

Delude

by TheDeepEnd

Casey just wanted to have a normal life. She would only be so lucky. She despises school, especially after she meets Evan Fynn. In seconds, he's undone everything she's worked hard to maintain; he's taken everyone from her, filled their minds with lies to drive them away. She is desperate to find out why, even if the truth is more terrifying than she expected.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 17

Casey just wanted to have a normal life. She would only be so lucky. She despises school, especially after she meets Evan Fynn. In seconds, he's undone everything she's worked hard to maintain; he's taken everyone from her, filled their minds with lies to drive them away. She is desperate to find out why, even if the truth is more terrifying than she expected.

I stared at the ceiling, blinking into the darkness, and rolled over. The numbers on the digital clock on my bedside table were blurry; I figured it was well after midnight anyway. I groaned and bit my lip, trying to ease myself back to sleep.

If I didn't sleep now, I wouldn't be getting up later when I needed to. Summer was over and that meant back to school. The thought made me shudder in disgust.

It wasn't that I hated school. Well, that's not true. I did. I loathed having to wake at the crack of dawn, get dressed blindly, and barely have anything to eat before I went out into the cold air.

What I forgot to mention is that I'm too good to take the bus. Who likes to sit in a small ass seat with some fat kid? I'd likely suffocate before I got to school anyway; no one at Grandview would notice.

I glanced at the clock again.

6:15AM.

I sighed. I had to get up soon. I stared over at the large window in my room, the curtain closed tightly so no light could get in. I listened closely for my mother's footsteps.

My parents had taken to telling me that I could get up on my own. After all, I was seventeen now. I don't really know why they thought I should still be treated like a baby.

They'd always encouraged me to do things for myself because, as they so eloquently put it, they weren't going to be around forever. It was absurd, stupid, and preposterous.

I shivered as I slipped out of bed and the cold slithered from my feet all the way up to my shoulders. I started to dress mechanically; white blouse with a striped vest and a pair of jeans and some crappy yet comfortable sneakers.

I walked into the bathroom and flipped on the light. I turned on the sink, splashed my face with cold water, and stared at my reflection; my grey eyes were shiny, and my

brown hair was tangled with knots. I ran a hand through the front, sighing when I got stuck.

After I fixed my hair the way I liked it, I turned off the light and left my room. My nose twitched as I smelled something cooking when I came down the stairs from the second-floor landing.

My mom waved a spatula at me from the kitchen as I sat at the table. I yawned widely, and I heard her click her teeth together impatiently.

"Morning," I mumbled. "What's for breakfast?"

"Eggs," my mom said flatly. "Want some?"

I shook my head and yawned again.

"What time did you get to sleep?"

"Late," was all I said. I knew what she was getting at.

"You need to sleep decently on school nights," she said disapprovingly. "Casey, are you even listening to me?"

With only two hours of sleep, my mind had begun to shut down, and as my mother spoke shrilly to me, I jumped.

"I'm listening," I said.

As if on cue, my cell phone rang, filling the room with a heavy guitar solo that effectively startled my mother so much that she dropped the pan she was holding. She scowled at me.

"I hate that thing." She didn't understand phones like that.

"It's just a text," I muttered, flipping open my phone.

Your mom looks pissed, C. Let's get going.

"My ride's here," I said, standing. "See you later."

My mother just waved an empty eggshell at me as I slid out the back door.

Meeting

Chapter 2 of 17

I gripped his arm and he lowered his head to stare at me. I was surprised as I led him to the nurse's office that there was no hostility in his voice as he spoke.

I didn't look back at the house as I approached the red Mustang that was waiting for me in my driveway. I stared in awe as I opened the door and slid inside, grinning.

"Nice fucking car," I said, nodding in approval.

Jade McCoy, my best friend of three years, leaned over to pet the dashboard, her blue eyes glistening with joy.

"I know, right?" She smiled broadly. "It was my birthday present from my dad."

"Your dad bought this for you?" I was stunned. Jade's father barely sent her birthday cards since her parents split.

She nodded vigorously.

"What did he want?"

Jade glanced over at me as she pulled into the road. She shrugged. "I don't know. He and my mother haven't spoken in almost two years."

I didn't say anything as we hit a red light on Ridge Avenue. The car jerked to a halt as Jade slammed on the brake.

"What was up your mom's ass?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Doesn't she ever get laid anymore?" Jade was nothing if not outspoken.

"Ugh!" I groaned as we neared the school. When she parked and we got out, I made sure to slam the door extra hard. This caused her to glare at me.

"What the hell was that for?"

"You can't just say shit like that about my mom."

Jade just shrugged and headed toward the school. I rolled my eyes and followed her, knowing she'd be fine later. She liked being able to find ways to blow off steam.

Before I headed to homeroom, I stopped at my locker. As I swung it open, it stopped halfway and I heard a moan from behind it.

'Shit!' I hissed and moved the door slowly. "Fuck, I didn't even see you."

The boy I hit stood with his hand on his nose, with blood sliding down the cracks of his hand. He looked as surprised as I did, his green eyes wide and watery. He sucked

in a shaky breath and extended his free hand, and then he mumbled something.

“Sorry.” I raised an eyebrow at him. “I didn’t catch that.”

He blinked at me, sniffed, and winced. He tilted his head back and talked to the ceiling.

“My name is Evan.” His words sounded strange with his broken nose. “Thank you for hitting me with your locker. It’s a nice first day welcome.”

“I should get you to the nurse.” I felt bad. I didn’t mean to hit him. “It’s this way.” I touched his shoulder and he flinched. “Sorry.”

“S’ok,” he mumbled. “I just didn’t know you were going to touch me.”

I gripped his arm and he lowered his head to stare at me. I was surprised as I led him to the nurse’s office that there was no hostility in his voice as he spoke.

“What’s your name?”

“Casey,” I said as we walked passed a group of students. “It’s over here.” I pointed to the sign and dropped his arm.

He frowned at me. “Well, thanks. I hope I’ll see you around.”

I sighed when he vanished and shut the door behind him. I looked around to see the hallway empty, knowing I’d already missed part of my first class. I cursed and headed for the library.

I took my usual seat in the back by one of the bookshelves. I didn’t like sports, so I considered changing my spot. Maybe the Psychology section? Right, then people would openly talk about me instead of behind my back.

I liked being away from people. I liked to observe them when they didn’t see me doing it. It was better than trying to make friends with people who didn’t want me in their groups.

I shook my head. I wanted to write something but didn’t have a notebook or a pen. Maybe I could write on the desk and the librarian would see it as being creative.

I moved the chair back and stood, with the intention of going to ask for paper and a pen, when I was stopped by a chilling feeling; I felt like someone was watching me.

I scanned the library and found nothing. The feeling still did not subside as I walked to the front and asked for a notebook. When I received it, I turned to go back to the table.

I decided to move away from the sports section and go sit on one of the chairs on the other side of the room. I pulled my legs underneath me and opened to the first blank page.

Unseen

Chapter 3 of 17

“That’s nice.” I couldn’t help the not-so-nice tone that crept into my voice. I turned my head away from him and focused on what the teacher was saying.

After the library, I headed to my next class, hoping I wouldn’t be late for that one. I had Psychology and I was excited for it. I had always been interested in that subject, even when I was younger.

My mom had taken me to Borders one day when I was twelve, and I had managed to get lost on the second level. While I was wandering past the bookshelves, I was reading the signs of the sections.

I stopped at the Psychology section and walked down the aisle, looking at the books. I wasn’t really sure what the subject entailed until I saw the spine of one of the covers: the science of the mind or of mental states and processes.

When my mom found me, clearly furious that I left her side, I showed her the book and she stared at me.

“You won’t need to know that crap,” she told me. I opened my mouth to protest but she glared at me. “It’s all nonsense, let’s go.” Her voice commanded that I follow.

Now, as I stepped into the classroom, my mother’s words ran loud in my ears. I wonder if her mother ever told her anything she was interested in was crap or pretty much useless. I didn’t think so.

I frowned as my eyes locked with the boy I had hit with my locker; he sat in the back with his head tilted to the side as he spotted me. He smiled slightly, wincing as the action sent a sharp pain through his semi-healed nose.

