



PLAYLIST

- “Bad Girlfriend” by Theory of a Deadman
- “Bleed It Out” by Linkin Park
- “Blow Me (One Last Kiss)” by P!nk
- “Colors” by Halsey
- “Dirty Little Secret” by All-American Rejects
- “Do You Know Who You Are?” by Atreyu
- “Happy Song” by Bring Me the Horizon
- “I Think We’re Alone Now” by Tiffany
- “Lose Yourself” by Eminem
- “Love the Way You Lie” by Eminem
- “More Human Than Human” by White Zombie
- “Mudshovel” by Staind
- “Sk8er Boi” by Avril Lavigne
- “So Cold” by Breaking Benjamin
- “Square Hammer” by Ghost
- “Stupid Girl” by Garbage
- “True Friends” by Bring Me the Horizon
- “Where’d You Go” by Fort Minor
- “Wildest Dreams” by Taylor Swift



DEDICATION

To Claire and Bender
and what would've happened Monday morning...

CHAPTER 1

MISHA

Dear Misha,

So, have I ever told you my secret shame?

And no, it's not watching Teen Mom like you. Go ahead and try to deny it. I know you don't have to sit there with your sister, man. She's old enough to watch TV by herself.

No, actually, it's far worse, and I'm a little embarrassed to tell you. But I think negative feelings should be released. Just once, right?

You see, there's a girl at school. You know the kind. Cheerleader, popular, gets everything she wants... I hate to admit this, especially to you, but a long time ago I wanted to be her.

Part of me still does.

You would absolutely hate her. She's everything we can't stand. Mean, cavalier, superficial... The kind who doesn't have a thought stay in her head too long or else she needs a nap, right? I've always been fascinated with her, though.

And don't roll your eyes at me. I can feel it.

It's just that...given all of her detestable attributes, she's never alone. You know?

I kind of envy that. Okay, I really envy that.

It feels like shit to be alone. To be in a place full of people and feel like they don't want you there. To feel like you're at a party you weren't invited to. No one even knows your name. No one wants to. No one cares.

Are they laughing at you? Talking about you? Are they sneering at you like their perfect world would be so much better if you weren't there, messing up their view?

Are they just wishing you'd get the hint already and leave?

I feel like that a lot.

I know it's pathetic to want a place among other people, and I know you'll say it's better to stand alone and be right than stand in a crowd and be wrong, but... I still feel that need all the time. Do you ever feel it?

I wonder if the cheerleader feels it. When the music stops and everyone goes home? When the day is gone and she doesn't have anyone to entertain herself with? When she removes her makeup, taking off her brave face for the day, do the demons she keeps buried start playing with her when there's no one else to play with?

I guess not. Narcissists don't have insecurities, right?

Must be nice.

My phone buzzes from the center console of my truck, and I look away from Ryen's letter to see another text roll in.

Dammit. I'm so late.

The guys are no doubt wondering where the hell I am, and it's still a twenty-minute drive to the warehouse. Why can't I be the invisible bass player no one cares about?

I stare at her words again, running over the sentence in my head. *When she removes her make-up, taking off her brave face for the day...*

That line really hit me the first time I read this letter a couple years ago. And the hundred times since then. How can she say so little and yet so much?

I go back and finish the last part, already knowing how the letter ends but loving her attitude and the way she makes me smile.

Okay, sorry. I just had a Facebook break, so I feel better now. Not sure when I turned into such an idiot, but I'm glad you put up with it.

Moving on.

So just to set the record straight from our last argument, Kylo Ren is NOT a baby. You understand? He's young, impulsive, and he's related to Anakin and Luke Skywalker. Of course he whines! How is this a surprise? And he'll redeem himself. I'll bet you on it. Name your price.

Alright, I gotta go. But yes, to answer your question, that lyric you sent me last time sounds great. Go with it, and I can't wait to read the whole song.

Good night. Good work. Sleep well.

I'll most likely stop writing you in the morning,

Ryen

I laugh at her *Princess Bride* movie reference. She's been saying that for seven years. The first year, we were required to write each other as part of a fifth grade project, pairing students in her class with students in mine.

But after the school year ended, we didn't stop. Even though we live less than thirty miles away from each other and have Facebook now, we

continue to communicate this way because it keeps it special.

And I do not watch *Teen Mom*. My sixteen-year-old sister watches it, and I got sucked in. Once. I'm not sure why I told Ryen. I know better than to give her ammo to tease me, dammit.

I fold the letter back up, the worn creases of the black paper threatening to tear if I unfold and read it even one more time. A lot has changed in our letters over the years. The things we talk about, the subjects we bicker over, her handwriting... Writing that has gone from the big, unpolished penmanship of a girl who has just learned cursive, to the sure, confident strokes of a woman who knows who she is.

But the paper never changes. Not even the silver ink she uses. Seeing her black envelopes in the pile of mail on the kitchen counter always gives me a nice shot of adrenaline.

Slipping the paper into my glove box, among a few other of my favorites of Ryen's letters, I take my pen, hovering it over the notepad that sits on my lap.

"Spread on your bravery, line the eyes and the lips," I say under my breath as I write on the paper, "glue up the cracks and paint over the rips."

I stop and think as I pull my bottom lip in between my teeth, grazing the piercing there. "A little here," I mumble, the lyrics turning in my head, "to cover the bags under your eyes, and some pink on your cheeks to spread the lies."

I quickly jot down the words, my chicken scratch barely visible inside the dark car.

I hear my phone beep again, and I falter. "Alright," I growl, willing the damn texts to stop. Can't my bandmates host a party without me for five minutes?

I put the pen to paper again, trying to finish my thought, but I stop, searching my brain. What the hell was next? *A little here to cover the bags under your eyes...*

I squeeze my eyes shut, repeating the line over and over again, trying to remember the rest.

I let out a breath. Shit, it's gone.

Dammit.

I cap the pen, tossing that and the notepad onto the passenger seat of my Raptor.

I think about her last sentence. *Name my price, huh?*

Well, how about a phone call then, Ryen? Let me hear your voice for the first time?

But no. Ryen likes to keep our friendship status quo. It works, after all. Why risk losing it by changing it?

And she's right, I guess. What if I hear her voice and her letters become less special? I get to imagine her personality through her words. That would change if I heard her tone.

But what if I hear her voice and I like it? What if her laughter in my ear or her breathing into the phone haunts me as much as her words, and I want more?

I'm already obsessed enough with her letters. Which is why I'm sitting in my truck in an empty parking lot, rereading one of her old ones, because they inspire my music.

She's my muse, and she has to know it by now. I've been using her as a bouncing board for years, sending her lyrics to read.

My phone rings, and I look down to see Dane's name.

I let out a hard sigh and snatch it up. "What?"

"Where are you?"

“I’m on my way.” I start the truck and put it in Drive.

“No, you’re sitting in some parking lot writing lyrics again, aren’t you?”

I roll my eyes and end the call, tossing my phone onto the passenger seat.

So driving helps me think. He’s doesn’t need to bust my ass just because I can’t help it when ideas hit me.

Pulling onto the street, I lay on the gas and head to the old warehouse outside of town. Our band is hosting a scavenger hunt to raise money for our summer tour in a few months, and even though I thought we should just set up some gigs—maybe team up with a few other local bands—Dane thought something different would draw in a bigger crowd.

I guess we’ll see if he’s right.

The bitter February chill cuts through my hoodie, and I turn on the heater and flip on my brights, the wide light casts a glow deep into the darkness ahead.

This is the road to Falcon’s Well where Ryen lives. If I keep going, I’ll pass the warehouse, the turn off for the Cove—an abandoned amusement park—and eventually, I’ll arrive in her town. Many times since I got my license I’ve been tempted to drive there, my curiosity overwhelming, but I never did. Like I said, it’s not worth the risk of losing what we have. Unless she agrees to it, too.

I lean over to the passenger seat and shove the notepad and other papers away, searching for my watch. I’d left it in here yesterday when I washed the outside of the truck, and it’s one of the only things I’m responsible with. It’s a family heirloom.

