

Prologue

Rebecca

The first time I heard his name was out of Amy Greer's mouth. "Evan Michaels," she had hissed. For some reason, my ears perked up when she said it.

We were in my car, driving around campus. Our pledge class was wreaking havoc on the fraternities. It was a required night together. We were supposed to be having a low-key sleep over in the sorority house. We thought it would be much more entertaining to play some pranks on the fraternities.

I remember laughing so hard I could hardly catch my breath. We were young and doing stupid things like spray painting the snow with messages for boys that had crossed us. Not the most mature thing to be doing, but certainly fun.

Amy had been going on and on about this guy named Evan. All I really remember about the details of her story was that they had been hooking up for a while, and it was good. Whatever "it" was. Sex? I had no idea and I didn't have the balls to ask. I had virtually zero experience with the opposite sex.

Amy assumed she and Evan were exclusive. Evan thought otherwise. It seems to be a common characteristic among the shitbag population around campus.

I distinctly remember thinking that I should stay away from him. I had never had a boyfriend. I could count on one hand the number of boys I had kissed. I wasn't looking for a promise of forever, but I knew that I wasn't interested in pursuing a player. I may have had a hand in helping Amy spray-paint the words "EVAN IS AN ASSHAT" in bright orange on the lawn of his fraternity.

Three years later, I find myself thinking back to that moment, to Amy's diatribe on Evan Michaels. I had been warned. I had been *warned*. I only have me to blame for this one.

I'm cursing myself for not heeding the warning that night, for not remembering that I had an actual internal dialogue with myself about staying away from him. I didn't even know who Evan was at the time, and I still told myself to stay away. If I had, I wouldn't have ended up in this situation, listening to my friends try to get me out of the miserable state I'm in.

Christ. I'm heartbroken. And angry. I'm furious with him. No, scratch that. I'm furious with myself. As much as I want to hate Evan, I can't. I love him. I just don't want to love him.

I have too many thoughts circling around inside my skull and I want off the goddamned merry-go-round. I'm pretty sure I've developed adult ADD.

I'm ashamed to acknowledge that under all this anger and hurt is fear. I don't know how to say the words I know I need to say. Anxiety starts building in my gut. It's become an all too familiar feeling.

I try to slow my breaths. I try to stop obsessing over the thoughts that I knew better than to get involved with Evan Michaels, that I was too inexperienced to jump right in to a relationship with him. I never trusted that he wouldn't hurt me. I knew I was being stupid. *You're so stupid, Rose! Why'd you do that?!* (Best line in *Titanic*).

I attempt to stop thinking about how much I love him and the fact that sometimes he's actually a pretty amazing person. No, anger is easier. I need to hold onto it to get through this without bawling my eyes out. I'll pet it, and stroke it, and it will be my pretty new pet pronounced with a French accent—Ongare. It's time to put on my big girl panties and deal with the fallout. It's confrontation time, bitches, and a coward I'm not. Sort of. I square my shoulders and exit the building.

As I walk to the Tau house, a bothersome thought slows my feet. If I've so successfully strapped on my big brass balls, why do I suddenly feel like I'm marching to my doom?

Evan

Wearily, I get up off the ground and stretch. My eyes fall on the black car in front of the house. What on earth is Rachel doing here? Then I catch movement on the sidewalk. It's Rebecca. Oh, shit. I've definitely done something to piss off the universe and now it's extracting payment. As I sprint towards the house, a feeling of dread hits me. Why am I chasing someone that doesn't want to get caught?

Chapter 1

Rebecca

"She's dead. Car accident ... I think the paparazzi were involved." My head jerks in his direction. Princess Amelia is dead? I don't typically find British monarchies interesting, but that's crazy. And so very sad. She was only 27.

I take a moment to look him over. He looks like he hasn't shaved in a couple of days. Gone is the longish, messy hair I usually associate with him. He must have cut it recently. It's extremely dark, almost black, and short on the sides. The top is slightly longer; but his sideburns are still there, stretching down towards his jaw.

I suddenly have a strange affinity for sideburns. What would he do if I reached up and touched them? Maybe tugged on them a bit? How hard is too hard to pull on someone's sideburn? I mean, guys like it when you pull on their hair, right? Sideburns are just an extension of your hair. Seems logical.

The thought makes me laugh—on the inside. The outside world must never be privy to the lunacy of what goes on in my head. Or, at least, that's what my brother, Garrett, likes to tell me. Too bad Garrett's not aware that he and I are exactly alike.

My attention comes back to the boy in front of me. I guess he's more of a man, really. His hazel eyes are intense. When you speak to him he gives you all his attention, like whatever you have to say is the most important thing he's ever heard. It's intimidating. And sexy.

I prefer his new look over the shaggy hair he and many of his lacrosse teammates usually sport. I know immediately that I will make out with him, if he's up for it. I would never tell him that, of course. But the thought is there.

