

Listen Closely
by myheartisinohio | KH

Chapter One

There are two things I learn about my brand spanking new family on the first day in the new house.

One, Travis McCall is completely fucking gorgeous.

Two, Travis McCall is completely fucking insane.

I can't decide which I like more.

To be fair, Dad gave me some advance warning. At ten o'clock that morning, just a few hours before we packed up and drove up to Lakewood, he sat me down for a Serious Talk.

"Garen, I want you to understand some things about the situation with Evelyn, Bree, and Travis before we head over to the new house, alright?" he asks. I nod, but I'm not sure if he sees. He could be as completely focused on something else as I am. But to tell the truth, I care a whole hell of a lot more about whether or not my guitar is in tune than I care about the family dynamic of my new would-be steps.

"You will notice that Evelyn is a bit... over protective of her son," Dad continues. I snort.

"Well I do so love a mamma's boy," I say.

"It isn't like that, Garen. A year ago, Travis had an accident."

I look up at that. "What kind of accident?"

"He overdosed on sleeping pills in a suicide attempt," Dad says. I stare at him.

"Yeah, Dad, that's definitely what an accident is," I say. He shakes his head and goes on for another half hour, telling me how Travis is in therapy now and he takes antidepressants to help with his "tendencies" and how I should just watch what I say around him so that I won't set him off. The entire conversation is completely pointless. I've never even met the guy and I can tell already that there's not a single switch in his body that'll have anything to do with me if it gets turned on. It's obvious Evelyn is the one who set him off. She's come over for dinner a few times before, and God. If I had to live with that obsessive-compulsive, overbearing freak for a mom, I'd try and fucking kill myself too. Of course, my mom's probably not much of a better option. But if the choice is between a crazy stalker mom like Ev and one who forgets your name half the time like mine, I'd take the one who'll leave me alone.

"Garen? Is that clear? I don't want you to try to be as... controversial as usual," Dad concludes.

"I don't try to be controversial, Dad."

He gives me The Look, and I don't blame him. How many times did he get calls from one of the sergeants at school saying I was being an asshat?

"Mr. Anderson, we found several empty alcohol bottles in your son's room. When we asked him about it, he insisted he wasn't breaking any rules because there was no alcohol left *in* the bottles when we found them..."

"Mr. Anderson, we've had complaints from several students that your son continually interrupts history class in order to make suggestive comments to his teacher... Mr. Cunningham..."

"Mr. Anderson, your son set fire to the supply shed behind the building last night..."

If you listen to my side, that last one was an accident, but I really doubt Dad is willing to take my side about much of anything anymore. Now, he just shakes his head and tells me to make sure my car is packed, because it's time to go. The car is definitely packed. I spent three hours this morning loading everything meticulously so I wouldn't have to worry about my dad's half-assed packing job at last minute, and therefore wouldn't have to worry about killing him if he scratched my car. Unfortunately, my car is just one of the many things in this world that I like better than people.

The house Dad bought is basically the exact same size and layout as our old one. There are only three differences as far as I can tell.

One, there are two more rooms in New House than there were in Old House.

Two, every single room in New House has a door, and in Old House, only the bathrooms and bedrooms did.

And three, the Old House is in Ohio, and this one is in the Ass of Nowhere, Connecticut.

Other than that, though, the houses are identical. So I know exactly where the rooms are upstairs, and I know exactly which one I'm claiming as mine. Top of the stairs, first room on the left, just like before. I bring everything of mine upstairs and into my room. It only takes me two hours to set it all up, and after that, I come back downstairs and sit down, right in the middle of the entrance hall. I consider it my sort of retaliation, because honestly, I never wanted to come here. I liked Ohio just fine, thanks. When Dad said we were moving here, the only reason I was even okay with it was because I never spend much time at home anyway. Patton Military Academy is in southern New York, and I spent ten months out of the year there. That's probably why Dad took so many business trips to other states; he didn't have to worry about being home to make sure I didn't blow anything up. And since one of those business trips is where he met Ev, I guess it's sort of my fault that we moved. I was fine with it, I really was, until he told me that I had to get to know my new housemates by staying Lakewood permanently, meaning no more Patton. I didn't speak to him for a week after that, not like he cared. It was my own personal retaliation to be as much of a pain in the ass as possible, since that's what got me sent to military school in the first place.

Cut to me, lying on my back on the floor in the entrance hall, right where everyone needs to be walking. When Ev and her kiddies arrive, I don't get up to greet them. She opens her arms at me like she expects me to leap up and give her a big hug. I shake her hand without getting up, and then go right back to staring at the wall near me. She isn't pleased with this, but instead of saying anything, she just collects my dad and drags him off to the kitchen to fool around while pretending to make dinner. I hear movement and voices outside, and a few seconds later, Travis McCall elbows the front door open and stumbles across the threshold with a huge box half-obscuring his vision.

Great. The guy announces his presence by tripping over a doorstep and I already want to throw him up against the wall and have my wicked way with him. Anyone who saw him wouldn't blame me for it either; the guy is pretty much godlike. His hair is light, light brown, almost blonde, and just long enough to fall in some effortlessly messy way he's probably not even aware of, curling slightly at the ends. Blue-grey eyes, barely tanned skin, and the most lickable dusting of barely-there freckles I have ever seen in my life.

Please, dear God, do not let this boy be straight.

His eyes lock onto mine, but he doesn't say anything, just ducks his head and carts the box upstairs. On his way back downstairs and outside, he walks as quickly past me as possible, his head turned the other way. It's sort of funny at first, the way he obviously has as little interest in this family bonding as I do. By his third trip back out, though, it's old. I retrieve my guitar from upstairs and sit back down in my old spot. If he doesn't wanna play, I'm not going to force him to be talk to me. He comes back inside with another box and trips on the stairs. I lied. I'm so going to force him to talk to me.

"Do you want help?" I finally ask. I see him sort of tense up, almost like he forgot I was there, which is

impossible. He's walked over me four times. As he starts to turn his head, I quickly look down at the floor. There's dead silence. Any time now, Travis. Just a word. 'No thanks' or 'Sure, even though you're a crazy freak who is checking out his future stepbrother.' Something. Anything. I look at him, and he turns back around and starts dragging the box up again.

"No, I got it," he says. I watch him head back upstairs. Okay. Maybe I watch a little more closely than necessary. He ignores me again on his way out, and attempts to on his way back in. The box he's holding rattles loudly, and my guess is kitchenware.

"You're going to break something. Probably something glass, and then probably your back," I say. Alright, stupid idea. He looks pissed. I'm contemplating apologizing, but what comes out instead is just more of the usual banter I go with. God I need to learn to associate my brain to my mouth.

The way Ev comes out of the kitchen, just popping into sight with this huge look of glee at just the utter awesomeness of the world, reminds me a lot of those prairie dogs I spent all of ninth grade biology watching videos of. I fucking hated those things, but that's exactly what Ev reminds me of. A prairie dog. Not a good sign.

She makes the most pointless introductions on the planet. I force a smile through it, say whatever I have to in order to get her to go away. Leave me alone, leave me alone, I'm trying to flirt with your son, leave me alone. It takes her longer to get my mental hints than I'd like, but she eventually retreats to the kitchen with Dad in tow.

"I'm writing a song," I say to Travis as he passes me. The words are out before I even stop to think about whether or not they even make sense. He ignores me and goes back outside. I strum a chord on the guitar as he comes back in. "It's called 'Travis Is A Stubborn Asshole'."

He looks ready to turn around and punch me in the face, but he just continues up the stairs. I strum the same chord again and hum softly. As he heads back down the stairs, I grin.

"It's about this guy Garen who has this stepbrother that starts breaking boxes full of stuff because he won't ask for help carrying them," I say. He finally looks at me, and I almost want to move backwards because of the intensity in his eyes.

