

PART ONE

THE iVORY TOWER



DEVON

Monday

First-day-back assemblies are the most pointless practice ever.

And that's not saying much, seeing as Niveus Academy is a school that runs on pointlessness.

We're seated in Lion Hall—named after one of those donors who give money to private schools that don't need it—waiting for the principal to arrive and deliver his speech in the usual order:

1. Welcome back for another year—glad you didn't die this summer
2. Here are your Senior Prefects and Head Prefect
3. School values
4. *Fin*

Don't get me wrong. I'm all for structure. Ask any of my friends. Correction—*friend*. I'm pretty sure that, even though I've been here for almost four years, no one else knows I exist. Just Jack, who generally acts like there's something seriously wrong with me. Still, I

call him a friend, because we've known each other forever and the thought of being alone is much, much worse.

But back to the thing about structure. I'm a fan. Jack knows about the many rituals I go through before I sit down at the piano. Without them, I don't play as well. That's the difference between my rituals and these assemblies. Without these, life at Niveus would still be an endless drudge of gossip, money, and lies.

The microphone screeches loudly, forcing my head up. Twenty minutes of my life about to be wasted on an assembly that could have been an email.

I lean back against my chair as a tall pale guy with dull black eyes, oily black hair slicked back with what I'm sure was an entire jar of hair gel, and a long dark coat that almost sweeps the floor stands at the podium, staring down at us all like we're vermin and he's a cat.

"My name is Mr. Ward, but you must all address me as Headmaster Ward," the cat says, voice liquid and slithery. I squint at him. What the hell happened to Headmaster Collins?

The room is filled with confused whispers and unimpressed faces.

"As I'm sure some of you are aware, Headmaster Collins resigned just before summer break, and I'm here to lead you all through your final year at Niveus Academy," the cat finishes, his lips pursed.

"So, the rumors *were* true," someone whispers nearby.

"Seems like it . . . I hear rehab is super classy these days, though . . ."

I hadn't even heard anything was wrong with Headmaster Collins; he seemed fine before summer. Sometimes I feel like I'm so lost in my own world, I don't notice the things that seem obvious to everyone else.

"And so," Headmaster Ward's voice booms over everyone else's,

“we keep within the Niveus tradition, starting today’s assembly with the Senior Prefects and Head Prefect announcements.”

He swivels expectantly as one stiffly suited teacher rushes forward, handing him a cream-colored envelope. Silently, Headmaster Ward opens it, the paper’s crinkle amplified to a blaring shriek through the speakers. He removes a small card and places the envelope on the podium in front of him. I start to zone out.

“Our four Senior Prefects are . . .” He pauses, his pupils flicking back and forth like black flies trapped in a jar. “Miss Cecelia Wright, Mr. Maxwell Jacobson, Miss Ruby Ainsworth, and Mr. Devon Richards.”

At first, I think he’s made a mistake. My name *never* gets called out at formal assemblies. Mostly because these assemblies are usually dedicated to the people the student body knows and cares about, and if Niveus was the setting for a movie, I’d probably be a nameless background character.

Jack elbows me, pulling me from my shocked state, and I push myself out of the chair. The creaking of wooden seats fills the hall as faces turn to glare at my attempt to shuffle through the rows. I mumble a “sorry” after stepping on some guy’s designer shoes—probably worth more than my ma’s rent—before making my way to the front, where the senior teachers are lined up, my sneakers squeaking against the almost-black wood beneath. My heart pounds, and the light applause comes to an awkward stop.

I recognize the other three standing up there, though I’ve never spoken to them. Max, Ruby, and Cecelia are these giant, pale, light-haired clones of each other, and next to them, my short frame and dark skin stick out like a sore thumb. *They* are main characters.

I stand next to Headmaster Ward, who is even more terrifying up

close. For one thing, he's unnaturally tall and his legs literally end at the top of my chest. His pupils move toward me, staring, despite his head facing the front.

I look away from him, pretending that the BFG hasn't got a scary emo brother called Ward.

"I've already heard great things about our Head Prefect this year." Ward's voice drags, making what I'm sure was meant to be a positive, somewhat lively sentence as lifeless as a eulogy. "And so, there should be no surprise that the Head Prefect is none other than Chiamaka Adebayo."

