



The Silver Swan (The Elite King's Club 1)

Author: *Amo Jones*

Category: Romance, New Adult, Thriller, Action, Suspense, Dark, Young Adult

Description: Riddle me this...

"I am neither dead, nor alive, and I'm not something little Madison can hide.

But you will be dead, by the time this is done...

the timer starts now, and the games have just begun..."

Madison Montgomery comes from money and power, but when someone close to her commits the ultimate crime, Madison must live with her tainted name for the rest of her life. When she begins Riverside Preparatory Academy, the private school her father has swept her into in The Hamptons, she hopes for a fresh start. What she wasn't hoping for was the pack of bad boys who run the school; ten, to be exact. When Madison gains the attention of their leader, Bishop Vincent Hayes, a whole new world that she didn't think existed is exposed to her. A whole world that starts and ends with The Elite Kings Club and these boys, are about to flip her world upside down. Secrets are overflowing and family lies are about to be exposed. Is there more to Madison Montgomery than even she knows?

Total Pages (Source): 92

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

THE SCHOOL HALLWAYS CAVE IN on me as I walk through what would be my first day at Riverside Preparatory Academy. The sound of closing lockers and snickering voices surround me, and all I want to do is go visit my mom's grave. My dad moved us across the state, because he had found "the one." I'm beginning to think he can't count. This would be his third "the one" since my mom's passing.

Reaching my locker, I pull it open and place my brand-new textbooks inside before taking out my class schedule. Calculus. Great. My leather bangles jingle as I close my locker door and make my way to calculus. It's September, so at least I'm starting at the beginning of the school year.

Halting at the threshold of the classroom, I look down to my paper to check the numbers before looking at the ones mounted above the door. Ignoring the twenty or so eyes gawking at me, I manage to slip out, "Is this 1DY for calculus?"

The teacher, I assume, walks up to me, his black-rimmed glasses shielding his tired eyes and his gray hair illustrating his age. "Yes, Madison Montgomery?"

Swallowing, I nod. "Yes, that's me."

"Welcome to Riverside Prep. I'm Mr. Warner. Why don't you take a seat?"

I smile at him, clutching my books, and walk toward the crowd of students who are all sitting in their chairs, and that's when the whispering starts.

"Madison Montgomery? Isn't that the girl whose mom murdered her dad's girlfriend before killing herself?"

“Are you sure?” her friend asks, eyeing me skeptically. “She seemed so much prettier in the newspapers.”

“No, that’s definitely her. Her dad is loaded too. They’re from old money, and her mom was a bored housewife who caught her husband cheating. So she stabbed the woman to death before shooting herself in the head—with Madison’s shotgun.” The air begins to thicken as I drop down to my seat.

“Her shotgun? She owns a shotgun? Ew. Better stay away from her. She might be as crazy as her mother.”

They laugh before Mr. Warner clicks his fingers, demanding their attention. I close my eyes briefly, swallowing down any hope I had at getting a fresh start at a new school. Nothing and no one could give me a new beginning. Who was I kidding?

At first break, I walk to the outside entrance and take a seat on one of the steps. The way the school is laid out allows students to use the front steps to eat their lunch or the cafeteria. The atrium is filled with students, so I opt to eat out here where the sun is shining and where it’s less... people-y.

“Hi!” a chirpy voice bellows, and I look up behind me to find a girl who’s as small as a pixie. Her tiny body is covered in the finest labeled clothes, and her white-blond hair has the sun bouncing off it. I also can’t help but notice that where my wrists are bound by black metal and leather bangles, hers are silver and gold. I know instantly we can’t be friends.

“Hi.” I tuck my brown hair behind my ear.

She sits down beside me anyway, taking a bite out of her sandwich. “I’m Tatum. You’re new, right?”

I nod, sucking the juice from my apple off my thumb. “Yup. Sorry, you probably don’t want to be seen with me.”

She waves my comment away. “I know all about you. Madison Montgomery, seventeen years old. Daughter of a murderer who then shot herself. Dad has money coming out his butt. Came from Beverly Hills to the Hamptons. Have I missed anything?”

I blink slowly before narrowing my eyes. “You forgot the part where it was my gun.”

She laughs nervously. “I know. I was just hoping that wasn’t true.”

“My point. You probably don’t want to be seen with me.” I turn my attention back to my apple.

She shakes her head. “Nope, you and I are going to be great friends.”

After break, I carry on to my next class, and before I know it, the bell rings for lunch. Tatum insists on showing me around the school the best she can, pointing out all the different classrooms and where I can sign up for what. During lunch, the boys come from their side of the school, and we all join in the cafeteria, which splits the girl and boy sides of the school. On the rich side, it’s up there on Bill Gates’s status, and I’m seriously wondering how the hell my father managed to get me in. We’re rich, yes, but there’s something else about this school. You need a high level of pedigree to get in, too.

We walk into the cafeteria, and Tatum points down to my skirt. “You can accessorize your school uniform. We can hem it higher if we want.” My plaid school skirt sits just above my knees, and I’m okay with the length. I don’t want to attract any more attention, so I brush off her suggestion.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“Thanks,” I answer dryly, before bringing my eyes to the doors that open out to the boy’s side. A handful of guys push through the doors, talking and laughing with each other. They commanded the atmosphere instantly. Their grins are cocky with self-assurance.

“Who’re they?” I ask, nudging my head toward the group walking toward the garden wall at the far side of the right wing.

“They are trouble,” Tatum mumbles, taking a seat on one of the picnic tables. I watch them closely. They’re all hot, really hot. Tatum turns around, following my line of sight. “And that’s slut trouble,” she mutters, pointing toward the girls who were babbling off earlier in calculus.

“What do you mean by trouble?” I ask, ignoring her reference to the girls and taking my eyes away from the commotion.

“I mean, not only are they advantaged assholes who own this school, and when I say own, I mean literally—at least for Nate anyway. But around here? They call the shots. The students of Riverside Prep are just pawns in their sick and twisted games. They own this school, Madison.”

“You say that like they’re in a gang.” I peel open my yogurt.

“They may as well be,” she replies, opening her carton of juice. “Apparently, they’re members of this super-secret club.” She leans in closer and smiles. “The Elite Kings Club.”

“THE ELITE KINGS CLUB?” I ask, taking a bite out of my sandwich. Jimmy, our cook, made my favorite. Chicken salad with diced tomatoes and chopped lettuce mixed together with mayonnaise. He’s so good at his job that my father uproots and brings him wherever we end up living.

Tatum waves her hand around, rolling her eyes. “They’re like this undercover exclusive club. No one really knows what happens in this club, or who all the members really are, but it has to do with blood and your family lineage, apparently.”

I continue eating my sandwich. The bell rings to signal that break is over once again, so I collect my books from the table.

“What do you have now?” Tatum asks, shoving an apple in her mouth so she can have a free hand to collect her books. I laugh under my breath as she takes the apple out of her mouth. “What?”

I shake my head. “Nothing, and I have PE.”

She scrunches her face. “You do know that was optional, right?”

I nod, helping her pick up her books when I see she’s taking too long. “I like sports.”

We turn to walk back into the girls’ hall, and just when I hit the doorway, something urges me to turn back around.

You know that feeling you get when you can feel someone watching you? Yeah, I had that times seven. When I pause in my step, Tatum halts her yapping about some game that’s happening on Friday night, her eyes going over my shoulder before her face pales and her eyebrows pinch together. I slowly turn back around to look in the cafeteria to find all—seven, there’s seven—boys staring right at me. I scan over each of them, lingering a little too long on the one with messy dark brown hair who’s

sitting slouched over a chair. He has wide shoulders and a strong, angular jaw. His eyes continue to summon mine when suddenly I feel as though I'm locked in a trance. Knowing I should pull away, I swallow and turn back around to go to my next class.

“Whoa! Hold up!” Tatum runs up behind me. “What the hell was that about?”

I shrug, pulling out my schedule from my pocket. “They’ve probably heard about my mom.”

Tatum scoffs. “They wouldn’t care about that, I’m sure. That was something else. But hey”—her firm grip on my arm halts my forward momentum—“you don’t want them to notice you, Madison. They’re not good people.”

“Well, seems it’s a little late for that.” I shove past her and carry on toward the back doors that lead to the gym. I’m walking down the long corridor and am about to round the corner into the girls’ locker room when I walk into a rock-hard chest.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, pulling my hand back from his pec. “I’m so sorry.” I look up to honey-brown eyes shaped by thick eyelashes. Pretty boy.

“Hey, no worries.” He collects his duffle bag from the ground before reaching his hand out to me. “Carter. And you must be Madison Montgomery.”

“Great,” I mutter. “You’ve heard all about me.” I drop my eyes to his chest, remembering how hard it felt under my palm.

He chuckles. “Which story?” he teases, winking at me.

I smile at his attempt to lighten up the mood, shaking my head. “I thought this was the girls’ side?”

“The gym is co-ed. How’re you liking your first day?” he asks, leaning against the wall.

“Well,” I begin, my eyes darting around the long corridor, “a little intense.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“Carter! Get your ass in here!” an older man wearing a whistle around his neck and a baseball cap calls out from the other end of the corridor.

Carter’s eyes stay on mine, a small smirk appearing on his mouth. “I’ll see you around, Madison.” He pushes off the wall with a grin, strolling past me.

“Yeah,” I answer, once he’s already gone. “I’ll see you around.” Turning back around to peer over my shoulder, I catch him watching me, so I wave lightly at him before carrying on toward PE.

That’s two nice people I’ve met on my first day, and I didn’t see him sitting with the Elite-whatever boys, so I’m hoping he isn’t friends with them.

I’m waiting outside the front gate of the school for my driver when Tatum comes running up to me. “So, Carter Mathers.” She wiggles her eyebrows.

I tilt my head. “How do you even know about that? It literally happened not one hour ago.”

“News travels fast around here.” She picks at her nails, unfazed.

“I’m starting to get that,” I mutter.

“So anyway,” she continues, hooking her arm in mine. “I need your number so we can plan this weekend.” I see my black limo pull up to the curb, and Harry, my dad’s driver, steps out of the driver side. Tatum pulls out her phone, and I ramble off the numbers to her while making my way to my ride. “Okay! I’ll text you!” she yells out,

as Harry opens my door and I clutch it in my hand.

“Do you have a driver?” I ask her, one foot inside the car.

She shakes her head. “I drive.”

I wave her off and slide into the back of the car. Today was truly interesting. I’m not sure how to take the events that have happened, but if every day is going to be like today, I’m in for a long ride.

AFTER PUSHING OPEN THE DOUBLE front doors to our colonial home, I drop my bag in the foyer and make my way into the kitchen. Our house is exactly what you’d expect someone like my father to own. All neutral milky whites on the walls, with a crystal white staircase that leads up to the second level. I take a can of Coke out of the fridge before making my way upstairs. My dad and his new bride will be back on Monday, and I’ve only met her once or twice, but from what I’ve seen, she seems nice. Nicer than his last money-hungry broad, who he brought home anyway. I’m walking up the stairs when my phone vibrates in my back pocket. I fish it out quickly and slide it open when I see it’s my dad.

“Hey.”

“Madi, sorry, honey. We forgot to tell you that Elena’s son will be moving into the manor as well.”

I pause, scanning the long hallway once I reach the top of the staircase. “Okaaay. I didn’t know she had a son.”

“She does. He attends your school. I need you to keep him at arm’s length.”

“What does that mean?”

He sighs. “Just wait until we get home, Madi.”

“Dad, you’re being cryptic. I’ll see you when you get home, and I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

I hang up the phone before he can continue to badger me, or worse, give me “the talk.” After shoving my phone into the back pocket of my jeans, I walk to my bedroom door, halting when I hear sounds coming from the bedroom next to mine. Is he already here? Fighting my nosey tendencies, I push through my door and sigh with the relief of being back in my safe bubble. Kicking my door closed, I walk toward the Victorian-style glass doors that open out onto the little balcony that hangs over the pool. I push open the white net curtains and unlock the latch to let some air in. The light afternoon breeze brushes over me, sending my long brown hair swishing over my shoulder.

My safe bubble of relaxation is short-lived as Ludacris’s “What’s Your Fantasy” shakes the vintage art I have hanging on my walls with its deep-sounding bass. I shake my head, walking back into the room, which continues to house boxes of all my items I haven’t unpacked yet. I pull open the bathroom door that’s joined onto my room and close it before wiggling out of the clothes I wore to school. Slipping into the scorching yet soothing spray of water, I work double time at washing myself before turning off the faucet and wrapping a towel around my body.

I’m stepping out of the shower when I see someone leaning against the doorframe of the other room that’s connected to the bathroom. A loud scream erupts from me, and I clutch the towel around my body. I forgot about that damn door. Genuine’s “Pony” is playing now, and my eyes narrow on the tall, lean guy standing in front of me with his arms crossed in front of himself.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“Get out!” I point to his room.

He chuckles, his eyes traveling down my body, and his head tilts. “Oh, don’t be shy, little sis. I don’t bite...” He grins. “Hard.”

I clutch the towel tighter, scanning down his naked chest to where a tight six-pack sits proudly, with two muscular arms framing his torso. A large Celtic cross tattoo sits over his left pec, and on the right of his ribcage, he has a scripted tattoo sprawled out over it.

I look up to his face, where the corner of his mouth kicks up in a smirk. A lip ring sits to the side, and his eyes zone in on me, glistening with mischief. “You done eye-fucking me, little sis?”

“I’m not your little sister,” I hiss, narrowing my eyes. “Get out. I need to get changed.”

“You not gonna ask my name?” he questions, his smooth, sun-kissed skin glowing in the bathroom light, his blue eyes laced with mischief. He pushes off the doorframe he was leaning on, walking toward me with so much swagger he could give 50 Cent a run for his money. His dark blond hair sits messily all over his head, and his torn jeans hang nicely off his hips, showcasing the rim of his Phillip Plein briefs. He pauses when his chest is almost flush with mine.

Reaching for his toothbrush, he grins. “The name’s Nate, little sis.” He winks at me, squirting toothpaste onto his brush before his smile flicks to the mirror. He pops the toothbrush into his mouth and smirks.

Spinning around, I quickly dash out my door. What the fuck was that about? And there's no way I'm sharing a bathroom with him. Picking up my phone from the bed, I dial my dad. When it goes straight to his voice mail, I growl lightly. "Dad, we need to talk about my living situation—STAT!"

Shuffling into some skinny jeans and a checkered top, I brush my hair out and tie it into a messy high ponytail. Shoving on my Converse sneakers, I head for the door. Just as I open up my bedroom, Nate is walking out of his, still with no top on, and still with those sinful jeans hanging off him. He annoys me instantly. His cocky smirk is spread out over his mouth, and his baseball cap is flipped backward. "Where you off to?"

"None of your business," I answer, slamming my bedroom door and wondering whether I should have locks put on it. I continue toward the stairs when he races up behind me.

"Sure it is. Big brothers are supposed to look out for the little ones."

I halt, spinning around on the fourth step and glaring up at him. "We"—I gesture between the two of us—"are not related, Nate." That only makes his grin go wider. He leans on the rail of the stairs, and my eyes flick under his bicep, where there's a scar embossed into his skin. He sees where my eyes go and quickly crosses his arms in front of himself. "But since you're asking," I say, walking the rest of the way down the steps. I turn to face him and tilt my head once I hit the bottom. "I'm going shooting."

ARRIVING HOME LATER THAT NIGHT, I thank Harry and make my way up the large cobblestone entryway, up to the front door. I can hear the music before I hit the entrance, so when I swing the door open and see a house party in full swing, I'm not even slightly surprised. Slamming the door shut—rather dramatically—I scan over the drunken crowd. Where our marble kitchen is, there are teenagers playing beer

pong, and dancing and grinding on each other in the background.

Swinging my eyes to the sitting room that leads off to our outdoor pool and pool house, I see another crowd dancing in strobe lights, with Akon's "Ain't Saying Nothing" blasting from the DJ booth set up where our couch once sat. I look back outside and see the party lights on inside our pool, and half-naked people cannonballing into it, with a few others making out in our Jacuzzi.

Motherfucker!

Narrowing my eyes, I can almost make out another crowd behind the pool, on the grass area where our backyard leads to the beach. Oh, man, I'm going to kick his fucking ass. When I see the black baseball cap with blond hair peeking out slightly from underneath, and the same lean, tan build—still wearing no shirt—I know I've found Nate. I walk toward the couch, where he lounges with a few other guys, his head bobbing to the beat of "Nightmare on My Street" by DJ Jazzy Jeff, as he loads up the tip of a bong with weed.

I recognize all of them from school today—the guys Tatum referred to as "The Elite Kings Club." Nate is apparently the one whose great-great-grandparents were the founders of Riverside Prep. I'm not sure if that was from his mother or father. Elena is lovely and is as rich as my father. That's probably why I like her more than anyone else he's introduced me to. I know she isn't just after his money. So I guess it's her side. My dad is good-looking for an old man. He isn't really old though, sitting at forty-seven. I guess there are fathers with kids my age who are older. He trains daily and eats well, and Elena is the same. She's fit for her age and takes care of herself. Though I have only met her twice—the first time was when we moved here a few days ago, and the second time was before they flew to Dubai for a business meeting—she was nothing but nice to me. How she managed to have a shithead son like Nate, I don't know.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“Nate!” I snap, rounding the couch until I’m standing in front of him. His arms are stretched wide over the sofa, his legs spread in front of himself, his lips forming an O before he slowly blows out a thick cloud of smoke, while his eyes stare straight through me. “Shut this down—now.” The blur of movement catches my attention in my peripheral vision, but I ignore it.

He smirks. “Little sis, might want to go put that gun in the cabinet before you freak everyone out.”

I clutch the straps to my 12-gauge around my shoulders. “Shut it down, Nate. I’m serious.”

He shoots up off the couch with a red cup in one hand. “Wait! Come here.” He pulls me under his shoulder, his mouth dropping down to my ear. He points to the first guy who was sitting beside him on the couch. “That’s Saint, Ace, Hunter, Cash, Jase, Eli, Abel, Chase, and Bishop.” My eyes drift over them dismissively. I recall a few of them from school, but there’re a couple older-looking guys who I don’t recognize.

“Hi,” I manage to say—awkwardly, I might add. I turn back to Nate. “I’m serious. You will get us both into trouble. Close it down.” I turn around, and just as I’m about to hit the entryway to exit the lounge, I spin back around and catch them all watching me. Nate is smiling from behind his cup, while the rest of them have a mixture of emotions sprawled across their faces. When I settle on... I think Nate said his name was Bishop, the same guy I had a stare down with at school today, who is now sitting on a kitchen chair with his legs spread out in front of him, my cheeks flare to life. His eyes burn into my skull, and if guys had a resting bitch face, then that would be it.

Shivers creep up my spine; I don't even know why. Maybe it's because he seems just so... unapproachable. I scoff inwardly. Typical fucking prep school students. Walking back up the stairs, leaving Nate to shut it down on his own, I walk into my room, placing my shotgun at the top of my closet, and take out some clothes while I'm there. Slipping into the bathroom, double checking the locks on both doors this time, and taking hold of the faucet, I turn it on to scorching hot before stepping into the cascading waters. I let the harsh pounding of the water drown out the bass of the music. I stay under the water until the warmth prunes my skin slightly.

Quickly drying my body and stepping into my silk pajama shorts and a tank top, I hang up the towel after ruffling it through my hair. Unlatching the lock to Nate's room, I then turn and step into the cool air of my own. The music has stopped, and I can hear distant shouting slowly descend outside with cars skidding off and girls screaming. I crank open the door to my little patio, opening it wide. Once the house sounds safe enough to set foot out again, I walk across my room and pull open my bedroom door, making my way down the stairs slowly. I'm halfway to the kitchen when I notice Nate and his friends still in the same position in the lounge. They pause their talking, right along with my steps.

I look at them. "Don't stop on my account," I murmur before I continue my trek to the kitchen. After shooting, I'm always hungry, and I'm not about to stop my routine because some "elite boys" were in my house. I woke up this morning an only child. How did I manage to gain not only a stepbrother but someone like Nate as a said stepbrother?

I pull open the fridge, taking out some eggs, milk, and butter, before going to the pantry for the flour and sugar. Placing all the ingredients on the kitchen counter, Nate walks in with his arms crossed over his chest as he leans against the entryway. I bend down and take out a bowl from under the breakfast bar along with a wooden spoon.

I point to him. "Do you ever wear a shirt?"

He snorts. “Girls rather I didn’t.” He winks before moving toward me as Cash, Jase, Eli, Saint, and Hunter walk into the kitchen, all eyeing me skeptically.

“What’re you making?” Nate asks, watching me closely.

“Waffles.” I look toward the other boys, who are all spread out in different spots in the kitchen. The air is a little uncomfortable.

I clear my throat and look to Nate. “How come I’ve never heard of you? My dad didn’t tell me Elena had a son.” I pour in all the ingredients as Nate walks toward one of the cupboards and pulls out the waffle maker, plugging it into the wall.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

He shrugs, leaning back against the counter. “Don’t know. Maybe because I’m such a rebel.” He grins.

“Are the stories about you true?” Hunter questions, his eyes darkening on me.

“What stories might those be? There are a few,” I retort, walking up to the waffle maker. Nate takes the bowl from me and begins pouring the batter into the maker.

“About your mom.” A little blunt, but I’m used to it.

“The part about her killing herself, or the part about her murdering my father’s side chick beforehand?” I throw back, my head tilting.

Hunter has what I’d call rough features. I’m not sure how to place his ethnicity. He has dark eyes, olive skin, and a scruffy but clean five o’clock shadow over his jaw.

He leans against his chair more, eyeing me closely. “Both.”

“Yes and yes,” I answer flatly. “And yes it was my gun.”

I turn around to catch Nate glaring at Hunter. “Move,” I order, pointing toward the waffle maker. Nate steps aside to let me in, and my arm brushes against his. I pause, my eyes going up to his face to catch him smirking down at me. Before I can tell him to wipe the smile off his face, Eli comes up beside me.

“I’m Eli, and I’m the eyes and ears of our group. I’m also the little brother to Ace.” He points over his shoulder to an older and bulkier version of himself.

I smile politely at Ace, not gaining a smile in return. Whatever.

“You mean club?” I reply without looking at him. I pour more batter into the maker before noticing everyone is quiet.

“Tsk, tsk. I see rumors have already made it to you on your first day. Who told you?” Nate asks.

I step away from him, putting the waffle on my plate and deciding I want out of this kitchen because it’s a little too crowded with testosterone.

“Tatum.” I squirt maple syrup onto my waffle. “I’m going to go.” Then I snatch my plate and make my way toward the stairs. On my passing, I see Bishop and Brantley talking in the living room, still in their same seats.

I pause, gripping onto the stairwell, and turn my head toward them, only to find Bishop looking straight through me. I’m not sure what these boys’ deal is, but it’s a little intense. Bishop has an angular face with high cheekbones and a jaw that could be sculpted for a Greek god. He has loose dark hair that makes my fingers twitch to run them through it, and piercing, dark, army green eyes. His thick dark lashes fan out across his perfect skin. His shoulders are lean yet are set with confidence. The dominance that surrounds him is evident, and once I realize I’m still ogling, my eyes widen in horror before I spin around and dash back up the stairs.

Closing my bedroom door, I place my plate on my study desk that sits beside the balcony door and sigh. There’s no way I’ll be able to stomach eating anything now. Climbing under my crisp linen sheets, I turn on the television that hangs on the wall opposite my bed and push Play on the next episode of *Banshee* before sinking into my pillow, my body finally relaxing after one long-ass day.

I’M COMING DOWN THE STAIRS the next morning with an apple jammed in my

mouth, and my books clutched in my arm when I walk straight into Nate's back. I take the apple out of my mouth. "Shit, sorry, I'm so late."

"I know. How many episodes of Banshee did you watch last night?" he asks, collecting his keys off the kitchen table.

"I don't know. I lost cou— Wait!" I throw my hand up. "How'd you know I was watching Banshee?" I hop up and down, trying to shove my foot into my Converse.

"I came in to see if you were okay when I saw light was shining under your door. You were crashed out by then. By the way, nice pick of TV show. Is Harry taking you to school?" He takes hold of my arm so I can lean on him to balance my footing before finally getting my foot into the damn shoe.

I hand him my books to hold and bend down to tie up my laces. "Yeah, he does every morning."

I stand back up as he passes me my books and we make our way out the front door. "I'll drive you. Doesn't make sense not to. We go to the same school."

I look down the driveway to see Harry not here. Crap. Chewing on my lip nervously, I nod. "Okay."

He gives me a cheesy grin, his dimples popping out as he takes my hand and we walk toward his Porsche 918 Spyder. He beeps her, and I slip into the passenger seat, clicking my seatbelt on.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

Sparkling the car to life, he smiles. “You know... you made a little bit of an impression on the boys last night.”

“What?” I ask, shocked. “That was one of the most awkward moments of my life, and that’s saying something, because my life is made up of awkward moments.”

He laughs as I reach for the stereo. When it switches on, Dr. Dre’s “Forgot about Dre” shakes the inside of the car, and I quickly turn it down. “Jesus!”

He chuckles from his seat, watching me closely. “What? Don’t like old school hip-hop, sis?”

“Nothing wrong with hip-hop, but having it that loud will blow your eardrums. You should look at getting them checked, just in case you’ve already done damage.”

“If I had a hearing problem...” he smirks, dropping down gears and jolting us forward so fast my head slams back into the headrest, “...it wouldn’t be from loud music. It’d be from Little Nate penetrating women so good that it has them screaming bloody murder.”

I jerk away from him in disbelief. “Little Nate?”

His face drops. “What’s wrong with naming it Little Nate?” He almost looks offended that I laughed. I feel a little bad about that. Nate has a twisted bad boy feel about him, with added cockiness. But now he’s not playing fair, because when he pouts, it looks cute on him.

“Uhhh... the fact that you actually named it. And anyway, why would you want to name...” I point down to his crotch, and when my eyes travel back up to his face, I’m greeted by his cocky all-boy grin. His hand travels down the front of his ripped jeans as he clutches his junk. Oh, Lord. “Y-your...” I stutter. “For the love of God,” I whisper, shaking my head.

He teases, “Cock? Dick? Magic stick? The power shaft? The womb raider? The yogurt—”

I shake my head, cutting him off, “Elena is a sweet woman. How the fuck did you come from her?”

We pull into the private underground parking lot under the school, and I climb out of the car, shutting the door behind me.

“What’s your last class?” he asks, rounding the car and hooking his arm around my waist. I wiggle out of it. I’ve become aware over the last twenty-four hours how smooth things are around Nate, but I still can’t have his arm around me. I’ve never had many friends at other schools. He and Tatum are the first people, since before my mom snapped, to not have my past bother them as much.

“Um, I think I have PE.”

He nods as we begin walking toward the elevator that takes you to the school’s first floor. “I’ll pick you up from there. What do you have now?”

“Calculus.” I cringe, knowing Ally Parker and Lauren Bentley are in that same class.

“I’ll take you there now.” He nods toward the corridor.

I smile. Maybe I threw him off the boat a little too early. He’s only being nice to me.

Nicer than most people are, anyway. “You don’t need to do that, Nate. I’m fine.”

He wraps his arm around my neck and pulls me into his embrace. “Well, since we’re siblings and all, it’s my duty to look after you.”

“Nate,” I groan, as we continue walking down the corridor that leads to my first class. The walls are painted in classic whites and neutral colors, with all the rooms leading off it in similar hues. The gym sits at the end of the corridor toward the fire exit, and although I haven’t seen the boy’s hall yet, I have a feeling it is similar to ours. “You really don’t. I’ll be fine.”

“I just wanna get to know my new sister. That’s all.” He winks down at me just as we reach the doorway to my class.

“Fine,” I say, crossing my arms in front of my chest. “But I’m not good with people, just giving you a warning. I’m more the loner type.” He watches me carefully, his head tilting while he studies me closely.

“I can dig the lonely girl thing.” He winks at me again before turning around and heading toward the boys’ hall.

Why? Why did I have to get someone annoying like Nate as a stepbrother?

THE BELL RINGING BREAKS THE concentrated silence in the classroom as we all gather up our books. Tatum bumps my hip with hers, flicking her long blonde hair over her shoulder. “Lunchtime! That class almost killed me.”

I smile, collecting my pens and placing them on top of my books. “You say that in every class.” I roll my eyes as we begin retreating from the room.

She snorts. “That’s true. So, what’s your plan for after school? Nate Riverside is

throwing a party this weekend, and I'm not usually one for going to any of these parties, and we might get kicked out, because we don't hold the same status, but I feel like crashing. You in?" she asks, as we make our way to the cafeteria.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

I roll my eyes again as we push through the doors. “That means it will most likely be at my house then.”

She pauses, her little hand wrapping around my arm. “Elaborate, Montgomery. What does that mean?”

“Nate,” I say flatly. “His mom and my dad are married. We live together, and before you jump down my throat, I only just found out yesterday.” Yesterday feels like a century ago, because of how easygoing Nate has been with me.

Her mouth drops to the ground. “Shut. Up.”

“What?” I reply, turning her toward the buffet. My stomach is grumbling, and because of skipping dinner last night, all I had in my stomach was the apple I power-ate this morning.

“Holy shit,” she whispers in shock. Her eyes lock back onto mine. “This is fucking awesome! We’re so crashing,” she squeals out in excitement.

“Um, Tatum? It’s not crashing if we’re in my house. He’s doing it on purpose, because our parents don’t get back until Monday.” We both pile our plates with the different variety of foods they have available. Sushi and exotic fruits? Am I in school or at a five-star restaurant?

“Holy shit. No, Madison, you don’t understand. These boys never—”

Fingers slide over my eyes, blacking out my vision. Tatum sucks in a breath. Lips

skim over the back of my ears as a deep growl sounds. “How do you feel about incest, little sis?” Before his hands drop from my eyes, he laughs, stumbling backward. Tatum’s jaw is about to be permanently dislocated if she isn’t careful, and when I spin around to evil eye Nate, I’m cut off by the entire cafeteria and how it had grown almost silent, watching our exchange.

“The students of Riverside Prep are just pawns in their sick and twisted games. They own this school, Madison.”

“Nate,” I hiss at him. I haven’t managed to tell him yet, but I’d really appreciate keeping a low profile.

His smile drops. “What?” he asks innocently, much like a toddler who didn’t know he wasn’t supposed to eat a cookie before dinner.

I nod toward everyone watching us, and he shrugs, locking his arm around mine. “Come sit with us.” He looks toward Tatum. “You too, Masters.” Then he pulls me down beside him.

I drop my tray on the table, moving over for Tatum to take a seat beside me. Her arm brushes against mine stiffly. I can sense her discomfort and unanswered questions, but I can answer them later. Opposite me to the left, Bishop and then Brantley sit opposite Tatum. Beside Brantley are Abel, Hunter, Eli, and Cash.

I pick up one of my sushi rolls and bite down on it, trying really hard not to make a mess, but sushi being sushi, rice ends up on my lap. Nate’s talking about the party this weekend, and when I raise my eyes up to look in front of me, I’m instantly imprisoned by Bishop’s glare. His face is blank, filled with—nothing. His strong, chiseled jaw sits taut, and his green eyes remain glued on mine. I squirm in my seat, and Tatum looks at me sideways. Her hand goes under the table, and a second later, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I reach in to take it out when Nate looks toward me.

“What do you think, sis?”

“Hmm?” I ask, annoyed that he’s interfered with whatever Tatum was about to say to me.

“What kind of alcohol do you want this weekend?” he prompts, his eyes drifting between both of mine.

Damn it, he’s hella fine.

I scowl at my inner self. The hell is wrong with me? He’s basically your brother, you fuckwad.

“Oh!” I smile, my cheeks heating. “I don’t really drink.” I clutch my phone in my hand, ignoring the dark green eyes that are still peering at me from across the table.

Nate scoffs, taking one of my sushi rolls and popping the whole thing in his mouth. “That changes this weekend. It’s Brantley’s birthday. We don’t usually throw parties”—the corner of his lip kicks up as a mischievous glint darkens in his eyes—“but we do birthdays.”

I swallow past the lump that has now formed in my throat. My eyes flutter to Bishop again to find him looking down at his phone. Dropping my eyes to my lap, I slide my phone unlocked to see Tatum’s message.

Tatum – No way

Me – What?

I glance at Tatum, who has a shit-eating grin on her face. Her eyes drop down to her lap, and I wait impatiently for her text. Stretching my feet out, they collide with

someone else's under the table, so I quickly pull them back. Shit. My phone vibrates, and I look back down.

Tatum – You have a particular set of eyes on you that every girl at this school would plead for.

That's what.

Me – What the hell are you talking about, Tatum?

“Hey!” Nate bumps my arm playfully. “Who're you texting?”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

Brantley and Bishop begin talking about something in hushed tones. If my observations are correct, Brantley and Bishop seem like the quieter ones. I think Nate likes me, but the other guys, I'm undecided still. Apart from that little talk in the kitchen last night, I don't have much to go on, but they all make me extremely uncomfortable.

I look to Nate pleadingly. "Can I talk to you?"

His face sobers. "Yeah, come on." He takes my hand in his as I smile down to Tatum. "Won't be long." My eyes drift to Bishop, who's watching Nate's fingers lock around my hand. I don't know why, but I pull out of Nate's hold. He falters for a second, but when I look back down to Bishop, he's scowling at me.

What the fuck?

We begin walking out of the cafeteria and toward the front doors, where there are concrete stairs sprawled out to accommodate more than enough people to sit on. Some are eating lunch out here, not many though. They look like the type of people I should be eating with, not Nate and his damn club.

"What's up?" he asks, once we get outside.

I sigh. "Nothing, I just... really, it's a little much," I answer truthfully. "What's the deal with you guys?" We continue walking down the steps as Nate shoves his hands into his pockets.

"What have you heard?" His eyes remain ahead.

I look to him every two seconds while watching my step. “Well, only from Tatum about some Elite Kings Club?” I quiz him.

He laughs, throwing his head back. “Madi, that club is merely a legend. It’s all fueled by teenage drama queen bullshit.” His laugh is forced and his smile doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Okay,” I say. “Tell me more about this legend.”

He smirks, pausing his step. “Maybe one day, just... not today.”

“What?” I grin playfully. “Why not today?”

His eyes flick over my shoulder, his face turning serious. He looks back to me. “Not yet, I’ll tell you when I think you can handle it.”

He winks at me before walking past and back toward the doors again. When I turn around to see where his eyes drifted to, I catch the back of Bishop walking back inside. Sighing, I shake my head, wondering when the exact moment was my life had become so damn eventful.

I’M PILING MY HAIR INTO a high ponytail when Nate walks into my room. I rode with him on the way home today, and it wasn’t that bad. After we both battled over the music selection, eventually Nate told me if I touched it again, I would have to walk home. The way he smirked when he told me that had me thinking otherwise though.

“Hey!” I pull my leather jacket over my white tank, opting for skinny jeans and my Chucks to go with it.

He leans against the doorframe, a bag of chips in one hand, again with no shirt on,

low-riding jeans, and his cap flipped on backward. He points down to me. “Where’re you going?”

“Hmmm?” I ask, picking up my phone from my bed. “To the mall with Tatum.”

“Tatum, huh?” he teases, sucking the excess flavor off his fingers. “She single?” His sucking halts before he slowly pulls his finger out of his mouth. “Not that the relationship status bothers me.”

I stop him, my hand going up to his chest. “I don’t know. I think so. Are you going to move?” I ask, pointing down the hallway to let me through.

He looks down at me smugly before Chamillionaire’s “Rockstar” starts playing in his pocket. His smile falls as he quickly walks back to his bedroom, closing the door behind himself.

“Everyone is weird at this school,” I mumble under my breath, pulling my door closed. Taking a step forward, I crash into a solid body. Just as solid as Nate’s but... a little bigger.

“Shit,” I mutter, my hand coming up to my forehead. When I drag my eyes up the body, they fall on Brantley. “Nate’s in his room. Sorry,” I apologize again for bumping into him.

His eyes darken, a snarl bringing up the corner of his mouth, which he opens, ready to say something—

“Brantley!” a low growl snaps from behind him. The air suddenly thickens, and when I look behind him, I see Bishop standing there, his eyes glued on the back of Brantley’s head. “Go to Nate’s room.” Brantley narrows his eyes on me again before he continues down the hallway and into the bedroom.

Once the door closes, I huff and look to Bishop. “Who stole his toys?”

Bishop’s eyes stay on Nate’s door, refusing to acknowledge me.

I curse under my breath. “Sorry, hi, I’m Madison.”

His eyes finally drop down to mine. He has really amazing eyes, not only the deep jade army color, but how they’re shaped. And when they look at you? They look through you, as if they’re summoning your soul and calling the reaper.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“Wish I could say I was sorry about that,” he mutters his reply, his eyes going back to Nate’s door.

I turn to follow his line of sight before looking back at him. “Don’t worry about it,” I whisper softly. “I’m used to it.” I step to the side to walk around him, when he matches my step, blocking my way.

He searches my eyes intently before dropping them to my lips then back to my eyes.

I tilt my head. “Can I leave?”

He doesn’t say anything, just stares blankly at me for a few seconds before finally walking down to Nate’s room.

Shaking my head, I pull open the door when Tatum drives up in her baby blue Ferrari, complete with black rims and black tint. It’s the nicest Ferrari I’ve ever seen, and fits Tatum to a T. Her parents are always away for work, and Tatum jokes that her “family time” is watching the latest box office movies. I wish I could sympathize with her, but I don’t think she worries that much. I clutch the door handle and turn to slide inside the passenger seat of the car before I turn around and look up to Nate’s bedroom window, finding all three of them staring down at me, watching carefully. My smile falters before I slide into the compact car.

“Hey, sugar!” Tatum claps in excitement. “Let’s splash some cash!”

The drive to the mall is short, because Tatum has a seriously heavy foot. We scan the stores, while, more Tatum than I, looks for the perfect outfit. By the fourth store, I

give up and hand her my dad's platinum card to just buy whatever she wants me to wear, because if there's one thing I hate, it's shopping. She exits one of the boutique stores with a shit-eating grin on her beautiful face, and I wince. I can almost feel my tits shrivel up from how tight whatever it is she chose for me. Pulling me up by my hand, she drags me toward a little quirky ornament shop, tucking the dress away.

"Your new room. I thought maybe we could get something. I mean, I know I haven't seen your room yet, but I figure, because you just moved here, it'd be a little empty."

Understanding the kindness in her suggestion, and still trying to not find someone being nice to me as something awkward, I nod.

"I could always do with something else. I love décor."

"Good!" She claps her hands. "I didn't really feel like dragging you in on my own." We walk into the dark purple shop that's surrounded by hot lava lamps and smells of incense. I'm instantly drawn to a little light that is turned on and showcasing its colors against the blank white wall at the back of the store. Walking toward it, I smile. "I want that!"

Tatum's eyebrow quirks. "You sure? I mean, it's cool, but where would you put it?"

I step toward it and drop down to my knees, tilting the bulb upward. "You can move it so it's on the ceiling." I shift the bulb to tilt it higher, and instantly, all the stars light up.

"Wow!" Tatum whispers. "That looks much better."

I nod. "It reminds me of when my parents used to take me out on hunting trips and we'd camp out in the forest."

Her eyes narrow. “Hunt what exactly?”

I stand back to my feet. “Just deer. Or we would go duck shooting.”

Her features relax. “That sounds... nice, I guess.”

I laugh. “It is! We’ll have to go sometime.”

“Yeah,” she says, looking to the side. “Maybe.”

“Hey,” I swat her, “I came shopping, so you come hunting.”

She gulps. I laugh, just as I see one of the workers walk toward us.

“Ohhh,” the member of staff says, looking up to the ceiling. “That’s how I was supposed to set it up.”

I laugh again, looking up to the stars once more. “Yeah, I think. I’m not sure.”

The worker looks back to me. She has to be around our age. She has long, pastel pink hair that’s braided in a fishtail over her shoulder, and bright green eyes. Her little pixie nose sits on her olive face, crinkling as she laughs. “I better change that.” Stepping forward, she leaves it how I had it. “Thanks. You probably saved my ass from my boss.”

“Oh,” I reply. “No problem.”

She picks up one of the boxes and hands it to me, then we follow her back to the counter. She beeps it through and smiles. “This is pretty cool, right?”

“Yeah.” I return her smile. “I’m new here, so Tatum thought I needed something to

spice up my room.”

“Oh, you’re new?” Her gaze falls on us. “I probably don’t need to ask what school you go to.” She says it politely enough.

“Riverside.”

She nods with a small smile.

“What school do you got to?” I ask, leaning on the counter.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“Hampton Beach High.”

“Oh!” Public? That’s a school I’d feel more comfortable in.

She gestures toward the lamps. “We have these lamps that have like, ambient sounds that play and make it feel like you’re in the forest.”

I spin around to look at where she’s pointing, getting far too excited.

“Seriously?” Tatum mutters under her breath.

“Ignore her.” I walk toward the lamps and snatch one greedily. “Thank you! My stepbrother is having a party this weekend, so when I decide to ditch and go to bed, I can use this. Might save his life.” I grin at her. She bursts out laughing, and I tilt my head. “Hey, do you like parties?”

After switching numbers with the worker girl, whose name is Tillie, we sit down at a café and eat our weight in fried food and chocolate brownies.

“I can’t believe you invited her off the bat.” Tatum pops a chicken tender in her mouth. “Mmm, but she seems nice, right?”

“Right,” I agree. “So be nice.”

“Hey!” she scolds me. “I’m always nice.”

That wasn’t fair of me to say. She has been nothing but nice to me. I smile, shoveling

another piece of brownie into my mouth, where it melts on my tongue, mixing with a spoonful of ice cream. It turns out Tatum has as much of a sweet tooth as I do, and we make plans to have a girls' movie night tomorrow night with buckets of candy. Tatum said she wants to watch a chick flick, but I cut her off by declaring my dislike for corny romcoms. So we agreed that I'll pick the movies and she'll bring the candy. Win-win.

"So what's it like being Nate Riverside's little sister?" Tatum asks, driving us back to my place.

"I'm not really his little sister," I deadpan. "I don't know why, but he's taken it upon himself to torment me at his every turn."

She giggles, dropping gears, and my head slams against the headrest from the force. "Honey, if Nate took it upon himself to torment me, I'd welcome it. He's the biggest manwhore of Riverside Prep though. He's even slept with Sasha Van Halen."

"I'm not even surprised," I mutter under my breath as we pull into our private driveway.

Sasha Van Halen is the daughter of the biggest tycoon in the United States. She's splashed all over the tabloids—hot mess and all that.

"One last thing," she says, pulling up the emergency brake. "I want to talk to you about them." She gestures toward Nate's window and my eyes follow. "You gained Bishop's attention today at lunch."

"Hardly," I scoff, shaking my head.

"I need to educate you on Bishop Vincent Hayes," she begins, and I tilt my head toward her. "He's only ever been seen with one other girl more than once, that I know

of. One, and she meant a lot to him. They were together for years. Everyone would say it was fate, Bishop and Kholes; they were this match made in heaven. She moved, he moved. They knew each other since they were little, because Kholes's mom was a junkie and would leave Kholes in the house on her own for hours on end. Kholes went to Hampton Beach High School, which is on the rough side of town. Anyway, Bishop tried to save her. He tried so hard, but eventually, Kholes followed her mother's footsteps and picked up the needle." She took a breath.

"She died?" I ask, my heart sinking. I know what it's like losing someone you love.

"No, we don't know where she is. About two years ago, she sort of just disappeared. No one whispers her name. The week she went missing, all the boys weren't at school, and then suddenly they're all walking back into the cafeteria like they own the place, as if she didn't exist. Someone tried to ask Bishop about her, but he almost snapped the guy's neck, so everyone took that as a sensitive subject and never asked questions again."

She pauses again, her bright blue eyes twinkling on mine. "I'm only telling you because so many girls have tried to fill the spot that Kholes left. As far as I know, Bishop hasn't had another girlfriend since. That's two years. Anyway, that brings me to the next subject." My mind is still swimming with the mass of information she just unloaded on me. Two years ago? People don't just disappear into thin air. There's always a reason why people go missing. She clears her throat. "The Elite Kings Club—"

"I asked Nate about it, and he said it's all based on legend and false assumptions."

She shakes her head, her blonde waves falling over her slender shoulders. "They won't tell you. It may sound like gossip, but it's very true. I've seen the mark."

"Mark?" My brain is about to explode from the information that is being shoved

inside it.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“Yeah, they’re branded when they’re babies. It’s a ritual all the parents perform.”

“That’s crazy.” My shoulders go slack. “I’ve heard enough. Anything else?”

“Yes! Be careful. I only know so much about them because I’ve studied them for as long as I’ve known them. I’ve never shared my thoughts with anyone else, because no one else has become close to them, but I can see that’s going to be changing with you. You need to be careful, Madi.”

I clutch the door handle and push it open, taking my bags out of the backseat. “Okay, I’ll be careful, but I think you’re being paranoid.”

She offers a small smile before I close the passenger door, and then she skids out of my driveway.

This kind of stuff just doesn’t happen, not in this world.

SLAMMING THE FRONT DOOR CLOSED, I walk into the kitchen with all the information Tatum just fed me brewing in my brain. Pulling a Coke from the fridge, I close the door when my heart leaps at the sight of Hunter leaning against the entryway.

“Shit!” My hand flies up to my chest.

“Sorry.” He smirks. “Nate has training, so he has me on babysitting duties.”

“Babysitting duties?” I ask, offended. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

He shrugs. “Brantley is here. You need someone near you when he’s around.”

I cock my head, running my eyes over him. Standing at around six-foot-two, he towers over my five-foot-three.

“Why?” I ask, my eyes diverting to the wall. “What did I do to him?”

Hunter pauses, his finger running across his upper lip. “That’s not something you need to worry about yet.”

“I’m sure I could just get the full lowdown if I ask Tatum,” I mumble from the rim of my Coke.

“Tatum?” He barks out a laugh. “Tatum lives for drama and bullshit. Nothing she says holds any substance.” His eyes narrow on me briefly.