Evan Michaels. It's been almost three years since I first heard his name. We're sitting on the back deck of his fraternity house. It's a Friday night. There's a small group of us that have come back a couple of days early to campus before the start of the fall semester. Normally, they don't let you move in until the day before classes start. Freshmen come three nights before, but upperclassmen aren't allowed back that early. Unless you play a sport.

This fraternity, which they refer to as simply "Tau," is full of athletes and they've been here for over a week. I don't play a sport, but I'm tight with campus security thanks to my many parking tickets. I gave a sob story about my family being out of town the day of the official move-in and not wanting to do it all alone on Sunday. They took pity on me. Suckers.

I'm friends with many of the lacrosse players—and virtually all of them are in this fraternity. My close friend, Joseph Moreland, or "Joey" as he's known, is on the team. He called me earlier and invited me over for some beers. Who am I to turn down free beer? We're poor college students, after all. Evan being on the team and in the house tonight? Bonus.

Evan and I aren't friends, but he's showing potential. Anyone's first conversation with me is considered an application for friendship. I usually know immediately if I will "click" with someone. This is one of the reasons why I love our school. I get my "click" on with almost every person I meet. That sounded kind of dirty in my mind so I give myself a mental high-five.

Persimmon College is small—like seriously tiny, smaller than many high schools. With just over 1,500 students you would think I would have had a conversation with Evan before this night. But no, I haven't.

I frequent this fraternity, but he's usually with a girl or hanging with his friends, engrossed in something. Of course, I've seen him hundreds of times, but this is the first real conversation we've ever had since "Hello" and "What's up?" don't constitute actual dialogue.

Looking back, this is probably why I remember this moment so vividly, why I catalogue it into my long-term memory. It is the first time that laser focus of his has ever been directed at me. It's weird, though. His eyes are pinpointed on mine, but I feel the laser hitting me right in the crotch. Neat trick, Evan.

He's still looking at me while I digest the news about Princess Amelia. Earlier, I noticed him look me up and down when I first came out onto the deck. He had stared at me when I hugged Joey and laughed at the way Joey dramatically declared how much he had missed me. I still felt Evan's eyes on me when I hugged his roommate, Drew.

There was no formal introduction with Evan since the campus is so small and we already know each other's names. When Drew released me and I turned, I was standing face-to-face with the 6-foot wall that is Evan Michaels. We simply stared at each other for a moment, but it wasn't awkward. In fact, I didn't really think much of it until he flashed that adorable grin at me.

I've gotten used to stares from the opposite sex. I'm not beautiful by any means, but I do get some attention. I don't think that's saying much since I suspect that most college guys are eager to make out with all sorts of willing participants.

My hair is wavy, naturally blonde, and hangs just below my shoulder blades. My eyes are light blue and I get compliments on them. A light dusting of freckles from the summer sun covers my nose and shoulders. I'm pretty fit from a mild obsession with exercising. Several of my sorority sisters call me out when I head to the gym for the second time in a day. But it's totally necessary on days that I've eaten my weight in pizza. I guess I would say I'm comfortable in my own skin.

"That's terrible. How did you find out?" I ask Evan.

We don't have cable here. Or even air conditioning in many of the buildings. We live in a tight mid-western bubble of sorts, in the middle of nowhere, with limited technology. I usually get my news from my phone calls with my parents. My phone calls on *real* phones. Cell phone coverage here is deplorable.

We do have email and the like, of course, but our school is still way behind the technology wave. I read the Wall Street Journal, but that's more because I like to know what's going on in the business world and my Accounting professor last year had made the subscription a requirement. I briefly wonder how a monarchy's death might affect financial markets.

"NPR," he replies.

Ah, the trusty radio. I dig it.

"I usually listen while I pick up the room or fold laundry." He cleans? Hmmm. I also make note that he might not be dumb. I listen to NPR, as well, so he must be smart. God, I'm a bit of a self-righteous biatch.

I tend to judge people inside my head, something my parents encourage me to work on since I suck at hiding emotions on my face. I'll work on it later. I'm too distracted by Evan to focus on my shortcomings or my tendencies to be a sanctimonious twat.

"You do know what NPR is, right?" he asks.

Okay, he might be a dickweed. Or my soul-mate since that's something I would totally say. So I laugh.

"Yeah, asshole, I know what National Public Radio is." It's dead silent for a moment. Then everyone starts laughing, including Evan. I realize he probably doesn't know that I tend to cuss like a sailor—something I inherited from my father.

I also lack a filter. But I'm working on it. Sort of. My potty mouth revealed itself at a disturbingly early age so it's ingrained into my daily vocabulary. I take it as a good sign that Evan thinks my reply is funny. His friendship application might get approved, after all. Although, I might want to rub up against him later which is a step beyond friendship. I need to keep thoughts like that locked deep inside my head with the rest of the garbage.

That's how the next couple of hours go. Sipping beers, trading creative insults, talking about current events, plans for after graduation, and all the stress of entering adulthood. Probably a little heavy for my first night back, but I am drinking with a group that prides itself of being intellectual. Then, suddenly the bomb drops on my potential plan for hooking-up with Evan.