As I slid into the only other empty seat next to him, he put his hands behind his head and nodded briefly at me.

“How are you feeling?” I asked as I took out my notebook.

“Well, it’s not every day I get my nose broken by a female.” He laughed, seeming to find the situation funny. When I didn’t make a noise, he looked at me.

“I feel bad,” I murmured.

“Do you feel bad enough to take me out as an apology?” He grinned and brushed a hand through his choppy brown hair.

I considered this for a moment and nodded. “Not that bad.” I watched his face fall and I frowned. “I’m just not—”

“Hey, it’s cool.” He smiled thinly, his eyes no longer on me. “I have someone else in mind to go out with anyway.”

Ouch.

"That's nice." I couldn't help the not-so-nice tone that crept into my voice. I turned my head away from him and focused on what the teacher was saying.

"She's really nice," he muttered beside me. "She showed me her car – a red Mustang."

I nearly dropped my pen when he said the last part. I stared at him, my eyes wide, and then I smiled.

"You're going to go out with Jade?"

"How do you know her?" He seemed annoyed that I had said what I was thinking.

"She's my best friend," I murmured.

"Well then," he mumbled, glancing at me. "Are you telling me that I can't take her out if she wants to go?"

"She wouldn't want to go," I said automatically.

Yes, now he looked annoyed. His green eyes narrowed as he said, "What makes you think she'll say no to me?"

"For one," I bit out, "you're horribly conceited. Two, Jade isn't dating anyone at the moment. Three, she'll probably laugh in your face when you get the courage to ask."

Evan looked like he was going to throw his notebook at me, or worse, he would start crying like a baby. I didn't say anything as I heard Mr. Avery clear his throat agitatedly.

I felt a pang of guilt tug at me halfway through the class. I had lost what was being talked about because all my mind could focus on was that stupid, rejected boy next to me.

I rolled my eyes, ripped a piece of paper out of my notebook, and scribbled something on it. I breathed out a long sigh as I passed it to him.

Are you okay? You look like you're going to cry.

He stared at me, his lip curling slightly.

You shouldn't tell me lies about your friend, you know.

I blinked.

What lie?

He smirked at me.

If you wanted to ask me out, you could have. You didn't have to invent that story to keep me from being interested in someone else.

"What?" I hissed, as I read the answer. "What the hell are you talking about?" I said to him, my voice a little louder than I intended.

Everyone turned in their seats to look at me.

"Miss Sullivan—"

Fuck.

"Yes sir?" I mumbled, looking into Mr. Avery's angry face.

"If you and Mr. Fynn have something to sort out, then by all means talk outside. We'll wait." He was unpleasant. "Otherwise I suggest you sit down."

I hadn't realized I was standing. I sat down and picked up my pen; it trembled in my fingers. I was even more surprised when that sudden creepy feeling emerged again.

Every single head in the class was facing the front of the room, so why did I still feel as though I were being stared at by unseen eyes?

Betrayal

Chapter 4 of 17

"You know," Jade's voice was thoughtful, "I never really noticed how bad you were before."

I could hear the words in my head as if he had spoken them to me. Those words made me angry, made me want to hit something. I wasn't that type of person, though.

As I walked down the hall after class, I saw Jade standing by a row of lockers. She looked annoyed about something, her blue eyes dark as I approached her.

"What's wrong?"

"Evan told me what you did." Her voice was bitter.

"What did I do?" I tried to sound surprised. He had gotten to her fast with whatever lie he had invented in his own head.

"He said he asked you out and you freaked."

I stared at her. "You believe that?"

"You have been weird lately."

Wow, thanks.

"What else did he say?"

"He said you made up this shit about me, that you didn't want anyone else liking him." She was hurt.

I frowned. "He assumed I liked him and I don't. He thought I made all that stuff up to—"

"Did you hit him?"

"I did but—"

Jade's eyes narrowed and she stepped back from me. "I don't know what your problem is recently but I think you need to talk to someone. Why the fuck would you hit anyone?"

"I hit him with my locker," I said, glaring. "It was an accident."

"He said you punched him." She dropped all of her books and stared at me. "You have enough anger in you so I—"

"You're kidding, right?" I could feel something nasty coil around my stomach and squeeze. I was not a violent person by any means.

"Maybe you need to talk to someone about your issues." Jade tried again, thinking I hadn't heard her the first time.

"I don't have issues." I scowled at her. I suddenly knew what the feeling was.

Jade's mouth twisted. "You need to relax. Want me to take you to the nurse?"

"I'm not injured."

"You should see if she can give you something to ease whatever you're feeling."

I frowned. "I'm not feeling anything but pissed."

"You know," Jade's voice was thoughtful, "I never really noticed how bad you were before."

"What are you talking about?" I felt the tears building behind my eyes, stinging. "You've known me for three years! I'm not an angry person, Jade!"

The disbelieving look in her eyes terrified me.

"I have to go," she said hurriedly. "Evan's waiting for me."

I had three classes left. Three classes I didn't feel like going to. So I walked down the hall while people bumped into me, hissing different things as they passed. Soon I ended up outside the school, and I collapsed into a heap on the grass.

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I saw was students filing out of the front doors. The buses waited by the curb, the drivers probably anxious to get home.

I watched Jade step out with Evan, her arm twisted around his as they walked toward the back lot. I wanted to call out to her, but people were already staring at me since I'd been sleeping on the ground.

I picked myself off and dusted the dirt from my clothes, and then I began to walk away from everyone. I'd lost my ride home and I definitely was not taking the bus.

Just as I stepped off the curb in between two buses, a car screeched to a halt, almost running me down. I stared at the driver and recognized him as my Psychology teacher. I waved and kept walking. I glanced around and found that there was no one to even walk with on the way home.

I left the school and walked down the sidewalk toward the woods. It was sort of a safe haven for me when things went wrong, and right now I needed it. No one would know I was there and that made me feel better.

I found the trail easily, as it wasn't too far from Grandview, and I steadied myself as I walked down the path, looking behind me to see the trees swallow me whole. Comfort settled in me and I grinned, then sat on a lonely looking stump and pulled out a cigarette.

"Fuck," I murmured as I rummaged through my bag.

"Need a light?" a voice asked.

I glanced up into a pair of stormy-colored eyes.

Open

Chapter 5 of 17

His eyes narrowed unexpectedly and I frowned, unsure if I had done something. "You should stay close to the road," he informed me. Then he stuck his hand out.

The sunlight had come into the woods, then, blinding me and obscuring the view of the guy who had spoken. I slid my hand across my forehead to shield the beams and got a better look.

His hair was a faded-black and choppy, his eyes almost the same color as mine, though a little darker. His lips turned upward, his snake-bites gleaming.

"Did I startle you?" he asked. He was holding a lighter. "I'm sorry if I did. I just didn't expect anyone else to be here."

"Yes," I said. "I mean, yes, I need a light. I forgot mine."

He lit my cigarette and sat down beside me. It was a very quiet few minutes before he spoke again.

“You go to Grandview?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Are you new?”

“I go to Fairfax,” he said softly. “But I wanted to transfer to your school.”

“How come you didn’t?”

“My parents thought I’d get into trouble.” He laughed. “I guess maybe they’d be right. I was arrested before going back to school.”

“For what?” I was annoyed that I was prying into this stranger’s life, and at the same time, comforted that he was letting me in.

“Someone died two days before I went back to Fairfax,” he said, glancing at me. “The cops saw me coming from the same direction and thought I did it. I had no idea the body was there until they caught me.”

“That’s awful,” I said, shaking my head. “But your parents backed you up, right? I mean that’s why you’re not in jail.”

“My folks weren’t around when this happened, they were on vacation and refused to come back and help me. My dad said I was old enough to deal with this situation myself.”

“What about your mom?” My heart thundered in my chest as I listened. It was like I was watching a movie and it was just reaching the climax. I was anxious to hear the rest.

“My mom and I have a strained relationship.” He smiled tenderly and extended his hand to me. “You know about most of my life, but not my name.”

I stared at his hand, at the scars going across his knuckle, and I frowned. I shook it softly.

