



The Knight

Author: *Lucy Auburn*

Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: I've learned the truth, and I've suffered for my sins. It seems like every which way I look the past is haunting me. All I want to do is escape, but Coleridge isn't done with me—not by a long shot.

Total Pages (Source): 65

Page 1

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

Chapter 1

The lights are blinding.

Red, blue. Red, blue.

They shine through even my tightly-closed eyelids.

I feel hot and cold at the same time. Cold from the remains of the storm sticking to my skin. Hot from the heavy blanket weighing me down. Cold from the New England winter closing in. Hot from the fire kindling inside me, sparking to life after finding a new target to burn.

I'm sure we've got enough rope left to do the job.

Fingers on my neck. Pressure on my nose and mouth. I force my eyes open, wondering if I'm dead. Wondering if I'm about to die.

I don't feel the burn of rope on my neck, or the pain of suffocation.

If this is the afterlife, though, it's not what I pictured. Way too many flashing red and blue lights. And a flat board beneath me, being effortlessly lifted up into the rear of an ambulance. It takes me a moment to realize that I'm not even wearing my dress anymore. Someone must have cut it off me.

A calm voice, floating above my head, says, "You'll be at the hospital shortly, Ms. Wilder. Try to take it easy—no, don't sit up. We called your emergency contact. Your

mom is on her way."

Ms. Wilder. It all comes back to me at once: Georgia at the Blind Ball, Holly trying to talk her down, getting partnered with Cole, running outside in the thick storm, and that kiss that made the sky split open and everything come crashing down.

I told the Elites that Silas killed himself.

The men who put me in the trunk made it clear that he was murdered.

I struggle, despite the advice from the EMT, and he patiently pulls the oxygen mask off my mouth. "Is there something wrong? Any pain anywhere?"

Coughing, I lick my lips. Another voice, this one at my feet, silhouetted by the red and blue lights, speaks up. "Is she ready to give an initial statement?"

"I'm not sure—"

"I'm ready." Pulling myself up, the blanket askew on my lap, I squint at the police officer standing at the open doors to the ambulance. She's thin and smartly dressed, her eyes projecting confidence. "I want to tell you everything I know—everything that happened. Those men..." Rubbing my throat, where a rope didn't tighten, I ask, "Did they get away?"

"We didn't find any men." The officer's voice is calm and empathetic. "We just found you, passed out in the trunk of the car. You're lucky your classmate found you."

"Classmate?"

"Young man with a funny name: Ferdinand von Hassell. He's headed to the station to give a statement. I'll let him know you're up and doing well—he was very worried."

Chills go down my spine.

Mariana's rapist saved my life.

There are two pressing questions on my mind now.

The first is: how did Hass know where to find me? When I look out past the parked police vehicles and their flashing lights, I see nothing familiar. Those two men had to have driven me pretty far into the woods, all the way to where they planned to stage my death—just like they staged Silas's suicide.

The second is: where is my brother's laptop, and why were two strangers willing to kill for it?

I have the feeling that Hass knows the answer to the second question as well as the first.

Rich boys don't find their way to active crime scenes on accident.

And boys like Hass don't save girls like me unless they're looking for information that the dead won't give.

* * *

They bring me to the hospital first, to get checked out. I try to protest, but it doesn't matter—teen girl gets found chloroformed and stuffed into a trunk, the officials have her looked over.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

My mom can't afford any of this.

If my dad really is on an oil rig off the coast of Louisiana, he should be sending money back. But I doubt that the selfish bastard is. He's probably hoping that he can forget about the family he fucked over—and the son who died knowing what it feels like to have your own father beat you to within an inch of your life.

I'm all alone in this, which means trying to get out of it as quickly as possible. But the doctor who checks me out wants me admitted the second I try to stand up and fall over, dizzy. He says soothing words about blood tests and CT scans, but all I hear are bills that will bankrupt my mother for no good reason.

I'm so despondent as the nurse puts the IV in my arm that she checks me a second time for fever, clucking over the state I was found in. Somewhere in my unconsciousness I lost my wet dress in exchange for an oversized hospital gown that won't close in the back. Heated blankets are thrown over my legs, and a TV remote put into my hand, but all I can think about are those two men who took me.

They could be anywhere.

They could've even followed me to the hospital. It's not like it would be hard to figure out where I am—Great Falls is a small place, and if they have access to a police scanner, they'd figure out what's going on pretty quickly.

I just don't know why they left me alive, or how Hass found me. I know what I suspect: that he's somehow involved in this, money and all, so he—or more likely, someone more senior—called off the hit. Then he found my body in the trunk of a car,

while the guys who took me got a chance to get away.

It's the only thing that makes sense to me.

And it means I have to get back to Coleridge right away, so I can head to my room and grab Silas's laptop before someone else gets to it. Right now Hass could still be giving a statement at the station, but as soon as he's out he'll probably take that laptop—or get Georgia or someone else to take it.

If it has something on it that was worth killing my brother over, I need to know. But there's no way I'll be able to get back and beat Hass there before the doctors are done poking and prodding me to the tune of too much money.

I need help.

"Excuse me." The nurse turns just as she was about to leave my room, a patient expression on her face. "Do you know where my things are?"

"That dress of yours had to be cut off, honey. I'm sorry."

I don't care about the dress. It wasn't even my money that paid for it. "I mean my cell phone."

"The police took everything. Officer Lopez might know where it is. Is there something you need?"

"To call my mom," I lie, trying to sound like a scared seventeen-year-old girl. It's not hard, because I am one. "I know she's on her way, but I haven't gotten to talk to her yet."

"Oh, sweetie." The nurse reaches into her scrubs. "You can borrow my phone."

Now I have to lie again. "I uh, don't have her number memorized." An arched brow at this. "You know, Generation Z... anyway, when will the cop be by with my stuff?"

"Officer Lopez should be by soon to take your statement. She'll have your things with her, unless they have to go into evidence—at least that's what I know, from dating a cop." Shrugging, the nurse puts her cell phone back into her pocket, still looking a little judgmental about my claim that I don't know my own mother's phone number. "Just settle in and relax, sweetie. I'm sure your mom will be here in no time."

"Thanks."

Clearly I've taken up enough of her time, because she heads out the door in a hurry to finish up the rest of her rounds. Once she's gone, the room falls into a strange silence, and everything that's happened to me floods back in.

Georgia's cruel face as she told the entire student body of Coleridge who I really am: a liar.

Those photos of me and Silas up on the screen, his smiling face flashed there, alive and golden in the early summer sun.

Cole taking my hand and insisting we dance together, two snakes too clever to realize we were each biting our own tails.

His handwriting in his journal, and in that note, sealing his own fate—but leaving out the part where there was a body in the trunk of his car. He told Holly that he never knew about that part; I wonder how he lied to her so easily.

Then I'm thinking about the storm. The kiss. How I raised my voice and let the fire out, trying desperately to burn someone beside myself.

And then—the car nearly hitting me. Two men getting out. I try to pause the memory and see their faces, but they were backlit by the headlights and darkened by the storm clouds overhead. Their voices are seared into my memory, but their faces skitters at my mind and away, replaced by the sweet smell of chloroform and the burn of rope around my wrists.

What should we do with her?

What we did with her brother.

His muddy shoes limp on dangling feet. Body swaying in the wind. Bruised and broken, dead and unmoving.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

I thought he put the rope around his own neck.

I sought revenge for the boys who made him want to do it.

But he was my brother who got up after Daddy's fists made him black and blue, defiance in his eyes and venom in his voice. I should have known he wouldn't have given up fighting so easily. I shouldn't have ever believed he did that to himself.

All this time that I let the lie fester inside me, I wasn't looking for my brother's murderers. That sick realization is like a bruise forming in my middle, or a sharp object hollowing me out from the inside. I can feel the fire I tried to burn out growing in my chest and stomach, desperate to get loose and rage against the men with the rope.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to see their faces. One was taller and thinner; one was shorter and thicker. They had short hair. Mid forties to fifties. I can't remember anything else.

I hate myself for not being able to remember.

I hate this hospital and its damned procedures for keeping me here when I should be running straight to Coleridge to look for that laptop.

And I hate, just a little bit—maybe more than I care to admit—that I'm still alive.

At least if I'd died tonight in the hands of the man who killed my brother, I wouldn't be alone anymore, sitting with the realization that I was wrong this whole time about

what—and who—killed him.

Chapter 2

"Brenna Wilder." I've never been so relieved to see a police officer as I am to see Officer Lopez walk through the door, a plastic bag full of my belongings in her hand. My eyes immediately zero in on the familiar old phone with a cheesy case sitting next to my student ID and painfully thin wallet. "The EMTs handed this over, but there was nothing in here that we could use for evidence or pull for prints. Including the rope that was used to tie you up, though we'll send it for DNA testing and see if we get any hits in the system."

"I just want my cell phone, please."

Her eyes study me astutely as she closes the door behind herself. "In a minute. First I want to talk to you about a few things."

Swallowing, I ask, "Wouldn't a detective normally do this?"

"One will be by shortly, after he finishes taking a statement from the classmate who found you." My cheeks flush at the mention of Hass, and my hand closes over a knife I'm no longer carrying with me. "I wanted to get your statement first, though, while the memories are still fresh. Can you tell me what happened?"

I open my mouth, and pause.

Standing outside my hospital door, his face just visible in the little window, is a green-eyed boy I know far too well.

Cole Masterson showed up here.

And I can't help remember something he said—about me digging too far, figuring out too much. She's done too much sniffing, one of the guys who took me muttered. I was looking into things I barely understand, and two strange men tried to kill me for it.

Officer Lopez is studying me sympathetically. She reminds me a little of a softer, warmer version of my aunt, who always makes sure everyone is taken care of, no matter what it costs her.

Two green eyes meet mine through the glass. I wonder what he's doing here.

Glancing over her shoulder, Lopez looks out the window—and Cole vanishes in an instant, like he was never there. "Something wrong?" she asks me.

"Just thought I saw someone I know."

Taking a deep breath, I decide to try to tell her as much as I can—at least, as much as I dare. I'll leave out the parts about me stealing other girls' identities to buy nice things. And, as much as it pains me, I just can't tell her what Hass did to Mariana. That's not my story to tell, and I've been told point blank not to tell it.

But I can give her Silas's story.

The one with the tree on the hill, the snake in the grass, and the rope we cut to bring him down.

They put him in the ground, but he's not buried yet. Not until I tell his story.

The dead don't rest easy.

"I had a brother... a twin." The pain in my chest steals my breath for a moment, and I have to make myself inhale through the tears that gather in my eyes, desperate to be

unleashed. "Something terrible happened to him. I didn't understand, but then tonight... tonight..."

"Yes?" She has a pen and a pad of paper in her hand, her intuitive, empathetic gaze pulling at the part of me that wants to tell me this story. "What happened to your brother, Brenna?"

Page 4

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

"He died." I clear my throat and try to swallow my tears. "There was this storm, and I—"

Before I can finish explaining, the door to my room opens. A man in a suit walks in, sharply dressed. He immediately meets eyes with Officer Lopez, and something passes between them, a tension that snaps like lightning in the air.

"I'm Ms. Wilder's lawyer, Robert Pierce." He holds out his hand. "I'll be representing her from here on out."

That's news to me.

"She's not under arrest," Officer Lopez points out, her eyes flashing as she raises her chin. "This is an active police investigation, and there's no need for lawyers here."

"Of course." Putting his hand down, the lawyer glances at me, and I frown at him. "Ms. Wilder, if there's anything you need, just let me know. I'm here to help."

Glancing at Officer Lopez, I find myself wondering what will happen if she finds out those two men wanted Silas's laptop. She'll probably want it as evidence. But I need to know what's on it before I hand it over—especially if there's anything else that might compromise his memory, like information about him dealing drugs.

But I know there's a catch. Between Cole showing up here, and now a fancy lawyer in a suit, something is going on. So I pretend to be confused, telling the lawyer, "I can't afford to pay someone."

"My services have been arranged on your behalf by a benefactor." Officer Lopez makes a face at this, and I have the feeling she'll be figuring out who this benefactor is right away. "Whatever you need, just let me know."

"Again, she's not under arrest."

"And I'm happy to ensure that it stays that way."

A snort from Officer Lopez. Looking at me, she says, "He's not your lawyer unless you say he is."

Looking at this "Robert Pierce," I find myself seeing green eyes, hearing the sound of lightning striking a tree, and feeling a snake coil around my ankle, ready to bite. This has to be because of Cole—or one of the other Elites—which means there will be a catch.

But if he can get me Silas's laptop, then I'll take his help.

"He's my lawyer," I tell Officer Lopez. "Not that I need one, right?"

"Of course not," she says lightly. "Now, for that statement..."

I tell her how Silas died, one night in a storm, hanging from a tree. My voice goes hollow as the story spills out like blood. It feels like something that's pulled out from the heart of me against my will. Lopez doesn't look surprised at my words, which makes me wonder if my brother's death came up when they ran my identity through whatever database they have. Clearly my disguise as Brenna Cooke wasn't as thorough as I wanted to believe. There must have been something I forgot to take care of—that or, Hass straight up told them my real name, which is entirely possible.

I want him to pay for what he did. To Mariana, to me, and to Georgia even. But I

won't be able to do that without evidence, and right now the only evidence I have, I can't give to the police without betraying someone's confidence. And neither Georgia nor Mariana would testify against Hass.

"Brenna?" Officer Lopez is watching me. "Is there something you wanted to tell me?"

Opening my mouth, I consider telling her all about what I saw Hass do to Georgia. But what did I really see—him push her against the wall, her squirm and tell him no? Afterwards she was mad that I intercepted, so I doubt she'd back up my version of events, truthful as it is.

"Whatever it is," Lopez continues, "you can tell me. I promise."

My Elite-appointed lawyer frowns in my direction. "Brenna, it's my duty as your lawyer to tell you not to incriminate yourself in anything."

Incriminate myself? Last I checked, I'm the victim here. Unless something else happened while I was unconscious in the trunk of the car—or Holly has decided to press charges for identity theft.

That's not a story I'm here to tell. This story has a far more unhappy ending, and Officer Lopez probably can't do anything to change that. Not until they identify the assholes who kidnapped me, something I have the feeling will prove to be unusually difficult, given how random all of it was.

"I just... my brother, I think he was killed."

The officer's pen pauses on her notepad. "What makes you say that?"

"Something those guys who took me said." Reaching up, I rub my neck, the ghost of a rope felt there. "You'll find them, won't you?"

"Of course." Reaching out, Officer Lopez squeezes my hand, and I'm filled with an unexpected comfort. "We'll do everything we can in patrol to find them on the streets. Any suspicious activity, any men who fit their description, and we'll take 'em in. Speaking of, that description..."

I give her a rough sketch of both of the men, though the truth is I didn't see anything identifying about them. It was night, there was rain—and tears—in my eyes, and I barely paid attention to them. By the time I realized what was going on, they were knocking me out.

I'll never forget their voices, though. I tell the officer this, heart in my throat as I remember the words that will haunt me.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

There's a knock on the door, and someone new comes in: a non-uniformed officer by the looks of him, with a badge hung around his neck. It's the detective, and based on the look he shoots Officer Lopez, he's none too keen on the fact that she took my statement first.

"Officer Lopez, if you could wait outside in the hallway while I take the witness's statement." He looks at the lawyer and grunts. "Pierce."

"Lyons."

Lopez hands me the bag full of my stuff. I try not to take it too eagerly. "We'll keep an eye out for those men, Brenna. I promise that we'll find them."

"No need to make that promise, Officer." Lyons narrows his eyes in her direction. "I'm on the case."

"Of course," she says, somehow managing to sound polite and yet doubting at the same time. "I'll just wait outside, then, make sure no one shows up to kidnap this young woman a second time."

I watch her leave, then open up the plastic bag. It's sealed tighter than I realized, with a large red label on it and my name scrawled at the top. My student ID is inside, along with my phone, and the clutch I took to the dance, all of its contents emptied: gum, a tiny thing of hand sanitizer, a bottle of ibuprofen, two tampons, and a keychain pepper spray Wally insisted I take with me to Coleridge. Grabbing the phone first, I push the power button and watch its cracked screen flicker to life.

Then power back down again, the battery symbol flashing red.

Great—the damned thing ran out of battery while I was in the trunk of a car. That makes it pretty much useless to me. I won't be able to call someone to grab Silas's laptop out of my room, and now I've got this detective watching me impatiently. At this rate Hass, or someone else, will get the laptop and wipe it of whatever evidence is on it before I even figure out why those guys killed for it.

Glancing at "my" lawyer, I ask him, "Can you do me a favor?"

"Of course. Detective Lyons, if you could give me some alone time with my client—your uniformed officer already took her statement, after all, and she's had a long night."

The detective makes another grunting noise, sealing my impression of him as one of those bro-like dudes who speak solely in monosyllables. "Just one question before I pop out to grab myself a coffee: what are you doing with a false ID and the social security number of a dead infant?"

Panic seizes my chest. "I, uh..."

"Don't answer that," the lawyer says, making me grateful for his presence in the room. "Detective, unless my client is under arrest?"

A keen smile breaks out on the detective's face, and I change my estimation of him from, suddenly realizing he has to be clever to have gotten to his position in the department. "Not yet," he says, "but, Brenna Wilder, whatever is going on here, you're better off just telling us the truth now. Not just because me and my guys will figure it out, but because whatever you're up to, it nearly got you killed tonight."

"Detective."

"Fine, fine, I'm leaving. Confer with your client and figure out her defense—she's going to need one if it turns out she's involved with something bigger than just a fake ID."

The detective heads out into the hallway, passing by Officer Lopez, who's standing alert and on watch. As the door closes behind him, I find myself wishing very badly that I'd never started digging into anything at all.

Then again, if I hadn't, I wouldn't know the truth about my brother's death.

That alone is worth whatever trouble I'm in now. I can take it all—just as long as the real murderers get arrested.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Wilder?"

The lawyer is looking at me expectantly, but there's something I want to know before I trust him with this particular task. "Who hired you?"

"A concerned benefactor."

"That's not a name."

He lifts his brows, looks down at his phone, then glances out the little window into the hallway. Something crosses his face, and he nods; craning my head, I try to see who he's looking at, but either there's no one there now or they're at an angle I can't see, unlike the very tall lawyer.

"I can tell you that I've been hired by a group called the Elites."

The way he says it makes it seem like he doesn't even know what the term means, but of course I do. Cole Masteron, Tanner Connally, Blake Lee, and Lukas DuPont are

the four reasons why I came to Coleridge under a false name in the first place. They run the social circles of the school, despite being first years—the equivalent, at a public school, of the junior year of high school.

I came here loathing them, and found myself ensnared in their web. Ruining them and their reputation got me more than I bargained for: I was taunted by Cole, teased by Tanner, got my tests stolen by Blake, and at least some of the girls interested in them cut the safety line to my harness while I was indoor wall climbing, then they even went so far as to throw me into the enclosure that holds Coleridge's mascots, four wolves who are barely tamed.

I survived it all. I even made it to the end of semester Blind Ball, despite all the mistakes I made along the way, including betraying someone who I didn't realize actually cared about me, my rich socialite roommate Holly, getting exposed in front of the whole campus for stealing and lying about my name, and accidentally doing to one of the Elites what they did to my brother Silas: falsely accusing him of sexual assault.

Coming here was supposed to take down the four rich boys who carelessly pushed my brother to commit suicide. The truth has turned out to be far more complicated than I expected. Now all I have to show for my efforts is the attempted kidnapping that I nearly didn't make it through and a lawyer hired by boys who I know must hate me as much as I once hated them—feelings that have been complicated by kisses that never should've happened.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

I don't understand why they would hire a lawyer to protect me.

Unless they're afraid that more of their secrets might come out if the police look too closely in my direction, discovering, perhaps, that the reason why I was targeted by killers was because I looked too closely at a strange accident Cole was involved in. What could've been a simple night of reckless drinking and driving has gotten not just him in hot water, but also the governor, whose son was in the car with Cole—and who covered up the accident in the first place. Investigators are still looking into the body of a young woman found in the trunk of that car, and somehow I get the feeling the Elite don't want them looking too closely.

I just don't know why.

I thought a lot of terrible things about those rich boys, but I never thought they were murderers.

If they have blood on their hands and I accept this lawyer's help, that means tying myself to them in ways I never would've accepted before I stepped foot on Coleridge's campus.

But my life has gotten complicated, and I can't turn down help, no matter where it comes from—or whose money pays for it. There are too many questions that need answers, and people who need to pay for what they've done.

Chief among them, the two men who put a rope around my brother's neck and hung him from that tree.

"I need you to go to my school, or have someone go there or something, and get this laptop from my room." I hand over my student ID, which still has my false name on it: Brenna Cooke, a girl with secrets. "The laptop has evidence on it."

He raises his brows. "Evidence you don't want the police to find? Because, Ms. Wilder, I have to warn you that impeding a police investigation isn't covered in my services."

I wonder how much extra that kind of help costs. "It doesn't incriminate me. It's my brother who I'm afraid will be exposed on it, and he's dead. But I think it could prove who took me. I want to know who it was."

"Fair enough." Pocketing the ID, he studies me. "You know, Ms. Wilder, I've seen many clients try to take justice into their own hands. It almost never ends well."

Frowning at him, I point out, "I can always call someone else to get the laptop." And I can—if I have any friends left, or get any battery back on my phone. "Just do this one thing for me. Consider it the cost of whatever retainer they're paying you. After this, I won't need representation."

"For both our sakes, I hope that you're right."

Chapter 3

Time passes painfully, physically slowly. I can feel every drip of the IV as it slowly dilutes the chloroform going through my veins. One of the nurses lends me a phone charger, and I manage to respond to Wally and Mom's concerned texts; they're on the way here, but still at least a couple of hours away.

I want nothing more than to jump out of my hospital bed, run down the hallway, and go straight back to the Rosalind dormitory to get my brother's laptop out of my room.

It kills me that I didn't figure out sooner something else might be on it—Lukas even pointed out that there was some kind of used-up space on the hard drive. But I know nothing about computers, and knew even less, apparently, about my own twin brother.

A drug dealer for some kind of criminal ring that ultimately killed him, and nearly killed me too.

He was in so deep that I didn't even see him drowning.

I'm lost in my thoughts when a knock comes on the door. Before I even get the chance to respond, Tanner Connally saunters in.

Behind him, I hear Lukas's European-accented voice say, "We should decide what we're going to say—oh, you just went in. Fabulous. I'm sure that'll end splendidly."

Looking up into Tanner's light hazel eyes, I feel a chill go down my neck. He's observing me with concern, even as he walks confidently into the room like he owns the hospital itself. If I didn't know better, I'd almost swear that he's actually worried about me.

An impossibility.

One his slight frown and the dark circles under his eyes communicate anyway.

"You sure do know how to leave a party," he says, his deep voice falling into his signature drawl as he leans up against the window across from my bed. "Next time my dad has one of his boring fundraiser and drags me with him, I'm leaving via mysterious circumstances, and showing back up on the police blotter. It really has a certain flair to it."

He would turn this all into one big joke. "Be careful. If you disappear, you might not come back."

"Is that some kinda threat?" A crooked smile twists his mouth at one end. "Aw, I'm touched. I knew you cared."

I sigh, looking to Lukas for someone reasonable. "What are you two doing here? Did you come to see how that lawyer you bought is working out? Because I wasn't arrested."

"Yet." Tanner raises a brow in my direction. "Didn't you steal from Holly? Come to think of it, Georgia's dad had to cancel her credit card a while back. Was that you too? You act so suspicious and distrustful, but you're the one no one should trust. Maybe you should work on yourself first before you fuck up someone else's life."

"Hush," Lukas says. "Brenna almost died tonight. That's why we're here—we want to see if you're okay. Or at least I do. Things got... heated in the storm."

He has an intense look in his blue eyes as he approaches the bed, almost studying me. His dirty blond hair is a mess; it doesn't look like he combed it. And while Tanner somehow managed to fall into a pair of jeans and a loose T-shirt at some point tonight, Lukas is still wearing what he wore to the dance, albeit without the suit jacket or the pompous tie. There's a slouched and worn-in look to him, like he was tossed around in an industrial sized dryer after going for a swim in a pond.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

A moment passes between us, and I know we're both thinking about the things we said. Worse, the things we did. What I did to him with my stupid, naive little blog. And what he did to me—what I thought he did to me—with my brother's reputation and his untimely end.

"They killed him."

The sound of my voice is louder than I expected, and I twitch at its volume. Speaking the words aloud to them, unlike to Officer Lopez, makes it all seem fresh and real. But also messy. Like a scabbed-over wound, recently picked with grubby fingers.

"Those two men who took me," I continue, "they said something when they were..." My hands go up to my neck, and I find myself struggling for the next breath to finish the sentence. "When they put me in the trunk. They said they would do to me what they did to Silas."

Lukas freezes, his facial expression oddly devoid of emotion. What Tanner does is the opposite in every single way: he curses up a storm, a filthy word barely springing from his mouth before another one rises on its heels, tripping over each other on their way to my ear. Pacing in front of my hospital bed, every muscle in his body tense, he makes me feel like I should be doing the same thing with the same energy.

But all my anger died with the toxic cocktail of chemicals still racing through my veins. It'll take hours, maybe even days of recovery before I feel strong enough to burn as I did before. Maybe it's for the best—when I come for those men, I want to be ready. The fire inside me has a history of hitting the wrong target when it's released from its cage too eagerly.

"We came here to warn you about something, but I guess it'll be the least of your concerns." Lukas runs a hand through his already-messy blond hair, tossing it wildly around his head. "That detective is talking to Cole and Blake right now. He wants to investigate you for falsifying your identity. The school administration found out what you did."

My blood freezes. "Am I going to be expelled?"

Tanner rolls his eyes. "Shouldn't you want to go home now, you bloodthirsty monster? You almost died. Also, if what you said is true, then you can't blame us for what happened to your brother anymore—last I checked we're not murderers."

"I don't want to go home," I protest, even as I find myself wondering if I'm insane for saying it—and even worse, meaning it.

Leaving Coleridge should be the first thing on my mind, but for some reason it's not. I've paid too steep a price to give up on the academy now, after everything. And I'm not done here. Not yet.

Not until the right people pay for the hollow ache inside my chest where a brother's love used to live.

"I need to know what happened to Silas. I don't have all the answers yet." I shouldn't be explaining this to these two wretched, terrible boys who pulls at my conscious and makes me want to scream, but here I am saying the words anyway. Maybe it's something they put in my IV. "There is no home for me until I know why I had to put my brother in the ground."

Lukas is watching me. "Understandable."

"Brutal," Tanner counters. "And very, very stupid. Are you willing to die to sate your

curiosity? This is how you got burned in the chapel, you know."

Frowning, Lukas says, "I thought you burned her."

"She's a good liar." Tanner narrows his eyes at me. "You should let the police do their jobs, and get out of here before that detective decides to charge you with something for using a fake social security number."

"You know about that?" I glance between them. "I guess Georgia figured it out."

"Cole did, actually," Lukas says, and my hands knot up into fists in the sheets at his name. That kiss is still seared into my mind—a kiss far less sweet than Lukas's lips on mine, leaving an imprint behind on my lips, which burn with hunger and hatred alike for him. "He's talking to the detective right now."

"What is he saying?"

Looking away, Lukas says, "Probably anything to get you kicked out of Coleridge forever so you leave instead of digging into more things that aren't your business."

My voice is hoarse and angry as I point out, "What happened to Silas is my business."

"That may be," Lukas states calmly, "but it's not safe for you here."

"So you're turning me in to the police?"

"I'm sure you'll get off with a misdemeanor," the European bastard says dismissively. "You're still a juvenile. The worst they'll do is assign you community service."

"And kick me out of Coleridge."

Tanner snarkily points out, "You didn't earn your spot, so what do you care if you lose it? It wasn't yours to begin with."

Maybe it wasn't. Maybe I used a false name and fake transcripts to get in, and barely managed to stay in by the skin of my teeth. But I did stay in, without even cheating, and now my spot at Coleridge feels like it belongs to me—stolen or not. I've suffered at the school, lost my naïveté and my purpose, betrayed myself and my brother's ghost with kisses that never should've happened, and sinned a dozen times over.

The school is mine to stay in.

I suffered hard enough for it.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

And I'm not through finding the truth that I can only find here, where my brother's path took a terrible turn in the wrong direction.

It isn't fair—the Elites have done plenty that could've gotten them kicked out of school, save maybe for Lukas. They've drunk on school grounds and had girls in their boys-only residence halls. Blake has stolen student work—mywork—as a TA, and Cole breaks the school codes against bullying. But no one in the administration will dare to even suggest suspending them as long as their families run so much of this privileged world with their money and influence. They won't be fined by the police for drunkenness or public nudity. Theirs is a life above the law.

Of course, I can't pretend I'm not a sinner.

I know I've done things that no one would approve of.

Things that, if my father found out about, might make him angry enough to start hitting me the way he used to hit Silas. That is, if he were around to find out.

Somehow that makes me want to stay at the school even more.

It's hard to explain any of this to the two Elite boys staring at me now. My best friend, Jade, would say that I'm stubborn as a mule and then some, and she's not wrong about that.

But if Cole is getting me kicked out of school right now, it might not matter how stubborn I am. There are no second chances for fucked up girls like me. They save those for boys with white teeth and long names. I don't get to be bad and loved. Only

discarded for my sins.

"I guess this is it, then." I find myself pinching the sheet that covers me and fussing with the threads as if they might unravel between my fingertips. "Last night really was my last night at Coleridge."

Lukas's mouth thins into a line. "It's for the best."

Wicked, wicked Tanner says, "If you'd like one more last night, you're always welcome in my sheets. Not like you can get expelled twice."

To think, his father is running for President. You wouldn't know it from the way he acts. Maybe that's the point for him—the kind of rebellion that will cost his absent father everything. He certainly seems to enjoy pushing the line so far that it's practically curved into a circle at his insistence.

"I'll decline your offer," I tell him, pushing my voice until the words drip with sarcasm. "From what I've seen—and heard—you probably have something."

"Oof." Tanner places his hand over his heart in mock pain. "An allegation of venereal diseases? You wound me. It's a good thing you won't be going to Coleridge much further, or I might throw myself into the wolf enclosure in despair."

His words send suspicion through me. Earlier this semester a group of girls put a bag over my head and dragged me into the wolf enclosure at night, leaving me there, the gate locked behind me and the groundskeeper nowhere to be found.

Before I can ask him if he had something to do with that—not that I think he's bad enough at lying that I'd be able to see through him if he feigned innocence—someone new walks through the door.

Someone new and very, very familiar to me.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Brenna won't be leaving Coleridge." Those dusky green eyes unique to Cole Masterson seem to be brimming with secrets and mysteries. "I decided she was better off staying."

Chapter 4

"You decided? And here I thought the administration got a say in that."

"Yeah, well, I was the one who found your falsified records. So I massaged things a bit."

"Massaged?"

"As far as they're concerned, you're enrolled as Brenna Wilder and always have been. Anyone who saw or believes otherwise has had their memory corrected for them." He cocks a brow at me, and I suck in a breath, wondering what this favor will cost me. "You're welcome."

"Why?" Lukas asks, voice low and horrified. "Cole, we all agreed that she shouldn't be here."

I can't help it; his words are a blow. To my ego, maybe, or the part of me that thought he was the kindest of the four brutal Elites. He kissed me so softly, and seemed wounded about what I did. I thought, foolishly, that Lukas DuPont cared for me. But he's made it clear more than once now that he wants me nowhere near the academy, so clearly I was completely wrong.

"Wanting her gone is in the past now," Cole says, like he didn't just spend months of his life devoted to tormenting me, and sic a bully of a redhead named Georgia on me.

"I changed my mind."

I'm the one who asks, "Why?"

"That's what I'd like to now." Blake Lee, the Hollywood slash Seoul celebrity progeny himself, slips into the room. "You said some bullshit about being whimsical and prone to flights of fancy, Cole, but we both know that's not the real reason you changed your mind on Brenna sticking around Coleridge. When you make a decision like this, it affects all of us. So I want to know why."

Cole looks to me, and I can't stop myself from briefly, embarrassingly, licking my lips. It's foolish to think that a kiss from a girl like me, raised in Wayborne Virginia, could possibly change Cole's mind. He doesn't like me—I'm the one who instigated the foolish kiss, for one thing, but for another it was a hate-filled thing, brief as a lightning bolt and just as destructive.

He's kissed girls like Holly, had every socialite on both coasts on his arm, and could snap his fingers and have a model delivered to his door—even after the scandals he's been embroiled in. Maybe even because of them. No girl thinks she'll be the body in the trunk, after all. Not when a boy like Cole looks at her.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

It twists me up inside to know that he'll be forgiven for his DUI, and for untold things besides that night, when no one will ever forgive me for being who and what I am: poor, bitter, angry, and driven to immoral lengths by revenge. Holly Schneider will probably forgive Cole Masterson and break up with her new boyfriend for him before she'll forgive me for what I did to her, and I did it not knowing she was truly kind, a girl set apart from the rest who genuinely offered me her friendship.

I'll only be able to go back to Coleridgebecauseof Cole. Because of whatever "massaging" he claims he did with my student records. And I don't understand why he would do it, when he couldn't possibly want to be with me any more than he wants to throw me.

"Do I need a reason why?" Cole asks, aggressively staring down Blake. "Last I checked it was my decision to mark her, and it'll be my decision to change my mind."

Tanner drawls, "What're you, the president of a club I don't remember forming?"

"You don't get to make decisions for all of us," Lukas argues.

Frustration shoots through me, and I snap out, "None of you get to make decisions forme.Especially after everything you've done to me."

"Oh?" Cole stares me down. "So you're saying that youdon'twant to be allowed back into Coleridge? Because we both know your life has never been this good before, and never will be again if you're expelled from school. But if you'd like to return to the trailer park you came from, be my guest."

In a low voice Lukas warns, "Cole."

"Sorry, sorry." Biting smile on his face, Cole waves his hand through the air dismissively, as if erasing his own words. "The respectable mid-to-lower class residence in which you were raised. Or is that a pile of sticks now? I forget which of your homes was destroyed."

I loathe him. But as I clench my fists and he watches the movement, his eyes flickering, I get the sense that's the point. He wants me to hate him. He says these terrible, biting things to my face so that I'll despise everything about him. Why he would do that after ensuring my place at Coleridge, I have no idea. Maybe it's just a game for when he's bored, like a cat biting the tails off mice. Or maybe he's playing some other, deeper game I can't quite see yet. Either way it's working—I feel sick just thinking about the kiss we shared.

Cole continues, "It wasn't much of a loss, though, was it? Losing your house in that tornado. A piece of plywood and two nails could replace it."

Even Tanner and Blake are looking at Cole as if he's gone too far this time. Lukas has an expression on his face that I've never seen before: pure, unadulterated rage. It transforms his model good looks, pale perfect skin, blue eyes and soft blond hair. Suddenly he looks less like a painting and more like a Nordic soldier about to roar into battle wielding an ax.

"Get out." He aims his words at Cole, his voice devoid of all warmth or emotion. "Go take a walk around the block and don't come back until you've grown a soul."

Flicking his eyes to Lukas, Cole looks him up and down dismissively. "You're one to talk. No one wants her gone more than you. She should thank me for what I've done for her." This is the moment when he looks at me with nothing but contempt in his eyes. "Thank me, Brenna, and you'll get to stay at Coleridge—for a little while."

I swallow, irritated with myself for being intimidated and afraid. I'm the fire and Cole should burn. He should be afraid of me. "Why?"

"Because you interest me. Because I want to see what you do next." Taking a step towards the bed, he adds, "And because when you decide to leave, it should be because of me. Not some two bit low rate mafia wannabes with a little bit of chloroform. I want my name on your lips when you run out of this place for good."

Tanner shoots him an incredulous look. "Laying it on a little thick there, aren't ya Masterson?"

"He's been practicing his sociopathy," Blake notes dryly. "If you ask me it's a little heavy on the sadism and light on the coherency. Work on your flirting, Cole."

I find myself turning red; though I can't see my blush, I can feel it, from my collarbones all the way up to my hairline. It's like my heart is beating just beneath the surface of my skin. "He's not flirting," I protest, "he's toying with me because he's sick. If you want to get rid of me, get rid of me already. Cut out the back-and-forth bullshit."

"So you do want to leave Coleridge. Not even a fight to stay in?"

"I'll fight you," I warn him, but the words come out weak considering my current position in a hospital bed. "It's not you I want the most, though. I want to take down the people who did this to my brother. I want his murderers to suffer. And everyone else who stood by while he was suffering."

"To do that, you have to stay at Coleridge," the sadistic fucker points out. "So again, you're welcome. Just know that you have to leave when I tell you to, and I'll make you suffer if you don't."

"Not if I have anything to say about it." Lukas's growl of a sentence jolts me, and I find myself staring at him in wonder. He's glaring angrily at Cole. "We were supposed to get Brenna to leave Coleridge for her own safety. Not as some kind of sick game. Bring her back if you intend to do something to protect her, but these half-measures will just put her in danger."

I tilt my chin up towards him, ego still bruised at the discovery that he doesn't want me around. "I can handle whatever it is."

"Can you? Because you would've died if the cops hadn't shown up tonight. From what I hear, Hass found you, not that that makes much sense. Unless you fought off your attackers and failed to mention?"

My pride is ticked further, and I have to look down and away, embarrassed—and more than a little afraid—to admit that he's right. When those men came for me I was completely helpless. For all my grand plans about revenge and the fire that I swore would burn the Elites to the ground, all it took was a little struggle and I was almost done fighting permanently.

If I go back to Coleridge, those men will know. They were waiting for me inside the school's gates. My face was familiar to them. And I already suspect that they're working with Hass or connected to him in some way.

But I want to go back anyway. "Who's to say I'll be in any less danger back in Wayborne? Besides, Lukas, it's not your choice to make."

