



# Between (Tory's School for the Troubled)

**Author:** *Katie May*

**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Dark, Horror

**Description:** They say I'm troubled.

They tell me I'm damaged.

They ridicule me, point fingers at me, and send me away.

Tory's School for the Troubled is supposed to be my redemption.

Instead, it's my new hell.

In this school, I'm surrounded by the broken and the hurt. The liars and the psychopaths.

Everybody at this school is hiding behind a mask, including the professors.

They say monsters roam the halls of this academy at night, and I think...

I think they might be right.

**Total Pages (Source):** 85

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

## Prologue

### Bianaca

My tears blinded me, tiny crystals that were suspended on my cheeks. I could taste salt in my mouth, but I surged forward.

With a sob, I grabbed the bottle of alcohol from the passenger seat.

Indecision roared within me as I considered the brown liquid. The bottle was unopened—I hadn't dared while driving—but the pain was immense. Smothering. I was standing at the pinnacle of a damn cliff, and all I wanted to do was jump.

Would anyone catch me?

Would anyone care?

The answer to that question was no. Not anymore. Not after...

I couldn't finish that thought. Sobs shook my body, blinding me.

The pain...it was everywhere. Who knew the pain from a broken heart could hurt in so many places? I could feel it in the tips of my fingers, my legs, the soles of my feet. Hell, I could even feel it on my scalp.

I was dying. I would be the first girl to die from a broken heart.

The car caught on something—a slate of ice, perhaps—and I scrambled to regain control of the vehicle. I fishtailed, a scream erupting from my mouth.

With another cry, the car flipped. Glass shattered around me with the equivalence of a thunderstorm, a sudden onslaught of glass rain and booming noise. Tiny shards became embedded in my skin, my hands, my face, but still, I kept spinning.

Down and down the rabbit hole I fell.

Darkness shrouded my vision, a cauldron of spilled ink, and I welcomed it.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

1

Bianaca

The gates sprouted from the ground like jagged, silver teeth. Ominous structures, like keen claws preparing to devour you. Once you entered, you were never able to leave.

And no, despite popular belief, I did not have a propensity for dramatics.

I stared up at the building silhouetted in the waning sunlight.

The steeply curved roof was a strange combination of shingles, bricks, and cement blocks. Row after row of windows lined the stone siding, broken apart only by immense doors, nearly two stories high, with golden knockers.

Tory's School for Troubled Teens.

And my new home.

I glanced back at the taxi idling in the parking lot. My mind warred with my body. The latter wanted me to run—run fast and run far—while my mind warned me of the consequences.

My mind won the grueling battle.

Taking a shuddering breath, I slung my duffle bag over my shoulder and walked to the wrought-iron gates. This close, I could depict twin gargoyles guarding the

entrance.

Stone bodies with intricate wings crafted on either side. Fangs the size of my head. Pinprick black eyes.

I shuddered instinctively, backing away from the malicious stone creatures.

The grounds of the school were just as immaculate, carefully manicured greenery with shrubs adorning the side of the building. I could see a forest peeking out from behind the school, a rich tapestry of greens and the beginnings of yellow. Fall was fast approaching, bringing with it a frigid chill.

Craning my neck, I studied the building once more. Where were the students? The professors?

The oppressive silence sent goosebumps racing down my arms. Goosebumps that had little to do with the cold wind.

After taking another deep breath, I pulled out the school's pamphlet.

I couldn't recall where or how I had gotten the pamphlet. It seemed to have materialized out of thin air.

Mom always said I was a troubled child, and Steve, the asshole, agreed. After the incident...

Well, Mom said she was left with no other choice.

And Steve, of course, had provided the funds to send me away. He couldn't provide food on the table, but money to send his stepdaughter to boarding school? Magic!

Mom didn't believe me when I claimed he must've robbed a bank.

The pamphlet showed a picturesque school with a shining sun and shining smiles and shining people. Of course, they placed the one Hispanic person on the cover.

Because why not?

Instructions indicated for me to wait outside until my tour guide arrived. My thin jacket did little to quell the frosty air.

Mom would've reprimanded me for not wearing warmer clothes.

"You're eighteen now," she would scold, slapping me with a dishtowel. "Act like it."

Or, at least, she would've done that. Until Steve. Until our lives became so fucked up to the point I could hardly recognize it anymore.

I had to remind myself that Mom wasn't here. She hadn't bothered to see her own daughter, her only child, off. Instead, she had chosen Steve the Asshole. She always chose him.

Always believed him.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

My foot tapped with increasing speed against the asphalt as seconds turned into minutes. I wouldn't consider myself an impatient person, but I was cold and just finished my period and really fucking craving chocolate cake. Frankly, I was not in the mood for this shit. The only other option for me was jail...though that was looking more and more appealing as the seconds droned on.

I was just about to say piss off and head inside when a herd of taxis pulled up to the curb.

The first taxi had a petite, wide-eyed female stepping out. The second, an unfamiliar male.

And then I saw him.

My body stilled, heart hammering against my rib cage. My breath left me in a swooping exhale.

I could scarcely believe what I was seeing. After a moment, I pinched myself.

Nope. Still awake.

“Beau?” I gasped, tongue turning to cotton at the sight of my best friend.

My well-behaved, straight-A student best friend. The angel to my devil best friend. The victim to my—well, you get the idea.

His blond hair was tousled, longer at the top and shorter on the sides, and he wore a

fitted blue shirt that heightened the blue of his eyes. His face had always been handsome, chiseled marble, and his pouty lips were curved downward as he surveyed the school with a clinical detachment.

At my voice, his eyes flickered toward mine. Surprise crossed his face followed by something akin to relief. In three long strides, he was in front of me.

He raised a brow, the eloquent gesture saying what he never would.

Why are you here?

“Why are you here?” I countered. What I really wanted to ask was, “Did you follow me?”

But his face had held nothing but genuine surprise at seeing me, and it was illogical to believe he would willingly follow me to a school for troubled teens.

The last time I had seen Beau...

I couldn't complete that thought. My memories of those days were a blur, a combination, I was sure, of drugs and alcohol. My last vivid memory was Mom shoving me into a taxi with only my suitcase and the damn pamphlet.

And then the incident. It played on repeat in my head.

Shivering, I stepped into Beau's embrace.

The heat he emitted was almost palpable, and I found myself nuzzling his neck. I had missed him. I hadn't even realized how much until I came face to face with him.

How would I have survived the rest of high school without him?



“What are you doing here?” I repeated, pulling away to survey his face. His brow furrowed, a tiny crease appearing between his eyes, before he shrugged.

Movement over his shoulder captured my attention.

More people exited the various taxis. A pretty girl with light brown hair. Two more boys.

My eyes became locked on the taxi driver's. I blinked rapidly, unable to correlate what I saw with what I knew. Surely, it was a trick of the light.

In that brief moment, it almost appeared as if the lady had black eyes. And I don't mean eyes so brown they're black, but legit black eyes.

Obsidian stone black eyes. Supernatural television show black eyes.

Before I could formulate a question, the taxis pulled away.

Definitely a trick of the light.

Beau tapped my shoulder, face creased with concern.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

“I’m fine,” I answered his unasked question. Taking the hand still on my shoulder, I gave it a reassuring squeeze. “But you haven’t explained why you’re here yet.”

“Because he’s special,” the strident voice came from the front entrance of the school, and I turned toward the newcomer, surprised.

Her blond tresses were fluffed to maximum...flufficity (if that wasn’t a real word, I declared it as one). Light pink eyeshadow made her green eyes pop vibrantly, and her lips were cherry red. I knew girls like her. Hell, I had been the butt of a joke from girls like her. They had sticks so far up their asses that it could’ve been considered anal.

“Hello! Gather around!” Her voice was just as aggravating—high-pitched with the slightest Southern drawl. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Or possibly stab her when her gaze rested on Beau appreciatively.

Thirsty bitch.

“I’m Maria, and I’m going to be your tour guide.”

Tour of your damn vagina, I thought, trying to ignore the blatant ogling of my best friend. I would bet my very soul that she would try to get him to her bedroom by the end of the day. And let me tell you, my soul was a very valuable object. All dark and twisted and lovable.

God, what was wrong with me?

This was Beau, not my boyfriend. Why did I have the urge to pee on him like a damn dog claiming its territory?

Maria was babbling, hands moving animatedly to emphasize her point, but I tuned her out.

School is so amazing and schoolish. School has classrooms and teachers. School has constipated puppies being kicked by Oompa Loompas on acid.

Or maybe I was taking creative liberties on her speech.

We stayed in the courtyard, the grass spliced apart by a circular drive and a wide fountain. A monster was carved into the stone, each detail crafted with the utmost care. I tried to decipher the creature, but it was an odd combination of a lion, dragon, and human. Nothing I had seen before, but with the capability to evoke fear deep within me.

I pulled my attention away and grasped Beau's hand. He looked surprised at my initiation of contact, but not displeased. With a squeeze meant to reassure, he pulled me up the steep staircase and through the front door.

The interior of the school was just as opulent as the exterior. A three-tiered chandelier greeted us, providing a golden aperture toward another set of stairs. The brown, wooden walls were devoid of any pictures or decorations. Just wood and fine-trimmed rails. The furniture in the initial room, which I assumed served as a lobby, consisted of two leather couches placed into a semicircle and a fireplace carved into the wall.

A couple of students were lounging around, each dressed in the same outfit Maria wore: pleated bottoms and white shirts.

“Tanner!” Maria called cheerfully. A young man lifted his head, surveying Maria with barely concealed distaste.

The first word I could think of was hot. And not in the way you would expect. His hand was inches away from the flickering flames, a serene expression crossing his face as he came close to burning himself.

And of course, he was gorgeous too. A strong jawline framed by blond, almost golden, hair. He had aqua blue eyes, the color of a Caribbean Sea, and full, cupid bow lips.

So yes, I suppose you could argue he was hot in more ways than one.

His free hand held a cigarette, and he absently put it to his lips and took an indolent drawl.

“You know you’re not supposed to smoke in here,” Maria huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

“When has smoking ever killed you?” His voice was raspy with a strange, unfamiliar lilt. An accent of some sort, but I couldn’t pinpoint the exact location. Australian, perhaps? His eyes flickered from face to face, stopping on mine.

“Gunshots, on the other hand...” Trailing off, he shoved the butt of the cigarette into the hearth and stood to his full height. He wasn’t as tall as Beau, but he was more muscular, each individual one articulated through his thin black T-shirt. Unlike the others, he wasn’t dressed in the uniform required of all school students.

Without another word, he shouldered past us and up the stairs. He was near the top when he turned to look over his shoulder, a cruel smile forming on his face.

He raised his thumb and pointer finger, a bad impersonation of a gun, and fired.

I almost felt as if the bullet speared my chest.

Bianaca

We stopped at another large banquet room, a sprawl of food set up on a buffet. Everything from glazed chicken to sugar-sprinkled strawberries to fish fillet. My mouth watered as I took stock of the delicious selection before me.

Maria led us to the line, and we all immediately piled our plates.

Beau chuckled when I skipped the main course and went straight to the dessert. He knew of my chocolate cravings, particularly during a certain time of month. With an amused sigh, he piled extra brownies and cookies on his plate and presented it to me like an offering.

“You’re my hero,” I cooed, smacking him on the cheek. His face went up into flames, and he swatted my shoulder.

I remembered when we had first become friends, ten years ago. Beau had been getting beat up on the playground, and I had retaliated by punching the bullies in the face. Mother had been furious, but Dad? He was proud.

Beau had followed me around the next day of school, a shy and timid boy. At first, I was annoyed by his constant attention, but I soon came to enjoy it. Not just enjoy it, but crave it. We had been inseparable ever since.

The rest of the tour consisted of classrooms, the cafeteria, and the wing that housed

the dorms.

It was as we were walking through the second courtyard that I saw them. There were only two of them, gliding across the yard with a grace that made me instantly jealous. Sheathed entirely in black—from their shoes to their gloves—the person on the right wore a white, porcelain mask. It had red, painted-on lips and pinprick black dots for eyes. The person on the left had on a lion mask, complete with a magnificent golden mane and tiny whiskers.

I stopped, shock and disbelief warring in my stomach. I reached out and grabbed Beau's hand in mine, relying on his steadfast strength.

"Who the hell are they?" I whispered. Maria, who was standing in front of me, spun on her heel.

"Those are two of the professors," Maria supplied, following the direction of my gaze. The two masked figures slid past us, footsteps almost synchronized. Goosebumps erupted on my flesh, and I rubbed at my arm with my free hand.

"Professors?"

What the hell kind of school was this?

Maria nodded stoutly, reaching for her blond braid to play with the ends.

"It's their way of dehumanizing themselves, making themselves known as the top dog in the school. It prohibits any kind of relationship or friendship between faculty and students. They don't talk to us outside of class, and we are never allowed to look at their faces." She shrugged nonchalantly as if this was completely normal to her. I supposed, in a way, it was. How could she not see how badly that was fucked up?

“Definitely makes for a healthy learning environment,” I drawled sarcastically. If Maria noticed my snark, she didn’t comment on it. Instead, she nodded her head seriously.

“It helps.”

Without another word, she spun on her heel once more and led us down a hall. Beau removed his hand from mine, and I instantly missed the contact.

“This is the Registrar and Admissions office.” She pointed to an unassuming room with the front wall made entirely of glass. I could make out standard waiting room chairs positioned around the outer wall of the room and a desk. An auburn head was bent over a stack of paperwork. “You’ll get your dorm number and class schedule here. Everyone, stand in line!”

I moved reluctantly to the back, already hating Maria. She was nice and all, but...

But her damn, manicured hand was on Beau’s forearm a few spots ahead of me. She leaned forward to whisper something in his ear, and he chuckled, a low, delicious sound that sent heat pooling between my legs.

What the fuck was wrong with me? This was Beau, for fuck’s sake. My best friend. Why did I feel so possessive, so jealous, so...aroused? And that was what his laugh did to me, that low, husky chuckle. It made me think dirty thoughts that best friends should most definitely not be thinking.

I continued to watch Maria and Beau converse—well, Maria talked. Beau just nodded his head politely and smiled at the appropriate times. It would take more than a pretty face to get him to talk.

As if he felt my eyes on him, Beau turned toward me. The smile that lit up his face



was radiant. It was a smile designed specifically for me. My own lips curved upward, lost in the infectious pull of Beau's happiness.

He gestured for me to join him. Resisting the urge to smirk smugly at Maria—like a damn middle school girl holding hands for the first time with the popular boy—I took my spot next to Beau.

“I was just telling Beau about some of the classes,” Maria gushed. She smiled at me briefly before her focus returned to him. My stomach tightened uncomfortably, and I shifted from foot to foot.

“What's your favorite?” I inquired politely. Honestly, I didn't care. I just wanted her to stop talking. She was nice and everything, but I had never been a people person. Only Beau had been able to break through my hard, apathetic exterior. He'd chipped away at my walls, one piece at a time.

“Oh, I don't know. I really like art class...but that could be just because of the view, you know what I'm saying?” She nudged my side conspiratorially, and I managed to awkwardly laugh. Beau snorted at my failed attempt at “peopleing,” but really, what did he expect from me?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

“Next!” an upbeat male voice called. Beau gently shoved my shoulders toward the desk. With a resigned sigh, I relented and moved toward the secretary.

The man’s head was bent as I approached, rapidly typing on his computer. His head was bobbing side to side as he sang beneath his breath. I couldn’t recognize the song, but it was hauntingly beautiful.

His head snapped up, and I was momentarily struck dumb.

The man was gorgeous. Beautiful auburn hair with streaks of gold and dark red. Large hazel eyes framed by thick lashes. Full bottom lip and a small top one. What was going on here? Did this town just breed beautiful, sexy men? Or was it just the troubled guys? After all, this was a school for troubled teens.

He smiled at me, flashing perfect white teeth, and extended a hand. I shook it, stunned by how warm he was. How strong his grip was. How my heart began to beat erratically against my rib cage.

“The name’s Kace! And what’s your name, beautiful lady?” His fingers were rapidly tapping against his knees, and his body was bouncing like a fucking ball. The man had so much energy in him it was both adorable and nauseating.

“Bianaca,” I answered.

“Bianca?”

“No, Be-ana-ca,” I stressed. His gorgeous, impish smile never left his face as he

typed something into the computer. His fingers moved rapidly over the keys. I supposed he did need an outlet for all that pent up energy.

Humming beneath his breath, he swiveled in his chair and rolled backward toward the printer. His long fingers gripped the corner of the newly printed paper before he rolled the chair back toward me.

“Here you are, beautiful lady,” he said with a wink. The man was...extra. But I couldn’t help but smile in return. Damn. I was a sucker for the crazies.

“Why thank you, handsome man,” I replied with a dramatic curtsy. He held the paper out for me to take, and I could’ve sworn his hand purposefully brushed against mine.

“I hate to say next...” He glanced over my shoulder and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Especially since the guy behind you is not nearly as sexy as you. And he’s glaring at me. Like he wants to rip my head off.”

I giggled, glancing over my shoulder at Beau. He was, in fact, glaring at us, muscular arms crossed over his broad chest.

“He’s all show but no bite.” I lowered my voice even further. “Unless you ask him to.”

“Is that something you like?” Kace’s smile was positively wicked. Sinful. “Biting?”

“Is that something you like?” I parroted. Before Kace could reply, Beau stormed toward us.

Kace directed his smile at Beau good-naturedly.

“Sorry, man. Didn’t mean to flirt with your girl.” Despite his words, he sounded the

exact opposite of apologetic.

My stomach fluttered, both at being Beau's girl and the thought of Kace flirting with me.

Down girl.

Beau, ignoring him, grabbed a pamphlet from the counter and wrote down his name and information.

"He doesn't talk much," Kace commented, typing Beau's information into the computer.

"You have no idea."

Beau pinched my arm, and I stuck out my tongue at him.

"Only speaking the truth," I jabbed.

With a roll of his eyes, Beau grabbed the paper Kace held out to him and then reached with his free hand for me. He began to pull me toward Maria and the others.

"Hope to see you around, pretty girl!" Kace called with a jubilant laugh. A tentative smile touched my lips.

"I thought it was beautiful lady?" I teased. He laughed again.

"Why can't it be both?"

Seeing Kace around? No, that would most definitely not be a bad thing.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

3

Bianaca

I glanced from my slip of paper to the golden 232 etched into the doorframe. My room was on the second floor, only a few feet away from the communal bathrooms. According to my sheet, this was one of the only single rooms.

Lucky me.

Fumbling with my suitcase, I used the key Maria gave me to open up my new room. My new home.

Bright light blinded me from the opened windows.

It was small, though that was to be expected in a dorm room, with a single bed pushed against the far wall, a dresser, and a desk. Textbooks already adorned the bookshelf directly above my desk, the titles ranging from mythological studies to trigonometry.

With a heavy sigh, I tossed my suitcase onto my bed and surveyed the room with my hands on my hips. The room was...doable. It didn't compare to my room back at home with its black and pink comforter and darkly painted walls. The cement blocks made it feel more like a prison than a room. The voice came from behind me, breaking through my reverie like the crack of a whip.

“What are you doing here?”

I spun, hands instinctively balling into fists.

A young man stood in the entryway to my room, staring at me with such an intense loathing my hackles began to rise. Backing away from the figure, I defiantly lifted my chin.

“This is my room.”

He took a step closer, and my breath caught. His body was toned and muscular, and his dark hair was styled away from his forehead. His eyes were just as dark as the rest of him, twin obsidian stones fixated on me with an almost incandescent fury. His face was covered in piercings—a bulb in his eyebrow, two more in his lips, a few in his ears. Somehow, it promoted him from hot to downright sexy.

“Your room?” the man’s gravelly voice demanded. He took another threatening step closer, and I automatically took a step back. My hair stood on end. Despite his otherworldly good looks, there was something dangerous in his eyes. A sort of haunted look that reminded me of a cornered dog. He was a lion that wasn’t just out for the hunt, but for the kill.

His fingers absently trailed over my desk as he continued to advance on me.

“Did you hear about the girl who used to have this room?” he asked conversationally. Before I could respond, he continued, “Her name was Josie. And did you know that she disappeared a few months ago?” Again, he didn’t wait for me to reply. “This room has been empty all this time...until now.”

He towered over me, his considerable bulk making me feel tiny and vulnerable. Still, I met his stare with glacial eyes. I wouldn’t let him intimidate me.

“And then you just arrive...steal her room. Steal her class schedule.” He grabbed a

piece of my blond hair, holding it between his thumb and pointer finger. His hot breath brushed across my face, eliciting delicate goosebumps. “And if I find out that you had something to do with her disappearance...I’m going to make you scream.”

My breath was ragged. Damn. The kinky bitch in me actually enjoyed his threats.

Refusing to cower, I took a step even closer to this stranger.

“It takes a lot to make me scream. You sure you’re up for the challenge?” I breathed. I could’ve sworn that his breath caught and his heart rate increased.

“So innocent...” His voice was a whisper. The aroma of leather and pine body wash assaulted my senses. It was a masculine scent, one I had the distinct feeling was uniquely his own.

His previous words flitted to me, and I snorted. I was anything and everything but innocent.

“I wonder how innocent you will look when I break you?” he mused, shifting even closer. “And I will break you. I will tear you apart until you are unrecognizable. Tears, cries, shouts...they’re all the same to me. By the time I’m done with you, I’m going to know exactly what makes you tick. What you like, dislike, despise. You see, little one, I have a motto.” He pressed his lips against my ear. “Guilty until proven innocent.”

My heart skyrocketed. His touch sent licks of fire racing down my spine. It was as if his soul and body called to me, called to the twisted, demented bitch I knew myself to be, and demanded my compliance. I was drawn to his darkness like a moth diving into a flame. I was going to get burnt, but damn if it wasn’t beautiful. Like called to like, after all, and his darkness was a mirror image of my own.

Coming to my senses, I shoved at his hard, muscular chest. He willingly allowed me to push him away, an amused smirk playing on his lips.

“You don’t scare me,” I said, proud when my voice remained steady. That wasn’t necessarily a lie. He didn’t scare me. Not in the normal sense. Beau always used to tease me for my need to rescue and care for strays. This man may not have been a stray, but he was broken. And the idiot within me wanted to fix him.

“No?” He raised an eyebrow, that sinfully delicious smile once again on his face. “I haven’t even begun yet, sweetheart. Trust me: you’ll know when I’m starting, and you’ll know when I’m done. Those lips...” His fingers brushed my parted lips, and ridiculously, my tongue wanted to sneak out and taste him.

What the hell was wrong with me?

He was threatening me, teasing me, playing me like a damn mouse, and my ovaries wanted to jump him. I blamed it on my lack of sex. The sooner I rectified that situation, the less horny I would be.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

Logic.

Reaching for his wrist, I removed his fingers from my tingling lips. His eyes flared with a sudden...heat? Anger? Desire? This man was a dangerous enigma. I needed to remember that. There was nothing more dangerous than an unpredictable person with a vengeance. A vengeance wrongly directed at me.

“I hope you find...Josie,” I said, gauging his reaction when I said her name. His face remained stoic. “And is she your...girlfriend?”

His lips curved up devilishly.

“Is she?” he taunted. Rolling my eyes, I crossed my arms under my chest. The movement pushed up my breasts, and I felt a moment of power when his eyes latched onto them. Once again, his eyes flashed with a voracious hunger, primal and carnal. His lashes fluttered. “And no, she’s not. She’s my sister. Was my sister.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, stunned by his break in character. For a brief moment, there was vulnerability in his steely gaze. Just as quickly, his expression shuttered off, concealing him once again.

“I don’t need your fucking apologies,” he snapped. “What I need is for you to answer my questions.”

“I don’t have the answers.” My voice was subdued, a contrast to his fierce one.

“Then you better find them.” He took a step backward, toward the door, and a part of

me instinctively mourned his absence. That part was a fucking idiot.

“Or what?” I snapped.

He flashed me another one of his grins. It was a grin that promised pain, promised death, promised pleasures that made my head spin.

Without answering, he slipped out the door.

\* \* \*

I found Beau in his room, a few halls down.

The room he was in was similar to mine—small desk, bed, and a large wardrobe. Unlike mine, there were two sets of everything.

Beau’s side was still bare minus the few clothes he had begun to hang up and photographs taped to the wall. The other half of the room was covered in photographs and paintings. Some were of cars and landscape while others depicted women in scantily clad clothing. They were all gorgeous, obviously made by the hand of a real artist.

Beau waved his hand in my face to capture my attention, and I reluctantly turned my attention away from an exquisite painting of what appeared to be a city. Chicago, perhaps. Or New York.

“You ready for dinner?” I asked, plopping onto his bed. My eyes latched on a framed photograph sitting beside his bed. It was of us, taken only a few months ago. My arm was around him as I smiled up at the camera. He wasn’t looking at the camera, but instead at me. There was something in his gaze...

Something I couldn't pinpoint...

I remembered when that was taken. We had just driven back from Beau's football game. They had lost, but Beau had been in such a good mood. He had taken me to Freddy's Diner for a midnight feast.

My lips curved at the memory.

His hand grabbed my arm, opening it up, and I watched his finger dance over my skin, writing words into the sensitive flesh.

Do you remember when that was taken? he wrote. Goosebumps caused my skin to pebble. Everywhere he touched left a trail of tingles and heat in its wake. Addicting.

"Of course," I replied back, smiling. It was one of the happiest days of my life. Before everything went to hell. "Do you remember that double date we went on? With Dick and Mandy?"

And yes, that was actually his name. Dick the dick. I had been dating him for two years when I convinced Beau to go on a date with Mandy Parkinson. She had been pining for him for years. We had decided to go sledding at the local park. Everything had been good until...well, until I discovered that Mandy and Dick were having an affair behind my back.

Beau had quite literally beaten the shit out of Dick, and Mandy had gone home in tears. The two of us spent the rest of the day drinking hot chocolate, people watching, and cuddling in front of the fire.

"That was one of the best days of my life," I admitted, tentatively tracing my face in the photograph. "It showed me who I could trust...and it also taught me who I had in my corner. You're my best friend, Beau."

I turned away, meeting his gaze with a soft smile. I tried to show him through that eloquent look how much he meant to me, how badly I needed him in my life. Somewhere along the way, my feelings for him had twisted, becoming something more than friendship.

But I couldn't tell him that. Not now. Not ever.

His eyes warmed as he reached forward and cupped my cheek. Instinctively, I turned my head to kiss his palm. In his presence, there was no fear or worry. The mysterious professors, the asshole stranger, my stepfather, they all faded away. All that existed in our tiny world was him and me.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

Oh God, what was I thinking? This is Beau.

“We should go eat,” I stuttered, wrenching away from him. He made me feel too much, too quickly, too intensely. When I was with him, I forgot my name and all of the reasons why a relationship between the two of us wouldn’t work. He was the only guy capable of hurting me, breaking me.

I had had boyfriends before—Dick was just one of them—and I had partaken in senseless hookups. I had never allowed anyone to get too close to me. There were walls around my heart, walls forged from trauma, walls made of impenetrable steel. Somehow, someway, Beau had chipped apart those walls, revealing the girl beneath. I refused to ruin our friendship, our connection, because of a senseless, unrequited crush. He may have been attracted to me, but he would never reciprocate my feelings.

I wanted to be more than a quick fuck to him, and that was all Beau did. Alas, I had found myself in the dreaded friend zone. It sucked there, but at least we had cookies.

“Your roommate is an amazing artist,” I said, desperate to change the subject. “He did draw these, correct? Who is he?”

He stared at me quizzically, golden hair catching on the waning sunlight flickering through the opened blinds. His expression changed and tightened, confusion giving way to unreadability.

In answer to my question, he shrugged his broad shoulders.

“You don’t know?” I questioned, and he nodded an affirmative. “Well, I got a single

room.”

And it was apparently the room of a dead girl. Missing girl. Something girl.

I conveniently left out the snippet of information. I wasn’t sure Beau would take kindly to the knowledge that someone had threatened me.

My stomach growled, deafeningly loud. Beau’s lips twitched, and I glared at the offending body part.

“Shut your mouth,” I mumbled to it, and Beau’s grin grew. He took my arm again and wrote onto my skin.

Someone’s hungry.

“Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Laugh it up, asshole. I wonder if you’ll still be laughing when I steal your dessert.”

How are you still hungry? We just ate.

“Are you calling me fat, Beautiful?” I teased, resorting to calling him the old nickname we used as kids. He rolled his eyes, pinching the underside of my arm. “I just need dessert. Lots and lots of dessert.”

Smirking at him, I began to walk backward, out of his room and down the hall.

“Brownies and cupcakes and cakes and ice cream.”

He rolled his eyes heavenward, but the quirk of his lips betrayed his amusement. He could try to hide it all he wanted, but he knew I was hilarious. I made myself laugh daily.

“And pies and pizza and turkey legs and—”

A soft, muffled sob interrupted what I was going to say next. Turning in the direction of the sound, I saw a group of guys huddled together. They were maybe a year or two younger than me, baby fat still prominent on their faces, and they all threw back their heads together in a bone-chilling laugh.

It was only then that I saw her.

It was a girl, younger than me, with her dark hair twisted into two long braids. Her head was down, a posture that indicated her as demure and apprehensive. One of the guys was going through a pink backpack, pulling things out and throwing them on the ground. He grabbed a handful of crisp bills, said something to his friends, and pocketed them.

I saw red. It covered my vision like a garnet sheen, a thick theater curtain being drawn closed. My hands curled into makeshift claws.

Before I realized what I was doing, I was charging forward. Beau helplessly grabbed at my arm, no doubt trying to place himself in front of me, but allowed me to take the lead.

He recognized my kick-ass expression.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I snapped, pushing through the men until I was directly beside the girl. Beau stood beside me, towering over the other guys with a glacial glint to his eyes.

When none of the guys responded to me, I turned toward the one who held her backpack.

“Give that to her. Now.”

He lowered his chin submissively, but his eyes were hard. Defiant. I had the distinct feeling that only Beau’s presence stopped this asshat from retaliating.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

Lips pursed, he thrust the backpack into the girl's hands. She staggered back a step, and I reached a hand out to steady her.

“And give her what you took.” I narrowed my eyes at him. Turning toward the shitbrain beside him, I nodded toward the papers on the ground. “And you, clean up what you dropped.”

He obediently dropped to his knees, muttering beneath his breath, while the apparent ringleader pulled out a wad of bills. The girl snatched it from him and shoved it into her front backpack pocket.

I waited until the other young man picked up the papers before placing my hands on my hips and leveling them with my best glare. Beau had once called it my mom glare. Half disapproving. Half murderous.

“What is wrong with you guys?” I met their eyes, one at a time, each guy displaying conflicting emotions. Guilt. Rage. Anger. Only the leader appeared unperturbed, almost bored. He lazily shoved his hands into his pockets.

“She's a freak,” he said at last. The girl flinched, leaning into me as if I was capable of shielding her from this grueling, dangerous world full of assholes and bigots.

“Excuse me?” I took a step forward.

Without responding, asshole and his friends stalked down the hall, whispering to themselves. I was stunned at their brazenness. Sure, I knew bullying still existed, but I never imagined it would happen like this. At my old school, people were cowards

and relied on social media and rumors to fuel their hate-filled tendencies.

“Are you okay?” I asked the girl. She was so tiny, so frail. Her cheekbones jutted out, and her light blue eyes had dark shadows beneath them.

“Between,” she whispered. I furrowed my brows.

“Huh?”

“Between.” Her tiny hand gripped my wrist in a vise-like hold. I winced at the initial stab of pain. “Between. Once you escape one set of monsters...you find new ones.”

4

Bianaca

Romance books lied.

The greatest smell in the world wasn't male sweat or their cologne or some shit like that. No, the greatest smell in the world was a buffet with noodles and chicken and chocolate cake.

My mouth watered, salivating like the thirsty bitch I was.

After her ominous message, the girl had hurried away. Beau placed a hand on my shoulder, gently restraining me from going after her, and led me toward the school's cafeteria. I was grateful he was there with me. Without him, I would've been wandering in circles for weeks. The school was huge. Hallways led to more hallways that led to doors that led to even more hallways. It was a labyrinth, one you could get lost in.

I still couldn't understand how Beau got sent to a school for troubled teens. He was eighteen and had never gotten in trouble a day in his life. The one fight he had been in, with Dick the dick, lasted only five minutes, and Dick had been too scared to press charges. It just didn't make sense. Beau was the light to my darkness. The voice of reason to my crazy ideas.

I would get the information out of him...after I got food. Filling my plate with sweets, I waited for Beau to grab his own food. He garnered quite a bit of attention

with his chiseled good looks and charming smile. I didn't blame the girls for staring, for smiling at him, for asking him his name. My stomach churned, but I forced myself to remain calm.

Just friends. Just friends.

"Hello!" a chirpy voice greeted. The newcomer was an unfamiliar female with dark brown hair and tanned skin. She flashed me a smile. "I'm Ali! What's your name?"

"Um...Bianaca."

"Nice to meet you, Bianaca," she said. "I'm on the New Student Committee with Maria. If you have any questions, don't be afraid to ask."

Without another word, she hurried toward Beau, no doubt to repeat her spiel. Or proposition him. It had happened before—people using me to get to him. Hell, my only female friend in high school had admitted to it. Beau was charismatic, and the female population, as well as half the male one, was not immune.