"So, my girlfriend..." he starts.

Cue the record-scratch. I don't hear the rest. He lost me at girlfriend. Well, shit. Evan is committed? I thought he was a player.

"Do you know her?" he asks.

Since I stopped listening, I have no clue what he's asked. "What?" I reply.

"Rachel Tierney. My girlfriend. She just transferred to State."

Rachel's a year younger than us, so she'll be starting her junior year at another school. Why would she bail after two years, especially when Evan the Sex God is still here? I find that odd. But what do I know? I've only made out with two guys since coming to college.

I'm still a virgin, but not opposed to giving it up to someone I think might make it good. The two guys in question didn't really "do it" for me, so I didn't let it go that far. One of them, Aiden, might have a shot. He's fun and we've been on this rotating random hook-up cycle since I was a freshman. But he hasn't brought me to orgasm with his mouth or hands, so it's not boding well for him. I don't like hooking up when I'm drunk and since I tend to drink every weekend, the hook-ups don't happen very often. But I'm okay with that. It's not like I'm looking for the love of my life.

Evan's still staring at me, waiting for my reply. "No, I don't know her. I mean, I know who she is. I've seen her around the frat house, of course. But we've never formally met."

"Well, she'll be here in a couple of weeks to visit for one of the outdoor parties that the SIXs throw."

Why is he telling me this? Should I reply or act like I care? I just nod.

"Were you planning on going?" His eyes are still on mine, so he must be speaking to me.

SIX, which is a nickname for the Sigma house, is not my sorority. But since majority of our small campus is Greek I have a lot of friends in other sororities. Several of my close friends are SIXs. Persimmon's not cliquish like many bigger campuses. The Greek system here is mainly a social outlet.

Evan wants to know if I'm going? I know for a fact I will be attending that party. It's right next door to my sorority house, after all.

"I will probably go," I reply. He smiles at that and I go all gooey inside. We sit there, smiling at each other. Shit-on-a-stick. Evan has a girlfriend. That news alone should stop the butterflies that have been flitting around my insides all night. But it does nothing of the sort. If anything, my adrenaline is pumping harder.

Do not swoon over the hot lacrosse player with a serious girlfriend! Stop. It. Alarms start going off in my head. Warning! Danger Will Robinson! Abort mission! Nope. Butterflies are in overdrive. I am so screwed—and not in the way I want to be.

Evan

Rebecca Banks is not what I expected. She's a total tomboy and talks like a cynical old man sometimes. I know she's close to Joey and a few others in my pledge class, but I really never paid much attention to her before tonight. Well, that's not entirely true. I like to watch her ass whenever I have the good fortune of seeing it. I'm not ashamed to admit it's what I noticed about her the first time I saw her our freshman year. I would say it's her best asset, but it's in tough competition with her smartass mouth. And she's rather fond of cursing. I like it, which perplexes me.

Rachel is nothing like Rebecca. I probably shouldn't let my mind go there, but I can't stop it. I'm guessing it's because things have been so shaky with Rachel the past few months. I find myself questioning our relationship more and more.

We share interests, we get along—usually—and we both have this pressing need to perform well in all things. I respect the hell out of Rachel. Admittedly, it helps that she's beautiful. I was insanely attracted to her right from the start. Her thick hair is jet black and always perfect. Her big eyes are an incredible shade of bright green. I've never seen eyes like that. She rarely wears make-up because she doesn't need it. And until recently, I was confident that she was my future.

Sitting here tonight, though, laughing my ass off with my friends and this crazy girl sitting across from me, I'm wondering when was the last time Rachel and I laughed like this? Have we ever? I can't recall a time. Not that Rachel's not fun. We laugh and enjoy our time together. But this is ... different. I can't seem to put my finger on it, exactly.

Despite whatever I'm feeling right now, I know I'm not prepared to let go of what I have with Rachel. I pray that this time apart will help calm the waters. In the meantime, I'm going to enjoy what's left of my time at Persimmon.

Rebecca's loud laugh brings me back from my thoughts. She's got a great laugh. She smiles almost constantly. How have I not noticed that before? I see her slap Joey on the arm and he's laughing, too. I must have missed something.

"I think it's time to call it a night, gentlemen," Rebecca announces as she wipes her eyes. I assume they're watering from her fit of laughter.

Before I can offer to walk her back, Joey chimes in. "Wait, I'll walk that way with you. I have to get something from my car and it's parked in front of your house." Why am I disappointed that Joey offered first? It's not a big deal. I know he's protective of Rebecca.

"Goodnight, boys." Rebecca waves as she turns towards the door.

"See ya, Rebecca," I say before she steps through the doorway. I think I may have said it way too loudly. Nice, Evan. You're a smooth one, you are.

She turns her head back towards me and her adorable smile widens. It hits me square in the chest. I like it when she smiles at me—way more than I should. She turns back and disappears through the doorway. I'm left staring at her ass and wondering what it would be like to have it in my hands. *Shiiiiit*. I'm in trouble.

