

Chapter Two

The journey up the stairs seemed to set the pain in my body anew, and by the time I got to the top and down to my room I was panting like a dog in the summer. My bed, despite being a crappy twin size, was singing the song of angels, and I wanted nothing more than to welcome it. Though i couldn't fully rest yet, at least i could sit.

I took my phone off my charger and saw the text Katie sent just like she said she would. Ava Rosser, lives on 716 west lot street at the Glass house. My finger hovered over the number, trying to convince myself to click it but I was already second guessing if this was the right thing to do. Was I really going to let them run me off like I was a scared pup - a yorkie, like they called me- with my tail between my legs?

Lizzy's face flashed in my mind and I winced. Okay, yeah, maybe it was for the best. But what if they said no and I was stuck here? Maybe Niko's power reached outside of campus and once they learned I had beef with her, they'll just slam the door in my face. My finger trembled, still waiting for me to make my decision; I sighed. I can't go back home, not yet. I still needed to prove myself.

I clicked the number and brought the phone up to my ear.

As it rang, I ruffled around through my drawers hoping that I had some tylenol or ibuprofen lying around. There was a pounding that was building in my head and i wanted to nip that in the bud before it could get any worse. With a huff I slammed the drawer closed, coming up empty handed, and eyed Katie's - much cleaner- side of the room. Before I could decide if it was worth Katie's ire or not, the ringing turned into a "Howdy!"

My heart skipped and I started to stammer before the heavy southern voice continued on and I realized I was listening to her voicemail.

"Howdy! This is Ava Rosser! Leave a message and I'll get back to you faster than you can say 'Fright Night!' Haha, unless it's Susan, then you can bite me! Buh bye!"

I quickly hung up before the beep went off, because like many people in my generation, i was terrified of leaving voicemails. Even though I hadn't met her yet, Ava seemed exactly like the kind of person that would be friends with Katie. I dialed the other number Katie sent, and wondered if this was the guy that she had mentioned.

"Hello, you've reached Michael Glass. If you're calling about a room then leave a voicemail. Do not text me, I will not respond to any text asking about it. Otherwise, Leave a message. bye"

The beep went off and I paused, awkwardly breathing into the phone.

"Um, hi, my name's Klara - uh, Klara Sage and i was calling about the room? And if you could get back to me as soon as you can that would be awesome. At this number?" i added on

and immediately regretted it. It was something i always heard mom do but it just sounded weird coming from me.

Of course this number, what other number was there?

“Okay... bye.”

Ugh, why was I like this? I hung up but my mind was still racing. Who knew how long it was going to take before they called back. And even though I had wanted to lay down a few minutes ago, I honestly don't think I would be capable of going to sleep. Not here. That cruel smirk Niko had and Lizzy's face absolutely would not leave my mind. My heart pounded every time i thought of them.

They knew my dorm number. What if they came back right now and decided they couldn't risk me talking about what happened? Even the mayor's kid had limits on what they could do. Just like Katie said, she can't risk me snitching. And I wasn't the fighting type of girl, especially against all three of them.

No. they would destroy me.

But it's not like I had a friend who's place I could crash at for some time. Nor could I hold out at a hotel or something, that would most definitely catch mom's attention. The Glass house was the only option I had now. And if they couldn't let me stay then maybe they knew some other housing option. The park bench was even a better option than spending another day in this dorm.

I stood up and immediately regretted it when my vision blurred and my knee whined at my sudden movements. woah. Okay, move more slowly next time. Got it. I started collecting the few items and sad walmart clothing I had left, and shoved them in an old duffle bag. Next was books, the single family photo I had, and... that was it. It took only mere minutes to pack up all the important things I needed and wanted.

Growing up, I had always prided myself on not being like other girls -however cringy that was- and acted like I was better for not being obsessed over one Direction, or BTS. *'who cares about some stupid boyband when i all i needed were my books,'* i had always said with my nose thumbed up. Now look where that got me: friendless. All the other girls and boys avoided me and i had convinced myself that it was better that way.

I turned to look over at Katie's side and it was drastically different. Not just all the dark and spooky stuff like her skull lamp, but she had different kinds of posters of metal singers and bands, along with various pictures of her with her friends. It was easy to always act like she was some gothic weirdo and judge her for her style, but she seemed happy while i was...

God, I was pathetic.

sadness(and mostly pain) weighed me down as I threw my bag on my shoulder-and almost knocked myself over- and grabbed my duffle. Here's to hoping I never have to come back here again. With one last look back, I walked out.

