

Thesis Submission Assignment

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Artist Statement

Reading has always been an integral part of my life. I love learning about different people, backgrounds, cultures, and emotional situations. I memorized my first book at the age of three; I made my mom read it to me countless times over and over again. I knew books would always be ingrained in my heart. As long as I had a book in my hand, I was never alone. Books are friends to those who feel entirely alone; this is a power that books have and it is important we do not forget that power. As a result of these thoughts, writing has become an extension of this love as my mind fills with stories I want to tell. I want to communicate my thoughts and feelings to the world through novels and screenplays. I want to reach across the distance to those who may feel alone and give them a friend who understands the struggles and situations they are going through in their lives. God never meant for anyone to do life alone, and I think books can show people they are not alone in this life.

My love of reading uncovered a love of writing as well. When I was in seventh grade I started writing my first novel. I ended up throwing it out, but I wanted to write something meaningful. In high school, I took as many English-related classes as possible. In my senior year of high school, I took five English classes: Honors English, Creative Writing, Novels, Advanced Composition, and Journalism. I served as the Sports Editor of our school newspaper. I also wrote pop culture articles about what trends would leave lasting impacts on our world.

In college, I majored in English and kept quite busy with my heavy course load of reading and writing. In my senior year of college, I took a Playwriting class. This class forced me outside of my comfort zone. For the first time, I would have to write something, and classmates would act out my scenes in front of the class. Immediately after, students in the class would give constructive criticism of the scene and how I could improve it. I thought I would dread this, but

I loved it. I loved the feedback, and it pushed me to want to write more. Writing has always been important to me, and now I know that no matter where I go in life, I want to pursue it more.

Writing a novel has always been a dream of mine. I am currently writing a mystery novel with a murder/mystery twist. My story will be full of complex characters who are navigating their character arcs. I want to write successful complex characters, and I can only do this by researching the ways to create such characters. Sol Stein discusses the importance of strong obstacles in a story and the importance of plotting them throughout the book to add strength to the novel (Stein 86). I will need to make sure to use the plot to help further my character development. Strong stories are centered around strong characters.

Strong characters are what make or break a story, and characters who overcome obstacles adds so much to a novel. One novel that made a huge impact on me was *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. The novel is told from Scout's point of view. Scout and her family overcome countless obstacles in their quest to do the right thing. I love the way the story is told and how powerful the courtroom scenes are even though they are illustrated from a small child's point of view. Jean Louise Finch, or "Scout," tells us the story where her father defended an innocent black man accused of an unspeakable crime. I want my novel to have that power and intensity. I want to pull the reader in, so that person can hang on to every word. I want to show how this story forever shows the importance and passion that can be portrayed in the courtroom. I want to use these scenes in my critical essay.

I will never forget the lesson Atticus wanted Jem to learn about courage in the novel. He used Mrs. Dubose as a vehicle to learn this lesson, but he really wanted Jem to understand why he was defending Tom Robinson. "I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before

you begin, but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do” (Lee 112). This is such a powerful quote because it shows the courage Atticus must have in the courtroom to defend an innocent black man and he wants Jem to see that making a difference is what real courage is: standing up for someone even if you don’t win. In court, Atticus talks about the power and importance of the court. “Our courts have their faults as does any human institution, but in this country, our courts are the great levelers, and in our courts, all men are created equal” (Lee 205). This novel shows the great depth of character that Harper Lee creates in Atticus Finch and Scout Finch. The novel is enduring and remains important because of the complex characterization.

Nineteen Minutes by Jodi Picoult is also novel rich in strong characterization. Picoult is a writer who speaks the truth into readers. She shows the story from all sides and forces readers to come face to face with tough issues. I want to be a writer that powerful and makes that much of a difference in a person’s life. The first time I read *Nineteen Minutes* changed the way I viewed the school environment and showed me what I wanted to change to protect kids. I want to write my novels with that much conviction, passion, and temerity. I want to write my courtroom scenes with the same drama and intensity. I want people to see the power of my words the same way I forever fell in love with Picoult and the way she develops multidimensional characters and plot twists. Picoult spends a great deal of time with character development and all of those little nuances are interlaced in the courtroom sequences. I plan to examine this book in my paper and explain why it is such a powerful novel because of these scenes and the impact they make on the story. Stein discusses the importance of keeping readers interested with curiosity and suspense; it is important for the reader’s curiosity to be “greater than his need for anything else. Suspense is the strong glue between the reader and the writing” (Stein 97). If the reader is not interested in

the plot throughout the story, then the story will lose its momentum. *Nineteen Minutes* ensures that the reader is constantly caught up in the suspenseful moments of the trial and the emotional turmoil in the characters' lives. It is incredibly important for a novel to be visual and play with all these elements, so when I read a book, I try to imagine book as a film as well. I try to put myself in the place of the characters in the story and see how their complexities lend themselves to the plot.

The plot needs to lend itself to maintaining the complexities of the characters and *Law and Order SVU* is an important drama that has strong plot points, but are character led. I think this can show a vulnerable side of a character; the emotional growth and development of a character is very important in a novel or a screenplay. These are ideas I want to replicate in my writing and make my scenes and chapters incredibly powerful. This show supports the character development arcs where characters completely change and grow. I want to pick a character from the show and then show this character's progression through the show, and how this development impacted and influenced the character and those around the character.

My plan for a critical paper is to write about the importance of building and analyzing complex characters. What makes a character complex? How can I make a character more impactful? What is more important the plot or the characters? These are all issues I wish to examine as I am writing my paper. I also want to pay attention to the story arc and one of my sources alluded to the power and strength of character development. People are drawn to characters that grow and change over the course of the story. I want to utilize that and see why those characters are so important and worthwhile. I would also like to make a connection to the importance of characters with fanfiction and the reader's need to continue a beloved character's storyline however they can. I think there is something interesting in that that I want to develop.

My vision for this paper is to show the impact and importance of character development in television, literature, and film. What makes characters more impactful than others? Are flat characters ever more powerful than dynamic characters? What impact can static characters have on dynamic characters? These are all questions I wish to explore through my research. My novel is all about one character and I want to be true to her character; it is important for my readers to connect with Cassidy Michaels. This paper will give me a chance to see how to make her a more complex character that will drive my plot. Cassidy's life is the plot of my story. I want to make her more intentionally complex while also staying true to her emotions and vulnerabilities.

The sensory language will be so important. In order to ensure I have a grasp of the concepts, I need to be able to show my readers a clear picture of this case. We need to keep our sensory language fresh and inviting to tell the story we want to tell and appeal to the reader. What does the character look like? Feel like? Smell like? Are these all important to the character development? Is a physical description of the character more important than the dialogue of the character? What is the picture that the reader will cling to? I want to research all the ins and outs of characterization to ensure my characters are real and intention.

This paper will provide detailed notes for anyone wanting to write about complex characters. I want to explain what is important and why it is important to the reader or viewer. My main character in the novel is who drives the novel, so I want to make sure her character development is fully realized in the story. This critical analysis paper will allow me to explore different avenues of character development to ensure I am telling a story about a well-rounded, dynamic character.

Novels need to have characters with interesting character arcs, so this paper will help me make my main character stand out. Cassidy Michaels is my main character, and she is conflicted about her feelings for the man accused of her roommate's murder. There is another layer to the story where Cassidy's boyfriend, Justin Daniels, slept with her roommate and was initially a suspect in her disappearance. I want her to be a relatable character in the story and I want readers to be able to connect to her through emotional realism and emotional output.

The literary context for this work is wrapped up in my novel. I want to make my mystery novel's characters to be intense and integral to the plot. It is incredibly important to show why character analysis matters. My character is being framed for a crime he did not commit. I want the case against him to be thrown out in the courtroom due to a court error. I want to do my research to make sure I pick something believable that goes along with my story as well. I want to show the reader a clear picture inside the innocent person's mind and that is why I want to examine character analysis from all viewpoints – hero and villain. This character, Ryan Jacobs, has had a traumatic life with terrible consequences. However, he is not guilty of this crime. He is being framed because another character is threatened by him. He is not the main character, but he is a very important supporting character who becomes an integral part of the novel. His past does not define him, and it will not define Cassidy either.

Even though Cassidy and Ryan have undergone traumatic pasts, it is important to push through those moments and see them grow and change over the course of the story. This novel is very important to me because I think you can provide an entertaining mystery story with elements of romance without crossing the line into inappropriate language or situations. I think revealing the emotions and thoughts of Cassidy will relate to many young women who are dealing with the same trauma. Readers will relate to Ryan as well once they understand what he

has been through and what is important to him. I also want to write a believable love story and if there isn't a connection between the characters and the audience then I know the story will fall flat. I need my readers to feel that connection, and I want my characters to have an impact without being too descriptive about things that are not important. As a Christian, it is very important to me to write stories without explicit content that still deal with harsh, real issues. Cassidy Michaels lived through an abusive childhood when she was molested by her father. None of the abuse is detailed in the novel, but Cassidy's post-traumatic stress disorder affects how she handles different situations.

I think it is important as a Christian to explore these issues in a way that others can see they are not alone. This can be done in a way that doesn't traumatize the reader but can show them if they have gone through a similar situation that they are not alone. Cassidy and Ryan have suffered through so much trauma, but their characters are going to get through it and come out on the other side. Adding to the childhood abuse, Cassidy also suffers the loss of her brother, who was her entire world. I think it is important to write about loss and the importance of getting help. This paper will help add credence to what I am trying to do. I need to understand everything about characterization to make the story real and credible. If my credibility disintegrates because I don't understand ways to mold my characters, then my story won't reach anyone. Writing a story that can captivate someone, and make readers fall in love my characters is the goal.

Writing something that matters is powerful and all-consuming. Research is incredibly important in the writing process. This paper will give me the opportunity to dig deeply into character analysis. I will analyze various mediums and explain how these mediums impact the novel or screenplay. Authenticity matters and I want to make sure I am honest with my readers

while also teaching them something about characterization, the human condition, and our world. Stein talks about the importance of credibility and how “every important action in the story is at risk unless the writer is confident that the motivation or ability of the character makes the action credible” (Stein 152). Building these credible actions are important to the development of the characters and the plot.

There is power in words that are written in honesty; words that push us toward change and intuition. Without research, this will not happen. I am incredibly excited about the process and using what I learn to help further my mystery novel. Maybe my novel will affect someone like *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *Nineteen Minutes* affected me. The human emotions always play into every situation and the novel and screenplay are not any different. I want to affect these changes in my novel and make an impact on someone’s life. The dream of every writer is to make an impact, and I desperately want my story to matter to someone and make a difference in his or her life. That is why I write, and what I hope to achieve with my first novel and research.

Critical Analysis Paper: Creating Memorable Complex Characters with Character Arcs

When writing a novel or a screenplay it is incredibly important to create dynamic characters that resonate with readers or viewers. Characters drive the story. If readers cannot connect to a character in the story, then that story won't be memorable. Complex character development will focus the story and add emotional depth. If readers are not emotionally invested in the characters, then it will be difficult to engage them in the story. This paper will prove that character arcs create complex characters that drive character growth and create emotional connections between the characters and the reader; these connections allow readers to connect more deeply with a novel and make it more memorable.

Sol Stein made a very interesting statement about the importance of character development in his book, *Stein on Writing*. He said that readers and viewers must be emotionally invested in the character to care about the story. "We need to know the people in the car before we see the car crash" (Stein 50). Why would people care about characters they don't know? They would not, and that is why it is vitally important for readers and viewers to be emotionally invested in those characters (Stein 50). Characters need to have flaws because perfect characters are boring and do not exist (Cole 3). Readers connect with characters that grow and change over the course of the story, and it is an essential component of plot development to use characterization to drive the story.

In order to develop characters that further the plot, the writer must be careful to make the characters complex with multidimensional elements. Linda Seger's book, *Making a Good Script Great*, dedicates several sections of the book to the importance of multidimensional characters. Multidimensional characters allow the audience to see multiple sides of them. The characters are "fleshed out" and comprehensive (Seger 197). There are three dimensions to multidimensional

characters. First, what the character is thinking. This can encompass the character's attitude, philosophy, and values. Seger uses the example of *Dead Poets Society* to explain the teacher, John Keating, and his educational philosophy shows us who he really is. He wants to motivate students to think for themselves and what they can contribute to life, so he asks kids "That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?" (Seger 201). These are powerful words that reveal facets of Mr. Keating's character and show the viewer that Mr. Keating values the individual and wants to inspire his students. This scene inspires the students and shows them that not everyone will learn the same and everyone will make different contributions in life. It is brilliant and impactful.

The second dimension of a multidimensional character centers around the actions the character takes and the moments leading up to those actions (Seger 198). Becoming familiar with the character's actions trace back to what motivated the actions and why. *Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult begins with the action and then proceeds to walk the reader through why Peter Houghton was motivated to bring a gun to school and shoot several of his classmates. After the shooting, readers are taken back in time to learn the reason why Peter Houghton would do this. We go back to his first year of school, and many other school years after that. We learn the cruelty of his classmates who bully him relentlessly. We learn about his childhood best friend, Josie Cormier, who abandoned him because she couldn't handle being on the outside of things anymore. Picoult takes the reader on a journey through several characters to understand why the actions happened. This provides the reader with a clear picture of all the important characters and how this action impacted their character development. Each character is different, and the reader is taken on a journey through many characters to try to make sense of the senseless tragedy the school endured and how they will move forward. There is no sugar coating in the novel as

Picoult masterfully weaves her intricate tale. Peter Houghton wasn't born a killer; he was subjected to bullying and emotional abuse that pushed him to become a different person. Picoult wrote the novel to show the horrors of bullying and what little is being done to combat it ("Jodi Picoult").

Finally, multidimensional characterization would not be complete without examining the emotional output and feelings of the character as well as seeing how the character responds to emotional situations (Seeger 198). These moments of emotional depth, motivational thinking, and character's actions will produce a clear picture of the protagonist and why people connect with that person. Emotional feelings and moments can define a character more clearly at times than anything else because people are emotional beings who become invested in the people they grow to care about, even on a fictional level (Seeger 203). In the film, *A Time To Kill*, the defense attorney gives a gripping and emotional closing argument. He instructs the jury to close their eyes and walk through the story with him. He builds the emotional tension by walking the jury through what happened to that innocent young girl. He explains what she went through, what she lost because of those men, and how much she suffered before she died. Then he delivers a line that surprises everyone in the courtroom: "Now imagine she's white" (Grisham). This single line makes the jury see things from a new perspective and put themselves in the shoes of the young girl's father and how easy it would be to react with rage and take justice into his own hands. The emotional output of this scene and the masterful acting of Matthew McConaughey pushes this scene into a moment forever branded in film history for its impact. The tension and emotion of this scene are unparalleled and though difficult to listen to show how much tragedy the defendant has endured and how he wanted to punish the men that tortured and murdered his precious ten-year-old daughter (Reeves).

Grisham wrote the novel *A Time To Kill* after being inspired by a real case that occurred in the 1970s close to his home. He wanted to tell the story but give the young girl's father the justice he sought. It was his first novel and he said it was very important for him to write novels "cleanly and clearly" (Writers and Company). He promised to do this in all he wrote and after he made this rule the novel "just kind of flowed" (Writers and Company). Jennifer Rubin, writer for the Washington Post, wrote a column on Grisham's social and economic impact on the novel industry. Rubin stated in her commentary that Grisham enjoys writing about the little guy taking down the big fish: "Corporate America greed" (Rubin). Grisham saw the law as a weapon to right the wrongs in society and give people a chance for justice or retribution (Rubin). Grisham wanted to be a lawyer because he had romantic notions about taking down the bad guys and being involved in big cases, but he didn't really enjoy "playing politics" like he thought he would (Writers and Company). Grisham has shaped many of his books this way and essentially created the "legal thriller" to give a voice to those who want to change the world and use the courtroom to help them seek remuneration and comfort (Rubin). This novel is successful because people can identify with a father's emotional rage over what happened to his daughter. Readers understand the righteous anger. Readers and viewers alike were overcome by the emotions defense attorney Jake Tyler, Matthew McConaughey played this character in the film, brought into the courtroom. He forced people to see things from an emotional point of view: the point of view as a father. Emotional buy in for the characters is what makes books and films stand out. If people are interested in the protagonist and care about what happens to him or her then that will help propel a book or film to be a success.

Once readers are interested in the protagonist of the story they will care about the plot of the story as well. James Scott Bell discusses the importance of plot development when relating to

character in his book, *Plot & Structure*. He explains that “what makes a plot truly memorable is not all of the action, but what the action does to the character” (Bell 141). He also points out that audiences and readers “respond to the character who changes, who endures the crucible of the story only to emerge a different person at the end” (Bell 141). Simply put, readers want to read a story about a protagonist that grows and changes over the course of the story. Yvonne Grace, an award-winning Television Drama Producer, said that in many stories character comes first. “The plot come out of the interplay between what they do and why they do it” (Grace 2). In order to create a character driven plot, there must be a detailed, comprehensive character arc that tangles and plays with the plot.

Law and Order SVU is known for the complex character arcs that change and manipulate the plot; many of the prosecutors have compelling character arcs that make the viewer root for those characters to win. A favorite on the show was Rafael Barba, a prosecutor who changes radically throughout his time on the show. He wasn’t the protagonist, but he was a character with a very interesting story arc that often collided with the protagonist of the show, Olivia Benson. Barba’s dialogue and actions show who he was as a person. When his character leaves the show, he pours his heart out to Olivia and explains how she changed his life and how he saw all the cases that came across his desk.

“The world was an old movie. It was all black and white. And it was high noon. I was Gary Cooper. I was absolutely sure - absolutely - who were the good guys, who were the bad guys. And then you...you started to weasel your way into my world, and the black and white became different shades of gray...Before I knew it, there were blues and greens and yellows and reds. I’m you now, Liv. You opened my heart and I thank you for it” (Wolf).

It is incredibly important for the dialogue used by the character in the story to match the character's personality and story arc (Wilson). Rafael grew as a character and his dialogue matched his heart. The way he prosecuted cases on the show changed dramatically and, in the end, he even went against the law he saw as black and white to do what he thought was the right thing. He crossed the line, and it made his character even more relatable. As Bell stated, people are drawn to characters who grow and change. Barba grew and changed over the course of his time on the show and people were devastated when he left the show, but happy for the character arc his character had been given.

Characters with compelling stories also give the story a direction and purpose. Character changes must also be credible and believable for people to connect to the emotions (Cole 3). Linda Seger's book, *Making a Good Script Great*, dedicates a chapter to "finding your character's spine" (Seger 177). The spine of a character is centered around three elements: motivation, goal, and action. These three elements seek to define the essential characteristics of a character. Who is that character? What does the character really want? What is that character willing to do in order to obtain what the character wants? (Seger 178). If the reader or viewer can clearly see the spine of the character, then they can connect with the character and what motivates that character. After these connections, the character can make an impact on those interested in the story.

The character's motivation and goal are interchangeable because the motivation involves the protagonist in the plot and drive the goal the character hopes to achieve (Seger 180). The goal will push the protagonist into action and interest the reader or viewer. In order to accomplish the goal that the character is motivated to achieve the character will have to cycle through the following three elements: great risk, direct conflict, and character transformation (Seger 180-

181). These elements are essential to generate interest in the plot of a novel through a character's story arc. Many novels depict a protagonist who works through these elements to draw the reader or viewer into the story.

Katniss Everdeen, in *The Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins, is a protagonist with a dedicated spine. Her motivation throughout the series is to protect her sister (later this also encompasses protecting Peeta, but her sister was always her primary concern). Her goal is to defeat President Snow, so she can protect her sister from the evil dictator, President Snow. The action is shown when she is willing to be the face of the rebellion to bring Snow down because that is what is best for her sister and those she loves. Katniss encounters great risk when she volunteers for her sister when she is chosen at the reaping. She knows it may mean her death, but all that matters to her is protecting her sister. She encounters direct conflict in the arena when she is forced to fight other teenagers from other districts to stay alive for her sister because she promised her, she would.

As the series continues, Katniss transforms. She still wants to protect her sister, but she also wants to protect everyone from a dictatorship. She falls in love with Peeta. Then Katniss encounters devastating heartbreak when the sister she fought so hard to protect dies in the war, and she is forced to try and go on with life without her sister. When Alma Coin steps in to serve as interim president until the people can make a "rational decision," Even in her fog of grief, Katniss sees Coin for who she is. She sees her as another dictator taking over for Snow. She won't stand for it, and she kills Coin to protect the people of her country. Katniss Everdeen is a dynamic character who draws people into her character arc. President Snow served as a catalyst character who pushed Katniss into action and caused the events to happen. Even though Snow is

a minor character, he was a character that forced Katniss onto a different path toward transformation (Seger 216).

Katniss Everdeen had an emotionally driven character arc, and that made readers connect with her because she did not see herself clearly. K.M. Weiland, author of *Creating Character Arcs*, discussed the importance of the protagonist having a Lie he or she believes because that Lie keeps the protagonist from accomplishing what will make that character happy. Weiland stated that “In order for your character to evolve in a positive way, he has to start out with something lacking in his life, some reason that makes the change necessary” (Weiland 26). Katniss lived only for her sister and not for herself. The Lie Katniss believed is that the only purpose she had in life was protecting her sister from harm.

Weiland said that the protagonist realizes “the symptoms of the Lie in his life, even if he isn’t able to recognize the Lie itself” (Weiland 28). The reader or viewer can see this more clearly and as the character grows and develops over the course of the story, the character recognizes what the Lie is and confronts the Lie effectively provoking change. The Lie could be a feeling that the character is unable to distinguish because he or she cannot separate it from the emotion of it. Examples of these feelings may be fear, guilt, hurt, unable to forgive, dark secrets, shame, and beliefs (Weiland 28). Without confronting the Lie, the character can never push past it to seek the truth and grow in a positive way (Weiland 29). The Lie also contributes to the character’s arc and how that character will grow and change because of the lie.

Characters who are unable to see the truth because of the Lie will struggle until they are able to see the Lie for what it is and pave the way to their truth and new self. Charlie is the main character in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky (a novel and a film). Charlie struggles with anxiety and depression. He blacks out during violent encounters and emotional

moments. The audience does not understand why he struggles so much, but as the story progresses, we are given glimpses into Charlie's childhood. We learn that his aunt died in a car accident, but even more troubling is what the audience learns toward the end of the film. Charlie's aunt had molested him as a child; he repressed these memories, but when he must confront the Lie his anxiety overwhelmed him. The Lie he told himself is that it was his fault that his aunt died because he was angry with her for molesting him, and then she got into a car accident. He kept the secret from his family because he was ashamed of himself and what happened.

The emotional turmoil of the abuse forced Charlie to repress these horrific memories, but without confronting the Lie and dealing with the trauma he cannot move forward with his life. Weiland also wrote about the "Ghost" in a character's past. The ghost haunts the character but can also provide the why behind the character's belief in the Lie he has allowed himself to believe (Weiland 43). The loss of his innocence as a child, and the emotional turmoil of a past suicide attempt stunt his development and allow the ghost of his aunt to haunt him throughout the story. We only learn about his past traumas because he decides to move forward with his life as he befriends a group of misfits and finally learns the impact and power of real friendship and love.