“I’m Nixon,” he said, grinning.

“Casey,” I muttered, trying not to look too distracted by his hand. Curiosity tugged at my mind, compelling me to ask the question. I took a deep breath and opened my mouth.

“It’s nothing,” he said, his grey eyes sliding to the ground. He picked up a leaf and turned it over in his hand. “It was a long time ago. Don’t worry.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“You didn’t,” he reminded me. He didn’t look at my face, just pushed some hair from his eyes. “But I know people. They can’t help themselves.”

I looked at him; he had his head tilted up toward the sky, hair falling back, grey eyes calm. Almost as soon as he blinked, I felt a raindrop fall from the sky, landing on my shoulder.

“Damn,” I heard him hiss. “I’ve got to go.” He stood and wiped the dirt from his jeans as he stared at me. “Can I see you again?”

The words were caught in my throat. I nodded briefly.

Nixon grinned at me, his eyes lighting up. “Same spot tomorrow?”

“I don’t go too far into the woods,” I said.

His eyes narrowed unexpectedly and I frowned, unsure if I had done something. “You should stay close to the road,” he informed me. Then he stuck his hand out.

For a moment I was confused. Did he want to shake my hand or hug me? Then, embarrassed, I looked down beside me at the lighter. I hadn’t realized he even put it there.

“Here.” I handed it to him.

“Thank you,” he said politely, smiling.

Then, without me hearing a sound, he was gone.

Distrust

Chapter 6 of 17

I woke with a start and winced, tasting blood in my mouth. I grabbed an empty cup on the table next to the couch and spat into it. I frowned as I watched the saliva and blood mix.

I left the woods with a strange feeling in my stomach. There was no possible way I liked someone I didn’t even know. Plus, for all I knew, he could be just as bad as Evan.

When I reached my house, I found it vacant. I slipped into the quiet and went into the living room. I plopped down on the couch and turned on the TV, leaning back against the arm rest. I let my bag fall to the ground, spilling everything in it, and then I closed my eyes.

I was in the woods, walking aimlessly. Then I saw something between two of the trees, a figure forming. They stepped out into the sunlight, grey eyes worried.

“You can’t trust him,” Nixon said, his hand reaching to touch my shoulder. “It’s not safe, Casey.”

“Who?” I could hear my voice tremble.

“I can’t tell you,” he said, frowning. “You just need to be cautious.”

I felt my chest tighten with anxiety, and I wanted to shout at him, but I held myself back.

"What did you want to say?" he mumbled.

"Who is it?" I tried again.

But he was gone.

I woke with a start and winced, tasting blood in my mouth. I grabbed an empty cup on the table next to the couch and spat into it. I frowned as I watched the saliva and blood mix.

I had bit my lip far too hard.

"Damnit," I hissed, sitting up and grabbing a napkin from the table. I wiped my mouth and cringed.

As I went up to my room, I made sure to put the bloody napkin in the garbage. My mother would probably think I got into a fight at school if she saw it.

I lay on my bed for hours until I knew I wouldn't get into trouble for cutting school. The door downstairs opened, and I heard my mom call out to me, asking if I was home. I stared at the ceiling as my bedroom door creaked open. It wasn't dark out yet, but the sun was going down, giving the room a haunting glow.

"Case, are you feeling all right?"

"Fine," I lied. My lip had stopped hurting. That was one less thing to worry about.

"I thought you'd be out with Jade." My mother's concern was genuine. "Didn't you say you would be?"

"No."

"But I thought—"

"Go away." I wanted her to leave. I wanted to sleep. I think she muttered something about me being a bitch when she slammed my door shut.

Falling asleep in my own bed was better than on the grass outside. I woke hours later from a dreamless slumber, the shadows gathering in around me. I glanced at the bedside clock.

I still had an hour left. I rolled over and pulled the covers over my head. I wanted my body heat and the warmth from the heavy blankets to engulf me so I could go back to sleep.

Maybe laying awake would clear my head. I thought about calling Jade before school and seeing if I could get a ride from her, but I doubted she would agree. Besides, she was probably devoting all her time to Evan.

I shuddered at the thought of him telling her lies about me. It was ridiculous that she would believe anything he said about me; she knew me better than that.

I thought about rolling over and suffocating myself with my pillow; then I wouldn't have to get up ever again. But I think my mom would notice if I didn't come downstairs at all.

Again, I stared at the ceiling. I just wanted time to speed up so I could get through the day. I suddenly felt a pang of excitement surge through me as I thought of what awaited me after today was done.

I could hear my mom banging pots, and pans in the kitchen and I cringed. I missed my dad's quiet way of doing things in the morning. Something coiled in the pit of my stomach, and I recognized it immediately; I felt guilty for not telling him that I loved him enough.

When he died, my life had been reduced to zombie-like movement, and sometimes, no movement at all. I used to sit in my room for weeks on end, never answering the phone or the door when someone came by. My mom had started drinking more and being bitchier than she was when he had been alive.

I kept that to myself. I would tell people that they had split up years ago and we barely saw him anymore. It was easier than the truth. That was the story I told Jade, anyway.

Visitor

Chapter 7 of 17

I didn't ask how he knew I was home, and I didn't bother to check the door as I slipped outside and followed him away from the house.

Telling Jade the truth was harder than it seemed. Not only was she my best friend but I knew that she would feel betrayed that I lied for so many years. Even though she had probably lied to me multiple times throughout our friendship, it didn't compare to what I had done.

I rolled over and glanced at the clock. I was supposed to be up in twenty minutes. I groaned, my body refusing to move. I heard my mother downstairs – it was the way things went around here, in the same order that it had been since my dad died.

The slamming of a pot jarred me from my catnap, and I yawned. I groaned before realizing I did have to get up. I shivered as my feet touched the cold floor of my bedroom.

Something slammed again from below and I recognized it at once; my mom had left for her therapist appointment and wouldn't be back until later in the day. I sighed with relief and started to make my way into the hall and down the stairs.

I told her that not everything needed to be solved with a trip to the shrink. I'm pretty sure she didn't appreciate that answer, as after she told me to shut my mouth if I knew what was good for me.

As I slipped into the dimly lit kitchen, I breathed in the lingering scent of pancakes. There was a plate with a note attached to it on the table.

Going to be late tonight – pancakes okay for breakfast?

I stared at the paper. Since when did she care what I ate? I glanced out the back door, hoping to see Jade's car in the driveway, even though I knew it wasn't going to happen.

Maybe staying home was easier than going to school and facing either of them. I wondered who he was telling lies to now. I didn't really have many friends to begin with. Maybe I'd be safe for a time, and he wouldn't ruin my reputation.

At my other school, people liked the idea of judging me better than getting to know me first. I was thankful when my mom had enough sense to move us from there. It was probably the best thing she had ever done for me.

I returned to my spot on the couch from the previous day with my plate of warm pancakes. I stuffed one in my mouth and turned on the TV. I yawned and curled up, feeling my eyes shut automatically.

Sometime later, a noise startled me so bad that I fell off the couch and slammed my arm on the coffee table. I winced as I sat up, turning just in time to see my half-eaten food land on the carpet.

There was some talk show on, the host discussing something I had clearly missed the first part of. I stood up and cringed as a pain shot through my leg, somehow from the fall.

I heard the sound again. It sounded like the trees were swiping against the side of the house. But as I focused on it, I knew within seconds what I was actually hearing.

Someone was knocking on the back door. I looked at the clock and noticed it was almost noon. I couldn't remember if anyone was supposed to come by. If they were, my mother never let me know.

I limped into the kitchen and gripped the doorknob, turning it slowly. I had an unpleasant feeling that I would find someone on the other side that I did not want to see.

I was surprised, however, to see Nixon standing on my porch. He had a cigarette in one hand and something in the other. He smiled at me when he held it out to me. "This is yours. You dropped it yesterday."

"How did you know?" I was staring at my ID, my grumpy face glaring back at me. "You left before I did."

"I forgot something, so I went back." He smirked and leaned against the door frame. "Are you sick?" When I shook my head, he reached out and grabbed my hand. "I have a surprise for you, then. Come on."

