

One Side of the Wall

The Partner Assignment (Book 1)

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Thank you Mom for always being my #1 Fan.

Thank you Dad for inspiring my love of reading. Those hours of reading Harry Potter to me before bed have finally paid off.

Thank you Bella for listening to my books without complaint for hours on end. Let's hope everything doesn't go black.

To the soul holding this book, I sincerely hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

If you want to follow my writing journey and blog, check out my website: www.booksbyshaelyn.com

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Thank you to my characters.

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This side of the wall is supposed to be perfect.

Chapter 1:

The Outsider is assigned a partner.

Year 141, after the end of the world.

After every continent except for one was destroyed, after the world lost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the human population, and after the wealthiest of the remaining people built the safe haven called Oxbow City, reproduction became a top priority.

My eyes are sore from crying. Whether I cry more or I don't cry at all, it won't return me and my brother to our village, it won't allow me to see my mother again, and it won't change my future.

It only makes me miserable and unable to move forward.

After my waterfall of tears during my first night in Oxbow City, I vowed it would be the last time I showed any weakness from my past as an Outsider. To survive I have to adapt and commit to my new surroundings. Smoothing my face into a reactionless stare, I push my emotions deep inside myself,

promising internally I will never give these people the satisfaction of seeing me cry.

It's easier than I thought to shut off the part of myself with genuine feelings and connections to my past, to suppress my emotions and lock my memories into a box.

On Partner Assignment Day I feel queasy as I roll out of bed. My roommate Kelsey says she also feels nervous, although I don't believe she can relate to what I'm going through. My life has changed drastically in the past few weeks and now I'm going to be assigned to the person I will be forced to marry once I graduate high school.

I wear my only dress, white with cap sleeves, and all the fourth-grade kids head to the gym. In typical Oxbow fashion, our results will be read out in front of our classmates, like it's an accomplishment to have our future decided for us.

The gym is crowded. Girls are seated in the rows of chairs on one side of the room with the boys on the other, awaiting the dreaded moment of hearing their own name announced. If your name is called, both partners climb the stage on opposite sides, meet in the middle, then hug while everyone claps. After that you have to hold hands with your new partner as you walk back out the side door and into the courtyard. They expect you to spend time together while waiting for the ceremony to conclude.

The thought makes me want to puke and punch someone at the same time.

I pray to whatever gods are out there that I don't have a match.

Some parents stand at the back of the gym with cameras as if they are excited for this torture. My knees tremble until I sit down, waiting anxiously. Finally, a blonde lady in a tight dress taps the microphone and starts reading the results. Since we have over 1,000 kids in our grade, this will take a while.

I recall the conversation I had with Kelsey the day after I learned about the Partner Test.

Our history teacher explained to us that a meaningful and productive life was one that included creating children as quickly as possible to help rebuild a new, elite generation of Oxbow citizens to repopulate the Earth. Panicking internally but forcing my face to remain unaltered, I asked my roommate Kelsey how it works.

“It’s kind of a joke really,” she shrugs. “They assign you to your best match, if you have one, and it could be someone from our grade or in the higher grades for people who didn’t get partnered up during their test. You may not even get a partner until someone from the lower grade also takes the test, it really depends. It’s like a backup system they have to make sure everyone is married and having kids after they graduate, growing the population. The funny thing is if you fall in love with someone else by the time you graduate, you can get engaged to them if you want. They just don’t want people staying single forever.”

“What if you haven’t fallen for someone else by graduation?” I ask, thankful that she is addressing me like a regular human being.

Contrary to the promises made by the City Council to be integrated into this society as if I were born here, most people avoid me like a plague. There is a stigma attached to Outsiders, that we are uncontrollable, unsanitary, and untrustworthy. I wonder if the Outsiders before me endured similar rounds of torment.

Kelsey picks through her bowl of strawberries. “Then you marry your partner once you’ve both graduated. If you haven’t married by the age of 25, they partner all those single people up too. Only half the people end up marrying their partner, the others all go for someone else. Some people are

actually happy with their results though, they get paired with someone they know will be successful.”

She continues to eat the flawless strawberries, tossing the imperfect ones in the trash. Oxbow is a place where people can afford the luxury to be picky with food.