He looks away at this, his jaw setting. "Fine. I just wish there was something we could do or say to convince you to leave—of your own free will, not because of some kind of torture plan."

Tanner offers, "I can get you pregnant and kicked out of school if you'd like. Dad

would hate the optics of that—and I'm sure you'd love a piece of my trust fund."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

I roll my eyes, because despite the insult in his words there's a mirth to them that makes it clear he's not serious. "I'm not leaving Coleridge until I get what I want."

Blake asks, "And what is that?"

"Revenge. Just like before. Only this time, it's Hass I want to take down—and those two men. And if you get in my way," I warn them, heart beating fast, "I'll keep digging until I find enough dirt to really take you down. Especially you, Cole, you heartless bastard."

He smirks, throwing his hand over the left side of his chest. "Be still my beating heart. I think she loves me."

"We can help you take down Hass." The offer startles me, because it comes, of all people, from Blake. "Ferdinand Von Hassell should be rotting in prison. I don't mind helping make that happen if it gets you out of here faster."

"Seriously?"

"I doubt I look like I'm kidding."

His face is so serious, cut into severe lines just like his father starring in an action film, but somehow twice as intimidating. Looking at him, though, all I can think about is the memory of our kiss in the haunted house—and how it set me on fire more thoroughly than my own destructive anger.

The deal he offers is one I have to tread lightly with. His help—the help of all the

Elites—could be what I need to get Hass arrested. Especially if there isn't information on my brother's laptop that could take him down. I know there are secrets they share with the other boy, secrets that might very well be the reason Lukas is getting their shared tattoo lasered off his ankle. One of those secrets could take Hass down for good.

But I don't dare to accept Blake's offer of help unless it comes with support. My eyes flick to Tanner, the wildest of the Elites and most likely to say yes to this just to rebel against Cole's missive. If I can get half of them to make a deal with me, even a tentative deal, the others might very well crumble.

Trusting them is impossible.

Using them would be a gift.

I'll have to tread lightly if I do this. Even the snake, curled in a ball beneath the long grass, knows better than to bite the wolf's paw when the pack is together. Divide and conquer—that's the only way forward for the small predator turning carnivores into prey.

"How would you like to send a rich boy to jail?" I ask Tanner, tilting my head at him curiously. "I mean, it can't compare to getting a blowjob from—"

"I'll do it," he says, interrupting me but somehow doing it casually and slowly, as if he just didn't care to listen to the rest of what I have to say. I can see through him; he doesn't want Cole to know he's been fucking his little sister's tormentor, even if he claims to have done it as a type of revenge. "I like games, and you know that. Just tell me who to seduce and I'll take care of it."

Cole frowns. "I don't like this. What if—"

"And you?" I interrupt him by looking directly at Lukas, letting my eyes flick meaningfully to his ankle and back up to his face. "Do you want me gone so badly that you won't let me stick around long enough to lay this final demon to rest? It's what he deserves, after all. Unless you're still so loyal to your former best friend that you wouldn't—"

"No." Stiffening, Lukas stares me down. "You won't baselessly smear me a second time."

I feel the real prickle of shame deep inside me, traveling up my throat and freezing my tongue. It takes me a long, tense moment of silence to say, "I shouldn't have said that."

We lock eyes for a moment, both of us tense. Finally, Lukas breathes out slowly. "I guess that's as close to an apology as you're capable of now."

"Remember, Lukas, she almost died. So we're supposed to be nice to her," Cole taunts. "Or isn't that what you said?"

Lukas ignores his best friend, and I wonder how it even is that they are friends, given how incredibly different they are from each other. Even oil and vinegar mix when shaken hard enough, but these two are more like cars facing in opposite directions, hurtling towards each other on a one-way highway.

Blue eyes meet mine steadily, and slowly the anger drains from Lukas's expression. "I want to take down Hass as much as you. Maybe even more."

"I doubt that."

"You have no idea," he says, the words encapsulating everything I don't know about the four of them. "I'll rest easy as soon as he's put away, and do anything I can to help

you. As long as you promise that you'll leave Coleridge of your own free will the instant he's arrested."

I consider his offer. "People like Hass get arrested and released all the time. I'm only leaving when the job is done. He has to be sentenced to prison before I'll leave."

"That could take ages," Lukas protests. "The justice system doesn't run smoothly."

"I can probably help speed it up." Tanner's offer is surprising, but he just shrugs. "From what I've accidentally learned by being a member of my unfortunate family is that everyone is quite up in arms about what the Governor did to get his son out of trouble. Prosecutors are looking for a rich young asshole they can make an example of to show that the state really is tough on crime. Since Yates only got a slap on the wrist, they want the next one to get a tough sentence. Or so I hear."

It's more use than I thought I'd get out of the rogue senator's son, given his typical penchant for not giving a shit or knowing anything worthwhile.

"Alright, so we just have to get enough evidence to prove Hass is who he is—an unrepentant asshole who probably had something to do with what almost happened to me tonight—and we can get the District Attorney to put him in prison ASAP. Right?"

Page 11

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

Tanner shrugs. "That's the idea I guess."

Fabulous. I'm putting my greatest hope in the hands of a teenage boy who couldn't care less. Let's hope the combined intelligence of Lukas and Blake manages to make up for Tanner's complete bullshit.

Which leaves one.

I dare to look at Cole.

He smirks at me, a trap I'm about to fall into, one I can see and somehow can't step around.

"Let's do this thing, then. Get in a circle and put your hands together, everybody—the Scooby Doo gang is on the job."

If he lives to the end of the semester, it'll be a miracle. Even my small hands would fit around that throat well enough to strangle him to death.

"It's a deal, then." I take a deep breath, wondering if this is what it feels like to bargain your soul away to the devil himself. "You four will help me put Hass away for good, and I'll leave Coleridge. Forever."

We don't shake on it, but we don't need to. After everything that's happened, all the terrible things we've done to each other and said to each other, a handshake would be meaningless.

Instead we share a kind of understanding: that we're all fucked-up liars, and we're going to see this thing through to the end.

Because it's the only way for them to get rid of me—and vice versa.

Chapter 5

Mothers should be comforting. Like lighthouses that sit on shore and guide boats home, or a net that catches people jumping out of burning buildings. They're the arms that comfort and guide, the anchor in a ferocious storm.

At least in an ideal world.

In this world, my mother doesn't comfort me.

I comfort her.

"It'll be okay." My voice is muffled by her hair as she presses against me, my hands flat against her shoulder blades. "I'm fine, Mom. Nothing... nothing really happened."

"How can you say that?" Sobs escape her mouth between each word. "I almost lost you too."

Too. Just like Silas. She doesn't even know yet that it was the same men—I haven't told her that, and neither have the police, I imagine. I don't think she would survive knowing.

Our mother has never been the strongest woman. It's been months since I last saw her, but already her body feels frailer against me, her bones closer to the surface of her skin, every breath slightly hitched. I know she's been working two minimum wage jobs trying to make ends meet, neither of which give her health insurance, and I

worry.

But there's no room in our relationship for me to be the one worrying about her. Not when she needs my comfort to keep herself together.

So I press my cheek against her dry hair and murmur, "It'll all be okay."

When her cries and sobs have settled into sniffles, she moves back and I turn to Wally. He's waiting in the corner of the room, hands in his pockets, shoulders rounded and slouched. I find myself glad that the Elites left before Mom and Wally showed up, and I don't know if it's because I would be embarrassed of my new enemies or my old family.

"Jade wanted to come," Wally says, shuffling over to me to share a casual hug, one that gives me comfort instead of taking it. "She has finals, though, and you know how her mom is."

"Shouldn't that mean you have finals too?"

He waves my concerns away. "I'll take the tests late. Principal Snyder said it was okay. Besides, this is more important." Clearing his throat, he says in a haunted voice, "You almost died."

I did. It hits me all over again as I meet his eyes and see the genuine concern there for my life and safety. I was kidnapped, drugged, put in a trunk, and about to be murdered. I still don't understand what stopped it from happening or why, but I can feel the phantom pull of a rope around my neck when I closed my eyes.

Maybe twins are fated to die the same way, and this was fate's way of trying to pull me down into the earth next to my brother, to rest with him for eternity.

"I'm still alive, though," I tell Wally and the universe alike. "See? Heart's still beating and everything."

"I'm just glad the police found you." Wally doesn't know about Hass and he doesn't need to. "Do they know yet why they did this? What's the deal?"

Page 12

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

My heart twists as I consider every variation of the truth, and the lies, I could tell them. "They haven't told me much yet. I tried to give a description of the men, but it's all a little fuzzy. I think... I think they were organized crime. That's all I know, really."

"Oh, sweetie." Mom squeezes my hand. "Did they... hurt you?"

She wants to know if they sexually assaulted me. Dragging that sort of information out seems like a bad idea, but thankfully for both of us nothing of the sort happened. "No. They just knocked me out and put me in the trunk of their car." I find myself cracking a yawn, and realize with a start that I'm tired. "It was a cramped fit."

"I'm just glad you're with us now." Mom reaches out to smooth my hair back from my face, and I lean in to the gesture, trying to take comfort from it. Another yawn leaves me involuntarily. "You should get some sleep, baby."

"Don't want to." I force down a third yawn, ignoring Wally's bemused smile. "I was out for so long. I want to just... stay awake."

Wally points out, "That wasn't sleep, Brenna. You should get some real rest. I'm sure the professionals around here would agree."

"No." I shake my head, looking over at Mom. "I can leave soon, I'm sure. There's no reason for me to be admitted."

It takes her a moment to realize what I'm worried about. "Oh, sweetie, don't try to stay awake on my account. Your Aunt Cheryl has agreed to pitch in what she can to

help pay your bills, and the church will help with the rest. If you need to sleep at the hospital, that's what's going to happen."

"Also," Wally adds, "I'm pretty sure you're not the one who gets to decide whether or not you'll be admitted. They have doctors for that."

He has a point. And if it's not going to be an impossible burden for Mom, then there's no reason for me to turn down a little bit of sleep.

"Let me just stay up for a bit longer," I tell them. "It's been so long since we got to see each other. And it's almost Christmas. I don't want to miss out."

A while later I find myself passing out, head on the pillow, barely aware of my surroundings.

I dream of sweet-smelling clothes that pull me down into an open grave, where my brother's body waits, his skin cold and clammy, his eyes open and staring back at me.

In the dream, I don't scream.

Fear feels so far away from me now.

Instead I just close my eyes and let the coffin build itself around me one plank at a time.

* * *

I'm woken by a gentle light streaming in through the curtains of the window near my bed. My mom is sleeping on a bench cushion beneath the window, while Wally must be out somewhere, because he's tucked his jacket around Mom's shoulders and is nowhere to be found.

Turning onto my other side to get away from the sunlight, I find myself staring at Silas's laptop. My heart races as I realize that I almost forgot about it; once I sent that lawyer after it I let it leave my mind and tried not to worry about it.

But here it is, right in front of me, only inches away.

"Some man brought it while you were asleep." Mom has somehow woken along with me; it must be those extra senses only mothers get that jerked her awake just as I woke too. "He wanted to stick around, said he was your lawyer, but I told him I'm your mother. His number is over there—when did you get a lawyer? Nevermind, I don't want to know. Just tell me what homework you can possibly have that's so important you had a very well dressed man fetch your brother's laptop while you were convalescing in a hospital bed."

It's so many words at once. I don't know how anyone can keep up with my mother when she gets in an anxious mood like this one. She looks, and sounds, like she guzzled a whole liter of caffeine, then fell asleep anyway. But I'm just glad she's back to nagging me instead of crying into my shoulder and making me feel like I'm the parent instead of her.

"It's not homework that I wanted to do," I tell her, before realizing my mistake too late; now she'll have follow up questions. I don't want her to know all of Silas's secrets. Just the accusations that came out about him that weren't true were enough to almost send her to an early grave of despair and heartache. Scrambling to come up with something plausible, I tell her, "There's a game on here. And some... some emails."

Mom raises her brows. "Oh? Any boy in particular?"

Four of them, I find myself thinking, only to immediately discard the thought. The Elites aren't boys that I'm interested in or might date. They're four predatory wolves I

made the mistake of kissing, and the sooner my deal with them is done and they're out of my life forever, the better.

"There are no boys," I tell Mom, hating that it feels like another lie. "Just friends and stuff. You know us Gen Xers and our social media. Can't get enough of the stuff."

"Speaking of!" Mom reaches across me and pulls something off the table next to my bed. "I plugged your phone in with my charger. It was dead, you know. We called you on the way here and you never picked up."

"Thanks." I take the phone from her as she turns it on, afraid there might be something on it—though what, I don't know. "I should let my friends know that I'm doing better. I'm sure everyone is worried about me."

Another lie. My friends—Sasha, Tricia, Hector, even Chrissy, who I know now was never the victim she pretended to be—probably don't give a shit that I'm in the hospital at all. They saw Georgia's presentation exposing my lies, after all. When I ran out of the Blind Ball they didn't even try to follow me.

It was only the wolves who followed me: Cole, Lukas, Tanner, and Blake. Four boys who cared even less than my supposed friends, but were the first to visit me here in the hospital. The first to see me when I was down.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

The first to kick me while I was there, too.

Still, it strikes me as a sick, horrible kind of joke the universe is playing on me. Of course a snake like me, bitter and full of fire inside, would find herself with no friends and no one to care for her except the woman who birthed me, the one friend who has no idea who I really am, and four terrible boys who have some of the same dark secrets and darker tendencies as me.

I must be broken inside. The only ones who can care about me anymore are just as broken.

Now, as soon as my mother's back is turned, I have a truth to discover: if my brother was broken too, dark and twisted inside, and what it was that he was killed over.

Chapter 6

The partition on Silas's laptop hard drive is, of course, encrypted. At least I think it is—when I get to the portion of the storage system that looks like it could be what Lukas was talking about, based on the gigs of memory it's taken hold of, I try to open it up, but all I get is an error message.

If I were smarter, like my brother, I would know what secret it takes to open it up and find out what's inside.

But he was always the clever one, at least when it came to languages, history, and other hard facts. I was the street wise one, despite outward appearances—the one who pulled him back from the riverbank when he almost slipped in, the girl with a fist at

her side in second grade when the bullies came for him. Silas was going to make something of himself, and I was always destined to be pulled along in his shadow. Even the shadow of his grave.

Frustrated, I try a dozen different things, but there aren't many guides on the internet on how to hack your own computer. I guess it's probably something out there in some dark forum on the dark web, or maybe just inside a computer science textbook—I wouldn't even know where to look, much less understand the words.

I need help figuring this out.

The only person I can think of who can help me is the last one who will want to.

But desperate times, and desperate girls, call for pulling out my cracked phone and staring at the lit-up screen. Checking to make sure that my mom is snoozing nearby, and Wally is still gone, I unlock the phone and scroll through the waiting alerts.

There are things I'm tagged in on social media that I don't want to look at. No doubt it's all Georgia's doing after the ball last night where she revealed my elaborate lies. I have a few concerned messages from Sasha and Hector, but none from anyone else—including Chrissy, whose friendship I'm unsure I even want back.

One text message sends a shock through me, followed by a tiny flicker of hope that I can barely admit to feeling.

Holly sent me a text.

It's dated sometime last night, when I was yelling at the boys in the storm, or just after I got kidnapped. After I ran out of the party.

I'm sorry Georgia did that. It was never my intention to hurt you. Even though you

hurt me.

A message that stings as much as it comforts. Even though you hurt me. Can I really deny that I did? After I betrayed her, the one nice girl at this school, who lives in the upper echelon but treats all the others like human beings. I repaid her by stealing from her—then worse, last night I kissed her ex-boyfriend.

Her ex-boyfriend who she never would've broken up with if not for my exposé on him that revealed his covered-up DUI.

I really showed Holly what a terrible friend I am.

As I sit with the phone in my hand, reading and re-reading the message, trying to decide if there's anything I can say in return that won't make me look like an asshole, another message came through. Along with many others. My phone is catching up to what it missed out on while it was dead and waterlogged in the trunk of a car, right next to my prone body.

I swipe up on all the other notifications so I can see what Holly wrote. Brenna, are you okay? Sasha called but you didn't pick up. Lukas said he last saw you in the parking lot running away, but no one can find you. If you're safe please let us know!

Surely she knows by now what happened. Great Falls is a small city, and Coleridge is known for its gossip network. If Lukas didn't tell her—and he probably did, if he told her I was missing—then someone else did.

So she doesn't need to hear from me.

But the open invitation to contact her sits on my screen, unmoving yet somehow tempting me. I can't seem to stop myself from probing the wound that is our severed friendship, desperate to cauterize it even if it will never fully heal.

Part of me wants to pour my heart out directly into her message inbox, tell her how sorry I am, how much I regret what I did, how thankful I've become for our friendship. I want to explain to her that I'm broken inside, that my brother held a piece of my heart in his hand and it was buried with him the day that he died. My chest has a cavity full of grave dirt in it.

Burdening Holly with everything would be wrong, though, I realize. Especially if it might make her feel obligated to forgive me even though she's not ready yet. So I decide to stick to a simple response, one that doesn't invite anything more.

I'm safe. Thank you for worrying about me. After a long moment of staring at the text box, the cursor blinking at the end, I add, I'm sorry.

Then I press send and page away, scrolling through all my other messages and calls. I drop a quick line to Jade, who has been updated by Wally but made it clear in her texts that she was impatiently waiting for me to charge my phone and respond to her too.

Taking a deep breath, I do what I've been putting off since I unlocked the phone: I open up an old message window, one filled with texts back and forth about study dates and times, and type a fresh message to Lukas.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

I need your help with something. Can you head back here? Alone this time.

His response bubbles up faster than I expected, making my heart do a little gymnastics routine against my rib cage.

Sure. Are you in any danger?

Am I? I don't know. There's an officer standing outside in the hallway—not Officer Lopez this time—to make sure the men don't come back. And presumably once I'm back at Coleridge, security will keep me safe. But I don't know why those men were after me—or who they were. For all I know the cop in the hallway would be nothing for them to get by.

Still, Lukas deserves an answer that isn't speculation. As far as I know I'm fine. And there's an officer here. I just need you to do something for me.

Got it. On my way.

There's something comforting about knowing that he's headed my direction. Even though it stung that he wanted to get me away from Coleridge—still does, in fact—I'm starting to understand that it's because he worries about my safety, not because he hates me.

I just wish I knew what I'm in danger from. Maybe Silas's laptop will help with that. It's certainly got something on it worth killing over.

Mom stirs as a knock comes at the door. My heart leaps—Lukas must not have left

the building if he's back so soon—but it's not him. Instead it's Wally, two takeout bags in his hand. I can smell the French fries and burger patties from here. My mouth waters, and I realize belatedly that I haven't had much of anything—the little tray of food they tried bringing me after I was admitted just made me nauseous, so the nurse patted me on the knee and told me food could wait until more of the chloroform was out of my system. I'm hungry now, though, so that's a good sign that I might get to leave this place soon.

"Brought these for you." Mom thanks him sleepily, and Wally smiles at her. "Didn't want you going hungry. You either, Brenna. Though I may have stolen a few of your fries."

I roll my eyes. "Of course you did. Here, give them over—before the rest are gone. I'm the sick one here, after all."

As he gives me the bag, I slide a meaningful look over at Mom, and surreptitiously pull my phone under the blankets. With a glance and a few quick swipes, I send Wally a message, and he glances at his phone without tilting the screen so Mom can't see.

"Got it," he murmurs to me, before heading over to where Mom has just taken a nap. "Hey, Mrs. Wilder, why don't we get you out of those clothes? I have your suitcase in my truck, and I got us a place to stay not far from here—a cousin of mine lives nearby, and she'll take us in for a bit."

Mom shoots a worried look in my direction. "But Brenna—"

"I'll be fine, Mom. They'll probably release me soon, even. And you look like you could use a nice shower and a nap in a real bed. Now that my phone is charged, I can call you as soon as anything changes."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. Go take care of yourself."

As Wally takes my mom out of my room, her purse slung over his shoulder and bag of food in one hand, I'm struck again by the fact that we're the ones who have to take care of her instead of the other way around. It makes me resent her a little, and hate my dad a lot—he should be here for her to lean on, to use his money to get a hotel room and a warm meal.

Of course if he were here, comforting us is the last thing he would do. But he could send money home. Or call sometime.

He never will, I know.

So it's up to me to take care of Mom. At least I have Wally to help out. I don't know what I'd do without him.

Grabbing my fast food bag, I pull the hospital bed tray over and lay everything out, mouth watering. There's no fast food at Coleridge—at least, not unless you can pay for off-campus trips and fast food delivery just to get it—so this is my first cheeseburger with fries in forever. I intend to enjoy it.

Halfway through my burger there's another brief knock at the door followed by someone walking through. Yet again my heart jumps, but it's just the nurse on her rounds to take my vitals and note them on my chart. She smiles at my appetite and swipes one of my fries on the way out with a wink.

When the third knock at the door comes a minute later, I don't dare to believe it's him. It's not until no one walks through the door that I know it must be—I have to call, "Come in," before the impeccably polite Lukas DuPont will enter my room.

He no longer looks mussed and anxious. His hair looks like it's recently been cleaned and styled, and he has a fresh, clean shower scent to him. The uniform he's wearing is freshly pressed, its lines sharp and Coleridge-regulation. Unlike the other Elite, Lukas colors firmly inside the lines that the rules set out for him—even though he could gleefully break every single one.

His blue eyes and gentle smile make my heart race like I'm about to go over a cliff. I wish that I was past this, that I didn't feel so much when I look at him, but just the way he carefully takes a seat near the foot of my bed makes heat flush my chest and arms. It's undeniable that he's attractive, but on top of that we have a certain connection—one brittle, frayed, and with an end date, yet undeniable all the same.

I'll never forget the way he looks as he settles near me on my hospital bed, taking me in like I'm someone who matters to him, someone he wants to see whole and healthy. He doesn't seem to notice my messy hair or the ketchup I blot off the corner of my mouth, face roaring with heat. His eyes are taking me in like I'm a precious thing.

"You look better," he comments. "Last time I saw you, you looked rough."

"You too," I throw out. "I mean, that button-up looked like someone stepped all over it before they gave it to you."

"That was from running in the rain." His voice is mild, soft and gentle. "Running to find you, that is. When we didn't, I... well, I assumed the worst. So imagine how glad I was to be proven wrong."

Page 15

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

"Why?" Clearing my throat, I clarify, "I mean, why be glad? It's not like we're friends."

"Aren't we?" He glances over to the side, as if reflecting. "I guess we're not. Not even close, really. Isn't that funny? Not friends, not acquaintances, not anything else. Yet here I am, and you said you needed me."

"I do."

"So what do you need?"

His clear blue eyes are open completely. Whatever I say, no matter what I ask from him, I feel as if he'll agree in an instant. Yet there's still so much I don't understand about him—why he's friends with the other three Elites, how it is that he has a matching tattoo with Hass, a boy who couldn't be more his polar opposite when it comes to morality and general sensibility. Maybe it's just one of those childhood friendships that outlived its expiration date, but I find myself wondering if there's something dark beneath his surface, something I haven't yet found.

Shaking off my thoughts, I tell him, "I need you to help me figure out why my brother was murdered."

Chapter 7

"That's... a lot." Lukas blinks at me, looking a little startled. "Why me? How can I help?"

"This." I angle the laptop towards him so he can see the error message. "You said something about there being a partition on my laptop taking up most of the space. But I didn't put it there. It's... not actually my computer, either. Or it didn't used to be. It belonged to my brother when he was alive."

"Oh." Sucking in a sharp breath, Lukas studies me. "Iamsorry. About what happened to him."

"Don't be. It's not your fault. He was murdered."

A troubled expression crosses his face, and for a moment I think he's going to say something more, but he doesn't. Instead he reaches out and hovers his fingers above the keys, asking, "What makes you think that the reason he was murdered might be in this hard drive partition?"

"The guys who took me were looking for it." I swallow, fingers briefly fluttering around my unbruised throat, then reach across to press down on my snake bite scar. It no longer aches as much as it used to, but something about the ritual habit still helps me center my focus. "They said something about it when they grabbed me. Apparently it was supposed to be destroyed, and they thought the tornado took care of that, but it didn't. I was thinking maybe whatever Silas put on the partition might be something to do with whatever got him killed—there's nothing on the rest of the laptop that anyone would kill over. It's just homework and video games."

Lukas nods, his jawline hardening as he clenches his teeth, in concentration or frustration. "I'll help you figure it out. But I have to warn you, I'm no expert level hacker. If he put a password or some kind of work around on this, it'll take me some time to figure it out."

"How long?"

"Let me try to crack it and I'll tell you."

Settling onto the bed, Lukas leans over the table I have pulled above my legs, staring at the laptop screen in full concentration. He's so close to me that I can feel the warmth of his legs through the sheets. It's enough to make me blush, and I have to look down to calm myself, conflicting emotions fluttering through my chest.

Maybe it's a mistake to trust Lukas with this. After all, once he cracks open the partition, he'll see my brother's secrets on the other side. I have no idea what they might be—I can guess that they have something to do with the drug dealing he was doing, but even then, the size of the files on the hard drive makes it seem like there's more there than I can imagine. And just a bit of drug dealing isn't something to kill over, especially when as far as I know he only ever sold to other high school students, maybe a few bored soccer moms at the most.

No, if he was killed over these files, there are secrets there that could ruin his memory further and our family too. But I can't think of anyone other than Lukas who's willing to help me like this—especially not anyone who knows my secrets and doesn't seem to think any less of me because of them.

Which reminds me. "Thanks for looking for me, by the way." His pale blond brows rise as he glances at me over the top of the laptop screen. "I mean, you didn't have to. But Holly texted me. I guess she was worried."

"Of course she was," he says, like he's confused why I would think otherwise. "Look, Holly may not be your roommate anymore, but she's a stand-up girl. She would never stop looking for you if you went missing."

I have to swallow, because something about that makes a lump rise in my throat. I've had a lot of female friends in my life, including Jade, but almost none have stuck by me for the long haul. If there's something to be salvaged in my bond with Holly, I

hope I can figure out what to do or say to fix the rift between us.

Lukas adds, "She misses you."

"I miss her too."

"Then maybe reach out. Holly is the forgiving sort—if you earn it. The earning it part is key, though. She doesn't move on easily. But I'm sure you can figure out a way to make it up to her."

Thinking of the dress I wore to the Blind Ball, the one the paramedics cut off me, which I bought with Georgia's stolen credit card, I wonder if there is a way to make it up to Holly. What I did to her was so much worse than just stealing—if we hadn't lived together I wouldn't have been able to take that credit card offer and get the card in her name. She trusted me implicitly, and I broke that trust.

But Lukas knows her better than me. Maybe he's right. Maybe there is a light at the end of the tunnel, a place where I can be the kind of girl who has friends. The kind of girl who gets forgiven.

I watch him peer at the screen, typing around, moving his fingers on the trackpad. He spends long moments typing something into a black screen, then makes a frustrated sound.

"Your brother is good," he says, then his eyes fly up to mine, and he flushes at his cheeks and neck. "I mean was good."

Swallowing, I glance over at the screen, trying not to think about what the world is missing now that Silas isn't in it anymore. "What did he do?"

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

"I'm not quite sure yet. The error message is definitely a smokescreen—a little bit of programming I think he cooked up himself. But underneath it there's more than just a folder with a password. I'm afraid that if I poke at it too hard, I'll fuck something up." Something about the bluntness of Lukas cursing makes me lean towards him, feeling like we're two people on the same wavelength, headed in the same direction. "I want to ask someone for advice about this before I move forward. I won't mention the details—just the big picture. If that's okay with you."

"If you trust them, I do," I tell him, which seems impossible after everything, but is somehow true. "The sooner I figure out what he had on this laptop, the better. It's the key to everything."

"Of course." Reaching out, Lukas squeezes my hand, and my heart does embarrassing, unwise things. He pauses as he takes his hand away, pressing his palm down on the edge of the hospital bed like something is worrying at the edges of his mind. "I just want you to know, Brenna, that I never meant to hurt you. At least that wasn't the plan. What we wanted... what Cole wanted was for you to leave Coleridge. He was obsessed with it. But I just wanted you to stay away. Your brother, he dug into things that he should've stayed out of. That's probably why they killed him."

Leaning forward, I sense that there's something he wants to tell me. A secret that's been brimming under the surface of every interaction I've ever had with the Elites. Something that's the key to everything. "What did he dig into? And who is they?"

Lukas shakes his head, and I wait for him to say that these are Cole's secrets, not his. That's usually what causes him to clam up. But instead he murmurs, "I can't tell you without endangering your life. All I ask is that when you find what's on this laptop,

you tell me about it first before you go to anyone with it. There are people who can be trusted, and people who can't."

"What people? Why can't they be trusted?"

"Let's just say that not everyone in a position of authority at Coleridge, or in Great Falls, deserves to be there." His smile is humorless, his expression bleak. "That includes a lot of the big donors who gets buildings named after them and sweeten up the administration. Publicly elected officials who are supposed to serve the city but instead serve the rich who bribe them to keep their mouths shut. And even people further down the ladder, who follow orders from up top without knowing why."

Glancing out into the hallway, I ask him, "Are you telling me not to trust the officers on this case?"

"Maybe you shouldn't trust them, but... just don't go to them with one-of-a-kind, irreplaceable evidence until you've come to me. Just in case they're... not who they should be."

I study him. "Okay. I'll be suspicious." Pausing, I find my mouth dry as I ask, "Is all of this really that dangerous?"

"Maybe. Yes. I hope not."

"And you won't tell me what I'm up against."

He looks down at his hands, fingers curling and uncurling into half-fists. "With any luck, you'll never need to know."

So I'm in the dark, and there's nothing I can do to change that without someone's help. That feeling of helplessness is new to me—and I don't like the way it settles inside

my chest. It reminds me too much of being prone in the trunk of the kidnapper's car, unable to even scream for help. And I refuse to let myself feel that way again.

I have to find a way to get to the bottom of all of this, no matter what Lukas says. After all, it can't be that dangerous if four teenage boys who've never had a callous on their palms are involved in it.

* * *

I'm released sometime in the afternoon, Mom and Wally at my side. He's taken care of everything, as usual: he picked up a change of clothes for me from the local general store, got me a coat that doesn't have holes in the pockets or worn seams, and he runs out to his truck as Mom and I are leaving the hospital so he can sit in the cab with the heater on before we get there.

"If that boy weren't gay, I'd say you should marry him," Mom remarks as we walk up to his car, making me sputter with indignation and embarrassment. "What? He takes care of you."

"He's just a friend."

"I know that." She pats my hand. "I'm just suggesting that when you do find a boyfriend you want to bring home, make sure he lives up to the standard Wally has set."

That's hard to imagine. Not many teenage boys are the gentlemanly sort, getting out of the car to run around and open your door first. They don't walk to the drug store to get a replacement toothbrush for you when your brother uses yours to clean the toilet bowl, or get you the perfect birthday present just because. Wally is one of a kind, and I'm glad that he's my friend—and nothing more.

Mom and I climb into the truck, her in the middle, me on the passenger side. Wally helps us stuff our bags into the back. Then he puts the truck in reverse and looks over his shoulder, frowning.

"There's someone there."

"Just wait for them to pass."

"I don't think he's going to. He's walking up to your window, Brenna." He shoots me a worried look. "Does he look familiar?"

The officers said that I should be safe for now, as long as I didn't go anywhere alone at night and stayed firmly on Coleridge's campus, inside the circle of safety the security guards bring, but now I find myself wondering how true that could be. My heart skips a beat, and I look into the sideview mirror expecting to see an intimidating, strange face.

Instead I meet the eyes of the detective on my case. He flashes his badge and knocks on the window.

"Don't worry, I know him. It's an officer—the detective, in fact." Reaching over, I roll down the window, which takes a while given that Wally's truck is all manual, from the transmission to everything else. "What can I do for you, Detective Lyons?"

"I just have a few more questions for you, if that's okay."

Mom looks at me worriedly. "Do you need that lawyer of yours?"

Page 17

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

I consider Lukas's warning, but shake my head. In a low voice, I tell her, "If he asks anything I don't want to answer, I'll call the lawyer up. But until then, I'm okay."

She nods, clearly unable to deal with this kind of stuff—the scary stuff. "Whoever is helping you pay for that lawyer, thank them for me. And be careful. Don't say anything you shouldn't."

I wonder what she thinks it is that I've done, or how much she knows. "I'll be careful."

Hopping out of the truck, I follow the detective a few feet away, so we can get some privacy. He doesn't look like he suspects me of anything, so hopefully his questions are just more about the men who took me.

"I just have one question for you, if you could bear with me."

"Of course."

"What is your association with Peter LeGrand?"

Chapter 8

I blink at him. "Who?"

"You don't know?" Detective Lyons arches a coy eyebrow. "LeGrand is the man who gave you the social security number you used to enroll at Coleridge Academy—an act of fraud I've been instructed to ignore by my captain for some reason."

Trying my best not to let the shock and anxiety show on my face, I tell him honestly, "The person who helped me enroll at Coleridge was anonymous."

"So you let a complete stranger give you a social security number without even asking for his name?" The detective narrows his eyes at me. "Interesting."

"Do I need to call my lawyer?"

"You're not under arrest, Ms. Wilder. Despite your offenses."

He taps his pen against the pad of paper he's holding in one hand, which he hasn't written any notes on. It's clear to me that this is some kind of fishing expedition—he doesn't have anything yet, but he'd like to get something, and is hoping I might be loose tongued, alone and confronted like this.

Well, I'm not falling for it. "Does Peter LeGrand have anything to do with my kidnapping?"

"No," he admits, grudgingly. "At least, not that I know of. I'm still trying to figure out why you were taken—what motivated the men who kidnapped you."

"Well, maybe you should work on that," I point out, feeling intimidated despite the brave tone I try to put in my voice. "Last I checked I was the victim of a kidnapping last night, and no matter what petty offenses I may have committed, that's what you're supposed to be investigating. Or am I wrong about that? Is there an investigation into me, or someone associated with me?"

An oblique, slightly angry curve turns his mouth into a caricature of a smile. "No, there isn't."

"Maybe I should call my lawyer."

"That won't be necessary." Putting away his pad, he tells me, "I'll just note that the association with LeGrand was anonymous—and shut that part of the case. After all, I'm not supposed to investigate it. Forsomereason."

A reason that begins and ends with the Elites, I imagine, and whatever it is that Cole did to get me back at Coleridge. If that's what money buys—a change in an open police investigation—I shudder to think what else that kind of influence might have covered up in Great Falls.

Now I don't know if Lukas warned me about the cops because some of them are corrupt—or worse, because some of them aren't, and can't be easily bought by outside influence.

Detective Lyons tells me, "Have a good day, Ms. Wilder. We'll be in touch if any developments are made in your case."

"Thank you," I tell him, even though my heart is still slamming against my chest.

When I get back in the truck, Wally and Mom both shoot me worried looks, but I just say that the detective wanted another description of the men who took me. They don't need to worry about all the other things going on, things I've gotten myself into—and in over my head.

* * *

Rosalind Hall looks different.

It hasn't even been twenty-four hours since I was last here, but everything about it feels like I'm in a dream. Finals are still happening—I'm barely prepared—and the campus is filled with activity as students head towards their post-lunch classes. Everything looks, and feels, normal.

I can't forget Georgia's hateful face as she told the whole campus the truth about me.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

I have angry texts from Chrissy. Confused ones from Sasha. Disappointed-but-not-surprised voicemails from Tricia. Then the texts trying to figure out where I was, if I was missing, if this was a prank or I'd just run away. I let them all know that I'm fine, and their replies were one word answers, their worry no doubt replaced with anger at me for all the lies.

This is what it feels like to no longer have friends because of things you've done. The rest of my semester at Coleridge is going to be cold and lonely. I can handle it, as long as Hass getting arrested is my early Christmas present.

"Alright, here we are." Wally looks up at the building; he and Mom walked me through security, and he's got my bag slung over one shoulder, my few things shoved in it next to Silas's laptop. "You sure you want to do this? Because you can still come home, Brenna. Stay with me and my parents if you need to, go back to Wayborne High. It's boring, but that can't be so bad compared to what almost happened to you last night."

"I'll be fine." Reaching out, I squeeze my mother's hand, worry pinging through me at the thinness of her bones and tendons as they rub against each other beneath her pale delicate skin. "This place has top notch security. And the officers investigating what happened are right nearby. Nowhere could be safer."

"We can stay for a while," she offers, even though we both know she doesn't have the luxury of taking time off work for that. "If you need me, if you need Wally, we're here for you."

"I know." Looking into her eyes, I really believe that she wants to do her best to

protect me—even if she doesn't know how, or she lacks the strength to join me in the coming fight. "I'm not going anywhere. You won't lose me Mom, I promise."

I kiss her on the cheek and hold her tight, trying to give her a little of my strength, desperate for the fire that burns inside me to light the flickering candle of her vitality. I don't know why it is that she's so weak and grown weaker—grief, maybe, or being abandoned by her husband after losing her son. I worry for her being alone, and wish there was something I could do to help.

But I can't go home. Not yet. Not until I've laid my demons to rest, and the only place to do that is here at Coleridge, among the Elites.

"I love you," I murmur against her hair, and she says it back, her voice fierce and proud. "I'll come home soon for Christmas. Finals will be over in the blink of an eye, and then we'll be together again. You'll see."

"I'll be counting down the days."

After I step out of her arms I step into Wally's, and this time I'm the one receiving strength, not giving it. He's impossibly warm, a furnace beneath his thick coat, tall and broad and strong as an ox.

He tells me, "I'll come pick you up on the eighteenth. As soon as these damn tests of yours are over. And we're driving straight home, no stops."

"Got it." I smile up at him, then glance over at Mom. "Take care of her for me?"