"I am not your brother," he snaps. That does it. Even faking at being a polite human being is off the table now. Claws out.

"Did I say you were? I said 'stepbrother'."

I fucking hate it when I use that voice. You'd think because of that, I'd use it less often, but I don't. I must say things sharply as often as I say them normally.

"They're not married," Travis replies. I can tell he's trying to keep calm, and I can also tell it's not working at all. It's then that I remember I'm supposed to watch what I say so that I won't trigger another suicide attempt. I'm about to start nodding and telling him he's right, but then I realize I can't just let the conversation hang like that.

"They will be eventually. You think Evelyn would've agreed to move in if she didn't think she'd get a rock out of it?" I ask.

"Shut up," he snaps as he goes for the next box. The second he straightens up with it, the look of complete venom is gone, replaced by the obvious thought that he so cannot handle that. "Shit. I think I found my sister's TV," he pants.

I like that breathy little gasp he makes a lot more than I should.

I shake my head to clear it and stand up quickly. He's about a second from smashing that thing through the floor, and if he does, I'll somehow get blamed. I steady the box and slide my hands down onto his. He spreads his fingers apart so our hands are interlocked on the box.

Oh yeah. He's definitely not straight.

Not with the way he's pointedly staring at the box, not with the way his fingers keep shifting because they're shaking so much. God, *I'm* fucking straighter than that.

"They're not getting married," he says. It comes out a little softer and lower than his voice sounded before, and I have to consciously try not to grin like a moron.

"So? They might as well, since they're already playing one big happy family. You're so deep in denial that it's actually sort of cute," I say. His face remains perfectly neutral except the slight stain of red creeping into his cheeks.

"And you're cool with that?" he asks. I know exactly what he's talking about, and I know exactly what he's ignoring. So of course, I know exactly what I'm going to keep talking about.

"You being cute? Well, I'll admit that those funny tingly feelings in my stomach are kind of creepy now that they're in relation to my pseudo-stepbrother, but I'm willing to move past it if you are," I say. He presses the box against me, hard. He thinks I'm fucking with him just for the fun of it, and I sort of am. I'm also more serious than I have been about just about anything else in my life. I swallow hard and hope he's about to say something equally flirtatious.

"Fuck you. You know what I was talking about," he says. Or, you know, he could just snap obscenities at me. Same thing. And not at all completely frustrating.

"I know, they might get married, you're a whiney bitch, blah, blah, blah. And I really don't care what Dad does. He and my mom got divorced when I was fourteen, right after they sent me to PMA, so it's not like I have big issues about him moving on too fast. 'Sides, my mom's a bitch anyway," I say. And hey, about half of that is actually true. Maybe. They got divorced when I was fourteen, but I saw it coming since I was nine. It was after they sent me to PMA, but it was actually probably why they sent me to PMA. So they didn't have to pretend around me anymore. And I don't have big issues about him moving on too fast. I just have issues about him moving on with the mother of a guy I seriously would give anything to bed right now.

"What's PMA?" Travis asks.

Loaded question, and I don't know how much of a loaded answer to give. The bane of my existence for the past three and a half years. The worst and best place on the planet. Where my best friend still is without me. Where I lost my virginity. Way too many answers to give, so I disregard all of them.

"Patton Military Academy. All-boys military school. I went there for three years. Just got pulled last week," I say finally. We finally reach his sister's room, and I try to initiate some small talk about his cross-country team. As he tells me he's the only junior on varsity, he pushes his hair off his forehead. His face is flushed, and my brain is suddenly unobjectionably full of mental images of him right after a track meet, pulling the hem of his t-shirt up to wipe the sweat off his face. God. I need to start taking more cold showers.

"Star player. Well, aren't you cute," I say quickly, and I head for the door. I'm going to go back down to the hall, and sit there in the way, and play my guitar, and go back to ignoring him instead of picturing him all shirtless and sweaty after a track meet. Oh fuck, because that's definitely working.

"Can you stop doing that?" he asks suddenly. Stop picturing you shirtless? I would if I could, but-- okay, so that's probably really not what he was talking about, since he's not a mind reader (hopefully). I turn

back to face him quickly.

“Stop doing what?” I ask.

“Calling me cute. That’s twice in ten minutes,” he replies. Maybe I should reevaluate my decision that he was definitely not straight. I glance at the floor just so I won’t have to look him in the eye, then after a second, I look back up.

“And it bothers you, I take it?” I say.

“I didn’t say that,” he says as he heads back downstairs, pressing up against me as he moves through the doorway. This boy is going to be the death of me.

Chapter Two

The second I pass through the doors leading from the main hallway to one filled with rows of lockers, I'm completely alone. My immediate instinct is to turn right back around and find Travis, even if he is insane and kind of Stepford. At least I know his name. And at least he's human-sized, since I've apparently stepped into Munchkinland. On the bright side, it's easy to see over the heads of everyone in this hallway. On the dark side, every single one of them is staring at me like I'm a mutant freak from Plant Whatthefuck.

"You must be new," says a voice to my left. I barely glance down at the speaker, a dark-haired guy who must be at least half a foot shorter than me.

"Yeah. And either this is a town full of midgets, or I'm in the wrong place," I say.

"Obviously. This is the freshman hallway. If you're a senior, I can show you our hallway. I'm headed up there too," he says. When I look at him for real, it's obvious he's not a freshman. His face has none of the pre-pubescent boyishness that everyone else in the vicinity has. Instead, there is a wry smile on soft, full lips, and appraising blue eyes lined in black. The dark hair, which I had figured to be bed-head, is meticulously straightened and mussed, like a slightly tamer version of my own. He looks like he's one Converse-wearing step away from being emo. Not my usual type at all, but still doable. Very, very doable.

"Sorry," I say, eyes now focused on his decently tight jeans. "I didn't realize."

"I get that a lot," he says, and then holds out a hand half-hidden under the sleeve of his dark gray sweatshirt. "I'm Ben McCutcheon."

"Garen Anderson," I say. I let my hand stay in his for as long as I dare, but he doesn't seem fazed. I didn't think he would be. When I finally release him, he reaches past me to push open the door, and leads me back down the main hall to another set of doors.

"Where'd you move from?" he asks. I pause next to a classroom to peer inside as he continues on one, two, three steps ahead of me, then take a brief glance at his ass before he turns back around to look at me. I flash him a well-earned smile.

"I went to school in New York, but I lived in Cleveland with my dad during the summers," I say.

"Really? My cousin goes to school in New York too. Where'd you go?" Ben asks.

"Patton Military Academy," I say. "And if your cousin goes there, I probably fucked him. My bad."

The pause before his laughter is noticeable, but still less than three seconds, which settles it. He's definitely on my team, but most likely a virgin. And oh, how I love those virgins.

"He doesn't. Which is probably fortunate for you. He's about half my height and three times my weight," he says. He plucks the office paperwork from my hands and sifts through it until he finds my locker number and combination. He glances around, then leads me about halfway down the hall to locker 327. Three twenty-seven. March twenty-seventh. My birthday. Weird.

"Combination's six, twenty-five, eleven," I read over his shoulder before he can check the paper again. He hums softly in acknowledgement as he twiddles the dial and pops the door open.

"I haven't had a locker since middle school. I forgot how nasty they are," I say. He shrugs.

"Everything sucks in Lakewood," he says.

"I'm beginning to see that," I say, scraping at an ancient piece of tape that seems to be permanently

affixed to the inside of my locker door. Ben doesn't respond immediately, and when I finally glance at him, he's shuffling through my papers, his eyes pointedly avoiding mine.

"I'm having some friends over to my house later. I don't know if you'd be interested in meeting some new people, but if you're free, you should stop by," he says.

