



Nightfall

New York Times Bestselling Author
PENELOPE DOUGLAS

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Also by Penelope Douglas...

The Fal Away Series

Bully

Until You

Rival

Falling Away

Aflame

Next to Never

The Devil's Night Series

Corrupt

Hideaway

Kill Switch

Conclave

Nightfall

Stand-Alones

Misconduct

Punk 57

Birthday Girl

Credence

Playlist

Stream the *Nightfall* playlist [here](#).

“99 Problems” by Jay-Z (not available on Spotify)

“#1 Crush” by Garbage

“A Little Wicked” by Valerie Broussard

“Apologize” by Timbaland, One Republic

“Army of Me” by Björk

“Believer” by Imagine Dragons

“Blue Monday” by Flunk

“Down with the Sickness” by Disturbed

“Everybody Wants to Rule the World” by Lorde

“Fire Up the Night” by New Medicine

“Hash Pipe” by Weezer

“Highly Suspicious” by My Morning Jacket

“History of Violence” by Theory of a Deadman

“If You Wanna Be Happy” by Jimmy Soul

“In Your Room” by Depeche Mode

“Intergalactic” by Beastie Boys

“Light Up the Sky” by Thousand Foot Krutch

“Man or a Monster (feat. Zayde Wolf)” by Sam Tinnesz

“Mr. Doctor Man” by Palaye Royale

“Mr. Sandman” by SYML

“Old Ticket Booth” by Derek Fiechter and Brandon Fiechter

“Party Up” by DMX

“Pumped Up Kicks” by 3TEETH

“Rx (Medicate)” by Theory of a Deadman

“Satisfied” by Aranda

“Sh-Boom” by The Crew Cuts

“Teenage Witch” by Suzi Wu

“Devil Inside” by INXS

“Touch Myself” by Genitorturers

“White Flag” by Bishop Briggs

“Yellow Flicker Beat” by Lorde

“You’re All I’ve Got Tonight” by The Cars

Author’s Note

Nightfall is the final novel in the Devil’s Night series. All of the books are entwined, and it is recommended to read the prior installments before starting this book.

If you choose to skip *Corrupt*, *Hideaway*, *Kill Switch*, or *Conclave*, please be aware you may miss plot points and important elements of the back story.

All four prior novels are available in Kindle Unlimited.

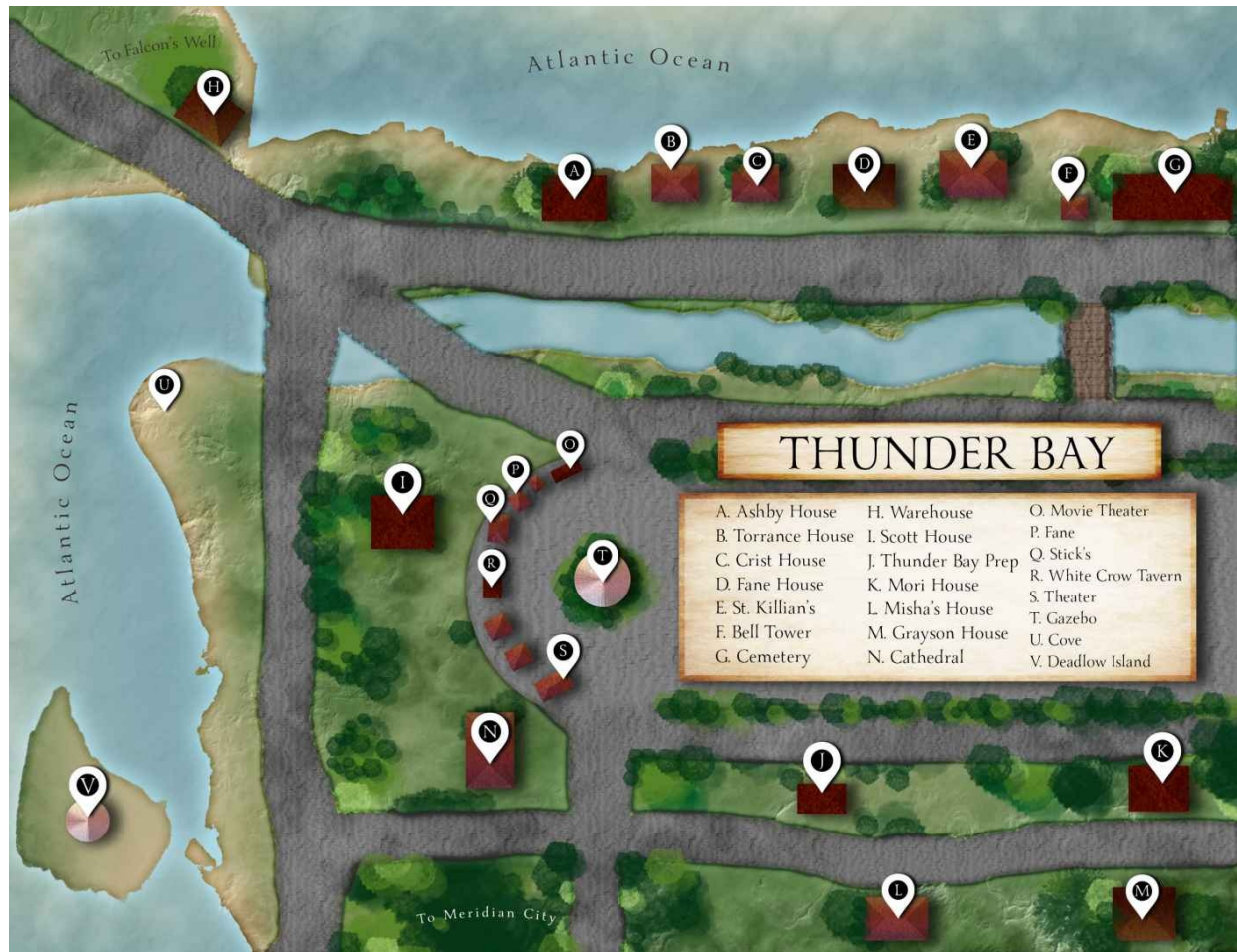
Also, if you enjoy Pinterest mood boards, all of my books come with one.

