



## Beneath The Surface: A FernHill County Story

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Dedicated to Sophie Alvord.

### INTRODUCTION

Pinned against the smooth beige drywall was a thin sheet of printer paper. But the paper stood out from those around it. The sheet featured the body of an uncannily skinny woman, drawn entirely in a cool color palette, warm colors only prevalent in its genitalia areas.

The women's breasts and vagina were replaced with bright warm areas of crudely drawn gore. The breasts were replaced with an exposed ribcage, dripping and oozing a neon orange ooze. The lower genitals were X'ed out and scribbled out like the artist didn't want viewers to see what was originally intended to be put on public display.

Showcased in the Cloverdale High School Senior's art display section, the piece stood out among the rest of the drawings. One piece was an impressive pencil sketch of a steaming hot blueberry pie on top of a cracked wooden table. Another consisted of a monarch butterfly spreading its wings throughout a lush fantastical forest landscape.

Even an oil pastel artwork of a sunset covering an array of mountains caught her glimpse, but her eyes kept focusing on the drawing of the woman's body featured dead center in the middle of the wall. It was like moths to a patio light bulb. And one defining detail made this piece stand out among the rest; it was vibrantly bursting with color.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" The woman captivated with a hypnotized gaze asked.

"Hi there, anything I can help you with?" The event ambassador's tone evoked a tone of annoyance and irritability.

"Yeah, I was wondering who drew... this?" She pointed to the extravagant piece, dead set in the middle.

"Oh... That one." The event ambassador replied, scanning the edges of the artwork for traces of a name, "It seems his name isn't listed there is it? Let's see if I can find him..."

She looked through her small list of art pieces linked to their respective names, gliding her finger through them. The viewer grew anticipated interest as she searched in the printed pile of identities and works.

"Right... oh, I guess this one isn't a boy? Strange that a girl would be drawing something this... Err-"

"Sick?" The girl lifted an eyebrow, crossing her arms.

"Well, if you mean in the same way I do. Let's see... The name of the artist is uh... ah, Chloe Thorn. Do you happen to know her or something?"

"Not even a bit!" She laughed to herself, shaking her head.

## CHAPTER ONE - WHISPERS OF PIGMENTS

"Chloe!" An unfamiliar face spoke with a genuine smile, though she decided to suppress it once she realized she was running through the noisy hallway with a grin on her face cheesy enough to give someone second hand embarrassment.

Chloe interrupted twisting her school lockers rotary combination lock at the mere sight of a complete stranger running towards her smiling, freezing up in an overwhelmed state of awe.

'Who... is that?' Chloe thought to herself, 'Oh god don't tell me it's one of my summer camp friends. They're gonna bring up memories I barely remember and act like we're best buddies. Just keep cool, it'll be over before you know it.'

"Hey! You're Chloe, right?" The girl collected herself.

"Um... yeah. But I'm Chloe Thorn... not Miller." Chloe hesitantly replied.

"No, no, you're exactly who I was looking for!" The girl beamed.

"Are you sure you don't have me mistaken for someone else? I'm just a nobody." Chloe admitted, shrugging off the girl's enthusiasm.

"The drawing of the woman, you made that right?"

"The one in the art show? Uhh... yeah? What about it?" Chloe scratched her head.

"Dude oh my god, that was so fucking cool! You kicked ass compared to everyone else! Your entry stood out like a sore thumb just like emptying pus and blood!" She exaggerated, moving quickly making different gestures.

"...Excuse me?" Chloe scrunched up her face in subtle disgust.

"Cause like, the focus was on gore and blood." The girl hastily added, slouching over a bit.

"I think we read into entirely different meanings." Chloe spoke nonchalantly.

"Oh..." She replied, sighing, releasing a bit more of her upward confident posture, "Well what is the meaning?"

"Um... I'm not supposed to tell you that." Chloe laughed, rolling her eyes.

"What? Why not?!" Eden sighed, lowering her eyebrows.

"Because then it invalidates your perspective. That's not how art works... Or at least that's not how my art works" Chloe emphasized with precision.

The girl paused before continuing, "But it won't, I know it won't!"

"I'm sorry but now that I know somebody actually enjoyed my entry, I can't just go and ruin that. Not for you." Chloe told her, rummaging through her locker sloppily shoveling together the school supplies she'd need for her upcoming class into her patchwork covered backpack.

"Well... Hey, regardless I thought you didn't gain the respect you deserved for it. It was easily the best one. You 'probably' had something to say, whatever the hell it might be. And I'm sorry all these boring ass snobs can't see that." She smiled warmly, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Mmm... We can't exactly expect respect in FernHill County of all places, can we?" Chloe shrugged, shaking her head in disapproval of circumstances.

"Definitely not." The two laughed in sweet unison.

"I mean..." The girl scanned the busy tiled hallway full of amateur posters, lockers, sweaty teenagers, and busy teachers, locking her eyes on one specific boy,

"How much you wanna bet that asshole with the mullet would hesitate on calling you a slur?" She smiled smugly.

"Oh god, 'would hesitate'? Motherfucker would use it as my nickname if I talked shit about football." Chloe giggled to herself.

"You're fun, Chloe! Hey you know, if you see me around maybe stop by and say something? Don't hesitate. Anyways, I gotta get going now."

"Hey wait-...your name?" Chloe asks her, raising an eyebrow up a little.

"My name?"

"Yeah, you never told me." Chloe nervously laughed a bit.

"Oh, right! Eden." She told her, rubbing her forearm letting out a small chuckle.

"Like the garden..." Chloe referenced, nodding to herself.

"Ugh, everybody always says that it's the most annoying thing." Eden glanced away annoyed.

"But you know what it means, right?" Eden shook her head in response and parted her lips, awaiting the answer, "Paradise." Chloe whispered, her face slowly retreating into an adorable beam.

"Paradise..." Eden repeated to herself, looking up at Chloe with a warm smile.

The two smiled at each other and looked into each other's eyes in warming glee for a few seconds. Interrupting the moment, Chloe suddenly heard a familiar voice call her name from behind, then another echoing through the dull paths between various classrooms. Eden turned to a clock on the wall and made the realization she might be late to her next class if she stayed any longer.

'Don't fuck this up, make her know you appreciate her company.' Eden recited in her head, dripping a nervous sweat across her forehead.

"Hey, I really gotta get to my next class now or else I'll be late again, but I'll see you around!" Eden told Chloe, joining the horde of students cluttering the hallway.

Her two best friends caught up with her as she zipped up her backpack and put the two straps on her shoulders. As she adjusted the rough straps, she faced the two. One looked her in the eyes while the other, slouched over, looked down at the floor with angst.

"Hey, Chloe." TYGER, a big bulky tall guy with a freshly shaved head begun, "Rocky's feelin' pretty shitty today, you got any advice I haven't already gave him?"

"TYGER, I told you not to say anything!" The other boy, Rocky, a skinny emo late teenage boy responded, upset at TYGER's lack of loyalty.

"Well if you don't open yourself up to getting help, somebody's gonna at least try to do it for you." He frowned, glaring at Rocky.

"Yeah, emphasis on trying." Rocky remarked, scoffing and crossing his arms.

"Hey what's the deal with you, Chloe? You didn't hear us yelling your name?" TYGER retreated back to a neutral expression, teasing Chloe with hopes of receiving a serious answer.

"I don't think most people could, maybe next time you should scream it and I might." Chloe sarcastically remarked, shaking her head at them.

"Ah, you wanna be like that? I see." He responded as he cupped his hands to his mouth, "Chloe!" TYGER yelled as loud as he possibly could, turning all the eyes on the three of them.

"Would you shut the fuck up, you idiot?!" Rocky says laughing at TYGER's response, pushing him into a locker.

"Tyler Harris!" A nearby teacher glared at him, "You are graduating this summer, set the appropriate model!"

"Sorry Miss G!" TYGER apologized, immediately after he mocked her with a nagging hand gesture.

Rocky began to snicker again, "Ah! Ah! There we go! You see that? I got a laugh out of him, Chloe!" TYGER gave a toothy grin looking toward her direction.

But Chloe was too busy looking towards the direction Eden went to notice. Her curled lips faded, thinking about Eden's short lived presence. She placed the tip of her finger in between her teeth and bit down, beginning to daydream. Tracking that girl down and absorbing herself in that presence, that energy once again; smiling, laughing.

Yet she looked at her environment, like a wild bird caged to an enclosure. Happy, yet longing for a home more comfortable alongside free birds like her. She let out one last upset breath of air, and weight plummeted to her shoulders, an escape from her reality shattered by a calling from the other side.

Beneath the surface of the large granite staircase stood an empty dead space room. The floor was dusty and unkempt. And the corners between the wall and the staircase was destined to be a spider's new home, but something always stopped them.

Lying in the space was Eden, sleeping to the sound of music playing through her earbuds. She'd gather here after school waiting for someone to pick her up and take her home. Yet she immersed herself in the world of her music. Avoiding a healthy eight hours, she couldn't resist the urge to doze off comfortably in her wedge just big enough to fit her and a little more. Drifting off into an escape, her reality became blurred for the betterment of her mind.

Chloe usually took a specific shortcut after school to walk outside into the outdoors, free of her stresses and worries, but her typical route was unfortunately shut off. She took a few steps beneath the surface of the staircase and locked eyes on Eden. She debated for a split second if she should keep going, preventing any chance of disturbing her newly found friend.

If she woke her up, would that be considered disrespectful? But what if she wasn't actually asleep? Maybe just in a zone listening to music? She'd been there before and she's well aware it's one of her only comfortable spots in life. What should she do? You know what, screw it, she didn't even care anymore. Chloe kneeled over calmly and lightly shook Eden. As she shook her sleeping body, she felt a cold shocking shiver slither down her spine and a flush of a freezing sensation.

Chloe started to panic inside. She pondered if this was the universe's way of telling her not to touch her. Would Eden get upset at her? What if she had ruined the odds of becoming closer? Her eyebrows curved inwards anxiously as she watched Eden's reaction.

Weary eyes opened slowly to a blurry face of fearful expression. It took Eden a second to process what was going on. She felt a trail of drool residue leading down her chin and her warm palm felt her holding the rectangular base of the device that changed her choice of music.

"Chloe?" Eden asked in a spinning daze of confusion.

"Shit I'm sorry, I woke you up didn't I? I just figured it'd be weird if I didn't say anything." Chloe tripped over her words.

"Hey wait, it's okay. I'm glad to see you." Eden's eyebrows curved inwards but the ends of her lips curved upwards looking straight up at her.

"Y- yeah?" Chloe stuttered, instinctually mimicking the same face Eden presented.

Washed away was the continuous regret and hesitance. Instead, a sea of warm tender relief replaced it, splashing her head to toe in peace. Her stomach and brain felt like soft TV static. Gentle, yet surreal sensations. She sat down next to Eden and reached her hand to her ear buds base. Eden squinted at her at first but connected the wires when Chloe asked her,

"Can I...?" Chloe asked below her breath ever so softly, almost as if she was talking to a cradled infant.

Eden replied with a gentle nod. Chloe then raised up the small device to get an accurate line of vision and read the screen. 'Make believe by Paranormal', the pixels read.

"You listen to Paranormal?" Chloe quickly grew a widened open mouth grin.

"I'm somewhat... closeted. Wait no! I- I didn't mean it like that!" Chloe giggled at Eden's dumb mistake.

"Sooo I'm assuming you don't like titties and you meant you're secretly punk?" Chloe continued to grin and giggle, shutting her eyes.

"I could've phrased that a lot better." Eden strayed from eye contact and slightly scowled.

"It's okay, whenever you're ready to come out."

"Shut up, I'm not gay!" Eden replied, starting to giggle with Chloe, playfully pushing her in the opposite direction.

"You know you have guts to accuse someone else of being gay when you wear that dyed emo haircut." Eden joked making a superior beam at her.

"Are you implying you don't like it?" Chloe looked away, reverting her joyous smirk to a downward curve.

"I never said that," Eden defended her, "I'm just saying most women who style that way typically like sucking up other women's saliva."

"Well shit, maybe you're onto something detective." Chloe's lips rose back up wide at the realization.

The two sit together side by side smiling looking directly in front of each other. Only in moments like these do seconds feel like minutes and minutes feel like hours. Eden suddenly spat out what was on her mind.

"Can I tell you something that might seem strange?" Eden asked her,

"I rarely judge my friends. You know, only if they're stupid." Chloe snickered in response.

"I was... Kind of yearning for the next time we'd see each other. Is that cheesy?" Eden quietly echoed at Chloe's eager glow.



"I don't think so. It's rare that I've ever been able to find someone I truly connect with in this town. And you... You fit that description." Chloe eyed Eden's heartwarmed grin in awe.

Eyes lock together tightly like hands held during a rainstorm. Eden's mere presence added a beautiful warmth to heart. She was an endearing stranger when they met, but now she wanted more. Chloe felt an urge inside to put her arms around her and never let go.

"Hey... Eden?" Chloe asks in a soft tone tickling Eden's earlobes.

"Yes?" Eden curiously replied.

"What are you um... Doing here of all places? Under the staircase?" Chloe scrunched her face up scanning the dust and spiderwebs surrounding them.

"Oh, this is where I wait for my... dad or someone... to pick me up." Eden darted her eyes down at her knees as her ease ridden grin faded.

"Do you um... See him very often?" Chloe muttered, twirling her hair around her finger deliberately looking away from Eden.

"I do... It's just... I guess I don't take advantage of it." She glares off in the distance for a short second.

The girls sat in unresolved silence as Eden continued looking at her knees, playing with her jeans. Her index finger and thumb grasped the small fold in the denim and she rubbed the material together, slowly turning to a moderately paced motion. The fluorescent LED panels hummed a looping buzz in the cold clammy air. It felt almost as if nobody was in the building at all. Eden shortly took a deep breath and began to speak again.

"We enjoy each other's company so much, it's funny to think we've only talked twice." She chuckled at the realization.

"You need to come over... To my house." Chloe impulsively spat out, her eyes twinkling like the curtains of nightfall.

"Your house?" Eden asked, scrunching up her face and raising a single eyebrow.

"You and me, outside this stupid ass school. I know you'd adore my room. Trust me, if you loved my show entry you'll love my room." Chloe exclaimed reassuringly.

"I don't know..." Eden looked away from her slowly.

"Oh... Yeah I'm um... Sorry." Chloe aimed her eyes away too, turning rosy red.

Eden looked back and felt a pit in her stomach seeing Chloe look so disappointed, "No no, it's not like that! It's just... You're kind of intimidating?"

"Intimidating?" Chloe asked, tilting her head ever so slightly.

"Chloe, as much as I want to know every little thing about you... You intimidate the hell out of me. You seem so bold and so brave about the causes you support... What if it hurts you?" Eden explained to Chloe, flushed and embarrassed, "I wanna do like you and make my stance on shit I know is undermined but I just don't know if I'm ready for that sort of commitment."

"Hey, that's totally fine!" Chloe touched Eden's shoulder gently, "We don't have to do anything you're not ready for yet. We can just have a normal hang out. What are you doing Saturday?"

"I'm free on Saturday." Eden tells Chloe, resulting in a sparkle of light to dance across the pupils of the two girls as they looked in awe.

Standing in the small blue house was Chloe, awaiting company. The house felt like a ghost town, barely even being occupied by more than one person. Everything was neat and clean and tidied up even before the plans were arranged.

The small little living room hosted a TV stand glossed over in spruce resin. It had two little cabinets containing a collection of VHS taped movies. A gray boxy CRT stood on top with a wide rectangular panel below the small little screen.

Not exactly knowing the most appropriate thing to wear for the occasion, Chloe wore a black bra under a fishnet shirt and a plaid skirt. She put her hair up in pigtails and wore jewelry she never usually wore. She debated if she should wear a dress or maybe just a shirt and pajamas, but in the end Chloe just threw something on that she knew would look good.

One knock at the door is all it took for her to completely stop pacing in front of the door and open it in utter excitement. Eden wore ripped up bell bottom jeans with a studded belt in a crop top with a design including thorny black roses.

"You look..." Chloe instinctively blurted out.

"Like I typically do?"

"Really... Um... Pretty." She stutters, cheeks glowing red.

"Oh? Th- Thank you." Eden shyly replies smirking, simultaneously twisting the ends of her hair.

"Here, come inside! My bedroom is right up these stairs." Chloe took hold of Eden's hand and guided her through the staircase up to her room.

Candles placed around the kitchen spread its sweet aroma everywhere it could reach. Hints of roses and orchids filled Eden's nose as she stepped foot up the small staircase. Vivid darkness shadowed over the hall leading to her room until they stepped inside.

Pushing the door open and clicking the light switch on, Eden was met with a room full of self expression and attitude. Political candidate support posters, small feminist organizations, artwork all over the walls depicting analogies and metaphors, symbols she'd never seen before. Colors popped out and screamed all kinds of messages. Most commonly, blues and purples and pinks would be prevalent among the walls. It was a lot to take in all at once, but she enjoyed it all slowly grinning.

"I don't know what to say." Eden told Chloe, waking around her room eyeing all the striking and controversial scenery.

"Too much or...?" Chloe smiled scratching her back.

"No, it's really inspiring actually!" She looked eagerly back at her.

"So... Why are you so hesitant to follow in my footsteps?" Chloe curved an eyebrow up raising her shoulders as well.

"It's... For a reason." Eden grabbed her own arm, rubbing it up and down.