If he asks for my number, he's a virgin. If he gives me his, he's not. It's all in the details, all in the confidence, the need to be able to chicken out.

"Yeah, that'd be awesome," I say, flashing him my most calculatingly dick-hardening smile.

"Cool. Let me get your number, and I can call you later to give you directions," he says. Bingo. Virgin. I dig in my pocket for the Sharpie I used on Travis this morning and reach for his sleeve to pull it up. He twists his arm suddenly, giving me only the back of his hand to work with. I shoot him a curious look, but he's staring at the marker, so I let it go. I scrawl my number across his skin. For good measure, I write my name underneath. If I have one more person give me two r's or decide my name is *Garret*, I'll kill something.

"Great. So, I'll talk to you later, I guess," Ben says. He checks the schedule once more before handing it back to me. "Room three fourteen is down the hall on the left."

Room three fourteen is the science lab where I have Genetics. Directly across the hall from it is where I have Calculus, and on the complete opposite end of the school is where I'm late to English. Back next to Genetics, I show up ten minutes late to French, and on the floor below... is Home Ec. Just like Travis predicted, just like I've been trying to pretend isn't on my schedule all day. The teacher, Mrs. Browne, is ancient. Her body is so frail, I'm afraid to walk past her too quickly in case the shifting of air molecules makes her break. She hears out of her ears as well as I hear out of my eye sockets, and it takes me ten minutes to introduce myself and explain that I'm new. When she says, "Welcome to Lakewood, Garret, dear," I cross the room in three strides and crank the heat on the blue oven up as high as it can go.

I'm sitting outside the principal's office when I make up my mind.

I hate this town.

I hate my dad for making me move here, when I would've been just fine alone in New York like I always am. I hate the new house, which looks exactly like the old house, which I also hated. I hate Evelyn, I hate Bree, I hate stupid, beautiful Travis. I hate all the people who won't stop giving me strange looks, and I hate myself for thinking I could be just fine with walking into Nowhere, Connecticut, with ridiculous spiked hair and worn-in combat boots and my whole stupid gay self. I hate the principal, I hate my teachers, I hate my classes, I hate my school. I hate everything in this town except for the Ferrari in the parking lot and the guitar in its backseat. The only two things I've ever really loved, besides my best friend. My best friend. Right. I fish in my pocket for my cell phone and dial the number before I can think of a single reason not to.

"I was wondering when you'd finally call."

The second I hear that sweet Southern drawl, I can finally breathe again. I laugh.

"Hey, Jamie," I say.

"Hey yourself. Tell me you fucked him."

"I fucked him. Who are we talking about?"

"You don't even know who we're talking about and you're admitting it?" James demands. I shrug even though he can't see. My body finally feels less tense, for the first time in more than twenty-four hours. I

shake my free hand slightly to bring some feeling back into it.

“Well, I’m playing the odds. I mean, it’s me, so—”

“True. Whore.”

“Jamie, you’re as bad as I am.”

“Not the point. Did you fuck him?” he asks impatiently.

“I really don’t know who we’re talking about.”

“Your new *brother*, Gare. Trevor.”

“Travis.”

“That’s what I said. Whatever. Come on, tell me everything. How many times? How big’s his cock? Is he better than me? Actually, don’t bother answering that last one, we already know he’s not.”

I snort and pull my legs up to my chest, hugging them with one arm. “James, the last time we had sex, I was fifteen. I barely remember it.”

“Excuse me?” James says, in the same polite tone you’d use to reply to someone suddenly speaking a language you don’t know.

“You heard me,” I say.

“I heard you, I just don’t believe you. Next time I see you, I’m fucking your brains out, just to remind you.”

“I can’t wait,” I deadpan.

“I know you can’t, you smartass. Now tell me some details before I drive to Connecticut and beat them out of you.”

“There are no details,” I say. There’s no point to pretending anymore. “I didn’t fuck him. I can barely talk to him without him getting mad at me. He hates me. And I hate *him*. He’s lived in Lakewood his whole life, so it’s not like he lost any friends because of moving. He knows I don’t know anybody here. This whole place is fucking ridiculous. Dad thinks I’m overreacting, he thinks I’m going to be fine as soon as I give it a chance, but I’m *giving* it a chance, and I still hate it. These people are different, they aren’t at all like the guys at Patton. They all stare at me like I’ve got the plague, and I’m starting to think that having the plague would be better than having to live here. I don’t know anybody, Jamie. I’m all alone in this stupid school, and it sucks. My teachers all hate me for being late to classes, because I keep getting lost because this school is a fucking maze. I’m outside the fucking principal’s office right now because I started a fire in Home Ec, which I didn’t even wanna take. I just wanna go *home*.”

“So do it,” James says. “The Testarossa’s in the parking lot, right?”

“Yeah...”

“Then go get in it and drive. We’re what, an hour away? Two? *Come home*, Garen. You know I’d never let somebody else move into our room, so it’s not like you have to sleep on the floor. Your bed’s still here, waiting for you. *I’m* still here, waiting for you. Please.”

“I want to. So fucking badly. You have no idea—”

“Mr. Anderson, do you mind?” demands a voice from the doorway. I glance up. Principal Hammond is

glaring at me, his arms crossed in what he obviously believes is an imposing, authoritative stance.

"I've gotta go, James. I'll call you tonight," I murmur.

"Good luck, buddy. You can text me if you need me," he replies, and I snap my phone shut. Hammond's hand twitches like he expects me to hold it out to him, but I simply check the time on the front screen and slip it back into my pocket.

"We don't allow students to use cell phones during school hours, Mr. Anderson. Since it's your first day here, I'm willing to forgive that, but from now on, I expect your phone to be turned off and kept in your locker. Do you understand?" I nod like a chastised child. "Excellent. Now, I just got off the phone with your father."

"I'm sorry," I say. Hammond blinks at me for a moment, but clears his throat and continues as though I didn't speak.

"I'll be very frank with you, Garen. After reading your Patton Military Academy file—which, I promise you, took me several hours—I can't say I'm surprised that you set *something* on fire your first day. The appliances in the Home Economics room are quite old, and some just don't work like they should. I am going to pretend, therefore, that this was an honest mistake, and not arson. I understand that your transition may be difficult, and I'd like to make sure you're as happy as possible here at Lakewood High. Just so we don't encounter a further misunderstanding in this class, I'll be transferring you to a Musical Theory elective during fifth period. I believe you'll find it more enjoyable; your father tells me you play the guitar. However, I would like to impress upon you the fact that I will not tolerate the kind of acting out that you reportedly did at Patton. To help further this message, you will have the pleasure of joining me for detention every day for one week. I hope that after this week, I will be seeing much less of you. Do you understand?"

I nod again, and he smiles in clear satisfaction. "Excellent. Now, if I'm not mistaken, you're missing lunch. Run along."

I have never been able to stand adults who treat me like a kindergartener, but I smile politely, thank him, and make my way down to the cafeteria, which might as well be in the basement. Only half of the tables in the room are full; it seems as though LHS greatly overestimated the number of teenagers in town when the school was built. But as if drawn by force, my eyes go straight to Travis, who is sitting across from a laughing girl with sleek ginger hair. Before I can think better of it, I cross the room and straddle the bench across from him.

"Remember how you told me they'd stick me in fifth period Home Ec?" I ask. The flicker of his eyes up to mine is obviously a forced movement, and I have to work to keep my smile in place.

"Yeah," he murmurs. His voice is barely more than a whisper, a husky bedroom tone. I want to lick his freckles.

"Well, you were right," I say. "Remember how you said the blue stove sets itself on fire if you turn it on?"

"Yeah," he says again.