Loud cheers fill the dark oak-walled hall as Chiamaka walks forward. I notice her army of clones seated at the front clapping in scary unison, all as pretty and doll-like as their leader. There's a smug expression on her face as she joins us. I almost roll my eyes, but she's the most popular girl at school, and I don't have a death wish.

I shift awkwardly, feeling even more out of place now. If Max, Ruby, and Cecelia are all main characters, Chiamaka is the protagonist. It makes sense seeing them up here. But me? I feel like any moment now, guys with cameras are gonna run out and tell me I'm being pranked. That would make more sense than any of this.

I know things like Senior Prefects are a popularity contest. Teachers vote for their favorites each year, and it's always the same kind of person. Someone popular, and I am *not* popular. Maybe my music teacher put in a good word for me? I don't know. He's the only teacher I really speak to.

"As all of you know, the roles of Senior Prefect and Head Prefect should not be taken lightly. With a lot of power comes great responsibility. It is not just about attending council meetings with me, or organizing the big events, or impressing a choice college. It is also being

a model student all year round, which I am sure the five of these students have been during their time at Niveus and will, hopefully, continue to be long after they leave Niveus behind.” Headmaster Ward forces a tight smile.

“Please give another round of applause to our prefect council this year,” Ward says, triggering louder claps from the sea of pale in front of us. I feel a few eyes on me, and I avoid them, trying to find something interesting in the floor beneath my feet, rather than dwelling on the fact that there are rows and rows of people watching me.

I hate the feeling of being watched.

“Now for the school values.”

We all turn to face the giant screen behind us, like we always do, ready to watch the school values scroll down like credits at the end of a movie, while the national anthem plays in the background. In normal assemblies, we usually just pledge allegiance to the flag, but seeing as this is the first assembly of the year, Niveus does what it does best: amps up the drama.

The screen is enormous and black and covers most of the large, double-glazed window behind the stage. Niveus is a school made up of fancy, dark wooden walls; marble floors; and huge glass windows. The exterior is old and haunted-looking, and the interior is new and modern, reeking of excessive wealth. It’s like it’s tempting the outside world to peer in.

There’s a loud click, and a large picture fills the screen: a rectangular playing card with *As* in each corner and a huge spade symbol at the center.

That’s new.

I turn to find Jack in the audience, wanting to give him our *What the hell?* look, but he’s staring at the screen as if the whole thing doesn’t

faze him. Everyone else in the audience looks just as unbothered by this as Jack. It's weird.

"Ah, there seems to be some kind of technical malfunction . . .," Mrs. Blackburn, my old French teacher, announces from the back. A few more clicks, and all goes back to normal. The national anthem blares from the speakers and we sing along, with our palms placed on our chests as we watch the school values fly past: **Generosity, Grace, Determination, Integrity, Idealism, Nobility, Excellence, Respectfulness, and Eloquence.**

Nine values most people at this school lack. Myself included.

"Now for a speech from our Head Prefect, Chiamaka." The student body goes wild at the mention of her name, clapping even louder than before and cheering like she's a god—which by Niveus standards, she basically is.

"Thank you, Headmaster Ward," Chiamaka says as she steps up to the podium. "Firstly, I would like to thank the teachers for selecting me as Head Prefect—it's something I never imagined would happen."

Chiamaka's been Head Prefect three years in a row now—there's nothing remotely shocking about her selection. Mine, on the other hand . . .

She looks back at the teachers with her hand still placed over her heart, from when we sang the national anthem, feigning surprise like she does every year.

My eyes really, *really* want to roll at her.

"As your Senior Head Prefect, I will work hard to ensure that our final year at Niveus is the best one yet. Starting with the Senior Snowflake Charity Ball at the end of the month, this year's prefect council will make sure it is a night everyone will talk about for many years to come."

People start to clap but Chiamaka doesn't back down. Instead, she drags the microphone forward, not yet done with her soliloquy.

"Above all else, I promise to make sure that the majority of the funding we get goes to the right departments. I'd hate to see all the generosity shown by our donors go to waste. As Senior Head Prefect, I will make sure the right people—the students winning the Math-alons, competing at the science fairs, the ones *actually* contributing something to the school—are prioritized. Thank you."

Chiamaka finishes, flashing a wicked grin as the hall erupts in applause once again.

This time, I roll my eyes without a care, and I'm pretty sure the girl in the front row with the red bows in her hair looks at me with disdain for doing so.

