

PROLOGUE

I wasn't a fool.

I knew what was being said about me, if the wary side glances and stifled giggles were anything to go on. But I could hear them now and, dear Lord, it made the words cut so much deeper.

"Aubrey, I feel so bad for you."

"Talk about losing the housing lottery," another chimed in.

My roommate let out a weary sigh for sympathy and then practically whimpered, "I'm, like, afraid to go to sleep at night. It's so eerie. She's like a character right out of *The Walking Dead*."

I could just imagine Aubrey in that moment, wide-eyed, drawing everyone in around the campfire—like she was gearing up to spook them with the really gruesome part of the ghost story. I could hear her damn gum snapping from the other side of the door, and could easily conjure up a visual of her mouth moving lazily, chewing in her very own irritating way, like a dumb effing billy goat.

"I don't think she's washed her hair more than two times since we've been here."

"Gross!" both of her minions shrieked in unison before they all broke out in a cruel fit of laughter.

"I don't want to be mean," she insisted. *Oh come on, Aubrey, sure you do.* "But Carolyn is just so...odd. This isn't what I signed up for."

I pulled a few long, stringy, brown strands in front of my face and examined them, running them between my fingers. I'd been away at school for nearly five weeks now. Washed my hair twice? No, I could definitely recall three, possibly four washings.

I crossed the room and stood before the full-length mirror, looking at this girl for the first time in God knows how long. *Who are you?* I took in the gaunt, hollow cheeks, the wan complexion, the cracked, chapped lips and the shapeless clothes that hung off my too-thin frame.

This was what you wanted, dummy...you wanted to get as far away from there as possible, remember? I do remember a burning need to escape. It drove me to follow through on my plan, even though I knew I wasn't on the most stable ground, mental health-wise. But now, standing in my room alone, listening to all of them talk about me as if I was some sort of freak? It made me miss home desperately

I missed my mother and father. I missed the way they took care of me, surrounded me in a cocoon of safety, love and care. I missed my little brother, Tommy, although at some point during the past six months he'd gone from idolizing his older sister to looking at me with a queasy sense of both fear and embarrassment.

I looked around this room. My side was barren, prison-cell chic, while Aubrey's side looked as if some bubble gum, sunshine, sparkle and happiness-inspired apparatus had crop-dusted over her belongings. Aside from the black satin comforter, which I can only assume was meant to communicate to her male suitors that she had a dark and naughty side, most everything was pink—hot, nauseating pink. She dressed pretty well but her interior decorating instincts were for shit.

The wall above her bed had a massive collage of photos, each one picked to highlight how beautiful, popular and perfect she was. Since I didn't spend much time outside of the room after classes, I often found myself studying the pictures. Handsome boys with athletic builds draped their arms around Aubrey, gazing at her, wanting her. A group of girlfriends, dressed in cheerleading uniforms, hamming it up for the camera. There was a prom picture too. A boy who looked like he was straight out of central casting for drop-dead gorgeous homecoming king-type was dressed in a fitted tux, his eyes fixed on the ample cleavage spilling out of Aubrey's hot pink bodice. *Believe it or not, Aubrey, you and I probably would have been besties in high school.* The thought tasted bitter and it stung, like bile rising up my throat.

Really, Aubrey was as much of an anomaly around here as I was. I mean, this was a seriously competitive school—one of the hardest to gain admittance into on the East Coast. There weren't many head cheerleader-Barbie types like her around. Most of the students here were sophisticated, albeit bookish types. You had your hipsters, your artsy kids, intelligent jocks and loners also. I guess I fit into that last segment of the campus population. But I'll be honest, even among *that* group I was more seriously messed up than anyone else I observed from my perch, overlooking the quaint courtyard from my second story window.

We couldn't have been more mismatched as roommates even if someone was intentionally trying to pair freshmen up to ensure certain misery. I was now awkward, quiet and easily rattled. Aubrey, in contrast, was socially outgoing, bubbly—a natural and skilled networker. While I had not managed so much as a “hello” to one other human in the past five weeks, Aubrey had secured herself an entire circle of BFFs and she'd had no less than three romantic encounters.

I was already in bed by the time she'd come back to the room, giggling and buzzing with these boys because, no, I hadn't made it to one party. I therefore had the pleasure of listening to Aubrey and her paramours bump, grind and moan. It was excruciating. Not because I was a prude or anything, but because it made it even more obvious to me that I was, in fact, an absolute weirdo.