Chapter 2

Rebecca

The next morning, I awake on the couch in my room at the sorority house. We don't sleep in our rooms usually. We have a rack-room upstairs with almost 40 single beds. But I had a lot to drink last night and thought I might need to stick close to the bathroom, which is directly across from my room. Plus, the couch is pretty comfy. I get up, get dressed, grab a bite to eat from the basement kitchen and head to the book store to buy my books for the semester.

It's only a two-minute walk, which is awesome considering I have to carry all the books back to my room. I'm not surprised that half of the athletes are in here this morning, taking care of business before their morning practice.

I walk up and down the aisles with my schedule in hand, searching for the texts that will cost me a small fortune today. I grab a law book and check the price. \$100 for a new text? Yikes. I reach for a used text; it's only \$60.

I think I'll go with the cheaper option. Not that I have to count pennies or anything. In fact, I have a small academic scholarship and my parents are paying cash for the rest. I have a bank account that they feed periodically so that I always have access to funds. I think they worry that I'm going to spend it all and then have an emergency immediately afterwards.

All the money from my past summer jobs is in that account and I'm proud of the stockpile I have accumulated. Two years ago, I put about a third of it into a money market fund that is doing quite well. I doubt my parents know just how much is in my accounts.

I seem to be the only person in my family with the obsession of saving as much as possible. But if I've learned anything from majoring in business, it's that one must anticipate all losses and assume no gains. Like a good little Girl Scout, I'm always prepared. Or is that saying for Boy Scouts? Either way, I'm positive I'll need that money at some point. So, for now, I'm content to live on the side of frugality.

I start thumbing through the book to make sure there aren't many handwritten notes or highlighter marks in it. I like to highlight and make notes in margins, so I need a book that will allow me to do so. After I'm satisfied, I turn and see a most welcome sight.

"What's up, Tooks?" Joey asks, sauntering up to me and taking the book out of my hands. He turns it to look at the cover.

My real name is Rebecca. Tooks is my nickname and stems from a somewhat embarrassing story. It involves a professor, with a very southern accent, saying she made a "mistook" and not correcting herself. I laughed so hard I peed my pants. In class. Not because it was an amazingly advanced level of hilarity, but because Joey and I had gotten high before class and my juvenile brain decided to hang on to that "mistook" for dear life.

Not my finest moment, but I'm working on it. Okay, okay. I have a lot to work on. But if a person can hear someone say, "Oh, dear, I surely just made a mistook," in a deeply southern drawl and not laugh, then said person must be a cyborg. Or a Vulcan. Anyway, Joey started calling me Miss Took, then Tookie. But Tookie sounds like a slang term for female genitalia so it eventually evolved into Tooks.

I look up at Joey and immediately smile. Joey is good people. The best. Never a harsh word to say, but not a pushover, either. I don't understand how he's so chipper all the time, but it rubs off on me and I like it. Ooh. That sounded dirty. Ten points to me.

"Books, Joey, books." I'm still smiling when I see Evan standing off to the side, staring at us. An odd expression is on Evan's face. He seems to snap out of it and steps towards us.

"Hey, Evan. What are you boys up to today?"

Joey hands me my book. "Breaking the bank on some books then off to morning practice. Then lunch and afternoon practice."

“Yuck.” I grimace. Two practices today in this heat does not sound like fun. I wonder why the coach would do that. Lacrosse is a spring sport and I thought the fall season was wasn’t taken as seriously. This coach must be in-it-to-win-it. Though, the effect these workouts are having on the team’s bodies is probably worth the effort.

Evan steps closer. “We’re hiking down to the barge tonight. You should come.”

Joey’s face lights up. “Yeah, Took. Come with us. It’s a relatively large group. Most of us are back in the house tonight and Sarah is finally here.”

Sarah is Joey’s girlfriend. She’s adorable. Some people might think it’s weird that I’m getting invited to hang out with guys that have girlfriends. But the truth of the matter is that many of my closest friends are male. I love my girlfriends, but my guy friends are often so much easier to get along with.

My cheeks hurt from smiling. Why am I smiling so damn much? “Sure,” I reply. A hike sounds good. Our college is up at the top of a cliff that overlooks a decent-sized river. There’s a barge at the bottom of the cliff that has been run aground and has been there for decades. It’s a popular place to hike down to among the students. There are tons of trails on and around campus and two of them will take you down to the barge.

Evan’s smile widens. “Great. Come over to the house around eight. We’ll start hiking down after it gets dark.”

“Awesome-sauce. I’ll see you guys later,” I say as I head up to the cash register.

I show up to the house a little after 8 p.m. I have my small navy backpack purse strapped on. It’s perfect for holding 6 beers, which is all I need if I want to make it down to the barge and back safely. I have a high tolerance for alcohol at this point. Not that I’m proud of it. It’s just that I’ve built up a tolerance the past couple of years. I suspect that I drink too much, too often. I should probably work on that, now that I think about it.

