

asked the Purity Club girls to dance.

stood in the corner looking like painted-up losers and Ryan Quinn was smack dab in the middle of the
c. New beginning. New town. New group.

me.

s had been her old school, she'd have put some fire into this party—

ru. If this had been her old school, she'd have ditched the party for... no, she wasn't going there
of the Purity Club was the perfect way to atone for the sins she'd committed then. As long as her past
she'd handle being ignored at the dance.

the king and queen had been announced, the PC girls were ready to leave. That was fine with her.
t of her mind. Things probably weren't going to get any more exciting at the PC sleepover, but at
ed her gown for Softe shorts and a tank top.

agged behind as they crossed the parking lot to Macey Brown's mom's Tahoe. The girls whispered,
nd of giggles. Were they laughing at her? Nah. She was just being paranoid. They'd included her in
coming stuff. She was the one who'd held back, not sure she was ready to open herself up to a new
they were in the SUV, Macey cranked up the radio—and it wasn't the Christian rock she usually lis
ve around town and sang along to the radio and for the first time, Ryan almost felt like she fit in
a front of the courthouse fountain.

ne on, girls, let's go.”

ey and Katie McDonald exchanged one of those looks that said they had a secret. All the girls laugh
on it too. Uneasiness wafted across the hairs on the back of Ryan's neck. She reminded herself she v
nd forced a grin. “What's funny?”

ey flashed a plastic smile. “You'll see. Ladies—shoes.” They kicked off their heels and climbed o
a plastic grocery sack with a bottle of dish soap sticking out of the top.

e going to soap the fountain. PC girls committing minor vandalism? This was not in her change-my-

girls held up the hems of their dresses and climbed into the fountain, squealing and giggling as the water splashed over them. Ryan stepped over the stone wall into the water, ignored the cold chill that shot from her toes to her spine, and stood in the splashing and giggling.

She waded over to her. “Ryan, I have to confess that we brought you here for a purpose.”

The girls moved close to Ryan.

She smiled, but wariness eased its way into her mind. “What? Is this an initiation?”

Two girls, McDonald and Carle Davis each grabbed an arm.

“They’re going to dunk me. Relax.”

She looked back at her with cold black eyes. Her sweet Southern smile was replaced by a sneer. “You’re not.”

“Deal. They’re just having fun. She dropped to her knees, and sucked in a breath as the cold water hit her face.

The other girls closed in. Jessica Stern pulled plastic scouring pads from the bag and passed them to the others.

She pulled the cap open on the soap. They had crazed looks in their eyes and despite her bravado, the hair on her arms stood up.

Ryan’s neck screamed that this was not good. “What are you doing?”

“You’ve discovered you’ve been a naughty girl.”

“Shit. Shit. She tried to laugh but all that came out was a nervous giggle. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve been talking about abusing the temple God gave you. You’ve abused and shamed your body with sex and drugs.”

The girls’ captors tightened their hold. Ryan’s heart raced and she tried to pull away, but then it seemed like a vice grip.

“You’re on her. They poured soap over her and scrubbed. She screamed and they pushed her under. When she came up,

she coughed soapy water.

The scouring pads scraped across her skin. She twisted and kicked to get away, but they held her down. “You’re soiled,”

Ryan and screamed, “You are soiled by the workings of the devil!” She ran the pad above the scooped soap.

“Down. Soap bubbles foamed in the water. “You’re evil and unclean.” She scrubbed the pad across Ryan’s face.

“Your first pass felt like sand, but she kept working that damned pad. Over and over her cheeks, across her neck, across

her neck. It felt as though fire raked across her with each angry stroke.

“You’ve gone batshit crazy. She turned her face to get away from the torture, but Macey clamped a hand on her shoulder.

“The nylon deeper into Ryan’s skin with each stroke.

“Macey yelled, “Stop it, Macey. That’s too much!” The hold on her right hand was released and Ryan tried to pull

“Macey off. But the other girls were quick to pin down her arm again. A knee dug into the inside of each leg,

“and her legs by putting pressure on her kneecaps. She fought, but they kept her pinned.

“Macey yelled again. “Macey, she’s bleeding. Let her go.”

“Macey released her chin and looked down on her. The whites of her eyes glowed in the lamplight, giving her a

“detached look. She held the scouring pad above Ryan’s face and squeezed.

“The water mixed with blood showered down. Ryan clamped her eyes shut and prayed the torture would end.

“Macey dropped her voice an octave. “I command the darkness in you to come out.”

