



# The Midnight Confessions, Part One

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**Category:** Romance, Adult, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** I never saw my life going this way.

I was happy, popular, the girl everyone wanted to be.

Until I'm uprooted from watching sunsets in the back of a pick up truck, to fighting traffic in the middle of a snow storm.

I hate it here.

I may not be able to take it out on my elders, but I can on her.

The perfect daughter.

My new step-sister.

**Total Pages (Source):** 29

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:31 am*

## Prologue

I can't believe my dad shackled me with her... she's so blonde and perfect. Not to mention the typical mean girl. What the hell was he thinking?

I shut my laptop and groan as the bell rings. Going home after school used to be my escape, but now she's there.

I swing by my locker and grab the books I borrowed from the library. I'm hoping to just lock myself in a bubble and get lost in the spicy fantasy I've been dying to read.

Honestly, being the sandwich between two yummy men in a romance has got to be better than my reality.

My sigh of relief as I continue down the hall to walk outside to the parking lot turns into a glare when I see Little Miss Perfect giggle and flirt with the football players while they eat up the attention. Must be nice. I've never really dated much outside of hookups because my dad and I moved so much due to his job.

I could be here one day and gone the next, so what's the point?

I certainly didn't expect my dad to find someone, especially not a carbon copy of Lyra... at least on the outside. Bella is kind, beautiful, and loving. It sometimes makes me feel bad that I think so badly of Lyra, but whereas Bella is warm, Lyra is the Ice Queen.

Icy, perfect blonde hair, blue eyes, and a body most women would kill for. She has it

all, and has lived in Texas her entire life. God, I think she was even Miss Cactus. Lyra is certainly pretty enough to have won.

I force my steps to stay measured and not race past Lyra. Ugh, why is she practically blocking the exit?

Turning to squeeze past, the football player who is talking to Lyra in the middle of the hallway steps away, pushing me into the lockers. Squeaking in shock, I wiggle and push back. I'm short and curvy, I can't push this huge linebacker out of the way.

"I'm right here, move you big oaf!" I yell.

Gasping, he turns and looks down at me. "Shit," he mutters, rubbing the back of his neck in mock embarrassment. "I don't know how I didn't see you, you're just so forgettable I guess?"

Henry, who is not forgettable in the least now that I can see his face, shrugs with a smirk before turning back to chat with Lyra.

My eyes well with tears, mostly angry. I inherited my red hair and foul temper from my father, and I want to curse him out. Looking over at Lyra, a look of concern flits through her expression before she shrugs.

"Off you go, Cassie. Try not to run into anyone with those wide hips of yours," Lyra says, and the boys catcall with her.

Taking a deep breath, I mutter, "One more year in this hell hole without beating anyone to death, you can do this."

"I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you. Cassie, I'm sure my mother could enroll you in elocution lessons," Lyra taunts, and I growl under my breath.

I shouldn't bother, because now the football players are barking at me. Fuck my life. Can we move yet? I'm ready to get out of this small town.

I finally reach my little car and sigh when the heated seats warm my cool skin. I will never get over the special upgrades my dad gave me. I think he felt guilty about falling in love again so soon after the divorce.

I crank my radio and haul ass home. Maybe if I get there first, I can take a quick bubble bath before Lyra hogs the hot water. I still don't understand what she does in the shower for three hours. You wash, shampoo, condition, shave, rinse, and get the hell out.

Pulling into my driveway, I'm shocked to see three large military moving trucks and people walking in and out of the house. My hands shake, and tears immediately fill my eyes.

No, no. He is not doing this to me again. He promised this was the last base until college. I started to make plans, and I even ventured out and made a friend. One, Danny, but he's the first guy I've actually enjoyed hanging out with after school, and now, it looks like I'll be leaving him.

I should have known better. I was taught at a young age not to form relationships because long distance never lasts.

ChapterOne

SIX MONTHS LATER

New York State is really fucking cold. I'm used to warmer temperatures, cowboy boots, and cute skirts. I went into shock when Mark told me the military was packing up our entire lives and moving us across the country in less than three days.

I didn't realize this happened in real life.

It was like being kidnapped, and no one cared. I stood there with my mouth open, gaping as movers in military uniforms moved around me like I didn't exist with the occasional mutter of, "Excuse me, Ma'am."

Ma'am, they called me fucking Ma'am, like I was some thirty-year-old housewife and not a hot teenage girl who was totally checking them out and considering how to get one of them to take me home.

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But no, they ignored me and just kept packing my things from the front lawn and taking boxes to the trucks as if I was invisible.

No one acts like that around me. I'm Lyra fucking Edwards. So, I stormed into the house and found out that she and Mark were getting married immediately so we could transfer with him. He wasn't planning to, but he was offered a promotion, forcing him to move if he accepted it.

Apparently he's very goal oriented, so he didn't blink outside of pushing forward their wedding by a year. Sure, they were engaged, but I didn't really see it ever happening. Mark is not someone my mother would normally date. He's older than her by at least five years, wears glasses, and while he's fit, is practically bald with his buzzed red hair.

My mom has always had a thing for the bad boys or assholes. The ones that would rock her world for a month then leave her crying, brokenhearted, on the kitchen floor with a tub of ice cream. Mark came out of nowhere with his loser daughter and orders to move us to a frigid city where everything changed.

I feel as if I've been living in the Twilight Zone since that day six months ago when my mother's eyes lit up, and she told me they were getting married the following day. I wanted to throw a classic spoiled brat fit, but I didn't have the heart. I always wanted my mom to find someone.

All those times picking her up off the kitchen tile and throwing away the empty tubs of ice cream while she cried and questioned what was wrong with her.

It broke me, and I guess I can admit that Mark treats her like a princess, and he accepted me too. Usually I was just the pain in the ass baggage that accompanied my mom.

After my mother had stopped squeezing the life out of me and talking about getting me a dress, Mark graced me with a very rare smile, and said, “I’m so very happy to call you my daughter officially, Lyra. I know this will be difficult, but Cassie can show you the ropes. She’s old hat at this, and the perfect soldier, right?”

I didn’t even notice Cassie was in the room. She’s always been too quiet and just like Henry said, forgettable.

Cassie looked stricken as she listened to her father, and I felt this pang of familiarity for a second. Me too, girl. It’s too bad I hate your guts.

I think for a minute I was hoping that she would throw the fit, but I should have known better. In the end, Cassie just nodded and whispered, “Anything you want, Dad. I’ll start packing up my room,” then left me to deal with the happy couple, all while trying not to show I was dying inside.

Glaring at the snow falling outside my window, I try not to wish I was wearing cowboy boots and cute dresses instead of snow boots and sweaters.

“Lyra!” my mom calls my name, and I sigh. It’s my senior year of high school, and I still hate this place.

“Coming, Mom!” I yell, shivering in anticipation at how cold it’ll be outside. I don’t think I will ever adapt.

Maybe the military should include a guide for the step-brats who get pulled into this life kicking and screaming. I certainly never volunteered to move to this ice palace.

Walking down the stairs of the house we moved into, I have to admit it's one of the only things I like about living here. It has an attic that my mom is converting into a library nook, and a basement for games.

Mark told me I can bring over friends as long as I let him know, which I'm okay with. I may be the Ice Queen to people who don't know me, but I respect my elders. My new step-dad is fair, and I know he didn't have a choice in this move either, but damn am I struggling.

I slip in my socks on the last step and gasp when my ass hits the bottom stair. "Oww," I whimper. I used to tan so well back in Texas, and now I'm so pale that I bruise easily. Thank God it's not swimsuit season so no one will see the blooming bruise that's sure to be emerging.

"Lyra! You're going to be late for school, sweetie," my mom says, exasperation coloring her words.

My mom is a nurse, but works PRN now that she's a military wife. It means her schedule is a little more flexible, but she's also trying to find her way in this weird world we live in.

Jumping up despite my wince, I sprint for the front door. "Sorry, Mom. The stairs and I had a disagreement, and they won this time," I explain, grabbing my dreaded snow boots.

Mom chuckles, shaking her head. "Please don't leave without Cassie. She's sending in her assignment for one of her online dual enrollment classes. That girl hustles, I've never met someone so driven before."

I know she isn't comparing me to Cassie, but I feel a thread of hurt nonetheless. She's perfect, driven, smart, and doesn't participate in any of the "silly things" I do.

Again, my mother has never said any of these things, but my inner voice is a bully and a bitch.

As I watch Cassie run in and shove her feet into sensible winter boots, I purse my lips. We couldn't be more different if we tried. Quickly putting on my cute knee high winter boots with my jeans and pink sweater, I stand to really look at her.

While my white-blond hair is smoothed into a fishtail braid with a white and pink headband, Cassie's hair is a wild curly mass of red hair. She's wearing an oversized green sweater as a dress, black leggings, and her green eyes hide behind her glasses. There's so much potential in my step-sister, and I'd help her... if I didn't hate her guts.

"Are you done being superwoman, yet, Cassie? We need to get to school, and not all of us are as perfect as you are," I say cheerfully, but I know Cassie can hear the snark in my voice because her brows furrow in confusion.

"Um, okay, Lyra. We still have plenty of time to get to school though," she murmurs.

Mom's eyes bounce between us, aware of the tension but unsure as to why. She wants us to love each other like real sisters, however it's just not going to happen. Cassie is an usurper on my territory, my mother's heart, and my place as the favorite.

There's no way in hell she's getting off easy.

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“Bye, Mom,” I say with a smile, grabbing my backpack and kissing her cheek.

“Have a good day, Bella,” Cassie says quietly. She’s a mouse, staying in the shadows, and I’d prefer it if it stayed that way. Instead, she’s always winning academic awards and working on school projects.

I do alright in school, but I live for cheer and my social life. I enjoy being in the spotlight and adored, and while this school has already elevated me to school royalty even though I’m the new girl, it’s not enough.

Sailing past my step-sister, my braid hits her in the face.Ooops.

“Oh my god, are you serious?” Cassie gasps.

“Lyra, that wasn’t very nice. Please try to get each other to school in one piece,” Mom groans.

“I want to drive,” Cassie insists as she rushes with her little legs to catch up to me.At least I have height going for me.I’m five-eight, leggy, and thin. I have to be little so I can fly.

It’s my happy place, where nothing else matters.

“No,” I snap, opening the car doors. “You’re terrible at driving in the snow, you’ll kill us. I, personally, would like to live to graduate high school. I would normally say you’re welcome to live dangerously, but you’re a passenger in the car with me. Get your ass in the seat or I’ll make you walk. My mom can’t help you, so don’t look at

her, Miss Goody Two-Shoes,” I tell her, rolling my eyes as she turns to my mom, who is already in her car and backing out. “My mom also believes in fighting your battles, so you need to toughen up a bit.”

Cassie hurries around the front and climbs into the car. Smirking at how quiet she is, I get into the driver’s seat and start the engine. Shit, it’s cold. I’m still not used to the automatic start yet, because I didn’t have one in Texas.

Shivering, I turn on the seat warmer for myself and pull out of the driveway. Cassie turns on pop, and I wrinkle my nose. Her music is depressing, talking about broken hearts and needing the other person. Glancing at the radio, I see it’s an artist I don’t recognize: Chord Overstreet.

“Cassie, I need some Taylor Swift in my life instead of this sad music. God, who hurt you?” I complain, changing the music as I drive.

Cassie’s mouth drops open, an angry blush rises on her cheeks. She would be really pretty if she gave a shit about her appearance.

“My music isn’t shit or depressing,” she sputters.

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Yeah, okay, baby sis, whatever you say.”

“Ew, Lyra, please never call me that again. We were born a week apart, and we are most certainly not sisters,” Cassie says, her expression disgusted.

I’m having too much fun fucking with her, so I mess with her all the way to school.

Slamming out of the car, Cassie mutters to herself about how she can’t wait to graduate as she stomps into the building.

While Cassie is a whirlwind of anger, I get out slowly, smiling at my friends as I see them. They surround me, and I promptly push her out of my mind.

Tormenting my new step-sister is going to become my new favorite hobby, I just know it.

## ChapterTwo

I rub my shoulder after being pushed into a locker for the second time today. My dear step-sister found friends quickly at this new school, while I frankly haven't tried. Leaving Danny was hard. We still text occasionally, but it's not the same. I'm tired of moving, and the constant new bullies no matter what school I go to. The catcalls by football players about what I'm hiding under my clothes or mean girls 'accidentally' pushing me into lockers is getting old.

Sighing, I glance at the lunchroom and ask myself if I want to put up with the trauma that is eating in there.

Glancing at my stomach, I glare as it rumbles. Grabbing an energy bar from my locker, I shake my head. The last time I attempted to get into the lunch line, some of Lyra's friends started to moo at me. I don't want to deal with that again.

Swallowing hard, I close my locker and force myself to walk to the lab. I have a project I want to work on, but because I share the car with the Ice Queen, I can only do it during school hours. If anyone asks, that's what I'll tell them anyway.

It has nothing to do with the fact that I have nightmares that the entire lunchroom will start mooing when I walk in.

Looking down at the energy bar I'm clutching, I toss it into my bag, deciding I'm not really hungry. Walking quickly, I'm soon at the laboratory. Knocking, I peek into the

room and see a few other students are also working on various projects. Relaxing, I'm glad I'm not the only one thinking ahead.

Lunchtime flies by, and soon, I'm putting my supplies away, content for the moment because I finished writing my findings down in my notebook to write my paper. Grabbing my bag and heading towards the door, I smile serenely at one of my classmates as I walk by.

"Woah, Cassie, you look proud of yourself," he says with a friendly laugh as he puts his books away.

"I finished everything I needed for my project, and now I just have to write the paper," I explain.

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“Speed demon,” he teases me. “You have such focus, I’m a little jealous. I’m about halfway done collecting data, so I’ll be here again tomorrow.”

Shrugging, I say, “You’re chipping away at it and dedicated to finishing. You should be proud of yourself.” Putting on my backpack, I wave goodbye as he smiles back at me in surprise and nods.

I think his name is Brenden, and he usually hangs out with the football players. I try to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he’d be grateful for my words one moment and bullying me the next.

Apparently, that’s just how high school in sleepy Brooksville is. I don’t remember eleventh grade being this awful in Texas. It’s like the entire school is out for blood. My blood.

Weaving through the crowd to my locker, I stumble forward as I see the paint has now been decorated to look like a cow. There’s brown, black, and white papers all over in the form of the animal. Breathing shallowly, I can’t get enough air as I reach out to touch it. A note is taped to the cow, and my fingers tremble as I reach out to pick it up.