One of those nights I overheard a semi-thoughtful boy whisper to Aubrey, “Yeah? You wanna do it with your roommate right there?”

Tipsy Aubrey giggled, shucking off her jeans. “Who cares? It's like I don't even have a roommate.”

Exactly.

I wasn't even here.

I didn't exist.

I remember the screaming—it went on and on, ragged and rage-filled. A welcome silence followed by the relentless pounding of fists against a door. Sparkling bits and pieces—the shards of glass refracting light in a really beautiful way. I remember red, so much red. Red splattered and smeared across every square inch of that damn photo collage.

I didn't remember the sirens or the police restraining me.

I didn't remember what I had done.

They filled me in on all that later.

Chapter One

Two years ago...

Jeremy

They'd all been talking shit before I even showed up for the first day of try-outs. No one walked onto varsity as a junior. They'd all paid their dues freshman and sophomore years. They'd all earned their positions...whatever. I *was* walking on and they all knew it.

I was seventeen, a full year older than most of the other juniors, thanks to being held back in the second grade. I was already well over six feet tall and I was *not* lanky or scrawny by any means. I'd been shaving since eighth grade and by now, was easily mistaken for being nineteen or twenty.

The decision to come to Westerly High was not mine. Apparently, my specialized private school tuition cost the state upwards of sixty-thousand a year. During my last annual review, the school district administrators, much like a prison parole board, deemed I was now fit to re-enter society. Academically and socially, I was considered rehabilitated.

I was furious...scared really. I didn't want to go back to a place where I knew every day would be a struggle. My teachers reassured me that I was ready. I was doubtful.

The one and only incentive I had for returning was football.

First morning of practice and the August sun is beating down on me as soon as I leave the air conditioned cocoon of my truck. My '97 Chevy is old and rusty but there's enough freon in its AC to freeze a side of beef. I let myself delay cranking open the cab's worn, rusted door for five full minutes. I figured a pep talk of the *no fear... yield to no one...strike hard* variety was in order.

"If he's as good as they say he is, then sorry, but fair's fair."

Tall and slim, with a haircut right out of some prepster store catalogue, I'd pegged him as the quarterback. A beefy, angry looking kid—pegged him as a linebacker—challenged him sarcastically, "Loyalty counts for nothing, right Spence?"

"We're here to win games," Spence answered leisurely, lacing up his cleats, "not to give out prizes for fucking loyalty."

They caught site of me standing there, promptly clammed up and went back to the business of suiting up. I was trying not to feel awkward but I was standing there with all my gear and had no idea where to settle in. For all my bravado, arriving somewhere you're clearly not wanted sucks, even on the best of days.

I looked towards Spence, figuring he was a potential ally, but when he locked eyes with me and then looked away without so much as a head nod, I figured I was on my own. *That's all right. I don't need any of these pansy ass bitches for friends.*

I'd read last year's roster on line one night when I was looking for some information on the coaching staff. All but a few of the players had douchebag first names: Spencer, Emory, Parker, Chase, Landon...what the fuck? Your typical wealthy, stuck-up pricks. I always had a take-no-prisoners attitude on the field but now I'd be out for blood.

I turned towards a deserted section of the locker room, figuring I could find an unoccupied locker to stash my gear. "Hey," I heard someone say behind me.

This one was close to my height, leaner build, friendly face—not that I was looking for friends at this point. I tried my best to affect an *I don't give a shit* attitude. “Hey.”

“Do you have a lock?” When I shook my head, he handed me one. “Take this, it’s an extra. I wouldn’t leave my shit unattended. You’re not the most popular guy at the moment.”

“I can see that.”

“I’m Will Clarke,” he said, extending his hand. “You’re Jeremy, right? I remember you from Driscoll Elementary.”

“Yeah,” I said, shaking his hand, “Jeremy Rivers.”

“You left in what, fifth or sixth grade? Did you move away or something?”

I heard some asshole cough into his hand as he mumbled loudly, “Juvie.”

That elicited a few laughs and sneers. So that’s where all these fucktards thought I’d gone? Made sense, I guess. I did leave Driscoll on a pretty low note.

“See you out there,” Will said with a sympathetic look as he backed away.