Charlie's character makes an impact from page one in the novel and within the first minute of the film. Weiland explained the importance and impact of a characteristic moment in a story. The characteristic moment in work must introduce the protagonist in a variety of ways. We need to know the protagonist's looks, gender, age, occupation, physical characteristics, role in the story, personality, and interests. The characteristic moment must also reveal scene goal, the story goal, and the influence of the plot on the character and story arc. Introducing a

characteristic moment should also show the strengths and weaknesses the character may possess, the relatable appeal the protagonist will have with the audience, and the characteristic moment should also further the plot development from the first page (Weiland 50). The reader or viewer should be able to see pieces of the Lie the protagonist believes because this Lie is intermingled with the identity of the protagonist.

A film that delves into the emotions of the protagonist is *Erin Brockovich*, and the film is based on real-life experiences. Erin is a real-life character that viewers relate to and root for at the same time. The film opens with Erin at a job interview, and being told she is not qualified for the job. People can feel her desperation. This is a characteristic moment because we know what she looks like, why she needs to work, and that she loves her three kids. When she begins working at a law firm, Erin is quite different from the other people working there. She has experienced being broke and she cares for all the people in the PG&E lawsuit that the law firm is trying to take on. This movie focuses on binding arbitration and there is not an actual court case, but this is another way the law works in the novel. This works to the film's advantage because Erin doesn't understand the law either, so the viewer learns about what it is as Erin learns about it. This makes Erin even more likable to the viewer while also providing context for the law. A single mom who is struggling to take care of her kids while also helping people in desperate need is something that people respond to and the fact that it is based on a true story is icing on the cake. Erin is a character with flaws, but that makes the viewer empathize with her even more.

In *Where the Crawdads Sing*, Kya's flaws help build her character arc and make her character so powerful. The film exposes the prejudices people have against Kya because she is the "marsh girl" who the town has shunned since she was a small child. The courtroom scenes in the film depict Kya as a shy girl who almost seems afraid of everything around her. Her lawyer's

kindness is on display and the audience is grateful at least someone in town with some power wants to help her. Her lawyer also paints a picture for the jury in the opening argument. “The state is going throw a lot of words at you about Catherine Danielle Clark. But I am asking you to look at the evidence the State will be offering to back up those words. You’ll find there is none. Furthermore, you are going to hear that there’s a good chance that no one murdered Chase Andrews and that the defendant, Miss Clark, finds herself here because it is easier to lay blame on an outsider than it is to rely on facts. And although she was born and grew up not five miles from this courtroom, Miss Clark is an outsider” (Owens). This opening argument shows us his integrity as a lawyer, but also paints a picture of what Kya’s life has been like. It is necessary to the plot and storyline. These aspects not only develop her characteristic moment, but also show the importance of complex, multidimensional character development.

Everything that contributes to a character arc helps define multidimensional, complex characters with flaws and hope. It is very important not to create shallow characters in a work of fiction. Shallow characters can be impactful to the plot of the story, but they will never be a part of a character driven story. Sol Stein discussed James Bond and Sherlock Holmes as examples of shallow characters that are used to drive plot and not character development. Bond and Holmes are characters in action movies. They are not characters’ that readers and viewers will sit around and contemplate their emotional depth. The story is in the action and not in the character. While this works in films, this is not very successful in novels. Readers need to connect with characters in stories (Stein 65). Both Bond and Holmes are beloved characters who garner a huge fan base, but the stories are not character driven stories. It is important to understand the distinction between character driven and plot driven.

In contrast, a character driven plot will include action, but that action influences and defines a character's growth and development. Memorable characters stand out. They are more than their physical attributes (Stein 55). Stein explained the five ways to categorize characters in his book *Stein on Writing*. Characters can be described by their physical attributes, clothing choices, psychological attributes/mannerisms, actions, and dialogue. In order to create a character with a compelling character arc and emotional depth the writer needs to focus on the ways characters can be seen and heard in film and novels.

It is important to explain and develop what a character looks like, but it could also be done in a way that shows instead of tells. In *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Captain Jack Sparrow is a force to be reckoned with in everything he does. The way he walks, the way he talks, and the actions he is involved in show us what his character is about, and we don't learn through the dialogue of others what the character is like. His character is distinctive and interesting. In *The Great Gatsby* novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Daisy Buchanan is characterized as "the golden girl" by the narrator Nick Carraway. "It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth, but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget" (Fitzgerald 10). The reader learns about her beauty and the impact of her look upon people without saying she had blonde hair and blue eyes. The way Daisy is introduced shows the reader how people feel about Daisy's beauty without telling them about it.

The reader also learns through her conversation with Nick that she is unhappy when she tells him she hopes her daughter will be a silly fool, so she isn't disappointed. This shows a depth to Daisy. This shows that Daisy isn't happy even if she is beautiful and rich. This is another way

to characterize a character through dialogue. Author Jodi Picoult believes that novels need to include “real-life conversations” in “different contexts” when dealing with dialogue to make the story more authentic, and to make the characters real (“Jodi Picoult”). The reader can learn so much about a character because of the way a character speaks. Daisy also dresses like a modern “flapper” woman in the book because she wants to have the power and control over her life that she doesn’t have. Because she is desperately unhappy with Tom, who is always having affairs, she decides to embark on an affair of her own with Gatsby. This is the action that Daisy takes to try and change her life. Gatsby loves Daisy, and she thinks that it will make her happy. Daisy may feel this way, but psychologically this doesn’t work out because Gatsby wants too much from her and he is not the man she should be with. All of these conversations and complex emotions assist in developing Daisy’s character and helps the reader see who Daisy really is. The reader sees past all of Daisy’s pretty features and money. The conversations and actions of her character show us that Daisy is a selfish, spoiled individual who only cares about her own wants and needs. Even though the reader doesn’t like Daisy, her character arc guides the reader to a true understanding of the character, good or bad.

Another book and film that shows all five ways to characterize characters is *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. The book and film continue to have a profound impact on society. Atticus Finch is a brave lawyer who defends Tom Robinson even though many people don’t want him to do that because Tom is a black man, and it is the 1930s. Tom is accused of raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell. Atticus defends Tom Robinson by poking holes in the prosecution’s “evidence.” We watch as Atticus masterfully questions Mayella Ewell and backs her into a corner when her lies don’t add up. She claims that Tom held her down and had her about the neck, but we learn through Scout’s narration that Tom doesn’t have use of one of his

arms, so he could not accomplish what he is being accused of in the courtroom. The movie takes it a step further and Atticus asks Tom to catch something with that hand and we learn about him getting his arm caught in a cotton gin when he was a child and how it tore all his muscles loose. Mayella clearly didn't know this, and you can see the trepidation in her terrified eyes. Atticus exploits this untrue evidence in his case. Scout watches her father carefully from the balcony. She is in awe of him even if she is embarrassed by how he appears at times. Mayella knows she needs to make them believe Tom did this or else she will suffer at the hands of her father. Atticus is calm and patient with her, but he is still showing the jury and the judge what is really going on. Atticus shows his strength of character in how he deals with Mayella. The audience can see and feel his empathy for her and the abuse she has endured all her life, but he stands against that to try to free an innocent man.

Atticus Finch gives a brilliant closing argument. The book and the movie clearly show the strengths that Atticus possesses as a lawyer. He is defending Tom Robinson to the best of his ability and everyone in that courtroom knows it. He lays out the case for the jury. He shows all the evidence that proves Tom could not have hurt Mayella and that the Ewells have lied throughout the entire case. He says that "This case is as simple as black and white" (Lee 271). He is alluding to innocence and guilt, but also to race with this statement. He wants to expose those prejudices that lurk deep in the hearts of everyone in that room. In the movie, Atticus continues his closing statement by showing who is truly guilty of a crime and it isn't Tom Robinson. "The state has not produced one iota of medical evidence to the effect that the crime Tom Robinson is charged with ever took place. It has relied instead upon the testimony of two witnesses whose evidence has not only been called into serious question on cross-examination but has been flatly contradicted by the defendant. The defendant is not guilty, but somebody in

this courtroom is” (*To Kill A Mockingbird*). This statement is powerful and shows the truth of who Atticus Finch is. Atticus is shining a light in the ugly places people try to hide. This dialogue shows that Atticus wants the truth to come out and he wants to expose those who lie and cheat to get ahead in life. He wants to leave a legacy that his children can be proud of.

He goes on to expose racial inequality here. “And so a quiet, respectable, humble Negro who had the unmitigated temerity to ‘feel sorry’ for a white woman has had to put his word against two white people’s” (Lee 272). Atticus is exposing those evils and prejudices to try and force people to confront the truth. The jury still came back with a guilty verdict, but Atticus said that at least it wasn’t an instant guilty and that they are making small strides and changes in the way the law prosecutes. He can see the silver lining where the rest of us all see that unfairness and feel rage at such injustice in the world. Atticus doesn’t win the case, but he does win the respect of almost every single person in that courtroom, black or white (Reeves). Reverend Sykes is sitting in the balcony with Atticus’s children, and he tells the children to stand up because “their father’s passing” (Lee 283). This is a sign of respect and shows that they understand he did his best to defend Tom Robinson even though he wasn’t going to win the case.

Earlier in the novel, Atticus tried to warn his children of the harsh moments life could offer. Scout, the narrator, does not understand the significance of the conversation at that time, but her older brother, Jem, does. Atticus told Jem he wanted Jem to understand real courage. “I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It’s when you know you’re licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do” (Lee 112). This dialogue reveals the character of Atticus Finch. His words are powerful and drive the story forward.

Atticus also told Scout that you can't understand a person until you see things from his point of view. "You never really understand a person until you see things from his point of view – until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (Lee 39). This advice helps Scout to understand Boo Radley at the end of the novel. This quote did not only help the reader understand Atticus, but also helped the reader understand minor characters in the story. Boo Radley is a minor character, but he is eccentric and that makes him interesting to the story. He is mysterious, and when he is finally seen in the story Scout sees him for who he really is and not what people think he is. Stein addressed the power of minor characters in his book: "Minor characters can not only help characterize the major characters in a story but can also advance the plot" (Stein 72). Boo Radley gives us a glimpse into Scout's character and assists her in growing up. Harper Lee's story is chock full of characters that audiences can relate to and the character driven story speaks truth to its readers and viewers. Lee wanted to tell "an honest story about life as she saw it" (Shapiro 3). She wanted people to think about the way they viewed people and how they viewed themselves considering prejudices (Shapiro 3).

Harper Lee created memorable characters that have left a lasting impact on our world. C.S Lakin, creator of online website *Live Write Thrive*, shared an article about emotional character development written by blogger and freelancer, Patrick Cole. "We remember the emotional attachment that Atticus Finch has to justice; we remember Boo's emotional struggle with the concepts of equality and tolerance" (Cole 4). Without the complex characters of Atticus, Scout, and Boo Radley the novel would not have had the power it still holds over people today. It is important that main characters have character arcs that further develop their characters.

Beloved characters are not the only characters with character arcs and complex characterization. We have already discussed the character of Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*, but

there are other villains in stories that can also have complex character arcs that emotionally affects the readers. Villains don't have to be all bad. Many villains have real human emotions and feelings. One single incident may alter the course of a character and make that person a villain. Stein said that as writers we are "manipulating" the emotions of the characters by "pitting characters against each other to create a story" (Stein 68). Villains in stories still need to be a part of the action, but they don't have to be completely evil. Marvel handles this issue very well. Wanda is devastated by the loss of her love, Vision. Lost in her grief, she takes over a town, creates a version of Vision, and creates their children. Her grief made her a villain, but she is not a typical villain. Even as a villain, the viewer feels for her and grieves with her. In the end, she realizes what she has done. She tells Vision and her children goodbye to free all the people she imprisoned (*Wandavision*). Antagonists must have backstories as well, so that the readers or viewers can see why they became who they became. They also need to make the antagonists human and interesting (Writers' Center). Characters create the story many times, so it is important to listen to the characters as they grow and develop.

When it comes to writing characters and creating their story arcs, it is important for the writer to spend time with the characters he or she is creating. A.J Pearce is a column writer for *The Novelry* online. Pearce explains the importance of creating complex characters by spending time getting to know the characters and their personalities. "It takes time to see the real them. Stick with just the superficial character traits, and you'll have nothing but flat characters" (Pearce 2). If the writer does not take the time to get to know the characters, then he or she will not know their complexities, what matters to them, or their backstory (3).

It takes a long time to get to know characters and the characters a writer creates are no exception. Pearce urges writers to give their characters time to play. "Play with a piece of plot

and see how they handle it...Even if you forget the details, their attitude and gut responses will stay with you. And that's what builds a deep character" (Pearce 3). Playing with the plot will provide a way to truly get to know the characters and help the characters develop important layers of meaning. A writer can even take it a step further and imagine having conversations with their characters to see if the dialogue the writer is creating is "layered and complex" (Pearce 6).

Developing beloved characters is so incredibly important. Characters move readers and viewers. Without that emotional connection, the story won't be as impactful as it could be. The American Psychological Association wrote an article about the importance engaging characters have on personality, empathy, and experience. "Our desire to stay involved in a fictional world may show that we have identified with one or more of its characters, or formed bonds with them, which often happens when characters are likeable, interesting, or complex" (APA). This is why fanfiction has such a large fanbase.

Fanfiction.net has over twelve million registered users in over forty languages (fanfiction.net). Fanfiction is written about beloved characters from books, movies, and television shows. Sometimes the stories are different perspectives of the novels written, but often the writers take the characters and put them into an alternate reality to tell a new story with those beloved characters. This is because the characters transcend the stories they are in for many readers. The beloved *Harry Potter* series have 845,000 stories dedicated to the book series on fanfiction.net while the *Twilight* series has 222,000 stories dedicated to it with *Percy Jackson*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *The Hunger Games* not far behind (fanfiction.net). Supernatural tops the television show fanfiction stories with 127,000, while Star Wars and Avengers top the movie fanfiction page with 59,600 and 52,100 respectively (fanfiction.net).

These statistics on fanfiction.net clearly show the impact that characters have on people who want more of those characters. Writers must continue to develop emotionally complex characters that appeal to readers and viewers. Compelling characters must have a character arc that exposes the big Lie the character has not dealt with and show ways the character can grow and develop over the course of the work. If readers did not connect with Katniss Everdeen, would they have cried along with her when her sister died? No, they would not care what happened to her loved ones if they did not care about her and her story arc. If readers did not feel compassion for Peter Houghton in *Nineteen Minutes*, would the story about bullying and school violence have had as much of an impact? No, the vulnerability Picoult exposed in the complex character development resonated deeply with readers who were disturbed by the trauma Peter had endured. In *The Great Gatsby* if Daisy Buchanan was described artificially as only a pretty face, would her character have had the emotional depth to pull readers into the story? No, Daisy is the villain in the story, but the reader must navigate her complex character arc to see her for what she is. In *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, would Charlie have been such an impactful character if we did not understand the big lie, he hid from himself about the traumatic abuse he suffered at the hands of someone who was supposed to love and protect him? No, Charlie's character would not have been fleshed out without the blackouts, the flashbacks, and the awkward moments when he reaches out and shows the compassionate side of his heart and makes friends with the outcasts who change his life. All of these characters prove that a fully developed character arc propels the reader into the story and establishes an emotional connection and the story. In every story readers and viewers see or read, they personally connect to a character, good or bad, and how that character impacts the plot. Character arcs not only appeal to

the readers but resonate deep within their hearts and encourages them to reach out once again to discover how richly characters can impact lives.

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The Secrets Within

By Monica Cookson

Part One: Novel

Chapter 1 – Cassidy Michaels

Pain. All my life all I have ever known was pain. Pain is my constant companion in life. It never ends, just varies. Looking around my therapist's office never calms or comforts me. I come because I made a promise. No more, no less. Does it help me? I don't know. Sometimes I think it dulls the agony, but I think that's just when numbness sets in and I can't navigate through the pain any longer. I walk slowly around the large office and take in my surroundings as I do every time I come, expecting something different. Studying my surroundings provides me with an out, an escape from what is to come. I hate it here.

An obscure sea-green sign propped up on top of the bookshelf draws my attention and I silently read the words. *Therapy pulls back the layers of skin like an onion to get to the inner self.* The irony of that statement is not lost on me. Every time I am here, I want to crawl out of my skin because the process is so painful, and agonizing. I avert my gaze and my eyes land on the man I see twice a week to help me get to this so-called "inner self." Dr. Vortek is quietly waiting for me to begin the session.

"Your sign is dumb," I tell him, gesturing with my thumb at his expansive bookshelf in the corner of the vast office. My voice is rough, anxious. My throat is dry, like sandpaper. I clear it, but my throat is still blocked as I try to choke down the apprehension that always clutches me like a vice. "Using an onion implies that the process could produce tears and also compares people's emotional turmoil to that of a vegetable. That's insensitive." He still says nothing, staring at me. What else is new? I decide to play the game a little longer, anything to get out of talking about myself, which I realize is crazy because that's why one comes to a therapy session. Jordan's face flashes into my mind and I shake my head to clear away the image or I will never get through this.

Dr. Vortek's silence unnerves me, putting me on edge. "Peeling the layers is the same as peeling the skin off of someone and I don't know about you, but that doesn't sound like a pleasant process. Maybe the person would be better off with those protective layers." I finish, embarrassed now. Why did I focus on that today? I wrap my arms around my waist and wait for him to speak.

His soft voice covers me like a warm blanket; it is soothing, low, and somewhat hoarse. "Cassidy, you have been a student at the University for two years and in my office twice a week since then and you want to talk about a sign I've had for ten years?" His voice is tinged with humor, his eyes twinkle and his mouth has curved into a small smile. His smile unsettles me. I want to avoid his question, so I try to change the course of the discussion.

"Who said it anyway?" My arms drop back to my sides, and I pace back and forth trying to ease my discomfort. I imagine my feet have worn a path in the plush, beige carpeting. I glance down to see and annoyance fills me when there is no proof I have paced here. I hate speaking to him and the clinical way he regards me. Why have I never noticed that stupid sign before now?

He smiles at me again after my question. I don't like when he finds me amusing. "I don't know. I saw it at the store, and I bought it." He says in his quiet voice, but his words are clipped. He doesn't like the question and I think it is because he doesn't know the answer.

I stop pacing, placing my hands firmly on my hips. "Seems like plagiarism to me. Isn't that something Boston University frowns upon?" Dr. Vortek doesn't answer and his face grows serious. Tension creeps over me. It's time to start, sinking into the familiar, uncomfortable chair. The red cushions are ripped at the edges and the arms of the chair are worn and tired. "You know, if you want your patients to open up to you, invest in a chair that is comfortable."

He doesn't respond, waiting. I shift awkwardly under his intense gaze. His thick salt and pepper hair is combed to the side and looks greasy in the dim light. His entire look from his button-up dress shirt to his slick shiny shoes screams "Shrink!"

I twist a long strand of light blonde hair around my finger, tugging occasionally. This nervous habit comforts me, the discomfort settles me. Trying to hide from his unwavering gaze, I turn my head slightly so my hair will fall over my face and shield me from scrutiny. I sigh softly and turn my gaze toward him with resignation. He had allowed me to open up and begin our session and I had chosen not to take him up on his generous offer. As always.

"How are you today, Ms. Michaels?" He asks, his tone soft, calming.

My fingers become slick with sweat, and I wipe them off on my jeans multiple times in an attempt to dry them. He always starts the same way and I never have an answer for him.

"Cassidy, I understand your reluctance to confide in an older man...given your history--"

I cannot allow him to continue this line of thought. It has taken me months to feel somewhat comfortable in this office. Dr. Vortek does not remind me of my father and other men don't either. My father is a beast in his own right and nothing can ever measure up to his cruelty and malice. "I felt fine until my mother made her weekly phone call," I answer before he has the chance to bring up my father. When I think about my father, all I see is the darkness. Dark rooms filled with terror; screams in the shadows, and anguish in the darkness. I couldn't talk about my father, not now, and very probably never. I hate when he brings up my past, my weakness, my father. He knows enough about my past. I have told him what my father did to me, but always in short sentences, devoid of emotion. I can't face all that, not yet.

His direct, but gentle voice pierces the uncomfortable silence. "How did your mother's phone call make you feel?"

The question is innocent enough, but it amuses me. “I thought Shrinks only asked questions like that in the movies.” I meet his eyes with a steady gaze, a hint of a smile on my lips, before standing up slowly. Trembling, I make my way over to the small window. The view of downtown Boston is obscured, and I can only see the red brick exterior of the rundown building next door, rough and neglected. “It’s almost comical how similar my life is to a horror movie with the only difference being that I don’t run down the street screaming with my hair flying out behind me as I beg for help that never comes.”

After my verbal word vomit, I sink into the dilapidated chair once more. Dr. Vortek leans forward, and I notice the right sleeve of his jacket has a tear in the green cotton fabric at the elbow. This comforts me. He is not as put together and perfect as he pretends to be either. Perfection is an illusion. “Why would you not scream for help?” He asks drawing me back to the present in his always soft-spoken, but demanding voice.

I stare at my hands, paint-stained after hours of working on set designs. I try to recall my love of the theatre to get through this moment, but nothing can ever pull me away from my past when Dr. Vortek goes poking around in it. My voice is barely discernible when I answer his question. “It never did me any good before. No one would listen.” What is the point of dancing around the issue? It is the truth. Everyone loves my father. No one knew him for the monster that he was except for Jordan and me.

He sees an opportunity and jumps in quickly. “What about Jordan? Didn’t your brother help you?” Any feeling of closeness that developed between us vanishes. Red, hot, fiery anger fills me as he brings up the one person, I have told him repeatedly, is off limits. I don’t talk about my brother in these sessions. Jordan with his short brown hair, determined eyes, and shy smile. The image shatters me as the pain bubbles to the surface. My older brother protected me as much

as he could even when he was beaten so badly, he couldn't walk. Jordan is the only bright spot in my childhood, and I love him with all that I am. But Dr. Vortek knows we don't discuss my brother within these walls. I can't talk about him. I won't.

"Don't you even speak his name!" My voice cracks, so close to my breaking point. My vision swims in front of me and black spots dot my line of vision. I can't look at him.

"Cassidy-" Dr. Vortek tries to get us back on track, but I am angry with him because I don't hear any regret in his voice. He wants me to face this and I can't. I can't.

"No!" I scream and stand up to leave. "This session is over!" I make my way across the room quickly. Jordan's sweet smile and infectious laugh cloud my already distorted vision. My entire body shakes as I struggle for breath, for control. I must regain control. I draw in huge gasps of air trying to ward off my impending panic attack. He crossed the line.

His voice stops me before I can pull the door open. He is standing behind his desk and his eyes plead with me to open up to him. His tone is sympathetic, and kind, but firm. "You will never heal if you keep pushing it away. Denial and anger will not work forever. You have to deal with these feelings, your anger before it consumes you."

I refuse to answer him as I storm out and slam the door. I know he is only trying to help me, but I can't do this. He can't use my brother as a pawn in my recovery – even the thought of it sickens me. Jordan is too innocent to be used that way. I promised him I would continue therapy, but I can't allow Dr. Vortek that much power over me. The tenuous control I have is starting to slip and if I lose that what will be left of me?

