

# the Girl you know



What they  
don't know  
will kill them.

ELLE GONZALEZ ROSE

BLOOMSBURY

the Girl  
You Know

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For Mami. I'll always be your munchkin.

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# *the Girl You Know*

ELLE GONZALEZ ROSE

BLOOMSBURY

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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Luna's story may be fictional, but the issues she and those around her face are very real. Please note that this book contains depictions of parental abandonment; on- and off-page drug use; off-page sexual assault; attempted assault; references to suicide, blood, and violence; and descriptions of a dead body.

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## CHAPTER ONE

The bitch at table three is going to ask me for something again. I can see it in the quirk of her mouth, the twitch of her manicured nails against the counter. Her hand goes high in the air, snapping her fingers like a whip before I can pretend I didn't see her.

“Miss? Excuse me?”

It's accusatory. She's already found me guilty of whatever crime she's made up. Her thin lips pinch into an even thinner line, her red lipstick disappearing into her mouth. Turning around and walking back into the kitchen would just dig me deeper into my grave. I kissed my tip goodbye when she first called me over, complaining that her coffee was lukewarm. People with complaints five minutes into a meal don't stop at one. They're full of them. Bitching and whining like windup toys until you offer them a slice of pie on the house to shut them up.

The woman bristles when I step up to her, tucking a dishrag into the belt of my apron. She takes her precious time, straightening out her collar and the gold-plated necklace at the base of her throat. “Joan,” spelled out in gold and adorned with pearls.

“I ordered my eggs over easy.” She waves her finger over the plate with such disdain you'd think I served her microwaved roadkill. “This,” she sneers as she pokes one of the eggs with her fork, a river of yolk trailing down to her home fries, “is over *medium*.”

I think of her then. Solina.

They'd cleaned up most of the blood by the time I was escorted down to the dingy, poorly lit morgue, which was half the size of the hospital itself. You don't need much space for anything in a town like Luster. Latest

census has our population in the high four figures. We'll all die someday, though, and they'll always need a place to store us.

The slab they laid her on seemed too clean. Guess that says something about the dishes we eat off. When they folded the white sheet back at her collarbone, her head tilted. A trail of blood, black as her hair and the grime beneath her fingernails, dribbled down her chin, staining that too-clean slab. I can smell it—the rot, the salt of the river turned putrid and vile—as yolk drips down the tines of Joan's fork. My stomach lurches when a drop falls onto the counter.

When will I forget the smell?

"Are you listening?" My hand flies up to my mouth as Joan snaps her fingers again, this time in front of my face. If my body weren't used to pushing things down, I'd have already hurled all over her crisp white blouse and over-medium eggs. "I'd like to speak to your manager."

That's enough of a threat to force my stomach into submission. I swallow the bile down and slap on the customer service smile I've spent three years practicing, but never perfecting.

"Of course, so sorry about that." I clear her plate before she can see the way my hands tremble. She turns back to her newspaper with a huff, muttering something under her breath about Podunk towns.

Over a week and it still hasn't sunk in. That the world has to go on. Shifts still have to get covered, coffee still needs to be poured, and strangers will still come in and out of this shabby diner on their way to someplace better. Strangers who don't know that my sister is dead. Who don't care about anything other than how their eggs are cooked.

"Table three wants to talk to you," I mumble as I slam my way into the kitchen.

Dede looks up from the grill when I toss the rejected eggs down behind him. "Watch it," he warns, wiping the sweat off his brow with a rag before squinting at the plate. "What's wrong with it?"

"Over medium." Like Joan, I dip a clean fork into one of the eggs, breaking the yolk free. "She wanted over easy."

"Puta mierda," he grumbles, throwing his sweat rag onto the plate. "You serious? That shit's over easy, yo." He pushes the rag aside to run a finger through the stream on the plate. "Look at that." Yolk trickles down

his fingers onto the *A* and *I* of his FAITH knuckle tattoo. He wipes his hand off before my stomach can twist again.

“You wanna argue with her, be my guest.” I scrape the plate off into the trash. A perfectly good meal, dumped out with the burnt hamburger meat and browned lettuce.

Dede starts up a fresh string of profanities, alternating from English to Spanish to the handful of Arabic he learned from the night shift busboy. He scrubs the kitchen grime off his hands before heading out to the floor. I’m sure he’s not what Joan expects of a manager, reinforcing whatever preinstalled, probably racist ideas about Podunk towns she had when she decided to stop in Luster.

I keep myself busy while Dede’s gone—chopping lettuce, unpacking boxes, scraping crusted food off supposedly clean plates. Letting my mind wander always brings me back to Solina. Her on that slab, or those pictures the cops tossed down in front of me like playing cards. Twisted bones and ripped skin. The cops hadn’t even blinked. Broken bodies are par for the course. My sister was just another box on their to-do list.

Keeping busy keeps me sane.

Times like these make me wish I’d let Solina talk me into getting a better phone. At least then I’d be able to listen to music. Instead, I’d played it practical. My phone came in a hard-plastic package from the back of a Walmart two towns over. The kind that’s usually reserved for drug dealers and businessmen’s mistresses. No frills, just a way to make and receive calls. Technically I can text, but I don’t have the patience for the keypad. Or the time to spend five minutes thumbing one key just to type the letter *C*.

Solina hated that I didn’t respond to her texts. I always told her to call me if she needed to talk that bad. Sometimes she did. Most of the time she didn’t. Her sophomore year she’d send me a text every morning. *Good morning my sweet gremlin sister* or *This bird’s been sitting outside my window for the past twenty minutes. Do you think it’s spying on me?* I would roll my eyes and delete or ignore her. One time I took a whole twenty minutes to finally respond, warning her that I’d block her if she kept sending me pictures of her breakfast.

*Shit.*

The tears come quick as a tidal wave, cresting as my chest tightens and washing over me with each exhale. Holding it in burns all over. My eyes,

my chest, my fingers digging into the steel counters. I can't do this. Not here, not now. Ten days since they found her and I haven't let myself sit with it yet, feel all that pain sitting in the pit of my stomach like the food I struggle to keep down. If I do, I don't think I'd come back. That much hate and rage and sadness can change a person. If you're from a family like ours, it'll destroy you. Papi lost someone he loved, holding Mami's hand the day she died. He sat in his pain for months, leaving me and Solina to fend for ourselves until he would hopefully pull himself back together again. He'd fought this battle once, after he "fell in with the wrong crowd" in high school, and won. He was six years sober when he met Mami, ten when they had us. He could do it again.

But he didn't. And look where we are now.

"Goddamn trippers," Dede grumbles as he reenters the kitchen. "Always looking for free shit." It's no surprise that Joan is an out-of-towner —better known to us unfortunate townies as trippers. Luster's full of them. We'd have a higher population if you counted the hundred or so people who come through every day, driving off to somewhere more exciting. Up to the Canadian border, or down to Spokane. We're the unfortunate souls stuck in the middle. It's even the official Luster motto, printed in chipped script on the road sign when you first get into town.

*Luster: Halfway to Something Great.*

Dede sags against the counter, hand stalling as he reaches for a bag of frozen patties. "You good?"

I nod, not trusting my voice to keep up with the lie.

"Lu." Dede's voice is quieter as he shifts closer toward me. He smells like sweat, grease, and tacky cologne. "I know you're not the, uh ... talkin' type." That's the understatement of the century. We've gone days without saying anything other than "Hello," "Goodbye," and "Burger special for table two" to each other. "But you know you can talk about it. If you want."

The offer is familiar. Cops and nurses and old-acquaintances-turned-strangers prodding me to open up to them because they don't know what else to say when the unimaginable happens. This one hurts the most, though. Hearing the sad twinge in Dede's voice, the multiple sentences without any cursing. A stark reminder that things are different now, that people will treat *me* differently.

I can't blame him for trying. As all-consuming as this feels, I'm not the only one who lost Solina. She'd sit at the counter every summer, legs tucked under her and books scattered everywhere, taking up more space than one person should. Dede would bring her enough Diet Cokes to keep her fingers sticky all summer long. Sometimes he'd bring her a grilled cheese if she stuck around until after the lunch rush. Crusts cut off. Tomato slices on the side.

She was picky like that. Even when I reminded her we didn't have picky-people money. He let her get away with it, though. Encouraged it, even.

"Gotta respect a woman who knows what she wants," he said, rewarding her with a high five and a plate of fries.

Telling him she was gone was the only time I'd seen him cry. Not the day he dropped a box of potatoes on his toe, or when he spilled hot oil on his arm. Not when his first wife left him, or when the second one dumped him for his stepbrother. He'd helped me drive through town the morning I realized she was missing, calling out her name for hours as we drove down the handful of roads that make up Luster. He was there when we got the call too. That they'd found a body in a place we never considered looking. As much as I'd wanted to curl up beside him then, I didn't. Didn't cry either. I held him instead, let him sob into my shoulder while I told myself that Solina had moved on to a world that deserved her. One of us had to stay strong.

That's one thing that hasn't changed since Solina died. I'm still the one who has to be strong.

"Thanks." I give Dede a tight-lipped smile. I'm sure he doesn't believe it, but he doesn't push me.

He sighs, running a hand down his stubbled chin and glancing over at the clock. "You've busted your ass enough for one day." He turns back to the grill. "Head home."

I glance down at my watch. Half the time it's broken, but even if it was running slow, I'd still have another hour left of my shift. "You sure?"

He nods, pointing his spatula at the nearly empty dining area. Snow always makes for a slow day. Storm season kills. Three weeks out of the year, I stomp home soaked down to my underwear with barely a quarter of

my usual tips. “Unless you want to stick around,” he teases with a raised brow.

With Joan? No way.

I toss my apron into the cubby beneath the cutting boards, along with my worn-down sneakers, lacing up my snow boots while Dede gets back to flipping burgers. There’s a Styrofoam box with my name on it sitting on the counter when I stand back up. My usual order: a burger and fries. Simple and easy to find in tough situations. Unlike my sister, I follow my own advice.

“Thanks again,” I say as I open up the box to steal a fry.

He doesn’t bother to look up from the grill, grunting as he points his spatula at the door this time. “Get outta here before I find something for you to do.”

I don’t need to be told twice. Carefully tucking the box into my backpack, I give Dede a wave and a goodbye muffled around a mouthful of fries as I back out the kitchen door. Joan’s seat is empty. She must’ve decided to skip out on a new platter of eggs, and the check, apparently. No surprise, not a tip in sight. Not even some loose change from the bottom of her purse.

The seat beside hers is now occupied by a different kind of nuisance—Luster’s resident evangelical savior and bane of Dede’s existence, Todd Lowry.

“Luna!” he shouts before I can turn back around and escape through the back door. “I’ve been meaning to track you down.”

The sound of his voice makes me freeze. Todd is usually impossible to shake off, but Solina always managed to do it with grace. On instinct, I turn to look for her. Wait for her hand to slide into mine and pull me toward the door as she brushes past Todd with a smile and a wave. She could talk her way out of anything, with her soft voice and kind eyes, while I glowered and waited for her to whisk me to safety.

Now there’s no one left to fight the battles for me.

In Todd’s rush to get over to me, the trusty postcards he shoves at every tripper he can find—promising salvation to those who seek it—fly out of his hands and skitter across the floor. Hundreds of neon-yellow-and-green eyes peer up at me as he scrambles to pick them up off the freshly mopped tile. Unblinking and judgmental as hell.

## *IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO SAVE YOUR SOUL*

Beneath Todd's ominous promise is a phone number, punctuated by hands folded in prayer. A number Solina and I once called just for the hell of it, only to find out it leads to a disconnected line. So much for saving your soul.

It's not the first, or even hundredth, time I've seen Todd's postcards, and yet something new lodges itself in the pit of my stomach. Something so wicked I don't dare dwell on it.

"I—uh—gotta ..." I don't finish that thought, turning on my heels and making a break for the bathroom at the opposite end of the room. Todd calls out to me but doesn't bother following. I've spotted him dozens of times since the news about Solina broke. It's impossible not to run into someone like Todd in a town this small, preaching the Lord's word anywhere there's a soul to be saved.

People like him prey on the weak. The homeless, the hungry, the down-on-their-luck looking for something to believe in. It's obvious what he wants every time he's tried to corner me since the news about Solina spread like wildfire. A chance to make a broken girl whole again.

I shoot Dede a text once I've locked the bathroom door. Give it a few minutes and he'll have chased Todd off with some choice cusses and a threatening crack of his dish towel. We hardly care about our image, but stragglers like Todd are as annoying for us as they are bad for business.