I didn't ask how he knew I was home, and I didn't bother to check the door as I slipped outside and followed him away from the house.

Suspicion

Chapter 8 of 17

He turned his eyes on me and grinned. "You would never believe me if I told you." He started to play with the string on his black hoodie nervously. "I think you need to sit down for this though."

I followed Nixon down the porch steps and watched as he leaned against a tree that stood in the middle of the yard; he glanced at me with his smoky eyes and held out another cigarette.

"Don't worry, I won't ask for any weird sexual favors in return."

I took the cigarette awkwardly, and as he lit it, took a long drag. I coughed and pulled it away from my face. "That's good to know, I guess. I don't need people thinking any less of me than they already do."

"What do they think of you?" He actually sounded concerned.

I hesitated before telling him what happened yesterday at school. I really didn't know what had compelled me to tell a complete stranger about the troubles going on with me when he probably had a lot of his own.

"He sounds like a real bastard," Nixon said when I finished speaking. "What are you going to do about it?"

"What can I do?" I muttered.

"Get even," he suggested.

"I don't know anything about him," I confessed. The cigarette trembled between my fingers. "I don't know what I did to him to make him hate me."

"You rejected him," Nixon said with a nod. "Guys can do a lot of fucked up things when that happens."

"So can girls," I pointed out.

"Right, but Evan seems to think that he can get any girl he wants. I think your saying no was a good thing, despite the circumstances."

"You don't know him, do you?" I put the cigarette to my lips.

"I've heard of him actually."

I nearly sucked it down as he spoke. The smoke slid away from my lips. I took a breath and tried to calm my lungs.

"Are you okay?" Nixon asked. I shuddered as he placed a hand on my back. "Sorry if I surprised you."

"I'm fine," I whispered, looking at him. I didn't mean to scare him like that. "How do you know him anyway? You said you didn't go to Grandview. Plus, he just started there."

"Is that right?" Nixon asked, scratching his chin lightly. He glanced up at the sun, then back at me. "Does everyone else think he's new as well?"

I blinked at him. "What do you mean think?"

"It's going to sound crazy," he explained, staring at me with a hard gaze. "I just know that you can't trust him."

The remnants of my nearly forgotten dream slid across my brain, then, at his words. I couldn't say anything that would make it sound sane. He would probably just think it was a coincidence anyway.

"Just tell me," I breathed, my voice shaking, betraying me.

Nixon frowned as he walked away from me, and continued up the steps back to the door. He looked back at me. "Aren't you coming?"

I followed automatically, my legs seeming to move on their own. A sudden sense of foreboding came over me as I went through the door. He stood by the couch, staring at the plate of fallen pancakes.

"I scared you," he guessed without looking at me. "I'm sorry for that. I didn't mean to."

I went to say that I hadn't minded, but shook my head. "What did you want to tell me?" I crossed my arms over my chest and stared at him.

He turned his eyes on me and grinned. "You would never believe me if I told you." He started to play with the string on his black hoodie nervously. "I think you need to sit down for this though."

I nodded and plopped on the couch. When he sat beside me, so close that our knees touched, my stomach fluttered. He looked like he was struggling with what he wanted to say. He took a breath, his words coming fast.

"Have you ever heard of a Sweeper?"

Composure

Chapter 9 of 17

He reached out, suddenly, and tapped my temple with his finger. Then he grinned. "Don't you remember your dream from the other night?"

I tried to compose my thoughts in order to speak. Instead, I stared at him with questioning eyes. He was watching me closely, his grey eyes narrowed slightly. He chewed one of his snake bites.

"Judging from your expression, I'd say not." Nixon frowned, his eyes focusing on something across the room.

"No," I responded, not liking the look on his face. "What is it?"

His lip turned up slightly, almost unsettling.

"Who," he corrected, his voice calm. "The Sweeper is a person, Casey."

I shuddered involuntarily at his words. "I don't understand."

He sighed, clearly frustrated that he had to explain this further. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Sweepers are humans with the ability to cast memories back, behind the more important things. They can manipulate the mind. Soon enough, though, the memories that have been pushed away, depending how strong the individual is, will vanish completely. I believe, but am not certain, that is what Evan is attempting to do to the people around you."

"Have you been watching some weird movies?"

"Maybe you should just see why I said not to trust him again."

"Again? But you never—"

He reached out, suddenly, and tapped my temple with his finger. Then he grinned. "Don't you remember your dream from the other night?"

I replayed his words in my head, trying to find some loophole, to make them not work. I gasped quietly, the realization slowly sinking in. It was a terrible feeling, being different, and now I really was.

"What are you?" I whispered. I wanted to run, but something compelled me to stay.

"Telepathic and Dreamer," he mumbled, like he was embarrassed by the fact. "I know how all of this sounds."

"Do you?" I hissed. "Because I'm pretty sure you don't."

"I was skeptical when I first heard it, too." He stared at me, his eyes cool. "I was going to call the police, just like I know you're thinking about doing. I don't need your expression to tell me that."

I wanted to wake myself up. Clearly, this was some horrible dream.

"It's not a nightmare," he assured me. "Do you understand what I'm telling you now?"

"You're crazy," I said, standing. He was up, too, his hands around my shoulders. I thought he was going to shake me.

"You're afraid you'll never get your friendship with Jade back, or your mother. You hate your math class, and you draw in the little margins of your notebook to pass the time. When you were younger, you got rejected by a boy you liked so you egged his house, only you accidentally broke a window."

I blinked.

"How am I doing so far?" He smirked.

"You're close," I whispered, my bottom lip trembling.

"Oh, and you think your father's death was your fault." He stared at me, frowning. "Is that good enough for you?"

I squeezed my eyes shut as the tears built behind them. "That was too close." My voice was small.

"It was necessary," he said softly. "I'm sorry."

I was aware of the ticking clock somewhere in the room. It thundered in my head and rattled through my body. I closed my eyes briefly, a shaky breath escaping me.

"I wish you knew what was coming," he said. "It's important that you know what's going to happen."

"I think you should go," I mumbled.

He stood up quietly, looking down at me. "Tell me you'll be careful."

I smiled. "I'll be careful."

He left without another word. I wondered if he'd be mad that I lied.

Dormant

Chapter 10 of 17

Only half of what he said weren't lies.

I must have fallen asleep again because when I woke it was dark out. I glanced around the living room and listened as the house groaned. I wondered if my mom had come home, saw me on the couch, and left without leaving me any food.

As I stood and stretched, I noticed something sitting on the corner of the coffee table. It hadn't been there when I had come home. Curiously, I leaned over and looked at it.

It was a lighter.

It was *his*.

Memories flashed across my brain at the sight of it and I shook my head. There was no way what Nixon said was the truth. He was just as crazy as Evan, spreading his lies to make me react.

Only half of what he said weren't lies.

I squeezed my eyes shut as if his words gave me a headache. I need to go see Jade, to tell her what I knew. Maybe she'd feel the same way, and we could go talk to someone.

Then I had a sudden thought: would anyone believe what I had to say? No. Everything I found out was so absurd, so unreal, that not a single person would be on my side for this.

When I turned to go into the kitchen, I was greeted by a familiar face, one that startled me so much that I stumbled back.

"Jesus Christ," I gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"Forgot my lighter," Nixon said, frowning. "Can I have it, please?"

"How did you even get in here?" I asked as I retrieved his lighter and handed it to him. "The door was locked."

"No it wasn't," Nixon replied. His fingers brushed mine for a fraction of a second before he pulled back. "You shouldn't sleep with the door open, someone might come in."

"I wasn't—but *you* came in."

"You didn't lock the door?" Nixon asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I did when *you* left," I said, shaking my head. "Maybe my mom left it open?"

Nixon stared at me. "Your mom didn't come home."

"How do you know?" I asked.

He frowned. "I waited outside."

I stared at him, my mouth working to form the words I wanted to say.

"I needed to see if I could trust you. I knew you lied to me when you said you would be careful. If you really want to find out more, then I will tell you what I know. If not,

then I'll leave and you'll never hear from me again."