Chapter 2

I lean back against the door's smooth, hollow frame and take a deep steadying breath. Justin Daniels is sitting on the small waiting room couch, flipping through a People magazine quickly without really reading it. I don't know why he wanted to come today. I liked to come to therapy alone. I wanted the time to compose myself and put my thoughts in order. I didn't like anyone seeing me out of control.

Justin looks up and smiles warmly at me. His short, blonde hair is neatly combed and his blue eyes gaze at me warmly. He looks perfect as always. Confusion clouds his eyes when he notices my state. "What's wrong?" He asks. Anger fills me. Justin never appears rattled, and I am sure I look as terrible as I feel in this moment.

"I don't want to talk about it." I pull him up by the hand. "Let's just go."

Justin doesn't say anything and follows me out through the office door and down the hall to the elevator. I push the button four times impatiently. Justin puts a comforting arm around my shoulders, and it takes everything I have in me not to burst into tears. Thankfully, he doesn't speak. Dr. Vortek just got under my skin today. I need to be more careful so he can't affect me that way again. I can't let my guard down with him again. I suck in another ragged breath, finally feeling calmer and composed.

The elevator door opens with a loud ding. I shrug out from under Justin's arm and hurry into the elevator. He follows me calmly. I rifle through my backpack for my Biology notebook remembering I have a test in thirty minutes. Justin sighs softly.

"Do you want to talk about it now?" he asks gently, but his questions grate on my nerves.

The elevator door opens into the lobby of the Student Health Center and I hurry out of the elevator and push open the glass doors to step out into the sunshine. The sun calms me further, but anger remains. I whirl around on Justin just steps behind me.

“Justin, I told you I like to go to therapy alone. I don’t like to talk about my past.” I try to be calm and rational, but even I can hear the annoyance and anger in my voice.

Justin holds his hands up. “I’m sorry, okay? I just missed you this weekend and I wanted to spend more time with you.” He walks up to me and shifts his arm over my shoulders once again; his arm encloses around me, squeezing gently. I still can’t shake the feeling that something is off with Justin. He has never gone to therapy with me but demanded to go today. I guess he missed me, but I was in therapy he wasn’t in there with me. Something just felt...wrong.

We walk in step to the main quad. I don’t say anything. I flip through my notebook – looking over notes I have studied for hours. Justin smiles. “You are going to rock that test.” He places a gentle kiss against my forehead, and we stop walking. I melt into his arms and hug him fiercely. I allow his calmness to numb my sense of panic.

Justin and I have been inseparable for nearly two years. We met at a rush party our freshman year and he pursued me for days until I agreed to go on a date with him. I was still reeling from what happened with Jordan, but Justin was persistent, and I finally relented. Other than my roommate, Jenna, he is the only other one (besides my brother) who knows about my past. It took me nearly a year to open up to him and tell him everything. When I did, it was a freeing feeling. He knows all about the worst parts of me and he still loves me. My life may be an ocean of chaos, but I know that Justin is the calm to my storm. I can trust him. I need to let go of these feelings. I am always trying to sabotage the good things in my life.

I finally pull away from the hug and stare into his intense blue eyes. He smiles at me and pushes a stray blond hair behind my ear. "Thank you," I whisper. He nods and leans in to kiss me on the lips. It is a soft brush on my lips, but I feel that familiar desire sweeps through me. I never thought I would want a real relationship because of what my father did to me, but Justin had changed that.

Justin grabs my hand and gives it a gentle squeeze before speaking. "Let's go out tonight. I have missed you so much." I smile and squeeze his hand right back.

"I can't. Jenna said she needed some girl time tonight. She has some things she wants to talk about, I guess." I am still smiling, but Justin's smile and easy demeanor vanishes. He recovers quickly and plasters on a small smile, but I see the change, and the unease returns.

"Blow off Jenna tonight. Please, Cass. We haven't gone on a real date in over a month. I missed you." He nuzzles my nose, and I am so tempted to bail on Jenna, but I can't. Something was wrong with Jenna and I am going to figure it out.

"I can't do that. She seems so upset." I frown as I speak. Jenna has been very distant the past few weeks. Hopefully, tonight she will fill me in on what is going on in her life. I can't cancel on her. Jenna is the only friend I have from home.

Justin sighs, frustrated. "All right, I understand." He says that, but his body language says something else entirely; he is rigid, on edge. Justin never acts like this, so I know something is wrong. I glance down at my watch. I only have ten minutes until my test begins. Justin notices me look at my watch and uses my distraction over my test to avoid the conversation.

"You need to go ace that test," he says smiling at me. "I love you. Call me after theater." He whispers those against my lips before giving me a quick kiss and hurrying off in the opposite direction.

“Love you,” I whisper. I feel sick to my stomach, but squash those feelings. I owe that to Jordan, that and so much more. Biology needs to be my focus right now. I walk quickly over to the Life Sciences building dedicated to maintaining my perfect 4.0 GPA.

Chapter 3

I breeze through the biology test and head back to my apartment. I need to be at the Theater in an hour. The apartment I share with Jenna is only a five-minute walk from campus. We pounced on the opportunity to rent it our sophomore year. You must sign a three-year lease, but the rates are better than paying to live in the dorms. Justin has an apartment in the same complex.

I walk up to the complex and take the stairs two at a time. Our third-floor apartment has a beautiful view of the campus. I stuff the key into the lock and open the door. I place my keys on the hook by the door and step right into my bedroom, dropping my backpack on my bed. I shut the door and select painting clothes from my closet; I put them on quickly before pulling my hair up into a messy bun. I grab my theater bag with my painting supplies from its spot tucked in beside my desk before quickly glancing at my reflection in the mirror.

My eyes are wide with excitement, cheeks flushed. I push back the stray hairs that I didn't pull up with the rest of my hair, behind my ear. I reach into my makeup caddy and touch up my lip gloss and reapply my mascara. Ryan will be here soon to walk to the Theater with me. Ryan Jacobs is a mystery to me. His dark brown hair and jade-green eyes flash into my mind for a moment and then I shake them away. Ryan and I are just friends, but I can't control my reaction to how attractive he is. I sigh loudly before opening my door and heading into the kitchen.

Jenna is there, sitting on the counter, furiously typing on her cell phone. Her jet-black hair hangs around her face in short, choppy layers. Her dramatic bangs hit just above her eyes. She always complains about having a huge forehead. Whatever. She was beautiful. She finally glances up and I smile.

"Still on for tonight?" she asks cautiously with worried eyes.

I nod. "Of course. Maybe you will finally tell me what's wrong."

Jenna looks down immediately and continues texting. I feel drained, so I decide to make some coffee to take with me to the theater. Jenna clears her throat and then speaks. "Cass, do you believe we will be best friends forever no matter what?"

I answer her immediately, turning to face her. Her eyes are huge, and her mouth is set with a frown. "Without a doubt in my mind. Please, Jenn. Tell me what's going on." She shakes her head. "We can talk tonight." She goes back to typing and tunes me out. My coffee finishes brewing, and I add way too much creamer to my travel cup. I put the creamer away and adjust my theater bag on my shoulder. A knock at the door interrupts my paranoid thoughts. First Justin acted off, and now Jenna?

"I'll meet you at the Pub at 7?" I inquire. Jenna nods but doesn't look up from her phone.

She isn't going to reveal anything else at this point, so I pull open the door. Ryan is standing there smiling at me. I love his smile. Whenever I see him, my heart skips a beat. I can't control that. His dark hair is covered with his painting hat and his green eyes shine with happiness. I smile at him and berate myself for the blush that I know is staining my cheeks.

There is no denying the fact that Ryan Jacobs is gorgeous. I smile brightly at him and step outside with him.

"See you soon, Jenn," I call back into the apartment.

"See you," she says so quietly I barely heard her, maybe my head is swimming.

Ryan catches my unease immediately. "What's wrong there?"

I shrug as we descend the stairs quickly. "She says she wants to talk, but she won't tell me what's wrong."

I watch the unease play over Ryan's features. His eyes go wide for a moment before he rubs his face with his hands wearily. "Hopefully she'll tell you tonight."

"What's going on Ry?" I demand. "Justin is acting weird. Jenna won't talk to me and now you look uncomfortable." I wrap my arms around myself and walk a little ahead of him, feeling the need to distance myself.

Ryan jogs to catch up with me and wraps an arm securely around my shoulders. I stop for a moment and turn. He envelopes me in a hug and I feel myself start to relax in his comforting embrace. His tattered gray hoodie is splattered with paint, but it is warm and soft. He smells like fresh rain; his smell always comforts me and makes me feel safe.

"I'm sorry," he whispers in my ear. I hold onto him tighter, needing the comfort he always provides. The coffee adds to the unease as my stomach churns. Justin should be the one I confide in, but something is off with him, and I can't put my finger on it. Guilt eats away at my stomach. Ryan sighs before answering. "I just had a bad weekend, Cass. That's all."

I nod against his chest and then pull away from him reluctantly, putting distance between us. I can't think clearly around him sometimes, and he breaks down barriers no one else can. There is a kinship to him that I can't explain. Something I don't understand. The connection is deep and intimate, but not in the romantic sense. I will never allow myself to cross that line and hurt Justin.

"Did you and Justin fight again?" I ask quietly. I don't allow myself to glance at his face as we walk. "I don't know why things are always so tense with you guys."

Ryan sighs and clears his throat. "We just don't see eye to eye about most things."

"I wish you could get along," I add. However, I realize I don't want that. I can't explain why, but I don't want Ryan and Justin to become close. It would be too weird for me.

This feeling makes me so uncomfortable, and nausea now settles in my already delicate belly.

“Cass, I can’t wait to get my apartment next year. I don’t think I want a roommate. I just...Justin isn’t...” He struggles with what he wants to say before adding: “We don’t have the same values I guess.”

The unease vanishes and I laugh. “Values? What are you talking about?”

Ryan tries to smile. His eyes don’t crinkle at the corners, so I know that it isn’t his real smile.

“Justin doesn’t appreciate things the way that I do.”

I decide to drop it because I don’t think I want to know anymore. I change the subject. “I think we can finish the sets before I have to meet Jenna. We have a few hours.”

Ryan smiles his real smile. “Challenge accepted.”

Chapter 4

An hour later, I am covered in paint, but the sets are done. The landscape we painted portrays a brilliant blue sea, a tangerine expanse surrounding the sun, and the waves are frothy white with gray embellishments. I enjoy painting. I love the colors and patterns we create. Ryan is the real genius with the paintbrush; together we make an excellent team.

“Well, I feel lost at sea,” he jokes.

I laugh lightly and nudge him in the side. “We must finish building the boat tomorrow. We are ahead of schedule. The show is in two weeks.” I take in Ryan’s clothes. He isn’t nearly as messy as I am. I decide to fix that. I sneak up behind him, sopping wet paintbrush in hand. “Ry, what do you think of this?” I ask innocently. He turns to face me and without missing a beat I run the paintbrush down his cheek...cerulean blue with sparkles drips down his cheek and onto his already paint-covered hoodie. “You were way too clean,” I quip laughing heartily. It feels so good to laugh, to be normal.

Ryan picks up a sponge we used to paint the sky...vivid orange. “Remember that you brought this on yourself,” he says softly, eyes dancing with amusement.

I scream and try to run away. He catches me easily by wrapping his arms around my waist. He runs the sponge down my right arm as I squeal before running it down my left arm. I wriggle away from him and turn around to face him.

His face is so close to mine. I can smell his aftershave, and see the pieces of his hair that are saturated with orange paint after our struggle. His eyes are soft and mesmerizing. My heart thuds in my chest and I have enough sense to step back and put a little distance between us.

I take a deep breath. “Truce?” I whisper, breathless after our struggle.

The intensity doesn’t leave his eyes as he stares at me. “For now,” he whispers hoarsely.

His words cause butterflies to flutter violently in my stomach. For Now. What does that mean? Why do I react so strongly to him? I step back even further to put more distance between us. When I'm around Ryan, my brain gets muddled. I never cross the line though; I wouldn't do that to Justin.

We finish cleaning up the mess we made. I laugh when Ryan slips on a splash of orange paint that we missed. "Could this be any more cliché?" I say, trying to stifle a giggle. I love this carefree feeling like nothing bad in the world exists. We exit the theater, and it has grown colder. Before I even shiver, Ryan is shrugging off his paint-stained hoodie and holding it out to me. I take it gratefully, smiling brightly. He holds my theater bag while I wiggle my way into his soft, warm shirt. I inhale deeply but try not to be obvious about it. Ryan smiles at me at ease in his black t-shirt, not looking a bit cold.

Before heading back to the apartment, we stop at the coffee cart in the Quad for coffee.

"Two vanilla lattes, hot, with whipped cream and caramel please." Ryan orders before handing over the money to pay. We usually stop for coffee after working at the theater, and we always order the same thing.

"Why don't you ever let me pay?" I ask him once I am holding the warm coffee in my cold hands. We resume the walk home.

"I have more manners than that," he quips with a smile.

"Your mother raised you well," I say easily. Ryan's whole face changes, his eyes are cloudy, and sadness seems to exude from his frame.

"She did her best, I suppose." Ryan finally says. The silence is uncomfortable for a moment, something new for us.

“Ry, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...” I start. Ryan stops and turns me gently to face him in the middle of the sidewalk. The air is crisp and cool. The sunset makes the sky purple-tinged with gold. Ryan’s eyes are stormy, but gentle at the same time as he gazes into mine.

“Please, don’t be sorry. I...” He seems to struggle with what he wants to say. “I didn’t have a great childhood. My father...” He chokes when he mentions his father, and suddenly all I want to do is hold him close and soothe him. I pull him to me and hug him tightly; he clutches me, almost desperately, back.

I pull away slowly and stare into his teary eyes. “I know all about having a terrible father...” I trail off, unsure how to say more at this moment. Suddenly, I want to open up to him and tell him everything. I want him to know he isn’t alone. “My father...hurt me throughout my childhood.” I shudder and my voice shakes when I say it. I struggle to talk about it in therapy, but it is a little easier to admit it to Ryan.

Ryan’s eyes are wide, and he reaches out and wipes away a tear on my cheek. When did I start crying? He caresses my cheek softly. “My father was a terrible man,” Ryan admits in a low, hoarse voice. He breaks eye contact with me and looks down at the ground. “He hurt all of us...” He trails off softly.

I reach out and take his hand in my own. “They can’t hurt us anymore,” I say, even though I don’t know where Ryan’s father is. I don’t know if he is still in contact with him, or where he lives. We have never talked about our pasts before this moment.

Ryan looks back up at me and his smile returns. “No, they can’t hurt us anymore.” I squeeze his hand before letting go. We resume our walk to our apartment complex in companionable silence. I am overcome with emotion. Ryan and I share a traumatic childhood with an abusive father. Maybe that is why I feel so connected to him because he has been

through the same things. I decide I want to tell him about my brother, Jordan, later. Not now though. I will never make it to hang out with Jenna if I open that up now.

Ryan walks me to my apartment door. "See you tomorrow, Cass." He says softly. "Thank you for opening up to me." He whispers.

I nod. "You too," I reply. I wave and step into the apartment.

It is dark in the apartment. Jenna isn't home. I reach into my bag and pull out my cell phone. I have two missed calls from Justin and several missed texts. Jenna sent me a text just an hour ago.

Can't go out tonight. We will meet up to talk soon. Don't wait up!

Anger bubbles inside of me. Jenna was avoiding me. She was hiding something from me and I didn't know why. I shake off my frustration and see a text from Justin.

Just checking to see if you changed your mind about going out tonight. Meet me at the Pub, please? I miss you. Love you!

I sigh and type out a response. *See you there at 7?*

The response is immediate. *YES!*

I laugh before gathering my items for my shower. I am still wearing Ryan's hoodie. I lay it carefully on my desk chair before heading into the bathroom.

Chapter 5

I step into Dublin's Pub, flashing my I.D. at the bouncer. He waves me forward. I glance around the crowded Pub and then glance at my watch. It is 6:45. I see Ryan sitting at the bar with a full beer sitting in front of him. I make my way over to him and sit down beside him, nudging him with my shoulder.

"Hey," I say with a smile as I sit beside him, shrugging off my jacket.

He turns to me with a big smile. "Hey, you! I thought you had plans with Jenna tonight?"

I sigh. "She bailed on me, so I am meeting Justin."

Ryan's eyes cloud over for a moment, but his smile remains.

"Well, can I get you a drink while you wait?" He asks throwing an arm around the back of the bar stool.

"Sure," I answer with a grin. He motions to the bartender.

"Amaretto sour, extra cherries, please." He tells the bartender.

"How did you know?" I question.

Ryan rolls his eyes. "I have never seen you order anything else."

I laugh lightly.

Ryan is wearing a sea-green shirt that makes his emerald-green eyes come alive. His hair is in its usual messy, gelled state. I lean against his arm for a moment and inhale his clean, fresh scent. I remember his hoodie carefully folded in my room.

"I forgot to give you your hoodie back," I told him sheepishly.

"Keep it," He tells me. He gazes at me intensely until the bartender brings me my drink.

I force my eyes away from his and sip on my sweet, fruity drink. I glance up at the clock and notice it is 7:05. Justin is late. I am less than impressed. He is the one that wanted to meet me in

the first place. Ryan noticed my glance at the clock but doesn't comment. Ryan must sense I don't want to talk about it, and I appreciate that. He seems to know me so well without really knowing much about my past.

I want to speak to him about it. "Thank you for sharing about your dad." I want him to know that I understand what a big deal it is.

His eyes are sad, but he manages a smile. "Thank you for opening up to me as well. It is nice, you know? Knowing I'm not alone."

I just want the sad look to leave his eyes. I reach up and wrap my arms around him in a big hug. He hugs me back tightly. He is so warm and comforting. His head rests against my neck, and his warm breath tickles me. Intense feelings rush over me, so I pull away slowly. I need to get some self-control!

"We should form a club," I say with a laugh. I am trying to defuse the tension around us. The air is charged, and goosebumps stand out on my arms. I rub them distractedly. He is still gazing at me intently, waiting for something. I don't know what.

"Hey, sorry I'm late!" Justin comes running in and sits down on the stool to my other side. He signals to the bartender to bring him a beer.

Ryan slowly drops his arm from the back of my stool chair and stands up. "I need to go and finish my theater paper that's due tomorrow." He says softly. He doesn't look at Justin. The tension has changed. I can sense the anger between the two of them. Justin glares at Ryan's arm that was just around my chair. I want to diffuse the tension.

"I finished my paper yesterday," I say with a smile.

Ryan finally looks at me and his eyes dance. “Of course you did,” he says with an eye roll. “Not all of us are so gifted, but at least I’m not a cheater right, Justin?” Ryan’s voice develops an edge when he addresses Justin.

Justin had just taken a drink of his beer when Ryan questions him. He swallows slowly before turning to face Ryan. “Sure, I guess.” He says with a glare at Ryan, before looking at me in confusion.

I clear my throat, trying to break the awkward silence that descends. “If you need help with it, just come by, ok?” I say earnestly.

Ryan smiles. “I’ll do that,” he says in a soft voice before Justin breaks in.

“Not tonight though; she’s busy tonight with me.” Justin is indignant and it is starting to make me angry. I am at a loss for words, but Ryan manages to answer.

“I’ll text you if I need help,” he says gently to me before dropping some money on the bar for our drinks. “See you tomorrow,” he tells me.

“Tomorrow,” I say quietly.

Ryan walks out slowly, and I turn to face Justin. I am angry and confused, unsure what to say.

“Want a beer?” He asks without looking at me.

I take in his appearance. His clothes are wrinkly, and his hair is a mess. “You know I don’t drink that stuff,” I tell him. “Did you run here or something?” I question.

He smiles, but he looks nervous. “Of course, I did.” He throws an arm around me and hugs me close. He still smells good, but the smell of sweat is mingled with his cologne. “I was late to meet my girl.” He smiles at me.

Justin is his usual charming self, but something is off. He was also very rude to Ryan.

“Where have you been?” I demand.

Justin takes a long, slow drink of his beer. “I had to drop off my Business Ethics paper. He let me have extra time and I needed to turn it in today.”

He isn’t looking at me. Why isn’t he looking at me? Unease creeps into my stomach, my sweet drink sits like a rock. Awkward. This conversation is awkward and uncomfortable, two things I never associate with our time together.

“Why would you turn that in so late?”

He finally looks at me and a smile lights up his whole face. “Because I am a procrastinator, Cass. Not all of us enjoy writing papers, you know?” He nudges me in the side with his free arm, and I laugh at his antics.

Some of the queasiness dissipates. “Well, not all of us can afford to wait until the last minute.” I think about how I need my GPA to remain perfect. I demand perfection from myself. I owe at least that to Jordan.

Justin grabs a menu off the counter. “Want to order some food and take it back to your place?”

“Sure.” I grab a menu and settle on a burger and fries. Justin orders his food and then he starts asking questions about the Theater conference I attended the previous weekend. We make a comfortable conversation, but the entire time something is still bothering me about how Justin is acting. I am going to get to the bottom of it if it’s the last thing I do.

Chapter 6

I unlock the apartment door and step into the darkness with Justin right behind me carrying our food. He sets the food on the table, and I flip on the light.

“Jenna?” I call into the darkness, already knowing she isn’t home. The apartment was empty.

Justin has opened the food containers and is already munching on his fries. “Maybe she went out.” He sits down at the table.

I take a seat beside him and open my take-out box. “Yeah, maybe,” I whisper. Something isn’t right. Jenna has been so evasive, and Justin has been so different. Something happened, and I am starting to suspect it is something that is going to destroy me. I try to tamp down the panic rising in me, but I am struggling to keep it together. I clear my throat. “What is going on, Justin? Why are you acting so strange? Why is Jenna avoiding me?” I want answers, and I want them now.

Confusion clouds Justin’s features, but there is something else too, guilt. “Babe, I have no idea what is going on with your freaky roommate, ok? Maybe she finally decided to go out and get a life. I am tired of her always trying to hang out with us. You and I hardly ever get time alone anymore without people around.”

He said, people. Ryan. He is talking about Ryan. The jealous edge in his voice makes me angry, and I finally lash out. “First of all, Jenna is not a freak! She has been my friend since high school. Secondly, I have no idea what is going on with you and Ryan! You guys are roommates, but you can’t stand each other! He is my friend, and you are my boyfriend. Your weird tension is stressing me out!” I take a deep breath before continuing, the anger hasn’t dissipated. “Stop

trying to make this about something else! Quit deflecting! What in the hell is going on with you?" I stand up abruptly and the chair overturns.

Justin stands up too and comes very close to me. "Don't treat me like I am stupid! I know, ok? I know Ryan is in love with you!"

I gape at him. "What?"

Justin takes a deep breath, trying to calm down. "Cassidy, there is no way you can't see that! He never goes out with anyone, but our group. He always walks you to and from class. He is everywhere you are!"

My heart is racing. My breathing labored. I can't process this. What he is saying can't be true. Have I led Ryan on? Have I caused this? Guilt floods me as I think about all our times together. We flirt constantly, but I never thought I was crossing any boundaries. Now, I'm not so sure. I also don't know how to feel about the fact that when Justin said Ryan was in love with me, that excitement pulsed through me. I force down the feelings and stare into Justin's eyes. He is angry, but so am I.