The storm rages on while I camp out on the closed toilet lid. I still haven't heard back from my roommate, Tiffany, about a ride home. Hopefully she can duck out of work early too. If a diner's this slow in a snowstorm, you'd think the local library would be completely dead.

While I wait for her to respond, I pull my hair free from its messy bun, hiding the baby hairs that managed to spring free. Even in the dead of winter, the diner manages to stay humid, the kitchen sweltering like a deep-fried jungle.

Solina hated our hair, and I couldn't blame her. A single drop of moisture and all hell breaks loose. The summer she sweet-talked me into buying a flat iron, she'd sit in our room for hours, pinching, pulling, and lathering her hair with oils whose names I couldn't pronounce until it was as pin straight as the model's on the box. I admired her patience, even when the stink of burnt hair lingered for weeks.

When Mami was still alive, she'd always say she was blessed to have two daughters, beautiful in all the same ways. The same round cheeks that we hoped would go away once we were older, but never did. The same lips, soft pink and curved at the center. The same eyes, dark brown with even darker lashes. Hers wide, mine sunken. Even the same freckles, dotting the corners of our eyes and apples of our cheeks like stars.

Mami said we were blessed too. To be able to look at your sister and see so much of yourself. The world knew we would have a special bond from the day we were born. People expect that from twins, especially identical. We didn't come up with secret languages or codes like all the books said we would. No one could have prepared us for the bond we'd have.

Looking up at the mirror, seeing the same cheeks and lips and eyes that I saw on that slab—mottled and gray and drained of everything that made Solina who she was—it doesn't feel like a blessing.

It feels like a curse.

## CHAPTER TWO

The Luster police station is twice the size of the hospital. In a town this small, crime is an extracurricular. Either you get really good at bowling and take advantage of Six-Dollar Lane Sundays, or you start swiping sodas and candy from the gas station mini-mart.

Despite that, the police never seem all that busy. Over the past week, I've made it a point to fill their time. They're lucky the snow closed down the roads for the rest of the night yesterday. Otherwise I would've headed straight here after getting off work early. Instead, I had to spend my one day off this week freezing my ass off on the bus stop bench.

I shove my hands into my pockets, feeling around for the switchblade I keep on me just in case. It took three trades at the group home we were in a few years back to get it. With its melted handle and dull blade, it's not going to do much to anyone who might corner me, but it's still comforting to know I'm not defenseless.

Officer Cartagena is easy to spot. Making his way across the parking lot, he doesn't bother to look up from his phone, sipping his coffee at the same time. A cruiser makes a risky swerve to avoid hitting him, biting back what I'm sure was a curse when Cartagena looks up with a piercing glare.

"You drive like that when you got your kids in the back seat?" he calls out, as if he isn't half at fault for looking at his phone instead of the road.

I hope someone punches him in the face someday.

I'd do the honors myself if I didn't need him. Not that he's actually made himself useful. All my calls to his office go straight to voicemail, claiming he's out in the field "investigating." If that's what he was actually doing, we'd know who killed my sister. Crime is common here, but murder

isn't. Yet Cartagena would still rather spend all day handcuffing middle schoolers over petty theft than take anything I say seriously.

"Morning, Officer," I call out, cornering him before he can get to his own cruiser.

The greeting jolts him, his hand flying up to his chest, splattering coffee across the hood of his car. But he plays it cool. "Good morning, Luna."

I hate the way he says my name. Like we're friends or colleagues. That's his shtick. The older, burly lieutenant with a soft heart and hard exterior. Or, that's what people used to think of him, at least. That soft heart turned rotten as soon as he made it to his sixties. Now he spends more time planning out his retirement in Boca Raton than he does on cases.

"Any updates?" I ask, settling my weight against the driver's side door. He's avoided me enough this week, I'm not letting him get off that easy.

Even through his sunglasses, I can feel the heat of his glare. He's sick of me calling and emailing every day, showing up when he goes too long without replying. I would be, too, if I were in his position. Some teenager coming around telling you that you're not doing your job. Wouldn't be a problem if he pulled his head out of his ass, though.

"I told you, Ms. Flores, that I'd contact you as soon as I had anything else to share," he replies through gritted teeth.

"Ms. Flores" sounds even worse. I've done a lot of growing up faster than I should have, but I still don't feel old enough to be anything other than Luna. "You said you'd give me daily updates," I correct. "That was over a week ago."

"I said I'd give daily updates *if* there was anything to update you on." His patience is as thin as his graying hair. He's aged five years in the week and a half since he met me.

"You haven't looked into her classmates," I supply. He's not picking up any clues on his own, so I'll leave breadcrumbs to lead him to the trail. "I could reach out to the office of student af—"

"Again, that won't be necessary."

There's that word again. Necessary. Nothing I've offered him has been deemed "necessary." Not Solina's computer, her friends, or my side of the story. They haven't bothered contacting Solina's school at all. He saw what was on the surface and decided it wasn't worth looking beyond it. A small

town full of reckless teenagers who loot gas stations for fun. A history of drunken incidents thanks to the ice coating the paths leading to the cliffs in Green Hills Park—broken legs and arms, or worse, snapped necks. A dead girl in the water. No signs of a struggle. The story wrote itself.

He won't say it outright, either because he's not allowed to or because he's worried how I'll react if he does. That he doesn't believe me, that this is one of those open-and-shut cases that's kept open for the sake of appearances but closed quietly when the dust starts to gather. It doesn't matter that she left without her wallet, or that she wound up at a park six miles away with no car in the middle of a storm. It doesn't matter that none of the pieces we have fit together. There's never going to be any updates. As far as the police are concerned, this story has its ending.

"Now, if you'll excuse me ..." Cartagena slides a cautious hand around me, reaching for the door handle. I shift over, firmly planting my thigh over the handle. Cartagena's an asshole, but he's not about to risk groping a barely legal girl in his workplace parking lot.

"You still haven't brought in her roommate for questioning. I don't have her number, but—"

"The case is being closed, Luna," he blurts out before I can finish, his cheeks red with either shame or pent-up anger. I hope it's shame. "The paperwork's been drawn up. Should be official by next week."

My mouth goes dry, dread creeping up my spine. The flashes come back, Cartagena's face clouded by visions of Solina's eyes, vacant and milky white. How could they have seen her body—bloody, broken, and bruised—and picked this ending?

Cartagena uses my shock against me, waiting until my body goes slack to make a jump at the handle. "I'm sorry, Luna," he whispers, before nudging me aside and pulling the door open.

If he were sorry, he wouldn't be doing this. He'd take me inside and write down everything I have to say. About how Solina was afraid of heights. About how she hated the cliffs, always tugging me to the opposite end of the park. About how pale she was when she came home for winter break, her fingertips cold even though she always ran hot. About the last thing she said to me, how I told her—

I stop myself. I've dwelled on that night enough.

“I wish it was better news,” Cartagena continues, one foot in the cruiser and the other on the ground. “Happy new year, Luna. I hope the next one is easier on you and your family.”

Even his well wishes are half-assed. If he listened to my testimony, he’d know I don’t have any family left.

“Please don’t do this.”

Cartagena winces, his mouth stuck somewhere between a grimace and a frown.

Vulnerability isn’t my strong suit. Solina once said my walls are made of iron. But I’m so tired. Tired of waiting for an answer, tired of wondering if there was anything I could’ve done differently, tired of leaving the porch light on, just in case Solina comes back.

Just ... *tired*.

Cartagena doesn’t respond. He closes the door and focuses his eyes on the road as he starts up the car, my lungs burning from the bitter sting of winter and car exhaust. Before he pulls out of the lot, he stops and looks back. He gives me a grim nod, a wordless final goodbye, and takes off.

And that’s it. My sister is buried five miles and six feet under from me. Luster was never supposed to be her home for long. From the moment we came here four years ago, we knew this was meant to be temporary. A pit stop on our way to something better. She was going to change everything. Go to the best school, get into the best college. Med school on a full ride. Now she’ll never leave. She’s the girl who played with risky thrills and paid the worst type of price. Dead at eighteen with no one left to grieve but a punk sister with a bad attitude.

I grit my teeth, clench my fingers until they dig holes in the tips of my gloves. Let the chill seep through, let it hold and harden me. You can’t cry in this type of cold. Your tears’ll freeze before they can roll down your cheeks.

My mind whirs, looking for a way out, or a loophole. Something else I can say or do to make Cartagena, any of them, listen. But my gut knows that it’s done. I may have dropped out of high school sophomore year, but I know no one lets you put a comma where they’ve decided to put a period. I fall back, staggering against the wall. The jagged brick cuts at my palm where the glove has frayed, but the pain is barely skin-deep. There’s a bigger ache inside me, threatening to swallow me whole.

Every day since they found Solina, that ache grows bigger, becoming less of a feeling and more a part of me. Today it feels impossible. How one person can hold this much pain inside them, enough to fill every ocean and some to spare. Cartagena's cruiser turns at the end of the road, the red-and-blue taillights disappearing as the snow picks up. A piece of her goes with him, abandoned like the fast-food wrappers and coffee cups on the floor of his car.

And, maybe, a piece of me too.

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## CHAPTER THREE

Tiffany ambushes me once I'm home.

"Well, it's about time her highness made an appearance," she croons the minute I walk through the door. She loops an arm around my shoulders once I've finished unlacing my boots, blowing a puff of cherry-scented smoke against my cheek. Today's ensemble matches her choice of vape flavor—pink bell-bottoms with a matching knit crop top adorned with bright red hearts. "What did we say about observing the holiness of your day off?"

"Wasn't working," I grumble under my breath.

"Mm-hmm," she hums, unconvinced. In Tiffany's eyes, anything outside of sprawling out on the couch counts as work. She lets go of my shoulder, tossing her vape pen onto the dining table. "You coming out with us tonight?"

I shake my head. Besides not being in a celebratory mood, I'd never be able to keep up with Tiffany and Dede's nights out, especially not on New Year's Eve. Together, the two of them can polish off a bottle of vodka within half an hour and still have room for a couple of shots before they start to lose their balance. Whenever they can, they pile into Tiffany's sticker-plastered, soccer-mom minivan and drive out to towns that are both more exciting than Luster and that will forget their names by morning.

Tiffany's done what she can to keep things afloat—keeping me fed and the house clean while I fall deeper and deeper into the hole Solina left behind. It's what she's good at, picking up the pieces. Without her, Solina and I would probably be back at that shitty group home. Or stuck at a halfway house for runaways without any prospects. After all she's done for us, the least I can do is not crash her one night out.

Tiffany pouts, then wipes it away with a wave of her hand. “Your loss.” She nods her head toward my room. “Didn’t stop me from leaving you a little New Year’s present in your room, though,” she sings with a flourish and a wink.

Tiffany’s present is sitting on the least messy section of my half of the unmade bed. She knows better than to leave something on the side that belonged to Solina. It was only hers when she was home. Summers and winters and the occasional spring break, when we had the extra pocket money for the train ticket home. Solina never had much, but I’ve held on to all of it. Her clothes, still hung up in the closet, her hairbrush on the nightstand. Even the glass of water she never got around to finishing. Our room has always been cramped. Clothes stuffed into every drawer and books stacked in corners or beneath wobbly nightstand legs. The thought of extra space would’ve once felt like a luxury.

But I’ve already buried Solina in one box. I can’t put her in another.

I pick up the bottle of tequila, complete with a red silk bow and a card that reads, *For auld lang syne bitch* in hot-pink Sharpie.

Beneath the bottle is a less exciting present. A stack of mail—past-due bills and threatening notices. A neon-green Post-it reads, *Say the word and I’ll burn the whole stack*. After almost four years of living together, Tiffany and I are pros at dodging deadlines. Nothing is ever as time sensitive as people want you to think it is. Still, I’ve put off facing the outside world long enough. Resolutions are bullshit, but I might as well try to start the new year off on a somewhat clean slate.

A credit card bill I’ve put off dealing with until payday, an electric bill I paid last week, and finally, a tuition bill.

*Kingswood Academy—ATTN: Solina Grace Flores*

My stomach tightens at the sight of the all-too-familiar maroon-and-royal-blue crest in the corner of the thick envelope, the way it does every time one of these shows up in our mailbox. Every three months, like clockwork, for the past four years. The bastards at the financial aid office never answer the phone during their supposed business hours, but they’ll sure as hell send you a bill on time.

There was a time when Kingswood was our one good thing. The best school in Washington State, and one of the best in the country. The type of boarding school we heard about on TV, with a sprawling campus hidden

away in the Washington mountains. Solina had applied on a whim with help from one of the halfway decent guidance counselors at the group home. She told us to keep our expectations low, that Kingswood Academy—home to senators' sons and diplomats' daughters—wasn't the kind of school that let in kids like us. Kids like me, sure. But Solina was always extraordinary. Smarter than everyone in the room, including most of the teachers, and so kind even the pettiest kids couldn't find it in them to hate her.

