



HERE, MAYBE WE'RE ALL A LITTLE...

U**N**h**i**N**G**E**d**

A DARK ROMANCE WHY CHOOSE SERIES

STEPH MACCA

Unhinged

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Triggers and Warnings

- **Mental illness (including cPTSD, PTSD, BPD, schizophrenia, anger management, OCD, depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies, bipolar disorder)**
- **Murder**
- **Suicide**
- **Death of a parent**
- **Death of a friend**
- **Drug addiction**
- **Violence**
- **Swearing**
- **Sexual assault**
- **Removal of limbs**
- **Tattooing**
- **Needles**
- **Blood**
- **Penetration with objects**
- **Morgues/mortuary cabinets**
- **Unethical abuse by professionals**
- **Infertility issues**
- **Abuse and neglect**

What a good fucking girl you are.

Spread these pages while you spread your legs.

Let all the unhinged, depraved darkness out.

Chapter 1

Unknown

Sometimes you need to cut ties with people...

And sometimes those ties are arteries.

Shamefully, I should have learned more by now with my time on this Earth. But, life never quite happens how it should.

What I have learned though is the world is not black and white despite the ignorant, naïve fuckers who live by that philosophy. No, it's many shades of fucked up – and I've been in the grey for a long time.

People will always believe what they want. A few who know the whole story see me as a hero – a martyr of the fallen.

I'm not a hero though. I don't pretend to be something I'm not. I also don't see the need or pleasure in categorizing myself.

Many people see me as the villain. And to that I say... *then I'll be the fucking villain.*

Chapter 2

Avery

Lilydale Foundation Center...

From the outside, it almost looks *normal*. The pristine white marble columns, neatly trimmed vines and bushes, and an obscenely disgusting amount of roses everywhere. Roses, really. With a name like Lilydale they could have at least used some of the ridiculous amount of money they make to put actual fucking lilies in the garden. Maybe the roses are a metaphor - the sharp thorns being dangerous despite looking like pretty little harmless flowers.

If it wasn't for the huge black metal gates surrounding the property and guards with guns, you'd almost believe it was a nice place to be. Maybe that's what they want them to believe. Or at least... us.

"Avery, it looks lovely. Don't you think so?"

I look over at Margaret, my designated social worker. Her perfectly trimmed bob-styled brown hair makes her look older than she actually is. I'm sure it's all a ruse. You don't take up a job dealing with fucked up kids with the appearance of a young twenty-five year old. Especially when I'm only five years younger than her. She wants us to believe we're not as messed up as we are.

She has it all wrong though. If anything, her fitted power suit and expensive haircut remind me how privileged she is. Props to her for taking on a job like this, but I bet she's never known struggle in her entire life. She probably went to an Ivy League school and never had to worry about things like money or food. Hell, her parents are probably still together, sailing on a yacht somewhere in the Caribbean.

"It looks like Hell," I reply in a monotone voice.

Margaret plasters on a warm, encouraging smile. "It's really the best outcome. I think you'll like it here."

I scoff. "It's a glorified juvenile prison, Margie. Not an academic facility to give me a bright, shiny future. Let's not pretend it's more than what it is."

"But it might give you a future," she murmurs. "We were lucky to get this option. The other one..."

She trails off, swallowing her words and shifting uncomfortably. She doesn't have to finish the sentence. I already know what the alternative was.

Prison.

After all, isn't that where you go when you murder someone?

I still remember the Judge's voice, scolding me when he read out my sentencing in Court. I barely paid attention — too dazed and in disbelief from the mess I found myself in. From the moment the words "guilty" left the head juror's mouth, all I could hear was a buzzing in my head as everything else faded out around me.

The only reason I was even here was because a spot had opened up at the elusive Lilydale Foundation Center and some new baby attorney wanted to make his mark in the profession and argued for it. Who cared either way? I was already a mess and no matter where I ended up, I was still going to be a mess.

The downside about coming here is they are going to try to rehabilitate me into a functioning member of society, fully funded by mysterious donations. Prison is *supposed* to do the same - if you ever get out. I suppose if you're a murderer, you're always going to be branded by that. It doesn't matter how much you change, you'll always be known for what you are.

I have no idea why people would want to donate to a facility like this. I guess if you are rich with cash to throw around, it doesn't matter where it goes. It looks good for you and you just claim it back as a tax write-off. Win-win situation.

The attorney told me I was lucky they even considered this option given the charges. Not to mention it's apparently extremely difficult to get a spot here.

Lucky.

I don't consider myself lucky. They just want to use my sob story to further themselves and pretend that this institution will

change me into something successful — a phoenix rising from the ashes of pain. Imagine the newspapers in five years time if I suddenly became this outstanding citizen after everything. The media moguls cashing in on my story. They don't give a shit about us. They just want to exploit our pain for their own benefit.

Apparently, my team had high hopes for me, telling me over and over that this will change my life. I'll get a second chance, and one day, everything will be a distant memory. I just had a small fraction of hope that eventually my life would end and I could try again in the next lifetime if I'm fortunate enough to not end up in Hell.

"Let's just get this over with," I mutter to Margaret, watching as the front doors open and a man in a suit emerges. He trots perfectly down the steps and gives Margaret a smile.

"This must be Avery White," he says to her, ignoring the fact I'm standing right next to her.

Margaret puts a hand on my shoulder. "It is! She's very excited to be here."

I roll my eyes, shrugging her hand off. The man turns his attention to me, his welcoming expression dropping as his façade disappears.

"Ms. White, I trust you're prepared for your time here."

Slowly, I look up at him with a hard expression. "Tell me - how does one *prepare* for this?"

Margaret stiffens at my tone, brushing her hair behind her ear nervously. "We have all the paperwork here, Mr. Whittingham. The Court orders are annexed at the back which outlines the proposed plan for Avery's treatment and conditions of enrollment."

She hands over a black binder, my name scribbled neatly at the top. He collects the binder from her, tucking it under his arm.

"Right. Well, thank you for dropping her off. Ms. White, if you'd please follow me. I'll begin your orientation."

Margaret goes to reach for my arm, but quickly abandons that idea. "Best of luck with everything, Avery. I hope this helps and you find what you need."

I ignore her, following this twit inside. He's much easier to deal with than Margaret with her trembling emotions and pity. I don't even spare her a backwards glance as the door is closed behind me when I step inside.

The entrance is much like I expected it to be from the outside. Too much white, overly clean and bare. All the doors leading to other rooms are closed, and the office desk in the center of the room has more flowers decorating it.

"Avery White," Mr. Whittingham says, handing my binder to the woman behind the desk.

She's an older woman, her face aged with wrinkles. Like her colleague, she's almost completely void of emotion. I suppose dealing with lunatics on a daily basis will do that to you.

She hands him an envelope, glancing at me briefly as she takes in my appearance.

My black hair is styled in a Dutch braid - thanks to Margaret who insisted on playing hairdresser this morning. I have to give her props, at least she cares about her clients. She's probably one of the only people to actually ever care about me. But the difference is she's being paid to give a shit. One day, that enthusiasm will wear off, and it will just be about the money for her as society drains her expectations.

The woman's brown eyes lock on mine, my gray ones reminding me I couldn't be more different than these elitists.

"The foundation Doctor has a copy of your medical history and would like to see you in the clinic tomorrow to discuss."

Her gaze lingers over the bandage wrapped tightly up my left arm, making it obvious she's read my file herself — what a nosey bitch.

"Lucky me," I say blandly.

She lets out a little sigh under her breath, turning her attention back to Mr. Whittingham. "The envelope has her access information, designated professional schedule and classes. I have confirmed that we have received her transcripts from Lake St. Louis High."

"Excellent," he replies, motioning for me to follow through a door to our left. "Thanks, Teddy."

Mr. Whittingham closes the door after me, and I notice every single door has a keypad access pad. He catches me checking them out, nodding towards one.

"Every door in the facility has a two part access system. A staff card and a code must be entered for it to open."

"Let me guess," I say. "You're telling me this as part of the lecture about not trying to escape. You know, just in case the guards with guns around the perimeter don't deter me."

Mr. Whittingham swipes his card and enters in a code on the next door, hiding the pad from view before opening the door and holding it for me. "You wouldn't be the first. Surprisingly, guns don't deter a lot of people here."

"I can't imagine why not," I reply sarcastically. "We're all mentally deranged, right?"