"I need to know what's going on. I need to know if I'm in danger." I couldn't stop myself. I needed to know everything that was going to happen to me, to my mother, and Jade.

"Are you sure?" Nixon asked, stepping closer. Now he was close enough to smell. He watched my nose twitch and smirked.

I nodded and took a seat at the kitchen table.

"So, what, do I have to kill someone?" The question left my mouth before I could stop it. It frightened me, how calm my voice was.

"Not exactly," Nixon muttered as he sat down beside me. "It's a bit more complicated than that."

"What's more complicated than not killing someone?"

"You have to strip him of his powers." Nixon looked at me, studying my face. I think I looked confused because he laughed in an obvious sort of way and said, "I'm afraid I lost you."

I looked at him uncomfortably.

"You're the only one who can do it, Casey," he explained.

I felt my body tense. "What can I do? I don't have any powers."

The way he smiled at me made me shiver.

Explanation

Chapter 11 of 17

"You're lying," I hissed, tears sliding down my face. I felt sick. "You fucking bastard."

Nixon tugged a hand through his hair and shook his head. He watched my expression for a few more minutes, and then smiled thinly. When he reached over and touched a piece of my hair with his fingers, his hand brushing my cheek, I recoiled.

"Sorry," he said, drawing back. "It was loose."

I stared at him with a strange feeling in my stomach and frowned.

"Your hand is cold," I said.

He smiled and rubbed his hands together. I was less than surprised when he touched my face again. This time, however, he pulled me close. I was close enough to see that his pupils had dilated.

"You're scared," he muttered. "You think if you do what you want that it will complicate things."

"What do I want?" I asked, my voice shaky.

He did not answer. Instead, he pressed his lips against mine softly and I closed my eyes. Warmth spread through my body the instant he had done that, and my head felt light. His tongue nudged my lips apart, and I complied all too willingly. He tasted sweet. Far too sweet.

When he sat back and looked at me with his head tilted, I felt my face heat up. There was no use hiding anything now. He smirked and folded his hands in his lap.

"Now what?" he said.

I just stared at him, not understanding.

"I kissed you," he explained. "You seemed to enjoy it, unless you're trying to cover up that little emotion."

I nodded. "I haven't—"

"I know. Now that we've got that out of the way, there's something else you need to be aware of."

I leaned forward.

"There are more like Evan Fynn out there. I know of one – a girl – she possesses the same ability as him, plus another; she's a Sleeper."

"What is that?" At this point, I thought I could figure it out.

"Do I really need to tell you?" He sounded frustrated.

"I guess not," I mumbled.

He frowned at me. "You're not too quick on the uptake, are you?"

I felt something inside me quiver at his words. I stood up and stared at him, my eye narrowed. "You can't just spill all of this on me and expect me to understand. Even if this is true, it would still sound like bullshit to other people. If I told anyone, they'd think I was crazy and lock me up."

He blinked at me, and if it were possible, his eyes darkened more as he rose from the chair. He glared at me.

"You don't understand. You're too fucking scared to see what's right in front of you. If you don't want to do this, then you're probably going to die, along with the people you care about. I didn't think I was wasting my time. I thought you reached your potential by now."

"By now?" I asked, ignoring everything else he had said. "What the hell does that mean?"

Nixon looked at me, his eyes shone with disbelief. He looked as though he were thinking of what to say, how to say it.

"Just say it!" I shouted. I could feel the hot tears building behind my eyes. I knew what he was going to say. "You don't think I can do this, that I'm too stupid and won't survive."

"Actually," he started, "what I was going to say is this: that you're not human."

My face paled and I blinked. "Yes I am," I argued.

He shook his head. "No, you're not. What you are, I don't know, but I was sent to protect you. You've been alone for over one-hundred years, until now."

"You're lying," I hissed, tears sliding down my face. I felt sick. "You fucking bastard."

"Why would I lie to you after exposing myself?" He stared at me, his eyes warm. "I'm keeping you safe by telling you what you need to know."

"Telling me that proves you're crazy." I reached out and pressed my palms against his chest, intent on shoving him, but he stopped me by wrapping his hands around my wrists.

"Stop," he instructed.

My body complied and I sank back down into the chair behind me. I stared at him as he looked at me. When he crouched down and took hold of my face again, I did not resist.

"Come with me," he whispered. He took my hand and pulled me up.

With every piece of me vulnerable to him, I followed him out the door.

Nixon had taken me back to the trail near the school, and as we walked through the woods, the shadows from the now present moon seemed to jump out at us. I wondered where the time had gone.

"Sit," he commanded.

The ground below was cold as I knelt down, blinking up at him. I watched him pace, my tongue burning with questions again. I seemed to forget that I was angry. All I wanted now were answers.

As he joined me on the ground, I said, "Why did you bring me here?"

He smiled thinly. "Did you really think you came here of your own free will for years because *it comforted* you?"

"I guess you're going to explain that too," I said, staring into his face. I had the thought to lean over and kiss him again, but brushed it away. There were more important things than my hormones.

"You came here because this is where I felt safest."

"Of course it was." I expected that.

"I needed you to be completely at peace when I came here, and you were. How else do you explain feeling so calm around me?"

"You pose no threat," I said. "I was compelled to trust you."

"There it is!" he exclaimed, seeming excited. "That word. How many times have you felt compelled to do anything you wouldn't normally do?"

"Well none before I—"

His eyes lit up and he nodded. "You see, don't you? Finally! I knew you would."

My eyes widened.

"You've been controlling me? I asked.

"No, no." Nixon shook his head. "There's something else I'm able to do — I can manipulate emotions. I can make you feel how I want."

"So, you've been controlling me to feel trusting and obedient?"

"I wouldn't use the word controlling," he said. "I was able to access parts of you while you were sleeping. I helped loosen your distrust of me before we met. Do you understand?"

"What about my wanting to kiss you?" I asked. I stared at the ground as if expecting an answer from the still leaves that had fallen.

He reached out and touched my chin with his hand, startling me. When he lifted my head, his eyes gleamed as the moonlight slid across them. When he leaned over and kissed me, my breath caught in my chest. Something stirred inside me, and I found myself straddling him, my fingers in his hair.

"That's all you," he grunted, his lips firmly locked on my neck now. His tongue swept against my pulse, and it seemed to speed up. My head swam with images as he wrapped his arms around my waist.

"Is this dangerous?" I asked as he pulled away.

"No," he said. "This is good."

"My mom is going to be worried," I said suddenly. I went to stand but he grabbed my hand.

"How come?" he asked, tilting his head.

"It's late."

"Let me take care of that." He smiled and brought my mouth to his once more.

Exchange

Chapter 12 of 17

I watched his snake-bites move as he smirked. I shook my head and put my hand up. "Stop doing that!"

I kept my eyes on his face as we entered my house, only to find it empty. I watched the slow smile form on Nixon's lips as he looked at me. I rolled my eyes at him and went to the fridge, realizing I hadn't eaten and it was late.

"Your mom will be home soon," he assured me.

I looked back at him, started to ask how he knew that, but then just brushed the question away. There were most important things to worry about than his weird extra senses.

When I set a lot of food on the table, he examined it, and then looked at me.

"What?" I snapped.

He shook his head and lowered his feet from the table top. "Why so much?"

I had a piece of chocolate cake shoved in my mouth already so I glared. "I'm sorry, but when someone told me I'm not human, I got a little weird."

"Weird?" he said, raising an eyebrow.

I watched his snake-bites move as he smirked. I shook my head and put my hand up. "Stop doing that!"

"I'm not doing anything," he said, placing his hands behind his head. "I think that cake is the only thing going into your mouth the rest of the night anyway."

When I swallowed, I stared at him, my temper building. I didn't think it would be too long until I exploded, but I held myself together. I couldn't yell at Nixon for fear he would leave, then I would be—

"You won't be alone," he said. His arms slid around my waist and he pulled me closer. "I won't leave your side. I can't. I have to protect you. It's my job, Casey." He lifted one of my hands and laced our fingers together.

I watched as his pupils dilated and he stared at something behind me. As I looked around, I could see things growing hazy, and I shook my head thinking it was a trick of the eye.