The look on Solina's face when her acceptance letter came was priceless. I always wished I'd taken a picture of that moment, so I could pin it to the fridge for whenever Solina doubted herself. Finally, the world was seeing what I knew all along: she was brilliant.

But an acceptance letter was just the first hurdle. We had dozens more to go.

In the end Kingswood is what brought us to Luster, and by default to Tiffany. From the second that acceptance letter came, we knew the group home was a dead end. There was no easy way for Solina to get to Kingswood unless one of the counselors wanted to cough up the gas money and spend twelve hours round trip driving up to the mountains to drop her off every semester.

Two weeks after the acceptance letter came, we snuck out after curfew and took three buses to a town we didn't know, looking for a person we'd only heard about in the stories Papi told at the dinner table. All we had was an address and a photo, one of the last pieces of our old life that we'd held on to, of Papi and his cousin, Angel, on the front steps of the house they grew up in. On the back was an address, a phone number, and a message telling Papi to come visit Luster sometime. Luster wasn't the perfect solution. It was still hundreds of miles away from Kingswood but was at least within an hour of a train that could take her there. Luster gave us the possibility of something we hadn't felt in a long time: hope.

Angel had been in prison for six months by the time we got to the address scribbled on the back of the photo. Some asshole at a bar had said something under his breath about Tiffany, still loud enough for both of them to hear. She'd insisted on leaving, trying to drag Angel back out to the car, but he wouldn't let it go. Fueled by four Fireball shots and a line of coke, Angel whaled on the piece of shit until the bar was sticky with blood and liquor. Judge called it battery, until the guy died in the hospital two weeks

into the trial and the charge got bumped up to manslaughter. Maybe another judge would've been more understanding, considered that Angel wasn't unprovoked. But the one he got took one look at his name, the tiger tattoo stretched across his neck, the girlfriend he was trying to protect, and gave him life.

When Tiffany opened the door for us, her eyes were red-rimmed, a tissue clutched in her hand. Half a year had gone by and she still hadn't processed that he wasn't coming home. Part of her will always feel guilty about what happened, as if she could've changed a bigot's mind. But maybe she could've pulled Angel harder, or picked a different bar, or stopped him at two shots instead of four. She was haunted by a thousand what-ifs until we showed up on her doorstep looking for the only family we had left.

Tiffany has always been a mother hen, the caring friend who made sure everyone got home safe, fed, and watered. The friend with meals to share and an open invitation to crash on her couch. She was made of the exact type of kindness we needed, and we were the opportunity to make it up to Angel she'd been looking for.

Taking us in was a fresh start, for all of us.

"Want me to call those assholes and tell them to fuck off?" Tiffany leans up against the doorframe, jutting her chin toward the bill in my hand.

Scholarships covered most of Solina's expenses, but Kingswood came with fine print and hidden fees. Somehow, they always managed to send a bill at the end of every semester, even if it was for something as pointless as a "snack refill charge." If I hadn't dropped out of Luster's mediocre public school my sophomore year to work at the diner full-time, these bullshit charges would've sunk us by now. Solina was always the one with a future, anyway. Not me.

I let out a humorless snort. "Like they'd answer."

Now that I can cross Cartagena off my never-ending list of loose ends to tie up, Kingswood can take the top slot. What would've been Solina's last semester starts in less than a week, and as far as they know, she'll be back on campus by Thursday. There are plenty of handbooks for dealing with grief, but none about the logistics. How to pay for a funeral. How to close accounts. How to contact a school to let them know one of their students is dead. Part of me hoped they'd find out on their own somehow, but other than a five-line article in the *Luster Sun* about a "local teen found

dead” that I had them take down, since they couldn’t even bother to say her name, there’s no proof of what happened.

No one but us knows that she’s gone.

“Seriously, though,” Tiffany insists, nudging her shoulder against mine. “If you need me to call them, I will.”

“I’ve got it,” I reply, tapping the bill against my hand before tossing it into the trash pile. Kingswood even sent along a copy of Solina’s schedule for next semester, printed on obnoxiously thick card stock, a wax seal of the Kingswood lion crest keeping the paper folded neatly.

With that sorted, Tiffany makes herself at home on the edge of my bed, holding up the bottle of tequila. “Figured you wouldn’t want to come tonight, but I’m not leaving your ass behind in a dry house on New Year’s Eve.”

We both know I don’t like drinking, but I can’t blame her for thinking I might want to start now.

“This is the part where you say, ‘Thank you, Tiffany. You’re *such* a good friend.’ ”

“Thank you,” I spit out to make her happy. Playing along with Tiffany’s games is practically baked into the lease. All this Kingswood bullshit just brings me back to Cartagena. The fucker has dug under my skin, his words echoing with every moment of silence. *I wish it was better news.*

Silence for more than two minutes when Tiffany’s in a room is a red flag. I’ve forgotten she’s still there until she’s standing back up and resting a hand on my shoulder. “Did something happen?”

Most touch makes my skin crawl, but Tiffany’s has a strange way of making you feel at home. Pokes in the ribs and piggyback rides to the kitchen. Slow dancing in front of the TV and licking strawberry juice off our fingers in the summer. It took over a year for us to shake off the fear that we were a burden to her, something she felt obligated to do because we were all she had left of Angel. But ever since the day she met us, soaking wet and fresh off the bus from a town we were trying to forget, she’s felt like family.

I shake my head. The truth sits on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow it back down and give her a smile. If she knew, she’d cancel her plans, stay

home, and make a night out of eating pizza and yelling “fuck the cops” at the TV until our throats were hoarse.

Luster isn’t kind to people like Tiffany—Black, trans, and unashamedly proud of who she is. Some days she leans into it, loving that she can enrage someone just by existing. Other days, I brace myself for her to finally leave. Pack up her mess of a room, take the rainy-day fund from the cereal box beneath the kitchen sink, and go to Los Angeles like she always says she will. And I wouldn’t blame her if she did. But Los Angeles is still too far away a dream, so she settles for the next town over instead.

Tonight, she’ll get to sip overpriced mixed drinks and laugh and dance and sparkle like the gem she is, and tomorrow she’ll be back here in this pit of a town. Getting ready to visit the love of her life like she does every first of the month. Hiding tears and telling herself that holding his hand from across a table feels the same as it did at home.

After everything we’ve been through these past two weeks, it feels strange to call a night out important, but who am I to judge people who know how to cope.

“I’m fine,” I say, and I almost believe it. “Have fun tonight.”

Her left brow quirks into a carefully sculpted arch. “You sure?”

This time I give her an even wider smile, pushing through the dull pain of pulling my chapped lips taut. “You deserve to have some fun.”

“You do too, you know.”

*But I never had fun in the first place.*

Instead, I shrug. “Maybe next year.”

Tiffany grins, holding up a hot-pink pinkie finger. “I’m holding you to that.”

My smile feels less forced when I slide my pinkie through hers. “Don’t have too much fun, though. I’m not cleaning up any messes for free.”

She crosses her index finger across her chest. “I wouldn’t dare.”

With a kiss to my cheek, she heads back to her room, humming a song under her breath and swaying her hips with every step. I don’t envy Tiffany often, but I wish I had her heart. If I were half as kind as her, maybe it’d be easier to find some happiness. Silver linings in the massive pile of shit that has been this year. But, for now, I have tequila.

Usually, I keep my distance from anything that could be considered a vice. A talk from a social worker at the group home has always stuck with

me. About how kids like me and Solina were bound to be drawn to things that were bad for us. The chart with a dozen different statistics has stayed in the back of my mind, the numbers faded but the message holding strong. Addiction can run through a family like blood. Just because Papi was miles away didn't mean he couldn't still hold influence over us.

I turn the bottle around in my hand, let the weight of it ground me.

Fuck it. I deserve a bad decision.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

The living room is cramped, even for two people. A beat-up love seat we found on Craigslist sits against one wall, with a TV that's more static than picture half the time against the opposite. There's barely enough room to throw your feet up on the coffee table. I'd take the "party" to my room if Solina's warnings about crumbs and ants weren't still etched deep into my brain.

Old habits don't die with the people who instilled them.

Tiffany and Dede head out at a quarter to ten. They leave me behind with kisses on the cheek and well wishes for the new year. All I give back is a mumbled "Drive safe" before I collapse onto the couch with my unopened tequila.

When it comes to television, the pickings are slim. An old-school sitcom marathon is the only thing that holds my attention for longer than a minute. It's the type of stuff they'd play on repeat in the rec room at the group home. No one could be bothered to pay for cable, so we were stuck with endless reruns of *The Nanny*. Not that any of us complained. Fran Drescher was the closest thing we had to a mom the six months we were there. The group home wasn't comforting, and I'd sooner choke than call that place a happy time in our lives. But the thought of Solina—blood warm and pumping through her veins—is enough for it to be one of the good memories.

Even the good memories make me feel sick. At a quarter to eleven, I stop fighting my conscience and pop open the cap on the tequila. Mother Goose Tiffany made sure to leave me mixers in the fridge, sodas and fruit juices, but I don't bother. Why sugarcoat it?

Tequila comes with its own sour memory. I brush my fingers against the ink on my wrist. On our eighteenth birthday, we'd piled into Tiffany's car with a handle of Casamigos and an appointment at the cleanest tattoo parlor we could find within twenty-five miles. With how plastered we were by the time we got there, it's a miracle the tattoo artist didn't kick us to the curb. The tequila did the trick, though. All we felt was the taste of lime and salt on our tongues as me and Solina sealed our bond with ink. A crescent moon on her left wrist. A sunset on my right.

So we could always be together.

It doesn't take long for me to remember that tequila smells like trouble and goes down smooth. By eleven thirty the bottle is almost empty and dangling from my limp fingertips. Alcohol makes me see the world the way Solina saw it—colorful and bright and the edges never that sharp. Whatever sitcom is on becomes the funniest shit I've ever seen, and I laugh along with the audience until tears well up in the corners of my eyes, but never spill. Alcohol wasn't Papi's vice, but I can see why he fell so hard and so fast. It took thirty minutes for me to not be able to hold on to thoughts long enough for them to pull me down. Heroin would've done that in five.

With ten minutes to midnight, a broadcast from the fireworks show in Seattle takes over.

"Coming to you live from the Space Needle in Seattle, we at KIRO 7 News Seattle want to wish you a very happy new year!" A pair of newscasters in matching blue suits clink their plastic cups together, shivering against the wind and giggling as the crowd around them goes wild.

Wimpy. Luster winters make Seattle look like an island paradise. I'd kill for a day where I didn't have to wear three layers of socks to go outside.

Bitterness aside, I follow their lead. Lifting up my bottle in a toast, I down a shot's worth of tequila in honor of the new year. The newscasters banter about resolutions as the countdown clock barrels closer and closer to midnight. He resolves to exercise more regularly. She decides to quit ordering takeout.

I wish resolutions worked the way we make them sound. That I could wake up tomorrow a new person, this awful year packed and shoved out of sight like clothes I've outgrown. Maybe then letting go wouldn't feel so impossible. I could be the person people are always hoping I'll become. The

one who knows how to smile. Who can pretend my past was just a bad dream.

All the talk of resolutions brings on a wave of shame. Or maybe that's the tequila. I don't believe in resolutions, but if I did, I'd know where to start.

I want to find the person who killed my sister. I want to sink my nails and teeth and that dull switchblade into them until they feel what she felt, until they feel all the pain I've carried since that night.

Since the night I told her to leave.

Every year I have plenty of regrets. People whose food I've spit in, even when they deserved it. Stuff I've swiped when the cashier wasn't looking, even though we needed it. It's easy to justify not being kind when the world treats you like shit under a boot. But I can't justify what I said to her.

Pieces of our last conversation ring in my ears until it feels like it's coming from the TV, the pink-cheeked announcer sounding more like Solina with every passing second.

"I don't want to go back there," she said the day she was supposed to head back to campus. She was leaving early for an apprenticeship with her biology teacher, she'd said. We'd all been so proud, we didn't mind the ache in our chests at the thought of celebrating the holidays without her.

There was a strange paleness in her always-rosy cheeks. I'd brushed it off as a cold, maybe the flu. She was wearing a sweater I'd never seen before. Cream with gold buttons.