"And remember how I have self-control issues?" I prompt. *You should know. You had a prime example of those issues this morning in the hall. Show me you remember it. Show me that you felt something when I had my teeth on your ear, my tongue on your skin.* His eyes lock onto mine again. He looks like he was just electrocuted. I bite back a smile.

"Yeah," he whispers a third time, his voice cracking. I knew it. God, I knew it.

"Well... the bad news is I have detention for the rest of the week. The good news is that they were able to

put the fire out in under five minutes. The even better news is that they transfer me to Musical Theory starting tomorrow," I say. Musical Theory wouldn't be my first choice, but I doubt I'm in anybody's good graces enough to request another music elective. I open my mouth to say this out loud, but Travis is muttering some stupid single word response, making it clear he wants me gone. "What's your deal?" I demand. No response. I finally remember the girl sitting next to me, and turn to face her. Her face is calm, but her eyes are searching my face almost frantically.

I should've remembered to factor in friends. More than three years of Patton fooled me into thinking this really *isn't* a big deal, that no one really cares if you walk into a room and try to flirt with your stepbrother. I forgot this was Lakewood. And I forgot Travis would always be sure to remember.

"Sorry," I say. "Garen Anderson."

The redhead smiles brightly and shakes my offered hand. "I know. Travis was just talking about you, actually. Faye Taylor."

Of course he was. I try to gauge Travis's reaction, but his blazing eyes are locked on Faye's face. He's furious, and it's adorable. His freckles stand out even more, and I just want to take him out to my car and... Christ. This needs to stop. Step out of the fantasyland, Garen, no matter how fun it may be. The boy is a closet case, but basically unresponsive.

"You were talking about me? How cute," I say. I can feel someone's eyes on me. When I glance around, I notice tiny little Ben leaving the cafeteria with a tall blonde guy in a slightly wrinkled button-down. Ben is looking over his shoulder at me, but once he realizes I'm watching him, he breaks the stare. "I'll have to go get friends so I can talk about you to them too. In fact, I think I'll go do that now. You need a ride home tonight?"

But across the table, Travis's hand is going up to his mouth, his thumbnail between his teeth. God. His teeth are perfectly white, perfectly straight. He'd have such a gorgeous smile if he knew *how* to smile. Which I know a few ways to teach him.

"I have track tonight," he says, snapping me back to reality. "I normally just walk home in the afternoon 'cause my schedule's different every day. Work, track, shrink. You know the deal."

"So I'll wait in the library and then drive you home after. Big deal," I say. And if you just so happen to decide that we should have hot, crazy sex in my car, and if you just so happen to end up falling in love with me, and if we just so happen to run away back to New York together and spend the rest of our lives sleeping together in a tiny apartment in the Village? Then so be it. I can work with that.

"You don't have to, really," he says quickly. *Did you know that we're soulmates? I want to say. Did you know that my locker number is my birthday, and my locker combination is the number of letters in your first name, the sum of the digits in the cell phone number you logged in my received calls list this morning, and the day Dad told me you were born, which obviously means we're meant for each other in some cosmic stupid way? And did you know that I was able to figure that out because I can't stop thinking about you, because you're under my skin in a terrifying way no guy ever has been before?* Instead, all I can say is his name. Two short, stupid syllables. It gets him to look at me, though. "I'll be out front after your practice. Meet me there, okay?" I stand before he has a chance to argue, and add to Faye, "It was nice to meet you."

It takes most of my self-control not to bolt out of the cafeteria. Once I clear the doors, however, I skid to a halt. Ben and the blonde guy are sitting nearby on the floor, leaning back against a display case for the National Honor Society and talking quietly. Ben glances up when the door slams shut behind me, and whatever sentence he's saying seems to die in his mouth.

"Hi," he says blankly. The blonde guy blinks at him, brow furrowed, then looks around and sees me.

"Hi," I echo, to both of them. There's a moment of silence where Ben just stares at me, and then he's suddenly on his feet.

"Garen, this is Alex. Alex, this is Garen. It's his first day here. He moved from New York," he says.

"Nice to meet you," I say.

"Same here," Alex replies. "Did your parents get a job transfer or something?"

"Uh, no. I live with just my dad, and he got a new girlfriend. We moved here so they could live together without her kids having to switch schools," I says. Ben cocks his head to the side.

"Do her kids go here?" he asks. I shrug.

"One does," I say. "He's a junior. His name's Travis. You'd know him if you saw him, trust me."

"Shit," Alex says, drawing the word out for a few seconds longer than necessary. "You mean Travis McCall?" I nod. Ben turns to Alex.

"He's the one who overdosed, right? God, those assemblies were the fucking *worst*," he says.

"Assemblies?" I echo.

"Yep," Alex says. "After he tried to kill himself, we had probably ten different assemblies about suicide prevention and stuff. It sucked."

"The guy's gorgeous," Ben says, and I exhale a laugh. *You think?* "There's no denying that. But he's also insane as fuck. You'd be better off avoiding him as much as possible."

"I'll keep that in mind," I mutter.

Chapter Three

I'm staring at the ground when the side door to Alex's basement swings open, and consequently, the first thing I see is a pair of gray-and-black-checkered Vans peeking out from the bottoms of skin-tight black jeans. I smile, first at the shoes, and then up at Ben's face.

I am getting laid tonight.

"Hello, gorgeous," I say. He laughs softly and steps to the side to let me in. I take extra care to press my body against his far more than is necessary.

Moving near me, can feel the heat of his skin even through the fabric of his t-shirt, want to – need to – going to touch him, but then he's past me, into the hall, leaving nothing but cold air and the smell of his coconut shampoo. "And it bothers you, I take it?" "I didn't say that."

Ben is saying something to me, but I can't seem to focus on it. I take a step closer to him – too close, probably – and duck down a little to put my lips almost against his ear.

"It's loud as fuck in here. What did you say?" I say. He seems momentarily stunned by my sudden proximity, but after a moment, he twists slightly towards me. Green light.

"I asked if you wanted something to drink. Alex is around here somewhere, but he's wasted, and a shitty host regardless," he says. I nod and follow him across the basement to an old white refrigerator. He swings the door open to reveal several six packs of cheap beer and one two-liter of Pepsi. I can clearly visualize Dad's disappointed face and Sergeant Smith's purple, screaming one, so I gesture reluctantly to the Pepsi.

"I don't drink," I say. "Alcohol, that is. You know... anymore."

Ben glances at me, clearly surprised, but lets his mouth twitch into a smile and takes out the bottle. "Me either. Never really did."

"What, you mean ever?" I ask. He shakes his head.

"I've had it a few times, at family functions or whatever, but I just don't like the taste," he says. I watch him pour two cups of soda, and accept the one he offers to me. He takes a sip, I watch him swallow, and he watches me watch him. After a minute of expectant silence, I finally take a sip of my own drink and lean back against the counter.

"I was big into partying at Patton. Drinking and stuff. A lot. And, uh..." I hesitate. This is the deal-breaker, this is the one that'll ruin Lakewood for me completely, but Ben's eyes are so wide and so blue and so honest that I can't *not* say it. "Coke." His eyebrows shoot up, as if to punctuate the syllable, so I continue quickly. "I'm off it now. And I was never an addict or anything. I-I'd do it maybe... I dunno, twice a month? And I was fine without it, I just used to do it at parties and shit, and I uh... this is coming out all wrong."

"Are you worried about making a bad impression on me?" Ben asks, his eyes on his drink. After a brief pause, they flicker up to meet mine. And fuck if they're not *smoldering*. I wish I could stop time, if only for the second, the minute, the lifetime it would take me to actually make up my mind about this.

On the one hand, I can start the nurturing process of a long, twisted obsession with my possibly-straight, soon-to-be-stepbrother. I can continue thinking about him every second of the day. I can continue flirting as much as I think I can without getting punched in the face. I can wait it out and try my best and pray to gods I probably don't even believe in, and maybe, maybe, maybe it'll work out someday. But probably not.