The air felt muggy and thick. The sun blazed without any breeze to take the edge off. I was always in top condition and I’d been running sprints and doing stair drills at a punishing pace all summer long, but today was rough. Not nearly as tough for me as it was for some of the others, who had obviously been spending the summer hanging out poolside and sucking down booze from their daddies’ liquor cabinets.

As we filed back into the locker room, I could feel a few of the guys actively hating on me. The negative vibe was hanging in the air. One kid I’d consistently burned during sprints and receiving drills purposely pushed into me, nearly knocking me off balance as he made his way past me down the narrow locker room aisle. This shit was *not* starting today. I reached out and grabbed the collar of his jersey, jerking him back slightly. “I wouldn’t do that again,” I said evenly, leveling him with a menacing look.

In truth, I was scared shitless, fairly certain that forty guys were about to jump me and start beating the shit outta me at that very moment. But I knew better than to show fear.

“Do *what* again?” he challenged.

I turned my attention back to the locker, attempting to appear bored. “You heard what I said. I don’t think I need to repeat it.”

I wasn’t looking to start anything but I wasn’t backing down either. I knew I had to watch it here. I had a past in this school district; one misstep and I’d be out. But I wasn’t a pussy. Anyone who messed with me had better be ready to back it up.

Spencer Davies’ interest was piqued now. “Aw, throwing a tantrum, Baker? You just got smoked, plain and simple. Deal with it.”

“Fuck you, Spence,” Baker shot back.

“You’re the one getting fucked, Baker. Just fucked yourself right outta your starting position.” With that, Baker slammed his locker loudly and went for the showers.

“It must be nice,” another moron chimed in, “strolling right in and passing by seniors who’ve sweated on that field for years, earning their way onto this team.”

“Holy shit, Chase, you sound like a fucking drama queen,” Will said, exasperated.

“It’s Chase’s time of the month,” another guy added. A few of the guys laughed then, easing the mood in the locker room.

The first two weeks were the same: I’d outperform my competition at practice, shrug off the hatred and ignore the snide remarks. No one actually ever stepped up to me. I had a reputation earned long ago. When you punch a teacher out, people tend to remember. So they taunted

from afar, never fearless enough to challenge me directly. My therapist would have been proud if she'd witnessed how I was putting my anger management techniques into practice *every* minute of *every* fucking day I was around these guys.

They weren't all bad. Will Clarke, Drew Oliver and Mike Hanson weren't exactly my new best buddies that fall but they didn't support the few guys that were campaigning to make my time at Westerly High unpleasant. These guys respected my ability and despite my bad reputation, gave me the benefit of a fresh start.

Just the same, I gravitated towards the rougher element. My friends were the pot smokers, the class cutters, behavior problems and occasionally, the petty thieves. Keep in mind this was one of the most affluent suburbs in the country, so behavior problems were fairly mild in comparison to say...anywhere else in the world. For the most part, these kids were do-gooders. You had your occasional over-privileged, unsupervised kid looking to get back at mommy and daddy by developing an alcohol or meth problem, but overall it was pretty tame.

I felt more comfortable on the periphery, on the fringes. Always had. In this town, I was an outsider from day one and I knew it.

"How did it go today?"

"It went, Dad."

It took some effort to calm the scowl, but I managed a genuine smile as I slid the salmon from the sauté pan onto our plates.

"Another gourmet meal. What have we got here?" my father asked, taking his seat at the table.

"Panko crusted salmon over quinoa with pancetta and balsamic glazed brussel sprouts."

"Thank God I was blessed with a six-foot-three teenaged boy who enjoys watching the cooking channel."

"Like I have a choice," I replied, rolling my eyes. "Your repertoire is limited to grilled cheese sandwiches."

He laughed warmly. "Yup. Your mother, though," he said reverently, "you take after her. That woman could cook. Every night I'd drive home from work looking forward to tasting what she'd whipped up. I loved the smell...bread baking or onions frying...just that home-cooking I'd get a whiff of when I walked through the door. She truly enjoyed cooking, just like you."

I nodded and then we ate in comfortable silence. As we cleared the table together and loaded the dishwasher, I told my dad about the days' drills, what I thought I did well and where I thought I could improve.

"What are your teammates like?"

"Not my teammates yet, Dad." I let out a breath. "I don't suppose I'd be too enamored with me if I was one of them. I'm bigger than most of them and I'm faster. They see me as a threat." Then I let all of my pent up aggravation and fear come out. "And I'd rather eat glass than be in that school anyway, you know? All those stuck-up assholes...and the work," I added, shaking my head. "You know it's gonna be too hard for me."