“A low, deep growl sounded from somewhere. The girls released her and squealed. She heard splashing water as she

Justin Hayes didn't care that he'd been kicked out of the Homecoming dance, but he was pissed as hell. He felt like a victim. When Coach Graves escorted Justin out, he lectured him about his anger and how he had to control it before he wound up in trouble with the law.

How had *he* become the bad guy?

When they got to Justin's truck, Coach Graves put his hand on Justin's shoulder, all fatherly, and said, "Stop what I said. You have to learn to let things go."

Justin opened the door and turned to Coach. He wanted to tell him he'd gotten it all wrong. But Justin had a punch and that was all that really mattered. He choked back all the things he wanted to say and closed the door.

Justin's hands gripped the steering wheel as he fought the urge to slam down the accelerator. He didn't need to. He needed to wrap his brain around the truth that had been revealed tonight. One more thing to add to the mess, a shithole of a life.

Justin made a right by the courthouse, where girls in their Homecoming gowns frolicked in the fountain. He parked on the side of the curb and put it in Park. They'd soaped the fountain. *At least someone was having fun tonight.* Justin watched the scene unfold, uneasiness filled him. Those girls weren't dancing in the bubbles. They were trying to drown someone.

Shit! They're going to kill her.

Justin jumped from his truck. A deep growl erupted as he ran toward them. The girls screamed and scrambled away like a sinking ship. Macey Brown stared at him as she stepped over the rim of the fountain, hatred blazing in her eyes. She wasn't scared like the other girls. She was mad that he'd interrupted.

Justin rushed past her. Ryan Quinn sat up and splashed water in her face. Her skin was raw and bleeding. He grabbed her by the hair. She wasn't crying—she was beyond that. She leaned her face into his chest and her body trembled. Justin opened the truck's passenger door and slid her onto the seat.

Macey stood in front of the hood with a pair of shoes in her hand. "You can have the whore. Jesus doesn't care. Neither do we." She chucked the shoes at him.

Justin caught one. The other thunked onto the windshield. He grabbed the shoe and climbed behind the wheel. Macey stood on the sidewalk with her hands on her hips. Her prom dress clung to her body and pieces of it were unpinned, making her look even crazier than she was. Katie tried to pull her away, but she wasn't strong enough. Justin drove away, Justin took a last look in the rearview. Macey remained on the sidewalk with her middle finger pointed toward heaven.

Justin shifted sideways and pressed her face against the seat. "Thank you."

The raw sound of her voice made his gut twist. "Are you okay?"

Justin nodded. "You're Justin Hayes."

"You can't have Shop together." They'd never spoken because she and her sisters hung out with Austin McCoy. Justin was the only one on this planet he hated more than Austin McCoy—he rubbed his cheek where Eric had managed to hit him—until tonight.

looked at the girl curled up in the passenger seat. Soap matted her super-short hair and mascara streaked her face. *Christ, what did she do to piss those girls off?* “Where do you live? I’ll drive you home.”

“Do we get some coffee or something first?” Her teeth chattered on the last word.

He turned the heat on high. “The Grind is still open.” He drove to the opposite side of the courthouse and pulled into the parking lot of a tiny coffee shop. “What do you want? I’ll run in.”

“A caramel latte.” She folded her legs under her and rubbed her arms. “They have my purse. I’ll pay you back when I get it. We’ll worry about your purse later.” He hurried into the coffee shop.

By God, there wasn’t a line to order. His slacks were wet up to his knees and he was dripping on the floor. The other people who were there stared as he squished to the counter. He didn’t care. He just wanted to get the drink. He handed the money to Ryan. *What the hell happened?* Her arms and face were raw. He needed to take her home so he could take care of her.

When he got back to the truck, he found her curled on the seat with one of his football jerseys draped over her. He took the drink and slipped off his loafers and socks.

He warmed her hands on the cup. “I found—your shirt in the—the back seat. I can’t get—warm.”

He took off his suit coat and handed it to her. “You need dry clothes.”

He set her cup in the drink holder and turned her back toward him. “Unzip me.”

“What?”

He looked over her shoulder. “I’m not g-going to strip in front of you.” She pulled the jersey over her head and threw it across the console to reach her zipper. His hands trembled and his fingers were clumsy as he worked.

She pulled her arms from the straps of her dress and into the sleeves of his shirt and did a whole lot of things until the dress lay crumpled on the floorboards. She pulled her knees close, stretched the shirt over her head, and

threw his jacket across her lap. She sipped her coffee. “Thank you for saving me.”