He casually walks alongside me, his slick blonde hair and blue eyes sticking out like a sore thumb with his black suit. "Call it whatever you want to make yourself comfortable. But Lilydale Foundation Center is an academic rehabilitation facility for young members of society. The first of its kind."

"Oh, please," I moan. "Save me the speech. It's a glorified money funneling place used to make yourselves look good. We're not saveable and you know it. But, the mission statement probably looks amazing and I bet your salary is impressive."

His lips twitch as he fights a smile. "I've heard it all before, Ms. White. Trust the process. You'd be surprised what can come out of Lilydale."

"I read the brochure in my holding cell. Lily Emerson-Dale killed herself due to mental illness, but was apparently an intelligent individual with great promise," I recite. "Her family had too much money so they created this facility to help others in her good name. But you just house prisoners here and disguise it as some type of privileged facility."

"We've had many individuals with similar circumstances to your own go through here and pass the process with flying colors. Many of whom are now successful individuals with new lives. Isn't that something you wish to strive for?"

I laugh dryly. "We all wish to be successful and happy, but life doesn't always go according to plan. Sometimes you can't save everyone. You can't save me."

He opens a final door. "We'll give it our best shot anyway. This is your dormitory, the Eastwood wing. There's only females in here, of course. The men are housed in the Westwood wing."

"Of course," I repeat sarcastically. "Can't risk the boys and girls mingling."

Mr. Whittingham ignores my comment, continuing. "It's just for housing. All members of the foundation co-exist during classes and free time."

"Free time. Sounds delightful."

"The staff will help you follow the routine, but you will have professional appointments in the morning, a small number of classes in the afternoon, then two hours of free time before dinner. After dinner, there's designated shower schedules before you return to your room for the evening."

My nose wrinkles at the access pads on the doors. "Where you get locked inside every night. Tell me, is there a fire plan in case the place burns down? Or do you just leave us locked in the rooms and claim it back on insurance?"

"The facility is up to code with all emergency procedures. There's a copy in your handbook in your room. I'm sure you will have plenty of time to read it."

I roll my eyes and step inside my room. It's basically the same as a prison cell anyway. Each room is numbered - mine is 213 - and it's barely bigger than a cell. There's a single bed in one corner, the frame bolted to the floor. In the opposite corner is a desk and chair, also secured. There's a second door to my left at the end of the bed, and Mr. Whittingham opens it.

"What? No access code?" I joke.

"The toilet and basin," he points out before closing the door. "Showers are down the corridor which we will show you later."

My eyes trail over the white walls, twitching at the painted floral artwork. Mr. Whittingham drops the envelope on the desk, turning to me.

"Read the contents of your envelope. It has all the information you need in it. There's also a copy of the handbook on the desk. You're scheduled for a psychiatric appointment in an hour. Someone will come to collect you."

I watch as he hovers in the doorway for a moment, hand on the frame. "I hope you enjoy your time with us, Ms. White. I think you'll grow to like it."

"Not likely," I mutter.

"Life is full of surprises. Be grateful someone cared about you enough to *try*. Most don't get that luxury. Welcome to Lilydale, Avery."

Chapter 3

Avery

"I can see the Judge ordered a psych evaluation which was done a few weeks ago. Did the psychiatrist go over the results with you?"

I blink slowly at the man, his pearly white teeth looking so unnatural. And who wears a formal suit to patient appointments like this? He reminds me of Margaret - trying to overcompensate for his age by dressing up. Maybe they should hook up and have cute little perfect babies with short bobs and tuxedos.

"She did," I reply, short.

He nods. "And how do you feel about that?"

I swear if one more person asks me how I feel, I'm going to go insane — if I'm not already there.

My eyes drift to his name plate on the desk, the letters so shiny, it's obvious he's a newbie as well - *Dr. Christopher Smith - Psychiatrist.*

"It is what it is."

Dr. Smith crosses one of his legs over his opposite knee, tapping his jawline. "The report covered some comprehensive information about your childhood. In any event, it's not surprising that you have been diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Is that what led to the events that brought you here?"

I don't answer him. I know he's trying to do his job but I've already been asked this a million times - by police officers, social workers, my attorney. No one knows the full story and that's the way it's going to stay.

"What events?" I ask, deflecting. "My father's death? My incarceration? My imprisonment here at this prestigious facility?"

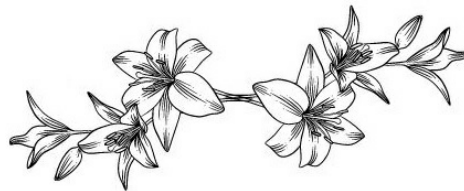
My tone drips with sarcasm, but he pays no mind to it. He looks down at the report in his hand, tapping away.

"What about your mother? Do you want to talk about her?"

I sigh. "How often are these sessions required during my stay here?"

Dr. Smith smiles politely. "Three times a week until your release."

I cross my legs and lean back. "Well, best we just take our time then. Seems like we have a long road ahead of us. We need to make sure we have plenty to talk about in the future since I'm not going anywhere anytime soon."



"This hall is where you have your meals. The times are written in your handbook. If you don't eat, then you wait until the next meal. Snacks are forbidden in the rooms."

My eyes narrow at the blonde haired girl, who looks to be around the same age as me. She's bored, reciting everything so perfectly like she's done it a hundred times before.

"Do you work here?" I ask accusingly.

She snorts. "No. I'm just like you. I've been assigned this job for six months. Orientation support, they called it."

"Sounds like a load of shit," I mutter.

Her piercing green eyes hover on my face for a moment, as if she's trying to figure me out. Well, good luck with that.

"It is," she confirms. "But it goes towards good behavior. I might be released next year because of it."

"Yippee."

She rolls her eyes, pointing her finger to another door opposite the hall. "That's the library in there. It's open during our free time, though I can't imagine anything worse. It stinks in there like something died five years ago."

"Probably did. One of us, I imagine," I say.

Her lips twitch slightly in amusement. "The only people that generally bother hanging out in there are a few girls who try to study for bonus points, and some group of guys."

"And they just let boys and girls mingle?"

A devious glint appears in her eyes and I realize that perhaps it's not as proper and fancy here behind the scenes as they made it out to be. "Sure. Just as long as everyone behaves. Last year two students got caught fucking in the library. They banned our free time for a week as punishment. If someone fucks up, we all get punished. It's a way to keep us in check."

"Not surprising. They seem to have a chip on their shoulder—"

"Vivian! I see you're showing Avery around."

We both turn around, spotting Mr. Whittingham standing behind us. Judging by the less than amused look on his face, he overheard our conversation.

"I am," Vivian confirms. "Not that I had a choice."

He ignores her, stepping towards me. "And I trust your appointment with Dr. Smith went well?"

I wrinkle my nose up at his words before I can stop myself. "Sure."

"Good," he replies curtly. "You will start classes tomorrow. Carry on."

The two of us watch him walk away, and when he's out of sight, we both let out a laugh.

"God, is he always that insufferable?" I ask Vivian.

She nods. "Yeah. You get used to it though. It's like black and white here — yin and yang. The facility staff all have sticks up their asses and the students... prisoners... whatever you want to call us, are reckless. Most here have some type of mental illness, thus the psychiatrists and guards on hand."

"I assumed so," I answer, following her into the hall. "Apparently, mental illness is the only thing that stopped me from going to real prison. Though, the jury is still out as to whether this was the better alternative."

Vivian pauses by the empty food stations. "It's not too bad. We get some benefits that you wouldn't get in prison. Plus, if we pass the facility and get released, our convictions become sealed. Or at least, that's what they tell us."

I hear footsteps behind me and I turn around to spot a fiery redhead staring at me. She's about my height - 5'9" - with dark blue eyes and a curvy frame.

"Who are you?" she asks me abruptly.

I raise an eyebrow at her hostility, wondering why it's even a surprise that there could possibly be a new *student*.

"This is Avery," Vivian answers for me. "Just arrived today. Avery, this is Siobhan. She's in the room next to mine."

Siobhan grimaces at me, looking me up and down. Slowly, she appears to decide I'm okay and holds out her hand. I shake it quickly, not keen to ruffle feathers so early on in my arrival, before dropping my arm back to my side.

"What did you do?"

"Seriously? Are you allowed to just ask that?" I ask.

Siobhan shrugs. "I don't give a shit whether you tell me or not. Just curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat," I murmur.

She nods. "Well?"

