

# VICIOUS KNIGHT

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B L U R B

*Everyone has secrets...*

What do you do to the person who learns yours?

I'll tell you what I did. I went after her.

I *wrecked* her credibility.

I *destroyed* her friendships.

I *ruined* her reputation.

And she responded in the most foolish way possible.  
She fought back.

My last name might be Knight, but she's the furthest  
thing from being rescued.

“Do it, Jade!” Leilani laughed so hard she bent over and placed her hands on her knees. Others in our half-circle echoed her amusement.

“Yeah, let’s see ‘em,” Hunter said from my right. I turned my head to glance at him. His eyes didn’t hold a euphoric sheen like most of the drunk idiots standing around the pool. He jutted his chin and stared like he was about to pounce on our far-too-exuberant friend in front of us.

I turned back to Jade and zeroed in on her chest, trying to understand what all the excitement was about. They were a pair of tits. Small ones at that.

“You want me to?” she asked, lifting the flimsy material of her shirt over her stomach. Her giggling cut off as she wobbled in her cock-tease heels, and she flung her arms out to balance herself.

“Yes!” several people encouraged.

Trey, our best asset on the Panthers’ offensive line, shifted uncomfortably on my left. I turned that way and noticed his new girl, Paige, tugging on his shirt and whispering something.

Paige was a good girl. Probably didn't approve of this kind of behavior. As far as I was aware, she didn't have much experience with parties.

Now *this* was interesting.

"Would you fuckin' relax?" Trey gritted, trying to keep his voice low so none of us would hear. Her face drooped, and her eyes shone, but not with a drunken glaze. They shone with tears.

Jade was still giggling and dragging the attention out as long as she could. Right now, she had the spotlight, and that's exactly the way she wanted it. She was having the time of her life.

"Jade, I don't think Trey wants you to." I said it as if it was a harmless taunt, adding amusement into my voice and giving him a nudge. Paige looked up at him expectantly.

Here we go.

Jade laughed. "That's not how you felt last night, baby."

More laughter rang out and a chorus of "ohh's" mixed in.

I stared at Paige's face, watching as her eyes widened and lips parted. She pulled herself from him and crossed her arms over her chest. Her eyes pooled more and a fat tear slid down her cheek. I couldn't take my gaze off the girl, but I could see from my peripheral that Trey wasn't turned toward her. He was eyeing Jade, a pissed off expression igniting his face at her having tattled on him.

"Can we go talk?" Paige asked him.

*Oh, come on, grow some balls.*

Jade, sensing the attention leaving her, cackled as she yanked her shirt up, exposing a mediocre pair of tits. Howls rang out through the backyard, along with drunken laughter. Everyone acted as if they were having the time of their lives. Well, not everyone.

When I turned my attention back to Trey and his girl, they were shuffling through the crowd.

I rolled my eyes. What the hell was there to talk about? He cheated on you. Throw your drink in his face and storm home.

Fucking pathetic.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, but before I could reach for it, my best friend's voice stopped me.

"Think she'll dump him?" Hunter asked, following my gaze.

I blinked and glanced at him before shrugging. "Couldn't give a shit."

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?"

He wasn't smiling, so I knew better than to admit it to him. Trey was our friend, and Hunter had loyalty to him. Although, not as much loyalty as he had to me.

I lifted my cup to my mouth and closed my eyes as I downed the rest of my beer. I tossed the cup to the ground and went to walk away.

"Cam." Hunter grabbed my arm. I glanced down at it, then up to his face. "Don't do shit like that. We're brothers."

"I know," I said, pulling away. "Honest mistake."

"Right."

His face softened some as he turned back to Jade, and I took that as my opportunity to move away. I pulled out my phone and glanced at the message before shoving it back in my pocket.

My heart rate quickened, but no one around was noticing anything but Jade. I could probably slip away. When I made it a foot toward the patio, Ethan, another lineman, stepped in front of me.

"Come on, man. We're gonna run through some plays." He had a football in his hands and a goofy smile. Playing while drunk was one of their favorite things to do, and it baffled me. We'd already given it our all at the game tonight. Football was the last thing on my mind.

The sound of someone puking registered, and I turned to see that it was Jade. "I'm gonna take her inside and get her some water."

"Come on, Cam. We need our quarterback!"

I ignored him and trotted over to Jade. My nose crinkled as the smell of regurgitated beer hit me. "You need to learn how to handle your alcohol better."

I grabbed her and pulled her to her feet. She slung her arm over my shoulder and let me help her toward the patio. I could feel Hunter's eyes on me, but by then, he was already part of another conversation. He wouldn't follow me.

"You gonna take advantage of me?" Jade slurred in an amused voice. Her foot caught on the concrete as we reached the back porch. Her arm slipped from around my shoulder, and she nearly face-planted. I caught her by her waist and hauled her back up to stand.

"Jesus, Jade. Pull yourself together."

She turned in my arms and dug her nails into my chest, all the while that smile never left.

Ignorance truly is bliss.

"I'd rather pull *you*, Cammy."

What does that even mean?

I rolled my eyes and urged her into the house, sliding the door closed behind me as if that extra barrier between me and Hunter would work.

"Fuck me, Cam," she whispered, foul breath wrinkling my nose. She bit her lip and leaned on me more. Her hands gripped my shirt and she rubbed her chest against me. She wasn't wearing a bra, and I could feel her hardened nipples through the material of our shirts.

My face contorted and I pushed her backward. Her arms flailed, and she landed on her ass on the kitchen tile. I glanced around to see if anyone noticed us, but everyone was too caught up in the game of beer pong going on. Jade hung



her head and covered her mouth like she was about to throw up again.

With a shake of my head, I left the kitchen and headed upstairs. My heart beat faster with each step, and my cock was already hardening at the mental image floating through my mind.

I glanced over my shoulder as an added precaution to make sure no one was following me. Most of my friends would be playing football out in the alley, Hunter with them. I hoped so, at least.

I barged through the door to his parents' bedroom and slammed it shut behind me. Sherry, Hunter's mom, smiled, leaning back on the bed with one leg crossed over the other. "What took you so long?"

"It's a big house," I joked, my own smile pulling at the corners of my lips. I turned to lock the door, but the lock didn't engage.

"Gene broke it last night."

My shoulders tensed, and I tried to hide the anger that ignited, but she could tell. She could always tell.

The bed creaked as she lifted off of it and walked over to me. She wrapped her arms around me and ran her hands over my chest. "It's fine," she whispered. "It was just a small fight."

"Did he hurt you?"

"No."

I turned in her arms and studied her face. She was good about hiding the bruises under makeup, but I didn't see any hints of one.

"Was Hunter here?"

She shook her head. "You know Gene's better about his temper around him."

"Right," I said, averting my gaze.

She cupped my face and brought it back to her before

standing on her toes and brushing her lips against mine. "Let's make it quick."

I smiled before threading my fingers through her hair and pulling her head back to expose her neck. Her breath hitched as I trailed my tongue over her throat and kissed up to her ear. "Yes, ma'am."

\* \* \*

*Eden*

"So, why don't you like parties?" Joshua Nixon's beer-scented breath drifted into my nostrils each time he spoke, reminding me that he was too close.

I inched back to create some distance between us, but he casually closed it a moment later. "I don't know... It's just not really my scene."

*Not really my scene* was the understatement of the century. Paige had to beg, plead, and ultimately bribe me to come here tonight. So far, two weeks of her doing my trig homework didn't seem worth it. But she was happy and safer with me there... I think.

I glanced through the mob of football players and cheerleaders, sprinkled with a few out-of-place individuals such as myself. This was definitely *not* my scene.

I sighed before returning my attention back to Joshua. "Have you seen Paige?"

He leaned down and angled his ear toward my mouth, making my grip on my cup tighten. I loosened it when the crinkling sound reached my ears.

It's possible that he couldn't hear me past the excessively loud hip-hop blaring through the speakers, but my guess was that he wanted to close some more of that much-needed space.

“Paige,” I said, raising my voice. “Have you seen Paige?”

He stood up straight and shook his head, and sure enough, we were *miraculously* a few inches closer. “I’m sure she’s having fun. You should too.”

He lifted his red Solo cup to his lips and downed the rest of it. A peek into mine revealed the same amount as when Joshua had brought it to me.

Right, like I’m gonna drink something I didn’t pour for myself at a party.

It was kind of sweet, though. Before he came along and decided I was worth talking to, I’d been awkwardly standing by myself, counting the seconds until I could leave. I’d been about twenty of those seconds away from bailing and waiting in my car when Joshua had sauntered up, two beers in hand.

I could at least *try* to be nice.

“So what colleges are you thinking of applying to?” I lifted the cup to my mouth and let some liquid splash against my lips without swallowing a drop.

“Oklahoma State scout’s gonna be at our next game, so we’ll see what happens.” He trailed his eyes down the length of my sweater, stopping at the zipper of my jeans. He lingered there too long before his gaze returned to my face, a smirk tugging his lips.

*Was that supposed to be flattery?*

“You should come.”

I stared at him confused for a moment before I realized he was talking about the game. “Oh, yeah... maybe.”

*Not.*

Before he could press, I continued. “So, OSU. Do you know what you want to major in?”

My genuine effort at making conversation died when Joshua chuckled. “Seriously?”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Of course he didn’t have

a major picked out. He was going to go to college to play football, not to get an education. Silly me.

I forced a smile and shook my head. “Never mind. Listen, I need to check on Paige.”

He gripped my wrist as I went to step away, slushing some of the beer from my cup. My eyes widened as I peered down at the dark spot on the rug. The *Persian* rug. This was Hunter O’Reilly’s house. No way did I spill beer on Hunter O’Reilly’s ten-thousand-dollar carpet.

“She’s *fine*, Thompson. Damn, don’t you ever relax?”

My veins heated and I was struck with the urge to dump the rest of my beer on his perfectly styled pretty-boy haircut. The same one most of the other jocks in the room had. Did they all go to the same barber? I mean, really, how about some variety?

“I told you, this isn’t my scene.”

I jerked my wrist from his bruising grasp and managed to get a few feet away when he spoke to my back. “Oh, right, you’re more the band geek type. My bad.”

A couple people within earshot laughed, and I paused, barely resisting the temptation to spin around and lash out. First of all, I was in *orchestra*. Second, yes, I much preferred my friends’ meaningful conversations over having to spend any amount of time listening to these assholes talk about throwing a ball to each other. Yay, we get it, you’re so incredible.

I can’t believe I thought for a minute that Joshua Nixon might be sweet.

I continued through the crowd, scanning the faces for my once very innocent friend. She’d only been dating Trey Langston for three weeks and already she’d lost her virginity, attended three football games, and been invited to a party at Hunter O’Reilly’s house—the party I could not leave fast enough. *Never* would I have imagined us here, with me

watching her fawn over her new football-player boyfriend, but here we were. Before Trey had infested her life, we'd joked about these people and their arrogant lifestyles... now she wanted to join them.

"Paige?" I called, but got no reply. A game of beer pong was going on in the kitchen. Letter-jacket-wearing meat-heads were too busy chanting at one of them chugging a beer to give me a passing glance. I was invisible to these people and had been since moving here sophomore year.

A groan came from my right, and I snapped my head in that direction. It was Jade Kinsley, sitting on the kitchen floor with her head in her hands. She looked worse for wear and minutes away from passing out... or vomiting. If she hadn't already. I glanced around for her pack of cheerleading friends, but every single one of them was either on the arm of a jock or nowhere to be found.

"Hey, are you okay?" I stepped further into the kitchen and bent down next to her.

She lifted her head and flicked a piece of hair over her shoulder before wiping the back of her hand over her mouth. An acrid odor wafted into my nose—stale beer and stomach acid. Gross.

"I'll get you some water."

"Fuck off band geek." Her words were slurred and carried no bite with them. I stood and stepped over her to open the fridge. I glimpsed the contents before spotting the bottles of water and grabbing one.

Jade's eyes were closed when I peered down, her head resting on her bare knee. The thigh-length skirt she wore had ridden up to her hips.

I crouched next to her and prodded her arm. "Here, drink this." I glanced around, in vain, to see if any of her friends appeared capable of operating a motor vehicle. Of course

not. Turning back to Jade, I sighed. "Do you need a ride home?"

She let out another groan and swatted the bottle out of my hand, her bitchy cheerleader glare training on me. "What part of 'fuck off' don't you understand, *Eden?*"

This time the bite was full force. The way she said my name made it sound like an insult.

*Fuck you too, Jade.*

I glared back at her and stood. Her eyes were closed again by the time I had a chance to storm away. "You're welcome," I mumbled, passing the rest of the idiots in the kitchen. Idiots that certainly didn't give a shit about her.

That's one thing this crowd didn't understand. They thought themselves superior to everyone else, would raise hell when one of their own was challenged, but when it came down to it, they were the last friends you'd want to have. None of them gave a shit about each individual within their group. They just cared about the group as a whole. Friends screwed each other's boyfriends, gossip spread like wildfire, and not a single soul cared if you were dying of alcohol poisoning on a kitchen floor. It was pathetic, and *this* was the group Paige wanted to belong to? Really?

I made my way up the stairs, hating the thought that she would go to one of these bedrooms with Trey, but also realizing it was a possibility. I should leave her alone. The last time I saw her, she was having the time of her life watching Trey play beer pong with a few of his friends. Every time he'd get a ball into a plastic cup, she'd squeal and jump like he'd just rescued a kitten from a burning building. The sight made me queasy, so I'd opted to lean against a wall in another room instead, staring at the front door with the hope of leaving soon.

That hadn't happened, but I was ready to go now. Paige

had made me promise two hours, and that time was about up.

“Paige?” I called, knocking on the first door that came into my view. When I didn’t get an answer, I turned the knob and pushed it open a few inches, peeking through the crack.

Empty.

*Great.*

I pulled it shut and moved on to the next. Hunter was one of the rich kids, and his house reflected that. There were way too many damn bedrooms. Family pictures hung on the hallway walls, showing the fakest happy rich family I’d ever seen. Or maybe I was just in a bad mood.

My confidence grew as I made it down the hall, and when I came to a set of double doors, I didn’t even knock. I threw them open, ready to see yet another Paigeless room.

My stomach dropped and the blood drained from my face as soon as the sight before me registered. It was a couple having sex. Scratch that—it wasn’t a couple. It was Camden Knight—quarterback for the Lincoln High Panthers, king of the jerks, and secretly voted most eligible bachelor by every girl in school... almost. Point is, he didn’t have a girlfriend.

He was on his knees, fully naked, behind a girl on all fours on a king-sized bed. Guttural moans erupted from her in a perfect rhythm to match his jerking hips. If it weren’t for the tattoo on her lower back gaining my attention, I might’ve assumed she was another cheerleader I didn’t recognize and high-tailed it out of there.

Except she wasn’t a cheerleader. She wasn’t a student. She wasn’t even a girl, but a woman, at least twice our age. Recognition from the hallway pictures hit, and my jaw dropped, my feet gluing to the floor.

It was Hunter’s *mom*.

She gasped as she spotted me and scrambled out from

beneath him, yanking the comforter and bunching it to cover herself.

That left Camden, *all of Camden*, exposed. My eyes involuntarily glimpsed his naked body, taking in tight muscles, tanned skin, and a dark patch of hair surrounding a massive hard-on.

My eyes snapped to his face when his head turned my way. Dark, angry eyes pierced into me and froze my blood until tiny ice crystals pricked my skin.

His hair was mussed, stopping just above his brows. He had a pronounced jawline, but it sharpened even more as he ground his teeth together.

“Get the fuck *out*,” he growled, pointing toward the door.

My mind and body unfroze at the same time. I gave a small shake of my head before breaking eye contact and jumping back into the hallway, slamming the door closed behind me.

*Oh. My. God.*

I scanned the hall for anyone who might have seen me coming from the room, as if *I* had done something wrong.

I needed to get out of there.

“Paige,” I called, banging on each door in the hallway. I didn’t dare open any more of them. My face still burned with embarrassment. That and my beating heart were sufficient reminders of why you *shouldn’t* go opening random doors.

*Does Hunter know? Does Hunter’s dad know? Of course not. Right?*

I took the steps two at a time until I hit the landing. Trey could give Paige a ride home, I just needed to go. But he’d been drinking. Shit.

“Damn, Thompson, you look like you’ve seen a ghost.” I wasn’t even sure who the voice belonged to.

As I took my first step toward the front door, Paige entered my line of sight.



She charged up to me, eyes puffy from crying, and took hold of my arm. "Can we go?"

"Yeah, of course. What's wrong?" I searched her face, but I already knew the answer. Football boy. That's what was wrong.

"Later." She tugged me along with her through the crowd, her gaze aimed at the ground to avoid prying eyes. A few people snickered and whispered in each other's ears as we walked by, probably trying to spin whatever rumor they found the most humorous and would cause the most damage. They dumped Paige for so and so and blah blah blah. They'd believe whatever lie that sleazeball sold them, and Paige would be dragged through the mud. They'd probably never even hear the truth, nor would they care for it.

But I would.

When we made it outside, I pulled away from her grasp. "Did he hurt you?"

She spun to face me, her eyes wide with disbelief. "What? No, just come on."

"Not until you tell me what happened. I'm not letting you run away from that asshole with tears in your eyes. We're not giving them the satisfaction."

She threw her hands up in exasperation. "God, why do you always have to make it an 'us versus them' thing? They aren't bad people, Eden. They're just *people*."

A sharp sting pierced my chest from her words, but I shook it off. She was hurt. Her emotions were all over the place. She didn't mean anything by it.

"Please, Paige." I gave a small smile and placed my hand on her shoulder. "I'm your friend. I care about you."

More tears filled her eyes and spilled onto her cheeks. She came closer and wrapped her arms around my neck, resting her chin on my shoulder. "I know, I'm sorry."

I smoothed my hand over her back. "It's okay."

She pulled back and fanned her face as if that would dry the tears. “I don’t know why I’m making a big deal about it, it’s not like we’re exclusive. He can do whatever he wants.”

“Trey cheated on you?” Anger and disbelief filtered in with my words. We were *definitely* not running away from this. Fuck that.

“Did you not hear a word I just said? He can’t cheat on me because we aren’t exclusive.” She gritted the words as if I was the enemy, but I couldn’t care about that then. I was in too much shock over what I was hearing.

“When did he *not* cheat on you, then? And with who?”

The last question blurted from my mouth before I had considered it. I don’t know why I felt the need to know. It wasn’t relevant to Paige’s feelings. Maybe I *was* as bad as them.

She crossed her arms over her chest and huffed. “Last night with Jade Kinsley. And *now* she’s upstairs fucking Hunter. Can you believe that? What a slut.”

Paige rolled her eyes. So far, I was the enemy and Jade was the villain. Trey, though? Nah, they weren’t exclusive so she couldn’t be mad at him. I wanted to smack the girl on the forehead, but instead I sighed.

“Well, Jade was in the process of passing out on the kitchen floor last I saw her, so I think you’re wrong about that one.”

“Mmm, no. They kicked us out of Hunter’s room. Trey and I were in there talking.”

“And she was coherent?”

“I don’t know. She looked tired. What difference does it make?”

“Then maybe he was just putting her to sleep?”

Paige narrowed her eyes. “Jade Kinsley is a slut, Eden. She *fucked* my boyfriend. Can we go now?”

She turned and made her way for my car, and this time, I

didn't stop her. I couldn't form words let alone command my hand to reach out. I was frozen in place for the second time that evening.

*What if he wasn't putting her to bed?*

"What's wrong?" Paige asked, slowing to a stop as she realized I wasn't following.

I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat and forced the words past my lips. "Are you sure it was Jade?"

"Yeah." Paige's eyes narrowed with thinly veiled suspicion. "Why?"

I turned toward the house and commanded my legs to move. It felt as if concrete had been packed into the soles of my shoes, but I managed to walk back up the steps and into the house, ignoring Paige's protest behind me.

She was wrong. She had to be wrong. Jade was beyond drunk. She wasn't capable of giving consent. Hunter was a meathead, but he wouldn't go that far... right?

"Eden, what are you doing?" Paige managed to slow me down by jumping in front of me, but I had built up enough momentum to slide around her.

"I need to check on Jade."

"No, you don't. Please, let's go," Paige whined.

Her hands reached out to grab me, but I jerked her off and hauled myself up the stairs. She followed after me, tugging on my shirt and pleading with me to stop. That we should just go. We shouldn't make a big deal out of it.

She didn't get it, and I didn't have time to explain it to her. If, after tonight, she still wanted to be with Trey, then I couldn't stand behind her. He was a cheater, and his friend was a rapist... maybe.

"Jade?" I mimicked my earlier search for Paige, but this time I knew which room they'd be in—Hunter's. His 'Do Not Enter' plaque hanging on the door stood out like a neon sign this time, and I barreled toward it with Paige at my ear,

yapping like a clingy puppy. I couldn't even distinguish her pleas by that point. The blood rushing in my ears drowned everything out.

I paused at the door and gripped the knob.

*Please don't be in here.*

With a twist, I flung the door open. My heart stopped, and the air tore from my chest. If it hadn't, maybe I would've managed to scream or yell or burst into the room and tackle Hunter to the floor.

They were both there, and neither were wearing clothes. Jade's eyes were shut, and I waited to see if they'd startle open when she realized my presence. Maybe they'd been closed in ecstasy.

Nope.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, and forced my eyes to Hunter.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I demanded, finally able to form words.

Hunter didn't offer an explanation. He climbed off the bed and covered his junk with a pillow before stalking to the door. His glare moved from me to Paige, who, when I glanced her way, looked as mortified as I felt.

Now she understood.

"You're both pathetic," he murmured with a shake of his head. "Go home." He slammed the door in our faces. I reached my hand out to stop it, but was too late.

No.

*We caught him.*

*He couldn't just ignore us.*

I banged on the door, yelling Jade's name. The knob would no longer turn. Either Hunter was holding it or he'd finally bothered to lock the door.

"Eden, what do we do?" The color had completely drained from Paige's face. If there was any uncertainty that

she didn't grasp the severity of the situation, it was gone. I hated myself for doubting her, for almost leaving her alone with these monsters.

I searched my mind for the answer. We could ask for help... but we'd be asking his friends. If Hunter was capable of something like this, why should we trust the rest of them?

I dug my phone from my pocket and tapped three buttons with a shaky finger—9, 1, 1.

\* \* \*

*Cam*

"JUST STOP IT, okay? We can't do this anymore."

"You're overreacting."

Sherry wiped at the mascara beneath her eyes before bending to pick up my shirt. She chucked it at me and stood up straight. She was already fully dressed... and panicked. As soon as the band geek left, she'd scrambled as if Hunter was on his way.

"Put your shirt on and get out."

I scoffed. The shirt bunched as I made a fist around it and stepped toward her. "So that's it then? What the fuck, Sherry?"

"Cam." Her eyes darted around in a panic. "Please."

Silent tears streamed down her face and cut me to my core. She didn't deserve this.

I pulled my shirt on before resting my hands on her shoulders. "Listen to me," I said, giving her a squeeze. "Hunter is *not* going to find out about this. That girl is a nobody. No one is going to believe her even if she does say something."

"What if you're wrong?" She shrugged me off and raked her hands through her hair. "This was a mistake."

My jaw ticked and neck tensed so tightly, I thought it might snap. I rolled it to ease some of the discomfort.

“Fine. If you want this to be done, then it’s done. But I promise you, I’m going to take care of this.”

I turned and started walking toward the door. My anger was so strong it made my hands shake. It made it difficult to walk. Breathe. Fucking *think* straight.

“How?” Sherry asked, making me pause at the door.

I glanced over my shoulder and did my best to don a mask of calm. It worked for so many people, but never for her. She was my best friend’s mom, and she was right. What we were doing was wrong. It was over. But I didn’t have to be happy about it.

“Trust me.”

She nodded and sniffled, collapsing onto the bed and holding her head in her hands.

I turned and walked from the room before I had to see any more of it. Her pain. Her sadness. It fucking ripped me apart.

I softly clicked the door shut behind me and hurried after the girl—Eden Thompson. I barely knew her, but she was Trey’s new girl’s friend. We had Senior English together, and she was one of those ‘sit at the front, frantically taking notes’ kind of people. I remembered her name from when we had roll call at the beginning of the year.

Eden—a Hebrew word meaning ‘delight’.

What’s the Hebrew word for ‘about to be dead’?

A voice registered when I was about to round the corner, and I paused. It was *her* voice. Worried. Frantic. Like she was telling someone about something she’d just witnessed.

My eyes widened, and I swung around the corner, stopping dead in my tracks when her words registered.

“Someone’s being raped.”

Neither her nor Trey’s girlfriend noticed me. They were

standing in front of Hunter's bedroom, and Eden was whispering into a phone. She gave whoever was on the other line Hunter's address and asked them to hurry, and only then did I register who it was.

The police.

My brow furrowed and head tilted as I tried to make sense of it. She hung up the phone and turned to Paige, who was in tears... again.

"They're on their way," she said.

Her eyes darted to me, finally noticing my presence, and she straightened.

I took a step closer and broke eye contact to stare at the door. Hunter's door. Things began to click into place.

As it turns out, Eden was now a problem for *both* of us.

Somehow, that made me feel a hundred times better. Water splashed into my veins, easing the flames that had been threatening to overtake me. At least it was Hunter's problem that needed to be fixed... for now.

"You should go," I said, eyeing Eden with a calm I wasn't sure how I managed. Paige would need to be taken care of too, but it could wait. "I heard that someone called the cops. Wouldn't want either of you to get busted for underage drinking."

Paige turned to Eden and grabbed her wrist. Eden stared back at me, seemingly unable to pull her gaze away until Paige yanked and forced her to take a step down the hall.

"We have to go," Paige urged.

Eden gave me one last glance before blinking and hurrying away.

As soon as they were gone, I banged on the door. "Hunter, open up. Cops got called." A few seconds passed before the door swung open and Hunter appeared in front of me. He was naked, and Jade was passed out on the bed with her legs spread.

*God dammit, Hunter.*

“The cops? What the fuck?”

His eyes were wide and his mouth was open. I’m not sure he knew he’d fucked up, but I didn’t have time to care. I pushed past him and picked Jade’s clothes up off the floor, already yanking them on her by the time Hunter appeared at my back.

“Did she say yes to fucking you before she fell asleep?”

“Of course,” he said, as if it was obvious. It fucking needed to be. My earlier anger began to redirect to him. Not because I felt sorry for Jade, but because I couldn’t believe how stupid Hunter could be sometimes.

Of course, now, it worked in my favor. More water sloshed into my fiery veins. Eden had just put the first nick in her credibility.

“Put your clothes on and go get some water. We need to wake her up.”

Hunter hurried to do as I said. All the while, I stared into the hallway. Eden would’ve been gone by then. She could run now. She *should* run now. But she couldn’t run forever.

See you soon.



When Monday morning came around, I didn't know what to expect. Paige and I hadn't stuck around after escaping the party on Friday. We'd bolted out of there and sped down the street just as the cop car rounded the corner with its lights on. I'm not even sure why we did that or what we were running from. Underage drinking had been the least depraved thing going on in that house. But we hadn't been afraid of the police, had we?

We'd been afraid of Hunter.

His dad owned most of the town, and so did Camden's. They were partners and best friends, and they each had equally spoiled meathead sons to root for on Friday nights. But did they have enough money to buy off a rape charge? Surely not. Hunter wouldn't even be at school today... or at least I'd been telling myself that as I sat in my red Corolla in the parking lot. The bell was going to ring in five minutes—about the time it took for me to walk to my locker.

With a deep breath, I gripped the handle of my backpack and climbed out of my car. I wish Paige had texted me back.

All weekend she'd been ignoring my texts and calls, but I'd chalked it up to her needing time to process what had happened. I'd need to talk to Jade as well, make sure she was okay.

The bell must've already rung by the time I made it to the entrance. No one was outside killing time before they had to get to their first period. The bench that the jocks huddled around was empty. It was almost... peaceful. Maybe being late wasn't such a bad thing.

When I made it to my locker, my friend, Sebastian, was waiting by it, glancing around nervously before widening his eyes when he spotted me.

"Hey." I gave a small wave and frowned at his expression.

"Hey, um. Don't open your locker."

"What?" I reached for the handle, ignoring Sebastian's words until he placed his palm over it to keep it closed.

"What are you doing?"

"Eden." His eyes darted up and down the empty halls. We were, without a doubt, late. "Someone put something in it. I went to copy your history notes and just about had a heart attack. I was waiting to warn you, but we need to go get the principal."

*Oh no.*

*Hunter.*

Sebastian tried urging me toward the principal's office, but I shook him off and lifted the handle to open my locker. Whatever it was, I could take it.

*Or not.*

My hand shot to my mouth to stifle my gag. It was a dead rat. Not just dead, but disemboweled. Its blood and guts sat in a pile on my books while the body dangled from its tail tied to the jacket hook.

"Get to class!" The voice came from Mr. Montgomery, the

vice principal. Before Sebastian could call him over, I slammed the locker shut and adjusted the bag on my shoulder. I gripped Sebastian's arm and shook my head before tugging him along to first period. Luckily, we had it together.

"What are you doing?" he whispered, once we'd walked past the office that Mr. Montgomery had disappeared into.

"We can't say anything."

"What? Eden, someone strung a dead rat up in your locker! *We have* to say something."

"No." I stopped and turned to face him. "Listen, something happened over the weekend that I can't explain right now, but if I tell on who did this, it'll only get worse. *Trust me.*"

Sebastian's brows wrinkled and his lips pressed together, but he gave a curt nod. "Fine, but you're filling me in later."

"I will, I promise."

My first two periods passed in a blur. A sinking feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach made me want to throw up the blueberry muffin I'd had for breakfast.

*He knew it was me.*

Of course he did. I'd thrown open the door, screamed through it when he'd slammed it in my face, and on top of all that, Camden Knight had seen me make the call. It would be idiotic for him *not* to know it was me, and I'd be insane to think he wouldn't retaliate. The dead rat in my locker was only the beginning, and each second that ticked by brought me closer to fourth period, AKA Senior English. Cam and Hunter were both in that class. So was Sebastian, thankfully. At least I had one ally.

Paige!

In the middle of Mrs. Morris's lecture, I pulled out my phone and shot her a quick text.

. . .

**WATCH YOUR BACK. The assholes are retaliating.**

THREE DOTS POPPED UP, but then disappeared.

“Eden.”

I glanced up to see Mrs. Morris’s disapproving stare. Her finger still pointed to a triangle on the board.

“Is there something more important that you’d like to share?”

*More important than trigonometry? You bet.*

“No, sorry.”

Her frown deepened before she went back to the board. “See me after class.”

I sank in my seat as a few kids around me snickered. This day was going to be entirely too long.

I spent the rest of the class copying what Mrs. Morris wrote on the board and trying to make sense of it. It was a hazy concept every other day, but today, there was no way I was getting it. She might as well have been speaking Chinese. My mind kept wandering off to visions of fourth period. Having to face Hunter. The *rapist*.

He was the one at fault, not me. So why was I cowering in fear? Why was I the one dreading seeing *his* face? He should be ashamed to step foot in this school, if he was even here at all. Why was I scared of him?

*Fuck him. Fuck all of them.*

The only mistake I’d made was running away Friday night and not checking on Jade.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and opened up my Instagram account. I didn’t have her number, but I still knew how to get ahold of her. The overachiever beside me gawked as he spotted me typing away under my desk after I’d already been caught.

. . .

**I'M SO SORRY FOR NOT MAKING SURE YOU WERE OKAY FRIDAY NIGHT. I HATE MYSELF RIGHT NOW. CAN WE TALK?**

THE BELL RANG just as I hit send. I shoved the phone back in my pocket and gathered my things. None were actually for this class. My trig notes were in my locker, soaking in rat blood at the moment, so all I had was an extra notebook and a pen.

Mrs. Morris erased the board and waited for the last person to leave before facing me. "I noticed you didn't turn your homework in."

*Also soaking in rat blood.*

"I forgot to do it... sorry."

"I find it odd that you'd apologize to me." She placed a hand on her hip and frowned. It was the same displeased stance she'd given me throughout the last three years. But I liked Mrs. Morris. She was a 'no student left behind' teacher, and I admired her for it, so each year I requested her class anyway. "It's not my future you seem intent on jeopardizing."

"With all due respect, Berklee College of Music doesn't care about my math grade."

"Do they care about high school diplomas?" She sighed when I didn't say anything. "Eden, have you thought about what you'd do if you *didn't* get into Berklee? Do you have a plan B?"

*Plan B?* I didn't believe in plan B's. All they did was distract you from plan A. Besides, I'd been working toward Berklee since freshman year. I had rehearsal every day during the week, and I practiced for hours on the weekends. Christmases, birthdays, it didn't matter. The cello was my life, and I was going to Berklee. I knew my audition piece by heart.

"I'll be fine, Mrs. Morris. And I won't miss any more assignments."

"Have Friday's assignment on my desk by *tomorrow*."

I smiled and nodded. *No student left behind*. "Promise. Can I borrow a textbook?"

Her head tilted. "Why?"

"I misplaced mine... I'll find it, I'm just not sure I will by tonight." She was already moving to get a textbook before I finished the lie.

"Work harder, Eden. I promise you won't regret it." I nodded again and took the textbook she held out to me. A kid kicking a soccer ball was on the cover, smiling ear to ear. Math books seemed to be the only ones that had covers that didn't reflect the subject matter. Even the illustrators understood its unappeal.

"I will."

Hugging the book to my chest, I turned and walked from the room, passing the first few students wandering in. I'd forgotten all of the dread that'd been clouding my mind, and I didn't let it return. It was too ridiculous to hide from them when they were the ones in the wrong. Dead rat or not, they weren't going to see me cower.

My chin jutted and shoulders squared as I entered the classroom for Senior English. Neither Hunter nor Camden were there, so it was mostly in vain, but a surge of pride rushed through me anyway as I took my seat next to Sebastian and let the textbook slam on the desk.

"Um, wrong class." Sebastian eyed me warily, the same way he had all of first period.

I stuffed the textbook into my bag and pulled out my spare notebook.

"Are you feeling okay?"

I peered up at him and gave my best smile. "Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

His forehead wrinkled and he shrugged like he didn't know what to say. He probably thought I was crazy, and maybe I was. I'd been invisible all through high school, standing on the sidelines watching everyone else's drama. Now, I was in Hunter O'Reilly's crosshairs, my invisibility cloak lying on the floor.

Fine. Bring it.

I checked my phone to see if Jade or Paige had messaged me back. Nope. I hoped they weren't being terrorized as well. I alone was responsible for the cops showing up at Hunter's party, so I hoped he kept the blame on me. Or better yet, put it on himself.

The bell rang and Mr. Gordan closed the door. I relaxed into my seat and flipped my notebook open, settling on the fact that Hunter was indeed not at school. He'd been arrested, expelled, and was awaiting trial. It was only his minions that I had to deal with, and that'd be simple enough. Especially once word got around that Hunter was a rapist.

But then the door flew open, and in walked the devil—or *devils*—themselves. They were laughing about something, and a little bit of that dread I swore I wouldn't feel flushed through me. I couldn't help but sweat thinking I might be the butt of their jokes.

Mr. Gordan glared at them, but said nothing as they slammed the door and took their seats a few rows from me, toward the back. Neither one tossed me a glance, but I swore I felt their gazes burning into the back of my head each time their muffled laughs reached me.

I sat up straighter and gripped my pen, listening intently to a lecture on *Macbeth*. English was my favorite subject. It and history. There was something beautiful about weaving together a story—even if nonfiction. Studying the mechanics of the written word stroked a part of my brain that craved art in its many forms.

I didn't hate school. Far from it. I only hated math.

Something pointed pricked the back of my head and I jumped in my seat, catapulted from the world of *Macbeth* into the world of Lincoln High. *Super.*

I reached behind me and pulled the paper airplane from between my back and the chair. I didn't bother to look behind me. I knew who had thrown it. More chuckling came from the back of the room, and Mr. Gordan turned from the whiteboard to glare at Camden and Hunter.

I unfolded the airplane and cringed. It was a crude picture of a rat with 'x's for eyes and red ink swirling from it onto the head of a stick figure girl. Wow. I wasn't the only one with an appreciation for art.

I rolled my eyes and crumpled the paper before tossing it into my bag. Sebastian caught my attention and mouthed 'Are you okay?'. With a single nod, I leaned back in my seat and tried to refocus my attention.

When class was let out, I turned to Sebastian while people shuffled around us. "We need to find Paige."

"Is she okay?"

Before I could answer, Hunter planted his hands on my desk and leaned forward. "What's up, Thompson?"

Camden was standing behind him, an amused grin plastered on his face.

"What do you want?"

His brows rose. "I should ask you the same question."

*What?*

He didn't wait for a response. Instead, he grabbed my bag and threw it over his shoulder before nodding toward the door. "Let's take a walk."

"Give that back to her." Sebastian stood and stepped up to Hunter, his chest pushing out. Hunter was about a foot and a half taller, so whatever intimidation Sebastian was trying to exude, it didn't quite stick. But it was sweet.



Hunter laughed and tossed Camden a glance. Before they could communicate in douche code how to handle Sebastian, I stood.

“It’s okay,” I said, giving Sebastian a warm smile and hoping he understood how grateful I was to have him as a friend.

But I could handle this asshole myself.

I turned to Hunter and gestured toward the door. “After you.”

Hunter led the way and when Sebastian took a step forward, Camden blocked him with one strong arm. “Not you. Go practice your flute.”

“He doesn’t play the flute,” I snapped, rearing back at Camden.

The arrogant smile widened and he nodded toward the exit. I faced forward and stared at Hunter’s back while Camden’s gaze burned a hole in my head. There was only one set of footsteps behind me, reminding me that my only ally had stayed behind. It was just me... sandwiched between a rapist and an adulterer.

Some of my bravery fizzled, and I slammed to a stop. Camden crashed into me a moment later, and he gripped my arms to shove me forward.

“You want to talk, let’s talk,” I said, adding as much bite as I could muster.

Hunter slowed to a crawl and tossed a glance at me over his shoulder. There was anger there... a lot of it. But a hint of amusement was there as well.

He looked to Camden and paused a moment before nodding and continuing forward through the abandoned hallway. Everyone else had gone in the opposite direction toward the lunchroom. We were headed outside.

“Look, seriously.” This time, I turned to Camden. I wasn’t stupid enough to think he was any better than Hunter.

Camden was *always* the one pulling the strings. But at least he was less pissed. “You think I’m a rat. I got it. But he’s the one who needs punishing, so whatever you guys are planning to do—”

Camden placed a finger on my lips and clucked his tongue. His other hand gripped me tighter as if sensing my urge to flee. “You talk too much, Thompson. That’s the problem.”

Hunter pushed open the side door that led to the football field and Camden shoved me through, finally letting go of my arm. I stumbled and almost crashed into Hunter, but he slid to the side, revealing that we weren’t alone.

Jade, Trey, and Paige stood in a half circle waiting for us.

My eyes locked onto Jade first, confusion swirling in my mind when I noted her arms defensively crossed over her chest, her nostrils flared. When I looked to Paige to try and make sense of it, she wouldn’t meet my gaze. She bit her lip and stared at the cement.

Jade’s voice snapped my attention back to her. “You have exactly one chance to explain yourself, Thompson. Make it count.”

“What? Jade, are you okay?”

She snorted. “Cut the bullshit. I already got your Instagram message, so let’s just skip to the part where you tell me why you tried to claim that Hunter raped me. Are you really that desperate?”

My jaw dropped in disbelief. “Desperate? Jade I was just trying—”

“You were *trying* to cause problems. And congrats, it worked. Cops shut down the party. But do you really think we’re just going to let it go?” She motioned toward the group slyly forming a circle around me.

“Jade, he raped you! You were unconscious. He...” I

looked to Paige and waved a hand at her new friends. “Tell them.”

Trey stepped in front of her and puffed his chest out toward me. “Leave Paige the fuck out of your lies.”

“You can’t rape the willing, Eden. God, you’re so pathetically jealous, aren’t you?” Jade said.

“Jealous of what?” By that point, I was yelling. I didn’t even care that a six foot four boulder of pure muscle was clenching his fists at his sides a foot away. I don’t know what Paige told Trey, but she wasn’t on my side. Neither was Jade.

“Of Hunter fucking Jade instead of you.” The circle went eerily silent as the voice of their king permeated the air. My brain was too cloudy to comment on the ludicrousness of that statement. Somehow, somehow, they’d managed to turn it around on me. But their reasoning made no sense.

Footsteps sounded behind me until Camden came into my line of sight. He patted Trey’s shoulder, calming whatever rage had been incited. Trey stepped back with the others and Camden turned to me. “I told them.”

*That I called the cops on Hunter? Yeah, I figured.*

“Okay.” I drew the word out and glanced around at the others’ faces. Their lips were drawn in a tight line while they waited on Camden to finish whatever he had to say. He didn’t look nearly as angry as the rest of them. In fact, he didn’t look angry at all.

“It’s okay, you don’t need to be embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed about what? What Hunter did was wrong, and if you peo—”

“Shhh.” Camden placed a finger on my lips to silence me again. I was getting tired of it, and I jerked away, ready to keep going, when his next words jumbled my thoughts.

“I told them we slept together.”

*What?*

"I know, I promised you I wouldn't, but I told them about your secret fantasy of sleeping with the football team too... I felt Jade deserved to know why you'd be angry with her for having sex with Hunter. He's not interested in you, babe."

I was lost for words. My mouth opened and closed like a goldfish, but nothing would come out.

This wasn't Hunter's doing. It was *Camden's*. Or did they know he was lying? Maybe I was the only one not clued in on what he was trying to pull.

"And as sweet as that is," Hunter mocked, stepping up to me—too close. "You can't just go around accusing people of rape. Do you know what that could've done to my scholarship?"

*He was there! He was fucking there! There was no way he actually believed the bullshit he was spewing.*

"You know what you did." The statement came out far less intimidating than I'd meant it. My voice was barely loud enough for him to hear.

"Jade," he called over his shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"Did you willingly have sex with me Friday night?"

She didn't even hesitate. "Yup."

Hunter threw his hands in the air as he turned back to me. "Well, there you go."

They were good. Doubt seeped into my version of reality, leaving me questioning whether or not I had it right. But she was *asleep*. I saw her closed eyes, and even if I hadn't, she'd been out of it earlier that night. No way had she been in any condition to *consent* to having sex with him... or maybe they'd already had an arrangement? Did that even matter? Fuck, I didn't know. If I'd known Jade wouldn't even care, I would've just went home and left her there to do what she wanted.

*But that isn't me either, is it?*

"All right, well, you're not in prison, so I guess I made a mistake." I glanced at Jade to see if anything flashed in her eyes, but she showed nothing but disgust. Paige still wouldn't look at me. "Sorry for ruining your party." I mumbled the false apology before turning and readying myself to bolt toward the door. Hunter grabbed me before I'd made it more than a step.

"Do you think this is over?" He asked, laughing dryly.

"Fuck you, Hunter!" I yanked against his hold, but his grip tightened to the point I had no doubt my arms would be bruised. I whipped toward Camden. "And fuck you too. Fuck all of you. You brought me out here to what? Scare me? You *can't* scare me out of knowing what I saw, but you don't need to worry. I won't be crashing anymore of your parties."

This time it was Camden who laughed. He took my jaw in his hand and applied enough pressure to make my heart skip.

"You're a witness to a crime that didn't happen, and we're not trying to scare you. We're trying to help you."

*Help me?*

I didn't ask the question out loud, but he must've been able to see it written in my expression because he answered it. "We're gonna make your wish come true."

He leaned in close, almost like he was about to kiss me, but he laughed instead. Minty breath brushed across my lips, and my mind screamed to spit, bite, yank out of their grasps. But I couldn't. I couldn't even move, couldn't focus on anything but Camden's words and their hidden meaning.

*We're gonna make your wish come true.*

Dread sank low in my stomach about the same time Camden released my jaw and Hunter shoved me toward Trey who was ready and waiting. He caught me and threw me over his shoulder in one swift movement.

“W-what are you doing? Stop! Put me down. I’m serious!” I banged against Trey’s back, but he didn’t even seem to feel it. The whole group started walking to the football field, Camden following behind and smirking every time I met his gaze.

I focused on Trey’s back and inflicted as much damage with my elbows as I could. I didn’t want to look at Camden. Now I knew what was so off about his eyes. He was pure evil. No empathy or remorse shone in his dark irises. The others I could chalk up whatever they were about to do to anger and loyalty to Hunter, but not him. I still didn’t know what his motive was or if he had one at all, but he wasn’t making a decision out of misplaced rage. He was just having fun.

I screamed at the top of my lungs, hoping some passerby would hear me and come help, but that backfired. We’d reached the football field and Trey rolled me off his shoulder with no warning. My arms reached out searching for something, but I crashed to the ground, landing flat on my back, the air tearing from my lungs. I opened my mouth in a gasp but all that came out when I exhaled was a groan. Pain radiated through my body, and I squeezed my eyes shut and rolled to my side.

“Isn’t that too far?” The voice was Paige’s. I’d almost forgotten she was there and that she was capable of turning on me like this.

“She makes it too easy,” Trey said.

“Easy Eden.” Camden chuckled. “I like that.”

“What are we doing over here? I thought we were just going to talk to her.” Paige again.

Hunter’s growl sounded right above my head. “Trey, will you shut your girlfriend up?”

His hands were on me, tugging my shirt up to my chest. Chilly air bit into the skin of my stomach, and my back pressed against cold turf.

My eyes popped open and I shifted to my back, gripping his wrist with both hands. “Stop.”

Adrenaline surged through my veins and I broke out into a full-fledged panic as he managed to yank the shirt over my head and toss it aside. Trey knelt at my head and cupped a hand over my mouth just as I pulled in a breath to scream.

I squirmed and fought, my limbs flailing in panic and my eyes searching the group for a weak spot. It was Paige. A tear rolled down her cheek and her hand covered her mouth as if she were afraid *she’d* be the one to scream. Her regret did me no good, though. She was a coward, the same one who would’ve walked away from Jade Friday night.

Hunter jerked my jeans down my legs, despite my best attempts at fighting him off.

Every nerve ending fired, forcing me to feel *everything*. My nipples hardened from the cold and poked into the thin material of my bra. Hunter’s palm moved from my ankles to my thighs. He wasn’t on top of me, but I could feel him leaning over me. My eyes squeezed shut, but Hunter’s sinister intentions spilled onto me, making me feel like I was wrapped up in him.

My words were muffled by Trey’s hand, but I hoped they did something. Anything.

*Stop.*

His hands moved further up my thighs, and he pried my legs apart. I screamed past Trey’s hand and kicked as hard as I could, but it only seemed to add more friction to Hunter’s fingers pressed against the seam of my panties.

*Stop!*

*Stop!*

“Stop.” It wasn’t my voice, but Camden’s. My eyes popped open as he stepped next to Hunter, arms crossed. “That’s good enough.”

Hunter stood and threw my jeans over his shoulder

before bending to pick up my shirt. Cool air rushed over my lips with each breath, and I blinked when I realized Trey's hand no longer covered my mouth. He stood next, but I didn't look back at him. I couldn't take my gaze away from Camden.

*What the hell is going on?*

Camden's lips were in a tight line, but when his gaze raked over me, taking in my chest heaving with each harsh breath, he smiled.

The others were already heading back—my clothes with them. They called after Camden and shouted a few vulgar insults my way.

This was it. This was my punishment.

Camden knelt next to me, and I fought the urge to scoot away. He was a monster, and I had no idea what he was capable of or what he was capable of talking his friends into. I glared at him and stayed still.

"Okay, you got me. We *did* bring you out here to scare you." He flashed me his teeth and nudged my arm like I was in on the joke.

*Psychopath.*

"But I do hope you've learned your lesson about talking too much." He raised his brows and waited for me to confirm, but something in his voice confused me. He wasn't talking about Hunter or what I'd seen him do. He was talking about what I'd seen before that.

"You did all this so that I wouldn't tell people you're screwing your best friend's mom?"

I forgot for a moment that I was half-naked, propped up on my elbows with Camden Knight kneeling over me. My resolve to avoid pissing him off further faded away and my narrowed eyes sharpened. The funny—well, maybe not so funny—thing was, I never would've told anyone about it. Rumors and gossip were reserved for *his* kind of people.



“You’re pathetic.”

The words slipped from my mouth, and I reared back in a dry laugh before I could regret them.

His smile widened and he stood, roaming his eyes over my body as if to remind me I was nearly naked.

It worked.

Goosebumps broke out across my flesh in all the places his gaze touched.

With a shake of his head, he met my glare once again. “You know, Eden. You really do talk too much.”

He winked before turning on his heels and walking back toward the school.

\* \* \*

*Cam*

THE SOUND of typing filled the computer science room, creating a white background noise that made it even more impossible for me to focus on my screen. Our semester project was to code our own app and present it to the class, bug free. I was about half way through.

My fingers stilled as the bell rang, and I rolled my neck before shutting down the computer and pushing out of my chair.

Hunter was outside the room when I passed through the door. He was leaned against a wall, arms over his chest. He didn’t usually meet me outside this particular class, but it wasn’t a surprise to see him today.

“Hear anything?” he asked, pushing off the wall and falling into step beside me.

He was talking about Eden. It’d been an hour since we’d left her and Hunter had been paranoid ever since.

“She’s not gonna say anything.”

“How do you know?” There was a hint of nervousness in his tone. When we first talked about how to handle Eden, he’d been all for it, but now, I could practically smell the regret wafting from him.

“I just do.”

That was a lie. I had no idea if Eden would say anything or not, but that was the point. The purpose of this was to find out how good she was at keeping her mouth shut... about Hunter *and* about me. Either way, it’d be handled.

We turned down another hall, heading for our last class before football practice. My eyes glazed over as the image of Eden entered my mind. She’d trembled and screamed past Trey’s hand, and I’d almost forgotten to give them the signal to stop. My cock had hardened watching her so defenseless, yet trying so hard to get away.

Then when she’d gotten free, she didn’t try to run or scream or even cry. She’d glared at me, called me pathetic, *challenged* me. That hadn’t been what I’d expected, but it intrigued me. I thought I’d had her pegged, but there was something I wasn’t seeing underneath. I couldn’t quite figure it out, but I would.

I wasn’t nervous to see what she’d do... I was excited.

“Cam,” Hunter said, shaking my arm. I snapped back to the present and followed Hunter’s pointed finger.

Eden was walking down the hall with her chin jutting. She kept her eyes in front of her, but with the way her face hardened, it was apparent she’d seen us. She hugged her books to her chest, but it didn’t hide the baggy jersey that hung down to her thighs.

Both Hunter and I turned when she passed us, and my eyes widened when I took in the last name displayed on the back of the jersey. *My name... my jersey.*

She was wearing clothes that I’d kept in the locker room.

I turned back around and continued forward, leaving Hunter standing there gaping.

My lips pulled into a grin, and my shoulders squared.  
Game on.

## EDEN

I didn't mean to start a war, but that's exactly what happened.

It'd been a week and one day since my 'lesson', and a week since I'd thrown it back in their faces... somewhat unintentionally. I don't know what they'd *expected* me to do. Walk through the school half naked? Run three miles home? They'd taken my school bag, containing both my keys and my phone, and I wasn't much of a stalker. Maybe they'd overlooked the obvious.

The locker room.

It took me all of five minutes to find Camden's gym bag containing his practice jersey with his last name scrolled across the back. He had a pair of matching track pants in there that I'd had to roll several times to get them to stay on my hips.

My logic wasn't nearly as vindictive as they saw it later, when they passed me in the hall, suited up in Camden Knight's clothes. He was the one who made the call, so he was the one I felt owed me. There may have been a moment when I considered Hunter's instead, but Hunter was a

hothead, and to be honest I was afraid of him. I didn't quite have Camden figured out. Sociopath? Probably. But someone so enraged by my wearing their clothes that they'd rip them from my body? I was banking on that being a no.

And I'd been right.

When he'd first spotted me after fifth period, he'd done a double take. I wasn't sure which he was more surprised by—my being in his clothes, or my being at school at all.

*He really didn't know me.*

Mr. Hines's hand cut through the air in a straight line and all sound in the auditorium died at once.

"Good work, everyone. Let's call it a day."

I filled my cheeks with air before letting it slowly whistle out. We were still three weeks out from our fall program, but Mr. Hines was pushing us hard. That was a three-hour practice, and the fingers on my left hand were numb from holding the strings.

I lived for this. The cello was my whole world. It was... freedom from everything bad, no matter how big or small. Lately, it'd been the only reprieve I had from the constant pranks played on me by the jocks.

The ruffling of sheet music and chairs scraping along the marble floor filled the auditorium.

"Hey," Sebastian said, spinning in his chair to face me. He was third chair violin, which put him directly in front of me.

"Hey."

He must've sensed the exhaustion in my voice because he stared off into space instead of saying anything further. Today had been a particularly rough day. Leilani—queen of the bitches—had attempted to dress up like me in an unflattering way and spent the entire day mocking me. She even carried around a cello bow to emphasize her point, as if I didn't pick up on the head cheerleader's sudden change in wardrobe. That wasn't the part that hurt, though. When I

passed the jocks' bench this morning, knowing they'd have fresh torment for me, Paige was there. She was tucked underneath Trey's arm, and instead of staring at the ground while I walked by, like she'd done the past week, she'd laughed along with them to Leilani's impersonation.

"You notice Paige hasn't been at practice the last couple days?" Sebastian asked, fingering the folder for his sheet music.

I finished tucking my cello into its case and closed the lid. "Yep."

He followed as I carried my instrument backstage and tucked it into a crawl space I'd found. I hated the idea of not taking it with me, but paranoia loomed that they'd find a way to get it from my car. Probably pay off a locksmith or something. At that point, there wasn't anything that would surprise me.

"What are you doing? Just keep it with the spare instruments." Sebastian didn't even need to ask why I wouldn't want it in my car. Things were getting out of hand.

"Where Paige can find it? No thanks."

"Paige? You don't think she'd do something like that, do you?"