"Always." He squeezes my hand. "Not just for you."

For Silas.

We share a brief moment of silence, both of us in that memory together. The one where we found his body hanging from the rope. The one where we cut him down.

"I'll get the men who killed him," I vow in a low voice to Wally. "I swear to you."

"Let the cops handle that."

Mouth tight, I shake my head. "They'll pay. I'll see to it."

"Fierce, wild Brenna. Don't destroy yourself in the process."

I promise nothing.

We say goodbye, and I watch them go for as long as I dare. Before the temptation to follow them grows too strong, I turn away to face the place where I'll be living until the exams are over, and after that, until Hass has been taken down.

Rosalind Hall. Ancient, beautiful, and foreboding. But what's really intimidating about it isn't the stately architecture or the impressive gardens that wrap around its brick walls.

The frightening thing about Rosalind Hall is the girls who live, and sleep, inside.

* * *

My room is just as I left it: a little bit messy, bedsheets askew, the dampness of the walls oppressive. Once I stopped living with Holly and left the Rosalinds, I was assigned to this room beneath the stairs, big enough for one and sad enough for a Gothic heroine to be stuck in while she waits for her hero to arrive.

Unlike Jane Eyre, though, I won't be ending my story with a brooding handsome

suitor whose mysterious secrets are mine to accept. There's no happy ending for me. The only way this whole thing ends is with destruction—of the people who killed my brother, or of me.

Sighing, I make my bed and do my best to turn my room into something less depressing. A glance at my phone reveals that I have no new messages—not a big surprise. All my friends must hate me now that they know how long I lied to them. And if they also know what I did to Holly... well, I don't expect I'll be getting any texts anytime soon. I'll be lucky if I'm not completely shunned.

Georgia couldn't have planned things better.

At least I have Silas's laptop. I can't afford to let it slip out of my hands, so I move all my books and stuff into my old backpack and sling it over my shoulders. From now on this thing is going everywhere with me—even to the bathroom. It's the most important thing in my life, the key to everything.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

I won't let my brother's murderers get away with what they've done.

Flipping it open and pressing the power button, I watch the cursor spin as it turns on. Before he left my hospital room, Lukas told me to try to come up with different ways to break the encryption Silas put on the hard drive partition. He said that I'd be able to figure out what methods or passwords he used best—I'm his twin, after all, or was before we put him in the ground, six feet deep and lifeless.

I wonder if I knew my brother well enough to know what kind of words he would use to hide something so important he was killed for it. Whatever I thought I knew about him, I was clearly wrong, because I didn't know him at all.

The laptop is a heavy weight as I head towards my last set of classes before finals begin, after which I'll get five days at home for Christmas break before Mom goes back to work and I have to come back here and do it all over again. Thinking about another semester at Coleridge, this time even more alone than before, makes me want to pack my bags and call Wally to beg him to turn the truck around and come get me.

As I'm considering what doing just that would feel like, even as I know I won't because of all the things I still need to see through to the end here, a familiar voice greets my ears. Dread curls in my stomach as I turn the corner towards my first class, Calculus, and come face-to-face with Sasha and Tricia. They pause in the middle of chatting in low voices, looking startled as they see my face.

Tricia says, "We thought you were still in the hospital." Then a moment later, "We uh, we would've come to visit. Were planning on it. But y'know, finals..."

"What she means to say is, we didn't know how to react to the news about you." Sasha is blunt where her girlfriend isn't; Tricia winces and squeezes her hands together at her words. "I mean, you lied about your name. Apparently you stole money or something—I still don't get how that worked, but I guess that's why you're not one of the Rosalinds anymore. And then you were kidnapped. Now you're just... back?"

I stare at them. "Nice to see you too, I guess."

"We just don't know how to react," Tricia explains, grimacing. "I mean, you could've told us. No one cares about your brother. I just don't understand why you would come here if..."

"Do you hate us?" Sasha blurts out. "I mean, Georgia said something about how you only came here in the first place to like, get you revenge on the rich kids who ruined your brother's life or whatever." I wince; the parts of Georgia's speech that I tuned out were apparently more revealing than I realized. "We're those rich kids, so I guess we just thought maybe you hated us too. Like you hate Holly."

I can feel my face go cold as all the blood drains from my cheeks at once. "I don't hate Holly! Who told you that?"

Shrugging, Tricia says, "We just figured you wouldn't have done what you did to her unless you really, really hated her."

"Yeah," Sasha says, "I mean, I like a good plot as much as the next girl, but using her for her money seems a little much. Why would you do that if you don't hate her?"

Her question digs deep to a place inside me I don't want to look at too closely. A rotten core that grows and festers the more I feed my misery and hate.

Ashamed, I tell the two of them, "I didn't do it because I hate Holly. I did it because I hate myself. There's... something wrong with me, ever since..."

"Ever since your brother died?" Sasha guesses, and I wordlessly nod. "Huh. Well, as long as you don't plan on stabbing me to death in my sleep, I guess I don't really care about the rest."

"Maybe next time, don't steal from someone as nice as Holly," Tricia adds, making me wish that I could sink into the floor right here, right now, and never come back up again. "I mean, if you're going to steal, Sasha is the one to target. She probably has half your bobby pins and a book you thought you were going to read stored in her dorm room."

"I do not!" Sasha objected, huffing indignantly. "I took one of Brenna's old scarves and a few ponytail holders, but that's it. Honestly you make me sound like a serial killer."

"You take things. As a... hobby?"

Raising an eyebrow at me, Sasha comments, "There are worse things to do. Also, it's not like I took anything you needed or noticed missing. I just like collecting old unused stuff. Especially from my friends."

Tricia shakes her head in dismay, but there's a little smile of affection curling up the corners of her mouth. "Like I said, so weird. But I guess if I can put up with her little eccentricities, I can put up with yours, too Brenna—as long as there aren't any other secrets you're hiding."

Just a little deal with four terrible boys, the kisses I shared with each, and my brother's laptop in my backpack, holding secrets untold. But that's not what Tricia is talking about, so I shake my head.

And, because I need to, I tell them both, "I'm sorry. I know I've been kinda fucked up. I shouldn't have lied to you about my name. I just couldn't deal with the truth. It was too hard to live with being his sister and all the consequences that came with it, when I didn't even get to live with him anymore."

"Yeah." Reaching out, Tricia squeezes my shoulder, which is basically a huge hug with a kiss, coming from her. "Sounds rough. I'm glad you're back."

"Me too." Sasha throws her arms around me hugs me tight—so tight that I can feel the sheath of a knife against her outer thigh, and have to hold back a little giggle of delirium. "Hope you make it through finals and come back next year."

"Speaking of... we've got to get to class."

"Yeah," I say, voice breathy from having the life hugged out of me by Sasha. "I should probably go too. Don't want to fail out after everything. Then I might really die."

I say it in a joking tone, so they both laugh—and cringe—but the truth isn't so far away.

Even after all this, I might fail out of Coleridge just because I'm not quite smart enough to hack it.

Chapter 9

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

My predicament with finals, it turns out, isn't exactly a secret. Although Blake isn't a teacher's assistant for our shared Calculus I class anymore, he still manages to pull me aside after class along with the teacher, Ms. Saint.

"Ms. Wilder," she says coolly. I redden as I wonder what message the teachers got about my new name for enrollment—and if it was as curt and steeped in privilege as Detective Lyons' orders not to investigate me further. "You have, understandably, undergone a recent trauma. And it has come to my attention that you may not be as prepared for our upcoming final as one may hope."

Reddening further at Blake's dark eyes on me, I defend myself. "I've been studying as much as possible. And my grades are going up—I'm not failing."

"Yet." I don't love the way she says the words, or what follows. "Your final is twenty-five percent of your grade, Brenna, and if you fail it, you'll fail the class. Which means repeating it next semester, and not graduating on time—not to mention the threat to your scholarship, which I imagine you need to continue attending."

Which I imagine you need. Is it that obvious that I'm poorer than everyone else here? The scholarship, of course, wasn't something I earned, but I've decided I deserve it all the same. I lost a brother and hardened my heart to get it and my place here at Coleridge. Blood has paid for what I've illicitly gained many times over. No one here has sacrificed as much to get here as I have.

That doesn't mean I'll get to stay if I don't do something about how terrible I am at math.

"I'll study more," I promise Ms. Saint, wondering what Blake is doing here at all, after everything. "What happened last night won't stop me from trying my best in your class. I won't let one final jeopardize my spot here."

Studying me over the top of her glasses, Ms. Saint nods sharply. "Good. Blake will help you by giving you private tutoring. I've cleared it with him already—he's most sympathetic to your predicament after what happened to you last night. Please, if you need anything, Brenna, let my know. I'm here to help."

Her warm sympathy falls on deaf ears, because all I can do is stare at Blake in horror. He looks like he's enjoying my dismay, and of course he would—we're going to be stuck in a small room together for hours if he gets his way, free to torture me in private. I don't kid myself that just because I've teamed up with the Elites on a singular goal, and Cole has cleared the mark on me, that anything has changed where Blake Lee is concerned. He's still the same impossibly cold, impossibly privileged son of a movie star and an entertainment mogul, his statuesque handsome exterior the thin veneer that covers up a cruelty just beneath.

To think, I sometimes look into his hard, angry eyes and see a reflection of my own fiery anger simmering there.

We couldn't be more different if we tried.

Looking back at Ms. Saint, I admit to myself that there's no easy way out of this. I'm going to have to do what she wants, even though I highly doubt Blake will actually help me. And based on the expression on his face, he knows it too.

The torture never ends.

"Thanks, Ms. Saint." Even as nausea rises in my stomach, I paste a smile on my face that I hope is convincing. "I'm sure he'll be a real help."

* * *

In English with Lukas, we thankfully share no interactions other than friendly ones. Unlike prickly Cole, roguish Tanner, and cold Blake, he seems to be mostly normal and easy to deal with—which only makes me wish that much harder that I'd never falsely accused him and only ever kissed him out of the Elites.

Maybe if things were different, Lukas and I would be more than distant acquaintances stuck together for a while. More, even, than friends.

Then again, I'm, well me. Even if I had perfect skin and highlighted hair—the salon appointment I booked with Georgia's card has already bronzed and faded—Lukas and I are almost as different from each other as Blake and I are. He has a literal heart of gold, despite growing up in privilege, and the smooth, easy personality that befits a diplomat's son. I'm all hard edges and scorching fire, certain to turn him off with the truth at my core more than anything.

It's good that my time here at Coleridge has an end date. If it didn't, I just might be doomed.

After English class is lunch, which I dread more than anything else today. Even whatever Cole has cooked up for me in Visual Art class can't be worse than walking back to the scene of the crime. The dining hall in the Coleridge Center is the same exact room where Georgia revealed the truth about me—and changed everything.

Hass will be there.

Just thinking about that makes my hands tremble. I haven't seen him since the Blind Ball, haven't even thought of him much after that day in the library when I saw him push Georgia up against a wall and grope her. But he's the one who found me. He's the one who called the police.

He can't have had a good reason for being there.

I'm going to find out the truth, and I'm going to take him down. To do that, I have to be able to face him. The least I can do is walk into the dining hall without flinching.

So why do I find myself standing still right outside English class instead, unable to make myself walk further? Here I thought the fire inside me was burning bright again and I'd be able to do anything.

Walk. Just take a step forward. That's all I have to do. Then another, then another... but I don't want to see his face. Those eyes of his, the fact that he looks so much like Lukas. Knowing that he's somehow connected to my brother's death. It's all too much for me.

"Brenna?" A familiar, European-accented voice drags me out of my spiraling thoughts. "Something wrong?"

Glancing over my shoulder at Lukas, I give him a shaky smile. "Nothing you have to worry about."

But he's studying me, and those bright blue eyes of his don't take long to get to the truth. "C'mon, I'll go with you to lunch."

"You don't have to—"

Page 21

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

"I want to," he says lightly. "Besides, someone has to look out for you. As we found out the other day, you're prone to disappearing at the most inopportune times."

I grimace, trying to adopt a light tone. "Let's hope that never happens again."

"It won't."

"Sure."

"I mean it." Reaching out, he captures my elbow in his hand, gently holding me still. "I want you to stay safe. Maybe someone should make sure you get back to your room okay, and don't go missing in the middle of classes. After all, those men who kidnapped you clearly know which school you go to."

"There's security around campus already," I point out. "I'm pretty sure someone will notice two strange adult men showing up out of nowhere."

Lukas's voice is soft as he asks, "What if they don't notice until it's too late, and you've been hurt? Those men incapacitated you very quickly. Don't you live alone in Rosalind Hall? Maybe someone should—"

"Lukas," I chide him softly, "I don't need you to protect me."

"Maybe you do." He's looking at me so intensely that I can see every shade of blue in his eyes. There's so much more there than you see at first glance. "I want to keep you safe, Brenna. I just don't know how."

"You could tell me what's going on," I point out, wishing that he would. "I know that I'm not being told the whole truth."

Lukas looks away, his hand falling from my elbow, and I know that I've hit the target right in the center. "Telling you the whole truth would put you in more danger, not less."

"How am I supposed to know what I should be scared of if you won't even tell me?"

"Be scared of everything," he advises me, sounding like a paranoid conspiracy theorist more than anything. "And hope that when this is all over, you can go back to your old life."

"Without Silas, that's just not possible."

Sadness turns his eyes down. "Regardless. You'll be better off when you've moved on from all this. Now—can we please just go to lunch? I hate not being able to answer your questions truthfully."

"Then answer them."

"Stop asking them." He's looking at me the way most people look at three-legged puppies. "Please? At least until finals are over. We can get you what you want without you knowing all the gory details of, well, everything."

He means that we can put Hass away and he can keep his secrets—though I suspect most of them are his friends' secrets more than anything else. His playing of both sides makes me grind my teeth, but it also gives me an opportunity, as we walk through the double doors to the dining hall, to ask a pointed question.

"How are the four of you going to help me get what I want? After all, it's not like..."

I go quiet as I see them.

Georgia and Hass.

No longer separate but clearly—based on the way he's practically giving her a hickey in front of the entire student body—together again, for better or worse.

Watching them makes my stomach roil uncomfortably, so I have to look away. A dozen questions race through my mind, though. More than anything I want to know what he told the police—and what he didn't tell them. However it is that he wound up becoming the person who "stumbled" on me unconscious in the trunk of a car, I know it wasn't an accident.

As soon as I look away, though, curiosity draws my eyes back to them. Georgia has her head tilted back, neck bared to his attentions. They're sitting at a round table with other students—mostly ones I barely know. No one seems to be giving their little show a second glance, though.

I wonder how it is that she can let him kiss her like that after everything he's done to her.

I don't know why I care, after everything she's done to me.

Those clever eyes of hers flick over and land on me, and I quickly look away, pretending as if I wasn't staring at their PDA even though it's the only thing interesting going on in the entire dining hall. Lukas doesn't seem to have noticed my wandering attention; he guides me towards a table in the back, tells me to get a seat, and offers to grab some food for me.

"You don't have to do that," I tell him, face reddening as I wonder if he thinks I'm that poor. "I can get my own food."

"Actually." He awkwardly scratches at his neck, right near the collar of his ironed button-up shirt. "Your student ID was apparently deactivated by the administration. You'll have to get a new one now that you're re-enrolled. Until then it won't work."

That explains why I had to wait for someone to let me into Rosalind Hall at my return. Face burning, I realize what he's very politely not saying: that I can't afford a meal here without access to my scholarship fund. The real reason why he insisted on escorting me to lunch is abundantly clear.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

The differences between us couldn't be more stark: I can't afford lunch, and he doesn't even have to think twice about offering to buy it for me. Making myself smile politely, because it's not Lukas's fault that I was born into a far poorer family than him, I nod. "Thank you. I didn't even realize that my ID wouldn't work, but... of course. It makes total sense. Just get me whatever is on the menu and looks good."

"Be right back."

As he melds into the lunch line, fitting in perfectly with all the rich kids, I let my eyes wander the full length of the dining hall. There's Georgia and Hass again, this time sitting next to each other instead of her on his lap, having an animated conversation with the rest of the table. I spy Piper Lyons, with her short dirty blonde hair and superior attitude, sitting at a table with a few other impossibly lithe girls. Veronica Pierce and Heather Tan are looking in my direction—at least until I stare at them and they duck their hands, exchanging no doubt pointed barbs. And at another table, there are a few somewhat familiar boys and—Hector.

Hector, who didn't text me while I was missing, who helped me sneak into Cole's room and steal his journal, who has a beef with him because of their fathers. He's sitting at a table with a few friends of his I don't know, talking as he twirls his fork in a pile of spaghetti. I must stare for too long, because his shoulders tense like he feels me looking his way, and then he glances up right at me—only for his gaze to skip over to someone standing a few feet away.

"Found yourself a nice table, haven't you?"

A familiar drawl drags me away, and I look up at the face that Hector was no doubt

staring into: handsome tanned skin, dark hair, an impossibly roguish smirk, and the kind of charisma that can lay a girl flat on the ground in an instant. Tanner Connally will never change, and there's something reassuring about that. A girl could set her clock to his innuendo.

"Lukas wanted me to sit with him," I tell Tanner, letting a hint of a challenge sink into my tone. "Unless you have a problem with that?"

"Never, Brenna." He so rarely says my name—it's almost always nicknames with Tanner—that the sound of those two syllables spilling from his Kentucky-soaked mouth sends a little tingle up my spine. I hate myself for it even as the hairs on my arm stand on end. "Just wondering if you planned on poisoning my food. Or maybe something more sinister, like seducing me. Setting me on fire? One never knows, with you. Always so creative."

Grinding my teeth, I point out, "I've never done anything to you that you didn't invite by being a complete asshole."

"True enough." Sitting down, he takes out his phone and taps through an app that I realize belatedly is a food delivery service. Technically we're not supposed to have any outside food delivered to campus on weekdays, but that won't stop one of the Elites. "My father is still in a tizzy about all your revelations. He's worried I'm going to get my own DUI."

"You haven't?"

"Not for lack of trying." He flashes those white teeth at me, charming and dangerous all at once. "I mostly get drunk and ride dirt bikes through the Kentucky countryside, though. Maybe I should upgrade to a Ferrari, really get the gossip rags going."

"And I guess if someone gets hurt that doesn't matter."

He gives me an exaggerated wounded look, putting one hand over his heart. "Me, maim or kill someone? Never! The plan would be to drunkenly drive my car into a tree. Maybe a mall, just to really get the scandal going. There's never anyone in malls these days."

I snort, shaking my head at his antics. "Your father's campaign manager must have a heart attack just thinking about your existence."

"You have no idea."

The way he says it makes it sound like there's something I don't know—some Connally family secret that could take down the whole operation. Trying to investigate it is a huge temptation, but Tanner is a small, moving target compared to Hass—though I haven't sworn that I would stop exposing the Elites. Just taken a break momentarily because it's easier to be on their side than against them.

Licking my lips, I ask him, "What could I possibly not know about you? After all, you're an open book. Especially these days."

"You mean especially after you posted that video of me punching another boy, and I had to go on the morning talk show circuit to give a sad tale of origin to explain it all." Tanner sighs dramatically. "How heartbreaking it was, opening myself up emotionally on national TV. Woe is me."

"You don't have to be such a dick about it. Just don't answer the question."

"Where's the fun in that?" Another flash of a grin, another white smile that makes my stomach do uncomfortable, embarrassing things. I don't want to admit to myself how much of an effect he has on me, but there's no denying it, especially as he leans forward and practically growls, "If you want to know more about me Brenna, all you have to do is ask... at the right time, in the right place. I'll reveal it all to you. Bare

anything. Strip naked."

"I get the metaphor," I tell him, trying to sound offended and uninterested even as uncomfortable things happen between my thighs at the thought of tanned, ripped Tanner taking his clothes off in front of me and confessing all his secrets. "Do you ever turn it off?"

"Nah, I'm always turned on."

Before he can slip another bit of innuendo in, Lukas shows up with our food, and Tanner shocks me by falling silent. I wouldn't think he'd care one way or another whether or not Lukas is around to witness his shameless flirting, but apparently he has at least a little bit in the way of standards.

"Thanks, Lukas." Warm gratitude suffuses me as he sets the tray of food in front of me. "I guess I'll have to get that new ID card soon."

"You can make an appointment for later today." Sliding his eyes over to Tanner, Lukas asks him, "Have you decided what you're doing about your finals yet?"

He shrugs. "Maybe I'll fail 'em on purpose, maybe I won't. Figured I'll decide when I sit down in front of each test."

"Why would you fail them on purpose?" I ask, curious despite myself.

"Easy—to piss the old man off. And cause trouble for him. No way he'll let me fail out of Coleridge, but keeping me here after so many Fs would cost him a shitload of money." Tanner grins, the shape of it pointed and feral. "So I fail on purpose. Just to fuck with him in the middle of his campaign."

No one dislikes George Connally as much as his son, it seems. I can't understand that

kind of hatred—even the way I feel towards my father is a slow-burning thing, not the kind of resentment that leads to self-sabotage. I get the feeling Tanner would do anything just to make his father angry, even ruin his own life.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

It's a dangerous thing. Pointing this out to him, though, would be like saying water is wet. I have the feeling he already knows—and doesn't give a shit. So I just take a bite of the sandwich Lukas got me and try to mind my own business.

Something that becomes impossible when Cole and Blake walk up to our table, and Cole declares, "I know how to get you what you want, Wilder."

Chapter 10

Hearing my true last name out of his mouth, even after all this time, makes my stomach churn uncomfortably. It'll be hard to be a Wilder again after so much time spent as a Cooke, but my father's name was my brother's name, and at least this way I'll be living the truth. For him, if no one else.

"Share with us," I tell Cole, who's standing there expectantly. "I suppose you've got some big dramatic plan that requires a lot of time and money."

"No. Just the opposite." Cole takes the seat right next to me, and I have to fight the urge to pull my chair away, even as his altogether too familiar scent washes over me. He smells like warmth and comfort, an impossible thing given who he is, with the light scent of apples wafting from his clean warm brown hair. "What I've got planned is going to be very easy and only mildly risky. Expensive? Not at all."

"It's not just your plan." Blake sounds peeved as he takes the remaining seat between Tanner and Lukas, his cold eyes narrowing at his friend. "I'm the one who reminded you what Hass likes to do at the start of every semester."

"The start? So this would be for January."

"Exactly." Cole smirks at me, leaning forward into my space until I can feel the warmth of his body in the air around him like a physical presence. "You'll have plenty of time to prepare. We'll even help—though you'll be on your own with this one. All it'll take is one simple night and a few minutes of effort, and Hass will be done for. Probably for a while."

"Tell me."

Blake is the one who starts. "He has a little tradition for the start of every semester of school: he buys all the drugs, alcohol, fireworks, and anything else he's not supposed to have and smuggles it on campus right before classes start. Then at the end of the semester, he makes it a mission to use it all up—calls it his last chance party and everything."

"Gross." I wrinkle my nose. "But somehow I doubt buying a few tabs of molly and some Roman candles will put him away."

"You're not wrong," Cole says, his voice so near that I can feel his breath on my cheek, making me warm in places I try not to think about. We're almost as close now, physically, as we were when we kissed—when I kissed him—and it feels like standing at the edge of a cliff, my toes over open air. "But word is—courtesy of a little digging Blake and I did this morning—that Hass is buying more than just some party favors this year. Apparently he's got more exotic tastes in mind."

I frown. "What, like a white tiger? Italian molly? I can't imagine what he could buy that would possibly get him thrown in jail."

An expression crosses Cole's face, one I haven't really seen before, something in between disgust and rage, guilt and shame. In a low voice he says, "What do you

think rich boys buy when they know they can get away with it?"

It's Blake who answers, even as my mind catches up. "Girls. He's buying himself his own little sex slave to keep in the family summer house nearby. All the way from overseas."

My gut churns, and I find myself glancing over towards Hass and Georgia's table. They're no longer canoodling, but she's staring at him with this rapturous expression on her face that I can't for the life of me understand. It's like she thinks he plucked the moon out of the sky, when really all he did was inherit a trust fund and act like a sociopath.

She looks up at me, stares me straight on, and smiles. I don't look away at first, forcing myself to meet her gaze despite the sick pit in my stomach. It's impossible to tell the source of the dread. I'm just as worried for Georgia as I am upset just at the sight of her, after everything she did to me at the Blind Ball.

I wonder what it'll take for her to break away from Hass's orbit. Even she deserves better than a boy like that one. Hell, no one deserves Hass.

Least of all someone who has no opportunity to say no to him.

Turning back towards the boys, I see they have some of the same dread and disgust on their face that I feel. Drugs, parties, even DUIs were one thing, but this is more like the body in the trunk of that car, the one Cole claims he had no idea about—something I'm shocked to realize I actually believe. And just like the governor tried to cover up for his son when he got pulled over with Cole, that girl stuffed into the trunk, Hass's rich parents will try to cover for him.

"How do we make sure that when he gets caught it won't all get swept under the rug?"

"That," Cole declares, "is where you come in."

* * *

The plan is for me to make sure Hass is exposed publicly—and on film—simultaneously as he's arrested, so that he can't run and hide from the charges. I'll do it anonymously, using my Legacies blog, because as the boys warned me, this is not the kind of thing I want to do under my legal name. It should all be over with by the end of January—along with my time here at Coleridge, if Hass gets charged quickly enough, which Tanner promises he will be.

One wrinkle: between then and now I have to pass my final exams. And other than Visual Arts, I'm starting to wonder if that's even possible. It's one thing to write an essay or prepare for a one page quiz; Coleridge finals, from everything I've heard, are an absolute nightmare to pass, even for the kids who have been going to top tier private schools their whole lives, or the scholarship students who actually earned their place here.

I'm nowhere near as smart as either.

So I'll just have to be twice as studious. Even though my mind keeps wandering back to the feeling of strong arms grabbing me in the rain and stuffing chloroform over my mouth. I can't stop thinking of that moment when I woke up in the trunk, bound and gagged, and wondering if I could've done anything to escape or call for help. But more than anything, my mind keeps ruminating over the fact that I have no idea how it is that I'm still alive—and the one person who knows is the one who won't be giving me any answers.

Even when stories about my kidnapping and rescue start showing up in the news, the statements Hass gives are all perfunctory and smell of lies: he was driving late at night to unwind, he saw a car parked on the side of the road and two suspicious men,

and after chasing them off discovered me in the trunk and called the police. No word where the men went or how they got away on foot. No explanation other than coincidence as to why he just happened to be there at the right place and time.

They gnaw on me, these thoughts, memories without explanation, a life I still have without knowing the reasons why. It's hard to concentrate on the work in front of me—even though doing the work is the only way I'll get my revenge.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

So when it comes time for me to join Blake in the library for his so-called tutoring, a little part of me is desperately hopeful that it actually will involve some learning and studying. Because I'm not sure I can do this alone, and that scares me.

"You're late," he says as I join him at a table in the middle of the study section, glancing down at his watch. "It's three fifty-nine."

"And we're supposed to meet at four," I point out. "Also, who even wears a watch anymore? What are you, my grandpa?"

"I have all my teeth, so I doubt it."

I snort at his little joke—Papa Edwin was an asshole, and I never knew my mother's father, so I can't say that I mind Blake's shit-talking. Still, as I point out, "Making fun of me for being country trailer trash is a little old now, don't you think? And I was early."

"Except it's four now, and your study materials aren't out in front of you."

"That'll take no time."

"Then do it."

As he watches, I pull Silas's laptop, my notebook, some pencils, and printed study worksheets out of my bag. Despite Coleridge's general love of online class material, teachers still print things—there's something about working a problem out with a pencil in your hand that just feels different. Opening the laptop, I pull up my online

textbook account and click to the first page of *The Fundamentals of Calculus*. Then I arrange my notebook, papers, and pencils in front of me, just for good measure.

Blake says, "It's four-oh-one now. You're late."

"I wouldn't have been if you'd kept your opinion on my late grandfather's dental hygiene to yourself."

"Or maybe you would be late regardless. Guess we'll never know." There's something about the way he looks at me that goes right to the center of my body. "You sure you want to do this?"

"What—study? I kind of have to one way or another. Unless you're thinking that you'll get rid of me faster by encouraging me to fail out."

"I don't think it'd take much encouragement for that to happen."

"Hey!" I frown at him indignantly. "I've been getting my grades up."

"It'll take more than slightly better grades for you to pass. But that's not what I was talking about. Are you sure you want to go after Hass like this?"

His words stir nothing but confusion in me. "Are you... worried? No way."

The frown that turns down the corners of his mouth is so much like his famous father's infamous blue steel gaze that my stomach does a flip flop. I was never a Jake Garrison fangirl, but sitting across from Blake like this, I'm starting to understand the appeal of an intense stare combined with a steeped brow.

"It's not you I'm worried about as much as the mission. Messing up your grades is one thing. This is so much bigger than you know."

"Then tell me." Frustration wells up inside me. "Whatever it is that I don't know, just tell me already, and then I won't be in the dark anymore."

"And give you satisfaction? Never." His coy, sadistic eyebrow arch ends the resemblance to his movie star father completely. "I'm just wondering if you have what it takes to get this done. Because someone like Hass can't be taken down unless you're truly committed."

"It's everything I want. Also, I have to point out that I did a pretty damn good job exposing you publicly for your temper."

"Didn't someone send that to you unprompted?"

I flush, wondering how he knows that. "I did my research. I put out feelers on all the right Korean news sites to get information. Just because the source came to me doesn't mean it took no effort."

"This is different, though. You can't get Hass arrested from behind a laptop screen."

"I'll do it anyway. What do I have to lose?"

Looking at me like he's really seeing me for the first time, Blake says, "Apparently nothing."

Then he flips open his study materials and starts to drill me on equations and formulas without even missing a beat. Flustered from our conversation, it takes me a few missteps before I get on track and manage to answer him, but after a while I get into a roll. I start to answer questions correctly, come up with ways to solve problems on my own, and manage to memorize a few things just in the minutes it takes Blake to quiz me on them.

By the end of the tutoring session, he almost looks impressed. As I gather up my things to go, I'm more than a little proud of myself for managing to get through an entire hour alone with Blake Lee without completely making a fool of myself. Maybe I will manage to pass my finals—or even better, ace them.

As I'm starting for the door, though, Blake stops me, a slightly irritated expression on his face. "Wait. It's getting dark out."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

"So?"

"I'm supposed to escort you around campus after dark if we're out together." I stare at him, jaw slack; he looks just as unhappy about this as I feel. "Lukas insisted."

"I didn't think you did what other people say."

"Like I said, he insisted. And I promised."

"So?"

"I don't break my promises. Especially to friends. Even more especially to Lukas."

I blink at him, wondering if I'm seeing a side of Blake Woo Bin Lee no one else has seen except maybe his closest friends and family. Here I thought that the angry, out of control version of him from that video I received was the deepest revelation of him I'd ever get, but now I'm finding out that he keeps his promises.

Still, I chafe at the thought of being nannied around campus, especially by the Elites. "You don't have to. The entire campus is under security. And just because it's dark doesn't mean it's dangerous."

Blake's jaw flexes, and I get the sense that he's grinding his teeth in frustration. Pushing an errant strand of hair out of his eyes, he stares me down the way someone normally stares down a vexing problem. "I'm going with you. That's final."

"Fine," I snap. "See if you can keep up."

"With those short legs of yours? I'll be fine. Where to, Miss Daisy?"

Shaking my head, I wonder how it ever happened that we kissed in the haunted house. It seemed inevitable at the time, like two flames meeting each other and doubling, our rage mirroring and joining together to grow. Now, though, even though he's still impossibly handsome, like a statue more than anything, all he does is frustrate and irritate me—especially when he takes the stairs with me and goes just fast enough that I can't keep up, until I'm following him instead of him following me.

"You know," I call out as he puts enough space between us for an entire sedan, "I'm pretty sure this isn't what Lukas had in mind when he asked you to escort me around campus. If someone stabbed me, would you even turn around and notice?"

Looking over his shoulder, he pierces me with his brown eyes. "I would notice, Brenna."

It's like lightning has struck again, coating my skin in a thin layer of energy. My name—something happens to me when these boys say my name, as if they've summoned me and are pulling gently on my strings. I find myself walking towards Blake, who stands still for me to catch up, drawn towards him even as I wonder why.

There are so many boys who are better.

None of them look at me like they know the dark secret deep inside my heart, and not only understand it, but share it. No one—not even wild, angry, larger-than-life Cole Masterson himself—has that same level of darkness. That desire not just to watch the world burn, but be the one who set it on fire.

"Well?" He arches a brow again. "Where to?"

"I don't know," I say, blushing a moment later as I realize what an idiot I sound like.

"I guess I should probably work on my final art project, but it's already so dark out. I kind of just want a mug of hot cocoa and to curl up by a fire."

If I felt like an idiot before, the feeling intensifies right now as I realize what I've just said and who I've said it to. Blake Lee doesn't care about my feelings. He's not interested in finding out what I want or if I'm craving something. Like a little boy with a magnifying glass, aiming it at ants, he just wants to see me burn.

"Let's go get you a cup of cocoa, then."

Shock ricochets through me. Staring at Blake, I feel my lips part and my mouth open. He said it so casually, so easily, like we weren't just screaming at each other in the rain two nights ago, as if I never tried to destroy him—or him me.

"You can't be serious."

Raising a brow, he looks at me. "Do I look like Tanner?"

"I—no. What does that have to do with anything?"

"I don't joke." Clearing his throat, he says, "We're stuck together. Until January at least. So if it makes my life easier, let's get you some hot chocolate. Maybe then you'll stop trying to stab me in the back every time it's turned in your direction."

"I didn't—you have to be friends with someone to stab them in the back. If you don't trust them it doesn't count. So technically I stabbed you in the front."

"That's splitting hairs. Come on."

He holds out his elbow towards me, and the only thing more shocking than the gesture is the fact that I loop my hand around his arm, the wool of his jacket warm

against my bare skin. We stroll down the sidewalk together, and with each step I feel like I must be having some kind of a stroke, because there's no way this could be real.

Blake Lee is a scorpion, not a prince.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

Casually, he says, "Girls normally ask me for more expensive things, you know. Jewelry. Concert tickets. Backstage passes are a big one for those who know my mother's industry. Autographs for all the rest, who at least are familiar with my father's blockbusters. Hot chocolate is the cheapest thing any girl has ever asked of me."

I stiffen. "Are you saying that I'm cheap?"

"And implying that you're easy?" He chuckles, the sound low and dark, melting like the chocolate I'm craving. "Nothing about you is easy, Brenna Wilder. There are scorpions with less sting."

It hits me that he's been thinking of me the same way I think of him: as untrustworthy, dangerous even. All this time I thought of myself as the underdog and the Elites as the enemies I had to take down. Maybe they saw themselves as performing acts of self-defense when they did things like steal my tests and get Georgia to humiliate me in public. After all, I'm the one who poked the hornets' nest, and the reason why they stung me.

Looking at things this way is like hanging upside down and discovering a whole new way to see the world. It makes me uncomfortable, so I change the subject.

"Let's go get this hot chocolate, then," I tell Blake, wondering if this is some kind of game he's playing—or if we're playing it together. "Maybe while we drink it you can quiz me some more on calculus."

As I take each of my finals, I can feel it, deep in my gut. This instinct that tells me the questions are coming easy. I know how to solve every equation in Calculus I, thanks to Blake, whose strangely gentlemanly behavior continued all week. English Language and Literature is a breeze, especially after Lukas and I absolutely aced our shared project. And though I'm bad at World History, Tanner showed me a few absolutely obnoxious mnemonic devices to use to memorize dates and names, which stuck in my head out of irritation as much as anything—an irritation that carries me through most of the multiple choice questions and makes writing an essay filled with facts far easier than I thought possible.

The last thing I have to do is turn in my final piece for Visual Art, and it's the only final I'm nervous about. Not because I don't think I'll pass it—I've got an A in this class for a reason—but because showing the class my final piece feels like opening up a vein in public.

Our teacher said to do something close to the heart, that showed off our favorite media and what we most want to depict. Art is memory, she said, and anything we put to canvas or paper will live forever.

There's only one thing I can think of that I want to have eternal life.

My hands tremble as I set my finished watercolor on my easel, its paper cover still intact. The hardboard backing is covered with little pencil scribbles I noted that are smudged here and there. Sometimes, as I worked on it, I worried that I'd forgotten so much—too much.

I don't know what caused me to choose this as my final assignment, before everything had been revealed. Maybe it was too big of a risk. But I couldn't resist the allure of doing something close to my heart.

Out of the corner of my eye I spot Cole taking a seat at an easel just to the right of me

and setting a pencil drawing in place. The work on it is the best he's done, showing almost as much improvement as I've pulled off in Calculus. He's taken what could've been a simple drawing of the campus and made it complex and almost sinister. Oak trees cast sharp shadows on the buildings, the darkness filled in with dark pencil gradients, and empty doors and windows seem to suggest an absence of life. Even the way the tree branches bend in the wind feels more ominous than anything.

He's shown Coleridge for what it really is: a haunted place cast in dark shadows.

Turning towards me, Cole raises an eyebrow in my direction. "Admiring my work?"

"I didn't realize you were drawing the campus."

"This place is so near and dear to my heart." He throws me a mocking smirk. "After all, where else would I meet a girl like you?" Motioning towards my hardboard, he points out, "Yours is very modern and avant garde."

I roll my eyes at his joke. "The watercolor is underneath. I'm protecting it."

"From what?"

"Shitty boys with buckets of dirty water."

"You wound me. Here I thought our little feud was over the moment our illicit tryst began."

I stiffen. "There's no tryst. Or you and me."

"Aww. And here I was brainstorming names for our firstborn child."