“And your words do?” I cock my head. “I don’t need a sitter,” I mutter bitterly, as I head toward the stairs—only for a wall of muscle to slam into my face yet again. “Jesus!” I cuss, getting annoyed at how my house has been taken over by mysterious boys who can never give me any answers. My eyes travel up a broad chest and land on Brantley’s dark, beady eyes. He has a bit of scruff around his jaw—not much, just enough it’ll scratch you lightly—and his eyes are as dark as a bottomless pit leading to the gates of hell. And when he opens his mouth, I find his words are much like his eyes.

“You’d do good to stay the fuck outta my way.”

Having about enough of all this bullshit, I cross my arms in front of myself. ‘Cause I’m a badass. “What the fuck did I ever do to you?”

I can feel Hunter’s presence behind me, silently watching.

Brantley's eyes snap to mine, burning into me like a hot knife through cold butter. "How about just existing? Everything was fine until you came back," he mutters, before shoving me out of the way and walking toward the door. He pauses with his hand on the handle and peers at me over his shoulder briefly. His dark jeans hang off his narrow hips, and the white tee he is sporting clings to him effortlessly. He mumbles something before storming out the door.

"Back?" I ask Hunter. "I've never been here in my life."

He watches me, pushing off the side of the wall. "He didn't mean back. He just meant when you got here." He walks toward the front door, dismissing me. "I'm out. My duties are no longer needed."

I stay there, staring at the door absently for a couple of breaths. "What in the world?" Immensely confused by everything that has shifted in my world in such a short amount of time, I walk up the stairs and into my room, pulling out my sketchbook and sitting down at my desk. Taking the remote off my table, I push Play on my sound dock. Picking up my pencil, I then press it into the corner of the blank white page and start scribbling.

Banging on my door somehow breaks through my drawing and music haze.

Thud thud thud. "Madi!"

Sliding my chair back, I glance at my alarm clock that sits on top of my bedside table. "Fuck." It's 5:30 p.m. I have been sketching for three hours flat without so much as a break for fresh air. Before my mom passed, I would draw like this at least three times a week, if not more, but since she died, I find it more difficult to completely let go of my surroundings and engross myself into my pencil and pad. Music has always been an outlet for me, but sketching was something personal that my mom and I used to do together.

Pulling on my bedroom door, I open it to Tatum. “I’m sorry,” I murmur. “I got a little carried away in my drawing.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

Tatum strolls past me, a paperback clutched in one hand and a pink duffel bag in the other. “I see that.” She waves her hands around my head, referring to my wayward bun that’s messily scrunched up and sitting lopsided on the side of my skull.

“Hey!” I scold her, giggling as I point to the bed. “This is nothing. You should see it in the morning.” This is true, because my hair game is atrocious in the morning. Not only is it thick and long, but it also has a natural bouncy wave to it too, coming from my mom’s Spanish background. “Relax.” I eye her suspiciously. “Where’re your pajamas?”

She looks at me with a smile, pulling out a pack of Twizzlers. “In my bag.”

I bend over, snatching candy from the pack, and walk toward my closet, taking out my cotton pajama shorts and a light tank. “I’ll take a shower. I came straight home and didn’t get a chance to clean up.”

“Oh,” Tatum clutches her chest in mock awe, “you’re getting pretty for me?”

I scoff, walking toward the en suite bathroom. “Definitely not.”

After scrubbing up in the shower, I brush my teeth quickly, just in case I fall asleep during the movie, and flick Nate’s door unlocked before slipping into my room.

I look down at the mountain of sweets around her legs. “Holy mother of f—”

“What?” she asks innocently. “Did you underestimate my sweet tooth?” I look down at the cheesecake, potato chips, M&M’s, packaged donuts, gummy bears, and soda.

“I think I’m about to get diabetes.”

She tosses a handful of M&M’s into her mouth. “Possibly.”

“I’ll go down and get some spoons for that.” I flick my fingers toward the cheesecake. Leaving her unattended with the goods, I fly down the stairs and run into the kitchen, my head bobbing as I hum the tune to “Simple Man” by Lynyrd Skynyrd—it’s still stuck in my head from my sketching. With two spoons clutched in my hand safely, I fly out of the kitchen, but pause at the foot of the stairwell, backing up until I’m in clear vision of the sitting room, where all the boys are sitting around on the large L-shaped sofa.

Nate is leaning back, his hand hiding his mouth, but the smile lines around his eyes show how much he’s trying to hold back a laugh.

“What?” I snap at him, ignoring the rest of the boys. God, he annoys me.

Uncovering his mouth, he shakes his head. “Nothing.”

My eyes narrow. “Yeah, sure.” I look to his left to see Bishop sitting there, his arms sprawled out over the couch. His dark T-shirt hugs him in all the right places, and his dark jeans sit on him casually. He has white Air Force Ones on his feet, and by the time my gaze travels back up his body, landing on his eyes again, his features have changed. Wiped clean of anything else but the resting bitch face he gives like a pro.

“Don’t you guys have a place where you can all meet? Why here?” I tilt my head, looking at all of them.

“Calm down, kitten. I’m on babysitting duty, so we have to come here.” Nate pauses, his grin kicking up. “Unless, of course, you would like to come with us?” I look back to Bishop to see his eyes, which still haven’t moved themselves off me, darken. Ace

whips his attention to Nate, scolding him.

“First of all,” I say calmly, “don’t ever call me kitten—ever again. Or I’ll shoot you.” I pause, laughing inwardly at his change of facial expressions. That probably wasn’t very nice, considering everyone already thinks I’m crazy because of my mom. “Second of all,” I add, “I’m not a child. I can take care of myself.” The end is more of a mutter, as I turn on my feet and walk up the stairs. I have just landed at the top, when I glance over my shoulder, feeling eyes on me. Bishop is at the bottom, staring up at me.

I turn to face him. “What?” He hasn’t spoken much to me, except for that day with Brantley. Tatum warned me about his reputation, and if that wasn’t a dead giveaway of how completely standoffish and uptight he is, not to mention unapproachable—have I said that yet? It deserves to be stated a second time—his personality in general would make you want to run. He reminds me of a king cobra. Silent, deadly, and leaving you guessing about what lies beneath his bite.

His blank face remains stoic, his strong jaw tensing, until eventually, I spin around and walk into my room. My heart pounds against my chest until my throat feels bruised and my saliva has run dry. Smashing my head against the back of my door, I watch Tatum scoot off the bed, now in her pajamas.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” I answer, handing her a spoon and walking toward the bed. “Let’s just eat all the sugar.”

I spoon a huge chunk of chocolate cheesecake into my mouth, groaning in approval at the soft, sweet crumble touching my taste buds.

“So tell me,” Tatum states, wrapping her long hair into a bow bun on the top of her head and removing her slim-rimmed glasses. “How did you manage to catch the eye of the one and only Bishop Vincent Haynes?”

“Oh, God, not this again,” I utter under my breath, going for another spoonful to fill my mouth. The movie has long since started, and the gunshots in the background are pitched low.

“He stared. That doesn’t exactly mean he’s interested—or me, for that matter. Because I’m not.”

“Mmmm.” She sucks the cheesecake off her spoon. “Now, say it again. This time with more conviction!”

I snatch my pillow and throw it at her head, but she catches it, falling onto her back and laughing.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry, but for the record, that little eye”—she gestures between our eyes—“fuckery that you two had going on was more than I had seen out of

him—ever. No one at RSPA is good enough for his royal highness.” She rolls her eyes, opening a bag of gummy bears.

“How do you know? Maybe he’s just discreet about it.”

She shakes her head. “Oh no, he has been with other girls, but they don’t attend RSPA. They’re like—” She pauses, mulling over the word she wanted to use. “—famous and stuff.”

Disappointed at her lack of a better word, I ask for clarification, “Famous—and stuff?”

She nods, oblivious to my stab at her wording. “Yeah. But those are all rumors though. No one has seen him with any of the girls who have apparently been with him. I’m talking like tycoon daughters, heiresses, that sort of boring crap. The only girl I know with 100 percent certainty was Kholes, and that’s because, yeah, they were always together when they weren’t at school. It was like a modern-day Cinderella, where the poor princess found her prince.”

“Oh! That’s just being mean.”

Shaking her head, she pops another gummy bear in her mouth, and I reach for one before she eats them all. “Truth. Shame really. He was still unapproachable back then, but at least he had a smile on his face when she was around, and he didn’t tell people to ‘fuck off’ if they got too close to him.”

I let out a breath. “Well... lucky girl then, I guess. Maybe. Because he sounds like an asshole.”

Tatum laughs, throwing a bear at me. “See... I knew we would be great friends.”

She was right.

MY CELL PHONE'S ANNOYING RINGTONE sounds off on my bedside table, waking me from my deep sleep. Grunting, I sit up off the bed and blindly reach for it, accidentally hitting Tatum's sleeping form.

"I don't want to go to Candy Land," she mutters sleepily, flipping onto her side. I stifle a laugh, sliding my phone unlocked and pressing it to my ear.

"Hello?" I whisper, careful not to wake Tatum.

"Sis...."

I look down at the screen of my phone, squinting my eyes from the bright light assaulting my vision. Pressing it back to my ear, I whisper loudly, "Nate! What do you want?"

"Why are you whispering?" he murmurs, almost whispering himself. "Ouch!" I hear him growl, and in the background, someone else says, "That's not why you're calling, fucker."

Walking into the bathroom, I flick the light on and close the door, careful to do it quietly. "What, why? What? Why the hell are you calling me at..." I look down at my phone again. "Fucking 3:00 a.m.?" My voice gets a little loud toward the end.

"I need your help."

"Why would I help you? I'm not even sure I like you!"

"What? Why? I've been nice to you. I thought we had a—ouch! Fuck! Okay." He takes a breath. "For real, Madi. I need your help." His change in tone jolts me, my

eyebrows rising instead of pinching together.

Closing my eyes, I lean over the sink, massaging my temple with my free hand.

“What is it?”

“I cannot believe I’m fucking doing this,” I mutter to myself, no longer caring if I wake Tatum. Walking into my closet, I leave my pajama shorts and tank on but pull a zip-up hoodie off a hook, sliding it on before throwing my hair into a tight, high ponytail and slipping on my Chucks. Walking out of my closet, I flick the light off, noticing how Tatum hasn’t moved, then walk out my bedroom and trek down our double stairs. The pitter-patter of my rubber soles squeaking over the tiles in the foyer is the only proof I’m making my way to our underground garage. After passing the theater, I push open the door onto the clean white space of the ten-car garage, which looks more like a showroom, with all the cars strategically parked on display.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

Seeing the midnight black Escalade, I unhook the keys that are hanging on the hook and beep it unlocked. Adding up the numbers in my head, I growl in frustration. Stupid Nate obviously wasn't thinking. How the hell am I supposed to fit them all into the SUV that only has seven passenger seats? Popping the trunk, I lay the seats in the back down flat and then slam it shut, walking back to the driver seat. Starting the car, I place my phone into the holder and speaker dial Nate.

"You good?" he answers.

"No, Nate, I'm not fucking good. It's 3:00 a.m. and you call me to pick you guys up from God knows where in a fucking seven-seated car. By the way, I usually need caffeine in the mornings before I can even function, and I'm not a fucking morning person. Let alone a 3:00 a.m. person!"

"You done?" he questions casually.

"I'm going to kill you."

"Sis, you're on speaker."

"I don't care."

He laughs.

"Tell me where I'm going," I snap.

He yaps off the directions as I drive. As more time passes and more directions get

spoken, it sends me deeper and deeper into the outskirts of town. “So you’ll get to a dark gravel private road to the left. Do you see it?”

Chills creep down my spine. “What? Yes.” I look from left to right, and I’m pretty sure I’m seeing shadows whip past my windows and weaving into the trees on the side of the road.

“Good girl.” He pauses. “Take that turn.”

Something doesn’t sit right with what he’s saying and his tone, but it better be worth it, and they better be in trouble, or I will so be telling on him.

If I’m still alive, that is. If not, I’ll just come back in ghost form and tear up their lives.

Pulling down the dark, eerie, bumpy gravel road, with nothing but the bright headlights of the SUV guiding my way, I swallow down my nerves. What the fuck is he doing, and why the hell did he tell me to come down here?

“Nate?” I whisper. “Maybe I took the wrong turn.”

Silence.

“Nate!” I yell at the phone. “This isn’t funny.”

“I’m not laughing, sis. Keep going. We can see your headlights.” What am I doing? I’m basically relying on the fact that Nate and I had bonded a little and our parents are together. I’m not sure those facts are worth my life. No, he wouldn’t. I’m just being paranoid. The only time, except for school, when I didn’t bring my fucking pistol either. I sag in defeat. My dad will not be impressed with my not carrying, and my mom will no doubt be screaming at me from the other side about how these are

the reasons why she and my dad educated me so much on firearms. I've failed as a fucking daughter. I scoot up in my seat.

"Nate, I don't fucking see anything up here, but ja— oh my God!" I slam on the breaks, all four tires locking up in a skid. I squeeze the steering wheel tightly, banging down the locks on the doors. "Nate!" I yell into the phone.

Silence.

Slowly, I look up out the front windshield, the thick dust from my tires interrupting the dust still floating in the air, and that's when I see it again.

Ten men.

Ten dark hoodies covering their faces.

Ten—

"Nate?" Understanding sets in. Ten.

Slamming the gear into reverse, I'm just about to floor it backward—to hell with anything or anyone behind me—when my driver window smashes into a million pieces, the tiny shards of glass falling onto my lap. I scream, my hands coming up to shield my face just as an arm slips inside and pops up the lock.

A deep chuckle breathes over the back of my neck as a leather gloved hand wraps around my mouth. "Hello, Madison. You may not know us, but we know you. We want to play a game. Here's what happens if you lose...."

I BITE DOWN ON HIS palm, knowing it won't do anything with the glove protecting it, but I refuse to go down without a fight. He laughs, pulling me out until

the air is dragged out of my lungs, and then he drops me. My back slams against the gravel road. Hair flies across my face as dark hands come down toward me again. Fear drives my body into autopilot mode, so I launch my foot out, kicking, lunging, and tossing myself around. I won't go down without a fight, that's for damn sure.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I scream at them.

Scooping my legs under his arms, he swings me over his shoulder effortlessly.

“Nate!” I scream for him. “I'll kill you. I swear to fucking God, you're dead!”

“Not if we kill you first. Shut the fuck up.” Big shoulders continue to carry me down the dead road until he stops.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

I raise my head, finding four dark shadows following behind us, all wearing hoodies to cover their faces. Scanning my eyes over each one, they land on who I'm pretty sure is Nate. "Why?"

He pauses, walking toward me just as whoever is holding me drops me to the ground. "Why, Nate?" I scream, my butt aching from being slammed onto the gravel.

Nate—I think— walks toward me, dropping to the ground until he's kneeling in front of me. He leans forward, and if the ski mask wasn't covering his face, I'd be able to see what I'm guessing is the smirk on his face. "You act like you don't know."

"What?" I turn and watch as he gets to his feet and opens up the back door of a long stretch limo.

"Blindfold her," another voice says.

"What?" I whip my head from side to side, watching each of them. "No!" I shake my head, stepping back until my butt hits the car. A strong arm wraps around my waist from inside the limo and pulls me inside. I scream—a full girly scream—just as a blindfold is being tugged around my eyes, shutting off my vision.

Silence.

With no vision.

All I have are my listening skills, which, if I'm being honest, doesn't have a very good track history. Breathing, deep breathing, in and out. That's all I can hear as the

car dips with people piling into the back. My chest rises and falls, my anger beginning to boil to the surface. I hear a door shut just before we start pulling out of wherever the hell we are.

“Why the fuck is this happening?” I decide to be the first person to break the silence.

“Stop the act, sis.” Nate. And he’s sitting beside me. Whoever pulled me into the car is sitting on the other side.

My head whips to where Nate is. “What fucking act? You’re truly starting to piss me off. I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. I came here because I thought the rest of you pieces of shit were in trouble! So you mean to tell m—”

“Jesus fuck, someone shut it up.” That came from the voice beside me. Nate chuckles, but I ignore him. My head turns to the other voice. “Oh, I’m sorry. I truly am. I’m so fucking sorry for actually leaving my warm bed and coming to make sure the rest of you are fucking safe and to bail you out of whatever the fuck you were all doing!”

“Nate, man, is your old lady serious about her dad? ‘Cause I feel sorry for you.” That came from someone opposite me.

I flip whoever that was the bird, not knowing whether they can see me or not.

“Sis, play nice. You do as you’re told, and this will end fine.”

“Yeah, except for the fact I don’t think she’s very good at doing what she’s fucking told.” That was the voice beside me again. Deep, domineering, and—

“Well, fuck!” Nate gripes beside me. “Tell me what the fuck to do ‘cause I got nothing! She is a girl!”

“Are you sure?” a voice opposite me asks. “I mean, she’s into guns, and has a smart fucking mouth on her. Maybe she’s not. Maybe I should check?”

“Fuck off, Hunter.” That was Nate.

I turn rigid. “No one will be checking anything.”

Nate shuffles beside me. “I’m going to ask you something, sis. Answer me truthfully, because where we’re taking you, you won’t make it out alive if you can’t be honest.”

“Where are you taking me?” I ask, mimicking his tone. “And who the fuck is that?” I bite out.

“Here we go,” the other voice beside me mutters.

“I’m sorry, would you like to wear the fucking blindfold?” I ask him, annoyed.

“I volunteer!” another voice says.

“Shut the fuck up, Cash!” Nate’s hackles rise again.

“Cash?” I scoff.

“You too!” Nate yells toward me. “Shut up.”

“Can someone please remove this blindfold?”

“I like it on you,” that same voice murmurs across from me.

Nate growls. “Back to my question!” he yells, though I get the feeling he’s not yelling at me this time. “Listen, we need to know if you’ve been here before.”

“Where?” I ask.

“To the Hamptons.”

Instant. “No.”

“This makes no fucking sense,” the voice beside me mutters again.

“Are you a virgin?” Nate asks.

That earns him a scowl. “What?” I sputter. “What sort of question is that?”

“Answer the fucking question.”

“She is,” the one beside me says.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” I scoff. “Would you like to answer all my questions for me? And I’d rather not talk about that.”

“Are you going to keep delaying your answers?” he retorts.

“I’m not—” A hand skims up my right thigh, on Nate’s side. “What are you doing?” I shove his hand off my leg, only for it to come straight back. “Go with it, sis.”

“Okay, first of all, if you’re going to be feeling me up, could you keep ‘sis’ out of your mouth?”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

He laughs, then his hand skims higher. “But I’d rather not.” Nate pulls away. “No, you’re right. This is too weird. Bishop.” He must lean over because his breath falls over my face.

“Yeah, no, that’s not what I meant!”

Bishop growls. Straight up growls. “Move, Nate.”

Nate’s leg that was brushing against me is now gone, and I turn my head toward where Bishop is, to ask what the fuck is going on, when I’m suddenly on my back and a hard body is hovering over me.

“What are you doing?” I whisper, feeling a little claustrophobic with my lack of vision and with him lying on top of me. Although he isn’t resting his whole body on me, his waist pins me down.

“Bishop,” someone warns opposite me.

His body brushes over me, and I slam my mouth shut. Warm, misty breath falls over my mouth in shallow pants. “Answer me when I ask you a question. If you lie, I’ll do something you may find inappropriate. Do you understand?”

“Um, honestly? No, I don—”

His mouth presses against mine, warm, soft lips heavy on my own. My blood heats and my ears begin to pound. He lifts lightly. “Do you—” He brings his mouth down to my ear. “—understand?” he growls into the thin flesh of my neck.

“Ye—” I clear my throat. “Yes.”

“All we had to do was kiss her to shut her up?” a voice says, then I hear a whack, and then he grunts, “Ouch!”

“Have you ever lied?”

What kind of question is that?

“Yes.”

“Are you a virgin?”

“That’s a tricky question.”

“How so?” he asks. I can almost imagine the head tilt.

“Well...” I clear my throat. You will not remember. “It just is.”

Pause. Silence.

“She’s not lying,” Bishop whispers.

“Yeah, we’ll be talking about that,” Nate says from the other side of the car.

“I doubt that, brother. The only thing you’ll be talking about is how you missed a flying bullet.”

Silence, and then laughter from everyone but Nate and Bishop.

“Do you trust me?” Bishop asks.

“No.”

“You’re smart.”

“Debatable, considering my current circumstances.” He lifts off me, and I scoot up from my position.

“Take off the blindfold.” I grip onto it, pushing it up my forehead. There are gold neon lights lining the inside of the... stretched Hummer? No wonder so many people could fit in it.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, looking around and out the windows. “Where the fuck am I?”

I look to Bishop, finding him every bit as delicious as I found him at school. Even though he and I had only spoken once before this, it’s still hard to realize it’s the same guy. Before tonight, I only had stare-downs to compare anything to besides the night he made Brantley leave me alone.

“Take her home.” Bishop doesn’t look at me; he looks straight at Nate.

“We can’t do that,” Brantley growls from a dark corner, his hoodie still over his face. Bishop still has his on too, along with his loose expensive-looking destroyed jeans.

Bishop looks directly at Brantley this time. “We’re taking her home.”

“Um, not to be a pain in the ass or anything, but you guys owe me an explanation. You pulled me out of bed at three in the morning, kidnap me, and then...” I look directly at Bishop this time, his eyes peering straight back from under his hood. Damn. Focus. “...kiss me. What the hell is going on?”

“Nothing that concerns you,” Bishop says, his eyes not moving from me. “At least

not now.”

“Hmm, see, I have a problem with tha—”

His hand comes out to mine, and then he tugs on me roughly until I’m on his lap, straddling him.

“What are you doing?” I push on his chest. Hard chest—check! One of his hands snakes up my spine and then toward the back of my neck, while his other remains clenched on my hip. He pulls my face down to meet his until his lips are skimming over mine. “Whatever the fuck I want to do. Now, do us all a favor, and shut your fucking mouth.”

I slam my mouth shut, my teeth pulling in my bottom lip. His eyes drop to my mouth before coming back to my eyes.

“I just realized I’m still in my pajamas. Yes, I want to go home. Take me home.” I climb off his lap and his grip on me loosens after a few seconds. Plopping down beside him, I look at Nate. “Fuck you.”

“Oh, you love me.”

“No, I’m pretty sure I don’t.”

“Sure you do.” He grins at me. “I’m sorry, kitten.”

“Nope.” I shake my head, pulling my hair out of its ponytail before raking my fingers through and pulling it back to the top of my head. “I’m not cool with kitten either.”

“But it’s cute.” Nate grins.

“Exactly, and I’m not.”

“Truth,” Brantley murmurs. “She’s fucking annoying. Call her... rat.”

I flip him off, and his eyes darken, but not in the way Bishop’s do. In a way that would probably send chills down my spine, because I’m 100 percent certain he hates me.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

We're pulling back up our private driveway, and when the car stops, I go to launch out the door.

"Wait!" Nate halts me. "I'm serious, sis. You can't tell anyone about what happened tonight."

"What the fuck did happen tonight?" I ask, looking at all of them.

"We—I can't talk about it with you."

"Well, why fucking kidnap me then?" I'm looking directly at Nate now. "Why not just say to me, 'Oh hey, wanna play Truth or Dare?' Like, fuck, Nate!"

"Fuck," he grunts and then looks to Bishop. "We should have done that."

Bishop shrugs. "Never played that fucking game, and ain't about to start." Bishop then looks to me. "And that ain't what we're about, Kitty."

"Oh! No you—"

Nate pushes me out and then slams the door. My mouth drops open at the closed door just as the stretched Hummer starts to pull out. I bring my hand up and flip them off, not doubting they'd be able to see, before I stomp up the marble stairs and then to the heavy double doors. A yawn slips past my mouth, and when I see the large clock that hangs on the feature wall inside the sitting room, I know why. The sun is about to come up, and I don't want to risk waking Tatum or having her inquire where I've been, so I walk into the living room. After removing my shoes, I pull down the throw

from the back of the couch and curl into the warm, soft blanket.

MY LEG FEELS HEAVY, AND the first thing I smell is—

“Bacon!” My eyes pop open.

Tatum walks into the sitting room with a frying pan in her hand and her hair already flat-ironed dead straight. “Get up, we need to have breakfast and then we need to leave.”

I groan, leaning back into the couch. “School.”

“Yes!” she hisses. “School! And by the way, if my snoring annoyed you so bad, you should have kicked me out. You didn’t have to sleep out here.”

“No!” I shake my head. “That wasn’t it. I just struggle to sleep with other people.” Not entirely a lie. I’m actually not the best sleeper when it comes to sleeping around other people. I get anxiety. Am I breathing too much? What if I accidentally touch them in my sleep? Not in a sexual way, but yes, what if in a sexual way? I don’t do well with it. I’m much more comfortable sleeping on my own. Also, I don’t share covers. Ever.

Tatum rolls her eyes, sensing my lie, but not knowing what part or why. “Come on. Breakfast time.”

I push up off the couch. “I’ll be out in a second. I’m going to jump in the shower.” Climbing the stairs, I walk into my room and consider checking to see if Nate is in his room, but think better of it. Asshole. I don’t know what the hell that was about this morning. Do I want to know more? Yes, probably. But am I angry more than anything? Yes. I’ve also come to the conclusion—between my trip from the couch to my room—that they’re a seriously fucked up group of friends. Not only are they

edgy, mysterious, and bossy, but they're... alluring. Exactly why I must stay away from them at all cost. Especially Bishop Vincent fucking Hayes. Motherfucker kissed me! And... and I loved it.

Cursing at myself under my breath, I make a mental note to go shooting after school. Since it is Friday and no doubt Tatum will want to do something this weekend, it'll be better if I get it out of the way early. I pull down some army green skinny pants and a white tank before slipping into the shower and rinsing off all of last night's fuckery.

Massaging the conditioner into my hair and taking in the silence of Nate's room, I'd say he didn't come home last night. So much for "I have to look after you." Lying ass. Stepping out of the shower, I pull down my towel and dry off quickly before getting dressed. Blowing out my hair, I brush on some light makeup, let my dark waves hang down my back, and then slip on my leather bangles plus the one my mom gave me before she passed. It's a leather Pandora charm bracelet. We would get new charms for it for every defining moment in my life. According to Mom, even dying my hair was a defining moment, so yup, we had a charm for that too. Wiping away the condensation on the mirror, I scan my face, gliding the wand of my lip balm over my lips. I have an angular, sharp jaw, cherubic pouty lips, and hazel eyes. My eyelashes are long and thick and natural, and my skin holds a natural shimmer of gold in it from my mother's Spanish heritage. I don't think I'm bad to look at, but I'm not anything special either. Especially if you stand me next to someone like Tatum or Tillie.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

Walking back down to the kitchen, I see Tatum is already sitting on the barstool, digging into her breakfast.

“Good to know you make yourself at home.” I laugh, going to where she placed my plate.

“Well, you know. All this food and no one eats it? It’s criminal.”

I snort, picking up half of a bagel. “My dad will be home this Monday.”

“Mmm,” Tatum says, licking mayonnaise off her finger. “Your house feels as empty as mine. No offense.”

“None taken, and it never used to be like this.” I bite into the greasy breakfast. “Anyway,” I mutter, swallowing my food and taking a swig of juice. “I wouldn’t have pegged you as someone who eats this sort of food.”

“I never used to,” she says shyly. I don’t want to pursue what she meant by that, so I just concentrate on eating the rest of my food. After eating, we empty our plates and walk out the house, the direct morning sun hitting both of us. I pull down my glasses as she beeps her car. “Guess it’s school time! Oh, hey, about tonight’s party, are you going to text Tillie to give her the deets?”

“Shit!” I gasp, remembering that I had left my phone in my dad’s Caddy, which was still not home. I’d have to talk to Nate about that when, or if, I see him. “Erm,” I answer, noticing Tatum watching me as she slides up her scissor door. “Yeah, I’ll text her later today about it.” I want to ask her more questions about The Elite Kings Club

too, but I'm afraid my newfound interest in the group would make Tatum suspicious.

We pull up to school not long after that. Tatum directs us into the private student parking, and we get out, walking toward the elevators that take us to the main lobby of the school. We're late—no surprise there. Running down the hallway, I push open the door to English, and the professor looks up at me, startled from his scribbling on the chalkboard. "So nice of you to join us, Montgomery. Take a seat, and don't make a pattern out of this." I nod, mouthing an apology, and then look toward the only free space there is left beside Ally. She stares at me with a snarl, and I drop my books on my desk, sinking into my chair in an attempt to focus on my schoolwork.

"Madison!" a voice yells out from behind me, as I walk toward the buffet, picking up a tray.

Carter smiles, taking a tray and falling into step beside me. "So, ah, I didn't know you were Nate's new stepsister."

"Oh no." I roll my eyes, picking up an apple. "Don't tell me you hang with them?"

He flashes me a boyish grin, and I take this brief minute to scan over his body. Strong, athletic, you can see he spends his extra time playing football. His floppy blond hair hangs short over his forehead, and his baby blues sparkle with a gleam. "Well, no... we roll in different circles."

I take a bite out of my apple and point to his varsity jacket. "I see that." I didn't mean that in an offensive way, just... Nate and those boys dress with swagger. Their bodies are built like athletes, but I'd bet my last dollar that none of them would be throwing balls.

"So you'll be at his party tonight, then?" he asks, as we reach the end of the line.

I spin around and face him. “Yup. Are you going to be there?” I ask as we head back to our tables.

He flashes me another boyish grin. “I think I’ve found my reason to be there.” Then he winks at me and saunters back to his table.

I’m still grinning from ear to ear and laughing under my breath when my eyes fall on a scowling Bishop. My smile instantly drops, and then Nate is pushing through people, heading straight toward me. “What was that about?”

“What?” I shove past him, my mood instantly changing. “Nothing.”

“Bullshit, Madi.” I ignore him and go to step toward my table, when his hand catches my arm, halting any movement. “Stay away from him.”

I shove out of his grip. “I should be staying away from you,” I hiss. “And by the way, where is my phone and my SUV?”

“Caddy is at home, and here’s your phone.” He tosses my cell toward me, and I catch it quickly before taking a seat on my chair.

“What the hell is that about?” Tatum mutters under her breath.

Nate comes next to me in a flash. “Come sit with us.”

“No.” I pick up my sandwich, unfazed by his presence, but fazed by all the attention he’s bringing to me.

“Fine.” He scowls at me, and then looks up to the rest of his hounds, letting out a loud whistle and then nudging his head.

No. Fucking. Way.

All seven of them drop their shit at the table, Nate resting comfortably beside me and Bishop sitting directly opposite me.

“I can’t do this,” I murmur to myself, shaking my head.

“Do what?” Bishop asks, eyebrow cocked. He leans forward, and whispers, “Wanna play a game?”

Tatum tenses and then looks to me. I ignore everything that’s going on behind me, my eyes remaining locked on Bishop’s dark, murky green ones. My jaw clenches. He leans back into the chair, and I stretch my leg out under the table, only for it to connect with his leg. His eyes twitch slightly before a grin appears.

Tatum clears her throat. “Um.” I look at her, leaving Bishop to continue his stare-down on his own. “Are you going to text Tillie?”

I pull my phone out of my pocket, sliding it unlocked. “Yeah, I’ll text her now.”

“Two questions,” Nate starts, taking my sandwich and biting into it. I whack his arm with the back of my hand. “What?” He looks at me annoyed.

“Can you fucking not? I’m hungry. Eat this.” I throw him an energy bar.

“I didn’t eat this morning!”

“Well, that’s your own fault for not coming home last night. Eat. Give this—” I take the sandwich from his grabby hands. “—back.” He looks longingly at my sandwich, and I chuckle.

“Mmm.” I curve my mouth around it slowly, biting down on it. “So...” I chew slowly until I swallow. Swiping a drop of mayonnaise of the corner of my mouth with my thumb, I suck it off. “Good.” I laugh again, taking another normal bite, and then look around the table at everyone’s silence. They’re all watching me with mixed expressions. I look back to Nate, about to ask what the hell is going on, only his mouth is hanging open.

“Yeah.” He takes the sandwich from me. “No more mayonnaise sandwiches for you. Mmkay?” Then he shovels the remainder of what was left into his fat gob. I flip him off, looking back down at my phone. I scroll through the contacts until I’ve find Tillie, and send her a quick message.

Me – Hey, it’s Madison. Are you still on for tonight?

Tillie – Hey! I was wondering when you’d text. Sure, what time?

Me – Tatum and I will come pick you up after school if you want?

Tillie – Um, I can get dropped off.

Me – Are you sure?

Tillie – Yeah. Just send me your address and I’ll be there.

After sending Tillie my address, I look back up to Tatum. “She’ll get dropped off after school.”

“Back to my questions. Who is Tillie, and is she single?”

I throw a carrot stick at Nate and then go back to eating whatever is left on my plate. My eyes fall on Brantley, who has gone from scowling at me to flat out ignoring me, and then drift down to the rest of the guys, who seem to be eating and conducting small talk among themselves. My eyes eventually fall on Bishop... and... he’s staring at me again.

“You know,” I whisper, inching toward him with a teasing grin, “it’s rude to stare.”

He clenches his jaw, his eyes and face hard and unfazed. Then his mouth tips as he leans forward until his lips are a mere breath away from mine. “You know,” he whispers back, cocking his head, “I think you know how poor my manners are.”

I look from his eyes, down to his mouth, and then back to his eyes. Narrowing my glare, I slide out of my seat.

“Oh, come on, kitty,” Bishop taunts as I walk toward the trash can, dumping the rest of my food. “I know how you like games.”

I flip him off over my shoulder and walk toward the girls’ side of the school, Tatum quickly catching up to me breathlessly.

“What the ever-loving fuck is going on with you and Bishop?” she asks loudly, gaining the attention of Ally and Lauren, who are stashing their books into their lockers.

“Shh!” I scold her, walking toward my next class. “I’ll tell you later.”

She stops, letting me carry on my walk toward my next subject alone. “You better!” she yells to my back.

I look down at my watch, seeing I still have some time to burn, so I decide to take a detour to the library. I haven't checked it out yet, but it has been on my list of things to do.

Pushing open the double doors, I walk into the smell of worn paper, sound knowledge, and history, and it instantly warms my heart. Pulling in a deep breath, I close my eyes and exhale softly, unleashing any bad juju I had by leaving it at the library's door. There's just something magical about a library. It's like a portal to many different worlds. We have one ready to be set up at home. My dad at least made sure to get a house with a library in it, so all I have to do is fill it and furnish the place. I'm sure I could do it anytime I want, with my dad's little plastic friend, but I want to make sure we really are staying here before I put down roots like that, and also without getting too attached. I've never let myself get too attached or too comfortable with where we have been, because I've been afraid. Afraid, because anytime I start getting comfortable, Dad would uproot our life and we'd be moving somewhere else. Do I know what Dad does for work? I mean, we all knew he is wealthy and came from old oil money, but he also has shares in different establishments, not only in the United States but in Europe as well. Money has never been an issue for me, but having an actual home has.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

After giving the librarian a polite wave, I head toward a dark, cozy corner tucked away behind History. After dropping my bag to the table that sits in front of the plush LazyBoy, I start on my trek of finding something to humor me for the remainder of lunch. After doing big circles around, I find myself down the Historical Folklore aisle.

Tilting my head, my eyes run over all the worn brown spines until I'm drawn to one with a circle symbol on. I don't know why, but I feel like it's familiar. I just can't pinpoint anything I have ever seen before. Slipping my finger on the top, I slide the heavy, long book out and carry it back to my seat. Crossing my legs underneath me, I run my fingertips over the cover of the book. The embroidered circle emblem with a double infinity inside of it. So simple, yet so familiar.

Opening the cover, the title page reads, Secrets are weapons, and silence is the trigger. – V. S. H.

I read over that phrase a couple more times. So vague. With a roll of my eyes, I flip the page, skipping the table of contents.

1

The Calling.

The somber side of me knew what was to come. When I felt my baby's first kick, I knew. Knowledge wasn't one we liked to hold onto very well in our world, not when The Chosen go by facts alone, not knowledge. Impulse actions, not knowledge. Consequences be damned. My child was to be one of The Chosen. He would be one

of the originals. This corrupt pact that Joseph had begun was only the beginning for generations to come. The firstborn sons of each chosen family. Dirty, spilled blood would then be passed down on to their hands.

The Calling. This was the calling.

“Madison, is it?” The librarian looks down at me, and I snap the book closed as if I had done something wrong.

“Yes, sorry.”

She points down to her watch. “Lunch is over. It’s time to head to class.”

“Oh!” I gather up my bag. “Can I borrow this?”

She looks at me, the sides of her eyes crinkling. “Sorry, honey, that’s a part of the section we don’t allow to check out. You can come in and read it anytime you like, though.” I hand it to her, and she walks over and slides it back into its slot.

Damn. I really wanted to read the rest of that book and I don’t even know why. It’s not a genre I usually read, far away from dystopian or vampire romances, but I really want to read whatever the hell is in that book. Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I nod. “Thanks.” And then I walk out of the library. As soon as the doors swing closed, I inhale my problems I had left at the door.

Great.

“SO SHE SAID SHE WOULD be here?” Tatum quizzes, rummaging through my closet with a bottle of Moet in her other hand. It’s 5:00 p.m. and she’s already started drinking. I fear she might be going to bed early tonight.

“Yes!” I hit my phone, dialing Tillie again. This time, she picks up.

“Sorry! I got caught up and I had to do....” She pauses, brushing me off. “Shit. I’m almost there.”

Hanging up my phone, I toss it onto the bed and buzz Sam to let her in as soon as she gets here, just in case we don’t hear her knock. Nate hasn’t come home, again, but he did text to say that they’ll be here soon to set up whatever it is they need to set up. My dad is going to kill us. I made it my duty, this time, to go around the house and put away any expensive items. Our house is still rather empty, even though Dad hired a few people to come out and unload boxes to make it more homey for me, which I’m used to. He’s never been a home parent; Sam practically raised me. Even when my mom was alive, they were both almost always away on business, and now that I look back on it, my mom probably followed him around like a lost puppy in hopes to keep him on a leash.

It’s true, my dad has never been one for commitment, and I’m surprised he hasn’t already found another mistress, but that side of him has never impacted me or how he parented me. Yes, he’s an absent parent, but I’m not bratty enough to give him a hard time about it. I’m well aware of his hard work and how I wouldn’t have the life I have if he didn’t. But if I’m honest, I always wondered what it would be like for my dad to be a middle-class working man. One who fishes on the weekends, is always home by 5:00 p.m., and watches the game on TV while tossing back a cold beer.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

I stand to my feet, brushing off my pants, and walk into the closet to help Tatum find something to wear before she has a breakdown.

“Why don’t you just wear the dress you bought at the mall?”

“Because,” she whines, “I’m almost certain I’ve gained three pounds since then.”

“Tatum?”

“Yes?” She groans into her hands, looking all distressed. I almost laugh. Almost.

“That was two days ago. Not possible.”

“Maybe not for you.” She eyes me up and down.

“Hey!” I whack her with the back of my hand. “I’ll have you know that if I didn’t watch what I eat, I would be the size of a house. Dude—” I grab onto my hips. “—they jiggle a bit.”

She pouts, and then we both burst out laughing. “Well...,” she says, handing me the bottle of champagne, “let’s just do the alcohol diet.”

I take the bottle from her, slipping out of my skinny jeans and hoodie. “And what’s that diet?” I ask, standing in my bra and lace panties, bringing the rim to my mouth and tossing it back until the bubbles are enticing my taste buds.

She waves her hands, freaking out over a black sequin dress. “Well, we get so drunk

that we no longer care about our weight.”

I laugh, taking another swig and pointing to the dress she’s holding and contemplating. “Deal. By the way, wear that dress.”

She nods and then spins to look me up and down. “By the way,” she mimics my tone, her eyes eating up my skin, “you have a fucking banging body, Madi. What the fuck?”

I turn beat red and change the subject. “Wear the dress.” I bring the wine back to my lips.

My bedroom door swings open, and I turn around with the bottle of wine pressed to my mouth, expecting Tillie to walk through.

It is Tillie. But she is not alone. Fuck.

“Holy shit!” Hunter gasps. Nate halts the door from opening any more, and then Bishop strolls in, his eyes licking all over my skin, making me feel even more naked than what I already do.

I squeal, dropping to the ground and ducking behind my bed. “Oh my God! Everyone but Tillie, get the fuck out!”

Bishop watches me, his head tilting until his eyes twinkle in mischief.

“Hey!” I point at the door. “Get. Out!”

They leave, but not before Hunter halts, his fingers gripping the edge of the door. “Just for, you know, future reference, what were you two—”

Bishop drags him out of my room by the back of his collar, and Tillie slams the door in all their faces.

“Jesus,” I mumble, getting back to my feet. “Fucking pack of unruly wolves.” Tillie is still watching the door when I burst out laughing.

“Sorry about that. I should have warned you about my stepbrother and his pack of...” I pause, attempting to find the appropriate word for them. “Of exactly that—wolves.”

Tillie turns to me and smiles. “No problem at all.” She looks down my body. “But seriously, can I have your boobs, because mine are like tiny lemons compared to those scrumptious things.”

We all laugh as she steps in closer with her bag propped over her shoulder. “I’ll get ready here.”

I nod, handing her the bottle of wine. “As you can see... we are far from dressed.”

Tatum nudges my hip with hers. “Ignore Madi. She’s a little...” She circles her index finger up near her temple to emphasize my edginess. “...crazy, because she didn’t get to go shooting after school.”

“Shooting?” Tillie asks, pulling out some clothes from her backpack.

“It’s a sort of hobby of mine.” I smile at her, and she grins at me.

“That’s badass. I’d love to learn one day.”

My back straightens at the opportunity to find someone, a friend, who is maybe interested in something I do. I know Tatum and I have grown extremely close in the short amount of time we’ve known each other, despite my thinking we couldn’t be

friends, but Tillie seems like the center of Tatum and me. Sort of like... a bit of each of us.

I'm obviously a little buzzed, because my train of thought is heading into the emotional tunnel, and I need to derail that right now. Swallowing, I nod. "I'd love to take you! Get changed and drink!"

She laughs, pulling out a long-sleeved short dress that looks tight. She hitches her thumb over her shoulder. "I'll slip into the bathroom."

Modest... far more modest than I'm being right now, which, now that I think about it, is a lot worse. At my revelation, I place the bottle of Moet down on my bedside table and turn to face her. "Of course." Sober up right now, Madi, or you'll be joining Tatum facedown before 9:00 p.m.

I spin back around to face my closet when I catch Tatum looking at the closed door. "Why would she be shy around us?" she whispers.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“Shh!” I bring my finger up to my mouth. “Maybe,” I say, scolding her and pulling my new—or Tatum’s—choice of dress off the rack, “because she’s been around us for all of five minutes.”

Tatum narrows her eyes. “Hmmm, maybe.”

“Stop!” I point my finger against the tip of her nose. “Don’t dig or anything. Just leave it.” Shit. I’m a little buzzed. “What the hell is in that wine, anyway?”

“Uhh, wine? Wine is what’s in that wine, and not the cheap kind. Live and learn, my love.” She steps into her dress, every inch of the sequined material pushing against her tiny frame. “Do me up!” I zip her up and she turns. “How do I look?”

“Holy shit, you look incredible!” Tillie says, walking out of the bathroom.

I halt, scanning her curvy frame filling her tiny little dress. “So do you!” I point. “You two are going to make me look like the ugly stepsister.” Tatum looks at me like I’ve lost my mind, and Tillie scrunches up her face. “Better continue my drinking,” I half joke under my breath.

I don’t have that high of a self-esteem, but that came from years and years of just never fitting in. All the pretty girls hang together; they all gravitate toward each other and all feed off each other’s beauty and what not, but that’s never been me. I’ve always been the tomboy loner who likes to shoot guns and wear Keds or Chucks. Tatum? She’s a heels-and-diamonds kind of girl—always looks stunning—and has the kind of confidence that could only come from being told “you’re the shit” for most of your life. Tillie, on the other hand, I’m still trying to work out. She has this

retro hippie feel about her, what with her pastel pink hair and earthy, naturally beautiful, in-line-with-the-universe thing going on, if that even makes sense—which I’m sure it doesn’t, because fucking wine.

Jesus, I need to pull my shit together. Deep breathing, in and out. But every intake of breath I take, I get hit with a rich tang on the back of my throat from the after taste of the expensive alcohol.

“Hello?” Tatum waves her hands in front of my face. “Earth to Madi, get changed!”

“Shit.” I snap out of my lingering thoughts of self-pity and tipsy ramblings. “I’ll get changed. Fire up the curlers.” I slip into my closet, unclip my current bra, and snap on a strapless. When I step back out, I say, “Tatum, did I tell you how much I hate you for choosing this dress? I don’t do dresses.”

“Good thing I gave you wine beforehand then.” She winks, curling her hair, as Tillie leans over the sink in the bathroom, doing her makeup.

“This was your plan?” I look at her with fresh eyes. She’s sneakier than I ever imagined.

Tatum taps her head. “You’ll never know.”

Hmm, sure I won’t.

“So,” Tillie says from the bathroom, “I’ve never been to an elite party before.”

I halt, dress clutched in my hand. “What?” I ask lightly.

“You know,” Tillie lines her eyes with black, “an elite party.”

“You mean figuratively?”

Tatum rolls her eyes, letting her long, blonde fresh curls drop over her slender shoulders. “No. She means Elite, Madi. We’ve had this discussion.”

“Wait, how do you even know about that?” I look back toward Tillie.

She stops what she’s doing. “We’ve all heard of them, Madi. I didn’t realize your stepbrother was Nate Riverside, though.”

“Are you judging me?”

She stops and spins to face me, horror flashing over her freshly marked face. “God, no, Madi. No. I was just surprised when I pulled up here. That’s all.”

I nod, turning back to hold my dress. If Nate and his boys cost me a friendship, I’ll have to kill him for real. I have a hard enough time making friends—not that I actually care—but I happen to like Tillie, so I don’t want to lose her friendship. “By the way, whatever you heard about them, it’s not true.”

“Is so.”

“Tatum, shut up.” I look back to Tillie with a smile. “It’s really not. They’re not all that interesting.” I don’t know why I feel the need to protect whatever the fuck I’m protecting, but I’ll blame it on the wine again.