After ensuring the cello was out of sight, I turned to Sebastian. His expression was one of disbelief, and I didn't blame him for it. I'd worn that same face naively thinking Paige could do no wrong. Not anymore.

"I'm not planning on taking any chances... and honestly, Sebastian, neither should you. I hope beyond hope they wouldn't come after you but—"

"I can take care of myself." He appeared so serious as he said it, but his eyes softened a moment later. "Let's just focus on taking care of you. Come on, I'll walk you to your car."

I forced a smile and let him lead the way. Sebastian had been nothing but supportive since everything went down,

but unfortunately, he was the only one. The rest of my friends—while good, well-meaning people—sort of bailed on me. I didn't blame them... not really. I was a target right now, and hanging around me put a target on their backs, too. And it wasn't like they banned me from the lunch table or were mean to me. They just seemed to always have an excuse to leave if I was around. I'd gone from someone nobody knew, to the person nobody *wanted* to know, all in a matter of a day. Hell, in the matter of a class period. As soon as I wore that jersey into school, I'd sealed my fate.

Sebastian held the door for me, but I froze as soon as I'd made it a foot outside. Camden's black Jeep was parked next to my car, and he was leaning on the hood.

The urge to turn around and go back inside, maybe hide *myself* in that crawl space, almost overtook me, but before I had the chance, Sebastian was at my back and the door was slamming behind him.

"What the hell is he up to now?" Sebastian grunted, already making his way toward the parking lot. I followed him, struck between accepting his protection and telling him to stand down.

*He didn't stand a chance against Camden.*

"Sebastian." He ignored me and continued toward my car. We were about halfway to the parking lot when I increased my stride and got in front of him. I spun and stopped, placing a hand on his chest to stop him too. His brows were creased and he had so much anger in his expression it was hard to remember it wasn't directed at me.

"I've got this, okay? Just go home."

"I'm not leaving you *again*, Eden. Not after what that asshole did to you the last time."

My heart squeezed. I'd asked Sebastian to stay behind the day they took me to the football field. I hadn't even considered the guilt he must've been experiencing.

“Look.” I pulled my keys from the small purse I kept strapped over my shoulder at all times since the incident. I didn’t trust leaving my keys in my locker, but there was another thing I wouldn’t be caught without... again.

I showed him the tiny canister of pepper spray I now had dangling from my keyring. “It’s just one of them. I can handle it, I promise.”

“Why don’t you want my help?”

“Because...” The words lodged in my throat.

*Because he’d kill you.*

*Because I don’t want to put you in their crosshairs.*

*Because I’m more afraid of what he’d do to you than enduring more of his torment.*

None of those seemed like a convincing enough answer. All were true, but Sebastian was too good of a friend to let it sway him. He didn’t care what the jocks thought of him being friends with me, and he would’ve put the target on his back in a heartbeat. I couldn’t let him do that.

“Because he just wants to talk... I know that doesn’t make sense, but—”

“Are the rumors true?” His face hardened to the point he looked like a statue, and this time, I think the anger *was* directed at me.

“Which ones?”

“That you slept with him. Or that you’re *sleeping* with him.”

I cringed as he said the word ‘sleeping’. Did it really look like that? The guy was tormenting me day in and day out. How was that even a question?

Still, there was only one answer I could think of that would get Sebastian to back off.

“Yeah.”

His lips parted and hurt flashed in his expression. That



wasn't the answer he was expecting... or the one he was hoping for.

He righted himself and gave an incredulous shake of his head. "Okay, well, have fun then."

Sebastian started toward the sidewalk. He only lived a few blocks away, so he walked to school.

Every part of me wanted to call after him. To correct my lie and tell him the truth. The rumors were bullshit, and Camden Knight was a sociopath I'd pissed off by not lying down and taking his depraved form of 'punishment'. I hadn't even done anything to deserve it, but in his mind, I'd crossed him nonetheless.

Rage bubbled underneath the surface as I watched my only true friend walk away from me, hurt. All because of *him*.

I narrowed my eyes at Camden's distant form, leaning on the hood of his car and smirking as he observed Sebastian and my squabble. I charged toward the parking lot, pepper spray in hand.

"Whoa, look at you, all hot and bothered," Camden said as I approached.

I darted for my driver's side door, and fumbled with the key as Camden came around to my side. With a yank, my door came flying open and I turned to Camden, pepper spray held out and ready. "Stay the hell away from me!"

His eyes widened and he lifted both hands in surrender. "Damn, Eden, calm down."

*Calm down.*

*Calm down.*

*Calm down?!*

I exploded. The composure I'd managed to keep broke with the last prick to my shields. It shattered like glass and fell to the gravel surrounding me. I threw my keys—pepper spray with them—into my car and slammed the door before directing my rage at Camden.

“Oh, Eden is my name now? Because you and your pack of wolves haven’t called me anything but *Easy Eden* for over a week! Do you think that makes you cool, Camden? That it makes you tough or funny or whatever the hell it is your trying to hide behind your very *pathetic* existence?”

“You know you’re the only one that calls me that.”

My mouth hung open to say more, but my tirade came to a screeching halt. He was supposed to be mad. To fight back and say all the stupid, mean things they’d already said to me, or *about me*. Instead, he was calm, collected. His hands had lowered as soon as I’d tossed the pepper spray and they now rested lazily in the pockets of his letter jacket. His hip leaned against my car.

“What?”

“Camden. No one calls me that. It’s just *Cam*.”

I stared at him in amazement. “Did you miss everything else I just said? Are you freaking dense?”

“No, I got it all. I just think you’re overreacting.”

“Overreacting?”

In one quick stride, he was right in front of me. His thumb covered my lips, cutting off my intended rant, while the rest of his hand cupped my jaw. He was pressed against me. His body heat filtered through our clothes and warmed my chest. His scent invaded my nostrils, and as much as I hated to admit it, it wasn’t awful. My skin heated more, but I could no longer blame it on the body heat.

It was *him*.

I’d felt his ice and the chill of my veins, but I didn’t realize he could heat them too.

“I don’t think you’re easy,” he whispered, his breath kissing my nose.

I expected him to smirk, somehow sensing the lack of revulsion my body was having toward him being so close, but he didn’t. He was serious. The golden rings around his

eyes caught my attention, and I couldn't help but see sincerity in them. Sincerity? Really?

"In fact, I think you're incredibly strong-willed. Maybe a bit defiant... but not easy."

I shrugged away his hand and retreated a step back from him. "You're the one that gave me the nickname."

"And I'm also the one that can take it away." He was still serious. I scanned his face, searching for some indication he was messing with me, but found none.

A bit of hope flared. He was right. He *could* stop all this. All he'd have to do was snap his fingers and the torment would be over. It was tempting to ask him to. The question perched on the tip of my tongue, but I resisted. There'd be strings attached.

"Yes, you could," I said with a curt nod. "And you didn't have to start all this in the first place, but we both know the kind of person you are, so I think I'll call it a day."

I opened my car door, but Camden reached out and shut it. "*You* started this, Eden. When you poke a dog, be prepared to get bit."

"I gave you back your stupid jersey, *Camden*."

"I'm not talking about that."

"Then I don't know what you're talking about."

"*Hunter*. You accused him of rape, remember?"

I laughed dryly and shook my head.

"What?" He asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Are you really going to pretend you care about Hunter? That you care about *anyone*? I saw your face when you were extracting your 'revenge' and you were the only one not angry. You enjoyed it." I paused long enough to huff. "And if you cared about Hunter, you wouldn't be screwing his mom."

Camden's glare pushed against my resolve, but my heels were planted firmly in the ground. He wasn't so amused

anymore, nor was he trying to get me to beg for his help. Now, he was pissed.

“You’ve got it all figured out, don’t you Thompson?” His tone was sarcastic, like I was missing something huge that flew over my head. I doubted it.

“Not everything... just you.”

That wasn’t entirely true. I still didn’t have a freaking clue who Camden Knight was or what his motives truly were. I knew he was a jock, and he was an asshole right along with the rest of them, but he didn’t quite fit in. I didn’t know *what* was different about him, but whatever it was, I could see it hidden beneath the surface of those irises.

He let out a dry chuckle and ran a hand through his hair before slowly strutting his way around my car and back to his Jeep. He opened his driver side door and glanced my way. “See you around, Eden.”

And then he was gone. His Jeep pulled out of the parking lot, and instead of getting in my car right away, I stared until it disappeared around a corner. I was pretty sure I’d struck a nerve, and I should’ve felt victorious. Instead I felt...

*Disappointed?*

The next day, instead of walking past with my chin up and my eyes directed straight in front of me, I chanced a peek at Camden as I made my way into the school. Whatever had affected him the previous day was gone, and on his face was that same smirk I'd come to recognize.

His minions cheered and whistled as they spotted me, and I caught Jade's gaze next. She was sitting next to Leilani on the bench, both of them mean mugging me.

I forced my gaze in front of me and pushed through the door, headed straight for my locker.

Sebastian wasn't there like he normally was, but I tried not to think too much of it. He must've been catching up on history homework that was due first period. We'd catch up later.

But maybe not. Maybe he hated me for falsely confirming the bullshit rumor I was only mildly aware of. There were so many, and sleeping with Camden was definitely not the biggest one people were talking about. The biggest one was my supposed goal of screwing the entire football team, which was laughable, considering they were the ones

tormenting me. Except it originated from Camden, and words from Camden Knight's mouth were absolute.

Sebastian didn't think *that* one was true, did he?

A numbing sensation came over my arms and my chest constricted. What if he did? What if he thought all of it was true? I had to set him straight. He was my only real friend at this point, and the thought of him believing all the rumors along with the rest of the school... it was too much to take.

I promised myself I wouldn't let them break me, but it was a quarter after eight in the morning and already I wanted to go back to sleep. I was so tired. Bags hung underneath my eyes with the constant stress keeping me up at night. Wondering what was being posted to social media, what awaited me the next day, what was circulating the text chain now.

I grabbed my history textbook and slammed the locker, spinning to head to class and hoping to set things right with Sebastian. A brick wall encased in tan skin and that stupid freaking smirk blocked my path.

Camden was leaning against the lockers a couple spots down from mine. "Are you always in your own world like that? You didn't even notice me walk up."

"Just leave me alone, Camden. I'm not in the mood today."

I tried to step around him, but he shifted again to block me. "You okay?"

I hugged the history book to my chest and peered at the gold ring around his irises. Was he serious? Did he actually care, or did he just want to make sure they'd gotten to me?

I pushed down the emotion I'd allowed to bubble to the surface in one regrettable moment, and was thankful he'd showed up. I might've gone the whole day feeling sorry for myself if he hadn't reminded me that I shouldn't let my guard down.

Shifting the history book to the crook of my left arm, I

dropped my right and allowed it to hang loosely at my side. "Sure thing, Camden. I'm good."

I stared him directly in the eyes as I spoke, and this time, when I went to step around him, he didn't stop me. My strides were long and my breathing easy as I sauntered my way to first period. I could feel him staring at my back, and that heat I'd experienced yesterday travelled over my skin again.

Sebastian wasn't in history class. My eyes kept darting to the door every time someone's blurred form passed in the window, but he never showed. I texted him after class asking if he was sick, but didn't get a response.

When I made it to Senior English, he was already in his seat.

"Hey," I said, sighing as I dropped into the desk beside him. "I thought you might've been sick."

He shrugged. "Overslept."

He didn't even look at me, and the twisting of my insides returned. I dug my notebook for English class from my bag and tossed it on the desk before leaning over toward him.

"Do you think we can talk during lunch?"

"About what?"

He had his notebook flipped open and started doodling in it instead of turning toward me. If there was any doubt in my mind that Sebastian was upset about yesterday, it vanished. He was definitely upset.

"About yesterday. That wasn't what you think."

"Then what was it?" Finally, he laid his pencil down and glanced my way. His jaw was set in a hard line, but that anger didn't match his eyes. They were too soft... hurt.

I opened my mouth to tell him how I'd lied, but his gaze darted past me, and I turned to follow it. Camden and Hunter had strolled into the room, and instead of heading straight to their seats like they usually did, Camden paused

in front of mine. He flicked his gaze between Sebastian and me and smiled before pulling a folded up piece of paper from his back pocket and resting it on my notebook.

With a wink, he moved on to the back of the class.

*Great, more drawings.*

I flung the paper into my bag and turned back to Sebastian, determined not to give Camden any more of my attention.

Sebastian's mouth hung open, his gaze pointed at my bag. With a huff, he shifted in his seat and stared at the whiteboard Mr. Gordon was seconds away from beginning his lecture on.

I cringed as it hit me what that had looked like... a love note.

"It's probably another drawing of a dead rat above my head," I whispered in a heated voice I hoped he'd pick up on. I was *not* interested in Camden. I was *not* sleeping with Camden. Camden Knight was an *asshole*.

"Whatever, Eden." Sebastian flipped his notebook to a fresh page with a bit more force than necessary. It was clear he had no intention of even looking at me.

I slumped in my seat and faced the board.

A dizziness came over me as I tried to pay attention to Mr. Gordon's lecture, but my mind was everywhere but on Shakespeare. We had moved on to studying *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and I *think* Mr. Gordon was going over the required reading we'd had last night.

I glanced toward Sebastian who was furiously taking notes. His brows were knitted together, and I tried to decipher if it was from anger or concentration.

Probably anger.

*Damn it, Camden.*

He'd managed to turn my last friend against me. Because, of course, all the others weren't enough. It wasn't enough to



have the whole school talking about what a slut I was or the STDs I'd supposedly contracted last year when I'd gotten with a bunch of college guys at a frat party. The fact that their king would dare to even admit he'd had sex with me was rather head scratching, but no one questioned any of it.

In one week, I'd become the school slut while still being a virgin. While still never even having my first boyfriend.

The dizziness morphed to anger. My cheeks flushed and the lead of my pencil broke as I pushed too hard on the paper.

They were chuckling behind me like school girls with a secret. Whispers, then chuckles, over and over, until I just couldn't take any more of it.

They were laughing at *me*.

They had the whole school laughing.

I dropped my pencil and whipped around in my seat. My eyes locked onto Camden as he was leaned over with a grin on his face, whispering something to Hunter.

"Shut up!"

The entire room froze, including Mr. Gordon. His mouth hung open mid-speech, and his dry erase marker hovered in the air.

Everyone's eyes all trained on me at the same time, and my cheeks heated even more, only this time, it wasn't due to anger.

Camden leaned back in his seat and tilted his head while Hunter remained hunched over on his desk, resting on his elbows. I turned back in my chair, ready to pretend I hadn't just yelled that in the middle of class, but Hunter's voice ruined it.

"Do you have a problem, Easy Eden? Tourette's maybe?"

Mr. Gordon piped in before I had a chance to respond. Not that I was capable of forming any more words right then. "There will be none of that in this classroom, Mr.

O'Reilly, and I don't want to hear another peep from you *or* Mr. Knight the rest of class." He turned to me with a pointed stare. "See me after."

I swallowed and nodded, shrinking lower in my seat. A few snickers sounded around me, but so much blood was rushing in my ears, I barely heard them. I *did*, however, feel their stares the rest of class. All of them. Even Mr. Gordon glanced over several times during the rest of his lecture.

"Psst." I peeked over at Sebastian.

He tilted his notebook to show me what was written in large letters on the side of his notes—I'm sorry.

My stomach flopped and my eyes began to burn.

*No. I was not about to lose my shit in Senior English. Not anymore than I already had.*

I nodded and forced a small smile before going back to staring at the electrical outlet below the whiteboard.

This would be the new hot topic before lunch let out. I could already see the rumor spreading about how I'd lost my mind in English and Mr. Gordon had to keep me after class to ask about my mental health. Spoiler alert—it wasn't good.

The bell rang and the horde of students jumped up from their seats, eager to get to the lunchroom and resume their gossiping. Many tossed me a look as they walked by and whispered to their friends, who then laughed like I wasn't even there, but I didn't look up from my desk.

When Camden walked by my desk, he gave it a tap. "Hang in there, kiddo."

*Fuck you.* Internally I screamed it, but externally I just lifted my head long enough to glare. He smiled before following Hunter out of the classroom.

It was only me, Sebastian, and Mr. Gordon left.

"I'll wait for you outside, okay?" Sebastian pulled the straps of his bag over his shoulders and paused by my desk. His entire demeanor had changed from angry to concerned.

If I hadn't been so mortified, maybe I'd have felt more relief from my best friend once again having my back.

"Thanks," I said, forcing another small smile and shoving my notebook in my bag. I zipped my bag and stood just as Sebastian shut the door to the room.

I shuffled over to Mr. Gordon who was staring at me like my dog had just died.

"You rang?" I joked, hoping that would ease some of the tension. It didn't.

"Is everything all right, Eden?"

*Is everything all right? Absolutely not.*

"Yeah, of course, I just... Sorry, I don't know what came over me today. It won't happen again."

He gave a sympathetic smile and nodded. "You know, when I was your age, I wasn't exactly considered one of the 'cool kids'."

*No way.* A mental image of myself with my hands on my cheeks and my mouth forming an O flashed through my mind.

"In fact, I remember very vividly thinking the majority of my peers were a bunch of self-righteous pricks."

*Did he really just say pricks?*

"But, and this is the part I really want you to pay attention to, high school ended, and none of that even mattered afterward. The actions I took while I was in high school, though, those mattered. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

*That my classmates are a bunch of self-righteous pricks, but I shouldn't do anything about it?*

"I think so." I shifted my bag on my shoulder. "I'm sorry for interrupting class, Mr. Gordon. It won't happen again."

"Just take the high road, Eden, okay? Next year, none of this will matter."

My face flushed at his words. Even *he* had heard the rumors. He knew exactly what 'Easy Eden' meant.

“Right,” I said, shifting my bag once again.

*Please tell me I can go.*

He must’ve noticed my fidgeting because a moment later he eyed my bag and let a sigh rush over his lips. “Well, you better head to lunch.”

I nodded and turned toward the door. “Thanks, Mr. Gordon,” I called over my shoulder. I rushed out of the room and found Sebastian waiting for me just outside.

“Was he mad?”

I shrugged. “I don’t think so. Honestly, I think he gets it.”

Sebastian’s lips quirked up a hair and he nodded. “Listen, Eden—”

“Don’t.” I forced my face to relax and let my hands fall from my bag straps to my sides. “I know what it looked like... I get it.”

“So you’re not... you know?”

“No. I’m not.” I nodded toward the vacant hall and started walking that way. Sebastian matched my pace and didn’t question why I wasn’t headed toward the lunch room. With the way things had been, there was a good chance I wouldn’t show my face in there the rest of the week. Eventually, I would. My pride wouldn’t allow them to scare me off forever, but right then, I just needed a break.

We pushed through the same doors the jocks had lured me to the other day and took a seat on one of the benches. Sunlight warmed my face in the chilly fall air, and finally, I could breathe again.

“Why would he say those things, Eden? Why’s he doing these things if none of that is true?”

It’d been a few minutes since I’d answered his last question, and I was really thinking we could just let it go. I had no desire to talk about *him* right then. Not during the twenty minutes of peace I had left before getting to go to next period and listen to people whisper about me.

As much as I wanted to pretend none of that existed right then, Sebastian had a point. He didn't know half of the reason the jocks hated me. I'd told him about my calling the cops on Hunter's party, so the rat and the football field incident made sense to him, but I'd said nothing about Jade... or Camden with Hunter's mom. It seemed wrong to tell *anyone* about those things, and the last thing I wanted to do was have the whole school talking about either of those events. Jade had been a *bitch* to me the past week, but how would I feel if people were talking about *me* being *raped*? Probably shittier than I felt now.

And Hunter's mom. What if that got back to Hunter's *dad*? I wasn't about to ruin a marriage over the temptation to share juicy gossip.

Sebastian wouldn't say anything, though. And even if he did, who would he tell? Our other friends? We didn't run in the same circles as the jocks, and Paige knew about Jade, so she was bound to tell someone. If anything got out, it would be because of her.

I turned to face Sebastian fully. "If I tell you, you have to promise me you won't say anything, okay?"

His eyes narrowed and he leaned my way. "Okay." He said it like it was more of a question than a statement, but I accepted it anyway.

"I didn't tell you everything that happened at Hunter's party."

"Okay, so what else happened?"

I bit my lip and peered over his shoulder. *This was so wrong.*

"Eden, please. Just tell me."

I returned my gaze to his face and took a deep breath. *Just spit it out.* "I saw Camden having sex with Hunter's mom."

"Oh my God." Sebastian's jaw dropped and he leaned in

closer, glancing around as if to make sure we were still alone. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah... Then on Monday he made it seem like that was what the football field thing was really about. He'd told all of them that he and I had slept together and that I had this 'fantasy' of being with the whole football team. I have *no* idea why he did that, but when it was just the two of us, he told me he hoped I'd 'learned my lesson about talking too much.'" I paused to take a breath and gauge Sebastian's reaction. His lips were still parted and his eyes were still glued to me in concentration. "Honestly, Sebastian, the guy's a freak."

He gave a slight shake of his head. "Wait, is that why you called the cops? Because of what you saw?"

"Not exactly." I cringed just thinking about it.

This was the part I really didn't want to repeat, but if I told him, everything would make sense. It was the *only* thing that would make sense. And he'd already promised not to tell anybody.

Another deep breath and I spilled everything to him. Jade. Hunter. Paige. What I saw, not being able to fathom how I'd been wrong. *If* I was wrong. Everything. By the time I was done, a weight the size of an elephant had lifted off my chest, and my eyes were burning yet again.

"Holy shit, Eden." Sebastian was staring off in space. He'd reacted the way I'd expect him to react. The way Paige *should've* reacted.

It was freeing to tell Sebastian, and I instantly felt more at ease. At least I wasn't alone.

"I know."

"And Jade really doesn't even care?"

"I don't think she even gets it..."

"Whoa." He gave his head another shake and slumped in the seat. We sat in silence for a few more minutes until the bell rang.

Sebastian peered over his shoulder toward the door and perched on the bench like he was about to stand. “We’re definitely talking more about this later, but are you okay? I’m so freakin’ sorry. I’m a shit friend.”

I frowned. “No you’re not. Honestly, I don’t blame you for thinking what you did, and I even *told you* it was true.” We stood at the same time and glanced toward the door again. “I just didn’t want you to get involved, and I couldn’t think of anything else to say that would make you stand down... I’m sorry I lied.”

“No, I get it.” He stepped up to me and wrapped his arms around me in a hug. “Just no more lies, okay?”

I pulled back and lifted my lips in a small smile. “Promise.”

“We should get to class.” He stepped toward the door and I went to pick my bag up off the bench, but the slip of paper Camden had given me was sticking out of the side pocket and caught my eye.

Sebastian paused when he noticed I wasn’t following him.

I glanced his way and gestured toward the door. “You go ahead, I’m right behind you.”

His eyebrows pinched, and his gaze shifted between me and the door, as if he was deciding if he should really leave me.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and pretended to be texting until the door to the school shut and Sebastian was no longer in sight.

Shoving my phone back in my pocket, I hurried to my bag. My chemistry class would be starting any time now, but for some reason, I needed to see what he put on that damn piece of paper. Even when he wasn’t around, he got to me.

I snatched the paper and unfolded it. My eyes narrowed as I read the words scribbled on the page.

**The course of true love never did run smooth**

Confusion surged until I recognized the line. It was from the first act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and was part of the required reading for last night.

*He read it?*

With a shake of my head, I crumpled the paper and stuffed it back into my bag.

Camden Knight was a mystery that would have to wait.



Thursday was no better than it had been. The jocks continued their torment. I spent lunch sitting in Mr. Gordon's class, pretending to work on my trig homework while he ate his lunch and awkwardly tried to talk to me about 'when he was a kid'. And Sebastian had a dentist appointment, so my only ally was gone the whole afternoon.

At least orchestra practice had been nice. It'd become my only reprieve from the jocks, and I began to thank the heavens above that it was deemed too lame for them to associate themselves with—even if it was to torture me.

By the time practice was over, I was smiling. The world didn't seem so bad, and what Mr. Gordon said about high school not mattering began to make sense.

*Berklee*, that's what mattered. And in a year's time I'd be surrounded by people like me and I'd truly belong.

I couldn't freaking wait.

I was still daydreaming about my life a year from now when I stepped through the door of the auditorium that led to the parking lot. Oklahoma wind whipped through my hair, and I wrapped my arms around my chest on instinct.

The smile I'd finally managed to have fell when I saw who was waiting for me by my car... again.

I sighed but began making my way to the parking lot. He hadn't shown up yesterday, so I thought maybe he was done with that. Guess not.

When I approached, he was already blocking my driver's side door, as if anticipating my next move. His arms were crossed in front of him and he lazily leaned against my car.

"Do you find it odd that football practice lets out before band?"

I paused a foot away and narrowed my eyes. "*Orchestra*. And no, I don't find it odd. One requires serious skill and dedication, the other requires moving a ball."

"What instrument requires moving a ball? I thought you played the cello?"

A bit of surprise ran through me at him knowing what instrument I played, but I didn't let it show on my face.

I gestured toward the door he was blocking. "You gonna let me go now, or do I need to threaten to call the police? Maybe I could get a restraining order granted. That'd be helpful."

"You don't need to threaten, I'm well aware you're not scared to tattle." He winked but didn't move.

"Do you honestly think this is a game I'm playing with you?"

His smirk deepened, revealing a dimple on his right cheek. My eyes zeroed in on it, and for just a moment I forgot what I was doing.

*Telling Camden to fuck off. Right.*

I pulled that day's note from my pocket and unfolded it as if I hadn't read it a hundred times to try and decipher its meaning. It'd been the same Old English type quote as yesterday, only this time it wasn't from the required reading.

I cleared my throat. "Alas, that love, so gentle in his view,

should be so tyrannous and rough in proof." The paper crinkled in my hand as I let it fall to my side. "What the hell is this?"

He cocked a brow. "*Romeo and Juliet?* Act one scene one?"

"Right, I know how to google, but why are you giving me this?"

He shrugged. "I figured you'd like to be wooed first."

My face froze in a permanent scowl. I didn't know what he was talking about, but I couldn't even bring myself to ask.

"Can you move, please?"

He chuckled and lifted off the car. "Well, since you said please."

I took a step toward the door, but as soon as I grasped the handle, Camden placed his hand on mine and leaned in. He was right up against my face, that damn dimple perfectly in my view.

"What're you doing?" Instead of the strong, confident sneer I'd intended, my voice came out shaky.

He was right there. His breaths skated over my face, a minty scent filling my nostrils.

I should've jumped back, pushed against his chest, slapped him for committing the crime of being Camden Knight.

I hated him.

Yet, I found myself frozen in place.

Warmth spread through me, and despite every brain cell I had telling me to be repulsed by him, I closed my eyes and waited for him to lean in...

And waited.

"Come to the football game tomorrow night." It was a whisper, moving from his lips to mine, and it had my eyes shooting open.

"What?"

"Tomorrow night. I want you to come watch me play."

Just like that, the spell broke.

I cleared my throat before yanking my hand from underneath his and stepping back. My eyes locked onto my car mirror—anywhere but that smirk.

“No thanks.”

“You know I have ways of being persuasive, right?”

My hands ached to touch my face to cool it down. It was so hot, I could only imagine the shade of red it must’ve been.

I’d been about to kiss him.

My tormentor.

My *enemy*.

*Shit.*

“Yeah, well, not sure how you’re going to persuade me into a setup like that, so I’m still gonna pass.” I took a step toward him, once again trying for the door.

He didn’t budge.

“Seriously, Cam, I need to get home.”

“Finally, you get my name right.”

I threw my head back and groaned, my shoulders slumping in surrender. I let the paper still in my hand fall to the ground, and Camden’s gaze followed it.

“No games, Eden, I’m serious. It’s not a setup. I just want you there.”

I dropped my head back down and narrowed my gaze on him. B-U-L-L-S-H-I-T.

“Why?”

His shoulder lifted in a shrug. “Just do.”

“Just do? Yeah, that’s not gonna work for me.”

This time, I didn’t give him the chance to move on his own. I stepped up to my door and shoved him out of the way with my shoulder. He could’ve stopped me, but instead, he stepped back and watched as I climbed into my car.

He gripped the door before I had a chance to shut it and

leaned into the car. "I want you to remember that I asked, Eden. I'm giving you a chance to say yes."

He smiled, probably sensing the goosebumps that rose over my flesh from his threatening tone. He stood up straight and, just before shutting the car door, he said, "See you tomorrow."

I waited until he got into his Jeep and drove off before I opened my door and snatched the crinkled paper still lying on the ground. I stuffed it back into my bag, cursing myself the entire time for caring about the piece of paper at all.

*But what if it meant something?*

It didn't. They were just some lame lines Camden was using to mess with me. Maybe he wanted me to think he liked me.

*I thought you'd like to be wooed first.*

First? Before what? What kind of ominous shit was that?

My palms were sweaty as I gripped the wheel, so I wiped them on my jeans before putting the car in reverse and pulling out of the parking lot.

His words stuck in my mind on the drive home, but by the time I pulled into the garage at my house, my nervousness had turned to resolve.

He wouldn't scare me into doing what he wanted, and I couldn't wait to see his face when he realized that.

*See you tomorrow, Cam.*

**S**ome Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.

I flattened the sheet of notebook paper on the table and read that day's note again. It was eight o'clock on Friday night, and I'd already changed into pajamas and was sitting in the kitchen, trying to figure out why the hell *this* was today's note.

The words came from *Much Ado About Nothing*—another one of Shakespeare's plays. We hadn't studied this one in class, so I really did have to google it this time.

He chose this line specifically. It wasn't from the required reading, and it wasn't from one of the more common plays. He'd *picked* it to tell me something.

That he was going to trap me? That the game was a trap?

*No shit.*

I sat back in my chair and sighed.

"Trig homework again?"

Roman, my stepdad, had sauntered into the kitchen behind me and peeked over my shoulder. I slapped a hand over the words, then immediately realized how ridiculous

that was. It was Shakespeare. Only Camden knew the perverse meaning behind it.

I lifted my hand from the paper and turned in the chair to see Roman eyeing me warily. I lifted my shoulder in a nervous shrug. “No trig homework today. Mrs. Morris doesn’t assign it on game days.”

He nodded, still with that skeptical look, and made his way for the fridge. “Seems a little strange that football games are considered more important than math homework, doesn’t it?”

He pulled a couple of twelve-ounce bottles of apple juice from the fridge and shut the door with his hip.

“I guess. I don’t know, pretty much everything revolves around football here.”

He nodded absently and sat next to me at the table, glancing around before sliding the juice in front of me.

“Don’t tell your brother.”

My icy mood thawed and I laughed at the joke. My little brother, Jordan, was obsessed with apple juice, and my mom had to stock up every time she went to the grocery store or we’d be out of it in a day.

Roman smiled at my laughter and rested his elbows on the table. “So why don’t you go to the football games?”

I raised my eyebrows and smiled wider to punctuate the hilarity of that question. “Football’s not really my thing.”

“But it’s your peers’ thing. It wouldn’t hurt to try it out, share in the joy, so to speak.”

*You have no idea how much it would hurt.*

“Does Paige go?”

*Paige.* I’d almost forgotten we used to be friends. She was the one my parents knew the most from the sleepovers we had every few weekends. Is that what this was about? Did he notice Paige hadn’t been over lately?

“She goes.” I could hear the contempt in my own voice, and inwardly, I cringed.

I hadn’t planned on telling Mom or Roman anything about Paige or the jocks. Roman would probably be cool, but my mom would, without a doubt, call the school. Maybe even force me to file sexual harassment charges for them stripping me down. She was a lawyer that wasn’t afraid to fight back. I loved that about her, but no way was I going to go through that. It would be a mess.

I opened my juice and took a swig before returning my gaze to Roman. He seemed to be waiting for me to continue.

I trailed the ring of condensation the bottle made on the table and sighed. “Paige and I aren’t really friends anymore.”

“Did something happen?”

I paused, trying to think of what *did* happen. The night of the party we’d crashed here. Neither of us had been in the mood to talk about what we’d seen, but I thought we were on the same page. I drove her home Saturday morning, and that was the last I’d spoken to her.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to speak to her again.

“Not really. Just hanging in different crowds.”

He eyed the paper still sitting in front of me. “Is there maybe a *boy* in those different crowds?”

I glanced down at Camden’s note and narrowed my eyes as if it had done something wrong.

“Her boyfriend is a dumb jock, so I guess you could say that.”

“And who’s the boy writing you poems?” He gestured in front of me.

“Also a dumb jock. It’s not a poem, it’s a line from a play and it isn’t flattery, trust me. He’s a jerk.”

“Can I read it?”

My first instinct was no, but then I realized maybe



Roman knew its hidden meaning—if there was any. He was a guy, right? Maybe he could read between the lines?

I slid the paper to him and shifted uncomfortably as I waited for him to read the words Camden had scribbled down.

“What do you think it means?” I asked when more than enough time had passed.

He scooted the paper back toward me and tapped where the ink splotched. “Means he loves you.”

“What?”

“Nah, I’m playing. I have no idea. Guy’s too smart for me.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes. “I highly doubt the captain of the high school football team is too smart for you.”

“Captain? Whoa, look at you Miss Popularity.”

My stomach sank and I fought the frown that tried forcing its way on my face. He was making a joke, but he had no idea how *infamous* I’d become. *Everyone* knew my name now. People I’d never met were whispering about me.

“Did I say something?”

My gaze snapped to Roman, and I shook my head. “No, sorry, just getting tired. I think I’m going to go to bed.”

“It’s 8:30.”

I stood and pushed in my chair. “I know, but it’s been a long day. Mr. Hines is working us hard for the concert coming up.”

“Okay, well if you need to talk, you know I’m here.” He didn’t sound like he bought a word of what I just said, but I forced a smile anyway, grabbing the paper and apple juice on my way out of the kitchen.

I clicked my bedroom door shut behind me and grunted as I flopped onto my bed, note still in hand. Camden’s handwriting was familiar enough to me that I could pick it out of a lineup at that point.

I folded the paper back up and tossed it on my

nightstand.

Laying on my back, I stared at the ceiling.

The game would still be going on. Was he glancing up in the stands searching for me, or did he remember he'd asked—more like *told*—me to go? He'd said nothing to me that day, which was frustrating because I'd been looking forward to telling him I wouldn't be there. It was irrational and downright moronic of me, but I *wanted* him to be looking for me in the stands. I hoped it bothered him. He was so used to getting whatever he wanted, and for once, he'd have to be disappointed... or he didn't care.

My frown deepened, and I grabbed my phone off the nightstand to pull up Instagram. I wasn't much for social media, but a notification showed on my screen about a week ago saying that Cam\_Knight8 was now following me. I'd rolled my eyes and ignored it at the time, but now I scrolled through his feed, searching for... what? I had no idea. Random lines of Shakespeare? A list of ways he planned to torture Easy Eden?

They were mostly pictures of him playing football, or pictures with the other jocks. Hunter was in several. I didn't know all of their history, but I knew their families were close. Which meant Camden had spent time around Hunter's dad... and mom.

Disgust washed through me at the thought.

*Gross.*

I scrolled back to the top of his feed and clicked on the picture he'd posted today. It was of him in his Panthers uniform, the black material making his eyes appear darker. He had a smile on his face and his helmet hanging from his fingertips. The caption read: **Looking forward to seeing all the fans tonight.**

My frown lifted into a smirk. *I bet you were, Camden.*

An idea came over me, and I jumped out of bed. I plucked

my Kindle from my dresser and climbed under the covers, resting my back against the headboard. I pressed the plus sign to make a new post and held the camera out to snap a picture of me holding my Kindle.

My fingers shook with excitement as I typed the caption: **Low-key night reading in bed. Wish there was more to do around here!**

I liked Camden's picture and followed him back to make it more likely he'd check out my profile and see my post.

*There.* I'd officially given Camden an F-you to going to the game. He wanted to bully me into it so he could torment me more, but it didn't work that way. I wasn't stupid, and I wasn't weak. He could have his minions and the rest of the school do and say whatever he wanted, but he couldn't break me. Next year I'd be living the dream in Boston while they're still stuck here wishing they were in high school, and that knowledge gave me so much more strength than they could take away.

Besides, if this were a battle, tonight I'd won.

I tossed the phone back on the nightstand and picked up my Kindle, prepared to get lost in a world that wasn't this one. I lied on my caption. There was nothing else I'd rather be doing.

\* \* \*

*Cam*

WATER SPLASHED from the pool and wetted the concrete a foot away from my shoes.

"Stop being such a sourpuss and get in!"

I glanced up from my phone at Leilani propped on the side of the pool. Steam billowed from the heated water and encased her as if she were the one steaming.

“Not in the mood.”

“Come on, Knight.” This time it was Jade who spoke. She padded through the water until she was next to Leilani. “We need to celebrate the big win.”

We need to celebrate. As if Jade contributed by waving her pom poms on the sidelines. I resisted the temptation to roll my eyes and instead, went back to my phone. I’d been staring at Eden’s most recent update for the past hour, trying to determine if she was being vindictive or if she’d forgotten about the game.

Pearly white teeth flashed me in the picture, mocking me. She hadn’t forgotten.

My hand gripped the phone until I noticed my knuckles turning white, and I tossed it down on the patio table.

“What’s up, man?”

Hunter appeared from my periphery, holding two beers in his hand. I glanced his way and held out my hand, twisting the cap off the bottle once he gave it to me. The cap clinked against the glass table after I flicked it off my thumb.

“Nothing.”

He took the chair next to mine and gazed over the pool. Jade and Leilani had taken the hint and were now begging for attention from Joshua and Austin, also in the pool. My jaw ticked from the sound of their laughter, and I had no idea why.

“You were a fuckin’ beast tonight. Thirty-five-yard pass for the winning touchdown, that’s what I’m talkin’ about.” He held out his fist and waited for me to bump it. I waited a moment, but begrudgingly reached over and knocked my knuckles against his.

“Thanks, you did good too.”

He nodded and ran a hand over his jaw. “Parents have another charity event tonight?”

My grip on the beer tightened. “Yup.”

I lifted it to my lips and took three long gulps. Hunter was staring at me with *that* look. The one that reeked of pity that I didn't need nor want.

I rested the bottle on my knee and stared at the people in the pool. "Fuck 'em."

"Yeah," he agreed with another nod. "I can't wait to get out of this fucking town."

I turned back to him and noted the sincerity in his eyes. He meant every word, and I didn't blame him. His dad was the biggest dick I'd ever met in my life, and if I were Hunter, I'd want to be as far away as possible. Much farther than the two hour drive to Norman we'd be putting between us and this town next year.

It'd been a dream of ours since we were kids to go to OU, play college ball, get the *fuck* away from our parents and this town. I was ready for it, but a lot had changed since I was a kid. Two hours felt a lot shorter now, and I wasn't sure it'd be enough.

No amount of distance would be.

Hunter scooted another chair in front of him and kicked his feet up on it. His eyes were glued to Jade... or maybe Leilani. I couldn't tell which one.

That's one thing I didn't understand about him. He always went with the easiest option in everything he did. He took only required non-AP classes, put in just enough effort in practice to get by, and screwed whichever girls required the least amount of attention. He was smart, athletic, and good-looking enough to do whatever he wanted, yet he was content with whatever was easiest.

I followed his gaze toward Leilani. She was the head cheerleader and the obvious first pick for homecoming queen. And prom. By movie standards, we would've made the perfect couple.

She giggled and splashed Joshua before turning and

paddling away knowing, *hoping* he'd chase her. *That* was the type of girl Hunter was interested in. It fucking revolted me. What good was a chase if they were waiting on you to catch them? It was boring.

*She* was boring.

I picked my phone up off the table and pulled up Eden's Instagram feed... again.

I scrolled through photos of her, her family, some flowers. Pretty basic stuff, but it had me glued to the screen for reasons I couldn't fathom.

I was going to win her over tonight.

That wasn't my initial intention when I'd asked her to come, but I'd decided it on the way home from school yesterday. She was the furthest thing from easy or basic, and I couldn't get her out of my head. I laughed along with people telling rumors about her I knew weren't true, and it dug its way beneath my skin and itched more every day.

I *wanted* them to be true. I wanted *her*. If only the one time. Just enough to kick her from my system and move on to the next.

The irony of it was I'd fucked my chances all on my own. I'd told them I'd slept with her before I'd actually wanted to sleep with her. She was some band geek I wouldn't have given another glance to, but she had enough credibility to ruin me. She'd seen me with Sherry and she had no reason to lie about it until I gave her one. No one would believe a word she said about me if they knew that we'd fucked, she was a slut, and I'd been the one to destroy her reputation. They would've laughed in her face if she started telling people what she'd seen. *Hunter* would've laughed in her face.

I tapped on the picture she'd posted tonight. Her smile was genuine, and her face was lit up like she'd been laughing.

She was the one laughing now.

*Fuck.*

“What are you looking at?”

I glanced toward Hunter before going back to my phone.  
“Eden.”

“Easy Eden?”

*How many Eden’s did we know?*

“Yeah.”

“Damn, dude. I know we’re having fun and all, but don’t you think you’re obsessing a little hard? If we’re going to do something about her, let’s do it and move on.”

I didn’t bother looking up. “And what would we do?”

Hunter leaned closer to peer at her picture. “I don’t know. Fuck her, I guess... She’s kinda hot.”

“I already told you, you don’t want to sleep with her. She’s got that smell.”

“So I’ll plug my nose.”

I glared in his direction, trying to remind myself he wasn’t challenging me. He didn’t know how deep my interest went. “Why would you want to fuck her after what she said about you?”

He shrugged. “I don’t hold grudges like you do. I’m kind of over it, and jealousy can be sexy on the right girl.” He bit his lip and nodded toward my phone. “I’m thinking there’s a few ways she can make it up to me.”

Jealousy. He actually believed Eden had accused him of rape out of jealousy. That’s what I’d told him, but still. Maybe he *was* stupid.

I flicked my gaze toward Jade. So was she. If I didn’t know her better, I might’ve felt sorry for her.

“No,” I said with finality, scrolling through her pictures once again.

He huffed and shook his head. “Whatever.” He jerked up from the chair and pulled his shirt off before diving into the pool, off to snatch his easy-as-fuck conquest.

I brought up Paige’s feed next and scrolled past the

pictures of her and Trey, pausing when I reached the one of her and Eden the night of the party.

Paige's smile was wide while Eden's appeared more forced. They were polar opposites in the picture and in real life. Paige's shoulder-length blonde hair was in spirals, while Eden's was dark brown, almost black, and straight as a board down to the middle of her back. She wore it in a ponytail too much, almost every day, but not in the picture. Paige's face was caked in make-up while Eden had a small trace of it. She didn't need any of it. Her olive-toned skin was flawless.

She was beautiful. She hid it well beneath plain clothes and a quiet disposition, but I'd seen it. I couldn't *stop* seeing it.

My phone screen blackened as I pushed the lock button. I stood and made my way for the door without telling anyone goodbye. Hunter called my name, but I was already halfway into the house and sliding the door shut.

Sherry was in the living room, sitting on the couch with a book in her hand. She glanced up from the page when she noticed me. "Leaving already?"

I nodded. "Homework."

"It's Friday."

I shrugged and continued through the living room past her.

"Cam?" she called at my back.

I paused and glanced behind me. She was eyeing me like she knew something was wrong. She *always* could tell when something was wrong. Problem was, I couldn't pinpoint it. It was another victorious night, another win. People would be patting me on the back all weekend. I should've been happy or proud or something other than *this*.

She gave me a small smile. "Drive safe, okay?"

I forced myself to return the smile before continuing out the door. It was another ten minutes before I was home and



slamming my own entryway door. It rattled the windows and echoed in the large, empty space.

"I'm home," I called to no one, just because I was in a weird mood. My parents were out. They wouldn't be home for another hour or so.

I sighed and walked to the kitchen to grab a Gatorade from the fridge before stomping up the stairs. I flung the door to my room open and kicked it shut with the heel of my foot.

I was hoping for some sense of relief to come over me from no longer being around anyone. I could be *me*. I could be alone. This should've been my sanctuary, but instead, it was just a room.

My computer chair creaked as I sat in it and turned on the power button to the modem.

While I was waiting for it to boot, I scrolled through Eden's feed one more time. Then I'd be done with it. All the pictures of her happy family were embedded into my mind by that point, but I stared at them anyway. My teeth ground together, and my chest constricted.

She'd rejected me.

I couldn't fucking *believe* she'd rejected me.

I'd wanted her there, and I didn't even know why I'd wanted her there. I'd resorted to *threatening* her because I wanted her there so badly.

And she still said no.

Instead of in my bed, she's in hers.

She probably spent the evening playing board games with her family or watching movies or whatever the hell happy Hallmark card families did on Friday nights.

Equal amounts of respect and resentment flooded me, and after my computer finished loading, I got to work.

Eden Thompson was about to learn that I don't bluff.

Nothing exploded over the weekend. No huge developments took place on social media, and Sebastian didn't blow up my phone over some awful rumor being spread about me—not that he would've. I was feeling confident and a bit proud when I got to school on Monday. I flung my bag over my shoulder after climbing out of my car, and I allowed myself to smile as I walked up on the jocks, my gaze aimed at Camden.

He didn't appear as solemn as I would've liked, but I chalked it up to him having the whole weekend to soak in the fact that I wouldn't bend to his every whim.

As I got closer, I noticed the looks were different this morning. There was less laughter and more smirks. A few gazes that looked almost... hungry?

Joshua held a phone in his outstretched hand and a hoard of guys stared at it and then flicked their gazes to me.

Leilani and her group just glared.

Camden pushed off the bench his foot was propped on and fell into step beside me. "Morning, babe."

*Huh?*

“How was the rest of your weekend?”

The guys surrounding Joshua and his phone snickered and outright laughed.

“Um, the rest of my weekend?”

He nudged me and chuckled, tossing his friends a look. “Yeah, after Friday night. You had that thing at your grandparents’ house, didn’t you?”

Too much confusion swam in my mind to respond to that. My grandparents didn’t live in this state.

He pulled the door open and waved a hand to usher me through.

I wanted to walk past him and pretend I didn’t care about whatever the hell he was pulling, but dread-filled curiosity wouldn’t allow me.

*What the hell is it now?*

I paused midway and leaned in, flicking my gaze toward the jocks when laughter erupted. “What did you do?”

I didn’t bother asking what this was about. We both knew he’d retaliate from my not showing up to the game, it was just a matter of how bad he’d retaliate.

*Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.*

He smiled and placed a hand on my arm, caressing the material of my sweater. I jerked it from him and moved further inside, bullets gunning him down with my glare.

“Have a good day.” He gave me a wink and let go of the door, the metal slamming in front of my face a moment later.

I turned and began the trek to my locker. The strange stares the jocks gave me continued on the faces of other students as I made my way down the hall. Several girls glared and whispered to one another. The guys smiled and tossed each other looks.

One of the guys from my homeroom gave me a nod. “Sup, Easy Eden.”

I ignored him and walked on by. My stomach sank lower

and lower, and by the time I made it to my locker it was damn near to the floor. I glanced around for Sebastian, but he was nowhere in sight.

I gripped my locker handle and closed my eyes. Whatever pride and confidence I'd had pulling up to the school was draining quickly, and I was caught in a place between needing to know what was going on and being too exhausted to deal with it.

An envelope fell to the floor as I opened my locker, and I swallowed before bending and picking it up.

*I guess there was no ignoring it.*

I ripped open the sealed envelope, my heart pounding against its cage. Two cardstock photos were inside, and I pulled them out only to immediately stuff them back in. My face heated to an impossible degree, and my eyes darted around to see who was watching me—the entire hallway.

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and slammed my locker before taking off toward the bathroom, the envelope crumpling with the force of my grasp.

*No.*

*No, no, no, no.*

*He didn't do this.*

I rushed through the door of the bathroom and locked myself inside a stall. My bag thumped to the floor, and the envelope tore with the force I exerted to get to the pictures. They had something written on the back of them, but my attention was locked on the images. I held them both in my hand and let the envelope flutter to the tile next to my bag. My hand covered my mouth and my eyes scanned the photos in disbelief.

They were of me. Except, they weren't. It was undeniably my face, but on the body of someone else.

The first picture I was in 'my' bra and panties, my hip cocked out in a pose in front of a full-length mirror.

And the second... It was still my face, a more confident smile this time. I was on a bed, leaned back with my knees parted and *no* clothes on. You could see *everything*.

Except it wasn't me. I hadn't taken these pictures. I *wouldn't* have taken these pictures, but at first glance, it was so convincing even I was questioning it. I forced myself to look harder at the body my head was attached to. The girl's breasts were bigger than mine. I had a scar on my knee from a bicycle wreck when I was eight that was missing. But her skin tone... it was dead on with mine. My face blended in perfectly. I don't know how he did it, but it looked more realistic than I wanted to admit.

I moved my hand from my mouth to run it through my hair.

*No. No. No.*

Remembering the writing on the back, I flipped the photos. On the back of the bra and panties image, in Camden Knight's handwriting, it read: **I gave you fair warning.**

Red hot rage lit up my face, taking over the embarrassment. You gave me fair warning? Are you fucking kidding me? So I guess I only have myself to blame then?

I flipped the other card. **Ready to play nice?**

I read the words over and over. Did he mean they were both circulating the school, and now I should do what he says or else he'll do worse, or was this another threat?

I flipped the cards over and grimaced at the picture of the naked girl... the one everyone would think was me. It was so much worse than the other. So much so, that if both were circulating, no one would bother with the bra and panties one. This one would've stolen the spotlight, so there wasn't any reason for him to send both... right? It was a threat?

I needed to know for sure.

The bell rang, indicating class was starting, and I shoved the pictures to the bottom of my bag and threw it over my

shoulder. My heart was beating a million miles an hour, and I was practically drowning in embarrassment as I left the bathroom, but I forced myself forward anyway. I had to find out if both pictures were circulating the school. Either way was bad, but I'd almost be relieved if it was just the bra and panties.

I stormed into history class, not bothering to acknowledge the sub we had that day, and plopped down next to Sebastian.

"Let me see the picture."

"Um, excuse me, do you have a tardy slip?" The sub's voice showed her annoyance, but I continued to ignore her. I wouldn't be staying long.

Sebastian appeared startled and glanced around him, as if I could be talking to anyone else.

"Now, Sebastian."

"Eden..."

"Now!"

The class was dead silent as my yell permeated the air. Even the sub fidgeted and stayed quiet, like she had no idea what to do. It was the second time I'd made a scene in class, but this time was different. So much anger and embarrassment swam in my veins, there wasn't any room for more of it. I didn't care what they saw me doing now. I only cared about what they'd seen on their phones.

He pulled his cell from his pocket and tapped a few buttons before handing it over to me. His face was solemn, maybe a little disappointed, but again, I couldn't care. Not right then.

I snatched it and peered at the screen. It was the bra and panties image.

My gaze snapped to his. "Is this it?"

His eyebrows creased in confusion and he nodded.

My chest expanded, allowing me to breathe easier. I

hadn't noticed it'd been difficult, but now that some of the weight was gone, I wondered how I hadn't suffocated.

I sat his phone on his desk and stood. That was good news, but it wasn't over. I needed to get to Camden and convince him to delete the other picture. Or force him to. Whatever it took.

I glanced around at the familiar faces. "Anyone here know which class Camden Knight is in?"

"Okay, you need to have a seat. I'm calling the principal." The sub hurried over to the desk and picked up the phone.

"Well?" I asked, not caring. The principal couldn't do shit to help me. Why should I be afraid of his punishments? If Camden could get away with everything he'd done to me, then I could get away with asking a question in class. Or not. Either way, I didn't care.

Ethan, one of Camden's minions, poked his head from around another kid. He hid in the back of class, just like the other jocks. He wore an amused grin that I wanted to slap off his face. "Calculus with Mrs. Morris."

*Calculus?*

The question formed and vanished just as quickly. I spun on my heel and stormed from the classroom. The sub was on the phone with the office when I left and would be telling them where I was headed, so I hurried my pace. I was practically jogging when I barged through the door to Mrs. Morris's room.

I'd interrupted her mid-speech and everyone sat up straighter and turned my way. Except Camden. He sat back with his feet lazily propped up on the legs of the desk in front of him, not looking remotely surprised by my presence.

Mrs. Morris took a step toward me. "Eden, what are you—"

"I need to talk to Camden. It's an emergency."

“An emergency?” She glanced to Camden who still appeared unbothered.

A knock sounded at the door, jerking my attention that way, and Vice Principal Montgomery stepped in. His lips were drawn in a hard line, and his posture was rigid. “Let’s go Eden.”

My lips parted and some of the anger-filled fog cleared. I turned back to Camden. His head was tilted and he stared straight back at me. He was amused, smug, but there was something else there as well... curiosity, maybe?

“He should be the one in the office,” I said, pointing toward Camden. The anger in my tone was apparent, and I imagined it wasn’t the only thing that pointed toward it. I’d worn my hair down that day, feeling confident, and with all the rush, it was a mess. A few flyaways were in my vision driving me mad.

And my face... it was *hot*. Blood was gushing to it at a pace that had the vein in my forehead throbbing.

Mr. Montgomery frowned and said nothing. No one did. The entire class stared at me like I was a lunatic who might snap if they spoke to me. They may have been right.

This was insane.

*I was insane.*

Camden was literally driving me crazy.

My mouth was still open, as if I was actually going to rat Camden out right there in the classroom. I wanted to. But what would that get me? The naked picture circulating the school.

I was *fucked*. He designed it that way, all of it. Nothing I did or said got me anywhere in his games. I could feel victorious, but only for a minute before the next thing ripped the rug out from under me.

*I hated him.*

I closed my mouth and glared at Camden for a couple



more seconds, ensuring he had enough time to feel all of the hatred coming from me, but of course, he didn't. He didn't feel *anything*. He wasn't capable.

Turning back to Mr. Montgomery, I held my chin up and followed him out of the classroom. As soon as the door closed behind us, I hung my head. My shoulders slumped as I followed him to his office.

The worst part about all of it was I still never got to confirm that it was only the one picture he planned to send out. Now I'd have to spend however long stressing over it. Even the best-case scenario—only bra and panties picture—sucked.

