



MIDPARK HIGH
BOOK 1

Feisty

CANDACE WONDRAK

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Chapter One – Jaz

Nothing felt right, and I didn't mean that in the angsty teenage *everything sucks* way. I meant it literally. The clothes Mom and I had picked up before coming here didn't look right on me. They fit, yes, but beyond that they were too...weird-looking.

They were nice, of course. No stains, no stray strings on any sleeves or sew lines. The clothes themselves were decent, but they were almost too much. Too fancy, too poser-y. Not sure how fancy you could be when you bought your clothes at the second-hand store, though.

Mom had told me again and again it would be fine, that it was only the kids in movies who noticed stupid things like that, but I wasn't so sure. The kids at Midpark were surely different than the ones I'd gone to school with before.

I stared at myself in the mirror, not liking the way the dress I wore looked on me. I was probably the only one awake in the house; Mom would still be asleep, and Ollie took some weird hours. That man constantly drowned himself in his work; Mom had told me he'd lost his family, but I had no other details.

Midpark was a rich high school. I was sure its students would somehow know I didn't belong there. I might live in the school district now, but I shouldn't be there—to which I'd say uprooting my entire life and moving across state lines one week after turning eighteen wasn't what I wanted, either.

We had to deal with the hand life gave us, and for me and Mom, life constantly gave us shitty hands. She was of the mind that it was starting to look up; we had a nice roof over our heads, she had employment paying well enough that she could funnel some money away and save, and we would all start fresh.

Mom even made me change phone numbers, forbade me from giving my new number out to my old friends—not like I had many, but still. She was being paranoid, and I had no idea why.

Back to the matter at hand.

My outfit. I wasn't really a dress-wearing type of girl. Time to change.

I eventually decided on a pair of ripped skinny jeans and a layered shirt, paired with a simple necklace. The pendant was a cross, but it wasn't gold or sterling silver, so the metal was a bit tarnished. I liked the look, though. Made it feel more real.

My bag was packed with new school items—unused pens still with their caps, unsharpened pencils and notebooks with not a single line written in them. Felt like the first day of school all over again, and in a way, it was. Halfway through the year and I would be the new student everyone gossiped about.

Not looking forward to that, but with any luck I'd be able to fly under the radar.

Hah. Me, flying under the radar. Somehow, I didn't think that would happen.

I did just a bit of makeup, curling my long black hair so it was wavy instead of bed-head kinky. Once it was a respectable time, once I was sure my mom would be up and downstairs, I zipped on some ankle-high boots, grabbed a jacket and my bag, and headed down.

Don't even get me started on how huge this house was. A sprawling mansion with dozens of rooms. Living life to the extreme, I guessed. It wasn't a wonder why Ollie needed a live-in maid to clean it. Mom always had odd jobs, but this was the first one she was actually excited about. Probably because she didn't have to drive anywhere, and also probably because she thought it would be good for me.

Sometimes I was a trouble-maker. Sometimes I said and did things without thinking. Didn't we all?

Yeah, get me away from all of that, and stick me into a rich, hoity-toity high school. Sounded like a great plan, didn't it?

I found Mom in the kitchen, cooking breakfast. The smell of bacon permeated the air, and I slid onto one of the bar stools on the island, dropping my bag beside me as I basked in the heavenly scent.

Mom didn't much look like me. If you took a look at her and then at me, you'd wonder just how we could be related. She had skin as pale as porcelain while mine was a bit darker naturally, along with blonde hair and blue eyes that I was constantly jealous of. Mine was a thick mess of black, and my eyes were the color of shit.

Or maybe that was just my jealousy peeking through.

I let out a sigh, catching her attention finally. She tossed a look over her shoulder, giving me a warm smile. “Ready for your first day of school?” A stupid question, because the answer should’ve been obvious.

“Nope.” I picked at a groove in the butcher block wood below me, wondering just what fresh hell I’d walk into at Midpark. Halfway through the year, there had to be drama aplenty. And with rich kids, I could only imagine what their particular brand of drama was like. “You know, I could be homeschooled.”

My mom threw me an icy glare.

“There are programs,” I quickly said. “So you wouldn’t have to do it.”

“No, like I’ve said a thousand times already, you’re going to Midpark.” She left her station near the stove, moving to stand on the other side of the island. Leaning her palms onto the wood, she whispered, “Think of it as the next step in your life. Midpark will be good for you. Maybe you’ll make connections. As much as it isn’t fair, the rich have opportunities normal people don’t.” She lowered her voice just in case Ollie came down the stairs at that particular moment, but he didn’t.

Making connections. Yeah, great. Wonderful. Somehow I didn’t think other high schoolers had to worry about connections and all that shit. I was just a super lucky duck.

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered, and Mom went back to the stove.

Within minutes, the bacon was done, and she started cooking me up some eggs. She wasn’t the best cook in the world, but cooking for Ollie was a part of her daily duties, so I knew she’d get better.

Being a live-in maid to a rich guy...seemed a little weird, but I knew beggars couldn’t be choosers. Mom had bounced from weird job to weird job for the last eighteen years ever since having me, but if this could be a more stable environment for her, I’d do my best to adjust. How hard could it be?

I was nearly done with my breakfast when I heard Ollie’s footsteps coming down the stairs. He carried a black leather briefcase, and he set it on the counter near the coffee maker. He said not a word, but my mom leaped into action.

“Here, let me,” she said, hurrying to make his damned coffee for him, as if he was some helpless twat. “I could’ve had it ready for you, but you go in at different times every day.” It was true; we’d been here only a week, and I’d already noticed Ollie’s work hours were crazy.

Maybe he just didn't want to be alone in this house anymore, or maybe the rich and semi-famous around here got into a lot of trouble and constantly needed his help. Oliver Fitzpatrick was the best lawyer you could get with money; it's how he afforded this place and all of the stuff inside it on his salary alone.

"I figured I'd drive Jazmine on her first day," Ollie spoke, using my full name instead of Jaz. Jazmine was so formal, so...ugh. I'd given up telling him he could call me Jaz. "You could get a head start in the living room."

Right. Because Ollie was hosting some kind of fundraiser here, because the man already didn't do enough work as it was.

I wasn't stupid. I knew that man was just drowning himself in work, work, and more work so he wouldn't think about the family he lost. Of course, I didn't know all of the details, but I knew he'd lost them. I knew he'd had children and a wife, and they were gone. Asking for the details about it felt wrong, so I hadn't.

"That would be lovely," Mom paused, tossing a glance at me, as if waiting for me to agree with her.

Not going to happen. I figured I'd have to walk, since there was no way in hell I'd ever let my mom drop me off at Midpark in her ancient van on my first day—and because Midpark was too rich for busses. Driving with Ollie might shield me from the cool temperature outside, but that was...just awkward.

I mean, I didn't really know the man well. I might be living in his house, but knowing him and living in his house were not two mutually coexisting things.

I kept my mouth zipped shut, knowing if I argued, it wouldn't be good. I wanted my mom to be happy. I wanted her to have a stable life. I loved her, probably more than I loved myself. If there was one person out there I'd do anything for, it was her, hence me zipping my lips and giving Ollie a thankful smile even though he wasn't paying any attention to me whatsoever.

By the time Ollie's coffee was done, I had finished eating. I zipped up my jacket and threw my bag around my shoulders. Mom hurried around the island to hug me, enveloping me in her arms. I just stood there, taking it, because there was nothing else I could do at this point.

Make her happy. Be good. Don't get into any trouble.

Seemed easy, but I knew it would be difficult for me.

“Make some new friends” were Mom’s last parting words to me as I followed Ollie through the kitchen. Make friends. Right. Because it was so easy, you could do it in your sleep.

Becoming friends with rich snobs...might be stereotyping, because I hadn’t stepped foot in Midpark, but kids like that were not the kind of people I wanted to be friends with.

Hey, maybe I’d be wrong. Maybe I’d walk through those doors and everyone would be nice and welcoming and all that. I could have nothing to worry about, just blowing everything out of proportion because it wasn’t what I was used to.

Or I could be right, and Midpark could be filled with snobby rich kids who’d rather turn their noses up at me than help me if I was dying.

The garage was attached to the house, and it held cars that probably cost more than I knew. I’d never seen Ollie drive anything but his big, black Mercedes-Benz SUV. I almost felt too dirty to touch it, which was ridiculous, because at the end of the day it was just a car and I was a person, but still.

Had to get used to feeling out of place, I knew.

I was the first in the car, Ollie climbing in shortly after he put his briefcase in the backseat. He hit the button on the vizor, and the garage door in front of us slowly opened. I tried not to stare at him too much; he was an older gentleman, maybe a few years older than my mom. If I had to guess, he was around fifty, or upper forties, at least. His black hair was greying, his eyes a tired blue.

Yet another lucky son of a bitch when it came to eye color.

Ollie kept to himself mostly when he was home. It wasn’t like we ate meals together. Mom made him his meal, which he usually took to his office upstairs. Mom and I ate at the dining table downstairs, sitting beside each other and wondering who in the world needed such a long table.

The rich, obviously.

The car was silent as Ollie drove us down the driveway, slowing to a halt to wait for Frank, the gate guard, to open the gates.

Yes. This mansion came with twenty-four-hour supervision. No sneaking out for me anymore, not that I snuck out often, but. Well, if I wanted to try it here, I’d have to get creative. Climb a fence or something.

The silence in the car was heavy as Ollie drove me to Midpark. The sun had barely risen in the east, and I would’ve claimed it was too early to do

much of anything, but I'd been up for hours, so my mind raced. Had Ollie done this drive countless of times before? If he had kids, if that house had been his for long, surely he did. He wasn't old enough to have kids that far apart in age from me.

My morbid brain wondered right then: *were they dead? Did they die? Did Ollie hold a weight on his shoulders because he thought he was responsible?*

As Ollie turned into Midpark High's parking lot, I studied the parked cars we passed. A lot were probably faculty vehicles, but there was no way there were that many workers here. Probably two hundred cars scattered around the newly-built, modern building with an abundance of windows and cameras pointed every which way. Those fancy cars also belonged to some students here, the ones old enough to drive and have their license. I had mine, but no car.

We'd lived quite a few hours away from here, in a different state, but Midpark did ring some bells in my head. Something had happened here, something that captured the national news for quite a while. I didn't really pay attention to the news, so I didn't know details. Didn't really care to.

Ollie pulled his car up to the front doors, and I glanced outside, at the other students chatting it up, already in their cliques, even though it wasn't even seven o'clock yet. They wore brand-name jackets with the fancy gold designer names stitched in them, shielding their bodies from the cold but looking cool while doing it.

The girls looked cute all bundled up, their hair done and makeup perfectly blended. None had holes in their jeans like me. Even the guys looked like movie stars in the making—their faces, their clothes, the way they stood.

Well, that was nice. Suddenly I felt very potato-y. Maybe I should've gone with that other dress and some tights or something...did I even own tights? I was overthinking it. These kids probably wouldn't look at me twice.

My stomach felt queasy. I didn't want to go out there.

Joke was on me, though. I had to.

With a wave to Ollie, I unbuckled my seatbelt, grabbed my bag, and got out. Ollie drove off, and I stared past the kids outside, looking at the front glass doors. I would have to march in, go to the office, get my schedule and locker, and hopefully a map.

Yep. I was going to be the weirdo walking around holding a map because I didn't know how to navigate the maze that was Midpark. Setting myself up for some mocking, but it had to be done. I could not be late to classes and disappoint my mom. No getting in trouble. No calls to the office. Just sit down and study like a good girl.

I held my head high and walked to the doors, the cold air whipping up a gentle breeze. Whether everyone's eyes were on me or not, I didn't notice. Tried not to, anyway. I might've made eye contact with one particularly cute blonde boy, but that was neither here nor there. I was sure I wasn't the type of girl a boy at Midpark would ever want to bring home to meet his parents. Basically a maid's daughter. If that wasn't ammunition for ridicule in a place like this, I didn't know what was.

The front office was right inside and around the first left corner. Thank God there were signs, otherwise I would've been wandering and looking even more a fool. Once I got my schedule and my locker combination—and a map—I was good to go.

Midpark wasn't too confusing of a school. It looked like the cafeteria was smackdab in the center, and there was even some space where students could eat outside if they wanted. Since it was kind of chilly out, I doubted anyone would be outside. There were hallways for the sciences, for the literatures and languages, the maths, and all the electives my old school had to cut because it was too poor and none of the parents wanted to vote for a levy to increase taxes to fund those classes.

Yeah, my old school got rid of art and music and all that. I didn't miss it much, though there were a few select people I did miss. It wasn't like I could talk to them, though. The way Mom talked, it was imperative that we moved on completely from that place, wash our hands of it. I did get into a lot of trouble there, so I was trying to turn a new leaf. To be good. To be the daughter she wanted.

I got to my locker and opened it, shoving my bag in and taking out a few clean notebooks, along with my pencil pouch. You weren't allowed to carry your bags to class. Just one of the many rules in this place. It was something I could understand, though; there were so many shootings in America, you never knew what someone could be hiding.

With my schedule resting on top of my notebooks and my map in my other hand, I started the first day of many I'd spend at Midpark High.

Things did not go how I expected them to.

Chapter Two – Archer

Here I thought today was going to be just another day. Another day when I smiled and pretended that everything was okay. Usually everything was okay, but sometimes it was hard to grin and bear it. I knew that's what people had to do in life, but every day when I looked around, I couldn't help but wonder if anyone else was saddled with the same burden I was.

It should've been just a normal day, but during homeroom I sat back and watched as a new face walked in and spoke to the teacher.

I leaned back in my seat; I was in the far back since my last name was Vega. Homeroom was basically just our first class extended, which gave time for the morning announcements and for the teacher to take attendance and send it to the office.

She wasn't a student here, I decided, tapping my pencil on the side of my desk. Most everyone else was caught in conversations, busy talking about what they did over the weekend. Party, party, party. I admit, I went to some sometimes, but only because I was dragged to them. Only because I was paraded around like a trophy.

Right when I decided she wasn't a student, the teacher strolled over to a cabinet on the far side of the room and got out a new textbook, handing it to the new girl.

So she *was* a student. A new student? We didn't often get new students here, mostly because those who didn't live in the area couldn't afford to send their kids here, and those who did live around here tended to stick around.

Except for that girl a few years ago, the one everyone made a big fuss about. Celeste. She came and she left. She didn't stay. She even had a police escort too, for a while. I did my best to steer clear of her, mostly because she had been a senior while I was a freshman. There were just some lines you didn't cross.

The teacher quieted the room—it was usually chaos until the announcements came on the loudspeakers—and introduced us to her. Jazmine Smith. She was a transfer student who'd be joining us permanently. The teacher told her where to sit, the empty seat beside me, and she kept her

head low as she walked through the aisles of seats, well-aware everyone's eyes were on her.

I couldn't help but watch her as she approached me, sitting up straighter as she slid into the seat beside mine.

She didn't look like the typical Midpark student. Her jeans were holey, for one thing. Holes in any clothing here were shunned and looked down upon. She had a bit of eyeliner around her dark eyes, a smoky black look.

Jazmine Smith was pretty, I realized. Thin and slender beneath those torn jeans, with long, thick black hair tumbling halfway down her back. She looked almost too old to be here, like she had an old soul tucked in that heart of hers. A beauty that was timeless and unavoidably alluring.

Wow. Listen to me go on and on about her. If I didn't know any better, I'd say I was almost smitten—a bad, bad thing.

I watched her with my peripherals, trying not to outright stare at her. No joke, but I was sure this girl was the prettiest girl I'd ever laid eyes on. She'd attract a lot of attention here, some good, some bad.

“New girl, huh?”

She stopped fiddling with her pencil pouch and stared straight at me. She sat less than two feet away from me, and she stared at me like I'd grown a third eye.

Right. Because I talked. Because that was me, trying to be smooth and suave. Most people probably believed it, even though inside I was pained to act so happy and jovial.

“That's probably why the teacher introduced me, and included the words *transfer student*,” she spoke, staring at me with eyes that could pin you in place, her voice deadpan. “But then again, what do I know?”

I grinned, dimples on my cheeks. “I think you and I are going to get along just fine.” Anyone who resorted to dry sarcasm was a winner in my book, although she'd probably make more than a few enemies around here if that was how she always responded to everything.

She let out an unimpressed sound. “I'm glad you think so, but I'm not so sure.”

“I'm Archer,” I told her. I'd seen this girl getting out of Oliver Fitzpatrick's car in the parking lot, and I couldn't help but wonder what that meant. Was she a relative? Her last name was Smith, but that didn't mean much when it came to marriage. She did have dark hair like the Fitzpatricks did.

“Not interested” was her curt reply.

I chuckled. “I wasn’t asking you out.”

She side-eyed me for a while, shortly letting out a sigh. “Sorry. It’s just...being new here. Not fun, you know?” I didn’t know, because I’d been with this crowd my whole life—as sucky as it was.

“I can imagine it’s scary, but I think you’re doing fine.”

She chuckled. “It’s not even first period yet. At least give me until lunch to fuck something up.”

Ah, so this girl wasn’t afraid to swear. Couldn’t say why, but I kind of liked that.

The girl puckered her lips as she looked at me, as if, for the first time, noticing my looks. Most girls did eventually, and then they started acting different around me. They started giggling and batting their eyelashes, flirting and all that. Only time would tell if she’d be the same.

“Jaz,” she said. “I don’t like Jazmine.”

Not what I thought she was going to say, but I found myself grinning all the same. “Jaz it is,” I mock whispered. “I’ll be sure to let the whole school know on your behalf—” I paused as I watched her open her mouth, ready to come at me with something, but right then the announcements blared to life over our heads, and the whole room got quiet.

Her dark gaze lingered on me for a minute or two after, and I couldn’t help but let my mind wander. I mean, she was gorgeous. Any guy with eyes could see it. Spunky, too, if our short conversation revealed anything about herself. I knew I immediately liked her more than I should, which was none. Nothing. I shouldn’t like her at all. Liking her would only cause both of us problems later on.

Problems, unfortunately, were something of an Archer Vega specialty.

Chapter Three – Jaz

They actually put me in choir. *Choir*. It was the period right before lunch, which seemed decent enough because for half of the class we were on our own and able to work on some homework—of which I already had a ton. So much catching up to do. Coming midway through the year, everyone was in the middle of different sections and lessons that my old school wasn't.

Apparently curriculums were different across state lines, let alone city lines.

But, back to the choir part. I didn't know if they just needed to fill up my schedule or what, but me and singing did not go hand in hand. I sounded like a dying cat crying out for its last breath, worse than nails on a chalkboard. I couldn't hold a note to save my life, and reading sheet music? Forget about it.

I could catch up on the homework and the chapters I'd missed, but choir? There was only so much you could do when you were musically inept.

Hmm...maybe I'd have to take a trip to the office and ask them to switch it up, put me in some other elective, because me taking choir could only end badly. I didn't know if Midpark had its choir perform at its rallies, but my old school did. I would annihilate every set of eardrums nearby if I had to get in front of the whole school and belt out the Star-Spangled Banner or some shit.

I sat by myself in the corner of the room, most of the other girls and boys in the class having their chosen group of friends. No one really spoke to me, though they did toss curious glances my way as they whispered to each other, probably about who I was or what I was wearing. Class was halfway over when a girl walked up to me and plopped herself in the seat beside mine.

She wore high-rise jeans that hugged her slender frame well, a red shirt that made her seem plain giddy. Or maybe that was the smile on her face. Her brown hair held highlights and gentle waves, waves that put mine to shame.

“Hi,” she said. “I’m Bobbi. Ms. Haber wants me to help catch you up with the rest of the class.” Her voice came out quiet; she was a giddy but soft-spoken girl, the complete opposite of me.

“I don’t know if I’ll be staying in the class,” I started.

“Why?”

I could’ve gone on and on about how weird it was to ‘warm up’ my cat-wailing voice, how strange it was to try to sing along to a song written in Italian—and I didn’t know any Italian or how to pronounce any of the words—but all I ended up saying was, “It’s not really my thing.”

“Singing is everyone’s thing,” she said, still smiling. Did she always smile, or was my budding personality just bringing it out of her? “Come on, just give it a shot. Once you get in the groove, I’m sure you’ll love it.”

I held back a frown, pretty damn sure I wouldn’t.

“Today’s your first day here, isn’t it?” Bobbi spoke, running her hand through her hair and tucking some of it behind her ear. The rest of the class had broken off into their own groups, the teacher locked away in her office, doing God knew what.

I mean, if this was how class would normally go...it could sort of be viewed as a study hall. My eyes glanced to the notebook in my lap.

“Yeah,” I eventually said. “Is it that obvious?”

Bobbi studied me. “We don’t really get many new faces. Most of us grew up around here. We never get transfer students. Did you just move to Midpark?”

It wasn’t like I wanted to advertise I was living with Oliver Fitzpatrick because my mother was his live-in maid, and he allowed us both to stay there because he had plenty of room. Then again, maybe I’d find out about what happened to his wife and his kids...was the ridicule worth the risk?

I settled for saying, “Yeah. Me and my mom.”

“I’m with my dad,” she said, as if that somehow cemented the bond between us.

God, listen to me. I sounded like a bitch, and I wasn’t. Not really. I was actually kind of nice—I think—but today my walls were up. I was a bit prickly because it was my first day here, with new people in a new place. Once I relaxed, once I lowered my guard a bit, everything would be fine.

Wasn’t too sure about making friends at this point, but that was okay.

“It’s not too bad here,” Bobbi went on, glancing around the room. “Everyone is nice...mostly.”

I let out a laugh. “You don’t sound too sure.” And she really didn’t.

She shrugged. “I’m sure you had mean girls at your old school, too. The principal has tried to cut down on the bullying though, after what happened a few years ago.”

That piqued my interest. “What happened a few years ago?”

Her eyes fell to her lap, and I watched her nibble her bottom lip in unease. Whatever happened a few years ago must’ve been bad. I didn’t get any strange vibes from this chick; she seemed like a decent enough girl who was just given a job by the teacher. I doubted she’d purposefully come over here to gossip about years past.

But then again, you never knew.

“Have you heard of Celeste Chambers?” she asked, hedging before telling me any information.

The name rung a few bells, but I wasn’t certain what bells they were. The name was recognizable, but I couldn’t say when or why I’d heard it. “I’ve heard of her, but I don’t remember why.”

“She was kidnapped a long time ago, came back after five years.” Bobbi shifted in her seat, looking uneasy as she whispered, “Things happened—”

“What happened?”

“Bad things. Rumor has it Celeste was involved somehow, and after fingers started pointing at her, she just...left.”

I had no idea how a high schooler could just leave. “She moved away?”

“I guess, although her stepdad didn’t. He’s still around. I think the community would go nuts if Oliver Fitzpatrick were to move away—this place might look shiny and clean, but it’s got a black underbelly, as long as you know where to look—”

My mind zoned out, even though she continued talking.

Hold the fuck up. This story wasn’t making any sense.

It was a good thing the bell rang right then, because otherwise I would have let my wandering mind get the better of me. When my mind wandered, it tended to come up with dozens of scenarios that were probably unlikely. I knew though that just because something was improbable didn’t mean it was impossible.

As everyone else got up and scurried out of the room, practically pushing past each other to be the first ones out, Bobbie switched tracks, telling me, “Look at the sheet music tonight, okay? We’ll figure out times to meet outside of class later to catch you up.” With a smile, she was gone,

leaving me sitting there for a few moments, wondering what the hell just happened.

A black underbelly to Midpark, and then she brought up Ollie...

I could totally see it, but maybe that was just because I loved all of the shows on the CW. Small-town people, rich people—they got into shit. This was life, and life tended to be messy.

I was one of the last stragglers to walk out of the room and into the bright hall. My feet drew me through the crowded halls and to my locker, where I shoved my books and notebooks in. Mom had packed me a lunch today, but I didn't know if I wanted to eat it. I knew my body needed replenishing, but actually sitting down and eating felt like the last thing I wanted to do.

Or maybe that was simply because I was nervous about finding a seat. It wasn't like I'd spoken to many people today. I got countless stares and questioning looks from the other students who wondered what rock I'd crawled out of, but no instantaneous offers of friendship.

Bobbi seemed nice, but I didn't really know her. If she had lunch the same period as me, I didn't want to put pressure on her or annoy her by asking if I could sit with her.

Hmm. Decisions, decisions.

Steeling my nerves, I grabbed my small bagged lunch and straightened my shoulders. Surely there had to be an empty table in the cafeteria. Surely. I'd just be the weird chick who transferred in the middle of the school year and sat alone at lunch. Not who I wanted to be, but at this point, I wasn't feeling very outgoing or friendly.

My walls were up, and it showed.

I closed my locker, practically alone in the halls. Everyone had already made their way to their next class or to lunch if they had it this period. I didn't need the map to find the cafeteria, thank God. It sat in the middle of the school; most of the halls eventually led to it, so even a blind person could find it.

My feet took me to the edge of the cafeteria, a big, wide-open space that held a tall ceiling, a wall of windows, and a bunch of stainless steel tables where the rich kids sat. Maybe it was stereotypical of me, but it was true. Only a kid born to parents who could afford to live in the area went to Midpark. I was the exception, mainly because my address was now the same as Ollie's.

As I thought of him, my mind wandered back to what Bobbi had said. Celeste. What happened to her? Now there were more things that made me worry. Ollie had been her stepdad, which meant he'd remarried after his old wife.

Maybe Ollie was involved. She'd brought him up like he was a part of it. Maybe he helped to get rid of Celeste, and his old wife, and was able to use his connections to cover it all up. I...probably should let the conspiracy theorists think up things like that and stick to trying to survive Midpark.

My eyes scanned the cafeteria. I was mainly looking for a table, but a teeny, tiny part of me searched for Archer, the boy I'd met earlier. There were tons of cute guys here, but none of them drew me in quite like Archer. He seemed fun, and he seemed nice, which was more than I could say for a lot of these kids—tossing disgusted and curious looks at me like it was their damned job.

Ugh, this day could seriously not be over fast enough.

I didn't see Archer's cute blonde head, which was probably a good thing. Attaining a crush on my first day at Midpark would only end in disaster, honestly.

You know what freaking sucked? There was not a single table empty. Maybe it was because it was too cold outside to sit in the square courtyard—a little bit of nature in the center of the school—so everyone was taking up the tables.

God, that just made things extremely awkward, didn't it? So I'd either sit myself in an empty chair, or...what? Eat in the bathroom like some kind of loser from an old eighties movie? No thanks.

I scanned the cafeteria again, spotting a table that was mostly empty. One boy sat there, but even at this distance, I was hesitant on calling him a boy. He looked more manly than anything, but maybe that was because of the thick black tattoos I spotted on his hands.

Looked like a loner, a stoner, someone who no one wanted anything to deal with—not the typical Midpark student, from what I'd seen today. Hmm. Even with the tatted-up hands, he was cute.

I must've been staring too long, for our eyes locked across the cafeteria, and he abruptly stopped fiddling with his food.

Well, I guessed my decision was made.

Chapter Four – Vaughn

Midpark lunches were not something you ate if you were smart. Most of the other students willingly ate the nicely-presented shit, shoveling it down their gullets as if they didn't have a care in the fucking world. I supposed they didn't. They weren't like me. They would never be like me.

And I didn't say that because I was of the *I'm so different than everyone else because I listen to emo music and wear eyeliner* variety. I meant it quite literally. I'd seen things in my eighteen years that these kids would never dream of seeing.

Maybe in their nightmares, but even so, their nightmares were merely my daydreams.

My eyes stared down at the tray on the table before me, and I moved around the pile of corn, pushing the small yellow kernels into whatever meat that was supposed to be. My hands were covered in ink. My family hated it the moment I came home with it, but I didn't care. It wasn't like I was the only one in my family with tattoos.

Something in my gut told me I was being watched—which wasn't unusual in and of itself, because I was an outsider here—and I looked up, scanning the nearby area. I sat near the windows at a table alone, my usual spot. Sometimes girls came up to me and tried talking to me; I didn't know if they thought I could be the bad boy they worked to tame, but I never looked twice at them.

These people...I might come from money like them, but we weren't the same. The money their family held was not like mine. We weren't even comparable.

My dark gaze landed on a girl standing at the edge of the cafeteria, holding a rolled brown bag and looking quite out of place. She stared right at me, and I stared back, unabashed. I wasn't one to back down, ever. If there was someone who didn't know when to stop, it was me. I blamed my father's genetics.

We were all a little...off our rocker, let's just say.

Whereas some girls might blush and look away, she didn't. She lifted her head high when our eyes met, as if mentally preparing herself before walking through the rows of tables to reach mine. She did not choose a

chair next to me, or even across from me; she chose the one furthest from me, at the opposite end of the table.

“Is anyone sitting here?” she asked, cocking her head.

All I did was shake my head, watching as she pulled out a chair and sat down. She tried to act tough, and maybe she was. She was obviously new here, not knowing anyone else to sit by. I had heard the rumor that Midpark High had its first transfer student in a while, but I didn’t pay much heed to it because I didn’t care.

Suddenly though, I was a bit curious.

The girl keeping to herself at the end of the table had long, wavy black hair, its tendrils tumbling over her shoulders and over her chest. She wore an outfit most people wouldn’t be caught dead in here, and her eyes were almost as dark as mine. High cheekbones, a small button nose...she was pretty, probably one of the prettiest girls in Midpark.

Looks didn’t much matter, though. It’s what was on the inside that counted.

“So you’re the new girl everyone is talking about?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

She paused, midway in unrolling her bagged lunch, tossing those black eyes to me. Some people didn’t like dark eyes, but I did. When they were so dark you weren’t sure what the other person was thinking, when you couldn’t tell whether their eyes were dilated in desire or fear—those eyes were my favorite. Black, soulless, a void of emotion.

“I guess so,” she muttered, giving me the side-eye as she glanced at my hands.

“How do you like Midpark?” It was almost funny how normal I sounded. I could put on a mask like the best of them. That was something the rich were all too good at, not just me. When you had money, it became easier to hide the wrongs you committed.

“Oh, it’s great. I love feeling like an outsider and coming into the year half-done,” she rattled off.

“At least you’re new. I’m an outsider, and I’ve been here since kindergarten.”

She finished unrolling her bag, sticking one hand inside as she gave me an unimpressed look. It wasn’t the eager curiosity some girls had, nor the utter disdain the others wore as they looked down on me. She radiated defiance, feistiness.

She might make this last stretch at Midpark fun.

“Well, you ooze friendliness, so I have no idea why that is,” she deadpanned, lifting a single eyebrow as she pulled out...crackers.

This girl was really going to eat crackers.

I let out a smile—a rare, elusive creature for me—and said, “I’m Vaughn.”

“Jaz,” she muttered, sounding unhappy as she shared her name, as if she was giving me the key to her heart. She looked like she was putting up a front, trying to act tough...or maybe that was simply because, compared to what I’d seen and had to deal with, no one around here was really tough.

True toughness was something you were molded into. These other kids might think they could stand strong when the going got tough, but they couldn’t. One drop of blood and most of them would run for the hills, fearing for their lives.

Jaz. I liked its shortness. Short and sweet and to the point.

She tore her eyes away from me, surveying the cafeteria. “This is going to be a long semester,” she muttered, frowning to herself. If she was a self-proclaimed outcast, she’d stay that way. I didn’t blame her for not wanting to integrate herself into anyone’s group. People around here were just annoying.

“Time tends to fly around here,” I said, causing her eyes to snap back at me.

“Not for me,” she said. “Never for me.”

I grinned, though the grin fell off my face the moment she no longer looked at me. All throughout lunch, I watched her, trying to figure her out. I liked to think I could read people pretty well, that I noticed little ticks and cracks in masks most people wouldn’t, but for whatever reason, I could not decipher her.

She was, for all intents and purposes, an unknown.

Something inside me hardened, and I stuck my spork in a piece of meat, knowing I’d have to get to the bottom of her. I didn’t like unknowns.

Lunch was over far too soon, and we parted ways. I didn’t see her at all the rest of the day, our schedules too different. All day I kept repeating her name to myself: Jaz. I kept picturing the way she’d looked at me, how she kept herself closed off from everyone else. I would get to the bottom of her sooner or later.

I might've blinked, and the rest of the day was over. When school let out, I grabbed everything I had to from my locker and walked outside. Many of the kids had their own cars, and those that didn't were either picked up by a parent in a fancy vehicle or by drivers. I had a driver who always pulled up to the front door and blocked the rest of the cars behind him, the car sleek and black.

I got in the back, slamming the door behind me. The windows were tinted, allowing me to gaze outside in privacy, no one looking at me. It was as the car was put into gear and slowly pulled away that I saw Jaz exiting the glass doors of the school, looking lost as she glanced all around.

Bundled up in a coat, the wind whipping at her hair, she looked even better than I remembered her being at lunch. A bit wild, a bit frightened. A part of me rather liked seeing the expression on her face, even though I wasn't able to stare at her for long.

Once we were on the road, I settled in the seat. I didn't bother buckling my seatbelt. Our estate stood on the far outer reaches of Midpark, where the mansions had acres and acres of land surrounding them on all sides. Long, winding driveways, gates and guards that kept most people away. My family's estate had cameras everywhere, along with multiple guards who walked the property at all hours of the day and night.

When you had an illegal business, you tended to be careful, and when that illegal business was sometimes had in your own basement, you were extra careful.

We pulled into the drive, slowing to a stop as the guard at the gate checked credentials. No one could just walk or drive onto our property. We probably had the biggest estate in Midpark, and that was because we had the most money. And the biggest family.

My father was older than the dads of other students at Midpark. He had quite a few wives, a lot of girlfriends, and more mistresses than that. The business had stayed in the family for generations, and he'd had this mansion and all of its fancy—ahem, not-so-legal parts—built. He ensured the family legacy would continue.

Needless to say, my family was huge. A lot of brothers, some full-blooded and others merely half since some of us didn't share mothers. Cousins aplenty. Sisters who were either inducted into the family business or who were thrown out if they refused. But even then, my father always kept an eye on them.

The gate was slow to open, and we drove through. The driver let me out near the front door, needing to go around back to park it.

Jaz.

As I entered the house, I couldn't get my mind off her. Was there more to her than met the eye? Was there something more to her than the lonely transfer student who put up walls to keep everyone out, or was that it?

I would find out what she had hidden in the depths of her soul. It wasn't like I had much else to do around here except wait to graduate. Jaz seemed as good of an obsession as any. Plucking her petals off one by one until she was laid bare. Was it wrong to be excited?

Because I was. Almost unreasonably so.

Chapter Five – Jaz

One day down. The rest should be easy compared to this horrible day—the freaking minutes seemed to drag on and on for hours, the hours lasting days. I knew that didn't make sense, but time literally crawled today.

And, what was worse, I had so much homework to do, so much to catch up on. Cue the typical teenage eye-rolling.

I exited the school, shivering once the cool winter air hit me. Other Midpark students lingered around the door, waiting for their rides, while others headed straight into the parking lot to their expensive cars.

I didn't envy them because of their money. I envied them because of their superior, carefree attitude. They probably didn't have a care in the world. They didn't know what it was like to drop everything and move, to change their number and delete all of their social media accounts because they were worried about their mom.

When Mom had come into my room and told me what to do, that we were moving the very next week and that I needed to leave everything behind, I was scared. Of course I was. I couldn't help but feel like there was something she wasn't telling me, almost like we were on the run.

Which was ridiculous, because my mom was a good person. She didn't have a criminal bone in her body, so I had no idea what we could possibly be on the run from, but still. Mom was too tight-lipped about it to be of any help.

I searched for my mom's van; I didn't assume Ollie was picking me up again. I knew that him dropping me off this morning was probably all I'd get from him, which was more than okay. We lived in his freaking house and my mom worked for him. I didn't need him to drive me to school, anyways. In fact, after hearing what I did from Bobbi, I'd rather be seen in my mom's crusty old van than Ollie's car anyway.

"Hey, you!" A shrill voice behind me called out, but I assumed they were talking to someone else, and I stepped out, still looking for my mom's van when I felt a hand curl around my arm and spin me around.

A girl wearing the thinnest jacket ever stood before me in heeled boots. Her blonde hair was curled, its tendrils pinned to the back of her head in an

up-do that made me wonder if she was going to the country club after school.

Rich people went to country clubs, right? It sounded like something they'd do.

Her eyes were a light amber, narrowed as she studied me, slow to release my arm. Her nails had acrylic on them, a wintry design on their long, pointed lengths. Small golden hoops sat in her ears, and she wore a pensive expression. Two dark-haired girls stood behind her; they were not nearly as studious of me as she was, though.

"Can I...help you?" I nearly winced at myself. I sounded like a retail worker, someone working at Starbucks, ready to bend myself backward to make the customer happy. Whoever this girl was, she didn't exactly look happy—and beside that, pleasing anyone was not what I cared about.

Except my mom. She was the only person I'd do anything for.

"I've been meaning to talk to you all day," the blonde girl spoke, slow to cross her arms and tap her long nails against her jacket sleeves.

"Uh, why?" As far as I was concerned, I had nothing to say to this chick. Nothing but *goodbye*.

"Jazmine Smith," she said, somehow knowing my name even though I never told her. "I just wanted to know if you plan on changing your name or not."

If ever there was a dumbstruck stupid look, I wore it. "Why?" What I should've instead asked was how she knew my name, but the answer was probably simple enough. I was the mainstay of gossip today, and I'd probably remain the center of it all for a while, at least until my newness died down.