Tillie shrugs. “I don’t know much, only rumors, and of course, Bishop Hayes used to date a girl from my school.” My heartbeat slows, thickening my blood. “And everyone knows who The Elite Kings are. Also,” she adds casually, “Nate and Cash are always at Backyard Bucks, and as usual,” she says casually, lining her lips, “Bishop is always ripping through the streets.”

“What, what, and what?” I ask, stepping closer to her and shimmying into the tight red strapless dress. It’s thin, snug, and has a deep dip over my sternum, showcasing my cleavage.

“You know, Backyard Bucks Octagon, and Bishop, racing?” She looks at me, waiting for me to catch on.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

Tatum looks at me sideways. “She’s new. She’ll figure it out.”

“I’m sorry.” I clear my throat, signaling for Tatum to zip up my back. “Did I get this right? Nate in an octagon, and Bishop races what? Cars?”

Tatum starts applying makeup and acting like she isn’t inhaling all the drama and new information. I know this is news to her too, because her mouth is shut and she has her ears tuned in to our convo.

“The races,” Tillie says ashamedly, almost like she thinks she’s not allowed to put her foot in it. Tatum starts applying makeup to my face and fluffing up my natural waves. “I assumed you knew, because, well....” She gestures around the place. “I only know because my sister occasionally sleeps with Jase, Hunter’s older brother. I heard them talking about it, so I snuck out and followed them one day.”

My breathing slows, the information sinking into me. I whack Tatum’s hands away from my face. What the fuck is with these boys?

“Because otherwise, that’s super confidential information. I don’t even know why Jase would’ve told my stupid sister, and please forget I ever told you.”

Tatum holds up a pair of hoop earrings in front of my face. “Earrings?”

My face falls in a death glare. “Hold them.” I get to my feet and storm out my bedroom door. I don’t care that my makeup is only half done and my hair is in a thick mane of soft waves down my back, or that I have no shoes on. This is my fucking house anyway. I fly down the stairs, the deep, slow, dark bass of “Devil’s Night” by

D12 already shaking the chandelier that hangs in the foyer. I round the corner to the living room, so fucking angry I want to hit something, preferably all of them, until they tell me what the fuck is going on.

I halt at the opening. They are all lounging around already, with Ally and Lauren stretched over their laps—or should I say, Ally stretched out over Bishop's lap. Awesome. I needed to hit Tatum for saying he isn't a manwhore and that he is fussy. Lies. No fussy man would have that dirty slut stretched out across his lap.

Okay, angry Madi is about to rear her ugly head. Maybe another glass? Or bottle... because you're classy like that. Nate is stretched out, with a bong in one hand and a cigarette in the other, grinning at me. Looking beside him, Hunter's chopping up white powder on the coffee table and rolling up a hundred-dollar bill. I shiver, not wanting to touch that subject right now.

Bringing my eyes back to Bishop, I see Ally purr against his chest. "Why's she coming?"

Bishop's jaw clenches, his eyes staying on mine as he strokes Ally's hair. He wraps her long mane around his fist, yanking her head up to face him, all while his eyes remain on mine. Locked, entranced, and fucking hypnotic.

He slowly drawls his tongue out and licks her across her bottom lip. "I don't know, babe. Maybe you should ask Nate why his annoying little sister is coming tonight with her annoying little friends." He sucks her bottom lip into his mouth, catching it between his teeth, before pulling back roughly. She moans shamelessly—fuck everyone else in the room.

Heat mixed with anger pulses through me. Calm breathing, Madi. Fuck him.

I look to Ally, a grin slithering onto my mouth. "Oh now, now," I tsk, my poker face

game strong. “Don’t act like his kisses are that good.” I roll my eyes with a smirk, narrowing them onto Bishop and cocking my head. “He tastes like washed up whores strung out on crack.” Then I look to Ally. “But I guess, now that I know who he has been kissing”—my smirk deepens—“it actually makes sense.”

“You bi—”

She goes to launch off the couch when a laugh erupts out of me. Nate snatches her arm, shoving her back onto Bishop’s lap. Bishop, who has hunger and hate mixed in his eyes, watches me carefully. I smirk at him, chuckling devilishly. If he thinks I’ll lay back and let him make a fool out of me with his little toy, he’s mistaken. I’ve spent most of my life being made a fool of, and I’ve come to realize, as of recently, I don’t much like feeling that way. Of course, this is because wine.

“You!” Nate points to me. “Need to change. You cannot dress like that here tonight.”

“He’s right.” Cash nods. Cash never says much of anything, so him even adding his two cents is odd.

“First of all, fuckers, I’m not changing. Do you know how long it took to get into this dress?” I ask sweetly, a smile still on my face. “I mean, one can only hope that, whoever the lucky guy is that I find myself with tonight, he finds it easier to take it off than I did putting it on.”

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“Shut up. Get changed.” Nate points toward the stairs.

“No,” I hiss, offended and looking him up and down.

“Jesus,” Brantley scoffs. “She’s already buzzed.”

Ally laughs, wrapping Bishop’s hands around her waist as she wiggles on his lap.

“Oh, this is comical.”

I flip them both off. “Not as funny as your breath, which tastes like ass, by the way.”

“Oh?” she asks, laughing and getting ready to shame me in front of everyone. Someone like Ally Parker doesn’t go down without a fight. “And you know what ass tastes like?” She and Lauren smirk at each other in triumph.

“Of course I do,” I say stiffly. “I’ve had my lips wrapped around Bishop’s tongue.”

Their laughing instantly stops, and she goes to launch off the couch again, but this time it’s Bishop who halts her movements.

“That was the last time you threaten me, in my fucking house too, by the way,” I say snidely, my shoulders squaring. Fuck her, and fuck these boys.

I turn around, forgetting why I even came down to see them.

“Oh, sis, come on,” Nate moans behind me. I flip him off and run up the stairs to continue getting changed.

New goals: look hot as fuck tonight, get drunk, and hopefully find someone to rub my ass against.

“JESUS.” I GLANCE AT THE stranger in the mirror. “That’s me?” I smirk, brushing myself off.

Tatum and Tillie burst out laughing, both of them nice and tipsy, and me a little bit past tipsy, but still sober enough to walk, talk, and act straight. I’m in that zone where everything is warm, when your blood is pumping, and you just know that tonight is going to be a good night. I can feel it in my bones and in my blood.

I touch my nude lips. “Damn. I look decent.”

“Decent?” Tatum mocks, offended. “Oh, honey, I don’t create decent. I create ‘daaaymn,’” she mocks Smokey and Ice Cube’s voices from the movie Friday.

I burst out laughing. Tatum did fucking good. My brunette hair is dead straight, hanging to my tailbone, my eyes smoked out in black, and my skin dusted in golden bronzer. My cheeks are brushed with peach blush, and my dress has been replaced with a more revealing one. Yup, I ditched the modest tight red dress, which Nate already tried to tell me to change out of, and replaced it with a thin spaghetti strap nude leather-like dress. It clings to my body like a second skin, accentuating my narrow waist and how my hips flare out slightly. It also showcases my bubble butt and D-sized breasts, both of which I always attempt to hide.

Not tonight though. Oh no.

I’ve always been self-conscious of my body. Because I don’t have that nice small butt or the perky small boobs that just sit there and look perfect. I’m not big. I’m actually petite, but my curves are most definitely not. The dress shows most of my boobs and a whole lot of my figure. I’ve done a good job at hiding it—up until now. Ally got to

me. Bishop got to me. They all got to me. Now I'm out to fuck them all over, in a small package of a dress.

“Wear the heels.” Tatum throws the black pumps at me.

“I really don't wanna.”

“I don't care.” She giggles, taking another drink.

The party downstairs is obviously in full swing, what with the loud pumping music, glasses clinking, and the roar of laughter. The squeals of annoying fucking drunk girls—you're a drunk girl right now—and the coming and leaving of headlights lighting up my dim bedroom further proves that tonight is going to be a messy night. We spent most of the night up here getting drunk and ready, and it was nice. I feel like I've known both Tillie and Tatum all my life, almost like we're all soul mates but the friend kind. Or maybe girls are supposed to find their soul mates in their friends, and guys are just there for the D.

After I relayed everything that happened in the living room back to the girls, we all decided to switch up my outfit and go a little over the top—which is why I am looking like I am right now.

“Are we ready, girls?” Tillie wiggles her eyebrows from the doorway.

“Wait, wait!” Tatum stops. “Are we getting ass tonight?”

I laugh. “I hope so.”

They both look at me. “Are you a virgin?”

“What?” I'm just about to give them a small fib when I decide I don't need to lie to

these girls. They're my friends, real ones. "No." My laughing turns serious. "I'm not kidding. I'm not a virgin. But I'd rather not go there right now." I pause, looking back to them. "Are either of you?"

Tatum nods.

"No way!" I breathe, but then feel instantly bad that I assumed she wasn't. "Sorry."

She shakes her head. "It's fine. Most people think I'm a slut."

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“We can talk about this later,” I say to her. That wasn’t a question; it was a promise. I look to Tillie. “What about you?”

She shakes her head. “No.” Then she adds, “Far from it.”

“Oh?” I smile at her. “Like that, huh?”

“Oh, I’m all about women’s sexuality. We have every right to enjoy it just like guys do.”

I hold my fist out to her. “Word!”

We fist-bump, and then Tatum looks at us. “I feel left out. New plan: Get Tatum laid.”

We all laugh, and Tillie swings the door open all the way, letting the bass stream through loudly. There is no one upstairs, which is a relief, but I gather that no one would step up to Nate and the boys by trying to cross them and invading our personal space. No one but me, because fuck them, basically.

We walk down the stairs, laughing and clutching a bottle of champagne each. I’m still not too hot on these heels, but hey, I can blame wine if I fall on my face. Yin Yang Twins’ “Shake” starts playing through the beefy speakers, and Tatum starts dancing and hopping down the stairs, our hair flying around the place. Yup, we are all very much drunk. Dragging us to the living room, where bodies are crushing against each other to the music, we ignore all the staring eyes glued on us as we continue dancing around, blocking everyone out.

I laugh, twisting in Tillie's grasp. When my eyes land on the boys, who are standing on the other side of the room, I drop down to the floor and grin at them before snaking back up, pressing my butt into Tillie. Not all of them are here, but Nate, Bishop, Brantley, Ace, and Saint are. Ally and Lauren are way past drunk, falling all over the place and rubbing up on each other. A giggle escapes me as my head swings back. They probably think they look sensual. Yeah, if sensual was two drowned raccoons who look like they just got smashed seven ways from Sunday with Charlie Sheen.

Bishop's eyes slowly lick all over my body, his lip twitching at the corner of his mouth. Psh, yeah right. I look to Nate, who's already storming up to me, his face red and angry, followed closely by the rest of them.

"Get. Fucking. Changed, Madi. Tonight is not the night to be dressed and acting like this."

"Oh, I'm sorry." I smirk, turning around and dancing against his chest, my ass pressing into him. Gag. "You're mistaking me for someone who gives a fuck."

"Tillie!" Saint snaps at my friend.

"Hey!" I click my fingers in his face, stepping between the two of them and narrowing my eyes. "Leave her alone, bud."

He grins, finding me amusing. "Step away, kitty. You already know we don't play fair."

"Oh," I say, matching his fight, "neither do I. You boys just caught me off guard that night."

I look to all of them. "Now, if you don't mind, you're kind of cock blocking us."

Then I take the girls' hands and walk them outside to where the music is pouring out, and the moon is shining over the bright fairy lights, the colored neons inside the pool, and all the half-naked drunk teens walking around.

I tip my head back, swallowing more wine. "That was fucking awesome."

A young guy is tilted over one of the lawn chairs, his bottle of tequila hanging between his fingers loosely. Tillie walks up to him, snatching the bottle quickly, and then comes back to us. "Time to really get shit started."

We drink, dance, and rub against each other until sweat is beading on our skin and the smile lines are permanently imprinted on our faces.

We're dancing to "Dangerous" by Akon when my eyes land on Carter. He's walking through the opening doors that lead out to where we are beside the pool. He's with three or four friends, all wearing their varsity jackets. Damn. I lick my lips. He's looking a little more delicious than he usually does. Wine. Oh no, Tequila. He's searching for someone in the crowd, and when his eyes land on me, a smile lights up his face, and probably the rest of outside, because he is just that damn beautiful right now. After being surrounded by asshole moody guys for the past couple of nights, I need this. I need to see a friendly face. Someone who makes me feel good. I wave. Oh God, I just waved.

"Did you just fucking wave?" Tatum hisses from beside me.

"Shut up." I keep the smile on my face as he walks toward us, drinking in what I'm wearing.

"Well, damn." He pulls me into his chest, where I instantly melt against him.

I look up at him and smile. "Nice to see you. I'm a bit drunk. Not enough to look like

that.” I wave over to Ally and Lauren. Ha ha. “Albeit, still drunk.”

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“Did you just say albeit?” Tatum scolds me through a whisper. Jesus, anyone would think I’m the virgin and she’s the cock expert. I discretely shove her away.

Worst. Wingwoman. Ever.

Looking over to Tillie, I see her dancing in one of Carter’s friends’ arms, her eyes rolling to the back of her head, lost in the beat of the song.

Best. Wingwoman. Ever.

Tatum is fired.

He grins, hooking his finger under my chin. “You’re cute as shit. You know that?”

“Hmm.” My eyes narrow as I ponder his words. “Not exactly the best line I’ve heard—”

He kisses me. His warm lips press against mine as his slick tongue slips between my lips. I freeze slightly, but then images of Bishop and Ally come through my brain like a bad romance movie, and my hands wrap around the back of his neck instinctively as I grind into him.

He pulls back, searching my eyes. “Wanna get out of here?” He waits for me to answer and must sense my hesitation. “Your friends can come.” He gestures to Tillie, where she’s locking lips with his friend.

“Okay.” I would not have been this easy had I been sober, and although I’m getting

cold feet about this getting laid business, it's not like anything could happen if Tillie is with me. And besides all of that, Carter's cool. I'm comfortable enough with him to go with him. Or maybe this is another thing I can blame on wine and bad experiences. Only, I have enough of those to last two lifetimes.

"To where?" I ask.

"To a good time?" he replies with a grin.

I look at Tillie, who is looking back at me pleadingly; she obviously isn't having second thoughts about getting ass tonight.

"Okay." He takes my hand, and I stop, looking back inside the house.

"Nate and Bishop left if you're worried about slipping past them?" Carter searches my eyes.

"But Hunter and Saint are...." I look to the side of the house, pulling on his arm and turning to face Tatum. "Come on!"

Tatum looks at us reluctantly. "Fine, fuck it. YOLO and all that shit."

I laugh, tugging Carter with me, his strong body brushing against my back. "You give me shit about using 'albeit,' and then you go and drop something like YOLO?" I unlatch the lock on the side gate and drag them through the finely trimmed gardens until we're eventually out front of the house.

"Tada!" I laugh, stretching my arms wide.

Carter points to a Porsche. "You're riding shotgun." He slaps my ass as he passes me, slipping into the driver seat. The guy Tillie is with gets into the back, and then I

shove Tatum in after Tillie.

“Oh, stop complaining.” I smirk at Tatum, who is in the back pressed against the car, trying to escape Tillie sucking face with... “What’s your name?” I ask the hottie in the back.

“Pauly.”

Then I look back to Tatum, only to find her scowling at me. “What kind of car does Bishop have?” I ask, pondering over what Tillie told us earlier tonight.

Carter snickers. “A matte black GranTurismo Maserati, why?” He looks at me over his arm.

I shrug. Of course he owns a Maserati. “Just wondering.” I look back at Carter. “And how do you know what he drives?”

He grins at me from the side. “You’re about to find out.” Then he drops the car into second gear as we zoom onto the highway, the tires eating up the asphalt.

THE CHAINSMOKERS’ “CLOSER” IS PULSING through the small enclosure of the car, and I spin around, dancing in my seat while watching Tatum, who has loosened up a lot more since leaving the house, dance in her seat. Thank you, tequila.

“So where’re we going?” We’ve been driving for half an hour now, the distant lights of the town long gone.

Carter grins, putting his headlights on high beam and then yanking up the emergency brake until the back wheels are latching onto the road. Suddenly, we’re sliding into a private long driveway, leaving a thick dust of smoke behind us.

Tatum scolds him, “Not cool, Dominic Toretto.”

I’m too busy smiling from ear to ear. “I want to do that again.”

Tatum kicks the back of my seat. I look at Carter, ignoring my tantrum-throwing bestie in the back. “I’m serious.” He smiles and then puts his eyes back to the road ahead. Upscale fencing encases the endless driveway. “What?” I grumble under my breath. We finally come to the end of the driveway, and I look at the half circle of cars lined up with people crowding around. And when I say cars, I mean cars. I narrow my eyes. “Is this the rich boys’ playground?”

Carter chuckles, pulling up to a stop. I’m not oblivious to how everyone has stopped what they’re doing, watching us in the car. “You could say that,” he says, winking at me and clutching his door handle. “Let’s go.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

Tillie grumbles, sitting forward, “I guess we’re going to see firsthand what Bishop does when he races.”

Wait, what?

Shit.

I push my door open, and Carter is already rounding my side. He places his hand out and I take it, standing to my feet. All eyes are on us. Great. I think I need more tequila. Snatching the bottle out of a very drunk Tatum’s hands, I bring the rim to my lips and pound it back.

“Hey,” he pulls me into his body, “you can ride with me.”

I swallow the potent liquid. “Really?”

He looks down at me, his eyes searching mine. “Really, really.”

Hooking my hands around his neck, I pull his lips down to mine. His warm breath falls over my lips and my heart pounds in my chest. I lean forward, about to kiss him—

A strong arm wraps around my waist, tugging me out of his grip. “Yeah, not gonna happen.”

I’m pushed behind Bishop’s body, with both him and Nate standing in front of me.

“Uh yeah, I’m pretty sure she rolled up with me, so she’s riding with me.” Carter reaches out to my arm, and he barely touches me, when Bishop steps up to him, chest to chest, nose to nose.

“Yeah,” Bishop murmurs, his eyes searching Carter’s and his square jaw clenching. “And I said it’s not gonna happen.” The entire crowd of people here are watching this epic pissing contest, Tatum and Tillie both awkwardly silent behind me.

“Bishop,” I whisper, but he doesn’t move. I look to Nate for help, only finding him watching Bishop with a questioning glare, and then looking back to Carter, who seems like he’s not going to back down anytime soon. Fuck. I’m on my own.

Bishop doesn’t move, so I raise my hand, grabbing hold of his thick arms. I could swear goose bumps break out over his arms at the connection of our skin. “Bishop?” I repeat, looking around nervously at everyone who is watching.

“Nah, it’s cool,” Carter says, brushing me off while his eyes search Bishop’s with venom. “You can take her for a ride. But make no mistake, she will be with me after, and...” He pauses, pretending to think over his next words. “...after that too.”

Oh, Jesus Christ.

He pushes away from Bishop, all of them still watching as Carter gets back into his car. Tatum clears her throat. “Um, well that was awkward.”

Bishop spins around to face me, both he and Nate obviously pissed at me. “What the fuck are you doing getting in the car with him? You were supposed to stay the fuck home!”

“Last I checked,” I said, looking directly at Bishop, “you don’t tell me what the fuck to do!” I really hope I didn’t slur in that sentence.

Bishop points toward his beautiful—fucking beautiful—Maserati. “Get in the fucking car, kitty, and don’t fucking move unless I tell you otherwise.” My mouth damn near drops open as I look to Nate, waiting for him to help me out here.

But my stepbrother is trying to hold in his laugh, his face turning purple. “Nate!” I hiss.

“Okay, okay, sorry, sis, but he’s right. I was going to lose my shit at you, but he did it for the both us. Get in the car.” He looks behind me, directly at Tatum. “You get in the fucking car too.” Then he looks to Tillie, who is now pushing Carter’s friend away. “And you, too.”

“Fuck.” Bishop shakes his head. “I can’t be carrying too much weight. I’ll take Madison.”

“Like fuck!” I blurt out. Bishop’s eyes narrow on me. I point. “Take Nate!”

“No!” Bishop orders, stepping closer. “Someone needs to keep an eye on you.” He snatches the bottle of tequila out of my hands and tosses it to the ground. “And since pussy doesn’t ride shotgun in my car...” He looks to Tatum and Tillie with a curled lip. Rude! “You will have to fucking do. Get. In.”

“You just said pussy doesn’t ride shotgun in your car!” I’m well aware people are still watching us, but because of tequila, I no longer care. I think I’ll give lots of fucks come Monday, though. “Last I checked, I have a pussy.”

Bishop grins, walking up to me. He tilts his head. “Hmm, want me to check? ’Cause I’m not so sure.”

I flip him off. “Fuck you.” Then I storm off toward his car, yanking the door open... and then failing, because they’re fucking scissor doors, before sliding inside. Bishop

is still scowling at me from the same spot before he finally turns to talk with Nate, who has tucked both Tillie and Tatum under each arm with a sly smirk on his face. Both girls look up at him like he's God's gift to women. Oh, ew.

Why the hell are they racing, anyway? It's not like they need money or cars, so why? Bishop turns and walks back toward me, sliding up his door and getting in.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“I don’t know why the fuck you’re doing this. Why couldn’t you and Nate just ride around your little circuit? I’d still be here when you got back.”

“First of all, it’s not a little circuit. It’s a forty-minute race across town. Second of all, you’re drunk, and there’s no way Nate would leave you unattended.”

Nate? It’s more like he has a lot to say about where or who I’m with tonight, but admitting I noticed would be about as useful as telling him I think he’s hot. It would embarrass me, because he would know I noticed, and then the ball would be in his court, which I’m not cool with.

“A forty-minute circuit?” He pulls my belt on and I ignore the way his strong arm brushes against my own.

Firing up his car, he hits his headlights and puts it into first gear. “Yes.” He pushes buttons on the GPS that sits on his dashboard until a map comes up with a trail of green.

“Why?” I ask, looking back to his chiseled profile. He really is that fine. I need to stop looking or sober up, or both.

“Why what?” he asks, revving the car until the rumble of the whatever-cylinder engine shakes under our weight.

“Why do you do it?”

“Ahh.” He grins at me from the side and taps his temple. “That’s the million-dollar

question though, isn't it?" Then he slams it into first gear, the tires kicking up the gravel before we're skidding down the driveway.

"Holy shit!" I spin in my chair to see the headlights behind us disappear as Bishop drops it into third gear and then back to second just as he reaches the end of the driveway, ripping up the emergency brake. The car's ass end slides out sideways, and we drift around back, onto the quiet road that leads to the highway. A very girly scream leaps out of my mouth, and I quickly slam my hand over my lips, unable to contain my laughter.

The passing streetlights flash across Bishop's face, showcasing shadows over his finely cut features. "Take a right turn at the next intersection," the GPS's electronic voice instructs from the dash. Bishop swerves into the right lane and pounds it until we're clocking in at around 100 mph. I thought I'd be scared. I mean, I have no experience when it comes to Bishop and his driving, but I not, and this may be the sole reason as to why so many young people are killed during illegal races—pure stupidity. I don't feel anything but the sheer adrenaline pulsing through me.

"You and Carter?" he asks, his eyes staying on the road ahead of us.

"Are about as friendly as you and Ally." My answer is clipped, but regardless of whether I'm enjoying this ride or not, I didn't ask for it. Bishop is an asshole and stuck-up. Everything I dislike in a male, or in a person in general.

He laughs, but it's more like a snark. "Ally means less than shit to me."

"Charming," I reply, deadpan.

He looks at me, a dark smirk coming onto his mouth. "Never." Then he slams it into third gear, and we shoot forward onto the highway. He rips up the brake as we drift onto a right turn effortlessly.

For the most part, the trip is quiet and uneventful. Bishop, being Bishop—all broody and silent. It’s unsettling, and I don’t really know what to fill the awkward silence with, so I just keep quiet. Bishop eventually hooks into an underground industrial parking lot, the deep pulsing vibrations of the car echoing through the vast empty space.

“Stay in the car.”

We pull around a corner, where a long stretched limo waits. A man dressed in a finely pressed suit, gray hair slicked back, and a cigar hanging out his mouth is leaning against it. To the left of him stand his two bodyguards, both in matching black suits, and both their eyes covered by dark sunglasses. Bishop pulls to a stop and gets out of the car. I contemplate getting out just to spite him, but then I look back at the man with the cigar and think better of it. He grins at Bishop in a way that has my skin prickling. Handing him a cigar, Bishop takes it then pushes it into his pocket.

What the hell?

Looking over my shoulder, I see how there’s no one behind us. Surely, the guys wouldn’t be that far behind. Bishop turns on his feet and walks back to the car, his eyes catching mine. I squirm, sliding down lower in my seat. Just as his hand falls on the door handle, I look back up to the man who is dressed in a suit to find him looking right at me. I need to look away from his gaze, but I can’t. His eyes skillfully laser into mine with an unreadable expression. He tilts his head then looks up at Bishop, who has paused with his hand on the door handle. I look away from the suit man and look back to Bishop, before the door swings open, and he slides in beside me. Firing up the car, Bishop snarls at the man and then floors it backward, snaking out of the compact underground parking lot.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“Fuck!” Bishop slams his hand on the steering wheel.

“What?” I look around us, wondering what could be bothering him. I mean, he won, right? That’s what this was for. I look back to him, and he reaches into his pocket, pulling out his phone.

“Bishop?”

He ignores me, pressing the phone to his ear. “Yeah, we have a problem. She did stay in the car! It doesn’t matter. I saw it. Yeah, I’ll go there now.”

He hangs up the phone and then drops it into fourth, slowing his speed.

“What’s going on?” I ask, leaning on the door. “Bishop, for fuck’s sake!”

“Nothing you need to worry about.”

“Oh?” I say, my eyebrows quirking up. “If that’s the case, then what was that about?”

We turn down a street that isn’t far from my place. If my memory serves correctly, it’s one street over from my house, which relaxes me somewhat. I hope Nate was right and we can trust Hunter and Saint to watch over the party, though I’m sure he’s not lying. I’ve noticed how everyone moves around them. Careful, scared, but respectful. Those are all things that come to mind. I already know Bishop is the ringleader. If Tatum telling me wasn’t enough, anyone could pin it with his air of command.

We pull into a high-gated driveway, and he rolls down his window, punching in a code. After a few seconds, the high wired fence separates and we drive down the cobblestone private road. Trees line our way, and tea lights hang amongst the leaves. We come to a large, round entryway, and—holy crap. When coming down the driveway, I assumed we'd be met with an old Victorian-style mansion, but that's not the case. A massive glass house greets me, and I mean glass everywhere. The executive-style home is beautiful, but cold. I look around to the back and see a huge backyard, where a river flows on the edge of the property. Bishop pulls up the brake and gets out of the car. I take that as my cue to get out, so I slip out, my head spinning lightly. I think I'm past the drunk phase now, and head straight into the hung-over phase, except I should be sleeping through this, not awake. Damn.

"Where are we?" I ask, looking back to the house. The square glass that sits on the top of a slightly smaller glass where the front metal doors are.

Bishop walks around to my side of the car, taking my hand and tugging me forward. "Come on."

"Where are we?"

"Do you ever shut up?"

"Honestly? No."

He ignores me by pulling me forward. In return, I ignore the way his hand feels intertwined with mine, but sweat beads on my temple anyway. I quickly swipe it away with my other hand. He walks us toward the side of the house, through the garden, and then toward the backyard. I almost stop in my tracks. The pool is twice the size of ours and has a glass bar that sits in the middle of it. Jesus. Who are these people? There are neon lights that light up the floating stools that round the bar, and more that light up inside the pool. Toward the back of the pool, there's a mini house

that looks exactly like the main home, only smaller.

“Whose place is this? And why am I here?”

Bishop ignores me yet again, because he’s good at that, and then pulls me toward the smaller guest house. Walking up the few steps, he slides the floor-to-ceiling door open and pushes the black net curtain out of the way.

Holy fuck. I’m in Bishop Vincent Hayes’ bedroom.

HE SLIDES THE DOOR CLOSED and I pause, looking around the dark room. The walls are glossed with black paint, all except the wall his bed’s headboard is against. That one is red marble with black swirls messily woven into it. There’s no trashy posters, no naked woman—unlike Nate’s. It’s clean, yet disturbingly dark. His bed covers are red and black silk, his dresser black marble, and there’s a large L-shaped black leather living room suite opposite his bed on the other side of the huge room. I thought this was a guesthouse, but it looks like it’s just one huge room with maybe... a bathroom? No kitchen. There’s a red and black rug sprawled out on the dark carpet, and the biggest TV I have ever seen hangs on the wall.

Yet, there’re no personal touches to it. It’s as though he doesn’t spend that much time here. There’re no pictures, no nothing. It’s... empty. I step forward, toward the back wall, which is all glass and looks over the river that flows down his backyard. It’s stunning. This room is stunning. Reaching out to touch the glass, I turn around to find him watching me closely. This is the first time we’ve been together alone in a room. I thought the car ride would have been awkward, but we somehow fell into an easy silence. Being in his room, though, this is strange.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

His eyes run over my body. “We’re just waiting for Nate and the boys. They’re shutting down the party.” He walks toward the black mini fridge he has in the corner of the room and pulls out a bottle of water then walks up to me, popping the cap off. “Drink.”

“I’m not thirsty.”

“Drink the water, Madison. You look like you’re about to drop into a coma.”

I take it from him. “Thanks.” I sip the cool water, letting it soothe my dry mouth and throat. Jesus, I need to go to bed. My eyes stay on Bishop’s as I take another drink. His mouth opens to say something but is interrupted when the door slides open, showing Nate, Hunter, Brantley, and Saint.

Nate stops at the threshold, eyeing both Bishop and me before a sly grin comes onto his mouth. “Interrupting?”

I roll my eyes, but Bishop ignores him. They all step inside, closing the door behind themselves. Nate walks toward me, pulling me into his arms. I look down at his white tee and scowl. “Jeez, Nate,” I murmur into his shirt. It smells of his cologne and Tatum’s perfume. “Leave my friends alone.”

“Hey!” He feigns innocence, dragging me toward the large sofa and pulling me down beside him. Tucking me under his arm, he grins. “She was all over my dick, and she’s hot.”

I pinch his arm. “Leave my friends alone. The last thing I need is them not wanting to

hang with me because my slut stepbrother can't keep his dick in one hole for longer than twenty-four hours."

He pauses, his mouth hanging open, but collects himself quickly with one of his sly smirks. "Well, now, that's not fair. I've been known to hit it more than once."

"No, you haven't," Hunter scoffs at him.

"Ah-ha!" I point to Nate, his mouth open again and his eyes narrow on Hunter.

"Why are we even here?" He changes the subject by looking back to Bishop.

"We need to talk about the pick-up." Bishop leans forward.

"You got there. So what's the issue?" Nate asks. I thought Bishop called him in the car, but I'm guessing it wasn't him. My eyes start to get heavy, so I press into Nate more, tucking myself under his arm. Their chatting drifts off into the back of my brain as sleep slowly takes over.

I wake to someone carrying me, and the chilly outside air skimming over my cheek. "Nate?"

"Bishop." He pauses, and my arm hooks harder around his neck. "Nate had to leave. I'll take you home."

What? Nate had to leave? He left me here? Piece of shit.

"You don't need to." I clear my eyes as we get closer to Bishop's car.

"What? Would you rather sleep here?" I don't miss the laugh in his tone.

I pause. “You’re right. Just put me down.” He puts me back to my feet and pops open the door for me. I slide in, looking down at my phone, and I notice it’s 4:00 a.m. The sun is sure to come out soon. Bishop slips into his seat and fires up the car.

“I was out for a couple hours.”

“You were,” he confirms, driving us out the long driveway.

“What did I miss?”

He chuckles. “Just Nate losing his shit.”

“Do I want to know?”

He shakes his head. “Probably not, no.” He takes the left onto my street, and I was correct; it’s literally a two-minute drive from Bishop’s. After pulling into our driveway, he stops at the front of my house.

I turn to him. “Why are there so many secrets?”

He looks at me sideways, his hand running over his upper lip. “In this world, secrets are weapons, kitty. It’s what stands between us and six feet underground.”

I chuckle lightly, clearing my throat while swiping my hair away from my face. “You say that like you live a different life.”

His head tilts. “Not everything is as it seems.”

“Hmm, cliché.”

He grins. “Come on, I’ll walk you in. Nate said your dad will be back on Monday?”

“Yeah.” I clear my throat and get out of the car. “I almost forgot. I’ve only been at this school for a week and it feels like a month.”

He laughs, taking my hand and walking me to the front door. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It’s a confusing thing.”

He nods, pushing the front door open and displaying the littered floor. Red cups are scattered everywhere. “Well, luckily I have a cleaner on speed dial.”

Bishop closes the door, and I make my way up the stairs. “You don’t have to walk me up.”

“Yeah, pretty sure I do.” Cryptic again. Nice.

“Why are you being nice to me all of a sudden?” I ask, hitting the top of the stairs. I stroll toward my room, with him close behind. I walk in then drop to my bed, and he follows, kicking the door shut behind him.

“It’s not for you.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“Oh, and just when I thought we were getting along.”

He shrugs. “I’m not doing it for you.”

I don’t know why, but that hurts. Because I’m stupid, that’s why. I swallow, my throat swollen and hoarse. “You can leave then.”

“If I said it was for you—” He walks toward my balcony door and looks out the curtain. “—would you say stay?”

I turn toward him, my hair sprawling out underneath me. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. Why are you looking out my door?”

“Why do you ask so many fucking questions?” he shoots back, stepping away from the door.

“You can leave,” I repeat.

“I’ll leave when Nate gets here.”

“That could be two minutes, or it could be days. Depending on how many women he’s found.”

Bishop drops down onto the chair that sits beside my bed, his legs spread out and his finger running over his upper lip. His eyes rake over my body in a way that makes my heartbeat speed up and butterflies erupt.

“We could make this more fun?” He grins.

My mouth snaps shut. “You confuse me. I thought you hated me.” I roll my eyes, kick off my shoes, and then get to my feet. Dying to get out of this damn dress, I walk into my closet, closing the door slightly, and reach for my zipper. Then I laugh under my breath. “Of fucking course.” Peeking around the door, I smile at Bishop. “Can you help me?”

He doesn’t say anything, just gets to his feet and walks toward me. Turning around, I scoop my hair out of the way and close my eyes. He takes the zipper and slides it down slowly, his rough knuckles skimming over my spine in the progress. Pulling my bottom lip into my mouth, I bite down hard to try to distract myself from the amazing feel of his skin on mine.

“Thanks,” I whisper breathlessly once he’s hit the bottom of my dress. I let the straps fall off my shoulders and then shimmy it down to pool at my feet. Laughing, I spin around, ready to tell him to get out, but as soon as his eyes lock onto mine, his arm wraps around my waist, and he pulls me into him. His lips smash against mine, and all oxygen and sense leave at his invasion. I fight it at first, confusion cloaking me, until he walks me backward and my back smashes against the wall, our kiss never breaking.

I open my mouth, allowing his tongue to slip in. He licks the inside of my mouth skillfully, expertly, enough to blow my fucking mind, and that’s when I tap out and my hormones take charge. I wrap my hands around the back of his tanned, muscled neck, my tongue caressing his gently. He groans into my mouth while his hands clench around my upper thighs and lift me off the ground. I squeeze my legs around his waist as his hands come up to either side of my face, while his groin pushes me harder against the wall. Shit. I feel my stomach clench with unease and uncertainty, fueled by fire. Pure, hot, untouched, and lit-the-fuck-up fire.

His tongue slides across my bottom lip before he sucks it into his mouth and bites down on it roughly, pulling on it until it pops out of his mouth. He looks at me, his dark green eyes searching both of mine. “Fuck.” He stops, looking down to my mouth and then back to my eyes.

“Don’t.” I shake my head. “Don’t think about it.” What the hell am I saying? I circle the back of his neck like a needy fucking cat would caress its owner to get attention. Jesus, I need help.

He groans again, shutting his eyes. “We had a rule.”

“A rule?” I bait, my head tilting.

“Yeah. Actually, more like a pact.”

“This pact.” I gesture with my fingers. “Does it involve me?”

He looks at me. “Don’t try to be cute, Madison. You know damn well it involves you.”

“What is it?”

“Fuck,” he whispers. “There’s so much you don’t fucking know, and you won’t fucking know. This is already thin ice we’re walking on.”

I look into his eyes, studying them. The way his dark green eyes have an even darker ring around the lighter color, and how his tanned skin glistens under my dim closet light. How his lips are slightly plump, delicious, and enough to make you fight a strong inner urge to bite down on them. Or his damn just-fucked hair. Bishop is intense and drop-dead gorgeous, but has an air of danger that hovers over him—and his damn Maserati. If that isn’t enough to fuck with your morals, the fact he’s an

unattainable asshole would.

I grind over him slightly, lean down to his ear, and whisper, “Then we’ll run.” I lean back, seeing the shift in his eyes. Shit, I might still be drunk, but there’s—

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

His lips smash back onto mine as he lifts me off the wall and walks me into the room. His palm skims down my spine until it gets to my bra clasp, and then he flicks it off with one simple twist of his wrist. Spinning me around, he throws me onto my bed, with nothing covering me except for my lace panties.

He tilts his head as he pulls off his shirt. “You a virgin? And be honest.”

“Does it matter?”

He shrugs. “Not really. But answer the question, because I don’t feel like being gentle.” He throws his shirt onto the ground while walking up to me, a smirk plastered on his mouth. A mouth I want to chew on, and a chest I want to scratch. Running my eyes up his beautiful body, every muscle trained, every single inch of Bishop Vincent Hayes is perfect. If I weren’t so horny, I’d want to punch him for being so flawless.

My eyes lock onto his as I smile sweetly. Shaking my head slowly, I mouth, “I’m not.”

“Fuck.” He loosens his belt and crawls up the bed with it dangling off his loose ripped jeans. Each crawl he takes toward me, I lie back farther onto my back, until eventually he’s hovering over me. Gripping onto my wrists, he slams them above my head, his legs coming between mine to stretch them wider. I close my eyes briefly, inhaling his scent as his flesh gently rubs over mine. He drops his lips down to mine, and as soon as his tongue dives into my mouth, I suck on it and twirl my tongue around him. He groans again, pulling back and running his tongue over my jaw.

“Shit,” I whisper, the way his smooth tongue and kisses are trailing over my sensitive flesh becoming overwhelming. Dragging his tongue down, he pulls my nipple into his mouth until the cool air is replaced with warm, needy saliva. My back arches into him, and his grip around my wrists above my head tightens.

“Keep still.”

Jesus, what? I loosen, attempting to harbor my breathing, but failing because of the trickery his tongue is playing with my nipple. He drags it down the flesh of my breast, dipping it into my sternum. Licking lower, he looks up at me from below as he sucks all over my flat stomach, until he reaches the elastic of my panties. His other hand comes down and tears them off, flicking them across the room. He leans back and stares at me intensely.

I squirm silently. I’m not that shy when it comes to sex, and I’ve only had it a couple of times. My first time doesn’t count, but the only other guy I’ve ever had sex with was a guy from my last school. We were together for three months. I had no friends, as usual, but he took me under his wing anyway, introduced me to the football team. None of the girls liked me. I wasn’t a cheerleader and wasn’t on the same social level as Jacob, so in their eyes, I was nowhere near good enough for him. We were together for those awesome three months and were quite sexually active. Until I found him in bed with Stacey Chance, the biggest slut of the school. It ended instantly.

But the way Bishop is staring at me, down there, has me fighting to squirm.

“Damn.” He licks his bottom lip, and my eyes blaze open, landing on his instantly. “That right there is the sexiest little pussy I’ve ever seen.” Oh, Jesus. His dirty words shouldn’t turn me on, but they do. He drops his head forward while his eyes stay on mine. “Keep your eyes open, kitty,” he growls from between my thighs, the vibration shaking my clit. Then he presses his tongue against my folds, circling my entrance

slowly, then looks down to what he's doing before running his tongue up my slit, finding my clit.

My chest rises and falls as my breathing rattles, and my eyes fight to stay open. I keep them on him and watch as his lips wrap around my clit, cloaking me with his warm, needy mouth. "Oh shit," I whisper, my pussy clenching, tingling, aching, and pleading for him to go harder and faster, but he doesn't. He kisses me down there, and then drags his tongue back down to my opening, slipping it inside before hitting my neediest spot. My head swings back as my hands curl into his hair and my hips rise, grinding against his face. Moaning, I lick my lips as my grip tightens, but then it's gone, and all I'm left with is the cold air brushing over where his mouth was.

I look back down at him, wondering what the fuck caused him to stop. He swings my leg over so I'm on all fours, slaps my ass, and pulls his cock out. "I told you to keep your eyes on me." I peek at him over my shoulder, hiding my smile. He grins at me, pumping his sexy, thick length, his eyes rolling to the back of his head sensually before coming back to mine, this time with dark undiluted heat. "Bad kitty."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

I think I bit off more than I could chew with Bishop. He slaps my ass again, this time harder, the sting belting across my sensitive cheek. “Ouch!” I squeal, my back arching and my ass pushing against his cock. He wraps his hands around my sharp hipbones, the tip of him lining up against my channel. Running his hand over my tailbone before going up my spine, he eventually rests his hand on the back of my neck. He squeezes it tightly and then sinks into me. I squirm at the invasion of his length, allowing myself to slowly open for him, clenching around him. “Fuck, you’re tight.”

Once he’s in me, I push back against him. “Harder.”

He pulls back and then slams into me. A loud moan escapes me at the feel of his tip hitting my cervix. Arching my back, he wraps my hair around his wrist, tugging on it until my head bends backward. He wraps his other hand around the front of my throat, his cock continuing its brutal assault on my pussy. He runs his tongue down my temple, his grip around my throat tightening. His other hand comes down between my legs, and I moan again as his thumb presses circles against my clit. My thighs clench, my stomach filled with heat so hot it could be lit in blue, and then I explode around him, my body wracking, my vision shaking so badly colorful dots dance around my room. He pulls out, flips my sweaty body around, and then lies on top of me, his heavy body pressing mine into the bed.

“Fuck,” I whisper hoarsely.

“Yeah, babe, you just got fucked.” He runs his nose down from my forehead, over my nose, and then his mouth drops onto mine, leaving the taste of myself on the back of my throat. He squeezes my breast, his legs opening me wide, his thick cock

rubbing over my clit as he grinds into me in slow circles, slowly working my body up again. His hand comes to my inner thigh as he stretches me wide before slipping inside of me. His mouth comes back to mine, his tongue clashing, rubbing, and licking everywhere. Owning every single inch of me without being too much.

He groans, pulling back and then slamming into me again, my boobs bouncing and my head smashing against the headboard as he rides my body like a wave. His hand comes to my throat as his other comes to my hair, wrapping it around his fist and tugging on it. That sets me off even more as I push up, meeting his every thrust. He grinds himself back into me, all while his mouth never leaves mine, his tongue not stopping its intense caresses. His pelvic bone hits my clit every time he descends back inside me. Picking up his pace, he pounds into me harder until I'm screaming his name through my sore throat and I'm exploding all over him again, his cock pulsing its release. I grind against him, milking every single drop of him. A side of me, a side I haven't ever opened before, wants to fuck the soul out of him.

He drops down on top of me, his lips brushing over the side of my slippery neck. My eyes slowly shut as I turn, taking the sheet with me, and lay into his arms, where I fall asleep.

"MADI!" TATUM WAVES IN FRONT of my face as I close my locker.

"Oh, what?" I ask, locking it and tucking my books under my arm.

"I said, did your dad know about the party when he got home this morning?"

We head down the hallway on our way to English. It's the only class Tatum and I share together.

"Um, no," I answer, trying to avoid her eyes. "Truthfully, Dad wouldn't care. As long as we stay away from his liquor cabinet and my gun cabinet, we're good."

“Oh!” Tatum replies, running her hand through her hair. “So how was the rest of your night, anyway? I haven’t seen you since Bishop whisked you off in his car and you avoided my texts all weekend. Did I do something wrong?”

Huh, what? I stop outside our next class. “Why would you have done something wrong?”

A guilty flush flashes over her face and recognition comes to me. “You and Nate.”

“I mean...” she corrects, “we sort of....”

“What?” I whisper-yell, gripping onto her arm and dragging her to a private corner. “You did not.”

She nods, a puppy-like smile on her face. “I did.”

“Tatum....”

Her hand comes to my arm. “It’s okay, Madi. I know who Nate is. I’m not stupid. I wanted to get rid of it, and he was obviously the perfect guy to do it with.”

My eyes narrow. “Yeah, I wouldn’t be so sure of that, T.”

She waves my comment away. “Oh please, I know I’m just another notch on his belt. It’s fine. It’s why I chose him.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

I relax a little, yet not enough to trust what she's saying. Not that I know anything about good—or halfway decent—first times. We start walking back to class.

“Anyway...” She grins. “...so what happened with you?”

What happened with me? Oh you know, got fucked seven ways from Sunday, and then the said person who did all the fucking left in the middle of the night and I haven't heard from him since.

“Nothing.”

We walk into class and drop down into two of the back desks.

Lunch bell rings, and I gather up my books, tucking my hair behind my ear as I walk toward the door, when Ally shoulder barges me. “Oops.” Her hand comes up to her mouth, hiding her grin. “So sorry, I thought they took the trash out early today.” She looks to Lauren, and they both laugh, flicking their hair behind their shoulders.

“Wow,” I say flatly. “Didn't think I could think any lower of you, but it turns out your lack of creativity when it comes to comebacks changed my mind.” Then I turn and leave them with their lips curled and their scowls carved into their faces.

“Hey!” Ally halts me. I stop just short of the door, and Mrs. Robinson stops stacking her paperwork on her desk. “Bishop is mine.”

I laugh. “You can have him.” When I finally leave, I walk out the door and toward my locker. Punching in my code, I slide my books in, obviously in a huff. I shouldn't

let Ally wind me up, but I do. I let her get to me, which isn't a good sign. It means I'm starting to feel for the people I keep around me. Hello, Bishop.

"Hey." A voice from behind me stops my deep breathing, but it's not the voice I want to hear.

"Carter, hey!" I close my locker and start toward the entry to the cafeteria.

He follows closely behind me. "Hey, I wanted to talk to you about that kiss."