"I've got to say, Eden. I'm surprised and a bit confused at the sudden change in behavior." Mr. Montgomery shut the door to his office and came around the desk to sit on his throne. I wonder if it made him feel important.

Blood still rushed in my face but not being in front of Camden cooled some of the anger. That, and it was starting to hit me that I'd made a fool of myself... again.

"I'm having an off day. It won't happen again."

"Is everything all right at home?"

I'd been staring at an elephant figurine he had on his desk, but my gaze lifted to him as his words registered.

"Yes?"

He cleared his throat and shifted. "I know this can be a difficult time in a young woman's life..."

His voice trailed off and I stopped listening. Instead, I focused on the cleft of his chin. It was remarkably deep. He must run a bar of soap down that thing to get the day's grime out when he showered.

A few more of his words registered, and I started to understand why the room all of a sudden held an awkward tension. Was he trying to hint that my outbursts were caused by PMS? Is this real?

“Mr. Montgomery,” I interjected. “I assure you, I’m just having an off day.”

His open mouth closed and he nodded. “Well, unfortunately, even off days have consequences.”

*So get to it.*

He leaned back and blew out a sigh. “I can’t let you interrupt classes, Miss Thompson. You’re going to have two days of in-school-suspension, and I’m going to let Mrs. Castle know you might come see her.”

Mrs. Castle, the counselor. Also, ISS? I’ve never had ISS.

“We have the fall concert coming up,” I stammered, sitting up straighter in the seat. “ISS means I won’t be able to practice.”

“That’s correct.” He nodded once. “And I hope there won’t be any more probl—”

“I’m first chair.”

His eyes narrowed at my interruption. “I’m being generous and counting today as one of your two days, Eden. Don’t push it.”

My skin tightened and muscles tensed, but I clamped my mouth shut. What if I had been a football player? Would I have had to miss practice then? Would I have even been given ISS at all? *No*. Football was far too important to jinx. We could lose a game for crying out loud!

I braced through another tense minute, somehow managing to keep my mouth shut, before I shuffled from Mr. Montgomery’s office to the room I’d be spending my next two days in. Eight cubicles lined along two walls, and I handed the monitor my bad-girl-slip and sat my bag down at the cubicle as far as possible from any other student.

It was all too surreal. I’d never been a ‘bad girl’. I’d never even been in trouble before today. The only times I’d been in this room was when a teacher sent me to deliver assignments to one of those ‘bad kids’.

*Yet, here I am.*

I took out my trusty Kindle—thankful I never went without it—and started reading while I waited on my teachers to send work. There was no point in Mrs. Morris sending any. It was hard enough understanding math when she was in the same room teaching it. I'd never be able to understand the notes. One more thing to thank Camden for.

*Camden.* How the hell was he in calculus? Was he trying to pad his transcript or something? I'd assumed with him being all god-like around here, he was good enough at football to get into college without a superb academic standing. Maybe he was shooting for a better school? Ivy league?

*Who cares?*

I shook away the thoughts and tried to concentrate on the romance novel I'd stayed up until one in the morning reading. Then, I'd been hooked. My own life faded and I'd transformed into another world. Not now, though. Now I was at Lincoln High and the only thing occupying my mind was that picture and Camden Knight.

## EDEN

I waited for him by his car. Since I wasn't allowed to go to orchestra, I'd gotten out of school when the last bell rang. It felt wrong. My fingers had itched to practice, and I'd made a beeline for the parking lot with the intent of going home to do just that.

But then someone had called me Easy Eden while I was walking to my car and Camden's image caught fire in my brain. Instead of going home, I drove to the parking lot behind the football stadium and pulled up next to his Jeep.

Now *I* was the one waiting for *him* outside practice. Despite all the shit that'd happened and the anger I held that day, I sort of loved turning the tables. I spent the two-hour wait running through scenarios in my mind and thinking up witty things I could say if he walked out with his friends. I don't know how I was still fighting him.

He *did* walk out with his friends. Hunter and Trey were on either side of him. I climbed out of my car as soon as I spotted them rounding the corner of the bleachers and hurried to prop myself against the front of his Jeep. I crossed

my arms and schooled my expression to appear as relaxed as possible.

Their mouths moved and the faint sound of their voices reached me in the distance, but they went silent after Hunter spotted me and pointed me out. It sounded like he said, "*Look who it is.*"

Camden smiled as he approached, not at all phased to see me. Disappointment slapped me in the face, but I hid it from my features.

"Hey, babe."

"What's up, Finch?"

The smile vanished and Trey glanced at Camden questioningly. Hunter kept his gaze on me, not seeming to get the *American Pie* reference.

*Good. That was just for Camden.*

Camden got it. His already sharp jawline became more distinct as his teeth ground together.

"I'll catch you guys later." His glare never left me as he dismissed his friends. Trey was quick to take off, but Hunter lingered, eyeing Camden in a way that I didn't understand. He almost looked concerned, but it couldn't have been for me.

After giving me a once over, Hunter wandered toward his own car. Camden stepped up to me and dropped his gym bag but didn't speak until Hunter was out of earshot.

"Do you think that's funny?"

I lifted a finger to my chin and glanced up as if to consider it. "Mmm, yes. Do you think ruining my life is funny?"

"Don't say that shit in front of him. It's too far." The venom in his voice stung my confidence, but anger quickly ignited. I pushed off the Jeep to stand up straight. *I* was the one that had gone too far?

"You get to *lie* about me, but you're mad when I tell the

truth about you? You're the one having sex with his mom. If he finds out about it, it's not my fault. It's yours."

Funny thing was, I didn't really believe what I was saying. I would've felt awful if Hunter found out about his mother's *kink* because of me. Even with how big of a jerk and *rapist* Hunter was. But it still felt good to say and there was some truth to it. Camden would always be in the wrong on this one.

"Do you think anyone would believe you? Think about it, Eden. All you're going to do is piss me off more."

"More? I did *nothing* to you." I threw my hands up in exasperation. He was psychopathic *and* delusional.

Instead of continuing our sparring match, Camden picked up his gym bag and walked around me to his driver's side door. The anger drained, and so did the color in my face. I hadn't even gotten to the purpose of this conversation.

"Camden?"

He paused, gripping the door handle. His T-shirt stretched around his bicep and shoulders, revealing their tension.

"Did you send out both pictures?" My voice matched how I felt. There was no heat to it, only dread.

His head tilted as he took me in. He seemed to be considering something. "You don't have a lot of friends, do you?"

"What?"

"Shouldn't you already know the answer to that?"

That wasn't a no, he didn't send both pictures out, but it also wasn't a yes. If he'd sent me the question through a text, I would've taken it as an insult, but it really wasn't that either. He just wanted to know.

"Most of my friends are afraid of you. They don't want to associate themselves with me anymore."

"But you're not afraid, are you?" He took a step toward me. "Why is that?"

I fought the urge to back away. Once he got a certain distance to me, it was like my brain shut down. I didn't want to let that happen again... but I also wasn't about to retreat.

"Why would I be?"

He was right in front of me now, his familiar scent filling the space. He shrugged but didn't give a verbal response. He seemed to be over it.

His eyes roamed my head, and he reached out to smooth a frizzy strand of hair. For some reason, I didn't stop him.

"I really like your hair like this."

My cheeks heated and I looked away. My hair was a mess today. I never should've worn it down. It was too humid, and by that point in the day it was a frizz ball. I wish I didn't care right then, with Camden paying so close attention to me. He was being sarcastic, wasn't he?

"You know what I don't get about you?"

I peered up and slyly shifted away, managing a few more inches of distance. When I didn't answer, he continued.

"When I'm mean to you, you get all fired up. Total confidence. But when I compliment you, you're all shy and quiet."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just stared. I never knew what to say to him when he wasn't being an asshole. It was too weird. Too unlike him. I *preferred* him mean because at least I knew how to feel about that.

I crossed my arms over my chest and backed up a step.

"Did you send the picture or not?"

"What if I did? How are you going to retaliate?"

My face fell and arms slowly uncrossed.

*No.*

Before I could think up any response, he reached out and grabbed my wrist. He jerked me forward and I stumbled into him, my eyes going wide. For a moment, I was in too much shock to push back. Camden used that moment to shove me into the side of his Jeep, the door handle digging into my

back. He pressed himself up against me and pinned my wrists to the window.

I was at a loss for words. My tongue was heavy and lungs were too busy sawing air in and out to even think about speech.

My eyes darted around the parking lot. There were still a few cars, but the team for the most part was gone. If I managed to yell for help maybe—

“Eden.”

I shifted my gaze to the gold ring around his eyes. It was smaller now. Darker. Yet, Camden showed no sign of aggression in his expression. Even with him pinning me to his car, he was eerily calm.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. “W-what do you want from me?” My voice shook, but it was stronger than I felt.

Camden didn’t scare me in class. His rumors didn’t scare me, his lies, his disemboweled animals. It’s like he tried to get to me from every angle, and with the pictures, he had. I’d come to him this time, but I still hadn’t been scared. The only time I’d truly been frightened was when they took my clothes and made me think they were going to rape me.

And now. Now, I was terrified.

“I think you know what I want.” His smirk never came over that calm expression. His voice was serious, soft, almost a whisper. It chilled my bones... but there was something else too. A warmth began just below my belly, small at first, and then growing as I stared into his eyes more. *Felt* him more. *Smelled* him more.

His hair was still wet from his after-practice shower and it smelled of masculine shampoo. It registered more as seconds ticked by and fear dulled. Axe, maybe?

Every breath I took grazed my breasts against his chest, turning my nipples into hardened buds.



"I'm not having sex with you," I blurted, shifting to try to get away, but only increasing the friction of our bodies.

I turned my face away from his and stared at the back of the bleachers, ready to scream if I spotted anyone.

He laughed and leaned in, pressing his lips to my ear. "At some point, you're going to want me to fuck you, but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Right now, that's not what I'm asking for."

A shiver ran down my neck, and I jerked against him again.

"Stop fighting," he whispered, warm breath skating over my ear.

"Please, just leave me alone." My voice came out whinier than I intended, but I didn't care. A boulder rested on my shoulders, pushing me down while Camden and his friends tossed more rocks onto it each day. It was getting to be too much. Too heavy. I didn't want to carry it anymore. I just wanted all this to stop.

"No." He pulled back, looking into my eyes now. My hands were still pinned against the window, and when his gaze roamed between us where my chest lifted and fell, I squirmed. "I'll make a deal with you, though. I won't show anyone the nude if you do something for me."

I narrowed my eyes and remained silent for several seconds.

*Sex.* He said that wasn't what he wanted, but what else could it possibly be? What the hell could he want from me?

I didn't know. But whatever it was, there were strings attached. I had two options. I could do what he said and most likely fall into another trap meant to torment me, or I could tell him to go fuck himself and ignore the talk about the picture.

The photo wasn't even of me, so who cares about it,

right? So what if it's my face. I knew the truth. That's all that mattered.

Except, I did care, and it wasn't all that mattered. My insides coiled just thinking about the way people would look at me. The way guys would—

“You're overthinking it.”

I blinked a few times and focused back on Camden. “What is it that you want, Camden? Honestly.”

He smiled and finally loosened his grip around my wrists. I yanked them away and crossed my arms over my chest, amazed when he made enough space for me to do it.

“Let's go talk about it.” He backed up enough for me to move around him.

“We can talk here.”

“No.”

My eyes roamed the parking lot. No one was around. He had me pinned to his car... How much worse of a situation could I get myself into? My head began swimming with possibilities... much much worse possibilities.

*He could rape me.*

Maybe roofie me first. Hunter had sex with Jade while she was unconscious, so who's to say Camden wasn't capable of something like that? He was delusional enough that he claimed I wanted to have sex with him, maybe he'd even think I wanted it.

*I didn't.*

My body might've responded to him in an odd way, but when I had sex for the first time, it'd be with someone I loved. Not someone I hated. Definitely not *him*.

His chuckle snapped my attention back to him. “What do you think is going to happen? I just want to talk someplace more private. Coach is going to be heading to his car any minute, and I don't want to be interrupted.” Camden pointed to the truck over his shoulder, the one I now assumed to be

Coach Clyde's. "I promise I'm not going to do anything to you. You don't need to be so scared."

He smirked and nudged me out of the way when my mouth opened to speak. I was going to lie and tell him I wasn't *scared*. That I just wasn't stupid. But no words came out.

He opened his door and tossed his gym bag in the back seat before climbing inside and returning his gaze to me. "Careful, Eden, a bug's gonna fly in there."

I slammed my mouth shut and furrowed my brow.

"Come on," he said with a wink. "I'll take you back to your car later."

"I can drive myself."

"No."

*No*. He'd said that word twice now with absolute authority, and it was pissing me off.

"*Yes*," I said, challenge dripping in my tone. Maybe everyone else took his commands without question, but not me. Fuck him.

"All right." He shrugged and pulled his phone from his pocket. I didn't think anything of it for a moment, just that he was being a bit rude. But then I remembered what was on that phone.

"What are you doing?"

He peered at me through his lashes like he'd forgotten I was there. "Sending my friends a present. You think it's been long enough that they'd buy us already having sex? I mean, I don't want them to think I'm a quick shooter or anything. Maybe I should wait until I get home."

"Don't." Panic flooded me and I shot toward him, reaching for the phone. He held it away from me with ease and cocked his head to the side. I could see the screen with Hunter's name pulled up above a string of messages. It was

ridiculous to think Camden hid any of this from Hunter, but my stomach twisted anyway.

“Okay,” I said, lowering my stretched arm back to my side and backing up a step from the Jeep. “I’ll go with you.”

His eyes sparked with something I prayed to God wasn’t malice and he tossed his phone in a cup holder. I still hadn’t moved to walk around to the passenger door. Still couldn’t decide which fate was worse. Probably the one I’d have from getting in that car.

This was stupid. So, so stupid.

“Let’s go then.” Camden twisted the key in the ignition and the engine roared to life. When I backed up a step, he shut his door.

I couldn’t see him through the tinted window, but I could almost feel that smirk, those eyes burning a hole into me.

He knew he’d won.

\* \* \*

*Cam*

“COLD?” I reached over and turned the seat warmer for the passenger side on. I casually placed my hand on Eden’s thigh and fought a smile as she flinched.

*This was too much fucking fun.*

I stared out the windshield, steering with my left hand draped over the wheel, but it took all my restraint to do it. I wanted to focus my attention on her. Let the car veer off the road, not give a shit. Just stare into those brown eyes and try to guess what was going on in that pretty head of hers.

She tried pushing my hand off her thigh, and I clamped down just to see her reaction.

“Where are we going?”

Her pitch was high, but even. She was nervous. I could

smell it wafting off her, sense it in the tension that filled the Jeep. It was too delicious to ease, so I said nothing. I think it bothered her most when she was partially clued in on my next move. Out of all the shit we'd—I guess *I'd*—done to her, she'd never acted this desperate. I'd even given her a chance to beg me to stop, and she hadn't taken it. All she had to do was go to that damn football game and I'd have backed off.

I thought I'd liked chasing her, but fuck it felt good to hold to reins. I should've thought of the picture thing sooner.

"I need to go home. I forgot, I have a ton of homework to do." Her voice was still even, but she squirmed beneath my hand. There was a layer of denim between us, yet she acted as if my touch was burning her.

"No, you don't."

"Camden, I'm serious."

"So am I."

She fiddled with the purse strapped over her shoulder, and it took me too long to realize what she was getting. A moment later, the pepper spray was shoved a foot from my face and her mask of calm was gone.

"Get your hand off me and stop the car, Camden. *Now.*"

I glanced her way only a moment before going back to the road. Her voice was still strong, but her hand holding the pepper spray was shaking. It was fucking beautiful, and might've even been intimidating if she hadn't already pulled this tactic.

"Do it and see what happens."

"I'm *not* kidding."

Another glance her way revealed her wide eyes, and now both hands gripped the pepper spray. Maybe she *was* serious.

I lifted my hand from her thigh and gripped the steering wheel before jerking the Jeep into my driveway. Her eyes darted around, and while she was distracted, I yanked the

pepper spray from her and tossed it in the back seat. Her head snapped to me and her eyes widened even more.

Fear. This time they widened with fear. Beautiful.

Seconds ticked by with my foot on the brake and the only sound in the car was her heavy breathing. She could've pressed the button if she wanted. Even now, she could open the door and run, but she didn't. She averted her eyes to the floorboard and leaned away from me.

"Are you really that concerned that I'd send a nude photo that isn't even technically of you?"

It was the only explanation I had that she could be so nervous, yet not run... Almost the only explanation. The other was that she liked it. She liked the fear, the drama.

*So did I.*

My dick stirred, and I had to fight not to acknowledge it. I was in track pants, and my boner would show if I didn't adjust it soon.

Instead of answering me, she turned away and appeared to be taking in the house. That was the most normal reaction I'd seen from her. Most people were taken aback by the architecture. My parents had good taste... and a lot of money.

I eased my foot off the brake and continued down the drive. I tapped the button above my rearview mirror for the garage and waited as it opened.

"Why are you doing this?" Her voice was feather light.

After putting the Jeep in park, I shut the car off and turned toward her. Most of her questions I ignored because I liked watching her squirm. It was fun to keep her in the dark. This time I didn't know the answer. Or maybe I did, but it was too simple for her to understand.

*I wanted to.*

"I like you."

"No, you don't... I'm a game to you."

“Well, I like games.”

She met my stare, seeming to work up the courage to say something before her gaze dropped to my pants. She froze for several moments before turning away and focusing on the floorboard yet again.

It was kind of cute. Shy. Nervous. Not the reaction I was used to when a girl saw me hard for them.

Now that the cat was out of the bag, I reached into my pants and adjusted my dick.

“Are you like Hunter?” Her voice squeaked.

*Was I like Hunter?* The fuck did that mean?

“In what way?”

She cleared her throat and turned to me. Her movement was so slow and muscles so rigid, it was like she had to force it. “In the way that you assume girls want to have sex with you, and so you just do it. Regardless of if they’re conscious or if they verbally reject you.”

*Oh my God, she thought I was going to rape her.*

My lips quirked and I rubbed at the back of my neck as I thought of an answer to *that*. It was so tempting to fuck with her, but I was having a hard enough time containing my laughter.

“It’s not funny, Camden.”

*Oops, I guess she sensed it.*

I chuckled and shook my head before opening my door. She was back to being fiery, and I liked it. I wanted more.

She stepped out of the Jeep as I made my way around it. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and her eyes were narrowed.

I walked past her to the garage door and flung it open. With a glance over my shoulder at my fiery little hell cat, I stepped into my home and made my way toward the kitchen.

*She’d follow.* I don’t know how I knew it, but I did. It’s like

she couldn't resist. She liked playing tug-of-war with me as much as I liked playing it with her.

Sure enough, she appeared in the kitchen entryway as I was grabbing a couple of sodas from the fridge.

"You never answered my question," she said.

I bumped the fridge shut with my hip and walked to the kitchen table. There was a much bigger table in the dining room that never got used. It was a fifteen-thousand-dollar prop. What a fucking waste.

I sat down and slid her soda in front of the seat next to me. "If you really thought that I was a rapist, would you have come here with me?"

My back was to her, but I could feel her there, staring at me. Probably trying to feel me out. She didn't know me, and I didn't know her. But for whatever reason, I wanted to. I didn't even know what I was doing right then or what I wanted from her, but I saw the possibilities. My dick strained against my pants and my jaw tightened.

Maybe I did know what I wanted.

"Are you a virgin?"

She stepped up to the table and sat down in front of the soda, staring at it and not answering me. I guess she came to the conclusion I wasn't such a threat.

Why did that bother me?

"Eden, I asked you a question."

She traced the ring at the top of the can and shrugged. "You don't answer mine. Why should I answer yours?"

I smiled and leaned across the table on my elbows. "You are, aren't you? Easy Eden is a virgin. That's rich." I chuckled to emphasize the fact that I meant it as an insult. That I was mocking her. My dick strained against my pants again, and my face ticked in response.

*Fight me, baby.*

Her eyes snapped to mine. "Fuck you, Camden."



*Camden.* Even my parents called me *Cam*, and for some reason I loved that she didn't. My name was smooth as silk on that sexy tongue.

She was a virgin.

She was *my* virgin.

"Careful what you wish for... Easy Eden."

*Boom. Triggered.*

She stood, sending the legs of the chair scraping on tile. I let her stomp a few steps toward the door, watching to see if she'd look back. See if she wanted me to chase her. She didn't.

*Good.*

I stood and, in a few quick strides, was right behind her. I grabbed her by the shoulder and yanked, spinning her to face me. Her eyes widened but then narrowed as her gaze moved to my hand still grasping her shoulder.

I dropped my hand to my side. "You still want to make that deal?"

Her gaze shifted to meet my stare. Flames ignited in her eyes. "I already told you, I'm not—"

"I'm not talking about sex. I wouldn't want it that easy."

Her brows knitted in confusion. It was justified. I hadn't meant to tell her that, and it wasn't necessary to put her at ease. But I meant it. If she fucked me now, it'd be a letdown.

No, I wanted to earn that shit.

That's what was so special about her. She was strong. Fierce. She didn't crumble. So many other girls would've ran home bawling after scaring them like we did Eden at the football field. But no, she'd improvised. She'd thrown it back in my face, begging for more. Challenging me to push all of her buttons until I found the right one.

She made me work for it, and I had one hell of a work ethic.

"Then just tell me what you want." She jerked from my

grasp and practically yelled the words. She was pissed. Genuinely. Her face was red, her fists clenched.

More blood pumped to my dick, reminding me how much it hated me right then for not taking what it needed.

"I want you to go to the football game next week."

Her lips parted in a huff. "You can't be serious."

"Seems pretty basic, doesn't it? One night. That's all I'm asking for."

"You're not *asking*."

*True*. She had me there.

"You can say no."

She ran a hand through her hair and peered away, as if to consider it. She'd caught me off guard today, wearing her hair down. She looked so different with it framing her face. Prettier. I wanted to reach out and run my hand through the strands, but I refrained... for now.

"And if I say no, you'll show people that picture?"

"Correct."

She paused a few more moments, her eyes darting over my face to study me. Her face had relaxed some, her hands no longer in fists at her sides. "Why do you want me to go?"

I didn't respond.

"If you don't tell me, honestly, then I'm not going. Period. I'm not walking into a trap, so you can just forget about it."

I still didn't respond. Instead, I shoved my hands in my pockets and lifted my chin. She wanted an answer that I couldn't give. I didn't even know it.

Her phone dinged and she pulled it from her back pocket, glancing at the screen before putting it away.

"My step-dad's here..."

*What the?*

She must've sensed my confusion because she answered my unspoken question. "I texted him the address when you left me in the garage." She said it like she was proud, but I

was just annoyed. I wasn't ready for her to leave, and I was confused at how she knew my address in the first place.

The memory of her staring out the Jeep window at the property flashed through my mind. She wasn't admiring the architecture, she was looking for the house number.

She turned to walk back toward the garage, but I grabbed her arm, gentler this time. She glanced over her shoulder at me.

"I don't know why I want you to go. I just do."

She gave a single nod, then shook me off. "I'll think about it."

*That wasn't a yes.*

Annoyance surged, but I accepted it for now. There was more than one thing to be annoyed about. I couldn't believe she'd texted her step-dad and he was already here. What, was he on call or something?

"You should go out the front door," I called when she went to walk away from me again.

She paused, and I was already walking away before she turned around. Her footsteps echoed on the tile, and each inch we came closer to the exit had me more pissed off. When we got to the foyer, I turned. She wasn't looking around starstruck at the chandelier my mom insisted we hang just beyond the entryway. In fact, she appeared less than impressed with all of it. She was annoyed.

"See you tomorrow," I said, my teeth gritted.

"No, you won't. Thanks to you, I'll be spending it in ISS."

*Thanks to me? Right, Eden.*

She brushed past me and jerked open the door before disappearing behind it. The window rattled as it slammed shut.

*Looks like I have a lot more work to do.*

“**E**asy Eden. Hey, Easy Eden.” The guy a few chairs down from me drew my name out. It sounded gross coming from his lips. Dirty.

I was beginning to hate my own name.

Mr. Gordon pretended he didn't hear the taunting, and I couldn't say I blamed him. Everyone knew about the picture. Even the teachers thought I was a slut. They all quietly judged me with their pointed looks and disapproving shakes of their heads. No one felt sorry for me this time, not even Sebastian. He'd blown me off this morning in history. Even now, his shoulders were tense and his knuckles were white gripping his pencil. He was doodling in his notebook before Senior English began, but it didn't hide the anger. The thing that struck me as odd and ripped my heart from my chest was that he was mad at *me*. Not the asshole behind us who was taunting me. The past couple of days I hadn't had a chance to talk to Sebastian because I'd been in ISS, but he didn't seem to want an explanation. There was one thing everyone in school had in common—they all thought this was my fault.

“I know you can hear me.” The voice came from behind me again.

I didn’t look back to see who it was. It didn’t matter. People had been taunting me all day. It could’ve been anyone.

This morning I’d gotten to my locker to find a blue bra dangling from it, similar to the one that’d been in the picture circling the school. Written in black Sharpie across my locker was, of course, my moniker—Easy Eden.

Somehow, it had gotten worse. Before, people laughed and joked. Some people glared, some shook their heads, but now the looks were more intense. Hungry. The girls still glared, but the guys... drooled.

*It wasn't even my body.*

Camden and Hunter strolled into the room as the bell rang. What did they do, wait outside for it? Too cool to be on time, or—God forbid—early?

I stared up at Camden as he was walking by and waited for him to put that day’s note on my desk. My notebook was opened, and I moved my hand off of it to give him space.

He didn’t look at me. He didn’t pull the note from his pocket. He merely sauntered to the back of the class.

Hunter was the one to pause today, and he pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. He winked after pressing it on the desk and slid it toward me.

“Let me know.”

With a smirk, he continued toward his seat, leaving me there staring at the folded up sheet of paper.

My arms tingled and started to feel heavy, and a sickening feeling occurred in my stomach.

*What was this?*

*Was Camden mad at me?*

*Damn it, Eden, why do you care?*

Mr. Gordon began the lecture, and I glanced over to see Sebastian taking notes. My hands felt so heavy that I didn’t

think I'd manage. I went back to staring at the folded paper. I should open it. My curiosity would only be clawing at me until I did... but it wasn't really curiosity. It was dread.

It could've been anything, but the thing I feared most was a line in Old English. That's what Camden did. If they switched it up, then I really was just some game. I wasn't special, all of this was a joke. The notes. His interest. *Me*.

*Don't you already know that?*

I let out a frustrated sigh and picked up the note. Lead fingers clumsily unfolded it, and I stared down at the unfamiliar writing.

### **Homecoming?**

I dropped it on the desk and slumped my tense shoulders. Homecoming—those were the wise words of Hunter O'Reilly. Nothing Shakspearian about that. His words earlier—*let me know*—finally made sense. He was asking me to go to homecoming with him.

The relief I'd gotten stifled. *Hunter O'Reilly was asking me to homecoming?* My brows knitted together, and I sank lower in my seat. That was a joke, right? Was Camden in on it?

I glanced behind me at Camden and Hunter. Both were staring at me, but only Hunter was smiling. Camden looked kind of... pissed.

I turned back around and tucked the paper into my notebook. They were messing with me again. That's all it was. It'd mostly been Camden, but he'd decided to bring Hunter in on it. No big deal.

*Liar.*

Nausea settled in and I leaned forward with my hand over my stomach. Fuck, I couldn't take the both of them.

"Are you okay?" Sebastian whispered, snapping my attention to him. I nodded and forced a small smile.

"When is homecoming?" I mouthed to make sure no one heard me. The last thing I needed was another rumor. I

wouldn't be going to homecoming with *anyone*, but it suddenly occurred to me that Camden might've already asked me to.

"Two weeks from Friday," he whispered.

That wasn't the same game. Were they taking shifts fucking with me? I'm certain Hunter was actually asking me to the dance homecoming night, but it still raised questions. They were best friends. They also hated me.

*What the hell was going on?*

Before I could wrap my brain around Hunter's actions, the bell rang and everyone shuffled from class. I put my notebook away and peered up at Sebastian who was waiting for me, despite the newfound information that I was indeed a slut. I guess he'd gotten over being angry about it.

I stood and threw my bag over my shoulder before walking out of the classroom, with him following behind me.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked, falling into step beside me.

I glanced his way. "Talk about what?"

His eyebrows rose and he tapped on my bag. "Hunter O'Reilly."

We made it to my locker, and I shoved my bag inside. "He just asked me to homecoming... because, you know, I'm the school slut and all."

"You're not a slut." Sebastian gripped my arm and tugged me to look at him when I went to walk toward his locker next. The action surprised me coming from him, and my eyes shot to the hand wrapped around my arm.

"Sorry," he said, pulling back. "But don't talk about yourself like that. It's bad enough hearing other people say it."

*Huh? It's bad for him?*

"Right." I shook my head and blinked. "Sorry."

"I'm not even going to ask you about the picture." Sebast-

ian's Adam's Apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Just promise me you're being smart."

"Sebastian, I..."

My mouth hung open, and once again I was struck with the inability to speak. *They weren't of me, just my face.* That sounded so lame. So implausible. I would've had to explain, and I was just too exhausted with it. It was almost easier to go with the lie. Nothing about that picture looked off, so if I told people it wasn't me, they would've just found me pathetic. And Sebastian didn't seem to want an explanation anyway. He wanted to move on, and so did I.

"I promise," I finally finished.

He gave a curt nod and walked the twenty feet to his locker before putting away his bag. It was just me, Sebastian, and a couple of stragglers in the hallway. Everyone else had gone to lunch. My stomach rumbled, and I cursed myself for oversleeping and not having enough time to pack a lunch.

Now was as good a time as any to practice that whole 'moving on' thing, I guess.

"Do you want to eat in the lunchroom today?"

Sebastian was walking back toward me, and his steps slowed as he approached. His eyebrows rose like he couldn't believe what I was saying. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah." I shrugged. "Can't hide forever, right?"

*Yes, you can.*

Before I could chicken out, I started making my way toward the lunchroom with Sebastian at my side. Loud voices and slamming trays reached my ears as we drew closer, turning my rumbling stomach. My appetite was nearly gone as we made it to the doors, but I took a deep breath and pushed through them anyway.

It was true. I couldn't hide forever.

A wave of energy hit me as soon as we stepped through. All around us was loud, people were everywhere, body heat



warmed the room. It was shocking compared to the peace I'd found outside on the benches, and I almost turned around and ran.

But then I spotted him.

Camden's eyes locked onto mine from across the room. His lips were still in a tight line and his hardened expression didn't match the lit-up faces of his friends, talking and laughing all around him.

I didn't know what he was mad about, but something sparked in me. Courage—maybe that's what it was. Or maybe even excitement. Whatever it was, it pulled my lips up into a grin and had my feet carrying me to stand in line.

He'd scared me out of the lunch room before, but I was back. He hadn't fully won.

*He never would.*

"What are you smiling about?" Sebastian asked, his own lips tipping into a grin. I had a feeling he'd been missing our other friends, or at least the normalcy of eating lunch with them. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed it too, until my eyes drifted to our table and the familiar trivia game was in play between Jacob and Louisa. Louisa's stack of cards looked bigger, so my guess was she was winning. Again.

I returned my gaze to Sebastian and ignored my moniker being said by a guy a few places in front of us in line, pointing me out to his friends. I shouldn't let that shit bother me. They were just words, and none of them would matter in a year. Sebastian, though, he would matter. Even some of my other friends might. "It's just good to be back."

His smile widened and we shifted up in line. The smell of chicken pot pie entered my nostrils as we moved closer and I inhaled deeper. It was one of my favorites.

When we made it to the front of the line, the lunch lady scooped food onto Sebastian's tray and handed it to him.

Next, she handed me one that was already prepared and sitting on the counter.

*Odd.*

I smiled and took the tray, following behind Sebastian to our table.

“Hey, Eden,” Jennifer, one of my friends from orchestra, said as I sat down next to her. Sebastian picked his usual—or what used to be his usual—seat across from me.

“Hey,” I said back.

A few people tossed each other looks before getting up. My smile fell, but I looked down at my tray and pretended not to notice.

“Ignore them,” Jennifer said, taking a bite of the pie.

Ignore them? Pretty sure *they* were trying to ignore *me*.

I glanced over my shoulder at Camden, who was still watching me intently. With the way we were positioned, with him to my right at the table behind me, he could see me while I couldn’t see him unless I turned. He wasn’t even eating. He still had a tray full of food.

*He was the one I should be trying to ignore.*

I turned to face in front of me, noting Sebastian’s disapproving frown. Picking up my fork, I spoke to Jennifer. “So, how have things been?”

“In orchestra?” she asked, not turning to face me. Louisa giggled and hopped up and down excitedly at the end of the table. Judging by Jacob’s somber look, she had just won the game.

“Yeah,” I answered. I was lying. I’d meant with her and the rest of the friends who’d abandoned me, but that wasn’t really fair. She wasn’t ignoring me now, and she’d continued talking to me in orchestra... when none of the jocks could see.

“It’s good. Mr. Hines is getting a little carried away with the practices, though. Yesterday’s ran three hours.”

“Whoa.” I scooped a piece of pot pie onto my fork and shoved it into my mouth.

“Yeah, I know. I wonder if he’ll want you to stay later today since you’ve been missing practice.”

She said it as if I *kept* missing practice. As if I was just like Paige. I swallowed and took a drink of water before replying. “Well, I’d be happy to make up the lost time. I’m just as committed as anyone else.”

“We know,” Sebastian interjected before the snootiness could go too far. It was obvious in my voice that I’d taken offense to Jennifer’s remark. The cello was my life. I wasn’t skipping practice on purpose, and I wouldn’t let them down. I was ready for the fall concert.

Jennifer glanced my way but didn’t say anything else. I could feel the blood filling my cheeks and just knew they were turning red. I didn’t want to be angry. I just wanted things the way they were before... but it couldn’t be that way, could it?

I picked at my pot pie and stilled when something caught my eye in it. My brows knitted together as I forked the piece of rubber and pulled it from the dish. A condom dangled on my fork in front of my face and a roar of laughter sounded behind me at Camden’s table.

I shot around and locked eyes with him again. Joshua and Trey were the ones laughing the loudest, but Camden just smiled. He’d been watching me because he’d been waiting for that. Waiting for one more stupid prank to go according to plan. How many days had he paid the lunch lady to set a tray aside for me, just in case I came to the cafeteria?

*I really was a joke to him.*

I dropped the fork and picked up my tray, not looking back as I stood and made my way toward the trash cans. Laughter spread through the cafeteria, Camden’s friends as its source. Laughter aimed at *me*.

*Don't run from them!* My brain screamed it at me, but my heart wouldn't listen. I don't know why I thought things might be different. When I'd been with Camden, when he'd taken me to his house... I thought maybe he was serious. Maybe he actually *was* interested in me, and all this was his fucked up way of showing it. The way he looked at me made me feel like there was more there than just getting off on tormenting me. Maybe he was even sorry.

*I'm an idiot.*

Correction... I'm a *joke*.

"Eden, you okay?" It was Sebastian. And *only* Sebastian. The rest of my 'friends' were still seated, avoiding looking at me.

Did I expect anything more?

"I'm fine." I dumped my tray and put it in the bin before turning to him.

He had a sorrowful expression that reeked of pity, but it wasn't necessary. The whole school was right. I had done this to myself. I looked around at all the eyes directed toward me, just waiting for something. Probably for me to cry. That was Camden's goal after all, wasn't it? To break me?

I turned toward Sebastian, my face a hardened mask of determination.

"We'll try again tomorrow."

“*W*hat do you mean I can’t play?”

Mr. Hines blew out a sigh and rubbed his temples. We’d just had a three hour practice. Despite my fingers going numb around the two hour mark, I’d given it my all today. I gave it my all every day, and now he was telling me I wouldn’t be in the fall concert.

*This couldn’t be happening.*

“Mr. Hines,” I said, shaking my head. “I know I missed practice, but I’m ready to go. I’ll stay later, I’ll come in on the weekend, I’ll—”

“It’s not practice, Eden. It’s your math grade... You’re failing.”

My chest throbbed with the beat of my heart. I could hear it in my ears, feel it pulsating in my veins.

*No.*

“Mr. Hines, I—”

“Do you think I’m happy about this, Eden? You’re first chair cello. Do you really think this is my decision? It’s school policy that includes all extracurriculars... What the hell were you thinking? Failing *math*.”

My eyes burned. A lump formed in my throat. My hands were trembling, and I knew if I spoke, my voice would too.

Camden finally got his wish. I was about to cry, and it had nothing to do with anything he'd done.

This was on me.

"I can get the grade up," I choked out. No tears had spilled, but the gleam over my eyes blurred Mr. Hines's image.

"Not in time for the concert. You're on suspension for a minimum of two weeks."

"Let me talk to Mrs. Morris."

"No." There was a bite to his tone that had my heart sinking. It was already decided.

*What would Berklee think?*

He sighed and picked up his bag, throwing it over his shoulder. It was only the two of us left in the auditorium. "Get the grade up, and you'll be able to play at the Christmas concert. You're going to practice with us, but Eden?"

I swallowed and rubbed underneath my eyes. "Yes?"

"You're still going to need to earn back your chair when it's all said and done, is that understood?"

I nodded. I had a limited number of words I could choke out before I'd lose it.

"Good." Mr. Hines gave my shoulder a squeeze. He was a hard man and an even harder conductor, but he knew what this meant to me. "I suggest you start bringing your cello home instead of hiding it here, then."

I nodded once again and took a strangled breath as Mr. Hines stepped around me. His leather shoes echoed on the marble stage, and a minute later the metal door clanged shut in the distance.

It was just me left, standing and staring out at the empty seats, knowing I'd be sitting in one next Saturday while the rest of the orchestra played without me. The rush I'd have

felt, the joy. It was gone. It was only me and a black hole of nothingness.

I felt like I was free falling. My arms were flailing, I was screaming, but nothing I did would keep me from splatting on the concrete. There was nothing to grab onto. No safety net. *No plan B.*

The metal door creaked open and slammed, and I wiped underneath my eyes before picking up my cello case and walking toward the door. I expected Mr. Hines to appear on the stage, telling me I needed to leave. That I couldn't just stand there all night, wallowing in pity.

He'd have been right.

It wasn't Mr. Hines who appeared. It was Hunter O'Reilly. I flinched back when I spotted him coming onto the stage. A red rose dangled from his fingers, and his blond shaggy hair was still damp from what I assumed was his after-practice shower.

"Hey," he said, his lips spreading into a small smile. "Football practice ran late today. I was afraid I'd miss you."

I brought the cello in front of me and took a step back. Tears still clung to my lashes, and I resisted the urge to brush them away.

He took a step closer, his brow furrowing when he noticed the tears, my flushed cheeks and tensed shoulders. All that time I spent trying to look strong, and it was all shattered in one moment.

"What do you want, Hunter?" I asked, giving in and wiping underneath my eyes while my other hand still held the cello. I sniffled and turned my head away from him, facing the seats. I couldn't stand to see the amusement I knew would be stenciled into that tanned, pretty boy face.

"I wanted to apologize."

*That didn't sound like he was amused.*

I turned back to him and tilted my head, taking in his

serious expression. His lips were in a tight line, and the rose was held loosely at his side.

“Today at lunch, that wasn’t funny. None of this shit is funny... I’m sorry, Eden. Truly. I don’t know why Cam is taking this so far.”

Hunter stepped toward me. My instincts told me to run the other way, but I kept my feet planted on the marble. Hunter was a snake. An asshole. A *jock*. Hell, a *rapist*. He was no better than the rest of them... but he was apologizing. And fuck, it felt good.

*Was this a trick?*

He paused less than a foot in front of me and sighed. “I’m going to talk to him.”

*Him. As in Camden.*

“You’re the one that pulled off my clothes. You—”

“I was pissed,” he said, that small smile disappearing. “After you called the cops, I’m not gonna lie, I wanted to get back at you.” He looked over my shoulder for a minute and shook his head. “But you’re right, that was way too far. I don’t know how I let Cam talk me into that.”

Talked him into it? So it really was all Camden’s idea?

*Why? Why did Camden hate me so much? Why did he want to hurt me?*

Maybe *this* was him, too. Maybe Camden sent Hunter to try and get to me because he hadn’t been able to himself. Or at least he *thought* he wasn’t able to. My eyes burned more, but this time it had nothing to do with my academic suspension.

He’d gotten to me. Just like he wanted. My body heated for him. My thoughts were invaded by him.

*I’d almost let him kiss me.*

“Did Camden talk you into raping Jade as well?” The venom that filtered in melted away some of my self-pity, and



I welcomed it. I didn't know what was going on, but I wasn't about to fall victim to Hunter O'Reilly.

He took a step back and ran a hand through his hair. "Jade and I hooked up, Eden. Seriously, please stop saying that."

"You can't hook up with someone who's unconscious."

His eyes narrowed. "Would you drop the good girl act? She was awake when she said yes. We're not dating, you don't need to worry about her—"

"I'm not fucking jealous of you having sex with Jade!" I was getting hysterical. The tears I had been holding back streamed down my cheeks, and I could no longer pinpoint why. I wasn't sad. I was pissed. Frustrated. Tired. Desperate. And alone. "How can you not see that what you did was wrong? You're pathetic. Jade's pathetic. Camden's pathetic. Your entire group is pathetic!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." My tone was sharp. Certain.

"Well, what are you, Eden? The school slut?" He laughed and waved his hands around, gesturing to the auditorium. "A fuckin' band geek?" Hunter tossed the rose to the marble and took another step back. "You know, I really did come here to say I was sorry, but you're not worth the trouble."

He turned and started walking away. His form was blurry, but I still stared after him.

I didn't like him. Hunter O'Reilly was the scum of the earth to me, and that couldn't possibly change.

But he said he'd talk to Camden. He said he was sorry. Admitted that it'd gone too far.

What if he *wasn't* lying?

What if he could stop it?

"Hunter," I called after him, my feet still glued to the floor.

He paused and glanced over his shoulder. "What?" His face was hardened with anger, and his voice matched it. Or maybe it was just annoyance.

Two words. That's what it would take to calm Hunter's anger, to get him to pity me. He wasn't like Camden. He was an asshole, but an asshole with a conscience. He truly didn't see his actions with Jade as wrong, and my accusation made him livid. He had almost the same amount of power as Camden. He had influence.

*He could stop this.*

All I needed to do was say two words.

"I'm sorry." They tasted bitter on my tongue. My throat closed up as if rejecting them. As if I was being punished by not being allowed to speak any more.

He sighed and turned before walking back over to me. His face had softened, and he tucked his hands into his letter jacket's pockets.

I swiped the back of my hand over my cheeks and met him halfway. This was an all new low for me, one I never saw myself resorting to. I was about to seek out help from Hunter. I had nothing else to lose but everything to gain.

"I just want it to stop," I whispered, dropping my cello case. The crash echoed around the auditorium, but not nearly loud enough to drown out my shame. "Please, stop with the name calling. The pranks. The mind games. Please, Hunter, please just leave me alone."

No matter how many times I wiped away the tears, new ones surfaced. A flood gate had opened and my deepest fear in that moment was that it'd never close.

Hunter sighed and put his hands on my shoulder. I tensed, my body screaming at me to pull back, but I refrained. My body eventually relaxed, and I fell into his chest, wrapping my arms around him and crying onto his letter jacket.

"It's all right, Eden," he said, rubbing his hand along my back.

It felt good. Damn, I hated to admit it. The shred of kind-

ness, the reassurance, I needed it more than I needed to breathe. That boulder that had been weighing me down had finally crushed me.

*And Hunter O'Reilly was the one there to pick up the pieces.*

What. The. Fuck.

I cried harder onto his chest and sank my nails into his jacket. He was warm. He didn't ignite heat in me like Camden did, but he was comfortable. Safer. Nicer. Maybe I'd been wrong about him.

"I'm going to talk to my friends, all right?" He ran his hand up the back of my neck, making a trail of goosebumps, before he reached my ponytail and tugged it loose. My hair fell into a veil around my face and I leaned back to peer at him. My hair tie was on the ground.

"You'll tell them to stop?"

"Yeah," he said, brushing away my tears with his knuckles. He gave me a faint smile and fingered a lock of my hair. "Of course."

It hit me all at once. The closeness of our bodies, his touch, the way he was looking at me. It swallowed the comfort I'd received from him only moments ago and had me blushing and taking a step back. My skin itched at the memory of his touch, begging me to scratch the sensation away.

"Thanks." I pulled my hair over my left shoulder and tucked the loose strands behind my ear. "I should probably get home."

His smile fell a little, but he nodded. "Sure, let me walk you out." Picking up my cello case, he started walking from the auditorium with me right behind him.

We made it to the parking lot before I remembered my trig notes were in my locker. I had a test on Monday and needed to be studying every minute I was capable.

*I was getting my chair back.*

“Shit,” I said, pausing and glancing toward the school. The auditorium wasn’t connected, and the school locked at five o’clock. It was almost six.

“What?” Hunter peered over his shoulder at me before following my gaze.

“I just... I forgot my trig notes. I really have to study.” I shook my head, trying not to hate myself too badly, and continued on toward my car. “Damn it.”

This carelessness was what got me in this position in the first place.

*Do better, Eden.*

I looked back when I realized Hunter hadn’t continued with me.

“I have an idea,” he said, holding my cello case out to me. I took it, my eyes narrowed in confusion. “Go put that in your car, then meet me by the front door.”

“What are you—”

“Just trust me.” He gave me a wink before breaking out into a jog toward the school.

I watched him for a moment before turning and heading back toward my car. I had no idea what he was about to do, but if it granted me access to my locker, then I was all for it. Grateful, even.

I made it to my car and stuffed the cello in the backseat before speed walking over to the school. Hunter wasn’t there.

I waited by the door for ten minutes or so before Hunter came jogging around the corner, something in his hand.

“Got ‘em.” He slowed to walk when he had just about reached me.

“Got what?”

“The keys to the school.” He flashed me a bright smile before holding up a keyring. It jingled as he shook it.

My jaw dropped and I followed him to the door. I glanced

around, as if waiting for someone to come around the corner any minute, demanding Hunter give the keys back. “How did you get those?”

“I have my ways.” He glanced at me and winked. The lock disengaged, and he pushed the door open, sweeping his hand out in front of him like some grand gesture. “After you.”

This had been one of the worst days of my life. Less than an hour ago, I’d just been delivered soul crushing news, I’d broken down and cried, and still, I found myself smiling.

I rushed into the school, my eyes darting around in case anyone was still there. Teachers and janitors still had access to the school, even after the doors were locked. Was that how Hunter got the keys? It looked like a janitor’s ring he was holding. Whatever, I didn’t even care. A surge of adrenaline rushed through me as I made my way to my locker.

I gently lifted the handle and creaked the door open as quietly as possible. Hunter chuckled behind me. “You’re adorable, Thompson.”

“Shut up,” I whispered, only kidding. I looked back at him and smiled so that he knew I didn’t mean it. That I was grateful for this. For the kindness in general.

*How far did I have to fall to be thankful for Hunter O’Reilly’s existence?*

I grabbed my notes and textbook and shoved them into my bag before glancing around again and shutting the locker. We walked together out of the school, my pace noticeably more hurried than Hunter’s.

When we made it outside, I turned back to him and beamed. “Okay, really, where did you get the keys?”

“A gentleman never tells,” he joked, turning his back to me to lock the door.

When he faced me again, he gave my shoulder a pat. “Stay tough, Eden. Everything’s going to be all right. I gotta get these back, but you’ll think about homecoming, yeah?”

My smile fell at the mention of the dance, and my first instinct was to tell him no... but I didn't. I found myself nodding. He gave me one last smile before walking away.

"Hunter," I called after him.

He paused and glanced back.

"Thank you."

With the lift of his hand, he gave me a salute and kept walking.

“*I*n five hundred feet, the destination is on your right.”

I gunned the Jeep, the engine revving, and passed a few more houses. *Rich* houses. In a nice neighborhood. Somehow, that heated my blood even more.

“Arrived.”

I jerked the wheel, veering the Jeep to the side of the road, and slammed on the brakes. My body jolted forward with the sudden stop, and when I slammed back against the seat, I shoved the Jeep into park.

A two-story, Georgian-style, red brick home was just to my right. I pulled up the address Paige had texted me to make sure I had it right.

*Yup.*

Eden’s family had money? She drove a *Corolla*.

I glanced back down at my phone’s screen and tapped the back button on Paige’s message. Underneath her name was Hunter’s and his last message to me. The one that had me speeding over here without any sort of plan.

**You owe me 100.**

The momentary confusion faded, and my eyes narrowed on the house. I grabbed my keys from the ignition and yanked open the door.

*You owe me 100.*

One hundred dollars. Today, Hunter had told me he was going to ask Eden to homecoming, despite me telling him to stay away from her. Underneath, my blood had simmered, but I'd just laughed. I'd bet him a hundred dollars she wouldn't give him the time of day. She wouldn't even consider it. How could she? She hated him. She could see past the superficial charm, the smile, the popularity, the money. She seemed to be looking past it just fine with me.

I was about to lose my fucking mind.

I threw myself out of the Jeep and slammed the door. A few flowerpots sat by the entrance, and I had to restrain myself from kicking them. A vision skated through my mind of picking one up and smashing it on the ground. It would've felt good. Better if it had been Hunter's head.

*No.* He was my best friend.

*She* was the problem.

I gave several angry knocks and stepped back from the door, running a hand through my hair and taking a deep breath.

*What was I doing here?*

The door opened, and I fisted my hands at my sides and stood taller. A million insults sat on my tongue, ready to fire as soon as I spotted her, but Eden wasn't the one who appeared in the doorway. It was a boy—maybe ten or eleven. He had blond hair and fair skin that looked nothing like hers, but still, I immediately came to the conclusion that it was her brother.

*Right, she had the whole close-knit family thing. Of course she wasn't home alone.*

"H-hi," I said, my fists unclenching. "Is your sister home?"



I smiled and tried not to look so threatening. He seemed to buy it because he opened the door wider and stepped to the side. “She’s in her room.”

*Her room. And where was that?*

I stepped into the foyer and glanced around. Her family had money, for sure. The real silk curtains and solid wood floors would’ve hinted at it if the Georgian-style and size hadn’t. But it didn’t have that same rich feel that my house had. It was homier, with pictures hung all over the walls, and a couch in the living room to my left that actually looked like it had been sat on.

“Hello.”

My eyes snapped to a man walking down the hall. He was for the most part bald, but his facial features resembled the kid’s.

*Stepdad.*

“Hello, sir,” I said, extending my hand.

He shook it when he reached me and gave a warm smile. “Roman.”

“He’s Eden’s friend,” Little Brother piped in.

“Ah, the poet.” Roman’s eyebrows rose and he smiled wider.

*What?*

“Camden, right?”

I blinked a few times and managed a nod. He knew my name, he knew about the notes. She’d told him about me?

*He picked her up from your house yesterday, idiot.*

“Well, Camden, it’s nice to meet you. Eden’s upstairs if you want to head up. Did she know you were coming over?”

*Okay, seriously, what the fuck?*

“Uh, not really.”

His smile turned sad. “She’s studying, but she could really use a friend. It’s been a tough day.”

Because of *me*. It's been a tough day because of me. But he doesn't know that, does he?

"Thanks," I muttered, and stepped around him to the stairs. "Nice to meet you both."

"You too!" Little Brother said. I hadn't even caught his name.

My anger had mostly dissipated by the time I made it to the top of the stairs. I was mostly confused. Yesterday, when he'd picked her up, she must've complained about me. She must've told her family about everything I'd done, all the shit going on at school. They knew *something* was wrong, so if she hadn't told them it was me... why?

Better question, why did it matter?

My eyes narrowed when I set sight on her door. It stood out with a wooden, purple "E" nailed to the front.

The anger was back.

\* \* \*

*Eden*

SINE IS OPPOSITE OVER ADJACENT. Cosine is adjacent over oppos—no opposite over adjacent... no, that's sine.

I turned over my notes to see what the correct answer was and ran a frustrated hand through my hair. This was fucking impossible, and it was only the very basics. By the time I was done with this, I'd be bald.

With a groan, I chucked my notes into my textbook and slammed it shut. This was hopeless. *I* was hopeless.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

There were several more days before Monday when I had to take the test. I'd get it, I just had to keep trying. I couldn't quit now. I'd take a break and practice one of my pieces for the fall concert... the one I wouldn't be playing in.

*Ugh.*

I still had my eyes closed, still trying to keep myself from flinging my trig book across the room, when my door flung into my wall.

My eyes flew open and I snapped my head in that direction, ready to yell at Jordan to knock first.

It wasn't Jordan.

It was *him*.

My eyes widened and lips parted as Camden stepped into the room and swung the door closed with his heel. His eyes never left me, and neither did the threat in them. The malice.

I gave my head a slight shake and neutralized my expression. Then I hardened it.

"What do you want?" I asked, jerking my textbook back open and pretending him being here hadn't caught me by surprise. Did my parents even know? If they did, they wouldn't just let me be in my bedroom alone with a boy... I don't think. The opportunity had yet to present itself.

He stalked over to me, slow and angry like. A tension filled the space, condensing the air going into my lungs and making it harder to breathe. I kept my gaze down at the notes, intent on ignoring him, but his presence wasn't one I could ignore. It used to be, before all of this started. I hadn't thought much of Camden at all, and he'd never known I'd existed. One party, the only one I'd been to, changed everything.

"You know, I thought Easy Eden was more of an ironic nickname, with you being a virgin and all. But I guess it fits you pretty well. You're not used to a lot of attention, are you, Thompson?"

Once again, my lips parted and eyes snapped to him. It wasn't shock this time, it was disbelief. "Get out," I said, my voice as cold as his.

"Excuse me?"

I stood from the bed in one angry jerk and squared my shoulders in front of him. We were close enough that my head was tilted up to look at him, but I didn't feel any smaller. Just the opposite. I felt like I'd grown six inches.