"Where, the diner?" I replied absentmindedly, too focused on making dinner to pay her much attention. The heat was busted, so she'd tagged along with me to work every day that week for the sake of warmth. She spent my shifts tucked into her usual corner booth, nose buried in a book she had to read for an English class next semester. It's still sitting on the nightstand, a Burger King receipt marking the place she left off. Reading isn't for me, but someday I want to finish it. So I can tell her how it ends.

In the blink of an eye, she was beside me, squeezing my wrist until I dropped the knife I'd been holding. "I mean Kingswood."

"What?" I snorted out a laugh, pulling my wrist out of her hold and flicking the tip of her nose. Our special, infuriating way of teasing one another. "Chickening out at the last second?"

But her jaw was set, her eyes as dark as the thin skin beneath them. “I’m serious, Lu.” When she inhaled I swore I could hear her heart rattling against her ribs. “I don’t want to go back there. It’s just been … a lot lately.”

Compassion hadn’t crossed my mind. I’m a lot of things, but empathetic isn’t one of them. I remember frowning, leaning up against the counter and crossing my arms. There was no world in which she was going to change my mind that night.

“So, what? You’ll skip your last semester and hang out here? Work the shifts I can’t cover for a buck fifty an hour?” I hadn’t meant to sound that angry, but we were so close. The possibility of everything we’d done—that *I’d* done—being for nothing made me bitter. Well, bitterer than usual.

“I’m gonna figure something out,” she mumbled. “Get a job. Maybe finish school from home. Or not, it doesn’t matter as long as—”

“Doesn’t *matter*?” I scoffed, pushing myself off the counter, crowding her space. “Kingswood is *all* that matters, Sol. We’ve busted our asses for years for this school, and you wanna give up in the final stretch?”

“I’m not giving up, I’m just—”

“What is it, then?” My hands flew up in the air as I cut her off again. “Because it sure looks like giving up to me.”

“It’s taking a break.”

*I don’t get to take breaks* sat on the tip of my tongue, but I had enough sense to swallow it down.

Instead, I pinched the bridge of my nose, willing my anger to cool down before I let it get the best of me. “You can’t just take a break now. We already paid for the semester, and you know those stuffy assholes at the financial aid office would rather eat dirt than give out a refund.”

That didn’t deter her, but it kept her from meeting my eyes again. “Then I’ll pay you back.”

Wishful thinking. In my two-plus years of working full-time, I only ever had just enough to get by. Just enough for the rent, just enough for Kingswood, sometimes not even enough to pay for groceries. That’s where luck came in—generous people like Dede and Tiffany who gave and gave and didn’t ask for anything in return. I’d never ask Solina to pay me back for Kingswood, but that didn’t mean I’d let her waste it either.

“It’s one semester, Sol. If you leave now, you probably won’t qualify for that Hightower scholarship.”

Graduation meant another set of bills—heftier, this time. Kingswood was no joke, but neither were the kinds of colleges I had in mind for her. Ivy leagues, universities with locked doors that Kingswood could open. If she wanted to become an oncologist, like we always said, she’d need to be the best. Stay the best. Fields like science and medicine aren’t welcoming to people like us. Girls whose childhoods left them with scars and without family or money to make up for what our resumes lack.

The Hightower Fellowship was a bright spot in the darkness. A \$250,000 scholarship awarded to one graduating senior courtesy of the Hightowers, a Kingswood legacy family as old as the limestone buildings. From the second I’d found out about it in the Kingswood quarterly bulletin, I’d hounded Solina about it. She was brilliant, a model student. Perfect grades even without all the privileges that come with a trust fund. More deserving of that fellowship than anyone at Kingswood could be, I was sure. All she needed to do was prove it.

“Just get it over with and you can figure stuff out afterward,” I pushed, unwilling to let this golden opportunity slip away from her—from *us*.

“Please, can you just *listen* to me?” Solina pleaded, tears gathering in her eyes. We stood toe to toe, almost nose to nose. Her cracked exhale was warm against my lips. “Can you act like you care for one goddamn second?”

*Act like you care.* All it took was four words to break me.

“No,” I growled, stepping impossibly closer to her. “After everything that I’ve done, that I do every day for you—this job, this town, this fucking life.” My voice echoed against the popcorn ceiling, making her shoulders tremble. “You don’t get to say that I don’t care.”

I’d never held my choices against her, because they were exactly that—*my* choices. There were still parts of our story that she didn’t know—the reason a social worker wound up on our doorstep six months after Mami died and Papi relapsed—because I was too afraid to tell her. To admit what I’d done, how stupid I’d been.

I did all of it for her—moving here, dropping out, becoming a parent because we’d lost ours—but none of it was her cross to bear. Because I was the reason we lost everything in the first place.

My response said everything she needed to hear. She grabbed her boots and jacket and stormed off without putting either on. We'd lived through enough Luster winters to know going outside without them was a mistake, but neither of us cared.

"Great, leave, so mature," I taunted, because I was hurt. Hurt by what she'd said and that it hadn't taken much to make her leave.

The next morning, she was dead.

If I were half the person she was, I would've gone after her. I would've seen the pain in her eyes and the fear I hadn't noticed since she'd been home. She wasn't the girl I knew anymore. She was pale and quiet and afraid. We'd had fights before. She had even stormed out once, too, when I told her I was dropping out of school to work full-time at the diner. But she came back that night.

She would've come home. I know that the way I know my own name—deep and unshakable. She didn't come home because someone didn't let her.

And I led her straight to them.

"Seattle, let's make some noise!" a woman with an electric guitar and neon-green hair shouts before a massive countdown takes over the screen. Ten seconds left of the year, and I feel like I'm falling apart.

That doesn't stop me from taking another swig of tequila, though, stumbling as I lift myself off the couch. The bathroom spins as I brace myself against the sink, nothing steady but the drip from the perpetually leaky faucet. The air is thick, so wet it makes my breath come slower. The radiator beside the sink spews steam at all hours of the day—our very own sauna. I take one last sip, polishing off the bottle. The clear liquid dribbles down my chin and burns its way down my throat. Nothing goes down smooth anymore.

*"Five ..."*

My reflection lets out a belly laugh, mocking me for following in Papi's footsteps so easily. Three weeks after Mami died, he turned to old vices for comfort. It only took me two. I wipe my chin with the back of my hand. The mirror doesn't stop laughing. I hate how much I look like her.

*"Four ..."*

Tequila holds my tongue and grief clogs my throat. It was that school, someone from that school did this to her. They were the reason she didn't

want to go back. And I was too caught up in my dreams of who she could be to see that.

“*Three ...*”

Solina’s voice washes over me, her words wrapped around my windpipe. *Act like you care.*

That’s the problem. I cared too much. Now my sister is dead, and I need to know who killed her because I can’t live in a world where it might’ve been me.

“*Two ...*”

She could’ve been great—*should’ve* been great—but I ruined everything. Long before that night I slammed the door in her face. We wouldn’t be here if I knew how to keep my mouth shut. If I hadn’t learned the hard way that you can’t trust every person with a kind smile.

My vision blurs, the edges of the world bleeding together. I lean against the cool glass of the mirror until the world stops swimming. When I pull back, a new reflection looks back at me. Was my face always this bloated? My teeth so rotten? My skin so bruised?

“*One ...*”

The crackle and hum of the TV bursts into a symphony of cheers, party horns, and the opening chords of a rock song I don’t recognize. Seattle swells with excitement, and somewhere miles away, Tiffany and Dede will take shots to the future. Here, there’s silence. No one around to hear the crash when my fist hits the mirror. No one but me to hear the screams.

And when I blink down at my reflection in the glass scattered across the bloodied sink, it hits me.

Maybe what’s haunting me has been the answer all along.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Everything hurts in the morning. It's like I've swallowed a mouthful of cotton, my throat dry and lips scabbed over with dead skin and dried blood. A pounding headache keeps me from lifting myself up and makes the broken ceiling fan spin.

"Good morning, beautiful," says Tiffany.

Sunlight almost never makes it to my room, back in the darkest corner of the house. Today, it blinds me, adding a new sting to the mix. "Wha's ... going on?" The words bleed together, my mind too split between processing the sun and the all-over pain to put together coherent thoughts.

"Looks like you had fun last night." Something new burns my knuckles. I hiss, trying to pull my hand to my chest, but Tiffany holds me down. Half our medicine cabinet is spread out across the bed, my left hand in her lap. She's already dressed in the drab gray sweatpants and matching hoodie she reserves for when she visits Angel. Gets her through the check-in process easier. "You owe me a new mirror, by the way."

I keep quiet while she works, biting back yelps as she cleans each cut. The mirror did more damage than I thought. My hand got the brunt of it, but I must've knocked my head into something along the way. The cut on my forehead is shallow but doesn't do me any favors when it comes to keeping headaches at bay.

I can vaguely remember feeling some pain last night, but I was numb to anything that wasn't screaming until my voice gave out. My body followed pretty soon after. I stumbled back to my room once I couldn't scream anymore and fell asleep dripping blood onto my comforter.

Which is gone, I realize. I sit up slightly, checking to see if I kicked it off while I slept. "Where's the—"

“In the washer.” Tiffany rests a hand on my shoulder, gently pushing me back down. “You’re welcome.”

“Thanks.” A wave of nausea comes when I lean back against the pillows. All I can do is stare at a fixed point on the ceiling.

“How was your night?” I ask once my stomach has settled and she’s moved on to bandaging.

“Fun.” Her tone is blunt but doesn’t pack any bite. “Wish I’d stuck around here, though. Might’ve saved my bathroom mirror.” A hint of a smile cracks through as she peeks over at me. It hurts to pull my lips taut, the dry skin stretching past its limit. But it’s hard not to smile when Tiffany’s around.

“All right.” Tiffany finishes tying off the bandages, patting my hand before setting it down on the mattress. “Breakfast is in ten. Try not to get into any more fights with inanimate objects, okay? I’ve cleaned up enough blood for one morning.” Before I can reply, she plants a kiss to my cheek and bounces out of the room like the hurricane she is.

The cold seeps in once Tiffany’s warmth is gone. Naturally, the radiator in our room would be busted for months while the one in the bathroom is constantly on full blast. Once my headache feels dulled enough that I won’t fall over when I stand, I slowly make my way to the garage. Glitter is streaked across the back window of Tiffany’s minivan. I can hear her complaining about what a pain in the ass it’ll be to clean already. We have a strict no-glitter policy in our household.

I’ve made it in time to move my comforter from the washer to the dryer. Pushing through the ache in my arms and throbbing in my knuckles, I squat down to move the damp comforter into the dryer, but a flash of gold catches my eye. A box shoved between the dryer and a stack of crates that’s been sitting in the garage since the day I moved in. The box is unusually damp, curdled dust sticking to my good hand, but the contents are in pristine condition. Kingswood blazers. Three of them. Washed, ironed, and ready for the new semester.

Dropping the comforter, I pick up one of the blazers and hold it up to my nose. The collar still smells like Solina. Eucalyptus shampoo and the pine-scented laundry detergent she insisted on, even though it cost an extra two dollars. The wrist is stained with spilled peach iced tea. She was always a messy eater.

Without thinking, I slip the blazer on. I don't fit into it the way she did. I'm all straight lines where she had curves. The shoulders hunch, fabric gathering at my collarbone where I can't fill the spaces. But it's better this way, easier to let her scent surround me.

I hate how present she still feels, but I don't think I could've survived if she wasn't. My world has revolved around her since we were fourteen. I've buried dollar bills in the box under our bed for over three years so she could have the life I once thought we both deserved. The money still went to her, to the coffin we buried her in. What does that leave me with now?

If I could, I'd sit here forever, wrapped in the warmth and smell of her. It's the closest I'll ever get to the way it was before, the two of us curled around one another during thunderstorms, whimpering until the storm passed. We were always too proud to admit when we were afraid.

Last night is a blur, but one thought comes rushing back. The force of it knocks me onto my elbows, leaves me breathless as I look at myself in the reflection of the minivan's rearview mirror.

It's like she's still here, looking back at me.

My head protests when I scramble back up as quickly as I can. The room spins and my stomach lurches, but I keep moving, barreling into the kitchen and bracing myself up against the doorframe.

"Calm down, the pancakes'll be ready in five," Tiffany replies without looking up. "Make yourself useful and grab the syrup."

When I don't, she turns around with an annoyed look. "What're you—" Her words trail off, spatula hanging limply in her hand as she takes me in. "Where did you get that?"

"Box in the garage," I reply, taking a second to let my headache calm down.

She bites her lip, giving me one last up and down before turning back to the stove with an unreadable look. "She asked me to iron them," she mumbles. She's the only person in the house with enough patience to brave the ironing board. "I meant to put those away, but ..." She heaves a sigh, shaking her head as she flips one of the pancakes before it's ready, batter splashing all over the pan. "Sorry."