And I want to laugh. That kiss had long since been replaced and stolen and then shattered into tiny little shards of nothingness by Bishop.

"We really don't need to go there," I assure him, brushing it off as we enter the lunchroom. I'm not deluded. I know how exclusive Bishop is, and I know he doesn't just sleep with and get with just anyone—well, so I've been told—plus, I know I'm nothing special. But being left cold while you're sleeping is a whole new level of rejection. Asshole.

Thinking about it just makes me mad, and instinctively, I lean into Carter. Not to spite Bishop, because I know he won't care, but to seek comfort in someone who maybe does want me. No, I couldn't do that. Squashing my thoughts, I grab a tray.

"So what do you think?" he asks as we get in line.

"About?" I raise an eyebrow, putting an apple and a salad onto my tray.

"About camping. We're all thinking of hitting the mountains for Halloween."

"Oh," I say, suddenly interested. I love camping and the outdoors as much as I enjoy recreational sports. "When?"

He loads up his plate, smiling at me as he tosses a carrot stick into his mouth, his two dimples popping in his cheeks. He's cute; I could do a lot worse where rebounds are concerned, but at the same time, I don't want to lead him on, because truthfully, I'm not interested in jumping into anything sexual or even halfway serious with Carter. Bishop was a wake-up call. Our one-night stand set off the alarm in my head.

"Who will be coming?" I continue, coming to the end of the table and taking a bottle of water.

"Pauly and Alias will be coming, with their girls, but you could bring Tatum if you want."

I take a bite of my apple, my eyes going over his shoulder and landing on Bishop and the rest of the guys that are there, Nate included.

"One problem," I interject, squirming under the daggers Bishop is aiming at me. "My aggro stepbrother and his pack of hounds? They won't let me out of their sight." Please let this go. Please let this go... I chant my prayer, hoping he'll tell me to forget it.

No such luck.

He shrugs. "It'll be a party."

I look over his shoulder again, catching Ally on Bishop's lap and playing with his hair. But his eyes are still on mine, boring holes into me.

"Good." I smile sweetly, looking directly at Bishop. "It should be fun." Two can play this game. I know I have no right to get angry or upset about him and Ally, but I'd be lying if I said it didn't sting a little seeing her so cozy on his lap—and him doing nothing to move her. But I'm not naïve enough to say we had a connection and that

we were deeply into each other now. This isn't a fairy tale, and that's just not how things go. At least not for me, anyway.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

“So when is it?” I ask, looking back to Carter and letting him lead me to the table where Tatum is sitting.

“Next weekend.” He surprises me by sitting beside us at the table, a couple of his friends who were waiting for him at theirs following suit, scattering themselves around our group.

“What’s next weekend?” Tatum asks, peeling off her yogurt lid.

“Camping!” I answer her cheerfully, knowing full well she’s going to scold me.

She kicks me under the table. “Great! Should be fun.”

I laugh, taking another bite out of my apple, and go back to ignoring Bishop. That is, until Nate comes to our table, leaning down and grinning at me, right before winking at Tatum. “Hey, sis, you need a ride after school?”

I nod happily, wiping my mouth. “Yeah, thanks.” He nods too, a small smile coming onto his mouth, and then he goes to push off the table and walk away. “Wait!” I holler, and he stops, turning back to face me. Nudging my thumb to Carter, I say, “Carter invited us to this camping trip this weekend. You wanna come with?”

“What, you think you can take my new baby sister without me, fucker?” Nate grins at Carter, but the grin isn’t the playful one Nate usually displays. This one is edgy, filled with warning bells and sirens. Nate continues to walk backward. “Of course we’ll be there.” Then he turns and goes back to where he was. Great. I could cut the tension in the air between these two.

I look at Carter, searching his eyes. “Hey,” I prompt, shoving his arm. I can’t be mad at Carter. He’s done nothing but make me feel wanted every time he’s around me. He looks back at me, his frown slowly disappearing. “You okay?”

He smiles. “Of course.”

“Is there something I should know between you guys?” I search his eyes, his breath a mere centimeter away from me. If he leaned forward, he could kiss me. Please don’t. I like Carter, but I think I’ve put him in the friend zone without knowing it.

“Yeah,” he whispers, his eyes falling onto my lips.

Oh no. Oh no, oh no.

Standing to my feet quickly, I tell him, “Great!” and pick up my tray.

“You didn’t eat much.” He points down to my food, and I pause, looking back up to Bishop to see Ally sitting beside him now, not on him. Progress, I suppose, but I still hate him. I drag my eyes away from Bishop and smile down at Carter. “Sort of lost my appetite.” Then I take my tray and walk toward the doors, emptying my trash and placing it onto the table.

Tatum runs up behind me. “Hey!” She takes my hand but I pull away from her, picking up my run. I’m not used to being around so many people, or even so many people being interested in me and my life. It’s all starting to overwhelm me, and I’m confused about Bishop and his mind games.

Why would he just leave? Was I not good enough?

Of course you weren’t! You’re a disgusting little girl who likes to do bad things.

My eyes shut as I attempt to push the ugly voice out of my head. It's been a long time since I've heard that voice, and I don't know what triggered hearing it today, but there it is. Opening my eyes, I see the bathrooms and run toward them, ignoring Tatum cursing behind me. My tears partly blind me, and the blue sign that shows it's the girls' bathroom looks all distorted and warped. I push through the door and fly into one of the stalls, slamming it closed and sliding the lock over. A second later, the door opens again.

"Madi?" Tatum whispers. "Can you talk to me?"

I've begun to like these people. Nate and Tatum, and maybe Hunter, anyway. I'm not sure about the rest of the Kings. Carter, too, he's not bad. But it's overwhelming. I've never had so many people show they give a fuck so much. I can't help but think this is all some sort of sick game. Why did Nate and Bishop take me that night? What did they mean when they said games, and why did they stop? Why? So many questions, it's making my head swim in confusion.

"Madi, talk to me, babe," Tatum whispers, leaning her head on the other side of the stall. "What happened?"

It's not Bishop and Ally who even triggered this, or triggered the voice. It's my own insecurities from my fucked up past. A past I've lived with on my own with fears of stressing my father out so close after my mother's death. But I blurt out Bishop anyway, because that's the easiest of the two to talk about, and it's believable.

"I slept with Bishop."

She sucks in a breath. "Well, I can't say I'm that surprised. So you're upset about him and Ally?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

Swallowing and swiping the tears from my cheeks, I lie, “A little.”

I have to open up to someone, and if it's going to be anyone, it will be Tatum. She and I have hit it off since day one, regardless of our differences. She's become the yin to my yang, and above all, I trust her. Leaning forward, I flick the lock and the door opens to Tatum's worried face. She steps inside the small stall, closes the door, and then locks it again. Dropping to her knees, she ignores the filthy ground, which is so unlike Tatum, the clean freak, but it also shows how much of a loyal friend she is.

“She means nothing to Bishop, honey. But I should have warned you about him. He's never been exclusive to anyone except Khales.” She pauses and then pats my knee. “Don't get me wrong,” she says with a laugh, “there have been a few others since her, but they've all been socialites, dosed in fame. No one has ever come close to bedding him from this school, or even college. And when I say there has been some, I mean, like, two girls that I know of. Well”—she tilts her head—“that the paparazzi have shot him with.”

“Paparazzi?” I question, a little horrified at why a paparazzi would take pictures of him.

“Well, aside from the girls he was with being famous, Bishop's mom is famous too.”

“Huh,” I huff, swiping away my final tears. “How so?”

She smiles, her lips pulling into her mouth. “Well, his dad is well respected in New York. They own most of the Upper East Side. Real estate market and all that. And his mom is Scarlett Blanc.”

“Scarlett Blanc is his mom?”

Tatum nods. “Yeah. So as you can see....”

I do see. Scarlett Blanc is a very famous actress. “Interesting.” My tears have long since dried.

“Was that all? There’s nothing else causing this?” she asks.

I shake my head. “No, nothing else,” I lie, because truthfully, I don’t want her to know I care. I don’t want anyone to know I care about how Bishop had Ally on his lap. That shows weakness, and I’ve never been good at showing vulnerability.

She takes my hand, pulling me up off the toilet seat. “Okay, so this is what we’re going to do.” She swipes the tears off my cheeks. “We’re going to never cry about Bishop Vincent Hayes again. Deal?”

I laugh, nodding. “Deal.”

We walk out of the bathroom, and Tatum turns to face me. “So Tillie wants to meet with us after school. Shall I catch a ride with you?”

I hitch up my books. “Yeah. I just have to head home and face Dad first, but you can come.”

“First time home since you got here?” she asks, an eyebrow quirked. To other people, the absentness of our parents is probably a foreign thing, but with me and Tatum, it’s all we’ve known. It’s a part of the package, whether we like it or not.

“Yeah, not that that’s the issue.”

“What is?” she asks, as we walk down the long corridor.

“Just the fact he told me to keep Nate at arm’s length for God knows what reason.”

Tatum smiles. “The club, that’s why. He would have heard all the stories, no doubt.”

I scoff. “I doubt it. My dad isn’t even from here. He’s from New Orleans, anyway.” I look toward the library longingly. “I’ll see you after school.” Then I power walk toward the library, leaving Tatum behind.

Swinging open the doors, I walk in and head straight toward where the book I picked up was.

“Madison?” the librarian, who I still haven’t caught her name, prompts, standing from her chair. She looks to be around mid-to-late thirties and doesn’t look like your typical cliché librarian. She’s funky, young-looking, and vibrant. No pantyhose and glasses on this one, nope. She has naturally red hair, pale skin, and a light sprinkle of freckles under her bright green eyes. Her skin is something to envy; it looks like silk. I try not to get too envious as I battle down my third zit this week.

“Hi.” I smile at her, clutching my books in my hand. “Sorry, I’m just going back to reading that book.”

She shakes her head. “No need to apologize. But can I ask what your fascination is with that particular book?” She quirks one eyebrow and leans against the desk, crossing her legs in front of herself.

“Honestly?” I scoff. “I couldn’t tell you. No idea.”

She watches me carefully, as if she’s trying to read between my words, and then exhales, her shoulders relaxing. “Go ahead. Just don’t be late to class.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I answer, walking back toward the little corner in the library I was in a couple of days ago. Dumping my books on the table, I start scanning through all the old spines until I find the one I want. Exhaling out a long breath, I slip it out of its slot and walk back to my chair. The sun hits the old leather cover as I run the palm of my hand over it, over the circle emblem with the double infinity inside. What is with this book? Why do I feel so drawn to it, like a magnetic field? Shivers erupt over my spine as I flip it open, picking up where I left off.

2.

The Decision

The sweat trickled over my head as I pushed for what felt like the one-hundredth time. I squeezed my husband's hand, the hand I took when we said our vows, the hand I trusted with my life, my child's life. The hand that would ultimately be the death of me. The hand that would wrap around my neck like the perfect brace, as the eyes, the eyes I looked up to now, admiring, the love and my future, would be the last thing to close the devil's door in my death.

With all my might, I pushed harder, until I felt as though my pelvic bone was being yanked out of me, until I saw stars exploding in pain behind my shut lids, until my legs were convulsing and sweat drowned my flesh, until the little howl of my baby boy's cry reverberated around the cold atmosphere. Just as quickly as he arrived into this world, he was taken away. With a wrap of a blanket and a snip of the umbilical cord, my husband took my baby away from me.

My head fell back on my bed as the flames from the open fire pit flicked over my hot skin. Warm, sticky wetness slithered out from between my legs as my eyes began to drop, weaken. I opened them slowly, watching the flames as they flickered under the kettle that hung over it, warming the water. A dark shadow came over the side of my bed as my husband, cradling my son, looked down at me.

"This is the decision, wife. You know what this means for him, what our cause is."

I struggled to gather words, my mouth closing and opening as my tongue licked my

upper mouth, seeking moisture. I nodded, knowing this was what had to happen. I had no say in the matter, and if I did disagree, there wasn't a lot I could do about it. So I nodded and watched as my husband and his three friends took my newborn son and laid him flat on the blank stone.

His piercing scream rippled through me and tears fell from my eyes. My husband took the small branding iron, laid it over the hot flame, and then walked back to my son. He pressed it onto his little upper arm. The scream turned violent, and my tears rippled through me as my heart broke. My husband wrapped him back up in his little blanket and then brought him back to me, placing him in my arms.

I cooed to my baby, moving up onto my elbows as one of our maids came rushing in, holding a warm bucket of water and rags. I rocked my baby, looking up to my husband with newfound hate, and then looked back down to my son, the Circle of Infinity now embossed into his innocent fresh skin.

The decision was made, and a new world order was about to begin.

Goose bumps break out over me.

"Madison? It's time for class, hon."

"Oh, okay." I shut the book and clutch it under my arm.

"I'm Miss Winters, just so you know next time you come in." She leans on one of the bookshelves.

"Will most likely be handy to know," I say, walking toward where I picked up the book.

She watches me carefully. Her mouth opens and then closes, as if she wants to say

something. I pick up my books from the small table and smile at her. “Thanks for letting me slip in here real quick.”

“No problem.” She smiles weakly. I turn to walk out the door, when a word stops me. “Ten.”

I turn around to face her. “Pardon?”

She clears her throat. “We close at 10:00 p.m. on Fridays. I mean, just the library and the gym. You have to access from the side door with your student ID card, but we’re open until then.”

She walks to where the titleless book is pushed in, her finger brushing over the spine. “Do you know why this book has no title?” she asks me softly, looking back to me.

I shake my head slowly. “No. I’m only up to chapter two.”

She smiles. “Those aren’t chapters, and this isn’t a book.”

Huh? Without wanting to sound like an idiot, I don’t say anything at all, hoping she’ll elaborate. She does.

“It’s all myth and legend, old folklore.” She smiles at me. “But this wasn’t written to be a book. The women who wrote it...” She opens the first page, running her fingers over the fine cursive writing. Every stroke of the crow quill done with perfect precision. “She wasn’t writing a book.”

“What was she writing, then?” I clear my throat.

“Her suicide note.”

THE REST OF THE DAY goes painfully slow. After that talk with Miss Winters, I left. I'm going to go back in there on Friday though. I want to read as much of that book as possible, even if it is a very long one. Or a suicide note, as Miss Winters said. That thought gives me the heebie-jeebies.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

Suicide note? If it was her suicide note, then what is with her comments about her husband's hand wrapped around her throat? Maybe they just liked kinky sex. But even as my dry sense of humor tries to make light of an obviously very dark subject and situation, my heart sinks. I felt everything that the woman had written. I was there with her through the birth of her son, as if I was watching a live show. With thoughts of the book, which I've decided to name *The Book*, since it doesn't have a title, the final bell rings and school is over for the day.

Walking out my classroom, I'm making my way down the rowdy corridor, when Nate hooks his arm around me. "Hey, you."

"Hi." I smile up at him. I had forgotten all about Bishop and Ally, and now I'm reminded why I love books so much—the escape. "How was your day?"

He shrugs. "It's school. What do you expect?"

"Truth!" I say, letting him lead me down to the underground parking lot. "Ready to face your mom and my daddy dearest?"

He grins, slipping his aviators over his eyes. "Nope."

I stop. "Crap! I forgot. Tatum is coming with us."

Nate shrugs. "Text her and tell her to hurry up."

"Is this going to be weird?" I ask him with skeptical eyes.

“What, ’cause I fucked her?”

“Well, yes.”

“No.” He watches me and then exhales, walking up and lacing his hands with mine. “I promise it’s not weird. I’m used to clingy. I know how to handle girls like Tatum.”

I scoff, reaching into my pocket to get my phone out. “Oh,” I grunt, punching in a quick text to her. “I’m not worried about Tatum, trust me.” His smile drops. I roll my eyes. How can he be offended by that? But then it’s Nate. Under the tough, bad-boy exterior, he has a very large ego. Shocker. He cares about himself, so me insinuating that Tatum isn’t interested hurt his little feelings. Hitting Send on her text, I clarify, “What I mean is that she’s not clinging. She used you like you did her.”

Tatum texts back almost instantly, saying she’ll meet me at my place.

Nate laughs freely, brushing me off. “See? Perfect. Maybe I should hit it again if she understands the deal.”

I nudge my head. “First of all, no. Leave her alone. Second of all, she’ll meet us at home.”

“Do I need to have the talk with you about my friends?” He looks at me under his arm as we start walking toward the elevator that leads to his vehicle.

I scoff. “No, definitely not.”

Because it’s too late.

YOU KNOW THAT PART IN movies where you see the two toddlers who got caught drawing on the walls, or cutting up their mother’s new Egyptian cotton sheets,

sitting on the sofa, attempting to look innocent as their parents sit opposite them, disappointed and deciding what they're going to do as punishment?

Yeah, Nate and I are the toddlers right now.

"Madi?" my father asks, looking down at Nate's arm that is snaked around my waist casually as we sit on the L-shaped couch. I shuffle anxiously, not liking the way my dad's obviously uncomfortable with Nate's arm around me.

"Hmm? Yes?" I decide to aim for innocence. Innocence always works with my dad. He actually thinks I'm naïve and probably thinks I'm still a virgin. Technically speaking, that wouldn't be a hard thing to admit when you're seventeen, but not all girls have my life or had my life.

Elena exhales, standing from the leather couch. "Michael, it's fine. They're kids. It's what they do." She pauses. "At least they get along enough to throw a party."

I honestly didn't think my dad would mind, not that I've ever thrown a party before, but he's an absent-ish parent. I'm almost certain his punishment card is void. He punched that ticket when he left me the week of my fifth birthday.

Dad gets up from the couch, his eyebrows drawn in and the wrinkles around his eyes deep. He looks to Nate. "No more." Then he disappears down the hallway with Elena on his trail.

"Whoa!" Nate laughs, leaning back on the couch and tilting his cap lower to hide his eyes.

"Whoa?" I whisper-hiss. "Are you kidding me?" I elbow him and get off the couch. "This is your fault."

He chuckles, the unfazed asshole that Nate is. "I'll take that."

"Nate!" I pinch his arm.

"Ouch!" He whacks his hat up higher until his eyes zero in on me. "What?"

"You were supposed to take care of the garbage bins!"

"No." He shakes his head. "I specifically remember doing them. Me and Tatum went around...." He trails off, his eyes gazing off into the distance.

"Hmm? You and Tatum went around where?" I tap my foot in frustration.

Nate laughs. "Okay, I'm sorry!" He gets up off the sofa, wrapping his arm around me and pulling me into his body.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:20 am

I fight against his hard chest for a second before giving up with a huff, melting into his arms. “Don’t do that again. We had a plan, and if we want any freedom around here, we need to stick to the plan.”

“Yeah.” His voice vibrates against my cheek, his sweet cologne hitting my nostrils. “But we don’t need to throw parties here anyway. We have Brantley’s house.”

“Brantley doesn’t like me very much, and it doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t be attending parties.”

“Brantley doesn’t not like you.”

“Oh, really?” I step away from his embrace, just enough to be able to see his face but still be in his arms. “The man’s lip is curled at me constantly. I think he hates me more than Bishop does.”

Nate’s arm tightens around me. “Bishop doesn’t hate you.”

“I’m pretty sure he does. In fact, I don’t think any of your pack are entirely happy about my existence.”

“They just don’t know you.”

“You all kidnapped me. They’d be fucking lucky to know me, which, by the way, why am I hugging you? I’m still pissed about that.” I push out of his embrace, only for him to tighten his grip. He hooks his finger under my chin and tilts my head up so I’m facing him. His eyes search mine, his lips so close that if I inched forward, we’d

be kissing.

“You don’t get a say in what happened that night.” He’s serious, and that makes me nervous. I’ve never seen Nate like this often. “I’m serious, Madi. We didn’t and don’t have much choice, except for probably Bishop.”

“Why do you like me?” I ask. He narrows his eyes. “I mean,” I whisper, my eyes dropping to his mouth, “you didn’t have to like me. We’re stepsiblings. We should hate each other.”

He inches forward, his arm clenching around my waist, pulling me in closer so I can feel his hard erection pressing into my tummy. He drops his lips softly, so they’re brushing over mine. “It was either I warm up to you...” He grins against my lips, but I don’t move. I should move; if I was smart, I’d move. But I’ve not been very smart lately. “Or I fuck you.” He sucks my bottom lip into his mouth.

Just as he’s about to pull away, I grip onto the back of his neck and pull him into me until I’m kissing him. I open my mouth and let his tongue slide in. Nate has his tongue pierced? The ball of his piercing glides over my tongue expertly, and holy hell, he’s a great kisser. He pushes my body down onto the sofa with his until my back hits the soft cushions. I inch my legs open until his knee is resting in between mine, not breaking the kiss. He tilts his head, giving me more access, and I lick his tongue, pulling it into my mouth while sucking on it.

“Madi, we’re going out for dinner tonight!” My father’s distant yell is like a bucket of ice-cold water. Nate and I both pull back, my hand coming up to my mouth and his eyes wide on mine, both of us in shock. I push him off me, and we both land on our feet just as my dad walks into the living room, doing up his cufflinks. “You’ll both come.”

“Sorry,” Nate deadpans. “I have plans tonight.” Then he looks to me. “And weren’t

you saying that Tatum is coming over?"

I look between Nate and my dad nervously. "Yeah, but I can cancel."

Nate looks at me with widened eyes. I widen mine back, because he's being rude. I know my dad is blunt, but that's how he has always been, and he may not be a great father, but he's always tried. "Good. It's settled. I'll meet you both out in the car in half an hour."

Half an hour later, Nate and I are both in the back of my dad's Range Rover, both scowling at each other, and neither has spoken since "the mistake." I would call it the kiss, but mistake sounds more fitting. Nate is dressed in casual dark jeans, a polo shirt, and black boots. I'm casual like him too, but not quite able to get away with jeans. I decided on a pant jumpsuit. It's black and plain, but has two slight slits on either side of my ribcage, showing a whisper of skin. It's one of the many clothes I have in my closet that I don't particularly like wearing, but because of status, I have to own it in case, I don't know... my dad decides to spring it on me that he's taking us out to The Plaines, the most elite restaurant there is on this side of town. I only know this, because when I texted Tatum to tell her I couldn't do tonight and that she and Tillie were on their own, she told me so. Right after cursing me out.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“So, Madison, how has school been?” Elena asks from the passenger seat.

“It’s been good.”

“Madi has settled right in.” Nate smirks from his seat. “Haven’t you, sis?”

The fact the same lips I was just kissing called me sis makes me gag. The hell was I thinking? My father looks at me in the rearview mirror.

“Yeah, I’ve found one or two great friends.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket as Elena shoots her questions at Nate. I slide my phone unlocked.

Bishop – we need to talk.

Is he serious?

Me – We really don’t.

Bishop – I’m not Nate, Madison. I don’t just stick my dick in every girl I see. We. Need. To. Talk.

Me – The way Ally paws at you, you could have fooled me.

Bishop – Jealous?

Me – No. And no, I don't want to or need to talk. Just forget it happened. I'm pretty much with Carter now.

Lies. Why the fuck did I just say that? It's the year 2017. We have drones, cars that can go in water, and men who walk on the moon. Why the hell haven't they figured out how to unsend a text message? I don't know who "they" are, but I'm blaming it on Apple.

Bishop – Careful, kitty...

I roll my eyes and push my phone back into my pocket. Nate's leg nudges mine, and I look up at him, the passing streetlights illuminating his sharp features. "What?" I ask.

"Who was that?"

"No one."

I look out the window, ignoring his gaze. How is it that, in a matter of weeks, I've woven this messy web? Suddenly, I'm wanting to be that new girl again, the one who was walking the halls for the first time ever.

"Dad?" I prompt, pressing my forehead against my cool window.

"Yeah?"

I exhale. "Can you fit in a round tomorrow before you leave?"

There's a long pause, and I close my eyes. If he says no, I might break. After everything that's happening around me, I want my dad with me, shooting like we used to. I need it to bring me back down from whatever cloud I've drifted off on.

“Sure, baby girl.” I exhale at his answer, my shoulders slacking and my stress already lifting somewhat.

Once we’ve pulled into the restaurant parking lot, I get out my side of the SUV and Elena looks at me. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad you and Nate get along.”

“I wouldn’t exactly say get along.”

“He cares about you,” she assures, closing her door. “That counts for something, because Nate cares about very little. Apart from his friends.”

I close my door and nod. “I guess we get along a little bit.”

Elena smiles and hooks her arm into mine. “So tell me. You like guns?”

After a surprisingly normal dinner, we came home, and Nate left almost instantly. We hardly spoke through dinner, as though the mistake was already forgotten. Works for me, because it won’t be happening again. There’s a light knock on my door just as I’m about to get into my pajamas and start on my English paper.

“Come in!” I yell out, rummaging through my closet. It’s still a mess from the party, and in other cases, I would be the first to clean it, but I’ve found myself more relaxed lately, sedated almost.

“Hey, sugar!” Tatum walks in, with Tillie following closely behind her.

“Hey!” I smile at both of them. “What are you two doing?”

“We thought we’d come see you, since you pulled a sicky on us and bailed.” Tatum takes a seat on my bed, and Tillie slips onto the chair beside my white study desk.

“Yeah,” I mutter, finding my tank top and pulling it on. “Sorry about that.”

This is awkward; even though the mistake meant nothing to me, I don’t know if it would mean anything to Tatum. She says that Nate was just a “nothing” to her, but don’t we all say that?

“I brought my favorite friend.” Tatum whips out a blue book-style box with gold trimming.

“No way!” I gush, walking toward her. “Debaue & Gallais’s Le Livre?” I blurt out excitedly.

“Geez,” Tatum mutters. “Your French is more immaculate than mine, and I lived there for a year.”

I wave her off. “I’ve studied the language, and the culture, and in this case... the chocolates!” I open the gold-embossed leather box and inhale the sweet, rich smell of ganaches and pralines. “Mmm.” I take one out. “I haven’t had these in years.”

Tatum looks toward Tillie and rolls her eyes. “Don’t let this pig eat them all. Come taste.”

Tillie swallows nervously and then steps toward us. I fight the urge to snatch the box and run away like a cavewoman.

“What’s so great about it? It’s just chocolate, right?” Tillie asks, picking up one of the pralines. I pause my chewing, narrowing my eyes. Insult chocolate, you should not. Especially Sulpice Debaue’s fine work.

“Aside from the fact that you have to be on a waitlist to order a box and it’s five-hundred or so dollars? Not much.” Tatum shrugs.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Tillie blushes. “You guys are way too rich. I feel like the lost girl.”

“You’re not a lost girl. You’re perfectly within your element with us.”

Tillie smiles softly, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Yeah, I guess.”

I lick the chocolate off the top of my mouth, looking at how Tillie has gone quiet.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

She looks at me. “Yeah!” She smiles fakely. “Everything is fine. What are we doing this weekend?”

Tatum kicks off her shoes, and Tillie removes hers, shuffling beside Tatum. “I don’t know. We’ve all, you included”—Tatum looks at Tillie—“have been invited to a campout with Madi’s new man for Halloween.”

“He’s not my man,” I say to Tillie.

“He’s totally her man,” Tatum retorts casually.

I shake my head and mouth “He’s not” to Tillie.

“Anyway,” Tatum interjects loudly. “I think we should do it.”

“I don’t know,” I mutter, standing from my bed. I wanted to go camping for so long, but now that I know Carter has other feelings toward me, I’m a little scared he might get the wrong idea about my saying yes.

“What’s there to not know about?” Tatum asks, wriggling up to my headboard and slipping under my covers. Her ash blonde hair is up in a perfect bow bun on the top of her head, and her face is fresh from makeup. She definitely has that deflowered glow about her. Fucking Nate.

“Lots!” I say, waving my hands in the air. Tillie scoots up beside Tatum and slips under with her, following the chocolates.

“Madi!” my dad yells from downstairs. I walk toward the girls, snatching the expensive box of chocolate from them, tucking it under my arm. I evil eye them, walking toward my door.

“Coming!” I yell back, opening my door. I turn around to face them and point my finger. “This conversation is not over.”

Walking down the long stairwell, I see Dad is standing beside the opened front door. His face is blank, his jaw taut, and his eyes hard. Oh no, now what have I done?

“What’s up, Daddy?” I coo, coming to the door. He looks outside and I follow his vision until I’m looking directly at Bishop, who is standing there in ripped jeans and a white T-shirt, with combat boots on his feet. My mouth waters, and it’s not from the chocolates.

“Hi,” I say to him, ignoring how his hair still looks damp and how relaxed his stance is. Both legs spread casually, his jaw tense, his eyes hard, but his mouth inching toward a smirk.

“I got this, Dad.”

My dad stalls, looking to me and then to Bishop and then back to me. He kisses my forehead and then looks into my eyes. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Of course we will.

I smile. “Sure thing.” I’m not looking forward to this chat.

“What are you doing here?” I ask Bishop, stepping outside into the dark night and closing the heavy wooden door behind myself. He steps backward and takes a seat on one of the steps. His car is parked directly in front of the stairs, and I’m even more annoyed at how distracted I must have been to not hear his car pull up.

“I told you,” he says casually. “We need to talk.” Ignoring the fact I’m in tiny little booty shorts and a tight tank that rides up my tummy, I take a seat beside him. Thank God my feet are covered by my socks. Bishop looks down to my feet. “Is that Banksy’s work?”

“I’m shocked,” I scoff sarcastically. “You know Banksy?”

“I know his artwork.”

Trying not to look at him, I flip open the box of chocolates and sit them in the middle. “I can share.”

I give in and look at his face, catching his eyes piercing into mine. His mouth is behind his shoulder and he’s studying me like I’m the most important test in history.

When the silence becomes too much and my face feels like it’s going to burst into flames, I pop a chocolate into my mouth. “What?”

He pauses and then shakes his head, looking ahead of himself by breaking our eye contact. I instantly miss his demanding glare. “You’re different.”

“I’ve been told that all my life,” I snark. His jaw tenses. “Is that what you wanted to

talk about?”

“You and Carter?” he counters.

“Are none of your business.”

“Really?” He scoffs, swinging his attention back to me, and when his eyes lock onto mine, my breath catches at the intensity of it. “Pretty sure you made it my business the second you were screaming my name and clawing up my back.”

“I don’t scratch,” I correct him casually, sucking the chocolate off my fingers.

His eyebrow quirks. “Sure about that, kitty? I can show you the marks if you want? Pretty sure they’re still there.”

“You don’t get to ask about me and Carter when you had Ally on your lap.” I keep the jealousy down, because that’s exactly what I am. Jealous.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“Ally is nothing. It’s what she’s always done. She hangs around us like a fly does to shit. It’s nothing, never has been. I thought you would know this, but then I forgot you were new.”

“So if that’s true, what? What did you want to talk about?”

He exhales. “I don’t fucking know, Madi. Jesus.”

“Call me when you figure it out.” I go to stand, when his hand catches mine. I look at him and he stands, towering over me. “All I know is that I fucking hate when Carter has his hands on you, and I’m not familiar with this feeling.” I’m guessing this is a shit time to bring up his ex, so I swallow my nosy questions.

“But?” I ask, because... I don’t know why. I’m a girl with fully functioning lady parts, and Bishop is hotter than sin, and that’s all I got.

“But this can’t ever work, and I don’t know what the fuck to do about it. I’m not used to not getting what I want.”

“I see that.”

He chuckles, his finger running down the side of my face. “Fuck, kitten, you have no idea the kind of crazy shit you have me feeling.” His smile falls and his jaw tenses. “But we can’t.”

“Why?” I whisper, looking to his mouth. “Why can’t this happen?”

“That’s the shit part,” he replies. “I can’t even tell you why.”

“Then you already know this discussion is over.” I’ve come to realize there are secrets upon secrets, and no one is telling me anything. I’ve brought it down to it not being any of my business, but it’s getting old real fast. I’m not one to pry into other people’s business, but these secrets he, Nate, and the guys have are starting to itch at the back of my brain.

“Yeah,” he replies, looking down at me and stepping backward. “I just wanted you to know that I wish it could’ve been different between us, and shit is about to get worse.”

“Yeah,” I whisper, as he walks back to his car and gets into the driver seat. “Me too.”

I go back to my room, slamming my bedroom door to find the girls snuggled in my bed and watching Netflix. “We’re fucking going camping.”

“I JUST WANT YOU TO be careful, baby,” Dad assures me, loading up his third round. He points toward the cutout target, then squeezes the trigger, emptying out.

I point toward mine, closing one eye and zoning in to the bull’s-eye. I squeeze the trigger on the pistol and fire. The kickback isn’t as bad as it should be with someone light like me firing a Desert Eagle, but it’s Daddy’s, and he’s had me shooting this since I started out. It may sound dangerous to some people, but our home has always been a strong advocate at exercising our second amendment rights, and aside from that, we love to hunt deer. I don’t own a pistol; I own shotguns, and use them often.

“I’ll be fine, Daddy.”

He looks at me worriedly, and we both remove our protective glasses, waiting for our targets to come up. “I don’t like Nate and his friends.”

I roll my eyes, unclipping my target man and seeing I shot within range. “Daddy, you don’t like any boys.”

“No.” His tone changes, becoming stern. “Madison, I’m serious. I don’t like those boys.”

I take my grin away from my amazing shots and look toward Dad. He hardly ever uses that tone with me, and it sobers me some. “Okay, Dad, I’ll be careful.”

“Good.” He smiles again and then looks at my target. “How’d you do?”

Walking into my bedroom after seeing Dad and Elena off again, I flop down onto my bed, mulling over my thoughts from today. After Bishop left last night, Tatum and Tillie ended up crashing in bed with me halfway through a Sons of Anarchy episode. Tatum was bored out of her brains during episode one, but Tillie and I wanted to watch it. My phone vibrates in my back pocket, and I slip it out, sliding it unlocked and answering. “Hello?”

“I’m almost home. Come out when I beep.”

“Why?” I slowly rise from my bed.

“Because I’m back to babysitting duty, so you have to stay near me.”

“Yeah...” I shake my head. “...about that. I don’t think my dad actually put you on babysitting duty, Nate. The man doesn’t like you very much.”

“Fuck your dad,” he mutters.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing. Get out of the house and come down when I beep, or I’ll drag you down over my shoulder. And just so you know, Hunter and Brantley are here.”

“Fine!” I blurt, hanging up my phone and tossing it onto my bed. I walk into my bathroom and let my hair trail down to my tailbone before shoving on a NY baseball cap. I’m still in my yoga pants and tight tank from shooting, but I slip out of my running shoes and put on a pair of Air Max 90s. I’m picking up my phone from the bed when Nate beeps from outside. Taking the steps two at a time, I walk out the front door and pause.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“I can sit in the back,” I say to Brantley, as he gets out of the passenger seat of Nate’s Ford Raptor. Brantley doesn’t answer; he just slips into the back. “Or not,” I mutter, stepping up on the running board and sliding into the seat.

“So you know how it’s Halloween this weekend?” Nate grins as he pulls us out of the driveway.

“It is?” I ask sarcastically. “I didn’t even realize.”

“Yeah.” Brantley smirks from the back. “It is.”

I look to Nate. “So why am I here, anyway?”

“I told you.” He looks to me, pulling down a street off ours. “I have to look after you.” He pulls us into a long gravel driveway, up to an old southern-style-looking home. High ceilings, white pillars, the American flag flying proudly outside the front door.

“Do we all live down the same street?” I ask Nate.

Brantley grunts in the back, ripping off his seatbelt and getting out of the truck once we stop. I look to Nate nervously. “Nate, I don’t really wanna be here if this is Brantley’s house.”

Hunter clears his throat from the back. “Don’t worry about him.”

I look to Hunter, shocked about him talking to me. “But I do worry.”

Hunter rolls his eyes, taking off his belt and opening the door. “She’s a lost cause if someone like Brantley scares her.” Then he shuts the door and follows the way Brantley led toward the house.

I follow behind Nate as he leads us through the massive entry to the house and then downstairs into a bedroom. There’s an entry door to the side that goes out to the swimming pool, and the whole back wall is floor-to-ceiling windows. I flop down on one of the single sofas in the corner of the room. Hunter and Nate slide open the door and walk out toward the pool, laughing. Fucking Nate, leaving me in here with Brantley. Brantley is brooding, over the top, and... silent. He’s around six feet, dark hair, piercing dark eyes, and a sprinkle of stubble over his jaw. He’s the definition of scruffy hot. Brantley leans on the door, looking out to Nate and Hunter.

Wanting to break the silence, my no-filter comes out in full effect. “Why do you hate me?”

He looks at me over his shoulder. “You’re not a very likeable person.”

“Really?” My eyebrow quirks. “And you think you know me well enough to make that assumption?”

He scoffs, pushing off the door and turning to face me, his arms crossed in front of his chest. “I don’t have to know you to make that assumption. I’ve heard enough.”

“You’re a bit of a dick.”

He looks directly at me, his eyes piercing into mine. I fight the need to squirm. “I’ve never claimed to be anything else, kitty.”

“What did I do? Or what did you hear I did?”

“It’s not what I heard,” he says casually. “It’s what I know.”

“That makes no sense.”

“You make no sense,” he responds, walking toward me. He’s wearing a dark shirt, loose jeans, and black boots. He stops directly in front of me, bringing both hands down to the armrests on either side of my chair, caging me in. Leaning down, his eyes go from my lips to my eyes and then back again. “You think because Bishop fucked you that you have a free pass?”

My heart launches in my chest, and surprise must spread over my face, because he laughs, a menacing tone in his chuckle.

“Oh what? You thought he actually wanted to fuck you?” He tilts his head and leans closer so his nose is touching mine, his lips a whisper away. I hold my breath. “Naw, kitty. That was all part of the plan.” He inches forward, his lips brushing over mine. “Get you wet and needy, fuck you inside out, pretend that you meant more than an easy piece of ass.” He pauses, searching my eyes. ““I wish it didn’t have to be this way,”” Brantley mimics Bishop’s last words to me from the other night.

My vision turns bleak. Everything in my peripheral turns black. “It was a trick?” I whisper, more to myself than to him.

Brantley laughs. “This is all a game, kitty. And you’re in the middle of a very fucked-up board.”

I snort sarcastically. “You think I care?” I brave myself to bring my eyes straight to his.

His narrow, dropping to my mouth. “Prove you don’t.”

“You hate me.”

“I’ll fuck you as hard as I hate you.”

My eyes grow hooded as I run my tongue over my bottom lip. “I sort of have a boyfriend.”

He laughs, his eyes still searching mine. Everything in the center of me kicks up to scorching levels. “Carter?” His hand flies up to my neck as he pushes my head back into the chair more. He tilts his face. “You and I both know he’s too vanilla for the shit that goes on in your head.” He pulls me up off the chair by my neck.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

I match his stare. “Big words. All talk, no bite?” What the hell am I doing?

He laughs, the grip he has on my neck tightening, and then he pulls me into his mouth, catching my bottom lip between his teeth. He tugs on it roughly then slips his tongue into my mouth. I open it, angry at everyone. Angry at Nate, because I don’t know if his caring about me is genuine. Angry at Bishop for using me like a toy. Angry at my-fucking-self for thinking Bishop was into me. Just make it go away.

I wrap my hands around the back of Brantley’s neck, and his grip disappears from my throat as he pushes my hands away from his skin, picking me up from behind my thighs and throwing me onto the bed. He crawls up to me slowly, gripping my wrists and slamming them above my head.

“Brantley, Nate and Hunter will come back soon.”

He smirks, his eyes darkening and his waist pinning me to the bed. “Yeah, sort of counting on it. I’m sure we can work out a roster.”

“Not happening.”

“You say it like you’re the one in charge here?” he asks, running his finger down my sternum before coming back up to my throat.

He squeezes again, and my core clenches in response as my eyes roll to the back of my head. “Yeah.”

His mouth drops to the side of my neck, his legs coming between mine, spreading me

wide. “You like that shit, huh?” I do. He grinds into me, his hardness pushing against my sex.

Make it go away.

“Interrupting?” A voice breaks our embrace, but Brantley stays there, looking down at me, and then grins.

“Depends,” he says, looking over his shoulder at Bishop, who just walked in the room. “Care to join? Wouldn’t be the first time we’ve shared.”

Bishop stays silent, so I inch up onto my elbows to look at him.

He looks at me and smirks. “Naw, I’m good. I’ve already had her. I don’t feel like shoving my dick in dirt for a second time.”

“Ouch,” I reply deadpan. It hurt more than I care to admit, but being told I was being used has somewhat numbed any pain afterward. I hate Bishop Hayes.

“Yo! Brantley has—” Nate walks into the room, speaking directly to Bishop, when he sees me and Brantley on the bed. He rolls his eyes. “Get off her, dawg.”

“What if I don’t want him to get off?” I snap. If I’m dirt and mean less than nothing to these boys, then what’s the point of walking out with my dignity? “Or what, Nate?” I smirk at him. “Mad it’s not your tongue down my throat?” Then I push off Brantley’s chest, crawling out from under him toward the edge of the bed. “I’m leaving.” I walk toward the door, straightening my tank.

“Oh, come on, sis. We’re just playing.”

“Fine, but find a new toy.” I look to Bishop. “One that doesn’t feel like you’re

fucking dirt.” I pull open the bedroom door.

“You fucked her?” Nate barks at Bishop.

Oops, did I let that slip? My bad.

I walk out the front door and then break out in a jog. I know my house is only a five-minute walk, but I don’t feel like talking to anyone right now, and I have a feeling Nate will try to chase me. Bishop, Nate, Hunter, and Brantley have already stirred shit with me. I don’t even want to see what Saint, Ace, and Jase are capable of, what with them being the older brothers. It was all a game. Bishop pretending to give a fuck, they played me like a fucking fiddle.

THE NEXT DAY, I’M SITTING beside Carter in the cafeteria, when Tatum drops her bag beside me. “I fucking can’t wait for Halloween this weekend.”

“I can’t believe we’re doing it in the woods,” I answer, taking a bite out of my apple.

Carter nudges my arm with his. “Leave your guns at home?”

“Maybe.” I look up toward Bishop. “Or maybe not.”

Carter follows my eyes. “Trouble?”

“You could say that,” I mutter, dragging my eyes away from them. Ally walks across to their table, and I roll my eyes. Here we go. Only this time when she goes to lower herself onto Bishop’s lap, he pushes her off, and she falls to the ground in a mess. Nate laughs, Brantley grins, Hunter barks out a hyena howl, and the rest of the boys snicker, watching her with distaste. Every single one of them are assholes. I don’t like Ally, and I might even go as far as to say I hate her a little bit, but that proved there is not one redeeming quality in any of those boys. They’re all assholes. Usually, there’s

at least one in a group who isn't. But not here and not them. I've tangled a web with the school bad boys, and now I have to unleash my claws to escape.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“What’s going on with you guys?” Tatum asks, taking a swig of her water.

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

“You locked Nate out of your room last night. That’s not nothing.”

“I don’t like Nate very much right now.”

Carter hooks his arm around my waist and pulls me into him. I know I should pull away. Nothing good will come from me leading him on. But I can’t help it. Having someone who is interested in me makes me feel wanted. That’s all a girl really wants, isn’t it? To feel wanted?

“Hey.” I turn to face him. “I’ll drive out on Friday. I just need to do a couple things beforehand.”

“I can come with you,” Tatum adds.

I shake my head. “It’s fine. I have Google maps or whatever. Just give me the details on where we’re going and I’ll meet you all out there.”

Carter looks to me. “You sure?”

I nod. “Yeah, positive.” He pulls out a piece of paper, squiggles down the directions, and then slips it across the table to me. “It’s about an hour and a half drive inland. The conditions are rough. It’s called The Myriad. It’s a water hole and is literally in the middle of nowhere. You have to park your car and then follow the manmade trail

into the forest. You'll see everyone's cars, so it should be fine, but you don't get cell phone service out there, so I'd suggest you take someone with you."

"Carter, I'll be fine."

"I don't know." Tatum chews her lip. "What about mountain lions?"

"This isn't my first camping trip. I have my dad's compass too. I'll be fine. I'm experienced in the forest like you are at shopping in Barney's."

"Okay, fine," she exhales. "Me and Tillie will meet you there."

The lunch bell rings and I gather up all my trash, placing it onto my tray.

"Madi!" Bishop yells out to me. I ignore him, but it's obvious I heard him as the whole cafeteria pretty much stops what they're doing. Tatum looks at me, but I ignore her too. Walking to the other side of the room, I dump my tray into the garbage and push through the doors.

Fuck him. `

My phone vibrates in my pocket just as I hit my next class.

Tillie – Hey, chica! Are we still on for this weekend? How are we dressing?

Right. Halloween. Between everything else, the drama with Bishop, camping, and wanting to keep reading The Book, I forgot about what we're dressing as for Halloween.

Me – Still a go! You'll ride with Tatum. Dress wise, I'm not sure. I'm guessing Tatum will want to go shopping. What're you doing after school?"

Tillie – Today?

Me – Yes.

Tillie – I can come.

Me – Okay, we'll pick you up from school.

I haven't been to Tillie's school before. Never had a reason to. But suddenly, I want to see it. There's so much to Tillie I still don't know, but she fits in with Tatum and me like the missing puzzle we need. The day goes slow, and I pass my science test, even though I didn't study for it. I'm walking out of class at the end of the day, when Tatum catches up to me, clutching her books and out of breath.

"Shit, bitch, slow down next time." She huffs.

I giggle. "Maybe we should start exercising."

We both pause and look at each other, then start laughing. "Maybe not."

I nudge her. "Hey, we have to pick up Tillie. She wants to go shopping for this weekend."

"Yes!" Tatum says, rolling her shoulders like she's gearing up for war.

I stop. "What? Now you want to exercise your shoulders?"

"Of course," she mutters. "Dad's black card is about to get a workout."

Walking out the front of the school, we wait for Sam to pick us up. Sam is my dad's other driver, but she's more my driver when Dad is away and takes Harry with him.

Since yesterday, I've ignored Nate and his wanting to give me rides to school. I have nothing really to say to them, and I don't trust any of them, even less since they kidnapped me. Which Tatum still doesn't know about.

We slide in, and Sam smiles at me in the rearview mirror. "Have a good day?"

I shrug. "Could have been better."