"You're not going to come to *my* house and talk to me like that. I'm done with your bullshit, Camden. One day, everyone else is going to be done with it too, and you're going to be that guy, that forty-year-old man that keeps talking about his high school football days to his one loser friend. And I can't wait to see it." A bitter laugh erupted from my throat. "Actually, scratch that, I won't be around. But *you* will."

I was feeling proud of myself. Strong. Tall. Vicious. Almost as vicious as him. His face remained hard, his eyes narrowed and jaw clenched, but there had to be some hurt underneath. He had to see a sliver of truth to my words. He couldn't think his days as king of Lincoln High were unlimited.

He could make my life as miserable as he wanted, but he'd always end up losing in the end. His entire pathetic group would.

Camden inched his way closer until the material of his jeans grazed the hem of the pajama shorts I'd put on after I'd gotten home. My legs heated with his warmth, and I caught his scent.

At first, I thought he was trying to intimidate me. That he wanted me to back away, but when I searched his eyes, I spotted something else. Something I couldn't quite figure out.

He placed his palms on my shoulders and pushed, sending me stumbling backward and falling to my bed. I caught myself with my hands on the mattress, but before I could stand back up, Camden was there. He shoved me down

and pinned my shoulders to the mattress, situating himself on top of me.

I was rendered speechless. My lips were parted, but the only thing that came from my mouth was flustered puffs of air.

He shifted so that his boner pressed into me, and I turned my face from him to hide the fact that my cheeks were heating.

I should've screamed.

One cry for help and my parents would be crashing through my door. I could picture Roman throwing Camden off me. My mom hugging me while we called the police, filed a restraining order. Called the school to ensure I wouldn't be near him. All it would take was one scream.

I stayed silent.

Camden nuzzled my neck, inhaling a deep breath before letting it exhale over my ear. Goosebumps rose all over my body, but the area his breath touched concentrated the tingling sensation. "Do you think you know me, Eden?"

Yes, was my initial, stubborn thought, but I quickly realized that was inaccurate. I didn't know him at all, and that's the part that scared me... but it was also the part that excited me.

"Camden," I whispered, trying to simmer whatever rage-fueled need was happening inside of him.

He groaned into my ear, shifting himself and rubbing his hard-on against me in the process. "I love it when you say my name."

I didn't have a chance to regret the failed attempt at calming him. He shifted again, and again. He gently thrust his hips into mine, rubbing me in a spot that kept all my protests perched on my tongue, sitting there, waiting for me to make the call. Waiting for it to feel bad, for me to feel violated.

I *should've* felt violated. I hadn't asked for this. I hadn't wanted this... or maybe I had. I didn't know. What I did know was that my shorts were too thin, his smell was too delicious, and his warmth bathed me like a bonfire on a chilly October night.

It felt too good to tell him to stop. To even *want* him to stop.

Camden's breath quickened. It was deeper, heavier. The audible sounds of his desire heated me even more. The tension in the room moved to my core, packing itself into the bundle of nerves Camden kept hitting. It twisted itself tighter and sent a wave through my body with each round of friction.

My head was still turned away from him. My eyes were closed, and I couldn't force myself to open them and look his way. I was frozen beneath him. Frozen, while also on fire.

His lips pressed against my ear, kissing it before sucking my earlobe into his mouth and nipping it.

A rush of air blew over my lips and I squirmed, not to get away, but to get closer. I'm not sure he knew that, though. I had no idea what Camden knew. Maybe he could feel the desire pouring from me as much as I could see it pouring from him.

Or maybe he didn't care.

His lips travelled my jawline before dipping to my neck while his hands ran down my sides. He slipped underneath my T-shirt and cupped my breast, squeezing and jerking his hips harder against me.

"Fuck," he whispered, sending hot breath over my already inflamed neck. Every part of me he touched burned.

Pressure built in my chest, and I couldn't hold it in any longer. A soft moan vibrated my throat, throwing the last bit of chance I had at protesting out the window.

He had me, and he knew it.

His hand squeezing my breast paused. He pulled it from my shirt and lifted off me and rested on his forearms. His hips had stopped moving.

I thought maybe it was over, but a moment later he gripped my jaw and forced my face toward him. My eyes opened wide and muscles tensed.

“Don’t fight it.”

The command held an authority to it that the stubborn side of me immediately wanted to challenge. I took a breath, not sure of what I was going to say, but it was stolen from me.

Camden’s lips crashed to mine. He used both of his hands to cup my face, and it was a tossup whether he was doing it out of passion or to hold me in place.

I couldn’t bring myself to care.

My eyes closed and my hands came up to his chest.

His kiss was rough. Brutal.

His tongue sought entrance into my mouth, and I parted my lips for him. No, I parted my lips for *me*. I wanted this. I wanted to feel good, to feel desired. I didn’t want to be enemies with Camden, and I didn’t want him to hate me anymore. If he ever had.

I wanted peace. Peace felt like ecstasy. Or maybe it was the tongue inside my mouth, or the hands holding me in place, or the bulge in Camden’s pants pressing against me.

Or maybe it was all of it.

I sucked in a deep breath through my nose, just realizing I hadn’t been breathing. It wasn’t the priority it typically was. My body didn’t want oxygen as much as it wanted Camden.

*Camden.* I was kissing Camden Knight.

A knock sounded at the door, breaking the spell. My body went rigid and eyes popped open.

Camden rolled off me and sat up, scooting himself farther up on the bed away from me. My heart skipped and face

flushed as I sat up catching my breath and yanking my fingers through my tangled hair.

“Yeah?” I flinched at the breathiness of my voice.

The door opened and my mom appeared. Her brows were knitted together, and she looked from Camden to me.

“Dad mentioned we had company.” She turned to Camden and nodded. “Hello.”

Her words were light, but her tone was not. She knew what we were doing. She could probably sense the itch I had to straighten my clothes and see the obvious nervousness in the way I shifted. And there was no telling what I looked like.

“Hi,” Camden said, not standing. He was bent over, forearms resting on his knee. I blushed when I realized what he was doing—hiding his boner.

My mom turned back to me without so much as introducing herself. It was a little rude, but justified given the circumstances. “Dinner’s almost ready. Will Camden be joining us?”

I knew my mom. That question was a formality. The only appropriate answer at that time was *no*. Thankfully, Camden caught onto that.

“I’ve actually gotta go.” He stood and cleared his throat. “See you tomorrow,” he said to me before awkwardly making his way toward the door. My mom stepped to the side and didn’t take her eyes off me as he left.

“What are you doing in here with the door closed?”

I looked down at my feet and shrugged. “I didn’t know it was supposed to be open.”

“Eden.”

I glanced up and sagged my shoulders when I met my mom’s disapproving stare. She was a really great mom. She cared for me, loved me. But she was not someone I wanted to disappoint.

*One more area of my life Camden poisoned.*



That wasn't fair to think that, though, and I knew it. My stomach sank with shame because of it.

Why did I keep making things harder for myself?

"I'm sorry, Mom."

She sighed, and her face softened. It was still disappointment, but less intense. Less angry.

"We'll talk about it after dinner."

Her Corolla pulled up to the school at the same time it always did. Just a few minutes before the bell. It was hard to say if she did that to avoid me or if it'd been a habit of hers before I'd noticed her. How many times had she walked past me before, hiding that body underneath frumpy clothes?

She hadn't wanted the attention. She hadn't wanted to be noticed.

She couldn't hide anymore. Not from me.

Her car door opened and she stepped out a moment later, pulling her bag out of the car with her. Her hair was in a ponytail again today. Last night it hadn't been. I'd had the opportunity to run my hands through it and pull, and I hated myself for not taking it. Her fucking mom had interrupted too soon, and I'd missed my chance.

I'd have another one.

A hand waved in front of my face and I blinked, focusing my stare on Hunter, who was standing beside me.

"Did you miss everything I just said?"

"What?"

“Party tonight at my house. You in?”

I nodded and went back to staring at Eden who had by then reached the sidewalk. He didn't need to tell me there'd be a party tonight. It was Friday, and we had an away game. There was always a party at Hunter's house on game day, no matter how late it was and whether we won or not. His parents were cool like that. Well, Sherry was.

Trey whistled when Eden walked up, and her head turned in our direction. Her gaze zeroed in on me.

“Hey, Easy Eden,” Joshua mocked.

She flicked her gaze toward him, then back to me. Why? Did she want me to tell him to stop? She couldn't think it was that simple. That she could kiss me and give me a massive case of blue balls, and everything would just go away. The fun would stop.

*Don't be so naive, Eden.*

“That's enough,” Hunter snapped.

All conversation came to a halt, and all eyes, including mine, turned to Hunter.

*What the fuck was he doing?*

He took a step away from the group and turned to address all of us. “I'm tired of this shit. Eden is a nice girl, and it's time to leave her alone.”

His eyes roamed everyone except for me. A few people turned to look at me, but I kept my stare on Hunter. This was my game. Everyone knew it, and he was trying to end it.

He didn't like her. He wanted to fuck her. And the only reason he wanted to fuck her was because I told him she was easy. I'd made her look like a slut, and sluts just so happened to be Hunter's type. Except, there was an abundance of girls that would sleep with Hunter, so why her? Why now?

Just... why?

I glanced over at Eden, who had also paused when Hunter said something. Her lips were parted, and she was

staring at him. Her wide eyes blinked, and she must've felt my gaze on her because she looked my way. She scowled before turning and heading toward the school.

She fucking *scowled*. Because I wasn't her protector. Hunter was.

*Why?*

When I turned back to him, he was eyeing Eden's ass just before she walked through the school door. A shit-eating grin was sketched on his face.

"Well that was cute," I said, pretending that little charade hadn't lit my bones on fire.

His grin widened and he waggled his eyebrows. "Seriously, dude. You owe me a hundred bucks. She wants it."

A few people around exchanged looks and laughed, realizing that had been an act. Big bad Hunter wasn't really mad at them.

*Pussies.*

I didn't answer him. If I did, I'd say something I'd regret. I was sure of it.

He addressed the group again. "Really, though, guys. Time to chill. It's getting old."

"I'm not done."

All heads turned my way, and Hunter's smile fell. He wouldn't challenge me in front of the group, but it was clear he didn't approve. I didn't blame him. There was no reason to keep picking on Eden. She was all used up, and she didn't react in a way that was any fun for the rest of them. But she reacted against me, and there was this part of me worried that if she wasn't retaliating against me, fighting me, she wouldn't have any more interest in me. As it was, I had her. No one had the balls to go after her while she was my target, and it was only a matter of time before someone realized what a catch she was. I was certain her friend, what's-his-face, already had. And now maybe Hunter, too.

Shit, *Hunter* had the balls to go after her.

"All right... Nevermind then." Hunter bit the side of his cheek, something he did when he was frustrated, and waved his hand to dismiss the attention everyone had on him.

Conversation started back up after an awkward pause, and Hunter came to sit on the bench beside me.

"You trying to ruin my chances?" He nudged my knee and chuckled to try and lighten the mood. It didn't work.

"Let it go."

He nodded and rubbed at the back of his neck. All I had to do was tell him she meant something to me. That I *hadn't* used her for sex, that I'd *lied* about her, that she *was* someone I was genuinely interested in. If I did that, then he'd drop it. He'd walk away. He wouldn't see it as me being greedy with my girls or me wanting to be an asshole. The problem was, if I admitted it to him, I'd be admitting it out loud to myself, and I wasn't ready to do that.

It would take no time for word to spread about an actual relationship with Eden and me. But then what? I'd lose interest. She'd lose interest. It wouldn't be exciting anymore. We'd be as boring as any other couple.

*Couple? Was my mind really going there?*

I felt eyes burning into me on my right, and I turned to meet Paige's stare. She immediately looked away, blushing at being caught. I took in her too short skirt and recognized it as one I'd seen on Leilani a dozen times.

*That is the shit I'd end up with if I dated Eden. Band geek turned wannabe gossip-girl. Pass.*

I rolled my eyes and stood as the bell rang. I wouldn't see Hunter until after third period when he met me to walk to English. Normally, it was annoying to spend time with people who weren't my friends, but today, I was grateful we didn't take the same classes.

Today, I needed a break.

“Later,” Hunter called at my back as I walked toward the school door. He was waiting on Trey to finish kissing his girlfriend before class like he was going off to war. It made me want to puke, so one more reason I was glad I didn’t have first period with them.

I lifted my hand without looking back and gave a half-hearted wave.

Stepping into the school, I took a deep breath. I was still angry, but at least I didn’t have to try so hard to hide it now. The hallway was loud with conversation and slamming lockers. They parted for me like the Red Sea, never wanting to be the one to get in my way. The weird thing was, they didn’t even know me. They barely saw me at all. I was Camden Knight, football quarterback. Prom king. The guy nobody wanted to fuck with.

And that was all.

Fuck, I was being such a little bitch today.

I snatched my notebook from my locker and headed to calculus.

About halfway through Mrs. Morris’s lecture, I gave up trying to pay attention. And that was saying something because math held my attention more than most things. My eyes glossed over and Eden appeared in my mind, biting her lip while writhing underneath me and trying to hide the fact that she loved me grinding on her clit. That moan that had come from her, the way she said my name... it was getting me hard just thinking about it.

I glanced down to make sure my dick wasn’t too noticeable in my jeans, then laughed when I realized how fucking hilarious it would be if I got caught getting a boner in calculus.

“Something funny, Mr. Knight?”

I looked up to see Mrs. Morris and the rest of the class staring at me. I guess my laughter was a little too

*distracting*. You could thank Eden Thompson for that, everyone.

“Lots of things are funny, *Mrs. Morris*.” I drawled her name in a way I prayed would make her uncomfortable. She was a youngish teacher. Maybe early thirties. This was my first year being in her class, and if she wasn’t such a good person with a ring on her finger, I probably would’ve tried to bang her. Huh, guess I do have some morality.

*What about Sherry?*

Mrs. Morris eyed me warily for a split second longer before clearing her throat and letting my disruption go. She went back to the lesson on limits and so did the rest of class.

My jaw clenched as my mind moved from Eden to Sherry. What the hell had I been thinking there? That was reckless. For both of us. Hunter could’ve been the one to walk in on us instead of Eden.

I wonder if *my* mom would care if I found out she was fucking my best friend.

I flipped to a blank page in my notebook and clicked my pen. I needed a new quote. Something juicy. Something that made it clear Eden was mine, and that I’d lose my shit if she went to the dance with Hunter. I didn’t need the note to say that, but it was kind of fun. She had to have already known I wouldn’t want her going anywhere with my best friend. Or anyone else. Hell, if I thought the flute player stood a chance, I’d have gotten rid of him a long time ago.

I tapped my pen on my desk as I searched my mind for something. The last one I’d written, I hadn’t given to her. I’d been too pissed off knowing Hunter was slipping her a note of his own.

‘There’s beggary in love that can be reckoned.’

It was a good one, but kind of a moot point being as she didn’t think she needed my help anymore. She thought she had *Hunter’s*. There was no reason to beg me for shit... except

maybe that picture. She really hated the thought of it getting out, and talk about the bra and panties one was dying down. It would be a really great time to spice things up.

But then, what if she didn't forgive me? What if she went out with Hunter just to spite me? A fake nude of Eden wasn't something that would put him off. It'd make him want her more.

So, scratch that. I needed a new line.

I stared up at the ceiling tiles and let my mind wander through Shakespeare's plays. Othello was my favorite, and I could quote several lines without looking them up, but I was coming up blank on anything that would fit our current predicament. There was a line from Henry VI that was sticking out to me, but I couldn't remember the exact words. Something about winning over a woman who's beautiful. Wooing her maybe?

I dug my phone from my pocket and held it under my desk, out of Mrs. Morris's line of view. After pulling up Google, I typed in some key words. A smile pulled my lips at the first thing that popped up.

'She is beautiful, and therefore to be wooed; She is woman, and therefore to be won.'

*Perfect.*

I shoved my phone back in my pocket and scribbled the words onto the paper.

"Mr. Knight." Mrs. Morris's annoyed voice broke through my concentration just as I finished up the last letter.

I flicked my gaze up to see her standing with her arms crossed, her eyes shooting daggers at me. "Yes?"

"Could you tell me what the limit of this function is, please?"

She waved to the board, but I let my gaze linger on her a moment longer before roaming my eyes over the problem. I'd glanced through the textbook last night, and today's stuff



was pretty basic. It helped that she'd even graphed the function. It was a cute attempt to embarrass me, though.

"It's one."

Her eyes widened for a moment, and she smoothed her hands over her skirt before nodding.

The bell rang, saving her from having to say anything. Shuffling notes and bags zipping filled the classroom.

"All right, guys. Have a good weekend." Mrs. Morris stood out of the way as people packed their things and left. As I walked by her, I made sure she saw me look her up and down suggestively, my lips tilted in a smirk.

"Camden," she called, after I'd already started walking away.

I paused. "Yes, Mrs. Morris?"

"Even if you know the material, it distracts others around you when you're doing other things... And stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?"

"You know what." Her voice was serious, but there was an underlying nervousness to her tone.

My smirk deepened before I continued out of the classroom. She wouldn't budge, but it was still fun to mess with her. Not nearly as fun as it was messing with Eden.

*Is that all it is?*

I put my hand in my pocket and ran my fingers over the folded note. No. There was more to it than that, but it was hard to tell what it was exactly. I'd never had a girlfriend or anything like that. I'd never wanted one. I liked to chase, but only for sport. As soon as I caught them, I tossed them back. I was almost *afraid* it would be that way with Eden.

My next two classes dragged on. Every time I glanced at the clock thinking it was almost time to go, it was two minutes since the last time I looked. I started thinking about lunch in second period and wondered if she'd show up in the

cafeteria again. I'd almost forgotten about the arrangement I'd had with the lunch lady to give Eden a 'special' tray. It had been a real mood lifter after Hunter pissing me off.

*Finally*, the bell rang in third period. English was next and Hunter would be waiting for me at the lockers. My AP history class was on the opposite side of the school, so it always took me a few minutes to get there.

Hunter had a foot propped against a locker, hands in his pockets, when I arrived.

"Sup, nerd," he joked, shoving off the locker.

I flipped him off but smiled. "How was preschool? You get your puzzle done?"

"Nope, I was too busy fuckin' your mom."

I laughed but controlled myself from getting too carried away. He had no idea just how funny that was to me. Damn, I was a bad friend.

*Yeah, you really are.*

I swallowed down the guilt and continued down the hall with Hunter at my side.

"You ready for tonight?" he asked.

He was talking about the game. We were playing against one of the toughest teams in our division, and the only quarterback that had a better passing record than me. I hadn't even thought about it.

"Yeah, you?"

"Hell yeah, I am. Those pussies don't have shit on us."

I forced a smile. I couldn't care less, but he acted like it was his whole world. It *was* his whole world. We hardly talked about anything but football. We watched the Dallas game every Sunday at his house, the OU game on Saturdays. It was cool and all, but sometimes I wondered if it was genuine, or if he ever thought about things. Things we couldn't talk to each other about, like his dad being a piece of shit or the fact that his mom had a habit of getting around.

*The fact that he has a shitty best friend.*

"We've got the best running back in the league, so I'm sure we'll do just fine."

"Aww, you're so sweet," he winked and laughed. He was like that. You couldn't compliment him without him deflecting. Or at least, *I* couldn't.

The bell rang just as we walked through the door. My eyes locked onto Eden, but today, she didn't look up. Her hand was on her forehead and she was propped up on her elbow, staring down at a mound of notes. A textbook was underneath it, and as I stopped by her desk, I glanced over it to see what it was. Math. She'd been studying it when I got to her house last night, too.

"You trying to memorize the book?"

She jumped in her seat, her hand crashing on the desk. When she saw it was me, her eyes narrowed.

I could feel Mr. Gordan at my back, waiting for me to sit down so he could start class. I smiled at Eden and pulled the note from my pocket before tossing it onto her desk.

"For you, my love."

She rolled her eyes and shoved it into her bag.

She really was mad at me. Hmm.

Showing Mr. Gordan mercy, I strolled to the back of the class and took my seat. Hunter had his notebook open and was writing something that I highly doubted was Mr. Gordan's lecture notes. I leaned over to take a peek.

You look beautiful today.

Give me a fucking break. He glanced over at me and lifted his brows, as if challenging me to say something. Instead, I rolled my eyes and leaned back in my seat. She wouldn't fall for that shit anyway. No way in hell.

Still, the sound of the paper ripping as he tore it from his notebook had my jaw ticking. He folded it up and passed it

to the person in front of me before pointing at Eden. He knew better than to hand it to me.

The note travelled up to her while Mr. Gordan pretended not to notice. He had to be so tired of our shit.

I could only see the back of Eden's head, so I didn't get to see her expression. Would she know it was Hunter who passed it to her? Could she tell it wasn't my handwriting? I'd basically called her beautiful already, so if she didn't get anything from *that*, she wouldn't get anything from *this*.

She better not get anything from this.

My back stiffened when her arms moved in a way that let me know she was unfolding the note. Mine, she'd shoved in her bag. After a few seconds, she glanced back at Hunter, her cheeks red.

*What the fuck?*

She mouthed 'thank you' and turned back toward the front. I gripped my pen so tightly it nearly snapped, and I threw open my notebook to a blank page. Today, I'd take notes. If for no other reason than Hunter not feeling the need to talk to me.

"Hey." He reached over and tapped my shoulder with the back of his hand.

I sighed and turned his way to give him a pointed stare.

"That's how you do it," he whispered, a grin on his face.

He really did think this was a game.

"Have fun with the chlamydia," I whispered back.

His eyebrows pinched and he frowned. "Do you have chlamydia?"

I shrugged. "Not anymore."

He gave a nod like that was actually something he needed to consider. Not the fact that him going after her clearly pissed me off. But, of course, that didn't count. I'd told him Eden and I were done hooking up weeks ago. That she wanted him and was jealous of Jade which was why, in an

angry fit, she'd accused him of rape. I'd told him she was a slut. I'd even told him that the notes I was giving her were taunts because I liked messing with her. This shit right here? It was my fault.

Fuck.

About halfway through class, Hunter leaned over. "Cam."

He gestured for me to come toward him, and I did, angling my ear so he could whisper near it. I assumed whatever he had to say, he didn't want anyone else to hear.

"I think we should ease up on Thompson. Yesterday, after practice, I went to the auditorium and she was crying."

I pulled back and narrowed my eyes at him. Lying? Really, Hunter, you're going to resort to that?

"I'm serious," he whispered, glancing at the girl eavesdropping in front of him. She straightened back toward the front, but my guess was she was still listening. Oh well. Plenty of worse things have been said about Eden.

He turned back to me, and his hard expression made me question if maybe he wasn't lying.

"Why was she crying?"

He shrugged. "I think she's just tired of it. She asked me to talk to you, and honestly, I don't know why you're hating on her so much."

"I'm not," I whispered through gritted teeth.

*Now who was lying?*

"Just ease up, okay? I really do want a shot." He flicked his gaze toward her, then back to me. "She's cute."

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

"What if I'm not done with her?"

"Done with her how?"

"Done sleeping with her."

It was his turn to be pissed. He shook his head and scoffed. "Whatever."

With that, he relaxed back into his chair and ignored me the rest of class. When the bell rang, he grabbed his stuff and jumped from his desk. With the way he moved, I knew better than to go after him. He was pissed, and I understood why. But he'd get over it... in time.

For once, Eden and her friend left the classroom before me. I was slow getting up from my desk. Slow enough that I had a chance to creep behind them. They headed outside—unsurprising after what happened yesterday—and I followed.

At first, I wasn't sure I'd actually confront her, but the more I walked, the more my anger intensified. If she'd just tell Hunter to fuck off, then I wouldn't have to tell him to stand down. She *should* be telling him to fuck off. She'd said it to me multiple times, and I'd been the one on the verge of bringing her to orgasm the day before.

When I made it outside, they were already seated on a bench. Both turned to face me. Both glared.

What was she even pissed about? After last night, I would've thought she'd develop a bit of a soft heart for me, but that didn't seem to be the case.

I stopped just short of the bench and glared right back. "I need to talk to you."

"No thanks."

"I'm not asking."

Her friend stood, but instead of leaving like he should've, he put himself between me and Eden and jutted his chin.

*Aw, cute.*

"If she wants you to leave her alone, you need to respect that."

I chuckled and relaxed by a hair. "That's a little *tame* coming from a tough guy like you." Sarcasm dripped in my tone.

"Go away, Camden." Eden crossed her arms over her chest. Her tone didn't suggest anger. No, it was too soft for

that. It was more like resignation. My head tilted as I glanced her way. That same textbook was sitting beside her, and she almost looked... sad.

“No.”

“She said go away!” Flute Player stepped forward and gave me a shove. I hadn’t been expecting it. I’d been too busy studying Eden, so I stumbled back a step.

*Bad move.*

After I recovered from the shock, I lunged toward him and grabbed him by the collar. I lifted him a few inches, and couldn’t help but smile when he whimpered. “What the fuck did you say to me?”

“Camden, stop!” Eden was there, pulling on my arm holding her friend. I glanced toward her and frowned. There were a lot of things I thought Eden could forgive me for, but hurting her friend wasn’t one of them.

I released his collar and let him fall to the ground. He crawled back a foot before standing.

“Sebastian, just go.” Eden ran a hand over her face. I studied her closer and noted the bags under her eyes. She looked like shit.

Sebastian—finally, I knew his name—gripped his bag, but didn’t take his eyes off me.

“We can go inside and get Principal—”

“No.” She took a deep breath and blew it out before peering at Sebastian. “I’ll see you at rehearsal.”

He glanced between her and me, clearly undecided. His face fell when he finally made up his mind.

I smirked. “Bye, Sebastian.”

With one last glare my way, he stepped toward Eden. “I’m going to wait just inside. I’ll watch through the window.”

She gave him a small smile and nodded before he walked away. As soon as he was out of earshot, she whipped toward me. “You’re such an asshole.”

"I'm an asshole? Your boy's the one who chose to get physical with *me*." I pointed to my chest and shook my head.

"There's about a million reasons you're an asshole, and you know it."

Whatever amusement I'd felt from Sebastian's little beta-male episode evaporated. This was about Hunter. That's why I'd come out here. I needed to convince her to stay away from him, so that I could tell him he had my approval to go for it. Otherwise, I'd have to put up with his pouting for the foreseeable future.

But I couldn't help taking a shot at her. She set me up for it too perfectly.

"That's not how you felt last night."

Her face fell, and she looked away before biting her cheek and shaking her head. One side of my lips pulled in a crooked smirk at her reaction.

"Well, that's how I feel now." Her voice was soft, but I ignored the regret in it. She'd be all fire in a minute. I was sure of it.

"But it's not how you feel about Hunter, is it?"

Her eyes snapped back to me.

*Here we go.*

"Hunter is *your* friend. Not mine. Just because he's tired of your shit and is willing to be nice to me doesn't mean I like him."

I laughed and stepped toward her. She retreated with each inch I grew closer.

"Hunter is only being nice to you because he wants to fuck you. That's it. If you're thinking he's your white knight, you're wrong. No one's coming to save you, princess."

Once again, she averted her gaze. She stared out over the football field, probably reliving the day we took her out there. I relived it too. All the time. Although, not in the same way as her, I imagined.



“Well you’re certainly not my knight, are you.” It wasn’t a question, and it didn’t hold the heat that I expected. It didn’t hold any heat at all.

*Shit.*

I didn’t know what to say to that. A tired look came over her face, and I wanted to shake her. Tell her to wake up. Keep fighting. Don’t pull this shit. No, I wasn’t her knight. I was her enemy. Her tormentor. We fought with each other, and we loved it. *Both* of us.

“Do you even care that I got in trouble last night after my mom caught us?”

She turned to look at me, and now I wished she’d look away. She was hurt. I’d hurt her... for real this time.

“I hadn’t thought about it.”

She sighed. “Of course you hadn’t.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” I walked toward her, and this time, she didn’t retreat. She crossed her arms over her chest and stood her ground.

“I meant that, it was just a kiss. I didn’t know you’d get in trouble for that. It wasn’t a big deal.” Eden cringed, and I immediately realized that was the wrong thing to say.

She walked over to the bench and started shoving notes in her bag.

“Eden...”

She whipped back around, and my heart squeezed as I noted the pain in her eyes. Weight piled on top of me, sagging my shoulders and making my arms feel heavy.

*I’d really hurt her.*

“Remember when we were at your house, and you asked me if I was a virgin? Made fun of me for it?”

I didn’t want to acknowledge that last part, but I swallowed and gave a shallow nod.

“Well, did it ever occur to you that maybe I also hadn’t had a real kiss? That maybe last night was my first?”

More weight piled on me, and this time it was my stomach dropping. "I didn't realize."

"You didn't realize, or you didn't care? Do you care about anyone but yourself?"

"Yes." My jaw ticked from the accusation, but I was beginning to understand it. I'd pushed too far. I'd taken something from her that she couldn't get back.

But she could've stopped me.

"Really? Who?"

My mouth opened to defend myself, but my mind came up blank. There were people I cared about. Of course there were. But how could I tell her I cared about Hunter after what she'd seen me do? She'd never believe me. I couldn't say I cared about Sherry because she wouldn't understand.

"Exactly," she said, scoffing and going back to putting her things in her bag. She zipped it up and threw it over her shoulders before beginning to walk away.

"I care about you. I care that I hurt you."

She paused, her shoulders tensing. "No, you don't."

"Yes," I said, walking over to her and gently pulling her bag's strap off her shoulder. "I do." I sat the bag on the ground and placed my palm on her shoulder. Even through the material of her sweater, I felt a surge of desire from just touching her. Last night's memory played again, replacing some of the guilt with want.

And I definitely wanted Eden.

She still hadn't turned to face me, but her breath hitched as if she were fighting back emotion. She wasn't feeling the electricity I did from a simple touch. She wasn't trying to fuck me like I was her. She was just hurt, and come to think of it, I had no idea what she *did* want.

"Just stop."

"Don't say that," I whispered, trailing my fingertips up to

the collar of her sweater and tracing a line around her throat. "Tell me what's wrong so I can fix it."

She knocked my hand away and stepped forward before turning to face me. Sure enough, there were tears in her eyes.

This wasn't fun for me. I stood still, with my mouth in a straight line, trying not to show what it was doing to me. This had been my goal in the beginning. I'd wanted to break her, to see her cry, to see her hurt. Now all I wanted was to make it go away.

*What have I done?*

"You don't care about me, Camden, so please, stop with the mind games. Tell everyone I'm a slut, pay someone to put condoms in my food or photoshop my face on a naked woman's body. I don't care anymore. Do whatever you want, but stop with the mind games."

"They aren't mind games." My voice came out harsher than I intended, but I softened my features a moment later. "Eden, I promise you, I didn't kiss you because it's a game to me. I kissed you because I wanted to. Because I *like* you. That's it. I didn't mean to hurt you."

She threw her head back in a dry laugh. "You like me? You didn't even text me, or message me on Instagram or *anything* last night. You watch your friends make fun of me, but you expect me to believe you like me?" She ran her hands over her face. "You're only saying this because you don't want me to talk to Hunter. You're afraid I'll tell him what you did, but I won't. I'm not going out with him, and I won't say anything, so please, just stop. I can't do this today."

She tried to pick up her bag, but I stepped in front of it. She nearly bumped into me and froze at the close proximity. I could feel that electricity again. I always felt it when we were this close, and I refused to believe she didn't feel it too.

She didn't look up into my eyes, but she also didn't back away. Her breaths were shaky, and it was hard to tell if it was

still from her emotions or from the same current I was feeling.

“You’re right, I don’t want you talking to Hunter.” I placed my hand under her chin and tilted it so that she’d look at me. “But it isn’t because I’m afraid you’ll tell him things. It’s because I’m afraid you’ll like him more than me.”

“Who says I like you at all?” Another dry laugh. “You’re awful to me. You’re awful to *everyone*.”

I placed a finger on her mouth before she could continue. She was right. I wasn’t a particularly nice person, and I got off on bullying her. But only because I knew she could take it. Whether she knew it or not, there was a part of her that liked me. That liked to fight me, that liked me fighting her. There was a part of her that wanted me just as much as I wanted her.

“I want to make a deal with you.”

“A deal? You mean where you tell me to do something and if I don’t, you’ll find a new way to torture me? What’s next?”

Her eyes had narrowed and tears dried. I sighed in relief at the return of her sass. My stomach unclenched, and the world seemed to lift off my shoulders. I liked her so much better like this.

“This time I’ll give you something in return.”

Silence filled the space as she stared at me, both confused and suspicious. One of her cheeks caved in from her biting it as she considered the statement.

“And what would you give me?”

I pointed to her bag. “You’ve got a big math test coming up, right?”

She nodded, skepticism still apparent in her expression.

“And I’m assuming with the way you’ve been glued to your textbook, you’re worried about it?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Just answer the question.”

More silence ensued before she sighed and glanced at her bag. “I just need to get my grade up, okay? It’s none of your concern.”

I tilted my head. “You’re failing?”

With the way she tensed and clenched her jaw, I figured the answer was yes. It was a bit of a head scratcher for me. Eden didn’t strike me as the type of person to be failing *any* subject, but whatever. It worked in my favor.

“If you promise to stay away from Hunter, I’ll help you raise your grade.”

“By cheating?”

My brow furrowed at that response, but I chuckled. “By helping you study.”

“And how are *you* going to help me study?” There was a snarkiness in her tone that pulled the muscles in my back taught, but I refrained from shooting a comment back. About a thousand of them were perched on my tongue, but this was a deal I wanted her to accept. One that I *needed* her to accept.

“I’ve got a 4.3 GPA, Eden, and my best subject is math. You barged into my calculus class, remember?”

She bit her cheek again and shifted her feet. “You’re not paying someone to do your homework?”

I huffed and rolled my eyes, mentally reigning in my temper. “No, I do not *pay* people to do my homework.” I picked up her bag and held it out for her. “Take the deal, or don’t.”

She took her bag and slowly pulled it over her shoulders. She still didn’t look convinced, but of course she wasn’t convinced. I was just a dumb jock, right? Wrong. Fuck this.

I shook my head and started walking toward the building. Sebastian was in front of the window, glaring at me.

“Wait!” Eden called.

I paused but didn’t look back.

“You have a deal.” Her voice was strong. Fierce. It reminded me of why I liked her in the first place. She wasn’t the kind of girl to beg. She was the kind of girl to leverage. This opportunity happened to fall into her lap.

I turned and peered into weary brown eyes. “Be at my house tomorrow at one.”

Desperate times call for desperate measures. Isn't that what they say? Well, this would be a desperate time and would call for an even more desperate measure.

I was at Camden's house, standing outside his front door... willingly. This was even after the shame I'd experienced from kissing him, having my mom give me *the talk*, and listening to her and my stepdad fight about whether or not I should be grounded. Roman won, thankfully, and my mom let it go. I wasn't allowed to have Camden, or any other boy, in my room with the door shut, but I also wasn't grounded.

But the worst thing. The one that made my being here the most pathetic, was how I was letting him get away with treating me. I shouldn't have expected him to message me after he left my house, but I had. I shouldn't have expected him to defend me in front of the jocks, but I had. *Hunter* had stood up to his friends for me, while Camden simply watched.

The reality was, I was nothing but a toy to him. Yet here I was, about to let him play with me some more.

Pathetic. That was the only way to describe it. Absolutely pathetic.

I took a deep breath and knocked on the door. I needed to be first chair cello, and I needed Mr. Hines to write my recommendation letter. Berklee was the most important thing to me, and if I didn't get in, I'd be stuck here. I'd be stuck in some shitty job, thinking about high school just like the jocks would be doing. I'd wind up just like them.

So, for now, I chose pathetic.

I wiped my clammy palms on my jeans and straightened my posture. The fake smile was already plastered on my face, and my hand was ready to reach out to shake Camden's parent's hand when the door opened. Camden appeared, and I glanced over his shoulder before letting my smile fall.

"Nice to see you too."

I returned my gaze to him and shifted my backpack strap higher on my shoulder. "Hey."

He opened the door wider and stepped to the side. His smell invaded my senses when I walked past him, but whatever warmth he exuded was swallowed up in the freezing cold space. The theme of the house was white and *clean*. White tiled floor, white walls. The gaudy chandelier hanging above my head was the closest thing to color the entryway had. It was reminiscent of Camden's soul—empty.

I frowned at that last thought. I didn't actually believe it. No matter how much I tried to hate him, my mind wouldn't accept it. Exhibit A, he still managed to get me alone. Did I even counter with a more public location? We could've just as easily studied at a library or coffee shop. Did I *want* to be alone with him?

"Are your parents home?" I asked, more as a distraction



before my mind could think of an answer to my last question.

He clicked the door shut and put his hand on the small of my back. He leaned in to whisper in my ear, and for some reason, I didn't pull away.

Ha! For *some* reason, Eden? Seriously?

"Nope. It's just you and me. No one to interrupt."

"We're just studying." I turned to face him. He was only about an inch away, and I had to crane my neck to look at him since he stood straight. "You promised you'd help me. If you're planning anything else, I'm going home."

He grabbed my wrist as I started toward the door and shoved me into the wall before pressing himself against me. He planted both his hands on either side of my head, boxing me in.

My eyelids slid closed of their own volition, and my lungs burned with each labored breath.

I should've known this would happen. I *had known* this would happen.

*This is what you wanted, isn't it?*

Camden leaned in and pressed his forehead to mine. His breathing wasn't ragged like mine. It was perfectly even.

*Because this is just a game to him.*

My eyes shot open, and I placed my hands on his chest and shoved, but he didn't budge. "I need to go."

"No, you don't," he said, a smirk playing on his lips. "You don't even want to."

"Camden, seriously."

"Why did you read his note yesterday, but not mine? Why did you stuff it in your bag?"

*What?* I thought back to yesterday and the note that'd been passed to me in English. I didn't even know who it was from until I opened it. He was mad about that?

No, not mad. Jealous.

I didn't respond, and his eyebrows knitted together. His lips drew in a tight line. *This* wasn't a game. This was real. The most real I'd ever seen Camden.

Why did I like it?

"After what Hunter did for me yesterday, I have no reason to blow him off. You, on the other hand, I have a multitude of reasons."

I pushed harder against him until he gripped both my wrists with one large palm and held them to my chest. Part of his hand was pressed to the swell of my breasts, but he didn't seem to notice. Too much anger bloomed in his eyes for me to see any lust that might've been hidden underneath.

He wasn't trying to seduce me. He was trying to scare me.

"Do you want him, Eden? Honestly."

My wide eyes searched his. He was always so calm, so put together. He strutted through the halls at school, always with a crooked smile, and always cocky. There was a permanent glint in his dark eyes, an aura of confidence. Arrogance even.

That was all gone.

Correction, it was all fake.

"First, tell me why you care."

"You know why."

"No. I don't. You treat me like dirt. You encourage others to treat me like dirt. Why, Camden? Just tell me why."

One side of his lips tilted up and he released my wrists. I kept them to my chest, a small barrier between us. None of the anger left his eyes, but the glint was back. Whatever beast I'd awakened, it was calming.

"I like that you fight back. I like that you aren't scared of me." His eyes dipped to my neckline and he pressed his thumb against my jugular. "Even now, with me pressed against you, pissed, your heart rate's out of control. But it isn't from fear. It's excitement. You're just as excited as I am."

"You're delusional."

“And you’re in denial. You like the attention and you fucking know it. *I* know it. What I don’t know is if you like it from Hunter too.”

I remained silent. I didn’t like it from either of them, but if I had to choose, I’d choose Hunter’s kindness. That’s what I told myself, over and over, as I stared at the gold ring around Camden’s eyes, but it was a lie. Deep down, I knew it. Camden knew it. Maybe the whole school knew it.

I had Camden Knight’s attention, and he had mine.

And maybe he was right. Maybe I did like it.

“I don’t like Hunter.” The words slipped past my lips, and I didn’t have time to consider whether I should’ve said them. They were true, but it would only bring up another question. One I couldn’t answer.

“Do you like *me*?”

There it was.

I averted my gaze to the floor and searched for a smudge, a speck of dirt, anything.

I should’ve hated him.

But I didn’t.

Why did he have to kiss me? Why did he have to smell so good? Why did his touch have to set every last of my nerve endings on fire?

“I don’t know.”

His thumb, which had remained *unnervingly* pressed at the pulse point on my neck, moved up to run across my bottom lip.

I closed my eyes and inhaled his scent. He wore cologne, but underneath, there was more. Distinct. Addictive. *Him*.

Shit.

“I’m sorry, Eden. I should’ve texted you the other night. I should’ve asked if you were okay.”

He cupped my face and urged me to look at him. Sincere eyes, no smile. No games.

“I don’t want to tell anyone about this. They wouldn’t get it, and I don’t want to explain it to them.”

For a brief moment, hurt washed over me. He didn’t want to tell anyone he cared for me... not that he was *with* me. He’d already spread that rumor as far as it would go.

But then Sebastian’s image popped into my mind. My other friends.

They wouldn’t get it either.

“Okay,” I said, giving a nod. I wasn’t sure what I was agreeing to, but a moment later, all thought was robbed from me. Camden leaned in. He paused a mere centimeter from my lips, waiting for me to meet him. It wasn’t enough for him to take this time. He wanted me to give.

A second went by.

Then another.

“I thought about you,” he whispered, minty breath teasing my lips. “When I got home, I went straight to my room. I pulled up your picture, the one I used to photoshop, and I imagined what you looked like for real under those clothes. I tried to imagine how your lips would feel around my cock. How pink your pussy is.”

“Stop,” I whispered, trying to turn my head, but Camden held my jaw.

“I thought about how sexy you looked in my jersey. How I wanted to tear it off you. Fuck you in front of everyone.”

Our noses were touching. Heat spread throughout my body, and my pussy clenched. His eyes reflected mine, revealing what he did to me. My body was a traitor. Hell, even my mind was a traitor. I just hoped, with everything in me, that my heart wasn’t.

Because he’d break it without a second thought.

“Camden—”

“But,” he squeezed my jaw tighter. “*Last night...* all I could think about was the hurt on your face, and about Hunter

telling me that he saw you crying.” His grip relaxed and he smoothed his thumb over my chin. “I don’t want to break you, Eden. I just like to fight you, and I like it when you fight *me*. But I’ll stop... I’m sorry I hurt you.”

“It wasn’t even you,” I whispered, closing my eyes.

“Then what was it?”

This was it. Warning bells sounded in my mind, red flags raised, my shield tried it’s best to come up between us. If I told him what mattered to me, he’d know how to destroy me. No more rumors, no more jokes. He wouldn’t need them. He’d have real ammunition.

My eyes were dry, but inside I was drowning.

“I’m losing my chair. I’m not eligible to play at the fall concert. If I don’t get my math grade up, I won’t be able to play at the winter concert. It could hurt my chances of getting into Berklee.” I took a shaky breath. “I can’t let that happen.”

My eyes were still closed, but I felt Camden pull back. Our noses no longer touched. His minty breath no longer tempted me to do things I knew I shouldn’t.

“Eden.”

I tentatively opened my eyes and stared into a pool of color that reflected something I couldn’t quite define.

“Let’s go study.”

\* \* \*

*Cam*

SHE WAS STARING up at the ceiling, deep in thought. Her lips were twitching, as if she were reciting something. All she had written was the problem number.

“What are you doing?”

She jumped, and her eyes shot to me. “Cosine is adjacent over hypotenuse... right?”

I bit one side of my cheek to keep from smiling, but Eden caught my amusement anyway. Her eyes narrowed, and she fixed her gaze on the opened textbook in front of her. I waited a minute while she stared at the words on the page to see if she had any idea where to go next.

Nope.

“You know you don’t have to memorize it, right?”

“I’m not memorizing the textbook. I’m just thinking.”

I chuckled. “No, I mean cosine. Just remember SOHC-AHTOA and you’ll be able to figure it out.”

She glanced up, confusion wrinkling her forehead. “What?”

I sighed. “SOHCAHTOA. It’s an anagram. Some old hippy, caught another hippy, tripping on acid... we can make up a dirtier one if you want.”

I gave her a wink, but my smile faded when she still didn’t catch on. She was staring at me with her brows pinched. She looked like I was trying to sell her drugs.

“Look.” I scooted over to sit next to her on the bed and took her pencil. After flipping to a blank page, I scribbled the letters and wrote the meaning of each one. SOH= sine, opposite, hypotenuse. CAH= cosine, adjacent, hypotenuse. TOA= tangent, opposite, adjacent.

Her eyes widened, and she flipped through her notebook. She stopped on a page and read over it for a minute. “Holy shit.”

Sure enough, the anagram was written right there.

“This was one of the days I had ISS... I didn’t know what it meant.”

Guilt flickered, but I said nothing. That was the day Eden learned I’d sent that picture around the school. The day she’d stormed into my calc class in a fit of rage, or

maybe it had been desperation. Whatever it was, it'd been my fault. If I'd known what it'd lead to, how much orchestra meant to her... I'm not sure I would've done it at all.

The crushing look in Eden's eyes when she'd talked about losing her chair reminded me of Hunter last year when he'd gotten a concussion and had to sit out the rest of a game. It'd torn him up, and I'd never understood how anyone could have that level of passion for something. It was just a game. In this case, it was just a concert.

But to Eden, it was everything.

She wrote some numbers down in her notebook and grabbed her calculator. Her movements were jerky, like she was excited. Her teeth sunk down on her bottom lip, and after she typed into the calculator, she held it up for me to see. "Is this right?"

I took it and double checked her work. "Yep."

"Oh my God," she said, a heavy sigh brushing over her lips. She closed her eyes, looking a thousand pounds lighter. When she opened them, she turned to me and smiled. "Thank you."

Two words I never thought I'd hear out of her mouth. But fuck, they sounded sweet. I stared at her lips a little too long before pointing to the textbook. "Come on. Do another."

With a nod, she went back to it. The problems were just for practice, so once Eden got the hang of it, we moved on to the next concept. Eden was... behind. By a lot. Several times she got frustrated enough that it's like her mind shut off and I had to pull her back. My guess was that was what kept her from learning this shit in the first place.

It didn't matter, though. There were many things people might've found unpleasant about me, but the one thing I did have was patience. I waited for her to realize how important this test was, and she did. Every time. She huffed and shoved

the textbook away from her only to bring it back, avoiding my pointed stare.

She was beautiful when she was angry. When she was fighting, even if it was herself. Her cheeks flushed and frustrated fingers mussed her hair. Her nostrils flared. Fuck, it was sexy.

I was lost in thought, staring at her parted lips, when she glanced up at me from the calculator. She handed it over, looking noticeably more confident than when we'd started studying several hours ago.

I checked her answer before closing the notebook and tossing it to the side.

"What are you doing?" she asked, wrinkling her brow and reaching across the bed for the discarded notebook. I pressed my hand over hers when she made contact with it, and her eyes shot to me.

"That's enough for today. You can come back over tomorrow if you want to."

"Camden, I have to—"

"You will," I said with certainty. She was getting it now. Maybe she could stand to study a little longer, but I couldn't stand having her on my bed one more minute. Not with her nose in a textbook.

Study time was over.

Her throat moved as she swallowed, and she drew her hand away from mine. This was the time when she could tell me she wanted to go home. She could get up, leave, and even come back tomorrow, and I'd act like nothing happened.

But I wanted her to stay.

"Thanks for helping me," she said, closing her textbook and leaning off the bed to tuck it into her bag. Her sweater pulled up, exposing the tanned skin of her back, and the tip of purple panties. My cock began to harden, but another thought occurred to me.



“Are you adopted?”

Brother’s hair was light. Mom was blonde. Stepdad was, well, stepdad. Eden’s hair was nearly black, and her skin tone was many shades darker than theirs.

She straightened and swatted her ponytail over her shoulder before turning to me. No emotion showed on her face. “No. My biological father is Cuban.”

She said it like that was a question she got asked a lot.

“Your last name is—”

“My family’s last name is Thompson. I’m a part of my family. We had it changed when I was ten. Is this of interest to you?”

Her tone was clipped, but still, her expression didn’t change. Sensitive subject? Well, well, well, the girl with the perfect family was a little dysfunctional after all.

“Where’s your real dad?”

Now her eyes narrowed. “At home. With my real mom and my real brother.” She stood and ran her palms along her sweater to smooth the material. “Which I need to get to.”

“Wait,” I said, standing and blocking her way to the door. “I’m sorry. I was just curious.”

“Curious?”

“Yeah.”

She glanced around my room, pausing when she got to my desk. I followed her gaze. No one was ever here, so I didn’t think much about it, but I guessed the three monitor system might’ve been a head scratcher.

“Where are your posters?”

“What?”

She held out her palms to gesture toward the room. “Your football posters. Girls in bikinis. Cars. Where are they? I mean, you’re Camden Knight, right? Why is there a bookshelf with classic literature instead of magazines? Why does your computer look like something out of a security office?”

I glanced around trying to see what she saw. The walls were empty, but... so? So what if I liked computers, liked to read?

"Is that fucking with the dumb jock image you want me to have?"

"Nope." She shrugged. "Just *curious*. Hey, where are your parents?"

"That's enough, Eden."

"What?" She laughed dryly. "I thought we were learning about each other?"

A sharp pang pierced my stomach, and the skin on my face stretched as it hardened. She fucking knew. She'd seen me. The question was when. Was it today because I invited her to my room, or was it before that?

I'd brought girls to my house before. I'd used the fact that my parents had money to my advantage. They'd drool and gape in awe as soon as we pulled up to the house, and by the time I got them to the guest bedroom, my pants were around my ankles and their mouths were on me. It was so easy. Too easy. I wondered if I'd brought them in here, if they would've had the same questions Eden did, but I doubted it. All they saw was a football star and money. None of them saw *me*.

This was my space, and I'd invited Eden into it.

Why?

"Sorry," Eden said, uncrossing her arms and letting them dangle at her sides.

I shook off the blow and rolled my neck. "For what?"

I walked to the bed and flopped down on it, leaning my back against the headboard and hanging one foot over the edge. I closed my eyes and tried to appear as relaxed as possible. "Don't you need to go?"

She sighed and a few moments later the bed shifted with her weight. I opened my eyes and peered at her, sitting on

the edge with her hands in her lap. She was staring at me, sadness in her expression. No, not sadness... pity.

“Eden, seriously, I don’t know what you’re thinking, but stop. My parents are out of town this weekend. They’ll be back on Monday.”

“It must be lonely.”

A bitter laugh rumbled my chest. “It’s Saturday. I’ll be at Hunter’s tonight, surrounded by my friends. Where will *you* be?”

“They don’t even know who you are, though, do they? That’s what I meant. It must be lonely to have to hide yourself like you do.”

My eyes widened and I gave my head a shake. “You’re reading so much into nothing.”

“How many times have you referred to me as a band geek?”

“What?”

She twisted to face me fully and brought one leg up on the bed. “*You’re* the one that photoshopped me. I thought you’d paid someone to do it, but you didn’t.” She gestured toward my desk as if that made it obvious. I guess it kind of did.

“You like computers. You like math. You like freakin’ Shakespeare. All I’ve ever heard about you was that you liked football, and yet...” She glanced around the room. “No football.”

“Just because I don’t hang up tacky posters doesn’t mean—”

“Just because my skin is different from my family’s doesn’t mean I have issues over it, either. Just because my biological father is gone doesn’t mean I don’t have a dad. It doesn’t mean anything, just like your stuff ‘doesn’t mean anything’, so why don’t we respect each other’s privacy and not poke?”

My mouth hung open to tell her she was wrong, but after a few seconds, I let out the breath I'd been holding and nodded.

I rested my head against the headboard and waited for her to leave. There was an awkward tension in the room, and it was difficult to pinpoint which one of us it originated from. Probably both. We were exposed to each other, our insecurities hiding behind a curtain that'd been pulled back.

She didn't make any move to go. She sat there staring at her lap, picking at a fray in her jeans. I'd gotten my wish that she'd stay, but now I wasn't sure I wanted it.

*Careful what you wish for.*

"Does Paige ever talk about me?"

I let her words register before I sat up straighter. I scooted toward her on the bed and braced my palms on the edge. That was why she wasn't leaving. There was more she wanted to know.

"Why do you ask?"

She shrugged. "Can you just answer the question?"

"Leilani and Jade are bitches. They like to talk shit, and they pressure other people to do it. So, yeah, sometimes she talks about you."

"What does she say?"

I searched my memory for specific things, not that I would've told any of them to Eden. She was making it clear Paige's betrayal hurt her, and I wouldn't add to it, but I was curious myself. The disloyalty between Eden's friends was baffling. If Sebastian wasn't trying to get with her, he'd have turned on her too.

Now that I thought about it, Paige didn't say a whole lot. She mostly just laughed along. She'd told me things because I'd asked. Paige had confirmed that Eden was a virgin, never had a boyfriend, played the cello, hated the jocks and thought she was better than us. Paige had told the

others that last part as well, and that's what had really gotten them going. At first, I wasn't sure if it was true, but it was.

I wasn't mad at Eden or anything. She didn't know us, and there were groups we saw as beneath us too. Like band geeks for example... and computer geeks.

"She says you're a very good girl."

Eden huffed and stopped picking at her jeans. "Right, and I'm sure she put it in those words."

"Does it matter?"

She waited a few seconds before shaking her head. "I guess not."

"Would it make you feel better if I told you Trey cheats on her every chance he gets?"

"No," she said, turning to face me. "It wouldn't."

Of course it wouldn't. She wasn't Leilani. I couldn't count the number of times someone had told me Leilani and I would make a great couple. Or even the number of times Leilani had said it herself. We went to every function together, we had sex on occasion, but there was nothing there. No matter how much she wanted there to be.

Eden was Leilani's opposite.

I cupped her face and leaned in, waiting right in front of her lips to see if she'd close the distance this time.

She did.

Soft lips tickled mine before she pressed herself into me. My other hand reached up to cradle her face, and a bolt of lightning tore down my spine.

It felt like this last time. Like I was a wolf smelling blood. A need erupted inside of me, and I pushed myself harder against her. My tongue prodded between her lips, demanding access to her mouth. I made my way through with a bit of resistance and tasted her, my cock hardening in response.

She was a little awkward and hesitant, which made the fact that I was her first kiss make sense.