It was the middle of the night on a Friday, yet the campus was weirdly deserted. I hobbled down the path leading away from my dorm and there were only a few stragglers going to and fro. And quite quickly as well. One guy stumbled as he rushed past me, head ducked and avoiding my eyes. Maybe it was because of the thick humid air that seemed to have a mind of its own and wanted to smother you - which I was absolutely not built for. It made sense no one would want to linger in it longer than they had to. but Morganville University had always been kind of strange; something I noticed since I started attending.

The small campus gave off an old horror movie set vibe. The centuries-old, washed-out campus halls and dorms were half clustered and set up in a confusing way as if there was no real plan when they were built. It left a lot of tight spaces and angles that made it easy to imagine things hiding. The unkept lawn browned and wilted by the Texas heat and sun didn't help either. The university already gave me a haunting feeling during the day with all the students around; always walking in small, tight groups with their heads ducked. It was even worse all alone in the middle of the night.

As I came to a stop at the parking lot, I noticed there was an uneasy silence - not even sounds of the night bugs around - that made the hairs on my arm stand on end. Long shadows were cast by the tall buildings and trees that loomed even bigger now in the darkness. The sliver of the moon and half of the working flickering light posts refused to bring comfort to my racing thoughts of all the horror movies I had ever watched. The shadows seemed to be inching closer and closer to me, though that might have just been my mind playing tricks on me.

If the Uber doesn't get here soon, I might just decide to take my chances with the monster inside before the monsters out here get me.

Thankfully, it didn't take that much longer and I quickly got inside the car before it even fully stopped. It wasn't until I closed the door that I remembered that I hadn't looked at the license plate first. I had been so focused on scaring myself that I hadn't checked to make sure I was in the right car. Mom would kill me if she knew. My eyes flickered nervously to the rearview mirror to see hard eyes squinting at me. Images of him locking the door and pulling off to brutally murder me played in my head.

"You Klara Sage?" he said, voice scratchy.

My own barely came out louder than a squeak.

"yes?"

"Alrighty then."

And that was it. He let out a cough and pulled off, not entertaining my nonsense. I let out a slow breath and shook my head. Of course, he wasn't a serial killer, this wasn't a movie. Are serial killers even still a thing in this day and age? The car fell into a more comfortable silence and I was grateful he wasn't one of the types of drivers that liked to talk a lot. With my head against the window, I watched the buildings pass by and fall into the background as we drove

away from the university; it was almost easy to be lulled to sleep. But I fought against the weight of my eyelids.

He might not have been a serial killer but I still didn't fancy the idea of going to sleep in a stranger person's car.

"You know, it ain't really safe for a little lady like you to be out here all alone, you know? especially at this hour," he said, hard eyes once again meeting mine.

My heart jumped into my throat and any thought I had of sleep was shoved from my mind by the rush of panic. Oh, god, he was going to kill me. That's what every creepy guy said in horror movies before chopping up someone.

"Uh, i'm sorry?"

"You ain't from around here - I can tell from your accent- so I'm just givin' ya a warnin', girl. Morganville ain't safe enough to be roaming about lookin' for some party."

"I'm not - uh - I'm not going to a party. I'm actually going to my friend's house," I lied, hoping that would scare him off if he was thinking of trying something.

He slowly nodded his head, eyes going back to the road.

"Good. It's always good to have someone to watch your back here. Me? I'm protected," he said and lifted his right hand.

His jacket sleeve shifted down, revealing a bracelet. My eyebrows went up when I realized that it looked exactly like the one that Lizzy had. Or I thought it was. It was pretty dark and he put his down before I could get a better look at it. There goes the country club theory. The man didn't give off 'rubbing elbows with rich people' vibes.

"Not that tends to matter much to them bastards," he mumbled.

"Wait, what do you mean prot-"

Before I could ask what he meant by 'protected', the car came to a stop.

"Well, we're here. Don't forget to rate and tip," he said, his voice clipped.

The sudden change in his tone threw me off and all I could do was stammer out a thanks and hurried out. My shoulder accidentally hit the corner of the door as I moved to close it. I paused and slammed my eyes closed, the pain bringing me to a standstill for a moment. The intensity had mellowed out some, but heavens, I knew it was going to hurt in the morning.

The car revved off down the road- in a hurry just like everyone else in this town was- and I glanced around the street. Lot Street seemed no different than the campus, giving off the same spooky vibe, and leached off color. Even though Morganville was beaten down by the weather and intense heat, I was still pretty in awe of Antebellum style despite, you know, the history, and how worn down the street was.

There were no houses like this in Detroit.