"I'm going to Kingswood," I say, my voice steady and sure even though I still feel like I'm trapped underwater.

Her shoulders lock, but she doesn't take her eyes off the pan. "What?"

“None of us have told them about Solina. Cops never bothered to contact them either. I could go back there, as her. Figure out what happened.”

*Find who did this.*

The silence makes the three feet between us feel like miles.

“Have you lost your *freaking* mind?!” Tiffany finally snaps, swinging around with her nostrils flaring. “You could get *arrested*, Luna. And that’s assuming some rich kid doesn’t try to slit your throat first or—” She stops mid-tirade, her cheeks flushing.

“Or what?” I challenge. “What else am I supposed to do? Stay here and do nothing?”

She points the spatula at me, lets the tip of it rest on my chest. Pancake batter drips down my shirt. “Yeah, that’s exactly what you should do.”

If there’s one thing she should know about me by now, it’s that I’ve never sat by and let things happen. My business with Cartagena is proof of that. If there’s a hole, I fill it; a question, I answer it. It’s what brought me and Solina to her. We needed a fresh start, I found it.

Now Solina is dead, and I’m going to find who did it.

I snatch the spatula out of her hand and toss it onto the counter. “This is the only way we can find out what happened.”

It would be so simple, sliding into Solina’s skin. Wearing her name like armor. Whoever hurt her would have it written all over their face the second they saw me. A girl brought back from the dead.

“Uh, *no*.” The smell of smoke stops Tiffany before she can continue. She flips around, turning the burner off and fanning the black smoke billowing from the pan before the fire alarm can rat her out. “Cops are pieces of shit, but it’s *their* job to get answers. Not yours.”

And they’re not doing their job.

“They’re closing the case.” Hearing it in my own voice packs twice the punch. And I’d already hated Cartagena’s voice to begin with. Nasal, like a poorly healed nose job.

Tiffany stiffens, her hand falling back down to her side. Black smoke curls around her as her chest balloons up with protests, the same ones I’d had before Cartagena shut me down. Soon enough, Tiffany deflates too. She bats the smoke away and sags against the counter once it’s gone. There’s nothing else we can say that hasn’t already been said hundreds of times.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

I wish people would stop saying that.

There’s no time left to feel sorry for myself. I cross the cramped kitchen to get back to my room, grabbing the stack of mail that’s still sitting on the edge of my bed. Tiffany’s brow furrows when I return waving Solina’s schedule in front of her. The Kingswood wax seal glimmers in the dim light of the kitchen when I hold it up. “We could do this. We have her schedule, the uniforms, her books. It would take a few days. Just until—”

“Until what?!” Tiffany shouts back. I can’t even remember the last time she raised her voice like this. This kind of anger is reserved for bad answers on *Wheel of Fortune* and coupons we didn’t use before they expired. It takes a lot to turn someone as sweet as her sour. “You get them to confess? This isn’t the fucking CW, Luna. You don’t get to just throw on a blazer and play Nancy Drew.”

And to think, I thought she’d be on my side. Telling her was supposed to be a formality, an excuse to get a ride to the train station. The night after we found Solina, she nearly punched a hole in the wall of the living room. Pacing for hours, tears streaming down her cheeks. In between sobs she promised we’d find who did this, holding my hand so tight I worried the bones would snap.

When did that change?

“We don’t even know if someone at that school did this,” Tiffany continues, gesturing to the crest on the blazer’s breast pocket. “It could’ve been some rando at the park for all we know.”

Of course I’d considered that option too. That some tripper lured her off the road, but Solina knew as well as I do never to trust strangers—even the kind ones. We don’t know much, but we know a fall off the cliffs at Green Hills Park is what killed her. That there’s no other way her body could’ve been so badly bruised except from those jagged rocks jutting out of the water. And I know she never would’ve gone to that park unless someone wanted her there. Someone she thought she could trust.

And there’s no one in this town she would’ve trusted.

I throw the envelope from Kingswood back down on the counter and storm out of the kitchen.

“Come on, Lu,” Tiffany calls out, trailing after me but keeping a safe distance. “I’m not the villain here.”

“No,” I snap, prepared to slam my bedroom door. “You’re just like the rest of them.”

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Usually, sleep doesn’t come easy, but today I crash as soon as my head hits the pillow.

Closing my door means the heat from the bathroom radiator doesn’t waft over. In just a few hours, my room becomes a tundra, and I don’t even have my comforter to hide under. My joints crack unsettlingly when I stretch, my skin a map of cuts and goose bumps. The sky is pitch-black, but the clock says it’s only ten past four.

The scent of something sweet lingers in the air. Sugar cookies. Out-of-town bar crawls aren’t sustainable, so stress baking is Tiffany’s coping mechanism of choice. She must’ve made them before she left. The drive up to the federal prison takes two hours on a good day, and she always gets her gas worth, telling Angel about all the things he’s missed until the guards bark that her time is up. If she doesn’t hit traffic, she’ll be back in about three hours.

I pull on an extra pair of socks and sweats, grabbing one of the spare quilts from the closet before crawling back to bed. The door creaks open so quietly I don’t notice until someone is sliding under the covers. My breath hitches as a warm body slots behind me, arms wrapping around my waist. The smell of frosting and flour. Tiffany.

“Shouldn’t you be—”

“I can go tomorrow,” she interrupts before I can finish asking. The part of me that’s not still angry at her feels guilty for making her break tradition. Though if there’s anything she and Angel have, it’s time.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers as she leans her chin on my shoulder, her breath hot against my cheek. My hands rest on top of hers, just above my belly button.

I nod instead of replying. I’ve never been able to stay angry at her for long. She and Solina have always had that effect on me. Exceptions to my cold heart.

“I just ...” She exhales sharply. I can’t tell if she’s at a loss for words or close to tears. “We can’t lose you too.” It comes out broken, less than a

whisper. I can't apologize for wanting to find answers for Solina, but I can for hurting her.

A tear rolls down her cheek, smeared against mine before I can reply. The knot in my stomach, the one that hardens with every day I hold everything in, keeps my own at bay. I don't say anything, not yet. Instead I hold her close, running my chilled fingertips along the length of her arm while the tears fall.

Her sniffles turn into a quiet laugh. "We'll need to do something about these." One hand comes up to tug at my earlobe. "Ready to get your ears pierced?"

Needles creep me out. Solina didn't really care, though. Sometimes when we went to visit Mami at the hospital, she'd sneak us little presents, toys or candy or a few crumpled dollar bills from the bottom of her purse. Solina saved up hers until Papi agreed to take her to a kiosk at the mall to get her ears pierced. Mami brushed her hair back the next time we saw her, grinning at the fake pearl earrings.

"Just like yours!" Solina exclaimed.

She wore them all the time. Until she turned sixteen and I got her real pearls, not the plastic kind they shell out at the mall for ten bucks. It took six weeks of double shifts and a loan from Dede to swing it. She cried when she hugged me, told me she'd never take them off. She wasn't wearing them the night she left. One last fuck-you before she died.

"You'll text me every day," Tiffany says, a command, not a suggestion. "Gather all the evidence you can find, and get out of there ASAP, all right?"

I don't say anything to that. The details of my half-formed plan are still murky, but I know what I'm going there to find. Proof of what I've known all along—that this was never an accident. But I don't know if I want the same ending Tiffany does. Me on the train back home with a folder full of proof to hand off to Cartagena, just for him to toss it into the back seat of his cruiser. I could hand him a knife with her blood on the blade, and he'd still choose to look the other way. He doesn't deserve to finish this—I do. Make whoever killed my sister pay for what they did, even if it means getting caught in the process.

Life in a cell is better than a life of never knowing what happened.

Last night's thrill comes rushing back—pain and anger colliding into a fire I can't put out. A fire that has my fingers twitching from the urge to

reach for my switchblade. To leave right now and hunt down whoever tore my life apart. But Tiffany would never let me leave if she knew that.

There aren't enough words to capture everything I want to say to her, about how it feels to finally have someone on my side. I don't trust my voice not to reveal everything I'm hiding, so I turn around in her arms. She gasps when I hug her. You could count on one hand the number of times we've hugged in the years we've known each other, none of them initiated by me.

"Promise you'll come back?" she whispers against my hair.

I'm not in the habit of making promises. I don't say things I don't mean or can't see through to the end. The last time I made a promise was when a woman in a boxy gray suit took us away from Papi to the first of a revolving door of homes, Solina's hand clammy and trembling in mine. I told her I would keep her safe.

"Promise," I reply.

Because I won't break another.

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## CHAPTER SIX

None of the brochures did Kingswood justice.

The winding single-car road up the cliff that Kingswood was carved into makes it feel like you're barreling toward something extraordinary. Like the slow, nerve-racking trek up to the crest of a roller coaster. It's harder and harder to breathe with every wrap around the cliff, going higher and higher until it feels like I could touch the clouds. I can't tell if it's me, or if everyone here has to work this hard for something as simple as breath. It hitches in my throat as the mostly empty shuttle finally reaches the peak of the cliff, black iron gates waiting for us.

A man in a crisp suit nods to our driver. The badge pinned to his chest says "Security," but I wouldn't have thought otherwise if he'd said he was a professor.

The guard taps his knuckles against my window twice before pulling the door open. "Student ID," he orders as light floods the back seat.

The shuttle's only other passenger, a boy with a crew cut and a glitzy designer watch, rushes out of the car. He spent the fifteen-minute ride from the train station barking orders at someone over the phone, digging into some unlucky bastard for screwing up his flights and forcing him to take the train instead. I'd get a kick out of how red in the face he got over being stuck in business class if it wasn't a stark reminder of how insufferable the people here will be.

I readjust the collar of my sweater—another one I don't remember buying for Solina. Lilac this time, and softer than anything you can find at Goodwill. Based on the label, it cost more than two weeks' worth of paychecks. She'd mentioned in passing that a friend had let her borrow some stuff for a party. On the cuff of the sleeve are three monogrammed

letters—PMW. The same three letters on the cuff of the cream sweater Solina wore the night she died. I’d shrugged them off as a designer label then, but when I spotted them again, and again, and again—almost a dozen sweaters I’d never seen before carefully hung up in the closet—I realized they may have been something else entirely. Initials.

With my shuttle-mate already barreling toward campus, I reach into the pocket of my blazer for Solina’s ID. The first official test. My first performance. The guard had barely glanced at Business Class Boy’s ID, but he takes his time with mine.

*Solina Grace Flores, Year 12, Kincaid Hall*

Leaning in with a scrutinizing scowl, the guard scans the details twice before examining my face. Something tells me his suspicions don’t have to do with whether I should be here, but whether I deserve to. With my weathered peacoat and torn stockings, I’ll never blend in the way I want to.

The guard finds whatever it is he’s looking for. “Best of luck this semester, Ms. Flores.”

I nod because I don’t trust my voice. Not yet. I’m still jagged and raw and you can hear it in the way I clip my words. Solina’s voice was warm and sweet like her morning coffee. It’ll take time to learn how to capture that.

Once the guard steps aside, the iron gates part. I take my first hesitant steps onto Kingswood’s grounds with a stomach full of knots and my nails digging into my palms.

To say the campus is intimidating wouldn’t do it justice either.

The campus is as gray as the sky. From the buildings to the benches to the students milling around, it’s as if the entire cliff top has been sapped of color. Even the ivy snaked across every building’s edges is a green so dark it’ll vanish after sunset. Gargoyles and cracked angels loom over the campus from sills and tower spires, their hollow stone eyes watching me no matter which way I turn.

After miles and miles of flat dirt roads whipping past the train’s window, barren of life except for the occasional coyote, the greenery here feels like an offense against nature. Nothing natural should be able to exist this high up, yet everywhere you turn there’s something new to ogle at. Like Kingswood tore everything lush and fruitful from the ground and kept it for itself.

Once the iron gates close behind me, I pull my jacket tighter around my torso, burying my face in my frayed yellow scarf. A handful of students are wandering across the grounds, most of them dragging suitcases behind them. Solina didn't leave me many breadcrumbs to follow. No social media accounts. No notes hidden beneath the mattress. With her phone lost somewhere in the river, I didn't even have her texts to go off of.

Having no evidence means everyone on campus is a suspect. Chills surge down my spine as I rush toward Kincaid Hall, checking over my shoulder every few steps. I'm surrounded by possibilities. And with every possibility comes a threat.

All the work I'd done studying the map of Kingswood I found online doesn't mean much once I'm on the campus itself. The winter is as bitter here as it is in Luster, but by the time I finally manage to track down Solina's dorm, I'm drenched in a layer of sweat.