"Justin, you are still deflecting! You still haven't answered my questions! This isn't about Ryan! What is going on with you?"

Justin steps even closer to me and places his hand against my cheek. "Some guy wants my girl, and you want to know what's wrong with me?"

I swipe his hand away angrily. "This isn't about him, and I know it." All of the fight goes out of me. I pick up my food and walk toward my bedroom. "You are keeping something from me, and I'm not going to sit here and pretend that nothing has changed between us. You are different, and you have been different since I came home on Sunday. You and Jenna have both

been different.” My voice is shaky and trembles slightly as I finally voice the question my mind won’t let me banish: “Did something happen between you two?”

I don’t allow my eyes to leave his. I don’t want to miss a single detail of his expression. I watch his brilliant blue eyes, clouded by tears. I notice the pain radiating from his entire being, but I don’t see any hint of deception in those eyes.

“What? How could you even ask me that?” Justin steps closer to me, and I step back even closer to my bedroom, hovering in the doorway. He stops advancing on me, but his gaze never wavers from mine.

“You’re just different. You’re defensive. It’s not like you at all.” I say softly, finally forcing my eyes away from his vulnerable state.

I hear him step closer to me, but I stay rooted in my spot. He lifts my chin gently with his soft fingertips before taking my face in his hands, urging me to look at him. “I just don’t like how close you are to Ryan, babe. That’s all.” His fingers caress my cheeks gently, wiping away the tears that continue to fall unbidden down my face.

He’s lying, I think to myself. I don’t believe him.

“As for the rest of it, I missed you last weekend. I miss you whenever I am away from you...all the time.”

His voice is so sincere, and vulnerable. However, I know it isn’t the truth. Something is wrong here. I don’t move away or resist when he closes the small amount of space between us, kissing me gently. He leans his forehead against mine and breathes me in after the gentle kiss, a kiss meant to reassure me. A kiss that was supposed to convince me everything was normal.

I pull away from him, but my hand grabs onto his rumpled BU t-shirt for a moment. I need something tangible to grasp in my shaking hands. I need to ground myself now. He is still pretending this is about Ryan. “He’s my friend, Justin. That’s not going to change.”

I see the surprise in his eyes and the shock radiating from his body so close to mine. He steps back slightly. “You spend so much time together. You look like a couple when you are out together.” Justin says this bitterly, but I can’t bring myself to feel guilty.

“That’s your insecurity talking.” I sigh and turn away from him. I set my Chinese takeout down on the edge of my bed just inside the doorway before turning around to face him again. Our eyes lock again. I hope he sees the determination in my eyes because I’m not going to waver on this. “I’m not going to turn my back on someone who has been a very good friend to me, not when we share so much.” I gasp and look down at my shoes. I hadn’t meant to be that honest with him. He doesn’t deserve that from me right now. It is also not my place to tell Justin about Ryan’s past. It seems like a violation of his trust to even think about telling Justin.

Justin’s anger is palpable. “Share so much? What are you talking about?”

I know my response will just fuel the flames, but I can’t help my sharp retort. “That’s personal, and none of your business.”

Justin takes a step closer to me again, raising his voice in response. “I’m your boyfriend! There should be no secrets between us.”

I almost laugh at the irony of this situation, but it isn’t funny. I step back into my room, putting more space between us. Tears cloud my vision as I stare into the face of the man I have loved for two years. When did he become this stranger standing before me? I take in his unkempt appearance and wild, frantic eyes. How long have I been a fool? “Then how come you’re keeping secrets right now?” I whisper before slamming the door in his face.

He comes to my door. I hear his timid knock. “Cass, come on. We need to talk about this. Please.”

I don’t answer him. I can’t. I don’t know what I would say to him. I push my food container on the floor, my appetite long gone. I curl up on top of my lavender comforter, sinking into the downy depths, and clutch my pillow tightly in my arms. Tears stream endlessly down my cheeks. At first, I angrily swipe them away, but after a while I let the silent tears fall without disdain. I stand up and walk over to my desk chair. Ryan’s paint-covered hoodie is carefully arranged on the back of the chair. I touch the rough paint exterior, resisting the urge to grab the hoodie in my hands and inhale Ryan’s scent left behind on the tattered fabric. I cross over the window and gaze outside at the cloudy darkness.

The tenuous grip I had maintained over my life these past two years disintegrated, leaving me terrified. Justin and Jenna. The only two people who know all the details of my past. The only two people who could hurt me. What happened between them? In the morning, I’m going to confront Jenna. I won’t live like this. Jordan would want me to be brave and strong, not this mess of a girl. After some rest, I am going to confront Jenna and then Justin again. I am going to get answers, even if they are answers I don’t want.

Chapter 7

The sunlight streams across my face, forcing me to wake up. I glance at my phone and see that it's only seven. I climb out of bed quickly, determined to have answers. Jenna may have been out late, but she was getting an early morning wake-up call. I throw on my favorite pair of black Nike sweats and a simple, long-sleeved t-shirt covered in faux paint splatters before throwing my hair into a loose ponytail and walking out of my room. I glance over at the couch and see Justin sleeping with the thin, blue blanket we keep on the back of the couch. I stay at his face, just trying to figure him out. I know he is lying to me. I know it. I'm not sure why he stayed the night, but I'm not going to bother him right now.

I cross over to Jenna's door and knock lightly. "Jen, we have to talk." I don't wait for a reply, and I push open the door. The sight shocks me. Jenna is not in her room. Her bed hasn't been slept in and nothing has changed since last night. I sink into her soft bed and send her another text message: "Where are you? I'm getting worried." I press send and then hear a buzz on the floor beneath my feet. I look down and see Jenna's hot pink purse sticking out from under the bed. Panic fills me as I pull the bag out from under the bed and open it. I see Jenna's phone, her wallet, and her car keys. She wouldn't have gone anywhere without these things.

I grab my phone in one hand while cradling Jenna's purse in the other. I dial 9-1-1 with shaky fingers. A monotone voice reached out to me in my panic. "9-1-1, what is your emergency?"

My voice breaks as I try to speak. "Yes, hello..." I trail off trying to clear my throat and force my voice to cooperate. My voice is soft, squeaky.

"How can I help you?" The voice sounds friendly now.

“My roommate didn’t come home last night, but her wallet, phone, and car keys are in her bedroom. I think something terrible has happened to her.” My voice is gradually rising until I am screaming into the phone. Terror squeezes me and I fight to take deep breaths to avoid a panic attack.

“Ma’am, I will send an officer to your address. Please don’t panic. Someone will be with you shortly.” The kind voice speaks quickly, and efficiently. I know her words are meant to be soothing, but all I can think about is the fact that Jenna is missing. Missing. I didn’t know or I wouldn’t have just slept through the night. I should have gone to the police earlier.

“Thank you,” I whisper before ending the call and dropping my phone on the bed.

Justin walks into the bedroom, rubbing sleep from his eyes. His usually perfect gelled hair is in complete disarray and his clothes are wrinkled from a night on the couch. He looks at me and sees the panic on my face. “What’s wrong?”

I stand up, still clutching Jenna’s purse. “Jenna didn’t come home last night. Her stuff...all her stuff is here though. She wouldn’t have left without it.”

Justin approaches me and speaks calmly. “Babe, I’m sure she is just – “

I cut him off angrily. “If you say she is just fine I am going to lose it. She isn’t FINE, Justin! All her stuff is here. She doesn’t have her car keys, her wallet, or her cell phone!” I yank the cell phone out of Jenna’s purse and hold it up for him to see. “Nothing about this situation is FINE.” She always takes this ridiculous hot pink clutch purse everywhere even when it clashes with what she is wearing.

I stomp past him and out into the living room. I clutch her phone desperately in my hand but set her purse carefully on the table. I pull out her wallet and car keys to let them sit out on the table. I examine her purse for other clues, but other than Lifesaver breath mints and cherry, red

lip gloss there is nothing else in her purse. “Where would she go without her purse?” I whisper to the room.

Justin cautiously approaches me and holds me from behind, his arms wrapped securely around me. “Everything will be ok, babe. You know how flaky Jenna can be.”

I wrench away from him and spin around to face him. “I can’t deal with this...with you right now.” I stare into his surprised eyes, and I feel bereft. “I feel like I’m looking at a stranger.” I break eye contact with him and look down at the carpet, focusing on a tiny nail polish stain Jenna stressed about for days. The memory of her sitting cross-legged on the floor dabbing at the stupid stain for over an hour makes me smile. Will I only have memories left now? Will I be left with all these unanswered questions?

Justin uses his fingertips to lift my chin, so I am looking into his eyes once again. “I love you, Cassidy Michaels trust in that.” I stare into those eyes I have always trusted without hesitation and feel myself wanting to drown in those comforting words, but I can’t.

A knock at the door gives me a chance to step back. I run to the door to let the police in and I’m surprised to see Ryan standing on the doorstep holding a Dunkin Donuts box and a coffee carrier. “I brought breakfast. I needed to bring you gifts, so you’ll help me finish my paper. I’m stuck on – “Ryan breaks off. He notices the tension in my body, and he must see something in my eyes that troubles him. “What’s wrong?”

I push the door all the way open and motion for him to come inside. “Jenna’s missing,” I whisper.

Ryan’s eyes widen in shock. “What?”

“She never came home last night.”

Chapter 8

Another loud knock breaks up the uncomfortable silence, I rush over to the door. Two policemen stand in the doorway. One is tall and lean with a very bored look. The other is short and stout with kind hazel eyes. “Thank you for coming so quickly,” I say while motioning them into the apartment. They step inside hesitantly. “Please,” I say walking over to the couches. They sit together on the dilapidated couch. I sink into the comfortable recliner – the only seat I ever occupy in our living room. Jenna claims I am too attached to a piece of furniture, but this recliner sat in the apartment I shared with my brother, Jordan. I couldn’t ever part with it. Not ever. The recliner hugs me as I try to gather myself.

“Miss, unless you have evidence of foul play, there isn’t much to go on at this time,” the tall, bored cop tells me.

I hold up Jenna’s purse. “I have her car keys, her wallet, and her phone. You think she left without all of these voluntarily?” I am stunned. Why don’t they want to help find Jenna?”

The one with the kind eyes speaks quietly. “We are going to file our report. We will search the apartment and her vehicle, and we will canvas the college. We are going to do everything we can to help you find your roommate.” He cleans his throat. “Do you have a photo of Ms. Evanston?”

I jump up quickly, still holding on to her purse and its contents. “Yes,” I say clearly before plucking the picture frame from the side table in the living room. I hand it over to the kind police officer not even needing to look at a photo I know as well as any. I am standing next to Ryan and Justin in the photo. Jenna is on Justin’s other side. We all have our arms around each other smiling for the camera. This photo reminds me that things were not always strained between Justin and Ryan. It reminds me that things haven’t always felt so broken.

I settle myself back down in the recliner, trying to keep my composure. Ryan moves behind me and places a comforting hand on my back. His touch soothes me in a way that I know it shouldn't. It calms me, making me feel like everything is ok. Justin remains seated at the kitchen table, eyes narrowing when he sees Ryan comforting me. I don't have the time or energy to deal with Justin's antics, but I do question why he wasn't the one to comfort me, to know what I need.

"Do you have a digital photo of Ms. Evanston? We can distribute that more quickly." The kind one says gently.

"Of course," I say. I reach into my back pocket for my phone before remembering I left it in Jenna's room. "I can just give you one off of Jenna's phone. I know the code." I pull the phone out quickly and gaze at the photo of the two of us she has as her background for a moment before entering the code. An unread text message from Justin pops up and I open it without thinking about why I am doing it. The text is from 4:30 pm yesterday.

JUSTIN: Are you still meeting Cassidy tonight?

JENNA: Yes.

JUSTIN: Please, don't do this.

JENNA: I have to. I can't live like this anymore.

JUSTIN: It will destroy everything.

JENNA: She has to know the truth.

JUSTIN: Let me tell her, please.

JENNA: Ok, but you have to tell her tonight or I will.

JUSTIN: I don't think you understand the consequences your confession will have on all of us.

I blink my eyes rapidly, trying to make the message change. My breathing quickens. My heart beats rapidly in my chest. Large black spots encumber my vision and I reach out to grab the top of the recliner to steady myself. I immediately take screenshots of the conversation and send them to my phone number before taking a calming breath and staring at Justin.

“Justin, what is this?” I want my voice to sound strong, but it sounds weak to my ears. Weak. Vulnerable. Pathetic.

Justin makes his way over to me, but I scoot away from him. I hand the phone over to the kind policeman and then cross my arms protectively over my chest.

“I can explain this,” he whispers.

“What were you supposed to tell me last night, Justin? Because you told me nothing!” I yell at him. “Jenna was going to tell me today if you didn’t tell me last night and now, she is gone. What is it?” I demand to know. I need to know. Why is it that I think the answer will shatter me? Regardless, I need to know. I need answers.

“It’s nothing, babe. I had a rough weekend and said some things I shouldn’t have...things that upset Jenna and – “

Ryan cuts Justin off abruptly and turns on him in anger. “Stop lying, Justin! Just stop!” Ryan then turns his back on Justin and faces me and tears are prevalent in his eyes. “I wanted to tell you, Cass. I did, but I felt like you should hear it from them!” He glares over his shoulder at Justin. I stare at Ryan, uncomprehendingly, unwilling to put the pieces together in my mind just yet. “Justin promised me he would tell you, but I can see now that he never planned to be honest with you.”

Ryan reaches out and takes my hand. I want to wrench my hand away, but the pain in his eyes tears into me and secures me to my spot right next to him. I wait for him to tell me, for my

world to collapse around me. “I caught Justin and Jenna together when you were out of town.” He holds my hand in both of his large ones before delivering the words that I don’t want to accept, but words I know are coming. “They were together...in Justin’s bed.”

I’ve always known you could live through the pain. Pain can gut you with a serrated knife, tearing into your flesh slowly, but it won’t kill you. No, I know from personal experience that pain is traumatic, torturous, and tormenting, but it doesn’t kill you. There is no remedy, no magic medicine to numb the torture left in its wake. Our relationship flashes through my mind. Justin guides me with his hand on the small of my back whenever we enter a room. Justin gazing lovingly into my eyes when he kisses me. Justin holding my hand and crying with me when I share the pain of my past. Our first date was when he planned a picnic in the Quad with candlelight. That was the first time I kissed him. Our relationship had been a bright spot in a life filled with darkness.

Pain bleeds through you and pushes you to the brink of no return. The ringing in my ears is a welcoming distraction. I don’t want to hear Justin’s voice. The dots swimming in my line of vision blots out his lying, manipulative face. My body is trying to protect me from him, shut down his explanations, his excuses. Anger bubbles to the surface threatening to overtake everything in its wake. I want to give myself over to this anger and revel in it. Anger numbs the pain in my mind if only briefly, providing me the solace to do what I need to do in this moment.

I turn to Justin and in a monotone voice order him. “Get out.”

I withdraw my hand from Ryan’s and slowly and calmly walk over to the door. My heart beats erratically in my chest. Am I going to pass out? I take a deep breath and pull open the door. “Get out,” I say again since Justin has not moved an inch.

Justin hurries over next to me, eyes filled with tears. “Babe, please. Let me explain...” I cut him off. I am not interested in his words, his lies.

“You couldn’t possibly explain this. There’s nothing you could say to make this ok.” I whisper. Anger coursing through me as traitorous tears drip down my cheeks, staining my skin. I want to yell. I want to scream. I don’t want to cry. He doesn’t deserve my tears.

Justin reaches for my hand, but I step away and motion to the open doorway. “Goodbye, Justin,” I whisper. Even though he has destroyed me and broken my heart the look in his eyes burns through me. His pain is evident and even though I hate him right now it hurts to see him in pain. I shift my gaze away from his. He moves past me and walks through the open door. I turn to face him and close the door, but before I can he whispers, “This isn’t over.” He turns and walks away. I slam the door and lean against it to catch my breath. Sobs threaten to overtake me, and I push them down. I reach deep inside myself for the strength I need to get through this moment. Ryan comes close to me but doesn’t touch me. The space he gives me doesn’t make me feel better. It makes me angry.

Ryan wants to explain. His voice is low, tortured. “I’m so sorry you had to find out that way. I wanted him to be the one to tell you.”

He reaches out for me, but I step back. I hold my hand up, indicating I don’t want to talk about it right now. I turn to the policemen, wanting them to leave. They have just been standing there, observing us. It surprised me that they didn’t intervene, but I guess nothing dangerous had played out in front of them. I had just lost my trust in the one man besides my brother that I had trusted with my life; Justin threw that trust back in my face and watched me drown.

“Does this help find Jenna?” I ask quietly. My voice is calm, cool, and collected – everything I’m not.

The kind policeman nods. “Yes, miss. We are going to take this phone into evidence and investigate Justin Daniels's whereabouts at the time of your roommate’s disappearance. We will be in touch.” I nod and show them to the door. They leave quietly, almost too quietly. My apartment is no longer a sanctuary.

“It was eating at her, I know. She couldn’t even stand to look at me,” I say to Ryan without turning around to face him.

“I wanted to tell you the moment I caught them, but I thought they should tell you. Justin promised he would. Tonight, I realized he never planned to do that.” Ryan approaches me again and I don’t move away. He reaches out and takes my hand in his own tentatively. “Can you ever forgive me?” he whispers. His voice is soft, but there is real despair in his tone. His anguish is palpable and reaches me in my waves of darkness. I reach out and cling to him like he is a beacon of light that will save me. I crush him close to me and let the sobs wrack my body. All my strength leaves me, and I cry. I break down and cry in a way I have only cried once before. The only difference is that now I have someone here to hold me up this time. I’m not alone and that feeling spreads through me like sunshine, warming me from the inside out.

I am not sure how much time passes before I can pull away, but I slowly extricate myself from his arms and wipe at my red, weary eyes. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. I’m embarrassed by my reckless abandon now. Ryan has been important to me for a long time now, but breaking down like this is too much.

Ryan tilts my chin up to gaze his warm, inviting eyes. “Never be sorry.” He crushes me close to him again. “You have nothing to apologize for.” He leads me over to the table and pulls out a chair for me. I sit slowly. He hands me a coffee from the container he brought in and then opens the box of donuts and pushes it toward me. “Eat.”

I shake my head. “I can’t.”

He smiles at me. “You have to eat, please.” He picks up a glazed donut, covered in chocolate sprinkles, and holds it to my mouth wiggling it back and forth. I smile at him. I can’t help it. I take a big bite and chew obnoxiously in his face.

“Happy?” I ask him with a grin.

He grins back. “Ridiculously, thank you.”

I stick my tongue out at him and take the rest of the donut from his hand. The sugary mixture coats my tongue. I take a long swig of the sweet coffee to wash it down. “How do you always know what I need?” I ask him. He is attentive, affectionate, and insightful.

Ryan smiles but looks down at his hands when he answers me. “I don’t think we are ready for that conversation right now.”

I can’t stop smiling as his cheeks redden in embarrassment. “What conversation is that?” I ask even though I feel like I already know the answer.

He looks at me. His emerald, green eyes flooded with emotion. “The conversation about my feelings for you.”

I look down at my hands quickly. Warmth envelopes me and my chest tightens. I know I shouldn’t be reacting this way, but I have known for a long time that what I feel for Ryan is not platonic. I no longer have to hide or fight these feelings after Justin’s betrayal. However, I also know that I’m not ready for that conversation. It’s much too soon. Ryan seems to read my thoughts. He reaches out and takes my hand, lacing my fingers with his own.

“I’m not going anywhere, Cass. We have time. I know that time isn’t now and that’s ok.” He squeezes my hand reassuringly and for the first time since hearing about Justin and Jenna’s betrayal a small bit of the weight that has settled around my chest lifts a little and I smile.

Ryan's declaration of his feelings for me fills me with hope. I didn't realize how much I needed that hope until I felt the sweet relief that accompanied it. I revel in the weight of his hand in mine, the softness of his skin. I inhale his intoxicating scent and I am reminded of when I held his painting hoodie up to my nose to inhale after he let me wear it yesterday. He has always taken care of me as long as I have known him. I didn't realize how much I needed him, until now. I lean into him and hug him tightly against me, yearning for the comfort his touch provides. Ryan hugs me back just as tightly and whispers in my ear. "I'm here, Cass. I'm not going anywhere."

I pull back reluctantly and look deeply into his eyes. "Thank you." He smiles at me, that bright, brilliant smile I have been drawn to since we met. We eat in comfortable silence. I don't want to talk, and he seems to sense that. Ryan walks me to class. I want to go to class, but I don't know why I bothered. I can't focus on anything. I leave my morning classes remembering nothing. I decide to head to the theater to clear my head and finish the set designs. Was it only yesterday that Ryan and I worked on the set designs? It seems like a lifetime ago.

I step into my sanctuary. The smell of paint and the dramatic lighting relaxes me and for the first time today, I feel present in a room. I belong here. I don't even bother to change into painting clothes. I pick up a paintbrush and a palette of paints before walking over to the sets Ryan and I worked on tirelessly. I miss him. This should stun me, but it doesn't. Even before the betrayal, Ryan was important to me. I may have tried to pretend that wasn't the truth, but I was lying to myself. I know I should feel guilty. I know I should feel bad for how I feel, but I don't. Justin slept with someone else. That negates everything else in my mind.

My phone vibrates against my hip, and I raise it to my ear quickly.

"Hello?"

“Good afternoon, may I speak to Ms. Michaels please?” The voice is friendly but authoritative. Afternoon? I check my watch and see that I have been painting for several hours.

“Speaking,” I whisper hoarsely. Is this about Jenna? Have they found her?

“This is Detective Taylor with the South Boston Police Department. I was wondering if you would be able to come in and speak with us?”

I clear my throat, but it remains clogged with tears. “Have you found Jenna?”

Detective Taylor answers calmly. “No, miss. However, we have discovered some things on Ms. Evanston’s cell phone, and we have spoken to several people about your roommate. We would like the opportunity to speak with you. Can you come to the precinct?”

I nod before realizing he can’t see me. “I’ll come right over.”

“Thank you, Ms. Michaels. See you soon.”

Chapter 9

Ryan drove me to the precinct. As soon as I hung up with Detective Taylor, I called him. Now, we were in the police station waiting room. I hadn't allowed myself to think about what Detective Taylor wanted to speak with me about. I have a terrible feeling building inside of me.

Ryan sits down beside me and grasps my hand tightly in his. He looks good in his cargo shorts and faded t-shirt. He always looks good. "Whatever it is, I'm here for you."

I smile. "I know," I say quietly. I run my fingers through my hair and pull it into a knot at the base of my neck before reclaiming Ryan's hand on the arm of the uncomfortable folding chair.

He gives my hand a gentle squeeze and then a good-looking black man in his late-thirties breezes into the room. He is wearing black slacks and a teal dress shirt. The shirt is tight against his muscular upper body. He looks tough, but his eyes are kind.

"Ms. Michaels?" He asks, stopping in front of me.

I stand and nod.

"I'm Detective Taylor. Would you come to my office please?"

I pull Ryan up beside me. "This is Ryan Jacobs. I wanted him to come with me."

Detective Taylor reaches his hand out to shake Ryan's hand; Ryan accepts his hand quickly.