“Oh I see you found the school’s present. You’ve been skipping meals, and we wanted to make sure you were eating properly,” Christy says, one of my step-sister’s horrible friends. I don’t stop to turn as I tear down their “creative artistry” and open my locker to find hay spilling out of it.

“No fucking way,” I whimper in horror at some of my books being ruined from the

wet straw, and my eyes well up with tears.

“Miss Cassie, I know I didn’t hear a straight-A student curse in the hallway,” booms a teacher.

Turning, I let him see the mess in my locker. “Do you think I did this to myself, too?” I ask softly, tears rolling down my cheeks as the students roar with laughter.

His mouth drops open as he sees the mess, and he excuses himself to find an assistant principal. My eyes wander the crowd as they continue to their classrooms at the behest of another teacher. Lyra smirks as she walks by, murmuring, “Interesting diet choice there, baby sister. I’ll have to tell Mom to start serving you this for dinner.”

I open my mouth to say something, but she’s gone, disappearing around the corner. It happens so quickly, I have to ask myself if I’m going crazy. I’m so distraught by the time Mrs. Michaels finds me, I can’t talk. She sends me to the nurse’s office to sit and get a hold of myself while the custodian comes to take care of my locker.

“Are you sure?” I wheeze, anxiety and embarrassment clawing at me. Pushing the note in my hand into the pocket of my sweater, I shake my head. “It’s not fair for him to clean up someone else’s mess.”

I feel bad and want to tell them I’ll take care of it, but there are spots in front of my eyes from panicking.

“Hey,” barks the custodian, as he steps in front of me. His tone reminds me of my father’s when he’s yelling instructions at people, and it helps me breathe. It’s familiar to me.

“Yes,” I say softly, wrapping my arms around myself.

“Did you make this mess?” he asks, pointing at the offending locker.

“No, Sir, I did not,” I tell him, and there’s a small smile on his lips when I call him “Sir”.

“Then you don’t gotta apologize to me,” he says with a nod. “High schoolers are snotty-nosed brats most of the time, and I have made people help me before. However, today is not that day, and you’ve had a rough day already. Go rest your feet, calm down with the nurse, and maybe go home early.”

I haven’t had much experience with the custodian, but I can appreciate his kindness. “Thank you, I’ll do that,” I mumble, then walk away. I head to the nurse’s office and lay down, thinking about what a shit day I’ve had.

My stomach rumbles again, and I studiously ignore it. After this latest incident, maybe I do need to lose some weight. My hips are a little round, and I could stand to lose a little weight in my ass.

Maybe if I do, I’ll actually be able to be happy, and my step-sister will stop trying to ruin my life.

The nurse walks out of the room after telling me to close my eyes and take as much time as I need. Pushing my hand into my sweater, my fingers brush the note. In the crazy of everything, I forgot about it. Opening it, I mutter, “This is probably a really bad idea.”

This is just the beginning, little cow.

You should just disappear.

I hear your father has a pretty gun collection.

Mouth dropping, I sit suddenly, shocked anyone could be so cruel. A wave of nausea rolls over me, and I cover my mouth, begging it to go away. I already seem crazy after I freaked out in the hallway, puking would just be the cherry on this fucked up day. I wipe the tears and lean forward on my arms to steady myself. I close my eyes and try to catch my breath.

I don't know why they're being so cruel, but maybe they're right. Maybe I would be better off gone.

### ChapterThree

These past few months have been hell, and I'm so ready to escape. My grades are slipping, I'm having trouble focusing and sleeping. I don't feel safe in my own home.

Lyra has made it her mission to torture me, and the worst part is she likes to bring her new boyfriend around. He creeps me out and likes to touch me when no one is near.

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I crack open my door, hoping no one hears or is around. I just want a glass of water, then I'll go back to my cave. My stomach grumbles too, but I don't even bother. Nothing stays down these days. My nerves are too high-strung.

I make it back from the kitchen without any incidents, but when I walk into my room, he's on my bed, flipping through my Kindle. "You're one of those freaks, aren't you?" Kelter, Lyra's boyfriend of the month, asks.

"I... freaks?" I ask, wondering if I can walk back out again, leave my house, and never return. My dad has been really busy and out of town, so I doubt he'd even notice.

Smirking, he tosses the kindle onto the ground and lunges for me. Screaming in terror, I try to run, but Kelter grabs me around the waist, clamping his huge hand over my mouth as he pulls my back to his chest. He's six feet tall of pure muscle, but still I kick and writhe, trying to get away.

"No one will know, pretty girl," he whispers in my ear.

Shaking my head I beg, "Please," behind his hand, but it's muffled.

"I just want to know if you taste as sweet as your sister," Kelter coos into my ear, and I think I'm going to be sick. "You've been a bad girl and very loud. If someone comes in, I'll tell them you came onto me. That you want everything your sister has. Because it's true in a way, isn't it? Lyra is prettier," he whispers as his hand pushes up my pajama top to skate his palm up my body until he's cruelly squeezing my breast.

Whimpering in pain, I press my lips together to hold the sound in. He's right, he'll just turn it all around if someone walks by. Kelter left the door wide open too.

"I'm sure Lyra would let me fuck you if I asked, you know," he chuckles darkly. "I asked her if I could fuck with you a little because she hates you so much, and she told me to go wild."

Pushing his hand down my body, he murmurs, "I wonder how tight your pussy will be for me. I don't see you dating... is it possible you're still a virgin? It would be fun to be the first to stick my dick in an unused pussy. Girls around here are sluts."

Useless tears streak my cheeks as I try to pull away, but his arm is banded around my waist tightly. I can't pull away or get any space from his hard cock that's grinding against my ass. Gasping for air, I shake my head as his hand sneaks under the band of my shorts, skating against the smooth skin.

I thank God I'm not a virgin; this isn't my first experience with a man, but I am very limited in my sexual interactions. I haven't attended a party since the eleventh grade. We're now over halfway through the school year here, and I haven't had the energy to flirt with the taunts and bullying at school being so bad.

Kelter's long fingers glide along my core, and I buck against him in terror. His fingers are cold, and I'm completely dry as he pushes his finger inside of me. "So goddamn tight," he groans as I scream in horror on the inside.

I can't believe this is happening in my own home.

Kelter lazily pushes another finger as I cry out in pain. Please don't let this be happening...

"Cassie, are you seriously trying to fuck my man with the door open?!" Lyra

screeches at the lowest possible decibel.

Kelter lets go of me as if I was on fire. “Your sister is a little temptress, baby. I tried to hold out, but she pulled me into her room,” he says, acting the victim.

My mouth opens and closes, unable to make a sound.

“I caught you, Cassie, with his hand in your pants. Can’t you get your own man? Kelter, did she give you blue balls,” she coos, rubbing his chest as I look on in shock.

How could anyone be so clueless?

“She did, baby girl. I need you to suck it and make it better,” he flirts, kissing her hard as I gag.

Lyra grabs his hand to pull him away as she glares, mouthing, “Stupid cow, he’s mine!” as she drags him out the door. Kelter shoves the fingers that were just inside of me in his mouth, his tongue swiping along them to lick up my essence.

As he walks around the corner, he pulls his fingers out, giving me a cruel smirk and raising a single finger to his lips to signal that I stay quiet.

My stomach riots at this point, and I race to the toilet, barely making it before I puke. Moaning, I lay my head on my arm, waiting to see if a memory stirs that’ll make me puke again.

A knock on the door has me scream in fright, jumping.

“Honey, are you alright?” Bella asks, frowning.

No, I’m the farthest possible thing from alright.

The room swims, and I close my eyes.

“Yes, Bella, thank you,” I murmur weakly. “My stomach has been off today, and I may have picked up a bug. I’ll be okay though. I’m never sick for long.”

Except for lately, I can’t keep anything down, and my clothes are becoming really baggy on me.

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“I’m worried about you, Cassie,” Bella murmurs.

I open my eyes and shake my head, swallowing hard against another wave of nausea.

“I’m going to mention this to your dad the next time he calls, honey. You know how much he worries. Try to feel better, okay?” Bella walks away, closing my bedroom door, and all I can think is I finally have a little peace.

Laying on the cool floor, I curl up in misery. No one would ever believe me if I told them the truth.

\* \* \*

It’s been a month since one of the lowest days in my life. Spring is in full swing, and I can see flowers growing back now that it’s April. I’ve been so depressed, the change in weather perks me up just a bit, and I can’t wait to get through the rest of the school year and away from that cesspit called high school.

Sighing, I force myself to put on a long-sleeved blue dress with black tights. I would rather hide in a baggy off the shoulder sweater and leggings, but Lyra looks like she’s sucking on a lemon whenever I wear those.

I just want to melt into the background the last month and a half of school and then disappear off to college. I need a new start, I need normal and boring. Where people don’t moo at me when I walk by even though I’ve lost weight.

As a fuck off to my lovely step-sister, I tug on a pair of well worn combat boots.

Maybe the nod to a pair of kick ass boots will wear off on my weary soul. Grabbing my bag, I look around my room, wishing I could stay here with my kindle instead.

At least while Lyra is at school I know I'll be safe.

It took me a week before I could pick up my kindle, because he had touched it, and even then, I wiped it down with bleach wipes, but I never did continue the book I was reading. It's tainted now.

Shivering, I put on my black peacoat and walk out of my sanctuary. Dad is actually home again, and as I move downstairs, I see him chatting with Bella before she goes to work. I really am happy for them, which is why I keep putting one foot in front of the other and force a smile on my face.

I would never purposefully ruin someone else's happiness. It's not in me to hurt my father, not after how messy his divorce with my mom was.

It was a nasty few months; she was cheating on him and then tried to take me from him, saying military life was an unstable environment in which to raise a child. I had to testify and ask to be placed with my father.

It was a shit show.

"Good morning," I tell them with a smile. "I'm just about ready to go whenever Lyra is."

My father opens his arms to me, and I walk into them. I love his hugs. They're strong, the perfect pressure, and last just long enough. They're also the only hugs I've gotten in a long time.

I don't accept comfort from Bella anymore, because the last time I did, she noticed

how thin I was. I don't want to deal with the questions. Dad, on the other hand, thinks I'm perfect at any weight and doesn't pay attention to it.

Stepping back, my body relaxes just a little. Maybe today will be better.

"I'm ready to go!" Lyra yells as she stomps down the stairs. She sees me and smirks as she walks up to us. "I'm so glad you're on time this morning, Cassie."

My father snorts. "What do you mean? Cassie is one of the most punctual people I know, Lyra. I have some errands to do today, but I'll be home for dinner. Anything big happening for either of you today?" he asks.

It warms my heart that Dad stuck up for me, but Bella stiffens a little, as she is starting to see how manipulative Lyra can be. No mother wants to admit their daughter is a monster, but the rose-colored glasses have slipped just a bit recently.

Lyra chatters about different social clubs she's in and how excited she is about prom. I simply smile and nod, because I'm just excited finals are almost here so I can ace them and leave this awful place.

I can't tell Dad this though, can I?

"That's wonderful, Lyra. I'm so excited about all of your accomplishments this year. Cassie, honey, any big projects coming up?" Dad asks, leaning back a little to look down at me.

I don't know how he's six-two while I am barely five-two. It's just not fair. Smiling tightly, I shake my head. "Wrapping up some assignments, waiting on the last of my acceptance letters, and business as usual, Dad. We're going to be late... I'll see you for dinner?"

Dad stares at me for a moment before nodding. I feel like he's somehow seeing more than he should when he's been so oblivious the last few months. This isn't the time to become the helicopter parent, Dad.

"Have a good day, kids," he starts to say as we open the front door and walk out. "Hey, you didn't go to the kitchen at all, Cassie. Did you eat breakfast?"

I stopped eating breakfast the last time Lyra mooed at me and told me I was cannibalizing my brethren when I was pouring a glass of milk. I can't think about milk now without getting anxious and nauseous.

"I ran out of time," I tell him, turning with a shrug and a small smile. I rarely lie to my father because he can see through them. "It won't hurt me to skip today, I'll be sure to eat later."

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Maybe.

Lyra sends me a knowing smile, and I ignore her as I hurry to the car.

Ever since she insisted on driving in December, I stopped offering. I'm going to pretend to have a snobby chauffeur who drives me to school every day.

The small smile that blooms dies quickly as Lyra asks, "So when is the last time you ate? You've gone from being a round little heifer to rarely eating in front of people. Do you have a stash of food in your room or something?"

Lips pressed together, I ignore her. The truth is, I eat just enough to keep from passing out because I'm never hungry anymore. I used to love food, and she's ruined that for me, among other things.

"Hello, earth to Cassie!" Lyra calls, and I growl under my breath as she pulls out of the driveway.

The entirety of the drive is my lovely step-sister trying to get me to speak to her while I stare out the window. I can't even tune her out, but I can ignore her.

The moment we're parked, I exit the vehicle as if it's on fire. Breathing deeply, I walk away.

"Cassie, what the hell's wrong with you?!" Lyra yells.

Rolling my eyes as I walk quickly away from her, I mutter, "You, duh."

I don't have a single class with her since I'm in advanced classes, and I focus on this as I move through my day. I have a fruit bar in my bag that I'm actually contemplating eating as I finish my last class before lunch, when I hear someone clear his throat. Looking up, my brows raise as I see it's a guy who's in my American Lit AP class, but I've never spoken to.

"Hi?" I ask with a little smile to soften my cluelessness.

"Hey, Cassie, I'm Walker Evan, we've been in classes all year, and I haven't had the balls to talk to you," he says, wincing slightly at his crassness.

I laugh openly, sure he's mistaken. There's nothing about me that's scary or overbearing. I'm a tiny redhead who hides from people.

"Are you sure you're talking about me? I assure you, I don't bite," I tease him.

I haven't flirted since we left Texas, but it feels good to relax and enjoy the attention of a boy.

Walker's eyes widen in surprise as he listens to me, and then he shakes his head, as if he's entranced by me.

"Yeah, I'm definitely sure. You have this glow about you, and I'm not sure you realize how gorgeous you are. What I mean to ask, because I'm screwing this all up, is do you want to go to prom with me? Were you planning to go?" Walker is babbling, and it's adorable from someone who is so gorgeous.

He pushes his dirty blond hair out of his eyes as he steps out of my bubble so I can stand. Grabbing my bag, he hands it to me.

"I... wasn't planning on attending. I haven't been asked by anyone, and I haven't

made an effort to make many friends,” I confess with a shrug. “I guess it’s the curse of the military brat.”

Walker nods, biting his lip as he walks with me. “I think you should make a really great memory with me. Please tell me you’ll go to prom... With me, I mean?”

He gives me puppy dog eyes, and I want to tell him no, because there’s no way this guy wants to go out with me. Walker has warm, laughing light brown eyes, and looks like he doesn’t take himself very seriously. Except, now that I think about it, he’s been in a few of my advanced placement classes.