And it would.

I hoped.

"I saw you this morning getting out of Oliver Fitzpatrick's car," she explained. "So tell me, Jazmine, are you his replacement daughter, or is he going to put a ring on it when you turn eighteen? The men around here like them young, from what I hear." Behind her, her friends giggled.

Her words shocked me into silence, and it wasn't often that someone could do that to me. Usually I could have a comeback ready in seconds, but this? This was...there were no words. Literally no words at all.

"Either way, I'd be careful if I were you," she warned. "People close to Oliver Fitzpatrick tend to disappear. Wouldn't want that pretty face of yours

to be next, would we?" She tilted her head, radiating bitch, and then walked away, her heeled boots clicking on the pavement. Her friends trailed after her, leaving me flabbergasted.

What in the hell...

I heard a familiar honk, and I spotted my mom's old van near the sidewalk, sticking out like a sore thumb. Before I could let myself linger on what that girl had said, I hurried to the car, hopping in the front seat and buckling my seatbelt all before I even glanced at my mom.

Mom had to stop the van to let some kids cross in front of her, and she glanced to me, giving me a supportive smile. "How was your first day at school, honey? Make any new friends? No new boyfriends, I hope."

Boyfriends, as if boys just lined the streets to get to me. I knew that's what parents always said to their kids, but that wasn't the case. My mom didn't want me dating, ever. It was an annoying rule that I sometimes followed, sometimes didn't.

"School was fine," I told her, leaving it at that. I was silent as Mom pulled the car to the road and turned left. That girl, I had no idea who she was, but somehow I had the feeling I'd be seeing a lot more of her in the future. She seemed to be a know-it-all snob, which was great, because I'd thought things were going too smoothly before I'd met her.

"That's great," Mom said, too oblivious to see past my blatant lie.

Even though I knew I shouldn't, my mind wandered back to what that girl had said, and then I remembered what Bobbi had told me in choir. Curiosity would kill me one of these days, but it would not be today. Today I'd settle for asking, "Do you know what happened to Ollie's family before?" It sounded like he'd had two families that just...poof, went missing.

Shit like that didn't happen, unless someone was trying to cover something up.

"No, I didn't ask him," Mom said, tossing me a quick look.

This was so not a conversation we could have in the house, at least not while Ollie was home. He kept such weird hours. "I heard he was Celeste Chambers's stepdad."

"Celeste Chambers," my mom repeated, her blonde brows furrowing. "That was the girl that was kidnapped a few years ago, I think. Shit. And they never caught her kidnapper either, though from what I remember,

everyone thought it was her biological father—that happened right at the middle school—”

I knew what she was thinking, because I was thinking it too: this place wasn't safe.

“Whatever happened to her?” I asked.

“I...I don't know. The news went quiet on her after she got back.” Her hands tightened on the wheel. “She was Ollie's stepdaughter? He mentioned his sons before in passing, but not a stepdaughter.”

“You didn't check him out before accepting the job?” I was aghast. You'd think she would have, especially since we'd both be living in his house for the foreseeable future.

“Of course I did, but I didn't look into his family life. He's a great lawyer with nothing but good reviews—”

Oh, dear God. My mom's research involved reading the reviews people had written about his job. That was not something you relied on reviews for. No Yelp search should ever be included when you were literally putting your life in someone else's hands.

Reviews. Fucking reviews. I couldn't get over it.

“Mom,” I spoke blatantly, “he could be a serial killer who kills his family or something!”

“Oh, shush. You will not bad-mouth Ollie, and I certainly hope that anytime someone brings up rumors involving him and his old family you will defend him.”

“He's a lawyer. He can defend himself.” And he also knew ways around the law, knowing the law inside and out to do what he did...

My mom's knuckles on the wheel practically turned white. “Drop it, Jaz. I know you're stubborn, but now is not the time to start picking. Leave it alone. The man lost his family—I'm sure it hurts him to think about it.”

So was Celeste dead? Was his second wife dead too? Wouldn't that have been something on the news? *Girl escapes kidnapper only to end up dead a year later* or something? It didn't make sense to me, but then again, none of this did, now that I was actually thinking about it.

“I feel like you're not worrying enough,” I whispered, breaking the silence of the car as my mom pulled into Ollie's driveway. We rolled to a stop near Frank, the daytime guard, and he sent us a wave before opening the gate.

“And I feel like you worry too much. Just...just drop it, honey. Let it be. We could have a good thing here, but only if you let it.”

A good thing. I mean, to me, we had a good thing before, but all of that meant nothing when I got off the bus one day and my mom told me we were leaving and she was becoming a live-in maid.

A maid. My mom. If you’d spent any extended periods of time with my mom, you’d know how ridiculous it was.

I said nothing as I got out of the car and headed into the house that was more like a mansion than a home. Too big, too spacious. Too much unused and empty space, even if there was ample furniture and decorations.

This place would never feel like a home to me. It would never be my home. I’d left my home in the dust, and it felt like an eternity since then. My life was changing, that much I knew, but now...now it felt like it was changing too much, too fast. I needed to press the brakes, to slow it down. Anything.

Ollie wasn’t home yet, and I ignored my mom as I headed upstairs to the small room I’d claimed as my own. I’d been given a choice as to what room to claim, because there were practically a dozen or so bedrooms, but I’d chosen the smallest, the one most reminiscent to the one I’d left.

It was still bigger, still fancier, but it was all I could do.

I’d mostly stuck to my room so far, but now I had the strangest of urges—I wanted to snoop. I wanted to get to the bottom of it, be like Nancy Drew and discover the truth. If my mom and I weren’t safe in this house, wasn’t that kind of important to know? Shouldn’t that mean we should skedaddle our asses out of here?

I mean, that’s what I thought, but it felt like my mom was content to stay here regardless of the truth.

Ugh. Whatever. I needed to not focus on that and get my homework done. Try to get caught up. It’d probably take me a few weeks to fully get in the swing of things—and if I was honest, I wasn’t a straight-A student—but I had to try. I had to put my blinders on and focus on the matter at hand, and that was adjusting to Midpark, not digging where I didn’t belong.

My resolution to keep my nose out of it lasted an hour. We didn’t eat dinner until late usually; most nights Ollie was out until six-thirty or seven, and he was always served his food first, leaving Mom and I to eat whatever was left. When I pulled out my phone—one of those cheap phones, not an iPhone or Android—I was able to see it neared four-forty-five.

Well, I'd been studious for a long while, hadn't I? I thought it was time for a short break.

And by break, I meant Googling.

I pulled up the internet and hit the search bar, my eyes glancing to my shut door before getting up from the desk and walking to the bed in the center of the room. Only the headboard rested against the wall, its other three sides jutting out. The room was big enough for it. I'd already kicked my boots off under the desk, but as I climbed onto the bed, I tore off my socks and flung them to the floor.

Laying on my stomach, I typed in Celeste Chambers and clicked on the first few articles that popped up in the *News* section. I scanned them fast, getting the gist of it. When she escaped, she was only seventeen, so the news outlet couldn't cover her story in detail. There were no pictures of her, either. No recent ones. The latest report—dated not even six months ago—had tried to contact her and talk about her future, but the only quote was from Oliver Fitzpatrick, who'd said Celeste was trying to move on with her life and leave her past behind her.

Huh.

I set my phone down, my mind racing. That could mean so many different things. Maybe her mom and Celeste had decided being with Ollie wasn't a good fit; maybe they got divorced. But if that was the case, wouldn't the news outlets have gone after Celeste's mother?

Her kidnapper was never found, although Celeste's biological father was found mutilated in a place most authorities claimed was where she was held. Most now assumed it was her father who had kidnapped her, and even then, some even went so far as to blame Celeste for his death. She got out, killed him, took her vengeance, and disappeared. But then who helped her? Surely a seventeen-year-old girl wasn't capable of such violence all by herself.

Bobbi's words rang true—Midpark had a dark underbelly, one you wouldn't realize if you were just scratching the surface.

Mutilated. That was not a word I ever wanted to read, much less think about someone from this very town being. It was such a harsh, bloody word.

What if it was Ollie? He seemed like a nice enough guy, but he was quiet, closed-off. There was something hiding behind his tired blue eyes

that I couldn't place, and that bothered me. I liked to think I could read people. It was a good skill to have in life.

Living with someone who was capable of such slaughter...I couldn't do it. I didn't want to put my mom at risk either, even if she liked the job. Even if it put a roof over our heads, cut down on the bills, and still paid her a salary she could shore away and save. I just couldn't do it; could you blame me?

Of course, this was all me hypothesizing. I had no proof that Ollie was involved in anything.

Proof. I had to get proof, knowledge that one way or another would put this matter to rest.

But how?

Chapter Six – Jaz

Bobbi and I made plans to meet next week after school to practice the songs we were learning in choir. We had a concert in less than a month, and whatever I was—alto, soprano, whatever—was still up in the air. I refused to really sing in class, kind of humming along with the girls around me.

I had that to deal with, and also a test in world history next week, which Archer was being kind and letting me borrow his notebook to copy tonight. That blondie was a cutie. If I wasn't careful, I might just fall for his dimpled smiles.

Now that it was lunchtime, I was a bit hungrier than I was yesterday. I wasn't letting the stares affect me as much, though maybe there weren't that many stares to begin with. Today I wore flared jeans and a longer shirt. Maybe I fit in more with my outfit? Or maybe my newness was already wearing off. I hoped the latter.

Fortunately, I did not come across that blonde chick again, though there were still a few hours left in the day, so I should really bite my tongue.

After grabbing my lunch, I went to the cafeteria, energized and ready. Should I sit with the same kid again? Vaughn. He was attractive, in the dark, brooding and dangerous kind of way. The tattoos on his hands were a little much, but I supposed if he came from money, he probably had a family business to fall back on. There weren't that many places out there who'd hire a young employee with hand and knuckle tattoos.

Must be nice, to be able to do what you wanted when you wanted, all because you came from wealth.

Mom and I weren't exactly poor, but we weren't rolling around in the dough. I always had a fit of tiny jealousy toward those who had both parents together and those who could afford the latest phone and newest gadgets.

Just like yesterday, the cafeteria was bustling with students, munching and chatting away, having a good old time. I felt a little lonely, looking at them having such fun times with each other. I had friends before but...well, it was strange, but it didn't feel real. It felt like, my whole life, I'd been slowly putting up my walls, as if waiting for my life to come crashing down.

And it did. It came crashing down the moment my mom told me we were moving at the drop of a hat, right after turning eighteen.

It wasn't fair.

I didn't hate her for it, but I was a bit resentful of what these kids had that I didn't.

The only wide-open table was, yet again, the one with Vaughn. Had no choice yet again, unless I wanted to be better acquainted with a bathroom stall. Since that wasn't an option, and because I was me, I marched over to him and sat down—unlike yesterday, I didn't steer clear of him. I sat right across from him, tossing my lunch down and pulling out the chair, aware that everyone nearby was watching.

If me sitting by the loner kid shocked these guys, just imagine how continuously horrified they'd be if I kept doing it day after day.

Vaughn merely watched me sit down with his dark, mysterious eyes. Or maybe that was just me attributing more to him than I should. He seemed like the mysterious type, the kind of guy you could never really know what went on in his head.

His dark hair was black and somewhat greasy, its top lengths sticking straight up. The sides of his head were cut shorter, to the point where his hairline seemingly faded away once it reached his neck. He wore a black shirt, along with dark jeans. I didn't have any classes with him, but I could imagine that he constantly lounged around, looking bored.

Hell, he looked bored right now, staring at me.

"What?" I asked. "Do you have a problem with me sitting here today?" I sounded weirdly confrontational, which was so not how I wanted to sound. Maybe it was the way those dark eyes pinned me to my seat, how much I wanted to squirm when I saw his lips thin and a slight frown cross his face.

I'd gotten him to smile yesterday; what was with the switch? Was I some bore now?

"Not at all," Vaughn said. "Don't let the face fool you. I might look murderous, but that doesn't mean I always am." He pushed around the food on his tray—today was chicken nuggets and fries.

They...they actually looked kind of good.

And then my mind snapped back to reality, at what he just said. "So you're only sometimes murderous?" With what I'd found out about Celeste Chambers, I kind of had murder on the brain. Not actually going out and

killing someone, but...what would it take for someone to snap and dismember someone else?

I just...no. God no. Ugh. A shiver crept up my spine as I pictured what the crime scene must've looked like, and I fought to not let it show.

"Occasionally," Vaughn spoke, giving me a slow, seductive smile. "I think we all are, depending on the day." The way he spoke about it, as if he had first-hand experience being murderous...

Or maybe that was just my mind being paranoid.

Snap out of it, Jaz, I told myself. Be cool, be normal. Basically, be anything but yourself.

Easy.

Easier said than done, that was.

"Well, personally I've never been murderous," I said, shrugging as I unrolled my lunch.

"Then you haven't been pushed enough." Vaughn cocked his head, giving me the side-eye.

"Not to change the subject, but what do you know about Celeste Chambers?" When I spoke her name, I lowered my voice, not wanting everyone else to overhear. Then again, if that blonde chick knew I'd gotten out of Ollie's car yesterday—thank God he didn't offer to drive me today—the whole school might know.

Vaughn's dark brows furrowed. "Aren't you new here? Why are you so interested in something that happened years ago? Celeste is old news now. You, Jaz, are the new news." He actually picked up a fry and ate it—the first time I'd seen him eat. He didn't seem overly muscular, but he was lean. He had to work out, and eating the stuff the kitchen put out wasn't exactly a healthy choice.

Not that I sat there ogling his arms. Which I didn't...much.

"I am," I relented, "but I've heard some things and I just want to know the truth. She escaped her kidnapper and came back?"

"Yeah," Vaughn spoke, flattening his hands on the table, allowing me to see the tattoos on them. The guy actually had *hate* and *pain* written across his knuckles, along with some kind of thick black tribal design on the rest of them. Hmm. No wonder everyone else steered clear of him. Didn't notice those particular tattoos yesterday. "And then she was gone like two months later."

In two months she was gone again? As in disappeared? Surely the news would've been all over that, so there had to be more to it.

"She disappeared again, or she left Midpark?" I asked, slowly lifting a cracker to my mouth. I really wanted to snatch one of his chicken nuggets, but that would've been going a little too far, doing too much, too soon. Vaughn and I weren't BFFs.

His lips curled into a smile. "She just vanished. She stopped coming to school, and that was the last anyone has heard of her. Everyone assumed she needed to start fresh, especially with what happened to some of the other kids here."

Bobbi had mentioned some incidents, but at the time, I hadn't sought to clarify. Now I needed to know, so I asked, "What happened to the other kids?"

"There was a guy, Axel Redmand, who got his hands cut off. They say his hands were never found, meaning whoever did it probably kept them," Vaughn spoke, still somehow keeping the smile, even though his tale was making me queasy.

Someone cut a kid's hands off and kept them? Just...what? How was that even something that could cross someone's mind?

"And then, of course, there was Alice," he spoke her name lightly. "Her car hit a tree, and afterward...she was never the same. People pointed fingers at Celeste, blaming her for everything. Both Alice and Axel had gotten into some confrontations with her. I was a freshman at the time, so I didn't pay much attention, but everyone around here knew the rumors."

So these terrible things happened, and everyone blamed Celeste? Why? Because she was an outsider, because she'd been away for years?

What if she *did* do them? Leaving after things like that...it kind of painted her in a bad light.

And then another idea came to me—what if Celeste didn't do them, but she had them orchestrated? What if she had help?

I was so lost in my own head that I couldn't say anything; Vaughn however said, "Why are you so curious about what happened years ago?"

How could I explain it all without sounding absolutely nuts? Normally I wasn't paranoid, but there was something about Ollie and the story of Celeste that set me on edge, something I didn't like. I didn't know what that was, but it made me uneasy all the same.

“It’s a long story,” I said, fiddling with another cracker. “I wish I could find out the truth about what happened to her.” If she’d left, great. Her and her mom were incognito somewhere else. If she and her mom were buried in the backyard, then my mom and I would skedaddle ourselves the fuck out of here.

Vaughn studied me, and I wasn’t sure I liked the way his black eyes zeroed in on my face, how they seemed to look over every curvature there, how his gaze dropped to my chin. Or was it my mouth? Was Vaughn staring at my mouth? I honestly couldn’t tell.

If he was...bad boys weren’t necessarily my thing, but it kind of gave me a certain thrill.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret around here,” he said, leaning forward and resting his forearms on the table before his tray of nuggets. “The rich don’t go digging for dirt themselves. They have someone else do it.”

“Like a spy?” was what my brilliant mouth said.

Vaughn actually chuckled at that—and I almost hated how dark and low the sound was. It was a chuckle that I might just hear in my dreams. “I suppose, if you want to be fancy, but there are lots of ways. Theoretically, you could get anyone to do anything, as long as you have some blackmail.”

This guy was talking about blackmail so nonchalantly, as if he dealt in this shit all the time. What had I gotten myself into? Who the hell was I sitting with? How could he say half of the stuff he said seriously?

“Or, if you have enough money, you can always hire someone else to do the digging,” Vaughn added, giving me a sly grin, as if he knew how much he’d unsettled me by bringing up blackmail.

Did he have blackmail on other people? Did he use it?

I forced myself to swallow, trying to sound as normal as possible as I asked, “Like a private investigator?”

“As long as you have the money, you can pay someone to do anything.”

That also sounded ominous...or maybe that was simply because my mind was running a mile a minute with everything he’d told me. It wasn’t like I had the money to hire a PI, but...that was more likely than blackmail.

Maybe I could try PI-ing myself. Maybe I could sneak around the house at night? No, that would probably only end up in me getting caught red-handed, and knowing my mom, she’d somehow know something was off with me if I tried to brush her off in the few hours right after school to do it.

Ollie was having some fundraiser event this weekend. Most of the house would be off-limits to the guests, and I was already told I'd have to stay upstairs in my room...but what if I didn't stay in my room? What if I used that time to snoop while my mom acted the maid and kept offering the rich folks champagne or whatever the hell it was they'd be drinking?

Maybe I'd give it a try. Or maybe I should just give up and let it be.

How could I sit back and let it be, though, when something was clearly wrong with this situation? Something had happened with Celeste and his second wife, and that didn't even mention his first family. Ollie was hiding something, and if that something would put my mom and I in danger, we had every right to know.

"I assume you do have the money, don't you?" Vaughn's voice cut into my thoughts, and I merely blinked at him, too startled to say anything.

Had my face given away my not-so-rich status?

"Of course I do," I finally said after regaining myself. "I wipe my ass with money. Don't you?"

Again, he chuckled, and again, I hated myself for liking the sound.

This one...this one might just get me into a whole lot of trouble if I let him.

Chapter Seven – Archer

Things were happening that I knew shouldn't. It was only a matter of time until everything blew up in my face, but I couldn't help it. It was like, the moment I saw her, I knew. I knew she was different. I knew I liked her, even though I shouldn't.

I really, really shouldn't, given the current state of my life, but that's how things seemed to go. Life kept kicking me while I was down. Someday I hoped to get back on my feet again.

It was Friday, and she was coming over to my house after school. We had a test next week to study for. I'd given her my notes to copy, which she did earlier in the week, but I couldn't help but let slip the fact that I'd be glad to help her study. Make notecards or whatever it was people did while studying.

And...Jaz had actually agreed. The academics were harder here than they were at her old school, and she wanted to do her best. She'd told me she needed help, and I...I had been too stunned at her acceptance to say much of anything.

It took a little finagling, because I'd already had plans this afternoon, but luckily I was able to push those plans to tomorrow. This afternoon would be solely about me helping Jaz and catching her up. Nothing else.

I couldn't let it become anything else.

My brain was logical here; it knew nothing good would come from it, and yet, later that afternoon, when I saw her exiting the building, my body started to heat up in spite of the chill outside. I stood near my car, watching as she crossed the parking lot and headed straight to me. Her nose was a little pink from the cold, but she was just as gorgeous as I remembered her being earlier.

The kind of gorgeous you couldn't fight. The kind of pretty you couldn't deny. She was worlds above everyone else here, and the sad thing was she probably didn't even know it.

Her face lit up when she saw me, a wide smile growing on her face. A smile like that could stop anyone in their tracks and make you rethink your whole life.

Damn it. I was smitten, somehow. I liked this girl a whole lot more than I should. Really, I should take a step back. This could only end badly for the both of us.

As we got in the car and put our seatbelts on, Jaz said, “I texted my mom and told her I was studying at the library. For some reason, I don’t think she’d like me going to a boy’s house.” She brought those dark eyes to me, and my stomach hardened.

And something twitched in my pants when I thought about having her in my room, but that was something best left forgotten.

“Your mom doesn’t want you alone with boys?” I gave her a smirk as I started the car and drove us off, away from Midpark High, away from the people who, I hoped, hadn’t really seen us together.

I mean, I could just be driving her home like a gentleman. It’s what I would say if anyone asked me about it on Monday.

It was a lie, but...sometimes you had to lie. Sometimes lying was for the best.

“My mom is...let’s just say protective of me when it comes to guys,” Jaz said, staring out of the window, a pensive look on her beautiful, tan face. “She doesn’t want me dating, and she definitely doesn’t want me alone with any attractive guys—” She abruptly stopped, her eyes widening as they darted to me, as if she realized what she just said.

Attractive. She’d called me attractive.

I drove with one hand, hiding my smile with the other.

Jaz’s voice lowered an octave when she muttered, “Please pretend I didn’t just say that. Not that I’m saying you’re not attractive—not that I’m saying you *are* attractive...oh, God, I’m just going to shut up now.” She slunk in the leather seat beside me, looking like she wanted to shrink into herself and cease to exist.

“So I take it you haven’t dated much,” I managed to say as I grinned like an idiot behind my hand. It shouldn’t make me feel so good, hearing her call me attractive, but it did. It so did, even though it was wrong.

“Here and there, a little, mostly behind my mom’s back,” Jaz said. Her backpack rested on her lap, and she ran her hands over it. It was worn, old, some of its fabric fraying at the seams. Not a typical backpack for Midpark, and I couldn’t help but wonder where she’d moved to, where she lived.

Guess I’d find out, once I drove her home—unless she planned on walking home, which I wouldn’t advise, since it got dark so early.

Did she wear torn clothes and have a ratty old backpack for style?

“But nothing steady, nothing long-term,” she finished. “Which is fine, because couples come and go in high school at the speed of light.” Jaz now traced circles on her backpack as she glanced to me. “What about you? I bet you date a lot.”

“Not as much as you’d expect,” I said, wishing I meant it. Wishing things were different. It wasn’t the first time I’d wished things were different, but it was the first time I wished things were different for a girl.

We continued to chat as I drove us to my house, a newly-built three-story home with painted brick and natural wooden accents. The house itself was small compared to some of the mansions in Midpark, but it was far from the smallest, too. We had no fence, no gate, so I was able to drive right up to the three-car garage. I had no siblings, so I was able to pull into the third spot, right next to my mom’s car.

It wasn’t like she was able to drive, so I didn’t know why we still kept it. Her keys were locked away, someplace she couldn’t find them.

Jaz and I got out, and I prayed that my mom was still having a good day. On her bad days, my dad called a nurse to take care of her during the day while we were gone. This morning she’d been okay...and since I was having company over, I prayed she’d still be okay.

I was the first to walk into the house, the first to look around, holding my breath as I felt Jaz come in behind me. With a hand on the strap around my shoulders, I called out, “Mom? Are you awake?”

“Of course I am, honey. It’s three in the afternoon,” my mom said, her voice coming from the kitchen.

Glancing back at Jaz, I slowly led her through the house, knowing my mom would be nosy and try to peek in my room if I didn’t introduce her right away.

Our kitchen was a wide-open space with lots of cabinets, all of them painted a very light grey. The counters were a black marble, veins of white running through them. There was a large island, where the sink was, along with hanging lights over it. Mom stood in an apron, something cooking in the oven.

“I’m baking a pie for later,” she rattled off, stopping only when she glanced at me and Jaz. “Oh, I didn’t know we’d be having company!” Mom sounded happy; I’d take this over her bad days anytime.

“Mom,” I said, gesturing to Jaz, “this is Jaz. Jaz, my mom.”

My mom moved around the island, wiping her hands on the apron. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she had a bit of white smudged on her forehead, somehow. She held out a hand to Jaz, saying, "It's good to meet you. Are you his girlfriend?"

I was nearly knocked over with the bluntness of her, and I let out a nervous chuckle. "Mom, stop." Heat flushed my cheeks; I didn't get embarrassed easily, but mothers tended to do that. Say the wrong things, assume the wrong things. It was something they collectively got together and decided to do, to embarrass all of their children.

"Oh, right. You kids don't use labels these days," she laughed out. "Would either of you like a snack?"

Shaking my head softly, I said, "No thanks, Mom. We're going upstairs to study." I led Jaz away from the kitchen and to the stairwell, doing my best to ignore the way my mom laughed to herself and said something along the lines of *so that's what they're calling it*.

God. How embarrassing.

Jaz said nothing as I led her to my room, and she continued to say nothing as I shut the door behind us, pretty much locking my mom out. She wouldn't barge in, but who knew if she'd try to feed us.

"Sorry about her," I said, hoping my mom seemed normal enough that I wouldn't have to sit and explain the whole situation to her.

"It's fine," Jaz said, glancing at me as she set her bag down on the floor. Her jacket came next. "Your mom seems nice."

Thank goodness today was a good day, otherwise...well, we would've had to go to the library to study, and that invited a whole slew of other problems.

My room was nothing special. I had a few canvases hanging on the walls, a flat screen TV facing my bed, along with the typical bedroom stuff. Dressers, a desk, a walk-in closet. It was normal around Midpark, anyway.

As I watched Jaz study my room, I couldn't help but wonder what her room looked like. She didn't seem to be the kind of girl who liked pink fluffy things, and I wondered what her style was like, what her sheets looked like...I should not be imagining her sheets, or what could be done in them.

Nope. Had to get my mind out of the gutter.

"It's not much," I said, moving to set my backpack on my desk. I hung my jacket on the doorknob to the closet. "But it's my room."

“It’s big,” she said, and then it looked like she caught herself. “A little bigger than mine, I mean.” She folded her arms over her chest—*bad place to look, Archer*, I told myself—and slowly met those dark eyes with mine. “I don’t like the empty space.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It just feels...like wasted space.” She shrugged. “I also find the houses around here to be ridiculously big. No one needs a house that’s the size of a school.”

I found myself grinning.

I couldn’t say what it was about this girl, but I liked her. I liked her too much.

Had to bring in a chair from the next room over, but I situated us both at my desk. Within ten minutes, I had out our history textbook, along with my notebook. I was able to pull some blank notecards from one of the drawers in the desk and handed them to her. She’d write them down. I knew how our history tests went by now, I knew what was important to know and what wasn’t.

As we worked, I tried not to stare at her too much. The more I looked at her, the more beautiful I found her. There was only two feet between us, and yet it both seemed too far and not far enough. I knew I shouldn’t let my mind linger on this girl at all, and yet...I was like a dog with a bone. I couldn’t help it.

She smelled like fruit, like some kind of berry. Was it her soap? Her shampoo? Was it weird that I was thinking about this while she was intent on writing? Breathing her in only made my mind wander more.

Her black, wavy hair fell over her shoulder, her dark brown eyes focused. Her full lips were parted ever so slightly, and I hated myself for wanting to feel those lips on every inch of my body.

Wrong. It was wrong. I shouldn’t.

But I did, hence the issue here.

“I’ve never studied with notecards before,” Jaz was busy saying as my mind wandered. “Seems like a lot of work.” She extended her arm, rolling her wrist as she held onto the pen.

“It is,” I said, barely able to contain myself. I thought I sounded normal—I hoped I sounded normal, given the fact my mind was currently on what Jaz looked like beneath those clothes. “But it’s worth it.”

I might seem like a good guy, but I wasn’t. Right now, I really wasn’t.

She let out a sigh, her mouth curled into a grin. Jaz clearly had a comeback ready, but the moment she turned her head and looked at me, nothing came out. Suddenly she felt closer than she did mere moments ago.

Wait, that was because I leaned towards her, scooting to the side on my chair to get closer to her.

Our faces were less than a foot apart now; I could feel her breath hot on my face, and my lower gut warmed. I wanted to touch her, but I knew that if I did, I'd throw all rational thought out of the window. Once I touched her, I wouldn't be able to stop.

Which was ridiculous, because we'd just met, but this...the feelings inside me were too strong to deny.

I'd never felt like this before. Maybe it was simply because I knew I couldn't have her, and that made me want her. Maybe it was because I knew it could never be between us. A terrible reality, but it was mine.

Jaz was unable to say anything, her black eyes dropping to my mouth as her lips puckered. She turned her body on her chair, our knees leaning against each other's. I had one arm on the desk, the other on my lap, and it took so much restraint from me to keep myself back.

Seriously. Holding myself back had never been so hard.

"You get very serious about your notecards, don't you?" Jaz asked, her voice nothing but a breathy sigh. I had the feeling she wasn't talking strictly about notecards, either.

"I do," I agreed, inching closer to her.

Bad, bad idea. Press the brakes, take a step back. Get up and walk away. Do anything but this.

Did I? Did I stop myself even though that's what the logical side of my brain was trying to tell me? The answer to that would be a resounding *no*.

"We should focus on the notecards, maybe," Jaz whispered, though she didn't pull away. She didn't turn her head nor break the spell she had over me. I noticed she leaned in just as I did.

I wondered if she wanted to kiss me as badly as I wanted to kiss her. If she did, we were both in trouble, because once passion was unbottled, it very rarely could be ignored. This was not a good time for me, and yet I couldn't tear my eyes off her parted lips.

They looked so supple, so soft and inviting.

"You're right," I whispered, the hand on my lap moving to hers, touching her knee gently at first before curling around it. She didn't move

away, didn't jerk her knee away from me. "We should focus." My words came out in a whisper, and I fought to keep myself under control. Why was there something about this girl that drove me crazy? She shouldn't. This was supposed to be a studying session, not a hookup.

The hand holding onto the pen set it down softly, and she turned her body toward mine. My hand slid up her leg a bit, soaking in her warmth through her jeans. Jaz nodded, but she was unable to say anything else—mostly because I'd closed the distance between us and pressed my mouth to hers, swallowing those soft, supple lips.

If she smelled good, she tasted twice as good. The way her lips felt on mine, how they melded against me as she kissed me back, blew her strawberry scent out of the water. I immediately felt a twitch in my dick, and I knew right then and there that I'd failed in keeping myself away from her.

I really was a bad dude, with everything, but I couldn't help it.

Jaz kissed me back softly, tentatively, and yet I could feel the hunger resting in her core, how she was trying to hold herself back just as I was. The hand that had held onto the pen moved to my shoulder, and she parted her legs more as she wrapped an arm around my neck and pulled her top half closer to me.

Before I knew what I was doing, I was using the hand on her leg to pull her onto my lap, never breaking our lip lock. With her legs parted, she fit on my lap perfectly, her slender body curving against mine, the fullness of her ass putting just enough pressure on me to make my cock harden even more.

Yeah. I now sported a raging boner, but it didn't dissuade her or me from continuing.

I had both hands on her hips, my fingertips grazing the top hem of her jeans and touching her bare skin. Jaz shuddered into the kiss and started to rock her hips, grinding her midsection against mine. I ran my tongue over her bottom lip, and she parted them, allowing my tongue entrance. The moment my tongue touched hers, a jolt of heat coursed down my spine, and my grip on her hips tightened.

Right now it would take an apocalypse to get me to let this girl go.

The way she moved those hips...she had to have done this before. Her mom might not have wanted her to date, but it was clear she had to have done other things. You didn't move your body like that innocently, didn't know how to wrestle tongues when you were a virgin.

Maybe it was stupid, but I didn't like the thought of Jaz with anyone else. Just a fleeting moment of possessiveness over a girl that wasn't even mine—stupid. So stupid.

I didn't know how to be smart in times like this.

I couldn't say how long we were lost in each other, how many times she ground her midsection on mine, stoking the ache in my balls and the throbbing at the tip of my cock, but it was a while—and I was so lost in her, I nearly came right then and there. In my pants, like some kind of junior high noob who'd just seen his first tit.

I had to pull her hips off me—thereby effectively yanking that luscious mouth off mine, too—to stop myself from coming. Staring into her eyes, noting the flushed skin on her cheeks, I knew she was as worked up as me, and I knew we couldn't just stop now.

Guess we could, but where would the fun in that be?

My arms curled around her backside, and I lifted her up, holding her to my chest as I brought us to the bed. I laid her down on top, watching her all the while, and she didn't say no, didn't stop me. Her eyes held a heavy desire, lusty for me—but the craving went both ways.

Instinct. This was all instinct, as if this girl called out to my baser animal, the man inside who was helpless against her. Logic told me to stop, but the animal inside said *take, take, take*.

The animal inside would win.

My mouth connected with hers again, and I ran both hands up her shirt, cupping her breasts over her bra. I felt her arching her back under me, felt her hands tugging at my shirt. My hands only left her breasts to answer her prayer and take off my shirt, dropping it to the floor. Her shirt came next, and her bra soon after that.

If she was gorgeous with clothes on, she was drop-dead fucking brilliant with them off. The most beautiful, the most alluring, the prettiest I'd ever seen. Her breasts were tinged in pink, heaving with every hard breath she took, her nipples hardened into points.

I could've come in my pants right then and there, just looking at her.

I didn't, though. Thank God.

I didn't wait to take off the rest of her clothing, needing to see her in her full glory, needing to know how she looked with her legs spread before me. This was wrong, and it was moving way too fast, but I didn't dare stop myself now. We'd already passed the point of no return.

Holy hell, was she stunning. With her legs spread, she was a fucking goddess.

My dick, if it wasn't already rock-hard, would've jumped to attention the minute my eyes raked across the pink, slick folds of skin at her apex.

It was time. I couldn't wait anymore. I couldn't keep dancing around the bush like it didn't exist—in this case, the bush was Jaz. She wasn't bushy, though, she kept her entire body smooth, not a single piece of hair anywhere on her legs or near her pussy.

She was flawless.

I could not tear my jeans off fast enough. Once I was free of everything, I scrambled to get a condom from my nightstand, tearing it open and sliding it on, all the while keen that she could theoretically stop me. She could tell me no. I wasn't a rapist; I would pull back and stop myself.

I really didn't want to, though.

Situating myself between her legs, she gave me no resistance. She didn't tell me to stop. Jaz simply shut those dark, luring eyes and arched her back, telling me she was ready. She wanted me.

She'd regret it eventually, but I was certain we both would at this point. This was a disaster waiting to happen, and I was too horny, too needy, to pull back and stop before things got bad—and they would get bad, mark my words.

The tip of my cock poked her entrance, and I let out a ragged moan as I slipped inside of her, inch by inch, taking her in one fluid motion. The way her body felt wrapped around me was heaven. There was no better feeling in the world. None. My body hunched over hers, and I started to rock my hips, dragging my length in and out of her.

It was right when I was starting to lose myself in the act when there was a soft knock on the door, accompanied by my mom's bright voice, "The pie is almost done. I could bake you guys some cookies—"

My thrusting paused the moment I heard the knocking, and I had to wait a few seconds to make sure it wouldn't sound completely obvious that Jaz and I were in the middle of having sex. "No, Mom, we're good. Thanks." I sounded a bit short, but that was because I was currently balls-deep in Jaz, who looked like she was both amused and mortified.

"Okay, well if you change your mind, just let me know!" My mom's jubilant voice faded as she walked away in the hall, and I let my shoulders relax.

“Does your mom normally have conversations with you while you’re inside someone else?” Jaz asked, her breath hitching as I withdrew my hips from her. Such a bold, blatant question...it only served to make me work harder.

The next time I filled her up, I did it a little bit rougher, a little harder, and it shut her up just as well.

Her eyelids slammed shut, and she let out a low moan, dragging her fingernails down my back—so hard they’d surely leave marks. Right now I couldn’t care less. I wanted those nails, I wanted every single moan she’d give me, the expression on her face as I pumped into her.

Watching her squirm underneath me was too much. The orgasm that had been building ever since I pulled her ass to my lap exploded in a wave of hot bliss, forcing me to close my eyes and groan. My thrusting became erratic, quick and successive movements of my hips, the cum shooting from my tip and being held back by the thin rubber around it.

What I’d give to be able to cum inside of her...

Not a thought I should be having.

I pulled out, still breathing hard, slowly opening my eyes to meet her dark stare. Sometime during my orgasm, she’d opened her eyes and watched.

Collapsing beside her on my bed, I whispered, “Would you believe me if I said I really did invite you over here just to study?” A grin grew on my face; I couldn’t stop it. I felt like the Cheshire Cat, like I’d just gotten a peek at my presents before Christmas. Giddy. I felt fucking giddy.

Jaz thought on this, comfortable with her nakedness beside me. She rolled to her side, propped her head up, her hair cascading over her shoulders and to the bed. Posing her own question, she asked, “Would you believe me if I told you that the last thing I planned on doing today was sleeping with you?”

We were both liars to ourselves, it would seem.

We lay there for a few moments before getting up, cleaning up, and dressing, acting as if nothing at all had happened. Personally, I couldn’t get the feeling of her tight pussy out of my mind, but I knew I’d have to.

That was a mistake—but it wasn’t like I could confess and tell Jaz everything. There were things in Midpark she didn’t need to know, secrets and lies I wished I could keep her from.