My father was quiet for a moment. He understood my fear—he'd lived with it, still struggled with it himself. "I don't imagine any of this will be easy on you, but I do think it's all going to work out just fine, Jeremy. I feel it in my heart."

My father was good like that, supportive, and he always made me feel like he was right in there, taking the blows and fighting alongside me.

Us against the world.

It was just me and my dad in the small brick house that sat at the edge of this massive property. The house was larger than the one we left, even though these were technically servants' quarters. It was quiet here. In those first few years, sometimes it was too quiet.

My grandparents lived in a modest house closer to town, right off Main Street. It was better having them around. My mother's parents were doting grandparents and they did their best to help out. They'd had my mom late in life though, their only child, so they were pretty old by the time I came along. My Grandpa could throw the ball around the yard with me and he let me tinker as he hobbled in the garage, but I didn't have any sort of structure really. There were many nights back then when my dad didn't bother with the whole bath, brush teeth and bedtime story routine that my mother had established. And put it this way, after she was gone, no one was sitting at the dining room table in the evenings helping little Jeremy with his homework—homework that he simply could not do.

I can still picture my mother sitting with me, tirelessly flipping through flashcards. Each letter of the alphabet, she'd train me to name them and then to pair a sound with each one. It took repetition, day in and day out, for me to master this basic skill. My mother always smiled patiently and paired the painful task with cookies, hot chocolate, kisses and hugs.

She got sick when I was in first grade so the tutoring sessions went by the wayside. When I entered second grade in this new school district, I think the phone calls and meetings with Dad started right away. The appeals to have me tested: I couldn't read at all, maybe I needed glasses, maybe I was intellectually impaired. I overheard it at the time but didn't know what they were talking about, other than the fact that I couldn't read. Of that, I was already painfully aware.

In *this* school, not only were the other kids in my second grade class reading, they were reading full-on chapter books with many, many pages and no pictures. *How could anyone enjoy a book without pictures?* But these kids were the offspring of doctors, high-profile trial attorneys...astrophysicists for fuck's sake. Their DNA gave them reading superpowers, while I was lacking in every academic skill area. Even math, which came easily to me, was now giving me trouble because I couldn't make heads or tails of the word problems.

My father was in no state to even think about getting me help at the time. Getting through a day's work, remembering to shower, to shave, remembering to eat—those were now priorities. He was grief-stricken. So I repeated second grade and struggled my way through third, fourth and fifth, growing more frustrated and angrier year by year.

The last day of August, our last practice before Coach was announcing the starting line-up—that's when I saw her. She was the reason I'd been "asked" to leave school all those years ago.

We had to walk through the gym on the way to the locker rooms. Every other day it was empty, as football practice started a few weeks before school started up. Today though, the girls' volleyball team was having tryouts. *When did volleyball uniforms get so hot?* I took in the shorts that barely covered their ass cheeks and the tight, formfitting tank tops. The guys started hooting and hollering as they took in the scene, the girls preening, laughing or looking annoyed in response.

Back in the locker room, Chase, one guy I had come to truly dislike, called out, "I know who I'll be whacking off to tonight...Samantha Cavanaugh. That girl has the sweetest tits I've ever seen."

"You mean, the sweetest tits you've *never* seen, don't you?" Will asked.

“Only a matter of time, young Will,” answered Chase, stupid smug grin on his face. I pretty much always had the urge to slap that kid.

“I’d take Carolyn Harris over her any day. She’s a lot nicer and those legs...I can envision those long, beautiful legs wrapped tight around me,” Mike said, making a crude gesture with his hips.

“Shut the fuck up. Carolyn is *mine*.”

“Take it easy, Drew,” Mike said.

Drew’s face changed from menacing to light in the span of a second. “I’m fucking with you, Mike, but she *is* going to be mine. I’ve been waiting to ask her out for a year.”

I raised my eyebrows as I looked to Will. Once I heard her name, I was listening with rapt attention to everything that was said. Will explained, “Carolyn’s parents won’t let her date until her sixteenth birthday, or at least that’s what she tells Drew to make him back off.”

“October twenty-ninth, baby,” Drew said absently, tossing a football into the air repeatedly.

Spence pushed Drew’s shoulder so that he missed the ball. “That’s a little ass backwards. Are her parents Amish or something?”

