

Part I

“Why must happiness be at the cost of someone else's suffering? What is life if not endless consequences?”

Chapter One

2 months later

There weren't many things Noah wanted in life, but the things he did want, he wanted badly. Like 20/20 vision. His glasses constantly sent a tickle from the bridge of his nose to his temples, which remained for a while even after he took them off, making it hard to focus on anything the professor was saying. And because without his glasses he couldn't see anything past a few feet, he'd begrudgingly put them back on and swallow the emergency aspirin he kept in his wallet along with an expired condom he had in case someone glanced into his open wallet. Having people believe he was sleeping around and had a magnum-sized cock was good for his image. College was all about spreading STDs and getting wasted at parties hosted by disgustingly spoiled rich kids. Parties Noah would attend with a frown on his face for a couple of minutes before grabbing two red cups and darting off to an empty room to drink both their contents on his own. Sometimes he would masturbate, just so that he would feel as though he belonged. Because then he had achieved the two things expected of him; getting drunk and having an orgasm, both of which left him feeling drained and numb and far more pathetic than he would've felt had he just stayed at home and studied.

In his junior year of high school, Noah made the shocking discovery that he was considered conventionally attractive. Being the son of a famous baseball player and a former model had its perks. He'd inherited his father's lean, tall body and his mother's perfect hair and face: Straight nose, defined jaw, full lips, green eyes. His hair was a light shade of brown and curly when he actually bothered to wash it the way his mother taught him when he was little. These days it hung low over his eyes in big waves that he preferred over the tight curls he'd grown to resent over the years.

The discovery of his apparent attractiveness was caused by a rapid increase in girls who seemed to stare at him in the hallway. At first, he thought it was because he had sauce from lunch smeared across the face, or something equally embarrassing. But when he asked Scarlett about it, she laughed and told him about how he had become the talk of the volleyball team since the beginning of the term. Over the summer, Noah's father had insisted he start working on his body. "It would be a waste," he'd told him. Good genetics. Noah didn't argue. His being occupied gave him an excuse to give to Toby when he asked Noah to go to the skate park with him. The reason he didn't want to go was because A, he couldn't skate, and B, he'd be alone with Toby since Scarlett had been on vacation in Cuba with her family, and if there was one thing Noah hated it was being alone with Toby and his passions.

Over the course of 3 months, his father put him through absolute agony. Cardio in the morning that gave him stabbing pain in his abdomen, followed by hours of weight training in the afternoon that left his limbs aching, accompanied by a strict diet of chicken breast, canned tuna, and other various sources of protein. The pain receded after the first month, but never quite went away as long as he kept applying heavier weights. He preferred it that way, it kept his mind occupied.

So, after Noah's body had visibly gotten more toned and his biceps doubled in size, the girls noticed.

At first, he liked the attention. Belonging felt good. Joining the football team (though he never much cared for sports), getting invited to parties, dating his first girlfriend, losing his virginity; all the things everyone was dying for back in high school. But then it got tedious. Love confessions written on lined papers would slide out

of his locker when he tried to grab his books for class and somehow his phone number had become public knowledge. And then there were the opinionated ones, who would tell him to stop hanging out with Toby and Scarlett because he was out of their league. He hated being told he needed new friends. He was fine with only the two of them in his close circle, but somehow to everyone else, it wasn't enough.

Toby was a known menace, a troublemaker who spent most of his teenage life high and anywhere but school. Noah understood why he might've been considered bad karma, but that didn't mean he would just stop being friends with him. And then there was Scarlett, who was popular enough, being captain of the volleyball team, but somehow became the laughingstock after rumor went around that the reason she was always with Noah was that she was sleeping with him, which obviously was complete bullshit because it had been the one and only pact him and Toby ever made: Scarlett is off limits. He still remembered the sticky feeling of their saliva conjoining when they shook hands that day at the apex of Hill Bill, their favorite meeting spot (the hill had an official name that they had both refused to use, and so they decided to name it Bill because they were 9 years old at the time and children were notoriously uncreative when it came to naming things), with a deep determination to avoid a sworn rivalry caused by a female to ever get between them.

Scarlett stopped talking to him for a while after the rumor started spreading. She would distance herself from him and Toby and stay longer at volleyball practice after school instead of going back to Noah's place as they would often do. She refused to be seen with Noah at school and even stopped attending classes. He hated it. He would never disrespect her by using her for her body, and she knew it as well as he did. But the embarrassment she must have felt seemed to outweigh what she knew of him, and so she continued to ignore him for months. Things went back to normal after Noah slowly inserted himself back into her life with small gestures like getting her brownies from that coffee shop she liked so much, or picking her up from school every morning even though she explicitly warned him not to. She eventually warmed up to him again, and they went back to being best friends once more.