The doors of the frat house are always unlocked and I walk up to Joey’s room only to find it empty. I hear music down the hall and I follow it. It’s coming from Evan’s room. There’s a dozen or so people in there, mostly male. Sarah looks up from Joey’s lap and immediately jumps up and hugs me.

“What’s up, buttercup?!” she exclaims. She’s cute as a button. Chin-length auburn hair, pale skin, and a tiny lisp when she’s drinking.

“Hey, Sarah. I missed you too!” I laugh at her enthusiasm. She’s obviously been drinking. We fall into conversation, playing catch-up from our summer adventures. I don’t have many as I spent the summer working for my dad and carting my younger brother to and from football practice.

Before I know it, the sun is setting and everyone is packing up. Evan files in behind me as we make our way down the stairs.

“Do you want me to carry your backpack?” he asks.

My head snaps to look at him. Uhhh ... why would I need him to carry my tiny backpack? I’m kind of insulted, though he’s probably trying to be chivalrous. Real gentlemen carry ladies’ tiny backpack purses full of beer cans for them. I snicker at the thought of him wearing my purse on his back.

“I’m good,” I politely decline—or, at least, I think it was polite. We don’t talk much as we head out of the frat and towards the wooded trail. Once we get to the opening in the tree line, the group starts the descent in single file.

We hike down slowly. Several people have headlamps and keep the trail lit for everyone. Since there’s a lot of underbrush and high-growth, most of us are in jeans or thin pants.

Evan is in front of me and I’m totally checking him out from behind. His jeans are loose-fitting and hang low on his hips. His t-shirt is tight, showing off his large arm muscles. Now that I think about it, his shirts always look tight on his arms.

His upper body is pretty huge. I love how snug his shirt is around his biceps and shoulders. I can see the muscles through the material, as well as the bottom of a tattoo that looks like it wraps around his left bicep. Maybe someday he'll let me touch it. Maybe ...

"Umph!" comes from his mouth because I've stumbled right into the back of him. I go down to one knee, trying to not fall all the way down. I end up kneeling in front of Sir Gets-me-wet.

He turns and laughs. "Lose your footing there, Tooks?" I'm thankful it's dark out so he can't see how red my face is. I don't normally get embarrassed.

"S-sorry. It's a pretty steep decline here," I stammer out.

Evan helps me up but doesn't release my hand once I'm steady. "I'll help you the rest of the way down."

"Umm ... we're like 10 yards from the bottom." My palms are sweaty. Why are they sweaty?

"Yeah, I know, but I'd rather not take a chance on being killed if you fall again." At least he laughs after he says it.

"My bad, Evan. You can hold my hand if you're scared. Of dying." He chuckles and we make our way down to river bank. Once I reach the bottom he releases my hand and for some reason it bothers me. I liked holding his hand.

We walk over to the flat land parallel to the barge. People are already sitting on blankets and pulling out cans from their backpacks. I find a dry spot and sit down. In a matter of minutes everyone is on the ground, drinking, talking, and laughing.

As I sit there, I realize I'm not especially close to some of these people. But Persimmon is such a tight-knit community that nobody is a stranger. It's like constantly being around extended family. I love it and I'm happy here in this moment.

Evan sits beside me and opens a beer. We're both quiet, watching the water, laughing at some of the stories we're hearing. It's comfortable with him. I think we could become great friends. Of course, I still want to touch him in inappropriate ways, but I accept the fact that he's off limits.

"So, Tooks. What's your story?" he asks.

"My story?"

"Where are you from?"

"Close by, just across the river. It's only about a 45-minute drive from campus. My parents live on 80 acres and before you ask, no they don't farm."

He smiles and shakes his head. "Do you have siblings?"

"Are we playing 20 questions?" Sometimes my mouth runs faster than my brain and I can't help my response.

"Is this the get-to-know-you interview that must take place before you can consider signing the friendship contract?" I almost slap my forehead at that one. Evan's not aware he's applying for a friendship contract with me. That's an inside thought! Oops.

He laughs. "You're kind of a smartass, Rebecca."

"So I've been told. My parents worry that I can't make friends."

He chuckles again and it makes me smile. I really like making him laugh. I don't want to be a jerk so I give him the details of my boring upbringing in good ol' Johnson County.

My father, Jim, is an engineer. My mother's name is Paige and she helps out my dad with his business. And by helping out, I mean she does everything in the office but the engineering. True to their southern heritage, it's a patriarchal family where Dad owns 51% of the business and Mom owns 49%. I guess she should be thankful that she got that much? Perhaps I have some pent-up hostility over this. I'll think on that later.

"I love my dad, but I hate that he thought he should have controlling interest, as if mom would cause an issue where it would be needed. If anything, she does more work than he does. I would never let a man put me in the position to be less. Or to feel like less."

Evan pauses mid drink, then finally swallows and lowers his beer. "But maybe it works for your parents? It could have been more strategic than sexist. Like if something happened to your mom and her 49% went to somebody else. That's just protecting the business. I guess it would be different if it were also the dynamic of their marriage."