On the other hand, I can fuck Ben McCutcheon into oblivion. I can do what comes most naturally to me,

and I can do at Lakewood High School exactly what I did at Patton Military Academy, and I can maybe fuck up everything again, but it could maybe be worth it.

"I'm concerned for your virtue," I say, staring at his mouth. Make up my mind for me, Benjamin. You know you want to.

He laughs, a low, husky ghost of a laugh. "You'd probably have to be even more concerned if you could read my mind right now."

Mind made up.

"It really is loud in here," I say. "We should go someplace quieter to talk."

"Talk?" he echoes, amused. I press my palm to the small of his back to shift him closer to me and lean down slightly so my lips are right against his ear again.

"Well, when I say 'talk,' what I really mean is that I want to take off all your clothes and lick you all over," I say. To illustrate my point, I knot the fingers of my free hand in his hair and run the tip of my tongue along the outer shell of his ear and down to the lobe, which I take gently between my teeth. His breathing stops short. I pull back just enough to press my lips to his neck. "What do you say?"

"I say, Alex's parents are out for the night, and there's a spare bedroom upstairs," he says. That's all the invitation I need. I glance around the room once, then pull Ben towards the stairs. He darts past me on the way up and pushes open the door leading to the rest of the house. There are no lights on, and Ben grabs my wrist when I reach for the switch.

"Come on," he says, tugging me down the hall to another set of stairs. It occurs to me, as I'm stumbling up the stairs after him, that he's gotta be half-bat in order to be able to see right now, but he finds the door to the spare bedroom easily enough, so I'm not complaining. The second the door is shut behind us, I pin him to it and kiss him.

You can tell more about a person from one kiss than you can from any conversation you will ever have with him. And based on this kiss, Ben is pretty much my soul mate. I smile slightly against his lips, trying not to think about the fact that Jamie would kick my ass for thinking that. *Jesus, Garen*, he'd say with an eye roll, *you think every guy you kiss is your soul mate, right up until you find somebody who can do it better. When are you gonna realize that your heart's not in your damn pants?* Clearly, I will never learn.

I yank down the zipper of his sweatshirt and blink hard, trying to adjust to both the darkness and the realization that he's not wearing any shirt under the hoodie. He pushes my jacket off and dips a hand under the hem of my t-shirt, dragging his nails down my chest a little harder than expected. I shiver and press against him. Suddenly, he grips my hips and spins me around, slamming me back against the door so hard it creaks. *So that's how he likes it.* I'm almost surprised. Almost.

"Come on," I whisper, nudging him back towards the bed. The second the back of his legs touch the floral bedspread, I push him so he's flat on his back. He reaches for me, but I knock his hand away and take a step back. In the dim lamplight glow, I see a flash of apprehension move across his face. I tug my shirt off over my head and start to unbuckle my belt.

"Putting on a show?" Ben asks, his voice barely more than a harsh whisper.

"Uh huh," I say, grinning. He reaches for me again, and this time, I join him on the bed, straddling his hips and pinning his wrists down. He makes a brief attempt to get free, and then settles instead for grinding up against me. I shift both of his wrists to one hand and use the free one to rub the front of his jeans.

"Tell me what you want me to do to you," I murmur against his throat. He makes a small sound, and I shake my head. "Come on, love, I need more than that. Tell me."

"Fuck me," he says, raising his hips to press them to mine. I unzip his jeans and tug them down over his hips, and he makes another small sound. I smile against his mouth and start to slide my hand up and down his cock. His eyes flutter shut and his lips part slightly, but no sound comes out.

"Say it again. Tell me what you want," I whisper. He wrenches his wrists away from my grip and attacks the fly of my jeans.

"I want you to fuck me," he says, and this time, it's an order. I fish a condom out of my back pocket and roll off him just long enough to pull off my jeans. By the time I move back towards him, he's out of his jeans as well, and tugging the foil square out of my hand to rip it open with his teeth. I lean back and shift him into a sitting position just enough to push his sweatshirt the rest of the way off. He tenses suddenly, and after a few seconds, I realize why. His wrists are decorated in criss-crossed scars, and he seems eager to cover them back up again. He scrambles for his hoodie, but I toss it onto the floor.

"If you want me to ignore those for right now, I will," I say, and he nods quickly.

"Yeah. Yeah, thanks," he mutters.

"Hey. Hey, Ben, look at me," I say. I brush my palm against his cheek and kiss him again, this time gently. "We're talking about this later, though. Okay?" He nods again, and I nudge him back down onto the mattress. It only takes a few more seconds of grinding my hard-on against his before he's ready again, scars almost forgotten. He rolls the condom down over my cock and grips my hips.

"Fuck me," he says, "hard."

Suddenly, it's not so surprising that he likes a little pain with his pleasure.

"Hang on, hang on, hang on," I murmur. I slip two fingers in my mouth and roll my tongue over them until they're coated in a fine layer of spit, then drop my hand between his legs and slowly push them inside. Ben makes a harsh sound in the back of his throat and clenches his fists around the sheets. I trace his collarbone with my tongue, and he knots his fingers in my hair, yanking my face up to his to kiss me again while he rocks his hips back and forth, fucking my fingers.

"You ready?" I whisper, and he nods.

"Yeah, I'm ready. Fuck me," he says, and I press into him. He wraps an arm around my neck, and I can feel the raised scars on his wrists rubbing against my skin. I try to slow down, go a little more gently, because clearly he's fucked up, he's broken, he's just a little bit *delicate*. But he shakes his head and thrusts up to meet me.

"Fuck, Garen, you can do more than that," he hisses. "Stop treating me like I'm a doll. Fuck me like you mean it."

"I don't wanna hurt you," I murmur, but he is whispering in my ear, telling me *harder, faster, more, more, more*, and after a while, I give up on trying to be delicate with him. He likes that. He digs his nails into my skin, bites my lip, gasps into my mouth as I pound into him.

If this is how the boys in Lakewood fuck, I think I'm going to like it here.

I come before he does, but slip a hand between us to stroke his cock, and he comes before I've even had time to pull out. We sprawl out on the bed together, side by side, both with our eyes closed and our breathing labored. When I have finally come down, I roll onto my side and kiss Ben's shoulder.

"You... are a wild thing," I whisper, and he lets out a breathy little laugh.

“Thank you? I think?” he says.

“Oh, it’s definitely a compliment,” I say. I sit up halfway and glance around. “Where the hell did my pants go?”

“Forget them,” Ben says, grabbing my arm and pulling me back down next to him. “You can find them later.”

“Alex won’t mind us staying in here?” I ask. Ben shakes his head.

“Alex is probably passed out by now, and we usually stay over after his parties anyway. ‘We’ being me, Jer, and Mason. And you now, I suppose,” he says. I grin.

“I’m flattered,” I say, and he smirks at me. His eyes flutter shut, and I can tell he’s seconds away from sleep. Not that I’m surprised, considering the amount of energy he just put out. I pull one of the blankets over both of us, let him curl up against my side, and press one last soft kiss to his mouth.

“Night, Wild Thing,” I say. He hums softly in acknowledgement.

The second my eyes are closed, it is impossible to remember that I am in Alex’s house with Ben, and not back in my own bedroom, with the gorgeous freckled psycho I have been obsessing over for a week now. I can feel the edge of my mouth twitch up into a small smile. It’s a good image, really. Travis would fit perfectly in the curve of my arm. When we looked at each other, I would lose myself in his blue-gray eyes the same way every boy I’ve ever been with has said he has lost himself in my green ones. We would be perfect together. Heartbreakingly, painfully perfect.

I grit my teeth together and force my eyes open, determined to stay awake and forgetting Travis for as long as I possibly can.