"Lucky you're not a cat then."

Her eyes flare up slightly as Vivian sighs, grabbing Siobhan's arm and pulling her to the side. She whispers something heatedly at her before Siobhan throws a glare at me, stomping away.

"Don't worry about her," Vivian says dryly. "She just found out her brother committed suicide on the outside. She's not doing all that great. Her family is really messed up."

"I thought she was going to punch me or something," I grumble, watching as kitchen staff walk past us, unfazed.

"Nah, she's fine. She's bipolar so you just have to roll with her moods and take her as she is. She was on track for release but her brother's death sent her mental health into a spiral so that's long gone."

I look around the room, spotting a few lingering students. "I thought free time wasn't until the afternoons."

Vivian follows my gaze. "They assign us jobs, like mine. We all just tend to keep to ourselves though."

"Wouldn't it be hostile? Sticking unhinged, hormonal, mentally unstable people in a facility together?"

"Oh, yeah," she agrees. "People get physical all the time. There's cameras everywhere. Don't be fooled, the guards will swarm in quickly if shit hits the fan. But, there's consequences like I said. Plus, they make you do extra psych sessions and shit."

I let out an annoyed groan. "Fuck that. It's already bad enough that they are trying to get me to talk about my feelings."

Vivian motions for me to follow her out of the hall. "Eh, you get used to it. I just tell them what they want to hear. I'll show you the courtyard."

We round the corner, heading towards a line of windows and a set of double doors when a body comes flying between us.

Vivian manages to launch herself out of the way in time, but I get smacked into the wall. I turn around, glaring at the back as the person keeps walking. He turns his head to peer over his shoulder, his obsidian eyes glaring at me.

"Watch where the fuck you're going," he spits out before turning away and stalking down the corridor.

"What the fuck is his problem?" I say loudly.

Vivian watches his retreating form. "That's Theo. Ignore him — he's a psycho. He barely socializes with anyone. He's probably just pissed to be on extra work duty."

His black hair and tall frame vanish from view and I shake my head, continuing on. "Whatever. I'm used to dealing with angry lunatics."

"He's bad news," Vivian says, opening the double doors to the courtyard. "He put someone in the hospital three weeks ago. Broke his nose and eye socket. There's not enough anger management classes in the world to fix him. He's been given extra work as punishment."

"Great," I mutter, looking around at the courtyard. Its square form is in the center of the building, the sun shining down onto the neatly trimmed grass. The walls surrounding it are cobblestone, covered in vines. It's a strange contrast to the front of the building, and as usual, there's more fucking flowers.

Benches line the courtyard in front of the walls. It's a decent size, maybe half a football field in length. I spot some cameras in the corners, perfectly positioned to get a view of the entire area.

"This is one of the areas we can utilize in our free time, particularly when it's a nice day like today. If it's raining, there's a few common areas inside but they get crowded pretty fast. Unfortunately, during free time, you're not allowed back in your room."

"How many people are here?" I ask. "The *welcoming* brochure didn't say."

Vivian thinks for a moment. "Around a hundred I think. That's capacity. I believe they have an equal number of places for men and women."

"And people get a spot if someone is released?"

She nods casually. "Or dies."

I pause, looking at her incredulously. She raises an eyebrow at me, shrugging.

"Well, that's how you got here. I suppose they wouldn't have told you that. But it's not often that space becomes available. Lucky for you, someone did die."

I shake my head. There's that word again - *lucky*.

For some reason, my journey keeps moving with the death of other people. And yet, apparently I'm lucky for it. People have a fucked up way of looking at prospective.

I guess we're all a bit fucked up though.

Chapter 4

Avery

I don't know what's worse - the fact that the dressing gown provided by the nurse doesn't cover my entire body, or that the doctor who looks about sixty-five is humming *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* as he reviews my medical file.

"My, my. You've been through a lot," Dr. Markel exclaims with a warm smile.

What the fuck. This man is far too bubbly for a staff member in this place.

"Yep," I answer, unsure what else to say.

He walks around to me, lifting my arm carefully. "And they did a skin graft for the burns, is that correct?"

"That's correct."

"And you also suffered a broken leg a few months ago, as well as a broken nose."

"Also correct."

He nods. "Interesting. And can I see the scar on your back?"

I turn around, the gown not covering my black underwear. He pokes my skin with his latex glove as I resist the urge to move away. The scar tissue is still tender, even though the injury was months ago now.

"And this was due to a beer bottle being smashed into your back which required surgery to remove the glass?"

"You continue to be correct," I snap, feeling like Johnny Depp on the stand, a highlight I followed to distract me from my everyday life before it burned down in flames.

Dr. Markel pulls off his gloves, tossing them into the trash can. "How is your chronic pain level on a daily basis?"

"It hurts most of the time."

"I see. Do you take any medication regularly?"

I shake my head, already sensing where this is going.

"Well, the chronic pain may or may not get better with time. It's also possible that it's exacerbated by your mental health. I'm going to make suggestions to Dr. Smith to look at placing you on some antidepressants or anxiety medications. In addition, I'll prescribe you a low dose of slow-release analgesia. It will help build up in your system to provide long-term relief while we deal with the other issues. Are you on any birth control?"

I blink at him, my face sneering in disgust. "Why would I be on birth control?"

Dr. Markel looks at me confused. "You're a woman. Perhaps it's something you were interested in for protective or preventive purposes? Some women also take it to assist with their menstrual cycles."

I laugh sarcastically. "Dr. Markel, I assume you, like the other members of staff here, have read my file. Do you really think I had time to pursue romantic connections, let alone had insurance to cover the cost of birth control?"

"There are other avenues, but I see your point. Does your menstrual cycle give you any grief?"

"Besides the fact I bleed from my cunt? Not really. I cramp like every other unlucky girl."

Dr. Markel tenses up slightly, his forced smile dropping slightly. "And from your other injuries? Did they change your cycle in any way?"

I look away, not interested in reliving that experience by conversation or other means. Dr. Markel ignores my silence, looking at my medical notes. "You may not need them for preventive measures, but should you wish to look at options for menstrual management, it's covered under your stay here."

"Are we finished yet?"

I hate that this place wants to know every little dark secret about us. Some things need – no, deserve – to be left alone.

"Almost. How was your sleep last night? Most people struggle on their first night here."

I shrug. "The bed is uncomfortable and the person across the hall from me kept screaming in random intervals. But it was fine otherwise."

He nods. "We can prescribe melatonin if you have any issues sleeping. Let me know if you have any medical concerns at our next appointment."

With almost perfect timing, there's a knock on the door behind me and I peer over my shoulder, spotting my escort. I don't wait for either of them to direct me, standing up and walking out of the room.

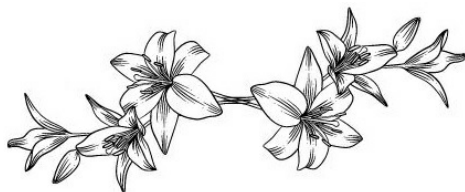
The guard quickly catches up to me as I head off down the corridor, his long legs matching my pace without effort.

When we reach my room, I step inside, turning to look at him. The fact they make their guards look like SWAT members is hilarious — black full attire, chest plates and head gear. I don't think there's anything we could use as a weapon to strike their heads, if we were insane enough to ignore the guns and tasers they carry.

"Someone will be back to collect you in two hours for class," he mutters, closing the door before I can respond.

I stare at the metal door for a few seconds before sitting down on the bed. My fingers stroke the bandage on my arm, curiosity almost getting the better of me. I hate looking at the burns, a constant reminder of the fire. It was my biggest regret and most surprising triumph.

Laying back, I gaze at the ceiling, counting the tiny specks until the hours pass.



"You must be Avery," the teacher says when I walk into the classroom.

It's set up similar to a high school room, lines of individual tables and chairs running in rows. Almost every seat is already occupied as curious, hovering eyes focus on me. There's only about a dozen students, the numbers low, probably for the benefit of the teacher.

"Yeah," I answer in a quiet voice, feeling uneasy as I'm watched by a room full of strangers.

The teacher, a woman in her mid-30s, points to a vacant desk near the front. "I'm Charmaine. You can sit there."

I make my way to the table, sliding into my seat. I can still feel eyes burning into the back of my head, but I ignore them.