That was 4 years ago, and Noah hasn't allowed himself to lose her again. They decided to attend the same college, Michigan State University, a public, state-funded college instead of one of the multiple Ivy Leagues he had been accepted to. An education was an education, he told himself. Being with her was more important than whatever Princeton had to offer. Toby had tried to get into MSU as well, but to no one's surprise had been rejected, and ended up not going to college at all. "Not my thing," he'd said when inquired by Scarlett. "So how are you going to find a job?" asked Noah, to which Toby had tilted his head back and looked at the sky as if in a romantic drama. "I'll see where life takes me. Maybe travel the world."

"Travelling the world won't put bread on the table."

Toby had exhaled loudly. "Not everyone is born with money up their asses, Scar."

Which was true, he supposed. Had either Scarlett or himself decided to never work a day in their lives again, they could've comfortably done so. Scarlett's parents, both doctors, were the founders of one of the biggest and well-reputed hospitals in Michigan and came from old German money. Apparently, the grandpa of some old dead relative they hadn't even previously heard of left it all in their name because Scarlett's father was the only male relative in the old dead relative's bloodline that hadn't kicked the bucket yet, so to him it all went. They immigrated to the US before Scarlett and her brother were born and spent a decade building Hirsch Hospitals from the ground up, became even richer, bought an estate in Noah's neighborhood, and became one of the most well-known families in new-money Michigan. Mr. Hirsch started a collection of old expensive cars, and Mrs. Hirsch became quite fond of hosting dinners at her house, both hobbies Scarlett despised with everything in her being.

Noah was pulled out of his train of thoughts by his growing headache, pushed his glasses up his nose and tried to focus on the inexact formula for entropy the professor was deriving in front of him. It was something he had already taken in Thermodynamics 1, but the professor, a senile old man who owned the same button-down in many different colors, thoroughly enjoyed revisiting formulas from old classes. "This will be important if you

want to understand Bernoulli's equations," he said, after focusing the entire 2-hour lecture on revisiting basic differential equations, which like the inexact formula for entropy, was something Noah knew by heart. He wondered if the professors at Princeton too enjoyed making their students hate their major with such passion.

Professor Kennedy wrapped up the last derivation of the formula and handed out the grades of the first term exams. "The highest grade was a 94%, making the average grade of 33% into a D+." The room erupted into disappointed moans and whispers. D+ for 33% was considered awful in engineering. Usually, the highest grade was between 60 and 70 percent, which would make a score of 33% a solid B-, which meant that whoever broke the curve would become the most hated person in the room for the entirety of the term. Noah didn't understand why. He had studied day and night for those grades, almost entirely sacrificing his private life so that he could ensure that he stayed at the top, so why would anyone get mad at him for it? The way he saw it was that everyone was responsible for their own grade. He hated the curving system his university followed. It caused students to become reliant on others for their own grades, which made no sense to him. Study and do well, it was that simple really.

Noah hurriedly shoved his notebook in his bag as he went to collect his paper. His face dropped when he looked at the number that was written on his paper.

88%.

Not 94%.

He double-checked the name written on the exam. Noah Carson, in his handwriting. "Professor? I'm sorry to bother you, but I think you might have made a mistake."

Professor Kennedy proceeded to call the rest of the names, not even sparing Noah a glance. He waited until the last student came to collect their paper and tried again.

"Professor, a moment of your time, please."

The old man sighed in answer, "If I had a dollar for every time a student claimed there'd been a mistake in their exam, I'd be long retired."

Noah hastily followed him out of the room and straightened his backpack on his shoulder. For his old age, the professor had impressive stamina. "Yes, I understand, but you said the highest grade was a 94. My paper is only an 88."

The professor stopped dead in his tracks and leaned forward as much as his hunched back allowed him to. "I don't see the problem, young man. All it means is that someone else got the 94. Though an 88 is nothing to be ashamed of."

Bullshit. An 88 was in fact something to be ashamed of if someone else had gotten a higher grade than him, even if it was just by 6 percent. It didn't make sense. The majority of his classmates were imbeciles who would rather die than put work and effort into their degrees. The chances of someone getting a near-perfect score were close to zero. Unless they cheated, which made Noah even more angry than the possibility of someone being better than him. Cheaters were common, but that didn't make them any less disgusting. Laziness was high up on the list of things Noah couldn't stand, amongst things like murderers and rapists. Everyone makes a choice in the morning, either you get up and do something productive, or you give in to your desires and waste time trying to achieve those.

Noah thanked the professor for his time and left the building. Scarlett was already waiting at their spot when he arrived. A small, paved space between the science buildings that wasn't very comfortable, but isolated, which made it good enough to become their regular meeting place for the past 3 years.

“What took you so long?” she asked as he made to sit down.

“Was busy contemplating my life choices. Someone’s got a higher grade than me in heat transfer.”

Scarlett’s pale face came into vision, eyes wide. “What? How? Did they cheat?”