My future is determined by tests.

The Partner Test is only my latest nightmare. A month ago, I had taken another test, one that all 9-year-old Outsider children must complete in order to determine which lucky kid (plus their siblings if they have any) gets to move across the wall for the rest of their life. This is an act of generosity by the Oxbow City Council to keep the peace with the struggling Outsiders, and it occurs annually.

Apparently, I had aced that test, because my name was the one that President Maroon announced from the wall on August 25, Year 141, after the end of the world.

I sincerely hope I've failed the Partner Assignment Test and am deemed unsuitable.

After sitting for a long time watching unlucky kids get paired up, the crowd of fourth graders inside the gym is thinning. Most have been paired with someone from our grade however, as Kelsey predicted, there were several who were paired with kids from the older grades. Those were some awkward hugs on the stage. As the remaining pool dwindled, I started to hope I may not have a match.

Then my name is announced, crystal clear, over the speakers.

“Aurora Lovejoy and William Inch.”

My heart drops into my stomach and I continue sitting in shock until the girl to my left elbows me. Standing up shakily, I shuffle down my row. I keep my head down as I march up the side of the gym, following the arrows of tape on the floor until I reach the stairs.

Every day I endure constant ridicule from my fellow classmates for being an Outsider. It's bad enough that I'm stuck with the Outsider reputation, but now I've been paired with the one person who has a reputation sizable to my own.

William Inch, the Dwarf Kid.

Really, he's only slightly shorter than the other boys, however he's going to be short when he's fully grown. Compared to my understanding of dwarves, which are little beings only a couple feet tall, Will wasn't strange looking at all.

He has a normal face and light brown hair, which hangs messily in waves on his forehead. His torso is proportionate, but his arms and legs are a bit stubby. He is teased relentlessly by the other kids, boys specifically. Kelsey said that his family is extremely wealthy, and his father is the Commander of the Protection, which is Oxbow's military organization in charge of the safety of the city. His family, and his last name specifically, carry enough weight that Will can use it to his advantage.

This Partner Assignment is obviously cruel punishment from the administration. Their hatred of Outsiders, or anybody who doesn't fit their elite mould, is punished. Why not pair up the Outsider with the Dwarf Kid, kill two birds with one stone. I guarantee my test results never predicted this, they probably did this purposefully and pretended there was a scientific process behind it. This pairing is punishment for us both.

I blink a few times, examining the wooden stairs that lead to the stage, reluctant to take a step. A finger pokes me in the back impatiently so I climb up the first two stairs. My head makes it high enough to lock eyes with Will, who is already standing centre stage with his hands in his pockets, when my foot slips off the next step.

Attempting to save myself, I throw my hands out in front of me, but it's too late. I have already smashed face first into the staircase. My ears barely register the shock and "Oh!" sound from the crowd. My shin stings as it scrapes along the edge and my nose hit hard, causing it to erupt with blood.

Cupping my nose instinctually, blood pours from my nostrils into my hands. Automatically, my eyes water, but I force my face to stay expressionless. There are red droplets littering the stairs. A pair of hands clutch my waist as someone helps me onto the stage while the announcer-lady grabs my arm and leads me forward.

"Oh goodness," she mumbles. She's shoving tissue up my nostrils, which burn heartily. Will is still centre stage and she drags me toward him. His face looks worried although how would I know, everything is blurry from how lightheaded I am.

"I suppose she's already falling for him!" The announcer jokes into the microphone and everybody laughs. I tip my chin back and attempt to control the flow of blood, which is rapidly soaking through the tissue.

"Alright you two, let's have a hug! Have to keep things rolling!" she says excitedly.

Will looks apologetic as he closes the space between us, circling his arms behind my back. I keep one hand on my nose, trapping my elbow between us, and thread the other around his neck. Thankfully he's only slightly shorter than me and I'm able to lean on him for a moment to keep from fainting. His warm cheek is pressing against my ear.

We part and Will takes my free hand, leading me across the stage and returning to the stairs. Strangely enough, his grip comforts me and I follow him easily. He steps in front of me, helping me find each stair in my blurry vision. My legs are going numb as we leave the gym and enter the courtyard. The applause for the next two victims fades into the distance.