Kind of.

I find it and hold the steering wheel, fastening the black suede cuff around my wrist with a time piece inserted between two brackets. It had

been my grandfather's before he passed it down to my dad at my parents' wedding, to be given to their firstborn son. My father finally gave it up last year, only for me to realize he'd lost the original time piece in it. An antique Jaeger-LeCoultre watch that's been in the family for eighty years.

And I will find it. But until then I'm stuck with a piece of crap sitting in its place on my grandfather's cuff.

I finish securing the strap and look up, seeing something on the road ahead.

As I get closer, I make out a form moving along the side of the road, the blonde ponytail, the black jacket, and the neon-blue running shoes unmistakable.

You gotta be kidding me. Son of a bitch.

My headlights fall across my sister's back, lighting her up in the dark night. I turn down my music as she jerks her head over her shoulder, finally noticing someone is there.

Her face relaxes when she sees it's me, and she smiles, continuing jogging.

And she has her fucking earbuds in, too. *Awesome safety precautions, Annie.*

I slow the truck, roll down the passenger side window, and pull up beside her. "You know what you look like?" I bellow, anger curling my fist around the steering wheel. "Serial killer candy!"

Letting out a silent laugh, she shakes her head and speeds up, forcing me to, as well. "And do you know where we are?" she argues. "On the road between Thunder Bay and Falcon's Well. No one's ever on this road. I'm fine." She arches an eyebrow at me. "And you sound like Dad."

I frown in disgust. "A," I say. "*I'm* on this road, so no, it's not empty. And B. Don't shake your head at me just because you're the only one dumb

enough to jog in the middle of nowhere at night, and I don't want you to be raped and murdered. And C. That was uncalled for. I don't sound like Dad, so don't kick me in the nuts like that again. It's not nice." And then I bark, "Now get in the damn truck."

She shakes her head again. Just like Ryen, she loves to tease me.

Annie is my only sibling, and despite my less-than-stellar relationship with our dad, she and I get along really well.

She continues jogging, breathing hard, and I notice the bags under her eyes and the sunken look of her cheeks. An urge to scold her nips at me, but I hold it back. She works too hard, and she's barely sleeping.

"Come on," I tell her, growing impatient. "Seriously, I don't have time for this."

"Then what are you doing out here?"

I look out to the empty road to make sure I'm not swerving. "It's that scavenger hunt thing tonight. I'm putting in an appearance. Why aren't you on the well-lit track at the park with the safety of the two dozen other joggers around? Huh?"

"Stop babysitting me."

"Stop doing stupid shit," I retort.

I mean, what the hell is she thinking? It's bad enough being out here alone during the day, but at night?

I'm a year older, graduating this May, but normally she's the responsible one.

And that reminds me. "Hey," I grumble. "Did you take sixty dollars out of my wallet this morning?"

I noticed it missing, and I'd just taken out money yesterday. I didn't spend it, and this is the third time my cash has gone missing.

She puts on the ten-year-old sad face she knows works on me. “I was going shopping for some science project supplies, and you never spend your money. It shouldn’t go to waste.”

I roll my eyes.

She knows she can just ask our dad for more cash. Annie’s his angel, so he’ll give her anything she wants.

But how can I be mad at her? She’s going places, and she’s a happy kid. Anything I can do to make her happier, I guess.

She grins, probably seeing me relent, and lurches over, grabbing onto the window frame and hopping up onto the cab step under the door. “Hey, can you pick me up a root beer?” she asks. “An *ice cold* root beer on your way home from the warehouse? Because we both know you’re only going to stay there for five minutes unless you find a hot girl who entices you to be sociable, right?”

I laugh to myself. Twerp.

“Fine.” I nod. “Get in the truck, and you can go to the gas station with me. How about that?”

“And some caramels,” she adds, ignoring my request. “Or anything chewy.” She then hops off the step, taking off at a faster pace down the street away from me.

“Annie!” I lay on the gas, catching up to her. “Now.”

She looks over at me, and snickers. “Misha, my car is right there!” She points ahead. “Look.”

I shoot my glare farther up the road and see that she’s right. Her blue MINI Cooper sits on the right shoulder, waiting for her.

“I’ll meet you at the house,” she tells me.

“You’re done running then?”

“Yessssss.” She bows her head in dramatic nods. “I’ll see you when you get home, okay? Go get my root beer and candy.”

I give her a joking smile. “I wish I could, but I don’t have any money.”

“You have money in your center console,” she throws back. “Don’t act like you don’t stuff change everywhere and anywhere instead of putting things in their proper place. I bet you have a hundred bucks all over that truck.”

I snort. Yeah, that’s me. The bad, older brother who doesn’t pick up after himself and eats mozzarella sticks for breakfast.

I step on the gas and head down the road, but I hear a yell behind me.

“And some dill potato chips!”

I see her in my rearview mirror, her hands framing her mouth as she shouts. I honk the horn twice, letting her know I heard her, and speed ahead, pulling over in front of her car.

I see her shake her head in the mirror, like I’m so overbearing, because I won’t leave until she’s in the car.

Sorry, but yeah. I’m not leaving my pretty, sixteen-year-old sister on a dark road at ten o’clock at night.

She pulls her keys out of her jacket pocket, unlocks the door, and waves to me before she climbs in. When I see the headlights come on, I put the truck in Drive again and finally go.

I lay on the gas and sit back in my seat, heading down the road toward the abandoned warehouse. Her headlights fade from view in my mirror as I go over a small hill, and worry creeps in. She doesn’t look right. I don’t think she’s sick, but she looks pale and tired.

Just go home and get in bed, Annie. Stop getting up at 4:30 in the morning, and get a decent night of sleep.

She's the perfect one out of the two of us. A 4.14 GPA, star of our school's volleyball team, coach of a little girls' softball team, not to mention the clubs and extra projects she takes on...

My bedroom walls are covered in posters and black marker from writing lyrics everywhere. Her walls are covered with shelves of trophies, medals, and awards.

If only everyone could tap into the energy she seems to have.

I pull onto the gravel road, round a few turns, and see a clearing ahead, surrounded by dark trees. The massive building stands tall and imposing in front of me. Most of the windows are shattered, and I can already make out the lights inside and the shadows of people moving around.

I think they used to produce shoes here or something, but once Thunder Bay became an affluent, wealthy community, production was moved to the city, keeping the noise and pollution far away from the fragile ears and noses of its residents.

But the warehouse, although falling into ruin, still has its uses. Bonfires, parties, Devil's Night... It's a space for havoc now, and tonight it's ours.

After parking, I climb out of the truck and lock it, more conscious of protecting Ryen's letters and my wad of notes than my wallet in the console.

I walk for the entrance but once inside, I don't stop to look around. *Square Hammer* by Ghost plays as I weave through the crowd and make my way for the corner where I know I'll find the rest of the guys. They always snatch up the seats over there when we party here.

"Misha!" someone calls out.

I glance up and nod at a guy standing with his buddies near a pillar. But I keep going. Hands pat my back and a few people say hi, but mostly I see

everyone moving about, their laughter rivaling the music as phone screens light the air and pictures snap around me.

I guess Dane was right. Everyone seems to love the event.

The guys are exactly where I knew they'd be, sitting on couches in the corner. Dane works on the iPad, probably managing the event online. He's dressed in cargo shorts and a T-shirt, his usual attire no matter what temperature it is outside. Lotus fastens his black hair into a ponytail as he talks to a couple of chicks, while Malcolm raises his bong to his mouth and lights the stem, his curly brown hair covering his, no doubt, blood-shot eyes.

Awesome.

"Alright, I'm here." I lean down to the table, picking up the guitar cables one of them left laying in a spilled drink, and fling them to the couch. "Where do you want me?"

"Where do you think?" our drummer, Malcolm snaps. Smoke pours out of his mouth as he jerks his head to the crowd behind me. "They want you, pretty boy. Go make the rounds."

I shoot a look over my shoulder, grimacing. "Yeah, no." Getting up and singing or playing a guitar is one thing. I have a job then, and I know what to do.