He turns his head towards the river, not looking at me when he asks, "Would you prefer to be the one in a relationship making the decisions?"

"What? No. Relationships are 50/50, right? I would like to think that I am capable of compromise. I definitely wouldn't trample over someone else's objections or opinions, especially not my spouse's. This is why many people don't mix business with their personal lives. It's not always healthy."

He nods, like he's agreeing with me. "Would you give up your dream for someone you love?"

Surprisingly, I don't even hesitate. "Nope. But I also wouldn't ask anyone to give up theirs for me. Resentment is a terrible thing and it would be bound to happen. Again, I'd like to think that there would be a way to compromise. Dr. Rogers thinks I like negotiating a little too much. But I think it's best when all parties can come out ahead."

"You'd make a good lawyer, Rebecca. Or a mediator."

"Thanks. I think." That earns me another smile.

"What about your brother?"

"Garrett is a sophomore in high school and thinks he's a football god. And a baseball god. And a gift to the female population. Our family is pretty sports-oriented. I was voted Most Athletic for my high school's senior superlatives. But I'm more proud of the fact that I graduated with honors and got an academic scholarship."

I stop speaking, fearful that I'm starting to sound like a braggadocio. Some piece of my psyche wants to impress him without sounding so full of myself. I simply do not know how to walk that line. I have never felt the need to impress a dude. Good god, I'm turning into such a ... girl. Yuck.

"Same here. I got free tuition because of my academics. The school gave me nothing for lacrosse."

"Yeah, but at least you still get to play a sport. My sports days have been over for years. Maybe that's why I'm such a gym rat." I finish my beer and open another. "What about you, Evan? What's your story?"

Evan goes on to tell me about his family. He comes from a long line of judges. His dad, grandfather, and uncle have all been judges at one time or another. His aunt is a law professor. His sister is a lawyer. He's not sure if he wants to pursue law, though his father is pressuring him.

He's strongly considering med school and has already ranked his top schools for application. He spent the summer studying for both of the required entrance exams—the MCAT and the LSAT. This confirms my suspicions that he might be intelligent after all and not just the school's lacrosse star. It only makes him more attractive. I decide not to discuss my experience with the LSAT. He seems pretty angst-ridden over the pressure he's getting from other people.

The night wears on and the group is moderately calm. We talk and drink until just after midnight. That's when we see the first sign of lightning in the distance and decide to call it a night. The hike back is even slower thanks to the alcohol. Luckily, I don't fall on anyone. By concentrating really hard on the ascent I'm pretty sure I'm saving lives. But that's probably the alcohol talking.

Once we get back on campus, Evan offers to walk me to the sorority house.

"It's across the street from the frat house, Evan. I think I can make it."

"I know, but you shouldn't be walking around campus alone in the dark." He's scowling at me.

"I walk back to the house *every* weekend. Across the street. For three years running." I point to my house—the Omega house—which is actually dark right now. Why aren't the outside lights on tonight? A brief feeling of unease overcomes me. I'm not stupid. I know better than to traverse around in the dark alone. An escort home sounds nice right now. But Jim Banks taught his daughter to never show fear, or to act like a ... girl.

"I'll scream really loud if someone tries anything, okay?" Way to compromise, Rebecca. He's still scowling. "Fine. But I'm standing here and watching you all the way."

I laugh and try to act tougher than I am. "Sure thing, big guy. Watch me walk all the way. Across the street." I hear his roommate, Drew, snicker as he walks by, turning towards the frat house. "See you guys later," I say as I turn and head towards my sorority.

"Later, Tooks," Joey calls out as he walks with Sarah down the sidewalk.

I don't look back, but I'm sure if I turn around I'll see Evan standing there, watching me. Keeping my eyes trained on the dark house in front of me, that feeling of unease disappears, knowing that Evan is on the lookout. And *that* is what sets me right back on edge.

Evan

God help me. I cannot stop staring at her ass as she walks to the side entrance of the Omega house. I'm so distracted that I don't hear Drew come up behind me. He puts his arms around my shoulders and says in a low voice, "Best ass on campus."

I turn my head and narrow my eyes at him. "Watch your mouth."

Drew laughs. "Sure thing, big guy," he says, repeating the exact words Rebecca had just said. I shake my head and laugh at him. "Come on, Michaels. She made it inside the door. Let's have one more before we turn in."

"Best idea you've had all day." We turn and head into the house.

Chapter 3

Rebecca

When I wake up the next morning, my hand is in my underwear. Hmmm. That's a first. What was I dreaming about? I close my eyes and try to remember. My hand is still in my underwear. I only get snippets of a dark figure with large biceps putting his hand in my pants ...

My head snaps up when I hear a noise at the door. My face flushes with embarrassment. Then it's quickly replaced with a fit of giggles. It's move-in day and my roommate has just shown up to campus. Now we're both laughing.

"Is this what you do when I'm not here?" She manages to get out.