"Since we have a new addition today, we are going to re-do our regular general knowledge test. It will give me an idea where you are all sitting in terms of your academic level. Avery, for your information, the classes here are specially designed to help you get your high school diploma since students who come to Lilydale generally haven't completed their basic education."

I hear curses and groans behind me, my new peers annoyed that my presence is forcing them to undergo a test. I sigh, resting my elbow on the desk and popping my chin in the palm of my hand.

Charmaine walks down the rows of students, handing out a bundle of paper. "You know the usual drill. You have two hours to complete the test. It will cover your knowledge in all general areas. If you finish early, please close the test and remain seated."

I twitch as I feel someone close by staring at me intently. I turn my head to the right, staring at the guy parallel to me. He shows no signs of discomfort at me having caught him watching.

My eyebrows furrow with uneasiness, my eyes meeting his dark gray orbs. Something catches my gaze and they drift lower, noticing a red scar on his neck — like someone slashed open his throat.

I quickly look back up, his lips breaking into a wide smile. His dark brown hair looks freshly cut and styled, making me suspicious. Surely we have access to things like haircuts and basic services, but the fact it looks like he has wax or gel in his hair confuses me, as does the black nail polish on his fingers.

"Hi," he says quietly, winking at me.

I recoil in my seat slightly, suddenly feeling intimidated. It takes a lot to make me feel like that, especially after what I've been through. But there's something about him that's unsettling.

"Leave her alone, Grey," Charmaine says, walking between us. She whacks him in the back of the head with his test before putting it in front of him. He barely reacts, his eyes still locked on me.

"You're no fun," he tells her.

Charmaine shakes her head, passing me my test. "Just try to focus on your test, Avery. He's friendly... *ish*."

The reassurance does not hit the intended mark, and Grey lets out a low laugh, finally moving his attention to something else.

I grip my pen in my hand, wondering if it would work as a weapon. I once stabbed my father with a spoon. I managed to draw blood from the force, but it didn't do anything to stop him from punching me. Nothing ever did when he was drinking like that.

"No talking, no cheating. Time starts now."

I shake away the thoughts, opening the paper and looking at the first section — math. I cringe, taking my time as I start working

through the questions. I've never been good with numbers. I was always distracted at home and in class, so it never had time to click.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Grey flying through the answers, not even breaking a sweat. I quickly glance to the other side for reassurance, relieved to find most people are going slow, so it's not just me.

I manage to make it to the end of the math questions, sighing quietly in frustration when it moves to English. I start reading the questions when a scrunched up ball of paper hits my test. Following the projectile direction, I spot Grey staring at me again.

"What are you doing?" he asks with a grin.

I squeeze my pen tighter without realizing, watching as his eyes move down, locking sight with it. I don't answer him, too scared it will alert attention and I'll get in trouble.

"Ahh," he says, nodding. "You want to stab me."

"What?" I hiss quietly, taken aback. "I'm not going to stab you."

Grey leans back into his chair, relaxing. "But you thought about it. I like that."

Charmaine stalks down the aisle between us, slamming her hand on Grey's test. "Back to work, Grey. Leave her alone. I'll move you if you don't stop."

It feels like I'm back in kindergarten, the teacher threatening to separate the two kids who won't stop talking. Except, we're not kids and we're not talking. This fucking lunatic is practically provoking me to stab him with a pen.

He pouts at her, making a hand gesture as he pretends to zip his lips closed. When she turns her back away from us, he winks at me, wiggling his eyebrows.

I ignore him, turning my attention to the scratched up desk. My fingers trace the carvings in the wood — some markings by pens, others by fingernails. I squint at it closer, wondering if the faint red stains are from the color of the wood, or from blood. Knowing this place, it's probably the latter.

Somehow, I manage to finish the test. Like I was warned, it was generalized, covering everything from math and English, to history and geography questions. There was even a small section about legal studies — specifically criminal law proceedings. I'm not sure if that's something we would have learned in high school, or if these assholes just have a sick sense of humor. Maybe, it's their way of ensuring if we suck at math, we can score high on knowledge about being a criminal.

After all, isn't that what we all are?

You can dress up a trash can in a ballgown, but at the end of the day, it's still a fucking trash can. Call it a rehabilitation center or whatever they want, but it's still just an asylum for the mentally unstable.

"Your escorts are here to accompany you to the hall. I'll have your grades tomorrow," Charmaine tells us, opening the door to reveal several armed guards.

The sound of chairs scraping on the ground echo around the room as everyone jumps up from their seats. I stay frozen for a few seconds, unsure of the procedure until I spot Grey beckon me with his index finger.

I'm even more inclined to stay seated, but Charmaine collects my test, motioning me to leave.

"Off you go, Avery," she murmurs, moving past to collect the tests behind me.

"Oh, okay," I mutter, standing up. I head over to the guards, staring at Grey uneasily as he lingers waiting.

Grey grabs my arm suddenly, making me yelp. The sudden movement doesn't go unnoticed as two guards surrounding us whip out their tasers.

"I'm just escorting her, gentlemen. Sheesh," Grey groans.

"I'm fine," I snap quietly, pulling my arm away from him. "Don't touch me."

He feigns looking hurt, his stormy eyes dancing with controlled emotion. "I'm hurt, little killer."

"Don't call me that," I growl, my voice louder this time.

Grey raises an amused eyebrow at me, but before he can respond, one of the guards shoves me, motioning for me to walk.

I stumble briefly, my feet quickly following the last of the other lingering students. I power walk, desperate to catch up and get away from this psychopath following me.

Up ahead, someone turns a corner and I follow suit, relieved to realize I now know where I am. The familiar corridor leading to the hall smells oddly of new paint today and without thinking, I run my fingers along the wall as I walk.

Checking my fingertips, I confirm my suspicions as white paint smears over my skin. I rub my fingers together to disperse some of the paint, looking up as I step inside the hall.

Unlike the last time I was in here, it's absolutely packed with people wearing matching light gray outfits. I guess they went the cheap route when deciding what to make us wear. Judging by the number of heads in here, I'd wager a bet that it's the entire student population of the facility.

I glance around nervously, letting out a sigh of relief when I spot Vivian lurking to the side of the hall with a few other people. Sensing someone behind me, I look over my shoulder, finding Grey standing close by.

Taking off quickly, I weave through people until I reach Vivian. She looks bored, checking her fingernails. Sensing me, she looks up, giving me a blank stare of acknowledgement.

"Surviving?" she asks.

"Barely," I mutter, glancing behind me nervously.
Vivian lets out a sarcastic laugh. "Well, this should be good then."

Chapter 5

Avery

"What?" I mumble, concerned and confused.

The words have barely escaped my mouth when someone climbing onto a table rips my attention away from Vivian.

A broad-shouldered, dark-haired guy stands over the crowd, waving his hand to silence them.

"Listen up, fuckers. You know the drill. Free time starts now. Don't fuck up. Don't fuck anyone up. Just sort your shit out and move along."

Judging from his appearance, he is a student as well. I look over at the guards, scattered through the crowd, checking for their reaction. This must be normal, because no one, except for me, seems to bat an eyelash.

Noise erupts from the crowd of students, bodies dispersing in every which direction. It's not coordinated or graceful, and I now understand why Vivian is pressed against the wall.

Several people collide into me, seemingly on purpose, as they head towards the doors. I'm not quick enough to realize, my body slamming into the ground as I fall.

I'd at least hope that people would have the decency to walk around me, but they don't. Feet step on my hands and even one guy steps on my calf.

I let out a yelp, suddenly frozen as I get stampeded by the crowd who doesn't give a shit.

All I can see is Vivian's flat, ballet-style shoes, completely still as no one makes an effort to help me.

I'm going to fucking die in this place, I think to myself, curling up as I brace myself for more impact.

"Walk the fuck around," someone growls.

A foot on my thigh puts pressure on my back, the old scar tissue flaring to life with pain. It's thankfully short lived as the person is shoved off me.

Suddenly, the crushing of humans on my body stops, people finally walking around. I start to push myself up on my arms, holding in a groan of pain.

I was taught a long time ago to never show you're in pain if you can help it. It never ends well and no one wants to hear about it. I'm already mentally scolding myself for letting out a sound when someone first stepped on me.

"Here," a stern voice says before a hand appears in front of my face.

Looking up, I spot a tanned blonde with light green eyes staring back at me.

"I'm fine," I mumble, ignoring the pain to stand up without taking his hand.

He drops it back to his side, looking over at Vivian and her crowd.