But this? Humoring people I don't know to raise money? We need the cash, and I have my gifts, but conversation is not one of them. I don't mingle.

"I'll do security," I tell them.

"We don't need security." Dane stands up, the ever-present hint of a smile on his face. "Look at this place. Everything's awesome." He walks up to me, and we both turn to look out at the crowd. "Relax and go talk to someone. There's tons of good-looking girls here."

I cross my arms over my chest. *Maybe*. But I'm not staying long tonight. That song is still in my head, and I want to finish it.

Dane and I watch the crowd, and I see people carrying cards around, which they picked up at the door. Each one has various tasks to complete for the scavenger hunt.

Get a picture of a six-person pyramid.

Get a picture of a man with lipstick on.

Get a picture of you kissing a stranger.

And then some of the tasks get a little dirtier.

They have to upload the photos to Facebook, tag our band's page, and we'll pick a random winner to win...something. I forget. I wasn't paying attention.

Everyone has to purchase a ticket to get in, but since there's a full bar, it clearly—from the looks of it—wasn't hard to draw a crowd and get people to pay the price. The bartenders are supposed to card everyone, but I know it's bullshit. Everyone drinks and gets away with it in this town.

"So how are you doing?" Dane asks. "Your dad on your case again?"

"I'm fine."

He pauses, and I know he wants to push harder, but he lets it go. "Well, you should've brought Annie. She would've liked this."

"Not a chance." I laugh, the scent of weed drifting into my nostrils. "My sister is off limits. You got that?"

"Hey, I didn't say anything." He feigns innocence, a cocky smile on his face. "I just think she works hard and could use some fun."

"Fun, yes. Trouble, no," I correct. "Annie's on a good track and doesn't need distractions. She has a future ahead of her."

“And you don’t?”

I feel his eyes on me, the challenge lingering in the air. I didn’t say that, did I?

Dane stays quiet for a moment, probably wondering if I’ll answer, but again he just changes the subject.

“Alright, so check this out,” he says, leaning in closer and holding the iPad in front of me as he scrolls. “Four hundred and fifty-eight people have checked in already. Videos and photos are being posted, hundreds of tags, and people are even going live on their own profiles... This worked better than I could’ve imagined. The exposure is already paying off. Our YouTube videos have quadrupled in hits tonight.”

I glance at the screen, noticing our band’s name with a lot of pictures in the feed. Drinks are raised in the air, girls smile, and some videos play as he scrolls, showing the warehouse.

“You did good.” I gaze back out at the warehouse. “Looks like the tour is bankrolled.”

I have to hand it to him. Everyone’s having fun, and we’re making money.

“Come by tomorrow,” I tell him. “I have some lyrics I want to try out.”

“Fine,” he answers. “Now do me a favor and go relax, please. You look like you’re at a chess tournament.”

I shoot him a scowl and grab the iPad out of his hands, letting him walk back to the guys, laughing.

Drifting around the action, I scroll the feed as I walk, recognizing lots of names of friends and classmates who showed up to support us. The small fires from the pits waft through my nostrils, and I study a picture of a guy with the word *HORSE* written in Sharpie over his fly. A girl points to it,

posing for the camera with her hand over her mouth in surprise. The caption reads, *I found a horse!*

I laugh. Of course, some of the tasks, like snap a picture of yourself with a horse, can't be done unless you get really creative. Good for her.

There are a zillion pics and videos, and I don't know how Dane's going to sort through all this shit tomorrow. Though, knowing him, the winner won't be random and fair at all. He'll just choose the best looking girl from the photos.

Scrolling down, I spot a video that starts playing, and I watch as a girl takes a bar gun, faces it upward and away from herself, spraying water. It shoots up and then falls back down like a fountain.

She performs a sexy little dance move and laughs at the camera. "I'm standing in a fountain!" she announces, her breasts barely contained in her tank top.

A tank top she's wearing in the chilly New England February weather.

But then one of the bartenders snatches the gun out of the girl's hand and sets it back in place at the bar, shooting her an annoyed look.

I hear a quiet laugh from the other side of the camera.

The girl in the tank top reaches for the phone. "Okay, that was embarrassing. Give it here. I need to edit it before I post it."

"Uh, uh," the female voice behind the camera taunts as she backs away.

But tank top girl charges her, squealing, "Ryen!" And then I hear laughter, and the video ends.

I stand there, staring at the iPad, my heart slowly starting to pound in my chest.

Ryen?

The girl behind the camera is named Ryen?

No, it's not her. It can't be. There are tons of girls who probably have that name. She wouldn't be here.

But I look at the video, and my gaze is drawn to the names at the top of the post. She'd tagged the band and a few other people, but then I look at the name of the person who posted it.

Ryen Trevarrow.

I straighten my back, my chest rising and falling with shallow breaths.

Oh, my God.

Shit! I instantly look up, unable to stop myself from scanning the crowd, drifting from face to face.

Any one of these girls could be her. She's here? What the fuck?

I look down at the iPad again and hover my finger over her name, hesitating.

Seven years I've known her, but I've never seen her face. If I search her out now, there's no going back.

But she's here. I can't not look for her. Not when I know she could be within arm's reach.

That's too much to ask of anyone.

And we never promised we wouldn't look each other up on Facebook. We simply said we wouldn't communicate on social media. For all I know she's searched for me. She could be looking for me right now, knowing what band I belong to and that this is our event. Maybe that's why she's here.

Fuck it. I tap her name and stand frozen as her profile comes up.

And then I see her.

Her picture appears, my stomach drops, and I stop breathing.

Christ.

Slender shoulders under long, light brown hair. Heart-shaped face with full pink lips and a daring look in her bright blue eyes. Glowing skin and a beautiful body.

From what I can see, anyway.

I let my head fall back and draw in a breath. *Fuck you, Ryen Trevarrow.* She lied to me.

Well, she didn't lie exactly, but I damn well got the impression from her letters she didn't look like that.

I'd pictured a geek in glasses with purple streaks in her hair dressed in a *Star Wars* T-shirt.

I look back down at her picture, my eyes falling down her back where parts of her skin peeks through the design of her sexy shirt as she looks over her shoulder at the camera. My body warms, and I quickly scan her profile, looking for some clue—any clue—that it's not her.

Please don't let it be. Please just be sweet, socially awkward, shy, and everything I've loved for seven years. Don't complicate it by being hot.

But it's all there. Every clue confirming that it's Ryen. My Ryen.

The check-in at Gallo's, her favorite pizza place, the songs she's listening to, the movies she's watching, and everything posted from her latest version iPhone. Her most favorite possession in the world.

Shit.

I turn off Dane's iPad and start weaving around people as I slip through the crowd. The heaters warm the frigid air, and I pass more fire pits, smelling the roasted marshmallows. Music blares from the speakers all around, and I flex my jaw, trying to calm my heart.

I walk up to the bar and set the iPad down, turning and crossing my arms over my chest. *Just stay put.* If she's here to see me, she'll find me. If not, then... What? I'll just let it go?

“Hi.”

I dart my eyes up, my heart plummeting into my stomach. The fountain girl from the video stands in front of me, a few feet away.

And next to her...

My eyes lock on Ryen, and I know her friend just spoke, but I don't care. Ryen stands quietly at her side, eyes slightly thinned, looking at me hesitantly.

Her hair is long and straight—not curled like the Facebook photo—and she's wearing a black, off-the-shoulder sweater and skinny jeans that are torn to near shreds. I can see bits of her thighs.

Ryen. My Ryen. I tighten my fists under my arms, my muscles tensing.

She isn't saying anything. Does she know who I am?

I hear her friend clear her throat, and I blink, dragging my eyes over to her and finally answering. “Hi.”

Fountain girl cocks her head at me. “So, I need a kiss,” she says matter-of-factly.

I breathe shallow, so aware of Ryen it hurts.

“Do you now?” I say, noticing her long, dark hair spilling around a scarf she wears with a gray tank top. It's fucking freezing in here.

She gestures to her card. “Yeah, it's on my scavenger hunt.”