Chloe fell onto her messy bed bouncing from the reaction. She placed her hand next to her side and patted the spot. She looked up at Eden simultaneously, gleaming in joy.

"Come on! You know you don't have to stand." Chloe politely offered.

Eden responded cooperatively, falling onto the bed, mirroring Chloe's fall. They turned their heads up at the ceiling. Looking up, they saw glow-in-the-dark star stickers barely holding onto the surface of the popcorn ceiling.

"It's not like I don't want to... This town disgusts me." Eden admitted in a mixed look of hesitation and frustration.

"Then what is it?" Chloe asked, watching the small rocks of ceiling popcorn barely held onto by a loose thread of dusty cobweb remains.

"I'm... afraid." Eden told her with a brief sigh, "Imagine what it would be like to be someone that breaks the traditional expectation..." She moved her eyes scanning Chloe and interrupted herself laughing, "Or I guess you don't have to." Chloe rolls her eyes giggling back in response, "But did you hear about what they did to that gay guy on the news?"

"I'm sure it's not as bad as other stories I've been told." Chloe replied unphased by the idea.

"Chloe, they catfished the poor guy and stabbed him in the stomach on the bridge over and over and over. They left him hanging upside down by rope late at night. The only reason he didn't fight back was because they drugged his drink at the bar."

"Fucking Christ, are you serious!?" Chloe muttered, terrified at the vision of the incident.

"That's already tragic enough, but now imagine if he was a transsexual or Asian or something on top of being gay. People don't like the things they don't understand here and feel threatened by it and you know how they cope in Cloverdale? They resort to violence to feel safer about themselves." Eden stammered as knots grinded in her stomach.

"But... there's a huuuge difference between being born with a sexual preference and raging against the rule of a country." Chloe exaggerates, inviting room for agreement.

"Yet you still make it known you're on their side! Do you really think anyone who makes that known is at no risk?" Eden rhetorically asked.

"I guess I get where you're coming from but..." Chloe sighed, closing her eyes for a split second, "If nobody does anything... Who's to say the world will change at all? The shit we hear... All because some guy was born liking other guys... It disgusts me. It disturbs me. I know it isn't my problem, but I feel responsible to make a path forward for a world that loves everyone." She spoke her mind, making occasional hand gestures.

"And you aren't afraid of what they'll do to you?" Eden somberly muttered under her breath.

"I totally am. But, if I die doing what's right... Molding a better world future generations would want to live in... I'll take the pain that comes with it. It's a small price to pay for me. Just imagine if one of us left a legacy on this world, the changes we could influence. I think there's still hope for this country, but not many people are doing anything about it."

"That's... A beautiful outlook." Eden acknowledged.

"It's one I grew up with. I never understood the appeal of bullying. I never understood the appeal of excluding someone because of something they can't control. And I'm not a saint... I've done it before, I think we all have. But especially as I grew up I became so intolerant to that shit. I would never force you to but..." Chloe rolled over to face Eden, "I think you should express your feelings." She suggested

Eden rolled over to face Chloe slower in the same way she did. The two's heartbeats increase. Locking eyes, Chloe placed her hand gently on Eden's as she looked up and smiled a heartwarmed grin. Eden's cheeks start to glow a subtle blush again. Chloe brushed a lock of Eden's hair with her fingers, putting it back behind her ear as Eden watched in awe. She then softly moved her palm, tenderly rubbing down to her neck and subtly stopping.

"I really like you..." Eden softly remarked, moving her eyes from her own lower body up to Chloe's glossy lips.

"Yeah?" She asked in sheer amusement, "I really like you... too."

Unspoken tension hung in the warm air, ripe with blossoming potential. Both girls lay face to face waiting for the other's next move to unfold and reveal the thrilling descriptions. Chloe gazed at Eden's lips as Eden moved her tongue across the top of them, somberly singing a sweet rhythmic melody in the confines of her inner consciousness.

Eden felt a sudden pause in her breath, noticing every little movement Chloe would make. Her cheeks and ears lobes grew a vibrant rosy hue, twiddling with a loose strand of her hair. She felt compelled and pulled to Chloe spiritually, unlike the strongest of magnetic charges.

Chloe finally traced her fingertips across Eden's smooth, soft delicate skin with care and sensitivity. She paved a short path from her collarbone to her shoulder, sending waves of anticipation and warmth within Eden's body. Ignited flames heating anywhere she would touch, it was like Chloe could read her.

Eden parted her lips slowly, catching Chloe's attention. Her gasps fell short and shallow in quick repetitions. Fog and condensation of stress and worries melted away as the rainfall showered

over it. Eden raised her hand up to Chloe's chin and she barely grazed her thumb across it, pulling her head in closer to her. Both of their heartbeats increased in pace. The two narrowed their faces together, only a breath away from each other's lips.

Chloe and Eden sat in melancholic silence, both yearning for more in the moment. Yet they looked forward to a path of beautiful connections and memories. Chloe closed her eyes and shut her lips, cherishing the slow sensual moment.

## CHAPTER 02 - THREADS OF CONNECTION

"Ice cream... Hmm..." Chloe mumbled to herself studying the warmer climate. "Don't you find it weird that it's still like January and there's no snow sticking to the ground?" she asked Eden calmly.

"Eh, early season warming isn't that uncommon. Especially in Oregon." Eden replied, softly rubbing the graphite tip of a pencil across a soft recycled paper brand.

"Well... I guess but... it just feels like we're in June. It should be freezing still, but it feels like so much has changed all too quickly." Chloe responded, biting the top of her index finger while looking down at her boots in frustration.

"You shouldn't worry as much as you do, Chloe." Eden set her pencil down, turning her head to the general vicinity of Chloe.

"It's not something I can control." she explained a little defensively. "It's just... instinct, for me." she replied subtly grunting.

"I understand that... But it seems like you're always anxious about things you can't control yourself. There's worse things going on that you have some control over, you catch my drift? Like what about the re-election of Ray? We're both voting age!" Eden explained, presenting a neutral resting face.

"Again, I can't control my anxiety. I don't think you do get that." Chloe quietly scoffed to herself.

"I'm sorry... Maybe ummm... a personal question," Eden stammered "Why aren't you afraid of like, assault? Of death? You go out and protest and riot, and does that never even cross your mind?" Eden raised a saddened, concerned eyebrow at Chloe, looking her straight in the eyes.

"You know, for someone so extroverted anybody would be surprised to learn you're the more reserved out of the two of us in this case." Chloe responded, slightly smirking and snickering to herself.

Eden shrugged, returning to creating visions on her notebook paper. They sat on a park bench together, side by side watching the lonesome playground stand like a husk of its former purpose. Ironically enough, nobody had played on it in the past few months at all. Yet, a mother duckling found shelter from the cold underneath the slide. With nowhere else to go, it was her only option. A man-made object, attracting the innocence and beauty of nature.

"I've been thinking about that thing you said." Eden glanced over at Chloe, awaiting her response.

"What thing?" Chloe stumbled, wrinkling her forehead with the swift movement of her eyebrows.

"You told me back at your house... You're willing to get yourself hurt or killed if it means you're paving the way for a better future." At first Chloe parted her lips and lowered her eyebrows slowly, ready to respond. But she was interrupted before she could even begin as Eden continued, "I think that's really admirable. A- and..."

Chloe's expression quickly returned to one of awe the moment she heard the word 'admirable'. Eden attempted to rehearse the next set of words she was going to say in her head, but it took a few seconds. She was indecisive about how she wanted to phrase things, but she finally came to a conclusion.

"I think I wanna start to try to be who I really am... on the inside." Eden slightly curved one end of her lips.

"Hah, I knew it! You were never into guys! Nobody like you would be into dudes!" Chloe responded teasingly, giggling in the middle of her second sentence.

"Wuh... What!? No! I told you I didn't mean it like that!" Eden smiled, closing her eyes and laughing along.

"Hey, I told you it's okay! Whenever you're ready to come out I'll be there for you!"

"Oh why's that? You wanna be the first in line or something?" Eden grew a wide single curved grin, as she looked off into the distance.

Chloe panicked, quickly shaking her head in response, "No! I meant like... a supporter! I'm as straight as like... a uhh a straw."

"A straw? A fucking straw?" Eden wheezed out in laughter, "You must use bendy straws then because whenever I see you, the gaydar overheats."

"Oh shut up, you dumb ass!" Chloe smiled and lightly hit Eden on the arm.

"And I'm not talking about one of those straws with the bendy joint at the top, I mean like those ones with the loops and all the curves and twists. You know, the ones you can spell your name with?" Eden ran with the joke, continuously laughing at her own humor.

"You're hilarious, Eden." Chloe sarcastically remarked, wearing a smug gleam.

"No, but for real, I wanna start joining you. I'm gonna start easing myself into this stuff slowly."

"So... You aren't afraid?" Chloe asked surprised, and excitedly jumped a tiny bit from her seat.

"Aren't as afraid. I'm bringing pepper spray and my pocket knife regardless." Eden reassured, bouncing her foot against the concrete quickly.

"That's not out of the picture for me either. It's kind of a... necessity." Chloe sighed, looking off at a political sign reading, 'Keith Underwood for FernHill County Sheriff 2000'.

"I've always wanted to be open about this stuff." Eden told Chloe, "I think I just needed someone to..." She locks eyes with Chloe again, looking at her genuine smile.

She could read an entire story in that expression. Eden began to realize that Chloe never slouched around her. She was never quiet either, never thinking for longer than she wanted to. Eden could tell Chloe felt genuine around her in a way she'd never seen before. Eden would remember sometimes glancing towards her around school, before they formally met. Chloe had been pale and hunched over, nervous and lost in her own mind. She never smiled. Instead she would look down at her feet while walking to her next class, unless she needed to look up for something. But the way she saw Chloe now was like yin and yang with old Chloe.

"Someone to help me escape my shell." Eden finished her sentence.

Chloe peacefully exhaled a small breath of air and, without thinking, she moved her hand towards Eden's. But before Eden could even notice, Chloe jolted it back. As much as she wanted



to, would she be the next one hung off the bridge? Even though it wasn't like that, strangers seem quick to assume. She didn't feel that way though, of course not. She'd always stood in support of women who have those feelings toward each other, but herself? There wasn't a chance. Eden was a friend, and that's all she ever could be. Just a best friend.

"Are you okay?" Eden asked as she placed her hand on Chloe's lower arm gently and softly without hesitation.

Chloe's face swiftly turned as red as the ripe flesh of a watermelon. Her heart skipped a beat as she adjusted her bottom lip, biting down on it. A tingling flush spread across her cheeks, making her jolt her eyes away from Eden. Chloe knew this was exactly what she wanted, but the fear of what could happen smacked her across the face., She had to tell Eden.

"D-... Don't touch me." Chloe blurted out, immediately regretting the implications of her words.

"Oh! Oh I'm... I'm sorry." Eden took her hand off, quickly shifting from warm and inviting to embarrassed and ashamed.

"Fuck! I didn't mean it like that! I just..." Eden listened with her lips slightly parted and one eyebrow higher than the other. "You know, what if people got the wrong idea. Remember... the story?"

"Ohhh... No, I totally understand where you're coming from. I just figured it'd be okay since—"

"But this is like in public..." Chloe interrupted her with a barely hidden frown.

"Right... We don't mean anything by it though, right?" Eden asked as she looked down at her rapidly tapping foot.

"Yeah! Of course not. Not, not like that..." Chloe ran her fingers through her hair, looking into the distance trying not to release a breath of air.

Seconds felt like minutes, and minutes felt like hours, but not like before. Chloe and Eden looked down at the dead grass beneath their leather combat boots as the blazing hot sunlight soaked into their pale moist skin, drenched in a layer of sweat.

"Eden?" Chloe looked over at her cautiously, interrupting the moderately lived silence.

"Chloe?" Eden replied, reciprocating her careful approach.

"What do you um... fear the most in life?" Chloe kept her eyes switching between looking down at her nails, and looking back up at Eden.

"Oh..." Eden paused and bit against her nail gently, thinking to herself, "Opening locked doors."

"Opening locked doors?" Chloe gazed at Eden with a welcoming sense of curiosity.

"Yeah... I have this recurring dream. I'm in my bedroom and I look out my window. Outside it's an empty void. Then soon after, I usually put my ear up to the door and listen. Cliques of people laugh and talk together enjoying each other's company. The first time I had the dream, I walked into the room excitedly and everybody paused. They turned their heads and made undivided eye contact with me. They just stood there and stared at me... I couldn't take it. I rushed back into my bedroom, slamming the door shut. Then, the laughing and conversations continued as if I was never there. A couple times after, I would isolate myself in my room and tears would just rush from my eyes without my input, like running water. I would try to repeat happy thoughts and memories, but my tears just kept rolling down. So one day, I had the dream again and I found this weird white mask on my bedside. The outside of the mask looked like it was smiling and laughing, but when I looked inside, I saw the mask looked like it was almost crying. I put it on and left the room and everybody started to treat me like we were lifelong friends. Everybody wanted to talk to me, yet I felt this instinctual urge to put on a persona, so I did. I told them lies on top of lies, and they ate it up happily."

"Wow... that's..."

"Surreal?" Eden interrupted, "Yeah, ever since, if I had that dream I'd always put on the mask."

"...You know, I think I like when we're alone together more." Chloe

"Why's that?" Eden darted her focus back to Chloe.

"It feels like there's a thousand sets of eyes all around us... judging our every move." Chloe explained, painting a picture of tension and isolation.

Sirens wailed and stomping feet echoed throughout the streets of Cloverdale. Groups of impassioned people flooded the avenue. Among the angry mass was Chloe. She stood between them all holding a sign of cardboard and wood with text in bold, colorful, eye-catching glitter letter stickers. The sign read:

**'WATCH YOUR BACK B4 THEY WATCH OURS. DON'T Let The ALL EYES Bill Pass!!!'**

Chloe felt right and as if she was wanted in the center of the cause. However, something tugged on her heart with an iron grasp. A crater in her heart that could only be filled with one admirable sweet face. Almost as if by some coincidental miracle, the hole snapped close like the end of a jigsaw puzzle. Chloe spotted Eden, weaving through the crowds, trying to get through to her.

"Chloe! Chloe!" Eden cried out, waving her arms up in the air like a lovable dork.

"Eden! I'm over here!" Chloe was determined to get to her, pushing and shoving her way through the tide of human sardines to get to Eden.

Once they finally met each other in the middle of the crowds, Eden tightly reached both her arms out and pulled her friend into her warm grasp. She firmly hugged Chloe's body against her own and rested her chin on Chloe's shoulder. Chloe stopped in place and put her arms in the same motion slowly, without any hesitation. Closing her eyes and earning a smile that reached wide and far, her body felt as if it melted into Eden's like pushing lumps of clay into each other creating a stronger whole. A familiar scent tickled her nose. Eden smelled like some combination of wood and grass, with notes of cinnamon and orange. It was uniquely inviting and comforting, and sweetly spicy. As long as she held onto her, Chloe felt like she was tucked into a cocoon of security and safety.

Eden held on and felt a sense of peace. Yet at the same time, it felt almost as if a hand or a set of fingers that weren't really there were pushing on the inside of her stomach. A bittersweet tender push. She'd never felt this sensation before, but she liked it. She felt an urge to hold onto Chloe as long as she possibly could. And, as her fingers stroked through Chloe's hair, it almost felt like the entire world had stopped spinning. Eden only wished she could savor it forever. Until shards of the moment shattered like glass, interrupted crudely by reality.

"You know what they did to you people in the past?" a stranger asked rhetorically, interrupting their joyous little world.

Eden reluctantly attempted to hold onto her longer, but Chloe let go, uncomfortably. Chloe's posture changed. Weighted and ashamed, she was contorting her face in pain, lowering her eyebrows and scrunching up. Chloe quickly noticed Eden's disappointment in her response, deeply craving making amends. But before she could even respond, Eden argued back, confronting the stranger.

"Excuse me, dick wad! Is there an issue here? We were just hugging!" Eden responded, facing the man with a confident, brave stature.

"I do, it looked like some fuckin' homo shit. You can go and take that faggotry in the bedroom, dykes." the stranger casually spouted, as if the language was second nature.

"Um... sorry but we aren't... anything." Chloe chimed into the conversation, timidly stroking her hair.

"And so what if we were!?" Eden simultaneously replied to Chloe and asked the strange man.

"If you were a couple of faggots, you'd burn in hell. Cause what you two are doing isn't natural. You're spitting in the face of our savior, Christ." The stranger stared Eden down in a glare, crossing his arms.

"Yeah? Alright, alright. I got some advice for you too. Go to the nearest bridge you see, and jump straight into the waters. Maybe then you'll find a purpose at the bottom of the bloody rocks!" Eden chewed back at him, laced with disgust.

The stranger burrowed his eyebrows in anger, turning ripe red. He grunted and huffed, glaring down at Eden's face, suddenly dread-ridden at the realization of what she had done. Chloe abruptly grabbed ahold of Eden's arm and jolted her into the opening of the crowd. Eden tried to contest her choice, but quickly co-operated. The two left the initial scene quietly. Chloe scanned for a less hostile bunch and unwillingly settled into a new group, surrounding local law enforcement.

As Chloe searched her surroundings, she saw a familiar man. Stood in a defensive stance, a middle aged man with a bushy mustache made eye contact with her and Eden through his tinted sunglasses. The bulky, buff man was suited in a navy blue police issued uniform, with a holster around his waistband containing a pistol and taser. As he looked at Chloe, he tipped his sunglasses and rested his arm on the top of a small, silver metal bar barrier, blocking off the crowds from the street.