I should've known it was only a matter of time until it all came crumbling down.

Chapter Eight – Jaz

Saturday came, and other staff arrived. Ollie had one of the biggest mansions in Midpark—the thing had a freaking ballroom on its lower level in the back, where dozens of tables were set up, draped with nice white cloths and golden accessories. Okay, it wasn't really a ballroom, but it sure looked like one.

My mom would be one of the waitresses, or whatever the fuck they were called. You know, the people who walked around during fancy events like this and carried trays of champagne and other finger foods before the actual meal. The food was being brought in from a restaurant; Ollie's kitchen was huge, but it could not feed fifty people in one night.

Mom and Ollie were busy with the early morning preparations, gaggles of people constantly walking in and out of the house. I was supposed to keep to myself—which I planned to, later—but I did use the chaos of the morning to spend a little extra time in the living room, where pictures were hung and even more sat on the mantle.

I had homework to catch up on, a history test to study for, but after what happened with Archer...

No. I wouldn't think about it.

To keep my head buried beneath the sand, I would focus on the mystery plaguing my mind. What happened to Ollie's family? What happened to Celeste and her mother? I'd Googled both, found no obituaries. For all intents and purposes, they just vanished.

Which couldn't be right. People didn't just disappear. They didn't simply go away. And especially after everything Celeste had been through...

The house full of noise, of people bringing in the folded-up tables and decorations, was enough of a distraction for my mom and Ollie himself. No one would bother me here in the living room. No one would watch me study the photographs as if they held onto some clue about what had happened here.

If my mom and I weren't safe here, I had to know. If Ollie was some kind of rich serial killer, there was no way we'd stay in this house. I wouldn't let my mom put herself in danger, even if she claimed it was all

for me. For me to go to a good school, for me to get connections or whatever other bullshit excuse she used. We left our old life completely, changed our numbers and left without telling anyone in our own town goodbye—hell, it was enough to make me wonder if Mom was also hiding something from me.

Could no one tell the truth anymore? Could no one simply just let things be?

My eyes roamed across the pictures. I saw none of his wife—either of them, actually—but there were plenty of his kid. Or were they kids, as in plural? Each face looked the same, and yet, as I roamed from picture to picture, I was able to pick up on some subtle differences. In almost half, the cute boy was grinning, and in the other half, he wore a serious expression... but that wasn't what set them apart for me. It was the eyes.

You could tell a lot about a person from the look in their eyes. A face could lie, but the eyes couldn't. A smile could lie to you, but if you stared into the eyes attached, if you knew what signs to pick up on, you could see through the facade.

The bad thing was, I felt like almost everyone around here was a liar.

Or maybe that was just me, feeling insecure after hooking up with Archer.

It wasn't like that had been my first time. I'd done it before, behind my mom's back, since she didn't want me dating or seeing anyone of the male gender. No, it wasn't like I'd tossed my virginity to the wind with Archer, but a part of me did feel uneasy about it.

What if I wasn't as good at reading people as I thought? What if it was some kind of game to him: how fast can I bang the new girl? I'd be pissed, and I didn't get pissed often.

I was seconds from picking up one of the frames on the mantle when I heard my mom's voice, "Jaz, I told you you needed to stay upstairs today."

Restraining myself from touching the frame—this one of a particularly sullen, black-haired boy frowning, I turned to my mom and gave her a look. "Staying up there all day seems a little extreme, don't you think? What am I supposed to do for lunch? And dinner?" Now that I was thinking about it, complaining about food while I was in the living room, obviously not scrounging for something to eat, was probably not the best defense to use.

Mom wore her blonde hair in a high bun, wearing all black like most of the other hired staff. Not a speck of jewelry sat on her body, nor an ounce of

makeup on her face. Not that she needed it. She was gorgeous.

“I will bring food up to you when I can, honey. Ollie just doesn’t want you getting in the way, and since he is both our boss and the reason we have a roof over our heads, I have to side with him.”

I resisted my urge to roll my eyes and remind her that we had a roof over our heads before we moved here, before she took this weird job as a live-in maid for some lonely rich guy whose previous families had vanished.

Instead, I said, “Okay, fine. I’ll go back upstairs.”

My mom let out a sigh, as if I was saving the day by getting myself out of the way. “Thank you.” She waited to leave, apparently needing to see me go up the stairs with her own eyes.

Dragging my feet through the living room, I headed to the spacious staircase, heaved a sigh, and went up the damn stairs.

I had no desire to see rich, hoity-toity people. I didn’t want to be down there when the guests started coming, but locking myself away in my room wasn’t what I wanted, either. God darn it, I wanted to snoop. Was that so bad?

Okay, don’t answer that. Snooping was probably bad, especially when it could get my mom fired and us thrown out onto the streets.

I made like a good little girl and went to my room. Closing my door, I bit my lower lip as I moved to sit at my desk. I really should drown myself in studying, but looking at these notecards made me think of Archer.

I was not the kind of girl who got crushes so fast, not usually, but it was hard to deny those dimples, the easy air about him, how he made me chuckle with his witty comments. He seemed nice, which was more than I could say for a lot of kids at Midpark High.

And his body...oh, his body was something special, too. Not to mention the way he could move, and those hips...

I really should stop my thoughts right there, because anything that came after the thought of his hips was definitely not something I should be thinking about.

Letting out a groan, I rested my head on the desk, closing my eyes. Things couldn’t be easy here, could they?

Time passed almost ridiculously slowly. I eventually decided to just turn on the TV that rested on the wall near the bed and drown out my thoughts in the mindless noise. Mom, for her part, did bring me up lunch, but once

the early afternoon hit, I knew that'd be all I'd see of her for a long while. From what she'd told me, donors would start to arrive in the late afternoon. It was a fundraiser for some charity, which was great, but even my mom didn't know what charity that was.

I couldn't help but wonder, of course, if it was all a front for something else. If, just maybe, there was no charity—but that was my wandering mind getting the better of me.

When evening fell—which it did early, because in wintertime it was practically nighttime at five o'clock—I went through my closet and changed, dressing in all black. I wasn't stupid enough to want to interrupt the charity dinner, but I couldn't just sit here and twiddle my thumbs all night.

Mom didn't want me downstairs? I wouldn't go downstairs. I'd stay up here, but keeping to myself in my bedroom all night wouldn't happen.

The house was big. I'd kept to myself ever since moving here frankly, and with my mind racing at a thousand miles per minute, I had to snoop, even if snooping was bad. If tonight I came out with nothing, then I would forget about it. Simple, easy.

That's what I thought, anyway.

I changed into black leggings, dark socks, and a black shirt. Blend in with the shadows or something, right? In the movies and TV shows, people always wear black when they're sneaking around. It was pretty much an unspoken law. My dark hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, and as I passed my reflection in the mirror, I had to stop and check myself out.

Some people couldn't pull off wearing all black, but I was pretty sure I was one of them. The dark color made my tan skin look even darker, blending in with my hair and my eyes. It wasn't often that I wasn't jealous of my mom's complexion, but right now, tonight, I didn't look too shabby.

I moved to the door, slowly opening it and poking my head out. I heard nothing, except the faint sounds of laughter down the hall and down the stairs.

Time to snoop, and hopefully put my mind at rest.

This house had countless other bedrooms, most of them furnished but unused. I had no idea why Ollie needed so much space, especially if it was just himself here. My mom and I each took up one room, but that still left so much empty space.

It wasn't the bedrooms that sat wide open and mostly empty that were my focus. My focus were the rooms whose doors were permanently closed, as if wordlessly forbidding me to enter. To that, I'd say *fuck it, I'm going in, anyway*.

Once I reached the first locked door, I gripped the handle and turned it. Tried to.

The damned thing was locked.

Okay, that was a little weird, wasn't it? This wasn't my mind making up a story—there really was a locked door, and there shouldn't be.

My eyes studied the doorknob, and I wondered if I'd be able to open it with a butter knife. The locks at our place were like that, and although these doorknobs seemed fancier and with a shinier finish, they looked much the same.

Problem was, the butter knives were all downstairs in the kitchen, which meant I'd have to go down there to get one.

Was it worth it? Was possibly being able to go inside this locked room worth me getting in trouble—and in the worst-case scenario, possibly getting my mom fired? Who could say. The only person who could answer that question would be someone who knew what that room held.

I wouldn't get caught. I'd be careful.

Creeping down the hallway, I left the locked room. My socks were noiseless on the steps as I took them one at a time, focusing on what I was hearing. Music, now. This charity event was in full swing, and I knew the hall in the back of the house was full of people in suits and women in fancy dresses.

So not my thing. I didn't do dress-up.

As I came upon the first floor of the house, my pace down the steps slowed. I peeked around the banister. The stairs let out into a wide hallway between the living room and the dining room, and beyond that was the kitchen.

My nerves were on fire as I rushed through the corner of the dining room, rounding into the kitchen. It wasn't the kitchen I was used to, so it took me a bit too long to find the drawer with the silverware. Once I had a butter knife, I stuck it in the side of my leggings, covering it with my shirt.

The last thing I needed was someone walking in on me and asking why the hell I was bringing up a knife to my room.

My steps quick, I hurried back to the stairs and took two at a time to get back up there. My heart thudded in my chest, not happy with the whole sneaking around thing. Stealth was really not my forte...then again, I wasn't quite sure what my forte was, exactly.

Once I reached the locked door, I tossed a look over my shoulders, making sure I was alone before retrieving the butter knife from my side and sticking its flat, semi-sharp tip in the outside of the doorknob. It took me a few tries, but I was able to unlock the door from the outside.

Score one for Jaz, zero to Ollie.

It was ridiculous how excited I was my plan worked, and I slipped inside the room, hurriedly closing the door behind me as I stuck the butter knife back into the waistband of my leggings. I turned around to view the room that had been locked off, and for a moment, I couldn't breathe.

The room...was pink.

Like, *pink* pink.

The bedding, stuffed animals—everything screamed feminine. Even the pictures on the wall were ones of cartoon animals and things a younger girl might find cute. I moved in front of the dresser, running a hand over the top of its wood.

Dust. Thick dust.

A layer of dust like that didn't just appear in a week. No, if I had to guess, this room had been closed-off and untouched for months, maybe even years.

Was this—I suddenly grew horrified—Celeste's room?

Something didn't feel right here. I pulled open one of the dresser drawers, finding a neatly-folded pile of panties. Frilly and lacy, they were not the panties a young girl would wear. Those were pairs an older teenager would wear.

And they were still here.

If Celeste and her mom left...wouldn't she have packed the essentials?

Then again, she was rich. She came from money—it was obvious the rich didn't care about the same things poorer people did. Whereas I packed everything I owned, someone like Celeste might not.

After pushing the drawer closed, I checked the others—and then I checked the big closet in the far side of the room. Call me crazy, but it looked like all of her clothes were still here. I saw no empty hangers or half-filled drawers.

Somehow, it didn't sit right with me.

I was about to head out, to do some more snooping—because the more and more I thought about it, the stranger it was—but as my hand touched the knob, my ears heard voices in the hall. I instantly froze, my spine growing rigid.

I could hardly hear what they were saying...but it sounded like Ollie's voice.

Ollie's...and someone else's. Another man.

God, I really wanted to poke my head out and see who Ollie was talking to—wasn't it weird to be up here while his charity gala thing was going on downstairs? Unless...unless he needed to talk about something he didn't want anyone else to hear. Unless it was a private matter.

Once their voices faded down the hall, I quietly reached for the doorknob, twisting it slowly and pulling it open just enough to stick my head out and peek. I didn't see Ollie or whoever was with him; they must've disappeared in one of the rooms further down the hall.

I stepped out of the room, closing it behind me. I practically tiptoed down the hall, and the voices grew louder with each step I took. I shouldn't be here, shouldn't listen—whatever it was was their business, not mine, but that pit in my gut told me something was off, so I had to listen. I had to hear.

After a while, I realized the room they were in was Ollie's office, and I stopped just beside the door opening, leaning my ear toward the wall as if it would help me hear better. I didn't get a good look at the man Ollie was with, but judging the sound of his voice, he was a very dark and dangerous man.

Something here was wrong.

Chapter Nine – Vaughn

The last thing I wanted to do on a Saturday night was play dress up and accompany my brother to the Fitzpatrick's house. Oliver's house, really, since it seemed the other Fitzpatricks were simply gone, vanished into thin air.

I felt awkward in a suit, my black hair combed back and styled with gel. This, I knew, would be one boring night. Talking to the socialites, acting polite, smiling when necessary. I was not nearly as good at it as I should be, but that was mostly because I didn't care. Once I was out of Midpark High, it wasn't like I'd have a job that required me to be polite. I'd just be a beast they'd uncage every once in a while.

I sat in the front seat of my brother's car—a shiny, sleek black vehicle that did anything but blend in.

Well, the car blended in well around here, anyways.

We were on our way to Oliver's house, and I shifted my weight, tossing my brother a glance. I had many brothers, some full-blooded and others half, but he was the one who was in charge of most. He was our father's right-hand man, the one who'd take over the entire operation once our father died.

At twenty-six years old, Markus was a monster wearing the face of an angel. He was better at playing the field than me, although he had years more practice. When I turned twenty-six, maybe I'd be that good, too.

"I still don't know why I had to come," I muttered, turning my dark gaze to the window.

Markus's black hair was a bit shorter than mine, though his eyes were just as dark, if not darker. If you stared into his black, soulless eyes too long, you were liable to lose your sanity. He had a way with people.

He also looked a lot better in a suit than I did, but that was just me being whiny and awkward in my own fancy clothes.

"Because Travis is out of town on a job," Markus hissed, shooting daggers with his eyes as we pulled up to the front gate. He hit the button to roll down his window, flashing his ID to the guard in the small guard station, who then nodded and hit a button to open the gate. Once the

window was back up and no one else would hear him, he added, “And because you need to learn some responsibility.”

My hands clenched on my lap. He always knew the things to say to irritate me to no end. “I have plenty already.”

“Do you?” Markus shot back, rolling his car beside the others in the lawn. He put the vehicle into park and took out the keys, glancing at me. It looked like we were late to the party, but that’s how we always were—that way everyone could see us as we strolled in. No one would ignore the Scotts. “Because as far as I can tell, the only thing you seem to do is sit in your room and watch the days go by.”

We got out of his car, and the cool air whipped my face the moment I stood straight. We wore no jackets over our suits, but Markus seemed to be fine. I was fine too, but that was mostly because I was trying not to let his words get to me.

I didn’t just watch the days go by. I...I did homework, and stuff.

It wasn’t like I had to try too hard, because my life after Midpark High was already set in stone. I’d decided it was pointless to go to college—some of us did, some of us didn’t. I was literally just waiting until the day I became one of the family’s many instruments of vengeance and retribution.

Life was...boring now, what could I say? Although, it had gotten a little less boring with Jaz’s random addition—she still sat with me at lunch, made no moves to try to get closer to me, nor did she look at me like an outcast. The female population of Midpark fell on either side of the line, but she fell on neither. She was an outlier, someone I still couldn’t peg.

I thought about her more often than I should, probably, but I kept her to myself. The last thing I wanted was for my family to find out that a girl had wormed her way into my head. We’d lost some brothers due to shifting loyalties; my family would not lose me, too.

“So you slap me in a suit and bring me here,” I muttered, frowning as I stared up at the mansion we approached. A bellboy stood at the door, and as we neared the giant front door, he opened it for us, ushering Markus and me inside.

“In life, you will be forced to do many things you don’t want to,” Markus said, turning his dark eyes to me.

An older woman wearing all black brought us to the great hall in the back of the house, where everyone else was, already seated and eating. Numerous waiters frolicked about, rushing between tables for refills and

second helpings. We were shown to our table, but we did not sit down. Markus went straight to Ollie, who stood off to the side, a tall glass in his hand as he spoke to some other people.

I wanted to leave, but since I couldn't, I was slow to sit. The placemat before me was empty of food, but I knew that the moment I sat down it would change.

Someone came and poured me some water; someone else came and gave me a small salad bowl. I, meanwhile, wasn't hungry for any of this shit.

I heaved a sigh as I reached for the water and took a small sip. So many people all around, the noise level in the large room was almost too much. Everyone chatted away happily, and I had to stop myself from frowning. Markus and I were probably the youngest people here. Everyone else was at least fifty—excluding the busboys and the waiters.

An older man from a nearby table got up, bringing over his wineglass as he sat himself in the empty chair beside me, giving me a once-over. "Well, well. From over there," the man spoke, frowning slightly, wrinkles around his green eyes, "I thought you were Travis." He downed the rest of the red wine in his glass, his Adam's apple bobbing quickly.

I wasn't sure how he thought I was Travis. The tattoos, maybe—but he didn't have any on his knuckles or his hands. Besides the dark hair, we were different. Different eyes, different expressions...different levels of tolerance for stupidity.

I wasn't sure who this man was, but I imagined Travis was a better person, more able to deal with him. I, on the other hand, immediately wanted to punch this guy in the face—and I didn't often get needlessly angry like that.

The man wore a sleek dark blue suit, his blonde hair shorn short. "That would've made things too easy. If you were Travis, I could've strong-armed you for information about my son."

Saying nothing, I merely stared at the man, wishing he would get the hint and go away. Go back to his trophy wife—who looked like she was already drunk. My hand went to the table, my fingers toying with the silverware.

A sharp knife. Sharp enough to pierce skin, but that would be murder. My family didn't do public murder.

“Can you believe that rotten son of mine disowned me?” The man went on, “As if he’ll ever amount to anything without the Salvatore name. Fucking good riddance.”

Ah. That cleared things up. This man had to be James Salvatore, a man who’d gotten most of his wealth from driving up the price of whatever pharmaceutical his lab had created. He probably had looked better than he did right now.

The man then shocked me by setting a hand on my shoulder, squeezing it hard. “Whatever you do, son, don’t be like my boy. Don’t let a girl come between you and your family. Blood’s thicker than water.” James Salvatore swore under his breath, pushing down on my shoulder as he stood up.

By the time his hand left my shoulder, I was gripping the steak knife atop my napkin perhaps a bit too hard.

Normally I played it cool, but some people just got under my skin. Or perhaps I was just a bit too on-edge tonight, not wanting to be here.

I released the knife, slowly picking up the fork and nibbling at the salad before me. Using my peripherals, I kept an eye on Markus. Ollie had stopped talking to anyone else around him, and it was a long while before Markus met my eyes across the room. He tilted his head, and then he and Ollie started to make their way out.

He wanted me to follow, which meant I pretty much had to.

I stood up, moving across the giant room. As I went, I caught snippets of conversations, my ears always listening.

“The parties aren’t quite like they used to be. Do you remember the ones Nathaniel Chambers used to throw, years ago?”

“Whatever happened to Astrid and Celeste? You never see them around town anymore.”

“I hear Oliver’s hitched up to his new maid. A *maid*—can you believe it? I bet she’s around here somewhere—”

So many different conversations, so many different voices, all clamoring and fighting to be heard. I dutifully ignored them as I exited the ballroom. I wasn’t too far behind Markus and Oliver, but I took my time in following them, knowing it was family business.

If it was family business, I had to be involved, too. It’s why Markus didn’t come alone.

I shoved my hands in my pockets, watching them round a corner and head up the stairwell. I might’ve gotten a little sidetracked, finding myself

in the kitchen and then the living room, studying the place as if it held the answers.

It didn't.

Just more mysteries to most of the Midpark townsfolk.

When I reached the base of the stairs, I closed my eyes for a moment, letting out a long, silent sigh before heading up. I was excited to get out of Midpark High and be fully immersed in the family business, but this wasn't the kind of business I'd be balls-deep in. I wasn't a suit-wearing guy.

Granted, you did what the family asked of you when it asked it of you, and if you couldn't adapt, the family took care of you. If you couldn't contribute to the family's wealth, you were no longer a useful resource.

I was silent as I went up the stairs, about to head down the hall on the second floor—they couldn't have gone too far.

But then I stopped. Then my eyes focused on someone else standing in the hallway, near an open door as if she was eavesdropping. And—strangely—she held onto a small knife.

Jaz.

What in the world was she doing here?

Her head was turned toward me, her ear practically on the wall near the door, which I assumed was where Oliver and Markus were. Jaz's eyes widened when she saw me, and she opened her mouth but didn't say a thing. Probably because if she did, it would've alerted the two inside the room that she was sneaking around, listening to things she probably shouldn't.

The last thing I expected to see was her, especially here, so I found I could not do a thing, even as she stepped back and shut herself in an adjacent room, hiding from sight. I couldn't go to her without Oliver and Markus seeing me pass, so that was out.

Still, what the hell was she doing here?

I moved to the open door, practically interrupting Markus and Oliver, who were already in deep conversation. I didn't fully go in the room though, folding my arms over my chest and leaning on the door frame, acting as a bodyguard of sorts. An enforcer. Backup for Markus, not that he needed backup.

Oliver trailed off, his tired, weary blue gaze landing on me. "What..."

Markus tossed me a glare, as if he'd known I'd purposefully followed them slowly. "Oliver, this is Vaughn, one of my brothers." He returned his

glare to Oliver, saying, “You won’t always be dealing with me, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

They stood in what looked like an office, built-in bookcases on either wall, tall windows behind the grand mahogany desk. Oliver stood near the leather chair behind it, Markus on its other side. He was smart to put something between him and Markus, not so smart to trap himself inside the room.

Oliver closed his eyes, the bridge of his nose wrinkling. “I’ve done everything you asked of me, given all that I could—”

“And yet the family demands more,” Markus said, cocking his head with a glower. One hand rested in his pants’ pocket, the other—the one with the watch—tapped the edge of the desk slowly. “Or have you forgotten what we’ve done for you? Without us, there would be no more Oliver Fitzpatrick. You’d be in prison, your name ruined.”

“I’m well aware of how you’ve...helped me,” Oliver spoke, begrudging in admitting that we’d helped him.

“The first time, we gave you leniency because you took Lorelei,” Markus said, scowl deepening. He was a man that could truly look frightening, even when he wasn’t trying to be. The way his body filled his suit, he was a muscular giant, towering over most. He had the intimidating presence nailed. “But don’t forget that you chose to come to us again when the twins proved they were too much for you to handle.”

The twins—I remembered the pictures downstairs. The twins were long gone now, though I found it hard to put my mind to the matter at hand, knowing Jaz was here.

Why was she here? What the hell was she doing here, sneaking around? And then, almost ridiculously slowly, I realized: did she live here? Was she related to Oliver? Was that why she was so curious about Celeste and her mother?

Oliver’s shoulders fell, and he moved to sit in his chair, looking oddly small. “I did my best with them, I really did.” His face appeared pained. “I thought...I thought it was just a momentary slip-up.”

“It was a slip-up because they weren’t trained. If you would’ve allowed us to train them as we do every other child in the family, Lorelei would never have died,” Markus told him, slow to sit in one of the chairs facing his desk. “You would’ve had no need for a second wife if that was the case.”

“Every man needs happiness,” Oliver spoke, as if he was making excuses for himself, why he had to go and remarry Astrid Chambers, thereby cementing himself as the stepfather to Celeste, who captivated America when she was taken all those years ago.

Oh, yes. I knew everything that happened. Why didn’t I tell Jaz when she asked? It wasn’t my place to. If she really wanted to know, she’d find out on her own.

Markus smiled—a cold, cruel, almost calculating grin, one that flashed his teeth and showed just a hint of the beast lurking within. “Not *every* man, Oliver.” The smile fell off his face in an instant. “You know why I’m here.”

Oliver let out a sigh. He opened one of his desk’s drawers, pulling out a checkbook. “I just sent in my last payment two weeks ago. How much do I need to give you to call your family off? It’s been years.”

“I’m not here for another check,” Markus stated, leaning back in his chair, lifting his arms and resting them on the wooden armrests. “I’m simply here to remind you that someday the family will call upon you, and when it does, you must answer.”

The lawyer knew better than to ask what would happen if he didn’t.

Markus studied Oliver, and even though I stood behind him under the doorframe, I could imagine the look he gave him, how downright evil Markus looked right then. If anyone was a demon wearing a human mask, it was him. “Perhaps it’s not a good time to mention them, but we have located Zane and Thorn, in case you’re curious.”

My eyes drifted away from Markus and Oliver, moving to the door down the hall where I knew Jaz was. She hadn’t come out. She was probably waiting for us all to leave. Well, wouldn’t she have a rude awakening coming once this meeting was over?

“It took us a while to find them, but we did,” Markus was busy saying. “Do you want to know where they are?”

Oliver still had his checkbook out. “That depends, I suppose. Are they safe? Is Celeste—”

“Celeste Chambers is still alive, although I doubt she still goes by that name,” Markus said. He crossed his legs, looking at home, even though he was currently intimidating the shit out of Oliver Fitzpatrick. “Zane and Thorn are both alive as well. They’re resourceful; I’ll give them that. Must have something to do with the blood that runs through their veins... obviously from their mother’s side. No way they got it from you.”

Zane and Thorn were, in a roundabout way, a part of the family. Even though the family had tossed Lorelei out because she refused to play her role in our legacy—years ago, back when Markus was still a child and I was not even a thought in my mother’s head—and the family always watched their own. It should come as no surprise to Oliver that Markus had found them.

Oliver took the insult with a wince. “No, I’d...that’s okay. I don’t need to know where they are.”

“If you ever change your mind, you know how to reach me,” Markus said, getting to his feet. “Never forget your debt to us, Oliver.” Straightening out his suit jacket, he turned and walked past me, turning in the hall and heading toward the stairwell. He went down without a glance behind him.

The man in the chair looked uneasy. I could tell Oliver didn’t enjoy dealing with us, and I couldn’t blame him. We were an intense family all around, though he really should’ve been used to it from his previous wife and his sons. Anyone who had Scott blood never did things half-heartedly.

I met Oliver’s eyes, gave him a smirk, and then reached for the doorknob, pulling the door shut behind me. It would’ve been smart to follow Markus, but for whatever reason, I couldn’t. Not when I knew Jaz was just down the hall, trying to hide.

My ears heard no sounds in the office, which meant Oliver hadn’t gotten up yet, so I allowed myself the respite: I walked to the door I saw Jaz disappear into, quietly entering and closing the door behind me, locking both her and I in the room.

It was another office—this one a woman’s, if the more feminine and smaller furniture meant anything. An urn sat on the right side of the desk, and Jaz stood near it, having set down her small knife to peer inside it.

Huh. Must’ve been quieter than I thought, because she didn’t notice me. She was too busy studying the urn.

“Find something interesting?” I asked her, less than a foot behind her.

Jaz nearly jumped out of her skin, whirling on me with a look of fright in her eyes. During the turn, she knocked her hand against the urn, causing it to wobble. It would’ve fallen to the floor, but I was able to move closer and catch it before it tumbled...and pretty much pin her to the desk while doing so.

My hand rested on top of the urn, and my eyes flicked to the silver engraving on its lid. Lorelei Fitzpatrick, Oliver's old wife, whom he kept locked away in here. I was slow to return my gaze to Jaz, to note the pink rising in her tanned cheeks.

We did stand awfully close, I supposed.

I released the urn once I was sure it would not fall and took a step away from her, giving her room to breathe. Just enough, anyway. I was still probably too close to her. Closer than I should be, given how much she'd been on my mind recently.

It was funny—I wasn't the kind of guy who lost himself in thoughts of girls or what wonders their bodies held. I couldn't care less. Most everyone at Midpark was annoying, mildly aggravating at best...but Jaz was something else.

And now I knew why.

Looking at her in her dark leggings, her black shirt...I knew it right then. She didn't belong here.

"You're not supposed to be here," Jaz whispered. Her dark eyes glanced at the urn, and she was slow to swallow. "Thanks for catching that, though."

All I did was smile, even if that smile felt a little hollow. Most everything did in life, lately—although her addition did shake things up a bit. I watched as the pink color in her cheeks slowly faded, gone the moment she stared up at me defiantly, fiercer than any wildcat.

"You're crowding my space," she said, setting her hands on my chest and pushing me away from her. I let her, watched as she headed toward the door—which I'd locked, just in case Oliver decided to come over here.

"I wouldn't go out there, if I were you," I told her, causing her to abruptly stop before she turned the handle. "Oliver's still out there."

Jaz turned to glare at me, no longer the friendly girl she was at lunch. She was...nervous? Nervous about being alone with me? Some girls would kill for the chance, and others would want to leave the room just as badly as she did.

But she didn't want to leave because she was stuck in here with me. She wanted to leave because I'd caught her doing something she shouldn't have. Eavesdropping.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, cocking her head.

I said nothing, turning to pick up the butter knife she'd left on the desk in her hurry to get away from me. A single brow rose as I wordlessly asked the question plaguing my mind: what on earth was Jaz doing here with a butter knife?

"That," she said as she took the knife from my grip, jutting out her bottom lip in a pout I almost found cute, "is none of your business. I'm asking the questions here." She spoke in a bare whisper, now that she knew Oliver was still next door.

Or he was, before I'd come in. Maybe he was gone by now.

Or maybe he still sat in shock over everything Markus had said. After all, he'd found out his two sons were still alive, which was more than he'd hoped for, clearly.

"I came with my brother," I told her, resting my ass on the edge of the desk, moving far enough away from the urn to not hazard an accidental touch like Jaz did moments ago. "What are you doing here? You the hired help?" The busboys and waiters downstairs wore mostly black, but none of them wore black quite like her.

If I was honest, it was my favorite color. I was usually not one to appreciate the way a girl's body looked, but hers was voluptuous and curved in all the right places. Jaz really was a cut above the rest.

"I..." Jaz's voice quieted; she sounded so far from the confident, sassy girl she normally was at lunch. Was it merely because I'd caught her out of her element, or was it something else? "I live here."

"You live here?"

"Yeah," she muttered, "my mom is Ollie's maid. We both live here now." She held onto the butter knife with one hand, using her other to run her palm up and down her arm, as if trying to stave away the goosebumps on her flesh.

Was she embarrassed at what she'd just admitted? I found it...well, color me fucking stupid, but I found it entrancing. For just a quick moment, I felt a strange pitter-patter in my chest. That pesky heart inside of me actually felt...warm?

That was weird.

I took a step towards her, slowly circling her like a vulture. She let me, her posture rigid, her lips parted slightly. Those leggings, I noticed, hugged her ass perfectly. It was impossible not to stare. Before I knew what I was doing, I was reaching for the elastic band in her hair, tugging it down and

letting that thick, black hair free. I rolled the elastic band around my wrist, standing directly behind her.

My body wanted to be closer to hers. Was this what other people felt on a daily basis? Was this what wanting someone else was like—lusting after them, devouring them with your eyes and having it never be enough?

I didn't like it.

But I did.

"So that's why you were asking about Celeste," I whispered, tentatively reaching a hand between us and touching the tips of her black hair. "You're worried." She didn't step away from me, even though she could. I supposed that was a good thing.

"Things just don't seem right around here," Jaz whispered, her voice nearly lost by the time it reached my ears.

The hand I had touching her hair moved past it, running down the smooth curve of her back. I heard her breathe in sharply, and I found myself with the bizarre desire to keep touching her. "You're right about that," I relented, wondering why this girl had such a hold on me. So immediately, too.

It felt...it felt like fate.

"I only want to know that my mom and I are safe here," Jaz whispered. Across the desk, her reflection shone in the windowpane, and I met her eyes there as I swept some of her hair over her shoulder, watching as she closed her eyes and shivered.

There were so many things I could've told her in that moment, so many things I caught myself from declaring. *I could keep you safe. I could keep everyone else away. It could all be me.* But, alas, instead I merely whispered, "No one's ever safe in Midpark, Jaz."

The truth. The truth from a liar's mouth. My family lied for a living. If we all went around and told the world our bloody truths, we'd be arrested, put in prison, put to trial, and then executed.

Jaz then turned around, giving me the sultriest look I'd ever been given. Her expression made my lower gut burn with a yearning I couldn't recognize. "Why do I have the feeling that you're right?" she asked, her dark eyes raking over me, taking in my suit and how closely I stood to her. "You look good in a suit, Vaughn."

I'd been paid compliments before, but never had any actually stuck. This one...I believed every single word she said.

I was well aware that I could spill the beans to her, tell her exactly what happened to Celeste and her mother, how my family had helped Oliver with the cleanup of not one but two wives, but I knew such knowledge would only drive her further away from me—and call me selfish, but I didn't want this girl running.

No, no running, unless she ran right into my arms.

“You look good in anything,” I told her, meaning it.

Later that night, after Markus and I drove home, I dreamt of her. I dreamt of her skin naked against mine, hearing her flush sighs near my ear. I dreamt of her body tangled with mine under sheets that were as soft as velvet.

Until I woke in the middle of the night with a pitched blanket over me, I'd thought I was free of the obsession that tended to run in my family, but it looked like I was wrong.

So, so wrong.

Chapter Ten – Jaz

Turned out, pretending everything was normal when everything was not normal was a difficult thing to do. All day Sunday, I was lost in my own head. I tried to study, tried to do anything other than get lost in my thoughts, but I couldn't.

That urn. Vaughn and his brother with Ollie. What kind of shady business were they in together? His older brother had sounded like some kind of beast in a suit. Anyone with a sense of self would be afraid of a man like that.

Thoughts like those carried over into the next day, at least until homeroom and first period, where I came face to face with Archer again.

Well, at least Archer was good to get my mind off things, right? Off of everything that had happened, the muffled words I'd heard about Ollie owing Vaughn's family for something...and off of the meeting I had later today. After school, after my musical tutoring session with Bobbi.

I didn't have the money, but I'd get a job somewhere if I had to. The consultation session was free, after all, so it wasn't like I needed a good chunk of money this afternoon.

I actually made it to homeroom before Archer, which was a little odd, because so far the boy had been there before me every single day. When he sauntered in the room and headed towards his desk in the back near me, I couldn't help but feel a warming in my gut at remembrance of what we did.

Hooking up with him had probably been a mistake, but...

Hell, I didn't even know what happened, still. All these days later, and I didn't know what came over me. It wasn't like me to let passion take over, but damn it, if it hadn't felt amazing...there was no denying the power he had over me.

Archer's blonde hair was a little ruffled, messed up as if he'd just rolled out of bed. He wore a blazer over his shirt, nice dark jeans that hugged his assets perfectly. And, yes, that boy had every reason to look so drop-dead gorgeous with what he was packing under there. The muscles, the dick—I mean, really, you'd have to be blind to not be able to appreciate him.

I said nothing as he sat beside me and set his books down on his desk. It took him almost a full minute to meet my eyes, which seemed a little weird,

and when he did, the expression he wore was not the usual friendly face he'd always given me. No dimples, no smile.

What the hell...

Oh, wait a minute. I knew what this was about. This was because we'd hooked up, and he was probably worried I'd be clingy or something. Hah. Right. As if I wanted him to be my boyfriend or something.

The thought instantly riled me up, and I turned my head to the side, staring hard at the ground. Of course hooking up with him was stupid. What the hell was I thinking? Hint: I wasn't. Normally I was very logical when it came to that sort of thing, but something inside of me just snapped when I was over his house.

If I could, I'd take it all back.

Eh, not really. It was a fun time.

I let Archer stick to his silence all period, and after the bell rang and everybody got up to go to their second class of the day, I followed Archer out of the room. Once we were in the hall, I tugged on his sleeve, stopping him. We stood off to the side in the hall, out of the crowd hustling to get to their next class.

This talk couldn't last forever, otherwise we'd both be late—and Mom would kill me if she heard I'd been tardy already—so I had to keep it succinct.

"Hey," I said once his blue eyes met mine. A color so crisp and clear even the waters in the Caribbean were jealous of their hue. His head was bent towards me, his mouth a thin line. His six-foot frame was hunched; he hardly looked like himself, and I hated it. "Are you okay?"

Maybe I was overreacting. Maybe this wasn't about me.

"I'm fine," he said, though he said nothing else to elaborate.

Okay, maybe this *was* about me.

"If this is about what happened last week," I started, "just forget about it." Maybe it'd be easier if we both forgot about it. Hooking up so soon had been downright stupid. I honestly didn't know what I'd been thinking.

"I can't," Archer finally spoke, sighing as he ran a hand through his blonde hair. "That's the problem."

I blinked, not sure where he was going with that. "Why is that a problem?"

"It just is, okay? Just...give me space." Archer said nothing else as he turned and disappeared in the hall, blending in with the other students,

leaving me alone to wonder just what the hell he'd meant.

Why was it a problem? Did he plan on spending the last half of his senior year solo? I didn't get it.

Ugh. Boys. Stupid no matter where you went or how much money they had.

Truth be told, I was still fuming about that little encounter by the time lunch arrived. I sat at the table with a huff and unrolled my bagged lunch. Crackers and cheese, nothing too special. Didn't even know why I needed a damn bag. Stupid.

No, wait. That wasn't stupid; Archer was stupid. Yeah.

Vaughn was already sitting by the time I did, and he watched me with his dark, penetrating stare for a while—at least until I met his eyes, for then he said, “Something bothering you, Jaz?” He cocked his head, eyes somewhat narrowed.

He sure had the intense stare down pat, didn't he?

For whatever reason, I didn't want to tell him about my little hookup with Archer. Even though Vaughn and I weren't...well, anything, I just couldn't. Maybe because, even though his family business was obviously shady as shit, I kind of liked him. Thought he was cute. Whatever.