The world is tipping sideways, and I bump shoulders with Will, who puts his arm around my back.

“Are you okay?” I think I hear him say.

“I’m just... dizzy...” I mumble. My plugged nose muffles my voice.

“Sit here,” he says, dragging me over to a bench. Then he’s gone, and I stare up at the blue, cloudless sky.

After a few minutes, his hand pulls the tissue out of my nose. He replaces it with something wet and cold, which alleviates the majority of the pain instantly. It’s a wet face towel and I sigh loudly, my vision clearing up.

Will is throwing away the bloody tissue and every other couple in the courtyard is watching us. My cheeks threaten to flush but I ignore them and watch a ladybug crawl across the ground.

Will sits beside me, rubbing his palms on his pants. His light blue dress shirt is splattered with my blood.

“Sorry,” I say, pointing at his shirt weakly.

“I didn’t like this shirt much anyways. Besides, your dress got most of it,” he replies. He’s right, my white dress is ruined.

This is the first time I’ve heard him speak. I’m not sure what I was expecting but his tone of intelligence doesn’t seem to fit with everyone’s mockery. Blood has stopped gushing from my nose and I remove the towel from my face to breathe.

I stare at my dress in defeat. “I messed everything up.”

“I don’t think so. I wouldn’t be as tough as you if I almost broke my nose. You only seem inconvenienced.”

Why is he being so nice when everyone else ignores me or calls me derogatory nicknames?

“I bet nobody has ever fallen like that on Partner day. Is my nose wrecked?” I blurt the question out in a worried tone. I’m scared my nose is broken and my face is ruined.

He takes the cloth, cups my chin gently, and wipes my nose with it. “Your face could never be wrecked.”

It stings but I stay silent.

He sets the cloth on the bench. “There, like it never happened.” I stare at his dark blue eyes momentarily before someone is calling his name by the pool.

“My brother,” he groans and stands.

Will has one brother in the grade above us, Sky, and a fraternal twin brother, Greyson. Sky is often the one teasing Will whereas Greyson is quiet, due to the fact that he went deaf a year ago and communicates using sign language. When he does speak his voice is raspy. I’m currently learning sign language because Greyson is my partner in my elective dance class.

Unsure what to do, I follow Will over to where Sky is standing with a crowd of his friends. They’re all giggling at something on his cell phone (another device completely new to me) and then he’s laughing obnoxiously and shoving it in Will’s face.

“It’s true! How fitting, the outie and the imp!” He’s wiggling a photo of us hugging on the stage.

I’m instantly furious. This is exactly what I was afraid of. I receive enough ridicule without this adding to the mix. Anger feels good. It’s the only emotion I’ve had in weeks, the easiest to feel, and I absorb it hungrily. Now Sky is waving the phone tauntingly in my face, so close that the screen bumps into my nose.

“Ouch!” My hands fly to my face.

“Stop!” Will commands in the same moment, slapping Sky’s arm down. The humour fades from Sky’s face.

“Defending your freaky girlfriend already, are you?” Sky mocks.

I grit my teeth. “I’m not his girlfriend.”

“Aw, hear that? She doesn’t like you midget,” Sky says, seizing Will’s collar and pulling him close. Sky towers over him, an entire head taller. Will’s hands are clenched around Sky’s fists and everyone is backing up except me.

“You’re a spoiled brat,” Will growls.

“You can’t call me that!” Sky shouts, shaking Will.

“Well if I can’t then I must not have,” Will replies, smirking.

Sky raises one fist, ready to punch. “If you say one more thing, I’m gonna... I’m gonna...” he stutters for a moment too long and Will pounces on the opportunity.

“You’ll what? Keep us all waiting to death?”

Abruptly, Sky shoves Will and he falls onto his back with a thump. Sky’s friends are laughing obnoxiously as they leer down on Will, who is red in the face. An anger bubbles up inside me and I charge forward, throwing all my energy into one push.

I shove Sky hard in the shoulder and he stumbles, unprepared for the blow, and falls into the deep end of the pool with a hefty splash. There is silence until Sky surfaces, spitting out water.