Please enjoy *Nightfall*’s storyboard as you read!

<https://www.pinterest.com/penelopedouglas/nightfall-2020/>

Onward!

xx Pen



“You need not be sorry for her. She was one of the kind that likes to grow up. In the end, she grew up of her own free wil a day quicker than the other girls.”

-J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan

For Z. King



Chapter 1

Emory

Present

It was faint, but I heard it.

Water. Like I was behind a waterfall, deep inside a cave.

What the hell was that?

I blinked my eyes, stirring from the heaviest sleep I think I've ever had.

Jesus, I was tired.

My head rested on the softest pillow, and I moved my arm, brushing my hand over a cool, splendidly plush white comforter.

I patted my face, feeling my glasses missing. I rolled my eyes around me, confusion sinking in as I took in myself burrowed comfortably in the middle of a

huge bed, my body taking up about as much room as a single M&M inside its package.

This wasn't my bed.

I looked around the lavish bedroom—white, gold, crystal, and mirrors everywhere, palatial in its opulence like I'd never seen in person—and my breathing turned shallow as instant fear took over.

This wasn't my room. Was I dreaming?

I pushed myself up, my head aching and every muscle tight like I'd been sleeping for a damn week.

I dropped my eyes, spotting my glasses folded and sitting on the bedside table. I grabbed them and slipped them on, taking inventory of my body first. I

laid on top of the bed, still fully clothed in my black, skinny pants and a pullover white blouse that I'd dressed in this morning.

If it was still today, anyway.

My shoes were gone, but on instinct I peered over the side of the bed and saw my sneakers sitting there, perfectly positioned on a fancy white rug with gold filigree.

My pores cooled with sweat as I looked around the unfamiliar bedroom, and my brain wracked with what the hell was going on. Where was I?

I slid off the bed, my legs shaky as I stood up.

I'd been at the firm. Working on the blueprints for the DeWitt Museum.

Byron and Elise had ordered take-out for lunch for themselves, I went out instead, and—I pinched the bridge of my nose, my head pounding—and then...

Ugh, I don't know. What happened?

Spotting a door ahead of me, I didn't even bother to look around the rest of the room or see where the two other doors led. I grabbed my shoes and stumbled

for what I guessed was the way out, and stepped into a hallway, the cool marble

floor soothing on my bare feet.

I still went down the list in my head, though.

I didn't drink.

I didn't see anyone unusual.

I didn't get any weird phone calls or packages. I didn't...

I tried to swallow a few times, finally generating enough saliva. God, I was thirsty. And—a pang hit my stomach—hungry too. How long had I been out?

“Hello?” I called quietly but immediately regretted it.

Unless I'd had an aneurysm or developed selective amnesia, then I wasn't here willingly.

But if I'd been taken or imprisoned, wouldn't my door have been locked?

Bile stung my throat, every horror movie I'd ever seen playing various scenarios in my head.

Please, no cannibals. Please, no cannibals.

“Hi,” a small, hesitant voice said.

I followed the sound, peering across the hallway, over the banister, to the other side of the upstairs where another hall of rooms sat. A figure lurked in a dark corridor, slowly stepping onto the landing.

“Who is that?” I inched forward just a hair, blinking against the sleep still weighing on my eyes.

It was a man, I thought. Button-down shirt, short hair.

“Taylor,” he finally said. “Taylor Dinescu.”

Dinescu? As in, Dinescu Petroleum Corporation? It couldn’t be the same family.

I licked my lips, swallowing again. I really needed to find some water.

“Why am I not locked in my room?” he asked me, coming out of the darkness and stepping into the faint moonlight streaming through the windows.

He cocked his head, his hair disheveled and the tail of his wrinkled Oxford hanging out. “We’re not allowed around the women,” he said, sounding just as

confused as me. “Are you with the doctor? Is he here?”

What the hell was he talking about? *‘We’re not allowed around the women.’*

Did I hear that right? He sounded out of it, like he was on drugs or had been locked in a cell for the past fifteen years.

“Where am I?” I demanded.

He took a step in my direction, and I took one backward, scrambling to get my shoes on as I hopped on one foot.

He closed his eyes, inhaling as he inched closer. “Jesus,” he panted. “It’s been a while since I smelled that.”

Smelled what?

His eyes opened, and I noticed they were a piercing blue, even more striking under his mahogany hair.

“Who are you? Where am I?” I barked.

I didn’t recognize this guy.

He slithered closer, almost animalistic in his movements with a predatory look on his face now that made the hairs on my arms stand up.

He looked suddenly alert. *Fuck.*

I searched for some kind of weapon around me.

“The locations change,” he said, and I backed up a step for every step toward me he took. “But the name stays the same. Blackchurch.”

“What is that?” I asked. “Where are we? Am I still in San Francisco?”

He shrugged. “I can’t answer that. We could be in Siberia or ten miles from Disneyland,” he replied. “We’re the last ones to know. All we know is that it’s

remote.”

“We?”

Who else was here? Where were they?

And where the hell was I, for that matter? What was Blackchurch? It

sounded vaguely familiar, but I couldn't think right now.

How could he not know where he was? What city or state? Or country, even?

My God. *Country*. I was in America, right? I had to be.

I felt sick.

But water. I'd heard water when I woke, and I perked my ears, hearing the dull, steady pounding of it around us. Were we near a waterfall?

"There's no one here with you?" he asked, as if he couldn't believe that I was really standing here. "You shouldn't be so close to us. They never let the females close to us."

"What females?"

"The nurses, cleaners, staff..." he said. "They come once a month to resupply, but we're confined to our rooms until they leave. Did you get left behind?"