What’s the worst that could happen?

“Yeah... okay. I’m in. I’ll meet you at prom?” I ask with a smile. I don’t want to be stuck there, and Lyra and her friends are taking a limo. The car will be available that night, and I’ll have an escape without waiting for someone to take me home.

Walker stares at me, pushing a curl off my forehead. My hair is actually pretty today, spiraling in pretty ringlets instead of a frizzy poof. I thank the hair Gods that I got asked to prom on a good hair day.

“Yeah, Cassie. I’ll see you there. Don’t stand me up, okay? I can see when to stop pushing, and you’re done bending, aren’t you?” he asks with an amused expression.

Wow, the man can read the room. He deserves an award.

“Yes,” I tell him, bobbing my head with a giggle.

“Damn, you’re seriously gorgeous. I’m a lucky man,” Walker says with a grin, dropping his hand from my hair. “I’ll see you around.”

A smile tugs at my lips as I touch the curl he was playing with. Biting my lip, I float through the rest of my day. The taunts don't really bother me, I ate the energy bar today outside at a picnic table, and then ignored my step-sister on the drive home.

## Page 8

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Walking inside, I smile at my dad, who is working in the living room. “Hi, Dad!” I greet as I put my stuff up and grab a snack of crackers and cheese.

Lyla glares at my plate but can’t say a word because I plant my ass next to my father. Stomping up to her room, I relax next to Dad as I eat.

“Ah, so you are eating,” Dad teases me, closing his laptop.

Shrugging, I bite into a cracker, sighing happily. “I’ve been really busy, and sometimes I’m just not hungry. I’m just, ya know, listening to my body,” I tell him.

“Mmhmm, Bella mentioned she thought you may be losing weight, but it looks like you’re healthy and beautiful. Nothing to worry about, right?” he asks, leaning back to search my face.

“Nope,” I tell him, taking a bite of cheese and ignoring the inner voices that moo at me. God, high school is so fucked up. “Things are good. I even got asked to the prom today!”

Dad grins before his eyes narrow. “Tell me everything about this guy. Can I run him through my government databases? Please,” he begs, and I toss my head back as I giggle.

“Dad! No, he seems really nice. If he tries anything, you can burn his world to the ground,” I tell him with a feral grin.

Sighing happily, he throws his arm around me. “There’s my savage baby girl,” he

mutters.

“Who is savage?” Bella asks, and I hide my smile.

I have my moments, I just hide my crazy well. My father taught me self defense, but Kelter’s actions terrified me, rendering me helpless. I don’t want to think about him, so I push away memories of his cruel smirk out of my mind.

“I am,” I tell my stepmother with a wink, eating another cracker. Bella laughs as if I’m joking, and my dad just squeezes my knee before changing the subject.

## ChapterFour

### THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS TRIGGERING SCENES

The next three weeks fly by; I have a beautiful dress, I asked my stepmother to do my hair and makeup, and I’m ready to go to my high school senior prom!

Laughing at my own excitement, I stand, walking to the mirror. Bella went down to talk to my dad for a little bit, so I’m in my room alone. I chose a deep green silhouette gown with a plunging neckline and thigh high slit. Staring at myself, I can tell I’ve lost weight in my stomach and hips. I didn’t mean to skip so many meals, but there’s nothing I can do about it tonight.

I’ll turn a new leaf tomorrow.

Turning slowly, I admire how the dress hugs my curves and how pretty my red hair looks. Bella braided the top away from my face and then twisted the rest of my hair in a gorgeous bun at the nape of my neck.

My makeup is done in pretty pinks and browns, and I’m in awe at how pretty I feel.

Bella asked if I wanted to try contacts out for tonight too, so I went to the eye doctor to see what I thought. My green eyes sparkle with excitement at me, bright and happy, not hidden away as they usually are.

“Holy shit, that’s me,” I breathe in awe.

A snort at my door makes me gasp, turning toward it. My dad looks amused as he stares at me. “You look beautiful, Cassie,” he murmurs, staring at me intently. “Turn for your old man, will ya?”

Snickering, I raise an eyebrow. “Like a twirl, Dad, really?”

Rolling his eyes, he grumbles, “If you et tu, Brutus me, I’m disowning you, young lady.”

“You’re so easy, Dad,” I giggle, slowly turning for him.

“Yep, gorgeous, but Bella’s right, Cassie, you’re losing weight really fast, and that worries me a little,” my father says with a frown, coming forward to hug me to soften his words.

“Dad,” I sigh, knowing he’s right.

“I know, I know. We aren’t going to talk about this tonight, but we’re gonna discuss calorie intake tomorrow and make a meal plan, okay? I need you to take care of yourself, you’re my girl,” he says, squeezing my shoulder.

Tears prick my eyes as I nod. “No tears, I didn’t mean for that to happen. I just wanted to tell you that I’m not unaware of the situation, I have eagle eyes,” he lectures, and I giggle.

“I thought you were getting rusty, Dad,” I tease him, moving away to grab a tissue and make sure I didn’t mess up my eye liner.

“God, please never say that around my subordinates, they’d never let me live it down,” he groans, and I cover my mouth to hold in my continued amusement.

## Page 9

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Grabbing my phone, I wince. “I have to go, Dad. We’ll talk later?” Grabbing my shoes, I walk quickly toward the stairs.

“I need a picture!” My dad protests as he follows.

Biting my lip, I nod once I get to the bottom of the stairs. Putting on my shoes, I hand my phone to Bella, and she takes a few photos of my dad and I smiling before I dash out the door.

Walker made sure to give me his phone number before I left school the other day, and I quickly shoot him a text as I walk to the car.

Me: I’m on my way, my dad wanted me to take a few photos with him.

I see bubbles in the text but get into the car instead of waiting to see what he has to say. Driving to the school, I park, and only then do I look at the text he left me.

Walker: Take your time, be safe. See you soon.

Smiling because it is really sweet that he is worried about me, I get out of the car with my clutch, throwing in my phone, prom ticket, and keys into the bag.

Hurrying to the school gymnasium where prom is, my feet slow as I see Lyra, her friends, and their dates chatting in their gorgeous dresses just outside of the gym. Biting my lip, I try to discreetly walk past them.

“Cassie!” Christy yells delightedly, and I wince.

Turning slowly, I face my tormentors. “Hey, I’m just trying to go into prom, just like everyone else. Can you just lay off for one night?”

Lyra walks forward, her eyes skimming over me. “You look really pretty, baby sis. It’s too bad we’re the only ones who’ll see you in this,” she murmurs almost regretfully.

Walker throws his arm around Lyra with a cruel pretty boy smirk. A sinking feeling hits me in the gut, and I press my hand to my stomach. Please, don’t let me be sick in front of these people. Please, please.

Pulling a breath as if my life depended on it, I try to make my voice strong. “I should have known better than to think you’d actually want to go with me, Walker,” I tell him, the little girl inside of me who wanted to be normal for once wilting.

Walker shrugs. “If I knew that body was underneath the huge sweaters you drown yourself in, maybe I would have. Is it too late to ask if I can fuck you? Is there something wrong with you that you haven’t hooked up with anyone all year? Oh God... are you a virgin?! Fuck, I really missed my chance to be the first to get inside that pussy, haven’t I?”

The guys around him chuckle and clap him on the back. I must be numb, because I can’t feel embarrassment and my eyes are dry.

Turning away, an arm grabs me around the waist and pushes me into the group of people. I pinwheel my arms so I don’t fall on my ass in my high heels.

“Oof,” I gasp when I run into a solid chest.

“You don’t have to throw yourself at me,” says a voice that makes my skin prickle with goosebumps.

Lyra rolls her eyes, grabbing my arm and pulling me away from Kelter. “Cassie likes to try to take things that don’t belong to her,” she says, dragging her finger down my cleavage slowly. My breath hitches, and an odd feeling of butterflies overtakes me before she grabs the dress and pulls hard.

The material makes an unsettling ripping sound, and then hands are pulling at my dress, copping a feel, or pulling my hair. I lose my mind, tired of being hurt, kicking, screaming, and even punching one of the guys in the face.

They all think it’s hysterical. “I bet she’s a real hellcat in bed,” one of the guys on the football team says, licking up my neck before pushing me away into the arms of one of Lyra’s friends.

“Lyra, she really is pretty underneath all of these clothes,” Trish teases, pinching my now exposed nipple. I fight her off, tears starting to flow. Every time I try to run, someone else pulls me into the group.

Why hasn’t a teacher stopped this? Why isn’t anyone outside monitoring for shit like this?

I wrap my arms around myself protectively, looking around for a hole to run through. I’ve lost my clutch with my keys and my phone, but maybe I can just walk home.

“Lyra, I have to know, has she ever crawled in bed with you?” Kelter laughs, starting to walk toward me again.

I can’t do this again, kneeing him in the balls like my daddy taught me as soon as he’s close enough, I finally push through everyone. I use my elbows, heels, and the flat of my hand when I can reach, but the reality is they use it as an excuse to pinch my ass or pull my hair.

“Come back if you want some dick with your foreplay, baby!” Walker yells, and I run.

Lyra’s giggle carries back to me as I escape. Once I feel as if I’m far enough, I lean against a tree by the front of the school, gasping for air. Shuddering, I can feel their hands on me still. It’s also cold, and my dress has too much ventilation now. I didn’t bring my sweater with me because I didn’t want to mess with how pretty I looked.

So much for that.

## Page 10

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Based on how my bangs hang in my face, my pretty braided bun is completely fucked. Even though it just happened, my mind replays the hatred and mocking on everyone's faces. The idea that I would ever be interested sexually in my step-sister after this makes my stomach pitch, and I gag on bile. I didn't eat today because I was so excited, and now I'm grateful because I don't have to deal with puke on top of everything else.

Spitting to rid myself of the sour taste in my mouth as my throat burns from the reflux, I force myself to start walking. It's a long walk, and I don't know how I'm going to explain my appearance to my father.

God, Bella. I really don't want to have to look her in the eyes and tell my stepmother that her daughter is the evil spawn of Satan. I don't know much about Bella's ex-husband, but something tells me this wouldn't be welcome.

I am clearly spiraling, and I pinch my inner arm to get myself to focus. I walk for what feels like forever but couldn't have been longer than an hour. Cars have passed by me, honking and catcalling, but no one offers to help me. I hide the worst of my torn dress by wrapping my arms under my chest, so it looks like I had a wild night drinking, as I'm sure my mascara is smeared all to hell from crying too.

I guess prom is over now.

No one ever stays long. It's the after parties that matter.

Sighing, I push my hair out of my face where it lays gnarled and knotted, partially pulled from the multitude of pins Bella used.

Looking around, I realize there are more houses around me. There's a party raging at the house I'm walking past, and high schoolers laugh and make out. Rolling my eyes, I know I won't be asking anyone there to give me a ride. I've got to be a twenty minute walk from my house, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm finally getting closer, even though I'm seriously considering taking off my heels.

I just want to get home and put this day behind me.

Approaching a huge group of bushes as I pass the house party, I bite my lip. I don't know why, but greenery at night like this freaks me out. I always feel like something bad will happen to me.

I have very little time to react, when my worst nightmare comes true. A muscled arm grabs me, pulling me through the bushes, scratching my exposed arms, chest, and face as I inhale to scream.

A hand clamps on my mouth, followed by a knife at my throat. Whimpering, I can't breathe. Why today of all days?! Why do you hate me so much, God?

"Now that I know exactly what you have underneath your clothes, I need to test drive it for myself," a voice chuckles that I instantly know. Kelter.

I can hear people laughing not far away from me as the party rages on, but I'm terrified as his hand pushes the torn fabric of my dress aside, exposing my breasts. I try to push him away, but he's too strong as he pulls me closer to his chest, growling in my ear.

"No one cares about you out there, little girl," he whispers. "Everyone is drinking, and your sister is busy getting wasted. You can either give me what I want, or I'll slit your throat and leave you to die. Your life may be shit, but at least you'll live if you let me fuck you."

Kelter throws me on the ground, following me down, choking me with his huge hand, so I can't make a sound. My ass is exposed to the air, and he grabs it so hard, I know there will be bruises. Yanking my thong, he rips it off before he releases his cock. The only reason I know is because he thumps it on my ass as he pumps it. I can feel his hand as it brushes me each time, and I whimper.

“Shhh, you're so lucky, you're getting the pleasure of my cock. Maybe you won't be such a cold fish in bed like your sister. I like it when they fight me,” Kelter says before he shoves his dick inside of me.

It burns. It hurts as Kelter forces and thrusts himself deeper. I try to get away now that there's not a knife on me, but he squeezes my throat harder as his breath sharpens. My eyesight darkens, and I beg the powers that be to let me pass out.

Kelter fucks like a wild beast, and my eyes water as he stretches me without any lubrication. I'll feel him for days afterwards and have to relive this night every time I move. All I want to do is forget what's happening tonight.

That's never going to happen.

Soon he groans as he comes inside of me, and as I feel the wetness, I realize he didn't use a condom. Oh my God, I want to die. I haven't been on birth control because there's no reason to be. Plus who knows what kind of STDs he has.

It's as if my hearing has narrowed to just him and I, and I live in a bubble where all I can hear is his harsh breathing in my ear.

“You'll never be safe now that I've fucked you. Your pussy will be imprinted on my dick from tonight on, and I'll crave you again soon. You'll never be able to get away,” Kelter says as he stands, fixing his pants.

Gasping for breath, I look up as he zips his pants and pockets his knife. There are bushes all around us, so all people can see is maybe his head.

“Don’t tell anyone, or I’ll say you begged for it. Lyra thinks you’re a little slut anyway, and I’ll tell her you hopped on my dick when I was half passed out after drinking tonight. Face it, babe,” he smirks as he starts to walk away, “all of your options are shitty ones. Thanks for the tight pussy.”

I sit up and the bubble pops as he leaves, and the sounds of partying return. I just lived through Kelter raping me, and no one cares. I stare blankly as I think about how no one would have probably even bothered to help me if they saw or heard, brushing away the tears.

Crawling on my hands and knees, I crawl through the bushes so no one will see me. My clothes are a mess, I have cum leaking out of me and twigs in my hair. This is the night that’ll never end.

I don’t know how to feel as I walk home, avoiding the one person’s stares when I see her. She opens her mouth in shock, but I break into a run. My ankle threatens to roll in these damned heels, but I don’t stop. I don’t have a key to get into the house, but Bella hides a spare in the plant by the front door.

My father hates that she does that because it affects the security of the house, but tonight, I’m grateful.

