up over some cute boy, who is still probably an asshole, with hot abs and a decent shot.

Decent. Not great. Not bad. Actually…pretty good.

“I don’t date,” I whisper as I move toward my front door. I save Lauren’s screenshot as my wallpaper before unlocking the door and moving inside.

CHAPTER THREE

Tristan

Friday is tomorrow, and Joker and I are only halfway to getting Dub two grand. *I'm* only halfway there. Joker hasn't done shit to help with this, and it's his mouth that started it. All he can talk about is how freaked out he is that he hasn't been initiated yet. I don't think he really wants it to happen. He won't say it, but I sense it—the hope he has as his window shrinks and it still hasn't happened.

Today's his birthday. It's coming today. Unless Dub finds out that we're nowhere close to making his cash flow. He won't though, because he knows I'll find a way to get it done. I always get it done. I should write that down on this scholarship application Ms. Beaumont sent to me in homeroom yesterday.

SPECIAL SKILLS: GOOD AT HUSTLING.

I'm supposed to bring back the filled-in application to her at lunch today so we can enter it into the computer. I should have stopped this before it got this far. All I could complete is my name and address. It got to the part about parents, and I just had to sit back and stare at it, imagining the words I could jot down.

Father started a gang that makes national news for being the leading cause of death for boys under the age of eighteen in Miller. Mother will forever be in recovery for heroin habit and is now addicted to God.

I roll the application up in my hands, twisting it tightly, hoping it will disappear. Either way, I'm going to have to break the news to my counselor that

college is not a part of my plan. She just seems like the kind of person who pushes back and fights to “save us kids.”

My usual spot along the wall right outside our school is full today—young smokers getting their fix barely off campus grounds. They think they’re rebels because of it. I wonder what they’d do if I pulled out my piece and asked them to move.

I don’t pack at school. Too many metal detectors and resource officers wandering the hallways. Besides, my rep is enough to keep people away from me. When my dad was killed, Dub stepped in to fill the role. I’m marked—literally. People know what the black *X* is on my wrist. It means I’m blood to Dub, no matter what our real DNA is, and that’s like being royalty in Miller.

I lean against the main gate they close when school’s in session. It’s a fucking fire hazard, locking us in like this, but nobody points that out. The padlocks were in response to the time some guys from The Tribe rushed our cafeteria last year and stabbed some freshman in the chest. They were coming for one of ours, but they got some kid who was just trying to eat his goddamned lunch instead. He wore the wrong color that day.

It’s this senseless shit I don’t understand. And maybe it’s all senseless.

I hear the out-of-place music blaring before my eyes lock in on the familiar, battered truck. Some country song is blasting so loud it’s buzzing her windows as she hits the curb of the school parking lot and stops at the guard to show him her pass.

I was a dick to Riley when she showed up at the courts, and my better-self kicks at my insides a little as she drives through. That place isn’t a place for her, though. I traded an ounce for three hundred bucks to some guy tweaking on a bike he stole about ten minutes before she showed up. I dealt another ounce an hour after she left, and I made a grand when the lights went out. That’s when the bigger customers come, the ones who are packing. She was there to play basketball, but that’s not the same game everyone’s there for.

“Hey, isn’t that the girl from yesterday?” Joker’s mouth is full when he slides in next to me. His chewing literally makes me shrink my shoulders, convulse, and move to the side.

“What? I didn’t finish my English muffin this morning, man.”

His words are laced with a smacking sound, the bread now like glue around his teeth and gums. Disgusting! I angle my head toward him and sigh, but I’m hit with the funniest thing I’ve ever seen the moment my eyes fully take him in.

“Yo, you are getting your ass kicked today if you walk around in that thing. And not by me or the boys, I’m talking like…*everybody* is going to kick your ass!” I cup my mouth, laughing under my fingers.

Joker’s shoulders sag as he looks down at the brown, fitted sweater with fat wooden buttons dotting up his chest. An oversized collar hangs open, showing the wrinkled neck of the T-shirt he has on underneath. He looks like a grandpa.

“My mom got it for me. It’s couture.” He shoves his hands in the sweater’s side pockets, the weight of a backpack pulling down the shoulders of the knit as it rests heavily on his back.

“It’s geriatric,” I say.

My friend furrows his brow and tells me to fuck off. I let him have his peace for now because I know he’s going to catch hell when the others see him. Joker’s mom almost died last year from an infection she got in the county hospital. She was in there for a heart condition. He probably hates that sweater, but she got it for him. I get it. I’ll lay off.

“That girl from yesterday is staring at you now. You must have really pissed her off.” I twist to follow Joker’s line of sight and confirm he’s right. She’s pulling her backpack straps tight on her shoulders while she looks at me with laser beams. Her long hair is pulled back on the top with the ends slung over one shoulder. She looks like she’s dressed for a fishing trip—long basketball shorts that stop just above her knees, shoes without socks and a T-shirt that she practically swims in. As mean as people are going to be to Joker today about his sweater, I don’t think it will compare to the nasty shade she’s going to get from most of the girls in this school.

“I can’t help how she feels,” I finally answer my friend, abandoning the gate and turning away from Riley’s death stare. Joker chokes out a laugh at my cold response. I should have been cold right from the start. If I’d done that, I wouldn’t feel so crappy now. There wouldn’t be this tug that makes me turn around one

last time before we walk through the main doors—just to make sure the heat I feel on my skin is coming from her laser eyes.

Check. It is.

I leave Joker where the hallways split, and he heads to his homeroom while I go to mine. He's in a class filled with problems. It's a struggle to keep him out of in-school suspension. The principal won't kick him out because he goes to church with both of our moms, which is the only reason Joker's still here. There's a guy named Roman in his class who we've had a lot of problems with. He's Tribe, even though he doesn't show it or say anything. We can just tell by the way he's always trying to push Joker into a fight. It's all about provoking people. It's not a fight between two guys that anyone craves—they want the war. It gives both sides something to do when there's a person to focus the hate on.

We hate them, and they hate us.

Even though we're all really just the fuckin' same. The media and the cops, our governor and those kinds of people, they all like to use race in the headlines. Both of our gangs are mostly Latino, and they like to play up the turf war—like only one of us is superior. But if we all lined up, we're all just forgotten and angry souls, and we're brown and white and pink and broken. We don't even know why we're angry most of the time. Someone told us to be mad at the other guy, not to date that girl because she comes from their side, or to take over this corner because that belongs to us.

Sometimes I wonder why we want any of it. We're fighting over shit and living in poverty. What good does any of it do? I guess it lets us survive until the next day. That's the good it does. None of us can get out, so we fight to make sure we keep us all in.

"Mr. Lopez, please come see me." I stop halfway into my seat, dropping my backpack to the floor, my rolled-up and empty scholarship form still in my hand.

"Yeah," I mumble when I reach the edge of Mr. Pedrona's desk. He was my homeroom teacher last year, too. They moved him up to seniors because they thought he would fit better with more mature kids. He ignores us just the same way he did when we were juniors. His light went out when he got assigned to South.

He slides a pink hall pass across his desk, and I notice my name on it.

"You're getting moved." He glances up at me above the rims of his glasses, then relaxes back into his chair and continues reading the news on his phone.

"Why?" I slide the form closer and eventually pick it up. It reads: MISS FORTE.

There is literally zero additional information. I turn the slip around and hold it up until Mr. Pedrona looks up at it. His eyes flit up to me and he shrugs.

"Just go to her class. You're being moved." Someone sniggers behind me, and I turn around in time to see some dude named David, that I barely know, duck his head and clear his throat. I begin to walk back to my desk, but juke toward David as I pass and he flinches. It's temporarily satisfying.

Nobody else pays attention as I lift my bag and slump out into the hallway. I could just keep walking out the front doors and go back home, but my mom would be upset. I'd only have to show up and report to Miss Forte's class tomorrow, so I zigzag my way around the halls to the area I *think* her classroom is in. I've seen her a few times, but I'm not even really sure what her subject is. Whatever it is, it's giving me an extra-credit dose of karma right now. I wait just long enough for Riley to pull the door open, distracted by her own pink slip as she walks inside.

Seeing her this close up, her clothes don't seem as baggy as they did from far away. She's wearing the same shorts she wore out on the courts, but she has these low socks on with running shoes that make her legs look even longer somehow. I start to convince myself that she's taller than me, and I'm slightly intimidated by it when I walk into the classroom myself and end up shoulder to shoulder with her.

Now I'm intimidated by a bunch of other things, and her height—and her spectacular legs—are the least of it. She's still giving me lasers. Crystal blue ice.

"Riley…Tristan. Good timing. We're just picking our seats for the month. There are a few in the front still open, so go ahead."

A larger woman with thick black glasses and tightly curled hair, pulled up into a pile on top of her head, takes our papers and ushers us to the seats. By *a few,* Miss Forte meant: three. There are three seats in the middle of the front row,

and Riley and I have the same idea—both automatically putting one in-between us.

I can feel Riley looking at me as we both sit down, so I glance her direction in time to watch her mouth contort into a sneer as she swings her bag around her body and rests it in the chair between us, as if she's building a wall. Fine with me. If it wouldn't look weird, I'd pile mine on top.

Riley pulled a notebook from her bag before she dumped her bag. I don't even have a notebook, and as I scan the rest of the desks in this class I realize I'm the only one. I don't know any of these people. I recognize Miss Forte because she stands out front in the mornings and yells at the cars and busses.

"Welcome, Riley and Tristan. You're new in IB, so if you have questions about how we operate in here, just ask. We're a small group, and I don't buy the whole hand-raising-wait-until-you're-called thing. Just ask."

The teacher leans into her desk while she holds an attendance sheet against a math book in her hands, glancing around the room and checking off names. I count twice, getting seventeen of us both times. That's less than half as many people that are in my homeroom…my *old* homeroom, I guess.

"What's IB?" I ask.

A girl with short black hair and super trendy glasses turns around and stares at me. I pucker my lips and shrug at her before whispering "She said I could just ask questions."

"It's the International Baccalaureate program. Your counselor placed you in here for the rest of the year. She talked to you about it yesterday?" Miss Forte stares at me for a couple of seconds after answering then looks back down at her list of names to check her work.

I'm in the smart kids' class. What the actual fuck?

"No," I say, standing from my desk and lifting my bag back over a shoulder. I laugh to myself at how light and empty my bag looks compared to everyone else in this room.

"No, as in she didn't talk to you?" Miss Forte pushes her glasses down her nose and maneuvers herself between where I'm standing and the door.

"No to all of it. I need to talk to her. No offense, but I can't be in here." I

move closer to the door and she puts her palm on it, leveling me with the kind of expression Joker's mom did when we were kids and she caught us ripping off the ice-cream truck.

"Fine, I'll see her after class." I breathe out heavily and slump back to my desk.

She hovers around the door for the next twenty minutes as she walks us through this thing she calls a *writing prompt.* Eventually, the bell rings and I get up just as she's passing out notebooks with hard covers. They look expensive.

"We're not done, Mr. Lopez," she says with her back to me.

"Yeah, that was the bell," I say.

"Not our bell. Sit." I move in a circle in the small space between my desk and the fortress one Riley and I are trying to keep between us.

"Not our bell?" I repeat her then run my hand through my hair, my forehead hot. I feel trapped in this place, and I'm starting to wonder if it's just a really vivid dream. I don't sit until Miss Forte is directly in front of me, and even though I look down on her by a few inches, it doesn't seem to matter in our power scale.

"Not. Our. Bell." She slaps one of the booklets down on my desk and points at it with her finger, her thick, red fingernail making a clicking sound. "Now, write about yourself. *Anything* about yourself. You can't fail. It's the easiest thing we're going to do in here."

I sink back into my seat and flip open the cover, glancing around the room at the busy pens and pencils held in clenched hands that have already nearly filled a page. Writing about myself is literally the *last* thing I can do. I have to be bad at it. And I have to get out of this class.

Over the course of an hour and fifty minutes, I learn that this classroom—with these seventeen other people—is where I will spend every minute of my day at South, except for lunch and weight lifting, for the next seven months. Unless, of course, I can make my counselor realize what a terrible mistake she's made.

Joker’s texted me ten times wondering where the hell I’m at. They quit letting us leave campus for lunch two years ago, because more than half of the students wouldn’t come back.

I text him from right outside Ms. Beaumont’s office.

Bro, my schedule is WTF. I’m at the office.

My phone buzzes in my hand with his response, but I don’t have time to read it before my counselor is ushering me into her office. I sling my bag over my shoulder and tuck my phone in my back pocket, kicking my untied shoelaces ahead of me as slide into her office. I bend down to tie them when I sit.

“How’s IB going?”

I’m still bent over in the chair, finishing my laces when she asks.

“Uh,” I pause to finish tying, then reach into my bag for my blank scholarship form. “I don’t really think I want to do it.”

“Uh huh.” She leans back in her chair and folds her arms, rocking herself slightly while she pushes her tongue in her cheek.

“And I don’t think I can do this,” I say, setting the bent scholarship form on the desk between us. It unrolls just enough to expose all of the blank lines.

She pulls it toward her and flattens it out, nodding slowly as she looks at it.

“I’m just not college material, Ms. Beaumont. It’s fine, really. I’m good. I’ll be fine.”

I shut up when she leans to her right and reaches into a drawer, pulling out a folder thick with forms. She licks the tip of her thumb and flips through a few of the pages until she finds whatever it is she’s looking for and pulls out a green sheet of paper that she gives to me.

“You can get this one. I know you can,” she says, turning the page around so I can read it.

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I spin it right back around and push it closer to her.

“It’s the same problem as the other form. I’ve got nothin’ to say about myself. Not that some scholarship group wants to hear anyway.”

She just slides the paper back.

“Then let’s find things for you to say.” She’s adamant, but I laugh because

she has no clue how hopeless this cause is. And the more she fills my head with potential, the sadder I get about my reality.

"That IB class thing…I don't think I'm supposed to be in there."

I'm not arguing my case very well, and that's part of the problem with all of this. I'm not articulate. I'm not some genius in hiding. I looked at some of those assignments listed on the board in Ms. Forte's class and I didn't know what most of them meant, or if they were science things or math or whatever. I'm not sure what I did to land myself in here, or why I'm her cause, but she just needs to drop this and leave me alone.

"You're giving up too fast, Tristan." She leans forward on her elbows, and I instinctively slide my chair back a few inches.

"I don't want this," I say, shrugging and looking around her bare office. She has two pictures on her desk, one of her with an older man and a little girl, the other is a man dressed in a military uniform. I point to it.

"That your husband?" She shows a hint of a grin then moves her hand to the picture to turn it so she can look at it straight on.

"It is. He's on his third tour with the Navy. That's our little girl, Melody."

She twists the other picture more so I can see. I bet she has these pictures in here to seduce kids like me into the illusion of a happy, normal life like hers. If Dub were in my situation right now, he'd say something to make her uncomfortable—not a full threat, but just something that makes her feel *off*. I could talk about how lonely she must be with her husband overseas, or I could tell her a lie about how I know someone who just died in the Navy. I could even just sit here and stare at her with the right look in my eyes that makes her want to do anything she can to get me out of her office.

But this is where I'm not like the others—not like my dad or Dub. When I was a kid, I'd watch the older guys start fights at restaurants or yell things at women on the streets. They'd celebrate and laugh like it was Christmas afterward, but by the time I was eleven or twelve, I realized that they really weren't doing anything other than acting like dicks. I saw the expressions on other people's faces, and a lot of them were scared, sure…but most of them were just disgusted.

“Melody’s a nice name,” I say, pulling the form into my hand to read it. “I’ll fill it out as far as I can, but I really don’t want to be in that class, Ms. Beaumont.”

I stare at the same few words that were on the last form—*volunteerism, clubs, philanthropy*—while she stares at the top of my head. We’re at a standoff, and she knows she can’t make me do anything, really. My mom could force me into the class, but even she knows that forcing me won’t make me happy, and I’ll just quit showing up. Me finishing school is a big deal to my mom—for me it’s only leverage.

“How about…for two weeks…” I glance up into her waiting eyes and hopeful, but faint, smile. “You just try it. We’ll talk again after two weeks, and if you’re just as unhappy being in there as you say you are now, I’ll put you back on your old schedule.”

I can say no to this. I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to. It’s one of my few rights as a seventeen-year-old—the right to be obstinate. I’ve never been anything but obedient, though. I obey everyone. I even do what Joker says, even when it’s a dumb idea, like trying to make two grand by tomorrow with shitty weed and a thinning crowd of potheads to sell to.

“Two weeks,” I repeat, my stomach bubbling. I want to say no, but I just can’t. I’d rather survive the torture of two weeks instead with the hope that when I sit in this chair again and she asks me what I want to do, I can really tell her the truth and not let her convince me otherwise.

She stands with her hand held out, and I breathe in deeply through my nose. I roll my head as I rise and eventually squeeze her palm with mine, sealing my fate.

I leave her office with a different paper but the same task, just as impossible, and my body feels like all of the earth’s gravity is pulling at me and trying to hold me still. Joker is sitting with his back to me on the edge of a bench outside, near the bus turn-in.

“Hey, Joke!” I yell out for him, and just as he starts to turn, I see who he’s sitting with.

“Dude, you’re so late. I think they stopped serving lunch already,” my friend

says, his face plastered with the grin he gets when pretty girls acknowledge him. My stomach rumbles, and I know I'm hungry but I'm also sick, and Riley is staring at me over Joker's shoulder with the same poisonous expression as before.

I hold her stare for an extra second, a blip too long, because in this small space of time her mask slips and I see how upset she is underneath her play of anger.

"Nice to meet you, Paul." Riley's eyes linger on mine while she swings her arm into my friend as she calls him by his real name. It's odd to hear, because when I'm with him, it's usually just our crew, and all we ever call him is Joker. He's Paul with my mom. Paul with the regular world. Riley is the regular world, and that's why this line is here.

"Tristan."

I nod as she says my name and leaves. There was this tiny break in her voice. She thinks I'm a dick. I am. I'm also a lot of other terrible things.

"She's so pretty," Joker says.

He uses this baby voice as he lets his tongue fall out of his mouth while he watches her walk away. I haven't gotten to talk to him yet, so he doesn't realize that I'm going to have to follow her, then spend the next three hours with nothing but a desk between us, and a bunch of lessons that are so fricking far above my head it's impossible for me not to look like a clown.

"She's going to meet us out at the courts today. She asked if we were going again, and I mean…"

I blink slowly and look at him sideways.

"What?" He holds his palms up, so innocent.

"Maybe you can ask her if she wants to buy some weed," I say, shaking my head and moving toward the main doors for the school.

"Baby, that's not fair man. I'm weak with pretty girls. You know I am, and she's just different. She'll be gone before it gets too late, and…"

I feel my chest snap, and I grit my teeth hard, but it doesn't do any good. It's my dad's blood—it's my own, well-honed discipline. I don't mix the real world with our world.

I turn into my friend just before the school's exit and stop his steps as my chest brushes against his. I'm bigger. I've always been stronger. And I am smarter.

"Don't call me that, Joker. Only Dub—it's just Dub's name for me. It's not my real name." I can feel the irrational mix of emotions churning inside my body, like a cocktail of dangerous drugs. Joker pushed a button. My emotions were already high. And fucking Riley—her sad eyes and the way she was so nice. Her whole damned other world seems nice. I crumple the scholarship paper in my hand until it's a ball that I can easily discard, then turn back to the exit and toss it in the can by the metal detectors they don't bother to use when people leave. They only worry about the things someone brings into this place, I guess.

"I'm sick, so I'm going home. You'll have to drive me, Paul."

I use his real name in front of the guard, who looks at me sideways. He's not buying my lie, but he also doesn't feel like working hard. I sign a scribble for my signature on the front pad and Paul does the same, then I give him a good enough excuse to let us go.

"My mom said she'd call the office on her next break. She runs the thrift store, and I guess it's senior discount day or whatever. She works with his mom; so they both know." I sell it with a roll of my eyes and a shrug. It gives the guard enough to sit his ass back in his chair. I don't know his name. He's newish. The old guard, Rodney, got promoted to drive around campus in the little cart. Rodney would have just let me go anyhow, though, because he didn't really care either. This place is just somewhere for them to go during the day and collect. It's better than the alternative, which I guess is how I'm going to make my living.

Joker and I keep up the act until we get to my friend's car near the back of the student lot. His backdoor creaks when I pull it open. I toss my backpack inside and slam it closed, the handle rattling like it always does. I fix the blanket that covers my half of his front seat, then climb in and count as I draw in a slow breath while he starts the car.

"We're ditching. We've got a grand to make in one day, so we've gotta go push it somewhere else," I say, looking over my shoulder to the backseat floor of

Joker’s car. I find one of my old hats. I grab it and shake off the dirt before pushing it low on my head. I like to hide in the shadow, even if it’s only pretend.

“Mall then?” my stupid, stupid friend asks.

“I think it’s time we saw a movie,” I say, leaning against the passenger window and pulling the brim of my hat down a little more.

“Heh heh, now we’re talking,” Joker says, pulling the gear shift down to reverse and spinning his tires as he fishtails out of our school lot.

I’ve never been the lead at this, but I know all of the same buyers. It’s Dub’s money in the end. I know he’ll be all right with me selling in his special spot. I pull my phone from my pocket and send out the usual text, only I tell people to look for me, and me alone. We’ll have everything sold within the hour, because rich, suburban kids like to throw parties. Then we can head to the courts to make sure Riley doesn’t meet anyone she shouldn’t.

I get a time and a theater number in return. Nothing left now but to buy a ticket. Though I feel like I bought mine years ago.

CHAPTER FOUR

Riley

I can tell the courts are empty before I get close enough to confirm it with my eyes. The only sound I hear is the occasional jingle of the chains and clack of the rim from a missed shot. A kid pushes the ball up from his chest when I step up, and his noodle arms can barely lift it high enough to ricochet off the bottom of the hoop. It doesn't keep him from trying, though.

His feet are bare, wet socks and laceless shoes discarded in the middle of the court. His red hat is turned to the side, and his sleeves are pushed up over his shoulders so he can mimic his heroes as he dribbles out and then in. As I get closer, I can hear his whispers as he tries to create the sound of a roaring crowd. His steps slow as he prepares for a layup, taking twice as many steps as are allowed, then flinging the ball up in the air and only making it to the corner of the backboard. He jogs in my direction, hot feet slapping at the pavement as he chases his ball.

"You've got some pretty tight moves." I nod at him, and he shoves his tongue in the side of his mouth as he slows his jog into the saunter of a little man. I flex my jaw to hold in my laugh, because he's trying so hard to be tough, but it's nothing but adorable.

"I come out here right after school to practice. That's how you make money at this…you put in the time." He lisps through his *Ts* and it melts my heart a

little more, making it impossible not to at least grin at my new young friend.

“Good advice,” I say, dropping my ball to my side and dribbling with my left hand. “Wanna practice a little with me?”

“Uh huh.” He rushes to the place where his ball rolled, near the fence, then back to me, facing me and trying to dribble just like I am.

“You have to trust your hands,” I say, stopping my ball on the ground with my foot. I kneel down and hold his still and hover my hand over his feet, glancing up to look him in the eyes. “Can I make a little adjustment to the way you’re standing?”

“Uh huh.” He nods again.

I glance down at his bare feet and smirk.

“You run through the sprinklers on your way here?” I look up at him with one eye squinting, and he shakes his head *no.* I tilt my chin to the side a little, and he shakes his head harder.

“I put them in the drinking fountain,” he finally admits, a bubble of laughter exploding from him when my eyes shoot wide and my cheeks puff out. I’m only half exaggerating because I drank from that fountain yesterday. Feet are gross.

“Well, mind if I nudge your ankle a little…right…here?” I push his right ankle out slightly with pressure from my fingertip, then his left before glancing up at his eyes.

“Now bend the knees, but only a little.”

He follows my direction, his arms still out to his sides like he’s trapped on a wooden beam and searching for balance. I stand and reach for his wrists, shaking them lightly.

“Loosen up,” I say, and he immediately goes limp. A laugh echoes from my chest. “Not that loose, more like when you’re swimming.”

I sway a little, side to side, my hands out like a hula dancer. My friend does the same, and we move like this while facing each other for about a half a minute. He starts to smile when I nod in praise, so I crouch down again, urging him to keep going. I pick up his ball and bring it up slowly to his hand. He watches it the entire way as I move it to his fingertips then back down, repeating the motion of a dribble over and over.

“What’s your name?” My question brings his eyes to me, but I keep moving the ball while he’s not thinking about it, and his hand automatically flexes in anticipation for every time it returns.

“Jaden,” he says, blinking when he realizes what’s happening. His first instinct is to look down, but I flinch before he can.

“Uh uh, eyes on me,” I say with a grin. “Jaden, I’m Riley. I’m new here, and I need friends to play basketball with. Think maybe me and you can play sometimes?”

Jaden’s lips stretch until all I see are teeth stained blue from some sort of candy clicking around behind them. He nods, and I hold his ball still. Then I stand and hand it to him.

“Let’s warm up.” With the tip of my toe, I roll my ball with enough spin to kick it up into a bounce.

“I wanna learn that,” Jaden says, and I lean my head back to laugh.

“That’s soccer.” I giggle.

“You play two sports?” His eyes are wide, and I’m so in love with the enamored twinkle in his eyes that I can’t bring myself to crush him and admit that the only soccer move I know I developed because I’m too lazy to bend over.

“I play lots,” I say, lifting my chin confidently.

I move toward the hoop, and Jaden follows me, losing his dribble several times, but always forcing himself to take his eyes off his hand. I admire his tenacity. He reminds me of me.

We mostly dribble together, and we start to practice shooting when a few guys I don’t recognize from yesterday show up and begin to shoot around us. They don’t ask us to leave, not directly, at least. But there are subtle things they do to try to force us to get the point, like pushing our balls to the side when they rebound from the hoop or playing one-on-one in front of us as if we don’t exist. Jaden steps back eventually, hugging his ball in front of his body, but the more they puff their chests, the more I want to deflate them.

A few more guys show up, along with Lauren, and Jaden walks to the center of the court to pick up his socks and shoes and eventually takes a spot on the top of the bleachers.

“Smells like pussy.”

There’s a snickering sound, muffled by a hand, coming from over by the hoop. Another one of the guys holds out a palm for his friend to slap. They glance at me and laugh a little harder, but I keep my reaction in check.

The comment doesn’t shock me. It doesn’t even offend me, really. I’ve heard worse on every court I’ve ever played on. Hell, my friends from my old… *old.*..neighborhood treated me like one of the guys, and the trash talk was legit. I dished it, and I could give it right back now if I really wanted to. I could tell them it smells like tiny dick to me, or a dozen other just as vulgar comments. But I’ll just let my shots talk for me.

My hater steps up to the top of the key and sinks a jump shot, so the second he runs forward to grab his ball, I stand just where he was and drain the same shot. It takes him three or four more to realize what I’m doing—that I’m matching him—and after I sink my seventh, his friends start to notice, too. Eventually, we’re in a standoff of three-pointers. We’ve both made four in a row, our balls following one another through the hoop, and his friends, and even Lauren, are getting loud.

“Ohhhh!” They chant after every single made shot. My opponent hasn’t missed, and I’m starting to feel like I’m getting a little bit lucky with my streak when the ultimate distraction dribbles up next to me and shoots from the three-point line while his eyes are on me. Tristan’s shot clanks off the metal rim and his eyes blink slowly as he chews at the inside of his lip, never once glancing at his ball. He doesn’t care if he made it. Making it wasn’t the point. Interrupting me was.

“Let’s split up and get a game on,” he says. He’s looking at me, but he’s speaking to everybody else. This actually bothers me more than the under-the-breath pussy comment from earlier.

I sense there are natural divisions on this court, Lauren’s brother and cousin taking one side and Tristan and his friend Paul on another. The few other guys gravitate to sides, and I can quickly tell the sides aren’t even. I step in on Tristan’s team and catch him draw his lips in tight and breathe in deeply. His eyes hover on mine for a few seconds, and his mouth stays in that rigid, straight

line.

“I got point,” he says, finally looking away and taking a pass from Paul.

I roll my ball over to the bleachers and catch Lauren’s attention. She picks it up and tucks it under the first bench, sitting one row above it and resting her elbows on her knees, ready for the show.

Time to break some freezing-cold ice.

Tristan takes the ball to center court and points out to both corners, shouting at Paul to cut before passing to some other guy whose name I didn’t get. He didn’t tell me. Nobody told me anything, other than the first hater who I shot with before Tristan came. He told me “all right” and he said it once, after my third three-pointer.

Paul catches the ball under the hoop eventually and lays it in. They all slap hands; only Paul slaps mine.

We split up defense, and I take the only guy left unguarded. He’s not very good, and he only gets a pass or two before eventually turning the ball over to Tristan, who comes out and hits a jump shot with nobody even close.

They all slap hands.

I watch.

The game goes on like this for almost twenty minutes—boys throwing around words, shirts coming off, and strong arms shoving into one another just to gain a few more inches on the court. I hold my own on defense, but I’m not really in *their* game. I’m guarding a guy named Danny, I’ve figured out. He doesn’t get to play often. I know how he feels.

My hater’s name is RJ. He sinks a jump shot over Tristan to tie the game before Paul holds up his hand and calls time for a water break. I watch Tristan run over to the fountain and I open my mouth to warn him about the footbath information I possess, but then I stop and instead just smile. I don’t know how dirty Jaden’s feet were, but I hope they were disgusting.

I stay in the center of the court, dribbling the ball I didn’t get to touch a single time during play. I pass it through my legs a few times and remind myself that things are always like this in the beginning. Every court is the same—everywhere I’ve lived.

Only something here is just different. That wall I'm used to climbing over feels bigger somehow. And every time I think I have my hands on the top, Tristan lays a new row of bricks for me to climb.

"Yo, Zach. Jump in on this. We're tied up," Tristan shouts to someone behind me. I turn to see a guy dressed in black shorts that sag on his hips, socks pulled up to cover his legs and basketball shoes that barely have laces. If this guy runs, he's going to fly out of those shoes.

"You can have the next game, Zach," I say.

The new guy stops somewhere between the bleachers and me, wrinkles on his forehead, and a glare in his eyes.

"This is the next game. We're done," Tristan says, and my chest lights on fire.

"Bullshit, we're tied!" I slam the ball down hard, letting it bounce off to the side. Lauren coughs through a laugh several feet to my side.

This is not the nice guy who helped me unload boxes and move my weights. Tristan has officially risen to the rank of biggest asshole I've dealt with…ever. He's securing that title more and more with each passing second he stares at me, too, letting me stand here with my hands fisted at my sides and my breath too ragged for not having run in several minutes.

I tilt my head to the side in a silent gesture that conveys "come on, stop it." The tip of his tongue peeks through his tight lips, bit by his front teeth, and his jaw flexes like he's fighting the urge to either really dig in and fight me over this or to just give in and finish our dumb game.

"Zach, you're with me," he says, a jerk to his head that seems to order Zach to keep moving and dump his things from his pockets on the end of the bleachers.

I breathe out and roll my eyes, the back of my throat clicking as I turn to the side. My skin is tingling with anger and frustration, and my eyes focus on Lauren and her hands cupped over her mouth, poorly hiding her shock.

Tristan's sliding steps move closer and I begin to shake my head, turning to look him square in the eyes before his mouth can make a sound. I hold up a finger to point at his chest, then curl my hand into a fist as my eyes dim on his.

He draws in a heavy breath through his nose and his lips pinch at the corners. I can almost see him trying to work out what to say, like some sort of struggle happening in the pools of black centered in his deep brown eyes. I save him the speech.

"Okay," I nod. I move backward, toward my things, the bleachers, and the open gate to the sidewalk home. "I see how this is…how this place is. I see *you*, Tristan. Oh…I see you."

His eyes flicker, then draw in, shutting out everything around us so he can tell me some secret. It's patronizing.

"You don't belong here," he says, his voice rough but low. A few of the guys near us still hear him, though. He's trying to be intimidating. I see it in the heat of his eyes and feel it in his growl. "This court is not for nice little girls. Go home and play with your hair…paint your nails. I don't care. Just get out of here."

He shrugs out the words, shaking his head like all of that is just some sort of assumed thing I must enjoy more than being out here. He couldn't be more wrong. I shake out a laugh, my chest lifting and my eyes flaring on him. He doesn't think I see him at all, but he's vulnerable. I see that for sure. This front he puts up here for some alpha neighborhood bullshit is fragile as hell, and he doesn't intimidate me. He only drives me to knock him down.

I leave him standing in the center of the court, and when I reach the bleachers I finally hear him start to talk to his friends. The game picks up. The only eyes on me are those of the girls watching today and my new pal Jaden. His mouth is hung open, and I feel like I let him down somehow, so after I pick up my things, I reach out a fist for him to pound. He does, but his eyes still look worried.

"I'll be right back," I say, winking.

Lauren laughs under her breath, amused by me I guess. I'll need her help.

"Got a few minutes?" I widen my eyes in a plea for her to come with me.

She smirks with a short breath, then glances to the court and back to me before nodding and stepping down from the bleachers. I pick up my ball and lead her through the gate and down the street toward my house. My pace is

deliberate, and I can hear her breathing pick up after the first block. She's not running on the same pissed-off fuels I am, and she's in jeans and heels, so I slow down just enough for her shoulder to meet up with mine.

"That was seriously the best thing I've seen in a long time out there," she says, still panting a little.

"Uh huh." My mind can't form a response bigger than that; it's too busy playing out arguments with Tristan, exchanging words and dreaming up his jerk-face responses. I'm not sure what changed between the time we first met and now…other than the day of the week and his personality. I feel sick in my gut that a part of me actually thought he was cute. I feel sicker because a part of me still does.

What does that say about me? The fact that a guy can push me around like that and I can still find him appealing speaks to a flaw I need to stomp out like a roach. My hands are shaking and dying to form fists, I'm so mad. I'm so angry that tears are threatening to form. I'm embarrassed, and I don't like being humiliated. I belong where I say I belong, and my dad would want me to stand up for myself.

I'm not a sweet little girl. I'm a girl who wants to get to do the one thing she loves in this place she has to live. I have no choice but to be here, and there is no fucking way some cocky boy is going to be the thing that makes me doubt myself. I'm a girl who is going to get her way. I'm a woman! And if I have to get rid of the distractions so the little baby-ass boys on *my* court can move past the bullshit and realize what I'm here for, then that's what I'll do.

"Those guys aren't all bad…Tristan, he's…"

I cut her off when we reach my driveway.

"He's a fucking asshole," I fill in the rest.

Her laugh echoes behind me as I lift open my garage door.

"Watch your step. I still have to unpack a lot of this stuff," I say weaving around the stacks of weights, boxes of kitchen supplies, and some tools, until I get to the door to the house. I push it open and lean my hip into it waiting for Lauren to follow me.

"You don't lock that shit?" She points to my door handle as she steps up the

small concrete lip into my house.

I glance around at our things—my weights the only real items with value that I can't carry with me at all times.

"What would someone steal?" I shrug and meet her eyes.

Her lips crinkle as her chest shakes with a silent laugh.

"Girl, until you've lived here more than a week, just take my advice, okay?" She points to the bolt on my door then looks me in the eyes. "Lock your damn door."

Sometimes I don't like carrying keys, and my truck is really hard to start unless you know just the right things to do, so I'm not really worried about someone jacking it while I'm gone, even if they did find my keys in the house. My dad has never locked our house—any house—when we're gone. Sometimes we forget to lock it up at night. I shrug, mostly to humor Lauren as she walks inside, then I lock the door behind us just to make her feel like I've learned something.

I toss my ball into a pile of towels that still need to be put away, then drop my phone on the kitchen counter before moving toward the drawer we affectionately call the "man drawer." It's super sexist, but the things in there are all manly, I guess, which is why my dad has always called it that. I pull out the scissors he used for breaking down our moving boxes, and before Lauren has a chance to realize what I'm doing, I twist about a quarter of my hair in my hand, tugging it to the side in its ponytail, and I cut it off.

"What the fu…"

I turn to see Lauren's mouth hung open, and her eyes wider than I thought they could go.

"I can't shave it unless it's short," I say, reaching down with my hair-filled hand to swing open the cabinet that the trash can is hidden in. I drop the heavy strands and tug the rest of my hair free from my hairband, grabbing another section and chopping it off just the same way.

"Oh my God, I can't. I can't watch you do this, Riley! Riley, stop…" Lauren is pacing, pausing just in front of me and reaching toward the scissors, then recoiling and holding her fingertips to her temples as she paces again.

“It’s just hair. It took me, like a year, maybe a year and a half to grow that,” I say, chopping away at more loose pieces.

“Yeah, a year is a long time! And some of us have to *pay* for long hair like that.” She holds her hands out toward me in a choking motion, and it makes me snicker.

“You can have my hair, if you want it. Seriously, take it. It’s free,” I say, running my fingers through the various lengths I have left.

“Riley, nobody wants hair that looks like that,” she says, pointing to the nest I’ve left in the trashcan.

I wrap my fingers around a thick amount left on the right side of my head and twist to look at the pile of hair.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I say as I cut through the shorter stuff left behind, getting it closer to my head.

“Gah! Just…just give me the scissors.” Lauren holds her palm open and I lift my right brow as I look at her.

“Just cut it close. We’ll get the rest with my dad’s clippers,” I say, handing over the scissors and turning my body so my back is to her.

Her first few cuts are tentative, not taking enough, and I can tell she’s trying to salvage what I’ve done.

“Lauren?” I wait while she nips at a few more pieces.

“Yeah.” There’s a sigh mixed with her response.

“My hair really isn’t important to me. I won’t regret any of this, I swear. What I will regret is not proving to those guys out there that I’m just as good as they are; that I belong.”

I tilt my head and look up and to the side to catch her eyes. She pulls the scissors down and rests them on my shoulder, and we have a silent conversation that lasts only two or three seconds. She nods. She doesn’t smile, in fact, she still looks a little sick, but she nods anyway. She gets it.

“A’right, then. Let’s do this,” she says, sheering off big chunks at a time until sprinkles of hair dust my shirt and fall down on my legs and the floor. She cuts until my hair is a very messy boy-cut length, then we move to my dad’s bathroom and plug in his clippers to take it down the rest of the way. I leave

about a quarter of an inch, and my scalp only shows through a little. It's bright white underneath, but my head isn't so bad.

I pull my T-shirt off and use it to wipe up the stray hairs on the counter then rub my hands over my soft head a few times to shake loose anything that remains.

"You're oddly good at this. Shave your head often?" Lauren asks, and I think she's joking, but I'm not sure because she still hasn't smiled or laughed. Nothing about this is amusing to her. It might not be to me later, but right now, I'm operating in prime-directive mode.

"Ha, no. This is a first for me. But my dad does, and I get the stuff he can't reach, like making it a straight line along his neck and stuff," I say, pushing the hair on the floor into a little pile before moving to my room for a clean shirt.

I slip on my old team shirt over my sports bra and roll the sleeves up over my shoulders. There's a hole on the right side along the bottom where the shirt ripped two years ago when some guy guarding me grabbed on. Now the hole is just this thing I constantly mess with—a distraction for my fingers. If I ever lost this shirt, that hole is the thing I'd miss the most.

When I make my way back to the kitchen, Lauren has already found the broom and dustpan, and she's swept most of what I didn't already throw into the trash into a pile. I take over, and after about ten minutes of sweeping in here and in my bathroom, the floor is probably cleaner than it was before I shed all over it.

"Okay, I'm ready." I grab my ball and tuck it under my arm and hold the door open through the garage for Lauren to follow.

"You're nuts. I like you, but you're nuts," she says as she passes through the door. I let it slam behind me but stop when she turns quickly and folds her arms.

"I know, yeah, yeah…lock it." I rush back inside and grab my key, locking the door behind me, then propping up the garage door for Lauren to slip through, pushing it back down behind both of us.

"One day, your neighbor's house is going to be torn to pieces and then you'll thank me for nagging you about locking your damn door," she mutters as she takes long strides to keep up with me.

“Why would I thank you for my neighbor getting broken into?” I know what she meant, but I like being a smart-ass.

“Psh, you’ll be glad you’re not the one with missing chunks of wall and the stench of a crack pipe in your carpet,” she says, and something about her tone tells me she’s been broken into and the crime involved something pretty similar.

“Point made,” I say.

We don’t talk for most of the walk back, and I can’t even get my hand to dribble the ball. My nerves are starting to combat with my resolve, and the battle inside is making me feel a little dizzy. I can’t believe I shaved my head. I start to laugh, quietly at first, and soon loud enough for Lauren to hear.

“What’s so funny?” She stops and pulls the heels from her feet, holding one in each hand. I look down at her bare toes and pinch my brow.

“Seriously? You shaved your head and you think I’m the weird-ass one because I took my shoes off so I don’t get blisters? Please…” She puffs out her lips and rolls her eyes, passing me and marching on toward the courts.

The corners of my mouth slowly arch up and my eyes gaze up to my own brow, to the place where the shadow of my long hair used to shade my forehead. I nod and let the thump in my chest settle down with my steps forward. The closer I get, the more I remember why I did this, and I thank my impulses.

Lauren and I pass through the gate and move to the bleachers, but I don’t stay with her. I set my things just where I left them the first time, then I walk to the free-throw line, where Tristan’s back is to me, but everyone else has stopped moving. Zach is breathing so hard his hand is pretty much glued in a spread-out position on his chest, and his T-shirt is soaked with sweat. I’ve been gone for less than half an hour, and he looks nearly dead.

“I got you, Zach. Go take a seat,” I say meeting his eyes as I feel Tristan’s move to me, my view of his body turning in my periphery.

Zach’s eyes are only half open, he’s so tired, and his focus dances between me and what I’m sure is Tristan behind me. When he finally nods, I know he’s been given permission, so I turn around to face the boy who made me have to fight for this.

“I’ll take point, if that’s cool with you?” I cock my head to the side and perk

up the corner of my mouth, my teeth biting the tip of my tongue. I've made Tristan go speechless, and it's as satisfying as I thought it might be when I ran the clippers across the center of my skull. His eyes trace that line right now as his mouth hangs open and barely pushes out a laugh in disbelief.

"I fit in better now?" I step closer, prompting his eyes to dip back to mine. His lips might not smile, but his eyes do, and I live in this righteous little space for a full breath until he rolls the ball from his hands to mine, thrusting it with a little pop that attacks my balance. I hold steady.

Bare-chested and moist with sweat, his body hovers nearby for an extra second, and my feet twitch, ready to put the space back between us, but my own body reacts differently. It likes the fight—it likes the boy, even if he's a bit of an asshole. Still. My heart and head want to push him around a little just to see how he reacts.

The standoff lasts only a few seconds, but it burns in the dead center of my chest, and I enjoy the feeling. I enjoy it almost as much as I like the victory. I've made him bend, but I'm conflicted about wanting him to break.

I smack my hand on top of the ball and dribble back, letting it bounce at my side on its own while I push my right sleeve back up over my shoulder and run my fingers over the ragged hole in the bottom of the jersey. The guy who put it there had nothing on this one. He also wasn't even close to as…I don't know… interesting, maybe? I didn't hate him nearly as much. I didn't like him nearly as much either, and that's the part I don't know how to deal with. But the first step is to make Tristan trust me out here, on *our* court, so that way I can get just a little piece of it. Without this place, I'll never feel like this is home. I'm gonna need his permission, I guess, and I'm gonna get it the only way I know how—by driving hard and shooting smart, the only two rules one needs in life.

"Post up!"

They all fall into line…even Tristan.

Step one. I'm on my way.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tristan

I barely remember my father. But I remember him telling me that Dub was the only man I could really trust because me and him—we were the same.

I used to think that was true. I believed it, wished it, prayed for it even. It's not true, though. I'm nothing like Dub Lewis, and I never will be. What's strange, though, is for the longest time I felt the sting of self-hatred because I didn't want to be such a disappointment. It felt like I was letting everyone down, like somehow it was a weakness to not have that killer instinct. Every horrible thing I witnessed—every body I helped bury, or weapon I hid, or lie I told to people who really know the truth, but just can't do anything about it—none of it felt good. I didn't enjoy that same numbness Dub had to doing the wrong things. My conscience didn't work that way, or maybe my conscience just existed.

I knew every bit of this was wrong. I know it's wrong. I hate it. I hate my fate. It's there, though. I'm married to it because of the place I was born, the man who fathered me, his friends and his choices, and my mother's weaknesses. All I can do is make the most of it, and maybe find a little happiness somewhere on the fringes.

I'm nothing like Riley. Fuck do I wish I was.

"I can't believe she shaved her head, yo!"

Joker's been talking about it nonstop since we got home from the courts late

last night. While he was fangirling though, all I could think about was how the hell I was going to get her to leave before Dub showed up.

Lauren's always been like a sister to me. She knows what I am, the rules that dictate how I behave. All I had to do was make eye contact with her as the sun was beginning to set and she got it. Her brother got it, too. Somehow, in this place, they've lived in those fringes I only get to visit. They've been safe, and their souls have stayed clean.

Lotus bailed first with Lauren, and DJ goes where they go. The game broke up naturally by then, and Riley ended up walking home with them. Joker almost left too, as if he forgot the entire reason we were there in the first place, staying late and waiting for him to share the good news with Dub…on his birthday.

Dub seemed happy about the cash, almost relieved to have it. Joker started to ask questions, but I shut him up fast. If Dub owes someone for something, we don't want to become part of that collateral. I've been debt free with the Fifty-Seven for my entire life, and I intend to end my life that way, preferably many years from now.

"Why were you so hard on her, man? She's actually pretty good out there, you know?"

Joker's got a crush. He's also distracting himself from the fact that his birthday came and went, and he wasn't initiated. The topic was never brought up, and we spent twenty minutes with Dub out at the courts last night. I've been waiting for him to bring it up, not that I have any answers for him. I'm respected like I'm one of the leaders, but I don't make those decisions. I've never wanted to.

We're both waiting in Joker's car while Riley parks her truck several spots away and jumps in the back to mess with who knows what. I think my friend wants to rush out of here so we can time it just right and have no choice but to walk into the school with her. I want just the opposite. I'd rather sit here, watch her for a little while, and think about the things I can't talk about, not even with my best friend.

He's right—she's a damn good player. She'd dust him on the court in one-on-one, and I'm not so sure I could hang. She's got this drive that I can just see.

It pours out of her and it's like this uniform she can't take off.

"She shaved her fucking head, man," Joker says.

A quiet laugh escapes me, and I can't help but repeat him.

"She shaved her fucking head," I say.

She's settled whatever she's been working on in her truck, and she stands tall in the truck's bed, one hand on the arch of her back while the other runs over her velvet head. Her lips curve up at the touch, like it's still a surprise to her. She exhales hard as her hands move to her hips and her body twists until her eyes find us there watching.

"Shit, she saw us," Joker whispers, as if she can somehow hear us, too.

He slides down in his driver's seat and pulls his hoodie over his head. It's ridiculous.

"Bro, she can see everything you do. Don't be dumb," I say as I slide one leg forward and bend my other knee more, getting comfortable where I am—comfortable with the idea of her and me staring at each other for these weird, longish moments.

I've been chewing on this pen cap, and I bit down hard when her eyes hit mine. My teeth work around the plastic in a circle now, feeling the grooves with my tongue. Joker was right before…when he said she was pretty. She wears a bald head boldly, this sexy badass thing that somehow makes her even more feminine, which I know is exactly the opposite of what she was trying to achieve.

I lift my fingers from the pen I'm holding to my mouth in a small wave, and I can feel my lips barely smiling. At this very moment, something about this right here makes me happy. It's going to end in a blink, but before it does, I let myself have it—the fantasy where I can pretend that this girl and I could get to know each other more than just two people who live on the same street and sometimes play ball in the park.

Her neck moves with a swallow. She doesn't smile or wave back. She bends and lifts her heavy bag to her shoulder, swings one leg over the side of her truck bed, then sits to slide onto the ground. She stares at me as she passes between two cars. She stares at me all the way to the front of our car. She looks at me as

she passes my window.

I keep my eyes on her the entire time, and I swear the air is sweeter when she passes even though my window is rolled up and there's no possible way she and I shared the same air.

"We can go now," I say after enough time has passed to give Riley a good head start.

I grab my bag from between my feet and swing his door open, and he does the same, taking his bag from the back seat before locking his doors and meeting me at the edge of the lot.

"You're afraid of her." He says the words like he's been thinking about them for a while, like he was nervous to say them. As much as we've always been best friends, because of who I am, Joker's always treated me with a little bit of reservation. I would never do anything to hurt him. I hate that who we are—the gang—has that kind of power, the kind to keep two people who are practically brothers on guard enough to hold back the truth.

"Fuck that," I say, because I'm a liar too. Because Joker's loose mouth could get me in trouble. It could lead to someone thinking there's a girl I like who isn't someone's sister or someone who's been around us for a long time.