I bared my teeth, losing my patience. Enough with the questions. I had no idea what the hell he was talking about, and my heart was pounding so hard, it

hurt. *They never let the females close to us*. My God, why? I retreated toward the staircase, moving backward, so I didn't take my eyes off him and started to descend as he advanced on me.

"I want to use the phone," I told him. "Where is it?"

He just shook his head, and my heart sank.

"No computers, either," he told me.

I stumbled on the step and had to grab the wall to steady myself. When I looked up, he was there, gazing down at me, his lips twitching with a grin.

“No, no...” I slid down a few more steps.

“Don’t worry,” he offered. “I just wanted a little sniff. He’ll want the first taste.”

He? I looked down the stairs, seeing a canister of umbrellas. Nice and pointy.

That’ll do.

“We don’t get women here.” He got closer and closer. “Ones we can touch anyway.”

I backed up farther. If I bolted for a weapon, would he be able to grab me?

Would he grab me?

“No women, no communication with the world,” he went on. “No drugs, liquor, or smokes, either.”

“What is Blackchurch?” I asked.

“A prison.”

I looked around, noticing the expensive marble floors, the fixtures and carpets, and the fancy, gold accents and statues.

“Nice prison,” I mumbled.

Whatever it was now, it clearly used to be someone’s home. A mansion or... a castle or something.

“It’s off the grid,” he sighed. “Where do you think CEOs and senators send

their problem children when they need to get rid of them?”

“Senators...” I trailed off, something sparking in my memory.

“Some important people can’t have their sons—their heirs—making news by going to jail or rehab or being caught doing their dirty deeds,” he explained.

“When we become liabilities, we’re sent here to cool off. Sometimes for months.” And then he sighed. “And some of us for years.”

Sons. Heirs.

And then it hit me.

Blackchurch.

No.

No, he had to be lying. I remembered hearing about this place. But it was just

an urban legend that wealthy men threatened their kids with to keep them in line.

A secluded residence somewhere where sons were sent as punishment, but given

free rein to be at each other’s mercy. It was like *Lord of the Flies* but with dinner jackets.

But it didn’t exist. Not really. Did it?

“There are more?” I asked. “More of you here?”

A wicked smile spread across his lips, curdling my stomach.

“Oh, several,” he crooned. “Grayson will be back with the hunting party

tonight.”

I stopped dead in my tracks, lightheaded.

No, no, no...

Senators, he’d said.

Grayson.

Shit.

“Grayson?” I muttered, more to myself. “Will Grayson?”

He was here?

But Taylor Dinescu, son of the owner of Dinescu Petroleum Corporation I

now gathered, ignored my question. “We have everything we need to survive, but if we want meat, we have to hunt for it,” he explained.

That’s what Will—and the *others*—were out doing. Getting meat.

And I didn’t know if it was the look on my face or something else, but Taylor started laughing. A vile cackling that curled my fists tight.

“Why are you laughing?” I growled.

“Because no one knows you’re here, do they?” he taunted, sounding

delighted. “And whoever does meant to leave you anyway. It’ll be a month before another resupply team shows up.”

I closed my eyes for a split second, his meaning clear.

“A whole month,” he mused.

His eyes fell down my body, and I absorbed the full implication of my situation.

I was in the middle of nowhere with who-knew-how-many men who'd been without any source of vice or contact with the outside world for who-knew-how-long, one of them who had a great desire to torture me if he ever got his hands on me again.

And, according to Taylor, I had little hope of any help for the next month.

Someone went to great lengths to bring me here and make sure my arrival went undetected. Was there really no attendant on the property? Security?

Surveillance? Anyone with control of the prisoners?

I ground my teeth together, having no idea what the hell I was going to do, but I needed to do it fast.

But then I heard something, and I shot my eyes up to Taylor, barks and howls echoing outside.

"What is that?" I asked.

Wolves? The sounds were getting closer.

He shot his eyes up, looking at the front door behind me and then back in my direction. "The hunting party," he replied. "They must be back early."

The hunting party.

Will.

And how many other prisoners who might be just as creepy and threatening as this guy...

The howls were outside the house now, and I looked up at Taylor, unable to

calm my breathing. What would happen when they came inside and saw me?

But he just smiled down at me. “Please, do run,” he said. “We’re dying for some fun.”

My heart sank. This wasn’t happening. *This wasn’t happening.*

I backed up as I headed down the stairs, keeping my eyes on him as he stalked me, liquid heat coursing in my veins.

“I want to talk to Will,” I demanded.

He might *want* to hurt me, but he wouldn’t. Would he?

If I could just talk to him...

But Taylor laughed, his blue eyes dancing with delight. “He can’t protect you, love.” And then the floor creaked upstairs, and Taylor tipped his head back,

looking at the ceiling. “Aydin is awake.”

Aydin. Who?

But I didn’t care to stick around and find out. I didn’t know if I’d really be in danger with these guys, but I knew I wouldn’t be in any if I ran.

Leaping down the staircase, I swung around the banister and bolted toward the back of the house, hearing Taylor howl as I disappeared down a dark corridor, sweat already cooling my forehead.

This wasn’t happening. There had to be surveillance. I refused to believe

Mommy and Daddy sent their heirs and assets here without some kind of insurance that they’d be safe. What if someone were injured? Or gravely ill?

This was a...a joke. A vastly inappropriate and lavish prank. It was almost Devil’s Night, and he was dealing me in. Finally.

Blackchurch wasn't real. Will didn't even believe this place existed in high school.

I passed rooms, some with one door, others with two, and some with none at all as the hallway splintered off into other hallways, and I didn't know where the

hell I was going. I just ran.

The rubber soles of my sneakers squeaked across the marble floors, and a tickle hit my nose at the stale scent of age. Nothing was warm here.

Walls changed from cream to maroon to black, rotting wallpaper fading in some areas and ceilings a mile high, as well as drapes falling down windows that

were eight times my height.