Vaughn did look ridiculously sexy in that suit. His slender frame, even the tattoos. He'd been a smoldering hottie Saturday, and I'd be lying if I said certain thoughts didn't run through my head when he and I were alone in that office. Even though I was a little freaked out about the urn and the ashes—because I still never found an obit for Ollie's previous wife, which didn't sit well with me—it was impossible not to wonder what it'd feel like for him to pin me against the wall and...

Do other stuff. Ahem.

“Yeah,” I said, deciding to turn it around on him. While the lunchroom around us was a cacophony of sound, our table was silent for a few minutes until I asked, “What business does your family have with Ollie?”

Vaughn set his arms on the table, and for a split-second, my eyes fell to the words written on his knuckles. Hate and pain. What kind of rich family would want their kid tatted up like that? Then again, maybe his family didn't like the tattoos either. Maybe he'd turned eighteen and decided to get them for himself regardless; it was as plausible as anything else.

“Why are you so curious about everything?” he questioned.

“I told you, I just want to make sure my mom and I are safe.”

“And I told you no one is safe.”

True. He did. And just like then, it was very ominous to hear now. Felt like the beginning of a horror movie, when the dirty man at the gas station in the middle of nowhere warned the main characters not to go where they were going.

Unlike those characters in the movies, though, I had to ask, “Why?” Why was no one safe in Midpark? Why did it feel like Vaughn knew what he was talking about? Why, why, why?

“You heard what happened years ago, but things around here have been steady,” Vaughn explained. Today he didn’t bother getting any food; I never understood why he wasted the food, because he never ate it. “It comes and goes. I’m no psychic, but I bet the worst is planning on coming around again.”

Right. Very mysterious, very cryptic, very aggravating and pointless.

“So you’re saying you think my mom and I should leave?” I decided to ask what I’d already thought about. Finding a place to live would be the hardest thing, but we’d make do. We’d figure it out. We always did.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“I’m saying bad things happen, and money tends to cover it up. If you’re not careful, you might find out something you don’t want to know.”

“Like what you and your brother were doing over at Ollie’s house on Saturday?” I offered, hoping to trip him up.

A slow smirk crawled across Vaughn’s mouth, and I watched it form. I wasn’t really a fan of the tattooed bad boys, but for Vaughn, I could definitely make an exception. He wasn’t someone I’d bring home to meet my mom, but I was sure he’d be good for other things.

Wow. All right. Clearly, I had sex on the brain—which was stupid, considering what happened last week with Archer.

“I’d be very careful asking questions like that,” Vaughn whispered, his voice low. So low I could hardly hear him with the noise around us. Everyone else, chatting away without a care in the world. “You might just stick your nose where it doesn’t belong, and then what would happen?”

“What?”

Vaughn said nothing, leaving me an insane kind of curious.

Was that a threat?

I ate my crackers and cheese in silence, frowning at him. Vaughn watched me the whole time, and I...I wasn't sure if I liked his attention or not. Sure, he was attractive, but there was obviously something else going on. Something with his family and Ollie, something they'd need privacy to discuss.

Maybe I wouldn't just ask about Ollie. Maybe I'd ask about Vaughn's family, too. I filed those questions away for later; first I had to get through the afternoon, including a session with Bobbi in the choir room after last period. I'd already told Mom I needed some musical tutoring, and she was just happy I was actually getting into something.

I wasn't, but I couldn't tell her that.

Vaughn and I hardly spoke the rest of lunch, and when the bells rang overhead, I hurried to pick up my stuff and leave, not even telling him goodbye. If he wanted to be creepy, whatever. He could be. No one was stopping him. But I wasn't going to sit there and take it with a smile on my face, either.

I wanted an easy afternoon, at least my last classes, anyway—I knew that choir tutoring would be like nails on a chalkboard—but when I made it to my locker after lunch, I saw a girl standing near it, a purse that probably cost a few hundred dollars, or more, slung across her shoulders. Her blonde hair was curled, tumbling down her back. Today she wore four-inch heels and a dress that hugged the curves on her body.

I didn't know her name, but I did remember her from before: the girl who accused me of being Ollie's next wife. Or plaything. Or whatever.

"Um," I spoke, causing her to lean her back against the lockers and look at me. "You're kind of blocking my locker."

Her lips, painted in a dark, matte red, curled into a smile. "I know. I just wanted to make sure I got your attention."

A part of me wanted to tell her she'd got my attention last week after the things she'd said, but I held it in. Maybe this girl wasn't as bad as her first impression gave off. Maybe she was actually nice.

Hah. Probably a pipe dream. She kind of radiated bitch, even when she wasn't outright being one.

"Well, you have it," I said, really hoping she'd get to the point fast. Hardly anyone had spoken to me so far, unless they were forced to. I wasn't under the impression that I had any friends here, but making enemies, I

knew, was a no-go. Lay low, be good. Don't get the entire high school upset with me by being mean to one of its most popular students.

I had no idea if this chick was popular, and I didn't really care. I meant it, though, when I said I didn't want to make enemies. I still had half a year left, and if Mom and I ended up staying here, I didn't want to live through hell for the next six months until graduation. Hell was not on my bucket list.

"I've been trying to figure you out," the girl said, eyeing me up. "You came to school with Oliver Fitzpatrick once, but ever since then, you come in a ratty minivan the nineties are missing. Word around town is Oliver hired a maid—and what's even worse, the maid lives with him. That wouldn't be you, would it? Or the middle-aged has-been who owns that van?"

Did she just call my mom a middle-aged has-been? I felt both insulted and amused. Who the hell insulted someone by calling them that? Wouldn't that just mean her parents were middle-aged has-beens, too?

"What is your point?" I asked, cocking a hip and taking an attitude. Kind of hard not to, when this bitch refused to just go away.

"My point is, either way, you don't belong here. You might be flying high now, but you're not ready to face Midpark. Trust me, Jazmine, you won't like what you see. Do us all a favor and drop out—or transfer. I'm sure there are online schools that'll take you—"

Why the hell was she trying to get me to leave Midpark? I didn't understand.

I also didn't understand why she thought it was in her right to tell me all of these things. Bitch overload, thank you very much.

"I don't know what I ever did to you, but whatever it is, I want to say I'm sorry," I started, noting the way her expression started to change. "It's what I want to say, but I'm not going to, because you're being a bitch."

The girl blinked, her amber stare narrowed as her lips puckered into a frown. "I'm sure you know exactly what you did. You might play coy and innocent, but no one in Midpark is innocent. I hope I'm there the moment you realize that." Her frown morphed into a superior grin, and she gave me a wink before sauntering off in her four-inch heels, walking in them like a pro.

I watched her walk away, stunned at the encounter. Where the hell did she think she was coming from? What gave her any right to say those things

to me? Insulting, demeaning...the list could go on. Whoever she was, she was not nice, and I hated her instinctively.

If she thought I'd be a good girl and let her bully me out of Midpark High, she had another thing coming.

Chapter Eleven – Jaz

The choir room was empty, the teacher gone. Ms. Haber must trust Bobbi, because we were alone in the room after official school hours, although with how Bobbi was acting, this was normal for her.

She must really love choir, for whatever weird reason.

I actually attempted to sing, too. Bobbi tried to smile at me while I was belting out the melody I had to learn, but I knew I was shit at it. I did hit a few of the higher notes, but when I looked down at the sheet music, it was a freaking puzzle to me. It could be written in an alien language for all I knew.

Bobbi sat beside me—though she made me stand straight, with perfect posture when I was singing—nibbling on the end of a pencil. Today her brown hair was in a messy bun, but she was one of those lucky girls who knew how to actually make their buns look cute. Anytime I put my hair in a bun, I looked like an ogre.

It was as I sat beside her, heaving out a sigh, that Bobbi asked, “Something’s bothering you. What is it?”

Oh, God. What wasn’t bothering me today? Archer, Vaughn and his family, everything with Ollie, not to mention that blonde chick and everything she’d said...and then, who could forget my appointment in—I glanced at my phone for the time—forty-five minutes, which meant we’d have to wrap up here soon so I could have enough time to walk to the meeting place. I’d also had to resort to emailing, which was just...so old-school.

Since I couldn’t tell Bobbi about all of my problems, I settled for one. I told her about the confrontation between me and that blonde chick near my locker. I kept out the part about Ollie, though I supposed if the blonde bitch wanted to, she could spread rumor after rumor about me. Who would this school believe: a newcomer, or someone who’d clearly been here her entire life?

After I finished relaying the story to Bobbi, I finished with, “I don’t even know who that girl is, and she’s intent on making my life hell here.” Surely seemed like it, anyway. I did not need any more drama. I already had enough shit on my plate, didn’t I?

Bobbi let out a thoughtful sound as she dug her phone out of her purse and typed in her passcode. “Was this her?” she asked, clicking on something on her phone before turning it to show me. She’d pulled up a picture of a group of girls wearing dresses—maybe their homecoming dance? I saw Bobbi on the end, though she looked just as dolled-up as the rest of them.

The middle girl, I noticed, was indeed the blonde bitch who had it out for me. The other girls in the picture were the two dark-haired ones who hung near her that first day, when she’d accused me of being Ollie’s newest toy.

“Yeah,” I said, pointing to the middle of the picture. “That’s her.”

Bobbi shook her head slightly. “That’s Brittany Pots. For whatever reason, she’s the queen bee around here.” She put away her phone.

“Are you friends with her?” I didn’t want to call Brittany any names or say something I’d later regret.

“No.” Bobbi shook her head. “And the only reason I have that picture is because Brittany and her friends ran a poll on her Facebook profile to see who had the ugliest dress.” Her shoulders rose and fell once, mostly hidden beneath a sweater that was a few sizes too big. “Spoiler alert, it was me. I’m still pissed about it, all these months later.”

I personally thought they all looked beautiful at the time of the picture, but that was neither here nor there. It seemed Brittany was able to do whatever she wanted when she wanted; the principal’s stance on bullying sure didn’t seem to affect her at all.

“So,” I said, lowering my voice even though we were alone and the choir room’s doors were shut, “she’s kind of a bitch.”

Bobbi let out a laugh. “Forget the *kind of* part. Still, somehow everyone loves her. The teachers, the underclassmen, the boys—especially the boys, but I hear that’s because she...” Her cheeks flushed, and she had to break eye contact.

“She what?”

“Let’s just say, her skills with her tongue are pretty much legendary.”

Oh.

Oh.

Well of course the boys are going to love her, then. That didn’t surprise me. And knowing she was a good two-faced liar with her teachers and the

other faculty here was also unsurprising. Brittany got away with everything she did and said because she was up their asses and fake to them. Ugh.

Brittany Pots. Well, at least I had a name to the face now. At least I knew who I was dealing with—the queen bitch of the school everyone worshipped.

“Has anyone ever stood up to her before?” I asked.

“Not really. Most everyone who’s not in her inner circle either wants to be, so they put up with her shit, or they want to hook up with her.” Bobbi sighed. “It’s just not worth it. I ignore her when I can, because I know if I ever brought anything up to a teacher, they’d just take her side automatically.”

“That sucks.”

“I feel like that’s how it is in every school,” Bobbi said. “Not like I’ve been to a bunch of schools, but it’s what I like to assume.”

“You’re probably right,” I said quietly. In my old school there were the popular kids—mostly jocks and the kids who were funny enough to earn their friendship—and then everyone else. The bandos, the nerds, the outcasts. Every school had cliques.

I checked the time again.

Bobbi was about to say something else—and as much as I’d love to stick around and hear all the gossip involving Brittany, maybe prepare myself for what she had in store for me—I said, “Sorry, I have to go. I have another meeting I can’t miss.” I stood, went to grab my bag and my jacket—both of which were on the chair on my other side.

“Oh, okay.” Bobbi gave me a smile, but her smile looked...well, a bit sad. She set down the sheet music on her chair as she stood up with me, watching as I shrugged on my coat and hauled the straps over my shoulders. “I think you should stay in choir. You still need some practice, but you catch on fast.”

I laughed at that. Her compliment sounded genuine, but I really didn’t think me and choir were good fits. Still, they’d probably force me to take something else, and I had no idea what else I would enjoy, so maybe I should just suck it up. After all, it was only one semester, and then I’d be graduating and only seeing Midpark in the rearview mirror.

“Thanks,” I said, grinning, “I’ll keep that in mind.” I gave her a short wave before exiting the choir room, heading down halls that were jam-packed during the day. Now, they were eerily empty, my footsteps echoing

the only sound I heard. I zipped up my coat and headed out, into the brisk January.

It was nicer weather for a winter month than the weather I was used to—we always got more snow, not to mention wind chills that made you regret ever coming outside. And leaving your bed, for that matter. Midpark rested in a more southern state. It might be chilly here, but they had it good.

I didn't tell my mom where I was going, which was probably stupid, but if I told her exactly who I was meeting, well, she'd probably freak out. I didn't want to worry her needlessly; I wanted...well, I literally just wanted to make sure we were safe.

Although...with everything that happened with Vaughn and his brother, I wanted to know stuff about them, too. If Vaughn was even safe to be around. If I was surrounded by liars and killers and kidnappers, or if it was all in my head and that anxious brain of mine.

Really, I wanted the truth, which no one wanted to give me flat-out.

I had my phone in my hands, the directions to the diner where we were meeting on its screen. I kept my head down, glancing both ways before crossing any roads, heading away from the school. It'd take me a long while to walk home, but it wasn't like I could call my mom and tell her to pick me up. I'd make do.

The man I was meeting was someone named Jacob Hall. He had a background in blue, although he clearly wasn't working for the police anymore if he was a private investigator. His reviews were mostly good; no outright awful ones. Most said he went above and beyond what they'd expected of him, which seemed like a good thing.

Of course, I had no idea how expensive he was to hire, but one step at a time.

My feet took me across town, to a small diner that looked so out of place in Midpark. Its style screamed fifties, although everything looked updated and well-kept. It was one of those places that tried to look old, but it wasn't really. A single-story eatery with most of its booths on the outer edges, where the floor-to-ceiling windows were. The kitchen was in the back center, just behind the counter, where leather-covered stools were.

The moment I walked in, I had to pause to take it all in. The checkered tiles on the floor looked freshly-waxed, the red leather on the stools and

booths new and clean. The register sitting on the counter looked old, but its steel was shiny and fresh.

Okay, who was I kidding? With the vibe this place gave off—and the jukebox in the corner of the diner—this place was freaking cute. I loved it.

I turned off my phone and slid it in my coat's pocket, glancing around. The last email he'd sent me told me he'd be waiting in the corner booth, and indeed there was a man sipping coffee in the furthest booth.

Holding my head up high, I hoped, fucking prayed, I looked like a serious potential client and not some silly high schooler who was in way over her head. The latter was true, but still. I didn't want to be laughed out of the diner.

As I walked to the furthest booth, I shrugged off my backpack, setting it on the floor behind me. It was an odd time, so most of the booths were empty; too early for dinner. Still seemed rather late for coffee, but I knew my mom drank it at all hours of the day. I, myself, couldn't stand the taste, even with a bunch of added sugar and cream to nullify the bitterness. Also hated the smell, go figure.

I slid myself into the booth across from him, saying, "Jacob Hall?"

The man was slow to set down the coffee mug, his fingers still curled around its white handle. Our eyes met, and I was momentarily stunned.

He was...he was definitely not what I'd been expecting.

I was expecting someone, uh, older. Much older. Like, grizzled cop veteran with scars and an unkempt beard, not to mention an intimidating face that you'd see in your nightmares.

Or maybe I'd just seen too many movies, because the real Jacob Hall was nothing like that.

He was young. Young as in, maybe ten years older than me. Maybe. No way was this guy thirty. His hair was cut short, a light brown color, his clothes fitting snugly over his body...and his muscles. Because he had them.

Lots of them.

A square jaw lined in stubble, with eyes such a pretty hazel I was momentarily awestruck. He leaned back, giving me a good view of his solid chest beneath a button-up grey shirt, finally releasing his hold on the coffee cup.

Jacob Hall was insanely good-looking—who would've known? Certainly not me, otherwise I would've prepared myself mentally to be in

the presence of such a hunky sculpture. It wasn't often that a man's looks rendered me speechless, but Jacob's definitely did.

God, why'd he have to be so cute?

"Marie?" he asked, his voice low as he studied me.

Marie was the name I'd given him in the email, not wanting to use my real name for whatever reason. Again, I'd probably seen too many movies.

"Yeah," I said. I was seconds from telling him that my real name was Jaz, because he didn't seem like a serial killer stalker from first glance, but the man stunned me by what he did next.

After reaching into his pocket and pulling out a few singles, he tossed the money on the table, got up, and started walking away.

What in the hell...did I say something wrong?

I grabbed my bag and went after him.

I mean, what else was I supposed to do?

Chapter Twelve – Jacob

I needed a job. I had rent to make. It was that simple. It'd been a while since I'd had a job that'd taken me more than two days to do—it was not that hard to follow and catch spouses who were having affairs behind their wives' or husbands' backs. Those were the usual jobs I did around here.

Why did I stick around Midpark after the shit hit the fan? I didn't know. Because this...this was the town I grew up wanting to live in. I didn't grow up in Midpark, didn't go to its fancy schools, but I did always watch from one town over, wondering what it was like to live like them. The rich and semi-famous.

I graduated the academy almost right after high school, and I got a job being one of Midpark's police officers. A few years later, I got fucked. Fucked by some rich sociopaths who thought something inappropriate was going on with me and their younger stepsister.

Nothing inappropriate was going on. I wasn't like that, but they'd somehow put evidence on my laptop, in my saved drive. They got me fired, and so here I was. Most people didn't want to touch me, let alone look at me in this town, not after that—because, untrue as they were, some people still believed those rumors.

It annoyed the fuck out of me, which was why I spent most of my time not thinking about it, but the moment the girl walked in, somehow I knew. My stomach sank, and I knew. She was Marie, the one who'd reached out to me. She wanted to become a client. I hadn't seen her around here before, but that was probably because she still waded in the kiddie pool.

Fuck that.

So when I asked if she was Marie, and she said *yeah*, I did the only thing I could: I got up and walked away. I wouldn't do it. I'd tried to find them again—Zane and Thorn and Celeste—because a part of me always regretted letting them go, but I couldn't. I lost sleep over wondering whether they'd change their minds and come back for me. Kill me.

Because that's what they were. Killers, even if, allegedly, the person they killed deserved it. I wasn't a judge or a jury. Hell, I wasn't even an executioner, but in that restroom years ago, when I'd stared into Celeste's

watery eyes and listened to her plead for me to let her go, she made me, forced me into a role I never wanted.

I was not going to let another pretty young face get to me.

I was out of the diner, reaching for my keys in my pocket when I heard her come rushing after me, calling out, “Wait!” I stood near my car, but I stopped and glanced back at her.

A mistake. A mistake because she thought that meant I’d listen to reason and go back in the diner.

“Why are you leaving?” she asked, practically cornering me against my car. She had guts, I’d give her that, but I was not having any of it. She needed to learn to pick up on things like this. “We didn’t even talk about the job yet—” Her cheeks were red, or maybe that was just her natural blush. Her hair, long and black, hung over her shoulders in gentle waves. Her dark, warm eyes were just the type of eyes to lure you in.

She was pretty. Pretty and young, a terrible combination when it came to me.

“I don’t need to hear about the job,” I told her, resisting my urge to unlock my car and hop in, drive off and leave her in the dust. “I don’t work for kids.”

Her full lips formed a frown. “I’m not a kid,” she said, exactly the kind of thing a kid would say.

Yeah. It was best for me to hightail it out of here. My hand reached for the handle, and I was seconds from hitting that unlock button when she spoke again.

“I’m eighteen,” she said, holding her head up high. Her body was slender under her coat, and her face...it was the kind of face that probably got her loads of attention, even when she was little. Smooth, tan skin, not a blemish anywhere to be seen. Big eyes that seemed to stare into your soul and know, in a split-second, what your darkest fears were.

I immediately didn’t like what that gaze made me think of: Celeste, her abuse, and the psycho brothers who took her with them when they left. I had no idea how Oliver Fitzpatrick or his wife could live with what they’d allowed to happen.

“Sorry,” I said, not sorry at all. “The answer is still no.” I hit the button on my keys and climbed into the driver’s seat, about to close the door, but the girl, Marie, blocked it by rushing towards me, standing between the open door and the car.

I could push her out of the way to close it, but that would involve touching her, and I would not touch a barely-legal child—even if it was just to get away.

No. I wouldn't, lest this whole town echo with *I knew that Jacob Hall wasn't a good man*.

The problem, of course? The problem was I already knew I wasn't a good man, but for others to think that I'd done inappropriate things with a seventeen-year-old girl who'd just survived five years of kidnapping was another story. I was a bad man, but I wasn't *that* type of bad. There were different levels of evil in the world.

"Move," I told her, meeting her defiant stare. In that moment, she hardly looked like an eighteen-year-old. The way she glared at me, she could easily pass for someone older. The way her cheekbones were pronounced, smooth and slender in every way, she held no traces of the typical cherub innocence teenage faces usually did.

"No," she said, boldly holding my stare, "not until you hear me out."

"I'll drive off with the door open," I warned her, one hundred percent serious. Anything to get her away. Away from me, away from my car... mostly away from me. The more I looked at her, the prettier she became.

Fucking terrible thoughts.

"Fine," she said, sounding like she was pouting.

I thought she meant fine as in she was going to give up and leave, let me be, allow me to drive off and pretend like this meeting never happened, forget her face in its entirety, but I was wrong. So, so fucking wrong I could do nothing but sit there in shock at what she did next.

She hoisted herself up and crawled over me to get to the passenger seat, knocking her bag against my head as she went.

I held in a grimace at the feeling of hard textbooks slamming against my temple, turning my head to the side—away from her—and wondered just what the fuck kind of joke this was. Some kind of cosmic *let's all laugh at Jacob* moment? I might've had patience before, but after these last few years...I didn't anymore.

"All right," she said, dropping her bag between her knees and reaching for the seatbelt. "Let's go. Wherever it was you're running off to—"

"You could've just crawled into the car of a serial killer," I told her, slowly turning my head to look at her. The cool air from outside blew in; I

refused to shut it on principle. The moment I closed that door would be the moment my willpower crumbled and I accepted whatever job she had.

Money was money, after all...

No. I didn't work with kids, and I meant it.

"Are you?" she asked. "No? Then okay, I think I'm good right here." She buckled her seatbelt, obstinate to the fucking extreme. "I need your help."

And I needed eight hundred dollars by Friday to make rent.

I squeezed my eyes shut and pinched the bridge of my nose. I really didn't want to entertain the idea of working for this girl, but when faced with no other options, what the fuck else was I supposed to do?

After sighing yet again—I had the feeling I'd be doing a lot more sighing after I said what I was about to say next—I looked at her hard and said, "A thousand dollars, and I'll help you with whatever you need." I hated saying it, but I needed the cash, and if this girl was serious about hiring me, she had to fork it over and pay for it.

Desperate. I was fucking desperate, and I hated myself for it.

Hmm. Maybe it was time to leave Midpark. Clearly, this place hadn't done me any favors, and it didn't look like it would let up anytime soon.

Marie's eyes widened—and here I thought they couldn't get bigger. The eyes gave her an innocent, naive quality, but the rest of her was too flawless to belong to an eighteen-year-old. "I don't have a thousand with me."

"Then get it, and meet me back here on Thursday." I reached for my door, yanking it shut, slamming it. Glaring at her, I added, "Unless you've changed your mind and no longer need my help?" I had no idea what this girl needed my help with, but it would at least pay my rent for this month.

The other two hundred? Food, because you needed that shit to survive.

Her jaw set, and she stared at me with defiance in her gaze. "I'll get it." She said nothing else as she unbuckled her seatbelt and got out, slinging her bag over her shoulder as she moved toward the diner, getting off the parking lot.

With one hand on the shifter, I stared at her for a bit too long before putting the car in reverse and driving away.

She was just a means to an end, I told myself as I drove back to my apartment. If she belonged to one of the rich families around here, a thousand was just a weekly allowance. She'd be able to get it, and I'd make

my rent. At least for now. What the future held in store for me was anyone's guess.

I let out a groan as I went up to my place. I'd installed new locks after my place was broken into—though I supposed they weren't new anymore, but still. Multiple deadbolts, each with different keys. I figured by the time it would take someone to unlock them all, someone else would come strolling down the hallway and see them.

Even after all this time, I still didn't know how those devilish twins had gotten so good at what they did, but it was a moot point now. None of it mattered. They were gone and I was here, somehow.

Somehow still here.

The story of my fucking life, really.

I pushed inside, and after I locked each and every lock, I tossed my keyring onto the counter in the kitchen. As I walked down the hall, I slipped off my shoes and worked to take off my jacket, tossing it into my bedroom. I went into the bathroom and closed the door, instantly gripping the vanity's counter as I stared at myself in the mirror.

I looked like shit, I thought. My face looked more haggard than I remembered it being, but maybe it was just this place. Me, trying to make it here when I should've walked away all those years ago. Why didn't I? What made me stick around?

The truth...the truth was nowhere as pretty as the rest of Midpark was.

I pushed off the counter, starting to unbutton my shirt. I had to turn away from my reflection when my shirt opened to reveal my torso, or more specifically, the one part of it I never wanted to look at. The part of me that reminded me of my mistakes, my lies.

The only time I let myself think of what I did was when I was in the shower, when I had the water pelting my back and washing away the day's filth. Even then, it was too much, for I shouldn't think of it at all.

My feet brought me over the tub's edge, and I pulled the curtain closed before starting the water.

Underneath it all, I was just as scarred as the next person, just as battle-hardened. I used to be a better person, but that was before Zane, Thorn, and Celeste. Before I lost my job—the one thing I'd wanted growing up.

Almost absentmindedly, I touched my lower abdomen. Where sculpted muscle sat, scarred flesh was also.

Hell. Even back then, when I was just a cop trying to do his best when given such a high-profile case, I was a liar. I just used to hide it better.

One day at a time. That's how I had to take this. Relax, cool off, simultaneously hope and pray that girl both got the money and didn't. If she didn't get the money, I'd figure something out.

I always did.

Chapter Thirteen – Jaz

One question that plagued my mind while I was walking home was: how the hell was I supposed to come up with a thousand big ones? It wasn't like I was an heiress, a daughter of one of these Midpark families. I was an outsider, and being an outsider, I didn't have cash overflowing from my vagina. Nope. The only thing I had in my vagina was...

Well, let's not get into that, because my thoughts would only lead to Archer. Maybe even Vaughn.

Heck, or maybe even that ex-cop...

Needless to say, my hormones had suddenly jumped into overdrive here, and I was so not here for it. The only thing I was here for was figuring out mysteries and deciding whether or not my mom and I were safe here.

It was dark by the time I arrived at the house, talked to the guard for him to open the gate for me, and walked up to the house. Ollie was home already—strangely—and Mom had just arranged our leftovers at the dining table. Ollie had taken his meal up to his study, which he usually did.

Once Mom and I sat down beside each other, Mom gave me a smile. “How was the singing lesson?” Tonight's dinner was some kind of meatloaf. My mom had never been much of a cooker before, but she'd turned into a regular chef after getting this job. Then again, she didn't have anything else to do all day besides clean and do laundry, so. There was that.

“Great,” I said, hurrying to dig in and cut my slice of meat. And then I remembered: “I might have to meet with her more. Bobbi says I catch on fast, but I'm still not very good at reading sheet music.”

“You and Bobbi could always meet here,” Mom said, giving me a smile. She reached for a glass of water—she never drank, ever—and took a tiny sip. It felt almost weird to sit at such a long, expensive dining table with just the two of us, but I'd become somewhat used to it by now. “Bobbi is a girl, right?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, Mom.”

“Okay, good. You're too young to date—”

At that I had to glare. “I'm eighteen. How old do you want me to be?” It'd been like this for years. Ever since I made the first mistake of

commenting on a celebrity's attractiveness on the TV in front of her when I was younger. Anyone with a penis was the devil in her eyes, and I wasn't sure why.

I thought, at one point in my life, that maybe it was because of Dad. She never spoke about him, never even told me who the hell he was. On my birth certificate, he's listed as unknown. But eighteen years was a long time for someone to hold a grudge, especially against every guy with a dick.

"Just..." My mom let out a sigh; it wasn't the first time I'd made a comment like that, and it wouldn't be the last. "Let's just focus on you graduating, okay? Then we can talk about you dating."

Wow. It was the twenty-first century and my mom seriously didn't want me dating until sometime after high school graduation. I'd told Jacob I wasn't a child, but sitting here and listening to her reason—and realizing how grim and solemn she was about it—made me think twice about that.

Did Mom think she could always control me? Technically I didn't even have to live in this house anymore. Theoretically, I could go out, get a job, get my own place, do what I wanted. Date who I wanted.

Now was not the best time to think about hooking up with Archer, but the dick—I mean, the boy—did cross my mind.

I wouldn't mind having a steady boyfriend. I wouldn't mind going out on dates and acting like a real teenager. That, unfortunately, just wasn't how my life was. Never was, never would be. It was something I'd faced a long time ago, but for whatever reason, it particularly stung painfully tonight.

Maybe because I was trying to be responsible and see past the bullshit everyone was feeding me.

"Whatever," I muttered, not feeling too happy about it. "So I guess that means you don't want me getting a job?" A job wouldn't bring me a thousand dollars in four days, but it was something I could use to start funneling away money.

"A job?" Mom nearly dropped her silverware onto the floor. "What in the world has gotten into you?"

I paused for a moment to think up a lie. "I want new clothes."

"Why? What's wrong with the clothes you have?"

"I don't fit in with everyone else at Midpark," I whined, sounding exactly like an angsty teen would. "I stick out like a sore thumb." Did people say that these days? Eh, well. I got my point across anyways.

My mom could not hide her shock—after all, never before had I ever said something like that. I never really cared about fitting in or being like everyone else. I knew I wasn't, so I didn't care. "Your clothes are fine."

"No, they're not," I argued, but in the back of my head I was wondering just how the hell I was supposed to get a thousand freaking dollars by Thursday. It was a small price to pay to be assured that my mom and I were safe here...or confirmed that we weren't. I loved my mom above all other things in this world, even if she occasionally made me want to pull my own hair out.

She was my mom. Moms tended to get that reaction from their kids every once in a while.

"You have no idea what it's like," I said, frowning, "going to a rich school, surrounded by people who have all of the newest phones and the in-style clothes."

Mom blinked, giving me an unimpressed look. "You'll be fine, Jaz. Suck it up."

Well, that was probably that. This bone was a bone I'd never reach. Mom didn't want me dating, didn't want me to get a job...if I didn't know any better, I'd say Mom didn't want me to do anything in general. If she had her way, I'd still be living with her, date-less, as a thirty-year-old homebody.

Like, come on. Sooner or later all baby birds had to leave the nest, even if they crashed and failed at their attempt to fly.

Not saying I'd fail, but with the way Mom helicoptered around me, I hardly had any room to try.

We finished eating dinner in silence, and I spent the rest of the night in my room, doing homework. Midpark academics were indeed on another level than my old high school. I found it so strange that such things could vary from school to school, let alone state to state. But, regardless, I had to catch up, at least get *Cs* and *Bs* on everything. As were probably out of the picture here, what with everything else going on, but you never knew. Maybe I'd get lucky.

It was almost nine o'clock when I was done with all of my homework. My brain was still trying to think up a way I could get the cash by Thursday without stealing it from someone. Ollie had more than enough money to spare, but it wasn't like I could go up to him and say pretty please. The man

was my mom's employer, so I couldn't try to use him like that. Plus, it wasn't like he owed me anything.

And, anyway, he'd probably ask what the money was for. What was I supposed to say then? *Oh, I'm hiring a PI because I think you and every other person in this town is hiding something terrible from my mom and I.* Yeah, somehow, I didn't think he'd like that.

It wasn't like I could ask anyone else. I hadn't made any friends. Not really. Archer had been acting weird since we hooked up, so that guy was out. Vaughn's family was clearly in some shady deal with Ollie, so I wasn't sure if he'd even listen to me when I asked him for money. It was his idea to go with a PI, telling me the rich never got themselves dirty.

Seriously, I didn't know anyone well enough to ask them to lend me a thousand bucks. Hell, even at my old school, I didn't have friends like that.

But, maybe when it came to money, these people thought differently about it. Maybe a thousand bucks was like asking someone to buy you lunch. It was quite possible that it wasn't a big deal, and I was just making it one because I was...well, me.

The least I could do, I supposed, was try.

The next morning in homeroom, before the morning announcements came on the loudspeakers, I leaned over to Archer. He actually wore a hoodie today, which I thought was kind of weird—but then I saw the athletic brand on the hoodie, and knew it wasn't so weird. Seemed certain brands were universal with jocks.

Wait. Did that mean Archer was a jock? I'd seen his body, his muscles—among other things—so I knew he had to work out. For whatever reason, knowing that Archer was possibly a jock made me conflicted. It made me wonder if what we did was just a joke. Him trying to get with the new girl, the new girl spreading her legs like an eager beaver, him getting what he wanted and being done with me instantly.

I...I didn't like the thought of that.

"Hey," I whispered. The rest of the class was busy talking, as they usually did before the announcements, so I was reasonably sure they wouldn't hear our conversation.

Archer turned those gorgeous baby blues on me, his expression unreadable. Either he was trying to give me the cold shoulder, or he was a hot and cold kind of guy. I wasn't sure which one ticked me off more.

But enough about that.

“Let's say I need to make some quick cash,” I said once I had his full attention. “How do I do that around here without throwing my morals out of the window?” Yeah, I was sure there was one way I could make a lot of money...but selling myself for cash just felt dirty. Not against anyone who did the same for a living, but that wasn't me.

Neither was hooking up with someone I'd just met, but Archer proved me wrong on that.

God, I didn't know whether I liked this boy or hated him.

“Don't you live with Oliver Fitzpatrick?” Archer asked, frowning slightly. I'd like to say his handsome face didn't look so good while frowning, but that would've been a lie. Archer looked good no matter what expression he wore—a frown, a dimpled grin, his orgasm face...yeah, especially that last one. “I'm sure you could ask your sugar daddy for some money.” His voice actually sounded bitter, as if he was upset at the thought of me and Ollie.

Which, just, no. Nope. No fucking way.

Come on. *Sugar daddy?*

I instantly started to fume. This had to be Brittany's doing. This whole school probably knew I lived in the Fitzpatrick's house, and they either knew my mom was his maid or thought that I was banging him. Gross. He was like fifty years old—that's a tad too old for me.

“He's not my sugar daddy,” I muttered, wondering if that was why Archer was so upset. Had Brittany started rumors about me last week? Had Archer stumbled upon them and, worse, believed them?

Oh, that bitch. It wasn't like me to want to get into catfights, but Brittany was making it hard.

“Then what is he?” Archer asked, eyebrows furrowing. Personally, I couldn't tell if the boy was literally jealous or if he was just grasping at straws, any reason to be upset with me, to push me away after what happened between us.

“He's...he's—” I stumbled over my words, not exactly wanting to admit that my mom was his maid, his cook, his housekeeper—that he was the only reason we had a roof over our heads in such a nice town. Mom and I never could've afforded an apartment in Midpark, let alone a big, fancy house.

Archer's frown deepened into a scowl, and he turned his head away. "That's what I thought." It was all he said to me, all he would say, apparently.

I settled into my seat, trying to hide my own frown. Knowing Archer was upset with me, knowing he thought I was with Oliver Fitzpatrick—as in banging that fifty-year-old dude—made me annoyed. First off, the only one I'd banged in Midpark was him. Archer, not Ollie. Secondly, we weren't together, so technically it wasn't any of his business who I was banging or not. Thirdly...thirdly, I just wanted things to go back to normal with Archer and I. His grins, his sarcasm, his laugh.

Was it stupid to miss his laughter?

Probably. The whole thing was stupid, because a girl like me could never get a guy like Archer. I'd been stupid to give into passion before, utterly naive to think that nothing would change between us afterward. This was what I got, what I deserved for being so foolish.

Ugh.

It just sucked, because I...in spite of it all, in spite of how annoying he was currently being, I liked him.

I liked Archer Vega a lot.

Chapter Fourteen – Jaz

Choir was...actually not bad today. We got to use the period as a study hall because the teacher had to go pick up her kid from the elementary—he got sick or something—and she was dropping her kid off at home and then coming back in. I wondered if all teachers got away with shit like that, or if it was just the choir teacher, because she kind of had her own hall in the back of the school, along with her own set of backdoors.

Bobbi sat next to me, working on what looked like math homework. She suggested we work on helping me and my lack of skill in reading sheet music, but right now it was hard for my mind to focus on anything other than the current obstacle in my life: money.

I needed money. Where the hell was I going to get it from? Now would be a really good time to magically come across a filthy rich friend or something.

I had a little over two days to get a grand. People around here probably shit out money like that, but for me, that was a lot. It was a lot, and I had no idea what to do.

My face must've looked perplexed, for Bobbi set down her pencil and asked, "Is something wrong? You don't look so good."

"I'm fine," I said, albeit a bit too quickly. "I just...there's a lot going on. I don't know if I'll be able to meet this week after school."

Bobbi nodded, her highlighted auburn locks falling into her face, which she quickly tucked behind her ears. "What about this weekend? I could come over your house, or you could come over mine—"

Frankly, either one of those sounded miserable, but there was no way I'd tell her that.

"I'll look at the sheet music when I can," I promised. If all else failed, I'd just mouth along the words during our concerts...and fail the 'tests' Ms. Haber gave us randomly. She pulled three students from the general class, took them into her office, and made them sing a verse of whatever we were learning. If she didn't hear you singing, then you automatically got a zero.