The house I stood in front of was the biggest on the street, while the others were smaller - still beautiful- ranch houses. It was exactly what came to mind when a person thought of the South. Not exactly plantation house size but built in fondness of it; two stories, big gray columns that likely had been white when first built. a wrap-around porch I just knew I was going to love, and large windows everywhere with black shutters to match. Windows that showed that nearly every light in the house was on.

It was impressive.

There was a big goofy smile on my face as I stared up at it. I could really imagine staying here; sitting on the rocking chair on the porch as I studied for some upcoming exam, enjoying the breeze. Maybe even make friends with- what's her name?- Ava, and talk about whatever girls liked talking about. I could put in the effort this time, and I know I've said it before, but now I meant it. And, most importantly, there would be no worrying about Niko anymore.

The smile slowly slipped away as I was suddenly hit with the feeling that something was wrong. I don't know what it was but it felt like a fist was tightening around my stomach and growing. A chill danced along my skin even though just a second ago I had been sweating. A drop of sweat was still falling down the side of my face. It was a familiar feeling but one that was only distantly so, one I hadn't felt since I was a child.

I glanced around again, this time more slowly and taking everything in.

Nothing seemed to have changed: trees lined the street, their canopy growing into each other and giving plenty of shade. the entire street was completely deserted, one end of the block had no streetlights at all and was shrouded in blackness. It was almost impossible to see anything down there except for what looked to be a car and something short and stocky next to it - maybe a trash can or a fire hydrant.

There wasn't a peep coming from anywhere on the block; No surprise though, since it was pretty late at night. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but no matter how closely I scanned around It felt like ... I was being watched? Like eyes were peering at me from every angle, and it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand.

Get inside now.

Warning bells went off in my head as the adrenaline in me spiked up, and I choked back a gasp. All the pain that I had felt was temporarily forgotten and all I could feel as my legs trembled slightly was a choking fear that wrapped around me. It was like every single inch of my being was screaming at me to run, that there was something dangerous out there.

But where?

My eyes went back to the end of the street, where it was almost like a wall of night, so thick and black. A shudder rolled over me, tensing every muscle painfully. It hit me at once. *Something was hiding down there.* That's where the feeling of eyes came from. I knew that as

certain as I knew I could breathe. If that wasn't enough to urge me forward, a low sound, almost like a laugh, cut through the silence and distance.

It whipped towards me like a tendril and was all the push I needed. I heaved up my bag and threw open the gate, ignoring as the metal slammed together.

If this had been a normal visit during the day the path from the gate to the door wouldn't have been anything, but with my messed up leg and with what felt like the devil just behind me, it might as well have been miles away.

It was so close.

Just an arm's length away.

Just a breath away.

Just a-

There was a caress against my neck.

A scream tore from my throat. Any bit of control I had was completely gone, and my body flailed around wildly. Part of me wanted to run, and another wanted to fight back my attacker with a half-empty duffle bag. My feet tangled together and I tripped and fell backwards toward the house, my elbow slamming into the cement steps. The pain vibrated up my arm, cutting off the rest of my scream and all I could do was suck in a breath.

With a heaving chest, I stared up to face -

No one.

There was no one there.

The yard was empty and deserted as it had been just moments ago. There was no big bad monster or serial killer wanting me dead. My eyes, wide as saucers, darted around, half expecting someone to be hiding in a bush or something. *I don't... I don't understand.* Something had touched my neck. I remember my hair moving as fingertips just barely brushed my skin. *Did I just imagine that? Was I just going crazy?*

The feeling of being watched and the fist in my stomach was still there. I dropped my head in my hands, grasping at my hair hard enough to hurt. Just add it to the rest of the mess I was feeling. Everything was just constantly building up and threatening to spill out of me: anger, frustration, sadness, and fear. It was all just too much. All because I wanted to wash some freaking clothes tonight.

The door behind me swung up and I swirled around, almost falling off another set of stairs. Thankfully I managed to catch the banister this time. There were only so many times I could take getting seriously injured in a day.

A tall guy- a hot guy- with a buzz cut and a nose ring dressed in Cookie Monster pajamas and a hoodie glared down at me while holding... a super soaker? I blinked at him with an incredulous look, not entirely sure what to make of what I was seeing.

“Who the fuck are you, and why are you on my porch?” he demanded and pointed the gun at me.

My eyes went wide. Not out of fear, obviously, but out of pure bafflement. Was he serious? For a moment I thought maybe it was a real gun that was maybe designed to look like something else. But taking a closer look, all I saw was orange and green plastic: it just looked like a child’s toy. I glanced between him and the water gun, still trying to make head or tails of him.

“You better answer or I’m lighting you up,” he said, moving his finger to the trigger like that was supposed to be a threat.