But the light fixtures shone, casting a somber glow in every office, den, parlor, and game room I passed.

Stopping short, I took the second right and dashed down the hall, thankful for the silence, but also unnerved by it. They were outside the door moments ago. They had to be in the house now. Why wasn't I hearing anything?

Dammit.

My muscles burning and my lungs tight, I couldn't hold back the groan as I stumbled into the last room at the end of the hall and ran to the window. I lifted

it open, the crisp air rushing in and breezing through the drapes. I shivered, seeing the vast green forest, almost black in the night beyond the window.

Hemlocks. I looked out, scanning the terrain. There were red spruces and

white pines, too. The moist scent of moss hit me, and I hesitated. I wasn't in California anymore. These trees were native to land much farther north.

And we weren't in Thunder Bay. We weren't anywhere near Thunder Bay.

Leaving the window open, I backed away, thinking twice. The chill in the air blew through my short-sleeved white blouse, and I had no idea where I was, how

far from civilization, or what kind of elements I'd run into unprotected.

I ran back out of the room, pinning myself to the wall and quietly stepping down the corridor, keeping my eyes peeled. *Think, think, think...*

We had to be close to a town. There were paintings on these walls, priceless antiques, massive chandeliers, and a hell of a lot of money that went into furnishing and decorating this place.

It hadn't always been a prison.

No one would spend this kind of money on something a bunch of little frat shits were going to trash. It was someone's home, and they wouldn't have built it

leagues away from town. A home like this is for entertaining. There was a ballroom, for Christ's sake.

I wrung my hands. I couldn't care less who dumped me here. Right now, I just needed to get somewhere safe.

And then I heard it.

A call—a howl—above me. I stopped, my blood freezing. Tipping my head

up, I followed the sound as it drifted from my left to my right, my pulse skipping

a beat as the floorboards above whined with weight.

Simultaneously. In several places.

They were upstairs, and there was more than one. Taylor saw me run this way. Why would they be upstairs?

And then I remembered what else was upstairs. Aydin.

Taylor spoke of him like he was a threat. Were they going to him first?

An echo of a voice traveled down the hall, and I trained my ears, the window behind me beckoning.

Another cry echoed farther down, possibly from the foyer, and then another howl somewhere around me.

I twisted around, dizzy. What the hell was going on? The nerves under my skin fired, and I forced myself to swallow as bile churned in my stomach.

They were spreading out.

Wolves. I paused, remembering the howls outside. It was like wolves. A pack separates to surround its prey and test for weaknesses. They flank the sides and

the rear.

Tears hung at the corners of my eyes, and lifted my chin, pushing them away. *W ill.*

How long had he been here? Where were his friends? Did he have me brought here as revenge? What the hell?

I told him not to push me all those years ago. I warned him. This wasn't my fault. He got himself put here.

I dove into a billiards room, grabbed a cricket bat off the wall, and crept back

out, hugging the walls with my back and darting my eyes all around for any sign

of them. Chills spread up my arms, and despite the cold, a light layer of sweat

covered my neck. Training my ears, I listened as I took one quiet step after another.

A thud hit the floor above me, and I sucked in a breath, shooting my eyes to the ceiling again as I trailed behind the stairs.

What the hell was going on?

A blue hue, like moonlight streaming through a window, lit the dark marble floor down the hallway, and I followed it, heading to the back of the house.

I inhaled, a sting hitting my nose. Sterile, like bleach. Taylor said the cleaners and staff just left.

My knees shook, and my heart hammered in my chest. I felt like I was already walled in, and I didn't even know it.

"Here!" someone shouted.

I gasped, flattening myself to the wall as I slipped around a corner.

Peering back around it, I spotted shadows moving along the wall as they found my open window.

“She’s running!” one of them shouted.

I exhaled, fisting my hands. *Yes*. They thought I crawled out the window.

Their footfalls pounded across the floor, racing back toward the foyer, hopefully, and I clasped my hand over my mouth as they faded away.

Thank God.

I didn’t wait another moment. I ran and ran, finding the kitchen in the southwest corner of the house. Leaving the lights off, I dashed for the

refrigerator and swung it open, racks of fruits and vegetables shifting with the motion.

I looked around, gaping at the size for a moment. It was a walk-in. I thought

Taylor said they had to hunt for their meat. There was a shitload of food right here.

I stepped inside the space, the immediate temperature change making me

shiver as I scanned the shelves of food, all looking freshly stocked. Cheeses, bread, deli meats, butter, milk, carrots, squash, cucumbers, tomatoes, grapes, bananas, mangoes, lettuce, blueberries, yogurt, hummus, steaks, hams, whole

chickens, burgers...

And this wasn’t counting the pantry they probably had, too.

Why would they have to hunt?

Wasting no more time, I grabbed the netted bag hanging inside and dumped out the produce it stored, quickly stocking it with two bottles of water, an apple

and some cheese. Maybe I should bring more, but I couldn't take the weight right now.

Diving back out of the fridge, I tied the bag closed and raced to the window, inching up on my tiptoes and seeing flashlights dance across the vast lawn.

I almost smiled. I had time to find a coat or sweater and get the hell out of here before they got back.

Spinning on the ball of my foot, I took a step, but then I saw him standing right there, a dark form leaning against the door frame to the kitchen, staring at

me.

I halted, my heart leaping into my throat.

At least I thought he was staring at me. His face was hidden in shadow.

My lungs froze, aching.

And then I remembered... *wolves*. They surround you.

All except one. He came at you from the front.

"Come here," he said in a low voice.

My hands shook, knowing that voice. And those exact words he'd said to me that one night.

"Will..."

He stepped into the kitchen, moonlight casting a dim glow on his face, and something inside me ached.

He was big in high school, but now...

I swallowed, trying to wet my dry mouth.

A light spatter of raindrops glimmered on top of his messy but trimmed head of chocolate hair, and I'd never seen him with scruff on his face before, but it made him look harder—and more dangerous—in ways I didn't realize would

look so good on him.