He has to quiet down, thankfully, when the teacher appears at the front of the class,

practically beaming. She doesn't waste any time, wanting to get right to our projects, her enthusiasm clear. I have the feeling no one here is going to fail this class—which is probably why a rich, sullen boy like Cole took it instead of something a little harder. Somehow I doubt he has a passion for art. The only thing he seems interested in is teasing people and pulling the wings off butterflies.

So it baffles me why my heart flutters every time those boy eyes flick my way. He's watching my easel, waiting for me to reveal my art. If I didn't know better I'd say he was a fan, but clearly he's just hungry for something acerbic and insulting to say.

One by one, Rainbow—our teacher's accurate name—goes down the line and selects students to stand up, face the class, and present our art. My heart does a little flip as the student right before me is called, and I count down the seconds until it's my turn, barely able to hear anything going on around me."

"Brenna." Unlike the other teachers, Rainbow hasn't treated me any differently since discovering I'm Silas Wilder's twin sister, a fact that I appreciate more than anything. "Why don't you show the class your piece."

It's now or never. There's nothing Cole can say that will ruin this moment for me—I promise myself that if nothing else. Taking a deep breath, I stand up, turn my easel to face the rest of the class, and tear the thin piece of paper covering up my watercolor to reveal what's beneath to everyone.

"This piece is called Fireflies." I blush at how literal the name is, even though there's nothing else I could have possibly called it. "It's a memory that's dear to me, and I wanted to capture it somewhere it would last."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

My large watercolor canvas is covered in tones of grey and blue with a wash of gold and yellow light in the middle. The piece depicts two children in profile, facing the middle of the composition, their hands cupped between them and spilling light. Fireflies dance in the night and set their profiles on fire.

On the left—a little girl with dark wisps of hair lit by golden fireflies. She stares at the fireflies with rapt wonder on her face. On the right, a boy with a mischievous smile, looking not at the glowing bugs but at the girl.

My throat aches at the memory of Silas, when we were both young and at least a little innocent, before the yelling and throwing turned into hitting him, before things like dealing drugs and keeping secrets on his laptop ever occurred to my brother. At that age we looked so similar that only our haircut and clothing made it clear we were fraternal twins, but sometimes I would throw on his baseball jerseys and tie my hair up in a cap, so that people would think we were two little identical boys.

It didn't take long for that age to pass, and our halcyon days to end for good. There are no good photos of our late night summer hunts for lightning bugs in the tall grass, but I remember it so clearly that the painting felt more like the memory of something I observed instead of experienced.

Maybe it wasn't as perfect as the watercolors make it seem. There was yelling even then, and my brother and I fought sometimes, throwing mud and pushing each other down in the grass. We were little tyrants who made our mother swear she wouldn't have another kid. But we loved each other, and I couldn't imagine my life without him—then and now.

He deserved eternal life, even if only through my art.

"Beautiful," Rainbow declares, softly clasping her hands together. "If I have your permission, Brenna, I'd like to put it on display in Coleridge Center near the entrance for visiting parents to see."

"I—I'd love that," I tell her, shocked despite myself. "Thank you."

Glancing into Cole's blue eyes, I wait for him to say something, mouth some terrible words, or even just smirk in my direction. But he's not looking at me, and he doesn't even glance up after I've stared at him for what feels like a whole minute.

He's staring at my painting, something strange and sorrowful on his face, almost like regret.

I sit down and look away before I can start imagining even more fanciful things. Rainbow moves on to the next student, and soon enough class is over—and along with it, finals.

It's time to go home.

But all I can think about is coming back here again, and finishing what I started.

* * *

"There's something you need to know." Cole finds me after class, jogging to catch up with me on the path back to the dormitories. "The truth about that accident."

"Which accident?"

"The one you made public—because I gave you the report."

Coming to a sudden stop, I turn to face him, staring up into his hazel green eyes. The truth is, ever since the Blind Ball, I've been full of questions for him. The instant I realized that he was the anonymous person who dropped that accident report off at my door, I've wanted to know why, and I've almost asked him a dozen times, if not more.

I was afraid, though. Afraid that the truth would change how I see him—make me feel sympathy for him, maybe, or think we were on the same side. More than that, though, I was afraid that he'd make me feel like a fool even more than I already am. This whole time I thought I was facing off with him, he was playing both sides: his and mine.

I have to admit, I was also worried that if I probed too hard, took the opportunity to ask him too many questions, he would rescind his offer to help me go after Hass. I'm not sure I can get him on my own—not after what nearly happened to me. As much as I'm loathe to admit it, I need Cole's help more than any of the others, and until he gave me this opening, I wasn't sure I'd ever to be able to get any answers from him. This may be my one and only chance.

So I start in with the hard stuff. "Why did you remove the parts about the dead body from the report before you gave it to me?"

"I didn't," he says. "That's the version that I got from my source inside the department. I had no idea they doctored it."

"Really? You expect me to believe that?"

"You think I would cover up some poor girl's murder?" He advances on me until there are only a few inches between us, and I have to take a step back, tilting my chin up to look into his impossibly bright eyes. "I wouldn't do that, Brenna. What happened that day was, as far as I was concerned, a solid I did for a friend in trouble."

"Really? You drove drunk as a favor?" I snort, the sound unladylike. "Somehow I doubt that."

"I wasn't the one driving the car. Michael was. That's why his father went to so much effort to cover the whole thing up and have the police chief doctor the version of the report authorities had—he didn't want anyone to know. I still have no idea how you got the original."

"I have my own sources," I tell him lightly, not wanting to reveal too much of myself. The more mysterious I seem, the better. "None of this explains how you were found in the driver's seat."

"We switched places, obviously. The second there were police sirens."

"Why?"

Cole looks away, taking a step back and staring into the light blue winter sky. His breath fogs in the air, a Connecticut cold front turning him into something out of a winter catalog. Between his dark hair and the slight shadow on his jaw, which is already sprouting hints of stubble he doesn't always shave away, he looks like something girls dream of to keep them warm when the temperature drops.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

I don't know how to reconcile his impossibly attractive outside with the vindictive and petty core I know lies beneath. Out of all the Elites, Cole could really do something with himself, change the world with all his money and influence—his is the fortune that will be the largest, when he inherits it. Yet he chooses to play games and carry out petty grievances instead of seeing the world for the broken place it is and trying to put the world back together.

What tempts me most is the belief that I could change him, mold him to become a better man.

That way lies a trap only young women fall into, and once we're consumed by it—by the dreams of a young man who could be better, but won't—we never come back out the other side whole.

"We switched places," Cole says finally, "because Michael had a body of a girl in the trunk of the car, and he wanted me framed. At the time, he said it was because he was high as a kite and he didn't think I was that drunk, but honestly... I think he was using me. And I was just barely shitfaced enough to fall for it."

Staring up at him, I find myself torn between two parts of me: my heart that says everything about him is telling the truth, and the darkness that lies just behind my heart, which insists no one should ever believe anything he says until his dying days.

It doesn't matter which part of me is right.

In the end, I've chosen to make a deal with Cole Masterson, and the only way to see that deal through to the end is to let him think I believe him. Whether or not I do.

"Okay." Taking a deep breath, I look at the oak trees, which have given up their leaves so easily. Then I stare back up into his hazel eyes and make myself look like a girl without a heart of fire and a dagger buried in her back. "So that's the truth. I believe you."

Cole chuckles, the sound dark and empty. "You don't," he says lightly, lighter than he should, "but it doesn't matter. We're two snakes, you and I, and we're tangled together whether we want to be or not."

Before I can tell him to fuck off—or worse, have another terrible lapse in judgment and kiss him again—he spins on his heel and walks off, towards nothing in particular, his figure growing distant with every one of his long strides.

I hate that he takes a little piece of me with him when he goes.

* * *

Wayborne seems smaller than it was before. I know that's impossible; the town hasn't changed, it's just me that's changed. I've been at Coleridge long enough that my vision has adjusted.

But on the other hand, after the tornado destroyed so much of our street and other parts of town, things had to be rebuilt, and there are still holes where the refuge has been cleared away but nothing new has come in its places. Wayborne isn't exactly the kind of town that attracts developers with deep pockets eager to build shopping centers and condominiums. Whatever gets rebuilt anew will have the sweat and tears of our local residents in every beam, just like the house I grew up in bore the mark of my grandfather from the front door to the back.

Wally doesn't drive me down the street I grew up in.

Instead he drives me towards his house, where Mom is staying for a bit, since her new apartment building got mold. He keeps a light tone as he talks about it, but I have no doubt his family is under some strain.

"We can go to Aunt Cheryl's," I remind him. "She doesn't live that far away. And I'm sure she'll let us crash on her sofa."

"No way. Dad wants the Wilders back in Wayborne. Besides, we have more than a couch to crash on. Mom is setting up the pullout sofa in the basement just for you. And Christmas is better in a big, happy group."

It is—which is why I don't know what to feel about the fact that my dad hasn't even contacted us to tell us he's not coming home for Christmas. Or at least, if he called Mom, he kept it from her. There are questions that loom in our future, thoughts of divorce papers and alimony, me figuring out what I'm doing after high school, and if I'll get a job at the closest retail outlet or diner, since I'm unlikely to get a scholarship big enough to be able to go to college.

All things that are hard to think about now that Silas isn't in the picture. He was going to sweep me away to some big city, far from Mom and Dad, and we were going to leave Wayborne in the rearview mirror for good. Now I don't know what to think or feel—it seems impossible to consider leaving Mom after everything, and somehow I doubt I'll be able to make it on my own without my brother's genius to support me.

Maybe there's something on that laptop partition that could help with that—for all I know he put some computer program there, not evidence that got him killed. Lukas and I still haven't cracked it. The sooner we do the better—especially because, as the days roll on behind me, I feel further from my brother than ever.

This is my first Christmas without him.

Just like my most recent birthday was my seventeenth, alone.

Wally is right; it's for the best that Mom and I are staying with his family. At least this way we won't be completely alone. Their presence might just be enough to fill in the cracks and missing pieces of what use to be an entire family, darkness and all.

"Ready?" Wally asks as he parks the car, studying me. "You don't have to be holiday cheery if you don't want to, you know. We'll all understand if you're a little down, now more than ever before."

"I know how much your mom loves Christmas." I pat him on the shoulder. "I'll be fine. I can sing all the carols and drink plenty of eggnog."

"My mom puts alcohol in that."

"All the more reason to guzzle it down." Throwing him a smile that I almost feel inside me, I push open the passenger side door and slide out of his truck onto the ground. "Let's go be merry and bright."

"If you say so."

Truthfully, there's only one thing I want for Christmas: to finalize my revenge. The sooner January comes, the better.

Chapter 12

January

Second Semester, First Year

I made it. I'm back.

Even I couldn't have predicted that I'd pull it off. Hell, it barely feels like I did—without Cole's mysterious pull with the administration and Blake's shockingly genuine tutoring, I might not be walking up towards Rosalind Hall right now, about to return to my depressing room beneath the stairs and endure at least another few weeks worth of torture. But I'm back, and more ready than ever to see Ferdinand Von Hassell, rich piece of shit and rapist, go down for his very real crimes.

First, though, I have to put my stuff away. Taking out my key—the room under the stairs doesn't have an ID scanner—I unlock the deadbolt and open up the door.

A putrid stench hits my nostrils.

Despair fills me as I walk into the room and stare up at the source of the smell. A steady stream of what can only be sewage is leaking through the ceiling—the pipes must route through here somehow, and during the winter break one of them broke. A steady drip of sewer water has been falling down onto my mattress and has soaked every inch of it. It's spilling down onto the floor even, and if I take another step forward I'll be standing in it.

"Welcome back to Coleridge, I guess. This must be the school's way of telling me what it thinks of me."

* * *

Mrs. Reynolds stares at me over her desk, a frown on her face. I can tell what she's thinking: I'm a problem without an easy solution. She's probably trying to decide whether or not she can shove me in the basement and call it a day.

"Ms. Wilder. Your time at this school has been most... eventful. How long has it been?"

I squirm in my seat. "One semester, like all the other first years."

"So just a few months." Sighing, she pushes up her glasses, the plaque with her title of Residence Director gleaming at the front of her desk. "A suitable room will be found for you while the sewer line is fixed. Old buildings have issues. These things happen."

"Right," I agree aloud, though inwardly I suspect Georgia might have something to do with it. That might just be paranoia on my part, though. "I thought Rosalind Hall was full up, though."

"It is." She clicks around on her computer screen, not lifting her eyes towards me. "We may be able to find a place for you, though."

"Oh?"

"It's just not up to me." Her eyes lift from the computer and fix on the door behind me. In a voice pitched to carry, she calls out, "Come in."

I turn to the door, a question on my lips, and make eye contact with Holly. She looks good—her dark hair is cut close to her jawline, which accentuates the feminine point to her chin. Her eyes are bright, skin perfect as always, two points of color high on her cheeks. She looks like she just came in from the cold, and is invigorated by it instead of turning into a tight ball seeking warmth, like me.

An awkward feeling hangs in the air as we consider each other. Besides our texts before break, we haven't communicated in any way, other than passing in the halls at a distance. No doubt she was busy with finals—I know I was.

"Holly." I lick my suddenly dry lips. "Hey."

"Welcome back, Brenna. I hope the winter break treated you well."

Thinking of moments with Wally's family by the fire, getting to eat food at Jade's house on Christmas Eve, presents from Aunt Cheryl and a brief moment where I could pretend like everything was okay, I tell her, "It was good."

I leave out, of course, the nights I spent awake and shivering, not from cold but because I could feel his absence. Some days, missing Silas is like a scabbed-over wound, the pain buried beneath thick protection created by time and distance. Other days it's more like a phantom limb, screaming at me with pain, because my body knows that something is missing.

"Ms. Schneider, please take a seat." The Residence Director motions towards the chair next to me. "You said in your email to me that you would consider rooming with Brenna again. Is that still true?"

"Yes," she says, and I startle with shock at how certain she sounds, how easily she says it. "I think whatever differences we had, bygones are bygones, and this is a new semester."

"Ms. Wilder." It takes a great deal of effort to tear my eyes away from Holly's face and back towards Mrs. Reynolds. "Would you be amenable to rooming with Ms. Schneider once more? Even if only temporarily."

I feel like I've walked into the upside down. Holly's room is a corner room, one of the best in Rosalind Hall. I was lucky to get to live there in the first place, and I fucked it all up for no good damned reason. Am I amenable? I'd love nothing more than to be back in Holly's good graces.

I'm just not sure if that's what this is. After all, Holly is a nice girl. She could just be letting me live with her again because the alternative is me sleeping on a toilet. Or worse, maybe she's decided to cross over to Georgia's side. While it doesn't seem like her, anything is possible.

All I know is that if Holly might forgive me, I'll do anything I can to earn that forgiveness. I just hope that it's possible.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

"I'd love to room with Holly again—if she's okay with it. Temporarily or... otherwise."

"Good." Holly doesn't look over when I glance at her surreptitiously, wondering what she's thinking. "Brenna, if you could just sign this agreement, we'll get your ID card programmed to open the door to your old room, and a few volunteers will be by to help you move your stuff."

The agreement, which I skim curiously, basically states that I don't hold Coleridge liable for the sewer leak, or any resulting health issues related to it. How brutally rich of them to think that I could sue the school in the first place. I sign it, because I don't really have any other option, and I'm pretty sure I'm not going to get the Black Plague from briefly stepping into a dirty room. Trust Coleridge to have a form like this ready to go less than an hour after I found the leak in the first place.

"Alright." I pass the form back, still feeling a bit like I'm in a dream. "Is that it?"

"That's it. You're ready to go."

I follow Holly out the office door, a thousand questions and a million words gathering inside me, waiting to burst out of my mouth. It takes all my strength to stay quiet long enough to let her speak first.

In a low, severe voice she says, "You will not steal from me again."

"I won't." Meeting her green eyes straight on, I try to convey with my face just how much I mean it. "I swear it, Holly. Everything I did was so stupid and so, soshitty. I

won't do something like that again."

After studying me for a moment, she nods sharply. "This doesn't make us friends again."

"Of course," I say lightly, though it pains me not to beg her to let me back into her good graces. "Whatever you want, whatever pace you choose... it's all up to you. I won't push anything. I swear, Holly, you won't regret this."

She wrinkles her nose. "God, you sound so anxious. Calm down a little—it'll be okay. I wasn't gonna let you live in that sewer room. I'm not a vindictive person. One time my best friend in middle school cut all my hair off in my sleep."

"What did you do?" I ask, as she leads me towards my new-but-not room.

"I rolled with it. Turned the whole thing into a new hairstyle—an asymmetrical bob before they were even a thing. Can you believe people actually bought into it? A few girls even brought a photo of me to their hair dressers."

I can believe anyone would do anything just because Holly did it first. She's a natural trendsetter, the kind of girl who would make you want to buy a stupid tea based on an Instagram post, because she looks so flawless and laid-back that ofcourseyou'll look the same if you just drink the tea. What's worse is that Holly wouldn't shill something like that in the first place, because she's not the type to take advantage of her good looks or privilege, which takes all the bite out of being envious of her.

Her light is the kind that spills over onto other people and makes them glow in the most amazing ways.

One day, hopefully before I leave Coleridge, I want to stand in that light once more.

* * *

Two Days Later

"On a Wednesday?" I frown at Cole, uncertain if he's fucking with me. "You're really sure that Hass is going to buy girls on a Wednesday? Of all days?"

Cole shoves some of his lunch in his mouth and talks around it, as if he wasn't raised by rich parents who probably taught him how to use a salad fork when he was four years old. "Wednesday is when the private airport is closed for new flights, and they only close it when someone has bought it out for something special, so it's the only day he could be flying 'em in. Also, I had Tanner contact Hass's dealer, and he told Tanner that if he wanted any molly he better get it before tonight."

"Tonight it is." Even though I've been preparing for this for weeks, practically salivating at having my chance, suddenly my palms are sweaty and my stomach is doing flip flops now that it's finally here. "I can't believe it. I mean... we're really going to do it."

Tanner pipes in. "Mostly you're going to do it."

"What do you mean?" I look back and forth between him and Cole, then over at Lukas, who's frowning at Tanner, and Blake, who's basically ignoring all of us in favor of pouring over some book he probably got from the restricted access section of the library. "You guys are going with me tonight, right? I mean, it's off campus and I don't have a car. Or off campus privileges. Or a camera to film any of it with."

"We'll go with you," Lukas reassures me, though he darts a look over at Cole to confirm. "Right? I mean, why wouldn't we?"

"We're needed here, on campus. While Hass is out on his little drug mission, we've

got something closer to home to take care of. Something that's none of Brenna's business."

I stare at him. "You can't be serious. There's no way I can do this alone."

"You can have my car," Cole says casually. "And Lukas's camera. But the four of us have to take care of something. Besides, how hard can it be? He's doing the handoff at a private airport. Just park the car on the shoulder of the road, roll down the window, and aim a telephoto lens at him. I'm sure you'll get enough for a warrant of his place, and once the feds find the girls, that's all they'll need. Just be sure to post pictures and video on your little blog with the most salacious headline you can come up with—the guillotine-lovers and SEO will do the rest." He smirks. "You know how much our generation slathers at the thought of eating the rich and guilty. Give them what they want, and Hass will be viral by tomorrow before classes are even over."

He makes it all sound so easy—too easy. I haven't been off campus alone since the night of the kidnapping, though, and despite myself, I'm afraid of Hass. He has a temper—I've seen that firsthand with Georgia. If he catches me taking pictures of him, whether I'm in a sports car or not, I may not be able to get away before he does something to me.

And I don't think that a little knife will be enough to scare him off a second time.

I find myself looking at the one person here I trust to defend me: Lukas. He's frowning at Cole, and when he meets my eyes, I can tell he's thinking of stepping in and saying something.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

Before he can, another voice speaks up. "I'll go with her. You don't need me tonight, Cole, and besides, I could use a little excitement."

I stare at Blake, lips parted, wondering if I really heard what I think I just heard. There's no way that Blake Lee himself, son of Jake Garrison, asshole extraordinaire, the coldest statue around, actually just volunteered to show up and protect me.

But no—he didn't mention anything about protection. He just sounded bored, and more than anything, eager for the conversation to be over.

Still, if he's with me, Hass won't do anything to me. He doesn't want witnesses like Blake, who has the money to protect himself from whatever he's got up his sleeve. That much I'm certain of. Even if all he does is slouch in the passenger seat staring at rare books, having him there is the only insurance policy I need.

"Fine." Cole shrugs. "You're right, we don't need you. The three of us can get this done all by ourselves. Just make sure Wilder doesn't scratch my car—I just paid for a new paint job, and I don't want to have the racing stripes redone."

Now I find myself staring at Cole with an open mouth—this time in disgust, not shock. "You haveracing stripeson your car?"

"No, but at least now I know you're listening. Here." Reaching into his blazer pocket, he pulls out a keychain and slides his car keys over to me. "It's the Maserati in the back lot. Blake knows the one. Just wave at the gate guard and he'll let you through—I have off campus privileges anytime I want."

"Must be nice to be rich," I mutter as I take the keys and slip them into my backpack."

"Yeah." Grinning, Cole stretches, his arm muscles rippling as he pulls them exaggeratedly over his head. "It is nice to have money. Maybe one day, Wilder, you'll get a taste of it yourself. Once you do, I guarantee one thing: you won't ever want to go back."

Chapter 13

Cole's car has a manual transmission.

I don't know why this is such a shock to me. It's a European sports car—of course it's a stick shift. The thought of someone like Cole learning how to use a clutch and a transmission breaks my mind a little. He doesn't seem like the type with patience to shift gears.

"You do know how to use a gear shift, right?" Blake aims a droll, raised eyebrow at me. "Because there's no way I'm driving. I have notes to take for an essay due in two weeks, and unlike you I don't phone these things in at the last minute."

"I don't phone things in! And of course I know how to drive a stick. Wally taught me."

"Wally? Nevermind, don't tell me who that is—I'm sure it's just some boyfriend of yours back home who's missing his front teeth."

"You've really got to get new jokes."

"Fine: he's got a birthmark on his face the shape of a cowboy boot, and a twang in his voice you can hear from space. He's so bow-legged you could drive a semi between

his knees. The tip of his dick has a little stetson on it. When he—"

"He's gay, and not my boyfriend. Are you done?"

Blake levels a dry, expressionless look at me. "I suppose."

"Good. Because we've got shit to do, and an asshole's life to ruin. So I don't want to waste any time."

Putting my right foot on the brake, and my left foot on the clutch, I turn the engine on. It purrs to life at the push of a button—keyless startup. Wally's truck always took some coaxing to come to life, but not this car. It was born to carry rich boys places in the blink of an eye.

I wonder, idly, if this is the car Cole's parents got him after the DUI. He must have been very good friends with Michael Yates to actually take the fall for him. It seems impossible to believe—out of all the parts of his story, that's the one I doubt the most. He has friends, sure, but he manipulates them, leads them, cajoles them, and enjoys their company. Taking the fall for them? Seems impossible.

So the fact that all my instincts tell me to believe him galls me to my core. Cole Masterson has a golden tongue; he could convince the sun to rise in the west and set in the east if he wanted to, just with a few liquid words. Of course he got a brand new car even after wrecking one and getting arrested. His parents wouldn't have said no to their golden boy—the eldest, inheritor of it all.

Staring down at the gear shift, hand on the leather, I wonder why it feels warm. As if his hand was just here beneath mine. Like our skin is not quite touching.

Blake clears his throat, and I jerk back to the present moment. "I put the address in my phone's GPS, since I know your shitty phone probably doesn't even have apps."

I grit my teeth to keep from snapping back at him, because the truth is that the GPS on my phone is basically useless, especially out on the country roads we're about to drive on.

"Just tell me what turns to take." Moving my foot from the brake to the gas, I rev the engine a little, and enjoy the way it vibrates beneath me like a predator eager to jump to life. "I'll get us there before anything goes down."

* * *

The thing about a Maserati is, it's a conspicuous car. Cole didn't lie when he said there would be plenty of space around the Great Falls Municipal Airport to park the car so Hass doesn't know it was here, but the thing about the airport being closed to any traffic except this one plane is, the entire public lot is empty. I can't exactly park this flashy blue Italian sports car in the middle of it and call this whole thing a stakeout.

"There—that dirt road over on the right, opposite the airport." Blake points out his window, and I squint in the direction of his finger, barely able to see the break in the trees. "Drive the car that way. I'm sure no one will spot us under the canopy."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

As I pull up towards the little dirt road, though, I start to get antsy. "It's barely wider than the car."

"So?"

"Cole said not to scratch the paint."

"He also said it had racing stripes on it."

Still, I can't seem to put my foot back on the gas. It's absurd—a few months ago I would've given anything to have the chance to wreck Cole Masterson's car. All it would take is a tap on the gas and a turn of the wheel and I could have this thing in salvage condition like that.

But his parents would just get him a new one.

More importantly, my thinking has shifted in ways I'm uncomfortable examining.

"If you won't do it, I will," Blake says, "and I'm the world's shittiest driver, so this thing will be wrapped around a tree."

"Fine," I snap, temper running hot just in his presence. "I'll have to back into it if we want a good vantage point, though."

Expensive cars, thankfully, come with backup cameras. As I position the wheel and stare at the screen, biting my lower lip, I feel Blake watching me intensely. The whole ride out here he just stared at his book and took notes on his iPad without even

glancing my way except to tell me to turn the heat down—like he doesn't have fingers that work. Now he seems to only have eyes for me, and it's unnerving.

So I flick my eyes over to him and catch him staring. "What? Do I have something on my face?"

He looks away, suddenly stiff. "Just your face."

"Wow. How creative of you. Next you'll say you're rubber and I'm glue."

I tap on the gas to pull the car back a little, only to feel Blake's eyes on me again. This time, he's the one who breaks the silence.

"I was just thinking how unfair it is."

"What?" I ask, as I put the car in park.

"Girls like you shouldn't be so beautiful." I freeze, fingers curling over the steering wheel, feeling like a rabbit trapped in a tiny metal cage instead of a girl with an engine at her fingertips. Blake continues, voice nonchalant, "You don't have money to do any of it: get those old highlights fixed, find yourself a dermatologist that does fillers, have your clothing tailored, or even buy clothes worth wearing. I can tell you put no effort into your appearance. But you still look gorgeous. Half the girls at Coleridge would kill you just to use your blood as a vampire facial and find out if any of it rubs off."

"What?" I wrinkle my nose, blinking at him. "That was almost a compliment, until you got weird."

He cocks his head to the side, looking at me with a curious yet distant expression on his face. "I didn't mean it as a compliment. I just meant..." Then he pauses, suddenly

silent, his mouth going soft at the edge. "Huh. I guess it was a compliment. I don't know why I said it."

"Uh, okay." I don't know why my heart is racing. "Maybe we should just get the camera out, set it—"

"I do know why," Blake says suddenly, sounding like he just solved an impossible problem and has somehow surprised even himself with the answer. Turning to me, he says with something like awe in his voice, "Brenna, I think I'm falling in love with you."

* * *

The sun moves lower in the sky as the awkward silence in the car stretches twenty minutes long.

I can't believe Blake told me he's falling in love with me.

Even more, I can't believe how I responded.

"No you're not."

To which he just made an incredulous noise, pulled one of his books out, and started acting like he was studying it. It's been twenty minutes now, though, and it's obvious that he's not really reading the book. I've seen Blake study; he always takes copious notes, and turns the pages to an exact rhythm, like a robot. He's barely skimmed the pages he's been turning and hasn't scribbled anything down in his notebook.

I don't know why he said what he said.

It can't be true.

Can it?

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

No, of course it isn't true. It's impossible for Blake Lee to love anybody. He's a cold bastard who feels nothing. If he's telling the truth, he's mistaken about what he feels. Probably he just thought I was a little cute and mistook the feeling for love because he's never had a single affectionate emotion in his life.

Yes, that must be it. He's overreacting to a little tiny bit of attraction. Soon enough he'll realize he was wrong and remember that he loathes me completely. If anything, it makes sense that he'd mistaken his loathing for something like love—the dolt has probably never felt anything as intense as hatred before.

Reassured by my line of reasoning, I return to surveying the airport across the street. The camera the boys sent along with the car is heavy in my hands, a telephoto lens hanging off the end of it, capable of seeing impossibly far into the distance. Raising the screen up a bit, I roll down the window and aim the lens towards the airport hanger door as a figure moves in the distance. With the help of a 600mm lens—the kind of thing that only paparazzi use to take creepy photos of actors—I'm able to zoom in on the figure and see a few details.

It isn't Hass. I snap a few photos anyway, a simple one second hold on the shutter engaging the lens over a dozen times. This camera was made for someone who isn't me—a private detective maybe, or someone with the money to replace it if it's broken. No doubt thousands of dollars worth of equipment is in my hands, and I'm lucky to have it, because otherwise I'd have to use my camera phone and get close enough to wind up caught.

"You know," Blake says, startling me with the suddenness of his voice after so long spent not talking, "the normal response to a confession of feelings is some kind of

sentiment in return, positive or negative. At least a 'thank you' if things are awkward. Not a denial followed by complete silence."

I stare at him, open-mouthed. "I thought we weren't going to talk about this."

"Yeah, well, I'm talking about it." He narrows his eyes at me, and I wonder how he's convinced himself that he has feelings for me, given the irritation that flashes across his movie-ready face. "You're an odd girl, you know that, right?"

"Which is exactly why you're wrong about how you feel." I sneak a quick glance at the camera's screen, swinging it out and towards me, but the man in the hanger is just standing there, lighting a cigarette. No crimes afoot—yet. "I mean, we kissed once. We've never even spent any significant time together."

"Except all those lunches. Calculus classes. One-on-one tutoring."

"Yeah, well, that's not... not the same."

"As?"

"Dating," I shoot back. "Even Tanner and I went on a date, even if it was just part of your little games that you played with me."

"Are you saying that you have feelings for Tanner?" There's a cold, aggressive tone in his voice, one that makes me glad the senator's son isn't here right now. Blake sounds like he would stab him if given enough reason—or any reason at all. "I should have known. Every girl falls for that bonehead. Did you know he once drank his own piss on a dare?"

"I do not have feelings for Tanner, and gross." I have to shake my head to get the image Blake just left there out of it. "Can we please just focus on what we're here to

do? Because I'm pretty sure that's Hass's plane landing, sex slaves and all."

"Fine, act all business if that's what you want. But this isn't over."

It sounds like a threat more than anything. Lucky me—I've got a suitor with issues. As Blake returns to not-reading his book, I observe him in the rearview mirror, wondering why it is that he's suddenly attached himself to me. Maybe it's guilt. He clearly wants something back from me in exchange for his confession, and I don't know what to say or do about that.

Observing the strong lines of his jaw, the pout of his lips, how his sleek black hair falls into his face in pieces, which he sweeps back with an impatient rake of his fingers every few minutes or so, I'm suddenly struck by how much more alive he looks when he doesn't know anyone is watching. All the statue has drained out of him as he skims the book in his hands, and without the stiffness there, what's left behind is just a boy.

A handsome, complicated, often cold boy who claims he's falling in love with me.

Blake's eyes flick up to meet mine in the rearview mirror, and a butterfly flutters in my stomach. He still has his real, vulnerable face on, and for a moment he looks like the kind of boy whose arms I could fall asleep between, dreaming of safety and security, knowing he'll still be holding me when I wake up.

The moment passes, and the cold statue of Blake Lee returns. Clearing his throat, he observes, "The plane is landing. You should probably take some photographs."

Startling back into action, I aim the telephoto lens at the airport runway as a small passenger plane drops out of the sky. It puts down its landing gear and skids down the runway, heading towards us with impossible speed, then slowing down bit by bit.

Pulling the camera up, I click photos, unsure if this part will matter to the investigation, but certain enough that the camera has space on its card for anything I want to shoot.

"You know, there's a good chance even this won't take Hass down," Blake says, in a distant yet bitter tone of voice. "Do you know how powerful his family is? They own half the political influence in America."

Gritting my teeth, I point out, "You're not helping. So hush."

He grumbles, but falls silent as I roll the window down further. The door on the side of the little plane is opening, and someone is getting out. I can't get a good angle from just outside the car, so I hang the camera outside the open window, one hand supporting underneath it, the other depressing the trigger.

The door opens, and a large man walks through, tugging a skinny, pale blonde girl behind him.

I depress the shutter, adrenaline coursing through me, tasting victory.

But I put too much enthusiasm into it.

With a sound like my heart breaking in two, the camera falls to the ground, and the lens shatters—ruining all my hopes and dreams in an instant.

Chapter 14

Page 34

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

Staring at the broken camera lens, I take a deep, shaky breath. There has to be some way out of this—some alternative. Maybe there were other lenses in the camera bag. Or maybe I can just twist it back together...

"Well, fuck." Blake's voice is mild, despite the deep shit we're in. "You sure do know how to ruin things."

"Shut up." Opening the driver side door, I check to make sure we haven't been spotted and kneel by the shattered camera and lens. "There has to be some way to fix this. The battery pack fell out of the camera body, but it's not actually broken... it still turns on... shit."

The camera screen flickers to life and blinks out again, torn and broken. I try pulling the photos up, but a big red sign flashes across the screen: **SYSTEM ERROR**. Turning off and back on again does nothing.

"I can't believe this." I stare at the camera, certain I must be cursed. "Everything I touch is ruined. Even this. It was my one chance, and..."

Distantly, I hear the sound of the car door slamming. That must be Blake, coming around the rear of the car to tell me I'm a fuck up. He'll probably make fun of me for thinking I could ever pull this off, laugh in my face for believing he was actually falling in love with me, and tell me to get my own ride home, because he's going to drive the Maserati back and leave me here to think about what I've done.

"What's wrong?"

I look up at him as he comes to a stop in front of the broken camera and my shattered hopes and dreams. "I dropped it. I fucked it up. Everything I touch is just... fucked up the instant I touch it."

"It's just one camera, Brenna. I'm sure we can figure out some other way to catch Hass." Kneeling beside me, Blake picks up the lens, which is bent at the end, and fiddles with it for a moment. "The mount just needs to be replaced. Until then, I bet a pair of pliers would hold it together, and I know Cole keeps a toolbox in his trunk. It can be fixed."

"But the camera is ruined."

"Let me see it."

As I hand the body of the camera over our hands brush together, and a spark of electricity goes off inside me. It's unfair that a cold, distant statue of a boy should be so impossibly warm, should give me so much comfort with a simple gesture or a few reassuring words. Watching him mess with the camera, testing different things, I wonder why he's doing this—actually helping me.

It almost makes me think he might really...

"There." Holding the camera up, Blake shows me the clear, bright screen, absent of any glitches or the red flashing warning sign. "I just had to blow some dirt off the sensor, take the battery pack out, and restart it. Now it's like new... mostly. That smudge of dirt won't go away, but you can still photograph crimes with it. Just don't try to win any photography contests."

"The lens, though." I take a deep breath in, trying not to let the tears I'm holding inside fall from the corners of my eyes and spill down my cheeks. The last thing I need is to look weaker than I am in front of Blake Lee. "How will we attach the

lens?"

"Here—hold this."

He hands me the camera body, grabs the lens, and strides around to the back of the car, where a small, streamlined trunk barely takes up any room. As he opens the latch and grabs a toolbox inside, I look back towards the end of the runway, where three girls have been dragged off the plane and down its stairs. They're standing in the cold, shivering in fishnets and flimsy clothing, all of them thin, pale, and impossibly made up.

At first I wonder why there are three of them, until I realize that of course Hass would want options. To him these aren't three human lives; they're a menu of flesh, and he gets to pick which one he wants. Like ordering a sushi roll or putting your favorite color of tennis shoes in your cart online.

I wonder what will happen to the two girls he doesn't pick. Maybe they'll be lucky and get to go home, but somehow I doubt that. More likely they have other billionaires to service in exchange for money—teenage billionaires, or ones in their sixties, it won't matter either way to the men brokering them off for money. No doubt they came here believing they would get the American dream, or some semblance of it, not realizing they'd simply be sold to the highest bidder and kept in fear for the rest of their lives.

An engine rumbles to life around the curve of the road, and moments later the nose of a silver sports car turns down the asphalt. I watch it go by and swing towards the tiny airport: Ferdinand Von Hassell, here to inspect his goods. It's now or never—if Blake hasn't fixed the telephoto lens, then we have to figure out a backup plan, fast. Otherwise we'll lose our chance to take Hass down—if that's even possible. Blake is starting to make me wonder if these rich assholes will get to do what they want, no matter how the rest of us try to take them down for their numerous sins.

I watch as the silver sports car parks, and know we don't have much time. "Blake, tell me that telephoto lens will go back on the camera."

"I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but it looks like the mount is permanently fucked." Pacing around to my side of the car, he holds up a much smaller, less useful lens. "The good news is, I found the kit lens in the camera bag. So you can at least use the camera."

"How far will the kit lens be able to get us?"

He shrugs, looking annoyed. "You're the artist. You tell me."

"I'm not an—you know what, whatever. Let's just do this."

Grabbing the lens from his hand, I do my best not to touch my fingertips to his skin, and find myself blushing anyway. Touching him, not touching him—all of it is just me trying to navigate myself around the undeniable attraction I feel to him and the rest of the Elites. No matter what I do, no matter how I act, I'll feel this way as long as they're around to make me feel it. So I'll be better off the sooner I leave Coleridge, since the only thing that waits for me here is temptation, secrecy, and lies.

Twisting the lens onto the body of the camera, I flick on the screen and check to see how far into the airport it can zoom. My heart plummets as I twist the lens as far as it can go only to get no details at all, not even more than a slim slash of pixels where each of the girls stands. The only way to get this finished and done with is to cross the street and hide out somewhere close enough to see what's going on—which means putting myself at far more risk than I originally bargained for.

"What's wrong? Is it not working?" Blake hovers unusually close to me, acting invested in this for the first time since the day started. "You can always try blowing dust out of the sensor."