Chapter Four

"Ben, are you in there? Do you know if Garen went home last night when everyone else did?"

"Oh my fucking Christ, Jeremy, if you knock on that door one more time, I will murder you. My brain is bleeding," I hear Alex moan from the other side of the door. Beside me, Ben stirs, rubbing sleep from his eyes and smearing the remnants of his eyeliner a little more. I yawn and check to make sure the sheet is protecting our decency enough.

"Come in!" I call.

"Jesus, do you have to yell?" Alex complains as the door flies open. There is an immediate pause as he and Jeremy blink down at us, and Ben pulls the blanket up a little more securely, blushing. He also, I note, slides his forearms completely down, hiding the scars from view.

"Well," Jeremy says, "good morning to you both, too."

"Bite me," Ben says.

"I did," I reply, and he shoves me. Alex climbs onto the foot of the bed and curls up in a ball, cradling his head in his hands.

"Ben," he says in a small voice, "will you make us French toast?"

"Al, you'll throw up. I will cook French toast, and you will eat five pieces, and you will throw up. Everywhere. You do this every time you have a hangover," Ben says. "Also, I'm still naked, and I don't think it's safe to cook that way."

"So put on some pants. They're right... did you guys literally just *throw* your clothes off?" Jeremy asks, picking up my t-shirt, which is hanging halfway off the nightstand. I tug it out of his hand and pull it on over my head.

"Feel like providing me with some pants, too?" I suggest. He grabs them off the floor and blinks around the room.

"Do you have any boxers somewhere around here or something?" he asks. I shake my head while stifling a yawn.

"Go commando most of the time. Like, five out of seven days of the week," I say.

"Oh, is that all?" Jeremy says.

"I'm a good little Jewish boy. I try to keep my junk covered on the Sabbath day," I say.

"It is the Sabbath day. Friday evening to Saturday evening, right?" Ben says. I shrug.

"Okay, so I'm not as good of a little Jewish boy as I thought. Alex, you mind getting off the bed so I can put these on?" I ask, gesturing with my jeans. Alex rolls off the bed onto the floor with a moan that might be kind of hot, if he didn't sound like he was five seconds away from vomiting. I dress under the blankets and crawl out of bed, trying not to shift the sheet off of Ben as I do so.

"So about that French toast..." Alex prompts from the floor. I offer him a hand, and he accepts it limply. I pull him slowly and awkwardly to his feet, and steady him with a hand on his shoulder. When I catch Jeremy's eye, he is watching me apprehensively, as though he's positive that now that I've fucked Ben, I'll move on to Alex, and then him. I release Alex's shoulder and jam my feet back into my combat boots.

“Everybody fuck off out of here,” Ben grumbles. “I need to get dressed. And then yes, Alex, I will make you your goddamn French toast.”

“Thank you,” Alex says, pawing at Ben’s foot in what must be gratification. Jeremy grabs him by the collar of his shirt and tows him towards the door. He glances at me, but I cock my head to the side, daring him to tell me to leave. He only hesitates a second longer before guiding Alex out into the hall. I turn to face Ben again.

The truth is, I’ve never been too good at the one-night-stand thing. I don’t get emotionally involved, I don’t fall in love, but for a few hours afterwards, I usually end up convincing myself that this could go somewhere. Something about fucking always makes me want to cuddle. However, if cuddles aren’t an option, I’ll settle for another fuck. I’m adaptable that way.

“I wasn’t a virgin,” Ben says suddenly. “I don’t know if you thought I was. Or if that would weird you out. But I just wanted you to know that I’m, you know, not. Or, I wasn’t.”

“I kind of figured. You don’t fuck like a virgin,” I say, laughing. He allows a small, tight smile, like he’s not sure if I’m complimenting him or not. To clarify, I gather up his clothes and crawl back onto the bed, straddling his hips and pulling him up into a sitting position to put the hoodie back on him.

“So, this French toast I keep hearing about. Is it really as good as Alex seems to think it is?” I ask. He laughs, and I shift off him again so he can pull on the rest of his clothes under the sheets.

“Well, probably not. He still kind of acts drunk when he’s hung over, so that might explain a lot. He’s got a pretty low alcohol tolerance, which is surprising, all things considered,” he says. I frown.

“What do you mean?” I ask. He shakes his head, but I can tell that’s not the end of the story, even though he moves on like it is.

“The French toast is really not that great, but I’m a pretty decent cook. I’m half Italian, so I think that part is mandatory. You wanna?” he asks, gesturing towards the door. I hook an arm around his waist and press my lips to his neck.

“Yeah, I wanna,” I say. He laughs softly and shoves at me with one hand.

“I meant go downstairs,” he says in a lower, slightly huskier voice.

“Shame I didn’t,” I murmur. It takes us almost half an hour to stop making out long enough to remember that he’s supposed to be making everyone breakfast. When we finally get downstairs, Alex is slumped over at the kitchen table, nursing a bottle of water, and Jeremy is standing at the counter, texting someone. Mason is sitting cross-legged on the floor with a lit joint between his lips.

“Um... Alex? Are you aware of the fact that Mason’s smoking weed on your kitchen floor?” I say. He nods. “And you’re aware of the fact that your parents are going to be able to smell it?”

“My dad’s out of town until tonight, and I’ll have to clean the whole house anyway. A little Febreze will make it *aaaaaaall* better,” he says.

“What about your mom? She doesn’t care?” I ask.

“I haven’t seen my mom since I was ten. So, no. I’d wager she doesn’t care,” he says. I glance at Ben and murmur, “I thought you said his parents were out. I figured that meant they were still together.”

“It wasn’t my place to tell you the story. And I guess, technically, they still are. I mean, they’re not divorced. His mom’s just AWOL,” Ben replies. Alex shifts jerkily, and Ben touches his shoulder once before heading for the refrigerator.

"Hey, Garen," Mason says, holding out the joint. "You want some?"

"No, thanks... I'm not really supposed to," I say. He chuckles.

"No one's really supposed to, unless they're a cancer patient or a Beatle," he says. I shake my head.

"No, I mean, I gave it up when I moved. Or at least, I'm trying to. Smoking, drinking, other stuff," I say.

"And what, pray tell, does the 'other stuff' you're giving up include?" Mason asks.

"Clearly not promiscuous sex with random guys," Jeremy mutters, and Ben punches his arm. Hard. I clear my throat.

"Well... you know how most people celebrate turning sixteen by going to the DMV to get their driving permits?" I say. They all sort of nod. "I celebrated it by sharing half a bottle of Jack with my best friend and snorting two lines of cocaine off my Intermediate Map-Reading textbook."

"You actually had a class on reading maps?" Ben says, eyebrows raised.

"You do *coke*?" Alex says, sitting up straighter. He pauses, then turns to look at Ben. "I'm pretty sure my question wins."

"I had to take the class as part of my Military Leadership Education Program. And before you make fun of that, I feel I should tell you that part of my freshman M.L.E.P. was Introduction to Basic Marksmanship," I say. After a moment, I glance at Alex. "And I don't, you know, really do it anymore. I wasn't an addict or whatever. I just liked getting high."

"Did you ever do any other drugs?" he asks. I really do not like the curiosity in his tone. Aren't small-town boys supposed to be put off by this shit?

"Yeah," I say after a minute. "Besides the obvious - 'cause I think everybody drinks or smokes pot these days - I did um... coke, obviously. And sometimes my friends and I would put a few drops of GHB in water bottles before class and just kinda nurse that throughout the day. I did PCP a few times because this one guy I used to buy from liked to lace shit and not tell his customers, 'cause he was really fucked up. Uh... this one time when I was a sophomore, my friend's boyfriend convinced me to do meth with him. It was really bad shit, though. I freaked out because I wasn't really into drugs much at that point - this was after the weed, but before the coke, I think, so I was like, fifteen? - so I couldn't handle it at all. Anyway, Jamie broke up with the guy and beat the shit out of him. He was really protective of me at first. He also had to spend the night babysitting me the only time I snorted heroin."