Suddenly, there was this intense pressure in my head. It pounded, blinding me, and bringing me halfway to my knees. I could hear a voice talking, but I didn't know who it was.

"Fight it."

I gripped where I thought the table leg was, but all I felt was cold air. Then, as quickly as the pain had come, it dispersed, leaving me to see small dots in front of my face when I opened my eyes.

"What—" I gasped.

"It hurts like hell the first time, I'm sorry."

Everything around me was normal again, and as I straightened up, I saw Nixon's worried face. When he reached for me I backed away.

"What did you just do?" I demanded.

"Touch me," was all he said.

"Why?"

"Just do it."

"No."

"Fine!" he shouted. He grabbed my hand and held it tightly. When he refused to let go, I continued to fight him.

"Let me—" I started to say but something stopped me. I blinked a few times. "Oh, no way," I whispered.

He dropped my hand.

"I wanted to prove that I wasn't lying to you," he said. "This was the only way to make you believe."

"Your dad," I said, my eyes swimming with tears. "Nixon, I'm sorry. Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged. "You already lost your own father; I didn't think it was important. At least not until you trusted me enough."

"I trust you," I whispered.

He smiled and I kissed him again. When I stepped back, I heard a car pull into the driveway.

We sat in the living room, waiting. Nixon was standing next to couch as I fidgeted on it. He looked at me, his eyes telling me to relax, and I obeyed. I stared at the TV, seeing us reflected in its screen.

When my mother walked in, she stared at us for a moment before addressing Nixon. "Is your last name Ford?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Your father was Charlie?"

"Yes." He glanced at me, watching my expression. "Did you know him?" He looked at my mother. She hadn't seen his eyes shift.

She smiled and then looked at me, frowning. Here it was. I was grounded forever.

"Why didn't you tell me you knew your father's friend's son, Casey?"

"I didn't know," I said, glancing at Nixon.

"Nonsense," my mother said, waving a hand dismissively. "You must have forgotten." She looked at him again. "Tell me, is your father well?"

Nixon shook his head. "Didn't you hear? My father died."

"Oh," my mother exclaimed. "I'm sorry. He was a nice man. How is your mother doing?"

"We have a strained relationship," Nixon replied. "I haven't talked to her for awhile."

"That's unfortunate." She yawned and glanced at me. "It's very late and I have to get up early tomorrow. Nixon, it was so good to see you. You should come by again."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll be seeing a lot of me," he promised, smiling.

When she went upstairs, I turned to him. It was hard to be angry after what I'd found out he's been through. Instead, I walked over and took his hand, leading him outside.

Fear

Chapter 13 of 17

"Stop," I whispered. He was very close and for the first time, I was afraid. "Get away from me."

When we were safely outside, I sat on the porch steps and pulled him down next to me. When I felt him wrap an arm around my waist, I relaxed.

"Why aren't you afraid?" Nixon asked.

I watched his breath twist in the cool air before I answered. "What am I supposed to be afraid of?" I stared up at him and watched his mouth twitch.

The intensity in his grey eyes made my heart pound against my chest. He reached out and pushed my hair behind my ear, then shook his head.

"You know you should be afraid of me, and yet here you are, curled up with me like I'm some old security blanket."

"You won't hurt me," I said. When I looked into his face again, I saw something that made me frown. "You won't, right?"

"I can't promise you anything," Nixon said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry."

I stared at his hand, again laced with mine, and raised an eyebrow at him. "Why can't I—"

"It was only temporary," he explained. "I knew you wouldn't be able to handle the transfer at first. Though, I admit, you did a better job than the last person I allowed to access my power."

"What happened?" I asked, not quite sure I wanted to know.

"She became very frightened," he said softly. Suddenly, he reached up and rubbed his eyes, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of glasses. "She started to back away from me, shrieking for me to break the connection. When I told her to relax, she pulled away."

"So she thought you were crazy," I mumbled.

He nodded. "Somehow she screwed up my connection for anyone else I tried to encounter. I didn't know if anyone else could help me."

"So, this thing, whatever it is, has been going on for a long time?" I said. My thoughts were clouded when he finally put his glasses on. I shook my head to uncoil that image from my brain.

He smiled.

I frowned at him.

"So," I said, trying to figure out my words. "What's this whole deal of me not being human? Because last I checked, I definitely was."

"You're taking this exceptionally well," Nixon praised. "I'm a little worried you might go and hang yourself when things finally set in."

"That would be the human way of doing things," I said. When he stopped laughing, I let my mind wander. "What am I then?"

He sobered up, his face serious. "I told you that I don't know the answer to that one."

I made a noise in my throat that sounded like a growl and said, "You're bullshitting me, right? You mean to tell me that you've been sent to protect me and you don't even

know what I am?"

"Please," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "Please sit down."

I was trembling from where I apparently stood, glaring down at him. His expression was half between shock and pain. He looked like he wanted to say something but thought better of it.

"If you want to speak, do it. It's not like you'll say anything worth hearing."

He rose from his spot on the porch, his lips curved into a tight unpleasant smile. Before I knew what was happening, I felt my back hit one of the columns that held up the house.

"You're so foolish," he hissed, his eyes darkening behind the lenses. "Stupid and foolish. Don't you see that I don't have all the answers to your insignificant questions?"

"Stop," I whispered. He was very close and for the first time, I was afraid. "Get away from me."

He frowned at me, and the light from the kitchen had slid onto his face from the window, his eyes cool. He stepped back and lowered his gaze.

"I'm sorry I frightened you," he said quietly. He reached for me and I moved away, feeling the fear in the pit of my stomach suddenly explode.

"Can you please leave?" I said gently, my head turned away from him. I couldn't meet his eyes. I didn't want to see the pain in them because of me.

"Casey—" he pleaded.

The last thing I remember before I shut the door in his face were his fingers slipping through my hair.

Stolen

Chapter 14 of 17

My best friend was nothing more than a mindless drone now, filled with lies and misconceptions about me. My mother, wherever she was, had no idea what was happening to her, and she wouldn't believe it if she were told the truth.

I crawled onto the couch after I shut the door in Nixon's face. Staring back at it, I pulled a blanket tightly around myself. Maybe if by some miracle I died in my sleep, I wouldn't have to feel so guilty for hurting him. But I knew fate was never kind to me.

I curled up, closed my eyes, and willed sleep to come. Something startled me, though, and I sat up. My heart was pounding in my chest in a way I'd never felt before. It took me a moment to recognize the feeling.

Fear.

It was intense, burning, constricting. There was something to be afraid of. Something here in my house. I slipped off the couch and quietly crept to the stairs. I couldn't shake the feeling that someone else was up there.

Slowly, and on the verge of tears, I ascended the steps. I shook as I tried to be quiet. As I reached the top, I looked at my door first. I saw that it was half open, which was the way I usually left it.

Before I even took another step, I felt an unusual draft slide around my body. I brought my hands to my arms, brushing away the goose bumps. When I turned, my knees buckled beneath me and I fell onto my knees, silently thanking the carpet for its softness.

My eyes widened as I stared at my mother's wide-open bedroom door and shivered as a cruel wind seemed to slam into my body from the darkness. I gripped the banister and shut my eyes.

Please, no.

As I took a breath and began to stand, a hand slipped over my mouth and my middle, hoisting me up. I reached behind me to grab at the person's face, scratching, thrashing. When he slid a hand to my throat, I thought he was going to choke me. As his fingers pinched the spot between my neck and shoulder, a blanket of black invaded my eyes.

I felt like I was floating away from my body as a voice called to me, a recognizable, scared voice. I didn't want to go back. I didn't want any part of this if it meant losing the people I cared about.

My best friend was nothing more than a mindless drone now, filled with lies and misconceptions about me. My mother, wherever she was, had no idea what was happening to her, and she wouldn't believe it if she were told the truth. If they died, it would be my fault.

My thoughts turned to Nixon as I tried to wake up. I didn't mean to react the way that I had. Maybe he would sense that I was in trouble and come find me. But after the way I treated him, that was a long stretch.

Something lightly brushed against my temple, suddenly, and I blinked. When I was able to sit up, I watched my living room come into view. My mouth was dry, and as I turned to ask for water to whomever had done this, my eyes widened.