I let myself in, and the house is completely quiet. Dad and Bella went out, taking advantage that their daughters wouldn’t be home. They are staying at a hotel in the city. It’s nice that they were able to have a date night, but I’m mostly glad I won’t have to answer questions. Pulling these stupid torture devices off my feet, I let them dangle on my numb fingers as I walk upstairs.

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The neat freak in me won't allow myself to drop them by the front door. I toss them in my closet where I'll probably throw out the dress, shoes, and everything that reminds me about tonight. I groan at the headache I'm starting to feel and the pain from being ripped to shreds.

Opening the medicine cabinet, my fingers stall when I see pain medication there. I don't know how they got here, but as I pick them up, I feel lightheaded and fall to the floor.

No one cared when the school royalty moo'd at me and taunted me.

No one cared when they pulled at my dress, groped me, and passed me around.

No one cared when Kelter snuck into my room and hurt me.

My own step-sister gave him the go ahead to fuck with me.

And so... no one cared when he finally did, with a party raging all around me.

Cassie... why are you even here?

Opening the bottle, I shake twelve pills out of it and stare at them. On trembling legs, I push myself up to standing, filling a glass that's by the sink and swallowing them all.

It's like the universe agrees with me. I'm tired of fighting the world.

Sliding down on my back onto the cold tile again, I let my eyes close.

If no one wants to fight for me, then I'm done, too.

## ChapterFive

"Ugh, I can't believe he ditched me tonight!" I groan, almost toppling over the porch railing.

Oops, I may have overdone it.

Christy grabs my arm with a giggle, pulling me upright.

"Kelter is kind of a sleaze, babe. He keeps looking at your step-sister in a weird way. You may need to talk to him about it, unless you're okay with him sticking his dick in her too," she says with a shrug.

Christy isn't the nicest person, but she always gives it to me straight and is always willing to help me put people in their place.

Like Cassie.

I don't feel bad for what we did after I found her with my boyfriend. If you play with fire, you're gonna get hurt.

The girls and I decided to come to my house to hang out and crash for the night because Mark and my mom are staying in the city. It's cute that they have date nights, and I kind of want that when I'm old and married.

Someday.

Kelter isn't that person, but he's gorgeous, fucks hard, and makes me come so much I passed out once. I wasn't even all that upset to find he was gone when I woke up.

My relationship with Kelter is about being young, popular, and enjoying it. There's nothing deeper than that, but that doesn't mean I'm okay with him cheating on me with Cassie.

Deciding I'll talk to him tomorrow about it, I let myself into the house. Sometimes Kelter likes to surprise me in the middle of the night, so I leave the door unlocked as I close it. Cassie left her clutch in the parking lot when she ran, and I was the best big sister, picking it up and tossing it in the limo. Dropping it by the front door for her to find later, Christy, Trish, and I walk through the house to the kitchen to grab snacks.

"Do you think there's any pizza places open," Trish sighs as she sits down. "I could seriously go for something greasy. I'll go back to eating like normal tomorrow."

Shrugging, I grab a pizza menu and toss it toward her. "Today is special, graduation is in less than a month, eat whatever you want," I laugh.

Christy snickers as she thinks of something, and I raise my brow. "Cassie Moo has been dropping weight, did she develop an eating disorder or something? I'd develop a complex too with those thick thighs and hips that could take someone out!"

I nod, and a twinge of guilt hits me. I've been really hard on Cassie, but she really needs to learn to keep her head down. All I hear from our parents is how accomplished she is, and that she's been accepted to four schools. She's going to Dartmouth next year on a full scholarship... you'd think the girl would slow down and live a little, but she lives in her books lately.

I haven't even seen her in the attic library. I know she carries around her kindle everywhere, but Cassie used to read up there as a reward when she finished her

schoolwork.

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Now... she hides in her room as soon as she gets home. I know my mom and Mark are worried about her, and if I wasn't the reason she's become a recluse, I'd be worried too. She'll be fine as soon as she graduates. It'll all be fine. No one dies from being bullied in high school, right?

Thump.

I look up, frowning as I hear it, and so do my friends. "I didn't think anyone was home," I mutter.

Trish drops her phone on the kitchen counter, having placed her pizza order.

"I have to pee, so I'll go check it out, Lyra. Maybe Cassie came in after suffering her penance for reaching too high. She should have known Walker wouldn't want anything to do with her. I can't believe she fell for it," she scoffs, hopping off the stool and walking out of the room.

Scrolling through my phone, I turn on some music, going through the cabinets for the snacks we originally came in here for. Dropping everything on the counter, I turn to ask Christy something when I hear Trish scream my name.

"What the hell?" I ask, looking up at the ceiling as if I could figure out what was wrong.

"Lyra, it's Cassie, get your scrawny ass up here," Trish screams, and I kick off my heels and run.

What happened?

Trish rarely screams, so something bad must have happened. Did she decide to shower and fall? Ugh, our parents will never leave us alone again if that's the case.

Christy and I pound up the steps, breathing hard when we get to the second floor. My heart is racing with worry and adrenaline, and the tipsy feeling I had earlier is fast disappearing.

"Where are you, Trish?" I yell, panic clear in my voice.

"Oh my god, Lyra, we're in her bathroom!" Trish screams.

I push into motion again, bursting into Cassie's room. "What's wrong?" I gasp, stopping abruptly when I see Cassie sprawled across Trish's body. Her lips are blue too.

"I think she took something," Trish whispers, handing me an open bottle of pills that are spilled on the floor near her with trembling fingers.

Falling to the floor next to them, I take it from her. Kelter has been selling pills at school, and these look suspiciously like them. Why would Cassie have the entire bottle, though?

"We have to help her," I breathe. I don't know why she would take these, but I can't let her die. I might hate her, but I never truly wanted her dead.

"Christy, will you turn on the shower, please?" I ask. I pull Cassie up, looking at Trish for help. I need to wake her up enough so I can make her puke up the pills. That's all that's in my mind as we haul her and sit her in the shower.

The freezing water hits her skin, and it takes a second to register, but Cassie begins to shiver. Opening her eyes, her teeth chatter as she stares at us. “What’s going on?” she mewls, beginning to cry.

Unzipping my dress, I step out of it, tossing it to Christy before I step inside. Squatting beside her as the freezing water hits us, I murmur, “This is going to sound really weird, but I need you to puke. You took something you weren’t supposed to, and it’s making you really sick.”

She begins to cry, and I push her hair out of the way as I push my fingers into her mouth to make her vomit the pills. Cassie struggles against me, but I’m stronger than she is. I don’t know what the hell happened, but I know I’m going to have to find a way to cover it up.

My mom and Mark are enough helicopter parents as it is.

Cassie gags against my fingers, and I wince as I feel her body shudder. Pulling out my fingers in time, she leans forwards and pukes the pills up.

“That’s a good girl,” I sigh, rubbing her back. Her hair is still a mess, and it looks like she may have just gotten home when she decided to take a handful of painkillers.

Watching her, I wonder if she finally snapped. I didn’t want this to happen. I wanted to fuck with her enough that maybe she’d have to change schools, stay with her aunt in South Florida, but I didn’t expect her to try to off herself.

Cassie is gasping for air, and I say softly, “One more time for good measure, sweet girl. I don’t want those pills to have any sneaky effects while you’re sleeping this off.”

“No, no, please,” she cries pathetically, but I grab her face, squeezing her jaw until

she opens her mouth. Down my fingers go back into her throat until she can't stop her gag reflex, and she pukes again. I just thank God she actually has a reflex, because I trained mine away years ago.

Once Cassie is done puking, I help her up. Turning off the water, I ask her, "Why would you do this? I don't think what we did was so terrible."

Cassie stares at me before shaking her head and unsteadily getting out of the shower. I hear the front door slam, and I roll my eyes. Of all times, this is when Kelter decides to drop by?

"Where is everyone?" Kelter yells as he stomps up the stairs, and Cassie freezes as she steps out of the shower.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:31 am*

“In Cassie’s room!” Trish yells without a second thought. I glare at her because the less people who see her like this, the easier it will be to cover it up.

Cassie goes even paler than she was before, shaking. “Please, please, not him,” she whispers.

I frown as I watch her, confused. I know he fucks with her a little, but she shouldn’t be terrified.

Kelter walks in and stops, surprised. “Did you two finally decide to get it on? Can I join?”

Cassie faints, and I gasp, catching her around the waist before she hits the ground. “What the fuck, Kelter. She took some pills, and we think tried to kill herself, and Trish found her. Did something happen after we messed with her at school?”

Christy murmurs, “Lyra, we should work on getting her changed and warm, or we’re gonna have to call an ambulance.”

That’s the last thing I want, so I nod at her, knowing she’ll grab her clothes. Christy pushes past Kelter, and I sink to the floor with Cassie in my arms.

Staring at him, Kelter shifts his weight uneasily. “Come on, babe, you told me to fuck with her, and she’s got amazing tits,” he groans, adjusting his cock that’s starting to harden through the thin pants he’s wearing. He’s changed out of his suit.

Oh shit. No, no, no...

“Trish, will you help me get this dress off, please?” I ask, clearing the lump developing in my throat.

I don’t want to believe that he’d force himself on her. Ignoring his gaze, I work to get the now destroyed dress off of Cassie. Laying her on the floor, I examine her body quickly. There are scratches all over her face and body that I didn’t pay attention to earlier because I was trying to get her to throw up the pills.

“Are those your pills on the floor, Kelter?” I ask, refusing to look at him as my horror grows.

Cassie isn’t wearing underwear, and I don’t think she’s the type to go commando. There’s a handprint beginning to bruise on her stomach, hips, and breasts. And worst of all... there’s a dried white substance on her thighs.

“I mean... they’re mine, yeah,” Kelter says, answering the question I asked. “It started getting a little hot at school, and you said I should stop dealing for a bit.”

“But why are they in Cassie’s bathroom?” Christy asks, pushing past him with clothing.

Biting my lip, I point to the cum dried on my step-sister’s thighs. “Is this your cum too? Did you fuck my step-sister without a condom? Are you fucking stupid?” I scream.

My best friends look down at Cassie and gasp. Christy shudders, gagging as she sees the bruises. “Babe, those aren’t the marks of someone who enjoyed or wanted to have sex,” she says softly.

I look back down, and my heartbeat begins to roar in my ears. I can’t get enough air, and I shake my head. “You raped her!” I scream. “I told you to fuck with her, but not

this. Why would you do this?!”

Kelter smirks, shrugging. “Because I could. She screamed really pretty for me. You were so busy drinking and having a good time, you didn’t realize she walked right past the Turners’ house on the way home. I was drinking a beer on the porch and saw my opportunity. Ten out of ten grade pussy. It probably would be easier if she had killed herself,” he tells me.

“Shame you have to cover this shit up with me. Your parents will kill you if they find out you condoned all of this.”

Realizing he’s right, I close my eyes. “Will you grab the bleach wipes for me under the counter, Trish?” I ask, going into fix it mode.

Bleach will be really harsh on her skin, but I need to destroy his DNA on her thighs at least.

“Lyra,” Trish whispers in horror, and I shake my head as tears start to well in my eyes.

“Just do it,” I insist. “I just need them for her thighs. Christy, I would go, the pizza will be here soon, but I need to make sure this is done before she wakes up. Can you grab the baby wipes I keep in my bathroom too?”

Christy nods shakily but gets up and walks out without saying anything.

Looking up at Kelter as he picks up his pills, I do what I have to. “I’ll clean this up for you because I have to. But we’re done, do you understand? Lose my number, don’t speak to me or Cassie ever again,” I insist, my voice thready with tears. “I don’t know how much she’ll remember, but I will do my part. We’re going to clean her up, put her to bed, and see what she recalls tomorrow. Hopefully she believes it’s all a

bad dream.”

There’s so many bruises though... fuck, how is this going to work?

Christy comes back with wipes and a warm blanket because Cassie is still shivering. Working quickly, we clean her up, the three of us crying. Kelter bites his lip, slowly walking backward away from us.

“Well, it was a great run, babe. Glad I got that sister pussy before you broke up with me,” he says, waving as he turns to leave.

“Get the fuck out of my house, you fucking rapist!” I scream, gasping as I cry harder. Cassie moans Kelter’s name as she sleeps, and I look down in horror.

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*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:31 am*

Kelter laughs as he walks out of the room. “I’m glad I’ll be haunting her in her dreams, even if she never remembers,” he says, shaking the bottle of pills and making a cold sweat appear on my body.

“No, no, go back to sleep,” I whisper, as we finish cleaning her with wipes, and she begins to stir. We made sure to wipe her down with baby wipes after we used the bleach wipes on her thighs because I remember her saying once that she had really sensitive skin.

Dressing her quickly in warm pajama pants and a long sleeved shirt and socks, we also wrap the blanket around her.

Grabbing her arms while still in a wet bra and panties, I jerk my head to her legs. Trish and Christy help me get her to bed, even though we knocked her body into the door once.

One more bruise won’t matter, will it?

Making sure she’s covered in blankets, I start to leave when Cassie begins to open her eyes. Thinking quickly, I force a smile. “Back to sleep, drunkie. You shouldn’t drink so much if you’re not used to it,” I say softly.

Cassie moans, “Never drinking again,” and turns to go back to sleep.

Sighing, I gesture to Trish and Christy that we should leave. Closing her door as we walk out, I look at them. “We’ll never talk about this again,” I say softly. Trish and Christy dash their tears away and nod. “Will someone make sure that asshole is

actually gone? I want a shower, to put on sweats, and go to bed. I want to forget this whole damn day.”

“I’ll go. If he’s still here, I’ll kick his ass,” Christy snuffles.

“I’ll go with you. The pizza should be here soon, if it’s not been dropped on the porch. I’ll put it away... I’m not so hungry anymore,” Trish whispers.

I leave them to it, walking to my room. I can’t believe how fucked up today went. All I wanted was to teach her a lesson.

After I’m changed, I find myself drawn to Cassie’s room. She’s still passed out, but I need to make sure she’s okay. She didn’t deserve this. I pull back the covers and slide in next to her. Cassie mumbles something, but I shush her and start to run my fingers through her hair like my mom used to do for me. She sighs and settles back down.

I stay with her all night, not daring to close my eyes. Call it guilt, or fear that she may relapse, but my body refuses to leave hers until dawn peeks through her curtains. I sneak back into my room and climb into my bed. My phone buzzes, and I reach to check it.

Kelter: Remember, babe, keep those pretty lips shut or what I did to Cassie will look like child’s play.

My hands shake, and I drop my phone to the bed. Burying my face into my pillow, I sob and pray that one day Cassie will forgive me. Even if she never remembers, I will make this up to her.