Movement from my peripheral captured my attention, turning me away from Beau. Or perhaps I had always noticed them, a lighthouse in a roiling sea. A flicker of light in the inky darkness I had grown accustomed to. I hadn't realized at the time how strongly we were connected, how our souls screamed for each other, recognizing the kindred spirits in each other that others overlooked.

I spotted Kace first, the flirty guy from the receptionist office. He was sitting beside the asshole from earlier today, facing me, and making a house out of his waffles and french fries. Yup. You heard me right.

The weird guy from the fireplace was across from them, leaning back in his chair as if he gave zero shits about anything. They were three of the most gorgeous guys I had

ever seen. Such male hotness should be banned. It was not healthy for my ovaries.

Beau stepped up beside me, Ali still talking his ear off. Apparently, there was a certain criteria required to be on the New Student Torture Squad or whatever the fuck they called it. Perky (and I didn't just mean their breasts) and talkative. Huh. Two traits I didn't possess.

"I do have a question for you," I interrupted Ali, pointing toward the godlike trio. "Who are they?"

Her eyes flickered to them, and a dreamy, wistful expression softened her features.

"That's Kace, Tanner, and Aiden."

Aiden. That was the name of the asshole who had forced his way into my room.

"Hmmm..." I trailed off, considering the three men with appraising eyes. Kace's auburn hair and lean frame. Aiden's piercings glinting in the artificial cafeteria lighting. Tanner's broad shoulders and leather jacket.

Ali snorted. "Don't get your hopes up. They don't date. Ever."

"Ever, you say?" Because, really, I was always up for a challenge.

And I needed a distraction from Beau. Perfect, smart, funny Beau who made my heart thunder in my chest. Not just thunder...but turn into a whole fucking thunderstorm, complete with rain and lightning and the whole shebang.

Stupid, traitorous heart.

Without waiting for her to respond, I walked to their table, Beau following behind

me.

It was Kace who saw me first, smiling at me over the top of his food castle. Tanner swiveled his head marginally, met my gaze, and then turned back toward his uneaten tray of food. It took Aiden a moment longer—he was obsessively stabbing at his sandwich (no surprise he had a penchant for sharp knives)—but when his eyes met mine, they grew cold. Pinpricks of fear raced down my spine, but I moved with a confidence I didn't actually feel toward their table.

I sat in the empty seat between Kace and Aiden, ignoring the startled looks the entire cafeteria gave me. One would think I had pissed on the fucking queen by their reactions.

Or kings.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

Beau, after a moment of hesitation, sat beside Tanner.

Silence.

Long and pronounced.

“Little girl,” Aiden drawled at last. He leaned back in his chair and linked his hands behind his head. The movement pulled up his shirt, revealing a sliver of golden skin. “I take it you misunderstood my earlier warning. Or you’re just dumb.”

At his words, Beau’s eyes zeroed in on Aiden’s face. He did not look pleased.

“Or maybe...” I attempted to recreate the same nonchalance he had. “I know exactly what I’m doing. How can I prove I’m innocent if I never get a trial?”

Without breaking eye contact, I brought the gooey brownie to my lips. He watched, mesmerized, as I bit the end off, using my tongue to wipe away the remnants.

“So what were we talking about, boys?” I asked smugly. Aiden shook his head, as if coming out of a daze, and turned toward Tanner.

“We were actually discussing the best ways to get a woman to orgasm,” Tanner said, eyes locked on mine.

Oh.

Shit.

Behave, I mentally scolded my libido. I knew what they were doing. I recognized their intimidation technique as one I had just used, though on a much larger scale. I would be damned if I let them affect me. Mentally, at least. Physically, on the other hand...

Feigning nonchalance, I asked, "How would you go about doing that?"

Tanner's eyes shone with a wicked gleam, and Kace began to laugh beside me.

"Depends on the girl," Aiden said slowly, pulling my attention to him. His eyes watched me, watched my face, gauging my reaction. Every tick, every movement, every breath. There would be nothing that would go unnoticed.

Keeping my face impassive, I nodded for him to continue.

"I would start by kissing those soft, plush lips. Nibbling on the bottom."

"That's where we'd vary, brother," Kace said from behind me. "I would start on the neck."

I felt his fingers brush at my blond tresses, pulling them away to reveal the back of my neck. His finger, as light as a butterfly's wing, glided across the smooth skin.

"And then my hand would lower down," Tanner continued. "To those pale white thighs."

I felt something brush against me beneath the table. Tanner's feet.

It took every ounce of willpower not to squirm.

"I would kiss a trail down your neck." Kace's voice was a mere breath. "To your



breasts. I would take one of those pink, perfect nipples in my mouth.”

“And I would take the other one,” Aiden added. “You would be marked by my saliva. Those nipples would ache until it bordered that precarious line between pleasure and pain.”

“What about him?” Tanner jabbed a finger in Beau’s direction. My best friend was unnaturally still, eyes wide. It looked as if he wasn’t even breathing.

“Where would you like him, pretty girl?” Kace teased. His damn finger was still brushing the back of my neck. Heat shot straight to my core at the contact.

“He can take her lips,” Aiden supplied with a wicked grin. “I imagine you would like that, wouldn’t you?”

Now I was the one who wasn’t breathing.

“I would finally reach your beautiful pussy, wet and ready,” Tanner continued the narration. His eyes were molten gold, piercing me and rendering me immobile. My breath shuttered. “My tongue would lap up those delicious juices as if you were the holy grail. God, I bet you would taste delicious.”

“And I would kiss the underside of your breasts, my hand sneaking out to pinch that nipple of yours.” Kace’s hand pinched the back of my neck to emphasize his point.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

I closed my eyes, head rolling backward. An involuntary moan escaped my parted lips. Damn them. And damn my own mind for giving in so quickly.

Aiden carefully grabbed my chin, pulling my face toward his.

“And you would come screaming our names. Like I promised.” He grinned. I imagined that would be how the devil smiled. “And I wouldn’t even have to fuck you.”

My body was on fire. My veins. My chest. My damn pussy. The thought of them, all four of them...

“That’s an interesting rhetorical,” I managed to say with a calmness I didn’t feel.

Aiden looked like the cat who ate the canary, but there was one thing he didn’t know about me. I never, ever, became the victim. The mocked. The butt of the joke. As my mother always said, if you don’t like the narrative, change it. Only you could dictate your story.

“Aren’t you going to ask me?” I kept my voice light, licking chocolate from my fingers.

“Ask you what, pretty girl?” Kace questioned. His signature smile was back on his face. I wondered if it had ever left.

“How I would make a man orgasm?”

The table went silent. The rest of the cafeteria was mere background noise. We were suspended in this tiny moment, the five of us.

I met Tanner's eyes first, an imperious set to my chin. This was a dare, and he could either take it or cower. His eyes flared with a sudden heat.

"How would you make a man orgasm, Bianaca?" I didn't miss the emphasis Aiden put on my name. An indication he knew exactly who I was and all I had done.

Two could play at that game.

"Well, Aiden..." I had the pleasure of seeing his eyes widen slightly, almost imperceptibly, before I continued on. "I would begin with sweeping his hair out of his face."

With steady hands, I brushed at the dark hair grazing his forehead. I made sure to let my hand linger against his skin a moment longer than necessary.

"And then I would nibble on his earlobe. Slowly. Taking my time." I turned toward Kace then and gently tugged on his own earlobe. Two fingers, grazing the soft skin. His smile didn't leave his face, but he shuddered delicately.

"And then I would kiss him." I leaned across the table, toward Tanner, and brushed the back of my hand against his lips. He inhaled sharply, eyes fixated on my hand. I leaned forward even farther, giving him an ample view of my cleavage.

This time, I heard Beau's sharp intake of breath.

"After that, I would kiss down his chest to his rock hard cock." Sitting back down, I grabbed Aiden's hand. "I would start by stroking it." Gripping his pointer finger, I curled my hand around it and began to rub. Up and down. Up and down.

His eyes were wild, feverish. I could see his cock tenting his pants.

“And then I would put him in my mouth...”

At my words, he lifted a single brow. Daring me. Taunting me. The bastard didn't think I was going to do it.

And I would've stopped if I knew that was what he wanted. But I could see the desire, the need, the lust, in his eyes. His emotions consumed me.

Without breaking eye contact, I swiveled my tongue around the base of his finger, trailing it upward until it reached the very tip.

Somebody groaned, Kace I believed, and Tanner muttered, “Fuck.”

I began to suck off Aiden's finger, smiling in satisfaction when he rumbled deep in his chest. His hand went down to his cock, stroking himself through the material of his jeans.

With an exaggerated pop, I released his finger, dripping in my saliva.

At the end of the day, I had marked him.

Smiling contently, as if I wasn't falling apart at the seams and in desperate need of a cold shower, I said, “And that is how I would make a man orgasm. And what do you know? It didn't require any fucking.”

I threw Aiden's words back at him, my smile growing when his eyes narrowed into thin slits.

“Where have you been all my life?” Kace mumbled in a daze. Tanner was staring at

me as if I was a strange and foreign species. A zebra in a flock of sheep.

And Beau...

In that brief moment, before his walls went up, I saw nothing but pure carnal lust. Could he want me as much as I wanted him?

Before I could be certain, his face went blank, once again shielding me from whatever lurked beneath that seemingly apathetic exterior. I tried to swallow my disappointment.

“I’m done with dinner. Beau?” Beau nodded, standing up to follow me. Smirking at the three boys, I added, “And you’ll be a dear and take care of my dishes, won’t you?”

5

Bianaca

Mom was late. Again.

She had texted me an hour earlier—an hour after the gym had already closed—to tell me Steve had taken her out to dinner. Some obscure Italian restaurant near the downtown area.

The only person who remained was Eric Long, the owner and manager.

Shivering, I tugged my coat closed. The zipper had broken a few months ago, and I hadn't saved enough money to buy a new jacket. Heaven only knew that Steve and Mom wouldn't spend money on me. Steve believed in "responsibility" for children and had polluted my mother's mind. Of course, such responsibility only applied to me, not his own son. Dylan would never take responsibility for his actions.

Because of Steve's parenting motto, my car had been taken from me until I could pay for my own insurance. I had to choose between a job and gymnastics. The choice was easy.

Gymnastics was my life. My escape. My one bright spot in the monotonous darkness that was my life.

Glancing at my phone, I saw no new messages from Mom. Of course, she had forgotten about me. Steve had probably given her some bullshit spiel about how I

would gain character by walking the twenty miles back to the house. I could call Beau and ask him for a ride, but the last time I had checked in on him, he had admitted he was on a date. I didn't want to bother him. One half of me knew he would come running to my aid while the other half was worried he wouldn't. "Need a ride?" Eric asked, stepping outside and locking the door.

Victory Gymnastics was an immense structure that appeared more like a barn than a gym. It had a hideous vaulted green roof that clashed greatly with the beige walls. There were no windows—the coaches didn't want the girls to get distracted—and two doors, one on either side. It might've been ugly, but it was my home. The monochromatic lobby with white plastic chairs, white tiles, and white walls held more happy memories than my own house. And the gym itself? No words in the thesaurus were adequate enough to describe the exhilaration I felt when I stepped on the squishy blue mats. Felt the chalk on my hands. The leotard rubbing against my skin.

Eric was a retired professional gymnast. He was well into his seventies with a receding white hairline and a potbelly that accentuated his age. But there were crinkles around his eyes and mouth from repeated laughter. This was a man who loved life and everyone in it.

"What?" I asked, blinking rapidly at him. He chuckled.

"I see that your mom isn't here. Again." His lips twisted into something that resembled a scowl. Well...as close to a scowl as Eric could get. "Do you need a ride?"

Eric lived on the opposite side of town, but the sun was waning behind nearby buildings, and the air was getting chillier. I hated to inconvenience him, but I knew I had no other alternative. I would walk...if I didn't live in a bad part of town.

A girl like me? Walking alone at night? I may have been desperate, but I wasn't stupid.

I was just about to accept his offer when a familiar red Mustang pulled up. Music emanated from the vehicle—some rap song that had every other word some type of cuss.

Dylan popped his head out the driver's side window.

"Hey, Sis! I'm here to pick you up," he called. Eric, seemingly satisfied that I had a ride, patted me on the shoulder.

"See you tomorrow," he said with a tender smile. He waved hello to Dylan as he walked to his own vehicle.

I remained frozen, mouth agape, as I stared at Dylan's mischievous smile. Coming out of my shock, I hurried to the passenger side door and threw my duffle bag over the seat before climbing in.

"I'm not your sis," I hissed, hating the term. The connotations behind it. Dylan was Steve's son.

And my pain in the ass.

"Be nice to your brother," he said with a laugh. The sound sent pinpricks of fear racing down my spine. "I drove all the way from home to pick your sorry ass up."

His hand rested on my knee, and my stomach threatened to expel the contents of my dinner.

"Don't touch me." My voice was weak, even to my own ears. I debated how



beneficial it would be to run to Eric's car and take him up on that offer. Before I could even fully articulate the thought, the old man was pulling away with a cheery wave in our direction. So oblivious, like the rest of the world.

But why would he, or anyone else for that matter, think differently? For all he knew, Dylan was a nice older brother picking up his little sister from gymnastics class. Normal.

Dylan's hands moved farther up my sweatpants, stroking my inner thighs. I tensed, squeezing my eyelids shut.

"Don't be like that, Sis."

\* \* \*

I woke with a start, heart hammering in my chest. My stomach plummeted like a fucking bowling ball as I replayed the dream in my head. I had gotten so much better at quelling the nightmares. My sleep was supposed to be the one place I was safe.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

If, of course, safe equaled unaware.

Blinking rapidly, I turned toward the school provided clock. It was a little after two in the morning.

I groaned, rubbing a hand down my face. I knew that sleep would continue to elude me no matter how hard I tried. It was a problem, I would admit, but one that was easily fixable.

With a heavy sigh, I stealthily opened my bedroom door. The hallway was empty, as was to be expected this early in the morning.

After one more quick glance in both directions, I hurried toward where I knew Beau's room to be.

I didn't bother knocking. To be completely honest, he probably expected me. I hadn't been able to go longer than two nights without him.

Fumbling in the dark for his bed, I was unsurprised to feel his body pressed against the wall, leaving me space beside him. Quietly, as to not disturb him or his roommate, I slipped beneath the covers. His strong, muscular arm immediately curved around my waist, holding me to him. A scent that was uniquely Beau's assaulted me. Pomegranates, the smell of his favorite body wash.

Feeling safe and secure for the first time since I had arrived at this school, I allowed sleep to pull me under.

\* \* \*

I woke up confused.

It wasn't so much the body beside mine that had my heart pitter-pattering in bemusement, but the room itself. Bright light immediately speared my vision, and I blinked rapidly, attempting to adjust my eyes. The bed beneath my body was uncomfortable, and the blankets were unnaturally scratchy. It most definitely wasn't my canopy bed with satin red blankets and black throw pillows.

Beau snored softly beside me, breath caressing my face. With him still fast asleep, I could survey him without interruption. He had a sort of unattainable beauty that most models would die for. His golden hair and pale skin made him the epitome of the boy-next-door. His unnaturally long lashes were feathered against his prominent cheekbones. He looked softer as he slept, innocent almost, as if he didn't have the weight of the world on his shoulders.

I had to remind my heart to calm the fuck down.

Yawning, I twisted in my bed, determined to get a few more hours of sleep before breakfast, when I met a familiar pair of burning eyes.

I gasped, muscles tensing like a thousand currents of electricity coursed through my veins.

Tanner was shirtless, lying on the bed opposite Beau's with his blanket curled around his waist and feet. From my angle, I could see extensive tattoos spanning the length of his sculpted, golden chest. I spotted what appeared to be a blood-red dragon and a bow and arrow set. A few phrases in unreadable script ran down his side.

His lips curved upward into a smirk when he caught me staring.

Without breaking eye contact, he threw off his blanket and sat up in bed.

Giving me an unobscured view of his erect cock. Yup. Tanner apparently slept in the nude.

I gasped, turning to face the ceiling. Still, his...thing haunted me. I had seen a lot of cocks in all my years, and his was definitely one of the best. Not thick, necessarily, but long.

Unbidden, my eyes flickered back toward the man in question. He was standing, lazily stretching his taut muscles, but his gaze remained fixed on me, gauging my reaction. The asshole knew I was going to look again.

But how could I look away?

It was just...pointing at me. This fucking erect cock with pre-cum on the tip.

Heat pooled low in my stomach, and I rubbed my thighs together to alleviate the ache.

I closed my eyes, briefly, but I could still see Tanner. His cocky smile. His glorious golden brown hair. And...his chicken leg. He didn't deserve to have me think of it as a cock. Nope. That was reserved for guys who didn't piss me off.

Hating myself, I reluctantly reopened my eyes.

Tanner was standing in front of his closet, profile to me, and was absently perusing his clothing options. And totally not absently, he was stroking his cock, from tip to balls.

Shit. Shit. Double dildo on a club sandwich.

There was a smile on his face and a wicked gleam in his eyes. It was the only indication that he was aware I was watching him. Watching him...and getting turned on. There was something erotic about watching him stroke himself with both me and Beau in the room.

Two can play at that game.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

Acutely aware that Beau was still fast asleep beside me, I pulled off the blanket, revealing my red lace panties to his wandering eyes. His hand paused on his cock, head tilting curiously to the side.

Feeling irrationally bold, I gripped my heavy breast through my thin sleep shirt, testing the weight. I knew I had good boobs. Large and perky. As he sped up his own strokes, I tweaked my nipple through my shirt. My other hand trailed down my stomach, resting on my panties.

In tandem with his erratic movements, I stroked myself through the thin material. I was pleased when his breathing got heavy, sawing in and out.

He no longer pretended he wasn't staring at me. His body twisted to face me fully, his hand moving rapidly down the length of his long cock. Perspiration beaded on his forehead.

I imagined that cock inside of me, pounding me into oblivion. Wave after wave of pleasure carrying me away into an abyss. When Beau groaned beside me, mumbling something inarticulate, my pleasure intensified until I thought I was going to be cleaved in two.

Suddenly, I couldn't stand the panties obstructing my desire. I pulled the lace away, spearing myself with two of my fingers. Juices met my greedy hand, but I didn't let up. Each stroke sent me closer to tumbling over that pinnacle of desire. With one final flick of my clit, I went spiraling over the edge, muffling my moan with my mouth. Tanner followed immediately, cum squirting across his bed and hand.

My underwear was positively wrecked.

Totally worth it to see the shocked expression on Tanner's face. Aw. Did poor little Tanner not think he was going to actually come?

Being extra quiet, as to not wake Beau, I tiptoed out of bed and to the door. Tanner continued to watch me, eyes widening almost imperceptibly. I saluted him—and his cock—before sliding out the door.

The halls were still empty, thank God, and the beginning rays of sunlight streamed through the window at the very end. I had just turned a corner when a hand clamped down on my shoulder.

I jumped, startled, and met Tanner's bemused gaze.

"What the fuck was that?" he whispered harshly. I glared at his offending hand until he reluctantly removed it, shoving it into his sweatpants pocket.

"Oh. So you do know how to wear clothes," I quipped.

"I don't wear clothes in my room," he retorted. "Ever."

"Even with your new roommate?" I countered, feeling heat rise to my cheeks. Why did the thought of Beau and Tanner both being naked at the same time arouse me as much as it did? I quickly tried to smooth my expression into one of impassivity. Still, I had no doubt he had seen the flare of heat in my eyes.

Damn.

"If you were my roommate, I don't think I would ever wear clothes." His voice was low, a silky timbre, and made me reflectively think of his chicken leg.

Down girl, I scolded my vagina.

“Oh, go fuck yourself.” Turning on my heel, I hurried in the direction of my room. “I know you’re quite capable of it. Never seen a guy come so quickly through masturbation before. Must be one hell of a hand.”

“I can always show you,” he said lightly, and my eyes rolled backward in my head.

I knew guys like him. Guys who thought that the world would bow down to them. Cocky assholes who never had to work a day in their life. He was attractive, sure, and there was no denying he had a nice cock...I meant chicken leg...but his personality was an entirely different story. There was brooding, and then there was asshole. He fell into the latter category. I barely talked to him and his friends, and I already knew they were going to be trouble.

But my middle name wasn’t Karma for nothing.

Actually, it wasn’t. It was Gracie. But you get the idea.

“You think you can just look at me with hooded eyes, that damn tongue licking your lips, that perfect pussy spread out like my own personal feast, and walk away?” he asked, towering over me. He was so much bigger than me, both in height and muscle mass, but I knew instinctively that he would never hurt me. He would never take more than what I offered him. I couldn’t tell you how I knew that, only that I did.

“I think...” I leaned forward, breath caressing his face. His eyes fluttered shut. “I think I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

Leaving him dumbfounded, I strode toward my bedroom. The door had been kept unlocked, and I easily slid inside. I was just about to shut the door when his foot appeared in the doorway. I quirked a brow at him questioningly.



“It’s not safe for you to not lock your door,” he said casually. “There’s a lot of creepers here.”

“Says the person who followed me into my room,” I pointed out, walking to my still unpacked suitcase. Unzipping it, I shuffled through the clothes. I was painstakingly aware that he stood mere inches from me, dressed in nothing but a pair of sweats while I wore nothing but a long shirt and panties. I was also aware that his dick—

Stop!

Finding what I was looking for, I stepped around Tanner’s muscular form. His eyes were trained on me, watching my every move in rapt interest.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

“You’re the one who gave me a show,” Tanner said after a few minutes of silence. I smirked.

“And that gives you leeway to be a stalker?” Placing my hand on my hip, I turned to face him. His eyes flickered upward from where they had once rested on my ass. Instead of appearing sheepish, his smile broadened.

“If I remember correctly, you were watching me first.”

Kind of hard to miss.

Shrugging, I winked at him.

“I’ve seen better.”

I had been hoping to get a reaction from him, but his smile only widened.

“Don’t talk about other dicks you’ve seen, sweetheart. I kind of want to kill them all.”

“The dicks or the men carrying them?” I questioned, stepping into the closet. When he made a move to follow me, I slammed the door closed.

“Both,” he admitted unashamedly. “I don’t want to think about you with other guys.”

“What about your friends?” I asked, whipping my shirt off and stepping into the teal leotard. It was the designated colors of my gym, with a bright purple stripe running diagonally across my breasts.

“What about them?”

I shimmied into a pair of sweatpants, jamming my elbow into the closet door in the process. “Am I allowed to talk about their dicks?”

He chuckled softly.

“I suppose I’ll allow that. Aiden would kick my ass if I kept you all to myself.”

“You seem to be implying that I’m yours.” My words were muffled from the sweatshirt over the top of my head. It smelled of vanilla, my favorite perfume.

“Who’s that guy you’re always with?” Tanner asked, changing the subject. When I re-emerged from the closet, he was scrolling through my phone. I knew we didn’t have any service, so he must’ve been looking at my photos. I slapped his hand, and the phone bounced onto the bed.

“Beau?” I asked, reaching my hands up to twist my hair into a bun. Having hair like mine, cascading down my back, was a pain in the ass. Literally. It sometimes got stuck in said ass. I had learned long ago that mere ponytails couldn’t tame the mane.

“Is that his name?” Tanner shrugged. “He doesn’t speak much. And by much, I mean he doesn’t speak at all.”

“And you speak too much,” I retorted.

Tanner watched me. There was a sort of reverence in his eyes as I finished piling my golden hair at the top of my head. “You have a lot of pictures of him on your phone.” The whole statement was said nonchalantly, as if he didn’t completely invade my privacy.

“He’s my best friend.”

“Just a best friend?”

Ignoring him, I grabbed my phone from where it had dropped along with my headphones. I had memorized the map the night before and knew that there was a boxing gym a few buildings over. It wasn’t the ideal place, but it was better than the hard wooden floors of the main gym.

“You going to ignore me?” Tanner asked in amusement. Maintaining eye contact, I purposefully placed the headphones into my ears. He didn’t need to know that I had no music playing.

With a jump to my step, I walked the unfamiliar halls until I stepped outside. The campus was beautiful in the morning, the metallic violet sky painting everything in pink and the palest green. The trees were a magnificent canopy of dark green, and the grass was manicured immaculately. Even the creepy-ass fountain couldn’t tarnish the beauty of this Sunday morning. Nor the brooding asshole stalking me.

He didn’t say a word as he followed me down the gravel path and to the smallest building on campus. He stared at me oddly when I skipped inside but didn’t comment. Smart boy.

There were two sections. One consisted of a standard boxing square complete with a rope perimeter and two chairs in either corner. The second room had blue mats expanding the length of the floor. Both rooms were, fortunately, empty.

It was the second room I headed to, shedding clothes as I walked. I heard Tanner’s sharp intake of breath, and my smile widened. Ignoring him, I skimmed through my playlist until I found my competition song.

I then connected my phone to the school's Bluetooth speaker.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

“Move to the side if you’re going to stalk me,” I told Tanner, shooing him irritably with my hand. Seemingly in a daze, he stepped backward until he was pressed against the wall.

I dropped to the ground, prepared to begin my stretches. Tanner crossed his arms over his chest, silently watching me. When I moved into the splits and threw my upper half forward, he made a weird sound in the back of his throat.

“You’re flexible,” he murmured.

Unable to help myself, I twisted my head to smile at him. “You should see me in bed.”

I turned my face away before I could see his reaction.

After I finished my stretches, I stood up and tossed him my phone. He caught it easily, brow furrowing in confusion.

“Can you be a dear and press play when I tell you to?” I asked, moving to my starting position.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not really. No. If you’re going to stalk me, the least you could do is press a damn button. I know that’s hard for you to compute—”

My spiel was interrupted by the beginning notes of my song. Sticking my tongue out

at him one last time, I allowed the music to reverberate through my body.

Gymnastics wasn't just flipping and tricks. It was a dance, an art form, a way to express yourself. I could feel the music from the tips of my fingers to my toes. It pounded within me, demanding an outlet.

My choreographer had decided I did best at jazz and contemporary, and my routine reflected that choice. When I got to the first tumble pass—roundoff, back handspring, full—I took a deep breath. It wasn't nerves I felt, but exhilaration. Suspended in the air as I was, I felt like I was flying. Everything always appeared so insignificant during that brief moment when my feet were off the ground.

I landed perfectly, flashing a bright smile at no one in particular. Actually, I take that back. It was a smile for myself. I was damn proud I had stuck it.

Continuing the routine, I did an aerial that led down to the splits. My body swayed with the beat; every twist and turn was as natural as breathing. My hardest stunt was a full-twisting double layout, and I landed it with only a bobble.

By the time I had finished, I was breathing heavily. I always had a high after I finished a perfect routine, and today was no different. Usually, that meant I wanted to either fight or fuck. Since Tanner was the only male in the vicinity, I settled for scowling at him.

His mouth was comically agape, eyes wide. I also noticed that his pants were very obviously tented.

Putting an extra sway to my hips, I moved to where he was standing. His eyes followed me as if I had my own magnetic force field. Those pouty lips of his opened, and his tongue snaked out to lick the edge. His hands rose almost instinctively.

I held out my hand to him, tapping my foot impatiently. I tried to pretend I wasn't affected by him, but I knew I wasn't succeeding. My breathing was almost embarrassingly loud. At least I could contribute that to my workout. What was his excuse?

When he stared at me blankly, I nodded toward my phone still clutched in his hand. With what seemed like reluctance, he dropped the phone into my waiting hand.

"What the hell was all that?" To clarify what he meant by "that" he made dramatic looping motions with his hands. Guys were so clueless sometimes.

"That was gymnastics." I reached down to grab my sweatpants and then sweatshirt, a short distance away. I debated whether or not to redress, but decided against it. The last thing I wanted to do was get my clothes all sweaty before my shower.

"I thought gymnastics was like pom-poms and school spirit and all that shit."

Rolling my eyes, I bent down to take a sip of water from the drinking fountain. I could feel his eyes on my ass, but it only tempted me to shake it like a lunatic.

Figured that would make me look like I was seizing. Totally not sexy.

"That's cheerleading," I said at last, wiping water from my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Is there a difference?" he questioned briskly. Despite his tone, I could see genuine curiosity in his eyes. It was that curiosity that compelled me to answer.

"Both are sports, obviously, despite what people say. Have you ever watched college cheerleading or gymnastics? The things they can do with their bodies...that shit's intense. It requires dedication and work ethic. I train five hours a day, five days a



week. Once you commit to it, you can't do it half-assed. Competitive cheer involves both gymnastics and stunting." When he stared at me dumbly, I elaborated in simpleton terms. "Cheerleading is dancing, flipping, and throwing people up in the air. At least competitive. Sideline cheer is different, and that actually involves cheers."

"And you do gymnastics?" he asked.

I nodded, stepping outside. The heat greeted me immediately, and I was suddenly grateful I hadn't put my sweats back on. It was blisteringly hot, the sun broaching the horizon in the cloudless sky. A few people were already up and about, walking the campus dressed in the traditional academy uniforms.

Conformity at its finest, my friends.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

A few stared at me as I strutted by, dressed still in my leotard, but I ignored them. It wasn't as if I was flaunting a lot of skin besides my legs. And it wasn't as if I was dressed the way I was for their benefit. They could get over themselves.

It probably didn't help matters that Tanner glared at everyone who dared get too close to me. With his piercing eyes and tattoos on display, Tanner was a scary son of a bitch. I would most definitely shit my pants if I was on the receiving end of his glare.

Oh, wait. I had been. Multiple times.

It was a miracle that my pants were shit free.

"Do you do sports?" I asked as we entered the dorms once more. The air conditioning was a welcoming relief. If it wouldn't have looked too weird, I would've starfished in the middle of the hall and soaked in all that AC. Alas, starfishing was generally looked down upon.

"Yes," Tanner answered gruffly.

When he didn't elaborate, I elbowed him in the stomach. "It's rude to stalk me and not allow me to stalk you in return."

Disbelief was evident on his face. "You want to stalk me?"

Did he...did he sound awed?

That kinky shit got turned on by the thought.

“I mean, I’ve never stalked anyone before, but it could be kind of fun.” I shrugged a shoulder, picking up my pace to get to my room. Breakfast would begin in a few minutes, and I wanted to shower before then. Sweat was the bane of my existence.

“I play lacrosse,” Tanner mumbled at last, and I staggered to a stop, spinning on my heel to face him.

“Seriously?” I asked. He glared.

Yup. There it was. The shit-your-pants glare. Tanner was an expert at wielding it.

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

I shrugged, walking backward down the hallway.

“The bad boy with tattoos. The I-don’t-give-a-fuck attitude. Probably rides a motorcycle.” I considered him blatantly. “I never would’ve expected you to play an organized sport.”

His lip twitched, there and gone too quickly for me to be certain. I was pretty sure he had a unicorn smile—a term I had coined for those assholes who thought they were too good to smile. It was the equivalent of seeing a unicorn.

“You’re wrong,” he said softly. “I drive a Slug Bug.”

I paused mid-step, mouth dropping open.

“You’re totally fucking with me,” I decided, beginning my backward walk again. His face remained serious.

“Am I?”

“You do not drive a Slug Bug.”

Impassively, he added, “It’s yellow.”

“Well, I drive a bike. It’s black...like my soul.” I mimicked his straight-face.

We had finally reached my room, and I turned then so I could open the door. Tanner remained behind me like my shadow. A big, sexy shadow with a big, sexy chicken leg.

Okay. Totally not sexy when you phrased it like that.

My breath left me when I opened up my dorm room door.

It was like one of those post-apocalyptic movies where everything was left behind in the state of an evacuation. My clothes were on the floor and bed, my dresser was tipped over, and my bed had been completely removed. It appeared as if a tornado had destroyed my room.

Or as if an Aiden had ransacked it.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

I may be stretching, but I was pretty sure it was the latter. If the black-haired man with piercings and a major attitude problem digging through my box of pictures was any proof.

“What the hell?” I snapped. Aiden looked up from his search, a malevolent smile on his face.

“You’re back,” he said helpfully.

“And you’re in my room.” Apparently, we were just pointing out basic facts today.

Aiden gracefully rose to his full height, dark eyes grazing over the room without sticking on anything in particular.

“Josie’s room,” he corrected.

I snorted. “My room. If you have a problem with it, you can bring it up to the school. Or Kace. He works in the admissions office, doesn’t he?”

Aiden was in my face in a matter of seconds. His hand rested on the wall just beside my head. I knew I shouldn’t have been intimidated by him, but his position was an exact replica of another male. Another...

Crossing my arms over my chest to hide my trembling hands, I met his stare indignantly.

He could try to bully me all he wanted, but I would push back. Always. He shoved

me, and I shoved him twice as hard.

“She is fourteen, did you know that?” Aiden leaned even closer, and it took every ounce of willpower not to flinch away. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

“Josie?”

He nodded. “She is fourteen, and she’s gone. Missing. I would do anything to protect the people I love.”

His breath fanned my face, and the smell of peppermints permeated the air.

...and I really shouldn’t be focusing on his toothpaste.

“And is this the part where you threaten me, again? Tell me you’re going to make my life hell, again? Maybe masturbate in a swimming pool of lost dreams and tears?” I sighed. “Because I hate dramatics. Don’t just threaten me. Man up and take some action.”