The prefects all stay behind to get their badges, while everyone else marches out of the assembly to their first period classes. I watch them with their shiny, new fitted uniforms, their purses made from alligator skin and faces made from plastic. Looking down at my battered sneakers and blazer with loose threads, I feel a sting inside.

There are many things I hate about Niveus, like how no one (besides Jack) is from my side of town and how everyone lives in huge houses with white-picket fences, cooks who make them breakfast, drivers who take them to school, and credit cards with no limit tucked away in their designer backpacks. Sometimes, being around all of that makes me feel like my insides are collapsing, cracking and breaking. I know no good comes from comparing what I have to what they have, but seeing all that money and privilege, and having none, hurts. I try to convince myself that being a scholarship kid doesn't matter, that I shouldn't care.

Sometimes it works.

The badges are all different colors. Mine is red and shiny, with *Devon* engraved under *Senior Prefect*. The prefects teachers choose in senior year always have high GPAs and, as a result, are immediately drafted as the top candidates for the valedictorian selections, and while Chiamaka will probably get it, I'm still happy to even be considered. Who knows, if I can get Senior Prefect, what's stopping the universe from granting one more wish and making me valedictorian?

I don't usually allow myself to dream that much—disappointment is painful, and I like to control the things that seem more possible than not. But I've never been on the teachers' radars before, or anyone else's for that matter. I excel at being unknown, never being invited to parties and whatnot. Now that I'm here, and something like this is actually happening to me, I can't help but feel it is a sign that this year is gonna go well . . . or at least better than the last three. A sign that maybe I'm gonna get into college—make my ma proud.

Ward finally dismisses us and I rush out of the hall, weaving through a small crowd of students still hanging about, and into one of the emptier marble hallways with rows of dusky gray lockers. I only slow when a teacher turns the corner. She gives me a pointed look, her sleek bob giving her face the same scary, judgmental appearance of Edna Mode from *The Incredibles*. Then she passes and I can breathe normally again.

The sound of a locker door slamming hard grabs my attention, and my head whips around to find the source. A dark-haired guy with sharp, heavy makeup around his eyes and an expression that says *Fuck off* stares back at me. Josh? Jared . . . ? I can't remember his name, but I know his face.

He's the guy that came out last year at Junior Prom, walking in

holding his date's hand. *His guy-date's hand*. And it wasn't that big a deal. People were happy for him. But all I remember was looking at him and his date, hand in hand, and feeling this overwhelming sense of jealousy.

Prom is one of Niveus's many compulsory and meaningless events, and so, like a masochist, I watched them all night, from the benches at the side of the hall. I watched them slow-dance, arms wrapped around each other like they were naturally safe there. Like nothing bad would happen to them. Like none of their friends outside of school would hurt or mock them. Like their parents wouldn't stop loving them—or leave them. Like they'd be okay.

My chest had squeezed as I'd held on to that thought. My vision blurred, the lights in the room becoming vibrant circles. I had blinked back the tears, quickly wiping them off my cheeks with the sleeve of the black tuxedo I'd rented, still watching them dance—like a class A creep—looking away only when it got too painful.

“What?” A deep voice cuts into the memory like a blade. I blink to find the guy at the locker is staring at me, looking even more pissed off than before.

I turn quickly, walking the opposite way now, not daring to look back. Because, one, Jared? Jim?—*that guy*—scares the shit out of me, and two . . . My mind flashes back to prom, *their intertwined fingers, their smiles*. I screw my eyes shut, forcing myself to think of something else. Like music class.

I climb the steps to the first floor, where my music classroom is, burning the depressing memory and tossing its ashes out of my skull.

My body tingles when I see the dark oak door with a plate engraved *Music Room*, and the sadness melts away. This is my favorite classroom,

the only place in school that's ever felt like home. There are other music rooms, mostly for recording or solo practice, but I like this one the most. It's more open, less lonely.

"Devon, welcome back and congrats on becoming a prefect!" Mr. Taylor says as I step in. Mr. Taylor is my favorite teacher; he's taught me music since freshman year and is the only teacher I ever really speak to outside of class. His face is always lit up, a smile permanently fixed to it. "You can get started on your senior project, along with the rest of the class."

My classmates are lost in the world of their own music, some on keyboards and others with pencils firmly gripped in their hands as they write down melodies on crisp white music sheets. We were supposed to start planning our senior projects over the summer, ready to showcase when we got back. But I spent most of my summer occupied with my audition piece for college, as well as other not-so-academic things.