“Maybe. I’ll know for sure once I find out who it was. I’m going to ask Adam tomorrow.”

Adam was someone Noah considered a friend on a good day, and a liability on most days. He was everything he hated in a person. A lazy cheater who did all the thinking with his dick instead of his brain and funded his shit house parties with money his father shoved up his ass as if it were a suppository. Noah tried to get rid of him throughout the entirety of the semester, with no success. He was like a stain you can’t get rid of, no matter how often you wash the cloth.

“How much did you get?”

Noah hesitated. “88.”

“You’re lying.”

“I wish. “

Scarlett shook her head and pushed off the wall to sit across from him. The look on her face radiated something between disappointment and disbelief.

“How did that even happen, didn’t you say you studied?”

“I always study, Scar.” He leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

“I know, I know. But this one especially, no? I thought those chemistry classes were your strong suit. You got an A plus last semester in fluid-“

“Enough about me,” he cut her off. The last thing Noah wanted right now was to think about his failure. This was his safe space. He had the entire night to think about where he went wrong and what he could do to fix it. “How are your classes? Any luck with Butter?”

Butter was her Federal Civil Procedures professor. His name was Wolfgang Buta, but most students just called him Butter. The reason for the blatant disrespect in referring to him was due to the agony he had put his class through. Scarlett was a Law major, and according to her, law professors were known to be unreasonable when it came to grading papers, contrary to what their profession might suggest.

“I just came back from his office.” She sighed. “The fucker somehow tried justifying taking 7 marks off my grade because I used a comma instead of a semicolon. Which by the way, is a perfectly acceptable way of referring to a paragraph. Using quotation marks, now that would’ve been a deadly sin, but a comma? Stupid old asshole. I bet his dick is small and his wife left him for it.”

“Likely. I heard dicks shrink with age. Not the balls though. They start looking bigger because the sack drops. “

Scarlett made a face. “Didn’t need that piece of information, thank you very much.”

Noah laughed. “Yes, you did. You need to be prepared for when your husband’s dick starts looking funny.”

“Who said I’m getting married? I’ll be hot even when I’m old. College boys love Milfs. I’ll never have to look at a wrinkly old penis.”

Noah would never admit this to her, but Scarlett was objectively beautiful. Probably one of the prettiest people he's ever seen. But he could never quite pinpoint what made her so attractive. His best guess was that the reason was in her eyes. They were slightly too large for her face, and a shade of brown so dark they looked black. The dark, long lashes just added to their appeal, same as the blonde curtain bangs that framed her face and eyes so perfectly it made him want to personally thank her hairstylist. The rest of her features weren't lacking any beauty either. Pouty lips, a round freckled face, a sloped nose, and her body athletic from years of playing volleyball competitively, but hidden under the mountains of clothing she always wore.

"You'd die sad and alone." He said.

"No, I wouldn't. I have you."

"I'm afraid my penis isn't immune to aging."

A choking laughing sound escaped from her, one that was incredibly unfeminine but so much like her at the same time. "Fair enough."

After more pointless conversations they decided to eat sandwiches from the cafeteria and get drinks, both of which Noah paid for. "Wanna come home with me?" he said as he swallowed a big gulp of his vanilla milkshake. "We can finish your awful reality TV show. There's only like two episodes left and I'm dying to know who Emily ends up with."

"Liar, you couldn't care less." She paused and squinted her eyes at him. "But Josh, definitely."

"Are you crazy? She has far more chemistry with Benedict."

"Sure, but who wants to fuck a dude called Benedict? He doesn't even go by Ben. Could you imagine moaning that?"

"No I cannot. I don't like men, remember?"

She laughed. "I can't come, I'm sorry. Got a paper to work on for Sociology. If I finish it today, I'll be yours all of tomorrow. Deal?"

"Deal."

Noah walked Scarlett to her car. He heard the click of the keys 4 times before she decided to open the car door. They hugged goodbye, and Scarlett's vanilla perfume found its way into his airways. It was the only thing she's ever worn because every other perfume she's used made her head spin. Noah appreciated it. He loved vanilla. It made her smell like a cake.

The smell of alcohol hit Noah the second he opened the front door to his house. It was a scent he was used to by now, though that didn't make coming home to it every day any more pleasant.

"Mom, I'm home." He yelled through the kitchen, not expecting a response. He didn't get one.

Noah placed his bag on his bedroom floor and followed the smell of puke and booze back to his parents' room. He opened the door to find only his mother's matted hair spilling out from atop the blanket, with her curled up beneath it in a fetal position. The source of the smell was spilled on the bedroom floor in chunks, along with 2 bottles of half-empty vodka and prescription pill bottles. On the nightstand next to the bed was a picture of his dad from approximately 20 years ago. Young and full of life, standing in the middle of the baseball field in his

jersey, and flashing his million-dollar smile to the camera. Noah recognized the picture. It was the one his mom looked at the most. Something about the smile making him look alive again, she'd said.