Ugh. I knew I should've just quit choir. More stress was the last thing I needed, and an F on my report card wasn't a good thing. Mom would kill me.

“As long as you know your part by the concert, you’ll be fine,” Bobbi said, sounding sure of herself. “We still have three and a half weeks until then. That’s plenty of time. Maybe we can meet a few days next week.” Thankfully she didn’t push the whole meeting over the weekend thing, which was good, because neither one felt like an option. Not this weekend.

Not ever, really.

“Yeah,” I told her. “I’m sorry. This week just isn’t good for me.” That wasn’t exactly a lie.

Bobbi still stared at me, her hazel eyes practically peering into my soul, as if she could see that I was hiding something from her. “You know what else happens in February?”

Oh, God. Was there something else I had to prepare for, too? What more could there possibly be?

My face must’ve given my thoughts away, because Bobbi laughed. “It’s nothing bad. It’s not another concert or anything.” Her lips were curled in a smile. “The winter formal.”

Ah, a dance. Lovely. That was not something I would look forward to. In fact, that was something that Jazmine Smith would steer clear from until her dying breath. No dances for me. No disappointments for me, because surely there would be some. It wasn’t like any guy would ask me, and I sure as hell would never ask someone. I might be bold, but I was not *that* bold. I mean, look how Archer turned out. We’d fucked, and now he thought I was sleeping with Ollie, too.

Yeah, no thanks.

“Do you go to those things?” I asked, leaning back in my chair. The hard metal dug into my back, but I didn’t care. These chairs were not comfortable no matter how you sat in them; the pains of being a folding chair in a room that constantly needed to be moved around.

“Those things?” Bobbi echoed, still smiling. “Yeah, I do. You saw that picture of me at homecoming with Brittany and her crew.” She shook her head, muttering, “They went around and took pictures with everyone. Out of literally everyone in the whole school, my look was voted to be the ugliest. Can you believe it?” She chuckled, although it was a dry sound.

Right. Totally forgot that. My bad.

“Everyone goes to the dances,” she finished, shrugging, done talking about Brittany.

“Surely not everyone,” I mused. Wondered if Vaughn went to the dances, if he asked anyone. He did look ridiculously handsome in a suit, even with those hand tattoos...wouldn’t mind those hands holding me close, but that was a daydream to be locked away and never thought of again.

You’d think I would’ve learned my lesson after Archer and his one-eighty, but nope. I didn’t.

“Pretty much everyone,” she said, shrugging. “The best part is dressing up and making fun of everyone else’s dance moves.”

“Have you got a date yet?”

“No, I usually go stag. It’s more fun that way.”

I wasn’t sure how a dance could be more fun if you went to it alone, but maybe she was right. I’d never been to a dance before, mostly because I didn’t see the point. Mom and her no-dating rule. Of course, her rule didn’t stop me from hooking up and dating occasionally, but it always fizzled out at the end.

Things with me never lasted, though sometimes I did wonder if I sabotaged them purposefully, not wanting to end up like my mom. A single mother working hard just to make ends meet.

She playfully bumped shoulders with me. “You should come. It’ll be fun.”

I gave her a smile that probably looked as fake as it felt. “I’ll think about it.” Hint: I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t think about it at all. If I could just keep my head down and survive the last six months of senior year, that would be great.

When the bell rang, I all but ran out of the classroom. Bobbi seemed content to keep talking about the winter formal, but my mind was still on this week’s problem: the money. I had to get money, fast. I’d checked online for some local jobs, and there was nothing that would pay well. All part-time jobs that, frankly, would take me forever to save up.

Walking through the halls, I avoided bumping into anyone as I made it to my locker. Since Midpark was so big, some kids were hurrying to their next class, and others, like me, were heading to lunch. I shoved in my books and took out my bagged lunch, not even that hungry. My mind was so focused on the money that the last thing I wanted to do was eat my cheese and crackers.

Yes, I had cheese and crackers every day. It was simple, easy, and Mom could pack it for me while whipping up Ollie's morning coffee.

My feet slowly drew me to the cafeteria, and I shuffled to the table I shared with Vaughn. It wasn't like I could ask him for money. It was possible he'd forgotten my inquisitiveness about him and his brother and their business with Ollie, but maybe not. He knew he didn't tell me everything, and after seeing those ashes in the other study...

Something wasn't right here, and I had to know what it was. I didn't like walking around, being blind.

Vaughn had bought a lunch today, today's meal pizza. Just pizza, as if two pizza slices were enough of a meal. For me it would be, but for him? I'd make a joke about teenage boys eating lots, but Vaughn hardly ever ate everything that was on his trays during lunch.

I sat across from him, slowly unrolling my bag, not saying a single word as I reached for my crackers.

Eyes so dark they were nearly black, Vaughn watched me with bored disinterest. I never could tell what was on his mind, and it unnerved me. He was good at masking his feelings...or maybe he didn't have many feelings to begin with.

Apparently around here, you never knew.

"You seem stressed," Vaughn commented, his tattooed hands picking the pepperoni off his pizza piece by piece, bringing them to his mouth.

"I don't like being kept in the dark," I muttered. Letting out a sigh, I met his dark stare and added, "I feel like everyone is keeping things from me, and it's bothering me."

"I'm sure people had secrets where you came from, too."

"Sure, but not secrets about past wives or shady businesses—" The latter caused Vaughn's expression to change, and I froze, wondering if I'd said too much, lumped him and his family in with Ollie when I shouldn't have.

Whoops. Sometimes I said things without thinking. A bad habit of mine.

Vaughn's look was serious, and he leaned forward on the table, the intensity on his face making my insides coil tightly. "What shady business do you think my family is in, Jaz? Because I can guarantee it has nothing to do with you."

“I just want the truth.” And it’s true—give me the truth about everything, and I’d be fine. I’d sit back and watch my last months as a high school senior pass me by. But hide things from me? Keep things from me? I was liable to bounce off the walls trying to figure out the truth, and I meant the truth about everything and everyone. I didn’t like playing games.

“Sometimes the truth is better off hidden,” Vaughn muttered, frowning slightly. “Sometimes when you find out the truth, you realize you would’ve been better off just leaving it be.” Trying to get me to drop it, probably.

I met his frown with one of my own. “So if I were to hire a private investigator and have him look into your family, what would happen?” Obviously I wasn’t going to get any info from Vaughn. He’d been not-so-forthcoming once he realized he had shit to hide, too.

Could I take anyone in this town at face-value?

“Don’t,” Vaughn warned. “My family doesn’t take kindly to people sticking their nose where it doesn’t belong.”

“Then tell me what you and your brother were talking about with Oliver,” I started.

He shook his head, his black hair swaying slightly. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I just can’t.”

I wanted to get up and walk away, but then I’d have nowhere to go. Vaughn needed to know I was serious, but he held all the cards right now, not me. I wouldn’t hold a single card until I knew the truth.

“If you go digging up graves,” Vaughn spoke quietly, his voice a deadly kind of intense, “you’ll find nothing but skeletons, and you’ll only anger the people who put those skeletons in the ground in the first place.”

Words that were probably wise and rooted in truth, but still I couldn’t let it be. My gut told me something was going on around here, and I had to figure it out. I had to find out the truth, otherwise...otherwise what? What if this was all me trying to prove to my mom that we shouldn’t be here? What if this was me being a rambunctious kid, seeking to prove I was right and my mom was wrong?

I didn’t want to be like that, but I also couldn’t just sit idly by.

“Maybe you’re right,” I started, meeting his eyes. “Maybe it’s a mistake to want the truth, but I can’t stop. I’m going to find out the truth, one way or another, and you can either help me or not. Either way, I don’t care.”

That was...a lie of sorts, because I didn't want the boy across from me on the opposite side. I wanted him on my side, with those hands...

I really needed to stop thinking about those hands.

I grew more frantic as the hours ticked by, as Tuesday turned into Wednesday. Mom was being extra paranoid about me, constantly throwing me worried looks anytime she passed me in the house. She even demanded a freaking hug before I got out of the car that next morning.

I gave it to her, because what the hell else was I supposed to do?

Heading inside the school, I kept my head low. Most everyone usually stood outside in the cool air talking or headed to homeroom early. I planned on doing the latter—at least until I spotted an insanely cute boy standing near my locker. He still wore his coat, his bag slung over his wide shoulder, meaning he hadn't even stopped at his own locker yet. His blonde hair was covered in a hat, and I stopped twenty feet away, wondering just why the hell Archer Vega was by my locker.

Also, how did he know where my locker was? I never told him.

Well, there was nowhere else to go, so I might as well just face the music.

I walked up to him, holding my head high. Archer was well over six feet, a giant, and he had muscles to match. Honestly, I didn't think anyone else could even compare to him. His looks could stop any girl dead in her tracks, and they damn well nearly stopped me—and I knew what he was packing under the hood. He was just as impressive without clothes as he was with them.

"Archer," I spoke, an obviously fake enthusiasm dripping from my voice. "To what pleasure do I owe this little visit?" Oh, dear lord. I wanted to smack myself. No teenager in the history of history had ever sounded as stupid as me.

Archer's blue eyes fell on me, slowly checking me out. To my utter shock, his lips curled into a smile and his dimples appeared. Yes, those fucking dimples could get me anytime, anywhere. Literally knock me off my feet.

Okay, well, maybe not literally, but close.

"I've kind of been an ass," he said, one of his hands resting on his bag's strap.

I would not argue with him there.

“I’m sorry about what I said yesterday. I just...I heard some things and I...” Archer shook his head. “I know it’s no excuse. I shouldn’t have said that.” Referring to Ollie being my sugar daddy. An apology was definitely merited.

I shrugged, even though his comment had hurt me yesterday, I couldn’t blame him too much. If he thought I was with Ollie, he probably thought me hooking up with him was a mistake. Don’t get me wrong, it kind of was, but at the same time, I wouldn’t take it back. It felt hella good at the time. It’d been a long while since I’d lost myself like that.

A very, very long time.

“It’s fine,” I said.

“No, it’s not. I couldn’t stop thinking about it yesterday,” Archer spoke, his blue gaze shaking with emotion. He really did feel awful about it, and I was half expecting him to drop to his knees and beg me for my forgiveness at this rate. “I feel really shitty about it.”

Again, I shrugged, because what else could I do? “It’s really fine. I just...I’ve been worried that you thought what we did—” I had to lower my voice at that, because it wasn’t like I wanted every Joe and Sarah walking by to overhear our conversation. “—meant that I’d be, like, all over you.” The stereotypical girl after sex, or at least that’s what most guys thought.

The truth was girls just wanted to have fun sometimes, too.

“I don’t want things to be weird between us,” I added.

“I don’t want things to be weird, either,” he repeated, nodding along. He reached to his head and tore off his hat, his blonde hair sticking every which way—the cuteness overload making my lower gut warm.

And other places, but let’s not think about those.

“My friend is having a party on Friday,” he said. “Parents will be out of town. I was hoping...” Archer paused, coughing to cover his awkwardness. “I was hoping you’d come with me.”

As...as a date?

For a moment, all I could do was stare up at him and wonder: was this really happening? Was I really getting asked to my first-ever party? I’d seen these things in the movies and television shows, but never had I ever been formally invited to one. Crazy house parties were real things people had? Who knew?

My mom would never let me go. Never.

Still, I was eighteen, so technically I could do whatever the hell I wanted, and if that was going to a party, that meant me going to a party against her wishes. Doing something I wanted to do instead of blindly following her.

Huh. Maybe that party could help get my mind off how badly I failed at acquiring money. I would never work with Jacob Hall, but maybe that was for the best.

Since I was so lost in my head, Archer said, “Think about it, okay? I can pick you up at seven.” He said nothing else, though he did flash me a dimpled grin before leaving, a pep in his step that wasn’t there earlier.

All I could think was: damn. Did that really just happen? Maybe I was fitting in around here more than I thought.

After taking off my coat and shoving it and my bag into my locker, I grabbed what books I needed and headed to homeroom. I was there before Archer, and I waited for him with bated breath. It wasn’t that I wanted to talk to him...okay, it was exactly like that. I might’ve had a teeny crush on the guy.

Alas, Archer didn’t show up until right before the announcements came on, which meant I couldn’t talk to him, because class started right after that. I did steal a few looks at him, though. And then a few turned into a lot, and a lot turned into...

Let’s just say I stared at him probably all period.

As the day went on, my mind wavered between thinking about the party and thinking about the money—or lack of, really. Lack of money meant no PI. No Jacob Hall. And after I was so brazen in climbing into his car like that. I’d made a fool of myself pointlessly, told him I wasn’t a kid uselessly.

Hell, even kids in Midpark could get their hands on a thousand big ones, I bet.

When I saw Bobbi in choir, before class officially started and we had to do our warm-ups for our vocal cords, I stood beside her and tugged on her sleeve. It was a friendly gesture I couldn’t take back, but I needed to talk about it.

Not about the money, but about the party.

“I was invited to a party this weekend,” I said, causing Bobbi’s eyes to blink in shock. “I know, it’s crazy, right? I probably shouldn’t go.” What I wanted was for her to tell me that I should stay home, where I was safe and

sound, and be miserable because I failed at hiring Jacob. Granted, she didn't know about Jacob, but still.

"A party?" Bobbi echoed, her lips slowly smiling. "As long as the invitation wasn't from Brittany." Brittany had, somehow, become the butt of most of our jokes. "Why don't you want to go?"

"I never said that."

"Well, it kind of seems like you don't want to."

Other kids filed into the room, setting down their stuff in the corner. "That's not it."

Bobbi lifted her dark brows. "So you *do* want to go?"

"That's...also not it."

The girl who was probably the closest thing to a friend I'd make in this place laughed. "So you don't want to go, but at the same time you do? I think I get it." She still grinned. "Was it a boy who invited you?" The look on my face must've given it away, because she immediately said, "It was! Who?"

"Shh," I shushed her, not wanting everyone to know my business. I opened my mouth to tell her who it was, but the bell rang, and Ms. Haber walked out of her office, coffee in hand. Anytime she was, well, on time, you knew you were in for fifty minutes of straight singing.

I was getting the hang of it—I still thought my voice sounded like shit, but I knew how to warm up my voice, at least. Bit by bit I'd learn. Still couldn't read sheet music that well, though. I mostly had to go off how the girls beside me sounded to catch the tune and the notes.

By the time the bell rang again and I picked up my stuff, I went to Bobbi to tell her about Archer, but she shook me off, saying, "I have to stay here and talk to Ms. Haber. You go. I'll talk to you tomorrow." She gave me a grin before disappearing in Ms. Haber's office.

It was probably for the best. If I started gossiping about Archer, things would only escalate.

With a sigh, I exited the choir room and entered the hall. My feet drew me through the crowded halls, my boots clicking on the clean tile below. The boots were pleather, and they were years old, well-worn in places. I loved them all the same, though.

I made it to my locker, my mind lost in everything that was going on. My fingers twirled the lock and found the numbers to the combination, and I opened it—immediately I was hit in the face with something that sat on

the top shelf of the locker. It wasn't hard, and it wasn't big, but it came out of nowhere. After it slapped against my face, it slid to the floor, and it took me a few moments to realize what it was.

Money.

A stack of bills with a small white paper wrapped around their middle to keep them together.

Shit.

I bent over and picked it up, cradling it to my chest between my books, tossing a quick look around to make sure no one else had seen it. My mouth fell open when I touched the corner of the bills—one hundred dollar bills, to be exact—and flipped through their corners.

There were at least ten bills here, probably more.

What the hell...

Another glance over both shoulders, and I couldn't see anyone looking at me, watching. No one creeping around to make their presence known. Someone had stuffed this money into my locker, but why? And who?

I should probably take it to the office, but the selfish part of me won out, so I stuffed it in my backpack, in one of the front zippers, before grabbing my lunch and closing my locker.

That money could pay for Jacob.

I hurried to lunch at an almost ridiculous pace, my feet nearly tripping over each other as I went. For the first time ever, I made it to the lunch table before Vaughn. Seemed odd for him to take his good old time coming, unless the line in the kitchen was long—I threw a quick glance at the kitchen in the back—and it wasn't.

Minutes passed, and I slowly began to eat, feeling weird sitting by myself. As it turned out, I needn't have worried so much, because Vaughn showed up ten minutes later, sliding into the chair across from mine.

I stared at him for a long while. He had no food, so he hadn't gone to the kitchen. He wore a thin black sweater, its sleeves long and covering up most of his arms. My eyes fell to his tattooed hands, at the words scrawled across his knuckles and the black tribal design on the rest of them. Did those hands shove money in my locker?

No. No way. He knew I suspected his family of something, so I highly doubted he'd ever fork over cash for me.

I decided to be straightforward, asking, "Where were you?"

A slow, careful smile spread on his lips. “Nowhere,” he said, obviously lying, because unless he fazed in and out of reality, he had to be somewhere at all times. Checkmate, bitch. Try again. “I came in late. Had some family business to take care of.”

I nearly choked on the cracker I was currently chewing on.

Vaughn smirked. “Kidding. I overslept. It happens.” He leaned forward, lowering his voice to a deadly low decibel, “Wouldn’t want you thinking I was into any shady business.”

Was he...was he *mocking* me?

I swallowed the cracker in my mouth, needing to take a sip of water. Mom packed me those tiny water bottles, the ones that were less than half the size of the normal ones—I had to drink nearly all of it before I was able to say, “I never accused you or your family of anything.”

His smirk was gone; he simply cocked a single eyebrow at me now.

“All I’m saying is that something felt off, and the more you get offended, the more I think I’m right.” I had no idea what kind of business his family could be in, but there were lots of illegal things rich people did—they just had the money and power to cover their crimes up.

“I’m not offended,” Vaughn spoke. “I just wish you’d let things be.”

“Says the guy who told me to hire a PI.”

His gaze narrowed. Those dark eyes looked sinister, downright evil when he wore an expression like that. “You really want to know what my family does?”

I could not nod fast enough.

Vaughn’s gaze dropped to my chin, slow to rise to meet my stare. His head gestured back, and he got up. He...wanted me to follow him? He must, because he said nothing else as he walked away, zigzagging through the crowded lunchroom.

My eyes darted around, wondering if it would look weird for me to get up and go after him. Oh, hell. What other choice did I have? I had to know. I had to. I was dying to know the secrets Midpark held, and knowing what Vaughn’s family did would knock at least one secret off my roster.

Deciding why not, I got up and walked in the same direction.

The halls were empty because everyone was either in class or at lunch, and I watched as Vaughn disappeared in what looked like a unisex restroom. I threw a look over my shoulder to make sure no one would see

me disappear the same place he had, but no one was around. It was safe enough to go into a bathroom with a handsome boy with knuckle tattoos.

Yeah. Safe enough.

He might radiate danger, but my curiosity drowned out my danger radar.

The moment I walked into the bathroom, I spotted a sterile room, white walls, white floor tiles, a clean porcelain toilet. I took a few steps in, for a stupid moment wondering if my eyes had deceived me and Vaughn didn't enter this unisex restroom—but then I heard him.

He was behind me, near the door, helping to close it...and then his tattooed fingers flicked the lock.

Our eyes met, and I wondered, for the first time, if Vaughn was more dangerous than I thought. The look he gave me right now made my stomach harden and my breathing catch in the back of my throat.

Maybe it wasn't smart to follow him like this, but it was too late to turn back now. Far too late, because the more I looked at him, the warmer my body became. Even though I didn't want to admit it, it was true. Vaughn Scott turned me on.

Damn it.

Chapter Fifteen – Vaughn

I shouldn't have egged her on like that, but I couldn't help it. I wasn't late. I was able to use the excuse of sleeping in because lunch was the only time I saw Jaz. The reason I was so late to lunch was because I was trying, stupidly, to avoid her.

I could not get her off my mind, no matter how hard I tried, couldn't stop myself from thinking about her as I lay in bed at night. Hell, I couldn't even stop myself from dreaming about her—which was just odd to me, because I'd never dreamt of anyone like that before. Being close to anyone, desperately desiring someone else, it just wasn't me. I was born into a family of psychotic, obsessive monsters, but I'd never been like my brothers.

Until her, it seemed.

The moment Jaz walked into my life, everything was thrown off. She sat with me at lunch, didn't flinch away at my glares. She didn't try to get with me out of a thrill, nor did she avoid me because I was an outcast. She was...she was different. So different.

Jaz held her head high, her gaze unblinking as she said, "I don't see why we had to have this conversation here." I stood near the door, having just locked it, and she appeared completely at ease.

Well, mostly. There was a slight twinge to her cheeks that was not there before.

"We didn't," I confessed, seeing no reason to lie to her. She stood less than four feet away from me, and I closed the distance between us with two long strides, studying the way she held her ground. She did not back herself up to the wall as some might've. "I just wanted to get you alone."

Jaz didn't let my confession rattle her. "Why?" The pink color in her cheeks grew, and I recalled the same reaction from her when we'd been in the woman's study in Oliver Fitzpatrick's house. Her house, too, technically.

Why seemed to be the million-dollar question here. Why was she so adamant in finding out everyone's secrets? Why couldn't she just let things be? Why did she affect me like no one else had ever affected me before?

My fingers flexed at my sides; keeping my hands to myself had never been so hard. What was this girl doing to me? Making me crave things I'd never thought twice of before...this wouldn't end well for her, or for me. I wasn't like everyone else here. My family was unlike any other. If she kept digging, she'd see it.

I just wished she'd keep her focus on Oliver, not me. Not my family. Investigate Oliver's past, dig up his skeletons, and leave mine alone. His were ugly, but my family's were worse.

"Why do you think?" I posed the question, cocking my head at her.

Jaz's eyes, more of a light amber than dark, soulless pits like mine, fell to my chest. "I don't know. It's why I asked you first." Her lips drew into a pout, and I wondered, just for a split-second, what they'd feel like brushing against mine.

A kiss. I'd never been interested in kissing anyone before. I never saw the point, but this girl...this girl was bringing things out of me left and right. I felt crazy, like a madman, with how much I thought of her, how badly I wanted to touch her. Was that normal? Did other people feel like this, too?

I took another step towards her, pressing my front against hers. Still, she didn't take a step back, didn't seek to put more space between us. "I think you know," I whispered, meeting her eyes and holding them.

Her face was...stunning. High cheekbones, not a scar or blemish in sight. Full, luscious lips and wide, innocent, alluring eyes. Her black hair was down today, falling in waves over her shoulder, and I had the urge to tangle my hands in its lengths, tug, expose her neck to me and that throbbing artery I knew pumped full of blood—harder now, based on the way her cheeks were pink. Her heart was in overdrive, but that was fine...mine was, too.

My heart beat almost wildly in my chest, beating so loudly I could practically hear it. Simply being near her made my heart go crazy. If this was normal, I could understand why other people would be addicted to the feeling.

"I don't," Jaz muttered. "Your family..." Not another word she could say, because I'd lifted both hands and set them on her waist, just over her shirt. I could feel her warmth seeping through the fabric, and I wondered how warm she'd be skin-on-skin.

“I don’t want to talk about my family,” I whispered, my hands holding onto her more firmly now. Now that I knew she wasn’t going to push me off or run away—like any sane girl would’ve done at a time like this—I felt a bit more confident.

Perhaps I shouldn’t be. This feeling, this inner urge, was as new to me as something could be, and yet I let instincts take over—wasn’t that what my family had always fostered? Our instincts were primal, baser, more animalistic. We were monsters wearing the faces of men and women, and we used it to our advantage. My family would surely be shocked that a girl had somehow claimed my attention.

I wouldn’t be the first to fall prey to a woman. Other men in my family had, and the results were mixed. Sometimes the woman fit well in our family. Sometimes they didn’t. Above all else, though, our family remained. We were huge and we were widespread...my father had many women, and they in turn had many children. Not every man I called a brother was a full-blooded brother, but they were brothers all the same.

Cousin just didn’t have the same ring to it.

But, enough about them. Right now the only thing on my mind was the girl in front of me, the girl whose hips felt ridiculously warm under my touch. The girl who currently gazed into my eyes with a level expression, her lips slightly parted.

“Then what do you want to talk about?” Jaz asked, hardly sounding like herself. Her voice was soft and light, the kind of voice that a breeze could blow away. Her eyelids fluttered as if they fought to instinctively close. Her body leaned against mine, and her hands were slow to grip my arms, her fingers curling around my biceps, keeping herself steady.

“Maybe I don’t want to talk,” I suggested, sounding utterly serious. Sounding like I’d suggested that before, to other girls. I hadn’t. This was completely new territory for me, and I wasn’t sure if I was nervous or not.

My heart didn’t beat in anxiety or nervousness; it beat with anticipation, a hunger that I’d never known until now.

More. It wanted more. It wanted everything Jaz had, everything she was, everything that made her Jaz. My heart beat with a steady throbbing desire to take what I wanted, and right now—and for the foreseeable future—that was her.

“I don’t think we should be in here,” Jaz whispered, angling her head up to mine, a wordless challenge. When she breathed out, I felt her warm

breath on my face, and my heart sped up even more, which I didn't know was possible. "We should probably go back to lunch." A feeble attempt at getting this—whatever it was—to stop.

I feared the time for stopping was in the far distant past, because as I gazed down at her, my body warmed up, and I felt a twinge of longing between my legs. My dick wanted her, too. Every single part of me wanted to make this girl mine, which hardly made sense; I barely knew her.

But maybe that was the thing. You didn't need to know someone that well to want them. You simply did. You wanted what you wanted and you couldn't change it, no matter how hard you tried.

A new feeling for me, definitely.

"You're probably right," I agreed with her as my hands on her sides slid downward, my fingertips grazing her skin just above the waistline of her jeans. Her skin was on fire, searing to the touch. "But..." I trailed off, for there were so many things I could've said right then, so many things I both wanted and did not want to say.

Me, caught between what I wanted and what I knew would happen in six months. This was just a game, just a temporary respite from my future. Whatever strange feelings this girl elicited from me would never last. It couldn't.

Jaz's voice caught on the word, "But?" Begging me to finish, begging me to say more.

I didn't know what to say. This was stupid, and yet I could not fight the pitter-patter of that box in my chest, my heart that had never beaten for anyone else before. What was it about her? Why was I drawn in like a moth to the flame? In that analogy, I should be the flame, not her. I was the destructive force of nature, not her. She was beauty incarnate, not death. She wasn't like me.

She'd never be like me.

That thought alone almost made me push her away—both figuratively and literally. The fact that she would never be like me meant we couldn't last, but wasn't that the thing about life? Nothing lasted. Nothing was forever. Eternal was merely a word in the dictionary people used occasionally, not truly knowing its full definition. Nothing, not even love, was eternal.

I said nothing, because I had no idea how to voice the feelings inside of me, how to tell Jaz without sounding too over-the-top about how frantic my

thoughts were. The only thing I could do was hold her body close to mine, lose myself in the way she stared at me, how her hands gripped my biceps, and drown myself in everything she was.

We wouldn't talk about my family. We wouldn't talk about Oliver Fitzpatrick or her fears of Midpark. We wouldn't talk about anything.

I took a step forward, my hands gripping her bare sides under her shirt, forcing her to step back. I stopped us only when I had her against the wall, and I brought my hands to her neck, holding onto her perhaps a bit too roughly.

She was strong. She could take it.

She had to.

My hands moved up to cup her jaw, my thumbs lightly running over the edge of her mouth, her lips softer than I ever could've imagined. I pressed my hips against hers, the heat inside my lower gut only growing when she let out a shaky breath.

I really shouldn't want to kiss her, but I did. I did, more than anything.

I was slow to lower my head to hers, leaning my forehead against hers. Our noses brushed, both our breaths catching the moment our lips came together.

Hmm. I wasn't sure what a kiss should be like, mostly because I didn't have much to compare it to, but...with her, I was pretty sure I liked it.

Her mouth molded against mine, the softness of her lips drowning out my racing heart. She let out a soft moan into my throat, and I peered at her through slit eyes, afraid that if I closed them, things wouldn't be the same.

Her eyes, I noticed, were shut. Jaz was giving her all to the kiss, her all to me. It was an invigorating rush, having her give in and give up to the feelings she surely had. Having her body pinned between mine and the wall gave my body ideas it never had before.

I wanted her. I wanted her more than anything. I craved this girl like an addict, and I had no idea why. Hell, even if I could've stopped myself from feeling the way I did, I wasn't sure I would want to. The high I rode right now wasn't like any other feeling I'd ever had, her warmth flooding me like no other sensation.

Feeling her lips against mine, the slow kiss steadily giving way to something harder, rougher, hungrier, I knew it would be hard to give this one up. And, as foolish as it made me, a part of me didn't want to. I wanted

to keep her. Lock her away from the world, shield her from the rest of the liars and the beasts, and have her all to myself. Was that wrong?

By the time our lips parted, we were both panting for breath. My body was hard in places it shouldn't be, and I knew she had to feel it; my hips dug against her, the main force pinning her back. Jaz had to know how wild she drove me.

Why couldn't she let it go? Forget about my family. We could spend the rest of the year doing just this—losing ourselves in each other, giving in to instinct and passion. Never thought I'd be one to think something like that, but life had a way of throwing curveballs. Jaz was the curviest of curveballs there ever was.

We must've spent more time than I thought lost in each other, because before Jaz or I could even speak, the bells in the hall rang, signaling the end of lunch.

Her tanned cheeks were more flushed than they were before, her breathing still ragged. Once she heard the bell, she came to her senses and pushed me off her. I could've stopped her, could've held her back, but I let her go, knowing she had thinking to do. I had to do the same.

That one...I had the feeling I'd never truly get her out of my head.

I watched as Jaz unlocked the door, threw a look over her shoulder, and slipped out. She said not a word to me, but that was fine, because I wasn't quite sure I could have a conversation right now, not with my body still heated up, not with my heart beating a mile a minute in my chest, as if it threatened to escape. Not while I had a hard dick pressing against the fabric of my jeans.

Somehow, someway, things had grown immensely more complicated the moment Jazmine Smith walked through these halls. Midpark, I knew, would never be the same.

Chapter Sixteen – Jaz

Later that night, I pretty much locked myself in my room. My mind was aflutter, my thoughts racing like the best Olympic sprinter. I couldn't get them under control, couldn't force them to simmer down and shut the fuck up.

I kissed Vaughn.

Or, technically, Vaughn cornered me in the bathroom and kissed me first, thereby making me kiss him back.

I still didn't know how it happened. I would never have pegged him for the type of guy who'd corner any girl in a bathroom and pin her against the wall. Not that I was complaining, because if I was honest, his lips tasted sweeter than honey and better than I'd expected—not that I thought about his lips a lot before that moment. I didn't.

Did I?

Oh, God. It was almost impossibly hard to keep myself under control here. Who knew Midpark would come with an overabundance of guys who just wanted me? Not that I was patting myself on the back or anything, but still. Archer was done with his self-imposed pity party of jealousy, and Vaughn wanted me. It was crazy.

And then, as I sat on the floor in front of my bed, I wondered if Vaughn really wanted me, or if he just wanted to get my mind off his family. There were worse distraction methods out there, frankly, but if that was the case, I'd be pissed. I was not above hitting Vaughn where it hurt.

I shook my head, not wanting to think about either of them, instead turning my thoughts to Jacob Hall, the PI I was going to hire, assuming the money I stuffed in my backpack earlier was still here.

After unzipping the front compartment, I found that it was. I'd locked my door, so it wasn't like Mom could waltz in at any moment and see me handling a huge wad of cash, but for whatever reason, I was still unsettled as I tore off the white paper wrapped around the stack and started to count.

There was...

There was more than a thousand here.

Quite a lot more than a thousand.

I stared at the money, wondering just who the hell had slipped it to me. Surely it wasn't Archer, and no way it could've been Vaughn, not with how I basically confessed that I wanted his family investigated.

The truth was I probably shouldn't use it. Whoever had put it in my locker somehow knew I'd needed the cash, and I bet it didn't come free. Whoever it was would demand a price when I least expected it, so really I should...what? Turn the money in? Then I wouldn't be able to hire Jacob Hall, nor would I be able to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that my mom and I were safe here.

Or if we weren't, because the more strange shit happened around here, the more I wondered if safety was nothing but a luxury in Midpark.

How would I even convince my mom to leave Midpark if it turned out we weren't safe under this roof? I had no idea, but that would be a problem for future Jaz, not current life Jaz. Right now, I needed to send an email to Jacob and tell him that I would see him tomorrow.

Once that was done, I counted out ten of the hundred dollar bills, stuffing the rest under my mattress. I'd have to move it eventually; didn't want Mom finding it when she washed the sheets. For now, it'd work just fine.

I showered and then tried to sleep. Sleep took a while to come, but once it did, I was out like a light, and the next thing I knew, my alarm was going off, its sound grating on my ears. I had to roll over to turn it off, and once I did, I buried my face in my pillow.

Somehow, I knew today was going to be a long day.

Mom made pancakes for breakfast while simultaneously making Ollie his morning coffee. Ollie actually made his presence known in the morning, and I was finishing up my last bite of pancake as I said, "I've been meaning to ask, how was your fundraiser last weekend?"

Both Ollie and my mom paused to look at me, though they wore different looks. My mom looked annoyed, while Ollie just looked shocked. While it was true I didn't like talking in the mornings, it was also true that Ollie was into something shady. Shady shit tended to get people in trouble, and I didn't want my mom caught up in it just because she worked for him.

The things you did for the people you loved.

"It was good." Ollie gave me a smile, but I sensed something hidden behind it. A fakeness someone wouldn't see unless they paid attention, unless they were looking for it. Along with that fakeness came something

else, though. A sadness? He did seem rather glum most of the time, though I assumed that was because, again, he was into some shady things.

He said nothing else, leaving the house after grabbing his coffee and his briefcase. Both Mom and I watched him go, and it was only when we heard him leave the house through the side door that led to the garage, where he parked his car—one among many—that my mom turned to look at me.

“You’re oddly chatty this morning,” she commented.

I just shrugged, not wanting to talk about it.

My golden silence lasted until I reached homeroom, where Archer sat, waiting for me with a grin on his face. Those dimples could seriously kill you if you weren’t careful and didn’t take the right precautions. What were those precautions? I’d have to let you know once I figured out what they were.

He wore a slimming dark blue shirt, although on him the fabric hugged his muscles and made his biceps appear even thicker. His blonde hair was combed to the side, styled with just the barest hints of gel. The way his blue eyes watched me enter the room, following me as I went to my seat beside him, made my stomach harden in memory of what else his body could do to mine.

Hooking up with him so fast had probably been a mistake, but it’d been fun. I wouldn’t mind doing it again.

Not that I wanted to, you know, date him.

Not that I would be opposed to it, either—but of course if I dated him, I’d have to figure out whatever mixed feelings I had about Vaughn, first. I couldn’t go out with Archer while secretly pining for Vaughn. That just wasn’t right.

“Hey,” he said, grinning as I sat down.

“Hi,” I responded. Morning time was not my best conversational time, but I’d make an exception when it came to Archer. I’d always make an exception for him. He was too cute to resist, really. And those muscles...oh, his muscles went on for days. They’d lead any girl astray, even a girl on a mission, like me.

I should be thinking about my meeting with Jacob later, but instead I was meeting Archer’s grin with a grin of my own. I probably looked like an idiot, but oh, well.

He leaned over his desk, asking, "Have you thought about the party tomorrow? I'm not saying I won't go alone, but...I really want you to come." Even though the dimples still sat on his cheeks, his eyes held a seriousness, almost pleading with me to go to this party with him.

I hadn't spoken to my mom about it, but I knew she wouldn't want me to go. "I still have to ask my mom," I said, mentally wincing when I realized how stupid I sounded. I was eighteen years old; I shouldn't have to ask. Yes, I still lived under her roof...

Wait a moment. No, I didn't. I lived under Ollie's roof, so technically my mom couldn't use that card against me.

"Here." Archer said nothing for a while as he flipped to a blank page in his notebook, scribbling something down before tearing it out and handing it to me. On the page, all that was written was a ten-digit number...his number. "Text me. Maybe I can think up some pointers." He grinned. "Parents always love me."

My heart thudded in my chest, and I hurriedly folded the paper and shoved it under the cover of my textbook, as if not wanting anyone to see what he'd given me. We were in the back of the class, so it wasn't like anyone was staring, and the announcements hadn't started yet, so everyone else was caught up in their own conversations, too.

"Why does that not surprise me?" I asked, unable to keep a straight face. He made me feel giddy. Vaughn...Vaughn made me confused, conflicted. Or maybe that was just because I knew his family had to be in some shady business.

"I'm a lovable fool," Archer mused, reclining in his seat as if it were a couch or something more comfortable than a hard chair attached to a desk top.

"The jury's still out on that."

"Are you saying I'm not a fool?"

I shrugged. "I'm saying I don't know what you are yet."

His dimpled smile was slow to fade, and he sounded utterly serious when he said, "I hope to prove myself to you, then. Show you how much of a fool I can be." For whatever reason, his words caused my heart to skip a beat. Or two.

Tapping the side of my desk with my fingertips, I decided to ask, "You didn't put anything in my locker, did you?"

Archer looked almost alarmed at that, caught totally off-guard. He blinked, asking, “What? No. What was in your locker?”

He genuinely seemed curious, not wearing the face a man caught would wear, so it wasn’t like I could tell him the truth. *Oh, you know, a few grand. Nothing huge.* Yeah, I was going to keep it to myself for now.