I spot my station at the back by one of the windows, with a keyboard on top of the desk and my initials, *DR*, engraved in gold into the wood. Not many people take music, so we all have our own stations. I've always loved this classroom because it reminds me of those music halls from the classical concerts online: oval-shaped, with brown-paneled walls. Being in this room makes me feel like I'm more than a scholarship kid. Like I belong here, in this life, around these people.

Even though I know that isn't true.

"Thanks," I say, before stepping toward the keyboard I've dreamed of all summer. I don't have a keyboard at home, because there's no space and they are a lot more expensive than they look. I'm sure my ma would get me one if I asked, but she already does so

much for me and I feel like I burden her more than I should. Instead, when I'm not in school, I improvise; humming tunes, writing down notes, and listening to and watching whatever I can. I'm more into the composition and songwriting aspect of music anyway, but it still feels good to have an actual instrument in front of me again.

I plug the keyboard into the wall and it comes alive, the small square monitor in the corner flashing. I put my headphones on, running my fingers over the black-and-white plastic keys, pressing a few, letting a messy melody slip out, before I sit back, close my eyes, and picture the ocean. Bluish green with fish swimming and bright sea plants. I jump in, and I'm immersed in the water.

The familiar sense of peace rises inside, and my hands stretch toward the piano.

And then I play.



CHIAMAKA

Monday

High school is like a kingdom, only instead of temperamental royals, golden thrones, and designer outfits flown in from Europe, the hallways are filled with loud postpubescent teens, the classrooms with rows of wooden desks, and students dressed in ugly plaid skirts, navy-colored slacks, and stiff blue blazers.

In this kingdom, the queen doesn't inherit the crown. To get to the top, she destroys whoever she needs to. Here, every moment is crucial; there are no do-overs. One mistake can have you sent to the bottom of the food chain with the girls that have imaginary boyfriends and wear polyester unironically. It sounds dramatic, but this is the way things are and the way they will always be.

The people at the top in high school get into the best colleges, get the best jobs, go on to run the country, and win Nobel Prizes. The rest end up with dead-end jobs, heart failure, and then have to start an affair with their assistant to create some excitement in their otherwise dull lives.

And it's all because they weren't willing to put in the work to make it in high school.

Maintaining popularity at a place like Niveus is not about how many friends you have. It's about looking the part, having the best grades, and dating the right people. You have to make everyone wish they were you, wish they had your life. I know to an outsider, it seems horrible—making people self-conscious, feeding off their envy, destroying anyone who gets in your way—but I learned early on that it's either kill or be killed. And if I had to stop and feel bad for every instance I've had to step on someone's toes to keep the crown, I'd be very bored.

Besides, regardless of whether it's me or someone else, there will always be a kingdom, a throne, and a queen.

I stare down at the badge with *Senior Head Prefect, Chiamaka* engraved into the shiny gold metal. It's weird that after three years of fighting my way up to the top of the ladder, it can all be summarized by something so small and seemingly insignificant. I find myself smiling as I run my thumb over the cold surface. Even though it's so minute in the grand scheme of things, it's what I've wanted since I was a freshman, and now I have it.

"Your badge is really pretty, Chi. Congrats," Ruby says, as I walk out of Lion. She and Ava, the other girl I hang out with most of the time, are outside by the door, waiting. The hallway is still filled with students, talking and biding their time before the warning bell rings. The new headmaster kept me back a little longer than the other prefects, wanting to introduce himself properly.

I'm hoping I made a good first impression on him. That first image someone has of you is etched into their minds forever, but the new head didn't seem that enthused by me. He just stared at me coldly, like I had insulted his tacky suit or told him his tie didn't match his shoes. I did none of that, I was polite. And yet . . .

I slip the badge into my blazer pocket and wipe the smile off my face with a shrug, not wanting to seem too eager.

“Thanks.” I look down to Ruby’s badge—dark blue—pinned proudly to her chest. “You too.”

She gives me a toothy, empty smile, her green eyes wide as she says, “Thank you, Chi.”

I raise an eyebrow. Usually there’s more from Ruby, a subtle jab that seems harmless to most but that I know isn’t.

“I mean, it’s such a shame they don’t always give certain titles to the people who *deserve* them . . . But, you’ll look great in the prefect photograph at the end of the year, Chi.”

There it is.

