

New Hope

Chapter 1- I am Justin, Part I

March 7th - I have a confession

Have you ever just sat in your car on a rainy day, listened to your favorite depressing song, and stared out into the world like your life is one of those teenage angst movies? Yeah, me neither. But if I had done, then I'd have lost count by now. Day by day I walk through this life, barely recognizing myself as I hold onto the person everyone thinks I am... or thinks I should be. Trying to cling to the fake reality I've created, my ordinary world.

The truth is, I'm anything but ordinary. This facade wasn't built to last and as time creeps behind me like an eldritch horror, I've slowly come to realize that my world is going to crumble sooner or later. I have a secret that could change everything. Life would become infinitely more complicated and I'm not ready for that. My family, friends, random strangers in the street... everyone would look at me differently. Like I'm a freak.

I have a confession to make. My differences carve a bigger divide than just your typical teenage bullshit. The energy that's stained my soul has become a burden I can no longer ignore. I've tried to get the urges under control and I've tried to push the constant pulsing to the back of my mind, but when left unchecked it takes on a shape that's both self-destructive and dangerous.

It's been 14 days since the last incident. Now that I'm acknowledging and nurturing the beast inside, I've learned how to stay in control. There's a long way to go before I can fully

control it, but this is a step in the right direction. Once I understand control and discipline, I can keep it suppressed. I can keep it hidden.

In the meantime, I'm going to focus on the one thing I can control.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fucking shit! I can't believe I forgot it!" I scold myself, running in blind panic through the winding high school hallways. With just three minutes to spare before lunch period was over I had virtually no time to waste. Miss Morris was a stickler for punctuality and hated any late students with a passion. But this was important, and I could afford my English teacher's wrath for today if it meant getting my Goddamn book back safely.

It's way more important than any other work of literature, more important than school itself. I'd even dare to say it's even more important than Krispy Kreme, but that would also get you publicly stoned for blasphemy so I won't admit that out loud.

My life is in that book, my literal life written down and recorded onto beige pages. I know, not many 18-year-old boys keep a diary but I think I deserve to be the exception. With all the fucked up things that have happened this year I need an outlet... a place to vent and write down my thoughts without persecution. There isn't a soul on this earth I can confide in that would understand, so writing it down is the next best thing.

Everything I can't say out loud comes to life on paper, my passion for music and lyrics masking the truth behind song. The truths sealed between a hardback cover and metal latch are

far more dangerous than anyone could realize. My deepest secrets and hidden emotions, all on display if I don't get to the library quick!

"Move out of the way!" I yell at a group of freshmen that had congregated at the bottom of the spiraling stairs up to the library. They had little time to react before I trampled over them and dashed up the steps two at a time. "Please be there, please..." I muttered, hoping nobody had taken it.

I'm not a runner, not in the slightest. I've already thrown up twice this semester during track. Granted, the chocolate-filled donuts may have played a minor factor, but I'm not about to admit that to anybody else. There are for sure no donuts in my system right now and I'm sprinting through the school like a gazelle; dodging, ducking, and diving around my peers as if there was a pack of cackling hyenas in hot pursuit.

Without a second thought, I burst through the library doors like a Superhero breaking into an evil lair, scanning the room for possible enemies. Luckily, my archnemesis Tiffany was nowhere to be seen. Hoping that nobody had noticed my over dramatic entrance, *everyone noticed*, I retrace my steps from earlier.

I spot a stack of books in the study area and remember that I spent some time catching up on physics homework. But as I approach a pit suddenly forms in my stomach. Theo, the resident school bully and town asshole, is sat with his pack of cronies laughing at something on his phone. Trying to ignore the sudden glares from them, I search through the pile of books and sigh not seeing my songbook anywhere.

"Hey Justin, what you lookin' for?" Theo's voice rings from behind me. I hadn't realized he'd left his pack and was now uncomfortably close to me.

“Nothing Theo, just misplaced my physics homework,” I reply, trying not to make eye contact. His ivory skin and monochromatic hair sparkled beneath the library chandeliers, crystal sweat painting his skin beautifully. His eyes burned a deep orange as I shifted uncomfortably under his gaze, unaware of how loaded his question was.

“Homework, you actually do that shit?” he scoffed, folding his arms.

“Funnily enough, you do kinda need to turn in assignments to get good grades.”

“My grades couldn’t be better, and I haven’t turned in a single assignment this semester,” he smirks, proud of the fact. I try to ignore his obvious baiting but can’t help but roll my eyes at his obnoxious smirk.

“Hey... I’m sorry by the way. It must have been hard coming back to school so quick after what happened last week.”

I notice him shift uncomfortably, not wanting to meet my gaze.