"Well?" he snaps at them.

Vivian shrugs. "You know the rules."

"I am the fucking rules," the guy spits out. "I told you all to make sure there were no more *accidents*."

"We're not getting involved," a male to her right growls. "She'll learn quickly," he adds, glaring at me.

My eyes narrow, unimpressed by the sudden change in their attitude. "As in learn not to get crushed and die?"

He snorts. "Exactly. Keep to yourself, stay out of the way," he says, like he's reciting some script.

I shift my focus to Vivian, disappointed I thought I had a potential friend or acquaintance in this God forsaken place. It's obviously not the case, and I should have known better. As if sensing my train of thought, Vivian shrugs.

"It's every man and woman for themselves. You either survive in here and get freedom, or you don't."

You don't...

So, the alternative is to do good, reform and leave, or be stuck here forever until death.

"Gotcha," I mutter coldly. "Nice to know the rules and where everyone stands."

Vivian nods once, glancing back to the man before heading off to follow the tail of the crowd with her posse.

Most people have now left the hall, except for a few in corners, lingering around.

I turn back to the man, trying to decide if he's friend or foe. Obviously, there's no friends though.

"Thanks," I offer bluntly. "I think I have it from here."

The man peers down at me, cocking an eyebrow. "Come with me."

He doesn't wait for a response, turning on his heel and heading towards the doors. I stay put, until he stops, half-turning to look at me like I have the audacity to defy him.

"Now."

There's an authority to his voice that demands something, and my feet move slowly, while my brain tries to decipher what exactly.

I expect him to turn down the corridor, but he walks away, into the library.

Vivian might be a bitch, but she was right about one thing — this place does fucking smell.

The stench of mold and dust hovers in the air, clinging to every surface. It's fairly empty of patrons, and it's right to assume no one picks up a book in here as most are covered in thick layers of gray dust.

I'm going to be murdered in here.

The man leads me past several adjacent rows of shelves until we reach the end of the room. It opens up into a space, filled with tables and chairs. In the far right corner, I'm horrified to spot Grey standing. That damn bastard is everywhere I don't want him to be.

"Absolutely not," I mutter, stopping in my tracks.

Grey looks up, hearing me, giving me a big wave. "Little killer! You found a lost puppy, Damon."

Damon scoffs. "Even a puppy has survival instincts. She's like a docile sheep."

"I beg your pardon?" I snap. "I'm not a fucking sheep. And I'm not docile."

He straightens up, reminding me he's easily 6'4. Cold, heartless and stern, his presence intimidates me. I fall silent, turning my head to look at the ground to my left.

"You just got crushed in a crowd. You seem to think you have friends, when that doesn't exist here. You obviously believe you don't belong here, and can't seem to control your emotions."

I stumble on my words, trying to gather my thoughts.

He's right... about everything. And I hate that. I hate that a perfect stranger has been able to read me so easily, making my body tense up in danger.

"I can control my emotions," I finally answer. "I'm just annoyed that you seem to feel like you run the show."

"I do run the show. You'll be quick to learn that."

Grey laughs in the corner — not at me, but at Damon. The latter glares at him, staring daggers but it doesn't faze the brunette.

"I know. He's a big, scary man," Grey says to me. "He's okay."

"I don't believe that," I mutter. "Or you."

Grey's hand flings to his chest, grasping the place where his heart should be. "I'm hurt again. You need to stop doing that — I might get attached."

"Grey, shut the fuck up," Damon snaps, before turning back to me. "I brought you in here to explain some things. The faster you understand and realize, the easier it will be for you."

"Do you work here or something?" I ask, confused. It's obvious he's not a staff member but this whole hierarchy concept that seems to be rearing its head is baffling.

Damon raises an eyebrow, crossing his arms. My eyes flicker to his forearms, noticing the black ink covering the entirety of his arms. "Do I look like I have a stick up my ass?"

I can't help the laugh that bubbles out of my throat, quickly covering my mouth. "Sorry. I thought the same thing about the staff," I mutter, quietly.

"See," Damon mutters, fingers tapping away on his skin. "Can't control your emotions to save your fucking life. A minute ago you felt threatened. Now, you're laughing."

My lips purse shut for a moment, my body tensing up nervously. "Just tell me what you wanted to tell me."

"Gladly. I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, being new here. Consider this your one and only orientation, of sorts," Damon says.

"I already had orientation," I mumble, confused. "Vivian was in charge of it."

Damon scoffs. "Vivian is nothing but trouble. But that's not the orientation I'm referring to."

"Go on," I press nervously, bewildered by the conversation.

"There's a *certain* way we do things in here. A system, if you will."

My nose resists the urge to wrinkle as fresh dust tickles it. "Does Lilydale know about this system?"

A small smirk breaks free on his face. "Of course they do. And they don't care. You're docile, but I'm guessing not stupid. They don't care about the patients here."

I hate the way he says patients. I'd rather be referred to as a prisoner. At least then I could focus on the fact I did something

bad, rather than the reality that *I* am bad.

"It's just a money-making scheme," I mutter quietly. "To look good."

Damon nods, like he's praising me for my observation skills — much like a child figuring out that one and one make two. "So, we take charge here. They only intervene when it gets physical. Everything else is fair game."

My eyes widen when I spot Grey pulling out a candy bar from his pocket, the plastic wrapper making too much noise in the quiet space. He looks at me, breaking off a piece. "Want some?"

"No," I shake my head. "Where did you even get that?"

"We have our methods," he grins, popping the piece in his mouth.

Damon nods, like Grey's answer is the obvious thing to take away from this conversation. "We have methods for everything. We're in charge, and what we say, goes. Outside of the basic schedule you've been given, everything else is run by us. When we say jump, you say..."

"Off a bridge?" I murmur, sarcastically.

I expect some snide remark, but Damon just laughs. "Exactly. If people need to be taken care of, then we'll do that too."

My thoughts go back to the conversation I had with Vivian, about people dying in here. I assumed any deaths were suicides, but now I'm just not sure. Maybe this place is more like a prison than I expected. Which means I have more to worry about.

"And who exactly is in charge?" I ask hesitantly.

Grey finishes his candy bar, throwing the wrapper on the ground carelessly, as he walks towards us. "Why, my Darling, we are."

Damon cuts him off as they stand next to each other, glancing down at me. "If you ever need intimate details of the system, you'll know. But for your sake, I hope you don't because it will be the last thing you ever learn."

The two of them walk either side of me, heading towards the library doors. His words take a moment to sink in, my mind even more confused and terrified now.

By the time my body catches up with my mind, I spin around to ask more questions, but they have vanished out of sight, leaving me alone in the dusty book graveyard.

I think I'm in trouble.

Chapter 6

Avery

I spend the remainder of our free time exploring the open areas. I use the description 'open' loosely as it only consists of the hall, library, the courtyard and a few vacant rooms.

Besides the ability to read books, the only other option is to *socialize* by the look of it.

There's furnishings in the rooms such as chairs, but that's all. And everything is bolted down.

The small amount of windows inside are all barred up and it appears most people choose to spend their free time outside in the courtyard. I can only imagine the chaos that occurs when it's raining and that's not a possibility.

I don't know why Vivian mentioned that no one likes to hang out in the library, because I'm fairly certain that's where I'm going to be every day. At least then I'll be alone and safe. I'd rather take my chances at being cornered in there than deal with the psychopaths outside.

I can't trust anyone in here, and that's fine. It's no different than my life on the outside anyway.

Once upon a time I had friends, but if my mother's circumstances didn't drive them away, then my father sure did. He made sure to isolate me, so no one wanted anything to do with me. Sometimes, I still hear his voice, telling me things. His favorite saying used to be '*you'll never amount to anything. No one will want you. So, you should thank your lucky stars you have me.*'

Lucky.

No wonder I hate that word so much. Because if I have to describe my time with my father, lucky is not even in the dictionary for me.

There's a strange screeching noise that rings through the air, and judging by the stampede of people heading back to the hall, I assume that's the signal that free time is over.

Begrudgingly, I head into the hall, lingering to the side in the swarm of gray outfits. The guards filter in after us, ready to escort us back to our rooms.

The same guy as earlier stands on the table, making silent hand gestures to the crowd. He motions to the guards who barely pay attention, and I wonder if he's in Damon's circle. I can only assume he is given the small information I know now.

