

DEADLINE

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by

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Chapter 1

The school loses its heartbeat by 3 p.m. The halls are silent; no footsteps patter down the linoleum, and there are no whispers hidden behind books. The students who slam lockers and kick stray pencils have made their escapes. The teachers who scold them for the noise were quick to follow.

Of course, there are some exceptions, like little muscle spasms to keep the blood pumping through the building. At the end of the hallway on the second floor, opposite the study halls and library, is the newsroom. It's one of the few classrooms whose door always seems to be left slightly ajar, open for any breaking news or frantic last-minute edits. A light at the end of the hall, this room holds every secret that passes through notes, slips through vents, and filters through the student body.

It's the first Thursday of the school year, and class has been out for an hour. Ian has always enjoyed being the last one in the hall, listening to his footsteps echo. Venice High School feels like a new building when the hallways aren't covered in trash and teachers aren't yelling over the hallway gossip. He finds it satisfying to disturb the silence, to be the only one causing ripples in the water. Ian twirls his lanyard around his finger as he walks into the newsroom, the keys clashing against each other. He runs his hand through his hair, brushing the short black strands off his forehead.

The room is empty-- still clean, too, a sign that nothing has started yet. He volunteered to do inventory for Mrs. Dales, the journalism advisor for Venice High. The

principal requires it before any reporting can begin. It's an easy job, since inventory is conducted the last week of school as well, once all the equipment should be put away for the summer and only the yearbook staff is left working. Ian has almost memorized the inventory sheet from his years working on the journalism staff.

The dark green cabinet is tucked into the corner of the room, unlabeled to prevent any kids who aren't in journalism from sneaking in and stealing their cameras. It's a ridiculous idea, but Ian bites his tongue around Mrs. Dales. The cabinet looks suspiciously bare without any labels taped to its front compared to the other cabinets. Half of the time it's left half-open. In a month, the cabinet will spill charging cords and press passes out of its side, just like last year. Mrs. Dales wishes for a responsible staff each year. *She shouldn't hold her breath.*

The cabinet door always sticks. He has never confirmed whether that's another security measure or just a maintenance issue that was never reported. He tugs once, twice, three times before the latch finally pops and he can peer inside. The cords are neatly wrapped and labeled, all cameras are tucked away into their cases, and the press passes for remaining students swing slightly from their hook.

Ian loves the chaos of the newsroom. He thrives on the quick deadlines and needs the pressure of a print date and the success of an entire group of people riding on him to shine. His mind wanders too much without the work, and he knows he's inflated situations before when he's left to think about them for too long.

He goes through the motions; counting USB cords, marking how many charging cords are piled on the shelf, plugging in chargers and making sure each camera has a full

battery. He rewraps each cord around long fingers, and tucks some on the top shelf just to inconvenience some of the shorter staff. It's boring work but he makes a point to volunteer for it each year. It puts him on Mrs. Dales' radar for being an active member of the staff, and someone she can trust.

And active and trustworthy are both excellent traits for an editor in chief. Mrs. Dales selects a new one every year, and Ian knows he's the perfect choice. He's been on the paper all four years of his high school career, longer than most of the staff, and his work is consistently graded above the rest of his classmates. Ian's already started making a list of changes he'll make to the paper as head editor. Mrs. Dales likes to announce the editor in chief of the newspaper the last Friday of the first week, giving herself three days to sort out how she wants her staff delegated.

Tomorrow, he'll get the position he's been working towards his whole time at Venice High. His heart pounds faster at the thought.

Once all of the equipment is charged and accounted for, Ian locks the cabinet and moves to the front of the room where there are four computers, one for the editor and one for the assistant editor of the paper. The other two are intended for the producer of the news show and the editor in chief of the yearbook. The rest of the walls in the room are lined by computers, and the staff sits with their back to each other. The center of the room has a table and some chairs, left open for staff to communicate freely in the middle of the space.

Ian rolls the chair out from under the table and slowly slides into it, relishing the feel despite each chair having the same worn-out cotton covering. The difference is, this

chair holds power. The person in this chair makes the executive decisions; what articles get written, who writes them, what page designs go through, and is in charge of sending the final document to the printer and picking up the papers. It's a lot of work, maintaining a staff of high school students, but Ian's ready. He's proven time and time again that he can handle the pressure and that when they are missing something, he knows all the right sources to contact. The paper would be nothing without him.

Ian waits for the computer to turn on, stretching out his long legs under the table. The tap of his shoe hitting the dull tile breaks the silence. The school received funding to replace all the old PCs in the newsroom with Macs, making it easier for the broadcast students to work on their videos. However, the journalism computers are always cluttered with article drafts, video clips, and potential yearbook photos, requiring a thorough refresh at the beginning of each year. The staff loses articles and pictures each year because they don't pay attention to where they're saving. It's hard for Ian to feel bad when someone has to start their article over. They should know better.

Once all of desktops are cleared, Ian opens the shared drive folder and begins to sort through any files left out of the class folder. It's a boring process, but a quick one this year. Ian saves his work to the shared drive and his personal drive, as well as a USB drive he keeps in his backpack. He doesn't expect the same level of responsibility from his peers. Although, once they're his staff, he can start emphasizing the importance of saving files in the proper folders. He'll sacrifice an article or two to set an example.

His task list completed, Ian shuts down every computer and rubs at his eyes. He knows he should wear his glasses more, but hates the way they leave marks on his nose,

already slightly crooked from being broken when he was younger. His girlfriend says the dark navy frames bring out the blue in his eyes, but Ian knows she's just being nice.

He moves to turn off the lights, but pauses. He looks over the room, still so neat, with no post-it notes tacked onto computer screens or printouts scattered across the limited table space. He resists the urge to knock something over. It feels wrong, a room usually so chaotic sitting so peacefully and stagnant. Soon, he'll be at the forefront of all the chaos, assigning jobs and hounding others for deadlines, all while he tries to manage his own work. His heart pumps faster in anticipation. The summer is always so dull, waiting around for something to happen. His classmates all post their vacations pictures online, nothing nearly as interesting as classmates having spats via Twitter or hearing rumors while crossing the hall. Soon, it will be his duty as the editor in chief to know all the gossip, the relationships between students, and the social climate regarding big issues among the student body.

Ian hovers by the door, letting his mind wander to the rest of his future staff. The only person who could possibly get the editor position over him is Omar, whom he likes working with and trusts when it comes to journalism decisions. Actually, Ian thinks Omar would be an excellent assistant. They co-wrote an article last year that was one of the bigger feature stories. Ian was impressed by Omar's ability to find and meet with sources, and he never forgot to grab headshots or stock photos when he was out. Omar has a natural charisma that is even apparent over the phone, which is why he scored several interviews with members of the school board.

Ian turns off the lights and locks the door. He needs a second in command, and

Omar has proven himself. A year younger than Ian, Omar is missing some experience, and this is only his second year in the district. But, Ian thinks, a fresh look at some things about Venice could be what the paper needs. With his guidance, the two of them could lead their staff to finding stories that go beyond football recaps and teacher profiles. Ian smiles to himself at the thought, retracing his steps through the empty halls back to his locker to stash the keys.

Omar also has a better relationship with Mrs. Dales than Ian. Ian's never managed to get beyond conversations about class and deadlines with her, and every attempt at more personal conversations felt forced and awkward. He's accepted it, but it didn't stop the brief spark of envy when Omar and Mrs. Dales grew close quickly. Omar knew about her kid's sport schedules and asked about her husband's job while Ian could hardly get more than a greeting out of the woman. Omar is a talented writer and knows how to get people to open up, two traits that Ian knows Mrs. Dales is looking for.

He sighs, his exhale loud in the hall. Omar seemed to win Mrs. Dales over after his first article, something that read more like a profile in the New York Times rather than an article about the departure of a history teacher. Even Ian was impressed. If he has to work under anyone, he doesn't have a big problem with it being Omar.

Just as long as Omar is the only person he's working under.

Fridays always thrum with energy at Venice High. Students are caught staring at the clock throughout a period, and knees bounce under desks in frantic rhythms. Even teachers lose focus by the end of the day. Giggles between classmates permeate the walls

as students plan their evenings with one another, deciding whose house to crash and what movies to bring. The first Friday of the year is almost as pointless as the last Friday of the year, few assignments given and no knowledge retained from the hours spent in class. Students leave with smiles on their faces, ready to embrace the weekend.

Ian storms out of his physics class and heads toward his locker. The heavy wooden door smacks loudly against the wall, jarring several freshmen waiting outside the room. Some heads turn, but most students in the crowded hall are too focused on stuffing their books into bags and getting out of the building as fast as possible. Ian glares down at the floor as he walks, fighting the urge to kick his locker when he reaches it.

“That asshole,” he mutters as he yanks it open, shoving his math books back onto the top shelf. The events of this morning replay in his head, over and over. Nothing has been able to distract him from his failure.

Mrs. Dales announced staff positions for the Venice View that morning, greeting the class with donuts and juice. She proudly stated that her staff is one of the most talented staffs she’s had in her career at Venice High, making several of the returning students roll their eyes. Each year, her kids just seem to get more talented, despite Ian knowing that his sophomore year was the worst collection of journalists he would ever work with. He ate his donut peacefully, hiding his smile while she talked.

“And now, I am proud to announce our new editor in chief,” Mrs. Dales said, and Jessica, a new writer on the team, started a small drum roll on her desk. Ian shifted in his seat, ready to stand up and accept his position.

“Omar Faraji!”

He stared blankly while Omar stood up, big smile gracing his features. Ian's heart dropped as Omar thanked Mrs. Dales and began his small speech, the speech that Ian should have been giving. Part of Ian deflated, but he still had hope; if Omar is the editor in chief, then certainly he's the assistant. No one else is as experienced or as competent when it comes to the newspaper. And now, he has a permanent scapegoat whenever something goes wrong, because he's not the one to make the final decision. It's perfect. It's going to be perfect.

Ian had just started clapping for Omar when Mrs. Dales began again, announcing that she had actually already spoken to Omar about his position to gain his insight on who would be his second in command. Ian was confused, wondering why she'd decide to change the way she chose her staff after all these years. He was still hopeful, though. He was good friends with Omar, surely he'd still be chosen for the assistant editor position.

He almost choked on his donut when Omar pointed to Casey, another relatively new journalist who writes sub-par articles and uses only his friends as sources, and announced that he would be assistant editor. The shock prevented Ian from doing anything more than swallowing his food and quietly clapping along with the class. Mrs. Dales came up to him towards the end of the period and told him that she had him on the list as well, but that she was afraid to stretch her talented journalists too thin with extra responsibility. Ian forced a smile and nodded as she spoke, trying not to flip his desk over.

He sacrificed sleep, a social life, and his grades for this program. And they couldn't even reward him with an assistant position.

Ian shakes his head, focusing his attention back on the present. He slams the door of his locker against the one next to it, satisfied by the loud noise it creates. The hallways clear quickly, leaving him and a few other students scattered down the two long rows of lockers. His mind is racing, trying to figure out how this happened, or what he did to make Omar choose Casey over him. He glances up when he feels the presence of another person at his side.

Rob Stocker is leaning against the opposite locker, broad shoulders blocking the way. His eyes are wide, obnoxiously blue, and Ian's already annoyed.

"So did you hear the news?" Rob asks. A senior yearbook photographer, Rob's the closest friend he has at Venice. It doesn't stop Ian from hating him half the time.

"That I got screwed out of my position by freaking Omar and Casey? Is that the news?" Ian asks. Rob frowns, distracted from his original statement by Ian's outburst. He puts his hand on Ian's shoulder.

"Dude, that's shit. I'm sorry." Ian doesn't bother shrugging off the comforting hand. "But that's uh, not the news." Ian keeps fumbling in his locker, trying to find an outlet for his anger that isn't punching Rob square in the face. He promised his girlfriend, Emma, he'd work on his anger issues, and has done pretty well so far. He can't have Omar and Casey ruining that for him too.

"Well, are you going to tell me?"

"Delaney and Omar are dating." Ian froze.

He should tell Rob that he's sorry, considering Rob has been in love with Delaney for the past two years, but Ian's too busy wondering when they were ever together long

enough to start a relationship, and how Delaney's dad had ever let Omar set foot into his house, let alone kiss his daughter goodnight.

"What?" he says, the only thing he can manage to get out amidst his racing thoughts.

"Yeah, I guess they were talking last year and then hung out like, the whole summer and now they're in love." Rob's eyes are downcast, toeing a scrap of paper on the ground. Ian really should say something, but his brain is still reeling from the news.

Delaney, former head cheerleader for the football team and lead anchor for the school news show, is dating Omar, a relatively unknown junior who is now the editor in chief of the school newspaper. Ian's known Delaney for several years now, and they've grown closer this past year because Emma and Delaney are best friends. She generally went for the all-American boys, tall and broad with short blonde hair and big blue eyes, boys you'd see in catalogues for the latest teen clothing stores. Boys like Rob, who is well aware that he is the epitome of "her type" yet has never been able to get her to accept a date. *Well, he's not her type anymore.*

"Does her dad know?" Ian asks, confused as to how Coach Moore would have ever let his daughter date a black guy. Coach's history of racist comments is well-known among the student body, several of his football players able to quote the infamous story of how he lost his football scholarship to "that black kid with Affirmative Action on his side". Omar is the only black student in the school, but since he doesn't play football, Ian is sure the two have never formally met. Omar only wrote a few sport columns last year, and from what Ian can remember, they were focused on spring sports. He can only

imagine the look on Coach's face when he finds out his precious daughter is dating a black kid.

It would serve Omar right, for giving away his position to someone who doesn't deserve it. Omar didn't even apologize to Ian for not choosing him, or express any sort of guilt for taking his place as head editor. Ian hopes every minute Omar spends with Coach is miserable.

"I don't think so, it all seems pretty hush-hush right now," Rob says, looking around the empty hall. There's a few kids left, although none seem interested in their conversation.

"So how did you find out?"

"I saw them in the hallway earlier. I was walking with Casey to English and we saw Delaney give him a kiss before her class. I asked Casey what was up, and I guess he's known about it for a while. Probably was the one who got them together, to be honest," Rob replies. He shrugs his shoulder, as a poor attempt to pretend he's not upset by the news. Ian really should say something nice.

"Casey's such a rat," he says instead. It does makes Rob smile, so Ian counts it as a moment of comfort. Casey and Rob have been friends for a while, both playing football their freshman year. Casey stuck with it while Rob chose to play soccer instead, but the two of them still run in the same circle of friends. Rob was the one who got Casey interested in journalism, although Casey chose the newspaper over the yearbook. "Make sure none of the football pictures for the yearbook feature him."

"He's the quarterback, dude. Dales would have my ass. It's just," Rob pauses,

looking earnestly at Ian. “You would have told me about Delaney and Omar if you knew, right?”

Probably, Ian thinks, but not out of friendship. He would have liked to see what Rob would have done to stop their relationship. “Of course.”

“Exactly. Like, he knows how I feel about her. He didn’t even tell me that Delaney was interested in those people!” Rob hushes his voice towards the end, careful of anyone who may be wandering the halls. Ian nods along, finally closing his locker and leaning one shoulder against the cool metal. His anger is still simmering on the surface, but Ian knows his anger will only get him so far. He can’t spend a year being angry while working on the paper he loves. He needs actions, somewhere to place this anger. He needs revenge.

Rob starts speaking again, pulling Ian’s attention back to Omar’s new relationship. “I mean, I guess I should be happy that she’s so happy. I thought she was going to pull a muscle with how much she was smiling yesterday. I just wish it was because of me,” Rob says, sighing in dejection. Ian generally tries not to roll his eyes when Rob gets so hopelessly sappy, but this time, he perks up. Omar has been especially happy about almost everything the past week, and Delaney must be the answer to that.

Well, Ian knows one person who can put an end to that. He just needs to catch him before he gets too deep into football season.

“Rob, don’t be so hopeless just yet.” Rob cocks his head to the side, waiting for Ian to elaborate. “Now, let’s get out of here. I have to break the news to my dad, and I’m going to need all the prep time I can get.”

Ian's house is several miles away from the school, and he wishes the drive was longer.

Ian's family lives in a comfortable house, the typical suburban home in a newly built neighborhood with high ceilings and too many levels. It's too big for three people. His voice echoes when he calls something out from his bedroom, and his dad is usually in the lower level, a pretentious way for saying he's downstairs. There's a basement below, relatively sparse compared to other basements Ian has been in for parties. He supposes they don't keep a lot of things for sentimental value. If it can't be used, throw it out.

Dread builds up in his stomach as he walks up the driveway to his door, hoping he can sneak into his bedroom without anyone noticing he's home. The lock in the door always clicks, but unless someone is sitting in the dining room, he should be able to make it through.

He turns the knob, hears the click, and slowly pushes the door open. He takes a soft step over the threshold, staying as quiet as possible. His backpack shuffles against the cotton of his shirt as he fully enters the foyer. He pauses: still silent. Ian slowly pushes the door close, turning the knob to minimize the sound of metal clicking into place. It makes a soft clink, indicating it's closed.

Surprised he's made it this far, he toes off his sneakers and picks them up, walking barefoot down the hall. He can see the staircase, and the carpeted floor that will muffle his steps until he's safe in his room. He puts his left hand on the bannister when a soft, "Ian?" breaks the silence, and he winces. *Shit.*

He turns around and sees his mother, sprawled out along the sofa. Where he's standing, he can't see her face, just her denim-clad legs propped on the opposite armrest. She looks even thinner, long limbs stark among the wide leather couch. Absently, Ian wonders what she's had to drink so far. The jeans suggest she's gone somewhere, although Ian's not sure exactly where she spends her time during the day. She works from home, typing up transcripts of interviews and lectures for various clients. Ian's never been able to successfully sneak past her, but not for lack of trying.

"Hi, honey!" she says, speech slurred from either sleep or drink, most likely both.

"Hey, mom."

"How was your day?" she asks.

"It was fine," he replies, stopping himself from clenching his teeth at the reminder of just how terrible his day was. He'll have to talk about it at dinner anyway, the least he can do is save himself the humiliation of repeating it again. "I'm tired."

"Oh honey, I bet. Go take a nap, I'll call you when dinner's ready." He nods, although she likely can't see him, and heads up the rest of the stairs. He peers over the banister at the top to see his mom already dozing back to sleep. There's no drink on the table next to her, but Ian's sure there's a sticky glass in the sink that smells like vodka.

He ducks into his room, closes the door, and tosses his backpack across the room. It hits the wall, shaking the picture frame on his desk and knocking it over. He sighs, moving to pick it up and place it upright. The photo of him and Emma, taken by Delaney at one of the football games last year, is the only photo of his family or friends in the room. The walls are decorated with newspaper articles, clippings taken from the New

York Times and the Wall Street Journal¹. There are magazine articles as well from several different publications, each selected for their brilliance. Ian thought if he just studied these articles, studied the way each journalist wrote and learned how to incorporate it into his own style, he'd be editor in no time.

Well, that dream was certainly shattered. Apparently, all it really takes is one good article and some charm to make it to the top. And to be second best? Just be friends with the asshole who makes it to the top and hope he doesn't stab you in the back!

Ian sits on his bed, staring at one of the articles on the far wall. It's tacked next to his desk, where he actually sits and does his work, unlike Emma, who uses her desk more as a vanity table than anything else. He wanted to be an editor who had experience with each element of the paper, down to knowing how to use the design software. He redesigned the page himself, spent hours dragging text back and forth with the motivation that it would make him the most skilled editor in the history of Venice View.

Hours wasted, Ian thinks, biting the inside of his cheek. The page looks nice, and there are several other chunks of Pulitzer-winning articles redesigned and taped to various parts of his room. He was going to reorganize them, create a mural once he was editor and show it to the staff as a source of motivation. He had a lot of plans for his staff.

Now, he thinks about tearing it all down.

His phone is tucked into the front pocket of his backpack, and faintly, he hears the buzzing of the vibration setting. He doesn't move, too exhausted from the day to think any more about getting gypped by Omar and Casey, or to try and predict how dinner is going to go tonight. Instead, he leans to the side, falling fully into his bed. It takes only a

few moments for him to fall asleep.

He wakes to a knock on his door, quickly followed by it opening. “Dinner’s ready, let’s eat.” Ian’s dad doesn’t wait for a response before shutting the door again. Dread builds up in Ian’s stomach, only stifled by the growl that follows at the thought of food. He didn’t eat lunch, he suddenly remembers, being too irritated to do anything but tear apart pieces of the dinner roll and stir the shockingly bright gravy into his potatoes. He might have eaten a chicken nugget, maybe two.

He forces himself up, running fingers through his short black hair and pushing it back into place. He pulls at a few strands that refuse to move, urging them up. Emma’s the only one who he allows to mess with his hair, and even then, he fixes it quickly.

He pulls his shirt taut over his stomach, smoothing any wrinkles. Ian’s not interested in any snide comments about how he’s dressed or why he’s so tired after just a few days of school, and how is he going to make it a whole year? His dad always finds the most minute details to pick at. At least tonight, he won’t have to look very far to find a failure.

Walking down the stairs, Ian’s already thinking of other things to mention about his day, ways to spin the events into a good thing. Maybe he didn’t want the responsibility after all. Maybe he was kept on staff because he was the best, and they needed a good role model for the rest of the reporters. Maybe it would look bad if every feature story was written by the editor.

Ian sighs, reaching the bottom of the steps with a quiet *thunk*. The wound is still fresh. He doesn’t want to lie about it. He wants the entire world to know that he was

robbed, his position stolen underneath him by two average students, one who can't even tell the difference between APA and MLA style. No, he is going to look his father in the face and tell him he didn't get his position, but he isn't the one who failed. Dales failed in picking the wrong editor, Omar failed in picking the wrong assistant, and Casey failed for even accepting the position he can never manage.

His dad is already sitting at the dinner table, scrolling through the news on his phone. He glances up briefly when Ian pulls out his chair, giving his son a small nod before looking back down. His mom is in the kitchen, still scooping something that steams into a bowl. She turns and smiles, asking, "How was your nap?" Her hair is neatly brushed and pulled off her face, all remnants of her own nap today replaced with the image of a hardworking housewife in the kitchen

"It was fine," he replies, sliding quickly into his seat. Their table seats eight people and is too big for their family. The three of them generally clump together towards one end, although tonight Ian is keeping his distance. His mother will likely sit between him and his father, keeping any comment about the change in seating arrangement to herself. She'll lead straight into conversation about their days, and Ian will want to die.

She finishes scooping food into a bowl and carries it to the table, placing it in the middle. It's a soup, with potato and cheese and broccoli, and Ian's stomach grows at the smell. His mother's cooking is one of the few things that warms him to her. They're not close; he's heard enough arguments at night about the men his mother sleeps with when his dad is out of town, so Ian keeps his distance. You can't trust a woman like that, his father told him once when he was twelve, and Ian has kept the advice close to heart. But

he can't ignore that her cooking is something he looks forward to each night.

"So how are my boys today?" she says, passing one bowl to Ian and one bowl to his father. They take them silently, and the pause extends for a moment longer before his dad replies, "Today was fine." His mom nods her head, scooping soup into her bowl while she waits for her husband to continue. Ian watches, uncomfortable. They try to be kind in front of him, although there are moments when they both fail and snark to their son about one another. Ian wonders why they haven't filed for divorce, but he doesn't want to suggest it. Even though his parents are miserable, a selfish part of him wants to keep them together.

"Work was busy, but it's better that way. We've been trying to close this deal for a while, and I think tomorrow will finally be the day." Ian's dad works in advertising as the go-between for the client and the agency. Ian doesn't know much about the job, but he knows his dad hates having to deal with the art department. "They've been so hung up on this damn font, though. Who knew people cared so much about whether the swoop on the 'y' crossed over itself?"

Ian swallows a mouthful of soup instead of responding. He wants to tell him it matters when it comes to legibility, consistency, and overall attractiveness of the ad. It's the first thing he learned when they had a mandatory lesson on design his freshmen year of journalism. Instead, he concentrates on the burn of broth down his throat, and the way it warms his chest.

His mom nods her heads with a grin, clearly forced. Ian's dad isn't even looking up from his food. She turns to him, grin slightly bigger, and asks, "and how was your

day?”

Ian swallows hard although there's no food in his mouth. He doesn't know whether to tell them or not, so he plays it off. “It was fine. Classes are still slow since it's the first week,” he says, taking another spoonful of soup. He's hoping that's enough to satisfy them, and they can all go back to sitting quietly.

“How about the paper? Everything okay with that?” Ian chokes on his food, coughing for a moment before recovering. His mom watches him, blue eyes patiently waiting for an answer. Ian fights the urge to glare. Of course she found the one thing he doesn't want to talk discuss.

“It's fine, mom,” he starts, words tense.

“They should be announcing the editor soon, right?” she asks, and Ian can't stop himself from laughing. It's short, more of a harsh exhale than a laugh, but it makes him feel less like he's about to combust. His mom's eyebrows furrow just enough to show confusion, but with minimal wrinkles on her forehead. Ian wonders if she's practiced that in the mirror.

“Yeah, they did today.” His grip on his spoon tightens, bracing himself.

“And?” his dad asks after a loud slurp. Ian's eyes jerk up, away from his bowl. His dad's eyes are locked on his phone, but it's clear he is listening for Ian's response. Something cold flows through Ian. His dad rarely listens during dinner conversation, and Ian doesn't necessarily mind.

But he's listening now. Ian's mortified.

“Omar Faraji is the head, and Casey Langdon is assistant,” Ian says, forcing a

little pep into his voice. It's glaringly fake, and his mom winces.

"But I was so sure you would get it," she says, like it's helpful, like he wasn't thinking the exact same thing. His dad is looking at him now, eyes narrowed.

"The black kid?" he asks, and Ian nods silently, stirring his soup as a distraction. Everyone knows Omar, if only by his position of being the only black kid at Venice. Ian's not sure his dad has ever called Omar by his name.

His dad leans back in his chair, spoon still dangling from his fingers. He laughs once in disbelief, and Ian can feel his face grow warm in humiliation.

"How does that work?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Dales doesn't explain her decisions," Ian says, trying to stay calm. His mom reaches over to place her hand on his, but he slips it away to rest on his lap.

"He's only been there a year. I thought the person who has worked the longest usually gets to be editor," his mom says, tone soft, like he's a small animal that could be spooked. It grates on his nerves.

"Usually, but not this year," he answers, gritting his teeth. He needs this conversation to be over.

"Is there a new diversity quota on the staff?" his dad asks, laughing, like Mrs. Dales ruining Ian's senior year is something to joke about. His mom shoots his dad a small smile in response, but Ian doesn't bother.

"I'm glad you think this is funny," he mumbles to himself, looking back down at his bowl. He sees movement in his periphery. When he looks back up, he meets his dad's

eyes.

“I don’t think it’s funny, Ian. I think it’s sad that your teacher caved into this “politically correct” expectation that minorities deserve positions they didn’t work for,” His dad says, tone calm, and Ian can’t look away. Something in him shifts; the anger is still there, resting under the surface of his skin, but something feels calmer in his heart. It’s the nicest his dad has spoken to him in a while.

“You should have gotten that position. It’s a disgrace that you didn’t. But it’s a lesson too; you’re going to have to fight a lot harder for what you deserve because of your skin color,” his dad continues. Ian stays quiet, waiting for his dad to say something about being disappointed anyway or how he should have known about his disadvantage and overcome it anyway.

“I’m sorry, honey,” his mom says, reaching over to grab his hand. He lets her squeeze it once before slipping his hand away to grab his spoon again. There’s pressure in his throat, and Ian shovels more soup into his mouth with the hope of swallowing it down. He won’t cry about this, certainly not in front of his dad.

“Does it really matter, though?” his dad asks, and Ian almost chokes on his food. His mom even looks up quickly, a sharp jerk of her head in his periphery, to shoot a look at his dad. He continues to look at Ian, waiting for an answer. *How does he not get it?*

“Yes,” Ian answers, trying to hide his disbelief at the question. “It’s what every reporter works towards. It’s the highest position on staff. You call the shots, down to who writes what article and how the page looks. It’s the best thing to have on a resume, too.”

His dad scoffs. “Why are you so worried about a resume right now?”

Ian looks back down at his bowl to hide rolling his eyes. His dad has always been out of touch when it came to Ian's life, but Ian figured his dad would at least know he was starting college applications.

"I need a leadership position for my college applications. Editor was supposed to be mine," Ian explains. His dad shrugs.

"Why not just go into the military?" his dad says, like it's been Ian's plan all along, like every high school student's dream is to be screamed at for hours and forced to run drills every day. Ian physically recoils at the thought.

"Because I want to be a journalist, dad," Ian says.

"He's going to win a Pulitzer before he's thirty," his mom adds, smiling at him. Suddenly, the goal seems childish.

"Be a journalist after. Serve your country for a few years, get free tuition, then you can start writing whatever the hell you want. It's a beautiful system, you should appreciate it," his dad says, looking back at his phone. He's checked out, already moving onto the next thing to grab his attention.

"It's an option," his mom says, and Ian glares down at his soup. It's already gone cold. "But not the only one. I'm sure your resume looks just fine without being editor, dear."

"We'll see," Ian says, holding on the bright spark of hope in his chest.

And if it's not enough, he'll just have to find a way to get his position back.

Chapter 2

It's too early for this, Ian thinks.

He's sitting at his computer, scribbling doodles in the margin of his notebook. Briefly, he entertains the idea of digging his pen so deep into the paper the plastic cracks, but he's not in the mood to clean up the ink. Ian hates sitting through article assignment, the first task at the beginning of each month. It's tedious but necessary, considering everyone besides him seems to struggle with remembering what events they have to cover and their deadlines. It's especially dull in September, where there are only a few events scattered among the four weeks. Most of the first issue consists of editorials and summer recaps, and it never sells well.

A whiteboard takes up most of the front wall in the room. Someone many years ago took the time to draw out a blank calendar in permanent marker, leaving empty spaces for the month and the number of each day. They have to go over it again every few years to keep the lines dark, and the editor is in charge of writing out the calendar for each month and adding events to it. Omar just finished adding the last number, and is looking out at his staff with eager eyes.

His broad shoulders are blocking two of the days from Ian, only making him more irritated. Omar isn't a huge guy, but he's tall and fills out his frame. Casey is much larger, his football build looking out of place among the rest of the newspaper staff.

Ian's not sure why they call it a newspaper. Technically, they produce the school magazine, publishing once a month and using glossy paper with colored photos. Mrs. Dales figured high school students would be more willing to read a magazine, and places a big emphasis on getting the student body involved in the paper by featuring quotes from students and using their photos. If anything, she says, it will sway some more kids to buy a paper to show their parents.

"Okay guys," Omar starts, pulling Ian out of his thoughts. "Let's start adding events."

Ian sits quietly while staff starts shouting out things to add to the calendar. He rolls his eyes when Casey blurts out the date for the first football game in two weeks, as though it wasn't the biggest event of the month. It will likely be their feature story, like it is every year, requiring an interview with Coach Moore and a handful of players. Ian starts jotting down possible questions, trying to make them sound different than every other freaking year they write this article. They should just recycle last October's feature story and save themselves the trouble.

"Do you have an article idea?" Omar asks. Ian looks up from his notebook to meet Omar's eyes, big and brown. They're lighter than Ian expected, now that he's really looking, admiring the flecks of gold in the dark brown. He glances around briefly to see that the rest of the staff has already become distracted and chatty, flipping through their personal calendars and looking up the school's official calendar online. Omar has moved from his spot at the front of the class to stand next to Ian's computer, where he sat just to Ian's left last year.

“No, I’m just drafting some interview questions,” Ian replies. Omar grins.

“Perfect! Do you want to take this one? Not sure if I trust the new staff with the first feature of the year,” Omar says, leaning in closer to make sure none of the staff hears his comment. Ian forces a laugh.

“Yeah, no problem. I’ll schedule something with Coach Moore early next week, and I have... three classes with football players? I think. I’ll see if they can get me some quotes or even drop by after practice next week.” Omar nods as Ian talks, his eyes bright. *It’s almost overwhelming, Ian thinks, how happy Omar is.*

It’s a shame he has to ruin it.

“Sounds great! And I mean, you can always get Casey to get some quotes for you if you need him to.” Ian tries not to make a face, but he knows Omar catches his hesitation. Ian wouldn’t let Casey touch one of his articles if his grade depended on it. Frankly, he has no interest in anyone else (save Omar, since he proved himself last year) being involved in his articles. Ian doesn’t share bylines. If he’s going to put in the work, he wants the credit for it.

Omar doesn’t comment on Ian’s reaction, which is nice. He’s not willing to explain why he thinks Casey is an incompetent journalist and overall big-boned idiot to his new editor, especially since Ian has been trying to ignore the fact that he is required to work under said idiot. Frankly, it’s taking energy he doesn’t have to act like it’s not killing him that he’s not standing next to Omar, taking article ideas despite how tedious he finds the task.

“All right, well, just let me or Casey know if you need anything,” Omar says. Ian

nods, placing his attention back to his notebook while Omar tries to capture the class's attention again.

Ian watches as the class naturally grows quiet when Omar steps back in front of the board. It's impressive, to say the least.

"Okay guys, bring it back to me. When is the first soccer game?" Omar asks. Bethany, a quiet sophomore who switched from broadcast to newspaper, calls out an answer. Ian half-listens as Omar runs through the list of fall sports. It's short and quick, thank God.

"Okay, moving away from events. Are there any new teachers we should do a profile on?"

"Mr. Thatcher is the new College Prep English teacher, I think he teaches Etymology too," Matt replies, a fourth-year newspaper student whose focus is page design. Katie, a third-year designer, says something about a new janitor. Ian rolls his eyes. Who cares about janitors? No one even speaks to them anyway.

"Yes! We need to highlight more staff beyond teachers anyway. Do we have any new administration coming in?" Omar replies, jotting notes on the blank side of the whiteboard. He's excited, gesturing quickly while he tries to get more discussion going with the class.

"I can check with the main office, Mr. Lowell should know," Casey says.

"Okay, great. What about new clubs?" Omar asks, taking a brief pause from his notes to stop and rewrite a word. Ian was wondering why Omar's handwriting had seemed slightly off; now he realizes it's because his hands are shaking. Ian stares,

transfixed by the slight movements. He imagines the first day as editor would make someone a little nervous, but it's not like Omar is speaking to a room full of strangers. He's known these people for a year, having transferred last year from out of state. Ian figures it's a pretty simple position when you're friends with everyone.

Ian glances around, eyes landing on Carol and Alex. They sit across the room from Ian, and Alex was almost suspended last year for tweeting racist things about another football team in the district. Coach Moore argued on his behalf and the administration let him stay. Faintly, Ian remembers Carol making a comment to Katie about how Omar should have moved to the other school, where he'd fit in. Katie was so shocked by the comment she told Omar, not wanting him to think she said it. Omar hasn't really spoken to Carol or Alex since.

Ian goes back to his notes, sinking more into both his seat and his thoughts. Omar is uncomfortable in his position as leader—Ian's not sure why just yet, but it's something. Probably because he knows Casey is less of a help and more of a burden. Ian scoffs out loud; he probably just owed Casey a favor, and this was how he paid him. Ian lost his rightfully deserved position because Omar can't just lie to someone. Being noble gets you nowhere.

Looking down at his notes again, Ian realizes the opportunity he has in his hands. An interview with Coach means a chance to out Omar and Delaney to her dad, who won't stand for this relationship. Delaney will dump Omar because she can't just go against her father like that, not when she's daddy's little girl. Coach is the only family she has, there's no way she'd risk anything that would harm their relationship, especially

when it's just a dumb boy in high school. No, she would end whatever magical summer fling they had and Omar would be crushed, and Ian will have the satisfaction of knowing that he was the cause of it all.

Ian has to wait a week before he can put his plan into action, but once Monday rolls around, he's ready. He schedules his interview with Coach Moore during fifth period, his and Rob's lunch period. Most interviews are scheduled during the day since students are lazy and don't want to wait around after school, and while Ian would have enjoyed experiencing Coach's wrath first-hand after school, he figures it's safer to just do lunch. He's not looking to get Coach fired, although considering administration has not fired him yet, he's not sure if it's even possible. The football team is pretty successful, and who needs a safe school zone when you can take home football championships?

Rob is coming with him under the excuse that they need pictures for the article, as if snapping a headshot of Coach is a difficult job. They could just use the previous three years of headshots, after Coach committed to shaving his head, and Ian's sure none of their readers would know. Press passes in hand, they show them to the poor faculty member in charge of monitoring lunch (this semester it's Mr. Angelus, one of the French teachers), and head up the stairs. Coach's office is tucked into the hall of alumni photos, the only room in that wing.

"Okay Rob, we have to strategize," Ian says, stopping in the middle of the hall once they're away from other classrooms. Rob stops, moving his attention away from twisting the lens cap of his camera on and off.

“Why? We go in there, you get your interview, and at the end you tell Coach that Omar and Delaney are together,” Rob say.

“Right, but here’s the thing—I can’t be traced back to throwing Omar under the bus. I have to work with him, and if I want to even find a way to get Casey’s position, I can’t do it knowing Omar hates me. I need to keep his trust,” Ian explains. He has to protect himself. Rob nods along, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth.

“Okay, so... Is there a way we can make it an accident? Maybe you tell him you’re happy to hear about the two of them?” Rob asks. Ian shakes his head.

“No, Omar could still resent me for it,” Ian says, refusing to take any risks that could tarnish his reputation in Omar’s eyes. He hates needing Omar to like to him, but he knows it will be worth it.

Rob rolls his eyes, growing frustrated.

“Dude, who even cares what that asshole thinks? It’s your position in the first place,” Rob says, tone sharp. Ian nods absently, focused more on planning their next move than anything Rob is saying.

Rob.

“Hey, doesn’t Coach already know about your crush on Delaney?” Rob’s cheeks grow pink and he looks down at the floor. Ian remembers the time Rob made a poster and stood in her front yard until she got home, unaware that Coach was the one driving the car.

“Yeah, he’s uh, seen some of the more extravagant things I’ve done to get her attention,” Rob says, shrugging off his embarrassment. Rejection and humiliation hasn’t

slowed Rob down any, though. Ian would admire the determination, if it wasn't so pathetic.

"So you should be the one to tell him! You don't work for Omar, so if Coach tells people that he found out through you, it won't affect you at all," Ian says. Rob mulls over the idea, then starts to nod.

"Okay, that could work. I mean, we're kind of on a more personal level anyway, so I guess mentioning this to him wouldn't be weird."

"Right, but if I talked to Coach about his daughter, it'd be super weird. Besides," Ian continues, growing more excited by the idea, "This might actually be a way to get you in his good graces. Technically, you're doing him a favor." Rob perks up at that.

"Yeah dude, I'm like, saving Delaney from herself." Ian wants to laugh, but keeps it together. *And Rob wonders why Delaney won't date him.*

"Right. Okay, this is going to work. But wait until I finish my interview, I do actually need to get a good article out of this," Ian says, growing serious when they mention the paper. If he can't have a leadership position, he'll just have to write the best articles out of the entire staff. Given the competition, Ian's confident he can stand out among the rest of them.

And now that he has Rob doing his dirty work, Omar has no idea that his star journalist will also be the one who took Delaney away from him.