"Shut it, Jen." I'm still amused when I get up and hug the shit out of her.

"Eww. Go wash your hands!" She exclaims. "And put some damn clothes on."

I realize I'm dressed in only a tiny pair of flowered string bikini panties and a see-through tank. I fell asleep on the couch again instead of putting on pajamas and sleeping in the rack room. "Yeah, yeah. You just want help moving your stuff in from your car," I retort.

"Duh," she says.

I get dressed and help her lug her belongings into our room. She has way too many clothes. But I don't complain since I borrow them all the time. We break to grab a late breakfast and then start the tedious process of setting up our room.

We make plans with some of our sorority sisters for the evening. We're going to frat-jump, meaning pay a visit to all the houses. There are only four, all next door to one another, so it's not exactly a chore. We're going to have so much fun this semester.

"Jesus, that's disgusting!" I yell. I clamp my mouth shut, willing the vile concoction to not come back up. Whiskey chased with Dr. Pepper. Yuck. Once I'm sure it's going to stay down I open my eyes. Jen is cracking up. She has the best laugh. It's sweet and feminine. I think I bray like a donkey.

We've been out for hours, hopping from one frat to the next. One more to visit—the Tau house. We save it for last because it's right across the street from our house. No need to make ourselves walk any further than necessary at the end of the evening. It's not laziness, it's simply that we know we may be stumbling back at the end of the night.

"Let's go!" Jen shouts over the music.

I nod and look over at Elizabeth and Morgan, the only other sorority sisters still hanging with us. The ladies tend to abandon the pack as the night wears on—I'm guessing to hang on to some frat guy for the night. We say our goodbyes and head to the Tau house.

As we enter and walk through the foyer, I see a small group of guys in the computer lab, just off from the common room. There are only six computers set up because the space is small. The doors are closed, but since they're glass-paneled, I can clearly see inside.

Evan is facing away from the door, elbows on his knees, eyes on the floor. Brock Gibbons, one of my favorite guy friends, is speaking to Evan. Drew is sitting beside Evan and Joey is leaning up against the wall with his arms crossed.

Brock looks up and we make eye contact. He looks back at Evan, puts a hand on his shoulder and starts speaking again. They look to be having a serious conversation so I decide not to approach. This isn't the usual scene in a frat house, especially when there's a party going on upstairs.

"What do you think happened?" Jen asks.

"I have no idea. I hope nothing too serious." I reply. "Let's go upstairs."

We've just reached the second floor when I hear Brock's voice from the bottom of the stairs. "Tooks!" he yells. I turn and watch him jog up the stairs. He barrels into me, picking me up and hugging me hard.

"Can't. Breathe." I struggle to get out. But I'm smiling. Man, I've missed him.

"Sorry. I'm just excited to see you. You can't see me for the first time in three months and keep walking," he chastises.

"Uh, I'm pretty sure I shouldn't have interrupted whatever was going on downstairs." Duh.

"Yeah, well we were just wrapping up. Our boy Evan needed a little pep talk."

"Is ... he okay?" my mind immediately starts thinking of all the terrible scenarios that could have happened.

"He'll be alright. Woman troubles have put him in a funk," he replies.

"Oh. Okay. I thought maybe something had happened to a family member or something. So, I guess this is better?" I pose it like a question. Brock laughs. He gives me zero info. I can only assume that Evan and his girlfriend are having some major issues.

I will not feel good about this. I will not feel good about this. I repeat this mantra to stop the hope that just bubbled up in my chest. I will stop the butterflies in my stomach. Yeah, good luck with that, dumbass.

"Come on, let's get you ladies some drinks," he says as he leads us down the hall to his room where we proceed to play I-Don't-Know-What-You-Did-This-Summer while drinking beer.

I think Jen might have the hots for Brock. They have the same double-majors and are both super-intelligent beings. I squint and try to imagine what their children might look like. Beautiful, smart little bastards is what they'd be. I chuckle to myself when Jen gives me an odd look.

"Whatever you're thinking, Becks, I don't want to know." She's the only person that calls me Becks. I flash a smile and take another sip of beer.

I keep checking the door, expecting Evan to eventually make his way here. I also make several trips to the bathroom closest to his room. The door is shut each time I walk past. Who knew I had stalker-like tendencies? And why on earth do I have anxiety tonight? I'm not the one having girl problems. I'm never like this so I resolve to bury it deep and enjoy my time with my friends. But isn't Evan my friend, too? Bleh. I think I need to vacate the premises sooner rather than later. I promise myself that I'll finish my beer and then I'll skedaddle.

Evan never does make an appearance. After my third beer in Brock's room I realize that I have had too much to drink and my stomach is starting to throw a fit. Elizabeth and Morgan have already left. I stand and announce that I am heading home.

"I'll come with," Jen says. I raise my eyebrows at her. I guess she's not planning on hooking up with Brock tonight.

"See ya, ladies," Brock says as he gives us each a hug.

"Anything going on next weekend?" I ask him.