And then her eyes fall down my body, a smile playing on her lips. I guess that means she wants a kiss from me?

She steps forward, but before she gets too close, I take her card out of her hand and skim it.

“Funny. I don't see it on here,” I say, handing it back.

“I'm doing it for her,” she explains, shooting a look to her friend. “She's shy.”

“I’m picky,” Ryen retorts, and I quickly turn my eyes on her again, her flippant response goading me.

She cocks her head defiantly, staring me full on in the eyes.

So does that mean I’m not worthy? Well, well... I hide my smile.

“Lyla!” someone nearby yells. “Oh, my God, come here!”

Ryen’s friend turns her head to a group of people to her left and laughs at whatever they’re doing. She must be Lyla then.

She turns back to me. “I’ll be right back.” *Like I care.* “Just please kiss her. She needs it.” And then she notices Ryen shoot her a glare and turns back to me, clarifying, “For her scavenger hunt, I mean.”

She walks away, laughing. I almost expect Ryen to follow her, but she doesn’t.

It’s just us now.

A cool sweat breaks out on the back of my neck, and I look at Ryen, both of us locked in an awkward silence.

Why isn’t she saying anything? She has to know who I am. Of course, she doesn’t know I formed a band recently, because I wanted to surprise her with an actual old school demo tape for our graduation in a few months, but it’s damn near impossible to be invisible these days. Our names and pictures are on our Facebook page and the rack cards by the entrance. Is she fucking around with me?

She shifts her stance, and I see her chest rise with a heavy breath, like she’s waiting for me to say something. When I don’t, she lets out a sigh and looks down at her card. “I also need a picture of eating something *Lady & The Tramp*-style with someone.”

I keep my arms crossed and narrow my eyes on her. She’s going to keep up with this charade?

“Or...” she goes on, sounding annoyed, probably because I haven’t responded. “I need a picture of a picture of a picture. Whatever that means.”

I remain silent, getting a little pissed she’s acting clueless. *Seven years, and this is how you want to meet, Angel?*

She shakes her head, acting like I’m the one being rude. “Okay, never mind.” And she turns to walk away.

“Wait!” someone calls.

Dane jogs up behind Ryen, stopping her, and then walks up to me, scolding under his breath, “Dude, why are you looking at her like she slapped your grandma? Damn.”

He turns back to Ryen and smiles. “Hey. How are you doing?”

I drop my eyes but only for a moment. Does she really not know who I am?

I guess there would be plenty of people here who haven’t heard of us. We’re not a big deal, and this is probably the only thing going on in a fifty-mile radius, so why wouldn’t she be here, if only because there’s nothing else to do?

Maybe she has no fucking clue she’s standing in front of Misha Lare right now. The boy she’s been writing letters to since she was eleven.

“What’s your name?” Dane asks her.

She turns back, her eyes flashing to me, clearly indicating her guard is up now. Thanks to me.

“Ryen,” she answers. “You?”

“Dane.” And then he turns to me. “And this is—” But I shoot out my hand, knocking him lightly in the stomach.

No. Not like this.

Ryen sees the exchange and pinches her eyebrows together, probably wondering what my problem is.

“So you live in Falcon’s Well?” Dane continues, taking my cue and changing the subject.

“Yeah.”

He nods, and they both stand there, falling silent.

“Okay, so...” Dane claps his hands together. “I heard you say you needed to eat something *Lady and the Tramp*-style?”

Not waiting for her answer, he reaches over the bar and digs in the garnish containers.

He holds up a lemon wedge, and Ryen winces. “A lemon?”

“I triple-dog dare you,” he challenges.

But she shakes her head.

“Okay, wait,” he urges, and I keep watching her, unable to tear my eyes away as I try to process that this is fucking Ryen.

Her thin fingers that have written me five hundred eighty-two letters. The chin where I know she uses make-up to cover up a small scar she got from a fall during ice-skating when she was eight. The hair she told me she ties back every night, because she says there’s no hell worse than waking up with hair in your mouth.

I’ve had half a dozen girlfriends, and all of them I knew ten times less than I know this girl.

And she really has no idea...

Dane comes back with a wooden skewer, the tip holding a roasted marshmallow from one of the fire pits.

He walks up and shoves it at me. “Cooperate, please.”

And then he turns to her and grabs her phone. “Go for it. I’ll take the picture.”

Ryen’s amused eyes flash to me, immediately turning dark, because she clearly doesn’t want to eat anything *Lady and the Tramp*-style with me.

But she doesn't back down or feign shyness. Walking up, she grabs a bar stool and steps up on the prongs to raise herself higher. She's not short, but she's definitely shorter than my six feet. Leaning in with her lips parted, she stares into my eyes, and my fucking heart is going wild. It takes everything I have not to unwind my arms and touch her.

But she stops. "I'm coming at you with my mouth open," she points out. "You gotta show me you want it."

And I can't help it. The corner of my mouth lifts in a small smile.

Fuck, she's sexy.

I didn't expect that.

And I fold. I hold up the marshmallow and open my mouth, holding her eyes as we both lean in and take a bite, pausing a moment for Dane to take the picture. Her eyes lock on mine, and I can feel her breath on my lips as her chest rises and falls.

My body is on fire, and when she leans in farther to bite off a bit extra, her lip grazes mine, and I groan.

I pull away, swallowing the goddamn chunk whole. *Damn.*

She chews the bit of marshmallow, licking her lips and stepping down off the stool. "Thank you."

I nod. I can feel Dane's eyes on me, and I'm sure he knows something is wrong. I toss the skewer down on the bar and meet his eyes. He's wearing a coy smile.

Fucktard.

Yeah, okay. I liked the marshmallow, Dane. I'd like to eat a dozen of them with her. Maybe I won't rush home quite yet, okay?

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I take it out, seeing Annie's name. I hit Ignore. She's probably wondering where I am with her snacks. I'll call her back in a minute.

“So...” Dane says. “All these pictures you’re posting on the page...you don’t have a boyfriend who’s going to come hunting us down, right?”

I tense. Ryen doesn’t have a boyfriend. She would’ve told me.

“Nah,” she replies. “He knows I can’t be tied down.”

Dane laughs, and I stand there, listening.

“No, I don’t have a boyfriend,” she finally answers seriously.

“I find that hard to believe—”

“And I’m not looking for one, either,” she cuts Dane off. “I had one once, and you have to bathe them and feed them and walk them...”

“So what happened?” Dane asks.

She shrugs. “I’d lowered my standards. Too low, apparently. After that, I got picky.”

“Does any man measure up?”

“One.” Her eyes dart to me and then back to Dane. “But I’ve never met him.”

One. Only one guy who measures up. Does she mean me?

My phone vibrates again, and I reach in my pocket, silencing it.

I glance up and see cameras flashing all over and spot people taking a pic in front of the graffiti wall to the right.

I step up and take her phone, surprising her. Walking around behind her, I turn on the camera, changing it to selfie mode, and lean down, capturing our faces on the screen. But I adjust it to also include the guy behind us taking a picture of two girls in front of the graffiti pictures. “A picture...”—I speak low in her ear, indicating our selfie— “of a picture” —I point to the guy behind us on the screen taking a pic— “of a picture.” And I gesture to the graffiti wall they’re standing in front of.

A smile finally breaks out on her face. “That’s clever. Thanks.”

And I click the pic, saving the moment forever.

Before pulling away and saying goodbye, I inhale her scent, frozen for a moment as I smile to myself.

You're really going to hate me, Angel, when we finally do meet someday and you put all this together.

Ryen takes the phone and slowly walks away, looking back over her shoulder at me before disappearing in a throng of people.

And already I want her back.

I dig in my pocket and pull out my phone, dialing my sister. How much will she hate me if I ask her to go get her own snacks? I'm not sure I'm ready to leave yet, actually.

But when I call back, there's no answer.

CHAPTER 2

RYEN

Three months later...

Dear Misha,

What. The. Hell?