*I was her first kiss.*

I urged her back on the bed and climbed on top of her, running my hands up her sides and pulling her sweater up to the edge of her bra.

She gripped my hands and broke the kiss with a gasp. "Wait."

*No*, was my first reaction, but I let her guide my hands away.

"I can't do this."

"Why?"

She swallowed before taking a shaky breath. "Because we're not dating. We don't even *like* each other."

I reared back and glared at her. "Eden, I fucking like you. I told you that."

She leaned on her elbows and peered at me. Her eyes were filled with want. I could see it. She fucking wanted this.

"You don't even know me."

I placed my hands on her shoulders and eased her back to the mattress. "So let me get to know you."

"That's not the way it works."

My eyes ducked to the smooth skin of her stomach. It moved with her breaths and my gaze lowered to her hip bones, peeking out of the top of her jeans. Saliva pooled in my mouth, and I inhaled a sharp breath.

She wasn't pushing me off of her. She wasn't acting as if she were uncomfortable.

*She wanted this.*

A thought occurred to me and I tried to inject some tact into the question.

"Have you ever given yourself an orgasm?"

*Completely fucking tactless.*

My eyes flicked to her face and noted the red tinting her cheeks.

“Yes or no?”

“I... I don't know.”

I shifted myself lower so that my mouth was at her waist. I nipped the skin above her hip bone and ran a trail of kisses across her stomach, pausing just below her belly button.

“Camden,” she said, placing her hand on my head and weakly urging me off. If she thought saying my name would get me to stop, she needed a better method.

“You'll like it,” I promised, popping the button on her jeans. “We don't have to fuck. I'm just gonna make you feel good.”

“I'm not a slut,” she blurted, probably more for herself than for me.

“Eden, look at me.”

She propped herself onto her elbows and peered down at me. She was aroused. It was apparent in her flushed cheeks and dilated pupils, but there was something else that looked a lot like shame.

“Liking sex doesn't make you a slut. It makes you human.”

“Really?” She snorted. “Because you didn't seem to think that before when you were telling the whole school what a—”

“I lied to them. I always lie to them, just like you said. But I swear, I'm not going to tell anyone about this.”

She shook her head. “You're lying.”

“No, I'm not.”

I curled my fingers under her panties and prepared to pull them down, but she squirmed and gripped my hands to yank them away.

“I said no!”

Her voice was loud and angry enough to startle me, and my eyes snapped to hers. Her face was pinched in a scowl

and she crawled out from beneath me before buttoning her pants in angry jerks.

“Eden, chill out.”

Another striking glare. “If you think I’m letting you do this to me after everything, you are so wrong.”

She climbed off the bed, but before she started toward the door, I grasped her wrist. “It’s not like that.”

Her chest shook with rage, and she closed her eyes. When she opened them, I caught something in her eyes. It wasn’t rage. It was fear.

“I *promise* it’s not like that.”

“Thanks for the help, but I shouldn’t have taken it. I don’t want anything from you. I don’t like you. I don’t have any intention of giving my virginity to you, so you might as well stop trying.”

She yanked out of my grasp and stepped around me. Gripping the handle on her bag, she lifted it and headed for the exit. “I wasn’t trying to fuck you.”

She paused at the door but didn’t turn my way. “Well then, I guess you didn’t fail.”

With that parting comment, she was gone.

I thought about going after her, but it wouldn’t have made a difference. Running a frustrated hand through my hair, I fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

This was why I liked her. Because she was difficult. It wasn’t a matter of making her feel good or trying to impress her with shiny things. No, she was more of a challenge than that. But maybe she was too much of a challenge?

Or maybe I was going about this the wrong way. I didn’t know what the fuck Eden wanted.

But I was bound to figure it out.



The writing in front of me blurred until I couldn't see it any longer. My brain was sludge, but I continued to stare anyway. This test meant everything right now, and I'd be damned if I wasted a single minute of class not going over it. I'd already checked my answers twice.

The bell rang, and everyone except me shuffled from the room. Desks made screeching sounds as the legs scraped across the floor. I only shifted with my head in my hands, still concentrating on the last page of the four-page test.

"Finishing up?" Mrs. Morris's voice sounded above me, and I sighed before peeling my eyes away from the paper. I folded it over to the first page and begrudgingly handed it over. My hand was shaking.

Mrs. Morris frowned as she took it and flipped through the pages. "It's looking good, Eden. Do you not think you did well?"

"I don't know," I said around the frog in my throat. "I think so."

She nodded and placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. After giving a tight smile, she walked around to her desk

and sat my test on top of a stack. Students for her next class were already filing in, so I picked up my bag and stood to leave.

“I’ll email you tonight with the results.” Mrs. Morris’s smile did little to hide the worried creases at the corners of her eyes. “I’m sure you did fine.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Thank you.”

The air felt dense as I made my way from class. It was like I was walking underwater, each of my steps working hard to slosh me forward. I hadn’t gone to Camden’s house on Sunday to study, even after he’d texted me asking if I’d wanted to. I hadn’t texted him back. I’d typed out a message asking how he’d gotten my number but ended up deleting it before hitting ‘send’. He was good at manipulating me into doing what he wanted. Too good. So, I’d studied the entire day by myself instead. I hadn’t thought I’d needed his help, and I hoped with everything that I’d been right.

My side tingled as my phone vibrated in the pocket of my bag. After making it into the hallway, I paused outside the door to check my messages.

**Camden 7:34: Good morning**

**Camden 7:58: Good luck on your test**

**Camden 8:49: How did it go?**

The time stamp of his last message reminded me how long it’d taken for me to leave class. The bell rang as I tucked the phone back into my bag and headed for Senior English, which I was now late to.

I tried to hurry, but my legs still wouldn’t move at a normal pace. I trudged through the halls until finally, the door appeared. Mr. Gordan had already begun the lecture by the time I opened the door and quietly slipped inside, clicking it shut behind me.

“Do you have a tardy slip, Ms. Thompson?” Mr. Gordan frowned at me when I slumped in my seat. I shook my head

and was getting up to go get one from the office when Camden's voice stopped me.

"Mr. Gordan, do you think Sophocles thought up Oedipus because he had an oedipal complex himself?"

Mr. Gordan tilted his head towards Camden. So did most of the other people in class. He rarely spoke up, but when he did, his voice was a force that commanded attention.

Mr. Gordan leaned against the whiteboard, smearing dry erase marker on his Polo shirt. Not that he cared. His eyes lit up at Camden's question, and I could almost see his brain churning as he took the bait. "Interesting question. Not much is known about Sophocles' childhood, but from what we do know..."

I sank into my seat as Mr. Gordan droned on, going back and forth with Camden. I was a little taken aback by how much Camden seemed to know on the subject, but I shouldn't have been surprised. He was smart. I didn't want him to be, I didn't expect him to be, but he was.

I unzipped my bag and pulled out my notebook to distract myself from his voice. It was smooth and confident. Just like the rest of him. It was too easy to get lost in it, and I was determined not to.

Everyone else could fawn over Camden Knight, but I wouldn't. At least, not anymore.

I drew a heart on the top of my paper before filling it in, pressing the lead of my pencil harder to darken it more and more until it was barely a heart at all. The outline was still there, but there was nothing warm or happy about it. It might as well have been a black hole.

"Wasn't your test today?" Sebastian whispered. Apparently, I wasn't the only one not focused on Mr. Gordan and Camden's debate. I flicked my gaze his way and nodded.

He cringed. "Sorry."

"I think I did okay," I said, reassuring him. I smiled and

flipped to a blank page to start taking notes. Mr. Gordan was wrapping up. It struck me that Camden had asked about my test before my best friend, but I pushed the thought away before it could grow.

Thirty minutes and three pages of notes later, the bell rang. I put my notebook away and got ready to stand when Camden stopped in front of my desk. Hunter had continued walking but paused and looked back at Camden with his eyebrow cocked.

“So, how’d it go?”

I moved my gaze back to Camden and shrugged. He wasn’t getting it. My not texting him back was me ignoring him. It was me saying I wasn’t interested in this anymore. I wasn’t falling for it. It did *not* mean he should try harder.

“I’m sure you did well.” He pulled a note from his pocket and placed it on my desk before turning and following Hunter out of the classroom.

I stared down at the note, tempted to open it up and read it then and there.

But that was a bad idea. It was meant to soften me—to show me the jerk could also have a sensitive side.

It was fake.

I snatched the paper, crumpling it in a fist, and stood. Sebastian led the way to the door, and I tossed the paper into the trash can on my way out.

“Should we go to the lunchroom?” he asked, pausing in the hallway. “Doesn’t seem like Golden Boy’s interested in being a dick anymore.”

“Oh, trust me,” I said with a snort. “It isn’t over.”

I looked left and right down the hall, trying to decide what we should do, while also not analyzing Sebastian’s comment. If I did, I might doubt that I was right. I might consider that it might be over. The jocks hadn’t harassed me

this morning. They hadn't said anything to me at all. It was just like before all of this started. I didn't exist to them.

I couldn't think too hard about it. If I did, I might forget how much I wanted to be invisible. How much I hated the taunts, or how much I hated having Camden's attention.

I glanced at Sebastian and forced a smile. "Let's go to the cafeteria."

\* \* \*

*Cam*

MY EYES WERE GLUED to the cafeteria door, waiting to see if she would appear. Hunter and I had just sat down at our table, and already he was deep into a conversation with Trey about the game this Friday. We were playing the Douglas Wolverines, and it was supposed to be a guaranteed win. They were five spots below us.

"You excited for the dance next week, Paige?" Hunter asked.

I peeled my eyes from the door to glance between the two of them, noting the kind smile Hunter's lips were pulled into. Paige lit up like a lantern at being noticed.

"Yeah," she said, setting her fork on her tray and sitting up straighter. "Really excited."

"Me too." Hunter's smile widened. "It'll be fun. So will the after party." He gave her a wink and picked up his fork to twirl spaghetti noodles onto it. He still had Paige's full attention, as well as mine.

He was up to something.

"I still don't have a date, though."

"Oh," Paige sputtered. "I'm sure there are plenty of girls who'd be thrilled to go with you."

The level of excitement in her voice made me nauseous.

All because one of Trey's friends was speaking to her. I rolled my eyes and gazed back over toward the door. Eden was there, standing in line with Sebastian. She had a look on her face that made me think she too was feeling nauseous.

Her eyes darted around and landed on me before quickly looking away.

"Yeah, you're probably right. I was wondering, though. Do you think you could ask your friend, Eden, if she has a date?"

My head snapped to Hunter and then swung to Paige. She shifted uncomfortably on the seat and slumped her shoulders. A smile was still curving her lips, but now, it wasn't genuine. Now, she got it. Hunter didn't like her. He wasn't accepting her into our group. He was *using* her, all so he could use her friend.

"Eden isn't really the homecoming type."

"Really?" Hunter pushed his tray away and leaned forward on his elbows. "What *type* is she?"

The challenge in his tone caused Paige to squirm. She peered at Trey, but he was silent and keeping himself busy eating. She should've learned by now that Trey wouldn't get in the middle of Paige and his friends. One of us could roofie and fuck her, and he'd sit back and pretend it wasn't happening. She was lucky she wasn't our type.

"I just mean, she didn't want to go to the dances any other year, so I don't think she'll want to go now... But you can ask her."

"What if you asked her for me? Would she say yes then?"

Paige bit her cheek and shrugged. "We're not really friends anymore."

Eden caught my view again when she walked to her table diagonal from ours. She was with Sebastian and had a nervous smile on her face. Her other friends glanced at each other uncomfortably. They looked like they were trying to

decide if they should leave rather than being seen with Eden. In fact, I was certain that's what it was, and I'd noticed it multiple times before.

A couple of the girls got up and walked through the cafeteria to dump their trays. Eden didn't look at them, but her muscles visibly tightened. She flicked her hair over her shoulder and picked up her fork, twirling around spaghetti as if she was looking for something hidden in it. *Like a condom.*

Another of her friends got up and left, plenty of food remaining on their trays.

Two more, a guy and a girl holding a stack of cards, got up and walked out of the cafeteria.

Eden stared down at her food. She had the fork in her hand, but it no longer moved. Sebastian sat there talking with a different friend, pretending nothing was going on.

They were shitty friends, and she was better off without them. Sure, it'd been my fault they'd abandoned her, but really, I'd done her a favor. Nobody wanted 'friends' like that.

Hunter was still talking to Paige, but I no longer cared about what he was saying. He would try to get to Eden, if for no other reason than to prove to himself that he could. It was a competition to him, but he thought he was only competing with himself. In his mind I'd already slept with Eden, so he needed to prove that he could too.

He couldn't. Neither could I.

"Who are you going with, Cam?" Paige asked, pulling me into the conversation. When I peered her way, she was still clearly uncomfortable. Her shoulders were tense, and her teeth were gnawing on her lip.

"Leilani," Hunter answered for me. "Homecoming king and queen go together."

He kept his tone light, but there was an underlying bitterness that I didn't understand. It wasn't about me taking

Leilani. Hunter didn't care about that. All he cared about was sex, and he'd fucked her more times than I had. Way more times.

Did *he* want to be homecoming king?

"Votes aren't cast or anything," I said, staring at him.

He turned my way and smiled. "Dude, come on. It's you." He laughed and abandoned the conversation by going to his food. I continued to stare. His laugh reminded me of all the times I'd tried to compliment him and he'd deflected it. Was he deflecting this too?

The conversation moved to another topic, and Hunter joined in as lively as he was any other time. I couldn't stop watching him, and a few times, he glanced over at me and pulled his lips up in a nervous tick. Something was wrong.

"You free tonight?" I asked him, interrupting his conversation with Trey.

He glanced over at me and shrugged. "Uh, yeah. You wanna come over?"

I mimicked his forced smile. "Yeah." I studied his expression, searching for whatever was bothering him like it'd be etched into his skin. "I'll be there."



The texts kept coming. Again and again and again, no matter how many times I ignored them. Camden talked to me as if we were friends. As if I was responding to him. Monday, I went to sleep shortly after I'd gotten a 'good night'. Tuesday, I'd woken up to a 'good morning'. Wednesday, he sent me a picture of him by a diving board. He had his shirt off, his eyebrows were lifted, and a humorous smile played on his face. He looked like he'd been laughing, and I could picture his hard abs rippling as he did. The V peeking from his swimming trunks was strategically exposed, and his hair was wet, suggesting he'd already been swimming.

Below the picture, three dots had popped up, and despite my best effort not to, I'd stared. I'd waited greedily to see what he would send next. They'd disappeared, and then they were back, as if he'd been debating on what to say. Finally, he sent the message, 'you should get snap chat'.

I'd rolled my eyes and tossed the phone on my bed. I'd been studying—this time for a history test—and refused to let him distract me.

But then as I'd lain in bed, I'd stared at the picture. I'd studied his smile, trying to see if it was genuine. Was he laughing at me, or was he just happy? That was the question I'd asked myself a thousand times since then.

It was Thursday, and I was leaving orchestra practice with Sebastian by my side. My bottom ached from sitting for the three and a half hour rehearsal, but not near as much as my pride. I was sitting in sixth chair. The *last* chair.

"We should do something tomorrow night," Sebastian said, pulling me from my thoughts. The image of Camden evaporated and was replaced by Sebastian's nervous smile.

Nervous?

"Like what?"

Another chip at my pride occurred when I found myself hoping he'd say we should go to the game. I'd told Camden I'd go, but that was over now. I didn't care if he sent the picture, or at least not enough to bend to his will. Everything had come into light the day I'd stupidly gone to his house. His motives. What I had to lose. What he wanted from me.

The answer to the last question had finally become clear that day—everything. He wanted *everything* from me. My friends, my reputation, and my body. And he wasn't stopping until he got it all.

"Want to see a movie? There's some good ones out."

I smiled and shifted my cello case to the other hand. "Yeah, sure. Is it cool if I bring Jordan, though? My parents are talking about having date night this weekend, so I might have to watch him."

"Uh." Sebastian went silent for several moments. Parking lot gravel kicked up as he dragged his feet. "Yeah, sure."

I peered at him, my eyes narrowing in confusion. "He's a cool kid. We wouldn't have to watch a cartoon or anything like that. He watches action movies with Roman all the time."

“Right,” Sebastian said, giving a tight smile and a nod. “Cool.”

He didn’t appear to think it was ‘cool’, but I fought the urge to defend Jordan further. I was already overprotective of my little brother, and I knew it. We made it to my car, and I shoved my cello into the backseat. Turning back to Sebastian, I placed my hand on my hip. “Want a ride home?”

He fidgeted for a moment, appearing even more uncomfortable, and I made an effort to not appear so defensive. I let my hands relax at my sides and softened my expression.

His mouth opened and closed, as if he wasn’t sure how to answer. “No,” he finally pushed out, shaking his head and blinking a few times. “It’s okay.”

He started off toward the sidewalk and peered over his shoulder. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See ya,” I said, my hand lifting in a wave.

I got in my car and shut the door, taking a minute to stare out at Sebastian as he walked away. Had I been mean? Had I said something wrong? I could never tell anymore. The jocks had me so on edge most of the time that it was easy for me to snap. But I hadn’t this time. Not really. Maybe if I hadn’t been preoccupied with Camden’s image in my head, I’d have been better able to tell.

Letting out a sigh, I turned the key in the ignition. I kept going over my conversation with Sebastian on the way home, analyzing if I’d been too moody, defensive, or if maybe I was reading into something that wasn’t there. Maybe he wasn’t even mad or upset. We’d just gotten out of a rehearsal that had both our fingers damn near bleeding. Maybe he was just tired. I sure was.

All thoughts ceased when I turned onto my street and took in the black Jeep sitting in the driveway. I squinted and nearly hit the mailbox as I was pulling up because I couldn’t take my eyes off the vehicle.

It wasn't him. No freaking way.

I parked next to it and got out of my car, never tearing my gaze away from its too-tinted windows. I couldn't tell if anyone was inside, so when I stepped up to it, I cupped my hands around my eyes and pressed my forehead to the glass. It was empty, but I did notice one thing. My pepper spray, the one Camden had tossed in his backseat, was sitting in the cup holder.

Shit.

My head snapped toward the house, as if I could see Camden through the brick. I groaned as I grabbed my cello from my backseat, along with my bag, and shuffled into the house to whatever fresh hell awaited me. Maybe he'd tied my family up and held a knife to one of their throats, waiting to 'make another deal' with me as soon as I stepped through the door. My family's lives for my virginity.

I cackled at my own depraved joke and simultaneously hoped there wasn't anything too malicious waiting for me.

Who was I kidding, this was *Camden Knight*.

"Mom?" I called, setting my cello case down and flinging my bag off my shoulders when I made it inside. It echoed loudly on the wood floor, and a moment later, Roman appeared in the hallway that led to the kitchen.

"Sup, kiddo?"

"Where's Mom?"

My eyes darted around frantically, searching for any sign of Camden. My mom couldn't have known he was here. If she had, she would've asked him to leave. So where was he?

Roman pointed his thumb behind him. "Everyone's out back. Come join us."

"Everyone?" I asked, taking a tentative step toward him.

Roman smiled as he reached out and squeezed my shoulder. "Don't worry." He urged me into the kitchen and toward the back door. "I already talked to Mom, and she's fine with

your friend being here as long as you guys aren't doing anything you aren't supposed to. She's having a hard time admitting it, but I think she likes him. He's quite the charmer."

"What's he doing here?" I asked, stopping and turning to face Roman.

His eyebrow arched and his head tilted. "Did you not know he was coming? We assumed you'd asked him to apologize—"

"Apologize?"

"Yeah," Roman dragged out the word. "For last week. He said he felt like he owed us an apology for breaking our rules and assured us it wouldn't happen again. You didn't tell him to do that?"

"No," I said, letting out a gust of air. "I didn't." I fought the urge to roll my eyes and tossed a look over my shoulder at the screen door. Voices sifted through. Mom's. Jordan's. *His*.

"Sounds like you've picked yourself a good one, Eden. Don't stress so much, okay?"

I turned back to Roman, forcing a tight smile and a nod. He reached out and squeezed my shoulder again before gesturing toward the door. "Come on. We're all having a good time out there."

I took a deep breath and trudged out the door, imagining the nightmare motives Camden had for this. I was right, he really wouldn't stop until he had all of me. Until everything I loved was torn apart, including my family.

Bastard.

He met my stare when I stepped onto the patio, and my breath caught. I tried to maintain my glare, but when I took in the sight, my entire demeanor melted like ice cream on a hot summer day.

Camden's arm was arched back with a football in his hand. His aim was pointed toward Jordan, who was standing

twenty feet away with his hands on his knees. Camden's lips were pulled into a smile that mirrored my little brother's. Happy. Genuinely happy.

I must've stalled him because Jordan shouted, "I'm ready!"

Camden looked forward and tossed the ball into the air, a couple feet from where Jordan stood and laughed as my little brother dove for it. He gripped the ball and hugged it to his chest as tight as his ten-year-old arms would allow before falling to the ground.

Roman and Mom's clapping and whistling caught my attention, and I turned my head toward them. They were both seated on our patio bench, Roman's arm slung around the back of it. Mom had a smile that I rarely saw from her, and her blonde wavy hair framed her face in a way that, coupled with the smile, made her glow.

"Hey, baby," Mom said, flicking her gaze toward me. She leaned over and patted one of the chairs. "Come sit with us."

I glanced between her and Camden, who was catching a wobbly pass from Jordan, before I took the seat beside her.

Roman kissed my mom on the cheek and whispered something in her ear that made her giggle. She turned to me. "Apparently, your brother is a football star."

I trained my gaze on Jordan, elbows on his knees and hands splayed like Camden was instructing him. "Apparently."

I'd yet to smile. My expression might not have been angry, but skepticism still sat heavily underneath. The house wasn't on fire, and no one was being murdered, but I had a hard time believing Camden was here because he wanted to play catch with my brother.

He kept looking my way, catching my eyes for brief moments before going back to tossing the ball to Jordan. His form was just like his smile—smooth and confident. He must've had quite the muscle memory to look like that. My

thoughts drifted to the photo he'd sent, and I pictured what his muscles looked like underneath his shirt as his arm crooked back and slingshotted the ball. Some of his muscles were visible, like his bicep. It flexed, tightening his shirt, as he brought the ball back and—

“How was school?”

I gave my head a shake and turned to Mom. Roman was smirking as if he'd read my thoughts, but I ignored him.

“Umm, it was okay.”

“Trig still going well? Camden mentioned you might need help today.”

*I bet he did.*

“I'm still keeping up. Mrs. Morris said she'd give me extra credit if I needed it.”

“She can see how hard you're trying,” Roman said, joining the conversation.

He was right. I'd gotten a C- on Monday's test, and Mrs. Morris had emailed me with about a hundred exclamation marks after the number that night—71. She'd been floored and told me repeatedly how proud she was of me. So had my parents. It felt good, but there was an underlying bitterness to it all. I'd gotten that grade because I'd had Camden's help. Without it, I wasn't sure what would've happened. Even worse, how well could I have done with that extra day of studying help that I'd declined?

My grade was now a 65, which still made me ineligible. I had to make a 98 on that test to bring my grade up to a C. But I'd do the extra credit, and I'd have the satisfaction of knowing I did it on my own.

I didn't need his help.

“Well, that's wonderful,” Mom said, leaning into Roman more. “We're both very proud of you... and we're happy you're getting the help you need.” Her gaze wandered to Camden as she said that last part, and I followed it.

Sweat broke out over my forehead, despite the chilly October air, and my lungs burned. She was trying to like him... for me. Because she thought *I* liked him. I never should've kept this from her. I should've gone to her and told her about the bullying, the football field, the rat, even the rape. Instead, I'd hidden it all, pretending everything was okay and convincing myself I was making things easier that way, but that wasn't true. I was being a coward. If I told them what was going on at school, then it would make it exist at home. This was my sanctuary.

And now it wasn't.

"I'm gonna go inside," I announced, standing and brushing imaginary dust from my jeans. "It's kind of cold."

Roman frowned, and my mother studied me, her lawyer face in full effect.

"Why don't you bring out a blanket?" Roman suggested.

I'd already passed them and was almost to the door when I turned and gave a tight smile. "That's okay. I've got some studying to do, too."

Roman nodded, but I wasn't sure if my mom bought it. I'd been too chickenshit to glimpse her expression. The screen door creaked as I pulled it back and let it slam shut behind me.

The sweat on my forehead became more pronounced as I made my way upstairs. Why couldn't he just leave me alone? This was my safe space. My jockless space. My Camden's-bullshit-free zone.

I collapsed onto my bed and swiped the beading sweat with the back of my hand. My heart rate was too quick. It thudded in my ears, so loud it was all that I registered until the knock sounded on the door.

The door creaked and Camden entered my line of sight.

He sat down next to me on the bed. I didn't sit up, nor turn to look at him. Maybe if I ignored him, he'd go away. If I



didn't move, he couldn't see me. He was a vicious T-Rex, and I—

“I was waiting for you by your car.”

*Damn it.*

I let out a heavy sigh and sat up, still not looking at him, but giving up on pretending he wasn't there.

“Orchestra ran later today, and I was there thinking about how last week you pointed out my not caring that you got in trouble...”

“So you thought, ‘Hey, I’ll go remind her parents I exist.’” I scoffed and rolled my eyes, tucking a flyaway that had escaped my ponytail behind my ear.

“No.”

I planted my palms on the bed and turned my head to face him, skepticism written all over my features.

“I came to apologize. Your stepdad started talking to me about football, and your little brother got excited... I wasn't even trying to intrude, it just happened.”

“Right.” I looked away from him in order to peer up at the ceiling in exhaustion. I couldn't do this shit anymore.

“Eden.”

Another sigh and I rolled my neck to look at Camden.

“I'm sorry.”

I waited for a smirk, or for the amusement in his voice to register, or for something, anything, to indicate that he wasn't serious. The gold ring making up the delicate edge of his irises stood out to me, but then again, it always did. His jaw was flexed, his lips were thin. His hands were resting in his lap. If he was faking sincerity, he was doing a damn good job of it.

I didn't say anything, mostly because there were so many things he could've been sorry for, and I couldn't begin to guess which one he was referring to.

“I keep treating you as if you're any other girl, but you're

not. You're different. Those differences are hard to grasp sometimes, but they're the reason I like you. They're what make you... you."

My brows pinched together, and I tilted my head. "What are you talking about?"

He scooted closer to me, and I had to force myself to stay still. My muscles ached to squirm away, and my eyes shot to the open door on instinct.

"I pushed you."

I returned my gaze to Camden. We were inches apart now, but his hands were still in his lap. His voice was low, like he was saying something he didn't want to carry outside my room.

"I thought a lot about it, and I get why your interest in me has seemingly... died. You weren't ready for anything, and I tried to get you to do it anyway. Sex, even if it's not *really* sex, is a big deal to you, and it should be. I wasn't thinking, and I'm sorry."

I stared at him, searching the dark in his eyes for any indication that he was lying. Because he *had* to be lying. I needed him to be. I needed him to be Camden Knight, the asshole jock, the bully. That was the barrier between me and the warmth he enveloped me in when we were this close. It was hard to say no to the charming, helpful, broken guy. It was easy to say no to the bully.

"It wasn't a big deal," I said, mimicking his low voice.

"Yes, it was." He moved his hand to rest next to mine on the bed, still not touching, but so close. "But it's not going to happen again."

"I know." I lifted my hand and rested it on my lap before scooting a few inches away. "Because I don't like you like that. I'm not interested in having a relationship with the guy spreading rumors about me."

“They’ve stopped. No one’s going to be spreading anymore—”

“Because of you, or because of Hunter?” I whirled my head toward him so that I could see his face when he answered. When he inevitably lied.

He paused for several moments and took a deep breath. “Hunter is the one who told people to stop, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“So, you haven’t really done shit for me then, is that right? Let me ask you something, Camden.” I leaned in closer, but it had nothing to do with not wanting anyone to hear me. I wanted to project as much malice as possible. “Which would make me more pathetic... going out with Hunter, or going out with *you*? Because you keep telling me I shouldn’t go out with him, but—”

“If you want to go out with him, then do it, Eden. Go out with him. I’m sure he’ll have much more respect for how far you’re willing to go than I do.” Camden ran a hand through his hair, tousling the brown locks. Somehow, when he was done he looked even more handsome.

“Should I be *thanking* you for not raping me?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then what?” My tone was clipped, and some of the pride he’d stolen over the past month returned. The bite was delicious, it was powerful. It almost made me realize why he did what he did. Making him small, made me feel so much bigger.

He sighed and shook his head. “I’m sorry, okay? That’s all I’m trying to say. I’m sorry for pushing you. I’m sorry for sending the picture, the condom, the rumors, all of it. None of it was even necessary.”

“What do you mean by ‘even necessary’? Necessary for what?”

The emotion Camden had allowed himself to display

came to a screeching halt. His demeanor changed in an instant from vulnerable to guarded. I watched it. I could almost see the shield coming over his skin.

“Nothing.”

He rubbed the back of his neck and glanced around before standing. “I hope your parents aren’t mad at you anymore,” he said, not looking at me. He went to step away but stopped when I spoke.

“They weren’t ever *mad* at me. They were disappointed. They weren’t holding it over my head or anything.”

“Right.”

“Camden.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed, and he took a few moments to look at me. Goosebumps rose over my flesh when our eyes met, the coldness in his reminiscent of when I’d seen him before. Before all of this happened. Before he decided he liked me. Before I knew him.

*Did I know him?*

“I don’t think we should be enemies anymore... but I don’t know if we can be friends. Too much has happened.”

His shoulders bunched with tension, but he nodded. “You’re probably right.”

Two steps closer to the door.

Three.

I knew I should let him go. I should let him walk out of there and allow myself to be the victor. I’d won, and for the rest of my life I could take solace in the fact that I hadn’t let them break me. I hadn’t let them take everything, just *almost* everything. But something was mixed in with the victory, swirling with it, overshadowing it. It was vinegar to my victory’s water, making it sour.

It was regret.

“Can I just know why?” My voice filtered through the room, making me cringe. He stopped in the doorway and

turned, his eyes still cold as ice. There was desperation in my tone that made it that much worse.

He glanced around, as if contemplating whether he should leave or stay.

“Please,” I said, abandoning my win altogether. The word burned my throat like acid, which would’ve explained why it came out so gravely.

“Is it important to you?” he asked, taking a step back into the room. His hands were in his pockets, but the relaxed gesture didn’t ring true. He was on the defensive. I was certain of it. It’s why his gaze was so cold, and it got me thinking. Was he always on the defensive? The only time he warmed me was when we were alone.

I nodded and smoothed my hands over my lap. “Yeah.”

He scanned the room rather than answering. What he was looking for, I had no idea. He locked onto a photo in a frame on my dresser, and he walked over to it to get a better look. All I could see were the rigid planes of his back, and they weren’t giving me any clues as to what he was thinking. But then again, I could never tell what Camden was thinking. I never knew his motives. That’s why this was so important to me. I just... needed to know.

He picked up the picture frame and held it closer to his face. I guessed he was looking for something, but I couldn’t begin to understand what. I stood and carefully walked over to him, being as quiet as possible, so as not to startle him.

“You have a beautiful family,” he said, setting the frame back down and shoving his hands back into his pockets.

“Thank you.” It was a whisper that came out more like a question.

“Hunter is my family.” He turned to me and leaned against the dresser. The intensity in his eyes was enough for me to want to look away, but I didn’t. My gaze didn’t waver.

“I know you might think I’m lying when I say this, but he’s like a brother to me. He’s *important* to me.”

“I’m not going out with him.”

Camden chuckled dryly and looked away for a moment. “I know, I’m not talking about that.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair again. “You wanted to know why I started being mean to you...”

My eyes narrowed in confusion. “Because of what I said about Hunter? None of it was a lie, I watched—”

“I know. I’m not talking about that either.”

He didn’t elaborate, but he also didn’t have to. The memory of that night came back to me in a flash, and I realized what he was talking about. Hunter’s mom. I’d almost forgotten about it, and my stomach twisted as the memory surfaced. Something came over me that I never thought possible in a scenario like this—jealousy.

“This is the part where I fucked up by not realizing you aren’t like most people. I thought you’d tell him, or Paige, or somebody. I thought it would get back to him, so when it did, I wanted it to look like you’d lied about it.”

My lips parted and eyes softened. “That whole time... you were trying to destroy my credibility?”

He nodded and looked at the photo again. He traced his finger around the frame and didn’t say anything more. It was like he was giving it time to sink in and waiting on me to react. But it didn’t sink in. It couldn’t. None of it made sense.

“If you care so much about Hunter, why would you do that to him?”

“I don’t expect you to understand.” His voice was even, and none of his earlier defensiveness registered. He wasn’t the least bit surprised by the question. It was what he’d been waiting for.

“Can you at least try to explain it to me?”

He turned to face me, pulling his hand back from the

frame and laying it on the dresser. His lips parted to say something, but he hesitated like he wasn't sure he should. Why would he be sure? I'd told him I wasn't interested in him. That he didn't mean anything to me.

I'd lied. What I meant was, I didn't *want* him to mean anything.

"You were right," he said, before pressing his tongue against his bottom lip. "I hide myself from people. They see a quarterback, and I'm afraid they won't like anything else. So I hide it."

I nodded in understanding even though I had no idea where he was going with this. "Sherry could tell, and she just... talked to me." That forcefield peeled over his skin and he narrowed his eyes. "Like I said, I wouldn't expect you to understand."

He lifted his hand from the dresser and pushed off of it. He was about to step around me, but I blocked his path. I pressed my palm to his chest, and his gaze flicked from my hand to my face.

"I get it." I took a deep breath. "She saw you for who you really are, and she didn't hate it. She still took advantage of you—"

Camden erupted in laughter. He brushed my hand off him and shook his head. "Took advantage of me? Eden, you are adorably naive."

"Am I? Because she's over twice your age, and—"

His thumb pressed to my lips in what had become his signature move, and he stepped forward so that we were an inch apart. "It's over," he said, still not removing his thumb. "There's no need to talk about it anymore."

He removed his thumb when I nodded, and he cocked his head toward the door. "I'm gonna go."

I bit my lip and nodded again. This time, I wouldn't stop him. Not because I wanted him to leave, but because I

couldn't bring myself to shatter anymore of my pride. It had to be over. I had to—

“Do you want to go with me?”

My chin jutted as I looked up at him. “With you?”

“Yeah... You can say no.” He swallowed and lifted his hand only to lay it back at his side. “You can always say no.”

Ten minutes ago, I thought I'd won. I thought I'd wanted Camden to leave me alone, stop with the mind games. But there was a chance that they weren't mind games, and I could see it. I wanted it. I *liked* it. I didn't want to, but I did.

And there was a chance that maybe, just maybe, nobody had to lose.

“Okay,” I said, turning and looking at the door. “Let's go.”

\* \* \*

*Cam*

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?”

The leather seat squeaked as Eden fidgeted... again. I turned my head her way for a brief moment to glimpse her expression. Nervous. It reminded me of the first time she'd been in my car, and I'd drooled over her nervousness then. Now, it was disconcerting. I was doing everything I could to get her to be comfortable around me, and still, I was failing.

“The lake. There's a spot out there that I like to go to sometimes.” I paused and cleared my throat before forcing myself to say this next part. “I can take you back if you want? If you've changed your mind.”

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “I'm fine.”

*Oh, thank fuck.*

I'd been trying to get Eden to warm up to me all week. A week to show her there was nothing to be afraid of. I could



tell that's what was holding her back, and I understood it. She had no reason to trust me, but I was trying. Hard.

She'd made it clear that it'd hurt her when I hadn't messaged her, so I'd done that every day this week. Multiple times a day. All of them were read within a minute of me hitting send, but no little dots appeared below them, no response ever came.

Then there were the mornings. She didn't want people taunting her, and I'd let it stop. Hunter had *technically* been the one to stop it, but my blessing was what had sealed the deal. He and I had a long talk Monday night, and I told him to go for it. Ask Eden out, win her over. It didn't matter to me. It was the second hardest lie I'd ever had to tell him, but it wouldn't go anywhere. Eden wasn't interested in Hunter. Hell, I was having a hard enough time getting her interested in *me*. She'd shoot him down the second he asked, whenever that would be.

I'd advised him to give it at least a few days to reach out to her. He needed to avoid appearing desperate. Really, I just needed him to give me time to win her trust.

It still didn't seem to be working.

One arm draped over the wheel, I lightly turned the Jeep around the last hill. The lake came into view. The sun had set, but it was nicer at night with the way the water reflected the moon.

It was a Thursday in the middle of October, so we were two of the only people out there, passing only a few campers on our way to the spot.

Eden's shifting stopped, and I glanced over to see her staring out the window at the water. She had to be wondering what the hell I was doing, and to be honest, I was wondering it too. I shouldn't have been bringing her out here.

Five more minutes and the back road came into view. I

slowed the Jeep to a crawl as I turned, flicking my gaze to Eden once again.

“You’re not bringing me out here to murder me, are you?” she asked with a chuckle that didn’t quite convey humor.

When we made it to the waterline, I put the car in park and turned to her, leaving the ignition on. “Sure you don’t want me to take you home?”

She swallowed and glanced around out the window.

I shut off the Jeep and tossed the keys into the center console before climbing out and walking around to Eden’s side. I opened the door and immediately noted the pepper spray gripped tightly in her hand.

It was my turn to nervously chuckle. “What are you doing?”

“Promise me this isn’t a prank,” she whispered, her voice shaky.

So much fear. It hung in her voice, danced in her eyes, but it had nothing to do with her having to brace through another ‘prank’, did it?

“Are you afraid to like me, Eden? That once you admit it, I’m going to pull the rug out from under you?”

She still held the pepper spray, but her grip relaxed. She didn’t answer the question, but that was an answer in and of itself. The answer I wanted, needed, and had been trying to get all week.

“That’s why I brought you out here.” I snaked my hand out and gripped the pepper spray, urging it from her hand before tossing it into the center console with the keys. “I’m going to give you something else. I’m going to give you *my* trust, so maybe it’ll help you trust me.”

I held out my hand to help her from the Jeep. She glanced out at the water. She was debating on if I was lying. She was *always* trying to figure out if I was lying, but she’d missed something that, to me, was so obvious. I’d never lied

to her. I'd lied *about* her, I'd lied to everyone else, but never to her.

Her jaw flexed as she swallowed. She placed her hand in mine and allowed me to help her out. I was still holding her hand, and when I shut the Jeep door, I felt her flinch.

I trained my gaze on her face, studying the lines in her brow, the skepticism swallowing her. "You okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" she asked, even as her eyes darted around some more. What was she looking for? Other people? A bucket of pig's blood hanging from one of the trees, waiting for her to walk underneath it? That would've been a good one.

I squeezed her hand and led the way to the water's edge. There was an old deck out there you couldn't see until you walked up on it because the weeds had grown so tall. A thick tree branch hung over the structure and dangling from it was a makeshift swing Hunter and I had made when we were ten. We hadn't used it in years, and it probably wouldn't hold our weight anymore. That'd been the highlight of our summer, flinging ourselves into the water in our secret spot. The only spot we could go where no one, not our other friends, parents, or girls knew where it was.

It was ours, and I was breaking the sacred rule.

I traipsed through the weeds with Eden following behind. All around us, frogs croaked and crickets sang. The overhanging tree shadowed the deck and made it difficult to see even when my foot planted on it. I sat down on the edge, letting go of Eden's hand, and waited for her to sit next to me. It took her a few moments, but when the deck creaked and her legs draped over the edge next to mine, I turned her way.

"So?" she said, her voice quiet.

This was such a huge deal to me, I'd forgotten I had to explain it to her. I wasn't very good at that part.

I took a deep breath and stared out over the lake. "Hunter and I found this spot when we were kids. His parents had taken us to the lake, and we'd spent the day exploring. It'd taken hours for us to get here."

Eden didn't say anything, but instead waited for me to continue. My pulse had quickened and my fingers were tingling, although not from the cold.

I glanced over my shoulder at the Jeep.

*This was a mistake.*

"And this place is important to you?"

Eden's soft voice brought my attention back to her. I flicked my gaze between her eyes and her lips. She hadn't told anyone what had happened with Sherry, and to the best of my knowledge, she hadn't told anyone about what had happened with Hunter and Jade either. No rumors were going around about either of those things, and they should've been. It's what I would've done to retaliate. It's what any normal person would've done. But not Eden.

She was different. She could keep those secrets, and she could keep this one.

I coughed to hide the ragged breath vibrating my throat and covered a hand over my mouth. "Yeah, it kind of is."

"Okay..."

"Did you know Hunter had a rough childhood?"

I forced the question out before locking it away forever.

"What?"

I was staring out at the water, but I could hear the confusion in her voice. It was predictable with the way she saw him, saw us. We appeared to have it all... cars, money, girls, whatever. There was a party at Hunter's house every weekend. His parents attended every game. Everyone thought Hunter to be the poster child of the spoiled rich kid. Sometimes it felt like I was the only one who could see beneath it.

“His parents fight a lot. His dad isn’t the nicest guy in the world, and Hunter... he’s had a hard time with it.”

The board creaked with Eden’s movement. “Oh... I. I don’t mean to sound unempathetic, but... what’s the significance of this spot?”

I flexed my fingers, trying to get the tingling to go away. Fuck, I sucked at this.

“That was the first day I ever saw Hunter’s dad hit his mom.”

The crickets seemed to get louder, like they were protesting me telling the secret. Especially since it wasn’t my secret to tell.

“Hunter doesn’t talk about it. He doesn’t talk about much at all, but that day, he was humiliated. He was crying, and it was the *only* time I’ve ever seen him cry. We ran from the campsite and didn’t say a word until we made it here. Then he told me everything.”

Wood creaking. That’s what filled the air next.

Eden’s gentle grip wound around my forearm. She wanted me to look at her, but I couldn’t.

“Why are you telling me this?” she whispered.

“Because you think he’s a monster. You think what he did to Jade was unforgivable, but what you don’t get is that he doesn’t see things the way a normal person does. He mirrors his dad without trying to. He doesn’t realize what he’s doing sometimes, but he’d never hurt her. He’d never hurt anyone.”

“Do you think that didn’t hurt her?” Anger filtered into her tone, making me wince. I wasn’t explaining it right.

“No, I don’t. And you don’t know Jade. She’s got problems too.” I shook my head. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Eden scoffed, and finally, I looked her way. She was biting her lip, staring straight ahead now. “Why wouldn’t I understand?”

“Because your home life is so fucking peachy,” I said, the

frustration in my voice apparent. "It's not a bad thing, Eden. I'm not trying to insult you."

Her head snapped my way, her eyes narrowed.

"So, what? We should just go on forgiving rapists? Is that the right thing to do?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"I don't know," I whispered, shaking my head. "I just know he's my best friend, and I don't want you to hate him. Just like I don't want you to hate me."

Her face softened and the brown of her irises darkened to the color of midnight, but the moon reflected off them as well. They were beautiful. All of her was beautiful. Even the soft parts.

"I don't hate you."

"No?"

She shook her head and tucked baby hairs behind her ear—a nervous habit I was beginning to associate with her. "Just... please don't be lying to me. Promise me this is real... It's too cruel of a joke if it's not."

"It's real," I assured her, lifting my hand to brush across her cheek. I paused before it could reach her and let it fall back on the deck. I wouldn't push her again, but fuck I wanted to.

"Promise?" Her next breath shook.

"I promise."

Her shoulders trembled, and I fought the urge to wrap my arm around her for warmth. I hadn't realized just how cold it was.

Her jeans grated on the wooden deck as she scooted over to me. She placed her hand on my arm and tilted her head up toward me. Her lips pursed and her eyes closed just before she kissed me.

The vanilla scent of her shampoo teased my senses as I

laced my fingers through her ponytail. I tugged the band from it, letting her hair cascade over my hands to drape her still tense shoulders.

“Leave your hair down,” I whispered, breaking the kiss to scoot closer to her. I peered into her eyes to make sure no more fear was there. It wasn’t. “I like it like this.”

I cupped her face with both my hands and leaned in, tasting her on my tongue, feeling the soft flesh of her lips. My cock hardened, and I considered stopping before it went too far, but fuck that.

Eden’s tongue sought mine, and she moaned as I pushed into her harder. She bunched my shirt with her fists and pulled me closer. This was what she was like with all of her guard down. Still fierce. Still strong. Still perfect.

I should’ve done this a long time ago.

I wanted to pull her onto my lap to straddle me, feel her hips grinding on me, taste her arousal on my tongue after pulling off those virgin panties. Just a taste, then I would be satisfied.

I lowered my hands over her shoulders and down her sides before I realized what I was doing.

I broke the kiss and stilled my hands on her ribcage. Our breathing was heavy, and I returned Eden’s smile when it registered.

“It’s cold,” she said with a chuckle, glancing around. “Maybe we could sit in the Jeep and talk?”

*Talk.* Yeah, right.

I smiled wider and nodded. “Absolutely.”

**S**ebastian: Sorry, not feeling well. I'll catch you next time.

I stared down at Sebastian's message while Jordan pressed on his tiptoes to peer at the phone. "What'd he say?"

"He said he can't make it."

Jordan groaned before taking a step toward the door. "Can we go now?"

I continued to stare at the message as if I'd missed something. Last night when I'd gotten home, Jordan had asked if we could go to the football game tonight, and I'd stupidly said yes. I hadn't remembered that we were supposed to go to the movies with Sebastian until school today, and I'd asked him if we could go to the football game instead. We were supposed to meet him there, and I'd only texted to ask if he was about to head that way.

"Eden, come on. We're gonna be late."

I sighed before tucking my phone in my purse and following Jordan out the door. He jumped with excitement the whole way, and by the time we were pulling into the



stadium parking lot ten minutes later, some of that excitement had rubbed off on me as well.

I gripped the steering wheel tighter as I pulled into one of the only vacant spots. The stadium lights were on, and there was a roar coming from the stands.

"It's starting!" Jordan hurried to unbuckle his seatbelt and swung his door open, nearly hitting the car next to us.

"Careful," I snapped, whirling around and talking to dead air as he'd already slammed the door shut.

I inhaled a deep breath in an attempt to make the butterflies in my stomach chill out. No, not butterflies. More like bats.

A tap came on my window, startling me, and I let go of the steering wheel and pulled the keys from the ignition.

"Come on! We have to hurry," Jordan whined, opening my door.

"Would you calm down, please?" I asked, getting out of the car and locking the door. "It's just a football game."

"But Camden's playing. He's the quarterback, Eden."

"Yeah, I know." I rolled my eyes and started toward the stadium with Jordan beside me. It was a low blow for Camden to tell Jordan about the game, knowing he'd be excited enough to ask me to take him. Jordan had spent one afternoon with Camden, and already, Camden was his idol. It was sweet, but also terrifying.

No. I was done with that thought process. This was a good thing. We were just going to watch a friend play football. Nothing bad was going to happen. No blackmail was involved, even if we'd never had an actual conversation about what would happen if I *didn't* show up to this game. That was over. Camden wouldn't—

"Can I get a Gatorade? Camden said they have Gatorade here."

"Yes, you can get a Gatorade."

I grabbed Jordan's hand as we got closer to the gates, but he snatched it back. There were so many people flocking around in blue and black Panthers gear. Several of the people we passed, I didn't recognize. All this for a high school football game. If we had this kind of turnout for concerts, I'd have a heart attack on stage.

"One Gatorade, please," Jordan said, slapping the money I'd handed him onto the concession stand counter. The lady with blue and black war paint under her eyes offered him a kind smile as she picked up the cash.

"What kind would you like?"

Jordan looked up at me. "What kind does Camden drink?"

"Blue, please," I said to the woman. That was a guess. I had zero care on what type of Gatorade my enemy drank. No, *not* my enemy.

Damn this was weird.

After Jordan got his Gatorade, we walked up the ramp into the stands. The national anthem was finishing up and everyone was still standing. I recognized the girl singing from my trig class.

The song ended and people began taking their seats. My eyes darted around the stands, searching for an opening. Jordan had been right, we should've left sooner.

"Over here." Jordan tugged me along with him up the stairs. I scanned the rows, trying to see where he'd spotted, and when I did, I froze. There was an open space, but it was just above Hunter's parents, or at least the woman I recognized as his mom.

Jordan whipped around when I'd pulled my hand from his.

"I think I see better ones over there." I pointed in an arbitrary direction and took a step down. The players took to the field and the people in the stands started cheering.

"No, it's fixing to start. Come on." He grabbed my hand

and started pulling me up the stairs again. I tried to protest, but he wasn't having it. He was a ten-year-old with a one-track mind.

"Excuse me," I muttered to no one in particular as we shuffled our way down to the empty spot on the bleachers. People craned their necks to see around us, as if they didn't want to miss a moment of what was happening on the field. I don't think it'd even started yet.

We made it to our seats just as "Panthers will start with the ball" blared from the loudspeakers positioned around the stadium. I looked out over the field, searching for Camden. I couldn't remember what his number was, but with as many people I noted having #8 sprawled on the back of their shirts, I guessed it was that. Sure enough, #8 stepped into the quarterback position.

I could tell it was him with his signature confidence and smooth composure, even if I hadn't known what position he played. Several of the players' helmets moved as if looking up in the stands, but not his. His was still, his complete focus on the field. I wish I could lie and say I didn't find it sexy. Or maybe I shouldn't want to lie. Maybe it was a good thing to think the guy I was talking to was sexy.

So, so weird.

The ball snapped and Camden caught it with ease. He looked downfield and jerked his arm before slyly handing the ball to another player who ran several yards and evaded two tackles before being taken down.

The crowd roared and Hunter's mom stood up, cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled, "Way to work as a team, boys!"

She sat down, her back straight and laser focus on the field. Hunter's dad mumbled something to her that I couldn't make out with all the noise, and she looked to him only a moment before going back to the field.

When I glanced over at Jordan, he was sitting on his hands and perched on the edge of his seat. His eyes were comically wide. "Having fun?" I asked, leaning in next to his ear.

He briefly looked my way before nodding and going back to the game. Football wasn't really an interest of mine, but it was for Roman and Jordan. They put the Dallas game on every weekend, and Roman had even taught me some about the game when I was younger. It wasn't the same on TV as it was in person, though, especially with players that I knew. Finally, I was starting to understand the appeal.

The ball snapped, and Camden threw a pass down the field. One of our players almost caught it, but it slipped through their hands.

Hunter's dad perked up and shouted, "God dammit! Give it to eighteen!"

Hunter's mom touched his arm, but he shook her off.

I looked out over the field to see who number eighteen was. He was the running back who'd run the first play. Hunter.

The next two plays went to Hunter, and he managed another first down. When Camden threw the ball again, to a different receiver this time, it was caught and the Panthers scored the first touchdown of the game. The crowd went freaking insane, and I found myself clapping and smiling along with them. The enthusiasm was contagious.

Maybe this wasn't as stupid as I thought.

The offensive players trotted off the field, while defense pulled on their helmets and trotted to prepare for kick off. Camden took off his helmet and ran a hand over his hair to smooth it back from his eyes. He didn't look into the stands, but my eyes caught Hunter's as he waved. He had a grin on his face that sent blood rushing to my cheeks. His mom waved back, and a gust of air ran over my lips in a nervous

chuckle. He wasn't waving at me, he was waving at his parents. He probably didn't even notice I was—

"Camden!" Jordan stood and waved his arms in the air like he was a tourist trying to hail a taxi.

"Sit down!" I tugged on his shirt and turned my head to let my hair cocoon around my face, as if it could really shield me from embarrassment. I'd worn it down tonight because Camden had said he liked it that way, and now I felt like the world's biggest idiot. The stadium lights felt like they were aimed directly at me, acting as spotlights for my unease.

"Hi there." The voice belonged to Hunter's mom. I cleared my throat and turned to face forward as if I hadn't just been trying to go incognito. She wasn't paying attention to me, though. She was talking to Jordan. "Are you a friend of Cam's?"

"He's Eden's boyfriend."

"No." A bout of nervous laughter bubbled in my chest. "He's not. That's ridiculous."

Hunter's mom turned to me. I expected her smile to fall when she recognized who I was. Needles pricked my skin at the prospect, starting from my forehead and traveling to my chin as the blood drained from my face. But she didn't frown. Her smile widened, and she held out her hand. "I'm Sherry."

I stared at her for a moment longer than necessary before blinking and placing my hand in hers, allowing her to give it a shake. "Eden."

"Eden, what a nice name. Will you be coming to the post-game celebration at our house? Any friend of Cam's is a friend of ours."

Hunter's dad stared straight ahead but grumbled, "It's a party, Sherry. Not a 'post-game celebration'. Don't be so politically correct."

"Right," she said, her smile hardening. "Party."

“Uh... No. I have to get my little brother home.” I nodded toward Jordan. “Thank you, though.”

She glanced at Jordan and nodded, the kindness in her eyes never wavering. “Ah, of course. Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

Jordan was too focused on the field to register that Sherry was speaking to him, and she chuckled.

“Pleasure to meet you too,” I said.

With that, she turned to face the game, immediately cheering on the defense who’d given the other team a second down.

I shrank in my seat, staring out at the field, but not bringing myself to look where Camden had been. I shouldn’t have felt weird for coming tonight. We weren’t enemies. We were... friends. Maybe more than friends. I shouldn’t feel like coming here had let him win. It wasn’t a competition anymore.

But it wasn’t that simple. I couldn’t lay down all my defenses just because I was starting to have feelings for him.

So instead of watching the second quarter of the game, I watched Hunter’s parents.

His dad, who’d I’d learned was ‘Gene’ from Sherry asking if he was thirsty, sat with his muscles tensed. He was leaned forward, hands on his knees. He didn’t clap when the Panthers scored, even when it was Hunter doing the scoring, but I watched as his posture tightened when a pass was dropped. If I craned my neck, I could see his hands balling into fists.

He cared about this game in a way I had a hard time fathoming. But he seemed to care more when they messed up than when they did well.

Then Hunter fumbled the ball.

Mr. O’Reilly slingshotted out of his seat. His fists at his

sides were clearly visible now, and my eyes locked onto the white knuckles. "Hang onto the damn ball, Hunter!"