"You," I gasped. "What are you doing here? Why did you do that to me?" I demanded as my eyes narrowed.

He touched my hair, his face inches from mine as he spoke. "I told you I would protect you, didn't I?"

"But you made me—"

"I didn't want to hurt you, Casey, but you gave me no choice. If you just stopped fighting for just a second, you would have realized it was me."

"How?"

He smiled, his piercings lifting. "Maybe my voice isn't enough for recognition." He frowned and sat beside me.

"You didn't have to do what you did," I said, shaking my head. "You could have let me know it was you."

"I couldn't," he said. "I couldn't let him know you were there."

"Him who?" I felt a tremble go through my body and I shut my eyes. "Where is my mother, Nixon?"

"I don't—"

"Don't tell me you don't know!" I screamed, opening my eyes. The air around us seemed to thin out and crackle. "I need to know, I can't let her die!"

A smile flitted across Nixon's face and he nodded. Without explaining his actions, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine.

"You'll get them back," he told me. "I promise."

Pain

Chapter 15 of 17

"Nixon, wake up," I said. When he didn't move, I got off the couch and went over to him. I smirked and bent over to brush my lips against his.

When I opened my eyes again, I saw Nixon in the chair across from me, his chin resting on the palm of his hand, eyes closed. He made some sort of noise, something resembling pain. I felt something tug at my insides.

Faint light filled the room to tell me it was morning. I suddenly thought of the previous night and shook my head, trying to force away the tears that I knew were coming. My vision blurred as I wiped my eyes.

"Nixon, wake up," I said. When he didn't move, I got off the couch and went over to him. I smirked and bent over to brush my lips against his.

"There's a better way to wake me up," he mumbled, opening his eyes. He yawned and ran his hands through his hair, staring at me. "You've been crying," he said, touching my face. His hands were warm against my skin.

"I haven't," I said, and then I frowned. "Do you need to use the shower?"

He stood, stretched, and shook his head. "No, but you might want to. You smell awful."

I glared at him.

"I'm not being funny," he said as he entered the kitchen and opened the fridge. He took a cup from the cupboard and poured some orange juice. He held out the carton to me then smirked.

"Dick," I muttered and walked up the stairs to the bathroom.

When I shut the door and turned on the water, I went to the sink. I looked up into the mirror and my reflection stared back at me. My eyes looked tired, the skin underneath shadowy, and my hair was messy, tousled, and unclean. I frowned at myself.

I undressed and stepped into the shower, the water soon becoming a source of comfort as its warmth slid down my body. I didn't move, didn't touch anything around me. I just stayed frozen, staring at the wall. The heat from the water made me moan as it worked to undo the knots in my back. When the water had begun to feel like hands, however, I turned my head.

And screamed.

With his hair wet and a childish grin on his face, a half-naked Nixon grinned at me. I blinked at him a few times, my eyes sliding to his chest. I shook my head, feeling my cheeks heat up.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I shrieked. "Get out!"

Something flickered across his face and he smirked at me. When he gripped my chin in his fingers and lowered his mouth to mine, all thought to get him out of the shower fell apart. My fingers tangled in his wet hair and yanked, my body aching to be close to his, clothed or not.

His hands slid across my back, nails brushing the sensitive part so I twitched in his arms. When his fingers slid to my hips, my brain blamed the water, the heat getting to both of us. He bit my lower lip and pulled back to look at me.

"You can hit me now," he said, stepping back to give me room. I watched his eyes roam my body.

"Just get me a towel," I said.

"Cold?" he asked, smirking arrogantly.

I blushed, and when he turned off the water and handed me the towel, I snatched it and wrapped it around myself.

"I can't believe you!" I snapped as I got out. "You're lucky I didn't scream so loud that the neighbors thought I was being attacked. Asshole."

As I ran a hand through my hair and held the towel securely with the other, Nixon came behind me. He placed his lips against my neck, and I shivered again.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I thought maybe I'd be able to help you ease some of your stress and pain."

"By coming into my shower when I'm—"

"Pretty much," he said, shrugging. "But I cleared your mind, didn't I?" He smiled and wrapped his arms around my middle, squeezing the fluffy, warm towel into my stomach.

"You're going to be in a shit load of trouble when my mom—" I stopped and closed my mouth, my eyes widening. Then I burst into tears and turned around, slamming right into his chest.

"It's okay," he said, kissing the top of my head. He held me at arm's length and looked into my face. "Get dressed. I promise I won't look."

I nodded, sniffled, and went into my room. After I dressed in a pair of low jeans and a black tank top, I curled up on my bed, pulling the covers over my head. Everything from last night came back and my stomach twisted unpleasantly. It continued to do so until I stuck my head over the side of the mattress and vomited onto the floor.

"Case, you okay?" I heard the knock faintly but didn't respond. The door creaked open and I heard his footsteps. "Oh," was all he said when he was close to the bed. "Hang on; I'll get something to clean this up."

When he shut the door, I wept.

I couldn't do this and that only meant one thing.

This was the end.

Manifest

Chapter 16 of 17

"Suit yourself." He shrugged, reaching out to grab my hand. He held tight and concentrated; I could see his pupils dilating.

When I awoke, my head was pounding again. I slipped a hand through my hair to press my fingers to my skull and looked next to me. Nixon was sleeping sitting up. I smiled slightly and moved to him, lowering my head onto his chest, and wrapped my free arm around his stomach.

He grunted in response to my touch but didn't wake.

My thoughts drifted as I listened to his heartbeat, slow and even, and came to stop at my mom. Anyone who had known the situation, aside from the two of us, my controllable best friend, and the bastards who took her, would think I didn't care about getting her back.

"Stop worrying," Nixon mumbled and rolled over. "Go back to sleep."

I frowned and had a sudden thought. I sat up and hooked my left leg over his middle and sat on his side. He groaned and turned his head, his eyes taking in the position I was in. When he smirked and reached to grip the back of my head to bring my mouth closer to his, I blinked.

"You're picking a funny time to go shy," Nixon whispered, his breath sliding across my cheeks. "Please don't worry. We'll save them."

And he kissed me, his lips soft and warm against my own. When his tongue prodded my mouth open, I parted my lips all too willingly. I heard him chuckle softly through the kiss as his fingers twisted in my hair and his hands gripped my hips, his fingers slipping under my shirt.

As my ears picked up the sound of my own appreciative growl, I smirked and shoved my hands between his back and the pillow, my fingers kneading at his muscles. When he groaned, I pulled back.

"I'm sorry," I muttered. I avoided his gaze and stared at the bathroom door instead. I felt him move slightly but I refused to look at him.

"Look at me."

His voice was husky, and I shivered as his fingers slid under my chin, cradling my jaw in his hand. Finally, I turned my head; my eyes took in a sight that made my heart skip a few beats. I bit my lip.

It's just your hormones, I told myself as I stared at him.

He was holding his shirt and grinning at me like he had in the shower before. I shook my head, trying to make that image dissolve.

"It's not going to go away just because you want it to," he said as he glanced at me. He smiled and moved until he was right in front of me. Then he took my hand and placed it on his chest. "Can you feel it?" he whispered, tilting his head.

His heartbeat seemed to speed up when his lips fell against my neck, his mouth working to assault my pulse point. He was able to pull me onto his lap without breaking contact and carefully slid the straps of my tank top down.

"I've already seen you naked," he reminded me, his breath floating across my skin.

I shuddered at the memory and nodded.

He hooked his fingers into the belt loops on my jeans and pulled me closer still until my forehead was resting against his and I could see his eyes, warm and calm.

"Don't remind me," I said. "It was not my finest hour."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Nixon said, shaking his head. "I'm the one who's probably going to hell for that little move."

"You're going to hell either way," I told him.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I've seen the kind of people who are going there, and they definitely do deserve it. I think the Devil has a special seat for Evan, though, and his minions."

"You don't think he was working alone to brainwash Jade?" I asked, sliding off him.

He understood my actions; however, his eyes betrayed him. He tried not to look too disappointed as he put his shirt back on and pushed his hair behind his ears.