Aiden chuckled darkly.

“You have a lot of balls,” he murmured. His hand, tantalizingly soft, brushed a strand of my hair behind my ear.

“No, that’s Tanner.”

Yup. Pretty sure Tanner choked on his own spit at that one.

He really had to learn to swallow.

“But you see, I don’t think you’re going to do anything.” I took a step forward until

we were chest to chest. Aiden was breathing heavily, each exhale making his body touch my own. “I think you’re all talk, but no action. I think that somewhere in that fucked up brain of yours, you know I have nothing to do with Josie’s disappearance. But you don’t want to admit it, even to yourself. Why? That remains unclear. Is it because you’re not masculine enough to acknowledge you have a problem? Is it because your dick is constantly flaccid? I mean, a limp dick would make anyone angry. Or is the word I’m looking for hangry? Are you hungry, Aiden?”

I tilted my head back, focusing on the silver bulb in his eyebrow instead of his dark eyes. They were black holes, abysses, and I knew I could get lost in them.

“Now get the fuck out of my room.” I punctuated the final statement with a shove to his chest.

Tanner raised his hand. “Do I have to leave?”

“Were you aware of what your idiotic friend was going to do?”

His sheepish smile was answer enough.

“I saw him enter your room after you left,” he admitted. He didn’t sound guilty about keeping it a secret, only that he got caught.

Asshole.

With an imperious set to my chin, I pointed toward the door.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

“You have five seconds to get out before I scream,” I said.

Aiden narrowed his eyes into thin slits.

“You wouldn’t dare.” His voice was low. A warning and a promise. A promise for what had yet to be seen.

I raised a brow at him, allowing my lips to curve slightly. “Do you want to take that chance?”

It was a contest of wills as I locked eyes with him. The air crackled with tension until it became almost palpable.

But what he failed to realize was that I was an expert at staring contests. Hadn’t lost in three years.

Bitch had nothing on me.

After what felt like an eternity, Aiden pulled his eyes off of mine with a grunt. Without another word, he stomped out of my room like the drama queen I knew him to be.

“You, too,” I said to Tanner, who stubbornly remained. His full lips pursed.

“I thought we bonded today,” he protested.

“Oh please.” Rolling my eyes, I moved to pick up the clothes that were now on the



ground. “You just want to get in my pants...er...leotard.”

Without bothering to acknowledge something we both knew to be true, he said, “I’ve never seen anyone stand up to Aiden like that. Most are too scared of him.”

“He doesn’t scare me,” I blurted, folding up a shirt. The sudden silence was charged with tension.

“And why is that?” Tanner asked tightly. Suspiciously. A voice that hinted he knew exactly what I wanted to remain hidden.

“Because I know evil, I’ve seen evil, and Aiden isn’t it.” I settled on a half-truth. I had seen evil. Seeping over my skin. Contaminating my lungs. Killing me. There was so much evil in the world, so much darkness, that my only option was to find one bright spot and hold onto it. That was Beau. My light.

“But I’m serious, Tanner, get out.”

It must’ve been something in my voice, a quiver perhaps, for Tanner slipped out without confrontation.

Alone at last, I allowed the tears I kept at bay to slide down my cheeks.

What Aiden failed to realize was that he would never be the big, scary monster in my story. I had a monster.

And his name was Dylan.

6

Beau

Bianaca must've forgotten that I was a light sleeper. Maybe she did know, at least innately, and chose to ignore it.

Standing in the shower, beneath the blistering water, I allowed my mind to wander back to that moment less than an hour ago. Out of my peripheral in my tiny twin bed, I watched her hand tease her breast, her nipple a beaded bud as she rubbed it into submission. When her hand slid down to her panties—my favorite red ones—I thought I was going to come right then and there. Her tiny gasps. Those breathy moans. That damn mewl.

It hadn't even bothered me that Tanner had also been privy to her little show. I was too turned-on, too aroused, to think clearly. He could've been fucking her, and it would've been okay with me.

My hand dropped to my rock-hard cock as I stroked myself. Was it wrong for me to think of my best friend in such a way? Maybe. Possibly.

Perhaps that was why I was so accepting of Tanner being with her. I knew I would never get the chance—she only considered me as a friend—so I had to live vicariously through others.

I pictured her dewy features, heart-shaped face, and golden hair cascading around her shoulders. Her breasts heaving beneath her thin shirt.

Breathing heavily, I exploded, the image of her plump, pink lips around my cock sending me over the edge.

God, I loved her. I didn't think it was possible to love someone like I loved her. Her smile was capable of lighting even the darkest of days. And when she laughed? I was a goner. From the first moment she teased me, I knew it was her. Only her. I would love her until the day I died.

From afar, of course. I wasn't stupid enough to believe she loved me back. She had only ever looked at me like she would a friend, a best friend, and I knew she needed my friendship more than she needed a boyfriend. I could be what she needed, though, even if it killed me.

I was dying, ever so slowly. But it was worth it. To be a part of her life...I could want for nothing.

Turning off the shower, I toweled myself off and dressed in the standard school uniform. The shirt clung to my muscles, and I purposefully left the top few buttons undone. I knew that she had a strange fascination with my skin. Don't ask me why.

Quickly, I raked my fingers through my wet blond hair and stepped into the hallway from the community men showers.

I let out a gasp when I ran into a familiar figure.

Mary...or something. I couldn't recall her name. She was pretty in an elfin sort of way with light blond hair, as thin and as straight as golden wheat, and large eyes.

"Beau!" she said cheerfully, placing a hand on my arm. I tried not to flinch at the initiation of contact.

I smiled and nodded at her in greeting.

She was pretty enough, I would admit, and I would also admit that I would've fucked the shit out of her only a year before. Nothing romantic, but in a desperate attempt to get over my unreciprocated feelings for B.

And then I decided—fuck it. It wasn't fair to these girls, and it sure as hell wasn't fair to me. Since I came to that conclusion, I had turned into a damn monk.

“How's your room? Your roommate? Your roommate is Tanner, correct?” Her voice took on a wistful quality when she said his name. “Have you met his other friends yet? Aiden and Kace?”

Her cheeks heated, and I tried to smother the snort that threatened to escape. No doubt, she was thinking about a big-ass orgy with the three of them and her in the middle. I got it. I did.

The dudes were hot. If I wasn't desperately in love with B, I might've even propositioned them. I wasn't gay or anything, but I liked sex. A lot. Boys. Girls. It didn't matter to me...anything to help me take the edge off.

Poor Mary...Marie...failed to realize that they had their sights set on another girl. My girl. I wasn't sure the guys had even realized it as of yet.

Smiling in what I hoped wasn't a condescending manner—I didn't want to be a dick—I moved to walk past her. Either she was oblivious and didn't get my hint, or she was persistent.

“My room is a few doors down,” she said chirpily. I smiled once again and nodded. Her eyes heated at my acknowledgment, and I felt a pang of guilt. She would expect me to come visit her, would hold onto that hope, and would be disappointed when her

fantasies never came to be.

Finally—finally—I stopped in front of B’s room, hand tightening on the doorknob.

“Is this your room?” she asked, fluttering her lashes in what she probably suspected was a seductive manner. Frankly, she looked as if she was seizing.

Once again, I gifted her with my customary nod and smile. Fake as shit. Only someone who truly knew me would note the tightening of my eyes and the smile that doubled as a grimace. I had learned how to articulate every word through my features, how to tell a story through look alone. However, I also learned how to blank my expression until my true emotions were unrecognizable. Unattainable, as B once told me. I hid behind these impenetrable walls that not even cannons could conquer.

I didn’t bother to tell a giddy Maria that this was B’s room. At the end of the day, I had no doubt I would spend more time here than in my own. Curled around B’s dainty body. The pervasive scent of her honeysuckle body wash enticing me. The soft skin beneath my fingers.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

Maria stood, waiting, and I awkwardly waved. What did she want from me?

When the tension became almost palpable, thick enough to cut with a knife, I opened the door, slipped inside, and lightly shut it.

It took me a moment to take stock of B's minuscule dorm room, and another moment for the proper anger to fester.

Her room was in shambles. Clothing littered the ground, and her dresser balanced precariously on one leg. Her bedspread, the school-sanctioned peach color, was shredded, as well as her mattress.

All I saw was red, vibrant in its intensity. I barely even noticed that my hands were clenched into fists by my sides, the overwhelming need to smash them into someone's face nearly killing me. I had no doubt who was behind this destruction.

The same asshole who had threatened her. Who she had threatened with pleasure I could only dream of having.

B was bent over her duffle bag, muttering inarticulately beneath her breath as she inventoried her belongings.

She was dressed in that damn leotard—the leotard that was both a godsend and my own personal hell. How was it possible for someone to look so perfect, so beautiful? The fabric accentuated her delectable curves, and her golden hair was flowing around her shoulders. It was a different color than Maria's. While Maria's was so blond it was almost white, B's was pure, undiluted gold. Darker strands of brown were woven

throughout, heightening the brown in her eyes.

A memory assaulted me then—a memory I didn't recognize—and I staggered.

\* \* \*

“You fucking cunt,” a malicious voice sneered.

My voice was raspy from years of no use, but the words came out clearly. “I’m going to kill you.”

He laughed, the sound grating on my nerves. Anger thrummed through my veins like wave after wave of electricity.

“I’d like to see you try.”

\* \* \*

I was pulled out of my strange daydream by B’s voice. Shaking my head, I willed myself back to the present. Trying to understand my vision was like trying to push back the waves of the ocean: impossible.

Just a product of this fucked up school, I told myself.

“You just going to stand there like a creeper?” B quipped, not bothering to turn around. She placed her hands on her hips and cocked them to the side. “You know what, never mind. I’m done. Fuck them right in the ass with a dildo made of barbed wire.”

With a dramatic sigh, she flopped onto the bed, placing a hand over her eyes. The bed creaked dangerously, but B didn’t react.

I hesitantly reached down and grabbed a pair of jeans off the floor, folding them up and setting them on her still standing desk.

“I’m tired and hungry and sweaty and just not in the mood for this shit.” Once again, she released an agitated sigh. One eye blinked open, surveying me. “Come cuddle.”

There was both a plea and a demand in her voice. Vulnerable and dominant. My cock hardened shamelessly, but she fortunately had already reshut her eyes.

I didn’t need to be told twice. Quickly, I scurried to the bed and dropped down beside her. She immediately curled onto my chest, her head in the crook of my neck, and I breathed in her heady, distinct scent.

Being with B was wandering alone at night, then suddenly emerging in a bright paradise. It was the elation you felt drinking water after years in the desert. It was rainbows and sunshine and every fucking cheesy description you could think of.

“Sorry if I’m sweaty,” she mumbled sleepily into my chest. It was well into the morning, the sun breaking through the foliage of trees outside her window, but I knew B would be tired after an intensive workout. More times than I could count, B would return from gymnastics practice dead to the world. She would collapse onto the nearest flat surface, the rest of the world diminishing to mere background noise.

I wanted to ask her what had happened, if those assholes had hurt her, if she was okay, but I was content just to hold her. Love her. Feel her heartbeat thrum against my chest. Her silky soft hair brushed my face with each twitch of her body, and I inhaled her scent. Love for her reverberated through my body, my heart, like a sledgehammer, until all that existed was her. Her and me, in a cocoon of our own making.

“I think I’m going to go to the admissions office later on,” she confided softly. “I



can't handle...I just don't want to deal with people."

I snorted. Understatement of the century. B really only had two moods. Stabby and murder. I had the distinct feeling that Kace, Aiden, and Tanner evoked the latter one. Only I was fortunate enough to see the full spectrum.

She giggled against my chest, hearing what I didn't say aloud.

"I'm not usually this..." She trailed off, unable to find an appropriate word. I didn't think there was any word in the English dictionary that could describe Bianaca Steal.

C-R-A-Z-Y

I wrote into the sensitive skin of her arm. I didn't have to see her to know that she rolled her eyes.

"I'm always crazy," she countered. "But they just bring out the psychopathic crazy."

Patting my stomach, she abruptly jumped to her feet.

"I need to shower and get dressed. Are you staying here?"

I nodded. There was nowhere else I would rather be.

Her eyes softened as they traced my features, there and gone too quickly for me to be certain I hadn't imagined it. My heart pounded erratically in my chest at her unexpected display of affection.

She grabbed her uniform off the floor and slipped out, smiling at me. My head fell backward on her pillow, and I groaned.

That woman...she was going to be the death of me.

7

Bianaca

The first person I saw when I entered the admissions office was Kace.

He wore the standard school uniform that showcased his muscular thighs and toned back. He wasn't as big as Tanner nor as tall as Beau, but he was definitely not lacking in the muscle department.

He was bending over a filing cabinet when I stepped up, and my eyes, unbidden, landed on his firm ass. Straightening, he flashed a wicked grin over his shoulder.

"Well hello, pretty lady," he teased. My cheeks wanted to erupt in flames at being caught ogling, but I willed my expression to remain impassive. He may have had a good butt, but he was a dick. They all were.

I had heard whispers of them as I had walked the halls. The Three Horsemen. Apparently, they were waiting for their fourth. A stupid nickname, if I did say so myself.

Without preamble, I dropped my information packet into his hands. His brow furrowed, lips curving downward adorably.

I pointed to my room number, trembling with agitation.

"I want to change rooms," I said curtly.

Kace's eyes widened marginally, almost imperceptibly, at my tone, but his signature grin remained in place.

"That's not allowed."

He handed me the packet back and stepped toward the desk. Surprisingly, we were the only two in the office. It was almost eerie without the chatter of students and the clicking of keyboards being typed on.

"Why the hell isn't it allowed?" I asked, standing in the center of the room. My eyes followed his movements as my body remained still. Frozen in shock.

He casually, almost indolently, sat in his leather chair, legs kicked back. He grinned impishly at me.

"Don't know. I didn't write the rules." Shrugging, he turned toward his computer, dismissing me.

Oh, hell no. I was not being fucking dismissed by him.

With a speed that shocked even myself, I moved around the desk and placed myself in front of his computer screen. In this position, I found myself standing between his legs, those long lashes of his fluttering against prominent cheekbones. I briefly lost my train of thought as he stared up at me.

His lips curled up on one side in a crooked grin.

"So you threaten me, destroy my room, and annoy the living hell out of me...all because of where I was placed to live in. Outside of my control, might I add. And when I try to switch rooms, you tell me it's impossible. Am I hearing this right?" I asked. My voice rose with each word until I was practically shouting.

Still, that infuriating smirk never left his handsome face.

“I didn’t destroy your room, nor did I threaten you,” he said at last, and my temper flared.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” I threw my arm back, irritated, not seeing the coffee cup until it shattered and black liquid spilled everywhere.

Cursing, I jumped away from Kace, an apology on my lips. That apology died when I took in the laughter dancing in his eyes. The mirth in his smile.

The blisteringly hot liquid landed on the keyboard, sizzling, before cascading onto the floor. Still, Kace did not stop smiling.

Laughing, he jumped to his feet.

“I always hated that damn computer. Seriously, I think it was made in the 90s.”

“Um...”

Fear strangled me. It may have been a piece of shit computer, but it was still the school’s, and it still cost money. Money that I didn’t have. Breathing was difficult as I stared at the sparking keyboard.

“What’s wrong?” Kace asked, amusement draining from his eyes. He began to take a step toward me, thought better of it, and stepped backward.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

“What’s wrong?” I laughed in disbelief. “What’s wrong is that there’s a broken computer here that I’m going to have to pay for.”

I began to run through a list of my expenses. Gymnastics itself cost an arm and a leg. Literally. Mom and Steve had agreed to pay for that, if only to get me out of the house and their lives. I recently took a job as a waitress on the weekends—so long as I didn’t have a gymnastics meet on that Saturday—but the tips were subpar at best. I didn’t need expensive clothing. Thrift stores could sustain me for a little while. I even came across a few leotards on more than one occasion while shopping there. I could potentially sell a few of my solid gold medals as well as—

“I’ll take care of it,” Kace said off-handedly. I blinked.

“Huh?”

“I’ll take care of it,” he repeated.

I was struck dumb. Speechless. The scared little girl within me wanted to jump on his offer like it was a raft floating in the ocean. The independent woman wanted to scoff at his condescending tone. I didn’t need people to pity me, pity my upbringing, and I especially didn’t need them to splurge money on me like I was some type of prostitute.

Money, I had come to realize, always had strings attached. No one ever willingly handed it out. No one ever willingly protected someone they didn’t know. Didn’t like.

I crossed my arms under my breasts, and his eyes instinctively flickered downward,

his Adam's apple bobbing. Just as quickly, they danced upward, once more meeting my eyes.

“What do you want?” I asked cagily.

His eyes widened in horror.

“You seem to be under this delusional mentality that someone can't do something nice for another person without expecting something in return.” He began to pace, his feet leaving imprints on the off-white carpeting.

Leaning back against the distressed wood of the desk, I folded my arms over my chest. “I don't know why you, of all people, would expect anything different. You and your friends hate me.”

He didn't let up his erratic pacing.

“We hate what you represent,” he said dismissively. He punctuated that statement with a wave of his hand, effectively sliding it under the rug in his own mind. I bristled. “Josie was our best friend,” he continued. “When she and her girlfriend went missing...I've never seen Aiden lose it like that. They were both his little sisters.”

“I'm sorry,” I whispered, and I honestly was. However, I didn't know how any of that related to me. It was merely a coincidence that I happened to be placed in Josie's old room.

“If it wasn't for the dreams—” Kace broke off abruptly, running a shaky hand through his auburn hair. “That's not important.”

On the contrary, I had the distinct feeling that it was extremely important. When Kace's eyes flitted around the cluttered office, not sticking on one thing in particular,

I realized he was hiding something from me. Something that had to do with Josie and this entire mess I found myself in. He knew why Aiden was so antagonistic toward me. He knew...and was keeping his mouth shut.

My retort died on my lips at the sound of footsteps.

Spinning on my heel, I came face to face with a stampede of teachers. They all wore solid black clothing and similar white masks, moving as fluid as water to form a semi-circle around Kace and me. I didn't have to see their eyes to know that they would be fixed on the sputtering computer.

My heart hammered in my chest, each breath clogging my throat. There was something about these professors, something about the power they exuded that went beyond a mere authority figure, that caused my stomach to plummet through the floorboards.

Instinctively, I inched a step closer to Kace. My hands trembled by my sides, but I shoved them into my skirt pocket. For some reason, I knew that any show of fear from me would be fatal.

As quickly as I thought that, I swept it away in a tidal wave of anger. They were teachers, not monsters. There was no logical explanation for why I felt such unease in their presence.

Kace, however, went ramrod straight beside me, his lips flattening into a thin line. He bowed his head submissively, peeking through a fringe of dark lashes.

"I apologize," he said sincerely. "I spilled my coffee, and Bianaca was helping me clean up."

For a second, it was so silent I could've heard a pin drop. That silence was penetrated



by the slap of flesh. I turned, wide-eyed, just in time to see Kace rubbing at his now red cheek. One of the professors slowly lowered his—her?—gloved hand.

Terror cemented me to the ground. Terror and something akin to disbelief. What the hell had I just witnessed?

I immediately opened my mouth to call out the horrendous human being who dared put a hand on Kace, but the boy in question grabbed my shoulders, placing a hand over my mouth. I struggled futilely in his iron vise of a grip, but he refused to relent his hold.

I wanted to scream at these masked men and women. These cowards.

How fucking dare they?

Seething, I watched them calmly glide out of the room. It was only then that Kace released me, sighing heavily and throwing himself into the chair. He looked tired. Worn. Dark circles were prominent beneath his mossy green eyes.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

“What the hell?” I whispered. For some reason, I found I couldn’t raise my voice. Now that the fear had ebbed, my body trembled with fury.

“Don’t,” he warned me. With a tired sigh, he ran his fingers once more through his garnet streaked hair.

“Don’t what?” I snapped. “Don’t act appalled that a teacher laid a hand on you? Don’t be disgusted? We need to call the cops!”

His body was drooping with fatigue, but at my words, he straightened and his eyes turned icy.

“I will deny everything,” he said curtly.

I gaped.

“What? Why the hell would you do that?” I demanded. He jumped to his feet abruptly, towering over me. The part of me that had been abused and taken advantage of wanted to cower away, but I held firm, meeting his eyes.

“Stay out of things you know nothing about,” he hissed, teeth flashing in the artificial school lighting. My heart pounded in my chest, but not in fear. Just then, he was heart-wrenchingly beautiful.

Standing toe-to-toe with him, I held up my chin imperiously. “Make me.”

He grunted, muttering something indistinct beneath his breath, before sidestepping

me and racing out of the office. He kicked a garbage can as he went, not bothering to watch it and the garbage scatter across the floor.

My stomach clenched, my mind racing a mile a minute. When I tried to process what I had just witnessed, a headache erupted behind my eyes. It just didn't make sense. Kace's reaction. The teachers inflicting physical harm on the students.

And, perhaps most importantly, the flicker of fear in his normally jubilant eyes. I had seen fear like that once before—in my own eyes when I looked into the mirror, after Dylan had...

It was a sort of haunted expression that made me question how much he really knew about this school.

I thought of my own acceptance...or something. The memory was fuzzy. I remembered the car accident, but not the explicit reasons why I had been driving under such distress, and I somewhat recalled... a conversation with my parents, perhaps?

My head continued to pound in tandem to my racing heart.

Releasing a breath, I glanced once more around the empty admissions office. It felt smaller without Kace's larger-than-life presence. Empty.

Hoisting my backpack farther up my shoulder, I stepped into the hallway. For the first time, I spotted more than one student roaming the halls. They all wore a similar style of uniform to the one I had on. A few of them cast me perplexed glances before quickly looking away. No doubt they had witnessed Kace's tantrum through the glass windows.

And probably even the slap to his face.

My temper flared once more as I met each of their gazes. If they had seen, why hadn't they done anything?

My eyes locked on a striking shade of blue on the other end of the school hall. He was impossible to miss, towering over the other students at six feet and four inches. His eyes narrowed into thin slits even as a malicious smirk tugged up a corner of his mouth.

No.

I thought I had escaped him. In my mind, he was nothing more than a distant memory. A nightmare that demanded it remain buried.

Somehow, somehow, my monster had found its way from under my bed and was standing in front of me.

My body trembled, fear and anger battling for dominance. It was my fear that won, and I raced down the hall in the opposite direction of him as if I was on fire.

One word reverberated through my head, a motto and a prayer.

Escape.

I pushed open the bathroom door and flung myself into the nearest stall. Dimly, I was aware of tears cascading down my cheeks and landing on my lips.

He couldn't be here. I had thought I had left him behind, left that part of my past buried.

But, as promised, Dylan Holebroke had found me.

8

Bianaca

I used to fear the dark.

It—the darkness—was where my monsters hid. It was the place I had lost my innocence, my hope, until all that remained was a bitter, frightened girl.

In some twisted way, the darkness was also my savior. With it, I couldn't make out his face. The lust I knew would be emanating from his eyes. The curve of his lips. Instead, I saw only a silhouette. It allowed me to believe, if only for a moment, that what happened was just a dream. A nightmare.

But with any darkness, light always seeped through. This light wasn't necessarily a good thing. It just meant that I saw everything with vivid clarity for the first time in my life.

My mind propelled me backward, toward a time I wished to eradicate from my mind.

\* \* \*

I held the blade loosely, surveying the bright silver in the artificial lighting. My body was shaking, but my hand was surprisingly steady.

As I narrowed my eyes at the offending object, I could've sworn it whispered seductive promises to me. Ways to diminish the pain that threatened to consume me.

And that was all I wanted...for the pain to stop.

I brought the blade down on my wrist, tears blurring my eyes. They tasted salty—like blood.

The second it would've touched my sensitive skin, I paused.

Why should I let Dylan continue to control me the way he had? He shouldn't be allowed to dictate how I felt about myself and my body. Still, I couldn't deny that ever since that night, I felt ugly and used. Unwanted. A discarded scrap of trash tossed to the side of the road.

It would be so easy...

I just needed something, anything, to soothe the mental anguish. The mental pain. What would be a better solution than physical pain?

With that thought, I brought the blade once more to my skin. A strangled gasp escaped me as blood welled, a deep, vivid red.

I never knew blood could be so red, so bright. It screamed at me against my pale skin.

Sobbing, I brought the blade back to my skin, parallel to the first mark, and began to cut again.

And again.

And again.

\* \* \*

I was pulled out of my thoughts by a bathroom stall opening and closing. A collection of giggles and heels clanking against the linoleum tiles of the bathroom floor.

Wiping my tears on the sleeve of my blouse, I stood reluctantly, flushed the toilet despite the fact I didn't use it, and stepped outside. A few of the girls gave me quick glances, no doubt noticing my red, blotchy face, before turning back toward one another. Nobody asked me if I was alright, and I didn't know if that was a blessing or a curse.

Washing my hands, I shouldered past the throng of curious teenage girls and into the hallway. My breathing was embarrassingly loud, and my heart threatened to pound straight out of my chest.

What was he doing here?

Was this some twisted, fucked up joke by the universe?

Stumbling over my own two feet, I made my way down the hallway. I knew that the majority of the students were in the cafeteria, but the last thing I wanted to do was surround myself with people. They always saw too much, heard too much, assumed the worst. For some undefinable reason, my life felt like it was under a microscope. One wrong move and I would be dissected.

Beau would be waiting for me, but he couldn't know. Not him. He would see straight through my smile in the way only Beau was able to. I could never hide anything from him no matter how hard I tried.

I tried to gorge the image of Dylan's face out of my mind, but it remained imprinted. Taunting me. Laughing at me. A scream threatened to escape me, but I kept it in check.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

At least until I entered my room...

I yelped as I ran into a warm, muscular body. The apology on my lips faltered when I met Aiden's dark eyes. His tongue was absently swirling around his lip ring, and I wasn't going to lie and say I wasn't hypnotized.

"Where are you running off to, little one?" he asked mockingly. Only then did I rip my eyes off his lips and meet his dark, piercing gaze. The amusement diminished when he took stock of my expression. Fury replaced it almost instantly. "What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

He cast a quick, predatory look around as if the person who had hurt me was lurking behind a damn flowerpot waiting to jump out and say "boo."

"Why does it fucking matter?" I asked, attempting to bypass him. His hand gripped my wrist. It wasn't painful by any means, but I was already so riled up from seeing Dylan that I involuntarily flinched.

Aiden released me as if I was acid, eyes darkening even further.

"Who hurt you?" he demanded. And that was what it was—a demand. He would not take "no" for an answer. This was the type of man who was used to getting his way, used to people falling over their feet to please him.

Unfortunately for him, he had never come across the likes of me.

He was giving me whiplash with his hot then cold attitude, and I was getting damn



tired of it.

“Fuck off,” I hissed, spinning on my heel and stomping down the hall. I had no destination in mind—hell, I didn’t even know where this particular hallway led me—but I knew I couldn’t be around Aiden a second longer without being arrested for murder. The man annoyed the ever-loving shit out of me.

“Is this how it’s going to be?” Despite me practically running, his long legs were able to keep pace with me. The condescending, asshole smirk was once again etched across his face, but a fire still burned in his eyes. A fire that promised vengeance and pain. I couldn’t decide if that pain was directed at me.

“How is it, Aiden?” I said his name as if it was something vulgar, a curse word, and I was at church. “Me walking away from you? Me telling you to fuck off and leave me the hell alone? Because I can tell you this is exactly how it’s gonna be.”

His eyes flared briefly. At first, I thought it was anger, anger toward me, before I realized...

“You kinky shit,” I mused in disbelief. “You like when I talk back to you.”

One glance at his erection tenting his pants confirmed that he was, indeed, aroused.

“If it makes you feel better, I don’t think you’re behind Josie’s disappearance.” He shared this with feigned nonchalance, but I could see a brief flicker of pain in his eyes when he spoke of his missing sister. That pain was replaced by anger, so strong that I gasped. “And I would be more than happy to kill whoever put that haunted look in your eyes.”

I gaped at him, wondering if he was serious. After a moment of silently staring, questioning his sanity, I shook my head and continued walking.

“You’re insane,” I decided. “Next you’re going to tell me the proper ways to dispose of a body.”

He smiled cruelly. “That’s more Tanner’s expertise. Apparently, a tub of acid would do the job just nicely.” He paused suddenly, grabbing my waist to spin me around. “There’s a reason they call us the Three Horsemen.”

“Because you bring destruction,” I said breathily. His proximity was messing with my brain cells. If he did this to me, I had no doubt he could completely destroy any lesser woman or man. He, and the rest of them, were dangerous. It was unsurprising they left a trail of destruction in their wake. The most beautiful type of storm but destructive, nonetheless.

“Everything but death,” he agreed. He leaned closer, and I was suddenly assaulted by his scent. Woodsy. Smoke. Outdoors. I didn’t know why it comforted me as much as it did.

“Until you find the fourth horseman,” I pointed out. I needed distance from him. Now. Hundreds of miles still wouldn’t be enough. He had his own magnetic field, and like the idiot I was, I was helpless not to be drawn into it.

Pressing my hands to his chest, I shoved. There was no way I would’ve been able to move him if he wasn’t willing, but he must’ve sensed my sudden surge of anxiety. His hands disappeared inside his pants pockets as he leaned against the wall.

“When we find our fourth horseman,” he began, words a seductive purr, “you can bet your ass that this world will burn. And when the person we love is threatened?” His lips flattened. “Everyone will die.”

9

Bianaca

I remained in my room, staring blindly out the window. At one point, it had begun to rain. Thunder crackled overhead and lightning struck, illuminating the sky in palest gold.

I barely processed Beau sitting beside me on the bed, wrapping his muscular arm around my waist. He held me to him, content to comfort me and hold me together when I wanted nothing more than to fall apart. He didn't ask me what was wrong—he knew I wasn't in a state to answer—but he didn't let go of me, either.

Hours passed. We moved only for bathroom breaks and to sneak snacks from the cafeteria. Still, my stomach began to growl, having only eaten one granola bar that entire day.

E-A-T, he wrote on my skin. Goosebumps erupted wherever his calloused finger touched me. I shivered delicately.

“I'm not hungry,” I whispered, focusing once more on the bloated, angry storm clouds prowling overhead and the pelting rain. Beau leveled me with a no-nonsense scowl. Before I could protest or assure him I was fine, he grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet.

I didn't complain as he led me outside, beneath an awning that shielded us from the worst of the storm, and to the cafeteria.

“Princess, I’m surprised to see you here,” a snide voice said from behind me. I rolled my eyes but did not allow Aiden’s presence to deter me from my goal.

My goal: eating as much food as humanly possible until I could continue in my wallow of self-pity and teenage angst. Healthy, I know.

“In the cafeteria?” I snapped, barely sparing him a glance as I piled my plate high with spaghetti. “Eating?”

I was becoming increasingly pissed at his devaluation of women. He deserved a good kick to the balls. With cleats on. Metal cleats. Cleats made of knives sounded appealing...

“That’s not what I meant,” Aiden said with an eye roll.

“Look, I don’t give a shit ‘what you meant’,” I hissed, throwing his words back at him. “You said it yourself...you don’t think I’m behind Josie’s disappearance. Leave me the hell alone.”

Aiden clicked his tongue ring against his teeth, the sound oddly seductive. Decadent.

“I’m afraid that’s not a possibility anymore,” he said lightly. His eyes shone with humor.

What I wouldn’t give to shove a poisonous dildo into that smug, smiling mouth—

Beau stopped whatever retort burned on my tongue, one arm lazily resting on my shoulders. Aiden’s eyes narrowed on the limb before his smile widened.

Crazy, psychotic bitch.

“Come,” he said, nodding toward the table we had sat at last time. My cheeks heated when I thought of our encounter.

The salty taste of Aiden’s finger...

The bulge in Kace’s pants...

And then my thoughts drifted to Tanner’s sensual show just that morning. The feel of Beau pressed against my back, arm spooned around me, hand inches from my breasts...

Down girl, I scolded mentally. I really had to get fucked. My damn ovaries were practically putting up ads on Craigslist: Wanted. Four Men to Find a Home Within My Pussy.

So fucking dramatic.

My vagina, that was. She acted like she hadn’t been fed in years.

Beau paid for my dinner, and I reluctantly followed him toward the table that housed the Three Horsemen. Only Tanner sat there currently, his feet kicked out and a lighter in his hand. As I watched, brow furrowing, a brilliant flame emerged. Tanner stared at the flickering flame with awe. Wonder. Reverence.

When he caught me looking, he shoved the lighter into his leather jacket pocket and flashed me an indolent grin.

“If it isn’t the little gymnast,” he cooed.

Throwing myself into the seat opposite him, I gave him the finger.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

“There is nothing little about me,” I practically purred, running a hand down the cleavage my shirt revealed. Tanner’s Adam’s apple bobbed, eyes riveted on the swath of skin exposed. “You, on the other hand...” I trailed off, satisfaction filling me when Tanner’s cheeks turned red and he huffed out his chest.

Beau snickered, covering his mouth with his hand when Tanner turned his glare onto my best friend.

“As much as I love measuring penises,” Aiden deadpanned, “I would rather talk about you.”

He pierced me with a stare that put all other stares to shame. He took tall, dark, and sexy to a whole new extreme with that one eloquent look that made words unnecessary. Once again, he was demanding things of me I wasn’t sure I wanted to give him.