When he holds up two fingers, some people move past me, while others stay still. I have no idea what this secret code is, and as I do my best to figure it out by studying the moving bodies, a voice in my ear scares the hell out of me.

"You're three."

I jump, turning towards the voice. Grey stares at me intensely, like he's waiting for me to thank him for this information which means absolutely nothing to me.

"What does three mean?"

"Group three."

"And how exactly do I fit into group three?"

He grins, tapping his nose with his middle finger, the black nail drawing my attention. "We say so."

"Of course," I groan. "The infamous secret society."

Grey laughs, leaning against the wall next to me. "You'll get the hang of it."

I watch the man on the table, ignoring Grey. I'm ready to leave but he holds up five fingers, instead of three.

"What?" I whisper to myself. "What kind of system is this?"

"The working kind," he says happily.

More people walk past us, heading to the doors as guards start herding them like sheep. A familiar figure moves past me, dark eyes boring holes into everyone's skulls.

I can't help but stare at Theo, the darkness that emits from him is volatile. Vivian might be full of shit, but I believe her when

she says he's dangerous. You could be blind and deaf, and still feel that presence from him.

He pays no attention to me, disappearing through the doors with the others. Grey follows my line of vision, whistling low.

"Ooh, girl. He's trouble. A fat no."

"Everyone here is trouble," I mutter, embarrassed that he's caught me.

Grey laughs. "True. But Theo is off-limits."

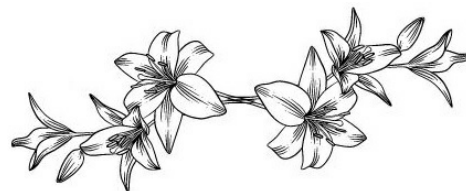
"Off-limits?" I repeat. "You control who we look at?"

"If we have to," he replies casually. "But that's not what I'm referring to."

This time it's my turn to laugh. "Please. I have no intention of engaging with anyone in that sense," I tell him, dryly.

Table man holds up three fingers and I push off the wall, heading towards the doors. Behind me, Grey snickers, knowing I can still hear him.

"We'll see, little killer. Everyone has urges."



I'm only back in my room for about thirty minutes when someone bangs on the metal door. It flings open immediately after, revealing a guard and several fellow patients lingering behind.

"Shower time," he growls at me.

I stand up, looking around the room. "Do I need to bring a towel? I don't have any here. Or clothes for that matter..."

"You'll be given all that. Get moving."

Surprisingly, he doesn't wait, heading down the hallway. I quickly follow suit, following the over five girls.

I'm absolutely desperate for a shower. It's been two days since I had one and I'm sure my hair is full of dust from the library.

I missed out yesterday with it being my first day, so I'm not sure what to expect when I walk into the showers.

It's kind of exactly how I imagine prison showers to be, if they gave just a little bit of privacy.

There's half a dozen stalls lined up, with small partitions that hide us from our collarbones to knees. At least I don't have to be concerned about getting a finger in the ass while picking up soap.

The absolute worst part though?

The fucking flowers.

I wish I was kidding, but there's more flowers in here than any other room. It's like the designers planted an upside down garden with dozens and dozens of flowers hanging from vines around the room. The floral smell overpowers the room, which seems to get worse with the steam.

A girl next to me catches me staring and snorts. "Fucking ridiculous, isn't it?"

I glance over, taking in the petite strawberry blonde. "Just a tad."

"Enough chit chat," the guard scolds, giving me a small push towards a stall.

"Okay, I'm moving!" I snap, looking around trying to figure out this shower system.

There's no benches in the stall, or the towel and clothes I was promised. The strawberry blonde steps into the stall next to me and pulls her shirt over her head.

"Just pull them off inside and chuck them outside the door. They will hand us towels when we finish and new clothes. Then you just need to pick up the old ones and put them in the laundry rack in the corner."

"Thanks," I mutter, pulling my shirt off. "How long do we have to shower?"

She disappears from view for a few seconds, before springing back up to fling her shorts over the stall door. "Five minutes. So, if you need to wash your hair, get on to it straight away."

"Right," I say, panicking. "And shaving? Do we ever get to shave?"

I'm not desperate to have hairless legs, but eventually it will be a bush in a few weeks if I don't do something.

"On Sundays, we get a longer shower and some hair removal cream to apply. Be warned though — it smells like ass and is greasy."

I let out a laugh. Well, of course. Because they're not going to let us have razors in here. The guards are close by, but if someone wants to slit their wrists, it would be too easy.

Speaking of wrists, I stare at my bandage, knowing it needs to come off. At least no one will be able to see, so I quickly whip it off, hanging it over the door.

I do the best I can with scrubbing my hair and body before the time is up, ducking out of sight as to not bring attention to my arm. I'm fairly certain I still have soap in places when the guards yell at us to turn off the showers, before throwing towels over the stall doors at us.

I barely manage to catch mine, nearly dropping it on the wet ground.

"Hurry up," they direct at us, barely giving us a minute before fresh gray clothes and underwear are launched at our faces.

The underwear smash into my face, and I recoil, pulling them away from my nose. I don't want to consider the possibility that someone else has worn these, so if I pretend and don't smell them, I'll be none the wiser.

My long hair is still dripping when we're ushered out of the stalls. No matter how skilled I get at these short times, it's never going to be enough to deal with my lengthy hair. I guess it's time for a natural dry. Gone are the days of hairdryers. Who am I kidding? I never owned one — just used to wrap my hair in a towel and wait.

As we head back down the corridor, we're pushed back into our rooms, the door slamming closed behind us without a word.

If I'm correct, it should be dinner time soon. It feels wrong for me to shower before dinner, the thought of wearing dirty clothes to bed, but it's not a summer vacation.

I hang out in the room, pacing as my stomach grumbles, wondering if dinner does exist. I'm starting to lose hope when finally, the door opens again.

"Dinner — let's go," the guard says dryly.

"Finally," I mumble quietly, happily following. The only thing that can give me happiness is the thought of food.

It's short lived though, when I get to the hall and line up. The wafting smell of food is not mouth-watering, and when I reach the buffet style setup, I'm disappointed to find nothing but unseasoned pasta. I blink, confused.

Even at home, I'd at least be able to chuck some sauce on it. Apparently, the only option for dinner tonight is plain pasta, steamed vegetables and what I suspect is dry chicken. The grayish hue concerns me and I opt not to give myself food poisoning, no matter how much I hate being here. Suicide by moldy pasta is not the way I want to go.

My poor plate looks miserable — a spoonful of pasta and some sad looking broccoli and carrots.

I turn to inspect the seating options, realizing there's no free tables left. I'd have to sit at an occupied table, and judging by the glares, no one is eager to volunteer.

The only table that's mostly vacant has a single sole occupant.

Theo.

I weigh up my options, looking at Vivian in the corner with her crew, to Grey over with his.

Finally making a decision, my feet drag along the ground, like I'm slowly walking to my execution.

I feel several eyes on me as I pass by tables, people watching closely.

Stopping at the edge of the metal table, I wait for a few seconds to see if I get acknowledged. When I don't, I quickly slide into the seat farthest away.

I keep my head down, picking at my soggy pasta with my plastic fork. Eyes are burning into me from every direction, but it's the ones in front of me that I look at.

"... Can I sit here?" I ask quietly, trying to think of a back up plan if I'm ejected from my spot. That's if I survive long enough.

Theo glares at me, his own fork poised between his fingers as he twirls it around. "I don't know. Can you?" he spits out sarcastically.

It's like the whole room is watching our awkward exchange, and I have to assume Theo hates it as much as I do. Or as much as he hates me.

"I can leave if you like," I mutter so only he can hear. "I just don't know where else to sit."

The seconds tick by while I wait for his answer. I stare down at my pasta, pretending like it's the most interesting thing in the room. If I'm being honest, it probably is.

Theo doesn't respond, glaring at me for a bit longer before turning his attention back to his food. I peer up slightly, watching as he stabs the sad little vegetables onto his fork — no sight of chicken on his plate either.

I decide that no answer *is* an answer and continue eating in silence. At this stage, I haven't been yeeted from my spot so I think I'm in the clear.

At least for today...

Chapter 7

Avery

"And how are we feeling today?"

The words make me cringe. I don't think I'll ever get comfortable with them. It's always like a knife being stabbed into my gut. Ironically, that happened on my fifteenth birthday. Granted it was a butter knife so it didn't get very far. Yet this question is still more painful than the physical abuse I endured.