They continue their walk down the hall, undisturbed by wandering students or office aides carrying leave slips. Their footsteps echo on the shiny floor, and both of them are quiet, thinking of their missions. They pause when they reach the door, waiting for

any changes in the plan. Neither of them speak, so Ian reaches for the handle of the office and turns it.

Coach Moore's office is relatively large for his position as the football coach. He helps other classes sometimes- once, he was Ian's substitute for Chemistry when the scheduled sub was late, and Omar told him last year about the train wreck that was Coach Moore trying to teach his English class *Crime and Punishment*. He commonly spoke in the Post-Secondary Preparation requirement, a one-semester class about preparing for college and learning about personal finances. His speech is always the same, preaching the merits of college athletics without acknowledging that most students are planning on getting an actual education instead of wasting their free tuition on parties and paid grades. Still, the student body likes him because he's friendly.

Ian knocks twice and opens the door, finding Coach buried in paperwork at his desk. The beginning of football season is really the only time Coach could be considered "busy," and the only time his job is worth the money the school pays to keep him. He doesn't look up when he hears the door, only lifts a hand and waves them into the room. Ian and Rob slip quickly in and close the door. There are two chairs across from his desk, large and padded. Ian sits quietly in one while Rob stands awkwardly next to him, fiddling with the memory card again.

Coach's pen flies through a signature before dropping onto the desk, and he finally looks up. His eyes flash in recognition at Ian across from him, but his eyebrows furrow once he realizes Rob is also joining him.

"Robert, can I help you?" he asks, voice cold. Rob straightens up, surprised by the

direct acknowledgment.

“He’s my photographer,” Ian replies quickly, trying to move the conversation off Rob. His article comes first. “I wanted to make sure we have a good photo. My hands always shake.” Coach turns his attention away from Rob and looks at Ian, giving him a small smile.

“Well, next time, try to find someone else.” Ian can practically feel Rob wilting under Coach’s disdain, but he keeps a smile on his face.

“He’s the best on staff,” Ian says, which isn’t necessarily true, but he’ll do Rob a favor. He needs Rob on his side for his plan to work, and while Ian doesn’t care whether Delaney ever gives Rob the time of day, it would be an extra stab in the back if she starts dating another journalist.

Coach glances at Rob again, hardly buying Ian’s lie. He may not be the best (Sarah Stanley is probably the best, but she’s been taking photography classes at the community college downtown for the past two years), but he’s very good at his job.

“So, is this just another pre-season interview?” Coach asks, focusing his attention fully on Ian. Ian chuckles out of courtesy, but wants to scream. His articles are not “just” articles. He puts time and effort into making sure the articles he writes are original, even when they’re about events that happen every year and don’t necessarily warrant an article at all.

Regardless, he smiles, turning on his audio recorder on his phone and opening his notebook to a blank page. He likes to record his interview and take notes, making sure he doesn’t miss anything. Sometimes, it’s easier for him to think of follow up questions after

reading a response.

“Well, sort of. My questions focus more around how the student body has become more active at football games, and whether that influences you or the team. Have you noticed a change in student engagement?” Ian asks.

“Well, we certainly have more students at each game...” Coach starts. They continue their conversation about the increase in student interest regarding high school athletics and how it has influenced his football players. It’s nothing groundbreaking, but it’s different from their previous articles, and Ian’s sure he can put a spin on it to further differentiate it. Coach answers his final question and as Ian writes down the last remark, Coach provides him with the perfect transition.

“So, do you need to interview any of my boys? I don’t like practice being interrupted, but I can pull them out of class real quick if you want.” Ian glances over at Rob as though thinking about his answer, and Rob beats him to it.

“We can have Casey pull some quotes with the team after practice. Give him his first responsibility as assistant editor to the paper,” Rob says.

“Oh right, he did score that position,” Coach says with a smile, eyes focused on Ian. Ian fights the urge to scream.

“And you’ve got to be in charge of the whole thing by now, right?” Coach asks, and Ian knows he’s trying to be friendly. He clenches his jaw, hard.

“No, Omar is. You didn’t know?” Rob answers, playing off the confused student surprisingly well. Coach glares at him, but Ian’s not sure if it’s out of distaste for Rob or Omar.

“No. Why would I know that?”

“Well, he’s Delaney’s boyfriend. I figured she would have mentioned it...” Rob trails off, watching the realization dawn on Coach’s face. He’s stoic at first, the only sign he’s really paid any attention to Rob being how wide his eyes are. Slowly, his face grows red, anger building each moment the three of them sit. His beautiful daughter with the only black student in the entire school. Ian stops himself from hitting record again on his phone, figuring that would look a little suspicious to have on film.

It’s dead silent for a minute before Coach says anything.

“Robert, are you lying to me?” Coach asks, calm facade wavering as he grows angrier. Robert shakes his head quickly.

“Absolutely not, sir. I was just as surprised as you are.” Coach’s big hands grip the arms of his desk chair tightly, and he leans back into the chair. Ian’s pretty sure Coach has forgotten he is here, too consumed by thoughts of his daughter’s love life.

“You’ve been robbed, Coach,” Ian says quietly.

Silence follows. Coach’s face grows red as he stares down at his desk. His knuckles are white, a stark contrast against the black pleather of the chair. Ian wonders if he and Rob have crossed a line.

He wonders if they’ve put themselves on the front lines of Coach’s infamous rage.

A full minute passes before Coach opens his mouth. Ian braces himself for it.

“This is Venice High, how could this have happened?” He starts, voice quiet for the amount of fury in his eyes. Ian says nothing, waiting for his outburst to pass before starting again. He glances over at Rob, and meets terrified eyes. Ian wonders if his

expression looks the same.

“And behind my back?” Coach continues, voice louder, looking briefly like he was going to throw a picture frame off his desk. He reaches for it, then drops his hand quickly. Coach takes a deep breath instead. Ian mimics him, unthinking.

Coach runs his hand down his face, and Ian briefly fears he’s about to see a grown man cry. He pulls it together quickly, but Ian looks at the ground to avoid seeing the sheen of tears in Coach’s eyes. “I don’t even know when they’re seeing each other.”

“She’s just being rebellious, I’m sure. Once the novelty wears off, she’ll dump him,” Rob says, and Ian looks up to glare at him. They’re not here to comfort, they’re here to instigate. Of course Rob’s obsessive desire to be liked by Coach would get in the way.

“No, this ends now. Where is he?” Coach looks to Ian, and Ian shrugs. He’s pretty sure Omar is in World History with Mrs. Teddering, but he’s not going to divulge that information. This plan worked surprisingly well, if Ian must admit, and he’s not entirely sure where to go from here. Also, he’s not entirely sure what Coach plans to do once he finds Omar.

“I don’t know his schedule during the day, but I know he’s meeting with Mrs. Dales after school today to go over the printing schedule. You’ll find him there after three.” Coach nods as Ian speaks, then, as though realizing he just had a breakdown in front of two students, sits up straight and gives them a small smile.

“Thank you, Ian. Is there anything else I can do for your article?” Ian glances at his notes one more time for appearance’s sake, and shakes his head.

“Nope, we have everything we need. Thanks for your time,” Ian replies, standing up. Rob’s camera catches his eye as he stands, and he looks back at Coach. “Well, we forgot to do your headshot, but we can come back later for that.” Coach nods and waves the two out of his office.

The door has barely clicked shut before something crashes against it. Rob stares as another crash is heard from inside the room, and an exclamation of “FUCK” is muffled but still audible to the two boys. Ian looks at Rob and swallows down the laugh that is building in his throat.

“So that was successful,” Ian says, fighting a smile. Rob nods, still looking dazed by the past ten minutes. They head back down to the cafeteria, snagging a few things to eat quickly before the period ends. Ian tries to start a conversation about the state football team, but Rob is too distracted.

“Dude, are you okay?” Ian asks. He can’t have Rob regretting what they just did.

“I’m okay, I’m actually... awesome. Like, did you see Coach look at me like I wasn’t his enemy? And he called me Rob? He always calls me Robert because I’m pretty sure he knows I hate it but not today.” Ian has the courtesy to look down at his food before rolling his eyes. “Omar won’t even know what hit him once Coach goes down there and breaks them up.” Ian’s thankful when Rob stops rambling about his relationship with Coach.

“I have another favor,” Ian starts, watching for Rob’s reaction. He’s not sure how much he can count on Rob, but the only way he’ll know is if asks.

“Yeah man, shoot.”

“I need Omar to think I’m still on his side, or else he’ll find a way to sabotage my work.” This is an assumption from Ian, but he figures he would do it if Omar interfered with him and Emma. “So I’m going to warn him about Coach.”

“How? You know Coach is going to be at Dales’ room before three.”

“I know, which is where you come in. I need you to buy me enough time to talk to Omar before Coach gets to him.” Rob’s excitement vanishes.

“How am I supposed to do that? He’s so angry, he’ll probably punch me for keeping him away from Omar any longer,” Rob says. Ian nods, agreeing that distracting Coach long enough for Ian to warn Omar is a big task. But he needs this time.

“What if that’s what you warn him about? Tell him he needs to keep his cool because Omar is a student, and he can’t go around hitting students after school. He needs to protect his job and his daughter, and he doesn’t need to sacrifice one for the other.” Rob looks hesitant but nods slightly, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth before he speaks.

“Okay, I can do that.”

Ian smiles.

“Of course you can. Besides, this shows him you care about his wellbeing as well as Delaney’s, and that’s a sign of a good boyfriend.” Rob perks up after that, nodding more clearly as Ian walks him through the plan.

“Dude, you’re good at this,” Rob says. Ian grins.

“Don’t cross me, and you’ll never have to worry about it.”

Chapter 3

Ian can't tear his eyes away from the clock.

Physics always drags on, but today is especially challenging. He doesn't even try to hide his longing to get out of there from Mr. Barnes, who keeps glancing in his direction but doesn't say anything directly. He's not sure if it's excitement or nerves twisting in his stomach, but it only gets worse as the minutes tick down.

"Ian, can you tell me—" Mr. Barnes starts, pulling Ian's attention to him. Ian almost jumps when he hears his name, and jerks his head towards the front of the class. Fortunately, the bell rings before Mr. Barnes can finish his question, saving Ian from embarrassing himself in class. Ian can't help but smile.

"I'll finish that question tomorrow, Mr. Davis," Mr. Barnes says, pointing at him.

"I look forward to it," Ian says before grabbing his textbook and leaving the classroom. He tries to walk at a normal pace, but he knows he's rushing down the hall back to his locker. He knows he told Rob to keep Coach occupied until Omar's already in the newsroom, but he doubts Rob is going to be able to keep Coach from going anywhere, especially when it comes to his daughter. He needs to get Omar down there as soon as he can.

His drops his stuff into his locker before heading down another hall, where he sees Omar piling books into the top shelf of his locker. Ian stops for a moment and takes

a deep breath. He can't fuck this up. If he plays his cards right, he comes out looking like a good guy, a trustworthy friend, while Omar is stuck floundering after his relationship is over. It's an easy position to play up, and Ian can manage to use that trust to get what he needs. It may not be editor in chief, but it's better than a blank line in his resume.

Ian leans against the locker next to Omar, and waits for him to close the door. Omar startles when he sees him. Ian fights his smile, trying to look concerned instead of excited.

"Jesus dude, you scared the shit out of me," Omar says with a small laugh.

"We have a problem," Ian says, keeping any hints of humor out of his voice. Omar stands up straighter at the seriousness in his voice.

"Why? What's going on?" Omar asks, brow furrowing in concern.

Ian thinks about keeping his comment vague, or talking around the issue. He decides it wouldn't be as satisfying.

"Coach found out about you and Delaney."

Omar pauses for a moment, letting the news sink in. Ian watches Omar shift his grip on his backpack, looking up and sighing. Ian wasn't expecting Omar to become stressed so quickly.

"Shit... How did he find out?" Omar asks, looking at Ian for answers. Ian lets his face fall, and glances down. He figures he should own up to his "mistake" before it gets out that he was there when Rob told Coach about their relationship.

"Ian, what the hell?" Omar says, sounding betrayed. Ian expected this, and he's ready to defend himself.

“I didn’t know it was a secret! Coach didn’t know that you were editor in chief this year, so Rob told him, and was like, didn’t Delaney tell you? And Coach was like, why would Delaney tell me about the editor for the newspaper, and Rob was like, well, they’re dating. And that’s when Coach lost his shit,” Ian’s slightly out of breath once he finishes his rambling, hoping Omar buys the frantic facade. “We didn’t know, Omar, I swear.”

Omar looks down, mulling over Ian’s words. Ian watches him silently for a moment before growing antsy. Ian’s been waiting all day for the confrontation, and he has little patience left for Omar to sulk before his meeting with Dales.

“Look, Omar, I’m sure it’s all going to work out. Coach is a reasonable person, especially since you have Delaney on your side,” Ian says, glancing up at the clock in the hall. There’s still ten minutes before his meeting is supposed to start, but Ian’s too restless to wait around in the hall. For all he knows, Coach is already down there fuming, and Mrs. Dales is going to end things before Omar even arrives. “All you have to do is talk it out. I’m sure Coach’s biggest problem is that Delaney didn’t tell him, you know how protective he is over her.”

Omar’s not paying attention, Ian realizes, clamping his mouth shut. No point in wasting his energy if he’s not even going to pay attention to what Ian is saying. He was being nice, too.

“Omar, are you listening?” Ian says, tapping Omar on the shoulder. The boy jerks his head up, looking at Ian as though a teacher caught him sleeping in class.

“Sorry, what’s up?” Omar asks, still distracted by his thoughts.

“Your meeting with Dales starts soon, we should head up,” Ian says. Omar nods, turning and heading towards the stairs. Ian follows behind quickly, matching Omar’s nervous pace.

“So I’m thinking we should change our printing schedule,” Omar says as they head upstairs. Ian rolls his eyes behind Omar, but is willing to entertain the idea. Changing the print schedule is an unnecessary hassle, and even Dales will find this idea ridiculous.

“How were you planning on doing it?” Ian replies.

“Well, I’m thinking we should print based on the actual date, not the day of the week. It’s easy to go to print on Tuesday and sell on Friday, but half of the time, we’re already into the next month. What if we sold on the last day of the month, so our September issue actually came out in September?” Omar suggests. It makes sense, but Ian still can’t shake his resistance to change for his paper. *At least Omar isn’t as stupid as he seems.*

“I see what you mean, but I’m not sure if it will make much of a difference for the readers.” Ian takes an extra large step, falling in line with Omar’s stride. He needs to keep up the supportive friend routine, but Ian wants to shake him by the shoulders. Changing the print schedule is just not worth the energy.

“Ideally, we’d publish our September issue at the beginning of September, but that’s impossible,” Omar says with a laugh. “I don’t know, hopefully Mrs. Dales has some ideas to improve our scheduling.”

“Good luck, man. She’s relying on you to have most of this figured out,” Ian says,

and Omar sighs. Ian has little sympathy. If you can't handle the commitment, get a new job.

Mrs. Dales is sitting at the table in the center of the room, scrolling through something on her laptop when they walk in. Ian smiles at her then goes over to his computer, ready to type up notes while he eavesdrops. The room is empty save the three of them, still too early into the semester for many to be staying after class. Mrs. Dales waves Omar over to the table and he moves quickly, taking large strides to cross the room to sit in the chair across from her.

"Hi Ian," she says, glancing in his direction before turning her attention to Omar. "How's it going, Omar?" Her eyes are big and bright blue, like a cartoon character. Her blonde hair is pulled up in a bun at the top of her head, and there's usually a pencil tucked in it. Mrs. Dales is almost fifty, but she always comes across as younger, and most of the students love her. Ian doesn't really get it, but he tries.

"Could be better," Omar answers, and Ian zones out of the conversation when it turns to discussing the print schedule.

He keeps glancing at the time in the bottom corner of his computer screen, waiting for Coach to barge in at any moment. He can't sit still as he types, and his knee keeps bouncing against the corner of the desk. Ian crosses his legs under the table, trying to keep himself relaxed. Minutes pass, and Ian grows tired of listening to Dales and Omar drone on about dates and turnaround time and if the student body is attentive enough to realize the selling dates change each month. *What a letdown.*

Ian almost jumps out of his seat when the newsroom door swings open and

smacks against the wall. He turns and sees Coach, broad chest heaving and face red, in the doorway. Omar glances at Ian, eyes wide and mouth slightly agape. He looks terrified.

“Coach Moore, nice to see you. Can I help you?” Mrs. Dales asks, smile forced and tone warning. Ian has always wondered if there was a problem between the two teachers, and it’s apparent now. Dales always seems annoyed whenever Coach appears in an article, but he assumed it was just because the material is stale.

“Mrs. Dales,” Coach says. It’s a statement, a mere acknowledgement that she’s spoken to him, but it’s something. Coach turns his eyes onto Omar, who is staring straight ahead now. “Omar, out here, now.”

“We’re currently in a meeting right now,” Mrs. Dales starts, voice stern. Ian’s heart is pounding against his ribs, and he hopes he doesn’t look so delighted at the tension. His fingers have stopped typing, afraid if he draws attention to himself, he’ll be asked to leave. He’s come too far now to ruin it.

“It’s okay, Mrs. Dales,” Omar says, slowly rising out of his chair and giving her a smile. “We’ll be really quick.”

Shit, Ian thinks, watching Omar take a step towards Coach.

“You’re not leaving this classroom, Omar,” Mrs. Dales says firmly, still glaring at Coach. Both Ian and Omar sigh, each relieved that the conflict will stay inside the classroom for their own reasons. Ian sinks a little lower in his chair and turns back to his computer, trying to look uninterested in the conversation around him. He starts to click around the internet, pretending to gather possible story ideas from events listed on the

school calendar. Hopefully, they're less willing to kick him out if he's working.

"Coach, please sit," Mrs. Dales says, and Ian hears footsteps heading towards the table. He can't believe Coach is actually going along with it.

"With all due respect, this is a private conversation," he says, voice gruff, and Ian knows he's crossing his arms in front of him and trying to look threatening without having to turn around. Coach's favorite tactic is intimidation, but Ian also knows it doesn't work on people older than seventeen.

"Would you rather have your private conversation in the hallway, where any passing student or staff member can hear?" Mrs. Dales asks. Ian hears metal scrape against the floor, indicating that Coach took the chair across the table from Mrs. Dales. Ian braces himself for Omar's tragedy.

"None of this goes into any of your articles," Coach says.

"It's off the record," Mrs. Dales says.

"Good," Coach replies, already sounding more composed. Ian's a little disappointed.

"So is it true?" Coach asks, and Ian finally gives into his desire to watch the events unfold, and turns around. Dales has her back to him, but he can see Omar and Coach clearly. Both are too focused in their conversation to pay attention to his intrusion.

"Is what true, sir?" Omar asks.

"Don't play games with me, boy!" Coach snaps back, and Ian sees Mrs. Dales flinch at the noise.

"Yes, Delaney and I are dating," Omar says calmly, unsmiling. He's doing well,

Ian admits.

Coach lets out a sigh and looks away, straightening up in his chair. Coach was still holding on to hope that Ian and Rob were wrong. Now he has to face it. Omar sits silently, on edge, waiting for Coach's next move.

"So what's this about?" Coach asks after a moment.

"What?" Omar asks, genuinely confused.

"What are you getting out of this? Did you want to be popular? Everyone knows Delaney, so if you leech off her, maybe you can get invited to some more parties. Or is it this position? Did she get you this position?" Coach starts, voice growing louder and words faster as he continues. Ian watches Omar's jaw clench, and he knows he's biting the inside of his cheek. It's a good way to keep quiet. "I will not let you take advantage of my daughter so you can reach whatever goals you have."

"I am not using Delaney!" Omar snaps, raising his voice slightly. Coach stops immediately. Ian's impressed.

"I'm sorry for yelling, but I'm not using Delaney. We're dating because we like each other. I got this position because Mrs. Dales wanted me to run the paper. You know I write good articles, you even complimented me on my feature article with Ian last year!" Coach doesn't acknowledge the memory, but Ian remembers. Their article about the impact extracurriculars had on student performance wasn't groundbreaking, but it praised arts and sports equally, earning Coach's attention. Ian thought they made a good team, but apparently Omar wasn't impressed enough.

"I just can't believe you stole my daughter from me, and I never even knew,"

Coach says with a sigh, one that seems to rattle in his chest.

“She’s not property, I didn’t steal her. She wants to be with me, and I want to be with her,” Omar says, voice firm.

Ian wasn’t expecting Omar to stand up for himself. He thought Omar would roll over like every boy does when confronted by the father of his girlfriend, just nod his head with every ridiculous accusation Coach made, and pray that his classmates never find out why they broke up. He didn’t think Omar would fight for the relationship, still so new. It will only make him miserable in the long run, dodging insults from Coach for a year until they break up when Delaney graduates.

Ian was so confident Omar would realize this. Instead, he keeps arguing, and winning. Ian sighs softly, turning back to his computer. He lost, again.

Damn.

Coach opens his mouth to respond, hands clenched into fists, but is stopped by the sound of the door opening. They all turn and see Delaney standing in the doorway, arms crossed. Her light brown hair is pulled up in a ponytail, swinging slightly behind her as she walks into the room. Her blue eyes are narrowed, glaring at the situation in the center of the room. She looks at Omar and gives him a small smile. *This was unexpected.*

“Delaney, come on in. Maybe you can wrap up this conversation so we can get back to work,” Mrs. Dales says, waving her in. Delaney shrugs her backpack off into an empty chair and goes to stand next to Omar. Coach watches, looking more heartbroken than angry now.

“Hi, dad. This is my boyfriend, Omar,” Delaney says, voice unwavering. She

places her hand on Omar's shoulder, and Ian thinks Coach is about to cry.

"How did this happen? Why him?" Coach asks, pointing at Omar as though he is a strange man she picked up at a bar, not one of her classmates.

"We started talking about journalism, he gave me some advice on one of my videos. It was good advice, although I didn't take it. He's smart, dad, and he's a great writer. I admired his talent and enjoyed working with him. That's how it started," Delaney says, squeezing Omar's shoulder. He places his hand on hers and squeezes back. Ian braces himself for Coach to go mad, but he just waits for his daughter to finish.

"Then, we started hanging out at football and basketball games, and it was a lot of fun, but I knew you would have a problem with it. I didn't want to hurt you, but I want to be with Omar. I'm really happy, dad. We're really happy."

Coach listens silently, looking away from his daughter. Everyone is waiting for his response, and the air feels thick with tension.

He sighs heavily, and stands up. Omar follows his lead, reaching to hold Delaney's hand. The three of them are quiet, and Ian hopes, briefly, that Coach will lose it, forbid his daughter to see Omar, and give Ian something worth smiling about.

"Are you really happy?" Coach asks Delaney. Ian's hope sinks.

"Yes, dad. We're happy," she replies, and Omar can't push down his smile. Ian wants to hit something.

"Well, then I suppose I can't do anything about it," Coach says with a deep frown. Omar lets out a relieved sigh, and Mrs. Dales shoots him a smile. Delaney smiles wide and hugs Coach, and he hugs her back. Despite his reluctant approval, he still gives Omar

a cold look. Omar stays still.

Their hug ends, and Delaney moves toward the door. “I have to run to my locker, I’ll be back,” she says to the room, effectively ending their private conversation. The minute she’s out the door, Coach’s glare is on Omar.

“I’m still not happy about this,” he says, and Omar nods his understanding. Coach lets out another sigh, and his anger seems to be replaced with exhaustion. “Watch out for her. If she can lie so easily to me, imagine how she’ll lie to you.” Ian’s eyebrows shoot up, shocked at the insult he just tossed at his beloved daughter. Omar looks the same, but Coach slips out the door before he has a response.

There’s an awkward silence after Coach leaves, the three of them unsure how to react. Omar looks over at Ian and shrugs his shoulders, a small smile still lingering on his face. Ian gives him a strained smile in return before closing out of the internet browser on his computer and shutting it down.

“Well, I should get going, sorry you had to go through all of that,” Ian says, reaching for his backpack. Omar laughs.

“It’s okay. I feel better now that he knows. I mean, it was going to happen eventually, right?” Omar says.

“Oh, no doubt. Can’t be the dirty little secret forever,” Ian says, watching Omar’s face fall slightly. He leaves quickly, saying a quick goodbye to Delaney in the hall on his way out of the school.

Ian doesn’t realize he’s been grinding his teeth together until he gets to his car, and the ache radiates through his jaw the whole drive home.

Chapter 4

Ian hits redial, and bites the inside of his cheek when he hears Emma's voicemail again.

"Hi, this is Emma Williams, I can't come to the phone right now. Leave a message and I'll call you back as soon as I can!" the recording says, voice sugar sweet. Ian ends the call, and opens his texts.

"Where are you?" he types and sends quickly, looking back up. Rob's car is running in her driveway, wasting gas as they wait for her.

"Parking is going to be a bitch," Rob says, leaning forward to peer out the windshield towards Emma's window. The light is off. Ian watches his phone, waiting for a text back.

"Yeah, I don't know why she's taking so long," Ian says, typing another text.

"Probably just talking to her dad or something, it's no big deal," Rob says with a shrug, turning back to his phone and scrolling through Twitter. He's been in a mood since he heard that their plan didn't work, and that Coach accepted Omar as Delaney's boyfriend. Ian's lost the patience to get him out of it.

Ian's blood heats with every passing moment. He calls her again, digging his fingers into the leather interior of the seat under him as the phone continues to ring without an answer. *What the hell is she doing?*

Finally, she comes out and walks to the car slowly, tossing her blonde hair off her shoulder. Ian wants to scream.

“Hey guys, sorry about that. My dad was talking to me about application fees,” she says as she slides into the backseat, like it’s perfectly acceptable to leave them waiting for twenty-five minutes in her driveway.

“The game is about to start,” Ian snaps, turning to shoot her a glare. She meets his eyes and shrug.

“Sorry, I had to answer an important question,” she says, as though Ian is in the wrong. He makes a fist and digs his nails into his palm. He can’t stand that damn tone.

“Well you could have answered one of my texts,” he says through gritted teeth.

“Ian, you texted me twenty-three times in fifteen minutes!”

“And I wouldn’t have had to if you just answered one of them!” Ian shouts.

Emma presses her lips together, and he can see the tension in her jaw, biting back her response. “I was going to tell Delaney we would be late, but I didn’t know how late because you wouldn’t answer. Now we’re going to be at least fifteen minutes late, and she’s probably already filming on the field,” he explains, like she’s a child. Emma’s expression slowly softens, and she even looks like she feels a little guilty.

“Sorry, sorry, I’ll respond next time. Let’s go,” she says quietly, leaning back into her seat. Ian nods, and Rob puts the car in reverse, finally.

The drive is relatively quiet, Ian still stewing from his spat with Emma. Rob makes a few comments about the radio, but they’re met with one-word responses. Fortunately, the tension eases the closer they get to the stadium, and Ian feels better once

they arrive. They luck out and find a parking spot close to the concession stands.

The first football game of the year is always packed. The three of them weave through hordes of students to find a comfortable place on the bleachers. The game is in full swing, and Ian is already over it.

“I hate this,” he groans, and feels more than hears Emma’s laugh against his shoulder. People are loud and have no respect for personal space, and there are children running everywhere. But as a journalist, he finds himself at every game, sitting on the hard metal bleachers and watching the student section from the top row. He brings his notebook with him, although rarely does anything worth writing about occur. The only thing that really keeps him from losing it is that Emma is there, fingers entwined with his and her head resting on his shoulder. He doesn’t get this during basketball season, stuck watching her cheer from the bleachers instead.

“You are so dramatic, just relax for a few hours and have a good time.”

“I am not dramatic! I don’t know how you can relax when there’s a thousand kids yelling for two hours about a handful of dudes running back and forth after a ball.”

Honestly, Ian doesn’t really mind the sport itself, he just prefers to watch it quietly at home. Judging by the look Emma shoots him, she’s aware of his half-baked complaint. Ian ignores her look, and presses a kiss to her head instead.

He watches freshman shuffle around on the bleachers, trying to get a decent spot without upsetting the status quo. Apparently, areas of the bleachers are reserved for different grades, but Ian has never fully bothered to care who he was standing around when he did get roped into the Student Section. Besides, his press pass can get him pretty

much anywhere he wants on the field.

“Hey, guys!” Ian and Emma turn to look at Rob, juggling a soda and a large popcorn while climbing over miscellaneous jackets and pom-poms forgotten by kids.

“Hey, Rob, what’s up?” Emma asks, her tone stilted. It makes Ian wince slightly. Emma shoots a glare at Ian when Rob sits down next to him, and Ian shrugs. Emma thinks Rob is a creep, but Ian gets a kick out of him. He’s just lucky Emma chooses to be kind to him.

“Not much, just enjoying the game as a spectator and not a reporter,” he looks down at his full hands, and looks back up. “I don’t have to take photos tonight!”

“Who’s taking them?” Ian asks, surprised that the head photographer has the first game of the year off.

“Um, I think it’s Blair. We’re not playing a rival, so Dales didn’t really care who was getting pictures. As long as we have some.” Emma hums in response, sitting up and removing herself from Ian’s side.

“Blair.... Who is that?”

“The girl who slept with Christian Kellogg last year under the bleachers,” Ian replies, and points down to the corner of the field.

“Is Omar here?” Emma asks, a strand of blonde hair flying in front of her face. She quickly tucks it back with a bobby pin, and Ian swoops another stray strand from her shoulder for her to add to her bun. “Thanks, babe.”

“He should be here somewhere,” Ian started, looking around from where he sat to see if Omar happened to be anywhere close.

“Is he down on the field?” Rob asks, shoveling a handful of popcorn into his mouth. Ian looks away as flecks of food fall out of his mouth.

“I doubt it, not after Coach stormed into class and was ready to kick Omar’s ass,” Ian says. Emma groans.

“I felt so bad for Delaney, I would be mortified if my dad did that,” she says. Ian wraps his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close with a smug look.

“Lucky for you, your dad loves me.” Ian’s not really sure why, but Emma’s dad always lets him stay over late and invites him over for dinner almost every weekend. He talks to Ian about his future plans, recommends colleges and keeps him posted on places he might be able to get a job before college. He even invites Ian to golf on the weekends. Ian’s never gone, having no clubs and no interest in golf, but he knows that one day, he’ll agree.

Emma laughs, leaning into his embrace. Rob makes a noise, but Ian’s not sure if it’s a gag or a choke. He ignores it either way.

“True. But still, he should have known better. And poor Omar, being yelled at in front of his staff,” she says, and Ian can only think about how much he would have enjoyed sitting in that room, watching it all unfold.

“Yeah, that really sucks,” Ian replies, a burst of annoyance sparking through his system. That plan would have been perfect if Coach wasn’t such a sucker for his daughter. Now he’s back to square one, and this stupid team can’t even score a touchdown to distract him from his failure.

“I don’t know why they thought it would stay a secret anyway,” Emma says,

trailing off, mind already going somewhere else. Ian glares at Rob, willing him to keep his mouth shut. Ian told Omar they let it slip on accident, and they have to keep the lie going.

“Right? I mean, we knew it was on the down low with the students, but how did she manage to keep Coach out of it?” Rob replies, and Ian entertains the idea of punching him directly in the mouth.

“She’s sneaky, that’s for sure,” Emma says, still staring off at the opposite side of the field. Ian’s arm instinctively wraps tighter around her shoulders, as if she’s about to suddenly disappear into her own secret affair. He knows she wouldn’t, having bonded over their mutual hatred of people who cheat when they first started dating, but he can’t help the chill that creeps along his spine. “You okay, babe?” she asks.

“Mmhmm, just waiting to see if we’ll finally score,” he lies. She’s heard him talk about his parents more than enough, she doesn’t need to hear that the off-hand comment about a friend reminded him of how livid his father was when he found out his mother cheated, how their screaming echoed down the hall, how a twelve-year-old learned the true nature of people from his father’s heartbroken rants.

Emma rests her head on his shoulder, the movement pulling him away from his thoughts and back to the game. He can see Coach screaming from the sidelines, pristine white baseball cap sticking out from the rest of the stained and dingy Venice Rams gear below. Ian has yet to wrap his head around the choice to make most of their merchandise white when their primary school color was green, but he supposes it works well with the grass stains on the players’ pants. Down the line is Delaney with her video camera,

currently squatting in the grass to catch a shot of a Ram catching the ball. The other team is on him quickly, and Coach grabs Delaney by the arm to pull her up and away from the mass of players. He covers his laugh by pretending to clear his throat.

“She’s going to get herself hurt,” Emma says quietly.

“I think she can handle a minor tackle,” Ian jokes. She doesn’t laugh. “Baby, I’m just kidding. She’s a big girl, she knows what she’s doing.”

Casey jogs over to the edge of the sideline and points at Delaney. She waves, clutching the camera to her side. Coach lingers for a moment before patting her on the shoulder and moving down the line, back to staring intently at the game in front of him. “Besides, Casey will watch out for her,” Ian says.

“She wants to go into war zones after college,” Emma says, paying no attention to Ian’s remarks. “Delaney wants to be right in the heart of everything, even when everything is violent and terrifying. She’s not always going to have Coach or Casey or Omar.” Ian nods, not entirely sure why this conversation is happening or where it’s headed. On his right, Rob cheers for the Rams advancing twenty yards down the field, but it seems muffled compared to Emma’s whispers in his ear.

“She’ll have someone, though. They don’t just send you off with a camera and a map.”

“I just worry, is all.” Emma ends the conversation with that and a quiet sigh, and Ian brings his attention back to the game. The Rams are well on their way to another touchdown, and the bleachers vibrate with the force of stomping feet. Ian and Emma watch quietly, muttering criticisms under their breath, while Rob yells and stomps and

tosses popcorn on the bleacher below them. It's another five minutes before they finally score, the student section roaring as the scoreboard updates.

"You guys are no fun," Rob says, sitting back down after his celebration.

"The problem with being a good team is all of our wins are predictable. And Cyprus High? Easy win," Ian replies, and Emma shrugs her shoulder.

"M'just tired," she mumbled, and pulls her sweatshirt tighter against her thin arms. Rob scoffs, but doesn't argue.

The three of them spend half the game like that, bits of conversation interspersed with bouts of silence. Ian is just about to call it a night when Omar starts climbing up the bleachers, waving a hand out at them from the bottom. Ian is sure he's the only one who sees him, so he smiles back. "Hey, it's Omar. Act like you like each other," Ian says, looking at Rob. Rob rolls his eyes but gives Omar a small smile when he joins the group.

"You don't look like you're enjoying yourselves," Omar says, sitting down on the empty bleacher in front of them. He flicks a piece of popcorn across the metal bench, and another piece upwards. The group watches as it flies through the air and lands on someone two bleachers down, and they all turn their heads. Ian appreciates the distraction, as simple as it is.

"We're bored," he says. "A win is no fun when it's expected." Omar shrugs his shoulders, shirt pulled snug over muscle. Briefly, Ian thinks about working out more.

"Not even a little satisfying?" The conversation stops while the White Rams score again, this time Casey beating Cyprus for a touchdown. Omar stands up to cheer, and Ian reluctantly follows when Emma does the same. He used to follow the energy of the

games, regardless of whether the team was expected to win or not. Seniors are supposed to stand in front of the student section as an award for making it through high school, or whatever justification they created before his time at Venice High. The idea of emerging himself into the waves of students makes his stomach roll.

The wave of Omar's hand catches Ian's attention, and he follows the direction until he sees Delaney, waving next to the bench for the players. She raises her camera to film the stands of cheering students, b-roll for another standard commercial for the football games. They're all basically the same, shots of students cheering at the camera spliced with football plays and a shot of Coach yelling from the sidelines. Ian watches the news show because Emma produces it, but the stories are so... fluffy. The anchors crack jokes, the commercials are full of bad acting, and the actual news stories are short and unnecessary. Somewhere along the lines, the world decided broadcast journalism didn't need to have substance as long as people found it entertaining, and Ian hates every minute of it.

"Are you guys making a commercial?" Omar turns and asks Emma. She nods, smile tight.

"Yeah. Students like them, so we keep making them." Ian knows Emma doesn't like to badmouth the broadcast program because she's the executive producer of the whole thing, but he can practically feel her restraint beginning to crack. "Look forward to another four, at least." Ian presses a kiss against her temple.

Omar nods, eyes understanding. "Yeah, Delaney mentioned something about trying to focus more on the news instead of commercials."

“We’ve got a few things in the works, so hopefully Dales will let us shift the direction a little. If I make another commercial asking students what they did over break, I will actually go insane,” Emma laughs, but Ian knows that she’s at the end of her rope. College application season is starting, and Emma needs something to submit with her resume that doesn’t feature students sharing their opinions on new movies or fast-paced shots of sporting events.

“I’m sure whatever it is, Dales will be happy to put it on the show. Especially if it’s coming from you,” Omar says with a smile. Emma smiles back, genuine. Ian entwines his fingers with Emma’s, gut twisting slightly as he forces something like a smile onto his face.

They sit back down once the crowd has calmed, Rob the only one still dedicated to watching the game. Emma checks twitter while Omar responds to a text, but Ian doesn’t look to see who it’s from. “So I’m having a party next Saturday night to celebrate the first print of the paper, you guys in?”

Ian’s first response is an immediate no, uninterested in going to a party full of journalism staff when he could be doing literally anything else. “My parents are out of town until Monday so there’s no worries about getting busted.”

“We will see you there,” he replies. He’ll find a way to have a good time.

The next two weeks pass in a blur of article prints and layout designs, every open spot of tabletop soon covered with a proofread copy of an article, red lines dashing across the page, and checklists that are quickly passing deadlines without a mark in the box. Ian

types quickly as the rest of the staff works in a blur behind him, crowding the table to give opinions on design and cover photos. He doesn't care, so they don't ask him.

His cover story about the football isn't difficult, and has been finished for the last week and a half. But Ian prefers sitting at his computer and balancing his lunch on his lap while he reads rather than try to choke down his lunch in the cafeteria. Emma pops in when she can get out of her sociology class early, and she perches on the table next to his computer when Mrs. Dales is in the other room. Delaney is in the newsroom almost as much as Ian is, working on her football video.

"I will go crazy if I have to make one of these again," she says, dragging her mouse across the table to drag a clip into her commercial.

"Why aren't the freshmen making these?" Ian asks.

"Apparently they're still learning the software," Emma says, rolling her eyes. Delaney laughs.

"Don't roll your eyes, we milked that excuse for weeks when we were freshmen," Delaney says, turning away from the screen to face her friends. "I wonder if those photos are still buried somewhere in the drive."

"We can only hope not," Emma replies, pulling her foot up to the table and hugging her knee to her chest. Ian fiddles with the shoelace of her sneaker.

"What photos?" he asks, almost wagging his eyebrows but deciding against it. Emma sees the thought flit across his face, because she gives him a faux-glare.

"Not those types of photos, obviously. We used to just mess with all of the filters."

“They’re probably gone by now. Are you guys coming Saturday?” Delaney asks, turning around in her chair to look at them.

Ian glances at Emma, who is already nodding her head. A part of his gut drops at the confirmation, although he’ll try to have a good time regardless of company. Besides, he can sneak some serious booze from his parents, which makes everything a little easier.