“There’s nothing interesting about me,” I huffed, glaring at my spaghetti. I swirled it around my fork, my appetite suddenly forgotten.

“You sure? I think flexibility is quite interesting,” he said.

“Why do you always have to make things a sexual innuendo?” I asked absently. Tentatively, I took a bite of the spaghetti. Knowing my luck, psycho Aiden would’ve poisoned it. Lure me in with a false sense of security...and then bam. Murder me.

It wasn’t poisoned, at least from what little I knew of how poison tastes (which was nothing at all), but it was salty.

Like Aiden's finger.

"It's only sexual if you make it sexual," Tanner pointed out.

"How did I make it sexual by pointing out he made it sexual?" I jabbed a finger at Aiden's chest across the table. When the asshole opened his mouth to respond, and no doubt confuse me further, I blurted, "Where's Kace?"

His energetic presence was noticeably absent.

Aiden and Tanner exchanged a quick look. It was only a second, but it allowed me to know everything they weren't telling me.

Whatever they said next was going to be a lie.

"Sleeping, probably," Tanner said dismissively. Too dismissively. Too nonchalantly.

How ridiculous would it be if I sang "liar, liar, pants on fire"?

I thought of the last time I had seen him. The look of terror on his face seconds before he was slapped. The hand-shaped, red imprint on his cheek. The anger burning in his eyes. They were hiding something from me, and I was damn near determined to get to the bottom of it.

Aiden stiffened suddenly. His hand darted out and grabbed my own, squeezing tightly. I glanced at him in confusion before turning a quirked brow to Beau. Beau, however, was staring at the offending limb as if he hoped he could burn a hole through it.

"Keep your head down and don't fucking say anything," Aiden hissed, releasing me and bowing his head. His long, ringed fingers absently picked apart his sandwich as if

he didn't have a care in the world.

But I could see the tension in his powerful muscles, the rigid way he held himself.

"Head down," Tanner snapped, kicking my shin. Obediently, perhaps recognizing the plea in their command, I lowered my head. Beau, beside me, did the same.

When the professors entered the cafeteria, they didn't walk. They glided. The footsteps had an eerie absence of sound, which made the beating of my heart all the more oppressive and haunting. I could hear nothing but my own heart pounding in tandem to their rhythmic steps.

With bated breath, I glanced up through my fringe of thick lashes, ignoring Aiden's hiss of disapproval.

They moved to form a circle around the perimeter of the cafeteria, their masked faces staring at no one and everyone.

Static crackled overhead from the school's intercom. A mechanical voice echoed over the speaker.

"Juliet Hudson," it said. I couldn't decipher any gender. It just...was.

A trembling girl stood from a table near ours. She couldn't have been older than fifteen and had a light cascade of bleached blond hair and way too much eye makeup.

The moment she stood, two of the professors rushed forward and grabbed each of her arms.

I couldn't help my sharp intake of breath.



This didn't remind me of a school...this reminded me of prison guards transporting prisoners.

## Page 32

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

Beau's fingernails dug into my thigh, and I turned my hand over to capture his own, locking our fingers together.

"Ali Griffin."

I stiffened as the girl I had talked to only yesterday, the girl who had warned me about the guys, was yanked from her seat. Sobs shook her body, but the professors—if you could even call them that—did not relent. They dragged her kicking and screaming out of the cafeteria.

They listed a few more names, all in that mechanical voice, and a few more students were dragged out of the room. It went in one ear and out the other. Their screams. Cries. That damn, grating voice...

I couldn't process what I was seeing. Hearing. Experiencing. A part of me didn't even want to.

My hands shook.

"What the hell—" I began, my voice a whisper. Aiden leveled me with a glare that would make any sane person shit their pants.

The glare did nothing for me—I already knew I was insane.

"Shut the hell up," he hissed.

Beau's hand was tight in mine; I knew for certain that he was going to leave crescent-

shaped indents in my skin from his fingernails.

We waited a minute in silence. It felt like hours. It felt like years. Time moved slowly when you were scared, I realized. Like molten lava sludging down the base of a volcano. There should be an entirely new time system for fear.

That minute? Longest damn minute of my life.

The whispers began once more followed quickly by a boisterous laugh a few tables over. It was that laugh that set off a chain reaction, like a wildfire in the forest. Everyone began talking at once, hands moving animatedly and smiles on their faces. Only a few, Beau and I included, still looked scared.

“What the everloving fuck—”

“Language,” Aiden chastised, finally tilting his head up and shoving his sandwich into his mouth.

“How can you be so calm?” I asked in disbelief. Fear was running rampant in my stomach, a vociferous mixture of dread and anxiety that threatened to choke me. What I had seen should not have evoked such calm, serene reactions from anyone. It was pulled straight from a horror novel—Psycho 101. A class I was sure Aiden excelled at.

Tanner was the one who answered, shrugging his broad shoulders.

“We’re used to it.”

The words were like a bucket of cold water dousing me. Submerging me. Drowning me. I gasped for breath, struggling to take air into my lungs. Was that what dying felt like?

It sucked ass.

“You want a word of advice?” Aiden asked casually. He lazily took a sip from his coffee cup—probably spiked with vodka and the blood of his enemies—before meeting my eyes. He appeared calm, but there was a slight furrow between his brows. A crinkle that hadn’t been there previously. It was the only hint that something lurked beneath his apathetic front. Somehow, that damn skin crinkle demoted him from intimidating to approachable. It made him look...human.

Not a word I would normally associate with Aiden.

“What’s this word of advice?” I asked, only half-listening. The other half was planning an escape. A way out. This was...

There were no words in the English dictionary that could possibly describe all that I felt about this hellish place. Had I somehow landed in the loony bin? That wouldn’t surprise me. I was one hit away from blowing. All someone had to do was light the fuse, and then...boom. An exploding Bianaca.

A dead Bianaca.

After all, you couldn’t survive such an explosion.

“Keep your head down. Don’t make eye contact. Don’t draw attention to yourself,” Aiden ticked off, using his fingers as a visual.

“Oh...and don’t die,” Tanner added.

Something occurred to me then, plowing me over like a semi-truck. I met Aiden’s icy eyes as revelation crested the horizon. For the first time, I could see. Or at least understand. His anger and aggression. His fear. That haunted, vulnerable look in his

eyes.

“Is that what happened to Josie?” I asked before I could stop myself. “Was she taken just like those other students were?”

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

I knew I had crossed a line when he went ramrod straight, his hands curling into fists. His expression clouded over, gray storm clouds moving in front of the sun, before he jumped to his feet. In a matter of seconds, he was towering over me.

I wanted to cower at his proximity, to retreat in on myself as I had done time and time before, but I forced myself to keep my chin up. To meet his eyes that were penetrating my scalp.

Beau, beside me, stood up in alarm, but he was quickly restrained by Tanner. Beau may have been taller, but Tanner had considerably more muscle.

“He’s not going to hurt her,” Tanner whispered, probably expecting me not to hear.

I kept my gaze on Aiden, ignoring the struggle from behind me.

“Don’t talk about shit you know nothing about,” he hissed, placing his hands on my shoulders.

“Like Josie?” I asked, poking the bear. I was desperate for answers, desperate for some explanation that went beyond four simple rules. I had the distinct feeling that Aiden could offer me that. I just had to prod him enough times until he had no other choice but to answer me.

His hand clenched, unclenched, before clenching once more. With a guttural scream, he released my shoulders and stormed out of the cafeteria. I watched his muscles flex as he walked away. Ran away would be a more accurate description.

As soon as he left, I turned toward Beau. He didn't need me to say anything. He had always been on the same wavelength as me, a product of our friendship.

With a nod, he grabbed my hand and pulled me from the cafeteria. I was vaguely aware of Tanner trailing behind us, hands in his pockets.

"Do you have anything in your room?" I asked Beau. He shook his head.

We ran through the lobby, the same lobby I had first seen Tanner in, and out the front door. It was still raining, heavy torrents that instantly drenched my blond hair and clothes. Still, I did not let that deter me as I raced down the steep steps, past the fountain, and to the heavy gates.

They reminded me of teeth. Heavy, keen teeth preparing to devour me whole. Goosebumps erupted on my flesh at the visual.

Getting eaten alive by a school...not the way I wanted to go.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Tanner called over the rumble of thunder. Beau, hand still gripped tightly in mine, merely glared at him. I could tell he felt the same as me: confusion, fear, and anger all battling for dominance.

What type of sick, twisted school did our parents send us to?

I would like to believe that Mom didn't know, but doubt niggled my mind. The last few years had found us on a precarious ledge. One wrong move, and we would both topple over. I still loved her, but she wasn't the mom I grew up with. She was...different. And not for the better.

The stepfather, on the other hand....

Anger thrummed through my veins, wave after wave of fire that settled in my core, burning me from the inside out. I wanted nothing more than to punch that smug prick until he bled.

“You ready?” I asked Beau.

His hardened eyes met mine before he nodded resolutely.

Without preamble, we pushed open the gates. I had expected them to be locked, but they opened easily. Too easily.

When had anything in life ever been this easy?

Despite my misgivings, I took the gift for what it was and ran through the fence. Lightning struck overhead, painting the landscape in white light, and thunder boomed, the sound reverberating through me.

I began to run in earnest, fear only spurring me on. Faster. I could run faster.

Beau suddenly stopped beside me, the movement so sudden that I nearly face-planted into a mud puddle. His face was unnaturally pale, eyes wide. Terrified.

And then I realized...

We had just exited the front door of the academy once more. The fountain. The stone staircase. The distressed wood.

The fence that was once more closed.

“What the hell?” I whispered, tugging on Beau’s hand. He came, somewhat dazed, and together we opened the fence once more.



## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

Raced out.

Stopped.

We were back at the top steps of the academy, staring down into the manicured grass, thicket of trees, and that damn monster fountain.

The closed gates taunted us.

No. No. No. No.

Tanner chuckled darkly from where he was leaning against the marbled wall, just under the archway. His muscular arms were crossed over his chest, amusement flickering in his dark gaze.

“Welcome, Little Gymnast, to Tory’s School for Troubled Teens. Or...as we like to call it...Hell’s Academy.”

10

Bianaca

I blinked at him wordlessly.

The sky continued to fall apart around us, but Tanner held my entire attention. My mind was a hurricane of emotions, not one of them pleasant.

But was there any storm that was?

“What?” I whispered. His words replayed in my head. I tried to focus, tried to understand, but the meaning repeatedly slipped through my fingers. Half of me wondered if he was crazy while the other half wondered if I was crazy.

“Well, it’s not technically hell—at least, we don’t think so.” His face turned contemplative. “We don’t really know where we are. Hmmm, I should probably ask Kace to research this stuff. He’s smarter than me. Not as smart as Aiden but—”

“Cut the shit, and tell me what’s going on,” I snapped. Trembling, I forked my fingers through my hair. My wet curls clung to my scalp, incapable of being tamed at the moment.

Tanner didn’t spare a glance at Beau. His attention was fixed on me, eyes locking with mine in a silent battle.

“Short story, little gymnast, is that none of us fucking know what’s going on.” He

paused, straightening himself from the wall and stalking toward me. “Let me guess? You have a vague memory of being handed a pamphlet by someone you love, probably an authority figure, before being shoved into a taxi. Next thing you know, you end up here. Am I right? You barely remember anything else from the last few weeks besides that. Did I hit the mark?”

His words paralyzed me, cementing my feet to the ground. The sheer absurdity of his statement combined with my own hammering heart made me suddenly dizzy.

I staggered, only being kept upright by Beau’s hand on my arm.

“I can see in your eyes that you know what I’m talking about,” Tanner said. “For me, it was my grandma. What about you?”

“My mom,” I stuttered out. Her face flickered in my mind, that small, sympathetic smile she wore as she handed me the pamphlet. Her soothing voice. The gentle nudge on my back as she placed me and my luggage in the taxi.

Forgotten.

For the first time in my entire life, she made me feel forgotten. Unwanted. Unloved.

I brought my fist to my forehead, attempting to regain some semblance of control. The more I tried to think about my acceptance here, the fuzzier the thought became. It continually trickled through a filter until I was only left with large, confusing pieces. Not enough to make sense of this puzzle, but enough to make my mind wander.

I wouldn’t have believed him normally. A part of me refused to, clinging to the hope that there was some rational explanation.

But one look at Beau’s stricken face confirmed my deepest fear: Tanner was telling

the truth.

“I can see the wheels turning in that pretty head of yours, little gymnast.” Tanner leaned once more against the pillar, propping his chin onto his hand. Was his nonchalance an act, or did he really not give a damn? “Care to share with the class?”

“Oh fuck off,” I mumbled.

“We don’t know for sure what, exactly, is happening. It could be an experiment. Could be hell. Could be something else entirely.” He leaned closer suddenly, hot breath stirring the hair by my ear. “Or, we could just be fucking with you.”

I pulled away, body rigid.

“What exactly do you mean?”

“There are some drugs that cause hallucinations.” This was all said apathetically accompanied by a shrug of broad shoulders.

“Drugs...” I whispered dizzily. I recalled Aiden stepping up to me in the cafeteria. Walking me back to my seat. He had stood so close that the heat he emitted was almost palpable. Was it possible he had done something to me? Placed a drug in my spaghetti?

Beau had gone still beside me. His muscles flexed, jaw clenching.

“You son of a bitch!” I pounded a fist into Tanner’s shoulder, but he merely laughed. The sound was not jovial.

“I never said we did that,” he pointed out. “I’m just saying it’s a possibility.”

My brain fired at a rapid pace, desperately trying to cipher through all the information I was given. Anger, blistering hot, pooled low in my stomach, threatening to burn me from the inside out. I had been so damn stupid.

Trusting these men.

Their sole purpose was to destroy me, to harm me, to ruin me. They would think nothing about putting drugs into my food. What better way to destroy someone than to contort their reality?

Tears burned my eyes, but I willed them to remain in place. I would not give this asshole the satisfaction of seeing me cry. Seeing me broken.

It was what they wanted, after all.

“Did you drug me?” I whispered at last. Hoarsely.

Damn it. Even my voice sounded broken, despite my best attempts at keeping it impassive.

Tanner’s eyes flickered to mine, briefly, before resting on a spot above my head. The gate, I realized almost dumbly.

I knew he was going to say yes. There was no other explanation for what I had endured. Magic like that didn’t exist. Even if I did maybe believe in ghosts and demons and angels, I sure as hell didn’t believe in magic schools and superpowers and mass conspiracies.

Instead of answering, Tanner turned on his heel and walked back into the school. He held himself as taut as a bowstring, muscles upon muscles of barely suppressed anger and tension. Only when he was halfway down the hall did he turn back to look at me.

His expression was tense, voice terse.

“Don’t leave your room at night,” he said stiffly.

“Is that a threat?” I asked, balling my hand into a fist.

Tanner shook his head. “No. It’s a warning...and one I shouldn’t even be giving you.”

Before I could inquire further, he had disappeared around the corner.

“Son of a monkey anus bitch!” I screamed into the air. Beau placed a hand on my shoulder, turning me toward him, and I willingly burrowed myself into his warm embrace. “Did he drug us?” I whispered. “Did they do this to us?”

A part of me willed him to say yes. I didn’t want to deal with any other alternative. The fear was raw, a wound that hasn’t quite scabbed yet. It permeated the air like a sickly poison.

Beau didn’t speak, no surprise, but held me tighter. His soft lips brushed the top of my head.

Suddenly, it was too much.

Or perhaps it had always been too much. Either way, I couldn’t stand there another moment, in Beau’s arms, acting like I was okay. My head and heart pounded in tandem, and my thoughts whirled madly. It was impossible to sift through them all, to form a coherent understanding of what I witnessed.

Ripping myself out of Beau’s arms, much to his protest, I raced down the hall. I heard him make a strange sound behind me, followed quickly by the slapping of his tennis

shoes against the tiles. He abruptly stopped, and I knew he was letting me go.

He understood me better than anyone else, and he knew about my need for space. This revelation from Tanner, whatever the hell it meant, demanded it of me.

My breathing was heavy when I threw myself into my bedroom, locking the door tightly behind me. I remained still for a moment, merely panting against the wooden door, before I moved to my bed.

Was what Tanner said true?

Was I in some sort of hell? Or was this one of those paranormal schools I loved to read about in my books?

Or was this something else entirely? A mere hallucination from the drugs Tanner had alluded to?

They may have claimed that they believed me when I insisted I wasn't behind Josie's disappearance, but I knew their characters. Revenge ran through their blood, contaminating their lungs like some sort of pollution. Until I could prove without a doubt that I wasn't behind Josie's disappearance, they would continue to come after me.

I thought back to the events in the cafeteria. The professors each adorning a plastic mask. The fear on the students' faces as they were forcibly removed.

Fear gripped my heart as understanding dawned on me.

I had no idea what was true and what was fake. What was reality and what was some drug-induced hallucination?



Turning my face into my pillow, I let out a scream. No one would hear it, and even if they did, I suspected no one but Beau would care.

But Beau wasn't with me at that moment. No one was.

## Page 37

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

For the first time in forever, I felt alone.

I allowed myself to fall into unconsciousness. Blissful unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

Tapping on the door woke me.

I sat upright, stomach-churning, and peered around my room. Darkness clung to every corner, every crevice, every item, sheathing it like a thick blanket.

I was somewhat surprised, and perhaps a little hurt, that Beau hadn't snuck into my room with me. I knew he was only respecting my wishes, but a part of me yearned for his comfort.

The knocking began again, further rousing me from my sleep. Maybe Beau had decided to join me. The thought had me eagerly sitting up.

"Beau?" I murmured, wiping sleep from my eyes. Throwing off my thin covers, I padded barefoot across the hideous blue and black dotted carpeting.

It had never occurred to me that it would be anyone but Beau at the door when I opened it. The face staring back at me, however, was not that of my best friend. Instead, it was a familiar girl with wild black hair and crazed eyes.

It took me a moment to place her name. Kelly. From the hall. She had been the younger girl getting bullied by those boys.

My eyes traced her small, pixie features and the white nightgown she wore. Her hands hung limply by her sides, nails digging into the palms of her hands.

“Between,” she whispered, casting a haunted look in both directions. Both were empty at this time of night...or morning, if my dorm room alarm was any indication. Three, to be exact.

“Kelly?” I asked. The fog from my sleep had yet to fully recede, and I scrubbed at my eyes once more as if that would somehow speed up the process. “What are you doing here?”

“Between,” she repeated urgently.

I blinked at her.

Before I could formulate any type of response, she shoved past me and entered my room, slamming the door shut. I opened my mouth, but she quickly put a finger to her lips.

Shhh.

Nodding to show her I understood, I perched on the edge of the bed. My heart ached for Kelly. She was obviously unwell.

Was that why she was sent here?

Was that why I was sent here?

I was surrounded by psychopaths. It only made sense if I was one as well.

I didn't know what she wanted me to hear, but I decided to humor her, tilting my

head curiously to the side and nodding at random times. Her eyes narrowed slightly.

Whoops. Apparently, that wasn't the reaction she wanted.

"This is serious," she hissed, for once sounding coherent.

I nodded, properly chastised.

And then...I heard it.

There were no words to describe it. The scuttling of thousands of beetles, perhaps. The lightest click click click coming closer. The sound of mechanical spiders filling the walls, trying to claw their way out.

I froze, only my eyes moving to meet Kelly's wide-eyed stare. She, once again, put a single finger to her lips.

The clacking was growing closer, just outside my dorm room door, before continuing down the hallway. It felt like an eternity instead of a few minutes as I held myself still. Waiting.

My breaths sawed in and out, but I managed to keep my gaze fixed on Kelly. She didn't seem surprised by the strange, eerie sound reverberating through my room, nor did she seem upset.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

“What the hell was that?” I whispered. It felt like it was hours later, but I knew it had only been a few minutes.

Her voice was soft when she answered me. “The monster.”

She spoke with such sincerity, such earnestness, that I wanted to believe her. I honestly did.

But then I thought of Aiden, Tanner, and Kace. Three boys who thought they ruled the school and everyone in it. Three men who I didn’t entirely understand. Who I both feared and revered.

Those assholes had no doubt put her up to this. A prank to scare me.

Shaking my head, I flashed Kelly a cold smile.

“This isn’t fucking funny. And you can tell the three assholes to leave me alone. I tried switching rooms. I tried talking to them. I tried everything, and I’m done. I’m done being their punching bag. If they fuck with me one more time, they’ll live to regret it.” My jaw clenched so tightly I was afraid it would break.

Kelly, for her part, looked nonplussed.

“Between,” she whispered.

“This again?”

Perhaps Kelly did theater or something. Either way, she nearly had me convinced.

Monsters didn't exist. At least, not the monsters we read about in books and saw in movies. The real monsters were ten times worse. They looked like humans, walked like humans, talked like humans, but they were anything but.

Without another word, Kelly grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet. I just barely resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

I had read numerous bully novels. This was the part where they lured me to some abandoned warehouse or whatever and dumped punch on my head. Or stole my clothes. Or ridiculed me in a public shaming.

Despite knowing this, I allowed Kelly to pull me out of my room and into the darkened hall.

I felt a brief stab of irrational fear. I kept hearing the strange clicking noise, replaying on a loop like a song on repeat. It had felt so...authentic. Totally monster movie-worthy.

"Where are we going?" I asked Kelly. The only response I got was the single damn finger to her lips reminding me to be silent.

Darkness clung to me, surrounded me, clogged my lungs, but I still followed Kelly. We reached a fork in the hallway, and she veered to the right. I had never been in this particular section of the school, and even with the lights off, I found myself gaping at the numerous paintings on the wall. A bunch of portraits of stuffy white men. A few landscapes. A couple abstract pieces, which were my personal favorite.

Too soon, Kelly reached an unassuming wooden door with a broken handle. Despite the darkness, I could clearly make out the words NO STUDENTS

PERMITTED engraved onto a golden plaque.

“Um...” I stuttered, anxiously glancing up and down the hall. The last thing I wanted to do was get in trouble. Was that the point of this prank? Make me get caught in a place I wasn’t allowed to be? Have the teachers administered the punishment the guys were too scared to do themselves?

This door only led to a staircase. The distressed wood creaked beneath my feet as I inched myself upward. My hand feebly gripped the splintered railing. Kelly remained in front of me, her dark silhouette only broken apart by the intermittent flashes of light from cracks in the wall.

Finally, we reached what looked like a balcony. Surprisingly, it was empty, but voices carried to me from down below.

Kelly spun on her heel and placed her hand on my mouth before I could even think to comment. Warning me with her eyes to remain silent, she crouched down and peered through the wooden bars. After a moment of mindless staring, I reluctantly crawled up beside her, finally focusing on the scene below.

My breath left me, and my heart, which had been beating steadily, sped up.

I had thought I would see the guys. Perhaps hear them talk about their master plan to eliminate me or whatever men did nowadays. Maybe even witness a mass orgy.

I didn’t expect to see the masked professors standing in a semi-circle around a trembling, familiar female. Ali. Her face was tear-stained, red and blotchy, and she was stripped down to her bra and panties.

The professors were silent, staring at her through their white masks and pinprick black orbs for eyes. It wasn’t them that I heard. No, it was Ali’s pathetic whimpers

and cries. Her screams for help.

I instinctively lurched to my feet before Kelly pulled me back down, eyes frantic. They pleaded with me to remain silent and calm, to watch and not intervene.

How could she expect me to keep my voice down? These teachers...

Disgust filled me. What did they plan to do to her? Rape her? Assault her? Millions of scenarios ran through my mind, each one more damning than the last. My hands were trembling by my side, a product of both my fear and anger.



*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

I didn't consider myself a social justice warrior, but I also needed to take a stand for those who were wronged. Those who were suppressed. It was ingrained within me to fight for the people who couldn't fight for themselves. This poor, defenseless girl was one of those people.

I didn't know what I could do, but I knew I had to do something. Anything.

I reached into my pocket to grab my cell phone, grateful that I hadn't changed into my pajamas. Fortunately, it hadn't fallen out during my restless sleep. Unfortunately, it was dead.

Cursing mentally, I estimated how long it would take me to run back down the staircase, through the hallway, and to the dorm rooms once more. Someone there would have a phone, of that I had no doubt. The only doubt I had was whether or not someone would be inclined to call. The school couldn't all be made up of monsters, could it?

My train of thought was cut off by a familiar clicking sound.

Kelly's hand gripped mine, fingernails digging into my skin. I didn't mind the pain.

I had once welcomed that exact sensation, after all.

All I could do was watch, helpless and afraid. Confused.

Terrified.

The stomach-churning, hands clenching, face whitening type of fear. The fear you could never articulate unless you had lived through it yourself. The fear that made people understand the distinct difference between empathy and sympathy: you could never really understand something unless you had experienced it.

The room wasn't large by any means—the size of two classrooms put together. Numerous candles were placed in handles on the walls, bright flames flickering in the cavernous room. The carpeting was blood-red, and the walls were gray slates. Behind Ali, who was facing the professors, was what appeared to be a dark cave. Room was too crude of a term. It was a gaping opening in the wall, the size of a crescent moon, and seemed to be made entirely of darkness.

It was from that darkness that the hand emerged. Black, with veins running down the length of its scaled arm. Claws extended from the fingertips, a russet brown color. The hand itself was the size of Ali's body.

Ali screamed, a horrified, helpless sound, just as the hand gripped her waist and pulled her into the cave.

It was there and gone in less than a second.

The professors stared a moment longer, the silence deafening, before exiting out of the two doors on either side of the room. Away from the cave.

I stared.

That was all I could do. Stare and gape.

My hands were trembling, and I felt something salty touch my lips. Tears, I realized dumbly. My tears.

Kelly turned her cherubic face toward mine. She, too, had unshed tears in her grassy green eyes.

Voice subdued, she whispered, “They need to feed the monster.”

11

Bianaca

I woke up in a cold sweat, my heart pounding and mind racing. Fear doused me like a bucket of cold water being poured over my head.

My dream...it had felt so realistic. So real. I could still hear the whimpers escaping Ali's parted lips. See the fear emanating from her eyes.

I scrubbed a hand down my face, willing the images away. I knew, without a doubt, that they would haunt me. It was only a dream, only a nightmare, but it had felt so damn real.

The time on the alarm clock showed it was a little after eight. Breakfast would've already started, and Beau would no doubt be looking for me.

The remnants of my dreams suffocated me, a cotton ball being shoved into my throat. I forked my fingers through my blond tresses as if that gesture could somehow bleach my mind of what it had conjured up last night. It wasn't unusual for me to have nightmares, but this was unlike any that I had ever had before. Who knew my thoughts could be so twisted and deprived? One thing was abundantly clear: the school, or the boys and their drugs, was messing with my mind.

\* \* \*

Quickly, I dressed in a tank top and shorts combination, combing my hair with my

fingers. When that didn't work, I tossed it into a tight ponytail. I was desperate to release some of my energy. It ran rampant within me, a coiled snake seconds from striking.

There were a few students still clustered in the hallway, and I gave them a nod as I walked by.

It didn't take long for me to reach the gym I had visited the other day.

Dropping to my butt, I began to stretch my taut muscles, the dream replaying in my head. Over and over and over again. I saw it all. It remained etched on my eyelids like a tattoo I couldn't remove.

Why had I dreamt that? What could my subconscious possibly be trying to tell me?

Or...

Was it real?

As soon as I thought that, I shook my head vehemently.

I didn't want to even start going down that road. It would lead to a place I wasn't sure I could get back from.

It was a dream. I had to believe that, had to hold onto that, or else I would truly lose my mind.

"You look to be deep in thought," a soft voice said, startling me. I glanced up, not at all surprised to see Tanner leaning against the doorframe. He was dressed in a pair of low-slung sweatpants and a white shirt. The pants showed a dusting of blond hair and glorious tanned skin.

He was an asshole, yes, but he was a sexy one. There was no denying that.

“What do you want?” I snapped, turning back to focus on my stretches. I lowered myself to the splits, leaning over one of my legs.

“To talk,” he answered evenly.

“I’m busy.”

“B...” He took a step closer, eyes earnest. “We really need to talk.”

“About what?” I retorted. “About how you claimed you drugged me?”

My hands trembled at just the thought. The violation.

I had the sudden, irrational urge to slam my fingers into his eyeballs. Watch him bleed.

Or cut off his nuts.

That could be quite painful, I would imagine.

Tanner seemed undeterred by my snark.

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

“About this school. About our place in it.” He stepped farther into the room, hands shoved into his pockets. It only served to make his pants fall farther down.

Damn. That golden skin...

Down girl, I chastised myself. I blamed it on my vagina. The vagina was always the answer.

“Don’t you have a class to be at?” I asked, moving to my feet. “Or a breakfast to be eating? Or a girl to be fucking? Anything besides bothering me?”

He chuckled.

“It’s Sunday, my little gymnast. No classes on Sunday.”

I squinted at him, sure he was fucking with me.

“I’m not stupid. Yesterday was Sunday. Today is Monday.”

The smile on his face, the smile I was beginning to believe was his signature facial expression, grew ever so slightly.

“That brings us to the problem I would like to discuss.” He spoke so diplomatically, so sincerely, that my damn heart wanted to believe him. But he was rotten, through and through, and I knew I couldn’t believe one word that came out of his stupid mouth. He wanted to confuse me, wanted to destroy me, wanted to belittle me until I was nothing but a pile of bones and skin.

He could try all he wanted, but he would never break me.

Confuse me, yes, but not break.

And this? This confused the shit out of me.

“Look, I don’t have time for these fucking games—”

“No games.” He sat directly across from me on the blue mat, watching me as I lifted my leg behind my back. His movements were indolent, relaxed, as he perched himself onto his elbows. “You’re right. Technically, it should be Monday, but the rules are different here.”

“And how’s that?” I asked, humoring him.

“The rest of the students believe that it’s always the weekend. Always Saturday and Sunday. It may be a boarding school, but you’ll never have to go to class.”

I snorted. Actually snorted. Sometimes, I wondered if he could hear himself. I wondered if he understood the nonsense he was spewing. The idiocy.

“Okay, big man.”

Rolling my eyes, I scrambled to my feet and grabbed my newly charged phone out of my pocket and scanned my music playlist. I needed something upbeat for my workout. Something I could dance to. I needed to practice and perfect my layout full. Competition season may have been on hold until I was able to leave that stupid ass school, but I would be damned if I didn’t train daily. Gymnastics was the only thing I had besides Beau.

I didn’t have a family that loved me unconditionally or a boyfriend or anything like



that. Their love, the love my family gave me, was conditional. It relied heavily on expectations I couldn't meet and conditions that I would never grant. Gymnastics was my one escape, my way out of this horrible world I had found myself trapped in, if only for a moment.

"You don't believe me?" Tanner asked, oblivious to my thoughts. He moved to his feet as well.

I rolled my eyes.

"I don't know what I believe, but it sure as hell isn't you. I mean, you did confess to drugging me."

I couldn't hide the anger in my voice. The bitterness.

"We did," Tanner said softly. "Drug you, that is."

His confession brought about a surge of anger, white-hot. Before I could stop myself, I lunged the short distance to him, punching him firmly in the face. He let out a startled cry, hand gripping his cheek.

My knuckles ached, no doubt bruising, but I had never felt so fucking satisfied before. The asshole deserved that...and a lot more.

Tanner lifted his head, eyes widening in shock.

"Did you just...?" He shook his head, dazed. "Did you just punch me?"

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

“I’ll do a lot more than that,” I warned, advancing on him like a lion preying on a gazelle. He took an automatic step back.

There was no anger on his face. Instead, he seemed sort of awed.

And if the heat in his eyes was any indication? A little turned on.

Sick, twisted asshole.

“Do you think you can go around drugging girls?” I asked, shoving his chest. This time, he barely staggered back a step. “Hurting people? You think that this is a fucking game you’re allowed to play?”

“If you would let me explain,” he began, irritated.

Still, I did not relent in my pursuit, venturing another step closer. This close, I could see a scatter of dark freckles across his tanned face. His hair was a light brown, longer than most men’s, with golden highlights streaked throughout. He was so fucking handsome that my heart hurt.

Why did all the hot ones have to be assholes?

“We did what we did to protect you,” he blurted. His eyes locked with mine. “We did drug you, yes, but we did it for a reason. We didn’t cause the hallucination. We wanted you to see.”

“See what?” I hissed, jamming a finger into his firm, muscular chest.

“The food.” His voice was calm. Soothing.

“You wanted me to see the food?” I quipped, raising an eyebrow.

“The food is what makes you live in a happy, little bubble where everything is safe and fine and dandy. Unicorns and rainbows and all that happy shit. It’s what makes you believe that every day is the weekend, that students aren’t going missing, that this is just another fucking school.”

I gripped my hair that had escaped its bindings, pulling at the strands.

“I don’t get what you’re fucking saying. Is that what you’re trying to do? Confuse me? Because it’s working.”

Tanner, abruptly, grabbed at my shoulder, pulling me even closer to him. We were nose to nose, both of our breaths sawing in and out. His eyes traced my features, moving from my eyes to my lips before meeting my gaze once more.