"It works," I tell him, "but I'll have to get closer if we want anything good enough to go on the blog."

"What—can't you just put blurry, pixellated photos on there and tell everyone it was Hass? You're just an anonymous blogger, after all. It's not like you're a journalist. Or this is the aughts. No one will give a shit if it's just speculation."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:40 am

"I will. And so will the cops. Not to mention the judge we need to sign a warrant so the police can find all the evidence they need at Hass's family home. If we're gonna do this, we have to do it right—even if that means getting closer to the action."

Blake stares at me, something slightly anxious in his eyes. "But they almost killed you the last time you dug into them."

I frown at him, yet again puzzled and irritated by all the vagueness. Who is 'them?'"

He closes his mouth. "Nevermind. You don't need to know."

"Of course." I grit my teeth together, frustration building inside me. "I'd give anything to know the truth, but you'll never tell me. Some kind of love that is."

Yanking the camera strap around my shoulder, I head towards the road, intent on finding a place to hide near the airport hanger and getting the proof I need to take down Hass—and get the hell out of here, for good. I hear footsteps in the leaves behind me, and fume at the fact that Blake is following me.

Whirling around, I yell at him, "Go back! I don't need your help."

"I thought you wanted to be protected." He advances on me instead of backing away, brown eyes intent on my face, his breath fogging in the cold winter air as the sun sets. "You said that you wanted one of us here just in case something happened. Well, I'm here. And I'm not going to let you out of my sight."

"I should've just gone alone." For some reason I'm breathing heavily, even though I

haven't done anything at all. My heart is racing, my blood pressure rising, every nerve on end—all because he's standing close to me, moving closer by the second, his mouth saying things I don't understand. "Don't follow me. We'll be more conspicuous together."

Blake frowns, narrowing his eyes at me. "Is this because I said I'm falling in love with you? Do you feel awkward now? Because that's a stupid reason to put your life at risk."

"No, it's—that's not it."

"I can take it back," he says, voice resentful and churlish, sounding nothing like a young man in love. "I don't like you at all. I'm not falling in love with you."

I sigh, shaking my head at him. "You're not very convincing, which sucks because until now, I thought you were definitely wrong about how you felt. But the reason why I don't want you with me has nothing to do with...this." I motion back and forth between us, my fluttering fingers encapsulating everything this, no words for what it could be or isn't. "Someone needs to be lookout in case I'm caught, and if you're next to me you'll just be caught too. More importantly, there's no reason for two of us to go when only one person is needed to operate the camera. I can be quiet, I can go in and out—but not with you breathing down my neck."

"I'm very quiet," he says with a frown. "I get your point, but..."

"But what?"

"I don't like sending you off into danger."

This apparent crush he has on me, fleeting as it will hopefully turn out to be, is going to be a problem. "I need you to let me do this. Whether it's dangerous or not, it's what

has to happen."

His nostrils flare and his jaw tightens in frustration. "Fine. But only if you let me do this."

"Let you do—what!?"

Before I can step back or slap him away, he reaches out, puts his hand on my waist, and draws me close. "A kiss for good luck."

"Luck?"

"And to figure out if what I'm feeling is real." His eyes dance with an uncharacteristic mischief, and I feel like I'm seeing things. "You kissed me last time. This time, I'll kiss you."

Leaning down, he meets my lips in a scorching kiss that shocks and delights me.

It's the storm after the calm.

Energy meeting and clashing in the heavens.

Two statues coming to life.

We kiss with a passion I didn't know I had before now. My hands go limp, the camera strap hanging from my shoulder as I lean towards him and open my mouth to his scorching tongue and lips.

I never knew that so much passion was hiding behind his still, serious face. The way he kisses me is completely different from every interaction we've ever had before. It's passionate, all-consuming, and, most shocking of all, actually sweet.

When he steps back he takes with him my belief that he's nothing but a still statue, along with the breath in my lungs and my ability to stand up straight. I'm practically swaying on my feet—and what's worse, I have to get across the street in just a few seconds, because Hass is getting out of his car and heading towards the plane and its passengers.

"I have to go." Looking up into Blake's brown eyes, I'm suddenly struck by the realization that his hands on my waist are the only thing holding me up and keeping me steady. "You weren't kidding, were you? It wasn't a prank."

Page 36

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

"When I said I'm falling in love with you? No." He shakes his head, then wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and my knees briefly tremble. "I was deadly serious. And so is what you need to do, so if you're in any danger, I'm going to call the authorities. No matter what Cole says about dragging the cops into this. So stay safe."

"That's the plan," I tell him lightly, but the truth is, so far today has gone nowhere near to plan.

So let's hope this last, final bit is different than the rest has been.

I need a win.

Chapter 15

I have to hike across the street to get to the airport hanger parking lot. Hass and his thugs are around the corner to the back, so I head towards the front, crossing my fingers that no one will be on lookout.

Everything about this is dangerous.

As I find some crates in the airport hanger to hide behind, I find myself wondering why I didn't make Blake do this instead. But the truth is I wouldn't trust him to pull it off the way I will. This is personal. It was my brother who was killed because of whatever Hass is involved in. Not to mention he's too tall to fit into the spot between crates I plan on wedging myself into to get a good view of Hass's criminal activities.

There's a good twenty feet between my current hiding spot and the one I need to get

into to film Hass. I can see his tall, angular form get out of his car and pace back and forth, cell phone to his ear. The passenger side door opens a bit, and a woman's leg reaches out, resting for a moment. I'd recognize those custom designer shoes anywhere.

Georgia Johnson herself is here with her shitty not-quite-ex boyfriend.

My mind races. I wonder if she knows what he's here for—if she's involved too, or if he's kept her in the dark. I'd believe a lot of things of Georgia, but not that she supports human trafficking.

Hass turns his back to me as he raises his voice on the phone, so I take this chance, the only one I might get. It feels like my footsteps, quiet as they are, ring out through the empty airport hanger, but Hass doesn't turn as I run in a crouch towards the sliver of a break between two crates near the hanger door. Sliding into my spot, I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing pulse.

If I'm caught right here, right now, no excuse I come up with will fly. They'll know what I'm up to, and if Blake doesn't pull me out in time, I could wind up just as dead as my brother.

It's hard to keep my hands from shaking as I flip the camera on. Hard not to think that Hass, who is maybe fifteen feet away from me at the most, will hear even the quietest of noise from the shutter as I experimentally take a few photos of him.

This close, I can hear his side of the phone conversation, and see Georgia's impatient face as she waits in the car for him.

"No, the pickup was supposed to take ten minutes."

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Well, bring it to me later on then." A pause. Hass paces away.

I wonder why it is that he hasn't gone to the other side of the lot, past the plane, to see the women—from where he is they're not even visible, no doubt standing outside in the cold freezing to death. I'll have to move as he does in order to get close enough to photograph them. There's a spot I can get to, right outside the doors behind a parked baggage car, but I'll have to wait until Hass has walked past to run out and crouch behind it.

Georgia's designer shoe taps out an impatient rhythm on the asphalt as she waits for Hass. The evening light is draining from the air as the sun sets; soon it'll be even colder, the half-dressed girls shivering in their skimpy clothes. I can't seem to stop darting glances at Georgia, wondering how it is that she's here, with him, doing this. It's hard to decide which thought is worse: that she knows, or that she doesn't know.

"Hass!" Stretching up and out of the car, Georgia aims a frustrated pout in his direction, stopping him in the middle of his phone call. "How much longer is this little detour going to take? Our reservation is in fifteen minutes, and you said we'd be celebrating our three month anniversary."

I take a few photos of her, more to get used to focusing the lens than anything. One in the middle, as she takes a step forward, strikes me. Playing them back on the screen, I zoom in on her leg and suck in a breath as I spot bruises in a familiar formation, spaced apart like a handprint.

No doubt she'd say, if she heard my worry for her, that she can handle him. That it's none of my business. Even, that she'd get me back for getting involved if I try to poke my nose in. After all, she didn't like it very much when I waved my knife around in response to him pushing her against a wall and groping her.

Having sympathy for Georgia Johnson is like having sympathy for the devil himself. But there it is anyway, a hot knife of worry in my stomach. Even after everything she's done to me, I wouldn't wish this on her—because she's not my worst enemy when he's standing right there next to her.

Into the phone, Hass, says, "Just give me a minute." Then he covers the mouthpiece with his hand—apparently he's too rich of a dumbass to know the mute button exists—and stalks towards Georgia, advancing on her until she shrinks back against the hood of his sports car. "I'm in the middle of some very important business. So your fucking reservation can fucking wait, you addle-brained dumbass. Some of us do more with our inherited wealth than shop online all day and stuff our faces with fattening food."

I wince at the way he towers over her, how he reaches up to tug on a lock of her red hair, his movements decidedly non-playful. There's a threat written in every tense line of his body, but I find that I can't lift the camera to take a single photograph, because my arms are shaking and he's standing so close that I'm afraid I'll be Georgia next if he hears me.

Georgia protests in a low, shaky voice. "I do not eat fattening food."

I have to roll my eyes. Of course she would object to that part, which matters the least out of all of it. She should be shoving him away, telling him not to insult her. If it were me or another one of the girls she would. But shockingly, her take-no-prisoners attitude seems to disappear when Hass is around.

"Get back in the car, Georgia." Hass sneers at her and opens the passenger door, shoving her forward. "Mind your business and stay in there."

"Ow!" Lifting her foot, she rubs at an ankle that must've twisted as he shoved her. "What is wrong with you? Just tell me what you're doing. It's our anniversary, Hass."

Nothing can be more important than that."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

"Nothing?" His voice goes low and still, and I feel my body respond to the implicit threat in it, my heart racing and my adrenaline pumping. "You stupid bitch. This is more important than anything you'll ever do with your pathetic life."

Grabbing her wrist, he yanks her and spins her so hard that she cries out. I go still and cold as he shoves her back, her stumbling steps bringing her closer and closer to my hiding spot by the second.

As he advances on her, he lectures her in a cold and condescending voice. "I brought you along because you wouldn't stop whining, but make no mistake, Georgia, I don't need you here." With a suddenness that shocks me, he raises his arm and backhands her across the face so hard even my teeth rattle. Then he grabs her elbow and yanks her close to him, his face inches away from her reddening cheek as he says, "If you don't behave yourself, I'll leave you behind in this airplane hanger overnight. Maybe a little exposure will give you the sense to leave well enough alone."

He pushes her, and as she falls down to the concrete ground her arms flail wildly, knocking aside one of the empty boxes protecting my left side from being seen. Eyes widening, I crouch down lower, heart racing wildly.

Georgia says, "Please don't leave me." Some part of me breaks for her, and I wonder if this is what it feels like to forgive a girl like me, a broken girl who does terrible things because she's hurting inside. "I promise I'll be good."

Towering over her, Hass looks down at Georgia like she's prey. He's so close that all he'll have to do is swing his head in my direction and I'll be spotted. I pray, for Georgia's sake and my own, that he's done letting out his rage on her.

"Make sure you keep that promise," he says, an almost gentle croon in his voice, "and I'll reward you. Now hush so I can finish this call. Wipe yourself off and wait in the car for me."

Turning on his heel, he paces out the hanger door and puts the cell phone back to his ear. I breathe out a sigh of relief that he didn't spot me, barely able to believe my own good luck.

Then Georgia stands up, sniffing, and reaches out to brace herself on one of the crates next to me. I startle, looking up, and meet her eyes.

For a long moment we stare at each other.

I can see her figure out that I saw what he did to her.

She looks at my face. At the camera. Back to my face again. I lick my lips, darting my eyes to Hass, wondering if I can say something to keep her quiet before she shouts out to him. Once he knows I'm here, I'm doomed.

Instead of saying something, though, Georgia straightens her little black dress, combs her hair back over her shoulder, and turns away from me. I watch her walk to the car. She only glances over her shoulder, once, from my hiding place to Hass, then climbs inside the car, silent as the grave.

It takes me a while to figure out that she's not going to tell him she saw me. She's going to keep my secret. And, I imagine, she expects me to keep hers too—or there'll be consequences. The thought of keeping what Hass did to myself makes my stomach churn, but as long as he gets arrested for what he's about to do on the other side of the plane, at least Georgia will be safe from him. Even if she doesn't know she needs protection, I plan on giving it to her.

Girls stick together.

Even when we loathe each other.

I just hope that I'm able to get a good angle on what's about to go down, one that will show quite clearly the criminals Hass is working with—and the terrible thing he's about to do. Switching my attention back to him, I watch as he finishes up his phone call and slips his cell back into his pocket. My eyes dart to the baggage cart I'll have to hide behind to get photos of him—getting there will mean crossing an open area with nothing to keep me from being spotted if he looks over his shoulder.

Raking his fingers through his golden blond hair, Hass paces towards the aircraft parked some distance from him. This is it—he's going towards the girls. It's now or never. Taking a deep breath, I wait until he's crossed in front of the baggage cart, then pace around the side of the crates and fast walk in a crouch.

As the wind whips around my hair and the sun sets in the distance, I feel like any moment this will all come crashing down around me. He'll turn and see me. Georgia will open up the car door and tauntingly announce my presence in an ultimate betrayal of what little faith I have in her. Blake will decide to save his own skin instead of remaining lookout for me.

I'm halfway to the baggage cart when I make a mistake.

Glancing over my shoulder, I look towards the parked sports car where Georgia is. She's not looking at me, though—she's staring into the passenger side mirror, delicately sponging a bruise forming on her cheek, one the shape and size of Hass's broad hand.

It's what I see past the car, out on the road, that makes me pause for a long moment, one in which anything could happen.

From a distance, the figure is nearly unrecognizable, unless, like me, you've been staring at him for months, hatred and lust alike churning inside you. Black hair, a naturally tan complexion paled by winter months spent studying, tall, broad shoulders with an impossibly expensive down-filled jacket draping them—Blake Lee is standing right in front of the trees, out in the open, abandoning his spot inside the car and the safety within.

Because from where he is, he can see me.

Can protect me if something goes wrong.

I can't see his eyes from here, but I can feel them on me. Watchful. Quiet. Ready to swoop in at any moment. Like a lighthouse on the shore or a distant sign pointing towards safety, he's there, and he's not going anywhere.

Until now, I didn't believe.

But it's really true.

Blake Lee is falling in love with me.

Chapter 16

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

I swallow, feeling like a fish out of water, frozen on the asphalt. Then I hear Hass's voice and startle out of my stupid, selfish thoughts, remembering all at once where I am. Rushing in a crouch towards the baggage cart, I slid into a space behind it and rest the camera lens on one of the shelves, pointing it right towards the girls and the thugs keeping watch over them.

Except it's less like keeping watch and more like keeping them trapped there, with nowhere to run and no one to witness what's going on—just me and my camera.

From here, unlike across the street, I can zoom in well enough to take photos of the girls and the thugs. I quickly focus on each of their faces and snap as many as I can, hoping maybe once we turn this all over to the police they'll be able to identify who the girls are and help them out—assuming, of course, enough of the cops aren't paid off by Hass's family to look the other way. The blog will help with that; just like with the governor's scandal, it's hard to get officials to stop investigating you when the public is calling for blood and truth.

I'll make sure the world knows who these girls are and cares enough about them to try to save them, even if they're the only ones willing to do anything.

This kind of active investigative work, more than anything I did with the Legacies blog last semester, is invigorating. It makes me feel like I'm really doing something as I zoom out to capture all the players on camera and hit the record button to get some video.

Maybe after graduation I can find a way to keep doing this sort of work. Someone has to keep the rich, privileged monsters of the world in check—whether they're my age

or adults. If Silas could see me now, he'd be proud. I'm making sure his death wasn't for nothing.

Despite the wind, I manage to pick up some of the conversation going on between Hass and the men, and it chills me to the bone.

"This one has been trained." The taller man, with dark hair, motions towards the ice blonde girl in the middle, who has vacant eyes and long sheer sleeves that barely cover up her reason for needing them. "She is very docile, easy to manipulate."

"Too old," Hass says dismissively, though to my eyes the girl doesn't look much older than eighteen or nineteen. "I want a fresh one I can break in on my own." He paces down towards the girl on the right, a black-haired girl with dark brown skin who flinches even as she raises her chin at him defiantly. "This one has spirit. Does she speak English?"

"No," says the second, shorter man, in an Eastern European accent. "That is part of the appeal, though. You can talk freely about her without worry. And she can be trained."

"Huh." Hass considers the girl, and I clench my fist, wishing I could castrate him with my mind. She doesn't look much older than sixteen, and has the lithe body of a dancer—no doubt what she thought she'd get to do when she was trafficked. Imagining him breaking her like he's been trying to break Georgia makes my stomach churn.

But he dismisses the girl with a wave of his hand. "Too much work. This one I like, though." Stalking towards the third girl on the other end of the line, who cowers back from him, he surveys her sharp cheekbones, dark hair, and ice-pale skin. "Eastern European?"

"Yes. She was born in Latvia, procured in Poland. Her English is fluent—though she stutters. A nervous habit."

The way this turns up the corners of Hass's mouth is enough to make me grind my teeth nearly to nubs. He inhales deeply as the girls cringes away from him, acting almost as if he can smell her fear—and for all I know the psychopath can. I watch him nod sharply, then pull out his phone and ask, "How much?"

One of the men leans forward to rattle off a number, and I don't catch this part of the conversation. But it's clear things are about to wind down—which means that Hass will return to his car, while the girl, apparently, will be driven to his family's empty apartment to await his presence and find out what nightmare her life has just become. Before he walks past this baggage cart and sees me, I have to get back to the airplane hanger, footage intact, or her nightmare will never end.

Ending the recording, I snap the camera screen back on the body and tuck it into my jacket. Then I glance over my shoulder to judge the distance from here to my hiding space—it's so much further than it looked on the way over. Suddenly it feels like the sky itself has widened, and everyone is staring in this direction, just waiting for me to dart out and get caught.

Something unlikely happens: my eyes are drawn to Blake's figure standing in the distance, and I somehow gain confidence from knowing he's there. Even if the worst happens, he'll make sure that they don't hurt me, or worse, kill me—of that I somehow feel sure, despite everything. Blake Lee isn't the type to stand watch over a girl for no reason.

Taking a deep breath, I rise into a crouch and walk as fast as I can, nearly running despite my crouch, towards the airport hanger door. I can feel Georgia's eyes as I pass by the sports car, but shockingly she does nothing, says nothing, as I rush behind its hood and back into the darkness of the hanger. My spot with the crates and boxes is

maybe twenty feet away at the most, and just in time, too, because I can hear Hass's footsteps in the distance as he walks in my direction.

Overeager to get back to safety and be done with this thing, I hang a sharp left and run a few steps—only to trip and fall on the concrete floor. My breath leaves my body as I fall down, rolling towards my right side, and the camera spills out of my jack. It slides across the smooth concrete, just far enough for a sliver of setting sun to land on it.

Hass is moments away from walking close enough to see the camera—and then me. I can't save it, and the evidence, without being discovered. Which means it's as good as lost, all because of one clumsy moment when I couldn't keep my feet under me.

Those girls deserve better than a screwup like me trying, and failing, to save them. All I had to do was not fuck this up and I couldn't even manage that. The only thing left is to run and hide, on the off chance that Hass won't spot me the instant he sees the camera.

Before I can make my way towards the hiding place, though, something extraordinary happens.

Georgia gets out of the car, swings the door open wide, and calls out to Hass. "Ready to go, babe?"

"That I am," he says, suddenly in a buoyant mood, the slime ball. "I hope you're ready for seven courses, because I'm treating you special tonight."

How quickly he changes from the shitheel who shoved her to a smirking, charismatic rich boy treating his girlfriend out to dinner. It's like there are two sides of him, completely separate, and this must be the side that makes Georgia primp and preen.

Her car door, at least, hides me and the camera from view. Before anyone can see, I reach out to snatch the evidence up and slide into the hiding place between the crates, feeling like I finally got a tiny bit of luck.

As I watch Hass and Georgia, though, I realize it wasn't luck at all.

He strolls over to the driver side of the door, opens it up, and slides in. As he's turning on the radio and adjusting it, she looks over her shoulder—right to the spot where I just was, along with my camera.

The expression on her face when she sees that I'm gone is unmistakably relief. Her eyes briefly flick to my hiding place, and she purses her lips, yet again saying nothing. Making me wonder if I ever really knew the mean girl who stood up in front of everyone and exposed me for a fraud. Maybe I've never really known anyone at all—including, especially, myself.

Shaking her hair out, she slides into the passenger side of Hass's expensive car, closes the door, and doesn't look back once as he peels out of the parking lot impossibly fast and sends his expensive car down the road. On the other side of the private jet, a black SUV takes another passenger for another ride—this time, without a fancy seven course meal on the end of it. Just a nightmare that I hope I'll be able to stop in time.

* * *

"Took you long enough." Blake gives me a scorching once over, his eyes narrowed, as I walk towards him. "What were you doing, picking boogers out of your nose? Nevermind, I don't want to know—as long as you got what we came here for."

He sounds just as irritated and hostile as ever, but underneath it is something new, or at least something I've never paid attention to before. It turns out that while he was getting angry and resentful towards me, he was also feeling something else: worry about my safety. And it's that worry more than anything that makes him give me another once over with his eyes, which are narrowed in anxiety as much as anything else.

"I'm fine," I tell him. "Not a scratch on me."

"I didn't ask if you were okay."

"Didn't you?" I pitch my voice up into a singsong, teasing tone, taking another step towards him until we're close enough that the fog of our breath on the air mingles together. "You've been standing out here this whole time. Waiting for me. Watching to make sure I get back in one piece."

"Because if you don't, we won't..." His eyes flick down to my mouth, then back to my eyes again, and he swallows. There's something crazed in the back of his gaze, feral and impossible to deny. "I don't care what happens to you."

"Sure." I've never been more confident that a boy is lying to me than I am right here,

right now, standing toe to toe with him. "And I don't want you to kiss me right now."

His eyes flick behind me, then back to my face, then to the air above my head. In a strangled voice he says, "You don't?"

Instead of telling him it's a lie, I close the distance between us until our mouths are a breath away. Eyes still open, I look up into his deep brown gaze, which is conflicted in every way imaginable.

Quietly, he murmurs, "What about the others?"

"What about them?"

"What if..."

"Are they here right now?" I ask, my mouth nearly brushing his. "Last time I checked it's just you and me."

"Oh, fuck."

Grabbing the back of my neck with one hand and my waist with the other, he crushes me against him all at once, every drop of his lust pouring out of him as he bends my body against his and seals our mouths together. The kiss is scorching from head to toe, every inch of us touching. I can feel his arousal grow as he deepens the kiss, tongue and lips hungry, desperately getting as close to me as he can.

My body responds to him, my thighs parting to let his knee press between them, heat flaring in my abdomen. I feel reckless and wild as I realize that my body, and mine alone, is turning the statue that is Blake Lee into a living creature of flesh and blood with roaming fingers and a hungry mouth.

He's electric, alive, pouring his lust and hunger into me. His mouth is a greedy thing. I curl my fingers around his neck and press my hips to his. My nipples brush against my bra as he grabs me and pulls me close. I can feel his fingers dip beneath my jacket and flirt against the warmth of my skin at the edge of my shirt, cold rushing in and prickling goosebumps rising everywhere he touches.

I moan into his mouth.

His erection bumps, clumsily, against my hip.

Then the camera lens digs into my rib cage, and I remember all at once why we're here together. Awareness floods me, along with regret and shame, even though I know I would do it again. Kissing Blake Lee is a mistake I'd make a thousand times—especially because, as I pull back from him, he pants wildly, trying to bring us close again. There's no rush of power quite like the rush I get from seeing the raw desperation on his face.

He'd take me anywhere, do anything, just for more of my touch. Watching him shudder and struggle to pull himself together, running a hand through his hair and wincing as he tries to sort out his suddenly tight pants, I feel a rush of power. This feels better than any revenge I could have imagined—especially because the thought of Blake on his knees in front of me, mouth being put to good use, is a thrill of its own, one I never dared to imagine before.

There are girls in countries all across the world who would stab someone to experience what I just did. Girls who dream of the taste of him on their lips, musk and fresh mint as I wipe my hand across my mouth, so warm I could take my jacket off and feel nothing.

In a hollow, ragged voice, Blake says, "That was..."

"A kiss." I clear my throat, hearing the burr in my throat and blushing at how wanton I sound. My lips are raw and sensitive where we kissed, his unexpected stubble like a rash around my mouth that tells every secret. "It's just a kiss. No one has to know."

"Right." His eyes dart all around us like a wild animal. Impulsively, he says, "If no one has to know, we could do it again."

I can't stop myself from smirking, part happy girl with an incredible, impossible crush—the kind of feeling I never thought I'd have at all, much less towards a boy like this—and part a creature of revenge, watching one of my targets fall in the most powerful, unexpected way.

There is no Blake Lee, one of the boys who tried to ruin my brother, left anymore. All I see before me is a boy who would do anything for me, anything at all. Just to have my lips on his.

It can't last.

But knowing it's mine is enough to make me happy for a brief, delirious moment, as I revel in the fact that I've finally won.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

So I lean forward, get up on my tip toes, and give Blake another taste of what he wants: me.

* * *

It's not until we're about to pull up to Coleridge that my mind leaves the lust-fueled nirvana I've been in and I hand the camera over to Blake, telling him to take a look at the photos and video I took.

"There should be enough to at least get a detective you guys trust to get a warrant and investigate further, but I'm not sure how much audio I got." Reaching the gate, I pull over to punch in the after hours code so I can park Cole's car in the lot, my mind racing as I think about how it'll feel to watch Hass get arrested. "Do you think he'll be doing the perp walk by noon tomorrow? God, I hope so. It would be the best belated Christmas present ever."

"Brenna..."

There's something strange and empty in Blake's voice, so I look over, wondering if he's going to tell me he regrets all that kissing. He keeps acting like he thinks it'll bother the other guys, but from what I can tell none of them felt more than a passing attraction towards me, even Lukas.

That isn't it, though. Blake is holding the camera between his hands, a stricken expression on his face, and the screen is black.

"The photos." My mind knows what he's going to say before he says it, and I white-

knuckle the car steering wheel so tight that my fingertips go numb. "Brenna, they're gone. They're all gone."

Chapter 17

I walk towards Carthage Library in a stupor, Blake trailing behind me with the camera in his hands, muttering as he tries to figure out a way to recover it. There's a dim hope that the SD card will have the data on it once we pull it out, but it's such a long shot I don't dare to even consider it for more than a moment or two.

I know how this is going to end.

In my mind, I can already see Cole's angry face when I tell him that I'm the one who fucked up. I'll have to admit that I fell and dropped the camera, which was probably when the photos got fucked up.

Briefly, I wonder if Georgia is going to show up at my door demanding to know what happened. She had to have sheltered me from Hass for a reason, just like there's a reason why he "found" me in that trunk on the side of the road. I suspect Georgia has a better motivation than Hass, but even then I don't dare trust her as far as I can throw her—which would be, admittedly, not far at all, even though she's toothpick thin.

My mind is wandering. I don't want to think about what's going to happen when I tell the others how it's all gone wrong. Maybe they'll demand I leave Coleridge anyway, because their part of the bargain is up. They helped me, after all, even though Hass won't be arrested based on our ludicrous story about girls and a plane. No doubt if we go to the cops now, without any proof, he and his family will just sweep it under the rug, and it'll be like the girls never existed at all. Blake didn't even see most of it, and I doubt the word of an identity thief like me will sway the cops into getting a warrant for the house of foreign dignitaries, which Hass's parents are. I'd be laughed right out of the precinct in the middle of trying to make the report.

We have nothing, which means that girl will be trapped with Hass until he gets bored of her. No, I decide, as I take the steps to the library and grasp the heavy door handle. If I have to I'll break into Hass's vacation house and free her myself while he's out—she shouldn't have to suffer for my stupid, clumsy mistake.

"I'm sure we can do something with this," Blake says from behind me, holding up the scratched SD card and squinting at it. "Lukas knows way more about computers than you might think. Despite how much time he spends on his hair. He can probably reformat it or whatever they do with these things."

Blinking, I stare at him, mouth slightly agape. "Re...format it?" Blake stares back at me. "Do you know nothing about computers?"

To my shock, he flushes at the collar, looking genuinely embarrassed. "It's not that I'm a technophile. It's just that the written word on paper is so much more...clean. Why would I rely on computers when pulp and lead have gotten it done for thousands of years?"

I shake my head at him, truly surprised to discover Blake Lee has a flaw—other than, of course, being a general asshole with a cold personality and the inability to smile, all of which I've been proven wrong about from just a simple kiss that electrified everything.

"Leave the computer stuff to Lukas," I tell Blake. "He's the expert on this kind of stuff."

"That was the plan," he says defensively. "I leave the tech stuff to DuPont, and he leaves the being-devilishly-handsome to me."

It's the first time I've ever heard Blake preen, much less watched him do it right next to me, and it's fascinating. He throws a rogue one-sided smile at me, practically

tripping over his feet as we go up the stairs to Carthage's second floor, and my stomach does a little flip-flop at the sight of him becoming awkward because of me.

Unlike him, though, I don't think Lukas will be able to fix the SD card. It's clearly scratched and bent beyond repair; nothing will help us recover the photos if the physical card is lost. The only hope we have is that Lukas somehow managed to get into the encrypted partition on my brother's laptop, which he's had all day and been working on diligently, using the notes I took on possible passwords my brother may have used. If Hass is somehow connected to the men who took me, then the partition could very well hold information that will take him down—along with all the other men involved. Without getting some sort of evidence soon, I might just go crazy walking these halls with Hass day in and day out, knowing he should be in prison but unable to make it happen.

As we walk through the stacks upstairs, heading towards the wide-open study area where we're meeting the guys, I cross every finger and toe that something can be done about the SD card or the partition or, simply, any of it at all. If all else fails, Mariana could choose to release the video of Hass and testify against him, but I know I could never ask her.

It'll be up to the five of us in this room to take down Hass.

Looking from Lukas, to Tanner, and finally to Cole, I wonder if it'll be enough. So much privilege under one roof, combined with my burning need for revenge, and even then we might not be able to pull it off.

"Well?" Cole leans forward, an eager look on his face that reminds me uncomfortably of what it was like when he teased me last semester, pouring dirty water on my artwork and manipulating me like a pawn in his games. "What did you get? Is it enough, you think, to get a warrant?"

Blake answers by throwing the SD card down on the table. It slides towards Lukas, spinning as it goes, and he quickly reaches out to stop its movement before it can plummet off the edge of the table. He holds it up and immediately frowns when he sees the state it's in.

In a bored voice, Blake says, "We damaged the SD card. Hope you can fix it."

Glancing over at him, I wonder a little why he said we, but don't have much time to examine it. Lukas is pulling out his laptop and an SD card reader, along with a microfiber cloth from his bag. While he gets to work fiddling with the card reader and trying to get something off of it, I grab the seat next to Tanner, and Blake sits next to me—even going so far as to scoot his chair over so it's as close as it can plausibly get.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

Cole watches this all with observant blue eyes, taking it in far more closely than I'm comfortable with. After a long moment of silence, he finally asks, "What happened?"

"Well," I stumble over the right explanation to justify the SD card's state, "there was a bit of trouble with the lens and I had to go into the airport hanger..."

"I dropped the camera." Blake's lie shocks me so much that I fall silent, staring at him wide-eyed. "Brenna saw everything that happened, though. Maybe she could give a statement to the police."

Frowning, Cole shakes his head. "That can't happen," he says, while Lukas just firmly tells Blake, "No."

Grumbling, Blake mutters back, "You guys act like they're the boogeyman."

"You don't have the experience with them that we do." It's Tanner who speaks up now, to my surprise, sounding uncharacteristically serious. "People have tried these take downs before. This one will only work if it's public and anonymous. Otherwise..."

I look around at each of them, wondering yet again who they are, and what will happen if this all goes wrong. "Otherwise what?"

"They'll make you disappear," Cole says simply, as if it's nothing to mention secret societies willing to kill people at the drop of a hat. "You can't testify against them. Not alone, as the only witness to some big, elaborate crime. It'll never work."

Lukas adds, "So we just have to hope that I can somehow get some data off this impossibly damaged SD card, because without it we have nothing."

I fall silent at this, folding my hands on the table and staring down at the grain in the wood. All of this is my fault—if I'd just paid a little more attention to the task at hand, been less of a clumsy idiot, everything would be okay. We'd finally be able to take down Hass, maybe even part of this mysterious operation the guys won't explain to me, and Silas could rest in peace.

Hot tears gather in my eyes and tighten my throat. It takes all my effort and concentration not to let them fall. To have come so far, risked so much, and turn up nothing—it's the worst outcome I can imagine.

I'm so busy trying not to cry that I barely notice the minutes pass. At one point I feel a heavy hand on my knee, and slide my eyes over to look at Blake, frowning at him. He has a dark look in his eyes, and he briefly squeezes my knee then slides his hand back, somewhere between comforting and confusing. The one-eighty from him seems to have come out of nowhere, but I start to understand it when I see Cole cut his eyes at Blake, and Blake's smirk in response.

This is just another game to them.

It's always a game, the way they toy with me.

Yanking my eyes away from them, I watch Lukas steadily work on the SD card, and tell myself I don't care why Blake kissed me or what's going on between him and Cole. What really matters is taking down Hass—and getting the hell out of here as soon as the work is done, so I can return to Wayborne and have a normal life again. If there's anything the winter break showed me, it's that I still have friends and family in Virginia, even if none of it is perfect and it'll never feel the same again now that my brother is gone.

After several long minutes, Lukas looks up at me with something like regret on his face, and I know. It's not going to be fixed. Everything I touch will always be broken. This, most of all, because of how important it is.

"I'm sorry," he says aloud, and we all go still at the obvious news that follows. "I can't get any information recovered off the card. It's just... gone."

Swallowing, I nod, because if I open my mouth to speak embarrassing tears will come out. I can't stand the thought of them seeing me cry, especially because this is all my fault. I ruined everything.

Maybe I deserved to be bullied.

For a long moment, no one says anything. Cole breaks the silence with a single, inelegant, "Fuck me in the nuts."

Tanner scrunches up his nose. "No thanks?"

"What's with the question mark, Connally?" Blake shoots Tanner a look. "Were you considering it?"

"Maybe I was a little—"

"Shut up, all of you." Lukas quells the childish taunting with a single sentence and his narrowed blue eyes. Then he looks to me. "Brenna, what do you want to do next? We could try something else, like surveilling his house to see if we get anything. I know that property, and the fence is high, but we might be able to catch enough to get a warrant, if nothing else."

Clearing my throat, I do my best to swallow my grief and shame, telling myself that I'll get through this just like I got through Silas dying and even being kidnapped. "I

think... maybe we should try to find those guys who took me last semester. The police haven't given me any updates in a while, and I think they're treating it like it's unsolvable. But if we get them, maybe they'll be able to explain why and how Hass 'found' me."

Cole arches a brow. "And how do we do that?"

"I don't know," I confess, frustrated. "They were like ghosts in the night. The only thing I know is that one of them mentioned a guy named Sal. And they wanted Silas's laptop." Daring to hope, I ask Lukas, "Any updates on that?"

He shakes his head, and my heart plummets into my stomach. "Sorry, Brenna. Your brother was very, very good at encryption and security. I haven't been able to crack it."

"Damnit." Rubbing my eyes, I admit, "I don't know what to do next. Maybe if we had more time... but the trail gets colder the longer we wait. And I have no idea what Silas even has on that partition. Or what password he used to secure it. I didn't know my brother at all, it turns out."

A moment of silence passes. Quietly, Blake points out, "She could still testify. Maybe the police will let her do it anonymously. If we talk to one of our guys—"

Page 42

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

"Absolutely not." Cole's tone allows no argument, and his eyes are fiercely angry and oddly protective as he looks my way. "It's not worth the risk to her safety."

I quietly point out, "But what if it's the only way? Then it's worth it."

Lukas says, "You don't understand what you're up against, Brenna."

"Then tell me." Once again, frustration wells up inside me. "Tell me what I'm up against so I can understand. Otherwise we're all wasting our time."

Before we can discuss things further—or devolve into an argument, one that Tanner will apparently watch with half-lidded, disinterested eyes—footsteps catch my attention, and a familiar voice calls out behind us.

"I'll testify if she will."

Chapter 18

I stare at Georgia's perfectly lined eyes, her sculpted face, the bright orange-red fire of her hair. She's dressed to the nines, apparently back from her date with Hass, but there's no sign of him anywhere nearby.

There's also no sign of the hand-shaped bruise on her cheek, which I know must be turning a mottled purple color by now. Whatever foundation she uses, it's covered up Hass's sins quite perfectly.

Except that you can still see the pain in her eyes, and the way she holds her mouth

gingerly on one side, talking around the things that he did to her in the bright light of day.

"I know you saw what Hass did to me." Her words are for me alone, her eyes intense as she stares me down, sounding like she's challenging me more than anything. "You were there getting evidence against him, right? But something went wrong when you fell."

I swallow, unsure how much I should trust Georgia, but on the other hand: she already saw me there and didn't do anything to turn me in, to Hass or otherwise, so there's not much I can say to make things worse. Reluctantly, I tell her, "We had proof he was... breaking the law. But the SD card got scratched, and now we can't retrieve the data."

"Figures." She scoffs at me. "You would think that Hass could be taken down over some drug deal. Clearly you have no idea how much money or influence his family has, or you wouldn't even think it was possible. I can tell you right now, Ferdinand Von Hassell could buy a whole truck full of heroine and they would do nothing to him. Nothing."

I keep my mouth shut tight, but Cole doesn't. "He wasn't buying heroine, you absolute idiot. He was buying a girl—one who will probably be more obedient than you, since she'd be his slave."