I am afraid of her. More than that, though, I'm afraid *for* her.

My friend slaps my hand in our usual shake as he heads to the west end of the hallway, and I turn to the right, to the lonely classroom with unfamiliar faces—all but this one that's quickly becoming too familiar.

The office doors are open as I pass, and for some reason, my walk slows. The bell is ringing, and I could use that as an excuse for not stopping, but I stop anyway. Ms. Beaumont is at her desk. I can see the sleeve of her red shirt, her pen writing something on a form—probably someone else's scholarship application. She leans forward just a little, and our eyes meet.

"Tristan! Come in!"

She's standing and moving around her desk, and my pulse is racing wildly. It's hard to breathe, and I can't really control my expression. It feels like seconds pass before I can get my mouth to work, but I know it all happens much faster than that.

“I’m late…I’ll stop by later. Sorry,” I say over my shoulder, veering my direction back down the hall. I won’t stop by later. This momentary lapse was just me dreaming. If I picked up another scholarship application, I’d just need to throw away another piece of paper.

Everyone is in their seats by the time I get to our classroom, and Riley’s bag is planted in the barrier between us. I slide into my spot as the last bell finishes and stretch both of my legs out until I can see the edges of my Vans over the end of my desktop, even from my slouched position.

Ms. Forte has started to walk through the rows of our class, marking her attendance sheet and sliding a composition book out of her stack as she goes. She gets to me and stops, reaching into the middle of the stack to find mine. It’s easy to find—there’s nothing in it. I didn’t even put my name on it, but somehow, she knows where it belongs.

“Tristan.” Her mouth draws a tight, flat line as she tosses my book on my desk. It slaps loudly, making it impossible for others not to turn and look.

Awesome. Just…awesome.

“There literally isn’t an easier assignment in this class. I give you books, and you write in them. I don’t care what it is, son. Ha, I don’t even grade the spelling! I just want you to activate that part of your brain, and to feel what it’s like to put things on paper. I’d take pictures, at this point.”

She looks down at me for an extra second or two because she knows I don’t really care about the consequences. She’s going to milk the drama and hope some of it sinks in and triggers guilt. It won’t work. I’ve been trained to feel nothing in situations like this. I close my eyes as she continues along my row, and I leave them closed for a few more seconds until Ms. Forte finds the one thing that can make me open them again.

“Riley, that’s some hairstyle. Very chic! I like it! What brought that on?”

I pull my pen free from the side pocket of my bag and begin chewing where I left off.

“You should probably ask Tristan about it.”

I squish the plastic cap between my top and bottom molars, and I laugh a little, silently, too. I shake my hand and drag my book toward me and open to the

first page where I scribble my name—my *full* name—Tristan Alejandro Lopez.

Leaning forward, I cradle the book between my forearms on my small desk then glance to the right where Riley is doing the same thing. Her eyes shift just enough from her book to catch me looking at her, so I smirk as I put the pen cap back in my mouth and wave with my fingers. Her focus leaves me and her gaze slowly moves back to her own work, but I keep watching. She knows I am. I know she does, because after a few seconds, she shifts her left palm to the edge of her desk, curling every finger but the one in the middle. I decide this is what I'll draw in my book today.

It only takes me a few seconds to scribble a rendering of her hand flipping me off, so I draw an arrow to it and tag it with her name. Then I spend time shading in her fingernails, even though her real ones aren't polished or long. I noticed, because compared to most of the other girls at South and in our hood, Riley is epically plain. I've only seen her with makeup once so far—the first time she came to the courts. It wasn't like she was all made up to go out or whatever, but she had some black under her eyes and pink on her lips.

I glance at her again, and unlike my pen, hers is busy making words. I wonder if she's writing a story or an essay or if she's writing about me. She isn't drawing pictures; that much I can tell for sure.

I spend the next ten minutes adding lines to my art. They look like sunbursts around her middle finger, and it makes me laugh a little, which draws Ms. Forte's curiosity. I don't try to hide it, and there's a little part of me that hopes she disapproves of my drawing and it somehow gets me kicked out of this class. Instead, though, I get the exact opposite.

"Well, it's progress. You aren't going to be an artist, but at least you won't fail the world's easiest assignment," she says, turning my book toward her for a better view. She glances over to take in the real Riley, which gets Riley's attention.

"What do you think?" Ms. Forte asks, taking my book in her hand and holding it up like a children's librarian would during story time. "Look like you?"

Riley purses her lips and flattens her pen against her book then twists in her

desk to see Exhibit *A*. I'm sure this is a tactic to embarrass me and somehow inspire me to want to try harder, but I don't care that everyone is starting to put their pens down and catch a glimpse of my art, too. Riley stares at it for a few seconds, blinks, then opens her eyes on mine, letting the corner of her mouth crawl inward as if to say "Really, Tristan? That's the best you've got?"

"I mean, if we arranged a session and I had some better tools, I think I could get your cheekbones down a little better." I take my own book back in my hand and look at it quizzically, pretending to be serious.

Riley moves her legs back under her desks and continues writing, her pen working faster now. As Ms. Forte moves down my row, I lean over the desk between us and whisper.

"You writing about me?" My lips pucker a smile that grows when her left knee begins to bob nervously. I don't know why, but I love that I'm getting at her. The faster her knee moves, the quicker her pen inks out words until she finally slams the cover of her book closed, laying the pen on top, like a punctuation.

She leans forward and rolls her head to the side, and her eyes smile, the bright blue winged with crinkles at the corners.

"Yep."

An anxious buzz forms in my lips and I try to keep my smile in place.

"Serious?" I ask, lifting one brow.

Riley's eyes tease me for a second, dimming as she studies me as if she's trying to read my poker hand. She quickly throws her own ace.

"Serious," she says, grabbing her book in her hand and passing it to me.

I look toward the back of the class where Ms. Forte has stepped out the back door, propping it open with her foot while she talks to our principal in the hallway. Hesitantly, I take Riley's book in my hands and look at her sideways, mostly expecting to open her book to see some story about her missing her old home or school or friends. I open the book and flip the first few pages before looking down to see if I've been fooled. My name jumps right out at me.

Tristan is a sexist. It's too bad because I think we could have been friends. I'm not giving up on him entirely, but I'm certainly not letting him off the hook.

I'm going to show up and play on his court every day. And I'm going to keep my head shaved just like this for as long as it takes for him to start treating me like I belong there. To be honest, I don't miss my hair at all. I might not ever grow it back. But he gets zero credit for that.

It goes on, but I get the gist. Fine, I'm sexist. If she knew the truth, that I roll with killers and the worst people on earth, I would worry. I'm good with her thinking this instead. Strangely, though, the part that's not sitting well with me is the statement "could have been friends." We probably could have. I'd probably want more. Maybe she would too. It could have been one of those really sweet stories about how two people meet. Instead, I'm a sexist and somehow, I'm going to have to keep her away from everything bad that happens out there on those courts at night, without us being friends. That part actually makes me sick.

I practically sprint from the classroom when the lunch bell rings. It's not all bad, but that outsider feeling starts to really suffocate me after an hour or two, and I had to rush into the hallway just to breathe. I didn't even bother with my bag. There's nothing in it of value, and I'm just going right back to that classroom in forty minutes.

I make my way out to the half wall I usually find Joker at, but he isn't there. I wait on him for a few minutes, until people quit spilling out of the main exit, and finally give up and stand in the snack-bar line. My stomach is roaring, so I order two plates of fries when I finally get up to the register. I head back to the wall expecting to see Joker there waiting for me. When he's not, I take a seat, straddling the wall with one leg on either side so I can scan most of the area and look for my friend.

My hand plucks fries one by one until I'm nearly sick from eating so many, so fast. I have about half a plate left when I notice Riley stand tall from the table she was sitting at with Lauren and a few of Lauren's friends.

My eyes follow her to the trashcan a few feet away and then to the main office doors, where she slips inside and remains. I pull my phone from my

pocket and message my friend when I don't have any texts from him. I'm sure he ditched, or maybe he decided to spend his break getting high. He always takes some of the product we sell when we're moving something for Dub.

After I hit SEND on my text, I kick my leg over the wall and drop my plate in the trash before heading toward Lauren and the other girls. My hands rest heavily in my pockets. My brown canvas pants ride low on my hips. I look down at my white shoes and grimace at the scuff on one of the toes; I let my eyes pass along the office entrance as I walk by just to see if I can spot Riley inside. My counselor's door is closed, and irrationally I start to imagine the two of them sitting inside, discussing me.

"Why can't you just be nice to the girl, you dumbass?" Lauren smacks one of her school books along my thigh and I jump in response.

"Oww!" I rub my side and scowl at her before sitting down in the seat Riley left open. It's still warm from her body being here. "What is that, a math book?"

She squints at me and mouths for me to *F off.*

"It's an algebra book. I'm in algebra, Tristan. And I'm graduating…with my full degree. And I'm leaving this shithole." She's speaking slowly to me both to mock me and because I've pissed her off.

"Yeah, relax. I know, I get it…you're better than the rest of us, blah, blah, blah." I smirk at her and she breaks into a laugh, hitting me again with her book.

"I didn't say that. And you know I miss as many days as you do in this place. I'm just saying I've got plans beyond here," she says, leaning into me.

I've never said anything to anyone that would lead them to believe I want anything other than to step into Dub's shoes when he's done with them, but I've always gotten the sense that Lauren knows. She and I have a lot in common. Her dad ran with mine, which is mostly the reason she's been so focused on her brother and cousin staying out of the gang's business. Her mom also happens to be my mom's sponsor. Where her mom had a weakness for alcohol, mine liked heroin. They run a thrift store through the church together now. Some of my shithead friends like to make jokes about ex-users selling used shit.

It's never funny.

Lauren and I are woven together in all of the bad places in life, and that

makes it easy to see right through each other, I guess. Kinda like how I know she's probably not going to get very far out of this place after we graduate because even junior college costs money neither of us has.

"You get roped into those scholarship forms from that counselor lady?" I reach over and take a piece of the crust left from her pizza, and she pushes her plate in my direction, encouraging me to take it all.

"I have filled out seven of those things, and oh my God…it took hours!"

I chuckle while I chew, nodding.

"You filled one out?" Her surprise is a little insulting, but really…it's true.

"I threw it out. What am I going to put on that thing? Special skills—I like to push people around so they're afraid of me and I'm amazing at hiding weapons." I stuff the rest of the crust in my mouth and glance to see Lauren's disapproving face. I guess some of this stuff has been building up inside; I don't really air it out much.

"Sorry," I say, sliding out of the seat and taking her tray and the plate she let me finish up to the trash bin and rack. My eyes dart toward the office door a few times on my walk back to the lunch table that everyone but Lauren has now abandoned.

"You don't intimidate people," she says, shaking me out of my visual stalking mode of the last place I know Riley went.

"What?" I scrunch my eyes, not entirely sure what she said.

"I said you don't intimidate anyone," she repeats, which I can only react to with a harsh laugh. "Okay, yeah…people are intimidated by you, but you…yourself? Uh uh. You're kind, Tristan. It's your biggest virtue, and your most pathetic weakness."

"Thanks," I laugh, stretching my arms out and sliding my hands across the table to the other side. I let my forehead fall against the tabletop and close my eyes.

"You could do so much good, Tristan Lopez…" she says as I roll my head to the side then prop it up in my palm, resting on my elbow. "If only you weren't such a goddamned chicken."

My mouth flattens more than it already is with the heavy kick her words give

to my chest, and I'm left staring into her eyes. They slant with pity, and I swim in it for a few seconds before I step back into the life I have—play the part of the bad guy.

I sit up straight, drawing my hands in, palms flat on the table in front of me, and I look down at how much area my fingers cover when they're spread out like this. These hands can do such terrible things. I curl my fingers and knock my right fist on the table as I stand, chuckling. Stepping into Lauren before I leave, I lean down and press one hand on the center of her book. Most people would look down and pray for me to leave at this point, but she matches me stare for stare, blink for blink.

My head leans slightly to the left, and I smirk.

"You don't know shit about me, Lauren. I'm not afraid of anything." I pause, cocking a brow and lifting the corner of my lip just a little more. "How about you?"

My eyes shift from one of hers to the other, and she doesn't flinch despite how close we are. Eventually, she stands without ever breaking our sightline, and with her heels, she's almost my height.

"See?" she begins, glancing past me at something briefly, then coming back to meet my eyes. "Instead of doing something good, you're standing here trying to pick a fight with me."

I breathe in rapidly, twice. I swallow and force myself to draw in my next breath slowly through my nose.

"Riley just left the office. She looks upset. But you've got things to do, don't you? A line to draw for her safety or whatever…isn't that the story you tell?" She laughs softly and shakes her head as her eyes move down my chest, eventually tapping on the center of it with her long, red fingernail.

Lauren leaves me there alone, chuckling more as she pulls her bag up and walks away. I should be offended, or angry. This is where guys like me pound their fists into things and let the rest of their immediate company know how pissed off they are. My jaw flexes, and my hands are fisted tightly, but the only person I really have to be mad at is me. Lauren was just holding up a mirror. The fact that I don't like the person looking back at me is my fault entirely.

Joker still hasn't shown his face, and I'm sure he's high and goofing off by now. The easy choice would be to take off for the rest of the day to go find him and keep him in line. A week ago, that's the decision I'd make. Ten minutes ago, before talking to Lauren, I'd still probably be walking the opposite direction, out the doors and into Miller's streets to find my just-as-doomed friend.

I glance over my shoulder, though, my feet still rooted where Lauren left them. The office doors are closed and Riley is long gone, but my counselor is in there, along with a bunch of pipedreams. Chewing at the end of my tongue I will my body to turn, forcing one step then another until my fingers are wrapped around the office door handle. There's a blast of cool from the air conditioning as I step inside, and the smell of fresh copies stings my nose.

Ms. Beaumont is in her office, but she's occupied with whatever's on her desk. I could still leave unnoticed, but wouldn't that be the easy thing to do? Wouldn't that be running away? Like something a scared person does?

"Got a minute?" My own voice surprises me almost as much as it does my counselor, who jumps in her seat and covers her chest with her palm.

"Tristan…oh man you got me. Yes. Of course!"

She gathers up some folders on her desk, pushing them into a stack. One of them has Riley's name on it, and my eyes must rest there a little too long because she quickly flips them over.

My throat clears.

"I…can I get a new copy of that application?" I hold the inside of my cheek between my back teeth and meet her gaze. My legs are bobbing nervously; I push my feet back under the chair I'm sitting in. It only makes it worse, like a sprinter in starting blocks.

"I messed it up, so now it's just a bunch of scribbled out stuff. I know we have to type it in on the online app in the computer lab, but I can't even read it now, ya know? Ha. Anyhow…"

She's already slid open her side drawer and leaned down to rifle through folders. She comes up with the form quickly, a grin on her face as she places it in front of me. I've never even been in our school's computer lab. I'm such a fraud.

"I'm glad you're here, Tristan. I actually had an idea, and I think maybe it

will help you in your applications," she says.

I suck in air and slide the form toward my body, ignoring my inner voice of doubt that keeps telling me I'm just going to throw it away again. I fold the paper in half, maybe partly thinking that will quiet the voices in my head. It doesn't.

"Yeah," I say to her, hoping to trade the conversation I'm having with myself for one with her.

"I've heard you play a little basketball…not for the school, but with your friends and stuff," she says.

I bite down on my bottom lip and feel my eyelids freeze open and rigid.

"Uh huh," I answer. My pulse is beginning to double its rhythm in anticipation of wherever this is going. Maybe she wants me to think about tryouts and joining the school team. We suck, but I guess I could put up with it for a couple months. It would give me something to talk about on those essay questions. Maybe I'd be a superstar compared to the other guys that tryout… maybe I'd get a scholarship that way. Dub would be proud of this. If I was a baller? That would be okay. This would be an exception that the guys would all overlook.

I'm ready to agree before I really know the terms, but by some miracle I keep my mouth shut until I get the real bite.

"We have a few students…female athletes," she nods quickly while she speaks as if I'm supposed to nod back. I do, agreeing to whatever direction this is going with a small gesture. "As I'm sure you know, we don't have anyone to coach the girls team this year. And without a coach, the team won't be able to form, and one of the girls is quite good. I really think she could play in college, but without her senior year, well…"

Every muscle in my face is working to make my expression look exactly like it did when I walked into this office. My eyes are fighting me, wanting to widen, and my mouth is watering—my stomach a concert of my drumming pulse.

"And I just had this idea…actually…you coming in here sorta sparked it," she says, giggling. I'm laughing too on the outside, but my insides are trying to win over what I can see unfolding. All I had to do was keep walking to class, or

even better, leave to go find my friend. But Lauren put that shit in my head and now here I am, sitting in front of some bright-eyed woman who has an idea that she's spilling out excitedly while I struggle to pay attention. Her words are muted against the protests happening inside my head right now.

"You would be doing it as a volunteer, of course," she finishes, and I don't respond for several seconds, still registering the small portion I actually heard with the bits I'm filling in that my mind made blank.

She's asking me to be the volunteer coach for the South High girls' basketball team. I know who the girl is that's good. I know *every* girl in this school, and only one of them is good. She just happens to be spectacular.

"I'm pretty sure students aren't allowed to do that," I say with a shrug, my pulse slowing down a little with the excuse. I'm pretty sure I'm right, and even if I'm not, having students coach other students feels like a really bad idea.

"I can get an exception. You'll have a supervisor, but he won't really do anything. He'll just observe while he grades, and he'll be there for you to check in with when you need him. We have some leeway because of the district budget, and our staff numbers. It's only because you're seventeen." Of course, she has an answer. My blood warms again, my beating heart kicking off my ribs.

"And he can't just coach?" I throw one more idea out.

She laughs, which means it's not a good idea.

"It's Ron Green. He's in his sixties, and he doesn't know a thing about sports. And he didn't volunteer to stick around after school, he actually gets paid to lock up at night. Not much, but enough to do it," she says.

"I don't know." I exhale and sink into the back of her office chair, that I don't even remember sitting down in to start with. I drag the new, and still quite blank, application into my lap, and I stare at it and try to imagine how any of this goes. Why would she ask me to do this? I know she's heard the things that are said about me and the others like me. Her eyes have grazed over the *X* on my wrist a few times in our past meetings. She is purposefully not looking at it now, though. She's going out of her way to avoid it, conveniently ignoring this big question mark about me in favor of fitting me into a puzzle she's trying to finish. She needs something from me for someone else, I need this for this thing she's

convinced I want—college.

“I’m not sure I really have time…”

“Three times a week, two games a week, eight weeks.” She folds her hands, one palm over the other, resting them on her desk as her mouth pulls tight into a “gotcha” kind of smile.

“Games don’t start right away, so ten weeks,” I say, shrugging and blinking my eyes as if somehow that trumps her.

“Nine weeks. It starts next week.” She reaches into her drawer, which I’m starting to think is a bottomless pit of so very many things, all of them problematic for me. She pulls out a sheet that seems like a calendar, and lays it on the desk between us, the words facing me. “If they make it to the playoffs, it will be a little longer, but think of how good that will make you look?”

“You mean how good it will make that girl look,” I correct.

Her head tilts and she glances at me sideways, one eye smaller than the other.

“How good it will make you *both* look,” she corrects.

My eyes flit up to hers briefly then back down to the schedule. I pull it closer with my finger, then rest my hands in my lap behind her desk, where I can crack my knuckles one at a time, over and over again. I can feel that I’m rocking, not much, but slightly back and forth. I did this when I was a little kid and I had to make a decision. I was never good at it because I knew that saying yes to one thing meant saying no to the other. But what am I saying *no* to here…at least if I say yes to this?

Am I saying no to Dub? To Joker and the other guys? To my dad? I swear the *X* on my skin burns with that thought. I wrap my fingers around my wrist and twist lightly, trying to rub away the sensation.

“Tristan, do you want to go to college? Have you thought about what this could mean for you?”

I quiver at her pointed question and my chin lifts as my eyes snap to hers. The questioning expression on her face is exactly the way I feel inside—it’s so familiar, the look in her eyes. It matches my uncertainty. It feels like my doubt.

“I don’t know,” I say, and just getting those words out causes a spike in my pulse. I shift in my seat to rid my limbs of this instant nervous energy.

“Do you not believe me when I tell you that you can? Are you afraid of wanting to go?”

Her psychology degree is paying off here. Yes and yes, and probably yes to her next seven questions.

“I don’t know,” I say again instead, letting my gaze slide down to her chin. It’s hard to be vague when I look in her eyes.

The wheels of her chair screech against the tiles of the floor, and I flinch but don’t glance up as she moves from her seat. From my periphery, I watch her walk around her office to a small table pushed against the wall to my left. She squares herself with me and leans back, sitting on the table with her arms and ankles crossed.

“If it isn’t this, Tristan, I’m going to find something else,” she says, and I look up enough to catch her stare. “I’m not giving up on you.”

“Don’t make me your project,” I say back quickly. I open my mouth to try to apologize, but I’m not really sorry, so I breathe out and close my lips, shaking my head instead.

“It’s my job,” she says, after a few seconds of silence between us.

She has a really shitty job. It would be easier to build a rocket out of her office supplies than to motivate teenagers at South.

“Do you get, like…I don’t know, evaluated or whatever on how many of us go to college? ‘cause you’re screwed if that’s the case.” I cross my right leg over my knee and thread my fingers behind my neck, stretching my elbows out to the sides.

Ms. Beaumont laughs.

“The only person who evaluates me is me.”

I hold her stare for a breath then laugh as I sit forward again.

“I’m sorry, but that’s really cheesy,” I say, showing a small lift in my shoulders.

She copies me, but the longer she stares at me the more serious the look in her eyes becomes. Things feel a lot less cheesy all of a sudden. They feel…sad.

“If you don’t want to try to make a change this way, Tristan, then I’m going to find another way. For as long as I have access to you, I’m not going to stop.

This road you're on, it's got you so twisted, and I…God, Tristan, I see it. I can smell it in the air when we talk, and I can taste it. It's so sour and bitter, and I know it's making you sick. It's making me sick for you, Tristan. And yeah, I know I have no idea how bad it actually is, but I know more than you give me credit for. I see your map, and I'm begging you to just consider this alternate route I'm showing you. You don't have to go this way, Tristan. You can turn."

I'm sure she can see the sweat on my forehead. I feel it, but I won't reach up to stop it. I won't give it power. The air in here feels thick, like it's squeezing my entire body trying to drown me in the truth she just blew into the room. I'm staring at her waist, at the threadbare spot along the bottom of her red jacket. There's a string barely holding onto a gold button, and it won't take much to pull it away and leave the button without a home. As polished as she presents herself here every day, she's worn and battered too. Maybe she does belong here after all. Maybe…just maybe…this is exactly where she's meant to be.

"Nine weeks," I say, glancing up briefly. I catch her hands fall away to her sides, a hopeful gesture. I look back down.

"Eleven weeks tops."

Her voice cracks.

"Eleven is a lot more than nine," I say through my exhale, as if the time commitment is really the issue. It's committing to *anything* that's the issue—anything that isn't Dub and the Fifty-Seven and Joker and the secrets I know that would topple this entire world.

The bell rings to return to class, and I pull my phone from my pocket one more time. Joker finally responded. He sent a pic of his emoji, smoking weed. Figured.

This is my road. This is my travel mate. Everything leads to the same disappointing place. I'm capable of so much more.

"Okay," I say before I have time to play out the other side in my head. That other side is based in fear and habit. It's hopeless. And it isn't brave.

"Tristan, this is so great!"

Ms. Beaumont is already buzzing around her desk, gathering a packet of materials. She pulls the phone from its receiver and begins to dial the front desk,

getting the secretary.

“Jaime, I’m going to need to get some consent forms, and I’ll need some time with Gary,” she says, her eyes whizzing around from one thing to the next. Gary is the principal. His name is Dr. Normal, which is why everyone—even the students—call him Gary. His formal name and title sounds like a super villain. He’s too nice for this school. His car has been jacked twice, and now he drives this really old station wagon that doesn’t start half the time. He’s been at South for three years.

“Can I just pick this stuff up after school? I need to get back,” I say, feeling this odd pressure in my chest. I know it’s not because I’m worried about being late, but I tell myself it is just to get me out of this room.

“Yes, perfect. I’ll see you at three.” Ms. Beaumont waves me out without looking, and I leave before I can hear the secretary’s shocked reaction to her idea of having me coach girls. Most of the teachers in this place work their asses off trying to keep the guys away from the girls’ activities. She invited me in, though.

I catch Lauren’s eyes just before she heads into her science class. I used to have that class with her before I was moved—before I became Ms. Beaumont’s mission. Lauren winks at me and sticks out her tongue through her wide smile because she thinks I went chasing after Riley. In a way, I guess I did. I didn’t go in there entirely for her, but if that’s not where I’d seen her leave in tears, I’m not sure I would have. Not today.

I glare at Lauren, but she doesn’t notice; she’s already gone. I don’t know why I’m compelled to save face in front of her anyway. I work so hard trying to show people I don’t give a damn about my life or my future. I try so hard that I think maybe I convinced myself I didn’t. There’s a sliver in me that does, though. I feel it beating now in the pit of my stomach. It’s this victim, kicking and screaming while I drown it one day at a time, making it quieter and quieter until I almost don’t hear it at all.

Someone gave it a voice, though. It’s loud today—loud now.

I pull open Ms. Forte’s door, and Riley’s back is to me, her skin pink along her neck, blotchy from crying and grabbing at herself, no longer protected by a thick wave of hair because she shaved it all off—because of me. Her thumbnail

is caught between her front teeth and her lips are parted while her glassy eyes stare off ahead. My bag is right where I left it, and hers is on the ground next to mine this time, instead of in the seat between us.

I slip into my seat, leaving my legs to the side so my body is facing her. Almost everyone is here, and Ms. Forte is going to start talking soon. I have seconds to speak without it being a class interruption—without anyone but Riley hearing me. They tick away until there's almost nothing, and with barely a breath left in my chest I eek them out.

"I volunteered to coach your team. You'll have a team. I'm the best they could do, but…you'll have a team. I just thought you might want to know."

I don't say it like I'm excited, because I'm not. I'm dreading it, mostly. In the seconds since I agreed to do it my mind has been flooded with all of the things it's going to interfere with—of the things I won't be there for and that Dub will turn to someone else to do. They're all awful things that I don't want to do, but they're my job. I've *always* been the one. I might get replaced and lose my place in the ranks.

Riley blinks, her long lashes splashing away a tear. Her smooth head and delicate profile is so soft, and even from the side I can see the crystal blue color of her eyes. They're like diamonds. Her lips draw in lightly and she puffs out a breath, a release. She doesn't look at me, and I'm glad. I think if she did right now, that voice inside would get even louder, and I can't take that much conflict in my soul. As it is, I've justified doing some good to offset all of the bad things I've been a part of.

But seeing her reaction makes me feel right. I've done something right. I've made thousands of choices since I was old enough to exercise free will. Other than the rush I used to get from being on lookouts when I was nine and ten, I have never felt like I do right now, sitting in this dumb desk that's too small for my body, in this classroom that's too advanced for my education. Somewhere there was a fork and I went in a different direction from the one I always choose. Why am I desperate to go back and choose differently?

Ms. Forte leads us through a psychology lesson for the rest of our class time. I fade in and out of her lecture, but the parts I catch feel incredibly close to

home. We're learning about the differences and similarities between psychopaths and sociopaths, and the entire lesson feels like a checklist for Dub. When Ms. Forte passes out a self-evaluation quiz, I take it first for Dub, answering things like I know he would. Lack of empathy, inability to feel remorse, habitual lying and disregard for rules or law—every trait is him, including the big one that elevates him to psychopath.

Do you have any close bonds, including to family members?

Dub doesn't. I've seen him laugh through funerals, and I don't think there's a single soul he wouldn't feed to the sharks, and that includes me. I used to think he was close to my dad, that they were like brothers, but I think they were just the same and that's all their connection was based on. If lives depended on it, they both would have pulled their guns and shot at one another without a blink. They'd probably both end up dead in the duel.

Such a waste.

I start to wonder where I fall on this scale, and if I'm just trying not to be like Dub even though I've practically been raised to be just like him. I struggle this time through, and there are some traits I answer in ways that seem completely heartless, resounding yeses to *criminal versatility*, *juvenile delinquency* and *promiscuity.* We're given girls in the Fifty-Seven. They're rewards, basically, and it's almost like this arranged pairing when we're old enough to get a hard on. Girls in the gang are desperate to belong to someone, and the men cheat as much as they want. Girlfriends and wives even accused of cheating or just disrespecting their man are punished. Two of Dubs are gone, and I never asked about it because I know the truth in my gut. It bothers me, and the more I think about my answers, the more I think I'm just afraid of being anything other than cold—because warm gets me noticed and noticed gets me gone.

I close my eyes and think about the characteristics on this list and what I would say about myself if I grew up in, say, San Diego or some small town in Montana. If I had the choice, would I turn to crime? Would I do some girl in a parked car because my friends all did if I didn't think they'd beat the shit out of me for passing her up?

Would I be coaching a girls' basketball team if I wasn't getting anything out

of it for me?

The afternoon bell dings before I get to finish my evaluation, so I fold it in half and stuff it in my backpack where it will sink to the bottom and become forgotten. I don't actually think I'm either of those things—a sociopath or a psychopath. I think I'm just surrounded by them, and I think I'm thinking too much for a guy who doesn't really have a choice about the people he hangs out with.

I swing my bag over both shoulders and turn to exit the room. Any peace I had with my fate explodes the minute I feel her arms wrap around my shoulders and neck.

"Thank you." Riley's voice is a meek whisper, and her chin pushes into the crook of my neck when she speaks.

I'm frozen with surprise, and maybe more with something else. The instant she touches me my mind is zapped with this intense clarity. I'm nothing like any of them—Dub…my dad…even Joker. I want some other life so badly I can almost feel myself in it. I feel it in the way her air tickles at my neck as she stutters her breath. It's in the way she fits against me as my hands slowly rise and flatten on her back. My heart is literally tapping out a distress call and hunting for an escape. Anything, as long as this isn't the only time I ever get to hold this girl.

Her hold loosens, so I do the same. She isn't some reward, and I would never trap her. She moves away from me without even looking, and all I'm left to do is take in her raw honesty as she runs the butt of her hand along her cheeks to erase her overwhelming emotion. That was a different girl than the one who marched home and cut off her hair just to make a point. That was a girl who almost lost the only way she had to get something she truly wants.

And now I'm the guy who gets to help her. I'm walking two paths beginning right this minute, and I can't let them cross. The collision would be deadly.

CHAPTER SIX

Riley

"Just because I'm tall does not mean I'm athletic," Lauren says.

I offered to pick her up for school this morning. She's hit her limit for days she's allowed to miss. I've never missed a single day of school, so it's hard for me to imagine. I don't think she misses for fun, though. I think that's an act, because I've seen her working on homework at lunch. She cares about it more than someone who's coasting. Her brother gets to school early to help in the cafeteria, and her mom can only make the drive once. She was stressed about it yesterday, so I said I'd drive her for the rest of the year.

She wasn't expecting the strings attached. I feel a little guilty about them too.

"Being on a team of some sort looks good when you apply for college." I rifle around her bedroom while I talk and pull a pair of shorts from a drawer. She snags them out of my hand and tosses them in the corner.

"Riley, I never would have become your friend if I knew you were going to rope me into some running shit. You know what? Forget it…I'll walk my ass to school," she says, zipping up her backpack and walking out of her room.

I grab the shorts she threw in the corner and pick up one of the several T-shirts I found and she threw on the floor.

"School is six miles. You'll exercise less playing basketball with me three times a week," I say, catching up to her just as she opens her front door. I step

out and wait while she locks it, then hold up the clothes I stole.

“Riley. I said no,” she says. Her head leans to the side, which means I think maybe I have wiggle room.

“Yeah, but it’s not a hard no,” I say as I walk backward to my truck.

Lauren’s hands rest on her hips and her backpack slides from her shoulder and dangles from her elbow. She huffs and looks to her right, eventually laughing. It’s not a happy kind of laugh, but I think it’s the giving-in kind.

“I regret you,” she says, shirking her bag back up on her shoulder and pointing at me as she moves forward.

“You love me,” I smile, opening the driver’s side door.

“I hate you. And I’m not good, so don’t expect much.”

Lauren slides in on her side and drops her bag on the floor between her knees. She’s wearing boots, which means I’m going to need to get her shoes for tryouts today.

“Stop smirking.” She jerks her seatbelt and buckles it sloppily, swearing under her breath.

I wait for her to finish and before I back out of her driveway I pause and force her to look me in the eyes.

“Thank you,” I say.

I mean it, sincerely. If I can’t somehow put together a team for my senior year, then years of hard work are going to be for nothing and my goals will die a harsh and instant death.

Lauren purses her lips and her eyes scowl, but her features ease eventually as she exhales through her nose.

“You’re welcome.”

She means it sincerely, too. Even kicking and screaming.

“You get to show your hair to your dad yet?” she asks during the drive.

I start to laugh then palm my head, remembering the feel of my dad’s hand in the very same place just this morning.

“He saw it this morning. It took him six bites of breakfast before he noticed. Wanna know what he said?” I muse to myself just thinking about my dad’s humor as my friend nods for me to share. “He said this should cut down on

shampoo costs and shower time. Then he grunted out a smile and ate his toast."

We move through the last intersection on our way to the school, both laughing at my dad's reaction compared to the one Lauren says her mom would have.

"I guess our parents want us to look like them," she says, busting out a laugh. "My mom's hair is long and silky, and your dad's is…"

"Yeah…you're right. He's bald," I say, smiling.

I don't think that's why he wasn't shocked. I actually think a part of him was, but if the biggest hurdle he has in raising a teenage girl as a single dad is the fact that she shaves her head, then I think he's relieved.

I was a little crazy by the time I got to Ms. Beaumont's office yesterday. I went in to find the principal because I'd heard he was also the athletic director, and I'd seen the list posted for the boys' basketball tryouts but nothing else. Lauren's brother was the one who told me that they didn't have funding for girls, so I went in armed with everything I know about Title Nine and equal opportunity to play.

Ms. Beaumont heard my briefly rehearsed speech, the one I'd spent the hour before piecing together in my head. Then she told me there was no money to hire a coach, and South teachers can't volunteer because it violates their contract. The only solution was to play on the boys' team—the sucky one that Tristan and Paul and every other decent player out on the park courts refuses to join.

I don't know why Tristan volunteered. I didn't dare ask when he told me right before class. I've never really felt a wave of relief like that, one that smacks me in the chest and knocks my breath out from my body, but that's what happened when he told me he was coaching. It was like my spine was this messed-up stack of cups and somehow, with one word, he righted them all and I could stand straight again. It left me feeling really fragile, and I didn't want to say anything stupid to make him change his mind.

The student lot is full, so I cruise around the drive and pull next to the curb under a tree across the street from our school. Tristan is sitting on the concrete wall just off school grounds. It surrounds a dirt lot piled with construction debris and trash. I should talk to him, with a clear head, but I don't feel nearly as steady

as I'd like to. I still feel tingly inside, anxious for him to follow through.

"If I go through all of this and I get cut, I'm going to be pissed." Lauren slams the door behind her and I laugh to myself as I kick open my door to exit.

"I'll be happy if more than five girls come out for the team. From what I hear, there won't be enough to cut," I say, grunting as I lift myself up over the edge of my truck bed.

I slide my arms through the straps for my backpack and grab my dad's old duffel bag in my free hand. I managed to find it in one of our remaining boxes this morning, and I'm thankful I didn't have to bring my basketball shoes and clothes in a grocery bag.

My gaze catches Tristan before I jump down from the side of my truck. His heels are knocking against the wall in a steady rhythm, and the cord from his earbuds winds down his black T-shirt. His hair pokes out from the sides and back of a gray beanie, and he's nodding to the same beat that his feet move to.

In a way, he seems so isolated like this. But he doesn't seem unhappy. It's actually the happiest I've seen him since that first day we met. His lips are almost smiling, and whatever the song is, it must be one he likes because every few seconds his mouth moves as if he's uttering lyrics.

"Quit ogling the coach," Lauren says, smacking the top of my shoe.

"I'm not," I laugh, internally realizing that yeah…I maybe was. I leap down next to my friend and we both begin walking toward the school. I try to hide it when I glance Tristan's direction as we cross the street, but I do a poor job of it and Lauren catches me.

"You need to be careful there," she says.

I just roll my eyes and mutter, "Whatever," but before our feet hit the main walkway into school, she grabs my arm and urges me to face her.

"No, Riley. Not whatever. This is like what I told you about locking your door. This isn't one of those things that you get to laugh off. When it comes to Tristan Lopez, be careful there." Lauren's eyes are frozen open on mine and her lips are tightly sealed. She's become instantly serious, so I nod.

"Okay." I shrug, and she repeats my *okay* like we're signing a contract with our acknowledgements.

The first bell rings, and Lauren tugs her bag against her shoulder tightly as she walks backward and points at me.

“Good,” she says, her expression bending into something a little less rigid, but not by much. “I’ll see you at lunch…and hey, maybe we can just eat lunch today rather than forming some other plan that involves me having to sweat, yeah? One activity is enough for me.”

I smile and breathe out a laugh, and she finally breaks into a smile too.

“You love me,” I shout now that she’s several steps away.

“Not even close, honey!” She turns as she responds, looping her arm through another girl’s. I recognize her from the courts, too. I don’t remember her name, but since Lauren accepted me, the other girls seem to as well.

I adjust my grip on the duffel bag and look to the side where Tristan hasn’t moved from the wall. We start class in minutes, but he seems to have no intention of hurrying. I wonder if he’ll be there today—*I wonder if he’s backing out of volunteering.*

I’m about to walk over to him when he kicks away from the wall and pulls his phone from his pocket to read a message. He takes his earbuds out and rests them over his shoulder as he looks down then up a few times, like he’s waiting for someone. His feet travel in slow circles, almost like he’s nervous all of a sudden, and suddenly our eyes meet and he stops moving.

“Hi,” I mouth, lifting my hand but only as high as my waist. Tristan doesn’t wave back, but I know he sees me. We’re too far to talk, but close enough to see some details, and I see the slight down turn in his mouth. He glances to his right, then his left before his eyes come back to mine. He looks like a kid caught with his sister’s Barbie doll and a pair of scissors, unsure of what to say or how to react. I should just go to class, but it feels unfinished to just leave without talking to him.

I take a step forward, and his chin drops to his chest as his palm holds his phone in front of his eyes. An older SUV pulls up next to him and he turns without acknowledging me and climbs inside, shutting the door as it drives off. I take a few more steps, my pace a little faster as if I could catch them. By the time I get to the end of the building the street is empty in both directions. The

only sounds are of birds chirping in the single tree that grows amid the pile of junk in the dirt lot. It's fallen over, but somehow it still manages to be green and form branches.

Tristan slips into class thirty minutes late. We're journaling, and I haven't written a thing. I'm the victim of having too much on my mind.

He takes his seat and drops his bag at his feet then pulls the beanie from his head as our teacher approaches.

"Sorry," he says, a little breathless. He runs his hand through his hair a few times, unruffling the twists and curls. He leans to the side and glances at me as he reaches into his pocket for a pass, handing it to Ms. Forte. She doesn't bother to read it before she crumples it and puts it in her own pocket, but I can tell from one quick peek that it's blank.

"Maybe some words today, huh?" She sets his book down and looks at me as she turns and passes my desk, tapping on my book as she passes.

"Oh, yeah…sorry," I say quietly, not that she's stuck around to hear my response.

I have pages filled. Next week I'll need a new book. One day of nothing won't hurt me. I lean forward until my head rests in my palm, and I push up my cheek until my right eye is forced to close. I put my pen on the paper and begin with a dot, not sure what word it's going to become until the ink begins to draw.

Where did you go?

I grip the pen in my fist and slowly slide my book to the edge of my desk until the side I've written on hangs over the edge. Turning my head, I wait for Tristan to notice. Our eyes connect first, and I look down at my paper for him to follow. His head rotates to the side and his lips move slightly as he reads. His eyes come back to mine, and I quietly return my book back in front of me while I study every small movement in his face. He doesn't blink, but his lips stretch and his jaw flexes. With a furrowed brow he looks down at his own book and begins to write, holding his pen still for a few seconds just like I did.

Family. Had to help with something.

He lifts his book and looks over my head to make sure nobody is seeing. His answer is vague, and it feels made up, and the twisty feeling has a tighter hold on my chest, making it hard to get a full breath.

Is something wrong?

I slide my book to the edge of my desk again and tap on the pages, and his mouth curls with a tiny, breathy laugh as he reads. His eyes flit to mine, and he shakes his head before looking back at his own book to write.

Everything is fine.

He starts to lift it for me to read but I lean enough to the left that I can see it fine. I smile at him and mouth "good." He nods in return, then turns his focus back to his book and I stare again at mine. The knot is still heavy in my stomach, and I know why it's there. It's there because I'm afraid this is all his way of setting the stage to bail on me. I'm afraid to get comfortable because I've had setbacks already. I should be playing for a bigger public school with a better team, but I'm here—where we can afford to live and where school boundaries are law, and where private schools are far and cost more than college. I need this team to work, and I need to be amazing.

Are you backing out?

I write my question quickly and prop my book up and twist in my seat, getting not just Tristan's attention, but that of a few people near him. His head jerks up and he squints, eventually looking at the girl who sits behind him. She shrugs and I pull my book back into my chest while I wait for his response. His forehead wrinkle relaxes slightly and his lip ticks up on the side as he leans over his book to write.

Is that an option?

He turns his book to face me and I read with raised eyebrows that fall low as soon as I finish. I look up to meet his gaze, and he begins to laugh silently.

"Kidding," he whispers.

"Tristan, I'm just glad to see you've moved on from pictures," Ms. Forte says from the back of the classroom.

I tuck my chin to my chest and begin to scribble out the evidence of my

questions with slow circles on the page, as if my conversation with Tristan is something that needs to be hidden.

"I prefer to use the term *illustrations*," Tristan says, his reaction the exact opposite of mine. I close my eyes and smile, and when I open them and glance his way, he's grinning wide, his teeth showing. It somehow lights up the room, and I wonder if anyone's ever seen it before. I feel like if they had, it would be all anyone talked about. Nobody has told me about Tristan Lopez's smile—not even Lauren, so maybe it's something just for me. He bites his bottom lip and shakes his head, amused at himself, then turns a page in his book and begins to draw. Before Ms. Forte collects our books, he reaches across the desk between us and his fingertips brush my elbow. I flinch a little before he hands me his book. I stack it on top of mine but leave the page open. He's drawn the basketball court and dotted out plays with positions marked. He's also written my name for every *X*, which makes me laugh and also worry.

"I'm not expecting much," he says with his shoulders high and his mouth pulled into a tight-lipped grin. I close his book and hand them to our teacher as she passes. Then I turn to the side and lean in closer to him.

"I am."

Our eyes hold on for a long breath or two, and I try to say something with mine. I try to convey exactly how important this is to me, and I think he gets it. He's quiet for the rest of the day.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tristan

Nothing like a ton of unwanted pressure piled onto something you're already dreading. Riley has expectations, which I…well…expected. Waking up this morning, my only hope was to meet Dub at the corner by my school to pick up the keys to the storage locker in the warehouse district.

I didn't think he'd be late. I didn't foresee him giving me a bag of dirty hunting knives, and I didn't plan on going back to the storage place with him to move things before an inspection.

I carried bloodied knives in my backpack all day. I came in through the cafeteria this morning—after school started—to avoid the metal detectors, and I ditched my notebooks in the backseat of his car to make room. I solved his problem and took my orders just like the good little boy I've always been.

I've texted Joker seven times to come to the gym. He has to take my bag and finish the job because I can't, and the fact that my rep depends on him doing something right scares the hell out of me. I don't have another choice, though.

That's a lie.

There is another option, I am just choosing to ignore it this time around. I could blow this off and leave Riley hanging, head off into my normal uniform of quiet seventeen-year-old guy who cleans up bloody messes. I probably should.

"Dude, I'm sorry, there was this cat…" Joker huffs out as he jogs around the

corner.

He rests his hands on his knees and bends forward, and I wait for him to catch his breath, and when he finally stands I hoist my bag from the ground and shove it at him.

“I’ve gotta get inside.” I turn my back and shake my head.

“Don’t you wanna hear about the cat?” he pants.

I scrunch my eyes tightly, then pinch the bridge of my nose before looking back at him.

“No, not really, Joke. I just want you to take the shit away and get it done.”

I’m short with him, which isn’t really abnormal, because Joker has a tendency to frustrate me. I love him like a brother, but he has always pushed my buttons. He can’t focus, and he forgets things, which is why the fact that I’m leaving *this* up to him has my stomach so sick. But there’s something else in his head, eating at him right now. He usually just calls me a dick and moves on after I’m cold with him, but there’s a shade to his eyes that looks hurt and maybe nervous.

“I’m sorry, man…it’s just, I have to do this for school, and my mom’s proud and you know how that goes. I’m under a lot of pressure, and I hate not being able to take care of Dub’s things. I didn’t mean to take that out on you though, especially when you’re helping,” I say, holding my hand out for him to slap.

He swallows out a smile and grabs my hand before slapping it twice like we always do when we say goodbye. I fed Joker the same story everyone gets who finds out what I’m doing. I don’t share that I had a choice, that I agreed to this. That would bring my loyalty into question.

“I get it, yeah,” he says, his feet sliding backward as he holds my bag up in his right hand. I can hear the metal blades move inside.

“The shovel’s in our garage, and my mom’s at church, so anywhere on the side of the house is fine,” I say, reviewing the directions I gave him earlier over the phone. I’ve buried dozens of Dub’s knives and two of his guns in my yard over the years. They don’t stay there long, even though our house has never been searched. Keeping things on the move is always better, just in case, and I don’t like the idea of my mom taking the fall. I’ll move them back to storage after

tomorrow’s inspection.

“I’ll get it done, Tristan. You can count on me,” Joker says.

Our eyes linger on each other for a breath, guilt stabbing me inside and something tormenting my friend behind his gaze.

“Thanks,” I finally say, breaking the long pause.

I reach behind me for the gym door and Joker nods with his mouth a tight line. I wait as he turns and slides my bag over his shoulder, clutching the heavy bottom against his side like a football as he begins to jog away. I don’t know where his car is, and I don’t know if he plans to run the entire way rather than drive just to cover a trail, but I do know something’s not right.

My back is to the gym when I pull the door open, and I spin as I enter, taking a deep breath to clear my head of what I just felt and make space for what I’m about to feel. My eyes go right to Riley, to her long legs stretched out in a *V* in the center of the court, socks pulled up her calves and wrinkled shorts gathered just above her knees. She’s wearing that same shirt she did out on the courts with the sleeves rolled up over her shoulders. She’s stretching and pointing her toes toward Lauren, who I have not seen wear clothes like that since we were kids. Seven or eight other girls are lingering near the drinking fountain, not sure what do to, and half of them are in jeans. My “supervisor” is also nowhere to be found. Figures.

I take in air until my lungs are so full it burns. Then I blow out hard enough to puff my cheeks. This is gonna be rough.

Riley looks up at me mid-sentence to Lauren. They’re both laughing and her mouth closes on the sound as I step up. They were talking about me.

“Hey…Coach,” Lauren says, coughing out a laugh when she’s done.

I lean my head to the side and glare, but Riley’s whisper takes my attention to her.

“Stop it, you promised,” she says to her friend.

“Promised what?” I fold my arms and look down at her as she leans back on her palms and brings her legs together, pulling one knee up, but swaying it side to side as she glances up at me. Her shorts have slid up her thigh, and that draws my gaze there for a split second, and the vision of my hand beginning at her

knee and traveling up sinks in to all of my weakest places.

"That she wouldn't make fun of you for doing this for me," Riley says, and I flinch slightly at that very last part.

For me.

For…her.

I did do this for her. It was supposed to be for me and some future I know I really don't have a prayer's chance at having, but honestly? If Riley wasn't the one who needed this…if she weren't involved, I'm not so sure I would have said yes to any of it.

"You can make it up to me by getting those girls over there to come stretch. If that's it, we're not having cuts, so maybe talk to the ones in jeans about what to wear next time, too," I say, ending with a sigh and my palm rubbing on the side of my face.

"Fine," Lauren whines. She drags her feet in and I notice her shoes. They look like running shoes, and I'm pretty sure they're too small. Lauren's feet have always been big, and when we were little, before she got all fashionable and shit, we used to share.

"Wait," I say, stepping on the heel of my right shoe and pulling it free, then doing the same to the left. I kick them toward Lauren.

"Gross," she says, scrunching her nose.

"Oh get over it. You know your toes are curled under your feet in those things. Put on my damn shoes," I say, rolling my head to the side already exhausted from battling with her. If I have to do this with the other girls I'm never going to make it. They can play barefoot. Fuck it.