Yeah, you heard me. I said it. I might also say this will be my last letter, but I know that's not true. I'm not going to give up on you. You made me promise I wouldn't, so here I am. Still Miss Fucking Reliable after three months of no word from you. Hope you're having fun, wherever you are, douchebag.

(But seriously, don't be dead, okay?)

You have the notes on the lyrics I sent with my previous letters. Kind of wishing I made copies now, since I feel like you're gone for good, but what's the point? Those words are meant for you and only you, and even if you're not reading the letters or even getting them anymore, I need to send them. I like knowing they're in search of you.

On the current news front, I got into college. Well, a few, actually. It's funny. I've wanted everything in my life to change for so long, and when it's finally about to, my urge to escape slows down. I think that's why people stay unhappy for so long, you know? Miserable or not, it's easier to stick with what's familiar.

Do you notice that, too? How all of us just want to get through life as quickly and as easily as possible? And even though we know that without risk there's no reward, we're still so scared to chance it?

I'm afraid, to be honest. I keep thinking things won't be any different at college. I still don't know what I want to do. I won't be any more confident or sure about my decisions. I'll still pick the wrong friends and date the wrong guys.

So, yeah. I'd love to hear from you. Tell me you're too busy to keep this up or that we're getting too old to be pen pals, but just tell me one last time that you believe in me and that everything's going to be fine. Shit always sounds better coming from you.

*I Don't Miss You, Not Even a Little,
Ryen*

P.S. If I find out you're ditching me for a car, a girl, or the latest Grand Theft Auto video game, I'm going to troll the Walking Dead message boards under your name.

Capping my silver-inked pen, I take the two pieces of black paper and tap them on my lap desk before folding them in half. Stuffing them in the matching black envelope, I pick up the black sealing wax stick and hold it over the candle sitting on my bedside table, lighting the wick.

Three months.

I frown. He's never been quiet this long before. Misha often needs his space, so I'm used to spells of not hearing from him, but something is going on.

The wax starts to melt, and I hold it over the envelope, letting it drip. After I blow out the flame, I pick up the stamp and press it into the wax, sealing the letter and finding the fancy, black skull of the imprint staring back at me.

A gift from Misha. He got tired of me using the one I got when I was eleven with a Harry Potter Gryffindor seal on it. His sister, Annie, kept making fun of him, screaming that his Hogwarts letter had arrived.

So he sent me a more "manly" seal, telling me to use that or nothing at all.

I'd laughed. *Fine, then.*

When we first began writing each other years ago, it was a complete mistake. Our fifth-grade teachers tried to pair up our classes as pen pals according to sex to make it more comfortable, but his name is Misha and my name is Ryen, so his teacher thought I was a boy, and my teacher thought he was a girl, etc.

We didn't get along at first, but we soon found that we had one thing in common. Both of us have parents who split early on. His mom left when he was two, and I haven't seen or heard from my dad since I was four. Neither of us really remember them.

And now, after seven years and with high school almost over, he's become my best friend.

Climbing off my bed, I slap a stamp on the letter and set it on my desk to mail in the morning. I walk back, putting my stationary supplies back in my bedside table.

Straightening, I place my hands on my hips and blow out an uneasy breath.

Misha, where the hell are you? I'm drowning here.

I guess I can Google him if I'm that worried. Or search him on Facebook or go to his house. He's only thirty miles away, and I have his address, after all.

But we promised each other. Or rather I made him promise. Seeing each other, where we live, meeting the people the other one talks about in their letters, it'll ruin the world we created.

Right now, Misha Lare, with all of his imperfections, is perfect in my head. He listens, pumps me up, takes the pressure off, and has no expectations of me. He tells the truth, and he's the one place I never have to hide.

How many people have someone like that?

And as much as I want answers, I just can't give that up yet. We've been writing for seven years. This is a part of me, and I'm not sure what I would do without it. If I search him out, everything will change.

No. I'll wait a little longer.

I look at the clock, seeing that it's almost time. My friends will be here in a few minutes.

Picking up a piece of chalk out of the tray on my desk, I walk to the wall next to my bedroom door and continue drawing little frames around the pictures I'd taped up. There are four.

Me last fall in cheerleading, surrounded by girls who look exactly like me. Me last summer in my Jeep, with my friends piled in the back. Me in eighth grade celebrating 80's Day, smiling and posing with my whole class.

In every picture, I'm up front. The leader. Looking happy.

And then there's the picture in fourth grade. Years earlier. Sitting alone on a bench on the playground, forcing a half-smile for my mom who brought me to Movie Night at my school. All the other kids are running around, and every time I ran up and tried to join in, they acted like I wasn't there. They always ran off without me and never waited. They wouldn't include me in their conversations.

Tears spring to my eyes, and I reach out and touch the face in the picture. I remember that feeling like it was yesterday. Like I was at a party I wasn't invited to.

God, how I've changed.

"Ryen!" I hear someone call from the hallway.

I sniffle and quickly wipe away a tear as my sister opens my door and waltzes into my room without knocking. I clear my throat, pretending to work on the wall as she peeks around the door.

"Bedtime," she says.

"I'm eighteen," I point out like that should explain everything.

I don't look at her as I color in the same section I finished yesterday. I mean, really? It's ten o'clock, and she's only a year older. I'm more responsible than she is.

I can smell her perfume, and out of the corner of my eye, I see that her blonde hair is down. *Great.* That probably means she has some guy coming over and will be well-distracted when I slip out of the house in a bit.

"Mom texted," she tells me. "Did you finish Math?"

"Yes."

"Government?"

"I finished my outline," I say. "I'll work on the paper this weekend."

"English?"

“I posted my review for *Brave New World* on Goodreads and sent Mom the link.”

“What book did you pick next?” she asks.

I scowl at the wall as white shavings drift to the floor. “*Fahrenheit 451*.”

She scoffs. “*The Jungle, Brave New World, Fahrenheit 451...*” she goes on, listing my latest non-school books Mom gives me extra allowance to read. “God, you have boring taste in books.”

“Mom said to choose modern classics,” I argue back. “Sinclair, Huxley, Orwell...”

“I think she meant like *The Great Gatsby* or something.”

I close my eyes and drop my head back, releasing a snore before popping it back up again, mocking her.

She rolls her eyes. “You’re such a brat.”

“When in Rome...”

My sister graduated last year and goes to the local college while living at home. It’s a great arrangement for our mom, who’s an event coordinator and is frequently out of town for festivals, concerts, and expos. She doesn’t want to leave me alone.

But honestly, I have no idea why she puts Carson in charge. I make better grades and stay out of trouble—as far as they’re aware—a hell of a lot better than her.

Plus, my sister only wants me in bed and out of the way so she can get it on with whatever guy is on his way over here right now.

Like I’m going to tell our mom.

Like I care.

“I’m just saying,” she says, planting a hand on her hip, “those books are a lot to wrap your head around.”

“You don’t have to tell me that.” I play along. “All those big concepts inside my itty bitty brain. It’s enough to make me feel as dumb as a bag of wet hair.” And then I assure her, “But don’t worry. I’ll let you know if I need help. Now can I get my nine hours? Coach is taking us through a circuit in the morning.”

She shoots me a little snarl and glances at my wall. “I can’t believe Mom let you do this to your room.”

And then she spins around and pulls the door closed.

I look at my wall. I decorated it using black chalkboard paint about a year ago and use it to doodle, draw, and write everywhere. Misha’s lyrics are scattered over the wide expanse, as well as my own thoughts, ideas, and little scribbles.

There are pictures and posters and lots of words, everything meaning something special to me. My whole room is like that, and I love it. It’s a place where I don’t invite anyone. Especially my friends. They’ll just make a joke out of my really bad artwork that I love and Misha’s and my words.

I learned a long time ago that you don’t need to reveal everything inside of you to the people around you. They like to judge, and I’m happier when they don’t. Some things stay hidden.

My phone buzzes on my bed, and I head over to pick it up.

Outside, the text reads.

Tapping my middle finger over the touchscreen, I shoot back, *Be out in a minute*.

Finally. I have to get out of here.