“No, they’re cool, just a little protective. I’m good with it. And when Carolyn *does* go out with me, at least I’ll know she hasn’t already sucked off every other guy in our grade...unlike Chase’s babe.”

The locker room erupted in laughter with a whole lot of “burn” and “oh, shit” taunts thrown in. Chase looked like he was going to charge at Drew for a second before he started to laugh along with everyone else. “Yeah, I wouldn’t call Taylor pure as the driven snow, I guess. I wouldn’t call her my babe, either.”

There was no more talk of Carolyn but my thoughts were stuck on her, even as the coaches came into the locker room to announce the starting line-up for our first game that following Friday. When Will slapped my back, I was startled and looked up at him. “You daydreaming, Rivers? I thought you’d be more excited about being a starting cornerback.”

I smiled, nodding, recovering myself. I looked over to see Landon Westfield scowling in my direction. He was a senior who would now be sitting on the sidelines unless I got injured. I did feel bad, kind of. Being him sucked right about now. But this was football, not girl scouts, and I appreciated that the coaches here respected talent and work ethic.

As I lay in bed that night, my thoughts drifted back to that week in sixth grade that changed my life.

With my learning delays and the surly attitude that I used to mask my embarrassment, I tended to frustrate my teachers. But even though I wasn’t the most respectful kid in class, I knew my place. I’d never made an enemy out of any teacher. Sixth grade, though, brought Mr. Witt. I’d named him Mr. Zit inside of a week, due to his post-pubescent case of acne. He wore glasses, he was my height exactly, and he was mean. It’s like he had me pegged as an outsider, poor and stupid, inside of a week.

I didn’t think I dressed shabby or anything, but these kids dressed differently. They seemed to have new sneakers every few weeks while I got new ones only when I let my dad know that my big toe had a blister from being crammed in too tight. Other boys dressed in khaki pants, some wearing button down shirts and loafers when there was no dress code. What twelve year-old boy willingly does that? Anyway, I guess I looked, dressed and acted...different.

The first day Mr. Witt called on me to read aloud, I swear I saw him smirking. He knew. Fucking bastard knew and he was trying to make me look like a fool in front of the entire class. I shook my head, declining. He raised his voice and ordered me again to read. I said, “No,” meeting his gaze without raising my voice. He told me to stand in the corner next to his desk, where everyone had no choice but to stare at me. I tried to think of anything else—the new snowboard I was hoping to get for Christmas, Beatles’ lyrics, the Patriots’ chances of making it to the Super Bowl that year—anything to take my mind off of where I was at that very moment and why.

I stood there for the duration of that period. He was our Social Studies teacher too, so I had to stand for the next period also. When the bell rang for Gym, I went to move and he yelled, “You will stay right there!” As the other kids filed out, he lowered his voice and said, “You will stay there until you learn to listen.”

The other kids came back from Gym, one or two chuckling over my predicament when they saw me still standing there, but most looking uncomfortable or sympathetic. Carolyn Harris, sitting right up front, looked as if she was fighting back tears. I had to look away or else I knew I’d start crying too and I was *not* crying in front of Zit. I wouldn’t give that asshole the satisfaction.

The entire day I stood there. I was told to each lunch standing while the other kids went to the cafeteria and he held me back when the other kids went to Music. He tried to speak to me a few times but I stood there, stock still, defiant in my silence. He swapped one failed strategy for another, changing from tough guy, to good cop, to “doing this for your own good” bull-shitter. I gave him nothing.

At dismissal, gathering his things and walking out of the room, he announced, “Perhaps Mr. Rivers will demonstrate respect tomorrow, as the rest of you do.” He tried to sound casual but his voice was shaky from what I guessed was either nerves or fury—I wasn’t sure.

A few boys smirked at me as I angrily grabbed my things from my desk but most steered clear. One douchebag named Trent teased, “I c-c-can’t ruh-ruh read.”

I kept my head down for a second, grinding my teeth to keep from swinging. When I peered up at him, I must have looked set to kill because he literally ran around a desk and scooted out of the classroom at lightning speed. I felt a hand on my shoulder and spun around to see Carolyn, her eyes full of pity. “I’m sorry, Jeremy. He’s a jerk.”

The day had gotten to me.

I snapped.