For the first time all night, I gave a wide smile and let out a small giggle at the ridiculous sight. I was being threatened by a guy in Cookie Monster pants with a super soaker. I don’t think anyone could make up something like this. His thick brows furrowed and his gun dipped as he finally took a good look at me. He cocked his head and I noticed a tattoo on the side of his neck - it looked like it was some bird.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to laugh - I’m, just - I’m here for the room?” I said, almost a question.

He stared at me. “You’re here for the room?”

“Uh, yes?”

“Really? This time of night? hollerin’ too? I might look dumb, but I’m not an idiot.”

Oh, great, this was coming out to a great start. With a groan I pulled myself up, using the banister for support. The entire time I noted that he never dropped the intense battle look he wore nor did he step out past his threshold. Likely ready to slam the door in my face at a moment’s notice. Not that I blamed him. I would be suspicious of a crazy lady who looked like she just got in a fight standing on my porch in the middle of the night too.

“Okay, I know I look like a crackhead or whatever. The screaming was because I thought I saw something but I think it was just my mind playing tricks on me, you know? It’s, like, really dark out here, and my frien- well, my roommate sent me here for Ava? She said she could help get me a room and I really need this room.”

God, I was rambling. If he didn’t think I was a crazy mess before, he most likely thought so now. The sound of a TV from inside drifted out to the porch and I glanced around trying to avoid his brown eyes as he looked at me over, trying to decide what to do with me. The entire time, my hairs were still on end - the feeling of being watched still hadn’t disappeared.

He sighed, glancing away and I started to panic, already knowing what he was going to say. I was starting a bad habit of just getting in people’s personal space tonight but my emotions

were on the fritz. I couldn't just go back there, I couldn't. So I hobbled forward and grabbed his arm, stepping a foot inside. He startled and took a step backwards, pulling me further inside.

"Please, I know I'm crazy to be here so late, but I wouldn't be here if I didn't have a good reason. I can not go back there. Let me stay. Please," I said, a slight whine to my voice that I hated.

Niko was only part of the issue. I was terrified of what could happen if I was forced to go back out into the dark street. Maybe it was just in my imagination but I didn't want to find out that it might not be. He blinked down at me, the look on his face unreadable, and I realized just how tall he was compared to me and just how close I was to him. He smelled like vanilla.

With an awkward cough, I let go of him and took a step back.

"Shit, man... hell, you're already inside, so why not?" he said, lowering the toy gun to his side. He pulled me further inside and closed and locked the numerous locks on the door. Wow, I guess this was a dangerous neighborhood.

The fist in my stomach immediately left and my muscles relaxed. I let out a breath of relief.

"Alright, you can stay for the night, but I'm not the one you gotta ask if you wanna stay for good. Micah owns the place so he decides who stays and doesn't. He's got a bit of a stick up his ass and he's real picky about who he lets stay. He lets me crash because I'm a real sweetheart, you know?" he said and turned around.

He lazily smiled and I was momentarily lost for words. His entire demeanor changed -more relaxed; his face softened, and the smile only made him hotter than I originally thought. And younger too. He originally seemed to be early twenties, the deep voice adding to that. But now he looked like he was around my age, even with the stubble he had.

He wasn't hot in the clean-shaven, preppie boy way that the guys at school were. He was hot in a 'bad boy, don't tell mom about him' way. I never really saw the appeal to those types of guys. Then again, I never really met a real 'bad boy' - god, that was cringe to say - only posers. But there was something about him that said he was the real deal.

Then again, he threatened me with a water gun while wearing Cookie Man P.J.s, so maybe that was just the brain damage and lack of sleep talking.

"Right. Micah. Katie kinda told me about him. Good to know."

I held out my hand, "I'm Klara, by the way."

He didn't hesitate to take it. his giant hand, rough with calluses, engulfed mine.

"I'm Jonah."

It was a strong firm handshake and I couldn't help but smile up at him. I always liked to give handshakes growing up. It started back in fifth grade when my math teacher Mr. Robins would start every class with shaking all of his students' hands.

"Learning how to give a good, strong handshake is important. You can learn a lot about a person from how they shake your hand," he would always say.

And I took that to heart. After that, every time I met someone I would shake their hands. The other girls would goof around and the boys never wanted to shake my hand. I stopped doing it as much in high school, but whenever I did, boys and older male teachers would never shake my hand properly. It was always soft and weak. It was like they thought that because I was a girl I couldn't handle a real handshake.

Not Jonah though.

He was a bit weird, but I think I was going to like him.