“Not really, I’m over it,” he replies, rather unconvincingly.

“Well, I know we aren’t really friends. But if you ever need someone to talk to, I’m a pretty great listener.”

That wasn’t a lie. I am a good listener... but knowing how wrapped up Theo is in his own ego my friendly gesture was sure to turn his expression sour.

“Why would I ever want your help? I’m a Brantely... old money, you don’t have anything I’d want or need,” his lips twist to reveal his devilish canines, sharper than the average person.

“I know who your family is and if you haven’t forgotten, I’m a Hope. It wasn’t just your Great Grandfather who founded this town,” I reply, annoyed with how he always lorded his money and status over everyone.

“Are you trying to piss me off? Cuz I’m not in a playful mood today...” he said quietly, his voice deep and heavy.

“Honestly Theo, I was just trying to be nice. But since you don’t seem to give a shit I’d like to continue looking for my homework. So if you don’t mind...” I brush past him, the strong stench of his expensive aftershave attacking my senses.

My indifference to him probably spins the cogs in his little brain wild, but I care little to explain who Theo Brantely is right now. I need to keep looking for my book.

Quickly rushing over to the furthest corner of the library, otherwise known as the Shade Circle, I hoped my book would be nestled in one of the chairs. Teachers assumed that it was named so by students due to the towering bookshelves that cast an everlasting shadow over the circle of beanbags... but they couldn’t have been more wrong. In reality, it was the perfect nook for students to sit and gossip.

For some reason, everyone seemed to believe that the Shade Circle had some sort of silence ward placed upon it. No sound left its vicinity and so secrets and private discussions could be had and shared without unwanted ears listening in. Of course, that was utter bullshit but teenagers in highschool will believe anything if it’s backed up by gossip.

My usual spot in the music room is being used by freshmen for an Enterprise day, or some shit. That meant I had to find somewhere else to write this morning during my free period and the Shade Circle just so happened to be empty. Even though I’ve been practicing control, the insatiable urge returned this morning and I needed a way to release all my pent up frustration before it blew. The last thing I needed was to have an episode in front of my friends,

they would never understand. Luckily, we opted for different classes so I spend my Tuesday mornings alone with my thoughts.

As I approach the Shade Circle I let out a huge sigh of relief when I catch the glimpse of my book nestled into one of the beanbags. It appeared to be exactly where I left it, so without wasting another second I swooped down like an eagle and pulled it close to my chest. Checking my phone, I now had just two minutes to get to class and the English room was at the other end of the building. Could it be done? Can I run the entire length of the school in under 2 minutes and get to class on time? Watch me try!

English was fairly boring. Correction, I find English incredibly boring. I absolutely despise *of Mice and Men*. Why can't Curley's wife just like the color red? Not everything in life is a metaphor to be picked apart. My favorite color is orange and I'm hardly free or sexual... in fact, I'm the total opposite! Literature needs to leave Curley's wife alone and give her a Goddamn name, but that's hardly something I can write about in my essay that's due by the end of this week. "Psst, Justin..." a familiar raspy voice whispered from behind me.

Miss Morris had her head down marking papers, so I quietly turn in my seat to face my grinning best friend, Ethan. His beautifully tanned skin was a complete contrast to my own, even after my recent vacation to Australia giving me a decent golden glow. "We missed you this morning," he said, running a hand through his mousy brown hair and gazing at me with beautiful emerald eyes. "Stacey was asking about you in History."

“Of course she was,” I mumbled back, my moment of admiration ruined. Ethan raised a curious brow, and I quickly sit upright trying to feign interest. “I just spent my free period chilling out and writing. Found a spot at the Shade Circle cus this stupid Enterprise Day has taken over the music room,” I explain simply, hoping that would distract and cover my ass.

My friends know about my book and that I like to write music, but they have never so much as taken a glimpse of what’s sealed inside. I’m not one to blow my own trumpet, but I’m a fairly competent singer, not that my friends have ever heard me sing properly. Well, except for that one time at Jeremy’s birthday party when I got wasted on Dark Fruits and spent an hour singing karaoke. You’d have thought the Christmas classic, Baby It’s Cold Outside, couldn’t be sung by one person... apparently you’d be wrong.

“You need to put that book down for a while and come back to reality,” Ethan said, keeping a cautious eye on Miss Morris.

“Says the drama student,” I snicker back, to which Ethan just shrugs and leans back in his chair, kicking his feet up to rest on the back of mine,

“Touche,” he chuckles, tapping his pen against his lips. My eyes absently travel down from Ethan’s eyes as I watch him play with the pen, rolling it along his lower lip. In an instant, I’m consumed by the thought of my best friend's lips on mine, his olive skin pressed against me in a moment of passion. “But seriously mate, this girl is into you and you don’t even know how lucky you are,” Ethan says, pulling me from my thoughts and back into the painful reality.