“This school isn’t like the others. I was telling the truth about that. We don’t know everything, but one thing we do know is that they are drugging us. Every time you eat the food in the cafeteria, the drug is going into your system. It makes you believe things that aren’t true. It makes you believe that everything is normal. Those kids that were pulled out of the cafeteria? No one remembers. And if they remember, they believe that it is normal.” His warm breath caressed my face, eliciting goosebumps on my skin. “That was what Josie discovered before she went missing. She was...well...she didn’t like to eat.” His face tightened at the memory. “When she didn’t eat, she could see things with vivid clarity.”

Despite how bogus his story sounded, I held on to every word, filing them away for a later date. I would dissect his story in full when he wasn’t staring at me with wide, earnest eyes. Teeth glinting in the artificial gym lighting.

“She snuck into the employee’s only lounge and found this weird liquid. The professors have been drinking this to remain coherent when the rest of the students saw things through a blurry, distorted haze. A funhouse mirror, she would say. You only saw what the professors wanted you to see.

“She gave us the liquid, and suddenly, we understood. We saw what they didn’t want us to see. Do you understand? Do you understand what I’m saying?” He pleaded with me with his umber gold eyes to believe him. To trust him.

I knew he would continue to spin his lies like a spider spun a web. I also knew he was spewing nothing but bullshit.

All I wanted was for him to shut the hell up.

“You are so full of shit,” I murmured, grabbing the back of his neck and pulling his lips down to mine.

I kissed him with all of the pent-up anger and aggression I wanted to remain hidden. I kissed him like I was drowning, and he was my life preserver.

My hands tangled in his golden-brown hair, turning his head to angle him the way I wanted him to go. His tongue prodded the seams of my lips, and I opened up eagerly, taking him in. It wasn’t a dance, but a battle. A war. Kissing Tanner was a fight between two broken souls, only one able to emerge victorious.

His large hands cupped my ass, pushing me against his erection. I knew that he was large, and I wanted nothing more than to wrap my mouth around his thick girth. The need was almost painful.

Leaving my ass, his hands lifted my shirt over my head. His thumb brushed the upper swell of my breast before lowering, pulling my heavy mounds free of the confines of

my bra.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he muttered, ducking down to pull one of my nipples into his mouth.

I slipped my hands underneath his shirt, touching his bare skin.

His lips moved from my aching nipple, up the swell of my breast, before landing on my neck. He alternated between licks, sucks, and kisses until he finally reached my lips. I desperately kissed him back, reveling in the contact. The comfort.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

His hand slipped into the waistband of my shorts, rubbing me over my panties. I gasped into his mouth, a strange combination between a moan and a sob. I wanted—no, I needed—him to touch me.

“Please,” I whispered, kissing the side of his mouth. I planted tantalizingly light kisses across his smooth jaw and down to his neck. There, I sucked deeply on his skin, relishing in his intake of breath.

The horny bitch within me wanted to mark him as mine.

“Please what, little gymnast?” he asked breathlessly.

“Touch me,” I practically begged. Without another word, he pulled my underwear away from my aching core and stabbed a finger inside of me. He began to rub his finger up and down my slit. I pulled my lips away from his neck with a gasp, but he captured them once more with his own. Eating away my moans. Devouring them.

A second finger followed the first one, followed by a third. His thumb found my clit, rubbing it in earnest.

“I’m so close,” I whispered.

“Come for me.”

His words were my undoing.

I didn’t just come. I exploded.

He kissed me through my orgasm, fingers continuing their relentless pursuit. He was determined to unravel me. Destroy me.

And damn, if it wasn't working.

Only when I was fully sated did he pull out. He brought his fingers to his lips, eyes intent on mine, before licking them clean. His tongue swirled over the tips, sucking them until the evidence of my arousal disappeared.

If that wasn't the sexiest thing...

"You taste good," he said with a casual shrug.

His erection strained against his sweatpants, begging to be set free.

With a coy smile, I patted the prominent bulge. He hissed, teeth clenching.

"You can take care of that yourself," I said, shouldering past him. "And thanks for the orgasm!"

He stared at me, mouth agape, before he managed to stutter, "You don't fucking thanksomeone for an orgasm."

In answer, I gifted him with my middle finger. I was confused, yes, as I tried to piece together what had happened. What he had told me. Nothing made sense. Not his words, not his actions, not my own traitorous heart. I needed a moment—or five-hundred—to get my bearings.

"Have fun sucking your own dick."

12

Tanner

The sated moans echoed in the hall.

I frowned at the noise, anxiously worrying my lower lip with my teeth. Braving to venture farther, I pounded my fist against the wooden door. Immediately, the moans subsided until it was utterly silent.

“Open up, asshole!” I called. There was a shuffle—an indignant feminine curse followed by the wisp of fabric—before the door was thrown open. Aiden stood on the other side, dressed in only a pair of unbuttoned pants, and scowling.

“What?” he asked darkly. He turned on his heel, stomping back into the room but leaving the door open for me. An invitation.

I followed him inside, spotting immediately the petite, naked female sprawled on the bed. When she saw me, she pushed her naked chest out farther in a failed attempt to entice me. I couldn’t help but chuckle. Blond, of course, with dainty features and a lean body.

“The face is different,” I told Aiden casually as he shoved a shirt on. He scowled at me but did not otherwise react. “Bianaca’s nose is smaller, and she has two dimples on her cheeks.” I pointed to my cheeks in demonstration, and his scowl only grew.

The blond bimbo sat up in bed, lips pursed.



“Who the hell is Bianaca?” she asked seconds before realization dawned. Turning toward Aiden, she feebly hit his now covered chest. “Is that why you called me B?”

I snorted out a laugh, covering my mouth with my hand when Aiden glared at me.

“I think you should leave,” Aiden told the girl curtly. She frowned, crossing her arms over her chest.

“We haven’t even finished,” she whined, glancing from Aiden to me. When she met my eye, her smile turned coy, devious, and she flicked her nipple. She was cute, I would give her that.

But she was...wrong.

“He said leave,” I snapped, my already thin patience splintering. I had never been known as the “nice guy,” and I wasn’t about to start now.

She helplessly glanced once more at Aiden, but he remained stone-faced. After one more ineffectual sweep of her thumb over her beaded nipples, she huffed, grabbed her clothes, and stomped into the hallway.

Naked, of course.

Rolling my eyes, I gifted Aiden a rare smile. “Trying to fuck Bianaca out of your system? You picked a real winner,” I teased.

“Piss off.” He sprawled himself out on the bed, placing a muscular forearm over his eyes. I watched him with barely contained amusement.

It was rare, if not unheard of, to see the great Aiden so unhinged. So disheveled.

In the coming silence, I surveyed the small dorm room that he shared with Kace. Aiden's side was adorned in black—black tapestries, black bedspread, black portraits he had commissioned me to paint. Kace's, on the other hand, was a kaleidoscope of color. It was as if someone had vomited a rainbow on his half.

The two were as different as night and day, black and white, but I had never seen a deeper bond before in my life. They were brothers, in every way but actual blood. I knew Aiden felt responsible for Kace, especially after...

I didn't want to think about that.

"Did you tell her?" Aiden drawled, not bothering to lift his head or open his eyes. I moved to sit on the desk chair, kicking my feet up. The room felt vacant without Kace's presence. A part of me wanted to go look for him, but my rational reasoning warned me against it. Kace would come to us when he was ready. Until then, it was best to let him be. Let him hide.

I wondered what new crevice of the school he had found to hide away in.

"Yup," I answered Aiden.

Unbidden, my mind traveled back to the moment in the gym. Her hooded eyes, emitting lust in palpable waves. Those mewls escaping her pretty, pink lips. Those fucking tits...

My cock stirred just at the memory.

I had always laughed at the nonsense of people coming in their pants with just a look, but with her, I believed it was entirely possible. I had never wanted to come as badly as I did right then and there. Her soft lips melding against mine, making us one. Those long tresses just begging me to run my fingers through.

Aiden's voice pulled me out of my wistful fantasy. My daydream.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

The fact of the matter was, Bianaca hated me. She was sexually attracted to me, sure, but her feelings did not extend further than that.

I didn't know why that bothered me as much as it did. I didn't want or need a girl in my life. There was a reason people called me an ass, and it wasn't just because I had a nice one. Hell, I couldn't even remember my last "girlfriend's" name.

Honestly, I couldn't remember anything besides how soft B felt in my arms, as if she was made specifically for me.

Fucking cheesy ass shit if you asked me.

"Did she believe you?" Aiden asked, once more pulling me from my reverie. From the slightest tilt of his head and the quirk of his brow, I realized he had probably asked this question more than once. My face wanted to burn in shame, but I schooled my features carefully. Aiden was a shark. The second he smelled blood, he would pounce.

"No," I answered.

He snorted. "As eloquent as always, my friend."

"Whatever."

Shaking my head, I stood, stretching my arms over my head.

"She has you wrapped around her little finger, doesn't she?" Aiden's voice dripped

with condemnation. Amusement. It was an odd combination that he was able to pull off perfectly.

“I’m not the one fucking other girls while screaming her name,” I snapped. If I expected a reaction out of Aiden, I was sorely mistaken. He merely grinned, dark eyes shining.

“You wouldn’t need to fuck other girls, would you?” He sat up, that perpetually amused smirk still in place. When I didn’t answer, he continued, “You know exactly what she feels like, don’t you?”

Damn him. Damn his perceptiveness.

I kept my face stoic. Impassive.

As always, he could see right through me.

“How did she feel?”

“I’m not talking to you about this.” Jumping to my feet, I made an immediate beeline toward the door.

“Did you taste her?” he continued his crude line of questioning.

“Shut the fuck up, Aiden.”

I knew he was trying to get a reaction out of me, setting bait like I was a damn fish he could catch, and damn, if I didn’t play along. He had that way about him—a way of inherently annoying the shit out of me while simultaneously making me want to spill each and every one of my secrets.

“Don’t let feelings get in the way of our plan,” he called to my retreating back. I froze, muscles tensing.

“Your plan,” I countered, not bothering to turn around. “Not our plan.”

He made a dismissive noise in the back of his throat.

“Just stay focused. Think with your head, not your dick. And especially not your fucking heart.” He said the last word as if it was a vulgar curse.

I didn’t have to worry about that, though. I didn’t have a heart. Not after everything I had been through.

Saluting Aiden with my middle finger, I made my way down the hall and to my own room.

\* \* \*

“Where is he?”

The punch landed squarely on my cheek, wrenching my head to the side. Blood gurgled in my mouth, but I defiantly spat it out.

“Fuck off,” I hissed. Talking was painful. Moving was even more painful. My body felt as if it was weighed down by lead weights. Each of my muscles ached. I was barely capable of keeping my eyes opened.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

Breathing raggedly, I braced myself for the next round of pain. And the pain would come, of that, I was certain.

Punch after punch assaulted me. I knew my face was a hideous canvas of blues and greens and blacks. Faded bruises mixing with fresh ones.

Still, I had to give myself some credit. I didn't cry or scream once. Not when they broke each of my fingers. Not when they pressed a knife into my sternum. Not when they showed me pictures of my mother.

"Daddy left me, just as he left you," I taunted. The man roared, pulling his hand back once more. The second before his fist would've connected with my face, he paused. Blinked. Smiled.

I hated that fucking smile. It was a smile that promised pain. Agony. Endless torment. I made a vow, right then and there, that I would never smile again for as long as I lived. If smiling meant pain...

"Where's your dad, kid?" he asked, tone curt. "We don't want you. Just your father. Do you get that?" He had a strange accent, this man, but I couldn't pinpoint the exact location. His skin tone suggested he was middle-eastern, but his lilt hinted at European origins.

He flashed a smile, white teeth flashing.

"All we want is the money your dad stole from us. Where is he?"

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “If I knew, don’t you think I would’ve told you? I have no loyalty to that bastard.” I thought of my mom just then. How he had left her to die. The woman he had promised to love, to protect, had been discarded like yesterday’s trash.

I had tried to protect her, but there was only so much I could do against a dozen grown men with guns.

Tears burned my eyes, but I knew they wouldn’t fall. They never fell.

“What about your grandma?” the man asked, and a wave of ice slithered down my back. Despite the fear gripping my heart, I kept my face blank. Giving nothing away, but taking everything in.

“What about that old bat?” I asked nonchalantly. I spat once more, smirking slightly when the blood landed on his pristine white shoes.

His eyes flickered downward, a scowl on his face, before they rested once more on me.

“If you’re going to be like that,” he muttered, stepping away. I heard, rather than saw, him shuffle through stuff behind me. The ropes dug into my wrists and ankles. Blood matted my hair to my scalp, and my clothing was in tatters. There was only so much the fabric could take when faced with a knife.

The man returned, smiling coldly. In his hands was a container of gasoline.

“What are you doing?” I asked, staring at the object with wide eyes. For the first time, I felt the beginnings of panic burn in my chest. He wasn’t just going to hurt me.

No, we had passed that. The asshole planned to kill me.



“Stop.” I struggled futilely against the bindings. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

The liquid was poured over my head, dousing me immediately. My eyes were wide with panic, and my body trembled. Tears welled, and I didn’t hesitate to let them escape.

Perhaps they could be mistaken as the gasoline.

“One last chance.” The man idly played with his lighter, a brilliant flame emerging before disappearing almost immediately. “Where’s your father?”

“I. Don’t. Know.”

And then it was agony.

\* \* \*

I woke with a gasp, heart hammering and sweat coating my skin.

I must’ve fallen asleep, though the clock showed it was only noon.

And I had the dream, the nightmare, again.

Scrubbing a hand down my face, I stared up at the white-painted ceiling.

The same dream. Every night. Every day. Every damn time I closed my eyes.

What the hell did it mean?

13

Bianaca

I used to have this recurring nightmare.

Every night, every day, every damn time I closed my eyes, the nightmare would assault me like a freight train. I staggered helplessly under its weight, but it didn't relent, tugging me into an icy embrace.

I'd wake up blinking rapidly, unable to conjure up the remnants of my dream. All I remembered was terror. Absolute, overpowering terror. It was the terror that paralyzed you, cementing your feet to the ground. It was the terror that bypassed your fight-or-flight response until all you could do was stand there, trembling. It was the terror that made sweat bead on your forehead and your hands shake, a scream lodged in your throat.

I never remembered the explicit details of the dream, only that he played a pivotal role in it. He couldn't just haunt me when I was awake; he had to seep into my dreams as well.

He wasn't traditionally handsome—his forehead too large, his nose too small, and his hair too greasy—but he carried an arrogance, an imperiousness, that put others to shame. He held himself as if he owned the world and everyone in it. As if he owned me.

If there was one silver lining of joining a new school, it was escaping Dylan. My

nightmare incarnate.

Why did he always have to follow me?

He stood on the other end of the hall, eyes narrowed into thin slits. The few students present provided a barrier between me and him, but I knew he could still get me if he chose to. Dylan always got what he wanted, and what he wanted was me.

Fear clogged my throat, choking me, but I did not break eye contact. I had a feeling it would be seen as a sign of weakness, and that was the last thing I wanted to be. With Dylan, I had to be brave and strong. The second he knew how much he affected me would be the same second he won.

And I would be damned if I lost this battle.

Skin prickling, I raised my chin and continued walking. To get to the cafeteria, I would have to pass him.

One step.

Two step.

“B.” His voice slithered over my skin, a tangible being. Fear gripped my heart in a chokehold, but still, I walked on, ignoring him. “Little sister.”

At that, I spun on my heel to face him.

“Don’t call me that,” I hissed. Disgust curdled in my belly. Those two words shouldn’t be permitted to ever leave his mouth.

He smiled coldly, teeth remaining hidden behind thin lips.

“That’s what you are, is it not?”

“You’re disgusting.” With that, I began to walk faster. Despite my brisk pace, his long legs were able to eat up the distance between us.

“I missed you, little sister,” he said mockingly. His arm wrapped around my shoulders, and every muscle in my body tensed.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Why?” He tilted his head to the side curiously. His smile was snake-like, venomous. Deadly. “You weren’t complaining last time.”

I felt sick to my stomach. What little I had eaten threatened to come right back out.

“Don’t,” I warned, furious when my voice quivered. I couldn’t say one fucking word to him without reverting to a scared child.

A scared, defenseless child that he had taken advantage of.

“Don’t what?” he asked, a smirk still firmly etched into place. “Don’t talk to my little sister?”

I recoiled from him as if his touch was toxic, seeping into my skin and slowly killing me. That wasn’t an inaccurate comparison, in all actuality. Dylan was toxic, poison, deadly. He wielded his weapon with an expertise and finesse that hinted at years of use. He had been a monster long before he had attacked me, long before he had turned into my monster.

“You’re mad,” he observed. “Why are you mad, little sister?”

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

His touch was burning through my clothes, burning away my skin, until I was stripped bare for this monster to see. My heart continued to beat, my lungs continued to take in air, but I was dead to the world. This fucking monster had killed me with just a touch.

Desperate, I began to run, distantly aware of his laughter echoing behind me. I had no destination in mind, only away.

My footsteps pounded over the carpeting, down a spiral staircase, and outside. The sunlight belied how cold the day had become, my thin jacket doing little to quell the chill. Still, I ran. Past the carefully planted flower beds. Past the ornamental roundabout with the stone statue. Past the academic building.

My breathing sawed in and out, my heartbeat ricocheting.

Pulling my jacket tighter around my shoulders, I became distinctly aware of a low moan. No, not a moan. A cry. A strange combination between a scream and a sob. Masculine.

I had run farther than I had thought, stopping just in front of a minuscule shed with distressed wooden walls, faded white paint, and a collapsed roof. Row after row of unwashed windows greeted me, and the doorway was balancing precariously on its hinges. Weeds and ivy climbed up the structure; the grass was overgrown, completely obscuring the pebbled pathway.

The sound—the hiccuped cry—was coming from in there.

My mind warred within me, curiosity fighting against my rational sensibilities. My curiosity won out, and I found myself slowly venturing toward the building, hands shaking with nerves. The air was cold, but that was not the cause of the goosebumps erupting on my skin. My tongue snaked out to lick my suddenly dry lips as I pushed open the rusty door. Steady hands belied my fear when I looked around the sparsely furnished dark room. The only light came from the blighted sunlight, peeking through the gray clouds.

There was no furniture besides a worktable carrying a handful of unfamiliar tools. Opposite that, yellow tape announced a section of the room as “in construction”—a fact that I found immensely odd considering it was mere inches from the wall. What could possibly be added when a fence was adjacent to it just through the faded wood? The second thing I noticed was the shock of garnet hair and piercing eyes. Those eyes effectively trapped and ensnared my own.

They were red-rimmed, tears suspended from his abnormally thick lashes. His nose was just as puffy, as were his cheeks.

“Kace?” I asked, shocked. My eyes automatically roamed his body for injuries. Had the professors gotten to him? Hurt him? The mere prospect had me seeing red. I had never considered myself nurturing or protective before, but something about Kace made me want to kill every last person who dared hurt him. Dared to make him cry as he was. I couldn’t understand my own emotions, my own feelings. I told myself that I hated him and his friends, hated everything that he stood for, hated what he had done to me, but a sly voice whispered something else entirely.

After all, what had Kace done besides take the fall for me? If I should hate anyone, it should be Tanner and Aiden. Aiden specifically. There was no denying that he was the instigator of everything that had happened—the drugs, the lies Tanner told me, the constant bullying.

“Kace?” I ventured a tentative step forward. He reminded me of a cornered animal preparing to run. His wide eyes flitted, never sticking on one thing in particular. After that initial eye contact, he made a point of not meeting my gaze again.

“Go away,” he whispered harshly. Succinctly. His words were as sharp as a whip marring flesh.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Why do you fucking care?”

His words momentarily stunned me. Because he was right, of course. I had no reason to care, no reason to want to comfort him. Not after everything we had been through.

Those assholes had drugged me and lied to me, made me believe that I was trapped at this magical school—scoff—but Kace’s vulnerability called to me and my protective instincts. Before I could second guess myself, I crouched down beside him.

I didn’t touch him—I had a feeling he wouldn’t appreciate the gesture—but I allowed him to know that I was with him.

“Did the professors hurt you?” I asked softly.

He snorted, lips curving into a cruel sneer. “Everybody hurts everybody in this world. That’s just the nature of life, Bianaca.” His voice turned hoarse, each word nearly indecipherable. “I have hurt so many people.”

“You have,” I agreed with an offhand shrug. When his head snapped toward my face, I smiled unapologetically. “What do you want me to say? Lie? We both know that would do no good.”

“I hurt you,” he continued brokenly. “Why are you being nice to me?”

“Because you also saved my ass,” I pointed out. “You took the blame for me. And besides, you weren’t the one bullying me. That was Aiden and Tanner.”

He looked so despondent that my heart physically ached for him. I wanted to reach out and grab his hand, but I balled my hands into fists to resist the urge.

“I should’ve stopped them.” He bobbed his head decisively as if agreeing with his own statement. “I knew you had nothing to do with Josie’s disappearance, but the others...” He raked a hand through his hair causing the red strands to become even more disheveled. “Josie was a sister to all of us, but she was related to Aiden by blood. Her death...disappearance...” His voice fumbled over that word before he cleared his throat and continued doggedly, “It shattered him. Aiden, as you may have guessed, had never been the sanest person to begin with. He lost the final shred of his humanity when she went missing, and I don’t know if he’ll ever get it back.”

My legs throbbed from holding myself up, and I allowed myself to sink onto the dusty wooden floor. Curling my legs to my chest, I wrapped an arm around them. Holding myself together.

“What happened?”

Kace dropped back to the ground, sprawling himself spread-eagle. He stared up at the ceiling as if he found one of the wooden boards particularly interesting. For a moment, I thought he wasn’t going to answer. When he did speak, after a long moment of silence, his voice was subdued. Soft. Devoid of any feeling.

“What you saw at the cafeteria. They began calling names. Aiden was absent during that time—probably fucking his latest conquest. We were sitting at our usual table—Tanner, me, Josie, and Olivia—when Olivia’s name was called. At this time,



we had already deduced that the school wasn't what it appeared to be. We didn't know everything, but we knew that any name called was fated for death.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

“Josie freaked out. That was the only word for it. She screamed, cried, attacked.” His lips puffed out. “The teachers were shocked. The food they gave us—some magical blend maybe? Or a science experiment?—assured that we were good students. Good prisoners.” Tears welled in his eyes once more, and I watched as one slid down his cheek. “They took her with Olivia. By the time we were able to look for them, they were gone. Vanished. Disappeared.”

The only sound was the wind howling against the windows. I wrapped my arms tighter around my knees.

“Her room remained empty for months...until you showed up. The girl that haunted our...” he trailed off, and I couldn’t help but wonder what he was going to say.

I, myself, didn’t know how to respond to such a story. In a way, it confirmed exactly what Tanner had told me. That the school was some sort of...paranormal academy? Hell? The verdict was still out on that one. It also conjured up images of my dream with Kelly, the professors, Ali, and the monster.

Unless...

The prospect of it being more than a dream very nearly had me collapsing. It unraveled me, greedily grabbing at a thread and pulling until I was nothing but a puddle of string. I could hear my breathing turn shallow.

“Was Tanner telling the truth?” I whispered. I hated when my voice cracked.

Kace, finally, turned his head to meet my eyes. Those auburn streaks in his hair

caught in the minuscule shaft of sunlight.

When he didn't answer right away, I continued, "What day is it today?"

Understanding dawned quickly.

"The rest of the school thinks it's Saturday or Sunday," Kace answered. His eyes watched me intently, gauging my reaction. "But time moves differently here. The food they give us warps our perception of reality."

No. No. No.

"This better not be a sick joke," I managed to sputter out. My hands gripped at my hair, pulling on the strands as if I could physically remove them from my scalp.

Kace's expression turned sympathetic and then mocking. Cruel. Not toward me, I realized, but toward himself. Self-loathing emitted from him in waves.

"Maybe it is. Maybe this entire thing is one sick joke." He turned to face the ceiling once more. "If that's the case, then we're all the butt of this joke as well. Fucking hilarious."

I scrambled to my feet, grit and other unsavory substances sticking to my legs and butt. I helplessly wiped my hands down my sides in a pathetic attempt to remove them. I felt dirty, disgusting, as if I was plunged headfirst into a pile of garbage. There was no eliminating the sickly sensation creeping down my arms, across my chest, settling inside of me, bone-deep.

Wariness crept over me, and all I could do was stare at Kace. "I'm losing my mind."

Broken. Pathetic. A slight hitch to my voice.

This school was slowly breaking me in a way I had never allowed Dylan to do before. These men were. I no longer knew what was real and what was some twisted game. My head throbbed, unable to collect and articulate every damn answer to the numerous questions I had.

And Kace...

Crying in an abandoned shack at the edge of the school, directly adjacent to a fence. His predicament was just another question with no answer. Or perhaps it was an answer with no question. I didn't even know where to begin with this, with him, with everything.

I could feel the beginning tendrils of anxiety and depression snaking its way to my heart, clasp the organ in its meaty embrace and hold it hostage. It had been too long since I felt like that, felt like the world and everyone in it was killing me. Months.

Now, it came back with a vengeance.

"Wait," Kace whispered as I backed up. The backs of my legs collided with the work table, and I heard something clatter to the ground.

With a strangled gasp, I spun on my heel and ran as fast as my legs could carry me.

In the wind, I could've sworn I heard Kace's voice cry, "Don't leave me."

But that was probably my imagination as well.

14

Bianaca

Angry, gray storm clouds obscured the sun from view. As the sky opened up, releasing its torrent of rain, I remained huddled beneath the bough of the largest tree. The canopy provided minimal shelter from the raging storm, but I eagerly welcomed each raindrop cascading down my cheek.

The icy rain reminded me that I was still breathing.

My mind raced, formulating more questions than answers. Each new number to this fucked up equation caused a piercing headache to appear behind my eyes.

Hell. Supernatural. Experiment.

So many scenarios.

I tried to piece together what little I knew. Tanner was right. I, along with the others, had arrived in a cab. I hadn't had one conversation with any of the professors, though I did see them often gliding through the hallways. Students were being plucked from the school and being fed to a...monster? Even to my own ears, that sounded insane.

Insane.

Insane.

That one word reverberated through my head, pounding my skull like a sledgehammer. It was killing me slowly from the inside out, demolishing my defenses until I was nothing more than a trembling pile of discarded waste.

Insane.

Insane.

Was that what I was?

Insane?

The idea held merit. More merit than anything else I could conjure up.

Placing my head in my hands, I let out an anguished cry. It echoed in the surrounding forest, this chaotic battle scream.

Insane.

Insane.

Insane.

I released my head and clenched my hands. My fingernails dug into my palms, and blood welled. Still, I pressed down harder, relishing in the blistering pain running up my veins. My nails continued to pierce my skin, tiny crescent-shaped indents, but I didn't relent. My hold tightened.

More. I needed more.

More answers. More pain.

More pain.

Blood cascaded down in red rivulets, staining my pristine gray uniform. Pain continued to assault me, each stab a wound I wasn't sure I could recover from.

“What are you doing?” I heard the voice, somewhat distantly, come up from behind me, but I paid it no heed. Instead, I dug my fingers farther into the flesh of my arm. Tears sprang to my eyes, but I couldn't separate them from the rain pelting my face.

In the distance, lightning struck, a giant spotlight being flickered on. The light was snatched away, and gray darkness returned.

Pain.

More.

I needed it.

“Fucking damn. Stop!”

A rough, calloused hand grabbed my own, wrenching my offending nails away from my skin. I glanced up in shock, surprised to see Aiden inches from my face. Rain matted his dark black hair to his scalp, and his lip and eyebrow piercing glimmered each time a new strike of lightning erupted overhead.

He was breathing heavily, chest heaving, but his eyes were focused as they rested on mine.

“What are you doing?” he hissed.

Tears, once more, spurted in my eyes, but I angrily brushed them away.

“Why do you care?” I asked just as bitterly. Each word was a slash of a whip, succinct and penetrating. His eyes narrowed on me, but his hand was surprisingly gentle as it held my own.

“I don’t. But for some reason, I don’t like seeing a female sitting in the rain, hurting herself. Excuse me if I’m a bleeding heart.”

I snorted, wrenching my hand away from his. Or, at least, attempted to. Instead of breaking free, he held me tighter. His long fingers clasped my wrist with a familiarity and tenderness that took me off guard. All I could do was stare at where we touched, the sky continuing to fall apart around us.

“Fuck off, Aiden,” I whispered. I wondered if he could hear my words over the



rumble of thunder and cacophony of rain.

“Why are you doing this?” he continued, ignoring me. His gaze was fixated on the stream of pink cascading down my hand. His thumb traced each jagged mark on my skin before pushing my sleeve up higher. His eyes flashed dangerously when he took in the now healed, self-inflicted scars taking up residence on my upper arm.

With bated breath, I watched him. Watched his tantalizingly light finger trace the area above each scar, never touching. Watched his lips part, a puff of air escaping. Watched the banked fire in his eyes grow to an inferno. He looked as if he was seconds away from either screaming at me, crying with me, or throwing me over his shoulder and locking me in his room.

I couldn’t understand why, though. Aiden hated me. Not only that, but he blamed me for the disappearance of his sister. There was no reasonable explanation for the protectiveness tightening his features. The compassion in his dark eyes.

“Because I’m going insane,” I breathily replied, glancing up at him through my fringe of lashes. He didn’t pull his attention away from my arm.

“You’re not going insane.” His tone was just as soft as mine, just as husky, and I wondered if my presence was affecting him as he affected me. The thought made me feel empowered, tiny licks of fire dancing through my veins.

“I’m seeing things, believing things, that can’t be real.” My broken confession finally had his eyes flickering upward. For a long moment, I could see nothing but indecision in his gaze. He chewed on his lower lip, tongue swirling around that enticing lip ring. I couldn’t look away, utterly enthralled.

“Come with me,” he said after a long moment of silence. Without waiting for me to respond, he jumped to his feet and extended a hand. I eyed the proffered hand warily.

This was the moment, I realized, when I had to decide whether or not I would trust him. Whether or not I would let him past my carefully constructed walls.

They were made of iron and stone, sure, but Aiden was a cannon. He came charging through my defenses, blow after blow. Surprisingly, I allowed him to.

With a stiff nod, I captured his hand with my own, and he pulled me to my feet. His eyes flashed with something I couldn't quite comprehend before that was replaced by calm indifference.

"Come." He squeezed my hand and pulled me to a familiar building.

The hut I had found Kace in only an hour before.

This time, however, when he opened the creaking door, there was no sign of the eccentric man. I couldn't understand why I felt disappointed.

Aiden ducked beneath a loose ceiling board before stopping in front of the yellow tape indicating that particular part of the building was under construction.

He took a deep breath, shoulders stiffening, before glancing back at me. Coldness once more iced over his eyes, and I staggered back a step. Had I gotten this all wrong? Had I been stupid trusting Aiden?

"What I tell you cannot be heard by another soul," he said curtly. His grip on my hand now felt almost punishing. "I don't even know why I'm fucking telling you this, but if you tell anyone else, even that mute boyfriend of yours, I will kill you. Do you got that?"

All I could do was nod mutely. Whatever warmth had once emanated from Aiden's eyes was gone now. In the brooding man's face was a prowling tiger out for the kill.

With a stiff bob of his head that indicated he heard me, Aiden ducked beneath the yellow tape, pulling me after him. I moved slowly, warily, my legs feeling like jelly.

“Are we supposed to be in here?” I whispered. Despite everything, I found myself clinging to Aiden like a damn monkey. My body was practically molded against his back, our fingers interlocked to the point of bruising. If it bothered him, he didn’t complain.

Ignoring my question, he stepped in front of an unmarked, opened doorway.

Mouth agape, all I could do was trail after him helplessly as he pushed the door farther open and stepped down a steep staircase.

Steep didn’t even begin to describe it. The staircase seemed to go on for miles, nothing but inky darkness as its destination.

Fear gripped my heart and refused to let go. I could feel my whole body shaking, a feat that became more obvious when pressed against Aiden’s sturdy, calm one.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

“What’s down there?” I whispered.

The darkness seemed to go on and on forever. Never stopping. Never relenting. I could feel phantom tendrils snaking around my wrists and ankles, holding me captive.

Aiden, once again ignoring me, slowly descended into the darkness. I remained frozen on the top step, my body irrationally crying out when his warmth left me.

“Are you coming?” he asked, unable to mask his irritation.

“What’s down there?” I repeated stoutly. After everything I had seen with Kelly, everything I had experienced with these men, the last thing I was ever going to do was travel down a dark, never-ending staircase with a man who hated me. I had better survival instincts than that.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I waited impatiently for an answer. My foot tapped with increasing speed as the seconds dragged on and Aiden continued to stare at me, a quirk to his brow.

“Don’t trust me?” he asked. Like the asshole he was, he didn’t sound upset, only amused. That damn brow lifted higher, nearly touching his hairline, when I remained silent.

“Not as far as I can throw you,” I admitted unashamedly. He chuckled.

“Don’t you want the answers, Bianaca?” He practically purred my name, his voice smooth bourbon. “I’m offering them to you.”

Once more, he extended that hand of his. This time, however, I didn't take it. Couldn't. It wasn't just fear and distrust, but some innate voice within me warning me against it. I knew that the second I followed him, he would lead me off a cliff. No, I had to play this game differently if I was going to emerge victorious.

Following a cruel, sadistic boy into a dark basement was not a move I could afford to make.