Georgia's eyes widen, and she shakes her head, visibly shocked. "No way. There weren't..." Stopping, she realizes, "But the plane. I thought it was weird he wanted to meet his dealer there. I didn't even think there might be something up. He kept it all from me. Then he went home early from our date because he said he had a phone call with his father and their business manager, but it must have been..."

As she trails off, I stay silent, feeling a strange mixture of pity and resentment

towards her. When I caught Hass being a shitheel to Georgia, she acted like I was the one doing something wrong by stepping up and threatening him if he didn't stop groping her even as she told him to stop. They broke up briefly, but she got back together with him, and made it clear with her stunt at the Blind Ball—and the thing with the wolves, which I suspect was her doing—that she viewed me as the enemy, not him.

So to have her standing in front of me, silent in the face of her own boyfriend's cruelty, offering to give me the one thing I need, fills me with a mixture of satisfaction and wariness. For all I know this is another trap—although a strange one, given that she could've ruined everything for me several times by now.

Cole starts to say something, but I turn and shake my head at him, and he falls silent. This is for me and Georgia to handle. It's a thing between two girls, full of loathing, coming to the same table to share bread.

"Why?" I ask her simply. "You didn't want to get him in trouble before. Testifying against him for abuse is a big deal."

She winces at the word abuse, and I wonder if she hates being seen as a victim as much as anything. Georgia is one of the most feminine girls I've ever seen, from her high heels to her thick long hair, never without makeup to highlight her big eyes, plump lips, and girlish cheekbones. But she's never been a damsel in distress, and she never will be.

"I want him to pay for what he's done."

"That's it?" I wait, watching her, studying every expression that passes across her face. "You know that if you do this, you'll be helping me. And possibly putting yourself in danger."

"I'm aJohnson," she says, like it isn't one of the most common surnames in America. But I know what she really means: her father is a blue blood, and her grandfather too. No one is going to come for her. Not like they'll come for me. And, as she adds, "Boys like Hass may have everything, but they need to learn that they can't shove around girls like me. We'reequals.I'm not some slave he can buy."

My stomach turns, and the moment sours. Of course Georgia would see herself as above any other woman Hass is attracted to. That includes the girl who deserves so much better than to be sold to him and dismissed by Georgia as just another rival for his affection. Just when I thought she might get it, that maybe there's something in the middle of her other than pettiness, jealousy, and spite, she proves me wrong.

I need to stop looking for something beneath the surface of these blue bloods. Underneath they're all the same—when it comes down to it, they stick to their own, like wolves in a pack working together to slaughter sheep.

Even the predators know to only bite the jugular of prey. And I'll never be a predator like them. But I can work with them as a wolf in sheep's clothing, if they'll give me the chance.

"If you testify, what makes you think it'll take Hass down?" I ask Georgia. "After all, you just said his family has the influence and money to keep him from getting in trouble for a plane full of heroine."

"This is different." She raises her chin, and with one thumb, reaches out and smears the makeup off the edge of her jaw, all the way up to the place where her cheek meets her nose. Along the way a purple bruise is revealed, its swelling puffy and dark, and she winces even as she touches it. "He didthis.To me. I'm far more valuable than a plane full of heroine. I am my father's daughter. He'll make sure Hass pays for what he did."

I study her for a moment, observing the careful way she holds herself, so as to not stretch or press against the bruise. When Hass backhanded her, I didn't imagine it would cause so much damage.

It occurs to me, not for the first time, how lucky I am that my father never hit me.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

And how unlucky Silas was that he hithim.

"It sounds like you don't need my help. You could just testify on your own—and maybe you should." I watch Georgia's face fall into a scowl at my words, and wonder if she expected that she could just waltz in here and I'd fall in line. "After all, you're Georgia Johnson. I'm nobody—sorry, I'm Brenna Wilder. You know that."

Gritting her teeth despite the flash of pain that shows in her eyes, Georgia says, "If you're expecting me to apologize, fat chance."

"Like I said, it doesn't sound like you need my help. Or do you?"

"You know that a woman's testimony doesn't matter if there's just one of her. Double if she's just a girl." She scowls at me, her red brows drawing sharply together. Jerking her chin towards the guys, she says, "Did you make them apologize to you? Or is it only girls like me who are expected to say they're sorry for being what we are."

Her words startle me, not least because they echo thoughts I've had myself. The Elites could run around this campus knocking people over like bulldozers without a single word of contrition falling from their perfect lips, and no one would care at all. They'd be allowed to grow up, to mature, to turn a new leaf and put it all behind them without being forced to reflect.

Girls like me—girls who grow desperate and angry, who steal and hurt others, on purpose or on accident—are expected to prostrate ourselves, noses to the ground, to get back into society's good graces. No one makes allowances for our damaged hearts and missing pieces. We are not allowed to sin and be forgiven.

Girls like me, and girls like Georgia.

She adds, "Everyone was going to find out who you were eventually. Secrets don't keep around here. They spoil and go rotten. I just saved you from your own lies."

"You didn't do it because you wanted to expose me for lying. And as for the guys, they're shitheads who should atone for everything they've done, but we both know this isn't about them. It's about the two of us and no one else." I meet her gaze head-on, ignoring the grumbling from the guys behind us and holding my hand up towards them to make it clear they're not meant to interrupt. "What you did, Georgia, you did because you were angry and spiteful. And the only way I'm going to do this with you, while trusting you and putting my neck out for you, is if I know that you can be trusted."

Grumbling, she asks rhetorically, "Whatever happened to girls sticking together? I know, I know—you'll just say I fucked that up by being a bitch. Well, I can't make you trust me. But you won't be the only one sticking your neck out. Think about that."

I consider her words. "I'll think about it. And get back to you tomorrow. If we're going to do this, I want to be sure."

"Don't take too long. This whim of mine has an expiration date." Reaching up to cup her cheeks, she wryly adds, "It's probably about as long as it takes for the bruises to fade. Once they're gone, though, so is our evidence, and my incentive to testify."

"I won't take too long."

"Hmmm." Jerking her eyes away from me, she glances back at the guys, and calls out to Tanner, "I hope breaking up with me was worth it, Connally. You'll never get a girl like me again."

"Ain't that the truth," he says, but his tone puts a very different spin on it than what she meant. "There are no girls like you out there, Georgia Johnson. As God as my witness I hope I never meet another girl like you again."

"Whatever." She rolls her eyes dramatically. "Look at you, acting Southern. Like you weren't born with the same silver spoon in your mouth as the rest of us."

"What would you know, Princess."

"Enough to know I'm better off without you." Flipping her hair over her shoulder, like she's not sporting a bruise from the boyfriend she got since she and Tanner broke up, Georgia hands me a slim card. "My number. I assume you don't have any professional business cards, so I'll give you mine. Call me when you've made up your mind—and don't balls out on me."

I scrunch up my nose. "Balls what now?"

"Pussies are strong. It's testicles that shrivel up at the first sign of cold or a little kick. Remember that when you're deciding if you should testify or not. I won't go without you—I'm not sticking my neck out alone."

With a smirk on her face, she shoots Tanner a parting look, turns on her heels, and walks out of the study area, every inch a confident young woman.

I always thought that it had to be one of two ways: either women let themselves be hit because they're weak, or they leave because they're strong. Seeing Georgia with Hass, and now later the very same day, I realize how wrong I was to believe that it was that easy.

Georgia Johnson isn't a coward.

She just doesn't know how to stand up to Hass alone.

Loathe as she is to admit it, she needs me.

I just don't know if I'm as strong as her—strong enough to get up when I'm knocked down and keep going. That's a kind of strength the world has never asked of me. I have a decision to make, and I can only make it alone, preferably after a good night's sleep.

Turning back to the boys, I consider my options. When Cole opens his mouth to say something, I shake my head at him. "This isn't your business, for once. Let me make this decision on my own. It's mine to make." He frowns, and before he can argue, I add, "Unless you were planning on telling me more about this mysterious criminal organization I'm up against?"

Silence all around, though Blake looks mulish about it. "That's what I thought. If you're going to let me walk into the darkness without a light, the least you can do is let me make my own decision about which way to go. I'm alone in this. Don't pretend otherwise."

Reaching out, I take Silas's laptop out of Lukas's bag, ignore the guilty look he sends my way, and walk away from the Elites without saying goodbye.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

It's time I figure out what I'm going to do without them and their help behind me. I need to know if I can stand on my own in this, the fight that matters most of all, one only I can finish.

Georgia was right. Some things are best left to us girls.

* * *

Early the next morning, I get up before Holly—an achievement all on its own—and slip out the door, needing time and space to think. Part of me wishes I could talk to Holly herself about this, but whatever our rekindled relationship is, it's not quite friendship. At least not yet, and even then, I don't know if we'll ever have the kind of friendship where we can talk about the things I'm doing with the Elites.

Maybe if I'd never stolen from her. Or if she'd never found out—a selfish thought I cringe I even let myself consider. But at the end of the day there's no forcing friendship, especially one like this. I have to just let myself accept the fact that I'm lucky Holly even lets me live with her now.

Pulling my coat on, I head out towards the front steps of Rosalind Hall and take them down two at a time. The air is cold with winter and the recent night, the sun still rising on the horizon. Around me a strong wind whips through the stripped branches of the old oak trees, yellow and orange autumnal leaves fluttering through the air. I flip my jacket collar up as the wind bites into me, wishing I had one of the down jackets I've seen rich Coleridge kids put on, effortlessly warm and fashionable.

I haven't yet decided if I can trust Georgia.

It's not just that it's unwise—I've heard the tale of the scorpion and the frog. It's also the fact that whenever I think of taking her hand and agreeing to testify with her, the fire inside me growls and snarls, rising up in anger.

It was one thing to reluctantly work with the Elites against Hass.

Teaming up with Georgia would be another thing entirely. She didn't try to chase me away from campus out of a misguided worry for my safety or the desire to get me to stop digging. Her only motivation was cruelty, pure and simple. And she changes with whatever way the wind blows. Working with her means accepting that she's unpredictable and uninterested in my safety. It's a dangerous thing.

But the only path forward that I can see. Without her, I'll just be a lone witness to Hass's crimes, and I doubt anyone who matters will give a damn, even with the Elites backing me up. All their vague references seem to suggest that the enemy we're up against is much bigger than Hass and his rich parents. The disgraced governor has something to do with it, along with that girl in his son's trunk and the police chief told not to look into my identity fraud.

More than one person is at the top of this pyramid looking down, holding impossible amounts of power in their hands, wielding it against anyone they see fit to strike down. All I have between me and them are four cruel boys who've kissed me and cursed me in turns, and a girl with red hair who loathes me like it's a full-time job.

The part of it that stings the most is knowing that they're all I'll ever have in this, and that I deserve them, because we're more alike than I want to believe. Their cruelty, their pettiness, all of it lives in me. Fuels me. Makes me betray people who are better, more pure than me.

I find myself wandering off the beaten, paved paths of Coleridge's campus, towards uneven ground that hasn't been tamed. I've walked far enough from the residence

halls that I'm getting close to the visitors center now, and with it the wolves. Even though my disastrous night with the four predators was more cold and exhausting than frightening, I haven't been able to bring myself back since. Walking past them reminds me of four other predators I'm now trapped with, for good or ill.

Curving past the tall fence that keeps the wolves in, I find a sloping path, unpaved, that leads towards the rear part of the grounds. My calves are starting to ache, along with my lungs and throat; the cold air and sloping ground is challenging. Unlike Holly and some of the other girls here, I only exercise when forced to, and don't own hundreds of dollars worth of athletic wear to cushion my feet and keep my ears warm. I hate that I'm so different from them. Maybe if Georgia and I were alike in other ways I would know how to trust her. As it is, I only see the worst parts of me, and the best of her, when I look at her freckled face and bright red hair.

The ground beneath my shoes is covered in a thick layer of fallen pine needles. They cushion my steps, and as I walk down a steeper slope, start to slide beneath my feet. Grabbing a nearby tree trunk, I'm struck by the ribbon of red plastic sticking out of it, like some kind of tape or rope was yanked away and left some part of itself behind. The sight nags at part of my mind, but I can't figure out what it is, so I move on.

Walking through the trees reminds me of that scorching kiss with Blake—the first and the ones that followed it, his body responding to mine. I don't think he faked his attraction to me, but I have no idea what to think of the rest.

A boy like him falling in love with a girl like me must be a colossal joke. A mistake. Some kind of game or lie.

But he watched for me, to make sure I was safe.

He worries for me.

So does Lukas. Even Cole seems to want to protect me—though from what, he'll never say. Tanner... is a feral beast unto himself, impossible to predict. They care for me, though. I've seen it since everything changed the night of the storm. It wasn't just cruelty that made them try to push me away.

I don't know why my heart races when I think of them. I don't understand why the thought of kissing one makes me worry what the other three will think. Some part of me must have gone mad the night of the kidnapping, my good senses leaving me along with my presence of mind when the chloroform hit my bloodstream.

I keep moving through the woods, past the tame part of campus, because the alternative is standing here with my thoughts and going slowly mad. In the distance, I can see the fence, barbed wire and concrete posts. I can't even tell anymore if it's meant to keep others out or us in.

Something gives beneath my foot.

Yelling in surprise, I look down to see that the ground has softened and slid out from beneath my. My ankle rolls to one side, useless beaten-up tennis shoes doing nothing to support my foot.

Cringing, I try to step away from the soft ground—

And the earth itself falls away beneath my feet, dropping me down into a deep, dark pit several feet down.

Chapter 19

Darkness. That's all that I can sense at first, along with the cold wet of earth all around me, soft beneath my searching fingers. Above me, I can see the distant, cloudy winter sky, and I force myself to stand on my twisted ankle and reach up

towards it.

My arms aren't long enough to grab the top.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

Heart pounding, I reach into my pocket for my phone—and remember, too late, that I left it in my room. I wanted to be alone to consider my next steps; I didn't want anything, including social media, to come between me and my thoughts.

The one time I forgot that I'm a member of Generation Z.

Running through the options, I realize that no one is going to come for me for quite some time. The groundskeeper checks on the wolves, sure, but I purposefully beelined away from their enclosure. Classes are going to start, and while my absences will be noted by the teacher, they'll probably assume I'm just another Coleridge kid playing hooky, at least until I don't come back to my room.

That's assuming, of course, that Holly notices me missing—and misses me. Other than quick hellos and goodbyes, we've barely spoken two words to each other most of this week, and we share a class together.

Closing my eyes, I go over the block schedule I got for this semester, trying to figure out if one of the teachers might notice me gone and actually report it as a problem instead of assuming it's just another skip day.

8:00-9:30 French I

9:35-11:05 Advanced Biology

11:10-11:45 Lunch

11:50-1:20 Intro to Economics

1:25-3:00 Music Study

Only the music teacher would be likely to notice me missing, because Mr. Hall, out of all my teachers, knows that I like the class. The others, I've been skimming by in at best all week, because I knew that I was going to take Hass down and possibly leave Coleridge forever afterwards. It didn't seem worthwhile to stand out in class or try to ace my first biology quiz when I knew the grades likely wouldn't matter.

Now that I'm stuck in a hole, reliant on my teachers caring that I'm gone to get out of it, I wish that I'd paid more attention.

It looks like I'll be getting myself out of this pit. Hopping on my good foot to the edges of it, I feel at the dirt. The walls of the hole are almost perfectly flat, as if created by a machine—and of course it probably was. No doubt the red ribbon I noticed on the tree outside was once part of a barrier tape warning students not to go further out.

Some jackasses who wanted to get drunk and high on campus without getting caught probably tore it down, leaving no visible signage for the rest of us to see and avoid any construction. The board that wobbled and broke beneath my feet came down here with me, the WARNING sign across it buried in pine needles.

Between this and the sewage in my room, I'll be signing a lot of agreements not to sue Coleridge. All that's left is a little food poisoning and I'll have the trifecta of on campus hazards at my disposal.

Sighing, I shove my hands into the wet earth, grateful that it's mixed with natural clay this deep, and try to get leverage to pull myself up. It's hard going—I've never had much upper body strength—but I manage to get myself up off the ground enough to shove my left foot into a similar toe hold in the earthen wall. Buoyant, I dare to stretch my twisted ankle out and push my toes against the earth, hoping to be able to

push myself up enough that I can make it to the top.

My ankle screams at me almost immediately, and the pain is bad enough that I jerk back from the wall, hop down, and curse my own clumsiness yet again. If I make it out of this I'm enrolling in Coleridge's free yoga classes, held in the Coleridge Center every Thursday. Apparently I could use the improved coordination, stat.

For several long, impossibly lonely minutes, I try to pull myself up to no avail. Abandoning that, I tilt my head up towards the distant sky and yell, wishing the delinquents who tore down the caution tape would show up in the morning instead of the evening. Classes will start soon, and I want to wash all the mud I can off me before I have to show up and attempt to conjugate French verbs for over an hour.

Eventually even my throat is hoarse, and I start to wonder if anyone will notice me gone.

There's very little sun down here, so it's getting cold already. The damp invades my jacket and shirt. More and more by the second, my ankle throbs with mind-numbing pain.

Then I hear footsteps in the distance. The sound of someone jogging nearby. Clearing my throat, I start to yell for help. "Hey! I'm—" My throat dries up, and I have to stop to cough for a while. Long seconds are lost to my hacking. By the time I'm done, a whole minute has passed.

Frantic, I listen for the footsteps, but I can't hear them anymore. Whoever they are, they've moved on.

Despair sets in, and I close my eyes. The darkness on the back of my eyelids doesn't look that different from the darkness of the hole. Everything about it is all-consuming. It's stupid, because I know that someone will find me eventually, but I

can't help but feel abandoned. Everyone leaves me. Silas. Dad. Mom. Everyone.

Just as the self-pity is really setting in, I hear a voice. "Hey! Can you reach up and grab my hand?"

Opening my eyes, I look up in disbelief. Holly's face is staring down at me, rimmed by the distant light of the cloud-covered sun. She's wearing her hair in a ponytail, just like the day we met, wireless earbuds tucked into her ears.

Getting down on her knees, she leans forward into the pit and reaches down for me. Her hand seems to bring the sun, and its warmth, with it.

"Grab my hand, Brenna."

"I don't know if I can," I confess.

"Try anyway." Urgently, she stretches out her fingertips. "I've got you."

Something rises in my throat, tasting like absolution. Taking a step forward, I gingerly put weight on my injured ankle, stretch onto my toes, and reach both hands up to clasp the warmth and strength Holly offers.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

"Get some purchase on the edge of the hole," she encourages me. "You can do it."

Biting my lower lip, I jump upwards, scrambling against the wet earth. Holly takes my weight effortlessly, grabbing my hands in both of hers, concentration lining her face as she pulls me up.

Out of the darkness and into the light.

By her side. I tumble out onto the earth, rolling on the wet leaves and cold grass, panting at the effort of it. Holly shakes out her hands, staring down at me. "You okay?"

"I'm good." I blink up at her face, still backlit by the sky. Above us, the wind pushes the clouds aside, and the sun dares to show itself. Its rays begin to banish the chill on my skin. "How did you know I was lost?"

She shrugs, looking away, then back at my face. "I just... knew. I looked for you and you weren't there. So I kept looking until I found you."

"Thank you." Sitting up, I confess, "I don't know if I would've been able to find you. If you were missing. Not that I was missing, just... a little lost."

A little laugh escapes Holly's mouth, and she smiles at me. The sight of it is worth more than a thousand kisses from a thousand terrible boys. I didn't even know I needed her smile until seeing it eases something within me, banishing a rot that set in the moment she discovered I'd betrayed her.

Maybe girls like me can be forgiven.

She suggests, "You stick to the getting lost. I'll stick to the finding. We both have our strengths."

"I guess so." I tilt my chin up and stare into the sun to hide the mist smarting at the corners of my eyes, but I know she sees through me. Girls like Holly always do. "Have I missed French class?"

"No," she says, and I groan in disappointment.

"Put me back in the hole and come back in an hour or two," I suggest. "In time for lunch."

"You wish." Laughing, she stands and helps me to my feet. "C'mon. I'll help you get to the nurse's office and have that ankle patched up. Next time, read the warning signs."

As we walk out of the woods, I look over my shoulder and see what she meant. The signs were there all along, nailed onto the tree trunks, long before I hit the torn red caution tape. But I wasn't looking for them, so I didn't see them.

This thing with Georgia is the same, except I see the warning signs.

I'm going to keep going anyway.

* * *

I can feel it all through French and biology class. The heaviness of my decision weighs on me, but I know it's the only one that I could make. I have to do something about Hass, even if it means trusting Georgia.

Still, I can't keep myself from feeling trepidation as I head towards the table in the back of the dining hall, where I've been eating with—and making plans with—the Elites. I get fewer eyes following me than I did the first few times I sat with them, but there are still plenty of curious, and jealous, onlookers. From the rumors that have trickled to me, some people think I'm Cole's new girlfriend, others Lukas's. No one has guessed that wild Tanner would settle down with me, or cold Blake warm up to me, but they all wonder what I'm doing here.

A voice calls my name, and I look to the left to see Holly waving at me from a table. "You can sit with us if you want," she says, and I look over at Leo Cooper, her new boyfriend, as well as the other Rosalinds: Sasha, Piper, and Kaylie Jefferson, who replaced Georgia after she left. Tricia is also with them, sitting next to Sasha. Holly points to the seat next to her. "There's a spot here for you."

Unspoken is the fact that there's also a spot in the Rosalinds for me. Holly never replaced me after I left, even though ostensibly five is the perfect number of students to run the events.

Before, I wouldn't have thought it possible. But after she pulled me out of the hole this morning, we spent the whole walk to the nurse's station talking and sharing. She told me that her new boyfriend likes to try to cook things for her late at night in the Coleridge kitchen, and confessed that she sneaks him in just so she can smear sauce on his nose. I told her that I've never been more sorry for anything than I am for what I did to her. She put her arm around me and held me up, then asked me if I wanted to talk about my brother.

For the first time, I wanted to tell her about Silas. About the way he used to laugh, and how he made the sun rise in the morning, and caught fireflies in the evening. But I choked up, and all I could say was, "I want to."

"One day," she responded, squeezing me comfortingly. "When you're ready."

Looking at her now, open-faced and waiting for me, all I want is to go to her. Sitting next to Holly would be a privilege. The thing is, though, I'm not done with the dirty work ahead of me, and until I am, I can't let myself rest at her side.

"Maybe next week," I tell her, glancing over at the table where the Elites sit. "I'll see you after class?"

Holly follows my gaze, and I wonder if all she sees is that I'd rather spend time with her lying ex-boyfriend than with her. But she just says, "Of course. After class."

It hurts to turn away from her. I know how valuable a friendship like hers is. But I have something to take care of before I can return to her good graces and stay there permanently.

Sitting down at the lunch table, I receive the full attention of the Elites. Cole raises a brow at me, expectantly.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

I take a deep breath in. Let it out through my nose. Tell myself that I only feel like I'm making a decision I'll regret. If I do this, then soon, it'll all be over.

"I'm going to testify with Georgia. I'm going to do it."

I've made my choice. There's no going back now.

I hope it's not the last choice I get to make.

Chapter 20

After my music class, I spend some time in the outdoor pavilion where it's held, enjoying the rays of afternoon sun leaking in through the sides of the tent. It's been cold all winter, but now that the sun has come out I feel warmer than I've been in a long time.

In a few hours, Georgia and I are going to go to the police to tell them what happened at the private airport hanger.

I don't know what happens after that. The future is a blank space, waiting for somebody to write the next part of the story. For the first time that person will be me.

I think of Silas, and pinch the scar on the base of my thumb where the snake bit me the day that I found him hanging from a tree.

Maybe if the police open an investigation into Hass, they'll open an investigation into my brother's death too, and I'll finally be able to breathe again.

"Brenna." I turn at my name, surprised to see Blake entering the tent, his cheeks reddened from the cold and the sun. "We need to talk—somewhere private preferably. Come with me."

I frown at him. "What's this about?"

Standing at the entrance to the tent, he shifts back and forth impatiently. "Just follow me. It's important."

Sighing, I grab my backpack and stand up, the weight of Silas's laptop resting against my back. At this point I'm starting to resign myself to the reality that it might only ever be a brick to me, the closed-off partition reminding me of how little I ever truly knew my brother while he was still alive.

"Where are we going?" I ask Blake, as he leads me down a path away from the Coleridge Center. "I've never been this way."

"This is where the advanced computer classes are held," he says, leading me to a small building and swiping his ID by the door. "No one is here this time of day."

I follow him inside, the sound of fans greeting me on the other side of the door. Three rows of tables hold monitors, and on one side is a long row of black boxes that are clearly servers. Despite the cold outside, it's cold in here too, no doubt to keep the computer equipment from overheating.

"You take a class here?"

"Yes. Don't look so surprised. They hold advanced math classes here too." He paces down the rows of computers and opens a door that leads to a small room full of comfortable chairs, built-in wall shelves holding thick volumes of esoteric programming books. "In here. No one will find us."

A strange thrill goes through me as I walk into the room, goosebumps rising along the skin of my arms. Here I am, alone with Blake, just like yesterday in the woods when we kissed so long and so hard that I felt his desire for me even hours afterwards, imprinted on the tender skin of my lips. I can still feel the strength of his hands digging into the curve of my waist, can almost taste his bittersweet mouth on mine.

But as he turns to face me, arms crossed over his chest, it becomes abundantly clear that we're not here to makeout. We're here to talk about something, and I have the feeling I won't like what he has to say.

"You need to know the truth." The seriousness in his voice catches me off guard, so I sit down on one of the study chairs next to the bookshelves, watching as he takes a seat opposite me. "I'm tired of all these half-truths and outright lies. If you're going to testify, Brenna, someone has to tell you what you're up against."

"I've been asking that for weeks now," I point out. "Why would you tell me when the others won't?"

"Because I'm not as embedded in all this as them. Not as scared as them. Maybe not as scared as I should be." He folds his hands on his knees, looking very serious. "My mother's career in Korea has sheltered my family from some of their influence, and though my father has had his unfortunate...dealingswith them, we're not old Western money. Not like the Mastersons or the DuPonts. And we're not in politics like the Connallys. So the Syndicate doesn't have control over me like they do over the others, and they don't have any dirt on my family, either."

"The Syndicate?" I blink at him. "That sounds very... organized crime."

"What else would you call dark money in politics and international monopolies that destroy small businesses? Officially, they're an underground network of old money types who make business dealings and help each other out of a jam. They

do favors and court influence. If money passes hands, that's just what they've been doing for generations. That's the cover, at least." He grimaces. "Unofficially, people who get in their way or look at them too closely tend to disappear in very sudden ways. The cops don't tend to get involved, either because the deaths look like an accident or..."

"Suicide." My hands tremble, and I have to fold them together. "So those men who killed Silas, who kidnapped me were..."

"The arm of the Syndicate, yes. Or in this case, low life thugs working for them. Those at the top rarely get their hands dirty—at least, not like this. They're fans of going on dates with models," he says, putting air quotes around emphasized words, "who are in reality trafficked female escorts. They do plenty of drugs, have wild parties, and break the law in big blue collar ways like insider trading. But they don't kill teenagers. That's dirty work that they leave to the lowest level."

Setting down my backpack, I pull Silas's laptop out of it, suddenly certain what I'll find on it. "You think my brother had dirt on the Syndicate?"

"I think he most definitely did, because he was one of their drug dealers. Not that he had direct dealings with them—at least, as far as I know he didn't. They weren't exactly the type to come visit Wayborne Virginia. But he must've had some sort of dealings with enough people in their organization to get curious, or paranoid, and start digging."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

"He was killed for it." Setting the laptop down on the end table beside me, I squeeze my hands together so my fingers don't tremble. "And then I started posting on the Legacies blog. Somehow they must have figured out it was me. I don't even know how."

Gently, Blake says, "It wouldn't have been hard, Brenna. Half the social networks you used have members of the Syndicate somewhere on the board. When you got too close to that story involving the governor's son, they probably decided to look into you, pulled your public IP address, and figured out pretty quickly that only one person could've posted from both Wayborne and Coleridge's campus. From there, it's pretty easy to find you."

"They were looking into my family." I close my eyes briefly at the memory of those mens' voices. "They knew our house was destroyed by the tornado. I didn't realize how they knew the laptop was still around, but it must be because I logged into websites from it and posted to the blog."

"Exactly. So they're already gunning for you—or at least, that laptop." Staring me down, Blake says, "If you want to walk away from all this, Brenna, you can. Just give me the laptop, I'll have my dad turn it into one of them—he has to deal with their types in Hollywood even if he doesn't want to—and they can destroy it. We'll tell them that you never even looked at it, and they'll leave you alone."

I blink at him, confessing, "That's not what I want to do." Then I realize, "That's not what you want me to do, either."

"Walk away from all this? No. I think you should face them."

"Why?" I study him. "I'm just a teenaged girl, after all. Some nobody. Trailer trash, basically—isn't that what you call me? There's nothing about me that's special enough to go after a group that's actually called the Syndicate."

"You have a fire inside you." I startle at how much his words echo my thoughts. To me, the rage that I feel, the drive to destroy and take without thinking, is like flames seeking fuel. Blake continues, "I see that fire when I look at you. It burns so bright, I think it could bring the whole world to its knees. The Syndicate won't know what's coming when you come for them."

Quietly, I point out, "But I mess up so much. The SD card in the camera. All that logging into social media networks—I should've realized not to leave a trace, should've always used a VPN. Everything I touch is ruined."

"We all make mistakes. We all get better. You're the only person I've ever seen with the drive to take on the powerful." Sliding off his chair, he gets down on his knees in front of me and takes my hands between his, their broad strength and incredible warmth giving me a fire of another sort. "I believe in you, Brenna. You don't ruin things—you come at them headfirst, no matter the consequences. Also," a devilish smirk curls up his lips, the mouth I once saw as emotionless now wicked with desire, "you touched me, and I'm not ruined."

I find myself leaning down towards him, our eyes meeting, his hands touching the insides of my thighs, just above my knees. Breath catching, I murmur, "We should try again, just to see. Maybe this time I'll destroy you with a single brush of my lips."

"I wish that you would try."

Surging upwards, he captures my lips with his own, hand reaching up to cup the side of my cheek. I moan and lean back into the chair as he presses me into it, his body parting my knees, his broad shoulders warm beneath my hands as I reach up to brace

myself against him.

Those clever fingers of his, fingers that trace the lines of books and memorize their secrets, reach between my legs and dance across my thighs, the edge of my skirt pushed up past my knee-high socks.

I whimper, and he captures the sound in his mouth, kissing me so deeply that all thoughts leave me at once.

Warmth pools inside me, warmth that has nothing to do with rage or revenge. I feel like an entirely different girl with Blake Lee's body against mine. Reaching beneath me, he pulls me body towards his until my legs are parted around his hips, wrapping around behind him, the bulge of his hardening erection obvious and so close to me that I shiver.

His mouth drops from mine and travels down, leaving kisses on my jawline, my neck, behind my ear. Pressing his hips forward, his breath hitches in a moan as his clothed erection brushes against the edge of my dampening underwear. I startle at the realization that my skirt is up around my hips, my breath coming hard and fast, his fingers traveling underneath my button-up and towards my bra. Any second someone could walk into this room and see us here, unmistakably heading towards something I've never done before, never even thought I'd be so close to doing.

"Blake..." My voice trails off into a breathy moan as he nips gently at the tender skin of my neck, right near my pulse, his fingers unhooking my bra, broad thumb reaching around to brush against my nipple. "Blake, we shouldn't. Not here."

"Why not?"

He leans back, his eyes all pupil, blown wide and dark. Somehow his belt has come undone, and my eyes travel down to his crotch, blushing fiercely—it's clear from

what I can see that he has plenty to work with and is more than just a little into my body.

"Anyone can catch us," I point out, embarrassed at the roughness of my voice. "There's not even a lock on the door."

"So? Let them catch us." He smirks. "I'd like to see what they think of one of the Elites fucking a girl like you out in the open. They'd probably talk about it for days."

My stomach drops, even as a part of me imagines what that would be like, how he would feel inside me, and I blush furiously. Still, those words—I didn't think I'd hear the first guy who was really into me talk about it likethat.

Stumbling, I tell him, "I'm a virgin."

"And?" He just looks at me, dark brows barely moving. His hand is still beneath my shirt, and he brings it up to rub a circle around my nipple, smirking as my breath hitches. "I figured that out. So am I—you know that. It's like an albatross around my neck. Let's get it out of the way together."

"Just like that?"

"Yes." He tweaks my nipple, and I have to force myself to grab his wrist and pull his hand away, even as that part of my body wants nothing more than to feel more of it. Blake frowns at me, clearly annoyed. "What's wrong? I know you want me, that much is obvious. And it's not like you're saving it for marriage—neither am I. So let's practice together."

With effort, I push him off, reaching back to try to put my bra together again. As I do so, I ask him, "Is this all just a game to you?"

"Oh, Brenna." He rolls his eyes at me. "Isn't everything?"

"No." Shaking my head, I jump off the chair and move past him, yanking my skirt down and pulling my socks up until I feel less like a fool. "I should've known better. You never had feelings for me."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

"Of course I didn't. I was thinking all wrong—what I thought was love was just attraction. Cole made that clear to me." He frowns at me, and as I grab my backpack and put the laptop back in it, he takes my wrist in the circle of his thumb and forefinger, holding me back. "I thought you'd be relieved. You don't want me to fall in love with you."

The way he says it, so plainly, I find that I can't disagree. But for some reason I can't reconcile the boy in front of me, the obvious arousal in his pants and the coarse words, eager to get me over with and move on, with the boy who waited for me on the side of a busy road, worry in his eyes.

They barely seem like the same person.

I didn't realize until now that I wanted that boy on the side of the road. That my heart aches for him. The one standing in front of me isn't nearly a substitute—even when he is down on his knees.

"I'll testify." Yanking my hand away from his, I pull my jacket over my shoulders and throw my backpack on. "But I don't want to ever be alone with you in a room again. Not after this. Notlikethis, either. You and Cole can play your games without me. I have more important things to do, like trying to stay alive."

Blake looks stunned, and as I walk away I feel his eyes on me.

He doesn't follow.

* * *

Georgia's car is an impossibly bright hot shade of pink that must have been custom. It's a Tesla, shockingly earth conscious but still wildly expensive, complete with the screen up front and an automatic driving mode that she probably uses all the time.

Leaning up against the hood, she watches me walk towards her, and frowns in my direction. "Couldn't you have worn something a little nicer than that?"

I stare at her clothes, which are undoubtedly designer, then compare them to my uniform. She makes me look shabby—which is ridiculous because, as I tell her, "We're going to the police station, not a fashion show."

"Still. This is public. We'll be seen together."

"Just get in the car and drive, Georgia."

"Fine!" She throws up her hands at me. "God forbid you improve yourself a little. Excuse me for wanting to be a positive force in your life."

I ignore her words, biting down on a million retorts. If I'm going to get through this and make it to the other side, I need to get used to Georgia's eccentricities—or, to be more accurate, her absolute bullshit.

"I took photos of the bruises last night when they were at their worst," she says as I slide into the car, pulling up a slideshow of her camera roll on the dashboard screen. "Look at this. It's fucking gnarly. Took me five layers of yellow concealer to cancel it out." Frowning, she looks at her reflection in the rearview mirror and realizes aloud, "Oh my god, they'll probably take my makeup off at the station. Then I'll have to go homelike that."

Because apparently it needs to be said, I point out, "No one you know will be at the police precinct."

"Oh. Right." Her facial expression changes. "Well, let's do this then." She turns over the engine and fiddles with the buttons on the dashboard screen until pop music blares from the car speakers. "I pick the music—I'm not listening to your sad playlist. You probably don't pay for no commercials."

"Fine by me."

I let my mind wander as she drives towards the Great Falls Police Department, thinking, inevitably, of Blake. Some part of me wonders if I should've just gone through with it. Maybe that was the best chance I'll get to lose my virginity to someone who's handsome and attractive, obviously into me, and capable of doing more than just fumbling around and shoving it in.

But it didn't sit right with me that the version of Blake I got wasn't the one I wanted. Besides, I can't go back to him now—that'll just look pathetic. I have to live with my decision.

Even though I'll be thinking of that kiss, and what didn't follow, for days, maybe even weeks. No one has ever touched me like that before. It might be a while before anyone else even wants to. I just have to hope the next person to come along doesn't want to just "get it over with" like it's some sort of terrible task to check off a to-do list.

Before I know it we're outside the precinct. Then I'm walking in with Georgia, who complains and makes me walk one step behind her. Soon enough we're at the front desk, telling them what we're here for.

An officer comes out to meet with us.

Then a detective. One who seems very interested in hearing about crimes the Von Hassells may have been up to.

"Take it from the top," he tells me. "I want to know more about the girls you saw. Tell me about the men, too—what did they look like, and do you think they were related to the men who took you last December?"

I tell him every detail, well-acquainted with this process by now.

And I try not to think what will happen if the Syndicate decides I should die for this.

Chapter 21

Two Days Later

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

I'm bent over my economics homework at lunch, double-checking everything, when someone taps me on the shoulder. Across from me, Holly frowns—I've been sitting at her table for lunch ever since the disastrous fallout with Blake—and as I turn around, I'm unsurprised to see that Cole is the one standing behind me impatiently.

"You could come back to sit with us," he says, and I feel everyone at the table go still.

The other girls don't seem to understand why the Elites have taken such an interest in me, and I haven't been able to tell them. Georgia hasn't wanted me to, for one. Now that Cole is staring at me like I'm a vexing problem, not a girl he has a crush on, hopefully they'll understand that it has nothing to do with romance.

In an annoyed tone, he adds, "I need to ask you something. In private."

"You can text me." I hold up my phone, flashing it at him. "Or message me. You can even email me. Those are all private."

Tricia's mouth drops open, and Sasha elbows her until she shuts it. I can tell they're wondering why I'm back-talking Cole so thoroughly. I wish Hector were here to see this, but it pains me to admit that we'll probably never be friends again. He wasn't a fan of being lied to, and felt like I used him. I can't say that he's wrong.