Noah opened the curtains, allowing some much-needed sunlight to pass through the room. After he aired out the room, he pulled the blanket off his mother's body. Her skin was bare except for a flimsy pair of black panties that covered her private parts. She groaned in protest, further curling in on her naked body. "Turn off the damn lights!"

"It's the sun, and no. Get up."

She groaned, "And do what?"

"The dishes, the laundry, maybe even remove your vomit from the carpet if you're feeling silly."

"No."

Maybe he should just leave her there, lying in her own filth. She deserved it. The urge to leave and never come back was a daily struggle Noah had to push away. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't and wouldn't abandon her. His father would punch him straight out of heaven if he found out, though Noah doubted there was a place for him there after murdering Toby in cold blood.

Noah groaned and rubbed his face with a hand before stalking to the connected bathroom and filling the bathtub. He picked out a pair of pajamas and some fresh underwear which he folded neatly and laid out in the bathroom along with a towel. His mom thrashed in protest as he picked her up and moved to the bathtub, but her body was too frail, so all her efforts did was tire her out even further, which worked out in Noah's favor. He placed her in the bubble-filled bathtub and crouched down next to it.

She hugged her knees to her chest and rested her head on top of them, looking to the side, half awake. Noah thought he saw a tear roll down her face. He was certain of it when he heard her sniffing. He handed her some toilet paper, which she reluctantly took but didn't bother wiping her eyes with.

Noah got up and moved toward the doorway, where he stood for a minute, casting a glance over his shoulder to where his mother sat. She wasn't making any moves to clean herself, and that made Noah more angry than it should've. What more could he do? Bathe her himself? He already placed her in the tub. The least she could do was meet him halfway by washing the grime off her body. She was sick, he reminded himself, sick not with illness but with grief. It might as well have been the same injury that took his dad. But at least he had still been a person before he died even when he was long considered braindead.

Noah closed his eyes for a moment, counted to 10 backwards, and then moved back into the bathroom. He crouched next to the tub and began washing her shoulders and back with the washcloth he had laid out for her. He tried to shampoo her hair but couldn't even run his hands along her scalp before being stopped by the tangles mess that had accumulated in the back of her skull. She didn't protest when he dumped half a bottle of conditioner in her hair and began working out the mats. He ended up using the entire bottle but at least she looked human again.

"Head down," he said, and she obliged flipping her hair down, the ends dipping into the murky bath water. Noah put her hair into a towel and wrapped it around her head. "There are some fresh clothes on the washing machine. Wash your body and put them on."

She gave him a faint nod and he left the room, surprised by her agreeing to wash herself. He went downstairs to grab a bucket of water and cleaning utensils, before he began ridding the entire room of its empty food cartons and bottles of booze, even throwing out the ones that still contained some liquor. Not that it meant anything. His dad had left them an inheritance that was enough to last for a lifetime. Noah had considered taking her credit

card away, but he figured she'd probably end up killing herself if she went on withdrawal, so he decided against it.

While he was changing the bed sheets, he found that the mattress underneath was stained yellow and green and reeked of death. He made a mental note to replace it soon, as well as to throw out the carpet. The floor would be easier to scrub next time.

His mother finally emerged from the bathroom half an hour later, just in time for Noah to finish tidying up her room. At the sight of her clean room, her bottom lip began to wobble as tears rolled down her face once more. She began sobbing violently, trying to stop her tears from flowing with the heels of her palms the way a child would. Noah sat next to her and held her for a long while. He made soothing sounds to try and soothe her.

"I'm sorry," she said in between sobs.

"It's okay."

"I miss him."

"I know."

She didn't say anymore after that and ended up falling asleep in Noah's arms, who proceeded to lay her down on her freshly made bed before putting a blanket on her.

As much as he resented her for her problem, he also couldn't blame her. He didn't want to imagine the pain one felt by the losing your partner. Losing your dad was one thing but losing the love of your life was a whole nother. People leave all the time. Friends and family alike. Children would eventually leave their parents' house and grandparents would die of old age. But your partner was the one consistent person in your life. The person that, once you found them, was supposed to stay with you until the end of time. The grief of losing your soulmate must be agonizing. And so even though he wished she had her shit together, he understood that it would take a while until she would be his mother again. Maybe weeks, maybe until the rest of her life, he wasn't certain.

That night, Noah made pasta because it was the only thing Scarlett taught him how to cook. He made his mother join him at the dinner table. They didn't talk the entire time, though she did thank him before going back to her room. Noah washed the dishes, then grabbed his duffle bag and headed to the gym, where he proceeded to lift weights until his arms were shaking and his calves started cramping up.

All he could think about by the end of his workout was how badly he wished Scarlett had just come home with him.