“We’ll be there. Who else—” Ian’s phone buzzes in his pocket, distracting him from finishing his question. He digs it out, apologizing on reflex, and glances at the screen. It’s a text from Rob, and the preview shows that there’s an image that goes with it. He opens it, clicking on the image to enlarge it, and feels Emma peering over his shoulder from her perch. He instinctively turns away, hiding his phone from her.

The tweet is from an account Ian has never heard of, and says, “Blair from Venice is a dirty whore. She’ll spread her legs for anybody.” He doesn’t know much about Blair beyond what he hears about her, but he chuckles anyway.

“What’s it say?” Emma asks, leaning over to peer closer to the screen. Ian holds it out to her and watches as her mouth moves ever so slightly while she reads. Ian’s not sure if Emma knows she reads everything out loud, but he has a feeling she’ll be weird about it if he mentions it, so he says nothing.

“Ian, that’s so mean!”

“I didn’t say it! Rob sent it to me, I really don’t know why,” Ian says. Delaney walks over, leaning into Ian’s space to read the screen. He rolls his chair back slightly to breathe easier.

“C’mon guys, that’s not cool,” Delaney says, and Ian looks at her with wide eyes.

“I didn’t ask for this! If anything, you two should be calling Rob the dick.”

“Oh believe me, we are,” Delaney says.

“Who’s running the twitter account?” Emma asks, reaching for the phone to look at the icon in the corner.

“I’ve never seen it before, it’s probably one of those anonymous accounts that people create specifically to post mean things,” Delaney says, and Ian laughs.

“Isn’t the internet a wonderful place?” he jokes. Emma and Delaney both roll their eyes, and Ian texts Rob back a quick, “Ha ha, what account is that from?”

Rob texts back moments later, saying, “Anonymous twitter for Cyprus, IDK why Blair is on it.”

“Who cares, that’s funny. Does Venice have one?” Ian asks. He doesn’t post a lot on his Twitter account, but he does keep up with his timeline. There’s no easier way to find stories than by hearing exactly what students want to read about. Following that account might add a little excitement to his feed.

It takes about two minutes for Rob to text him back, Emma and Delaney already having moved onto a different conversation. Soon, Ian is scrolling through tweet after tweet of vague cruelties from one student to another, some about students he’s never even heard of. Most of them have names, while some of them are just general statements about “nasty ass freshmen” and “sleazy junior girls.” He’s fascinated, naturally curious to see how people really feel about their peers once any possible consequences are removed. You can’t punish a nameless twitter account.

There’s an icy jolt down his spine when he sees his name, only to realize the

tweet is directed at a different Ian, one of the basketball players. He keeps scrolling until he sees Emma's name, then his vision goes red. He slams his phone down on the table.

"Ian? What's up?" Emma asks, resting a hand on his shoulder lightly. He takes a deep breath, counts to five, then another deep breath. His therapist was very clear about breathing being his best bet in relaxing.

"Sorry, sorry. It's nothing, something dumb online. Sorry to interrupt your conversation," Ian responds. Delaney nods, giving him a concerned look before waving Emma over to her computer.

Briefly, Ian's struck with a wave of affection for Delaney. She's always been very nice, and rather funny, and is a very competent journalist. She's going to be very successful, Ian knows. And she and Omar do make a good-looking couple, he admits.

"Ian, which shot of Casey should I use? The one of him catching the pass, or the one of him tackling this kid?" His affection for Delaney vanishes.

"I don't think it matters," he answers, going for a subtler version of "who gives a shit?" "I think they'll both work." He glances at a marked-up printout next to his computer. He sees a typo, fifth line, seventh paragraph, completely untouched by red pen. He looks away.

Let Casey deal with it. It's not his job to edit anyway.

"Of course it matters! Here, this is a shot of offense," she says, playing him the video of Casey catching the ball. It's closer than most of the other football footage, so he must have been close to the boundary line. It's a good catch, but Ian wishes she left the rest of the shot in so he could watch Casey be pummeled into the ground.

“And here is a shot of defense,” Delaney continues, playing the other shot. Ian shoots a look at Emma, who gives him a small shrug in response.

“I thought you didn’t care about these anymore,” he says, and Delaney sighs.

“I don’t, but I still want them to look good. Besides, Casey would be bummed if I used a bad shot of him.”

“Who cares?” Ian says, unable to stop himself.

“I do! He’s my friend,” she answers, trailing off as she goes back to clipping seconds of video footage out of her commercial.

“Well don’t spend too long staring at Casey, Omar might get jealous.” Emma and Delaney laugh at Ian’s statement, but he wasn’t joking. The room is quiet after, only the clicks of keyboards breaking the silence.

Chapter 5

Rob's whistle echoes down the quiet street, and he looks over to Ian with raised eyebrows.

"Were you expecting to end up in Monroe Lane?" he asks. Ian shrugs his shoulders, trying to hide his own shock. He glances at Emma, whose mouth is slightly agape. They take a moment to stare at the house from the street, taking in the extravagant landscaping that surrounds the large front porch. The flowers are duller in the dark, but Ian can picture how bright the pink and yellow petals look in the sun. Two large columns flank the front door, and there's an outdoor furniture set off to the left.

Ian glances down the street. The houses are similar, all high columns and brick accents. Monroe Lane is a subdivision towards the edge of town, and most of the kids there drive out of Venice to go to the private school a few cities over. Ian's never seen any of the houses up close.

"No, I was not," Ian answers after a moment. "Emma, did you know he lived over here?"

Emma shifts her purse strap to her other shoulder, and shrugs.

"I think Delaney has mentioned it before, once or twice. I'm sure we know more people in the neighborhood—" Emma says before Rob cuts her off.

"No, we really don't. These people don't send their kids to public school. I doubt

they've even been to a Venice football game. They're a whole other species..." Rob trails off, and Ian rolls his eyes.

"Shut up. They're rich, they aren't aliens."

"Still," Rob says, looking back at the house, "makes you wonder how Omar's family got here. His parents must have some high-end jobs."

"Well, why don't we go inside and ask him?" Emma says, taking Ian by the hand and pulling him towards the house. He lets Emma drag him along for a moment before taking a big step to fall in sync with her. He hears Rob's footsteps behind them.

The door is unlocked, which is risky when it comes to any party, but Ian doubts most people are looking to crash a party full of journalism students. They step into the foyer, surprised by how loud the music is inside the house when you can hardly hear anything from the outside. All the lights in the house are off except for strands of Christmas lights haphazardly strewn along the walls and windows. It's a decent amount of lighting, although some spots in the room are darker than others. They toe their shoes off out of courtesy and walk down the short hallway into the kitchen.

Beer bottles are scattered along the counter, and there's several bowls of chips in the corner by the fridge. Omar is in the center of the room, leaning his hip against the island and talking to Casey, who seems to wobble every time he gestures with his arms too much. He's talking about the game last night, another win, and Omar glances over to meet Ian's eyes.

"Ian! Glad you guys could make it!" Omar says, breaking away from his conversation with Casey to greet them. Casey follows, like a big, dumb dog.

“Your place is really nice,” Rob blurts out. Omar smiles.

“I mean, it’s the same as every other house on the street, but thanks,” Omar replies. Rob is still looking around the kitchen as though he’s never seen a kitchen with high ceilings and wall-to-wall cabinets.

“Do you guys want drinks? We have Bud Light, PBR, whatever that stuff is that Jeff brought. I think there’s a bottle of vodka floating around somewhere,” Omar says, pointing to a row of coolers next to the fridge. “I mean, the vodka is cheap as fuck, but it’ll get you buzzed.”

“We brought some stuff too, courtesy of a lazy, drunk mom,” Ian says, swinging his backpack off his shoulder and onto the island. “I told her we were studying as I was raiding the cabinet. She’s either really stupid, or kind of cool. The jury’s still out.”

“Hey, be nice to your mom,” Emma says, while pulling out the bottle of rum. Ian looks at Omar and rolls his eyes with a smile, and Omar laughs.

“I get it, dude. For real.” They don’t talk about their parents much, but something tells Ian that Omar understands what it’s like to hate your mom while still needing her.

Omar is quick to grab a few sodas and some cups while Emma continues to empty out Ian’s backpack, grabbing a bottle of vodka and some shot glasses she snuck from her house. Casey hovers around Emma, and Ian objectively knows that he is eyeing up the alcohol and not his girlfriend, but he can’t help that his hate flares a little more when Casey leans in, his chest brushing against Emma while he reaches for a shot glass.

“Where’s Melanie?” Ian snaps, and Emma looks up, confused by the outburst. Casey shakes his head, too stupid to hear the bite to the words.

“Who cares? She’s been so weird lately, always texting me and shit. Like we’re not together,” Casey says, rolling his eyes. Ian’s retort stops in his throat. They were definitely together last he heard.

“Uh, does she know that?” Omar asks, clearly just as confused.

“She should, I was pretty clear in my text,” Casey says.

Emma laughs, unable to keep it in. Ian loves her.

“She was just talking about how you guys were in the running for Homecoming King and Queen, she seemed pretty excited,” Omar says, holding Emma’s cup so she can pour rum into it without spilling. Ian puts his out too and waits.

“Well, I mean, we probably are. I can’t control that.” Casey turns towards the cooler in the corner, mumbles something about another drink, and wanders away from the island. Emma looks to Omar.

“You better hope she doesn’t show up, or else you’re going to have a situation on your hands,” Emma says, a warning for him to watch his party guests. It’s a nice area of town, and no one is looking to get busted.

“Well, as long as Casey’s behaving, it shouldn’t be too big of an issue,” Omar says. Ian locks eyes with Emma, who seems to see the cogs turning in his head.

“Do not text her,” she whispers in his ear. He has Melanie’s number thanks to a group project last year. He smiles and reaches for a soda to finish off his drink.

“I’m sure she’ll find him all on her own,” he replies, taking a drink. It’s the perfect mix of rum and soda, alcohol cutting the sweetness just enough so he doesn’t feel as though his teeth are rotting. Emma likes hers sweeter, and he turns his head away

when she holds her cup up to his mouth for a taste.

“Ew, God no, get that away from me,” he laughs.

“Where did Rob go?” Omar asks, pulling Ian’s attention away from Emma. He turns his head to peer into the hall and sees him talking to Alex and Delaney.

“You invited Alex?” Ian asks, looking at Omar with genuine surprise. Omar’s smile dims, but he tries to force one.

“Yeah, all of the staffs were invited,” Omar says with a shrug, although his voice is quieter.

“Okay but like, Alex is a dick to you. And Carol said—” Ian starts before being cut off.

“I remember what Carol said,” Omar snaps, and Ian bites his tongue. Apparently some things do cut a little deeper than he thought. “Delaney wanted me to invite them, said it would be a good way to make amends.”

“You don’t sound too eager,” Emma says quietly.

“I’m not. It’s not me who owes them a damn thing,” he says. There’s a break in the conversation, a pause that holds the weight of Omar’s words. Ian thinks of a way to change the subject, or better yet, leave the conversation all together.

“Hey baby!” A voice rings through their silence, and all three turn to see Delaney break away from the conversation in the hall to join them. Rob follows, practically on her heel, and a wave of disgust rolls through Ian. The least he can do is try and hide that he’s in love with his party host’s girlfriend.

“Hey guys, so glad you made it! Katie just got here, she said something about

Melanie coming by later?” Ian shoots Emma a look, thrilled. She elbows him in the side.

“Is she looking for Casey? Because according to him, they’re not together anymore,” Omar says after pressing a kiss to her cheek. She beams at Emma and Ian, and a spark of something twists in Ian’s gut. It must just be irritation; everyone knows PDA is gross unless you’re the one doing it.

“Oh yeah, he told her that last week over text. Did you guys not know?” Delaney asks, looking genuinely surprised that none of them were aware. “He didn’t tell you?”

“Babe, I don’t think she knows it’s over,” Omar says, trying to hide a laugh but failing.

“Well, she’s never been very bright. He told me the other night at dinner, when Dad was helping him with applications. I guess he’s just not interested in her anymore,” Delaney replies, taking a sip of Omar’s drink. Ian cocks his head slightly, wondering why Casey had to come over for dinner to get college application help. *Also, who needs application help?*

Katie joins them, pulling the conversation away from Casey and to Omar’s house.

“Thanks for having us all over, this is a really great place. I love the decor!” Katie says, pointing over to the elaborately framed mirror in the hall.

“Thanks, my parents inherited a lot of it from my grandmother, she lives in Africa,” Omar says.

“Gosh, that’s really rough,” Katie replied, pouring herself a quick drink. Omar purses his lips then takes a swig of his beer before giving her a tight smile.

“She’s a fighter,” Omar says. Ian’s not positive, but he’s pretty sure he heard

Omar tell someone that his grandmother worked for the government. He glances at Omar, who meets his eyes and gives him a wink.

“Are you lying about your grandmother again?” Delaney asks, throwing an arm over Omar’s shoulder and leaning into him. Rob shifts uncomfortably next to Ian. *God, get a grip.*

Katie looks over at Omar with wide eyes.

“You’re lying?” Katie asks, confusion in her voice.

“I didn’t lie. Grams is a fighter,” Omar says, more to Delaney than Katie. Delaney scoffs.

“But she doesn’t live in a war-torn village,” Delaney laughs, and Ian even winces a little at how callous it sounds. “She’s a politician in Botswana.”

“Wow, no shit!” Katie exclaimed. Ian’s already had enough of Katie’s presence, her high-pitched voice and constantly eager demeanor drains him. “Do you go there a lot?”

“Not really, my parents travel more than me. School gets in the way,” Omar answers.

“Your parents are out of town a lot,” Delaney says, apparently just now realizing how often she comes over to her boyfriend’s. Omar shrugs and clear his throat.

“Uh yeah, you know, work, conferences, and everything.” He doesn’t elaborate, and Ian bites his tongue before asking more.

“That must be pretty convenient for you two,” Katie jokes, winking at Delaney. Delaney laughs, Omar looks down at the floor, and Rob makes a noise that sounds almost

like a scream behind clenched teeth, and walks away, too drunk to be discrete.

Ian slinks an arm around Emma's waist, holding her close against his side. She presses a kiss along his neck, short and sweet with just a hint of promise for later. There's a flare of heat at his core, and he takes another sip of his drink, letting the alcohol feed it.

"It certainly helps," Delaney answers, then steers the conversation elsewhere. Ian and Emma chat with them for a little longer, refill their drinks, then split off to see who else is tucked away in Omar's house.

His house is big. The ceilings are high and there is one large staircase that curves into the foyer. His living room has a spinning disco ball that projects rainbow lights on the walls and his speakers blast next to the fireplace. People are spread out along the large leather sectional, and Ian's jealous that they're more drunk than he is. The Christmas lights along the walls make it hard to see all the decor, but he keeps passing by fragile glasswork on side tables and the mantle seems to be filled with framed photos, although he can't make them out in the dark.

"Babe, can we dance?" Emma asks, moving directly in front of him and resting her hand on his chest, the other still clutching her drink. He laughs, feeling the room swirl a little when he tilts back. She's so beautiful, he thinks.

"You know we're gonna win best couple, right?" he blurts, leaning in to press a kiss on her forehead. She stares for a moment before smiling.

"Yeah I know, but don't say it out loud. People won't vote for us," she faux-whispers.

"Of course they will, there's no competition," he answers, wrapping his free hand

around her waist and swaying both of them to the beat of the music. A few other people are dancing, he sees, but it's not really that kind of party.

The song changes, increases tempo, and Ian jokingly sways them faster.

"No babe, you're gonna make me- Ian!" Emma shrieks, breaking free of his embrace. "You made me spill my drink." She's using the tone that grates his nerves, nasally with long vowels, and his mood starts to tank.

"It's no big deal. There's nothing on your shirt," he replies, pulling her closer by the hand. She slips her fingers out of his grasp, and hot rage flares for a moment before simmering, like the first flicker of a match.

"But I don't want to mess up Omar's house, let me go find a towel," she sighs, turning back towards the kitchen.

"I'll come with you," he offers. She rolls her eyes.

"I can find a towel by myself, give me like, two minutes."

Ian hovers in the living room after she leaves, uninterested in joining another conversation. His drink is almost gone but he knows he'll get sucked into more asinine small talk if he follows Emma.

His dad said they hang out too much, that he spends too much time following in her footsteps. Ian didn't give it much merit at first, but now he's starting to wonder if his dad was right. *Then again, dad gave mom all the space she could want, and she found herself in someone else's bed.*

A too-loud laugh jars him from his thoughts, and he turns to see Casey looming over Blair and Bethany, laughing at something. They're practically yelling over the

speakers, and Ian can barely catch what they're saying.

"I didn't know you could write like that!" Bethany says, resting her hand on Casey's arm. Blair watches her hand creep along his shirt and tries to keep the smile on her face. "I would have guessed it was a different person completely." Bethany twists a strand of her long black hair around her finger, like she's five years old.

Ian takes a long chug of his drink, finishing whatever rum and flat soda is left, while Casey laughs again.

"Thanks, Bethany!" Ian's pretty sure Bethany's comment is not a compliment, but of course the idiot would be grateful for it.

"Hey Ian, where'd Emma go?" Rob asks, suddenly appearing from behind him.

"She's getting a towel. This moron just thanked Bethany for accusing him of plagiarism," Ian says, gesturing at Casey. It's not as discreet as he prefers, but no one seems to notice.

"Wait, Casey plagiarized?" Rob asks, genuinely surprised.

"No, he—" Ian starts, ready to explain, but the words get caught in his throat. Plagiarism is a crime punishable by journalistic death. If Casey slipped up and copied something, that jeopardizes the paper and the program as a whole. That would also free up a position on staff, and who better as the assistant editor than the one who caught Casey cheating?

"I don't know, actually. I have to go read over his article again, but I just heard her say something about it being written by a completely different person."

"Shit, dude," Rob says.

Casey turns at that moment and makes eye contact. Ian's stomach drops at Casey takes a step in their direction, Bethany still clinging to his arm, when Melanie storms into the living room and in front of Casey.

"Where the hell have you been?" she yells. She's short, a good foot below their star quarterback, but Casey still backs away as though she was about to fight him. "We had a date tonight." Bethany glares from where she's tucked against Casey's side, although her hand has suddenly dropped down to clutch her purse.

The room has gotten quiet, someone being wise enough to turn down the music so the house could hear. Emma rushes back to Ian's side, entwining their fingers.

"Find a towel?" he asks, eyes never leaving the trio in front of him.

"Fuck the towel, I have to see this." His heart swells a little in his chest.

"Melanie, I told you we were over," Casey says, looking down and scuffing the floor with the toe of his shoe like a child being scolded. Ian really, really hopes Melanie punches him.

"What?" She says, quieter.

"I knew he was a liar," Ian says to Emma.

"You said you were really busy with college apps, and that we couldn't go out a lot any more, but that we would hang out tonight. Nowhere in your text says," she pauses for a moment, taking a deep breath. "That we're done. I've been sitting in my fucking house for two hours waiting on you, and you're telling me we're over, with this whore on your arm?" Melanie has gone hysterical now, voice high-pitched and choked with tears.

"Excuse me?" Bethany says, moving in front of Casey to face her.

“No, no, don’t fight, not here—”

“You heard him, you two are over. Now get out, this isn’t your party,” Bethany snaps. Melanie glances at Casey, who is scanning the crowd for someone. His eyes widen and he mouths “help” to the crowd. Delaney breaks through the crowd, Omar right behind her.

Melanie laughs, but it’s a harsh sound that hardly sounds like a laugh at all. “Of course you’d want Delaney, the perfect little problem solver. Are you fucking her too? That’d be a pretty low blow, especially-” Ian wants to laugh, but tries to reign it in when he makes brief eye contact with Omar.

“Melanie, go home. You know it’s over,” Delaney says, slightly slurred. Melanie laughs.

“Wow, just where would Casey be without Delaney at his side? Probably flunking out, I’d say. Do you do his homework too, or just his applications?” Melanie asks, taking a step closer to Delaney. The tension is spreading amongst the group as she continues. While Ian is loath to admit it, the journalism staffs are close. Attacking two of them while in a house of journalism students is pretty damn brave.

“Mel, let’s go outside, we can talk—” Casey starts, reaching to grab her arm and lead her out. She jerks her arm away quickly, and reaches up to slap him across the face. Casey moves out of the way, missing her palm, but bashes his elbow against a vase and knocks it off the table. The shatter rings in Ian’s ears.

“Oh my god Omar, I’m so sorry,” Casey slurs, while Omar just gapes at the broken glass.

“Way to go, asshole. Now we’re over,” Melanie says, then storms out of the room. The slam of the front door shakes the wall.

“Well everyone,” Delaney starts, “I think that is it for the party.”

Ian and Emma watch while everyone slowly make their way out of the house, roaming to respective cars and calling for rides on the lawn. Omar bends down and begins to pick up the pieces of colored glass. Casey hovers, distraught.

“Omar I am so sorry, I didn’t mean to ruin your party, I didn’t know Mel was going to show up,” he rambles, running his fingers through his hair several times and leaving it in complete disarray. He’s a mess, and Ian thinks it’s hilarious.

“Hey, we’re going to head out, do you need any help?” Emma asks Delaney, who just shakes her head.

“No, I’ll handle it tomorrow. Thanks for coming guys, sorry about the end.” Ian flashes her a genuine smile.

“Oh no worries, we had a great time. Best party I’ve been to yet.”

For once, he’s not lying.

Chapter 6

Monday is a disaster.

The door to the newsroom is closed when Ian arrives, and he braces himself for the chaos before he opens the door. It's eerily quiet, and no one turns to look when he walks into the room. He walks to his computer and sits, and makes eye contact with Casey, who's awkwardly hovering in front of the white board. He looks like a kicked mutt, and Ian turns away before Casey can get the idea that Ian wants to talk. Flashes of Saturday night run through his head; Casey stumbling in and out of conversation, booming laughter echoing down the hall, the crash of the glass on hardwood.

He wonders if Omar's parents are back yet, if they've realized their vase is missing. Maybe they left little shards of stained purple glass lying between the floorboard.

Maybe Omar's mom got a piece of it stuck in her foot.

Omar isn't in the room yet, and Ian is almost positive he's being reamed out by Mrs. Dales. None of the problems were major-- every picture was captioned and attributed to the photographer, every graphic fit well on the page, and all of the headlines were spelled correctly. But once students started to read the paper, the whispers in the hall became consumed with students pointing out misspellings, weird paragraph breaks, and even some incorrect information. Ian tuned it out on his walk upstairs, just as he

tunes out most hallway gossip, but he knew what they were talking about. At least he edited his own piece before submission.

“Did you see the twitter page? Every mention is someone pointing out something we fucked up,” Carol says to Alex, both seats tucked away in the corner of the room.

“How do we have multiple editors and still have typos?” Alex whispered, Ian just able to hear it from his seat. Casey lifts his head at the noise but doesn’t seem to understand the comment, and he goes back to checking his phone. It’s a fair question, although it’s not like Alex couldn’t edit his own damn work.

“It happens,” Jack, a junior reporter, states. “Although I think some mistake were introduced by design. None of my copy has errors, but the printed article does. I shouldn’t be blamed for that.”

Katie swivels her heads and glares. “Don’t blame it on us, it’s your responsibility to fact check.” Jack stares back, mouth wide in shock.

“And it’s your responsibility to make sure the entire article gets placed on the page!” His voice is starting to rise, and Ian watches in delight. Samantha, whose computer is next to his, lets out a deep sigh.

“I thought things were going too smoothly around here,” she says to Ian. She’s another senior, both having witnessed many arguments and even full-blown fights over the most minor of details.

“It was refreshing,” he lies.

“Is Casey going to step in or if he just going to let his staff rip each other apart?” She asks. Ian feels a sudden burst of anger when she refers to the class as Casey’s staff.

He can feel the flush creep up his face. This should be my staff, this should be my responsibility, I should be ending this argument, his brain repeats. He should be the one standing at the front of the class, addressing the problems with the last issue. Although, if he were editor, they all wouldn't be in this terrible fucking boat in the first place.

"Ian, are you okay?" Samantha asks, pulling his attention back to her. He glances over to respond, and sees that her eyes are downcast, brow furrowed. He realizes he's gripping the notes from his last class so tight the paper is starting to crumple. He places them back onto the table, watching the blood flow return quickly to his knuckles, replacing the stark white with his regular skin color, if not a little pinker than normal.

"Yeah sorry, got a little lost in my thoughts," he says, turning his head to look at Casey. The lug is still standing there, watching his staff accuse each other of ruining the paper. Those not involved in the argument are glancing around the room, looking for any sort of sign of what to do next. Ian knows he could end it, his senior status gives him enough authority to have the staff listen to him at least for a little while, but he's having too much fun. Katie looks like she's about to launch herself out of her chair, and Jack has only grown more animated. Bethany and Scott have also joined in the conversation. Ian glances at Casey and wonders if maybe that's why he doesn't want to involve himself, assuming he even remembers flirting with Bethany all night.

The journalism door slams shut, throwing the room into complete silence. Mrs. Dales is at the front of the room, Omar less than a foot behind her. She looks more shocked than angry, eyes wide and mouth slightly open. Ian's not sure why, but he guesses she's not in the newsroom enough to see how often they fight. God, even he and

Emma have had a few spats in here, or in the broadcasting room.

“Is everything all right?” she asks, looking pointedly at Katie and Jack. Katie, jittery with flushed cheeks, starts in again. “Yeah, I was just defending the page designers because apparently all of the typos are our fault.” Jack is already speaking before she finishes.

“I did not say they were all design’s fault, but I said there are some typos introduced by them while they were working on my—the pages!” He corrects himself, but it’s clear he’s focused on his article and his article only. Ian doesn’t hold it against him.

“See, you don’t even care!” Katie says.

“Enough!” Omar shouts.

The room goes silent.

Omar moves to the head of the classroom, in front of the whiteboard. Ian’s never heard Omar raise his voice before, except out of excitement. The scolding makes even him nervous, and he slouches slightly in his seat.

“We all made mistakes on this issue, and we have to own up to them. It’s the only way we’re going to become any better,” Omar says, making a point to look around the whole class instead of strictly at Katie and Jack. Still, they get the message, and Jack mumbles an apology. Omar nods, and continues. “We’re going to make a list of every mistake we find in this issue and write it down so we know exactly where things are going wrong and we can discuss how to fix them.” Ian’s surprised by how level-headed he is, considering his ass is on the line when it comes to the quality of the paper. Ian

would be fuming. He would scold every staff member with an error on their page and make them rewrite their articles to prove they had improved.

“This is not how we wanted to start the year off, I know. I accept the blame for not catching the mistakes. It was my job,” Omar pauses, and Ian is taken aback by the emotion in his voice. “And I failed. The next issue, I will make sure to be checking everything on the page, and I believe you all will too. Now,” he pauses again to hang up a big white sheet of paper on the whiteboard. He writes the date they went on sale at the top, and hands the marker off to Casey.

“You can write down the notes if you want,” he says. Ian raises his eyebrow at the tone; it’s not cold, but it’s certainly not the tone you used with your best friend. It was almost distant, as though Omar didn’t really know who he was directing his statement to. Either way, Casey took the marker quickly and shifted closer to the board.

Ian sits quietly while they discuss the paper, pretending to take extra notes so no one notices his silence. There’s something off with Omar, but he’s can’t exactly pin down what it is. He knows the Twitter feed for the paper is full of snarky comments from other students, but there’s generally backlash for something in the paper, whether it’s mistakes, a controversial article, or just complaints that the paper was boring. It’s a hard group of people to please, especially when they’re trying to appeal to everyone in the school.

Omar picks people to speak quickly, replying to every suggestion with a terse “right” and “put that down.” Casey is quiet, nodding whenever he receives a demand. Ian would laugh, if it wouldn’t be so out-of-place in the near silence that has blanketed the room between suggestions for the list of errors.

“Ian, do you have anything else to add?” Omar asks. There’s five minutes left of the period, and he sounds so tired.

“No, I think we’ve hit everything,” Ian says. Omar nods. The sheet is full of bullet points, a mass list of page numbers and the errors on each. Ian’s done this once before, but their list wasn’t this long. Even he’s a little embarrassed.

“We’ll work on our article list for the next issue tomorrow. But we owe it to the school to do better,” Omar says, just beating the bell. Everyone leaves quickly except Omar and Casey. Ian tries to linger, slowly putting his books back in his backpack and rearranging them a few times, just to see what Omar says. But the two of them are quiet, Omar looking over the list again while Casey fiddles with the straps of his backpack and avoids Ian’s eyes. Ian eventually leaves, nodding at the both of them before entering the hall. Neither nod back.

Rob’s standing outside the class, leaning against the wall and checking his phone.

“So how was class? Did Dales ream you guys out?” Rob asks, slipping his phone back in his jean pocket. Ian shrugs.

“Dales said nothing, Omar did most of the scolding. But I’m pretty sure he’s the one most upset by it, it was weird,” Ian says, leaning a shoulder against the wall.

“I mean, he is in charge. I don’t know why Dales even thought he’d be capable enough for that position,” Rob says, and Ian lets out a bitter laugh.

“Tell me about it,” Ian says, about to walk off to his next class before Rob asks him if he’s seen a tweet on the Venice Anonymous account.

“No I don’t follow it. What’s it say?” Ian asks.

“It’s about the paper. It says, ‘the paper’s terrible because black people don’t speak proper English, let alone read it. Thanks Omar!’” Rob looks up from his phone, laughing. Ian laughs too. It releases a little tension.

“Oh, did you say anything about Casey’s article?” Rob asks, changing the subject quickly. Ian pauses for a moment before remembering the conversation at the party.

“No, I didn’t get a chance today, I’m going to let Omar know tomorrow,” Ian answers, glancing at the clock in the hall. “Shit, I’m going to be late to math. I’ll see you around.” He leaves without waiting for Rob’s goodbye.

He slips his phone out of his pocket and logs into his new Twitter account, completely anonymous from his current one. He types quickly, hitting “tweet” then refreshing his timeline. A plain blue egg as his icon and the name “Protect the Ram” appears at the top, with a tweet posted one second ago:

“@VeniceAnon Casey def. didn’t write his own article. Shame Omar lets his staff steal, but who’s surprised?”

Ian turns his phone off as he swoops into his math class, looking down at the floor to hide his grin.

The tweet gets more attention than Ian had ever expected. It has thirty-four likes when he gets home, and has been shared by three other accounts. By the next morning, it’s up to sixty likes, indicating that at least sixty people in the school have started to ask if Casey stole elements of his article. Ian’s almost giddy, anticipation building in his gut like fireworks as third period gets closer, when he can talk to Omar about the tweet.

His fidgets as they run through article ideas, sole of his shoe tapping against the floor. Samantha gives him a look halfway through the period, and he blames his energy on the coffee he had for breakfast. The energy of the newsroom is much more optimistic than yesterday, although Katie and Jack don't seem to be speaking. Ian figures it will blow over in the next few days.

Brainstorming takes half the period, and once stories have been claimed, Ian pops up to the front of the room where Omar is double-checking their list.

"Hey Omar, can I talk to you—" Ian starts before Omar cuts him off.

"We know for a fact the school is planning on cutting some of the art programs, correct? Like we have a written confirmation that this is in the budgeting plans for next year?" Omar asks, not looking up. Ian flounders at the question, too focused on his own.

"Uh, I think so?" he says, irritated that Omar found the one article topic Ian knows nothing about. He makes a note to look into the matter later, for his own sake. The paper can't have an assistant editor who doesn't know what's happening in the district. "Send someone down to Mr. Lowell and have them ask, he always knows that stuff."

Omar sighs, quickly scribbles something down. Ian tries again.

"Can I talk to you about something in the hall?" Ian asks, gesturing to the door.

"Now?" Omar asks, and it's not a snap, but Ian's blood surges hot anyway.

"Yeah, it's important," Ian says, voice firm. Omar gives him a short nod and they both walk out into the hall.

"So what's so important?" Omar asks, his foot tapping against the floor. It rings out down the hall and in Ian's ears.

“Have you seen the tweets on the Venice Anon account?” Ian says, not wanting to stretch this conversation out any longer. Omar furrows his eyebrows.

“No. You called me out in the hall to talk about Twitter?” Omar replies.

Ian’s anger flares again. “Can you let me finish?” he snaps, and Omar’s eyes widen, but he’s quiet. *Fucking finally.*

“People are saying Casey plagiarized his article.” The hallway is silent, and Ian’s words seem to echo off the linoleum.

“What?” Omar says. Ian’s pleased by how quiet he is.

“Yeah, someone tweeted that Casey copied his article, and sixty people have seen it. You have to do something,” Ian says, softening his words at the end. He can’t have Omar think Ian’s accusing him of something. Omar runs a hand through his hair, looking down. Ian’s heart is beating fast with excitement; Casey is about to be fired.

“Have you talked to Casey about this?” Omar asks.

“No, I wanted to talk to you first, let you know what’s going on,” Ian says, lowering his voice. “Do you really think we can trust Casey?” Omar’s face twists into an expression of disbelief.

“I don’t see why we shouldn’t, I mean, he’s our friend. He wouldn’t do this.” Omar sounds confident, but Ian can see the doubt in his eyes. He recognizes it from every time his mom tells his dad about what she did during his business trips, and how his dad just nods his head and goes along with it all, like Ian can’t see right through them.

“I mean, he’s under a lot of pressure with college applications and football season. I’m not saying he’s a bad guy, of course he isn’t,” Ian emphasizes this with a

pause, “but maybe he took on more than he could handle.”

“Do you think he plagiarized?” Omar asks. Ian’s taken aback by the question. He figured Omar would be too furious to care what he thought. In fact, Omar doesn’t seem angry at all.

“I don’t know, I’d have to look into it. But is it a risk we should take? We’re already on thin ice with the school,” Ian says, a reminder of what is at stake.

Omar doesn’t respond for a moment, and the two stand silently in the hall. The newsroom door swings open, and Jack’s head pops out from behind the doorframe.

“Hey Omar, we need an opinion on the cover story,” Jack says. Omar’s attention is already on it, and Ian glares at Jack.

“Scrap any sport stories, we can’t have two cover stories on athletics in a row. Give us a minute.” Omar’s voice is back to his normal tone, confident in his commands.

“Ian, I need you to look into this. If he’s copying stories, we have to address it before the next issue. But I’m not firing someone based on a rumor,” Omar says, looking Ian in the eye and keeping his tone serious. Ian nods.

“Yeah, of course,” he forces out, digging his nails into the skin of his palm. The reputation of the paper is at stake, and this idiot wants to worry about friendship? Casey doesn’t even heavily contribute to the paper.

He’s not an asset, Ian thinks, watching as Omar ducks back into the newsroom.

Ian takes a deep breath, trying to clear his head. He needs proof of plagiarism to get Casey off staff. He can’t change the word document on the shared drive because they’ll see the modified date is recent. He doubts he’ll be lucky enough to find any direct

quotes stolen from another article.

Ian walks back into the room. He sits back at his computer and glances at his notebook to see what options for articles he has this month, but is distracted by a crinkled piece of paper tossed behind Samantha's computer. He grabs it and flattens it against the table, soon realizing it's a marked-up draft of her article for the last issue about the changes undergoing the English class requirements for graduation. He crumples it back up and leaves it on the table, going back to his work.

A few minutes later, Ian realizes he found a solution.

Chapter 7

Ian has just finished retyping Casey's article about how the new federal regulations on health food will affect cafeteria meals when Emma slips into his room.

"Hey, Ian," she greets, tossing her purse on his desk chair and crawling across his bed to settle against his side. He quickly saves the document and shuts his laptop, looking up at her with wide eyes. "Everything okay?" she asks, glancing down at the laptop.

"Yeah, yeah, I was just trying to get stuff done before you came. Just finished," he answers, abandoning his sentence to kiss her and hopes she doesn't ask any more questions. She leans fully into the kiss, humming when he reaches an arm between her waist and the wall to pull her closer. She moves easily but pulls away from the kiss sooner than Ian wanted.

"Babe, come on," he says, redirecting his kisses to her neck. He needs a break, and Emma's been too busy with cheer practice or whatever it is they do pre-season to fool around after school. There's a stirring in his gut, and for once, it's not anger.

"As much as I am loving this," she starts, laughing while tugging at the hair on the nape of Ian's neck to pull his head up. "I can't stay long tonight. I told Ellen I'd spend the night at her place tonight." Ian jerks up, blood cooling rapidly.

"What?" Emma frowns, running his finger lightly through his hair. "I'm sorry I haven't been over lately, it's just—" He grabs her wrist and pulls her arm away from him.

Her whole body shifts with the sudden movement, and she looks at him with wide eyes.

“Ian, ow,” she says, trying to pull her hand back. He doesn’t let go.

“Who’s Ellen?” He’s never heard that name before, and Emma never cancels their plans.

“She’s a new member of the cheer squad, she transferred from another district.

Ow, Ian, you’re hurting—” she says.

He can’t even hear her, brain too busy imagining her crawling into the lap of another guy.

“Where does Ellen live?” Ian asks, grip still tight. Emma twists her wrist, but he doesn’t let go. He needs to know if she’s lying. The thought makes him squeeze harder.

“Off of MacNamara street, by the old Catholic church. Let go!” She jerks her arm and he releases her, eyes stuck on the sight of red marks that match his fingers wrapping around the skin like a bracelet. He wonders if it’ll bruise.

“Ow babe, that really hurt. What the hell?” Emma’s voice is small, muffled slightly from looking down.

“Are you lying to me?” Ian asks. Emma looks up, eyes wide. He’s seen his mom do the same to his dad.

“What? Of course not. Ellen needs extra help since she’s new to the team,” Emma says, and her voice still sounds so small. Ian doesn’t respond immediately, but gently reaches for Emma’s wrist, small in his thick fingers. He rubs his thumb along the marks, trying to fade them away. He’s not proud, but there’s nothing he can do about it now. She doesn’t pull back.

“Okay,” Ian says, looking Emma in the eye. “I’m sorry for grabbing you, but don’t just cancel out of the blue like that to hang out with people I don’t know. It makes me nervous,” he speaks quietly, keeps his grasp on her light, like he’s speaking with a spooked animal. She’s wary, he sees it in her eyes, but she stays settled against his side.

“Ian, you know I wouldn’t cheat on you,” her voice is louder now. And he knows, objectively, that she wouldn’t, but he can’t stop the flares of jealousy when she’s talking to another guy or when she’s spending her evenings with other people when she should be in his bed. Emma is his, and it’s important that everyone knows. Sometimes, she just needs a reminder.

He wraps his arm around her shoulders and presses a kiss against her temple, his lips lingering there for a moment. She’s warm and smells like roses-- he pushes away the image of someone else giving her flowers. Her body lotion smells like roses. He knows she’s not lying.

“I know, I’m sorry, baby.” They sit like that for a few minutes, silent. Finally, Emma speaks first.

“What were you working on?”

“What?” he replies, unsure of what she’s talking about. She turns into him, resting her chin on his shoulder. The bone digs into the muscle, but he doesn’t mind.

“When I came in, what were you working on?” *Shit.*

“Oh, just another college application,” he answers, shrugging enough that her head shifts up and down with him.