"Nah. The guys have an extended trip next weekend. Three away games back-to-back-to-back. And I think the last one is like six or seven hours away, so they won't be home until Sunday evening.

Since most of the fraternity is on the lacrosse team and their fall season is beginning, this place will be a ghost town. We don't go out much during the week, unless there's some sort of function happening. I guess I won't see Evan until the weekend after next.

Then I remember that's the weekend of the SIX's outdoor party and Rachel will be here. Or not. I'm not sure what's going on with them and I'm not comfortable asking Brock so I don't say anything.

"What time is your first class tomorrow?" he asks.

"My roommate doesn't have class on Mondays this semester," Jen states then sticks her tongue out at me.

"Me either," Brock informs me. "Let's hang Sunday. Jen, you free?"

“Probably not since I have an 8 a.m. on Mondays, but let’s see how this week goes,” she replies.

“I’m in.” I say. “But I need to get home now. Your shitty beer is killing my stomach.”

They both laugh. “Yeah, I’m sure it has nothing to do with the shots of cheap whisky you’ve been taking all night,” Jen says.

“You’re right. It’s probably the Dr. Pepper,” I say, trying to keep a serious face.

“Get out of here before you puke in my room,” Brock is smiling when he says it, so I know he’s not really kicking me out.

“Later, Brockly.”

“Later, Tooks.” He turns to look at Jen and nods his head. “Jennifer.” Jen rolls her eyes at that and we make our exit.

Evan

I’m sitting in my room, drinking alone while everyone else in the house is partying. I’m not partying. I’m coping. I’m not feeling up to being social. Rachel called me earlier and the conversation ended with tears—hers, not mine.

I fucking hate it when she cries. It makes me feel like I’ve done something wrong when I haven’t done anything of the sort. Her father, John, wants to have dinner with us next weekend. He’s set up an interview for me at State for Saturday morning. Without asking me first.

While I’m extremely grateful that John is willing to make some phone calls on my behalf, I’m ticked that it would be done without consulting me. He knows I play lacrosse and have obligations on campus. I think back to the conversation Rachel and I had earlier today.

“But it’s fall, Evan. Lacrosse is a spring sport. Dad didn’t know you’d have lacrosse next weekend.”

“But you did, Rachel. You know my fall schedule. I fucking handed it to you over a month ago.”

“I know you’re upset, but it’s not a big deal either way. You can miss your game and come here and do the interview—the one that could greatly impact your future. Or, I can ask Dad to tell them that you are unable to make it due to your busy schedule.”

I am so pissed right now. “Do not make it sound like this is my fault or that I don’t give a shit about my future. Your father has put me in a position to back out of an interview that never should have been scheduled for this weekend in the first place. It doesn’t look good for me—someone supposedly eager to get into State’s med school—to cancel the damned interview that was arranged to help me get into State’s med school.”

She snuffles. “I don’t get why you’re so upset, Evan. This is your future. Our future. I’m just trying to help you as much as I can.”

“Did you tell John to set up this interview for Saturday?”

She doesn’t say anything, but I can hear her crying.

“Answer me!”

“I’m trying to help!” She yells. Rachel never yells. “But you don’t want my help, do you? You want to play lacrosse and not think about the future. You can’t wait until spring to figure this out. At this rate, you’ll never get into State and I’ll have transferred for nothing!” She starts sobbing.

I purposefully lower my voice and speak slowly so she will remember every word. “I did not ask you to transfer to State, Rachel. That was all your doing and I fully supported you in your decision. Despite what you and your father might think, I’m perfectly capable of doing things on my own. You two may have very well just fucked me over. Do not try to railroad me into doing something you think is best for me again. Not ever again.”

“Evan.” She whispers it. “I didn’t mean to. I thought you’d be happy. I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, well, from where I sit it sure feels like you didn’t think about me at all.”

"Don't say that. Everything I do is with you in mind. I didn't know missing a fall game would be such a big deal. Forgive me, please." Christ. She sounds so pathetic.

"Look, we're both upset and it's not helping anything. I'm going to get off the phone. We can talk tomorrow."

"O-okay." Her breath is still shaky. "Have a good night."

"Goodnight, Rachel."

"I love—"

I hang up before she finishes.

Drew comes in the room. He and the guys know all about the phone call. Really, it's just the tip of the iceberg. The fighting's been going on since spring. They're not especially fond of Rachel at the moment and I can't blame them.

"You okay?"

I take a long pull off my beer before I answer. "Yep."

"You drunk?"

"Yep."

"Hope it helps. I'm going to bed. The house is emptying out now so it will be quiet soon."

"Good to know. I think I'll turn in, too." I stand to head to the bathroom and the room starts to spin. Shit. This is gonna hurt in the morning.

When I get close to the bathroom, I see the back of a head covered in wavy blonde hair heading into the stairwell. My last thought before I enter the bathroom is whether or not Rebecca noticed my absence ... and which fuckers were on the receiving end of her smile tonight. I then proceed to puke out my guts into the toilet.