Shaking my head, I backed up one step. Then another. And then another.

Aiden watched my retreat with a strange combination of amusement and wariness. His pink lips pursed, but he allowed me to leave.

"I thought you wanted answers," he said harshly.

"I want a lot of things," I whispered. He prowled after me, stopping when his lean, muscular body was towering over my own. My back touched the wood of the shack, but I did not break eye contact. "And I think you want things, too. Things that you aren't willing to admit to anyone, let alone yourself."

When his brow furrowed, genuine confusion contorting his face, I realized I was closer to the mark than I had initially believed.

"I don't need you to jump in and save me," I continued raggedly. "I don't need you to manipulate me with this whole hero act, Aiden."

At that, his smirk returned once more. "Who said I was manipulating you? Maybe I actually am the hero." That smirk grew into a brilliant grin, one that spread across his entire face and made the skin around his eyes crinkle. "Have you ever thought of that? I may not be the stereotypical Prince Charming, but what if I'm the hero in this scenario, not the bad guy?"

He took another step closer, his leg going between my own. I hated how my heart picked up speed, hammering erratically beneath my ribcage. It was seconds away from breaking free entirely.

“Prove it. Prove to me that you can be a hero, not the bad guy.”

“I stopped you from hurting yourself, didn’t I?” he whispered. His hand reached out to push a strand of blond hair behind my ear, and I couldn’t help but shiver delicately. “I didn’t like seeing you hurt, and I did something about it. Doesn’t that make me a hero?”

He sounded so confused just then that I wanted to comfort him. To tell him he was a hero, not a villain.

But the words got stuck in my throat.

“I think...” I began softly, pushing past him. He moved away easily, hand still extended as if he wanted to brush another tress behind my ear. “I think you need to figure that out for yourself.”

Before he could respond, I hurried out the door. I didn’t know how to deal with Aiden, but one thing was certain.

I wanted to.

15

Bianaca

My breaths had evened out by the time I returned to my room.

The initial panic and inconsolable grief had ebbed, leaving me with nothing but an icy numbness. This avoidance of emotion wasn't the healthiest coping mechanism, but it was all I had. It had helped me through my childhood, and I knew it would help me now.

Stumbling, I peeled off my wet clothes and ambled to my closet. I felt as if I was drunk. Intoxicated. Drugged.

All of which I might actually be.

Perusing my options, my sardonic grin faded when I took stock of my school uniforms.

Each and every one had been destroyed by scissors. The white blouses required for us to wear by the school had holes in them, directly over the chest. The skirt was nothing but threads, each one hanging precariously from the waistband. Fuming, I ripped open my underwear drawer.

The assholes had even touched my bras and panties, too! Did they not realize how fucking expensive that shit was?

I held up my favorite lacy red bra and nearly burst into tears when I noted the holes carved into each cup. My underwear had a similar one in the lining.

My anguish transformed into blistering anger. With a scream, I threw the clothing across the room.

I had been stupid to believe the guys, even for a minute. They were animals, predators, and I was the helpless prey they had set their eyes on. When would they get sick of messing with me? When would they realize that I wasn't going to fight back?

Fight. Back.

There was no denying how appealing that option sounded. I wanted nothing more than to give them a taste of their own medicine.

Wasn't there some saying about playing with fire? Something about getting burned? Well, those assholes weren't going to just get burned. Oh no. That would be too easy. They were going to get obliterated until they were nothing but a pile of ashes. Ashes I would happily piss on, if I had my way.

Smirking cruelly, I considered the destroyed clothes once more.

Oh yes. I would get my revenge.

In the meantime? I would show them not to fuck with me.

All eyes were on me as I stepped into the cafeteria, a sway to my hips and my chin held up imperiously. The boys gaped, lust emanating from their eyes in palpable waves. The girls just looked aghast.



Piling my plate high with salad, I winked at the boy standing beside me. His eyes were trained on my chest before lowering. He couldn't seem to decide where to look. Not that I blamed him. I imagined I was quite the show.

As I moved through the throng of students—some boys whistling in appreciation and almost all sporting boners—I stopped at Aiden's table. His mouth was opened, eyes wide. Tanner sat beside him with a similar expression on his face. Kace, once more, was noticeably absent.

“Nice try, boys,” I said lightly.

I plopped my plate down, finally catching sight of myself in the window.

My white shirt and destroyed bra revealed my breasts to the entire world, my nipples beaded nubs. My skirt was in similar disarray, my ass and pussy entirely visible. I only had to spread my legs for someone to get a good look at my pink lips.

“What the fuck...?” Tanner breathed. His eyes were trained on my nipples with a carnal hunger. Aiden, on the other hand, looked furious. His eyes narrowed into thin slits, and his hand clenched into a fist.

“Why are you wearing that?” he asked darkly. He glared at something over my shoulder before settling his gaze back on me.

“Apparently, my wardrobe got an upgrade when I was out. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?” I asked with feigned sweetness. I even batted my lashes for effect.

“No,” Aiden stated in the same, malicious voice.

“Hmm...that's strange. I could've sworn...” Shrugging, I leaned over the table, my

breasts bouncing with my momentum. Aiden and Tanner both groaned—and so did the table behind me. I knew that this position gave them a perfect view of my slick folds. “I like this style. It’s...airy. Freeing.” I smirked at my own joke before throwing myself into the seat across from them.

Aiden had once more diverted his attention from me to glare at each and every guy who dared glance my way. His body thrummed with an almost incandescent fury.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

“I didn’t do this,” he hissed.

I merely quirked a brow at him in response.

“Oh? You sure?”

Because I sure as hell didn’t believe the little asshole.

“I don’t want others seeing what doesn’t belong to them,” he answered easily, and my stomach plummeted, clenching tightly.

“Is that possessiveness I hear, Aiden?” I asked. “Because I don’t belong to you.”

“Not yet,” he mused. He picked up his sandwich, eyes fixated firmly on the bread. “But soon, you’ll belong to the Four Horsemen.”

I snorted at that. I would rather belong to the devil himself than to the asswipes who think they own the school...and me, apparently.

Wait...

“Four? I thought there were only three of you?”

Before Aiden could answer, a hulking figure stood over the table. I batted my eyelashes innocently, smiling up at Beau, who glared down at me.

“Like my new wardrobe?” I asked coyly. His scowl only strengthened. Kace stood

behind him looking wildly disheveled. His shirt was halfway unbuttoned to reveal a splattering of chest hair, and his pants weren't zipped. Dark bags belied how tired the man actually was despite his easygoing grin. "Are you okay?" I asked, concerned.

And then I mentally chastised myself for being concerned in the first place. For all I knew, Kace was behind my wardrobe malfunction. These guys were dangerous, and I couldn't fall for their pretty faces and pouty lips. After all, hadn't Lucifer been beautiful? The most beautiful men were the most dangerous.

"Fine," Kace answered briskly. Dismissively. Despite his tone, his eyes were latched onto my heaving chest. His tongue absently traced his lips.

Beau raised an eyebrow at me, demanding answers I wasn't sure how to give him. Instead of saying anything, however, I straightened. The movement pulled his attention to my breasts, and I could've been mistaken, but I thought his eyes flashed with heat. Just as quickly, the heat diminished from his face, and his expression shuttered closed.

Without a word, he removed his jacket and shirt. He draped the jacket over my shoulders, buttoning it shut, before making me stand and tying the shirt around my waist. He was so tall that the shirt was easily able to turn into a makeshift skirt.

"Thank you," I whispered hoarsely, finally recognizing what I had done. Embarrassment didn't encapsulate what I felt, but it also couldn't be described as pride. A part of me was ashamed of my childish behavior while the other part felt good that I had stood up for myself. The two contradicting emotions clashed within me, battling for dominance. I wasn't afraid of my body—despite the various scars I knew were on display—but I was afraid of what people would think of me. Still, I couldn't regret what I had done.

Behind us, some of the guys booed and groaned at the show being over. They were

quickly quieted by four simultaneous glares.

Sitting back down, I picked at my lettuce.

“I didn’t do it, you know that, right?” Aiden said suddenly, interrupting the silence we had all grown accustomed to. Beau and I both tossed him a glare.

“Oh really?” I asked darkly. “Then who else would’ve done it?”

He shrugged, but his eyes took on a dark, predatory glint. No, not predatory. Murderous. “No idea. But I can find out if you want. Make sure they never do it again.”

“Um...no thanks.” I rolled my eyes at his alpha, macho display. I didn’t know whether or not I believed Aiden, but I knew for sure that I didn’t trust him. Not one little bit. “I’m going to get something sweet.”

“Salad not working for you, little gymnast?” Tanner asked in amusement. His eyes flickered to my chest as if he was visualizing my breasts once more. My rather full breasts. In response, I gave him my middle finger.

“Is your cock not working for you?” I retorted with pseudo-sweetness. Aiden and Beau both snorted out a laugh while Tanner’s eyes narrowed.

“My cock works just fine, as you are well aware.”

“Am I? Hmmm. Maybe I saw something different than what you saw?”

Before he could respond, I hurried out of my seat. Every eye was on me as I perused the food choices. My body was craving chocolate. Chocolate cake. Chocolate brownies. Chocolate ice cream.

“Don’t get the pudding,” a soft voice rumbled in my ear. I didn’t jump, despite him startling me. Glancing over my shoulder, I met Kace’s bright eyes. This close, I could see flecks of whiskey and gold swirling in the irises.

And I could also see the sadness. Grief. Pain.

Why had I never realized it before?

“But I like pudding,” I answered calmly, stunned by my own revelation. I recognized the haunted look in his eyes because I wore it as well. Was he the kindred spirit that called to my own? Like recognized like, after all. And there was no denying the pain emitting from his body in palpable waves.

“This pudding is disgusting.” He lowered his voice to a mock whisper. “I heard they make it out of human blood.”

Elbowing him lightly in the stomach, I laughed. “They do not.”

“Do too,” he protested. “Sacrificial ravens.”

“So how did the blood go from human to bird?” I asked cheekily.

“Spoiler alert: Maybe the humans are the birds.”

“Plot twist: Maybe the birds are the humans,” I countered.

Movement out of my peripheral ensnared my attention. The professors were once more gliding gracefully into the room. The chatter and whispers diminished in the cafeteria like a flame being blown out until the room was utterly still. Fear prickled beneath my skin until I was shaking with the force of it.

Kace grabbed my shoulder and harshly pushed me to the ground, behind the buffet line. His body protectively covered my own.

Once more, the mechanical voice grated over the loudspeakers.

“Tiffany Mehal.”

Screams. Cries. Pleas.

I was suddenly grateful that I wasn’t witness to this horrific scene. My nails dug into my palms even as my face burrowed inside the crook of Kace’s neck. His hand automatically tightened around me, holding me to him.

“Jeffery Lirrent.”

“Mallory Kent.”

Another scream. The sound of flesh hitting flesh. Feet dragging across the linoleum tiles.

“Tobias Matter.”

At the last name, the speaker abruptly cut off, and silence descended. I pressed my face farther into Kace’s skin, breathing him in deeply. For some inexplicable reason, I felt comfort in his arms. The sense of safety. I couldn’t entirely understand it myself nor did I want to.

Fear continued to strangle me long after the teachers left and conversations resumed like normal. It held me in a chokehold, refusing to release its tenacious grip. I was trembling when Kace finally helped me to my feet, eyes staring blindly ahead at the door the majority of the professors and selected students had disappeared down.

My stomach was a tumultuous mixture of fear and desperation. I wanted to vomit, to scream, to cry, to rip my hair from my head.



Because if the guys were telling the truth, if what I had seen with Kelly was reality, then those students were going to die.

They were going to get sacrificed to a monster.

16

Bianaca

I didn't know whether I was surprised or not to find Kelly towering over my bed, black hair cascading around her in soft waves. I blinked rapidly, attempting to remove the remnants of sleep from my brain.

Body heavy with fatigue, I awkwardly gaped at the small girl standing over me. After everything that had happened, I was positive I had locked the door.

So how the fuck had she gotten in?

"Kelly?" I asked in disbelief. She blinked her crystal blue eyes at me.

"Between," she whispered softly. The familiar word made me freeze and tense. I sat up in bed, somewhat reluctantly, and I turned toward her fully. Tiny hands gripped my wrist, nails digging into the sensitive skin. "Between."

"Are you trying to tell me something?" I asked, my voice just as quiet as hers had been. "Do you know something about the school?"

I didn't know how to phrase my questions in a way she would understand. Fear was an iron claw around my throat, cutting off my breath. My heart beat rapidly beneath my rib cage.

Did Kelly have answers? If she did, I needed to figure out how to get them from her.

She was willing to answer my questions in her own obscure way. It was my job to piece together the puzzle.

Her hand still tight on my wrist, she pulled me off the bed. I came willingly, feet muffled by my fuzzy socks I had slept in.

“Between. Between. Between.” Her free hand curled into a fist that she rammed repeatedly into her head. Immediately, I attempted to restrain the offending limb.

“Stop,” I said desperately. Wide, tear-filled eyes met mine once more, and I was struck by the despondency in them. They weren’t the eyes of a child. They were the eyes of someone who had seen too much, lived through too much, yet was forced to repeatedly act as if she was okay.

She yanked at my hand, pulling me down so we were eye-level. Her voice was raspy with suppressed emotion when she spoke next. “Once you escape your monsters, you find new ones.”

“What does that mean, sweetie?” I asked gently. I implored her with my eyes to explain, to help me solve this damning puzzle, to trust me with her secrets. The unshed tears in her eyes heightened the blue color, stagnant tears hanging suspended on her lashes.

“Between. Between. Between. Between.” She released my wrist as if it was toxic, pulling open my bedroom door and slamming it shut. Terror for her slithered down my back, and I desperately reopened the door. Memories of the clicking sound replayed in my head on a loop.

The monster had been hunting these halls.

But one glance in both directions confirmed that they were empty. No monsters. No

Kelly.

It was the latter observation that had me stepping outside, into the darkness that cloaked the halls like a cauldron of spilled ink. Only the light from my opened window allowed me to see my hand in front of my face.

Had it always been this dark?

I didn't think so.

"Kelly?" I whispered tersely. She couldn't have disappeared so quickly. Even if she was running, the halls were long enough for me to have spotted her before she turned the corner.

Did she sneak inside one of the other rooms?

I hadn't heard any doors beside mine slam shut, and I knew for a fact that her room wasn't on this hall.

Where had she gone?

That minuscule seedling of fear sprouted into a full-grown tree. The darkness only provided substance to the damn fear plant, helping it grow.

"Kelly?" I whispered harshly. I took an automatic step back into my room. Despite my fear for Kelly, I wasn't stupid enough to wander these halls. The last thing I wanted was to end up like Ali, sacrificed to an unknown monster.

Goosebumps erupted on my skin at the thought.

Monster.

The word itself sounded crazy, ethereal. Something you would hear in movies or read in books. Monsters weren't supposed to exist in real life. At least, not the stereotypical scaly beings that hid under beds.

## Page 57

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

No, those monsters were reserved solely for novels, not reality.

With one last glance down the empty hall, I shut my bedroom door. My heart was in my throat, choking me, but I refused to suffocate. Not this time.

With more determination than I felt, I grabbed a notebook out of my desk drawer and wrote down what I knew.

Masked, murderous professors.

Sacrificial offerings to some monster...god?

Asshole men.

No escape.

Between.

I circled the final word multiple times. Between what? I knew once I deciphered that definition, the rest would fall into place. I would have to be smart about how I went about it. My usual method of confrontation wouldn't work with Kelly's delicate mental state.

With one last glance at the paper, I placed it on my nightstand and slipped under the heavy blankets. At least in my room, I was safe.

Right?

Right?

Unbidden, my eyes snapped shut.

\* \* \*

Morning dew graced the green grass. The air was cold, near freezing, but the sun hung high in the sky, belying the frigid day. I moved stiffly, weakly, unable to formulate any thought besides “run.”

Run away. Run from him.

I dared a glance at a puddle of water and gasped at my reflection. My clothes were in tatters, my hair wildly disheveled, and fresh bruises darkened my pasty skin. I didn't look like the girl I once was. This person, this female with sunken skin and haunted eyes, was a stranger.

Still, I kept walking. Houses blurred, a combination of whites, browns, and grays. There was a noticeable lack of clouds in the sky, so despite the wind, the sun glared down on me. It did little to unthaw my frigid body.

My dead one.

Beau was exactly where I had told him to meet me. His golden hair glinted in the sunlight, and his hands were shoved into his jacket pockets. He hadn't noticed me yet, so I took the opportunity to study him unobserved. He looked beautiful and radiant standing beside the park bench. A knight in shining armor brought to life. His lips were pulled back into an easy grin as he tilted his face upward toward the sun. He looked so serene, enjoying life and everything it had to offer. I hated to pop his happy bubble.

He glanced in my direction, as if feeling my eyes grazing his back, and the content expression disappeared to be replaced by something darker. In three long strides, he was in front of me, gently placing his hands on my shoulders.

And that was when I exploded. Sobs shook me, tears cascading down my cheeks. I desperately clung to Beau as if he was a life preserver and I was a sailor lost at sea. His hand cupped the back of my head as he crushed me to him. Despite the gentleness of his embrace, his body was as taut as a violin. Tension seeped from every pore in his body, waiting with bated breath for a target.

Finally, he pulled me away from him and met my eyes. His were dark with promise. Promise of pain and vengeance and death. In his gaze, one word reverberated.

Who.

“Dylan,” I sobbed, wrapping my arms around my body. “Dylan.”

Dylan.

Dylan.

Dylan.

\* \* \*

I woke up with Dylan’s name a scream on my lips.



17

Aiden

Ididn't know I was a sucker for pretty blonds with doe-like eyes. Honestly, I had preferred dark-haired, exotic beauties.

But it was those damn eyes...

Those were eyes that hid years of pain behind a faux smile. An innocence and inner radiance that shone through whenever she smiled.

Not that she smiled a lot.

There was something...haunting about Bianaca. She was a beautifully wrapped present I was determined to pick apart, piece by piece. If I happened to destroy her in the unwrapping process, well, I never said I was a saint.

I just couldn't get the damn girl out of my head.

Pressing my ear to the door, I waited with bated breath for the telltale sign of clicking. The Monster only made its rounds every half hour, the precise moment the grandfather clock in the hallway pierced the silence.

"You coming?" I asked Kace tersely. He remained on his bed, curled up in a ball and eyes absently fixed on the far wall. "Asshole, get the fuck up."

Again, not even a twitch.

There was only so much I could do for him when he got like that. Booze and fucking were the two main ones. We were never shy of female company, and we both lived to make their wildest fantasies come true.

Taking her to the precipice of pleasure, both of us working her body in tandem.

The image of our last hookup contorted in my mind. Instead of the red-head whose name I couldn't recall, it was Bianaca pressed between us. Kace ducked his head to nibble on her collarbone while I brushed a hand down her bare ass. I reached over her pale shoulder and pulled Kace's lips down to mine in a bruising kiss, never taking my eyes off of her.

Fuck.

Even the fantasy was making me rock-hard. Uncomfortably hard.

Both Kace and I weren't gay. Hell, we weren't even bi. However, we were not afraid to be sexual with one another if it was what the lady desired. Kissing Kace didn't do anything for me, but listening to the woman's breathy moans? Her staggered breaths?

That was icing on the fucking cake.

I wondered how Bianaca would sound...

Shaking my head once more, I turned back toward my roommate and best friend.

"Do you want me to grab someone?"

By someone, I meant a female.

Kace surprised me by shaking his head vehemently.

“No,” he said coldly. He still did not break his intense staring contest with the wall.  
“Just go.”

I hated to leave him like that, but there wasn't anything I could do that didn't involve physically dragging him down the hall. Been there, done that, ended up with a bruise to the eye.

Sighing, I opened the door a crack and peeked into the hallway.

Empty.

Padding my bare feet softly over the wooden tiles, I raced to the front door. This pathway was as familiar to me as the one in my own room. There was only one fork in the hall, the right leading to the exit and the left leading to the girl's wing.

For a brief second, I considered heading to the left. The need was almost pressing, but I shook it off. I would dissect it at a later time. And by later, I meant waylater. Like, never. Maybe in twenty years. But now, I had someone I had to meet.

Stealing one last glance down the darkened hall, I raced out the front door.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

The chill, as always, startled me. It was yet another thing that set this school apart from the others. It was always abnormally frigid, even in the supposed summer months. I tugged my jacket closed and raced down the narrow, grassy pathway.

It was easy to believe that no one suspected what we were up to. Because if they did...

No, I had to remain firm in my conviction that none of the professors had caught wind of our activities. I was still alive, still breathing, still left with more questions than answers at this shit school.

Unlike Josie.

Her name felt like lead in my stomach, tangling with the jumble of nerves. There was no escaping the pain of her absence. She was my little sister, one of the few people I loved.

Until the day I died, I would grieve her.

Her disappearance—kidnapping—was only one of many mysteries. Why her?

Was it because she had uncovered something important? She had been the one to discover the drugs in the food and the antidote to stop the illusions. How had she even discovered something so...outlandish?

My selfless little sister. Risking her life to save all of ours. Stupidly. I didn't deserve her sacrifice.

And then there were the dreams...

With Bianaca.

I touched my lips with the tip of my tongue.

“You’re late,” Tanner said lazily, but he sounded like he couldn’t give two shits either way. He leaned against the shed wall smoking a cigarette. How he got a surplus of that shit remained a mystery. It just randomly kept appearing in his room. “Where’s Kace?”

I shook my head once, and that eloquent gesture was answer enough.

Tanner allowed me to lead the way into the dilapidated shed with the rickety doorway and hole-ridden roof. Under the yellow “caution - keep out” tape. Into the door and down the staircase.

I could tell why Bianaca had freaked out. I, too, would believe that I was being sent to my death. There was something uncanny about a darkness that clung to you like a second skin. The phantom tendrils of monsters clawing at your wrists. The disembodied sensation where you weren’t aware of where your hands were.

Darkness.

Utter and complete darkness.

Only when we were at the bottom did we dare switch on a light.

That superstition was silly, if it could even be classified as one. Ever since we had first discovered the diminutive shack and staircase, we had been terrified to even breathe let alone shine a light. That fear had ebbed after we had gotten an idea of

where the guards were going to be and when, but the cautious gestures—like keeping the lights off—did not.

The light illuminated a damp, dusky corridor. Gray, slate walls surrounded the perimeter and only a single table sat in the very center. Behind the table, a large tunnel branched out.

It was wide enough to fit two of me side by side and smelled vaguely of mildew and mold. The walls were entirely made of rock, clunkily chipped away. The slates of rock haphazardly sat on one another.

The tunnel was obviously manmade.

The creator or creators—the structure looked as if it'd been years in the making—had come to the same conclusion we had after discovering the horrors of this school. If you couldn't go over the gate and you couldn't go through it, then you had to go under it.

“She didn't believe you?” Tanner asked, removing his shirt. I removed mine as well, but unlike him, I carefully folded it and set it on the table.

“She didn't come down the staircase.”

We stepped into the tunnel, relying on the thin beam of the flashlight. We had to get new batteries soon. Maybe I could fuck one of the student workers from res-life.

Even as I thought that, a shudder went through me. An option that would've once sounded immensely appealing now held the same appeal as stabbing myself in the eye with a rusty spoon.

“That's because you're a psychopathic monster,” Tanner pointed out helpfully, and I

snorted.

“We’ve been over this. Psychopaths mimic emotions.” And I just felt everything too much.

## Page 60

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

Waving a hand dismissively, Tanner moved to the edge of the cave where a blockade of rock remained. It was the last obstacle between us and freedom, us and home.

Me and my sister.

The second I was out of this hell hole would be the same second I began my search. Josie was still alive.

She had to be.

A couple of tools littered the floor, all of which were stolen from the woodshop classroom. Why a school that didn't teach any classes had such an elaborate set up remained a mystery to me.

"She hates us, you know that, right?" Tanner said, picking up a hammer. It wasn't our preferred tool, but it was the best we had.

Now came the hard part of breaking the seemingly impenetrable blockade of rocks without the entire cave falling on our heads.

Fun.

"You sound upset," I pointed out, surveying my brother in arms. He swung the hammer in the center of the cave, muscles clenching.

"She's cool."



For Tanner to say that, when he hated everyone, even me, was a big ass thing.

Why did I feel...jealous over the fact that he liked Bianaca?

And the fact that she might have liked him back?

Growling, I grabbed the second rusty hammer and surveyed the rocks. We had been working for months and had only managed to make a dent. When I said impenetrable, I wasn't kidding.

The tunnel was both a beacon of hope and a fucking death sentence.

When we had first found it, we had noted tiny white Xs in certain areas. Tanner believed they were points to use our tools on, designed specifically to break the wall yet keep the ceiling from crumbling.

"So what are you saying?" I asked, swinging again. The Xs had long since disappeared, but our work was far from done. It seemed as if the tunnel of rocks extended forever. "Do you want to keep her?"

"And that's your fucking problem," Tanner huffed out through uneven breaths. "You can't keep a fucking female. You can't own her."

My lips curved upward as I swung my hammer. After Josie had disappeared, I found that I hadn't cared whether or not the ceiling collapsed on me, burying me alive. Suffocating me.

Eventually killing me.

Tanner and Kace felt the same but for entirely different reasons.

Now? I could see a newfound cautiousness in each of Tanner's swings. His eyes flickered warily to the ceiling, watching a few rocks tinkle down, before slamming the hammer into the wall once more.

"We may not be able to own this girl," I whispered. "But she may be able to own us."

18

Bianaca

“Little sister!” Dylan raced down the hall, light eyes glimmering, and put an arm around my shoulder. I tensed immediately beneath his touch but kept my face perfectly apathetic.

It was a technique I had honed, one that my therapist had taught me. If I acted like it didn’t bother me, it would stop.

Only, I feared that nothing would ever stop Dylan.

The school’s hallway was bustling with teens, locker doors slamming shut, laughter from the nearest group of jocks penetrating the chatter.

It was just another day in high school.

Hell would be a better description. Or purgatory—in these halls, I wasn’t quite dead or alive. I just was, floating through the motions in a disembodied state.

“How’s my favorite sister doing?” Dylan asked lightly. He pulled me to his locker, arm still tight around my shoulders, and began to grab his notebook and textbook.

I anxiously scanned the crowded halls. Did anyone see? Did anyone care? How could anyone think this was normal?

But if there was one thing I knew about high school, it was the need for conformity. Nobody dared to break free from the status quo, let alone stand up for what they knew was wrong. They kept their heads buried in the sand like good little pets, choosing to see the world through a warped funhouse mirror.

Me? I was trapped on the other side, ramming my fist against the glass. Blood rained down, staining the skin of my knuckles, but the cage did not break. I was forever trapped, fated to be an observer in my own life.

“Stop touching me,” I whispered to Dylan harshly. I attempted to pull away, but only half-heartedly. It wasn’t as if I wanted him to touch me, but I knew the consequences of my actions. If I embarrassed him, he would seek out his revenge.

“The new kid’s staring at you again,” my stepbrother said conversationally. I stiffened beneath Dylan’s hold, only allowing my eyes to move as I surveyed the teeming throng of students. Sure enough, I met a pair of dark orbs locked on me. I couldn’t quite read the expression on his face, but I would almost describe it as horrified.

I could’ve been wrong. Nobody had ever noticed or cared how Dylan treated me before. Not even Beau noticed half the time.

The new student had arrived with his younger sister a few weeks ago. I had immediately hit it off with the younger girl who was, as Beau pegged, a groupie. She sat at my table, chatting excitedly about anything and everything.

Her brother was slightly more reserved. I sat next to him in math class, and I knew that he was ridiculously smart. Almost genius level. It wasn’t something I would expect from him given his emo, brooding-guy look. For the most part, I ignored him, but I did catch his eyes on me from time to time, his long tongue swirling over his lip ring.

“He doesn’t matter,” I said, turning my attention away from the new student and his way too enticing eyes. The last thing I wanted was for him to be on Dylan’s radar.

As quarterback and basketball star, Dylan had the entire school under his thumb. He wielded his power like a sword, not hesitating to cut someone down. Ruin them.

He had tried it with me once before, and he had tried it with Beau.

“Come, little sister.” Dylan’s fingers bruised from how tightly they gripped my arm. “Let’s get to class.”

\* \* \*

I woke up in a cold sweat, heart pounding in tandem to my racing thoughts. The dream had felt so vivid, so realistic. I could still feel the weight of Dylan’s arm around my shoulders, smell his acrid, rancid breath.

Why had Aiden been in my dream?

I didn’t want to dwell on that, choosing instead to get out of bed and walk to the communal showers. The hot water did little to wash away the remnants of the dream, however.

To my surprise, a fresh uniform was sitting on my bed when I stepped back into my room in only a towel. My dripping wet hair cascaded down my back, watering the wooden floors.

A simple note was tacked to the blouse.

Sorry.

-K

K? Kace?

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:02 am*

Had he been behind my wardrobe malfunction?

Shaking my head, I hesitantly lifted the uniform as if it was a poisonous snake preparing to strike. There were no holes, no shreds, and I was shocked to see it was in my size.

Was this a trick?

Despite my unease, I found myself methodically dressing, reveling in the warm fabric and smell of laundry detergent. I had no doubt Kace had used his connections with the school to get me this uniform.

Fully dressed, I stepped out of the room and headed toward Beau's.

The blond giant was leaning against the wall outside his door when I arrived, waiting for me. Without a word, he took my hand in his and pulled me in the direction of the cafeteria. His large hand made me feel so small and dainty. Fingers interlocked, I could almost imagine we were boyfriend and girlfriend instead of merely best friends.

Why did that thought make my heart skip happily?

"I had the strangest dream," I said to Beau conversationally. He turned to face me, one eyebrow raised inquisitively. Explaining quickly, I recalled my dream to Beau. I told him about Aiden making an appearance at our high school, which alone was strange. I would've remembered someone like Aiden gracing the halls of Ravenswood High.

Beau listened to it all with a contemplative frown on his face. Only when I was done did he grab my shoulders, halting my forward progression.

His fingers lightly traced over my inner arm, writing into my skin.

Maybe not a dream. Maybe memory.

I frowned.

“It wasn’t a memory,” I assured him. “I would’ve remembered Aiden at school. You would’ve, too.”

His face twisted, deep in thought, and his finger lifted to tap at his chin.

Weird dreams, he wrote after a moment of silence.

“You’ve been having weird dreams, too?” I questioned, easily able to understand his eloquent language. Beau nodded. His brows were drawn tight, and his lips were puckered. “What happened?”

While one hand continued to tap at his chin, the other rubbed soothing patterns into my arm. His touch elicited goosebumps all over me.

With a sigh, he removed his hand and reached toward a bulletin board, pulling down a sheet of paper. It was an advertisement for support groups, particularly ones dealing with sexual assault.

Turning it over, Beau grabbed a pen from a cup near the board and began to write.

Beau hadn’t always been mute. There was a time, many years ago, when he had been loud and vibrant. A shining light. A beacon breaking apart the monotony of darkness.



That had all changed, though, after his stepfather had murdered his mother. His therapist called it selective mutism.

I called it silence. Complete and absolute silence. It was almost unnerving at times. Daunting, even. I knew that he had so much to say, but no will to say it.

Clearing my throat, I waited for Beau to hand me the slip of paper, his messy scrawl taking up the entire back.

They're strange. Half the time I wake up not remembering them. What I do remember is Dylan, oddly enough. I remember being furious and attacking him. And I also remember him fighting back. And something with a knife. You're there as well, leaning over me. Crying. And then I wake up.

Beau shrugged his large shoulders, and I gulped. Something about his words...

I sifted through my memories, looking for any truth to them, but I came up blank.

It was just a dream, after all. Who said that dreams had to hold snippets of truth?

I could see that it was bothering him. His eyes were abnormally large in his face, and dark shadows marred the skin beneath them.

"It's just a dream," I assured him, squeezing his fingers.

I didn't know who I was trying to convince.

Me or him.

We turned at a fork in the hall, and I staggered to a stop, nearly tripping over Beau's feet, at the sight before us.

Kelly was pressed against a wall, a young man leaning over her. I couldn't recall his name, only that he was the ringleader from the first time she had been bullied. His arm was lightly pressed against her throat, and his eyes were narrowed as he hissed something at her.

Only when I got closer could I make out the end of his crude speech.

"...fucking freak," he cursed, releasing her. Kelly didn't sag in relief. She didn't cry. She didn't even move, instead choosing to blink up at him with wide, innocent eyes.

The boy, only a year or two younger than me, met my gaze and noticeably gulped. He glanced back at Kelly before hurrying down the hall.

The entire exchange lasted only a few seconds.

Beau made a move to go after the little shit, but I placed a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"What was that?" I directed my question at Kelly while still holding on to Beau. The girl glanced up at me. Unlike the other students, she wasn't wearing a uniform. Instead, she wore a white dress with pink flowers adorning the belt. Her black hair tumbled loose around her shoulders, as dark as obsidian stones.

“He didn’t believe me,” she whispered. Her eyes flickered to Beau and then back to me, eyes imploring if we could trust him. I nodded once. “He didn’t believe me about the monsters.”

At that, Beau took a step forward, and my hand slid from his shoulder. He pulled me to him, burrowing his face into my hair and inhaling deeply. There was no sharp intake of breath. No confusion. No glances down at Kelly as if she had lost her mind.