Lauren sneers at me, but she takes my shoes and trades out the ones she's wearing, handing them to Riley who runs over to the side of the court and drops them by the wall. She takes a ball from the rack and dribbles her way toward me, crossing it through her legs a few times without looking. She handles it well. It's kinda sexy, honestly.

"So be real. Are these girls going to be any good at all?" she says, catching the ball at her hip and turning to look on at them with me.

"Not a chance," I snicker. "Lauren will be decent. She's tall and strong, and

she's athletic. The rest of them, though? I don't think they've done anything since field day in fourth grade."

"Ooof," she breathes out, bouncing the ball once in front of her, catching it at her chest, and then turning to face me. It's like we're having a private meeting. Her feet are close to mine, and if she dropped this ball, I could grab her waist and pull her closer. Her waist is thin, and I've seen the curve of her stomach muscles when she lifted the bottom of her shirt to wipe the sweat from her face. Smooth, golden skin that I'm suddenly imagining in one of those swimsuits on those models in the swimsuit edition of my *Sports Illustrated*.

My eyes come up from her chest to her face, and I shrug not even caring that I was caught. Her cheeks are pink, and she hasn't run enough for it to be from anything but blushing.

"What's the plan?" She moves right to business, which is for the best.

I probably should have really thought of a plan. I've honestly got nothing. I've never run a practice, and the only thing I've ever played is street ball, which I'm guessing won't fly in here. I don't see these girls pushing each other to the ground and driving to the basket like I would or like Lotus or even like Riley. I think before we do anything, I'm going to need to see exactly what we've got.

"Let's run some layups, do some passing drills, and maybe set up a really simple play?" My brow arches at that last part with doubt that it's possible, but Riley buys in with this sureness that makes me wonder if there's anything she won't bully her way through.

"Sounds good," she says, jogging to the other girls and repeating my directions with a lot more detail and authority than I provided. She doesn't really need me here. She could run this entire thing by herself. But I'm glad that there's some district policy out there that requires a separate coach, and I guess I'm glad that the teachers are apathetic and not willing to volunteer.

It takes almost half an hour to get the other girls organized and up to speed on the most basic rules of the game. Two of them are here to earn a PE credit, and they insist on doing nothing but sitting on the bench. It leaves me with seven semi-willing players, with only one—Lauren—that offers any help to Riley at all.

But Riley…she doesn't really need it. No matter where she's at on the court, her hands lay the perfect touch on the ball. Where the other shots rattle, hers hums. I've never been to a museum or anything like that, but her body is like those white statues I've seen pictures of in books. Her body is all curves and skin, and when she shoots, her fingers pose in the air above her head as if there's some sort of magic thread that connects the very tips to the ball, guiding it the rest of the way when it leaves her hands.

She's been coached well, and everything she's done out here looks great on paper—I'm sure college scouts love her on a checklist and a highlight reel. But I wonder what happens if she's truly challenged. She's going to face girls in our district with schools that are all about basketball. Those teams make cuts to get to the cream of the crop, and the guards on those teams push hard—they play on the streets. They've taken what they know about ball in here and applied the rules of the streets to their game. It's different, and Riley needs a little more edge if she wants to compete with that.

I give maybe five directions all day, guidance more than anything on what drills to run next, and Riley takes over for the rest. I'm only standing here because I want to look like I'm involved if the principal or Ms. Beaumont walks in, but honestly, I could go sit on the bleachers and play a game on my phone the entire time and this practice would run exactly the same.

I could babysit.

They've moved on to passing drills with layups, and so far, Riley's the only one to make her shots. Lauren's come close, and for her it's just a matter of shaking off some rust. By the tenth trip through—the fifteenth time the ball has been thrown over the backboard completely—I decide it's enough for one day.

"Looks good, guys. Ummm, yeah…" I clap a few times just to get them to stop, widening my eyes when they connect with Lauren's.

She laughs and mouths, "I told you so."

"I have schedules, and I guess the school or district or someone needs you to take home the waivers and have someone fill them out with insurance and medical stuff and things like that," I ramble as I lead them toward the bleachers where I set the stack of papers down. I grab the one from the top before anyone

sees it, crumpling the stained sheet and stuffing it in my pocket. The papers were in the bag with the knives for a while today, and I didn't notice the smudge mark earlier. If Riley saw that and figured out what it was…maybe that would be a good thing. Maybe she needs to see.

"Bring them back tomorrow, I guess," I say with a small shake of my head.

I don't really know what I'm supposed to do with the forms, and Riley and Lauren are the only two girls I've heard speak in the hour we've been practicing in here. The rest of the team members grab at the papers, and Riley forces them in the hands of the two girls who swear they will never play. I can already hear the boys outside banging balls into the wall, anxious to get inside. They practice later, because there isn't really enough space to run both teams at once. The guys have enough for both a varsity and a junior varsity squad, even though both teams suck ass. Any guy who's worth it plays on the courts around here.

"I am not riding home like this, Riley. You're just gonna have to wait," Lauren says, pulling my shoes from her feet and tossing them to me one at a time. I slip them on my feet as she does.

"It's fine. I'll take you home after you change," Riley says, glancing from my feet to Lauren's, probably a little surprised that we wear the same size.

"Lady, I'm showering. So you can wait for twenty minutes, that is…if you want me to do this crap again tomorrow." Lauren stands with her boots in one hand and her bag in the other. There aren't lockers to leave things in—the PE ones ripped from the walls when the regular ones were taken out.

"That's fine. I'll shoot around," Riley says.

She dribbles back out to the court as I watch Lauren's back fade and disappear behind the locker-room door until Riley and I are alone. The boys will come in any minute, so this time is short—both a relief and…not so much a relief. The ball bangs from the rim behind me, the first time one of her shots has made that sound all day, and I turn to tease her about it, but stop when I see she shot it from way behind the three-point line.

"That's a good distance," I say, walking up.

She shrugs as she jogs by me to get her ball only to dribble out and take the shot again. It *clangs* off the rim in the same spot as before.

“You’re just tired. Full strength I bet you make that shot,” I say. This is the most I’ve talked all afternoon. I want to praise her for some reason, give her an out for missing what is really not an easy shot.

“I know,” she says.

My mouth hangs open for a skip, and she smirks, turning and shooting again, this time from the area next to me, a little farther than before. The ball crawls in, barely.

“You have a lot of confidence,” I say, rubbing my hands together while I debate whether or not I’m going to test her. I know she’s trying to tempt me into it. I’m just not sure if this is Riley’s way of flirting or if it’s only about basketball.

“I should,” she says, passing the ball hard at my chest, and pushing me over the edge as it snaps into my open palms. I played *with* her on the court. Nobody out there really challenged her. One-on-one is an entirely different game—nobody to pass to, no excuses, every miss on your shoulders and the blame comes down to your shot, your speed, and your aggressiveness.

I laugh quietly, letting the ball bounce in front of me a few times while I roll my long-sleeved T-shirt up to my elbows, then lick my palms and run them on the bottoms of my shoes one at a time for traction. I kick the ball up to my hands and dribble toward her.

“You’re good,” I say, nodding. I acknowledge that she is because that’s also her problem. It’s her weakness. More than overconfidence, Riley is actually cocky about her game. She thrives off the frustration of others. I saw it out on the courts when she made some of my boys look like fools. I’m sure a lot of that goes with the territory of being the outsider. It’s why she shaved her head—a girl breaking into the boys’ club and all that. She needs to bring more than that, though; she has to play with more than some chip on her shoulder. Those girls are going to be just like her, only they’re going to have fight in their step.

She follows me out to the foul line and I turn my back to the hoop and bounce the ball to her.

“First to ten,” I say, studying her eyes. My expression hardens, and she follows.

“You want a head start?” she asks.

The ball pounds on the court to her left as her lip curls on one side. I’ve known her a week and I’ve already decoded her arrogant smile. It draws one out of me. I keep my eyes on hers as a challenge, but I’m mostly listening. She has a pattern—everyone does. It’s one of those things a person can only learn when they spend late nights out on the asphalt with their best friend, ears tuned to hear everything, because that’s the only way someone can know if danger is coming. The ball is like a clock, her timing being rehearsed over and over before she actually does anything. She jerks once, trying to get me to react, and I open up on the left ready to match her moves.

She doesn’t go, and she laughs a bit at my response. It was the right one. I’m getting her timing. That was a rehearsal. Her dribble slows back down and her body vibrates with the movement of her arm and hand pushing the ball down. The sound steadies before it picks up, like a wind-up toy ready to be let loose. I wait for her to move again, this time to the right. She takes a few long strides then shortens up, ready to pull up for a jump shot, but I’m right there to block it.

“Damn it!”

I laugh silently as she chases me, and by the time I post up top, her face is red. It’s not from the heat or exertion—she’s pissed. She’s so mad all she sees is the ball. She’s not watching my shoulders or the shift in my hips. She’s zeroed in on the leather and the black lines and that tiny hole where air goes in. She’s practically memorizing the number of textured dots on the ball’s skin. I keep my arm out and begin to drive a split second before I bring the ball with me, and it’s enough to make her lose her balance and stumble trying to catch up to me. I make an easy layup, then pass the ball to her.

“Go on, take it up top,” I say, trying to hold in my urge to add a little trash.

Riley bounces the ball hard once and stops it at her waist as she mashes her lips together and stares at a spot on the court a little beyond me. I don’t really mean to frustrate her, but I’m not a coach. This is the only way I know how to show her where she needs to get better.

She sets up the same way as before, and this time when she jerks, I don’t even move. I step back and relax my shoulders and let my eyes roam from the

ball up to her face, and a second later her eyes snap to my waiting stare.

"What?" She shouts the question, and Lauren takes a step back into the locker-room door behind her.

"Let's just stop. I've gotta be somewhere and you've played a lot today already." I run my hands over my forearms nervously as I spit out excuses. The locker-room door is closed again, but I'm not sure if Lauren isn't watching us through a sliver. I don't want to make Riley upset, and if I keep pushing, I'm going to expose more problems in her game. I don't think she wants that.

"No, you said ten," she says, stopping the ball and holding it at her side.

Her jaw works side to side and the blue of her eyes muddies as she stares at me. My mouth tastes sour, like it does every time someone I know goes missing—or worse, someone missing gets found.

"Riley, I know. I just forgot I have a thing…"

Her eyes soften quickly, her breathing harder now than when we were playing. It slows after a few seconds, and she looks down, nodding with closed lips and a face colored with disappointment and rejection.

I'm sick.

"I'm not a real coach," I say, swinging my hand forward until my fingertips graze hers, still wrapped around the ball. Her eyes flit to the place I touched and she curls those fingers in, eventually letting the ball drop.

"Teach me," she says as I reach forward to grab her abandoned ball.

"Teach you what?" I know what, I just don't know how to teach it. I don't know how to do something this normal—*anything* normal. My brain is thinking about Joker and my bag and my mom at church. I'm dancing between this gym with this girl and all of the things I'm afraid my best friend is fucking up at home.

Riley reaches forward and slaps the ball from my hands and backs up, dribbling at her side just as before.

"What am I doing wrong?" She stares at me, but my body is still relaxed. "How are you beating me there. Show me…tell me when."

She keeps her eyes on mine, but after a few seconds I look down at her wrist, at the steady drum, and I run my hand over my mouth and slowly nod.

“Right now,” I say.

She stops her dribble and her body stiffens.

“I haven’t done anything,” she argues.

I exhale heavily as my eyes close on her hand and open on her face.

“You don’t think you have, but you have,” I say, rolling my palms open for the ball. She gives it to me, but I can tell by the way she’s twisting her lips and pulling in her eyebrows that she doesn’t believe me.

“Do me a favor…close your eyes,” I say, bringing her gaze to mine the instant I do. A second or two passes while she sorts out if she really wants to, and eventually she does. Her arms are stiff at her sides, and she’s flexing her fingers in and out, rolling them into fists again and again. This girl is a fighter.

“I’m going to go in for a layup, but before I do, I’m going to pretend that someone is guarding me and there’s a big guy in the middle I have to get around,” I say.

“I can’t see that,” she shrugs.

“I know, just…all I want you to do is listen.”

I’m closer to her than before. It isn’t right for me to notice things about her right now because she can’t hide them, but her face is shaped like a heart. Her cheeks are round, naturally pink the way some girls paint theirs, and the part just under her eyes is dusted with tiny freckles. Her lashes are so long, they reach that place on her skin, and one of her lashes has fallen out. I want to brush it away with my finger then blow it into the air and make a wish just like my mom always does.

I dribble until I notice her start to feel the pattern. Her hands have stopped flexing, and she’s touching her thumbs to her index fingers, literally keeping time whether she realizes she is or not. I let it ride for a few more seconds then I drive the ball in and make my shot.

“What did you hear?” I ask.

She doesn’t answer right away, and when I come back to face her, she’s looking down at the ground, trying to remember the details.

“Do it again,” she says.

“Okay,” I nod.

I wait for her eyes to close and I gift myself another glance at her freckles, but I also pause on her lips. They pout, only a little, but the top curls up and the bottom down.

Before she questions my delay, I begin to dribble. I keep everything the same, making my move and driving in for my shot. This time when I come back to her she's waiting for me. Her eyes are wider, lip lodged in her teeth—a brightness in her face that says, "Aha!"

"You wanna go for real now?"

She breathes in and nods hesitantly. I won't change anything up because I think she needs to see success. Lauren's come back out; I try to keep my focus on Riley. I don't want her to feel pressured to show off. I actually just want her to learn.

I post up and keep the ball at my side, the pattern exactly the same. My dribble intensifies and I lean forward just as Riley's palm finds my chest.

"Yes," I startle, a little from her touch but more because she really gets it—she knew it was coming.

"Again," she asks, and I start over. This time I take it inside and drive, and Riley works with me; the only reason I'm able to make the shot is the two or three extra inches I have on her height.

Our game falls back into a natural pattern, and when she takes the ball up, I stick with her entire drive. Rather than run into me, though, she peels around and tries again.

"Yes," I repeat again. I'm grinning. I feel it pushing in my cheeks, and I think it's pride. She's learning something that I'm teaching her, and this whole miserable thing has become fun. I'm actually happy. I'm satisfied. Something *good* is coming out of my work.

The guys have started to wander into the gym, and it's getting harder for her to hear me when I have the ball, so I pause and reach up to her chin. My touch jolts her back a step, but she quickly catches herself.

"Sorry, I…" I wince and tilt my head as I look at her shoulder then back up to her eyes. "Can I?"

I reach back up toward her face, and even though her eyes flare, her head

nods. My fingers lift her chin until we're looking at each other, and I swallow away the rush of something else that makes me feel an instant numbness. For a single heartbeat, I see her with her long hair. She was softer that way, but not any prettier really.

"I'm never going to give away where I'm going, just like you don't. You're man-on-man no matter what kind of game you're playing, and your eyes—my eyes, her eyes, his eyes," I point in various directions. "They're all working in the future, seeing what's open, where to go after. The eyes aren't going to tell you what your man is doing now. But his body will. You can hear it, and you can see what you hear if you watch the right places."

I pat my hips, and her eyes trail down to my waist, then I make a fist and pound it on my shoulder, where she looks next.

"Watch me turn," I say, making my beginning move over and over as she studies me.

When I think she gets it, I take the ball and start to work again. I drive and she drags the first few times, but pretty soon she's reading me just like I read her. We go for several points while the boys team works a few drills on the other end of the court, and I ignore the digs the other coaches make at us. They're talentless—not worth my energy.

I'm starting to sweat harder, and Riley's playing harder again, but now we're evenly matched, my only advantage genetic. She makes a few shots on me, too, and I start to pick up my game, my arm strong against her as I push her back toward the hoop. She checks her body into mine as she rolls. Every touch is part of battle, until the very end when she goes up hard and I swat her ball away, but catch her body as she begins to lose her balance. I end up sweeping her into me and walking her backward until her back hits the brick wall; the worn paint barely reads some school motto nobody knows.

"You okay?"

My hand is pressed between the arch of her back and the brick, and my other palm is flat against the wall on the other side of her. Her eyes are fixed at my neck, her lips parted with heavy breaths that push her chest out. Long lashes blink against her cheeks, now a deeper red, and something living—breathing—

deep inside my body is begging her to look up at me. Instead, her chin falls and her focus drops to the floor. I slide my hand against her as I let go and remember how hugging her felt yesterday as I take a step back.

"Yeah, I'm…I'm good. That was a nice block," she says, blinking rapidly. I see the blue of her eyes briefly before she looks away, her head turning as she searches for the ball.

"Here." Lauren tosses the ball to her.

Riley takes it and breathes out a "Thanks" as she moves to her things over on the bench. My back falls against the wall as I fold my hands together and rest them on my head, pretending I need to get air. I don't. I'm breathing fine, or rather, I'm barely breathing at all. I need to hold myself accountable—and I need to hold myself back.

I need to stay away, and Lauren's expression is a great reminder. Her eyes beam pity because she knows me, knows my fate. I never saw this coming, though. I didn't know Riley was out there. I didn't know being around someone like her would make me happy—that we would match like this.

This might only be about basketball for her. It's become about a lot of things for me, though. And my phone rings at the perfect moment—there to remind me about how these things…? I can't have them.

I wait for Riley to pull together her bag, and I keep my mouth shut, only waving goodbye as she leaves. I see Lauren's warning in her eyes as she follows her friend out the doors, and then I pick up my phone from the bleachers and check the message that's just been left.

"Hey Baby, I need something big. It's gotta be just you, though. Nobody else, you get it?" Dub's voice is low, but it isn't drunk or high. It's serious, and my stomach sinks. I keep listening as he gives me directions to some place off the highway, on a dirt road, where who knows what I'll find. I'll need to take my mom's car, which I hate, but I have no choice.

Dub calls. I say yes. And so goes my life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Riley

I pull into our driveway just as my dad is backing out the other side. I've missed our window.

My truck idles next to his, the bubbling of barely running motors invading our entire street with deafening rattles. I roll my window lower as he slides down the passenger side so we can yell to one another.

"Did you eat?"

I'm always worried that he doesn't. He's diabetic, and when he doesn't eat the things that I make, he eats junk. Sometimes I think he pops insulin shots like coffee drinkers suck on mints.

"Lasagna this time! I was impressed!" He grins and wipes his fingertips along the corners of his mouth to emphasize the fact that he ate.

"It was vegetarian. No meat!" My dad is very much a meat-and-potatoes man, so when he likes something a little less carnivore, I'm always relieved.

"Could hardly tell!" he shouts, giving me thumbs up. "I gotta go, running late. But I'll be off Friday night, so maybe we can have dinner together…watch the game? Shave each other's heads?"

"Ha ha!" I say, then smile and wave as he rolls the window back up and pulls out onto the road behind us. My dad and I love the Cavs, but it's been forever since we got to sit down and watch a game together. It's been about two years,

really. The last game was the night my mom didn't come back. Last time we tried, he fell asleep from exhaustion. He probably won't make it tomorrow either, but even just watching the game on low while my daddy snores next to me in his lounge chair is enough.

I pull the garage door closed behind me and walk right into my house, stopping the second I'm inside and thinking about Lauren's advice. I click the lock to the right and wonder if it's really necessary.

After a rushed shower and change of clothes, I slide across the cool tile in our kitchen in my socks and pray there's enough lasagna left for me to dive in. The blast of cold tickles my skin and I lean into the shelves to feel it just a little bit more. My eyes find the familiar green plastic bin, and I pull it out and crack open the lid to discover my dad only had a thin slice.

"Impressed my ass," I hum to myself, pulling my phone from the pocket of my sweatpants and typing my dad a message.

You barely ate a thing, you liar! Don't you dare eat those little donuts! And I'll make meat next time, ok?

He won't see it until he gets to work, and probably not until later tonight when he has time to sit still and read. My dad's not very obsessed with his phone. I had to talk him into a smart phone last year when his flip version finally fell in half. It helped that the phone repair shop guy laughed when he asked them to fix it.

I pull the lid completely from the dish, but stop with it held between both hands. It's heavy—enough there for three or four people. I like to cook with leftovers in mind, but if I'm the only one who likes this, I'm going to be consuming a lot of ricotta and mushrooms. I glance at my phone again and check the time, nearly six.

I press the lid back in place and carry the container back to my room. I shove my feet in my running shoes and rub my hands over my head sending tiny little droplets everywhere. A perk about not having hair is that my head dries incredibly fast, but I can tell that by next week I'm going to have to make some decisions. It's already growing, and I'm going to start to look like I eat electricity for snacks if I don't come up with some kind of style.

With my keys and phone in my pockets and dinner in my hands, I head back out the way I came in—once again locking the door behind me. Lauren would be proud. I know which house is Tristan's, but I've never as much as walked by. It's in the opposite direction of school, the park, and the grocery store—the only three places I ever have to go. I spot my buddy Jaden on his bike about six houses down, and I stop when he squeals his tires in front of me and flashes me his hands. They're covered in something purple and sticky.

"Are you going to play?" He nods toward the park behind me, his eyes wide with hope. If my stomach wasn't growling, I might hang out with him instead, but the bottomless-pit feeling practically echoes up my throat when I respond.

"Can't, Jaden. I'm so sorry, but I need to eat dinner then do some homework," I say.

"Homework's stupid," he says, licking along his wrist.

I giggle.

"I used to think that, too, but turns out it's pretty important stuff. You gotta know how to be a grown-up, and school teaches you that…know what I mean?"

He's not really listening to me, but he lets out an "uh huh" as he sucks on his fingertips.

"Is that candy?" I scrunch my face, a little grossed out because his hands are pretty dirty, too.

"Popsicle. It melted," he says, slurping along his palm next.

"Yeah, I can see that," I laugh out.

He turns his hand over to look for more sugary goodness, and as he's holding it up, I notice the *X* drawn on his skin with an ink pen. Tristan has the same mark on his wrist.

"What's that for?" I ask, expecting him to tell me Tristan's his favorite player out on the courts or some kind of hero worship. I don't get anything close to what I expect, though.

"That's none of your business," he shoots back, rubbing his arm along the bottom of his shirt in an effort to erase the mark I'm guessing he drew there himself.

In a mere fraction of a second, Jaden has turned from a sweet eight-year-old

kid to someone who's both angry and afraid. He's rubbing his skin so hard it's turning red, the black lines only smearing around. He looks a little panicked, and I can tell he's about to spit on his arm so he can scrub harder.

"Try dish soap," I say, reaching toward him but stopping before my hand touches his arm. "I used to draw on myself all the time," I say, looking to both sides in a super exaggerated way, then bringing my finger to my lips to show Jaden that what I'm about to tell him is a secret. "I wrote the answers for my math test on my arm, but shhh."

His eyes flash, and lips that were starting to frown perk up a little. I nod, then cross my heart with my free hand.

"I swear it works," I say, my reassurance—and the fib I told about cheating—seem to relax him enough to straighten his bike between his legs and begin to pedal.

"Thanks, Riley. I'll see ya tomorrow." He races to the end of the block then turns right, and I hope his house is on the very next street. I want him to get to that soap fast, because I don't like seeing him scared.

It makes me wonder why that *X* is so important, and why he'd put it there if it was so dangerous to have.

I replay the frightened look on his face for the next several minutes until I'm in front of what I hope is Tristan's house, my finger pushing in a dimly lit doorbell that has yet to make a sound. I dig in with my nail, trying to get it to catch, and finally hear a faint buzz echo from inside.

Someone moves along the window by the door, and I shuffle my feet and roll my shoulders back. The door is already opening, so leaving the lasagna by the door and running away isn't an option, but I consider it for a brief second.

"Oh," I blurt out in surprise.

It's a pretty bad way to greet someone I've never met, but I was expecting a six-foot-plus, cute, Latino boy—not a five-foot-tall Latina woman who reminds me so much of my mom.

"I'm sorry, can I help you?" she asks, and I struggle to find the right transition from "Oh." Eventually, I just squeeze my eyes closed and scrunch my nose and lips in embarrassment.

“I was expecting Tristan, and I just blanked. I’m so sorry,” I say, opening one eye first, then the other when I see her smiling back at me. “Let’s try this again. I’m Riley. Is Tristan home?”

“Come in,” she says, her smile growing warmer as she pushes the door wide.

I step in, my legs a bit shaky from the jolt of adrenaline and nerves. Days ago, Tristan was doing all he could to make me feel unwelcome, and now I’m standing in his house. I’m not sure how he’s going to react, but maybe it’s a good thing that his mom—*I think this is his mom?*—is here to monitor him.

“He’s not home yet, but he should be soon. He took the car for something he needed to do with his friend, Paul. I’m sure he’ll come home hungry.” She laughs then stops with her mouth in an *O* when she sees the food in my hands.

“I guess I sensed his growling stomach,” I say with a chuckle, holding up my dish. “I’m Riley, by the way. I just moved in down the road…”

She stares at me silently, her mouth hinting at a smile, but the quiet feels awkward so I add more.

“Tristan’s coaching our team…the girls, I mean. Since we don’t have a coach?” My voice lifts at the end, waiting for her to give me some sort of sign that she knows about this.

“I think the counselor made him do it?” I add on.

“That was really sweet of you to bring over dinner,” she says, taking the container from me and guiding me into the kitchen. I follow, a little more confused than before. “I’m glad to hear Tristan is doing something positive,” she continues. “He doesn’t tell me much about where he’s going or who he’s with.”

I sense some dissatisfaction in her tone, and it’s so different from the way things operate in my house. My dad knows pretty much everything about my routine. He knows about Tristan’s coaching, about how bad I’m pretty sure our team will be, and about my growing doubt that I will ever get a college to consider me.

“Well, you should be proud. He stepped up and saved my season,” I say. She tilts her head and holds her eyes on me for a few seconds.

“He thinks you’re pretty,” she says, teasingly. My chest burns a bit at the mention, and I’m glad she turns around.

She pulls the lid from the container I brought, and it makes me anxious as she pulls out a knife and a fork, cutting the lasagna into sections. She holds both knife and fork in one hand when she's done, reaching up to pull three plates from a cabinet, then she turns and looks me in the eyes.

"This smells amazing. Do you mind if I join you, too?"

A wave of relief sweeps through my insides. I'm so freaking happy this woman approves of my cooking, and she has yet to even tell me her name. I see where Tristan gets his quiet intimidation from.

"That would be great…" I draw out *great* hoping she'll fill in the blank with her name. She doesn't, and when she turns around, I mouth *oh my god* to myself.

When the door rustles behind me with the sound of keys, I jump back a step, turning while gripping the edge of the counter in front of me. There's no greeting yelled from his mom, or any announcement from him. It's just keys in the door, a slam, and footsteps. Everything halts when he sees me, however.

"Why are you here?" The line between his eyebrows deepens and his lips hang open, and for a brief moment I swear they quiver.

"Riley here brought over dinner," his mom answers for me. His eyes move from mine to her then back again, holding my gaze as he waits for confirmation.

I lick my lips and smile tightly.

"I made too much, and my dad won't eat anything that isn't a meatball or a steak, and I figured you were probably hungry, and I…"

"She thinks you're cute," his mom says, walking past me to step into her son and kiss his cheek. My smile twists into a panicked look the second she says that, and his expression isn't so different from what I imagine mine is.

"So I see you met my mom," he deadpans, his eyes fluttering closed in embarrassment, then opening on his mother. She pats his cheek with an open palm, teasingly.

"She did. And I bet she's totally regretting it." Her laughter boils out in this infectious song, and I find myself laughing with her…*at me!*

The sound of the microwave oven whirls behind us, filling the dull silence that follows, and Tristan's gaze finally slips into the kitchen, his nose catching the scent.

“Your dad didn’t want to eat that?” He steps closer to the oven, stopping it before it beeps and pulling the plate out halfway through its cooking cycle. He picks at the top noodle with his fingertips, flinching from the searing heat.

“Ouch!” he bursts out, jumping.

“It’s probably still cold in the center, so maybe just…” I step up next to him, and we both reach for the fork on the counter at the same time. I pull my hand away when our fingers brush against each other and take a step or two back. His mom’s giggling picks up again.

“You two are too much. Let me finish, and you…” she slaps the top of her son’s hand lightly then points at him as she pulls the plate and fork away. “You need to learn patience. It’s not done yet, and things are always at their best when they’re done. Always in a rush and taking the easy way.”

She mumbles her last few words, and Tristan looks at me with a roll of his eyes.

“It’s Lelani, by the way. My name?” His mom turns to look at me over her shoulder, smirking. “I just wanted to see how long it took you to ask.”

A nervous chuckle escapes from my lips, and when Tristan’s arm brushes against mine, I hiccup from being startled.

“Sorry,” he says, smirking. He tosses his hat on the counter and runs his hand through flattened hair. It seems soft, and I instinctually move my own hand to mine, feeling the soft velvet stubbles that can now be bent in a direction.

“My mom thinks she’s funny,” Tristan says, sliding out a stool for me while sitting in one himself.

“I *am* funny,” his mom says, pulling a now fully heated slice of lasagna from the microwave. She slides the plate to me, but I push it toward Tristan.

“You eat first. I want to see what you think of it,” I say. He squints at me, suspiciously, but takes the fork his mom placed next to the plate and shovels a healthy bite onto the fork. He pauses with the food just at his lips, puckering to blow while raising one brow at me.

“That’s how we trained my dog when we were little,” I say, and he moves the fork a few inches from his mouth and frowns.

“You burned your dog with hot food? That’s not very nice.” He keeps a

serious face for a second, but slowly eases into a grin.

“No!” I laugh and shake my head at him. “I was just noting how you learn by getting burned. Like we used to spray him with a squirt bottle when he did stupid things, and it usually took a while for him to get it. One burnt tongue and you know not to just dive into your food.”

Tristan stuffs the forkful into his mouth and begins to chew, the corners of his mouth creased and cheeks dimpled like he has something to say. I hold my breath, waiting for him to comment on my food, but instead he takes another bite, not talking until he turns and realizes I’m staring at him.

“Oh,” he chuckles, pulling the collar of his T-shirt up to his mouth and talking through his bite. “You were waiting…it’s good. It’s…” He pauses to swallow. “It’s really good. You could seriously do something with this.”

“I don’t think anyone’s saving the world with lasagna,” I muse.

“Mmmm I dunno,” he hums through another bite, leaning into me, his arm warm against my skin. “This lasagna is world-saving quality.”

His mom slides a plate in front of me next, then puts the last dish in for heating. I pick at mine, not as hungry as I normally am, I think mostly because I’m a little nervous. My eyes keep flitting to Tristan as he slices into the food I made, taking large portions and closing his eyes at each first taste. Somewhere between the third and fifth bites I began to smile.

“I can *feel* you looking at me.” He holds his knuckles against his lips to suppress his laugh, and it’s simply cute. I’ve never been this satisfied watching someone taste my food before. I’m not even that great of a cook. I bet he would have loved my mother’s cooking.

“Sorry,” I say, smirking and moving my attention to my own meal. I take a larger bite to set him at ease.

Lelani takes her plate from the microwave just before it beeps, then turns her back to us and slides into the living room, turning on the television and upping the volume a few extra levels.

“I can’t hear you!” She raises her voice dramatically.

Tristan pushes his plate back a few inches and lets his forehead fall to the counter where he pretends to bang it a few times. I laugh, and slowly he rolls his

head to the side until his eyes are settled on mine. His smile softens and he lifts his head slightly, pinching the corner of his mouth curiously.

"What *do* you want to do if you don't want to cook then?" His question excites me, because I've thought a lot about my future.

"Well," I say, taking in a deep breath while I mentally bring up my file of plans and dreams. "I'm going to create sports camps for girls from broken homes to go to. I want them to be staffed with the best coaches, and they'll include workshops on body image and self-esteem and how to take care of your mental health and how to make time for you when you feel responsible for taking care of a parent and…"

"Wow."

I stop at his one-word interruption, my lips falling shut as I realize how much I spilled out without even breathing. I adjust my feet on the stool footing and twist in my seat to face him.

"Sorry," I exhale. "I get a little excited about the possibilities, I guess. It's something I've thought about for a couple years, and I just really think I can do it."

Tristan doesn't speak right away, instead studying me until I feel compelled to look down and clear my throat. It's hard to read him when he's quiet. His face goes to this emotionless place sometimes, almost robotic, only it's as if he has no power on at all. He gets lost somewhere, but I know he isn't gone, because his eyes move with me. I glance up now and find them waiting, and I'm both surprised and not.

"Anyway," I say, suddenly embarrassed to have thought of my future at all. I turn back to my food, and Tristan slides his plate close again and works to finish his last few bites.

My appetite now gone, I push my plate toward him.

"You sure?" he asks.

"I'm not very hungry," I say, and I know I sound like I'm pouting. I guess I am, but Tristan doesn't have to be as excited about my goals as I am. I just wonder why he asked. I take my phone out to check the time and leave it in front of me just to have something to look at while I sit here in silence.

“I think you’re going to do it…that stuff you said. I think if anyone could do some kind of camp like that, it’s you.”

I don’t look at him after he says that, and I can tell he’s not looking at me either. For whatever reason, it was hard for him to say. That makes it a lot more special to hear.

“Thanks,” I say quietly, my eyes down at my lap and my mouth ticking up proudly on one side.

The entire space around us quickly becomes about the other noises—forks sliding against plates, the news airing on the television behind us, his mom’s small coughing sounds in-between bites. His phone buzzes a few times on the counter next to his hat, and he turns it to read, but ignores it quickly, and I wonder if it’s Paul. The next time it vibrates, he doesn’t even bother to check, and drags his phone face down along the counter as he stands, then pushes it deep into the pocket of his shorts.

“Let me get that,” he says, stopping me from getting up and taking my fork along with his and both plates. He sets them in the sink and turns so he’s facing me, his weight resting on the counter’s edge.

“How about you?” I ask, wanting to know something about him other than the little warnings I’ve gotten from Lauren and the things I’ve made up in my own head.

“What about me?” He shrugs.

“Well, I know you’re not going to play basketball…I mean, rec league and all,” I joke.

He picks up a towel resting on the sink behind him and throws it at my face. I deflect it onto the counter in front of me, and he reaches forward to grab it. I quickly snag the other end, and we play a weak game of tug of war that I lose willingly. He snaps the towel at me then, but only lightly before turning back to the sink to hang it where it belongs.

“I meant what do you plan to do…after here?”

His palms move to his sides, spreading to either side along the surface in front of him as his shoulders roll and the muscles on his back flex through the tightness of his T-shirt. The top of a word peeks out along his neck from the

collar of his shirt, and I struggle to read it until he speaks.

“I’m going to learn how to quit getting burned…just like your dog did, I guess.” His shoulders rise with a deep breath, and his head sinks just as my heart does in sympathy. I’m not sure how to respond to that. I think maybe I’m not supposed to.

He rests there for a few seconds, and in that time, I make out more of the word on his neck, and I’m not sure, but I think it says a name.

I part my lips, hoping something light or clever will come out the second I make a sound, when a melodic knock raps at Tristan’s door. I jump in my seat, but his mom doesn’t seem to hear the sound at all, and Tristan just turns slowly, his eyes wide and subdued. He glances at me, and in the fraction of a second that our eyes meet before he moves to the door, I sense dread in his body.

“I might have to go,” he says just before he gets to the door. I stand and ready myself, running my now-empty container under the sink’s water while he talks to someone outside. I dry it with a paper towel and wave until I get Lelani’s attention. She winks at me and nods toward the door with a teasing smile, but I can only politely grin in response. She has some pretty overt couple goals for barely knowing me, and I’m pretty sure her son’s mind is occupied with something else.

I let myself out the door to find Tristan and Paul talking in the middle of the yard. They’re standing close to one another at first, but step apart when they notice me.

“Riley!” Paul walks up to me and embraces me in a bear of a hug. He seems a little drunk, maybe high, so I indulge him, but free myself quickly. I catch Tristan’s eyes next, and that blankness is back in his face. His expression is icy, so I try to think of a way to excuse myself quickly.

“I should get home. I’ve got homework, and my basketball coach is a real jerk about grades,” I say, getting a laugh from Paul but no reaction from Tristan. “Right, so…”

“Awe, stay and hang with us,” Paul says, grabbing onto my arm, but easily letting my wrist then fingers slip through his grasp. His words come out in long drags and he loses his footing backward when I step away.

“I would, but I really have to go. I was just bringing dinner,” I say, moving closer to Tristan.

“You bring him dinner and not me? That’s not fair,” he teases, and it sounds both like a joke and desperately sad. “You like him better, huh? The girls always like Tristan better. It’s because he’s so tall, huh?”

His laughter booms out this time. He’s not right, and I pick up my steps, passing Tristan and giving him a brief look. His look moves from me quickly, though, back to his friend.

“You can’t have him, though. Not unless you’re looking to join the club,” he says, and I catch him saluting Tristan when I gaze over my shoulder.

“Shut up, Paul.” Tristan’s warning is short and full of bite.

I leave them in a face-off and neither of them calls after me as the distance between us grows. By the time I get to my own driveway, I turn back to see their profiles walking in the middle of the street in my direction. I slip through my garage door and follow my new routine, locking the door and flipping on a few of the lights. Lauren’s words haunt me a little, but something about that look on Tristan’s face feels like a more serious warning. I pay attention to it, and I’m uneasy because of it.

I wait in my main room by the front door, peaking through the side of my blinds until I see their forms pass. I stay there watching for several minutes more. Everything outside is still, and minutes pass before a car drives by. It isn’t very late; the sun only recently setting, but I can’t help but think about Tristan’s face, Lauren’s words, and my locked door. I hate feeling afraid.

“Screw this,” I mutter to myself, pushing back from the window and marching to my room for my ball.

I don’t bother to change clothes or shoes, leaving in my pushed-up gray sweatpants and the white T-shirt I stole from my dad during the move. I lift the garage door because the keypad’s busted, and leave the inside door unlocked, like I always have; I do it in protest and as an *F you* to that nervous feeling these people have made me have. I close the garage and jog down my driveway, picking up my dribble once my feet hit the street.

I get to the park in less than a minute. The hum of the lights is loud when no

one is around, and the bugs have come out to feast, their bodies bouncing off the lamp glass up above. I push open the gate, and it squeals as I walk through, bouncing my ball to the center of the court. I hold it in my palms and stare at the rim to my right, then my left. It's lonely out, but nothing about this place is scary. If people just showed up, the lonely would go away and everything would be fine.

"Hey!" I shout, spinning slowly as the echo of my call diffuses into the night air.

"Who wants to play?" I shout again and kneel down with my hand on the ball to steady me. My ears focus on every sound, and the only ones I hear for the next minute are nature-made. A roach scurries onto the court, so I stand up and move closer to it and kick it back into the dirt. I start to feel bad a second later, so I walk over to check on him since he's the only thing that showed up when I called. He rushes through the chain link and into the gutter, disappearing down a sewer hole. I laugh silently to myself as I walk back toward the hoop.

I miss the roach.

I give up on the fantasy that someone else might show up, and I start to practice the drills I worked on with Tristan earlier, paying attention to the way my body moves and how I press the ball. The benefit of being alone is I can hear every sound I make with my game—the moments my dribble speeds up, the way my feet sound on the pavement. I try some tweaks I think might fool an opponent, but my shot gets sloppy, and the more times I drive the right way and miss, the more frustrated I get. I go back to my old way and the ball lays in perfectly. I stare at the chain swaying from the rim and breathe out, my shoulders sagging in defeat.

I can't get it.

"Hey!"

My head snaps to the right, and my pulse jacks up. Tristan is walking toward me quickly. His pace is angry. His face…looks *angry*. My eyes scan from left to right confirming he's alone.

"Why the fuck are you out here?" His eyes are wider than normal and his voice is raised; his toes stop inches away from mine. Everything about his body

is in this predatory mode, his weight shifting from side to side, his chest puffed and shoulders broad. His hands are out at his sides, arms slightly open.

“Are you playing defense? Is that what this is?” I make a joke, but he doesn’t find it amusing. I let go of forcing a smile on my face and take a step back to get more distance between us.

“I’m fine out here, Tristan.” I shake my head at him and think about how I *was* fine until he showed up and sounded off these alarms.

“No! You’re not fine out here!”

He closes in again, and I look down at his shoes. His hand touches my chin and he pushes up, his touch not gentle but not hard. I slap at his hand.

“Don’t!” I scowl and he breathes out heavily, slowly closing his eyes as his tongue licks his lips.

“You need to hear me,” he says in a forced-calm kind of tone. “Riley, you can’t be hanging out here at night alone. You’ve gotta get this. You need to understand the things that happen here.”

“What happens here?”

I fold my arms over my chest and jut my hip to the side as I wait for him to answer. His eyes dim and his mouth falls into a frown, but I don’t let go of his stare. I challenge it—I challenge him.

“Really. If this place is so scary, tell me the details. I live here, don’t I?” I say with my palms open to my sides. I glance around and spin slowly again taking in the quiet and poor neighborhood. “What’s so scary here? Tell me what I’m supposed to look out for. Tell me why this court is so fucking dangerous.”

I lean into him with those last words and finish with my mouth in a hard line. I know how to push back. I’ve always pushed back, everywhere I’ve lived. I can always break in and become accepted, but for some reason this place is so hard.

Tristan doesn’t back off, his eyes locked on mine in long silence. I hear him breathe, huffing out angrily until he finally blinks and quits breathing completely. He still looks at me, and he’s still close.

“This street…this park especially, it belongs to the Fifty-Seven,” he says.

I puff out a laugh through my nose and let my head lean to the side.

“Do you understand what that means?”

His eyes sear into mine, and I eventually have to look away with a nervous laugh. I fold my arms over my chest again, but underneath, my heart begins to knock louder.

“Yes, Tristan. I know what the Fifty-Seven is. I’ve lived in this area for a long time, just not on this street. I’m not new,” I say, chewing at the inside of my cheek when I’m done. It’s partly for show, because what I know about the Fifty-Seven is limited. I know what I read online, and what I’ve seen mentioned in the news. I hear about it in blips—like when the place my old friends and I used to go to after basketball games for burgers and shakes was closed because the manager was stabbed during the overnight shift.

“Riley, go home.”

“No,” I answer fast.

His face hardens, his teeth clenched in the back so tightly I can see it in his flexing jaw. He knows I’m not going to bend, and that makes him nuts. I like that it does, and I’m not sure if I’m pushing back to make a statement, or because I like that it gets to him—that he *feels* it.

I feel it. Something.

He breaks away after a few seconds, running his palm over his mouth in frustration before he walks to the corner of the court for my ball, picking it up and tucking it under his arm on the other side of his body as he starts to leave. I’m slow to react, in some sort of numbed state. I snap out of it when he’s almost to the gate, and I run up to him and reach for my ball.

He hears me coming, and just as my fingers skim the surface of my ball, he turns to move it away, holding a stiff arm out with his hand wrapped around my elbow.

“Hey!” I grunt out the word and lunge at him awkwardly, his hold on my arm tight. I pull wildly until he lets go, but I don’t stop when he turns away, instead jumping onto his back and gripping his body while my legs wrap around him until he’s essentially carrying me while spinning in an effort to shake me off.

“Riley! Get off!”

He jerks hard to the side, but I grip at his chest, my body sliding from him enough for my foot to reach the ground and pump me back up. He starts to

stumble, and my ball comes loose, so I let go of him and rush to it, picking it up and holding it on my opposite side. My breathing is hard, my heart almost one solid beat—it rushes so quickly in my chest. His shirt is crooked and pulled lower on one side of his arm and his hair is wild from the fistful I suddenly remember grabbing.

Tristan breathes out and rolls his eyes with his face up to the sky. I start to grow a little embarrassed, and my closed lips quiver with nervous energy. He steps closer to me, and this time I refuse to move. My grip stiffens on my ball, and my leg muscles become rigid where they rest. I will be immoveable. His eyes drill into mine, then move to the dark and quiet park behind me, looking off into the distance.

"You know what?" His gaze clicks back to me. "Fuck it."

He pivots and shoves both hands in his pockets as he walks away, pulling his right hand out to fling the gate closed behind him with enough force it bounces back open part way. His head shakes a few times as he leaves, but by the time he crosses the street and is out of the glow of the closest streetlight, he's gone back to his normal, unhurried pace.

I don't belong here. Tristan does. And that has everything to do with the point he just tried to make. I get it; I'm not stupid. I know what he is. I just don't believe it's *all* he is. And I don't think he does either.

Five minutes pass. I follow his steps out off the court into the street and back to my home. I close the garage and lock my door, then leave a note for my dad on the counter, asking him what he wants for dinner during the game.

I finish my homework in half an hour and spend the rest of the night awake in my bed, counting the number of cars I hear pass every hour. It's very few. In my mind, every single one of them is driven by a gang member. They all have guns and drugs inside. Blood stains their floor mats. Tattoos number them like good soldiers. They run scared, but play tough. This is what Tristan wants me to see, and now it's all I can imagine. This and the pleading look in his eyes when he begged me to go home.

I didn't want to. Not until he left. I wanted to stay with him. I wanted him to stay out there with me.

He didn’t.
He can’t.
He never will.

CHAPTER NINE

Tristan

Dub was pretty high by the time I found him kicked back at a campsite on some dirt road about six miles from the highway. He was high, but he still knew exactly what he needed to say to me. I pulled up in my mom's car, and he pushed back in the metal chair outside some guy's camper, his boot resting on a propped-up piece of wood that had been singed in various places. He was chewing on something when I shut off the car. By the time I stood in front of him, he was ready to spit it out. He swallowed it instead, which means he either didn't want me to know what it was, or it was Oxy. He loves Oxy, and those pills never go to waste.

Two days ago, he told me he kicked Joker out. Out of the Fifty-Seven, out of his life, and, "He better be out of this city when he gets his diploma." Dub spoke those words and then my best friend lost his mind. Joker told me last night he had no idea where he went after Dub's talk. My guess is he knows, at least he knows how it started. He went to Sophie's Den, the house full of squatters near the warehouse district where anyone can load up on whatever poison they'd like for cheap.

It's cheap, because everything there is cut with something else. Sometimes that shit isn't even cut, it's just acid and chemicals. It's run by The Tribe, and it's how they buy their power.

The need to be high terrifies me. I stay straight because of it. I've only been drunk and high a few times when I was twelve and thirteen because Dub made me. I made myself believe I liked it, because I wanted to belong and be just like him. I didn't want that at all, though. I liked his power, the way he controlled everything and the way girls looked at him. The weed and the pills, though…I woke up feeling like my mom at her lowest—a place I will never go again, and I will crawl through fire to keep my mother out of that hell. I tell Dub I'm better sharp. I make it about him, just like I make my life about him. He likes it that way—respects my choice because it's about him.

Joker was stoned when he showed up at my house last night. He didn't make much sense, but he confirmed what Dub had said. He passed it off like no big deal. Kept telling me they both decided it was best, and he wanted out anyways. I know he did, but I also know getting out of the Fifty-Seven doesn't work that way. It's not like giving a resignation. Anyone who leaves becomes a risk, and Dub doesn't let anyone go unless he has leverage, or unless they're terrified of crossing him, which is why we all fucking stay.

That's the thing I keep coming back to. Joker fucked up somewhere, and if he's out because he was disloyal, he's not safe. He has to know. He has to run.

He wouldn't hear any of it last night, and this morning he was gone. I called him when the sun rose, and I drove my mom's car over there before she got up for work. His car was gone, and his room looked like he'd just got up and left. I came to school thinking maybe he just came here, but I knew in my gut he wouldn't leave for school that early. He either ran before they could find him, or he ran when they did.

My knee won't quit bobbing up and down. So far, I've drawn a black circle with ink in the center of my journal; I've ripped through the paper with the pressure of my pen. This class is the last place I want to be, but I don't know where to begin to look for Joker—I might as well stay here as if everything's normal until I know where to go.

Riley's back to not looking at me. "I'm glad," I keep telling myself. Such a liar. I like talking to her. She listens, and I don't feel crazy for having the dreams that I have when I'm around her. She's so normal, like how people our age get to

live and be in other places. In Miller, she sticks out—like a flower in a bed of weeds.

My arm is marked with faint blue lines, bruising from where she scratched me fighting to get her ball. I keep replaying how that all went down, how defiant she was. She's fearless, and it's going to get her in trouble. The courts are Dub's domain, and if Joker is in the trouble I'm afraid he is in, I knew most of Dub's close crew would meet up there eventually. Riley standing under the buzzing lights was like a sick joke, and I just had to get her to leave.

She fought me so hard. I went back twenty minutes later just to make sure she left, and I could finally breathe when I saw that she had.

There's one scratch on my arm that's still pink. Her nails clawed my skin as she slid from my body. I keep rubbing the place where it burns, glancing at her and hoping she notices. Part of me wants to make her feel bad that she went ballistic and hurt me in her rage, not that I'm hurt really. She's just so physical. When Lauren and I were kids, we would fight about a lot of things, but I don't think she ever climbed up on me. Riley didn't hesitate. She just did it, as if we had history.