“Nothing,” I shrugged it off, wishing I could tell him to forget I asked. If it wasn’t Archer, who was it? It wasn’t like I spoke of me needing money to anyone else, and I hardly had any friends here, let alone acquaintances. My mystery donor would have to remain a mystery for now.

The day passed slowly, and I diligently went to class, pretending everything was alright. Not a care in the world. Just a normal student at Midpark—hah. As if I’d ever blend in with this crowd. It was true that they all wore the latest fashion, the newest stuff. My clothes were sometimes holey, sometimes ratty-looking, and most were a few years old. I got my period when I was eight, so I was an early bloomer. Had to start wearing a cupped bra in sixth grade, not to mention having to learn early that deodorant was a necessary evil.

Yeah, having just graduated fourth grade, getting a period was the last thing on my mind—since, you know, we hadn’t even covered it in health class yet.

Ugh. Being a girl sucked, really.

Bobbi wasn’t there in choir, which kind of stunk, because I hadn’t really spoken to anyone else in the class. I kept to myself, tried my best to sing along with the warm-ups and the songs we were learning for the next concert. The hour ticked by slowly.

The whole day moved ungodly slow, actually. Every minute felt like an hour, no joke.

Once the bell rang and it was lunchtime, I practically ran from the choir room. The day was a bit more than half over when lunch started, which meant I was that much closer to seeing Jacob.

Maybe I should’ve tried to look tougher today. Maybe I should’ve done my makeup and looked good. If I was going to hire him, I didn’t want him thinking I was just some run of the mill kid. I wasn’t a child—and even if I was, sometimes kids were forced to grow up fast. Being with my mom for so long, just the two of us, I never felt like a normal kid. Not really. I always felt...out of place, no matter where I was.

I wanted to be normal, but...maybe it was the fact that I didn't know who my father was, but I had the feeling normal just wasn't in my blood.

Chapter Seventeen – Jacob

This was a bad idea. It was a bad idea for many reasons, but as I sat in my car in front of the diner, waiting for her to show up, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was very, very wrong. My vehicle was off, and the air inside grew chillier with each passing minute. I should really go inside and order a coffee, wait for her to arrive, but I couldn't.

I couldn't stop staring at the file on my lap.

Oh, I'd been contacted yesterday for another job, but this job was unlike any other job I'd ever had before. This job wasn't a simple one, like most were around here. This wasn't about catching someone cheating or even committing fraud. This was...I should've said no. I should've declined the job, but they were able to wire money straight to me. Enough to cover my rent for the next six months. The worst part? They said more money would be in it for me if I actually did the job. The money they'd sent me was an incentive, a booking fee.

My eyes studied the picture sitting on top of the file. A pretty face all bundled up as she exited Midpark High.

Her name wasn't Marie; it was Jazmine Smith, and the one who wired all that money to me wanted me to keep an eye on her. Follow her. Figure her out. Where she came from, who she was, why she was here.

Almost like...almost as if they suspected her of something.

I knew I couldn't put anything past a pretty face, and it was from past experience that I knew even a high schooler could get into a lot of shit.

What the fuck was Jazmine into? Why was someone paying me so much money to investigate her, basically stalk her? Now I had no choice but to work with her. She said she'd acquired the money I'd asked of her, so now I had to do the one thing I didn't want to do—be around a young, pretty face.

The rumors would surely start flying, but I didn't work for the police department anymore, so it wasn't like I could get fired. If I kept up this job, maybe I could save up enough to leave Midpark. I didn't want to leave, but it might be my only option at this point. Midpark clearly did not coincide with my mental health.

It was hard to stay sane in this place.

I leaned an elbow near the window, gazing down at the photograph. Jazmine Smith, not Marie. She was young, so I guessed I could understand why she'd given me a fake name to begin with. She didn't know what she was doing, and frankly I had no idea why the hell she wanted to hire me to begin with. This way, though, I'd be getting paid twice, double-timing the clock. I'd work for her while simultaneously working for Mr. Anonymous.

Yep. Mr. Anonymous. That's who contacted me. I had an email, and that's it. I tried to search for the email, to see a name attached to it, but there was nothing. Absolutely nothing.

The photo of Jazmine had been taken from the parking lot of the school during the afternoon pickup. Since Midpark didn't do buses for its high school, it could literally be anyone. A student, a parent, someone just using the pick-up time to his or her advantage and blending in.

I found it ironic that Mr. Anonymous wanted me to stay close to Jazmine, and Jazmine had already found me of her own accord. Made my job of tracking her down easier, but still.

Fuck. I didn't want to do this. I didn't want to be around that girl more than I had to. Seeing her young, pretty face just brought back memories I'd rather not remember. Everything that happened years ago...it still riled me up. I never should've let them go. I never should've let Celeste's horrible past get to me. I should've natted the fuck up and did what I had to, which was bring them in, make those fucking brothers confess that they framed me.

I wasn't labeled as an official sex offender, but I bet that was only because the department let me go. If I put up a fight, I bet things would've gone down differently. I'd lost everything that day—my future, my career—and all because I just so happened to be put on Celeste's case.

Heaving a sigh, I closed the folder on my lap and shoved it in the backseat. With my keys in my pocket, I got out of my car and locked it, holding my hands in my coat pockets to keep them warm as I entered the diner and sat in the same seat I'd taken up earlier this week.

I ordered a coffee from the waitress and waited, keeping an eye on the parking lot through the windows. I checked the time on my phone, hating every single thing about this day. Why I was here, what I was doing, what I'd be doing for the foreseeable future...

It fucking sucked.

She showed up ten minutes later, all bundled up. She went to unzip her jacket as she turned and headed in my direction. Jazmine shoved her backpack onto the booth before she slid on, knocking her legs with mine under the table, immediately causing me to pull mine back and scowl.

No fucking touching.

“Sorry,” she said, noting my scowl. Her long black hair hung over her chest, catching on the open zipper as she turned toward her bag and unzipped it. “I have your money.” She said it loudly, and I glanced around the diner; it was pretty empty, so it wasn’t like the whole town had heard her declare it, but still. This girl had not an ounce of common sense in her head, clearly.

She handed me flat bills after taking them out of her backpack, and I quickly counted them on my lap before shoving them into my coat’s inner pocket. Well, seemed mommy and daddy did come through, or maybe she’d had the thousand stashed away, pocket change for later.

“Um,” she started, biting her bottom lip. I shouldn’t have let my attention fall to those lips, but it did. Her teeth were perfectly straight and almost ridiculously white, or maybe that was because her lips were rosy and her skin was tan. “Before we start, you should probably know that my name isn’t Marie. It’s Jaz.”

Jaz. So she went by Jaz. Somehow, that wasn’t surprising.

I tried to act surprised that Marie was not her real name, cocking my head after taking a long sip of coffee. “Why’d you give me a fake name, Jaz?”

Her amber eyes fell to her lap, and she shifted her weight in the seat. She must’ve crossed her legs, because again, she touched me under the table—this time with her foot. God, if I could get away from this girl, keep her at a ten-foot distance...hell, even ten feet might not be enough. I angled my legs away from her, tilting my whole body so I pretty much faced the window.

“I don’t know,” she finally said, meeting my eyes. “It seemed like a good idea at the time. I didn’t know who you’d be.”

I gave her a tight-lipped smile. “Anything else you want to tell me, Jaz? Before we continue, that is. Anything you’re hiding from me that I should know going into this?” After taking another sip of coffee, I waited.

She shook her head, parting her lips to say, “No, I didn’t hide anything else.”

At this point, I didn't know if I believed her, but I had to remember to be calm. To be charming—as charming as I could be, given my past with girls like her. If I was supposed to look into her, I had to act friendlier toward her.

These were the days when I hated my job.

“Let's discuss why you're hiring me, then,” I said, running a finger around the rim of the mug. The coffee here wasn't the best, but it would do. It did just fine.

“My mom and I are new in town,” she said, holding her arms together. “I just...I just want to make sure we're safe here.” As she spoke, she hardly seemed like the bold, defiant girl who'd literally crawled over me in my car.

And whacked me with that bag and the textbooks inside.

I studied her. She was uneasy before me, but whether she felt so because she was with a stranger or because of what she was asking me to do, I couldn't say. I understood what she wasn't saying, though—if she wanted to make sure her mom were safe, it meant she didn't think she was safe.

Knowing someone out there wanted me to keep an eye on her, investigate her, I couldn't help but agree with her.

My job, however, wasn't about keeping people safe. It was about finding the truth, no matter how deeply that truth was hidden.

“And what can I do to help you?” I questioned, staring at her perhaps a bit too hard. Jaz seemed to squirm under my gaze; maybe I was overdoing the gruff, no-nonsense act a bit. It was hard not to though, when she kept accidentally touching me.

“I want you to look into some people,” she said. The tip of her nose was red from the walk in the cold, and the waitress came by to ask if she wanted anything. Jaz waved her off, shaking her head. She'd rather have a cold nose than order a hot chocolate or something. “Oliver Fitzpatrick and the Scott family.”

I was in the process of taking another sip from my coffee when she told me the names, and I nearly choked.

Why in the fucking fuck would she have me look into Oliver Fitzpatrick? I found it almost ironic, given my history with the man and his family.

And the Scotts? They were...well, from what I heard they weren't the type of family you looked into. You steered clear of them, avoided them,

unless you had to—and this girl was basically tossing me to the wolves.

It wasn't like I could say no. She'd already paid me a deposit, and I had to keep an eye on her anyway. Getting on her bad side would only make things harder, so I had to do my best.

I didn't want to do anything with her, but that was off the table completely. The money was too good.

"Do you—"

"I know who they are," I said. What this girl did not need to know was my history with them. It was a long story anyway; I was sure she had homework or something to do. I started to get up, to reach for my wallet to pay for the coffee, but she stretched her arm across the table and grabbed my hand first.

"Wait," she said, fingers tightening around my hand. "That's it?" Jaz did not release my hand, even when I sent her a dark glare.

This girl...working with her was going to be hard, if she kept insisting on touching me at every single turn.

I yanked my hand out from under hers, tossing a look around the diner. The waitress was talking to the lone customer sitting near the register on a stool, and the cook was whistling in the back.

"If we're going to work together, I need you to..." I trailed off, wondering how I should say it without sounding weird. Meeting her eyes, she almost looked hurt, wounded that I'd tear my hand away from hers like that.

Big, wide eyes like hers, warm as chocolate, could get you into trouble. I had to be careful with her.

"To what?" Jaz asked, leaning forward, pushing her chest against the side of the table.

I looked away quickly, chastising myself for even glancing there. "Just...check your email, I'll be in touch." Before she could say anything else, before she could stare at me with those honey-colored eyes, I threw down a five on the table and got up, hurrying to my car.

Once I was safely inside, once I had the engine started and heating up, I glanced up. Through the diner's windows, I could see Jaz still sitting at our booth. I waited until she got up, pretending to be busy in my car as she exited the diner and started walking.

And then, suddenly, it occurred to me, something that should've occurred to me before—she was *walking*. She wasn't driving. Did she not

have a car? And then, my stupid self, realized something else.

Her clothes.

She didn't seem like the typical Midpark brat.

I waited until she crossed the street to get out of my car, buttoning my jacket as I decided to follow her. A split-second decision, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. I didn't know any eighteen-year-olds who'd voluntarily walk in Midpark. Like, anywhere. Not even to the base of their driveway.

I kept my distance, turning up my collar. Jaz kept glancing to her phone, as if needing to follow it for directions—which I also found odd. When she'd said her mom and her were new in town, she'd meant it. Shiny and new, oblivious to the way things worked around here.

Deeper into the heart of Midpark we went, where the streets had dividers between lanes and houses had gates and fences around them. It was quite the jaunt—at least a mile or two. I stayed one hundred feet behind her, keeping my head low just in case she turned around.

She didn't. She was blissfully unaware she was being followed, oblivious to the point where it was laughable. I didn't know how I could ever take this girl seriously—she needed a wake-up slap. I wasn't sure how things were where she came from, but in Midpark, you had to be careful. Under the painted faces and the freshly-pressed suits laid monsters of every kind.

Cheaters. White-collar criminals. Frauds and gamblers. Even the worst of the worst—abusers, and those who turned blind eyes to it. Midpark might look like a nice, pretty, rich town, and it was, but underneath it all sat an ugly darkness.

I never would've guessed where she was going, but I had to slow my footsteps the moment a familiar house came into view. It sat behind wrought iron gates, a twenty-four-hour guard constantly in the guardhouse just outside it. I watched from across the street as she went up to the guard, smiled, and then...then the guard let her in, and she walked up the long driveway to the house as the gate shut behind her.

As the world turned to twilight, I felt something in my stomach harden. That house...I'd been in that house before. I'd sat on the street on watch for hours as I shadowed Celeste. This—my fucking awful luck—was shaping up to be exactly like that.

Jazmine Smith lived in the Fitzpatrick house.

She lived with Oliver, and yet she wanted me to investigate him? That didn't bode well, and I couldn't help but wonder just what shit Oliver Fitzpatrick had gotten himself into. Celeste had pretty much fallen off the map. As far as I was supposed to know, she and Astrid should still be in that house.

They weren't, though.

I knew they weren't. If they were, the news would've been all over them, constantly checking in. Something had to be up. Why was Jaz living there? I could think of no logical reason for her to be in that house, unless she was a distant relative.

She had the dark hair like Zane and Thorne, but her face, the level of warmth on her skin...no. She couldn't be related. Her last name was Smith, one of the most generic names in the United States.

In my pockets, my hands clenched to fists the moment I decided I was going to find out just what the hell was going on here. Two birds with one stone, two jobs at once. I could handle it. The money would make sure of that.

Chapter Eighteen – Jaz

“So you’re going?” Bobbi asked, referencing the party. Since it was Friday, the choir class was pretty much left to its own devices. I’d long figured out that choir was basically half singing, half study hall, and I wasn’t going to complain. The days we spent singing were torturous.

Bobbi and I sat in the corner of the room, though I leaned away from her. She wore an oversized sweater, covering her mouth with its long sleeve. Her hair was a bit greasy and up in a bun; she’d told me she caught something and was in bed all day yesterday.

“Have you asked your mom yet?” she said, cocking her head, her hazel eyes boring into me like daggers. She knew my mom didn’t want me going out or dating, so she knew how badly tonight would probably turn out.

“Not yet,” I said. I’d figured it would be best to spring it on her and then storm out of the house; it would give her no time to argue with me. “I don’t want to do it early and risk her finding a way to keep me there forever.”

“And you’ve never been to a party before?” Bobbi asked to clarify, her voice muffled and sounding quite sore through her sweater sleeve.

I shook my head. “Is that lame?”

“Around here, yes,” she answered honestly. “Even I’ve been to some, and I’m what most around here would consider uncool.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I felt...strangely nervous about tonight, although I probably shouldn’t be. Didn’t tell Bobbi who’d asked me, who was driving me, and who I’d texted last night after getting home from the meeting with Jacob—but that was probably for the best. I didn’t want her to think I had a crush on the guy.

Even if, you know, I did.

But as it stood, I had a crush on Vaughn too, which was just stupid. So in reality, a crush meant nothing.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” I said, losing myself in the racing thoughts in my head. The rest of the class had broken up in groups, all chatting away happily. I wondered if any of them were going to the party tonight. It sounded like Bobbi hadn’t been invited.

Everyone seemed to like Archer. He was probably popular, whatever the hell that meant around here. To me, everyone at Midpark was the *in* crowd.

Even the choir people who, at my old school, would've been considered geeks, seemed to fit in with everyone else. I could hardly get my bearings at Midpark High.

"Have you decided what you're going to wear?" Bobbi asked. "Sounds like you have a date, so you should dress for a date."

Dressing for a date. It was not something I'd ever had to do, so I felt clueless, utterly lost. I wasn't sure I had anything in my closet that would count as date clothes. Nothing fancy, that's for sure. I'd probably look like a loser next to Archer at this party.

The look on my face must've said it all, because Bobbi started to laugh—although her laughter was interrupted by a coughing fit. Once she had her lungs under control, she said, "You look lost."

"I am lost," I muttered, frowning. "What do people wear on dates?" God, that sounded like a ridiculous question, but I spoke it seriously. I might've snuck around with guys here and there before, but that was different than an official date. When you were running around between classes and during assemblies, you didn't care what you looked like, only that you succeeded in hooking up.

Bobbi laughed again. "Oh, you need a lot of help. If I wasn't feeling so shitty, I'd offer to come over and help you pick out an outfit."

For a moment, I just stared at her, wondering if our friendship was at that level. I didn't even know we had a friendship to begin with—was this how you started one, unofficially? Dressing the other?

Don't get me wrong, I had friends at my old school, but...I never really clicked with them. There was something always holding me back, as if I'd had a sense of premonition and knew Mom would drag me states away during the middle of my senior year.

The bell rang, and we said our goodbyes. By the time I got to the cafeteria, Vaughn was already sitting and picking through his food. Today's choice was a cheeseburger, along with some questionable-looking mac and cheese. He wore a short-sleeved shirt today, his black hair spikey.

He stopped fiddling with his food the moment I sat down, bringing that dark gaze to me. His tattooed hands seemed to tense, and I tried not to stare at them as I opened my lunch bag. That black stare made my heart do funny things, and even though I shouldn't, I remembered that encounter in the restroom.

That kiss...how badly I'd wanted to do more, kiss him more, never have that moment end.

It was weird, having two crushes at once. I didn't think I'd ever had feelings for more than one guy at a time. Sure, there was always the passing *oh, he's cute* that popped in my head about certain boys, but never any of the heart-skipping, thigh-clenching variety.

Still, for someone who wanted to kiss him again—and do more—it was kind of funny how I was acting as if the kiss had never happened. Probably because it was official: I was getting Jacob to look into the Scott family. I didn't want him to be pissed at me, which he definitely would be. But maybe he'd never find out. He probably thought I didn't have the money to hire a PI, and technically he'd be right.

That money had come from somewhere, but I had too much on my mind right now to worry about that, too.

Vaughn, on the other hand, stared at me harder. I caught his eyes constantly dropping to my mouth, and the attention on certain body parts of mine made me hot in a way it shouldn't. He hadn't always been so blatant in his staring, but after the moment we shared in the restroom, it was almost like...well, almost like he thought I was his. His to stare at, his to kiss, his to do whatever with.

Some girls might like that, but I...I didn't.

Not entirely, and that was mostly because I had a crush on someone else, too. My heart was currently being pulled in two different directions, and I had no idea what to do. A part of me hoped Jacob would find something terrible out about his family, and I could use that to distance myself from him.

I mean, the whole school didn't shun him for no reason, right? Just because he had hand tattoos? There had to be something else.

Or maybe he was an outsider because he wanted to be. Maybe he didn't care enough to try to fit in and be friends with everyone else. Just because he came from money didn't mean he had to get along with everyone else at Midpark; he was obviously unlike anyone else here—which was probably why I was so drawn to him.

Oh, fuck. Either way, I was in trouble. I was in so much trouble.

Vaughn said nothing, which was his usual preference, I'd noticed. I coughed as I reached for my tiny water bottle and unscrewed the cap. "You have any plans for this weekend?" I asked, nearly choking when I realized

that could be taken as a sign of interest, that I wanted to know if he had plans so I could ask him out or something.

Probably too lost in my own head. I needed to snap myself out of this funk. I mean, so what if I liked two guys? So what if I was going to a party with Archer tonight? Yes, we'd hooked up; yes, we might hook up again, but that didn't mean I was dating him exclusively. I could have crushes. Crushes were no big deal.

"Family stuff," Vaughn said, giving me a slow smirk, and I immediately caught myself wondering if he smirked at anyone else like that, or just me. "You going to be peeping through the windows?"

It was a good thing I didn't have anything in my mouth right then, because I would've been too startled to swallow properly. "What?" I couldn't sound surprised enough.

"You know, since you want to investigate my family," he whispered, his expression unreadable. That was the thing about Vaughn, I never knew if he was joking or not. He didn't do sarcasm well, but he had serious and grim down pat.

"I wouldn't want to investigate if you'd just tell me what they did," I muttered, hoping to get through to him. Of course, nothing I said now would change how he felt. We might've made out a bit in the restroom, but he was still miffed about me wanting to know more.

And that—that only made me more curious. The Scotts had to be hiding something.

"Leave it be, Jaz, because you're not going to like what you find."

I rolled my eyes. "Well, I actually do have plans this weekend." Technically, just tonight, but he didn't need to know that. "I'm going to a party. Going to make some new friends, have fun, maybe drink a little," I chattered away, hoping to get his attention, and I did. It was only when I had his full attention that I added, "Did I mention I'm going to the party with a guy? I didn't, did I? Well, I am, and for your information, he's super cute. Very attractive."

Vaughn's lips thinned into a line, and he outright glared at me, which made me feel pretty good.

"Blonde, too," I murmured, sighing out the most over-the-top, girlish sigh I could muster up. As if I swooned right there. "I've always had a thing for blondes." I said that last part purposefully because Vaughn had dark hair like me. "Blue eyes, too—"

His tattooed hands dropped his spork, and I watched as those fingers clenched into fists. He did not like hearing about that.

It was probably a bad idea to poke the bear, but I couldn't stop myself. He teased me about spying on his family—which to me made sense, because clearly the Scotts and Ollie were into some weird shit—so I came back to give rise to his jealousy by telling him about my date with Archer, only I was smart enough to know to keep Archer's name to myself. The way Vaughn looked right now, I bet he'd go start a fight with Archer without any hesitation whatsoever.

It felt wrong to hold such power over him...but also kind of right. Had to be careful, otherwise it might just go to my head.

"Am I making you jealous, Vaughn?" I baited him, already knowing his answer.

Or, I thought I did.

Vaughn's eyebrows came together, and his gaze was slow to rise off the table. "You..." It sounded like he was having a rough time speaking, or maybe he just didn't want to admit it. "You are." He shook his head, repeating, "I'm...jealous?" His words ended sounding like a question, as if, not once in his life, he'd ever been jealous. As if this was something new to him.

Maybe it was. Maybe he'd never let himself care for any of the other girls around here—to which I'd say, why me? What made me so special? I wasn't, truthfully. I was special only in that I didn't come from Midpark, wasn't born swaddled in green. Toss me into a normal school in a lower socioeconomic community, and I was absolutely normal.

Vaughn shook his head, muttering, "What are you doing to me, Jaz?" As if I was changing him.

I swallowed, even though nothing was in my mouth. "I'm not doing anything to you." And that was the truth, at least...I thought so. Maybe, unconsciously, I was doing something to him, but I would argue that he was also doing the same to me. Affecting me. Changing me. Making me like a bad boy with tattoos.

And not only that. Making me like a bad boy with tattoos and making me crave his touch. His intense stare. Those hands...those hands could hold onto you with a fervent vengeance, make you forget every last thought in your head.

“You are,” he whispered. Around us, the world faded away; suddenly there was no party tonight. No Archer. No blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy. There was nothing but him, no one but him.

My lower gut burned, and I found myself with the need to cross my legs and clench my thighs. “I don’t mean to.”

“But you do.”

The way he said it, as if it was so plain and simple what I did to him, made my face heat up. I had to break eye contact with him as I said, “I’m sorry.” Wasn’t sure what the hell I was apologizing for, but once I said it, I couldn’t take it back.

Sorry for riling the beast? Sorry for making him jealous? Sorry for doing whatever it was that I did to him?

I wasn’t sorry. I wasn’t sorry at all.

Vaughn was quiet for a while, and even though I no longer stared into those black eyes, I knew his attention was fully on me. His tightened fingers relaxed, no longer fists on the table, and they spread apart on the table’s surface, drawing my focus.

Hate. Pain.

Was that what I would get from him? Was that what our future held if I chose him?

“Don’t be,” he finally said, causing my eyes to snap up to his. “I’m starting to like it.”

I had no idea how to take that. I did know one thing, though.

Vaughn said I was affecting him, but he didn’t see the whole picture, didn’t see how badly he affected me. He did. He affected me so much more than I wanted him to, and it seemed, despite me trying to put up walls, he and Archer had knocked them down effortlessly.

Hell. I was in so much trouble with those two.

Chapter Nineteen – Jaz

I was never a girl to obsess over an outfit. Clothes were clothes; as long as the important bits were covered and I didn't look homeless, I didn't really care what I looked like. But, for whatever reason—ahem, mainly Archer—I wanted to look better tonight than I usually did. I wanted to look pretty.

No, wait. Not just pretty.

I wanted to be fucking drop-dead gorgeous, a kind of beautiful that would stop a man in his tracks and make him rethink his entire life.

A bit much? Maybe, but I was going for it anyway.

I dug through my closet for what felt like hours after school, tossing most of my shit aside, because that's what it was: shit. I decided on a dress—a white and black number that my mom had bought me for Christmas years ago...a dress that actually still had the tag on it. Because, you know, I never wore it. Me and dresses didn't mix; I wasn't that girly.

Tonight, I would be, even if the outside weather wasn't really permitting. I'd pair it with boots or something, and a badass leather jacket.

I tossed the dress onto my bed, finding boots that were a bit worn but would go well with it. Then I went to the dresser and chose a necklace. I'd showered right after getting home, so my hair was clean; the next step was to curl it. Or, more accurately, kink it into gentle, soft waves. Give my hair some lift, some volume.

It took me a while, but once I was done and dressed, once my hair was parted, the top half pinned back, I had to stop and appreciate my hard work in the mirror. The dress was slimming, the fabric clinging tightly to my body to show off my curves. The boots made my legs look longer, and the small bit of makeup I'd done around my eyes really gave me a nice, smoky look. I'd elected to wear some dark tights under the dress, to shield my legs from the cold.

Maybe I was overdoing it, but I didn't care. I looked damn fine, and I knew not a sane soul would argue with me there.

I checked my phone, spotting that I had a text from Archer, saying he was on his way. The world outside was dark; dinner was late tonight. As far as I knew, Ollie hadn't even gotten home yet. That was fine, as I wasn't

super hungry anyway. Who would be, when they faced a date with a ridiculously cute guy—a guy whose body was on a level of its own?

I unplugged my phone from its charger and grabbed my leather coat, shrugging it on before heading down the stairs. Mom was in the kitchen, her blonde hair held up in a clip on the back of her head, her slender figure wearing all white.

For a split-second, I thought she looked like she belonged here. Like she lived here, beyond the fact that she was Ollie's maid. Who the hell wore white while they were cooking? It was a recipe bound for disaster.

The moment my heeled boots clicked on the tiled floor, my mom spun to face me. Her blue eyes widened in shock, and it took her an uncomfortably long time to say, "Jaz—why are you so dressed up?" She had a white apron tied around her equally white clothes; she was nearly blinding to look at.

"I'm going to a party," I said, hoping I acted confident and not bitchy. I'd be a bitch if I had to be, but I was really hoping it wouldn't be necessary.

"You are not," she replied, giving her back to me once more as she returned her attention to whatever was cooking on the stove. "Take off your coat and go back upstairs. Ollie just called and said he was on his way home—"

"I'm going to a party, Mom," I repeated, my tone firmer. "And I'm going with a boy. He's on his way here to pick me up."

Mom practically slammed down the stirrer, whirling on me. Her eyes glimmered in irritation, and she stormed around the island, meeting my brazen stance with her own. "No boys." Her tone had kept me scared for years, had basically forced me to play the good girl to her face and be the bad girl behind her back, but tonight I wasn't having it.

Tonight was when I put my foot down and said *no more*.

"I'm eighteen," I told her, in case she'd forgotten. "It's time that I started dating. This isn't the nineteenth century—" I wasn't sure where I was going with that, but my destination was somewhere. "—I'm allowed to see boys. I'm allowed to be friends with them. And, I know this is crazy to you, but I'm allowed to kiss them."

My mom had never looked more horrified than she did in that moment. "Jazmine Smith, you will not be seeing any boys tonight, and you will

certainly not kiss them.” She lifted a finger, pointing to where the stairs were. “Up to your room.”

“This isn’t your house,” I told her, feeling oddly bold. “You can’t order me around.” Okay, she was my mom; technically she could order me around whenever the hell she wanted, but not tonight. Tonight I was going to that party, so help me God.

She let out an incredulous chuckle. “What has gotten into you?”

“What has...” I started to repeat her, but my voice cracked. What got into me? A whole lot of things, most of them stemming from her. “Mom, this might come as a shock to you, but a lot has gotten into me. First, you made us move, without any notice. Second, your stupid rules about changing our numbers and making me delete all of my old friends out of my life. Oh! And let’s not forget the whole no-boy thing, because you’ve been harping on that since I turned twelve.”

I sounded hysterical, and that’s because I was very much so, so hysterical that Mom could do nothing but stand there and blink.

“I’m tired of it,” I told her, “and honestly, I think I’m old enough to be able to decide who I want to spend time with—and if that someone is a boy? Then I guess it’s a boy. I’m not stupid, Mom, I won’t get pregnant, if that’s what you’re worried about. I’m not going to grow up and be like you—single and bored with your life because you have to work all the time to support the daughter that you never even wanted!”

Okay. That might’ve been a little over the top, huh?

But, you know what? It was true. Every little bit of it was true.

“Jaz,” my mom whispered, shaking her head gently, “how can you think I never wanted you?” She took a step towards me, excess water in her eyes. “I love you, honey, even if—” Mom stopped and shook her head, clearly not wanting to finish whatever she planned on saying.

But I needed to know. “Even if what?”

“Nothing,” my mom said, brushing me off. “Go to your party, if that’s what you want. Just be safe.”

That was such a switch from how she’d been seconds ago, I didn’t understand. I didn’t immediately jump on the chance to leave, even if I should have. Instead, I stood there staring at my mom like I hardly knew her. “Even if what?” I repeated, this time firmer, harder. So hard she flinched.

“What I was about to say was stupid,” Mom told me, blinking away the tears in her eyes. “Forget I said it.”

“Mom.”

We stared at each other for a while, each of us daring the other to leave, to say something, to do something. It was my mom who relented first. Softly, she whispered, “I was only going to say that...you look a lot like him.”

Him.

A bitter smile graced her face. “His looks could stop planes in the sky,” she muttered about He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named 2.0. Not Voldemort, but worse.

My father.

For the first time, she rendered me speechless. Mom didn’t need to clarify who she meant by him; he was ingrained in my head forever, even if he’d never been a part of my life. An unknown for all these years.

The man whose name wasn’t even on my birth certificate because my mom claimed to not know who he was. She was tight-lipped about her early adult years; I never knew if she partied it up or if she slept around—but the way she looked right now, what she said, my mom knew exactly who my dad was. How else could I look like him?

Had she hidden him from me for all these years on purpose?

Why?

Since I said nothing, my mom gave me a smile. She reached for my head, tucking some wavy hair behind my ears before cupping my cheeks. “I’ve done everything for you, Jaz. I really hope you believe that,” she whispered. “I’ve done nothing but my best. I knew the day would come when you’d have to make your own way in this world...I just thought I’d have more time.”

The way my mom was talking, like tonight was goodbye, felt a little silly. I’d see her later, for goodness sakes.

“Mom,” I said, sounding uneasy, “it’s just a party. Cool your jets.” I stepped away from her hands the moment I heard my phone going off, and I walked towards the front door as I answered it. The caller-ID read Archer Vega, so I knew he was here. Beyond the gate, since I never told the guards to be on watch for him.

“I’m outside the gate. The guard’s not letting me in,” Archer said, sounding a bit awkward.

I grinned; I couldn't help myself. "I'll be right out." I hung up and threw a quick glance at my mom, who still looked remarkably depressed as she stood staring off into space. "I'll see you later, Mom. I'll be safe, promise."

Mom gave me a smile, but I could tell it was fake.

With a heavy heart, I left the Fitzpatrick house and began to head down the long driveway, zipping up my leather jacket over my dress. My dress actually had two pockets, and it was those pockets I shoved my phone into. I knew I'd be taking off my coat once we got to the party...I also really hoped I didn't overdo it by looking so amazing.

The night sky was alight with stars, sparkling and giving light to this otherwise dark night. The moon was a thin crescent, a small sliver of its true self. I folded my arms across my chest as I walked to the gate, calling for the guard. Once the gate opened, I walked to the passenger side of the car, giving the guardsman a smile. It wasn't Frank, the daytime guard. I liked Frank the most out of all of them; he was nice, and also the one I dealt with the most.

I got into the car and buckled my seatbelt, my face met with a blast of warm air from the vent in the dash. Archer's blonde head was turned toward me, his eyes wide. "You look..." It would seem he was at a loss for words.

"I'm hoping the word you're looking for is a synonym of good," I deadpanned, giving him a smile.

Dimples appeared on his cheeks. "Right, yeah. You look amazing. I just...wow."

All that with my jacket still on? The boy would be brainless once I took the worn leather off.

He looked pretty smoking himself, but he always did. A thick blazer sat on top of a collared shirt, dark jeans hugging his legs as he glanced over his shoulder and backed the car up. As we started driving, I kept stealing glances at him, finding he did the same. We'd definitely make pretty babies...not that I was thinking about babies or anything, but his looks plus my looks? That would be downright explosive.

"So how overdressed am I?" I broke the silence of the car, turning my head to stare at him unabashedly.

"Seriously," Archer said, trying to keep his eyes on the road but failing every few seconds, "you look hot, Jaz. You seriously blow everyone else out of the water. I feel like a troll beside you."

I laughed. “Oh, come on. That seems a little extreme.” I playfully reached over the center console, giving him a soft shove I hoped was playful and flirty. “You’re a cute troll.”

“I’ll remember that,” he grinned.

Outside, the scenery began to change. The large houses grew far apart, further and further until acres separated them, mansions whose land was too large to be fenced-in. Still in Midpark, but probably on its outer edges.

It definitely wasn’t the way to his house; I remembered it from that time before, when we’d perhaps gone a little bit further than we should’ve with each other. Still, it’d been fun, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t slightly hopeful for more sex tonight. It was truly a stress reliever like no other.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

Archer stunned me by reaching for my hand, moving it to rest on the center dash. His thumb traced my knuckles, and I willed myself not to get lost in the gentle, pleasurable sensation. “You’ll see,” he spoke with a wink. And those dimples...

In another ten minutes, we arrived at what I would describe as a mansion in the middle of the woods. Tall trees, barren of their leaves, looked like skeletons surrounding the house, and as Archer drove us up the winding driveway, I peered around, spotting a whole host of cars parked along the driveway that curved along the house.

Three floors, probably half as big as Ollie’s house—and that was saying something, since the Fitzpatrick house was frigging huge—but still rich all the same. Since it sat so far off the road, and its neighbors weren’t anywhere in sight, I supposed no one would be calling and complaining about the noise.

As we pulled up, I saw that every single window in the house glowed from the lights inside. Based on how many cars were here already, I’d say the party was hopping. There wasn’t such a thing as late, just fashionably on time.

Archer parked his car in an empty space, undoing his seatbelt and opening his door. When he saw that I still stared up at the house, he paused to ask, “You okay, Jaz?”

Did my face give my nervousness away? Remind me to have a little chat with my face later, then. I didn’t want Archer to know how anxious I was about this whole thing, and I certainly didn’t want him to know this

was my first party. I knew parties like this were had, but I never thought I'd walk into one, let alone go to one with a handsome guy on my arm.

"I guess I'm a little nervous," I admitted, giving him a sheepish look as I unbuckled my seatbelt.

Archer's mouth spread into a dimpled grin, and he leaned over, whispering, "You're going to be fine." He ended the appraisal with a soft peck on my cheek, and my skin tingled long after his lips were gone.

I didn't know why he affected me so much, only that he did. I never thought I would be the kind of girl who was helpless in the face of her crush, but when it came to Archer Vega, somehow, somehow, I was just that. Helpless. Weak at the knees. Absolutely smitten like I'd never been smitten before.

Exhaling a shaky breath, I got out of the car and followed Archer to the front door. The closer we got, the more I could hear the thumping of music inside. I felt his hand grab mine, and as we stood before the door, we shared a meaningful look. He gave me another smile, and my stomach was suddenly full of butterflies. And then we walked in.

Chapter Twenty – Archer

I focused on the feeling of her hand in mine as we entered the house. It was a house I'd been to many times before, and it was a house I'd spend more time at after this. It was far from my favorite place to be, but unfortunately, I had no choice.

I didn't have a choice in any of this.

It wasn't like I was looking forward to tonight. It wasn't like I wanted to be a part of this, but you did what you had to in this life, whether you regretted it or not.

Most people would probably jump to my defense. I was a good kid. A great student, a loving son. I was what every mother wanted their son to be...at face value, anyway. When you really dug deep, you didn't find in me what you'd thought you'd find.

I was a liar.

I'd been lying this whole time, and tonight the lie would come crumbling down, and the result wouldn't be pretty.

This was it.

Pretty faces that I knew from Midpark were everywhere. In the living room, dancing, in the hallway, making out, and probably quite a few of them upstairs, getting straight to business. I pulled Jaz and I to a stop near the grand staircase, where I saw two smirking faces standing, midway up.

Deetra and Chelsea, her two friends. The two girls who did anything she asked, no matter what that something was. They stood, leaning over the railing, just above us, sniggering to themselves. Jaz didn't hear them, and neither did I, but unlike Jaz, I was aware of their presence. I knew why they were here.

I knew why everyone was here.