He took me down the short hall, further into the heart of the home - the foyer- with a light cinnamon smell in the air. Shoes off first though, and off they went in the small closet to the left of the entryway. The house looked better inside than it did outside. Lots of large open space, and wood everywhere, and more modern than I was expecting. The sound of the TV got louder and it seemed to be coming from down another longer hall.

Jonah faced me and I dropped my gaze down to my feet. They looked plain but thankfully trimmed. Maybe I should start back painting them?

"You hungry? I was just about to warm up some grub if you're down?" he asked, sliding the gun onto the table in the middle of the foyer.

The thought of eating made me want to puke. Just standing in the cool air-conditioned house after dealing with a horror show of a night just about convinced me to drop and fall asleep right where I stood. That would probably be what made him regret letting me. Instead, I just shook my head.

"I'm actually just really tired."

"No problem. I can take a hint. Though usually, women tend to enjoy my company." he said, running a hand over his head.

My cheeks burned and I started to stammer, making him let out a chuckle.

Oh, that was a nice laugh.

"I'm messing with you, Klara. You look beat... uh, pun not intended."

Great. He noticed. Here I had been hoping that maybe I didn't look as bad as I felt.

I was suddenly painfully aware of myself from head to unpainted toe. I was never really the prettiest girl, but I always thought at least I wasn't that bad-looking. But now I was dressed in

an old hoodie that had a weird stain on it, checkered P.J. pants, with a bruised head and curly hair that was probably a rat's nest. God, Why didn't I at least finger-comb it before leaving?

I stood there awkwardly not really sure what to say, and wanted to put my hood up even though the damage was already done. He coughed and scratched under his chin, making the same sound Dad did when he scratched his stubble. I should call them. I haven't spoken to them since yesterday. Mom's probably worried even though she would never admit it.

"O-kay. I'll just show you to the room, yeah?"

He motioned for me to follow up the stairs. I let out a soft groan, cursing myself for being so dang weird, and followed after him. With every step I took, it was like every injury I had was coming back out full force. From my ankle, my knee, my side, all the way up to my collarbone. By the time I had made it up *all thirteen steps*, I was gripping the banister and horribly hiding how badly my breathing was.

Jonah had made it up there much faster than I did and was watching me with a concerned look. I let out what I thought was a cool laugh, trying to downplay how much I was suffering, but I'm almost certain I just sounded like a chicken being strangled. His face deepened more in concern with furrowed eyebrows and dimples showing.

"You good?"

"I'm fine. Do I not look fine? Where's the room?" I breathed out.

The hardwood floors had made my feet cold, so I was grateful that a long and colorful rug lined the hall as Jonah led me down it. There were a lot of doors up here and I couldn't really keep track of them because I was too focused on trying to breathe normally and not like a fish out of water. Jesus, was living always this hard?

"That's my room, that's Micah's one, that one is also Micah's room. No one is allowed in there. I think it's his sex room or something. He's really kinky that one." he said, wiggling his eyebrows at me. Once again, my cheeks started burning like an innocent virgin girl.

I mean... I was, but my body didn't have to betray me and make it so obvious.

"Anyway, that's the bathroom, and word of warning: you should try to get in there before Ava does otherwise it'll be hours before you can get in there. There's another one downstairs so you won't have to worry that much though. "

Finally, we got to the end of the hall with two doors left.

"This one is Ava's, and this one will be yours - if Micah says yes," he said, and opened up the final room.

I ignored what he said about Micah, not really wanting to think about that at the moment, and stepped inside. A lemony smell greeted my nose and I took a deep sniff in. And, oh, it was lovely. I had spent so much time in my small crappy dorm, that I had forgotten what it was like to

be in a real bedroom. Not only a real bedroom, but it was even bigger and better than the one I had back at home.

I would have taken anything they gave me but this was way better than what I was expecting. There were two large windows with blinds and thick curtains in the room, letting in the moonlight. An empty desk with a lamp stood next to one of the windows, which is where I was going to spend a lot of my time. There was a full-size wooden canopy bed, and even though it wasn't the princess style I always wanted as a kid - I thought it was more than fine. Not only was there a full-size dresser against one of the walls but there was also a closet. No more sharing a clothing space with a roommate, thank god.

"Oh, wow," I said, stepping further into the room.

Without another word, I dropped my bags on the floor and face-planted onto the bed. The warmth and softness were enough to almost knock me right out. The only thing keeping my eyes open was that Jonah was still there based on the chuckle he just let out. I was usually better composed than this but I couldn't find it in me to care that much.

"I guess that's my cue to leave. Good night, Klara."

"Buh bye," I said, my voice muffled by the thick blankets.

The last bit of energy I had left my body at the sound of the door clicking shut, and I was out as soon as my eyes closed.