He leaned in and taunted Chloe, "What exactly are you gettin' out of this?"

"Keith..." Chloe muttered to herself in disgust, staring into his dreary eyes weighted by dark bags.

"I questioned authority once and yuh know where I got? A smack on my ass cheeks that went red for weeks." Keith quipped, chuckling at Chloe's presence, "I suggest you and your little friend here run along home and let the decisions be made by professionals. Mr. Elliot knows what FernHill County needs.

"Are you trying to intimidate me? I hope you know it isn't working." Chloe asked, her glare unwavering.

"I'm tryin' to knock some logic into your stupid little punk mindset! You and the rest of these delusional followers won't influence the big man. Besides, why be afraid of surveillance if you ain't doin' nothin' illegal?"

"Because it's fucking weird, that's why! Cameras everywhere!? You know how many lives this could ruin!?"

"When will you learn, kid?" Keith smiled maliciously.

"Learn, ...what?" Chloe asked, her discomfort palpable.

"I know your secret. And I'll tell you right now, your people will never change this county."

Chloe's eyebrows furrowed into a scrunch as her nostrils flared. She shot another glare at Keith's sinister grin and gripped Eden's hand, maneuvering out of the protest spot. Her free hand curled into a fist.

"Fuck you, Keith." Chloe yelled back as he laughed at her.

Eden, caught off guard by the sudden confrontation, dropped her picket to the trashed concrete surface. She followed Chloe in dead silence, attempting to process the situation but lacking context. Though the more she tried to piece it together, Eden got caught up in a whirlwind of confusion and emotion.

"Nice meetin' yuh, new chick!" Keith hollered as they ran off together.

"What the fuck were you thinking!?" Chloe yelled at Eden, pacing back and forth in her bedroom as Eden sat on the bed, both hands on her knees, slouched over upset.

"Did you hear what he fucking asked us!?" She yelled back angrily looking up at her, "You know what they did to you people? You know what that implied! You know exactly what that fucking implied!" Eden yelled back at her.

"But why'd you have to give into it!? You could've ignored him, but you had to make a scene!" Chloe asked, throwing her hands in the air in frustration.

"I don't understand why you're so upset at me. You of all people should be proud of what I did for you! For us!" Eden pointed at Chloe.

"Proud? Oh you think I should be proud!?"

"Yeah, play dumb now like you didn't just tell me a couple weeks ago... Oh you're willing to stand up for whatever you believe in! As long as it paves the way for a better future!" Eden mocked her using air quotes.

"That wasn't paving the way for a better future, that was making an ass out of yourself! Don't you see that!?"

"Someone needed to put him in his place!"

"You could've gotten us killed back there, Eden!" Chloe screamed, pointing at the door behind her lunging at Eden.

"I did exactly what you told me you wanted to do!" Eden replied as her voice broke subtly.

"Yeah, except I meant stand up for what you believe in on a bigger scale! Protesting for gay marriage legalization, the hate crime law to be passed, getting murderers of same sex couples to be sentenced to harsher punishments! Not telling some bald-headed frog-looking dick bag to kill himself! What the hell is that gonna do!?"

"I was standing up... for both of us."

"And it could've cost us everything!" Chloe spilled out.

Eden looked down at her boots again, ashamed and upset. Chloe stood in front of her, arms facing the ground and fists clenched up. Eden felt a hard sheet of guilt thrown over her, taking Chloe's concern into realistic account.

Despite what happened, Chloe loved Eden. She shouldn't have ever yelled at her, right? Eden was just doing what she felt was right. She even encouraged her to. But once she finally followed through, she was yelled at and shamed for it. Chloe rushed over to her bed and sat down next to Eden.

Chloe's elbows rested on top of her knees as her fingers dug into her eyes and her both palms rubbed her face slowly as she sighed. She barely started to hear something in the deafening silence of the house. Somber gentle whimpers grazing the hairs of her ears, coming from her left.

She took her hands off her face slowly, and put them down to get thighs as she looked over at Eden.

Small clear translucent drops fell from Eden's face, her upper expression hidden from her hair. Her lips were clearly visible and the bottom lip quivered and shook as she bit down onto it, failing to hold it in place and preventing it from shaking. Chloe's heart sank into her chest and immediately she felt nauseous, almost like throwing up everything she'd eaten up to this moment all over her hardwood floor.

Her eyes became cloudy watching Eden sit there in pain, presumably due to her actions. Chloe's body trembled softly as a chill traveled down from her head to her spine. She felt terrible. Eden continued to whimper and sob, hunched over, watching as her teardrops fell to the floor and splashed into puddles of suffering.

Eden tried to suck it all back in and stop crying, yet her sniffles didn't get her anywhere but caught. The longer she did it, the louder she became despite how much she didn't want Chloe to realize. Chloe would perceive her as sensitive. But Eden knew she was strong and brave, and she wasn't some whiny little girl. She was so afraid of Chloe seeing her in a different light that she started to shake a little.

Without a second thought, Chloe reached in and put her arms around Eden's neck. She scooted in as close as she could so that they were touching sides, and dug her face into her neck, shielding her eyes from the room. Eden began to cry harder and harder, and Chloe just held on tighter. She tried to tell Eden something softly, but her mouth covered by her neck muffled the audibility of the words.

"I cannot understand a word you're saying right now." Eden told her, sniffing and giggling at the same time.

She raised her face off her neck and repeated the muffled sentence, "I'm so sorry... I made you cry."

"It's okay," She responded, continuing to whimper and sob softly, "I probably deserved it."

"Oh... No honey, of course you didn't. I ...went too far. I just... I'm scared."

"Scared of what would happen to us?" She asked, trying to pull herself together, sloppily.

Chloe slowly pulled her arms off of Eden and calmly started to stroke her fingers through Eden's hair, "Remember how I told you I'd be willing to die if it meant good for the world?"

"Yeah? Are you... afraid of dying?"

"No... no I'm not. I guess I'm really afraid of... you dying." Chloe stopped stroking her hair and looked down at the floor mirroring Eden's gaze.

Eden raised her head slowly and looked at Chloe, tear marks rolling down her cheeks. Her mouth was slightly opened and her eyebrows curved inwards and up, a tiny bit shocked by Chloe's answer.

"You got upset because—"

"Because I'm afraid of losing you!" Chloe interrupts mid-sentence, "You're the best friend I've ever had. I... I love you more than anyone else I've ever met... And if I lost you... I..."

Eden started to tear up again listening to Chloe's words. She feels the imaginary hand pushing on the inside of her stomach again, tying knots in her intestines, the bittersweet sensation she'd felt in the afternoon. Trembling slightly, she let the tears roll across her cheeks and kept listening to Chloe's every word.

"We just met a month ago and... and I feel more comfortable with you than I do with my own mom. You're so... real and genuine to me... You never judge or hate... You take interest in my passions when my other friends don't even think about it." Chloe explained, losing a steady rhythm of breath.

"Chloe..." Eden responded softly.

Chloe raised her head from her position and faced Eden. For the first time since they entered her bedroom, the two were seeing eye to eye. Eden's face was red with a mix of natural and make-up blush, with black mascara tear marks reminding Chloe of her actions. Chloe's face was red from natural blush. Her makeup was smeared and ruined from rubbing her hands across her face. She looked defeated and hurt, in a more vulnerable spot than Eden was used to seeing.

"I... I love you." Chloe finally admitted, bursting out into more tears immediately after.

Eden grabbed a hold of Chloe and embraced her against her own body. The two initially felt freezing cold in the sunset lit room, but embracing their bodies against one another and holding on tightly produced a warmth that heated them both up. It was the best relief the two had felt in a long time. It was passionate and tender, and it made them feel like, just for a moment, the entire universe revolves around the love they embraced for each other.



"I love you too... Ch- Chloe." Eden said, sniffing, as the tears kept rolling.

## CHAPTER 03 - HUES OF MELPOMENE

Paranormal or BLXZZRD?" Eden asked Chloe.

The two sat criss-crossed on Chloe's bed facing each other. Eden wore a visibly aged, oversized T-shirt with a floral skull design covering her underwear. On the other hand, Chloe wore a band tee that was on the brink of barely fitting her, alongside some baggy navy blue plaid pajama pants. It'd been a few weeks since their fight, which had proved to be a testament to their bond.

Stronger than ever before, the two started seeing each other at least once every weekday after the school day ended, assuming nothing interrupted their plans. Eden sleeping over at Chloe's house became a regular occurrence on weekends.

"Why do you always give me the hard ones? Why not something cool against something lame like... Storm vs Sorrow Instinct?"

"Because that's boring! Why would I ask you something if I already know the answer to it? Besides, you're the weird artsy one."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh shut up, you know what that means!" Eden smiled playfully.

"Fiiine. Paranormal I guess. ...You know, I'm getting kinda bored of this game."

"Well, what do you wanna do?"

"I don't know," Chloe responded, puzzled.

"Hey..." Eden said looking at Chloe as she sparked up and looked back at her.

"Yeah?"

"Remember that night when we... had the fight?"

"Oh... Um... Yeah I do. What about it?"

"I just... I remember how you comforted me after it all happened."

"Oh...?"

"How you stroked your fingers through my hair," Eden said, beginning to smile, slowly looking down at the bed. "The way you hugged me, you know... All the things you said?"

"Yeah, I'm really sorry... about all that. It was really embarrassing and stupid."

"Chloe..." Eden spoke as she took her hand and put it in hers.

Chloe went from looking ashamed and embarrassed, to sparks lighting up in her pupils. She once again made eye contact with Eden curiously. Eden's gaze was soft and warm, piquing Chloe's interest.

"I loved every second of it." She told Chloe with a gentle tone of voice.

"I... I felt the same way I just... I didn't wanna embarrass myself."

"Chloe!" Eden exclaimed frustrated.

Her head rushed with thoughts of panic and worry. Was she joking? Was this a setup? She probably looks stupid now, doesn't she? She wishes and wishes she could just escape the conversation but it'd be too awkward so obviously, she can't just walk out. 'I'll never hear the end of this!' Chloe thinks to herself.

"You know you can tell me anything, right?" Eden finished, melting away all Chloe's worries.

"Jesus fucking Christ, don't keep me waiting like that asshole!" Chloe playfully pushed Eden, giggling with her in relief.

"Have you ever thought about that moment... since it happened?"

"Better question: what's the correct amount so that I can admit I think about it a ton, but not in like a creepy way?"

Eden giggled to herself, "You're cute." Without thinking about the implication of what she was saying, her face began to blush.

Chloe followed along too, her lips separating leaving a small gap leading her mouth, "Y-... You think I'm cute?"

"Um... Yeah..." Eden replied, fixing her hair.

Chloe used the palm of her hand to lift herself up off her criss-cross position and onto her knees. Eden watched nervously as Chloe approached her, walking on her knees. When Chloe finally reached Eden, she sat on her legs and locked eyes with her. Eden moved her hands from her lap and put them next to Chloe's

hips, supporting her balance. The two stared at each other with awestruck expressions for a few short seconds. Eden excitedly anticipated what was going to happen next, while Chloe cautiously thought through what her next move would be. Chloe gently placed her warm palm onto the surface of Eden's right cheek and slowly moved her hair out of the way. She watched as Chloe moved her, puzzled by what she was doing.

Both their hearts raced and skipped a few beats as they watched each other's every move. Eden's breath slowed as she tried to catch it, but it only became irregular. Chloe took note of Eden's body language before taking her free left hand and grabbing Eden's hand.

Chloe closed both her eyes slowly, lashes gently smacking into each other. She approached Eden's face as Chloe mirrored the motion. The bridge of their noses just barely touched. The room became so silent that they could hear the inconsistent rhythms of each other's breaths over anything else. Chloe took in the scent of Eden's perfume again. The sweet notes of citrus fruits became more apparent, along with a strong kick of cinnamon sticks. Eden inhaled a small breath of air and started to hold it in for a short second.

Eden's forehead began to move slowly off Chloe's, as their chins got closer. Chloe quickly responded with the same motion. Their chins touched slightly, and Chloe moved to rest her lips on top of Eden's. They barely grazed the surface of each other's lips and started to feel the moisture from both making contact. They pushed into each other a little more and locked contact for a few seconds.

When they finished, Chloe lifted her face off of Eden as she did the same. The two looked at each other. Chloe's face was as red as Eden had ever seen it, and Eden could barely maintain eye contact, smiling so wide. When she finally met Chloe's eyes again, Chloe grabbed her cheek again and pushed their lips together, softly kissing with their eyes closed, changing positions carefully every few seconds. Chloe pushed her lips off Eden's again, and opened her lips to mutter something to her,

"I've been waiting for this moment for a while now..." Chloe stammered, opening her eyes to meet with Eden's which would shortly follow suit.

"I've been waiting for this moment..." Eden caught her breath for a short second, "Since I first met you."

Chloe shut her eyes and giggled with Eden for a bit, before moving back her lips into the same position they were in before. She moved her palm softly across Eden's cheek with care. Her palm naturally moved off her cheek onto her neck and eventually her shoulder as they continued to kiss gently. Eden barely opened her mouth, and decided to graze the side of Chloe's tongue with her own. Chloe responds positively repeating the same motions. They continued the passionate acts for a bit longer.

Chloe moved her hand to rub the curve on the side of Eden's stomach, eventually reaching her hip. Eden took Chloe's hand and guided Chloe to grab her forcefully as she rubbed her tongue against hers faster until Chloe jolted back off of her.

Eden looked upset at Chloe's reaction, and scooted even closer towards her. She pushed Chloe's chin up to hers with her index finger and looked at her with concern. Chloe looked back visibly sad.

"Hey, ...are you okay?" Eden calmly whispered, "You know... we don't have to do anything you're uncomfortable with, right?"

"Right, I understand that..." Chloe responded dully.

"Tell me what's going on?"

"It... It's..." Chloe stuttered, coming to a sigh by the end, "I'm afraid you won't see me the same way if I tell you."

"Chloe," Eden took both Chloe's hands, "nothing will change what we have... the way I see you... I promise you."

Chloe took a deep breath and slowly pushed herself off the bed. She then put her hand in her pajama pants and adjusted her genitalia area slightly. When she finished adjusting the area, she pulled out a strip of black tape that she showed Eden before she dropped it to the floor.

Examining Chloe's body closely, Eden noticed something. Initially surprised, Eden's face then fell into a genuine expression of pity. She suddenly felt the urge to say something.

"You're a tra-" Eden started to speak, until Chloe interrupted her quickly.

"Don't! I fucking hate that word! But... yeah. I'm so sorry I wasn't honest with you. I just... I'm not supposed to tell anyone. My mom told me from a young age, 'it'll end ugly'... B- but I trust you! I'm so sorry... I really am."

"I didn't expect anything like this..." Eden replied.

"This is probably a deal breaker for you, isn't it?"

"I don't see how it could be a deal breaker."

"Y- you don't?"

"Chloe, this doesn't change a thing for me. You're still the same girl I spent all these life-changing memories with. You're still the same girl I... fell in love with..."

"A- Am I even a real w- woman," Chloe stammered, quivering violently, "...If I wasn't born one?"

"Your genitals don't define you, Chloe. You're as much of a woman as I am!" Eden pleaded, tucking Chloe's hair behind her ear.

Chloe looked down at the floor and began to well up with tears. Before she even realized it, drops fell from her eyes. Eden noticed she had started to sob, and lifted herself off the bed as fast as she could to rush over to her. Eden wrapped her arms around Chloe and embraced her in a tight hug as her teardrops continued to fall from her eyelids. Chloe audibly started to whimper and breathe unsteadily.

"Shhhh, it's okay... It's all gonna be okay" Eden reassured her as she listened.

Before she could say another word, Chloe started speaking to her again, "I've n... never told anyone this... before in my entire life." In between her talking, she began to whimper a bit more until she could compose her next sentence, "I'm so... f- fucking afr-... afraid."

"I know, baby. And I'm really proud of you for building up your strength."

"You know... w- what would happen t- to me if the wrong person found ou- out about this? What would h- happen to me?"

"I get it... Being one of the only black women terrifies me, especially in Cloverdale."

"No! It- it's not that! I mean the government!"

"What about the government?"

"They'd arrest my mom for child abuse and send me off to some camp to 'treat my illness'. That's how they see it... a f- fucking mental illness!"

"You already know you have my word. I'll be six feet under the ground before I tell anyone else."

"It's not that. I tr- trust you." Chloe replied, wiping her nose with her wrist, "Can't you imagine how hard it is? Everyone sees me a certain way, but if I tell anyone I risk that perception being gone, I risk my mom landing in prison, nobody would ever see me the same way ever again."

"You're the bravest girl I've ever met, you know that?" Chloe looked at Eden smiling with moist eyes and tear marks, "And... me and you together are going to change this world. I promise you, one day at a time, we'll make the foundation of a future where you won't have to fear any of that happening. Okay?"

"I love you so f- fucking much, Eden" Chloe responded holding her tightly.

"I love you too, Chloe." She released their embrace and wiped the tears off Chloe's face, "Now we should get you cleaned up."

"Can you hold me again... Once we're done?" Chloe asks softly.

"For as long as you want, baby."

"Where are you taking me?" Eden took Chloe's hand, blindly guided by her throughout the walls of her house.

"Shhh, don't worry you'll love it, I promise!" Chloe reassured her, gently pressing on her bedroom door so as to not make any sound giving up their location.