“You better watch out cause us outie’s are crazy!” I yell wildly, flailing my arms around. Sky stares me in disbelief, his friends in fear, and Will examines me curiously.

“What a *freak*. You really do like him,” the brunette girl in my grade sneers. She side-steps around me as if I may attack her too.

“I don’t like *him*, I hate *him*!” I exclaim, pointing at Will then Sky. I stomp back to the gym feeling immense satisfaction.

This is the incident that prompted my “wild” reputation for the next eight years.

Chapter 2:

The Outsider embraces her stereotypes.

“How did you find that Math test this morning Rorie?” Kelsey asks me, adjusting her bathing suit so her boobs show more.

“A lot easier than Mr. Macleod said it would be,” I reply, touching the long braid in my black hair.

We took extra time this afternoon to look our best for the pool party tonight. It’s the first Friday in June and everyone in the high school grades will be partying on campus. I adjust my outfit, which is a skimpy bikini top and tight shorts, leaving my body fairly exposed.

I’m proud of my body as I put in the effort to maintain my physical fitness daily. I train in my dance class then gymnastics class every afternoon, giving me a lean figure. My appearance is one of the features that makes my classmates forget temporarily that I’m an Outsider and I use that to my advantage. It provides relief from the prejudgment I’ve endured ever since I arrived here when I was nine.

I’m 16 now, and the most important lesson I’ve learned in Oxbow City hasn't come from the teachers or the books. It’s

the general lesson of life; if you can't beat them, join them, and you might as well embrace your stereotypes.

After I pushed Sky into that pool the rumors spread like wildfire and I was henceforth known as the crazy, unpredictable, wild Outsider. In ways this was my only advantage, earning me fear, respect, and admiration.

The downside is that I've become a target for the popular girls, but the upside is that I've become a magnet for the boys. I developed a chest and curves a year before the other girls in my grade, which initially I was insecure about, until Kelsey advised me to use it. She describes my appearance as an "odd beauty that makes people stare."

I'm sweating buckets as we walk barefoot down the cobblestone path from the girl's dormitory. This has been the hottest month of the year and it's only going to get worse. Ever since the War of the Gods and the end of the world 149 years ago, the weather has been unpredictable and dangerous.

Passing the garden of waterwood trees, we emerge into the packed courtyard.

The substantial pool is filled to the brim with students. Some are lounging, others are playing a volleyball game in the shallow end, and of course several are pushing one another into the deep end. Students on various animal and food shaped blow-up boats float between the action. Music is blasting and the beat pounds in my heart as we weave through the crowd toward the deep end of the pool.

"I feel so bloated right now," Kelsey complains, sucking her stomach in tighter. Kelsey is blonde, very curvy, and over six feet tall. I'm only 5'3" and fairly thin, making us a contrasting pair.

"You look good, trust me. Let's get a drink," I suggest. We snatch a couple tiny vodka bottles off a nearby table.

Weaving through the crowd, we reach the edge of the pool, but I instantly try to turn back. Kelsey notices my discomfort and rolls her eyes, giving me a light shove.

“You can’t always avoid him!” she hisses.

Will is sitting in a lawn chair next to a plastic table covered with beer bottles. Greyson is sitting on the other side next to Mateo, the hulky black guy that hangs around Will like a bodyguard.

Sky and the brown-haired girl from my grade, Olivia, are playing chicken with another couple in the pool.

Olivia was paired with Sky on our Partner Assignment Day and she has made a point of flaunting it to her benefit. Sky is graduating at the end of August, meaning he will begin his official Protection training with Commander Inch, his father.

The eldest son in the Inch family inherits the role of Commander (an Oxbow tradition, positions of authority tend to move down the family line) making him one of the wealthiest men in the city. Not to mention the power he will inherit, with an entire army at his fingertips.

Sky and Olivia’s relationship hasn’t been perfect though. In fact, they have a dramatic fight and break up at every party, then a week later they’re back together and making substantial displays of PDA. They’ve both cheated on each other multiple times, if you consider it cheating, but which of us hasn’t? Partner Assignment Day seemed to reinforce to all of us horny teenagers that we need to get our kicks in before we’re tied down.