“Oh, where too? Did you ever hear back from Emerson?” He bites down on his

cheek, hard.

“No, still waiting. I’m looking into Syracuse,” he says, which isn’t a complete lie. His application is almost ready to submit, but he’s hoping he’ll have a leadership position to update by the end of the week.

“That’s great!” Emma says, pressing a kiss to his cheek. Guilt pools in his stomach when he catches a glimpse of her wrist, still pink.

“Yeah, we’ll see what happens. When are you going to Ellen’s?”

“Probably not for another hour or so. So I guess we’ll have to find something to do,” she says, placing her hand on his thigh and squeezing. He grins, heart starting to race again, heat returning to his gut.

He forgets about Ellen for a while, but his stomach starts to sink while he watches Emma tug her shirt back on.

“Are you okay?” she asks, pausing before grabbing her purse from his desk.

“Yeah, just stressing out about applications. Have fun at Ellen’s.” He smiles, pulling her in for one more kiss before lying back down in his bed. She smiles and runs her hand through his hair one more time before standing up and slipping out of his room.

The silence is unnerving, and Ian has to reach for his laptop to keep his thoughts from racing around Emma and her evening plans. His word document loads quickly, and he focuses his attention back on his personal project. His fingers start moving before his brain, and he lets the tapping of his keyboard break the quiet in his room. Midnight comes quickly, and he falls asleep alone, clutching a pillow to his chest, laptop still open but moved to the floor.

“Hey Omar, you have to see this.”

Omar is typing quickly, and he tilts his head just enough to indicate that he heard Ian but has yet to turn his eyes away from the screen. He’ll be blind by thirty, Ian thinks. Omar opens his mouth, then closes it again, attention dedicated fully to whatever article he is working on. Ian’s been so obsessed with his own project, he’s not even sure what Omar’s article is about.

Ian hovers quietly for a moment, although his toe starts to tap against the tile. The sound isn’t noticed among the constant chatter in the room, surprisingly full for a Friday afternoon. The first draft deadline isn’t for another week, but everyone in the room seems to be working on their article. Ian’s never seen the staff so motivated.

Omar types the final sentence of his article with flourish, hand flying off the keyboard, before spinning in his chair to face Ian.

“Sorry dude. What’s up?” Ian leans down so they can talk quietly without drawing attention.

“I have something I need to show you.” He practiced saying them with sincerity at home so he wouldn’t crack a smile, although the excitement was building in his stomach. He could almost taste his victory, sweet like honey. He could hear Omar telling Casey that he’s fired, asking him to leave the staff, and telling Ian that he needs him to take over the position. He’s imagined the scene enough.

Omar nods and they head back into the hallway, an odd sanctuary for their private discussions. A handful of students are still milling around their lockers, texting for rides

or waiting for their club meetings to start. Ian doesn't care. He thinks about asking them to gather around and witness his genius. He doesn't, but the idea of an audience to his success leaves him yearning for someone to linger close enough to hear their conversation.

"I found this on the floor this morning," Ian says, pulling a dirty piece of paper out of his backpack. He hands it to Omar, fingers shaking slightly in anticipation. "It was tucked in the corner by the trashcan. I don't know how we hadn't found it earlier, honestly," Ian trails off as Omar is busy scanning the paper, brushing dirt off it while he reads. Ian tries not to beam in pride.

He spent an evening retyping Casey's article, then searched for another article about the same topic— apparently everyone was really interested in the new regulations on junk food— from the Washington Post. He was careful to inject phrases just large enough to read wrong with Casey's style, but not big enough to be obvious that they were copied word-for-word. He placed six phrases within the article, tucked within paragraphs of Casey's own words, and all circled by his mother the next day.

Ian was hesitant to ask for her help, but he knew Omar would recognize his handwriting, and all the editors on staff were women. His mom didn't ask any questions, just took the pen he gave her and waited for directions. She circled the phrases he added to the article, jotting down little notes like "awkward" and "does this need a citation?" He added several punctuation errors to have her correct too, mimicking every edited draft he's ever turned in. He came to school early, tossed the article on the ground and slid it across the floor under his shoe, gathering dust and dirt. All he had to do was crumble it

once before it looked like every other tossed article that missing the garbage can. It was perfect.

“Is this— do you recognize this handwriting?” Omar asks, trying to remain calm although Ian can see his hands, stark against the white paper, are shaking. Ian shakes his head, looking down.

“No, but I don’t think it’s someone on staff. He must have showed it to someone else,” Ian says. Omar laughs, once, a harsh chuckle that seems to echo down the now-empty hall.

“So he copies a Washington Post article and someone else, who we don’t even know, catches him in the act?” Omar says, and Ian wonders if he’s become too sloppy, or gone too far.

“I— wait, how did you know it was that article?” Ian’s stomach drops so fast, he surprised his legs didn’t give out with it.

“I read the article. I had to make sure we had a fresher take on it, and that he didn’t just repeat someone else. Which,” Omar takes a breath, but his fingers are gripping the paper so hard it’s start to crinkle, “I guess he did anyway, someone just managed to save our asses!” Omar isn’t yelling, but his voice is rising, and Ian can’t help but stare. Omar’s always so cool under pressure. Ian wasn’t prepared to see him crack.

“I’m sorry Omar,” Ian says, because it seems the proper response. Omar is quiet for a moment, eyes glued to the article, and Ian starts to worry that he’ll find something that indicates that it’s fake.

“I need to talk to Casey,” Omar says softly. Ian exhales when Omar looks up at

him, a confirmation that Omar believes that Ian has found proof that Casey is a risk to the paper. Delight surges in Ian but he forces away the smile, nodding to the door to the broadcast studio down the hall.

“Last I heard, Jeff was interviewing him for the news show about the upcoming game. He should be down there,” Ian says. Omar nods, taking a deep breath and running his hand over his hair.

Ian had planned on waiting it out, letting Omar run through the firing process on his own and telling him about it later, but he can’t stop himself. He blurts out, “what happens next?”

Omar sighs, and Ian realizes just how tired Omar has seemed the past week. His eyes aren’t as wide as they were when class started, and he yawns during conversations with the staff. Omar’s shoulders drop from where they were hunched while he read the article, as though he was bracing himself for impact.

“I don’t know, Ian. Casey’s an idiot,” Ian bites his lip to stop from smiling when Omar’s tone gets harsh again, “but I can’t ruin his academic career.”

Ian jerks back in shock.

“So you’re not going to say anything? He’s a threat to the paper.” Ian works hard to stay level-headed and keep his voice calm, but his tone gets sharp at the end. Omar doesn’t back down.

“I am aware. But I can’t do that to another student, and I can’t fire him without getting Dales involved. I don’t like it, but that’s how it is. I can’t trust him with the assistant editor responsibilities, but I also can’t throw him under the bus,” Omar says, and

he's so damn genuine Ian wants to scream. Instead, he bites down on his cheek, hard.

Copper lingers on his tongue.

"Word is going around Omar, you have to address this before it gets too big," Ian argues, and he's talking much louder than he intended but maybe if he shouts, Omar will actually hear him.

"The school has a rumor from some Twitter account that is completely anonymous, it's hardly proof. But I have to trust that you'll stay quiet about this. It can't spread any farther than the three of us," Omar says. Ian can't do anything but nod.

"So what are you going to do, then?" Ian knows he sounds bitter, but he can't cover it up now. If Omar didn't fire Casey over plagiarizing, he won't fire him over anything.

There's no chance he's going to become assistant editor, at least not officially. His resume will remain empty, and colleges will continue to pass him up, and he'll be stuck in fucking Venice for the rest of his life. People don't win Pulitzers in towns like Venice.

At least Ian's question gets Omar angry again. "I'm going to tear him a new one," he spits. "This," he holds the article out to Ian again, "is completely unacceptable. I'll edit everything he writes by hand, and I don't want him involved with any major paper decisions anymore. The way I see it, he's already fired." Ian wants to scream, but he just keeps his eyes down at the floor, traces the lines in the tiles with his eyes and nods along with Omar's rant.

"Ian," Omar says, voice soft again. Ian looks up when Omar put his hand on Ian's

shoulder, the physical contact jarring. His friends don't normally touch him, and his dad hasn't given him physical affection since he was eight. Omar's hand is warm and larger than he expected on his shoulder. He looks up, and meets the warm brown eyes he remembers from the beginning of the year. "Thank you for this. I know the paper is your priority, and I trust that I can turn to you with any help I need while handling this. But we have to keep it quiet." Ian gives a quiet agreement, the "yeah" practically a whisper.

Omar nods his head and gives Ian's shoulder another squeeze before letting go. "Now I have to go talk to Casey. I'll see you later?" Ian nods and uses whatever energy he has left to give Omar the smallest smile.

"Yeah, see you later," Ian says quietly. He watches Omar turn and head down the hall, the article clutched tightly against his side.

Ian's left standing alone, shock and anger clouding his thoughts. He forms a fist and digs his nails into the soft skin. It's not enough. He was so close, and Omar wouldn't make the damn decision to get Casey off of staff.

If this doesn't get rid of him, then what will? This would cost a real journalist his entire career. And Ian doesn't even need Casey off the staff, he just needs the position. *One fucking position*, Ian keeps repeating in his head. *It should have been so simple.*

He pulls his arm back and punches forward. The smash of skin against metal reverberates down the hall. The metal is cold against his knuckles, before all he can feel is sharp pain along his hand. He knows he didn't break it, and wonders if he should hit it again. The tension in his chest is gone. Ian takes a deep breath. It's easier this time.

He brings his hand up to his face. There's blood, a small trickle coming from the

knuckle of his ring finger. It's bright against his skin. He watches a drop slide down towards his wrist, and he thinks of Emma and bruised fingerprints. He thinks of Omar, who looked so angry but couldn't make the one simple decision to give Ian what he needed.

Fuck it, Ian thinks, punching the locker again for good measure. He lets himself pretend it's Omar for a moment, a brief release before the pain in his hand doubles and he hisses out a breath.

No one comes out to see what's happened. He wasn't expecting anyone to.

Chapter 8

The soccer ball flies up, but lands only a few feet away from him.

Ian's not a fan of sports, but it feels good being able to kick something, even if the ball only travels half the distance he was aiming for. He huffs and waits for Rob to walk up to the ball.

"So wait, Casey actually copied his article? Shit," Rob says, drawing out the last word. Rob kicks it back, and Ian stops it quickly.

"No, he didn't. I made a fake article and had my mom write edits," Ian says, as though Rob should have figured it out on his own.

"Holy shit." Rob misses the ball when Ian kicks it back, too busy staring at him.

"What? It was easy," Ian says with a shrug. The worst part was asking his mom for help, and even she was willing to play along.

"But Omar thinks it's real?" Rob asks, retrieving the ball and dribbling it back to the center of the yard. Rob kicks it back to Ian, letting it slowly roll to the corner of his backyard. Rob's house is on the outskirts of town and his yard is bigger than the rest of the neighborhood's. He has a soccer goal on one side, but Ian's not good enough to play goalie, and Rob would rather have a challenge when he's in goal.

"Yeah, and he still won't fucking fire Casey." Ian dribbles the ball back and forth, growling when he kicks too hard and the ball rolls an extra two feet. He stomps over,

muttering “stupid ass ball,” under his breath.

“You’re really not messing around, huh?” Rob says, something like admiration in his voice.

Ian looks up, incredulous.

“No, Rob, I’m not. That’s my fucking position. In fact, I should be editor in chief. Venice View should be mine. I’ve already given it three years of my life. I’m the most dedicated journalist on the staff. And Omar won’t even give me the assistant position out of some bullshit guilt complex,” Ian yells, kicking the ball as hard as he can. Rob ducks away as it flies towards him, sailing towards the edge of his yard.

“Well, at least being angry makes you better at soccer.”

“Fuck you,” Ian says. Rob laughs, flipping him the middle finger and running to fetch the ball. Ian grits his teeth, heart pounding in his ears as he remembers his failure.

“So, evil genius, what’s next?” Rob asks. Ian bites his lip, thinking.

“I don’t know,” Ian says, and he hates that it’s true. Rob shrugs, kicking the ball back.

“You’ll think of something.”

Ian just nods, already focusing his thoughts on his next move. He decides to change the subject instead.

“Rob, have you read the Venice Anon account recently?”

“Yeah, dude, I’m on it all the time. It’s hilarious. Did you see the post about Casey? I guess he broke another heart,” Rob says, laughing. Ian rolls his eyes.

“God, these girls are so stupid,” Ian says, thinking back to Emma dating Casey in

middle school. He used to daydream about catching Casey in the act of flirting with another girl, then telling Emma and breaking them up. He would have been the hero. Fortunately, he never had to interfere because Emma grew wise enough on her own to know Casey wasn't worth her time. "You'd think they would learn he's a snake."

"Pretty face, they don't seem to care. And quarterback? It's a girl's wet dream," Rob says, toeing the ball but not kicking it back. His voice is softer now, and Ian braces himself for a pity party. He doesn't have time for this.

"Well, not every girl's," Ian says. It's the bare minimum for a comforting statement, but Rob smiles anyway.

"That's true. Do you think it's true, once you go black..." Ian laughs, and wants to tear his hair out. The thought of chasing after a girl for three years is a joke.

"I wouldn't know. Why don't you just find another girl? We have a whole school full of them," Ian suggests, although he already knows the answer.

"I don't want another girl. I want Delaney. You said you would help me—"

"I know what I said. And we'll get there. But currently, any plans to run Casey and Omar into the ground are on pause until I reevaluate," Ian says, voice firm.

Rob huffs, kicking the ball towards the goal. Ian's snarky "Goal!" is ignored.

"You're going to help me though, right?" Rob's voice is quiet, and Ian almost misses his question over the sound of a car's engine driving by.

"Yeah, Rob. I'm going to help you," Ian answers. Maybe it'll feel better, sabotaging Omar's relationship while he waits for the next move on his staff position. If he can't get what he wants, he doesn't see why Omar— weak, guilt-ridden Omar—

deserves to have what he wants.

And if he helps Rob in the process? Well, he can't say Ian's never done anything nice for him.

Ian can't escape the goddamn football team. Undefeated, the White Rams have reached the last game before playoffs, and hallway chatter is now exclusively about the upcoming game. Casey seems to be the second most popular discussion, although everyone is more interested in his breakup with some junior girl Ian doesn't know. He tries to drown it out with thoughts about his date with Emma tonight, his application to Syracuse in the mail, what it would feel like if he bashed his head against the white brick of the school walls, but he can't escape it. His footsteps feel heavier, his irritation seeping into every conversation he's had so far.

"Hey babe, my dad's not sure if he's going to make it to dinner tonight," Emma says, glancing up from her phone. She's taken to hovering around his locker before second period.

"Bummer. You still want to eat at your place then? Mom would probably be thankful that there's a different face at the table," Ian offers as a joke. Emma gives him a stern look.

"No offense to your mom, but I don't want to be the distraction for whatever is upsetting your parents this week," Emma says, although she keeps her tone soft. Joking about Ian's parents is a fine line, but he tries not to snap at Emma. Ian shuts his locker, making the effort not to slam it in Emma's ear. He leans in and presses a kiss against her

cheek, making her smile.

“Neither do I. Let’s just go to your place, if anything we’ll get lucky and have the whole place to ourselves.” He wraps his arm around her waist and pulls her closer, whispering the end of his sentence in her ear.

“Ian, stop, not in the hall,” Emma says, laughing, and pulls his arm off her. She entwines their fingers instead. “We’re about to be late, let’s go.”

Ian reluctantly lets her pull him away from his locker and into the flow of students, moving together at an increasing rate as the clock ticks down before the period starts. Ian doesn’t drag his feet, but Emma notices his slower walk.

“What’s up? Everything all right?”

“Yeah, just not eager to listen to spats about font size today,” Ian answers. Emma nods, and gives him a small laugh. He knows it’s fake, just a little noise of sympathy, and he gives her a tight-lipped smile in return.

“Well, just think about tonight. Today will go by in no time.” Her voice is higher pitched than normal, and it grates on his nerves. She drifts away from his touch and says goodbye before he’s left alone at the door of the newsroom. This damn room seems to be the center of his life. For once, he hesitates before going in.

Everyone is already seated, although their voices are louder than usual. Ian works to keep his face void of emotion when he sees Casey. Casey looks huge at his computer, and Ian pictures his sausage fingers struggling to type his article. He smiles slightly, heading to his seat and logging into his computer.

He manages to ignore the noise, focusing all his attention on his current article

about the upcoming levy and its effects on the student body. He's still in the research phase, compiling a list of phone numbers for people to interview and looking into the levy history of Venice Public Schools. His list is coming along nicely, and he's about to dig further into the past levies that have been passed for the district when Omar pulls the attention of the class.

"Okay guys, we're at the last game before the playoffs. I need to pull someone to write an article about Venice's history in playoff games, since it's pretty much guaranteed we'll be going," Omar says

Ian stops typing and turns, mouth agape.

"There's already three articles about the team," Ian says. He told himself he would stay quiet in class, just work on his article and get the 45-minute period over with, but this is asinine. They have to appeal to the entire student body, and a good portion of them don't give a shit about the football team.

"Well," Omar says with a small sigh, and Ian thinks he's about to change his mind, but he responds with "there's going to be four."

"That's a lot of athletic articles," Jack says quietly, looking over to Ian.

"That's unheard of. The max we run is two," Ian says. Omar looks at him and frowns.

"I know that's not normally how we do things, but everyone is talking about the playoffs. We write about what the students are interested in," Omar says. Ian shoots a glare at Casey, even though he understands that it wasn't his call to make, now that he's only the assistant editor in name. Casey has stayed silent, and Ian knows Casey is too

scared of what Omar can do to his academic career to argue with him.

“At least half, likely more, of the student body does not care about the football team,” and just to look nice, Ian adds, “no offense, Casey.” Casey looks to him, surprised to be addressed directly, and shrugs.

“No worries,” Casey answers, quietly.

“I don’t think that’s accurate, Ian. If anything, it’s the biggest event for the community as well. These stories span beyond Venice High,” Omar says, tone growing firmer. Ian’s face twists into disbelief. *Like hell the community cares.* They might be interested in a recap of the month’s games, but they certainly wouldn’t be looking for a copy of Venice View to find it. Ian’s proud of his work, but he doesn’t expect it to have an impact on the community.

“No, they don’t. We write for the students, not their parents or their neighbors. We’re a school paper, we have to try to incorporate the entire school,” Ian argues, tension rising in the room. No one else is chiming in for either side, and Ian can feel the stares of his classmates on his skin. Omar is growing frustrated, sighing again and running a hand through his hair, no longer cropped close against his scalp.

“Ian, I don’t know what you want me to tell you. We’re adding the article,” Omar says. Ian won’t let his ideas be brushed aside so quickly.

“I don’t think—” Ian starts, but Omar cuts him off.

“I don’t care what you think!” Omar snaps, and the room becomes eerily quiet. Ian’s mouth clamps shut, and he’s too stunned by Omar’s tone to even respond. The two stare at each other for a moment, and Ian purses his lips. He knows when a conversation

is over.

“Fine.” It’s curt, quieter than he normally speaks but loud enough that the class hears him relent, and it almost feels as though there is a collective exhale. Ian’s teeth are clenched so hard he thinks they’re about to crack, and he turns his chair around to go back to his own article. For a moment, his typing is the only sound in the room.

“Okay, who wants to work on this article?” Omar asks, turning his attention back to the room. The staff is reluctant to answer, tensions still high from their argument. Someone raises their hand, but Ian refuses to turn and see who. Omar is still talking, but Ian just continues to type. He starts to write a rough draft, which is really nothing but unsubstantiated claims that will have to be deleted, just to keep his typing a constant current under the rest of Omar’s announcements. Omar wraps it up, and soon everyone is back to typing, and his noise melts back into the general sounds of the room.

“Hey, Omar?” Ian pauses when he hears Casey beckon Omar over, curiosity overtaking his anger for a moment.

“What, Casey.” There’s no inflection at the end of the question, and Ian bites back a smile. At least something is going right today.

“Can we talk later today?” Casey sounds so sad. Delight flares in Ian, a warmth around his ribs.

“I’m pretty busy today. I’ve got dinner with Delaney tonight. Maybe another day,” Omar says. The conversation is over after that, and Ian goes back to typing aggressively.

Despite Casey being taken down in Omar’s eyes, Ian is still stuck in as a reporter

whose opinion doesn't seem to matter at that. His enjoyment of Casey's misfortune only lasts so long, and he's back to reflecting on the past ten minutes of class. Omar's voice still rings in his head. Ian grits his teeth again and stops typing long enough to squeeze his fingers into fists. He knows it looks like he's stretching his hands, not furling and unfurling his hands as an outlet for the adrenaline that's warming his blood.

He spends the rest of the period working on his article, finishing the research portion of his article in record time. No one bothers him with their questions.

He's ready to spend the rest of the day in a similar fashion, quietly simmering from his argument with Omar and using the avoidance from his peers as a chance to evaluate the situation and figure out his next step. He won't let Omar get away with dismissing him like this, like his contribution to the paper isn't ten times more than Omar has ever put in, like he didn't build this goddamn paper, like the paper isn't his only way out of this god forsaken town.

He will not get stuck in this town, working dead-end cashier jobs like half of the other graduates. He's getting out, and he's taking Emma, and he's never turning back. He just needs the next step in his plan.

Luckily, the next step appears at his locker before lunch, in the form of a big stupid blonde lug.

"Ian, I need your help." Ian wants to laugh in Casey's face, but he knows better. Burning bridges always makes it harder to get what you want. The more friends you have, the more resources.

"What's up?" Ian asks, closing his locker and giving Casey his full attention.

Casey looks lost, standing at Ian's locker and asking for help. They don't talk, more out of Ian's purposeful avoidance than anything else. The fact that Casey is clearly uncomfortable makes him think Casey's noticed how often Ian ducks out of conversations when he's around.

"Can we talk somewhere private?" Casey asks. Ian gives him a blank stare. Students roam the halls constantly during lunch periods since there's no attendance for lunch. Finding a spot void of people is not an easy task.

"Uh, we can try. I don't know—" Ian says.

"I have a spot, come on," Casey interrupts, reaching out to pull Ian's arm but stopping himself at the last moment, dropping his hand to his side. Ian is thankful. Casey decides to trust that Ian will follow him, and Ian does, mostly curious as to how Casey could want his help.

Casey ducks into the back hallway where the locker for the football and basketball teams are, and it's empty. Ian rolls his eyes behind Casey's back. Of course, he takes him to the locker rooms. It's like the boy knows nothing but football and the newsroom.

And even that might be pushing it.

Casey settles behind the wall that leads to the football locker room entrance, almost blocking the door. Ian stands in front of him but doesn't try to duck out of sight, preferring to keep a good amount of personal space between the two.

"Okay, what's going on?" Ian asks, growing impatient. Casey hasn't yet made direct eye contact with Ian, too busy looking for any wandering athletes or teachers. He's

beginning to look like he snorted coke last period, and the effects are really starting to kick in. “Casey, dude.”

“What? Sorry. It’s just, this is really important and you need to make sure you will tell no one about this. Seriously, no one. Not even Emma,” Casey says. Ian grits his teeth when Casey says her name, but recovers quickly. He can’t let the past get in the way.

“You got it, bro.” Ian adds the “bro” at the end although it feels wrong in his mouth. They’re not friends, he’s sure Casey knows this, but if it gets him to spit it out, Ian can pretend.

“Okay, so, you know how things have been weird between me and Omar since I broke the vase at his party?” Casey starts. Ian had practically forgotten about the party, although he is delighted to play the moment Casey ruined the evening in his head again.

“Uh, no, not really. Things have been weird?” Ian asks. Casey sighs, and Ian thinks he’s going to roll his eyes but instead he just looks down and scuffs the floor with the toe of his sneaker, like a dejected cartoon.

“Yeah, there’s just been a weird tension. I came over the next morning to help clean up, but he was still upset. I’ve been trying to make it up to him, get back to being friends,” Casey explains.

“Oh, uh, that sucks. I didn’t know things were bad,” Ian says. He’s treading in new water—no one ever goes to him for sympathy. In fact, he’s sure most people have learned that sympathy is not his strong point. The lie sounds more obvious to his ears, but Casey just gives him a small smile. *The idiot buys it.*

“They weren’t bad, they just weren’t good. I could fix it. But now...” Casey trails off, taking a breath and glancing around once more. Ian looks behind him to an empty hallway to speed up the process.

“You’re good. Tell me what happened,” Ian says, about to lose his calm exterior.

“Omar thinks I plagiarized my last article.” Casey says it so fast, Ian has to repeat it in his head a few times to fully understand what came out of his mouth. Ian’s eyebrows shoot up. He wasn’t expecting Casey to come to him with something like this. He also wasn’t expecting Omar to keep Ian’s name out of their conversation.

“What? Why would he think that?” Ian asks, voice unnaturally high in his faux-shock.

“He found this, I don’t even know, this fake draft of my last article. I have never seen it before in my life, and I certainly did not write it,” Casey says, emphasizing his last sentence.

“Wait, a fake draft? What do you mean?” Ian says, playing up his disbelief.

“Someone copied my article and planted quotes from another article into it. They edited it too, circling the copied quotes and fixing punctuation. But, there’s a comma mistake, and I never misuse the comma. Ever!” Casey states.

That would have been good to know.

“Did you tell Omar that?” Ian asks, interested in what Omar actually said to Casey. Maybe his chances aren’t completely gutted.

“Yeah, of course. But the only way he could confirm that was through talking to Dales, and he didn’t want to risk me getting into real trouble,” Casey says.

“That’s very kind of him.” There’s a pause in the conversation, and Casey waits for Ian to meet his eyes.

“You don’t think I would do that, do you?” Casey’s voice, normally so damn loud in the halls, is soft, almost meek. Ian wants to laugh, but knows better.

“No, Casey. I really don’t,” Ian answers, and he takes a moment to appreciate how easy it is to tell the truth. Casey seems to breathe easier, and smiles at him.

“Thanks, Ian. That means a lot,” Casey pauses, looking slightly uncomfortable again. “So there’s something I need your help with.” Ian waits quietly, brain frantic. He couldn’t predict any of the last five minutes of his life, and he hates surprises.

“I need you to talk to Omar about it,” Casey says.

Fuck. It’s not hard to make it look like he’s spoken to Omar about it, but if Casey mentions this conversation to Omar, he’s caught playing both sides. Frankly, he’s already put himself in that position. There’s nothing to stop Casey from telling Omar right now that Ian doesn’t believe he would cheat. He needs to find a way out of Casey’s corner.

“Casey, I would love to vouch for you, but I don’t know if Omar is going to take my word,” Ian says.

“But he trusts you, and you guys are pretty close friends. I’m sure he would take it into consideration at least.” Casey’s voice is starting to sound desperate, and Ian loves it.

“I know, I know. Let me think about how I can approach this, give me a minute,” Ian says, thoughts spinning. Casey obliges, waiting patiently while Ian thinks. Omar is going to dinner with Delaney, so he’ll have time tonight to think about his next move—

“Hold on, I have an idea. Omar trusts me, but I’m not sure if I’m the best person

to approach him with such a sensitive subject,” Ian starts, something like excitement starting to bubble in his stomach.

“But you said you don’t think—” Casey blurts, voice almost cracking.

“Hey, hey, I’m not done.” Ian’s not used to comforting people, and his patience with the situation is growing thin. He needs to end this conversation before he blows it.

“You should talk to Delaney. She knows you’re a good guy, and Omar would take her word over anyone’s. If you let her know what happened, she will get you back in his good graces,” Ian explains. Casey nods along as Ian speaks, and Ian lets out a small sigh as Casey processes his plan.

“I think you’re right. I should talk to Dee,” Casey says, glancing down at the floor for a moment before looking back up. Ian’s head tilts at the unfamiliar nickname but he says nothing.

“For sure. She’s your best chance, dude,” Ian says, giving Casey a light pat on the arm like the rest of the football team does. It doesn’t make them less uncomfortable.

Ian is about to walk away, excuse himself to go eat, but he stops himself from spinning on his heel and high-tailing it out of the hallway. “Although there is one thing. Don’t tell Delaney that you spoke to me first.”

“Why?”

“Omar doesn’t want you to get in trouble, so he’s keeping this whole thing under wraps. We can’t have word get back to him that you’ve been discussing the whole thing with other people. I mean, he probably assumes you mentioned it to someone in confidence, but it will look a lot better if he thinks you kept it just between you, him, and

Delaney,” Ian lies, creating a half-baked excuse to cover himself.

“But why would he not be mad about me telling Delaney, then?” Casey asks, and Ian rolls his eyes. He can’t help it sometimes.

“Because he knows you and Delaney are best friends. It’s only natural you would talk to her about it. Me and you? We’re not exactly what you would call close,” Ian says with a smile, and Casey gives him one back. Keep it friendly, and Ian won’t have to have a conversation about why he dreams of smashing Casey’s fingers in the frame of the industrial gym doors.

“I get it,” Casey says, nodding his again. “Thanks, Ian. I feel better just knowing I have someone in my corner, you know?”

“Of course. Don’t stress about it too much though, you need to keep your head straight for the big game this Friday,” Ian says, slowly backing up into the hall. Casey follows, and soon they are awkwardly standing together, in full view of anyone passing through.

“Yeah, no pressure, right?” Casey says. Ian forces a laugh.

“All right, I’ll see you around. Good luck,” Ian says, turning quickly and trying to casually leave Casey’s presence as fast as he can. Casey calls something out, probably another damn thank you, but Ian ignores it.

Well, he needed a new move. He’s made one. Now he just needs to see where it will take him.

Chapter 9

Ian doesn't expect to spend his Thursday evening on Omar's porch.

Omar texted him an hour ago, blunt and concise: "Want to apologize. I have beer. My house?" Ian was tempted to say no and tell him he can take his apology and shove it, but his curiosity got the best of him. He hasn't spoken to Omar since their argument beyond giving him a basic run down of his article progress. He knew Omar was gauging where they stood during the conversation, so Ian showed him, answering his questions quickly and turning back to his work immediately after the progress report was finished. They didn't speak again that day, nor the day after.

He told his mom he was going to Rob's house to play video games. She was already half a bottle deep in wine, so there's no argument about leaving the house at 10:30 on a Thursday. He hasn't seen his dad all evening.

His car is one of the few on the road. He's always enjoyed driving after the town has fallen asleep. He's still fuming, but the calm of the evening keeps his head clear and allows him to focus on why he's going to Omar's house. Ian knows objectively that a friendship with Omar is the best way to rise in the ranks for the paper. While it's been nice to give his actions over to his feelings, Ian knows that he cannot shut himself out of the leadership due to breaking away from Omar. Besides, Omar has embedded himself in Ian's group of friends as well. There's no avoiding him anymore.

Besides, he'd rather bite his tongue around Omar than suck up to Casey every day.

Omar is sitting on his porch when Ian pulls up, which keeps him from purposefully running over the flowers that surround the bottom of his mailbox. Ian pauses for a moment before getting out of the car, playing up his nerves. Omar stands from the swinging porch chair as Ian approaches, eyes soft and smiling.

"Hey," he starts, putting his fist out. Ian hates every greeting that involves touch, but he figures he would rather fist-bump Omar than hug him. He touches their knuckles together lightly, putting his hand back down to his side and looking away from Omar.

"Hey," Ian replies. It feels good to see Omar's guilt. Ian knows he should just pretend to forgive him for snapping during class, but he's feeling indulgent. Ian lets himself believe for a moment that Omar feels guilty for stealing his position, that he's going to admit that he is not qualified for it and that Ian should have been editor in chief all along. He can practically hear the words in Omar's voice.

"Ian, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you," Omar says, voice loud in the quiet of the neighborhood. Ian's daydream was nice, but he's quickly shoved back down into reality.

"Was I wrong?" Ian asks. This isn't how the conversation is supposed to go, but he can't stop himself. He needs Omar to admit that Ian was right. He's been in journalism for four years now and is the best journalist on the staff. His voice needs to be heard. His advice is the most valuable Omar can get, and he won't just give up after being shut down once.

“What?” Omar’s stance shifts, his legs straighter, chest pushed slightly forward. He thinks they’re about to fight.

“Was I wrong about there being too many football articles?” Ian repeats, looking Omar straight in the eyes. He doesn’t step closer, but he thinks about it, foot rising just a hare’s inch before firmly placing it back down.

Omar looks surprised, and he waits for a moment before relenting with a sigh.

“No, you weren’t. But the playoffs are—” Ian puts a hand up, stopping Omar.

“I get it. But I needed to hear that I was right. It doesn’t matter here, but it could matter in the real world,” Ian says. Omar nods silently, waiting for Ian to finish. “It was your call to make, and mine to question. But next time, let’s not get so heated.”

Omar laughs, and Ian forces a smile, relieving the tension in the air.

“You got it. Want a beer?” Omar asks, changing the subject. Ian laughs, because this whole thing is so absurd. He wants to punch Omar’s fat fucking nose and see if it’ll break on the first try, but instead he’s going to take a beer from him and sit on his porch. Brilliant.

“Yeah, I’ll take one.”

“They’re on the back porch, c’mon,” Omar says, and he leads Ian around the back of the house instead of cutting through. His parents must be home, a shock from what Ian’s gathered about Omar’s family. They quietly walk around to the back, lit up by two porch lights and a string of what look like Christmas lights. A cooler is sitting on the table, located to the left side of the porch, away from the sliding glass door. Ian can’t help but look into the windows and see if he can catch a glimpse of Omar’s parents, but he

doesn't catch any movement before Omar sees him.

"What are you looking at?" Omar asks, twisting the cap off his beer. Cheap shit, then, meaning he'll be sober enough to get home if he stops at his third beer.

"Uh, nothing—well, okay. I was trying to see if your mysterious parents were there," Ian admits. Omar laughs instead of getting angry, a response Ian wasn't expecting. Once, Paul Brookline said his mother was a drunk, and Ian served detention for three days for how badly he fucked up Paul's face. Ian's pretty sure the scar on Paul's left cheek is from him.

"They're home, surprisingly enough, but tucked away upstairs. They each have their own office," Omar says, gesturing to a window, lit from inside, toward the right of the house. Ian nods, twisting the cap off his drink and letting the hiss break the brief quiet.

"Are they really gone that often?" Ian asks.

"Almost every other week." It's a quick remark, and Ian knows he should probably stop asking, but he likes to prod.

"That must be nice," Ian says, trailing off to give Omar the out if he wants to take it. Omar gives him a sideways glance, mouth almost upturned into a smile.

"You know the only reason I'm still talking about this is because I know your parents are similar, right?" Omar says, burying the threat with a wry grin. Ian has never drawn parallels between the two before, but now he's curious.

"Really? Why do you think that?" Ian asks, head cocked. Omar doesn't know a damn thing about his family.

Omar sits down on the tabletop, propping his feet up on the seat of the chair in front of him. Ian sinks into the chair to his left, taking a swig of his beer. It tastes like garbage. He drinks again, gulp heavier.

“Your parents aren’t there when you need them, either,” Omar says, tone soft, like Ian’s some child. Fury flares deep in his chest.

“Yeah, well who the fuck says I need them?” Ian tries to make it sound like a joke, but his voice catches on the last word. Omar doesn’t mention it, nor does he end the conversation.

“You told me about them last year, after the last paper was submitted for printing. We were at Jack’s house and you drank too much,” Omar continues. The fury sinks.

“I remember. Well, sort of.” Ian drinks again, willing away the memories of complaining to Omar about how his mom is “a slut and dad’s never home to do anything about it.” “Nothing has changed, except that now they fight about her cheating. He clapped her in the mouth the other night,” Ian’s voice gets quiet as he remembers hearing the slap, how he also flinched from where he was sitting in the living room. They hadn’t even waited until after he went to sleep to start fighting.

“Jesus, dude,” Omar says, equally quiet. Ian’s surprised at how comfortable he is, cool night air ruffling his hair and nothing but their voices breaking the calm. There’s still rage at the core of his being, still another rejection letter on the counter and the chances of another on the way, but he can ignore it for a moment and breathe.

“Well, here’s to great parents.” Omar clicks his bottle against Ian’s.

“So it doesn’t bother you?” Ian asks, trailing condensation down the side of his

bottle with a fingertip. Omar chuckles, but it's lacking mirth.

"What? People talking? People are always gonna talk," Omar shrugs, but Ian knows there's something there, buried deep.

"It burns when people talk about my mom." Ian's surprised at his own outburst. Omar is too, by the way he looks at Ian as if he's meeting a stranger for the first time. Ian takes another swig of his drink, and hopes it'll wash out the taste in his mouth.

"People were already saying things about my parents when I moved, putting the truth out there was the only way to try and stop it," Omar explains. "I think they try their best, but it doesn't make their absence any better."

"What'd people at school say?" Ian feels guilty for asking, but he doesn't know. He didn't pay any attention to Omar until they started working on article together and even then, their conversations centered around classes and journalism.

"Oh you know, my mom was a coke addict, or a whore, or a coke-addicted whore, and my dad was in a gang, or in prison."

"Or in prison for being in a gang," Ian provides, a little levity.

"Or in a prison gang. Really wide imaginations, you white kids." Omar's laughing now, and Ian shrugs.

"I hear it all, I see it all. Can't do anything about it but stick close with the people who care," Omar says, and taps his bottle against the side of Ian's. The collision of glass rings out into the dark, and Ian almost flinches.

"So you've seen the tweets," Ian says, upward inflection like it's a question, although he knows the answer. Omar nods.

“I didn’t think about it when I launched the account for the paper, kind of figured students would behave themselves when it came to a school account. Don’t ask me why.” Omar reaches over and grabs another beer from the cooler. A few drops of ice water splash onto Ian’s jeans, and he preoccupies himself with soaking the spots with his shirt sleeve. He wasn’t expecting the evening to go like this, and he’s not sure where to go from here.

“And that fucking anonymous twitter or whatever? I mean, who even cares...” Omar trails off, taking a big swig of his drink.

“Yeah, I’ve seen some pretty rough stuff on there,” Ian says, waiting to see if Omar will mention anything specific.

“You know Delaney brought Casey’s article up at dinner last night?” Ian stops short of bringing his drink to his lips, and then uses the bottle to hide his smile.

“Really? Why?” Ian asks. Omar sighs.

“She doesn’t think he did it. I guess he told her about it and she’s worried that someone is trying to frame him for something, I don’t know. It all seems a little crazy to me,” Omar says.

“What are you going to do?” Ian’s voice takes on an anxious edge, and he wills himself to relax. If Delaney actually gets Casey back on Omar’s good side, Ian will throw himself through a damn window.

“I don’t know. I can’t just turn around and say it’s no big deal when you found that rough draft. Also, who would bother to set Casey up?” Omar asks, disbelief in his voice. Ian shrugs his shoulders.

“I don’t know, but that does seem farfetched. She must just be supporting her friend. I mean, they’ve known each other since they were kids, of course she’ll be on his side,” Ian says.

“Yeah, I wasn’t really surprised. It’s just,” Omar pauses. Ian waits patiently, eager to hear what Omar’s going to add. There’s something Ian can use here, he just needs Omar to spit it out. “It’s not really a ‘whose side are you on’ situation. I have proof that he cheated. And I’m being nice in not telling Dales about it, but she keeps looking at me like I’m the bad guy when I don’t immediately forgive him.”

