

CREEPER



Warning: *The following excerpt is unedited. Typos and grammatical errors galore.*

Double Warning: *Since this is rough-draft material, the scene I'm sharing with you may or may not end up in the final book...if the story even makes it to publication.*

Triple Warning: *Sorry, I don't really have a third warning; I'm just a goofball who wanted to write "triple warning." It's so fun! Anyway, enjoy the excerpt!*

Prologue

Caden

The ground was dry and hard, impossible conditions for digging. I gripped the handle of the shovel tighter and jammed the heel of my boot into its shoulder, forcing its blade to gouge deeper into the earth's unyielding flesh.

"Dammit, dammit, dammit," I muttered, wiping away the sweat creeping down my face with the short sleeve of my blood-splattered T-shirt.

A full moon mocked me with a condescending glower, making my fingers shake even harder while the fresh corpse two feet away offered no assistance in my endeavors whatsoever. The damn thing just kept stinking up the place and collecting more flies, even though it was *his* eternal resting place I was crafting.

Bastard. He'd been just as worthless alive as he was dead.

But I'd been the one to end his life, so I suppose it was just as well I dug his grave without his help.

My stomach churned and nausea mounted. Murder. I'd committed murder not even an hour ago. My first. Hopefully my last.

I was going to be sick any second.

Swallowing the bile down, I kept digging, my breaths coming in choppy, frantic bursts that matched the wild stampeding of my heart.

I never thought I'd have the propensity to kill. I wasn't excitable, confrontational, or even violent. A quiet introvert who didn't involve myself in other people's drama, I should've lived the rest of my life without even getting into a disagreement with another human being, much less killing one. So why the hell was I out here in the middle of nowhere on a scorching hot July night, hiding a dead fucking body?

"Can I help with anything?"

Oh yeah. There was my reason.

Five feet away, she hugged herself on the opposite side of the hole as the body, trembling in her low heels and holding together a torn patch of cloth on her dress at the collar, a tear the corpse had ripped open, right before I'd taken his life.

I paused digging long enough to say, "No."

I refused to look up. I couldn't bear to meet her gaze as she beheld the monster I'd become. If she looked into my eyes and only saw a murderer, I'd break. I'd dissolve into nothing.

She fell quiet so I kept digging. The pit in the earth slowly grew deeper while the pile of dirt by her feet steadily mounted higher.

"Caden?" she said, speaking again.

The quiver in her voice made me wince. I stopped digging but kept my head down.

A second passed before she shuddered out a breath. "Maybe we should tell the police."

I looked up, and in the moonlight, I caught the tracks of mascara-laden tears trailing from her eyes. She shook with fear, but it didn't seem to be a fear of me. It seemed to be the same kind of distress I was experiencing, the sheer terror of being thrust into a situation that yawned way too big for either of us.

Letting out a hopeless breath and resting my forearm on the handle of the shovel to inspect the job I'd done: a two-by-six-foot cavity that was barely a foot deep. At this pace, it'd take the entire night to make it anywhere near grave-worthy. My gaze wandered back to her face. She cried so quietly I wouldn't have known she even wept if the damning moon weren't revealing all her secrets.

"Is that what you want, then?"

It'd been her idea in the first place to go this route, hide the body so no one ever found it.

But now she shook her head and rasped, "I don't know. I...it was an accident. And self-defense. Maybe they'll understand. Maybe they'll..." Her words died off as she met my

stare, and every reason she'd initially decided the police would not understand must've filtered back through her brain.

She wanted to protect me. I couldn't even process how much that affected me. In all my life, I'd only yearned for such protection. Except now it came too late.

In return, I would do anything for her. Turn myself in or hide the evidence, whatever she wished, I would grant.

"What about this?" I motioned toward the grave. "What do we tell them if we bring them out here, and they see this? That we were going to cover it up but changed our minds?"

She gave a small, uncertain shrug. "Well. That'd be the truth." She focused on the corpse before shuddering and zipping her gaze to me. "If we never told them and they found the body, we'd look even guiltier than if we did this."

I guessed we were telling the police then. Tossing the shovel next to the dead body, which made her jump, I climbed from the hole.

She pulled upright, alarmed, her eyes widening with panic. "What're you doing?"

Confused, I squinted at her. "Stopping. I thought we were calling the police."

"But..." Shaking her head, she backed away and spread her arms to motion toward my abandoned project. Then her worried gaze sought mine. "Aren't you going to disagree with me? This is *your* future we're deciding."

I shook my head, letting her know I'd disagree with nothing she had to say. "I'll do whatever you want."

Except that confession seemed to agitate her more than anything. "*Caden*?! Are you insane? Why don't you have an opinion about this? I don't want to be the one to make the decision. What if I make the wrong one?"

I glanced at the body. "The wrong decision's already been made. Nothing from here on out will be right, no matter whether it's the best, honorable thing to do or not."

A sob wracked her, and she cupped her mouth with both hands. “Caden,” she whimpered. “I can’t do this. I can’t decide. I don’t want you to get into trouble.”

I met her haunted gaze, and everything inside me tightened. “That’s not something you can control.”

My brutal truth seemed to slay her. The stream of tears on her cheeks thickened. “Caden... I’m sorry. This is all my fault. I’m so sorry.”

“Hey. No. This is not your fault.”

When she shook her head, unable to buy that, I grew angry and upset and heartbroken in the same moment: mad she was blaming herself, frustrated I couldn’t fix this for her, and sad because watching her pain stressed me more than worry for my own future.

My future really didn’t matter anymore. I had taken life, I was already damned, either by my own demons or any acts of the legal justice system.

Watching her fear settled it for me. My own fate was fucked. There was only one way I knew how to feed her any kind of relief. The truth could at least set *her* free.

Stepping closer, I lifted my hands to cup her face, but stopped a few inches from contact, realizing my fingers were coated with dirt and dried blood.

She sniffed away a tear and looked up at me with eyes full of pleading. “Caden?” she whispered.

I dropped my hands, unable to touch her with such filth. She’d be clean of this; I’d make sure of it. “This is what we’re going to do,” I said.