I lost my virginity last year to a random boy in the grade above us when I was drunk. It was an awful experience. It was mostly awkward and slightly painful, and the guy used me to gain popularity. Apparently doing an Outsider is a badge of honour.

My second experience wasn’t any better.

Honestly, I'm starting to wonder if people in this city need to do crazy things just to entertain themselves more, as if normal experiences aren't enough for them. But how would I know? I hardly feel emotion and pleasure is still foreign to me.

Kelsey strolls up to the table and swipes a beer.

She winks at Mateo. "Hello boys."

I know she likes him even though she got paired with a nerdy boy in our grade named Moses, who is the same height as me with bony limbs.

"Ladies," Will greets in his low voice, nodding at me. I glance at his feet, which are barely brushing the ground, then back at his face.

Will has matured substantially over the years. He is 4'7" tall, so technically speaking he's not even a foot shorter than me, however he's still teased regularly for being a dwarf. He hasn't bothered me during the last eight years and we both know we've been leading separate lives.

I know he's been with one other girl in the grade below us because that story spread quickly. The surprise for everyone except me was that Will has above-average sized man-parts. Apparently, some people think that being a dwarf means that every part of you is dwarf sized. I hadn't put much thought into this before, although I couldn't imagine actually making love with a dwarf.

Will is simply... Will.

Nothing special.

I would describe him as intelligent and sarcastic. His messy brown hair still hangs down to his eyes, but his overall look has become more masculine in the past year. His facial hair covers his cheeks and chin with a five-o'clock shadow and I suspect that if he let it grow, he would be one of the only boys in our grade capable of producing a full beard. His voice

dropped a few years ago to a very low octave and he can consume more alcohol than most of us.

“You look good Aurora.” He nods at my figure appreciatively and takes another sip of beer.

“Thanks, you look...” I struggle for the right word. “Drunk.”

He laughs huskily and holds up his beer, saluting toward Mateo and Greyson.

“Excellent observation.” His mouth drips with sarcasm and he chugs the remainder before slamming the bottle on the table.

Will points to the mini vodka bottle in my hand. “Drinking alone is so depressing. Why don’t you join me?”

He raises his eyebrows in challenge, so I spin the cap off and pour the contents down my throat in one gulp. It burns but I show no reaction before screwing the cap back on and setting the empty bottle next to Will’s.

“Just a little something to start off,” I say, tasting the vodka on my breath.

“You’ll need a chaser to get through this evening.” He snatches a fresh bottle of beer and, slipping out a large pocket knife, uses the blade to uncap it before passing it to me.

Kelsey shifts around me and begins a conversation with Mateo as Greyson reads her lips. This leaves Will and I alone in our conversation. Stepping closer, I lean one hand on the table and angle my hip out.

“Don’t like parties? You seem to be enjoying yourself just fine.”

“I think you like parties about as much as I do, which is very little. Too loud, too much puke, and too many...” he fades off as a couple of the athletic guys in our year stumble over dragging two girls with them. “Neanderthals.”

They interrupt us on cue. “Hey Inch, waiting for Rorie to have pity on you? Hold on, I just thought of this. Your last

name is Inch... because you're only an inch tall?" Carter badgers him and almost falls over in the process. His heavy intoxication is obvious by the slurring of his speech and the way he hangs off his girlfriend. The other boy laughs harder than any sober person would.

People often joked when Will and I were together that I was finally having mercy on him. It's a common trend to believe that Will is in love with me and that I held no affection for him, however this isn't true. We are both equally indifferent toward one another.

Will smiles up at Carter as if he is a sweet ignorant child.

"I've never heard that one before," Will states sarcastically. "But to be exact, I am 55 inches tall. That's 54 more inches than you thought."

A snort of laughter comes out of my nose before I stifle it into a fake cough at the look on Carter's face. He's confused.

"Whatever Dwarf Kid." Carter gives him the finger as he and his crew continue around the pool.

I cross my arms and offer Will my advice. "You need to quit making enemies out of everyone."

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "Oh please. I could pay them thousands of dollars every day and they would still call me a dwarf. Why would I go out of my way to impress people who will never like me anyways?" He opens another beer and takes a swig.