## ChapterSix

Itoss my phone on the bed and fluff my hair. I can't believe graduation is in two days.

This year has flown by. I am so excited for the big party tonight. We won't have too many more times to hang out before it all ends, and I could use a night out.

Even though I moved here just before my senior year of high school, I can honestly say I had the best year. It was a huge adjustment to go from Texas to upstate New York, where it could snow at the drop of a hat. We have been snowed in three times this year, but because Mark is so prepared, he had the generator ready to go and was able to clear our driveway and steps quickly and salted them.

I've decided Mark isn't so bad.

Checking my makeup one last time, I decide it's time to head out to the party. Walking out of my room, I listen for Cassie, thinking briefly about inviting her. We still aren't close, and I feel guilty about prom night.

Cassie is practically a ghost as she goes from class and then back home. There's no spark, no anger, no excitement. She doesn't seem to remember anything about that night, but I'm worried about her. I'm not as self-involved as my parents think I am, and I've noticed the looks Mom and Mark give each other when they think I'm not looking.

Biting my lip, I look into her room and see her bed is perfectly made, but there are items missing from her desk and nightstand.

Where is she?

Walking carefully down the stairs because I have fallen down these one too many times, I decide to go find Mark and ask where Cassie is. My hands shake, and I don't know why.

The worst thing he can say is that it's none of my business, so why am I so nervous?

Smoothing my sweating palms on my pretty burgundy dress, I search him out. Finding him finally on the back porch, I join him.

“Hey, Mark?” I say softly. He’s staring out into the backyard absently. Mom gardens, and it’s a sea of pinks, purple, and yellow flowers. It’s calming to sit out here.

Mark turns towards me, and I startle as I see how sad his eyes are. There’s this deep grief in his light green gaze that pulls at me. They remind me of the color of spring, and as such, they should be happier than they are now. My hands tremble as I look back, and neither one of us says a word for a full minute.

“Come sit a spell, Lyra, unless you were on your way out?” Mark asks before his eyes return to the kaleidoscope of colors in the garden.

I was on my way out, but my feet have a mind of their own as I move to sit next to him on the porch swing.

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“Is Cassie okay?” I ask softly. “I know we haven’t been the best of friends, but I’ve noticed the change in her, and she’s not here—”

Mark lifts a hand, and my lips press together to hold back the tide of words that threaten to overflow. Even as my step-father, he commands a room.

“Cassie came to talk to me about how she’s been struggling, and she’s done with her courses. Her finals have been finished for weeks, so there’s no real reason to stay here,” he begins.

I can’t help myself, and I whisper, “But we still have graduation.”

Mark shrugs, his fingers twitching just enough that I can tell he’s not as calm as he seems. This man has a tough poker face, because he has very few tells.

“She told me it was a piece of paper that she doesn’t need to be here to receive,” he murmurs, his voice thick with emotion. “My baby girl has talked about nothing except getting out of high school since prom. It’s as if she couldn’t stand the thought of going into those halls, sitting in classes day in and day out. Cassie told me she couldn’t stay here anymore, and she’s just not my baby girl anymore. Something’s broken inside of her that I can’t fix,” Mark whispers.

Tears start to slide down my face as I clasp my fingers tightly together.

I broke your little girl. It’s all my fault.

“So, I sent Cassie somewhere she’ll be able to get away, find some peace. It’s

incredibly difficult to ask for help when you're hurting, and you don't know which way is up or down. I'm proud of her... I'm just really gonna miss her," Mark mutters, standing quickly and walking inside.

I gasp a breath, leaning over as I hug myself. "Oh my God," I whisper.

She couldn't stand to be here anymore. I am also really proud of her for going to her dad for help, before she took matters into her own hands...again.

Except she doesn't remember doing it at all.

Getting a hold of my emotions, I carefully wipe my tears. Pulling out my phone from my clutch, I check my makeup and see I didn't fuck it up too badly. I'm late for the party now, but I honestly needed to know what was happening with Cassie.

She went home early today, and Mom picked her up from school. I got a text telling me that she wouldn't need a ride. I wonder if my mom knows more details.

I doubt she'd tell me anything though.

Taking a deep breath, I look at the setting sun and walk back inside.

"I'm heading out," I call out as I stride through the house.

"Bye honey!" my mom yells, and I hear Mark grunt a goodbye.

Cassie is his everything, and he's the last person I thought I'd affect with my petty actions.

Grabbing my keys, I leave for the party. The drive is fast, but as the sun goes down leaving the world in darkness, I find my mood dropping. Great, now my excitement is

shot, but I still need to make an appearance.

Christy's parents are out of town, and they told her she could have a graduation party, as long as the cops weren't called. As her best friend, I absolutely agreed to come.

I don't understand, I was so excited to be here before I left my house.

Maybe I'm growing a conscience.

Sighing, I step out of my car, forcing myself to smile brightly.

As I walk up the drive, Christy squeals, darting down the porch to hug me.

"We are going to have the best night ever!" she yells, and I can't help but chuckle.

Christy quickly helps me regain some of my lost excitement, and I bounce into the house with her. People hug me and smile as they come in, and Christy and Trish pull me into dancing with them.

Hours pass, but I nurse my drink.

Having to pee, I stand from the outside patio seat I escaped to when the heat inside became too much.

"You okay?" Christy asks, looking up from where she's making out with someone.

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“I’m great, babe. I just have to pee,” I laugh.

“Ohhh. Go up to my room, skip the line downstairs,” she advises as Tyler pulls her back to his lips.

Smirking, I’m happy she’s having so much fun. I haven’t hooked up with anyone since I broke up with Kelter. I found out he’s kind of an asshole, and three girls have come up to me to tell me that he has pushed them into walls to grope them.

They said he doesn’t like the word no very much. The girls denied that he hurt them other than this, but dammit... how did I never realize this before?

I feel like an idiot because if I hadn’t witnessed what he did to my step-sister, I probably wouldn’t have believed them.

I’m a shit person.

Pushing through the throngs of people, I finally make it to the stairs.

“Oof,” I mutter, as I bang into the wall as someone pushes me.

It’s a busy area, so I squeeze past someone who is on the stairs. Quickly moving, I pound up the steps to Christy’s room. I have to pee so badly.

I didn’t realize it until I stood up. It’s so odd how that happened. I see Christy’s pretty lavender door, and I sigh in relief.

So close.

There's a sign that asks people not to go into her room, so I open the door, not expecting anyone to be inside.

Except... there is.

Kelter is pushing a girl so far into the mattress, her screams are muffled as he fucks her. Based on how hard she's struggling, I don't think it's consensual.

"Hey, asshole, get off her!" I scream, walking into the room.

"Awww," he grunts as his thighs slap against the girl's ass. "You missed me, did you? Let me drain my balls, and then I'll fuck you next, okay?"

"No, no. You're hurting her," I tell him, grabbing his arm and pulling him.

"How do you know, maybe she likes it," he taunts, pushing her head into the mattress deeper while she screams and flails. "That's it, baby, you know I like it when you fight. Ohhhh, fuck. I'm gonna cum."

No... not again.

Breathing hard, I punch him in the stomach, and when he leans forward, I hit his nose hard.

"What the fuck?!" Kelter gasps, lifting his hands over his face.

The girl on the bed picks up her head off the bed and inhales deeply.

"Get off me, oh my God, he's still inside of me... Get off!" she screams. I push him

again, and he sprawls on the floor with his dick erect and mocking.

“I may be bleeding, but I wouldn’t be against you riding my dick to make up for how your jealousy is fucking with my vibe,” Kelter jokes.

His friends look in, catcalling him for getting his ass kicked.

“You! Parker!” I yell, grabbing a blanket for the girl who’s trying to cover herself. The sick fuck stripped her of her skirt but at least left her with her top.

Parker steps forward, covering his mouth to hide his laughter.

“Do you stick your dick in a girl if she tells you ‘no’?” I bark in my best rendition of Mark’s voice.

Parker straightens, realizing it’s a very different scenario than he expected.

“No, absolutely not,” he says, shaking his head, his eyes bouncing over to the girl crying hysterically now that she’s free.

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I vaguely recognize her, but I can't remember her name.

“Call the emergency line and report this. Keeping quiet means you're complicit in what happened.”

Parker's and other phones are out so quickly to call the police, my view of humanity is brightened. Two football players keep Kelter from leaving as well, and I hide a smile when one of them sits on him.

“You'll pay for this, bitch,” he growls at me, and I sigh, feeling some of the stress roll off of my shoulders. I crouch down to get into his face, so he really understands my words.

“Try your worst, you rapist asshole. I am no longer under your thumb,” I growl and watch as he starts to panic. I may have been complicit in what happened to Cassie, but never again. It's time for me to grow up. College is starting soon, and I don't want to always be known as a mean girl.

Cassie was different. She was encroaching on my territory, but I never wanted things to turn out the way they did.

\* \* \*

“You did it, baby!” my mom squeals as she hands me a large bouquet of flowers and hugs me tight. Mark gives my shoulder a squeeze, but I know this is hard for him. Cassie should be here too. She should have been called and accepted her diploma just like everyone else.

“Thanks, Mom, so what’s the plan?” I ask, and she looks over at Mark who shrugs, then back at me.

“Oh, well, we thought you would have had plans with your friends, but I guess we could all go out to lunch. We have something we need to discuss with you anyways,” she says then takes my hand and wipes her eye with the other. “I am so proud of you, Lyra.”

I smile and nod, trying to hide the fact that I’m dying inside. She shouldn’t be proud of me. She should hate me and want to disown me for what I did.

Trying not to drag my feet in dread, I get in the car to go to lunch.

My mom keeps sending Mark furtive glances as we walk to our table, and I get the feeling this is going to be bad. The last time they had something to tell me, we moved to the frozen tundra.

Sitting at the table, they wait until after we order to begin talking. Mark doesn’t give anything away in his expression, but then I don’t expect him to. Taking a sip of water, I wait to find out what they have to tell me.

“We’re so proud of you and all of your accomplishments, as you know. I cried in the stands when they called your name,” Mom laughs, shaking her head as if it’s silly.

I know those tears were for Cassie and not me. God, she should have been here.

They called her name even though Mark told administrators she wouldn’t be here to receive it. He went up to accept her diploma and all of her honors cords. People who have never paid attention to her cheered, and somehow it made everything even more sad.

Mark clears his throat, and I force myself to focus. “Your mother and I decided that you should take the car when you go to UT. Cassie won’t be needing it at Dartmouth, and it would be inconvenient for you not to have one in Texas, Lyra,” he says.

I want to tell him I won’t need a car, but the grocery stores aren’t within walking distance of campus. Taking a breath, I nod.

“Thanks, guys, I really appreciate that,” I murmur. I don’t want to seem ungrateful, because it’s a really nice gesture. I just wish I knew Cassie was alright.

“If you need anything while you’re at school, please let us know, though it may be a little difficult to get a hold of us in a few months,” Mark continues, and I wait for the hammer to fall.

Shit. Here it comes.

“Honey,” Mom says, reaching out and grabbing my hands. “Mark was specifically asked to head a task force in Germany. He didn’t want to uproot anyone yet again, and Cassie was having such a hard time, so Mark initially declined it.”

Wait, what?! Mark is a military man through and through, so I’m really surprised he would decline the move.

Mark sees my surprise and shrugs. “I told them my girls were in their senior year of high school, and you’ve had a lot of changes this past year since your mom got married. They asked me in March, and it didn’t seem right to uproot us all. My bosses took it alright, and they try to be sensitive to our families,” he explains.

“So if you said no, why are you still going to Germany?” I ask, still confused.

Mark sighs, looking a little embarrassed. “They refused to fill the position and didn’t

tell me. They called me two days ago, asking if I'd be willing to take the position now that both of my daughters have graduated high school."

Oh my God, he called me his daughter. I feel a lump in my throat, and I can't even get mad that he's moving with Mom to fucking Germany. Mark is such a good man, I can see why my mom fell in love with him after her string of loser boyfriends.

Blinking quickly, I swallow around the knot in my throat. "I'm really happy for you guys. I'll be fine in Texas, and if I need anything, I'll tell you. Promise."

Mom has tears in her eyes as she nods, knowing I'm struggling to be strong. I pick at my French fries as I eat, thinking about all of the changes that have happened this year.

I guess this is what it's like to grow up.

### ChapterSeven

Dropping a box onto the bed, I look around with a smile. My parents are amazing. They made sure I got a single occupancy room. The room is as large as a double, so I have lots of space to decorate, stretch out, and chill.

I love being in Texas again, and as I walk to my huge window overlooking the quad, I grin. I can see days studying outside and hanging out with friends. I want to try out for the cheerleading team and have an incredible time here.

My phone rings, and I look down at the screen.

"Mom!" I squeal, accepting a FaceTime from her. Dropping into the bed, I smile at her.

"How is the room, darling? Did you have any issues with the drive?" she asks.

I shake my head. "No, the drive was long, but no real issues. I took a few breaks, but I blared my music, and it helped. I also spent the night in a motel last night to catch some sleep, and now I'm ready to do some exploring." I wrinkle my nose as I think. "First, I need some coffee though. And not that gas station slop."

Mom grins at me. "Go explore, unpack later. I expect details and pictures!"

"I wouldn't dream of depriving you from all of the details," I laugh. "I'll talk to you

later. I love you! Bye, Mom. Send my love to Mark.”

Waving, I disconnect as she yells that she loves me. Mom tends to talk louder in video chat, and it’s adorable. She knows she doesn’t need to, but it’s like she has to show me how much she loves me since she moved.

Standing, I change quickly into a pair of cut off shorts and a cute crop top. Grabbing my wristlet, I leave, making sure I lock my door. I smile and chat to a few of my neighbors as I walk through the hallway. Everyone is dashing around but seem really friendly as they move in.

This is the college experience I wanted, and why I chose Texas. There’s nothing like the bright smiles, open arms, and charm of the South. I found I really ended up enjoying upstate New York toward the end of my senior year, but I can’t live in the snow without my step-dad as my safety blanket.

I was never scared about being snowed in or losing power when he was around. Now that he’s in another country, Texas is a better place for me. Plus I already know some of my classmates.

Walking up to the coffee cart, I smile brightly as the cute barista sees me. “Can I get a medium iced caramel latte please?”

He smiles with a nod. “Are you moving in today?” he asks as he runs my card and starts my drink.

“I am! I’m a freshman,” I explain, unashamed of being a freshie, because everyone has to start somewhere. “Any advice while I walk around?”

He chuckles as he pulls the shots for my drink. “I’m a junior, and my advice is to just get a feel for where the buildings are, have fun before classes start, and enjoy your

college experience. It really flies by.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that. Have a great day!” I tell him as he finishes making my coffee and hands it to me.