"Gene," Sherry said, glancing around as if she were embarrassed.

He shuffled through the stands, unconcerned with telling Sherry where he was going, not that she'd asked. He stomped down the steps and propped himself against the railing, his back coiled tight.

Sherry shifted on the bench and must've sensed me watching her because she turned back and shrugged. "Men." She smiled as if it were funny, but there was no humor in her eyes. When she faced forward, we both went back to the game.

I didn't want to watch Hunter's parents anymore. My stomach had bottomed out after having seen the sad look in Sherry's eyes, one I imagined was permanent. If Camden hadn't told me about their marriage, would I have seen it? Probably not. No one around was paying any attention, and several of the dads got mad when something happened. Gene hadn't even been the only one to yell out at Hunter when he'd fumbled.

No, I'd seen it because I'd been looking for it.

I sat up straighter and took a deep breath before turning my attention toward Jordan. "Having fun?"

He flicked his gaze toward me and nodded before going back to the game. I followed his lead. The other team had the ball, and they were at the ten-yard line. The ball snapped, and the quarterback threw it to a receiver who was wide open in the end zone. The crowd groaned.

"No, come on!" Jordan said, throwing his hands up.

I bit my lip to keep from smiling, then scanned the team to gauge their reactions. Okay, maybe I was only looking for Camden's.

He was on the bench with his arms slung over the back-

rest. Hunter was beside him shaking his head and saying something, but I couldn't see Camden's face to judge if he was talking back. With the way his arms were draped, he didn't appear to be worried. We were up by two touchdowns, so his lack of worry made sense, but the crowd didn't hold that same confidence. You could feel the tension in the air.

Half-time began, and I perked up in my seat while a huge chunk of the crowd made their way to the concessions and bathroom. The band was coming onto the field and getting ready to perform.

Cheerleaders in front of the stands began a routine, and Sherry clapped and cheered along with them, her enthusiasm all of a sudden nauseating. I glimpsed Leilani at the top of the pyramid and refrained from rolling my eyes.

"Nice job, girls!" Sherry yelled, when they were done and going to get a drink of water. Jade peered up into the stands, a huge smile on her face... until she saw me, of course. She tapped Leilani on the shoulder and said something into her ear a moment before Leilani's eyes darted to the stands, scanning until they locked onto me. A glare followed, but I looked away, focusing my attention on the band.

They started to march and our school anthem blasted from their instruments. Leilani, Jade, Mr. O'Reilly, and everyone else faded from my thoughts as I watched the performance. The cello was my instrument of choice, and concerts were where I enjoyed performing, but marching band had always fascinated me. If I hadn't hated the idea of sitting through football games, I probably would've come to watch them more than the two I'd been to.

Orchestra had solo performances that were magnificent, but marching band wasn't like that. With one person, it was chaotic and silly. The trumpet didn't have such a beautiful tune by itself, but pair it with seven other instruments, seven



other choreographed movements, and it was an appealing, complex structure. Fascinating.

Jordan turned to me in the middle of the routine. "I have to go to the bathroom."

"In a minute."

"But the game's going to start." He tugged on my sleeve, but I ignored his whining. I was too concentrated on the performance.

"Come on, bud, I'll take you."

Paige's voice registered from my left, and my head snapped in her direction, completely breaking the spell the marching band had on me. My eyes narrowed and jaw clenched, but Jordan jumped from his seat and ran to her before I could process what was happening.

"Paige!" He threw his arms around her waist and squeezed.

"Hey, bud." She chuckled and rubbed his back, slowly removing her hands when she noticed me glaring at her.

"Hey, Eden."

Sherry was glancing between us, but the tension must have been obvious because she turned toward the field and watched the marching band finish up.

I stood and took Jordan's hand. "Come on, I'll take you to the bathroom."

"Paige said she'd take me." He yanked from my hand in protest, but I grabbed it again and pulled him with me from the stands. He stopped fighting me as we descended the stairs and rounded the corner to the bathroom.

"Are you mad at Paige?" He stopped just outside the men's room. Luckily, the line wasn't long since halftime was about over.

"Hurry up or we'll miss the start of second half. You don't want that, do you?"

He furrowed his brow. "Are you mad at Paige?" He asked

the question with more force this time, making it clear he wasn't going to budge. For a ten-year-old, the kid was too smart.

I sighed and stared off into space, considering if I should lie to him or not. Glancing back down at his narrowed eyes, I shrugged. "Kind of."

"Why?"

"She—" I cut myself off, realizing I had no idea what I was about to say, but knowing it wasn't about to be the truth. He loved Paige. I wasn't about to make her out to be the bad guy... even if that's what she was. "We had a disagreement... Now, go to the bathroom so we can get back."

He bit his cheek and waited a few moments before turning and pushing open the door to the bathroom. A few minutes later, he returned.

"Wash your hands?"

"Yes," he said with an eye roll.

We walked back into the stands just as the Panthers kicked the ball to begin the second half. I crossed my fingers, hoping that Paige would be gone by the time we got back. My chest deflated when I spotted her up in our seats, talking to Sherry.

Jordan stopped me before I could take the first step up the stairs. I turned back to look at him, and my heart ached when I registered the sad look in his eyes. "I like Paige."

I forced my lips to tilt up and ruffled his hair. "I know you do."

With slow steps, we made our way back to our seats, my eyes avoiding both Sherry and Paige the whole way. Paige scooted over to give Jordan and I room, and we squeezed into the gap, me sitting next to Paige. Bitterness bubbled to the surface from being so close, but I pushed it down for Jordan's sake.

"So how've you been, Jordy?" She leaned forward and

smiled over at Jordan who finally allowed his attention to be interrupted from the game.

“Good,” he said, more cheer in his voice than he had a minute ago. “We’re here to watch Camden.”

“The team,” I corrected him, turning my head to glare so that he’d get that he needed to stop saying that. “We came to watch *all* the players.”

“Ah.” Paige sat up straighter and pretended to focus on the field, but, out of the corner of my eye, I caught her glancing at me.

“So, what’s going on with you and Cam?”

“Nothing.”

“No?” One eyebrow rose, but after I hesitated, she gave a curt nod, telling me without words that she didn’t believe me.

I was here, my little brother had given me away, there were a million rumors circulating the school about me being a slut. Was there really any point in denying it?

“What I mean is,” I said, turning toward her and whispering so that Jordan couldn’t hear. “It’s none of your business.”

She met my stare. Her lips pulled into a frown, and her eyes conveyed worry, which made no sense. I’d expected her to roll her eyes or smirk, something indicating she too thought I was a slut. She’d had no problem acting that way before.

“Be careful, okay?”

I let out a dry laugh. “What?”

“He’s not a good guy, Eden. I know you hate me right now, and I get it. I really do. I’ve been the worst friend in the world, but trust me when I say, you should be careful.”

“I don’t trust you, Paige. Period.”

My voice came out louder than I’d intended and Sherry’s

head turned slightly toward us. She faced forward again and leaned on her knees.

“Are you sleeping with him?”

Anger boiled beneath my skin, and it took every amount of restraint I had not to implode. With all the rumors, with her screwing Trey, *letting* Trey screw everyone else, she had the nerve to ask me that? As if it was any of her business. As if she was any better.

I glanced at Jordan to make sure he wasn't paying attention to us. His eyes were glued to the football field. I turned back to Paige.

“I'm not a *slut*.” Venom laced my tone, seeping in with my words and coating the underlying meaning.

“But you think *I* am.” She shook her head and bit her lip before looking away. Her eyes welled up with tears, and my face fell. I'd seen Paige cry dozens of times, but before a month ago, I couldn't have predicted being the source of her pain. I wish it felt good and the image of her laughing with her *new* friends about me would replay in my mind, but all I could see was the hurt on her face.

“We're not friends anymore... You don't need to warn me about—”

“Okay, I get it.” She wiped beneath her eyes. She was staring at something on the field, and I followed her gaze. It wasn't something, it was someones.

Jade and Leilani stood two feet apart, their legs spread in the ending move of a cheer. Both of their eyes were locked onto Paige.

“Oh, I see.” I rolled my eyes and laughed dryly. “They sent you up here to scare me away. Cool.”

“No, they didn't.” Paige whipped toward me and placed her hand on my shoulder, which I swatted away.

“Eden, listen.” She glanced down at Sherry before putting her mouth next to my ear. “Hunter wants me to talk to you

about going with him to homecoming. Cam and Hunter, they—”

“Stop.” I stood and gestured toward Jordan for him to stand too. This had been a terrible idea. I should’ve known one of them would ruin it.

“Come on, we have to go.” Jordan slowly stood and took my hand.

“Eden, wait.”

I whirled around, my eyes crazed and teeth bared. “Leave. Me. Alone.”

I’d made no attempt to be quiet, and several people, including Sherry, broke their concentration on the game to turn and stare at us.

Paige glanced around, the color draining from her cheeks. Her shoulders slumped, and she looked away.

Oh, I embarrassed you, Paige?

*Good.*

I gripped Jordan’s hand and guided us out of the stands. I had to force myself to go at a pace his short legs could keep up with, and when we’d made it to the railing, I chanced a glance toward the benches where I’d last seen Camden. The defense was playing, so he was still there. Our eyes met, and his head tilted in question.

I paused and took a moment to just stare. The first half had been nice, even with Hunter’s parents taking the bulk of my attention. For a moment, it had felt as if I really had been there to watch my boyfriend play.

I gave a small wave before continuing on out of the stadium, not looking back again.

“*R*un the ball.”

The voice belonged to Gene, but my eyes never left Hunter. Sweat dripped from his chin to his white T-shirt. His chest showed clearly in the beam of the porch light where it'd soaked through. I hadn't sweat a drop, and my fingertips touching the lace of the football had gone numb. My breath fogged in front of my face. Hunter jogged up to stand to my right. He bent his knees and rested his hand on the ground while peering up at the blackness of the backyard where the light didn't reach.

The patio door slid open and Sherry appeared holding her robe tightly around her. “Gene, they've been at it for hours. Don't you think this is enough?”

“Shut up,” Gene barked over his shoulder before turning to me. The light shone down on his back, casting a shadow ten feet in front of him and painting an ominous haze over his face.

“Run the ball.”

I flicked my gaze between Sherry and Hunter. His

breathing was deep. A shiver ran down my spine just looking at the sweat that was drying.

I clapped a hand over the ball. "Hike."

Hunter sprinted three steps out before pivoting and charging toward me. I pumped a fake pass to the darkness before handing it off to him. My numb fingers prickled as the ball left my hand, and I shoved them into my hoodie pocket for a minute of relief.

Hunter's legs stretched in front of him as he sprinted the ten feet down the backyard to the spot where Gene had jogged to. Gene's face contorted, and an animalistic grunt barreled up his chest as he shoved Hunter to the ground when he was in reach. Hunter rolled in the grass, the ball tucked tightly in the crook of his arm.

The corners of his eyes creased, and his white teeth gleamed as he bared them. "Are you all right?" I asked, taking a step in his direction.

Gene held out a hand to stop me and snatched the ball from Hunter before hurling it my way. I caught it without moving my glare from Gene's poorly lit face.

He peered down at Hunter, who was still heaving on the ground while holding one hand at his side. "Get up."

"That's enough." The ball fell from my fingertips and thumped on the grass.

I stalked toward them and nudged Gene out of the way. I crouched next to Hunter and spoke low enough that Gene wouldn't hear. "You don't have to do this anymore. Let's just go."

Hunter's closed eyelids wrinkled more, and he groaned as he pulled himself up. I stood along with him and waited for him to decide what to do. But I already knew what he'd choose.

He jogged up to the imaginary starting line we'd drawn

three hours ago and planted his hand in the grass, in position.

“That’s my boy.” Gene clapped and stepped off to the side, ready to play the role of biggest dickhead in the world.

“Let’s go, Cam.”

With a shake of my head, I trudged over to the ball. My phone vibrated against my thigh as I was picking it up, and I grabbed it from my pocket to check the message. It was from Leilani, asking if I wanted to come over and hang out with her in the hot tub. Right then, yeah, I did. Anything but this bullshit.

“You know, maybe you should be less preoccupied with your girlfriend and more preoccupied with your team,” Gene snapped. “You’re the captain. Every mistake comes down to your leadership.”

I shoved my phone in my pocket and tightened my grip on the ball. My brain tried to glue my mouth shut, but testosterone was pumping. The challenge misted in the air, wrapping around me and squeezing. I rolled my neck to ease some of the tension.

Hunter’s head turned my way. “Cam, run the ball.”

“Let’s go!” Gene commanded, snapping his fingers. How were they not numb?

I chucked the ball into the pool and took a step toward him. “Would you just shut the fuck up?”

His eyes grew comically round, and his chest pushed out like something out of a cartoon. “What did you just say to me?”

“I’m so sick of your shit!” I stalked up to him and gave him a shove, but predictably, it backfired. He charged toward me and shoved me back with more force than necessary to have me falling to the ground.

“Gene, that’s enough,” Sherry said, her voice shrill.

He glanced her way and spat. “Go back inside.”



He yanked me up by my hoodie and held me within an inch of his face. My jaw clenched and hands fisted at my sides, but I made no more moves to escalate the situation. We'd been here before. I knew how it ended.

"You're a little shit, Cam, you know that? You fucking be thankful you're Ronald's kid, or I swear to God—"

"Gene, come inside. Now."

*Dammit, Sherry. Shut up!*

His wide eyes snapped to hers, and his jawline sharpened. He shoved me to the ground and stalked that way.

"Or what?" I asked, standing and stepping after him.

"Hunter, tell your friend to go home."

"Or what, you fucking pussy?" I raised my arms in invitation, but it was in vain. He'd paused and his muscles tensed, but he didn't turn my way.

Hunter grabbed one of my arms and pulled me back before inserting himself between us. "Stop."

His voice was a low growl, as if I was the one he was mad at.

The patio door clanged as it shut behind Gene and Sherry.

"Get out of my fuckin' way."

I went to charge toward the patio, but Hunter's hand blocked me. I glared down at it before meeting his eyes.

"You're gonna piss him off even more, and then what, Cam? What the *fuck* are you gonna do, then?"

My fists relaxed, and I tucked my open palms into my hoodie, peering over his shoulder at the glass door they'd gone through. Neither of them were visible, which meant they'd most likely gone to their bedroom to fight. As if Hunter couldn't hear it.

He was right. This was my fault.

"Are you okay?" I asked, turning back to him and rubbing the back of my neck.

His glare was pinned on me, but he removed the hand from my chest. "Yeah."

I nodded and let my hand fall to my side. "Hunter, I—"

"Who texted you?"

"What?"

"Tonight. You kept looking at your phone. Who were you texting?"

One side of my lips pulled up, and I wrinkled my brow. "Why?"

He shook his head and turned as if he was going to go inside. I knew better, though. He'd stay out here in nothing but a T-shirt and sweats for at least another hour. Sometimes it was hard to tell if he was avoiding hearing their fighting, or if he was punishing himself.

I followed him over to the patio and took the seat next to him.

"Leilani asked if I wanted to hang out in the hot tub. I'm sure she sent you a text long before she sent one to me. We both know I'm the backup sex."

"You're the one that says no."

His skin was pulled taut over his jaw. Sweat caked his blond hair, matting it over his forehead into hard, freezing strands. "That wasn't the only text you got tonight, though."

"Why do you sound like a jealous girlfriend?"

"Why do you sound like someone evading a question?"

I'd kept my tone light to insert some humor into the conversation, but clearly that wasn't what Hunter was after. Leaning back in the chair, I stared at the pool. So many memories had been made in there.

"Cam."

My breath fogged around me as I turned his way.

"What was Eden doing at the game tonight?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Tell me the truth." He leaned toward me and placed his hand on the arm of my chair. "Are you seeing her?"

My mouth opened to answer with an immediate *no*, but I hesitated. *Was I seeing Eden?* I was hanging out with Eden. I liked Eden. But I wasn't Eden's boyfriend. I wasn't anyone's boyfriend. By society's standards, I was closer to a relationship with Leilani than with Eden.

"No."

"I'm not going to be pissed if you are, I just—"

"I'm not dating the band geek, Hunter." My face tugged into a cringe at my own words, but I didn't correct them. They were true. We weren't dating. I wasn't lying to anybody.

"But you're still fucking her."

"No."

He shook his head and laughed dryly. He snatched his hand from my chair and leaned back.

"Why are you being so pissy?"

"Because you're full of shit." His voice rose into a shout. "Do you really think I'm that stupid?"

"I don't—"

"Stop, Cam. Just stop. I'm not doing this tonight." He stood and glanced toward the door. The anger in his expression was there, but it was diminishing. He looked exhausted.

"Can you give me a ride to Leilani's? I left my keys inside... Unless you plan on cockblocking me from her, too."

"You can come to my house."

Hunter shook his head. "No thanks."

He stood, staring down at me, waiting for me to move. Words perched on the tip of my tongue, but the problem was, I didn't know what they were. I knew I should tell him *something*, but I didn't have any idea what.

Tough conversations weren't our thing.

I stood and scratched at my hairline. I hadn't had a

shower after the game, and the feeling of filth was starting to be overbearing. It'd be better to go home alone. I was tired anyway. "All right."

We walked around to the front of the house and got in the Jeep. Hunter didn't say a word on the way over to Leilani's, but instead, stared out the passenger window. When I pulled into her driveway he turned to me, his lips in a thin line. "Hey, so I just want to thank you for that sound advice you gave me for Eden. It's really working out."

"What are you talking about?"

"Hang back and wait, right? That way, I don't look too desperate."

I poked my tongue into my inner cheek and expanded my chest with a heavy breath. "Don't you think we have more important things to worry about tonight than Eden?"

"Oh, I'm sure that's the way you see it." His hard expression didn't budge. With one last pointed stare, he threw open the passenger door and climbed out of the Jeep. He pressed his palm against the edge of the door and paused. "You might not be done with her, but neither am I."

I rolled my eyes and put the car in reverse before he had a chance to slam the door. My knuckles whitened as I clutched the gear shift.

Fuckin' immature asshole. He was acting like she was some toy we were fighting over. My chest tightened as I whipped out of the drive and started toward my own house. It took several miles before my grip on the steering wheel relaxed.

This wasn't about me. This was deflecting what was happening with his parents. That was all.

Sherry's image popped into my head, and I pulled my phone from my pocket to check my messages. Only Leilani's text showed on the screen. Sherry wouldn't be texting me. That was over.

I tossed my phone into the cupholder and inhaled deeply, focusing on my breathing until I pulled into my own driveway. My parents' cars were parked in the garage next to each other, and I pulled the Jeep beside them. They hated it when I parked in the garage this late, so normally I'd leave the Jeep in the driveway and go through the front door. They said the garage door opening woke them up.

Too bad I didn't give a shit.

I yanked the keys from the ignition and slammed my door after getting out. Despite the rage simmering underneath, my lips pulled up on one side. At least they'd know I was home.

I let out a laugh and walked into the house, stopping in my tracks as I spotted my dad in his pajamas, leaned against the counter.

"What is *wrong* with you?" He asked, disgust contorting his face. His lip curled and he folded his arms over his chest. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Sorry... didn't mean to wake you."

He huffed and his cheek protruded from his tongue poking into it, mirroring the same habit I had. Was it genetic? Or had I learned it from watching him all these years?

"Gene called about ten minutes ago and said you were causing problems at his house."

"Gene's an asshole."

"No, he's my business partner." My dad's fist crashed to the countertop, jingling the set of silver serving spoons my mom kept in a decorative vase. They were just for show. No one cooked around here.

"I don't have time to deal with this right now, Cam. Do you get that? Do you even care?"

"Care about what?" I shouted, lifting my hands. "Care

about your work? Care about your partnership with *Gene O'Reilly*?"

"Care about *anybody* but yourself." Dad's voice reverberated in the kitchen. I flinched from the noise, and maybe from the words too. They echoed in my head long after the sound died.

"What on earth is going on?" My mom appeared in the kitchen, worry etched into her expression. She jerked her robe tighter around her chest and gaped at my dad.

I turned my gaze to him and watch as he deflated. His thick brows relaxed, as did his fists. "I'm sorry, honey. I figured Cam's arrival had already woken you." There was an unsurprising bite to his tone. His gaze flicked toward me before going back to my mom. "Go back to sleep. I'll be up soon."

She blew him off and turned to me. "Are you all right?"

*Am I all right?*

It was such a simple question, but one that evoked bitterness. It weighed down my blood until the stream through my veins slowed to a crawl.

"Yeah."

She huffed and ran her hands over the sides of her nose. "Then why are you coming home so late?" She moved her hands to her hips and spoke as if I'd done something wrong. Something abnormal. Like I'd broken one of their nonexistent fucking rules.

"I was practicing plays with Hunter and Gene." I rolled my shoulders and forced my muscles to relax. "We won tonight, you know?"

Her face softened, but her hands didn't lift from her hips. "Yes, we know. We listened to it on the radio on the way back from the city. Don't deflect—"

"Cool," I said, glancing at my dad, who was still leaned

against the counter. "I'm gonna go to bed now, if it's all the same to you."

His nostrils flared and he pushed off the counter. "Do not cause problems with the O'Reilly's, Cam. I don't care what you think of him, he's my business partner, and you will respect that. Is that clear?"

My teeth ground together as I jerked my head in a nod.

He walked past me and then past my mom, who still stood in the entryway. Her lips were pulled into a frown, and the familiar gleam of disappointment in her eyes had me peering at the tile.

"Please don't make us enforce a curfew, Cam. You're eighteen, you—"

"I'm sorry I woke you."

A sigh whipped through the air, and my mom's bare feet padded on the kitchen tile until she was next to me. She wrapped her arms around my shoulder and kissed my hair. She jolted backward and lifted her hands to her nose. "Jeez, kid," she said, waving a hand and laughing. "You need a shower."

"Sweating is part of the game. It's kinda unavoidable." I shrugged and tried to inject humor into my tone, but the bitterness broke through.

Mom sighed again, almost dramatically this time. "Well, I'm sorry we couldn't make it this time, but we'll be there next week."

"I know," I said, snapping my gaze to her. "I'm gonna go take a shower now."

I brushed past her, ignoring her third and final sigh. My steps were quick going to my room, but I tried to keep them as controlled a pace as I could. I wasn't running from her or her disappointment. Or at least I didn't want to be.

I kicked the door shut when I made it to my room and pulled my phone from my pocket. After swiping the screen, I

punched in my passcode and pulled up the messages from earlier. The ones from Eden.

**EDEN: You played really great tonight! Sorry for leaving early. Have to be up early for the fall concert tomorrow :(**

**Me: I thought you were ineligible?**

**Eden: Do football players still go to games when they're ineligible?**

**Me: Point taken.**

She hadn't texted me back after that last message, and by now, she'd probably be asleep. It was a little annoying that she'd left early, but seeing her in the stands had fueled me. I'd played my best game tonight. Not that I didn't always, but this time I felt like I had a reason to. It was... nice.

I typed 'good night' and hit send before exiting out of my messages. Tapping on the Safari icon, I waited for the internet to load. I pulled up the school's website and checked the time for tomorrow's concert. It started at one.

My eyes narrowed as I stared at the phone screen. Had to be up early? Fucking liar.

I set an alarm for eleven and plugged my phone into the charger before heading for the shower. Liar or not, she'd shown up tonight. Tomorrow I'd return the favor.



“*I*s it about to start?” Jordan whispered to my mom for the third time. My jaw ticked, but I kept my eyes on the stage. The orchestra, *my* orchestra, wasn’t there yet.

“Five more minutes,” Mom whispered back, kissing the top of his head. She peered at me and gave an apologetic frown. I smiled and shrugged my shoulders like it was no big deal. Like this wasn’t my whole freaking world and it wasn’t killing me to sit in the audience instead of standing off-stage, cello in hand. My palms would’ve been sweating, and I would’ve been tightening my fingers around my bow. It looked like nervousness, but I knew what it was. Excitement. Happiness. Joy.

Not the dead weight of regret.

A couple more minutes passed, and I sank lower into my chair, splaying my hands out over the armrests. No one was sitting to my left, so at least I had that. And, really, this was cool. I’d get to see how we looked, watch and listen to the symphony... instead of being a part of it. Damn, I sucked at thinking positively.

Chairs squealed with people shifting on my left, and I sighed as I glanced at the only empty seat in the aisle, the one right next to me. Resting my hand in my lap, I returned my gaze back to the stage.

“Is this seat taken?”

My eyes darted to Camden’s silhouette, his frame darkened from the low lighting in the auditorium. I shook my head and bit my lip, fighting the smile that was threatening to take over my sour mood.

“Camden!” Jordan screeched. Mom shushed him and patted his head to temper his excitement.

“What’s up, little man,” Camden said, as he sat in the velvet seat next to mine, leaning so that his mouth was to my ear. “Hey, beautiful.”

My cheeks heated, and I sank lower, somehow embarrassed and giddy at the same time. I glanced over at Mom and Roman, but their eyes were on the stage. Roman’s arm wrapped around my mom and she leaned into him. Jordan’s eyes though? Yeah, they were glued to Camden.

“You did good last night,” Jordan whispered, glancing to my mom to make sure he wasn’t about to get reprimanded. She just smiled and kept her eyes on the stage.

“Thanks. I saw you up in the stands.”

The lights in the auditorium dimmed lower, signaling that the performers were about to come on stage. I turned to Jordan and put a finger over my mouth before he could say anything else to Camden.

Heels clanked against marble as my peers followed in a line, that broke into three, as they maneuvered to the three rows of chairs. Black dresses and blue ties colored the drab stage, everyone dressed up in our school colors for the occasion. Their backs were straight, and their faces were reminiscent of an army line as they stood in front of their chairs, waiting for Mr. Hines to give the signal to be seated.

Mr. Hines was facing the audience, microphone to his mouth, and he began giving the opening welcome, thanking people for coming and praising the students in participation... students that weren't me.

"You look really good," Camden whispered into my ear. I glanced down at the black dress I would've worn onstage and frowned.

"That was a compliment," he said, humor in his tone.

I turned to him and forced a smile before eyeing up his black suit. "You look good, too."

I'd meant it. The material hugged his limbs and torso like it was tailored just for him, which I'm sure it was. His smell drifted into my nose, the scent of his shampoo stronger today as if he'd just taken a shower.

"How did you know what time the concert was?"

"School website."

"Ah." I smiled, this one not forced, and faced the stage. The band took their seats and Mr. Hines turned to face them. They focused on him, staring at his hand that gave the signal as if it were the only thing in the room. I knew that feeling. The people faded into the blackness of the auditorium, your heart beat out of your chest, your fingers tingled with anticipation. If I had to compare it to a sport, it'd be track, where the runners are set on the starting line waiting for the gun to go off.

Boom.

Mr. Hines's hand came down to signal the musicians. Violin's filled the auditorium first, beginning the piece in a soft symphony. The cellos followed, and my eyes closed as I listened. It sounded so different in the audience. On stage it was big, loud, the sound of my own cello my focus. Here, all instruments came together in a meshing of utter harmony. I'd been to many orchestra performances—professional ones—but to hear the music we'd been practicing for weeks from

the other side of the curtain was surreal. It felt so wrong and so right at the same time.

I opened my eyes as the song ended and immediately felt Camden's gaze on me. I glanced up at him and blushed. His expression wasn't humorous like I'd expected. It was serious. Hard lines on his face, tight lips.

"What?" I whispered as a new song began.

He shook his head and blinked, as if he hadn't realized he'd been staring with such intensity. "Nothing."

I went back to the band, this time keeping my eyes open. My hands clasped together in my lap, and I pulled into myself as the prickled waves wracked through me, similar to what I would've felt on stage, but different somehow. More relaxing as opposed to exciting.

Song after song played, and at some point, I forgot Camden was there. I forgot *anyone* was there. Blackness enveloped the auditorium, leaving only the brightened stage, the musicians, and the music. It was art. It was beauty. It was everything.

When the last note to the last song reverberated off the walls, Mr. Hines turned and the auditorium echoed with clapping. I forced my heavy hands to clap and was the first person to stand, hitting my hands together harder. Around me, I could sense the people as they stood after me, but my eyes never left the stage. Several of my friends broke out into wide grins, and they glanced to each other as they took in the standing ovation.

They bowed when given the instruction, and Mr. Hines thanked the audience for coming to the fall concert.

People began shuffling through the aisles as my peers walked backstage in a line. I turned to head that way to congratulate them but was met with Camden's hard chest. I peered into eyes much more relaxed than they had been and smiled.

“What’d you think?”

“I liked it,” he said, grinning. “Not near as much as you did, but still. It was cool.”

*Cool.* Ah, yes, the perfect description for an orchestra concert.

“I’ll be sure to let my friends know.” I stepped around him and walked backward toward the emptying aisle. “Be right back.”

“Meet us at the car,” Mom said, picking her purse up off the floor and urging Jordan to walk. He rubbed at his eyes and took a step toward Camden.

I turned and hurried toward the back room the players would be in. My smile stretched over my face, and excitement still coursed through my veins. I would never sit out of another concert. Period. I refused to be in the audience again, but it wasn’t quite as bad as I thought it would be this time. It was neat to see them, rather than concentrating on my own movements and instrument.

The back room was buzzing with laughter and conversation when I got there. I found Sebastian standing with a couple other violin players, eyes wide as well as their smiles.

“Hey, you guys did great!” I said, bouncing next to them.

Sebastian met my gaze. “Did you see that standing ovation?” The excitement in his voice matched that of the room. We’d never gotten one of those before. Most of the audience consisted of family members that didn’t necessarily have a passion for our kind of music.

“Yeah, I did! I’m so happy for you!”

His expression softened by a fraction. “I’m sure we’ll get one at the Christmas concert, too.”

I nodded and wrapped my arms around him in a hug. He startled a moment but hugged me back. I pulled away and laughed out a breath. “I’m just really glad I got to see it. Seri-

ously, you were amazing. And I'm glad you're feeling better today."

He glanced around, distracted. The back-room conversation was beginning to get as loud as the football stadium had last night.

I placed my hand on his arm. "I'll see you later."

"Eden," Sebastian called, pausing me from making my way back to the door. "You should come celebrate with us. Rachel, Jennifer, Keith, and I are going out for pizza."

Camden popped into my mind. Would he want to go out with my friends?

I shook my head. "Sorry, I've got family plans."

"Okay, well, next time?"

"For sure."

When he turned back to his group, I tucked my hair behind my ears and left. Camden was waiting alongside my family at the Lexus. He seemed to be deep in conversation with Jordan, but I didn't catch what they were saying. My ears were still ringing from the back room.

"Ready?" Roman asked as I walked up.

"Yep." I glanced to Camden, then back to Roman. "Is it all right if I ride with Camden?"

He looked to my mom for her approval, and she nodded with only a slight hesitation. He was warming up to her fast.

"I've gotta stop by my house to change first, if that's okay?" He glanced between me and my mom.

"As long as Eden isn't in the room you're changing in."

Roman chuckled, and I rolled my eyes, trying to hide the embarrassment that flushed through me.

They loaded up in the Lexus and left Camden and I standing in the nearly empty parking lot.

His Jeep was on the other side, and when I started that way, his fingers laced through mine. I stopped and peered

down at our hands, and then to his face. Amusement flickered in his eyes.

“We probably shouldn’t take too long. Wouldn’t want your parents thinking there’s any funny business going on.” He chuckled and tugged on my hand as he walked to his Jeep. “You know that’s what they call it? Your prudish ways are starting to make a lot of sense.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked, unlacing my hand from his and pausing once again.

He turned and looked back at me, an eyebrow raised. “You don’t want me—”

“No, I—I do.” I swallowed and allowed my gaze to travel the parking lot. This was where he’d approached me alone for the first time. Where he started his crusade to win me over, or at least, looking back, it seemed like that was what he was doing. “I just... What does this mean? Are we dating?”

My stomach twisted as I asked the question. If Sebastian hadn’t asked me to go celebrate with them, I’m not sure I would’ve thought so much about it. My friends didn’t know. Granted, I only had one left, but last night I hadn’t been sure what to say to Paige either. I didn’t want to lie to anybody, but it was tough when I didn’t know the truth.

“Uh...” Camden trailed off. Gravel crunched as he shifted his feet. In other words, no, we weren’t dating... but we liked each other. We were showing up to each other’s events, each other’s houses.

This was happening, and I either needed to stop it or embrace it. No more lying to people. No more lying to myself.

I stepped up to him and laced my fingers through his. “Never mind... I’m really glad you came. It means a lot to me.” Rising onto the tips of my toes, I kissed him on the cheek.

His eyes widened, but a smile stretched over his face.  
“You’re a really cool girl, you know that?”

“Yeah,” I said, walking along with him to his Jeep. “As cool as orchestra.”



Her eyes burned into the back of my head. Hunter went on and on at my side about who knows what. Saturday night, maybe. He'd mentioned Leilani's name a few times. By the tone of his voice and his easy going attitude this morning, he'd cooled off since Friday night. Or he was just pretending not to care. Either one wouldn't have surprised me coming from Hunter.

I couldn't focus on that now, though. Eden's footsteps sounded behind me in the hallway, her friend's voice carrying the same level of ignored enthusiasm as Hunter's.

I gradually picked up my pace toward the lunchroom. Hunter matched it without him seeming to notice the change, and Eden's footsteps faded. I glimpsed her blue, long-sleeve Panthers shirt going past as I opened the door to the lunchroom and turned my head, not enough to meet her stare but enough to know she wasn't also entering the lunchroom.

*Thank God.*

"So what'd you do Saturday night?"

Saturday. So he hadn't been talking about Friday.

“Nothing,” I said, giving my shoulders a shrug. “Just hung out at home.”

He grinned ear to ear, and I braced for the lame joke I could practically see perched on his lips. “Played your nerdy computer games?”

“It’s coding, Hunter. Not a game.”

“Yeah, whatever. Just make sure you mention my name in your acceptance speech.”

“What?”

“For your next Nobel Prize.”

I rolled my eyes and moved up farther in line, taking out my wallet and removing a few bills.

“Seriously, how’s your project coming along? Good?”

“I’ve been busy, but yeah, made some progress yesterday. Should be up and running by the time we start next season.”

Hunter wrapped his arm around my shoulder. “First season as Boomer Sooners!” He grunted before removing his arm. He was usually in a good mood, but today it was almost... suspicious.

One side of my lips lifted in acknowledgement.

“How’s the app supposed to help us again?”

I resisted the urge to bang my head against the wall. He’d asked me to explain it a thousand times, but never really listened. His eyes glazed over like I was trying to explain the stock market every time. “It’s an algorithm. We’ll be the only people who have access to it, and it’ll calculate how often the other team runs their plays. And it’ll search for other patterns. That way, we can know better what to expect.”

“Ah, right,” he said, not sounding the least bit convinced.

It was my turn in line and I tossed the bills on the line lady’s table before moving on through.

“You didn’t flirt with her today.”

I glanced over my shoulder at Hunter and raised a brow.

“The line lady,” he clarified, stabbing a thumb in her

direction. “You flirt with her almost every day, which is weird to be honest because she’s like... old.”

“She’s thirty.”

“Exactly.” His dimple stuck out as his face contorted. “And wait a second. Did you already—”

“Like a month ago, can we let it go?”

He laughed and shook his head. “Dude, I will never understand your type.”

“I don’t have a type.”

We moved up more in the line, and I smelled her. Or maybe sensed her. I wasn’t sure. What I did know before I even turned around was that Eden was in the line. I glanced over my shoulder and met her stare. She was in front of Sebastian, and he was still talking to her. She lifted her hand in a wave and smiled.

Sebastian’s mouth stopped moving, and he looked to me, his nose crinkling in either disgust or anger. Whichever it was, it wasn’t surprise.

He knew. Which meant she’d told him. Which meant she *wanted* people to know.

*Fuck.*

I nodded and turned my head to face in front of me.

“Sure, man. Whatever you say. You don’t have a type.” Hunter chuckled loud enough for everyone in line to hear. “Still, I can’t believe you’re banging—”

“Hey,” I turned and placed a hand on Hunter’s arm, squeezing hard enough that it’d startle him, but not hard enough that he’d shake me off or draw any more attention to us. “Drop it, okay?”

His gaze darted to my hand, and his eyes narrowed. “Okay?”

When I removed my hand, he peered over his shoulder. I didn’t follow his gaze, but the grin on his face when he turned back toward me told me he knew *why* I wanted him

to shut up.

“Band Geek doesn’t know about Line Lady?” He had the sense to keep his voice low, but I scowled anyway.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No?”

“No.”

“All right, then.”

I was next in line and grabbed my tray when the lunch lady handed it to me. My eyes were off Hunter for only a few seconds, but when I flicked them to where he’d been standing, he was gone. I trailed my gaze farther down the line to see Hunter standing in front of Eden. His back was to me, but Eden’s face was in view. Her lips pulled into a fake, nervous smile, and she glanced to me as if asking for something.

“Next,” the lunch lady barked, making me flinch.

I shook my head and started walking to my spot, not looking back at Hunter. He was probably just talking to her to taunt me or to ask her out to the homecoming dance, *again*.

The tray thumped to the table, and I took my seat at the end. Trey was in front of me with Paige on his left.

“You okay?” Trey asked.

I nodded and picked up my fork, not looking at either of them. If I lifted my eyes I might see Hunter with Eden, and I was already bristling underneath. Why couldn’t he just leave her alone?

Minutes passed, and Hunter still didn’t show up, laughing and clapping a hand on my shoulder like I’d expected him to. I couldn’t take it anymore. My skin itched, and I chucked the fork onto my tray and ran my short fingernails over my arms before forcing myself to peer at Eden’s table.

It was fuller today. Not so many of her friends had gotten up once she had sat down. In fact, it had one more person,

sitting right next to her. My eyes burned into the back of Hunter's head as he was turned toward Eden. This time, the smile on her face was genuine. The corners of her eyes creased, and she covered her mouth as she laughed.

What. The. Fuck.

Trey and Paige must've noticed my stare because they turned that way as well.

Trey laughed as he turned back around. "Jesus, he's not giving up, is he?"

"No," I said, sliding my tray to the spot where Hunter normally sat. I leaned forward on my elbows. "He's not."

"Maybe you should tell him to back off," Paige offered, a tremor in her voice.

"And why would I do that?"

I caught her looking to Trey in my peripheral vision, but she didn't expand on what she meant.

Eden's mouth moved, and she tucked her hair behind her ears. It was something I'd seen her do multiple times, usually when I was making her nervous. She didn't look nervous at all right now. She looked relaxed... comfortable.

Hunter had that effect.

Leilani's overbearing perfume entered my nostrils as she sat down beside me. She scooted my tray back my way and sat her own down in front of her. "It's homecoming week!" She said, clapping her hands together. When I didn't respond, her head turned to follow my gaze. A dramatic sigh rushed over her lips. "Hunter's still trying to bone the band geek, huh?"

"What did you just say?" I rolled my neck to face Leilani, taking in the low-cut vee of her blouse with disgust. She didn't have the tits to pull something like that off, and it was too cold to be wearing that shit. It was desperate, and it was annoying, and I wish she'd go the fuck away.

Her eyes widened, and she looked to Paige as if that would help her. As if *Paige* had her back.

"I think Hunter's made it clear that we're done messing with Eden Thompson, so you should watch the name calling. Might piss somebody off."

"Name calling?" She huffed and waved her hand at me while looking at the others. Everyone else remained silent. "Is it name calling if it's true?"

"There are *many* true things I could say about you, Leilani."

A red haze covered the fake tan on her face, and her skinny jaw clenched. She whipped her blonde hair over her shoulder and stood, picking up her tray.

She stomped in the direction she came from, to the middle of the table where Jade and the other cheerleaders sat, but paused when I spoke to her back. "How was Friday night? Did you have a good time?"

The anger that had been simmering underneath my skin was trickling out of my pores, covering me like a bitter tasting blanket. It was hot, and my skin warmed from the top of my head to my toes. It was like I was on fire.

Leilani turned, her hip cocked out and her face taking on a forced relaxed look. "Don't make a scene, Cam."

Her eyes darted around, and she smiled nervously as if she was afraid of anyone seeing the tension I was placing between us.

My gaze shifted to Hunter and Eden, still chatting away.

Leilani wasn't the cause of my anger. She was just an annoyance. But unfortunately, for her, I very much felt like making a scene.

I stood from my seat and looked her up and down, smirking as that mask of calm dissolved and she straightened, glancing around to make sure no one was looking at us.

“Friday night, Leilani. Did you have fun fucking my best friend in your parents’ hot tub? Yes or no?”

It took a few seconds, but the noise level in the cafeteria fell to an all-time low. Leilani’s face blanched.

Her eyes widened to globes, and she let out a nervous laugh. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I glanced toward Eden and Hunter. I had both of their attention now, along with the rest of the cafeteria. Good. They both needed to hear this.

“You don’t remember fucking Hunter Friday night?” I laughed and waved at her as if she, herself, was the joke. “It’s okay, Leilani. Your promiscuity isn’t a secret.”

“Cam.” Trey stood and his eyes darted between me and Leilani.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I placed my hand over my heart to mock sincerity. “Promiscuity means she’s a hoe. Like, she fucks a bunch of different guys.”

Hunter stood and began making his way across the room, but I only allowed my eyes to stay on him a moment before returning to Leilani. Her lip quivered, but she jutted her chin in mock defiance. All those times she coughed ‘slut’ when Eden walked by. All those times she cackled along with others as she taunted her, and Eden never once shed a tear. I’d only wanted to ruin whatever bullshit Hunter was over there feeding Eden, but now I *wanted* to make Leilani cry.

She made it way too fucking easy.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, knitting my eyebrows together, as if confused. “Did I say something mean?”

“Fuck you, Cam.” The first tear fell onto her cheek, and she let her tray crash to the floor. She stepped around me and made a beeline for the door. It was so different from when I’d sent Eden out. She’d walked so much slower, her shoulders squared.

This was just pathetic.

“Let’s go.” Hunter grabbed my arm and nodded toward the door. I hadn’t even realized he’d made it to me. I shook out of his hold and roamed my gaze over the cafeteria, pausing when I got to Eden. Her face was set in a frown, but her eyes were the only pair that hadn’t looked away.

I turned to Hunter and nodded before following him out of the cafeteria. He stopped just outside and shoved me into the wall. “What the hell is the matter with you?”

My hands fisted at my sides, but when I looked up, the scar above his eyebrow stuck out to me. His veins were popping, and it always made the scar appear whiter. I’d given it to him in a sword fight we’d had with sticks when we were kids. He’d been my best friend my entire life.

I pumped my hands and forced myself to relax. “Leilani’s pissing me off.”

“Oh, Leilani’s pissing you off?” His narrowed eyes never softened, and he stepped up to grab my shirt collar. “Or *I’m* pissing you off? Just fucking admit it, Cam. You don’t want me around Eden.”

“Fine,” I gritted, shoving him off me. “I want you to back off.” I was panting as if I’d just sprinted a mile, and I ran my hands through my hair.

“Good, that’s progress. Now tell me why.”

I narrowed my eyes and started to walk away, but Hunter stepped in front and put his hand on my chest. “You want me to back off because you like her.” His eyebrows raised and his lips moved in an exaggerated manner as he enunciated his words.

I pushed his hand away. “If you know that, then why are you doing this?”

“Because you fucking need it. You’re hiding, Cam. You’re always hiding. *Stop it.* You’re my best friend, and I know you. I’ve got your back. If you like a girl, just fucking say so.”



I shook my head and broke eye contact, choosing instead to peer down the hall. "It's not even like that."

"What's it like, then?"

"Just drop it."

"No!" Hunter stepped toward the wall and slapped his palm against the brick. "Stop saying that. Stop doing this. You've been this way since we were kids, and I'm fucking sick of it."

"You're sick of it? What about you, Hunter? Do you tell *me* everything? Should we put on facemasks and gossip around a movie, would that make it better?"

He went silent, and the white of his scar caught my eye again. Every inch of his face was set in stone.

"You already know everything about me."

He started walking away from me, and I took a deep breath before speaking to his back. "I like her. We're not dating, I'm not lying to you about that... but I like her."

He paused and glanced over his shoulder. "Good. Now go apologize to Leilani, and stop being an asshole."

He continued down the hall, his strides noticeably more relaxed. I sighed and started walking the other direction, towards the girls' bathroom. I had no idea where Leilani was, but that was my first guess.

“Okay, but you’re not seriously going out with that guy, right?”

I flicked my gaze to Sebastian but continued out of the auditorium. Today, we got our music to start practicing for the Christmas concert, and it’d felt almost like a second chance. I’d beamed when Mr. Hines had handed it to me, and even now, I gripped my music folder in my hands as if it would fly away if I didn’t hold on tight enough. It was a great couple of hours, and Sebastian had to ruin it by bringing up Camden’s thing with Leilani in the cafeteria today... the very last thing I wanted to talk about.

“No, we’re not dating, but honestly, Sebastian, it’s my choice. I told you about him because we’re friends, and I trust and respect you, but please lay off.”

“Oh my God.” Sebastian stopped just before the door and dropped his violin case. Dropped it. Like it meant shit to him. My eyes widened as I stared at the case on the hard, linoleum floor of the backroom. “Stop being so stupid! He’s playing you. Fuck.” Sebastian raked his hands over his head, his hair too short for him to tousle it.

My arms pulled into my sides like I was trying to make myself smaller. I didn't say anything, nor did I move. I'd never seen him like this.

"I'm sorry," he said, letting out an awkward laugh and scratching his head. He stepped toward me only for me to take a step back. "Eden..."

"I'm not stupid."

"I know, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"And this isn't the way you support a friend. Maybe you're right. Maybe he's just playing me, but you don't have to get so angry about it. If he is playing me, then I'm the one who gets hurt, not you."

Another laugh, but this time it was bitter. "You're the only one who gets hurt?"

I set my cello case to the floor and held my music to my chest, under my crossed arms. "I mean, I know you care for me, so I get that—"

"Do you know that I care for you?"

His mouth hung open, and his chest shook with ragged breathing. His eyes held hurt that, for the very first time, I recognized.

Oh, fuck.

"A-as a friend... yeah."

"Eden, I like you as more than a friend, and I always have." He stepped closer, and I had to tighten my muscles and will my legs not to carry me backward. Away from him. Away from this. Oh, please no. "I care about you. That guy doesn't, and he's never going to."

"Sebastian, I—"

"I'm not finished."

Now he was directly in front of me, close enough to touch. I held my breath to keep from inhaling his cheap cologne. His hands reached out and rested on my shoulders, his touch sending bugs crawling beneath my skin to make

their way to my stomach and turn it. Is it possible for shoulders to feel nauseous?

“I get that Camden has money and popularity. I’m not stupid. I know why you’d choose him over me.” He shrugged, his hands on my shoulders readjusting and sending another round of discomfort through me. “But he’s going to fuck you over... so don’t let him.”

My mouth opened, but I didn’t know what to say. My first inclination was to defend Camden, but that seemed like the wrong thing to do. The sad thing was, Sebastian might not be wrong. Camden could very well screw me over, and the conversation—if you could call it that—with Leilani today sent up some obvious red flags.

But I couldn’t control who I liked.

“It has nothing to do with money or popularity... it’s just. We have chemistry. You and I have been friends for so long that—”

“That what? *We* don’t have any chemistry?” He yanked his hands from my shoulders and stepped back from me. “You know what, Eden? I should’ve listened to everyone and stayed away from you.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Yeah, I do.” He picked up his violin case but didn’t take his eyes off me as he backpedaled toward the exit. “They were right. You ask for it.”

Sebastian turned and pushed his way through the door, letting it slam behind him and causing me to flinch. A few other people had been standing on the other side of the room watching, and now they scurried through the door.

My eyes pooled, and I closed them, trying to dam the tears. It didn’t work. My lashes wetted and fat drops spilled from each eye. I swiped at them with the back of my hand and took a shaky breath.

*I ask for it.* He was referring to the hurtful things that’d

been done to me, and probably the hurtful things to come as well. That's what my friends thought. Not that I was noble or brave for sticking up to the jocks, just that I was stupid.

Stupid. Is that what I'd call a person like me, dating the guy who'd started it all? Blowing off the one who'd been there for me?

Yeah, I would. Or maybe I'd just call it pathetic.

I hadn't heard any more footsteps enter the room, so when the door creaked, my eyes opened in surprise. I thought maybe it'd be Sebastian, but instead, it was Camden. Wiping the last of the tears from my eyes, I started his way. "What are you doing in here?" I asked, picking up my cello and keeping my head down in an attempt to hide the fact that I was upset.

Camden took my cello from my hand and glanced around. "I saw Flute Player leave looking all pissed off. Is it just you left?"

I followed his gaze around the empty room and nodded. There'd been enough time that everyone should've been off-stage by now. "Why?"

He set the cello down and grabbed me by my waist, tugging me toward him. "No reason."

His lips crashed into mine, and one hand threaded through my hair while the other squeezed my hip bone. I broke the kiss and gasped. "W-what are you doing?" I asked, my eyes darting around the empty room in case anyone had come in.

"Look at me."

I snapped my gaze to his wide eyes, and instead of shrinking back, I stood taller.

His hand left my hip and he pointed a finger toward the door. "Fuck that guy, Eden. I don't know what he said, but fuck him."

“He said I was stupid for liking you,” I blurted out. “And that all my friends think I’m stupid, too.”

“Yeah, and they did the same thing to Paige. You have really shitty friends, so maybe it’s time to just let ‘em go?”

I didn’t say anything for a few moments as the weight of his words crashed down on me. Paige. *They* hadn’t done the same thing to her, *we* had. I’d treated her like she was a moron for wanting to go out with Trey, and the entire time I’d looked at the jocks in disgust, questioning their loyalty to one another. Never could I have seen coming that *my* group of friends were the ones who had no loyalty. Holy shit. Camden was right.

“What about your friends? What about what you did to Leilani today?” My tone was clipped and defensive, and deep down I knew why. I wanted him to be the one to have shitty friends instead of me.

“That was me being an asshole. I saw you with Hunter, and I got jealous.” He shrugged. “Took it out on Leilani... but she’s fine. I apologized.”

“Oh, right, because everything just goes away when you apologize.”

I pulled away from him and tried to step toward the door, but he blocked my path. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” I sighed. “When you insinuate that girls are sluts to the entire school, it’s humiliating. Trust me, I would know.”

“So I won’t do that again.” I took another step, and once again, he blocked it. “Are we okay?”

His head tilted as he stared at me, looking for something. Or maybe waiting for something. I’d kept it buried in the back of my mind all day, having no intention of bringing it up. What was in Camden’s past was none of my business, and if he wasn’t ready to tell his friends about me, then I’d respect that. I’d seen the way he’d avoided my gaze this morning, and

then in English he hadn't stopped by my desk. I got the message, but I'd thought it wasn't anything to worry about. Not until he gave me a reason to worry.

I sighed and brought my hair over one shoulder. I'd worn it down since he'd told me how much he liked it, but now I felt stupid for it. Played.

"Are you seeing Leilani?"

"What?" His head jerked back like he was surprised by the question. "No. I told you, I was jealous of seeing you with Hunter. That's it."

"So there's nothing between you two then? You haven't slept together?"

His mouth hung open and he paused before speaking. "I mean, not recently."

"What's *recently*?"

No response.

"Have you slept together in the last month?"

"Eden..."

"The last week?" A lump formed in my throat, cracking my voice on the last word. I swallowed it and stood straighter. My chest was aching, but why? We weren't dating. He'd made that clear.

"No, not since you and I... No. She's just a friend."

"What about the line lady?"

He threw his head back and sighed.

"Yeah, I heard Hunter in the cafeteria today."

"It's been about a month for that too."

"Right." I took a deep breath and readied myself for his next response. "I know that you're much more... active than I am, but I need to know if this is exclusive. Because if it's not, I don't think I want—"

"It's exclusive." He stepped up and placed his hands on my shoulders, similar to how Sebastian had, but now the touch

warmed. Butterflies flew in my stomach instead of it churning with disgust. “For both of us, it’s exclusive.”

My face scrunched at the underlying meaning. “Are you talking about Hunter?”

He stayed silent but nodded.

“Hunter texted me Friday night at like one in the morning saying that you liked me, and that he hopes I’m giving you a chance. Today, he was just talking to me. Mostly about you.”

“He texted you?”

“Yes,” I said, dragging the word out. “I assumed you knew that. Actually, I figured you were with him. Don’t you have parties on Friday nights?”

He let out a breath, smiling as if someone just pulled a hundred pound weight off his chest. “It ended early. Listen, do you uh,” he glanced around and let out another big breath. “Do you want to hang out tonight? Maybe at my house this time?”

His tone changed with his last sentence. It was deeper, more intense. We’d made out many times since this *thing* between us had started, and my guess was Camden was getting anxious to do more. His house had a lot of privacy. Closed doors.

I rubbed my lips together as I considered it. Did I want to? Yes. Did I think I was stupid for wanting to? Also yes. But apparently, I was already being stupid, and it wasn’t as if we had to have sex. He wouldn’t push... I don’t think.

I opened my mouth to speak, but his lips smothered the words before I had a chance. When he pulled back, I was breathless. “Yes?” he asked, cocking a brow and smiling.

I swallowed and nodded.

“Okay.”

\* \* \*



*Cam*

"IS THIS REALLY YOUR FAVORITE MOVIE?" I asked Eden, who was leaned back against my headboard, hugging a pillow to her chest.

She glanced to me long enough to stick her tongue out before going back to the movie playing on my TV—The Princess Bride.

The way her eyes glossed over was too cute to break her concentration again, so instead, I just stared at her, smiling each time she did. She gripped the pillow, and she belted out a laugh at something in the movie.

My smile widened, and she turned to me as if finally sensing my stare. "Quit looking at me like that," she said with a chuckle. "It's creepy."

"I'm just thinking of a line that I want to write for you tomorrow."

She shifted so that her back was straighter and loosened her grip on the pillow. "What is it?"

"If I told you, it'd ruin it tomorrow." Amusement entered my tone, but her face softened and grew more serious.

She grabbed the remote from the nightstand and lowered the volume of the television before turning to face me fully, her elbow resting on the headboard and her hand holding her up. "Do you have them memorized, or do you google them? Honestly?"