"But...", Sam prompts, knowing what I'm like. Sam has been our driver since as long as I can remember. She's a fifty-two-year-old African American woman who has practically raised me since I was a child. Her and Jimmy both did. Jimmy is almost sixty, and I've been trying to get them together for years. If you ask me, I'd say they've been sporting a bit of a crush on each other for years now, but neither of them wants to act on it.

Tatum interrupts, "But she has boy trouble."

"Oh," Sam quips, pulling out onto the street. "What kind? The kind I'll need a shovel and an alibi for, or the kind I should make pie and threaten to cut his balls off until he forgives you kind?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

I giggle and Tatum laughs. “No, neither. I don’t want you making pies for any of them.”

“You be careful, baby. I know you think you don’t care and you shut all your feelings out, but one of these days, it could bite you in the ass.”

“What?” I snort, leaning back in my seat. “Like I might start caring too much?”

Sam shakes her head. “No, baby girl, more like you might not be able to ever switch it back on. You’re too young. Live, feel, have sex—don’t tell your father I said that—but don’t ever not feel. That’s what makes you Madison.”

“I feel, Sam,” I whisper, looking out the window. I can see Tatum staring at me out the corner of my eye, no doubt brewing her hundred and one questions she’s going to slam me with. “I just try to choose where I direct my energy and who deserves it.” Sam knows about my past and what happened there. She’s the only person walking this earth who knows, and that’s how I like to keep it. The only reason she knows is because I came home drunk from a party one time and spilled everything to her.

“Hey.” Tatum nudges me. “What’s up with you spending so much time in the library anyway?”

“I don’t know. I’ve always loved books.”

“Nuh-uh,” Tatum says. “There’s something else.”

Sam looks at me with a smile. “Madi has always liked books. We used to read her

everything when she was a little girl, and she was reading chapter books when she turned six. Smart girl, in some aspects.”

We pull up to the house and I slide out. “Thanks, Sam. Can you tell Jimmy that me, Tatum, and Tillie will be home for dinner tonight?”

“What about Nate?” Sam asks, just as I’m getting out of the car.

“Fuck Nate.”

“Madison Maree Montgomery!”

“Oh, you did not just triple-M me, Sammy!” I spin back around to face her with a grin on my face as I walk backward toward the house. “You take that back!” Triple-M is my initials. I despise the fact that my name starts with an M all three times. I think it was my mom’s way of punishing me just a little bit more. I used to joke about that when she was still alive, but now that she’s dead, the thought just makes me feel guilty.

“Don’t swear at me, little lady!” Sammy doesn’t like swearing, and her hackles go up anytime someone cusses around her. That’s probably why she and Jimmy never worked, because the Italian has a foul mouth. Which is one of the many reasons why I’ve always loved him. He sometimes swears in Italian, and for a long time when I was younger, we would both swear in Italian around Sam so she didn’t know. “Scopare questa merda!” Sammy wouldn’t know what the hell we were talking about. It was funny.

I walk inside with Tatum on my tail, and head into the kitchen, opening the side cupboard to get out the car keys. I take the GMC keys, and we both walk out to the garage.

“You know...,” Tatum starts, as we both slip into our seats. “How was Bishop in bed?”

I laugh, firing the car up. “I don’t kiss and tell, Tate.”

“Ohh, sure you do.”

I shake my head and laugh, pulling out of the long driveway. “I really don’t.

Pulling up to the curb of Hampton Beach High, Tatum whispers, “I haven’t been here in a while.”

“It’s not that bad. I expected a little more on the rough side.”

Tatum shakes her head. “The people are a lot on the rough side, though.”

Tillie comes walking out of the front gate, clutching her backpack, with another guy walking beside her.

“Hotness at four o’clock,” Tatum announces, eyeing up Tillie’s friend.

I shove her. “Don’t be a gawker.” But then I run my eyes up and down his body. “Totally hot though.” He has a shaved head, tattoos mapping out all over his neck and arms. His dark eyes and olive skin have me thinking that he’s a little Spanish? Maybe? But then again, he has fair features. Sharp nose, a jaw that could match Bishop’s.

“You just told me not to gawk, and then you go and drool all over the center console?” Tatum shoves me.

Tillie opens the back door and cranks down her window. “Girls, this is my friend

Ridge, who is annoying, by the way,” she announces, evil eyeing him.

Ridge grins, and damn all hot bad boys from the wrong side of the tracks. He flashes his deep dimples and pearly white teeth at Tatum. “Naw, I’m not annoying.” He looks up to Tatum and me. “She just needs to be extra careful.”

Tillie rolls her eyes. “I’m always careful. You’re just overbearing.”

“I’m Tatum.” She waves from the front.

He looks at her and nudges his head. “Sup.”

I smile. “I’m Madison.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

He tips his head at me. “Okay, got to go now.”

“Who is that?” Tatum purrs, as we pull away from the school. “Please tell me you’re hitting it.”

“I am.” Tillie nods. “But it’s completely mutual, and we have no interest in ever going further than great sex with each other.”

I look at her in my rearview mirror. It’s not that I don’t believe her. It’s just that... yeah, I don’t believe her. You don’t become friends with someone who looks like Tillie and then who looks like Ridge, and not want to make babies together.

“Really?” I answer. “How does that work? You know... without becoming attached in some way.” Not that I’m clingy, but even I struggle with separating my feelings with sex. It’s something I’ve always struggled with. I’ve never been able to be one of those girls who could have sex with a guy and not at least feel something for him, even just a little bit. And even without knowing Bishop, I just don’t think it’s in me to do that. Except now I definitely feel something for Bishop. Hate.

“It just does. Ridge and I have known each other since we were kids. We’re probably a little more experienced than most people our age, but that’s because we’ve been sleeping together for a very long time.”

I pull onto our highway and head toward the mall. “And what about when one of you wants to sleep with someone else? Won’t the other get mad?”

She shakes her head. “No. It’s seriously just sex. I know it’s hard to understand for

most people, and I know girls say they're cool with this kind of situation and then they get attached, but I really am cool with it. He's had lots of girlfriends since we started sleeping together." She shrugs, and I watch her in the rearview mirror, trying to catch her bluff. "Sometimes he cheats with me, or sometimes he doesn't. Either way, I get laid." She winks at me.

I shake my head and laugh, pulling into the parking lot. "Well, he's hot, just saying."

"You want his number? Certain he would be interested," Tillie says, shrugging and pushing open her door.

"What?" I scoff, getting out and walking around to the front as we start toward the mall. "I didn't mean as in I want a taste. I just mean as in he's hot."

"Well, I do!" Tatum says, linking her arm with Tillie's.

Tillie laughs and then stops when she realizes Tatum is serious. "Oh no, no, no, honey." Tillie taps her hand as we walk into the cool air-conditioned mall. "He would eat you alive."

It's funny. At first glance, you would think Tatum is the slut of the group, not me or Tillie. Not saying we're sluts, but we're the most sexually active out of the tripod.

I burst out laughing just as my phone vibrates in my pocket. Seeing it's an unknown caller, I shoo them into the closest clothing store and swipe my phone unlocked.

"Hello?" I'm still laughing when the word leaves my mouth.

"Riddle me this," an automated voice answers on the other end.

"Pardon?" I ask, taking a seat on one of the café chairs. "Who is this?"

“I am neither dead, nor alive, and I’m not something little Madison can hide. But you will be dead by the time this is done. The timer starts now. The games have just begun.”

“Hello? This is not funny—” The line goes dead, and I look down to my phone, my mouth slightly open. What the hell was that about?

“Madi!” Tillie yells out from one of the clothing shops, waving a dress around.

Oh no.

“Coming!” I call out, looking back down to my phone. Who even uses that spooky voice, and who the hell was that? Some stupid kid playing with their parents’ phone.

Yeah, some stupid kid who just so happens to know how to block their caller ID.

Standing to my feet, I walk toward the clothing store and push my phone back into my pocket, along with my feelings about that call.

“What. Is. That?” I ask, pointing toward the outfit Tatum is brushing down in front of the mirror.

“What?” She laughs like a hyena. “This is Harley Quinn!”

“I know it’s Harley Quinn, but why are you wearing it?” I giggle, taking the costume Tillie chose for me from her.

“Because I wanna find me my puddin’.”

“Oh Lord.”

She starts flicking her hair around like the lunatic she is and I shake my head, looking down at the... “I am not wearing this.”

“Whyyy?” Tillie moans. “It’s cute!”

“Yeah, for a girl who wants her cookie hanging out.” I give it back to her and flop down onto the customer chairs. “I can’t even think about what I want to dress as.”

“Well, you have to go as something!” Tatum exasperates, walking back into the changing room and slipping out of her outfit.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“Yeah, well....” I look to the left and see a skeleton-style masquerade mask. “Hold that thought.” I walk toward it, standing on my tippy-toes to unhook it from the mannequin. Running my thumb over the embossed skeletons and lace, I smirk. “This I can work with.”

“That’s a little creepy,” Tatum mutters from over my shoulder.

“Well, duh, it’s Halloween, and I know this may come as a shock to you, but you’re supposed to dress creepy, not like a skank. We save that for the weekends our boyfriends break up with us.” I smile at her; adding that last part was to soften the blow. Tatum isn’t a whore or a slut, but she is a bit of a skank. But aren’t we all? As much as I love jeans, hoodies, and clothes that cover my butt, sometimes I like dressing up too.

Tillie laughs. “Well, I’m going as a cowgirl, Tatum is going as Harley Quinn, and Madi is going as a ballroom zombie! We’re all a match made in hell.”

We start laughing, and I walk away from them, going through the clothes to try and find a dress or something to wear with it. After the fifth failed attempt, I push one of the dresses back onto the hook and spin around. “I can just wear a black dress with this.”

“And suspenders!” Tatum yells as we walk out of the shop.

“No, no suspenders.”

“You’re no fun.”

“Tatum, we’re going to be in the forest. I’m not dressing like a skank in the forest. By the way, who’s going to set up our tents?” I ask, stopping outside a little café and dropping my bag down on the table. Tatum and Tillie take a seat. “Good question. Maybe you should ask Carter since he will be there early.” One of my many problems. But he could set up our tent, and it’s not an invitation or anything. But he is a male, and sometimes they expect something in return.

“I’ll text him.” I take a seat and look through the menu.

“So... Bishop, huh?” Tillie wiggles her eyebrows. I peek up at her from the menu.

“We don’t talk about him,” I reply blandly, before going back to searching between BLT bagels and potato skins with sour cream.

Tatum pours her a glass of water and giggles. “Yeah, he’s a no-go zone as far as conversation starters go with Madi.”

“But I haven’t even had a chance to talk about it!” Tillie scolds like a burned out toddler wanting the last cookie.

“Nothing great.” I drop the menu as the waiter comes to our table. “Can I get the potato skins, chicken tenders, and a Coke?”

“Why?” Tillie questions, after ordering her food.

“Because it happened, and then I found out it was all some sick fucking....” I pause, looking up at the waiter, who had to be around our age, sporting floppy brown hair and makeup that could give Tatum’s a run for her money.

He notices me watching him and laughs, brushing me off. “Oh, girl, you don’t have to worry about me.”

“Yeah, okay.” I smile at him, and he rolls his eyes, scribbling down our orders before leaving.

“Sick, what?” Tatum taunts, taking a drink of her water while smirking around the rim of her glass.

“I don’t know, but it wasn’t real. None of this is real.”

“None of what?” Tatum asks, leaning back in her chair. I really wish she would stop asking so many fucking questions.

“I don’t know, Tatum. I’m lost and confused.”

“They’re dangerous, Madi,” Tatum whispers, leaning forward. Tillie pauses and watches our exchange closely. “Think about it. Kholes went missing... no one knows where she is or what happened. All we know is that she dated Bishop.” She leans back into her chair.

“So? That could mean nothing,” I reply smoothly.

“And it could mean everything,” Tatum retorts calmly.

I shrug. “So what? I’m staying away. I don’t even know what happened between us.”

“Nothing,” Tillie announces out of nowhere.

“What?” I whisper. It’s the first time I have heard her say anything since bringing up this conversation to begin with.

“Nothing happened between you. It meant nothing to him.”

“And how do you know that? I mean, I know that, but how do you know that?” I ask, leaning forward and pouring another glass of water as the waiter comes back and places our food on our table.

“Just a guess. I mean... none of those guys had ever had a girlfriend before,” Tillie says casually, taking one of my potato skins. “The only one who ever did was Bishop, and look how that ended.” She laughs, shaking her head. “I don’t mean it in a mean way, just in a real way.”

“It’s fine,” I whisper, picking up some fries and dipping the crispy, deep-fried goodness into the sour cream. “I just wish they would forget about me.”

“SO NOW THAT WE HAVE our costumes sorted for this weekend,” Tatum says over the phone, as I turn on the faucet to my shower, “have you asked Carter if he can set up our tents?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Nate walks into the bathroom, his hair all over the place and his white Calvin Klein boxers on. He doesn't spare me a second glance, just goes straight to the sink and squirts toothpaste onto his toothbrush.

"Madi?"

"What?" I ask, looking back to the floor. No smart remark from Nate? That's unlike him. I look back up to him in the mirror. He brushes his teeth, his eyes peering back, but this time they're looking through me, not at me, and when it comes to Nate, there's a huge difference. I shiver at the stare he's giving me.

"Sorry, um, yeah, Carter said he would."

"Okay, good."

Nate stops his brushing, his eyes remaining on me as he leans over and slowly spits. Rinsing his toothbrush, he puts it back on the sink.

"I gotta go." Just as I hang up the phone, Nate walks out, slamming the door behind himself. What the fuck is his problem? Deciding I don't want to face his bullshit, I walk over and flick the lock before shimmying out of my pajamas.

Scrubbing the sweet-smelling soap into my skin, my eyes close as vivid pictures of the night they stopped me down the dark road come back to me. My breathing picks up slowly, my chest rising and falling. "You want to play a game, kitty?" The rough material of their ski masks burn across my face. Fight or flight. Fight or flight. Flight. My hand skims over my belly ring, down to the apex of my thighs. "You know you

want this, kitty,” Bishop’s lazy voice comes into earshot. I do.

Slipping my fingers between my folds, I glide one of my fingers inside me. Groaning and tilting my head back, I massage the inside of myself, Bishop’s grin flashing in my memories. His touch, the way he rode my body until I couldn’t feel my legs and sweat was pouring out of my pores. The way he ran his tongue all over my flesh and then down to my clit.

I grab onto the soap and lather up my finger before bringing it back to my clit, imagining it’s Bishop’s expert tongue flicking over my nub. My eyes slam shut, my legs clench, and my core erupts in pleasure as my orgasm rips through me, owning me. Opening my eyes slowly, I blush. I can’t believe I just fucking did that. I hate him, so why the fuck does he still turn me on? Even though I know nothing was real with him? Am I that screwed up?

Possibly.

Getting out of the shower, I dry myself quickly and get dressed. Walking down the stairs, the house is eerily silent, something I used to be accustomed to. But since being here, it’s not something I’m used to anymore because of Nate, who is the furthest thing from silent. “So much for babysitting,” I mutter to myself, as I step outside our front door and see his car is gone. Closing it, Sam opens the door behind me again. “Madi, you need a ride to school today?”

I shake my head. “It’s cool. I’ve got that camping trip tonight, remember?” My dad and Elena will be home tonight from their trip too, so I won’t be coming home after my detour to the library. I figure I’ll get changed in the girls’ locker rooms before leaving and get a workout in before the school gym closes at ten. By the time I get out to the site, which apparently isn’t a real campsite, it will be close to midnight, but I’m hoping that it’s one, easy to find, and two, it’s easy to fricking find.

“Oh, right. Do you have everything packed?”

“Yes, Sammy, I have everything.” I step down the stairs, clutching my duffel bag. “I’ll see you on Sunday!” I yell out to her.

“Oh! Madi!” Sammy hollers, and I spin around.

“What?”

She rushes inside and then comes out again, tossing me some keys. “The GMC isn’t here. It’s getting fixed, something to do with a faulty fuel pump.” She shakes her head then looks back to me. “You’ll have to take your dad’s Aston Martin.”

I catch the keys midair. “The DB9?” I shiver. “I can’t take that. He’ll kill me.”

“He will not, and he was the one who called me to say you needed to use that car.”

I pause. “Is this a joke?” I look around my body. “Daddy loves me, but he doesn’t love me that much.”

Sammy laughs, spinning around and waving my dramatic ass off. “Have fun, Madison.”

I grin. Dad is letting me take the DB9? That’s so far past odd I can’t even see the fucking aliens anymore. That made no sense. I beep it unlocked, slide into the driver seat before clutching it into first gear, and drive toward the school.

I’m late. Again.

“Madison, I thought we had this discussion about your tardiness?” Mr. Barron, my physics teacher scolds, looking me up and down. Mr. Barron is one of those teachers

who have an authoritative hand, but you don't mind, because he's young and handsome, so you wouldn't mind him spanking your ass while you call him Daddy.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Face palm, Madison.

Five o'clock shadow, plaid shirts, nicely fitting jeans that show his butt. Mr. Barron is hot, so I instinctively blush under his glare. "Sorry, it really wasn't my fault this time. There was traffic." His stare stays glued on mine until I'm squirming in my spot. "It won't happen again, sir."

He nods. "Very well, take a seat."

Did I mention the Irish accent? Someone splash me with cold water. I scramble back to my desk and pull out my notepad.

Ally turns in her seat toward me. "Hey, slut."

The whole class starts laughing.

I narrow my eyes at her. "You say it like you know, Ally. Say, don't you speak slut, too? Of course you do," I answer for her, bored with her weak jabs.

She spins around toward me. "Bishop told me about how you scratch in bed." She's digging to hit a nerve, and besides the fact I'm pissed Bishop has talked to her about our little fling, I won't give her the satisfaction of seeing it. Fuck her.

"Really?" I tease with a quirked eyebrow and a smirk. "So he told you just how sharp they are then?" My smirk deepens, and when she realizes what I'm implying, her mouth snaps shut.

“Still a slut.”

“Still don’t care.”

The bell finally rings for the next period and I scramble out of my chair, pushing through the crowds before making my way to my next class. Please, please let this day go fast.

This day is not going fast. I drop my tray onto the lunch table just as Tatum dances over with Carter and... I forgot his name already... on her tail.

“Hey, sugar! You don’t look so hot.”

“Thanks, Tatum,” I mutter, dropping down onto the seat. Carter slips in next to me, and I try my hardest to ignore Nate and Bishop in the corner.

“She always looks hot. What are you talking about?” Carter scolds Tatum.

“Please stop.” I massage my temples slowly, taking in deep breaths. “I literally don’t know how I’m going to make it past this day, let alone tonight. I feel like Ally sucks the life out of me, and I’ve had her in all three of my morning classes.” I yank open the lid to my yogurt, tossing it onto my tray. “She’s fucking—”

“Not worth your energy,” Carter finishes, taking the yogurt from me. He laughs. “Calm down or you’re going to get this all over your clothes.”

I can’t help it anymore; my attempting to not look toward Bishop and Nate fails me on epic portions, because I fucking look. Only, they’re not looking at me. Nate has a new girl on his lap, and Bishop has gone back to his stone-cold self, not acknowledging anyone else’s existence. Huh. I thought I’d be pleased, but because of Nate’s icy-cold shoulder he threw at me this morning, I don’t know. I’ve somehow

grown accustomed to them watching me, whether it's creepy, annoying, or not.

"Thanks," I say to Carter, dragging my eyes from the group of them.

"So what time will you get out tonight?" He swings his leg over his chair so he's sitting on it backward.

"I've just got a couple things to do, but I should be there around midnight. I'll text you guys when I'm on my way."

He looks like he's mulling over my idea, but then nods. "Yeah, okay. We're going out after school so I will set up your girls' tent."

"Mmm!" Tatum wiggles on her chair. "Can you put us in the best spot?"

"What? Tatum, it's literally in the middle of the forest. There're a few flat areas where we set up, but it's black. There are no best areas." Carter chuckles.

Tatum pauses. "Wait, I thought it would like, have a lake or something pretty?"

He laughs. "No. This is a Halloween party camp out. There are no pretty things."

I giggle when I see Tatum's face fall.

"But I bought heels." She pouts.

Carter laughs again. "Take them back, baby girl. You won't be needing those."

Her lip trembles, before she takes a bite out of her apple. "I guess Harley Quinn could wear Chucks."

Someone find this girl her puddin’.

THE FINAL BELL RINGS AND I nervously pull out my phone from my pocket, sliding it open. I’m sick of not knowing what the hell is going on with Nate, so I send him a text.

Me – What’s going on with you?

Shoving my phone back into my pocket, I head toward the library. Flopping down onto the sofa, with The Book in one hand, I look down at my phone again. Zero new messages. Frustrated, I open a new message and type one to Bishop.

Me – Is Nate with you?

Sighing, and a little more agitated than usual, I shove my phone away and flip open to the next excerpt.

3.

The Ritual

Flames danced around the pitch-black night of nothingness like bright flickers of warmth, tormenting the sky like it had been waiting for me. For my son. Licking over my skin in faded hope, because I’ve come to realize... this was false hope for me. But I hoped someone somewhere would find my words one day, not for solace, and not for understanding.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

I walked down the dirt path that led to the center, where the mass of flames were alight from the bundle of dry wood. Five men surrounded the pit of flames, all covered in long, hooded cloaks. They didn't have to show their faces for me to know who they were. They were my husband's soldiers. They believed in this atrocious cause just as much as my husband did. Blinded by some false perfection of what the world should be.

My husband has always been an overachiever on a larger scale. It would frighten me at times, because when he was fixated on something or someone he wanted, he stopped at absolutely nothing to get it. It was almost as though a blood thirst would start in his bones, and he wouldn't sleep until he had his feeding. His latest obsession, I knew it wouldn't pass. They never did. He always got what he wanted in the end, above all. But I had hoped he would change the plans, the rules.

Though, he said there were no rules. “” he would write, which means “There are no rules” in Aramaic. I wasn't sure what he meant by that, at least not right now, at this moment, but it wasn't long before I would learn exactly what he meant.

I walked toward the men, my son cradled in my arms.

“Katsia, give me the boy.” My husband hurried from the other side, standing near a large, flat, cold stone.

I looked down to my little boy, my throat contracting and my tears welling up behind my lids. I didn't want this. I didn't want to do this. I didn't care about building a syndicate of men who would rule for generations to come. I didn't care about riches or power. I cared about my child. But my husband swore that no harm was going to

come to him, not one speck. So, slowly but gently, I headed toward the stone, the flickering of the flames lighting up the dark moonlit night like large fireflies.

“Put him down, Katsia. We will do no harm. That, I promise you.”

Clutching my son in my arms, the little swaddle wrap he was tucked into flush against my chest. “Your promises don’t do anything to calm my erratic thoughts, husband.”

He stepped toward me, taking my baby away and placing him down onto the rock before unwrapping the cloak I had him snuggled into. “Your feelings are no business to me, Katsia. Now, leave if you can’t handle this.”

“I will not leave my child with you, Humphrey. Not ever. Do it fast and give my boy back.”

His eye twitched, just as he drew his hand back and then pounded it across my face, a loud slap sounding out just as a sharp sting erupted over my cheekbone. I fell to the ground in a mess, clutching the damp, loose dirt ground under my fingernails. Pushing myself up slowly, I looked up at him from the earth.

“You call me Husband. Not Humphrey. Get up and stand like a real woman should. You’re embarrassing me.”

I stood again, squaring my shoulders. He looked down to my son, just as someone else came over clutching a metal stick.

“He has to be initiated through correctly,” my husband said, looking toward David, one of his men. “Bring me the girl.”

A young teenager was pulled from the forest, stuck in between two other cloaked

men. She had a blindfold around her eyes, and her hands were bound behind her back. She had slits already sliced around her neck.

“What are you doing?” I asked Humphrey, watching the frantic girl pant for escape from beneath the gag in her mouth.

Humphrey smirked at me. “This is the ritual. It’s what every initiation has to go through after the branding, and then once again when he hits puberty.”

“What?” I whispered, because I had quite possibly lost my voice.

He walked toward me, running his rough hand down the side of my cheek. “Oh, sweet Katsia. I told you. This is the process, and you have to trust it.” But I didn’t. “This woman will be kept for him until he comes to puberty.”

“And then what?” I muttered, holding back the bile that was rising in my throat.

“And then she will take his virginity.”

I shook my head. “No.” But even as I denied it, the snarling grin that popped up at the corner of his mouth told me that he was far from finished with revealing his sick plans.

“And then he will kill her.”

With my stomach churning, the ringing of my phone interrupts my reading, and I fish it out, flicking to answer it without looking at the screen.

“Hello?”

“When the lights go out, and no one is about, will Madison scream or will she pout?”

Because one thing I know, that you may not so, is how you scream for me, down below.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“Who is this?” My breathing thickens again, and I stand from my chair, the book dropping to the floor.

The twisted crackle of a toned laugh blisters through my eardrums, and my pulse picks up. “Wouldn’t you like to know, my favorite little slut? Tell me... does Daddy know how fucking good you suck?”

“This isn’t funny.” I look down to my phone and then bring it to my ear. “Seriously—”

They hang up. The blank dial tone rings through my ears and I shove my phone back into my pocket, bending down to pick up the book. I look around the library. When I walked in here, there were lights on down a few aisles, but now it’s inky dark, with nothing but the weak lighting hovering over the reception desk where Miss Winters is sitting. Clearing my throat, I place the book back onto the bookshelf and collect my bag before swinging it over my shoulder. Whoever this caller is, he’s starting to freak me out. I haven’t even solved his first riddle—which, in my opinion, didn’t make sense.

Walking toward the student access door, Miss Winters stops me. “Madison?”

I turn to face her, my hand on the cold metal bar of the door. She walks to where I was, and then comes back to me, clutching the book. Shoving it into my hands, she says, “Just take it.”

“But I thought—”

She shakes her head. “Don’t ask, just...” She looks around nervously, as if she’s checking for the boogie man. “Just take it, okay?” Her eyes lock onto mine pleadingly.

Slipping my fingers around the old, worn leather cover, I nod. “Thank you, you didn’t have to do this, though.”

She looks over my shoulder, a shimmer of panic crawling over her face before she masks it with a fake smile. “It’s okay. It’s nothing. I noticed how much you’ve been coming in to read it, so I’m sure I can make up some story about it being lost and then magically finding it when you return it. It’s no biggie.” She brushes me off, but I still see the underlying panic beneath her words.

“Okay, well, thank you.” I slip past her finally, clutching the book in my hands, and make my way to the girls’ locker room near the gym.

Walking into the empty stalls, I place the book into my bag and pull out my dress, hair dryer, and flat iron. I can’t believe I decided to get ready here. Should I just brave it and go home? No. No, that’s a terrible idea. Shimmying out of my clothes, I wrap the towel around myself and walk into the scolding hot spray of water, scrubbing up in fast-forward, because, let’s face it, all people get murdered in the damn shower in locker rooms. I’ve watched *Scream*. I know what happens when you turn to get your shampoo. Not to me though, nope.

Turning off the faucet, I wrap the towel around my body again and slip out, drying my hair first, and then I run the flat iron through it quickly. I don’t know why I’m spending so much unneeded time on this; it’s not like my outfit is to die for. No pun intended. Slipping on the black strapless dress, which hugs around my butt a little more than I wanted for tonight, I brush on some makeup, going heavy on the eyes to add the effect to my zombie masquerade mask, and then slip it over my head. There. That’s all I need. Gliding on a deep burgundy matte lipstick, I walk back to my bag,

pull out my Keds, and shove them on my feet before putting all my clothes back into my bag, on top of the book. Now that I have it, it's all I can think about. Hopefully, the party won't last too long, and people won't notice I've snuck into my tent to read. Major regrets are rolling in now about me agreeing to do this. This isn't even my idea of what camping is.

Shoving everything inside, I swing my bag over my shoulder and then make my way down the dark corridor to the elevator that'll take me down to the basement of the student parking lot. Chills break out over my spine, and I get this overbearing feeling that someone is watching me. Someone I don't know or am familiar with. Shrugging it off, and wanting to get the fuck out of here STAT, I push the button, and then push it a few more times in an attempt to hurry it up. It dings open, so I walk inside the warm enclosure, pushing the correct button. It's a quick trip down, and once it pops open, I'm once again met with echoing silence of nothing between these concrete walls. Beeping Dad's car, I pull open the driver door with my heart pounding in my chest, swing my bag inside, and quickly slide in, locking the doors instantly.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“Holy shit,” I whisper. I’m completely aware at how I’m working myself up. My pulse slowly drops and I press the button, starting the car.

“Call Tatum,” I order the Bluetooth, just as I’m pulling out of the garage.

“Calling Tatum,” she replies, and I hit the stereo on just as Figure’s “The Exorcist” starts pumping through the speakers. Turning it down a little low so I can hear Tatum, she picks up almost instantly, and I let her and the music calm me.

Except you turned on a remix song for The Exorcist. Who are you trying to calm? Your ninth demon?

“Girrrl!” Tatum squeals down the phone, her voice doused in muffled drunk tones and loud music.

I laugh, pulling onto the main highway that will take me to where they are. According to my GPS, it’s a thirty-minute drive into literally the middle of nowhere. “What?”

“This party is puuumping! And, oh my God!” she slurs. Oh dear. “Carter put us on the flattest part of the ground, you know, like sort of beside him, which is shady as fuck! But still, everyone else’s tents are a little lopsided.” She giggles and then burps. “Oops. ‘Scuse me.”

“Tate?” I laugh. “Slow down or you won’t be able to meet me when I get there. Remember, I have no service. Where’s Tillie?”

“She’s here somewhere.” She brushes me off. “Hurry up! We need you! Oh! And the

Kings aren't here. You're safe!"

Shaking my head. "Okay, I'll see you in thirty minutes! Get someone sober to come with you."

She hangs up the phone. The Kings aren't there? That's odd, considering they were so hell-bent on making my life miserable. They must have found a new toy to play with. I should be happy, but another side of me—the girly side—wants to know what the fuck I did wrong.

Turning the volume to full blast on the radio, I let Disturbed's lyrics from "Tyrant" absorb all my feelings. Just as I hit the exit, my phone lights up on the seat.

Unknown – Run

I swerve on the road, headlights flashing ahead of me and taking my attention away from my phone. Just as I correct the car back onto the road, another text lights up.

Unknown – Amateur move. I really hoped that would have killed you once and for all.

Throwing my phone onto the ground, I look in my rearview mirror but see nothing. No headlights, nothing but darkness and the passing glow from the street markings. A bead of sweat forms on my forehead, so I swipe it away. Am I being stalked? What the fuck is going on? Glancing down to my phone that's on the floor on the passenger side, I ignore the incoming text and concentrate on making sure I get there in one piece.

"You have reached your destination," the GPS announces, just as I pull down a dark, bumpy gravel road.

“And where exactly is that?” I ask myself. Two seconds later, my phone lights up on the floor again and I roll my eyes, reaching over and scooping it up. Sliding it unlocked, I open it onto the recent message.

Unknown – Hell

My panic starts to kick in and I look in my rearview mirror again, only to find I’m all alone with no road markings. Now I’m just surrounded by inky blackness, full-on creepiness, amongst the freaking forest. Looking forward, I concentrate on what I’m doing. Leaning over, I pop the glove compartment and see my dad’s pistol he keeps in there. Smiling, and feeling a lot safer than I felt two seconds ago, I pull it out and place it on my lap. My dad always said to me, “Madi, don’t ever point a gun at a man unless you have the balls to pull the trigger.” Suffice it to say, I have big balls right about now. I don’t want to hurt anyone, but I’ve been trained to take care of myself, and this is how I do it. Guns don’t kill people. People kill people. Guns are there to protect people who need to be protected from people who kill people.

Just as I pull up next to a line of cars, another text comes through. “Seriously?” I groan, picking up my phone and sliding it unlocked.

Unknown – Naw, baby. That ain’t gonna do jack shit when my hands are wrapped around your neck and your mouth is sucking on my dick.

I spin around, looking outside, but no one has followed me this whole time. What the fuck? I notice I’m still getting service since his texts are coming through just fine, but when I look at the service bar, I can see it dropping in and out. “Shit.” Taking a chance anyway, I dial Carter. There’s no use in trying Tatum; she’s probably already smashed, and as far as I know, Tillie doesn’t actually own a phone. I mean, we text her when we’re not with her, but she never has a phone when she’s with us.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Carter picks up, but I can hear a girl's voices in the background. I roll my eyes.
“Carter?”

“Hello? Madi? Can you hear me?”

No, I cannot hear you over all the mouthful of cock.

“Yeah, Carter—” the line goes dead, and I look down to my phone to see the service gone. “Fuck!” Picking up my bag from the passenger seat, I push my phone into the front pocket and pick up my gun.

This doesn't seem like a great idea anymore. Back at school, when I said I'd do this, it was because I was in the light of the day. Now, I'm in the dark and can't see shit. Shivering slightly, I think about throwing on a sweater, but my dad always said that the cold is what helps you stay alert. With that in my brain, I slip out of the car, ignoring the stabs of panic that erupt all over my flesh from being out in the cold, quiet open, and then slam the door shut, hiding the pistol behind my duffel bag as it slouches on my shoulder, but not far enough I can't pull it out whenever I need it. Walking forward to the breaking of the forest—what Carter said to follow—I tighten my grip on the gun. It's too silent. Why's it so silent? It's throwing me off. No birds or crickets chirping.

I kick myself. I should have bought my headphones. It would have made this trip a little less daunting, and then maybe I could have ran through the forest until I got to the site. Crunching of the dead leaves vibrates under the soles of my feet as the cold, thick air whips my hair across my face.

“I wanna play a game,” a voice whispers from behind me, and I jump two feet into the air, whipping around to face whoever it is that’s there, my gun drawn.

But no one is there.

“Who the fuck are you?”

A round of echoing laughter breaks through the night, swimming with the heavy gusts of wind. “Riddle me this....”

“No! Fuck you!”

They all laugh again, like a torturous cackle created from my very own nightmares.

“Oh, you will,” another voice growls over the back of my neck, so close I could feel his warm breath fall over the fine hairs on my back.

I swing around, but once again, I’m met with empty air.

“Weak,” another voice taunts.

“Too slow!” another one laughs.

Sucking in my breath, I whip around, only to be met with the dark, inky forest, filled with the tang of pine, crisp dry leaves, and the moonlight reflecting between the broken branches of the trees. Moss blankets the thick sheet of dirt that is around my feet, and I bring my hand up, aiming my gun at nothing. “Who the fuck are you, and why the fuck are you following me?”

I feel his presence before he speaks, but when he opens his mouth, I know who it is instantly. “Riddle me this, kitty,” he whispers softly through his rough, lazy voice.

“How many secrets do you hold within your bones? Or do I need to cut you open

until your mysteries bleed out all over your home?” He steps forward, his hard chest brushing against my back muscles. I close my eyes, my grip around the gun tightening. Running his lips over the back of my earlobe, he groans, “You’re not the only one who can leave scratch marks.” Then he shoves me forward until I smash into a large tree trunk. The gasp of air I was holding in rushes out from my lungs as he steps between my legs, stretching me wide.

“Leave me alone, Bishop.”

He laughs and grips my wrists tightly. He snatches my gun from me and then pulls cable ties around my wrist. Fuck! Panic starts to rise again. Why the hell are they doing this to me? Nothing makes sense, and nothing has made sense since I got here. “You and I both know that’s not what you really want.”

Loud footsteps sound out behind me, and when Bishop finally shoves me around to face him, his face catches my attention first. It’s completely masked in skeleton special effects makeup, and he’s wearing dark loose jeans, with a dark hoodie covering his head. His eyes peer into mine, but they’re covered by white wolf contacts. “You”—he steps forward—“know what I’m talking about, kitty. Why are you acting dumb?”

I swallow. “Dumb? What the hell are you talking about?” I look over his shoulder and see more figures, with skeleton faces and dark hoodies and jeans on, scattered around the place, leaning against trees. I search for Nate, and Bishop must know what I’m doing, because he laughs again, his hand flying up to my throat. He squeezes gently. “He can’t and won’t save you, kitty.”

His grip tightens, and my swallowing gets heavy. I look up into his eyes as he pushes me against the tree trunk again, the burning graze cutting into my back.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Stepping between my legs again, he drops his mouth to my ear, and growls, “Tell me what you know.”

“What?” What does he mean what I know?

“Wrong answer, kitty. You lose round one.”

“Round one?” I scoff, yanking at the cable ties that are digging into my wrists. “What the fuck do you want?” My anger is kicking up a notch. Sure, I may be timid and a quiet girl at times, but my fuse is very short. I can’t be bothered with killing people with kindness; that shit takes far too long. He pushes me back, his grip tightening until my air supply is stolen.

“What do you know about the Kings, kitty?”

My eyes close, the desperation to gain more air strengthening with each passing minute. Legs! I draw my leg back and kick him straight between his.

“Fuck!” he roars, bending over but not letting go of my throat. The rest of the boys watching behind us jolt forward, but they’re too slow. I kick him again, in the same spot, and his grip around my neck unlatches.

I quickly spin around and bolt. Running through all the scattered leaves, on broken sticks, and jumping over fallen logs, I run until my chest is burning and my vision is blurred. Something’s wrong. Silence. Complete silence. Slowing my running, I suck in heavy breaths as chills break over my flesh and what feels like a hundred tiny slithering snakes crawl up my spine. I shouldn’t have stopped. Stupid rookie move.

Cranking my head over my shoulder a little, I see the shadow of someone coming up fast behind me. Just as I'm about to run, someone pushes me from behind, and I'm falling, face first. Because my hands are tied, I have nothing to break my fall.

"Fuck!" Bishop yells from behind me, and then a heavy body is pressing into my back. He digs his knee into the center of my spine, shoving my already pounding face that's shoved into the dirt deeper. His hand wraps around the back of my neck as he squeezes again. I inch backward, my shoulders coming up in an attempt to stop his assault. "Don't. Fucking. Run, kitty. You wanna know why?" he grates, dropping down to my ear, and my eyes sting with unshed tears.

"Why?" I croak through my parched throat.

He laughs, and I swear to God that laugh is enough to fuck with any demonic being. "Because I will always catch you, kitty, and trust me when I say," he murmurs into my ear, his warm breath gliding over my neck, "I'll always find you." He gets up off me and flips me over onto my back.

"Tsk, ts, little sis." Nate walks toward me, but I focus my eyes on the sky. The branches frame my vision like a small circle, and I tilt my head, studying them closely. Nate bends down, but I can't look at him. I always knew Bishop hated me somewhat, and when we slept together, it was more of a hate fuck, but Nate straight up betrayed me. Surprise, surprise. Most people do, I've come to learn. "Answer the question."

"Fuck you."

He laughs, his hand coming down to my throat. He looks up at Bishop and then grins over his shoulder. I quickly look back up to the stars once he's brought his attention back down to me. Gripping me roughly, he yanks me to my feet and shoves my back up against a tree trunk. My head smashes against the hard bark and I groan, my eyes

closing. That fucking hurt.

“B, come grab her legs so she can’t kick...” Nate studies my face, his wolf-colored eyes looking over my body. He grins. “Or scratch us.” I snap my mouth closed before opening it again.

“Nate, what the fuck are you doing?”

“I need to know the truth, kitty. And I need to know tonight.” I look over his shoulder to see the other five boys there, standing in the weak mist of the foggy night. The air is thick, and I know the fog is about to get a lot worse.

“I don’t know what the fuck you mean!” I scream.

Bishop steps forward, pushing Nate over slightly and grabbing onto my legs. Before I know it, they’re wrapped around his narrow waist and he’s pressing his groin into my center, the bark from the tree once again digging into my back. I should have worn the damn hoodie. He shoves me again, using his waist to move me. “Answer the fucking questions, kitty.”

I don’t ignore the way his bulge has expanded against me either, and as much as I hate him and hate what’s happening, my body has a mind of its own. “I am answering the questions! You’re just not listening!” I yell, pissed off at all of them. Do I think they will hurt me? Yes. But my anger trumps my fear, and that’s a dangerous trait to have against Bishop and Nate, because they love the fear. I can feel it, see it in their eyes. When they know I’m afraid, they get a kick out of it.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Nate looks over his shoulder and gives the other boys a look before staring back at me. He steps aside, giving Bishop even more reign over my body. Slowly, Bishop's hips sink into me again and my throat contracts. I narrow my eyes on him.

He smirks, before groaning, "What?" innocently.

"You know what, and for the record, that is not happening again."

Nate laughs behind him. "We all know that's bullshit."

Bishop smirks at me again. "Unconvinced."

"I know nothing. Now let me go before my friends come find me."

"I don't buy that you don't know anything about us, kitty. In fact, I'd be willing to bet on it." He pushes into me again and my stupid core contracts.

Are you kidding me? He runs his nose down my jaw, but I fight it. I look directly at Nate. "This what you wanted?" I question him, my eyebrow quirked. "To see how hard Bishop can fuck me? Maybe learn a thing or two for the next time you're mouth-fucking me on the couch?"

Bishop stills. Every muscle in his body turns rigid against mine before he loosens. I don't know if he knows I caught that, or if he even cares that I know.

Nate comes to the side of me, running his finger down the side of my cheek. I shove away from him. "Naw, sis, don't act like you didn't mouth-fuck me back. In fact, if I

remember correctly, it was your hot little tongue that slipped into my mouth first.”

Bishop comes up from my neck, his hand coming to my cheeks, where he squeezes roughly. “Answer the fucking questions, kitty, before I fuck you right here and now. And trust me, what you experienced the first time was gentle up against how deep I’d fuck you right now.”

“Bro? What if she’s telling the fucking truth?” someone behind Nate asks, stepping toward us. When he gets closer, I see it’s Cash. “I mean, it’s possible that she—”

“Shut the fuck up, and no it’s not. And no we can’t take chances. And no I won’t fucking take her word for it,” Bishop snaps, looking over his shoulder. “Get back to where the fuck you came from and don’t interrupt again.”

Cash’s jaw tenses. I think I like him a little more than I did before.

“Game time,” Bishop says to me. “Every time I think you’re lying—” He pulls out a Swiss Army blade from his back pocket and flicks it open. “—you lose a piece of clothing.” He tilts his head. “And when you have no clothing left?” He glides the blade down my sternum to my belly button. “Then we’ll have to start getting creative.”

“This is bullshit!” I spit. “I fucking told you that I don’t know anything!” Goose bumps break out over my flesh, and he sees it. Grinning, he grips the knife in his hand and then grabs onto my thigh again. “I’d be real honest if I were you, kitty, ’cause boundaries?” he taunts. “Those are things I don’t have.”

“Fine!” I splutter. “I’ll answer with complete honesty, but then, you will let me go!”

Bishop searches my eyes, his bright, marble wolf ones looking into mine. Why the fuck does the whole skeleton thing do it for me? And why the fuck am I thinking

about what does it for me and what doesn't right now?

"I'll be the judge of that." Then he leans forward and nips my lower lip, like he fucking owns it. I growl, the vibration pressing against his chest. "Aw, that's real cute. The kitty purrs."

"Fuck you."

"Can we get to the questions?" Nate says, looking between Bishop and me in disbelief. "Geez, your guys' hatred used to be hot foreplay, but now I'm seriously thinking I'll be needing to hide the knives."

I laugh, tilting my head back, and then look back to Nate. "Oh, you'll be needing to hide them from me, brother, and I'd be sleeping with one eye open from now on."

"Hot. Gonna come suck my dick in my sleep?"

"More like bite it off." I pause and pretend to mull over my thoughts. "Oh, but that would require me actually being able to locate it. Houston, we have a p—"

Bishop slams his hand over my mouth. "Shut the fuck up!"

I nod and he lets go, but I still manage to send a snarl toward Nate.

"Do you know about The Elite Kings?" Bishop shoots off.

"Only what Tatum has told me. Which isn't much."

He pauses, waiting for me to continue. "And what is that, exactly?"

My eyes narrow. "It's literally not much as I can't even really remember what she

said. Honestly? That little race you had, told me more than what Tatum could have.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Nate snaps, his lip curled.

I giggle. Fucking giggle. I could slap myself, but it added to the effect of my sarcasm, so I go with it. “Nate, so you all go do a little underground racing? Big wow, I don’t really care.” My eyes widen at the end of my sentence.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Bishop studies me, and then slowly but surely, his grin tilts up to a full clown smile, displaying his pearly white teeth and dimples. But his eyes? Yeah, his eyes aren't smiling. They are dark, shaded with hate, and planted by anger. It's in this very moment I realize that maybe I'm wrong. My face slowly falls, which only makes Nate start grinning.

"Aw, that's cute, kitten." He brings his hand up to my dress, over my breasts, and flicks his knife open before slowly cutting down my front. Now my tight strapless dress has a jagged cut down the front, my bright yellow lace bra on full display, but thankfully, because it's tight, it doesn't fall off me.

"What the fuck?" I yell at him. "I answered your question. That wasn't part of the rules!"

Bishop smiles. "I make the rules."

"Has anyone else spoken to you about us?" he questions.

"What?" Now I'm just over it, sick of the games and the underlying bullshit they seem to put me through. This is the second time they've done some fucked up cat-and-mouse game with me, and each passing minute, my patience runs thinner. "No one has said anything! I don't know who the fuck you are, what the fuck you stand for—or don't—and I don't care! Now..." I slice my glare to Bishop. "Let. Me. Go!"

He pauses, studying me closely. "And if I don't fucking believe you?"

"Then your lie detector is shit." I stand my ground from my precarious position.

Nate throws me a wink and then walks off toward Hunter and Brantley, who are standing beside a thick tree. Bishop hasn't moved, his hands still gripping around my thighs tightly. "You fuck him?"

I scowl. "What?"

"You heard me. Answer the question," he growls, pressing into me again.

"Hang on a second. You guys stalk me, chase me through a forest, scare the shit out of me, tie me up, and cut my fucking dress, and now you're asking if I fucked Nate, like you give a shit?"

"I didn't say I give a shit." Bishop smirks. He drops his lips to my ear, his hand running down the side of my ribs. He squeezes roughly, a little too roughly. Rough enough to leave a bruise. "I just need to know if I won the bet or not," he seethes through a harsh whisper. I tilt my head back, forcing the tears back. Of course. Of course this is a fucking game to these boys. I'm such a fucking idiot.