"Is that even possible?" Ben interrupts. I nod.

"Yeah. Most people smoke it or shoot it, but shooting up is only for like, hardcore people, you don't come back from that. And I dunno, I just prefer to snort shit. I only did it once, and I hated it. But I think that's it... wait, no. There were a few months in sophomore year when I used to be really into Coricidin - they're these over-the-counter cold pills. If you take a bunch at once, you hallucinate."

These declarations are followed by complete silence, except for the sizzle of the French toast on the stove.

Finally, Ben coughs. "Anyone else suddenly feel really boring?"

Alex snorts, hunching back over the counter. "Whatever, Benjamin. You were the weirdest member of the group until about five minutes ago when Garen started talking."

I get a little thrill at that, actually being referred to as part of the group. Ben, however, just rolls his eyes and turns back towards the stove.

“Oh? What’s so weird about Ben?” I ask.

“Nothing. Alex’s just convinced that I’m like, an S&M freak or something,” he says over his shoulder. Considering the bite marks all over my neck and the scratches down my spine, I’m inclined to agree with that.

“You are,” Mason says. “Garen, man, Ben used to go with this guy Ethan, right? And whenever they’d be done hanging out or whatever, Ben would come hang with us, and he’d have all these bruises and cuts and stuff.”

That triggers something inside me, and suddenly, I don’t feel like I’m standing in Alex’s kitchen anymore.

I’m lying on the floor of my dorm room, trying to catch my breath. Dave is hovering over me, with this panicked expression on his face, like even after all these times he’s still surprised by what he just did.

“Garen, baby, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to push you so hard,” he says, stretching out a hand to me. I let him help me to my feet, but once I’m upright again, I am overcome with the urge to get back at him. So I plant my hands on his chest and shove him as hard as I can. He staggers back a few steps, and then his face clouds over, and I barely have time to try to twist away before his fist connects with my face.

I can feel my nose breaking, actually feel the crunch of bone and the pain rocketing across my face. I stumble back a foot or two, swearing around a mouthful of blood, my eyes watering. Dave doesn’t seem as sorry this time; he grabs the front of my shirt and shakes me hard so that blood splatters down onto my clothes.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Garen?” he is screaming at me, and really, all I can think is, What’s wrong with me? Are you kidding? But I guess he isn’t kidding, because the next punch to my ribs doesn’t feel like a joke at all.

“You hear me?” Mason says, and I nod jerkily.

“Yep. Bruises, cuts, S&M, got it,” I say. I cross the room to stand behind Ben, who is still focused on the French toast. At the moment I’m sure he’s least expecting it, I slip an arm around his waist and, with my free hand, knot my fingers in his dark hair and give a sharp yank. He makes a soft little *nnggh* sort of gasp deep in his throat.

“What was that for?” he hisses.

“To see if you liked it,” I say. Still gripping his hair, I slide my other hand up under the hem of his hoodie, curl my fingers, and drag my hand down towards the top button of his jeans, digging my nails into his skin and leaving five angry red lines in their wake.

He makes another of those throat noises, though this one is better concealed. “Okay, okay, I liked it. You get the picture. What was *that* one for?”

“To see if I liked it,” I reply.

“Garen, can you please stop giving Ben a boner over my breakfast?” Alex pleads. The vehemence of his request is a little surprising, and when I twist to look at him, I see a spark of something painful in his face. God, is he *jealous*? Experimentally, I press my lips to Ben’s neck without taking my eyes off Alex’s face. There it is again, that flash of jealousy, then shock, like even he doesn’t understand why he’s feeling like that. Fuck my life, Alex is into Ben.

"Alright, alright, I'll keep my hands off him," I say, shrugging and stepping back. "So, that mean one of you guys would be willing to tell me how I can convince my dad's girlfriend's son to sleep with me instead?"

"Travis, right?" Ben says, shaking his head. "Didn't we already talk about this?"

"I seem to be drawing a blank," I say in my smallest, cutest voice. Ben just rolls his eyes and flips the French toast out onto a plate, sliding it down the counter to Alex.

"Okay, so, let me remind you," he says. Then, ticking items off on his fingers, he starts in, "One, his mom is dating your dad. Two, I'm pretty sure he's straight. Three, he's fucking psychotic. And four... if he's gay, I called dibs in tenth grade."

"Are you kidding me?" I laugh.

"I'm dead fucking serious, dude. Alex, tell him."

"It's true. First day of sophomore year, little freshman McCall shows up, looking all freckly and sad inside. And Ben's like, 'he's so cute, I wanna touch him all over, I call dibs.' And we were all like 'okay, bro, not like any of us are ever going to try to beat you to him.' And then the kid tried to kill himself, which only made Ben like him more, 'cause Ben's into fucked-up people like that. Then last year, Ben's all 'oh my god, he does track, I like it when he sweats, his freckles are so cute' or whatever, and we're like, 'man, can you not talk about this?' And a few weeks ago, when school started, Ben was like 'he got so tall, he's so fucking hot, I'd totally let him put it in my ass.' Swear to god, he starts crushing on that kid every year like clockwork. So, yeah. Sorry. Ben already called it," Alex says with a shrug.

Ben is glaring at him so hard it looks like his eyes are going to explode. "That is so not how that conversation went, you little shit."

"There was some other stuff in the middle, but yeah, Ben, it is. You've just got such a hard-on for the kid that you don't even realize how ridiculous you sound, mooning over some eleventh-grade jock." They glower at each other for another moment before Alex turns back to me. "Come on. Everybody has one big high school crush that lasts way longer than it ever should. Travis McCall is Ben's."

And Ben seems to be yours, I think, cocking my head to the side. "Fine, how about we share? Ben can have him, I just want his virginity. It's not like I actually like the kid."

Lie, lie, lie.

They believe it enough, though, and Alex digs into his French toast. The rest of the conversation is easy, and around one in the afternoon, Alex starts to whine about feeling sick, so Ben sets him up in bed with a can of ginger ale and a book. Books seem to be Ben's solution to most things.

Once we're out in the driveway and Mason and Jeremy have both driven off, Ben turns to me. "What are you doing today?"

Probably you. "Nothing planned. Why?"

"Wanna hang out or something?" he asks, the corner of his mouth twitching up a little, like we both know what the 'or something' will end up being. I smirk back.

"Sure. Just give me half an hour to go home and shower first. If you give me your address, I could just meet you there after," I say. The key to this is to act like there's a possibility of actually going out someplace, like we're not going to just spend the rest of the day fucking our brains out at his place. He nods along, unlocks his car to grab a Sharpie from his glovebox, and scribbles his address on my palm.

"Just come around the back and knock on the slider door when you get there. My room's in the

basement,” he says, almost apologetically. I nod once and move past him towards the Testarossa, pausing just long enough to duck down and brush my lips against the hollow of his throat.

The house is empty when I get back. Travis is at work (as always), Bree is at her boyfriend’s house (as always), and Evelyn has scribbled a note for me on a pad of paper on the kitchen table. *Garen— Your father and I have gone out for lunch with friends. We should be back around 3pm. There’s food in the fridge, be nice to Bree if she’s still there and Travis when he gets home from work. Love, Evelyn.*

No, I *don’t* love Evelyn, thank you very fucking much. I tear off the sheet of paper and scrawl on a fresh sheet, *Ev: Got home from Alex’s at 1ish. Heading over to Ben’s now to hang out, won’t be back until late tonight / tomorrow sometime. Later, Garen. P.S. Your son looks cute in his work uniform.* So, yeah, I haven’t exactly seen Travis in his work clothes, but based on what I’ve heard him mention over dinner, he has to wear some hideous apron, sometimes a visor. And in my mind, he looks very cute.