He stared through the windshield to keep from gawking at her. “Are you ready to go home?”

“Not yet. I can’t.”

He looked at the scrapes on her face and arms. He should get her to her parents, but after what she’d endured, he didn’t want to let her call the shots. “Okay. Where do you want to go?”

“Anywhere. I’m just not ready to face my parents.”

He drove through quiet neighborhoods and tried to think of something to say. But the girl on the other side of the truck didn’t seem in the mood for small talk. She was probably in shock or something. He thought about calling her parents, but that would just complicate things.

It didn’t take long to cover the streets of Hillside. He pulled up to a stop sign and looked at her. “Want to go home?”

She shivered and nodded.

He pulled into a spot in front of the playground. “Are you warm?” She nodded and he cut the engine. In the dim street lights, he could tell her face was beginning to swell. Blood beaded across her cheeks where the scratches had been. “You need medical help.”

n watched water trickle down her neck as she squeezed the cloth against her throat, and told himself thinking it was sexy. “What happened back there?”

lower lip quivered and tears filled her eyes, but she didn’t cry. She pressed the back of her head into I thought it was an initiation.” She moved the cloth to the left cheek. “Those girls are crazy.”

waited for her to finish the story, but was met with silence. Whatever happened, she wasn’t going to t

ly she let out a breath and said, “I saw you dancing. What happened to your date?”

ook his head. “I didn’t have a date. I—ah—was asked to leave.”

at’d you do?”

in a fight.”

tin McCoy?”

Perez.”

batted her arms with the cloth. “I know Eric. He’s in the Purity Club. I thought you guys were friend h. Not so much.” His body tensed as he thought about the note his sister had written. Eric had let hin

or Austin. When Justin figured out what Eric had done to his sister, the bastard had laughed. He

, are you okay? You look like you’re about to explode.”

ooked at the red marks on her arms and blew out a deep breath. “Yeah. I guess we both had our fri ight.”

y were never my friends.” She pulled Justin’s suit coat up over her shoulders. “I have to get my s don’t even have my cell phone.”

help you.” He started the truck.

y?”

you know her number?” He pulled his phone from the center console.

a clue.”

rolled through his contacts. “I don’t think I know anybody who’d have her number.” He tossed h the console. “We’ll just go there. Give me directions.”

I can’t. I don’t want to see them.”

get your stuff. You can stay in the truck.” She was shaking her head before he finished his sentence They won’t even know you’re in my truck.”

—just no.” Fear flashed in her eyes. He needed to back off.

y.” He looked at the clock on the dash. It was already after midnight. “What do you want to do?”

be.”

the hell did that mean? “O... kay. So do you want to hang out here for awhile?”

hopped and got out of the truck.

He followed her to the swings. “You okay?”

sat at the table behind her in Shop for weeks and, other than her comment on her shirt, they'd never said a hello. He wasn't usually shy around girls, but most girls didn't look past him like he was invisible. She was, next to him on a swing in the middle of the night. He twisted the swing toward her. "Right, how do you like Hillside?"

"Different from Chicago, that's for sure. My dad grew up here. When the economy went south, so did the feed store from my uncle. I like working in the store."

He lifted his feet and let the swing rock back and forth. "What was life like in Chicago?"

She pushed off with her feet and gained altitude. "Life in Chicago was about as different as it gets."

"How so?"

"In the starters, we didn't live in an ancient farmhouse. We actually had places to shop and I went to the store every day."

"That explains Shop class."

"I paint and I paint. I love it all, but my favorite is woodworking. Something about the smell of the wood... She leaned forward and looked at him. For the first time since he'd rescued her, she didn't look crazy, huh?"

"Not crazy." He was tempted to tell her that he understood art because of Chelsea. But saying *I get it, my sister was an artist* just didn't sound right.

He leaned back and pumped the swing higher. He caught up to her. They swung in sync, the only noise the chains. The wind felt good on his face. He looked at her to ask if it stung her raw skin. She wore a smile forced and tears leaked from her closed eyes.

He wanted to wrap her in his arms and squeeze away all the shit that had happened to her. He needed to know where her parents could deal with what those bitches had done to her. He let his swing stop, and then in a voice he could manage, he called, "Ryan." She didn't answer, but she let her swing slow too. "Ryan, I want you home now."

He nodded and dragged her feet until the swing stopped. When they stood, he couldn't help himself. He gave her a hug. She didn't wrap her arms around him, but she relaxed against his chest. He held her tight and pressed his hand on the top of her head. His heart warmed at the feel of her pressed against him. He wanted to be her protector, to keep her safe from anybody who'd make her cry.