“She’ll understand, just give her some time,” Ian says. He doubts she’ll let it go, which is all for the better— as long as Omar doesn’t cave, he can play this to his advantage.

“I hope so. I mean, if we’re being honest, she’s the reason why it’s easy to shrug off the tweets and the snide comments in the hall,” Omar says, flippant, like they’re discussing next week’s homework and not Omar’s treatment at the hands of his peers. Ian doesn’t respond immediately at first, letting Omar’s statement sit in the air. He figured as much, but he wasn’t expecting Omar to say it out loud. Ian doesn’t even talk about his feelings for Emma with people.

“Like, I know she’ll always be there, you know? She knows everything about me and still loves me. She’s amazing,” Omar’s starting to babble now, and Ian’s thinking the alcohol is going to his head. He should get going, he knows, but he needs a way to get out of this conversation.

“She’s pretty cool. It’s too bad about her dad, though. I know he’s been pushing

Casey at her for a while,” Ian says. Omar is quiet, finishing his beer. Ian’s takes the last swig of his and places his bottle on the table.

“Yeah, but she chose me,” Omar says finally, and Ian knows Omar’s not talking to him anymore. Ian lets them sit in silence for a moment longer, then stands up.

“Well, this has been nice, but I should get going. We’ve got some work to do tomorrow, prepping for the game and all,” Ian says. Omar stands up too, and they face each other.

“You’re right, man. Thanks for coming over. And I do mean it, I’m really sorry about the other day.” Ian smiles, and puts his hand out for a fist bump. He supposes Omar’s earned it after everything he’s said tonight. Omar bumps him back, and Ian heads back to his car, Omar still lingering on the porch.

Ian’s drive home is quiet, radio down low, and he replays their conversation in his head. He does like Omar, he really does. But he needs that position, and if he has to take Omar down to get it, he will. His career is bigger than any petty high school friendships. He knows there’s another rejection letter on the counter, tucked into that damn envelope.

He can’t stay here, he thinks as he pulls into the driveway, letting the car run for a moment. He has to get out, and college is the quickest way to do it. At this point, he’s willing to do anything to get accepted.

The only light on in the house when he gets back is the kitchen light, reflecting bright on the countertops. It means his parents have gone to bed, and he thanks God for small mercies. Ian grabs a glass from the cabinet to fill with water, and turns toward the fridge to grab ice.

The rejection letter stares at him from the fridge, where it's taped on each corner, spread flat. His eyes can't look away from the word "Unfortunately," printed in stark black against the white paper. He doesn't need to read further. He's read the sentence enough from other schools.

He almost lets the glass slip through his fingers and fall to the floor, but catches himself at the last moment. He places it on the counter with shaking fingers, still staring at the letter.

It wasn't open when he left, Ian realizes, dread growing in the pit of his stomach. He knew it was a rejection letter, too thin to hold any actual information about enrollment, so he wasn't even going to bother facing his defeat.

His father, however, wasn't willing to wait.

Rage boils up through Ian's veins. *How dare he*, Ian thinks, reaching for the letter and tearing it off the fridge. He's going to shred it with his bare hands, tear the letterhead into pieces until it's nothing but illegible scraps, and bury the pieces.

He's already torn it once down the middle, then once more, before realizing there is something else taped to their fridge. It's an unfamiliar form, something with small text and many blank boxes. He leans in closer, reading the top.

"The United States of America is proud to offer you a chance at becoming part of our esteemed military force..."

Ian rears back as though he's been slapped.

He tears both the letter and the application form up and throws the scraps in the trash in the garage. If his dad asks, he didn't see it.

It doesn't erase the images from behind his eyes. He spends the night tossing between his sheets, something that feels like fear sinking deep into his core.

Chapter 10

Emma's never been very good with timing.

They have one more period before school is out, and Ian's just trying to muster up the energy to get through physics without getting called out by Mr. Barnes for being distracted. He's pulling out his last book for the day when he sees a familiar head of blonde curls out of his periphery. He shuts his locker and turns, giving her his full attention. She's happy about something; her eyes are wide, looking more green than blue today, and she keeps twisting the ring he gave her a year ago around her middle finger. He can't help but smile when she stops in front of him, moving close to not block the hallway.

"Hey, Emma," Ian says, waiting to see how long she can hold her news in.

"Hey, babe. How's your day been?"

"Long. I'm hoping Mr. Barnes realizes that half the school is too focused on the game tomorrow to actually put in any effort to teach, but my chances are slim. How are you?" Ian asks.

"I got my letter from Boston!" she blurts, unable to hold it in any longer. Ian's body doesn't know how to react—his stomach drops, but he can't stop himself from smiling wide.

"Babe, that's great!" he answers, and it's genuine, because he wants her to get in

her dream school, but it burns that she might be going without him. She laughs, tossing her head back and letting the sound echo through the hallway that is quickly becoming empty.

“I haven’t opened it, dad just texted me that it was here. So who knows if I got in,” she says.

Ian thinks about the letters taped his fridge, and the pieces in the trash. He thinks about what his dad must have looked like when he read them. Another failure from his only kid.

“I’m sure you did. Hey, we should get going, meet me here after class?” Ian tries to keep his tone up, feigning happiness despite the growing pit in his gut. Emma nods, giving Ian a quick kiss on the cheek.

“I’m going over to Ellen’s again tonight to work on our assignment for statistics, but I can probably pop by later tonight if you want to watch a movie,” Emma says, like it’s nothing that she switched their plans again. Ian’s face falls, and a spark of anger shines in his chest. He thought they’d have a full afternoon, just the two of them. He was planning to steal wine from his mom’s cabinet, too.

He’s about to snap at her, but he glances at the clock. There’s no time to start anything, and it will die before they meet up later. He’s not even sure he has the energy to fight with her at this point. It just seems pointless.

“Oh, okay. Yeah, let’s do later tonight,” he says instead. Emma’s eyebrows furrow slightly, and he knows she’s going to ask what’s wrong. She’s hesitant to leave, so Ian takes the first stride, trying to make it down the hall before the bell rings. “See you

later,” he calls back, voice colder. She’s still standing by his locker, looking lost.

Good, let her think about what she did, Ian thinks with a renewed sense of spite.

It’s always fucking Ellen ruining his plans. She better be the best damn cheerleader on this squad after all the time Emma wastes with her.

He makes it to physics just before the bell rings, and spends the period writing half-assed notes in his composition book while making a list in the sidelines of other schools he can apply to. Mr. Barnes doesn’t seem to notice. His list is large, as many schools have good journalism programs, but his choice is limited by the quality of their broadcast programs. Emma wants to go to the coasts, which makes Ian roll his eyes every time she shows him another school near the water. He hates the beach, burns easily, and has no interest in learning how to speak Spanish or any other language, for that matter.

And the money. If he can get admitted to a school with a scholarship, he can get his parents to cough up the rest of the money. But there’s no way he can follow Emma to Boston or San Francisco or wherever the hell else she wants to go without having school as an excuse. *And the thought of her trotting halfway across the country without him...*

His pencil snaps under the pressure of his fingers, the sound pulling him out of his thoughts. He sneaks towards the back of the room to sharpen it, tuning back into the class discussion. Somehow, they changed their course from learning the formula for finding the velocity of an object to Mr. Barnes’ prediction for the game tomorrow. Ian rolls his eyes as Karen flips her dark hair over her shoulder and leans forward, pushing her chest out, and asks if he thinks Venice will win against Saint Mark. Mr. Barnes is younger than most teachers at Venice, so Ian’s used to the girls in his class trying to gain his attention.

It's pathetic.

"I'm sure Venice will make it to the playoffs, considering how well we've been doing. Casey's one powerhouse of a quarterback," Mr. Barnes replies, turning to write another formula on the whiteboard. Ian grits his teeth, swinging the handle of the pencil sharpener faster. He knows the class can hear him, an underlying grinding sound under the lesson. James, a senior theater kid, gives him a look from his chair at their shared table. Ian doesn't flip him the bird like he wants, but continues to grind the wood into flakes.

"Do you need a new pencil, Ian?" Mr. Barnes asks from the front of the room. It sounds like a genuine question, but Ian feels like he's being scolded for disrupting the class. All he's doing is sharpening his damn pencil and hoping the grind of metal on wood will drown out any praise for that handsy Neanderthal.

"No, I should be good. Sorry." Ian goes back to his table, sitting down and jotting down the formula Mr. Barnes just added. His eyes shift back and forth between his paper and the clock for the following half-hour, foot tapping his way through his last period. The bell finally rings after several more tangents about the football team that leave Ian wanting to jab his pencil into his arm just for an excuse to leave the room. He weaves through students to make his way back to his locker, and is slightly surprised to see that Emma has beat him there.

"Hi again," she says with a small smile, her tone cheeky. He's still upset that she's ditching him for a few hours, but he can't help but smile.

"It's been a while," he replies. He mimics her stance, leaning one shoulder against

the cold dark green metal and facing her.

“I see you survived class.”

“Hardly. Watching Karen push her boobs out at Mr. Barnes is a special form of torture. You should do an exposé on it,” Ian says.

Emma laughs. It makes Ian feel a little better about the past forty-five minutes.

“I’ll pitch it to the crew, we’ve been looking for something with a bit of an edge,” She says. The conversation pauses for a moment, and Emma glances down quickly before meeting his eyes again, a nervous tick.

“Was something wrong earlier? You seemed upset when you left,” Emma asks. Ian scoffs because he doesn’t want to talk about it anymore, and turns away from her to open his locker.

“No, just a long day,” he says, hoping she’ll just let it go.

“Are you sure? Is there anything—”

“No, babe. I’m fine,” he says quickly, cutting her off. He kisses her cheek to prove he’s all right, but her eyes keep watching him as if looking for another sign of something being wrong.

“How was your day?” Ian asks, just to pull her attention away. Thankfully, she bites.

“It was pretty good. I got an A on my English paper, and the AP Government test got pushed back a week, so maybe I can actually learn what the hell a Super PAC is.”

“Doesn’t it have to do with raising money?” Ian says, remembering bits of the news his dad watches every night.

“Yeah, and apparently there’s a bunch of rules that go along with them. Oh! Did you hear about Omar’s gift to Delaney?” Ian cocks his head, curious.

“No, what is it?”

“It’s a bracelet made of these really pretty round beads. They’re different shades of tan and grey, and each bead looks totally different. It’s so cute. I guess it was a gift from his grandmother in Botswana, something he’s supposed to give a girl he really loves,” Emma says. Ian nods along, wondering if their conversation from the other night prompted this. Word will go through the school in no time that he took the next step in their relationship. Gifts from family are a big deal.

“Well, that’s nice, I guess.” Ian doesn’t really know what his expected reaction to this news is, so he settles for nothing.

“Babe, you’ll have to see it. It’s so pretty,” Emma says, then glances at the clock. “So anyway, I’m about to head over to Ellen’s, I’ll see you later tonight?”

“Yeah, babe, see you later. Text me when you guys are done. I love you,” he says, pulling her in for a quick kiss. She heads down the hall towards the front doors, and he heads upstairs. Ian only has a few more tweaks to make to his article for the month, but considering his original plans for the afternoon were cancelled, he figures he’ll be productive while killing time.

Ian’s not surprised to see Omar in the newsroom, typing bursts of words in between short silences. There’s no one else in the room, which is uncommon for the week before print date. He feels like he’s interrupting something.

“Oh Ian, hey.” Omar glances away from his screen just long enough to see that

it's him at the door, then continues to work.

"Hey, Omar. How's it going?" Ian sits down at his computer and waits for it to warm up.

"Pretty good, actually. I have a meeting in about a half hour with someone from the theater crew, I think her name is Vanessa? She's the student director or something. I guess they're really trying to get promo for the new play, so they're trying to see how we can help," Omar says, typing as he speaks.

Ian nods, pulling up his article and starting to scan through it again. "Are we doing a feature on it?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking our next article might be focused on the art events going on around school. We've pretty much exhausted athletics for now," Omar says casually, like it's not exactly what Ian wants to hear. Ian tries to hide his smug smile, but he's pretty sure Omar can sense his satisfaction.

"You can say I told you so, if you want," Omar adds. Ian chuckles, changing the word order in his opening sentence.

"I'm good, but thanks," Ian replies, a small gesture of kindness. Omar knows he was wrong, and has righted it, so Ian figures he'll save him the petty remarks. Besides, Ian's proven himself to have good ideas, and know what direction to take the paper. *All good qualities for an editor.*

"How much do you have left for your article?" Omar asks.

"Not much. Katie had some changes from her proofread, and there are a couple things I want to make clearer before the final edit," Ian answers.

“Oh, thank God. We’re still waiting for two articles to be finished. Katie’s starting to lose it,” Omar says, laughing softly. Ian turns, and shoots him a look.

“So, you’re also starting to lose it, then,” Ian says. Omar laughs, louder this time, with a hint of a hysterical edge.

“It’s a little harder this time around, without a second in command,” Omar admits. Ian doesn’t respond at first, unsure how to react. It’s pretty damn obvious that Ian is his second, and frankly should have always been his second.

“Do you need help with anything?” Ian asks. This is as close as his dignity will allow him to get to asking for the position outright. Omar needs to learn how to see opportunity when it’s staring him in the face.

“No, I’m good. I’m not sure if it would look good to have you picking up Casey’s work, either.” Omar says it so casually, Ian can’t hide his disbelief. Ian’s the only one who’s in this godforsaken room a week before deadline while the rest of their staff have already checked out of their role as journalist. Ian spends more time in this drab newsroom than any other staff member, Omar included. But it wouldn’t look good to have Ian helping out?

Ian turns back to his article, too distracted to really read the words on the screen. Is it the quality of his work? Does Omar think he’s not good enough to step into an editor role? The concept has him fuming, pounding on the keyboard. Ian’s writing cannot be compared to anyone else’s on this staff. His brain can’t even formulate a conscious thought beyond blind rage, white hot flashes in his head.

He keeps moving his fingers, typing nonsense to keep Omar from speaking to

him, the ungrateful ass. It feels like the air in the room has warmed. It's stifling. Ian can hardly breathe. He's about to stand up and take a walk around the hall just so he can think again, but Omar opens his mouth.

"I'm actually thinking about giving him another chance," Omar says. Ian's head is starting to spin. He needs to move. All that work, and for what? A backhanded insult and a still-empty resume?

No. That's unacceptable. A good journalist keeps digging, Ian reminds himself. There must be another way to get Omar to snap, to kick Casey off staff and to finally appreciate the work Ian has put into this program.

Omar won't fire Casey based on plagiarism, the mortal sin of the journalist world. If he can't get Casey based on his work, he'll have to go somewhere more personal.

"Ian? You okay?" Omar's looking at him now with concerned eyes. Ian's stopped typing, and the silence seems to make time feel as though it has stopped.

The question is out of Ian's mouth before he fully registers what he's doing.

"Does it ever bother you, Casey and Delaney?" The words manage to sound genuine, like a question he's hesitant to ask for fear of upsetting his friend. Omar's eyebrows furrow slightly, but he doesn't seem offended.

"Um, no. I don't really think about it," Omar answers, clearly caught off-guard by the question. Ian nods his head, trying to think where he can take this. Maybe, just putting a little doubt into Omar's head would be enough for a rift. Then again, Ian brought him proof of plagiarism and Omar did nothing. But it wouldn't hurt to try.

"I'm sorry, that's a personal question. It's just, they spend a lot of time together,"

Ian says. Omar shrugs, glancing at the clock before looking back to Ian. *Right, the theater meeting.*

“They always have. I wouldn’t expect her to change just because we’re dating,”

Omar says, unbothered.

“Wait, who told you they always hang out?” Ian’s not sure where this lie is going, heart racing with the risk, but he’s enjoying it. Plans can get so predictable.

“Um, everyone. Are you implying something?” Omar’s tone is sharp, and Ian is surprised by it. He didn’t expect it to be so easy to rile Omar up with a simple question.

“No, no. I mean, you would know, right?” Ian waits for a moment, letting Omar settle down. Omar starts to shut down his computer, and Ian glances at the clock. He only has a few more minutes to get this going.

“But I guess everybody thinks that,” Ian says, trailing off. Omar sighs, turning to face Ian. Ian flinches, briefly concerned Omar was going to hit him. If Ian’s being honest, he wouldn’t blame him. If someone said this about Emma, they’d already be on the floor.

“Ian, do you have something you want to say about Delaney, or not?” Omar’s eyes are piercing into him, and he can’t pull himself away.

“I’m saying you need to watch her. Delaney’s my friend too, but you never know. Especially given Casey’s reputation. I just don’t want you to get hurt.” Ian’s hardly able to finish his sentence with a straight face, but he manages. Omar says nothing in response, just looks at him a bit longer before standing up.

“I have a meeting, I’ll see you later,” Omar says, voice cold. Ian doesn’t respond back, and watches Omar stomp out of the room.

Well, that was easy. Now, he just needs to figure out how where to go from here.

Ian enjoys the rare quiet in the room while his brain runs in circles, creating a new way to sabotage Casey and Omar in one easy swoop. He knows Delaney isn't cheating, because she has no reason to keep Omar around if she wants someone else.

Briefly, he thinks of his mother, slipping into another's bed while his father is out of town. *She doesn't have a reason to stick around either, and yet.*

Ian's head whips to the side when the door opens, feeling as though he was caught plotting out loud. He's relieved to see Rob walk through the door, camera in hand.

"Hey, Ian. Wasn't expecting to see you in here." Rob's always been a loud guy, and his voice seems to reverberate off the walls. Ian winces, but keeps his comment to himself. He needs help.

"Just had to touch up my article. What're you doing?" Ian asks. The yearbook staff works all year, although they don't really get busy until the second half of the year. He's always wondered what they actually do during the first semester beside discuss yearbook themes and layout options, which he imagines takes about a week. Other than that, he knows nothing.

"Uploading some pictures from the field hockey game yesterday. It's a pretty boring sport, but Lana Karan got hit in the face with the ball, so that was exciting," Rob says with a grin. Ian laughs along with Rob, only half-engaged with the conversation. He knows he won't be able to pull this lie off on his own, and he'll need someone he can trust. Rob may be dumb, but if Ian can twist the situation to his favor, he can manage to get him on his side.

Ian moves from his seat to the computer Rob is working at on the other side of the room, sliding in close. The newsroom door is normally revolving, and it's almost unsettling that there's only the two of them there now.

"So, I have an idea. But I need your help," Ian says, ready to start his pitch. He hates asking for help, but he can't let his pride get in his way.

"Sure dude, what do you need from me?" Rob asks, half-listening. Ian rolls his eyes while Rob is still looking at the computer screen.

"It's about Delaney," Ian says.

Rob looks at him, giving him his full attention.

"Finally! I was thinking you forgot about me for a minute there. What are we doing?" Rob asks, excitement clear. Ian's unsure how much he should tell Rob, but he needs that camera.

"Well, I told Omar that Delaney was sleeping with Casey," Ian says casually.

Rob's face falls immediately, and Ian's taken aback by the response.

"What," Rob says, and it's genuinely heartbroken. *You idiot.*

"She's not," Ian says, loud and firm so Rob gets it through his thick skull. Rob perks up again, shifting in his seat to lean in closer. "Or at least, she's not to my knowledge."

Ian can't get his mother out of his head now. Part of him regrets taking this route, but he knows now it will work. Omar practically confirmed it with how quickly he grew defensive.

"I need proof that there's something going on between them," Ian says. Rob's

brows furrow.

“But you just said she’s not cheating. How do you get proof of something that’s not real?” Rob asks. Ian laughs.

“It’s not as hard as you think,” he answers, and he wants to brag to Rob about the article he created, but he stops himself at the last minute. Better that little trick stays quiet. “But we don’t need actual proof. We just need something to make Omar think they’re cheating.”

Rob keeps watching him with wide eyes, nodding slightly. He’s waiting for Ian to give him the rest of the plan.

The only problem is, Ian doesn’t actually have one.

“They spend a lot of time together, even in public. I want you to take pictures of them together, when you see them. Even if it’s just on your phone,” Ian explains.

“Easy enough. What are you going to do with them?” Rob says with a shrug.

“I’m not entirely sure yet. You might not even catch anything we can use, but right now, it’s all I’ve got,” Ian admits. He wishes he had more of a plan, but he can’t wait around for things to fall apart on their own. The staff shake-up needs a catalyst, and Ian is offering himself.

Rob turns back to his computer and drags a few files around before hitting the import button and pulling out his phone. “You got it. I’ll keep my eye out for them, see if anything exciting happens. Although they’re not touchy or anything.”

“You watch them often?” Ian replies, smirking. He can’t resist poking fun at Rob’s obsession with Delaney. Rob rolls his eyes and turns back to his computer, blush

spreading up his neck.

“Fuck off, Ian. Don’t you have something better to do?” Rob spits with little anger behind the words. The mention of his other responsibilities shakes him out of his good mood.

“Don’t remind me. These college apps are starting to really hurt my wallet.”

“How many more are you applying to?” Rob asks, curious. Ian knows Rob hasn’t start applications yet and isn’t planning on it until December. The idea of waiting that late makes Ian’s skin crawl.

As many as I need to get the hell out, Ian thinks, but shrugs instead. “Just a few more. I want to cover all of my bases.”

“Well good luck, dude. Although I’m sure you’ll get it to wherever,” Rob says. Ian nods, thoughts flashing to the small pile of rejection letters on his desk and the military papers pinned to the fridge.

“Yeah. I should head out. Are you going to be online later tonight?” Ian asks. He’s recently discovered the enjoyment of killing zombies for a few hours to unwind.

Rob grins. “Of course, dude. Ready to get your ass kicked?”

Ian stands, moving back to his computer to grab his backpack and swing it over his shoulders. “Yeah right. Text me when you’re on.” Ian leaves after that, thoughts drifting to the chemistry worksheet he needs to do and which setting he and Rob can play that will make it easiest for him to win. It’s nice to think about something else for a moment.

Chapter 11

Ian's reprieve from Venice View is short lived.

He tucks his hands into the pockets of his sweatshirt, trying to hide his fingers from the chill. Half of the journalism staff is stuck working the sidelines of the last football game before playoffs. Ian's not sure why he's there. He's not assigned to the sports section and he's not taking pictures.

The game is tied with ten minutes to go. No one's interested in a sideline interview right now.

Ian doesn't have any real complaints for working tonight, given it places him in the best spot to watch an exciting game. He wishes Emma were able to stick with him, but she's been moving between the sidelines and the student section to film enough b-roll for their recap video airing on Tuesday. High school deadlines are a nightmare, strictly because the school is only open Monday through Friday, and the students want their news now.

It almost feels like there are more journalists than cheerleaders along the sidelines. Omar is down the line by Coach, along with Delaney and Blair. Rob is on the other side of the field, catching some shots of the offensive team who don't get to hug the side of the Rams and are therefore shafted by school media. Scott's been roaming around the stadium getting pictures for the View, and Ian's pretty sure he saw Samantha buying

her ticket with a camera in hand. They've got full coverage from each branch of the journalism program, and Ian's impressed.

"Ian, do you want a camera?" Emma appears at his side so suddenly he flinches. She's already got her hand buried in her purse, large and hanging by her hip.

"Um, I don't think I need one." Ian's not very confident with his filming skills, but Emma holds a camera out to him anyway.

"Oh come on, babe. I know standing here is boring you to tears," she says. Her eyebrow is raised and her lips, painted deep red and a little distracting, are lifted into a smirk. Ian can't say no.

"The game's actually pretty exciting tonight," he answers, taking the small black video camera from her hands. She leans into his space, and he can feel the warmth of her breathing on his neck. Like reflex, his arm wraps around her waist, holding her close. They stay quiet for a moment, taking a break from the chaos around them. The referee's whistle blows from a few feet to their left, and several players rush onto the field, but Ian's every sense is homed in on the warmth of the body next to him and the rhythm of their breathing.

"Yo!" A voice calls. Emma moves first, turning towards the sound. Rob's running up to them, clutching his camera close against his chest. "You two done cuddling on the field? I thought we had a job to do." He runs a hand through his hair, unruly from jogging back and forth. Ian briefly wants to tear it out, but then relaxes when Emma gives him a kiss, brief and gentle.

"Fine, fine. I need a few shots down here before I go back to the student section

anyway,” she says, pulling away.

“You didn’t just come down to visit?” Ian asks, and he’s joking, sort of. He can’t help that his mood deflates slightly when he reminded of their responsibilities, and that Emma has other things to do besides warm herself in his embrace. Emma leans back, a few strands of her hair blowing against his cheek.

“Unfortunately, no. But it’s a pretty good work perk,” she says with a wink before stepping backwards, out of his arms, and heads back towards the stairs. “Take some pictures!” she calls, and Ian looks down at the camera in his hands, and sighs.

“You know how to use that thing?” Rob asks, looking through some of the shots he taken earlier in the game. There’s a lull in action on the field, although Ian’s not sure why.

“Fuck you, dude. I was in your class,” Ian says, remembering the brief week-long informal class about the journalism equipment the school offered for freshmen. It was boring as hell, but at least he knows a handful of angles for his pictures and how to upload them to the computer later. It’s more than some of the current staff knows. *More than Casey knows.*

“Ugh, don’t remind me. I still have nightmares of blowing up the system with that livewire chord,” Rob says, shuddering. Ian laughs, deep in his chest.

“I don’t think anyone has touched it since he told us the risks,” Ian says. He flips the power button on the camera and holds it up. It’s a cheaper camera, nothing like the huge-lensed magnet for disaster hanging around Rob’s neck. He can’t believe Rob brings his own camera to events, but he refuses to use anything else.

The image on the display is grainy where it's pointed towards their feet. Ian lifts it up, panning across the sidelines, past a row of football players' backs and to the huddle of Coach, Delaney, and Omar, shifted closer to him than before. Omar is speaking to Coach, and Ian can't resist taking a picture. Coach almost gives him a smile in response to something he says.

Delaney is standing between them, and she sees Ian and Rob first. She pulls her video camera up and films them in response, a wide smile plastered on her face. Omar's expression matches her when he turns and sees them, giving a small wave. Coach looks over and nods his head, still focused in the game.

"Shit, they're about to run the ball. Get ready for some action," Rob says, patting Ian on the shoulder before leaving him alone in his spot to take more photos. Ian's not bothered; the air is cool, and the energy radiating off the stands behind him is exhilarating. *These are the games people want to read about*, he thinks. *This is what people make careers out of.*

Ian's enjoying his spot away from the chaos of the coaching staff until the Rams gain twenty yards, and they begin to shift down the sidelines in his direction. It's a good thing the team is advancing onto the end zone, but Ian's spot is becoming more and more crowded with coaches, cheerleaders, and the rest of the football team. Omar finds him amongst the crowd.

"Hey, there. How's it going?" Omar says. He has a notepad open and his pen in hand, words quickly jotted on the first three lines. Ian's notepad is still in his back pocket, empty.

“I’m good. Haven’t really gotten anything for the paper yet, to be honest,” Ian says, although he’s thinking about fighting Scott to write the recap for the next issue. He’s itching to write something that’s not just statistics and quotes. Omar shrugs, smile from earlier still lingering on his face.

“That’s all right. The journalism program has pretty much swarmed this game anyway,” he says. Omar’s mood is almost contagious, and it’s hard for Ian to commit to any snarky comments.

“Well, thanks for the seat,” Ian replies, taking another grainy picture of the players on the field.

“I like to treat my staff well,” Omar jokes. Ian doesn’t respond, just keeps turning in circles to snap pictures of the events around him. He turns his back to the game, briefly paused while refs discuss a play, to snap a few pictures of the student section. He sees the usual people, the same seniors who hog the best spot at the front of the game. Several of them are wearing furry ram horn headbands, created by the art department and sold in the school store. They look ridiculous, as always. Ian’s about to turn around, until he catches something that stops his breath short.

“Hey, Omar?” Ian asks, swallowing hard.

“Yeah?” Omar replies, eyes placed firmly on the field.

“Who the fuck is that?” Ian’s tone makes Omar’s head turn, looking at Ian with concerned eyes.

“Who?” Omar asks. Ian’s blood is running hot again as his eyes continue to stare, transfixed on the pair to the left of the student section. Omar is quick to turn his full body

towards the bleachers, moving closer to better catch Ian's perspective.

"The guy talking to Emma," Ian says, and the words burn in his mouth as he watches his girlfriend laugh at this guy's jokes, flipping her hair behind her and tucking the stray pieces behind her ear. He points at something on her shoulder, and she laughs, placing her hand on his chest to balance as her body pitches forward in mirth. Ian tastes blood on his tongue.

"Oh, that's Anthony, Ellen's older brother. I think he's a freshman at the community college past the mall."

Ellen's older brother, Ian's head repeats.

The man Emma's been seeing on the evenings she cancels on him and says she's helping Ellen learn the routines outside of practice.

His brain is already imagining every scenario except the one where Emma is telling the truth, and he wants to make it stop, but the images just keep coming; them going out to dinner, movie night on the couch, his hands in her hair, her straddling his lap—

"Ian!" Rob's voice pulls him out, and he jerks his head away to look back to Omar, who is now joined by Rob, panting behind him. "Where'd you go there?"

Ian forces a laugh, running a hand through the dark strands of his hair and moving the perfectly placed pieces. He's sure it looks like shit at this point in the evening, anyway. "Nothing, just spaced out a little. I guess I'm tired," Ian says, trying to shrug the moment off. "But that's Anthony?" he asks, because his brain is fixated now and he won't be able to let it go.

Omar isn't buying his casual tone, but Ian only has so much energy to pretend that his vision isn't blurred with anger. Suddenly, his limbs feel too heavy to hold up the camera, and he slips it into his pocket. Enough pictures.

"Yeah, I don't know much about them since they're relatively new to the school, but him and Ellen are really close. I guess he drives her to and from cheer practice. He's pretty nice from what Delaney tells me," Omar says. Ian just nods, not sure what else to say.

It's not confirmed that Emma is cheating. They could just be friends, he could be gay, they could be overcompensating intense hatred for one another by being friendly. Ian lets these thoughts fill his head instead, actively pushing away anything that suggests otherwise. It just wouldn't be like Emma to betray him like that.

"Is this game over yet?" Ian asks, and Rob barks out a laugh.

"Uh, yeah dude. We've got two chances left to get this touchdown. If we don't, we go into overtime," Rob says.

Ian would rather die.

He focuses his thoughts back on the game, watching the offense line up, with Casey in the middle. They're further down the sidelines now, and Ian walks with Omar and Rob as they move closer. Delaney is already down there, tucked behind her dad. Her camera is still out, likely rolling in a constant stream.

The student section grows quiet, a simple decrescendo as the entire crowd seems to hold their breath. Even Ian, immersed back into the moment, feels the jitters in his fingers. This could be a big win for Venice.

There's only a minute left on the clock.

Just enough time for Venice to clinch the win, or drag them all into overtime. It's not the worst place to be in, but the team is tired, and they're desperate.

The ball is finally hiked back to Casey and the Rams are off, running in different directions past the end zone.

Another player is launching himself for Casey, ready to take him down. Ian holds his breath, waiting for the tackle.

Casey finally throws the damn ball.

The crowd is silent as they watch it soar smoothly into a pair of green and white gloves, firmly planted behind the end zone line.

The crowd bursts into a roar, the energy rolling off the bleachers onto the field, or maybe vice-versa with the celebration of the team shaking the ground the students stand on. Even Ian lets out a shout of victory, watching as Coach throws his hands up in the air and roars, mouth wide in victory.

Rob snaps pictures, shot after shot of cheering students and parents, catching celebrations from players and coaches alike. Omar is watching it all with wonder in his wide eyes, as though the sky is illuminated with stars he's never seen before. The sights are overwhelming, and Ian is about to turn towards the bleachers when he catches something that sends a shock down his spine.

The huddle of hugging players on the field part, all scattering to celebrate with family and friends in the bleachers. Ian watches as Delaney, mouth wide with laughter, run towards Casey's open arms. He lifts her, effortlessly, and for a moment they look as

if they are posing for a romance novel cover, or a catalogue ad of the high school sweethearts winning the home game. His helmet is off, hair sweaty and disheveled, and his face is still red from exertion. But his grin practically glows among the crowd and it's pointed straight at Delaney, thin body held effortlessly in his arms. They're staring directly at one another, beaming.

Ian can't believe it.

Ian glances over to Rob just in time to see four photos caught in this moment of blissful celebration. He can almost feel Rob's heartbreak radiate from behind the lens.

Ian turns away, almost feeling as though he is interrupting an intimate moment. He catches Omar, staring straight ahead, smile slowly slipping off his lips, eyes locked on the pair at the edge of the field.

Ian watches and waits for a reaction. Omar does nothing but stare, finally turning away when Delaney's feet hit the grass again. He turns away from Ian and heads towards the student section. He says nothing.

Ian doesn't move, not yet. He stands in his spot and lets the collective joy from the crowd play itself out around him. A thrill runs through his veins.

Chapter 12

The school is still buzzing from Friday's win. The hallways seem louder, and Ian keeps finding himself distracted with thoughts about Friday night, watching Emma throw herself onto another man, as though Ian hadn't seen her in the same spot multiple times that night. She wasn't even trying to hide it.

He turns right down the hall and is halfway through the math wing before he realizes he needs to be going the opposite direction for his Spanish class. He stops, jarred by the realization. He plays it off, ducking into the closest bathroom to wash his hands for no reason. It's a quick reprieve from the noise in the hall, and the bathroom is surprisingly empty. Ian splashes a little water on his face, but he doesn't feel any more focused and now the collar of his shirt is damp.

Ian shrugs it off and heads back into the hall and in the proper direction towards his class. His strides are long and quick, and he almost runs into someone.

"Oh shit, sorry," Ian says, taking a moment to realize who he almost nailed. "Emma! Hey." A pit drops in his stomach. She's dressed nicer today, meaning she was filming a segment for the show, and Ian's compliment dies in his throat. He can't shake the sight of her on Friday.

"Hey, you in a rush?" she asks. He can see the concern in her eyes.

"Yeah, just didn't want to be late to Spanish," he says. She raises an eyebrow

slightly, noticing that something is off. *Shit*. He really doesn't want to talk about this right now.

"Is everything okay? You've been avoiding me since Friday night," Emma says quietly, an imitation of privacy in the hall. The pit drops even lower into his gut. Her stance is firm, hip cocked to the left and arms folded in front of her chest. She's not moving until she gets answers.

"Yeah, sorry, everything's fine," he starts, but then changes his mind. Why lie to make her feel better? "Well, no, not everything is okay, but I don't really want to talk about it here." Ian feels exposed saying this out loud in Venice's halls, but it makes Emma's expression immediately soften.

"Oh, okay," she says slowly, unprepared for his response. Her gaze shifts to the floor for a moment, and Ian's follows, leaving them both staring at the off-white tiles. "Let's hang out tonight then, yeah?" Emma finally says, and Ian just nods, ready to get away from her so he can figure out what the fuck he's going to do.

"Oh! Before I forget," Emma says, catching him before he leaves. Ian watches as she rummages through her backpack, curious. She pulls a string of beads out. "This is Delaney's bracelet that Omar gave her. I found it Saturday morning while getting some b-roll of the field for our video. It must have fallen off during the football game."

Ian's attention is caught, watching the string sway in the space between them. How did Delaney manage to lose something so personal and not notice? And why is Emma giving it to him?

He holds his hand out and lets her drop it into his palm. It's a nice gift for a girl.

Ian briefly thinks about getting Emma something similar, but shoots it down quickly. He has to discover the truth first.

“Okay, and why are you giving it to me?” he asks.

“I don’t want to lose it, and I know you see Omar during second period. I figure you can give it to him, and he’ll return it to her. And of course, if you have it, there’s no pressure on me if it goes missing again,” Emma answers, finishing her sentence with a grin. Ian huffs, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips despite his anger at her.

“All right, I’ll pass it on. But I really have to go,” Ian says, tucking the bracelet into his pocket and moving past her, leaving her in the hall without a kiss. He knows she’ll bring it up later. Good. Let her think about it all day.

The bracelet sits in his pocket during Spanish, digging into his thigh when his jeans pull too taut as he shifts in his seat. He does feel the pressure Emma mentioned, as though the bracelet holds some significant power over Delaney and Omar, and losing it will rip them apart. Ian thinks about tossing it in the trash and leaving Delaney to explain where it went with no hope of ever finding it again, but that seems too easy.

Ian thinks of the ring he gave Emma for her birthday last year, and how it’s a comfort to see it firmly on her finger every day. He imagines how he would feel if she lost it.

He pushes the thought away quickly.

Does Omar know it’s missing? He’d be crushed once he realized it was gone.

And Emma didn’t mention anything about Delaney asking about it. Does she know it’s missing?

Class drones on, but all Ian can think about is the bracelet. It was Omar taking the next step in his relationship with Delaney. It's practically a precursor to a ring. And Delaney just managed to lose it.

While she was in Casey's arms.

Ian doesn't know if it slipped off while she was jumping into his embrace or when she was crossing the field to talk to Omar. Either way, Ian knows Omar saw them together, and that it meant something to him, and now Ian has more salt to pour into the wound. He can hardly believe his luck.

Ian's train of thought stops when he hears his name whispered behind him. Josh, a junior with bad brown bangs, sits behind him. Ian leans back enough to show Josh he's listening while also keeping their conversation hidden from Señor Miranda. The man's busy jotting words that Ian vaguely recognizes on the board, speaking Spanish that Ian should understand at this point but doesn't. He just can't be bothered when everyone speaks English anyway.

"Have you been on the Anon account for Venice?" he asks. Ian nods his head, eyes still locked on Señor Miranda. He really does not have the energy to bullshit his way through a grammar question if Miranda decides to punish him for not paying attention. Ian glances quickly behind him to see Josh doing the same. Good.

"Is Delaney really sleeping with Casey?" Josh asks. For the first time today, Ian wants to laugh. He hasn't submitting anything to the site recently, so unless Rob took it upon himself to make something up, it means the rumor has expanded beyond him. It means someone else has seen something questionable. It means there may be more that

Ian can use to bring both Omar and Casey down.

He wants to say yes, of course it is, she could never stay with someone like Omar. It's ridiculous that she even tried.

But he can't, because then someone could trace the rumor back to him, blowing any credibility he has with Omar. And Omar's a good journalist, he knows how to track things down. Any hint of Ian's involvement in this rumor will surely be found, and then his chances of success are shattered.

"Um, I don't think so," he says instead, taking the risk to look back at Josh. Josh doesn't seem to buy it, still grinning.

"Uh huh, I bet she got bored. Thinking she's edgy for fucking the black kid," Josh says with a smirk.

"Jesus," Ian mutters, turn back around. He's not going to get caught having a conversation like that in class. The punishment is lax, he knows, but he's not going to waste his time.

Josh doesn't ask him any more questions, but he does give Ian an idea.

The school thinks Delaney and Casey are hooking up behind Omar's back. Omar is starting to have suspicions that their relationship is a little too friendly with one another. Ian has Delaney's bracelet, a gift from Omar to show that he was committed to their relationship, and she managed to lose it on the football field.