I take a quick shower, not bothering to blow-dry or flat-iron my hair, and throw on an old Patton Military Academy shirt and a pair of jeans that are maybe a little tighter in the ass than necessary. It’s a short drive to Ben’s house, and I find the street easily enough based on the directions he called out his window to me before I pulled away from Alex’s curb. There’s only one car in Ben’s driveway, his silver SUV, so I make my way around back and rap my knuckles against the glass.

The room on the other side of the slider door is what looks like a mostly empty rec room, with white walls, light gray carpet, and a set of stairs on the other side of the room, leading up to the main floor. There’s only one other door inside the room, which is partially open. After a moment, it swings the rest of the way open, and Ben shuffles out of his room, his hair damp and messy from the shower, wearing nothing but a pair of jeans and a plain black t-shirt. He smiles through the glass at me, and I watch as he raises a hand to punch in the code to the alarm keypad next to the door.

For a second, it looks like his bare, left arm is streaked with blood all over. Then I realize that the blood is actually the mostly-healed remainders of older cuts, deep lines that criss-cross all the way across the inside of his forearm, with a few slightly neater rows of lines across his bicep. Some of the marks on his arm are just old scars, slightly discolored and raised lines of flesh, and some look like they can’t be more than a week old. Fuck, I just can’t stop staring.

“Hi,” Ben says, sliding the door open and stepping to the side so I can come in. I do, but without taking my eyes off his arm.

“Hi,” I echo. “So, you’re really into that, huh?”

Ben twists his arm away, like that makes any difference, and heads back towards the door he left ajar on the adjacent wall. “I wouldn’t exactly say that’s what it’s like. Anyway, sorry the room’s so small. I’ve got a lot of siblings, so none of us really has much space.”

The room is small, but after being stuck in a dorm room at Patton for years, it doesn’t faze me. Ben sits down amidst the rumpled sheets on his bed, and I sprawl out beside him without asking permission.

“Is everybody out, except you?” I ask. He nods.

“One of my little sisters had a ballet recital, so they all went to that. She doesn’t like me to go, though. She’s really afraid of messing up in front of me, so she asks me not to come,” he says. I notice what might be a family picture in a frame on one of the bookshelves that line the walls, and stand up to get a better look at it. Ben, clearly the oldest, is sitting in the middle of a couch, a baby boy curled up in his arms. There are four girls, two on each side of him, who all look to be between five and ten. Everyone’s smiling, honest-to-God wholesome smiles. The only picture I have of my family is from a few years ago, right before my parents got divorced. I look bored, Dad looks stressed, and Mom is gripping her cell phone tightly in her hand.

I turn back towards Ben and join him on the bed again, straddling his hips and fiddling with the hem of his t-shirt. "Are you seeing anybody?"

"Would I have slept with you last night if I was?" he asks.

I shrug. "Maybe. But I didn't mean like that. I meant for the cutting thing. Are you seeing a shrink or whatever?"

Ben jerks a little, like I splashed him with cold water instead of words. "What? No, I'm not seeing anybody about it. My parents don't even... look, the only people who really know about this are you and the guys. It's not a big deal. Lots of people do it."

"I don't know anybody else who does it," I reply.

"Yeah, well, I don't know anybody who sees a therapist."

I shrug, flattening my palms on his chest and slowly pushing him back so he's lying down on the bed. "My school used to stick me in with the counselor occasionally. If I did something really shitty, or they thought I was getting in too many fights, or if somebody told the wrong rumor to the wrong person."

"Yeah?" he says, a little hoarsely. I can't tell if he's getting upset or turned on. Maybe both. I tend to bring that out in people.

And then it suddenly occurs to me that Ben is probably the only guy in the world who wouldn't think I was a total loser for gushing about Travis, like some lovestruck schoolgirl. God, even *James* is tired of me talking about him, and he usually has a pretty high tolerance for this kind of thing. Carefully, I press my lips to Ben's collarbone, leaving a slow and soft line of kisses up his throat until my mouth is near his ear, and say quietly, "Travis sees a shrink, too."

Ben jolts again, but this time, it's less from the shock, more an involuntary twitch of his hips against mine. "He does? I mean, I heard he did. But I wasn't sure it was true."

"It is. He goes every week, and they load him up on antidepressants and stuff. Some guy named Dr. Baker," I say. Ben lets out a little bark of laughter at that.

"Are you shitting me?" I shake my head, and he laughs again. "That's Alex's uncle."

"Small world," I say, cocking my head to the side and trying to talk myself out of convincing Alex to help me steal whatever files his uncle might have that would help me get a look inside Travis' head. That would be wrong. A total breach of doctor-patient confidentiality. And really, really helpful. I mean, wouldn't most people happen to mention their sexuality to a therapist they've been confessing their secrets to for years? And wouldn't he probably have mentioned me by now?

Ben clears his throat, avoiding my eyes and acting like neither of us notices the blush creeping up his neck. As nonchalantly as he can manage, he asks, "So, what's he like?"

"Ever talk to him before?" I ask. He shakes his head. I lean down and trace his lips with my tongue for a moment while I consider his question. Finally, I pull back and say, "He's smart. Like, painfully smart. Has this way of talking to people, like he's not *trying* to be condescending, but he just can't help it. But he's, you know, kind of strange. He gets disproportionately stressed about school work and studying. He doesn't really eat, honestly. Sometimes I'll see him eat an orange or something in the morning, and he'll pick over his food at lunch and dinner, but for the most part, it doesn't seem like he eats that much. That's why he's so thin, I guess. And when he walks around the house in a thin enough shirt, you can see how small he really is, all sharp angles and paper-thin skin."

Ben's eyes darken a little, like he can't even believe I'm lucky enough to get to actually live in a house

with Travis McCall. I kind of can't believe it either. And I *know* it's twisted to stretch myself out over Ben a little more heavily, to brush my lips against his as I say, "When he's staying up late to study, he drinks a lot of coffee, and his hair gets all messed up like he can't stop himself from dragging his hands through it in frustration. And when we're eating dinner and he's just sitting there listening to whoever's talking, sometimes he gets this tiny, private smile, like he's making fun of them in his head."

Ben is still shifting a little restlessly under me, and when he moves at just the right angle, I can feel him pressing against my hip. How fucked up is he, to be getting hard listening to me talk about Travis? How fucked up am I, to be doing the same thing?

"He bites his nails, but just on his thumbs. He kind of gnaws on the nail for a minute when he's looking nervous, but then it's like he'll remember he's not supposed to, and he's a good kid, so he'll stop himself. But then it's like he can't convince himself to stop all the way, so he'll just sit there, tracing his lower lip with his thumb."

God, we're practically grinding against each other now, what the fuck. Ben's hands are on my ass now, pulling me tighter against him, and his mouth is open against mine.

"I-Is that all you—"

"He and I share a bathroom, and most mornings after he showers, he walks all the way from the bathroom to his bedroom with nothing but a towel wrapped low on his hips," I whisper. "He's got freckles *everywhere*, Ben."

Before either of us is really clear on what we're doing, we're both ripping each others' clothes off, touching each other everywhere at once, reaching for a condom and some lube. It's really screwed up, seriously, to be getting so turned on just thinking about this kid who might even end up being my stepbrother someday. Almost as screwed up as it is to be talking about him with Ben, like Travis had to be foreplay for us since he's too straight for either of us to get him. Clearly Ben is fucked in the head, but I must be, too. No normal guy would be doing something like that.

And whether it's fucked up or not, I still get off on it, burying my face in the curve of Ben's neck and picturing nothing but Travis's dark blue eyes.