“Shut the fuck up,” I snarled as I pushed her back by her shoulders. She tripped over the leg of my desk and landed on her ass, shocked. I ran—ran out of the class, ran out of the school and ran until I was at the lake, lungs burning, the cold, early December air freezing the tears on my cheeks.

I was mad at Zit, I was mad that I still couldn’t fucking read better than a first grader, and I was mad at Carolyn. Why did she look at me that way? Why couldn’t she just leave me alone? I *hated* myself when I pictured the look on her face. Quivering bottom lip, tears in her eyes, hurt and betrayed by what I’d done.

Carolyn had never been anything but nice to me and to everyone else in class. She always smiled—a sweet, adorable smile—whenever she caught me looking her way. And Carolyn was always kind to the class misfits—the fat kid who always had boogers in his nose, the one girl who’d sprouted giant knockers by fifth grade, the quirky autistic kid—she made attempts to

include everyone. *Is that how she sees me? Another misfit, the one who can't read?* Didn't matter. Fact was, she had been nothing but good to me and I'd just forcefully knocked her on her ass, cursed at her and left her crying.

Carolyn was smart—I'd say the smartest girl in our grade. I would smile inwardly listening to her answer questions, amazed by how much she knew. And when she read out loud to the class, it was like her voice put me under a spell. Carolyn read with emotion, changing her tone to match the mood and intention of the characters. She read so well that sometimes our teachers would let her read several pages in a row, rather than stopping her after one page and choosing the next narrator. I think they enjoyed listening to her sweet voice as much as I did.

Carolyn was also beautiful. Not prettier than the other girls, necessarily, but something radiated from her and drew everyone in. Happiness? Kindness? Whatever it was, I wanted some to rub off on me. Carolyn was everything a lonely, hot-tempered, foul-mouthed, hopeless boy could ever dream of.

We weren't friends back then. It was more like I was a distant admirer. She'd never know it though, as I made a point of scowling or turning away whenever she caught me staring at her.

As I sat in class daydreaming, I would imagine myself talking to Carolyn, making her laugh, amusing her with my smooth, clever lines. In reality, though, I lacked the confidence to interact with her in any way. And I couldn't trust in her kindness. Even though she was nice, I figured she also thought of me as stupid and incapable—someone to feel sorry for.

As the anger bled out of me that cold afternoon, I walked slowly back towards town, to my grandparents' house. By now, my grandmother was not in her right mind. She remembered me and could sometimes hold a lucid conversation with me, but she was not a caretaker anymore. My grandfather really couldn't look after me anymore either—his hands were full caring for Grandma. I'd go there after school, attempt homework for no more than fifteen minutes and then watch television with them most days until Dad picked me up.

Today I sat and had a soda with my grandfather and then asked him for five bucks. I needed to perform some act of penance.

I always saw Carolyn breaking off pieces of chocolate from a weird triangular shaped chocolate bar and handing them out to her girlfriends. As I walked into the grocery store, which in *this* town was like a gourmet food emporium, I saw the bars displayed up by the register. *Figures...she likes candy bars that cost three freaking dollars apiece.* I plunked my money down and went home to write a note that I taped to the weird triangle-shaped box.

I got into class before everyone else the next morning and shoved the candy into Carolyn's desk before taking my seat. Everyone looked at me warily as they filed in. That is, everyone except Mr. Zit. He didn't look my way.

When he was handing out permission slips for next month's class trip, instead of just giving a stack to one kid or giving the first person in each row papers to hand back, he called each child up one by one, in alphabetical order. He greeted each with a smile and some inane friendly comment as he handed them the paper. It was a trip to the Bruce Art Museum, a few towns over, and I was excited about it. I knew they had a few Rodin pieces and I was looking forward to seeing them up close. The closer Zit got to R, the itchier I got.

My grandfather loved tinkering with clay, metal, wood—he even carved soap. He would make the weirdest, coolest looking sculptures out in the garage. He gave me my first sculpting knives, sketch pads, pencils and charcoals when I was seven. He used to call me his Rodin, in reference to the fact that I was self-taught and my “art” could be a bit on the wacky side. When

my grandmother would look at my work, wide-eyed and bewildered, my grandfather would say, “Don’t listen to the masses, Jeremy. Rodin was an outsider—son of a clerk, self-taught, rejected from that snooty art school in *Pah-ree*. He went on to create some of the most famous works of art in the world. Don’t you ever listen... just create.”