"Little bit of both. Some I have memorized, some I don't remember the exact words, so I look them up."

"You have entire Shakespearian plays memorized?"

"No, I have *lines* from plays memorized. My mom's big into Shakespeare, and she used to read them to me as bedtime stories. Why does it matter?"

She shrugged. "No reason. You're just... I don't know."

Unusually smart. Is it mean if I think you're kind of wasted on football?"

"Excuse me?" My tone sharpened, and Eden shook her head, letting the hand holding her up fall to her side.

"Nothing. That's not what I meant. Sorry."

I'd puffed my chest out on instinct, but seeing her expression, I let it deflate. I scooted closer to her and placed my hand on her knee, running my thumb over denim and waiting for her to jerk it away. When she didn't, I continued. "Football is who I am. It's who I'm *supposed* to be."

She placed her hand over mine and halted my movement. I trailed my gaze from her knee, over her stomach, her breasts, and up to her face.

"You can be anybody you want to be, Camden. You don't have to let other people decide for you."

I moved my hand to the inside of her knee and up her thigh, carrying hers along with me. She inhaled sharply and turned to face in front of her.

"Which parts of me do you like?" I moved my hand up more, now situated at the top of her inner thigh. If her pussy clenched, I would've felt it. "This part? The nice part? Mean part? Football? Shakespeare? *Math*?" I chuckled when I said the last word, as if this was all a game to me. It wasn't. I really wanted to know. I *needed* to know.

"All of it," She whispered, circling my wrist with her palm. She didn't move it, she simply held it in place. I couldn't go farther, but I also couldn't pull back. Not for the first time, Eden's pupils dilated, her breathing hollowed and shook. She wanted it, but I'd learned my lesson from last time. She had to say it.

"All of it? Even the football?"

"Even the bully," she whispered, cringing as if she were admitting it to herself for the first time as well.

"Do you like to fight me?"

I put pressure against her hold, falsely trying to move my hand where I knew she wanted it but knowing she'd hold my wrist in place. She didn't disappoint.

"Not like that."

"Are you sure?" I whispered into her ear before nipping her lobe. Her breasts rose slightly as her lips parted and she drew in another sharp breath.

"I don't know," she said, now trying to move my hand away. She turned to face me and shook her head. "I really don't know."

"I do." I removed my hand from her thigh and cupped her face. "I know what you want, but I'm not going to give it to you unless you tell me it's okay. You're scared, Eden. I get it. But I'm not gonna hurt you."

Her gaze darted between my eyes and my lips. "Do you like it when I fight you?"

"Yes," I said, without hesitation. I adjusted so that we were closer, our clothes touching.

"Does it make us weird, or is that normal?"

She was starting to lose me, and I blinked a few times trying to focus on the question. Was she talking about rough sex? Probably not. That would've been normal. What Eden and I had, the fireworks that sparked when she challenged me, or even when she was just in the same room, that wasn't normal. At least not for me.

"I don't know, but I don't think we should spend a lot of time questioning it."

She sighed and dropped her eyes to my chest. "Are you like this with other girls?"

"Like what?"

"This." She waved to the TV. "The movie, the lake, the notes. Is this your *thing* or is it different? I won't be mad, I just want to know."

I moved her head up to face me and leaned in until my

lips grazed hers. I inhaled her scent and shuddered when my cock strained against my jeans. “Nothing about you is normal. Nothing about what I feel for you is normal. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Eden, but I don’t have girlfriends. I don’t have any idea what I’m doing, and no, I’ve never done this before.”

I pressed against her lips, even as my mind screamed at me to pull back. I had a plan. I’d bring her back here and I’d let her make the first move. If she wanted me, then she’d kiss me first. But she *did* want me. She’d wanted me for a long time, I just needed her to admit it.

I broke our kiss and looked into her eyes, smiling at the lack of color. Only a brown ring circled the black. “Do you want this, yes or no?”

“It depends,” she said, shaking her head.

“Depends on what?”

“On if I’m the exception to your ‘no girlfriend’ rule.”

My eyes trailed down her neckline to the blue shirt. A panther was on the chest and below it was ‘Lincoln High Orchestra Band Camp 2019’. Girlfriend. She wanted me to call her my girlfriend before she’d do anything with me... Damn it.

“I’ve never been exclusive with anyone, so I’d say I’ve already made the exception.”

“So then say it,” she whispered, inches away from my face. Sweet breath fluttered over my skin, making its way into my nostrils, my mouth. I could taste it, smell it, and I wanted more. I wanted her tongue, her skin, her arousal. I had to fucking have it.

“I can’t.”

Eden pulled back and the fire between us dimmed. I gripped her arm and yanked her toward me, her head bending to look up at me. Surprise flashed in her eyes, but she quickly righted herself.

"But I will. I just need more time."

"I get it," she said, subtly attempting to shrug out of my grip. "But it's okay, I can wait."

"But you want this. Right now. I know I'm not imagining things."

"I'm not the kind of girl that does things without a commitment."

"Then listen to me." I let go of her arm and placed my hand on the small of her back, scooting her toward me until we touched again. "I'm not having sex with any other girl. I'm not talking to any other girl. Isn't that a commitment?"

She glanced over my shoulder and narrowed her eyes as she thought.

"Hunter knows about you and me. Your friends know about you and me. I just," I ran my thumb over her jawline and restrained myself from leaning in. "It's hard for me to announce to the whole school when I've never done that before. You know?"

"Yeah," she said, nodding. Her eyes turned to focus on me. "So really, this *is* a relationship, just not one that we're publicizing."

"Exactly."

Her shoulders shook as she trailed her eyes down to my lips, then to my chest. "Okay."

"Say it."

Her eyes snapped to mine, and she hesitated before licking her lips. "I want this."

"*Me*. You want me."

She nodded and hesitated a few more moments. It was like her mind was holding onto the last few unbroken strands of a piece of rope, not giving up until they snapped.

I stared into her eyes, mentally pulling out a pair of scissors.

She took a deep breath and placed her hand on my chest.  
“I want you.”

*Snip.*

\* \* \*

Eden

CAMDEN CRAWLED off of the bed and walked over to the door. Metal clanked as the lock clicked into place. He glanced back over his shoulder, a grin plastered. “Learned my lesson about that one.”

I laughed and relaxed back on the bed. His jokes about sleeping with another woman shouldn’t have been funny to me, but somehow it was. Maybe it was the fact that I didn’t see Sherry as a threat. Whatever had gone on between her and Camden was over.

He stalked over to the bed, lifting his shirt over his head when he stood above me. Tanned skin covered muscle that belonged more on an NBA player than on a boy from my school. The boy I was sort of dating. The one standing over me.

This could not be real.

The bed shifted as Camden sat down beside me, and I scooted over to make room for him. His hand rested on my knee, as it had before, and my skin ignited. Every time I shifted, the wet spot in my panties rubbed against my skin. The slickness coating my folds became more apparent, and another jolt of electric current shot to my clit.

Everything about Camden heated me, excited me, built up an itch that I couldn’t quite scratch, even when I was alone in my bed with that damn shirtless picture of him on my phone. Now, he was in the flesh, and saying no to him...

It wasn't possible. My willpower was all used up. My internal battle lost.

I wanted him.

As his girlfriend.

As his lover.

As his enemy.

I'm not sure how much it mattered in that moment.

His hand trailed up my thigh and stopped when he reached my apex. He scooted closer to me and used his other hand to lift my shirt over my stomach. My skin chilled with the cool air in the room, but Camden's hand that glided over my skin, settling just below my bra, set my nerves on fire and left the cold a distant memory.

"You nervous?"

My eyes had been preoccupied by his hand, but I lifted them to take in his smirk. His eyes were black but still managed to shine with the gold ring around them. He was two things at once—always.

I shook my head and guided his hand under my bra. His palm pressed against my already hardened nipple, and I closed my eyes at the sensation. "Nothing to be nervous about," I lied, scooting down so that I was lying flat with my head against his pillow.

He removed the hand from my knee and used it to tug my shirt up to my neck. "That's right." He yanked his hand from beneath my bra and flipped me over so that I was on my stomach. "There's nothing to be nervous about."

He worked the shirt over my head and down the length of my arms in smooth, steady pulls. The image of Hunter pulling a similar move forced its way into my mind, and panic spread throughout my body. I tugged my arms underneath me and clenched my eyes shut, taking a breath. Then another.

"You all right?" Camden asked, trailing his fingertips just below the back of my bra.

He was straddling me, the energy emanating from him a force that sucked the oxygen from the room. Or maybe it was the hard-on poking against my tailbone. Whatever it was, it was intimidating.

I nodded into his pillow.

"Good."

My bra snapped and it splayed open over my back. Camden urged me up and moved the bra the rest of the way off before putting his lips to my ear. "You know you can tell me to stop at any time, right?"

"Yes."

Both his hands cupped my breast and squeezed.

"But you like this. You don't want me to stop."

I shook my head.

"Do you want me to go further?" An explosion erupted in each of my nipples as he pinched them between his fingertips. I arched my back into him, my head now in the crook of his neck.

I wouldn't say yes to that. I wasn't even sure what the correct answer was, but I didn't want to think about it. I only wanted to feel. To let go, stop fighting it.

I was so sick of fighting, and his hands on me, his power over me? It felt too good. Too sweet. Too peaceful.

Too *right*.

The fingers pinching my nipples eased, and he dropped me back to the bed before flipping me over. He was in a crouched position in order to do that, but instead of sitting back down, he reached for the button on his jeans and popped it. The ominous sound of the zipper followed.

I brought myself up on my elbows and peered down at the pants that he slipped over his hips. "Um, shouldn't we kiss some more?"



“You want me to kiss you?” he asked, his brow raising in question. Some of the tension he exuded cooled as he paused what he was doing.

“I don’t know,” I said, massaging my hair back from my face. “I just thought there’d be more foreplay.”

He chuckled and jerked his jeans the rest of the way. More electricity shot to my core, and I silently chastised myself for being turned on by that. What the hell was wrong with me?

“This is the foreplay, baby.”

He scooted up my chest and tucked my arms underneath his legs, pinning me. He held himself up part way, but there was enough weight on my chest that it was hard to breathe. I peered up at him, and the question must’ve been plain on my face because he chuckled before growing serious. “You trust me?”

I wiggled underneath him and cringed as I fought to breathe.

“Yes or no, Eden?”

Glancing up at him, I was finally able to take a breath. His legs were wrapped around me, smothering me with his weight and his scent. Every smell that entered my nostrils was him. Everything I could feel, the weight on my chest, the leg hair prickling my stomach, his satin sheets rubbing against my back, it was all him. Still, I wanted more. I wanted closer.

My eyes shifted to the outline of his dick in his boxer briefs. The V poking out was already ingrained into my mind from his picture, but up close, it wasn’t enough to look. I wanted to taste.

“I trust you.”

He lifted off me to tug his boxers to his hips. Air sucked into my lungs with harsh breaths, but it was robbed from me as Camden threaded his fingers through my hair and yanked

me forward, the tip of his cock poking against my lips. I peered up at him, and the smirk was nowhere in sight. The gold ring around his eyes was even smaller.

“I like to do the work.” He tightened his grip in my hair and squeezed his legs against me to make sure my arms couldn’t move. “So open your mouth and relax.”

“I’ve never done this before,” I blurted, panic entering again. I darted my eyes around the room and writhed beneath him. He wasn’t letting up, but then again, I hadn’t told him to.

I was in control.

I was in control.

I was in control.

I closed my eyes as I repeated the sentence over and over.

“Like I said, all you need to do is open your mouth and relax... or we can stop.”

“Stop like, for good?”

“If you want, or we could make out for a while. We could do some of that regular foreplay you had in mind.”

It was clear in his tone that that wasn’t what he wanted. *This* was what he wanted, and the next thought hit me like a train, sucking even more breath from my tiny lungs—this was why he had sex with older women. Girls my age wouldn’t want it like this, or at least I didn’t think they would. But for some reason, *I* did. Maybe. There was certainly a level of excitement to it that I couldn’t deny.

And if we did it the other way. The *normal* way. It wouldn’t be him. It’d be the same guy he pretended to be with Leilani and whoever else he chose to sleep with.

I didn’t want that.

I didn’t want fake.

He sucked the remainder of the air between us into his lungs in one sharp inhale as my lips parted for him. The tip of his cock poked against me again, and I opened my mouth

wider. Inch by inch he filled my mouth, smooth skin grazing over my teeth.

“Swirl your tongue around it,” he said, his voice as hoarse as mine had been. As if remembering I needed to breathe, I sucked in air through my nose and pushed it back out. His weight had lifted some, so it wasn’t all on my chest, but with the way he held my head, it’s like it put a kink in my trachea.

I moved my tongue around as he pulled himself out of my mouth then reentered. His vein throbbed underneath my tongue and I pushed down harder on that spot, flinching when he yanked my head closer, pushing deeper until he hit the back of my throat.

I coughed around him, and he eased up, pulling himself out of me and wiping the tears that had spilled due to the coughing fit.

“You okay?”

I peered up at him and nodded.

“Keep looking at me.” He urged my chin up so that I looked at him and pushed his cock back into my mouth.

I kept my eyes on him like he asked, and he picked up his pace. He shoved in and out of me, alternating between jerking me by my hair and thrusting himself into me.

It shouldn’t have been hot, but it was. The look in his eyes. The lust on his face. Knowing he didn’t show this part of himself to others... most others. My clit throbbed and I writhed beneath him again, but for a whole new reason. I tried to move my hand to my clit, but his free hand gripped my wrist as soon as I’d managed to get one arm free.

“No,” he said, so much lust dripping in that one syllable. “Your attention stays on me.”

When my arm went slack he released it, and I laid it back down at my side. My lids grew heavy, but every time I went to close my eyes, his grip in my hair tightened and he shook me. There was so much to feel. He filled my mouth,

consuming my senses. To look at him while he did it was almost too much, but I forced my eyes to stay on him anyway.

My thighs clenched and I rubbed my legs together to get some amount of friction to my clit. Soft whines crept up my throat, and Camden broke eye contact. His mouth opened and he lifted his head. "Keep doing that," he demanded, pumping into me at a faster pace.

I whined more, allowing my eyes to close as I focused on feeling. Smelling. Tasting. Each time he pulled back, a salty taste centered on my tongue. I moaned and licked at his slit, making him pause there and pull my hair to the point of pain. "Jesus fucking Christ."

He pulled out of my mouth, and before I could open my eyes, his weight lifted from me. My eyes shot open, and I rose onto my elbows, my brows pinching in confusion. He'd moved to my shins. Sweat coated his forehead, and he swiped the back of his hand over it.

"Is something wrong?"

His eyes darted to me and he laughed before reaching to the button on my jeans. "No, I just don't want to come yet." He popped the button and yanked them down my hips in one forceful jerk. "It's your turn."

He slid my pants the rest of the way off and tossed them to the floor. My legs pressed together, and he pulled them apart, my knees in his hands. His eyes were so dark, so crazed.

"Go slow," I whispered, grasping his hand that had made its way to my panties.

He flicked his gaze to me and nodded.

I rested my hand on the sheets and leaned my head back before closing my eyes. My muscles were rigid, the cool air in the room suddenly more noticeable. It bit down into my nipples, leaving a sting. The ripping of fabric filled the room,

and that same cool air coated my opening, cooling my arousal to make it even more recognizable.

My eyes shot open and I tried to pull my legs together, but Camden's hands were there to keep them pried apart. Most of my skin was now cold, but my cheeks were on fire.

"Camden."

"Just relax," he said, not even looking up at me. His eyes were on my most private area. His fingers dug into my thighs until I was sure they'd leave bruises. "It'll feel good. I promise." He shifted so that he was laying down on his stomach, his mouth inches from my throbbing clit. His breaths skated over me, *into* me. Electricity wracked my body, leaving me squirming.

"You still want this, right?" he asked, glancing up at me.

I swallowed and laid my head back on the pillow. "Yeah, I think so."

More breath ignited my nerves as he chuckled.

I was a moment away from telling him I changed my mind. A moment from letting the shame flood me, my mother's voice entering my mind, Sebastian's disapproval. One moment away from it, when something wet and thick collided with my most sensitive area. He started at the clit, as if he could see it pulsating. His tongue ran over it before dipping lower and running the length of my folds, one side, then the other. He was a dog lapping at the last bits of food in its bowl.

"C-Camden." My mouth opened in an O, and I fisted the sheets. My back arched and chest heaved to meet his movements. He found his way to my clit again and flicked his tongue over it.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I gasped as he inserted a finger into me, my walls spas-

ming around him. He pumped in and out of me while sucking on my clit. I was faintly aware of my legs trembling, as if his mouth was shattering the rest of my body, sending a shockwave that made it quake.

A minute passed before I realized I'd stopped breathing, and I sawed air in and out of my lungs.

Tension wound tighter, and my hips lifted off the bed, pressing myself into Camden. Harder. Closer. I was at the edge, ready to fly, when he yanked me back and I crashed to the ground.

I opened my eyes and lifted up to see him ripping open a foil packet. He quickly rolled on a condom and scooted up my body. I grunted involuntarily, my face immediately flushing when he laughed. "Soon, babe. I promise."

He positioned himself at my entrance and bent to kiss me. I tasted myself on his lips and tried to turn my head, but he held me in place.

He prodded against my opening, easy at first, before spearing me with one sharp thrust. Pain ripped up my spine and exploded behind my eyelids. I sucked the air from Camden's mouth in a gasp and pressed my hands to his chest to shove him off me.

He gripped my hands and pressed them to the bed. His tongue massaged my mouth, but I was no longer a participant in the kiss. I was no longer giving it to him. He was taking it.

He rested inside of me while my walls squeezed violently around him. He was too big. It was too much. He was ripping me apart.

He broke the kiss and wiped the tears that had leaked from my eyes, letting one of my wrists go in the process. "It'll only hurt for a minute."

I opened my eyes and narrowed them only a moment before lifting my free hand and connecting it with his cheek.

It wasn't hard enough to leave more than a faint red print, but it was enough to surprise him.

His head whipped to the side, and he swung it back to me with a glare. "What the fuck?"

"I told you to go slow, do you call that slow? Get off of me."

I yanked my other hand from his grasp and pushed against his chest again, more forceful this time.

"Eden, stop."

I kept pressing against his chest until he grabbed my arms again and pinned them above my head.

"I said get off of me!"

"Okay!"

The sharp tone of his voice caught me off guard, and I stilled beneath him. His eyes were narrowed, his jawline hard. He was no longer inside me, and my pussy clenched in disapproval. It still wanted this. Only my mind didn't.

"I'll get off of you, I'll take you home and we can pretend none of this happened. Is that what you want?"

Another tear spilled from my eye, but it no longer had to do with pain. There was a dull ache, but now I just felt stupid. My first time was ruined, or according to Camden, it'd never happened.

"No."

"Then tell me what you want," he said, releasing my wrists and moving his hands to cradle my face. "Honestly, Eden. I'm having a hard time figuring it out. You liked when I was rough with you before, but you switch off like a light switch. I don't know what you want me to do."

"I don't know either," I whispered, turning my head to face the window. There was a large tree outside, and I focused on its branches swaying instead of the tension in the room. Had he ruined it, or had I?

He had a point. One minute, all my inhibitions were gone

and the next it felt like I was suffocating... even without anything lodged in my mouth.

He started to climb off me, and I grasped his shoulders to stop him. "Wait."

"For what, Eden? What are we doing here?" He shook his head and rolled off me, planting his feet on the floor. "This isn't worth it."

"It's not worth *me*?" I scoffed, hoping to successfully hide how much that question drove a knife into my heart.

"That's not what I meant."

His back was to me, so I couldn't read his expression. He sounded cold, like he was closing himself off from me, and I was so confused as to whether I should blame him for it or not.

But I knew what I wanted, and it wasn't to be angry.

"I don't want to go home... I'm sorry I slapped you. Can we just. Can we pretend *that* didn't happen?"

"I can't control if it hurts, Eden. That's just a part of it. It wasn't intentional."

"I know," I said, taking a deep breath so this next part didn't sound angry. "But you can go slower... right?"

His back lifted in a sigh, and he raked his fingers through his hair. He turned and shifted closer to me, running his palm over my leg. "I'm sorry."

"Me too." The corners of my lips perked up, and I placed my hand over his. I pulled him to me so that he situated himself on top of me, the tip of his cock hovering at my entrance.

"So we can pretend that didn't happen?" I bit my lip as I waited for his response.

His own smile pulled at the corners of his mouth, and he leaned down to kiss me. Sweet. Gentle. Completely opposite to what he'd given me in the past. It was different, but still good, and exactly what I needed in that moment. My chest



warmed and that warmth spread to my belly, settling in my core that was already igniting from the feel of Camden so close.

He pushed in, this time slowly. My walls clamped around him, but the pain was more of a bite than an explosion. My face scrunched, and Camden pulled back to look at me, his body stilling. "Keep going?"

"Yeah," I said, forcing my face to relax. "It's just a lot."

"Heard that before."

Laughter bubbled out of my mouth, but I slapped him on the arm and shook my head. "Don't say shit like that."

He smiled and pushed in deeper, leaning in to whisper into my now open mouth. "I'm just playing. You're the only girl I want... And the only virgin I've slept with."

He paused when he made it all the way in, and then eased out.

"I'm not surprised." I tilted my head back as a rush of air blew over my lips.

"Oh?"

"Yeah," I said, fighting the grin pulling my lips. "You're much more into the... experienced type."

He laughed and pushed into me again, wiping the smile from my face and replacing it with pursed lips. "You mean old?"

"Tomayto, tomahto" I barely managed the words on a whisper, and I arched my back to meet another thrust. His hip grinded on my clit, and I shifted to add to the friction.

"You're my type," he said, giving my hips a more forceful jerk.

My hands lifted to his back, and I dug my nails into skin. "Okay, more," I panted, meeting another thrust.

He picked up the pace, driving into me with more force each time I shuddered. The pain was a distant memory, forced into the back of my brain by the overwhelming sensa-

tions wracking through me in waves. It covered me like a heavy blanket, suffocating me in the best way possible.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

“Is this good?” he asked, out of breath and with an amused tone. I laughed and combed my hand through his hair, gripping and pulling him to my mouth.

I tried to mimic the way he kissed me, with brutal passion. He didn’t need my words. Not now. Now he just needed to keep going.

Our tongues swirled, and I moaned into his mouth when he gave an especially vicious thrust.

It was every time now. Every jerk of his hips was almost meant to punish me, but I found myself rewarding him for it with more moans and more tugs on his hair. I was high on power, somehow sure that I was the one controlling the rhythm, even though they were his movements.

He picked up my hips and plowed into me deeper, reaching the point that pain bit each time he shoved all the way in. It mixed with the pleasure, and this time, I welcomed it.

He twisted me tighter and tighter and tighter, until finally, I snapped.

A white light burst behind my eyes, and my mouth opened, letting out a cry that pierced through the cloud of tension in the room. It fell like rain droplets around us.

Camden stilled and collapsed on top of me, and my eyes opened as my muscles relaxed their squeezing. He was still inside me, his once raging hard-on now softening.

“Camden,” I panted, running my fingers through his sweat caked hair.

He rolled off of me and pulled me to his moistened chest. It pressed into my breasts each time his chest expanded.

“What, babe?” he asked, already closing his eyes.

“That was perfect.”

His dimples stood out as he smiled, and he smoothed the hair back from my face.

“Yeah?”

I snuggled into him and closed my eyes. A slimy mess coated my inner thighs, but I was too exhausted to care. My muscles were spent, and my mind was dizzy with whatever chemical *this* was.

I was seconds away from passing out. I yawned and smiled as Camden’s hand rested on my hip.

“Yeah.”

“Why do we need to eat out here again?”

I nibbled on the salt covering a pretzel as I stared at Camden leaning over the railing of the football stadium stands. He turned back to me and threw his legs on either side of the bleachers below me. He rested his hands behind him and leaned back. “We don’t *need* to. It’s just nicer out here.”

I turned my gaze up toward the cloudy sky and frowned. “Yeah, such a beautiful day.”

“Do you really want to listen to Hunter and Trey talk about Sooner Saturday? Because I, for one, am tired of it.”

“You’re not excited about Saturday?” I bit into my pretzel and tilted my head while I chewed.

Camden shrugged. “I don’t know, I guess. We’ve already seen the college, though. Not sure what the point is of seeing it again.”

I finished chewing and swallowed before setting the pretzel down and considering the best way to relay what was on my mind. Last time I’d brought up football possibly not being the right path for him, he’d freaked out. I didn’t want a

repeat of that, but I also couldn't say *nothing*. If he didn't want it, then what was he even doing it for?

"So what are you going to major in?" I took a swig of Gatorade and wiped my mouth before setting the bottle back on the bench.

"Computer Science."

"That's fitting." I tapped the bottom of the bleachers with my feet and smiled. "Is OU known for their Computer Science program?"

He shrugged. "Hey, so what time do you leave for your Berklee interview again?"

*Nice change in subject.*

"My plane leaves at noon on Saturday."

"So you probably aren't going to make it to the game tomorrow night, huh? Gotta get your beauty sleep and all that." He winked and grabbed the Gatorade bottle, taking a drink.

"Oh, no, I'll be there." I shifted on the bench and picked up another pretzel. "I wouldn't miss it."

Camden didn't say anything, and when I glanced at him, his eyes were pointed up toward the sky. His face was expressionless.

"Do you not want me there?"

Rolling his neck toward me, he plastered on a smile. He sat up straighter and put his hand on my knee, tracing imaginary patterns into the denim. "Of course I do."

His eyes moved to my knee, and his cheek caved in as he bit it.

The past few days had been incredible. Better than incredible, really. We'd spent every night talking on the phone until one in the morning, and he'd been waiting for me at my car every day when orchestra let out. He'd walked me to first period every morning, knowing that Sebastian wouldn't. Sebastian and I were done being

friends by the looks of it. He'd ignored all my texts and switched desks in all of our shared classes so that we were no longer sitting together. Tuesday, I'd been relieved when Camden asked if I wanted to eat outside instead of the cafeteria, but now it was Thursday, and it was starting to get suspicious.

He still hadn't asked me to the homecoming dance. My dress was all picked out, but I was still waiting. Until now, I'd thought maybe it was an understood thing. I mean, his friends knew about him and me. Hunter had been especially nice to me and talked to me as if I belonged. Come to think of it, Hunter was the only friend that acknowledged me at all.

I should just ask Camden about it. I spent all my time being too chickenshit to ask the questions that sat so heavily on my mind, and I needed to stop. He was my boyfriend... sort of. It was weird for me not to know his friends. Right?

I opened my mouth with every intention of spilling my guts, but Camden cut me off before any words came out.

"Do you think I shouldn't go to OU?"

I blinked a few times and closed my mouth. Several seconds passed before I responded. "Do you *want* to go to OU?"

He sighed and leaned back again, peering up at the sky. "I don't know."

"Have you applied anywhere else?"

I chose my words carefully, knowing this was a touchy subject. But he'd been the one to bring it up this time. How long had he been thinking about this?

"About a month ago, I sent in an application to MIT." He laughed, and not in a humorous way, and shook his head. "Not that I was serious or anything, but other than there, no, I haven't applied anywhere else."

I nodded and blew up my cheeks before silently letting them deflate. "Why weren't you serious about it?"

“Because I’m a quarterback, Eden. No one would take me seriously.”

“I do.”

He peered over at me, his eyes narrowed.

I ran a frustrated hand through my hair and perched on the edge of the bench. “If you want to go to MIT, then go to MIT. You don’t have to let everyone else’s perception of you define who you are or what you do with your life.”

He held up his hand before I could continue. “I get it... I’m just thinking out loud. Sorry I brought it up.”

I sighed before climbing onto his lap and running my hands through his hair. He didn’t smile, so I knew I’d said too much... again. But he wouldn’t stay sour with me long. He couldn’t.

“You know MIT is in Cambridge,” I said, biting my lip and resting my hands on his chest. “Which is awfully close to Boston.”

“I know.” The faintest smile came over his face. “How the hell would I get rid of you then?”

I stuck out my tongue and snapped it back in my mouth when Camden’s fingers reached out to pinch it. “You’re too predictable,” I said, leaning forward to peck his cheek.

“Am I?”

I nodded, grinning.

Camden’s hand came up my back and he flipped us so that I lay on the bench with him on top of me. He covered a hand over my mouth and bent to whisper in my ear. “Or maybe you’re too *easy*.”

He cringed when I lapped my tongue on his palm, and he pulled his hand away before wiping it on my jeans. “And gross,” he joked, shaking his head.

“Nah, you like it.”

Bending and giving me a peck on the lips, he smiled. “Yeah... I really do, Eden. I like you a lot.”

Before I got the chance to tell him I liked him a lot too, his lips captured mine. I closed my eyes and kissed him back, opening my mouth and letting him massage my tongue. His fingers pressed to my jeans and he rubbed in exactly the right spot. How the hell he could find it that fast every time was a mystery.

"We can't do this here," I whispered into his mouth, urging him off me.

"Why not?"

"Because." I laughed, pressing harder against him until he finally let up. "I'm already the school slut. I don't think doing the football quarterback, in the bleachers, in the middle of the school day, would help my reputation."

"That mouth of yours has gotten so dirty." He clucked his tongue and shook his head. "Can I tell you a secret, though?"

I shrugged, bracing myself for the joke I could see dancing in his eyes.

"You're not the school slut anymore."

The air thinned, and all the white noise around us disappeared.

"What does that mean?"

"It means nobody's talking about you." He winked. "Fixed it."

I searched my mind for some evidence of truth to his words. I hadn't been paying much attention to gossip the last few days. I never really paid attention to it as much as it was shoved in my face, but now that I thought about it, nothing came to mind. The passing insults seemed to stop a couple days after Hunter stood up for me to his friends, but Camden was right. It'd been crickets.

"And how did you fix it?"

"By calling Leilani out in the cafeteria. Full disclosure, I didn't realize it was going to take all the attention off of you, but it did... You're welcome."



Two steps forward, sixteen steps back.

"You fixed it by calling another girl a slut. Great."

Camden sat up and squinted. "Do you have any idea all the shit she's said about *you*? You don't need to feel bad for Leilani."

"I'm not the type of person that can feel *good* about that, Camden."

He let out a frustrated breath and rolled his neck. I frowned at the bell ringing in the distance and shoved the remaining food back into the paper bag. I could tell he was trying. With the texts and phone calls, walking me to class, eating lunch with me. He'd said he'd never had a girlfriend before, so this was all new. And I wasn't exactly being open with him about what I expected. It wasn't fair of me.

I really should just tell him what I want.

"I'm not going to be around much tomorrow because of homecoming, so I'll probably just see you at the game, okay?"

"Are you coming over tonight?"

He shook his head. "I told Hunter I'd hang out with him and a few of the guys tonight."

*A few of the guys.* Gotcha, so I'm not invited.

"Oh, okay."

We started down the steps together, and when we made it to the grass, he threaded his fingers through mine. I followed his gaze to the field, to the spot they'd taken me.

"You don't have to come tomorrow if you don't want to, okay? I really don't want you to be tired for your interview."

"I've been training for this day most of my life, and my flight doesn't leave until noon. I promise you, I'm fine... I'll even go to the dance." I studied his face, watching for some reaction and hoping to see the realization that he hadn't asked me to go with him.

No reaction.

"Well, thanks for the support." He bent down and kissed

me before opening the door to the school and waving me through.

My face had fallen, and my legs felt heavy as I made it inside. Our classes were in different parts of the building, so Camden let the door shut behind him and grazed my arm as he passed me. He turned around and walked backward. "I'll see you tomorrow, all right?"

I forced a smile and nodded. "See you tomorrow."

*I* was late... again.

My eyes roamed the crowded stands, filled with laughter, smiles, and a whole lot of war paint. Apparently, even an hour before the game was supposed to start wasn't early enough to get a good seat at homecoming. Not a single empty spot stood out to me.

"Eden, over here!"

I was mid-turn, prepared to give up finding a seat and instead perch myself against the railing, when the feminine voice called out to me from the crowd. I roamed the stands again and paused on a set of hands waving. My eyes locked with Sherry, and the sweat on my palms cooled in a sudden breeze.

I gave a small wave back as if she was only saying hello, but she scooted over, squeezing herself into another woman, and patted the seat beside her.

I swiped my tongue over the roof of my mouth, desperate for any amount of moisture, and scanned yet again for *any* other option. There wasn't one. It was sitting next to Sherry

or standing down in the wind pretending I hadn't noticed the offer.

I trudged up the stairs and made my way through the crowded bleachers to sit between her and another woman with brown hair and a wrinkled nose. The woman stood out in the crowd, with bright red high heels and an outfit far too decadent for the occasion. It was even worse with her being next to Sherry, who sported Panthers *everything* tonight, including blue gloves and both Hunter and Camden's numbers painted on her cheeks.

"Hey, honey." She threw her arm around me and rubbed as if she thought I was cold. "Are you excited?"

I nodded and stared out onto the field where the players were lining up. The boys were in their uniforms, but the girls were decked out in homecoming dresses. I'd never seen so many bad spray tans in one place.

"Kind of confused, to be honest," I said, flicking my gaze to Sherry and smiling nervously. "Isn't the game an hour from now?"

She put her hand to her chest and threw her head back in a laugh. "Oh goodness, Cam wasn't kidding when he said you hadn't come to many games."

"What about Cam?" the woman on my other side asked. Her shoulder-length brunette hair blew around her face in the wind. She seemed intent on holding it down with both her hands and intense concentration.

"This is Eden." Sherry placed her hand on my shoulder and smiled. "She and Cam are friends."

"Ah, well, hello then." The woman let go of her hair long enough to shake my hand. "I'm Allegra, his mom."

My face blanched as she narrowed her eyes at my hand holding hers, probably feeling the sweat that'd caked my palms.

“It’s nice to meet you.” I pulled my hand away and slyly wiped my palms on my jeans.

*This was Camden’s mom.*

So many puzzle pieces clicked into place as I stared at her longer than appropriate. His lifeless house? She looked like she belonged in it... as a statue. She had definitely been the decorator. I glanced to the man beside her who I assumed to be Camden’s dad, but before I could get a good look, Sherry tugged on my arm.

“They’re about to do the crowning.”

“Crowning?”

She nodded and flashed me her teeth. “For homecoming king and queen. It’s the reason we’re here earlier than usual. Cam didn’t tell you to be here at 5:30 for a good seat?”

“No, he just said the game started at seven.” I fished my phone from my pocket to check the time—6:15. So I was technically forty-five minutes late. *What the hell, Camden?*

I looked onto the field where Camden, Hunter, and Joshua stood. To the right of them was Leilani, Jade, and Amber. The rest of the cheerleaders were equally dressed up, but stood on the sidelines along with the other players.

“The girls look nice.” Allegra turned to Sherry as she spoke, so I ignored the comment. My ears burned, but I reminded myself it wasn’t an intentional diss aimed at me. She didn’t even know me. And they were Camden’s *friends*, I couldn’t hate them anymore.

“They sure do.” Sherry turned to Allegra and smiled.

Was she ever not smiling?

Mr. Olstein walked up with the microphone in hand and thanked the crowd for coming to support the Panthers.

Several people hollered and horns blared each time Mr. Olstien paused his introductory speech, and I had to fight the urge to cover my hands over my ears. If concerts were

anything like this, I'd probably vomit every time I walked onto the stage.

"... And now the crowning of the king and queen..."

He put the microphone on the stand before pulling an envelope from his suit pocket. The crowd quieted, anticipation clouding the air as if none of us knew who it was going to be. Even I found myself scooting to the edge of the bench.

"Your homecoming king is... Camden Knight."

People shot up from their seats and a wave of energy flowed through me. Screams echoed all around me, and this time I did put my hands over my ears. Sherry extended her hand to me and helped me to my feet just in time to see an obnoxiously large crown being fitted onto Camden's head. He flashed the stands his smile, but it was the fake one. The only one I'd known him to have before a month ago.

My lips quirked up, and I clapped along with the rest of them, happy for a completely different reason. This was his senior year, which meant it was the last year he had to don that fake smile... if he chose. I'd focused on wanting to escape for so long that it never occurred to me that someone like him could want to escape too. And maybe, just maybe, we would get to escape together.

MIT and Berklee. Holy shit.

I laughed and glanced around at the crowd, feeling their excitement.

"Yay, Camden!" I screamed, cupping my hands around my mouth.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Allegra staring at me, but I ignored it.

Mr. Olstein pulled out another envelope and read off the piece of paper. "And your homecoming queen is... Leilani Donovan."

More cheers. More screams. The metal stands echoed with people jumping up and down. I smiled and cheered

right along with them, momentarily lost in the excitement to get too caught up in whatever that meant. A crown was placed on her head, and she jumped up and down next to Camden. She grabbed his hand and turned to him, her mouth moving as she said something.

He smiled and nodded, not letting go of her hand.

My eyes zeroed in on it, but I tried not to think too hard about the gesture. She could be his queen for these five seconds. I'd be his queen for the rest of it. Maybe even in Boston.

Mr. Olstein gestured for Camden to step up to the mike, and Camden did with Leilani still on his side. He thanked everyone for coming out to support the team, and by the time he was through his first sentence, I couldn't hear any more of his words. It muffled as if I was at the bottom of a lake trying to hear someone talking at the shoreline. My eyes glued to their interconnected hands, and only one word echoed in my mind.

Boston.

Boston.

Boston.

Not Lincoln High. Not the Panthers. Not Leilani. Just Boston.

"So, Eden, why aren't you a cheerleader?"

I blinked, just realizing that Camden had stopped talking and the cheerleaders were making their way off the field, probably to change. Turning to Allegra, I cleared my throat. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I said, why aren't you a cheerleader? Cam is friends with Leilani. I'm sure she could've gotten you a spot on the squad."

"Eden is in the school's orchestra. And she's extremely talented, too, if my sources are accurate." Sherry winked and patted my back. Had Camden been talking to her about me? Or had Hunter? *Please be Hunter.*

A sickening feeling twisted my gut, and I had to take deep breaths to unravel it.

No. I am not going to be the jealous girlfriend.

"Ah, that's interesting," Allegra said, her flat tone contradicting her words.

Twenty minutes had passed when the cheerleaders came back out onto the field in their uniforms. The other team had come out too, and the game was gearing up to start. Last time I'd been here I hadn't caught Camden looking up in the stands once, but already I'd met his eyes several times tonight.

"Gosh, I just can't get over how beautiful Leilani is." Allegra was peering down at her phone, and she leaned it across me to show to Sherry. "I mean, look at this. We looked nothing like that at their age."

"Big hair. Big pearls. That was my motto." Sherry gave her a kind smile and humored her by looking at the picture before going back to the game.

As Allegra brought it back across me, I glimpsed it. It was Leilani and Camden together in his foyer. The bright orange tie hanging from his neck matched her dress perfectly, and of course it did. That was his date.

My throat contracted and I breathed in the cold air, letting it burn as it travelled down my dry throat. His words from yesterday, telling me how busy he was going to be, echoed in my head.

"Excuse me," I said, getting up and sliding past people in the stands as quickly as I could.

"Eden!"

I didn't turn around. Sherry's voice drowned into the crowd as I made it farther away. Paige caught my eye as I hurried down the steps, and the knife in my chest sank another inch.

She'd warned me.



Sebastian had warned me.

*Everybody* had warned me.

I passed her and kept my eyes on the metal until metal turned to concrete and I was walking in the parking lot toward my car. All the yelling and cheers were behind me, but I could've sworn at least a few of them were in front, pointing their fingers and laughing. Tears burned my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. Not yet. Not until I was home, tucked underneath the covers where no one could see me.

What the hell had I been thinking?

"Eden!" I kept walking, but Paige's footsteps crunched on the concrete in a jog. She slipped in front of me and put a hand over her chest, the other hand on her knees as she bent over. "Are you okay?" she asked, out of breath.

I swallowed and stood as straight as I could manage in front of her. "Yup, just remembered how much I hate football."

She stood straight and grabbed my arm when I went to step around her. My eyes narrowed on her face.

"Wait, okay. Just wait a minute." She was still panting, and she took a few deep breaths before shaking her head and continuing. "I know you must hate me, and I don't blame you. I've been the worst friend to you, and I hate myself for it."

"Glad we got that cleared up." I tried to step around her again, but she stopped me.

"Remember at the party when I wanted to leave, and you wouldn't let us? I was pissed at you, Eden. I felt like I'd been humiliated, and you wouldn't just let me sulk in it."

"So, what, Paige? You wanted *revenge* for me trying to be a good friend?"

"No." She shook her head. "I only did what I did because I was scared of them lumping me in with you, and I know that makes me shitty, but that's not the point. The point is, I get

why you did it. I know what you meant when you said we weren't giving them the satisfaction of watching me run away."

Silence filled the air for a few moments as I processed her words. Her meaning.

She didn't want me to run away.

"Did you know he was with Leilani? That he never cared about me? I know—" I took a deep breath and closed my eyes a moment. "I know you basically said it, but... is that the way it's been this whole time?"

"I have no idea," she said, her face contorting in pity. "Honestly, he doesn't talk much to me unless he's asking about you, but he stopped doing even that about a week ago."

I nodded and pressed my hands to my cheeks, my palms cooling the fire that seemed to have ignited beneath the skin. "That's about the time I gave in to him..." Despite my best efforts, a tear escaped my eyes and crawled down my cheek, pooling on the tip of my index finger.

I closed my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest. "I'm so stupid."

"You are *not* stupid, Eden. I'm so sorry that I didn't try to warn you better."

"I wouldn't have listened to you." A bitter laugh rumbled my chest. "I didn't even listen to Sebastian."

"Hey." She gripped my shoulders and looked me dead in the eyes. Her face morphed from pity to determination. She was Paige again. Not the football player's girlfriend. Not the gossip girls' groupie. Not my enemy. Just Paige.

"We're *not* leaving here like this because we're *not* giving them the satisfaction. You hear me?"

I planted my hands over the creases of my nose and wiped away the moisture. "What am I supposed to do? They're all probably laughing at me right now."

She looked over my shoulder, her eyes glazing over as she

thought. “We find a way to get even. I can say for a fact that he doesn’t care about Leilani either, so there’s not much we can do there... Honestly, I’m not sure there *is* anyone he cares about, but I’m sure there’s—”

“Hunter.”

“What?”

“He cares about Hunter.” I peered over her shoulder and sidestepped her to take a step toward my car.

“Where are you going?”

I glanced back at her. “To get ready for the dance. You’re right, we shouldn’t give them the satisfaction.”

A smile lit up her face. “Can I help you get ready?”

“Depends. Can you teach me how you did your eyes?” I gestured to the smoky overlaying of eyeshadow Paige wore.

My face fell as she frowned. “Actually, Leilani did it for me.”

I nodded, forcing the jealousy snaking through me to stay hidden. “That’s fine, I was just playing any—”

“I can help with that.”

Both of us slowly turned and locked eyes on Sherry. Paige looked between me and her, waiting for me to respond.

A smile crept over my face, and I gave a single nod.

“Let’s go.”

Leilani's hands around my neck made my skin crawl. It was like poison seeped from the pores of her palm into my skin, and my cells died in every spot she touched. I couldn't remember if I'd felt this way before Eden, but surely not, right? Leilani and I had sex on a semi-regular basis before. She couldn't have repulsed me this much. Or maybe it wasn't the hands on my neck that were poisonous. Maybe it was the entire bottle of perfume she'd dumped on herself before—

“You played really great tonight.”

Overhanging spotlights travelled the room, passing over us and lighting up Leilani's face for a flash just as I peered down at her. “Thanks.”

I glanced down at my hands on her hips and raised them higher before going back to staring at the door. Eden hadn't shown up. Part of me was beyond relieved when I didn't see her after the first quarter, but an ache still throbbed my chest.

Did she hate me?

No, right? I hadn't chosen to be homecoming king just as

much as I hadn't chosen Leilani to be queen. I couldn't control that. It wasn't a diss at her... but she'd wanted me to take her to the dance, hadn't she? Fuck, I don't even know. These plans had been made for me long before tonight. How would it look if I *didn't* go with Leilani?

This wasn't my fault.

But then why did I feel so fucking guilty about it?

I sighed and dropped my hands as the song ended. "Have you seen Hunter?"

She shrugged and loosened her arms from around my neck. "I think he's with Jade."

"Jade's right there." I pointed to my left where Jade was already swaying to the next song with Joshua.

She turned back to me. "He's probably outside."

I glanced around the crowded gym, looking for some sign that he was there. I'd been staring at the door for the past hour, and it just occurred to me that I hadn't seen him come in.

"Do you want something to drink?"

"Cam, come on. You've danced with me to *one* song. I don't want to go sit down again."

I sighed and put my hands back on her waist, peering over at the door. At least it was another slow song.

"Are you looking for Hunter, or are you looking for the band geek?"

I glared down at her. "Do you remember what happened the last time you called her that?"

Leilani rolled her eyes. "Fine, *Eden*... She's not coming, so you can stop watching the door like a creeper. This isn't her scene."

"She left the game early."

"Because she hates football."

"No." I shook my head and let out another breath. "Something's wrong."

Leilani leaned into me, pressing herself to my chest as we rocked back and forth. I almost pushed her away, but a flash caught my attention. I blinked and focused on the camera before moving my hands lower and smiling down at Leilani. Another photo snapped and the yearbook photographer moved on to the next happy couple. When I went to pull away, Leilani's arms around my neck locked tight to hold me in place.

"Can you just pretend for five minutes that you *want* to be here with me?"

Her lips pursed in a pout, and for a minute I actually felt sorry for her. She thought she wanted me, but all she wanted was the *idea* of me. She wanted the football star, but none of the rest. She let me treat her like shit while she begged for scraps, and it was kind of... sad.

I leaned down and pressed my lips to her ear, moving my hands over her back in a mock caress. "Sorry."

Her lips curved into a smile on my neck and she kissed me there. "Much better."

"Don't push it," I said with a chuckle, rocking to the music. I glanced up at the door, but then let my eyes drift to the floor. Leilani was right. Eden wasn't coming.

"Can I ask you something?"

She wove her fingers through my hair and nodded. "What's up?"

"Do you like coming to these things with me?"

Leilani burst into laughter and muffled it in my shoulder before pulling back to look at me. Her amused expression fell when I didn't return it. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, I'm serious." I stood straighter and moved my hands down her sides.

"Cam, you just spent the last half hour staring at the door, hoping that the girl you had us all torment for two months would walk through. I gave up on you a *really* long time ago."

“So, if I said right now that I wanted to be with you, you’d say no?”

“Honestly?” Leilani paused long enough to stare into space and sigh. As if she hadn’t already considered it. “I’d probably say yes because you’re Camden Knight, but then I’d cheat on you mercilessly until graduation and dump you as soon as we move the tassels.”

“Ouch.” I drew out the word and widened my eyes at the level of honesty. Shit, maybe I shouldn’t feel bad for Leilani after all.

She shrugged and smiled. “Truth hurts.”

Letting out a small laugh, I let my shoulders relax and leaned into her. I could see it so clearly, and for the millionth time, I wondered how others couldn’t see it. It’d been this way since freshman year, Leilani and I being pegged as the perfect couple. We were decent friends, but that’s where it ended. If we hadn’t been in the same circle, we wouldn’t have even been that.

Movement slowed around me, and a wave of whispers gradually came over the dance floor. I perked up and glanced around, following the curious gazes to the entrance.

My stomach dropped to the floor, and the weight in my chest grew, preventing me from taking a breath.

*No.*

“Is that Eden Thompson?” The question drifted to me from somewhere on the dancefloor. Leilani must’ve heard it too because she whipped her head around and loosened her hold on my neck.

My gaze locked onto Hunter’s smile for several moments. It was the gasoline that poured into my veins, but the arm he had locked around her... that was the match.

“What are you doing?” Leilani asked when I went to step that way. “You’re just gonna make a scene.”

“I don’t care.”

“*Cam.*” Her voice was low and venomous. Her pride was on the line, and if the situation were reversed, I would’ve been pissed as hell at Leilani for not keeping up the charade.

But Eden stood there in an ankle-length silver dress that sparkled with every slight movement. It gripped her hour-glass figure and cut low at her chest, giving a glimpse to the entire room of what only I’d seen. Of what was *mine*. The worst part? The part that wrapped its hand around my neck and squeezed, was that it wasn’t my arm she was hanging off of. It was Hunter’s.

Fuck. That.

“Sorry.” I shrugged Leilani off me and stormed over to the table where they were headed. Hunter guided the scarf off her shoulders and laid it over the back of the chair he had pulled out for her. She turned to him and smiled, that smile falling when she spotted me.

“Something wrong, Camden?” she asked, her head tilting.

About a gallon of makeup had been applied to her face, and when she pouted, I had to resist the urge to recoil. She looked way too much like Leilani... and Jade... and the rest of the girls in my circle.

I turned to Hunter and lifted my hands out. “What the fuck?”

He looked around like he didn’t know what I was talking about. “Something wrong?”

My arms dropped to my sides and I huffed, shaking my head in fucking disbelief. Had this been his play the whole time? Pretend he was happy for me and then steal my girl?

Leilani appeared beside me, shooting me a glare before training it on Eden. “Hmm. You actually clean up okay.”

Eden’s nostrils flared, but she plastered on a fake smile. “Gee, thanks.”

“Eden, do you want something to drink?” Hunter



nonchalantly turned to her, and her smile turned genuine as she nodded.

I shot my arm out as Hunter started to walk away, halting him. "You are *not* getting her a drink, Hunter. She's not your fucking date."

"Is she yours?"

All eyes turned to me, but I said nothing. My scowl remained on Hunter. I clenched my jaw and it felt like it would crack from the pressure.

I turned to Eden and held out my hand. "Come on."

"What?" she snorted, flicking her hair over her shoulder. "I'm not leaving with you."

"Yeah, you fuckin' are."

I grabbed her wrist, but Hunter pushed me back and I stumbled into another table. Several heads turned our way, adding to the stares we'd already accumulated.

My hands balled into fists and eyes went wide as I stood up straight and took a step toward my best friend who was bowed up waiting for me.

"Jesus Christ, guys," Leilani hissed, darting her eyes around us.

Eden stepped between us before either of us could make a move, and she lifted her hand up to me, her back pressed into Hunter. "Just go, Camden. I'm not your girlfriend, and you don't own me. So just go enjoy your king and queen dance and leave us alone."

"I didn't choose to be homecoming king, Eden. Are you really going to break up with me over that?" I waved my hand between Leilani and me. "We're just friends."

"Break up with you? How can I break up with you if we're not even dating?"

My mouth fell open and I froze like that. All my thoughts jumbled as I tried to find the right words to say. We had an understanding. We were *exclusive*. How was that not dating? I

fucking told her to stay away from Hunter, and she shows up here with him. For what? To humiliate me, or because she's actually with him? And if she is with him, how the fuck do I change that? How do I change any of this?

Leilani tugged on my jacket sleeve. "Let's just go. This place is lame anyway." She glanced around the room and put on a mask of indifference, but I could see the embarrassment underneath. Music was blaring and *Cha Cha Slide* had come on, so luckily, a lot of people had abandoned eavesdropping on our drama, but plenty still stared.

With one last look at Eden, I shook my head and allowed Leilani to pull me away. We were headed for the exit, but I tucked my hand around her waist and pulled her into me. We were on the side of the dance floor, and I tossed a glance over my shoulder at Eden and Hunter who were now seated at a table. Their mouths moved in what appeared to be serious conversation.

"I don't want to leave yet," I said, turning back to Leilani.

She nodded and together we walked over to a different table on the other side of the dance floor.

"Well, that was humiliating."

I plopped down into the chair beside her and ran a hand through my hair. "I'm sorry. You were right, I should've just let it go."

Jade and Joshua stumbled up to the table, already tipsy on punch that was no doubt spiked. "This place is laaaame," Jade said with a laugh. "I'm ready for the party."

Leilani laughed and rolled her eyes, cupping a hand over Jade's. "I love you so much, girl."

A few other friends migrated to our table, and conversation broke out. I was facing away from Hunter and Eden, but the image of them together was burned into my memory.

If he wanted to fuck her, he would. People had sex with me because I was...well, me. Hunter had charm. He knew the

things to say, the moves to make. That's why she was here with him. Whatever he'd said, it'd been convincing.

And I wasn't doing anything to stop it. I picked up the cup Leilani sat in front of me and downed the vodka tinted punch. It slid a smooth path down my throat, and when I slammed the cup back to the tabletop, I immediately needed more. If Hunter was fucking my girlfriend, then at least I wouldn't remember it tomorrow.

Girlfriend. Was Eden my girlfriend?

Apparently not.

The chair legs scraped against the floor as I pushed it back and stood to get more punch.

I shuffled through the crowd, headed in the direction of Eden's table.

*Don't look.*

Some guy bumped my shoulder and lifted his hands in surrender, but I kept my gaze in front of me.

*Do. Not. Look.*

I scooped punch into a cup and filled up another to save a trip. Sparkling silver caught my eye, but I kept my stare on red punch.

Someone patted my back, and I snapped my attention their way.

"Whoa, sorry man," Trey said, holding his hands up. He grabbed a cup and filled it.

Then... I looked.

Eden's mouth was wide in a laugh, her hand to her chest. Hunter's chair was pulled up close beside hers and, with the way his hands moved, I could tell he was telling her one of his stories. No doubt one I'd heard a dozen times.

Trey followed my gaze and leaned in with his arm around my shoulder. "Mm, that is one fine piece of geeky ass." He pulled his arm from me and laughed. "And you guys all made fun of me for Paige. Told you they can be hot."

“Would you shut the fuck up?” I shifted my gaze to him, taking in his wide eyes, before I set the cups back on the table. I turned and started walking back over to Leilani and my other friends. I guess you could call them that.

If I couldn't call Hunter my friend, then I didn't have any.

But did he really want to date Eden? No. If he had, then he would've told me. This was all a competition to him. Everything was a competition to him.

“Cam.” His familiar voice stopped me in my tracks, and I turned to face my best friend. Trey was at their table, staring over at us with his eyes narrowed.