I clear my throat, and she doesn't flinch. We're reading a children's book. Something about story structure or whatever. I've read this one, so I've just been looking at the pictures. I had this book when I was a little kid. It's probably the only one I ever read on my own willingly. It's about a little girl who's afraid of the monsters in her closet. Every few pages she calls out for her parents to save her, and every time they come into her room to check on her, the monsters are gone. They tell her to turn off her imagination, but the moment they shut her door, the monsters are there again. Eventually, she decides to just make friends with them.

"Who's our protagonist?" Ms. Forte is roaming in and out of the aisles as she talks, and for whatever reason she straightens my book as she passes my desk. I sit up and turn it crooked as soon as she passes.

"Emily." The answer comes from one of the smart kids in the back of the class.

"Right. Emily," Ms. Forte repeats. "And the antagonist…the monsters,

right?”

The class behind me hums in agreement, and I chuckle, shifting in my seat to hide my eyes with my palm, elbow resting on the desktop.

“What’s our conflict?” There’s silence after her question. Soon, a few people murmur that the monsters won’t leave, and Ms. Forte tells them they’re in the “right ballpark.”

They’re not, though. Not even close. The problem isn’t that the monsters won’t leave. The problem is that Emily’s parents won’t listen to her—they don’t believe her. And her parents…they’re the antagonists. They’re the whole reason Emily has to learn how to sleep with the enemy.

I feel the vibration of my phone against my leg, so I take my phone out and rest it on my knee, scooting it in to read my message beneath the shield of my desk. My heart is pounding, expecting to see a text from Joker, but because it’s Dub, it takes me a few seconds to process and decode what he’s saying.

It’s dirty. Gonna throw it away.

I can’t make my eyes move from the words, and my teeth gnaw at the inside of my lip so hard that my skin feels raw in seconds.

Dirty. That word means a lot of things when we say it in our crew. It means cops. It means rat. It means problem.

It means Joker’s been looking for a way out, and the one he chose—the one he found—is going to get him killed instead.

I start to move more in my seat, and my shifting catches Riley’s attention. I can feel the heat taking over my chest, arms, and neck as I mentally piece so many things together. My friend ran, but before he ran…did he do something stupid? My breathing is rapid, and my body is flooded with uncontained energy. It’s not a need to flee, but more of a need to know—a need to see it for myself.

“Are you okay?” Riley’s whisper brings my attention to her fast. Her eyes are drawn in and her body is leaning over the desk between us. I must look ill. I glance over my shoulder and Ms. Forte’s back is to us. She’s talking; everyone’s listening but us.

“Can I borrow your truck?” My plea comes out urgent. Getting home is all I can think of, and I don’t have a car. Riley is my only immediate option, but she

can’t come. She has no reason to trust me, and I can see her searching for an excuse while she stares at me without any reaction at all. She’s blank, maybe even stunned that I’d ask for something personal like this when last night I was trying to break her and make her obey. She’s going to say no, and I knew when I asked, but I’m desperate.

“Okay.”

My chest shudders with the release of the breath I’ve been holding. Riley leans forward and pulls her keys from her bag resting on the ground by her feet. Her head tilts as she sits back up, her eyes scanning the back of the room to make sure no one is noticing. She leans over again and slides the keys to me under her palm and along the empty desktop between us, waiting until I reach across and our hands touch. Mine covers hers; I’m surprised by how cold her skin is under mine, which is burning up. She moves her hand away slowly, and my fingertips brush along every bump and curve until the only thing left is the feel of her fingertips tickling against mine.

Her hand slips away from the desk carefully, and her eyes stay forward—away from me. I bring her keys into my lap and clutch them in my fist next to my body, and I glance back again wanting to thank her, but she stays locked in her stare. I know she can feel me looking at her because at one point she scowls slightly and almost turns her head, letting her eyes flit close to me, but never directly at me.

I scare her.

She knows.

She helped me anyway.

Ten minutes pass, and the clock feels like it’s actually slowing down and working against me. I can’t wait for answers—not even the few hours it is until lunch. A lot of things can happen in a few hours in the world that exists outside of this school. So many things can change, and I won’t have a hand in any of it—I won’t be able to help tell the story because all of the important pieces, the protagonist, the climax…the monsters, will be written before I get a chance to.

“Excuse me,” I say, clearing my throat as I stand and slip the keys into my pocket unnoticed.

Ms. Forte twists and our eyes meet, hers full of warning, mine full of determination.

“Bathroom,” I say, pointing out to the hallway.

She studies me for a full second, trying to decide if what I’m saying is bullshit. I’m close to just bolting, knowing she won’t be able to catch me, when Riley stands next to me.

“Me, too. We’ll be fast,” she says, moving toward the doorway without even allowing our teacher the option of saying no.

I follow her out and don’t say a word while we both grab the plastic card passes hung on the wall. The door *clicks* closed behind us and we follow the normal path down the hallway to the restrooms around the corner on the right. Riley never looks back at me, walking into the ladies room without giving a single clue to anyone that might be watching. I want to thank her, but I also want to leave, so I don’t pause at all, moving quickly to the end of the hallway to the parking lot doors. A security guard stationed there glances up. I raise the pass and my keys.

“Forgot a book,” I say, not that the guy really cares. These guys make ten dollars an hour and their only job is to look at our bags and make sure we’re not carrying. He waves me by and goes back to whatever viral video he’s watching on his phone.

I wander through a few rows of the packed student lot until I spot the tailgate of Riley’s truck in the very last row. I jog, and eventually break into a run until I get to the cab of her truck. The door is unlocked, which is stupid to do even if she thinks her truck is a total piece of shit. Pieces of shit can still be jacked and sold for parts that are worth more than the whole. It happens a lot here. It’s one of the ways The Tribe makes money.

My knees hit her steering wheel, so I reach down and pull the lever to slide the seat back before I close the door. I put the keys into the ignition and try to familiarize myself with the dash as the dinging sound of the engaged key echoes. That’s when I see the stick shift.

“Shit,” I say under my breath.

I don’t know how to drive a stick. I’ve never really had an opportunity to

learn, and when I drive for Dub, the point is usually to be fast and to get us the hell out of some place. Not really a good time to stall out and blow a transmission.

I wrap my fingers around the steering wheel and flex my arms straight. I can do this. I press the clutch down to the floor with my foot and palm the gear shift, easing up the left while giving gas to the right. I can feel the truck begin to jerk, so I gas it hard and let up on the clutch, stalling out with a heavy shake that sends my body forward into the steering column.

Dammit.

After a few seconds of frustrated, hard breathing, I look to the left to see if anyone noticed my epic fail. The guard near the front of the school is still leaning on the wall. I'm sure he heard me, but he's not walking my direction, and he hasn't removed the radio from his hip to call me in.

I crank the engine again, and the truck sputters to life. I'm a couple feet from the spot I started in a few minutes ago. I go through the same routine, my arms stiff and my body rigid as I sit tall and watch over everything. I can feel the pressure building under my feet, the place where it starts to slip, and I give it gas and ease off the clutch this time, which ends up spinning Riley's tires against the gravelly asphalt and spilling smoke from the sides until the truck kicks forward again and dies.

I squeeze the steering wheel hard, the veins on my hands growing, the blue becoming more vibrant. I begin to shake the wheel, and when it doesn't move, I pound against it with my open palms, missing a few times and hitting the horn. My heart feels like it might rip its way from my chest. The beating burns against my bones, and my mouth tastes of stomach acid. This all feels like a sign.

There's no way I haven't been heard by now, and with the problems at our school, people hanging out in the parking lot for too long are treated hostile. Police will be called by our resource officer soon, if they haven't been already.

I give up, yanking the keys from Riley's truck and sliding from the driver's seat in one swift movement, slamming the door closed hard behind me. The guard is holding his radio in front of his body, either waiting for someone to answer, or watching to see what I do—if I bolt. This school is run like a prison. I

guess it has to be. I don’t know.

“Found it,” I say, as I pass him.

He hasn’t radioed yet, and my walking back inside seems to have cooled everything. I hold up a folded-up piece of paper that I pulled from the pocket of my jeans. It’s the questionnaire from Ms. Beaumont that I haven’t looked at since I got a second copy of it. I should throw it away, but it would seem weird to do it now, right after I supposedly “found it.”

My hands sink deep into my pockets, and I cruise back into class while Ms. Forte is drawing lines through words on the white board. The front of the room looks like a word jumble, and I realize from the amount of writing, I’ve been gone for a while.

One hand is propped on her hip while her other hand holds out an uncapped marker. Her eyes follow me as I make my way from the doorway hook where I hang the restroom pass down the row to my empty desk. My things are still here, which helps my story, so I go with it, holding up a hand in a silent apology for the interruption then pressing it on my stomach to fake that I’m sick. I match it with puffed cheeks that sell my point, and Ms. Forte rolls her eyes and returns to the board. The second she does I slide my palm along the desk with Riley’s keys cupped underneath. When I don’t feel her touch right away, I look at her and glance from her eyes to my palm, urging her to take her keys.

“I can’t drive a stick,” I whisper. Her mouth pinches in the corner, I think just disappointed that she wasn’t able to help me.

She slides her hand toward me to take her keys back, grazing my hand with her fingers as she does. I don’t know why my own fingers curl into hers just before she slips away, but suddenly we’re both frozen in this brief touch that I am instantly desperate to hold onto. My eyes flit up to her face, and her own are widened and focused on our hands. A slight twitch of her finger paints my skin like a feather, and I react by quickly pulling away. She pulls her keys into her lap and holds onto them for the rest of the lesson.

Our journals are passed out when Ms. Forte is done, and she gives us directions for today’s assignment. She asks for a poem, and all I can think about is the rap song that was playing under Dub’s voice when he told me Joker was

out.

Boy gotta gun, think it gonna make him gangster,

But I say no sir, cuz I can cap you faster.

Joker isn't fast. Dub's faster.

I scribble the lyrics down and underneath give credit to DC Combs, the author. I read them over and over and continue the song's bleak message in my head while my arms and legs grow more restless. After ten minutes of imagining the worst for my friend, I give in to the temptation to answer that last burning suspicion I have.

How dirty was Joker?

The classroom is quiet enough to hear the crackling of the ductwork inside the school ceiling and walls, but it's as good of a time as any. I grip my backpack strap and step away from my desk in one smooth stride, slinging my bag over my shoulder and marching through the widest row of desks until I reach the door.

"Tristan!"

I hear my name being called, and I'm honestly not sure if it's Ms. Forte or Riley yelling for me. Neither of them will catch me, though. I break into a sprint the moment my feet hit the hallway, and I push through the back door, speed by the guard and lift myself over the fence with one hand and a kick of my legs in the air.

I shift my bag so the straps are over both shoulders, and I start to sprint, cutting through yards and alleyways—anything I can do to cut the six miles from school to my home down just a little. I slip through traffic, weaving around cars and taking in the honks and shouts that come at me. I make it only two miles before I feel sick from running, and I walk along Miller's busiest road while holding my side and pushing back against a burning cramp.

My mom's church is close, so I exchange four more miles for a few blocks. Within minutes, I'm standing at the driver's side door of her car, keyless and scared. My breathing is ragged and uneven, and the urge to throw up keeps crashing in my stomach in waves.

I'm scared.

I’m afraid to walk into the church and ask my mom for her keys. Afraid of the disappointment I’ll see in her eyes because I’m not in school, and because I’m panicked over my best friend. I’m terrified of seeing Joker’s mom inside, of having to lie to her or look into her own worried eyes. I’m scared of what I’m going to find out next, of what I know, and of what I’m imagining.

My eyes closed, and my hand on the scratched metal door handle that I’ve broken into so many times before, I breathe in deep and will myself to choose the easiest path—the one that spares me some of the pain and judgment and gets me to the answers I need faster. I lift up hard and work my fingers under the metal casing, feeling for that familiar weak spot I know works. With my other hand, I push my fingertips inside and press on the metal lever, unlocking the door and slicing my finger as I pull my hands away.

I wince and suck away the blood while I slip into my mom’s car and lean to the right, the wires still exposed from the last time I had to do this. I jump her car and pull out slowly, my finger in my mouth again to keep my blood off her car.

I’m shocked nobody notices me, but at the same time I’m not. This is the kinda thing that happens daily in this town—cars getting jacked. Nobody has to race away with a stolen vehicle because the victims are too afraid to run someone down. It’s always one of us behind the wheel. And when it’s not, we’ll catch the driver because nobody steals shit in this area without Dub saying it’s okay to do it.

Unless it’s me…in my mom’s car. Racing home, hoping to prove myself wrong, but knowing that I won’t.

She’s going to see that her car is gone soon if I can’t get it back in time, so once I’m far enough away from the church, I gas it until the wheels squeal into my driveway. I leave the motor running and race to the back yard, cutting my way through the tall, overgrown bushes, grass, and weeds. It’s not hard to spot the place where Joker buried the knives I gave him. He didn’t bury them well, and I’m glad my mom hasn’t had time to come outside. She would have found these easily, and then she would have cried.

I pull the canvas material the knives are wrapped in from the dirt, loose soil easily falling away. The material unrolls as I tug it free from the ground. I don’t

even need to bother counting to know some of the knives are missing.

I fall back on my ass and stare at the pile of evidence resting between my feet. My palms dig into the moist grass and dirt beneath me. I can't look away, no matter how badly I want to. Nothing I do is going to change the fact that I gave Joker seven blades, and I'm looking at four.

"Goddammit, Joke…what did you do?"

I lean forward and rest my arms on my knees, running my arm along my nose and covering my mouth with my forearm for several seconds while I work through the disbelief pouring through my body.

My friend talked. My best friend told secrets that could get him killed to people that could take us down. Dub mentioned the ATF, but I don't think that's who it was at all. The FBI and Miller County have been trying to get inside the Fifty-Seven for months. Years, really. A new governor and a lot of bad press for the state of Ohio sort of amped things up lately, though. The good people out there want us gone. They're not wrong to. But three knives covered in a little DNA isn't going to be the thing that takes us down. It's just going to get my best friend killed…if he hasn't been already.

CHAPTER TEN

Riley

Lauren palms my head as she takes a seat on the bleacher row behind me. Her fingers roll across the velvet that is now my hair, pushing against the grain then working with it again.

“I’ve decided to make wishes on your head,” she says, rubbing a little quicker for another second or two, then closing her eyes.

“What’d you wish for?” I ask.

“Can’t tell you. Won’t come true if I do.” She pulls her leg up to tie her shoe while she smiles at me with tight lips.

“You know what I wish?” I begin, waiting until she glances up at me with a raised brow. “I wish I didn’t have to depend on a moody boy just to play basketball. That’s what I wish.”

My tone is pretty transparent. I’m worried about Tristan, because he left in a rush, and he looked scared. I’ve only known him for a week, but in that time, I’ve become certain of one thing—he isn’t afraid of much.

“Welcome to the world of disappointment and broken promises,” Lauren says, squeezing my shoulders as she stands, laughing quietly, and moves down to sit next to me sideways, one leg tucked underneath the other.

I roll my eyes and shrug.

“I know, men will disappoint you, blah blah blah,” I say.

“Not all of them,” Lauren interjects.

Her eyes grab onto mine and she blinks slowly, her mouth tight and curved with what I assume is a history of disappointment.

“My dad and Tristan’s dad used to be really good friends,” she says, picking at her fingers, her hands folded on top of her knee. She tucks her chin deep into her chest, her fingers stopping their movement while she sits completely still for a few long seconds. “They’re both dead, Riley. They both died in these horrible, awful, brutal, disgusting and…totally preventable ways.”

Her head tilts to the side and our eyes meet briefly before she looks back down again. I don’t know how to respond, and I’m not sure I’m supposed to, so I just remain quiet. My breathing matches hers, a slow rise of her shoulders giving me this ominous feeling yet I can’t imagine her telling me something worse than what she just did.

“Tristan…” Her mouth pinches in the corners with her pause, and she shakes her head, closing her eyes. “He is so much like his dad, Riley. His fears…how they make his decisions. He wants to be so different from his legacy, yet every choice he makes is the same ones his dad would have made. My dad made them, too, and these boys…fuck, these boys, Riley. They are so dumb, ya know?”

I shrug when she looks up, and she chuckles lightly then stands, waving a hand at me.

“I just get sick of it all sometimes. That’s all. I’m sure he’s fine, it’s just that I feel like the guys in this town, they don’t learn anything from history. They are hell-fucking-bent on repeating it over and over, no matter how bad the outcome always is.”

She jumps from the bottom row onto the gym floor, two girls on our team walking in behind her, but only two. That makes four of us, not even enough to form a starting squad. All I thought about today was practice, about working on what I did with Tristan into today’s drills and trying them out against my teammates. I looked forward to showing off how quickly I learn. I looked forward to showing off for him, even after the fight we had on the court last night.

I looked forward to making up and asking him questions. I wanted to *talk!*

“How bad is the outcome?” I ask, standing to stretch before walking down to the floor level to stand next to her. She scrunches her face. “You said they don’t care about the bad outcome. How bad does it get?”

I know this part of the county isn’t pretty. I know there are drugs and overdoses, shooting…*gangs*. I wasn’t shocked by anything Tristan said on the court last night, but every place I’ve lived has always had so-called dangerous areas. I refuse to give them power over my life, though. Nobody gets to keep me out of some place unless they own it, and you don’t get to own it by just saying so. When danger comes, I’ll leave. Not a second before.

“On a good day, you get a life sentence in prison.”

She pauses next to me for a beat then steps forward to pick up a ball. I do the same but don’t dribble right away. She gets a few steps into the court before I ask.

“How’d they die?”

Anyone else might pause, probably even get offended. It’s an incredibly personal and private story, yet Lauren doesn’t flinch. Her reply comes quickly… at least for half of my question.

“There was a shoot-out with the police. It made the national news, which was…well, it was quite a show-and-tell for me the next week,” she says. “They raided our home one night after he’d been out and my dad fought back. They shot him in the chest and he bled out before he got to the hospital.”

Her back is to me while she shares, and she stops at the foul line and takes a shot, her ball missing off the front of the rim. She turns to face me before retrieving it, shrugging one shoulder and offering a sad and distant smile on one side of her face.

“It’s probably better that he died there. They would have just locked him up,” she says.

“Why would they lock him up?” I know I’m brazen with my questions, but as long as Lauren doesn’t seem to mind sharing…

“Because he was a really bad man. And they raided our house for a reason. And because my dad was guilty as fuck…that’s why.” Her tone is more forceful, so I prepare to drop my questions, but I slip one more in before I’m done.

“How do you know?” I ask.

Lauren laughs to herself, jogging toward the hoop for a layup and dropping the ball in before walking away from it completely. She tugs her hair loose from the band holding it out of her face and wraps the material around her wrist instead while she looks to our left, at the large digital clock under the scoreboard that keeps the time.

Her eyes drift back to me and she smirks.

“He was hiding knives and guns in our hallway closet, and between fingerprints and circumstances, it was a pretty slam-dunk case,” she says, letting out a single laugh in her pause. “But I knew he was bad a long time before that. I knew because of all of his broken promises when I was growing up, because of all of the times we made plans that he missed, or that he said he’d pick me up from school and never showed up. I knew the time he was supposed to coach my brother’s basketball team and my mom had to step in and do it instead.”

She holds my stare for a few seconds, reading me while I let the meaning of her words sink in. Practice was supposed to begin thirty minutes ago. Tristan isn’t coming.

“I’ve got a lot of homework, and let’s be real, Riley…there are only four of us here, and not one of us is the coach. Girl, Tristan isn’t even a real coach. I’m just not feelin’ this today. I love you, though. I do love you.”

She sighs, then glances down and nods before moving toward her things on the bench. The other two girls follow her lead, excited to be done so early, and in less than a minute I’m in the gym alone.

I play solo for a few minutes, but I’m distracted by what Lauren said, and by my emotions. It’s making me play sloppily, and I’m not getting anything out of this. Maybe if I can stay here long enough, the boys’ team will show up. Or maybe…someone else.

I grab my things from the bench and stuff them in my bag, kicking open the door, golden rays of sun spilling in and the warmth mixing with the cool air. I find a decent spot on a half wall just outside the door, and I sit with my feet dangling and my shoes untied. The color outside grows more orange with each passing minute, and it dims the longer I wait. The boys’ team isn’t practicing

today either.

My dad has come and gone, another window closed without a chance to see him, so I might as well stay. I have failures everywhere I look, so why not deal with them here. I don't know where half of our team was today, and not a single college has opened my recruitment page in months—not even after the emails I sent out last night. I checked at lunch, and I could go to the computer lab now to check again, but instead, I hold on to that last little shred of optimism and belief that Tristan is good. He's the neighbor who helped me unload my truck, who said yes to saving my team, and who, for some reason, I can't separate myself from. He's who I've pictured before bed the last three nights, and I can't seem to quench this feeling that something is terribly wrong with him.

He wouldn't miss this for something trivial. I know people, and I know him. He's not a liar, and he's not a quitter. He'll be here…he's just late.

He's just late.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tristan

I've driven every street. I lied to my mom when she called, told her I came to grab the car right after school let out. She knows I'm lying, but I answered her call so there's that little pause in her mind that maybe I'm being honest. She lives for those little pauses. It's part of her faith—that the bad isn't really happening, and if she prays hard enough, everything will be okay.

I believe in confessions. I believe in repenting. And I believe for some of us, it's too late. I also believe that my mother's prayers are low on a long list of more important things for God to get to.

I'm tempted to pray right now, though. I would give anything to have my friend's car come into view the moment I round the school to pull into the lot reserved for teachers. It's not there, though. The lot is empty, minus one truck. Riley's truck. Everyone else has gone home, both practices done an hour ago. I'm not even sure if the girls had theirs since I wasn't there to run it, not that I have any real role or advice to give.

Circling around the lot, I glance inside her truck to see if she's waiting in the cab. I pull around both sides and am sort of relieved she isn't here to see me. A shoe slams against my windshield and rolls with heavy clunks down the side of the car's hood. I trace back its origin and my eyes meet furious ones. Riley's gray T-shirt is damp with sweat, her sleeves rolled above her shoulders and the

neck stretched low enough to see the top of her sports bra. Her school bag weighs down one arm and her duffel bag hangs from the other. She glares at me as she steps into the lot and begins to walk toward her truck, only one shoe on her feet.

“Dammit,” I hiss as I push the gear into park and get out of my mom’s car to retrieve her shoe.

“Riley, I’m sorry. I had to be somewhere, though,” I start to explain as I walk up behind her, holding out her shoe for her to take. She dumps her bags in the bed of her truck then turns to face me, her eyes moving from mine to her shoe as everything about her scowls.

“I had to run practice. And then they all left because they don’t believe we’re ever going to get to a game, and Lauren told me I shouldn’t count on you. So, tell me, Tristan. Can I count on you for this? Because this is important to me, and I still have time to scramble. I don’t know what I’ll do, but I won’t waste my time if you’re fucking hopeless. Just tell me now.”

Hopeless. That word sticks out. I don’t know how to answer it. I’m more hopeless than she could possibly understand. Guilt feels like shit, though, and for whatever reason, I don’t want to disappoint her. If I do, then all of this fantasy will disappear, and I won’t have a happy little world to play in anymore.

I won’t have her world.

I won’t have her.

“Take your shoe,” I say, completely disregarding everything she just leveled at me.

She stares at me blankly for a second before breathing out a short laugh and looking off to the side.

“Don’t do that. Stop with the eyerolls, Riley. I really don’t need your shit.” I both regret it and want to high five myself for still being the asshole when I need to be. I’m not lost to her—I’m in charge. My missing friend is more important, and I don’t owe her anything.

She rips the shoe from my hand and mumbles under her breath.

“I should just quit.” I catch that last part, and the guilt stabs again. I work to numb it.

She brushes into me, her body levying a hint of a shove when our arms touch, and I twist from the impact.

“Excuse me.” She actually huffs the words, and as fucked up as my world is right now, this makes me laugh out loud.

“Jesus Christ, Riley! Give me a goddamned break!” I chuckle through my words and thread my fingers together, my palms on my forehead as I take a few steps back. I slowly let go, my hands falling down to my sides in defeat. I’m surrendering to this day—to this life.

I let my head drop forward and I stare at her as she sits in the driver’s seat of her truck, her legs out the side so she can violently shove her foot in her shoe—the shoe she just threw at me.

“Why are you even here still?”

She stops tying her shoe when I speak and slowly twists her head until our eyes meet. Somehow that pissed off look is dug in deeper.

“If you were just going to leave the minute I showed up, why bother to wait around?” I step in closer and she gets out of her truck, meeting me halfway.

“I was just going to practice with the boys’ team,” she says, moving forward an inch at a time, her hips swaying with each small step. It feels like she’s punching me verbally. “I waited and waited, and they never showed.”

Our toes are touching, and she’s so close; I’m not holding onto her with my hands and that makes my arms feel lost and unsure. I hook my thumbs in my pockets to make myself feel stronger, and it works for maybe half a second.

“And then I thought, well maybe Tristan will show up. Maybe…maybe he’s okay. Maybe I’m worried for no reason at all. I bet his friend Paul will come and tell me he just got busy. And then you didn’t show up.”

She looks to her right, her eyes lost to something—her imagination, probably. Her jaw works side to side and her tongue passes over her front teeth as she slowly nods with an acceptance of some sort. Her lashes sweep down and kiss her cheeks, and she whispers, repeating herself one more time.

“You didn’t show up.”

Her chest lifts with a quick breath and her body twists to look behind her, leading her feet to her open passenger door. She was afraid something awful had

happened to me. She gives a shit, and this wasn't just about basketball for her either. She was worried…about me.

"Let's practice now," I say just as her hand grips the side of her truck door. She freezes then slowly lets her head fall to the side until it's resting on her arm and the truck door. She rolls to the side a little more until her forehead is on the glass. She glances at me sideways, her eyes impossible to ignore when they land on me.

"Okay," she nods, breathing in deep, stepping back and slamming her door closed. She walks past me toward the gym she'd just left, leaving her truck unlocked and her things in the back.

Rather than lecture her again, I just leap over the truck bed railing and lift her bags up with one hand, climbing down in a smooth and quick movement and opening her cab door. I set her bags on her seat and lock the door latch before slamming it shut. She's waiting for me near the curb by the gym with her hands out and that WTF look plastered on her face that she gets when those of us who know this place try to help her avoid its worst elements.

"People will steal your shit. It's a real thing. And if you leave your truck unlocked again, someone's going to steal that too." I stop at her side long enough to deliver my short lesson I know goes in one ear and out the other.

I purposely don't make eye contact with her, and I do that a little for her and a bit for me. She doesn't want me to piece together how much she cares, how worried she was. And I don't want her to think about how she barely knows me. I'm probably not worth the trouble.

The gym echoes with the squeals of our shoes and the door slams closed behind me as I follow Riley inside. I stop at center court while she walks to the rack of balls, taking the one on the end and dribbling it to me.

"You just gonna stand there?" She maintains eye contact while her hand works at the ball, and her expression is steely—the kind of face Dub gets when he's done with someone. I bet he made that face at Joker.

"Depends on what you want to work on," I say, shrugging with my hands deep in my pockets, my thumb rolling over the rough edge of my keys in one pocket and my fingers clutched around my phone in the other in case it vibrates

with a call from my friend.

Riley laughs slightly, tilting her chin up and stepping back a few paces toward the far end of the court.

“Me and you. One on one.”

I look down and let her gain a few more steps. It feels impossible to focus on where I am right now, and I want to scream at everything. I’m out of place. This is the place where *I* don’t belong. I’m overstaying my visit to the fantasyland, but I don’t know where else to go. I’ve looked everywhere I can, and I know by the time I go home, Joker’s mom is going to be worried. She’ll probably talk to my mom, and she’ll blame me, and then I’ll never get to visit the fantasies again. Maybe that’s the point of all of this anyhow—it’s God’s way of punishing me for what I am. He let me see what’s possible only to rob me of it but leave me with the memory.

“Fine, you check first,” I say, taking my position on defense and checking the ball back to her when she passes it.

She dribbles and stares at me for a dramatically long time, and eventually I stand straight and let my arms sag.

“Riley, you’ve made it clear you’re pissed. If you don’t really want to play, then let’s just go.”

All I can think about is rechecking all of the places I’ve been, then racing home to get to Joker’s mom—or to mine—before any phone calls come with bad news. The second I relax, though, Riley bolts around my right side and drives to the hoop, scoring. She’s been practicing, but I can still see her moves a little too early. If I weren’t this fucking depressed, I would have stolen the ball from her before her first step.

She checks the ball to me, and I do the same thing she did, only I hold the ball in my palms at my chest without even moving. I don’t know why I’m here. I should leave, and there’s no reason I can’t. It wouldn’t even be wrong according to the universe. My friend is missing—my *best* friend, and there’s a price on his head. And Riley’s right—I’m not so sure we’re ever going to really get to a game. All of this adds up to permission for me to leave her, to disappoint her and let her figure her shit out on her own, but I…can’t.

She was worried about me, and while the rest of my world is falling apart outside of these doors, the fantasy feels more real than it ever has in here.

“Come on!” she growls, swiping her hand toward the ball. I move it to my side just in time and take a half step back before pulling up to shoot, sinking a three.

I rub my eyes and wait while she jogs after the ball. I’m not into this—I’m not trying, and that’s not fair to her. She slams the ball down hard in frustration, catching it at her waist, passing it to me to pass back again.

She stares at me with the ball in her hands and her eyes narrow as she shakes her head. She isn’t speaking, but I hear her clearly. I sniffle and take a deep breath, spreading my stance and arms out, giving her very little room to work with. I nod at her and her chin dips as she drops the ball and begins to dribble. My eyes move to her hips, and she stumbles her dribble a little but recovers. I shake my head, still seeing her weakness, and I reach in for the ball. I tap it enough to make her have to chase after it a few paces behind her, but she salvages it again.

I want to tell her things, teach her how to gain more confidence in positions like this, but my mouth won’t work. I’m a mixture of terrified thoughts and desperate ones.

Her hand pushes into my stomach and her body turns next, her side crashing into me in an effort to gain more room. My feet lose their balance briefly, but I steady myself and become rigid in my position. She moves away and surveys her options, but comes directly at me again, this time harder—her elbow sinking into my gut.

“Foul,” I say, my quick temper flavoring my tone.

Riley doesn’t stop. I’m not even sure she hears me. Her body checks mine, and for the first time, she gets me to move nearly a foot from where I am. I ready myself for her next shove, though, and the result is my arm slamming into her bicep. She winces; I know it hurts, but she doesn’t quit.

“What are you doing?” I say, backing off just a little. Riley grunts as she rushes past me with the small opening, and she easily scores.

I roll my neck, a physical reminder for me to compartmentalize all of the shit

I'm feeling. I'm pissed. She's pissed. I'm scared. She's…scared for me, I guess? I don't know because she doesn't really talk. She just assaults me. I don't talk either, though, so…

"Your ball," she grumbles, shoving the ball into my chest. I feel it push out my breath and my instincts begin to win, my blood growing hotter as all things rational begin to fade.

I drive the ball fast, not even giving her a chance to get set up for defense, and I take it to the hoop dunking it and holding on to the rim long enough to pull my body up half a foot, engorging my chest and releasing my most primal self.

"Oh, I see how this is. Can't lose to a girl. Fine," she says, and I chuckle because she sounds so silly.

"Yeah, that's it. Whatever you need to say to yourself. Why don't you just drive the ball to my right again and show me every move with your feet about a half a second before," I say, not looking her in the eyes, but instead staring at her feet.

Her dribble picks up because I've made her mad, and she doesn't waste a lot of time trying to score on me. She falls right into her old habits though, just like I told her she would, and I slap the ball away about six steps from the hoop.

I rush after it and dribble out, shaking my head. I'm being a dick, but I don't know how to stop. I want to hit something, and I want to scream. I want to leave this place, but I also want to just stop and grab her shoulders and look into her eyes and beg the universe for forgiveness.

I want her to forgive me. I want my mom to be proud. I want to be born somewhere else, in a different life, with options and hope. I want my friend home, and I want Dub Lewis to die.

I want Dub Lewis to die.

My tongue passes over my lips at that delicious and dangerous thought. I've had it a million times, but never so clearly that I acknowledged it. Dub's the reason I am how I am. He's why I don't cry. I never wanted him to have the satisfaction, to see that he could break me. He pretended to have all of this love for my dad, but really…he never did. He didn't take me under his wing out of respect, he did it to show who was truly in charge now that my dad was gone. He

did nothing but fill my head with stories about how much my father failed and how his death was on his shoulders alone. He conditioned me to believe I was lucky I had him as a role model instead. The moment I began to believe it all, he marked me with his tattoo—holding me down, waking me from sleep just to gag me with a rag while one of his cousins sunk ink into my wrist with an *X* just like his.

Dub Lewis bought me, but I was never for sale. And now I want him to die.

Lost in my thoughts, I get lazy with the ball and Riley notices, grabbing it and moving around my body. I react as if this game matters, though, fueled by my stewing frustration, anxieties, and pure resentment and anger for this life I have. I rush at her to take the ball back, my arms so wide she's trapped, my steps aggressive. She falters, and I reach in, taking over the dribble while she grabs onto my arm. I shake her loose and score, but she shoves me the moment my feet land from my short jump, lunging for the ball when I grab it on my unsteady legs.

"That's a foul!" she shouts, swatting at me with one hand while I strong-arm her to keep her at bay. I can't help but laugh.

"I'm pretty sure *yours* was the foul," I mock, my skin tingling with this rush of adrenaline. Everything in me is spiking, and I'm not sure what emotion I'm going to feel next.

Without warning, Riley shoves the center of my chest, the impact enough to push her off a step or two. I chuckle, but only for a second, realizing quickly that this isn't about being playful or funny. Her eyes are glazed, and it's not like tears…it's beyond that. Her arms fall to her sides for a second, then flex again, her palms hitting my chest once more, but this time with her full weight behind them. My legs stutter, and every time I come close to regaining my balance, she comes at me again.

The ball falls to my side, and she kicks it, then moves into me one final time. Before she can back away, though, I wrap her wrists up in my hands and hold them between us. Her eyes are wild, like a stallion caught in barbed wire. She's trapped here too. This town…this school—here with me—this is the last place on earth she wants to be.

I can feel every muscle in her body flexing, trying to work up enough power to break away from me. She's pulling from my grip with so much strength her arms are quaking in my grasp. I should let her go, but she's only going to hit me again. She's angry at her life. I see it as clear as a reflection. I'm angry too. We're taking it out on each other.

"Riley, what are you doing?"

I shake her gently, and as her muscles begin to ease, so does my grip. My eyes dip to her chin and my brow creases. I don't think I've ever felt more lost in my entire life. Everything inside me hurts, and there isn't a damn thing I can do about any of it. I can't find my friend. I can't leave the gang. I can't be friends with Riley. I'm caught in a tornado of *impossibles* and *nevers,* and the only things left on my list are horrible sins.

I know her eyes are waiting for mine before I lift my gaze, and I know that they wait in judgment. I feel them—the heat. It burns my face and everything inside of me. I look into them anyway, because maybe they'll give me answers. Maybe there's forgiveness somewhere in the silvery blue. I crave peace. I need a home. I need a person.

"How did your dad die?"

Her question actually punches the air from my lungs.

"Ha ha," I breathe out in a short burst, stunned and caught somewhere in the midst of duty, regrets, and pain.

Her eyes are open wide and they haven't blinked since she locked onto me. She's not looking at me, though, but it's more like *through* me, her focus lost somewhere in my head because she's in there too. She's invaded me, welcome or not. She sees me, good and evil. I hold the tip of my tongue between my teeth as I steady my breath and remind myself of who I am and what I could do.

"He was stabbed forty-seven times in the Corduroy Prison yard. I had just turned eleven, and he had just been sentenced to life."

I stop and let my eyes truly focus on hers, connecting enough to bring her to the surface—so she *sees* me…feels this truth that I don't talk about to anyone.

"He was never going to get out, so a few people serving multiple sentences from our crew gave him relief. At least, that's the story certain people tell. I've

always thought about that number—forty-seven. It doesn't feel very compassionate. Nothing about being stabbed that many times comes off as a favor. Have you ever been stabbed?"

Riley swallows and shakes her head *no.* Her movement is so small, fragile too. It's strange to see her nervous, because up until now, everything about her has been defensive and strong.

"It's brutal," I say, relaxing my hold on her arms completely, letting them drop to her sides as mine do the same. "The wounds never really seem to heal quite right."

I suck in my top lip and hold her gaze, her face relaxing into a new realization. I know how being stabbed feels because I've been stabbed…a lot. I breathe in heavily, then exhale as my eyes fall closed. I lift the bottom of my T-shirt to the center of my chest so she can really look. The lines are pale, and they contrast with my darker skin. Time has made them less obvious, but if I put my hands on them I feel the knife cutting into me as if it were happening right this moment. It burns, and I swear it bleeds.

Riley's eyes trail from mine down to the evidence I've been hurt more than most. I chew at the inside of my cheek as she looks on, her lip puffing out in a quiver as she takes it all in.

"There are six of them," I say, running my fingertips over each one slowly, connecting the dots. "Three were from my first fight out on the courts. I was thirteen, and I should have kept my mouth shut."

Her eyes shift to mine quickly and flash wider. I shake my head before she can tell me I'm wrong. She doesn't understand the rules of this world. Anywhere else, a young boy shouldn't be stabbed for speaking up. But when you mouth off during a peace treaty between two rival gangs, your crew has to save face somehow. Dub didn't stab me, but two of his main guys did. They dragged me home and left me for my mom to take to the ER after that.

My mother prayed for days. When I wouldn't promise her that I'd quit the gang, she began lighting candles. She's still praying, four years later.

"And the other three?" Riley's voice is rough, tears caught deep in her throat that she refuses to let out. I recognize the sound.

I shrug.

“I don’t even remember,” I say, which is mostly true. One of my scars is from Joker. It was an accident when we were fifteen. He was scared and thought I was going to hurt him because he’d messed up a delivery for Dub. I was just there to make sure he was okay. I’ll never forget where that scar came from just like I’ll never forget how terrified he was when he saw me. He was an animal, caught and desperate, and he believed I would hurt him.

“They wound you to punish you. They make sure you never forget. That’s how this works,” I say, lowering my shirt and sinking my hands into the pockets of my jeans. I breathe with her automatically, and I think I do it so I don’t feel alone. Our bodies deflate in sync, shoulders rising together, lips parting. She’s beginning to understand how serious all of this is.

“I want to say you can count on me, Riley. I know it’s what you want to hear, and I know that’s why you’re mad,” I say, breathing out a sad peal of laughter. “I envy you so much.”

I squeeze my eyes closed, shaking my head and opening my eyes as I view off to the side, because the honesty stings. I’m rarely vulnerable, and I don’t think I’ve ever truly been raw with anyone. Not even my mother. It’s a challenge I’m driven to, though, and I don’t know why. I think I need to prove to myself that I’m tough enough for this—strong enough to let someone in and put a voice to how much I hate what I am and what I’ve become.

I swallow hard.

“You…you get to dream,” I say, holding onto my bottom lip with my teeth as my eyes settle back on Riley’s. She hasn’t moved. “I get to fight to survive, and you get to dream. And I want to help you, but I can’t promise you I’ll be there. There are too many…”

Pausing mid-word, I shake my head and force my lips closed tightly as I think of the right word. It turns out to be really simple.

“Bad guys,” I say, chuckling pathetically. “There are too many bad guys who own me. And I don’t get to make choices for myself. If I did, I would have been here for practice. I wouldn’t let you down. But as it is…I’m gonna. Over and over again. If you can work with that, then I still want to try to get you a team

that won’t suck on the court next week. And I want to help you show everything you have to whoever you need to so you can get the fuck out of this place.”

We stare at one another through a full breath while she takes in my partial promises, and I’m compelled to make my point again—the one I have been trying to make since I first met her.

“You don’t belong here, Riley. You just don’t.”

I’m barely done speaking when her hands reach up and touch my cheeks as her body steps into me. Her eyes close in a fraction of a second and her lips find mine, a cool and soft surprise that stuns me at the first touch, my entire body rushed with what feels like a shot of morphine beginning at my lips and flowing down my neck and arms and spine. It’s the softest kiss I’ve ever had. There’s nothing dirty or obligated about it. Her fingertips are feather-light against my skin, and her mouth holds onto my bottom lip with a quivering and timid touch that matches everything I know she’s feeling—that *I’m* feeling.

This kiss is uncertain. I don’t deserve it. She should take it back.

Her lips fall away from mine, losing their tentative hold as she rocks back on her heels and takes a single step away as her eyes open on me. They are heartbroken and embarrassed. I didn’t kiss back. It kills me that I didn’t, and I wanted to. God, did I want to. Her lips deserve better, though. Kissing back would have been another sin. It would have been weak in another way. I’ve let her get too close as it is.

“We can’t be friends.”

The sickness climbs up my chest the instant I utter those words. Her eyes flicker, the light dimming quickly, hope lost and regret quickly moving in. Her mouth hardens, lips forming a sneer. I wouldn’t be shocked if she spit at me next. She doesn’t, but she does slap me. My skin bakes, the burn from what I know is a bright-red sting she left behind throbbing as I tilt my head to face her.

She knocked me off my axis, but she didn’t destroy my world. It’s more than that, though. I know it the second she turns her away from me and walks out the gym door.

I didn’t destroy hers.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Riley

I'm glad my dad isn't home. We're one of those repressed kinds of tiny, little families. He doesn't directly show me how hurt he is about my mom, and I keep all of the teenaged girl bullshit out of his view. Granted, I haven't had much girly bullshit in my life.

What I just did to Tristan marks the third time I've kissed a boy. It's the *first* time I've kissed a boy without some sort of team party, closet dare, and bottle involved. It's also the first time I've really wanted to kiss a boy.

I'm still reeling from the slam of emotions my body was caught in. When he didn't show up, I thought I was pissed because he was letting me down as a coach. The more he talked, though, the more I realized I was mad because I was looking forward to seeing him. I was worried about him. I was…*am* so confused.

The sun is down, and I know I could go to the court and somehow it would probably get back to him and then he'd show up with his alpha-protecting mask on, but what good would that do? None of that is genuine or normal or how I want to be with him.

He can't even be my friend.

My mouth trembles with the urge to cry as I recall his words, how he sounded—how absolutely resolute he was. I stifle the feeling, though.

Tristan might not be able to be my friend, but Lauren can. I've been

wallowing in the same spot in the center of our living room floor for an hour. I've had a few dozen fake conversations with Tristan in my head. Sometimes, I yell at him and he grovels. Sometimes, he shows up at my door and says he's sorry, then sweeps me up in his arms. Most of the time we just have the same dumb conversation we had an hour before. True to life, I'm also getting nowhere with pretending.

I've managed to get my shoes off my feet with only my toes and heels and reach above my head with my fingertips to the coffee table to grab the remote. The Cavs are traveling today, so I settle on some college hoops. The sound of high-tops squeaking against hardwood comforts me.

I click on the game and then turn my focus to my school bag near my ankles. My toe hooks in the shoulder strap and I lift my knee to my chest, dragging the heavy bag along the floor until I can grip it and reach inside. My phone is close to dead, but there aren't any messages. Nobody's been looking for me or worried about me.

I laugh to myself—*at* myself—then hold my phone above my face as I call Lauren. The first time, my call goes directly to voicemail, so I dial again, this time listening to it ring and ring. It goes through six or seven times, and I'm close to giving up when she answers, out of breath.

"Riley, you okay?" She sounds panicked, like my house is on fire, but I have no idea. I sit up, my muscles suddenly no longer tired. My head swivels around, and all I hear is the hum of the broadcasters on the television and the buzz of the fan above my head.

"I'm fine. Why?"

She breathes into the phone, one of those exhales released like when I think I've lost my wallet and suddenly find it.

"Paul's missing. The police are at his house, and there's just a lot of shit going around, and I knew you had stayed to practice, but then I stopped by your house and nobody was home." She pants, catching her breath.

She was worried about me. I was worried about Tristan. Nobody was worried about Paul.

"I had no idea," I say, pulling my legs in close to my body and sliding my

gym bag on one side and the duffel on the other. I suddenly want to be surrounded by my things, as if they could protect me.

“He never showed up at school, and I guess it’s been more than twenty-four hours now. He’s disappeared before, but never that long. He’s usually just high on someone’s couch, but this is different. Have you seen Tristan?”

Her question hovers on the line for a second.

“Uh yeah…yeah. Like an hour ago maybe. He finished up practice.” I mash my lips together and shake my head, not satisfied with that lie, but frazzled from Lauren’s news.

“You practiced?” She asks, oddly interested.

“Yeah, well…sorta…not really, or just for a little bit. Lauren, Paul…what’s going on with Paul?” I bring her focus back to something more important than my failed attempt to connect with Tristan.

“I don’t know much. Lotus went over there because nobody could find Tristan. His mom is freaking out, Riley. She’s so scared, and it’s just so…I don’t know…familiar, I guess. I remember my mom freaking out like that when my dad never came home. I remember Tristan when his dad got arrested…”

“When he was stabbed…” I break in, closing my eyes in shame because maybe that was not something I was supposed to let others know, or share that *I* know.

There’s a noticeable silence between us, but eventually Lauren continues.

“Yeah…when he was stabbed,” she says, her tone somber, and maybe bitter. She must have been close with his dad, too.

“Can I do anything?” I know I can’t, but I feel this strange numbness—partly leftover from how I left Tristan and swallowed whole by what Lauren just told me.

“You can come over. It’s just me, and it feels kinda shitty being home alone right now. But don’t walk. I don’t know why, but I feel like the streets aren’t okay tonight…and don’t give me one of those Riley tough-girl responses. Just get in your damn truck, okay?”

I smile faintly.

“Okay,” I croak. “Be there in a few minutes.”

I hang up with Lauren and rush to my bedroom, tossing off my practice clothes and putting on my softest sweatpants and my long-sleeved T-shirt from The Ohio State. I wear this when I want to jet into my future. I read an article once about visualizing myself where I want to be in five or ten years, and I took it literally. I put these clothes on tonight not because of my dream to play for them, though, but because I want to flash into the future—away from all of these feelings.

I'm scared.

I follow Lauren's teachings, locking everything behind me and locking my truck's door when I climb inside. I weave through our streets and get to her house in less than two minutes, sad that I didn't pass Tristan's on my way. I didn't want to detour, though. My heart is thumping still, and when I was driving it was so loud I couldn't concentrate on the sound coming from my speakers. I'm not even sure if I had music on.

Lauren's waiting for me at the door when I slam my truck door closed, and she shuts her front door behind me when I slip inside.

"You lock your truck?" she asks.

I give her a lopsided grin, and she fake punches me.

"I said don't give me any of that Riley tough-girl bullshit," she growls. She's worked up, and that's making me get worked up.

"Sorry, and yes…I locked it."

I follow her into her kitchen where she has a tub of ice cream open in the middle of the kitchen island. She slides her leg up on the counter then shimmies the rest of her weight up until she's sitting with her legs crossed in the very center. She picks up the tub and holds it in her lap, grabbing the spoon and shoveling a huge bite of vanilla into her mouth.

"The spoons are in the second drawer from the left," she mumbles through her frozen bite. She gestures in the drawer's direction and I follow, taking one and shutting the drawer so I can join her.

Rather than climb up, I slide out a metal stool and straddle it, my knees jutting out in both directions, barely fitting under the counter bar.

"You can sit up here," Lauren says, tipping the carton so I can slip my spoon

in.

“I’m pretty sure I’ll crack that thing in half,” I say, tapping my fingernail on a gap that’s already formed in the center of the island where two cabinets have come together. Lauren shrugs.

“It was a do-it-yourself job and my brother didn’t cut the Formica the right way. You could probably slide that entire half across the room,” she says, swaying her spoon in the direction of the door.

I chuckle.

“We could use it to block the door,” I say, scooping up another bite.

“Now you’re talking,” she says, following my spoonful with one of her own.

My joke is funny, but just barely, and I get a sense in the silence that follows that blocking doors is something that’s been done in this house before.

Lauren and I go at the tub for about five minutes straight, feeding our faces to distract us from everything else. It works until we both feel sick. She tosses her spoon across the kitchen, landing it in the sink, and I try to do the same but miss, flinging it onto the floor with a series of clanks.

“You’re losing your touch,” she jokes.

I stretch my arms out on the counter and tip my chin up to look at my friend —my *only* friend.

“So Tristan told you about his dad, huh?” She looks a little surprised, maybe skeptical.

I nod with closed lips.

“A little,” I say.

She nods, too, then slides from the where she sits after a few seconds and picks up my spoon. She rinses both and sets them in the other half of the sink to dry.

“Did he tell you his story?” She glances at me sideways as she asks and holds my eyes briefly, smirking when I don’t respond right away. “That’s a no.”