“You told your bully about the monster?” I asked Kelly, blinking rapidly. Trying to piece together what exactly she meant.

I would also admit that I was confused by Beau’s reaction. Did he know about the monsters?

And if he did, how?

“I told them,” she corrected with a decisive head bob. “My men. My harem.”

“Your men?” I pulled back slightly to meet Beau’s eyes. He finally seemed just as confused as me, which did not bode well for Kelly.

He hadn’t reacted once to her cryptic comment about monsters, but the second she mentioned a harem? Confusion.

The girl’s smile was wistful, dreamy, as she swayed side to side.

“They just don’t know it yet,” she continued, voice raspy.

Yup. One too many screws loose.

Kelly froze suddenly. Her eyes widened slightly, almost imperceptibly, and she took

a step backward.

“They’re coming,” she whispered. “They’re coming.”

“Who’s coming?” I took a step forward to counter her step backward. Tears welled in her eyes, heightening the tiny golden flecks expanding like fireworks around her pupil.

Kelly’s voice was a hushed murmur when she said, “Some of the monsters.”

The girl was positively terrified.

I followed her gaze over my shoulder, but I already knew what I was going to see. This was only confirmed when the professors marched in pairs of two down the hall. Their black robes swished around their feet; white masks reflected the artificial lighting of the halls.

My heart began to beat rapidly. The professors had never made an appearance outside of dinner and the hour just before and after. What were they doing in these halls at eight in the morning?

“Reapers,” Kelly whispered, petrified. Her tiny body was shaking as if electricity coursed through her vines.

Reapers?

I didn’t dare reply out loud, afraid that anything above an unintelligible murmur would bring the professors’ wrath down on me.

Reapers.

I mulled the word over in my head. Something about it stuck, tattooing itself onto the deepest recesses of my brain.

Reapers.

“Why are they here this early?” I whispered, pressing myself to the wall as they passed me.

This close, I could see how similar they all were. Almost identical. Same height. Same dark clothes. And, at least in this batch, the exact same masks.

Kelly gulped. For a long moment, I thought she wasn’t going to answer. A ball of lead settled in my stomach mixing with the churning chasm of nerves.

When she finally responded, her voice was a breathy whimper.

“Because someone tried to escape.”

19

Bianaca

There was a palpable tension in the air. Something thick and dark, settling over the students like a tar. It clung to their skins, their pristine uniforms, their slicked-back hair. It made all the whispers and fidgets diminish like a flame being blown out until the large room was still and silent. The only sound was our own shoes pounding on the linoleum tiles.

The shortcut Kelly had led us to had worked. Surprisingly, we had arrived before the masked professors.

But everyone knew that something was about to happen, something that would alter our lives forever. Was it a feeling, perhaps? The type of feeling you get when you are standing in a crowded room with eyes caressing your back? The type of feeling you get when you know there is a monster beneath your bed and no one else believes you?

The air was too thick, too polluted, as I moved toward the table in the direct center of the cafeteria. Kelly branched off, but I didn't look to see where she was going. Tanner, Aiden, and Kace immediately glanced up when I arrived, their conversation halting. Tanner's eyes perused my form, as if checking me over for injuries, while Aiden narrowed his eyes into thin slits. Kace seemed nonplussed, humming beneath his breath and not at all bothered by what was about to go down. I was beginning to wonder if something was wrong with Kace mentally. One second, he was curled into a ball and the next he had a singularly beautiful smirk pulling at his full lips. His

change in attitudes was giving me whiplash.

“What did you do?” Aiden hissed darkly before I had even sat down. Beau moved to sit beside me, his large arm landing comfortably and protectively over my shoulders. Tanner’s eyes twitched at that, but he didn’t comment.

“Me?” I scoffed. “I didn’t do anything. Apparently...” I cast a quick look in both directions of the cafeteria. It was silent, yes, but I knew that if I kept my voice down, no one would hear us. I leaned across the table until my face was inches from Aiden’s. “Apparently, someone tried to escape.”

I gauged his reaction carefully, marking every tightening of his eyes, every downward pull of his lips, every color draining from his face.

His expression did all that for only a second before it was replaced by his customary apathetic mask.

But I had seen it. A theory I hadn’t even realized I had was only confirmed.

“Shit,” I whispered, stunned. “It was you, wasn’t it? All of you.” I purposefully glanced at Tanner and Kace so they knew which “you” I was referring to. And then my eyes slid to Beau who was staring intently at the tabletop, color rising to his cheeks. There was no mistaking the guilt in his eyes.

And that guilt slammed into my gut with the force of a bowling ball. I was the pin being pushed over, landing straight in the gutter. Betrayal. That was what this felt like. Knife after knife being slashed across my skin, embedding itself so deep that nothing could remove it. I was just waiting for one of those knives to hit an artery or my heart.

“Beau?” I whispered tersely. I stared at my best friend, the man I had been in love

with for years, and I only saw a stranger. His tall frame was huddled over the table as if he could somehow disappear from my prying eyes, but I still saw him. I always saw him.

But unlike the comfort and love he usually evoked, I only felt pain.

Whatever he was going to say, whatever rebuke he was going to give, was interrupted by the professors striding into the cafeteria. As was their usual, they took positions around the perimeter of the room. Caging us in. Herding us.

I wished I could see their faces behind those masks.

There was a crackle of electricity before the mechanical voice reverberated through the loudspeaker.

“There are two rules. One, you follow all instructions and go where the professors tell you to go. Two, you never, not ever, try to escape. Failure to follow these rules leads to the immediate expulsion of said student.”

There was a long, pronounced silence as everyone waited with bated breath. I knew my own heart was working overtime, attempting to put blood back into my pale face and frigid hands. Fear like no other clamped around my heart and refused to relent its iron hold.

I may have been pissed at Beau, I may have hated Aiden, Tanner, and Kace, but the last thing I wanted was for them to face the same fate as those other students. Sacrificed...to a monster. My tongue felt like lead in my mouth. I was watching a car crash in slow motion, knowing inevitably that everyone was going to die but being unable to stop it.

Each heartbeat tugged, pulled, pounded, until I feared it would break free from my



ribcage. Ice slithered up my spine.

And then the mechanical voice spoke once more. “Jessica Feeney, Tiegan Mayn, and Jeffery Heart.”

The next few minutes were chaos. A girl, her dark brown hair cascading around her shoulders and framing her sharp green eyes, jumped to her feet and immediately ran toward the cafeteria door. Two men from separate tables came as well. A professor lunged for them, but one of the men stealthily side-stepped and landed a punch onto his—her?—shoulder. The professor didn’t even flinch, instead grabbing the student by the scruff of his neck and pulling him up off the ground. His feet dangled in the air as the professor showed a considerable and completely ethereal amount of strength.

“Tiegan!” The girl, Jessica, more than likely, screamed. She immediately turned toward him, but another professor cut her off. Before the brown-haired girl could blink, something was jabbed into her neck. A needle.

She collapsed to the ground unceremoniously, the professor not even bothering to cushion her fall.

Jeffery, the only one of the trio left, glanced cautiously from side to side. He looked like a cornered, rabid animal as he was herded against the wall. His body shook, tiny beads of sweat dripping down his face.

“Please,” he whispered hoarsely, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. One of the professors calmly glided toward him and wrenched his arms behind his back. Jeffery let out a pathetic whimper, but he didn’t fight. He knew, as well as everyone else in the cafeteria did, that fighting back was futile.

The large cafeteria doors opened, and the professors exited, single-file, their new treats slung over shoulders or dragged by their feet.

The macabre, demented scene only lasted a few minutes. The second the doors closed, chatter resumed as if it had never stopped. As if three students hadn't just been carried away. As if death didn't await us all like an ominous, bloated storm cloud threatening rain.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:03 am*

Aiden let out a long exhale, his hands unclenching from around the edge of the table.

“What the hell?” I whispered, shaking. The scene replayed in my mind with vivid clarity. Every desperate cry. Every tear trailing down faces. Every otherworldly movement by the so-called “professors”.

Around me, the other students were acting as if they were fine. Laughing. Talking. Flirting. As if it was any other day.

“It’s the drugs,” Kace said, surveying me from beneath his fringe of dark lashes. “We told you. Without the antidote we gave you, you would be just like them. Oblivious to the horrors of the world.”

“I don’t understand,” I whispered honestly. My hand instinctively sought out Beau’s, and I held it in an iron vise. I knew my nails were digging into his skin, but if I hurt him, he didn’t complain.

“The drugs in the food,” Aiden began, nodding toward his plate of pancakes, “are unlike anything we had ever seen or even heard of before. It makes it so you see things through a different lens, a different perspective. Instead of three students being brutally attacked and ripped away, the other students instead saw the principal reprimanding them and calling them down to his office. I don’t know how it works.”

“Is it...” I almost felt silly for the question I wanted to ask. Almost. But I forged ahead anyway. The answer would do nothing for me. It wouldn’t pacify my rage for what I had just witnessed. It wouldn’t be the balm my soul needed to survive this nightmare. But an answer was an answer, and it was something I was desperate for.

“Is it magic? Paranormal?”

It was Kace who answered, leaning languidly back in his chair and kicking his feet up.

“Maybe. We considered that option.” He exchanged a glance with Aiden and Tanner and even Beau. The Three Horsemen. No, the Four Horsemen. I didn’t know when it happened or how, but somehow, Beau had joined their little group.

Without me.

“My bet is a governmental experiment,” Tanner said succinctly. Aiden rolled his eyes.

“That doesn’t seem likely.”

“And supernatural does?” he retorted back.

Ignoring him, Aiden looked at me. “We believe only one person knows the truth about this place.”

Kelly, I thought, but didn’t say aloud.

Aiden’s answer took me by surprise. “Heath.”

“Heath?”

I had never heard of a Heath before.

Aiden nodded seriously, flickering his eyes over my shoulder. “He’s the student body president appointed by the professors themselves. How would he not know?”

I followed his gaze toward a boy sitting at a table with a dozen others, laughing. He was handsome with wind-swept brown hair and a large smile. It was his eyes, though, that gave me a pause. They were surprisingly cold on his handsome face. Icy.

I knew innately that his smile was a mask.

A girl had her arm curled around his bicep as she giggled at something he said. Another girl was leaning so far over the table her large, perky breasts were practically spilling out. Still, he ignored them all as he talked. He was talking to them, but not at them.

And then I spotted Dylan a few people over, eagerly eating up whatever Heath was saying. Seeing my nemesis, my tormentor, made my blood run cold.

I turned back toward the four men eagerly, unable to quell the growing panic Dylan's mere presence evoked within me.

"He's an asshole," Aiden explained icily, oblivious to my inner turmoil.

"You're one to talk," Tanner snapped.

But it was Kace who was staring at me intently, brow furrowed. He had obviously seen something in my face, something that hinted at the fear I wished to remain hidden. His lips were pursed delicately as he surveyed me, but he didn't ask. He didn't demand answers.

But for some inexplicable reason, I felt as if I had just been seen more clearly than I ever had before.

"I want to know everything," I whispered, pulling my gaze away from Kace's. Aiden's smile was speculative, eyes amused, when I finally faced him.

“What if we told you everything in exchange for your help?”

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:03 am*

“My help?” I parroted dumbly.

But I would do whatever they needed, as long as I was included in their little escape plan.

Aiden smiled wickedly.

“Meet us in the shed tonight. Leave exactly at 11:42 PM. Not a second earlier or later.”

“Why?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. Was this just another game?

I was fucking tired of being a pawn on a game board.

So fucking tired.

“Because,” Aiden replied, “you want answers. I want your help. It’s a win-win situation, isn’t it?”

Isn’t it, indeed.

20

Bianaca

Time trudged by, each second feeling like hours.

I glanced anxiously at my bedside clock, waiting attentively for the little red light to mark the time as 11:42. Why I trusted Aiden with something like this remained a mystery. Logically, I knew it was dumb to trust someone like him—a predator. A wolf not bothering to hide its predatory intent behind sheep clothing. He was a lion out for the kill, not merely the hunt.

Somehow, I had found myself as the helpless gazelle.

At 11:30, I heard the familiar scuttling of beetles just outside my door. The mundane sound caused my hair to rise on the back of my neck. I was coiled tightly, a snake waiting to strike. Lashing out with my venom.

The sound receded as the...monster...turned the corner. Still, I couldn't quite calm my abnormally tense muscles or the pitter-pattering of my heart. No, not a mere pitter-pattering. It was pounding with the force of a thousand drums. Each one threatened to tear the organ straight out of my chest. Finally, when the clock struck the desired time, I climbed out of bed and tentatively ventured toward the door.

Was this going to be my life? Sneaking out of dorm rooms but not because I was afraid of getting caught by an RA, but by a monster?



Traveling to an abandoned shed to meet my bullies not a boyfriend?

After a quick glance in both directions, confirming the hall was clear, I crept down the hall now as familiar to me as my house back home. Fortunately, I remembered a jacket, so I immediately slid it on the second I was outside, the frigid air assaulting me instantly. Shivering, I burrowed my face farther into the soft fabric and made a beeline in the direction of the shed.

I vaguely wondered where Kelly was. Was she on the balcony again watching helplessly as students were fed to a monster? Was she safe in her dorm room? I didn't know why I was so worried about the smaller girl, but I couldn't deny that I was. Somehow, somehow, she had weaseled her way into my heart, and I had taken responsibility for her. We had a kinship, her and I, forged by trauma we couldn't articulate into words. For some reason, she had trusted me with a secret that could alter the world as we knew it. But why? Why me?

Was it because I stood up for her?

Shaking my head, I stopped in front of the dilapidated building dwarfed by trees. Voices reached me before I even entered.

“We have to tell her!”

I froze, one foot in front of the other. That voice...

Impossible.

“And what? She won't fucking believe us.” Tanner. His growly tenor was unmistakable.

“She'll believe me,” Beau said resolutely.

Beau. Beau talking.

Beau fucking talking.

A variety of emotions flashed through me, too fast for me to fully grasp onto any of them. Shock. Happiness. And then a blistering anger, red hot. It threatened to burn me from the inside out.

Beau hadn't spoken a word in years, not even to me. To hear him finally speak sent chills up my body, goosebumps across my arms.

Then, the jealousy hit.

It clambered to life in my stomach, tangling with the giant ball of nerves.

He hadn't spoken in years, and his first words were said to my tormentors? Anger thrummed through my veins.

Before I could stop myself, I stormed into the shed.

Aiden, Beau, and Tanner were all standing around the small work table. Kace sat on the ground against the wall, his eyes trained intently on his hands. He glanced up when I walked in before flickering his gaze back down.

"What the hell, Beau?" I asked, ignoring the other three men. My entire attention was on my best friend.

Combined with the jealousy and anger was something else, something that I had felt only this morning.

Betrayal.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:03 am*

All of my emotions must've been evident on my face, for Beau took an automatic step toward me, hands extended.

"Don't touch me," I hissed. "What's going on?" Finally, I addressed all four of them. Tanner had the decency to look sheepish, but Aiden met my gaze defiantly.

"I think you already figured it out," he said tersely. Each word was clipped, succinct, the biting slash of a whip. I felt it ram into me physically.

"You're escaping," I whispered. Not one of them denied it.

"That's right." It was Kace that spoke, his eyes still trained on his hand. "We can't stay here any longer. Obviously."

"Obviously," I repeated numbly. There was this roaring sound in my ears. A scream.

I turned my eyes onto Beau, who was watching me helplessly.

The air around us practically vibrated with tension. I kept my gaze locked on his as I finally dared a step closer.

"You knew." It wasn't a question, but he nodded in assent anyway. Tears sprang to my eyes, and I didn't bother to brush them away. I wanted him to see the hurt, the pain, the anguish. "You would've left me behind?"

At my soft words, he began to shake his head vehemently. His shaking hand reached for my arm to write on the sensitive skin, but I wrenched it away.

“No, you don’t get to do that. If you have something to say, then say it. You talked to all of them. Why can’t you talk to me?” I took a step closer until the tips of my shoes were touching his. Until our noses were a mere inch apart and his hot breath wafted over my face. “Talk, Beau. Fucking talk.”

He remained stubbornly silent, his eyes begging me, beseeching me, to trust him. There was something near pleading in his golden-flecked gaze.

But my nerves were alight, my stomach a tumultuous mixture of dread and anger, and the last thing I wanted to do was trust him.

What people failed to tell you was that the people you loved the most were capable of hurting you the most.

“Talk, dammit!” I screamed, pounding on his chest. “Talk!”

My only answer was the slightest shake of his head.

Suddenly, I couldn’t look at him, couldn’t be near him. It hurt too much.

Despite his anguished gaze and reaching hands, I ducked away, moving to sit beside Kace. The auburn-haired man immediately shifted until our arms brushed, his own eyes flickering with sympathy.

“So you’re escaping,” I whispered harshly. Grit and other unsavory substances clung to my clothes, but I paid them no mind.

“Yes,” Aiden answered immediately. “And we need your help.”

A strangled laugh escaped me. “Is that the only reason you brought me? Allowed me to join your little club? Because you need my help? What if you didn’t need me?”

Would you have left me here to die?"

Nobody answered, but their silence was answer enough.

"Fuck you," I snapped. "Fuck you all."

"It's not like that," Tanner snapped. "We have come to...care about you. We wouldn't have left you behind."

Care about me? I wanted to scoff. The only thing they cared about was themselves. I was just the girl who dared to defy them, the girl who had gotten in the way of their plans, the girl who had found herself in a dead girl's room.

"Down that staircase," Aiden began, pointing toward the door he had attempted to lure me down before, "is a tunnel. We don't know how long it's been here or what its purpose is, but we believe it will get us out of here."

"Or..." I met his stare with a quirk to my brow. "The tunnel will just lead us back to where we once were. Like the gates."

Aiden shrugged, undisturbed. "Maybe. But it's the only option we have. It's either leave through the tunnel or leave through a bodybag. And I don't want it to be the latter."

His words made sense, in a twisted sort of way. I filed the information away to look into at a later time.

"Okay," I said slowly. "So you found this tunnel. Why haven't you left yet?"

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:03 am*

“There was a cave-in,” Kace answered. He indolently rested his head on my shoulder, and I stiffened at the initiation of contact. My muscles slowly relaxed when I came to the conclusion he wasn’t planning on slashing open my neck or anything like that. “But we believe another group of students were trying to escape before us. They marked on the rock where we could dig without the entire tunnel collapsing.”

“Other students...?” I trailed off.

Other students had tried to escape?

What had happened to them?

That answer was simple if today’s demonstration was any indication.

“We believe they were caught,” Tanner parroted my thoughts with a nod of his head. “But, B, we’re so fucking close. So close. We think we can do it. Escape, that is. Maybe in the next few days.”

His words twisted my insides. Escape. Leave.

Those two words sounded so fucking appealing.

But so, so dangerous.

“Okay, so what do you need me for?” I asked, raising a brow. “I obviously won’t be much help with the heavy labor.” I was fit from gymnastics, but I wasn’t as buff as the four guys around me. Even Kace, the skinniest of the bunch, had corded muscles

accentuated clearly through the school uniform.

“Heath,” Tanner answered.

“Heath? The president?”

He nodded. “We believe he has more information than the average student. Maybe he’ll be able to tell us what’s on the other side of that wall.”

I gulped audibly, and Kace reached down to squeeze my hand.

“On the other side? Isn’t it...well...you know,” I stammered, eyes zeroing in on the anxious glances exchanged between all four of the guys.

“Maybe. That’s what we want to determine,” Aiden said at last. “It will be dangerous if we go through the tunnel blind. If Heath knows anything, we need to know.”

“And that involves me how?” I asked, though I already feared the answer.

“Use your female...charms,” Aiden said after a long moment of silence. Both Tanner and Beau refused to meet my eyes.

“You want me to seduce him?” I asked in disbelief. My stomach tightened to exponential levels. When no one answered, I narrowed my eyes into thin slits. “Fuck you all.”

“We need your help, little gymnast. We wouldn’t have asked if one of us could do it. Or if there was another female we could trust.”

“Fuck you.” It seemed to be the only two words I was capable of saying.

My fingernails dug into Kace's palm, my eyes spewing heat.

Fucking pricks.

"Okay, so we discover what's on the other side of the wall. We time our escape so the professors aren't around and won't notice our absence for at least a little bit. What about the monster?" I asked.

All four of the guys blinked at me.

"Monster?" Kace asked, staring up at me through his dark lashes.

I frowned. Was I going crazy? Was what Kelly showed me real?

How did they know about everything else, but not the monster lurking these halls?

I brought a hand up to my head as if that physical gesture could somehow clear my foggy mind. Memories bombarded me. Ali's death. The dark, sunken skin of the hand. The clattering noise echoing in the halls.

"Little gymnast, we don't understand what you mean," Tanner said at last. He stared at me long and hard, as if questioning my sanity.

"But...but...what do you think happens to the students that are taken? I've seen it happen. I've seen them become sacrificed to the monster."



21

Kace

All we could do was stare at the petite blond.

Stare.

As if that nonsensical, wordless gesture would grant some clarity on the fucking bomb she dropped with the finesse of a bull traipsing through a china shop. It didn't just sit on the floor idly; it exploded. Fucking exploded.

When nobody answered her and she didn't rush to clarify her strange statement, the silence grew. And grew. And grew. What started as a minuscule seed became a full-fledged tree towering in the center of the shed. It provided a metaphysical wall between us and her. Me and her. Her body may have been pressed to mine, my head on her shoulder, but there was an ocean of space between us.

"You don't believe me," she whispered. It wasn't a question, but Aiden, of-fucking-course, felt the need to respond.

"Monsters, sweetheart?" He quirked an eyebrow mockingly, but only someone who knew him as well as I did could see the tightening of his eyes. He didn't believe the little firecracker, but her words made him nervous.

What had she seen that made her think monsters existed?

What had happened to her?

I could see Beau itching to go to her, to comfort her, to wrap his arms around her and hold her tight. I knew because it was a reflection of my own feelings. Almost instinctively, I shifted so my arm was over her stomach. If it bothered her, she didn't protest. I would be the first to admit that butterflies fluttered in my stomach, their wings beating against the lining.

"Monsters exist," she said demurely. "I've seen them."

"We all have." Aiden spread his arms to encompass all of us in the room. "Humans are the worst monsters out there. Sometimes, our subconscious takes the form of—"

"Don't fucking bullshit me," Bianaca snapped, removing herself from my embrace. Instantly, I missed the way she felt against me. The heat of her. Her absence pulled back layers of skin and bone and muscle. "You think I'm making this up."

Aiden held her stare stubbornly. "I don't think you're making this up. I think that sometimes our brain compartmentalizes things to make you believe stuff that doesn't exist."

"Whatever. I don't fucking need this right now." Each word was succinct, a slash of a knife against flesh. She made a beeline toward the exit, her footsteps echoing, and every pore in my body wanted to call her back to me. I didn't know why I felt the way I did. I barely knew the girl but yet...

She was intimately familiar to me. Almost painfully so.

"Wait!" Tanner called. He ventured a step toward her but stopped when he saw the expression on her face. Cornered, almost. Wounded. She was scared and was trying to hide it behind an impeccably detailed mask. How was I able to read her so easily?

Why were her facial expressions so familiar to me? I didn't know the answers to those questions. When B stopped at Tanner's one word, hand extended toward the doorknob, I thought that he had reached her. I thought she would come back and listen to us.

But she was stubborn and seemed to have this delusional mentality that real life monsters existed. I knew that monsters existed—I believed myself to be one of them—but not in the form of sharp teeth and milky white eyes. They didn't hide under the bed, but they did lurk in the shadows. Always waiting. Always seeking out new, unsuspecting victims.

That was how my mom died. Walking home from the grocery store just after it had gotten dark.

My stomach tightened at the memory, emotions I intended to keep compressed rising up to meet me head on. I pushed them away stubbornly, focusing instead on B and Tanner. They appeared to be in a standoff, her eyes locked on his.

“Please, wait,” Tanner said. “If you're going to leave, give it five minutes.”

Five minutes. The professors wouldn't be in the general vicinity of her dorm room at that time.

She continued to stare at him as the time went on. Slow. Like molasses. She didn't say anything during that time, not even to Beau, who was staring at her so helplessly and despondently I felt for the bastard. I honestly did. Anyone with eyes could see that he was desperately in love with her. At the same time, I understood why Bianaca was fucking pissed.

When Tanner nodded, eloquently telling her she was okay to leave, Bianaca turned briskly and exited the shed. She didn't bother to glance back.

Only when she had disappeared from view did Aiden explode, knocking the desk over with a growl.

“Fucking shit!” he cursed. His eyes remained locked on the door as if he was expecting her to make a grand reappearance.

“You shouldn’t have said you didn’t believe her,” Tanner pointed out softly. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Languidly, he put one to his lips, lit it with his lighter, and took a long inhale. “You sounded like a condescending asshole. And Beau...” He turned toward the newest recruit of our little escape group. “You’re just a regular asshole.”

I snorted out a laugh, muffling it when two pairs of eyes directed their glares at me.

“But monsters? Really?” Aiden asked.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:03 am*

“Do you think something happened to her?” Beau piped up. His voice was raspy from years of silence, but his eyes were sharp. Protectiveness and possessiveness emanated from every pore in his body. The two Ps of a relationship.

“In a place this fucked up?” Tanner blew out some smoke. “Yeah.”

Beau’s hands curled into fists.

“We need to get her the fuck out of here,” he said resolutely. Tanner lazily cast his eyes toward the tall man.

“Or maybe she was telling the truth. Maybe there is a monster here,” he drawled. When we all stared at him with varying expressions of disbelief, he shrugged. “What? We all already know this school isn’t normal.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that.

“No sense worrying about it anymore. We’re leaving in a few days, and I’ll kidnap the damn girl if I have to. I couldn’t save my sister, but I’ll be damned if something happens to Bianaca.” Aiden’s voice was fierce, once more proving why he was the leader of our merry band of friends.

Seeming to come to a general consensus, we grabbed our gear off the floor and headed down the staircase.

The tunnel always gave me the creeps. Why was it there?

How did the professors, who seemed to know about everything, fail to realize there was a whole set of fucking tunnels that snaked beneath the wall?

Would we even escape, or would we end up right back where we started?

And who had tried to escape before us? What happened to them?

Questions bombarded me as I began the tireless task of hammering down the wall. I couldn't quite concentrate on any one thing. Senseless chatter from the other three men floated through one ear and out the other. Questions. Questions. And more questions.

And now, the biggest one: what the hell had Bianaca seen? Did that asshole Dylan have something to do with the terror in her eyes, the whitening of her face, the clenching of her hands?

Distantly, I was aware of someone screaming my name. Rough hands grabbed me, yanking me backward, just as the wall collapsed.

Dirt and rocks flew everywhere, and I lifted my hands to cover my face. Smoky sand infiltrated my nostrils, and I coughed violently, turning my face away.

“Motherfucking...” Aiden cursed.

“Shit,” Tanner agreed, eyes wide with awe and voice almost reverent.

I turned, shocked to see it was Beau of all people who had pulled me away. He was staring intensely at the now demolished wall.

Because behind the wall were more tunnels. Dozens of them. Branching in numerous directions. One tunnel led to two and another led to three. From there, they branched

off even farther. It was a never ending labyrinth of grit, rocky walls, and dirt.

“We did it!” Aiden jumped to his feet, eyes bright with excitement. That light had only come into his eyes two times before: with his sister, Josie, and now with Bianaca.

Only I doubted he felt brotherly affection toward the petite, voluptuous blond.

As one, the men burst into celebratory cheer. The usual slaps-on-the-back, shouts, and promises of alcohol. My eyes, however, remained fixed on the dark passageway. The light from my flashlight barely chased away the shadows directly in front of me. Everything was doused in a black sheen.

Tentatively, I ambled back to my feet and brushed dirt off my pants. Each step felt monumental as I walked away from my brothers and into the darkness. My light caught on the wooden boards making up the ceiling and proving that this tunnel was definitely man-made.

One step.

Two steps.

Three steps.

My heart hammered, and something akin to fear bubbled up inside of me. I was a damn kettle sitting on a stove, hissing and wheezing until it eventually erupted.

Four steps.

Five steps.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:03 am*

I willed the light to chase away more shadows, but darkness continued to cling to the walls and ceiling. This impenetrable darkness was as monotonous as a starless sky. My feet were heavy, my body reluctant to continue its travels.

Six steps.

Seven steps.

Something moved to the right of me, and I spun, light spinning wildly. It might've been my imagination, my fear manifesting itself physically, my flashlight playing tricks on me, but it almost looked as if a figure moved in the darkness.

For a brief moment, I wondered if we were alone.

A hand slapped down on my shoulder, and I jerked, pulling my arm back to punch the intruder square in the face. Aiden ducked just in time.

“What the fuck, man?” he cursed, restraining me easily. I berated myself for being such a pussy. B’s story about monsters had obviously fucked with my head.

There was no way monsters lived in these tunnels.

“Sorry,” I said sheepishly. “You scared me.”

Aiden continued to eye me warily before he eventually nodded. He was never one to prod—unless it had to do with Bianaca. Then he prodded away like a mad scientist.



“Alright. But I was just saying you shouldn’t be wandering these tunnels before we know where they lead. The last thing we need is for you to get lost.”

I nodded my head absently, his words making sense but not overly registering. My mind was still transfixed on the shadow I had seen moving in one of the tunnels.

It was just a play of the light. That was the only logical explanation.

I repeated that thought in my head like a mantra. A prayer. A damn life motto.

“We fucking did it,” Aiden said with a curl of his lips. For Aiden, that was practically a full-blown smile. “Months of work finally paid off.”

Beau and Tanner were beaming as well, and Tanner reached down to grab a rock. He held it up as if it were a glass of wine.

“This deserves a toast,” he said. Beau and Aiden both grabbed a rock off the ground, and after a minute of staring at them all like an imbecile, I grabbed one as well. “To getting the fuck out of here.”

“To getting the fuck out of here,” we all chanted, clinking the rocks together.

My stomach was a clamorous mixture of dread and exhilaration. Were we escaping one prison just to find ourselves in another? Were we escaping one set of monsters just to find new ones?

\* \* \*

We arrived at our rooms early the next morning, the sun painting the sky in palest pink, orange, and light green tones. After our initial celebration, we began to plan.

When to leave.

When to explore.

When to torture the information out of Heath, the class president.

Because, yes, we were willing to do that. We were willing to do anything if it meant leaving this fucking school.

And, of course, there was Bianaca's confession. It settled heavily in the air, this ominous cloud that threatened rain.

For some inexplicable reason, her words rang true. It was as if you saw someone you hadn't seen in years on the other side of a room. The name rested on the tip of your tongue, and you debated calling out. Eventually, you decided to remain quiet in fear you accidentally said the wrong name.

Crawling underneath my covers, Bianaca's words reverberating through my body, I fell asleep thinking of monsters.

\* \* \*

I punched at the mirror, reveling in the gratifying sound of glass shattering. My knuckles were red, skin peeled, but I relished in the pain. Allowed it to curl up around me like a warm blanket.

## Page 74

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:03 am*

My reflection, distorted through the mirror, showed a man with garnet red hair wildly disheveled and dark bags beneath both his eyes. His skin was sunken and pale.

Frankly, he looked like shit.

I looked like fucking shit.

Pressing my lips into a thin line, I glanced down at the orange bottle of pills. They were supposed to help with my bipolar disorder, but it only served to make me tired. Drowsy. Weak.

My hand was shaking as I picked up the bottle and faced my horrid reflection in the mirror. I was a shell of the man I once was. A carcass. My painted on smile couldn't hide the dead man underneath. Or, at the very least, a soon-to-be dead man.

I could still hear their taunts.

“The world will be better off without you in it.”

“Freak.”

“Weirdo.”

Moving slowly, I emerged back in my bedroom. The dresser had been demolished, lying in a heap of distressed wood and sharp stakes. The bed's headboard was broken as well. Not even my room was capable of escaping my destruction. My temper.

I knew I was being reckless, stupid, but I didn't see a point of holding on anymore. I had been gripping a thin branch for years that hung precariously over a chasm. My muscles were cramping, sweat clung to my skin, and my fingers ached from how sharply they grasped the branch. I was just so tired of fighting a battle I knew I wouldn't win.

I grabbed my phone and shuffled through my playlist, choosing a haunting melody. It seemed fitting, somehow, to play a song that reminisced on life and death in my final moments. With a sob, I shoved my face into my pillow and allowed scream after scream to leave my body. I knew no one would hear. Nobody ever heard.

And if they heard, they didn't care.

Didn't. Fucking. Care.

My heart was hammering a mile a minute, my thoughts in a race against the damn organ, but my hand was steady as I brought the pill bottle to my lips. With a dramatic flourish, as if I was downing an alcoholic shot, I consumed the pills.

Maybe, just maybe, relief would come.

\* \* \*

I woke with a start, head pounding. What the...?

It was the dream again. The same recurring dream I'd been having every night since I'd arrived at the school. These dreams taunted me, consumed me, pulled me under icy wave after icy wave until all I could beg for was death.

I scrubbed a hand down my face. Fucking hell.

I no longer cared what hell faced us once we made it out of this school. Nothing could be worse than this—losing a battle against your own mind.