Taking a sip as I step away, I moan. “You’re officially my favorite person!” I call over my shoulder.

“Just consider it my duty to caffeinate a gorgeous girl,” he flirts back as the next group of people walk up.

I blush because he really was adorable. I may have a thing for blue eyes.

There’s a tree filled with lavender flowers as I start to explore, and it makes me think of Cassie for some reason. I wonder how she’s doing and if she’s okay.

Biting my lip, I pull my phone out and send her a text.

Me: Hey, I just was thinking about you and wanted to know how Dartmouth is treating you? Do you like your roommate?

I don’t have high hopes of her responding because she hasn’t bothered to the last six messages that I’ve sent since she left.

\* \* \*

The next threedays pass by quickly as I get to know my floormates, go to parties, buy my books, and enjoy the pull of college life.

As I expected, Cassie didn’t respond to me, and I don’t know why, but that bums me out. I just want to know that she's okay. I’m sure she’s busy, pulled into the

excitement of school, too, but a single text wouldn't kill her.

Looking up at the building of my first class, I climb the stairs and find my classroom. I printed off all of the syllabi for my classes today, read my chapters for the first day of school, and I'm ready.

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Slipping into a seat, I smile politely at the person next to me. I'm trying to stay focused, but that doesn't mean I can't be nice. He smirks back, pulling out his laptop for notes.

I've never liked taking notes on my laptop and would rather retype them later, as it helps me retain the information better.

Grabbing my notebook and dropping it on the desk, I hear a chuckle. Glancing over from under my lashes, I see the guy gesture to my notebook.

"A little old school, don't you think?" he asks.

Gritting my teeth, I shake my head. "I process information better if I write it down first. Then, later I type it out, and it helps me reinforce what I've learned. It may seem redundant—" I start to say.

"No, no it doesn't, I'm being a dick," he says, looking repentant. "Let's try this again. I'm Trenton."

Trenton holds out his hand, and I decide to shake it. No one caught bad manners from a hand shake. Despite having a tendency to insert his foot into his mouth, he is cute with black curls and gray eyes. I wonder what his parents were thinking when they named him, because he doesn't look like a Trenton to me.

The professor walks in, and I turn to face him. He begins class, and he's smart and funny. I think I'm going to enjoy this class, even though the coursework is rigorous.

Finishing up, I pack my bag up and stand. Trenton slings his backpack over his shoulder and asks, “What building are you in next?”

I tell him I have math next, and he smiles. “I’m right next to that building, can I walk you? Otherwise I’ll just walk behind you and stare at your ass. Please save me from the embarrassment of you catching me,” he says unabashedly.

Blinking, I press my lips together. I have no doubts he really would stare at my ass as he walked to class. “Of course I need to save you from this, though I have to say, it’s a really nice ass,” I tell him, starting to leave the room.

We flirt as we walk, and it’s just easy and fun. As we get to my building, he rubs the back of his neck. “Thanks for being my walking buddy. Would you be interested in hanging out later? We could grab pizza and talk about which professors are going to give us heartburn.”

Trenton is sweet, and I haven’t gone out with anyone in a long time. If it doesn’t work out, maybe we can be friends.

“Yeah, I can do that. I have a long day of classes though, so is six okay?” I ask.

“That’ll work. I only have one more class, and then I’m going for a run,” he says, pulling out his phone. We exchange numbers, and then I walk inside.

Classes fly by, and I find out I’m not ready to date yet. Trenton is really nice, but there’s no spark. He didn’t even try for a kiss because he could feel I wasn’t into it.

We did agree to continue to be walking buddies though, and I need to start running again so I’ll go with him in the mornings, that way I’ll be ready for tryouts.

\* \* \*

This has been the longest day ever. It's Monday, and I had classes and then gymnastics right after. I chose to not accept when I tried out for the cheer team and was picked. The girls were very catty, fat shamed under their breath, and I'm trying to be a better person here.

The captain of the cheer team reminded me of how I treated Cassie, and I struggled to stay till the end. I wanted to walk out so badly.

When emails went out stating I had gotten in, I politely declined and stated that it was because I had chosen to take extra classes. I lied, but it was the only way I could nicely get out of it.

Instead, I checked the clubs on campus and found a gymnastics club that meets three times a week. I went, thinking it may be a fun alternative to cheer. I won't be in the limelight, but that's okay. I really just wanted to stay in shape and enjoy myself.

An added benefit I found out when I arrived, is that some of my friends from cheer are in the club too. They noticed the cheer captain was a bit of a twatwaffle, and all chose not to bother trying out.

Needless to say, after an entire day of classes and then gymnastics, I'm tired. I need a shower, but frown when I walk into my room and there's another bed where there wasn't one before. My things have been pushed over, and I can thank the stars that I hadn't bought the couch I was thinking about.

There's also a bunch of bags and boxes tossed haphazardly on the floor next to it.

Deciding this has to be a mistake, I take a quick shower and then go to find my RA, Marsha. She has to know what's going on. I run into my suite mate in my rush and smile tightly at her.

“Woah, where’s the fire?” Lorie asks.

I turn around as I slow my walk a little so I won’t run into anyone else. “No fire, but I need to find Marsha because I think there’s a mistake in my room. I’ll swing by later to explain?”

Lorie shrugs. “Yeah, want to watch a movie? We’ve both been super busy lately, and we haven’t had a chance to just chill.”

“God, that actually sounds amazing. As long as nothing insane happens, I’m in,” I tell her, because I don’t know how long this roommate fiasco is going to last.

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I can't find Marsha anywhere as I check her room, the study lounge, and her friend's dorm. Groaning, I walk back to my room. Opening the door, my mouth drops open in shock.

"Cassie?!"

### ChapterEight

I still don't know what to say. Cassie stands there sucking on a lollipop, but she doesn't look like my step-sister. She looks like some supermodel, and my brain is not connecting. I blink again, and she rolls her eyes, then turns and sits on the other bed, across from mine.

"So, yeah. I've lost some weight, and the ladies I stayed with taught me how to do my makeup," she says quietly, looking at me with her piercing green eyes, lined with kohl. God, I always thought if she just dressed like a normal teenager and did her makeup she would be pretty, but I never foresaw this.

I clear my throat and drop my purse on my bed, then spin to find out where the fuck she's been for five months. "What are you doing here? In Texas of all places?" I ask, and she ducks her head a little before pushing some of her now straightened red hair behind her ear.

"I'm starting college. I'm a little late in the school year, but I kept up online, so I'm hoping it won't take long to get used to my classes."

"Wait, you've been planning on coming here all along? What about Dartmouth?" I

am so confused. Why didn't my mom or Mark say anything? This is not adding up.

"After I left Ft. Lauderdale, my dad thought it would be best to come back here where you were. I don't think he expected to get extended orders to Germany. I told him over and over again that I'm better now and I could handle going to college without a babysitter, but you know how he is."

I sit on the bed and run my fingers over my side braid. I'm pissed that I was kept in the dark about all this, but I have a feeling my mom knew I would just argue with her.

"Why did you never call, or come back home? I mean I get it, things went to shit and I was a total bitch to you, but Cassie, you just dropped off the face of the planet. Right before graduation, which isn't like you at all."

She laughs, and I watch as she leans back on her bed and crosses her legs. I can't get over that she's in a pair of skinny jeans and heels. I have never been interested in girls, but I can admit my step-sister is hot now. The cow is nowhere to be seen.

"I guess I should thank you, Lyra. I think your display on prom night might have actually saved my life. I had to get away before I tried to do something crazy and hurt myself or worse," she continues talking, but all I can think about is that's exactly what she did, and I might throw up from the memories.

"So yeah, I started going to the gym and not skipping meals. I got my hair relaxed to get rid of the insane frizz, and I went shopping somewhere not plus-sized. It was a huge change, and I'm still trying to remember it's my reflection in the mirror, but I feel good, and I'm ready to get my life back on track."

I nod, then stand and grab my bag. I need to get out of here and think. I thought I had moved on from what Kelter did, but I was wrong, and I'm about to confess everything. Someone knocks on the door, and I use the excuse of answering to leave,

or at least I try.

Marsha is on the other side in the hall, and she gives me a frown. “Why are you not in your PJs? Did you forget about the mandatory slumber party down in the common room? Who is this?” she says, peeking over my shoulder at Cassie before shoving me out of the way.

“Well hello, beautiful, I’m Marsha your dorm RA, and I am pleasantly surprised that Lyra has been hiding you away from me.” Cassie stands and shakes Marsha’s hand, and I note that her cheeks are flushed.

Marsha is a huge flirt and has made it known that she’s bisexual. I couldn’t care less, it’s college after all, but I don’t like that she’s hitting on Cassie. I almost feel protective, or territorial, but that’s ridiculous. Is it because of Kelter? Or something more?

“Hi, I’m Lyra’s step-sister and roommate, Cassie. I love your curls... I’ve never been able to get mine to sit right,” Cassie says, touching her straight hair.

“Hmmm, I have to say a shit load of hair products are responsible for this,” Marsha says with a smirk, grabbing Cassie’s arm. “Ditch the heels, put on a little less, and come join us at the slumber party. Welcome to the floor!”

Yeah, I officially hate this bitch.

## CASSIE

I knew coming back to Texas would be weird and then finding out the only dorm room available was with Lyra, I was about to return back to Florida and continue this semester online, but that would just put me four steps back from the progress I’ve been making. And I have worked hard.

I never expected breaking down with my dad and asking for help would have led to an anorexia clinic in Florida for a month, then four more months with my aunt, healing and recovering, but I think it's the best thing that has ever happened.

I found myself. The real Cassie, not the shell that hid from her deepest and darkest truths. I really expanded my horizons, and I even went out with a girl. I never saw myself going that route, but men just turn me off lately. I feel jittery around them, and I'm not sure why. I've tried, but my last date with a man was disastrous.

So standing here in a dorm room with Lyra that we will have to share is not only making me anxious, but I'm now looking at my step-sister in a new light. She doesn't seem so high-strung here. She's more relaxed and actually wearing leggings which is making me feel like I've stepped into an alternate universe, and when she stands to open the door, I find myself checking out her ass.

This is just weird. A bouncy, energetic, pretty brunette with the bluest eyes I have ever seen strides into the room, pushing Lyra away, and introduces herself to me. She's blatantly checking me out, and I'm still not used to so much attention. Lyra was the one people always complimented, and the way she's pouting right now, I don't think she likes being ignored.

"So wait, you're Lyra's new roommate?" Marsha asks, and I nod. She frowns and glares at my step-sister. "Lucky," she grumbles under her breath, then gently grabs my arm. "Ditch the heels, put on a little less, and come join us at the slumber party. Welcome to the floor!"

I try to protest, but Lyra announces for the both of us that we'll be there. Marsha gives me a flirty smile, then releases me and blows us air kisses as she leaves. I turn to dig out some PJs from my suitcase, and Lyra moves closer to me. I pause and just stand there, waiting for some nasty remark or dig, but all she does is touch my hair.

“I like what you did, but I think I’m going to miss the curls,” she mumbles before stepping back and going into the closet. I take a deep breath and smile. I think this is the first time Lyra has ever complimented me.

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“Thanks, it was so hot in Florida that the first thing I did was get a haircut, but with my natural frizz it looked like I had an afro,” I say with a small laugh, remembering how awful that was. “So my aunt took me to her friend, and she did this cool relaxation thing. I think I might keep it this way.”

I grab my clothes then walk over to the shared bathroom and get dressed. I only have summer PJs, and I worry that someone is going to comment on my thighs. I might have lost weight at the gym and rollerblading, but I still have some thick thighs. Yeah, they may be muscular now, but still.

I take a deep breath and do some of the exercises my therapists drilled into my brain during my stay at the clinic.

I am beautiful, curves and all.

If they don't love me, then fuck them.

I love my body and that's what matters.

A knock on the door pulls me from looking into the mirror and saying my affirmations. “Hey, so we better go or Marsha will be back. She's super annoying when she gets a bug up her ass,” Lyra says through the wood.

“You got this, Cassie,” I whisper quietly, then smile. It's time for my first college experience.

“Coming!” I shout.

\* \* \*

“Oh my God, Florida sounds amazing right now. Is that why you’re so tan?” Aleena, one of my new neighbors, says as we snack on some fruit and veggies. The sandwiches look amazing, but I’m not ready to eat anything with carbs in front of Lyra. I know that’s something I will need to get over, but for my first night here, I’ll suffer.

“Oh yes, I spent a lot of time on the beach or rollerblading on the boardwalk. I’ll need to find something here to keep active,” I say quietly and another girl, Dena interrupts.

“You should look into roller derby. I couldn’t hack it, those girls are brutal, but if you skate, it should be a walk in the park for you,” she says, giving my body a good look. I try not to flinch or cross my arms over my stomach, hiding what’s no longer there. “Yeah, girl you definitely have the body to take some ladies on the track.”

I blush and thank her when Lyra makes her way over to me. She’s more subdued than I’m used to, and if I’m being honest, I’m a little freaked out. I have known Lyra for almost three years, and she has never not tossed a cutting remark or an insult under her breath as she passes me. I’m about to call Bella and ask if something happened to make her so... Not exactly nice, but maybe tolerable.

“Okay ladies, let’s all set up our sleeping bags and start the real party,” Marsha says, pulling a bottle of alcohol out from behind her back with a naughty smile. She shoots me a wink, and Lyra gently touches my arm.

“Do you want to take that corner over there?” she asks, and I nod as I follow her. We didn’t have sleeping bags so we grabbed a few blankets and pillows. She sets us up on a makeshift bed, and I can’t help but hesitate to sit beside her.

Sitting gingerly, I cover my legs with the blankets. I’m not comfortable being so

close to her yet. Lyra chats with everyone, but her eyes keep drifting over to me. I'm not used to the attention, but since she's not being mean, I'm finding I don't mind it. It's kinda nice.

Taking a sip of the alcoholic drink that Martha made, I listen to her advice.

"Alright girls, the campus is usually really safe, but last year, a girl went running and was attacked while she was out. Linda hasn't been found, and her roommate hasn't seen her since. Campus police suggest that we go out with a buddy," Marsha says with a shrug. "Honestly, I think there's nothing to worry about, so for now, find a friend to go out with. Most of us are always looking for someone to eat with or a study partner anyway."

Biting my lip, I wonder if we need to worry. I'm new here, at the very least, it's a good excuse to meet people.

Dena leans in to talk to me with a grin. "I volunteer to be your buddy," she teases. "I love your smile and feel like I need to see more of it." I give her a grin, and Lyra freezes beside me. I glance her way, and her eyebrows are furrowed. I'm probably going to have to tell her I prefer girls now, but that can wait.