I shrug.

“He told me some things…I guess. I mostly just yelled at him for ditching practice. He said he had something important to do though, so…” I stop, realizing what was so important. I lean back and hold the front of the counter to

stop my fall as my head tilts back. “Ohhhhhhh damn. He was looking for Paul.”

“I hope he was looking,” Lauren says fast.

I pull my brow in and wait for her to make eye contact with me again. When she finally does, she waves me off.

“No, I mean I’m sure he was. It’s just the crew…I don’t know…maybe they don’t want Paul to be found. But I’m sure I’m just talking shit and don’t know anything,” she says, her focus a little lost. I think it’s lost on purpose.

“Isn’t Paul his best friend?” My pulse is thumping wildly at the thoughts her reaction sparked. I’ve been vague with her and with Tristan for too long. I need a direct answer.

“Are you saying Paul is missing because Tristan made him…what?” I pause hoping she’ll fill in the space with a different answer. When she doesn’t, I finish the thought. “Would Tristan hurt Paul?”

Lauren’s eyes settle on mine for several seconds without blinking. I can read the uncertainty, and I don’t want to believe it, but at the same time…I feel it too. Lauren doesn’t react until my eyes start to sag and my breathing becomes labored.

“No…Riley, just no. Tristan isn’t a killer,” she says.

A rush of tingles, like needles, trail down my arms and neck. It’s a wave of relief as much as it’s a confirmation for so many questions I have. Tristan may not be a murderer, but he knows plenty of them.

“You have doubts,” I say, holding my front teeth together in a forced pause. Lauren grimaces.

“It’s less doubts and more like…well…like I have experience,” she says. “That life won’t come into this house. My mom swore it off, and I’ll keep it out. I’d give anything to move us out of here. This gang follows you, though. It’s in the suburbs. It’s in small towns. It just takes one person to find a few weak people they can manipulate with fear and then bam!”

I flinch when her voice raises.

“Why does Tristan do it?” My insides twist at the question. I want him to be good. I see it in him, the conflict and the struggle. He has a choice. I don’t understand why he won’t take it.

Lauren shakes her head at me finally raising one shoulder, as if she's signaling that she's given up.

"You'd have to ask him," she says.

Without warning, she slides her phone across the counter to me. It's buzzing with a call, and I see Tristan's name across the top. I square the phone flat in front of me then look her in the eyes.

"What do you want me to do? It's your phone. He's calling you." My fingers buzz with this sudden sense of urgency, and the only advice Lauren can give me is a disgusted wave of her hand as she leaves the room and heads down the hallway to her bedroom.

I should let this call go. I don't need to answer; it's not even my phone. The reasoning scrolls through my mind at a million miles per hour, over and over, yet my fingers hover over the phone screen and I stare at his name knowing I'm going to give in.

"Fuck," I breathe out, tapping the speaker icon and bringing Tristan's voice to life.

"Lauren, hey," he starts before I say a word.

"It's not Lauren…it's…Riley," I choke out.

He's silent for several seconds, the only sounds the muffling of the phone against his chin or cheek and a rumble of a car passing by in the background. He tries to cover up the sound of his throat clearing, but I hear his nerves.

"What are you doing there?" he asks.

I scrunch up my shoulders and panic a bit, searching for words. I glance down the hallway, but Lauren's nowhere nearby. She left me with this so I could do something about it. I'm not sure what, though. Maybe it's just for me to find answers.

"My dad's working tonight, and I wasn't in the mood to be alone," I say.

His breath blows into the phone, and it's a long and careful exhale. I picture him somewhere dangerous, involved in his friend's disappearance, and I know it isn't fair, but Lauren led me to these thoughts.

"I'm out front."

My heart kicks. I twist to look at the tightly locked door over my shoulder—

a bolt and a chain in place. There's a crack in the center of the wood, though, like the door has been attacked before.

"Why?" I ask.

The quiet grows, sitting on the line long enough that when Tristan finally does speak it startles me. The sound is jarring.

"I guess I didn't want to be alone either," he says.

Lauren walks back into the main room. She's muttering something about her brother needing cash and her mom's pills. Her voice is muffled because all of my attention is devoted to the silence on her phone. I shake my head out of the trance and our eyes connect.

"Are you still talking to him?" My heart thumps as I nod *yes.*

Her mouth twists.

"Good, tell him to come over. He can stay with you while I go to Paul's house." She walks away before I can respond, so I look at the carpet and begin to pace before speaking softly into the phone.

"Lauren needs to go to Paul's house. Can you come in?" I ask.

"What does she need? I'll just go..." He's still talking as Lauren walks by with a sweatshirt and a small backpack that rattles with the few things she threw inside.

"Uh, I think she's already leaving," I say, following her to the door.

Lauren unlocks and opens just in time to see Tristan stepping out of his mom's car, his phone discarded somewhere in the seat as I hear the sounds echo in both my ear and real life in front of me. I hang up.

"Just give me whatever you need and I'll take it," Tristan says, reaching for the bag. Lauren steps to the side, tucking it behind her, but doesn't step away from him.

"No offense, but you are the *last* person that Paul's mom wants to see right now," she growls.

Tristan leans back on his heels and looks up at the night sky with his palms out to either side.

"I'm just as shocked about this as everyone else is." His frown is hardened and his eyes look like they've been punched, swollen and sunken in. Lauren has

no pity, though.

“Are you?” she says, stepping into him. She pulls the bag around to the front of her body and uses it as a battering ram, pushing Tristan back a step. “This shit…it’s always just some game to you guys, like this fucking club you get to belong to. It’s like that until someone gets killed, Tristan. And you know better than anyone…or should I say *almost* better than anyone—when our neighborhood goes dark and ugly, ain’t nobody safe. Not you. Not me. Not Paul…”

Her eyes drift to me and Tristan’s gaze follows, his Adam’s apple dipping low, then sliding back up his throat.

“You stay here and try not to fuck up my friend. I like her, and she doesn’t need your mess seeping into her life.” Lauren glances at me with a nod then moves down her driveway while Tristan licks at the corner of his mouth, speechless.

“She’s just really stressed.” I don’t know why I feel the need to say something, and to say *that.* We’re all stressed, but whatever anger Lauren has with Tristan runs deeper than this moment right here.

“She’s right. I’ll just hang out here until she gets back. Go inside.” He nods toward the doorway now only a step behind me. I don’t like orders.

“No.”

My short response flips his gaze to me rapidly, his mouth squished tight and his eyes narrowed.

“Riley, this isn’t me playing tough guy or trying to boss you around. It’s not safe right now; so please go inside.”

I can tell he’s fighting with himself to show restraint. I relax my shoulders and take a step back, but I stop halfway through the doorway.

“If it isn’t safe, then you should come inside, too.”

Our eyes dance for a moment. This is where the real danger is, and this is the root of why I’m really here in the first place. There’s something about Tristan that speaks to me, and no matter how many warnings I get—from him, from Lauren…from the universe—I still want to let him in. I want time with him. I want to know why my friend thinks he’s so awful, because I just don’t see it.

“Just until Lauren gets back,” he relents, moving to his car to grab his phone and shut the door and lock up. Keys dangle from his index finger, twirling once before he grabs them in his palm. The gesture seems so nonchalant, except he repeats the movement all the way into Lauren’s house and doesn’t stop until I stare at his moving hand as he sits on the arm of the sofa.

“Sorry,” he grimaces, setting the keys down on the coffee table.

Lauren’s math homework is out; she’d been working on it I guess. Tristan tugs at the end of a paper that’s holding a spot in one of her books, pulling it closer and revealing her strings of numbers.

“I have a seventeen percent in math.” His face offers no reaction with his words, and his eyes scan over the page, trying to decipher Lauren’s handwriting. “I don’t even know how I got the seventeen. I think I just got sympathy points. I’m in that class because I test well. That’s what Ms. Beaumont says. I think maybe I just took *one* test well, though.”

He lets out a heavy sigh and pushes the book away before sitting up and sliding his hands up his thighs until they meet on his lap, fingers weaving and clenching at one another. I move to the center of the couch and turn sideways to look at him. My eyes can’t help but dart to his lips, and every view reminds me of how they felt, followed by the sting of his rejection. After a few long seconds of uncomfortable silence, I begin to chew on my thumbnail just to put pressure on my own mouth in an attempt to erase the ruined memory. It doesn’t work at all.

Lights reflect along the ceiling as they shine through cracks in Lauren’s front-room shutters. Tristan stands the second he senses them and moves to the window, tipping the blade enough to peer out. He shuts it tightly after a second, and when he turns, our eyes meet.

“Just making sure…” He stops midsentence. I let it go briefly but not for good.

“Making sure what?” I fold my arms loosely and cross my legs on the center cushion as I stare at him. Tristan pokes his hands in his pockets and shrugs, looking down at the floor for a while.

The room is so quiet that every small sound sends a jolt of urgency through

my body. The refrigerator motor kicks on…then off. The heater rumbles and buzzes a loose vent cover in the hallway. A cricket hidden somewhere inside echoes.

“You get like that when you live here,” he says, bringing me back to the surface.

“Huh?” I shift my gaze to him and he steps close again, this time sitting on the couch, our knees nearly touching as he turns to face me.

“Paranoid, I guess.” His eyes move between mine as I nod, kind of understanding.

Tristan clears his throat then slides against the corner of the couch, gaining a few precious inches of distance. Probably for the best since we can’t be friends.

“You want to listen to some music?” I ask.

He chuckles lightly and cocks one brow, relaxing his expression when he sees that I’m serious.

“Oh…uhm,” he glances around the empty home. I get why—he wants to be able to hear what’s happening…*out there.*

“I’ll keep it low. I just thought maybe it would help…I don’t know…pass the time you have to sit here with me? You know, since it’s so awful and we aren’t friends.”

My expression grows hard. That was passive aggressive, but I’m still glad I said it. I see him wince, just barely, and I’m satisfied.

“Music’s good,” he finally says.

I pull my phone from my pocket and open my favorite playlist, starting it then setting my phone on the back of the couch. It’s a mix of everything, which is what I was raised on. My dad’s more of the country and oldies type of guy, and my mom like hard rock. I love pop and rap and pretty much anything, so it works. The first song that plays is from the eighties. Tristan smirks, then turns my phone toward him so he can read, half laughing.

“Hey, I saw your lips moving with the words to that. You can’t make fun of me when you know the words,” I say, mouthing *too-ra-loo-ra* along with him. His mouth curves slowly, and when it’s finally smiling for real, everything in the room shifts.

We begin to sing together, both messing up verses in our own ways, nowhere even close to being on key. When the next song starts and it's country, Tristan groans, but I catch him mouthing the words to this one as well. I throw a nearby pillow at him and he catches it at his chest, holding it to his body and laughing until the sound fades out, and we're both just looking at each other.

Country turns into Elvis, and Tristan's lip ticks up on one side as he blinks and looks down. His gaze doesn't fall for long, though, and in a breath, he's studying me again.

"Careful, we might become friends," I tease. He doesn't laugh, and his grin falls a little, losing the dimples on his cheeks. I shouldn't have said that. He took it seriously.

"Every single time I hear a car drive by, I assume it's someone coming to kill me."

My throat goes dry at his words, and my heartbeat pounds in my gut. His eyes flirt with me, moving to and away while he chews at the inside of his cheek. I'm frozen on his face, but in the periphery, I can see him wringing his hands.

He looks up and lets his breath slip away until his lip hangs open and his features droop, almost desperate. It's a surrender.

"My best friend is probably dead."

The words vibrate as they escape his quivering lips. I feel the threat of tears in my eyes already, so I look away and brush their beginnings against my cheeks.

"I am the son of a man who started the Fifty-Seven. The man who had him murdered started the gang with him, and when my dad was gone, he marked me with this so I'd never forget," he says, turning his wrist out until the dark *X* is in plain view. He glances up at me then back down at his arm, his hair falling forward and shading his eyes. He runs his hand with the marked arm through it but keeps his gaze down.

"My dad wanted to be empowered…Dub," he pauses, flashing his wrist so I can tie a name to the mark, "he wanted money. And he liked how people were afraid. It took me years to piece it all together, or maybe I knew deep down the whole time."

A heavy sigh leaves his chest, and his eyes begin to glaze. He blinks a few times and starts to chuckle, meeting my eyes.

“I have tried to cry my entire life, and this is as far as I can get,” he says, laughing harder, then standing and wandering around the room. Elvis’s voice haunts the quiet spaces but eventually ends, and I pull my phone close and turn the music off.

“I have done things, Riley…I’ve robbed people. I’ve shot up homes. Yours… before you moved in. Me and Joker, that’s what we call Paul, and a few of Dub’s friends…”

He drifts into a sad laugh again, then flattens his palm on his forehead as his eyes widen.

“Jesus, Riley. We shot up every window in your house, and the county had to replace them all. We did it because we were bored, and we hadn’t shot anything in a long time.” He’s shaking his head, but I grip the cushion beneath me at that one key word.

“What other kinds of things do you shoot?” I ask, my body starting to sweat, visions pulsing in my mind of Tristan holding a gun sideways and pulling the trigger, stopping someone’s heart with the smolder of gun powder.

“I never killed anyone. I know that’s what you mean,” he says, glancing up, but not for long.

I nod, relieved and terrified at the same time. I’m terrified because inside everything he’s saying—despite all of these terrible things—I still see someone else. Maybe I’m blinded, but I don’t think so.

“I’ve buried bodies. Some of them haven’t been found,” he says, scrunching his eyes closed tightly before standing and circling the room. “I hated every moment of it, and I prayed for courage to stand up to Dub, to carve a different path. The dirt on my hands is stained with blood, though, Riley, and my nightmares...they are so bad.”

He stops pacing and just breathes, his chest moving so fast I think he may pass out. When it slows, he turns his head to the side and looks at me.

“This is who I am. This is why I said we can’t be friends. This is why I don’t want you outside on the courts, where I have personally dodged bullets. I am

nowhere near a whole human. I'm riddled with holes…wounds. I'm the least brave person I know, and I'm probably not going to live past my twentieth birthday."

His feet shift until his body is square with me, and he pushes his hands in his pockets again. He does this when he's vulnerable, as if he's hiding weapons and masking his true self. I see more of him than he believes exists though. This guy he describes is also the same one who volunteered to coach my team just so I could impress a few small-time college scouts. He's the one who made me go home when I was in danger. He's the one who, for some reason, has chosen me to save.

"Are you afraid?"

His eyes haze and search mine. He's bracing himself for the answer he expects, but I shake my head no. It isn't a lie. I'm not afraid. I actually don't think there is a safer place I could be right now, and a safer person to be with.

"Do you think I'm a monster?"

My eyes pinch, my brow creasing and my lips falling open with a soft breath.

"God, no," I say, standing from my seat as I flex my hands, relieving them from the stiff grip they've had for minutes.

I stop a few steps shy of him, and his eyes fall down my body, tracing my neck and shoulder and hip.

"You don't have to take this job, Tristan…the one that says you're a *bad guy.* It doesn't suit you," I say.

His head shakes in small, quick movements.

"No?" he whispers.

I shake my head and move a half step closer, his warmth beginning to radiate, like a warning.

"No," I repeat.

His chin tilts, pushing his head to the side just a hair, but his eyes stay on mine, roaming my face. Teeth clench and work through conflict behind his barely parted lips. His chest lifts and his face reflexes as he breathes, but his guard remains, even as he lifts his hand and touches the bottom of my chin with his thumb, adding a finger at a time until his palm holds my cheek. His eyes

become glossy again, never fully forming tears, and the right side of his mouth lifts, his eyes moving down to my lips. They part under the heat.

His smile grows, but faintly.

“You really look good without hair,” he says, pulling a quiet laugh from my body.

“Yeah?” I say, one brow raised in doubt. I haven’t thought about it much, but this is the first time I’ve considered whether or not I’m attractive like this. It’s strange how I don’t miss it.

Tristan’s eyes flit from my mouth to my gaze.

“You’re beautiful like this, actually,” he says, words that rob me of my breath in a way that nearly erases the gruesome parts of the story he told me before.

“Pretty enough to be your friend?” I make sure my tease comes out light this time, and Tristan’s lips close into a soft smile, his laugh a small twitch of his shoulders and chest.

“I said beautiful, not pretty,” he says, his fingers slowly sliding along my cheek until the tips reach the soft velvet of my hair. His thumb strokes the skin just under my eye.

His head falls to mine, and my eyes close in response, my hands moving to his shirt and holding on to fistfuls of the front.

“We are friends,” he says, his hands pausing where they rest, cupping my face as his feet interlace with the position of mine and we rock side to side just like this. His thumbs tickle at my jaw, his nose grazing against my skin, his breath scented with orange slices or candy. He’s intoxicating—delicious. And he’s helpless for the first time since we’ve met.

“We are friends, Riley, and I think we’re more. I am…compelled to tell you things. The ugliest things.”

I feel him swallow as his head rests on mine.

“I’ve shown you my hard truth, and yet you keep showing up. You’re so… fearless. And stubborn. You don’t pretend, and you don’t listen. God, I wish you’d listen sometimes.”

He laughs softly, and I feel the rumble in his chest, pulling a smile from me too.

“You are my test, Riley. My temptation. My mother says you’re the light, and I want to stand in it with you, but…”

“So stand with me,” I interrupt.

His head rolls against mine and his hands tremble with so much uncertainty. I reach for his elbows and slide my hands up his arms to his wrists, steadying him.

“You are so good, Tristan. You just are…I see it,” I say.

His breath begins to falter, and I can practically taste the conflict—his struggle.

“You are good,” I whisper just before his bottom lip softly touches mine.

I’m so hungry for his kiss, for him to be present here—with me—and to mean it. But I’m patient. His bottom lip rests just underneath mine, its movement slow against my skin until I feel his top lip close and trap me in his kiss. A gentle suck pulls me in more, and I open for breath—and for him. His head shifts slowly from left to right, his mouth making this tender pass before growing more aggressive.

This kiss is never full. It’s light, and cautious. It’s scared and greedy, afraid of being caught…of breaking a rule. Every bit of his mouth against mine is electric, and it’s barely there at all.

“I’m so sorry you met me, Riley,” he says against my lips, his voice a low hush.

I step into him and press my lips to his a little harder, holding my kiss there, his bottom lip now trapped softly between my teeth as I fight the pull to bite just a little more.

“I’m so glad I met you, Tristan. That’s the difference. I’m just so glad,” I say as my head falls into the crook of his neck.

His hands slide over my head and shoulders and back, cradling me to him closely as his cheek rests against mine, and I hide my face in the shadow of his jaw. I breathe him in, and I’m dizzy. I’m amorous. I’m all of it. But I am not scared. Tristan does not frighten me. He never has. He’s never been anything but the cute boy willing to help the new girl move some heavy things. This hardened, cold shoulder and the wall that came with it has never felt like him.

It’s never belonged, and all I have wanted to do was break through it.

I have. On a horrible night when his world is rocking. I have broken through, and with that comes responsibility. I can’t leave him to climb this alone. He’s given me so many secrets, and without asking, I know just sharing them puts him at risk. He and I aren’t supposed to walk on the same plane.

For however long it takes for Lauren to come home, I will stand here. I will hold on. I will be brave so he can be frightened, for once in his goddamned life.

Criminals aren’t born; they are made. This world made Tristan, and he fights to break free of it. That hold, though—it’s vicious.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tristan

I love being sick.

I've always been okay with it, and that didn't strike me as weird until recently. Until this morning, actually. I woke up with a stuffy everything. My head is pounding and my body aches. I'm barely able to stand without wanting to fall face down into the cool folds of my pillow.

I'm sick.

There's a decent chance I have the flu. God I hope it's the flu.

My mouth is stretched into the widest smile.

My mom didn't come home until five or six this morning. I was lying on the bathroom floor in a cold sweat by then, my pants kicked from my legs, my shirt tossed out the door, a towel over the only part of my arms and chest that felt cold under the blower. When my mom found me, she went into nurse mode. She fed me natural drugs—those are all we have in the house because she's so afraid to have anything real—and then she began switching out a cold compress on my head every fifteen minutes.

This is heaven for me.

The reason I love being ill so much is because it's the only way I can get away from it all. It's the one thing that has always been normal. When I'm sick, my mom acts like the ones on TV. I stay home, and I don't talk to a soul. There

is no Dub. There's a text or two, and eventually a lull when I say something like the word vomit or fever. Nobody wants to *get* sick. At least, none of the people I hang around want to be ill. They have things to do, parties to go to, girls to fuck, and drugs to smoke or snort.

Getting sick gets in everyone's way. If I could be sick for everyone, I would.

My mom's late for work, and I know she didn't really sleep between the hours of six and nine. She's faking it well, though. Her hair is wrapped on top of her head in a tight bun, and she's put on that kind of dress that never wrinkles and feels like pajamas.

"I'm going to go to Danette's when I get out. I'm working alone for most of the day because she can't leave the house. But if you need me, just call me, okay?"

I nod from my bed. I haven't left it since I crawled there hours ago. Danette, Joker's mom, probably hasn't moved much either—only she isn't sick. She's wrecked.

My mom kisses the top of my head then leaves her hand there to feel for heat. I'm not freezing like I was before, which means my fever probably broke.

"At noon, take more of the apple cider vinegar and garlic," she says, shoving keys, tissues, her phone, and a few random papers from the coffee table into her purse. That's how she cleans up—her equivalent to sweeping things under the rug. It's so appropriate right now.

The door closes and I stare at it for a long while, watching the thin line of light that shines along the seam where the wall and door don't touch. I should get up and lock it, but I can't. I'm dizzy.

I hope Riley isn't sick. I felt fine when I saw her last night…better than fine. I held her until we heard Lauren's keys at the door around three in the morning. I sat with her tucked to my side and just stared at my fingers running up and down her arm. I did this for hours. We didn't talk much, but when we did…it was so fucking free.

Nobody knows my entire story. Riley is now the closest. In ten days she has gone from interesting to necessary, and I don't know what I'm going to do.

Nothing I said made her want to run, or at least if it did, she masked it well. I

told her about being held down and gagged in the middle of the night while grown men tattooed my arm. I shared the time I hid in a ditch for six hours after burying myself with mud and sludge just to hide from cops who were chasing me after they raided Dub's cousin's house looking for drugs. I told her about the time Dub was so high he forced heroine up my noise so I could see why my mom had liked it so much. I was fourteen.

Not once did she ask to go home. She never baulked. She wouldn't run. She sees something that isn't there, but I don't have the strength to tell her. I like this lie, and the strangest part is that all I'm doing now is telling the truth.

My phone buzzes above my head and I poke my hands around sheets and my pillow case, searching for it. I bring it into my hands and rub my fist in my eyes, trying to focus. It's not a number I recognize, and that makes my heart race.

Joker.

"Yeah," I say into the phone after answering.

There's a second or two of silence and I start to hold my breath, ready to question the person on the other end.

"Tristan?"

Riley's voice washes over me, my body growing warm again. She's a danger to my fever.

"Hey," I say, my voice soft. I close my eyes, roll to my back and smile. She broke me so quickly, but damn does she soothe me right now.

"I hope it's okay that I called. I got your number from Lauren. You weren't in class and I was worried."

Her words tumble out quiet but fast. She was worried about me, the second time in forty-eight hours.

"I'm sorry, yeah. I got home from Lauren's and woke up an hour later so sick. How are you feeling?" I ask.

I think about how I feel—mentally and physically. I feel like garbage on both accounts. My best friend is still missing, our "boss" is charged with all kinds of motives, and I am weak for a girl who has no idea how dangerous I am. Add in my growling, yet nauseated, stomach—and I'm pretty much a ten.

"I feel fine," she says, unable to hide the heavy exhale that comes with her

words.

“I’m sorry I worried you. I didn’t even think, but with Joker gone and everything I get it…I should have called Lauren and had her tell you,” I say.

“It’s fine, it’s…fine.” She’s coming down from the height of anxiety and it’s zapping her energy.

“I’m sure updating me on your attendance was not high on your mind,” she says, a nervous laugh following.

“You were high on my mind,” I say, scrunching one eye and bracing myself for her to laugh at my cheese. That was cheese, and I have no idea why I said it, but it’s also true. All I’ve done is think about her—even at my lowest, my cheek resting on the tile floor and a wet wash cloth on my neck.

“I can come see you at lunch. Maybe bring you something?” I can hear the blush in her voice.

I’ve never had a girl want to take care of me that wasn’t obligated by blood. I’ve had *girls* that were both friends and…more. Sometimes we had sex. Sometimes I took them out to parties, to Dub’s house or out to the river for drinking. Mostly they just wanted to use me to get to our dealers, or to get to Dub. I was a stepping stone on the boyfriend climb.

“I like soup,” I say, wincing even though she can’t see me.

She giggles and the sound somehow makes me feel just a little better.

“I can bring you soup,” she says.

We’re both quiet and it’s nice. I can hear people in the background and I wonder if she’s hiding somewhere in a corner to call or if anyone notices at all. I feel like she should hide that she’s talking to me…maybe for her own safety or her reputation. But then, who really cares?

“I’ve gotta go. We’re making rockets today,” she says.

“Seriously? The one thing I can probably do and get a decent grade on and I’m home sick?”

She laughs, and I bite at my lower lip at the sound. I’d probably fail this project too, because I’m sure there’s more to it than just lighting up some MDF tubes and shooting them in the air, but I know that whatever Ms. Forte hands me for makeup work isn’t going to get done, so at least the other way I’d be ahead a

little.

“I guess I’ll see you around noon,” I say, resting the phone on my bed and laying my head on it, my body starting to feel the heavy waves of sleep. I didn’t get much, if any at all, and my body craves that almost more than it growls for soup.

“I’ll stop at home first to heat it up, so expect me a few minutes later,” she says, her voice gravelly and tired, too. She was up late with me, just not quite as late as I was.

She says something more, and I can tell by the sound that it’s kind, but I don’t know what it is. I don’t say goodbye because my body doesn’t give me a choice. It takes me under and rocks me until I’m numb, and for the next two hours, I dream I run an ice cream truck and Joker has to pedal to make it run.

I’m smiling when I wake up. My friend was alive and fine and funny as hell in my dream. My mental movie was spot on in all things Joker, even though what we were doing was ridiculous. For some reason, in my sleep, the faster Joker pedaled our ice cream truck, the less likely our chocolate-covered bananas were to melt. We didn’t sell anything someone could find on a normal ice cream truck, but everything was frozen. Flautas and tamales. Posole! I remember the posole, and in my dream, I liked it—even frozen.

My hands move to my lips to feel for remnants on my mouth, half expecting sticky. I smile under my fingertips when nothing is there. It was a seriously vivid dream.

The pounding comes again at my front door. It’s the reason I woke up in the first place, I think. I roll to my side to look at the time on my phone, and it takes my mind a few extra seconds to catch up and do the math.

It’s not quite noon.

It’s early.

That’s not Riley.

I kick away my blanket and shove my feet in my shoes, thankful I fell asleep in shorts and a T-shirt. The beating in my chest is like a battle cry, and I’m having a hard time balancing on my weak legs. A night of losing every calorie taken in has sapped my muscles.

My heart knows it's Joker. That's what my dream was about. It was a premonition, like somehow, I knew he was coming. I drag my palm along the hallway wall to keep myself from falling into it and I nearly tumble my way to the front door, doing the one thing I never do. I open the door without checking.

I would have been prepared.

He wouldn't have had the advantage.

This would have just been a conversation because he'd know that I was armed. He'd know because he always knows. Just like he knows when I'm not.

"Aww, look who's taking a sick day."

Dub's words slur a little, and I can't tell yet if it's because he's drunk or high. There's a difference. When he's drunk, he's still kind. When he's high, though—that's where his evil lives.

He pushes through my doorway, feeling the resistance I put up as my hand still grips the knob. His eyes go right to my hold. Again, I would have been prepared for this and been as emotionless as Dub is used to seeing me.

I cough, and it hurts my torn-up throat and sore belly. My head throbs because my mom uses witchcraft voodoo medicine instead of real decongestants and shit.

"I think it's the flu," I say, playing up my grip on the door, acting as if I need it to stand. Dub doesn't even notice, though, so once he's inside I let the door swing closed and I follow him into the kitchen.

"Car's gone, so I figured Lani must be out," he says, passing off his nickname for my mom. He's called her that for short my entire life. She hates it, which is exactly why he does it.

"Remember when she got back from rehab that last time?" Dub circles my kitchen a few times, flipping through cabinets until he finds a mug. He fills it with water then sets it on the counter, pulling a small packet from his pocket and pouring the contents—a blueish powder—into the water. He stirs it with his finger then gulps the drink down. It's for a hangover, which means he's drunk. He could be high, too, though, so I keep my guard up. I wish I had my knife on me. It's under my mattress, so if Dub tries to tuck me in, I'll be set.

"She tried to talk you into an exorcism," I say, my laugh faint but genuine.

My mom was convinced Dub was possessed, so she hired a pastor and convinced him to come to our home. Dub laughed in both of their faces, and the pastor took off with about a grand of Mom's money.

Voodoo. More like con games.

"Listen, Baby…" He says my name like that to disarm me. My brain automatically clicks over to use its subservient side. Even if he speaks the entire nickname—Cry Baby—I don't react like I do now, when he says it just like that.

I nod. I hate myself. I wish I had my knife. My mind plays a mental reel of me cutting Dub open from navel to throat, stabbing him over and over again. He finishes the rest of his doctored water and sets the mug down unevenly so it rattles loudly against the counter.

"This Joker thing is a serious problem. I need to know where he is. If he's being handled, then he isn't safe. You know how they work in the FBI—informants never get what they're promised. I'm worried about him. He's being played."

My face remains flat and emotionless, and even though I can feel my pulse in my throat, I remain calm at the surface. Dub is feeding me nothing but bullshit, and he knows I know. The trick is how do I respond to this without raising a flag, because I'm quickly getting the sense that he thinks I'm involved in this shit, too. I don't know if he thinks I'm hiding my friend or that I'm informing, too. Whatever it is, though, my tattoo and years of history are no match for Dub Lewis's paranoia.

"Cut the shit, Dub. You want me to kill him?"

My tongue burns as the words leave my lips, so I close my mouth and hold the fire inside. Dub turns his head slightly, looking at me sideways, an affectation he picked up from my dad. He used to exaggerate the act of studying someone. He said making a person think that they're being tested is enough to get them to spill their guts. I saw it so much I know how to defeat it, though. I got beat enough for taking shit that wasn't mine from the wrong person—from my dad—then I learned how to hide my tells.

I hide mine very, very well.

Dub finally scratches under his left eye then stands.

“You think you got that in you?”

I nod at him. Just like I always do. It’s complete shit, but that’s not what matters. All that matters is that he thinks I have the balls to go through with murder…of my best friend.

He chuckles, and the more he walks around my kitchen, the heavier the laughter becomes. I don’t laugh with him, but I never really do. Dub finds a lot of things entertaining that I just don’t get. That power he yielded when I was a kid wore off with puberty I guess. I see it for all it is now. He isn’t brave at all. Brave men could get their way without cutting into someone’s guts to make all others fall in line.

He picks up the mug again, and he’s staring into it as he gets closer to me. The outside reads with nursery rhymes and is colored with blue and yellow dots. It was a present someone got my mom when she was in rehab, as if some childish poetry and bright pastels and coffee swag would make it easier to stay clean.

People are fucking idiots.

Dub sets the mug down on the counter, but he keeps it in his hand as he slides it closer to me along the surface. It’s empty, so I’m not sure what point he’s trying to make until he picks it up about a foot off the counter and brings it down hard along the edge, shattering every bit but the handle. The sharp edge presses against the thinnest skin on my neck as the weight of his body holds me flat against the counter. I’ve seen this play out. This is usually when people shit themselves. Sometimes they cry. They always shake.

I do none of it. It’s how I’m built, this concrete being that doesn’t hear or feel. Dub presses harder, and I feel my skin tear. His mouth curls, the stench of pot and whiskey coming from behind his yellowed teeth.

The chuckle from before creeps in again, and after sliding the ceramic across my skin with enough force to leave a line, he lets up the pressure and tosses the handle into the sink, as if I’m going to wash it and save it for next time.

“You see Joker, you call me first.”

He doesn’t say another word, and he doesn’t stick around for my response. He saunters through my house back to the front door and leaves. I stare at the

closed door for a few minutes, my ears sensitive to every sound until I hear the familiar one of his car's rumble. I touch my neck and hold my palm in front of me when I'm sure he's gone. The blood isn't as bad as I thought it would be, but I think it will leave a scar. The cut stings when I touch it, and there's a rift of skin—my body open.

I jump at the next knock. This one's softer, and my heart sinks when I hear it for lots of reasons. I know it's Riley. The time is right. I also know that she saw Dub out front. There's no way she didn't, and they likely talked because it took him a while to start his car to leave. Mostly my heart squeezes though, because I don't have time to hide any of this from her. She'll see my neck. She'll read into things and be mostly right. I'll have to lie to her.

Unless…unless I tell her the truth. The question is can she handle it all?

Her knock sounds a little heavier the second time, so I adjust my shirt and twist my sweatpants straight again after being assaulted by my surrogate dad. I open the door quickly and move right into life as normal. It lasts for a breath.

"I brought your soup, and I think I met your uncle outside…" She stops talking when her eyes settle on my neck. Dub and I have a few similarities, but standing next to one another, it's easy to see we aren't related. We went through a lot of trouble to cover up our differences when I was a kid and we'd meet up at the movies to sell to the rich guys.

"He hurt you."

Riley sets my soup down on the same table my mom keeps her Bible on near the front door. She steps close to me and pushes up my chin.

"What did he say to you?" I ask, peering down at her the best I can as she tilts my head away. She tentatively touches the skin, testing to see how old the wound is. I cringe because it's fresh.

"Sorry," she says, dropping her hand and waiting for my gaze to become level with hers again. When it does, I spend nearly a minute just looking into the blue of her, wishing I could get lost there for good. As always, though, I'm just visiting.

"He asked who I was, then he told me you were home and I could go in if I wanted to," she says, her face falling as the pieces come together.

I bring in my lips and replay what she heard him say over and over in my head. What matters is who he thinks she is to me—a classmate, a friend, or something more.

"What did you tell him? When he asked who you were, what did you say?" I try to keep my voice calm but I know I'm making her nervous with the urgency.

"I don't know, I think I just said I'm a friend. Or maybe I didn't. I don't remember, but it was fast…and…"

I force a smile and wave lightly.

"It's fine," I say, taking my soup and moving into the kitchen with it. I peel off the lid from the Tupperware and breathe in the steam. "I love the alphabet noodles, too. It's a nice touch."

She offers me a short laugh, and I know it isn't genuine. I get a spoon from our drawer and move to the place I was just before Dub left, my eyes seeing the shattered pieces of the mug. I stare at it briefly then shift my gaze to Riley, who's looking down at it too.

Truth is what matters here. I can feel it, even though I don't want to dive into it. And I'll only give what she can handle. No more—more would be a burden.

"That was Dub," I say, the sound of my voice bringing her eyes back up to mine. I touch my neck then point to the ground before turning my arm over and showing her the *X* on my wrist. Her eyes fall, and I can read it in her expression; she sees this all as abuse. To me it's always been hierarchy, but I see now that it's not.

"It's all right really," I say, leaning over my soup and resting a hand on either side. My stomach rolls and I can't tell if it's because I'm hungry or because I'm sick.

"Why would he cut you?" she asks, her voice full of confidence. She isn't afraid of this world and my place in it, and when she asks her questions so bluntly, it rattles me. I laugh a little, which makes me seem crazy. Maybe I'm that, too.

I blow on a spoonful of soup and glance up at her through the steam. Her eyebrow lifts in expectation.

"To keep me in line, just in case I'm thinking of stepping out of it," I say,

putting the spoon in my mouth and holding the warm broth in my mouth for a few seconds before letting the noodles slide down my throat.

The saltiness is delicious. I know it came from a can, but running on empty has made it gourmet.

“This is delicious. Thank you,” I say, holding the next spoonful up to her like a toast. She smirks, but it dims quickly. I eat my next bite and prepare myself for her next question.

“He threatened you.” She doesn’t ask, so I just nod to affirm. I eat a few more bites while she moves to the sink and wets a few paper towels before bringing them over to me.

It’s getting harder to hold everything in. I need to let it out, to yell or push something. I need to hit things, hurt myself—I need to fucking feel!

The cool touch of the wet towel hits my chin and I pause with my spoon midway to my mouth. I cock my head slowly to look at her and lower the spoon, resting it back in the bowl while I sit up and let my hands fall into my lap. Riley’s eyes circle around my face as her hand dabs at my wound with the edge of the towel. The cut isn’t deep, but it’s swollen, like an animal scratch. Every douse of water stings, I back away a few times for relief.

“Sorry,” she whispers.

Her eyes flit to mine but return to my neck quickly. Her lashes flutter, her gaze focusing on every new inch until my cut is cleaned. I’ll probably just put on a hoodie to hide it from my mom, and by the time I can go to school again on Monday, things will have healed. Of course, I don’t have the ride I usually have, and my best friend won’t be there. If he isn’t dead already, he will be soon. I won’t be able to save him, and that truth hit me last night. I never really had much hope at all.

“He wants him dead.” I’m only partly surprised when I say the words out loud. I think I wanted to test myself to see if I could, to see how far I could push this *sharing*.

“Paul?” She sits on a stool next to me, bending her leg to angle herself to the side as she balls up the blood-stained fold of towels in her palm.

I nod.

“Joker. We call him Joker,” I say, sliding my hand over hers. I leave it there for a breath, just to feel how warm and real and alive she is, then I urge her fingers open and take the evidence that I’m hurt from her hand to throw it in the trash.

“Why do you call him that?” she asks.

I laugh lightly to myself as I open the trash bin and push the towels deep, covering them with the morning’s coffee grounds. My head is throbbing, and I’m nowhere near well.

“Because of how completely unfunny he is,” I say, turning around and resting my weight by the sink. I feel flush, and I’m sure she can tell.

She smiles a little, and it strikes me that a gang nickname probably isn’t something to be amused by.

“You know this isn’t all for play right? I mean yeah, his name is stupid and it’s kinda funny that we call him that, but besides all of that, this situation…it’s real. None of this is going to be okay, or end well. Nothing here ever ends well. That’s a dumb phrase, really…end well? All’s well that ends well!”

My voice lifts and I start to laugh without a real reason. This is the mental break I’ve been waiting for. I can feel it, my mind on the cliff’s edge. I need someone to push me. I need to fall.

I laugh harder.

“All’s fucking well that ends well!” I shout the words this time and spin slowly in my kitchen. The movement makes me nauseous so I stop myself, gripping the counter near Riley. Her hand wraps around my arm and her other palm finds my forehead.

“You’re burning up,” she says.

I smile at her through dopey eyes.

“My mom gave me some root and a bunch of vinegar or whatever. We don’t even have real medicine…ha!” My laugh switches gears quickly.

“Tristan, you should lay down,” Riley says, her hands on both of my shoulders, nudging me to her side. “Where’s your room?”

I guide her, and when my bed is in view I rush toward it, landing head first into the pile of pillow and sheets, tugging at loose ends to cover my body.

“Tristan, let me,” she says, jerking the cotton out of my hand and fluffing the blanket out above my body. It covers me and for a brief moment it’s all I see. The gray darkness of an old quilt is like a dream—everything else is erased. When it lands over my chest and hips and legs, I pull it into me as Riley tucks. I want to touch her, but I also don’t want to get her sick.

She’s infected as it is. I’ve brought her in too far, and even just being my friend—according to Dub—will put her at risk.

“You can’t talk to him. Or see him. If you see him, I need you to run,” I say, gripping her wrist and holding it to me. Her body freezes and our eyes lock. My room is dim, but there’s enough light to trace the soft curves of her face and to brighten the paleness of her eyes

“His full name is William Ansel Lewis, and everyone around here calls him Dub. If you hear any of those names though, you need to leave. You can’t go shoot at the court at night. You can’t hang out at home alone. You can’t be followed. You can’t walk down the street.”

“I’ll be fine,” she interrupts, her other hand flat on my chest in an effort to calm my manic heart.

“You don’t know what he can do,” I say, feeling a sting hit my eyes for the first time in forever. The tears won’t come, but the worry pushes hard from inside.

“Yeah, Tristan,” she says, moving her hand from my chest to my neck, the back of her fingers trailing along the tender, pink line I know is still very much there.

I swallow under her touch and she pauses, afraid she’s hurt me. Sleep is pulling at me, but everything else is wading through deep water, fighting to stay awake and alert. I drown in her eyes instead, and I search for the calm and good in them, clinging to the bits and pieces, to this dim light and her voice. I love sick days. He’s ruined those too.

“Just promise me. Promise me that for now, just for a little while…you’ll be careful.” I can’t ask her to stop being her. She wouldn’t do it anyway. But I can ask her to be safe. With Paul gone and Lauren angry at me, Riley has become my only friend. I could stare at her for days and never grow tired. Somewhere along

the way, my paths got tangled, and I think maybe she and I were never supposed to meet.

“I promise to be careful,” she hums, a faint smile dusting her lips as she bends forward and presses them to my head. Her hand follows up on the same spot, her fingertips running along my skin and up into my hair in a constant pattern until my eyes aren’t able to keep up. I fall asleep, the fever taking over and forcing more nightmares in. Through it all, though, I can still feel her touch. She stayed longer than she should have. She missed her next class. She left and locked my door behind her.

She was alone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Riley

My dad's eyes look almost as tired as Tristan's did earlier, only his are heavy from long hours at work, not some flu bug passed around at school. There's no way he's making it through the entire game, but I'm glad he's trying. I think I need this night more than he does. I need the small slice of normal, even though nothing has been normal in my house for a long time.

"The line has the Cavs up by seven," my dad says. The first quarter is half over, and the Cavs are down by six.

My dad hands me a paper plate with a slice of pizza on it. I pull it into my lap and curl up in the corner of the couch near his chair, the feeling familiar, but for the first time in a while, it's noticeable that my mom isn't in the room with us. She didn't love watching the game; she loved watching us. There's a void. I feel it and I can see my dad does too. It's the way his smile doesn't quite reach his eyes, forced joy. *Fake it until you make it*, isn't that what people say?

"Sounds like maybe you should make a bet," I say, winking at him.

My dad used to gamble with a bookie. He never posted a win, and he never bet a lot of money. Even though he was pretty much a sure payday, the guy quit calling and coming around. My dad's small change was just a pain in the ass, I guess.

"So tell me about school. How's basketball?" My dad talks with food in his

mouth, and it brings me an odd sense of comfort. This is still home, even with the craziness…I have this place.

“It’s good,” I say, pushing a small piece of crust into my mouth and chewing a few times before stopping myself. I chuckle and look at my dad, his head turning until our eyes meet. “I can’t lie. It’s all right, I guess, but we are going to suck. First game is Tuesday, and I’m really the only ball handler we have. Oh… and you’ll love this! Our coach is another senior.”

“Ha!” My dad puffs a laugh from his chest and keeps chewing. “That doesn’t sound promising.”

I shake my head and take another bite, the game commentary buzzing in the background.

“It’s hopeless, really. But Tristan said he can help me get enough time to make a highlight reel, and that’s all I need,” I say.

“Tristan?” my dad asks.

I swallow a large bite before chewing enough and start to cough. I guess there’s a lot I haven’t filled him in on, and Tristan is a tricky topic of conversation.

“Yeah,” I say, my voice raspy from coughing. I twist the cap on my water bottle and guzzle down a third of it.

“So this boy…he’s your coach,” my dad says, a protective line of questioning sorting itself. I can sense it all.

“Yeah,” I say, my eyes on the TV and my mouth busy with food. I feel like somehow my dad can see Tristan’s lips on mine, that he can read the emotions in my head and heart. I like this boy…a lot. And he’s the worst possible boy to like. But I do. I like him. I like him. I like him…

“If he knows so much about basketball, why isn’t he playing on the boys team?” My dad has put his plate down and his arms are folded now. I glance at him and pull in the right side of my mouth with a tiny laugh. His protective nature is sweet.

I roll my eyes and put my plate on the coffee table to give him my full attention.

“The boys suck,” I say.

“I bet,” my father fires back. He’s a little grumpy about it, but in a cute way. I close my eyes and laugh.

“Daddy.” I wiggle my head side to side and turn my focus back to the game in time to see someone sink a three. I raise my hands and pull them in for a quiet “yes!”

“Okay, so this boy, who is too good for the sucky boys’ team, is called *Tristan*,” my dad repeats the facts he knows so far.

I nod.

“Yes,” I confirm.

He breathes in deeply through his nose and turns his eyes to the TV, too.

“Is he cute?”

My eyes widen. My dad can’t see them, thank God! This is not a conversation I’ve ever really had with him, and I don’t know how to navigate it.

“I dunno,” I shrug.

“Ha! He is cute!” My dad stands, moving himself between me and the TV, folding his arms in pride. I try to look around him, but he steps in the way again. I finally give up and look him in the eyes.

“Okay, fine. He’s cute. You got me,” I say, waving my hands to my sides. “Can we go back to the game now?”

My phone buzzes on the table, and I lean forward to read the preview of the message, panicking when I see Tristan’s name.

“That’s him!” My dad starts to pace, folding his fingers together behind his neck as if I’ve been asked to get married. This is what zero dating experience gets me, I suppose.

“I’m sure it’s just about our next practice,” I say, waving him off but nervous about what his text really says. I’m worried he has news about Paul, or that the Dub guy came back to see him. My dad thinks I’m just embarrassed, but that isn’t it at all.

Our bell rings, and as my father moves to the door, I swipe up to read everything. I wish I didn’t, though. I wish I ran to the door instead, because all the message said was I’M OUTSIDE

He’s here, and my dad has opened the door. Words are being exchanged, and

so far, nobody has gotten punched. Not that my dad would punch a boy at my door, but I don't really know for sure. Again…zero dating experience. My eyes catch Tristan's over my dad's shoulder, and my dad follows his gaze until suddenly I'm staring into my father's eyes instead.

"Come on in." My dad raises one brow at me and bends his mouth into a smile that's both a tease and a warning.

"Thank you, sir," Tristan says. His hair is wet, fresh from a shower, and he's changed into black track pants and a white long-sleeved shirt. He's wearing his court shoes, but his body is dragging, so I know he didn't come here to play. He looks weak. He looks handsome.

"Tristan," my dad grunts out his name as he sinks back into his chair. I hover between the couch and the kitchen, unsure if I should run or play hostess. I'm nervous, and I'm worried. They're two different emotions, and I can feel them jousting in my chest. "Riley tells me you're the girls' basketball coach, so tell me what you think about their chances. Do you think they need to play man-on-man? Or a zone?"

My dad doesn't know shit about my team. He's trying to feel Tristan out, see how legit he is—see if he's just coaching this team to get close to me, which is utterly ridiculous and then yet, maybe…true? I groan quietly, but loud enough that both of them turn their attention toward me.

I close my mouth quickly and move into the kitchen to make Tristan a plate of pizza, and when I return both of them are sitting silently watching the game—a noticeable distance and awkward silence between them.

Shit.

"We're having pizza. But maybe you're not hungry yet…" I shift my eyes to my dad and back, not wanting to talk about how I visited Tristan earlier. Normally, I don't think my dad would care, but this whole meet-and-greet has gotten really tense.

"Thanks, maybe just the crust," he says, flashing me a closed-lip smile.

I take the middle of the sofa seat, which is one cushion closer to Tristan, and the second I sit down my dad looks my direction and lowers his chin with a huff. I hold out my hands as if saying "what?" and pull in my brow.

“So do you have a job other than volunteer coaching my daughter’s crappy team? That is what you called them, right? Crappy?” My dad only glances at Tristan, his eyes passing me on their way back to the game as he takes a large, satisfying bite of food.

“Is that why you’re being so cold all of a sudden? Because I told you myself we’re pretty crappy,” I say, looking from my dad to Tristan a few times. Neither of them reacts, and I wonder what I missed in thirty seconds while I was in the kitchen.

Tristan pulls his lips in tight and nods once, breathing out through his nose as he leans forward and sets a nearly untouched slice of pizza on the coffee table.

“I’m sorry. It was rude for me to interrupt. I just wanted to say thank you…” he stops himself before saying too much, shifting his words just in time. “Thank you for letting me know what assignments I missed today. We’ll have practice Monday, first game Tuesday. I’ll just see ya then.”

My mouth hangs open as Tristan smiles briefly at me then looks to my dad. He holds out his hand, and my dad actually shifts away from it in his chair, as if he’s somehow blocking his view of the game.

“It’s nice to meet you, sir,” Tristan says, waiting until the seconds begin to build and the tension in the room starts to suffocate me. My dad doesn’t make a sound and he doesn’t acknowledge Tristan’s gesture at all.