"It's hard to argue with that logic," I reply coldly. I've put significant effort into learning and adapting to the ways of the Oxbow people and I know in my heart that no matter what I do, I will never fit in. I will always be the Outsider.

"To never being liked." Will tilts the neck of his bottle toward me and I tap it with my own, in the form of a cheers. Water splashes my calves and I turn to see Sky, with Olivia teetering on his shoulders, waving at the edge of the pool.

“Hey, we need new opponents for chicken! What about you brother? You can sit on Rorie’s shoulders!” Sky hollers. His friends perched on the side of the pool guffaw with laughter.

A strange image of Will sitting on my shoulder’s pops into my mind and I roll my eyes. Neither of us answers so Sky splashes water onto the back of Kelsey’s legs, making her jump. Her hand flies off Mateo’s shoulder and Greyson glances over in surprise.

“What about my other brother? Want to play chicken? You can team with Rorie.” Sky both yells this and uses sign language at the same time so Greyson will understand. I observe Greyson, who seems to debate for a moment, then shrugs in agreement. I sigh and set my beer down on the table to leave, but not before I lock eyes with Will.

His stare is determined. “Take them down, will you?”

“My pleasure.”

I turn and follow Greyson toward the edge of the pool.

Since Greyson is my usual partner in dance class, we end up doing many routines and lifts together, therefore I trust him implicitly.

My relationship with each Inch brother varies substantially. With Sky it is pure irritation and sometimes hatred, with Will it is an unspoken understanding that we are technically going to be married one day, and with Greyson it is simple friendship.

All three boys appear related by their dark blue eyes and general face shape, however each one is unique in appearance. Sky styles his short dark brown hair back and dresses to show off his wealth. Will is messier, often wearing t-shirts and jeans. Greyson is definitely the odd one out with his style, wearing sweatpants and a baseball cap to cover his unruly light brown hair.

At the edge of the pool I slip off my shorts, exposing my bikini bottoms, and slide into the cool water, sending satisfying shivers up my spine. My skin is hot and this contrast comes as a relief. The water is up to my shoulders and I wait for Greyson to strip off his shirt. He splashes into the water and wades over to me.

“Ready?” he asks in his raspy voice. I nod and he takes a deep breath before submerging his head into the water. Sky and Olivia are readying themselves as Greyson slips his head between my legs. Balancing automatically on top of his shoulders as he stands, water running off our bodies, I prepare myself.

We seem to have gathered a small crowd around the edge of the pool and I spot Kelsey giving me the thumbs up. Greyson wraps his hands around my calves and I wonder about how awkward this would be with another boy, but with Greyson the discomfort is minimal. He’s used to touching my body and the only change now is that we’re both soaking wet. I’ve never considered more than friendship with him, however I’ve always found it curious that he’s never shown attraction to me whatsoever.

Everything is distracting right now. I force myself to focus on the task at hand, which is knocking Olivia off Sky’s shoulders. They’re smiling and laughing as if this will be an easy win, but I think they’ve underestimated me and Greyson’s teamwork.

Someone on the side whistles, indicating the match is starting, and Sky charges forward hungrily. Greyson moves smoothly to the side, dodging his initial attack, and Olivia nearly slips off Sky’s shoulders at his aggressive movements. She’s ranting at him, and Greyson makes his first move, locking arms with Sky. Now it’s up to me.

Reaching forward, I push Olivia’s shoulders back, but she grabs my forearms at the last second to save herself. The boys

are shoving one another and they both stumble. As they approach for another attack, Olivia raises her leg to kick Greyson in the face. I flick my own foot up, blocking her.

The boys are locked below, and Olivia and I are locked above. Each of us is shoving one another and hoping someone will lose their balance. Finally, I see my opening, and I slip my arm through and push Olivia's chest at the same time Greyson shoves Sky. They both splash backward into the water.

I tighten my thighs around Greyson's head to keep myself from slipping off and suddenly the roar of the crowd registers in my ears. I throw my arms up in victory, trying to relish the one moment where everyone accepts me.

"Just like when we were kids, huh Sky?" I shout.