When she'd read his thoughts, she stiffened and pushed out of his embrace. "Well, that's enough of that." She breathed and blew it out in a huff. "I'm good. Let's go."

It was just like that, the vulnerability he'd seen disappeared. She stretched to her full height and walked to the truck. He followed and started the engine. "Do you want to call your parents and warn them we're coming?" His stomach growled and she gave him a sideways look. "Is there anything open at three in the morning besides gas stations?"

"You spot me a few bucks?"

"No." He pulled from the parking lot and headed toward the Quick Stop.

arms burned and her face felt like it had been scraped with a cheese grater. Justin was right; she needed to let her mom care for her. The explanations, rehashing the shame she'd already brought her family, were too much to think about now.

It didn't matter that her parents had said that what had happened to her in Chicago wasn't her fault. She knew that it was. She'd made the decision to go to the party. If she hadn't gone, if she hadn't gotten drunk, if... if... if. She was sick of *ifs*. There had been no *ifs* in the fallout after it happened. She'd get hit with that. And the sex? Well, what was the use in saying no when she'd already said yes?

She'd wanted out of that life, though. Her therapist said that getting caught with her dad's boss's son was a mistake. She'd begged to differ. It was trusting an idiot who'd forgotten to lock the door.

The anger, pain, and tears in her dad's eyes when he found them naked on his office couch was something she'd never erase from her brain—and neither was the way she'd laughed about it. Somehow that night, regardless of her drugged-up brain and she'd made a decision to change. She didn't know how, but she was going to. The girl she hoped was still inside her. But the damage had been done and things had unraveled for her at warp speed.

Justin pressed the spirit towel to her face as Justin parked in front of the Quick Stop. He turned to her. "What do you want to run in?"

"I want to eat food. I'm starving." Her lips felt like they had a sudden outbreak of cold sores and the slightest movement sent pinpricks of pain across her face. She spoke flatly—not quite opening her mouth enough to get words out. She tried not to wince. Judging by the expression on Justin's face, she hadn't been successful. "Don't talk—just nod, or shake your head. Chips? Candy? Soda?"

Justin nodded at all of the choices.

Justin slipped his bare feet into his loafers and opened the truck door. "I'll be right back."

She watched him all the way into the store. It wasn't the first time she'd noticed Justin Hayes. He was the one who could get her into trouble, so she'd made an effort to look past him in Shop class. It wasn't just the

hips. “We have coke.” He handed her a can of Dr. Pepper, a Coke, and a Sprite. He opened the o
the candy section, we have M&M’s—plain and peanut—Snickers, and to add variety, Pixy Stix.”

at? No dip?”

e dimples deepened. “What do you want? I’ll go back.” He reached for the door.

caught his arm. “Kidding. This is great.”

at back. “So, are we gonna sit in front of the Quick Stop and pig out or do you want to go somewhere
s drive.”

ere?”

held the wet cloth against her mouth and found it easier to talk. “Anywhere. Show me *your* town.” She

of potato chips. “Which drink do you want?”

er Coke or DP.”

handed him the Coke and opened the DP for herself. He started the truck and pulled from the parkin
n?”

nodded. “What makes Hillside special to you?” She held out the bag and he took a few chips. “I
your life.”

made a right at the light and snaked through the quiet streets of Hillside to the hospital. “This is wh

y, that’s taking it way back. Fast forward a little.” She bit into a Cool Ranch chip and discovered a

ed her face. “Salt bad.” With one hand she pressed the towel to her eyes to catch any wayward tea

rom *those* seared her cheeks. With the other hand she held the can against her sore, swollen lips. *Jes*

ak.

n the burn eased, she lowered the drink and towel and cut her eyes to Justin.

half turned in his seat and those cute little dimples weren’t showing anymore. His face was too se
full of concern. “How about some ibuprofen? I can go back and get you some.”

at, are you sixty? Who calls it that?” *Do not smile. Don’t smile. Ouch. You shouldn’t have smiled.*

parents are nurses. So, drugs or no?”