Humiliate the new girl. Break her down. Show her that she didn't belong here with us, that she'd never be one of us. Maybe she wouldn't. Midpark was full of pretty faces that hid equally pretty lies. My face was one of them. Jaz had it good, not being one of us, although I doubted she'd agree with me on that tonight.

I moved us to the side of the staircase, pushing Jaz's back against the wall as I gave her a grin I knew she believed. "Jacket?" I asked as I took off

mine. I folded mine over my arm as I offered to take hers. My eyes watched her heavily as she unzipped and shrugged off her leather jacket.

God, she really was beautiful. Her figure, every last part of her body was without a flaw. Her skin, her eyes, her hair. I wasn't the type to get caught up in a girl's looks like this, but with Jaz, it was impossible not to. She was literally the prettiest girl I'd ever seen, which made tonight suck even more.

If I had a choice...well, I never had a choice. It wasn't my life to choose.

Holding both our jackets, I said, "I'll go get us drinks. Be right back." A part of me hated that she'd fallen for me so easily, the same part of me that hated myself for feeling something for her.

After all this time, you'd think I would know better by now. I, Archer Vega, could never be happy. I could never get what I want. I was stuck living a life I didn't want, having friends I didn't want—among other things—because...because of one person.

Jaz met my grin with one of her own, and my stomach hardened. "Okay," she said, her voice smooth and soft, like velvet. I could seriously listen to her talk all day, every day, and never tire of it.

Once tonight's events concluded, I doubted she'd ever want to talk to me again.

It was probably for the best, though. She was nothing but temptation to me, and I'd given in too easily. Tonight was about me just as much as it was about her. This was about us both, retribution for us both, for the wrong we'd committed by being together.

I knew better. I'd known better in the very beginning, and yet Jaz's beautiful face tugged at my heart and my body, making me a slave to the emotions warring inside. Sleeping with her was...there were no words for it.

My heart was on the floor when I made my way through the hall to the kitchen. Some of these kids probably had no idea the truth of tonight, but others had to. She wouldn't invite all of these people without telling them there was going to be a show.

I found her in the kitchen, two red cups near her on the counter. Her slim figure wore dark tights, strapped heels that she could walk in perfectly. She wore a tiny skirt and a low-cut top, showing off a lot of her cleavage. Her blonde hair was curled, hairspray holding the curls. Diamonds sat

around her neck in a choker, and the moment her amber eyes laid on me, she smiled.

It was a smile that a lot of guys would fall for, but I wasn't most guys. I knew what malice sat behind those lips, what devious thoughts laid in her brain. I knew better than most just how awful of a person Brittany Pots was.

I mean, this was her house, after all.

"There you are," she purred, taking the jackets from me and setting them behind her. "I was worried you wouldn't show."

Liar. She knew I'd show. She knew I had no choice in this.

I said nothing, to which she simply chuckled. "Oh, don't look so sad, Archer. I'm doing us both a favor. That bitch needs to know there are consequences for the things she does." Her lips were curled into a grin as she reached for the two cups behind her. She handed them both to me.

We'd gone over the plan again and again.

This, tonight...things would change, and after tonight, Jaz would never want to look at me again, not that I blamed her for it.

Liars got what they deserved in this town, and for me? For me it was a broken heart.

Chapter Twenty-One – Jaz

I hung where Archer had guided me, not wanting to go anywhere without him. I didn't know this house, didn't really know these people. Truthfully, I'd only come here for him, so everyone else could fall off the face of the earth tonight and I wouldn't care.

So many people. So much loud music. So much grinding and making out. And, if my nose didn't deceive me, so much pot. Yeah, the air was definitely rank with something; it made my nose itch.

Glancing at the other girls' clothes, I wasn't overdressed, so I was thankful to go all out tonight. I knew my dress was nothing compared to their shiny clothes and diamond-studded jewelry, but if I had to compare us, I'd still say I looked the best.

Was it just confidence or arrogance? I didn't know. Had to be careful, though. Didn't want to be too self-assured and fly too close to the sun.

Archer returned with two red cups, and he handed me one, giving me a dimpled smile. I stared up into his eyes, watching as he took a sip of his cup first. That blue...I swore, I'd never seen such pretty blue eyes before. Their depths were unlike any other, so crisp and clear, warm and inviting. They were the kind of eyes you could stare at for hours, lose yourself in completely.

My eyes? The color of shit. You couldn't compose sonnets about shit, but those beautiful baby blues? Oh, you could write whole novels about them.

I met his grin with my own, feeling giddy. It was impossible to not feel giddy while in his presence. Now that he was done being pointlessly jealous and back to his usual self, I couldn't help but swoon. I took a sip of the drink after smelling it—didn't smell too good, but I imagined it tasted better.

As the searing and powerful liquid fell down my throat, I found out I was wrong. So wrong. It burned going down, and I had to hold in a wince. Man, that stuff, whatever it was, tasted like shit...but it looked like Archer was downing it with no problems whatsoever.

Hmm. Maybe I was just a baby when it came to alcohol, having never drunk it before. It didn't exactly taste good, the opposite, really, so I didn't

understand what the big deal was, but maybe I just had to drink more of it to get used to it. It seemed as good of logic as any at this point. Drinking was like America's pastime.

My face must've given it away when I sipped from the cup again, because Archer said, "What's wrong? Don't like it?"

"No," I choked. "It's good." My voice came out paper-thin, and it was more than obvious I thought the stuff in the cup tasted like shit.

The dimples on his cheeks deepened as he gestured to where the living room was, where most of the other bodies were, grinding against each other, basically having sex with their clothes on while in beat with the music.

I followed him, and, lucky us, it was as we entered the living room that a guy and a girl making out on the couch got up, practically tripping over each other to find privacy. I watched them go as Archer plopped himself down and patted the cushion beside him. Sitting down, I glanced at the mass of bodies near the set-up speakers, watching how lost they seemed to be in each other.

"So how often do you have parties like this?" I asked, taking another sip of the drink.

Nope. Still tasted like shit. Still made me wince as it went down my throat.

Archer shrugged, sipping his own drink before holding the red cup on his knee. "You'd be surprised how boring it is in Midpark," he said, grinning. "And when things get boring, you tend to find stuff to do."

That's how it was everywhere, not just the rich suburbs.

Archer and I talked for a while. I kept trying to like the drink, but it was a little over half gone and I decided I absolutely hated it. I hated it with my whole being. I was not a fan of drinking, or alcohol, or whatever specific type was in this cup. I didn't even know what it was.

I blinked, shaking off the pit that began to form in my gut. Maybe drinking on an empty stomach wasn't a good idea. I didn't know—I'd never drank before. "What is this, anyway?" I asked after a while, turning to look at Archer.

It looked like he sat away from me, as if he didn't want to touch me on the couch.

That was weird.

His blue eyes were averted, and it seemed like he stared off into space. "I don't know," he answered gruffly, sounding like he had before, when

he'd been jerky and mean to me.

What the fuck was wrong with him? This hot and cold thing was getting really old. I thought, stupidly, we were past that.

"What do you mean you don't know?" I asked, moving a hand to my head. In the back recesses of my mind, a headache had started to form. This drinking thing really was shit, wasn't it? Who the hell wanted to do it for fun?

"It means I don't know," Archer answered, turning to look at me. No, not just look. Glare. He outright glared at me, no longer smiling, no longer friendly in the slightest. His handsome face read cold and jaded, and that pit that had started to form in my stomach only grew.

"Why are you acting so mean?"

"I don't know, why do you ask so many stupid fucking questions?" he shot back.

Shaking my head, I got up. Not sure where I was going, since Archer was my ride and I had no idea where the hell he'd taken my jacket, but I had to go somewhere. I couldn't sit and bear witness to his transformation into King Douche again.

Still holding onto the cup and what was left inside it, I took a step away from the couch. I had to stop for two things. The first reason being the room started to sway, not looking right. The second reason was that someone now stood in my way, blocking my escape.

A slender, pretty girl with blonde curls and cold dark eyes.

Brittany. Of course it was fucking Brittany. I couldn't get a break tonight, could I? I was looking forward to this party, to this date, and then Archer had to go and turn into a dick, and then Brittany had to show up. I mean, what the flying fuck?

"Where do you think you're going?" Brittany asked. She looked great in what she wore, I was loathed to admit. She held onto a cup herself, this one full.

"I'm...I'm leaving," I said. It was hard to speak, for whatever reason. My words sounded slurred, faint, almost. It was ridiculously hard to stand in my boots. My whole body felt heavy, and I just wanted to sit back on that couch and go to sleep.

I was too lost in my muddled head to realize that everyone dancing had suddenly stopped; someone had even turned the music off.

What in the world was going on here, and why did I feel like I'd just been punched by a semi-truck?

"Sorry," Brittany said, "you can't leave yet. You and I have to talk." She took a step forward, moving as smoothly as a human could in heels, like they were just an extension of her legs, like she was born with them. "You see, you're new around here, and already you've been a bad, bad girl."

I shook my head, unable to say anything other than, "What?"

Behind me, Archer got up, sauntering over to Brittany's side. Brittany shot him a smug look before bringing her eyes back to me. "Oh, don't act like you don't know. You stepped on my territory. You fucked my boyfriend."

The world continued to spin, but for a whole new reason now.

I glanced to Archer, barely able to make out his face through the haze. The pit in my gut grew to epic proportions, and I wanted—as stupid as it was—to cry. I watched in pure horror as Archer's arm wrapped around Brittany's waist and pulled her in, and he gave her a hard, fast, passionate kiss the whole room saw. Some, I noticed, were even recording it.

Was the whole purpose of tonight just cruelty?

My heart felt like it'd been ripped out. I wouldn't go so far as to say I was in love with Archer, but I liked him. I liked him a lot. And, anyway, if he'd been dating Brittany this whole time, why didn't he say something? I never would've slept with him if I'd have known he was taken—I wasn't that kind of girl. I didn't make those choices.

Once their kiss was over, Brittany turned to me. One of her hands was wrapped in his hair, the other still held onto the cup. It was that same cup she threw at me, drenching me in whatever sticky alcohol it was, dousing my face entirely. My hair, my neck, most of my chest. I immediately dripped with the stuff, and I stood there, blinking, in utter shock.

This was not happening, was it? This was some strange, bizarre nightmare, some stupid teen movie on *Freeform*. This was not my life. It couldn't be. I got into a fight with my mom for *this*? For that dick?

No. No, no, no.

I wanted a redo of tonight. I wanted...

A lot of things. I wanted a lot of things, things which I apparently would never have.

I turned to walk out of the room, to leave, to storm away—although I wasn't feeling half as well as I should've, and with my coat gone, I'd be too

cold outside to go far, especially since I was so drenched—but two sneering faces stopped me. Brittany's friends, the girls I'd seen hanging around her that first day when she'd asked if I was Ollie's new toy.

One of them, the red-headed one, held onto a phone, laughing as she recorded my dumbstruck expression. The other, a dark-haired, dark-eyed girl with equally dark skin held onto a pillowcase. She whipped it over my head, dousing me with fluff, feathers that had been stuffed into the case. The small white bits stuck to every place on me that was wet, and I even got some in my mouth. Hell, the gesture practically knocked me over.

"Next time you think of fucking someone's boyfriend," Brittany spoke, her voice suddenly right behind me. I dared not turn around—mostly because I didn't think I'd be able to. "Remember this, because if there is a next time, I won't be so nice about it."

Once I was sure I wouldn't fall over, I turned my head, spotting Brittany looking smug. Archer stood beside her, avoiding eye contact because—apparently—he was a lying sack of shit.

It really was true. I couldn't trust anyone in this town. I—

I really didn't feel good. I just wanted to go home, and for a long while pretend like this night never happened.

If I would've been feeling better, I would've put up more of a fight. I would've said something, done something. Raised hell like I knew I could. But tonight, tonight I wanted to tuck my tail between my legs and leave, go home and lick my wounds. Shower. Maybe throw up. Who knew? I wouldn't rule anything out.

I lurched forward, barely able to keep myself up as I pushed past Brittany's two friends, who each called me their choice of words. *Slut* and *bitch* being the two. A whole chorus of laughter bounced into my ears, and I could not get out of that house fast enough.

No one in Midpark was my friend. No one cared about me. I would never fit in here; it was stupid for me to even want to try.

My head throbbed by the time I stumbled to the front door, slipping in my boots. It was like the floor was slippery...or my legs weren't working quite right. My whole body felt off, somehow. I'd thought initially it was because I'd drank on an empty stomach, but what if this was something else? What if this was worse?

What if...what if I'd been drugged?

Fuck. I shouldn't have taken anything. That was one of the cardinal rules of going to a party if you were a girl, even I knew that. But no, I had to be so smitten with Archer that all logical thought processes flew out of the window of my brain when I saw those cute dimples and those dreamy blue eyes.

Shit. I had to get out of this house. I had to call someone. I went for the doorknob, well aware that Brittany and her crew had followed me into the hall. It took every ounce of strength in my body to pull open that door and walk out into the cold air of night. I stumbled down the front steps, practically tripping over my own feet as I tried to get to my phone in my dress's pocket.

My pockets were still dry, so there was that, at least. A tiny bright side in this otherwise shitty, horrible night.

I really didn't want to call Mom. She'd only tell me she told me so. If it were up to her, I'd never leave the house except for school.

My whole body swayed as my boots hit the ground, and I began to lose my balance. My butterfingers dropped my phone and I breathed hard as I stared at it, knowing I had to bend down and pick it up.

The problem was, I didn't know if I'd be able to stand back up once I did.

It didn't matter, though. None of this mattered. If I fell down, if I didn't get back up, the only one who'd care in the end was my mom. It was obvious Archer didn't like me. This whole time he'd been playing me, and I went along with it like the sap I was.

God, I hated feeling so weak, so sick.

I fell to my knees, but my hand didn't reach for my phone right away. I stayed there, shivering in the cold, feathers stuck to my body, feeling my shoulders slump. Laughter emanated from the house; if I had to guess, Brittany and her friends had followed me, followed me to watch, to laugh... maybe even to drag me back into the house once I passed out.

And then who knew what would happen. Who knew what these rich kids would do to my unconscious body.

Damn it. I was screwed.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Jacob

The last thing I wanted to do on a Friday night was follow Jazmine Smith, but alas, as I prepared to spend my evening parked on the Fitzpatrick's street, I saw someone pull up and park in front of the gate. I had gotten a burger from a local drive-through, about to bite into it, but when I saw that car, I stopped, put the bag aside, and waited.

I couldn't see who was in the car, but I saw them talking to the guard at the gate. The guard didn't let him in, though after a few moments, the gate did open, and Jaz walked out, wearing tall boots with a leather jacket.

Was that a dress?

I didn't wonder it because the dress fit her well—I wondered it because it meant she and whoever was in the car were going somewhere. Somewhere that merited that outfit. She almost looked like she belonged here, in Midpark. A pretty girl born to money, spending the money wherever and however she could.

She got in the car, and they drove off.

It wasn't my first time tailing someone. I knew how far I had to be for them to not notice me, how to tail them without drawing their attention. I followed them for probably about twenty minutes before I saw them pull into a long driveway. I slowed on the road, not wanting to actually go into the driveway with them.

Keeping my attention split between the driveway and the road, I pulled off to the side and reached for my phone. A quick map of the area told me the house sat pretty far back from the road, so it might be safe for me to get a quick peek up there.

The smell of my burger permeated the car, and I let out a groan, knowing I should stay here and eat it. But instead I got out, closing my car door quietly. I crossed the road and headed up the driveway, keeping off of it, hugging the trees sitting near it. The house was in the middle of woods, it looked like. A rich man's cabin that wasn't quite a cabin.

I kept my jacket closed, turning my collar up. This winter had been an abnormally cold one for Midpark so far. We got a bit of snow every now and then, but overall, usually winters weren't too bad. This year just seemed like the year of eternal cold.

After five minutes of walking, the house came into sight. It was an impressive place, newly-built. Tons of cars sat off to the side, and I spotted the car Jaz had gotten into. Lights were on in the house, and I wondered if this was some party. I really should steer clear, but my gut told me to stay.

Once I was close enough to see the address on the stone wall, I typed it into my phone and saw what popped up. The Pots family owned this, and I bet they were out of town. They had one daughter, a Brittany Pots, who was also a senior at Midpark High, just like Jaz was. Maybe they were friends.

Or maybe not.

It didn't seem like anyone else was coming up the driveway, so I hazarded a walk to the house, even a few peeks into the windows. The kids inside were drinking, from what I could see. So this *was* a high school party, Midpark style. I should just leave Jaz here and go home for the night. Whoever had hired me surely didn't want to hear about her partying habits.

Although, maybe Mr. Anonymous did. It seemed Mr. Anonymous wanted to know literally everything there was to know about her, which I found odd. He wanted me to stay close to her, to watch her, to get to know her.

That was unusual, wasn't it?

Whatever. It wasn't my place to judge. God fucking knew I'd been judged enough in my past; I didn't need to add more judgment to the world. It already had enough.

Eventually I'd had enough creeping. I stuck my hands in my pockets and started walking back. What else was there to do? It wasn't like I could barge into that party and have a good time with those kids. Fuck no. I'd learned my lesson when it came to Midpark High students years ago.

Fuck. I still wasn't over what happened. I still couldn't forgive myself for letting Celeste go.

I was midway past the group of cars when I heard the front door to the house open. Instinct took over, and I darted to the nearest car, crouching behind it so whoever it was couldn't see. If they happened to walk to this particular car, by the time they reached it, I'd be gone, having snuck away while they walked.

I didn't hear footsteps, though. Not many. A few, but then they stopped. Then it sounded like something fell...and a faint sound of voices in the background, coming from the house.

Was that laughter?

Whatever it was, it didn't sound right, so I leaned my head against the car, peeking through the window to see what was going on. Jaz was on her knees on the ground, other girls standing near the house, laughing at her.

Jaz must've dropped her phone, because she eventually got up, holding onto it. She took a few steps, but she swayed with each and every one of them. She hardly looked steady. What she looked like was drunk, but that was ridiculous, because she hadn't gotten here too long ago—and when she'd come out of the gate at the Fitzpatrick's house, she'd been fine.

And then I noticed she wasn't wearing her jacket, and the top half of her body was coated in something white.

No, this wasn't right.

My gut told me something was wrong, just like it'd told me years ago that something wasn't right with Zane and Thorn Fitzpatrick. I hadn't acted on my gut then, but tonight—tonight I couldn't just sit back and let things be. I had to intervene.

I got up, straightening myself out, acting like I had the right to be here. I didn't. I was pretty much trespassing, but seeing as how I bet Brittany was throwing this party without her parents' permission, I'd say I was fine.

I noticed Jaz swaying on her feet even more, and I had to rush to her side. It was a good thing I did, too, because the moment I reached her, she tripped. I caught her, realized that the white on her was actually feathers—and that she was coated in some wet, strong-smelling liquid—and glared at the girls at the door.

Their laughter died off, their eyes widening. They didn't know me. Why would they? Maybe if I cleaned up, shaved, looked like I got a decent night's sleep, they might recognize me as the officer who shadowed Celeste Chambers three years ago, but that was an eternity in the brain of a high schooler.

No, to them I was simply a stranger who now had Jaz in his arms.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" It was all I could think of to say at the moment, so it would suffice. Jaz was near limp in my arms, her form still swaying. I heard whispers amongst the girls about who I was, what I was doing here, but I didn't care to answer them or tell them. That would only get into the truth, and right now, hell, I wasn't sure what the truth was.

I turned my attention away from the girls, telling Jaz, "Give that to me." I probably needn't have said it, because her hand shook so hard she was hardly able to hold onto her phone anyways, but I did.

She handed it to me, and I slid the phone into my pocket, now able to wrap both arms around her and help her walk. She clung to me, her ankles nearly bending with each step we took down the long driveway. If she passed out, I'd be able to pick her up easily; the girl didn't weigh that much. What got me, though, was the smell. Such strong alcohol—and I was a fan of the strong stuff. I didn't do light shit often.

No, to drown out my sorrows I needed something that packed a punch, and right now Jaz was drenched in something like it.

What the fuck was up with the feathers? Just a way to embarrass her? Ugh, fucking kids. They were needlessly cruel at times, and downright rude the next. There were hardly any redeeming qualities about kids these days; having one of my own was literally the furthest thing from my mind.

The walk down the long driveway took a lot longer than it had me coming up. Jaz couldn't walk fast, she could hardly walk at all, and sometimes she stumbled, nearly taking me down with her. It got to the point where I was basically picking her up and dragging her along, her feet useless on the ground.

Once my car and the street came into view, I tossed a look over my shoulder, making sure no one had followed us.

No one did. Those kids didn't care enough about Jaz to follow, to make sure I wasn't some random predator here to take advantage of a girl who was completely out of it.

I wasn't that type of guy, but they didn't know that. It just went to show how ugly those Midpark kids were. All of them.

"What were you doing there?" I asked. "Those kids are obviously not your friends." I sounded like I was scolding her, my fucking God, like I was some concerned third party who just wanted the best for Jaz. I didn't. I barely knew the girl. Just because I was forced to work with her, for her, didn't mean shit. She didn't mean anything to me.

I helped her around the back end of my car as she mumbled, her words slurring, "I was lied to." At least, I thought that was what she said. Kind of hard to tell, with how badly her enunciation came out.

She wasn't there for that long. How could she be this drunk already?

Unless this wasn't because she drank too much—but more like *what* she drank.

Was she drugged? Were the girls by the doorway setting Jaz up for some kind of date-rape situation? A new wave of revulsion rose in my gut, and I

hated them even more. Probably shouldn't hate kids, but at this point, I didn't much care for following the rules of society. The world was fucked-up; I wasn't stupid enough to believe otherwise. Those kids would grow up to be just as vile as their parents, just as scheming and backstabbing as the worst of them. You didn't get rich and stay rich in America without stabbing a few of your friends in the back—and their enemies? Their enemies often ended up worse.

"You shouldn't go to parties with those kids," I told her, releasing my hold on her. She held onto the side of my car as I went to open the passenger door for her, swaying on her feet as if she couldn't find or keep her balance.

"Stop calling me a kid," Jaz muttered, looking pale under the moonlight, which was odd, because her skin was normally a rich, tawny hue. I was reaching into the car to throw my dinner in the backseat—funny how I wasn't even hungry now—when she stumbled past me, practically tripping as she hurled herself into the car.

I wasn't calling her a kid. I was calling those other girls kids, although, technically, she was one of them—

My thought process immediately stopped the moment Jaz muttered, "I don't feel good." And then she leaned over and threw up...right on my shoes. Even my recoil speed wasn't good enough to avoid the projectile vomit.

Fucking great. Could this night get any worse?

Her full lips curled into a frown, and she met me with pleading eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's fine," I said stiffly, even though it wasn't. I got her in, helped buckle her seatbelt, and then shut the door, swearing under my breath as I went to the bit of grass near the curb and did my best to rub the tops of my shoes on them, get a little of the vomit off.

I swore, if that girl threw up in my car, we would have a problem. I refused to clean up vomit from the insides of my car. Hell, I'd make her do it. Her vomit, her problem. I was just...

Just what? Just being nice? Just trying to help this girl so she wouldn't get into any more trouble? Jaz wasn't my problem, but...I couldn't leave her there. I couldn't let her fend for herself amongst the sniggering hyenas of Midpark. She was obviously out of her element here. She needed a life lesson—don't trust anyone in Midpark.

That included me, too. She shouldn't trust me. Even though I wasn't like everyone else here, I had secrets, too...and my secrets, I would go so far to say, were worse. I was not a good man. I was a sinner just like the rest, only everyone thought my sins died years ago. I'd known Zane and Thorn were monsters, because I was one too. My scars proved it.

I got into the driver's seat wearing a frown. As I started the car, I glanced at Jaz, finding her eyes were on me. She opened her mouth, maybe to ask what I was doing here, but she quickly shut it, moving to hold a hand over her face.

"If you feel like throwing up again, do me a favor and tell me. Roll down the window, something," I said, putting the car into gear. Vomit was the last thing I wanted in this vehicle; as awful as it was, I already knew my shoes reeked of it. I'd probably have to throw them out.

Five minutes into the drive, I wondered just where the hell I was going. I couldn't drop her off at the Fitzpatrick's house. She wasn't well enough to walk up to the house herself, and there was no way any guard at the gate would let me in with a half-conscious Jaz. Plus, I didn't want to risk Oliver seeing me.

Jaz wanted me to look into him, along with the Scotts. The Scotts had been in this town longer than most families, their property one of the biggest and most secure. She and I needed to talk about why she was so interested in them, but not tonight. Tonight, I needed to get her better.

Fuck.

The one place I drove to was not the place I should've, but I really didn't see any other options at this point.

I took her to my apartment building, where she'd sleep off whatever was in her system. Where she would promptly leave the moment she was better. I'd drop her off down the street from the Fitzpatrick's house.

Yet another thing I had to grill her on was why she lived there. Why would she want me to investigate the man whose roof she lived under? Did she not trust him? Had he done something? Were Zane and Thorn back and hiding out? And then, of course, that left Celeste.

I had to find out the truth.

I parked as close to the side door of the building as I could, hurrying out and around to help Jaz out of the car. If someone saw me with her, they might get the wrong idea, so I prayed we wouldn't run into anyone. My apartment building was far from the nicest in town; in fact, I'd go so far as

to say, since it sat in the heart of the city, it was one of the worst buildings around. Older, its insides needing an update. It's what kept it affordable though, so I couldn't complain too much about it.

Fortunately for me, luck was on my side. Jaz and I encountered no one as we made it to the elevator and headed to my apartment. I kept an arm slung around her waist as I reached for my keys and unlocked the door. I helped her inside, and then I flicked every single lock I'd installed. No more random rich boys waiting for me in my living room.

Yeah, the one time was bad enough.

I brought her to the bathroom, letting her go to close the lid on the toilet and instructing her, "Sit."

Jaz sat with no complaints, though I had to say, she'd looked better. Now that I was able to see her in the light, I noticed her makeup had smeared from whatever liquid had soaked her face and chest. The feathers stuck to her dress haphazardly, ruining the garment's fabric. I was sure the dress was salvageable, but all those feathers would need to be picked off, and then the dress heavily washed. But maybe dresses like that you couldn't wash like other clothes.

If that thing was hand wash only, I'd say just throw it out. I didn't have the patience for shit like that.

I left her, heading into the hall. The dress needed to dry, at the very least. And I was pretty sure I'd spotted a few flecks of vomit on its chest from when she upchucked on my shoes. Speaking of which...

I took off my shoes, went into the kitchen and threw them in the trash. Then I went to my bedroom, finding some old clothes I didn't wear anymore. Having her return home in a soiled dress or a stranger's clothes would be up to her. I didn't care if she'd get in trouble, but my conscience would be clear because I'd kept her from getting into too much trouble tonight.

I shouldn't have, but I did, and now it was too late to take it back. It wasn't like I could throw her over my shoulder, drag her back to my car, and drop her off at that house. No, we'd passed the point of no return now, so I had to learn to make do, as would she.

Jaz should be grateful to me for my interference. Hell, I'd basically saved her. I'd seen guys in the house as well, and I knew what was on their minds, especially when they spotted a girl so incapacitated she couldn't even speak right.

Once I had an old t-shirt and a pair of sweats in my hands, I returned to the bathroom, finding that she was working to take off her boots. Her fingers couldn't hold the zipper properly, and I stood there for a moment, watching her fumble and try.

It was the weirdest thing, watching her attempt to do something so simple. A part of me wanted to laugh. Another part of me wanted to get annoyed and walk away...and yet, a teeny, tiny part of me wanted to help her.

Goddamn it. I shouldn't want to help her at all. She was a job, not my problem to solve, not my ward to keep an eye on. She was nothing to me.

But, damn it all to hell, I moved closer, set the clothes on the bathroom counter, and knelt in front of her, swatting her hands away. "I'll help you," I growled out, "as long as you don't throw up on me again."

"I won't," she whispered a soft promise, blinking those warm, amber eyes at me.

I kept any following remarks to myself, because there was no way she could ever promise something like that. When you had to vomit, you had to vomit. There was no magical button to push and make the urge disappear.

My hands went to grip her left foot, and I held onto her ankle as I reached for the zipper, slowly pulling the boot off her foot and setting it aside. The same thing with the other boot. I got to my feet, gesturing to the clothes I'd put on the vanity. "You can change into these if you want. You will not sit on any couch of mine while wearing a dress full of feathers and, what I'm guessing, alcohol." If this girl wanted to stay in the bathroom until she felt better, that was on her.

I turned around to leave, but I froze the moment I felt her hand grab my arm, her fingers lightly curling around it. My feet immediately stopped, and I turned my head to stare at the hand as if it was some alien thing.

I never wanted to touch this girl, but tonight, apparently all of my rules were thrown out of the window when I realized what dire straits she was in.

Stupid. It was fucking stupid, and I knew in the end I would probably regret what I did tonight. I was no angel, saving her was not my priority. I really should've just let her lie in her own bed, a bed of her making. I bet no one made her go to that party. Whoever had picked her up had lied to her, feeding her what she wanted to hear, and she believed him. She wanted to believe him.

Like I said: stupid.

I was about to hiss out a *don't touch me*, but the moment our eyes met, my annoyance faded and instead I felt...a strange thing. Pity. Whatever was left of my heart hurt for this girl the moment I met those big brown eyes. Being lied to wasn't fun. Being thrown to the wolves wasn't, either.

Her breathing was hard, as if it was difficult for her to keep a steady rhythm in her lungs. Her feet, covered in tights, were flat on the floor as she slowly stood, her hand still on my arm. I didn't turn to face her; couldn't say why, but I was almost fearful of what I thought she'd say next.

"Can you..." Jaz blinked, her eyes like chocolate diamonds, sparkling in the fluorescent light. "Can you help me?"

What I should do was yank my arm out of her grasp—her hold on me was not strong, so it'd be something I could easily do—and yet as I measuredly turned to face her, I didn't. Her hand lingered on my arm, and I felt a warmth blossoming there that I shouldn't.

"Help you?" I repeated, sounding like a broken record. She should really get that hand off me. Even though her hand was curled outside of my jacket sleeve, her warmth seeped through anyway. It took everything in me to ignore it.

"I got into it myself," she murmured, shaking her head, a fleeting expression of unease rising on her features. "But that was before, when I didn't feel so..." She let go of my hand, practically falling over herself as she leaned toward the toilet, barely able to get the lid up before throwing up again.

She must've had nothing in her stomach, no recent food, because what she threw up was mostly liquid. Stomach bile, and whatever else she'd been given at the party.

Her hands shook as she gripped the sides of the toilet, wiping at her mouth before reaching for the handle to flush. Good, because the last thing I wanted to see was more puke. Bad enough I had to throw out a pair of shoes because of her.

"Get up," I said, watching as she slowly did so. Her thick black hair covered where the zipper was in the back, so I had to brush it aside. More than once. So much fucking hair. My fingertips brushed the nape of her neck, and I froze the moment I felt how soft her skin was.

No. I...I should not pay attention to that. Knowing how smooth her skin was was not something I should be aware of. Not at all.

I let out a slow breath as I forced my hand to the zipper, undoing most of it. The dress clung to her slender form tightly, the zipper following the curve of her spine. She must've worn a strapless bra under it, for I saw another black strap wrapping around her chest—Jaz's bra was not something I should let myself focus on, and yet the moment my eyes spotted it, it was all I could think about.

Fuck me.

This was a terrible fucking night. Why couldn't it be over?

My breath suddenly felt so heavy in my chest, and it took a lot out of me to pull myself away from her semi-dressed form and say, "It's done." I turned my face away, trying to focus on literally anything else, anything other than her.

She was...there was something about her that, for whatever reason, decided to draw me in tonight.

She was a trap. Jaz might not be aware of it, but she was a beautiful, entrancing trap that, in spite of my best efforts, tempted me.

Fuckity fuck fuck.

I turned to head out of the bathroom, needing to put more distance between us. I needed to vent the emotions out of me, and I needed to do it soon.

"I'm going to shower," Jaz called after me.

I stopped by the door, not daring to turn around to face her again. What if she'd taken off the dress and stood there in just her bra and whatever else was under it? No, I would not see her wearing less. No, no, no.

Saying nothing, I grabbed the handle and closed the door behind me. I stood there for a few minutes, waiting until I heard the shower's water start to run. Soon enough I heard the curtain being pulled aside, and then again after she stepped in. I hoped she wouldn't slip or fall—she could hit her head, knock herself unconscious...or worse.

Should I stand here and listen? That felt like a bit much, especially since I knew she was in there naked.

I really shouldn't think about Jazmine Smith's naked body. Not her curves, not her soft skin, and most definitely not those eyes.

I ended up deciding if she took too long in the shower, I'd make sure she was alright. For now, I would go and...I didn't know. Make some dinner, since mine had been ruined. Or maybe work out, because I needed to get this tension out of my body before I allowed it to fester.

Workout. I decided on the workout. The food could wait. Once she was out, I'd make her something. She had to put something in that stomach, something to help settle it. I wasn't a very good cook; more often than not I simply ate out because I hated doing dishes and the prep work. Hell, I wasn't even certain what I had in my refrigerator, but I'd make do. And if not, I could always get a pizza delivered, now that I had more than enough money in my bank account.

My place was a two-bedroom apartment, but instead of having a second room with a bed, the room was full of workout equipment. After being forced out of the Midpark Police Department, I took up working out. It helped get my mind off things, off my mistakes and what I did, and it helped me to focus my anger.

I changed into black sweats and a thin, athletic shirt, my bare feet taking me down the hall to the room at the end. I pushed open the door, gazing around at my equipment. It took me a few moments to decide on the punching bag. My wraps hung over the stand, and I grabbed them, frowning to myself as I wrapped my knuckles. When I got into my workouts, I lost myself. My thoughts often wandered, and with everything that had happened tonight, I knew I had a lot of pent-up emotions to vent out.

Moving to stand before the punching bag, an old worn bag I'd had for years now, I let out a sigh. I ran my hands along the sides of the bag before taking a step back and spreading my feet, fingers curling into fists, the wrappings around my knuckles tightening.

And then I began to workout, punching the bag over and over, from different angles every so often. My shoulder and back muscles clenched, and soon enough sweat lined my brows. My skin grew hot from the workout, and I put my all into it.

I tried to ignore my thoughts, but like always, they threatened to drown me.

Hah. Drown. As if anything could drown me. No, if something was going to get me, it would be the opposite. Fate would have me die like the rest of them, screaming in agony and choking on smoke.

My fist connected with the punching bag, and I felt the jolt of skin connecting with the bag up my arm.

My truth was not a truth anyone else knew. In fact, everything about me was a lie. I lied to everyone I met, the moment I opened my mouth and told them my name. The real Jacob Hall had died a very long time ago.

I couldn't say how long I'd been punching the bag, but a growing uneasiness in my gut made my abdomen tingle. I paused in my punching, lifting up my shirt to see the scarring there. The pain that radiated from the scarring was in my head, I knew, and yet I still hated it. I brought the bottom of my shirt to my face, wiping off the sweat on my hairline.

I went back to punching, losing myself in the moment. It was a sad thing that I'd rather think about her than my past.

Jaz. She was one person I should not let dominate my mind, but it would be stupid of me to not realize it. She might not have worn elegance tonight, but there was something about her that I couldn't describe. Jaz was bold, defiant, and yet so very gorgeous. So much more gorgeous than someone of her age should be. Her looks would get her in trouble, undoubtedly.

It wasn't what I should think about, and yet I found my mind could not go anywhere else. She'd caught me in her web somehow, even though I'd fought it.

Fuck. Where the hell was I supposed to go from here?

Chapter Twenty-Three – Jaz

The water helped to steady me. I turned it hot, but not too hot. I stood there for a while, letting the water wash over me, clinging to every inch of my body, in hopes that it would help to wash away the awful night I'd had.

My head hurt like a bitch, and I still wanted to collapse and sleep for days, but I could stand now. I could breathe. I still kind of wanted to throw up, but there was nothing in my stomach to vomit up anymore; nothing but stark yellow stomach bile. My hands shook, but not because of me feeling so ill.

No, they shook in anger over what happened. Over what those idiots did to me.

How dare they? Who the hell did they think they were, making a fool of me? And Archer—what the fuck was wrong with him? His hot and cold act was just that, an act, and I'd fallen for it like a fool among fools. Hook, line, and sinker.

I never thought I was an idiot before. Sure, I did some rash things, but didn't everyone? Everyone had their moments. This...there was no comparing this to anything. Tonight had been just cruel. Awful and cruel, not kids being kids. Tonight was about kids trying to play God, trying to tell me I didn't belong here in Midpark.

You know what? Fuck them. Fuck every single one of them.

They thought they got the best of me tonight—and they might've, if Jacob hadn't shown up—but never again. I swore to myself as I rinsed off my face, scrubbed off the smeared makeup and ran my hands through my wet hair, I swore to myself I would never let them get the better of me again.

They thought they'd seen the real Jaz? They had no idea the fire they'd set inside me. No idea how badly I wanted to get them back. Revenge. I wanted revenge, and I would have it. They had no idea the lengths I would go to to get them back for tonight.

Dramatic? Maybe, but they'd crossed the line. They had to have drugged me. A drink, even on an empty stomach, wouldn't affect me so quickly.

What? Did they think to mock me, have me realize the truth, and then pass me around to the lucky guys who were there? Fuck that. Fuck them. Fuck them all.

My mind was a whirlwind of potential torment, thinking of all of the ways I could make them pay. Archer, Brittany, her friends. They would all rue the day they thought they could get the best of me.