Omar is bound to notice it's gone. Ian just needs to figure out the best place for him to find it.

Ian starts copying the notes on the board to appear as though he's heard any part

of the lesson while the bracelet digs into his skin. In a perfect world, he would place it in Casey's bedroom and have Omar find it.

But that would require a friendship with Casey, and Ian would rather swallow the bracelet and choke on the beads.

Although, he can just give the bracelet to Casey first. Unless Emma has said anything to Omar, *which she hasn't, she's probably forgotten their conversation this morning already*, Omar doesn't know Ian has it. And if Ian can get Casey to return the bracelet, that puts the rumor directly in Omar's face.

It's weak, but it's something. Ian just needs to get Casey to keep his stupid mouth shut.

Ian says nothing about the bracelet during second period in the newsroom, and focuses most of his time on editing Samantha's article. Their next issue is going to the printer tomorrow, and Omar is having everyone read over each page to check for any last-minute edits. It's a smart move.

Ian passes Samantha's page to Katie.

"Looks good, although the layout is a little crowded," Ian says. Katie nods, glancing it over again.

"Yeah, the text needs a little more space to breathe. Do you think I should move that image further towards the left?" she asks. Ian looks over at it again, taking it in from a farther distance. There's just too much on the page, but shifting the image further away from the edge will create a little more white space.

“That would help. Maybe decreasing the size of some things too? But that might just be my bias. I like small, minimal designs,” he says with a smile. Katie rolls her eyes, but smiles in return.

“Okay, Mr. Pulitzer. Your advice has been noted.”

“That’s all I ask,” he replies, and the lie sounds natural. The design is not terrible, but Ian knows they could make it better if Katie took his suggestions to heart.

The next page sitting on his desk is about the playoff game, featuring a large picture of Casey throwing the ball taken during the first half of the game, and a smaller picture of the student section cheering after the win. *Unoriginal article with an unoriginal layout.* He skims it quickly, looking for typos in the text, before passing it on to the Katie.

“Any notes?” she asks, eyes focused on the page. Ian wants to say a lot, but he keeps it simple.

“Maybe we should show more group photos of the team, instead of just Casey?” he says, letting a little frustration slip into his tone. Katie smiles.

“Just what I was thinking. It’s too late now, but next time,” she says. The thought of publishing another article about the football team leaves him exhausted. *What a waste of paper and ink.*

Omar is quiet, sitting at his computer at the front of the room. He’s speaking with Casey when Ian looks over, and while it looks like they’re discussing the paper, Ian’s still annoyed. Why bother with Casey’s opinion?

The bracelet rolls in his pocket as he shifts.

He needs to catch Casey after class, alone.

He goes through each page he's given, marking mistakes here and there, and giving Katie more notes about the overall look. There's no cohesive style by any means, but it looks fine for a high school paper. Ian lets the pride settle in his bones for a moment.

The moment passes quickly when the bell rings. Ian watches Casey as everyone packs up around them, waiting for the right time to strike. He still looks so out of place in the room. Things must not be patched up yet.

"Hey, Casey, come here." Casey looks at him with wide eyes, surprised by Ian's request. He follows like a dog, quiet and practically on Ian's heel. *Has he never heard of personal space?*

They move into the small hallway that leads to the largest classroom in the school, primarily used for study halls. There's no third period study hall, so it's a good spot to have a private conversation. *And make out with your girlfriend*, but Ian keeps that information to himself.

"So how's it going with Omar?" Ian asks, forcing a smile. Casey's still stiff in his stance, but he relaxes a little after Ian asks. He shrugs his shoulders and lets out a big sigh.

"Not good. I've been talking to Delaney about helping me out with this, and I know she's doing the best she can, but I don't think anything is helping," Casey says. He sounds so sad.

Ian loves it.

“Really? I thought for sure she would have some influence,” Ian says.

“I did too! And I think things were working, for a little. But recently Omar’s been even colder to me. I don’t know what happened!” Casey talks with his full body, leaning in and out of Ian’s space and flailing his hands around. Ian tries to be discrete when he dodges an exasperated hand.

“Shit, dude. That sucks. But I have an idea,” Ian says, pulling the bracelet out of his pocket. Casey holds out his hand, but his brows are furrowed in confusion.

“Emma found Delaney’s bracelet from Omar at the game the other night. I’m thinking if you return it to Omar, he’ll see that you’re looking out for him,” Ian explains. Casey closes his fist around the beads but doesn’t pocket it just yet.

“Wait, why don’t you just return it to Delaney?” he asks.

Ian can’t believe he has to explain the positives of this situation, but here he is.

“Well I could, but then you skip out on a chance to prove to Omar that you’re a good friend. You know this bracelet is important to him, and you just had to make sure it got back to Omar,” Ian says, then pauses before adding, “and tell him you found it, don’t mention me at all.”

Casey finally takes the bracelet and stashes it away in his backpack. He locks eyes with Ian, and Ian braces himself for a sentimental moment. *God, who knew Casey would be so sensitive?*

“Wow, that’s genius. You really do think of everything,” Casey says, clearly impressed. Ian shrugs, taking the compliment.

“Not everything, but I do come up with some good ones,” he replies. Casey

laughs softly.

“But really, thank you for everything you’ve done. You’re a good friend, Ian. We should hang out more,” Casey says, looking so earnest for friendship.

Ian would rather die, but he bites back his remark and smiles instead. The tension hurts his cheeks.

“Yeah, maybe after football season. Don’t want to interrupt your schedule,” Ian says. Casey pats him on the shoulder, and Ian has to rebalance himself to not fall over with the force. Any guilt Ian may have had for setting Casey up this way disappears on impact. “But Casey, maybe wait until tomorrow to give Omar the bracelet. It’ll look weird if you held onto it all class and didn’t return it,” Ian advises, because he knows Casey wouldn’t think this through. Casey just grins at him, appreciative of the information.

It’s almost sad, how easily it is to pull Casey in different directions.

They part to get to class on time, and Ian’s pleasure radiates off him. He has a small smile he can’t seem to shake, and conversation with his classmates flows easier. The period flies past, and soon Ian finds himself back in the newsroom with his lunch, munching on chicken nuggets while he scrolls through the news. There’s nothing for him to work on for the paper, and he enjoys the downtime.

He’s surprised when Rob ducks his head around the door. Normally, Rob eats lunch with some of the guys from the soccer team. Ian knows there can’t be a yearbook emergency yet.

“Rob! You look... a little manic, to be honest,” Ian says. Rob’s eyes are wide and

he's breathing heavier than normal, as though he took the stairs two at a time. Rob smiles at him, showing off white, slightly crooked teeth.

"Not manic, just excited," he replies. He plops himself down next to Ian and reaches over to plug a USB into Ian's computer.

"What are you... wait, are these the pictures?" Ian watches as Rob clicks open the document and opens the first picture. It's nothing scandalous, just a photo of Delaney talking to Casey at football practice. The next photo is of another player, but Delaney can be seen in the background, laughing at something Casey said.

"The very ones. We have about twenty that show the two of them interacting," Rob says. Ian can't believe it. He knew there would be pictures, but these are perfect. There are pictures from football games, pep rallies, and the classroom.

"This is perfect, Rob," Ian says, impressed. He keeps clicking back and forth, as though the pictures will somehow change once he clicks away.

"I know, I was actually surprised by how many there are. It's kind of depressing, actually," Rob says, then pauses for a moment. Ian already knows what he's going to ask. "Do you think they're actually—" Ian cuts Rob off before he can finish.

"I don't know. It might not be as far-fetched as I thought," Ian answers, looking at the photo of Delaney in Casey's arms from the game. His brain fills in the rest of the shot, with Emma cheering along with Anthony in the bleachers, yards away from Ian. He swallows down the urge to scream that rises in his throat at the memory.

"Well, you'll help me win her away from Casey, right?" Rob asks, growing defensive.

“Yeah, Rob,” Ian replies, just trying to end the conversation. “I can’t wait to show these to Omar.” Rob gives him a grin, and Ian wonders if he’s expecting Ian to pat him on the back and give him a gold star.

“Me too. I would love to see the look on his face,” Rob says and closes the document on the computer. He slides the files off the USB and onto Ian’s desktop. “There, do with these photos what you please.” A thrill shoots through Ian at the possibilities.

“Great, thanks,” Ian says. Rob stands and swings his backpack onto his shoulder.

“No problem. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“I will,” Ian replies, and means it. He wasn’t expecting Rob to deliver as well as he did.

“Oh hey, I have a quick question,” Ian says, thinking about first period. “Did you post anything on the Anon account about Delaney and Casey?” Rob frowns, shaking his head.

“Uh, no. Did you want me to?” Rob asks, reaching for his phone.

“No, you don’t have to. Josh Farrel asked me if they were sleeping together today. He said there was someone on the site,” Ian says, voice trailing off. Rob’s eyes widen.

“Oh shit. So someone else—”

“Someone else noticed something too,” Ian says. Their conversation falls into a lull, and Ian starts to question whether they’re lying at all.

Chapter 13

Ian can't shake the feeling of dread on Tuesday.

It's the first morning in the past two weeks where his neighbor doesn't almost hit him with her car while they're pulling out of their driveways, and the traffic on his way to class is surprisingly absent. Still, something seems to be sitting on his heart. The paper goes to the printer today, and that means a brief day of rest for the staff. It's usually his favorite day of the month, but something just seems to be wrong.

He's about to head up to the newsroom for second period when Emma catches him by the arm in the hall. They spoke last night about things, although Ian didn't say anything about Anthony and she didn't say anything about college plans and neither of them were really interested in the sex, although he knows she thought it would make him feel better. Ian doesn't want to start a fight with Emma about Anthony right now, not with everything else he needs to focus on, but it doesn't keep the image of the two of them together from playing in his head whenever he tries to relax.

"Hey, I can't believe I forgot to tell you this the other night, but I finally opened that Boston letter," Emma says, already beaming. Ian feels the bile start to creep up his throat.

"And?" He asks, forcing the biggest smile he can manage. His tone doesn't quite match, and he watches the light in Emma's eyes dim a little, but she continues.

“I got in!” Her voice seems to reverberate in the halls, and several passing students turn their heads towards them. Ian pulls Emma close for a hug, because he knows that’s what he should do. Because he’s happy for her. And it helps that she can’t see his face when hers is tucked against his neck.

Ian knew this would happen. He thought he was prepared for it, but facing the reality of Emma leaving him for Boston is more than he expected. The dread settles into pain, deep in his rib cage, and it’s difficult for Ian to breathe past it. He tries, and manages to say a peppy “Congratulations, babe!” that rings false in his ears.

She pulls back, placing her hands on his shoulders and gripping lightly. She waits until he makes eye contact, her eyebrows turned down and expression questioning.

“Is something wrong?” she asks. The pain digs deeper, and there’s that fucking image of Anthony again in his head.

How does he tell her everything is wrong? Her interest in him is waning, he can’t get into a school, his dad is just waiting to tell him to pack his bags and ship him off, she spends more time with a practical stranger than with her boyfriend, and he’s investing his energy in sabotaging another relationship instead of facing his own?

Well, there’s no reason Omar and Delaney should be happy if Ian and Emma can’t be.

“No, I’m just tired,” Ian says. Emma drops her hands from his shoulders and crosses them over her chest. Her expression shifts, a new flame in her eyes.

“No you’re not. Stop lying to me,” she replies. She’s ready for a spat, practically bracing herself for a blow up. Ian doesn’t want to give it to her.

“What, I can’t be tired?” he says, and he watches as her eyebrows raise at his tone.

“Sure you can, but I know you’re not. Something’s wrong and you won’t tell your freaking girlfriend about it?” she says, tone harsh. Ian looks up at the ceiling tiles and counts to five. He can feel the irritation creeping up past the hurt, settling in the back of his mouth.

“Well, maybe I don’t want to hurt my freaking girlfriend,” he replies.

“How, Ian? How will you telling me what’s wrong hurt me?”

“I don’t want you to go to Boston.” It’s out before he can stop it, and it’s not exactly the whole truth but it’s something.

“What?” she says quietly, anger falling away into shock. Ian figures he might as well let this conversation continue to burn.

“I don’t want you to go. You’re going to leave me here and meet someone else,” Ian says, looking down. He has nothing once she leaves this town. He’s desperate. He needs something to make her think about him.

“I’m not going to Boston to meet someone else, I’m going to be a part of one of the best journalism programs in the country. Why does that mean we won’t be together?” she asks. Ian’s anger spikes at how naive she is.

“Because that’s what happens, Emma! People go off to college and forget about everyone back home. They lose interest in them and meet new people. It’s inevitable. I’m starting to think—” and Ian stops, because he didn’t mean to get this worked up. But his hands are clenched tight into fists and his heart is pounding, and he’s not sure if he can

stop.

Emma watches him breakdown with wide eyes. They face each other silently for a moment, until she asks, “starting to think what?”

He wants to scream. All he can see is Anthony’s dark hair and tall build and the way Emma leaned in when she laughed at his joke. It’s printed behind his eyelids, in vivid ink.

“Nothing. We need to get to class.”

“Ian, just tell me what—” Ian doesn’t wait for her to finish, and turns to head towards the stairs.

“We’ll talk later, don’t be late,” he calls down the hall to her. It’s the second time he’s left her standing in the hallway, and he knows it kills her. *Good*, part of him spits, *let her know what it feels like to be abandoned*.

Ian is late to class by a minute, although no one notices. The staff is in a frenzy. Omar is at the front of the room, and Ian stops to stand next to him, watching the class. People are frantically typing at their computers, clicking through folders and shouting things across the room. Omar is quiet, watching, brows furrowed.

“What’s going on?” Ian asks, hesitant to enter the chaos. Omar sighs, but when he looks at Ian, he can see a trace of fear in his eyes.

“The system rebooted itself last night, apparently. Nobody told Dales about it, and it wasn’t supposed to mess with any documents, but now people are missing their pages,” Omar says, disbelief in his tone.

“Shit.” Ian’s quick to go to his computer, and sure enough, his article isn’t saved

in the top left corner of his desktop. He can't remember the last time he used his USB, either. He runs a hand through his hair, tugging at the strands. It's longer than he normally lets it become, and he's sure pieces stick up a few moments longer than the rest. He can't bother to check.

He doesn't panic at first, just opens the shared drive for the school and clicks through to the Venice View folder. He opens it, and there are hundreds of folders, each one named a jumble of letters and numbers.

"What the hell is this?" he asks. Samantha turns to shoot him a look.

"Ridiculous, right? How does a refresh manage to fuck up this badly?" she replies. She's searching through her email, and Ian thinks about doing the same before realizing that he didn't email his finished pages to himself, just the drafts.

"Fuck," Samantha mumbles, closing the webpage and going back to her folder. She must have realized the same thing.

"Omar, what happens if we don't find them?" Jack asks. Omar says nothing at first, and Ian watches as he looks around the room, surveying the damage.

"We're going to look until we've either seen what's in every folder, or the period is over. If we can't find it, we just don't go to print today, and the paper gets postponed until we can make it again," Omar answers. The words sound like they physically pain him, and Ian gets a little bit of enjoyment out of it. It would be sweeter if Ian wasn't also starting to panic. At this point, all he has for college applications is his portfolio of work, and this article about the levies is his best one yet. He needs it to be published as soon as possible so he can start including it in his applications. This can't happen, not right now.

Ian's clicks become more frantic as he scrolls farther into the shared file. He finds several articles from last year, in various stages of completion. Samantha keeps mumbling curses under her breath, and it sounds like Casey is doing the same from across the room, although his muttering is more like talking to himself. Omar starts to look through the drive on his computer, and it doesn't seem as though he's having any luck either.

Ian's only a quarter of a way through the folders until he's hit with an idea. Everyone started from the top of the list, he realizes. They're not going to find anything faster if everyone is clicking through the same outdated folders.

He quickly goes back to the main folder, and scrolls all the way to the bottom. He clicks through the last one and finds a few drafts of articles for the current issue, but nothing completed. His stomach sinks at the idea of having lost the files. As if the paper's reputation isn't bad enough, they may have to change the sell date. They can't have another reason for the school to rip into them on Twitter.

He's about to give up on his plan until he opens a folder that's about eight from the bottom, and finds a handful of finished pages.

"Found some!" Ian says, loud enough that the class can hear him over the frenzy. Omar's at his side in an instant.

"Where?" He rests an arm on the back of Ian's chair and leans in to look at the screen.

"It's at the bottom, about eight folders up. It's not the full issue, but that's probably the best place to look," Ian says, shoulders dropping from where they were

hunched towards his neck. He didn't realize he had pulled them up so high.

"Great job, Ian. You may have saved the paper," Omar says, patting Ian on the shoulder. Ian can't help but smile in pride. He'll never turn down praise.

It takes them about half the period, but they manage to locate all of the pages. Omar is strict about having them saved on every computer and sent in emails to themselves just in case they were to do another refresh within four hours. It's excessive, but Ian gets it.

Ian's already worn out for the day once the bell rings. Between his argument with Emma and the threat of losing the paper for the end of the week, he's not sure if he can handle any more surprises.

He's about to leave with the rest of the class when he glances over and sees Casey speaking with Omar. He lingers long enough to watch Casey pull out the bracelet, but doesn't stay to watch Omar's reaction.

He enters the hall with a new burst of energy in his stride.

Omar finds him after last period while Ian's putting away his textbooks. Ian really should stop being surprised by people showing up while his head is in his locker, but he still startles when he closes the door and sees Omar hovering at his side.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to freak you out," Omar says.

"You're good. What's up?" Ian asks. Omar glances around the hall once, noting the amount of people still hovering around.

"Can we talk privately for a minute?" Omar asks in return. Ian would really love a

nap right about now, but he's certainly not going to turn away from this opportunity.

"Yeah, sure. Let's go to the newsroom," Ian starts, then stops midway towards the stairs. Omar stops behind him, and raises an eyebrow. The newsroom is not the best place for privacy, he realizes. They need a computer, and a place void of students.

"Actually, let's go to the library."

"Why not the newsroom?" Omar asks, hesitant to turn around and head back towards their new destination.

"There's too many people. If you want privacy, the library after school is the safest place," Ian explains. Omar sighs, then follows Ian towards the opposite end of the school. They don't talk on their walk, which is unsettling. Omar must really be rattled by something.

The library is at the end of the building, past the main office and the cafeteria. It's big for a high school library, although Ian rarely sees students working in it during the day. It's open until 3:30 for any students who don't have the time during the day to pick up books. The front desk is empty when they walk in, and he peers around to find the librarian, Mrs. Blanca.

Her head appears behind a shelf of books, wiry brown hair escaping her bun.

"Ian! How nice to see you," she says, voice soft. Ian thinks she's been a librarian so long, she can't remember how to speak at a normal volume. Interviewing her for the paper was a nightmare.

"Hi, Mrs. Blanca. Omar and I just need someplace quiet to go over some things for the paper. Is it okay if we sit in here for a few minutes?" he asks. Ian watches her

smile dim as she looks over to Omar, then forces it to perk up again.

“Of course. Hello, Omar,” she greets, although her enthusiasm is gone, replaced instead with false cheer.

“Hi, Mrs. Blanca.” Omar keeps looking down at the ground and scuffing the toe of his shoe along the carpet. Ian watches Mrs. Blanca follow his gaze to the floor, and Ian leads Omar toward the back of the room before she can comment on it.

They settle at a table tucked away behind rows of bookshelves. There is a computer at the table next to them. Ian figures it will look like a coincidence, if the conversation follows his expectations.

“So what’s up?” Ian asks, heart pounding quicker in his ears as he grows anxious. This could be the breaking point. He could get his position.

“Casey had Delaney’s bracelet.” Omar keeps his face down and scratches at a name that is carved into the surface of the table. If Ian didn’t already know what Omar was talking about, he would have asked him to repeat it.

“The one you gave her?” Ian asks, keeping his tone light, as though he’s not sure why Omar is upset just yet.

“Yes. The one that my grandmother gave me,” Omar says, a hint of bite in the words. Ian lets the statement sit for a moment, reacting several seconds later with a quiet, “oh.”

“She didn’t say it went missing. In fact, she hasn’t said anything about it at all,” Omar tells him. Ian nods, although Omar’s eyes are still fixated on the worn wood table.

“Does this mean—”

“I don’t know what it means,” Omar says quickly, finally looking up and meeting Ian’s gaze. “I don’t know if it means anything. But people are talking, and I don’t know who to trust.”

Ian’s shifts in his seat, straightening his back and keeping his eyes locked on Omar. Ice settles in his blood, but Ian can’t let his fear of exposure blow this for himself.

“What do you mean?” His question is gentle, and Omar responds to it quickly.

“It’s just, I can’t talk to Casey about this. Jack is so far into his own world, he wouldn’t notice if his own girlfriend was cheating. Blair is nice, but she’s not very up to date on the current events in the school,” Omar says. Ian didn’t think Omar was very close to any of them.

“Yeah, I don’t think she’d be much help,” Ian says.

“And Emma is too close with Delaney and I don’t want to put her in that position. You’re all I’ve got,” Omar finishes, meeting Ian’s eyes again before quickly looking back down. It’s touching, in a way.

“I have something I need to show you,” Ian says. He knows now he has Omar’s trust, and since Omar is already questioning Delaney’s dedication to their relationship, it’ll be even easier to sell the photos. When this is over, Ian’s going to treat himself for a job well done.

“What?” Omar asks. Ian gets up silently and moves to the computer, logging in under his account and pulling up the folder with the pictures. Omar just watches, waiting.

“So don’t tell anyone, but I have Rob’s password for his Venice High log-in,” Ian starts, setting up the lie to keep Rob from being his source. Rob is the last person Omar’s

willing to trust.

Omar moves his chair closer to the screen, watching as Ian clicks around a few more times before expanding one of the images. The photo is of Casey and Delaney talking at a pep rally. There are other students around, and even Omar is in the corner of the frame, holding a camera of his own.

“What’s this?” Omar asks, leaning in. The blue light reflects off his skin like a spotlight.

“I went through some photos, after we talked at your house. I was really just curious to see if we had a lot of pictures of them together, like as candid.” Ian starts scrolling through the photos slowly, watching Omar’s face for any cues. He squints his eyes at one, and Ian points to them laughing in the back, almost out of focus.

“That doesn’t mean anything, right?” Omar asks, and Ian can tell that he wants to shrug it off, say that it doesn’t bother him, but he can’t manage to pull himself away from the computer.

“It might not. They are friends, like you said,” Ian answers, and waits to see where Omar wants to take the conversation. Ian’s still on thin ice. This whole plot could blow up in his face if Omar doesn’t believe him.

“Right. They’re friends. They’re being friendly,” Omar says, more to himself than Ian.

Omar’s about to stand up and end the conversation until Ian opens the photo from the playoff victory, with Delaney held up in Casey’s arms.

Omar flops back down in his chair, as if his legs couldn’t handle his weight. Ian

says nothing, and turns to look at Omar. Omar's eyes shift over to him, and they both stare, waiting to see what the other one will say.

"That's not strictly friendship, is it?" Ian asks, and he keeps his voice quiet, still wary of their surroundings.

Omar's head drops into his hands, and Ian hears him take a deep breath. It's unsettling, seeing someone express that much emotion in public. Ian thinks about placing a hand on his shoulder, but stops himself. He's not interested in rubbing salt in the wound just yet.

"Fuck, Ian." The words are quiet, but Mrs. Blanca has been hovering around them for the past five minutes, and she's on the alert.

"Watch your language, Omar," she snaps, frowning.

Ian's surprised. He's said worse at a much louder volume and usually receives nothing but a glance.

"Sorry," Omar says back with little emotion. Mrs. Blanca continues to glare at him for a moment, then turns and heads back to her desk.

"We should get going," Omar says, standing up. He doesn't show any expression on his face and avoids looking Ian in the eye. Ian follows, quickly closing the window and logging off of the computer, following on Omar's heels.

"Mrs. Blanca hates when the black kid's in her library. Thinks I'll stain the pages or something," Omar says, louder than he's spoken the whole time they've been in the library. They pass Mrs. Blanca at her desk on their way out, and her jaw has dropped, although she says nothing. Ian's taken aback by the anger under the words. He doesn't

expect that from Omar.

There's a thrill in it all, Ian thinks, heart racing. Ian replays the outburst in his head all the way home.

Chapter 14

Dinner is already started when Ian gets home. He's not sure why, but he doesn't ask. His mother is standing over a pot of water, waiting for it to boil, and doesn't look up when he walks into the room.

"Hi, mom," Ian says. She looks up, the ends of her hair starting to frizz. Her smile doesn't reach her eyes.

"Hi, hon. How was school?" she asks. Ian shrugs, conflicting images of his spat with Emma and his conversation with Omar flying through his head.

"It was all right, nothing too exciting," he replies. He shifts his weight to the side, adjusting his backpack from where it sits heavy on his shoulder.

"How was your physics test?" she asks, looking back down at the pot. Ian's eyes widen a fraction.

"Uh, it was fine. I memorized all the formulas I needed. We're still waiting for them to be graded," he answers. He wants to snap that his test was a week ago, which she would know if she wasn't already on her third drink when he gets home from school. But right now, he's just impressed she remembered he had a test at all.

"Good!" she replies. She's still wearing sweatpants, meaning she stayed home all day. Irritation prickles his skin.

"What's for dinner?" Ian asks. His mom turns to go to their pantry, and pulls out a

bag of potatoes.

“Mashed potatoes and... something. I had a craving.” Ian watches her wash about five and set them on her cutting board. Something seems off, but he doesn’t know what it is. “What would you like?” she asks. Ian shrugs.

“I’m not picky.”

“I know that, dear. But what do you want to eat?” she asks with a smile. Ian mulls it over while his mother cuts the potatoes and puts them in the boiling water.

“Do we have steak?” he asks. He really doesn’t care what they eat, but it’s something.

“We do! Steak and potatoes it is, then.” She doesn’t turn from where she’s chopping, but Ian hears her quietly mumble, “you’re just like your father.” The words echo in his head, and make him frown.

He turns to leave, ducking upstairs to work on a few things before his dad gets home and he’s beckoned downstairs again. He hears the door slam shut an hour later, and braces himself for the rant about what ruined his dad’s day today.

His parents are having a conversation in the kitchen, all whispers, when he enters. They stop and turn to him, his mother’s face changing from a deep-set frown to a smile, small but there.

“Hey, Ian. Take a seat, I’ll bring food over in a minute,” she says, gesturing towards the table. Ian nods, catching a glimpse of his dad, arms crossed and head down while he leans his back against the counter.

He follows his mom’s directions, heading towards the table with dread sinking

into his bones at each step. The television is on in the background, keeping the silence from engulfing him. It's an easy distraction, although Ian's not interested in hearing about the football score from Sunday. He can still hear his parents whispering, although he can't make out the words.

His mom comes into the dining room a moment later, carrying the plate of steaks. His dad is on her trail, arms empty. He sits down as she continues to bring in food: mashed potatoes, green beans, and a basket of rolls. They're not speaking, and Ian knows they were talking about him, but he's not sure what about. He bites down on the inside of his cheek to keep himself from asking outright.

His dad starts first, spearing the largest steak with a fork and placing it on his plate. The food makes its rounds in relative silence, Ian growing more antsy by the moment.

"How was your day?" his mom asks his dad, who rolls his eyes and sighs.

"Stupid. The designs for our hairspray ad were supposed to be finished today, but naturally they weren't. Do art schools not have deadlines? Or are art majors just lazy?" Ian's dad looks at him for an answer, and Ian just shrugs. How would he know?

"And so since the design weren't ready, we can't go over them until Friday, since we're booked up with meetings the next two days. I swear, if I could, I would scrap the whole art department and replace them with salesmen or something. Someone who understands deadlines and how things run. They can pick up the art thing later." There's a pause for Ian's dad to shovel some food into his mouth, before he continues, "and then, some Mexican almost crashed his truck directly into me! These people are ridiculous."

Ian and his mother eat silently, nodding along with the words although Ian knows neither of them are paying attention.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” his mom says, *automatic response*, and his dad just keeps eating.

“So when’s the next paper coming out?” his mom asks, a quick shift in conversation. Ian’s unprepared for a question directly towards him, and he looks up, a green bean still sticking out of the side of his mouth. His mom smiles, and repeats her question. This time, the smile reflects in her eyes.

“Friday. They refreshed the system Monday night and we thought we lost all of the documents, but luckily I found them in the bottom of the folder,” he says, smiling a little. He should be proud. He deserves it.

“How does that happen?” his mom asks.

“I have no idea, we didn’t even know they were doing a refresh until after the fact,” Ian answers. His dad snorts.

“Trust public schools to mess up a basic procedure,” his dad says, words muffled with mashed potato. Ian rolls his eyes while his dad is looking away, careful not to be caught. If his dad wanted him in a different school, why not just send him?

“What did you write about this issue?” his mom asks, ignoring his dad. His dad doesn’t seem to notice, and continues to shovel down his dinner.

Ian braces himself. Hopefully his dad has completely checked out of the conversation so that when he says, “school levies,” his dad’s head doesn’t actually explode.

“School levies,” he says, sparing a quick glance back at his dad. His head is down towards his plate, still.

“Well, we look forward to reading it,” his mom says, shooting a quick glare at his dad. Ian knows he wasn’t meant to see it.

“Yeah, I’m excited to add this piece to my portfolio for school applications. I think this article is my strongest so far, it’s bound—”

The clang of metal on ceramic rings in the room, and cuts Ian off. His dad has stopped eating and dropped his fork down onto his plate. His mom alternates between staring down at her plate and looking at his dad.

“Ian,” his dad starts, voice quiet but firm. Ian’s not sure what’s going on. Did he say something?

“Yeah?” he replies when his dad doesn’t continue. His mom lets out a sigh that seems to rattle in her thin chest, hands moving up to cup the side of her face. His dad glances at her before turning his attention back to Ian, gaze locked on him. Ian swallows past the bile that rises in his throat.

“I think you’re done with college applications,” his father says.

Ian is usually good at keeping his feelings masked, especially in front of a cold-hearted asshole like his father. It’s weakness, and he knows better than to show it. But he can’t stop his face from falling, and the sudden chill over his limbs.

“What?” he asks, and it’s quiet and sad and he doesn’t want to sound like a child but he can’t stop it. He looks to his mother, whose eyes are locked on her potatoes. She doesn’t look up.

“You wouldn’t have gotten in anyway,” his father says, as though it’s common knowledge, as though Ian is a goddamn idiot. “I’m not going to waste any more money on this dream of yours that just doesn’t seem to be possible.”

His father speaks to him like a client, all logic with no emotion behind it.

“I’ve only been applying for early decision, I could still get in for regular admission. It’s way harder to get in early,” Ian tells him, pleading, hoping he can another chance to prove himself. He knows he can get in somewhere. At this point, anything would be better than the military. He’s even willing to go to the community college down the street for two years until he can transfer.

“It doesn’t matter. If it’s so hard for you to get in, who’s to say you’ll even finish? I’m not paying tuition for a dropout,” his father says, still looking at Ian. It’s the longest conversation they’ve had maintaining eye contact in months.

Ian feels heat behind his eyes. He tries to blink past it, but it continues to burn.

“I’ll look at cheaper schools. I’ll pay for it all by myself with loans. I just need more—” and he knows he sounds desperate, because he is, he’ll do anything to avoid being enlisted into some bullshit training camp and deployed to some foreign wasteland to fight for shit he doesn’t care about.

“No,” his father says, loud enough that his mother flinches. It feels like a slap in the face. “You’ve had time. You’re going to enlist, and then after you service you can get whatever liberal arts degree you want.”

And like that, his future is decided.

His father turns back to his meal, finishing what little he has left. His mother

continues to sit silently, poking at her food but not eating.

Ian's not sure he can stomach even looking at his food anymore, let alone eat it.

The heat's still there, tucked in the corners of his tear ducts. He can't cry at dinner. He lets the silence sit for a minute, his stomach churning with each thought of eating, before giving up.

"I'm going to work on my homework," Ian says quietly, and he knows his voice is shaking. His mother glances up, finally, and looks at his plate.

"But you haven't eaten most of your food," she says quietly. He can't look at her. She didn't even try to defend him. She wants him shipped off, too.

"I'm not hungry." The words are terse. His mother gives him permission, almost in a whisper, and the sound of his chair scooting across the tile is jarring. He bounds up the stairs into his room, head spinning, cheeks warm and wet.

He doesn't slam the door, more out of luck than caution. The pain in his chest sits firmly in the center of his sternum, and his quick inhale and exhale becomes a sob.

He can't believe it.

He knew this could happen. He knew there was a risk in following Emma to her high-end schools, and that early decision made it even more difficult. But he wanted to try. He figured even if he couldn't make it to the same school as her, he could find another in the same city. It wouldn't be perfect, but it would be close. They would make it beyond high school.

But they won't make it beyond a two-year deployment. Emma already has one foot out the door, and this distance will give her the final push. The pain in his chest

seems to radiate, sinking into the joints of his elbows, the muscles of his thighs. For a moment, his limbs are lead.

A blind rage kicks in, and Ian takes heavy steps to his wall, tearing the articles off it with fervor. *What's the point of working so hard, only to get every opportunity snatched away from you?* Why has he put so much effort into his articles, dedicated entire evenings to research and editing only to be overlooked for another's? For Omar, for that fact, just another junior who only gets the attention because he sticks out in the hallway. And Omar rejected him for Casey, *a walking concussion*, because apparently friendship is more important than skill.

Ian tears the articles he designed in two, three, four pieces and lets them fall to the floor. Only memories of wasted time. The articles he's collected over the years get a similar treatment, and he goes until his walls are bare white, and his carpet is littered with torn text. He sniffs, and runs a hand across his face to find streaks of tears. Another flare of anger, at himself for being so weak, ignites his bones for moment.

Then, exhaustion overtakes the anger and pain. He lets himself sink to the floor, sprawls out on the scraps of award-winning journalism that he will never write, and breathes. The ache is still in his chest, although now it feels like emptiness, a deep void that yearns to be filled with something.

He thinks about calling Emma. He thinks about telling her about the military, ending their relationship now so she can go fuck Anthony and start planning her new life without him. He can't make himself move for his phone, and the chance that she comes out of this breakup happy eats at him. *Why should she get what she wants?*

Why should anyone get what they want, when Ian won't? Why should Casey get to earn his position back, and be happy when he doesn't deserve it, and doesn't appreciate it? Why should Omar get to run the paper, and get the girl, and go to a good school when Ian's done everything he's done but better and still comes out with nothing?

What the fuck is the point of getting the position on the paper, if it will just lead to a nice resume for the local armed forces office?

He still wants it, he admits to himself. Ian needs the recognition for four years of good work. But laying on his floor, his thoughts start to turn. If he can't get his position, fine. Let Venice embarrass itself by neglecting its best journalist.

But he won't let Omar and Casey walk away unscathed. They will know what they did to him, and they will share his scars.

Ian's not sure how long he lies on the floor, letting his body rest. The emptiness fades for a moment, then returns when his thoughts drift back to Emma and life without her, a fate his father has forced onto him. Every image he had of his future had her by his side. He tries to picture the same scenarios without her, but each one feels incomplete. He sits up and looks over at his desk, the lone photo of him and Emma still sitting upright. It's the only decor in his room he hasn't destroyed.

He reaches for it, but stops when his phone starts to buzz. His stomach drops. What if it's Emma? He needs more time to figure out what to do. He can't break up with her now, he knows. The thought pulls at his heart. But he's not sure how long he can keep up the charade, either.

He picks up his phone, and breathes a sigh of relief. Omar's name pops up, and he slides open the screen to read the text.

"U buzy? Cme over."

Ian reads it several times. His first reaction is yes, he is busy trying to figure out how to clean up the mess that is his future, but his curiosity leads him to telling him he'll be over in fifteen minutes. The typos are odd, but he doesn't dwell on them.

His parents are still downstairs when he leaves, his mother finishing up dishes while his father watches the news. His father doesn't look away from the screen, fully engrossed in whatever the older blonde woman on the screen is yelling about. His mother turns when she hears his keys rattling in his pocket.

"Where are you going?" she asks, and has the audacity to look concerned. Ian almost ignores her completely, but changes his mind at the last minute.

"Omar's." It's quick and terse, and he's already out the door when he hears her call his name. He slams it in response.

His thoughts race the entire time, and he finds he can't remember the drive once he pulls into Omar's driveway. He walks around the house to the backyard to find Omar sitting in the same spot as last time he came, already three beers deep.

"Ian! Hey man, sit down," Omar says, pointing at the chair next to him. Ian follows his instruction and takes a beer unprompted.

"What's up?" Ian asks. Omar's staring into the dark nothing behind his house, empty field that will inevitably become more houses. It takes a moment for him to turn and look at Ian. Ian's not sure, but it looks as though his eyes are rimmed red.

“I’ve been thinking,” Omar starts, and his words aren’t slurred but are certainly slower, as though he has to concentrate to get them out of his mouth. A spark in Ian’s head goes off, thinking maybe he’s about to offer Ian the assistant editor position. It dies quickly.

“About?” Ian asks, irritated. He’s not in the mood to play games. He doesn’t even really know why he bothered to come over, other than as a means to escape his house. He should have gone to Rob’s. They could have shot zombies for a few hours. Ian would have probably felt better.

“Delaney. I think you’re right,” Omar says softly.

Ian almost spits the beer he’s drinking out.

Omar turns back to face the dark. “She cancelled our date night to help Casey with applications. She told me again to rethink his informal firing,” he says, and Ian can tell there’s a fire starting to rise in his veins as his voice grows louder. “She comes up with excuses for every mistake he makes, and constantly defends him. I can’t even come over for dinner because it will make her dad uncomfortable.”

He’s almost yelling at this point, and Ian watches in fascination. He never thought Omar would truly think that she’s cheating. He never thought Omar would take it this hard, either.

“It’s all over the Venice Anonymous account. People saying Delaney and Casey are dating, should be dating, will eventually get married. Asking how “that nigger in third period” could even think he was anything more than a way to rebel against her dad.”

Omar pauses, taking a breath. “I don’t even know why Karen Artino thought that would

be discrete, I *see* the way she looks at me during presentations. As though I managed to sneak in through the back door, like I'm not really a student." His words are clear, and Ian can't look away. He hasn't checked the account, too busy with his own plans to what others has to say. He wonders if he even had to bother with it all.

"You know my parents are wealthier than half of the people who live here?"

Omar says. Ian didn't.

"Really?" Ian says, not masking his surprise. Omar scoffs.

"Two doctors, mom's a brain surgeon. They're both on the boards at different hospitals. More education than half of the parents on this street. But everyone looks at me like I'm some thug off the street, playing white." Omar takes a long draw of his beer.

"Maybe you should relax on the drinking," Ian says quietly. "You're going to feel like shit tomorrow." Omar gives him a smile, fueled more by the booze than by feeling.

"Thanks Ian. You're a good guy, you know? I've always been able to trust you," he says, slightly slurred.

Something twists in Ian's gut, but he smothers it with a swig of his beer. Omar's the reason he's going to get shipped out of state, to be berated by a stranger for two years. He can't lose sight of that.