“I’ve just been really busy with my music,” I shrug, knowing that wasn’t the case at all. But *‘Ethan I’m gay and have the biggest crush on you,’* isn’t something I’m ready to blurt out in

the middle of our English class. Fuck, it's not something I'm going to blurt out period, at least not yet.

"OK, ok..." he replies mischievously. There is no doubt in my mind that he is up to something, Ethan can be insufferably juvenile like that. As wise and caring as he is, he also has a devious side to him which few dare to test.

Just as I was about to warn him from doing anything stupid, like setting me up on a date, Ethan flashes me a cheeky grin which causes me to cave instantly. That grin could melt even the callous heart of Big Brother, free all the proletariat from suppression and save the world in just one afternoon. He has this way of making anyone forgive him, for literally anything. It's stupid, but it's true.

"Mr. Hope! Eyes on your own work," Miss Morris screeches at me from across the classroom, making me jolt forward and bury my head down into my papers. The last thing I need is another scolding from my overbearing mother. Apparently, every teacher thinks I talk too much in class. When it's actually just because Ethan sits strategically behind me in most of them, clever bastard played the system.

It seemed like an eternity had passed before the clock reached 3pm, and the school bell rang like a siren, signaling the impending stampede. Miss Morris called out furiously, "*the bell doesn't dismiss you, I do!*" but it was a futile attempt of control as the students rushed out the classroom escaping literature hell. There was a collective sigh of relief as students were glad to be going home and the teachers, for the most part, were just relieved to not have sweaty hormonal teens around them anymore.

I don't like battling against the stampede, unlike Ethan who welcomes the challenge, so I wait a few extra minutes in the classroom for the initial rush to die down. Once I'm in the clear, I make my way through the less crowded hallways towards the track field where my friends usually meet after school. I spot them in our usual place, Ethan, Jeremy, and Rachael stood chatting away completely oblivious to me approaching them. Even when I was mere feet away, Rachael seemed to be enveloped in a heated discussion whilst Jeremy looked on deadpan.

"97% I couldn't believe it! I told her, I said you must have made a mistake. There's just no way," Rachael said, her voice stressed and laced with venom.

"No way, what did she say?" Jeremy replied back monotone, his stony face not moving an inch.

"Well here's the thing, she said there was a coffee stain on my test so my last three questions were *unreadable*," Rachael huffed, motioning her fingers furiously. Biting her lip, she couldn't contain herself and threw her arms down to her side in frustration. "All of my tests are placed in plastic sleeves before I surrender them to be marked. So I know for a fact that the coffee stain must have come from either her... or a saboteur!"

"Gasp," Jeremy replied, pulling out his phone and beginning to type away absently.

"Oh, Justin. I'm distraught," Rachael said, finally noticing me standing beside her. She flings her arms around me and envelops me in a tight embrace. In an instant, my senses are attacked by the strong stench of expensive perfume.

"It's not the end of the world, maybe you can appeal and retake the test?" I suggest, my voice muffled against her chest.

“That’s actually not a bad idea. I’m going to march down there tomorrow and demand that I retake it!” she beamed, perfect grades meaning everything to her.

Rachael has never scored less than 100% on a single test. It’s quite remarkable actually, and I wish I had the motivation and drive to do the same, but my head has been forced elsewhere and my attention is gripped by another force that’s battling for dominance.

You could consider Rachael and Jeremy polar opposites. One a raging fire of passion and dedication, the other a frozen block of ice that remained cold to the touch even when contempt. It was a weird dichotomy to see them side by side, but they were as close as two best friends could be. Their friendship was born out of a mutual need to survive, to not be alone in the world.

Rachael was *that* kid when she was younger. The kid that would, for lack of a better term, kiss the teacher’s ass. Figuratively of course. It made her an easy target for being teased and picked on. Jeremy transferred halfway through the year which meant at the time neither of them had friends, so they naturally drifted to one another. The resident school bully, Theo, who now terrorizes Springcreek High, decided to go in extra hard on Rachael one day. Unfortunately for him, Jeremy was training in self-defense martial arts and flipped the guy on his ass without so much as a second thought.

Up to this day, Theo doesn’t go near the duo and luckily for me, we’ve been best friends since first year of High School so I’ve been left alone too.

“Tiffany nearly knocked me out today,” Jeremy said suddenly, catching my attention. The mere mention of the harlot’s name sends a carnal fury through my body like no other. For

months I've been finding myself lost in my own mind, but the mention of Tiffany cuts through all of that like a bullet through my chest.

"Swoosh, swoosh," Ethan said, bending over and pretending to swing two imaginary truck-sized breasts.