As usual, Dr. Smith looks like he's off to a Wall Street event, while I wear baggy gray hand-me-downs — stunning attire for the modern day mental person.

"Fine," I offer.

He just nods nonchalantly and I have to give him credit, he's much more patient than I would be.

"Settling in okay?" he asks, trying another approach.

I sigh under my breath, considering the possibility that perhaps prison would be much better than this shithole. If I have to deal with this for years to come, I'm either going to end up dead or even more mentally insane than I am now.

"Okay, let's try this," he interjects when I don't respond. "What do you hate about this fucking place?"

The use of his curse words grabs my attention, shocking me. Obviously this was the desired effect, a tactic to break down my barriers.

"What do I hate about this place?" I repeat slowly, now wondering if this is a fucking hallucination. "Everything."

"The people? The staff? The building?"

I laugh. "The goddamn fucking flowers."

The words spill from my mouth before I can stop myself, and I curse myself internally. Fucking psychiatrists and their damn psychological tactics.

"Yeah, the roses are a bit much," he mutters, and I can hear some sincerity in his tone, leading me to believe that the excessive amount of floral decorations is definitely an overkill.

"Too much," I agree. "You would think they would at least put one damn lily in this place given the name."

Dr. Smith nods, putting his notepad down. "Tell you what. Let's not talk about your feelings. I know that's annoying. Let's talk about this place — just in general. Describe it to me."

I pause, pondering his suggestion. My instinct is to assess his words, trying to decipher what bullshit he is trying to achieve. I'm not a complete idiot. I know it's just a way to get me to open up. But if I'm being honest, I'm desperate to rant. I've spent my entire life being isolated and while I didn't expect to make friends here, it gets hard avoiding any humanly interaction. At least Dr. Smith is a normal person. I can't open up to any of the other patients here. Who knows how my words would get used or twisted? Here, at least I know why they want to hear the inner ramblings of my mind.

Besides, it's not going to make a difference anyway. I'm here for good — may as well use the time to bitch about this place.

"It's cold," I start. "Always so fucking cold. And I hate the color gray. I should appreciate I'm not in orange, but it's so miserable staring at the same shade of gray all the damn time. The bathroom stinks of flowers and I barely have enough time to wash my hair. Everything feels incomplete — like the building is this immaculate, stunning project. And then there's us."

"Us, being the patients?"

I nod, rolling my eyes. "This building could have been used for something a lot more beautiful. An orphanage or a school. And they put us inside. We make it look ugly, but also better at the same time."

"It's kind of like a school."

"It kinda isn't," I argue bluntly. "It's an asylum. That's why you're here. No one talks, but they also do. People die here."

Dr. Smith shrugs. "People die on the outside too."

"It's not the same. They aren't force fed raw pasta and put in dangerous situations."

I realize as soon as I say the words, that he will disagree with me. And he does. But that doesn't stop me believing my thoughts.

Sure, life is dangerous no matter what. But this is next level — a real life survival-of-the-fittest. Because if the chicken doesn't kill me, people like Damon probably will.

We spend the remainder of the session arguing over the facts of life before I'm promptly taken back to my tiny ass cell.

If I thought the chicken was bad, tonight's menu was some terrible version of Shepherd's Pie and I long for the days when a cafeteria served pizza. It may have been frozen from a cardboard box, but I now realize how blessed I was.

Staring at the roof of my room as I lay in bed, my mind turns to my life, replaying every single event that led me here. I should feel regret — but I feel nothing.

I don't give a shit that my father is dead, even if it was by my hands. He got what was coming to him.

I used to believe that karma was a real thing — but if that's the case, then why am I here?

Surely, my pain outweighed the suffering that led me to my crime. What ever happened to '*no good deed goes unpunished*' ?

My old best friend, Paige, used to tell me to count down the days until my eighteenth birthday. We would make plans to leave, get away from our families. But when my birthday approached, I swiftly realized it was wishful thinking.

It didn't matter that I was now an adult. I was trapped — forever.

I resigned myself to that fact, learning to numb everything. The good and the bad. These were the cards I was dealt, and it was my responsibility to deal with it.

When Paige was murdered by her brother, I promised her cold body that I would get out before I ended up like her. And God knows I fucking tried. I really, really tried.

I don't think people realize just how strong your bond is with your favorite, chosen person. And to lose them, it's something you never recover from.

She was the only person on this earth who understood and knew what I was going through. Being with her, it was the only time I didn't feel alone. When she was taken from me, I knew right then and there, I would be alone forever.

No loving family, no more friends. The kids at school just laughed at me as a teen, thinking everything was a huge joke.

Fuck. If only Paige could see me now. She'd be rolling in her grave.

I'm more trapped than I ever was. And still, no one cares enough to give me freedom.

I envy Paige. She got her freedom — just not the type we had hoped for.

But at least she's not *here*. Surrounded by screaming lunatics, wishing for death. Cold, ass soggy food and... footsteps?

I'm ripped from my train of woeful thoughts by the sound of footsteps outside my room.

I could be losing it, but they aren't the guards' footsteps. There's no heavy padding of steel-toed boots or dead silence besides their movements. I can hear laughter, jeering.

Creeping up to the door, I press my ear against the metal, trying to hear anything distinct. I could be fucking mental but I swear I hear Vivian's voice.

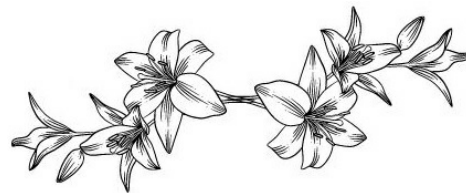
What the ever loving fuck?

The voices fade away with the sound of footsteps, leaving nothing but silence again. It's definitely past bedtime so no one should be out of their rooms, not even for duty.

I decide right now that I am, in fact, going fucking insane and crawl back into bed, the mattress making my back itch.

There's no way people would be out of bed, pacing the hallways like normal young adults without a care in the world.

We're in Hell. There's no Heaven here.



It's an odd day with no *professional* appointments so I relish the time before class.

As usual I'm stuck next to Grey in Charmaine's class, his relaxed posture looking out of place as he watches her pace the front of the class. His eyes follow her movements, a faint smile on his face like life is great. It's a nice change from having his attention, but I'm still on edge.

He makes no effort to even glance at me the entire duration of the class, and when the SWAT team arrive to escort us to the hall, he's the first one out the door.

Knowing the routine now, I follow the rest of the class out, mentally preparing myself for 'free time'. I'm tempted to try my luck with the library, but terrified of crossing paths with Damon and Grey.

As I approach the hall and spot the crowd, I briefly panic, wondering if I'm still in fucking group three — whatever that means.

Today, it's not the usual guy climbing on to the table to address us — it's Damon. My heart sinks and I slip to the corner of the room, making myself as small as possible.

"Hallman!" Damon yells, obviously addressing someone. "We need to talk. The rest of you, leave now."

"Fuck me," I mutter, watching as everyone scatters out of the hall. It's another curveball to the so-called hierarchy that I can't seem to follow. How do they expect us to know what the hell to do when no one tells us the rules?

I take off quickly to the library, not keen on being left behind to find out what's going on. Most people are vanishing towards the courtyard and I wearily check between the shelves when I enter the dusty room to make sure I'm alone.

As far as I know, Damon was still on the table as I left the hall so I think I'm in the clear.

Finding the darkest aisle, I take refuge at the end, pressing my back against the wall. It's the last lot of shelves before the open table area and I tuck myself into the corner, checking for spiders.

It's so peaceful in here — I can only hear the faint chatter from outside the library, but otherwise... nothing.

This was a good idea. A great idea, in fact.

I close my eyes, trying to stop my mind from doing that thing where it wanders back to old memories. Instead, I create a new reality, one where I'm free — loved and happy.

I let myself stay there, picturing myself on a beach, hearing the waves crash against the shore. My skin is warm from the sun, the sand scratching into my legs as I stretch out on a beach towel.

I'm on the verge of imagining a food van pulling up on the beach to deliver some decent fucking food when the library door smashes open, bouncing off the wall at the other end of the room.

This was a terrible fucking idea.

Curling my legs into my chest, I notice a gap in the bottom shelf behind me. I squeeze as much as my body in as possible, the sound of angry approaching footsteps making my heart race.

There's multiple voices — all male — talking angrily. They don't bother to lower their tone, obviously not at all scared of being heard or seen.