Those in the crowd who remember the story of how I shoved Sky into the pool laugh. Sky, on the other hand, stares at me through his wet eyelashes in disdain. I'm on an adrenaline rush and I don't care about whatever revenge he may attempt later.

Greyson sinks below the water and swims out from under my legs, emerging energetically and pumping his fist in the air. It's satisfying to win for once, however I figured it would feel better than this. I'm still empty inside.

The evening continues in a blur. I drink too much alcohol and try my best to act like I'm having fun. I go through the motions, smile when it's expected, laugh when everyone else laughs. I am the perfect puppet.

At some point people start dancing on the pool deck and in my drunken stupor, I join in with Kelsey and some boys. Everything is slightly blurry, my stomach is churning, and I try to forget everything in this moment. The night is hot but a light breeze swirls in, providing a reprieve whenever it touches my skin. I decide to escape the crowd.

Stumbling around the corner of a building, I collapse on the fresh grass before passing out.

Chapter 3:

The Outsider meets an Outsider.

Next thing I know there is something touching my lips, moving against my mouth, and I have a dream of being kissed.

Except the lips feel too real and I begin kissing them back. A tongue darts into my mouth and I gain consciousness. My eyes flutter open and a dark figure floods my vision, his nose sending warm puffs of breath onto my cheek. His lips are dry and I'm about to push him away when a flash goes off, blinding me momentarily.

Sitting up quickly, I knock foreheads with whoever it is and hear him curse. A street lamp shining dimly down on us reveals a person I never thought would be kissing me.

Sky is staring at me in triumph and in pain. I am coming to my senses now, my dizziness from before fading, replaced by pure adrenaline. He's holding his phone, smirking at the screen.

“What the hell?” I croak.

“Come on outie, you want to fit in so bad right?” He drops his head down and kisses me again before I can stop him.

Grunting in objection, I push him in the chest after a moment, and he breaks away reluctantly.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. “Get off me.”

“What, I’m not your type? You think you’re too good for me, the future Commander of this city? You humiliate me tonight and now you reject me?” His cheeks are flushed as he sways slightly.

“Sky, you’re drunk,” I groan. “You wouldn’t be doing this if you weren’t.”

“Well maybe I want a ride on the wild side just like everyone else. I know I can afford a ticket.” Again, he slams his mouth into mine, and this time I shove him away immediately.

“Shut up!”

Sky becomes angry. “I’m going to show this to everyone, starting with my imp brother. You’re so desperate everyone will believe it.” Sky’s contempt for me is clear and my heart races as I consider the consequences.

“You son of a—”

“You’ve been a very naughty girl tonight Aurora. What will your betrothed say?” He turns the phone screen to me. It’s a picture of us kissing a minute ago.

“He won’t care.” And yet I can picture how embarrassed Will would be to see his partner making out with his creepy brother.

“No, you won’t care. You’re the one who doesn’t care, Will on the other hand will probably be a bit worked up,” he sneers. “I could make this picture go away though... if you know what I mean.”

I know exactly what he means.

“You’re disgusting,” I whisper, feeling the bile rise up in my throat.

“So are you,” he says, his eyes catching my own. Then he leaves.

Rolling onto all fours, I take deep breaths to settle my stomach, then stand up.

This is a mistake. As I stand, my head pounds and my balance is off. Staggering sideways into the wall, I run my hand along the bricks as I step carefully back toward the courtyard. When I round the corner, I make out a few people still dancing and drinking and estimate I haven't been asleep for too long.

Still sticking to the side of the building for safety, I'm shuffling along the pathway, but another wave of nausea hits and I double over. After a few deep breaths I straighten again but decide to detour into a bathroom.

I barely stumble into a stall before I'm throwing up the entire contents of my stomach. My knees hurt from falling onto the white tile and my hands grip the toilet seat as I wretch a few more times.

"You okay?" A faint voice behind me asks once I'm done. I yank toilet paper from the roll and wipe my face before flushing the toilet. When I turn and lean against the stall wall, I see the person who was talking to me.

Her name is Lily and she's kneeling on the tile too, watching me nervously. I recognize this girl and I have to pull the memory from the depths of my mind. She's the Outsider from the year below me, the 10th grade. The Outsider from year 142.