"Right this way," he says ushering us into his office. His office is homey and the battered leather furniture has a comfortable feeling. I sink into the plush leather and sigh deeply. Ryan sits next to me and reaches for my hand at once. I fix my gaze on Detective Taylor's desk and see the framed photo of a beautiful child. Her hair is in braids, her face is lit up with a beaming smile, and she is standing in the ocean.

"She's beautiful," I say softly. Detective Taylor sits down at his desk and swells with pride.

“She is my entire world. She starts kindergarten this year.” I smile too but don’t know what else to say. Detective Taylor clears his throat before speaking. “Ms. Michaels, we found some concerning things on Jenna Evanston’s phone. The policemen who were at your house told me about Justin and Jenna sleeping together, but I’m afraid it’s more involved than that.”

His eyes are kind and sympathetic. “More involved?” I ask confused.

“It appears that Justin Daniels and Jenna Evanston were a couple for some time. We have brought Mr. Daniels in for questioning in Ms. Evanston’s disappearance.”

“No, Justin and I have been dating for nearly two years.”

“I’m aware of that. I’m speaking about when they dated in high school.”

It only takes a moment for your entire life to shift. I picture so many things as fragments of memory assault. How is this possible?

“No, that can’t be right. I introduced them in college. They didn’t know each other.”

Detective Taylor clears his throat and hands me a stack of photos. My hands shake as I take the photos. “Ms. Evanston’s parents provided these,” he says softly. These pictures are authentic. Justin and Jenna dressed up for a dance in their senior year of high school. Justin and Jenna smile widely as they hike through the forest. Several others prove what Detective Taylor told me.

“He’s been lying to me our whole relationship.” Tears cloud my vision. Ryan takes the photos from my hands and flips through them quickly, confusion prevalent in his eyes. “It’s all been a lie.” I can’t believe it. “Everything has been a lie.”

My knees shake as I try to stand. I’m still clutching the pictures tightly in my hand. Ryan gently touches my back to soothe me. I can’t process this. I can’t do this. Detective Taylor gently takes the pictures out of my hand. My hands start shaking uncontrollably. Detective Taylor sets a bottle of water in front of my chair.

“I’m so sorry, Ms. Michaels.”

I don’t even know what to say. “There wasn’t a single moment of our entire relationship that wasn’t a lie. Two years...two years together.” My stomach clenches painfully and the need to vomit overwhelms me. “I’m going to be sick,” I choke out before racing out of the room. Fortunately, the bathroom is right around the corner. I push the door open hastily and expel the contents of my stomach into the shiny porcelain bowl. On my hands and knees, I continue to wrench into the toilet as tears pour down my face.

Finally, the feeling passes, and I sit down on my knees on the chipped tile floor. Weakness fills my body and prevents me from leaving this position on my knees in the stall. I keep replaying the memories I have shared with Justin and Jenna over the past two years. How had they kept this a secret from me? Why did they pretend not to know each other when I introduced them? Sure, it would have been awkward, at first, but those feelings would have passed. If Jenna had been uncomfortable with me dating her ex, then I wouldn’t have dated him. They should have been honest with me from the start. Now I am left with feelings of emptiness as the coldness from the tile floor seeps through my jeans.

I hear the door creak open. I knew he would come to me. “Cass?” Ryan’s voice breaks through the melancholy in my heart. A small sob escapes my throat as I try to answer him. I find that I can’t speak, my entire body trembling. Ryan pulls the door open, breaking the lock in the process, and pulls me up into his arms. He hugs me tightly to his chest and I let the sobs overtake me. He cradles me and soothingly runs his fingers through my hair. “He never deserved you,” he whispers against my hair.

My sobs subside, but I still can’t speak. Ryan grabs some paper towels and wets them in the sink. He returns to me and cleans off my face gently. He then leads me over to the sink to

wash my hands. While I wash up, he flushes the toilet and cleans up any mess left behind without comment. There is not a person on earth more caring than Ryan Jacobs and I don't know what I have done to deserve him. "Let's get the hell out of here," he says softly. I surprise him by shaking my head.

"I have to see him." My voice is thick and hoarse.

Ryan gazes into my eyes questioningly. "Why?"

"I need to know why." Why did he do this to me? Why has he been lying to me? I need to know the truth.

Chapter 10

The glass conference room is sterile, uncomfortable, and cold. I sit on the edge of the dented folding chair and wait impatiently for him to come into the room. I told Ryan I had to do this, but now that I'm here all I want to do is run for the door. Justin is escorted in by a guard who then waits by the door while Justin sits down at the table. He smiles at me, so happy to see me. Anger bubbles inside of me, but I wait. I bide my time.

"I'm so happy to see you, babe." He reaches his hand across the thin metal table for my hand, but I pull my hand away quickly.

"I want to know if there is anything else you want to tell me."

He looks surprised by my demeanor, and I can't imagine why. "That night with Jenna was a mistake. I was drunk and she was drunk. It was meaningless...I can't even tell you how much I regret it."

I shift awkwardly in my chair and stare directly into his eyes. "Has it ever happened before?" I watch as his eyes for any flicker, any trace of manipulation. I find none. He is a good liar.

"Never," he whispers immediately.

"I don't believe you," I say quietly.

Justin looks at me curiously and I want to reach across the table and slap that look right off his face. "Babe, I know that I broke your trust, but I promise you. That was the only time."

"That was the only time you slept with Jenna?" I ask quickly.

Without even a moment's hesitation, he replies. "Yes, that was the only time."

I stand up quickly, ignoring the weak feeling in my limbs. I have heard enough. "I can't believe I ever loved you."

Justin stands quickly, panic on his face. “Why would you say that?”

I stop by the door and deliver the line that I know will wipe that ridiculous look off his lying, manipulative face. “I know, Justin. I know everything.”

I watch the shock come across his face as his skin grows pale. I realize I am seeing the real Justin at this moment.

“You can’t deny anything anymore. You can’t lie to yourself either.” I whisper hoarsely, unable to keep the emotion out of my voice.

Justin sinks down into his seat and reaches across the table for my hand. I am standing away from the table with my arms crossed protectively over my chest, but he still reaches for me.

“Please, just let me explain,” he says softly.

I laugh without humor, mockingly. “How can you explain this to me?” I don’t move, but my voice is much louder with anger evident. “What could you possibly say that would make anything...any of this ok?”

Justin takes a deep breath before talking quickly. “Jenna and I dated in high school, but I had no idea she was your roommate. When you introduced us, it just seemed easier to pretend we didn’t know each other than make things awkward and explain we dated. I didn’t want to screw up any chance I had with you.”

I scoff and start pacing the small room. “Screw things up? Justin, you started our relationship with a huge lie. How did you expect to hide that from me forever?”

He finally drops his eyes and stares at the small metal table. “I don’t know.”

“Finally, something honest comes out of your lying, deceitful mouth.” I say this harshly. I want to hurt him the way he is hurting me, but suddenly I don’t want to be anywhere near him. “Where is Jenna?” I ask him.

He looks surprised. "I don't know."

"Jenna just happened to disappear after you slept together, and she wanted to reveal your secret? That's awfully convenient for you," I retort hotly.

"I don't know where she is, but..."

I bring my hand up to stop him from speaking. "I can't believe anything that comes out of your mouth anyway. I'm not even sure why I wanted to see you. Ryan is waiting for me. I should go."

Justin stands and looks eyes with me. "I want you to be careful. Stay away from Ryan."

I stare back at him. "Why would I do that?"

"Because I think he is involved in this."

Justin's face is stone-cold serious, but I laugh at the absurdity of his statement. "Ryan isn't involved in this, Justin. You are the one who has been lying to be."

Justin looks down at his hands entwined on the table. "Are you with him?" He whispers.

I look away from him and stand up again walking toward the door. "That is none of your business anymore. You gave up that right a long time ago."

Justin looks up at me with tears in his eyes, and even though he has hurt me so much those tears hurt me as well. "Then you are with him."

Anger flairs in me once again. "No, I'm not. I don't move that fast. I'm not you. I wish Jordan was here. He would never let anyone treat me this way."

Justin stands up and slams his fist on the table. I jump in surprise and the officer in the room approaches him carefully. "Don't do that! Don't bring up Jordan!"

I open the door before glaring back at him. "You don't get to tell me what to do, not anymore."

I run out of the room and down the hall and the tears I have been keeping at bay fall down my cheeks in waves. All I want to do is run into my brother's arms and have him take all this pain away, but that of course is impossible. I sink down to the floor and Ryan runs to me. He checks me over with his eyes to make sure I am ok.

"That was pointless," I say softly, while angrily swiping at the traitorous tears falling down my cheeks.

"What happened? What did he say?" Jordan inquires.

"Nothing honest and then he brought up Jordan." I whisper and bury my face in my hands.

"Who's Jordan?" Ryan asks while rubbing his hands up and down my arms trying to comfort me.

I feel hollow when I answer his question. "Jordan Michaels was my brother. He's dead."

Chapter 11

I don't remember getting into Ryan's car, but it is dark once I settle into the seat. Ryan carefully shuts my door before running around to the driver's side. I bring my legs up to my chest and huddle against the passenger door frame.

Ryan doesn't say anything for a long time, giving me time to process, I think. After driving for a while, he asks me a question.

"When did you lose your brother?"

I stare out into the pitch-black night. "Two and a half years ago."

"I'm so sorry," he whispers. "The death of a sibling is unimaginable."

Ryan places a comforting hand on my leg. I maneuvered myself out of my huddled position and lean a little closer to him, hugging his arm. "Jordan was the only good part of my childhood. He protected me from -" I stop. The lump in my throat has grown too large to swallow causing me to be silent for a moment. "He protected me from my father when he could," I whispered.

Ryan pauses and then clears his throat. His voice is hoarse, maybe on the verge of tears himself. "I remember what you told me about your father...that he was cruel to you."

I wipe at the tears in my eyes before staring at Ryan. He is staring at the road ahead but keeps glancing my way. "My father was a monster." Ryan pulls over to the side of the road, the crunch of gravel echoes in the quiet car. He reaches out and holds my hand and remains quiet, allowing me time and space to continue if I want to continue. "It started when I was seven," I whisper looking down at our entwined fingers. "He would come into my room at night. I didn't even understand why at first."

I glance up at Ryan and his eyes are full of unshed tears as he gazed at me. I stare into his eyes and those emerald-green eyes give me the strength to continue, to finally let him all the way into my life. “I remember the pain though. It always hurt, but the first time was the worst. I didn’t know I could feel that much pain.” I swallow down the persistent lump, wanting to get this all out in the open with Ryan now. “Jordan didn’t know at first, but once he found out he never left me alone with him. Of course, he couldn’t always stop it from happening to me, but he did more than any other ten-year-old boy could ever do.”

Ryan reaches his free hand over and wipes away the tears on my cheeks. His eyes are damp, and his cheeks are wet as well. I brush my free hand over the wetness and rub my hand on my jeans. “Jordan never allowed himself to be a teenager. He gave up sports to make sure he was with me after school. If he had to go somewhere, he took me with him. When he turned sixteen, he attacked my father when he came into my bedroom. My father hurt him so badly that he couldn’t go to school for two weeks.”

“What happened after that?” Ryan asks quietly.

I shrug my shoulders awkwardly before continuing. “My father told me if Jordan ever attacked him again that he would kill him. I believed him, so I stopped screaming for help. I wanted to protect my brother, so I stopped fighting.”

I drop my head in shame, embarrassed that I stopped fighting him. Ryan tilts my chin up to look into his eyes, and I continue. “I had to protect him. It was the only way I knew how.”

Ryan shakes his head. “You were a child, Cass. You did nothing wrong. None of that way your fault or Jordan’s. Your father was the monster.”

I nod. “I know. Jordan figured out what I was doing. He became more determined than ever that we would escape. He saved every penny he could, working morning shifts at the local

plant before going to school. He encouraged me to take extra classes and graduate early. We had a plan.” I wring my hands together, determined to get through this. “So, for three years we did the best we could to avoid him. Jordan worked as much as he could. He graduated high school at seventeen, he worked all day while I was at school. He wouldn’t leave me alone at home. Our last night at home was...”

Chapter 12 – Three Years Ago

My heart was racing a mile a minute as I stuffed as many toiletries as possible in my backpack that I could. A suitcase had already been packed to the brim and was zipped beside me next to the full-sized bed. I didn't want to look at that bed. I never wanted to look at that bed again. My mom stepped into the room, holding a half-empty glass of amber colored liquid unsteadily in her shaky hand. I knew it was scotch; she always drank that nasty stuff. She was wearing a skin-tight red tank top with a short black skirt. Her body was tan and thin, but she didn't look beautiful. She looked run down, ragged. Her face was heavily made up as it always was. Her red lipstick slightly smeared with remnants clinging to the cloudy, crystal glass that forever served as her crutch. A distinct lipstick mark decorated the top of the glass, and her long fake nails gripped it in a claw like grip.

"What are you doing?" She said in a panic when she saw my bags. She stepped further into the room and surveyed the surroundings.

I don't look back at her again. I closed my dilapidated backpack and glanced around the room one last time. "I'm leaving." I say it boldly, proudly.

She sets her drink down on my dresser, and stares around the destroyed room. Clothes I decided not to take littered the floor. Hangers were thrown all over the room in my hurried attempt to pack as quickly as possible.

"You, you must clean up this mess! Your father will be home any minute! You know how he gets." The panic evident in her voice. My father. It was always about pleasing my father.

I sigh before turning and facing my mother. The woman who was supposed to protect me, but never did. "I'm leaving, mom. He can clean this up himself."

I sling the backpack over my shoulder and walk over to the suitcase. I pick it up and start to walk out of the room. My mother grabs the suitcase to try and detain me.

“Let go,” I grit out, ripping the suitcase away from her.

“Why are you doing this?” she screams out in shock.

I stare at her. “You can’t be serious.”

She has the gall to look me straight in the eye. “We have always given you kids the best of everything. You always have the best clothes, the finest cosmetics, and the most expensive accessories! We have given you everything, and this is how you repay us? Huh? Leaving without any notice, any warning?”

I set my suitcase down loudly. “Really, mom? The best of everything?” I massage my temples with my fingers, feeling a headache coming on. Jordan appears in the doorway and takes in the scene for a moment.

“Cass let’s go. It’s not worth it. She’s not worth it.” Jordan walks into the room and picks up my suitcase. He ushers me to walk out of the room ahead of him, and he follows right behind me. She follows us into the living room. I try to remain calm as I reach out to open the door, my hand just grasped the doorknob when she steps right behind us.

“You can’t leave!” She screeches. “Think about your father, Cassidy! How devastated he will be to find you gone!”

My hand freezes on the doorknob and my heart starts racing. I try to catch my breath and calm my rapidly beating heart. I whirl around on the woman who claimed to be a mother. Jordan placed a comforting hand on my shoulder, and I try to quell the rage that is threatening to spew out of my being.

“Of course, you would think about what he wants. You have always only cared about what he wanted.”

Jordan grips my shoulder more firmly. “Cass, it’s not worth -” He starts, but I don’t let him finish his thought. I want to finish this conversation with my “mother.”

“Now that I’m older, I’m even more confused, mother,” I pause to try and organize my raging thoughts. “How could you help him? Allow him to...” I trail off and stare at her with angry tears stinging my eyes. Jordan pulls me into his arms, but I continue to stare at my mother. She has gone sheet-white and is shaking.

“You always did have an active imagination, sweetheart. Your father has always been incredibly devoted to you.”

I scoff. “Devoted? Really?”

She turns to Jordan and appeals to him. “Jordan, your father won’t be happy you are leaving with Cassidy.”

Jordan releases me and sighs deeply before turning to fully face his mother. “God forbid if dear old dad is unhappy. That is all that has occupied your mind for our entire lives, isn’t it? Make dad happy. No matter the cost. Even if the cost is the innocence of your own children!” Jordan’s voice breaks and he takes a deep breath before moving very close to our mother and points his finger in her face. “Cassidy will never have to see him or you ever again. That is a promise I am going to keep.”

Jordan turns away from our shaken mother and opens the door to leave. Shock and fear run through me when I see my father on the other side of the door staring at us. He stands over six feet tall and darkens the entire doorway, casting shadows on our bodies by the doorframe. He walks confidently into the room and assesses everything with his cruel eyes. Everyone comments

on how attractive my father is, but that beauty is only skin deep to those who don't really know him. He may have been the star quarterback in high school, but we knew he was a monster. We knew who he really was.

He looks at our mother and the tears streaming down her cheeks, our suitcases, and then finally turns his gaze on me. He ignores Jordan entirely. "Where do you think you are going?" He asks in a deep voice, the voice of my nightmares.

I steel myself and stand taller. "We are leaving."

He laughs in my face. "You are not. You belong here with your mother and me."

I shake my head bravely. "No, I don't. I am seventeen years old today. I have graduated from high school. I am legally free to leave this place."

My father reaches out and grabs my arm. He wrenches me away from Jordan side and away from the door. He throws me onto the couch. The breath is forced out of my body at the sheer force of the impact. I don't make a sound. I've learned to never make a sound. He picks me back up and starts to shake me. "You are never leaving me!" He screams into my face. My teeth rattle as he continues to shake me.

"STOP!" I hear Jordan scream. My father stops shaking me and we all turn to look at Jordan. Jordan is brandishing a gun and pointing it at our father. He lets me go and I run over and hide behind Jordan. Jordan's entire stance is protective, his muscles taut and fueled by hatred and rage. Jordan continues, his voice very calm and controlled. "You'll never touch her again. If you even come near us again, I will use this." Jordan gestures with the gun and our father laughs heartily.

"You think anyone will believe you over me? Remember the times you tried to go to the police and tell them your father was the big bad wolf? What did they do? They brought you back

to me and had a good laugh. That gave you a bad rep in this town, boy. Who do you think is going to believe you now?" He laughs a cruel, hard laugh. "You sad, pathetic excuse for a man. No one will believe you over me."

Jordan smirks at him. "Maybe not, but if I go to jail for killing you then Cass will be safe. Either way you lose, Dad."

Our father looks at Jordan in barely concealed rage before turning to be in desperation. "Cassidy, sweetheart, please. For your brother's sake, you should stay here with your mother and me."

I stiffen behind Jordan before stepping around in front of Jordan staring down my pathetic excuse for a father. "Your threats don't scare me. Not anymore."

My mother tries to appeal to me. "Cassidy, darling, please!"

I barely glance at my mother as I turn away from my parents. "Goodbye," I say with finality.

Jordan remains silent behind me as he follows me over to the door. I turn the cool doorknob and open the creaking front door in anticipation. Jordan follows me out of the house and closes the door behind us. Through the door, I hear a loud, piercing scream of pain from my mother. I wonder if she finally realizes what she has done to her children before I realize she isn't capable of such complex emotion. She only wanted to make our father happy. She never loved her children; she co-existed with us in the Hell my father reigned down on us. Not once did she ever try to stop him. Not one time. As I walk away from my childhood home, I don't look back. There is nothing about the place that is worth a second glance. I climb into Jordan's small car. Jordan climbs in beside me. We smile at one another, finally free, before driving away to our apartment we rented a few hours away.

“It’s finally over, Cass. Our lives start today.” My heart was so full of possibility in that moment. I smiled brightly at my brother, my protector. I am so happy to leave this house and the people in it behind, but I can’t help but wonder if I can truly escape the terrors that have always surrounded me and wreaked havoc on my life.

Chapter 13 – Present Day

The sky is dark, and rain begins to plummet against the windshield. The rain matches my mood. Melancholy. Sad. These are always the emotions I feel when I think about my childhood home and the people associated with it. I turn around to face Ryan once again. He is staring into my eyes with nothing but gentleness. There is no pity in his expression. No disgust either. He reaches out to me and wraps his arms around my neck, pulling me into a comforting hug. I allow the tears to fall freely, but I don't lose myself in the emotions.

"I'm so sorry, Cass," he whispers in the darkness.

I shake my head to clear it, and sigh deeply. "I spend so much time trying to distance myself from my past, but it always fights its way back." I pull back slightly, but Ryan's arms stay around my shoulders.

Ryan's voice is soft, a gentle caress in the moonlight. "You come from a traumatic past. I know something about that myself. When the time is right, I would like to share my past with you." He clears his throat, trying to remove some of the emotion clogging it before gently running a hand down my cheek, wiping away the tears. "We can distance ourselves from the past, Cass, but like it or not, the past has made us who we are."

I take a deep breath, getting lost in his words while gazing unceasingly into his emerald, green eyes.

"Having terrible fathers connects us in a way most people don't understand. I'm glad you had your brother to get you through it.

An image of Jordan flutters into my brain the instant Ryan mentions brother. I relied on him so much for everything, and life without him was unbearable often. "I never would have made it without him," I manage to whisper. "I know that."

Ryan nods at me, and then drops his hands to my hands, gripping them gently. “You said Jordan died.” He isn’t trying to be nosey, but he is curious. I can’t say that I blame him. I look away from him quickly and stare out the window into the pitch-black night. The rain has ceased, and the stillness is unsettling. “Yes, my brother is dead.” I stare at my darkened reflection in the glass. I gently extricate my hands from his and wipe them on my jeans nervously. I take a deep breath before I turn to face him once again, not even bothering to wipe away the tears that stream down my cheeks – tears that are always present for my brother. “The day he died was the worst day of my whole life. Nothing my father ever did to me was ever worse than that day.”

It was time to tell him the rest of my story. Time to let him all the way in, and I wondered if he could stand to hear it and if I could stand to tell it. Ryan had endured physical and mental abuse all throughout our childhood, but he was stronger than me. He pushed it aside to take care of me, but I knew that abuse took a toll. I just didn’t know that toll would demand so much from me.

Chapter 14 – Two and a Half Years Ago

Our apartment may have been tiny, but I was so proud of it. There were two bedrooms, a single bath, living room, and an eat-in kitchen. Mrs. Coldwater had rented it to us the previous month, and she had been so kind and loving to us. We were out of reach of our father, two hours away from home. It was liberating, freeing. I smile as I delicately place strings of popcorn on our tiny Christmas tree. The tree lot had thrown it in the trash after it was accidentally cut too early. We grabbed it from the dumpster and brought it back to our little apartment.

Jordan walked into the room and smiled brightly at me. I found myself lost in his smile; I never saw it much growing up, but it was constantly on display since we had moved out on our own. We may have had a terrible childhood, but my brother made everything in my life ok. He rescued me, and I just knew things were going to be so much better from now on.

“That is one pathetic little tree,” Jordan said laughing as he approached me and the tree. He reached out and poked at the strings of popcorn. “Hello, sad decorations,” he was laughing, but his brow furrowed as he took in the entirety of the tree.

I laughed with him, and I wanted to reassure him. “We didn’t want to waste money on silly decorations. Those things don’t matter, Jordan.”

Jordan ruffles my long blonde hair affectionately and I sigh. “I just did my hair.” I try to sound firm, but there is a smile in my voice.

He stops messing with my hair and wraps his arm around my shoulders. “You’re right. We don’t need a special tree. Our independence makes this the best Christmas ever.”

I nod before bumping him with my hip. “Absolutely. I just wish you didn’t have to work tonight. It’s Christmas Eve.” I try to remain upbeat, but I’m sad to be alone on Christmas Eve.

Jordan was the only one I wanted to spend Christmas with, but I know he was trying to do his best for us.