Eventually pulling his hand in, hiding it deep in his pocket, along with the other one, Tristan turns his eyes to me.

“I’ll see ya Monday,” he says. His gaze hangs on mine, and I’m choked with a shocked feeling, unable to speak or react right away. There’s something in his eyes that’s troubling and sad, and this isn’t how I pictured this meeting going. Maybe that’s the problem, though, I never really pictured this meeting at all. There’s no precedent for it, but I can’t help but feel like if any other boy showed up, things would have gone down differently.

I swallow and stand.

“I guess I’ll walk you out,” I say, glancing at my father one more time as I show Tristan back to the front door. My dad eyes me, but it’s brief.

I follow Tristan to the door, stepping outside with him, but before I can close

the front door behind me, he touches it with his hand and pushes it open a few inches.

“You better leave that cracked,” he says, his mouth a tight flat line that pulls in on one side.

My head tilts as I try to read into what he’s saying, and I look over my shoulder, through the small crack in the doorway, where my father is intently watching me. I look back at Tristan, and he shrugs, both hands still in his pockets as he stumbles down the concrete step toward my driveway.

“What did he say to you?” I ask.

He shrugs again, this time shaking his head a little too.

“Nothing, really. I told him your team was pretty rough, except for you, and that the practices were really about finding a way to get you the ball. I made it up, because we’ve only practiced like twice, once really, when you think about it,” he says, holding his breath in when he’s done speaking.

“That doesn’t make sense. Why would he be so short with you about that?” I shake my head trying to piece together my dad’s reaction. It’s more than just protective Dad. I might as well have invited a vampire into the house.

“Riley, it’s fine. I’m sure he’s had a long day, and he probably just wanted to spend time with you, and I showed up…”

“Tristan, no…my dad’s not like that,” I interrupt.

He starts to repeat himself but stops quickly, his mouth falling flat, his eyes sagging, the weight of the world taking away a little more of his spirit. He looks so pale and weak, dark circles are starting to look more like black eyes.

“Your dad saw this,” he says, pushing up his sleeve just enough to flip his wrist and show me the *X*. He hides it again quickly, his shoulders falling, his chin lowering, and his eyes drifting down somewhere in the distance.

My lips part to question him, but I don’t even know how to begin. My dad wouldn’t know what that mark meant. He’s never mentioned anything about tattoos, for or against them, and it’s not even like Tristan is marked up much. He has the name on his neck, the *X* and a few small symbols spread around his body in places that no one can see with his shirt on. He’s polite. He’s a gentleman, and when he was being a dick it was because he wanted to protect me.

“That’s not it,” I say, a quick shake of my head.

“Riley, it’s fine.” He’s trying to make this okay, but it’s not. My dad doesn’t even know him yet.

“How am I supposed to live in a place where my favorite two people can’t be in the same space?” I lean my head with my question. My stomach is twisting more with each passing second. I look behind me to check, and my dad is still staring at me.

“You barely know me,” Tristan says, and a fire flickers in my belly at the words.

“Don’t say that,” I protest.

He laughs, backing down my driveway a little. I mash my lips and breathe in through my nose before turning and pulling the door closed completely and moving closer to him.

“You’re saying I barely know you because we’ve only just met, but that isn’t true. Don’t tell me that you haven’t opened up to me. I won’t believe it. Time doesn’t get to dictate how important someone is to you. That person gets to decide that. How they make you feel decides that. And in a few weeks, you have become important to me.”

I move to touch him, but he shirks his shoulder away, his eyes scanning behind me, looking for my dad. I stop where I am, and he backs up two more steps.

“Why did you come here?” I ask.

He’s sick, and I can tell by every muscle in his body that he’s not very strong right now. He got out of a warm bed and walked—*walked*—to my house. I’m important to him. He’s important to me. And Goddamn it that’s all that matters!

“I wanted to thank you, and just make sure you were okay,” he says, his tone nonchalant as if this moment isn’t a very big deal.

“Liar.”

His eyes snap to mine and his jaw flexes. I smirk but not in a teasing or friendly way. My eyes challenge him.

“Why did you come here?” I repeat.

He chuckles softly and shakes his head, lifting one shoulder a touch. I don’t

stop though. I ask him again.

“Why did you come here?”

My door opens behind me, and Tristan’s eyes flit to what I know is my father for a brief second, but they come back to me. He looks lost, and he looks helpless. In days, I have become his person too. That’s why he’s here.

“Say it,” I demand, my voice low and gritty.

His lips part with short breaths, and his eyelids sag lower. I can see the vibration in his mouth, the trembling in his face from weakness and nerves. For a guy who’s stood up to some pretty scare shit, being vulnerable in front of a Tomboy and her dad seems to have knocked him on his ass.

“You wanted to see me,” I say the words for him.

He pulls his lower lip in between his teeth and closes his eyes for a second then nods, the movement subtle and for me alone.

“Yes,” he says, opening his eyes back on me. They’re softer, but the fear is still widespread in his expression and posture.

“Then stay.” I don’t ask him, because I’ve come to realize that Tristan isn’t good with options. He always chooses wrong, so I choose for him.

“Stay,” I say again, ignoring my dad calling my name behind me.

Tristan can’t avoid my father, though the good inside him respects my dad.

“Riley, it’s time to come in. Say goodnight,” my dad says, and his parenting makes me start to laugh.

Everything about Tristan grows stiff, his neck is flexing and his pale cheeks are blotchy from anxiety. His smile is faint, and fake—he’s working hard to keep it there, and his feet are desperate to prove to my dad that he’s leaving.

He’s leaving me.

“Then let’s go,” I say, feeling in my pocket for me keys. My feet are in slide sandals, and I’m wearing cut-off sweat shorts and one of my dad’s old shirts. It’s good enough to go just about anywhere in Miller County.

“Riley?” My dad sees me moving toward the truck, and I break a little inside because I’m about to disappoint him. I’m not doing anything wrong, though, and I’ll be back before curfew.

“I’m going out, Dad. I’ll be back soon. I’ll call you if I need you,” I say,

turning to walk backward the final few steps. It was a bad decision to look him in the eyes, though, because what I see reflected in them is a replay of the heartbreak he's lived with for two years since my mom left. My chest seizes and breathing feels impossible, but I keep moving, unlocking my door and sliding to the middle to unlatch Tristan's side.

"Get in," I say to him as I fling the door open a little more. He's frozen in-between pleasing my father and pleasing me, but he eventually gives in, his eyes riddled with guilt as he climbs into my truck.

I pull out the second he shuts the door, not even waiting for him to buckle. I have no idea where we're going, but I can tell by the way my heart settles right back in place that leaving right now with him is right. He needs me.

We drive in silence for blocks, passing the corner liquor shop, pay-day loan store, and a place called The Pawn Yard. I went the opposite direction of every other trip I've made from my house, and I've found a part of our neighborhood that's somehow a little grittier. Weeds don't even grow in the dirt along the sidewalk, and streetlights flicker.

"I don't know where I'm going, really, so feel free to give me directions," I say.

"Okay, how about turn around," Tristan answers.

I glance at him and grimace.

"Very funny," I say.

"I'm not kidding, Riley. Your dad is pretty mad," he says.

"So," I interrupt. "I'm pretty mad, too."

Tristan laughs lightly and turns his attention to his window, holding his right fist to his lips in a poor attempt to quiet himself.

"What's so funny?" I say, glancing from him to the road and back again, finally stopping at a light. The truck is rumbling, and I check the gauge to see maybe a gallon left of gas.

"Why the hell are you mad? That's what's funny," he says, laughing a little harder.

I don't get it, and after a few seconds of me not joining in, he quiets down.

"Look, your dad is being protective. He knows I'm in a gang, or was in a

gang, or that I know a gang. Even if he doesn't know for sure, he thinks it. Teenagers around here don't have homemade tattoos branding them to…what? Express their creativity? I wanted to profess my love for pirates? *X* marks the spot?"

I crack a small laugh at his last suggestion.

"Riley, your dad is just being a good dad. And he sure as hell isn't going to like me now that you ran off with me, but I really appreciate the sentiment," he says.

My face sags as gloom settles in.

"Maybe that was a little spontaneous," I say.

"Uh, ya think?" Tristan's eyebrows raise, and his mouth curves up on one side, which pulls a half-hearted smile back to my lips.

"I need gas," I say, the light changing in front of us.

"One more block up and on the right," he says, motioning where to go.

I drive forward, finding the station just another block ahead, and I pull up to the pump and get out before Tristan can do it for me. I swipe my card, which my dad loads money onto once a week, and think about how he's probably watching the bank statement online right now. I bet he's panicked that I'm running away.

Tristan's opened his door, and he's started to slide out of the truck. His head is moist with sweat, and I worry that he has a fever again. I hold my palm on him, but he feels cool. Before I can pull my hand away, he slides his hand up my arm and weaves his fingers with mine, leaning his head into my arm with closed eyes. He opens them on me slowly, and without words I know he means *thanks.*

"I'm gonna grab something with electrolytes. I'm weak as shit," he says, letting go of our hold and stepping from the truck. "Want anything?"

I shake my head. He looks at me for an extra beat just to be sure, then moves on to the small store where people are scurrying around inside looking for beer and smokes. This is the place where the cops fill up their drinks and grab late-night dinners. There are four of them in the parking lot, a rare sight around here without lights swirling.

I pull my phone from my pocket and see the three missed calls from my dad. With a deep breath, I press on his name to return the last one. He answers in just

a ring, so I talk before he can.

“Please don’t be worried. I’m coming home soon. In an hour at the latest. And Tristan is a very nice boy. He’s a gentleman, and we’re friends. He missed school today, and I’m just going to catch him up on what he missed. I need you to trust me,” I say, holding my breath through every word, trying to make my case before it can be stopped.

My dad is silent when I finish, and I worry for a moment that he’s angry.

“An hour,” he finally responds, and I fill my chest with air.

“At the most,” I say, crossing my chest with tiny strokes of my fingers.

“Okay, Riles. I trust you then,” he says.

I hang up and turn to look inside the store, spotting Tristan in line. Two younger boys bolt through the back door with candy stuffed in their pockets, pieces falling free with every step as they spring away. Tristan and the store clerk both crane their necks at the sound of the alarm, but nobody in the store moves from their spot. The clerk remains at the register, eventually raising his hand and pressing something on an overhang above his head. The alarm stops.

Tristan says a few words to the man at the register, and their conversation lasts about a minute, longer than a single drink purchase usually lasts. Before Tristan leaves, the clerk holds out his fist and Tristan pushes his knuckles into the guy’s.

“What was that all about?” I ask as I hang up the gas nozzle and twist the cap on my tank.

Tristan glances over his shoulder as he takes his last few steps on his way to me, then chuckles as he looks back.

“Oh, I know those boys. They’re sorta cousins to Lauren. Like her mom’s sister’s step-kids or something? Anyhow, they’re pains in the ass, and that guy was going to get his pay docked for all that shit they stole. I just paid for it. No big,” he says, handing me a small chocolate bar. “You needed something sweet.”

His eyes glimmer, a happiness in them that I don’t think I’ve seen before. It will fade when the reality of his problems lap over us again, but for right now, it’s an awfully nice thing to see.

“Thanks,” I say, leaning into my truck. I’m aiming for flirtatious, but I don’t

think Tristan gets it, because he keeps walking around to the other side.

I roll my eyes at myself and unwrap my candy bar, biting into half of it as I get in the truck. My dad needs to know Tristan like I do. He needs to see these things—the small things. Instead of the kid with an *X* on his arm, who might look a little stoned now that I think of it, even though he's just zapped from being sick. My dad needs to witness the guy who saves a stranger's ass at a gas station. Since I've known him, it seems like all Tristan tries to do is keep peace, find a balance between good and evil, rights and wrongs. Those kids got away with theft, and maybe he should have chased them down or scolded them, since he knows them. But really—what good would lecturing them do? Instead, he erased the damage he could. He covered up the bad with something good.

He works in layers.

"We have an hour," I say, drawing a confused look from Tristan.

"I called my dad," I say, lifting my phone in illustration.

Tristan smiles and nods.

"Good," he says, leaving his tired eyes on me for a little extra time.

I'd be happy to sit here in the gas station parking lot, watching people and making up stories for them. I have a feeling Tristan would be good at that, but I also think some of his stories might not be made up. He seems to know or recognize nearly everyone.

"You're infamous, huh?" I ask it as a joke, but Tristan doesn't laugh. Instead, he chews at his lip.

"I'm not entirely sure what that means…I mean, I know what the word means, but I wouldn't say I'm like…Jesse James or anything. Isn't he that Western guy?" His analogy makes me laugh at first, but I let it fade when I realize that Tristan isn't really making a joke; he's deflecting an insult.

"No, you're not Jesse James. I just meant you do seem to know everyone..." I shrug, not wanting to say more and make this worse. "I didn't mean that like you're a bad guy."

"It's okay," he says, twisting the cap on his drink and sipping slowly as his focus turns to the front. "Sometimes I am…" He turns to me again briefly. "A bad guy."

His eyes stick to mine through the rise and fall of his chest. They're colored with regret and hopelessness, and I hate that I put that there. He turns back to the front window and leans into the door a little, his right knee lifted higher than the other.

I sink into my seat. My word-choice was stupid, and it's not what he needs to hear. I reach over and touch his arm, resting my hand on it lightly, feeling the warmth of him underneath a thin layer of cotton. His chin dips and his eyes hover over my touch.

"Think maybe you could teach me how to drive a stick?" he asks, blinking once and opening his eyes on mine. His lip tugs up on the corner. He wants to move on. I'll let him.

I nod slowly and grin faintly.

"Yeah…I think I can, Tristan. Where should we go?"

He sucks in his top lip with thought, then lets go as his smile expands.

"There's an empty lot about two miles away, where they tore down that big grocery store that made you bag your own things," he says.

"Okay then," I nod, turning over the engine, shifting and pulling us away.

Tristan carefully watches every move I make, and I try to explain the timing of my clutch foot with my brake and gas foot. It's hard to put into words for me because this is the only vehicle I've ever driven. I don't really know another way to drive, and I'm pretty sure if I suddenly had an automatic, I'd stomp my left foot up and down just out of habit.

We pull into the lot just off the main road, and I drive to the very middle, where the asphalt has the fewest holes and gaping cracks—and where the surrounding fencing is hundreds of feet away.

"You think you're ready?" I ask, and his eyes light up excitedly.

"Not even in the least, but that's why we're here," he says, bursting out a laugh as he leaves the passenger side of my truck.

I puff out a heavy breath, letting the air glide up, missing how it used to catch my long hair that hung over my forehead. I look up until my eyeballs hurt, trying to see if I can spot my hairline. It's gotten longer, and I think I'm going to have to start styling it soon. As it is, I push the centimeter-long pieces flat with

water.

Kicking open my door, I slide out so Tristan can climb in. Before I leave for the passenger side, I familiarize him with the clutch position. He chuckles when I touch his leg.

“Sorry, I’m ticklish,” he says, shaking his knee as if he’s trying to get the feeling to fall off onto the floor. I laugh to myself and twist my lips as I walk away, amused that Tristan has such an innocent weakness.

I climb into the passenger side and put my hand over his on the gear shift. His mouth stretches wide at my touch, and we both flex our hands, letting fingers find their comfortable place against one another.

“We probably shouldn’t hold hands, if I’m still sick,” he says. I feel his shrug flex along his arm, and I squeeze into his fingers harder.

“Probably,” I say, with no intension of letting go. “Of course, we’ve broken that rule already, so…” I hear him breathe out and his hand shifts under mine affectionately, fingers flexing again to hold onto me more. I think he craves to connect with me as much as I do with him.

Eventually, my hand curls along his, and with the motor off, I walk him through each position and timing with the clutch. We say the words, “second, third, fourth…” over and over until it feels like a rhythm to a song, his left foot playing base drum.

“Think you’re ready?” I slide my hand over his knuckles, not ready to quit holding on. He wiggles his arm slightly and gives me a lopsided grin.

“Can’t be any worse than when I tried to drive your truck last time,” he admits.

I laugh, my mind imagining that crumpled stalling-out sound that my truck makes when things don’t go right. I rest back into my seat and buckle up, motioning to Tristan to do the same.

“Just in case. Dashboards are hard on foreheads and all,” I tease. He doesn’t laugh, but just agrees and buckles quickly.

With his hands wrapped on the wheel, his arms stretched out and body stiff, Tristan takes a deep breath then turns on the ignition. We both ride the rumble, waiting as the motor finds it’s happy place somewhere between a gurgle and a

roar. Tristan gives it a little gas to keep it going. I didn't have to tell him to, so he must know a little bit about cars.

"All right, let's ease into it," I say, bringing his eyes to mine. He nods, but everything about his expression is tight with concentration. His hand moves to the gear shift and he scoots forward, ready to give it some gas and hit the clutch.

We begin to roll forward, and the engine makes that familiar sound when it's gasping for more—more gas, more shifting, more speed. It wants to travel.

"Do it now," I say, but Tristan reacts a fraction too late and we stall out, both of our bodies slinging forward until our belts stop us. I grunt from the pull.

"Sorry," he says. His voice is meek, and it makes him seem so much less threatening than his reputation says he is.

"It's okay," I reassure. I find his hand and place it back on the gear shift, holding on with him this time. "Let's do it together."

He nods and starts the truck again, his body perched at the edge of the seat and ready. He looks in the mirrors a few times, and I giggle.

"Don't laugh," he growls, playfully.

"It's cute. You check your blind spots like we're merging on the highway or something," I say, squeezing at his hand while he repeats my words in a baby voice, mocking me. It makes me laugh harder, seeing him stressed about something like this and letting me push his buttons.

"I suppose you just hopped right into this thing when you first got it and sped off fine, huh?" he says, sighing and readying his arms and legs to give it a try again.

"No, it took me a while to get the hang of it," I say, holding the rest in until one look from him forces out my laugh. "It took me at least ten minutes…maybe fifteen."

He sighs and falls back into the seat, the entire truck shaking as it idles.

"I'm kidding; I'm kidding," I say, hugging his arm with both of my hands. I feel where his muscle is thickest, and in a brief second or two I lock away how hard his bicep is. I wonder what he does to get his body like this.

"You aren't really kidding. I can tell," he says, still sounding a little dejected.

I lean in close, unbuckling to move my entire body closer to his, lifting the

torn arm rest out of the way and pushing it into the back seat so I can drive along with him. I slide one leg over the hump that houses the shifting stick and straddle it so I'm more in control. The position has also made my body rush with heat, and Tristan's arm has grown more tense.

"Let me help," I say, my voice cracking from the rush of feelings that tangle in my chest and drip down my insides.

I hear Tristan swallow, and he moves against me, positioning himself so he's ready to drive. My right hand covers his on the shifter again and I reach to my left, tentatively resting my hand on his thigh. He gasps quietly, and it makes my lip quiver. I'm being forward, and I probably didn't have to do this to get him driving a stick shift within the hour, but I also don't have a lot of time, and…and I wanted him to touch me.

I wanted to touch him.

"Ease up on the brake." My voice is low, and his body is rigid. He nods, but barely, and slowly lets up his hold on the pedal.

We start to rock forward, and without my direction, he gives the truck gas, moving us forward in a jerky motion that teeters on stalling out, but he shifts just in time, his foot on the clutch and my hand guiding his right palm through the gears.

"Good!" My heart is pounding with the rush of climbing to the top on a roller coaster, and as my engine begins to whine with the need for more power, Tristan pushes in the clutch. The truck whirs for a second or two as we float in neutral, but I maneuver his hand between my legs until the shifter slides into place for third.

"More gas, let's hit fourth gear," I say, leaning into him as he turns to the left to give us more room to speed up.

"Okay," he pants out nervously, racing forward and this time shifting all on his own.

"Woo whoo!" I scream and lift my hand from his. He glances at me briefly, his grin filling his face, his eyes bright with joy and his breathing rapid and elated.

"I did it!" he shouts, roaring through the empty lot, my truck bouncing over

divots and valleys as he reaches the end and slows down, turning and lowering the truck to third and then second. He moves forward and speeds up so he can shift again, this time making it the entire way on his own, finally coming to a stop near the same place we started his lesson.

We jerk forward as he shifts down, and the engine dies roughly, but we stop and Tristan did it.

“That was awesome!” He slaps his hands on the wheel and runs them around the curve a few times, rocking back and forth in the driver’s seat, his smile only growing bigger.

“Woo!” he hollers, slapping his hands on the wheel again.

“I’m so proud of you,” I say, squeezing my palm along his thigh, and realizing that my palm is still there…on his thigh.

My touch shifts Tristan’s mood, and his smile morphs into something more uncertain—his expression hungrier yet more timid.

“I should get you home,” he says, the words hardly making a sound. He swallows again, the movement labored and uncertain. Everything about him is uncertain right now, and I’m not sure what direction to give.

“I still have a lot of time,” I whisper, my fingers clawing into his leg slightly. His thigh flexes with his strong quad muscles and it draws a small breath from my now-open lips.

“Riley,” he says, bringing my eyes up to his face. His gaze is on the gear shift, where it sits between my knees, my legs parted in a way that I’ve never thought meant anything before but that means so much right now. My body is reacting in new and interesting ways, and I feel confident and terrified all at once.

“Stay with me…right here,” I say, turning just enough to reach my right hand to his face. I tilt his chin up and bring his gaze to mine. The things behind his eyes match mine. I feel them—I feel him, how he’s holding back, how he’s fighting to give in.

“Just for a little while,” I say, my tongue making a slow pass over my bottom lip. Tristan’s eyes follow the movement, the tip of his own tongue pausing between his teeth.

His eyes float back to mine, and the longer they hold my gaze, the bolder I become. I pull my hand from his thigh and turn to move it behind his head, gripping the rock-hard headrest that's been aged by the sun. My body twists as I lift myself up onto my knees and Tristan's hands slowly fall away to his sides, letting me in. My body presses against his as I slide my right knee over his lap until I'm straddling him, our bodies pushed together tightly from the little room left due to the steering wheel. My hands hold both sides of the seat next to his head and I sink down so I'm sitting on him, my pelvis and hips against his, his stomach warm, his thighs flexed and his erection searing hot and intrusive against me. The rough sensation is welcome to us both, I can tell by the way Tristan's lips fall open more, the bottom one quivering as his eyes haze and threaten to close.

He's hard for me. It feels amazing.

"Kiss me," I demand as his eyes open lazily, taking their time to focus on mine.

"I'm still sick," he says, his hands disobeying as his fingers begin crawling lightly along the fringed area of my shorts, sliding up my thighs and bunching the cotton material higher up my leg until his thumbs hook underneath the fabric and his fingers form fists.

"I don't care," I say, no longer seeing the tired in his eyes or the paleness in his face. His cheeks are flushed, and he's hungry.

My hands draw in to his shoulders and I run them up the curve of his neck, my thumbs tracing the strong line of his jaw. His head tilts to the side just a little, his lips catching the inside of my wrist, and I pause there to take in his gentle kiss along my skin. His eyes close briefly then open on me as he tastes my wrist again. His lip drags along the softness as I move my hands up more, gripping the length of his hair and tangling my fingers into the waves until his chin lifts and his mouth is level with mine.

"You shouldn't do things like this with a guy like me," he says, his voice rough but the pleading tone evident still. He hates himself, and he's denying himself, but I see more than the boy in a gang.

"You're the only boy I should do things like this with," I say, looking deep

into him and shifting until my forehead rests on his. He exhales heavily and loosens his grip on my shorts, dragging his hands lower on the back of my thighs then up again, this time under the loose material until his palms cover my ass and he grips with a forceful hold, pulling me against his erection and pushing me into him harder. The movement makes him groan, and I dust my lips over his to feel the sound.

I do it again, this time my lips pausing over his and my tongue making a slow pass between them until he parts and grabs my bottom lip between both of his. The rough edges of his teeth graze along my skin, and his tongue cools the burn, his hands sliding back down my legs then up over my shorts, along my back and up my sides until his thumbs flirt with the lace material of my bra.

“Touch me, Tristan,” I say, not even embarrassed at my forwardness. I’ve crossed over too far to blush now. I want his hands on me—everywhere. I want his lips on me—kisses left on every part of my body. The buzz of traffic hums in the distance beyond the closed windows of my truck cab, and the sun is long gone, only moonlight and a few dim parking lot lights left to showcase my skin.

The risk of being seen is small, but it’s there enough to thrill me, and I arch my back and raise my hands, pressing my palms flat against the inside ceiling of the truck. Tristan takes my cue and gathers the bottom of my shirt in his hands, pulling it up my body and arms and over my head, dropping it into the empty seat next to us. His hands trail down my arms to my elbows, urging me back to him until my hands return to his shoulders.

“You really have no idea how fucking angelic you are,” he says through lustful laughter.

My mouth stretches into a smile and I tuck my chin to my shoulder, feeling the heat of his eyes on me—on my bare shoulders and almost bare breasts.

“Seems like a sin when you say it that way—fucking angelic?” I say.

“It is,” he says, his eyes catching mine but briefly as he gives in to more.

My stomach beads with a chill even though the air inside my truck is warm. I shiver from his touch, his fingertips light against my tummy and along my sides and ribs until his hands are cupping my breasts, the thin white lace transparent and leaving little for him to imagine.

His thumbs glide over the tips, rough along the places where my breasts have become hard, drawing in to apply a sweet pressure through the fabric, bringing my nipples to rosy crests.

“Ahhh,” I whimper, grinding into him harder, needing to relieve this growing need between my legs that wants to feel more of him.

My sound pushes him to touch me more, his hands moving up to my shoulders and sliding my bra straps down my arms until they tickle against my biceps. I sit up tall and look down at him, pulling one arm through a strap at a time then reaching behind my body to find the small clasp. It unhooks easily, and the lace falls between us, leaving my breasts naked and exposed.

“I’m not as big as some other girls,” I begin, and his fingertips press into my lips followed by his own hush.

“You’re beautiful,” he says, his eyes on mine, honest and soft. He doesn’t leave my gaze, instead gliding his hands along my back and drawing me close. “You aren’t some other girl. You’re unlike any other girl. You make me wish things were different, that I was different, so don’t you ever apologize for being unlike anyone else. You’re exceptional.”

I swallow hard, my eyes burning with a mix of happiness and nerves.

“I think you’re exceptional, too,” I whisper, wishing for the first time since I’ve known him that his life was simpler. I wish his problems were fewer. I wish he wasn’t marked by someone so bad. I wish I’d known him in another life. It doesn’t stop me from wanting him in this one, though. Tristan Lopez is the first for me—he’s my first. He was my first real kiss. He’s become the first boy I’ve been intimate with, and I want to give him more firsts. I want him to have my heart.

I want to keep him. I don’t know that I can, though. Even still, I’m taking what he can give me right now.

I lean into him and press my lips against his softly, sucking in his top lip as his teeth scrape along my bottom lip. Sitting up again, I trace along his arms until I find his hands at my hips and I thread our fingers together and guide him along my skin until his hands are cupping my breasts. His touch is warm, but his eyes remain on mine. He only touches, seeing me with his hands, watching my

face react with every slide of his fingers along my skin. I keep my palms on his, empowered by the control, yet also giving every move over to him. His thumbs pass over my nipples and I ache deep inside, pressing into his lap and arching, finally letting go of his hands to stretch my body back enough to give him access to taste me.

He doesn't hesitate, his arms wrapping around my back and drawing my breast to his lips where he covers my nipple with his kiss. His tongue flicks at the hard tip and I twitch between my legs, throbbing and wanting. He moves his mouth to my other breast, doing the same, but this time sucking in until the raw burn becomes almost unbearable.

Unable to take it, I grab onto his messy hair and kiss him so hard that our lips quickly become pink. Tristan's hands shift back to my thighs, sliding up under my shorts and grabbing my ass hard, pulling me into him over and over again, the movement of my most sensitive area against his hard-on building into something that nearly takes my breath away.

Tristan's breath grows ragged, each pull of my body against him drawing a soft grunt from his lungs. His fingers dig into me, sliding up enough to find the band of my panties and tugging them down as far as they'll go. The roughness excites me and I lift my body enough to pull my shorts and underwear down enough for his hands to touch all of me.

"Fuck, Riley. Is this okay? We should stop, do you want to…"

"Shhhh," I hush against his lips, crying out as his fingertips run over my bare cheeks and find my wet and swollen center.

"Ohhhh fuckkkk," he breathes into me, growing stronger at the first touch. His hands knead at my skin, inching toward my sensitive area again until his fingers push against me with more force, one dipping inside. The feeling burns but soothes this itch that can't be contained, and I rock into him, whimpering as his finger moves in and out of me.

He brings one hand forward and covers my hand on his neck, guiding it down his chest and stomach until it's flat against his hard dick. His palm rests softly over mine and his eyes open to me as he licks his lips again.

"Only if you want to," he says, and I let my eyes dim seductively, spreading

my fingers out then gripping him through his pants.

“Ahhh,” he releases, his head falling back with parted lips. His fingertips stroke me up and down, sliding over sensitive areas that somehow reach higher and higher as I sink my hand inside the band of his pants and boxers.

He’s warm, and I wrap my hand around him feeling his dick throb in my hold before I begin to stroke. I’m acting on instincts, feeding off his happiness and sounds. I’m not sure if what I’m doing is right, or if I’m doing it well, but it feels good. I want to feel more of him, but I also know that this is enough. This feeling of him touching me, seeing me, my hand on him—the control and the lack of control crash into one another as we kiss and move together in a deserted parking lot somewhere on the edge of the scariest part of town.

My body starts to quiver, and he senses how close I am and begins to work me faster—pressing harder and grabbing my left breast in his palm, applying light pressure on the tip until I feel the waves take over and my hips grind against his hand. He sinks his finger in deep, and I work my hand on him, trying to maintain my hold while giving over to the recklessness between my legs.

“Like that,” he says, finally leaving my insides and holding at my hips while I grab him with both hands now and run my palms up and down him until I feel him begin to pulse again. His breathing stops and his eyes squint closed hard until hot cream spills over my palms and his body exhales. His hair is slick with sweat, and my skin is as well. I lay forward against him as his hands trail up my back, fingertips tickling me. My clothes are barely on, and I may as well be lying naked on him. I feel less like a virgin, and in many ways, I think I no longer am.

I’m not a lot of things anymore. I’m not innocent. I’m also not naïve. And I’m not letting go of Tristan. Not through this night, and not through his nightmares. I want to fall in love with him. I think I already am.

And I think he is, too.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tristan

Riley wasn't at the courts all weekend. For two weeks, all I wanted was for the girl to stay away from that damn park, and now when I'm dying to see her, she won't show up. I couldn't visit her again. Her dad was home this weekend, and I think if I showed up so soon he'd hate me more than I'm pretty sure he already does. Riley says he just doesn't know me, but sometimes snap judgments aren't too far off. He's probably right about this one.

I have nobody to talk to about this, though. Not that I ever talked to Joker about serious things, really, but I could have told him that I really like Riley, that I *more* than like Riley. He would have given me shit, but deep down, he also would have understood. Where the fuck is he?

I got up early this morning, beating the sun. I've been dribbling down at the courts for nearly two hours, and the only cars that have gone by have been driven by guys just like me. I knew every face I saw, politely nodding at most. Only one person stopped to ask if I was holding.

"Nah man," I said. "Try Dub's party later."

Dub always has a party. Every night is a party in his world. He gets high and gives up his weed and other things he's managed to land for way too little. It's why he's always strapped for cash. He's a sloppy user. But who could tell him that? I can't.

Paul has been missing for five days now, four that everyone knows about. I still haven't seen his mom, even though my mom told me to go visit her all weekend. She doesn't want to see me just like my mom wouldn't want to see Paul. All I symbolize to her is this massive clue that can't do shit.

I talked to Riley about it, and even she thought I should visit Paul's mom. She doesn't know what the anguish looks like on this side of life, though. When you know things that go on, when you suspect everyone and start to question yourself, if you had a part in someone's disappearance or death. I talked to her about it anyway though and it was the single thing that made my heart feel whole. I hid in my bed all weekend, talking to a girl I liked on the phone. There are guys out there that get to do this for their whole lives until they find some girl they want to marry, and then they get to live with that person and talk to them until they fall asleep every night. Not even my mom knows what that's like, because my dad was never home. And he cheated. A lot.

I want to talk to Riley now. It's why I'm out here. She drives by this park every morning on her way to school, and she'll do it again today. She'll see me, and maybe I can get a ride with her. I just need more time. Her voice wasn't enough.

I dump my bag on the ground and dribble out to center court then rest the ball under my foot while I check the time on my phone. Probably ten minutes, tops. I get excited when I hear the echo of a ball on the concrete, and I think maybe she's come to the park after all, but when I turn around I'm disappointed to see Jaden. He's a sweet kid, but I wish he wouldn't hang around here so much. His parents both work long hours, and that kid is never supervised. His mom and dad stamp cards and ride buses all day and night, kicking homeless people out of the depots and tolerating them on board. Even staggering their hours, there are long periods of time when nobody's home. It's a miracle Jaden hasn't been swallowed up by Dub yet. I wait for it to happen every year.

"You wanna play some one-on-one?" He dribbles up to me and attacks a few times before holding the ball on his hip. It's cute, which I know isn't the point he's trying to make. One day, when he's older—if he gets to *be* older—he'll intimidate the guys out here.

“Aren’t you supposed to be going to school?” I ask.

He coughs, and it’s so fake that I can’t help but tilt my face and lower my eyes.

“I’m sick,” he says.

“Bullshit,” I fire back, spinning my ball in my palm a few times.

His eyes widen, but I wave him off, because it’s not like that kid hasn’t heard a swear word before.

“You know missing school isn’t good for your brain,” I say, trying to find a way to be a motivator. I’m such a hypocrite, and I’m making my words up as they come, but for whatever reason Jaden has always looked up to me. I wish he didn’t. I wish I were a better role model.

“You miss school,” he says, and for once, I have him.

“Nope,” I say, turning and jogging to the hoop to lay the ball in. I get my rebound then nod for him to try.

Jaden stares at me for a moment then pulls his ball into his palms and begins to dribble. He keeps his head up the entire way to the hoop, and even though his shot is still too weak to make it all the way over the rim, his technique is a lot better.

“You’ve been practicing,” I say. His smile broadens enough that I see he’s lost a tooth.

“That girl showed me how to not look at my hands. She’s nice,” he says, and my chest warms quickly. How dumb that just hearing a little kid talk about Riley makes me feel sappy.

“She is nice,” I smile. “Go on, give me another layup. This time really push.”

“Okay,” he says, and I catch the lisp.

“You lost a tooth,” I call after him as he dribbles away.

“I did!” He turns to grin and lets his ball bounce away toward the gate. I nod to where it’s rolled and he rushes toward it, not catching it in time before it slips out into the gutter.

The rumble of the engine isn’t familiar, and that’s why I notice. Everything light and easy goes away in a flash, and terror replaces all of the good feelings I had inside when I see the grill of the Challenger pull into view. I don’t recognize

the guy driving, and the two shapes in the backseat are too hard to make out, but I know the passenger side dude is part of The Tribe. I've seen him try to sell here before. Last time he tried at night, but today it looks like he wants to take over mornings.

"Jaden, step back," I say, my voice stern. Jaden picks up his ball and plants himself just inside the gate of the court, hugging the ball to his chest.

The car slows as it passes, and everyone in the vehicle looks at me. I toss my ball to the side and fold my arms, sensing my empty pockets and socks. I haven't carried a knife in weeks, and my piece is still buried out in my uncle's yard.

Jaden takes a step back as the car tucks closer to the curb, the wheels moving so slow that I can count the spokes on the wheels. They're painted black, work probably done up at Henry's garage. It looks like his work. Henry used to run with Dub, but somehow he got out. Maybe he grew old. I need to find out how he managed to both leave this world and still make money off it, though, especially crossing enemy lines.

Nobody in the car smiles, and the uneasy feeling in my chest starts to make it hard to breathe. I follow my senses and take slow but deliberate steps toward Jaden. Within seconds, I'm standing just behind him, making him easy to grab or protect if something goes down. I dare the driver to look at me, but he won't, his eyes are busy scanning the courts and the surrounding park. I move on to the guy I recognize, and his eyes are waiting for mine.

I shake my head slowly, trying to silently say that this isn't one of those times—that I'm not here dealing and that this kid is just a kid. He glances to Jaden, and I step forward and put one hand on his tiny shoulder.

"Don't run. I've got you," I say. I can feel him trembling.

The guy's eyes move back to me, and I remain cold. Nothing is going to happen here today. I won't let it. This isn't how my time ends, and it's definitely not the end for Jaden. The passenger leans toward the driver and says something, his lips covered by his hand and the music inside the car rattling the windows. When the car moves forward, eventually turning right and disappearing behind houses and trees, I begin to breathe again. A full breath won't come for hours, though. I recognize the panic. Dub lives for this shit, and I just hate it.

“I’m going to school, and that nice girl? She’ll give us both a ride, so what do you say?” I ask.

Jaden nods quickly, and without warning, I feel his hand slide into mine. It’s half my size, and it’s chalky with dirt from the court and playtime. I pick up my bag. I still need to get my ball, but I also don’t want to let go of him, and I decide that’s more important.

He keeps up with my fast steps all the way to Riley’s house, and she’s just lifting the garage when my feet hit her driveway. Her eyes flash to mine and for a second, they smile, then she sees Jaden and her expression shifts, her eyes slanting and her lips closing before words can leave them. She’s caught between worry and confusion.

“Do you think you have room for two on the way to school?” Riley’s eyebrows raise as she draws in a breath, and before she can answer, the door to her house closes inside the garage.

“You ready?” Her dad sees me after two steps and freezes.

“Good morning, Mr. Rojas,” I say, confidently, figuring he really can’t dislike me more thank he already does. I also made sure his daughter was home before her allotted hour was up. Of course, that was after I saw her naked and did things that he would have every right castrating me for.

“Tristan.” His voice is deep and commanding. He’s wearing a blue uniform, his name stitched on the shirt pocket, and I know it’s some menial job that doesn’t pay well, but right now he may as well be the commander of the world’s army.

“They need a lift, Dad,” Riley says, urging his dad to look to the right a little, to see Jaden. She’s using him as a human shield. Fucking brilliant.

“They do, huh?” Her dad rolls his neck, making a cracking noise, then looks at his daughter. Riley lifts her shoulders and grins with closed lips, and her dad is as good at saying no to her as I am it seems.

“We’ll hop in the back,” I say, giving Jaden a boost and swinging my legs over into the truck bed. Riley’s old sweats are tossed around back here along with some ankle weights and a few ripped jerseys from other teams. I smile looking at her mess, loving that she treats this area like I imagine she does her

bedroom floor.

I glance through the back window as her dad and she get into the truck. She looks at me quickly, her eyes dancing with happiness. She's happy to see me, happy that I showed up in her driveway—in her life.

Jaden and I bounce a little as her dad backs out of the driveway, and I make sure to keep my arm along the truck bed side just behind him as we travel the four miles to the elementary school. There are a few times when we pull up next to cars that remind me of the one we just saw, and I instinctually get my arm ready to pull Jaden to me, but the need never comes. He doesn't have a bag or any of those normal school things with him, so I tell him to leave his ball with me for the day and to tell his teacher that his school bag accidentally went to work with his parents.

He thinks my lie is brilliant, but I just hope that it doesn't land on ears that have heard it before. I used that excuse a few times when I went here and had to run to school late after sneaking in extra basketball at the courts in the morning. My bag was always with Dub because he usually picked me up from school. My mom was never strong enough to keep him away from me completely.

"Hey, hop in the cab. There's room for three," Riley says, holding her door open and craning her neck to speak to me as Jaden hops out and runs to class.

I nod and stuff Jaden's ball into my fairly empty backpack, then hop over the truck side, landing in front of Riley. Her cheeks redden, and her smile is shy, which makes my mouth do the same. I haven't seen her since she dropped me off in my driveway Friday night.

She slides to the middle, tucking one leg up under her body, and I scoot in trying to keep my body as close to the door as possible. I glance to her knee, to the gear shift, and the place where her thigh brushed against mine, and I feel my pants tighten at the thought. My eyes drift up to Riley's and she smirks, chuckling softly. All I can do is puff my cheeks and shake my head to express how uncomfortable this ride has quickly become, and my reaction only makes her shoulder shake more with laughter.

"So, Tristan. Riley tells me that you are volunteering to coach because it will help with your college résumé, is that right?" His question feels a little less like a

test this time. I also notice that he has details, which means Riley has been talking about me—it sounds like *bragging* about me. She's oversold me, for sure.

"That's the plan," I say, pulling the details from my conversation with my counselor and maybe a little from my actual dreams. "I'd like to get into a state school, but junior college is fine. Really, whatever I can afford, and if someone will take me. There aren't a lot of places to do extracurricular stuff around Miller."

Her dad glances at me and our eyes meet for a beat. His expression is questioning my extracurricular activities, because he knows I've had plenty. I won't deny them, but I won't make them define me. Not in front of this important man.

"And what do you want to study?" he asks, looking back to the road.

I ease back in my seat and run my fingers over the edge of the seat belt. My mouth smiles without me telling it to. It's faint, but it's real, as my thoughts drift to that deep place in my mind, beyond my brain and at the center of my heart. I think about Jaden, and about me when I was his age and size. I admired my dad, and I loved how tough he and Dub were, but that's not all I dreamt about. I liked building. I asked my mom questions all of the time about construction, begged for dump trucks and tractor toys, and I drew my own versions of everything—from theme parks to skyscrapers.

"I'd like to get into construction," I say, not feeling strange about saying it at all. It isn't a lie, and it feels almost possible. It's labor—hard labor, and maybe it's being a boss one day. It would be a lot of learning on the job. But it wouldn't be this. Nothing would be this.

We stop at a light and Riley's dad turns his head toward me again. I meet him halfway, and when he nods with approval, I feel like maybe I crossed over a little bit to that other side.

"It's good work. Construction," he says, his eyes drifting to his daughter then back to the intersection.

I feel Riley's hand next to mine on the seat, and she stretches her pinky out enough to loop it over mine. My heartbeat picks up, but I don't jerk away. I let

her hold onto this small piece of me, and I leave it right here where it is—totally discoverable by her dad. He never notices, but that wasn't the point.

Riley held onto me, and I let her.

It's becoming harder and harder not to touch her. I look for opportunities everywhere. Her dad dropped us off and the moment he drove away, I held her hand. I massaged her neck and shoulders when we got into class, and when others stared at us, I bent forward and marked her neck with my kiss.

I feel like people have started to stare at us, judging *me* and *her.* I have it in my head that nobody in here thinks I belong with Riley. They'd be right. They can also all fuck off.

For the first time in this room, I am looking forward to that empty little book that Ms. Forte is handing out. Some people in here are on their second volume. I've cracked through four, maybe five pages, and that was mostly notes to Riley and doodles just to be an ass. I don't want to write now for academic reasons, though. I want to write for personal ones. I want to say things to Riley, and I don't know how.

The second my book lands on my desk, I flip by the first few childish pages and dive in. I press my mechanical pencil so hard that I break the tip several times, but I keep writing through it. Riley glances over and giggles, probably thinking I'm making a joke again. I send a crooked smile back, knowing that when she reads this, she'll feel bad for laughing at me. I'll kiss the guilt out of her.

I write about seeing her the first time. I write about how I felt when she showed up at the court, how I wanted her there, but was so afraid that she would get into trouble. I write about how jealous I was that Lauren became her friend. I write about how scared I was to come to her house, how many times I walked up and walked away again before finally knocking. I spend an entire page talking about her dad and how amazing he seems and how I wish I were more like him. My words about myself aren't always kind, but that's not the point. This is for

her, and it’s not about me. I apologize for who I am, but I can’t apologize for how I feel.

I’m obsessed. I constantly think of ways I can get out, how I can survive it and still be close to her. I imagine the pain of the beating I’d have to take, and the more I think about it, the less painful it becomes in my mind. I think it’s more than just a girl—Riley has opened this window to what I could be. She’s built a bridge between my reality and my fantasyland, and I can’t stop crossing it.

We move right into a lesson in humanities, and while everyone is passing their books to the front, I drop mine into Riley’s bag. She furrows her brow, but I hush her quietly and smirk. She shakes her head, probably thinking I’m making a joke just like last time with the drawings. Again, I will kiss away her guilt.

Ms. Forte begins to read something from a book I can’t pronounce. She calls the book *Gita* for short, and I can’t remember the longer name. The words sound foreign when she speaks them, and I’m forcing myself to pay closer attention than normal. If this is how people grow and escape, I need to learn. The only things I understand, though, are the things she puts in her own words. If I could just get this book rewritten by my teacher I might be able to learn.

My chest is tightening with a sense of hopelessness, and I rearrange my feet under my desk, forcing myself to sit up taller, as if somehow my posture is directly related to my ability to learn. This is an opportunity, and I have been wasting it. The class begins to ask questions, and the sound of their voices takes a backseat to my own thoughts. I think about that application, about what else I could put down. I should visit my counselor soon so she can show me how to log in online, so she can give me a list of colleges. I need to know how much things cost. I need a real job.

It's overwhelming, and I can’t hold onto the lesson being taught, words now unrecognizable. My chest tightens more, and my legs and arms are beginning to feel restless. I wasn’t made to be in a place like this. I was designed for the streets. I won’t ever be able to force it away. My life here won’t go away. It’s forever, whether I want it or not.

I can’t…breathe.

“Riley, you’re needed at the front office.”

I snap out of my own head when I hear her name. Her face crinkles as she glances at me with a faint smile, a look of surprise.

“Ohhh kayyyyy?” she says, stepping away from her desk and taking the small paper from our teacher that says she’s allowed to be wandering the hallways.

“See me after class, and I’ll catch you up on anything you miss,” Ms. Forte says. They both nod and smile, and Riley pauses at her desk, unsure if she should take her things with her. She eventually does, and I rack my brain in search of a way I can follow her out that door.

“Tristan…I’m up here,” Ms. Forte says, tapping on my desk. I rush with tingles, partly from her calling me out, but mostly from this uneasy feeling I have that Riley was called away. Something isn’t right, and I can’t help but think that it involves me.

Her dad must be here. He’s found out how bad I am. He knows that I touched his daughter, and he knows that I love her. He knows, and he hates me.

I’m unworthy.

I’m trash.

I’m a *cry baby*, whiner, never good enough, and all my dad did was get caught.

Useless.

The sting in my right eye shocks me out of my spiral. I lean my face into my palm and wipe the tear away, and a part of me is almost happy that it’s there. I’m not so completely gone that I can’t feel. I feel more than I ever have. My best friend is gone. My heart is split in two worlds, and the girl who holds half of it just walked out the door into something that I fear—that I don’t know and can’t see. All of it means I can’t protect her.

I never really could.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Riley

My dad wanted to come here to see the pictures. They won't show us the body. There isn't much body left, and everything that was my mother—her features, her hair, her smile—is now dust that feeds the earth. More specifically, it's feeding a small section that grows nearly nothing and is completely shaded by the long brick retention wall for the county dump.

Sheriff's officials walked the dump two years ago. They didn't sift through trash or dig around much. It was a cursory check mostly to satisfy everyone's assumption—including ours—that my mom just ran away.

If only they'd looked a little bit harder.

"I'm sorry, but can you explain again? How was she found? I mean who… why…"

My dad is having a hard time breathing. I told him we shouldn't come here. We didn't have to. DNA had already confirmed it was my mom. We wouldn't have been able to ID her anyway. Whoever killed her took everything we would recognize from her body, too. Her wedding ring, the watch my dad bought her for their anniversary, the gold, hoop earrings—even the clothes she was wearing that day are impossible to discern.

"The owner was just having some measurements taken to see how far he could expand and where his property ends, and that's when…" The detective

doesn’t finish. I’m glad, because hearing him talk about my mom as if she was some fossil that they found, or a missing coin, is gross.

My dad just keeps nodding.

“Did you catch who did this?” My dad looks up at the detective who’s now standing beside his chair. The guy wants us to leave. He’s done his good duty, giving us some empathy and letting us take our time—a whole two hours—soaking in the brutal truth. It’s time for us to head on home.

“Mr. Rojas, we’re investigating, but there’s not a lot to go on, and to be frank…we find bodies around here on an all-too regular basis. The gangs are a real problem for us to track,” the detective says, and I scoff, standing and pushing in my chair.

“Then maybe you all need to do a better fucking job!” The man’s eyes flare when I shout, but only a little. He’s been yelled at like this before. My dad reaches for my hand and grabs my wrist.

“Riles,” he says, as if I’m the one who needs to settle down. In fact, maybe everyone needs to be a little more upset—why isn’t *everyone* outraged right now?

I literally bite my tongue and fold my arms, squeezing at my sides with my hands. I want to go home. I want to erase this part of my day. I can’t though, so I’ll settle for screaming and kicking, for taking it out on the world and building a massive grudge against it.