His chest was broader, his arms in his black hoodie thicker, and he brought up his hands, using a cloth to wipe off blood that coated his fingers. Tattoos adorned the backs of his hands, disappearing up the sleeve of his sweatshirt.

He didn't have any tattoos the last time I saw him.

The night he was arrested.

Where was the blood from? Hunting?

I backed away as he slowly advanced, but he wasn't looking at me as he approached, just gazing at his hands as he cleaned them.

The cricket bat. Where was it?

I blinked long and hard. *Shit*. I'd set it down on the fridge floor when I packed the food.

I flashed my eyes to the refrigerator, gauging the distance.

Searching the counters, I spotted a trio of glass apothecary jars and reached out, swiping one onto the floor between us. It crashed, shattering everywhere, and he paused a moment, a smile in his eyes as I continued to back away, making my way for the fridge.

“This won't end with you in my sleeping bag this time,” he warned.

I grabbed another jar and shoved it to the floor, backing up some more and

closing the distance. If he charged me, he'd slip on the glass.

"Don't make promises you can't keep," I taunted. "You're still not the alpha."

The dark eyebrow above one of his eyes cocked, but he didn't stop, continuing toward me.

The pulse in my neck thumped, my stomach swimming, but...as the glass crunched under his shoe and his gaze held mine, the pulse between my legs throbbed, and I almost cried.

"Do you know why I'm here?" I asked.

"Have you been bad?"

I locked my jaw, but I remained silent.

A wicked smile spread across his face, and I knew this was it. I didn't think it would happen like this, but I always knew it was coming.

"You know," I said. "Don't you?"

He nodded. "Don't you want to explain?"

"Would it matter?"

He shook his head.

I gulped. *Yeah, didn't think so.*

He served two-and-a-half years in prison because of me. And not just him.

His best friends, Damon Torrance and Kai Mori, too.

I dropped my eyes for a moment, knowing he didn't deserve it, but I also knew I wouldn't have done anything differently if I could. I'd told him to

stay

away from me. I'd warned him.

"I wish I'd never met you," I said, almost whispering.

He stopped, glass grinding under him. "Believe me, girl, the feeling is fucking mutual."

I backed up, but my hand brushed my leg, and I felt something in my pocket.

I continued making my way for the fridge, but I reached into my pants and pulled out the hunk of metal, seeing a folding knife with a black handle.

Where did this come from?

I didn't carry knives.

I dropped the net and unsheathed the blade, holding it out in front of me, but he shot out and grabbed my wrist, prying my fingers open. I fought against it, trying to keep the weapon, but he was too strong. I cried out as I couldn't hold it

anymore and it fell to the floor, clanking on the marble.

Whipping me around, he fisted my collar and brought me in, pinning me between his body and the counter.

He looked down into my eyes, and I breathed hard, a lock of hair brushing against my mouth.

"You like alphas?" he challenged me.

I sharpened my eyes on him. "We want what we want."

He glared, those words far more familiar than he wanted to remember, and if

I weren't so fucking scared, I'd laugh.

Growling, he picked me up and threw me over his shoulder. "Time to meet one then," he said.



Emory

Nine Years Ago

"Why are you quitting?"

I stood there, avoiding my coach's eyes as I gripped the strap of my bookbag that hung across my chest.

"I don't have time," I told her. "I'm sorry."

I risked a glance, seeing her gaze hard on me under the short blonde hair hanging just over her eyes. "You made a commitment," she argued. "We need you."

I shifted on my feet, a curtain of self-loathing covering every inch of me.

This was shitty. I knew that.

I was good at swimming. I could help the team, and she put a lot of work into training me over the last year. I didn't want to quit.

But she'd just have to deal with it. I couldn't explain, even if not explaining meant that she'd misunderstand my silence as being irresponsible and selfish.

The voices of all the girls outside the office filled the locker room as they got

ready for practice, and I felt her eyes on me, waiting for a response.

It was useless, though. I wasn't going to change my mind.

"Is there something else going on?" she asked.

I squeezed the strap across my chest, the fabric cutting into my hand.

But I drew a deep breath and pushed my glasses back up the bridge of my nose, straightening my spine. "No one's giving me a scholarship for swimming,"

I spat out. "I need to spend my time doing things that will get me into college.

This was a waste."

Before she could fire back, or the look on her face made this hurt worse, I spun around and pulled open her door, leaving her office.

Tears lodged in my throat, but I pushed them down.

This sucked. I was going to pay for this. It wasn't over. I knew that.

But I had no choice.

The ache in my back fired up as I stalked through the locker room, and I slammed my hand into the door, feeling the pain in my wrist shoot up my

arm

before stepping into the hallway.

But I pushed through it, ignoring the discomfort as I headed down the nearly empty corridor.

I was glad I got out of there before she asked why I wasn't quitting band, too. Band wouldn't get me into college, either. I wasn't that good.

It was just all I had left now that got me out of the house, and I didn't have to

wear a swimsuit to do it.

I chewed on my lip, a ten-ton truck sitting on my shoulders as I stared at the floor. I headed for my locker without looking where I was going, because I'd walked this path a million times. *Just keep it together.* Time would pass. Life would move on. I was heading in the right direction.

Just keep going.

A few students milled around the halls, here early because of clubs or other sports, and I reached my locker, dialing in the combination. It was still a bit before the first class started, but I could go hide in the library to kill time. It was better than being home.

Emptying my bag of my math and physics that I'd finished last night, I

pulled my binder, my lit book, my copy of *Lolita*, and my Spanish text from my locker, holding everything in one arm as I dug on the top shelf for my pencil bag.

He was going to find out I'd quit. Maybe I had a few days' peace before that happened, but a knot tightened in my stomach, and I could still taste the coppery

cut in my mouth from two days ago.

He was going to find out. He wouldn't want me to quit swimming, and pointing out why I had to would only make him angrier.