The hall lights flicker as I dig through my pocket for Solina's key ring —one of the few things they were able to salvage from her body. I hesitate with my hand on the knob, unsure what to expect behind the locked door. Maybe her killer, perched on her bed waiting to see if I was ballsy enough to try this batshit stunt. Or, more likely, her roommate, Claudia.

But instead I find nothing. Silence, and dust floating in the midday sunlight. The room is neat, comfortable. Not exactly luxurious in comparison to the beauty of the campus itself, but twice the size of our bedroom in Luster. It doesn't take much to figure out which side of the room is Solina's. The flower-patterned bedspread we bought at a clearance sale. Posters from the backs of magazines we swiped at the grocery store. Rubber vending machine toys and vanilla-scented candles on the windowsill. Small pieces of a home she'd built for herself.

I run my fingers along the blush-pink flowers lining her comforter before curling up on top of it, burying my face in her pillow. The smell is stronger here. Eucalyptus shampoo, peach tea, and lavender perfume. The sheets are cold but lived-in—messily tucked together because Solina never had enough patience to make the bed properly. I know I can't linger. Last I checked, I had fifteen minutes to get to the senior assembly at the chapel across campus. That's probably down to ten by now.

But I stay there a little longer. Dig my nose into the pillow a little harder. Hold the smell and warmth and feel of her a little closer.

It shouldn't be possible for someone who's gone to still feel so alive.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

Kingswood doesn't boast itself as a place that values religion, but the chapel would make you think otherwise. Half-hidden behind a cluster of trees, it's one of the few buildings that isn't consumed by ivy—adorned with glossy rosebushes instead. Despite the array of candles lining the entrance, the interior of the chapel is bathed in darkness, the stained glass windows painting macabre shadows on the brown tile floor. I close my fingers around the worn handle of the switchblade as I scan the crowd. Everyone's too wrapped up in hugs and cheek kisses to notice the out-of-place girl huddled in the corner. Still, I search every face that glances my direction, looking for parted lips or the quirk of an eyebrow. A gasp, a scream, a lunge to knock me to the ground. Anything that'll point me to who I'm looking for.

Before I can finish surveying the crowd, a shadow stretches over me.

"Look who's still alive," a boy with golden-tanned skin and equally golden hair says as he wraps an arm around my shoulder.

I jolt in his hold, resisting the urge to kick him in the groin and press the switchblade to his jugular. He'd obviously meant his greeting as a joke, but it doesn't stop the words from ringing in my ears like a siren. There's no fear etched across his face, not even a hint of surprise. Just a smile bright enough to light up the darkest corner of the room, warmth radiating from him as he pulls me close.

"Seriously, though," he continues, his smile faltering as his brows furrow. "I texted you, like, six times."

Reluctantly, I let go of the switchblade to pull my hand out of my pocket, laying my hand stiffly at my side. Still close enough to reach for it if I need to.

“S-sorry,” I choke out, covering my surprise behind a cough. I straighten up before he can notice the slump of my shoulders. Solina always blamed my back problems on my hunch, not the twelve-hour shifts I worked every other day. My spine cracks unsettlingly as I roll my shoulders back and tilt up my chin, a protest against my struggled impersonation of Solina’s perfect posture. I’ve been slouched since the day I was born, but she never had any problems holding her head high. “I, uh—”

Before I can finish, a voice calls out to us from across the chapel.

When the boy turns to look over his shoulder, I sneak a better look at him. Smooth, blemish-free skin, carefully coifed hair. He’s wearing the same uniform as the rest of us, but something about the cut of his blazer stands out. Like every thread was chosen with him in mind.

It’s not until he turns back to me with a smirk that it hits me: I’ve seen him before.

Solina never had any social media of her own, but that didn’t stop her from stalking her classmates. While home for break, she’d stay curled up on the couch bouncing from one platform to the other and back. By the time I got back from work, she’d found dozens of posts to show me. Girls in silk dresses sipping champagne beside the Eiffel Tower, boys in thousand-dollar sunglasses gambling in Dubai. The kind of shit you see on those HBO shows about teenagers. Fast cars, first class, designer drugs.

She’d shown me him—the blond boy with the sharp jawline—more than once. Enough for him to stand out in the blur of rich-kid posts. Hunter.

“So, when’s the wedding?” I teased after she showed me a TikTok of him in a helicopter flying over the Maldives.

It wasn’t the first “marry rich, retire young” joke I’d made since I realized how wealthy her classmates were, but she’d clammed up like I accused her of arson.

“I don’t—I mean, he doesn’t—h-he doesn’t even know my name,” she sputtered out in chopped breaths. “I-I mean, he does. He just calls me Stella instead. Because it’s easier.”

“Chill, it was just a joke.” I held my hands up in peaceful surrender, but she still curled in on herself, shielding her phone from my view.

She never showed me another one of Hunter’s posts but didn’t stop looking at them. I watched over her shoulder as she dwelled on pictures of

him at a golf course and replayed clips of him manning a speedboat in Ibiza. For whatever reason, she decided to keep him to herself.

And I think I just figured out why.

Hunter's hand moves from my shoulder to the small of my waist, the antique class ring on his finger digging into me as a girl comes rushing over to us, iced coffee in one hand and vape pen in the other.

"The service here sucks," she says with a scowl before taking a drag from her pen. "What's the point of paying tuition if we can only ever get half a bar?"

The girl tosses her glossy, pin-straight black hair over her shoulder. Like Hunter, her light brown skin is startlingly blemish free. The freckles across her pronounced cheekbones look almost painted on, each mark perfectly spaced and sized to make her eyes seem bigger, her cheeks thinner. Beneath her blazer is an upscale version of the uniform—her skirt hemmed to coast just above her knees and her white button-down paired with a robin's-egg-blue V-neck sweater. The diamond studs in her ears glimmer when they catch the light, a perfect complement to the rose-gold hoop in her right nostril.

"It always craps out the first week back." Hunter hunches over until he's face-to-face with her, his hand never leaving my back. "And would it kill you to talk to your friends for more than five minutes?"

"Oh, *please*. Like you didn't spend twenty minutes picking out a caption for your little thirst trap this morning." The girl rolls her eyes to the back of her head and shoves Hunter with a ring-clad hand. My breath catches as the sleeve of her blazer pulls back enough for me to spot a set of initials monogrammed onto the cuff of her sweater.

PMW.

My heart pounds so hard and fast I don't realize I'm trembling until Hunter turns to look at me.

"You good?" he asks, giving my shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

I nod blankly, unable to keep my eyes off the girl in front of us. Just like Hunter, there's no flicker of shock or panic as she gives me a slow, searing once-over. If anything, all I can see is disdain.

"Sick of us already, huh?" she taunts, a cunning smirk tugging at the corner of her glossy lips.

Replies get caught in my throat as I struggle to find an answer to her impossible question. The holes in my plan appear all at once, and I've got about ten seconds before I let them drown me. All I have are glimpses of the life Solina had here—friends and crushes and inside jokes I'll never understand. I can straighten my posture, wear the right clothes, smile for once, but that'll only get me so far. Passing as her is one thing, being her is another.

"Maybe Stella's living a double life," Hunter teases, tightening his hold on my waist as he turns to look at me expectantly.

I stiffen in his grip.

Stella. He called me—*her*—Stella.

Solina never liked her name much. Neither did I, really. But our names were one of the few gifts from our parents that we got to keep, so we never complained. Even when teachers and doctors and social workers butchered Solina's first name like a piece of raw meat. If I had a dollar for every mispronunciation, maybe we wouldn't be here. But we loved the way our names fit together. Solina and Luna—the sun and the moon—always meant to be read together. Until we were torn apart.

And this guy can't even bother to get it right. Hunter knows her real name but chooses to call her something else. *Because it's easier*, she'd said, like it was an inconvenience. Swapped out for something that's easier to spell, or remember, or pronounce. Scraping away who she is and slapping something new on top—but our names were never just labels. They were a story. *Our* story.

I shake myself off and snap back to reality. The girl and Hunter share a confused glance when I slap on a smile as quickly as flicking a light switch—something unsaid passing between them before they turn back to me, waiting for an answer.

"I slipped on some ice and broke my phone. Wiped all my contacts," I explain, holding up my bandaged hand as proof. Tiffany had been smart enough to come up with an alibi for how I got so banged up. Injuries aren't unusual for me, but they are for Solina, who couldn't so much as lift a cardboard box without complaining.

The lower timbre of my voice betrays me. Solina's voice was light, melodic like a spring breeze. Mine is as harsh as the wind howling past the

chapel doors. “Sorry, cold,” I add, throwing in a cough hoping it’ll cover for the sudden raspy edge.

I reach into my pocket and hold up Tiffany’s parting gift—a brand-new iPhone in a hot-pink case—as proof. She’d insisted that I upgrade to the twenty-first century before leaving. No better way to call unnecessary attention to yourself than by walking around with a flip phone at a school for people who’re richer than God.

If the girl sees through my lie, she doesn’t let it show. With a sigh of vague annoyance, she swipes the phone out of my hand, holds it up to my face to unlock, and starts typing, all in one swift motion. “It’s about time you left the Stone Age.”

I swallow hard around a choked laugh. Shocker, Tiffany was right. Solina’s phone had only been a few generations behind the latest model. If I’d brought my real phone, they would’ve eaten me alive in seconds.

“You’re back in all the chats. You’re welcome.”

The girl—Poppy Washington, painted nails and sparkle emoji, according to the contact page she just created—hands me back my phone. A thrill runs through me—the letters *were* initials. I glance up at Poppy, expecting to see a girl so thoughtful she’d be willing to give away half her wardrobe to a friend. But as Hunter takes my hand in his, the look in her eyes is anything but friendly.

It was naïve of me to think Solina didn’t have friends, but she didn’t give me any impression that she did. All Tiffany’s prying for details about her “new hot rich friends” went unanswered the summer after her freshman year, usually with a shrug and a mumbled “I don’t really know them like that.” And that seemed to be true for the rest of her time at Kingswood. Name drops were reserved for teachers and the occasional reference to her roommate. The most she’d ever told me was that her classmates all seemed to know each other, despite coming from around the world. They’d met at conferences in Denver or competitions in New York, or spent their summers at the same college prep camp in the Poconos. The elite is a small circle. Everyone is bound to know each other, even from across the country.

Still, I can’t say this is the crowd I imagined she’d be part of. People who look more like wolves than friends.

“We’re gonna hit up the dining hall after this. You in?” Hunter asks me, squeezing our linked fingers.

Shaking off the heat of Poppy's glare, I give Hunter a half-there smile and a nod. Before I can flinch, he catches my chin between his thumb and index finger, tilting it up as he leans down to kiss me. My body goes straight as a rod, awkward and stiff in his grip as he pulls me in. His fingers are rough against the waistband of my skirt, his lips even rougher as he holds me so tight I tip slightly. Which just makes him hold on tighter.

The color in my cheeks trickles down to my collarbone as the room becomes unbearably hot. My eyes don't need to be open to know that everyone else's are on us. I can hear the snickers and whispers and click of a camera shutter. A knot forms in my stomach at the thought of whoever hurt Solina watching this stranger kiss me hungrily—laughing, taking pictures, waiting to strike now that they've seen me. It could even be the boy kissing the breath out of me, holding me tight because he knows I shouldn't be here at all. The urge to push Hunter off crawls up like bile, choking me until I can feel the world spinning beneath my feet.

A throat clearing finally breaks us apart. I sag against the marble pillar beside me, trembling with relief and heaving for breath as the room's attention shifts to the pulpit.

"If everyone could take their seats and keep their hands to themselves, we can get started," a balding man in a gray wool suit says into the pulpit microphone, eyeing us over his horn-rimmed glasses.

Hunter shoots the man an impish smile, one hand still on me as he waves back at him. "My bad, Mr. Hughes."

"*Dean Hughes, Mr. Sinclair.*"

Dean Hughes's reply earns him a hushed "oooh" from the crowd, but Hunter doesn't take the bait. He admits defeat with a dramatic bow before taking a seat in the nearest pew. He waits until Dean Hughes looks down at his notes to tug me down beside him, the lingering warmth of his touch stinging like an open wound.

"Get a room," Poppy scoffs as she squeezes in beside us, trapping me between her and Hunter. The heat between us feels as stifling as the kiss had.

Hunter leans across the pew to flick the side of her head. "Get a life," he whispers as Dean Hughes clears his throat again, then slings his arm across my shoulders.