Chloe successfully got through the door to her room and speed walked over to a set of short curtains. Rolling them back, she locked eyes on a metal bar attached to the frame of a small square window. Chloe's fingers pulled up on the bar, then left, rolling the panel back leading to the outside.

"This is really cute and all, but when can I open my eyes?" Eden asks.

"Be patient, we're almost there! Oh and make sure when I let go your eyes stay closed."

Chloe climbed through the window frame carefully, leaving her two socked feet on the shingles of the roof. She then grabbed Eden's hands and pulled her through the window, sitting on the roof beside her. Chloe looked off into the distance and smiled, finally telling Eden.

"You can open your eyes now."

Eden complied and looked at the sky around her. Pastel pink hues fading to oranges, fading to blues, covered in a wall of gently swaying gray clouds. The neighborhood around them was almost dead silent, the two girls being the only ones outside. Eden watched the sky and felt a gasp of breath before retreating to her normal rhythm.

"Oh... Chloe..." Eden said joyously, smiling full of admiration.

"Happy 19th, babe." Chloe replied, blushing at her.

"You're adorable." Eden sweetly smiled at Chloe.

Eden grasped Chloe's hand and scooted closer to her. She rested her titled head on Chloe's shoulders and happily sighed looking at the sunset. Chloe closed her eyes gently, feeling a warmth inside her stomach.

"I have a question, but it's kinda personal." Chloe told Eden, opening her eyes again.

"I trust you with my life, Chloe. No question you could ask could be too personal for me to answer."

"It's your birthday, what are you doing here with me? I- I mean I'm not complaining but you know, what about your family?"

"I am with my family. You're the only person I need." She replied, snuggling up closer to Chloe.

"Your Mom or Dad doesn't care if you're home on your birthday?" Chloe asked nonchalantly.

"Does all that even matter? I mean we get by, that's all that matters. At least to me."

Navy blue started to sink into the top of the array of colors in the sky. The crescent moon glowed and sparkled in the distance. They sat alone in the beauty for a few short seconds.

"I'm not sure where my life is going after all this." Eden admitted to her, "I feel lost in a sense. I don't know what I wanna do in my adult life."

"Do you see a future with me in it?" Chloe asked curiously.

"Well I can't lose you, you're too good in bed." Eden giggled, Chloe joining in quickly after.

"You don't have any aspirations?" She looked at Eden, puzzled.

"Of course I have aspirations. Psychology. I wanna help the people of our home find themselves. You know, like we did."

"Well, look into some state colleges. Maybe we can be together? I'm sure there's gotta be a psychology major in one."

"I just... Whenever I think about the future I feel dread. It's like a presence of doom, I guess. I should probably stay optimistic but... I just can't for some reason."

"Well... As long as I'm with you I promise I'll keep you safe." Chloe told her, playing with Eden's hair.

"Baby?" Eden asked Chloe.

"Yes?" Chloe responded.

"I love you." Eden told her, moving her head up to face Chloe.

She put her fingers under her chin and turned her face towards hers. Chloe turned beet red and parted her lips slightly. Before she could think another thought, Eden grabbed her cheek softly and pulled her forward. The two kissed as the crickets chirped and the sun finally moved away from the sky.

Later as the dark blue sanctuary dropped over the skies of daylight, stars shined brighter than ever in the moody nightfall. Rain spilled and poured from the stray gray clouds onto the surface of the beige grass, dead from the scorching heats of the afternoon. A familiar blue house stood in the middle of the scene encapsulating the scarce emerging natural beauty of the Earth. Inside the second floor lay a sleeping Chloe, drooling on her pillowcase.

A table parallel to her bedside supported her standard little flip phone device. The vibration started to buzz and shout as it received a call, yet not even a peep came out from Chloe. The vibrations echoed again shortly after they stopped, yet she still didn't wake.

Hours passed as the pattern repeated, until the room went dead silent. From out of nowhere, a loud pounding on the door jolted Chloe from her deep daze. She navigated through the thin walls of her house and made it down the stairs. Chloe gently turned the doorknob to reveal Eden, wet hair dripping down, her skin and clothes soaking.

"Oh my god are you okay!?" Chloe gasped, covering her dropped jaw with her hands.

"Just really c- c- cold... can you let me inside?" Eden whispered back, shivering and stuttering masking her frown with a forced smile.

"Of course, babe!" Chloe reassured her with a tight, tender embrace, "Come inside and we'll get you warmed up okay?"

"O- okay..." Eden tripped over her words, walking inside the house.

Chloe invited her inside and took her up to her room. From there, she offered Eden a shower, which Eden didn't hesitate to take. Rolling back the curtains, Eden stepped out and dried herself off, steaming red from the pressure and temperature of the water. She got dressed into her pajamas and met back with Chloe in her room, who gazed at her softly.

"Feel better now, hun?" Chloe inquired with concern.

"Yeah, thank you." Eden pursed her lips.

She made her way over to the bed next to Chloe and laid her head on her thighs, digging her face into Chloe's stomach. Black matte painted fingernails smoothly traced across Eden's scalp. She moved her head from her buried position and gazed up at Chloe happily.

"If you're comfortable and ready to tell me... can I ask why you're here? I'm really grateful, but there must be a reason."

"I just wanted to see my favorite girl."

"Is that really it?"

Eden squinted and scrunched up her face in frustration. She had attempted to shield Chloe from her wounded interior. Yet as much as she tried, she couldn't push her back anymore.

"Long story short, my parents found out about how you've been influencing me... and they don't like it. So, we had a fight. It ended when I told them they're barely even parents to me. I told them they couldn't



play both sides, acting like they care about me and then never engaging in my interests or comforting me, being there as supportive figures I could lean on. They snapped and told me if I think I'm such an adult, I can provide for myself. So, I walked all the way here to see you. I figured you could help get my mind off things."

"Eden... that's awful."

"I'm used to it. ...And honestly, the only family I need is right here with me."

Chloe lifted her lower eyelids and indented her eyebrows. Her grin grew end to end hearing Eden speak those words. Staring into Eden's eyes, she felt butterflies pushing against her chest.

"Do you think I could stay... here? Maybe just for a couple days."

"My mom's working graveyard and some day shifts sporadically all week. But Sunday, you should probably get home."

"Don't worry they're just petty like this. They'll want me back sooner than later." Eden began to let her mind wander before continuing, "Wait did you say graveyard and day shifts? What kind of job does your mom have?"

"She's a nurse at the Cloverdale Hospital. Did you hear about the shortage?"

"Shortage?"

"Hospitals are running low on nurses and doctors needed to treat Aspergillus so they're understaffed and overworking the ones they have."

"So... have you ever seen one of the infected bodies? You know, in person?"

"Yeah... it's tragic, really. My friend Rocky, his brother, was one of the first cases, at least in children. He... ended up not making it from what I heard."

"Is your mom around the house often?"

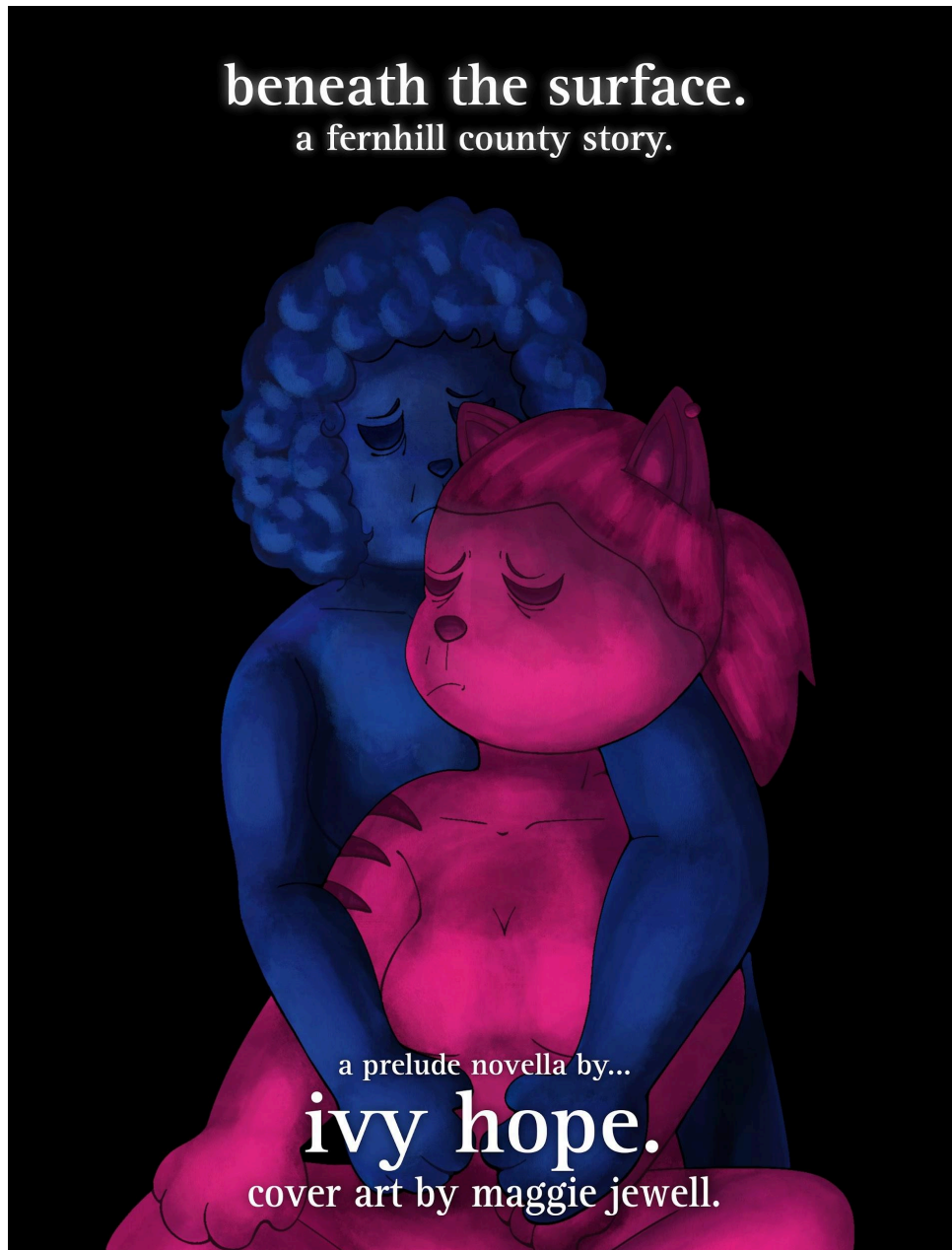
"No... she barely ever is. But I've learned to survive on my own. ...I miss her a lot. She's never around for long."

"Well... look on the bright side, when this is all over she'll probably try to make up for all the time you two lost together!"

"Yeah but the problem is, I don't know if Aspergillus will end."

"Mmm... no matter what just know, I feel your pain, Chloe. We'll get through this together. Together forever."

"Together forever." Chloe nodded.



## 04 - living alone.

a lone woman sat cramped in an office cubicle, slouched over stacks of papers, her pen tracing along the surface. The strokes rubbed softly against the blank sheet of printer paper. The tip of the pen began to dig into the page heavier.

The ballpoint ran steady and conservative, in motions back and forth, yet as the ticking from the clock rang in her eardrums, the woman pressed harder. Faster, her hand dragged. Long segments became short lines. The purpose became lost in a world of frustration. Before she knew it, the paper was a bleeding blob of scribbles.

A tall scrawny man in a branded polo shirt navigated his way through the identical rows of monotone white cubicles. The piercing fluorescent lights screamed throughout the room as did the clicks and clacks of keyboards. The woman's ears sat in a pain of acceptance.

The man looked down from above at the woman as he arrived at the cubicle. He scanned her every feature. The woman's auburn hair wrapped in a neat ponytail pulled upon her rosy scalp. Her green irises were sunk to the bottom of her eyelids, staring down at the ruined paper as her dominant hand shook in place. Her lips furrowed into a decline. Over the harsh noises of the room, she could hear a familiar voice.

"Hey!" The man exclaimed.

The woman turned her head and looked up, "Hi, Noah. You need anything?" She replied, stretching a polite 'smile' across her face.

"Not particularly, I was just in the neighborhood and figured I'd ask you something..." Noah declared, pointing his eyes down at the tips of his shoes.

"That is...?" She peered at the identical baby blue polo shirt they both were wearing.

"Well, you know your birthday is coming up quickly. The big twenty-eighter!" He laughed to himself.

"The exact same thing you said about my twenty-seventh..." Her eyes darted to the right.

"I um... just wanted to ask if you had any plans?" Noah cleared his throat.

"Uh... probably not... Birthdays aren't really special." Her eyes shifted back to the paper, tracing a set of barely visible blue eyes on she sheet indirectly traced onto the sheet.

"What!? Of course they are! Listen, how about this: Me and you, The Hex. It's this bar that-"

"No you listen," She quickly interrupted, "I know what you're trying to do and it's flattering but I'm not into..." She suddenly paused as her jaw lowered in fear.

"Not into...?"

"Not into um... drinking. I'd just... rather be alone on my birthday." Her shoulders hunched profusely.

"Right. Well, maybe that's what God would want from us right now." He grew a faked cheesy grin.

"Yeah, God..." She stared down into the traced eyes and huffed.

"Alright well, maybe some other time I could uh... treat you to dinner?" His voice shifted a pitch higher.

"Yeah, maybe." Her lips retreated from a forced smile to a resting face.

"Alright!" Noah stammered, "Good talking to you! Oh and uh, one more thing?"

"What." She gripped her pen tighter.

"Hypothetically speaking, chocolate, vanilla, or the daring choice, strawberry!?"

"Thai Tea." She dully spoke.

"Oh, um you can't choose that one. You'll have to settle for something else." Noah added quickly.

"Right... chocolate?" She clicked on her pen repeatedly.

"Oh actually, scratch that... Look I'll just put you down for vanilla if that's okay? Vanilla is good too, right?"

"It's... Safe."

"Okay Chlo, I'll see you around!" Noah hollered, walking away.

Just like that, Chloe dropped her scribbles and opted for clicking on her computer. A lone fish, swimming amongst the others in a straight coordinated line; It's safe.

Chloe finally pulled into her apartment complex. Careful steps lead to her front door as she examined a bright white slip taped into her door.

Skimming through it, the paper read, 'EVICTIION WARNING. This notice serves as an official warning regarding your tenancy at Shady Pines Apartments. It has come to our attention that there is evidence of illegal drug activity, specifically the possession of marijuana, on the premises. You are hereby required to cease this activity immediately. Failure to do so may result in further action, up to and including termination of your tenancy, eviction from property, and potential arrest.

In Best Regards - Matthew Easton'

'Silver Haze' the bottle read, '27% THC'. Gentle fingertips placed the buds onto the paper. The eviction notice now featured a dab of purple glue at the end.

The chunks huddled together, almost so much that it wouldn't practically roll. She finished the joint, twisting the ends, and placed the log up to her lips, igniting the lighter. She huffed as much smoke as she could, and reached for the TV remote on the coffee table.

Puffing big huffs of weed, Chloe sat her feet up on the table and scrolled through channels. Despite the amount she breathed in, her lips remained static. She jumped from channel to channel until she came across a local station, GTE News. A headline she read widened her pupils, as she coughed up her saliva.

"That's right Todd, Cloverdale High is officially hosting their last Art Show." The reporter said, "Due to budget cuts, Cloverdale High will be forced to shut down in August, merging with Ray Elliot Memorial High School. This means this will be Cloverdale's last art show for local FernHill County youth. Although, these cuts are necessary for... What does that say? Oh... Yes, increased budget for the police!"

Chloe's heart sunk into her chest as memories flooded back into her head. The day under the staircase, warm bodies giggling, eyes locked together, the slow tender moments of silence accompanied by the butterflies. Then, the lockers in the busy hallways. The beautiful curly hair, those enchanting blue eyes, her cute little puffy lips coated in a sheet of shiny lip gloss. She could smell the notes of perfume even without a trace of her presence.

Her vision became blurry, her eyes welling up. Chloe squinted hard and forced her head to the left, poking her fingertips onto her closed eyelids, teeth gritting. She took a slow breath in, and a slow breath out, reopening them and changing the station. It opened to a calm, older woman surrounded by plants.

"So, with our breathing activity done, I would like to ask you a question. It's one of reflection." The woman spoke to the screen, "Think back to when you were young. Ask your younger self, am I truly happy with who I have become?"

Chloe took the joint from her lips and looked down at the flowing smoke crawling to the ceiling. She turned her head around her apartment. A sink full of dishes, an unkempt gray carpet, and a colony of dead ants stuck to a baking soda trap on the coffee table.

Chloe pressed the off button and looked into the reflection of the TV. She took a puff from her eviction joint and stared into her own eyes from the reflection.

"You suck..." She muttered, "You... Suck!" Her voice became louder, "You suck! You suck! You fucking suck!" Chloe practically yelled at the screen as her fingers dug into her head. She started violently shaking, "You suck!" She started to scream and finally yelled, "God damn it, you suck! I hate you!"

'Cloverdale Rehabilitation & Therapy Clinic: Addictions Anonymous Meeting', the sign on the blue door read. Slouched over, Chloe walked through the doors and met the clerk at the front desk.

"Hi, are you here for the Addictions Anonymous Meeting?" She politely asked.

"Why, do I look like I'm under something? ...Sorry, yes I am."

"I've heard a lot worse. It's over to the right."



"Yeah, thanks."

