

OFFLINE: Chapter One

Blake Tyndall

Late that afternoon, I was on the fourth floor of the library watching the patio. Dark clouds were gathering over campus, turning everything gray. A couple staggered out front, happy, and went around the corner. After that, the patio sat empty. I imagined myself under one of the umbrellas, smelling rain in the cold air. Then I imagined looking up at the library and seeing myself behind the glass, watching.

For a while nothing moved. Not the trees. Not the clouds. Not me. A dirty coupe passed and I shook awake. I tried to remember the last thing I ate.

There wasn't anyone around the library. I stayed there most afternoons because nobody asked anything. I counted the textbooks scattered across the table. Six total. I counted them twice. I slid the notebook from the top of the stack into my jacket pocket. It was the only one I'd opened that semester. I stacked the rest in my arms and left.

Bumping down the stairs with my hands full, I realized the whole place was empty.

The books thumped against the counter. An older woman with white hair, cut to a bob, looked up through thin glasses hanging low on her nose; she asked for an ID and started scanning.

The computer beeped seven times, the last sounding wrong.

She looked at the screen. "Lewis?"

"It's the name on the ID. Everyone calls me something else."

She didn't ask which.

When I started to leave the white-haired librarian stopped me, pushing her glasses up, pressing her face closer to the computer; I had a book due over the break.

"Are you staying in the area?" she asked.

My pocket buzzed and the lady smiled.

As I walked off, I pulled my phone from my jeans: a notification from Oliver: Cool! See you there.

Later that evening, I was walking down the sidewalk in a clean shirt, hands in my pockets. I had changed twice and still looked the same. The sun had just set. It was cold enough for a jacket. A gust of wind hit my face as I came around the corner toward Blue Hawaii: a stucco rectangle. It used to be a pharmacy. The old sign brackets were still bolted into the brick, holding nothing. The patio up ahead carried muffled conversation, muted music, someone shouting. I saw the students. Tightly packed. Shouting over each other. I regretted telling Oliver I would come.

I followed the crowd in. A shoulder hit mine.

I slipped past the bouncer. Dirty looks hit the back of my head.

Inside it was hard to move. Chest tight, I made my way to the bar. The speakers were rattling the plastic flowers stapled to the ceiling.

Two bartenders, one with a thick mustache, sweat on his forehead, rocking to the music. He took a shot and pointed past me to a kid waving a metal credit card. The kid kept shouting to no one.

Finally, I got a beer and worked back to the front patio. I settled for a broken planter outside of the velvet corral and to the left. As I sat down, a guy with red cheeks and an exaggerated smile walked up and asked for a cigarette. His collared shirt had golf clubs and balls and tees all over it and was wrinkled as if he had slept in it the night before. I was down to seven, but I gave him one anyway. He put it in his mouth and started to flick his thumb in the air like he was asking for a lighter. All I had was matches, so I passed those over. He rolled his eyes and reluctantly took them. The first two matchsticks sparked and died. Muttering, he pulled another from the jacket. It caught for a second, but the wind put it out. I offered to help. Shaking his head, he handed over the matches and went back into the crowd.

I lit a cigarette and heard them coming from the parking lot. It was Oliver with Meghan and another blonde, her platinum hair bouncing as they walked. She was hanging on his shoulder, laughing. Behind them, Billy, in a leather jacket a size too small. I thought they didn't see me.

“Lewis!” Oliver was leaning halfway out the door. “We got a table, come on!”

Meghan dragged him inside. I could see Billy talking to some people across the patio. I started to get up and the red-cheeked guy walked up to me again. His eyes were glazed over and bloodshot. The cigarette I gave him was still hanging out of his mouth and he stuck out his hand, flicking his thumb in the air over and over.

“Nope, sorry,” I said pushing past, he smelled like B.O.

Inside was starting to get muggy from all the bodies packed tight. They had to keep the doors open, but there were too many people for any sort of draft. As I pressed through, I made eye contact with a girl. One strap off her shoulder, makeup smudged, eyes looking through me. I should have said something.

“Noah!” Someone yelled over the music. “Get over here!”

Oliver was grinning in a booth near the back. He’d kept the same booth all semester. He thought of it as his. Meghan was next to him and two girls I vaguely remembered seeing around his apartment before.

I walked over and he slid a bottle across the table. He asked me something, but I couldn’t hear anything. I started to say something but his eyes drifted away and Meghan started whispering something to him, while the other girls were giggling to each other. I had been ready to laugh if I figured out what was funny. I held the smile. No one looked back.

Someone abruptly grabbed me from behind.

“Lewis, you dog!”

He said it loud enough for people to know we knew each other.

It was Billy. Swinging his arm, trying to put me in a headlock.

I twisted out of it, spilling my beer. His arm was thin against my throat. The nickname slid past me like it was someone else’s.

Laughing obnoxiously, he went past me and fished a bottle out of the metal bucket. His sleeves were several inches too short, showing off a gold watch that looked oversized on his tiny wrists. He’d grown up two streets over from me. We weren’t friends then either. My brother used to put him in headlocks like this. Years back. Billy hadn’t forgotten. One of the girls yelled something at him as he reached over, he smiled at her and slithered into the booth, whispering close to her ear. Everyone was whispering.