"You lost!" Nate laughs, walking back toward us. He comes up beside us, tilting his head at me, before he says harshly, "She didn't open her gap for me."

"Fuck you, Nate. Fuck both of you."

Bishop lets me go instantly and I fall to the ground with a humph, the dirt and leaves grabbing onto my thighs and ass. Bishop leans down and cuts the cable ties in the middle, freeing my wrists. I stretch them out, looking up at him.

"I hate you," I snarl.

He grins. "And I still wanna fuck you, so we'll figure something out."

I snap my mouth shut, getting to my feet. He follows, standing an inch away from me. “There is no way in hell you are ever touching me again.” I glare.

He steps forward, backing me against the trunk. “Nice. Now, try again, but this time”—his hands slam up against the tree, caging me in—“say it like you mean it.” Then he bends down, pulling my lower lip into his mouth.

I fight a groan at how it feels to have his mouth on me again, and I can’t help it. I fucking hate myself for being this easy for him, but he doesn’t have to know how well my body responds to him.

He smirks against my mouth, slowly pulling back until my lip pops from his. He licks my chin leisurely. “Wanna lie to me again?”

“I hate you,” I repeat.

“Yeah, I know, but we fuck so well together.”

“Bishop!” Cash hollers from behind us. “Give the girl your fucking hoodie so we can get back to camp.”

Bishop grins, zipping his hoodie down, exposing his white shirt that glows in the moonlight. He tosses it at me and I catch it, slipping my arms into the warmth and fighting the urge to sniff the collar where his sweet, woodsy cologne is strongest. Planted right between clean soap and pure masculinity.

Scowling at him, Nate walks up to us, taking my hand, but I pull back. “Get fucked. I’m not following you anywhere.”

Nate shrugs. “Fine by me.”

Asshole.

Bishop chuckles, but I turn, making my way to God knows where in the forest. “Oh, and I need my gun back!” I yell out over my shoulder.

“Where are you going, kitty?” Nate asks as they all follow me.

“Well, to the camp, of course.”

“And how do you know it’s this way?” Bishop asks, his voice closer behind me.

“Because I just know.”

We make it to the camp, and as soon as the bonfire comes into view, I relax. It’s in the middle, and there’re around seven tents scattered throughout the area, but far enough away from each other to not know what’s going on in the one across from you.

“Madi!” Carter yells out from a log beside the campfire. He jogs up to me, and I see his eyes go over my shoulder to the boys behind me, a hundred questions no doubt simmering through his brain. A hundred questions I don’t owe him answers for. “Hey, you made it.”

I smile. “Just.”

Bishop snickers from behind me, and Nate leaves, snatching a bottle of whiskey off someone who has already passed out.

Carter looks back to me, his eyes glassy and lazy. Obviously, he’s drunk, and obviously, I’m jealous. It’s not quite midnight yet, and I need a drink. “Let me show you where your tent is.”

“Ok—”

“I got this. Thanks, bumboy.” Bishop hooks his arm around my waist, steering me toward a tent at the back, hidden a little deeper into the forest.

“Bishop! That was fucking rude. He set up our tent.”

“So he fucking should. It’s what bumboys do. Now...” We step into the junction of the tent, where two of the bedrooms join the other two bedrooms. He unzips one side, pushing me into the dark room. “Get changed into something more slutty.”

“What?” I snap. He steps inside the room too, but I can’t see him. I can only make out the edges of his body from the flickering fire dancing, where the party is. “Get out.”

He steps closer. “No.”

I step backward. “Bishop, I mean it. Get back.”

He counters my footwork, stepping forward once again. “No,” he whispers into the inky yet surprisingly warm enclosure of the tent. My back hits the weak wall of the tent and I gasp, closing my eyes. Fuck. I’m so totally screwed with him. I feel him before I see anything, his thumb dancing across my bottom lip. “Scared?”

“Define scared,” I breathe, my eyes still closed.

His thumb moves down the rim of my jaw, slowly trickling down the side of my neck and over my jugular. His warm mouth skims over mine softly. “Of me,” he whispers.

I open my eyes, the white of his skeleton mask glowing and the white of his eyes bright. “Yes,” I answer honestly, because I am. I don’t trust him, but I did like having sex with him. Maybe he’s right; maybe we can just have sex.

“Good.”

“This.” I gesture between us. “What is it?”

He lets out a throaty chuckle. “It means nothing. Just sex. You seem to get my dick

hard, so I'm running with it."

Swallowing past his words, I think over what this would mean for me. I've always gotten attached to the guys I sleep with. It's a fault of mine, and inside, I'd probably be labeled as a crazy girl, but I tend to feel too much.

"I've never done it before," I admit. "The whole friends-with-benefits thing."

He laughs, this time tilting his head back, and thoughts dance in my head to what it would be like smacking him upside the head in this very moment. "Baby, we are not friends, and we are most definitely not friends with benefits. You're my nemesis, who I always get panty-less. Now," he mutters, gripping the front of my dress and tearing it off. "Drop them."

Pushing my thoughts to the back of my head, I step out of my thong, kicking it away. He steps back, and I see his head tilt in the shadows.

"Fine," I mutter. "But no one is to know, and also, I'm not very good at this, because I tend to—"

"Stop fucking talking." His mouth smashes down onto mine. I groan softly, tilting my head to give his tongue more access. He works with his belt between us, yanking it off and dropping it to the ground with a clink. Bringing his hand up to my throat, he clenches roughly before slowly gliding down the front of me, squeezing one of my nipples between his fingers.

"Mmm," I moan into his mouth.

"Fucking missed this mouth," he mutters against my lips before dropping to his knees.

Clutching his hair into my fists, I yank his head up to look at me from down below. “First of all, no one will know about us, and secondly, you will not fuck anyone else. Comprendre?” I hiss, my eyebrows quirked, even though I know he can’t see me. I tug at his hair again. “If you can’t agree to not sleeping with someone else while we’re fucking, Bishop, you can leave right now and I’ll take care of myself for tonight,” I warn.

His slick tongue presses against the inside of my thigh. “Yeah, babe, pretty sure I can do that, since I don’t go sinking my dick into any fucking gap.”

I tilt my head back. “I hate you.”

He licks me all the way up to the junction of my thighs and then bites down on the tender flesh. “Ditto, baby.” He flicks my clit softly and my heart launches in my chest, my core tensing and my knees almost buckling. “Stay up!” he orders, pulling away from me with bite in his tone. He comes back to me and wraps his delicious lips around my clit, bending down more as his tongue slides deep inside of me.

“Oh fuck!” I pant, gripping his hair again and trying to fight the need to fall to the ground.

He drags his tongue up to my clit, circling again before one of his fingers slips inside of me, and then another joins in.

“Bishop,” I moan, as his pace picks up and his finger curls to hit the spot in me that has only ever been hit by him. Usually, I’m a clit orgasm kinda girl, but since Bishop, I’ve found out just how pleasurable it can be through penetration and when you fuck someone who knows what the hell they’re doing. I arch my back, pressing myself into his mouth. “Shit,” I whimper.

“Yeah, baby, let go.” He groans against my clit. His arm brushes against my ankles as he pumps himself, and with that thought in my head, I explode around and on his tongue, my body jolting and my brain swimming in a deep, dark, misty haze of euphoria. With one last long lick down my slit, he stands, his finger diving back into my channel. He withdraws and brings his finger to my mouth. I open—unwillingly, mind you—and he slips his finger into my mouth. I circle it, sucking off the sweet taste of my pleasure.

“That... is proof you lied to me, kitty,” he growls, pulling his fingers out of my mouth.

“What are you going to do about it?” I taunt him, smirking.

Silence.

Then he wraps my hair around his fist and tugs my hair so hard I swear I feel strands being ripped from my scalp. Pulling my bottom lip into his mouth, he bites down on it roughly, until the tang of blood trickles down the back of my throat. “Now? Now, I’m going to play with you.”

I smirk up at him, and his grip intensifies. I hiss through the snapping of my hair. “I’m not a toy, Bishop.”

“Wrong answer, Madison, because you are my toy, and the last toy I had?” His other hand latches around my throat like a choker as his mouth skims over mine again, sailing over his bite mark. “Broke.”

Khales?

Too horny to ask questions, I run my hand over his hard chest, every defined ab jolting under the soft palm of my hand. “I don’t like being a toy.”

“Tough shit.” He twists me around by my hair, and I obey, because he has my fucking hair, before shoving me down onto the mattress on the floor. My hands come out to steady myself, and I arch my back, pressing into him. His fingers dig into my hip bones as he runs his hand down from the back of my neck. “Fuck, you’ve got a sexy fucking spine.”

“What?” I whisper, looking over my shoulder, but he pushes on my head until my

face is buried in the soft blankets and my ass is elevated high into the air.

“I wonder,” he whispers, pressing one finger inside of me before his mouth comes to my pussy from behind. “What it would be like to take it apart.”

I pause, my breath stilling. What the hell does that mean? And why don't I care? I grind into his mouth, ignoring the fact that my butt is probably right there in his face, but he doesn't mind. Drawing his tongue out, he licks over my slit, over the opening of my pussy, and then comes to the crack of my ass, licking over my exit. Holy fucking shit!

“Yeah,” he murmurs, coming back up. “I'd fucking snap you, kitty.” Then his hand lands on my ass cheek with a stinging slap. I scream out, because it's fucking sore. “And I look forward to watching you break in my very hands.” Then he presses himself inside me until he tears through my tight entrance, the rim of his cock grazing over every inch of my wet walls. He pumps me once.

And then again.

Every single time, the head of his cock rubs deliciously against the most sensitive part of my pussy.

“And what if I let you?” I whisper into the blanket, drunk by his assault, hazy from his need. He pushes again, and then pulls out of me, flipping me over onto my back. I look up at him as he crawls over my body, his head tilted.

“Then I gave you too much credit,” he mutters. Shit. Did he hear me? “You're stupider than I thought.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Crawling off the mattress on the floor, I swipe my sweaty hair off my sticky forehead and look over my shoulder. Bishop looks at me from his position, sprawled out on the bed, his body on full display for me. Every muscle beneath his beautiful olive skin defined, but not so he's bulky. "Are you going to go all weird on me?" I ask, our eyes entranced together, locked in some epic stare-down, and the only thing going to lose are the butterflies entrapped in my gut. He continues to stare at me with a blank expression, while his index finger works his upper lip. His eyes are dark and brooding, just like him. Intimidating yet captivating. When our eyes connect, it's like he's shoved me through the gates of hell and locked them behind himself. I'm so totally screwed with him. I've never been able to separate sex from feelings, so why did I think I could do it with the one guy who evoked feelings in me the first time I saw him?

He shakes his head slowly. "I don't go weird."

I quirk my eyebrow. "Sure about that? Mr. Went All Weird On Me After the First Time?"

His jaw tics, his eyes remaining as cold as stone. Sensing the tense silence, I get to my feet, fully naked, and drop down, picking up a new dress. I shimmy into it, not needing a bra or panties, or maybe just wanting to get out of this room, because it's claustrophobic. Fluffing my hair up, I pull my Keds on.

"Where are you going?" he asks through a raspy voice.

"To get drunk." And then I pull open the tent flap and march toward the bonfire and all the drunk screams. Regardless if I know I haven't been able to separate sex from

attachment, I still want to try. And considering that when it comes to Bishop, I'm stubborn, I'm hoping that will win out and I won't let my pride get hurt by showing him I have feelings for him. Which I don't right now, unless you count hate as a feeling, but I know the possibility is there. It's always there with me.

Just as I approach the keg, Tillie walks up to me—or stumbles, rather. “I'm too drunk.” Her eyes are crossed, her words slurred.

I laugh. “I see that. Do I need to take you to bed?”

She shakes her head. “No.” Burp. “No. But I made a mistake.”

Filling up my cup, I watch as the foam wraps around the rim of my red cup.

“Okay, what have you done?” I smirk around my cup, lifting the disgusting beer to my mouth. Nate walks toward us and wraps his arm around Tillie's waist.

“Tada!” she announces, stretching her arm wide toward Nate. “Introducing: my mistake.” Oh no.

My smile falls instantly. “Nate!” I hiss. “She's drunk!”

He shrugs. “Needed something to take my mind off my stabby stepsister, you know, since you don't give it up.”

“Give what up?” My eyes slant. He pushes Tillie away and stalks toward me. “Nate? What the fuck are you doing?”

Caging me against a tree, he tilts his head, studying me. “There's so much you don't know, sis,” he snaps. “You're fucking deluded if you think you can make it out of this with your life.” He bends down, running his lips over the crook of my neck.

“You’re going to die.”

It feels as though a knife launched into my throat, and I swallow past it before shoving him away. “Leave me alone.”

“Naw,” he murmurs lazily, coming back to me and wrapping his hands around the backs of my thighs, lifting me up. He slams me against the tree trunk again, and I mentally slap myself for wearing no panties. “You and I both know you don’t mean that.” He lips skim over mine, but I move my face away from him.

“No, I mean it. Let me down, Nate. You’re obviously high. Let me go.” I can see it in how dilated his pupils are that he’s on some heavy shit.

“Nate!” Bishop barks from behind us.

Nate grins at me but slowly rubs my body down his abs as he drops me back to the ground. “I warned you,” he whispers, before bending down to my ear. “This is all a game, kitty. Bishop, me, the Kings—it’s a game, but it’s a death match.”

I watch him retreating back before looking at Bishop. “I think it’s time I start asking questions.”

Bishop walks toward me slowly. “Pretty sure asking questions is out of your jurisdiction.”

“I WAS SO DRUNK LAST night.” Tillie massages her temples as I strip down to my bikini.

Tatum scoffs, ripping off her clothes so she’s in hers as well. “No shit.” She rolls her eyes and steps into the cold lake. I woke up this morning needing a bath or shower, so I woke up Tillie and Tatum and dragged their asses with me to try to find a lake,

which we did. Buried in the middle of nowhere, about a forty-minute walk north from the camp. Tonight is our last night here before going home tomorrow, thank God. I don't want anyone to find out about Bishop and me sleeping together—again—so when—not if, when—something happens, no one can tell me they told me so.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“I can’t believe you slept with Nate, Tillie.” Tatum shakes her head and then dunks under the water, pushing her hair out of her face. “But seriously... how good is he?”

“Stop. Gross.” I shake my head, stepping into the lake. There are rocks that surround it, so I take a step on the first one, tying my hair up into a messy ponytail. “I don’t want to know about Nate and his....” I pause.

“Huge cock?” Tatum winks at me.

“Really?” I scold her. “You just had to say that?”

“Yes, really, and I’m flattered. I really am.” Nate smirks, walking toward the mouth of the lake, with Bishop, Cash, Abel, Chase, Hunter and Eli following behind him.

The Kings are all here.

My frown deepens, but I turn back toward the water and dive in until I’m under the bitter glacial water. Swimming to the top, I surface and swipe my hair out of my face with a smirk of my own. The sound of birds tweeting and crickets chirping hum through the blistering silence, and it feels natural, perfect. Doggy paddling under the water to keep my body afloat, I dunk my mouth under and examine the Kings. They’re all in board shorts, shirtless, blessing us all with their—what I have no doubt they call—masterpieces for bodies. Nate starts talking to Tillie, much to her dismay, and Tatum looks to be taunting Hunter and Abel, as the rest of the boys take a seat on a couple of rocks overlooking the vast area of the lake.

Still doggy paddling to keep above the water, Bishop starts walking in, headed for

me. Each saunter he makes toward me, the waters separate for him, much like the human race whenever Bishop is around. He gets closer and then dives under, every muscle in his body rippling as he plunges in. He disappears. Seconds pass, and he still hasn't resurfaced. I look around, left to right, and then finally come back to where everyone is on the shoreline, all talking like they were.

Where the fu—

Arms latch around my ankles, and I scream out loudly before the glacial waters suck me under again. My hands swing out as I attempt to pull myself to the surface, but Bishop's arm locks around my waist tightly, pulling me closer to him until my body is flush against his and we're both entrapped by the water. He grabs me at the back of my neck and pulls my lips to his, his tongue slipping inside my mouth. He grabs one of my boobs, pushing my bikini down and squeezing my nipple. Deciding to take his lack of grip on me as a chance to break free, I push off his chest and struggle to the surface, sucking in a large gulp of air and swiping my hair off my face. Bishop comes up a second after me, a smirk on his mouth and water trickling over his perfect face.

I splash him. "Dick move!"

He grins, swimming up to me. "I never said I wasn't a dick, kitty." He wraps one of his arms around the back of my waist and pulls me into him. I search his eyes for something, and I don't even know what. He glares back at me, burning enough to set my body on fire despite the fact I'm in a freezing fucking cold lake.

"What?" he asks, and I keep my hand on his chest, trying to ignore how his cock presses against my stomach every few seconds as he bobs in the water.

"We're supposed to be a secret, remember?" I tilt my head. "You're not being very secretive."

He shrugs and licks the lake water off his plump lips. “I didn’t get to where I am by giving a fuck what people think.”

“And where is that?” I ask, sinking closer into his embrace. I’m well aware of how this would look to our friends on the shore, but I’m so entranced by Bishop that I no longer care. Black Veil Brides’ “Knives and Pens” plays from Tillie’s Beats sound-dock in the distance just as Bishop grins.

“God status.”

I roll my eyes, swimming to the edge of one of the big rocks that are placed around the edge of the lake, pushing myself up and taking a seat on one that’s tucked away slightly. Bishop follows, coming to me and climbing up. I try to ignore the way his tan skin glistens in the afternoon sun and how his muscles contract with every single movement. I notice the scripted tattoo over his ribcage and nudge my head as he takes a seat beside me. “What’s the tattoo say?”

He leans over, lifting his arm to look at it, and then leans back on his elbows, shaking the water out of his hair. “There are humans, and there are wolves, and then there is me...” He inches up to me, his lips gliding over the thin flesh of my neck. “A fucking god.”

Page 63

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

I close my eyes and internally fight the urge to crawl onto his lap. Prying them open, they fall on everyone back at the mouth of the lake. “You did not get that.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, I did.”

“I’m not even surprised.” I lie on my back, throwing my arm over my eyes to shield the sun. Little colorful dots dance behind my shut lids, and I’m just about to ask Bishop about what the whole “riddle me this” stuff was about, when I feel his fingertip glide down the side of my ribcage.

“Bishop,” I warn through a whisper.

“Shh,” he coos, pushing his finger up to my lips. “Just go with it.”

“But what about the rules? We had rules.”

“Kitty, I don’t do rules—ever. In anything too, by the way. I do what the fuck I want, and if people don’t like it, then it’s no loss to me.” His warm lips press to the crook of my neck, and I suck in a breath, my pulse picking up speed. “I want you. You want me. Stop being such a fucking girl and spread those legs.”

Obedying his order, I slowly inch my legs wider, and he dips back into the water. Pulling my legs toward him, he ducks behind the rock and grips my bikini bottoms.

“Bishop!” I laugh, getting up on my elbows.

“What?” He licks his lips. “They can’t see, and who the fuck cares if they could?”

“Ah, me?” I answer sarcastically. “This may come as a shock to you, but I don’t go flashing my hoo-ha to just anyone.”

“Don’t say hoo-ha ever again.”

“Oh?” I quirk my eyebrow. “Is that your cock-block?”

“What do you mean?” he asks, dunking his lips under the water and then spitting it out.

“The opposite of cock-bait.”

He stops, his eyes running over my body in such a way it has me forgetting everyone that is here. “Naw, babe. Nothing can stop me from this.” He presses the cushion of his thumb against my clit, and I drop down to my back, my eyes closing but the afternoon sun fighting to break through my eyelids. “Your Betrayal” by Bullet For My Valentine starts blaring in the distance, just as Bishop pulls off my bikini bottoms and the fresh forest air whips around my tender flesh.

My chest rises and falls, my breathing heavy and needy, wanting him to dull the ache he has started, the ache that seems to be on Nitric Oxide whenever he’s around. His warm mouth blankets my folds and my back arches, my hand slamming down on my own mouth to stifle my moans. Spreading my legs wide, he licks me from my entry to my clit and then sucks on it softly before circling my nub in his mouth with slow, pressured rotations.

“Bishop,” I moan softly.

“What do you want, kitty?” he murmurs against my needy clit. “I might give it to you.”

“I... I...,” I mutter hoarsely. He presses his tongue over my clit, rubbing it vigorously until my thighs are quivering and my moans are about to scream out of my body. “I want you!” I whisper-yell. “Fuck, I want you, Bishop.”

“My what, kitty? You can’t have it all.”

Not seeing the truth in his words during my sex-drunken haze, I answer, “Your cock. I need it. I need you.”

He yanks my body and I fall into the water with a loud splash, the ice-cold lake only enhancing the sensitivity of my nipples. Wrapping his arm around waist, he props me up and surfaces me on the water. I wrap my hands around his neck, squeezing my legs around him, and slowly sink myself down on top of his thick head. His eyes roll back—fucking roll back—and my pussy clenches at the sight alone, but my finger comes up to his lips, where I run it over the plumpness roughly. He hits my hand away and shoves me against one of the rocks before trying to pull out of me. I clench around him, pulling him into myself during his outward stroke.

“Fuck,” he mutters. “So fucking tight.” His hand comes up to my throat. “But I fucking hate you.” He pumps me again. “Hate what you are.” He pulls out and then pushes in roughly, so rough my back starts to sting from the friction. He kisses me urgently, sucking my bottom lip into his mouth. “Hate who you are.” He pounds into me, raw and consistently, my back aching from the grazes, which is almost unbearable, but I’m so lost in our cage, a cage that’s entranced by Bishop’s voodoo sex magic, I don’t care. His hands come to my thighs, where he spreads me wider. “I hate you, kitty, and that’s why you will always just be another fuck for me.”

I rub myself against him. “I’m... I’m...” I wanna say a stupid bitch, but what comes out is, “...going to come!” I let go, my body shaking, my brain fuzzy, my vision blurred, and my hearing frizzled. My orgasm takes every drop of my energy and sucks it into a hole of nothingness with empty feelings.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

He follows closely, his cock pulsing inside of me as I continue to milk him.

His shoulders turn slack as he leans back, searching my eyes. “I’m flattered you hate me that much.” I roll my eyes and push away from him. He lets me go, and I try to hide my disappointment. Do I want him to chase me? Possibly. I have too much pride to accept him just letting me walk away, but I also know this is Bishop. It’s obvious just how unattainable he is, and him gracing me with his presence is what I should be happy with. I scoff inwardly. Fuck that.

“Hey.” His hand catches mine just as I get out of the lake and back onto the rock. I look at him over my shoulder, and he stills. His eyes settle on my back. “Shit.”

I look over my shoulder. “Those will heal.” I shrug, stepping off the rock and walking away from him, opting for the short trek back through the tree line of the lake to get back to the girls instead of swimming back. “My feelings, on the other hand...,” I whisper angrily under my breath. My feelings shouldn’t even be in the equation. I know this, but he doesn’t. He’s made it crystal clear he doesn’t want more, so I should just walk away now before I get hurt—or break.

“Madison!” he yells, jogging up to me. I ignore him, carrying on my walk. Am I being ridiculous? Yes. Do I care? No.

“Hey!” He tugs on my hand, spinning me around to face him. “What’s wrong?” His eyebrows draw in. He looks genuinely confused.

I shake my head. “Nothing. Don’t worry about it.” Then I turn around again and start walking back toward the girls.

He tugs on my hand again, only this time I fall against his chest. He looks down at me, making me feel small with a simple glare. “What. The. Fuck. Is your problem, kitty?”

I exhale. “It’s nothing. I guess I always knew you hated me, but I didn’t know the severity of it.”

He tilts his head. “So why are you sulking, then?”

I push at his chest, but his hand comes up and catches my wrist. “Stop the fucking bullshit, kitty. Tell me what’s wrong!”

“Why do you hate me so much?” I blurt out. “Why? Why did you say you hate what I am and who I am—as if you’ve known me forever?”

His jaw tics, but his grip doesn’t loosen. “Maybe I fucking have. Ever thought about that?”

I pause, slamming my mouth shut. “What do you mean?” I ask after a moment.

He pushes me this time. “Maybe I’ve known who you are for some time.” He starts walking back toward the mouth of the lake.

I run up to him, falling into step behind him. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means you should just stay away.”

“No.”

“What?” He spins around to face me. “What do you mean no?”

“I won’t stay away from you just because you said so!” I retort. “Tell me!”

He steps up to me, his eyes cold, his jaw stone, and his lip slightly curled. “You don’t know anything.”

“So fucking tell me!” I shout at him, searching his eyes and ignoring the shiver of goose bumps that have spiked over my skin. “God, Bishop,” I whisper in defeat. “Be honest with me.”

Silence. I look back at his face, catching him watching me closely. “You’re not ready. But I will tell you this...” He pauses, licking his bottom lip. “Not everything is as it seems. We—The Kings—don’t play games for shits and giggles. There’s a reason why we do what we do when we have to, and trust me, kitty. You’re lucky you made it out with your life intact—for now.”

“What?” I whisper in shock. I told him to be honest, but now he has given me even more questions to ask.

“As much as it looks like we’re trying to hurt you...” He pauses again. “As much as we have hurt you, it’s all for your own good.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” I rake my hair out of my face, my breath quickening. “Bishop, that’s just giving me more questions.”

“Do you trust me?”

Instant. “No.”

He gives me one of his panty-melting smirks. “Good. Do you trust Nate?”

Hesitation. “N—no.”

“Your judgment isn’t as shit as you think, then.” He steps up to me, gripping my fingers with his and pulling me into his body. “Believe it or not, though, we’re doing this for your own good, and it could quite possibly put us in danger too.”

I rub my temples. “You’re giving me a headache,” I murmur into his warm, hard chest.

“Well then, we’re even, ’cause I have something else that’s aching.”

I shove him, a small smile pulling on my lips. “So you hate me that much, huh?” I ask playfully, as we walk back toward everyone.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“Yes. I won’t lie about that, but that’s only because I have unanswered questions, suspicions, and a whole lot of facts that are in front of me. But it just so happens... you get my dick hard.”

“Hmm,” I murmur, just as we step out onto the sandy area. “And men say girls are complicated? That right there, Bishop Vincent Hayes, was a grade-A clinger warning!” I mock him, my mouth open.

He stops his walk, scowling at me with his lip curled up. “Say what?” Then he charges at me, grabbing the back of my thighs firefighter-style and flinging me over his shoulder.

I scream out loudly, hitting his ass with my hand while everyone chuckles in the background. “Bishop!” I yell at him, just as he tosses me into the air. I swim around midair just as my back and butt hit the hard water with a loud splash, and little bites cover my ass.

Thirty minutes. That’s how long I spent with Bishop. And he has bruised me in more places than I can see.

“SO ARE WE JUST GOING to ignore the fact that you and Bishop Vincent fucking Hayes are obviously banging?” Tatum states, pulling on her cutoff shorts.

I tug on my little black shorts, buttoning them up, and then throw on a loose white boyfriend suit-shirt, tucking one side in. “I mean, I don’t know. We’re just sleeping together, but you can’t say anything. And when this all blows up in my face, you’re still not allowed to say anything!” I look pointedly to both Tatum and Tillie.

“I didn’t say anything.” Tatum shakes her head, a small smile playing on her lips. But then her smile falls. “But please be careful. They’re dangerous, Madi.”

“I know how to take care of myself,” I reassure her with a smile. Looking to Tillie, I nudge my head. “What’s up with you and Nate?”

She stills, pulling on her boyfriend jeans. “Nothing.”

I narrow my eyes. “Bullshit.”

She exhales. “I don’t know. We slept together last night.” She looks to Tatum nervously.

Tatum stops what she’s doing, looking at me and Tillie. “What? Oh, please. Like I care. I was serious when I said I used him just like he used me. I wish you all the sexy times in the world, I promise.”

“Okay,” Tillie says relieved. “But he’s... I don’t know. Confusing.”

“Duh, it’s Nate. He’s a dick,” Tatum scoffs.

“No, that’s not it,” Tillie murmurs. “I mean, he’s obviously a dick and all that, but to me, not so much.”

“Hmm.” I stare off into the distance. “Interesting.”

Tillie laughs, tying her pastel pink hair up in a high ponytail. “It’s nothing.”

I bend down, pull out the bottle of Grey Goose, and then throw the red cups in the middle. “So this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when I said we should all go camping.” I roll my eyes. “This isn’t the camping I usually do.”

“We know that.” Tatum grins. “You should have brought your guns!”

A horrified expression pulls across my face. “What? No way. That’s not—no. That’s going against everything my dad taught me growing up.”

“Well, maybe we could all go together sometime. I’ve never shot a gun.” Tillie stares off into the distance.

“That’s a better idea!” I point, widening my eyes at Tatum.

“What?” Tatum feigns innocence. “Just saying... maybe you could shoot Bishop, and people would think it was an accident.” We all start laughing. Clutching my stomach, I wipe the tears off my cheeks.

“You know,” I say, pouring in the vodka and then opening the orange juice. “When I started at Riverside, I had no idea what to expect. All my other schools? It was difficult.”

“How so? You’re probably the coolest chick I’ve ever met,” Tillie says, and then looks to Tatum. “No offense.”

Tatum clutches her heart in mock hurt and then giggles.

“Because I just didn’t... fit in. Girls would just flat out hate me.” I shook my head. “Anyway, the only school I sort of did fit in—but somehow still didn’t—was in Minnesota. And that’s only because I was dating the quarterback.” I laugh. “He was popular, and everyone hated that I was the girl he chose, but they didn’t voice it.” I take a swig of my drink. “At least not until we broke up.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation,” Tatum murmurs, sinking her drink, “no one has liked me as much as you two do either. But... I’ve never liked them either, so it worked out

well.”

I smile, holding up my drink. “To us!” We clink and then swallow our drinks.

Tatum lies down. “Are we being unsociable by not being out there drinking with everyone else?”

I lean back on my elbows. “Probably, but we never liked any of them before we came here, so who cares?”

“Knock, knock!”

“Don’t come in. We’re naked!” Tatum laughs dramatically.

The zipper rips open, and Carter steps inside with a grin. “Aw, I’m disappointed.” He drops down beside me. “Why are you girls hiding out in here?”

Page 66

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

I giggle, leaning up and pouring more vodka and orange juice into my cup. “Because we can.”

“Oh, I see.” Carter grins. “My beer not good enough for you?”

I look at him, noticing where Bishop’s eyes are dark green and smoldering, Carter’s are bright and lively. Where Bishop’s bottom lip has a slight pout to it, Carter’s are average at best. Where Bishop’s skin is soft, tan, and glistens in the sun, Carter’s is pale white but has a slight blush to his cheeks that is—undoubtedly—adorable. Carter also has a single dip in his chin too that I also find adorable.

I look back into his eyes to find him looking at me with a smug grin. “Like what you see?”

I see Tatum whips her head toward us out the corner of my eye. I take a drink. “Meh.” I shrug. He elbows me playfully and we both laugh. I know Carter was with someone else last night, just like I was, but I don’t care. I don’t have any emotional attachments to Carter. I don’t hate him. I don’t anything him. He’s just pretty to look at sometimes.

“So.” Tatum rolls onto her stomach as I grab another cup and fill him up. “I heard you hooked up with Jenny Prescott last night?” She wiggles her eyebrows for added effect. “I heard she can do this little trick with her—”

“Stop,” Carter laughs, almost choking on his drink. “But yeah, she does a trick.”

“Oh, gross,” I mutter, looking to Tillie.

“Jealous?” Carter grins at me. Oh, dear.

“Definitely not.”

His smile falls slightly.

“I can back her answer, because she was with—”

I hit Tatum with my leg.

“Oh?” Carter quirks. “With who?”

“No one. With myself.” I smile at him.

“Oh, I see. No kiss and tell?”

I zip my lips and throw away the key. “Never.”

He leans back on his elbow, taking a sip of his drink. Bishop and I never had the conversation about how open we are about sleeping with other people, even though that’s not how I am at all. And even though I did make him say it just before sex, I don’t think that counts. Carter looks up at me. “Whoever it is, be careful, yeah?”

I look down at him, very aware of how close he is to me. I nod. “Of course.”

He smiles sadly then takes another drink, just as the tent entrance pulls over and in walks Bishop, Nate, and Hunter.

Bishop looks to Carter, his jaw slightly clenched, and suddenly, I feel guilty. Why the hell do I feel guilty? There were no promises made between us. But even so, I can say without a shadow of doubt that I don’t like being near any other guy but Bishop.

Having Carter so close to me doesn't feel right, but having Bishop sucking on my flesh does.

Bishop's eyes narrow on me, taking in Carter and me. He instantly has the wrong idea. Surprise, surprise. Instead of throwing a hissy fit, though, Bishop takes a seat beside Tatum as she pours them all a drink.

"Party in our tent then?" She looks to Bishop, Nate, and Hunter. Bishop's eyes haven't moved from me, so I look to Tatum, handing her my cup. "Another?" She raises her eyebrows. "If I didn't know better, Montgomery, I'd say you want to get wasted."

I shrug. "Well, since I didn't get to have any last night..." I look at Bishop with a fake smile. "Yes, I want more."

Nate shuffles over to the other side of me, his arm wrapping around my waist. I close my eyes, calming my breathing. "Sis," he whispers into my ear, his hair tickling my earlobe. "I'm sorry."

I open my eyes and look at him wide-eyed. "For what?"

"Everything, but most importantly, what's still to come." His eyes search mine desperately. Every sharp angle of his jaw and his straight nose pisses me off.

"I'm sick of the riddles," I whisper.

He grins and then leans into me, running his lips over my cheek. "I know." Then he pulls me closer to him and noticeably away from Carter. I take my drink from Tatum, bringing it to my lips.

"Music!" Tillie says, looking between me and Nate uncomfortably. I look back at

Bishop, who is leaning into Tatum, and she is looking at me in silent question.

Jesus. What sort of fucked up group are we?

I shake my head at Tillie, hoping she knows Nate and I are not like that. Tillie pulls out her sound dock and hits Play on Escape the Fate's "One For The Money." I smirk at her. I love her taste in music; it's so different from Tatum and Nate's hip-hop obsession. Not that I dislike hip-hop, I just have an eccentric taste in music and like to listen to different genres all at once, not the same over and over again.

Nate pulls out what looks like a brown cigarette, and then pulls out a Zippo, sparking it up. He takes a big toke and then passes it to me. I fight internally with myself before thinking, Fuck it, and taking the cigarette off him. The sweet, woodsy smell of marijuana smoke fills the tent and engulfs my senses.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Nate points to the tent entrance. “Bumboy, close the tent!” Carter looks at him with narrowed eyes before getting up and shutting the entrance.

I bring it to my mouth and inhale like I’ve seen in movies. Thanks, Redman and Methodman. The smoke hits me right in my throat and then in my chest. I cough spastically, my lungs feeling like they’re closing up, before handing it to Carter. A second later, my eyes are heavy and the thick smoke that’s starting to fog up the tent all starts to swim around everyone’s frames, slowly getting thicker and thicker.

I lean into Nate and laugh. “Are we hot-boxing the tent?”

He kisses me on the head. “Yeah, kitty, we are.”

My eyes find Bishop’s. He’s leaning on his elbow, but slightly into Tatum. His legs are sprawled out in front of him, but again, it looks like he’s open to her. He grins at me, and then leans into her, whispering something into her ear. Anger, jealousy, and hate fills me to the brink as I look to Tillie, trying to find something to take my mind off whatever the fuck Bishop is doing.

“Tillie! Come here.” I wave her over as she takes a long hit on the joint. “Whoa,” I laugh, as she takes a seat between Nate and me. “You’re hitting that like a pro.”

She shrugs. “I mean, it isn’t my first time.”

Nate grabs onto her and places her on top of his lap. “You’re so fucking sexy right now. I could eat you.”

“Please don’t,” I murmur, taking the joint from Tatum and bringing it to my mouth before taking another hit. This time, it goes down my airways a little smoother. I let the taste sit on my tongue, closing my eyes and feeling every inch of myself relax and loosen. All the stresses and worries I had thirty minutes ago mean nothing. Bishop across from me whispering sweet nothings into Tatum’s ear? Means nothing. I lay on my back with the joint between my fingers.

Carter bends over on his elbow, taking the joint from me. “The thing is for sharing, Madi. Puff, puff, pass!” He laughs, moving in closer to me once again.

I laugh. “Oh, Carter,” I announce loudly. “I don’t share anything, and if something of mine thinks I do share, I can show them in more ways than one on how I don’t.”

The tent falls silent, everyone understanding the meaning in my words. Everyone but Carter. Stupid Carter. I bring my hand up to my face, an inch away, but the smoke is so thick I can barely make out the outline of my fingers.

“But!” I add. “Good thing I’m a free agent, huh?”

A hand glides up my leg, and I know it’s not Bishop’s slightly rough hand. This hand is too soft. “Yeah, lucky for me.”

I turn my head toward where I know Carter is.

Nate laughs, but it sounds like it’s muffled. “Maybe we should get Hunter someone to play with. Then this can be one big orgy.”

Filled with anger, betrayal, and jealousy—jealousy, because Tatum probably has Bishop’s hands on her—my thoughts pause. My core clenches and sweat beads on my head. The thought fills me with excitement, hate, jealousy, and... lust? Why? Why does that thought turn me on? Annoyed at myself for being such a mess, I turn

onto my stomach.

“Naw.” I giggle, my eyes lazy and my movements slow. I rest my head down on my arm. “Hunter can play with me. I can take two... just ask Bishop. He knows just how much I can take in bed.”

Hands wrap around my ankles, and I’m suddenly tugged roughly, flipping onto my back. Yeah, those hands... those are Bishop’s. The weight of a body falls over me, lips coming down to my ear. He pulls my lobe into his mouth. “Careful, kitty. I don’t share either.”

“You be careful.” I shove at his chest and he laughs. “Go back to doing what you were doing.”

Bishop pulls out his phone and flashes it into the corner, where two people are making out. Hunter and Tatum. They must have connected after the smoke got too thick.

“Hmm,” I murmur, tilting my head.

He looks back to me, pressing his lips against mine. “But the questions is, why did that bother you so much, kitty? Do we need to have the talk?”

Carter murmurs from behind me, “I’m just going to go.” Then he slips out of the tent quickly, letting some of the smoke out, but not all. At least now I can see the profile of Bishop’s face, just as Breaking Benjamin’s “The Diary of Jane” starts playing out of the dock.

“I don’t know. I’m not very good at this,” I reply.

“At what?” he whispers across my lips, pushing me down onto my back with his

body. He stretches my legs wide with his, resting in between until his bulge is digging into me—right there. “At this!” I gesture between us. “I... I don’t think I can do it and not feel, Bishop. I’m not you.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“Feel this.” He takes my hand and brings it down, pressing it against his thick-headed cock. “That’s all you need to feel.”

“I warned you.”

He ignores me, grinding his hips into me. “I might know what I’m doing.” He brings his lips back to mine and kisses me, his tongue entering my mouth, and I massage it with my own.

“I have no doubt that you do. It’s me I’m worried about.”

“As you should be,” Nate warns from somewhere in the thick smoke. “Just for the record, if you cause one teardrop from her eyes, B, I get one swing.”

Bishop chuckles against my lips. “She understands the guidelines of the game. No. Feelings,” he murmurs, planting a kiss on my lips after each word.

“Yeah, except she’s a girl—shocking, I know—and they always feel. How you feeling right now, Tillie?” he murmurs seductively.

“Oh stop!” I shuffle up. “We are not all going to have sex in the same room.”

Tatum groans from the back. “Speak for yourself.”

“Nope!” I launch off the floor, walking toward the tent entrance and pulling it open, the crisp, fresh mountain air awakening me somewhat. Bishop comes after me, taking my hand. “What’s wrong?”

I turn to look at him, searching his eyes. “Nothing. Just... my friends are sort of skanks.”

He laughs, tucking me under his arm. “Yeah, that I can agree with.”

Later that night, I’m sitting on one of the logs surrounding the bonfire, with Bishop next to me talking with Cash, his arm around my waist.

Tatum comes bouncing up to me, handing me a drink. “Sorry about before.”

I laugh, shaking my head and patting the spot beside me. “Don’t worry about it.”

She leans on my shoulder. “One more night here.”

“Yup.” I pop the P. One more night, and all I want to do is read my book. I don’t want to pull it out here, because someone might recognize it, and then Miss Winters might land her ass in trouble. So instead, I’ve had to let it burn in the back of my brain. But Bishop has been keeping my brain and body occupied, so it hasn’t been that hard. But alas, I’m still struggling with the urge to read what else is going on. The train of thoughts she was feeling has evoked something deep inside of me that I can’t let go of.

“So you and Bishop? All out in the open?” Tate whispers into my ear.

I bite down on my lower lip and shrug. “I don’t know, but I think so?”

She laughs, shoving me playfully. “Well, just be careful. Don’t show him all your cards.”

“Is this you giving me advice?” I whisper back loudly into her face.

“Yes!” she hisses with a grin. “I’m too pretty for prison, and I will kill him if he hurts you.”

I laugh, shaking my head while taking a sip of my drink. “Thanks, Tate.”

I look toward Bishop to find him staring at me. He swallows the rest of his drink and then tugs on my hand. “Come on.”

Cash is staring at me with a hint of a smug grin on his face.

The music changes to Red Jumpsuit Apparatus’s “Your Guardian Angel,” as we slowly dodge people and make our way deeper into the forest.

“Is this the part where you kill me?” I joke, our fingers lacing together. My heart skips a beat with how right it feels to have him so close.

He looks at me over his shoulder. “You laugh now...,” he teases.

My smile falls. “I swear to God, Bishop, if this is ano—”

“Shut up!” He spins around, pressing his finger to my lips. “Stop talking.” His eyes slice through every single restraint I thought I had. I nod and he drops his hand. “Good.” He keeps walking deeper into the forest, dodging fallen limbs as I follow his lead.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“It’s not far.” We keep walking for another twenty minutes, and then he stops, facing a thick area of shrubs. “What’s this?” I ask, tilting my head.

He pushes through a thick bush and steps ahead.

“Bishop?” The bush flies back into the same position it was in.

“Step through, kitty. Stop bitching out.”

I push my hands through and separate the little sharp branches, and then step one foot in until I’m on the other side. Letting it go, it flings back into place and I wipe my hands on my legs. “Jesus, what—” All thoughts skyrocket out of my head. “Oh my gosh,” I whisper, stepping forward and taking in the surroundings. The bright moonlight is reflecting off the silky still water of the lake, and there’re thousands upon thousands of fireflies that have lit up the dark, murky forest around us. It looks stunning, something out of a storybook. I step forward again, and Bishop’s hand finds mine. Slipping off my shoes, I let my toes sink into what looks like silicon sand. “How’d you know about this place?” I ask, looking back at Bishop.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

He shrugs, stepping up to me and taking a seat in the sand. “We sort of had to do a once-over of the perimeter—you know, to scare this chick....”

I shove him. “Dick.”

He laughs, his pearly teeth gleaming against his tan skin, reflecting off the moonlight. He tugs on my hand. “Sit.”

I follow his command, shuffling into his warmth. “This weekend hasn’t been something I expected.”

He nods in agreement. “Yeah, tell me about it.”

“Pretty sure you knew your intentions.” I roll my eyes.

“Maybe—” He grins, looking out over the water. “—but you’re not like most girls.” He looks back at me. “You’ve never made shit easy for me.”

“I don’t know,” I murmur. “I seem to be an easy slut when it comes to you.”

He laughs, leaning back on his elbow. “You’re not a slut, Madison. You’re just a chick who loves to explore her sexuality. In whose eyes does that make you a slut?” he questions. I pause. He continues, “It doesn’t matter. What they think of you isn’t your business. But you’re not a slut. I know sluts, and trust me, if you were one...” He stops, grinning at me again. Smug bastard. “There would be no way in hell you’d be caught bouncing on my dick.”

“Charming.” I roll my eyes. He wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me into him more. “Why would I need to be charming?” he mocks. “You’re a slut, remember?”

I shove him, trying to contain my laughter. “Can I ask you a question?”

“No.”

“Well I’m asking you anyway,” I mutter, lying flat on my back and gazing up at the twinkling of the stars. “What happened to your ex?” Silence. Maybe I overstepped the line? No, I know I overstepped the line. I knew I was before I even opened my mouth.

“Who told you about her?” he asks, relaxing his grip around my body.

“A few people.”

“Tatum.” He shakes his head, then whispers, “That girl has the biggest mouth in the history of Riverside.”

“Hey!” I shove him again. “That’s my best friend.”

“Well then I take back my earlier statement,” he declares, though I know there’s a hint of humor in his tone. “You definitely have shitty judgment.”

“Well, I slept with you, so....”

He looks at me, his lip twitching at the corner, hinting at a smirk.

“Stop changing the subject.” I look at him, watching for anything. He shakes his head, no emotion pulling over his face.

“She wasn’t what you think, if that’s what you want to know. We weren’t what you think.”

“Okay, smartass, and what do I think?”

“I don’t know.” He looks down at me, and I snuggle into him more. “She was a means to an end. That’s all you need to know for now.”

“So many secrets.”

“You have no idea.” He squeezes into me more and kisses the top of my head.

“So I take it The Elite Kings Club is very much real?”

He laughs this time, squinting out at the lake. “True, but Madison?” He looks back to me, pulling me on top of him until I’m straddling his waist. I fight the urge to kiss him or grind on him, because apparently, I have zero self-control. He tilts his head. “This is not a joke.”

“I know,” I whisper softly, though I actually don’t know, because he won’t tell me much. I appreciate what he has already told me though, knowing that alone was a brave move for him.

“God, there’s so much you should know,” he whispers, his hands falling on my hips.

I inch forward and run my lips over his ever so softly, fighting to suck on his plumper lower lip. “Just tell me, Bishop. Tell me what it is.”

“I can’t, baby. Even though I want too, both Nate and I want to, we can’t. It’s not safe for you to know, and will only leave you with more questions.”

I sag against him, curling into the crook of his neck. “Fine, but one more question?”

“Yeah, go for it, kitty.”

“Is this real, what’s happening between me and you? Or is it all part of one of your games?”

He pauses for a second and then looks at me. His eyes fall soft, a softness I have never seen the whole time I’ve known Bishop. “Yeah.” He clears his throat. “Yeah, fuck, I think it is.”