Tossing the phone down, I peel off my tank top and push my sleep shorts down my legs, letting everything drop to the floor. I dash to my arm

chair and snatch up my jean shorts.

Pulling them on, I slip a white T-shirt over my head, followed by a gray hoodie.

The phone buzzes again, but I ignore it.

I'm coming. I'm coming.

Stuffing some cash and my cell phone into my pocket, I grab my flip flops and lift up my window, tossing them out and sending them flying over the roof of the porch, down to the ground.

Scooping up my hair, I fasten it into a ponytail and climb out the window. I carefully push it down again, leaving my bedroom silent and dark as if I were asleep. Taking careful steps over the roof, I make my way over to the ladder on the side of the house, climb down to the ground, and pick up my sandals, dashing across the lawn to the road ahead where my ride waits.

I pull open the car door.

“Hey,” Lyla greets from the driver’s seat as I climb in. I glance back, spotting Ten in the backseat and toss him a nod.

Slamming the door closed, I bend over and slip into my sandals, shivering. “Shit. I can’t believe how chilly it still is. Tomorrow morning’s practice is going to suck.”

It’s April, so it’s warming up during the day, but the early morning and evening temperatures still drop below fifty. I should’ve worn pants.

“Flip flops?” Lyla asks, sounding confused.

“Yeah, we’re going to the beach.”

“Nope,” Ten chimes in from the back. “We’re going to the Cove. Didn’t Trey text you?”

I look over my shoulder at him. *The Cove?* “I thought they posted a caretaker on site to keep people out.”

He shrugs, a mischievous look in his eyes.

Ooooookay. “Well, if we get caught, you two are the first ones I’m throwing under the bus.”

“Not if we throw you first,” Lyla sing-songs, staring out at the road.

Ten laughs behind me, and I shake my head, not really amused. The thing about being a leader is that someone’s always trying to take your job. I was joking with my comment. I don’t think she was.

Lyla and Ten—a.k.a. Theodore Edward Neilson—are, for all intents and purposes, my friends. We’ve known each other throughout middle school and high school, Lyla and I cheer together, and they’re like my suit of armor.

Yeah, they can be uncomfortable, they make too much noise, and they don’t always feel good, but I need them. You don’t want to be alone in high school, and if you have friends—good ones or not—you have a little power.

High school is like prison in that way. You can’t make it on your own.

“I’ve got Chucks on the floor back there,” Lyla tells Ten. “Get them for her, would you?”

He dips down, rustling through what is probably a mountain of crap on the floor of the 90’s BMW Lyla’s mom passed down to her.

Ten drops one shoe over the seat and then hands me the other one as soon as he finds it.

“Thanks.” I take the shoes, slip off my sandals, and begin putting them on.

I’m grateful for the shoes. The Cove will be filthy and wet.

“I wish I’d known sooner,” I say, thinking out loud. “I would’ve brought my camera.”

“Who wants to take pictures?” Lyla shoots back. “Go find some dark little Tilt-a-Whirl car when we get there and show Trey what it means to be

a man.”

I lean back in my seat, casting a knowing smile. “I think plenty of girls have already done that.”

Trey Burrowes isn’t my boyfriend, but he definitely wants the perks. I’ve been keeping him at arm’s length for months.

About to graduate like us, Trey has it all. Friends, popularity, the world bowing at his precious feet... But unlike me, he loves it. It defines him.

He’s an arrogant mouth-breather with a marshmallow for a brain and an ego as big as his man-boobs. Oh, excuse me. They’re called *pecs*.

I close my eyes for a second and breathe out. *Misha, where the hell are you?* He’s the only one I can vent to.

“Well,” Lyla speaks slowly, staring out the window. “He hasn’t had you, and that’s what he wants. But he’s only going to chase for so long, Ryen. It won’t take him long to move onto someone else.”

Is that a warning? I peer at her out of the corner of my eye, feeling my heart start to race.

What are you going to do, Lyla? Sweep in and take him from under me if I don’t put out? Delight in my loss when he gets tired of waiting and screws someone else? Is he doing someone else right now? Maybe you?

I fold my arms over my chest. “Don’t be concerned about me,” I say, toying right back. “When I’m ready, he’ll come running. No matter whom he’s killing time with.”

Ten laughs quietly from the backseat, always in my corner and having no idea I’m talking about Lyla.

Not that I care if Trey comes running or not. But she’s trying to bait me, and she knows better.

Lyla and I are both brats, but we’re very different. She craves attention from men, and she’ll almost always give them what they want, confusing

shallow affection for real feelings. Sure, she's dating Trey's friend, J.D., but it wouldn't surprise me to see her go after Trey, too.

Winning a guy makes her feel above us all. They have girlfriends, but they *want* her. It makes her feel powerful.

Until she realizes they want anyone, and then she's right back where she started.

Me, on the other hand? I'm weak. I just want to get through the day as easily as possible. No matter who I step on to do it. Something I learned not long after that picture of me sitting alone on that bench on Movie Night was taken.

Now I'm not alone anymore, but am I happier? The jury's still out on that.

Reap, reap, reap, you don't even know, all you did suffer is what you did sow.

I smile small at Misha's lyrics. He sent them to me in a letter once to see what I thought, and they make a lot of sense. I asked for this, didn't I?

"I hate this road," Ten pipes up. His voice is filled with discomfort, and I blink, leaving my thoughts.

I turn my head out the window to see what he's talking about.

The headlights of Lyla's car burn a hole in the night as the light breeze makes the leaves on the trees flutter, showing the only sign of life out on this tunnel-like highway. Dark, empty, and silent.

We're on Old Pointe Road between Thunder Bay and Falcon's Well.

I turn my head over my shoulder, speaking to Ten. "People die everywhere."

"But not so young," he says, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "Poor kid."

A few months ago, a jogger named Anastasia Grayson, who was only a year younger than us, was found dead on the side of this very road. She had a heart attack, although I'm not sure why. Like Ten said, it's unusual for someone so young to die like that.

I'd written to Misha about it, to see if he knew her, since they lived in the same town, but it was in one of the many letters he never responded to.

Taking a right onto Badger Road, Lyla digs in her console and pulls out a tube of lip gloss. I roll down the window, taking in the crisp, cool sea air.

The Atlantic Ocean sits just over the hills, but I can already smell the salt in the air. Living several miles inland, I barely even notice it, but coming to the beach—or the Cove, the old theme park *near* the beach where we're going—feels like another world. The wind washes over me, and I can almost feel the sand under my feet.

I wish we were still going to the beach.

"J.D.'s already here," Lyla points out, pulling into an old, nearly deserted, parking lot. Her headlights fall on a dark blue GMC Denali sitting haphazardly in no designated space. I guess the paint marking where to park wore off long ago.

Waist-high weeds sway in the breeze from where they sprout up through the cracks in the pavement, and only the moon casts enough light to reveal what lies beyond the broken-down ticket booths and entrances. Looming still and dark, towers and buildings sit in the distance, and I spot several massive structures, one in the shape of a circle—most likely a Ferris wheel.

As I turn my head in a one-eighty, I see other similar constructions scattered about, taking in the bones of old roller coasters that sit quiet and haunting.

Lyla turns off the engine and grabs her phone and keys as we all exit the car. I try to peer through the gates and around the dilapidated ticket booths

to see what lies beyond in the vast amusement park, but all I can make out are dark doorways, dozens of corners, and sidewalks that go on and on. The wind that courses through the broken windows sounds like whispers.

Too many nooks and crannies. Too many hiding places.

I pull up the sleeves of my hoodie, all of a sudden not feeling so cold. Why the hell are we here?

Looking to my right, I notice a black Ford Raptor sitting under a cover of trees on the edge of the parking lot, and the windows are blacked out. Is someone inside?

A shiver runs up my spine, and I rub my arms.

Maybe one of Trey's or J.D.'s friends brought their own car tonight.

"Hoo, hoo, hoo," a voice calls out, imitating an owl. I tear my eyes away from the Raptor, and we all look up in the direction of the noise.

"Oh, my God!" Lyla bursts out, laughing. "You guys are crazy!"