I smile again as we walk through the hallway, heading toward my locker. “I know I will. I’m so glad you’ll finally be in the photograph with me. It only took, what—three years?”

Ruby’s teeth are still bared as she nods. “That’s right, three years.”

Ava clears her throat. “What did you guys think of the new headmaster?” she asks as we get to my locker, clearly wanting to defuse the tension and stop the weird power play Ruby has been trying with me since last year.

Some days it’s like Ruby is praying for my downfall, others she seems satisfied with where she stands at school. Then again, that’s Ruby. The catty, spoiled daughter of a senator. Even though I’ve known her since middle school, we only started speaking in high school, when I became someone worth speaking to, I guess. Anyway, she’s always been a bitch, but maybe that’s why we gravitated toward each other. Girls like us, unafraid to speak our minds, tend to do well together.

I met Ava in sophomore year, when she transferred to Niveus

from some posh private school in England. She's this pretty, blond bombshell who everyone immediately took a liking to with her British accent and her straightforward persona. I actually don't mind hanging around her that much. Unlike Ruby, she's nice and honest—most of the time.

“The new head is kind of scary. Where's he even from?” I ask, shoving my purse into my locker, glad to not have to continue playing this exhausting game with Ruby so early in the morning. I can't wait to go to class and get away from her snide remarks.

Most people think the three of us are friends, since we're almost always seen together.

But we're not friends.

Our relationship is a transaction. I need a close, attractive circle. Small, because the smaller your group, the less people know about you—and the more they want to know. And, in return, Ava and Ruby like how powerful the three of us are together.

Ruby perks up, the way she always does whenever she has information that I don't. Her fiery curls light up as she beams, leaning in. “I hear he's from England, used to be the headmaster at some strict private boarding school.”

“I didn't even know Headmaster Collins was stepping down,” I say, annoyed that I have to restart all the work I'd put in over the past three years with him. Especially given Headmaster Ward's unwelcoming, icy demeanor. I grab some ChapStick from my pocket, just as someone taps my shoulder. I turn to face a familiar bright-eyed sophomore carrying a cup holder with two drinks.

“Morning, Chi. I got you a soy latte and a cinnamon latte on my way to school. Wasn't sure which you'd prefer . . . I remembered from last year that you liked them both, but if you change your

mind, I can bring you something else tomorrow,” she says, cheeks flushed as she rambles. I take the cinnamon one, relief spreading across her face.

“Thank you, Rachel,” I say, taking a sip of the coffee and turning back to Ruby and Ava.

“Actually, it’s Moll—”

“He seemed fine before summer,” I continue.

“I heard Collins had some kind of nervous breakdown,” Ava chimes in, and I shoot her a look which makes her shrink back a little. I understand Ruby knowing things I don’t; she always has her claws in other people’s business. But Ava too? I’ve clearly been slacking over the summer.

Before I can pry further, my vision goes dark, hands clamped over my eyes. I don’t have to see to know it’s Jamie.

“Guess who,” he says in a low voice. A part of me hopes the people in the hallway are watching. I can almost hear their thoughts . . . *Did Chiamaka and Jamie get together over the summer? They’d make the perfect couple. I’d kill to be Chiamaka . . .* All of them, drowning in envy. I smile at the possibility.

“Hmm . . . Tall, dark, handsome, and missing billions of brain cells?” I say.

The hands slip away and I can see again; Ruby’s face is unsurprised and Ava gives a sly smile.

“Correct,” he says, before kissing my head and ruffling my hair like I’m his dog or his little sister. I hope no one saw *that*. I smooth down my hair, avoiding Ruby’s and Ava’s gazes.

“We should probably head to class,” Ruby says, and I can hear the delight in her voice. She loves any moment of weakness she can find, and I guess my only weak spot, despite all the hard work I’ve

put into being perfect, is the fact that Jamie is still my best friend and not my boyfriend.

For now, anyway.

I force a smile. “Ruby’s right. Don’t want to make a bad impression on the new headmaster, especially now that I’ve been made Senior Head Prefect—not that that was a surprise.”

Jamie laughs, shaking his head. “You’re too cocky. What made you so sure you were gonna get it this year?”

I shrug even though I know why I was so sure. Every year since sophomore year—freshmen can’t be prefects—I’ve been Head Prefect. It’s not luck, it’s science. I deserve it, no matter what anyone says.