I WALK BACK INTO THE house with Nate next to me, dropping my bags onto the ground. “Dad?” I call out, throwing the keys to his Aston Martin on the table in the kitchen.

Nate opens the fridge and pulls out the OJ, twisting the cap off and taking a long swig. “Mom!”

Elena comes into the kitchen in her gym gear. “Hey, you two. Have fun?” she asks with a smile, before scowling and walking toward Nate, swatting his hand off the orange juice and placing it back into the fridge. “You!” She points to his chest. “Need some more etiquette training.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“Old dogs and all that,” I mutter, taking a seat on the stool.

Elena grins. “Very true, Madison.” She walks to the sink and fills up a glass of water. “Your father is out at the moment but will be home a little later. Are you okay?” She turns to face me, taking a sip of her water. She truly is beautiful. She has dark auburn hair, blue eyes, and soft milky skin. She doesn’t look forty-one, that’s for sure. She had Nate young, and I’ve never really asked about Nate’s dad, but I gather it’s a dark story since no one has brought it up. Elena Riverside—her name alone holds more substance than Nate’s lack of ability to turn down a lay.

“It’s okay.” I shake my head. “We had a great time, thank you.” I stand up from the stool. “But I’m dying for a shower.”

Nate grins at me, taking a bite out of a leftover roasted chicken leg. “Yah, I just bet you are.”

I narrow my eyes. Elena rolls hers. “Nate, leave her alone. You could do with a shower too.”

I laugh, poking my tongue out at him. His lip curls and I walk out the kitchen, picking up my duffle bag and walking up the stairs. I slip into my bedroom, dash into the bathroom—locking Nate’s side—shower, and then quickly shuffle into some loose gray track pants that hang off my waist and a relaxed white shirt. I loved being out in the forest, but damn it’s nice to be home.

I’ve never wanted to get attached to any of our houses before, but I don’t know. Something feels like this is it for us. I hope I’m right, because I will seriously be

thinking about letting Tatum's parents adopt me if my father thinks he can pack us up again and leave. I lotion up my hands and feet before slipping on some socks. Picking up my duffle bag, I rip through all my clothes until the tips of my fingers skim over the familiar brown leather book. My phone vibrates on my bedside table, but it's too late. I'm already flipping the cover and skipping to the chapter I'm up to.

4.

The tomorrow

What happens when everything you possibly thought you knew, everything you were educated on, was suddenly nothing at all?

Choosing a husband to bear my children wasn't easy for me; my parents chose him, and at the time, he seemed like an appropriate fit. He was hardworking, charming, and well-spoken. I thought he was everything I ever wanted in a companion, everything a girl ever needed in one, but it's only lately I've started to realize just how distant and out of touch my judgment may have been.

Lying Damien back into his woven crib, I hummed to him softly while continuing to rock the little crib in hopes of not waking him.

"Katsia, there seems to be an awful racket going on out there tonight."

I nodded, stepping away from the crib. "I hear that, too. Fear not, it shouldn't go on much longer."

Maree looks at me as if she was waiting for some sort of confirmation. I bobbed my head in understanding. She wouldn't let this go unless I spoke to my husband, and rightly so. Maree has a new-born baby just like I. And where Humphrey holds his gatherings, it so happens to be right beside her home.

“I won’t be long.” Giving her a curt nod, I walked past her and out the door, the soles of my flats pitter-pattering across the dusty forest floor. The moon was setting behind the overgrown forest trees, while the ash from Humphrey’s fire hovered through the night like fireflies lighting my way. His words caught me as I opened my mouth, halting any coherent words from passing my lips. Suddenly, I knew I wasn’t wanted here during this gathering, and if he found out I was, my safety would be in question.

“We kill him!” my husband’s righthand man salutes proudly.

“No, we should not rush this,” my husband replied. “This needs to be done carefully. I want people to know it was me but can’t prove it. I want to be feared. I want to rule this fucking village, and you’re going to help me do it.” He paused. “Tomorrow,” my husband continues. “Tomorrow I will put my ax through his skull.”

He was going to kill one of our leaders? For power? Why? What must he need to do so badly that he needed full power and control? Things were spiraling out of control. Every passing day it seemed things were getting worse, and worse.

They were.

“What?” I whisper to thin air, trying to wrap my head around the latest events in this story. Why? Why did Humphrey want to kill one of their leaders? To rule? Sounds like mighty big actions for something that is still, realistically speaking, not really up to him. He would have to win the people over as well. My phone dings again in the background, this time ringing, and I blindly reach for it, my eyes still on the book.

“Hello?”

“Are they still home?”

Bishop.

“Who? Are who still home?”

“Your dad and Elena.”

I huff, standing from my bed, and walk toward my sliding door that leads onto my little balcony, pushing the elegant white curtain out of the way. Peeking out the slit, I shake my head. “No, they’re gone. Why?”

“Pack a bag, and tell Nate to pack one too.”

“What?”

“Pack a fucking bag and be ready in five minutes. We’re almost there.”

The urgency in his tone doesn’t go unnoticed. “Why?” I straighten my shoulders, my eyes darting around the room.

“Ask questions later. For now, for once, just do as you’re fucking told.” Then he hangs up the phone. I look down at the now blank screen, my eyebrows drawing in.

“Nate!” I yell, dropping my phone onto the bed and walking toward our conjoined

bathroom. Pulling open his door, I instantly slam my hand over my eyes at the sight of Nate riding some girl. “Nate! Oh my god! For fuck’s sake!”

“Join in or get out!” He laughs, though if I take in the sounds correctly, I’d say he’s not stopping his penetrating.

I keep my hand over my eyes. “Bishop just called and said we both have to pack a bag and be ready in five minutes.”

“What?” He stops. He stops?

“Yes. So can you hurry up?” I roll my eyes, dropping my hand to my side when I realize I don’t care, until my eyes fall on Tillie. Oh no. Once? Fine. Twice? Not fine. My smile falls. “Tillie?” Her cheeks turn red as she pulls the covers up to her face. Nate rolls his eyes, tugs the bedding down, and then crawls off her, pulling his jeans on. “Don’t hide from her.”

“Jesus,” I whisper, my hand now coming to my forehead. “You and I will talk about this,” I hiss toward Nate.

“Jealous?” He wiggles his eyebrows.

I’ll punch him. I swear to God, I’ll punch him.

“No!” I scrunch up my face. “Get ready.” Then I leave them both, walking back into my room and straight to my closet. Pulling out my duffle bag, I yank down random clothes and shoes, shoving them inside before darting into the bathroom for my toothbrush, shampoo, and all the essentials I’ll need—including my birth control pill. Nate walks in, his door swinging open to show Tillie shuffling her jeans back on. He walks toward the sink and snatches his toothbrush, watching me closely in the mirror.

“Hurt her, Nate, and I’ll kill you.”

“Threats are cheap, kitty!” he hollers, as I walk back to my bed and shove all my toiletries into the side pocket before kneeling and scooping up the leather-bound book from under my bed, slipping it into my bag. “That wasn’t a threat.” My voice is calm, stoic. My bedroom door crashes open, hitting the wall to show a fuming Bishop.

“Holy fuck!” I yell. “What the hell is your problem?”

“Get downstairs, now! Where’s Nate?”

“In his room. Hey!” I walk toward Bishop, taking in his disheveled hair, and the sheen of sweat on his tanned skin, and his eyes. His eyes are furious, dilated to almost black. Can this man ever look ugly?

“Don’t.” He shakes his head. “Just get the fuck downstairs.”

Nate chooses now to walk in. “What’s going on?”

Bishop looks at Nate, Nate looks back at Bishop, and then the smug little smile that was on Nate’s mouth falls instantly. “Oh fuck.”

Bishop snatches my hand and pulls me into his body, just about to drag me out the door, when he catches Tillie in Nate’s bedroom. “Really?”

Nate looks over his shoulder briefly. “You are in no place to judge anyone’s choice of bed partner.”

Bishop’s jaw tenses. “Except you and I both know I didn’t exactly pick.”

Ouch.

Nate rolls his eyes, scooping up his bag from the floor. “She can come.”

“To the Galleys?” Bishop scoffs. “Definitely fucking not.”

“B, you don’t get a say in this, this time around. She’s coming.” Nate tugs Tillie’s hand.

Bishop steps toward Nate. “I always get the last say. Remember that.”

“Bishop, let her come. Stop being an ass,” I whisper.

He looks at me over his shoulder briefly, seeming to struggle with something, before looking back to Nate. “What? You think because she says, I’ll do it? Are you forgetting who I am?”

“We’re wasting time!” I yell. I don’t know for what reason, but it probably has something to do with how tense Bishop is.

He steps back, his eyes still locked on Nate. “Interesting, pup. You actually give a shit about his girl,” Bishop taunts him, snatching my hand and pulling me out my bedroom door. I glance over my shoulder toward Tillie and Nate. When her eyes find mine, I mouth “I’m sorry” to her, and she shakes her head with a small smile. Nate pulls her under his arm and kisses her forehead as we all walk out the front door.

Bishop opens the passenger door to his Maserati before walking around to the driver side. Nate and Tillie get into the back seat, and just as I’m about to slip into the driver seat, I notice the line of cars parked behind us. The driver in the Lamborghini behind us I recognize as Ace, and I guess the rest of the expensive cars have the rest of The Kings in them.

Page 72

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“Get in, kitty!” Bishop yells from behind the wheel.

I slip inside and pull my seatbelt on. “What’s going on?” I ask, clicking it in just as Bishop skids out of my driveway. I look into the side-view mirror to see the rest of the cars pulling out behind us. “Bishop!” I snap, looking toward him. “What’s going on and why am I in here?”

“You gonna explain, or should I?” Nate murmurs smugly from the back seat.

Bishop gives him a death stare into the rearview mirror. “That night you were with me.”

“Which night?” I add.

“The race.”

“I’m following.”

“You remember how I said something vague like ‘he won’t recognize you’?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he recognized you.” He drops the gear into second and floors it onto the main highway, away from the city.

“And who is he?”

Bishop looks into the rearview mirror at Nate before bringing his eyes back to the main road. “My dad.”

“WAIT.” I TURN IN MY seat to face him. “That was your dad? And why does it matter?”

Bishop looks to Nate again, his jaw tensing. “He thinks you’re someone else.”

“Well, that’s easy then.” I fling my hand around. “We’ll just tell him he has it wrong.”

“Yeah, that’s not how stuff works with him.”

“Well, explain,” I squeak. Bishop takes a turn, and I look behind us to see the rest of the boys following close behind. “And your mom’s famous! It can’t be that bad.”

“See, that’s the thing, though,” Nate says from behind me. “These people, every single one of them is in a powerful position.”

“Nothing makes sense,” I whisper, watching the blur of trees pass as we head deeper out of town.

Bishop growls, his fingers tensing around his steering wheel. “They think you’re someone else, and it’s hard to explain without letting something I can’t slip, slip, but they just...” He pauses, searching for the right words. “They think you’re someone else.

My body jolts from the bumpy road and I peel my eyes open, a yawn slipping past my lips. It’s dark out, the high beams the only light we have as we head deeper down a narrow dirt road that is lined with nature. Thick nature. I turn in my seat to see Nate and Tillie both asleep, Tillie cradled into the crook of Nate’s arm, and Nate with his

hoodie up and his cap shading his eyes.

I look back to Bishop. “How long have we been driving?”

He adjusts in his seat. “Five hours.”

Five hours? Holy crap. “Where are we going?” I question, watching as the forest gets darker and darker and the road starts to look less like a road.

“To a cabin.” He stretches his neck out.

“Why can’t you just tell him he’s wrong?”

“Because I can’t, Madi.” He looks at me from the corner of his eyes. “If it were that simple, I would have done it by now.”

“Well, I need something else. Because nothing is making a lot of sense to me right now.”

He grins for the first time since I saw him yesterday, his trademark smirk coming across his lips. “Aren’t you used to it by now, though?”

Pulling up to a wide stretch of land, he drives the car up closer to the log cabin that overlooks the rest of the secluded forest.

“Who owns this place?” I ask, looking at how it’s a little on the richer scale to be classed as a cabin in the woods—which admittedly is what I was thinking. You know, the kind the serial killer drags you back to. But it’s not that at all. Even though it seems upscale, I can see how the gardens are overgrown, the vines snaking up the pillars that sit on each side of the front porch. Someone hasn’t been taking care of it.

“Me.” Bishop pushes open his door and gets out.

“What?” I gasp, slipping out of the passenger seat. I’m just about to ask him more, when multiple headlights light up the dark, misty night, waking Nate and Tillie in the back. I shut my door, rounding the car toward Bishop. His arm slips out, wrapping around my waist as he pulls me into him more. I cave, melt, or whatever you want to call it. It feels good after being in a car for hours on end, that’s for sure.

His hard chest is flush up against my back when I run my hand over his muscled forearm, as the rest of the boys pile out of their cars, carrying a variation of bags.

Bishop nudges his head. “I’ll unlock,” he calls out, stepping backward and taking his body heat with him. He takes my hand. “Come on.” Leading me up the front steps and unlocking the door, instantly, soft musk hits my senses, mixed with old pine and something sweet and... masculine? Bishop flicks on the lights, dropping the keys on the table beside the coat hanger.

Pinching my eyes closed briefly, I then take in the now bright area. “Wow. This is all yours?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Bishop nods. “Yeah.”

“But is this smart?” I ask, just as Hunter, Ace, Abel, Brantley, and Cash walk through.

“Yeah, Bishop, is it smart?” Brantley seethes, evil eyeing me as he passes through.

I ignore him.

“It’s the last place they would think to look,” Bishop reassures. He walks into the sitting room, which takes up most of the ground level, overlooking the forest through floor-to-ceiling windows that are shaped like a triangle, pulling in from the middle.

“How so?” I ask, following him in farther.

“Because the first place they’ll look is your place, and then the rest of the boys’. By the time they’ve finally figured it out, we will have sorted our next plan of action.

I walk to where he’s leaning against the kitchen counter. “And exactly how long is this supposed to be?”

He pauses, looking directly into my eyes. “I don’t know.”

“Come on.” He pushes off the sink, taking my hand in his. “We’ll go up to the room.”

I think about arguing with him, but figure I can still do that in the room, so I let him lead me up the stained wooden stairs.

Walking in, he puts our bags onto the bed, taking a seat beside them.

“Here’s the thing,” Bishop starts, removing his shirt. My mouth waters and my eyes skate over him slowly. He catches my perving, pauses what he was saying, and quirks his lip a little before continuing. “My dad is a part of this... firm. These people, they all work for my dad.” He tosses his shirt into the corner and then takes another seat on the bed. “They follow my dad’s lead. In everything. You can think of him as sort of a CEO, I guess.” His eyes look into mine. “Madi, my dad isn’t a good man. Not that any of us are, but he’s definitely not a good man.”

I take a seat beside Bishop on the bed, my eyes locked on the wall opposite us. “What does he want from me?”

Bishop curses, tugs on his hair in frustration, and then braces his elbows on his knees, leaning forward. “He’s—I can’t. We can’t even talk about it.”

He goes to continue, but I cut him off. I know what he’s implying, and I don’t want to make him feel like he has to tell me and then feel guilty or whatever for sharing something so big. But if I guess, then it wouldn’t be his fault. “CIA?” I whisper, finishing his previous sentence.

“What?” His head tilts in confusion.

“You know....” I insinuate.

Recognition sparks in his eyes and he smiles, almost in relief. “Yeah,” he whispers. “Yeah.”

“Okay, but what do they want with me?” Now that I know his father works for the CIA, I feel more at ease. The Elite Kings, they’re just a bunch of rich boys out spending Mommy and Daddy’s money. They’re exactly the kind of boys I suspected

they were. I'm mentally rolling my eyes at Tatum and her overdramatic rumors about them all. Typical Tatum.

Bishop leans back onto his elbows, every muscle tensing in his movement. "They think your dad is laundering money for one of the major trading companies in Las Vegas."

Recognition slips in. My dad is always in Vegas, more often than not lately. Maybe that's why we always moved? Maybe we weren't moving because he couldn't settle. Maybe we were moving, because he was running from something—or someone. It makes sense in my head, the puzzle pieces slipping together slowly.

"So now what?" I ask, looking at him over my shoulder. "Is this what you guys couldn't tell me?"

Bishop nods reluctantly. "Yeah, babe."

"Huh." I look forward. "Why didn't you just come right out and hint to me earlier?"

"Because I didn't trust you. They—aside from Nate—still don't trust you."

Before I can ask him what they have to do with anything, there's a light knock on the door.

"Fuck off," Bishop snaps.

"Come in," I say sweetly, both of us in unison. Way too cheesy. The door creaks open, and Tillie pops her head around it. She's wearing one of Nate's hoodies and is looking at me like she has thousands of things she wants to say, so I pat Bishop's hand and look at him. "Give us a second."

He watches Tillie closely, too closely, and she looks back, her mouth slightly open. Something passes between the two of them before Tillie swallows nervously. Bishop shoves past her. Always the asshole.

Tillie smiles sadly at him with a nod and then takes a seat where he was on the bed.

The door closes before I turn to her. “What was that about?”

“What did he tell you?” she asks, her eyes searching mine.

“About what?”

“About this... what did he tell you?”

“I can’t say. Sorry, Tillie.”

A fake smile sprawls over her face. “It’s okay. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about—”

“Tillie, it’s totally fine. Was a shock initially, but it’s totally fine. Just one thing...” I hold one finger up. “Please be careful. He’s not capable of the things you might be expecting out of him.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Her shoulders slack in defeat. “Thank you, but I’m sure I’ll be fine, Madi.” She looks around the master bedroom. “I thought the room we were in was nice, but this is something else.”

I look around absently. “Yeah, it’s nice.”

Tillie turns to look at me. “So, um, did he say how he got this house?”

I shake my head, standing from the bed and picking up my duffle bag off the floor. “No, but I do have to say that a lot of shit makes sense now. And I need to have a talk with Tatum and her crazy imagination over these rumors.” I’m shaking my head and unzipping my bag when Tillie interrupts me.

“How so?”

“Let’s just say that they aren’t as bad as they seem.” I wink at her easily. Her face goes pale, her muscles tense, and her smile drops instantly. “Tillie?” I walk toward her. “Are you okay?” Goose bumps spring up all over my flesh from the look she is giving me, but in a flash, her smile is back.

“Yeah, sorry,” she tries to reassure me, but I don’t buy it.

“You sure?” I question, touching her arm. “Looked like you saw a ghost.”

She laughs me off easily. “Don’t be silly.”

I turn back to my bag and pull out my black leather jacket, slipping it on and doing up

the buttons before tugging on my Ugg boots. “Shall we go downstairs?” I go to walk past her, and just as I’m about to reach the bedroom door, her hand comes to my arm, stopping me.

“Your turn to promise me that you will be careful, Madi.”

I search her eyes with a smile, but when I see how serious she is, her eyes glassing over with unshed tears and fear rippling over her features, I pat her hand and give her a sincere nod. “Of course I will, Tillie.”

THE FLAMES FROM THE LOG fire Bishop and the guys set up outside in the large front yard of the cottage flickers into the starry night, licking over my skin with each flash. I wrap my jacket around my body tightly again just as Bishop takes a seat on the log beside me, handing me what I assume to be a glass of whiskey. I take it happily, the ice cubes clinking and breaking our silence. A few of the guys are still awake, spread out over the logs that are outside, as well as Nate and Tillie, who are snuggled up on the ground and sitting against one. Nate kicks a stone into the fire. His other knee’s pulled up with his elbow resting on it, and Tillie’s tucked between his legs.

“Nate?” I call out to him softly. He pauses, his jaw tensing.

“What?”

“What’s wrong?” There’s never been any beating around the bush with Nate. I think, from day one, he’s just always been that person I feel like I can trust, despite his shitty decisions. So they play games. When you have as much money as we all do—except Tillie—you find pleasure in shallow tricks.

He looks to Bishop, his lip curling slightly. “No, nothing. Everything is peachy, sis,” he almost hisses, before looking directly at me. His eyes soften a smidge when they

lock with mine, and he stands from the ground, making Tillie shuffle up quickly. Walking toward me, he stops directly in front and gently brings the back of his fingers to my cheek, running it down softly. I close my eyes. “Look at me, Madi.”

My eyes open to Nate looking down at me, ignoring Bishop. I could cut the tension.

“I’m sorry,” he says. Then he leaves, tugging Tillie behind him, who watches me from over her shoulder as she gets led back inside. Why is it that even though Bishop just told me what everyone was hiding, I still feel like I’m the only one out of the loop?

Sighing, I hand Bishop my drink and stand from the log. “I’m going to bed.”

He takes my glass, his fingers grazing over mine. “I’m just going to talk with Saint for a bit. I’ll be up soon.”

I smile down at him. “Okay.” Walking back inside the quiet cottage—despite the number of rowdy guys under this one roof—I trudge upstairs, with nothing but my thoughts. Pushing open our door, I pull out some panties and a loose tank before walking into the en suite. Flicking on the light, I place my clothes on the adjoining sinks and turn the faucet on. As the steam fills the large bathroom, I strip out of my clothes and pull a clean towel out of the cupboard, wrapping it around my body.

Why do I feel like there’s a major part I’m missing? I trust Bishop, though. I believe he’s sincere, and that might make me stupid, but why else would he feel like he has to hide something from me? His father being a part of the CIA makes a lot of sense. It aligns every single thing that has happened. That damn missing piece, though. It’s staring at me, flashing itself at me.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Chalking it up to me being overtired, hungry, and just exhausted, I drop my towel and slip into the shower, scrubbing up quickly but relishing in the hot droplets of water that cascade off my drained muscles. It feels so damn good. Remembering I want to get a quick read in tonight before Bishop comes to bed, I flick the faucets off and step out of the shower, wrapping the towel around me to dry quickly before stepping into my clothes—or lack thereof.

Hanging up my towel, I pull the door open, welcomed by uncongested air, and peek out the blinds next to the bed, checking to see if Bishop is still out there. He's there, chatting with Saint and Hunter. I quickly shut the blinds, pulling The Book out from my duffel bag and slipping under the blanket. Lying down, I open to where I was and lose myself back in the story.

5.

Lost innocence

After that night I heard my husband plan the deaths of our leaders, I decided to bury this book until I could decide whether it would be safe or not to continue with writing it. My son turned fourteen today, and tonight, it's his ritual. At fourteen, my son will lose his virginity to a woman who has far too many years on him than any mother would care to acknowledge. The years I had no say in. I used to fight Humphrey at every turn. Every decision he made that I didn't like, I would fight him. It started with him yelling at me and then beating me, but he soon realized I took everything he gave me. Once he realized that, he would punish me by beating my son. That worked effectively, because the one day he threatened that, was the day I started obeying his every word. That was the day my shoulders dropped in defeat, and I swore to myself,

as God as my witness, that I hope he dies one day soon. Dies a quick death, but dies nonetheless.

“Ma, I’ll be okay. No need to fuss.”

I pressed the crinkles out of his linen shirt, a smile on my lips. A fake smile, a smile he knew so well. My precious son, the one person I wanted nothing but happiness for, but I knew he wouldn’t get it.

“I know, my son. I know.”

He smiled. “This is for the best, Mother. Father knows what he’s doing. The people trust him. I trust him. You should trust him too.” My heart broke a little, but I was grateful he didn’t know what the kind of monster his father was. It was better this way. Nothing good can come for him if he knew. I didn’t want to ruin how much he looked up to his father—even though his intentions were not noble.

I rubbed Damien’s chest. “You’re all ready.”

He smiled. Damien’s white teeth gleamed across his face, the scar he got on top of his lip from when he fell off one of our horses still there. He was four at the time, and now he was fourteen. About to make love to someone who didn’t deserve it, all because his father said so. Because it was his coming of age. Because the younger he found someone, the longer they had to reproduce. The thought had my stomach churning with disgust, but I kept my smile on my face for my son.

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, Damien. Now—go ahead.”

He smiled at me again and then left our hut. It was much larger than our old

one—and my husband always made a note to remind me of that. Of how I owed him for getting me out of poverty, as he would say.

Damien escaped through the curtain. “I love you so very much.” I could feel him slipping through my fingertips already, and no matter how hard I tried to grasp onto anything I could at keeping him near me, I couldn’t. It was out of my hands.

Humphrey was succeeding in manipulating the most powerful men of our time. He had other men—leaders, but not in charge like him—who stood behind him. All had money, all earned power and respect, and together? They were untouchable. Nothing went through their intelligence. No one dared disrespect or cross them. They were feared amongst our people—amongst other people. We had money now. We didn’t know suffering, but I’d rather have no money and a family at peace, than him with all his riches.

I wasn’t prepared for what I was about to discover today—amongst Damien’s initiation. My worst fear. The worst possible thing that could ever happen, happened.

I fell pregnant.

My phone beeping with a text pulls me out of my story. “Fuck.” Frustrated at how it interrupted me just as I’m getting to something juicy, I close the book. I slip it back into my bag, deciding it’s probably a good idea to turn it in for the night, considering. Flicking off the bedside lamp, I snuggle into the blanket and unlock my phone to a text from Tatum.

Page 76

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Tatum – Are you okay?

Me – I'm fine. How are you?

Tatum – Bored. Why couldn't I come?

Me – 'Cause you weren't banging Nate while it happened.

Tatum – No way!

Me – Yes way.

Tatum – Tell me more, and where are you?

Me – No! Ew. And I can't tell you, sorry.

Tatum – Well you're no fun.

Me – I won't argue with that.

Tatum – Can I ask you a question?

Me – Always.

Tatum – Do you think you're falling in love with Bishop?

What? I read over her message again, my eyebrows drawing together. Why would

she want to know that? Bishop and I are not even in a solid enough relationship to start talking about love—that, I am sure of. Before I can reply to her spastic message, my bedroom door swings open and Bishop walks in.

“Oh,” he mutters. “You’re awake.”

“Disappointed?” I ask, locking my phone, thus shutting out any light. The bed dips on his side, and I hear his shoes drop to the ground and a shirt fall before a belt buckle clangs, and then the bed sinks again.

“Why would I be disappointed?” he grumbles, his voice right near my ear and sending vibrations through my bloodstream. I close my eyes and count to ten. I must contain myself with this man or he will ruin me. His hand wraps around my left cheek. “Madison.”

“I’m confused,” I blurt urgently. He pauses, his hand moving. Must be the dark that has my confidence shining rather brightly. No doubt I’ll get my ass burned. “I’m confused, because one minute you hate me, and then the next you’re touching me. I’m confused about this whole”—I flick my fingers through the air, even though I’m well aware he can’t see me—“thing.”

“I don’t hate you.” He breaks through. My heart swells in my chest at his words.

“What?”

He brings one leg between mine and sinks on top of me, his elbows resting on either side of my head. Running the tip of his nose down the bridge of mine, his lips gently stroke over mine. “I. Don’t. Hate. You,” he whisper-yells each word, laying little kisses on my lips, and then suddenly his tongue slips out and drags over my bottom lip. “I just really need you to spread those legs for me and let me get lost in you for a few hours.” The cushion of his thumb caresses little circles over the side of my

jugular.

“Okay,” I whisper through my parched throat.

He chuckles, his hips grinding into me so his erection presses against my leg. “That wasn’t a question, baby. Now, open up.” Then his head disappears under the blanket, and I’m getting a taste of ecstasy-spiked heaven.

WHEN I OPEN MY EYES, the first thing I notice is how numb my thighs and legs are, and then the next thing I notice is the bright sun glaring into our room through the... open fucking blinds!

“No!” I moan, covering my eyes with my arm. “Shut them.”

“Get up, baby. Come have breakfast.”

“I don’t wanna.”

Bishop grabs my arm gently and tugs it down, away from my face. “Come on.”

I peek my eyes open when I notice he’s blocking the sun with his massive body. And he’s clutching a loose white towel around his waist with droplets of water cascading down the ripple of his V before dipping under his—

“Madi!” he snaps.

“Hmm?” I look up at him innocently.

“Looking at me like that will get you fucked. Hard. And judging by the bruises on your neck, wrists, and...” He peeks under the blanket. “...thighs, I’m going to go with you don’t really want that right now.”

I shake my head. As much as I love sex with Bishop—love—I'm nowhere near ready for another round. The man is rough, no, lethal in the sack. The first time he left bruises on me, I thought it would bother him when it was over. You know, seeing how much he hurt me when he was so lost in his lust, but nope. He merely laughed it off like it was the most normal thing in the world, so now I just go with it and hope that one day, I won't be on the news with the headline: Madison Montgomery, death by penetration.

It'd be just my luck.

"So get up." Then he walks to his gym bag and pulls out some loose jeans and a plain white tee. Dropping his towel, he grins at me when my eyes go straight to his thick cock. Thick, hard cock. Grasping it, he slowly pumps himself, pulling his bottom lip into his mouth. Oh, God. "Like what you see, baby?" A little bead of precum wets around his head.

I nod slowly, rubbing my thighs together in an attempt to stop the sudden ache that has started. He sees the movement under the blanket and his eyebrows tug in. "Pull the blanket off."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“What?” I mumble through a croaky throat.

“Don’t answer back, kitty. Just follow instructions. Kick the blanket off.”

I do as I’m told, swinging the blanket off my legs but keeping them closed, aware I didn’t put my clothes back on last night. Neither of us did, because Bishop fell asleep while still pumping inside me. This was after my fourth orgasm. I actually second-guessed if it was possible to die from having too many orgasms.

The cool morning air whisks through the open window and glides over my sensitive clit. My eyes close as I try to contain the moan that threatens to pass my lips.

“Open your eyes,” Bishop demands, so I do. I open them to him as he continues to pleasure himself. His rough hand glides up and down his thick shaft, squeezing as he gets to the rim of his head before sliding back down.

“Touch yourself, baby.” Slowly, I run my hand up my thigh before spreading my legs wide, well aware of how direct his view is of me, but one thing I know is that no one knows my body like Bishop does. He knows how to work it and what to do with it. He knows ways to make me come that I didn’t even know were possible. “Spread yourself open for me, let me see all of you.”

I do as he says, my breath coming in harder as my index finger and my pointer finger slowly spread my lips open, giving him a perfect view. I grind against my finger as it rests beside my clit, watching Bishop’s hand work himself up.

“Slide a finger inside. Just one. Do what you do when you’re all alone.”

Again, I follow his command, slipping in my index finger and thinking about what I do when I'm alone. What I've done while alone and thinking about Bishop. Running my eyes up to his, I pinch one of my nipples between my fingers and let my hips roll, grinding against my hands. Then I bring the hand that was pinching my nipple down to my clit and rub vigorously, all while pumping myself in and out, my eyes locked on Bishop's and his on me. His movements become faster until he lets go. "Fuck this." Then he walks toward me, wrapping his hands around my ankles and pulling me down the bed. Taking a seat on the edge, he picks me up until I'm straddling his hips and then smacks my ass before lying on his back. "Turn around and sit on my face."

Doing as I'm told, I spin around, sit on his face, and suck his dick into my mouth.

After breakfast, Saint walks into the living room where Bishop, Nate, Tillie, Ace, Hunter, Abel, and Cash are. The rest of the guys have gone to get supplies for tonight. Apparently drinking and laser tag is a thing they do. Who knew we could make fun out of the weird situation we're in?

Saint takes a seat on the sofa opposite me, and I shuffle uncomfortably. I know he's Cash's older brother, but I've only met him maybe one or two times before this, and both times were awkward—to say the least.

"Do you have any questions about what's going on, Madison?"

I look at Saint. "Yes, when can I go home? Where is my dad? And I'm sure there has to be a misunderstanding. My father may be a lot of things, but he's not a thief."

Saint chuckles, his hand rubbing over his five o'clock shadow, his brown hair styled messily on his head. Bishop picks up the pack of cigarettes on the table and lights one before tossing the packet to Saint, who follows. I don't see him smoke often—but he makes it look hot, as does Saint.

Saint takes a long pull off his cigarette before blowing out the thick cloud and leaning back in his seat. “When we say so. He’s in Vegas. And I’m sure that’s what every little girl says.” He leans forward, flicking his ash into the ashtray on the coffee table. Bishop props his leg up against it, caging my body in. If I didn’t know any better, I would think that was an almost protective gesture. Saint’s eyes lock with mine, his dark ones daring me to question him. “But let me be very clear, kitty. Your father is no innocent in this.”

“Maybe he didn’t know?”

Saint laughs, looks to Bishop, and then takes another pull of his smoke. “She’s cute.”

“Up until last night,” I hiss toward Saint, “my father was my hero. So forgive me if I don’t trust any of your words over someone who has never given me reason to not trust him—ever.” I look to Bishop. “Unlike some.” Then I stand from the sofa and walk toward the doors that lead out to where we had the bonfire last night. Flopping down in the swing on the porch, I look out to the thick forest. We’re in the middle of nowhere. Actually, I don’t even know where we are. I’m surprised we get cell phone coverage. Who knows, maybe Bishop owns the cell phone towers, too.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“I know you have every reason to not trust me,” Bishop states, looking out toward nature’s playground, with his hands pressed into his pockets. “But trust me when I say that anything I do—we do, Nate and me—is for your own good.” He looks at me now, his eyebrows tugging together, making his features turn serious and hard. “Promise me you’ll remember this. No matter what.”

I search his eyes, trying to find something. Anything. “But you’ve told me everything—right?”

He stops, smiles, and then nods. “Right. That I have.”

“You’ve told me everything?” I repeat.

He nods again, looking away, and then walking up to me. “Yes. What are you looking at?” He takes a seat beside me on the swing.

“Out there.” I point. “I’d love to go hunt some deer.”

“No.” Bishop shakes his head with a small smile. “Maybe save that for another trip.”

I shrug. “It’s not like I have my guns here anyway, but I just wish I could.”

Bishop stops and then smiles. “Yours aren’t, but mine are.” Pulling me up from my seat, he gets me to my feet and leads me back into the house. Fishing the keys out of his pocket, he unlocks a door and then flicks on a light that shows stairs leading down to a basement.

“Come on.” He holds his hand out to me, looking up at me from a couple steps down. “I don’t bite.”

“Yes, Bishop. Yes, you do bite.”

He laughs this time, pulling me into him as we venture deeper and deeper into the dimly lit basement. “True that, but I can’t help it. You’re just so damn tasty.”

Bishop unlocks a cabinet that hangs on the wall on the far side of the basement. The collected dust particles that are sprinkled over the fine woodwork illustrates just how long ago it had been opened.

“If you tell me there’s a musket in here, I will shoot you.”

Bishop laughs, pulling open the cabinet. “Nah, babe, no musket.” It opens out onto a couple AKs, Glocks, semis, and shotguns. I run my hand over the cool black metal of the M4, and Bishop watches me in amazement. “It’s sort of getting my dick hard watching how much this turns you on.”

I roll my eyes and unhook the gun from its spot. “Trust you to find something pervy out of something so dangerous.”

“Hmm....” Bishop grins, unhooking the M16 and some shells. “I can think of a few things we could do with these.” He gestures to his gun, tilting it sideways with a cocky smile on his face.

“Most definitely not!” I turn around and walk back the way we came, passing all the old boxes piled up, and desks, decorations, and tables with white sheets draped over them. I grip onto the stairway’s railing. “That is never happening. Do you even know how dangerous that could be?” I ask, walking back up the stairs. But then I consider how he doesn’t seem to be bothered when I’m hurt during sex, so maybe the same

goes if he accidentally fucking kills me.

We walk out the front door, passing Nate and Tillie on the way.

“Wow, wow, wow, is this a good idea?” Nate looks to Bishop, eyes wide. Tillie chuckles beside me, toast in midair.

“It’s fine, Nate,” I say, patting his arm. “You can come.”

He looks to Bishop and then shakes his head. “Next time.”

I nod, then hook my arm with Bishop’s. “So, how long will this go on?” I ask, as we step off the last stair and walk toward the clearing of the forest.

“Hopefully not long. The school and your dad have been taken care of. They think we’re visiting colleges. Made up some bullshit about wanting to get in extra early to see our options and that it would be better if we all go at the same time.”

“Right.” Colleges. I never thought of that. We all leave at the end of this year. Where is everyone going? I haven’t even decided yet, and it’s much too far away to figure it out.

“Once we work out how to approach my dad, everything can go back to normal. Hopefully.” We step through the clearing and Bishop takes my hand, pulling me closer to him.

“Have you been hunting before?” I ask with a smile.

He pauses and seems to mull over what my question is, and then smiles mischievously. “Probably not the same kind of hunting.”

Rolling my eyes at—what I assume is—his playfulness, I draw up my gun and look through the scope. I could get used to this real quick.

A couple of hours later, we walk back up to the house, and Bishop takes my hand, grinning from ear to ear and pulling my body in to him. “You got my dick hard. Now—”

He’s cut off by Nate. “B, your dad is calling my phone.”

“Fuck.” Bishop walks toward him with me tucked protectively behind him. He snatches Nate’s phone and looks to him, something passing between the two of them.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“Answer, man, I don’t want it to spread out.”

“It already would have. They’d all already know.”

“Know what?” I ask, tugging on Bishop’s hand.

Tillie walks out the front door, watching me with a worried look. “Come on. We can put those away before someone gets shot.” She smiles weakly, gesturing me to come inside. I let go of Bishop’s hand and walk around Nate, toward her. We both walk into the house in silence, passing the guys who are all in the sitting room.

Walking down to the basement, she breaks the silence. “Are you okay? You and Bishop looked cozy.”

I laugh, opening the cabinet with the keys I got from him. “Yeah, I don’t know what we are.”

“Do you trust him?” she asks, as I hang the guns back, placing the shells on their shelf.

“Yes, I do.” She pauses, so I look at her over my shoulder. “Why?”

Shutting the cabinet, I lock it again and put the keys into my pocket. She turns around, leaning against one of the old shelves. “I don’t know. It’s just... I knew his ex.”

“Khales? Yeah, he has sort of mentioned her.”

“What did he say?” Tillie asks, her eyes watching mine.

“Just that it wasn’t as people thought it was—whatever that means.”

Tillie shakes her head, hiding a scoff. “Games, always games with these boys.”

“Tillie? I trust him.”

She looks like she wants to say something else, but changes her mind. “Okay.”

Nate lights up the fire pit and then walks toward me, handing me my drink. “You know...” He grins, flicking the Zippo between his fingers. “...Bishop inherited this house.”

“Really?” I perk up, wanting to know more. The sun is setting, letting off a beautiful orange hue in the sky, and the drinks are going down smoothly, and despite the circumstances of me being here, I feel great. “Do tell me more.”

Nate takes a seat on the log beside me, casting a small glance toward Tillie, who’s chatting with Saint opposite us. His eyes stay there for a beat longer, watching her and Saint.

I nudge him with my arm. “Hey.”

He looks back toward me with a smile, just as Cash takes a seat beside me on the other side. I look at him and smile; he smiles back. I haven’t spoken to Cash much, if at all, and I don’t really know his story, but I know he’s Saint’s younger brother. “Hey.” His blond hair drops to his collar. He has sort of a surfer look to him, with bright blue eyes and golden skin. So different from Saint, who has dark hair, a dark five o’clock shadow on his strong jaw, and dark eyes that could pin you with one stare. They must be half-brothers.

I look back to Nate. “Keep going.”

“Is it story time already, Nate dawg?” Cash teases with a smirk but then takes a long pull off his beer.

Nate shrugs easily. “Why not?” Then he takes a sip of his own beer. I don’t miss the silent communication that passes between the two of them. Nate brings his beer to his lap and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “As I was saying, Bishop inherited this cottage.”

“His grandparents or something?” I ask, looking back to the beautiful, large structure. You can see it has some age to it, but not old enough to go back any further.

Nate chuckles sarcastically. “Something like that.”

“Carry on,” I probe him.

“Well...” He leans forward, the rim of his bottle dangling between his fingers. “This house is sort of like a family heirloom.”

“Some heirloom,” I mutter, taking another drink of my whiskey sour.

“Okay!” Bishop grins, dropping a whole bunch of black bags at his feet.

I smirk at him. “Why do you have no top on?” His beautiful body is on full display, and he’s put a baseball cap on backward, covering his hair. I fight the urge to lick my lips, because the way the ripped denim jeans hang off his narrow waist, showing the edge of his Calvin’s, makes me want to melt into a puddle on the ground.

“This is how we play, baby.”

“Play what?” I ask, inching forward as Nate stands, drinking the rest of his beer in one go and then tossing his bottle to the ground. He grips the back of his collar and tears his shirt off, all his muscles tensing at the action, and his tattoos—a little more than Bishop has—coming into view.

Nate smirks down at me. “Paintball shooting.”

“Really?” I stand instantly. “I’m in!”

All the boys remove their shirts, and my eyes find Tillie’s instantly. We share a look that’s something like “Well gawd dayum,” then both laugh. I feel the tension ease off my shoulders in our laughing, and then I look back to Bishop, who is giving me the sexiest evil grin I have ever seen in my entire life.

“Nawww,” I tease him, walking past Nate and coming to the front of Bishop. Circling my index finger over his left pec, I grin back at him. “Jealous?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

He snatches my hand and then sucks my finger into his mouth before biting down on it roughly. “You’re mine, and I don’t share.”

“Since when did the no sharing rule come in?” I taunt him.

He hooks his arm around my waist and pulls me into him. “Since a couple days ago.”

“Rule change?” I tilt my head up at him.

He points to his chest. “Rule maker.”

I smile and then look down to the bags at his feet just as Nate comes up to us and takes one of them, handing me a vest. “Put this on.”

“You guys aren’t wearing vests.”

“We never have,” Nate replies, and then shoves the vest into my chest harder. “Put it on.”

I take it from him and slip my jacket off before pulling the vest over my tank top. “How long have you guys been playing?”

They all pause, and an awkward silence hangs between us all. I look to Tillie, who looks to Nate and then Saint awkwardly.

Bishop grins, his eyes gleaming like dark orbs. “It’s a sort of tradition, baby. Put the vest on. Only I’m allowed to mark you.”

“You need help.” Cash shakes his head at Bishop.

“Naw, don’t think that’s only you, kitty,” Brantley snarls from across the fire pit. “Khales used to come over with all sorts of marks and bruises on her. If you ask me, yours are pretty tame.” He looks to Bishop, who is frothing at the mouth. “What? This one just not hitting the spot like Khales did?”

I zip up my vest. “I don—” I look up to Bishop, only he’s not there.

“You say so much as another fucking thing toward her, and I’ll break your fucking jaw.” I walk toward Bishop, about to calm him down, when Cash takes my hand and pulls me backward. I look down to where his hand is then look up to his face. He shakes his head at me. Bishop continues, chest to chest with Brantley. “Are you forgetting who runs this show, pup? Or do I need to remind you who the fuck I am?”

Brantley searches Bishop’s eyes before he cuts them over his shoulder to me. “Nah, I’m good.” He bends down, picking up his gun and slinging it over his shoulder. What the fuck is his deal with me? It’s been no secret how much he has hated me, but I thought he’d got over it. We had a good patch, but since we’ve been here, he’s gone back to being a grade-A jerk. I already know he blames me for why he’s here, but Bishop said it’s no big deal, that they’re only here to keep his dad guessing. To keep him chasing us. I don’t—

“Madi!” Bishop growls, his eyes still on Brantley.

“Yes?”

“Got your vest on?”

“Yes.”

Bishop grins. “Good.” He points his gun at me, and before I can ask what the fuck he’s doing, he pulls the trigger and a heavy thud smashes against my chest.

“Ouch! Bishop!” I scold him.

“You’re out. Sit the fuck down.”

“But I—”

“I said sit the fuck down.” He points toward the log.

I huff and take a seat. Nate walks toward Tillie and points at me, and then she starts walking over, her bottom lip slightly puckered.

Plopping down beside me, she sighs. “I wonder what the big deal is?”

I shrug. “Who the hell knows with these boys? I mean seriously, right?”

Bishop Walks off, loading up his gun, with Nate and a few others following behind him. I look to Tillie and grin. “Who says we can’t join in?”

Smirking, she gets up from the log and reaches her hand out to mine. “Exactly.” Once all the boys have disappeared deep into the dark, gloomy forest, Tillie pulls out a gun from the bag she would have had. I walk toward her, bending down and picking up mine from the bag Bishop left behind too.

“Shit, shall we do this?” she asks, shuffling into her vest and looking from left to right, taking in her surroundings.

“What?” I mutter, loading up my paintballs into the gun. “Of course!”

Tillie laughs, shaking her head but following through with me. “Madi, you’re such a rebel. Won’t Bishop get mad?”

“That’s why I’m doing it.” I grin at her.

She shakes her head again as I swing my gun over my shoulder. “You’re so bad.”

We start tiptoeing into the forest, the thick branches instantly giving us coverage from the sun. “I’ll follow you,” Tillie whispers out.

I roll my eyes. “Yes. Follow me, but these bullets can’t kill anything that might try to kill us, so if like, a mountain lion or anything comes after us, I can’t help us.”

Tillie pauses just as we make our way through the clearing. “But you don’t actually hunt mountain lions and stuff, do you?”

I stop and turn to face her. “Of course not! But I would shoot to kill any human who does.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Her mouth slams shut and then she laughs me off. “Oh, you’re not being serious.”

I laugh with her, though I’m very serious. My dad had to physically restrain me after some stupid bimbo slut and her bimbo-ass family uploaded a picture of them on Facebook with a dead lion that they had killed, holding its lifeless body proudly. One day, I’m going to reenact that very photo, only holding their first-born child.

Okay, so that was too far.

Yeah, that was a little far, but alas, whatever people think about hunters, I love animals. More than I love people. I—me and my family—have only ever hunted deer, unless it was duck shooting.

“Madi!” Tillie whispers into the back of my neck, her breath misting across my neck.

“What!” I hiss back, drawing my gun up. Tillie is following closely behind me, her chest rubbing against my back every two seconds. If we were in a horror movie right now, she would be the death of us.

“It’s getting dark.”