Drive.” *And stop making me smile.*

rove past the elementary school and pointed to a field just beyond the playground. “That’s where I l
.” He slowed to a stop and gazed across the empty field. “Back then we were all friends—Austin

l me. We used to squirrel hunt at Austin’s place. His mom would let us camp out in the woods p
probably to keep us away from Austin’s dad. He was freaking crazy. There’s this clearing on top

see the valley below. It’s amazing. At night the stars are so bright it feels like you could reach up an
He drove forward again. “I guess that’s where I spent most of my days. What about you? You c

,”

hook her head. Hunting for her had been completely different. Magnificent Mile different.

here’s not a lot to see in Hillside. But I have an idea of another place we can go. Ever been to the tr

ad a nice profile, even with the little zit on his cheek. His hair had fallen across his forehead, almost covering his eyes. His eyebrows were thick and dark, and his lips were full and even. But as she studied him, she saw something else. It was subtle, almost invisible lines angling down from his cheekbones. Her art teacher in Chicago called them "survival lines." He said they appeared when people had survived a great tragedy.

He knew Justin's sister had been killed in a car accident a few years earlier. Was that where he'd earned the name?

He exited the freeway and smiled at her as he signaled a right turn. In a flash those lines disappeared, replaced by a pair of deep, dimples. "Feeling better?"

She nodded. It was a lie. Her face, chest, and arms were raw and swelling. She did not feel better. But she would be when she got home. She hoped she could sneak into the house before they saw that she'd been over her undies but Justin Hayes's football jersey.

He exited onto a dirt road. A rusted, bullet-hole-riddled BRIDGE IS OUT sign was illuminated briefly by a passing car. "We're here." He pulled to a grassy area close to the bridge. The full moon lit the rusted metal. "So what do you think of our river?"

"What river? Where?" *Crap. Smiled again.*

"Not the Chicago River. But it's a great place to hang out." He raised his brows as though he were waiting for a response. "Cute."

He turned the engine off, but the radio played on. He crumpled the empty chip bag and stuffed it in one of the back seats. He sat back and took a long swig of Coke. When he turned to her, she saw more than concern on his face. "Ryan, what happened to you tonight was horrible. I don't know why they did it and I don't know why anybody who'd do that to another human being is sick."

How bad was her face? What if they'd scarred her for life?

She licked the visor down and checked her reflection in the mirror. She looked like a circular sander had run over her face. The damage was around her mouth. Tears threatened again, followed by a wave of fear that her face was permanently damaged.

She lunged open the passenger door, jumped from the truck, and ran toward the water. Justin followed, shouting, "Ryan! Wait!" As she reached the bank, he grabbed her and pulled her back. He held her against his chest. "You don't know what's down there."

He pushed her away. "I wasn't going to jump."

She took a step back and held up his hands. "I'm sorry. The way you took off, I thought..."

He shook her head. "No. I'm not that stupid. I just needed some air. Besides, I don't want them to get a taste of what they hadn't realized it until she'd said the words, but she was pissed. She may not have qualified for the title, but nobody deserved what they'd done to her. A cool breeze kicked up, offering solace to her face and a little relief to her spirit.

She turned and faced the water with her arms outstretched in the wind. From that horrible night at Lore...

plug her toes in and a wisp of dirt fell away under them. She jumped back and fell on her bottom. “Wow, come sooner?”

helped her up. “You were having a moment.” He flashed those dimples. “Truck?”
h.” She felt a little shaky as she walked back. She wasn’t sure if it was from her newfound strength
her death, or those dimples. But holy crap, if it was the dimples, it’d destroy her.
won’t let it be the dimples. After tonight, we’ll be strangers again.

*

n shivered as he climbed behind the wheel. “Mind if I turn the heat on?” She shook her head and h
e. This had to be the weirdest night of his entire life. Who was this girl? She’d scared the crap out
’d torn out toward the river. His heart pounded just thinking about what could have happened.
asn’t sure if she was crazy or cool, but either way, he liked it. She curled up sideways on the passenger
d he spread his suit coat over her. He watched her try not to open her mouth as a yawn escaped, and
d at the pain that crossed her face when she failed. He clenched the steering wheel to keep from reacting
e had a feeling that would win him another view of the warrior.

s after five and the sun was breaking on the horizon. He turned to her. “Ryan, I’m taking you home.”
n and she didn’t argue. She nodded and tried to stifle another yawn.

gave him directions and he backed up. The trestle was halfway between Hillside and Spring Creek. He
the opposite side of Hillside—at least thirty minutes. She rested her head on the console between them
asleep before he hit the town limit. He ignored the urge to stroke her soap-matted hair.

the hell had happened tonight? He should thank Eric for being such a douche. If he hadn’t been k
nce, he’d never have driven by the fountain at the exact moment when Warrior Ryan needed a rescue
n. She was amazing, incredible, extremely hot—and he couldn’t wait to get to know her better.