"Exactly, she ran right past me and her tits were flying about like a game of Swing Ball," Jeremy chuckled, the image enough to put anyone off girls for life...

"God, she's such a nasty piece of work," Rachael folded her arms, the name also agitating her. Tiffany had developed much quicker than other girls when they were younger, which made her very popular with the boys. The attention must have gone to her head, and her tits, because neither has stopped growing since.

Every chance she got she would try to humiliate me. I'm not a hundred percent certain why, but I suspect that it's because I'm one of the very few guys that don't find her attractive. In fact, I find her utterly repulsive.

"I wonder how much they weigh," Ethan said, thinking to himself for a moment. And with that utterly repulsive thought now wracking around in my little coconut head, I let my thoughts distract me once again. Opening my songbook, I quickly flick through to the dog-eared page and glance over my latest work.

Suddenly, a slip of loose paper falls out from the book and onto the floor catching me off guard. In the rush to find my book this morning I hoped I hadn't accidentally torn out part of a page. But as I picked it up I realized that the paper wasn't the same. It was much thinner and lined. Folded neatly I could see the blue ink on the inside.

My stomach instantly dropped as a dark pit formed inside me. Someone had seen my book, someone had read its contents and they knew my secrets. The slip of paper was on the page of my most recent song. Which was in every possible way the most revealing. I shakily unfold the paper, frightened for what could be inside.

'Hi, I hope your book found its way back to you. I didn't mean to read, I thought it was just a library book. I think we have a lot in common and I'd love to talk to you. Here's my number, text me :D'.

"Shit."

As soon as I read the note my hands began to tremble. Even though I've been spending all my free time learning how to get my emotions under control, I'm not ready for this. I'm not prepared to handle the blow out of people finding out my darkest secrets. I need to be in my room... alone, so I can process how the fuck I could be so careless and to stop the pulsing pressure threatening to burst out of my head.

Slamming my front door shut behind me, I fall to the ground thankful that my mom doesn't finish work for another two hours. I bury my head into my knees in a feeble attempt of drowning out the vibrations that trembled through my body. I take in a deep breath remembering the breathing exercises I read online, but they did little to calm my nerves. The songs in my book are written from a place so raw and deep, whoever's read them knows me more intimately than anyone else ever could.

The more I think about how careless I was, the more intense the pulsing in my head became. I held my fists tightly and clamped my eyes shut, knowing that if I lost control of my emotions all my training would be for nothing. I vowed to get this under control, I promised myself that I would have a normal life.

My anger and anxiety suddenly shifted. In a split second the vibrations stopped and a burning determination to change for the better took over. Taking a moment to compose myself, I straighten a portrait on the wall before kicking off my shoes at the bottom of the stairs and clambering up before diving into my private sanctuary. Sonic, my adorable five-year-old Husky, was excited to see me for all of three seconds. Once he'd let out his usual musical howl he went right back to sleep in his bed, which is probably for the best because the level of profanity that left my mouth just moments later was so unforgivable that baby Jesus would have wept.

Taking out the note once more, I stare between the unusually neat handwriting and my songbook. My eyes dart between the two, trying to figure out how I can take control of the situation. A stupid mistake isn't about to make my world come crashing down, I can't let it.

Most of my songs were pretty well written, my thoughts and emotions hidden between the lines. But this past year has been more challenging than I ever would have thought. I needed an outlet, and the consequence of that is my songs are now far more explicit in what they mean.

"I wanted to fall in love with you, but you're just not my type. Am I out of my head to think ordinary could ever feel right? This love ain't normal; we ain't typical, you're playing on my mind," I read out in a hushed voice. Nobody could hear me, but it was a force of habit, the

words in this song are so obvious that I might as well have titled it “I’m a Raging Homo,” and joined the cast of Queer Eye.

The more I read, the more intense my drive becomes to take control. Staring at the number on the note, I was overcome by an overwhelming urge to find out more. I still have a long way to go before I can walk through this world like a normal person, and texting this mystery number would be unbelievably stupid.

Or perhaps it wouldn’t be...

I take my phone out and stop, taking a moment to think calmly and rationally. It won’t do me any good to panic now, the damage has already been done. This person knows my secret, but as far as I know, they don’t know who I am. If I’m smart enough, I can use that to anonymously connect with someone who believes they’re just like me. But in what way are they like me? There’s only one way to find out, and suddenly I’m overcome with one single emotion.

Hope...

Hope that I might not have to figure out who I am alone.