Chloe stumbled over to the room, avoiding eye contact with anyone around. She grabbed a folding chair and gently sat down, holding onto her purse carefully.

"That was until Sheriff Underwood searched my car. He found my whole stash. And while I'm thankful nowadays, that seven-year sentence really scared me at the moment. And I have FernHill County's Sheriff to thank for that. I wouldn't be the man I am today without that moment." A gruffy voice spoke from two seats away from Chloe, as she fidgeted with her pants looking down at the floor.

"Psst, hey! Your eyes are really beautiful!" A soft-spoken bubbly feminine voice spoke from next to her.

"Right, thanks," Chloe replied, unphased by the compliment.

"Alright well, I'm not sure Sheriff Underwood was the root to your self-growth but the interesting perspective is appreciated. Now, Eden..."

Chloe's heart skipped a beat upon hearing that name. Her body froze in place. It felt as if all her guts rose up to her throat like she was about to throw them up all over the tile floor.

Eden Hart? In the same meeting? It couldn't be true. Chloe thought to herself.

"Dina. It's Dina, Mr. Barlowe." The woman responded.

She never went by Dina... Just a coincidence. Right? Chloe peered her head up and looked over to her left.

"I apologize, Dina. Jeez, three years and you think I would've gotten it huh? Anyways, you've been a proud member of our Rehabilitation Center for three years now. Would you care to share your story with the group?"

"Of course, Mr. Barlowe. In my late teenage years, I was introduced to alcohol by a close friend of mine,"

'Ocean blue eyes, amber skin, curly locks of beautiful black hair... It's Eden.' Chloe began to tear up watching her speak for the first time in ten years.

"Whereas she preferred we used it sparingly for celebrations or fun, I started drinking regularly. I felt as if it exposed a facade of myself to others. Like a convincing mask of the real Dina Hart. The only person I'd been truly genuine to was my best friend. Something happened between us, and we haven't talked since, but the loss motivated me to drink more. I'd chug glasses of wine at dinner and then wash it down with butterscotch whiskey the next day, it was self-destructive and toxic to me and my friends. Up until a few years ago, alcohol was the only way I could bear to get through day-to-day life. But now, I've found a community here, and I can proudly admit I'm finally happy."

She's... Changed. I... I'm so proud

"Thank you, Dina. That's just one example of how resilience and courage can go such a long way to self-recovery. If she can do it, all of you can too. And clearly, you do have the motivation, otherwise, why would you show up? Now, new girl, what's your name?" Mr. Barlowe asked, looking towards Chloe.

Chloe scanned around the room nervously, catching Eden's beautiful grin. Just as she remembered it, filling her soul with warmth. Eden even smiled at her, but it felt as if something was off.

"Oh um, I'm sorry I'm not ready yet, can you move on to the next person?"

"Of course, take your time. Bill!"

Chloe turned over to her left and tapped on Eden's shoulder, similar to how she just had a second ago. Eden turned her head over in Chloe's direction, and smiled once again, a warming beam in a world of black and white. She added a short little wave, cute enough to melt Chloe's heart.

"Hey, Eden!" Chloe whispered to her, "It's me! Remember?"

"I'm sorry ma'am I go by Dina now, I think you might have me mixed up with someone else..."

"Eden, It's Chloe! Chloe Thorn?"

Eden locked eyes with Chloe as her jaw dropped. Her pupils shrank as it felt like a fist was pounding against her stomach. Eden's vision became cloudy quickly as her eyes welled up with tears. It was as if time had frozen in the room around them, and they could only listen to the skipped beats of each other's hearts. Eden grasped Chloe's hand as she pulled the two of them outside the building.

When they arrived outside the building, Chloe opened her mouth to begin to speak, until Eden quickly grabbed ahold of Chloe's body and yanked it into a warm hug. Chloe leaned in too, and ran her fingers through Eden's hair slowly, gently stroking it.

"Shhh... It's okay. Everything is gonna be okay now." Chloe spoke softly.

Chloe began to feel Eden's rigid breaths against her neck. A slow breath in became interrupted by little pauses. Chloe squinted her eyes hard, puckering her eyebrows. Eden kept trying to hold onto deep breathing but suddenly choked on the tears she finally let go from her eyelids, hiccuping on her own sobs. The pressure had been released, as Eden let out every raw emotion she'd been keeping.

Chloe began to grit her teeth again, locking her own breaths from escaping at hearing Eden's pure sobs. Her fist clenched up on Eden's backside until her body became weak, and she just pulled Eden closer to her body. She slowly opened her eyes as a single streak ran across her eyes and slowly down her cheek, as her lips rose up, finally smiling.

Eden moved away from the hug after what felt like hours had passed and looked Chloe in the eyes. She cracked a smile of relief, despite her mascara running from her eyelids. Chloe's lashes twitched, as her lips only rose higher.

"You're just as beautiful as I remember." Eden giggled, running her fingers through Chloe's hair, "Your cotton candy blue hair..."

"Yeah... I cut it off." Chloe looked at her, rubbing her arm.

"Why? It was so cute." Eden began to caress her cheek.

"All good things come to an end eventually."

Waiters and waitresses rushed around the restaurant serving each table in a hurry, navigating through booths and tables. Noises of happy strangers echoed through the building as the two women sat in a booth by a large window. The starry, blue night sky complimented the hazy yellows and oranges of the diner. Eden dug into her scrambled eggs like a dump truck, forgetting the hash browns and bacon on the side of the plate. Chloe just watched with a smile on her face.

Eden set her fork down, and poked her head up to Chloe, "I'm sorry, I probably look like a pig right now huh?" She giggled, blushing.

"No, no. It's okay. Long day?"

"Long week... But yeah... I've been starving all day. So, stranger, where have you been?"

"Um... I landed a job as a data entry clerk."

"Really? Chloe Thorn: Data entry clerk? You've really changed haven't you?"

"I... Um... It's safe."

"So, are you... Seeing anyone?"

Chloe shook her head, looking down at the table, "Since we broke up, I got with this guy named Tyler. We were in a band together when we were teens. I guess... Shared loss of a close friend brought us together. But we only dated for a week. We agreed we were better as friends. I heard he's doing well now, enlisting in the military last I heard. After that... No."

"Well if we're being honest, I haven't either. I don't know why. Maybe I was just... I don't know. Hey, it's kinda funny that you of all people wouldn't try to stop him from enlisting!"

"It feels like it's been a decade since I've seen you." Chloe replied, ignoring the remark at the end of Eden's sentence.

"It has been" Eden looked away from Chloe's eyes down at her own knees.

Chloe choked on the food she just put into her mouth and burst out coughing, "Really!?"

"Dude are you okay!?" Her head popped up from her narrowed direction back towards Chloe.

She cleared her throat, "Wrong pipe." Chloe clarified, immediately sipping her ice water.

"Yeah... Ten years. Goes by fast doesn't it?" Eden forced a giggle.

"Too fast."

"What about your family?"

"My mom's dead. You know my dad got the electric chair a few years ago, right? Yeah... I don't really have any family. It's just me now."

"I'm so sorry" Eden cupped her warm mug of hot chocolate, looking down at the reflection.

"It's really fine. I've learned how to live alone."

"But..." Eden leaned in and looked into her eyes as Chloe looked back up at her's, noticing Eden's body language, "Is that the life you wanna live?"

It felt as if a million little stones fell on top of her at once when Eden said that. Her stomach felt as if it was eating itself up inside. Her eyebrows lowered, and her hands started shaking. She felt ready to throw up all over the table upon hearing that one sentence.

I'm so alone. voices in Chloe's head began to echo, I don't love anybody, nobody is there to love me... What have I been doing with my life? I just want... I just want to feel a real connection again.

"I don't..." Chloe swallowed her saliva as a drop of sweat ran down her forehead, "I don't know, Eden. I don't know anything anymore"

"Hey," Eden lifted Chloe's chin up to look at her again, "I know this beautiful spot out in the park a couple miles away from here. How about we get your mind off this?" Chloe nodded.

"You know any constellations?" Eden asked Chloe, both lying down on a soft vibrant blanket.

The cool blues of the night illuminated both of their faces in soft, gentle hues. Their two arms faced close together, side by side in the gentle wind. The stars beamed down from the enchanting sky back at them, like loving eyes, blinking at the two.

Chloe took a deep breath and smiled softly, as she closed her eyes, "Not a single one." The two giggled.

"Yeah, maybe, none of that matters."

"That's a bit nihilistic."



"You're telling me about nihilism?" Eden remarked as Chloe chuckled, "I mean, in the moment. I know it matters to some people out there, but maybe what the universe wants us to focus on right now is something more... important."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Eden closed her eyes and took a deep breath in, and then out.

"Dina, huh?" Chloe smirked and looked over at Eden.

"Huh?"

"Dina, you said that was your name?"

"You know, as real as I am at rehab now, I still feel as if I can't be completely honest. It's supposed to be a place of authenticity and honesty, yet this home doesn't accept people like us. You remembered when I had to hold back and call you my 'best friend'? You were, but we both know the true relationship we had."

"Yeah... You were the only girl I ever loved. You were the only person I ever loved." Chloe added, fidgeting with her shirt and looking up at the blues in the clouds.

"I can't get that type of authenticity from anyone else, you know." Eden sighed, squinting her eyes.

"Did you ever come out to your parents?" Chloe bit her lip, asking carefully.

"Yeah, I did. A few nights after you left me. I was tired of holding it in."

"If you don't mind me asking..."

"They kicked me out and disowned me as their daughter. The audacity of them doing that, even after a suicide attempt."

"I'm so sorry..."

"No it's okay, it took years of therapy but I kicked their ass by getting myself off the streets and paying for college all myself. I miss them every now and then but I just remember my real family is my support group."

"So, what are you doing now?"

"I majored in the arts and landed a job as a storyboard artist for kids cartoons. It's a contract job so I don't get paid well, but it keeps me afloat."

"Oh my God, Eden, that's so amazing, I'm so proud of you!" Chloe turned over to her and placed her hand on her arm.

Eden turned over in the same direction and met eyes with Chloe. They both got lost in each other, reading stories in each other's expressions. Eden moved closer to Chloe's body as she eagerly watched.

"I've been thinking about you since the day we split..." Chloe whispered to Eden, sparked by the glow of anticipation.

"You... missed me?" Eden's brows curled as her lips soured, then moved back up again as goosebumps appeared on the surface of her skin.

"I... thought I'd never see your face again, Eden." Chloe's eyes filled like a pail of water, hyper fixated on every one of Eden's moves.

Eden leaned into her face, as Chloe moved to meet her. Her hand rubbed up against Chloe's hips as their lips softly introduced each other once again, moving faster and more tender the longer they lay on the blanket. Eden pulled off Chloe and cupped her face with her hands.

"Let's get out of here, you and me." Eden suggested, breathing heavily.

"Where?" Chloe's heart only kept pumping faster and faster.

"Back to my place." Eden bit her lip as Chloe's face turned beat red.

Eden jangled her keys trying to find the right one to unlock her apartment door. Chloe examined the surroundings, becoming increasingly disappointed for Eden's settled lifestyle. The air stank of cigarettes, and only a couple miles away, you could hear the busy streets of the city. It felt like a hole that was just good enough, and a life she'd just be okay with, not fulfilling her potential to the highs she knew Eden could reach.

"How long has it been since you've been with someone?" Eden asked as she opened the door to a very mediocre room.

"Sometimes I pay hookers. Maybe... two months?" Eden looked back again at Chloe replying with a strong look of shock and concern.

"Don't worry, I get tested! My last one was last week actually. I'm clean, promise." Chloe smiled, as Eden rolled her eyes.

"Are you even that good anymore?" Eden teasingly giggled, leading Chloe to the inside of her home.

"Of course I am, that's one thing that didn't change." Chloe smirked, making her way to the couch.

The white walls and dark grays of the carpet added with the stench of stagnant air caused Chloe's mind to sour rather than swim to a higher place. All she could feel was guilt. All she could wonder was, what if I didn't leave her? Would Eden be here if she had stayed? Would they have been... happy?

"Come on," Eden's rosy face smiled as she took Chloe's hand and led her to her bedroom.

Chloe immediately dropped thinking about the life they might have led and began anticipating. Eden's wide hips, her luscious lips, those ocean-blue eyes. Everything festered and crackled in her stomach, forming butterflies pounding, begging to escape. Chloe began to shake as the door opened.

Chloe laid down on top of the bed sheets in her bra, one strap loosely adjusted. Eden paced up Chloe's body, tracing one finger on her warm pale skin, lips caressing hers. Eden sat on her thighs, moving her left hand off of Chloe's cheek, down to her panties, barely tracing the outline of her shaft. Chloe instinctively burst out into a soft, loud moan. As Eden heard, she bit her lower lip and gripped onto the base, picking up pace, up and down.

"I want you so fucking bad," Eden barely muttered over her breathing, "Turn me over and use me like I'm nothing."

Eden rolled off and looked up at the ceiling, touching herself to the sound of Chloe's voice. Chloe moved on top of Eden, taking her panties off. She gripped the shaft of her penis and stroked up and down, watching as Eden played with herself watching. She spat at Chloe's face biting her lip and turned a more pronounced shade of red.

"Put in me you stupid bitch!" Eden yelled out teasingly.

Suddenly, Chloe smacked Eden across the face. She rubbed her cheek as her smile grew bigger. Chloe lowered her face down to meet with Eden's as her tip slid into Eden. Lips met once more as tongues reintroduced each other in the dim light of a single lamp. Chloe opened her eyes and lifted her head looking down at Eden.

"Eat this up you stupid whore, you know you won't get it better anywhere else." Chloe muttered as Eden's eyelids twitched and her lip quivered.

"Fuck, fuck, mmm..." She moaned as Chloe thumped against her.

Saliva trickled down from Chloe's lips, onto Eden's stomach. She paused and lowered her head down and took Eden's bra off, as she smiled back at her. Chloe stared down at Eden's exposed breasts. The motions went faster, and faster.

"Fuck, fuck, I'm almost-" Eden moaned until she was interrupted by her climax.

Eden squirted all over her bed sheets, letting out a harsh, echoing moan. Chloe licked her lips watching, and leaned in to bite Eden's lip as she came. Once she was done, she moved to the side of the bed next to her and sat, pondering her thoughts.

"Hey, don't you want to finish? You never came?" Eden asked, moving in close next to Chloe, snuggling her.

"I didn't need to." Chloe mumbled, looking down at her bare thighs.

"Well... Okay. As long as you don't leave again" Eden giggled, leaning her head against Chloe's.

Chloe immediately pushed her off and scooted away, "Don't make those kinds of jokes."

"What?"

"I said, don't-"

"No, no I'm fully aware of what you just said. What I'm asking is, why can't I?"

"They make me uncomfortable..."

"Oh, they make you uncomfortable!?! Do you have any idea how I felt when you got up and fucking abandoned me!?" Eden rose up off the bed and looked down at her, "I was at my lowest point in damn life, Chloe! You know what my Mom told me a few days before!?! No faggot is a child of mine. You know what that does to a person!?"

"Eden, I'm sorry. I really am."

"You didn't even meet me in the damn hospital! Now you're sorry?!" Eden choked up on her own sobbing and cleared her throat before continuing, "I could forgive all of it if you weren't such a Goddamn bore now! Closed off and quiet, that's not the you I know!"

"You think I look depressed but look at you! Living in a smelly apartment next to the big city! A storyboard artist at a damn cartoon studio, you know you don't love your job!" Chloe yelled back at her clenching her fists.

"Chloe, I'm happy! Can't you understand that!?! This isn't my ideal life but I'm okay with that. I settled for this and came to peace with it! I love my job, and I'm okay living here!"

"You're okay with living alone?" Chloe asked, jealousy pulsing through her.

Eden felt weak, cringing at the sentence she sat back down on the bed next to her. Her eyes got moist and red once more. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and looked back at Chloe.

"You've changed. And I'm not sure if it was for the better. You felt more passionate during sex than you were the entire day we spent together..."

"So, what... You don't love me anymore?"

"I love the Chloe that's still in there. The Chloe I saw hints of throughout the day. Not... this. You're not happy, and it's blocking your authenticity, we both know that."

Silence grasped the air. The two sat and looked down at the floor. It felt as if a wall had been built between them.

"I think you should go."

Chloe let out an unintentional mumble as she left Eden's car, "Is this it? Is this the end?"



She was in front of her apartment once again, greeted by the cold whispers of a black night. A single shiver traveled down her spine. Eden reached into her pocket and gave Chloe a folded piece of paper. Before she knew it, she was out of her apartment parking lot. Chloe stared down at the note, but thorns and spikes bit at her stomach, anxiety rushing with what might be inside. She left it back in her pocket.

Chloe clumsily put in the keys, unlocked the door, and stumbled back in. She sat down on the couch, glancing at the reflection on the TV screen. Chloe looked at the bottle of weed. She sighed, and closed her eyes reaching for the bottle. She grabbed a hold of it and threw it to the other side of the room. She began to hyperventilate looking at herself again.

I only had one shot at this... And I blew it. Chloe thought to herself.

The direction of her eyes shifted to an electric hair razor...

## Chapter Five - Fractured Canvas.

Sunlight pierced through the cracked curtains of Chloe's bedroom window, a silent, yet peaceful alarm to the real world. Throughout the night, Chloe would toss and turn from within the warm bed sheets and cozy blankets. Their positions changed from either of them being held, to inevitably meeting face to face, locking the bridges of their nose together.