“What do you want?”

He sighed and stuffed his hands in his pockets as he came closer. “Do you really think I'm trying to hurt you?”

“I don't know *what* you're doing, Hunter.”

“She was at my house after the game. My mom helped her get ready there, and Eden asked me if I'd take her to the dance.”

“Why would she do that?” I asked, my lips in a tight line.

“Because she knew you were taking Leilani.” He let out a deep breath and peered over my shoulder at my table. “It was humiliating for her. She thought you were together.”

“Eden and I *are* together. You know why I have to come to these things with Leilani. It's not like—”

“No, Cam. I don't know why. But that's why I brought Eden... I'm not moving in on your girl, she's just hurt, and she wants to make you jealous. Honestly, it sounded kind of fun, but was clearly a bad idea.”

My brain fogged over, robbing me of my next words.

Eden had humiliated me. I had humiliated Leilani. And apparently, it all started with me humiliating Eden. How many times had I done it over the last few months? Endless, but tonight hadn't been on purpose.

When would it stop?

“She came here with you to make me jealous?”

Hunter nodded.

I peered over his shoulder at Eden. She was staring at me, her face tight with worry. Paige was by her side and averted her gaze when she saw me looking their way. Not Eden, though. We locked eyes, and a million things were said between us in that gaze. It was always a battle between us. One of us was always retaliating. Most of the time I liked it that way, but I’d had enough. I wanted her.

Not as my enemy. Not as my hookup. Not as my prize.

I wanted her as the girl who liked me because of who I was. The girl who didn’t act like everyone else, didn’t try to blend in. The one who loved her little brother, her family, her shitty ass friends, and, yeah, maybe even me. I wanted her as my girlfriend. First and last. And I hoped with everything in me that she could see it in that gaze. No words necessary.

It wasn’t her that needed to hear the words anyway.

“Cam,” Hunter called to my back as I made my way to the DJ booth. The blood pumping through me caused a drum-beat to thump in my ears, drowning out the booming noise of the room. The microphone crackled as I gripped it with my sweaty palms, and I glared at the DJ when he tried to stop me. He slowly moved his hand to turn the music off, and I turned to address the room.

“Hey,” I said, more calmly than I thought possible. “Everyone having a good time?”

A few people cheered, while most looked around in confusion.

I cleared my throat. “Uh, I just wanted to let everyone know, there’s an after-party at Hunter’s house, and you’re all invited.”

The room erupted in a cheer, and my chest loosened. I considered handing the microphone back to the DJ and quit-

ting while I was ahead, but Eden entered my line of sight. Her silver dress caught in the lights above her, and our eyes met. Her brows were knitted together.

“I, uh... I also wanted to confess something.” The cheering in the crowd died as everyone waited eagerly to hear my next hot piece of gossip. The microphone was slippery in my grasp, and my cough echoed along the walls. All eyes were on me, the real me. My armor was lying on the floor.

*Fuck it.*

“A couple months ago, I told everyone Eden and I slept together. I started rumors about her. I got the whole school to believe that she was a slut.” Coach moved toward me from the other side of the room, and I held up my hand to stop him. His face was hard, warning clear in his eyes. “None of that was true. *None* of it. Even the picture I sent around was photoshopped. I said those things because I thought it was fun to mess with her. She didn’t take my shit like everybody else.” I took a deep breath. “But I was an idiot, and the truth is, I really like Eden. And if she feels the same about me, and she’s willing to forgive me for being a complete dick the last few months, then I really hope she’ll consider me as her boyfriend.”

*Dead silence.*

The faces in the crowd looked to each other in confusion, but the whispering hadn’t started. None of that mattered. I only had eyes for one of those faces.

I handed the microphone back to the DJ, who took it like I was handing him a bomb. The music started back up a few seconds later, and I made my way toward Eden.

“Holy shit,” she said, holding a hand over her mouth to suppress her amused smile.

“That bad?” I glanced around, the twisting in my gut seemingly permanent. Plenty of eyes were still on me, including Coach’s. He was headed straight for me.

“You didn’t have to do that.” Eden dropped her hand and shook her head, the smile now fully visible. She cupped my face in her hands and kissed me. When she pulled back, she didn’t even react to the cat calls around us. She didn’t seem to even realize how much we were being stared at. I, on the other hand, didn’t have an ounce of comfort left. “But thank you. And yeah, I guess I’ll be your girlfriend.” She winked and kissed me again. This time longer. More passionate. People cheered around us, but it slowly faded away. My beating heart raced for a new reason.

“Cam.”

I broke the kiss and peered at Coach. He didn’t seem the least bit amused by my awkward declaration. I turned to Eden and smiled, barely suppressing a laugh.

“Meet me at the Jeep?”

L eilani squealed as Hunter came up behind her in the pool and dragged her back by her hips. Laughter filled the air, mixing in with Eminem's voice blaring from the speakers. I shifted on Camden's lap, turning to him and watching as his soft lips moved, deep in a conversation with Trey.

White teeth shone as he smiled and shook his head at a comment from Trey. Something about the Dallas Cowboys wide receiver... I think.

"Whatever you say." Camden turned back to me, his smile widening. "What do you think, babe?"

I laughed and grabbed the cup from his hand before setting it down on the table separating us from Trey and Paige. "I think you talk a lot when you're drunk."

His hand cupped the back of my neck and he pulled me in. "Maybe you should shut me up then."

"Somebody needs to," I laughed, closing the distance to kiss him. When his tongue snaked its way into my mouth, I pulled back. With the way my face heated, I was certain my cheeks had turned red.



“Oooo, Eden’s got a boyfriend,” Paige joked, laughing and sloshing beer onto the patio.

“Yeah, she does.” Camden laughed right along with her.

I’d been drinking Mountain Dew for most of the evening, but with the way Camden and his friends acted without judgement or inhibitions, I finally understood the appeal of alcohol. It was crazy. Two months ago, I’d been here rolling my eyes at their behavior, but tonight I was sitting on my boyfriend’s lap, laughing along with the rest of them. It didn’t even feel weird or like I was the odd man out. It felt like I belonged.

“Do you wanna go someplace more private?” Camden whispered in my ear. He ran his palm in a circle over my knee before sliding higher.

“Cam, Eden, we need two more people. Let’s go.” Hunter splashed water onto the patio and lifted himself up on the edge. Steam billowed off him from the heated water coating his skin.

“Nah, we’re busy,” Camden answered for us. “Next time.”

Hunter’s eyes met mine, and he shook his finger at me before giving me a wink and turning his attention to Trey and Paige.

Camden’s hand settled between my legs, and his fingers poked into the material of my leggings. My eyes snapped back to him. I grabbed his wrist and pulled it down my leg. “Could you not?” I asked, keeping my tone light.

He pursed his lips in a fake pout, and I rolled my eyes. “Where do you wanna go?”

“Really?” he asked, his eyebrows lifting.

I shrugged. “You know, to talk about our newfound relationship and stuff. Hammer out all the boundaries.”

“Damn, do you know how to have fun or what?”

“Just shut up and answer my question.”

He chuckled before playing with a strand of my hair,

letting it fall and brushing his fingers over the exposed skin of my neck. "We could go upstairs. There's a few guest bedrooms."

"Is there one you haven't slept with another girl in?"

"Uh—"

"Never mind, don't answer that." I looked up as I thought. The last thing I'd want to be thinking about was a different time Camden had sex, so Hunter's entire house was probably out of the question.

"What about the Jeep?"

He bit his lip and slowly shook his head.

"You are such a whore."

Camden laughed. "But I'm a pretty whore, right? Why are you worried about that, anyway? It's not like they don't change the sheets."

I went to speak, but Camden pressed his lips to mine, stealing my words. He pulled back and ran his hands through another lock of my hair. "I don't want us to think about the past. This won't work if we do."

His humor had vanished, and he was all seriousness now. It sobered me some from the excitement in the air and my own thoughts.

He was right. If we didn't use this as an opportunity to start over fresh, we'd fall apart. Too many things had happened. We needed a clean slate, and after what he'd done at the dance, I didn't need to worry about trusting him anymore. I needed to worry about forgiving him. And I chose to forgive him.

I glanced over his shoulder into the house. It was jam packed since Camden invited the entire dance. "You think we'd be able to find someplace private?"

Camden smiled and leaned in to kiss my ear before whispering, "Let's go see."

His hand left my leg, and I lifted myself from his lap. He stood and took my hand before leading us into the house, lifting his middle finger into the air when a few people behind us cackled.

It was strange not to feel embarrassed by it. I gripped Camden's hand tighter and laughed as we passed through the door. I'd been the school slut for months, and now that I was actually here, at a party, about to have sex with my boyfriend, there was no judgement. No embarrassment. No anything. My group of friends would've wrinkled their noses at the thought, but not Camden's. I was starting to think I liked them better.

*Had Hell frozen over?*

We made it upstairs, and I started when Camden shoved me into a wall. His lips found my neck, and his hands wound around my waist. "Are you overthinking again?" he asked, his voice already sounding hoarse. He sucked on my neck and moved his hands underneath my shirt, sliding up to cup my breasts.

I gripped his wrist and glanced around the hallway. "Not here."

"Why not?" he asked with a chuckle. "We're not fooling anyone."

His words were a little sluggish. A little less smooth than usual. His face was flushed, and his eyes had half-hooded lids. He was drunk, happy, and had an animalistic look in his eyes that made me realize he'd been holding back before. It was sexy and worrisome at the same time, and an exciting shiver ran up my spine.

I shrugged his hands off me and took his wrist. "Come on," I said, leading him to the first door we came to. I assumed it was a guest bedroom, with the bland decor and lifeless vibe it had. Cozy enough, but not lived in.

Camden's hands were on me again as soon as the door clicked shut, and I took a step away from him, lifting my lips into a smirk.

"Babe, come on."

"You want me?" I asked, taking a step back when he came toward me.

He paused and chuckled, letting his arms fall to his sides. "You know I do."

"Then lay down on the bed."

His head tilted, but a half smile curled on his face. "You tryin' to take charge?"

Instead of answering, I just raised a brow and waited. He chuckled again before shuffling over to the bed and laying down, lacing his fingers behind his head on the pillow. "Satisfied?"

I clicked the lock on the door and sauntered over to the bed, swaying my hips more than usual. The smile vanished, and his eyes darted up and down my body. More of that need took hold, so strong I could smell it in the air. It clouded the room with the most delicious type of tension, and I loved it. I loved all of it. His life. His future. *Him*. It felt too soon to say the words, but with no alcohol in my system, he could make me feel blacked out drunk. He tore down all my walls, shut down all my reasoning, and ripped his way straight into my heart. And I fucking loved him for it. Just for being Camden Knight.

"Am I satisfied?" I asked, still smirking. "Not even close."

He went to lean up as I sat on the bed, but I placed a hand on his chest to urge him back down.

"Eden, what's up?"

"This time, we're going at *my* pace."

His face fell, and he pulled his hands from behind his head to rest on his elbows. "You haven't been liking it?"

"Of course I have." I smoothed a hand over his chest and

scooted closer. "I just—I want to try something a little different."

"Different how?"

He'd sobered some, and I could hear the sliver of disappointment in his voice. When we'd had sex it had been on his terms. How he'd wanted it, when he'd wanted it, where he'd wanted it. Now, his eyes glazed over as if he was picturing us, passionately kissing in the missionary position. It wasn't what he wanted, and he'd made that obvious. Lucky for him, I didn't want that either.

"I can tell you like to be in control. I get that, and I like it, but I also like to know what's going on. I want to have some control as well."

"Babe, if I've made you uncomfortable, I'm—"

"You haven't made me uncomfortable. Just listen, okay?"

He nodded and pushed his tongue into the side of his cheek while he waited.

I searched my mind for the right words to say, and blood rushed to my cheeks when the words jumbled into a hot mess. If they didn't make sense in my head, how where they going to make sense out loud?

"You know how you tell me you know what I want?"

His eyes narrowed to slits, but he nodded.

"Sometimes I can't tell what *you* want. Sometimes I think you might be holding back."

"If I need to hold back more, then I can. It's not a big deal." He placed his hand over mine and forced a small smile, clearly trying to hide the fact that it *was* a big deal.

"But I want to know what you want. That's the part that makes me feel out of control. I don't know what you're about to do or what you want, so even though I know I can tell you to stop, it's like... It's like I still don't feel as if I'm giving you the go ahead."

"So..."

“So I want you to tell me, right now, what it is you want... and then we’ll do it.”

My cheeks were hot as coals, but my voice was cool. I turned my attention to Camden’s chest, tracing an invisible pattern in his shirt when his laugh snapped my eyes back to his face. The confusion was gone, and in its place was pure amusement.

“Are you saying you want me to talk dirty to you?”

“No, that’s not—” I smacked my lips together. I did think knowing what he wanted would give me a better sense of control. It was too hard to say no to things in the moment. If I knew what was coming, I could feel like I’d agreed to it without so much of an internal battle.

But there was also a buzz on the back of my neck that travelled over my shoulders and down my spine at the thought of hearing the words come from his lips. So, yeah, I wanted him to talk dirty.

“Kind of.”

He chuckled again and scooted over on the bed before patting the space beside him. I lay down next to him and shivered when his hand cupped my hip and jerked me into him. His dick was straining against his pants and poked into my thigh.

“You really wanna know what I want to do to you? No holding back?”

“Yeah.” The word was a whisper brushing over my parted lips.

He let go of my waist and snaked his hand underneath my leggings, finding the sweet spot and rubbing me over my panties. My eyes fluttered closed, and my breathing grew deeper. How could he have this effect on me before we’d even started?

“I want to rip these panties off of you and put your ass in

the air. Shove your face in a pillow to smear that God awful makeup.”

“You don’t like it?”

I opened my eyes fully, momentarily taken out of the imagery. His face was dead serious, but his finger kept moving over my clit. Softly. Like he wanted me present enough to hear everything he said, but relaxed enough to agree to it all.

“No, I don’t.”

A small pang vibrated my chest, but the pressure on my clit overshadowed it. I’d been complimented a hundred times tonight on how well I ‘clean up’. I guess it was more flattering for him to like my normal look better anyway.

“I wanna bind your hands behind your back with something that’ll leave a mark so that I can see it tomorrow. Then I wanna shove my cock into you, *hard*. I want it to hurt a little bit, and I want you to scream loud enough that I have to shove your face in the pillow more to muffle it.”

My eyes widened, and I pulled back an inch. “Cam—”

“You told me not to hold back.”

Still, he was stone-cold serious. His finger kept rubbing me, but it slowed, as if he was waiting for me to tell him to stop.

“I know, I just—”

“I can improvise. It doesn’t have to be just like that... Isn’t that why we’re doing this? So that you can tell me what’s too far?”

He spoke in a defensive tone. As if I was attacking him. How afraid was he of rejection? How far was I willing to go to save him from it?

What did *I* want?

Instead of my mind, I searched my body for the answer, focusing on every sensation that coursed through me.

Arousal pooled in my panties. Camden's touch was still electric. My skin was hot, my nipples were hardened buds, and my thighs clenched to the beat of Camden's rhythm, aching for more.

Did I want what he was saying? As always, my mind said no while my body said yes.

I swallowed and shifted closer to him, lowering my hand to his and pressing him harder against me. "Keep going."

"You sure?"

I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his. When I pulled back, there was only an inch between our mouths.

"Yeah," I whispered. "Don't stop."

"I wanna come inside you. Watch it drip down your thighs after I'm done. I fuckin' hate condoms."

I shook my head. "Too far."

"I'll buy you a morning after pill."

"You gonna buy me the herpes medicine too? You've had sex with *Leilani*."

Camden laughed, and the sexual tension lessened, but I think I might've liked us this way the most. I smiled back, his amusement contagious.

"It's not nice to insinuate girls are sluts, remember? Besides, if you sucked my dick thinking I had herpes, then maybe you're the one with the problem."

"That's why I put on the makeup." I laughed again and bit my lip, pointing to the corner of my mouth as if there was a herpes outbreak underneath the foundation I applied.

Camden gave his head a shake and leaned in to whisper in my ear. "I'm gonna come inside you, and you're gonna like it."

With that, he shot up on the bed and pulled his shirt off, exposing the bare chest that stole my words. Every. Single. Time. Fuck, he was hot.



He flashed me his teeth before ripping my shirt over my head as well. I lifted my arms and let him pull it off me, but when he went for my pants, I grabbed his arm.

“You’re not having sex with me without a condom.”

He rolled his eyes and tugged my leggings down, freeing himself from my grip in the process. I was down to only my bra and panties, but it wasn’t so cold like it was at Camden’s house. My skin was on fire.

He stood from the bed and gestured toward my bra. “Are we gonna make this scenario come true or what?”

“Depends. Are you going to put on a condom?”

He reached into his back pocket and held the foiled packet up for me to see.

My eyes narrowed, and I scooted up on the bed. “You were carrying that in your pocket all evening? That’s some confidence you got there.”

“I’m dating Easy Eden. It was a sure thing.” He winked and twirled his finger in a gesture to tell me to hurry up.

I sighed, but didn’t manage to suppress the smile that teased my lips. He was joking. Old me would’ve ripped into him, stormed from the room. I would’ve expected candles and an hour-long make out session before *considering* having sex. But damn it, I liked the jokes. I liked that he made me laugh, that he challenged me, that he *pushed* me.

And I liked to push back.

I stood and picked my shirt up from off the floor. “Mm, guess you should work on hedging your bets.”

When I went to put it on, Camden tore it from me. I took a step back, and he gripped my waist and jerked me toward him. The sexual tension was back, and he stared into my eyes a moment before crashing his lips to mine. He tasted of beer, but he seemed to have lost his buzz. His movements had been much less sluggish since coming to the room.

His fingers threaded through my hair, and he tugged my head back, breaking our kiss.

He moved to my neck, down my chest, until he dropped to his knees and his face was at my breasts. He unhooked my bra and jerked it off my shoulders, making me gasp at the sudden friction teasing my sensitive nipples.

His mouth was on me a moment later. I inhaled a sharp breath before gripping his hair and pulling. His tongue teased my nipple for a few moments, then he moved on to the next, sliding his tongue across my chest until he reached it.

“This isn’t the scenario you described,” I said, my voice shallow and filled with more amusement. My lips were parted, and my legs shook. Suddenly, the only thing I wanted was to bring that picture in his head to life. To let him fuck me in all the ways I knew I shouldn’t.

Old Me would’ve shook her head, but this was New Me. And New Me didn’t give a shit what Old Me thought.

All I wanted was Camden.

He stood and kissed my lips before urging me back onto the bed. I sat, but then bit my lip and smiled as I flipped over. He yanked my hips up and moved a pillow in front of me. He gripped my hair and lifted me, making me gasp, yet again, and squeeze my eyes shut. When he let go I fell into the pillow that he’d shifted—just as he’d promised.

“Which parts of what I mentioned are too far?”

His voice sounded behind me, and the air caressing my most sensitive area reminded me of how exposed I was to him. My thighs were spread and ass was in the air. *All* of me was visible.

I gnawed on my lower lip and focused on running through the things he’d said instead of imagining what he must’ve been seeing. My heart rate picked up, and I could feel each beat throbbing my ears.

“Nothing.”

Seconds passed without any reply, and I went to lift up to look behind me, but Camden pressed against my back to hold me down.

“Are you sure?” There was skepticism in his tone, but also excitement. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

This was what I wanted—for him not to hold back. I wanted to be the girl who gave him what he needed, and I wanted him to do the same. So far, he’d succeeded. Tonight, it was my turn.

“I’m sure.”

The clanking of his belt filled the room and caused my heart rate to speed up even more. My pussy clenched as if my body was anxious for what would come next. My mind, though? Still not fully on board. I wanted the pleasure and even the feeling of being dominated, but the pain he’d described was casting an ominous shadow over the desire.

But I was in control still. I could always tell him to stop if it was too much.

Camden urged my hands behind my back, more gentle than I would’ve expected, and guided them through a loop he’d made with his belt. Leather pressed into my wrists as he pulled it tighter, but it wasn’t painful. It certainly wouldn’t be leaving any marks.

“You good?” he asked, trailing his hands down my sides to rest on my hips.

I nodded into the pillow and shifted. In reality, I was in a little bit of a panic, but I wasn’t ready to stop it. Nothing bad had happened.

His zipper sounded behind me, and a few moments later, the head of Camden’s dick pressed against my opening.

I cringed and braced for pain.

“You sure there’s nothing I mentioned that might be too far?”

I nodded again.

I expected him to spear into me as he had the first time, but seconds passed with him only prodding against me. He'd pushed just the tip in and pulled out, rubbing it on my clit and repeating the motion.

Where was the pain?

"You're perfect, Eden, you know that?"

I turned my head to the side to try and glance back at him when he thrust into me. All my muscles seemed to flex at the same time, and my movements halted. It hadn't hurt like I'd expected, but it still robbed the air from my lungs.

I sucked in a breath and rested my cheek on the pillow. Camden moved out of me and back in slowly, guiding his hips to hit the spot he knew felt the best. His hands massaged my ass, and he lifted me up more before beginning to pump into me.

Waves of pleasure immediately began to crash over me, hitting me in the sweet spot with every jerk. I breathed in the fresh scent of the pillow and closed my eyes, letting the sensations take over.

"Is this good?" he asked, his voice gritty.

I groaned out a barely coherent 'yes' and met one of his thrusts. If anything, he was being *gentler* than usual, and I kept waiting for his movements to turn rough. He chuckled behind me and picked up the pace. His fingers dug into my hips, and his balls slapped against my thighs.

My mouth opened in another moan, and I turned my face into the pillow to muffle it. The fact that we were in Hunter's house was floating around in the back of my mind, and I didn't want anyone to hear us, even if it had been obvious what we'd been sneaking off to do.

My arms started to ache with them being held behind my back. I tugged on them to see if the belt would loosen, but it tightened instead.

I abandoned the effort and relaxed my face into the pillow, going back to focusing on the pleasure. It was almost like I was sinking in it. I could almost feel the chemicals swimming in my veins, taking over every one of my senses. The sound of skin slapping, the smell of lavender fabric softener on the pillowcase, the feel of my walls expanding each time his cock rutted into me. I was beginning to understand why he liked it this way. It was raw, primal. He seemed to be able to go even deeper, faster, and after some time, he went harder. I both ached and writhed in ecstasy, but it was such a gradual shift I barely even noticed. I'd stopped bracing for pain long before it actually came.

Camden slowed and tucked his hand beneath me to rub circles around my clit. It was the last bit of friction I needed to put me over the edge, and my mouth opened wide and my eyelids creased as my muscles spasmed with my release.

Camden's thumb left my clit and he jerked his hips a few more times before stilling inside me. A warmth spread, but my mind was too foggy to tell what it was from. He undid the belt and let me collapse onto the bed before he shifted me so that I lay closer to the headboard.

My thighs were more wet than usual, and when I felt the liquid running across my thighs to the sheet, my eyes shot open. Camden was nuzzling himself behind me with his arms wrapped around me, and I turned my head to get a glimpse of him.

"What the hell, Camden? I said to use a condom."

"You say a lot of things." He kissed my shoulder, probably in an attempt to hide his smirk. "Get some sleep, baby."

He moved his hand up and down my arm and trailed his kisses to the back of my neck, sending a flood of warmth through me yet again.

My eyes closed, despite my desire to whip around to tell him he was an asshole. But then again, I kind of loved it.

A faint smile lifted my lips and I snuggled into him more. Seconds passed, and I started to register his caresses less. My breathing grew heavy, and I drifted off into the hardest sleep of my life.

*H*olding the letter above my head, I ran my fingertips over the ink for the thousandth time.

**Dear Camden Knight,**

**We are pleased to inform you...**

I'd memorized the feel of each letter. Could recite the entire thing from memory.

MIT wanted an interview.

MI fucking T.

It arrived yesterday, and I still hadn't told anyone the news, not even my parents. What would they think if I told them I'd applied? That I planned to blow off my scholarship to OU if I got in? Would they be happy, disappointed, proud? I didn't have a clue, so instead I'd kept it to myself. Eden got back from her Berklee interview tonight, and I'd tell her then.

*She* would be happy. At least that made one person.

My phone buzzed and I sat down the letter before picking it up, expecting Eden. She should be texting me anytime now so we could celebrate with her family. Apparently, she'd kicked the interview's ass, and her orchestra

instructor had already written an impressive recommendation letter.

She was in, and she deserved it.

It wasn't Eden who'd texted, though. It was Hunter.

**Need to talk. Come to the football field?**

I sighed and typed back that I was on my way. His dad probably flipped his shit again. Hunter and I had gone up to the school before for impromptu practices when his dad demanded he do better. It was so old, but Hunter was usually calmed down by the end of them.

I changed into sweats and a hoodie before leaving the house. It was only six thirty, but the sun had set. Crisp air sawed in and out of my lungs as I made my way to my Jeep parked in the driveway.

When I pulled up to the school, the stadium lights were on, but Hunter's car wasn't in the parking lot. I pulled out my phone and called him.

"Hey, you about here?" he asked.

"Yeah, I just pulled up. Where's your car?"

"I parked it in a different lot. Wanted the walk." His tone was tense. Angry. Normally, he did a decent job of containing it when his dad was being a dick.

"All right, I'll be right there."

The line went dead, and I pulled my phone back to look at the flashing screen. With a sigh, I stuffed my phone into my hoodie pocket and climbed out of the Jeep.

When I was almost to the football stadium, my phone buzzed again. This time it was Eden.

**Finally home. So much jetlag. Ugh, come over?**

I started to type that I'd be late, but Hunter entered my line of sight. His face and eyes were hard as granite, and his hands were shoved in his jean pockets. He didn't look like he was ready to practice. He just looked pissed.

I slipped my phone back in my hoodie and continued



toward him. Whatever his dad had done, it was bad. And honestly, it was about damn time. My veins throbbed and I readied myself for whatever he was about to tell me. This time, we'd get revenge. We'd get Sherry to report him, we'd fuck up his business, *something*. I was sick of this asshole.

"What did he do?" I made it to Hunter, and he turned and gestured for us to head to the field.

"I assume your parents don't know where you are?" he asked, ignoring my question. His tone was as hard as the rest of him.

"No, why?"

"What about Eden?"

"Hunter, your business is your business. I don't tell people about it, and you know that."

He was walking ahead of me, but he paused and looked back. I came up beside him, and he put a hand on my shoulder. "Good, Cam. I'm glad I have such a great friend."

He continued toward the field, and I walked with him, but a sickening feeling came over me. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and my gut churned.

Something was wrong.

"Hunter, what's up?"

Hunter slid his hand off my shoulder and walked ahead of me, ignoring my question yet again. I glanced around, sensing something but having no idea what it was. My steps were slow, but I continued to follow Hunter. We rounded the corner of the stadium, revealing several of our friends waiting for us. Trey, Nathan, and Zac stood in front. Joshua and Kyle stood above us, leaning on the railing of the bleachers, but they weren't alone. Eden's friend, Sebastian, was with them. Joshua and Kyle slid beneath the railing and landed on the ground behind me, while Sebastian took the stairs to join the group.

Sweat coated the hairs still sticking up on my neck, and I

darted my eyes to the circle forming around me, with Hunter and me in the middle. Hunter's arms were crossed over his chest, and his eyes were narrowed. I glanced at everyone's faces... they were all like that.

"Kay, so what the fuck's going on?" I asked, a laugh crawling up my throat and coming out with no trace of humor.

"You don't already know, Cam?" Hunter asked, his eyebrows raising. "I find that hard to believe."

I pointed to Sebastian. "What's he doing here?"

"We'll get to that in a minute. The guys have something they'd like to say."

"Did you set Jade up to tell Paige that I cheated on her?" Trey asked, his giant form seeming even bigger with the way his chest expanded.

"What?"

"Last year, when I was dating Natalie," Zac interjected. "You fucked her, didn't you?"

My eyes snapped to Hunter. He'd been the only one who knew about that.

"She dumped me the next day, and you told me she wasn't worth it, anyway. Do you remember that?"

"Zac I—"

"What about my sister," Nathan said before I could think through the lie I was about to tell.

I turned to face him. "All right, I'm sensing a pattern here, and if you want to believe whatever bullshit Hunter's decided to tell you, then fine, but I'm already done with this."

I took a step toward a hole in the half circle, but Nathan and Trey moved in to block me.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

An ache spread over every muscle in my body, and I closed my eyes in preparation for what I knew was coming.

“Sebastian, why don’t you tell Cam what you told me,” Hunter said.

I opened my eyes and turned to him, not bothering to hide the regret from my expression. “That’s not necessary.”

“Oh, so you’d like to just admit it yourself? Did you grow a pair of balls since thirty seconds ago?”

“Listen.” I held up my hands to him. My eyes darted around the group before settling on Hunter. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes.”

“Sebastian, spill it,” Hunter called over his shoulder. He turned back to me, rage burning underneath the surface.

He knew.

“Eden told me she walked in on you and Hunter’s mom having sex the same night she walked in on Jade and Hunter.”

Every brain cell I had screamed at me to deny it. That Eden was jealous and making up crazy things. This moment was what I’d been trying to avoid all along. It’s the reason I set out to destroy her credibility in the first place... and then I’d restored it.

I thought she hadn’t told anyone.

A knife drove into my back, but I couldn’t bring myself to be angry with Eden. I did this. It was on me.

“I don’t know what to say to that.” I took a breath and took in the angry faces of my friends. The ones who now knew every last shitty thing I’d done to them over the years. I didn’t keep secrets from Hunter, except for the obvious one having to do with Sherry. In any case, there was one thing abundantly clear.

He was done keeping them for me.

“Is it true?” Hunter asked, his arms uncrossing. Pain flashed across his features, momentarily masking the rage. He’d expected me to deny it, and I should’ve. But I couldn’t do it anymore. I didn’t want to lie, to hide things, to pretend

to be anything more or less than I was. I was a shitty fuckin' friend, and he deserved better than me.

They all did.

Emotion clogged my throat, so I cleared it before speaking. "I know sorry doesn't cut it. I know you want an explanation, but honestly, I don't have one." I shook my head and swallowed. "I'm so fuckin' sorry, Hunter."

The hurt vanished from his face, and I had a moment's notice to brace for the fist flying through the air. I lifted my hands, but not fast enough to block the punch to my jaw. My teeth clamped down on my tongue and blood filled my mouth. It spilled to the ground as I bent over and cupped my face.

"You mother fucker!" Someone yelled before shoving me to the ground. The ringing in my ears was too loud for me to distinguish who it was. A shoe connected with my side and then another. Yells and curses flew through the air, aimed at me, all still muffled by the ringing.

"Enough!" Hunter's voice cut through the noise, and the kicks stopped. I honestly didn't want them too. I deserved this. I deserved so much worse, but nothing could mask the pain of losing my best friend.

What had I done?

Trey gripped my hoodie and pulled me up. He dragged me to the concrete wall the bleachers sat on and threw me against it. A sharp pang rang out in my head, and my skull felt like it'd cracked. I touched my hand to the back of my head and brought my dampened fingers back to peer at the blood.

They formed a half circle around me, and Trey pinned me to the wall, extending my right arm across it. Instincts kicked in, and I fought against Trey, but Nathan stepped up to help him. Trey clamped a hand over my mouth, while Nathan took over holding my arm out.

I'd gotten my wish. It wasn't over.

My eyes locked onto Hunter's, the pain I'd seen earlier long gone. Sebastian was to his right, looking nervous as hell. His eyes darted around like he was trying to decide if it was the right time to flee.

"You know, Cam. I think I speak for all of us when I say I'm *sick* of you being in the spotlight."

He held out his hand and Zac pulled a hammer from the inside of his jacket, handing it to Hunter.

My eyes widened, and I struggled harder against them, eliciting Kyle to jump in and help hold me to the wall. My words were muffled against Trey's hand.

Every muscle in my body contracted as he stepped closer to me.

"So how about we change that?"

\* \* \*

*Eden*

**SORRY BABE. Having a rough night and can't make it. Meet me at the football field?**

I stared at Camden's message, trying not to be angry.

"Is he on his way?" Mom asked, putting the last of the dishes in the sink. "We can put a piece of cake aside for him."

"No, he uh... he's busy."

"Oh." Mom's lips pulled into a frown, and she turned to the sink.

I sat the phone on the table and took in a deep breath.

He said he was having a rough night. I didn't know what that entailed, but maybe it really was bad enough that he needed to skip out on my celebratory dinner. So what if he waited an hour to text me back? So what if he didn't let me

know in advance so I didn't stare at my phone like an idiot waiting for him to say he was on his way?

Rolling my eyes, I picked up the phone and punched in a text.

**Me: Rough night? Are you okay?**

Three dots popped up immediately like he'd been waiting for me to text back.

**Camden: Will be. Just need to see you...**

A few more seconds passed.

**Camden: Please?**

**Me: Be right there.**

A piece of my pride chipped as soon as I hit send on the last message, but I stood from the table and grabbed my keys anyway. "I'll be back," I called to Mom, scurrying from the kitchen before she could stop me.

"You headed out?" Roman asked from the living room, looking up from the Lego Star Wars ship he was putting together with Jordan.

I nodded. "I shouldn't be gone long."

He went back to the ship. "Tell Camden I said hi."

"And me too!" Jordan said, excited at the mere mention of Camden's name.

I turned and left before they could see the color draining from my face. I hadn't even stopped to think about how Jordan would be affected if Camden and I ended up not working out. Camden had quickly become his best friend. His idol. He'd be crushed.

*That's not going to happen.*

I tried to push those thoughts from my mind during my drive to the football field, but more thoughts surfaced. What would happen next year when I went off to Berklee? What if he didn't go with me?

I had a chance to live my dream, so why did the prospect of it make me want to vomit? I should've been nervous about

*not* getting into Berklee during my interview, but all I could think about was what would happen if I did.

The sinking feeling only got worse as I pulled into the parking lot next to Camden's Jeep.

What if he was breaking up with me?

No.

Things had been too good. I was too important to him. He'd invited me into every part of his life, and I'd let him into mine. He wouldn't throw it all away in a week.

*Would he?*

With shaky hands, I turned my car off and stepped out into the cold air. The stadium lights were on, but they did a poor job of illuminating the parking lot, so I couldn't see through Camden's tinted windows. I tried to open his door, but it was locked.

He must've been at the stadium... which would explain the lights, I guess. Did he know how to turn them on? Probably. Hunter knew how to get keys to the school, so I'm sure Camden had access to the lights.

I started that way, shoving my hands in my pockets to keep warm.

"Camden?" I called when I got closer. No response came, so I continued on toward the bleachers. Just as I was about to hit the field, Hunter popped around the stands.

"Hey, Eden."

"Hunter, hey." I stopped and pulled my hands from my pockets to rub them over my arms. I was wearing a sweater but hadn't thought to put on a coat. Hunter didn't say anything more, and I glanced around him expecting Camden to appear at any moment.

"Where's Camden?"

"He's in the locker room." He nodded toward it. "Come on, I'll walk you there."

"I-is something wrong?" Dread came over me like a

weighted blanket. This was weird. Why would Camden want to meet me here? Why was *Hunter* here?

Hunter sighed. "Some of the guys found out about Camden sleeping with their girlfriends, and they flipped out over it. He's fine, but he's a little beat up, so he's hanging out here until it blows over... He has some things he needs to tell you."

"He cheated on me," I whispered, searching Hunter's eyes for the answer.

Hunter frowned and looked toward the locker room. A sigh blew over his lips, sending a white cloud through the air.

My breath caught, and I let my arms drop to my sides.

"I'm sorry, Eden."

"Al—" My voice cracked, and I cleared my throat. "Already?"

"I really think he should be the one to tell—"

"Hunter, please," I said, tears stinging my eyes. "Just say it."

He finally looked at me, and his frown deepened. Pity reeked from him, making me feel even smaller... but at least he cared.

He held out his arms and took a step toward me. "Come here."

My heart burst, but I still hadn't shed a tear. I leaned into Hunter's chest, letting him wrap his arms around me. He was warm, like Camden, but it wasn't the same thing.

Nothing was... and it never would be.

"You don't deserve this," Hunter whispered, smoothing a hand over my hair while the other rested on my back.

I closed my eyes and held my hands to his chest, allowing myself to take the comfort. Just for a minute.

"Who was it with?" I asked, pulling back and tucking my hair behind my ears. I took a deep breath and stood up straighter. Whatever happened, I could take it. I chose to



take a chance on Camden, and if it was a mistake, I'd live with it.

*If it was a mistake?*

"Leilani... He really wants to talk to you himself, though. He's real torn up about it."

"Oh, I'm sure," I said, scoffing and taking off toward the locker room.

Poor poor Camden. Had to go a whole weekend without screwing someone.

My hands balled into fists, and heartbreak transformed to anger. I'd feel it again later. I'm not sure I'd ever stop feeling it, but Camden wouldn't see it. I'd never let him see it again.

Hunter's footsteps sounded behind me, but I ignored them. I didn't even care if Hunter heard what was about to go down. He'd already seen me cry. He'd seen me weak.

But never again.

The locker room door swung into the wall as I entered. I'd stormed in with rage, my feet carrying me a few steps before confusion crashed down on me, stopping all muscle movement.

Five of the football guys were standing in the locker room, hands in their pockets and smiles on their faces, but none of them were Camden.

Hunter's shoes echoed on the tile, but I still hadn't regained enough control of my muscles to turn around. He brushed my hair off my shoulder and tugged the neckline of my sweater, exposing more skin.

My breath hitched and eyes widened, but still, I couldn't move. I was frozen.

The other guys, including Trey and a couple others I recognized from the party at Hunter's house, took a step toward me.

"Relax, Eden," Hunter whispered in my ear, pressing his lips just below my earlobe. My skin crawled and I bunched

my shoulders, frantically looking around for my best option out of there. "I'm helping you. Trust me, there's no better way to get back at Camden than living out that fantasy he made up for you. Remember how badly he humiliated you?" He leaned away from my ear to look up at the others. "Shit, most of us even believed it."

Several of them chuckled.

"What are you doing, Hunter?" I asked, as if I didn't already know. As if I didn't already know what Hunter was capable of. I'd turned a blind eye to it because he was nice. Because he was Camden's friend.

How could I be so stupid?

"W-where's Camden?"

"Your friend told me about what you saw," Hunter said, running a hand under my shirt and gripping my hip hard enough to make me yelp. My brain searched frantically for an escape strategy, but Hunter was blocking the door. I couldn't even jump away from him because the others were there, and I wasn't sure who to be most afraid of. I didn't like the looks in their eyes or the smiles on their faces. "You really should've told me yourself, Eden. I thought we were friends."

I was swimming in a state of confusion and fear, but I tried to concentrate on his words. On what he was referring to.

"W-we are friends. I don't know what you're talking about."

His hand on my waist slipped beneath my jeans and panties. I squirmed, but his other hand threaded through my hair, and he yanked my head back. "Camden already admitted it to me, so there's no reason to lie." Venom laced his words, but there was also something that sounded distinctly like pain.

The confusion cleared and Sherry's face entered my

memory. She'd treated me so kindly that I'd almost forgotten about her and Camden, and what I saw... and who I told.

*Sebastian.*

"I'm sorry," I said, my voice cracking. "You're right, I should've told you... but you don't need to do this. I'm sorry, Hunter."

"Shhh, it's okay." His grip in my hair loosened, and he kissed my neck. His lips trailed down to my shoulder, and his hand moved farther into my jeans. Cold fingers bit into my skin, too close to my bundle of nerves. Instead of arousal, revulsion spread through me. "Camden's fucked all of us. This is your chance to get back at him."

"I don't want to get back at him."

I gasped as he yanked my hair. "Then help *me* get back at him."

Tears brimmed from the force he had in my hair, and I closed my eyes to avoid the looks from the others. Would they really rape me too, or were they just there to watch? How far was Hunter willing to take this?

I cringed as he popped the button on my jeans so he could move his fingers lower. A thick finger dug into my folds. There wasn't any lubrication, so even if he was trying to be gentle, it would've felt rough. Forced.

"Did he even cheat on me?" I blurted out, bending forward as much as possible to get away from his touch. I wanted to distract him more than I wanted the answer. I already knew the answer—no. He hadn't cheated on me. This was a setup, and one I'd fallen into embarrassingly easily.

Hunter's hand paused, and I opened my eyes, peering up at the guys who were looking at me like they were confused. Like I'd caught them off guard.

Perfect.

"What does it mat—"

I jerked up as fast and high as I could, my head

connecting with his chin mid-speech. He screamed and pulled his hands from me on instinct, and I spun around and sprung for the door.

“Shit!” One of them yelled and hurried toward me.

I ripped open the door and screamed as I ran into the chest of another man. I threw up my hands and prepared to fight, but he gripped my shoulders. His blue uniform registered and so did the badge sewn onto it. “Are you all right?” he asked, craning his neck to look behind me.

I pushed off of him and ran a few yards to the side, throwing my hands over my mouth and muffling my cry as red and blue lights filled my vision. A few other police officers were there, and their yells were muffled as they entered the locker room.

“Eden!” Sebastian ran up to me and gripped my shoulders, but I pushed him off of me. “Eden, are you okay?”

I leaned against the side of the locker room and crossed my arms over my chest as I focused on my breathing.

It was okay. They didn’t hurt me. I was going to be okay.

“I didn’t know they were going to do that,” Sebastian said, shaking his head. “I-I’m so sorry.”

Tears streamed down his cheeks, and he reached out his hand only to let it fall. “I was waiting on them to leave so that I could help Camden, and I saw you go into the locker room. Eden, I’m so so—”

“Camden?” I asked, pushing off the wall. “Is he okay?”

A siren reached my ears, and my head snapped to the parking lot where more lights flashed, this time from an ambulance. “Where is he?” I asked, grabbing Sebastian’s collar and shaking.

“H-he’s on the field.”

I peered over at the field where a couple cops were crouched on the ground. My legs moved me before my brain could fully process it. I started off in a walk, but by the

time I'd made it a few yards, I was in a dead sprint. I fell to the ground beside Camden who seemed to be coming back to consciousness with the police officers prodding. The officer held a flashlight to Camden's eyes, making him squint.

"Camden!" I screamed, touching his chest. He groaned, and the second police officer gripped my shoulders and pulled me back.

"Wait for the paramedics."

I scanned the blood on Camden's chin. He looked like he'd taken a punch, but it didn't look that bad. It looked okay.

The paramedics rushed over to us, and the officer shone the flashlight on Camden's arm. Words muffled around me, but I couldn't make out what they were. My eyes widened as I took in the disfiguring on his right forearm, and my mouth dropped open.

Something was wrong with it. It looked like there was something poking into the skin, like a stick, or a—

Bone.

The paramedics loaded him onto a stretcher, and Sebastian came up behind me.

"I couldn't stop them. They... they wouldn't listen to me. Eden, please believe me."

"I believe you," I said, turning to him. His face was pained, as if he was the one with the broken bone... the career ending broken bone.

I sniffed and threw my arms around Sebastian's neck, squeezing him.

"I fucked up so bad," he said, crying into my shoulder and hugging me tight.

"So did I," I whispered, shaking my head. I pulled back and peered at the stretcher being taken to the ambulance. "I have to go."

He nodded and I turned to follow them to the ambulance.

Camden was just barely awake, and he mumbled each time the paramedic asked him a question.

I tried not to look, but my eyes found the cop cars anyway. Hunter was in handcuffs, but his gaze was on the stretcher. Pain seemed to envelope him, but when he sensed me staring, he hardened his expression.

They lifted Camden into the back of the ambulance, and then climbed in.

I stared after them, my eyes wide and palms sweaty. Camden's mumbling reached my ears, but I couldn't understand what he said.

The paramedic nodded and turned to me. "Are you Eden?"

"Yes."

"He says he'd like you to ride with him."

“*H*old still.” Eden swatted my leg as if to reprimand me, and I leaned back against the bed frame and sighed. My fingertips brushed over the carpet we were sitting on. My eyes were closed at her insistence, and it only made the stench of Sharpie more potent. She must’ve been at this a good ten minutes.

“You almost done?”

“You don’t rush art, Camden. Hold still.”

If my eyes weren’t closed, I would’ve rolled them at her. Ten bucks said she was drawing a picture of a dead rat above my head just to spite me.

Minutes passed with the sound of Sharpie scratching along my cast, until finally, it stopped. The marker clicked as she popped the lid back on.

“Now?”

The sound of her breath blowing over my cast registered, and I opened my eyes to see her trying to dry the ink. She met my eyes. “So impatient.”

“You let me draw on you for thirty minutes, and we’ll see who’s impatient.”

“It was more like five.” She laughed and moved her hand-held mirror for me to see. It wasn’t so much a drawing as it was a quote done in calligraphy.

I smiled and read it aloud. “Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind, and therefore is winged Cupid painted blind... MIT class of 2024.” I glanced up at her. “You tryin’ to get my ass kicked again?”

She pouted. “Do you know how much time I spent looking through Shakespeare quotes? It’s mine to you.”

My smile widened, and I leaned forward to kiss Eden on the forehead. “It’s perfect.”

Her face lit up, and she scooted so that she was leaned back against the bed with me, her head carefully resting on my shoulder.

“And I love you, too.”

She shot back up and turned to face me. “What?”

I fought the urge to cringe from her accidentally bumping my cast and swallowed down the pain. “I said, ‘I love you, too.’”

Her lips twitched, but she fought the smile, still probably trying to figure out if I was serious. I was, and I’d known it for the last two weeks. She hadn’t left the hospital in all the time it took for them to do X-rays and put the cast on my arm, delivering the news I didn’t need a doctor to tell me—my football career was over.

Everyone knew about me and Sherry now, including my parents, and I’d been home all of five minutes before my dad had ripped into me. It was like his entire world had shattered that night, while all I could think about was how I wouldn’t have to tell anyone why I wasn’t going to OU. I wouldn’t have to hide what I’d done or who I was. It was freeing for me. There were a hell of a lot of things I’d have done differently, but it’s like the hard part was over.



I'd walked out of the house and called Eden, and I'd been staying in a guest bedroom at her house ever since.

"Have we been dating long enough to be saying things like that?" she asked, overanalyzing the shit out of it like she did everything else.

I twisted so that I faced her fully, and I placed my hand on my knee. "Time doesn't make a difference to me, but if it does to you, we can wait."

"I just... I want to do this right, ya know?"

She was biting her lip and fidgeting with her hands. I wished so badly I could see inside that head of hers. Watch her thoughts racing around the track of her brain at a thousand miles an hour, always trying to figure out what the 'right' thing was. It was cute, and I wasn't quite sure I wanted it to change. On one hand, it caused her way too much stress, but on the other, it made her so much fun to play with.

"I know."

She fidgeted more, and I could practically see her brain churning. I tilted my head as I watched her staring off into space, lost in thought. "Eden, really it's fine if—"

"Do you think I should drop the charges?"

*What?*

*That's* what was running through her head after I tell her I love her?

I sighed and knocked my head against the bed. This conversation had been brewing in that racetrack brain of hers for a while, but I wished we could put it off for a little bit longer.

"I think you're making the right choice, but you should do whatever feels right for you."

"You don't really think that, though, do you?"

I glanced over to see her studying me intently. Her lips were in a tight line, and her eyes were narrowed to slits. It's like she was waiting for the truth to slip from me. For me to

ask her to spare Hunter, drop the charges. Chalk this up to a bad situation that we could all put behind us.

It made sense for her to imagine that's what I would think. I'd never filed charges against Hunter, and denied to the police that anything had been done to me at all. I'd told them I fell off the stands and didn't remember anything else. It was an obvious lie, but it hadn't mattered. My parents hadn't even pushed for me to press charges. Everyone knew I deserved Hunter's backlash.

But Eden hadn't deserved it. I knew Hunter well enough to know that he hadn't been bluffing with her. If Sebastian hadn't called the police, I didn't want to picture what would've happened. And what about next time? What about the next girl?

Hunter had been my best friend. In my mind, he still was, and I'd texted him numerous times with no reply since that night, telling him I was sorry and had never meant to hurt him. Even so, he'd gone too far, and I couldn't protect him any longer.

I'd paid for my mistakes, and now it was time for him to pay for his.

Eden hadn't been the only one to press charges against Hunter. That would've been an assault charge that Hunter's dad could've easily paid off. But Eden's charge against him kicked him out of school and other girls came forward. I'd driven Jade to the police station myself, and I'd given a statement about what I'd seen that night.

Eden didn't know about that, though. I was still waiting to see how badly I'd be reprimanded for helping Hunter that night, and if it hurt my chances of going to MIT, Eden would be crushed. It didn't matter as much to me, although it would be a huge bummer if I blew that chance. I'd follow Eden to Boston, MIT or no MIT, because I *was* serious about her.

I loved her.

"I think what Hunter did to you could've been a lot worse, and I think there's a good chance it could happen again with a different girl... I'm going to support whatever you decide to do."

Eden nodded and finally let her face relax. She glanced down at the floor and picked at a piece of carpet. "I think *you* should've filed charges."

Another sigh brushed across my lips.

"But I get why you didn't."

I lifted my eyebrows and waited for her to continue.

She tucked her hair behind her ears and scooted to sit up straighter. "You love him. You see the good in him, the *hurt* in him. I can see it too, and I get why you wouldn't want to make things worse for him. I get that you feel guilty for what happened between the two of you. I understand a lot more about you than you think."

I nodded and turned so that I could run my good hand over her leg. She was right. She understood me, but I guess I shouldn't have been surprised.

We waited in silence for a few more minutes before Eden looked to me with a serious face. She'd been staring off into space as she thought, and now she looked like she'd made up her mind.

"I'm not going to drop the charges."

I lifted my lips into a smile and gave her a reassuring nod. "I know."

"And Camden?"

Her face was still serious, but something else had entered her eyes. So much certainty held up her composure, and I fought with myself not to smile wider. It was a confidence that was both cute and sexy. If there's one thing I'd learned about Eden, it's that when she set her mind to something, she'd get it. No plan B's.

"I love you, too."

## EPILOGUE

### EDEN

“*B*abe, seriously, it’s so cold.” My teeth chattered as I spoke, and I hugged myself tighter. All I could see was the inky darkness of the blindfold Camden insisted he put over my eyes before leaving my parents’ house.

“Almost there.”

My foot caught on something, a crack in the ground maybe, and I gasped, but Camden’s secure grip on my shoulders kept me from falling.

With a sigh, I regained my balance and continued walking God knows where. This had better be one hell of a Christmas present. Then again, I kind of owed him. He’d wanted to stay in Boston and spend Christmas with our friends, but there was no way I wasn’t going home. As much as I loved our lives at Berklee and MIT, it was good to be back... for a little while.

“Can I at least take the blindfold off?”

“No.”

The absolute authority in his tone had me rolling my eyes through the blindfold. Some things never change. But, then again, I wouldn’t have wanted them to.

We walked another minute, my sour mood lifting when we paused. My fingers began to tingle with excitement, or maybe it was from the cold, but either way, I was about to see my ‘surprise’.

“Now?”

“Almost.”

“It better be a pony,” I joked, shifting on my feet in a failed attempt at keeping warm.

“It’s a dog.”

“What? Really?”

“No, Eden. I didn’t bring you here to show you a frozen puppy. Will you chill?”

Throwing my head back in a groan, I shifted on my feet some more. Camden’s knee popped, and his jacket made a ruffling sound.

“Okay... Take off the blindfold.”

His voice came from below me. I stopped my shifting and loosened my arms from around myself. My veins froze over, but it had nothing to do with the temperature.

*No fucking way.*

I’d found the ring box months ago, and I don’t know how Camden had found out, but he’d been messing with me ever since. Three times my heart had stopped when he got down on one knee in our kitchen, only to tie his shoe. If he was seriously messing with me on Christmas with this, then—

“Oh, now you have patience?”

“What are you doing?”

“Take off the blindfold.”

My lungs burned as I sucked in cold air and slowly pulled the blindfold over my face. My eyes took in the football stadium first. We were in the same spot the jocks had brought me while we were in high school. The first time I’d spoken to Camden. It felt like a lifetime ago, and even though he was the same person, it was weird to think of him that

way. We'd moved so fast in our relationship that it felt like we'd been together for several years, instead of just one.

My eyes found Camden's, and my hand flung to my mouth. He was on one knee, but this time, there really was a ring box in his hand.

"Eden Thompson, will—"

"Why here?" I asked, my words sifting through my hand. I tucked my hair behind my ear, then dropped my hands to my sides.

Camden's mouth was still open from me cutting him off, and he chuckled and shook his head. He knew me well enough not to be surprised. This was so much. It was like my mind needed time to process what was happening before it could accept it.

Snow fell down on us, and my eyes dropped to his knee as he repositioned. His leg must've been freezing, and I couldn't help the small smirk that pulled my lips. This was really good payback for those other times. But I really did want to know. *Why here?*

"This was the first place I ever really saw you, and the place where I realized I loved you... I know it's not all happy memories, but they're my favorite. They remind me that not everything has to be perfect to be beautiful."

My heart leapt in my chest and I took in the football stadium again. He was so right. Nothing about our beginning had been perfect, but it was everything to me. *He* was everything to me. Our lives together, our schools, our futures.

I didn't want perfect. I just wanted beautiful. I just wanted *this*.

I returned my gaze to Camden and wiped underneath my eyes. My throat had clogged with emotion, and I coughed to clear it.

"You ready?" he asked, a smile on his face.

I nodded and flicked my gaze between him and the ring.

I'd tried it on the day I'd found it and cried. All the extra shifts he'd taken tutoring had started to make sense. It was like he bought it from a catalogue in my head with how perfect it was for me.

“Eden Thompson, will you marry me?”





## THANK YOU

I'd like to take a moment to thank you so much for reading VICIOUS KNIGHT. I hope you enjoyed this story! If you would be so kind as to leave a review, I would be eternally grateful.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole Cypher is an author and avid reader of dark romance. She began her writing journey in college and hasn't looked back since. In her books you can expect a yummy anti-hero, plenty of action, and a happy ending.

Be sure to sign up for her newsletter at [nicolecypher.com](http://nicolecypher.com) to stay up to date on the latest releases, special offers, and exclusive bonus chapters.