"Glad I can help. Sorry about Delaney," Ian says. The words fall flat, but Ian's sure Omar doesn't notice. He drops his beer to the ground and the sound makes Ian jump. The empty bottle bounces a few times on the pavement, but doesn't shatter.

"Me too, Ian. Me fucking too." The rage simmers in his tone. Ian recognizes it from his own voice.

“What’s next?” he asks, because he needs a cue. Ian wasn’t expecting to get this far.

“I don’t know,” Omar replies. Ian nods, and lets the words sink into the night.

Chapter 15

Omar storms into the newsroom during Ian's lunch period. Ian was trying to speed-read through the second act of *Othello*, and almost dropped his book when the door flung open. The English department likes to assign the play that the theatre department is putting on when they can, and this year is no different. Ian's always found Shakespeare overrated, but he needs participation points.

"I cannot believe this," Omar says, fuming. He paces back and forth in the room, clutching what looks like the new issue of Venice View. Usually he's ecstatic when he gets the first print of the new issue.

"What's wrong?" Ian asks when Omar doesn't continue, just keeps pacing around the room. He stops and turns to look at Ian, anger in his eyes.

"It's upside down," Omar says. Ian furrows his brow in confusion.

"What's upside down?" he asks. Omar is breathing hard, and the noise seems loud in the room.

"The fucking paper." He slaps it down on the table in front of Ian. It looks fine, the cover glossy and binding to the left. It isn't until Ian flips open the first page and sees that the layouts are flipped.

He's never seen that happen before.

"How did this—" he starts, and Omar snatches the paper back and shakes it while

he replies.

“I have no fucking idea. But the whole shipment printed this way, and I don’t know if we’re going to get the reprints in time.” Omar keeps looking frantically around the room, as though there’s a solution tucked inside a cabinet somewhere, or laying out on the center table.

“I could call the printer—” Ian starts, thinking of how he can somehow save the day again and prove his worth as an assistant editor. At this point, it is the least the world owes him.

“Don’t. That’s my job. This is my responsibility,” Omar says, and the words are so sharp Ian physically recoils. The reminder of his lack of power stings.

“Okay, Jesus, calm the fuck down,” Ian snaps back, because no one speaks to him like that. Omar runs a hand down his face and takes a deep breath.

“Sorry. It’s just— I need this to go well. I need this paper to succeed. It’s all I have,” Omar says, voice dropping in volume until the last sentence is almost a whisper.

Ian digs his nails into the flesh of his palm and says nothing. *It was mine, too.*

The door swings open again, and Delaney and Emma enter. Ian hasn’t spoken to Emma since their discussion in the hall, and he averts his eyes when he sees her.

“Oh, hey guys— Omar, what’s wrong?” Delaney starts, then diverts her attention when she sees Omar panicking in the room. He says nothing at first and stares at her, before realizing she asked a question. Ian holds his breath, and braces for impact.

“The printer fucked up the paper. We have to reprint,” he says. Delaney steps closer to him and reaches for his hand, but he moves away. Ian can see the confusion in

her face. He still hasn't looked at Emma.

"Oh no, I'm so sorry, babe. How long will that--"

"I don't know," Omar cuts her off, and her wide eyes become a glare. They stand there staring at one another for a moment, and Ian can feel the tension rising like smog. It's refreshing to watch another life fall apart. A life that's not his.

"Please don't talk to me like that," she says, and her words are quiet but firm, and Omar's anger seems to dissipate for a moment. Ian can feel Emma watching him, but he resists looking over.

"Sorry, sorry. It's been a rough week, and I'm taking it out on you," Omar says quickly. This isn't the boy Ian saw last night, and part of him feels cheated. Omar thinks Delaney is cheating on him, and he's just going to roll over and act like nothing is wrong? How does he expect to earn the respect he wants to badly from his peers, if he won't stand up for himself?

Ian's attention is pulled away from Delaney and Omar's conversation when Emma stands in front of him.

"You're ignoring me," she states. Her words are soft but firm, leaving no room for denial. Ian doesn't care enough anymore to bother.

"Yeah," he says. Her face falls, and Ian can't stop feeling a pang of guilt, like a dull ache behind his lungs. He breathes past it.

"Why?" It comes out as almost a whisper, and she looks so sad, he can't turn his anger on her. Not now, anyway.

"I felt bad about the other day. I know Boston is your dream. I didn't mean to turn

it back to me,” he says. Emma perches on the table next to him.

“It’s okay. I know this will be a change, and that’s scary. But you might still get in!” she says with a grin. He doesn’t try to return it.

“And you can apply to other schools in the area. We’ll make it work.” She’s so confident, and Ian can’t manage to force the truth out of his throat. Anger flares deep at the memory of his father taking away his chance at happiness with little care.

Ian chooses to nod instead, glancing back at Omar and Delaney talking. Omar’s body is still tense, a livewire waiting to snap. Emma glances at the clock, and mumbles a curse.

“Shit, I need to get to class. Mrs. Dunphy is starting to get skeptical about my passes from Dales,” Emma says.

“Will I see you later?” Ian asks, because he does miss her skin under his palms, her hips in his embrace.

She frowns. “No, I have cheer practice, then we’re doing a group dinner at Ellen’s.”

Of course, Ian thinks. Ellen (and Anthony, now he knows it’s really Anthony she spends time with, *the lying whore*) always manages to ruin his plans. Maybe getting Ellen off the squad will be his next goal, once Omar and Delaney are nothing but a blip in Venice High history, a fluke in the system.

“I’ll text you,” she says before pressing a quick kiss to his cheek and ducking out of the room.

“Where’s your bracelet?” Ian hears Omar ask, and he looks at Omar, who has

Delaney's hand in his, thumb rubbing along the bare skin of her wrist.

"Oh I, uh, left it at home," Delaney stutters. The lie is obvious, and the three of them know it.

"Did you?" Omar asks, giving Delaney another chance to tell him the truth. Ian feels a brief flare of delight. Delaney's lie, as simple as it is, just helps Ian's case more. If she lies to Omar about the bracelet, who knows what else she's lying about?

Omar knows it too. He spares a quick glance to Ian, a mere second of contact, and Ian knows they're on the same page. He almost feels bad for Delaney. *She's collateral damage*, Ian thinks. It's always sad when someone gets caught in the rubble. Then again, she was the one playing in the ruins.

"Yeah, I was in a hurry today," she says.

Ian expects anger, but all he sees is heartbreak in Omar's eyes. Omar was hoping she would tell the truth, give him something that explained why Casey had the bracelet, even if it was because she was spending time in his bed.

Omar's hand tightens around her wrist, and Delaney twists to get away. Ian's mind flashes to his fingers imprinted on Emma's skin.

"Ow, Omar, you're hurting—"

"You're lying to me. Casey gave me the bracelet the other day, after class," he says, voice cold. Omar lets her go and she pulls her wrist to her chest, soothing the red mark with her other palm. Omar's eyes linger her wrist, surprise in his expression.

Delaney takes a step back, creating a distance between her and Omar. She's hesitant, but her words hold a spark of anger.

“Fine, I lost it at the football game. I didn’t want to tell you because I was embarrassed and thought you’d be mad.” She pauses, waiting for a response. Omar says nothing, so she starts again. “I guess Casey must have found it. Why didn’t you tell me you knew where it was?”

“Well, I was hoping you’d be honest with me. But I guess that’s asking too much,” he answers. Delaney’s eyes widen at Omar’s response, and Ian can’t look away. He never expected everything to happen so perfectly.

“I didn’t want to hurt you! I know that bracelet means a lot and I felt so bad that I lost it,” Delaney says, genuine guilt in her tone. Omar nods, looking away from her for a moment. He looks towards Ian, although Ian knows Omar isn’t really looking at him, just taking a moment to regroup.

“How can I trust you, when you’re lying to me? What else are you lying about?” Omar says, and the questions are rhetorical. Delaney scoffs, although Ian can see the tears brimming in her eyes.

“Excuse me? What do you think I’m lying about?” She crosses her arms, ready for an argument.

“I don’t know, Delaney!” Omar snaps, and it’s loud. Ian looks towards the door, expecting a passing teacher to ask what’s going on. Delaney’s taken aback by his shout, watching him with wide eyes.

“Omar, what’s wrong? What’s going on?” she asks, and Ian can hear the sob buried in her throat and how it restricts her words. Omar takes a deep breath and looks down at the paper clenched in his hand, cover wrinkled beyond repair.

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” Omar starts, and the words still hold his anger, although it’s subdued. “I need to handle this paper situation. Let’s talk later. I didn’t mean to snap at you like that.” Omar reaches for Delaney again, and she looks at his hand, skeptical. After a moment, she hesitantly places her hand, small and white, into his large black palm, skin lighter at the center. There’s still a pink ring around the wrist, and Omar runs his thumb along the mark once.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, quietly, and Delaney nods.

“I’m going to the library,” she says, almost a whisper. “Let’s talk tonight.” Omar nods, and Delaney slips out of the room with no acknowledgement of Ian’s presence. Ian turns back to Omar, who’s staring down at the misprinted paper, gripping it hard with both hands. The pages crumble under the force, and Ian feels something warm like satisfaction settle in his chest.

“I’m going to handle the printer. I’ll be in the other room, it should be empty,” Omar says, leaving before Ian gives him a response. The door hasn’t even swung shut before Rob barges in, eyes narrowed and fists clenched.

“Ian, what the fuck.”

“Rob, nice to see you too,” Ian says, turning back to his computer. He’s not sure what Rob’s issue is, but he doesn’t really care. For the first time in weeks, he feels hopeful.

“Am I just a pawn to you?” Rob snaps, yanking the chair next to Ian out and sitting down. He leans forward, elbows on his knees, face several inches away from Ian’s cheek. Ian bites back the urge to tell him *yes, you are just a pawn, because no one gives a*

shit about your obsession with Delaney.

“What do you mean?” Ian asks after a moment, feigning confusion. He turns to meet Rob’s angry glare, blue eyes blazing. Ian never realized how large Rob is, looming over him.

“I have yet to receive one ounce of attention from Delaney since I started helping you with this whole... thing! She doesn’t talk to me in the hall, doesn’t acknowledge my presence at any event, and only seems to spare me a glance when we’re in a group setting,” Rob says, seething. Ian stares blankly at Rob rambles, mustering up the energy to pretend to care. He can’t believe Rob still expects to gain anything from this.

“Rob, relax. This takes time,” Ian says, voice as close to soothing as he can get.

“Well I’m tired of waiting. Why should I still help you?” Rob asks.

“You can stop,” Ian says, and the words make Rob stop in his tracks. “You can stop, and maybe this will still work. But maybe it won’t, and Delaney will stay with Omar, and you’ll still be home jerking it to her Facebook page.”

Rob sits quietly, letting the words sink in.

“You can watch and do nothing, and hope that a miracle occurs and Delaney finally decides you’re the man for her. Or,” he pauses, watching as the words start to resonate with Rob, and his anger subsides. “You take action and show her that you’re her best option.”

Rob sighs, leaning all the way back in his chair. Ian’s shoulders drop back down, and he realizes just how tense he was while Rob was in his face. There’s a potential for violence in Rob.

Violence may be what Ian needs, at this point.

“So what’s next?” Rob asks, pulling at a loose thread on his jeans.

“Omar is convinced Delaney is cheating on him,” Ian says, and the words sound like victory. The hardest part of Ian’s plan is done. It’s just the matter of making Omar do something about it.

“Really?” Rob says, eyes bright with excitement.

“Yes, really. They won’t be together for much longer,” Ian tells him. Rob nods, looking down.

“What about Casey?” Rob asks. Ian scoffs.

“She’s not actually dating Casey, remember? We made that up.”

“But other people think it, too. What if she is?” Rob asks, concern in his voice. Ian rolls his eyes, looking back to Rob. Ian doesn’t care, but he tries.

“She’s not. You know Delaney, you know she wouldn’t do that,” Ian says.

You thought that about Emma too, and look where you are now.

Maybe Rob’s thoughts aren’t as irrational as Ian thinks.

“But what if, once Omar dumps her, she runs to Casey? You know he won’t turn down any girl, especially not someone like her.” *Rob has a point*, Ian concedes. He nods his head in agreement.

“You’re right,” he says quietly, wincing at the words. “We need to do something about Casey.” Ian’s brain start to whirl, thinking of all the ways he can remove Casey from the situation. The easiest thing would be to kill him, but this isn’t the Elizabethan Era. He can’t just go around killing people because they’re in his way.

But it would be satisfying. And easy.

“What’s his biggest weakness?” Ian mumbles to himself.

“He’s relying on football to get into college. His applications are like, the only things he’s focused on. Maybe he’ll be too distracted to start dating anyone,” Rob says. Ian glances over.

“Don’t get your hopes up. All Casey wants is someone else to crawl into his bed each night,” Ian spits back. Rob physically deflates, shoulders slumping and eyes downcast. It’s pathetic. *Delaney would eat this boy alive.*

“I wish he would just break his leg, or something. Lose the chance at that fancy scholarship, spend the rest of his year recovering. Maybe you’d even get his position, if he can’t be here to do it,” Rob says.

It’s genius. Ian can’t actually believe it came out of Rob’s mouth.

“That’s it!” Ian says, unable to hide his excitement. Rob flinches slightly at the outburst.

“What’s it?” Rob asks. Ian turns in his seat, facing Rob. He leans forward, mimicking Rob’s position when he first came into the room.

“Rob, I need you to listen very carefully,” Ian starts, voice firm. He can’t fuck this one up. They’re about to take their plan to the next level, one that could easily ruin their futures. If they’re going to turn to violence, Ian needs to make sure they are both on the same page and equally committed.

“Ian, what—”

“Shut up, Rob. I have an idea. But I need to know how serious you are in getting

Casey out of the picture.”

Rob stares blankly, waiting for Ian to continue.

This is a bad idea, Ian knows. This is more than just academic dishonesty and petty high school gossip. Ian’s about to suggest assault, and he needs to know that Rob is willing to take the risk with him. It needs to be worth it.

“We can jump him after school, Friday. A couple of quick hits to the knees with a bat, we can get him enough that his season will be ruined. If we’re smart, we can do it without getting caught,” Ian says.

“Ian, you’re talking about some real shit,” Rob whispers, looking towards the door.

“I know,” he says, following Rob’s gaze. He’s lucky the paper is already in print. Usually, no one comes in to work during lunch when there’s no looming deadlines. “I know. Which is why I need to know if you’re willing to do this.”

“It would be worth it, right?” Rob asks quietly. “It’ll get Casey out of the way, for both of us.” A sick thrill rolls through Ian, and he grins. If he can get Rob to take the first step into violence, even something as simple as a baseball bat to the knee, who knows what else he can talk Rob into?

Ian’s had Rob wrapped around his finger for so long, he almost feels cruel pulling him tighter. But Rob knows too much, and he almost slipped away, and Ian cannot have that type of risk.

“Yeah, Rob. It’ll be worth it,” Ian says. Rob nods once, and looks Ian in the eye.

Perfect.

“Friday. After school. I’ll borrow my older brother’s baseball bat,” Rob says. Ian forces his face back to a serious expression, and puts his hand on Rob’s shoulder, squeezes once.

“We’re going to win this one, Rob. And it’s about damn time.”

Chapter 16

Ian sees Omar in the parking lot that afternoon, both heading in the same direction to their cars. He's taking long strides and Ian can see the tension in his shoulders. He's about to look the other way when Omar turns and his face lights up.

"Ian!" Omar calls. Ian forces a smile and swerves slightly to the left, falling into step with Omar.

"Hey, man. How'd the phone call with the printer go?" Ian asks. Omar's face falls into a grimace, and Ian doesn't fight his smug satisfaction. Let Omar feel the full pressure of editor in chief. Let him learn on his own that he wasn't suited for the position.

"They don't know what happened, and tried to blame it on me, even though I sent the files the same way I always do, I even checked! But they said they should be able to get the new orders printed by tomorrow. We shouldn't have to push back the sell date," Omar says with a relieved sigh. Ian keeps up his grin, muscles in his cheeks growing tired. He's unsatisfied. That was too easy to fix.

"Well, that's good to hear," Ian says. They walk quietly up to Omar's car, a relatively new black SUV. Ian hovers, unsure of what to do next. Omar glances around, as though expecting to be caught doing something wrong.

"Hey, get in for a minute," Omar says. He unlocks the doors and slides in the driver's side, leaving Ian confused and alone.

He slowly opens the door and climbs in. He doesn't know what to do with his hands. They sit in his lap, jittery.

"Uh, what's up?" Ian has no idea why they're sitting in Omar's car in the parking lot. It seems suspicious, although Ian's not sure why.

"I'm going to confront Delaney about Casey," Omar says. The words are out so fast, Ian has to repeat the sounds several times in his head before they make sense.

"Really? When?" he asks. He can't believe how well it's all coming together, after everything. The looming victory is dampened by his own future, dictated by his father. But he won't be the only one whose plans were derailed, who is going to be left behind and eventually forgotten. Casey won't get his football scholarship, and Omar won't get the girl or the reputation as a great editor for Venice View. Ian does feel bad that Delaney is stuck in the middle, but she's strong. She'll heal. She'd be better off without Omar, anyway.

"Saturday, I think. She'll be home alone before the game, we'll be able to have an actual talk without her dad or Casey interrupting," Omar answers.

"Emma's going over at some point, I think they were going to get ready for the game together," Ian says, although he doesn't know if those plans have changed.

"I'll only interrupt them for a few minutes. If she comes clean and admits what she's done, I will probably only be there for one," Omar says quietly. The words are sad, resigned, and Ian is surprised at how much Omar's spirit seems broken.

"Are you going to be okay?" Ian asks, because he's genuinely curious.

Omar lets out a sigh, long and deep. "I think so. It's just," he pauses for a while,

and Ian grows even more uncomfortable in the silence. “You finally get everything you want, and it slips away so quickly.” Ian nods, silently.

“It just makes me wonder, what’s the point in fighting for it all, if it’s just going to fall apart?” Omar asks. Ian thinks about Emma, and Anthony, and every spat they’ve had and all the times he grabbed her too hard or she snapped at him. He thinks about the future he had planned, and how his dad pulled all of his dreams down and let them crash into pieces.

“That’s life, isn’t it?” Ian finally responds. He’s not sure what he means, but it feels right, something to take up the empty space. Omar nods, staring off past the windshield into nothing.

“I guess.” They sit quietly a little longer.

“If it makes you feel better,” Ian starts, and he should stop before he blows it, but he can’t. “I know a way to get back at Casey.”

“How?” Omar asks, and his voice holds more excitement than Ian was expecting.

“It’s better that you don’t know.” The words are ominous, but Ian finds it rather fitting. Omar’s gaze lingers on Ian for a moment before he nods and turns away.

“Thanks, Ian.” The words are so genuine, they hurt. Ian pushes the pain away, and remembers everything he’s lost.

“You’re welcome, Omar. It’s what any friend would do.”

Friday creeps up quickly.

Ian feels a frenzy under his skin while he pushes papers to the student body. The

whole staff is out on the morning they sell the new issue, a stack of papers in one hand and a money envelope in the other. Ian used to hate it, but it's just become another menial task after four years. He goes through the motions, shouting "New View!" at passing students and keeping an eye out for any students who seem to be thinking about buying an issue to harass. His pile is slowly decreasing, and soon he finds himself back in the newsroom to grab more issues. Delaney is standing over her computer, eyes glued to the screen as she drags the mouse back and forth across a video clip.

"Hey, Delaney," Ian says, and she raises her hand off the mouse for a brief wave, not even turning to look at him. He doesn't hold it against her. The clip she keeps watching is a shot of the football team running through their banner, and part of a pump-up video for the game tomorrow. So it should already be exported and uploaded for the news show that's set to air in a little over fifty minutes. Ian recognizes racing the clock.

He moves to the back of the room and grabs a handful of issues, propping them into the crook of his elbow and heading back towards the door. "Wait," Delaney calls, still tweaking the transitions on her video. Ian pauses, curious. He watches her move to the top of the screen and click "export" before standing straight, and turning her full attention towards him. Her eyes narrow. He grins, unsure.

"What's wrong with Omar?" she asks. The question is blunt and sharp, almost accusing, as though she knows Ian has had his fingers all over their relationship. He pinches his eyebrows together, and forces a small frown.

"What do you mean?" he asks. Delaney doesn't buy it.

"Cut the shit, Ian. I know something been up, and you seem to be the only one he

wants to talk to these days,” she snaps. Ian feel a swell of warmth to his center. At least someone appreciates his company.

“Well, he’s been really stressed about the paper, you know?” Ian starts, making it up as he goes. It’s the only connection they really have, when Ian thinks about it. That, and their girlfriends being close.

Delaney crosses her arms and cocks a hip, waiting for more.

“I mean, the paper is kind of his baby. And with last issue being a train wreck, he’s been putting a lot of pressure on himself to make sure this one’s great. It sucks that he’s taken some of it out on you,” Ian lowers his voice, and takes a step closer to Delaney. Her expression softens just slightly, although she continues to stare at him as though she can see the lies as they come.

“Is that it?” she asks, eyebrow raised, waiting for more. Ian hesitates, wondering if he’s missing something.

“Um, yeah, I think,” he answers.

“Why won’t he give Casey a second chance?” she asks, Ian wants to laugh. How easily she fell into her role, without having to be led by Ian.

“He’s a risk to the paper,” Ian states. The words are true, but Delaney just shakes her head, looking away from Ian.

“No, he’s not. How can you believe that?” she asks, disbelief in her tone.

“I saw the article, Delaney. He’s a cheat,” Ian says, words hard but quiet. Their conversation is becoming heated, and neither want attention from the staff that is popping in and out of the room for more papers.

She stares at him, mouth slightly agape in shock. "You know he wouldn't do that. You've known Casey for years! He's never done anything like this," she says.

Ian is itching to get away from this conversation. For the first time, he's afraid he's going to lose his footing, get buried in his lies and expose himself. Delaney sees through more than he was expecting, but if he can keep her out of this for another day, his plan may succeed. He could win this one, for once.

"Yeah well, he did this time. It's easy for you to ignore it because it's not your show's reputation on the line. If it got out that Casey tried to plagiarize his work, the whole paper could sink," Ian says, growing irritated. Delaney scoffs.

"Please, you're not The Times. You're a writer for a high school paper, Ian. Don't let your ambition go to your head," she says. Ian clenches his teeth.

"Fine, forget about it. It would hurt Omar. You think the kids who's being mocked online by every other student here needs the extra hit to his reputation? Editor in chief is Omar's chance to prove himself to everyone who doubts him," Ian says.

Delaney looks away with a frown. "He doesn't need to throw away his friends in the process," she says quietly. Ian knows she sees herself as collateral in Omar's mission to make the paper a success. Maybe he'll tell her the truth, when everything's blown over.

"I'm sorry, Delaney. I'm sure things will relax after this issue. He just needed another chance to prove himself," Ian says, and he takes a risk and rests his free hand on her shoulder. She shrugs it off, but gives him a small smile.

"Let's hope," she says quietly. Ian nods, and turns to walk out. He has a couple

more minutes to sell before first period starts, not that any teachers expect their journalism students to be one time when they're selling papers.

"Hey, Ian, one more thing," Delaney calls, and he can't stop himself from turning around. "Why are you ignoring Emma?"

"I have to go, Delaney, let's talk later," Ian replies, and his words are terse. He doesn't stick around to see her face. Emma's a different issue. He has too much going on today to think about her.

"Hey, Ian!" Casey is on his way towards the newsroom, blonde hair flopping as he walks. He looks a little haggard, dusty facial hair covering his chin and upper lip, and his smile doesn't reach his eyes completely. It makes Ian smile.

"Hi, Casey." Ian wasn't expecting Casey to stop considering they are slowly running out of time to sell, but he does, and Ian follows suit.

"Many more papers in there?" Casey asks.

"A good amount, we have less than half of the order left though. Not bad," Ian shrugs, looking longingly down the hall, away from Casey.

"Great! Hey, have you—"

"Sorry, Casey, I really got to get back to selling these. I got distracted by Delaney— she's in there— and lost a few minutes. I don't want us stuck with a bunch of these," Ian says. Ian's trying to keep his voice light, but he sees Casey's expression dim a little at the rejection. "We'll talk later, yeah? Do you have practice?"

"No, I'll be heading straight home after school. Text me later," Casey says, heading into the newsroom after Ian nods his agreement.

Ian heads back into the throng of students, decreasing as the minutes tick. He lets his thoughts roam as he goes through the motions, taking money and passing out papers like a robot. No practice means Casey will be leaving with the rest of the student body.

“Shit,” he mumbles to himself. They can’t go after Casey in the parking lot with an audience. They need a new plan.

Ian hardly notices that he’s out of papers, too busy in his own head. It’s not until Jack knocks into him, a friendly nudge, that he realizes he’s standing with empty arms and a full bag of money. The halls are almost cleared, and there’s less than a minute left before the bell rings.

Shit.

Chapter 17

Ian doesn't see Rob until the end of the day. He's waiting for Ian at his locker, and he looks so nonchalant Ian wonders if he forgot what they were doing today.

"Hey, Ian. How was class?" Rob asks. Ian watches his toe tap rapidly on the tile floor as Ian approaches.

"Fine. We need to talk," Ian says. Rob straightens up, and gives him a quick nod. Ian packs his bag silently. The quiet is weighted, loaded with a pressure that keeps down any urge to break it. Ian leads them out to the parking lot with Rob on his heels, and they go straight to Rob's car, weaving through wandering students. Ian waits for him to unlock the door, and watches students weave around each other to get to their cars. It's chaos, cars swerving around loitering kids and mindless drivers, but Ian can't find any amusement in it today.

He slides into the car once Rob unlocks it, and they settle themselves silently.

"So," Rob says, finally breaking the quiet with a shaky voice, "what's up?"

Ian laughs, because it's so damn casual.

"Casey doesn't have practice tonight. He should be leaving any minute now, blowing our plan to shit." Ian hits the top of Rob's car. It's unsatisfying, although he does get a kick out of the way Rob flinches.

"Maybe that's a sign, you know?" Rob says quietly, head down and eyes focused

on his hands in his lap. He looks smaller, somehow, like he's shrinking into himself.

Something in Ian unsettles. This isn't the Rob he knows.

"What do you mean?" Ian says, shifting his body to fully face Rob. Rob shifts too, although Ian's sure he's moving away from him, turning towards the window.

"Maybe this is a bad idea," Rob says. The words sit, stark and honest, and Ian's unsure how to touch them. Outside, a car honks, although the sound seems muffled beyond their conversation.

Of course it's a bad idea. Ian isn't delusional—he knows what assault is. Stalking a classmate and breaking his knee with a baseball bat isn't a simple after-school scuffle. Ian's made his peace with it. After all, he only plans on being a witness to the crime, not the perpetrator. If they're caught, it's easy to say he had no idea what they were doing until Rob did it, and he couldn't turn his friend into the police. His word against Rob's in court, there would be a good chance he'd get off with nothing but a scolding for keeping the crime quiet.

He just needs Rob to do it.

"Maybe it is," Ian starts, shrugging his shoulders casually. "But it's also your best shot. You can choose to do nothing, or you can take a risk that can finally give you what you've been fighting three years for. Come on, man," he says, playfully punching Rob's arm. Rob looks over, hesitant to make eye contact. Ian rolls his eyes.

"You know this is your last shot. As long as Casey is in the picture, you've got nothing," Ian says, looking to hurt.

"Fuck you," Rob spits, glaring at Ian. Ian fights back a smile. This is the anger Ian

knows. This is the Rob he's friends with, fiery and ready for action. Ian tells him as much.

"There's the man I know. Rob, you don't back down from challenges. You fight," Ian says, placing his hand on Rob's shoulder and squeezing the muscle. He leans in, pulling Rob with him until their breaths are mingling. It's intimate, but it will keep Rob's attention on Ian, which is all he needs.

"You do whatever it takes to get what you need. Sometimes, it means getting messy. Sometimes, it means being cruel. But you deserve this, Rob. You've given her everything you can, and someone has always managed to beat you. But not this time," Ian says.

Rob starts to nod his head as Ian talks, and Ian can practically feel his blood racing under his palm. He's got him.

"This time, it's your turn to come out on top. Don't let your nerves ruin it."

Rob lets out a deep sigh, and Ian loosens his hold on his shoulder and lets him shift back into his seat. Rob looks at him directly, and nods his head once.

"Okay. You're right, Ian. We have to do this," Rob says. Ian smiles and lets the laugh that bubbling in his throat burst forth.

"Exactly. It's senior year, Rob. We're getting what we're owed," Ian says, leaning back in the leather seat of Rob's car. He's exhausted, he realizes, suppressing a yawn. This whole thing is draining, but Ian can't dwell on it. If he lets himself relax, or lets his body realize just how much rest it's missing, he's afraid his plan will die where they sit. He's come too far to give up, or postpone any longer. They need to do it, and do it fast.

“So, Casey isn’t going to practice. What now?” Rob reiterates, pulling Ian’s thoughts back to the situation. Ian’s thankful for it.

“That’s the problem,” Ian mutters, smacking the back of his head against the headrest.

“So we get him somewhere else,” Rob says, as though it’s so simple. They don’t even know where he lives.

“Where else, Rob?” Ian asks, and he knows he shouldn’t give him shit after just talking him back into the plan, but he can’t help it.

“We’ll just have to follow him, I guess,” Rob says.

“To where? Jump him in front of his house?”

“What’s it matter?” Rob asks. Ian looks out the window, letting the suggestion sink in. The parking lot is almost empty, only a handful of cars left scattered. He scans the lot while he thinks, and stops when his eyes lock on a familiar blue Camry.

“No shit,” Ian says, sitting up in his seat. “Casey is still here.”

“How do you know?” Rob asks, looking around the parking lot. Ian points at the Camry, sitting at the front of the lot.

“That’s his car,” Ian says with a smile. “Seven cars left in the lot, and one of them is Casey’s. How about that for your sign.”

Rob lets out a laugh, but it’s short and breathy. Ian would have missed it if he wasn’t paying attention.

“So what do we do? Get him in the parking lot?” Rob asks. Ian sucks his lip in between his teeth, biting down on dead skin. It’s not the most ideal situation, because

there's no telling who is going to leave the building at any moment, nor who is going to show up, but it's what they have. If they wait any longer, Rob will back out. Ian's not sure if he'll be able to talk him back in again.

"Like you said, what's it matter?" Ian repeats with a grin. "The lot is almost completely empty, so we should be fine. We'll wait until Casey comes out, catch him right before he gets into the car, speed off before anyone comes out. It will work, as long as we stay sharp," Ian says, meeting Rob's eyes and holding his gaze for a moment. Rob just nods.

"Got it. Now we wait," Rob says, although his tone tilts up at the end, like he's still asking Ian for confirmation. Ian nods, and props his foot up on the dash.

They settle into a comfortable silence as time passes. Another student, Ian thinks her name is Shelley, comes out to her car twenty minutes after the bell had rung and leaves. Rob starts to get anxious after that, looking towards the doors of Venice High every twenty seconds or so. Ian says nothing at first, but after a few minutes of his constant shifting, Ian starts to get annoyed. *Why can't anyone sit still anymore?*

"Relax, Rob," he says, shooting him a glare. Rob leans forward, arms on the steering wheel, and huffs.

"I can't, Ian. How much longer are we going to wait?" Rob asks.

"Until he fucking comes out. Do you have a date or something?" Ian watches the anger flare in Rob's face, eyes narrowed and breath quickening. "I didn't think so."

They fall into silence again, although the tension is still there, simmering. Another student leaves, Ian has no idea who they are, raising both of their hopes that they would

be able to get out of the damn car. After a half hour wait, Ian's also starting to become restless, shifting his legs around the small space in failed attempts to get comfortable. The air is stuffy, and Ian looks longing out the window, watching the branches of the trees around the front of the building sway with the wind.

Forty minutes after the bell rang, Casey finally steps out of the front doors. Ian lets out a sigh of relief and Rob tenses, hands gripping the wheel.

"Fuck," Rob says, and Ian grabs the door handle. They need to get moving now, before Casey ducks into his car. Ian pulls his ski mask out of his backpack, waiting for Rob to do the same. He doesn't.

"Rob, grab your mask, we gotta go," Ian says, tone firm. Instead, Rob turns the car on.

"Rob, what the fu—"

"I can't do it, Ian. It's too personal." Rob's voice is shaking. Ian's anger flares hot and bright, and he reaches for the collar of Rob's shirt and pulls him close.

"Yes you can. Don't be a pussy, let's go." Rob looks at him with wide eyes, and pulls himself free of Ian's hold.

Casey's already halfway to his car, and Ian's heart is pounding so hard it's the only thing he can hear. His hand is on the door handle, but it locks before he's able to open it.

"Rob, what are you doing?" Rob's staring ahead, watching Casey.

"I'll hit him, just nudge him enough to hurt," Rob says, and the words are so frantic and fast that Ian doesn't fully process them before Rob has already hit the gas and

is rapidly moving across the lot, towards Casey.

“Rob, don’t--” Ian says, panic blooming in his chest. *This is not the plan, this is not controlled, they don’t know what damage they can actually--*

The sound of Casey’s body hitting the hood of the car stops every thought in Ian’s head.

He watches as Casey’s back slams the windshield. He’s surprised the force doesn’t crack the glass. Rob breaks immediately, and Ian is thrown back in his seat. Casey’s body slides off, landing on pavement. The car is completely silent for the moment, both boys holding their breath.

Rob’s knuckles are white around the steering wheel.

Ian can’t move.

Casey hadn’t even turned around. A car was barreling through the lot, engine roaring, and it didn’t even cross his mind that he could be in the crosshairs.

Casey’s cry breaks the moment. Ian flinches at the sound. Rob puts the car in reverse, hands shaking, and backs away quickly. Casey is lying crumpled in the ground, arm tucked to his chest and shoe knocked off somewhere to his right. He’s facing them, although his eyes are shut and it looks as though there’s tension in his shoulders. His hands are gripping his sides.

He’s bracing himself, Ian realizes. He thinks we’re going to hit him again.

Briefly, Ian thinks the same. He looks at Rob, who’s backed the car up enough to see Casey but isn’t moving any further, eyes focused on the body before them.

Casey lets out a sob. Ian thinks about rain. Bile rises in his throat as they watch

Casey cry, shoulders shaking, battered on the ground, and he thinks about rain harder.

The burn doesn't go away.

Finally, Rob turns the wheel, angling the car to the left and turning to leave. Ian watches as Casey opens his eyes, rimmed red, and meets Ian's shocked stare. There's no change in expression, the shock and pain too overwhelming to make room for anger or betrayal, but Ian can't look away.

Ian doesn't turn away until Casey's face is a blur and Rob's at the exit of the parking lot.

They don't say anything while they drive, although Rob's hands are shaking so bad Ian's afraid they're going to end up off the road. Ian's stomach lurches, and he grips the door handle.

"Rob, pull over," he demands, swallowing quickly. He can feel the bile rising from where it settled. His fingers start to shake. He needs to get out.

They're only a few miles away from the school when Rob finds an unfinished road, paved for about twenty feet before leading into gravel, grass, and a large metal fence. The car is hardly in park before Ian is out, the breeze hitting the sweat on his face like ice water. It feels good, but it doesn't help the nausea rolling through him. He takes a step away from the car, braces his hands on his knees, and vomits.

"Fuck," he hears between his retching. He hasn't vomited in a long time. He forgot that the taste lingers in the back of your mouth.

His body heaves three times, emptying itself of his lunch. His body sways when he rises, and he spits a few times more, trying to erase the taste from his mouth. He

wonders if it's inappropriate to ask for one of those water bottles Rob always has in the backseat. *Who cares.*

Ian walks back to the car and slides into his seat. "Do you have any water?" he asks, voice raspy. Rob doesn't look at him, just stares straight ahead at nothing, and passes him the half-empty bottle in the cup holder. Ian takes a mouthful, swigs the water around in his mouth, and leans out the car door to spit. It clears his head a little, feeling cleaner.

"We should get out of here," Ian says, reaching for his seatbelt. They can't linger too close to the scene. Ian needs to move, needs something to focus on that isn't the sound of Casey's body hitting the windshield, replaying in his head on a loop.

Rob slams his hands against the steering wheel and shouts. Ian flinches at the movement. Rob's breathing is heavy and seems to echo in the small space. Ian waits for a moment.

Rob smacks the wheel again, again, again, face growing red and the screams buried in his throat getting louder, until he finally stops.

"Rob, you have to—" Ian starts, but is cut off by Rob's glare.

"I have to what, Ian? We just ran over a fucking classmate," Rob snaps. Ian meets his glare, ready to fight. Rob forgot the plan, and made his own. He has to live with that.

"That wasn't the plan, was it? We were supposed to get him in the knee, two hits then we're off. You were the one who decided to try and kill him with your car!" Ian shouts.

Rob grabs Ian by the collar, and a cold wave of fear washes over him. Rob ran

Casey over in a state of panic. *Who knows what he could do to me?*

“Do not put this all on me, Ian! You were the one who came up with this whole thing. You plotted it all. This has your dirty fingerprints all over it,” Rob yells in his face, and Ian forces himself to swallow his argument and reign in his anger to protect himself. He knew he could wrap Rob around his finger, but with the hold loosening, it’s clear that Rob could be more of a danger than Ian expected.

“Okay, okay,” Ian says, softly. He lightly holds Rob’s hands and slowly pulls them off his shirt, freeing himself. Rob seems to calm down at the words, leaning back against the window and taking a deep breath. The calm is fragile, Ian knows, and he needs to preserve what he can to get the hell out of this situation. He’s got other things to handle, before this can finally be over.

“Now what?” Rob asks, voice shaking, and Ian’s surprised to see tears falling along his cheeks. He’s never see Rob cry before. He watches a tear slide down the ruddy skin and fall onto his blue shirt, leaving a dark mark.

“We go home.”

Rob lets out a sob that Ian knows what supposed to be a laugh. Ian knows he didn’t give Rob an answer to his question, but it’s the best he has. His thoughts are still fuzzy, and the nausea is still simmering in his gut, a gentle wave that has yet to crest.

“That’s it? We just go home, act like nothing happened? Our lives are ruined, Ian. They’re over,” Rob says, voice wavering with tears.

Your life, Ian thinks. *Only your life is ruined*. He can still get out of this.

Ian reaches over to rest his hand on Rob’s shoulder for comfort. Rob looks at him,

eyes red and glassy with tears. The two boys stare for a moment, letting their actions sink deep into their memory. Ian thought he would enjoy the moment more.

Rob shrugs off Ian's arm, wipes at his face, and settles back into his seat at the wheel. He silently turns the car back on, and drives them back onto the road. Ian's phone buzzes in his pocket. He ignores it, and watches the car in front of them twist down familiar roads. The scenery is more interesting, this time around. He notes the color of the shutters of each house, the way the trees are cut to avoid the power lines, and which houses have flowers that will soon die lining their front porches. His phone buzzes again. He keeps watching fence posts become blurs as they pass them.