Eden opened her eyes, tapped on the shoulder by sunlight. Her heart melted, watching Chloe in such a serene state. Gently reaching for the remote, Eden turned on Chloe's CRT television set. The volume was loud and bold, screaming out at her. Eden jumped in shock. Despite the embarrassing scene, Chloe stayed deep asleep. In a panic, she lowered the volume urgently and began flipping through channels.

Assortments of programming on the blurry screen finally rested on a local news channel, GTE News, as Eden felt satisfied enough with the choice. On the blurry screen, two balding old men argued and bantered

with the headline reading, "Threat to Humanity Or Viral Flu Variant?". Eden leaned in, engaging with the debate between the two men.

"The consequences of pollution are taking place, and it's the fault of snobs like you!" One man in glasses passionately argued with the other, who had an impressive white beard.

"Consequences of pollution, right. We still don't know nearly enough about this disease to chalk it up to some ridiculous global warming hoax!" Eden chuckled and rolled her eyes.

"This fungus mutated to withstand higher temperatures! We could have prevented this if we took responsibility. Mother nature is plotting revenge-"

"I'm gonna stop you right there. Before you spew out some stupid hippie communist agenda and embarrass yourself, you can thank me later. Cause I for one, don't believe it! This is clearly an attack on America from terrorists of North Korea, maybe Iraq!?" He grossly exaggerated.

"No, no, no! There are specific statistics that show a rise in climate temperatures rising-"

"I understand your perspective sir, but the root of the solution lies in Jesus Christ. Think of the lovers, grabbed by the scorching hands of the devil and torn apart from each other! We need to pray this away!"

Chloe awoke amused, glancing at the TV and met Eden's gaze, "Still not used to the butterflies I get when I see you laying in my bed with me." She flirtatiously voiced.

Eden turned her attention from the news station to face Chloe, joyously beaming with a chuckle, "Good morning, beautiful." She pecked Chloe's lips.

"You're watching this garbage? GTE --- Government Televised Entertainment?" Chloe rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"Wait, doesn't it stand for education?"

Chloe scoffed, "That's what the cuckservatives want you to believe... But with the amount of BS they feed these idiots, it should be named entertainment."

She then took a deep breath of her bedroom air, wrinkling her nose up in disgust as she traced the scent to its origin. She took a few more instinctive sniffs. She raised a concerned brow at Eden and lifted one corner of her lip.

"What?" Eden shrugged, unfazed by the expression.

"Dude..." Chloe dramatically spoke.

"What!?" Eden grew a cheeky smile.

"You stink, go take a shower!" Chloe giggled.

"Why, cause you wanna see me undress or something?" Eden teased, blushing

"No, because you smell like sweat and B.O.!" Chloe laughed, playfully hitting her with a pillow, "Could be that too though..."

"Alright, alright." Eden shook her head.

Eden and Chloe finished her quick morning shower. The two girls brushed their teeth together glancing at each other in the mirror. The bathroom was beach themed with various sizes and types of rubber ducks, and the shower curtain set the mood of one. On top of the blue surface surrounding the sink, under the mirror cabinet sat a small hot pink glass, about as big as a shot glass.

After brushing her teeth Eden had a grand idea. She grabbed her brush from out of her own mouth and forced it in Chloe's mouth. Chloe's eyes widened in a flash. She choked the brush out of her mouth. She spat with a burrowing frown.

"Pleh!" Chloe jolted in shock, "Not cool! That's gross!" she exclaimed in shock and frustration.

Eden choked on her laughter, "Oh my god you should've seen the look on your face!"

"Yeah, it's really funny until you're getting someone's used toothbrush in your mouth." Chloe bantered, setting her toothbrush down.

Eden began to let her posture loose and lower her eyebrows softly, "Come on, did it really make you that upset?"

Chloe washed her mouth out. She then hummed a sentence to Eden. She couldn't quite make it out so she leaned in closer.

"What's tha--" Eden abruptly ended her sentence as Chloe sprayed an entire mouth full of rinse water onto Eden's face, Chloe choked up on her laughter.

"Okay, now I get it." Eden said with an amused head shake.

As Eden smelled the sweet fluoride toothpaste, she thought to herself, She played back! My adorable little nuisance.

Chloe grabbed a towel under the sink and handed it to Eden, "Here, for your face?"

"Aww, you're not just gonna let me sit dripping in your nasty saliva water?" Eden teased in a higher-pitched voice.

"Gee, thanks Chloe, that's so thoughtful of you!" She mocked back, blushing.

"Oh it sure is!" Eden played along, "And how about just because I love you so much, I lick the feet you've graciously touched the floor with?"

"Alright, you win the pity off!" Chloe hid her giggle with her hand.

"I love you, Chloe." Eden laughed.

"I love you too." Chloe grinned, "Now take the towel before I shove it into your face again like the mouth rinse!"

Eden rubbed the soft crimson bristles of the towel across her soaked face. She tossed the towel to Chloe. She wiped her face off. The playful banter settled as the girls started to put together the day's plans.

"So..." Chloe puffed out a breath, "What do you wanna do today?"

"Let's go out thrifting!" Eden's eyes lit up.

"Shopping should be fun!" Chloe shrugged, nodding.

"Shopping should be fun, I said!" Chloe mocked herself, carelessly moving clothes on the rack in boredom.

Meanwhile Eden meticulously examined and scanned each item--crop top, tube top, tank top, t-shirt, and dress--judging it according to her own preferences, "Mmm... yeah, no. But what about... this one... Eh too plain." she talked to herself under her breath.

Chloe snuck past the different racks of clothing with the stealth of a cat. She entered the inside of the rack. A few hangers rattled. Eden stopped and froze.

"Hello?" Eden called, raising an eyebrow, and glancing around the rack.

"Boo!" Chloe yelled out as Eden pushed back the hangers, revealing her mischievous grin.

Eden jumped backwards letting out an "Ack!" and almost tripping over her sneakers.

Chloe choked on her own laughter, "That was for the toothbrush incident this morning!" She ducked under the rack, walking out of it.

"Are you seriously this bored!?" Eden shot a glare.

"Come on, I can't have a little fun here?" She grinned as Eden resumed judging the variety of tops.

"You were the one that said shopping should be fun." Eden rolled her eyes, pushing the hangers to and fro.

"Yeah well, that was before I knew we were gonna go to these musty, dusty grandma stores! Like you'd seriously wear the things you've seen here? This is not where you wanna go to thrift, honey."

"Gah! Chloe! Go to the accessory section, or whatever! I think I found something... I don't remember." Eden barely glanced away from her main focus.

"Yeah, okay, maybe I can get that broken fortune teller over there to tell you this is a waste of time," Chloe mumbled, tilting her head and sighing. She scanned the room and saw two creepy-looking dolls, which renewed her interest.

Chloe skimmed through the other half of the store, making her way through shelves of board games and stuffed animals. Finally, she stumbled upon the two dolls. They were having a tea party. One doll's skin was a pasty pale white with rosy red cheeks, with a head of platinum blonde hair poking through her baby blue bonnet. She wore a small light blue laced dress to match her bonnet. The other doll followed the same clothing pattern but her skin was a light brown with curly black hair. Her outfit was a soft red. The blue-dressed doll was stretched out to hold something, though there was nothing to hold.

The blue doll sat in her designated seat, with streaks of marker ink emerging from the bottom of beady plastic eyes to her cheeks. The other red fitted doll had been stuck raising her glass to her lips, taking an imaginary sip.

What is this even supposed to be? Chloe thought to herself with bare unease, Maybe... a representation of the tea? But... They look out of place. She pondered.

Chloe picked up the semi-mounted dolls, feeling a subtle layer of dust. The faces felt like if you'd drop them, they'd shatter; they must have been made of ceramic. The dresses, on the other hand, felt soft and smooth. Suddenly, a small white pellet fell from the only remaining teacup, held by the red-fitted doll. Chloe placed the toy back onto the shelf and grabbed the pellet, examining it. She looked back at the toy and reluctantly moved the motorized arm of the doll with the raised cup downward. Inside revealed an identical white pellet.

Chloe felt a freezing sensation crawl down her body, Be wary or be warned, a monotone voice bellowed. She knew the voice was not her own.

What? Hello? Are you still here!?! Chloe mentally replied, but there was no response.

She glanced around for the voice, looking at shelves and shelves of junk. Her eyes passed a BB gun, novelty mugs, and eventually a large bold sign caught her eye. "CLEARANCE", the sign read in a confident red, eye-catching font. All her questions washed away. She put down the dolls and made her way over to the section, her mind blurring her previous priority. The orange-fitted doll fell from the base onto the surface of the shelf as the blue fitted doll sat still.

Chloe examined each article of clothing and its tag until she eventually stumbled upon two twin wedding dresses. She felt the fabric with her fingers. They were thin and scratchy. They both suffered from holes, and rips at the bottoms. The dresses looked damaged at the ends but better towards the top. They felt like they came from a pop-up Halloween store. Not the best level of craftsmanship, which gave them an odd charm.

"\$28.00 for a bundle. MUST GO NOW!" Chloe read the tags in awe.

"Hmmm..." Chloe grew a heartfelt grin.

She made her way back to Eden, cautiously holding onto the two dresses. She tapped her shoulder softly, and proposed an idea.

"Hear me out." She begged, crossing her finger behind her back.

Eden complied, eyeing down the dresses in an awkward slight grin, "I'm listening?"

"It's twenty-eight dollars for both these dresses. If we split it half way, it'd be fifteen and five cents."  
Chloe jumped up and down.

"And why are you so interested in buying wedding dresses...?" Eden raised an eyebrow.

"There's a valley of hills not far from here with a shopping cart. We could put on the dresses and roll ourselves down the hills!" Chloe closed her eyes with a dorky toothy smile.

"Hmm..." Eden thought briefly about whether she should encourage the idea, yet inevitably gave in,  
"Alright. I guess if we stayed here any longer you'd die of boredom. You can consider this your reward for stickin' with me."

Eden handed her a twenty dollar bill, a five, and three one dollar bills, "I'm in." She laughed as Chloe pumped her fist in the air.

"Ready!?" Eden exclaimed, her eyes fixated on the steep drop, holding a shopping cart Chloe sat inside of, both in wedding gowns, at the top of a hill.

The plastic bits of the shopping cart were scratched and torn beyond recognizability. Just solid red with shreds of plastic ripped off. One of the wheels was a bit flimsy compared to the rest, and the silver metal frame held some scratches as well.

Those mediocre wheels sat on top of a large hill covered in a layer of grass that looked like it never even heard of a raindrop. Just plains of flat beige grass accompanied by a nearby forest of leafless trees. A few of the bunch were barely even remaining, leaning on the surface, desperately calling for someone to end its limp misery. A sad sight, yet what these two young women call home.

"You know, the longer I stay up here the more I regret this idea!" Chloe yelled, her anxiety clear as the sunset.

"Oh come on don't bail out now, coward!" Eden chuckled, her playful attitude never surrendering.



"Weren't you the one that was hesitant about this!?" Chloe retorted, trembling at the gaze of the drop.

"You of all people should know the golden rule when it comes to us two! When you convince me, you really convince me!" Eden's mischievous grin grew.

"Eden this is a stupid idea! Roll me back up! Please!"

"What's that? Did you say push me, Eden!?! Okay!" she giggled, looking into Chloe's fearful eyes.

"I never said anything even close to--" Eden removed her grasp as Chloe let go of her grip on the cart, "Eden! Eden, I wasn't ready!" she scrunched her eyes, screaming.

The bumps and curves in the slope steered the cart unpredictably. Chloe's wails echoed throughout the winds. Eden stood back and jumped around like a cheerleader as she escalated quicker.

"Go Chloe, Go! Go Chloe, Go! Yeah!"

The cart came to a slow stop when it swayed left into a small bump, pushing the cart back softly. Chloe hid her face in her legs as Eden rushed down in glee.

"That was amazing! You're so brave!" She clapped.

"Amazing!?! You call that amazing!?! That was awful!" Chloe pushed herself out of the cart. Eden's smile faded.

Chloe stomped off into the near distance, resting on a smaller bump. Eden's heart sank as she followed.

"What's your problem!?! I told you no, like, five times and you still let go!" Chloe exclaimed.

"Chloeee..." Eden pouted.

"No! Don't 'Aw Chloe' me, no! What you did was uncalled for!"

"I'm sorry. I really mean it." Eden sat beside her, trying to console Chloe.

"You didn't wait till I was ready! You never even considered my boundaries." Chloe fixated her eyes on a limp tree.

"Chloe, I mean it though! Look, most of my life growing up... I was around boys and... I guess I... sorta got used to teasing a little on the edge with past friends. I guess our way of affection was bullying each other a bit. But... I get it, you don't like being pushed that far. You aren't like anybody else, you're Chloe. And... I'll try to keep myself mindful of that, okay?" Eden smiled sweetly, offering her a hand up.

Chloe lifted her head from digging into her knees and slowly pinned her head up to look at Eden's warm smile, "How could I not forgive a girl with a smile as beautiful as yours?" Chloe tapped the tip of Eden's nose and they both giggled.

Eden lifted Chloe off the grass. Chloe dusted the remaining chunks off the dress, but the stains remained--an eternal reminder of their reconciliation.

"Thank you... I love you." Chloe whispered in Eden's ear.

"I love you." She replied, and they nuzzled noses, Chloe giggling as Eden pulled a strand of Chloe's hair behind her ear, "We can leave now if you want. The sun is setting." Eden pointed, and their eyes illuminated with the beautiful array of colors.

"Well... I still have unfinished business here." Chloe mischievously grinned.

Back at the hilltop, Chloe clutched the shopping cart, "I'm ready when you are!" Eden called out boldly.

Chloe quickly jumped inside and firmly hugged Eden. Suddenly, a wheel hit a sturdy rock on the path. The rock sent the cart airborne. Chloe lost her grip on Eden's torso and they flung in opposite directions. Chloe landed face-first on a mound of dirt and picked herself up.

"Ew! Pleh! How does this dirt taste worse than the last I ate!?" Chloe panicked as she noticed Eden was missing, "Eden!? Eden!?" She jolted her body in the opposite direction, rushing to her still body, "Eden! Eden! Oh my God, Eden!" Chloe got down on one knee and shook her gently, "Eden! Eden!" she pleaded.

"So, you have a ring to go with this too? Or was the dress the limit for our budget?" Eden chuckled, fluttering open her eyelids.

"Eden, you dummy! I thought you were hurt!" Chloe snickered, hugging Eden again, tightly.

"Well, my mouth tastes like blood, but I didn't break anything so we're good there!" Eden spat out a bloody tooth.

"Eden!" Chloe gasped, covering her mouth, "Oh no! What if there's something else wrong? Do you have a concussion? How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Aw cheer up, I'm fine! But hey, you wanna drill a hole in it and make it your necklace?" Eden grinned and dusted off her dress.

Chloe's eyes rolled and she smirked, "Okay, now I know you have a concussion!" Chloe teased, cheekily grinning back. They high fived in excitement as the adrenaline began to wear down.

"Okay, open up?" Chloe asked gently, holding the pink plastic cup up to Eden's lips

"I appreciate you helping me, but I can manage this on my own, you know. Though, I love how caring you are." Eden offered before taking a sip of the water and rinsing out the blood in the sink.

"Yeaah, but this is my fault. Now I feel like I'm responsible for taking care of you." Chloe shrugged, rubbing the palm of her hand on Eden's lowered back hanging above the sink. Eden closed her eyes gently and smiled, comforted by Chloe's touch.

"Thanks, baby." Eden glowed.

The two stood in the middle of the crowded kitchen behind the clean white fridge, adorned in tacky magnets. Some held up photos of a happy little girl, others showcased a boy--evidence of her past that never caused an issue. Chloe and her mother never had any company over. And when they did and were questioned about the sight, the two chalked it up to being a little boy that no longer lives here.

"I have a question." Eden glanced at the picture, then back to Chloe.

"Yes?" Chloe leaned against the counter, awaiting Eden's response.

"Since your mom is never home, where does she sleep? Where does she eat?" Eden questioned, putting her finger in the missing canine gap.

Chloe smacked Eden's hand away, "Stop it! You're gonna get it infected! And we both know you can't afford that right now!"

"Sorry, it's just fun to feel!" Eden jolted her hand back and giggled to herself.

Chloe sighed, and slumping her shoulders. "She sleeps and eats at the hospital. They built a dedicated bedroom for healthcare professionals for the hospital a couple years back." Chloe explained, her gaze lowering to the floor.

Eden tried to shift emotional direction, "With a paycheck that can get you a house like this, the bedrooms must be pretty nice, huh?" She smiled.

"Rooms?" Chloe lifted her head back up, raising an eyebrow, "No, they have a bunch of beds crammed in a small room..."

"Oh... Righttt. Great now it's bleeding again!" Eden switched up, bending back over.

Eden spat out the rest of the bloody water into the sink, repeating until the water was clear, "So what are we gonna do with the tooth now?" Chloe stared down at the canine between her fingers.

"You heard what I told you." Eden crossed her arms, with a serious look.

"And you're sure you don't want to give this to a dentist to reattach it?" Chloe leaned one leg forward.

"I'm sure. It'll be like a little reminder of me. You know, for when I'm not around," Eden smiled warmly looking into Chloe's blue eyes.

"You're such a sap!" Chloe giggled, pecking Eden on the cheek. "Just remember I'm not ripping out my own teeth as a present for you!" She walked out of the kitchen into the garage.