I get straight As, and I’m the president of debate club, Young Medics, and model UN. I can speak four languages, five if you count English, and I’m going to Yale for pre-med, or at least that’s the plan. There’s no one else who makes more sense for the role of Senior Head Prefect than I do—and there’s no one else who’s worked harder for it.

Head Prefect is the icing on the cake. It tells universities like Yale that I care about Niveus—which I do—and that I’m a leader, which I am. I’m more than qualified for Head Prefect. Even though I know I shouldn’t care, it annoys me that when girls know what they want and how they’re going to get it, they’re seen as cocky. But guys who know what they want? They’re confident or strong. The reason I should be Head Prefect is because I’ve earned it, and Jamie out of everyone should know that.

I know he probably didn’t mean it that way, though, so I brush off his comment as we head out of the crowded hallway. As I’ve come to expect over the past three years, the sea of blue parts; people move aside as we pass through, drinking in our faces, clothes, and hair. I

always opt for a simple look: black thigh-high socks, a velvet Dolce & Gabbana jacket, and suede Jimmy Choo pumps. The more it looks like you didn't try, the better. I place my hand in my blazer pocket, feeling the badge again, the one thing to show for all my achievements. *Everything I've overcome.*

I feel this energy coursing through me, excitement bubbling inside. I'm not sure what it is—maybe it's finally being a senior, or maybe it is me being *cocky*—but something tells me that this year will be different from the others.

That this year will finally be the year everything falls into place; the year that will make all the blood, sweat, and tears worthwhile.

3



DEVON

Monday

One of the only silver linings of being at Niveus is getting to miss some of my classes to work on my Juilliard audition piece.

Ever since I mentioned the possibility of applying to Juilliard, Mr. Taylor has helped “fix” the problem of my attendance. Going to the best colleges is something of a priority for us Niveus students, and so it’s not all that unusual to see upperclassmen miss classes for extra lessons in their chosen majors.

Like now. After first period ended, Mr. Taylor let me move to one of the smaller practice rooms. I’m meant to be in math class, but instead I’m here poking random notes out of the keyboard. I swivel in my chair, reaching for more blank music sheets from the cabinet behind me, but when I tug the drawer, it doesn’t give. I let out a sigh and drag myself out of the chair. I keep a large stack of music sheets in my locker for times when I need to scribble down ideas for new melodies.

I sprint down the steps and through the doors that lead to the hallway where my locker is, stopping short when the students there pause

to stare at me. All of them. Some smile with teeth and others look at me with calculating glares. As if they know me. People usually look right through me, like my body is covered by some invisibility cloak. It's weird that they aren't in class, not that I can judge or anything seeing as I'm not in class either.

I edge toward my locker, feeling a little confused and disoriented.

"Is that the guy?" someone whispers. I turn back to find some of their gazes are still fixed on me.

I try to focus on entering my combination, and not the sound of someone gasping, or what feels like judgmental stares digging into my back.

1 . . . 8 . . . 6—I start, but a tap on my shoulder interrupts me, and I drop my hand. I'm met by Mindy Lion, a girl in my music class who I speak to sometimes, whose long purple hair and bright purple lipstick are impossible to ignore, whether you want to or not.

"Hey, Devon . . . Are you okay?" she asks, face filled with pity—which is really weird, because one, I don't suffer from resting bitch face, so I assume I look fine, and two, Mindy and I are acquaintances at most.

"Yeah, you?" I ask, because apparently we care about each other like that now.

"Yeah, of course. I just wanted to come over, because I know how hard it must be with the picture circulating and everything."

"What picture?"

Her mouth drops open.

"You haven't seen it?" she asks.

I shake my head, trying to look unbothered. I glance up; the people behind Mindy are blatantly rubbernecking now.

"What picture?" I repeat, my voice breaking a little. It's like my

body knows before my mind that whatever she's talking about, it's not good.

Mindy fumbles around in her bright red designer bag and pulls her phone out, tapping then presenting the screen to me.

I blink, looking at her phone closely. It's a picture of two guys. I glance back up at her, because what has this got to do with me? But then a weird thought pulls my eyes back down to the picture. It's not just two guys, it's two familiar figures—one with a bruised neck, and the other, a face I know all too well. I see it every day in the mirror. They are in a room, their lips locked.

My stomach flips and jerks out of my body, heartbeat stopping altogether.

Oh my fucking god.