I thought about sitting, but there wasn’t a lot of room.

“Be right back,” I said to the table. Only Oliver and Billy were looking at me.

I walked out to the back patio. The farthest picnic table was empty. I sat with my back to the wall and lit a cigarette. Too much light pollution. You couldn't see the moon.

Billy came out, made the rounds, touched everyone when he talked. Shoulders, backs, elbows. Like he was allowed.

He sat down. I could smell his cologne, he was wearing the entire bottle. He laid out a line on a square mirror. I didn't take any. "Debbie is dragging us to Paris," he said. "Off her meds." He laughed but didn't look up. He sniffed and rubbed his nose.

"Lewis." He sniffed again. "Yeah, Lewis. I was meaning to talk to you."

I saw Oliver coming out before the girls did.

"Uh-oh," I said.

Oliver came out in front of them, looked over his shoulder. Meghan and the other girls were giggling to each other in their short, bright dresses and bouncy hair.

"Hey. Put that shit away," Oliver snapped.

Billy grabbed the empty bag and dropped it under the table. He smiled at the girls. I pulled out a cigarette and he turned to me. His eyes were so blue that it was hard to look at them for very long. I looked away and he kept looking at the side of my head. He bumped my arm and asked for a cigarette, I obliged.

There were only a few matches left. I counted five cigarettes in the pack.

When I looked up, I saw Taylor.

The patio went still.

She was right behind Meghan, talking to one of the blondes. Hair slicked back. Black leather jacket. She looked completely different. Or I did. I remembered her barefoot in my kitchen, asking if I had any clean spoons. She'd never said boyfriend out loud.

Billy walked up to her and she looked right at him. He did a goofy walk for a few steps, then swooped his arms around her. She started laughing, but it didn't sound like her laugh. I hated how much I remembered her real one.

I watched the whole thing.

My beer was empty and my leg started to tap.

They all came back to the table and I was just sitting there smoking. Oliver grabbed a few plastic chairs and brought them over. Billy was hanging all over Taylor.

Oliver put the chairs down and gave me a quick look and then gave the room the rest of his face. I felt myself starting to get boxed in, the wall was right behind me, and I stood up before anyone sat.

“My beer’s empty,” I said. “Anyone want anything?”

Oliver didn’t look up. “For sure.” He turned to Meghan. They were whispering. Taylor was looking at me, but it was obvious she was trying not to. The corner of her mouth twitched the way it did when she was nervous. I hated that I still knew that. It was like she had seen a ghost, except there was nothing surprising about me being there. She had been the one person I didn’t have to talk to.

I smiled at her. Everyone was smiling, she wasn’t.

Billy started to turn around, right into me, he jumped back.

“Lewis!” He smiled. “Gotta cig?”

“Sure,” I said, looking at the cigarette behind his ear. Taylor stood behind him. Everyone else had sat down.

“Cheers, buddy!” Billy patted me on the shoulder and moved past me to the table. Taylor followed.

“Hey, Noah.”

She didn’t look at me when she said it.

I almost said it back. She had passed.

Of course.

Before I got through the door, I heard one of the girls yell, “Girl, Paris!”

I turned, Taylor was smiling, saying something. Billy was next to her, his arm draped over her, looking up at me with a big smile and wide eyes. For a second I watched it from across the patio. From the planter where I’d been sitting. Then I was back.

My chest was beating like crazy. The thought came up rotten and whole. I almost said it out loud.

Fucking bitch.

I worked back to the bar. The bartender pointed at me, finally. “Whiskey,” I shouted.

The glass hit the bar. The heat from seeing her was still in my chest. I threw it back, left the bills and went.

The front patio was still crowded. I couldn’t find a spot to sit and stood in the corner, lighting a cigarette.

It wasn’t long before Taylor and Billy walked out, she saw me, quickly looking away, she went that way. Billy looked over. He might’ve winked but I acted like I didn’t see them, then I looked back.

Taylor got into a black SUV parked on the curb, before she did, she wrapped her arms around Billy, they kissed, then he picked her up. He lifted her like he wanted people to see him lifting her.

I thought about going to get another drink and decided that I’d rather just go home. My cigarette was near the filter. When I put it out, Billy walked up, a ridiculous smile on his face. I tried to match but couldn’t.

“Lewis!”

I looked at the cigarette.

“Ah, what’s wrong, brother?”

I didn’t answer.

“Man, you’re so tense, chill, she really ain’t that great.”

“Don’t.”

“You’re hilarious, kiddo.”

“Don’t talk about her.”

“Man, forget it.”

“You’re joking, right?” He stepped closer as if to show that he was taller than me.

“Dude, fuck off.” I pushed him.

His jaw was going crazy. I walked off.

A hand landed on my shoulder. I turned, “Wha...”

Billy’s eyes. Wide and empty.

Then his fist came out of the dark and I hit the ground.