22

Bianaca

After a fitful sleep, I woke up the next morning feeling achy and confused. The conversation—confrontation—with the boys had left me physically and mentally drained. It took all my self-control to leave them, to not run back to them as I so desperately wanted.

Groaning, I glanced at my alarm clock to see it was a little after nine. Breakfast would be starting, and my stomach gave a little grumble as if agreeing with my mind that it was past my feeding time.

A girl needed to eat.

Dressing quickly in the standard uniform, I made my way to the cafeteria. This time, I wasn't accosted by Kelly, trampled by a swarm of professors, or stared at intensely by four guys more sinful than angelic.

When I arrived in the cafeteria, I was stunned to see the guys' usual table was empty. I tried to smother down the heartache I felt at their absence, hardening my resolve to distance myself from them.

Aiden had looked at me as if I was crazy and had accused me of murder. Kace had destroyed all my clothes. Tanner had teased me, used me, and then discarded me. And Beau...

Well...

His betrayal hurt the most.

I scarfed down the food, inhaled it, thankful for the antidote the guys forced to me drink, before moving back to my bedroom and changing into my teal leotard. I needed to work off this excess energy. I needed to escape my own insistent thoughts.

Quickly, I braided back my blond hair and wrapped it in a tight bun. It was crucial in gymnastics not to have hair loose you could step on during your tricks.

After slipping back on my uniform, I made my way to the gym. At this time of day, it was crowded. Boys, and a few girls, used the equipment efficiently. The smell of sweat permeated the air, but it wasn't entirely unpleasant. These were people who worked hard and played even harder. I couldn't help but respect them and the sweat they shed.

I wouldn't be able to do my full routine in a room this crowded, but I found a corner on the mat I had used the first day. Stripping out of my school uniform, I smiled smugly at the eyes I could feel caressing my skin.

Now, if only a certain four guys would look at me that way...

Shaking my head vehemently, I dropped to the ground and kicked my legs out into the splits. I bent over until my nose touched my toes.

My thoughts, however, weren't on my exercises, the pounding music reverberating through the building, or the hungry looks from a group of men jogging on the track around the mat.

No, my damn, traitorous thoughts were fixated on the conversation in the shed.

Escape.

That word made me feel warm and fuzzy, worth a thousand orgasms. I would give anything to escape. Anything.

Since I arrived here, fear had clouded my every waking moment. And sleeping moment, if I was being completely honest. From the students being forcibly removed to Kelly showing me a monster eating a student, I couldn't differentiate between what was real and what was a product of my own mind.

Would their plan work? Was it possible for us to leave the school?

And where would we even go? The police?

Not one of us had the answer to that, but...

But we knew someone who did.

My eyes flickered to where Heath stepped off a treadmill in the other room wiping sweat off his brow. Only a thin slate of glass separated us.

As I watched, transfixed, he brought his shirt up to wipe at his face, and I got a view of his chiseled, golden abs. He dropped his shirt and raised his head, meeting my eyes through the glass window.

My face flamed, tips of my ears burning, at being caught staring at him like some perverted voyeur.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Slowly, heart racing, I lifted my eyes back to where I had seen Heath.



## Page 76

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:03 am*

He was gone, thank God. Maybe he hadn't noticed me. Maybe he hadn't seen me. Maybe he hadn't—

"It's rude to stare," a calm voice said from above me. "And it's even ruder to quickly look away and pretend you weren't staring."

Wincing, I turned toward the voice despite already knowing who I would see. Heath stood above me, hands in the pockets of his low-slung basketball shorts. His brown hair was brushed back from his arresting face. The smile was back yet again—the smile so painfully fake it physically hurt me.

He reminded me of one of those politicians I always saw on television. Fake smile, immaculately dressed, the epitome of perfection...but a darkness in his eyes.

Despite that darkness, I didn't feel uneasy around him. I should've—he looked like a damn psychopath with that blindingly white smile—but I didn't.

Maybe someone disrupted my programming.

Aiden's proposition flitted through my mind.

Flirt.

Discover what he knows.

"Sorry," I said, the blush that darkened my face not at all an act. "I didn't mean to, you know, stare."

He flashed me another one of those smiles.

“I would’ve stared too if I had noticed you. What’s your name, doll?”

Doll. I normally hated pet names, but I couldn’t help the strange thrill that zinged through me at that one word. He probably said it to everyone. Probably had a whole arsenal of nicknames at his disposal. I was nothing special, I knew that, but that one nickname...

“Bianaca,” I answered, extending a hand. He shocked the fuck out of me when he brought my hand up to his lips and pressed a kiss on the sensitive skin.

“Bianaca.” His eyes turned contemplative as he tested the name out, swirling it on his tongue. Goosebumps pebbled on my arms. “I’m Heath.”

“I know,” I replied immediately. Stupidly.

Way to not look like a creeper, B.

Inappropriately, I wanted to add that I commonly stood over his bed eating cereal while he slept, but I figured we weren’t at that level yet.

Something flickered in his eyes at my confession, but it was there and gone before I could process it. His smile never once wavered from his face.

“That makes sense,” he said at last.

“What does?”

“Why you were looking at me.”

I was so lost.

My confusion must've been evident, for Heath took a step closer. He practically emitted heat in palpable waves.

"You want information," he whispered conspiratorially. His smile blinded me.

"Information?" I parroted meekly.

With another large, brilliant grin, Heath stepped out of my space and picked his bag up from the ground. Swinging it over his shoulder, he stared at me intently, searching for something. What he was searching for I couldn't discern.

"Tonight. 8 p.m. Room 321."

I was left dumbstruck as he walked away, singing softly beneath his breath.

What the hell was that?

And what the hell did the class president know that I didn't?

\* \* \*

I was surprised to see Kace, of all people, when I emerged from the shower dressed once more in my academy uniform. His garnet red hair was highlighted by strands of gold and brown, brushed away from his face. His hands were shoved casually into his pants' pockets as he surveyed me, leaning against the doorway of my closed room.

"Move," I snapped.

"We need to talk."

"Are you going to patronize me some more?" Without waiting for him to respond, I pushed him aside and shoved my key into the door. I wasn't at all surprised when he followed me inside, regarding my tiny dorm room with rapt interest.

Ignoring my question, he mused, "Single rooms are definitely bigger than double rooms."

"Get out." I pointed a finger at the door to emphasize those two words. Kace's dark red eyebrows rose, meeting his hairline, but he didn't respond. Instead, he began to finger the numerous pictures I had pinned around the room. There was one of me and Beau, our arms around each other and large smiles on our faces. I remembered when it was taken, only a few months ago. We had just arrived back from our senior field trip at the amusement park, and exhilaration still rode us both.

“He loves you, you know that, right?” Kace spun to face me suddenly, the picture all but forgotten. I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Who does?”

“Beau.” That single answer was said with such conviction, such sincerity, I wanted to believe him. I honestly did. But I knew love, and what Beau felt for me wasn’t it. At least, it wasn’t the love I wanted him to feel. There were numerous facets of love, all grafted from the same damn tree. There was the love between siblings, between child and parent. There was the love between best friends. And then there was the love between two people whose souls cried out for each other. Two people who couldn’t be whole without the other one present. I wanted to believe that was what Beau felt for me, but I would only be deluding myself. He had never loved me the way I had so desperately wanted him to. He stared at me as a friend, his best friend, and nothing more. He cared about me the way you would care about a little sister.

And it hurt. It fucking stung to know that your feelings weren’t reciprocated. Falling in love was scary in that respect. You gave yourself over to someone, surrendered a part of yourself so completely, that it was impossible to differentiate between you and them. Your feelings and their own. But those feelings became distorted, broken, when you realized they weren’t returned. Your heart was still beating, your lungs still took in air, but you were no longer alive. That was how you could die while still living. A painful, excruciating death I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.

“Let’s not talk about him,” I said flatly. Each word was sharp, succinct.

A large, luminescent smile took over Kace’s face. It made him seem younger, happier, as if the weight of the world wasn’t resting on his shoulders.

“Okay. Let’s do something else.”

I snorted at his eager tone. He sounded like a damn puppy, and the last thing I wanted to do was give in to one of the men who had bullied me since I had first arrived here. His enthusiasm, however, was contagious, and I found myself raising an eyebrow quizzically.

“What do you want to do?”

“I’ll show you.”

Without another word, he grabbed my hand in his and pulled me into the hall. A few students talked amongst themselves, and they all said hi to Kace as we passed. Apparently, he was popular, no surprise. He had that type of personality. Energetic, larger than life.

My confusion grew when he pulled me into the abandoned kitchen. The kitchen staff, all current students, were nowhere in sight, and the lights were off.

“Why are we here?” I asked softly as Kace expertly made his way through the dark kitchen, relying on the waning sunlight piercing through the window. The appliances were brand new, but Kace moved past all of them to stop in front of large cupboards. Without preamble, he wrenched open the cabinet doors and grabbed a large can of...pudding?

On closer inspection, I decided that it was, in fact, pudding.

“Kace?” I quirked a brow at the strange man.

“I want pudding.”

Only minutes later, I found myself sitting cross-legged across from him, the large can of pudding opened and two spoons speared into its chocolatey goodness. Of course,

we had to have an in-depth argument over the various flavors of pudding. I wasn't one to discriminate between any sweets, but Kace was insistent that chocolate pudding was the best kind of pudding.

"What are you going to do when you get out of here?" Kace asked now, dipping his finger into the can. Screw sanitary concerns. It shocked me that he was speaking of the escape so brazenly, so openly, but then again, everything about Kace was erratic.

"I don't know. Figure out what the hell is going on. Get the cops involved. The FBI."

He gave me an irritated look.

"I meant after that."

I was shocked to find myself responding.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:03 am*

“Beau and I have always talked about getting away. He promised to take me with him once he turned eighteen and got enough money for his own place.”

“Because of your parents?”

I stiffened noticeably, and Kace rubbed my knee sympathetically. When had he become...kind? When had he started feeling like a friend instead of an enemy? He had never been as bad as Aiden and Tanner, at least on the surface, but he had destroyed my clothes. And how did he know about my parents?

“Don’t be pissed, but I read your file when you first arrived,” he admitted, ducking his head sheepishly. My body stilled as if thousands of currents of electricity were coursing through my veins. When I didn’t answer, too shocked to speak, he hurriedly explained, “I realize now how wrong it was. I’ll be the first to admit I’m an asshole. I’m so sorry, B. I just...I don’t know what I was thinking. But you never really talk about them much.”

“And you don’t talk about your family.”

He made an annoyed sound. “I have a younger sister and an older brother. They’re perfect, of course. They have to be perfect to compensate for the fuck-up that is me. My mother works twenty four hours, so I barely get to see her. And I haven’t met my dad.”

“That’s the icing on the cake,” I pointed out. “Do you guys get along?”

“Maybe,” he said, leaning forward on his knees. “I’ll tell you about my family if you



tell me about yours.”

I grabbed his untouched spoon and took a bite of the gooey pudding. It was marvelous, though I’ll never admit that to him. I was way too stubborn to allow our pudding-debate to end in a win for him.

“It’s simple. I had a mom and a dad. My dad was an ass, so he left. My stepdad is...um...but my stepbrother...well...my mom does like the assholes, apparently.” I quickly swallowed another mouthful, keenly aware of all I had shared. Kace sat back, reflecting this newfound information.

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” he asked at last.

“Not with you.”

We locked eyes, and I felt something I never thought I would feel with Kace. A kinship. We both had obviously shitty pasts that still affected us to this day. Maybe that was what drew me to him in the first place—he was a kindred spirit, like me, who had somehow found me in the dissonant chaos that made up our lives.

“It’s just kind of funny,” he said at last. Despite the emptiness of the kitchen, he still found the need to whisper. “How many scars did we have to cover up because we loved the woman behind the knife? The man behind the fists?”

“The person behind the words,” I added almost absently, and Kace nodded, face uncharacteristically solemn.

“For me, it feels as if I can never be good enough. Like I’m always going to be a failure.” Kace wasn’t even looking at me as he spoke. His attention was diverted to the tops of his shoes, spread out before him. “It’s like constantly wanting to involve myself in the world yet feeling that I am not worthy enough to do so. There are points

in my life, times that I can't even begin to describe, where I wish that I had someone holding me up. You get to the point where you sink so low that you don't believe light even exists anymore. I don't want to fight the darkness alone."

My throat closed-up. Instinctively, I reached my hand toward Kace. When did I start feeling sorry for him? We weren't supposed to share our stories, weren't supposed to develop this bond forged of shared trauma. That wasn't us. Why the fuck did he have to ruin our mutual disdain for one another by being nice? By sharing a story I suspected he hadn't shared with anyone else?

"You don't have to fight it alone anymore. You know that you have me, right?" The words left my mouth before I could reel them in. Fucking hell.

"And I want to get better," he said earnestly. "Because of you."

"Don't let that be your only reason," I said hesitantly. "Do it for yourself."

I didn't understand where this conversation was going. It was no longer light and cheerful. We were treading water in unfamiliar oceans; one wrong word, one wrong move, and we'd be pulled under. It was like tumbling through a riptide, constantly searching for a pocket of fresh air. Once your head reached the surface, you would get pulled back under by forces beyond your control. There was no stopping it as you tumbled and turned through pits of nothingness.

We had to get out of the riptide.

"How about we have some more pudding?" I suggested coyly, pulling my hand out of his. I didn't understand anything, especially not the strange pitter-patter my heart made when his eyes turned downcast, lashes like twigs against his cheeks.

Light-hearted conversations about pudding, I could deal with. But this? This

bombshell being thrown on my lap? It was seconds from exploding, and I knew it would take us both with it.

“Yeah,” he muttered.

I reached for the pudding can and abruptly let out a string of curses.

Kace’s eyes flashed toward mine in surprise.

“What happened?”

“Cut myself on the damn can,” I said, holding my hand up to the diminishing sunlight flickering in through the open window. It cast enough light I could clearly make out a long cut slashing down my palm.

Kace stared at my hand with the oddest expression. I wondered if he was holding his breath; his body was shockingly still.

“I am so sorry,” he whispered. It was the barest breath of sound.

“Kace, it’s fine. It’s just a little cut.”

“I shouldn’t...I um...I have to go.” Kace jumped to his feet. His eyes moved around, but they didn’t stick on anything. Not me. Not the blood oozing from my hand. Not the discarded pudding spoon.

“Seriously,” I tried again, frightened by his behavior. I could see where this path was heading, and I was helpless to stop it.

He was falling back into the riptide.

“It’s fine. It’s actually kind of funny.”

“I need to leave.”

“Kace!” But he had already jumped to his feet and was running. Running. Running. I knew, then, that he wasn’t running away from me.

He was running away from himself.

23

Bianaca

I scoured the hallways, Kace's name on the tip of my tongue. However, after an hour of futile searching, I conceded defeat. There were other things, more important things, for me to worry about

A monster lurking in the school, for one.

Evil, murdering professors, for another.

My feet found themselves in front of a familiar door, and my heart stopped. Plummeted.

What was I doing here? In front of Beau's door, of all people?

Even as those thoughts flickered in my mind, I knew I needed to talk to him. I needed to set things straight with my best friend. Innately, I knew that he would never leave me. He had been there for me through it all—through the highs and lows. The elation and the consequential depression. Never once had he left my side, even when I pushed him away. It was illogical for me to believe he would leave me now.

I knew, in the deepest recesses of my mind, that his secrecy was some misguided attempt to protect me.

Hesitating, I lifted my hand to knock on the door. I was trembling, fear cementing my

feet to the ground. The last thing I wanted to do was hear his excuses, his reasoning, when it still felt as if every action of his was a betrayal. Despite my tumultuous thoughts, I knocked on the door.

My hands were covered in a sticky sheen of sweat, and I wiped them inconspicuously on my pants. Kace's words echoed back to me.

"He loves you."

It was so easy to believe it was true, to believe what I had always wanted to hear. But I was a pessimist by nature, and something like this was too good to be true.

Beau opened the door a crack, his eyes widening slightly, almost imperceptibly, when he saw me. He moved a step closer, his large body nestled in the tiny door opening. I opened my mouth to yell at him, to fire accusation after accusation at my best friend, to demand why he had kept such life-altering secrets from me. However, none of that came out of my mouth.

"I love you," I sputtered. My chest was as taut as the strings on a violin, but my stupid mouth forged ahead. "Oh my God. That just came...it just came out! I love you. See? I did it again. I just...I...I love you. And not like a sister loves a brother or a best friend loves a best friend. I love you, Beau. I've been trying not to say it. I've been swallowing the words because...why would I say them? What's the point of saying something like that? You're my best friend, and I don't need your love that way. But I do. I love you. You're a disease. From the first fucking look, you infected me. You're inside me, Beau, and I don't think I want you to leave." Tears slid down my cheeks as I absently rubbed at my heart. The damn organ was still beating even as I felt like I was going to die. "I can't eat. I can't sleep. I can't even breathe because you contaminated my lungs with your...gah. I love you. I. Love. You."

My confession settled in the air like a hundred pounds of cement being pooled over

our heads. His eyes were wide in his face, practically saucers, and his hand was white from how tightly it gripped the doorframe. He blinked rapidly, attempting to gather some clarity I imagined, before he took a step closer.

I held my breath, my turbulent emotions running rampant within me.

I hadn't intended to open myself up to him as I did, to make myself that vulnerable, but there was no denying the rightness of my words. Somehow, somehow, Beau had crept into my poor, desolate heart.

And then the fairytale shattered, imploded.

"Beau!" a feminine voice cooed. "Who are you talking to?"

The breath I'd been holding sputtered out. Suddenly, it hurt to breathe. Everything hurt. The pain started in my chest, the tightest of clencheds, before moving downward. I trembled at the sheer intensity of my emotions.

Beau stared at me, horror-struck, as a familiar blond female danced to his side, hooking her arm with his. Her hair was disheveled, and the first few buttons of her white blouse were undone.

Maria glanced at me coldly.

"Hi, Bianca. What are you doing here?"

Beau didn't respond to her, focused on me.

But I couldn't look at him. Not anymore. Not after I had spilled my entire heart to him, and he had so carelessly crushed it. In a matter of moments, he had killed me. Destroyed me.

Anger, hurt, and heartbreak all raged within me, my mind unable to settle on one emotion. After a long moment of tense silence, I made myself look up, meet Beau's eyes, and whisper, "I see."

And then I was running. I had never considered myself a coward before, but I couldn't get away from him fast enough. My heart beat erratically in my chest, the tiny organ feeling like it weighed a thousand pounds. It threatened to break free of my ribcage and shatter into a thousand pieces. Still, I ran. Tears blurred my eyes, a hazy sheen obscuring my vision. Behind me, I heard Beau cry my name. His voice was raspy, hoarse, but the anguish was clear.

I found myself outside, sunlight high in the sky.

Spinning in a wide circle, I let out a scream.



*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:03 am*

The walls had never seemed so high before, so daunting. The urge to run away was an itch on my skin I couldn't control. I needed to leave this damn school—leave the demons that haunted me. Moving briskly, I made my way to the sun-bleached shed, dwarfed by the trees.

Fucking Beau.

Fucking Maria.

She was probably one of those people who clapped when the plane landed.

I was so lost in my own thoughts that I didn't see Dylan until I ran straight into his chest. I stumbled, grabbing a tree branch to right myself, as he placed his hands on my shoulders. I grimaced at the contact, immediately pulling myself away.

“What the fuck do you want?” I asked harshly through my tears. His smile was cold, predatory, as he gave me a once-over. Knowing Dylan, he relished in my pain. The tears dripping down my cheeks. My puffy eyes. My teeth nibbling on my lower lip until it drew blood. The bastard probably was orgasming at that moment.

Fuming with irritation at being caught in such a vulnerable state, I placed my hands on my hips and canted one to the side. Dylan watched me with amused eyes.

“Where are you off to, little sister?” His mere voice sent pinpricks of terror skating down my spine. How could one person do that to me? How could one insignificant bug demote me to a weak, simpering, fearful little girl?

“None of your damn business,” I hissed. My jaw hurt from how tightly I clenched my teeth.

I couldn’t deal with Dylan today. Not with my pain so raw.

I made a move to walk past him, but he grabbed my arm, pulling me to a stop. I blanched.

“What’s in the shed?” he whispered darkly.

“What?”

“The shed.” He gave my arm a shake to emphasize his point. “You and those little boyfriends of yours have been going there a lot. What’s in there?”

“Fuck off.”

My show of courage dimmed slightly when his fingernails dug into my skin. No doubt, it would leave a nasty bruise.

“Are you going to ignore your brother, little sister?” he mocked darkly, leaning forward. My stomach curdled as his lips brushed my neck, inching higher until he could nibble on my ear. Tears burned my eyes at the unwanted contact.

Please, just let me go. Please.

I didn’t know if someone heard my pleas or if Dylan was just tired of fucking with me. Either way, he released my arm and shoved me. The momentum propelled me forward, and I landed on the ground with a cry.

“Stupid, clumsy bitch,” Dylan muttered. He glanced quickly from side to side,

ensuring no one was in the proximity, before pulling his leg back and kicking me squarely in the stomach. I let out a gasp, tears stinging my eyes at the pain.

“I hate you,” I whispered.

Dylan knelt beside me with a small chuckle. His hand fisted in my hair, pulling my head back to stare at him directly in the eyes. I resisted the urge to spit in his smug face. At the moment, I was vulnerable. The last thing I wanted to do was antagonize the beast.

“Love and hate are so close together, little sister. It becomes hard to tell one from the other.”

With that ominous statement, he released my hair and sauntered away, whistling beneath his breath.

Only when he was gone did a sob break free. And then another one. And then another. Soon, I was lying on the forest floor, tears cascading down my cheeks and hideous sounds escaping my mouth.

It was only five minutes later when he, of all people, found me, still on the ground and still sobbing. He didn’t say anything as he sat down beside me, his hand going to the small of my back and rubbing soothing circles. He didn’t speak, didn’t ask me what was wrong, just comforted me.

It took awhile for my sobbing to subside. Sniffling, I pulled myself into a sitting position and threw myself into his arms. He caught me, holding me to him and rocking me side to side. Once more, he didn’t speak. He was content with holding me, being there for me, and allowing the rest of the world to fade away.

“Do you want to talk about?” he asked, his tone dark as he brushed my hair away

from my face. I knew he saw the bruises on my arm from Dylan's grip. I knew he saw me wince when I moved, the pain in my stomach not unbearable but definitely not comfortable.

"No," I whispered.

Tanner nodded once before wrapping me back up in his arms.

24

Bianaca

I remained rooted outside the door, fist raised to knock. My hands were clammy, sweat sticking my hair to the back of my neck. Shaking my limbs loose, I took a deep, calming breath.

You can do this.

After that admittedly pathetic pep talk, I rapped my fist against the dorm room door. A moment later, it was pulled open, and Heath's psychopathic smile greeted me.

"Bianaca. You came."

"You have information I want," I said dryly.

Honestly, it felt like I was in the midst of a drug deal. Soon, I would be handing over wads of cash, and Heath would give me a bag of drugs.

Why did I always find myself involved in shady shit?

With a swooping gesture, Heath stepped back and allowed me inside his sparsely decorated room. The white walls were empty except for a few photographs, each depicting a different landscape. A nightstand and a lamp flanked the simple wooden bed, and a television was mounted to the wall. While it was considerably nicer than my dorm room and ten times better than Beau's, it was still unremarkable. Nothing

screamed “Heath.”

“As student body president, I’m able to get a bigger room than most students,” he said, noting the direction of my gaze. He didn’t sound cocky about his position, only resigned. “Over here.”

He led me through a door that I had initially thought would lead to a bathroom. Instead, it appeared to be some kind of sitting room complete with leather chairs, a mini-fridge, and a gaming console. A simple card table and four folding chairs were set up in the very center of the room. A girl and a guy already sat.

The guy’s back was toward me, but I recognized the girl immediately.

Maria.

Her white-blond hair was braided away from her face, and pink dusted both her cheekbones. Her glazed eyes rested on me as she toppled off her chair.

“B! You arrived!” She greeted me as if we were best friends and not enemies.

All I could see when I stared at her was Beau. His lips on hers. Her hands tangled in his golden hair. Their lips melded together.

My stomach churned and tightened, the contents of my dinner mere seconds from decorating the white carpet.

“Bianaca, I didn’t know you were coming,” the second voice said snidely. He swiveled in his seat, and this time, I was positive I was going to puke.

Dylan.

“What are you doing here?” My tone was scathing, bitter. Anyone with ears could hear the incandescent fury those five words exuded.

“Playing poker,” he answered dryly. He stared at me as if I was daft, the condescending prick.

Heath’s customary smile remained etched on his face, but his eyes tightened when he faced Dylan. Huh. The fearless class president obviously did not like my stepbrother.

Dylan, of course, remained oblivious, white teeth gleaming in the artificial lighting. He extended his arms as if he intended to hug me.

“Enough with the bull crap,” Heath snapped. This time, his smile slipped from his face completely. The man looked positively murderous. “I invited you all because I have something you need, and you have something I want.”

“What exactly do you want, Heath?” Maria asked, voice lowering in what she probably thought was a seductive manner. In my humble opinion, she sounded more constipated than sultry.

Heath leveled her with a glare that could cut glass.

“The rules are simple,” he began, ignoring her suggestive remark. Moving briskly to the table, he shocked the hell out of me by pulling out one of the chairs and nodding for me to sit. Only when I was seated did he push it back in and move to sit on the left of me.

Without his smile, those eyes appeared even more dead, more haunted. Hundreds of secrets lurked beneath his smooth-talking facade.

“But we’re not playing this game for cash,” he stated ominously. His eyes strayed to

Dylan's first and then Maria's before resting on mine. He seemed to have a way of innately commanding our respect and attention. Ensnared by his gaze, I couldn't look away even if I wanted to. "We're playing for secrets."



*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:03 am*

Chills erupted on my skin. There was no breeze, but it felt as if I was standing in the Arctic Tundra naked. Goosebumps pebbled on my arms.

“Secrets,” Dylan scoffed. He languidly kicked back in his chair, boots resting on the table. Heath stared at the offending limbs as if he wished to cut them off. Oblivious or just plain stupid, Dylan added, “I’m an open book.”

“Really?” Heath’s cadence contorted, turning darker as the seconds dragged on. “Have you ever raped anyone before, Dylan?”

My breath caught in my throat, and Dylan’s eyes widened slightly, almost imperceptibly. He quickly tried to school his features into one of indifference.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t you?” Heath whispered. Before Dylan could deny it, Heath held up a deck of cards. That smile returned, once more causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end. The hot and cold attitude Heath had perfected was creepy as fuck. “Let’s begin, shall we? Five cards stud.”

With nimble fingers, he dealt the cards.

I had played poker before, back in high school with Beau, and the rules of the game were simple enough. With stud, you weren’t allowed to exchange cards. Best hand won the pot.

Glancing at my cards, I spotted two black sevens, a king of diamonds, a five of

hearts, and an ace of spades.

“I bet one secret,” Maria said softly placing a white chip onto the center of the table.

“It’s early,” muttered Dylan, adding his blue chip. Heath added his green chip as well, face carefully impassive.

After a moment of hesitation, I added my red chip.

“Show your cards,” Heath instructed. I waited with bated breath as the other three revealed their cards to the table. Maria had a three of a kind, Heath had two pairs, but Dylan had a straight. His smile was smug as he acquired all the chips.

The game continued like that. Chips moved from hand to hand until even I had a hefty pile of blue, white, and green chips. I was able to gain most of my own chips back from the other three after they had stupidly bet against me.

After an hour of playing, Heath announced it was time to cash in.

Five secrets from Maria.

Five from Dylan.

One from Heath.

I could ask them anything, and they would be forced to answer honestly. Of course, there was no guarantee that they would answer honestly, but I had to try.

“I’ll go first,” Dylan said, flipping my red poker chip like you would a coin. He flashed me a tremulous smile. “Bianca, darling, are you a virgin?”

My teeth gritted at the intrusive question he obviously knew the answer to. Anger, hurt, and something akin to fear caused my heart to ricochet up a notch. I leveled him with my best glare, but I knew it would do nothing to deter him. My anger was only fuel to the fire. He relished in my pain, my fear.

“No,” I answered, my voice drum-shattering loud in the suddenly quiet room. Maria shifted uncomfortably, almost as if she felt the palpable tension cloaking both of us, and Heath’s eyes narrowed further.

“My turn,” I said stiffly. I held up Dylan’s chip. “Dylan, have you ever raped a girl or touched a girl without her permission?”

My satisfied smile dimmed slightly when the asshole didn’t even squirm. He met my gaze steadily, hungrily, lips curling into a scowl.

“Yes,” he answered without preamble. Without shame.

Yes.

That one word coated my skin like a dark, sticky tar. I couldn’t escape from it, from him.

Heath growled under his breath, but Maria either didn’t understand what he’d just admitted to or didn’t care. She giggled softly, indolently taking a sip out of her beer bottle and burping.

“My turn!” Her words slurred together. “Bianaca...which one of those guys are you dating? You know, the yummy ones. The sexy as hell ones. The ones I want to lick until they’re nothing but a popsicle stick—”

“None,” I cut her off.

Her brow quirked.

“None?”

“None.”

At this, she pouted. “Well, that’s disappointing.” Her pout transformed into a brilliant smile, slicing her face in two. “So does that mean they’re single?”

Before I could respond, Heath tsked disapprovingly. “That’s two questions. It’s my turn now.” Turning toward me, he shifted until his lips were a hair-breath away from my own. He spoke softly enough that the other two couldn’t hear. “Are you planning to escape?”

All coherent thought left me. My jaw went slack, eyes widening, as the implications of that simple statement assaulted me. Somehow, somehow, Heath knew.

He fuckingknew.

When I remained silent, he leaned even closer, lips brushing against my own.

“Don’t lie to me.”

“Is that a threat?” I asked breathlessly. Both his question and his presence was doing something to me. My brain couldn’t compute his words.

Stomach somersaulting, I held his piercing gaze. After a moment, he nodded and

pulled away, seeing the confirmation in my eyes.

I never did have a poker face.

“That’s not fair. I didn’t get to hear the question,” Maria whined, voice annoyingly high-pitched.

“Maria,” I broke in, diverting her attention. She smiled at being addressed, ruffling her blond hair. I knew I should ask Heath what I wanted to know. I knew I shouldn’t stir the proverbial pot. However, one secret slammed into me repeatedly with the force of a semi-truck. Try as I might, I couldn’t escape the need to know. “Did you have sex with Beau?”

With bated breath, I waited for her answer.

Those plush lips of hers pursed, the skin between her brows furrowing as she concentrated. Did she honestly forget who I was talking about? How many of those beers did she have?

“No,” she said at last. “I tried to, but he rejected me.” Her lips curled downward at the memory.

Mine, however, rose until my cheeks hurt.

Beau had rejected her.

He hadn’t slept with her.

Around and around we went, each question more invasive than the last. The group asked me everything ranging from my family life to my sex life. Only Heath leaned forward to speak to me privately, much to the others’ annoyance.

“When are you leaving?”

“Where are you going?”

“Who’s going with you?”

I knew I was breaking the rules of the game by remaining silent, but I couldn’t answer him. I refused to. The last thing I wanted to do was betray Aiden, Tanner, and Kace’s trust. And Beau’s, if I was being completely honest with myself.

I kept Heath’s one token gripped tightly in my hand as the questions continued. Finally, the game ended, and both Maria and Dylan excused themselves. Maria, with a large hug and a kiss to my cheek. Dylan, with a slap to my ass that made me see red.

I waited until they were gone before presenting the chip to Heath who was currently folding up the chairs. His eyes narrowed, eyebrows scrunched together, before he acquiesced with a decisive head bob. Nodding toward the leather couch against the far wall, he waited for me to sit down before moving to perch beside me. I appreciated the distance he left between our two bodies.

I didn’t trust Heath any more than I trusted Aiden.

“I won one secret from you,” I whispered.

“I see that.”

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:03 am*

He waited, arms folded over his muscular chest.

I had been thinking of what to ask, how to phrase my question, what would result in the most information. Finally, I settled on something simple and direct. “What’s on the other side of the wall?”

For a long moment, he stared at me.

His impeccably crafted expression gave nothing away. As I watched, transfixed, his eye began to twitch and he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“So you are escaping?” he asked breathlessly.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“No, I suppose I didn’t. But you need me, Bianaca. You need what I can offer you.” His voice was impossibly earnest.

“And what is that?” I raised one brow until it hit my hairline.

“Answers. Guidance. I can help you.” Leaning forward, he lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I know about the tunnels.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

That damn smile returned, and my hackles rose. Every nerve-ending was alight, fire racing through my veins.

“You need me,” he repeated. “How else are you guys planning on getting past the monsters?”

“Monsters.” My voice shook as image after image of Ali getting sacrificed played on repeat in my mind.

“And you’ll need my help to cross Dante’s nine circles. So I’ll repeat myself: you need me.”

“Dante’s nine circles?” I parroted, my brain threatening to explode from the overload of information.

“Where exactly do you think you are?” Heath asked, finally leaning away from me. Though his words were sharp, his eyes held nothing but morbid curiosity.

When I didn’t answer, he began to laugh. The noise was not a jovial sound.

“Baby girl,” he said once his laughter finally subsided. “You’re in purgatory.”