I blinked a few times, no longer really searching for my pens or pencils as the searing pain under my hair from the other night raced across my scalp again.

I hadn't cried when he pulled it.

But I retreated. I always flinched.

Laughter went off somewhere down the hall, and I glanced over, seeing some students loitering against the lockers. Girls in their school uniforms, skirts rolled up much shorter than the three inches above the knee we were allowed, and blouses too tight under their navy blue jackets.

I narrowed my eyes.

With heads together and smiling as they joked around with the guys, the whole group looked about as shallow as a rain puddle. Never deep enough to be more than what it was.

Shallow, boring, tedious, ignorant, and insipid. All the rich kids here were like that.

I watched Kenzie Lorraine lean into Nolan Thomas, her mouth moving over his like she was melting into him. She whispered against his lips, and his white teeth flashed through his little grin before he slid his hands around her waist and

leaned back against the lockers. My heart skipped a small beat, and I felt my pencil bag, absently sliding it into my satchel without taking my eyes off them.

Shallow, boring, tedious, ignorant, and insipid.

I blinked, my expression softening as I watched them.

Happy, excited, brave, wild, and in heaven.

They looked seventeen.

And suddenly, for a moment, I wished I was them. Anyone other than me.

No wonder hardly anyone at this school liked me. I was even tired of myself.

Wouldn't it be fantastic to be really happy for just five minutes?

Her friends hung around, talking to his, but I only saw him and her,

wondering how it felt. Even if it wasn't true love, it had to feel good to be wanted.

But just then, Nolan opened his eyes. He looked over at me, meeting my gaze head on as if he knew I was here the whole time. The vein in my neck pounded, and I was frozen.

Shit.

He didn't stop kissing her, though, holding my eyes as they moved together.

Then...he winked at me, and I could see his smile through the kiss.

I rolled my eyes and looked away. *Great.* Emory Scott was a pervert. That's what he'd say. Just what I needed.

I turned back to my locker, embarrassed, and slammed the door.

Everything ached, and I arched my back, trying to stretch the muscles, but just as I turned around to leave, a fist came down and knocked my books out of

my arms.

I sucked in a breath, startled as I retreated a step on instinct.

Miles Anderson glared at me as he passed, but a smirk curled his lips, too.

“See something you like, stupid?” he taunted.

I clenched my jaw, trying to get control of the pounding in my chest, but the sudden fright made my stomach roll as his friends followed him, laughing.

His blond hair laid haphazardly over his forehead, while his blue eyes trailed down my form, and I knew exactly what he was taking stock of.

The outdated plaid pattern of my secondhand skirt.

The missing button on the cuff of my blouse that was two sizes too big.

My faded blue blazer with little pieces of thread sticking off the patch-ups I had to do from the previous owner.

My worn shoes, from all the walking because I had no car, and how I never wore makeup or did anything with my dark hair that just hung down my arms and in my face.

So much different than how he looked. How they all looked.

Little shits. I let Anderson have his pathetic fun, because it was the only time he had any power. One thing I could be grateful to the Horsemen for.

I hated how this school was their own personal playground, but when they were around, Miles Anderson didn't pull shit like that. I could bet he was

probably counting the days until they graduated so he could take over the basketball team.

And Thunder Bay Prep.

Clenching my jaw, I crouched down and gathered up my books, stuffing everything into my bag.

But a light sweat covered my face all of a sudden, and I felt sick. Pushing myself to my feet, I blew out a breath and hurried for the bathroom, the closest

one up the stairs and down the hall.

My stomach filled with something, the burn of the bile rising up my throat growing stronger. Throwing my weight into the door, I pushed through and dove

into a stall, leaning over the toilet and heaving.

I lurched, the vomit rising just enough to taste the acid, but it wouldn't come up any farther. I coughed, my eyes watering as I gasped.

I pushed my glasses up on top of my head, holding the sides of the stall as I drew in breath after breath to calm down.

I rubbed my eyes. *Shit.*

I fought back sometimes.

When it didn't matter and when I wasn't really threatened.

I wiped my brow and flushed the toilet on habit, exiting the stall and walking to the sink. Turning on the water, I dipped my hands underneath the faucet, but

then I paused, my energy to even splash water on my face now gone. I just turned it off and left the bathroom, wiping my hands dry on my skirt.

I was too tired, and the day had barely started.

But as soon as I opened the door, someone stood there, and I stopped short, looking at Trevor Crist. He smiled at me as I fisted the strap of my bag, staring

at him.

He was only a freshman, two years my junior, but he was already my height and looked absolutely nothing like his brother. Fake, plastic eyes that didn't match his smile, and dark blond hair that was as perfectly styled as his tie was

positioned.

He looked like his name should be Chad. What the hell did he want?

He held out a blue notebook, and I recognized the frayed notes and loose papers inside, highlighted with scribbled yellow marker. I darted my eyes back

down the hall toward my locker.

I must've left it behind when that jackass knocked everything out of my hands.

I took the notebook, stuffing it into my bag. "Thank you," I mumbled.

"I got it all, but I can't be sure it's in order," he said. "Some of the papers fell out."

I barely heard him, noticing the hallways filling with more students, and Mr. Townsend make his way for my first class.

“Trevor Crist.” The kid held out his hand.

“I know.”

And I walked past him, ignoring his hand.

Heading a few yards down the hall, I held open the door, following another student inside, and scanned the classroom for the safest seat. In the corner, at the rear and near the windows, an empty desk sat surrounded by students at every available angle—Roxie Harris next to me, Jack Leister in front of me, and Drew

Hannigan kitty-corner.

I ran for it.

I slid into the seat, the legs of the desk skidding across the floor as I dropped my bag to the ground.

“Ugh,” Roxie groaned beside me, but I ignored her as I dug my materials out of my bag.

And she started to pack up her things.

The classroom filled, chatter and laughter pouring in as Mr. Townsend stood, hovering over his desk and going through his notes.