I had no idea how long I stood there in the shower, but eventually I got out. I had to use the towel hanging on the wall to dry myself, and as I rubbed it against my face and hair, I couldn't help but catch the scent on the towel. It smelled like Jacob.

It...wasn't a bad smell, actually. Musky, manly. The kind of scent I could close my eyes and get lost in—if it wasn't for tonight, I might've let myself. But now wasn't the time to get lost in a man's smell, especially someone like Jacob. Someone who I was not only working with, but also someone who was quite a few years older than me. He had to be nearing thirty. That was...a bit old for me.

Maybe.

Once my body was dry, I paused as I stared down at my dress. My legs felt a little stiff, and a whole lot sore, as if I'd done some hardcore exercise without realizing it. Maybe it was just my muscles trying to recover from whatever was in my system earlier.

There was no way I'd get myself into that dress again. That dress...held some awful memories now, memories I'd rather forget entirely.

No, there would be no forgetting what happened tonight. The memories would fester in my brain until they got their comeuppance.

My eyes spotted the clothes Jacob had brought in. They were his—and I bet they smelled like him, too. I probably shouldn't wear them either, but what choice did I have in the moment? I put my bra back on, along with my panties. I kept the tights off, leaving them on top of my dress on the floor. Might as well throw that shit out. Mom wouldn't know the difference... until she saw me coming home in clothes that weren't mine.

Damn. I couldn't tell her the truth of what happened. I'd only worry her, and I wanted to be able to take care of it myself. Might have to play dirty, but obviously those other girls—and Archer—didn't care about playing dirty. I'd have to think up another story to tell Mom, but I wouldn't worry about that now. Right now, I just wanted to get dressed, maybe run a comb through my hair, since I assumed he didn't have a brush in this place.

Jacob obviously didn't have a girlfriend. It was very clear he lived alone here. Not sure if that made me curious or relieved. Curious because he was a cute guy beneath that stubble, and relieved because I didn't want a girlfriend to get jealous of me or something. Things weren't like that between us.

The shirt he'd given me had some kind of sports logo on it, and I swayed a little on my feet as I slipped it on. I had to grip the vanity's edge to keep myself upright as I stuck one leg in the sweatpants, one after the other. I looked in the drawers for a comb, and I found one after two drawers, under a bunch of things.

Man, this guy had no organizational skills whatsoever. Everything was just thrown into the drawers haphazardly. Maybe he needed a girlfriend.

Brushing my thick hair with a comb was a bit of a process. It got tangled more often than not, and after a few tries, I simply gave up. My hair was too thick and too long to succumb to a comb. I needed a legit brush to get its lengths under control.

I tossed the comb back into the messy drawer, shutting it with a frown. Quietly, I exited the bathroom, pausing to hear where Jacob was. Of course, I realized I was technically in the apartment of a stranger, but I figured if he wanted to take advantage of me, he had ample opportunity to.

My ears heard grunting coming from a semi-open door down the hall, and I slowly walked toward it, taking my time in moving. If I went too fast, I'd probably fall. My legs did not feel strong enough to hold my body weight, and let's not even get into how badly my head felt right now. I literally felt like I'd been run over by a train.

Not an exaggeration, sadly.

My bare feet on the vinyl flooring were near silent, and I peeked into the room before stepping in, not certain of what I'd see.

Jacob. He'd changed into workout clothes and was furiously going at a large punching bag that looked like it'd seen better days. He might not take care of himself physically, but he worked out like a maniac, apparently. The room was full of workout equipment—weight machines, an elliptical, and that punching bag. He was very fit under those clothes, wasn't he?

I moved to lean against the door frame, silent as I watched him give his all to the punching bag. Over and over he hit it, his fingers curled into fists. Both his hands were wrapped in something white—bandages?

His arm muscles tensed every time he did a jab. Watching him work out was something I could do all night, frankly. It would help get my mind off everything that happened tonight; a nice distraction.

I was content in watching him quietly, but then he paused in his punching and reached for the bottom of his shirt, lifting it up to wipe his face; he must've been sweating too much. As the fabric lifted up, I spotted something on his lower back. Since I wasn't next to him, I couldn't tell what it was, but it looked like it wrapped around his abdomen to his stomach.

What was that? A scar? Some kind of deformity? It didn't matter. Regardless, Jacob was a fine male specimen, even if it did look like he hardly slept and forgot to shave more often than not.

A huge part of me wanted to address whatever was on his lower back, but instead I simply broke my silence by saying, "What were you doing there tonight?" I was in my own mind more than I was when he'd first appeared at Brittany's house, and now I wondered just how the hell he'd been there to become my savior for the night.

Honestly, it didn't make sense.

Jacob abruptly stopped wiping at his face, tugging his shirt down before he turned to me, his dark eyebrows drawn together, hazel eyes narrowed as if he wordlessly told me I wasn't welcome here, in this room, or even in his apartment. To which I'd only say, I was here because of him.

As much as I didn't like to admit it, I owed him. Who knew what would've happened if I'd have been alone tonight?

He sent me a frown, tilting his head slightly. His light brown hair looked so much darker drenched in sweat. It wasn't a bad look. He didn't leave his punching bag, but he did say, "Where?" As if he didn't know, as if he'd forgotten tonight's events.

Playing dumb didn't suit him.

Maybe it was because I'd had enough shit for the night, but I left my position at the door frame, my feet dragging across the floor as I moved closer to him. My head hurt like a bitch, but I ignored it, just like I ignored how my legs felt like jelly. I watched his posture straighten at my approach, and said, "At Brittany's. Were you working for someone else?" Couldn't say why, but I didn't like that thought. I mean, I knew he wasn't my private investigator, that other people could hire him, but I couldn't change the envy inside me at the thought of him being at Brittany's for someone else.

Selfish and stupid, but I kind of wanted him to have been there for me.

“What I do when I’m not working on your case is none of your business,” he told me, sending me a frown—his usual expression when he talked to me. I was pretty sure Jacob hated me on principle, since I was a kid in his eyes.

That...that really bugged me.

“You don’t have a monopoly on my life,” he added, scowl darkening.

I took another step closer to him, folding my arms across my chest. Felt weird to be standing there in his clothes, but at this point I could not back down. I couldn’t help the fact that I had an attitude. “I think I have the right to know what you were doing there,” I said, standing my ground as best I could, given the fact that I wanted to curl up and sleep.

“You don’t intimidate me, Jaz,” Jacob muttered. “You don’t have a right to know. You should be thanking me, though, because from where I stand, it looks like you would’ve had a really shitty night if it wasn’t for me.”

I already had a shitty night, but he was right. Other, worse things could’ve happened, and then where would I be?

His attitude, however, made me not want to thank him for any of it. His tone, his posture, everything about him was standoffish. Just plain rude. If he thought I’d do a curtsy and fall at his feet for helping me tonight, he was dead wrong.

“I don’t thank jackasses,” I hissed. This guy...no wonder why he was a loner, why he didn’t have a girlfriend. He was infuriatingly annoying.

“I bet you don’t thank anyone.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” I stated, huffing.

“You’re right, I don’t,” he admitted, taking a step towards me. There was less than two feet in between us now, and I could smell his sweat. It was not the worst smell in the world, I hated to admit. “For example, I don’t know why you want me to look into Oliver Fitzpatrick when you fucking live with the guy. So tell me, Jaz, what the fuck is up with that?”

I blinked. How did he...

Well, I did tell him to investigate Ollie, so I supposed it was only a matter of time until he found out I was living under the same roof as him. I just didn’t think it would happen so soon. I didn’t know what to say without telling him the whole story.

I...I didn’t want him to judge me like everyone else in Midpark did. Just because my mom and I didn’t come from money didn’t automatically mean

we were stupid or hoes just sleeping around trying to land a good husband. It didn't make us less than those who lived in Midpark, but that's how all those other people at the party saw it, I bet. That's how Brittany viewed me, how Archer did. You didn't do what they did if you liked the person on the receiving end of the ridicule.

My eyes closed. "I guess you and I have some things to talk about." When I opened my eyes, I found Jacob stared at me with a level expression. He no longer radiated anger. He looked...almost too intent on me.

He was slow to nod. "Yeah, we do."

We ended up leaving the workout room. Jacob took off the white wrapping on his knuckles before following me down the hall. We sat on the couch in his living room, and I had to work to keep my sigh to myself. It was nice to sit down on a cushioned seat and not feel the weight of a dozen eyes on you, all waiting for the show.

Tonight...I would never forget what happened tonight, and I would never forgive, either. I wasn't that sort of girl.

Jacob leaned his forearms on his knees, his head turned and his eyes on me. A cushion sat between us, putting space where there should be. It wasn't like I wanted to feel his leg brushing against mine or anything. Tonight was the night to get everything in the open, I guessed.

I did my best not to stare at him. It was supremely difficult to look at him and not get lost in how pretty his eyes were, or how he looked damn good sweaty. Who cared about the brusque attitude or the eternal five o'clock shadow or the bags hanging under his eyes? He was an attractive man all the same...and I'd thrown up on his shoes and begged him to help me take off my dress.

Oh, God. If I wasn't fuming inwardly at how shitty tonight was, I'd be totally embarrassed about all of that.

"My mom and I live with Oliver," I broke the silence of the apartment, unable to take the heaviness in his stare. I instead watched the coffee table before the couch, wishing it would sprout legs and run away; at least then the attention would be off me. "My mom got a job as his maid. He's always at work, doesn't have time to cook or clean or even do his own laundry."

Jacob listened to me, reclining back on the couch with his knees spread. "Go on. I assume there's more."

I wasn't sure what more he wanted me to say. Sighing, I added, "I know he was married to Astrid Chambers, and I know all about Celeste. But his

sons, Celeste, Astrid...they're all gone. And even his first wife, I couldn't look back and see an obituary, even though he has her ashes—"

"Astrid's not there anymore?" Jacob cut in, interrupting me. He wore a curious, concerned expression.

"No. She's just...gone. I was wondering if maybe she and Celeste went away to avoid the public eye, but then what about his sons? What about his first wife? I just feel like he's hiding something, and I want to make sure my mom is safe."

"And you," he said.

"Right," I said. "Me, too." In actuality, I was more concerned with my mom, but I supposed that was neither here nor there. He didn't need to know that.

Jacob ran a hand over his cheek, rubbing his chin in thought. He almost looked like he knew something, like there was something he wanted to tell me—or maybe that was just me hoping he'd have all the answers for me right now. It would mean I wouldn't have to pay him more. The other extra cash that I'd tucked away under my bed I'd saved for...something. A rainy day. A time when Mom and I needed it. I really didn't want to spend it all on Jacob.

"What about the Scotts?" he asked. "Why do you want me to look into them? They're a very old, very powerful family around here."

I knew what he was trying to say without outright saying it: he could get into a lot of trouble looking into the Scotts. Would he upcharge me? Would he demand more money? Fuck. This was a game I didn't know how to play; it wasn't like I was born knowing chess. This was confusing, and I supposed having enough money to wipe my ass with it every night would help. Alas, I didn't have that kind of money, and I didn't know the machinations of the rich.

There was no point in hiding anything from him. He knew I lived with Ollie, knew I didn't feel safe in the house. Why not go all out? "Oliver threw a fundraiser—" I paused as Jacob nodded, as if he was familiar with it. "—and two of the Scotts came over. I was upstairs, keeping myself away because I wasn't allowed downstairs, and I heard them go into Oliver's office." The memory was alight in my head, and I could picture it perfectly. "I couldn't hear exactly what they were talking about, but it sounded like..."

"Like what?"

I met his hazel stare, feeling a strange sensation in my gut. A warm, fluttering feeling. His eyes really were pretty. “Like they were involved in something shady.”

“So you hired me because something doesn’t feel right to you? Let me clue you into something about Midpark. Nothing is right around here. Everyone does shitty things—you should’ve learned that yourself tonight.”

Lecturing me, patronizing me. I shot him a frown. “Just because everyone does shitty things doesn’t mean I should be okay with it and go along with it. If my mom and I aren’t safe here, we’re moving.”

He let out a laugh. “Kids don’t usually have a say in what the family does.”

I wanted to punch him, but I held back, somehow. “I’m not a kid.”

“That’s what you keep saying, but I’m not convinced.”

I let out an annoyed grunt. “What the hell do I have to do to make you realize it? You don’t know who I am or where I came from. You don’t know that I had to give everything up practically the moment I turned eighteen. Do you know any kid who’s willing to give up all social media because their mom told them to? Do you know any kid who’s willing to change numbers and forget their friends? You don’t know a thing about me, Jacob. Not a thing.”

Jacob was silent for a while, staring at me, studying me. I wasn’t stupid enough to believe he was appraising me in a new light, but maybe he could realize that I was not a kid. He wasn’t dealing with someone who didn’t know how the world worked. I’d given things up, given people up, sacrificed all because my mom told me we were moving. I was the only one my mom had. If I’d have told her no and stayed, she would have no one.

His gaze dropped to my chin, but then he turned his head, broodingly staring off into the distance as he muttered, “You don’t seem like the typical Midpark brat. I knew it the first moment I saw you, I just didn’t know why. Hiring me, wanting the truth...” Jacob’s hazel stare was back on me, the intensity in his expression back as well, tenfold. “You might not like what I find, Jaz. You might regret contacting me.”

“If you’re worried I’m going to back out, don’t,” I told him, blatant. “It isn’t like I’m going to change my mind and want the money back.”

“Good, because there’s a no-refund policy.”

“I never assumed differently.” My stomach chose that moment to growl, loud enough for both of us to hear. Great. I was literally just telling Jacob I

wasn't a kid, and then my stomach had to go and proclaim it.

Granted, I didn't eat dinner tonight, which was probably why whatever was in my drink had hit me so hard and fast, but still. You didn't stomp your foot and say you weren't a kid, and then moments later let your stomach grumble in need of a cookie or a snack.

"You're hungry." Jacob's gaze fell to my stomach. Thank God I no longer wore that dress, so it wasn't like he could see anything. My full figure was hidden behind the fabric of his clothes, his baggy shirt and his sweatpants that were the very opposite of form-fitting.

"No, I'm not." I said it quickly, without thinking. Obviously I was, though. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out. Only someone with ears.

He heaved himself to his feet, shuffling towards the kitchen on the opposite end of the long room. The kitchen and living room were pretty much one giant room. "I don't have much, but...I can see about making you something."

"That's okay," I said, not wanting to be in his debt any more than I already was. Him feeding me tonight would only be the cherry on top of the cake. "I'm fine. I'll be fine."

Jacob would not take no for an answer, though. I watched from the couch as he peeked in his fridge, moved a few things around—beer bottles, from what it sounded like. He really didn't have to make me anything. Hell, just knowing the teeny bit I did about him, I doubted he was a good cook anyways. He probably got Chinese takeout every night and then spent half of the hours he should be sleeping in that workout room.

I decided to wait in silence, more curious than annoyed now. What would Jacob Hall make me for dinner? If you could call this dinner. It was pretty late now—I never told my mom what time I'd be coming home. I really should text her.

Jacob had my phone. Right. I'd given it to him when he'd miraculously come to save me from my *Mean Girls* tormentors.

Getting to my feet, I asked, "Where's my phone?"

Jacob was near the stove, and he tossed a look over his shoulder at me. "It's in my room. If you wait a minute, I'll get it."

I waved him off. My body might not feel great, but I could move better now. My guess was, my phone was still in the pants he'd been wearing

earlier. I headed down the hall, turning in his room. It wasn't like I planned on snooping or anything, just grabbing my phone. Getting what I needed.

His room was nothing spectacular. The bed wasn't made, and by the look of the pillows on it, he slept smackdab in the center, all sprawled out. Wooden boards with deer painted on them adorned the walls, and for a moment I had to pause to take it all in. It was not the kind of room I'd expect to see anywhere in Midpark.

I didn't belong here, but I was starting to think Jacob didn't, either.

The pants Jacob had been wearing earlier sat on the floor near his dresser, and I went for them without thinking. The moment I knelt down, the world started to sway without me. I didn't know if it was the act of me sinking to my knees or if I was still being affected by whatever had been in my drink. Either way, I had to stop moving.

I heard Jacob's heavy footsteps in the hall, his voice gruff as he said, "I told you I'd—" The moment Jacob came into his room and saw me, he stopped. He probably would've said something insulting, but I was too focused on trying to make the world stop acting so unlevel and wild.

Ugh. My head. It really, really hurt.

My face must've given away what I felt inside, for Jacob fell to his knees beside me. "What's wrong? You don't feel good? Come on, let's get you off the floor." His hands went to grip my elbows, and with a steadiness I was not currently capable of, he helped me up.

For someone who acted like they couldn't care less, he seemed awfully concerned about me. I wasn't sure how to take it.

He helped me stand and moved us backward to the bed, sitting me at the edge of it. The bedframe had no headboard or baseboard, just the simplest metal casing under the box spring and enough wood to stop the mattress from sliding off.

His hands curled around my arms perhaps a bit too tight, and I met his hazel eyes. Just like that, the world stopped spinning. Whatever nauseous feeling had taken over me mere moments ago vanished into thin air. Being this close to him, it would be impossible to not notice how handsome he was under the gruffness of his personality. His chin was square, his jaw wide. He was a rugged man, a man with problems of his own, but one who'd take the time to help me, even though he didn't have to.

What was he playing at, here? Was he hoping to win me over and get a little extra thanks from me, or was he simply trying to protect his investor? I

was a client of his, and without me alive and intact, there would be no future payments for him.

“The next time I tell you that I’ll do something, let me do it,” Jacob frowned out, finally releasing his hold on my arms. He went to the pants on the floor, picking them up and searching the pockets, stopping when he pulled out my phone and handed it to me. When I took my phone from him, my fingertips brushed his, and our eyes met.

Our eyes met, and then—stupid me—my gaze dropped to his lips. My mind immediately wandered. What would a kiss from Jacob Hall be like? Would it be rough and wild, akin to his appearance and his demeanor, or would it be soft and sweet, a surprising kind of kiss?

I shouldn’t be wondering about his kisses at all. Now was literally the worst time to think about kisses, especially Jacob’s kisses.

Jacob immediately gave his back to me, though he didn’t leave the room entirely. “Are you well enough to go back into the living room, or are you deciding to rest in my room?”

Being in Jacob’s room felt a little...strange. I shouldn’t know what his bed felt like. Hell, after what happened with Archer, sex and all that should be the last thing on my mind.

“I’ll come out,” I said, getting to my feet. I followed him out of his room, heading to the couch with my phone in my hand. I wasn’t going to text my mom right now, but it just felt good having it near. Was not going to tell her where I was or who I was with—because then I’d have to explain everything to her, which I bet would only upset her—but only that I was safe. Mom and I didn’t exactly part on great terms earlier.

My mind recalled what she’d said, that I looked like him. My dad.

I looked like my dad. Just as well, because I sure as shit didn’t look like Mom. Mom had the pretty blonde hair and blue eyes, while mine were the opposite. Black and brown, thick and unruly. Even my skin was a few shades darker than hers, but she was like a ghost, never getting a tan, even in the best of summers.

My mom lied. There was no father on my birth certificate because she’d claimed to not know who he was, but now I knew that was a lie. A fib I so willingly believed all my life, because why would my mom lie to me about something like that? Did she not want my dad to be a part of my life?

I didn’t know what to think of that, but I knew I was a bit miffed at it.

“Dinner is served,” Jacob spoke, interrupting my roaming thoughts as he set a plate on the small coffee table before me.

I snapped back into reality, noting that he’d made me...a hot dog. Just a hot dog. Not even in a bun, no ketchup, no anything else. Not exactly what I expected, but then again, I wasn’t sure what the hell I expected. He was clearly no chef.

And then, in spite of myself, in spite of everything that had happened tonight, I started to laugh. I laughed at the hot dog, at the state of my life, at everything, really. I laughed like I’d never seen something funnier. I laughed like I’d never laughed before.

Jacob stood near me, folding his arms over his chest, as if my laughter insulted his immaculate cooking skills. After all, he’d slaved over that stove, frying up this hot dog for me.

“I’m not laughing at you,” I told him, grinning as I leaned forward and plucked the hot dog off the plate. It was, to his credit, a perfectly-cooked hot dog. No parts browner and more fried than the rest. It was all an even color, warm to the touch. “I’m not. I love hot dogs. I haven’t had one since...” I trailed off, the smile fading on my face. “Since before we moved here.” I took a bite, chewing it softly, slowly, swallowing it as I watched Jacob unfold his arms and sit beside me.

And I meant beside me as in right next to me, no extra cushion between us.

This guy better be careful—or maybe I should be careful. With how willy-nilly I threw around my feelings, you’d think I’d have learned my lesson when it came to guys with handsome faces and secrets of their own.

I took another bite of the hot dog. It wouldn’t be overly filling, but it would be enough. “I’m worried that my mom has been lying to me.”

Whoa. Not sure why the hell I felt comfortable telling Jacob that, but... well, once it was out, it was too late to take it back.

“Lying to you about what?” he asked, running a hand through his hair. The gesture made me glance at his arm muscles perhaps a bit too long. It was easy to ogle this man. Too easy.

“My dad,” I said. “My whole life she told me she didn’t know who he was. Even on my birth certificate, there’s no name.” Another bite of the hot dog, my mind racing. With the hot dog settling in my belly, I was starting to feel better. “But tonight, we sort of got into it. She didn’t want me to go to the party.”

“For good reason, apparently,” Jacob muttered, stretching his arms out on the back cushions of the couch. If I leaned back, I’d touch his arm.

No leaning back, then.

“You don’t understand,” I said, shooting him a look. “I’m not allowed to date. She didn’t like it when I slept over friends’ houses. Ninety percent of the time, they had to come over our house. She’s always been so controlling —”

“That’s how parents are supposed to be.”

“No, not that much. I’m eighteen years old. If I want to date, if I want to go to a party, I should be able to—though tonight’s party doesn’t really prove my point.” I shifted in my seat, setting down the butt end of the hot dog onto the plate. Granted, technically both ends of hot dogs were the same, but in my head, the leftover end was the butt end, and I never ate it. Letting out a sigh, I said, “Anyways, tonight, she slipped up. She told me I looked a lot like my dad.”

Jacob, ever the investigator, put it together quickly: “So she’s known all along who your dad was. She just kept it to herself all these years.”

Even though it was probably a mistake, I leaned back. His arm grazed my neck, but I acted as though I couldn’t feel it, like it didn’t bother me. It did. It bothered me in a way it shouldn’t. That arm...I wouldn’t mind having it wrap around me. In fact, tonight of all nights, I could really just use a hug.

“Why would she do that?” I asked a man who would have no answers for me. Jacob was a PI, but he couldn’t figure out the answers to everything. He was no all-knowing man. I was asking the wrong guy.

He was silent for a while, pensive. “Maybe she kept him from you because she knew he wouldn’t be a good father to you. Maybe he’d be a bad influence, or maybe she wanted to protect you from him.”

I listened to what he said, the underlying message of his words. “So you think my dad could be...a bad guy?”

“You never know.”

My shoulders slumped, and I muttered, “That sucks, if it’s true.” My eyes turned down, and I stared at the backs of my hands, slowly turning them to view my palms. My fingerprints. What made me *me*.

I acted a bit rash at times. Occasionally my temper got the best of me. What if all of my bad traits were from him? What if Jacob was right and my dad was not a good man? If, all these years, Mom kept me under her wing

because she was afraid I'd turn out like him? After all, it wasn't too long ago that I stood in Jacob's shower, swearing vengeance on every person at that party.

"No matter who your father is, you're still you," Jacob told me. "You're who you make yourself out to be, not whose blood runs in those veins." A weird thing to say, but it made me feel a bit better anyway.

I let out a sigh, turning my head towards him. With his arm behind me, he sat so close. I didn't want to talk about my dad or my mom anymore. I didn't want to talk about me at all. After everything I'd told him, I felt like he knew too much about me. He knew too much about Jazmine Smith, but what did I really know about him besides his name and his job?

"What happened with you and the MPD?" A cool way of saying Midpark Police Department. I felt like I was on a TV show, talking like that. "You have police experience, but you're young. Why aren't you still with them?"

Jacob frowned—luckily this frown was not sent to me. He didn't look bad when he frowned or scowled, much to my chagrin. I shouldn't be attracted to this man at all. There should be no warmth blossoming in my gut as I watched him frown. "That's...a long story."

I leaned all the way back, my shoulder blades touching the arm behind me, kicking up my feet and resting them on the corner of the coffee table. He didn't move away from my touch, and I instantly found that reassuring. Grinning, I said, "I've got the time tonight, you know. It isn't like I have anywhere else to be."

Now the frown turned to me, though he didn't pull away. "I'd rather not talk about it. They're not good memories." Jacob liked to keep his emotions close to his chest, clearly. He didn't like expressing them or letting anyone else know what he was feeling.

I couldn't say why, but I wanted to pry Jacob open and see what lied inside. I wanted to see what made him tick, know his thoughts, know more about him.

Still smiling at him, I started to shake my head.

His brows furrowed, and he harrumphed, sounding particularly grumpy, "What?" Jacob didn't like me laughing at him, or even smiling at him.

"You're..." I trailed off, unsure how I wanted to say it. "A strange guy." When he gave me a glower, I added, "Not that it's a bad thing. It's not. I

just...I want to know more about you, I guess.” I shrugged, moving my legs so they tucked under my ass instead, leaning more towards him.

“There’s nothing to know.”

Somehow, I knew he was lying, so I kept grinning.

“Stop smiling at me like that,” Jacob hissed, the lines under his stubble deepening as he scowled even more. He looked like the epitome of the grumpy loner who didn’t want to be a part of any group, and yet constantly found himself in the middle of things anyway.

I tilted my head, my wet hair falling over my shoulder. “Why? Does it bother you, Jacob Hall?” I found myself biting my lower lip as I waited for his answer. The more I looked at him, the more I liked him.

“Yes.”

Inching closer to him, I whispered, “Why?” Still wore the smile, too. Jacob was a nice distraction from what happened earlier, from the headache pounding away in my skull.

“Because,” he spoke quickly, gruffly, “you’re...” He said nothing else, letting out a long, hard sigh. From seeing him work out, I knew his sighs weren’t the only hard part of him. All that muscle, all that sweat.

“I’m what?” I asked, less than three inches from his shoulder, from touching him. I shouldn’t...but I wanted to. I wanted to feel those arms around me again, now that I was not completely out of it as I was earlier. Now that I could close my eyes and lose myself in the feeling of strong, protective arms around me. I could appreciate them so much better now.

“You’re you,” he muttered.

The simple answer made my heart speed up. I was me. Well, of course I was me, but there had to be more to it. He had to mean it differently.

“Is that bad?” I asked, the smile slowly disappearing as I stared at him.

“Yes.”

The word should’ve cut me like a knife, but the way he said it, the expression his face wore, I knew he meant the opposite. “Then let me apologize, because I just can’t help it,” I told him. Before I knew what I was doing, I leaned into him. Not to kiss him or anything, but to his chest, his wide, solid, strong chest. With my nose turned in slightly toward the fabric, I could smell his sweat. I could smell him.

I could get used to a smell like that.

Jacob’s body tensed, and I knew he thought about getting up and walking away. I set a hand on his abdomen, recalling the scar I’d seen.

“What are you doing?” Jacob asked, sounding...confused? Anxious? Some kind of conflicted emotion.

“Nothing,” I whispered against his chest. With an ear against him, I heard a low rumble in his chest, almost like a growl. He was practically a stranger to me, and yet...I felt some kind of connection with him. And, by God, I wanted that arm wrapped around me, holding me.

Strange as it was, I wanted to use Jacob’s presence to help make me feel better. Was that wrong of me?

And then, like a miracle, the arm that rested on the back cushions of the couch moved, curling around me, holding me to him, keeping me rooted in place, as if he was scared I’d change my mind and get up.

“You should stop,” Jacob whispered, his tense posture relaxing. His words and his body were clearly on two different pages here, and I was too happy to feel his arm around me to complain or worry.

I shouldn’t trust him, but like I’d said earlier, if he was going to take advantage of me, he would’ve done it already. We wouldn’t even be in the position we were in if it wasn’t for me. He wouldn’t have made any moves; Jacob Hall was content to hold me at arm’s length. Literally, minus the hold part.

Except now, apparently, because with the way his arm felt around me, it didn’t feel as if he’d be letting me go anytime soon, even though he’d told me I should stop.

I let out a soft sigh, closing my eyes. It wasn’t the most comfortable position I’d ever been in, but it was one of the best I’d been in recently. I’d take this over a lot of things, even if it meant I’d have to deal with Jacob’s grumpiness.

“You’re not a bad guy, Jacob,” I murmured, feeling so relaxed I could fall asleep right on his chest, with his arm around me. The pain in my head dulled down, a sudden drowsiness overtaking me. Everything, combined with the heat from his chest, made me fall asleep.

The funny thing was, I could’ve sworn I heard Jacob mutter “You’re wrong” before I was out.

Mom was pissed when I got back, but that was expected. She was glad I was safe, and I was, too. She did not understand why I wore someone else’s clothes, let alone a guy’s, but I told her—swore up and down—that nothing happened. Nothing between me and anyone.

I did totally fall asleep on Jacob's chest, even drooled on him a little, but she didn't need to know that. I'd woken up a few hours later, jerking myself awake to find that Jacob had fallen asleep too.

The most bizarre thing was, Jacob looked so peaceful when he was sleeping. So unlike how he was when he was awake.

But, anyway, Mom was upset with me, and to placate her, I told her no more parties for a long time. That was a promise, although I didn't exactly promise it to her. She didn't need to know the truth about what happened, and she didn't need to know the vengeful thoughts in my head.

Archer, Brittany, her crew...I'd get them back. I would plan all day every day if I had to, until I had a plan so perfect and devious that I'd surprise even myself with it. They wouldn't know what hit them.

I didn't ask Mom about Dad the rest of the weekend, too lost in my own thoughts. I didn't forget what had been said, didn't forget what it all meant, but I'd let it slide until Archer and Brittany were dealt with. Once I could focus all of my energy on Dad and the truth, I would bring him up again to her. But for now, the topic was as good as dead at the Smith's dinner table.

Not that it was our dinner table. It was Ollie's.

By the time school came on Monday, I had the beginnings of a plan formulated in my head. I might need some help, but I was sure if I talked to Bobbi about it, she'd help. It didn't sound like she was a huge fan of Brittany and her crew. I wasn't particularly ready to return to school, but alas, there was nothing I could do. I had to face the music, as it was.

And so it shall be. The music would be faced, only the music that followed me the next Monday morning was dark.

Things around here were going to get worse before they got better.

Chapter Twenty-Four – Dante

When I promised Skull something, I would do anything to follow through. Anything. Most guys in the gang would say the same, but I was one of the few who meant it. I would die for him if I had to. But the job I had now was so much better than that.

It'd taken a while, but I'd found her. I'd found her, watched her, kept an eye on her even though he didn't want me stalking her. Once she turned eighteen though, she officially became an adult. She would have to choose, and if I had any say in it, she'd make the right choice. I wouldn't let her make the wrong one.

I didn't know her well, but watching someone from afar, you could learn a lot. Their likes, their dislikes, what they did when they were faced with a person who they didn't like...and a person they liked a bit too much.

I stood back even when I should've intervened. I was there the whole time, watching it all unfold. I even followed her and her savior to his apartment. What happened Friday had been the last straw. Skull hadn't given me permission to do what I was about to do, but I didn't care. I couldn't sit back and let her make all of these mistakes when her true future was still unknown to her.

The weather had warmed yesterday. Still a bit cool to ride a bike, but there was no snow and the skies were clear.

And I didn't mean a pedaling bike. I meant a motorcycle.

The chicks who hung around always loved it, and sometimes I took interest in them. Mostly just to pass the time, because I'd known for years now.

Jazmine would be mine. I'd make her see it. I'd make her believe it. I'd introduce her to a world she never knew existed. Open her eyes and let her view chaos in its entirety.

Chaos was a beautiful thing, truly. It was one of my most favorite things in the world.

I stood near my bike early the next Monday morning, staring at the front doors to the local high school. It was way too fancy for me. Just a quick look at the students getting out of expensive cars and heading into the glass doors told me that. Wearing black pants and leather, I didn't fit in. With the

sides of my head shaven and the tattoo curling around my skull, I definitely stuck out like a sore thumb around here.

There were cameras, but I didn't care. If I played my cards right, it wouldn't look like a kidnapping. It would look as if she came willingly.

And she would, because I knew her weakness.

Knowing weaknesses gave you a certain kind of advantage you just couldn't get with anything else. Knowledge truly was power...of course, it also helped if you had a knife or a gun to back you up.

Knives were fun. They were my favorite. In fact, I had a pretty impressive one in my inner pocket in my jacket. I'd flash it if I had to, although I really hoped to avoid it. Didn't want to cause a scene here at Midpark High.

I knew what vehicle I waited for, and the moment I saw it pull up to the school, the old van looking so out of place amongst the rich surroundings, my hands clenched into fists. This was it. I was going to see her up close. No more distance. No more hiding.

She got out of the car, waving to her mother before the old van drove off. I started walking across the parking lot, leaving my bike in one of the parking spots. My plan was to catch her outside, before she walked into those glass doors and disappeared in the sea of other high school students.

In reality, I wasn't much older than them. A few years, but those few years meant I'd seen a lot. So much more than these rich kids had. To be as important as I was at twenty-two years old, you had to be willing to get dirty and bloody, and I'd done both for him time and time again.

I hurried across the painted walkway that sat between the parking lot and the school. It looked like she was taking her time...almost as if she didn't want to go into those doors and step foot at the school.

Well, I supposed that meant I would be her savior today.

I was able to catch up to her, standing in front of her, stopping her sluggish walk immediately. She blinked in confusion, having no idea why a stranger like myself would practically bum rush to get near her, and she tilted that pretty head of hers up to me, her dark eyes locking with my blue ones.

Oh, God. She was even prettier up close. So pretty I instantly wanted to touch her all over.

That would come later. For now, I had to get her to come with me.

“Uh, excuse me,” Jazmine said, trying to walk around me, but I blocked her every time. A few other students around us were staring at me, but I didn’t care. Fuck all those people. Fuck them hard.

“Can’t let you go inside,” I told her, giving her a half-smile. Just being this close to her made my insides all warm. I could definitely get high off the feeling.

Her full lips pursed. “Why?”

“Because you have to come with me.”

She let out a nervous chuckle. “I don’t know you. I don’t have to go anywhere with you.”

I still smirked, and a hand reached inside my unzipped leather jacket. Flashing her the knife, I added, “You should know I’m more than okay with making a scene. It would be better for the both of us if I didn’t, but I’m prepared to do anything to get the job done.”

Her tan skin paled, her eyes dropping to my stomach, where the knife sat, just enough in view to be menacing. “What?”

I took another step towards her, cocking my head. “You should also know that I know where your mother is, and that, besides the guard—who I’m fairly sure I could take care of, because look at me—is alone during the day in that big house. I’m sure you’d hate if something were to happen to her.”

Intensity radiated off every word I said; I took my threatening seriously. When I threatened, it was more like a promise. If she didn’t come with me, I’d sure as shit make a fuss here and then I’d go to that big house and give her mom a visit. I wouldn’t kill her mom, because Skull would have my head, but I’d do just enough damage to make Jazmine realize she had no choice but to come with me.

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice shaking a bit. She was scared, and I didn’t blame her.

“I will tell you everything, but not here.” My head gestured to the parking lot, and she turned her head to look. My motorcycle was the only one in the lot, and it kind of stuck out. “Let’s blow this popsicle stand, Jazmine.”

Her dark brows came together, the wind whipping at her long, thick hair. “How do you know my name?”

“So many questions,” I mused, linking my arm through hers and practically dragging her to my bike.

We stopped near my bike, and she couldn't stop staring at it. "No helmet?"

I hoisted a leg over it, sitting on the seat. She'd have to sit behind me and hold on. "I'm a smooth ride," I told her, smirking, "when I'm on a bike."

Her eyes widened, and I laughed.

"Come on, we don't have all day. Get on the bike."

Jazmine looked like she wanted to run away and never see me again, but I'd called her out on her weakness: her mother. She cared a lot about that woman, for whatever reason. Me? The only person I cared about like that was Skull, and that was more like loyalty than anything else. She loved her mother, while I...I couldn't remember the last time I'd loved anything.

But, like a good girl, she climbed on behind me, wrapping her arms around my abdomen. If the positions were a little different, I could find us something else to do. Something with no clothes, preferably. Maybe even a little bondage. I bet Jazmine would look spectacular tied up and helpless.

I kicked up the stand, started my bike, and then we were out of there, my exhaust rumbling as we zoomed out of the parking lot.

The wind was cool as it whipped at my face, and I knew Jazmine was probably cold behind me, for she kept her face tight against my back to block out the wind.

Was this a kidnapping? Maybe. I did kind of force her to go with me, threatening her mother if she didn't. But this wasn't the first time I'd broken the law, and it sure as shit wouldn't be the last. For as long as I was alive and part of the crew, I would be a criminal.

The bad in life was what made me feel so alive. Jazmine might be a good girl now, but once I got my hands on her, once Skull was able to open her eyes, she'd turn a leaf and become someone new. I couldn't wait to see what the future had in store for us.

Things for Jazmine Smith would change. Her world would never be the same.

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Be on the lookout for book 2, Defiant, coming soon!