Everything about Lily is odd. Outsiders typically struggle to fit in, but Lily doesn't try to fit in at all. I know this because I've heard the other city girls discussing her bizarre habits and honestly, you can tell by looking at her.

Currently she's wearing a practical black shirt and baggy old cargo pants, and she's let her hair grow out into thick dreads that hang to her waist. Her brown eyes are wide, like a squeamish deer on the lookout for predators.

“I’m fine,” I reply hoarsely, clearing the leftover acid in my throat. She leans toward me and I resist the urge to move away from her creepy stare.

“Rough night huh?”

I can’t tell if she means to sound like a stalker or if it's coincidence.

I recall Sky forcing his lips on me and taking the photo.

“You could say that.”

Another pause, then I lose control completely.

“Sometimes I just hate this place! All the people in this stupid city who are so clueless and spoiled that they spend their time tormenting each other!” I burst out angrily then clasp my palm over my mouth in shock.

Of course, these were thoughts in my mind, but I have never voiced them before. The only person I care about is Mason, my younger brother, and I constantly worry about the consequences for him if I lose control. Lily merely stares at me, then begins pulling at a thread coming off her pants.

“I understand,” she replies. I guess if anyone would understand it would be her, the one Outsider that has a reputation worse than mine.

“Sorry, I’m just frustrated,” I backtrack automatically, afraid someone in a neighboring stall might have heard. Lily is silent for a whole minute until she shocks me.

“Do you ever think about leaving?” she asks, her eyes wonder-like again. She is attempting to stare into my soul. I jerk my head back.

Should I answer honestly? Can anyone hear us?

“I don’t know.”

Except I do know. I have wondered if I would remember my past again if I left, got back to my original surroundings. The city has always seemed impenetrable from the inside and outside.

“I did once,” she says whimsically.

She strokes one of her dreads, staring at the toilet paper roll on the wall. Suddenly I wonder if she is mentally stable. This could have been a dream that she's convinced herself is real. I listen intently and lean sideways to look under the stalls. We're definitely alone.

"Alright Lily, I think we should both get some rest."

"You don't believe me, I can tell. But I did, I got to the other side then came back." She glances at me again and this time I allow myself a flight of fancy with her.

"Ok then, how did you do it?" I ask, trying to sound as if she has inspired me.

"I was at the beach, swimming along the North wall. You have to dive near the orange buoys of the swimming area, then you have to keep swimming out further until you reach the end of the cement wall and the start of the generator wall. Then dive under. That was the hard part because the current from the generator is really strong and if you're not a good swimmer it will suck you in and shred you up." She smiles and examines the air as if there is a butterfly flapping above our heads. Then she focuses again and continues.

"Right where the wall meets the generator there's an opening at the sand with bars on it to let the water through, but one of the bars has been shifted sideways. It's a tight squeeze but I made it." Lily is clenching her fists and smiling at me.

"It seems odd that there would be openings in the wall on the ocean floor," I point out.

"There has to be otherwise the water pressure from the generator would crack it," she informs me, nodding enthusiastically. I have to admit, her story sounds specific for a dream.

"And you just, what? Dove under then dove back? What was the point?"

She snaps to attention as if I slapped her. “What’s the point? To prove that I could, wouldn’t you want to prove that you could? Prove that they don’t own you? But next time I go I’m leaving for good.” She twists her dread tightly as if wringing it out.

“Were there... other people?” I ask, unsure I’ll like the answer.

Eight years ago, I suppressed the memories of my past because I thought I could never return, however now I can’t remember my past even if I wanted to. But what if I could see my mom again? I know I had a mom but I can’t recall what she looked like.

“Oh yes, I saw some in the distance, but they were too far,” she replies dreamily.

This is when I decide to stomp out her stories.

“Ok Lily, I’m leaving now.” I stand gingerly. Lily stands too and moves away so I can pass her. As I leave, she grabs my arm.

“You should try it. The world isn’t ending anymore, but they trap us here like it is,” she whispers. One of her dirty dreads brushes against my arm and I shiver before she releases me.

As I speed walk out of the bathroom and back to my dorm, I wonder if Lily has always been this crazy.