But Roxie didn’t even have time to clear out of her seat before they were there. Drifting through the door, tall, magnetic, and always together.

I turned my head toward the window, closing my eyes behind my glasses and

holding my breath as I quickly pulled my earbuds out of my jacket pocket and

stuck them in my ears.

Anything to look unapproachable.

Please, please, please...

The prayer was too late, though. I could feel Roxie, Jack, and Drew's eye rolls as they sighed and grabbed their shit, vacating their seats without even being asked, like it was my fault these guys insisted on completely crowding me

no matter where I sat in this damn room.

Kai Mori slid into Jack's seat ahead of me, while Damon Torrance took the seat diagonally from me.

I didn't have to look up to see their dark hair, and I could always tell who was who without checking because Kai smelled like amber musk and the ocean,

while Damon smelled like an ashtray.

Michael Crist had probably planted himself somewhere close, but it was the last body, passing me in the aisle and planting himself in the seat next to me in

what should've been Roxie's seat, that made my heart beat faster.

I could feel his eyes on me as I stared out the window.

If I knew we were going to share classes when the administration decided to move me to senior English a few weeks back—a year ahead of schedule—I would've said no. No matter what my brother wanted.

I was pretty sure they only moved me, because I was “difficult” last year and

they thought challenging me would put a cork in my mouth.

They were all finding out that wasn't true.

"You're out of uniform," I heard some girl whisper.

And then I heard Will Grayson's voice heating the back of my neck. "I'm in disguise," he told her.

"That piece of shit has a hard-on for you or something," Damon added.

"Every time he sees you, he wants to get you alone."

I clenched my fingers around my notebook and pencil.

"In his defense," Kai chimed in, "it was you who put the 'Sorry, I hit your car' notes on people's vehicles all over town with his phone number on them."

Damon snorted and then burst out laughing, while Will breathed out a self-satisfied chuckle.

Assholes. My brother's phone rang all damn night last night because of that prank. And when he's aggravated, he shows it.

"So, what do you say, Em?" Will prodded, finally engaging me like he could never stop himself from doing. "Is your brother hot for me? He's certainly on my ass enough."

I remained silent, absently opening my notebook as people got situated in their seats and talked around us.

Everyone in this school hated my brother. Their money and connections had

no effect on his willingness as a police officer to hand out speeding tickets, parking tickets, investigate noise complaints, or shut down parties and drinking

as soon as he got a whiff of anything going down.

My brother was a jerk for doing his job, and when they couldn't come at him, they came at me.

I saw Will dig something out of his pocket, and I watched him unwrap a piece of candy and lift it to his mouth, peeling the sweet off the paper with his

teeth.

His eyes never left me.

"Take out your earbuds," he ordered me as he chewed.

I narrowed my gaze.

"And stop acting like you're listening to music and that's why you can't be bothered to deal with the people around you," he bit out.

Every muscle in my body tensed, and when I didn't listen, he tossed his wrapper onto the floor and leaned over, yanking the cord and pulling the earbuds

out of my ears.

I startled, sitting up straight.

But I didn't shrink. Not with him.

Now...he had my fucking attention.

Grabbing the cord from where it hung down to the floor, I rose from my desk, picked up my notebook and bag, and started to leave.

But then his hands were on me, pulling me down into his lap.

Everything in my arms tumbled to the floor, and liquid fire coursed under my

skin.

No.

I gritted my teeth and shoved at him as Kai sighed and Damon snickered, neither one stopping him, though.

I struggled against him, but he simply tightened his hold, turning his face away from my attack.

Will, Kai, Damon, and Michael. The Four Horsemen.

I just loved these nicknames little wannabe gangsters gave themselves in

high school, but someone should really tell them it wasn't scary when you had to

tell everyone how scary you were.

Every school had these guys, too. A little money, some connected moms and dads, and pretty faces without hearts to match. None of that was really their fault, I guessed.

What was their fault was that they took full advantage of it. Wouldn't it be fun if anyone ever said no to them? If one of them ever paid for a mistake? Or

ever said no to a drink, a drug, or a girl?

But no. Same story. Shallow, boring, tedious, ignorant, and insipid.

And while others may give in or pathetically protest before finally giving in,

I wasn't interested.

And he hated that.

I could scream. Get the teacher's attention. Make a scene. But he'd only get the laughs he craved, and I'd get the attention I didn't.

"Wipe that fucking glare off your face," he warned.

I locked my jaw, not doing a damn thing he said.

He dropped his voice to a whisper. "I know I may seem like the nicest one, and you probably think I regret the shit I give you sometimes, and someday I'll

wake up and reevaluate my life and its purpose, but I won't. I sleep like a baby

at night."

"You wake every two hours and cry?" I asked.

There was a snort behind me, but I didn't look away as Will's eyes sharpened on me. School was always the one place I had a reprieve.

Until I got to high school.

I rolled my wrists inside his fists, trying to pry him off. "Let me go."

"Why are your cuffs wet?"

His gaze fell and he forced my arm up, so he could look closer.

I didn't answer.

He looked back up at me. "And your eyes are red."

My throat tightened, but I gritted my teeth together and yanked my wrists free.

But before I could escape from his lap, he grabbed my chin in one hand and wrapped his other arm around my waist, pulling me in. Against his body, and whispering so softly no one could hear him but me.

“Don’t you know that you can have anything you want?” His eyes searched mine. “I’ll hurt anyone for you.”

The weight on my chest was too heavy, it almost hurt to breathe.

“Who is it?” he asked. “Who do I have to hurt?”

My eyes burned. Why did he do this? He’d soften and tempt me with the fantasy that I wasn’t alone and maybe—possibly—there was hope.

His scent hit me. Bergamot and blue cypress, and I looked up at his brown hair, perfectly styled and rich against his perfect skin and dark brows. Black lashes framed eyes that looked like the leaves surrounding a lagoon on some stupid island somewhere, and for a moment, I was lost.