Impatiently, Cole grits his teeth and says, "I need to talk to you in person. Now."

Looking over his shoulder, I see that Lukas is staring hopefully my way. Tanner seems to be distracted by the foreign exchange girl sitting next to him, practically in

his lap—apparently he found a new toy, one to replace the fun he had with Georgia and the manipulating he did to Chrissy. I hate how it makes my stomach cramp to watch her touch his arm, then see him flex and run his fingers through her hair. I hate even more how terrible I feel when I glance over at Blake, who quickly looks away, his posture stiff and statuesque, face emotionless once more.

Privileged asshole that he is, Cole Masterson doesn't care about any of the tension or awkwardness I'll feel sitting at his table. He probably knows what happened between Blake and me—I have no doubt they talked about it—and just doesn't give a shit about its effects.

"Fine." Standing up, I reluctantly tell Holly, "I'll be back in a sec."

"Of course." She looks casual, even though I know it strains her to have Cole in my life, especially now that we're friends again. "Don't fall in a pit on your way over."

I laugh, telling her, "I'm sure you'll be able to pull me out of it."

Cole frowns at me as I walk over to his table. "What was that? A pit?"

"Don't worry about it." I keep my voice light, enjoying the fact that it bothers him not to know what we were talking about. "Your ex and I are friends, but I doubt she'd want me telling you her business."

"It didn't sound like her business. It sounded like yours. Did you fall and I didn't know it? Has anyone pushed you? The people we're going up against will be on high alert now that you've gone to the police, even with someone like Georgia testifying with you."

"Stop worrying," I tell him, glancing over at Blake as I take my spot at the table, whose face is tense. No doubt he's worried I'll tell Cole I know all about the

Syndicate, and he'll get in trouble for his loose lips. "Georgia and I are going after a shitty teenage boy who's been suspended and expelled from multiple boarding schools. I'm sure no one will care much if we add another blot to his record. And we made sure the officers we gave our statements to were ones you recommended—not that I understand why. Care to tell me?"

Yet again he stiffens up, annoyance passing over his face. "You've been at Coleridge for months now. Haven't you learned that there are advantages to having connections? Some officers are better at this than others."

"Yeah, well—" My voice is cut off by the sound of my phone ringing, something unallowed in the halls of Coleridge. Annoyed, I pull it out and glance at the screen; the first six numbers are familiar. "It's the police precinct."

"Well, pick it up then. I'm waiting."

"We're not supposed to take phone calls on campus, especially during class time or lunch."

"You're standing next to me. You won't get in trouble."

That isn't exactly true, and it doesn't thrill me if it is, but I answer the phone anyway. After all, getting a demerit mark is nothing next to the hope that Hass might be arrested. "Hello?"

"Brenna Wilder?"

"This is she."

"This is Officer Munez. The District Attorney just called me. They want to press charges against Ferdinand Von Hassell. And they want to hear more about what you

witnessed. Care to come down to the station?"

* * *

It all goes by in a blur, faster than I thought possible. Like a boulder rolling down a sheer mountain face, it picks up steam the closer it gets to the end, falling faster and faster, threatening to create an avalanche.

By the time Georgia and I make it back to campus, Hass is being arrested.

I see the red and blue lights first. Georgia lets out a string of curses. "Fuckshito my goddamn it." She looks over at me, eyes wide, seeking reassurance. "We're gonna live through this, right?"

For the first time, I ask her, "Do you know what we're up against?"

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

"I know Hass's parents are richer than sin. They have political influence. He has ways to make things like this disappear." Her hands tighten on the steering wheel as she pulls into a spot at the edge of Coleridge's parking lot. "Fuck. He'll make this disappear, won't he?"

"I don't think he'll be able to." I point towards the news van parked in the lot, and the reporter fast walking towards the arrest scene, cameraman in tow. "Look."

The news van, of course, is courtesy of Blake. His family knows how to lead the media by its nose and point cameras directly at scandals. There's a reason why the Garrisons have never had anything negative written about them in the news—and why the Lee family, out of all the Korean media moguls, manages to hide in their estates without being bothered. When you give the media what it wants, feed it a diet of red meat and fresh blood, it grows full and looks the other way when you want it to. All Blake had to do was send an email to his family's publicist, and Hass's fate was sealed.

As he's frog-marched to a squad car, hands cuffed behind him, the reporter is already on the scene. She asks for a statement from the cops, who remain tight-lipped. I look over at Georgia. "This is where we come in."

"Where we—what?"

"We have to tell the media what he did to you." The look she sends me is scathing, which is why I avoided this until now. "The charges won't stick unless there's public pressure. You saw what happened to the governor's son—he made a whole DUI go away, even with a dead body in the trunk. They're saying the family fixer killed the

girl." Something I find doubtful, now that I know the Syndicate exists. "If that scandal hadn't gone public, no one would have ever known about it. The same with this one. It's hard to bury something this big."

In a small voice, she confesses, "I haven't told my parents about what's happening yet."

"Then you should probably shoot them a text, because we're about to go live." I tug on her sleeve. "C'mon—better to do it now, while it's still light out. Or do you want to be washed out on live TV?"

That gets her attention. She walks out of the car with me, and we go to the news van, where the segment producer is leaning up against the tailgate smoking. The cameraman has his camera pointed at the ground, and the on-air reporter is re-powdering her already-powdered nose. If someone doesn't talk to them soon, give them more to air, this story will disappear. I can sense it.

Sharks need chum in the water to get them going.

So I walk right up to the producer, wrinkle my nose at the cigarette smoke, and tell him, "We know why Ferdinand Von Hassell was arrested."

"Oh?" Dropping his cigarette on the ground, he steps on it, his full attention on me. "Do you really know, or do you just think you know? Because with a family this big, we've got to be sure."

"We know." Shoving her way forward, Georgia pulls a makeup remover cloth out of her bag and, in one wipe, reveals the mottled yellowing bruise on her cheek in the distinct shape of a handprint. "He did this to me. And a lot worse, too. I'm going to make sure he pays for it."

Leaning over his shoulder, the producer calls out, "Sheila! Reapply your lipstick. We've got a story." Then he looks to us, and asks, "How old are you two? I can't put little kids in the air."

"Eighteen," Georgia says, sounding annoyed. "I'm not a little kid."

"I'm seventeen." I frown. "Is that going to be a problem?"

He studies me. "We'll just show you from the neck down. You." Looking at Georgia, he takes her in, and I know what he sees: a perfect figure, a sympathetic pout, natural red hair, and a beautiful face ruined by a bruise. "That face is so dramatic. Perfect for television. What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Georgia Johnson, of the Plymouth Johnsons." I turn my head to roll my eyes where no one will see. Georgia adds, "You can talk to my publicist. A press release on all this will be going out shortly. We expect it to be news in the local papers tomorrow."

Walking up to us, the on-air reporter says flippantly, "We're not local, we're national. This story is big enough to be front page news if we play it right. Rich boy hits girlfriend, gets arrested, is found in possession of cocaine, heroine, and ecstasy? The public will eat it up. Everyone loves when a rich asshole falls."

Which means everyone will be watching this story.

It doesn't matter, I tell myself. They'll show me from the neck down. Besides, the Syndicate already knows who I am.

They came for me once. Two men tried to kill me. It can't possibly get worse than that.

Or so I tell myself.

* * *

Everything happens so quickly.

My classes become intense. Georgia and I do multiple interviews, her on the record, me as "Jane Doe." Reporters swarm the campus; Hass is suspended pending investigation, and then, when they find drugs in his room, expelled. It doesn't matter that he gets out on bail after being arrested—the school decides he's finally guilty enough to get rid of for good.

The post I make about it to Legacies gets thousands of hits. Ferdinand Von Hassell is all anyone can talk about. He's a symbol to them of what the rich have become: greedy, narcissistic, violent, and even, sometimes, above the law. The public calls for his head—and the DA promises to deliver it.

For a while, it feels like the world has settled, at least a little. My relationship with the Elites returns to what it once was: tense, distant, and mostly non-existent, save for the updates Lukas gives me on the laptop when he takes it for more encryption work. I barely look at Blake, and he doesn't even seem to try to look at me or not look at me one way or another.

But Holly and I are friends again. Tricia and Sasha are part of that fold, too. Even Georgia and I have a strange kind of mutual respect born out of sticking our necks out together, though she still doesn't miss an opportunity to subtly put down my clothes and hair when she gets the chance.

Chrissy doesn't really talk to me anymore, and neither does Hector. The former, I think, because I told her that I know what she did to Cole's little sister, and the latter because he can't forgive me for once being the Elite's enemy and now being something like their ally if not their friend. I tell myself neither friendship was really deep enough to matter, but the truth is that I miss them sometimes, when they're

sitting at their own table and won't look my way.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

Weeks pass before Hass's court date is set. He's kept under house arrest, deemed a flight risk, mostly because the first thing he did after being bailed out of jail was get in his car and try to leave the state. Sometimes I hear kids on campus talking about him, taking bets on if he'll be found guilty or not, whether his rich parents can get him out of this particular mess or if they'll be unable to pay for their son's freedom.

Somehow I manage to keep my grades up enough to stick around.

Even more amazing, I find myself starting to really, truly enjoy Coleridge.

My music teacher is a font of knowledge, and soon enough I can sightread music and play a few basic songs on the flute. In biology I excel at naming the parts of a cell and dissecting the frogs and sheep hearts they bring to us. French verbs still sometimes catch me unawares, but my teacher praises my accent, and soon enough I'm able to carry on simple conversations with other students. And while I'll never be excellent at economics, the macro and micro of it all catches my attention when my teacher manages to put things into perspective using real life examples and stories.

I wish, more than anything, that Silas were here to see me race towards the finish line. I make a promise to myself: that I'll visit his grave over spring break, and for the first time ever since he died, talk to him at his headstone.

It's something I've avoided doing, because visiting his grave means admitting that he'll always be in it, for the rest of time. But grief, like any open wound, cannot bleed forever. The body cauterizes the blood even when the heart isn't ready to move on. I still ache for him, wish for him, and curse those who killed him, but I no longer believe that revenge is impossible.

Any day now, Hass will make a deal for his freedom, and he'll have to give up the men who killed Silas. The DA knows he has knowledge of vast criminal operations. They've caught the little fish; the big ones will follow. It's just a matter of time.

So as I finish up my last test the Friday before spring break, a bounce in my steps, I smile to see that Wally has sent me a photo of Old Bess, his truck. He's going to drive up early tomorrow morning and pick me up from Coleridge so I can spend all week with my mom, who set up a sleeper sofa in the living room of her apartment just for me.

It won't be like things were before—nothing will ever be the same. But slowly, as we lick our wounds, we're learning how to be a family again. Just the two of us. I'm looking forward to this week away from Coleridge more than anything, because I know that when I return Hass's court date will pop up, and there's a good chance I'll have to testify against him.

If I'm lucky, the judge will let me do that inside a closed room. Otherwise... otherwise, I'm not sure what I'll do, because the truth is, I fear for my life if Hass and the Syndicate ever realize I'm helping to put him away. The rage inside me last semester almost consumed me completely, but I'd give anything for it now, just to give me the wild courage of a girl who doesn't care if she lives or dies.

As I head towards Rosalind Hall, I spot a familiar pair of green-hazel eyes, looking pointedly in my direction. Sighing, I try to pretend like I haven't seen Cole and swerve past him, but he's not having any of it. He picks up the pace and cuts me off on the sidewalk, turning to face me, walking backwards without blinking—or apparently worrying that anyone will run into him.

"What do you want?"

"Why do I have to want something? Maybe I just enjoy your presence." I scowl at

him, and he chuckles, the sound of it somehow light and dark at the same time. "Ah, yes, that's the face that I enjoy talking to so much. The face screwed up in hatred and irritation."

"Seriously." Sighing, I stop, and he stops too. "Tell me what you want before you impale yourself on the wrought iron fence behind you."

"I was going to sidestep it," he says mildly, but then he gets serious. Looking back and forth, he checks to make sure that the path is clear, then take a step forward and lowers his voice to talk to me. "You can't go home for spring break. Not yet."

I frown at him, irritation rising inside me. "You're not the boss of me. Last I checked I don't have to ask your permission." I try to sidestep him and go through the gates towards Rosalind Hall, but he grabs my arm and holds me just tight enough to keep me still without squeezing to the point of discomfort. "What is it? Are you worried that once I've had a taste of home again, I won't want to come back and be forced to see your bright face every day? Because I gotta tell you, Cole Masterson doesn't factor into my decisions."

He sighs, starting to say something, only to pause as someone walks past us. The student, one I don't recognize, gives us a significant look. I inwardly curse at the realization that this will only add fuel to the fire that I have some weird obsessive crush on Cole, and have been stalking him all year. Nevermind that he's the one who follows me around campus—the thought that it could be the other way around never occurs to them.

Once the lookie-loo is gone, sure to spread gossip about us being together all around school, Cole leans in close to tell me, "They know your identity."

"Who?"

"The Syn... the men who Hass works for, who your brother works for." I stare at him, aware he almost spilled the secret to me. Apparently Blake never mentioned that part of our ruinous encounter. "If you go home, you'll be putting not just yourself at risk, but your family too. You have to stay here—under security. Where they'll keep a close eye on you."

Swallowing bitterly, I observe, "I'm sure you're going home."

"My father would have my hide if I didn't." Cole cocks his head, letting my words sink in. "Or did you think that spring break with the Mastersons was some kind of picnic? Because I can guarantee that my mother has never put cold cuts or a cheap bottle of wine in a wicker basket, or sat on a blanket on a field of grass, in her entire life. I'll be going home to get additional tutoring in business and finance so I can take over the family empire, not so my family can hug me and make me hot chocolate."

"Riveting. I feel so bad for you," I deadpan. "So I'm supposed to be trapped here on campus because I'm in danger, but you won't even tell me who's threatening me? What a load of shit. I'm not twiddling my thumbs here alone for a whole weeks." I yank my arm out of his hand, glaring daggers up at him. "Unless you can tell me what the danger is, I'm going home, and I'm not asking your permission."

"Fine." He throws his hands up, annoyance in his voice. "You're in danger from a criminal operation full of rich assholes and politicians who cover each other's dirty work up and do favors to consolidate power. They call themselves the Syndicate, which I think is absolutely fucking stupid. They might as well twirl their mustaches."

"You and your friends are called the Elites," I point out, voice dripping with the irony of it. "I don't think you have a leg to stand on."

"I didn't pick that name." Cole frowns at me. "So are you staying here or not? Because I told you the truth, not that it'll do you any good to know the specifics. The

people who are after you will kill you whether you can put a name to them or not."

"If they're so rich and powerful, why would I be safe here? The security here isn't that great."

"Because they have rules. They don't kill their own, or anywhere near witnesses from their tribe. And like it or not, as long as you're here at Coleridge, you're insulated because you're surrounded by us. So you have to stay here. At least until Hass is sentenced, hopefully fucking guilty, at which point they'll kick him out permanently, because members of the Syndicate aren't supposed to get caught."

I consider what he's saying, filing that info about Hass away in the back of my head. "If I stay here alone, it'll be as good as going home. They'll kill me if there are no witnesses around to object."

Saying those words—that there's a threat to my life—really hits home what I'm facing. This is big, way bigger than me, and I don't know what to do about that.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

"You won't be alone," Cole says, brightening a bit now that I've given in to his strength of will. "The Rosalinds will be here, and some of the boys from Hadley and Lawrence too. Oh—and DuPont. His parents are out traveling Europe on business, so he decided to stay back and study." He shakes his head, making a disgusted noise. "Sometimes he's a stick in the mud."

Lukas will be here. I don't know why, but that calms me considerably. Something about his blue eyes has always made me feel safe and secure, even when we were standing on the opposite side of a line drawn in the sand. Even though I don't understand why he stays friends with the other three, who are so different from him.

"I'll stay," I tell Cole, already planning what I'm going to tell my mom. "But it's the last time I do something you tell me. After this is all over—"

"You'll ride off into the sunset and never see us again. Right, right. We're all looking forward to it. Just try not to get eviscerated in the meantime."

I roll my eyes, then watch him turn on his heel and walk away, done with me completely now that he's gotten what he wanted. As he strolls down the path towards Hadley Hall, I can't help but notice the way people react to them: girls sway closer, boys dodge out of the way, and even the trees seem to twist their branches around to follow his passing.

The whole world bends to Cole Masterson's whims.

Including, apparently, me.

Chapter 22

There's nothing like a New England campus in spring, emptied of all the teachers and pressure of class, the air fresh and light, the sun drying up the last of winter's passing. Getting up the second morning of spring break, I throw off the covers, pull on relaxed clothing—no uniforms all week—and stroll towards the dining hall without a care in the world.

Somewhere down the path, Holly is no doubt jogging in her athletic wear, hair pulled up in a tight ponytail at the crown of her head. She broke up with her boyfriend recently; apparently Leo Cooper couldn't take the pressure of visiting her family's Chelsea home and having his picture splashed across the social pages. Holly has been mourning in the way only she would, by dusting herself off and going out jogging every morning before the sun rises.

The truth is, she doesn't seem that broken up. I think I know the reason for that: she never really loved Leo.

Not like she loved Cole.

And Cole, for all his glaring flaws, loved her too. Maybe that's why he's been more of an ass ever since they broke up. Without her calming presence like a balm in his life, he's all rough edges and flares of temper. I didn't used to get their relationship before, but now that I'm back in Holly's good graces, I at least understand it from his side.

No one can light up a room like Holly Schneider. And there's no girl in the world that makes you feel as if you could be a better person, just for her, if only to make her proud.

He must have really loved her.

He'll probably never be the guy he was with her again.

Shaking the thought off, I pad towards the dining hall in my slippers, reveling in the ability to walk this stately, stuck-up, old and moneyed campus without a care in the world or stuffy rules to keep me in line. Hardly anyone stays here for spring break—even Holly will be flying out to Paris for a few days soon—which means no line for the breakfast buffet, which has been moved out of the residence halls and into the Coleridge Center to consolidate things while there are so few of us to feed.

Glancing around at the faces at breakfast, I see only one familiar to me: Lukas DuPont himself, head bent over a familiar laptop screen. I reluctantly let him have it overnight, making him swear he'd take it absolutely everywhere with him and never let it out of sight. Apparently he listened, because he's got a plate of bacon, eggs, and toast beside him even as his fingers fly over the keyboard.

I grab my own favorite—a bagel with bacon, cheese, and eggs—before I join him at his table, sliding a tray across from him and watching as he slowly reacts to my presence. "You were really into whatever you were doing there. Playing Minecraft?"

"Actually," he says, his body practically vibrating with excitement, "I think I finally cracked it."

That gets my attention, and I find myself putting breakfast down so I can lean forward and stare at the screen. "What was it, some kind of absurd password?"

"I used all the information you gave me about your brother to try to figure out how he would encrypt something this important. And eventually I realized we were going about things the wrong way. I was trying to enter through the front door, you see, or break down the back. But the whole time he had tunnels underground to lead us right to where everything was. It was ingenious of him."

I stare at Lukas. "Can you explain that with fewer metaphors? But also don't make it confusing."

"Right of course. Uh... basically, I noticed this old text-based game on your brother's computer. It didn't seem to fit the style of the other games he's downloaded and played, so I booted it up, and as it turns out, the game has a back door into the hard drive partition. It unlocks it."

"Wow." My hands shake, and I fold them together to keep them still. "How?"

"At first it was like a maze. Then I realized he's hacked the game and customized it. Instead of being set in a fictional city, it was set in Wayborne. I just had to use a little map of your town, and walk the character to your house. Once I did, I tried all the rooms, and the one that unlocked the partition is, I'm pretty sure, your brother's room."

"Show me?"

He does, turning the screen so I can see as he walks a tiny text-based character through the front door of a simplistic version of my house. The character goes up the stairs, and the screen erases the image, then builds the upstairs. It's just like I remember it from before the tornado turned our lives upside down: my room, Silas's room, the long hallway, and our shared bathroom. Lukas nudges the character into the room on the left, which makes the game quit and a window with the contents of the hard drive partition pop up.

"It wasn't his room." I have to pinch my hand to concentrate on the present, and keep myself from crying about the past. "Silas programmed the back door to be through my bedroom."

"Ah. I wonder why."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

"He knew." Meeting Lukas's sympathetic blue eyes, I do my best to stay steady and calm, despite everything. "He must've known how risky it was to dig into... into the people he was working for. So he left me a message, just in case something happened to him. I should've realized it sooner, but I was so stuck on believing that I didn't know him. I forgot how well he knew me."

Of course my beloved twin brother, who protected me and kept me from seeing the worst, darkest parts of our lives, would have programmed the partition full of secrets to open only if I was the one trying to crack it. I was so busy trying to figure him out that I forgot I already knew him as well as any person can know another.

"There are folders inside the partition." Looking at the screen, I devour every letter, every word. "One named 'June 27th,' while the rest are called... 'The Cook, The Thief, The Master, The Apprentice,' and... 'Brenna.' Why did he name a folder after me?"

"Let's find out." Lukas double clicks the folder, but an error window pops up, announcing that the folder is password protected. "Wow. Your brother was thorough."

"Or paranoid." Frustration mounts inside me. "We're so close that I can taste it. But it doesn't even matter if I can't open up this folder."

"Any idea what the password might be? He named it after you."

"I have no idea. Scratch that, I have a few ideas. Way too many to count. I'm just not sure if I want to know what's in here." Taking over the laptop trackpad, I scroll through the window and count a dozen folders total, none of them specific except for

the one with the date and the one with the name. "All of these are in code. I'm sure they're all password protected too."

"Let's find out." One by one Lukas double clicks all the icons, and every one of them throws up the same window. He shrugs at me. "It was worth a try."

"I can't believe him." I huff out a sigh of frustration. "If I'd known this was what Silas was up to, I would've looked over his shoulder while he was on his laptop more often."

"It's not that bad. If he had twelve passwords, they all had to be memorable. He might've even written them down somewhere—do you have any notebooks of his?"

"No." Miserable, I tell him, "If he had any, the tornado would've destroyed them."

"Well then, we'll just have to figure it out the old fashioned way. Don't worry." Lukas shoots me a surprisingly optimistic smile. "We'll figure it out eventually. Just give it some time."

That's the thing I'm worried about.

There isn't much time to spend.

* * *

My spring break is lost to a fever of trying to crack the password to the Brenna folder.

I take a shot at a few of the others, knowing that some of them, at least, are named in honor of the movie *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*. It was one of Silas's favorite movies, even though it was produced long before we were born. Cook could be a code name for someone who makes drugs, and Master is probably whoever is in

charge of the Syndicate. But many of the folders—The Dog, The Rebel, The Boss—seem repetitive or strange.

What I want to know is why he named a folder after me and kept it with all of this information on the men who he was apparently digging into. Every day I wake up and type passwords into the window until my stomach grumbles; every night I tug my comforter over my head to shield the screen from keeping Holly up, and then later just to keep me warm, as I wrack my head trying to figure out new passwords that could crack it.

The break is almost over when it hits me, while I'm out for a walk, the laptop on my back safely in my backpack. I should've realized it before, but I was too busy looking for the obvious, trying everything from my birthday to my astrology sign to the nickname Mom gave me when I was a toddler, Knee-High.

But it wasn't any of those, because the folder isn't about me. It's a message to me. Which means that my brother would've used a password that related to our relationship. Not some obscure fact about me that anyone could figure out or guess, but instead something only I would know, because we were the only two people who knew it.

Jogging over to one of the outdoor picnic tables in the quad, I swing the backpack off my shoulders and pull the laptop out with trembling hands. It's a good thing no one is here to see me, because I'm shaking from head to toe, full of nervous anxiety as well as an incredible amount of excitement—and more than a little dread.

I hope that whatever is in this folder, it's something I want to see.

My fingers shake so hard as I type out the password that I have to delete it twice and start over again. But once I get it in right, the password window clears, and the folder opens wide, for my eyes only.

FLAMEBUGS.

It was a word I came up with for fireflies when we were both eleven. My tongue tied, my brain spaced, and I couldn't remember any of their nicknames: lightning bugs, fireflies, even glow worms. So I blurted out the first thing I could think of, Silas laughed for minutes, and ever after that we called them flamebugs—but only when it was just the two of us around, catching them in our cupped palms.

I didn't even name the painting I made of the two of us after our nickname. It felt too much like a secret. I haven't said that word since he died—and even before he did, we'd long outgrown our era of catching bright, glowing bugs in our hands and watching them light up our skin, letting them go against each other's arms and laughing at the tickling they caused.

My eyes tear up at the fact that the password worked. He really did make this folder for me. As a message to me.

I have to wipe away the tears to focus on the screen and see what's inside. All I find are two files: a word document, and a video clip with a thumbnail of my brother's face.

Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes, breath out, and close the laptop. Swallowing, I look at Lukas and tell him, "I'll watch it later tonight. When I'm alone."

"Of course." Reaching over, he briefly covers my hand with his—then winces, as if remembering something, and pulls back from me. "If you need anything, just let me know. But I have the feeling that the passwords are all going to be things only you can figure out. And whatever information is inside, it's up to you to decide what to take to the police."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

"Thank you," I tell him. "For everything."

I mean it.

* * *

It takes me hours to get up the courage to open the files.

My room is empty, Holly galavanting across Paris, her social media feed full of photos of her with her family. I envy her the life that she has, not for the money and privilege—though that's part of it—but because of how easy and simple her family life seems to be.

She's not getting messages from her murdered brother, all the way from beyond the grave.

The word document is a letter. I read each word over and over, wishing it was longer, wiping tears out of my eyes periodically.

Brenna, if you're reading this, then the worst has happened. Well, two possible terrible things have happened: either I'm gone, in which case you better not eat all my chocolate oranges, or you've somehow become a hacker. That second thing seems unlikely, knowing you, but stranger things have happened.

I'm sorry you have to find out this way, but there are things you need to know. The first of which is: I haven't told you the whole truth. I wanted to, but I was afraid you'd look at me differently. I always told you that I'd take you out of Wayborne. What I

didn't tell you is that I was willing to do anything to make sure it happened. Even break the law.

I fell in with a bad crowd. How it happens doesn't really matter, but I should admit: that summer camp I went to was a lie, and so were a good half of the times I told you and Mom and our shithead of a dad that I was going to a game out of town with Wally. The truth is that I was meeting with my new bosses. I was getting assignments. And making money. More than you can imagine. Almost enough to go to New York and send you to NYU. Almost.

I thought I could look the other way long enough to dig us all out together. That changed, though. I saw things. Things I couldn't just ignore. More than just drugs or fraud. People were hurt. Lives were taken. I realized that I had to do something, and I knew it was dangerous. So I started gathering evidence. And then one day, I realized that what I was doing had become so dangerous that the only way out might be the end of me. I've been planning on writing this letter for a long time. Today is the day I do it.

I'm sorry, Brenna. Sorry I wasn't a better brother. Sorry that I left you (because we both know you didn't hack this computer.) Most of all, I'm sorry that I didn't get to see you do all the things I know you're going to do: figure yourself out, graduate and go places, get married to someone who'll have no idea what they're in for. Brothers are supposed to be there for their sister.

If you want to, you can pick up where I left off and take down the people who I'm sure are behind my sudden "disappearance." But I understand if you want nothing to do with any of it. God knows I would go back and have nothing to do with it too if I could.

I love you. Goodbye.

Tearing up, I read the letter two more times, then click the video and press play. It's very short, maybe fifteen seconds at the most. In it Silas sits in front of his computer—this computer—and speaks directly into the camera.

"This is the last living will and testament of Silas Edwin Wilder. I leave all I have, what little there is of it, to my sister Brenna Caroline Wilder. That includes my bank account and all its content, ending in the numerals 1534. That is all."

Blinking, I stare at the video. All around me the campus of Coleridge is quiet, a late spring chill settled into the air, the trees spending all their effort on making new leaves. A cloud passes over the sun, and I can see the laptop screen more clearly without the glare of light overhead.

My brother had a bank account.

One with money in it.

Money that got him killed.

Feeling sick, I close the laptop, and vow that I won't touch a single cent unless necessary. I can't even imagine what I'd do with it, but I know that I would give all the money in the world up just to have one more second with him.

Without even knowing it, I got tangled in the same forces he faced off with, the ones that ultimately killed him. I just hope I don't wind up in the same place as him.

I will take up his mission, and use the evidence he risked his life collecting.

Even though I wish he had told me what he was doing when he was still alive, so we could've faced the Syndicate together—or gone down together, like the mirror images of each other we were.

Chapter 23

The knock on the door rouses me from a late afternoon nap. I'm not expecting anyone, especially because spring break isn't quite over yet, so I call out, "Holly isn't here right now. Her flight doesn't land for another hour."

"It's me, and I'm here for you." Lukas's accent slips through the doorway, and I find myself getting out of bed quickly, squinting at my reflection in the bathroom mirror and trying to make the most of what I see. "I can come back later, if you're busy or... something. I just thought since it's the last day of spring break it'd be nice to do something fun. Even though we can't really leave campus. But maybe it was a silly idea."

"Just a second!" He sounds like he's considering turning around and leaving, so I add, "I'll go with you. I just need to get dressed."

A low chuckle from the other side of the door. "Having a lay in, are we? I'll wait. Just don't forget to take your jacket—it might be cold where we're going."

That gets my attention. The only places we can go are on campus, after all, and I've been to and from Carthage Library and the dining hall plenty of times. So much so, in fact, that I'm getting pretty sick of the old books that stretch floor to ceiling like something out of a fairytale.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

Okay, sono onecould get completely sick of all those books, not unless they're a monster. But it does start to become a little repetitive. I video chatted with my mom, Wally, and Jade back home, but it isn't the same as being there. Pacing the confines of the buildings I'm allowed to be in makes me feel like an animal in a cage.

What chafes the most is that I'm not even sure Cole is right about the danger to me. After all, Georgia is testifying, and he claims that the Syndicate doesn't go after their own. Surely there's no point in taking out me, the second witness, as long as Georgia's bruises and moneyied family speak for themselves.

Doing my best to look presentable, I grab my jacket, put a scarf around my neck, and greet Lukas at the door. "So, you're springing me. But I can't imagine anywhere on campus is possibly cold enough to justify dressing for cold weather. Itisofficially spring, you know."

"You'll see. It's a surprise." Reaching out, he takes my hand, and my stomach does strange, flip-flopping things. "I figured you'd be getting cabin fever by now, so I thought a little vacation was in order. And since you can't leave campus... well, you'll see. I've got it all planned out. Just come with me."

He leads me through the halls of Rosalind, seeming not to care at all that boys aren't supposed to be allowed in here. Warm spring air hits us as we walk down the front steps towards the campus paths, as all around us the world blooms to life, heat and sunlight returning to Great Falls like a flower's petals unfurling.

"You know, it's a little unseasonably warm," I comment, as I feel a trickle of sweat go down my back, right between my shoulder blades. "I'm starting to regret my outfit."

"Let's hurry, then." Pulling me along in his wake, he starts half-jogging down the path. I grumble, but he just aims a grin back at me and goes faster. "You can do it, Brenna!"

Laughing, I follow along with him as he kicks the pace up to a full-out run. The spring sun seems to beat down on me, turning my scarf into a nightmare around my neck. Soon enough, though, Lukas is slowing down, then stopping, leading me right to the athletics building.

"I've never been in here," I confess, staring at the lettering that reads Coleridge Athletics Facility. "It doesn't have a cool name like Carthage Library."

"But there's cool stuff inside."

I look at him curiously, and he raises his brows at me as he scans his ID to open the doors and let us inside.

"You haven't figured it out yet?" Motioning for me to go first, he gives me a bright, childish grin. "C'mon, Brenna. Surely you know by now what we're about to do."

I'm about to shoot back an annoyed response when a blast of cold air from the center washes over me, carrying a particular scent with it, and I realize all at once. "The indoor skate rink."

"Yep. That's exactly it." He walks in behind me as I drink in the chill air, the smell of winter somehow still lingering despite the warmth breaking over the world outside. "I thought maybe you could use the distraction. Plus they're melting it tomorrow to make way for spring and summer sports, so."

"I didn't even know the school had an ice rink. It seems so..."

"Upper class of us?" Lukas runs a hand through his hair. "The school also has a water polo team and an off-campus equestrian barn."

To think, they could've created more than a handful of scholarships a year, instead of devoting so much money to useless sports. No one at Coleridge is going to become a horse trainer or Olympic figure skater—not when they have trust funds at their disposal and companies to co-found on their eighteenth birthdays.

Still, as I walk over towards the lockers and spot a whole collection of extra skates, just sitting there and pristine for use, I find that I want more than just to hate Coleridge and all it represents. I want to forget my worries. To indulge in a little silliness with a boy who has kind eyes and cares about me enough to bring me to all this, just at the moment when I was feeling the worst.

"Thank you," I tell him, "but I can't skate."

"That's what I'm here for."

Lukas shows me how to tightly lace the skates up to my ankles, enough so that my feet will be supported, not so tight that my blood flow is cut off. He has his own pair of skates in one of the lockers, because apparently the ice rink is open to students who reserve it on the weekends, and he's one of those students.

Softly, he says, "I always loved ice skating. My mother used to bring me down to the frozen pond near our house in the winter, back when we lived in Brussels the second time around. She taught me and my stepsister how to believe that the ice would hold us up, no matter what."

"You sound like you miss her. I'm surprised you didn't go home for the break."

He grimaces, shaking his head. "Which home? My father spends all his time at the

embassy in DC, or with my stepmother at her home in Rhode Island. My mother is always flying from London, to Paris, to Rome, checking on all of our warehouses and marketing campaigns. Harrington Foods is more her child than me. Now that I'm old enough to take care of myself, she expects me to do just that."

"I'm sorry," I tell him, surprising myself by really feeling it. "That must be hard."

Lukas considers my words. "It is, but it isn't. I know they love me. They show it in other ways, by making sure I'm always well-fed, educated, and traveled. My mother would cross the whole world in an instant for me if she thought it was what I needed. My father would probably bring down the whole US government to protect me. But neither one of them will ever hold me while I cry. It's a different kind of love."

The kind of love the blue bloods have. A love where you send your child away to a strange and unfamiliar place, so they can have the best education in the world—even if they cry themselves to sleep at night. I can't imagine what it's like to go to a boarding school as a child. Even now, at the age of seventeen, I miss my mother in a way so unfamiliar to me that it aches deep inside. I wouldn't have been able to do this at twelve, or worse, even earlier.

Lukas helps me out onto the ice, laughing a little—not mockingly—as I walk around the rink with my ankles buckled like a newborn deer and grasp onto the railings at all times. He shows me how to balance the blade beneath me, and tells me stories of his childhood in Belgium as he takes my hands and guides me out onto the ice.

I fall. More than once. Each time the pain is a little less, although I don't know if that's because I'm learning how to fall better, or just because my ass cheeks are going numb. Lukas never laughs at my clumsy movements, and slowly, with his hand taking mine, I start to feel more confident. I venture further out onto the ice.

After about an hour or so, when we're both feeling the cold and the effort of

propelling the human body on top of frozen water with just blades beneath us, we head off the ice and shed out jackets. Lukas walks along the campus with me, pointing out the places where birds are building their nests and squirrels frolicking in high branches.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

"I always love spring here in Connecticut," he says, tilting his head up towards the sun, which is peeking out from behind a brief cloud cover. "It's lovely."

"It is." Looking around at the trees, I'm struck by the fact that the landscape of Coleridge has changed so much in the past two months, but I've barely noticed. I've been so consumed by revenge and retribution that I didn't look up from my homework and my worries long enough to see the world around me. "I wish I could stay for longer than just a semester and a half. Everything around here is beautiful."

"I wish that too." His voice has a low quality, something somber in his tone. "You're so beautiful."

It takes me a moment to realize that he's not talking about the landscape anymore. When I dare to meet his eyes, it's me he's looking at, unafraid to show his desire on his face. The sight of it makes a warm blush travel from my neck up to my cheekbones, which flush with embarrassment—and a desire all my own.

"I thought you'd never forgive me," I tell him, stopping beside him on the path, the two of us surrounded by an empty canvas. "What I did to you... I should've trusted you. I should've gone to you before I posted those things about you on Legacies."

"I've made my fair share of mistakes. And I understand now where you were coming from." He reaches out with one hand and brushes my hair back over my shoulder with his fingertips, his touch briefly skimming across my neck and sending fire wherever our skin meets. "That desire for destruction, for revenge, it lives in all of us. And it can destroy what it touches if we're not careful."

"You've never struck me as someone reckless." Looking up into his eyes, I feel my heart do reckless things as the space between us closes, a murmur turning into a whisper, a whisper into a breath. "Everything you do is careful. Planned. I doubt you've left any destruction in your wake ever."

"Yes, Cole does mock me for being a stick in the mud." A ghost of a smile flits across his lips, the mouth I've seen photographed and splashed across a thousand media pages now quirked in the tiniest bit of lopsided bitterness. "But I think I can't be careful anymore. There's something I want too much to care about the consequence. Someone I want, even if it destroys... well, everything."

I don't part my lips to ask who he means. It's clear he's talking about me. There are so many types of destruction he could be talking about. I've kissed all three of his closest friends. I nearly slept with one of them before I realized I was making a mistake. We both know that I'll be gone soon, somewhere a privileged son like him can't follow, all the way to the backwoods of Virginia that birthed me, far from his duties to his family.

The destruction doesn't seem to matter as our mouths come close enough for our lips to brush. I instinctively go up on my tip toes, leaning forward, and he catches me before I can fall too far, his hands bracing my arms and cupping my shoulders. Keeping my eyes open, I watch him from inches away, seeing the color that darkens his cheeks, the way his brows slant together as if what's about to happen weighs on him already.