When Zit called Trent Ralston’s name, I knew in my gut he would not be calling me next. Yep, next name called was Amy Simms. *Stay calm*, I told myself, but I knew my face was turning an angry shade of red. My knee was knocking with nervous energy against the underside of my desk.

Zit was downright gleeful after he finished handing out the permission slips. He clapped his hands twice and then told everyone to take out our book. We were reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I hated that fucking book. I hated certain characters in the book, namely Atticus and Calpurnia, who happened to be two of the truest, most genuine people, but I hated them because I stumbled so badly over their names. I came to like Boo of all people. His name? Piece of cake.

I had a pit in my stomach. *Here we go again*. “Chapter four everyone,” he chirped. “Mr. Rivers,” he said without looking my way, “I’m being generous and giving you an opportunity to redeem yourself. Please start us off.”

I took a look at that opening sentence: *The remainder of my school days were no more auspicious than the first*. There was no way. I couldn’t even make heads or tails of the second word. A long minute passed. “Jeremy? We’re waiting,” said the smug little shit. “Is there a problem?”

I stared down at the page and angrily swiped at the one hot tear that was escaping.

“I didn’t want to have to do this, I really didn’t,” he said in a saintly tone, meant to convey to the others that he was truly sorry about what my incorrigible behavior was forcing him to do. “Jeremy, come stand up front.”

I sat frozen, my body too big for the desk I was crammed into. In truth, being tall to begin with and a year older than the other kids, the desk was small, but this was different—I felt large, overheated, agitated and trapped.

“Jeremy? The *entire* class is waiting.”

I rose up and slowly made my way to the front. I heard someone behind me sniggering, probably Trent. Some kids looked up as I walked past but most kept their gaze straight ahead. Carolyn sat right up front, head down, shoulders slumped. She was clutching the boxed chocolate in her hands with a white-knuckle grip.

I took my place next to his desk and turned to face the class. I fixed my gaze on the back wall. My blood was liquid rage, pumping furiously through my veins. My fists were clenched and my jaw ticked angrily. Underneath all that anger, though, was shame. I was so fucking ashamed. Ashamed that I was stupid, ashamed that everyone knew I was stupid, ashamed that people, that Carolyn, felt bad for me on account of the fact that I was stupid.

I was this man-child, bigger than everyone but less capable than every single person sitting in that room.

Zit came and stood right in front of me, nose to nose. His hot, sour breath hitting me as he hissed, “You will do this *every* day. Do. You. Understand?”

Lights out.

I knocked him to the ground with one punch. I’m sure that punch was painful, as it packed every ounce of fury that had built up inside of me over the past two days.

I stood there for a moment, shocked, cradling my sore fist. I remember seeing his glasses, bent and broken on the floor. I'm pretty sure I also saw a tooth.

My class erupted as I ran out of the room, racing down the hallway as fast as my legs could take me. I ran straight into a lady as she rounded a corner, nearly knocking her over. By then I was crying—big, scared-shitless kinds of tears. “Jeremy? Are you all right, sweetheart?”

She worked in the main office. I remembered she was someone who had spoken with my dad and she'd given me a letter to bring home to him once. She was short and skinny, but she held me firmly by my shoulders and spoke in a sure and commanding voice. “It's going to be okay. Whatever happened, it's going to be *okay*.”

For some reason, her words soothed me. She led me to her office. After calling someone to go check on my class, she sat me down and in between tears, coaxed me into telling her everything.

Mrs. Connolly. From that day forward, she became my advocate, my biggest cheerleader. She was petite and looked sweet, but the lady was fierce. When the principal tried to lay into me after hearing Zit's side of the story, she stood up and faced off with him. “With all due respect, we will examine *all* sides of this story before Jeremy is assumed to be the one who bears all of the blame here.” I was stunned.

I never returned to Mr. Witt's class, and following an immediate evaluation, both psychiatric and educational, I was deemed to be severely dyslexic and dysgraphic—a fancy way of saying that I was not only reading disabled, but my writing also sucked. On the plus side, I was gifted in both mathematics and nonverbal reasoning skills, whatever they were. I was not psychotic or emotionally disturbed, as Zit had asserted.

I'm sure if I hadn't punched Zit and if I'd had the reputation of being a calm, good boy, the school would have kept me and arranged for remedial services there. Since I had, in fact, assaulted a teacher, the school approved funding to send me to a private school that specialized in educating kids with learning disabilities.

They wanted me gone.