Chloe came back with a drill bit small enough for the task, and the two girls carefully sat down together at Chloe's dining room table. Chloe lined the drill bit with the blood stained end of the tooth, focusing intently. Eden watched with a goofy smile as the drill slowly carved a hole through the tooth. Shavings of the bone flew from all directions until Chloe carved an appropriate hole for the string to seamlessly fit inside.

Eden handed Chloe a small thread of kandi necklace string. Chloe inserted the thread inside the crevice and began to compare the lengths of the thread to her neck. She finally decided on a length that would keep the tooth closely nuzzled to her neck with not much room to pull it off her head.

"Isn't that a little too close?" Eden questioned, "You can't even take it off, can you?"

"That's the point!" Chloe happily exclaimed, tying the end of the thread, "A piece of you will stay close to my body at all times. It should never break. The only way I'd get it off is if I ripped it off, full force. That way nothing but each other can tear us apart."

Eden blushed deeply. She met Chloe's lips with her own without a moment's notice. Chloe's pupils dilated, but then her eyelids fluttered closed and she pulled Eden's head closer. Chloe felt a rush of excitement and warmth as if a bunch of fireworks lit deep in her stomach. She ran her fingers through Eden's soft afro carefully, and as Eden caressed Chloe's warming cheeks, Eden felt Chloe's soft skin, and lifted her lips before shifting them in a new direction. Eden moved her head away before turning it to Chloe's ear.

"I love the way you stroke my hair." Eden whispered in Chloe's ear. Her lip hung open softly.

"I love it when you move positions..." Chloe giggled, whispering back. They locked lips again and pulled each other in closer.

Suddenly, a sharp pain crashed in her gums like lightning. Eden pulled away, wincing.

"Argh... I'm sorry. My tooth just..." Eden squinted and cried in pain.

"You know what works well for stuff like that?" Chloe asked her.

"Hm?" Eden asked, fidgeting her tongue in a missing tooth gap in desperation.

"Booze!" Chloe smirked, leaving the chair to fetch some.

"I don't know, Chloe. My mom's always warned me of alcohol." Eden nervously scrunched her open mouth and knitted her brows.

"She's probably just trying to scare you again!" Chloe called from the kitchen, grabbing the bottle from on top of the fridge and setting it on the beige countertop, "And what are the odds she just told you that to scare you?"

"Well... She told me if I kiss another woman I'll burn in hell too..." Eden fidgeted with her sleeve.

"And look at you now! Do you still believe that?" Chloe scoffed, pouring a bit of each in two small glasses.

"...No." Eden sighed, looking away from the direction of the voice, picking at her thumb skin.

"So? What are you waiting for? What's the worst that could happen?" Chloe opened the fridge and popped open two cans of root beer, mixing it into the glasses.

"Can't we just get me some ibuprofen or something?" Eden looked at her painted nails.

"Drinking all alone isn't any fun!" Chloe spoke, slowly pacing back to the dining room table with two almost full glasses in hand.

"You wanna drink... With me?" Eden asked, looking back at Chloe with a lowered lip.

"That's the point of it." Chloe reassured her, setting the drinks down in front of them.

"The pain isn't even really that bad, actually!" Eden shut her eyes and smiled, rubbing her arm.

"Honey, if you don't want to just tell me." Chloe's smile faded to a concern.

"I'm just scared." Eden shifted her eyes away.

"Scared of what?" Chloe sat down on the chair next to Eden, and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"What if I drink and I like it too much? Or what if I throw up? What if--"

"Eden, relax I'm right here. I won't let anything happen!" Chloe giggled.

"Well..." Eden initially hesitated, but inevitably agreed, "Okay, sure. I mean it's just one drink."

Later on during the night, the two sat together once again, laughing at each other's playful jabs, "Alright stuntmaster, let's get you to bed. You need rest so that your mouth heals up."

"C- Come on! What are y- you, my..." She paused to burp, "My mom? I'm fine, let's d- do something together! What about more karaoke!?" Eden gasped, "I love your singing voice, you should join a band!" she slurred.

"Eden I am in a band, silly! I already told you. Remember? EMBERZ?" Chloe awkwardly chuckled.

"Oh my--" She paused to hiccup, "Oh my god! Can I get your autograph!?" Eden's head spun as she smiled.

"If I can get you to bed I'll sign your shirt."

"Fiiine." Eden reluctantly agreed, holding Chloe's hand following her upstairs, slowly.

Eden pointed her head up at the enchanting, radiating neon green star stickers on the ceiling, one hand placed on her stomach, the other off to the side. She wasn't snuggling Chloe this time, she didn't even touch her. Instead, Eden just laid on her back, drooling from her open mouth. Chloe lay sideways facing the wall away from Eden.

Something isn't right... Chloe thought to herself, I mean, I had fun. And she's so supportive. She praised my singing voice. But something about that felt... So wrong. Should I have let her drink more than what I gave us? She's never drank before... No! I'm just being a drama queen again! She's happy. That's all that matters... Her guts twisted and knotted in turmoil as she tossed and turned during the night, eventually exhaustion swallowed her whole. She reached her arm over to Eden, but it remained out of reach.

Chloe woke up to the light of her floor and walls flooding the room with a beam of blue. The sound of faint rain eased her grogginess from staying later in the night, but only a bit. She turned over to find Eden, but she was missing from her spot. Chloe's heart pounded. She shivered as a chill crawled down her back. Chloe's eyes dilated.

Why isn't she beside me? Maybe she's downstairs? Chloe thought to herself, jumping up off the bed and jolting out of the room, down the stairs.

That's when she saw the front door creak open partially. Now she froze up in the middle of her rush down the steps. Her mind went blank as she stared at the door creaking open slowly and carefully, as if someone was trying to go unnoticed.

That has to be my Mom! No, she wouldn't come home without a call would she? Is she coming to stay for the night!? How am I gonna confess to her that I've been housing a girl she's never met before!? How am



I gonna explain to her that I've been having sex with someone I could potentially get pregnant!? I'll never see Eden again! Her mind raced, until finally the door revealed a face.

A dizzy and slow curly haired young woman caught Chloe's eye. It wasn't her mother after all, it was Eden coming home from whatever she just got back from. Chloe clenched her fist, dropped her jaw, and furrowed her eyebrows. She stomped down the stairs in frustration and put her hand on the door.

She left the house with a hangover!? Is she insane!? Chloe's thoughts narrowed as her anger heightened.

"Oh! Hi baby, you're-- guh... awake!" Eden exclaimed, swallowing her own throw up.

"Where the hell did you go!?" Chloe yelled at her, grabbing her hand and pulling her inside. She shut the door behind them.

"Are you mad at me?" Eden pouted, frowning at Chloe in fear.

Chloe felt overwhelmed contemplating Eden's response. The room became clearer as her senses heightened. The cedar smell of the floorboards, the sound of the birds chirping outside. Chloe paused and considered how she was directing her concern. She redirected her tone quickly and met eyes with Eden. She then indented her eyebrows and bit her tongue.

She loves my approval. Yelling at her isn't going to get me anywhere. I need to redirect your anger to her actions, not her character.

"No, I'm not mad at you... I'm just mad at the choice you made. Eden, you're a young attractive black woman with a hangover in Cloverdale. You're lucky you weren't assaulted or kidnapped." Chloe sighed, darting her eyes away from her.

"I know, I know. But I did it for a good reason!" Eden exclaimed, giddy to show her what she held in her red tote bag, embroidered with a yellow star and a flower, "I went to the local convenience store and bought something for us!"

"Alright... Fine." Chloe rubbed her temples for a brief moment and sighed, looking into the bag, "What was worth what you did?"

"More booze!" Eden shouted, opening the bag to reveal several assorted types of alcohol.

Chloe stared down the bag, slowly processing what she was witnessing. She stood in shock looking down with her mouth open slightly. She didn't know what to say, what to do, how to feel. She just stood in place.

Eden continued to explain herself, "Technically I couldn't buy it, but I had someone buy it for me so that--" Anything that came out of Eden's mouth afterwards became gargled and unfocused.

Chloe's body began to freeze up in place once more as her vision blurred. She couldn't focus on anything anymore, and just listened to the sound of silence in her mind, and the high pitch grating sound of blood flowing in her ears. But before it lasted too long, she felt herself instinctively blurting something out.

"The-- The Romans..." Chloe muttered under her breath.

"The Romans?" Eden scratched her scalp, "What does that have to do with--"

Chloe collected herself just as quickly as she zoned out of reality and interrupted Eden, "Before their fall... the Romans would drink wine to cure their hangover. But it only worsened their hangover!"

"So I'll just feel more of this if I drink more?" Eden hunched, softly dropping her bag to the floor as some of the drinks rolled out.

"That's exactly what I'm trying to say." Chloe grew a smile, satisfied that she could convince Eden.

"So, what do we do with this? I spent some of my own savings on all this..." Eden sighed, reading the label of a can she held up.

Look at how disappointed she is. She just wanted to bond with me, and I'm shutting her down! She even spent her savings on us two. I need to make this right, she thought to herself.

Chloe glanced down at her feet and fidgeted with her thumb before looking back up at Eden. She kept scanning at the can with lowered eyebrows and a raised lip. Chloe held her hands together at her waist and closed her eyes, then opened them back up again to talk to Eden.

"Save them." Chloe huffed, looking down at the floor again.

"Well I wasn't gonna throw them away. This cost me a bit!" Eden awkwardly giggled at the disappointed Chloe.

"We're uh... We're having a party at my best friend Rocky's house in a few weeks. I was gonna invite you anyway, but... now you have something that will really impress the guys..." Chloe forced a smile and chuckle.

Eden stepped closer to Chloe, "What, do you just want me to waste this?"

"I'm fine, Eden!" Chloe stepped backwards shouting, stepping back closer after realizing she might have given away too much.

"Are you sure?" Eden expressed a bit of concern, crossing her arms.

"Just forget about it. I'm glad you found something you enjoy." Chloe shooed Eden away with her hand and slowly walked up the stairs looking forward, not once back at her.

Eden's insides felt like they were struck by lightning and poisoned. Her body became weak. She looked down at the floor and began to ponder.

I did something wrong. I know I did. And now she's disappointed in me. I just don't know what I did wrong. I know she told me not to, but what's the harm in one drink? Eden thought to herself, grabbing a can and bringing it to the kitchen countertop.

As Eden felt the impact of the tab cracking open the hole, her heart felt a sharp spike of pain. She lifted up the can to her lips, and drank. Now, the pain started to ease.

The spacious room filled with different souvenirs and collectibles which reflected Chloe's various memories, were all drowned out with the pitch of the darkness isolating it all from the mind's eye. Not a single photo, not a single figurine, not an article of clothing from a band she enjoyed, nothing. All they were in the moment, were shadowy pieces of matter scattered around a pitch black room. The only thing Chloe could see was the stickers on her ceiling glowing that calming radiant neon green. She laid in utter silence for a few hours, until she heard a quiet knock at her bedroom door. Orange light leaked into the room and took away from the glow of the stars.

"What are you looking up at?" Eden's voice borderline whispered into the bedroom.

"I'm looking at the stars." Chloe spoke monotone, maintaining on the stars that weren't breached by the rays of light, "You can come in if that's what you wanted to ask, babe. Just shut the door behind you, please?"

Eden gently shut the door and made her way over to the bed to lay right next to her. She calmly let her body fall to the mattress to the right of Chloe. She looked over and her eyes began to squint in guilt.

"You left the house without telling me where you were going with a hangover to buy more alcohol. Then you snapped at me downstairs. Don't you understand how bad that sounds?" Chloe closed her eyes and softly spoke to Eden.

"I know, Chloe. And I'm sorry." Eden sighed looking up at the stars with Chloe.

"But sorry doesn't cut it. You can apologize for every little mistake you've made for the rest of your life but that doesn't mean anything until you prove it!" Chloe frustratedly exclaimed.

"So tell me how, baby. I'm serious." Eden continued to stare up at the wall, but pushed herself closer to Chloe.

What started off as a comforting feeling immediately processed as one that disturbed. Chloe's nostrils began to sting and tingle. She smelt something sharp and strong, yet sweet and fruity. Her index finger and thumb grasped onto a loose blanket next to her as she began to rub the fold of fabric together quickly.

Chloe paused before answering but eventually collected herself mentally enough to respond, "There's not much you can do in the moment, but I want you to promise me something, Eden."

"What is it?" Eden whispered into Chloe's ear, looking at the side of her face instead of the stars.

You need to come clean. Chloe thought to herself, You had fun last night, but the more you saw her the way she was, the more you realized it scared you. Eden deserves the truth and nothing less.

Maybe this morning really was a mistake? Eden pondered concurrently. She's going to say she's uncomfortable with me drinking isn't she? You really need to stop being so impulsive. If she tells you she wants the alcohol out of the house, you're throwing it away immediately. Chloe has been the best thing that's ever happened to you. You know how hurt you'd be to lose her.

"I..." Chloe paused for a brief second before continuing, "I want you to... promise to tell me where you're going before you wander off again. You really scared me this morning." She bit her lip and furrowed her eyebrows in despair.

"Then I promise not to run off again without telling you first. I won't ever do it again." Eden snuggled up closer to Chloe, grasping onto her arm, "I'm really thankful you brought this up by the way. Sometimes navigating things gets tough. But it's nice to have someone upfront with their feelings. I love you, Chloe.", she exclaimed with a wide smile, nuzzling her head into Chloe's arm and closing her eyes to rest.

"Yeah... I love you too, baby." Chloe looked back up at the stars.

The air in the room was stained of Eden's breath as Chloe's guilt trickled down her spine. Despite Eden sharing her warmth, she felt cold. But that cold didn't reach the outside, it reached within.

## Chapter Six - My Poor Magenta Heart

Rap music blasted throughout the small, cluttered garage. Dust coated boxes full of VHS tapes titled 'EVIDENCE TAPES' were stacked alongside shelves of car tools and gasoline. A mini fridge sat in the corner, excessively humming, while two young men lounged in withered camping chairs in the front of the room near the steps to the adjoining room.

One of the young men, with unevenly dyed black hair, pale skin, and fake piercings, rocked his head to the rhythm. The other, tall and muscular with a square shaped head, surveyed the room and turned to his friend.

"Rocky, why aren't we playing our music?" The man asked, scratching his chin.

"That would make more sense, wouldn't it?" Rocky awkwardly chuckled, "It's alright, Chloe's gonna arrive with her girlfriend soon. Hopefully she brought the CD with her." Rocky replied, opening his eyes and pausing the head rocking.

"Chloe's a lesbian!?" The man gasped with widened eyes and an opened mouth.

"I already told you this, TYGER! Gosh, do you not listen!?" Rocky leaned over to flick TYGER in the forehead before returning.

"Ow! Hey, I told you not to do that anymore." TYGER shouted at him, rubbing the affected area with his palm.

Abruptly, TYGER and Rocky heard a knock and the closed garage door, "Ah! There they are now!"

"What if it's your dad?" TYGER pondered.

"I could dream..." Rocky lifted himself off the camper chair to lift open the garage door.

The garage door opened to reveal Chloe and Eden. Chloe was slouched over with bags under her eyes, holding Eden's fabric tote bag. Eden on the other hand, had frizzy unkempt hair compared to her usual curls, and struggled to remain upright. She had a big wide smile on her face and reached them out before speaking.

"H-Hey, everybody--" Eden paused to burp, "What's g- going on?"

Chloe held up Eden, "Sorry about her, she insisted on pre-gaming..." Chloe walked Eden over to her camper chair.

Chloe slumped down in her chair next to TYGER. He noticed the fatigued Chloe leaned over and whispered into her ear.

"Yo, Chlo, are you alright? You look like you haven't been sleeping?"

"Oh don't worry about me man, have a good time." Chloe forced a smile.

"I can't when you look like this. Is something wrong?" TYGER placed a hand on her shoulder.

"I've just been trying to keep her safe. Trust me, I'm okay." Chloe sighed, averting her gaze to the concrete.

"Well, if you say so." TYGER glanced back at her quickly before looking away.

"Would you two stop whispering and show me the goods!?" Rocky stood in front of them with his hands on his hips.

"Y-- Yeah! We're n- not here to k- keep secrets!" Eden vibrantly giggled at her own remark, as she bobbed her head.

"Drunky over there has the right idea..." Rocky muttered as he grabbed the bag from next to Chloe's leg and searched through it.

TYGER snatched the tote bag from Rocky's hands and handed it to Chloe, "Rude to search through a woman's bag! How about the owner searching for it instead?"

"Oh... Thanks TYGER." Chloe spoke softly, "But this isn't mine, it's Eden's. She's the one that got this." Chloe held up two cans.

"Wait... Isn't she nineteen?" Rocky asked.

"Yeah... She got someone to buy her all this." Chloe set the drinks on the ground.

"Dude..." TYGER's eyes widened, turning to Rocky exchanging a smile, "Eden rocks!" They cheered.

Eden looked over at the two boys as a sparkle hit her eyes. Chloe tapped her foot, her face gone tense. Rocky and TYGER gave each other a high five, and walked over to Eden to give her one. She excitedly hit their hands.

"Aw c- come on, you g- guys are t- the cool ones!" Eden's face turned red with embarrassment.

"Yeah, she's right! Everyone knows I'm the best!" Rocky boasted, as TYGER smiled and scoffed.

The boys sat down with their drinks, "So..." TYGER broke the silence that lasted a few seconds, "You guys see that new GTV Music Video?"

"Ngh, this is too boring!" Rocky paced, "We need some excitement. A party isn't a party without it!"