Just for a moment.

“God, please,” I finally said. “Get yourself a life, Will Grayson. You’re pathetic.”

And his beautiful eyes instantly hardened as he lifted his chin. He pushed me off his lap and shoved me back toward my desk. “Sit down.”

He almost sounded hurt, and I nearly laughed. *Probably disappointed I’m not stupid enough to fall for his shit.* What was he planning? Gain my trust, lure me to Homecoming, and watch as they dumped pig’s blood all over me?

Nah, not original enough. Will Grayson had more imagination. I’d give him

that, at least.

“All right, let’s go ahead and get started,” Mr. Townsend said, clearing his throat

I grabbed my bag and notebook off the floor and slid back into my chair, tucking my earbuds into my pocket.

“Take out your books,” he instructed as he took a quick sip of his coffee and flipped a paper on his desk.

Will just sat there, staring silently ahead, and I faltered for a moment as I watched the muscle flex in his jaw.

Whatever. I rolled my eyes and dug out my copy of *Lolita* as the rest of the class found theirs. Except Will, because he hadn’t bothered to bring a bag or books today.

“We’ve talked about Humbert being an unreliable narrator in the book.”

Townsend took another drink of coffee. “How we are all the righteous heroes of

our own story if we’re the ones telling it.”

I heard Will draw in and release a breath. I focused on the back of Kai Mori’s neck, usually fascinated by how precise and clean the lines of his trim were.

I was having trouble concentrating today.

Townsend continued, “And how often a matter of right or wrong is simply just a matter of perspective. To a fox, the hound is the villain. To a hound, the

wolf. To a wolf, a human, and so on.”

Oh, please. Humbert Humbert was derailed.

And a criminal. Fox, hound, wolf, whatever.

“He believes he’s in love with Lo.” The teacher circled his desk and leaned against the front, his paperback curled in his fist. “But he’s not completely ignorant of his crime, either. He says,” —he flipped open his book, reading from

it—“I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew she would

not be forever Lolita.” He looked up at the class. “What did he mean?”

“That she’d grow up,” Kai answered. “And no longer be sexually attractive to him because he’s a pedophile.”

I smirked to myself. Kai was kind of my favorite Horseman, if I had to pick one.

Townsend considered Kai’s thoughts, but then prompted another student.

“Do you agree?”

The girl shrugged. “I think he meant that we change, and she would, too. It’s not that she’s growing up. It’s that she’ll outgrow him, and he’s scared.”

Which was probably what Humbert actually meant, but I liked Kai’s assessment better.

The teacher nodded and then jerked his chin at another student. “Michael?”

Michael Crist looked up, sounding lost. “What?”

Damon snorted at his friend, and I shook my head.

Townsend hooded his eyes, looking impatient, before restating his question.

“What do you think he meant when he said she wouldn’t be forever Lolita?”

Michael remained silent for a moment. I almost wondered if he would answer.

“He loves the idea of her,” he finally told Townsend, sounding finite. “When she eventually faded from him, the dream of her would still be there, haunting him. That’s what he meant.”

Huh. Not an entirely poor assessment. And I thought Kai would be the only one of them who’d actually read the book.

Townsend shifted, flipping to another page and read, “She says, ‘He broke my heart. You merely broke my life.’ What is she telling him?”

Everyone kept silent.

The teacher scanned the room, looking for a flicker from any of us. “You merely broke my life,” he repeated.

Needles pricked my throat, and I dropped my eyes. *You broke my life.*

A student sighed from a seat near the door. “She willingly indulged him,” he argued. “Yeah, it was wrong, but this is an issue today. Women can’t just decide

after the fact that they were abused. She was willingly sexual with him.”

“Minors can’t consent,” Kai pointed out.

“What, so you magically become emotionally and mentally mature when you

turn eighteen?" Will replied, suddenly entering the conversation. "Just happens overnight, does it?"

"She was a child, Will." Kai turned in his seat, debating his friend. "In Humbert's head, he demands sympathy from us, and most readers give it,

because he tells them to. Because we're willing to forgive anyone anything if they're attractive to us."

I stared at my desk, not blinking.

"He doesn't have a thing for Lo," Kai continued. "He has a thing for young girls. It's not an isolated incident. She was abused."

"And she left him to go shack up with a child pornographer, Kai," Will spat out. "If she were being abused, why didn't she have the sense to not put herself back in that situation?"

I rubbed my thumb over the paperback cover, hearing it skid across the gloss. My chin trembled, my eyes stinging a little.

"I mean, why would she do that?" Will asked.

"That's what I'm saying," another student chimed in.

Words hung on the tip of my tongue, telling them that they were

oversimplifying. That it was easier to judge a girl you knew nothing about than

to allow someone the dignity of their process. That it was more convenient to not

consider that there were things we didn't know and things we'd never understand, because we were shallow and entitled and ignorant.

That you stayed, because...

Because...

“Abuse can feel like love.”

I blinked, the voice so close that my ears tingled. Slowly, I raised my eyes to look at the side of Damon Torrance’s face, his shirt wrinkled, and his tie draped around his neck.

The whole class fell silent, and I glanced at Will next to me, seeing his eyebrows pinched together as he looked at the back of his friend’s head.

Mr. Townsend approached. “Abuse can feel like love...” he repeated.

“Why?”

Damon remained so still it didn’t look like he was breathing.

He looked at the teacher, unwavering. “Starving people will eat anything.”

I stilled as his words hung in the air, and for a second, I felt warm. He wasn’t completely devoid of brain cells maybe.

Feeling eyes on me, I turned my head, seeing Will’s gaze focused on my leg.

I looked down, finding my fingers curled around the hem of my skirt, the scratches and part of a bruise visible on my thigh. My pulse quickened, and I yanked my skirt back down to my knee.

“Flip to the last chapter, please,” Townsend called. “And take out the packet.”

But the bruise pounded with pain, and I suddenly couldn’t breathe.