In a low voice, he says, "We shouldn't."

"We will," I tell him, like I carry a disastrous future in my palms. "The match is lit, the spark is set."

"Let it burn."

He kisses me like a man, and not a boy just seventeen years old. His mouth is gentle but all-consuming. The first part of his kiss is slow and deliberate, his lips moving up and down on mine, his mouth just close enough to ignite desire deep within me, without a hint of tongue or anything deeper.

This is no rash, fast, sloppy kiss. Lukas takes his time with me, just like always. He keeps his hands on me to support my weight even as I lean towards him, put my palms against his broad chest, and drink of the subtle, water-like scent on his skin. First he gently takes my upper lip between his. Then, when I make a low gasping sound, wanting more, he takes my bottom lip and catches every nerve in it on fire with the deliberate caress of his mouth.

Slanting his lips, he deepens the kiss. Soon his mouth is exploring mine, the touch of his lips and his tongue skilled and gentle instead of probing or insistent. He doesn't pull our bodies together, doesn't press his arousal against me or put his hands beneath my skirt or my shirt. Instead he takes his time, and when he pulls away from me I'm left wanting more.

So much more.

Hands on his chest, I look up into his eyes and feel something wobble inside me. "Do that again."

His mouth quirks up in a smile. "We should probably get inside."

"Again," I repeat.

Eyes darting around to make sure we're alone, he leans in close and begins a shallow, perfunctory kiss that he clearly means to end quickly. But I'm not having it. Putting my hand on the back of his neck, I draw him in for a repeat performance. My toes curl as he lets out a little groan, halfway between arousal and frustration, and I know

that he feels so much more desire for me than he lets himself show with his body on mine.

This time, when we part, he has a wild look in his eyes, and his breath is coming short and fast, like he just ran somewhere without even knowing why.

"Let's get you home," he says, lacing his fingers in mine, "before you put on a performance the whole school won't forget."

"What? Oh." I realize, belatedly, that cars are starting to pull into the lot. Soon the campus won't be so empty. It's all going to begin again. "Thank you for the evening out."

"Of course. I'll escort you to your place," he jokes, putting his elbow out so I can lace my hand through. "An adventure is just what you needed, I think."

He's not wrong. I've been laying around in my room, morose, bored, and bitter, for so long that I forgot there were things outside that door. Even worse, I forgot there were people I could spend time with.

Lukas never asked what was on the laptop partition with my name on it, and I never told him, but I feel as if I could and he wouldn't let it slip to the rest of the Elites. There's something different about him; he's deliberate, slow, gentle, kind. For the hundredth time, I find myself wondering why he's even one of them.

This time, I dare to ask. "Lukas..."

"Yes?"

"I've been wondering." I lick my lips, feeling his eyes follow the motion, and heat rises within me again. It takes effort to concentrate on the question I want to ask.

"Why are you friends with Blake, Tanner, and Cole? Especially... especially Cole."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

His shoulders tighten, and his steps slow, tension thinning out his mouth. I can tell he doesn't like the question, but thankfully he says, "I don't blame you for wondering."

Hastily, I add, "You're all so different. But you most of all. And not just because you were born in Europe."

"Our parents have been friends for a long time. Especially my mom and Cole's father."

"Is that it?" I study him. "Because your friendship seems deeper than just convenience or childhood nostalgia."

Not meeting my eyes, he admits, "You're right. We have a bond that exists outside our circle of influential and powerful family members. Even if we didn't go to the same school now, we'd probably have the same friendship. But we're very different people."

"So why?" I press him. "Why be friends with him at all?"

"Because..." He trails off, seemingly reflecting, and I wonder if he's remembering every moment of his childhood with Cole. "He's not just the person you see now. There's more to him."

"Like what?"

"His fierce loyalty. His belief in others. The fact that he never backs down, even if sometimes that's more of a flaw than anything. Cole has been there for me. He'll be

there for you, too, as you testify."

"Somehow I doubt that." Looking up at him, I dare to ask, "Will you be there for me in the coming storm? Not just today, but in the future?"

"I'll try." He squeezes my hand, and warmth flows through me. "Whatever you need, just tell me."

"Another kiss wouldn't hurt," I tease him.

Leaning down, he tilts my chin up with his fingertips and presses his warm, parted lips to mine. The kiss is deeper, more confident now that we've done this a few times. He knows the way in, can sense how to stroke his tongue across my bottom lip and make me shiver with delight.

Pure pleasure courses through me, undeniable and raw in a way I've never felt before.

Until a voice cuts through it all and ends everything. "What the fuck do you think you're doing? Get away from him—get away from each other!"

I take dizzying steps back at the sound of Cole's anger, heart leaping to my throat in panic and he strides over to us, Tanner trailing in his wake by several feet. Anger written in the lines of his face, his scowling brows and harsh green eyes, Cole reaches out with both hands—and shoves Lukas in the chest so hard that he nearly falls.

"Cole!" Angry at him for ruining a perfect moment, I step between him and Lukas, even though I don't know what the hell I'm doing. Cole is just as likely to shove me as to stop fighting. "Cut it out."

"You." He spits the word out, looking at me like I'm a rabid dog that turned up on his doorstep. "The sooner you leave, the better for all of us."

Lukas, rubbing his chest, frowns at his friend. In a voice full of quiet rebuke he simply says, "Cole."

"I mean it. What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Cole advances on us, and I can't tell if he's trying to intimidate me or threatening to shove Lukas again. "This is some two-timing manipulative bullshit."

I scowl at him. "What the fuck are you talking about? I'm not two-timing anyone."

"Oh yeah?" Cutting his eyes up at Lukas, he demands, "Did she tell you that just a few weeks ago she nearly fucked Blake?"

"Hey!" Bringing my hands up, I shove him, just a little, but my half-assed strength does nothing but get me two palms full of warm chest. My eyes go to Tanner, standing casually behind Cole, looking bored out of his mind, then back to Cole's piercing green eyes full of anger. "There's nothing between me and Blake. Besides, that was months ago. And it wasn't... we didn't go out on a date or anything."

"So you're fast and easy," Cole taunts, and I blush furiously, shoving him again—this time hard enough to send him stumbling half a step back. I can feel students starting to trickle in from off campus, and the embarrassment of this, how public it is, makes me want to stab Cole to death. He says, "You know, Brenna, I've heard before that country girls are bow-legged for a reason. I just never knew how indiscriminate you'd be. What, one rich guy isn't enough for you? What's next—all four of us?"

He makes it sound like I want their money. But that's not why I'm doing this at all. Every bit of it has been a means to an end.

"All I want is revenge for my brother."

"So you don't want us, then, do you?"

"No!" I declare, curling my hands into fists in front of me. "I don't want you at all!"

"See?" Cole lifts his eyes and looks at Lukas, who is standing right behind me. "You're just a tool for her. A way to get back at the system that ground Silas into dust. She doesn't care about you—she'll never care about you. It's all a game to her."

Horror mounts inside me, and I whirl to face Lukas, trying to stammer out an explanation. "It's not—I didn't mean you. I wasn't using you."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

His blue eyes are sad as he says, "I'm different, then?"

"Yes!" I cling on to this explanation. "You're not like the others."

"I knew you judged us harshly, Brenna." He shakes his head, looking away into the trees. "I just had no idea that you thought so little of me. That you didn't even think this might've meant something to me. You see," he leans forward, voice pitched low, hands in his pockets, "I am like the others you scorn. I have distant parents and too much money. People are always trying to use me for my influence and connections. I thought maybe... well, you seemed different. But clearly all you want is what you can get from me. You don't even care if you bleed me dry."

"That's not true," I protest.

"Then tell me you have feelings for me. Tell me our time together today meant something to you."

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Bewildered, I realize that I've never told anyone I have feelings for them, not like this at least. I don't even know what it looks like to see two people fall in honest, genuine love. Every example in my life, from my grandfather and grandmother to my parents, has been toxic and terrible. There were no soft declarations of love or simple kisses.

I have no idea how to tell Lukas how I feel about him. The truth is, I don't even know if I do have feelings for him. And he would see it if I lie.

"See?" His mouth twists up bitterly; my silence is answer enough, for him. "Cole was

right. You're just playing games. I should've... well. It's for the best that you'll be leaving soon. That was always the plan."

Standing on the path to Rosalind Hall, as students awkwardly drag their designer suitcases around us, Lukas looks at me one last time, then turns around and walks away.

I have the feeling he won't be coming back.

Cole aims a triumphant smirk in my direction. "Just because we agreed to help you with one thing, doesn't mean you get to use us whenever you want. Lukas deserves better. I'll be glad to see you go."

"I can't wait to leave," I tell him, hating the fact that it's a lie.

I want to stay here, at Coleridge, more than ever before. Not for revenge. Not because of hate.

But because I'm finally starting to find myself, and I can only finish doing it here.

I don't see Cole walk away; I can barely look at him, because my own worst qualities are reflected back at me when I do. Slowly, spring breakers returning to campus start to stream around me, and I hold my breath to keep from crying.

Footsteps behind me. A familiar scent. Someone stands at my shoulder, casual, easy, never tense or uncomfortable.

He watched the whole thing.

I wonder what cruel jab will fall from his mouth in a dripping Southern drawl.

"Hey Brenna," Tanner says, "wanna go dirt bike riding with me?"

Chapter 24

"No one else will go," he complains, as I stare at him in bafflement. "All these rich kids are so precious about their skincare routines. You'd think a little mud would turn them into a puddle of goo. They're not like us."

I frown. "Us?"

"You know what I mean. Virginia is Southern. Especially your part of it. I know you've taken a tumble in the mud before." He's not wrong. "You don't seem to give a shit about a few scrapes and a little dirt underneath your fingernails. There's still half a day of spring break left. Come with me. It's the only chance you'll get to go off campus before they lock you in those classrooms and make you study yourself to death."

This is the last thing I expected to happen today, but somehow it makes perfect sense. Still, I can't help but look for the trap. I've barely had any interaction with Tanner since last semester. He's been content to go along with the ride, following Cole's lead, occasionally making swipes in my direction. Other than the triumph on his face the day Hass was arrested, he's barely seemed to care about what was going on around him at all.

"Why not just go by yourself? I'm sure you don't need me."

"Because it's boring as fuck alone." He doesn't sound like he's lying. With a shrug, he adds, "Besides, you seem like you could use the chance to run off some steam. This place is basically a super fucking fancy prison for lonely kids whose parents don't want to raise them. You don't belong here."

Unsaid in his words is the fact that he does belong here. Senator Connally sent his eldest, his only son, off to boarding school, while keeping his two daughters by his side as he campaigns for the presidential nomination. It's not hard to see why he would want foul-mouthed, prank-pulling Tanner somewhere else, given his penchant for trouble and his inability to keep his dick in his pants for long. But Tanner doesn't sound sad about it, just matter of fact in an almost joking way.

It would be nice to have an engine between my legs, the air all around me, defying gravity with a dirt bike in some off-road course somewhere. Which begs the question, "How are you going to get me off campus without testing Cole's wrath? He seems convinced I'll be assassinated as soon as I step outside the gates."

"Cole is paranoid." Tanner rolls his eyes, dismissing him with a flap of his hand that turns into a rude gesture. "You'll be fine. I'll have my butler take you in my SUV." He grins at his own joke. "Actually, the athletics director says he'll drive me. And I promise to single-handedly fight off any assassins who come for us."

I snort in derision at his mockery of my very real fears of being hurt or worse, but the truth is that I'm desperate to get off campus and blow off some steam. Especially now that my heart is hurting because of what Lukas said to me.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

"Show me your dirt bikes, Connally. Let's have some fun."

* * *

I should've known there would be alcohol.

Tanner has a can of what's ostensibly seltzer but is clearly alcoholic based on the way he keeps pausing between runs to drink it down. The athletics director, who's supposed to be supervising us, doesn't seem to notice or care—he's standing a good hundred feet away, at the edge of the dirt-packed race course, talking on his cell phone. The senator's son drinks half a can of something with a cherry on it without even being noticed.

"C'mon," he cajoles, as I do another tepid loop on the bike I borrowed, "get down in the pit with me and do some tricks."

He brought me to a tricked-out race course for dirt biking, complete with a long flat loop to race around and several hills to jump off of. The course stretches out as far as my eye can see, a strange and unnatural part of the Connecticut landscape. For all I know Georgia Connally built it for his son. It's certainly got quite the drop off from the flat area I've been testing my bike skills on and the pit where Tanner has been doing tricks.

Eyeing the incline, I feel my stomach go all wobbly. "I thought we were going to bike in some field or something. Or down a dirt road. Not... this."

"I can find a dirt road for you, if you want." Tanner aims a white flash of a grin at me,

then glances over at the glorified gym teacher. "We'll just have to ditch the help. Or pay him off."

Suede, the official Director of Athletics Activities at Coleridge, shoots a frown in Tanner's direction. "What's that?"

Tanner calls out, "The girl wants to bike that way." He points across the road from us, towards a field a mile long and a gravel road that vanishes between the trees. "We'll come back in an hour or two. Maybe more."

The wink he sends my way makes it clear what the "more" is meant to be, but for some reason I don't get flustered or irritated. I know by now when to take Tanner seriously and when to just ignore him. He's trying to lighten the mood more than anything, because he saw what happened between me and Lukas, and knows what's going to happen in just over a week when I testify.

I still don't know if I've properly explained to my mom and Wally what the testifying means. They know I witnessed something, and they know I'm the Jane Doe in the Ferdinand Von Hassell case. But they have no idea the danger I'm facing. I had to tell my mom I had too much homework to come back to Wayborne for spring break, a lie that stuck in my throat like a clenched fist.

More than anything, I want someone I can trust and confide in about this. Even Holly doesn't know it's me who's testifying—though I think she suspects. Georgia has managed to keep that secret. Until I tell her, or someone back home, the only people I have who know the truth are Georgia and the Elites.

What a cold shoulder to rely on for comfort.

"Alright." The athletics director eyes each of us, and apparently decides that as long as we come home alive, he doesn't care what else happens. "Be back in ninety

minutes. No more. None of this hour or two shit. Got it?"

Tanner grins like the cat who got the canary. "Got it. Let's go, Brenna."

We ride our dirt bikes across the road, me at a slower clip than him, my hands squeezing tight on the handlebars. Unlike Tanner I'm wearing a helmet, and my vision of his bike on the road ahead of me makes him seem like a dark silhouette, leading me astray. As we reach the dirt road and he stops, I push the visor up so I can see him better.

"Let me catch up!"

He slows his pace for me, the dappled overhead sun shining spots of gold on his face and neck, turning a boy into something else before my eyes, something wild and free like a forest sprite. For a moment, seemingly unaware he's being watched, Tanner pauses on the road and tilts his head up towards the canopy overhead, the long stretch of his throat vulnerable. A kind of peace falls over his face, and I wonder if I'm imagining things, or if sadness briefly changes his mouth into the shape of a sigh.

The expression leaves, and he shoots a grin over his shoulder at me. "Keep up, Wilder! I don't have all day."

Rolling my eyes, I look down at my bike and decide it's now or never. Time to rev the engine and prove that I can keep up with even the wildest of boys.

I can feel my brother's shadow spirit at my back, egging me on, his hands clenched on the handlebars next to mine, his voice goading and teasing. As Tanner calls out, "Let's go!" I can't tell if it's his voice or the echo of my brother's that I hear.

Turning the engine all the way up, I let the bike loose, aiming for the road ahead of Tanner, right where it widens. As I pass him he lets out a holler of delight, his voice a

wild whoop tinged with an unfixed drawl of an accent that his father has no doubt given up on getting rid of. A moment later I hear the roar of his bike behind me, and know he's fast on my tail.

As the road bends and we leave the world behind, I forget everything.

Who I am.

Who he is.

What I've lost.

What I've yet to gain.

I'm just a girl with a wild scream strangled in my throat, the wind whipping my clothing back, an engine warm and roaring between my legs. Gravel sprays beneath the bike's tires, and I let the scream out of my throat, yelling as loud as I can into the empty abandoned wilderness.

Tanner's voice joins mine, whooping so loud it echoes through the trees around us, filling the empty spaces and bouncing back. Electricity tingles in my fingertips and toes, and I grin even as the acceleration forces the visor of my helmet down and cuts off part of the light of the world.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

I feel as close to flying as I've ever been.

As close to being free as a girl with one foot in the grave and half a heart left to love can ever be.

We speed down the road, Tanner sometimes swerving ahead of me, only for me to catch him on a bend. The ground slowly dips bit by bit until suddenly we're accelerating fast down an incline, so fast my heart jumps into my throat. As the gravel road spills into a wide-open field, trees and posts in the distance, I slam on the brakes—too hard. I feel my stomach do a somersault as I come to a stop on the road and almost fall off the bike. As it is, the thing skids beneath me and flips me over, and I wince as the gravel skins my leg, pants yanked up to my knee, skin on fire.

Tanner comes to a stop nearby, more slowly and in control, then leaps off his bike and rushes over to me. The first thing he does is reach out and grab my helmet, gently lifting it off my head and looking into my eyes, the sun shining down on him. I bite down on my lip to keep from whining about the pain, feeling like a fool.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine." Wincing, I look down at my legs, the breath hissing through my teeth. "Just feel stupid is all. I should've known not to brake too quickly. I'm an idiot."

"Nah. It's a mistake anyone could make." His fingers are warm on my cheeks as he tilts my face up towards the sun and stares at me intently. "Your pupils are responding to light." Seeming not to care about how close we are at all, he runs impatient fingers through my hair, and relaxed minutely. "No bump on your head."

You were lucky—all you got is a bit of road rash. It'll scab over and itch like a bitch, but you'll be fine."

"Thanks." Tanner doesn't take his fingers out of my hair right away, slowly drawing them down towards my neck, then abruptly pulling back as if he's been stung. I watch his expression shift from wide open to closed off, turning back into the boy who's uninterested in what goes on around him, who mostly grunts instead of speaking. Impulsively, I ask him, "What's the deal with you and your dad?"

He frowns at me. "That's a pretty big leap in conversation."

"We're gonna be stuck here for a while," I point out. "And I've been wondering why it is that you hate him so much. I mean, the way you talk about him, it's like you'd love nothing more than for his campaign to be ruined. But don't you want him to be president? You'd get to live in the White House and flirt with a whole new crop of privileged teenage girls."

Sighing, he combs his fingers through his short-cropped hair, then licks his lips and gets to his feet. Holding out a hand, he helps me up, then motions towards a bench in the distance. "Might as well sit down. I'll probably have to get that asshole Suede to drive over here and pick us up. You're in no condition to ride back."

I hate to admit that he's right. He offers his arm for me to lean on, and I reluctantly take it, only able to put a little bit of weight on my left leg without hissing in pain. The cuts in my skin are shallow, but they stretch from ankle to knee, inches wide and painful. Tanner grabs the bags off the back of his dirt bike as we walk past it, then lowers me gently onto the bench, staring at my leg. The blood, at least, is helping to wash the dirt away. Lucky me.

It doesn't seem like he's going to answer my question. Opening the bag, he pulls out a water bottle and a flat pack which, once he opens it, reveals a small first aid kit with

some ace bandages and antibiotic cream. Surprise flickers across my face, and he smirks at me. "What, you thought Lukas was the only boy scout? I know a thing or two."

"I thought that pack was full of hard seltzer," I confess. In response, Tanner pulls out three cans, condensation dripping down their silver bodies, and I roll my eyes. "Of course."

"You might want one." He passes a cherry flavored can over to me, and I take it, curious. "This is going to sting."

That's all the warning I get before he's pouring cool water over my road rash, making me bite down on my lip from the sudden pain. The water flushes the dirt from my skin, revealing all the little pockmarked spots where the gravel scratched me to hell. With my luck, it'll probably be red and angry for a while before it fades, ruining the warm weather outfits I've been hoping to wear.

As Tanner uncaps the ointment and starts to carefully spread it on my skin, I open up the can of seltzer and drink deep, surprised by the pleasant fizzy taste of it. There's no heavy bitter punch of alcohol, which makes me think it'd be easy to get drunk on something like this—that's probably the point.

Con conversationally, Tanner says, "Evangeline Connally isn't my mother."

My head jerks around towards him, and I nearly choke on the seltzer sliding down my throat. Coughing, I mention, "I knew you were adopted. At least after that interview."

"Yeah, thanks to you Dear Old Dad made me go on an apology tour." He rolls his eyes, continuing up my legs with careful fingers, the ointment slowly soothing the pain. "I guess I should clarify: Evangeline Connally isn't my mother, but George Connally is my biological father. He had an affair."

"Oh." My stomach drops as I realize how much it must've hurt him to have to go on TV and declare himself adopted, all to hide his father's indiscretions—which he must be proof of. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. My mom was miles better than that stone-hearted bitch he makes me call 'Mom.' She loved me." His voice is carefully neutral, but I can hear the pain behind the words. "Dad wanted to pretend like I didn't exist, but then his pretty blonde wife wasn't getting pregnant easily—that part was true—and my mom was diagnosed with cancer. She called him up and told him that his mayoral run would be ruined by scandal if he didn't do something to support us financially. He caved. I was only three, but he wanted a son."

Studying him, something clicks in my mind, and I wonder how I didn't see it before. Maybe because I wasn't looking—that was the point, after all. "Your mom, was she..."

"Black? Mixed, but yeah. It's more obvious when I'm standing next to the girls." Tanner unrolls the ace bandage and starts to wrap it gently around my legs, his movements still shockingly soft for a boy so hard and wild. "That was part of why Dad didn't want me around at first, I'm sure. The good folks of Kentucky look down on men who cheat on their pretty blonde wives with a black woman." He snorts indelicately, even as my heart squeezes into such a tight fist that I feel the pain he won't put into words. "After Mom died, dad did adopt me under the books, along with Evangeline. Right after she got pregnant, and she claimed it was a sign from God—that he'd blessed them with children because they'd taken in an orphan. Nevermind that I was George Connally's son from the start."

"She didn't leave him?"

"And miss out on being a First Wife? Please. It was obvious even then where things were heading for him. He was in with all the right people, and they'd pull all the

strings to put him to the top. Me being around just gave them more leverage over him, and the people who put men like George Connally on the presidential fast track love a candidate they can control."

A surge of daring, fueled no doubt by the hard seltzer, makes me ask, "When you say the right people, do you mean the Syndicate?"

Tanner looks up at me, mouth quirking to one side. "You figured that out, huh?"

"Blake told me," I confess. I don't tell him what we were about to do when the secret spilled. "He said I deserved to know. He was light on the details, but it sounded like something out of a thriller. A secret society pulling the strings and running the world? That's the stuff of fiction."

"Or front page news, if you dare to read between the lines. Most people don't want to." Tightening the end of the ace bandage, he slides the metal clip over it and hops up onto the bench next to me, a can of seltzer in his hand. "The Syndicate isn't exactly the most secret organization in the world. Anyone who wants to can see which billionaires are donating to which presidential campaigns, who is hiding money in Panama, and all the journalists who write puff pieces about the rich and industrious. It's all a public game. Only the darkest part is kept secret, and if anyone tried to go public with it, they'd just call it all conspiracy theories and get you chunked in the looney bin."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

"You sound so sure."

"My mom tried to expose a member of the Syndicate before she died." He grimaces. "She thought that since the cancer was taking her either way, there was no downside. So she went after the pharmaceutical CEO who fought off the FDA and nearly killed her with a drug that's since been banned. Needless to say, her evidence was written off. It wasn't enough for the authorities to do anything. It never is."

Heart beating, I point out, "I'm about to do something when I testify against Hass."

"Ah, but he's Syndicate lite. A little league teenage boy caught with his pants down making a very stupid mistake. He hit one of their own. It's different."

"I'm not one of their own."

Reaching over, Tanner ruffles my hair, a light smile on his face. "You'll be safe."

"If I'm not?" This close, I can see the golden brown in his eyes, and I feel the heat of his hand. It wasn't that long ago that the same hand was traveling up my skirt as he pushed me up against a bookshelf. I wonder if he felt anything when he did it. I wonder if he feels anything now. "What will happen if they come for me?"

"Then I'll threaten my dad with public exposure of his affair, and make him pull the strings to let you loose." There's a fierce expression in Tanner's eyes even as his mouth curves up into an insolent quirk. "What's he gonna do, disown me?"

"That's the worst that can happen."

After I say the words, though, I wonder if they're true.

There's so many worse possibilities that I can't even imagine what will happen next.

Chapter 25

Sitting in the back seat of an SUV, staring out the tinted windows, I wonder how it is that my life has come to this. I never thought that I'd be testifying in a case like this—or that Georgia would be sitting in the seat next to me, her lips lined in pink gloss, staring at her phone and scrolling through social media comments.

In the front seat, Mrs. Reynolds, the residence director, checks her rearview mirror and pulls over to the courthouse parking lot.

"This is it, girls."

Glancing out the window, I see reporters and get nervous. "The DA said he'd meet us here. Aren't we supposed to have some kind of police escort or something? It's a high profile case."

Georgia rolls her eyes. "Relax, Brenna. You'd think someone put a hit out on you the way you're acting."

"Actually, last semester... nevermind." I doubt reminding her of the very attack on me she lived through a few short months ago will improve Georgia's disposition. Somehow she's only become more self-involved since we went to the cops about that day in the aircraft hanger, her follower count swelling with each sympathetic piece that comes out about the case. "Let's just wait for him to show up. I'm sure it won't be long."

Georgia taps her fingernails on her knees as we wait. At first I think she's just bored,

but then I realize she's just as nervous as I am. What we're about to do is a big deal—whether she acts like it or not.

Two teenage girls going up against a golden boy of the Syndicate.

I hope Tanner was right when he said I have nothing to worry about. Somehow I doubt he or any of the Elites will swoop in to save me if things go wrong. Whatever the Syndicate is or isn't, their families are all no doubt involved in the organization, and when it comes to boys like them, blue blood always comes before any other type of alliance. I'm on my own in this, with only the system to rely on.

Thankfully it's not long before the District Attorney shows up, his assistant DA trailing behind him, along with two uniformed men. They shoo the reporters out of the parking lot and close the gate, then have Mrs. Reynolds pull closer to the courthouse and drive into a small private parking garage. Something releases in my chest as the garage door seals behind us, the outside world blocked out along with the early morning sunlight.

The Syndicate may know who I am, or at least strongly suspect it, but I don't want to confirm their beliefs. And I don't want to be sitting near a car window when they decide what to do about me. Maybe I've been watching too many high drama TV shows, but bad things tend to happen to witnesses who go up against shadowy organizations. I'll be lucky if today ends with Hass behind bars and all my blood still inside my body.

"Good to see you bright and early." The DA greets us as we get out of the car. "Hope the reporters outside weren't too much trouble."

Georgia pouts. "I wanted to give an interview."

"As we went over before," the DA's smile grows tight, "it's very important that your

testimony not be public until after the FBI is able to track down the source of these human traffickers. I've been told they're very close to cracking the case. Now, if you'll follow me."

He leads us into the courthouse, with its stark white walls and yellow tile floor. I feel a trickle of sweat go down my back despite the unseasonably cool weather; some part of me reached for a blazer this morning to wear while I testify, even though I know there's no reason for me to try to look a certain way. Even with my best clothes on, I still can't hold a candle to Georgia, who's walking beside me in confidence and skinny heels.

The Assistant District Attorney goes over everything again. We'll be giving our testimony to the jury in a closed chamber. No media access, no photographs. Only Hass and the opposing counsel will be there from the other side. As he gives us advice on speaking clearly and overcoming our nerves, we pass by the bathroom doors, and Georgia asks for a chance to go to the bathroom—really, I'm sure, she wants to redo her makeup.

"Go on ahead." The ADA peers down the hall, and the bailiff stands at the end of it. "I'll just escort Brenna the rest of the way, and leave the bailiff with you."

For some reason he and the DA are in a hurry. Maybe they just want us to get to the courtroom and testify quickly; I don't know how all this works. But they lead me down the hallway, their steps long and difficult to keep up with, looking very important in their tailored suits with briefcases in their hands. We head towards a private office with big glass doors, and the ADA offers me a bottle of water.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

"I..." Looking down the hallway, I suddenly feel queasy. "I need the bathroom too."

Frowning, he peers out and confirms that the way is clear, the bailiff still standing there. "Fine, but make it quick."

Nodding, I fast walk down the hall towards the bathrooms, the need to pee—orsomething—overwhelming. My stomach is in knots, my bladder overly full, and every nerve in my entire body feels fried and on edge. I can't stop thinking about that night in the storm, when the two men kidnapped me and chloroformed me, and I almost joined my brother six feet under.

It could have gone so much worse.

Things still could go terribly.

And I never found out why Hass "found" me in that trunk. This whole time, I've been hoping the investigation would turn up something on those men, but if it did, no one bothered to reach out to me. I know they were just cogs in the machine, but they're cogs I want destroyed—along with Hass.

Maybe real life is like this. You don't find the answers to every question, or get a nice little bow tying everything together at the end of the story. Life goes on anyway, and we tell ourselves that it doesn't matter, even when it does.

The mistake, I realize, is that I put finding answers in someone else's hands. This whole time I was doing things wrong. I should be cracking open the files on Silas's hard drive myself, hunting down leads and finding where the trail ends like Nancy

Drew, instead of leaving it to people who don't care about my brother's killers the way I do.

Grabbing the restroom door in slick hands, I sigh when I discover it's been locked. Of course—Georgia wouldn't want to share her space with anyone else. But suddenly I need nothing more in the world than to pee, and I can't wait. Jiggling my foot, I glance over at the men's restroom and ease the door open.

The coast is clear. Sliding inside, I quickly do what I came here for and stare at myself in the mirror as I wash my hands. There are shadows under my eyes, born of nights spent lying awake, worrying about today, thinking about all the things that could go wrong.

My brother died trying to expose the truth.

I won't have honored his memory unless I finish the job.

After today, I vow to myself, I won't rest easy even if Hass is put in prison. I'll make sure that whatever evidence Silas compiled makes it to see the light of day—nevermind the risk or how many ways Cole tries to warn me off of it. The Syndicate needs to go down, and they'll never see it coming from a teenage girl like me, born in Wayborne under a stormy sky.

Licking my lips, I grab my cheap off-brand concealer out of my purse and dab some under my eyes. Then I head out of the bathroom—and pause.

The lock on the women's room has been broken. It's subtle, the wood of the door still intact, but a little sliver of light eases its way out that wasn't there before.

Glancing at the end of the hallway, I see no sign of the bailiff, and my pulse races.

The smart thing to do would be to walk away.

But I didn't come this far, fight this hard, to turn tail and run. If Georgia is in trouble, I have to do something. Hands shaking, I pull the keychain pepper spray Wally gave me out of my purse, and slowly push the door open.

On the stark white tile floor of the bathroom, beautiful red hair soaks in a pool of blood.

I don't give myself time to think. Running into the bathroom, I turn and raise the pepper spray—there's no one there. Pushing open the stall doors, I find them both empty. Blindly, I call for help, hoping that whoever comes will be on the right side. Then I turn to face Georgia and swallow at her pale skin and closed eyes.

Getting down on my knees, I reach out with trembling fingers and press my touch against her neck. There's warmth there, but no blood surging in her veins to meet me. No pulse anywhere that I can find. Cold all over, I put a flat palm against her chest, and don't feel her ribs rise with breath.

When I pull my hand away, it comes back sticky. The red of the dress she wore to the courtroom is soaking with blood.

I call out for help again, barely able to tell what words I'm saying, uncertain what will happen when someone comes. Then I straighten up, trembling, blindly stumbling to the sink to wash the blood off my hands—

The mirror is covered in writing.

YOU TOOK HIM FROM ME.

I stare at the crumbling lines drawn in red lipstick, stomach dropping as I take it all

in. Photos are taped to the mirror—photos of Tanner laughing, taken from a distance, as if with a long lens like the one I took to the private airport. There are somehow pictures of me with him in the library. Then more photos, ones of Georgia with him, but in all of them her face is scratched up and covered in black Xs.

A tube of red lipstick rolls towards me on the counter, as if hastily left there.

It's cheap off-brand stuff. The kind a girl like Georgia Johnson wouldn't ever touch.

Adrenaline fills me, and I know suddenly that the danger has just begun. But before I can escape the trap that's come for me, can get out of this terrible predicament, the help I called for comes.

It takes one look at the scene for the bailiff to shout for me to put my hands up. I do, lips sealed tight, mind working overtime to figure out who did this—and if the very same man who's sliding handcuffs around my wrist was involved.

Page 64

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

I don't need to hear them read me my rights. I won't say anything incriminating. I won't say anything at all.

After everything, it turns out I'm still just the pawn in someone else's story.

I have the feeling I'll be needing that lawyer now.

Chapter 26

The picture they paint in the interrogation room is dramatic. It's the type of crime you'd see solved on late night TV: young girl falls for boy, boy kisses her but doesn't love her back. He returns to his ex-girlfriend. She falls into a jealous rage.

One day, it becomes too much, and she stabs the girlfriend to death.

The whole thing is ludicrous; it falls apart if you examine it from any angle. Georgia hasn't been with Tanner in months, and if I wanted to kill her, I had plenty of opportunities before now. But the detective in charge of the case isn't looking for other suspects. After all, he was suspicious of me once before, and he's even more certain I did something terrible now that I've been found standing over a dead body with blood on my hands.

What I don't get is how they knew I'd be in that bathroom with her. But maybe they didn't need that part of the crime scene to make sense. All they needed was for the DA and ADA to look the other way when the timeline didn't add up, and a detective hungry enough to go after the easy suspect, because she's the one he wanted from the start.

"This interrogation is over." Robert Pierce himself walks through the door after what feels like hours. "I need to speak to my client."

Detective Lyons narrows his eyes, but gets up from the table, heading towards the door. "You get fifteen minutes. I'll be back."

"With more than circumstantial evidence, I hope."

"Count on it."

The door closes, and I fold my hands together as the lawyer sits across from me, wincing at the feeling of dried blood on my hands.

I still can't believe it.

Girls like Georgia Johnson don't die.

Pure spite should keep them going if nothing else.

"How are you doing? Jesus." Robert Pierce pulls a slim rectangular package out of his briefcase, and it takes me until he tears it open to realize that it's a hand wipe. "They should've let you clean up. Use this."

Wiping my hands off, I watch as the wipe turns a bright color of pink. It seems impossible that so much blood wouldn't stain a dark red, but there it is anyway, like a neon highlighter.

Looking up at the lawyer, I ask him, "Can I trust you?"

"As much as anyone." Leaning forward, he adds in a low voice, "Lukas DuPont wrote the check for me himself. I'm told that should mean something to you."

My shoulders relax. It's hard to trust anyone now that this has happened, when I can barely put the pieces together, but at least I know one thing: Lukas would never work with the Syndicate, so there's no way the lawyer is one of them.

"I just don't understand. How could someone have killed Georgia inside the courthouse?" My mind keeps replaying what happened. "The bailiff was standing right there—until he wasn't. But I was just in the bathroom right next to her, and I didn't hear her scream."

Quietly, he says, "Let's not dwell on who the killer might be just yet. Instead I want to talk about your timeline, and figure out why you couldn't have done this. Let's go over things minute by minute."

I do. He gives me a bottle of water. I drink it. I ask him to call my mom, and he jots down her number. Then he asks, "Could that laptop you had me get so many months ago have anything to do with this?"

I pause, sudden stricken. "I left it in my dorm room. It was the first time I left it... but Holly was there. No one could have taken it." But somehow, I know. "It's probably gone now. I never even got to copy the evidence that was there. Maybe if I had... but why kill Georgia? I thought she was safe. It makes no sense."

"If there's anything exculpatory on that laptop, we need it. I'll have my people on it right away."

"Your people?"

"Yes—the assistant who picked it up in the first place was a Coleridge grad, so he knew the layout of the place. He's since moved on, but I'll get one of my interns on it as soon as I step out of this room. You have my word."

I swallow, shaking my head. "No, go get it yourself. No one can be trusted. Not with this."

He frowns, looking up into my eyes, a strange expression on his face. "A little paranoid, aren't we?"

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:41 am

I have reason to be.

Before we can talk further, and I can warn him what he's up against—if Lukas hasn't already—a cop in uniform walks into the room. Bored, he tells the lawyer, "She's being released from custody."

"Why? Not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but Detective Lyons seemed to think this was a slam dunk."

"Someone else confessed."

I move in a stupor as they unlock the handcuffs. Rubbing my raw wrists, I wince as a little remaining dried blood flakes off my skin and onto the ground. If this was a way for the Syndicate to get me away from the laptop, it's far too complicated and risky to make sense. Especially when they could've just killed me.

In a daze, I follow the lawyer as he escorts me out of the interrogation room, then pause as the officer is about to walk away. "Wait! Who confessed?"

He turns, shrugging like he couldn't care less. "Some rich kid."

My heart slams in my throat. The lawyer is telling me that he'll call me a cab and make sure I get home safe, his tone curious, as if he can't quite believe my luck. But I'm barely listening, scanning the precinct for a familiar face, wondering if I'll even see...

There. Near the doors. Lukas has his back to me, but I know it's him. I can't see his

hands, so they must be cuffed.

I don't understand. It doesn't make sense. Why would he...

But then he turns, and sees me. I frown, gasping as I see that his hands aren't cuffed at all. He's standing near a few officers, but they move away a moment later, making it clear he's not in custody.

The lawyer guides me down the steps, towards the bullpen. I mouth a question towards Lukas, "What's going on?"

There's a stricken expression on his face as he watches me, and I freeze, trying to figure out why he's shaking his head, something like despair in his eyes.

Then someone shifts, and I see him, standing between a uniformed officer and Detective Lyons, carefree and cocky, looking for all the world like he's free despite the cuffs very tightly keeping his hands bound.

Cole Masterson confessed to a murder he didn't commit.

All to set me free.

27It continues...