“Well, that’s what happens when it’s almost 8:00 p.m. Chill out.” I go to step over a fallen log, when I slip and fall to the ground, just as a bright green splatter of paint shoots over the trunk that’s near us. Tillie snaps out of her questionnaire, looks to the green paint, and then screams out in shock just as another splatter of paint hits her square in the jaw. I slam my hand over my mouth in shock. That could have easily knocked out some teeth. Rolling onto my stomach, I prop my gun up against my

shoulder and peek through the scope, the diameter giving me zoom view. A bush rustles opposite us, but I know that's too easy and was obviously set up. Noticing the bush moved from the right first, I whip the end of my gun toward the right where, sure enough, Brantley and Ace's faces come into view, where they're laughing at Tillie's—and possibly my—stupidity.

I grin. “Boo-yah motherfuckers.” And then I squeeze the trigger, my gun pointing toward Brantley's smug-ass face first. When I see the bright pastel pink splatter all over his shocked mug, I quickly point it toward Ace and squeeze again, this time getting him exactly where they got Tillie, on the corner of her jaw.

They both scream aloud. “Fuck!”

I laugh and turn back to Tillie, who's weeping up against the trunk of the tree, tears pouring down her cheeks, smudging the green color on her face.

“Hey.” I shuffle closer to her. “It hurts, huh? Don't worry. I got them.”

She shakes her head, the tears not threatening to leave. “It's not that, Madi.”

“What's wrong?” I ask, shuffling closer to her, but my finger still trigger ready.

“My dad. Well, um....”

“Your bruises?” I whisper, more to myself than to her, putting two and two together, her being upset, and then the first thing she says is her dad.

She nods. “He's a drunk. My mom left when I was two, and he has always reminded me about how I owe him because he stuck around when she didn't.” She swipes the tears off her cheeks again. “He gets rough most nights.”

“You don’t need to talk about it if you don’t want to, Tillie. It’s okay.”

She smiles, pushing her long mousy brown hair away from her face. “Anyway, I just wanted to explain why I overreacted about that.”

Footsteps get closer, the crunching of their closeness vibrating out, and I quickly stand, shielding Tillie and raising my gun to whoever is coming.

“Whoa!” Bishop grins, his hands raised. “Just me, baby.”

I narrow my eyes. “Oh yeah? Last I checked, you said I wasn’t allowed to come and play. So, um...” I look down to Tillie, and she smiles at me with a knowing twinkle in her eye. I wink at her and then look back to Bishop. “That makes it us against you.” His smirk drops, and then just as he’s about to pull the trigger, I squeeze mine, and bright pink paint splatters all over the front of his hard chest before I turn the tip to Nate, giving him two solid shots to his chest. Grinning, I drop my gun. “See—”

Black paint hits me across my chest just as a sharp sting plows into me. “Oh my God!”

Bishop keeps grinning and then lowers his gun. “For a trigger-happy chick, you sure bitch like a girl.”

I go to whack him with the back of my gun, when he pushes it out of the way, his hand coming to my throat. He drops me to the ground with a thud, his grip still around my neck like a collar. He runs the tip of his nose over the bridge of mine, his waist pinning me to the ground and a smile tickling the corner of his lips. “See, baby? Don’t get fucking cocky.”

Nate rolls his eyes just as Brantley and Ace come around one of the tree trunks. “Fucking bitch,” Brantley grumbles, wiping the pink paint off his jaw.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Bishop grins devilishly before correcting it. He gives me a slight kiss on the lips, ever so softly, before he jackknifes up and turns to face Brantley. “Strike two, pup. Don’t let it get to three, ‘cause I’ll enjoy ruining your pretty little face way too much.”

I get up from the ground, swiping the dirt off the back of my pants. Taking Bishop’s hand in mine, I pull him closer to me. “It’s okay.” Whatever problem Brantley has with me, he obviously thinks it’s valid.

Slinging the gun over my shoulder, Nate bends down to pick up Tillie, cradling her into his chest. I watch them closely, slightly confused, until Bishop catches me. “Yeah, I think it’s safe to say the playboy has found his chick.”

“You think?” I ask, head tilted.

Bishop scoffs. “Yeah, pretty much.”

Bishop is talking on the phone when I come out of the shower, clutching my towel. He eyes me walking in, but continues to answer questions on his phone, watching me closely.

“Yeah,” he says. “No, she’s fine.”

I pause, grabbing my clothes out of my bag. “Yeah, I’m fucking sure, Dad. Call it off.”

Hope flares up in my chest, but I bend down and slip my underwear on under my towel, trying to be as quiet as possible. “Okay,” he murmurs. “Yeah, deal.”

Deal? What deal?

He hangs up his phone and then stands, walking toward me. The late afternoon sun setting shines through the windows, glowing against his tanned skin. “It’s done. He knows. I have to talk with him when I get home, but I think I convinced him enough to not chase you.”

I drop the towel. “Shall we celebrate, then?”

He smirks, walking toward me and pulling off his shirt. “Abso-fucking-lutely.”

I’M DRUNK, AND AS MUCH as I’ve tried to give myself a pep talk, there’s no denying that.

No, Madison, the ground is not supposed to spin like that. And, no, Madison, there are not two Bishops. But I’m happy and in good company. Since Bishop got off the phone with his dad, everything has calmed down significantly. The tension Brantley has been throwing my way has died off immensely, so much so I’m pretty sure I’ve caught him smiling at me a couple of times.

We all decided to spend one more night here and head back to The Hamptons tomorrow, and then back to school the next day. If I’m honest, I have a lot of bookwork to catch up on when I get back, so to say I can’t wait to be home, in my bed, is an understatement. Not that I haven’t enjoyed being here with Bishop and, admittedly, the other guys, but home is home, and my bed is far too amazing to swap for something in the forest.

“Hey.” Tillie nudges me, taking a seat on the log beside me.

“Hey back.” I smile at her, moving my hair out of my face and letting out a long breath. The flame from the bonfire heats my flesh, and I close my eyes, a smile

spreading across my face. I open my eyes, bringing my drink to my lips.

“So you and Bishop are a thing?” she asks with a quirked eyebrow, taking a small sip of her drink.

“Well, I mean... you and Nate?” I retort.

She smiles. “Touché.”

“Just be careful,” I whisper to her. “I know. He’s Nate, and he’s very charming... and he has that damn tongue ring.”

She bursts out laughing and then covers her mouth with her hand to keep from spitting out her drink. “Sorry, but word! It’s the tongue ring,” she teases. Though we both know that’s not true. She looks across from us, and I follow her line of sight, my eyes falling on Bishop, who is staring at me so intently it has me shuffling in my seat—or log. “Seriously?” Tillie shakes her head in disbelief. “It should be illegal for any man to be that good-looking.”

“Who, Nate?” I ask, because yes, Nate is very pretty.

“No.” She shakes her head, swallowing her drink. “Bishop. I see the appeal and why everyone—and I mean everyone—wants him. I mean”—she rolls her eyes—“look at him. Who wouldn’t want him?”

“I’m hoping you.” I laugh sarcastically before turning serious. “Seriously, I have enough girls to worry about chasing after him. I don’t want to have to worry about my friends too.”

She laughs, her head tilting back. “No, you don’t have to worry about me.” I look back at Bishop again to catch him still staring at me. The orange hues of the flame

ignite his cheeks, adding a blush to his tan complexion. Tillie leans into me. “And I wouldn’t worry about him, either. I mean, he’s never been a whore anyway, always selective and secretive. He’s always had the unattainable reputation. But with you, though?” she murmurs, almost to herself. “I don’t know. It’s different. You’re different to him.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“Well, I hope so!” I laugh her off, averting my eyes from Bishop and his intense gaze. “All things considered.”

She smiles. “So have you heard from Tatum?”

“Yeah.” I lean forward. “She texted me the other night. She’s fine... just same old Tatum. I’ll text her and tell her we’ll be back tomorrow.” She takes a step from the log and my hand goes out to her. “Seriously, Tillie, just be careful, okay? I love him; don’t get me wrong. He and I... we grew close quite quickly, and although he has done some questionable things to me, I know he wouldn’t intentionally hurt me.”

“I know, Madi. I’ll be fine. I promise.”

An arm wraps around my waist and I grin, knowing who it belongs to. Tillie smirks too and then winks at me. “Seems we’re both going to be a little busy tonight.” Then she walks back to Nate, who is waiting for her with open arms. They’re so cute, yet different. Nate, though... I don’t know. He’s never had a relationship before, according to everyone I’ve talked to, so that worries me. It worries me that I can feel he’s going to do something bad to fuck things up with this girl one day, but I know for a fact I will be there for both of them.

“Come on.” Bishop nudges his head, a bottle of Macallan in his hand. I stand, wiping the dirt off the back of my pants just as Pretty Ricky’s “Get You Right” starts playing on the sound dock, floating through the dark forest and hidden behind the laughs and drunken slurs of my friends. Yeah, friends. Some weird friendship we all have going on. “I wanna show you something.”

“Oh?” I prompt, settling into his step and snuggling into the warmth under his arm.
“Another firefly night?”

He smirks. “Not quite.” We head farther and farther away from the group and toward the back of the cottage, until darkness floats all around me. He pulls out a mini flashlight from his pocket and turns it on, shining it toward an overgrown bush area.
“Come on.”

“What?” I ask in disbelief. “In there?”

Shining the light under his chin, he nods. “Yeah, in there,” he whispers scarily.

I shove him. “Can you try to not be like, the boogie man?”

That earns me a throaty laugh. “Baby, I’m much worse than the boogie man.”

“How so?” I follow him anyway.

“Easy, the boogie man isn’t real.” He runs his rough fingertips over the inside of my thighs, dragging them over the zipper of my short shorts, and rubbing my clit through the denim material. “Feel that, baby?” he whispers into my ear. “That’s real, and that’s how I’m much, much worse than the fucking boogie man.”

My breath catches in my throat, but I swallow through it. “You’re such a fucking dick.”

“Yes, but I have a fucking monster one.” He yanks me, so I quicken my steps. “Come on.”

“Where’re we going?” I ask, following him through the overgrown shrubs.

He pulls me and I fall forward, the bush I stepped through swinging back into place. “It’s not far.” I swipe away the broken little twigs that cling to my shorts and follow him. “I inherited this house from my parents. When my dad was fifteen, it was his, and then when I turned fifteen, it came to me.”

“Hmm.” I grin. “That’s some family heirloom, though, right?”

He chuckles as we keep walking. “Yeah, that’s one thing you’ll come to realize. Nothing is done in halves.”

He stops, and I almost crash into his back. Stepping around his body, I walk forward and follow his sight. “Holy crap, what is it?” I whisper.

Bishop looks down at me, bringing the rim of his bottle to his lips and taking a swig. “Hmm, I’m not really sure how to answer that.”

I step around him, walking toward the cave that looks to be made of stone. There’s a dark door entrance with no windows, and the cave is surrounded by loose, overgrowing vines and shrubs.

“Have you been in it?” I ask, looking back up toward him.

“Never.” He shakes his head. “It’s just some old shit my dad used to talk about when I was a kid.”

“Kinda like the boogie man?” I tease him.

He takes my hand in his, and I ignore how my chest contracts and my core tingles at our contact. “Something like that,” he murmurs so lightly I almost miss it.

“So why did you bring me here, then?”

He grins. “‘Cause we’re going in.”

I shake my head. “I don’t wanna.”

“Baby?” He smirks—at least I think he’s smirking. The small light coming off his flashlight is hinting at a smirk from the crisp, sharp shadows over his cheekbones and jawline. “You’re coming.”

“Fuck.” I snatch the bottle out of his hands and bring it to my lips, swallowing the harsh amber liquid. Letting out a hiss, I wave toward the entrance of the stone. “Lead the way!”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

I follow as he walks toward the dark, gloomy rock. Goose bumps break out over my flesh just as we near it. It feels haunted, as dark shadows are dancing around in the silence.

“Did you hear that?” I whisper to him harshly.

“What?” He grins over his shoulder. “Naw, babe. Come on.” Pulling me into his warmth, he throws his arm over my shoulders as we walk into the entrance. I hold my breath, ignoring how the damp, congested smell of lake water engulfs my senses.

“Won’t there be like, bats in here or something?” I whisper.

“Probably.”

“You’ve been here before, haven’t you?” I call him on it because he’s way too calm.

“Meh.” He shrugs. “Once or twice.”

The dusted rocks and loose gravel crunch under my feet as we get deeper and deeper into the cave. The oxygen thickens, making it harder for me to breathe the farther we go in. “Bishop, it’s fucking with my breathing.”

He pulls me under his arm. “Woulda never pegged you as a chicken shit, Montgomery.”

I shove him playfully and then we stop, looking toward a large opening. There’s a massive hole above us where the moonlight shines directly in and onto a stage-like

platform. “Creepy,” I whisper, rubbing my hands over my arms. Tilting my head, I look at all the dark stains that spill over the rock. “Really fucking creepy.” He steps up onto it, the light from the full moon lighting up his body, shadowing his face. “Is this the part where you tell me to ask you what you eat?”

He chuckles. “No. This is the part where I tell you my dad is a dangerous man. My family are dangerous people, regardless of what you hear or see in the media. All of that is just shadowed by my mom because of who she is. It’s why my dad married her probably, to keep the spotlight off what he does.” Bishop pauses and tilts his head at me.

“Sounds like you’ve thought long and hard about this.”

Bishop laughs, jumping off the stage and stepping toward me. “I know a lot of things that would shock you, kitty.” His hand comes up as he runs the back of his knuckles over my cheek. “I do a lot of things that would undoubtedly repulse you.” He takes a short breath. I hold mine, trying not to think too much into what he’s saying or what he’s implying, because truthfully, a big part of me wants to know more about Bishop. Why he does what he does, why he’s so mysterious, why he and Khales broke up. Where is she, and why do people think she just went missing off the face of the earth?

But I know Bishop enough to know he doesn’t just give straight answers. He’s too smart for that, too many steps ahead of everyone to make an amateur move like say something he shouldn’t. Sometimes I wonder just how old he is, because he’s so smart. Not book smart, but street smart, and that’s not something you see in people our age.

He continues, breaking my train of thought. “I can’t let you know.” His fingers wrap around the back of my neck possessively. “I can’t take the risk.” His thumb spreads over my bottom lip. “I can’t lose you to this.”

“You won’t lose me, Bishop.” I take his hand in mine and search his eyes. Eyes that have seared through mine with so much hate it could light up the gates of hell. But right now? Right now, they’re mixed with something else. Confusion, lust, want?

He shakes his head, the corner of his mouth hinting at a smirk. “Yeah, I will, kitty. When all is said and done? I will.”

SCRUBBING THE LOOSE DIRT OFF my skin, I let the hot congestion of the shower engulf me, embracing just how amazing it is to be back in my room. In my shower, about to get back into my bed. Smiling, I turn the faucet off and step out of the shower, moving the glass door out of my way.

“Oh my fucking God!” I scream out, reaching for my towel and wrapping it around my body quickly. “Nate!” I hiss. “You cannot just come up in here and scare me like that. Fuck!”

His hand is rubbing over his sharp, pretty jaw, his perfect eyebrows pulled in. He’s thinking—hard, and not the least bit concerned over the fact I just gave him a full frontal view of my lady fucking bits.

Lady bits? FML.

“Question,” he starts, bringing his eyes to mine slowly, still serious, and again, not one bit bothered about what I’m wearing—or not wearing.

“Always, Nate, but for fuck’s sake, stop coming in here when I’m taking a shower.” I shove him out of the way, squeezing the towel around me more and reaching for my toothbrush.

“Do you love me?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“What?” My hand hovers over the end of my toothbrush, shocked by his question. “What do you mean?” I squirt paste onto it anyway and then slip it under the cool tap water, bringing it to my mouth.

“Simple question, kitty.” He smiles sadly, turning toward me.

I pause my brushing when I see the sincerity in his eyes. They say women are confusing? Nuh uh. Men take the cake for this shit.

I drop my hand to the sink. “I mean, I’ve never had a sibling before, but I can honestly say that if I ever had one, I’d want him to be you.”

Nate smiles sorrowfully, the dimples in his cheeks sinking in slightly. “Thanks, sis.”

“Why do you ask this, though? Are you okay?”

He exhales slowly. “Me and Tillie, what are your thoughts?”

Well, I wasn’t expecting that. If I asked him what his thoughts were on Bishop and me, I have no idea what he would say.

“Um.” I spit out my toothpaste, rinse my toothbrush, and then put it back into its slot.

“I mean, I don’t know. I just don’t want you to hurt her, Nate.”

“What if I can’t fucking help it?” He looks to me pleadingly. “What if I’m just one epic failure of giant proportions? What if I get so scared anytime I think I come close to me giving a fuck about a chick... I fuck it all up?”

“What have you done?” I ask blandly.

“I... I... fuck.” He pulls on his hair. “Why do I give a fuck about her, Madi?” he whisper-yells at me. “Why the fuck do I care? I’ve had little fuck buddies before, but I don’t tap more than once, and if I do, they’re with chicks who know the rules. And even if they do get attached? I have no problem breaking their itty bitty, little tender fucking hearts. I laugh at them, Madi!” He pauses, his chest rising and falling, his eyes furious and his jaw tense. He pulls at his hair frantically again.

I reach up and grab it, bringing his hand down. “What. Have. You. Done?” I murmur again, searching his eyes for any clues.

His shoulders go slack. He reaches out to his door handle, twists it, and shoves it open. “I fucked up.”

I let out a long, annoyed breath, my eyes staying on the naked body of some slut that’s spread-eagle on Nate’s satin red sheets. Without turning to face him, I launch my elbow back and clock him square in the jaw.

“Ouch!” He steps back, rubbing his jaw and quickly shutting the door.

“No!” I scream, a little crazily if I think deeply about it. “Why the fuck do you care if that slut hears?”

“Madi!” Nate shakes me, his hands wrapping around my upper arms. “Shh!”

“Fuck you!” I hiss, reaching for the door again, ready to pull the bitch’s hair straight out. I’m acting a little on the insane side, but he had one thing to do—not break my best friend’s heart—and he did it. This would undoubtedly shatter her. They may not be exclusive, but sometimes you don’t need to say the words “we’re together.” Sometimes, you know deep down what the fuck you’re doing is wrong, and by the

way Nate is acting and how he came in here, asking stupid fucking questions... that tells me he felt like shit while he was doing it. Hence, cheating. He cheated on her. He knew what he was doing was wrong, label or no label, so fuck him.

“Madi, we weren’t together, but I can’t do this with her!”

“Do what?” I yell again, my hands going in the air like a crazy person.

“I can’t do commitment! I’ve never been able to!”

“Why?”

“Shit!” He pulls at his hair again, his muscles tensing with the action. “I can’t do this with you right now.”

“Well...,” I murmur. “You have until I wake up in the morning to tell Tillie, or I will, and I’m not playing around. Nate, I may care about you like I do a brother, but blood or no blood, I would still act the same. Tillie is my best fucking friend, and she likes you—only God knows why—so fix this shit.”

Then I turn toward my door and storm back into my room, a little on edge and a lot annoyed. Flopping down onto my bed, I stretch wide and count the squares on my ceiling. I can’t fucking believe it. We’ve been home for approximately three hours, and he has managed to sink himself into someone else. What the hell is his problem? Are all men like this? Should I be checking on Bishop?

With that thought, my stomach churns with unspoken emotions. Nope, not going there. Bending over my bed, I pull out the leather book and sit back against my headboard, flipping open the page and looking over the double infinity sign again.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“Who are you, Katsia?” I whisper. I need last names or something. Who is this person and her mysterious husband? With so many questions hanging in my balance, I flick to the next page and start reading.

6.

Plot holes

Pregnancy went very slowly. Almost like a train that was about to crash, but in slow motion and you were the only passenger on board—with your pregnant belly. You knew it was coming, but you just hoped it was a different outcome. My husband always said how excited he was about us having another son. He said it was another soldier for his plan and that his right-hand man, Mathew, was also expecting a child. Around the same time as me too, they said. I was feeling very unnerved, not because I was pregnant at a later age, but because he was adamant it was a boy. Like he already knew I was bearing his son, the next boy in line.

What made him so sure I was carrying a boy? And why did that scare me? Why did I feel like there was always something missing when it came to what I knew, like something was always being held back from me? Stepping into the little nursery I had designed, I folded the little rug and placed it into the wicker drawer.

“Ma’am, I don’t mean to interrupt, but the meeting is about to begin and I need to escort you to the Landing.”

Nodding, I straightened my dress out, my hand running over my swollen belly. “I’m ready.” I was not ready, and I had no idea what was in store for me, but I knew I had

four months before I gave birth to my baby. I had to find out as much as I could before those four months were up, because I knew, deep down, that just like the calm before the storm, something was going to blow up, and I was adamant that I, or my child, would be in the vicinity when it happened.

I jolt from my sleep, attempting to keep my eyes peeled open but failing miserably. Closing the book, I push it under my bed and shut my eyes, promising myself that I will continue it tomorrow. Though the book is thick, I'm so engrossed in the story that I know it won't take me too long to finish.

"Madi come on! We're going to be late!" Nate yells from his Porsche.

"Well, you can wait!" I hiss to myself under my breath, reaching for an apple in the fridge and flicking my long hair over my shoulder. I've been wearing a lot of scandalous clothes lately—probably Tatum's influence—so I decide on ripped boyfriend jeans, a tight white tank top that shows just a smidge of my flat, toned belly and a lot of my boobs—not hard considering the size—and my Chucks. Leaving my hair in natural loose curls that flow down to my tailbone, I pinch my cheeks, trying to get a pink blush to spread across my skin, my leather bangles rubbing across my jaw in the movement, and then walk out the front door, closing it behind myself.

"Calm down!" I scold him, clutching my books in my hand.

He tips his aviators down his nose and checks me out from the driver seat just as I pull open the passenger door. "Well, damn, sis. Do you ever look bad?"

"Yes," I reply curtly. "Usually after I kill cheating men."

Nate rolls his eyes and pushes his glasses back up his nose, putting it into first gear and skidding out of the driveway. "Stop being dramatic. She didn't even care."

“I call bullshit. She would care.”

“And how do you know this? Maybe she’s just different.”

I grin, a thought popping up in my head. “Well”—I shrug, checking my nails with a slight smirk on my lips—“I mean, if she didn’t care, maybe it’s because she has this super sexy—and when I say sexy, I mean fucking gushing sexy, Nate. Like, one look and I was ready to tear my own panties off and shove them in my mouth just to have his hot body under—”

He slams on the brakes, my head jolting forward.

“Nate!” I scream at his impulsiveness.

“Yo! You hear that, dawg?” Nate hollers into his phone. His phone that is connected to his stereo. His phone that has the Bluetooth light flashing. His phone that—

“Yeah, I fucking heard that,” Bishop growls. So low it sends chills down my spine. Double shit. Fucking me and my unquestionable loyalty to my friends, always getting me into trouble one way or another.

“So who is this friend?” Nate asks, eyebrow quirked.

I laugh. “I’m not telling you shit.”

“Madi!” Bishop snaps. “Who is he?”

“I don’t know! We met him a few days ago when we went to pick her up from school.” Nate pulls back onto the road and continues to drive us toward school. “Anyway, Tatum and a little bit of me were saying how hot he was, and Tillie said how they sleep together. But they’ve been doing it since they were young and it’s just

something comfortable between them. Zero awkwardness.” I look toward Nate. “You can’t get mad, Nate the Snake.”

Page 87

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“Did you just call me Nate the Snake?” He narrows his eyes at me.

I shrug. “Well, you know, since you boys like riddles so much.”

“Your mouth... it’s going to land your ass in hot water one day,” Nate replies, pulling into the school parking lot.

Walking into my first class, I instantly know something is wrong. The classroom falls silent as I open the door.

“Madison, you’re late again. Why am I not surprised?” Mr. Barron says, not lifting his eyes off his chalkboard.

“Sorry, sir.”

“Take a seat, Madison,” he replies blandly.

I shuffle to the back of the room, ignoring the hissing whispers that start bouncing off the walls. It’s almost like my first day all over again. I drop my books down onto an empty desk and slide into my seat. I don’t even have Tatum in this class to ask what all the stares are about.

Sinking into my chair, Felicia—I think her name is Felicia—who has black hair, black clothes, and black smudged eyeliner under her lashes, leans toward me, her eyes staying on the teacher, careful not to gain his attention. “Psst.”

I lean toward her slightly, just as my phone vibrates in my pocket. “What?”

“So is it true? You’re like, sleeping with all of them?”

I snap my eyes to her, my heart pitter-pattering in my chest. “What do you mean?”

She reaches into her pocket and then pushes a couple of buttons before turning the phone to face me, hitting Play on a video. The first part shows me and Nate and our embarrassing kiss in our living room, and then skips amateurishly to me and Bishop kissing and hugging at the campsite, before jumping to me and Brantley. And then it goes to Bishop and me having sex in the tent, showing my silhouette dropping my clothes, and the video doesn’t stop. You can hear me murmuring and whispering out my pleasures for everyone to see and hear, my body rocking over his through the shadow. At the end of the tape, a little black box comes up with pink writing:

“You’re next, bitch. Your days are numbered—just like mine were!”

“Oh my God!” I whisper, tears threatening to surface. Shoving my chair back, I catch Ally smirking from the front of the classroom.

“Madison!” Mr. Barron scowls at me. “Sit down, or I will have to refer you to the principal’s office.” Everyone looks at me, their laughs circling around me, echoing in a swirl, pounding through me.

“I... I’m—”

“A whore?” Ally sneers.

The whole classroom erupts into laughter, and I quickly gather my books, my hair falling over my face as I dash out the door and down the corridor.

“Hey!” Tatum comes crashing into me, her phone plastered to her ear and her eyes watering, looking around frantically. “Oh, thank God!”

“Tate?” I break, my tears pouring over my cheeks.

“Come on, let’s get you home.”

I let her pull me under her arm as she takes me to the elevator. Slamming on the button vigorously until I’m sure she’s about to break it, the doors ding open and she pulls me in forcefully. Once the doors close, she swipes the tears off my face and kisses my lips. “It’s okay, Madi. It’s going to be okay,” she tries to reassure me, looking me in the eyes. “Goddammit, I’m going to kill that bitch!”

“Who?” I ask, swiping the tears off my face, as the door dings open again onto the underground parking.

“It was Ally, Madison. It may not have been her who recorded it, but she uploaded it onto her account on YouTube. She wanted people to think she did it.”

“Why?” I yell, following her to her car. “Why would she do this to me? Why?”

“Bishop, babe, it’s all for Bishop.”

“But the note at the end? About my days being numbered...?”

“Who knows?” Tatum unlocks her car, and I slip into the passenger seat as she slides into the driver seat. “But it was her, Madi.”

“I’m so embarrassed, Tate. I’ve never felt so humiliated in my life.”

“I know, babe. I know. Well, I don’t—but I can imagine.”

“Not helping.”

“Okay, totally not helping. I’ll take us back to my house if you’re not ready to face the Kings.”

I nod, swiping the tears again. “Sounds good, thank you, but can we quickly stop there and pick something up? I feel like I could do with the distraction.”

“No questions asked.” She pats my leg, driving out from the garage. “We will figure it out, okay?”

I nod again, trying to work out how exactly she thinks we’re going to figure it out. “Yeah, sure.”

Walking into Tatum’s high-class, modern home, I shut the door behind us, carrying a box of Krispy Kreme donuts and enough Carl’s Jr. to feed half a state.

“Feel a bit better?” she asks, smiling at me and flinging the keys onto a table.

“A little, but I haven’t had food yet. Ask me again after I’ve had enough carbs to impregnate me.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Tatum giggles. “Come on. We can go into the theater room and stuff our faces in there, with a bottle of tequila and some trashy romance movies.”

I follow her down the dark hallway, through her sitting room, and then through another door that leads down to the theater. “Your parents aren’t home?”

“Huh?” she asks, opening the door. “Oh, no, they left last night. I’m sure they’ll be home either tomorrow or on the weekend.” We walk into the room, Tatum hitting the lights until a dim hue settles over the triple row of large sofas. Each sofa is enough to sit two adults comfortably, and there are around ten of them in the theater. There’s a tiny bar tucked away in the corner with a popcorn machine and candy display, and then beside that is a large—no, scratch that—massive projector screen. Tatum walks to the bar, and I drop our food on a sofa, my bag onto the ground.

“Okay! Now I’m not good at cocktails, but we can just drink it straight. The end result is just the same.”

“Thanks for this, Tate. You’re a great friend.”

She pauses, handing me a glass and twisting the lid off, pouring some clear liquid into it. “You would do the same, Madison. It’s nothing.”

And I would. God knows I’d move heaven and hell for her if I had to. We sit down and my phone vibrates again. Peeling my burger cover off, I look down at the screen to see Bishop’s name flash across the phone. Exhaling, I take a large bite out of my burger, to the point where Tatum is looking at me with raised eyebrows.

“Hungry, or stressed?”

I shake my head. “He stresses me out,” I murmur around my burger.

“It’s not his fault, Madi.”

“No, I know it’s not, but I can’t talk to any of them right now.”

She nods, popping a chip into her mouth. “Totally understandable.” Shuffling back to the ginormous sofa, I kick my shoes off and finish the rest of my burger in silence.

“I found this book,” I say, starting on a donut.

“Oh? Kinky kind?”

I roll my eyes. “No, though I wish, because this one is kind of making me a little depressed.” I lean forward to grab it, when my phone lights up again, this time showing a text message.

Bishop – I’m sorry.

Ignoring him, I reach for the book and flash it at her. “See!” Then I flip it open. “It’s title-less, and Miss Winter wasn’t actually supposed to allow people to check it out of the library, because it’s some link in history. But after my third visit to the library, she must have felt sorry for me and let me take it.”

“Miss Winter is weird as fuck. I don’t understand that woman.”

“She’s not weird.”

“Give me a look.” Tatum waves for me to pass the book over.

“Tatum, wipe your hands!”

“Are you serious?” She pauses and then rolls her eyes, wiping her hands with a napkin. “Next thing I know you’ll be calling it your precious.”

I smile at her wit and then hand her the book. “So it’s about this woman, right? I’m only up to chapter 7—at least I think they’re chapters. It’s a very different book... but it’s intriguing. I’m still not sure what it’s about. I went into it blind, because it has no title, no blurb, none of that.”

Tatum takes a swig of her drink. “There’s no sex?”

“No.”

She hands it back. “Sounds boring.”

I snatch it back from her. “It is not boring. It’s fascinating.”

“So what is it? Like a memoir or something?”

I shake my head. “Apparently, it’s her suicide note.”

“In the form of a book?” Tatum squeals, taking a chocolate cream donut out of the bag. “How poetic.”

I flip the page open to where I was up to before falling asleep last night, and start reading out loud.

8.

Why?

“No, no, no, no, no...” I shook my head from left to right as another contraction rippled through my insides. “I don’t... I’m not ready. It’s too early.”

“It’s not too early, ma’am. You’re only two weeks early. That’s enough time for the baby to survive on its own.”

Leaning my head back on the cold, hard ground, I looked up to the stars. “It’s not time—”

“Enough, Katsia. It’s time. Do as you’re told and do it with class.”

I looked toward my husband. “Don’t you dare use that tone with me!”

“Woman! You are to do as you’re told, or so help me God, I will slap some sense into you!” he roared, launching at me. I didn’t flinch. My insides were tearing open, my stomach rippling with such pain it could put the fear of death into any man. I was ready for war. I didn’t know it at the time, but there was a reason why so many people were surrounding me. My husband’s right-hand man sat in the corner with his wife, who was cradling their newborn son, as well as the rest of the soldiers—as he called them—surrounded him.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

“Ma’am, you’re ready to push.”

“Why here?” I whispered out to no one in particular. “Why here?” I scream, just as a contraction hits. I pushed roughly, until my stomach rolled over in pain and my pelvic bone felt like it was shattering under the heavy pressure that was being lumped on it.

“One more push, ma’am. That’s it. I can see its little head.”

Breathing in jaggedly, I gave one last scream and push. With a pop, a bright, burning ring of fire around my crotch, and a wet river flowing between my thighs, I pushed until all the pressure I was feeling was no more. A soft cry sounded out and my maid smiled, wrapping the baby in a throw. “Ma’am, you have yourself a daughter.”

“What?” I smiled, love filling my being. I would have loved my child regardless, but knowing it was a daughter filled me with a different kind of love. The same amount, just different feelings.

The room cut silent. “Repeat what you just said,” Humphrey demanded, moving up the stone step. “Did you just say daughter?” he questioned her, his head tilted. I saw the look pass in his eyes, and I knew instantly right then and there that something was wrong. So very wrong. Husband was livid, absolutely spewing. A girl? A girl had no place for him in his world.

The maid nodded, fear flashing over her face. She looked toward me frantically. “Yes—yes, um....”

He snatched the baby from her hands, and I rose from the stone bed. “Humphrey!

Give me my baby right now.”

He took her down, one step at a time. “No. No girls.”

“What do you mean?” I screamed at him, blood dripping down my thighs and my body swaying from side to side.

“Girls that are born from the first nine,” he seethed, turning to face me, “are to be taken care of. Sit down, wife, and do as you’re told.”

“No!” I screamed, stumbling down the step. “Humphrey!” Everything blurred and spun, the cold walls going in circles in my brain.

“Ma’am,” my maid said, her face coming into view in threes. “Ma’am, sit down so I can tidy you up.” Her voice echoed and repeated. My eyes closed and my head tilted back as everything under me fell. I dropped onto my back, smacking the back of my head. Tilting my head up at the dark sky, I watched as the full moon blared down at me.

“How odd,” I whispered to my maid in a daze. “How odd that in this old cave, there’s a hole in the roof.”

I gasp, slamming the book closed. “Oh my God!” I hiss.

“What?” Tatum’s shoving popcorn in her mouth, totally engrossed in the story.

“I know this place that she was talking about, Tatum!” I yell. “We need to go—now!”

“Why?” She stands from the sofa, shoving some Ugg boots on.

“Because I think this place, this cave that Katsia was talking about... I think it’s at

Bishop's cabin, and how cool is it that we could go see it? Maybe I could study it a bit more."

Tatum stops. "That's just weird. Maybe it's a coincidence. That would be so trippy if it was."

"Maybe." I shrug. "But I still want to show him this book and read the rest, see if maybe it is, and then we can all go and have a look!" I can barely contain my excitement.

"History really gets you going, huh?" Tatum teases, throwing her hair into a high ponytail.

"Yes, and more importantly, it's taking my mind off Ally."

She nods. "All right then, my history goddess, let's go!" She smiles sadly.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah," she murmurs. "My dad used to read me old stories when I was a kid. That's all."

"Oh, well that's really nice. Why does that make you sad?"

She stops, seeming to think of her memories, and then exhales. "I trust you, and I know you care about me."

"I do."

"My parents haven't been home in months. They're fine, though, because I've opened bank statements and seen they're still spending money. I called the penthouse

that kept showing up on these statements and got them to put me through to them. Sure enough, my mom answered. My trust account is still large and I still have access to it. The mortgage and bills still get paid. But they just don't care, Madi."

I'm shocked. My mouth hangs open in utter shock, but most importantly, I'm hurt. Hurt for Tatum. "I'm sorry, Tate. Do they usually do this?"

She shakes her head. "I mean, they were always out, but they wouldn't leave for longer than a week."

"How long's it been?" I run my hand up and down her arm as a tear slips out the corner of her eye.

"Two hundred and eleven days."

"Oh my God!" I whisper, disgusted, and it's right here when I decide I hate her parents.

"Anyway," she shakes me off, "let's go see if Bishop's cabin has some creepy history on its land!"

Page 90

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

We get into Tatum's car and I turn to face her. "Do you know where his house is?"

"Everyone knows where Bishop's house is."

I laugh, shaking my head. "I guess that was a stupid question."

"So tell me more about this Katsia person."

I start talking about what I've read so far in the book, and then I turn to face Tatum. "It probably sounds stupid, but I feel a bond with Katsia. Like she's lived through all this... dark stuff, and I've been able to watch it through her words."

"It's not silly." Tatum shakes her head, turning down Bishop's road. "It's not unheard of. It's why I read."

"You read?" I ask, shocked.

Tatum giggles. "Don't act surprised, Madi. Yes, I read. Religiously. It's what takes me out of my life." Up until a few minutes ago, I always thought Tatum had a perfect life. Two parents at home, no messed up shit in her background. And now I feel terrible I made that assumption.

"I wish you had told me earlier, Tate. We could have had so many more sleepovers."

She smiles. "I know," she murmurs, turning into Bishop's gated driveway.

"It'll be locked."

She pulls the car up the curb. “Well then, we’re jumping!”

I laugh, pushing open the door with the book hidden under my arm. “Looks like we are.”

I walk toward a tree that’s close to the walkway, a branch dangling over the top of the fence that surrounds Bishop’s house. “There! Hold the book. When I get over, toss it and I’ll catch it, and then you follow.”

“Okay.” Tatum nods. “Jesus, I can’t believe we’re doing this. His dad is scary as fuck.”

“His dad isn’t home. He’s away until this weekend. I heard them talking about it while we were at the cabin. Come on.” I hitch my foot on a smaller stub and grip onto the rough bark of the tree, propping myself up. Swinging my leg over the final limb that hangs to the fence, I look down to Tatum.

“Are you sure about this?” she murmurs. “I mean, I know you’re not heavy, but that branch doesn’t look very thick.”

“It’ll be fine, and if I fall, it’s not like it’s a very long drop.”

“Ha ha.” Tatum laughs dryly.

“You’ll be fine. You’re a twig.”

“Yeah, but you—”

“Tate? Shut up.”

“Okay, okay.” With shaky limbs, I slowly stand on the branch, ignoring the creaking

my body weight is drawing from it. “Shit,” I whisper. “This is fine. I can totally do it.” I look forward, my eyes staying on the thick trunk, and take the first step. “Shit, shit, shit.” I hurry my steps, and just as I get to the end, I jump and land on the top of the gate. “See?” I grin down at Tatum.

“Yeah, okay, hurry up, show off.”

I jump down off the fence. “Okay! Toss it over.”

The leather book comes flying in the air and I jump to the side, landing on my stomach to catch it. “Shit!”

Tatum jumps down off the fence, landing on her feet. “That wasn’t so bad. Damn Bishop and him not answering his fucking phone. Seriously? Since when does he stop answering the fucking phone when you call?”

I shake my head, dusting myself off. “I don’t know.”

We start walking toward his house. “Hey, have you heard from Tillie?” Tatum asks.

I shake my head. “No, I tried to call her last night, though, but I know Nate has spoken with her.”

“What’s up with those two anyway?”

“No one knows. They’re weird. Nate slept with someone else last night and I lost my shit, told him I’d tell her if he didn’t.”

“I’m not even surprised.”

“Right? But they were so cute at the cabin, Tate. Like, they were like a real couple.

But apparently Tillie is fine with Nate sleeping with someone else. I haven't heard from her, though, and she's not answering my calls."

"Like you and Bishop cute?" She smirks, and the sound of his name and me in the same sentence has my stomach fluttering.

"Sort of." I smile.

Reaching his house, I follow the path to his bedroom at the back of the main house and near the pool.

"Jesus, it's like The Adams Family house, only newer."

I laugh. "Yeah, I know, right?" Walking toward his bedroom, I stop when I hear voices coming from what sounds like the ground.

"Did you hear that?" Tatum confirms my theory.

"Yeah, it sounds like Bishop's voice. They must be in the main house." I walk to the back, opening glass doors that open out onto the pool and Bishop's room opposite.

"You sure about this?" Tatum whispers, grabbing my arm.

"Yes! It's Bishop and Nate. We'll be fine."

"I'm not buying it," she mutters, looking around the house.

"It's open!" I whisper, pointing to the sliding wall.

"Oh, fuck's sake," Tatum grumbles. "I'm scared."

“Yeah, I guess I would be too had it not been for the cabin weekend.”

“Bishop is a nice guy now?” she asks, trying to reassure herself.

“Definitely not.”

“You could have lied!” she scolds, as we step into the sitting room.

“I’m not a liar,” I whisper calmly.

“Nah, dawg, nah....”

“Nate!” I whisper to Tatum. We turn and follow a door that’s cranked open under the double stairwell.

“Madi, I don’t know about this.”

“Okay, you stay here.”

“I can’t let you go down there on your own!”

“Well then, come. Either way, I’m going.” I walk to the door, pulling it open to voices that are louder.

“Don’t fucking care,” Bishop replies, his tone dark, tormented, and almost unrecognizable.

“You stepped out of the rules. She’s a civilian!” Brantley roars.

I flinch at his tone and sounds of a scuffle from all the glass smashing and someone shoving someone else.

“You and I both know she ain’t no civilian, Brantley.” I clutch the book close to my chest and take the final step down. My eyes find Brantley’s instantly, and he grins. “Well, looks like you got some explaining to do, B.” He smirks at me with a snarl. I can see the rest of the Kings in the room in my peripheral vision, but everything blurs when my eyes land on Ally, who is lying in a pool of her own blood, her neck sliced open, with a dark red gash splitting her throat, blood still pulsing out of it. My hand flies up to my mouth as an earth-shattering scream ripples out of me. In a flash, Bishop is flying toward me.

“Madi!”

I shove him away and turn, running up the stairs.

“Fuck!” Nate barks, and I can hear Bishop’s footsteps chasing me up the stairs. My heart pounds in my chest vigorously. He killed someone. He killed someone. He killed Ally. Tears stream down my face as prickles of fear ripple all over my body. He’s a killer. Bishop is killer. He killed someone. I push open the door just as vomit threatens to surface on the back of my throat. My eyes blur from the river of tears that are pouring out of my eyes, and when they land on Tatum, who is standing there waiting for me, my face pales. I run toward her, only to end up colliding with another body. Falling on my ass with a thud, the book flies through the air and lands on the floor. I can feel all the Kings behind me, watching me, all coming up from the basement.

I rub my hand over my forehead and slowly bring my eyes up to who I just collided with, guessing Bishop’s dad is home. Swallowing through the bile of everything I’ve just witnessed, my vision reaches the owner of the body, and I gasp, shock spreading over every inch of me.

“Dad?”

“Madison!” my dad snaps at me in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“No.” I shake my head. “What are you doing here?”

Dad looks down to the book that’s spread open as Bishop steps up beside me, looking down to it too. There’s an audible gasp that sounds through the air, and I turn to Bishop, my eyes heavy and weak from all the tears. His hand covers his mouth in shock, his eyes wide as he gazes at the book. He tugs at his hair, and I look down to the book, confusion clouding me everywhere. Shuffling over the floor on my hands and knees, I reach it, the next chapter open and ready.

9.

The Silver Swan

The truth is I don’t know what my husband did to my daughter. He said girls are tainted. There is no room for girls in his master plan, and that’s how it always will be. He said they would sell the girls, but something dark and doubtful always tickled the back of my mind. My husband was a liar, a cheat, and a manipulator. There’s absolutely not one part of his body that is truthful or redeemable.

Later that night, after my maid had cleaned me up, Humphrey came back into the cave, sat down beside me, and said, “Girls cannot be born into our covenant, wife. They’re weak by human nature. They must be taken care of at their birth.”

“You’re not God, Humphrey. You cannot deem who bears what when pregnant.”

“No,” he replied simply. “But I can take care of it.”

I shook my head, my heart in tatters, and my life turning bleak, dark, finished. “There will be no Silver Swans born into this family or any of the first nine. They will be

demolished.”

“Silver Swans?” I asked, clipped and annoyed.

“The Silver Swan is, in old times, what they would call a tarnished being. Every girl that would be born into the first nine is a tarnished being. It’s no place for a her.”

“Humphrey Hay—”

I swipe the tears from my eyes, not wanting to read anymore. “Dad?” I tilt my head at my father. “Why are you here?”

He swallows roughly. “I was just sorting out a business deal.” His eyes pinch, worried. “Just some business I had with Mr.—”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:21 am

Flashbacks come in at full force.

“Your dad has shady business dealings.”

“She’s a civilian!”

“She’s no civilian and you know it.”

“Do you know anything about us?”

“Have you been to The Hamptons before? And be honest with me!”

“Fuck your dad!”

“Trust me, Madison. Your father is no innocent in this!”

“He recognized her! Fuck!”

And then finally, Bishop’s words from the cabin. “Just promise me that you will always know we’ve done everything for your safety.”

All the secrets. The questions, the empty answers and promises. The lies!

My mouth drops open and my chest freezes as realization becomes clear. “Oh my God,” I whisper, my hand coming to my mouth. I look up at all the Kings and then look to my father, whose shoulders are slack in defeat. I look over his shoulder to see a strapping man in a tailored suit. His jaw is square and tense, his eyes dead and

emotionless. He flicks the cufflinks on his wrist and glares right through me.

“I’m the Silver Swan,” I murmur to myself, searching the floor for some sort of clue that I’m overreacting. Everyone pauses, no one correcting me. “You all lied to me!” I launch off the floor and point to them all. Hate builds up in force. Tears stream down my face as I turn to face Bishop. “You lied to me. Oh my God!” I step backward, Tatum, being Tatum, following my back. “Who the fuck are you?” I whisper to Bishop, then turn to Dad. “And who the fuck are you, too?” I shake my head.

“Madi, wait!” Bishop yells as I run through the door, clutching the book in my hand.

“Leave her, son.”

“Don’t talk about my daught—”

They all cut out as I pick up my pace, Tatum chasing me down the driveway. We reach the fence, and it slides open instantly as we get there.

“Madi!” Bishop yells, running down the steps of his house.

“Hurry, Tatum!” We run through the gates, and she beeps open her car. The gates slowly close behind us, and I quickly slide into the passenger seat, with her getting into the driver’s.

“Drive,” I hiss, my heart breaking when I catch Bishop’s eye, his hands curled around the bars of the fence.

“Where to?”

“Anywhere but here.”

“Okay. Are we running, Madi? ‘Cause I’m with you all the way.”

“Yeah, Tate, we’re running, and we’re not coming back.”

They are not the boys I suspected they were. They’re the kind of monsters you warn people about. Not naïve children, but adults. The kind who lie, cheat, manipulate, seduce, and kill, just to get what they want. They’re the kind you run from.

I’m Madison Montgomery, and I thought I knew who I was. But I was wrong. I’m not just some average girl whose mom killed herself after killing the woman my father was having an affair with.

I’m the Silver Swan.

And now? Now I’m just the remnants of the broken puppet they all used me as. Everything human inside of me has been taken out and replaced with nothing but cotton and fake love. There’s no coming back now—not ever.

The End

(For Now)