Tue 16:40pm

I can’t believe I’m doing this but you’ve got my attention. What is it you think we have in common? - River

It took me a while to type out, but I figured going as blunt as possible was the best way to get answers. I deleted the message about ten times, rewriting and deleting it again and again. My original thought was to ask why they thought it was appropriate to invade my privacy, but then I figured that might be too harsh and a little counterproductive. He did say that he’d mistaken it for a library book.

Assuming they are a he... well, hoping they are.

I couldn't think of how to sign the message, and damn right I'm not gonna use my real name! It isn't catfishing when you're just being cautious, I need time to assess the situation before I reveal anything about my identity. In all honesty, this entire thing stinks of Tiffany Swindleback, but I need to take the chance that it isn't her. That it's someone looking for another person to connect with.

River is a reference to my family's history in this town. Springcreek is a suburban town in the heart of Sunset Valley. The town is large enough to meet the needs of its residents without having to leave but small enough so that everyone knows each other. In the past, Springcreek was famous in our home state for the fresh spring water that flows through the center. It used to provide water for many neighboring towns, but with the rise of major corporations and the growing need for convenience my family business crumbled before my parents could inherit a dime.

Olde Hope, owned by my Great Grandpa Amias went under and they had to liquidate their assets to ensure they didn't lose everything. Luckily, the one thing they kept was this house which has been passed down the generations to ensure our family can remain on the West side of town. Olde Hope might have dried up, but as long as we remain on the West Side we have status and influence.

Hours seemed to fly by as I waited for a reply. Sat at my desk absently clicking through my YouTube subscriptions, to perched upon my windowsill looking out at the forest that stood at the border of my backyard. I finally settled on sprawling out on my bed, letting my thoughts drift in and out of the day's events.

Before I knew it, mom had come home from work and was preparing dinner. Fuck knows what she was making, but the past few months have been one terrible meal after another. I was hoping for one of her famous hamburgers, they always cheer me up.

Not that I was sad, at least not anymore. More anxious if anything, perhaps even excited because I've never spoken to anyone like me before. The entire town was a heteronormative haven ripped straight out of the '70s, with modern-day influences starting to seep their way in. Even though I had my friends, I still felt totally alone in a town that was so close-knit.

Suddenly, my phone vibrates and my heart skips a beat, like a literal melodic beat. Cardiac arrest all up in this, I was either going to die from relief or terror. I was about ready to grab the defibrillator, but then noticed Ethan's name pop on the screen. It was just a message on Snapchat. I frowned at the snap of my friends all at Starbucks enjoying a healthy dose of caffeine. Ethan and Rachael both looked delighted with their beverage, but Jeremy stared coldly at the camera, clearly not impressed. He was very particular about his coffee, and if it wasn't prepared exactly how he requested, then his cold demeanor would turn even icier.

You could have come, but you ran off before we could ask you. Is everything ok?

Shit... in my hurry to get home I completely blew off my friends. This year has already been troubling, and if they hadn't noticed my flakey behavior already then they for sure are talking about it now. It's no surprise they're worried about me, but I'm definitely not ready to tell them what's going on... I just want my life to be ordinary for a little longer.

I type some shit about feeling queasy from lunch and take a picture pretending to be ill. Hitting send, I hope this would be enough to get Ethan off my case, but that fire dwindled as my

phone vibrated again not ten seconds later. I reluctantly unlock my phone again to reveal a heart-stopping surprise.

He replied, the mystery person actually replied.

Tue 18:55pm

River eh? So we aren't using our real names then. Smart, anonymity is probably for the best. As for what we have in common I think you already know, otherwise, you wouldn't have replied to my note. I guess I'm just tired of dealing with this alone, it'd be nice to have someone to talk to about this stuff, - TBD

I need to take a second to digest what is actually happening right now. Someone is reaching out to me for the help I've been craving for years. Perhaps we could help each other. If we are keeping things anonymous then there's no harm in it. Nobody actually texts anymore, it's all Snapchat and Instagram, Facebook if you're ancient.

The only people that have my number are family and close friends. Hell, I don't actually know whether all of my friends have my digits or not.

Tue 19:01pm

Hmm, TBD... can't think of a name? If I stick around long enough to learn more about you I might be able to come up with one. I agree, sometimes I feel like I'm drowning in an ocean of lies. My friends have no idea who I really am, does that make me a bad person? – River

I sit in thought, something inside of me wants to open up to this guy. Never in my life have I spoken about this stuff, only written it down as songs that I don't sing. It's just a way to get rid of what's plaguing my mind, but deep down I do wish I had the courage to sing my thoughts.

A sigh of relief escapes my lips as mom calls me down for dinner. I didn't actually have anything to eat for lunch, too lost in my head to think about food. This was probably why I left my book in the first place, too engrossed to take in what was happening around me.