I lean against a post by the detective’s desk while he hands my dad a series of papers, one at a time, a few that my father signs. I’m sure one of them gives up our legal rights somewhere. The last thing he gives my dad is his card, telling him to call at any time. What’s really left to ask?

When my dad’s done talking, we’re escorted to the elevator and left to find the rest of the way out on our own. That’s it. Two years of living with some lie equals two hours of truth in a police precinct with a man whose last name is Stone and whose first name starts with a *B*. That’s all I could read on his badge, and it’s all it says on his card above the word DETECTIVE. He said his name at the beginning, but I can’t remember that now. I think I’ll just call him Bob.

My dad is incredibly silent all the way to his car. He doesn’t even ask me to

drive, just getting in the passenger seat and handing me the keys without looking before he closes the door. I wish that this could somehow just give us closure, but instead it's opened up so many new wounds. My dad hated my mom for leaving, only she never really left at all. They had their problems. He didn't think she worked enough, she thought she worked too much. It was always fights about money. We reported her missing, and there were half-hearted searches, but my dad always believed she just got sick of bickering. I still loved her, but that wasn't enough to save her. And she died in a place where murders just…*happen.*

She wasn't even buried very deep.

I climb into the driver's seat and start the engine, the radio barely a *buzz*. I turn it up to fill the silence, but my dad leans over and shuts it off. Nothing is ever going to be the same…again. I've done this before. I wish I was better at it.

The drive home is long, traffic snarling the streets around the precinct, office workers rushing off for lunch and construction trucks pulling in from the night shift. This place is almost normal, like any other urban spot, only it has this underbelly that's pure evil.

That's the thing that's hovering between us—my dad and me. That pure evil has a name in this county—The Fifty-Seven. My mom was caught in a place she shouldn't have been, some innocent casualty that got covered up so gang members could just go on with their day. The detective wouldn't go too in depth, but it was clear that gang activity is their first, and probably only, assumption.

Gang activity. This is why we drive in silence, why I'm wrecked with guilt that's battling out inside my heart and head. How could one member do something as awful as taking my mom away from me forever and then Tristan be so good? The only answer I come to is Tristan's not. It's like he's been saying to me the entire time—he isn't good.

He's one of the people who do things like this. He swore he never has, but men like him—they lie.

I don't see Tristan sitting in our driveway as I pull up. He's waiting for me, his back leaning against the metal door. My dad sees him, though. He sees him first, and he kicks open his door before I've fully stopped and rages at the boy I thought I could love—that I do love, or that I did.

“You get away from this house!” My father’s voice is a growl and his neck is red.

Tristan stands but he’s too slow to get to his feet and my father’s hands wrap around his neck, pushing him into the wall as he tumbles on top of him. Tristan struggles with him, squirming to break free as my dad’s weight takes him to the ground and they roll several feet on the concrete.

“Dad! Stop! Tristan…don’t!”

I’ve left the car running with the door wide open, and I’m waving my arms at the grown men wrestling. Grief and hate take over and punches are thrown, and it takes me several seconds to sort out which fists belongs to Tristan, and which ones are my dad’s.

“You son of a bitch, you take your poison away from my daughter! You leave my house!” My dad is sitting on Tristan, smashing into his chest, while all Tristan can do is cover his face and roll from side to side. Eventually, my dad grabs Tristan’s arm and stretches his hand back to expose his wrist above his head.

“This! I know what this means. I’m not stupid, son! I’m not fucking stupid, and I know that this means you…you did something awful to earn this!” My dad spits out the words, and they hit my gut just as they suffocate Tristan, his eyes glassy with this horrid truth being leveled at him.

Through it all, though, Tristan isn’t fighting back. I know he’s not because there is no way he isn’t at least twice as strong as my dad. He’s letting my dad hurt him. I let them go for almost a minute until my dad’s arms tire, and both of them are puffing for air.

“Dad, get off…” I say, wrapping both of my hands around my dad’s arm. I pull him until he stumbles off Tristan’s legs and completely collapses on the driveway, whaling moans as hot tears gloss his red face.

Tristan scurries back until his shoulders hit the wall of my house and he holds his knees close as he tries to catch his own breath. His face is pale, his eyes are void of everything, and his body is shaking.

“Come on, Daddy. Let’s get inside,” I say, helping my dad to his feet. After a minute, I feel Tristan’s body near mine, and before he can touch my dad I turn

my head and glare at him, mouthing “Don’t.”

I manage to shield him from my father’s view as I walk Dad inside, not wanting another trigger to hit my dad today. He’s had enough. We’ve *both* had enough. I guide him to the kitchen and fill a large cup with water and force him to drink.

“You should take a shower. I’ll call the school district, let them know you won’t be in,” I say, preparing for my dad to protest. He’s always known best; that’s his role as the parent. He gives over completely to me now, though. He’s in mourning.

I’m in denial.

I start the shower and lay out a clean towel and his pajama bottoms, the only thing I could find in his room, then I shut the door behind me and give him privacy. He’s going to grieve, and he’s going to pray. He’ll beg for forgiveness for hating my mom for so long, and then he’ll wonder if it’s his fault. He’ll think he’s being punished. I know this, because it’s what he did the last time—when he thought all she did was leave.

With the sound of running water vibrating the hallway wall, I walk back to the front door where I left Tristan to suffer alone. I know he’ll be there because as much as I want to hate him for all of this I also know none of it is his fault. He’s a symbol for our grief, and it isn’t fair. I also know he won’t leave, because he hasn’t let me take it out on him yet. He’s too good not to sacrifice his soul to me.

The door is cracked open just as I left it, and when I step outside, Tristan’s legs are pulled up the same way they were before. His face twists toward me, his eyes panicked as if he’s been caught by a hunter’s rifle. His muscles tense in an instant and I halt in the doorway, letting my mind run through the horror story I’ve just survived.

A surveyor was measuring land outside the dump. He stepped in some loose dirt and the surrounding rocks and clumps started to slide down the hillside. He fought to stay on his feet, climbing through the slipping dirt until he saw a bone that looked like a finger. That finger—my mom’s finger—was attached to a hand that was part of an arm that would lead to unburying her entire body.

In the news, this was just another story. BODY FOUND ON COUNTY LAND NEAR DUMP. If I think hard enough, I can almost remember hearing the reporter say the words on the nightly news about two weeks ago, just after we moved in.

They matched the body with missing-person reports. It took them days to come up with a short list, and then it took them until yesterday to confirm the dental records and DNA. My dad was called at work. He picked me up, and I knew the minute I saw him crying in the chair outside Ms. Beaumont's office. It took us another hour to leave the school, to drive to the police station. We were done before lunch.

My mom's death was covered in the span of a single morning. I don't even know where to begin. I don't know what to say, who to trust, or how to fight back. But I know that Tristan didn't do this. He wouldn't. I need him too much to hate him right now, even though he has to leave. He's innocent—I feel it, but him being here is also killing my father. It's because of what he is, what he represents because of a mark on his skin and the place he grew up. *This* place. The land of The Fifty-Seven.

"Riley," he says my name quickly, rushing to his feet and grabbing under my arms just before I collapse. He holds me to him, and I sob. I stain his shirt with my tears, grabbing at the color and stuffing the material into my eyes. I want to stop it from coming out, but I can't—it's an avalanche.

His hand cups the back of my head and I cling to him, gripping new places on his body every few seconds as I try to choke out words. I haven't told him about my mom yet. We didn't get that far—our love was still so new. He's going to have to learn this part of my story like this though, starting from the end.

"My mom…she was murdered…" I gasp, coughing and fighting for more air. My face is wet and my lips rest against his neck as he squeezes me to him tighter. "They found her. She's dead. She isn't missing; she's just dead."

In a few weeks, Tristan has become my person. He's the only one I have for this, and the irony is pure evil—because he probably knows who put my mom in the ground. Yet I hold onto him anyway. He's all I have. He is the *only* soul who understands.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tristan

A week has passed.

I haven't called or texted because I don't know what to say. Things are different in the moment, and I was the only person there when her world was falling apart. She needs to take care of her dad now, though. She needs him. He needs her. There isn't room for me in their space as it is.

Ms. Beaumont was able to suspend our games for a week. It's not like we play in a tough conference or anything. Most of the schools have to piece together teams just like us, so rescheduling this week's game to the end of the season wasn't really a big deal. I don't even know if we'll get to next week's games though. I'm not so sure there will be a team here when Riley decides to come back to school.

I've held practice for the last two days trying to keep it together for her, because that's all I can give her right now, this team. Lauren was the only person to show up yesterday, and I'm not shocked when she's the only one to walk through the gym doors now.

She hates me, too. She hates me because I stayed in—because she couldn't parent me the way she did her cousin and brother. She's right to; I should have listened to her. If I had a time machine I would fire it up and visit my five-year-old self, the one who got mad at Lauren for snagging the last cherry popsicle,

and I'd tell him to suck it up and let her have it because he owes her his life. She didn't keep me completely out of the gang, but she did keep me from falling in so far that I lost sight of what's right. I see that now.

"Just me and you again," I say, my voice echoing in the empty gym. She picks up a ball and dribbles toward me.

"Uh huh," she says with a roll of her eyes.

I smirk and kick away from the bleacher seats, walking closer to her.

"How long are you going to hold this grudge? You know I'd erase my whole life to fix this, right? Isn't that enough?" I reach in to grab the ball from her and she pulls it around her body. I chuckle because somehow, in the middle of all the shit that has gone down, she's gotten better.

"I know," she says, her tongue pushed into her cheek.

I hold her eyes and drink in the pity. It's there, just a little. I can't handle it for long, though, and I look away and move at the ball again, stealing it this time. Her hands fall on her hips, one leg off to the side as she grimaces at me.

"You don't guard the ball very well," I shrug.

"I just don't give a shit," she fires back, holding an open palm out for me to give the ball back. Her fingernails are a bright orange, like fire. She's tougher than she lets on. She's tougher than most of them.

I roll the ball into her hands.

"She's not mad at you, you know," Lauren says, her eyes drifting from mine to the ground as she bounces the ball a few times and backs a step or two away.

"You said that." Lauren's talked to Riley a few times this week. She's been taking her homework and letting her know about the basketball schedule and stuff.

"I did, but you're slow to listen to me—so I figured I had to say that shit again," she says, turning and jogging to the hoop. She lays it in, and it's actually a pretty shot.

"You're getting better," I say.

"I know," she says, her tone bossy.

Maybe she doesn't hate me anymore. I smile, and her lips pucker to mask hers.

“Let’s play,” she says, nodding for me to step closer.

I let her take the ball out first, and she goes for a smart shot, but misses off the rim. I dribble out and do the same, my shot sinking easily. We don’t keep score, and the play isn’t very competitive. We burn off stress; we laugh; we dance around saying things that are on both of our minds. We do this for twenty minutes until I just can’t take it anymore, and I hold the ball under my arm and sigh.

“I’m just not into it,” I say.

“It’s fine,” she says, slapping the ball from my hands and hugging it at her chest off the bounce.

I glance up at her and we both dash our eyes away, back to the ground. The silence is thick, the tension thicker. I’ve been thinking this for so long, and it has to happen. It won’t go well, but it almost doesn’t matter anymore. I need to say it to someone—I need to say it to Lauren. Maybe she can help.

“I want out,” I say.

She doesn’t react. She’s heard that before, just not directly. But it’s more than just wanting.

“I’m getting out. I’m…I’m out,” I say, my gaze dragging up her long body while hers do the same. We stare at one another’s blank faces for several breaths. She knows what this means. It means I choose death over the gang. It means I would rather die.

My mouth pulls at the corners, the weight pushing my lips down, the trembles fighting to get out. A rush of air leaves my nose as I fight to hold it in, but I can’t. My eyes begin to fill, and I don’t stop them. The first tear hits my cheek, and I keep my eyes open on Lauren. She scans the side of my face, and her tears start too.

“Okay,” she nods, dropping the ball and stepping into me. She pulls me into her arms and wraps me up in home, in the good and familiar. She loves me like family, and she is loyal. *This* is what loyalty is supposed to be.

“I’m scared,” I say, nodding against her neck as she does the same.

“I know,” she croaks, her voice hoarse with tears. My hands grab at her back as hers do the same to me and she holds onto me tighter. I start to laugh from the

mental strain of it all, of this moment and every moment that's led up to it.

"I have hugged more people this month than I have my entire life," I say, pulling a sad laugh from her that shakes her body. She slaps my back with her palm.

"Shut up you big, dumb, boy you," she says, quaking with more tears. "Just shut up and be brave. You got this, and you're going to be fine."

I nod against her, but I know that I'm not. I won't be fine. There isn't a way to really ever be fine, but there never was. It's about degrees of fine, and this is a path I can live with.

It's a path I can die with if it comes to that.

There was no need to practice anymore with just Lauren, so we both left before the sky got dark. She offered to give me a ride, but the long walk was too appealing. I'm not afraid of the streets. I know where to hide, where to run —*when* to run. There's nothing to run from right now. Not yet.

It took me an hour to get to Riley's house, and it took me another thirty minutes to find the strength to go to her door, but now that I've knocked and can hear movement inside, I wonder what took me so long. Nothing can rip through me more than seeing her so broken. Lauren promised she wanted to see me. She said Riley just didn't know how to ask.

Her door opens, and both she and her dad are standing in jackets, keys in Riley's hands. My eyes meet her dad's first, and he's still blank. I can smell the distrust, and I accept it.

"Hi uh…hi," Riley says, her mouth caught somewhere in between flat and a smile. It's only been a few days but it looks like she's lived an entire life. She's older somehow. Her hair has grown a little more, and it's smoothed on the sides, a small sweep of hair pressed into tiny waves along the top. She looks like an actress.

"I'm sorry, you look like you guys are headed out, I can…"

"We were just going to grab dinner," Riley interrupts. She looks back at her

dad, and they stare at one another silently for a full breath. “You…you could come. If you want?”

Her gaze peels away from her dad to me, so I look to his face to see if I’m really welcomed. The blank nothing still has him trapped, but it isn’t the rage it was a week ago. He draws his lips in tight and forces a smile, glancing at me and nodding.

“I’ll go start the car,” he says, excusing himself past us both.

I turn and watch his back move down the driveway to his car. He opens the door, slips in and cranks the engine a few times before it kicks over and starts.

“Sounds like the alternator, or maybe the battery,” I say, turning slowly until I’m square with Riley again. I want to hold her hand, to touch her arm or cheek. I don’t know if it’s okay to, though. I’m not sure where she’s at…with us.

“It’s been doing that for a few days now,” she sighs. “We don’t really have the spare cash lying around.”

I nod and glance back at her dad. He’s feeding the car gas to rev the engine. I did that to prolong my battery too. At least, until my uncle told me it didn’t do shit. I don’t think Mr. Rojas is in the mood for car one-on-one right now, though.

“My uncle works on cars…on the side. I can see if he has anything around, or maybe something cheap,” I say.

My hand itches to touch hers, but I settle for looking at her hands, the way she twists them together in front of her waist. She’s unsure what we are, too.

We are everything. We are everything. We are everything.

I have made her my mantra.

“That would be nice. If he has something, I mean,” she says. I step back so she has enough room to pull the door closed and lock it behind her.

“I don’t have to come,” I say, rolling my head from one side to the other. “To dinner? I’m sure you and your dad were planning on eating alone, and…”

“I think me and my dad could use another human being at the table.” She smiles with closed lips, but her eyes are still incredibly sad—and tired.

I nod, my stance giving way to her direction, and I follow her to the car. I open the passenger side for her to get in and she whispers, “Thank you,” letting her fingertips graze over my knuckles. It’s like the cool of ice in a fire. I feel it

all the way to the restaurant.

We don't go far, just up the block to the diner. It's a decent spot, well-lit and pretty free of people I know. I'm glad this is where they were planning to come.

"I haven't been much in the mood to cook, and my dad…"

"I just don't cook," her father says, his voice breaking through and stunning us both a little. He smiles on one side of his mouth as we get out of the car, but by the time he closes the driver's side door, any evidence of it is gone. Riley stands still, letting her dad travel a few steps ahead before she and I join him. Her eyes are heavy with worry. I brush her arm with mine to get her attention.

"You okay?" I whisper.

She forces a smile and nods, but it never reaches her eyes.

"He just hasn't said a lot lately. That was almost funny. It's like he shows up and then fades away again, though. Anyway," she shakes her head and picks up her step.

My gut sinks. I hate all of this for her. I think she would have been better off living with the lie. I wish I knew her mother. I wish she had a chance to talk about her—before talking about her became a different story.

"Three please," Riley says to the host. He's an older man, probably working here to pay for his health insurance, and I wonder if he has a wife to go home to or if he's all alone.

I wonder if I'm looking at my future.

The man leads us to a booth in the corner and runs through a list of soups and the nightly special before leaving us alone with our menus. We all open them at the same time, propping them up and shielding our view of everything beyond the words in front of us. I tilt mine to peek over the top, and Riley does the same. Her eyes dart to her dad, then back to me, and she lets out a tiny laugh.

"What?" Her dad puts his menu down flat on the table and looks at her.

"Sorry, it's just…we all look like spies," she says, lifting one shoulder.

I smile at her with tight lips, but her father just lifts his menu back up and blocks his face again. Riley's face falls.

"Maybe I am," her dad says, catching her attention before her eyes completely dim. "Of course, you just blew my cover, so…"

Her mouth puckers and I press my palm over my lips hiding my smile and holding in my laugh. Riley's eyes dance. Her dad *is* being funny. She needs him to be. I was here to see it, and I feel privileged.

Riley's foot swings sideways into mine, and I nudge her back with my toe as we both laugh through our nose and avoid looking directly in each other's eyes. That joke—we don't want to ruin it. It's meant to be taken very seriously.

We all order burgers, and they come out fast—not quite warm, and clearly saved from the dinner rush an hour or so before. The fries are hot, though, so I eat all of mine, sweeping up the cheese from my burger with the last one on my plate. Riley's dad is picking at his food, just like his daughter. I feel guilty for having an appetite.

"Oh, hey…" Riley says, putting her half-eaten burger back down and pushing her plate away. She's made a good effort.

"Yeah," I nod.

"I have your notebook in my bag." Her eyes lock on mine and her mouth rests in the softest, sweetest smile.

I swallow hard and push my plate away too.

"Thanks, I was looking for that," I say without breaking our gaze. Her lips begin to curve more, and I'm so caught up watching them, I don't see the group of men walking over to our booth until one of them slides into the seat next to me.

I see it all in Riley's face first, and every nightmare she and I have ever had gets replayed in an instant before Dub utters a single word.

"Baby brother, what are you doing here?" Dub's heavy arm swings over me and pulls me to him tight. I glance to Riley's dad. His head is cocked to one side, his eyes hazed with suspicion. Rightfully so.

"Just getting caught up on some things from school. Can't turn down a free dinner, too, ya know?" I laugh, and I know it's coming out nervously. That's not how I am with him, and this isn't how he is with me. Something is off. Things are wrong. I'm making them worse.

My eyes ping-pong from Riley to her dad, trying to speak without the use of words. They need to play along and go with this. They can't be important to me;

Riley can't be important. I feel her foot rest against mine under the table and it's shaking along with the rest of her leg. I breathe in deeply and force myself to calm down.

"You following me?" I level Dub, shrugging his arm off me and rolling my shoulders, acting like I normally would—like I have most of my teenaged life.

He chuckles, but I don't think he's fully buying my brave face.

"Nah, we just had some business, ahhhh?" He growls out a laugh and digs his elbow into my side. He ends up coughing, which means he's high right now. That also means he's paranoid.

"Right, well…you let me know if you need me for anything. We're heading back home, but I'll be around." I know I messed up the second the words leave my mouth, but I have to go with them now—I need to believe every word. I need to be the other me, just for a little while.

"Actually, I do have a thing. I'll call you about it later. When you get home," he says, sliding back out of the booth. He walks a few steps backward and winks at me, his lid closing slowly, heavy with sleep and dope.

They all leave, not ordering or using a restroom or anything. He really was following me. There's no reason for him to be here. And I don't want him following us to Riley's home.

"I'm so sorry," I say, unable to look either of them in the eyes.

"Check, please," Riley's dad says. The waitress's feet slide by, but I still can't get my eyes to glance up.

I can hear Riley's dad moving for his wallet, and I hear the sound of folded cash being counted. He slides the tab along with two twenty-dollar bills along the table until his fingertips are in my view. He pats down twice, and I slowly pull my gaze up to his.

"It's okay, kid." His voice is soft, and his lips rest in a straight line.

I nod lightly, wishing to travel to the end of what's coming, to be done with this chokehold.

I'm the last to leave the booth, and Riley's dad holds the door open for me as we leave. His hand falls to the center of my back, patting me twice, and the feel of his touch—this tentative acceptance—hits me in the center of the chest,

exhausting my breath and burning my eyes with hopes and wishes. I don't cry, but I close my eyes for the last few steps to the car to keep everything in. There's no time for any of it—*feeling*. My phone has already buzzed with an address from Dub.

The game has begun.

The ride home is as quiet as the ride there was, and the closer we get to our neighborhood, the more I feel the pressure of a ticking clock. My pulse drums, and I'm getting dizzy from the shadows cast on my lap by the streetlights we pass.

"I'll walk home from your house," I blurt out. Riley's head turns quickly, but her dad only glances at me in the rearview mirror. "I think I should is all. Those guys don't need to think you do me any favors, and I just think you should get inside."

Riley's eyes draw in. I've worried her, and I don't want to do that, so I glance toward her father so she thinks I'm doing this for his benefit. Her mouth tugs in on one side.

"Really, it's okay," I insist.

"Text Riley that you make it home safe," her dad says as we round the corner to her street. We pass the courts, a place neither of us has been in days, and the lights are on. There's a decent game of three-on-three happening, and it captures Riley's attention as we pass. It's Lotus and a few of his friends. She'd be safe there for a while, at least until they're done.

"You should play," I say quietly. Her dad still hears me and catches my eyes in the mirror. Riley doesn't answer.

We make it to her driveway a few seconds later.

"Tristan's right, Riles. You need to get out and put some work in…" He stops when Riley cuts him off.

"It doesn't matter. I'm never going anywhere anyway," she says, and both her dad and I rock back hard with the stop of his car. It's not the motion that gets us but the surrender we hear.

"Don't be stupid," I say, not choosing my words very well but getting them out quickly.

Riley turns slightly in her seat while the motor still hums around us. Her dad is squeezing the steering wheel, flexing his hands.

“I’m not being stupid, I’m just being practical. I’m smart, and I can go to school and study what I want. I’m just focusing is all, and living here…with what’s happened…” She stalls, and her father slaps his hands on the wheel hard, jarring his daughter with his outburst.

“What’s happened is we filled in the missing pieces of our puzzle, Riley, but that doesn’t change *anything* about where we are and what you get to do. I won’t let it. You don’t get to quit on you. Not an option.” He turns the motor off and clutches the keys in his hand, not fully looking at her, and the sound of his breath is heavy through his flared nostrils.

“Say goodnight to your friend,” he growls, stopping just before stepping out of the car. “Tristan, it was nice having you join us.”

His words are capped off by the heavy slam of his door, and for a few seconds, Riley and I stare at the space he just left.

“I think that was progress,” I say, trying to make a joke at a time when nothing is really funny. Riley smiles, and I catch it on the side of her face, her eyes are still staring at her dad’s form as he marches up the driveway and lifts the garage door. I should offer to fix that some time. I should fix ours.

I should do a lot of things.

“He’s moody. He’s been like that all day—up and down, then up again,” Riley says. “The detective called this morning. They linked my mom’s murder to another body they recovered on the other side of town about eight months ago. I guess the bullets matched. They said it looked like she just got caught in the wrong place. The other body was from some gang called Tribe?”

I’m sure one of our guys did this. If not, the Tribe cut out one of their own. Someone messed up and took Riley’s mom down, too. It could have been crossfire…it could have been a drive-by on the highway. Hell, Dub’s shot people while they’re filling up on gas. Someone threw her mom away like scrap paper. They didn’t even bother to cover her up well. Whoever it was, they weren’t on the inner circle. I would have known.

I would have been called to clean up the mess.

“How are you?” I say, leaning forward to press my forehead against the back of her headrest. She’s just right there, yet out of reach.

“I’m okay…and I’m terrible,” she says, a sad, short laugh escaping her lips. “If that makes any sense at all.”

“It does,” I say, bringing my hand up and reaching over the seat to her shoulder. My eyes close at the feel of her. I can sense her warmth even under the layers of coat and sweater. It’s growing colder outside, the time of year when I can see my own breath.

Her hand lifts across her body and over her shoulder to find mine, and our fingers interlock at the ends, holding on to this small place for us that exists and promises to disappear in seconds.

“I have to go,” I say, not able to leave.

“I know,” she says, loosening her fingers enough to trace along the spaces in between mine. “Your book is in my bag, in the backseat. You should take it… since I was just giving you homework.”

I nod, remembering the story and the performance we need to keep up. I’m glad she realizes that I’m not going overboard. Dub’s smart. He’s also psychotic.

“I’d like to see you again tomorrow,” I say, my dry throat making it difficult to swallow.

“I’d like that, too,” she says, giving my hand a final squeeze before opening her door and stepping outside.

I know that now is the time to pretend, just in case there are eyes somewhere waiting in a car, watching to see if she’s important to me. It hurts to leave without kissing her, but I have to. I push the door open and slam it, moving in the opposite direction from her with long steps toward my house.

“Thanks again for the ride,” I call over my shoulder, my book tucked under my arm.

I hear the sound of her garage door being lowered, and I imagine running back and reaching her before it closes. It’s a dumb fantasy, but it takes the sting away. So does knowing that she read every word I wrote in this book. I pull it open a few houses away from mine and flip through the pages, stopping when I get to the last one with my messy handwriting and misspelled words. Her note to

me is small, her letters curvy and perfect and so distinctly her.

I might love you.

I might love you, too, Riley. I might love you, too.

I text her the word HOME as my mom's car comes into view. I hover my thumb over the keyboard for an extra second, wanting to throw LOVE in the mix, too, but it doesn't feel like the right way to say it, so I stop with that.

My mom's car being here means she's home, and not at Joker's house. I haven't seen her in nearly a week, not since Riley's mom was found. My mom made me go to church with her that night to pray. I wanted to, though I'm not sure my requests did any good. Maybe. I asked for peace. It seemed like the only option on the menu.

This is now the longest my mom and I have gone without talking since she went to rehab. I should call Dub back right away, but I know that he's just going to take me away from home for at least the rest of the night. He's teaching me a lesson, because I haven't found Joker yet, or because he thinks I'm an informant too. This is how he breaks people—by abusing his hold over them. It was my job to hide the knives, and Joker stole three of them. I either look incompetent or guilty, and neither are good.

Instead of texting him back or calling, I go inside. The house smells sweet, like polvorones, and I find a pan half filled with chocolate drops when I get into the kitchen. The oven light is still on, so I check to see if anything else is inside, then turn it off when I see it's empty.

"Police, there's a strange man in my house." My mom's voice surprises me a little, and I jump where I stand.

"Very funny," I say, turning and reaching for a cookie. My mom lunges forward and slaps it out of my hand.

"Those are for Danette. Hands off," she says. I obey, stepping around the counter and moving close enough to hug my mom. We're not very affectionate, so I stop short of actually embracing her, instead sweeping the stray hair that's nearly cutting into her eye. She stops me from leaving her space fully, though, grabbing my hand and bringing it to her lips.

"My sweet boy," she says, and my heart sinks. I wish I had been sweeter.

Her eyes are red and sunken in deep, her face bare of the normal makeup that makes her look alive and happy. She looks worn like this, though I would never tell her. She's lived hard, and I think this last week and a half has brought her close to the bottom again. She's stronger than I give her credit for—stronger than me in many ways.

"Has Danette heard anything?" My mom's eyes linger on mine, and it hurts because I can tell she's trying to decide if I'm asking for me or for Dub. "I've been looking…for me. I want to find him, Mom."

Her features soften and her mouth curves slightly just before she kisses my palm again and lets go.

"I know you do," she says, moving toward the counter and picking up the cookie I dropped. She hands it to me and rolls her eyes. "You broke it anyways, so you might as well just eat it."

I grin, then push the warm chocolate dough into my mouth where it melts and coats my insides with something happy for just a little while. My mom never bakes her cookies all the way. It's her secret, she says. I've never broken it to her, but the diner serves a plate of hot cookie dough with ice cream. They've been doing it for years, so I'm pretty sure they're onto her.

"The sheriff's office is searching, but it's been slow. I wonder how hard they're looking." Her eyes settle on mine and I read her double meaning. When the law thinks a kid is in a gang, they sometimes look at a missing-person report as one less arrest they'll need to make down the road.

My phone *buzzes* at my hip again, and I know it's Dub wondering where I'm at, so I grab one more cookie and my mom's keys before I lunge just out of her reach. I'm about to lie to her, and it has to be solid.

"Where do you have to go now. It's bedtime for a lot of people in this county, you know," she says, teasing me with her words but grilling me with her eyes. I laugh at her joke, and I make it sound genuine.

"I'm not seven, Mom. It's still early. I'm just going to drive around a little. I've been doing it every night," I say, which is mostly true. I take her car a lot without asking, sometimes from the street right outside Joker's house, but most of the time I just walk or find a place where I can sit and wait for him to show

up. Joker would have texted me by now. He's not good on his own—he needs people in his life...caretakers. Every day the fantasy that he's on some bender grows thinner, and last night I started to wonder if he really ran—somewhere far.

My mom's mouth twists with uncertainty, but she buys into my story, snapping her fingers and turning her head for me to kiss her cheek.

"How do I know you're not just trying to take away my cookie?" I joke, hesitating before I step into her.

"Because I would never lie to you," she says. I die a little inside, and I think that was the point. I somehow keep my smile in place though and play the role of dutiful son, kissing her and breathing in the scent of her sweet perfume.

"I won't be long," I say, burning in my chest because I know I will.

I don't text Dub until I get into the car and have pulled up next to the park. I'm careful not to even glance at Riley's house as I pass. He sent me an address, but it looks more like cross streets so I'm not entirely sure where to go or what I'm looking for.

Are you at some party here?

I wait for him to reply, and it takes several minutes. Lotus spots me from the court and nods hello, so I pull up to the next block and kill the lights. I don't need to be seen.

Check out that corner. Right by the trash bin. I had car trouble. Keys under the can.

Car trouble means it's hot. I've done this job before, and I wonder if Dub stole this one himself while he was high and is panicking now that he's coming down. Stolen cars are an easy way to get nabbed. There are too many computer chips and shit inside, and they're easy to trace. He makes me move them because he's too worried about getting caught. We used to have a shop to take them to that chopped the right parts then I'd abandon it, barely running, somewhere at least ten miles away. The shop got busted a few months back, though, so I don't even know why Dub bothered other than he must have wanted something that was inside the car.

Got it.

I head south to One-Seventy-First. It's a two-lane road that eventually cuts

out into nothing and dead-ends. Warehouses hug both sides of the road most of the way, and half of them are empty. Miller County is one of those forgotten parts of the country where jobs are few and businesses left long ago.

I slow to a cruise around the last building, turning right on Carson. The tail of the car sticks out beyond a huge dumpster, and the ground is wet and littered with trash. I pull my mom's car behind the can and kill the engine, then sit behind the wheel for several minutes trying to drum up the energy to do this again. My palm flattens on the wheel's center and my vision blurs while I get lost in my thoughts. This isn't the middle of nowhere; it's just not a place anyone wants to go. I could be found here. Someone could catch me. My arm flexes as I lean into the horn, my palm depressing the center and letting the blare echo off the buildings and die into the night air, traveling across the abandoned field of weeds and grass all the way to the highway.

My hand doesn't ease up for almost a minute. I don't flinch once, and I'm never afraid. If someone hears this, if someone comes to stop me, then that's what's meant to be. I want out, and this is the way. If nobody comes, though—I am doomed.

I sit back and let my hand drop to my lap as I exhale. I've left the headlights on, so I watch as the moths dance in the beams of light. They look like they're fighting, tossing through the air into one another with no direction in mind. They just follow the light…blindly. They'll let it take them anywhere, even if it means death.

That's what I've done.

After ten minutes of nothing but my own thoughts, I pull the keys from the car and flip the lights out. Nobody is coming for me. I'm on my own.

I kneel on the ground and ease my palms onto the dirt, glass shards from broken bottles, needles, soiled clothes, urine—the homeless and the users come here. They aren't here tonight, though. The keys aren't very deep under the metal, so I reach in to my elbow and drag them out. He must have taken this from someone's driveway, or maybe the valet at one of the restaurants in the city. Maybe it belongs to someone he knows. Dub normally tells me to hotwire, or he's left the car running somewhere or with a screwdriver shoved in the ignition.

To have keys is rare.

It's unusual.

I stand and dust my jeans off at the knees, a single key and a key fob dangling from a ring on my thumb. This isn't just a car. I cock my head and look at the key fob in my palm and press the unlock button, bringing the car to life. It's an older model Chevy. The body is familiar. It's been stripped of hubcaps and symbols, but why? Nothing on this car is worth anything, which means it must have been about what was inside.

My feet drag forward slowly, a steady crunch of debris under my shoes. My pulse is picking up, and the closer I get to the car, the stronger the beat. It begins to hurt, like my heart wants to run and abandon me here. By the time my fingers wrap around the door handle, I'm shaking and sweating. I'm holding my breath and it's making my stomach grow sick. I see Joker's fucking sweater on the passenger seat before I get the door open. I step back as I fling the door wide.

"Fuck!" I scream the word, my voice vibrating and my eyes burning, blood vessels dyeing the white red. I can feel the pressure.

I wrap my arm around my mouth so I can moan loudly into the crevice of my elbow. That Goddamn sweater—was a gift from his mom! I breathe hard into my sleeve, my breath puffing out fog from the cold. I'm begging for hope somewhere in this, but I know there isn't. This isn't the only thing I'm supposed to find in this car.

My throat retches with the burn of bile, and I spit the foul taste out again and again as I force myself to move forward, to see more. My eyes scan over the emptiness inside the car—a few papers in the backseat that have nothing to do with anyone I know, an umbrella with a broken handle, and a pair of bowling shoes. This car is hot, and I don't know if Joker was just hiding in it or was forced inside, if they found him here or if…

It's that last *if* I can't finish because deep down I know.

…if he's still inside the car.

My body is trembling and my legs feel weak as I move to the back and run my hand along the edge of the trunk, curling my fingers underneath slowly and pausing at the latch. I blow out heavy breath after heavy breath with the

determination of a man about to walk through the fire.

I am that man.

The trunk barely opens before I see my friend's face.

"Ohhhhhhh no, no, no, no…"

I stumble back and land on my ass, crawling several feet more backward, my fingers getting cut from the dirty ground and my eyes burning with the scorch of hot tears. I wail loudly, my chest heaving as I gasp for air. I can't form words, but my mouth shapes out "Why" through every sob.

He wanted me to see this. To live this! This is a lesson, just like the tattoo. Dub is punishing me for not being loyal. He knows my thoughts, and he took my friend away; he punished him!

I snuff hard, snot dripping down my face, tears soaking my cheeks, drool stringing from my parted lips. He's broken me with my own damn heart, and I know this is a test. If I hide this—Paul, my sweet and stupid best friend—then I'm in for life. This is the line I'm supposed to cross to prove I'm worth the *X* on my arm…that I'm not like my dad.

I never believed the stories, and my mom never spoke of them. Lauren's the only person who would tell me things that everyone else left as whispers. She believed my dad wasn't arrested, that he was *brought in*. Lauren said she heard her mom talking about it once with my mom and Joker's, and I didn't want to believe her…mostly because if my dad was really an informant, then my life was a lie. He was sentenced to life, and I always thought it was strange that he wasn't deported. He'd broken so many rules for his status in the US. Someone doesn't get to be a refugee and a criminal, but they knew if they sent him back, he'd be killed. Word travels fast that someone's a narc, and in Honduras the gangs would have set him on fire and left him in the middle of the street.

He got to stay here, and he got to live in prison. That was the deal he'd made, which is a shitty deal, but one that must have seemed better than the alternative to him at the time. He had something on Dub. He had hate for his so-called friend, just like I do. Maybe it was money, or maybe it was over a girl. It doesn't take a lot in this world to build a massive grudge. Whatever it was, my dad underestimated Dub's reach, and he never got to see justice.

Dub had him killed.

He had my father stabbed forty-seven times when no guards were watching.

He owns the prison with bodies all loyal to him. He is the king of this messy land, and his greatest vengeance was turning me into his son. If I get rid of this car—of my friend—then I'm lost for good. He knows that even if I do it out of fear for my own life, it still means I bow down to him. He gets to own me, and I will never break free of it.

My chest is tightening and I tilt my chin to the sky, opening my mouth wide and gulping air. I can't fill my lungs, and each time I try, my draw of air grows smaller until everything around me becomes dark as my vision starts to collapse.

I'm wheezing and clutching my chest as I pull myself up on my knees and lean forward with one hand on the ground. I've had this happen before. Lauren says they're panic attacks, and that all I need to do is breathe, but it seems impossible when that's the one thing I'm panicking about. I spit out on the ground and shake with a cry. So many things are racing through my mind—all of the things that are bright and possible.

I focus on the fantasy. My mom and the voices in her church. Lauren's home, her brother and mom and the meals they make. The school, my counselor, and my notebook. The words I wrote about Riley. My heart, how it beats. Riley.

Riley.

I close my eyes and imagine her face, her wide smile and the bubbling sound of her laugh, the way it's so confident and pure. Her long lashes that shape her eyes and show her happiness and disappointment. Her jump shot, and the way she pushes me. Her bravery in the face of the unknown.

Riley leaps at life, expecting everything to work out in the end, where all I expect is darkness. I get what I see, and my world is dark right now. When the dark came for Riley, she fought for the light. She's a reason to fight now. I want to be like her. I want to live like her—do good things, work hard. I want to be with her.

I want to love her…to *get* to love her.

If I do what Dub asks, I'll still have her. She'll be safe, because I'll be able to protect her, but Dub will own me. I won't get to love her, because he'll never let

that happen. It will be like pressing myself against thick glass just to get a glimpse of her. I might as well watch over her as an angel.

I'm slow to my feet, pausing with one knee on the ground as I gain my balance and finally stand. My hands and arms are covered in scratches, holes torn in my long sleeves from the glass and metal and rocks on the ground. Dub chose the ugliest place in Miller to leave Joker for me to find. He did this on purpose, too. It's all symbolic to him.

I step forward and bend down to pick up the keys to the abandoned car, feeling my pocket to make sure my mom's is still there. I stare at the roads in front of me, and while there are a few, only one is right. It's the hardest one, but it's also the easiest, because if I do what's right, my heart will feel whole. Any other choice will leave me as a fraction of a man.

Squeezing my eyes closed hard, I will myself to switch to auto-pilot, to get through this and disassociate with what's real. I won't be able to survive it if I don't. When I open my gaze on the trunk in front of me, I'm as ready as I can be. I step forward and look down at my friend, a crusted and bloody hole in the center of his pale head. His skin shines blue, and his eyes are open. He saw it coming.

I gag, but work to convince myself that this isn't real, even though it is.

I push his eyes closed and slide my right arm under his shoulders, lifting his knees with my left. He's heavy and his back is still soaked with blood. The smell is almost acidic, pungent like burnt metal and vinegar. I hold my breath as I shift him into my arms and slide him toward my chest, carrying him to my mother's car. I lay him on the ground next to the back seat and pull the tarp from my mom's trunk, spreading it out in the back seat. I climb in through the other side to pull Paul's body up into the car by gripping under his arms. I grunt as I drag him, pulling at his soiled clothes until his body is finally clear of the door, his head resting on one end of the seat and his feet on the other.

I slam the door shut and walk around to close the other side, ignoring the blood on my body and clothes. I walk to the abandoned car and reach in the passenger seat for his sweater, holding it by the collar carefully, not wanting to get anything on it. I place the sweater in the front seat of my mom's car, closing

the passenger door and climbing inside to drive. Flies have started to collect, and the smell is making me sick.

Still, I breathe in through my nose and force my mouth to stop watering with the need to vomit. I toss the abandoned car's keys on the floor of my mom's car and begin to drive, retracing my route, but careful not to pull up alongside anyone. I take back roads when I get into town, and then I divert toward the government buildings, the streets filled with homeless just outside the Social Security Administration.

I don't stop until I get to the dark brown building made of solid brick and glass. I've thought about this place often, and my friend was here recently. They'll recognize him…someone will. I need to find the agent he was working with. I need to confess a lot of things. I need to get Paul's body to his mom, because her son deserves to be buried.

I need this all to stop.

I pull up to the curb, the tires scraping against the concrete, and I shove the car into park and don't bother to lock it. The streets aren't busy. Workers have gone home, buildings have closed. This is the only place open. It's always open in some way or another. They'll be glad to see me. I have everything they want.

I'm going to give them my story.

I push the callbox on the outside of the glass doors and the guard inside picks up the phone.

"Federal Bureau of Investigation," he says, his voice serious and his eyes studying me through the window. His hand is on his trigger behind the desk and cameras are pointed down on me from above.

"My name is Tristan Lopez, and I'm a member of The Fifty-Seven. I want to make a deal."

I lift my thumb from the speaker button as my weight falls back on my heels. I know that it's too late to run. I'm on this path now, and it's the right one. I just need it to have a destiny—some end that's different from my dad's. I don't want to die.

The man stares at me for several seconds, his jaw moving with a piece of gum. He's no doubt trained to take in the details, and I've presented a

compelling case at his door. My body is covered in evidence, and the motherload is parked in a car behind me. I let my eyes speak for me, pleading, and eventually the man stands from his post, lifting a radio to his ear. I can't hear him, and I can't read his lips, but when he's done talking to someone he comes back to me.

"Wait right there. Someone will come out to get you," he says, moving from behind the desk to the center of the lobby. His hand rests on the gun at his hip and his radio is clutched in his other hand, near his ear.

I let my eyes fall closed. I'm not going anywhere. This is salvation, and I welcome every challenge that will come along with it.

I hear the men coming and place my hands behind my head. They rush at me and push me to the ground. Knees press into my back, bending it forcefully. My cheek rubs along the concrete, scratching away a layer of skin on my face as they cuff my hands behind my back and lift me to my feet.

I don't have a lawyer, so my first request needs to be for one. It won't be anyone good, but it will help me from completely fucking this up. I keep my mouth shut until they get me inside, and nobody comes to see me for several minutes while I imagine they're searching through the car and picking apart every single detail. Eventually a man walks in, his tie loosened and his hair disheveled. He was called in for this, which means he's the right person.

"Lawyer," I say and he nods, holding me hostage with his eyes for several minutes before finally getting up and shutting the door to the small, hot room behind him. I don't see anyone else for hours, but it gives me time to plan my words and know what I need to say.

My lawyer is a young woman who looks my age. She's fresh out of college and desperate for work, clearly. There's no reason anyone would be a public defender here if they weren't. I start to prepare myself for the worst options—not to be heard and to go to prison and never see my mother, or Lauren, or Riley again—when fortune somehow throws me a fucking bone.

"Tristan Lopez." A new man has entered the room along with the one who came in earlier. I nod, ready to hear my rights or some other bullshit line I only know from television when he pulls my entire world in another direction.

“I’m sorry about your dad. I think we can help each other.” I stutter through a breath and sit a little taller, my body aching from the restraints that have my arms pinned to my back.

“I’m Agent Herrera, and I know you better than you think I do. So, before we get started, I need you to get this…I know everything you’ve done, but I also know everything you haven’t.” His eyes are cunning, like all police officers. I don’t trust him, but I understand that he’s my only option, so I nod.

“I will help you put them all away, but you have to take me in too,” I say, and my lawyer slides in closer, leaning forward and whispering loudly, which isn’t really much of a whisper at all.

“Tristan, let me talk for you,” she says, but I shake her off.

“No, there aren’t deals that will keep me alive other than this one. They *need* to believe that Paul did all of this, otherwise someone will kill me and you can’t stop them.” My eyes shift from my lawyer to the agent. “You said so yourself. You’re sorry about my dad.”

An understanding veils Agent Herrera’s eyes. My chest opens just a little, so I’m able to fill my lungs. The attack on my insides has slowed, unlocked by the truth. My heart beats on its own will, to its own rhythm—one not dictated by the man who marked me, by the man who gave me life, or by the woman who birthed me. Everything now is my choice, and I’m going to go down swinging.

I’m going to do something Dub never thought I would.

I’m going to be disloyal.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Riley

Tristan was right. I can't just quit on things, on dreams and all of the work I put in. I'm good, and I know I'm good. My mom will look down on me proudly from heaven one day, and I want the arena she sees me in to be big and grand. That won't happen if I stay in this room all day, every day.

My dad drowned himself in work for two years, instead of looking for something better that paid more; he just filled in the hours. It cost him sleep, cost him his health, and it cost us time.

I down the mixture of protein and milk, trying not to taste it. Vanilla never really tastes like vanilla. My dad is up early, scrounging the cabinets for something to eat, because I didn't cook last night. I wait for him to close the last cabinet on the left, the one that has cans of soup and green beans, and I slide the paper under his sightline.

"What's this?" he says, picking up the torn page that I've scribbled on. All I had was the corner of one of my homework pages, but I knew I had to write the number down for him. He would never take a text seriously.

"It's a job. It's delivery, and nothing is out of state, but there's a lot of driving. It pays twice your salary, and you work for as long as the delivery takes and still get paid for forty hours. I want you to call," I say, leaning into the counter with my hip while he looks back down at the number I found surfing the

classified ads on my phone at about four thirty this morning.

“Sounds good, I’ll get on it,” he says, dropping the paper on the counter and spinning to grab his jacket and hat.

“Get on it now,” I say, picking it up and walking the paper over to him. I meet him as he turns to face me, and I grab his hand and push the paper in his palm, closing his fingers around it and leaving my hands on his.

“Riles, I haven’t driven commercial in a few years,” he says, and I shrug at his response.

“So, renew your license. You drove a bus. It’s good experience. You’re qualified,” I say, waiting for his next argument so I can shoot that one down too.

“When am I going to have time to interview?” I saw this one coming.

“You’ll make time,” I say.

“I don’t know…” His eyes lower to his hand and he opens his palm. He’s going to find a way out, or he’s just not going to do it at all. Driving gives his mind too much time and being here feels empty. I get it, because I’ve felt my mom’s presence missing, too. But I also feel my dad’s, and that isn’t right at all because he’s alive. He’s just not here—not…*present.*

“You’re going to miss everything,” I say, nudging his hand with my own. His chin lifts and our eyes meet. “You’ve missed a lot already. I have my first game soon, and I’ve started up the scouting website again for colleges. I practice with some cool kids down the street, and my friend Lauren—you’d like her. I want her to come over for dinner one night. And I…I had my first kiss.”

My smile is faint and my dad’s eyes shift. It isn’t angry or protective, but it’s sad—his baby is growing up…and he’s missing the milestones.

“Who am I supposed to talk to about things? She’s gone, Daddy. And I know that I’m mostly about shaved heads and basketball and carbs and butter,” I chuckle, referencing the ingredients I know my dad likes best. “But I’m also about talking to my dad…about the game…about *boys*…about my future and all of the questions I know I’m going to have. I need you home. I can’t rely on your poor texting ability. It won’t do the job.”

His eyes are glossy as he nods at me, eventually pulling his phone from his pocket and moving to the table, dragging over his rolling chair. He flattens the

paper and dials, glancing at me while it rings.

“Hello, my name is Michael Rojas…I’m calling about your posting, looking for drivers. I’m renewing my CDL…” I squeeze his shoulder as he leans over the table to concentrate, and I bend forward to kiss his cheek.

I leave him with his big step so I can go take more of my own. My ball is a little flat. I stop in the garage and add air, bouncing it a few times for a test before leaving my pump on the bench that I should be using for bench press. A thin layer of dust has formed, and rather than blow it away, I leave it there and write the words GET IT with my finger on the dirty vinyl. I’ll see this and know I have work to do.

I grab my ball and lift the garage door, spotting my friend Jaden on his bike across the street. His backpack is bursting at the seams with his ball, and I smile because we’re going to the same place.

“What, you’re just gonna pretend you don’t see me?” I shout, and he stops with his soles of his shoes dragging on the ground for brakes.

“You coming?” He squints at me, the sun high above.

“Yeah, I’m coming,” I say, jogging over to him and walking with him the rest of the way to the park. He rides, but steadies himself at a slow speed, circling around when he gets too far ahead. I think in another life, Jaden was supposed to be my brother.

“You been working on your layup?” I ask as we step onto the court, DJ and Lotus already drenched with sweat from some serious one-on-one. I nod to them and they glance at me to acknowledge me. That’s more than before.