I remember Mrs. Connolly assuring me, telling me that I would love this new school. I wasn't convinced. I also remember her telling me how smart I was. When I smirked, she took me forcefully by the shoulders again and said, “Jeremy, some people are not smart, you're right. Some people, though, are smart in different ways. You can do math at a tenth grade level, did you know that? *I do* because I tested you. You can arrange puzzles better than ninety-seven percent of kids your age. Did you know that? *I do* because I tested you. The mathematicians and the puzzle solvers of the world are the inventors, the artists, the builders...the *creators*. Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Ansel Adams...great men who failed abominably in school. Trust me when I tell you, Jeremy, everything is going to be okay.”

I cried walking out of her office with my dad that day but they were tears of relief. And within two weeks of going to that new school, I had hope.

Carolyn

“Are you all right, Carolyn? You kinda look sick,” Erica said, concerned.

“Uh, yeah,” I said, recovering. Drew had just sidled up to me as the guys were making their way through the gym towards the locker room. He tugged lightly on my braid as he whispered, “It’s August twenty-ninth, Carolyn. The countdown is on.” He proceeded to raise one and then two fingers up in the air, smiling sweetly at me.

“I don’t know if Drew is going to last two months. Stop teasing him,” Samantha scolded me. She was smiling but sometimes, like now, I felt an undercurrent of animosity simmering just below the surface with her.

Kerri’s auburn curls bounced as she trotted over and sweetly chimed in, “Drew is a hottie, Carolyn. And it seems like he’s hopelessly devoted to you, bitch. I’m jealous.”

“Yeah, Drew’s nice,” Samantha shrugged noncommittally, drawing her words out slowly, “but the question is, will he wait for Little Miss Innocent here to finally say yes to a date? Really, Carolyn, most guys aren’t into being tortured.”

I said nothing. Drew had been playing this game with me, teasing me—taunting was more what it felt like. It started last year. When he asked me to the movies, I panicked. I don’t know where the lie sprang from but before I knew it, I was bound by it: no dating until my sixteenth birthday. Since then, he’d been counting down the months, which would soon be weeks.

Drew was gorgeous, well-mannered, at the top of our class and a great athlete. He was effortlessly popular and girls flirted with him given any opportunity. Drew and his closest friends, Will Clarke and Mike Hanson, were three of the most sought after boys in our class. I noticed a few female members of the senior class sniffing around them as well.

I couldn’t figure out what Drew saw in me, Little Miss Innocent. And that moniker? It sickened me. Samantha and the rest of those girls—my supposed closest friends? They didn’t know me at all.

Kerri swooned, capturing my attention again. “No, I think Drew looks like he would happily wait for Carolyn.”

“Boys like Drew do *not* wait,” Samantha said, definitively. She was the authority on everything, apparently. “Do you think any of those boys have turned down Taylor...or Lara Reynolds...or that goth slut, Vanessa?”

Erica’s eyes widened at the sound of Taylor’s name. She whispered, “Ohmigod, do you know what I overheard Taylor saying last night?” We all crowded around because Erica sounded like she had some grade-A dirt to dish. “She was telling Lara about some new guy. Just moved here, I guess. She told Lara she’d met him at a party down by the lake and,” she looked around, giggling, to make sure no one else was eavesdropping, “Taylor said his cock was so colossal she couldn’t take him all the way in. His dick,” she was cackling now, “choked her!”

Fact was, we talked trash about Taylor and girls like her—girls deemed slutty, easy—but we were really fascinated by them. Taylor was sixteen, nearly seventeen, but seemed light years older and more sexually aware than the rest of us. Rumor had it that she’d lost her virginity to her much older stepbrother when she was thirteen. She didn’t seem to care that everyone gossiped about her. Taylor was gorgeous, rich, she was into guys, she dressed in a way that was sexy and provocative...she owned it.

I wondered what it would be like to be Taylor sometimes. She was confident around the boys, in control. She pranced around in a teeny bikini at pool parties, sat in boys’ laps, purred in their ears...she fucked, that much was obvious. She was even rumored to have lured one of the younger P.E. teachers into a tryst on school grounds.

The way I assumed she was with boys both excited and repulsed me. The mere thought of metaphorically taking a walk in her shoes, shamefully, made my thighs clench with want.

It would never happen. Carolyn Harris was virtuous, smart, accomplished, serious...a good girl, or so everyone thought.