“Seniors, it’s an honor to welcome you back for your final semester at Kingswood Academy.” Dean Hughes’s voice is loud enough to rattle the crucifix on the wall behind him. He pauses, blinking rapidly as he takes in the winces throughout the crowd before—thankfully—leaning away from the mic. “Your final weeks at Kingswood will be challenging, but I have no doubt that you’ll brave them in stride. You are lions.” He taps the lion at the center of the Kingswood crest pin on his lapel. “And you are capable of great and brilliant things.”

His expression hardens as he flips to a new page in the notes he’s keeping in front of him. “For anyone who may be tempted to seek out shortcuts throughout the semester”—the crowd breaks out into giggles at Dean Hughes’s word choice—“remember that such behavior is strictly prohibited. And punishments will not come down lightly.”

Despite his tone, Dean Hughes’s words don’t hold much weight, based on the snort Hunter lets out. Poppy doesn’t look fazed either, rolling her eyes before returning her attention to her phone.

While Dean Hughes drones on about class schedules and midterms, I peek over my shoulder at the pews behind us. An ocean of clean-cut blazers and bored, vacant stares. There’s something eerie about them. Maybe the lack of color in their cheeks—or the lack of color at all. With the exception of me and Poppy, everyone in our row is some gradient of a blond and blue-eyed mold.

Or maybe it’s because I know what one of them is really capable of.  
Great, brilliant, heartless things.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

We make it all the way to the dining hall before I realize I forgot the one thing that gets me in and out of every building on campus.

“You coming?” Hunter calls out over his shoulder as he taps his student ID on the scanner attached to the door.

The echo of my heart pounding in my ears has quickly become my soundtrack. I run my hands through my pockets even though I know there’s nothing to find. The memory of tossing the ID onto Solina’s bed before rushing out the door is seared into the forefront of my mind.

“Shit, forgot my ID,” I mumble, too frustrated with myself to remember that Solina hardly ever cursed.

Poppy stomps her foot from inside the hall, crossing her arms impatiently. “C’mon, the good stuff’s going to be gone.”

Hunter turns back to me with a sympathetic smile. “I can grab this one,” he offers, holding up his ID.

I shake my head, jumping at the chance to put some distance between us, even if it’s only for a few minutes. “It’s fine,” I reply, the blunt edge of my voice peeking through the cracks in my performance. “Save me a seat,” I tack on, the muscles in my cheeks aching as I give my best attempt at Solina’s signature smile.

The imitation feels cheap in comparison to her effortless confidence, but Hunter doesn’t see past it, leaning in to give me a (thankfully PG) parting kiss on the cheek.

Once he and Poppy are out of view, I dash back to Kincaid, desperate for a moment alone to collect myself. Halfway down the path, I look over my shoulder, making sure neither of them decided to trail after me. The coast is clear, but I wind up walking directly into something—someone.

“Shit,” I hiss as something warm trickles down my arm, nearly burning my skin. The person I walked into got the brunt of the damage, their uniform button-down almost completely drenched in what I realize now is coffee. Fresh coffee. As in, so fresh there’s steam rising off his soaked shirt.

“I’m so sorry,” I reply while searching my pockets for something to help mop up the spill.

The boy doesn’t say anything, shooting me a glare so red-hot it stops me in my tracks. It seems impossible for eyes like his, blue as the sky after a storm, to hold that kind of fire.

Before I can apologize again, he breaks the eye contact and wordlessly pushes past me, his shoulder colliding with mine so roughly it makes me wince. I’d been so stunned by the heat of his stare that I forgot to take a good look at him, commit his face to memory to know who to avoid. But maybe that’s how everyone at this school is. Plowing through the people who get in their way.

“Dick,” I mutter under my breath, and keep walking.

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Rushing up the three flights of stairs is my second big mistake. There’s no way I’ll get used to the trek, or the way Solina’s blazer itches like hell the second I start sweating. My skin is scratched raw by the time I finally get to the fourth floor, my chewed-up nails doing more damage than I thought. Unlocking the door, I toss the blazer onto the desk chair and bury my face in Solina’s comforter. For a second time, I inhale until my lungs ache, and the scent of her surrounds me like a fog. Holding that breath until the tension in my muscles finally starts to thaw.

Once my racing heart has calmed, I reach for the ID, groaning when I accidentally knock it off the bed instead. Dust clings to my damp skin as I crawl on my hands and knees beneath the bed. Abandoned papers and cardboard boxes litter the cramped space. After I’ve tucked the ID back into my pocket, I pull all the debris toward me. Solina’s not stupid enough to keep something worth hiding in a box under the bed, but anything I can find to help me understand her life here is worth searching. Better to get a good look while I can, before her roommate shows up. See if there’s anything worth bringing up to Hunter and Poppy. The calculus notes and ripped

stockings inside the box aren't all that interesting, but something I spot out of the corner of my eye is.

A large crack runs through the wood closest to the wall. The gap separating it from the next panel is just big enough to stick the edge of your finger into. Testing my theory, I reach out and gently pry the wood with the tips of my fingers. The shift is so subtle I wouldn't have noticed it if I wasn't looking for something to give—a gentle click, like a key locking into place.

I grab the switchblade out of my pocket, flicking it open and shoving the blade beneath the crack. All it takes is a slight push for the board to spring free, revealing a small, dark nook beneath the floor.

"Well played," I whisper, hoping she can hear me as I lean over the opening.

The excitement burns out as quickly as it was lit once I get a look inside the hole, dark except for a clear plastic baggie tucked so far down I almost miss it. Pulling the bag up, I drag my fingers along the dank, warped wood of the crevice, not pulling my hand out until I'm positive there's nothing else left to find.

After I've crawled out from under the bed, I set the baggie down, carefully prying it open for a closer look. There's not much to see. Just a dozen small peach-colored pills. No dust on the bag, so it hasn't been sitting down there for long.

I run through all the bottles in the medicine cabinet back home, trying to conjure up a memory of a peach pill on Solina's tongue, but come up empty.

*She always complained about headaches*, I tell myself as I pour the contents into the palm of my hand, running my fingers along them like I'll find answers in the numbers carved into each pill.

But who keeps pain medicine in a hole beneath their bed?

Flashes of Papi's eyes—red-rimmed with pupils the size of our tiny fists—echo through me as I tuck the bag into my pocket along with the switchblade. There's no way Solina could have seen what drugs can do to a person and chosen to go down that road too.

The thought is too heavy for me to linger on, my throat tightening with every second I hold on to it. *They're not hers, they're not hers, they're not hers*, I chant to myself as I shove the pills under the comforter. My skull

throbs, every emotion I've choked down for two weeks threatening to finally break free.

I press the heels of my palms into my eyes, pushing harder and harder until all of it fades—the memory of Papi, the pills, the thought of Solina playing with the kind of risk that ruined our lives—and all I can see is stars.

Minutes that feel like hours tick by slowly. The sky is darker when I finally look up from the cradle of my hands, but it was never that bright to begin with. A flicker of light in the window startles me back to attention, followed by the sound of footsteps and a startled gasp.

I whip around, hand on the switchblade in my pocket, ready to gut whoever came after me, but all I'm met with is a trembling girl surrounded by scattered papers.

She squeaks when I take a lunging step toward her, stopping myself before I can strike. She holds a hand to her chest as she struggles to catch her breath. "Sorry, I-I didn't expect to see anyone."

She looks familiar, but I don't put my finger on it until I kneel down to pick up one of the papers she dropped and realize all of it is sheet music.

Claudia Bustamante, Solina's roommate.

I know as much about Solina's roommates as I apparently do about the people she called friends: next to nothing. The pool for potential roommates was small. All the scholarship students are exiled to Kincaid Hall, the cheapest living accommodations on campus at a whopping ten grand a semester. According to Solina, unless you wanted to live a few feet away from someone you couldn't stand, you had to play nice. A task made even harder when scholarship students dropped like flies year after year, either because their grades slipped below the 3.0 minimum or because the pressure outweighed the promise of a successful future. Both Solina's freshman- and sophomore-year roommates left by the end of the year. Last year one even left midway through the semester after bombing a physics midterm, and her GPA along with it.

Claudia, as far as I know, played nice enough. And even if she didn't, it wasn't like Solina had many options to choose from. Only five of the original twenty scholarship kids from their class had actually made it to senior year. Still, Solina didn't seem too upset about landing with Claudia in the shuffle. A supposed cello prodigy from Spokane who spent more time at the concert hall than she did in her room. One of the last conversations

Solina and I had was about her—about how she spent so much time rehearsing for some huge senior showcase that Solina had hardly seen her all semester.

“I thought you weren’t coming back ...,” Claudia says with a note of shock, looking at me as though she’s trying to figure out if I’m really there. She takes me in slowly, lingering on my bandaged hand and the cut on my forehead.

“Well, I did ...,” I reply warily, shoving my hand into my pocket. So, someone here *does* know something. Why Solina might not have come back this semester. Before I can think of a way to prod for more details, she drops the binders in her arms and launches at me.

I’m halfway to pulling the switchblade out when she wraps her arms around me, my body stiff against hers as I slowly realize that she isn’t preparing to attack.

She’s hugging me.

I’m not used to this. Friendship. Affection. The warmth of a body pressed flush to mine. It takes several seconds for me to relax into her hold —so long I worry she’ll pull away and see me for who I really am, but she doesn’t. She just stays there, face pressed to my neck like she’s trying to breathe me in. Hesitantly, I try wrapping my arms around her too. Pulling her closer. Leaning into the faint scent of apricots clinging to the collar of her blazer.

“Sorry, I just ...” She pulls away seconds after my hands touch the small of her back, wiping at her rosy cheeks. Her eyes are focused on the ground, but I can still see the glossy sheen. The tears she’s fighting not to shed. It’s a look I’ve seen often, staring back at me in the mirror. She inhales deeply, like she’s trying to ground herself, before meeting my eyes again, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. “I’m just really happy you’re back.”

“Me too,” I reply without thinking. I’m not sure how close Solina and Claudia were, whether she’d be happy to see her roommate too, but it feels like the natural response. Not from Solina, but from me. Because it *does* feel good to see her—someone who doesn’t look like they’re hiding daggers behind their smile. Whose touch isn’t tight enough to bruise. Someone who might be a real friend.

Claudia's smile fades as she takes in the papers strewn across the room and out the open door. "Sorry about the mess," she says with a sheepish laugh.

While she scrambles across the floor, scooping up the delicate pages, I fully take her in. Bangs so long they ghost across her eyelashes. Chapped lips, red and scabbed where she must've bitten too hard. Nails chewed down to the beds, just like mine. She's not at all what I'd expect for a Kingswood student, from her wrinkled blazer and button-down shirt to the calluses on the tips of her fingers.

I shake myself off before she can catch me looking. Helping her track down her sheet music at least covers up the heat in my cheeks. I focus on collecting the ones that have flown out into the hallway, one of them stuck beneath the door to the room across from ours. The door opens a crack as I pull the page out from beneath it. My heart stutters as I peek in carefully, hoping to catch a glimpse of the other girls on Solina's floor, but there's nothing to find. Despite the names on the door, Izzy and Laura, the room is empty. Feeling brazen, I push the door farther open to get a better look. A handful of boxes sit on the right-side desk, but there's nothing else left but dust on the mattress covers.

Questions sit on the tip of my tongue, but I hold them. Solina would know what happened to the names on the door.

"Izzy dropped out. Over break. One of the guidance counselors was here earlier packing up her stuff. I guess she'll pick it up later," Claudia says from the doorway. When I turn to face her, she quickly shifts her attention to readjusting the stack of papers in her arms.

"Oh." I pause, unsure whether I should say more or less. My memory is shit, but I'm pretty sure Solina never mentioned an Izzy. And yet, they both went home with no intention of coming back. Dropping out isn't uncommon here, that I know for sure, but two girls who couldn't stand this place so badly they left just steps from the finish line? There's no way that's normal. Not without a reason.

And if Izzy dropped out over break ... what happened to Laura?

"That ... sucks," I say before I can think to keep my mouth shut. If I could kick myself in the ass, I would. Solina would have at least known how to have some type of grace around sensitive topics.

Claudia gives me a look that's neither judgmental nor shocked, but lingering. Holding my gaze with an intensity that makes my heart race.

"We're going to the dining hall in a few. If you want to come," I say, half out of desperation to change the topic before she notices how red my cheeks have gone just from the way she looks at me, and half because Solina was always the type to go above and beyond to make others feel welcome.

Claudia's shoulders lock as if I just asked her to go skydiving instead. Her grip on the stack of sheet music tightens until her knuckles whiten, stark against her light brown skin.