Walking into the kitchen I barely notice my mom across the room as I stare down at my phone hoping for a reply. I sit down at the table and groan internally at the sludge placed before me. The new trend sweeping Springcreek is the Keto diet and naturally my mom has to be the main pioneer for the craze.

Sitting in front of me was a bowl of brown soup made from indistinguishable vegetables. It's safe to say my meals as of late have been less than fulfilling, likely contributing to my tiredness. My displeasure for the meal must have been obvious because my mom frowns as she sits down.

"You know, I'm growing tired of this ungrateful attitude," she says, folding her arms.

"It's not that... I've just had a long day and was hoping for one of your famous burgers."

"Justin, you know we can't eat meat on the current diet," she says, rolling her eyes condescendingly.

"I thought it was Keto? Meats are some of the staples for the diet, couldn't we just have Keto burgers or something?"

"Keto? No, no... that was last week. The girls are going vegan now."

"Vegan..?" I ask confused, this being the first time my mom's shown any interest in animal rights or the general health of the planet.

"Yes, it's basically cutting out all meat, fish and food that comes or derives from animals," she replies, proud of her generalised explanation.

"I know what veganism is mom, I'm just surprised you'd agree to do it."

"Well you know me, I'm all about the environment and saving the grizzly bears."

"I think it's the polar bears that are endangered..." I say, wondering whether having this conversation would be pointless. "What about your wine?"

"What about it?" she snapped, her head shooting towards the drinks cabinet that forever remained stocked in the off chance one of her pretentious friends came over. "You haven't been sneaking some have you? I bought that for the girls this weekend, we're going to the spa."

"No mom, I haven't. But did you buy vegan wine?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"Regular wine isn't vegan?"

"No... Neither are the avocados in the fridge, the white sugar for your decaf coffee or the shampoos in the bathroom."

"This is going to be harder than I thought," she hums to herself, considering whether she had the will power to actually go through with the vegan lifestyle. I remain silent, not sure if my response would get the reaction I'd hope for. "Anyway, how was school today honey?" she asks, changing the subject and shining the spotlight on me.

"Alright, same as usual," I lie, shrugging my shoulders hoping that she wouldn't press further. "How about you?"

"Could be better, we've been swamped with all these new orders..." she begins, but my thoughts drift elsewhere as my phone starts to vibrate under the table. I half-listen to her explaining how Karen, her 'cellmate' and candle fanatic, brought in new wax melts only available from one store in the whole state. Some women prefer cats, others prefer makeup...

not Karen. All Karen wants in life is to collect her candles and parade them to the world as if they were her children.

Checking my phone I zone out of the conversation completely, noticing that the message was from TBD.

Tues 19:11pm

Ok River, here's your first hint. I don't have a favorite movie, but I love Marvel as a franchise, I'm a nerd sorry! Tom Holland in the new Spiderman movie is beyond gorgeous.

I know the feeling, you're not alone. I haven't told anyone either, besides you. -TBD

At this point, I about lose my shit. It was a good job that whoever was on the other end of this phone couldn't see my physical reaction. I fucking LOVE Marvel, and honestly, the films and comics have helped me so much these past few months... more than anyone could understand. Thank Mary, Jesus, and Joseph for this wonderful gift; if he was a DC fan then that would have cut this adventure short. If you're going to try and fool the world that Batman is a superhero then go right ahead, but I know the truth.

On another note, it was also a relief to know that he understands how it feels to be like this. The weight of a secret can be unbearable sometimes, and even though I don't know him, I've opened up more in the past hour than I have in years. It's nice to finally have someone to talk to.

Tue 19:14pm

You do realize how risky that was right? If you said DC, I'd have blocked your ass and thrown my phone in the creek. All I can come up with at the moment is Spidey and Marv, but I'll keep trying. I have to admit, it's nice to get a release after so long. Thankyou, -River

“Justin, I’m sure that *me me* is hilarious, but I’m trying to have a conversation with you,” my mom says in an annoyed tone.

“You mean meme,” I reply, unable to process just how she managed to pronounce meme so wrong, “and I’m sorry, it was just a really funny one.”

“Look Justin, can we have a serious conversation without you dodging my questions?”

“I don’t dodge anything,” lying has become second nature to me, so they just blurt out now without much effort. But my mom can always sense when I’m not being totally honest, she is undoubtedly the hardest person to fool.

“You’ve been acting differently lately. I’m not sure if you’re having troubles at school or if it’s just normal teenage stuff... but if something is bothering you, you know that I would never judge you.”

“Honestly mom, I’m fine,” her reaction is impulsive, but the disapproving nod of her head is exactly why I can’t trust that she wouldn’t judge me. “It’s just school work, we have exams coming up and it’s a lot to remember.”