"You going to the play next month?" Ian asks, something to pull Rob away from the moment, focus himself in the future. Ian knows the play still has a lot of work, but it's supposed to be off to a good start. The lead actress is new to the drama club, he heard, but she's one of the strongest actors their director has seen. Rob doesn't respond to any of this, just keeps driving. They pass an ambulance, sirens blaring. Ian knows where it's going.

They pull up to Ian's house, and Ian wants to bolt out of the car the minute the car stops, but he keeps himself composed. Rob doesn't put the car in park, just keeps his foot firmly on the break. Ian gets the picture.

"Rob, go home and relax. It's going to be fine," Ian says, although he knows he shouldn't bother. He should be telling Rob to come up with a defense.

Rob looks at him, expression blank. His cheeks are still tear-streaked and red. *He cried the whole drive back*, Ian realizes. *He knows it's over.*

“Bye, Ian.” The words are terse and final.

Ian nods his head, and steps out of the car, grabbing his backpack from the backseat. Rob speeds off quickly, the roar of the engine jarring the peaceful quiet of the neighborhood. Ian watches until Rob’s car is gone, and lets out a deep exhale.

Chapter 18

Ian's phone buzzes again. "What the fuck do you want," Ian mutters to himself, fishing it out of his pocket. He has three missed calls and two texts, all from Emma.

"Come over now," the first one reads.

"Ian answer your fucking phone," says the second one.

Ian rolls his eyes. He's about to ignore them, because he is exhausted and still queasy and needs to brush his teeth, when the phone rings again. Emma's caller ID is a picture of them, taken at a party last year at Delaney's house. He's pressing a kiss to her cheek while she laughs, head tilted back slightly. He wants to throw his phone.

Instead, he answers.

"What?" he says.

"Ian, Jesus Christ, why aren't you answering your phone?" she says, ignoring his rude greeting. She sounds out of breath.

"I was busy, what's so important—" he doesn't finish his question before Emma continues, concern seeping into her voice.

"I need you to come over, now. Omar stormed into the house to talk to Delaney and they've been locked up in my room. Something's off, and I don't feel right about it," she says.

Ian recognizes when her tone shifts to fear. She thinks something serious is going

to happen.

“I’ll be there in five,” he says, hanging up and heading straight to his car, all thoughts of Casey and Rob pushed out of his head. He wasn’t expecting Omar to talk to Delaney until tomorrow. He thought he had a little more time to string Omar along. He may not need it, after all.

Hope stirs deep in his chest, underneath the nerves, that this could be it. All his work the past two months could finally result in something good. If he can get that position, he can find a way to get money for another application. All he needs is one acceptance, and he’s out of this damn town. He tries to tamper down the giddy feeling in his chest, but he can’t. It bubbles to the surface and he lets out a laugh as he drives towards Emma’s house. *It could all be worth it, in the end.*

The drive passes quick. Ian’s focused only on what’s happening in the room with Delaney and Omar. Excitement simmers in his veins. He’s almost jumpy with it, struggling to keep his hands still on the steering wheel and fiddling with the radio. He parks quickly on the street, in front of Emma’s house. The door swings open as he turns off his car.

Emma rushes out, hair flying in different directions. Ian can tell she’s had her hands in it, buried to the root. Her eyeliner is smudged underneath, and she’s bitten the skin of her bottom lip raw. He’s never seen her like this before.

“Emma, what’s going on?” he asks. She stops short of him, crossing her hands over her chest and keeping her distance. He was expecting a hug, and a sharp pain stabs at his chest quickly, before dissipating.

“I don’t know. Delaney was texting Omar earlier, and she said he was acting weird, then suddenly he was at the house,” she says, speaking quickly. She bites down on her lip again, and Ian reaches for her cheek.

“Babe, don’t do that, you’re going to—” he starts. Emma turns away from his touch.

Ian lets his hand drop back to his side. “Is something else wrong?”

Emma looks back at him, gaze hard and cold. “You tell me, Ian. You’re the one ignoring my calls. You haven’t seen me outside of class in a week.” Ian’s still focused on inside the house, but Emma’s stance is firm. She’s ready to fight, and Ian can’t deal with it right now.

“Emma, we have to see—” Ian’s cut off quickly.

“No, Ian. Give me an answer now.” She purses her lips, and shifts all her weight to the side, hip cocked. Ian hates when she stands like that. It means she’s not going to let anything go.

“An answer to what?” he asks, trying to play it off. Her jaw drops.

It’s not the best answer, he knows, but he needs to pull her attention away from him and back inside.

“Are you serious?” she asks, anger clear in her voice. Ian sighs, looking down. Guilt settles in his gut, heavy and sour. He owes Emma something, some explanation for his behavior. It’s not fair to keep her in the dark any longer.

“I didn’t get in anywhere,” he says quietly. Emma’s face doesn’t change.

His rage flares. Ian hates her for not being surprised, and even more for not

pretending.

“And you’re taking it out on me?” she asks. Ian rolls his eyes. *Why does she not understand?*

“No, Emma. I was trying to come up with a way to tell you. It was just easier to keep my distance,” he says, letting his voice drop down to hardly above a whisper. She always falls for things when he plays up his emotions. He’s not completely lying, but he’s not sure if he’s willing to ask about Anthony. Ian’s not sure what he would do if he found out he was right.

“It’s not a big deal, Ian,” she says, voice softer. She gives him a small smile, and he knows she’s trying to be comforting but the words feel like a slap.

She doesn’t think his future is a big deal? Emma’s known Ian’s life plans for years, and they all require graduating from college first. He won’t get a Pulitzer writing blog posts online. He repeats Emma’s words in his head.

They sound so much like his father’s, cold and dismissive. Ian’s skin feels like it’s burning.

“Not a big deal? This is my future, Emma!” Ian shouts. He tries to calm himself down, but the anger doesn’t waver. He clenches his jaw, feeling his teeth press hard against each other. It doesn’t help.

“You’re being dramatic, just apply to other—” Ian can’t let Emma finish her sentence.

“I can’t, Emma! I’m done! My dad’s sending me off to the military after this year.” She stops and looks at him, eyes wide. Ian’s on a roll now, and he can’t stop. *Let*

her hear everything that's happened. Let her know the truth.

"I wasted my chance to get out of here, become something more than just a high school journalist, because I was chasing after *you*. I applied to all of those schools, wasted all of my chances, for you. And I probably could have skated by, snuck into one of your fancy upper-tier schools, if Omar and Casey hadn't stolen my shot at leadership. The Venice View should be my paper, Emma. They should be my staff." He's breathing heavy, and Emma is watching him with wide eyes, shocked at the outburst.

Ian laughs. It's ridiculous. This whole fucking thing is ridiculous.

"I would have been okay working under Omar, you know? We've worked together. He's a good journalist. But Casey? God, it was like Dales spit in my fucking face. And she knew it, too. She knew what she was doing. She pulled me aside to tell me that I just wasn't good enough."

"Ian, she didn't do it to be cruel, she thought she was being kind," Emma says.

Ian takes a step back, appalled. She was supposed to be on his side.

"How can you defend her? She ruined my application. I have nothing beyond the View, Emma. Editor in chief was my big shot. And she passed it on to Omar, so she could pat herself on the back for having a diverse staff. And she let Omar pick Casey for assistant, who can barely string together a sentence!" Ian's heart is pounding loud in his ears.

"Ian, calm down, the neighbors—" Emma starts, reaching for his hand while she glances around her yard for any sign of being watched. Ian yanks his hand away.

"I don't care about your neighbors, Emma," he spits back.

“Well I do. Get in the damn house,” she demands. Ian pulls away again when she reaches for him. She looks up, eyes shining with tears that have yet to fall.

“Ian, why are you doing this?” Her voice is firm, but it cracks at the end. *She tries so hard*, Ian thinks. Emma’s always been stronger than he assumed.

“Because you’re listening now,” he says.

They stare at each other for a moment, Ian catching his breath from his tirade. She still doesn’t get it, though. She doesn’t understand the weight Ian is under, how delicate his situation is, and how much work he has put into getting out of it.

“Why did you think I wasn’t before?” she asks quietly,

The words slip before Ian thinks. “I know about Anthony.”

Emma looks up, perfectly filled eyebrows furrowed. Ian squeezes his fingers into fists to fight off the wave of anger that rolls over him. *How dare she play stupid.*

“Ellen’s brother? What about him?” she asks, and he’s impressed by how light she keeps her voice. It’s almost convincing. Ian wants to scream.

“I know you’re not helping Ellen with cheer routines, Emma! I saw you two at the game,” he shouts at her, taking a step into her space.

It’s all he’s been able to see when he thinks of Emma— her hands on his shoulder, broader than Ian’s, the way she tilted her head back to laugh at his stupid fucking joke, how he leaned in so he could whisper something to her. The images are seared into his memory, little pictures printed on the back of his eyelids. A constant reminder that once again, Ian wasn’t good enough.

“What are you implying?” Emma’s voice is cold, and she’s stepped away from

him again. Her arms are firmly crossed, like a shield. Ian drops his arms to his side and lets them hang lax.

“You’re cheating on me,” he says, and he knows the words will cut her.

Good. Let her bleed.

Emma’s expression twists before Ian’s even finished his sentence, betrayal and anger and hurt, so much hurt, crossing over her features. The tears fall down her cheek, quick, bringing traces of mascara with them.

“How dare you!” she screams, taking two steps until she is sharing his breath, chests almost pressed against one another. Ian knows there’s a calculated distance in their bodies. He’s always liked the way Emma carries herself, so aware of her body and the space around it.

Underneath his rage is a small pit of warmth, a subtle reminder of why he took all those application risks in the first place; to follow her.

“You know I would never do that to you. Anthony is the brother of a close friend, one that you didn’t even seem interested in meeting because you were so focused on yourself! You don’t get to take that out on me,” Emma shouts, and the words carry down the street. Ian knows she’s hurt, and he believes it’s genuine, but he can’t shake the feeling that something’s not right. She’s not telling the whole truth.

“You’re still hiding something from me, I can tell from the way you’re staring at me. I know you’re lying babe, but you can’t beat the best. I’ve run circles around the idiots we call friends the past month, and no one has even realized it,” he says with a laugh, before biting down on his tongue.

Ian shouldn't have said that. He clamps his mouth shut, and fumes at how Emma gets under his skin enough to make him say things he intends to keep quiet. He used to be impressed by it. Now, he wants to punch through her damn door.

“What the hell are you—”

Someone is screaming.

Ian turns to look at the window in the left corner of the house. Emma's gaze follows, and her bedroom window is cracked just enough to let in the breeze, and just enough to let the screams coming from the room carry outside.

Emma is running to the front door before Ian fully realizes what's going on. She's already opened it once he reaches the porch, and he catches up quickly as they bound up the stairs. The screaming is Omar, he knows. It's not high-pitched enough to be Delaney's.

The realization isn't comforting.

Emma reaches her door first, twists the knob and is met with resistance.

“Omar? Delaney?” she calls out against the wood. The screaming stops. Emma turns around, looking at Ian with wide eyes. She twists the doorknob again, harder, and the rattle of metal fighting metal makes Ian grit his teeth.

“Omar?” Ian calls out, expecting a response. He's the only one Omar trusts right now, maybe all he needs is a familiar voice.

They're met with silence.

“Ian, what the hell is going on?” Emma asks in a whisper. Her voice is shaking, and Ian reaches for her hand. She lets him.

“I don’t know,” he says, and it’s unsettling because it’s true. He has no idea what is happening. He has no plan for this is. “Here, let me try the door.” He pulls Emma several feet behind him, close to the middle of the hall.

“Ian, what—”

“Don’t yell at me,” he says, before taking a running start and ramming his shoulder against the door. It shakes in the frame, but doesn’t open. His shoulder throbs, but Ian doesn’t mind.

“Ian, don’t hurt yourself,” Emma says, although she hasn’t looked away from the door. *She’s only saying it out of courtesy*, Ian thinks. He ignores the sting that comes with the thought.

He steps back, puts one foot forward, and launches himself towards the door again. Pain shoots down his shoulder, radiating towards his fingers, but the door makes a loud cracking sound. It’s not open, but it’s weaker. Ian counts it as progress.

“Maybe try kicking it,” Emma says.

“Give me a minute,” Ian bites back. He’s tired, and he’s imagining the bruises he’ll have to explain to his mother later. She’s right. He should have kicked it earlier. Heat rises to his cheeks, and he turns back to the door. He should have known better than to ram himself against the door.

Ian braces himself for a moment before using all the strength he has to kick the door. Finally, the wood fractures, the crack making them gasp. Ian’s hardly set his foot back down on the ground before Emma is crowding behind him, pushing through the broken wood to wiggle her hand through the hole and unlock the door. Ian holds his

breath and she opens it.

“Omar?” Emma calls, stepping into the room. Ian’s on her heels, and he peers around her to look into her room. Omar’s on the floor, his back turned to them. Delaney is lying on Emma’s bed, back turned towards the wall. It looks like she’s asleep.

Omar’s back shifts. He heaves, breath wet in his throat. *He’s crying*, Ian realizes.

Emma steps further into the room, heading towards Delaney. Her eyes don’t leave Omar, steps careful and quiet as she approaches her friend. She looks ridiculous.

This whole scene is ridiculous. Ian would laugh, if the room wasn’t so damn quiet.

Emma reaches over to Delaney’s side, and nudges her. Delaney doesn’t budge. Emma finally looks away from Omar to glance at Delaney, confusion etched into her brow. Ian’s sure his expression mirrors hers. *What the hell is happening?*

“Oh my god,” Emma says, and Ian’s gut lurches at her voice, firm and serious.

Emma pulls Delaney’s shoulder, rolling her over on the bed and meeting her open eyes, blue and glassy. Dark purple bruises color her collarbone, in the faint shape of handprints. Emma gasps, reaching towards Delaney’s neck to look for a pulse. She pauses, fingers pressed against pale skin, then lets out a loud sob.

Ice runs down Ian’s spine.

That can’t be possible.

“No,” Emma says, voice cracking, “no, Delaney, wake up.” Her hands keep pushing against her friend’s body, trying to force a heartbeat.

Ian looks back to Omar, shoulders still shaking with his sobs on the floor. He’s

trying to figure out what happened, place all the pieces together, but there's something missing.

"Delaney, please," Emma keeps saying, and she keeps pushing, but nothing happens. Her words are desperate, and Ian can't watch anymore. He forces himself to move, walks with shaking legs close enough to the bed to grab Emma around the waist.

"Emma, stop," Ian says, and the words sound hollow, like they didn't come from his mouth. He can feel her body shake against his, and he grabs both of her wrists. Her knees give out, and Ian almost goes down with her. It's taking all he has to keep her up and away from pushing at her best friend's dead body.

Ian's mind is hazy, like he's watching the events through a fogged window, and he only knows Omar and Emma and Delaney through stories, like they're characters in a movie. Nothing feels real. He lets Emma cry, loud and harsh, choking out sobs for several minutes before wearing down, until she runs out of energy and her tears are quiet.

It isn't until she calms down that Ian hears Omar, quietly mumbling, "I'm sorry," over and over.

Ian lets go of Emma, stepping away from her and the bed (*with Delaney's dead body, oh my god, how did this happen*) and turning to face Omar. He's still crouched on the ground, hands braced against the carpet, words still spilling from his mouth.

"Omar," Ian says, and his voice doesn't shake, thank God. Someone has to keep it together. "What did you do?"

Omar sobs once, twice, before slowly rising from the floor. "I didn't mean— it was an accident— I just couldn't— she kept—" Omar can't finish his sentences, and it

quickly starts to grind Ian's nerves. Omar's eyes are red, bloodshot with tears, shining bright against his skin. Omar can't look at Ian, just keeps staring at Delaney's body, growing cold.

Ian stops himself from following Omar's gaze. The image of Casey's slumped body is still fresh in his mind. He can't add Delaney to that.

"You were right," Omar finally says after a moment, and Ian keeps his surprise tapped down, face emotionless. "We were texting, and I know I wanted to wait until tomorrow to talk but I just couldn't, I couldn't stand the idea that she was just stringing me along for, for what? A little rebellion against her dad? Date the black kid, no one else will! Maybe dad will finally pay attention to my work instead of the team, right?" Omar glances at Ian, looking for support. His eyes are wide, unfocused, shooting around the room as he talks. Ian stays still, watching, waiting for the rest of the story. He can feel Emma's gaze on him, burning.

"I had to talk to her, I had to get it over with. And I just couldn't get the idea of the two of them out of my head, the whole drive—" Omar pauses, takes a deep breath, and Ian can hear the sob he's trying to keep buried. "I kept thinking about Casey with the bracelet, how he had the gall to just give it me after class, like I didn't know what that meant, like I was that fucking stupid—"

"What?" Ian's head turns sharply at Emma's voice, soft but firm. She's sitting on the bed, Delaney's hand in hers. Emma links their fingers, Delaney's lying limp. Her eyes are fierce, red and rubbed raw, but still holding a flame. Ian's struck by her beauty for a moment, before her question fully settles in his head,

She's going to unravel this whole thing. A bolt of fear shoots through him, cold enough to pull him out of his stunned numbness. If Emma can prove Ian had a hand in this, she'll never forgive him. She'll never let him walk away from this.

Omar looks at Emma, eyes wide, brimming with tears. "Emma, I'm so sorry, it was an accident—" He stops.

"What did you say about the bracelet?" Emma asks, voice hard despite her tears, pinning Omar down with her stare.

"Casey gave it back to me, after class. Claimed he found it after the game, that lying son of a bitch," Omar says, anger rising again. Omar clenches his fists, looking down at the ground.

Ian can't say anything, frozen in place.

Emma releases Delaney's hand, and stands up. She takes a step forward. Ian fights the urge to step back and preserve the distance between them. Everything is more fragile than he was prepared for. *It was supposed to be so simple*, but now there's a body in the parking lot and a body in Emma's bed and Ian's presence is everywhere, in every rumor and lie and crime scene. Ian reminds himself to breathe, to stay calm until he figures out what to do next.

He's gotten this far. He can't let it all fall apart now.

"I found her bracelet after the game. I was getting a shot of the empty field, and it was in the grass. I gave it to Ian to return to you because I didn't want to lose it," Emma says. Omar doesn't respond at first, still looking down at the carpet.

His hands are shaking, Ian realizes. They're bleeding from little cuts on the back

of them. Delaney always liked her nails long.

“No, Casey found it and gave it to me,” Omar repeats, looking at Ian. Ian can feel Emma’s gaze on him, but doesn’t look at her. “Delaney lied to my face too, said it was at home, when Casey had it all along! I know all about Delaney and Casey, Emma. The whole school fucking knows.”

“Knows what?” she asks, looking at Ian.

He needs to say something, divert her attention, keep Omar from realizing the truth.

“What happened here, Omar?” Ian asks, and Omar turns away, shoulders heaving again with cries. He runs his hands through his hair, pulling at it hard.

“I just wanted to talk,” Omar starts, voice wavering again with the sobs buried in his throat. “I wanted the truth, Ian. I wanted to hear it from her instead of you. I needed to, I needed to know why she was doing this. Why wouldn’t she just dump me?” Omar takes a deep, shuddering breath.

Emma’s eyes haven’t left Ian, he knows. He refuses to look anywhere but Omar.

“But we started talking, and she was asking me about the paper, and talking about how much stress I’ve been under, and it just felt like everything was okay, you know? Like maybe things were fine. Maybe you were wrong,” Omar continues.

Ian sucks in a sharp exhale, fighting against the weight in his chest. He wants to hit him, punch him in his big fucking nose for blowing his plan to shit.

“But then she mentioned Casey, fucking Casey, always Casey. She asked again why I wouldn’t give him another chance, why I wouldn’t risk all of that time and effort

I've put into this paper for one dude that I was friends with, and I just..." Omar stops, dropping his arms and looking down.

Ian watches as Omar realizes there's blood on his hands. Ian spares a moment to glance at Emma, and lets out a small sigh of relief when he sees her watching Omar too. Something like hope flutters briefly in his chest.

Maybe he'll get out of this. Life owes him that much.

"I kissed her, to make her stop talking. I couldn't— I couldn't hear her say his name again. And then something just took over, and my hands were around her neck, and I just— I couldn't stop, and it was too late—" Omar stops with a sob, then another.

Ian can see it in his head; Delaney, completely clueless to what was running through Omar's head, how every insecurity had been pulled up and brought to the forefront of his thoughts, and how Ian had turned them all to point to Delaney as the problem. *Omar found a solution on his own*, Ian tells himself.

The pit in his stomach doesn't disappear.

"And now Delaney is dead," Omar says quietly, and the words are jarring.

Delaney's phone buzzes on her desk. The three of them flinch at the sound, and Emma reaches for it slowly. She's hesitant to open it, and Ian watches her debate the morals of opening a message intended for her dead friend before sliding her finger across the screen. Her eyes scan the message before looking up, meeting Ian's stare.

"Casey was hit by a car, he's on his way to the hospital," she says, and Ian wants to vomit again.

"Ian, what the fuck," Omar says, turning away from the them.

Ian can feel the ice fracturing beneath him. If Omar keeps quiet, if Emma doesn't ask any more questions, if life would give Ian one goddamn break, he'd be free.

Omar goes to jail for murder. Casey's hospitalized at least. The paper is his.

He wins.

"Delaney wasn't sleeping with Casey," Emma says, looking at Omar. Her words are confident, sure, a tone that doesn't allow for argument. Omar glances at Ian, but Ian averts his eyes. He won't take the blame for this. *It's Omar's crime, not his.*

"Believe me, I asked. They would have been perfect, you know? Like a movie," Emma says.

Omar looks away from her, stung.

"Emma, don't—" Ian warns. Her silence is best for the both of them; it keeps Omar from lashing out at Emma next, and it keeps Ian free from blame.

"Do not tell me what to do, Ian." Ian's never heard her voice so cold. He flinches, and rage radiates through him. *How dare you blow me off while I'm trying to save you?*

He flexes his fingers, balls them into fists and squeezes. His nails dig into his palms.

The rage lessens slightly. He can see clearly again.

Emma takes a step closer to Omar, although she's still far enough to duck away if he lunges at her. Omar's chest is still heaving, breathing heavy from his anger and his weeping. His eyes are sad as he watches Emma. Omar looks wary as she steps forward.

"But she loved you, Omar. She thought you guys were going to become the next big thing in journalism, some multimedia team. It was cute," Emma says, and Ian

watches as several tears fall down her cheeks. “She thought you were the one.”

Omar chokes out a laugh, hard and cynical. “Then why did she spend her evenings with Casey? Why was she so determined to get him back on my good side? Every damn day, she mentioned Casey, talked about how great he was, how much he deserved to be my assistant editor.”

Ian laughs, loud and quick. He couldn’t stop it. Emma looks at him, cold, calculating.

“Casey was so distraught when you fired him. He bothered her about it all the time. She figured once you got over it, she’d finally get some peace. Once Casey was focused back on football, and his applications were all finished, she’d be free to be with you again. She was counting down the days.”

Omar looks over at Ian.

“Did you know?” he asks, voice cold. Ian shakes his head.

“Omar, I had no idea, I thought—”

“Why did you give Casey the bracelet?” Emma asks, before Ian can finish his excuse. His thoughts are racing, heartbeat pounding in his ears. He can’t focus, can’t come up with a lie. Omar starts to chuckle. The sound draws a shiver down Ian’s spine. Ian can’t look at him.

“It was a lie,” Omar says. “You gave the bracelet to Casey so I thought they were fooling around. You pulled those photos to trick me.”

Ian can’t get out. There’s nothing to do but confess.

A sick thrill runs through him. *I won*, he reminds himself. Everything he planned

led to the ultimate goal— getting Casey and Omar out of his way. The two months he’s spent calculating every decision, creating each lie, and keeping them all in the dark was worth it. No one else would have ever been able to do what he’s done. He lets himself feel pride for a moment.

Let them hear what I’ve done, he thinks, spiteful, *let them see how stupid they are*.

“And you fell for it all,” Ian spits. Emma’s eyes widen in shock.

She was holding out hope, Ian realizes. She was hoping she was wrong. Ian still had her, for a moment.

He wants to lash out, punch a hole through the drywall, feel the bones break. Something that makes this feel real.

“Ian, what did you do?” Emma asks, horror in her voice. Her hands are shaking by her side. Her face is pale, and black streaks of mascara have streaked further down her cheeks.

She’s a mess, Ian thinks. It makes it easier for him to continue.

“All I needed was an editing position. I would have been fine working under you, Omar, but then you had to fucking pick Casey for your assistant. After the years I spent working for the View. And you threw it in my face. So it was my turn,” Ian says, feeling the pressure in his chest ease with each word. Omar’s face falls, crumbles into tears again.

“Was any of it true?” Omar asks, eyes falling back onto Delaney’s body, dark purple bruising by her throat. Ian didn’t notice that before. They’re in the shape of hands, fingers long and thick. “The article, the pictures? Did you believe any of it?”

“I forged the article,” Ian says, leaning back against the wall. His stance is casual, although his legs are shaking and there’s another roll of nausea in his stomach. “Rob pulled only the pictures I asked him to, out of thousands. He thought he’d be with Delaney once you and Casey were out of the picture, the idiot.” Ian can’t stop now, even if he wanted to.

“I wrote the plagiarism rumor for the anonymous account. A few others, too. I didn’t know if she was cheating or not, but I figured she would have been better off.”

Omar isn’t crying anymore, just staring down at Delaney’s body. White-hot anger flares through Ian at being ignored.

“I trusted you, and you led me to this,” Omar says, quietly.

“No, Omar, I did not. I forced the future, lied about Casey risking the paper before he could actually ruin it, and pulled you and Delaney apart before she would leave you for another. It was all inevitable! But you were the one who took it too far. There’s blood on your hands, not mine,” Ian says, and he knows he’s shouting, but he can’t let Omar pin this on him.

“Ian, don’t act like you’re innocent in all of this,” Emma spits, glaring at him.

“Shut up, Emma,” he snaps.

“He’s right,” Omar says, walking over to the bed. He pulls Delaney’s hand in his, and runs his thumb along the back of her knuckles. Ian’s eyebrows shoot up at the admission. He was ready for a fight.

“Ian led me here, but I took it too far. I became the monster everyone expected me to be. I’m sorry, Delaney,” he whispers, leaning down to press a kiss to her forehead. A

tear falls on her face and drips down her cheek, as if it were her own.

Ian glances away at the intimacy. It makes his skin itch.

Emma's scream jerks his attention back.

Omar has a knife in his hand, and Ian doesn't know where it came from, but there's blood on the blade. His eyes shoot up to Omar's face. His eyes are wide, and there's blood coming out of his mouth.

He's choking on it.

It takes a moment for Ian to piece it all together, thoughts moving through a shocked haze— Omar slit his own throat.

Emma moves towards him before Omar falls to the ground, still struggling to breath past the blood. She reaches for his neck, trying to block the blood flow with her hands, trying to keep him alive.

Ian can't move. He can only watch as her hands become covered in blood, how Omar's breathing starts to slow until it stops, until the only sound left in the room is Emma's heavy breathing and quiet sobs.

Then, there are sirens in the distance.

They jar him, pulling him back to face the damage he has wrought. Emma stops trying to save Omar, sits back on her haunches, and looks up at Ian. She's exhausted. He recognizes the look in her eyes, the resignation. There's a smudge of blood on her cheek. He steps towards her to wipe it off with his thumb, but she turns her head away.

Ian's plan is complete. He's next in line to take over the editing responsibilities of the paper, and the editor in chief is dead, the assistant in the hospital. *He wins*, he repeats

in his head.

It feels so empty.

“What did you do to Casey?” Emma asks quietly.

“What?” Ian asks, distracting by the sounds of sirens growing closer. They put him on edge, although he has not committed a crime. Not with his hands, at least.

“Omar said your name when I told him about Casey. What did you do?” Emma asks again, words harsh.

Ian sighs. There’s no reason to go back to secrets now.

“Rob was just supposed to hit him in the knee a few times, get him out of football season. But he lost it, said it was too personal, so he hit him with the car instead,” Ian says, words emotionless, like reading the narration for a script. “I didn’t do anything.”

Emma laughs, but Ian hardly hears it over the sirens. He can see the lights out her window, the ambulance pulled up in front of her house.

They should have called the morgue.

Emma rises from the ground and faces Ian.

“How can you say that? This is all your fault, how could you just...” she trails off, looking around the room. Ian can’t tear his eyes away from her hands, covered in blood. The ring on her finger, the one he gave her, is dulled by crimson.

“Your mother warned me about you. She told me to be careful, that you could—” Ian’s hand shoots out before his thoughts register the motion, striking Emma hard across the face. His palm grows warm.

Everything stills for a moment.

The sirens are deafening. Emma turns back to face him, pink handprint starting to appear on the smooth skin of her cheek. He likes seeing his mark on her skin, a sick sense of satisfaction in his heart. Emma doesn't raise her hand to her face, doesn't soothe the skin with her touch, doesn't do anything but stare, eyes cold and distant, at Ian.

The ice has broken, Ian realizes. He's submerged. No one is going to pull him out.

There's footsteps bounding up the stairs, and Ian doesn't know how they knew to come, but they're here. His heart should be racing, but it's calm, a steady beat keeping the rhythm of the moment.

"Congratulations, Ian. You've won. Is it worth the blood on your hands?" Emma asks, and her voice has never sounded so cold.

Ian's heart sinks.

"Emma, we could have had it all, if you had just kept your mouth shut," he starts, trying to stay calm, but losing it when he realizes just how close they were. It would have been perfect, if everyone had just played their role.

But Rob and Omar went off-script.

And now people are dead.

Ian steps forward, gripping Emma's face in his hands. A pit falls in his stomach when he realizes this is likely the last time he'll touch her. "If you had just stayed quiet, Omar would have gone to jail, and we'd be home free. I'd get the position, and get into college, and we'd leave this shit town and all its people behind. We'd take on the world, baby. But you had to open your stupid fucking mouth—"

He's squeezing her face in his hands. He wonders if this is what Omar felt, this

urge to hurt, to kill.

“Freeze!” Ian hears behind him, but he can’t let her go. Emma’s staring, eyes wide, but there’s no warmth in her gaze. It’s all cold, so cold. Ian lets it wash over him, until there’s nothing but ice sinking into his skin, through his veins. “Show us your hands!”

“No, Ian,” Emma says, pulling his hands off of her face. Blood colors his skin. It makes his stomach roll. Emma puts her hands up, fingers shaking. “Don’t shoot, officer,” she calls with a quivering voice.

The rest of it all passes in a blur. Ian puts his hands up, mirroring Emma, eyes running over her face and copying it all to memory. The ice in her eyes bites. Ian’s hands are pulled behind his back, clamped into handcuffs. The metal is cool, he notices, a distant sensation.

Emma is talking, he realizes, but he can’t hear what she’s saying. He’s watching her mouth move, watching her hands gesture to the bodies around her, then point to him, but Ian can only hear the rush of blood in his head. He forces himself to focus, to listen to what’s happening. They don’t put Emma in handcuffs.

“Is Casey okay, please tell me Casey is okay,” he hears Emma asking, voice wavering.

“He’s stable, last we heard. He’ll be all right,” the officer says, and Emma lets out a long exhale. *Of course he is*, Ian thinks. *Cockroaches are so hard to kill.*

Emma looks Ian in the eyes. “Good,” she says, staring him down. “Our paper needs a new editor.” It’s the last thing she says to him.

Ian watches her back as he's led out of the room, metal of the cuffs digging into the skin of his wrists. He says nothing, just silently follows the cue to slide into the police car. Ian leans his head against the back of the seat, and the tension seeps from his limbs.

He was so close, he thinks, disappointment settling in his chest. He was so close to having it all.

The car pulls away quickly, and Ian watches the houses pass by. He's seen them all before, a million times, but he can't tear his eyes away from it all. The sky is too blue to look elsewhere. The trees are starting to turn color, little flecks of yellow and orange amidst the green. Ian closes his eyes as the sunlight streams through the window, washing over his face. It doesn't alleviate the chill in his bones.

Ian happens to open his eyes as they pass the school. There's a crowd of people huddled in the parking lot, and he leans toward the window to get a better look. They're a blur of white and green, Rams' colors, and Ian starts to make out faces as the car stops at a light. It takes a moment for him to realize the crowd is composed of football players, cheerleaders, and the band, still clutching their instruments.

They gathered for Casey, he knows. News travels so fast.

Faintly, he can hear them chanting through the window, a rumble of sound.

It almost sounds like a heartbeat.

Conclusion

While *Othello* is considered one of William Shakespeare's popular plays, I discovered that there have been few modernized revisions of it in comparison to other Shakespeare plays, like *Romeo and Juliet* or *Hamlet*. *Othello* tackles heavy themes such as racism and what we would now consider toxic masculinity, and takes a progressive stance for a play written in the early 1600s. Othello himself is never treated as the antagonist of the play, and while he does commit the terrible crime of murdering Desdemona, the play consistently places the blame on Iago and his manipulation of Othello. Othello is seen as a victim of Iago, and a man whose insecurities regarding his race in a majority-white society turns him into an easy target for manipulation and betrayal.

Shakespeare's *Othello* shows how racism and the attack on one's identity can change a person and lead to tragedy. Toxic masculinity is rooted in Othello and Iago's attitudes towards women who may be unfaithful; they see these actions as a direct attack on their masculinity rather than a reflection of the relationship. While Desdemona is not cheating on Othello, Iago uses infidelity as the ultimate insult to Othello's masculinity and social power, and encourages him to punish Desdemona for her actions. Iago uses his position as a trusted person in Othello's inner circle to create distrust in Othello's relationship, all the while undermining his earned position in society by using his race as

a method to get revenge.

I chose to adapt *Othello* for several reasons, the first being I did not often see reimagined adaptations of *Othello* compared to other Shakespeare plays. I had written a very brief outline of *Othello* as a Southern political drama for my Freshman Honors Colloquium several years ago, and wanted to return to that project at some point to further expand on it. The project shifted to becoming a young adult novel due to the themes in the original correlating well with issues that young adults face, such as reputation, racism, and ambition.

In the original play, Othello is commonly insulted behind his back for his race, and his relationship with Desdemona is scandalous due to his background as a Moor. Othello is aware of his unique position in Venice, and his internalized racism allows Iago to manipulate him and turn him into the brute that Venetian society expected him to be. Iago feeds into Othello's insecurity at being the only black man in a position of power to twist his relationship to Desdemona into being one based on lies rather than love.

To prepare for this novel, I first studied the original play and the intricate relationships and motivations each character has. I read *Othello: Texts and Contexts*, written by William Shakespeare and edited by Kim F. Hall, and referred to several of the critical chapters for reference. I also watched the 2001 film *O*, directed by Tim Blake Nelson, as a reference for how to adapt *Othello* into a high school setting. In the film, Odin is the high school basketball star that receives the MVP award over Hugo. To familiarize myself with young adult novels after not having read them for several years, I read *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier. This book also served as an excellent

reference in terms of the style and format of a young adult novel. Other books I referred to during the writing process are listed on my Works Cited page.

Racism is prevalent in American society, although it has morphed in how it is expressed. Internalized racism is still common in a society that inherently places those who are not white in a “lesser” social category, and media commonly contributes to this problem. There is a clear prioritization of white characters and stories in all forms of media, causing black children to feel excluded from national conversations. I explored this subject through the character of Omar, the only African American student in his high school, and one who struggles with connecting with his peers due to their racism. He is given a position of power as the editor in chief of the school newspaper, a role coveted by his ambitious classmate, Ian.

I chose to use Ian, my modern Iago, as the main character for several reasons. First, I find exploring the antagonist’s point of view interesting because it provides a different perspective on the events of the story. Iago also has a very heavy presence in the original play, and one could make the argument that he is the true main character of *Othello*. Iago is also known for having mysterious motives for his actions; there are several motivations suggested throughout the novel for why he goes after Othello and Desdemona, although it is never fully discussed. I wanted to give Ian a clear goal throughout the novel, and show how the actions he takes in his ambition leads to several of his classmates and himself to ruin.

The biggest challenge in adapting *Othello* into a modern young adult novel was keeping the choices made and the reactions realistic. When reading a Shakespearean play,

one expects characters to murder one another over personal slights. It is a little more complicated to create these situations in a modern time period, especially in regard to young adults. However, I knew I wanted to retain the major deaths of Othello and Desdemona, for they are integral to the conclusion of the play. I changed the fates of Rob (Roderigo) and Emma (Emilia), keeping both characters alive to both keep Casey (Cassio) as an innocent victim to Ian's schemes as well as give Emma a larger role in the story.

I also wanted to create a stronger female presence in the novel, especially in the character of Emma. In the original play, Iago is very cruel to Emilia unless she is doing something for him. I changed their relationship to one that Ian is incredibly invested in, and made Emma a large motivator for his actions. However, I had Ian show abusive tendencies he observed from his father to retain some of the original character, but I chose to give a reason as to why he lashes out with violence. The relationship between Ian and his mother is one that I created for my novel to add depth to Ian's background and provide another female voice in his life. In further revisions, I hope to explore this relationship more as well as Ian's mother's connection to Emma, which is alluded in the last chapter of the novel.

I knew that I had to toe the line between making Ian a sympathetic enough character for the reader to be invested in his mission, but without presenting his actions as acceptable. I wanted to establish roots for some of his traits, like how his abusive behavior and his racial bias has been learned through his father's actions. I also wanted to add more to his need for the assistant editor position beside his own pride, and made the

position the pivotal factor to his acceptance to college and the continuation of his relationship with Emma. This fear of rejection from colleges and the uncertainty of the future is one that every young adult experiences, and works well to create a sympathetic journey for Ian.

In writing from Ian's perspective, I also got to explore what he felt beyond what he showed to others. I was especially excited to do this in the final chapters of the novel, where Ian's plan comes to fruition in a different way than he expected. I chose to have Ian's plans, while violent, not include murder, because I think most high school students would immediately dismiss anyone who suggested murdering their classmate. However, these things do happen, and I felt having them occur in a spur-of-the-moment decision was more realistic than plotted murders. This also allowed me to have Ian realize the full impact of his ambition, and have him face the damage he inflicted on his friends. While he does not fully express remorse, Ian witnesses the true consequences of his actions, and will be punished for them. I wanted the ending to be similar to the original, with Iago carted off by police, but I also wanted a stronger emotional reaction to Ian's downfall.

In the original outline for this novel, I wanted to include both Omar and Ian's point of views, and follow the parallels between their characters as well as explore the true impact of Omar facing attacks on his identity by his peers. However, I felt that I would have had to conduct much more research into Omar's experience as a young black man to truly tell his side properly than time provided. I chose to focus on Ian rather than write an uninformed perspective that does not do the character justice. Through Ian, I explored the pressure faced by young adults, placed on them by both their parents and

themselves. This pressure, as well as ambition and the idea of escaping an unsatisfying home life, is something many students, regardless of race, can identify with.

Ultimately, I wanted to explore a different perspective of such a notable story, and apply the themes Shakespeare explores in the Elizabethan Era to the modern high school environment. Using *Othello* as a starting point, I was able to take a classic story and reinvent it as my own. This is my first novel, and this process allowed me to push my boundaries in terms of telling a story longer than twenty pages. I discovered the importance of reasonable deadlines, and learned that the most vital advice for writing a novel is “to just keep writing.”

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