“We will celebrate tomorrow. It will be amazing,” he promised in a soothing voice. I nod against his chest when he hugs me. I inhale the comforting scent that surrounds my brother. He has always been my sun, and I am forever grateful for him. He gives me a funny salute before heading toward the front door. “Love you, see you in the morning.” His smile was so wide, so perfect. He was perfectly content in that moment, and happy.

“Love you,” I called at him as he ran out the door. He didn’t want to be late.

Chapter 15 – Two and a Half Years Ago

He's late. He's never late. I allowed the anxiety to fill me. Something was wrong. I knew it. It was nine a.m. Jordan was always home by seven. I had tried his cell phone twenty times. I tried again, sweat dripping down my neck, fingers shaking. "Hi, it's Jordan. I'm probably screening your call. Leave a message and I will get back to you if I like you." I smile at his silly message even though I have heard it so many times.

After the beep, I finally left a message. "Jordan, it's me. Please call me back. I'm getting worried. Love you." I end the call and then a soft knock echoes through the apartment. I grin. He must have lost his house key again. I pull the door open, smiling widely. "You need to put that key with your truck key in case I'm not home...I stop. Two policemen are standing at our apartment door their expressions serious.

It only takes one single moment for your life to change. The one moment that changes your forever. This was that moment. I knew it. The moment where the entire bottom falls out and you are left to learn how to fly without wings.

"We're sorry, miss. There was an accident." The smaller police officer said in a slow, sorrowful voice. It was clearly a tone of sympathy and my entire life unraveled and came apart at the seams.

My heart dropped out of my chest, and I fell to her knees, pulling at my hair so hard that it caused sharp pains to shoot through my skull. That pain was nothing compared to the pain in my heart though as I gasped for air. Jordan had been in an accident. Jordan had been in an accident! The words replayed over and over in my head, and I couldn't make sense of the words at all. The words didn't make sense. This couldn't be real.

“What happened to my brother?” It was the smallest squeal from way back in my throat and the heavy-set officer knelt beside me, his own eyes damp. He reached out to hold my hand, trying to provide me comfort I thought.

“There was a hit and run car accident. I-I’m sorry, Miss. Your brother didn’t survive.” The policeman’s voice was soft and shaky. The pain grew until it radiated from every fiber of my being. I collapsed against this stranger as my vision blurred, then doubled. Using the policeman for support, I stood on shaky legs before walking over to the side table and picking up a framed photograph of the two of them. They were both holding up a piece of cake. I closed my eyes and remembered that moment just two weeks ago...was it only two weeks ago? It had been the perfect moment between the two of them.

“Happy birthday, Cass!” Jordan smiled at her as he cut into the chocolate cake.

“I didn’t know you could bake.” I said in surprise.

Jordan laughed. “Well, I’m not sure I can, so forgive me if it tastes bad. Maybe it will be so good that I will become a chef.” He grinned at me before his face grows serious. “I just wanted you to have a perfect birthday, for once.” Jordan’s eyes became cloudy and sad for a moment before I threw my arms around his neck.

I remember how happy I was in that moment, and how grateful I was to have the best brother in the entire world. “Thank you, this is going to be a great day.” The forlorn look left Jordan’s eyes and he smiled at her. “To new beginnings?” I said while raising up my slice of cake to toast with his.

“To new beginnings.” Jordan agreed before they ate the cake and they both laughed after they tasted it. It tasted terrible, but to me nothing had ever been more perfect. The

bitterness of the unsweetened chocolate coated my tongue as I slowly chewed and swallowed the dry concoction in my mouth.

“Best birthday ever,” I told him seriously. I will never forget the look of pride on his face as he enveloped me into a big hug.

The memory saturated me as I clutch the photo in my hands finally allowing the tears to seep down my cheeks as the full impact of what was happening to me hit. The other officer approached me, he was young, but that is all I remember about him.

“Is there anyone we can call for you, miss? Anyone else who can come with you to identify the body?” He placed a calming hand on my shoulder and tried to soothe me.

It was a kind gesture, but I shook off his touch; trying to hold onto the memory of the bitter chocolate on my tongue, the sweetness of it; I want that memory to freeze me and protect me from what is to come, but it doesn’t. I set the photo back down on the battered side table gently, careful with the precious memory. I coldness swept through my body, and I hugged myself tightly. Identify his body? This was a nightmare.

My teeth started chattering. I was chilled to the bone without a hope of warmth or sunshine. “There’s only me.” I admitted quietly, knowing my brother wouldn’t want our parents anywhere near me or him. I forced the tremors out of my voice, wanting to be strong for Jordan. “Let’s go,” I said softly, mechanically, as she grabbed my keys from the side table with that precious photo and followed the officers out the door.

I walked down the stairs with the officers, got into the back of the police car, and silently rode to the hospital. Everything was hazy and gray as I tried to shake the mist that had gathered in my mind. I was going to identify my brother’s body, *Jordan’s body*, it was surreal. My vision was blurry, and I couldn’t see anything in front of me. The officers were talking, but their voices

were muted in my mind, and I couldn't make sense of their words; I decided it didn't matter what they were saying. I was awake, but I was asleep. This wasn't happening to me; it was happening to someone else just like I had tried to convince myself my entire childhood. The irony of the situation did not escape me. I was truly living in my own personal hell. Nothing could be worse than this moment in my life. He couldn't be dead; they had finally managed to escape. How could someone have killed him and then took off to finish their joyride? It was a complete nightmare. *When was she going to wake up? WAKE UP, Cassidy! WAKE UP!* I stared out the window, but the shapes slowly drifting by didn't come into focus. I closed my eyes again and tried to convince myself that this was all a nightmare.

I finally found my voice and choked out the words I so desperately needed to be true. "Maybe this is a mistake. It could be someone else." I whispered these words. The officers didn't answer me; I was sure they didn't know what to say. My ears started ringing and I realized that even if they talked to me, I would not be able to hear them. I held onto this sliver of hope as we exited the car and walked into the dilapidated building. I don't remember the car stopping. I don't remember who opened the door for me or how long it took to get inside. I knew that they would both see that they had made a horrible mistake. Her brother wasn't going to be under that sheet. It wasn't going to be him. Life couldn't be that cruel.

The older officer stuck by her as they went down into the dark and dreary basement. I thought that was fitting; the basement was dark and filled with despair, just like me.

The officer led me down the long hallway to the morgue. I entered determined; I knew it was not my brother. After all they had been through to start this new life, it couldn't be him. The cops had obviously made a monumental mistake, but I would smile and tell them that

everything was okay. Then I would go home and wait for Jordan to get home. I would make him lunch, and we would laugh about the mix up and the near heart attack I had.

I couldn't live without him. If he was gone, who did I have? We only had each other our entire lives. I'm not sure how I can move forward as one half of a whole. I finally took in the room; the thick smell of death permeated my skin and stifled my breathing. The coroner's eyes held no emotion. There was not a trace of sympathy, remorse, or sadness. I don't remember what the rest of his face looked like, but I remembered those cold, dead eyes. His emotionlessness frightened me. Did one become so jaded that nothing could stir emotion within them anymore? I gulped and felt the officer's warm hand on my shoulder. I knew he was trying to comfort me, but the only thing that would be able to comfort me would be that the person under that sheet was not my Jordan.

Agonizing seconds later, the coroner moved towards the body on the cold, metal table. The coroner pulled the thick, white sheet back slowly to reveal Jordan's head only. I struggled to focus on the stillness of my brother's face, the paleness of his usually rosy skin.

Shapes blurred around my eyes, and I found it difficult to focus, which seemed appropriate because I had seemed to lose my grip on everything. I nodded to the officer and then reached out hesitantly for my brother. I now knew that God could be crueler than I had ever imagined, if he even existed at all. My brother was lying there, as white as the sheet that covered him. His face looked unscathed, and I gently ran a warm hand across his cold cheek. I had never seen him so still, so lifeless. Seeing him this way, would forever haunt my dreams. I closed my eyes and pictured him as he had always been, my best friend and protector. My lips stung as I pressed a kiss against his cold, unwieldy forehead; the cold seeped into my entire being from

that one connection, the last connection, with my beloved brother. I had to thank him; words weren't enough, but they were all I had.

"I love you, Jordan. Thanks for everything you gave me." He deserved those words and so much more. I owed him her whole life; I know I wouldn't even be here without him. I closed my eyes and prayed to the God I had just denounced from the depths of my grief. My brother deserved comfort and peace, and I hoped he would find that in heaven. Jordan was in Heaven now; with his beautiful soul, it was the only place he could be. With one last look at the boy who had made my life worth living, I turned to leave the heavy, cold room. I leaned heavily on the officer's arm as I staggered out of this sterile, cold, lifeless room.

My black sneakers squeaked and echoed in the corridor as I exited the room before pulling away from the officer, and breaking out into a solid run. The officers didn't try to stop me. I ran past the nurses and doctors; I ran out into the cold winter afternoon; I ran until my lungs screamed for air and I toppled over in the frigid snow.

Taking in my surroundings, I realized she was at the park. Children were playing together on the playground bundled up in thick, warm coats, mittens, and hats. I remembered how me and Jordan would play together in our small backyard. He would hold my hand as we swung together on our tiny, yellow swing set. I remembered my screams of glee when he would spin me around on the merry go round at the park near our house. He had been the most sincere and decent person that God had placed on Earth. Now he was gone, the scream of anguish filled my throat and forced me to lie on the ground, exhausted with grief. My screams alarmed all around me, but it didn't matter; nothing mattered anymore. People crowded around her, trying to comfort her, but I felt nothing. My life was over.

Chapter 16 – Two and a Half Years Ago

The funeral was excruciating. I didn't want to share the day with our parents. They did not deserve to be at his funeral. I remembered the day our father had held a gun to Jordan's head. Would he have really killed him? I had arranged the funeral myself and paid for it with meager savings Jordan and I had accumulated. I didn't want our parents to receive that honor; I knew Jordan would have wanted it that way. I threw a red rose and a white rose onto the casket as it was being lowered into the ground. Our parents were there, along with many others who knew them. Well, they didn't really know them, but thought they did.

No one was there for Jordan, only me. Jordan didn't have any close friends growing up. He didn't have time to be social. Jordan had concerned himself with taking care of his sister and working every moment he could to make the money they would need to start over. The thought of all his sacrifices filled me with guilt. My brother never really got to live his life. Was part of this my fault? Should I have encouraged Jordan to leave me? I never thought about it; he had just always been by my side refusing to leave me. Jordan wouldn't have listened to me if I told him to move on with his life without me. He loved me. He was the only person in the world who had truly loved me.

Part of my soul had perished when Jordan had died. I couldn't be a whole person again without Jordan's strength. Life as I knew it would never be kind to me again. "I love you and I always will." I whispered as they lowered his casket into the earth. I remained at the cemetery alone for a while afterwards with my eyes closed picturing the amazing man her brother had been.

The wind whipped through my hair and fresh snow littered the ground. I sank to my knees and let the cold snow seep into my black tights. I tried to count the number of footprints

surrounding Jordan's final resting place. How many people had come? Too many for me to count. How many of them knew the truth about Jordan and our childhood? None. They all saw Jordan as bad news, the troublemaker. He was the kid who got arrested for beating up his own father. He was the kid who spread scandalous lies about his father and brainwashed his sister into running away with him as soon as possible. No one would ever know the kind, decent person Jordan had been, no one but me.

"Are you okay?" Jenna's soft voice permeated the air. I turned to take in my best friend from home. I had not spoken to Jenna in a while, but I was grateful for her presence now. Jenna had been my only friend at school. We were going to attend the same college.

"Thanks for being here," I said, and ignored Jenna's question.

Jenna wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me to my feet. "Of course, I'm here. What are friends for?" Her face had been so open, so comforting. It was a band aid for a bullet wound, but still, I would take any comfort I could get.

Grateful for her presence, I allowed Jenna to lead me away from the cemetery. My brother's body would forever remain here, but his soul had flown away, and I was glad he wouldn't feel the brutal cold of this late December morning. I thanked God for that at least because I sure as hell had nothing else to thank him for right now.

After the funeral, my mother and father had a small gathering of friends come to the house. Scott Michaels had many friends, and they all came to pay their respects. I looked sickened as I stared at our father. He cried the entire time and all I felt towards him was hatred. What right did he have to tears? He hated Jordan. He always had. Jordan had challenged him like no one else ever dared to challenge him; Jordan had intimidated Scott Michaels and he resented him for it. My mother delicately dabbed at her eyes with a tissue and

pretended to be heartbroken. I wondered if she was able to feel anything for anyone except her despicable husband. Did she ever feel anything at all? Was the tear dabbing really an act? When the last guest left, I grabbed my purse and headed to the door. I had no reason to stay any longer. I wasn't even sure why I had come back to my parents' house. Maybe I had wanted to see it one last time. They had turned Jordan's bedroom into a gym. I wondered how long they had waited after we moved out to do that? I just glanced into my bedroom, and saw it was unchanged. My father obviously hoped I would return. That would never happen. The memories of my father kept swimming into my mind. His rough hands holding me down, the pain that engulfed me when he hurt me in this very room. Jordan beating on the locked door, screaming at him to stop. None of that had faded and it never would. I shook my head to try to clear away the terrible memories that I would carry with me forever. I shut the bedroom door quickly.

"Cassidy, won't you stay tonight?" It was my mother's voice, but I didn't even turn around. I never planned to look at my parents ever again. I would never step foot in this wretched house ever again. I would no longer endure my mother's fake tears and my father's heinous attempts to grasp at humanity.

"I don't think so." I walked toward the front door and reached started to open the door when my father spoke to me.

"It is going to be a hard night for all of us; shouldn't we spend it together as a family?" His voice sounded so melancholy that it unnerved me, filling me with anger.

My body went rigid and the cold that had frozen my heart pulsed through my entire body making me shiver slightly in hatred. I had never hated my parents more than I did at this single, solitary moment. I would never come back; never see them again after this night.

“A hard night for you? Why is that dad? This from the man that put a loaded gun to his son’s head months ago. This from the man who soiled his son’s reputation to protect his own dirty little secrets?”

I had never possessed the courage that I was now displaying. I was standing up to my father, I had to, for Jordan. He would have been proud of me for this.

My father’s face clouded with rage, the only real emotion he was capable of feeling. “I see you intend for that smart mouth of his to live on.” He snapped at me revealing his true colors now that they were alone. He didn’t have anyone to show off for anymore. He sat in his black, leather recliner drinking his Scotch. I hated him. I hated him so much.

I nodded as angry tears filled my eyes. “Jordan will live on in me. I can’t believe you are already defiling his memory the day I buried him!” I let the tears spill over as I raged. “Jordan was my only family, and he will always live on in my heart. He will never be dead; he is always with me. As of this moment though, we are through. You will never see me again, Scott. I am no longer a member of this family. As far as you both are concerned, I was buried with Jordan!” I was out the door before my father could react and all I heard as I ran to the car was my mother’s hoarse cry of pain. She had lost both children in four days. Had my mother finally felt real loss? Did she regret how she treated her children? Was she overcome with grief that she didn’t protect us and love us above all else? Probably not, but it was nice to know that somewhere in my mom’s heart she was capable of real human emotion. I never would have fathomed that.

The Secrets Within

By Monica Cookson

Part Two: Screenplay

OPENING SCENE

FADE IN:

INT. BOSTON UNIVERSITY COUNSELING DEPARTMENT OFFICE - MORNING

Bright sunlight streams in from the long, skinny windows in the small, clean counselor's office.

CASSIDY MICHAELS (21) walks around the large office, observing her surroundings.

A sea green sign on top of one of the expansive bookshelves draws Cassidy's attention.

The sign reads: "Therapy pulls back the layers of skin like an onion in order to get to the inner self."

Cassidy frowns upon seeing the sign.

DR. VORTEK sits behind his massive desk, observing Cassidy quietly.

CASSIDY

Your sign is dumb.

CASSIDY (CONTINUED)

Using an onion implies that the process could produce tears and also compares people's emotional turmoil to that of a vegetable. That's insensitive.

Cassidy sighs loudly before sitting down on the couch, crossing her arms over her chest.

CASSIDY (CONTINUED)

Peeling the layers is the same as peeling the skin off of someone and I don't know about you, but that doesn't sound like a pleasant process.

Cassidy hugs herself tightly as she speaks.

CASSIDY (CONTINUED)

Maybe the person would be better off with those protective layers.

DR. VORTEK

Cassidy, you have been a student at the University for two years now and in my office twice a week since then and you want to talk about a sign I've had for ten years.

Dr. Vortek smiles at her. Cassidy shifts her eyes down momentarily before facing him again.

CASSIDY

Who said it anyway?

Cassidy paces back and forth, arms crossed.

DR. VORTEK

I don't know. I saw it at the store, and I bought it.

CASSIDY

Seems like plagiarism to me. Isn't that something that Boston University frowns upon?

Cassidy walks over to the old worn chair in the corner of the office.

CASSIDY (CONTINUED)

You know, if you want your patients to open up to you, invest in a chair that is actually comfortable.

Dr. Vortek clears his throat loudly.

DR. VORTEK

How are you today, Ms. Michaels?

Cassidy wipes her sweaty hands on her jeans multiple times.

DR. VORTEK (CONTINUED)

I understand your reluctance to confide in an older man...given your history-

CASSIDY

(Interrupts him)

I felt fine until my mother made her weekly phone call.

DR. VORTEK

How did her phone call make you feel?

CASSIDY

(laughs)

I thought shrinks only asked questions like that in the movies.

Cassidy stands up again and walks over to the window and peers outside.

CASSIDY (CONTINUED)

It's almost comical how similar my life is to a horror movie with the only difference being that I don't run down the street screaming with my hair flying out behind me as I beg for help that never comes.

Cassidy returns to the uncomfortable chair and pulls her knees up.

DR. VORTEK

Why would you not scream for help?

CASSIDY

It never did me any good before. No one would listen.

DR. VORTEK

What about Jordan? Didn't your brother help you?

CASSIDY

Don't you even speak his name!

Cassidy stands up, breathing heavily.

DR. VORTEK

Cassidy -

CASSIDY

NO! This session is over!

Cassidy walks briskly to the door, hand on the doorknob.

DR. VORTEK

Cassidy,

Cassidy stops at the door.

DR. VORTEK (CONTINUED)

You will never heal if you keep pushing this away. Anger and denial will not work forever.

CASSIDY

I am not in denial!

DR. VORTEK

You have to deal with these feelings, your anger, before it consumes you.

Cassidy turns to look back at Dr. Vortek in anger.

CASSIDY

I have been doing just fine with my anger thank you very much!

INT. WAITING ROOM OF COUNSELING CENTER

Cassidy walks out of the room, slams the door, and leans up against it.

JUSTIN DANIELS (22) sits in a chair in the waiting room.

Justin flips through a magazine, but sets it on the table and stands up, quickly walking over to her.

JUSTIN

What's wrong?

Cassidy sighs in frustration before grabbing her backpack from the chair next to him and walking over to the elevator.

Cassidy jabs the elevator button multiple times in frustration.

Justin places a comforting hand on her shoulder.

JUSTIN

Cass, what's wrong?

Cassidy wrenches her shoulder away from him and whirls on Justin in anger.

CASSIDY

I come to therapy alone for a reason, Justin! I don't want to talk about this.

Justin backs away with his hands raised up in surrender.

JUSTIN

Ok, ok. We don't have to talk about it.

CASSIDY

I'm sorry, ok? Therapy just takes a lot out of me.

INT. ELEVATOR

The elevator opens with a ding. Cassidy hurries on it and Justin follows her slowly.

Cassidy rifles through her backpack. Justin puts a calming hand on her shoulder, stands close to her.

Cassidy leans her head on his shoulder.

CASSIDY

Why did you want to come today? You have never come with me before.

JUSTIN

I just missed you this weekend. I wanted to spend time with you.

CASSIDY

For the record, hanging out in the waiting room of the counseling center is not spending time with me.

Justin nods.

CASSIDY

I'm sorry, ok? I don't mean to be short, but I like to go to therapy alone.

JUSTIN

It's ok. I understand.

Elevator dings again and the door opens into the lobby of the Student Counseling Center.

INT. LOBBY OF STUDENT COUNSELING CENTER

Cassidy and Justin walk through the lobby hand in hand.

Justin smiles widely and kisses her forehead.

Cassidy and Justin walk outside into the sunshine.

EXT. LIFE SCIENCES BUILDING

Cassidy and Justin are standing outside the Life Sciences building, near the steps.

JUSTIN

You are going to rock that test!

CASSIDY

Thanks.

Cassidy leans in and they kiss.

JUSTIN

Blow Jenna off tonight. Please Cass. I missed you.

Justin nuzzles Cassidy's nose. Cassidy pulls back.

CASSIDY

I can't do that. She seemed so upset.

JUSTIN

All right, I understand.

Justin looks everywhere except at Cassidy.

Cassidy glances down at her watch.

JUSTIN

You need to go and ace that test. I love you. Call me after theater before you and Jenna have your roommate girls' night.

Justin kisses Cassidy on the forehead and then hurries off in the opposite direction.

CASSIDY

Love you.

INT. CASSIDY AND JENNA'S APARTMENT

Cassidy walks into the apartment, shuts the door, hangs her keys on the hook, and walks into her bedroom.

JENNA EVANSTON (22) is sitting on the kitchen counter texting furiously.

CASSIDY

Hey, Jenn!

Cassidy runs into the bathroom and shuts the door. Jenna remains on the counter, engrossed in texting.

JENNA

Hey.

Cassidy comes back into the room, wearing her paint clothes for theater class, pulling her hair into a ponytail.

JENNA

Still on for tonight?

CASSIDY

Of course. Maybe you will finally tell me what's wrong.

Jenna looks down immediately and continues texting. Cassidy walks to the coffee pot and starts brewing a cup of coffee. Jenna looks at her.

JENNA

Cass, do you really believe we will be best friends forever no matter what?

CASSIDY

Without a doubt in my mind. Please, Jenn. Tell me what's going on.

Jenna shakes her head quickly.

JENNA

We'll talk tonight.

Jenna hops off the counter and makes her way to her room. Cassidy adds cream to her coffee and snaps the lid in place.

CASSIDY

I'll be back and ready to go around 6.

Jenna nods.

JENNA

See you then.

Jenna goes into her bedroom and closes the door softly.

There is a knock at the door. Cassidy walks over to answer it.

RYAN JACOBS (22) is standing there smiling brightly.

Cassidy smiles at Ryan, but then her face falls.

Ryan catches Cassidy's unease immediately. Cassidy slings her theater bag over her shoulder and walks out of the apartment with him shutting the door.

EXT. OUTSIDE OF CASSIDY AND JENNA'S APARTMENT

RYAN

What's wrong there?

CASSIDY

She says she wants to talk, but she won't tell me what's wrong.

Ryan's easy smile vanishes.

RYAN

Hopefully she will tell you tonight.

CASSIDY

What's going on, Ry? Justin is being evasive. Jenna won't talk to me, and now you look uncomfortable.

Cassidy wraps her arms protectively around herself, walking a little ahead of Ryan.

Ryan jogs to catch up with Cassidy and wraps an arm securely around Cassidy's shoulders.