TYGER sipped on a beer and looked over at the pacing Rocky, "I mean, I'm having a pretty good time personally. What about you girls?" Eden nodded, "Not every celebration needs fireworks."

"Fireworks... Fireworks..." Rocky muttered to himself as he paced, "I got an idea! TYGER, chug that beer you're drinking as fast as you can!" Rocky mischievously gazed at him and pointed.

"Me!?! Do it yourself!" TYGER rolled his eyes and pointed them away from Rocky.

"I- I'll do it!" Eden raised her hand with a drunken naivety.

Chloe, alarmed, leaned in, "Baby, this is a stupid idea."

"No, I appreciate the enthusiasm!" Rocky threw a drink to Eden, "Go on, Eden. Give us a show!"

What's he doing!? TYGER thought to himself, Chloe's clearly uncomfortable. You gotta take charge.

TYGER got up from his chair and put his hand out in front of Eden, signaling her to pause for a moment before standing in front of Rocky, "Look man, I don't like what you're doing here. You need to cut this shit out, now. Or else." TYGER clenched his fists.

Rocky chuckled to himself and laid a hand on TYGER's shoulder, "TYGER, buddy, it's a party! We're meant to have fun! Eden is having fun, she even wanted to do it! Are you gonna stomp on our parade? Think about how cool this is gonna be to watch." Rocky smiled, with a familiar stare.

TYGER's guts turned, He's got that stare again. Like he always knows how to get me to back down. I should have control over him, I could kick his ass! But I can't... It's not worth it...

He paused before replying, "Well, I guess it would be pretty badass, wouldn't it?" He forced a smile.

"That's the spirit, big man! Go take a seat, buddy!" Rocky smiled as TYGER sat back in his seat.

"Rocky, she's already been pre-gaming before we got here." Chloe raised her voice.

"Oh, have the fun police backup arrived on the scene?" Rocky turned over to Chloe and approached her, kneeling down to look at her, "I already have to live with a cop, why would I want more in my house?" Rocky laughed to himself as Eden joined alongside him.

"Eden isn't in the right state to do something like this physically or mentally. Here you want someone to do it!? I will! Pick me!" Chloe raised her arm up with a nervous smile and laugh.

"I uh... I don't know man, I think I'm with Rocky on this one." TYGER intervened.

"Why can't I just do it!?" Chloe spoke as she felt the mental sensation of a dagger twisting and turning in her heart.

"Because you're not cool like Eden is! You'll probably just throw it up all over my dad's garage floor anyways." Rocky dismissed, continuing to chuckle.

"S-- Stop bay-- babying me, Chloe! I can d-- do this just fine!" Eden shouted at Chloe in frustration.

Chloe's slumped lower as TYGER intervened, "What's really the worst that could happen here? We could always call Keith if something happened!"



"See?" Rocky grinned, moving away from Chloe to approach Eden as TYGER followed, "Alright, Eden? You ready!?"

Chloe's tapping got faster. She bit her tongue and she felt a puncture and tasted something metallic. She clenched her fists up. Her heart began to race as her body trembled. The sound in the room went mute for a moment. She could only feel her heart pounding in her chest.

I can't just sit here and watch, I can't! He's gonna kill her! I don't wanna hurt him but... You're dealt the hand you're played.

Chloe forced her eyes closed as tears formed. She rose from her seat.

Rocky and TYGER chanted, "Three! Two!"

Chloe darted from her seat and rushed over to Rocky. She grasped her fingers tightly onto Rocky's shirt collar. He froze up in the heat of the moment. Chloe screamed in anger. She pushed Rocky to the hard concrete ground and threw him across the room. Rocky opened his eyes to look at Chloe front and center standing over him, as TYGER watched in horror. Eden's eyes widened as she tried to comprehend the situation. Rocky spotted blood rushing from his lip. He furrowed his eyebrows. He lifted himself back up onto his feet. Tears flowed from Chloe's eyes.

"I-- I'm sorry, Rocky. I'm s-- sorry! I didn't want to resort to this. But I can't let you hurt Eden." Chloe sniffled, posture stiffened.

Rocky grunted and began to charge at Chloe. His eyebrows furrowed into a rage as he huffed and puffed forward. His arms extended in front of him as he got closer. Right as he was about to push Chloe to the floor, he felt a strong grasp on his arm. Rocky turned around.

"That's enough!" TYGER forced a weight onto Rocky's wrist, pulling him back, "I'm not gonna sit here and let you hurt her!" TYGER determined his gaze at Rocky.

"Rocky! God damn it! Are you listenin' to that cRAP music again!" A deep voice with a southern drawl echoed, jangling his keys. TYGER quickly let go of Rocky and scrambled to Eden.

TYGER gently grabbed Eden's hand and led her to Chloe. She kept her eyes locked on Rocky, managing his anger and holding back the urge to throw her down. As much as he wanted to get his revenge, he knew his father. One of Keith's few admirable values: You never put your hands on a woman.

"You need to take Eden and get out of here right now." TYGER firmly locked eyes with Chloe.

"I don't know what's wrong with me TYGER! I'm so sorry!" Chloe muttered, sniffing.

"Maybe we all got a little carried away." TYGER said as he rushed to the garage door to open it, Chloe holding onto Eden's hand, "But what matters now, is getting the fuck out of here before things get worse. Take her home and get some rest. You need it. I'll explain it to Keith."

"Thank you, TYGER. You're a good friend." Chloe smiled as she speed walked out onto the sidewalk with Eden, baffled as to what was even happening around her.

He rushed back over to Rocky as he lost balance after being frozen and dropped to his knees. Chloe glanced back over her shoulder to see Keith opening the door and TYGER rubbing Rocky's back, speaking something incomprehensible from the distance. The guilt bit harder this time. The fangs of regret punctured deeper into her mind. This time, it started to infect her.

Steam from the shower seeped into the dim room curling around the thin blue walls. Chloe stepped out of the shower, her steps sluggish and heavy. Her trembling hand reached for a red towel and pressed her hand against the condensation, wiping it away. She stared at her reflection.

The reflection was unrecognizable: Her once-bright blue eyes now dimmed to a lifeless gray, her smile vanquished, her cyan hair faded to a murky algae green. She saw a pale shell staring back--a echo of her fractured spirit.

She met eyes with herself, bags under her eyes, chapped lips, and pale skin, the burning warmth of the water lingering. Water dripped from her damp, lifeless hair, a dull green from the pastel it was. With every movement she made, her shaking intensified. She moved her hands to feel her face, tracing along the insecurities.

Her breaths, once steady and smooth, became labored and uneasy as she gazed into the mirror, each inhale heavier and faster. She began to hear voices from downstairs clearer. The muffled echoes of the voices of her mother broke through the haunting despair, until the sound of Eden's amplified it. Chloe's breaths became quicker as she heard each muffled word from Eden. Her heart began to pound. Her shaking escalated. Chloe's voice broke as she took in a breath of air, and an audible gasp for an emotional release echoed in the room.

She immediately clamped her mouth shut, stifling her turmoil. Chloe crouched down to open the cabinets. Her shaking hands fumbled with the blow dryer, struggling to plug it into the wall. The mechanical roar barely masked her cries. Chloe stumbled into the wall. The impact of the hit forced her to the ground. She took her hand off her mouth.

Chloe finally burst into a high pitched wail. Streaks of tears ran across her face. Her breaths became extremely short and repetitive. She began to hiccup her own sobs and gasped for a breath of air every few times. It's like for every breath of air she took in, another sob pushed out of her eyes. Tears dripped down to the cold, wet floor. Chloe felt so relieved by the release of emotional pressure. She added drops of water to the puddles, water dripping down her bare body. Throughout the turmoil, the back of her mind grasped a sliver of a positive thought.

At least the blow dryer suppresses the sounds of my helplessness.

The strokes of frustration painted similar colors downstairs. From the bottom story of the house Chloe's mom, Helen, stood in the kitchen peeling potato skins as they fell down to the bottom of the garbage bag. One after another, after another, piles of skin began to add up. She gathered the unpeeled potatoes and one by one, dropped them into a pot of boiling water. CRASH! Lightning and thunder roared in the wind, grasping the home from its electrical power. The warm anticipation of the opportunity to cook for her daughter and friend was taken as quick as the electricity was. The room turned pitch black.

"Y-- You can't c-- cook anymore can you M-- Miss Thorn?" Eden stuttered, bobbing her head slightly as she poorly attempted to piece together a sudoku puzzle.

"Like salt in the wound..." Helen whispered to herself, "Yeah I uh-- I guess not, Eden. You must need a candle to read that don't you? I'll be right back!" She turned around with a forced smile, exiting the kitchen to the downstairs bathroom.

Eden sat alone with crinkled and stained clothing, greasy hair and a dizzy head. The stench of alcohol was masked by the stench of vomit. Her smile was wide as her senses dulled. All the sound in the air slowly went stale. Her smile faded. Eden started to hear something. She could focus her attention entirely on it. She could start to hear the wailing of a familiar voice. It was Chloe. Her stomach began to twist. WHIP! The thunder interrupted the quiet moment as Eden jumped. Helen quickly entered the room as a faint warm light revealed her face. She approached the table as she set the candle by Eden.

"You're fine with sandwiches for dinner, right?" Helen muttered, purposely averting the light to reveal her face of sorrow.

Chloe limped down the hallway with puffy red eyes and entered the kitchen, "H- Hey, looks like the bl-blow dryer didn't work very good for you?" Eden cackled.

"You really think that's funny, don't you, Eden?" Chloe replied, not even looking her back in the eyes.

The three finally sat at the dinner table. Instead of the special food prepared for the occasion, the women sat in front of ham and cheese sandwiches with a glass of lukewarm tap water. Chloe peeled the crust off her sandwich.

Helen took notice and began to point it out, "Chloe, honey, I thought you liked the crust on your sandwiches? If I knew you didn't I would've taken them off!"

"Nothing changed, Mom." Chloe mechanically ripped the crust from off the bread, fixating her eyes.

Helen gave an awkward laugh and turned to Eden, "So, Eden," She paused to chew, "How are things at home? How are your parents?"

Eden placed her sandwich down on her plate and giggled, "W-- Well my p-- parents hate me!" Her speech ran thick with alcohol.

"Oh! I'm sorry for bringing them up..." Helen apologized, as she darted her eyes back down at the plate and put her hands to her thighs.

"No n- no d- don't worry about--" Eden hiccupped before continuing to stutter and slur, "About me Miss Thorn! I'm fine as can b- be!"

"Well if you say so... So how long have you two bee--"

Eden's voice cut through, escalating Chloe's frustration, "A- And you k- know the funny thing? I could walk... into my M- Mom's funeral house tomorrow a- afternoon... and l- l-laugh!"

"Alright, Eden. She gets it. We all get it." Chloe lifted her chilling gaze to Eden, stopping her from going further.

"W-- What the hell!?" Eden held her hand out in a flurry of confusion and frustration.

"Don't use that type of language around my Mom, we're trying to have a nice time here."

"N- No! No! ...F--Forget that!"

"Eden, honey I think you should calm down. Focus on your breathing." Helen intervened, placing a hand on Eden's placemat.

"I- I'm getting a little tired, no a- a lot tired of your atti- attitude, Chloe!"

"You wanna bring attitude into this? How about you look in a mirror." Chloe shot Eden a glare, her tone dripping with sarcasm as she bit into her food.

"Is there something I should know about you two?" Helen indented her eyebrows and declined into a face of concern.

"Not a thing. Sorry about her, she's just a little eccentric huh, Eden?" Chloe forced a smile, looking into Eden's eyes.

"O- Oh my G- God!" Eden turned her bobbing head in different directions analyzing Chloe's face, "Yo-- You're smiling at m- me?! I th- thought I'd never see you sm- smile at me again!"

"And tonight's comedian while she's at it." Chloe stared directly into Eden's eyes this time, a flame breaking loose inside.

"Chloe, have you checked on the garden outside lately? The plants seem a bit unusual, you should really check the PH in the soil when you get the chance."

\*Are you kidding me? She thinks this is because of my hormone levels!? Read the room, Mom!\*

"Y-- You guys d- don't ha- have a gar- garden?" Eden exclaimed in confusion.

"How many hours did you say she spent here today before I got off shift?"

"My hormones are in perfect balance Mom! Not every little issue stems back to me being transgender!" Chloe shouted at her mom.

"Chloe what is wrong with you!? What have I always told you!?"

"Eden knows, Mom! Look at that face, do you think she gives a shit that I have a penis between my legs!? She's so out of her own mind, she can't even solve a beginner level Sudoku level!" Chloe bursted out and yelled.

"D- Don't you even br- bring me in- into... this! I- I don't know what's gotten into y- you, but you're acting like... You're m- mean!" Eden intervened.

"Don't bring you into this? How the hell am I supposed to sit here and enjoy the one time, the one time out of the entire month I get to see my Mom for dinner when you're babbling about laughing at your Mom's corpse and swearing!? Tell me, Eden! Tell me!"

"That's enough!" Helen interrupted them both as they lowered their heightening postures, and slouched back over, "Your pity party is over! I work with dying children every day. I have to see mushrooms bulging their eyes out of their own sockets, spores emerging from their skin! And I just have to watch it happen until they pass away! I don't complain! So would you both just eat your goddamn sandwiches and smile!?"

Rain filled in the spot of silence with a relentless drumming. A wave of ease trickled over Helen as Chloe continued to glare down Eden. Eden shut her eyes and scrunched up her face. Streaks of tears began to roll down her face. Helen rose abruptly from her chair, shifting her anger to concern. She rushed to Eden's seat, gently placing a comforting hand over Eden's shoulder.

"Eden I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to let my emotions get to me. I'm so sorry you had to see that." Helen pointed a remorseful glow to Eden.

"N- No, it's not... that. Mi- Miss Thorn, y- your daughter won't sleep with m- me anymore!" Eden sobbed, digging her palms into her face.

The candle blew out. A few minutes passed as Helen walked away from Eden with a cold stare into the distance and furrowed eyebrows. Chloe immediately rushed out of her seat to apologize for Eden's behavior. Helen spoke a few words to Chloe, but Eden couldn't make them up over the crackling thunder from the outside. No matter what Chloe pleaded, Helen continued to grab her keys, purse, and head out the door. She drove off in the thunderstorm, heading for the hospital. Chloe curled her fist up into a ball and broke a hole in the wall as she screamed in frustration. She stomped down the stairs and headed to Eden's seat, noticing she was starting to fall asleep.

"Ridiculous. You're absolutely ridiculous, Eden! You completely embarrassed me in front of my own Mom that entire dinner!" The sounds of Chloe's immense disappointment in her jolted Eden awake more than the thunder was.

"Guh..." Eden wiped a bit of drool coming out from her mouth and rubbed her eyes, "Chloe... I'm sorry I shouldn't have said any of that. Ugh, my head." She groaned as she rubbed her pressure points together.

"Any other day I could handle something stupid like this! I cleaned the vomit on the floor you left in my room, smoothed over the messages you sent to your mom, I even got into a fight with my best friend just to keep you from getting alcohol poisoning. Did I complain once? But you kept drinking even before my Mom got here! Do you have any standards left!? Any at all!?" Chloe shouted, her face turning beet red.

Tears welled up in Eden's eyes, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Chloe! It helps the pain! I don't know what else to do anymore! I hate myself, I hate my body, I hate my life!"

"How is any of that my fault?! Why am I responsible to pick up every single mess you make!? I'm so tired, Eden! I'm exhausted! I used to love you! Look at you now, you're a husk!" she frantically continued.

Eden scrunched her face and jolted herself up from out of the chair, "You won't even cuddle me anymore! Stop pretending you're in love with me if you aren't, Chloe!"

"You wanna know the truth then, Eden? I hate you!" Chloe yelled at her. Eden dropped to the floor on her knees.

"I used to think you were mine forever! Now I fall asleep with a headache!" She screamed as her fists clenched, "You can't even live without my help! All you do is drink and make your consequences my problem! You know how much I cry when I'm away from you!? I can't stand it anymore!"

The weight of the world pushed Eden to the ground. She fell onto the cold hardwood floor. Her skin went dull. Tears began to water up on her eyes and fall across her face. The tears kept racing down faster and faster as Eden's eyes remained widened. She looked down at her knees and began to tremble.

"I don't know if I could ever love you anymore after everything that you've done to me! I never should have let you--"

WHIP! Suddenly, the thunder cracked. Chloe could see Eden on the floor. Her words came to a complete halt. Her fists unclenched. Her eyebrows lifted. Chloe's eyes widened and her mouth opened. It felt like a mold began to fester inside her stomach.

"It's all my fault..." Eden's voice began to tremble and break.

"...Eden, no." Chloe's heart began to feel sickly, hearing the mere desperation in Eden's pained voice.

"No. Stop making excuses for my shitty behavior. You're right. I'm sorry for everything." Eden wiped her tears with her sleeve and got up off the cold floor, "I'm packing my stuff and going back to the house. My Mom isn't coming back for another month." She echoed as she walked away.

Alone, in the dark. Chloe froze listening to the faint footsteps in the distance and the heavy rain from beyond the glass sliding door. Her face felt like ice. She couldn't move, she couldn't think, and she barely breathed. As soon as the door shut, she felt a trickle down her spine. She forced her eyes closed. She opened them back up only to see the house in all its color. But it didn't mean a thing anymore, not with her gone.

"What is wrong with me?" Chloe muttered.

07 - the vigil desperation...

Coming Soon.