“Are your friends helping you study? I haven’t seen them around here for quite some time. To be honest, I miss the chatter, it’s nice to come back from work to a full home.”

“They are, but we’ve been hanging out at Ethan’s since he has more space.”

My mother’s face casts a gloomy shadow at this, her bitter jealousy beginning to sneak through. The truth is, I can’t confide in her about anything that makes me appear abnormal. She says she would understand, and maybe that’s true... but her jealousy and anger for not having the life she so bitterly wants would cloud any good intentions. Her parents were the last to see

the small fortune left by Great Grandpa Alias, and they squandered it on pointless vacations and out of date furnishings for the house that there was nothing left for us but this old house.

My father isn't in the picture anymore, he left when I was four and I don't remember much about him. There aren't any pictures in the house and up until last year I never really cared. But now that my body is going through these changes, it'd be nice to know if I somehow inherited it from him. But contact seems so far out of reach that it's only briefly crossed my mind.

Mom would lose her shit if she ever found out that I was trying to contact him. He destroyed the perfect Nuclear family she desired, and her bitterness has prevented her from pursuing much else since. We scrape by to appear put together, but she knows deep down that the people of this town pity her... and the one thing she despises is pity. Concocting scheme after scheme to get rich quick but they all fail. She needs us to appear normal, to appear strong so that her superficial friends wouldn't pity her.

I finish my meal in silence, before heading back up to my room. The mysterious TBD didn't reply for the rest of the evening. Even though I checked my phone every few minutes, it seemed like an eternity had passed when in reality it was just a mere four hours before midnight finally struck. Though it was an early night for me, the weight on my chest wasn't as heavy. I could breathe normally for a change and my thoughts drifted seamlessly to a faceless boy that felt safe and familiar.

Hoping my mother would go to bed soon, I head for a shower to kill some time. Dropping my pajama bottoms I step in and let the warm water envelop my body. The silky

shampoo lathered into my scalp and ran down my neck into the crook of my back. I've never been overly confident with my body; although I wasn't exactly out of shape.

"It's what you do yeah, makes me feel like I'm falling. And when you move yeah, I can feel my body calling. It might be bad but I feel so good, and I want to be right where you're stood. Cuz you've been lookin at me all day, hoping that I would stay and I just wanna let you know. That my love will continue to grow, this love is forever, yeah I just want you to know."

The shower is my favorite place to sing. My mom's bedroom is on the opposite end of the house and although the walls are paper-thin, it feels like a totally different world in here. It's a place where my songs can come to life, the ones I choose to sing at least.

Turning the hot water off, I step out of the shower and quickly wrap a towel around my body before the cold air gets a chance to attack my skin. As I walk through my bedroom door I notice my phone vibrating on the desk. Ripping it from charge, I dive into bed and unlock the screen to see several notification pings from Ethan clogging up my bar. Far from unusual, but it wasn't the name I wanted to see. I scrolled until finally, TBD popped up at the very bottom.

Wed 12:14am

Sorry for the late reply, I don't expect you to still be awake. Marv is just... yeah keep thinking on that one. It's nice to know I've given you a release ;) – Spidey4now

I could feel my cheeks burning a crimson red at the text. The heat rushing to more places than just my face, I adjusted the towel hoping Sonic was already in bed fast asleep. That winky face shouldn't have the power to send butterflies through my body. Such a simple, harmless, flirt has sent my hormones into a frenzy. It could also be the sheer lack of sexual chemistry since... well ever.

Wed 12:33 am

No worries just finished up in the shower and feeling fresh! So... Spidey, flirting with a guy you hardly know? Brave move. –River

Wed 12:36am

Ooft the shower? Sounds hot! Flirting, whatever do you mean? ;D –Spidey

Wed 12:38am

You know damn well what I mean! Did you just give me your number so you could flirt?
–River

Wed 12:45am

Not at all! Sorry, I don't want to give that impression I've just never spoken to a guy like me before, new territory and it's kinda exciting but scary at the same time... if that makes sense? –Spidey

Wed 12:47am

Yeah man, it makes total sense! And you haven't given any impression, honestly, I quite like the flirting. It's the first time a boy's flirted with me and it feels totally different from when girls flirt. I like it... – River

Wed 12:54am

Well if that's the case, then I'll continue to flirt :p I'm trying not to eat my pillow right now so I can stay up and talk to you. Coffee with an extra shot and suspicious amounts of sugar it is for me! –Spidey

Wed 12:56am

I'm not a fan of coffee myself, I've never managed to acquire the taste. Dark hot chocolate on the other hand, that shit gets me going for real. –River

Wed 12:59am

Not a fan of coffee!? I've never been so insulted... sing me a song of woe River and feed me grapes as an apology. -Spidey

Wed 1:03am

I've never actually sung any of my songs for someone before. It's kind of hard to bare your soul when you don't know what it looks like yourself. Do you think yourself some sort of Egyptian Pharaoh, Spidey? The only person I feed is myself ;) – River

Wed 1:15am

Hopefully one day you'll sing for me. I know what it's like to not understand who you are. Sometimes it's like I'm on autopilot in someone else's body. The things I say, the things I do, it's from a person that died years ago. I suppose I'm just trying to hold onto my version of normal for as long as I can. –Spidey

P.s. Yes, I do think I'm Egyptian royalty.