"Oh no," he explained, "I think he's perfectly capable of that little act. What I don't see as his work is the whole kidnapping bit. There's no way he could have orchestrated such a big plan by himself. He had help."

"That girl?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. I fixed my top while he thought about the answer he was going to give me.

"Abigail," he corrected. At my confused look, he said, "I did some research. I needed to know what we're up against."

"You mean what I'm up against."

He smiled and shook his head. "I thought you were giving up? What made you change your mind?"

"She's my mother," I said, staring at him. "If anything happened, I'd be responsible."

"What about Jade?" he asked.

I miss you. I can't believe you were weak enough to let one person do this to you. If something happens to you, too, I'll never forgive myself.

"You're probably the most courageous person I've ever met," said Nixon, "even if you overreact too much." He grabbed my hand and squeezed it.

I laughed softly. "I'm not a person, remember? I'm a thing."

He looked at me, looked like he wanted to say something, so I nodded for him to go ahead. It was okay. Whatever he had to tell me, I wasn't going to get upset.

"You're human, Casey. You're just not yourself." He flinched, expecting me to blow up again.

I digested this explanation easier than anything he told me since we met. It sounded better to me than I could have hoped – I wasn't me. I wasn't the weird girl, the paranoid one, or the bitch. Scratch that last one.

"Who am I then?" I asked, blinking at him.

"You're the reincarnation of—"

Before he could tell me, however, something that sounded like a bomb exploding shook the house. It was less than five minutes; then it stopped, and everything was quiet. I looked at the book shelf by my bed that had fallen, the books trapped underneath.

Nixon's eyes narrowed and his jaw set.

I listened. I heard footsteps on the stairs. Then, without much warning, my bedroom door flew open and two figures walked in. One I knew too well; the other I didn't have the slightest clue as to who he was.

"Jade, darling, look who I found hiding from us."

Jade watched me. Her blue eyes glazed slightly; her lips pulled into a thin, cruel line. The other was a man. He was tall, with snow-white hair, honey-colored eyes, and a seemingly friendly smile.

"My apologies," he addressed us with a nod. "I seem to have grown impatient and your house has suffered something terrible."

"Who are you and what do you want?" I asked. My half blown up house could wait.

The man smiled and extended a hand to me. "My name is Noah, and what I want is you, little girl."

I shook my head. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Suit yourself." He shrugged, reaching out to grab my hand. He held tight and concentrated; I could see his pupils dilating.

A ripple of black manifested in the center of the room and grew until it looked very much like a black hole. I reached behind me to take hold of Nixon before Noah flung me effortlessly into the mass of darkness.

Urge

Chapter 17 of 17

Jade left him there, writhing in pain on the bed, as she went to go find her friend. She had a feeling Casey would be surprised to see her. The screams followed her as she shut the door to the room and walked down the hall.

I kept my eyes shut as I spun. It made me think of those carnival rides that I never liked going on, and I felt myself needing to throw up again. I didn't want to look, didn't want to see what I was in. When I heard an ear-piercing shriek, I knew it was coming from my throat.

The sudden impact of the ground startled me as I slammed into it. I finally opened my eyes to stare at the granite I had fallen on. I sat up, wincing and gasping, as a pain shot through my shoulder. Good God, I really was clumsy. I didn't dare look around for fear of what I would see.

A hand fell on my shoulder suddenly.

"Oh, I'm glad you—" My words died as I turned my head.

Noah smiled softly and brushed a hand through his hair. He held out his hand. He moved his white coat, and I could see the black shirt and pants underneath. "Come now, you've hurt yourself. I'll get you cleaned up."

"No," I said, pulling back. "I want to know where I am."

He frowned. "I've brought you to him."

"Him? Him who? Let go of me." I shook my head vigorously. I did not want to go anywhere with this man. "Where is Nixon? Jade? My mother? Dammit, answer me!"

Noah's mouth flitted, and he hoisted me up without my permission, sending a wave of pain with his touch. My knees buckled but he held me.

"You've dislocated your shoulder, darling," he said gently. "I will fix it and you'll be good as new."

"Good as new?" I muttered.

"Like a doll," he said, using his hand to brush my hair from my face. I flinched when he touched my temple. "You've cut your head, as well, it seems. This will not sit right with him if I bring a broken doll."

My mind registered his words and before I stopped myself I said, "Are you talking about Evan?"

Noah stopped walking. While he gathered his thoughts, I was able to look around at my surroundings, surprised at where that vortex had taken me. I vaguely recognized this place, as anyone would if they stood in the middle of a park.

"You're a smart doll, darling," he said, turning his eyes on me. "Come along. We can't afford to stop and waste time because you're easily distracted."

"Where are we? I think I've been here."

His lips turned upward and he chuckled. "You shouldn't be so surprised by that revelation. Didn't you ever wonder why you were struck with such a deep feeling of déjà vu most times throughout your life?"

"I just thought I was—" I began, but something caught my eye. Someone was coming toward us down the path.

"You know it's impolite to eavesdrop," Noah said without turning around or making any indication that he had heard another person. "Well, since you're here, Abigail, this is Casey."

I blinked at the girl; long, black hair with purple streaks. She had the same color eyes as Noah, and I wondered for a moment if they were related. It was then that I noticed she was wearing a reversal of Noah's clothing.

"No," she said unkindly, "we are not blood."

I nodded and she scowled at me.

"You don't look like he described," Abigail said, her eyes narrowing. "I thought you would be prettier." She sniffed indignantly.

Noah blinked at her. "She was prettier before the fall, Ab. She seems to have messed herself up a bit. I was on my way to clean her up when you intruded."

She stared at him, and then her eyes slid to mine before stalking off.

"I apologize," Noah said, shaking his head as we watched her disappear into the darkness. "She's the only female here, you see, so it's hard for her to maintain a decent level of composure around another one when she meets them."

I kept quiet.

"You are the first female she has seen for awhile," he explained. He gripped my chin and forced me to look into his eyes. "Abigail hasn't seen another female in the last three-hundred years."

"I can see why she tried hiding you."

Jade's voice was coy in his ear, her fingers wrapped in his thick hair as she forced his mouth down on hers. He resisted, but only slightly. She smiled at him as she slid her hands under his shirt.

"Fucking bitch," he hissed, his eyes flying open. "Where is Casey?"

"Probably dead somewhere," Jade commented as she straddled him. "You're smart enough not to fight me, boy, and that's good."

"Let go!" Nixon snapped. "I have to find her!"

He watched as something flickered in Jade's eyes and she gripped his wrist as he went to hit her. Nixon screamed as he felt the bones crack and a horrible abundance of pain ran through his body.

Jade left him there, writhing in pain on the bed, as she went to go find her friend. She had a feeling Casey would be surprised to see her. The screams followed her as she shut the door to the room and walked down the hall.

We stopped walking when we stood in front of a house. It looked like a Victorian but I couldn't be sure. When I looked behind us, the park had dissolved into a lonely street. I shook my head.

"It's an illusion," I said to myself.

"What's that?" Noah asked as he pulled me with him up the steps to the house. "Speak up, darling."

"Stop calling me that," I said, shifting my gaze to him. I had to admit that he was something out of a movie as he stood leaning against one of the columns on the porch, arms crossed. I didn't realize he let me go.

"Why?" He looked at me, frowning. "You don't like nicknames?"

"Not really."

He smirked. "Not even C?"

"How did you—" I thought about it for a second then changed my question. "Where are they?"

There was a terrible wail from inside the house.

"Please," I said, stepping up to Noah. "Let me see him."

He studied me, and then shook his head. "I will on one condition."

"Anything," I muttered, tears stinging my eyes.

He was in front of me before I knew what was going on, his hands on either side of my neck. I tensed, expecting him to snap it. I closed my eyes and waited. I felt him moving my head toward him. When I opened my eyes, it was too late.

His lips found mine, his tongue entering my mouth before I could stop him. As he pulled me against himself, I felt something go through me. An urge I'd never felt before wrapped itself around my brain and ordered me to continue.

So I kissed him, long and hard, the screams from somewhere above us fading with the night air as it coiled around our twined bodies.