Marsha frowns as she watches us from across the room. I don't know why she's upset.

"So... maybe we can grab dinner tomorrow if you want?" Dena asks with a smile.

My cheeks heat, and I blame how easily I get flustered, even now. "I have a bunch of late classes, but how does Wednesday sound?"

Marsha leans forward, unable to stay silent. "Make sure you have someone that lives in our building walk you back with everything happening...okay? Safety first!"

I nod. "I'll make sure to do that," I murmur. I turn to speak to Dena, but she's already turning away.

The next hour goes by quickly, and my eyes start to droop. I'm fading fast. Yawning, I lay down, and I can see a few other girls have given up and fallen asleep.

"Good night, girls," Marsha says softly, turning out the light in the common room we converted into our own huge slumber party space. Tonight's been fun. I've never been to a slumber party before.

Lyra rolls over to face me, but her eyes are closed. She scooches closer to me and sighs contently when my leg touches hers. I'm frozen, afraid that she'll wake and snap at me for touching her.

Afraid to breathe, I stare at her. She's gorgeous, and it looks like she's done well while I've been gone. My time away worked for both of us. I hope I can get to know this new Lyra, and that it's not just a phase.

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I don't know if I could live through another round of bullying.

### ChapterNine

Lyra is acting really strange. She's been pleasant and even asked to borrow one of my tops. I'd say we're turning into real sisters, but the way my eyes keep drifting to her ass, that thought turns my stomach.

"I'll see you later? I think Dena and Marsha mentioned ordering in Greek food while we work on homework tonight," Lyra says, pushing her fishtail braid over her shoulder.

She's in a burgundy dress with cute cowboy boots today and looks really pretty. It always looks effortless. You'd think she'd spent a million years in the bathroom, but she really doesn't.

Lyra's typically ready in twenty minutes, like this morning.

Forcing myself to answer as she stares at me as if she's worried I swallowed my tongue, I nod. "Yeah...That sounds good. I'll see you tonight."

Lyra gives me a blinding smile and rushes out the door. Blowing out a breath, I throw myself onto my bed.

I am not crushing on my step-sister. Absolutely not.

Sitting up, I brush my hair back.

“Time for class,” I mutter, grabbing my backpack. This is my third day of classes, and I still get lost on this campus.

Rolling my eyes, I force myself to walk out the door.

Today I’m wearing a cute skirt, tank top, and comfortable sandals that are also cute. Because I joined so late in the semester, I have a mountain of work to catch up with and the classes are all miles apart from each other.

Okay, I’m being dramatic, but this is what my feet think at the end of the day.

Hustling across campus, I manage to only get lost once before I find the right room. Breathing hard, I open the door that’s heavy as shit, looking for an empty desk. I’m not late, but I feel like I am as I stare at a sea of faces in front of me. It’s stadium seating, and God, is it intimidating.

Climbing the stairs, I slide into the first open seat toward the outside that I find.

“Cutting it a little close, huh?” whispers the girl next to me.

Sighing, I nod as I grab my laptop. I’m so glad I can use my keyboard to type my notes, because my handwriting is awful after an hour and a half of writing. “I transferred in three days ago, and frankly, I keep getting lost,” I confess.

She giggles, shaking her head. “This place is a maze! I’m Hazel,” she introduces herself. “I applaud you on making it then.”

Relaxing, I smile. “I’m Cassie, and thank you for that.”

My professor walks in for my Literary Heroes Throughout the Ages class, and I’m excited. This is a junior level class, but I was able to get special permission to take it.

I take notes as we discuss what's expected, when tests and papers are due, and dive into lecture for the last part of the class about what makes a hero.

My head is spinning by the end, but in a good way. I like to be challenged academically, or I'm easily bored. It's the reason I've always been in all honors, dual enrollment, or college classes. I need those things to keep me engaged.

Walking out of class, I think back on all of the snarky comments Lyra used to say to me about being a know it all. If she only knew it's really because my brain won't let me slow down.

The rest of my day moves quickly, and I wonder if I should join any of the clubs on campus. I finally have a clean slate, no one is here that makes me feel ostracized or out of place. Maybe I should check out the student center and see if anything is open that I'll enjoy.

My legs are tired by the time I get back to the dorms. Does this count as my exercise? Maybe I need to start going to the gym before classes so I don't have an excuse to miss it by the end of the day.

I want to continue the healthy habits that I've learned and not fall into an inactive lifestyle.

"You're home!" Marsha exclaims with a smile as I walk off the elevator. "We were just about to order food. Did you get lost again today?"

I smile sheepishly because it's a running joke now. "Yeah, a couple of times, but I found my way. I may go to bed early tonight though, my head feels so full," I groan.

"Welcome to college life," Marsha says as she throws her arm around my waist, directing me to her room where we're working on homework tonight. "You'll

probably feel like this a lot,” she laughs.

Lyra is sprawled out on the couch reading, while Dena is looking over the menu.

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Lyra looks up and frowns when she sees how close Marsha and I are. I really need to tell her I'm more comfortable with women than men now, because I don't want her to say anything mean.

Smiling at Marsha, I break away to sit on a bean bag to begin some homework.

We order food and spend the time studying, eating, and laughing. It's been a long time since I've been able to do this because of the bullying I experienced. Even in Ft. Lauderdale, I was pretty closed off as I struggled to heal.

Finally, at ten, I call it. I'm starting to nod off, and I'm exhausted.

"That's it for me," I tell them with a yawn. "I have one night class tomorrow, so I'll finish this off during the day at the library. I also think I want to check out the Student Center and see if there's any clubs I may be interested in."

Dena squeals, and I glance her way as I'm packing up.

"The Drama Club! We're planning a play now, and you're so pretty. Do you have any acting experience?" she asks, wide-eyed.

I laugh, shaking my head. "I don't have much experience in anything outside of school, honestly."

Lyra leans forward, thinking. "I do gymnastics, and we have a blast. Have you thought about doing something like that?"

I shake my head again, thinking how ridiculous that sounds. “Lyra, I am sooo not flexible. I think that sounds like an accident waiting to happen.”

Lyra shrugs and leans back with a small, private smile, and I wonder what she’s thinking.

“Oh, babe, I’m sure you’re plenty flexible under the right circumstances,” Marsha teases, and I flush. I will never get used to how forward she is!

“Just come and see what you think,” Dena says, as she plays with her hair. “I make all of the props and help sew the clothing. I’ve been doing drama club for as long as I can remember.”

“Okay,” I breathe out. I need to try new things. “When do you all meet?”

“Our next meet up is Thursday at five in the afternoon... Do you have classes?” Dena asks.

Thinking, I realize I’m available. “No, I’m free. You know I’m always lost here, walk with me?”

Dena agrees, and I trudge off to change, brush my teeth, and go to bed.

\* \* \*

I’m walking home in a pretty dress, and it reminds me of my prom dress. There’s rips all in it, but I don’t remember why. Wrapping my arms around myself to cover my breasts, I look over my shoulder and see a party raging on.

I’ll never be invited to something like that. I’m not good enough. My body is thick, curvy, and I can vaguely remember the sound, “Mooo!” being screamed at me.

Swiping away a stray tear, I walk by a giant shrub. I freaking hate these... they have always given me the heebie jeebies.

An arm reaches out and pulls me through the branches, uncaring if they scrape and scratch my skin. I gasp a breath to scream, call for help, but I can't.

"Now that I know exactly what you have underneath your clothes, I need to test drive it for myself," a voice chuckles that I instantly know. Kelter.

Handstouch me where they haven't been given permission, no matter how much I twist, fight, and squirm.

There's sounds of teens laughing and drinking, and no one cares that my innocence is being stolen from me...

"Cassie!" Lyra gasps, shaking me awake.

There's tears streaming down my cheeks as I sob.

"Why, why would he hurt me?" I cry out, holding my stomach tightly.

"Shh," she whispers as she gets in bed with me and holds me. "It's just a nightmare. You're safe. I have you, and you're fine. I'll stay with you until you go back to sleep, okay?"

I nod, unable to talk, and Lyra runs her fingers through my hair. It feels as if she's done this before, but she couldn't possibly have. She's always hated me, and the only reason she's being kind now is she must feel sorry that I'm such a baby, and I'm having a nightmare.

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“I’m sorry,” I gasp, my breath hitching. “I didn’t mean to wake you up with my stupid dream.”

“Shh, you’re okay. I got up to go to the bathroom, and when I came back, you were twisting and flailing in your bed. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

I sigh, snuggling next to her. She stiffens for a moment before putting her arms around me. “You’re safe with me,” Lyra murmurs. “I swear it. Just close your eyes and go back to sleep.”

My eyes get heavy, and it feels nice to be held. I haven’t had sex in ages, and I’m not one who usually gets hugs, so this is really nice.

“Why did you hate me so much?” I whisper, scared of what her answer is.

Lyra shakes her head, and I turn in her arms so I don’t have to look at her. She snuggles into my back, her arm squeezing me tighter around my waist.

“I never hated you, Cassie,” she says softly. “I was frustrated by the move, and you were so perfect. Even my own mother gushed about how amazing and driven you are. I just wanted to cheer and get decent grades, I didn’t care about ancient dead people in history or their lives.”

I smirk, because I was just thinking about this. “I can’t help the way my brain works. I need to be busy, or I get bored and depressed. Moving so often as a military brat, I could change posts often, so I didn’t want to get attached to people. Instead, I threw myself into the lives of ancient dead people,” I tease her, “and enrolled in online

college classes because if I moved in the middle of the year, I could still complete the course for credit.”

“Moving once was awful,” Lyra mutters, shaking her head. I can feel her breath on my neck, and I shiver.

Focus, Cassie.

“I have moved so many places, I can’t even remember them all,” I tell her. “We lived in Italy when I was ten, Japan when I was twelve, and when I was fifteen, I found out my mom was cheating on my father. Not even my mother stuck around,” I scoff. “So why would I bother investing in people when they’ll just leave?”

Lyra stays silent, and I start to drift. As my breath evens and I’m almost asleep, I swear I hear her say, “I promise I’m not going anywhere, Cassie.”

When I wake up, I’m in bed alone again, and Lyra is already gone for the day. She’s started running in the mornings with a friend before it gets too warm.

Sitting up, I wonder if it was all a dream, except I find one of her blonde hairs on my pillow.

Huh, that really happened.

## Chapter Ten

Thursday rolls around, and I’m actually excited to see what Drama Club is all about. I never thought I would enjoy Texas, I pictured it being as hellish as New York was, but I’m actually happy.

Lyra and I are... I guess you could call us friends, and I’m enjoying my classes and

my social life. I actually have plans most nights here, and that's something new to me too.

Wearing jeans, a cute pink tank top, and heels, I grab my wristlet to leave. Lyra said she was at the library for the afternoon working on a research project, and I'm realizing there's so much to her I still know nothing about.

She works hard, grabs life by the horns, but still manages to get all of her work done. I'm kind of in awe of how busy she is.

Walking out, I make sure to lock the door. Waving goodbye to a few of the girls doing their laundry or chatting, I hit the elevator call button.

"You know, you have legs, you should just walk down the stairs," a girl says, pushing me out of the way as she opens the door to the stairwell.

My jaw drops. I haven't dealt with any bitchiness while I've been here, and somehow it just surprises me. Shaking my head, I mutter, "I'm not fucking going down six flights of stairs in heels, twat."

I hear a giggle behind me and turn. "Did you forget to wait for me?" Dena asks.

Turning, I blush. "I figured you'd already be downstairs, and I was excited," I explain.

Dena nods, linking her arm in mine. "Don't mind her, I'm pretty sure she's on the rag, and her bitch meter is extra high. Or twat meter... I think your word is better," she teases.

I hide my face in her shoulder. "Ugh, I'm sorry. She was so damn rude, I'm out of practice dealing with unpleasant behavior."

“You’re totally fine,” she says, placing a finger under my chin to push it up to see my eyes. “Look, she’ll be back to singing show tunes at the top of her lungs in the shower again by next week. She’s my suite mate, and I’ve gotten used to her mood swings.”

“Ah, well, I’m kind of a bear on my period,” I admit. “I need a steady supply of dark chocolate and a heating pad to be able to function.”

“Sooo... Marsha usually stashes some dark chocolate in the community stash,” she confides as the elevator opens. “If you run out, go help yourself. The school gives her money to order important supplies like tampons, extra pencils, pizza, and chocolate. Loads of it.”

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I giggle as we walk onto the elevator. We chat as we go down, waving at people we see as we walk. I really love this campus and how pretty it is, there's so many places to sit outside and enjoy the weather.

I loved the idea of going to Dartmouth, but I have to admit it's nice to hang up my snowshoes for crop tops and sandals. Ft. Lauderdale really made me love being able to be in less layers year round.

I still love the snow, but this weather works for me.

We are headed to one of several theaters on campus, and my jaw drops as we walk in.

"Wow," I murmur softly.

"Isn't it gorgeous?!" Dena squeals softly. "Let's get you signed in, and see what you got! Umm...can you sing by any chance?"

"What?!" I screech, and Dena giggles.

I have the feeling that Dena may have omitted a few details.

There's a large man at the front of the theater barking instructions, but my father is a military man, and this doesn't really bother me.

I sign in with who I believe is one of his assistants and bite my lip. "I may have been talked into this," I whisper furiously. "I have no idea what to expect or what I'm doing. This is a mistake isn't it?"

Frank, the assistant, smirks and appears to be a student too. “Come with me, and we’ll chat so Professor Pales doesn’t lose his shit,” he murmurs.

Walking toward the back of the theater, I watch as tryouts start.

“Okay, tell me, Cas, who told you about the UT Drama Club?” Frank asks softly, watching the stage as he talks to me.

“Dena...” I begin to say, and he chuckles.

“Of course she did. Look, she’s a flirt, but she’s got a really good eye for talent. Can you read a script and memorize it?” he asks, frowning as he sees something.

“Yeah, of course,” I tell him, kind of surprised this is a question.

“Are you aware of how tonality and inflection affect how you say things in conversation?” Frank continues to interrogate me.

“Yeah, but—” My Latin class in the eighth grade had to go to a contest and recite Latin excerpts of stories. Tonality has been ingrained in my soul after that experience.

Frank doesn’t let me say any of this though.

“Can you sing at all?” Frank asks again, and I swear I feel like I’m in the middle of an interview.

“Yes, but I haven’t sung outside of a school choir in ages,” I groan softly, getting the feeling he’s assessing my skills as he talks to me.

“Perfect,” he mutters as he hands me a sheath of papers. “You’re reading Violet’s lines, and then I’m going to have you sing an excerpt from one of the songs.