Through my knees, I watch as the group walk by the aisle, heading to the tables. I catch a small glimpse of a man being dragged, and I realize it's Vivian's friend.

"Put him there," I hear, immediately recognizing Damon's voice.

There's a loud crash as I assume a body hits one of the tables forcefully.

My eyes widen in panic, my body staying frozen while I look at my legs still partially hanging out of the shelves.

Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck.

"Hallman, you piece of shit. You've had plenty of warnings, and you still can't do as you're told," Damon snaps.

"God, it was just one fucking night. Give me a break," he pleads, managing to sound annoyed. I'd be fucking terrified — what an idiot. There's always a time and a place to know when you should shut yourself down.

I hear another thud, and I shiver, recognizing the sound of flesh hitting flesh. It happens again, and tears well in my eyes as memories flash before my eyes.

I don't know whether to stay in the moment and listen to what's happening, or let myself drown in the memories.

The groans of pain from Hallman make it difficult to leave the room and I know the choice has been made for me.

"I think he needs another reminder," comes a sing-song voice.

Grey's voice floats through the library, chirpy as always, and it occurs to me now that I know why he didn't care about my presence today in class.

It's because he was waiting for this.

Chapter 8

Grey

My heart races in excitement as I circle the crumpled up loser on the floor. He can act all tough, but the little beads of sweat collecting on his forehead tell a different story.

Then again, if I was on the receiving end of a Damon episode, I'd probably shit myself too.

I watch as Louis swings a kick towards Hallman, laughing as it connects in his ribs. There's something funny about the sound of bruises being made. But still, it doesn't sit quite right...

"Stand him up," I order, waving my hand at the others. "He should take this on his feet like a man."

Damon gives me an annoyed glance, obviously irritated that I just killed the flow of things. Louis and Mark, however, pick Hallman up, forcing him to his shaky feet.

"Why don't you just take over then?" Damon snaps at me, folding his arms.

"Ooh, can I?" I taunt. He makes it sound like he's doing me a solid for letting me play too, but we've got the good cop, bad cop gig down pretty well now. He secretly doesn't give a shit if I play too. I think it amuses him, though it would kill him to admit it.

Hallman gives me a pitiful look of hope. "Buddy, come on. I got you those cigarettes last month."

"Eh, they were stale," I moan dramatically. "Honestly, you said your outside contact was a good dealer."

"He is!" he stutters quickly. "I don't know what happened."

I shrug, bored. "Not my problem, Sam. And stale cigs are the least of your problems right now."

"Look," he pleads, holding his hands up. "I wasn't thinking. Come on, you're a dude. You know what the urges are like. Especially in here. We all have needs."

Damon scoffs, disgusted. I just raise an eyebrow, giving him a perplexed look.

"Urges? When we say no fucking without permission, we mean it. You don't just bring your little girlfriend into our space. Your dick is not our concern. Shove it into a blender for all I care. Wait a minute," I pause, turning to Damon. "Can we get hold of a blender?"

He shrugs. "I can't see why not."

"WAIT!" Hallman gasps. "Look, I was high and horny. Please don't touch my dick."

I muffle a laugh as Louis and Mark loosen their grip on him slightly, obviously not wanting to be mistaken for accidentally going near his mini sausage.

"I think you should kiss my foot," I tell him, watching as horror crosses his face, followed by coerced consideration.

Damon rubs his forehead, not impressed. Hallman shakily gets onto his knees, shuffling towards me.

"No, no," I say, waving my finger at him like I'm scolding a child. "On your hands and knees, like the good little boy you are."

"Grey," Damon grumbles. "Don't make me lose my appetite."

I grab a chair, swinging it around. I sit down, slapping my knee like I'm summoning a dog. "Here, boy."

Hallman crawls towards me, eyes burning hesitantly into my filthy feet. I may or may not have planned this, deliberately walking around barefoot to collect some delicious bacteria from the floors. This place never gets cleaned, so God knows what has grown in the cracks in the floor.

Holding out my right foot, I wiggle my toes in front of his face. "Right here. Suck my toes."

I burst out laughing when he puts my big toe into his mouth, gagging.

"Okay, enough," Damon says to me. "That's fucking disgusting."

Clutching my chest, I look at Hallman, appalled. "I agree. What type of person would suck someone's toes?"

His eyes widen in panic, fumbling over his words. I don't give him a chance to form a coherent sentence, my foot connecting

with his throat as I kick him backwards.

I have to give myself credit — that was a pretty good kick. He lands several feet back in the middle of the aisles, gasping wildly for air as he grabs his throat.

His head turns to the side, and I notice he freezes, just for a split second — maybe less, before looking back up at the roof quickly.

Hmm. Interesting.

Something down that aisle caught his attention. He's tried hard to hide it, but the tensing of his torso coupled with the brief pause is enough for anyone to pick up on if they know how to read body language.

I've spent my entire life watching people from afar. Call it my little social experiment, but I love observing people. It's fun to read people, learning what they think and feel, how their bodies react subconsciously to their surroundings. You can learn a lot about someone from just watching them, even if they try to hide it.

Damon hasn't noticed, his body partially turned away. I think the toe sucking was enough to turn him off. Safe to say, foot fetish is not on his kink list.

When the sack of shit on the floor stops gasping enough to allow us to think, Damon kicks his calf to draw his attention.

"Break the rules again and I'll unleash Grey on you — with whatever fucking kitchen appliances he likes."

Without waiting for a reply, Damon steps over him, not bothering to miss his fingers as he squashes Hallman's fat fingers under his shoe. Louis and Mark follow him, the three of them pausing to look at me.

"You coming?" Damon asks.

I wave him ahead. "I'll catch up with you soon. I just need to finish up here."

"Whatever," Damon replies, bored. The three of them disappear from the library, the door closing shut behind them.

Walking over to Hallman, I lean down, trailing my fingers along his chest. I really need to repaint my nails, they are getting chipped. Perhaps I should try red next time with a more *natural* substance.

"How many seconds do you think it takes for a human heart to stop beating after it's cut out with a carving knife?" I ask him.

Hallman trembles, eyes glassy as the wimp fights back tears.

"I...I don't know."

"We're going to find out if you don't leave the library in the next five seconds," I grin at him.

Credit to him. He probably fucks like a goldfish on carpet but Christ he can move quickly when he wants to. He scrambles away from me, bolting from the library, limping as he goes.

My laughter follows him, hopefully haunting his mind. When the door stops swinging and fully closes, I turn my head to the side, noticing feet sticking out from the shelves.

Well, well, well... What do we have here?

Standing up, I stalk my way down the aisle slowly, watching as the feet scramble to hide, sensing the predator approaching. There's no room though — the feminine legs flailing in panic.

Reaching down, I grab the two ankles, dragging the body out from the tiny space in between the wall and the books.

I stand over the now paralyzed body, my eyebrows raising in surprise.

"Well, hello little killer. Have you been attending private meetings?"

Avery stares up at me, her stormy eyes jolty as she contemplates her next move. She's always so timid and frightened, and honestly, it makes my little black heart hurt a little. Who would be afraid of little old me?

I lean over, locking eyes with her. And just when I think I have her all figured out, the feisty little thing kicks me square in the gut.

"Ooft!" I groan, stumbling back. It's unexpected but frankly, I think I might be fucking in love with her.

"Get the fuck away from me!" she snaps, jumping to her feet. "Take one step towards me and I'll saw your fucking balls off!"

My eyes dance with delight hearing her tiny threat. I step towards her, watching as she freezes before moving backwards.

It only takes three baby steps before her back is against the wall, her fingers pressing into it like she's trying to find something to clutch on to.

"I mean it!" she says, but her voice trembles with empty promises.

"I hope so," I tell her, resting my hand next to her head as I cage her in.

Avery stutters, the emotions flashing across her face faster than Hallman took off — anger, fear, surprise, anger again, before finally resting on distress.

"I heard nothing," she mutters quietly. "I saw nothing."

I tsk at her, shaking my head. "Now, now, my darling. We both know that's not true."

I nearly crack up laughing when I spot the fire return in her eyes, the rare look of determination appearing.

"Are you going to shove my dick into a blender?" she taunts angrily.

Her stomach is sucked in against me — her attempt to make herself small, but all it's done is forced her into a tighter little space.

I bring my hand up to her leg, my fingers brushing against her pale skin. She stills, terror flashing from behind her eyes.

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