Cassidy stops for a moment and turns to face Ryan, leaning in to Ryan and he hugs her back tightly.

RYAN

I'm sorry. I just had a bad weekend, Cass. That's all.

They pull apart, and Cassidy steps away.

CASSIDY

You and Justin fighting again?

RYAN

There is a reason they tell you not to sign a multi-year lease.

(pause)

CASSIDY

Why are things always so tense with you guys?

RYAN

We just...we don't see eye to eye on most things.

CASSIDY

I wish you could get along, so we could all hang out more.

RYAN

I can't wait to get my own apartment next year. I don't

think I want a roommate. I just...Justin isn't...We don't have the same values, I guess.

CASSIDY

Values? What are you talking about?

RYAN

Justin doesn't appreciate things the way that I do.

Cassidy and Ryan walk in silence for a while. The theater building can be seen from a distance.

EXT. THEATER BUILDING - AFTERNOON

CASSIDY

I think we can finish the sets for the production today. We have a few hours.

RYAN

(smiling)

Challenge accepted.

Together they walk into the Theater Building.

INT. THEATER BUILDING - ALMOST TWO HOURS LATER

Cassidy is covered in paint and staring at what they painted.

The landscape portrays a brilliant blue sea, a tangerine expanse surrounds the sun, and the waves are frothy white with gray embellishments.

Cassidy holds the paintbrush, poised, checking for errors. Ryan comes to stand beside Cassidy.

RYAN

(jokes)

Well, I feel lost at sea.

Cassidy

We just have to finish building the boat tomorrow. We are ahead of schedule with the show still two weeks away.

Cassidy grins deviously before globing orange paint on her paintbrush and sneaking up behind Ryan.

CASSIDY
(innocently)

Ryan, what do you think of this?

Ryan turns around and Cassidy takes the paint brush and runs it up and down both of his cheeks quickly, coating them in orange paint.

CASSIDY
(laughing)

You were entirely too clean.

Ryan doesn't say anything, but picks up a blue, paint covered sponge and stalks toward her.

RYAN

Remember that you brought this on yourself.

Cassidy shrieks and tries to run away from him, but Ryan catches her easily around the waist.

Ryan runs the sponge up and down Cassidy's arm while she squeals with laughter.

Cassidy tries to wriggle away from Ryan and ends up turning in his arms.

Cassidy and Ryan make eye contact, and Ryan moves closer to her until they are only an inch apart.

Cassidy backs away, but their eye contact doesn't break.

CASSIDY

Truce?

RYAN

For now.

EXT. THEATER BUILDING AND CAMPUS - TWILIGHT

Cassidy and Ryan walk in the growing darkness away from the theater.

Cassidy shivers in the darkness. Ryan shrugs off his paint covered hoodie. Cassidy accepts it gratefully.

CASSIDY

Thank you.

Ryan smiles at her as they walk.

They stop at a coffee cart outside the Quad. The COFFEE CART WORKER smiles at them when they approach.

RYAN

Two vanilla lattes, hot, with whipped cream and caramel please.

Ryan hands him money, and the Coffee Cart Worker gets right to work.

CASSIDY

Why don't you ever let me pay?

Ryan hands her the coffee, and they resume their walk side by side.

RYAN

I have more manners than that.

CASSIDY

Your mother raised you well.

Ryan's eyes cloud with sadness. Cassidy frowns.

CASSIDY

Ry, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...

Ryan stops and turns Cassidy gently to face him in the middle of the sidewalk on the other side of the quad.

The sunset in the background makes the sky purple tinged with gold.

RYAN

Please, don't be sorry...I...I didn't have a great childhood.
My father...

Cassidy pulls him into her arms and hugs him tightly.

Ryan clutches her almost desperately. Cassidy pulls away slowly.

CASSIDY

I know all about having a terrible father...my father...hurt me
throughout my childhood.

Ryan grabs Cassidy's free hand and holds it tightly while she
speaks.

CASSIDY

No one but my brother, Jordan, was there for me. No one
believed us. Everyone believed he was such an amazing man.

Cassidy scoffs and turns away. She pulls her hand away and wipes
at the tears coursing down her cheeks.

RYAN

My father was a terrible man. He hurt all of us...my
siblings...my mother...

CASSIDY

They can't hurt us anymore.

RYAN

No, they can't hurt us anymore.

Cassidy and Ryan resume their walk to their shared apartment
complex.

EXT. CASSIDY AND JENNA'S APARTMENT

Ryan walks Cassidy to her door.

RYAN

See you tomorrow, Cass. Thank you for opening up to me.

CASSIDY

You too.

Cassidy opens the apartment door and steps inside. Ryan stands outside for a moment before he runs his fingers through his hair and turns away to go to his own apartment.

INT. JENNA AND CASSIDY'S APARTMENT

Cassidy walks into a dark apartment, flips on the light, and pulls out her cell phone. She is alone.

Cell phone displays eight missed text messages and two missed calls.

Cassidy opens the text from Jenna.

TEXT MESSAGE: "Can't go out tonight. We will meet up to talk soon. Don't wait up!"

TEXT MESSAGE: "Just checking to see if you changed your mind about going out tonight. Meet me at the Pub, please? I miss you. Love you!"

CASSIDY'S RESPONSE: "Meet you there at seven."

Justin's response is immediate: "YES."

Cassidy shrugs off Ryan's hoodie and then smells the shirt, inhaling deeply. She carefully sets the hoodie on the back of her desk chair.

Cassidy gathers her shower supplies before hurrying into the bathroom and shutting the door behind her.

INT. PUB - 6:45 PM

Cassidy walks into the Pub, flashing her I.D. at the BOUNCER. The Bouncer waves her forward into the Pub.

Cassidy glances around the club before checking her watch: 6:45. She sees Ryan sitting at the bar with a full beer in front of him.

Cassidy sits beside him, nudging him with her hip as she sits beside him at the bar.

CASSIDY

Hey.

RYAN

Hey, you! I thought you had plans with Jenna tonight?

CASSIDY

She bailed on me, so I am meeting Justin.

Ryan's smile falters, but he tries to keep smiling.

RYAN

Well, can I get you a drink while you are waiting?

Ryan throws an arm in the air to get the attention of the BARTENDER.

CASSIDY

Sure.

RYAN

(to the bartender)

Amaretto sour, extra cherries, please.

Bartender nods and saunters away.

CASSIDY

How did you know my drink of choice?

RYAN

I have never seen you order anything else. I pay attention.

Cassidy laughs lightly.

CASSIDY

I forgot to give you your hoodie back.

Their eyes lock.

RYAN

Keep it.

Cassidy forces her eyes away from his gaze. They sit in companionable silence for a few minutes before Cassidy glances at her watch again.

CASSIDY

Thanks for opening up to me, about your dad.

RYAN

Thank you for opening up to me as well. It is nice, you know? Knowing I'm not alone.

Cassidy gazes at Ryan again. The tension between them is palpable.

CASSIDY

We should form a club.

Ryan continues to gaze Cassidy intently, and then Justin joins them, sitting down next to Cassidy at the bar.

JUSTIN

Hey, babe. Sorry I'm late.

Ryan backs away slightly and Cassidy turns around to face Justin.

Justin is disheveled. His hair is a mess, and his clothes are wrinkly and dirty.

Justin orders a beer from the bartender and drinks it quickly, not once looking at Ryan or addressing him at all.

Ryan stands up.

RYAN

I need to go and finish up my theater paper that's due tomorrow.

Ryan doesn't look at Justin. Air is tense.

CASSIDY

I finished my paper yesterday.

RYAN

Of course you did. Not all of us are so gifted, but at least I'm not a cheater right, Justin?

Justin spits out beer before turning to Ryan in amazement.

JUSTIN

Sure, I guess.

Cassidy is looking between them confused.

CASSIDY

If you need help with it, just come by, ok?

RYAN

I'll do that.

JUSTIN

But not tonight, she's busy with me.

RYAN

I'll text you if I need help. See you tomorrow.

Ryan walks away and Justin turns to face Cassidy fully.

JUSTIN

Want a beer?

CASSIDY

You know I don't drink that stuff! Did you run here or something? You are a mess. Why did you talk to Ryan like that?

JUSTIN

Of course, I did. I was late to meet my girl.

CASSIDY

Let's just order some food to go.

JUSTIN

Your wish is my command.

INT. CASSIDY AND JENNA'S APARTMENT

Justin and Cassidy walk into the apartment, switching on the light. Justin puts the takeout bags on the counter. Cassidy walks over to Jenna's room and peers inside.

Justin shoves fries in his mouth.

JUSTIN

She must still be out.

CASSIDY

How did you know she was going out?

JUSTIN

You said you would meet me, so I assumed she wasn't home.

CASSIDY

What is going on, Justin? Why are you acting so strange?
Why is Jenna avoiding me?

JUSTIN

Babe, I have no idea what is going on with your freaky roommate, ok? Maybe she finally decided to go out and get a life.

Justin paces the room, and Cassidy looks at him with worry.

JUSTIN

I am tired of her always trying to hang out with us. You and I hardly ever get time alone anymore without people around.

Justin stops pacing and Cassidy moves closer to him, beyond angry.

CASSIDY

People? You mean Ryan? First of all, Jenna is not a freak! She has been my friend since high school. Secondly, I have

no idea what is going on with you and Ryan! You guys are roommates, but you can't stand each other! He is my friend, and you are my boyfriend. Your weird tension is stressing me out!

Cassidy takes a deep breath.

CASSIDY (CONTINUED)

Stop trying to make this about something else! Quit deflecting! What in the hell is going on with you?

Justin stands up too and comes very close to Cassidy.

JUSTIN

Don't treat me like I am stupid! I know, ok? I know Ryan is in love with you!

Cassidy gapes at Justin in shock.

CASSIDY

What?

JUSTIN

Cassidy, there is no way you can't see that! He never goes out with anyone, but our group. He always walks you to and from class. He is everywhere you are!

CASSIDY

Justin, you are still deflecting! You still haven't answered my questions! This isn't about Ryan! What is going on with you?

Justin steps even closer to Cassidy and places his hand against her cheek.

JUSTIN

Some guy wants my girl, and you want to know what's wrong with me?

Cassidy swipes his hand away angrily.

CASSIDY

This isn't about him, and you know it.

Cassidy picks up her food and walk toward her bedroom.

CASSIDY

You are keeping something from me, and I'm not going to sit here and pretend that nothing has changed between us. You are different, and you have been different since I came home on Sunday. You and Jenna have both been different.

Justin stares at Cassidy with tear filled eyes. Cassidy finally forces herself to ask the question she has been avoiding.

CASSIDY

Did something happen between you two?

JUSTIN

What? How could you even ask me that?

CASSIDY

You are just different. You're defensive. It's not like you at all.

Justin approaches her as she stands outside her bedroom door and takes her face in his hands. Cassidy doesn't resist him.

JUSTIN

I just don't like how close you are to Ryan, babe. That's all. As for the rest of it, I missed you last weekend. I miss you whenever I am away from you...all the time.

Cassidy leans her forehead against his and they kiss softly. Cassidy is the first to pull away, but still clings to Justin's shirt.

CASSIDY

He's my friend, Justin. That's not going to change.

Justin steps back in surprise.

JUSTIN

You spend so much time together. You look like a couple.

CASSIDY

That's your insecurity talking. I'm not going to turn my back on someone who has been a very good friend to me, not

when we share so much.

Cassidy stops abruptly.

JUSTIN

Share so much? What are you talking about?

CASSIDY

It's personal.

JUSTIN

I'm your boyfriend. There should be no secrets between us.

Cassidy steps away and moves into her bedroom.

CASSIDY

Then how come you are keeping secrets right now?

Cassidy slams the door in his face. Justin stands against the door, arms tensed as he braces himself against the door on both sides.

CUT TO: LIVING ROOM OF THE APARTMENT

JUSTIN

Cass, come on. We need to talk about this.

Cassidy lays down on her bed in her darkened room, clutching her pillow to her chest. Tears stream down her cheeks as she silently cries. She stands up and walks to her chair, where Ryan's paint-stained hoodie is. She briefly touches it before crossing over to the window and looking outside.

INT. CASSIDY'S BEDROOM - DAY

Cassidy wakes up slowly, still dressed in her clothes from the night before. She stumbles out of her bed and opens the door quietly. Justin is sleeping on the sofa. She knocks on Jenna's door softly.

CASSIDY

Jen? Are you awake yet? We need to talk.

Cassidy opens the door. Jenna's bed is made, and her room is tidy and orderly.

Cassidy walks over to the bed and sinks down on it and that's when she sees Jenna's purse by the bed, wedged between her bed and the nightstand.

Cassidy opens the purse and pulls out Jenna's wallet and cell phone. The cell phone shows all Cassidy's missed calls and text messages, along with a few others.

Cassidy pulls her phone out of her pocket and calls the police.

CASSIDY

Yes, hello. My roommate is missing.

Cassidy gets up still clutching Jenna's phone and paces the room.

I don't know where she is. Her wallet and phone are here. Her keys are here. Something is very wrong.

Justin appears in the doorway. Cassidy still pacing the room.

3706 Hillcrest Drive. Please hurry.

Cassidy ends the call and Justin steps into the room.

JUSTIN

What's going on?

CASSIDY

Jenna never came home last night. Her wallet and cell phone are here.

JUSTIN

Calm down, Cassidy. I am sure everything is-

CASSIDY

If you value your life, you won't finish that sentence. Jenna hasn't been home all night. She doesn't have her phone, money, or her keys. When are you going to realize something is very wrong here?

Cassidy leaves Jenna's room and walks determinedly into the living room. Justin follows her slowly.

JUSTIN

You called the police. There isn't anything else you can do right now.

CASSIDY

Are you going to start telling me the truth?

JUSTIN

The truth about what?

CASSIDY

Whatever it is you are hiding from me. Whatever it is you have been hiding from me for days. I know you, Justin. I know something isn't right.

Cassidy steps closer to him, tears in her eyes.

CASSIDY

And the longer you keep it from me, the less I am going to trust you.

JUSTIN

Let's focus on finding Jenna and then we can deal with -

CASSIDY

(laughs mockingly)

Oh, so now you want to find Jenna? You weren't so concerned a moment ago. What are you hiding from me? Tell me now!

A knock at the door startles them both.

Cassidy opens the door and Ryan stands on the doorstep with a box of donuts and four coffees.

RYAN

I brought everyone breakfast. What's wrong?

CASSIDY

Jenna didn't come home last night.

RYAN

What?

Another loud knock sounds, and Cassidy rushes over to open the door. Two POLICEMEN are standing in the doorway. Cassidy motions them inside. The policemen both step inside and Cassidy shuts the door softly.

CASSIDY

Thank you for coming so quickly.

Cassidy motions for them to take a seat on the couch. They sit. Cassidy sits in the recliner, and Justin pulls a chair away from the dining table to sit down. Ryan sets the box of donuts and the coffee carrier on the kitchen table. Ryan then goes and stands behind Cassidy's chair.

POLICEMAN #1

Miss, as you were told on the phone. Unless you have any evidence of foul play, there isn't much to go on at this time.

CASSIDY

I have her phone, keys, and wallet. Where could she go without those things?

Cassidy still holds all Jenna's items in her hands, clutching them.

POLICEMAN #2

Miss, we are going to file our report. We will search the apartment, her vehicle, and we will canvas the college. We are going to do everything we can to find your roommate. What is her name?

CASSIDY

Jenna Evanston. She is 22 years old. A little shorter than me. She has jet black hair.

Cassidy's voice cracks and she looks down at her lap. Ryan places a comforting hand on her shoulder. Justin is angry.

POLICEMAN #1

Do you have a photo of Miss Evanston?

CASSIDY

Yes, yes I do.

Cassidy stands up and crosses the room and picks up a framed photo off of the television stand. It is a picture of Cassidy, Jenna, Justin, and Ryan at a party.

Cassidy hands it to Policeman #2, reluctant to part with it.

POLICEMAN #2

A digital photo would allow us to share it quickly.

Cassidy pats her back pocket for her phone.

CASSIDY

I left my phone in Jenna's room, but there are several on Jenna's phone. I know the code.

Cassidy puts the wallet and keys on the chair and then quickly enters the passcode into Jenna's phone.

Before opening the photos, she notices something.

CASSIDY (continued)

Justin, there is a text from you that she didn't read.

JUSTIN

(nervously)

What? Oh yeah, no big deal. I had a question about a project.

Ryan stands beside Cassidy.

CASSIDY

A project? You guys aren't in the same class.

Cassidy opens the text message.

TEXT MESSAGE CONVERSATION BETWEEN JUSTIN AND JENNA. This is displayed on the screen as Cassidy's reads the conversation.

JUSTIN: Are you still meeting Cassidy tonight?

JENNA: Yes.

JUSTIN: Please, don't do this.

JENNA: I have to. I can't live like this...not anymore.

JUSTIN: It will destroy everything.

JENNA: She has to know.

JUSTIN: Let me tell her, please.

JENNA: Ok, but you have to tell her tonight or I will.

JUSTIN: I don't think you understand the consequences your confession will have on all of us.

CASSIDY

Justin, what the hell is this?

Justin makes his way over to Cassidy, but she scoots away from him. Policeman #1 reaches for the phone and Cassidy hands it to him quickly. Ryan stands in front of Cassidy when Justin tries to reach for her again.

JUSTIN

I can explain.

CASSIDY

Explain what? What were you supposed to tell me last night?

JUSTIN

Cass-

CASSIDY

Jenna was going to tell me today if you didn't and now she is gone. What was it?

JUSTIN

It is nothing, Cass. I had a rough weekend and said some things I shouldn't have...things that upset Jenna and-

RYAN

Stop lying, Justin!

Ryan turns around and faces Cassidy, turning his back on Justin. The policemen watch in interest as the situation unfolds.

RYAN

I wanted to tell you, Cass. I really did, but I felt like you should hear it from them!

Cassidy stares at Ryan as he pleads with his eyes for her to understand.

RYAN (continued)

Justin promised me he would tell you, but I can see now that he never planned to be honest with you. I caught Justin and Jenna together when you were out of town.

Ryan places his hands on both of Cassidy's hips softly to steady her before delivering the final line.

RYAN (continued)

They were together...in Justin's bed.

Cassidy's eyes immediately fill with tears, she sways on her feet. Ryan holds onto her tightly now.

CASSIDY

No.

RYAN

I'm so sorry.

Cassidy turns to face Justin. Justin's eyes are filled with tears and panic.

JUSTIN

Cass, please. Let me explain.

CASSIDY

Explain? What could you possibly say?

JUSTIN

It was a terrible mistake. I was drunk-

CASSIDY

(placing hands over ears)

I can't...I can't listen to this.

Cassidy walks over to the door, and pulls it open.

CASSIDY

Get out.

Justin stands motionless next to the couch. Cassidy holds the door open.

CASSIDY

I mean it. Get the hell out!

Tears course down Cassidy's cheeks. Ryan moves to comfort her, but then stops himself. Justin walks slowly to the door.

Justin stands right in front of Cassidy.

JUSTIN

Cass, please. Give me a chance to-

CASSIDY

(screams)

There is nothing you can say. Just get out!

Cassidy runs her hand through her hair and looks down at the floor.

CASSIDY

Please.

Justin nods. He reaches his hand toward Cassidy and withdraws his hand quickly.

JUSTIN

I'll go, but I'll be back to talk about this.

Justin walks through the door and as soon as he is through the doorway Cassidy slams it and leans back against it.

The Policemen approach hesitantly.

POLICEMAN #1

We are going to take Jenna's phone, Miss. We can use a picture on the phone.

Cassidy shakes her head as if to clear it and pushes away from the door.

CASSIDY

Of course, thank you.

POLICEMAN #2

We will be in touch.

Cassidy opens the door and the two policemen step outside the door. Policeman #2 hands her a card.

POLICEMAN #2

If you think of anything else, or if you have any questions. Please call us.

CASSIDY

I will. Thank you, officers.

Cassidy closes the door and turns to face Ryan.

RYAN

I'm so sorry I didn't tell you.

CASSIDY

Would you have told me if this hadn't happened?

Ryan nods.

RYAN

If he hadn't told you, yes. I would have told you even without this.

CASSIDY

Ok.

RYAN

Ok?

Cassidy nods.

CASSIDY

I believe you. I just -

Ryan comes to stand close to her.

RYAN

What is it?

Cassidy looks at him in agony.

CASSIDY

I just wish you hadn't kept it from me these past few days.

Ryan comes even closer and stands right in front of Cassidy.

RYAN

You must believe me, Cass. The anger, the pain, was consuming me.

FLASHBACK to the pain in Ryan's eyes when Cassidy had mentioned meeting with Jenna and Justin.

FLASHBACK to Ryan saying, "At least I'm not a cheater right, Justin?"

END FLASHBACK

CASSIDY

I see that now. It's ok.

Ryan cups her face in his hands.

RYAN

It's not ok. I won't ever lie to you again.

Cassidy stares into his serious eyes.

CASSIDY

Ever?

RYAN

I'll never keep something from you again.

Ryan leans forward and places a kiss on her forehead before stepping back slightly.

RYAN

I know you aren't hungry, but I'd feel better if you would eat a donut.

Ryan walks over to the table and picks up the box, holding it out. Cassidy walks over to him and opens the box. She takes a donut.

CASSIDY

Thank you.

Cassidy takes a bite of her donut and sits down at the small table. Ryan takes the seat beside her. He also takes a donut out of the box and begins to eat it.

Ryan takes a coffee out of the carrier and hands it to Cassidy before reaching for his own. Cassidy takes a long drink.

CASSIDY

You always know just what I need. Why do you take such good care of me?

RYAN

I don't think it's time for that conversation yet.

CASSIDY

What conversation?

Ryan leans close to her and whispers in her ear.

RYAN

The conversation about my feelings for you.

Cassidy bolts upright, knocking her chair over. Stunned.

RYAN (continued)

You're hurting. You're scared. We have time.

Ryan stands up and walks closer to her and strokes her cheek with the pad of his fingers.

RYAN

I'm not going anywhere.

Cassidy is breathing heavily but doesn't back away. She leans into Ryan's touch, closing her eyes briefly.

CASSIDY

I don't know what to say.

RYAN

Don't say anything. I understand. It's ok.

Ryan caresses her cheek once more before backing away slightly and sitting back down at the table. Cassidy joins him at the table.

CASSIDY

Now I know the secret, but I need to know where Jenna is now.

RYAN

Any ideas where she would go?

CASSIDY

No, at least not without her cell phone, car, or wallet. Something is definitely off here. Jenna never leaves her cell phone anywhere.

RYAN

We will figure this out, Cass.

Ryan reaches his hand out for hers over the table. Cassidy takes his hand and smiles slightly.

CASSIDY

Yes, we will.

INT. POLICE DEPARTMENT WAITING ROOM - DAY

Cassidy sits nervously in a small chair, her leg bouncing up and down nervously. Ryan sits beside her. He reaches out and places a steadying hand on her leg.

DETECTIVE TAYLOR (35) approaches them quickly.

DETECTIVE TAYLOR

Ms. Michaels,

Detective Taylor reaches out his hand and shakes hers firmly.

DETECTIVE TAYLOR

Thank you for coming in. We just have a few questions.

Cassidy and Ryan stand up and start to follow him.