I shake my head as Ten and Lyla hoot and holler, running toward the Ferris wheel just inside the gate. Scaling the grungy yellow poles about fifty feet above us, between the cars of the old ride, is Lyla's boyfriend, J.D., and his buddy, Bryce.

"Come on," Lyla says, climbing over the guard rail toward the Ferris wheel. "Let's go see."

"See what?" I ask. "Rides that don't run?"

She races off, ignoring me, and Ten laughs.

"Come on." He takes my hand and pulls me away from the ride.

I follow him as we head deeper into the park, both of us wandering down the wide lanes that were once packed with crowds of people. I look left and right, equal parts fascinated and creeped out.

Doors hang off hinges, creaking in the breeze, and moonlight glimmers off the glass lying on the ground beneath broken windows. The wind blows

through the elephant and hot air balloon cars on the kids' rides, and everything is hollow and dark. We walk past the carousel, and I see rain puddles sitting on the platform and dirt coating the chipped paint of the horses.

I remember riding that when I was little. It's one of the only memories I have of my father before he split.

The yelling and squealing of our friends fade away as we keep walking farther into the park, our pace slowing as I take in how much still remains.

This place used to be full of laughter and screams of delight, and now it's abandoned and left to decay alone, all of the joy it once contained forgotten.

A few short years. That's all it's been since Adventure Cove closed its gates.

But regardless, deserted and neglected, it's still here. I inhale a deep breath, taking in the smell of old wood, moisture, and salt. *Deserted and neglected, I'm still here, I'm still here, I'll always be here...*

I laugh to myself. *There's a song lyric for you, Misha.*

I stroll behind Ten, thinking of all the musings I've mailed my pen pal over the years that he's turned into songs. If he ever makes it big, he owes me royalties.

"Kind of sad," Ten says, wandering past gaming booths and letting his hand graze the wooden frames. "I remember coming here. Still feels like it's alive, doesn't it?"

The night wind sweeps down the empty lanes between the booths and food stands, sending my fly-aways floating around me. The air wraps around my legs and blows against my sweatshirt, plastering it to my body like a skin as chills start to spread up my neck.

All of a sudden I feel surrounded.

Like I'm inside the still funnel of a violent tornado.

Like I'm being watched.

I cross my arms over my chest as I hurry up next to Ten. "What are you doing?" I ask, trying to cover my jitters with annoyance.

He pulls at the shutter of one of the wooden gaming booths, and although it gives a little, it won't lift completely due to the padlock keeping it shut. "Getting you a teddy bear," he answers as if I should've known that.

"You really think they still have prizes in there after all these years?"

"Well, it's locked, isn't it?"

I chuckle and continue to watch as he grabs the side with both hands and heaves backward.

"J.D., stop it!" Lyla's voice rings out in the distance, and I look up to see their dark forms still climbing the Ferris wheel.

"Aha!" Someone else laughs.

Ten gives up on the yanking and starts inspecting the lock, as if he can just pull it open, when I drop my gaze and notice the grungy and shredded red and white plastic table skirt underneath the shutter on the bottom half of the booth.

I lightly kick my foot out, seeing the plastic give way as it flaps back and forth, indicating Ten's way in.

He stops, forgetting the shutter, and scowls at the skirt. "I knew that."

"Then go get me a teddy bear," I demand, giving him a small smile.

And he dips down on his hands and knees, mumbling as he crawls through the table skirt. "Yes, Your Highness."

"Use your phone for light!" I shout as he disappears inside.

"Duh."

I laugh at his muffled attitude. Out of everyone I call a friend at school, Ten is the closest to the real deal. Not as close as Misha, but close. I don't

have to fake it much around him.

The only thing that holds me back from getting too attached to him is his friendship with Lyla. If I left the security of my fragile little circle, would he come with me?

I honestly don't know.

"No teddy bears!" he calls. "But they have inflatables!"

Like beach balls?

"Are they still inflatable?" I joke.

But he doesn't answer.

I lean in close to the shutter, training my ears. "Ten?"

I hear nothing.

The hair on my arms stand on end, and I straighten, calling again, this time louder. "Ten? Are you okay?"

But then something wraps around my waist, and I jump, sucking in a breath as a voice growls deep in my ear, "Welcome to the Carnival, little girl."

My heart pounds in my ears, and I yank away, whipping around to find Trey holding a flashlight under his chin. The glow illuminates his face, emphasizing his devilish grin.

Jerk.

He smiles from ear to ear, his light-brown hair and cocoa eyes shining. Dropping the flashlight, he rushes up to me, and I barely have enough time to catch a breath before he dips down, lifts me off my feet, and tosses me over his shoulder.

"Trey!" I growl, his shoulder bone digging into my stomach. "Knock it off!"

He laughs, slapping me on the ass, and I cringe, feeling his hand graze down my thigh.

“Now, dumbass!” I shout, slapping him on the back.

He continues to chuckle as he sets me back on my feet, keeping his arm around my waist.

“Mmmm, come here,” he says as he backs me into the wall of the booth. “So you gotta taunt me, huh?” His knuckles brush the front of my bare thigh. “You wear that little cheerleading skirt at school, where I can’t touch you, and now when I can, you wear shorts.”

“What?” I play with him. “My legs look different in a skirt?”

“No, they look great either way.” He leans in, the beer on his breath making me wince a little. “I just can’t stick my hand up a pair of shorts.”

And then he tries to as if proving a point.

I knock his hands away. “Yeah, the thing is...” I say. “A *boy* whines. A man doesn’t let anything get in his way. Shorts or no shorts.”

His eyes fall down my body and raise again, boring into mine. “I want to take you out.”

“Yeah, I know what you want.”

Trey’s been flirting for a while, and I know exactly what’s on his mind, and it isn’t dinner and a movie. If I give him an inch, he’ll take a mile. I may not need a ring on my finger to have fun with someone, but I also don’t want to be a notch on his belt.

So I don’t give in to him. But I don’t reject him, either. I know what happened to the last girl who did that.

“You want it, too,” he shoots back, his wide shoulders and hard chest crowding me in. “I’m the shit, baby, and I always get what I want. It’s only a matter of time.”

I stare right through his ego, seeing a guy who toots his own horn, because he’s either afraid others won’t do it for him or he needs to remind

himself how awesome he is. Trey Burrowes is a house of bricks balancing on a toothpick.

Something brushes my calf, and I look down just in time to see Ten crawling out from under the gaming booth. I move out of the way and push Trey back, noticing that Ten holds something in his hand.

“I got a sword,” he says, waving the plastic inflatable in front of us.

Trey snickers. “Yeah, me, too.”

And I swallow the bad taste in my mouth at his crude joke.

He turns away, growing quiet, his attention immediately drawn up to the Ferris wheel.

So easily distracted. So easily bored.

“Tell you what,” I say, speaking to Trey as I stroll over and hook an arm through Ten’s. “I’ll let you take Ten home.”

Trey jerks his head over his shoulder, looking at me like I’m crazy.

“And then you can take me home,” I finish, seeing his eyebrow arch in interest.

School ends in six weeks. I can fake this a while longer. I don’t want to go out with him, but I don’t want to wake up tomorrow to a nasty rumor that’s not true plastered all over Facebook, either. Trey Burrowes can be nice, but he can be a real asshole, too.

A smile pulls at the corner of his mouth, and he turns back around.

“All you have to do is catch me,” I tell him, grabbing Ten’s hand. “So count to twenty.”

“Make it five,” Ten jokes, backing away with me. “He doesn’t know how to count to twenty.”

My stomach shakes with a laugh, but I hold it back.

Trey smirks, staring at me like I’m a meal he wants and nothing is going to stop him. And then he opens his mouth, slowly stepping toward us.

“One...”

And at that warning, Ten and I spin around and dash for the back of the park.

We both laugh as we race down paths thick with wet leaves and fallen branches, and whip around broken booths. We pass the Orbiter, Log Flume, and Tornado, which I remember used to play a lot of Def Leppard.