Umm...can you read music?"

"Yes...?" I tell him, now petrified of where this is going.

"Great, you're up next!" Frank stands and cups his mouth as he yells, "Thank you so much for your time! We will contact you if needed. Next up is Cassie Shephard, who is reading the part of Violet!"

Yeah, that's not unnerving at all!

Swallowing, I get up when Frank gestures me forward. Walking quickly to the front of the theater, I climb the stairs with a swallow. I haven't memorized shit and have never read this play.

"Miss Cassie, show me what you've got, please. I will be reading the male's part so you have someone to interact with," the professor says.

I nod, thankful I won't be talking to myself.

Looking down, I take a deep breath so I won't pass out. Seeing my lines, I look up at him.

He grins and winks, and begins to read the male's part, nailing tonality and emotion. Standing tall, I read my part back. It's fun, full of banter and snark, and I step right into Violet's role. I lose myself completely, until Professor Pales goes silent.

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Looking up, my eyes widen. The entire theater is silent. My eyes meet Dena's, and she jumps up and down with a smile and a giant thumbs up.

"Please, please tell me you can sing!" the director begs, dropping to his knees in supplication.

I giggle at his hysterics, and I can tell why he's the director of this club.

"Umm maybe you can tell me if you think I can?" I ask, and he nods.

"Fair enough!" he exclaims, and the piano begins to play.

Oh shit. He means right now.

I grab the song piece from behind my lines and look over it.

Seeing that the piano bar is ending, I take a big breath and go for it. I haven't sung in ages outside of the radio in the car, but in high school I drove to school with Lyra, and I didn't want to open myself to ridicule. She's already ruined so many things for me, I was afraid she would ruin this too.

As the song ends, I glance up. Everyone stares at me, I bite my lip, shifting my weight on my feet.

Frank stomps up the aisle aggressively, pointing at me. "You said you could maybe sing, you lied," he says, and I stare at him as if I'm a deer in the headlights. "Has no one ever told you how well you sing?"

I shake my head, and the silence breaks. People cheer and clap, and I cover my mouth as I start to cry. This wasn't the reaction I thought I'd get. Maybe I thought I would be booed off the stage?

And then I remember:

I am loved.

I am special.

There's no one in the world like me because I'm me.

My self esteem is still so low, but I'm working on it. Dena runs on stage as I cry and jumps on me as she hugs me.

"You were fucking amazing, beautiful. We'll have to remind you of it often, okay?" she says in my ear, and I nod, unable to talk from the emotion and adrenaline crashing in my body.

Today is teaching me that the words people have made me believe aren't true. I am worthy of friends, trying new experiences, and doing the things that make me happy.

Dena walks me off stage, and someone hands her a soda. Popping the top, she hands it to me.

"We're theater people," she explains as I take a sip. "Big emotions, adrenaline crashing, and bursting into tears when you're fucking amazing are all par for the course. Let's go find the professor."

We walk down the stairs, and the professor is talking to his assistants. "Ah, there you are. Doing alright?" he asks kindly.

This is so different from the man who was just boisterously yelling, but again my father is the same way, so I nod.

“Yes, this all,” I wave my hand around, “was a lot. I’ve never auditioned for anything before,” I explain.

Frank rolls his eyes next to him. “You should. You have the role, you just need to accept it. We’ll work together in rehearsals and have fun.”

“Will you be my Violet?” Professor Pales asks, grabbing my hand, and I can’t help but giggle.

“Yes. Please. I would very much like to be,” I tell him.

“Thank God, because I can’t see Violet as anyone else now,” he says, and I grin, taking another sip of soda to help with the shakiness I’m starting to feel. “You’ve had an exciting introduction to Drama Club,” he laughs. “Go grab something to eat, and I’ll see you at the next meet up.”

Dena and I start to walk out, and she bites her lip.

“So, I was trying to ask you this before, but I keep getting interrupted. So now that there’s no one around, can we maybe go on a date?” Dena asks, saying everything so quickly as if she’s nervous to ask.

Who could ever be nervous of me?

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“Yes,” I tell her, my breath hitching from all of the emotions from earlier. “I would love that. I also hate waiting, so why don’t you take me on that date right now?”

Dena grins. “Good, cause I have no chill either,” she tells me.

Walking together to one of the restaurants on campus, we chat about everything as we eat. It’s easy, fun, and there’s no expectations. It was great, outside of her odd fascination with her cat and the million photos she showed me.

“Oh my goodness,” Dena giggles. “So I’ve been in a Drama Club or theater my whole life, and there’ve been some disasters. Professor Pales really likes you though, and yes, he’s always that extra.”

“I really love it though. There’s no guessing, or worries that he’s not being honest,” I explain, shrugging.

Dena sobers as we finish our dinner, and we throw out our trash.

“It makes me really sad that people have hurt you like this,” she says as we start walking back to the dorms. “I always hung out with other drama fanatics, so people didn’t really mess with us. We were ‘creative’ or whatever, so we were left to our own devices at my schools. I wish you’d had a protective bubble for being super smart and special.”

I smile sadly, because I wish I had too.

She wraps her arm around my waist, and I give in and snuggle against her. We walk

home that way, and no one gives us a second glance.

## ChapterEleven

“I had a great time,” Dena says, leaning closer to me for a kiss outside my dorm room. I sigh and look up at her. I’m about to stop her and ask if we can just be friends, because I really like hanging out with her and I don’t want to ruin that, when Marsha comes storming down the hall toward us. She looks furious about something.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, and she shakes her head with a frown. Dena takes a step away from me and turns to our friend, concerned. I can’t help but to release a breath of relief. I mean I like Dena and she’s an awesome friend, but girlfriend? No, I don’t see it happening.

Marsha turns and falls into my arms, hysterical. I catch her and try to keep her from falling. She’s ranting into my shirt, but it’s all mumbles. “Help,” I mouth to Dena, and she bites her bottom lip, looking worried but confused.

Yeah, sister, join the club.

“Hey, Marsha, how about we go get some ice cream at the cafe?” Dena suggests, and Marsha pulls away from me, avoiding my eyes and nods. She wipes her face with her sleeve and gives me a small, shaky smile.

“Sorry, Cassie, I just really needed a hug,” she mumbles, then starts to walk away. Dena moves closer, and I stop her.

“What was that about?” I whisper, since Marsha is still within hearing distance. Dena sighs and runs her fingers through her hair.

“Marsha is one of my best friends, and I love her to death, but she was diagnosed bi-

polar three years ago. She sometimes will have manic moods, or depression outbursts. Usually ice cream helps. Did you want to come too?" I shake my head and fake a yawn.

"I'm beat, but you guys go. I'll see you tomorrow," I say, then give her a quick hug and open my door. Lyra left it unlocked and that worries me. Doesn't she know there is someone around here taking college girls? Dena gives me a wave, then takes off to catch up with Marsha.

I enter our dorm, then shut the door and thump my forehead against the hard wood. "So, I take it the date wasn't what you expected?" Lyra asks from her desk, and I groan.

"Am I going to get the mean version of Lyra, or the nice one I've been blessed with lately?" I can't help but snark. She laughs, but it's kind of sad.

"I really was a huge bitch to you. I don't think I ever really apologized. But I'm trying to be a new person. This is college, it's time for all the high school bullshit to be done with. I saw her go in for a kiss, so I knew Drama Club turned into more. It was only a matter of time. If you'd like to talk, I'll listen, and hey, I even have some lemonade. We can make some vodka drinks and chat." I sigh and nod.

"Yeah, I could use a drink. I just had a really weird moment with Marsha," I say, spinning to face her. She's sitting on her bed in the tiniest little shorts I have ever seen, giving me a show of way too much leg, and a top that's so thin, it looks sheer. I try to keep my gaze on her eyes, and her brows are furrowed in concentration.

I clear my throat, then move over to the closet so I can change into something comfortable.

"I like Dena as a friend, but all she wanted to talk about was her cat back home and

how much she misses her. Don't get me wrong, that's not awful, but for a date, it seemed weird. I think we're better off friends."

I can feel Lyra's presence behind me as she grabs some cups from the closet. "Maybe she was just nervous. It can't be easy asking a girl out," she mumbles, then moves to the small fridge we have and starts to make us some drinks.

"You're right. I've always been asked, but the possibility of disappointment is always scary," I agree, stripping off my shirt and bra for an off the shoulder shirt that'll work for hanging out.

Lyra gasps softly, and I look over my shoulder as I push off my jeans and step out of my shoes. This is the moment of truth... does she think I look gross naked?

Lyra stares for a moment, eyes heating before she forces herself to sit on the bed with our drinks.

Interesting, I'm not the only one affected.

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I've been noticing her more, and I've seen her glances, but now I know for sure. Tugging on my shirt, I check that it at least covers my ass, before I sit across from her and cross my legs underneath me.

"How about a drinking game?" Lyra says with a smile. "We clearly don't know each other very well anymore, so let's change that."

I bite my lip as I nod. Lyra doesn't know me partly because she saw what she wanted.

"We can do a question and answer game, and we'll both answer yes or no at the same time. Every time we say 'no', we have to drink. Are you in?" she asks.

Shrugging, I nod. "Let's do it. What's the worst thing that can happen?"

"Yesss. Okay. Ever snuck out at night?" she asks.

"No," I respond as she says "yes," and I roll my eyes. I'm going to be so drunk at this rate.

"Ever had sex?" Lyra asks, and we both say "yes", and neither of us drink.

We continue this way, and I even ask a few questions, each one even more ridiculous.

"Ummm. Okay, okay. Has a piercing in an intimate area?" Lyra asks expectantly, and I smirk.

"Yes," I answer as she denies it. She squeals as she processes this, and I giggle.

“Oh my God, you dirty girl. Where?!” Lyra asks, and I shrug.

I got my clit pierced on a dare while I was in South Florida, and it makes everything better.

That’s not part of the game though, so I’m not telling her that.

We’re pretty tipsy as Lyra falls onto her back, giggling. I put my empty glass on the floor next to me and crawl up the bed to straddle her.

“Hey,” I grin, my long hair a waterfall as I lean over her. “I’ve always been so jealous of your blonde hair... it always looked so soft,” I murmur, touching her braid gently.

Lyra grabs my hips, rolling them over her pubic bone, and I gasp. It hits me perfectly, and I moan. “Oh my God, what are you doing? Because it feels, ohhh.”

She licks her lips, biting her bottom one. “I don’t really know, but I want to make you feel good. Do you want me to stop?”

I shake my head, grinding against her again. My nerve endings are firing like crazy, and I whimper as my pussy clenches around nothing.

Lyra’s breath hitches as she stares at me, her blue eyes soft and needy. “Then... don’t,” she whispers, sliding her hand behind my head and pulling me down to her mouth.

Our kiss is all tongue, teeth, and years of past aggression. It feels amazing, and her hand glides down my body before she grabs a handful of my ass as she moans.

I groan, writhing against her body, feeling how tight her nipples are against her thin shirt. Her head falls back, gasping as I pull my head up. There’s so many feelings

coursing through my body, and I'm flushed with need.

Lyra's blue eyes are shining with lust for me and that turns me on even more. She bites her lip as she watches me, and I see a hint of doubt enter her eyes. "We shouldn't do this, right? I mean, you're my step-sister—"

I don't let her finish that thought though, leaning down to take her lips again. She melts against me, supple and needy once more. Kissing down her jaw, I lick down her body to her cleavage. I haven't been able to stop staring at it the entire time we've been hanging out together, her darkened nipples easily seen through her shirt.

She wiggles under me, and I shift my thigh so she can grind the dampness between her thighs on me. Lyra moans, and I smile before pulling her shirt down to release her breasts, nipping and sucking hard.

"Cassie, fuck, I need more, baby," Lyra whimpers, arching against me, totally lost to the pleasure I'm giving to her.

"I need to taste you," I whisper, kissing and nipping down her body until I come face to face with the tiny sleep shorts that have been taunting me.

Pulling them down, I throw them over my shoulder along with her tiny thong.

I tease the smooth skin of her mound as I drag my fingers through her wet folds.

"Cas... please, fuck, I'm so close. Don't tease," Lyra mewls, and for a moment, I feel powerful and desired.

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Grabbing her thighs, I push them open wide so I can see the perfect pussy I'm about to feast on.

"So fucking pretty," I murmur before sucking her clit into my mouth. Pushing my fingers inside of her, I watch her face as she grabs my hair, fucking my face. I love watching her take control of her pleasure.

I can feel her pussy start to flutter and know she's about to come. Fucking her hole with my fingers, I give her a tiny bit of my teeth on her clit as I continue to suck and nip.

"Oh, fuck, I... Hhm gimme all of that," Lyra cries, unable to maintain a thought until she comes all over my face like a good girl.

I climb up her body and kiss her, but her kiss is lackluster, and she pulls away.

We are both gasping for air when there's a knock on the door. We stare at each other in shock, and I lean back, trying to figure out what the hell is happening.

Lyra looks away as she sits up, standing and grabbing her shorts. She doesn't bother with panties, and I realize they are hanging from a lampshade.

"I should answer that," she says weakly, and I nod, standing and grabbing a pair of cutoffs so I'm not half naked, I slip them on then check the time on my phone. Midnight. Who is banging on our door this late? And is it a blessing in disguise?

What the hell happened in the last few minutes, and how did it all get so fucked?

I wait to see who is on the other side of the door, confused as to why Lyra is acting so odd.

Does she already regret what we did? I should have known she'd be ashamed when she said I was her step-sister.

## ChapterTwelve

Oh. My. God. What the hell did I... We just do? And why did I have the greatest orgasm of my life from it? I fix my hair and make sure my clothes are how they should be, then walk toward the door. Cassie won't look at me, and I know I fucked up by not kissing her after she made me come. But I mean come on, not only is she a girl, but she's my step-sister and roommate. It's too weird.

The frantic knocking continues, and I open the door, almost getting punched in the face by Marsha. I gasp when she grips my arms tight, squeezing. "She's gone. We were getting ice cream at the cafe, and he just came out of nowhere!" Marsha yells, her eyes wild and hair a mess, and Cassie comes over to us.

"Marsha, you need to calm down. What happened? Who's gone? Why are you covered in blood and dirt?" Cassie barks, and I glance down, noticing that she's right. Marsha has a gash above her eye and is covered in mud and leaves.

"Dena... He got Dena. I was knocked out, and when I came to, all I could find was this." Tears run down her face as she cries, and she can't get enough air in her lungs as Marsha lets me go, and I notice the sneaker in her other hand. It's hot pink, and I immediately know that it belongs to Dena, but the blood splatter all over it has me gasping for breath.

The End