“I have, wanna see?” Jaden says, dropping his bike at the corner of the court and fishing his ball from his bag. He dribbles with full speed toward the other rim and slows when he gets close, pushing hard and the ball almost making it over the metal this time. In a month, he’ll be strong enough to sink those every time.

I clap, then poke my fingers in my lips to whistle; Jaden smiles and waves at someone behind me. I turn to see Tristan, and I want to run to him and hold him tight but I know this isn’t the place. People will give us shit, and I don’t want anyone making fun of how I feel or how he feels.

Something is off in his eyes, though. He wasn't expecting me here this early, I guess, even though he's the one who told me I should show up. Not that we had a date, but he told me to keep pushing myself—to use these courts and play hard. He said he wanted to see me today.

It's as if I've travelled back to the beginning when he speaks, only his words are in slow motion now.

"You shouldn't be here," he says.

My heart slows and a weight pushes me down from inside, my shoulders sagging, lips frowning. This can't be what I'm hearing. We're past this.

Tristan's eyes scan the court behind me, and I open my mouth to protest when time suddenly brakes. The ball falls from the place where it's tucked under his arm, and he reaches for me, grabbing my upper arm and pushing me down to the ground. I land heavy, bones bruising and skin breaking wide open. He covers me, and the faint shrill of screams becomes instantly vivid as my senses catch up with what's happening.

Someone is shooting at us.

"Stay down!" Tristan yells, his body heavy on top of mine, his rapid breath pushing against my back and feeding the rhythm of my heart. I can feel him moving, scanning like a wolf back home protecting his pack.

"Jaden," I cry out, bending my neck as much as I can to search along the ground surface. I call his name again, louder this time.

"Jaden!"

There's a screeching sound, and in seconds, car doors fly open, shoes rush the pavement, the chain link sounds and bodies are collapsing on top of both Tristan and me.

Heavy blows kick at his sides, some hitting my ribs, and I feel them crack and bend. Stabs burn at my sides as fists pummel into Tristan and miss.

"Traitor! Where the fuck did you take him? What did you do?" A voice is growling in Tristan's ear, in mine, but I can only see the ground. My lip cuts against the rough surface of the concrete as our bodies shift.

"I didn't do anything. I did what you asked! What I always do!" I feel Tristan's body rip away from me as he grunts, his body being flung onto the

ground several feet away while a man jumps on him and holds his shoulders down, shaking him hard enough that his head busts open on the court.

“Don’t you lie to me, you disloyal little shit, I know you…you’re just like your dad…what did you do?”

It’s Dub. I recognize him even with a rabid face that’s spitting at Tristan. His muscles are engorged and his hold on Tristan’s shirt is so tight, he’s tearing the fabric in several places. It hurts to breathe; I’m pretty sure my ribs are broken, and my body is in shock, all of my muscles useless, my voice powerless, my lungs empty. This nightmare is happening, and I want to survive it.

I need to run. I need to save Tristan. I have to find Jaden. I miss my dad and want my mom. I hate this place!

It booms. The shot fired reverberates so loudly off everything around us that it penetrates the inside of my ear, burrows into my brain. I smell the smoke and I taste its acrid stench in the air. What was just slow motion now stops completely, and it feels like it takes me several minutes to focus on the world only ten feet in front of me.

Jaden is sitting on his bag, the zipper pulled all the way open, and a smoking handgun clutched in both of his hands. He’s screaming nonsense and his feet are kicking wildly. His eyes are scrunched closed so tight the tears are being forced down the crease of his nose.

My eyes flash to Tristan, to the body splashed with blood that lays over him. Dub’s silence must mean it was him who was shot. It can’t be Tristan, but I hear Tristan moan. I crawl along the pavement, trying to get closer to him, but everything is useless. I flail and gain inches, stopping when I see Dub’s body roll off his legs. His eyes meet mine and they are made of nothing but sorrow and guilt, even when he winces with pain as he pulls his leg out to the side. Blood soaks his jeans, and I can tell by the speed by which it grows that it’s his own. Jaden shot Dub, he shot *through* Dub, and the bullet hit Tristan.

“Tristan!” I finally gain my breath enough to shout his name, and it brings his eyes to mine one last time before dozens of armed officers, cloaked in tactical gear, flatten him and every other person on this court, including me.

“Tristan Lopez, you are under arrest under the Racketeer Influence and

Corrupt Organization statute. You have a right to remain silent. If you do say anything…" The officer grunts through his words as he jerks Tristan to his feet. He limps and groans from the pressure on his right leg, and I try to push myself up from the new hold on me.

"He's hurt! He was shot!" I scream but nobody listens.

Tristan's eyes rake over me, pain and anguish the paint of choice as they haul his body away and off this court—our home. I watch him for as far as my eyes can stretch to see, my head pounding from the abuse and from the strain of trying to look more than I'm able.

I'm held like this until more cars arrive, and eventually I'm greeted with my dad's voice. I've been given a blanket, as if that will make everything better, and all I want to do is find out answers—to find Tristan so I can defend him, so I can explain. They took Jaden away, but I gave a statement while the medics assessed me, and I hope it's enough. His life is forever changed because of what he did, and despite how awful it was, it was also brave. He saved Tristan's life. He saved all of ours maybe.

The gun was Dub's. He'd stolen it. That's all I heard before I was carried away and driven to the hospital with my dad following close behind.

I shouldn't be here.

That's what Tristan said. But I can't help thinking what would have happened if I wasn't there. One less body on the court, one less person to defend—maybe he would have fought Dub harder without my distraction, or maybe he wouldn't have fought him at all. Maybe that bullet would have missed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ONE MONTH LATER

Tristan

Two years.

That was the bargain. I get swept up with everyone else and my lawyer pleads me to two years because I'm a minor and my only felonies that can be proven are firing a weapon in gang-related activity and concealing evidence. They tossed around the word coercion a lot, but what matters is I'm on the record as keeping my mouth shut in court. I never lied to Riley. I never killed anyone. Murder was my personal line, but that line stopped at my own hands. I never spoke up about any of the crimes I saw.

I was too scared.

That's the argument that was made on my behalf, and I let it go through even though none of those awful things ever scared me. I wasn't afraid of much until this year, until Riley gave me a glimpse of normal.

One day, years from now, I will be telling my story—long down the road when it's safe to do so. I'll talk about how lucky I was, how I could have gone to an adult prison but I had so much to give the authorities that the trade was worth it to them. I'm not the example—those twenty-two other men are. They didn't get us all, but they got most of us. It was a quick sweep, warrants issued fast and

evidence gathered quickly. Dub didn't take great care of things—he relied too much on everyone else. Everyone else was sloppy. Messages weren't deleted, pictures were taken at parties, guns weren't put away. The Fifty-Seven waved their violence around on a flag—the FBI just needed to know where to look.

I gave them a map.

I won't set foot in Corduroy. I would die in an adult prison. Everyone agreed. Sometimes cases like mine can go either way, when the defendant is close to eighteen—old enough to know better. It depends on the factors, and the people charged with deciding someone's fate. Justice would have been right either way. I don't deserve this chance, but I'm taking it.

The classes in here are daily, even Saturday and Sunday. It's not a fancy degree like Ms. Beaumont was pushing for me in that honors classroom or whatever, but I understand the shit in here so much more. The teacher, Mr. Simms, is in his sixties. He's angry most of the time, probably mad that he has to keep teaching at all. This classroom isn't so bad, though. It's not like my first classes at South High, where one or two kids got booted from their rooms for calling teachers cunts or mother fuckers. Do that here and I'm looking at getting moved. Nobody wants to go to Corduroy, and that's a good discipline policy for a high school class full of fuck-ups.

My mom came yesterday. The facility is about an hour and forty minutes away from home, otherwise she'd probably come every day. She told me Lauren would be stopping by again later this week. The last time she came, she talked the entire time, not letting me get a word in. I think she wanted to keep us off certain topics. I know she's mad that I ended up in here, but I think more than that, she's angry at herself for not being able to prevent any of this. She couldn't have. I was a wide-eyed, awestruck kid who loved to watch his dad and his dad's best friend play cops and robbers—or more like robbers and robbers. I probably wasn't old enough to realize their games were real until it was too late and that life was all I knew. Lauren could preach at me until she was blue in the face, and I still would have gone to the movies every day and held that door open for Dub to slip through and sell drugs.

We study until three o'clock in the afternoon. The one thing about this place

that's just like South is the damn clock. I swear it moves backward, taking time away when I can barely keep my eyes open. The alarm sounds and we all snap our books closed and sit at our desks, waiting for them to be collected. I'd never read *Huckleberry Finn*, so that's what I chose. We all got to pick a book, and something about this story called out to me. I see a lot of myself in Finn, and this is the first time I've ever really *felt* what I read.

The guards release us a row at a time, bookending us on the way out so that nobody can be unseen at any time. I'm getting used to the lack of privacy. I like the order. It's too bad that I can't join the military. I think I would have been a good fit…minus all of the criminal shit.

I get to my cell, which I try to pretend is just a really ugly dorm room. The walls are white, thick with multiple coats of paint and rugged with brick. The concrete floor is glossy making it easy to clean, and a wooden plank-type bed is fixed to the wall in the back. A thin pad serves as my mattress, and I get a pillow and a sheet. We're allowed to check out books, so when the cart went by yesterday, I took *Huck Finn* so I could get ahead, as soon as they buzz to let us in, I move to where I left the book upside down on the floor and flip several more pages to where I left off in class.

The pounding at my door is normal, so I step to the small sliding window to see what I need to do. Sometimes it's the guards delivering hygiene kits, other times it's a message from a judge or an update from a parent. I haven't gotten a piece of mail yet, so that would be nice, but I can see pretty quickly that this guard's hands are empty.

"Lopez, you have a visitor," he says. Maybe Lauren's here today.

"Okay," I say, tossing my book to the bed and waiting for my door to unlock so I can be escorted. They don't cuff us in here. It feels risky to me, and there are a few guys I've seen I think I'd prefer to be in cuffs when they're walking around in here, but I'm glad this policy works in my favor. I didn't like being cuffed. It made me feel helpless, even if I wasn't going to fight back.

I walk just in front of the guard down the hallway and through two of the security doors to the main visitation room. It looks like the school's cafeteria, metal tables welded to the ground, four attached stools at every circle. A mother

is visiting her son at the table closest to me, and my eyes go there first. My stomach sinks in and my chest collapses when I realize Riley's waiting on the other end of the room. She isn't alone—she wouldn't be allowed. Her dad brought her here, and I'm ashamed.

"Thank you," I say in a hushed voice as I move from the guard toward her. Every movement I make is broadcasted on TVs mounted in the room. The guards in here see them, and the feed is watched on the other side of the glass too. Nothing gets missed in this place.

"Hi," Riley says, her hand reaching out slightly from her hip, fingers stretching like she wants to touch me, but she doesn't. She motions toward the table, so I sit. Her dad sits a table away, and I force myself to confront him.

"Hello, Mr. Rojas," I say.

"Tristan." His deep voice is serious. He's not here to talk to me, he's here for his daughter. I respect that.

I rest my hands, folded, on the tabletop and widen my eyes to Riley, urging her to do the same.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry," she stammers, bringing her palms flat to the table.

"They like to see the hands. I like visitors, so I overdo playing by the rules," I shrug.

Riley laughs. It's a pity laugh, and a nervous one. I think about making a spy joke to her dad, mentioning his menu, but I talk myself out of it quickly. He probably won't remember what I'm referring to, and he probably also isn't in the mood to joke.

"How are you? My mom said they sent you home from the hospital the same day?" She was kicked so hard. I relive the beating we both took in my sleep every night. Sometimes, I wake up screaming.

"Just deep bruising. The doctors said I must be pretty tough," she says, laughing out words that couldn't be truer.

"Toughest person I know," I say.

My right fingers spread over my left palm, flexing and wanting to reach for her, but I stay disciplined. It's amazing that she's here, but she needs to move on now. I won't tempt her into chaining herself to me and my unpredictable future.

“We won a game!” She sits up tall with this news, and it interjects energy into me, forcing a smile on my face.

“Yeah? Against who?” I never looked at the schedule. I held four practices in total, certainly not enough to call myself *coach* on a resume.

“Well…they were a little younger than us, but they’re good.”

I start to smirk and she rolls her eyes.

“You played the junior high,” I say, snickering.

“Yes, we did and we won, thank you very much!” She draws her hands in toward her body, and I frown, taking it personal. Her eyes fill with guilt, so I shake off my reaction.

“A win is a win,” I say. “Nice job, Mr. Rojas.”

“Meh,” her dad says, his eyes moving to mine briefly. He took over the coaching gig from me. Lauren told me he’s not bad, but he gets injured a lot trying to play with them.

“How’s the scouting website?” She’d only mentioned it once or twice, so I hope she went back to it and made more contacts.

“It’s good, actually. I got Lotus to help me take some videos. I’ve been playing at the court. I can’t do anything really aggressive yet, because it still hurts when someone touches me anywhere…around…” Her hands wave up and down the front of her body, and I grimace.

“Don’t,” she says, bringing her palms back to the table.

I look at her chin, not able to hit her eyes.

“Tristan, I would not be alive if it weren’t for you. Don’t you dare feel bad about some bruises,” she says. The reality of what she says forces a hard swallow in my throat. I nod a little and flit my eyes to hers, then look down again. Her hands slide forward, both of them covering mine. Her warm touch pushes into my core, ripping a hole right down the center of my body, my pulsing heart beating loudly and my lungs squeezing at the same time.

“They’re calling Paul a hero,” she says. Nobody knows he isn’t. He tried to be, even though I think he really just wanted to find a way out.

“Good,” I say, my lips tight as I offer a tentative smile.

“That was nice of you,” she says, and it takes a moment for me to register

what she means.

My gaze lifts quickly when I do, and I panic.

People can't know. It always has to be Paul. That's how this works—Paul was the informant, and I was unlucky. I'm a minor—no different than the five or six other teenagers who were picked up and detained.

"Paul's mom had a funeral," she says, and I snap out of the fear into the present.

I close my eyes and picture him, that ugly sweater. I wonder how she presented him, if the casket was closed. I wonder who came.

"Did you go?" I ask, and she nods along with her dad.

"Of course," she says, smiling softly. I move my hands underneath hers, letting her fingers fall in between mine. I can't hold her like I want, so I have to build a memory out of this. I need to remember every groove, the curve of each bone and the lines that tell her story on the outside and inside of her hands.

Her dad clears his throat, nodding toward the guard, so I back away, but the tips of our fingers hold on until the very last second.

"I'll come again," she says, standing to join her dad. He smiles briefly, not happy that she wants to see me more, but not forbidding it. She told him I saved her life, probably going into detail and making me sound braver than I was. His hesitation is the fact that I put her life in danger in the first place. But so did he. There are so many other places to live.

"You don't have to come. I mean, if you're busy, it's fine. I'm okay in here. I'm getting my GED and…I'm reading books by old, dead white guys," I say, laughing with her.

"That will take you far in life," she jokes, but what she doesn't realize is that it might. All of this that's happened, me being locked in here, the forced break from our neighborhood, the noise and pressure—it's going to let me taste the fantasy for real. If I play my cards right, I may just have a shot.

"Next time I'll bring you lasagna," she says, and I glance at the guard who shakes his head.

"No food. It's okay, like I said. Don't feel like you have to…"

"I'll see you Tuesday," she cuts me off, her eyes glowering a little. She's

making this light, but I can see how scared she is for me in her eyes.

I remember that look all night, and it's the same face she makes in my dream —when Dub is kicking her while I'm held down and helpless.

When Tuesday came and Riley didn't show, I was heartbroken. Even though I told her not to come, most of me expected her to anyway. That's how things are for us—I make requests and she ignores them.

I finished *Huck Finn* and moved on to *Tom Sawyer*. Mr. Herrera said I should have read them in the other order, but it doesn't seem to make a difference to me. Maybe if I've read more than three books ever, I would notice things like that. My first book had mostly pictures, so it hardly qualifies.

I've gotten into reading. I think it's the escape it gives me, and I start to wish that I'd taken Ms. Forte's journaling more seriously. I could have created my own world to travel into, though I guess I created one in another way—I ran away into Riley's.

By Friday, I'd given up on seeing her again. I mentioned it to this kid named Toby. He and I talk a lot out on the basketball court during rec hours. He told me I should just make her up in my head and talk to her that way. He's a year younger than me, and he's in here because he likes to set fires. He still talks about fire a lot, which makes me think he's not in the right place for the rehabilitation he needs.

I took his crazy advice and tried talking to make-believe Riley. I waited for nighttime, when I was alone in my bed. I hugged my pillow, but it was just mushy and cold. My imagination isn't vivid enough to smell her or make something so unreal feel warm. I could only whisper, and sometimes I just moved my lips. If people saw me talking to myself, it would invite problems, and I've worked so hard to eliminate them.

The next morning, I woke up feeling worse, feeling let down and disappointed. I skipped basketball that day, and I didn't read either. I wallowed.

I've gotten back to my new normal now, though. I wrote a paper yesterday

about Mark Twain, and the case worker promised to show it to my mom. It's smart…at least *I* think it's smart. I found all of the similarities between his characters' lives, and mine and Joker's. I call him Paul in the paper. All that's good about him was…*is* Paul, and that's how I want people to see my friend—even some hack GED teacher in the county prison system. Joker dies with Dub—and with me.

I'm anxious for visiting hours. My mom said Paul's mom wanted to come with her, and I've been practicing my apology. She won't want to hear it, but I need to say it. He was my brother, not by blood, but by something more. I should have taken better care of him. There was more I could have done, and I will always feel that way.

"T. Lopez," someone calls my name. I look around from the lunch table, one of the guards is scanning the crowd and his eyes stop on me. He holds up a letter, so I scoot my tray closer to Toby's and glare at him.

"Don't even think about touching the potatoes," I say.

He winks, and I know he'll dip his gross spoon in there. I ate most of them, so I give up on the rest.

A few people make jokes as I walk through the benches to the guard, teasing me for getting mail. That's what everyone does around her, and it's because we're all jealous when we don't get any. I booed someone last week for getting a thick envelope from their mom.

"Thank you," I say, nodding and taking the letter in my hands. I don't look at it until I get a few steps away, but when I see Riley's name, my heart leaps, and I begin to walk faster.

Someone slaps my butt as I pass, and one of the guards whistles and yells. I don't stop for any of it, my head down and eyes centered on the way she forms her *R*, the feel of the paper in my hand, the place where the edge is peeling up because the guards didn't stick it down tightly after ripping it open.

I get to my seat and my potatoes are gone. I glance up at Toby and he shrugs, so I flip him off.

"Who's it from?" he says.

"A friend," I say, because this isn't make believe. This is *real* Riley, and this

is private.

I slip my finger inside and tear the envelope gently, feeling the thickness of the folded paper as I do. It's more than one page, and for some reason, that excites me. It means that this will last. I can savor this, as long as it doesn't hurt.

"I'm going to the library for a bit," I say, holding the letter close to my chest and ignoring Toby's crass jokes that draw more attention to me as I leave. Others join in, joking that I'm off to spank it to porn and shit like that, but I let it roll off me. They can't ruin this. I'd given up.

"Library pass, please?" I ask.

The guard at the main window slides the clipboard out and I sign my name, taking the paper she gives me, and I leave the cafeteria, moving from one guarded space to another. It's usually quiet in here. A few people taking their GED seriously come in here to study sometimes, but today it's empty.

I find a table near the reference books, knowing it's the last place anyone will want to sit if they do come inside, and I unfold her letter and lean over it on the desk, cradling it as if it were her really here with me.

Tristan,

I'm so sorry I haven't been able to visit. My dad got a new job. He's driving trucks full of oranges and lettuce around the state. It's great, only now he can't coach, and he's on the road sometimes. He'll be home a lot more soon, but right now he's trying to impress people. Anyhow, I can't come without an adult, and I feel strange coming with your mom, so that's why you're getting a letter.

I called and they told me you can get these, so I hope it comes. I guess if it doesn't get to you, you'll never know.

Now that my dad can't coach, Lauren's mom is coaching. She's actually pretty good. She's good with the girls, too. She got two more to join the team. They still suck, but they're bodies. The school made her a part-time aid because the one in the special education class left for a job in Maryland. We've won three games now, and yes…that includes the one against twelve-year-olds. They were tall for their age!

I have other news, too. I hope you'll be as excited about it as I am. I'm worried it will make you sad, though. I'm having a hard time writing it down, but I need to just do it.

I got in to Ball State.

That's in Indiana.

I put her letter down and stare at that line. I have a mix of pride and grief flowing through me. I want this for her, but it means that distance will be between us too—not just lockdowns and floodlights and barbed wire.

She was right to worry, but it's not fair for her to have to. The letter goes on for another page and half, but it takes me five minutes to move on from that line. I think of Paul, and how I should have done more for him—how I need to give that energy to Riley now, and eventually I begin to read again.

It's not until August of next year, and I might not make the team. I got in on grades, and the coach there said they'd like to take a look at me. They gave me a partial scholarship for academics, but if I make the team, I might get a full ride the next year. That's why my dad's working so hard to save money.

I'm sorry I didn't tell you about this. I forgot I applied. I did it before we moved here, with the counselor at my old school. It was on a whim—she had me apply for everything. I never thought I'd actually get in, but now…

I'm sorry.

This is the end of the first page.

I stop here and feel the weight of that word—sorry. She shouldn't be. I scan through the rest of her letter, stories about practice, shooting at the court with Lauren. She mentioned that Jaden asked about me, and that part made me smile. She said he's doing well, and she sees him on the weekends at the courts. The courts…they're different too, I bet. I come back to the hard part again, though,

after I read her signature and trace the heart she drew with my finger. I wish it was the word—*love*. It's better that it's not, though.

My chest heavy with selfish disappointment, I leave the small table and walk up to the library guard.

"Can I have paper? I'd like to write a letter." He looks up at the clock, and I know I don't have much time before rec. They force us all to go outside, and I know it's so they can tear our rooms inside out to make sure nobody's hiding anything. There aren't many places to put much, though. My first night here, someone was busted for drugs, but other than that, every single search has turned up empty.

The guard reluctantly hands me a sheet of paper and a short, stubby pencil. I thank him and rush back to my spot in the corner, my hand working fast to get out everything I need to say. I begin with the important things first.

Riley,

I am so proud of you! I won't get into the part of your letter where you apologized because you never should. Not to me. I made choices and they landed me here. Yours are taking you where you've always wanted to go. Ball State is going to want you on their team, and they won't be the only ones, so make sure they're the best. Make sure you let them know you beat some pretty fierce seventh graders, too. (Kidding!)

Since you wrote something hard to say, I think maybe I should do it too. You might be upset with my next few words, but I think eventually you'll forgive me.

I stop there and stare at the page, my handwriting barely legible and my spelling wrong in so many places. I'm no honors student, and the fact that my old counselor thought I could be in the same league with any of those other students —with Riley—is funny as hell. She believed in something in me, and that's the part I hold onto now. Ms. Beaumont saw potential. I have potential. And I think it's because I'm good inside. I want to be good, to do good—to give. That's why

I need to finish this letter and send it without giving it more thought.

This letter needs to be the last you hear from me. I am a better human being because I met you. You changed me. You woke up parts that I didn't think I had, but your work is done. I got to love you for a little while, and I hope there were moments when I made you happy.

Please don't think this is an excuse. I'm trying to do the right thing. Go do amazing things.

Yours,

Tristan

I don't read what I wrote. I walk to the desk and hand the pencil over along with my letter and Riley's envelope.

"Can this be sent to the return address?" I ask.

The guard nods and takes my page, setting it on a stack of dozens of others just like it. The odds of it actually making it to Riley aren't high, but I can't think that way. If I do that, then I'll still wake up hoping to see her. I won't be strong enough to send that letter again.

A week has passed since I basically broke up with a girl—who was never officially my girlfriend—with a letter written in and mailed from a juvenile detention center. As far as boyfriends go, Riley should count her blessings that we were never "official."

That's the term Lauren uses anyway. She's thrown it around a few times in her recent visits. She told me she said it to Riley when she was upset about my letter. That's how she made her feel better, by labeling what we had as no big

deal.

The only problem was it was a big deal. It was to me, and I know it was to Riley. I could feel it when I was with her.

I'm waiting in the visitor's lounge for Lauren now, and I've practiced my speech to her all night. She needs to quit adding fuel to things. She's Riley's friend and she's like family to me, and I don't know how she's going to do it, but she needs to keep that shit separate.

I watch her pass through security, and the second she's buzzed in I stand to give her a hug. She turned eighteen a week ago, and besides allowing her to visit me without supervision, it's made her bossy as fuck.

"Thanks for coming," I say during our embrace. I run through my talking points mentally, and I'm ready to dive into them when we sit down, only Lauren never gives me the chance.

"Here," she says, sliding an opened letter across the table to me, her palm slapping it down forcefully. "And before you bitch about it, it's open because Mr. Security Man out there had to search the envelope."

What the actual fuck?

She lifts her palm and the handwriting gives everything away. It's Riley's.

"Okay, I did read it. But she told me to. She wanted to make sure it said everything you needed to hear. I don't know why she won't just bring her ass in here with me, but she insisted I play postal worker, so here you go!"

She pushes the pages toward me and they separate. Riley's writing is jagged, her letters tall and scribbled. She was angry when she wrote this, and I feel like a dick.

"Lauren, this wasn't the point," I say, gathering the pages and handing the letter back.

She tucks her arms under one another and stands from the table, shaking her head.

"Lauren, I can't read this," I say.

"Oh, yes you can," she shoots back.

I chuckle with frustration and run my hand over my buzzed hair.

"I am doing the right thing," I say, holding the letter in one hand and

extending an open palm with the other. “Lauren, please tell me you see this.”

She sighs, and I look up at her, helpless and with poison in my hand.

“You don’t get to quit being her friend just because you’re trying to turn over a new leaf, if that’s even how that stupid saying goes. What I mean is she was your friend, too. Even though you loved her, and ah…” She holds up a hand to stop me when I try to argue that point. I give up because she knows me well. “You did love her. You loved her as a friend first, though. You don’t get to take that away. No takebacks. Foul! No, wait…*technical*!”

She holds her hands up in the air and spreads her fingers, her nails clicking as they fan out.

“Is that some modeling pose or something?” I squint at her.

She smacks my leg and the guard steps closer so she backs up.

“Sorry,” she says to him, then turns her eyes to me. “Not sorry.”

I laugh at this entire exchange, and before she leaves, I take a deep breath and pull the letter closer again. I’m going to need to respond to this, and if she won’t come see me, I’m going to have to write.

“I don’t have her address. I gave it to the guard,” I say, and Lauren pulls a folded paper from her back pocket. I open what looks like a coffeeshop receipt and study the address written on the back. It’s familiar, and I know it’s hers.

“Thanks,” I say.

“Don’t mention it,” she answers, moving her hand into her purse and digging for her keys. “I gotta go.”

She doesn’t really, but she’s forcing me to be alone with Riley’s words. I stand and give her a hug then do as she wishes. I head straight to the library, to my favorite corner table covered in heavy books with very few pictures, and I begin to read.

Tristan,

No. That’s really all I should say, but it feels like a waste not to write more. So I will. If I want to write you letters, then I’m going to do it. If you let them pile up in your cell, then that’s on you. I’m just going to keep on writing. I like

writing you. It's good for me. It helps me work through shit. You're my person, and I still need you to be, so…no.

Her letter goes on for two pages saying mostly the same thing over and over, and by the end of it, I'm laughing. She's so stubborn, but the little things she lets out in-between ranting at me give me this small picture of what I'm missing. She mentioned failing a test, which I can't imagine her doing. I can't picture her failing anything—ever. She also talks about her dad liking another driver. She said they radio each other on the road. I wish I had a radio. I don't, though. I have an endless supply of paper and baby pencils like the ones they give away at the lottery counter so people can pick their favorite numbers.

I head toward the guard desk, and before I can ask, he slides me a few pages and a pencil.

"Thanks," I say, smirking.

I get back to my desk and begin immediately.

Okay, Riley. I'll write to you. We'll be pen pals. It sounds great.

I stop and read the words and shake my head, turning my pencil over only to be screwed by the lack of an eraser. I draw a circle around the entire first line and then attach an arrow pointing directly below.

That is not how I wanted to start, but they don't let us have erasers in here. In case you're wondering, erasers can be turned into lethal weapons.

No, they can't. These pencils are stupid.

I laugh lightly, amusing myself. It will amuse her. I guess I'm doing this—

responding. We're going to write. I'll do this for as long as she wants, until her letters stop. I ask her about her test that she failed, and I ask her about playing for Lauren's mom. Then I tell her a few things about when I was little, and Lauren's mom coached our Tiny Tykes team out on the courts. She did it for the same reason she's coaching now—there was nobody left to take it on.

I mail it and endure watching the guard read it before he puts it in the stack. It's a different guy from the one yesterday, so I make a mental note to learn their schedules. I like the guy who doesn't read my personal shit. This guy takes his job too seriously.

Riley's response comes faster this time. Her letter is happier, too, which I figured it would be since she got her way. She didn't answer me about failing her test, and she doesn't really have to. I think the fact that she's gone through so much and only managed to slip on one test is a miracle.

She loved my stories about Lauren's mom and asked for more things like, about me when I was young. It's hard to think of things that don't involve Dub at first, but once I scratch at the deep places in my memory, they start to flow more easily. I write to her about my dad, about the good things I remember of him, and how he used to speak Spanish around the house. I knew more of it when I was little, but I didn't practice a lot, because my mom didn't speak it. My dad never wanted her to feel left out, which was his way of loving her. I was given a strange view on love as a child. Favors and consideration, occasional passion, but no real affection except from my mom, and not until she was clean and sober.

For a month, our letters go on like this, sharing those personal details that chaos never gave us time for in person. A few times, she mentions that her dad is home, and I wonder why she doesn't visit, but I don't question it either. I like what we have going now, the distance that mail keeps between us. It's safe for her, even if I'm becoming dependent on her words.

Every new detail she shares pushes me in love with her a little more, but I also expect every letter I get to be the last. A month becomes months, and weeks start to pass between notes, until finally they stop for good.

I can live with it, with the way we just faded out. I can live with it because it

eased her into everything that comes next for her. I can't seem to stop writing, though, and when I quit having a place to send my words, I started to just save them up. Writing her inspired me to write *my* story, every single ugly word. This is different from the things I told the FBI. I write down the emotions, and how easy it was to grow up and believe this culture was right when it's all I'd been taught.

By the time I'm a week away from graduating the system—the term they use here—I've written enough for a book. I might just share it with the world someday, when people are ready to read it. I won't share Riley's letters, though. Those—they're just for me.

CHAPTER TWENTY

SOPHOMORE YEAR OF COLLEGE

Riley

It's surreal being back home, even though I've only been in Indiana for a bit over a year. I spent so little time in Miller, but my memories here are so strong. The things that happened here, my life here—it was loud. Short but loud, violent and sweet.

My dad said he could take care of all of this without me having to come back, but I wanted to be here. I think I needed to be. Some things just aren't finished.

My dad's moved up with the trucking company, and they offered him a supervisor's role. It's what he's wanted, and it's based in Indiana, which means that my partial scholarship will now cover the cost of in-state tuition as soon as we can get residency.

It also means that my dad gets to move.

I remember leaving our first house and feeling sad about letting go of things that I wasn't going to get to see again. I didn't think I'd feel that here, because the people I really care about have moved on—Lauren's moved down state for college, and her brother has his own busy life. Jaden's just a kid, and he's got a long road of therapy ahead of him, coming to terms with what he did in self-

defense and the trouble his father got into for having an unsecured gun in the home. Tristan and Paul's moms have both started a foundation through the church to fight gang violence that takes up most of their time.

The only person I really care to see again hasn't been a part of this place in a long time, but he'll be here today. That's why I had to come.

"He got home yesterday, right?" My dad grunts his question as he carries the box of random kitchen things to my truck. I help him heave it onto the back and then get in to slide it against the back of the bed with my feet.

"He did. He talked to Lauren, and that's what she told me," I say, taking another box from him while I'm up here. I lift it easily, and it makes my dad chuckle.

"You're getting so strong," he says, lifting the collar of his T-shirt up to his face to wipe away sweat.

"Six days a week of gym time and practice will do that," I say.

The first month of college conditioning almost killed me. I thought I was in shape, but I had no idea. A complication from a bone fracture in my ribs that nobody saw made things worse, and I missed half of my freshman year of ball having to let it reset and heal. That's when I quit writing to Tristan. I didn't want him to know, and I didn't know how not to talk about it or answer his questions about the team.

I didn't want to lie. And he didn't need the guilt.

I jump down from the truck bed and sit in the rolling chair in the driveway, kicking back and scooting to the edge of the concrete.

"Promise me you'll never get rid of this chair," I say, and my dad glances over his shoulder to see what I'm talking about.

"You should just take that back to school with you," he says, and the second he turns I celebrate with a fist pump and start to push the chair off to the side.

The sound of dribbling is faint when I first hear it, so I don't walk down the driveway right away, but as it grows louder—comes closer—I give in and walk toward the street to see who's come out to play.

It stops my breath when I see him at first. His hair is short, and mine is long again. I laugh faintly at the observation but stop when our eyes meet. He palms

the ball and pauses his steps. He knew I was going to be here. Lauren told him as much as she told me. I wanted to see him, but I also wanted to prepare myself for it. I guess I never really could have, though.

His lip ticks up on one side, and he drops the ball again, dribbling with his walk until he's in my driveway.

"Why do I always run into you when you're moving heavy shit," he says, leaning his head toward the piles of boxes and towering objects in the back of my truck.

His eyes crinkle with his smile, and his face has grown older. It's matured, the lines more defined and everything about him stronger, wider and…different.

"Short hair looks good on you," I say, glancing up at his head. It's a crew cut, basically.

He runs his hand over the top of his head and laughs on one side of his mouth as his eyes look up.

"Yeah, courtesy of the Miller County Correctional System," he jokes.

I nod.

"Yeah, I figured," I say.

Both of our eyes move, taking in small snapshots of the people we are now. My throat feels dry, and his neck moves with a swallow. This is weird for both of us.

"I was gonna go shoot for a while. I know you don't play with *rec* players, but I was thinking…" His brows lift and his smile slants as I laugh at his joke.

"Sure, I could slum it for a little while," I say. He winces and makes an *Oooo* sound.

My dad steps out of the garage and dumps another box on top of the growing stack. My stomach beats with my pulse, just like it did two years ago. The nerves never go away I guess.

"Hey, Dad?" I get his attention, and he does a bit of a doubletake when it registered with him that Tristan is here.

"I'm gonna go shoot for a while…that okay?" My father's eyes never make it to mine; they stay with Tristan. It's not the suspicious and protective face I used to see though. It's softer, maybe sympathetic. His mouth shifts into a slight

grin.

“Sure, I’m gonna grab some lunch for us. I’ll call you when I get back. Tristan, want anything?” My dad’s offer pulls a small breath of surprise from Tristan.

“No thanks, sir. I have an interview in a few hours,” he says, and I tilt my head in a proud surprise. He glances at me and flashes a tight-lipped smile.

“Job?” my dad asks.

“Scholarship. Just for County, but it’s something,” Tristan says, rolling his shoulders.

My dad doesn’t belittle it. It’s an achievement, and a huge step.

“Well good luck then…proud of you,” my dad says, smiling genuinely and heading back inside.

Tristan remains in his spot for a few long seconds, his eyes on the place where my father just stood. He soaks in the praise, and I wait for him to.

“Ready?” he finally says, bringing his eyes back to me.

He’s so handsome, and I wonder how a boy like him was born in a place so ugly. I admire how he survived.

“Yeah,” I smile, falling in step beside him as we move toward the courts.

Our feet sync up, and Tristan tries to stutter step a few times to get us off, which makes me laugh. I retaliate by reaching in and popping the ball from under his arm, but I dribble a few paces out before he takes it back. My arm glides against his, the contact normal but so obvious when it happens. I blush from it, and Tristan averts his eyes. We’re both nervous.

I’ve had two boyfriends since him. Both of them recent, at Ball State. They were…boring. They were necessary, and they were kind and good guys. My heart never skipped though. I never rushed to see them or made up excuses to be near them. When we were together, it was nice. When we weren’t, it was fine.

I only slept with one of them. I cried after, and not because he was cruel or I felt pushed into anything. I cried because it wasn’t Tristan. I’d given this first to someone else, and it didn’t measure up.

The courts are empty when we step through the gate. The bleachers have been painted a bright green, and the lines on the ground are white and clean.

“My mom had the church take over this space. They put a lot of work into it, I guess,” he says, glancing around.

“It looks nice,” I say, noting the new chains on the hoops and the updated backboards. I do my best to stop the quake in my chest, and I can tell being here hits Tristan as hard as it does me. I see it in the way his jaw flexes and his eyes flinch. I relive the gunshots too.

“What do you say you show me some of those new college moves you’ve learned,” he says, looking at me sideways.

I smirk. I’m about a million times better than I was the last time we played, but I won’t hold back on him. He’s the person I actually wanted to show off to most.

“You take it out first,” I say, smacking the ball from his hands and dribbling to the free-throw line.

Tristan jogs after me, his legs long and his muscles filling the fit of his black joggers more than they used to. He’s wearing a long-sleeved white T-shirt, and he tugs it up over his neck and tosses it to the side. That was a distraction, and it works because I check the ball and he drives past me easily, laughing when the ball goes in.

“Some college coach,” he teases.

My mouth curves up, bashfully, and his laughter slows down. His mouth settles into a soft smile, and his eyes linger on mine in a way that speaks silently. That attraction I felt two years ago has grown by leaps and bounds.

So has his.

I shake myself awake, and take over the ball, checking it with him and dribbling back a few steps to give me some room. He’s used to my jump shot, and he’s probably expecting me to drive to my right just like he taught me. What he doesn’t know is that I’m the best three-point shooter at Ball State.

I pull up, five feet behind the line, and let it fly. It doesn’t even make a sound when it falls through the hoop.

He stares at the rim for a few seconds, and as I walk around him, his mouth hangs open in awe.

“Not bad, huh?” I say, winking when he turns to me. His grin grows quickly.

“Oh, it’s on,” he says, racing for the ball and taking it up top quickly.

I dig in for defense, my arms wide, but his expanse just a little wider. He drives at me, and I close the distance, becoming more comfortable with our old aggressive game. I stop him on his first attempt, but he gets the rebound and makes his follow-up shot. I take the ball up and fake another three, and zip past him on the left.

“Whooooo!” Tristan shouts, holding one arm up in the air with his wrist bent in respect of my nice touch. He’s impressed with my handling on the left side, and I beam. In a way, I think I will always be his student on the court.

We play hard for almost thirty minutes, until my hair is wet and I have to twist it high on my head and his body is dripping with sweat. The entire time, the court belongs to us—our little kingdom. It has to end, but for now we have it.

“Last shot, all or nothing,” Tristan says, one eye squinted more than the other as he dribbles back and levels me with a challenging stare and tight smile. His cheeks are dented with his confident grin, and I remember the first time I saw his dimples. I put him in his place that day, and I don’t plan on leaving here a loser today.

“Deal,” I say, stepping close and guarding him aggressively. He fakes one way, and I stick to him, not falling for any of his moves, my eyes darting from his hips to his hands. I wait for every signal, and I’m a step ahead for each one, until he pushes the ball hard to the side and it bounces out toward the bleachers, no longer a part of our game.

“What…”

I don’t even get an entire word out before he steps into me and his right hand slides up my face. His eyes sink into mine, and they swim with regret and hope and longing. I get lost in them, and I feel all of those things in the center of my own chest.

I take small steps backward as he walks with me until we both stop just under the hoop. My hands flatten against his chest, sticky from hard play and warm with the life beating through him. His head falls against mine and my eyes close, feeling the brush of his lips against mine, the fight of temptation.

“I know you have school. I know your dad is moving, and I know your life is

in Indiana. But you and I are here," he says, his nose brushing against the side of mine as his opposite hand comes to hold the other side of my head. His fingertips thread into the loose strands of my hair, and my hands travel up his arms until I'm gripping his wrists, not wanting him to leave this spot.

"This place is us. It isn't all of the terrible things I survived, Riley. I come here and I see you, and I'm okay with just having that little bit," he says, dusting his lips against mine with the last few words. His breath is sweet, like candy, and his body has gotten stronger with life.

"You can have more," I say, opening my eyes and feeling my lashes brush against his rough cheeks.

"I won't ask that," he says, sweeping another strand of my hair back until his hands are buried. "I'll ask for this moment right here, to kiss you now. And maybe, if I'm lucky, I can kiss you again later. I don't care when. I don't care where. But just hold onto this," he says, holding my hand to his chest, pressing it to him forcefully until I feel the heavy beat fighting inside. "Remember how this feels because I will never forget it."

I step to him and his lips crash into mine, his right hand sweeping behind my back to pull me closer, swinging me around with our kiss like they do in the movies.

That's us. A moment in time. This one. Two years ago.

And god willing, one day in our future.

I'll hold on. I'll always look for our place. I won't be able to help it, because he's that one for me, whether I have him or not. He's my one. He'll shape my expectations, and maybe…just maybe…there will be a time for us again.

EPILOGUE

TWO YEARS LATER

Tristan

She was amazing. I didn't tell her I was coming, because I didn't want to mess with her head. It's not often that a baller gets to play in an NCAA championship game. It's less often that player is named MVP.

Most of the crowd has cleared out, and I can tell that's her dad talking to a few reporters by the tunnel to the locker rooms. He's glanced up at me a few times. I bought a ticket from a scalper to get in. It cost me a few days' pay, but it was worth it. Jaden wanted to come. He's become like a little brother to me, and my mom's gotten him involved with the church youth group. He would have liked to have seen Riley. I'm sure she would have loved to have seen him. Two tickets, though—that would have bankrupted me.

I wait while her dad shakes hands with the reporters and gives one of them back a mic that was pinned to his collar. He waits with hands deep in his pockets, smiling at them as they leave and rush off to catch time with his daughter.

I stand as he turns to look up at me.

"Some game, huh?" his voice echoes over the empty seats.

"I knew it would be," I say, matching his posture, my hands in my pockets

and my shoulders tight.

He nudges his head to the side.

“Come on down,” he says.

I look at my feet, dirt on my work boots, and stains on the bottom of my jeans. I smile at the floor and nod, taking heavy steps that clunk on the metal risers until I get down to the court, level with him.

He holds out a hand, and I grasp it, letting him pull me in for a hug with heavy slaps against my back.

“It’s good to see you,” Riley’s dad says. He’s shorter than I remember, or maybe I’ve grown.

“Same,” I say, exhaling some of my anxiety. Being here is harder than I thought it would be, but I wouldn’t have missed it.

Her father glances down at my shoes, so I kick the toe against the floor.

“Been working a lot. They leveled part of Old Town. They’re putting in a new city hall. I actually excavated the whole thing,” I say, looking up with a crooked smile. I’m a little embarrassed to be proud of that, but I am.

“That’s awesome. I always wanted to drive some of that big equipment,” he says, and I laugh, because deep down we’re all still little boys that like to dig.

“Yeah, it’s pretty cool stuff,” I say, my chest tight all of a sudden.

Cheers echo behind him, and I start to realize that I’m holding him up.

“You should go in there. See her celebrate,” I say, feeling a weight of sadness settle in. This isn’t our court. This place isn’t the same as home, and the emails, texts, and occasional phone calls we’ve had to keep our friendship alive doesn’t make up for real life contact. This is real Riley, and I’ve been holding on to make believe.

“Stick around. I’ll let her know you’re here. She’ll want to see you,” he says, and I nod, swallowing down the lump forming in my throat.

He pats my shoulder one more time and disappears through the tunnel. I look on, waiting to catch a glimpse, but all I see are reporters and families of other players. I’ve gotten dirt on the floor from my boots, so I kick it to the side and take a few steps out onto the glossy court.

“You made it.” I’m almost afraid to turn around at the sound of her voice. It’s

been a while since I've seen more than just pictures of her on social media. I dream that voice and hold onto it whenever she calls.

I turn slowly, and all grown up she's still the same girl. She's always *the* girl.

"I like the braid," I say, motioning to her thick hair, pulled back tightly.

"I should have shaved it again," she jokes, stepping closer. "Girls pull it."

I breathe out a small laugh.

Passing time…it's harder than I thought. I know she's dated. I've dated, too. We don't talk about it, but it's there in the things we don't talk about. It always comes back to Riley for me, though. She's always going to be that bar—the one nobody can live up to.

"What do you say?" She looks to our side, to the ball resting on the abandoned scorer's table. Ushers are starting to sweep through the empty stands, and half of the lights have been killed in the arena.

"I don't know. This feels like home court advantage," I say, biting my lip through a short laugh. Riley does the same.

So many questions stuff the air around us. We're both trying to put words to how we feel, but there just aren't any. Eventually, I settle on memorizing her face. Her eyes have always been my favorite color, and I'm not sure which came first. I don't think I knew that color existed until I saw her.

"Let's go," she says, and I'm not sure what it means. I'm not sure if she does either.

Her hand lifts at her side, and I hesitate for a second. If I hold it, I'll have to let go at some point. I do it anyway. My fingers finding their spot, wrapping around hers and squeezing tight at the feel.

I let her lead the way, through empty rows of bleachers into a tight hallway that leads to the still-crowded underbelly of the arena. Even when I try to free my hand, she holds me tight, fighting against every wriggle of my fingers until I get the point. I'm with her through all of this. Every reporter that comes to get a quote, every teammate that hugs her and she introduces me to—every coach or school administrator, half of whom she doesn't even know. She takes me through her world—through the fantasy.

I enjoy the ride.

And then…she says something that makes this dream feel a little more real. She opens up *possible*.

“You planning on sticking around Muncie?” It’s a local reporter, and the girl is young. She might even be with student news.

Riley looks at me and I let my eyes widen, not sure how to react and braced for her to say yes.

“I don’t know,” she says, leaving her gaze on me and smiling on one side. “We don’t really belong here.”

A coolness begins at my tongue and slides all the way into the center of my chest. *We* and *belong*. Those two words mean more to me than to the reporter who’s asking Riley to repeat herself. They were meant for my ears, not for some news story. I told her she didn’t belong in my world once, but she did. She just didn’t belong in the darkness. She belonged in the light.

I just never knew that she’d take me there with her.

I never thought I belonged.

I’m beginning to believe I do, though.

THE END

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This part is always the hardest. I have so much to say about this story, but I'm not sure I have the right words. This was one of those important stories for me. I'm not new to gang culture. The mentions of MS13 in the recent news weren't shocking to me, nor are the horrible things many of these gang members have done.

I had gang members in my high school. Looking back, I had gang members in my junior high and grade school, too. You see, I also haven't been surprised by the ages reported for most of the gang members in the news. They begin young—when they're moldable, and vulnerable.

When they're desperate.

My research has been heartbreaking. Tristan's story isn't just fiction. Parts of it are very real, based on some tragic lives, not unlike many I've known personally. Sometimes good people become swept up in terrible things, and sometimes choice doesn't exist.

There aren't easy answers, and I won't pretend there are, but in it all, there is love. Somewhere. Often deep and hidden. And there is good. And that's what this story is about.

Tristan is the rare diamond that made it out of a deeply damaged mine. Riley is the kind of girl who would shave her head just to prove she belonged on the same court as the boys. I have loved living their story, dreaming it and hearing it in my head…ALL THE TIME. I hope you did too.

The list of thanks is long. Firstly, to my family for rooting me on and telling

me gritty is good and that I am capable. To my beta readers, Bianca, Jen, TeriLyn, Shelley and Ashley—I know sometimes I leave you with major cliffies. Thanks for always trusting me and taking the ride. Thank you to my editors, Tina Scott and BilliJoy Carson of Editing Addict, and to my publicist, rock and sanity, Autumn of Wordsmith. You guys make me feel like the hard stuff is possible.

If you've enjoyed my story, the greatest gift you can give it, and by default me, is your review. You can leave it anywhere, really. I only get to do what I do because of the power of readers. Whether you blog, post your recommendations on your Facebook page, bookstagram, tweet, share favorite reads with your book club friends, or even just pass my name along to someone, your work and support is appreciated more than you'll ever know.

Thank you for giving my little story your time. I hope to give you more again soon.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ginger Scott is an Amazon-bestselling and Goodreads Choice Award-nominated author from Peoria, Arizona. She is the author of several young and new adult romances, including bestsellers The Hard Count, A Boy Like You, This Is Falling and Wild Reckless.

A sucker for a good romance, Ginger's other passion is sports, and she often blends the two in her stories. When she's not writing, the odds are high that she's somewhere near a baseball diamond, either watching her son field pop flies like Bryce Harper or cheering on her favorite baseball team, the Arizona Diamondbacks. Ginger lives in Arizona and is married to her college sweetheart whom she met at ASU (fork 'em, Devils).

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