Wed 1:18am

You've described it perfectly, although I can't help but feel like I've read that somewhere before. Maybe a certain songbook... belonging to me...? I can't help but feel so transparent. You've seen my darkest fears and greatest achievements and yet... I hardly know a thing about you. –River

Wed 1:22am

What do you want to know? It's only fair for you to ask something since I know so much about you already. -Spidey

Wed 1:25am

I know you go to Springcreek High, so the chances are we've walked past one another in the halls... or maybe share the same class. Are you even a senior? What classes do you take?
-River

Wed 1:33am

Well deduced, I suppose finding your songbook in the library is a pretty big give away that I go to Springcreek. Yes, I'm a senior... and as for classes I'm not going to tell you all of them. But I will say I'm not looking forward to the mind-numbing Physics class with Mr. Wells tomorrow morning ;D -Spidey

Wed 1:35am

Hmm, definitely food for thought! Thanks for sharing, and sorry if I'm keeping you up too late -River

Wed 1:41am

You're all good mate, I've been meaning to catch up on some shows anyway. I am gonna head off now though, so I'll drop you a message in the morning. Night, sleep well Waters!
-Spidey x

And just like that, I'm alone again. The solitude is a breeding ground for my swirling emotions. But unlike the last few months, they weren't taking over. They weren't negative or

self-destructive. I felt positive, hopeful that I'd finally found someone to connect with on a higher level.

Looking at the time, a curious thought crossed my mind. It was late and most of the town will be asleep by now. Slipping into my joggers and a hoodie I pull on my sneakers and creep out of the room. I slowly pressed past my mother's room, the light snores followed by rain patter from her Nightsounds App signaling that she was fast asleep.

I grab a can of grape soda from the fridge and stuff it into my pocket before sneaking out the back door. The yard was bathed in moonlight, the small specks of granite in the stony path glistening beneath my feet. Pushing through the bushes at the far end I clamber through a small hole in the fence and push through into the forest.

It was a beautiful night, the stars burning bright above the canopy of trees. The best part of living in a valley is the picturesque view constantly framed by rolling hills and clear skies. This forest stretched for miles, a protective barrier around the flowing creek. My family was once guardians of this land, but it's now just a rural escape that will eventually be bought off by some greedy corporation.

Walking further into the forest, I eventually arrive at my destination. A small nook by the creek known to nobody but me. This is my special place, sacred lands of untold secrets and demons. I've been coming here a lot more often, it's the only place I can safely learn how to control my emotions. Nobody will find me here, nobody will stumble into my path and discover my secret.

Taking out the soda from my pocket, I crack it open and perch myself on a mossy rock so I can look up at the sky. So many times I've sat here and wished I could be up there. Be amongst

greater beings who don't judge, persecute, or reject. Stars burn brightest just before they go out, and that's a lot like hope. You feel so passionate about something, so driven that when hope turns to disappointment, that spark is diminished altogether.

I hope that isn't the case here. I really hope that I can trust this guy, with more than just my sexuality. There's more to me than who I'm attracted to, that isn't what I'm afraid of. I've come to terms with the fact I'm gay and I'm just waiting for the right opportunity to tell the people I love. My true secret is much darker and far more dangerous than who I prefer to go to bed with.

Finishing the soda, I drop the can to the ground and think back on my night. Remembering why I came out here in the first place, I let my thoughts drift back to the faceless boy in my mind. Only, he wasn't faceless... I just couldn't put the pieces together yet. The positive emotions flowed through my body until finally, I felt my mind and fingertips pulsing with energy. I've been trying for so long to control this through hatred, to suppress how I truly feel so I don't have an accidental outburst. But maybe... maybe the key is to accept how I feel. To focus on the good and use that as a driving force.

Staring at the can on the floor, I raise my hand slowly. The thought of acceptance and hope flooding my mind, granting me the power of control I never had before. My eyes follow the can as it begins to rise up from the ground, floating several feet in the air as if being carried by an invisible force.

This is my dark secret, my demon. I'm not like anybody else, but maybe I've finally found someone willing to accept me... all of me. I am Justin Hope.