CASSIDY

It's not a problem. This is Ryan Jacobs.

Detective Taylor reaches out and shakes Ryan's hand firmly with a nod.

Detective Taylor leads Cassidy and Ryan to a small office and motions for them to have a seat.

CASSIDY

Is there any news? About Jenna?

DETECTIVE TAYLOR

I'm sorry, Ms. Michaels. We don't have any new updates on your roommate's whereabouts. However, her cell phone revealed some interesting information.

CASSIDY

What kind of information?

Ryan reaches out and takes Cassidy's hand in his own.

DETECTIVE TAYLOR

Mr. Daniels sent a number of threatening texts when Ms. Evanston planned to tell you about their encounter.

CASSIDY

I already saw the texts. Justin lied to me about them, but Ryan told me the truth.

DETECTIVE TAYLOR

The texts between Mr. Daniels and Ms. Evanston date back the past several days and include other interesting information.

Cassidy leans forward in confusion, but also in dread.

CASSIDY

What other information could there possibly be?

DETECTIVE TAYLOR

It appears that Mr. Daniels and Ms. Evanston dated previously.

Ryan and Cassidy both stare at him in shock.

CASSIDY

Detective, there must be a mistake. I...I have been dating Justin for the past two years.

DETECTIVE TAYLOR

I am aware, but they dated in high school.

Cassidy shakes her head quickly.

CASSIDY

No, they didn't date in high school. When Justin and I dated in college, I introduced them. They-

Cassidy's voice cracks and tears fill her eyes.

CASSIDY

They acted as if they didn't know each other. They've been...they've been lying to me for years.

Ryan drapes his arm around Cassidy's trembling shoulders.

RYAN

You're sure? Could this be some kind of mistake?

DETECTIVE TAYLOR

I assure you. It's no mistake. We recovered several texts over the course of months. We have also been in contact with Ms. Evanston's parents and they provided these.

Detective Taylor opens a small box and pushes it across the desk at Cassidy.

Cassidy looks into the box. There are framed photos of Jenna and Justin together. There is also a dance picture of the two of them together, smiling.

DETECTIVE TAYLOR

That was Mr. Daniels senior prom. He attended another school thirty miles away from your hometown. They broke up during Winter break, six months before you moved into the apartment with Ms. Evanston.

Cassidy just stares into the box, shuffling through the pictures. She comes across one of the two of them kissing. She pushes the box away and stands up abruptly.

CASSIDY

I think I'm going to be sick...

Cassidy hurries from the room. Ryan stands quickly to follow her.

DETECTIVE TAYLOR

Mr. Jacobs.

Ryan turns to face him, halting temporarily in pursuit of Cassidy.

DETECTIVE TAYLOR

Ms. Michaels is going to need your support.

RYAN

She has already been through so much.

DETECTIVE TAYLOR

Please let me know if there is anything I can do.

Detective Taylor hands Ryan a card. Ryan takes it carefully before pushing it into his back pocket.

DETECTIVE TAYLOR

I will contact you if there are any more updates.

RYAN

Thank you, Detective.

Ryan shakes Detective Taylor's hand and takes off after Cassidy.

INT. POLICE DEPARTMENT - BATHROOM - DAY

Cassidy leans over the toilet, throwing up violently. Seconds later, she falls back on her behind and leans against the door to rest. Tears fall down Cassidy's cheeks as she cries softly, using her hands to muffle her sobs.

Ryan knocks on the door.

RYAN

Cass?

CASSIDY

I'm here.

Ryan comes into the bathroom, locking the door behind him. He stands directly in front of her stall.

RYAN

Let me in, Cass.

Cassidy stands on shaky legs, flushes the toilet, and opens the bathroom stall. She falls right into Ryan's arms as the sobs overtake her.

Ryan brushes back her hair and holds her tightly.

RYAN

I'm so sorry.

CASSIDY

Everything was a lie. All of it.

Ryan holds her while she sobs in his arms.

RYAN

(whispers against her head)

He doesn't deserve you. Never has.

Cassidy hugs Ryan tighter as Ryan mumbles words of comfort into her hair.

RYAN

I'm here. It's going to be ok.

Cassidy pulls back slightly.

CASSIDY

I want to go and see Justin. He's here, right?

RYAN

I think so, but are you sure you want to see him?

CASSIDY

I have to.

INT. VISITOR'S ROOM AT THE JAIL - DAY

Cassidy sits behind the old wooden desk. Cassidy tangles her hands in her lap and then gets up to pace the small space. A jingle of keys is heard outside the closed door. The door opens and Justin is led into the room by a GUARD.

Justin looks at Cassidy in surprise and then a smile lights up his face as he sits in the chair. The GUARD stands in the corner.

JUSTIN

I'm so glad you came to see me.

Cassidy sits down at the table.

CASSIDY

We need to talk.

JUSTIN

Whatever you want. I promise I didn't hurt Jenna. I -

CASSIDY

I want to know if there is anything else you want to tell me.

CASSIDY

Anything you want to clarify?

JUSTIN

About what?

CASSIDY

You tell me.

JUSTIN

Can you give me any direction?

CASSIDY

How much more are you hiding from me that you are still dancing around the truth?

JUSTIN

Cassidy, what are you talking about?

CASSIDY

I know, Justin.

Justin pales and tries to reach for Cassidy's hand across the table.

Cassidy wrenches her hands back, just out of Justin's reach.

CASSIDY

I know all about you and Jenna.

JUSTIN

Cass, please. Let me explain.

Cassidy stands up and pushes away from the table. The chair turns over and Cassidy reaches down and rights it shakily.

Cassidy turns to face Justin again, tears streaming down her face.

CASSIDY

Explain? What exactly do you want to explain to me? How can you explain this?

JUSTIN

I, I just...I didn't know how to tell you.

CASSIDY

How about when I introduced the two of you? Why wouldn't you tell me then?

Justin stands and starts to approach her, but the Security Guard places a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

CASSIDY

How stupid did you both think I was? Was it all a big joke that you shared? Did you laugh at me behind my back?

Cassidy angrily wipes the tears with the back of her hands before folding her hands over her chest in a protective manner.

Justin puts his face in his hands, tears in his own eyes.

JUSTIN

Of course not. No one was laughing at you. You are never a joke, babe. Not to me.

CASSIDY

Don't call me that!

JUSTIN

Ok, but you have to know it wasn't like that. It wasn't like that at all. We just didn't want to tell you.

CASSIDY

But Jenna had decided to tell me, didn't she?

JUSTIN

Jenna wanted to hurt me because I didn't pick her!

CASSIDY

So, you killed her?

Justin stands abruptly.

JUSTIN

Of course not!

CASSIDY

I wish Jordan was here! He would never let you treat me this way!

Justin slams his fist down on the table hard making Cassidy jump in shock.

JUSTIN

Don't go there, Cass! Stop it!

CASSIDY

You don't get to tell me what to do. Not anymore.

Cassidy walks across the room and wrenches open the door. Cassidy runs down the hall and away from the room. Once she rounds the corner, she sinks to her knees and finally breaks as tears stream down her face in continuous streaks.

Ryan finds her there and sinks down on the floor beside her and wraps his arms around her in comfort. Ryan just lets her cry on his shoulder while he caresses her hair with his hand.

CASSIDY

That was pointless.

RYAN

What happened?

CASSIDY

Nothing honest and then he brought up Jordan.

RYAN

Who's Jordan?

CASSIDY

He was my brother. He's dead.

INT. RYAN'S CAR - NIGHT

Cassidy sitting huddled against the passenger door, tears silently streaming down her cheeks. Ryan is driving.

RYAN

When did you lose your brother?

CASSIDY

Two and a half years ago.

RYAN

I'm so sorry.

Cassidy staring blankly out the window. Ryan placing a comforting hand on her leg.

CASSIDY

Jordan was the only good part of my childhood. He protected me from -

Cassidy swallowing thickly.

CASSIDY

He protected me from my father.

RYAN

I remember you telling me that your father was cruel.

CASSIDY

He was a monster.

Ryan pulls over to the side of the road and then turns to face Cassidy. Cassidy continues to stare out the window.

CASSIDY
(CONTINUED...)

It started when I was seven. He would come into my room. I didn't even understand what it was at first.

Ryan's eyes are filling with tears as he is gazing at Cassidy.

CASSIDY (continued)
I remember the pain though. It always hurt, but the first time...it hurt the worst. I didn't know I was capable of feeling that much pain.

Ryan reaching out for her and then deciding against it, pulling his hand back.

CASSIDY
Jordan didn't know at first, but once he found out he never left me alone. Of course, he couldn't always stop it from happening to me, but he did more than any other ten-year-old boy could ever do.

Cassidy finally turning to face Ryan. Cassidy wipes away the tears on Ryan's cheeks as tears of her own fall down hers.

CASSIDY
Jordan never allowed himself to be a teenager. He gave up sports to make sure he was with me after school. If he had to go somewhere, he took me with him. When he turned sixteen, he attacked my father when he came into my room. I was thirteen. My father hurt him so badly he couldn't go to school for two weeks.

Ryan wipes away the tears on Cassidy's cheeks and caresses her face gently, listening intently.

CASSIDY
Later that night, my father told me if Jordan did that again he would kill him. I believed him, so I stopped screaming for help. I wanted to protect my brother, so I stopped fighting.

Cassidy drops her head in shame, but then looks up into Ryan's eyes pleading with him to understand.

CASSIDY
I had to protect him. It was the only way I knew how.

RYAN

You were a child, Cass. None of that was your fault or Jordan's.

Cassidy nods her head.

CASSIDY

I know it was my father's fault. Jordan figured out what I was doing and he became more determined than ever that we would escape. He saved every penny he could, working morning shifts at the local plant before school. He encouraged me to take extra classes, so I could graduate at sixteen. We had a plan.

Cassidy allows the tears to stream unchecked down her cheeks, while Ryan leans forward intently.

CASSIDY

(Continued...)

So, for three more years we did the best we could to avoid him. Jordan worked as much as he could. When he graduated high school at seventeen, he worked all day while I was at school. He wouldn't leave me alone at home. Our last night at home was...

FLASHBACK:

INT. CASSIDY'S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM - DAY

Cassidy hurriedly shoves things in a small bag. A suitcase is already packed to the brim and zipped up on the bed beside her. CASSIDY'S MOM, LORI (42), walks into the room with a half empty drink in one hand. Lori looks at Cassidy in shock.

LORI

What are you doing?

Cassidy doesn't even look at her mother and zips up her dilapidated backpack.

CASSIDY

I'm leaving.

Lori steps further into the room and sets her drink down on the dresser. Lori surveys the state of the room in dismay. There are clothes and items strewn all over the floor.

LORI

You have to clean up this mess. Your father will be home any minute!

CASSIDY

I'm leaving, mother. He can clean it himself.

Cassidy picks up her backpack and slings it over her shoulder. She picks up the suitcase and carries it at her side and starts to walk toward her bedroom door. Lori grabs at the suitcase.

CASSIDY

Let go.

LORI

Why are you doing this?

CASSIDY

(disbelief)

You can't be serious.

LORI

We have always given you kids the best of everything, and this is how you repay us? Huh? Leaving without any notice, any warning?

CASSIDY

The best of everything? Really, mom?

Cassidy drops her suitcase at her side for a moment, massaging her temples with her fingers. JORDAN (19) appears in the doorway. Jordan surveys the scene with his eyes.

JORDAN

Cass, let's go. It's not worth it.

Jordan gives Lori a look of disdain before picking up Cassidy's suitcase and following Cassidy out of the room. Lori follows them into the living room.

LORI

You can't leave!

Cassidy's hand is on the doorknob to leave the house with Jordan right behind her.

LORI

Think of your father, Cass. How devastated he will be to find you gone!

Cassidy's hand freezes in place. She starts breathing rapidly. Cassidy whirls around on her mother. Jordan places a comforting hand on Cassidy's shoulder with a look of rage at Lori.

CASSIDY

Of course, you would think of what he wants. You always have.

JORDAN

Cass, it's not worth-

CASSIDY

Now that I'm older, I'm even more confused, mother.

LORI

Confused?

CASSIDY

How you could help him...allow him to...

Cassidy can't go on and the sob finally escapes her. Jordan pulls her into his arms. Lori is standing still, her face sheet white.

LORI

Cass, you always did have an active imagination. Your father has always been incredibly devoted to you.

Cassidy turns away from her.

LORI

Jordan? Your father won't be happy you are leaving with Cassidy.

Jordan finally faces his mother, features contorted in rage.

JORDAN

God forbid if dad is unhappy. That's what has occupied your mind our entire lives, isn't it? Make dad happy. No matter the cost. Even if the cost is the innocence of YOUR OWN CHILDREN!

Lori is taken aback by Jordan screaming at her. Jordan comes very close to her face.

JORDAN

Cassidy will never have to see him or YOU again.

Jordan turns back around and Cassidy opens the door only to see her father, MITCHELL (44), darkening the doorway with a look of disdain already filling his face.

Mitchell walks into the room and takes in the situation. He notices the suitcases, Lori's tears, and then takes in Jordan and Cassidy in the doorway.

MITCHELL

Where do you think you are going?

CASSIDY

We're leaving.

MITCHELL

No you're not. You belong here with your mother and me.

CASSIDY

I am seventeen years old today. I finished my high school degree requirements two weeks ago. I'm legally free to leave now.

Mitchell reaches out and grabs Cassidy's arm. He wrenches her away from the door and throws her on the couch. Cassidy doesn't make a sound. Mitchell picks her back up and starts to shake her.

MITCHELL

You're never leaving me!

Jordan

STOP!

Mitchell turns and sees Jordan pointing a gun at him. He drops his arms and Cassidy races around him to stand behind Jordan. Jordan's entire stance is protective. Rage emanates from his feature.

JORDAN

(Deadly calm, but teary eyes)

You'll never touch her ever again. If you even come near us, I'll use this.

Jordan gestures with the gun. Mitchell laughs at him.

MITCHELL

You think anyone will believe you over me? Remember the times you tried to go to the police? That gave you the bad rep in this town, boy.

Mitchell laughs again, a hard, cruel laugh.

MITCHELL

You sad, pathetic, miserable excuse for a man. No one will believe you over me.

JORDAN

Maybe not, but if I go to jail for killing you Cass will be safe. Either way, you lose.

Mitchell stares at Jordan enraged, but doesn't move.

MITCHELL

Sweetheart, please. For your brother's sake, you should stay.

Cassidy stiffens behind her brother. She stands up straight and steps around Jordan to stand in front of him.

CASSIDY

Your threats don't scare me. Not anymore.

LORI

Cassidy, darling! Please!

Cassidy barely glances at her mother.

CASSIDY

Goodbye.

Jordan remains silent and follows Cassidy out of the house, shutting the door behind them.

There is a loud piercing scream of pain from Lori as Cassidy shuts the door.

END FLASHBACK

INT. RYAN'S CAR - NIGHT

CASSIDY MICHAELS (22) and RYAN JACOBS (23) are together in Ryan's car. Cassidy has just shared with Ryan the day she and her brother moved out of the house.

Ryan reaches out and wraps comforting arms around her shoulders. Cassidy sinks into them, leaning forward.

RYAN

I'm so sorry, Cass.

CASSIDY

I spend so much time trying to distance myself from my past, but it always fights its way back. Cassidy pulls back slightly from the hug, but Ryan's arm stays around her shoulders.

RYAN

You come from a traumatic past. I know something about that myself. When the time is right, I would like to share my past with you.

Ryan clears his throat and runs a hand gently down Cassidy's cheek, wiping away the tears.

RYAN (CONT'D)

We can distance ourselves from the past, Cass, but like it or not, the past has made us who we are. Having terrible fathers connects us in a way most people don't understand. I'm glad you had your brother to get you through it.

Cassidy leans into Ryan's hand and stares into his eyes.

CASSIDY

I never would have made it without him. I know that.

RYAN

You said Jordan died.

Cassidy looks away quickly and turns to the window, staring out into the pitch-black night.

CASSIDY

Yes, my brother's dead.

Cassidy wipes her hands on her jeans, and Ryan reaches out and takes her hand firmly in his. Cassidy turns to face him, with tears streaming down her face.

CASSIDY (CONT'D)

The day he died was the worst day of my whole life. Nothing my father ever did to me was ever worse than that day.

FLASHBACK

INT. CASSIDY and JORDAN'S APARTMENT - TWO AND A HALF YEARS AGO - DAY

Cassidy smiles as she places strings of popcorn around their tiny Christmas tree. JORDAN (23) enters the room and smiles at Cassidy.

JORDAN

That is one pathetic little tree.

CASSIDY

We didn't want to waste money on something that didn't matter much, remember?

Jordan comes up beside Cassidy and ruffles her hair affectionately.

JORDAN

We don't need a special tree. Our independence is what makes this the best Christmas ever.

CASSIDY

Absolutely. I just wish you didn't have to work tonight.
It's Christmas Eve.

Jordan sighs before pulling Cassidy into his arms and hugging her tightly.

CASSIDY (CONT'D)

I hate that you're working in a factory. You should be going to college.

Jordan shakes his head and pulls away slightly.

JORDAN

You are the brainiac, sis. Not me. College stopped being something I wanted a long time ago. Besides, that factory job is going to help us put you through college. Classes start in a few weeks.

CASSIDY

You've sacrificed so much for me.

JORDAN

For us. I love you, Cass. It's time for our lives to finally start.

Cassidy hugs him again tightly.

CASSIDY

I still think you should call in sick tonight.

Jordan laughs loudly before pulling away and walking over to the closet to get his coat.

JORDAN

Not a chance, sis. We get double time for working tonight. We can spend all day tomorrow together before we both have to work again on Monday.

CASSIDY

It's going to be the best Christmas ever!

JORDAN

I believe I already said that.

Cassidy walks quickly over to him and shoves him gently.

CASSIDY

Don't forget your lunch, J.

JORDAN

Never.

Jordan gives her a kiss on the cheek, grabs his bagged lunch on the counter, and salutes her as he is walking out the door.

JORDAN

I can't wait to give you your present in the morning.

CASSIDY

You are going to love yours.

JORDAN

Later, sis.

CASSIDY

See you tonight, J.

INT. JORDAN AND CASSIDY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Cassidy is pacing back and forth in the kitchen. She tries Jordan's cell phone again, but this time it goes directly to voicemail.

CASSIDY

He's two hours late.

Cassidy paces some more before a timid knock on the door startles her. She runs to the door and opens it quickly.

CASSIDY

Where have you been?

Cassidy stops when she notices two POLICEMEN standing outside her apartment door. POLICEMAN #1 steps forward a little.

POLICEMAN #1

Good evening, Miss. Are you Ms. Michaels?

CASSIDY

May I help you?

POLICEMAN #1

May we come in Ms. Michaels?

Cassidy steps aside to allow the offices to enter her apartment. They step in quickly. Cassidy looks, disappointment showing on her face.

CASSIDY

I'm sorry for the greeting. I thought you were my brother. He's late. I've been waiting for him to come home.

The policemen wait for Cassidy to turn around and face them. Grave looks on their faces, and Cassidy is alarmed.

POLICEMAN #2

Ms. Michaels, your brother has been in an accident.

Cassidy stands in shock for a moment before her knees buckle and she falls forward. POLICEMAN #1 catches her before she hits the floor.

CASSIDY

Is he ok?

POLICEMAN #1

Miss, let me help you sit down.

Cassidy grabs Policeman #1's arm quickly, squeezing it tightly.

CASSIDY

Is he ok?

Policeman #1 helps Cassidy sit on the couch. He sits beside her and holds her hand in comfort. Policeman #2 removes his hat.

POLICEMAN #2

It was a hit and run, miss. Your brother...didn't make it. I'm so sorry.

Cassidy pushes the policeman away and stands up quickly.

CASSIDY

You're mistaken. Jordan was an excellent driver. He would never--

POLICEMAN #1

--Miss, the hit and run driver caused the accident. We'll find the person who did this. I promise you.

Policeman #1 wipes at his eyes and looks away from Cassidy. Cassidy yanks her arm away from the policeman and puts her head in her hands, rocking slowly.

CASSIDY

(whispers)

It's not him.

POLICEMAN #2

Ms. Michaels. We believe it is. We need you to come down to the--

CASSIDY

--Where?

Policeman #1 puts a comforting arm around her shoulders.

POLICEMAN #2

We need you to come down to the morgue to identify your brother's body.

Cassidy nods before grabbing her coat and bag quickly. She picks up her keys off the coffee table.

CASSIDY

I'll need you to give me a ride. Jordan has the car. You'll see that this is all a huge misunderstanding. Jordan can't be gone.

Cassidy walks hurriedly to the door and the two policemen follow her.

POLICEMAN #1

We'll give you a ride and then we will bring you back home.
Is there anyone else we can call to come with you, miss? A
parent? Friend?

Cassidy shakes her head quickly before locking the door behind
them.

CASSIDY

No, it's just Jordan and me. There's no one else to call...

EXT. CASSIDY AND JORDAN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Cassidy is wild-eyed as she follows the policemen to their car.
She clenches and unclenches her fists before running both hands
through her hair, hurriedly. Policeman #1 opens the door for
her and she slides inside quickly. Breathing heavily Cassidy
stares out the window. Cassidy's breath fogs up the window in
the police car.

CASSIDY

It's all just a mistake. You'll see.

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - NIGHT

Cassidy walks down the dimly lit hallway, the two policemen at
her sides. They reach the door labeled "Morgue" and Cassidy
stops abruptly.

CASSIDY

You'll see. This is all just a big misunderstanding.

Policeman #1 ushers her forward as Policeman #2 opens the door
for her.

INT. MORGUE - NIGHT

There is a single metal table in the middle of the room. The
contents of the table are covered by a white sheet.

Cassidy freezes once again in the doorway before straightening up and approaching the table. The policemen stay by her side. Policeman #1 is teary-eyed and wipes at his eyes discreetly.

POLICEMAN #1

Ms. Michaels. We just need your positive identification and then we will take you home.

Cassidy nods before taking a deep breath. Policeman #2 gingerly lowers the sheet to reveal Jordan's head only. Cassidy's knees buckle as she stares in horror at her brother's pale face.

CASSIDY
(in agony)

No.

POLICEMAN #1

We are so sorry -

CASSIDY
(screams)

NO! NO! NO! JORDAN!

Cassidy sobs hysterically as she drops to her knees beside the table.

POLICEMAN #2

Is there anyone we can call?

Cassidy stands shakily and leans over the table. She hesitantly reaches her hand out to touch Jordan's pale cheek. She pulls her hand back immediately at the coldness of his skin.

CASSIDY
(whispers)

No, I'm alone.

Policeman #2 covers Jordan's face once again with the white sheet. Cassidy stands stoically beside the table.

CASSIDY
May I have a moment alone, please?

The policemen quickly walk out of the room. Cassidy circles the table before placing her hand on Jordan's chest.

CASSIDY

I love you, J.

CASSIDY

Thank you for protecting me and loving me. I promise I won't let you down.

Cassidy pulls the sheet back for a moment before leaning over and planting a kiss on Jordan's forehead. As soon as her lips touch his icy skin, the tears stream down her face once again.

CASSIDY

Goodbye for now.

Cassidy covers his face gingerly once more before turning and walking out of the room.

END FLASHBACK