The Zipper still stands, dark and rusted, and we weave through the old swings, the cold chains brushing against my arms. They squeak, probably giving away our position as I charge after Ten.

“In here!” he shouts.

I suck in a breath and follow as he dives into a small building that looks like it was meant for employees. Stepping into the darkness, I pull the door closed behind me and wince at the musty air that hits my nose.

Ten takes his phone out, lighting the room with his flashlight, and I do the same. The floor is littered with debris, and I hear a drip coming from somewhere.

But we don't pause to explore. Ten heads for what looks like a stairwell, rounding the railing and taking a step down.

That's weird. The stairs lead below, underground.

“Down there?” I breathe out, peering over the steel-green bars and seeing only pitch-black darkness below. Fear creeps in, sending chills down my spine.

“Come on.” Ten begins down the steps. “It's only a service tunnel. A lot of theme parks have them.”

I pause for a moment, knowing full well that anything could be lurking down there. Animals, homeless people...dead people.

“They used to control the animatronics and stuff from down here,” he calls up to me as he descends with his light. “It's a way for the staff to get

around the park quickly. Come on!”

How the hell would he know all that? I didn’t know theme parks had an underground.

But I can feel the threat of Trey at my back, so I let out a breath and swing around the bannister, heading down after Ten.

“There are lights on down here,” he says as he reaches the bottom, and I come up behind him, glancing over his shoulder to see what lies ahead.

My stomach somersaults. The long, subterranean path is built solely of concrete, a square tunnel about ten feet wide from side to side and top to bottom. There are scattered puddles, probably from rain run-off, a pipe leak, or maybe cracks in the walls letting in ocean water. They glimmer with the track lighting overhead.

A black void looms at the end of the tunnel, and I run my hands up and down my arms, suddenly cold.

“The lights are probably connected to the city,” I say. “Maybe they’re on all the time.”

Of course, I have no idea—and why would they be on all the time? But lying to myself makes me feel better.

I hear a door slam up above, and I jump, glancing up the stairs for a split-second before planting my hand on Ten’s back and pushing him forward.

“Shit,” I whisper. “Go, go, go!”

We race down the tunnel, my heart beating against my chest as we pass random doors and more passageways leading off to the sides of the main one we’re running down. I stay straight, though, feeling an excited smile creep up despite my fear.

I can’t help but think if it were Misha chasing us, he wouldn’t run after me. But he wouldn’t lose, either. He’d find a way to outsmart me.

I hear footfalls behind us, and I glance over my shoulder to see a light bobbing down the stairwell. Holding my breath, I grab the back of Ten's T-shirt and yank him into the room on the right. The door is missing, so we swing inside and hide behind the wall, breathing hard as we try to be still.

"Careful, babe," Ten says. "You're acting like you *don't* want to be caught."

Yeah, I don't want to be caught. I'd rather be waxed. Every day. Right before a scalding hot salt bath.

It's not that I'm not attracted to Trey. He's good-looking and built, so why wouldn't I be?

But no. I won't be one of his girls prancing down the hall at school in my skin-tight skirt while he slaps me on the behind and his friends pat him on the back, because I'm his newest piece-of-ass trophy.

Insert hair flip and giggle.

Not fucking likely.

Pressing my head close to the wall, I train my ears, gauging how close he is to us.

Did he turn back? Take a side tunnel?

But then I narrow my eyes, noticing a faint whine instead. As if there's a mosquito buzzing around the room.

"Do you hear that?" I whisper to Ten.

I can't make out his face, but his dark form stills as if listening. And then I see him digging in his jeans for something. A moment passes, and then his phone casts a small glow into the room, and I turn, widening my eyes at the sight of a bed, mussed white sheets, and a small table.

What the hell?

Ten moves farther into the room, getting closer to the bed. "So there *is* a caretaker on site. Shit."

“Well, if there is,” I speak low, approaching him as I study the items on top of the sheets, “why didn’t he kick us out when we got here?”

Ten holds up his phone, looking around the room, while I skim over the things on the bedside table and bed. There’s a watch on an old, black suede cuff laying on top of a picture of, what looks like, nearly an identical watch. There’s also a couple of paperbacks sitting on a pillow, an iPod with headphones attached, and a notebook with a pen lying next to it. I pick up the notebook and flip it over, seeing what looks like a man’s writing.

*Anything goes when everyone knows
Where do you hide when their highs are your lows?
So much, so hard, so long, so tired,
Let them eat until you’re ground into nothing.*

*Don’t you worry your glossy little lips,
What they savor ‘ventually loses its flavor.
I wanna lick, while you still taste like you.*

My chest rises and falls in shallow breaths, and my thighs clench.
I wanna lick...

Damn. A cool sweat spreads down my back as a picture of lips whispering those words against my ear hits me. I’ve never been much into poetry, but I wouldn’t mind more from this guy.

A familiar feeling falls over me, though, as I study the tails of the y’s and the sharp strokes of the s’s that look like little lightning bolts.

That’s weird.

But no, the paper is cluttered with writing over more writing and scribbles and scratches. It’s a mess. The rest looks nothing like Misha’s

letters.

“Well,” I hear Ten’s voice mumble at my side, “that’s creepy.”

“What?” I ask, tearing my eyes away from the rest of the poem and turning my head to look at him.

But he’s not watching me. I follow to where his flashlight is shining, and I finally see the wall. Dropping the notebook to the bed, I peer up as Ten runs the light over the entire surface.

ALONE.

It’s written in large black letters, spray-painted and jagged, each letter nearly as tall as me.

“*Real* creepy,” Ten repeats.

I inch backward, glancing around the room and taking it all in.

Yeah. Photos on the wall with faces scratched out, ambiguous poetry, mysterious, depressing words written on the wall...

Not to mention someone is sleeping in here. In this abandoned, dark tunnel.

The distant whine suddenly catches my attention again, and I follow it, leaning down closer to the bed. I pick up the headphones and hold them to my ear, hearing “*Bleed It Out*” playing.

Shit. I immediately drop the headphones, a breath catching in my throat.

“The iPod’s on,” I say, shooting up straight. “Whoever he is, he was just here. We need to go. Now.”

Ten moves for the doorway, and I turn away from the bed, but then I stop.

Spinning back around, I dip down and rip the page out of the notebook. I have no idea why I want it, but I do.

If it is a guy living here, he probably won’t miss it, anyway, and if he does, he won’t know where it went.

“Go,” I tell Ten, nudging his back.

And I fold up the page and stuff it in my back pocket.

Holding up our phones, we step out of the room and turn left. But just then someone catches me in their arms, and I yelp as I’m squeezed until I can’t breathe.

“Gotch-ya!” a male voice boasts. “So how about that ride now?”

Trey.

Squirming, I pull out of his hold and twist around. Lyla, J.D., and Bryce stand behind him, laughing.

“Damn!” Ten shouts, breathing hard. He was obviously caught off guard by their sudden appearance, too.

“You might’ve turned off the flashlights,” Lyla scolds with a smirk on her face. “We could see them as soon as we came down.”

I move past them, back toward the stairs, ignoring her. If we hadn’t been investigating that room, the flashlights on our phones *would’ve* been off.

“What are you guys doing down here anyway?” J.D. asks.

“Just go,” I order, losing patience. “Let’s get out of here.”

Everyone moves ahead, back down the tunnel, and I glance over my shoulder, scanning the nearly pitch blackness and the doorway to the room where we’d just been.

Nothing.

Dark corners, shadows, dank glimmers from the fluorescent light hitting the puddles of water... I see nothing.

But I breathe hard, unable to shake the creepy feeling. Someone is there.

“This was not the kind of fun I was thinking of when you guys suggested the Cove,” Lyla whines, side-stepping the small pools of water.

I turn back around, ignoring my fear as I rush up the steps. “Yeah, well, don’t worry,” I mumble just loud enough for them to hear. “The backseat of J.D.’s car isn’t far away.”

“Hell yeah.” J.D. chuckles.

And I resist the urge for one more glance back down the dark tunnel.

I climb the stairs, still feeling eyes on me.

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