"I have to head to rehearsal." She holds up the bundle of papers, as if it should be common sense. Which, I realize, it is. If Solina hardly ever saw her in the room they shared together, there's no way they were casually hanging out at the dining hall either.

"Thank you, though," she says, so quietly I almost miss it.

"Maybe we can do lunch this week," I say before I can overthink it. They may not have been best friends, but they were on good enough terms for Claudia to look forward to seeing her. Sol was the social butterfly to my wallflower—inviting someone to lunch wouldn't have felt as painful as pulling teeth for her, as it does for me. And Claudia clearly knows something. Maybe not much, but enough to know that there was a chance Sol wouldn't be back this semester.

"To catch up about break?" I continue when Claudia still hasn't responded, praying I haven't already shot myself in the foot with the one person who might know why Solina was so afraid of this place.

My heart stutters when Claudia smiles. Subtle, but just wide enough for her dimples to appear. "I'd like that," she says, soft and sweet as a song. No wonder she's a musician—even her voice sounds like a melody.

Before I can meet her smile with one of my own, a chirp makes us both jump. She pulls her phone out of her pocket. A photo of her smiling with a woman who looks like a carbon copy of her and the word "Mama" light up the screen. Claudia gives me one last smile before answering it and rushing toward the stairwell, speaking what I assume is Tagalog, based on the bits I picked up from Dede's second wife. In a blink, she's gone, and I'm left alone in an empty room with nothing but silence, questions, and the fading smell of apricots.

When the door at the end of the hall clicks shut behind her, I snap into action. Locking the door behind me, I head straight for Claudia's side of the room. I don't have much time—Hunter and Poppy are probably wrapping up with dinner by now—but I don't know when I'll have a guaranteed window like this again. Happy to see me or not, Claudia could be as guilty as anyone else here.

There's nothing tucked beneath her mattress or tangled in the sheets of her unmade bed. No secret cubbies hidden in cracks in the wood floor. No bloody knives stashed in the bins of torn jeans and snapped cello strings. No little peach pills in the drawers of her nightstand.

Her desk isn't much help either—a mess of barely legible notes, tea packets, and sheet music. Nothing that tells me anything I didn't already know. A photo sits on the edge of her desk of the same woman from the photo on her phone, her mom, pressing a kiss to her cheek in front of the Kingswood gates. Claudia's cheeks are fuller, her smile as radiant as the sun as she beams proudly at the camera, dimples on full display. Her uniform is freshly pressed, the white button-down so crisp it could've come fresh out of the box. A pin attached to her lapel reads "Cello from the Other Side" written in cursive on banners wrapped around an illustration of a hot-pink cello. This must've been her first day.

How could so much change in so little time?

Wedged in the corner of the frame is a ticket stub, with a Post-it attached. *Merry early Christmas nene* is written in Sharpie. I lift up the note to glance at the ticket itself. A performance by the Spokane Symphony on December 20.

December 20. The day Solina died. An alibi.

Every part of me trembles as I scan the ticket a second, third, and fourth time to be sure that the date is correct. A buzz in my pocket zaps all the excitement from the moment. A text from Poppy.

sooooooo are you ever coming back?? or did you ditch us already????

I groan at the thought of trekking all the way back across campus to the dining hall, but quickly tap out a reply assuring her that I just ran into my roommate and am heading out now. As much as being around them sets me

on edge, I can't waste a chance to talk to the people Solina was probably closest to, especially somewhere as public as the dining hall.

My step is lighter, though, as I grab my coat and head for the door. The ticket isn't much, but it's progress. One step closer to putting the puzzle together. And I'd be lying if I said I wasn't relieved that Claudia was somewhere in Spokane with her mom instead of on the edge of Green Hills Park that night.

That the one kind smile I've seen since I got here might be one I can trust.

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## CHAPTER NINE

Calling the Kingswood dining hall massive would be an understatement. The entryway alone is big enough to house hundreds. The hall itself could hold five times that. It's easy to get lost in the sea of blazers, looking for blond hair and green eyes in a blond-hair-and-blue-eyes haystack.

Instead, Hunter finds me.

"Took you long enough," he says as his hands find what I'm learning is his favorite spot—the small of my back. "Good stuff's mostly gone, but we can grab you something."

As much as his touch makes me squirm, it's easier to navigate the room with him at my side. Crowds part like the sea for us as Hunter guides me to an alcove off the main dining area. Kingswood's castle-esque glitz melts away as we enter the cafeteria portion of the room. No more polished wood tables and crystal chandeliers. It's all mid-century modern, the type of black-and-gold marble countertops Solina would drool over on those mind-numbing home renovation shows. These aren't cheap tack-on stickers or hasty get-it-done-before-production-wraps jobs, though. My reflection gawks back at me from platinum and steel surfaces—so clean they make the diner look about as sanitary as a landfill.

"Skip the sushi. They're out of the bluefin tuna, not worth the line." Hunter pushes a plate into my hands without looking at me, the porcelain so warm it stings my chilled palms. "Brisket was pretty decent today. Apparently the new head chef is some barbecue legend from Austin."

Hunter's voice fades away as I finally take in the spread. Polished trays sit on every surface, stuffed to the brim with more food than I've ever seen in one place. A casserole tray of scalloped potatoes; tins of pecan, apple, and blueberry pies; carving boards of pork and turkey; and stacks of

simmering ribs. A sushi chef in the opposite corner. Ground beef, sautéed veggies, and freshly pressed tortillas in another. Enough smells and pops and sizzles to make my knees weak. If this is considered slim pickings, a full spread must be enough to feed all of Luster two times over. No wonder Solina had the nerve to be picky whenever she was home. She'd gotten used to the luxury of options.

Hunter's review of the quiche lorraine cuts off when I lunge at the nearest platter, piling fried chicken, greens, and corn on my plate before moving on to the "decent" brisket. My stomach rumbles as I take it all in. I hadn't realized how hungry I was, how hungry I always am, until now. He smirks, watching me grab another plate when the first one isn't enough. He hovers beside me like a guard dog, finally giving up on keeping a hand on me as I dart from one end of the room to another. I've never gone hungry, but I've never had excess, and I don't have enough pride to turn down my one chance at it.

Not when this could be my first and last night at Kingswood. Either because Solina's killer finds me and slits my throat or because I cut theirs first.

"Geez," Poppy exclaims when Hunter and I return to our table—me holding two plates, him holding the third I couldn't juggle. "Did your mom forget to feed you?"

Poppy snorts around the rim of her mug of tea as we sit down opposite her. The look in her eyes should sting, tear me down a rung or two, but I'm long past giving a shit what other people think about me. Instead, my stomach drops—my appetite vanishing as I realize I've screwed up again already. Solina was a picky eater. She never would've piled her plates high with three different types of meat.

"I couldn't keep much down when I was si—"

"Hey, Pops?" Hunter cuts me off, his voice light and teasing as he drapes his arm around my shoulders.

You could see the spark in Poppy's eyes from the NASA space station. Her smug smirk turns sweet when she whips around to look at him, forgetting me like the untouched salad on her plate. "Yeah?"

Hunter leans in until he's barely a breath away from her. It'd feel uncomfortably intimate if his arm wasn't still on me, keeping me tethered to whatever game they're playing.

“How about you shut the fuck up?”

This isn’t like the teasing in the chapel. It sucks the air right out of Poppy, her body deflating like a balloon. Her cheeks pale as she leans back in her seat. With one sentence Hunter bled her dry of all the confidence I saw a minute ago. From wearing it like perfume to hiding behind her hand from two people she should consider friends.

I don’t need to look at Hunter to know he’s glaring right through her. I can feel it in the heat radiating off him, in the way his arm tightens around me.

He can break people without even touching them.

“Sorry,” Poppy mumbles. It’s unclear whether the apology is for me or for him.

The silence doesn’t sit for long. Hunter nudges his hand against my shoulder, gesturing to my untouched feast. “Don’t let it get cold,” he says, the sharp edge of his tone betraying the sweetness of his smile.

Quickly, I take a bite of chicken despite my fading appetite. Before Hunter can decide I’m not following orders either.

The food is so rich it sends a fresh wave of shock through me. Shock that they get to eat like kings on the regular, that Solina never told me this was what her life was like here, and that I’m so easily distracted from what just happened.

“How *is* your mom?” Hunter asks, slipping back into the charming, friendly skin he wore when he first found me in the chapel. If he can go from pleasant to vicious in the blink of an eye, he’d have no problem hiding something like surprise at seeing the girl he left for dead show up on campus.

My mind whirrs with theories and possibilities, exerting so much effort trying to figure out how all these new pieces fit together that I don’t even realize what he’s just asked me.

“My … mom?”

Has been dead since I was eleven.

A wave of panic washes over me. What if it’s a threat, disguised as something well-meaning? A warning that he knows exactly who I am.

His smile doesn’t slip when he replies, “Yeah, wasn’t she dealing with that whole thing with the school board? About the lunch program?”

He says it with such casual sincerity. Either he's on his way to an Academy Award or he's not just doing this to screw with me.

Which means ... Solina told him about her. Not our reality, but what we once were. Not quite the truth. Not quite a lie.

Mami was a teacher. A good one. The kind kids remembered years later. We only visited her classroom a few times, but I remember the art on the walls. Portraits of her by her students, calling her the nicest lady in all of Glendale Elementary. It seemed impossible for her heart to be big enough to love me and Solina and Papi and still have enough room left for all her students. But she did, remembering everyone's birthday and favorite type of candy and what was bothering them that week and how to make them feel better. She kissed a hundred cuts and gave a thousand hugs, and I knew I couldn't believe in God when someone as loved as her was taken away so soon.

The dinner table wasn't a place for work, but Mami only broke that rule when it came to the school board. All ten years of her teaching career, she'd rallied to expand the county's free lunch program. Thanks to budget cuts and bureaucratic bullshit, the bar for entry was so high hardly anyone qualified. She'd watched dozens of her students—almost all of them Black and brown—trade favors and dares for chicken nuggets and ham sandwiches. If she could've, she would have fed them all herself, with the same love and care that she fed us. With every lunch packed exactly the way we liked it: crusts cut off, with a kiss on a Post-it note in case we missed her.

I'd like to think that after she passed, after they saw Papi fade away and us disappear, that the school board finally made all those changes she rallied for year after year. But all the hope left in me was stamped out when Solina washed up dead on the riverbank.

"She got some signatures from other teachers in the county and backing from the principal, but it doesn't look like the Board of Ed will budge," I say, reciting from memory the last conversation we'd had with her about it. Two weeks before they found the tumors on her lungs. Three months before we lost her.

I'd be lying if I said I never wanted to pretend our lives were different, that we had parents waiting for us at home. Friends. Trips to the mall. Hobbies and interests instead of minimum wage jobs and bills to pay. But

living in memories that feel like fantasy won't get me through the day. The truth does, and it can't be ignored.

I can't blame Solina for wanting to pretend she was someone she wasn't. Not when I'm wearing her clothes and sleeping in her bed. That doesn't stop the truth from hurting like a bitch, though. Our lives were never perfect, but we always had each other. For me, that was enough.

For Solina, guess not.

"I'm sorry, babe." Hunter takes the opportunity to give me a consolation kiss on the forehead. His hand finally loosens around my shoulder, running along the top of my arm instead. "That's so fucked up."

It is fucked up, it's beyond fucked up. Tonight that barbecue legend from Austin will scrape whatever's left into the trash, while people like Mami die fighting for a kid to get a sandwich worth less than a dollar. Tonight I'll take off this uniform, this disguise, and go back to being a piece of the story Solina tried to hide.

Bitterness swells inside me. I spent three years working to give her the life she deserved just for her to make up a new one once she was here. I gave up my life, my story, only to be erased from hers. I risked everything to come here, put my goddamn life on the line, to prove to her that I *did* care, just to find out that she didn't.

I shovel a forkful of potato into my mouth. It tastes like ash.

A boy with tangled brown hair and a scowl joins our table, throwing his bag onto the bench beside Poppy and stealing a cherry tomato off her plate without a word.

"Excuse you." Poppy slaps his arm hard enough to make him drop the tomato back onto the plate. "Get your own."

My heart stutters in my chest as the boy brushes his hair out of his face long enough for me to catch a glimpse of his eyes, still packing the same punch as when I saw them on the path back to Kincaid. If he notices me, he doesn't show it. But he *does* look pissed as he shrugs out of his coffee-stained trench coat.

"Did you see how long the line is?" The boy gestures to the group of students snaking through the dining hall and out the door. The same line Hunter and I breezed past without protest.

Hunter shrugs, pulling Poppy's plate toward him. "Just go to the front, no one gives a shit." Poppy doesn't say a word when he pops the abandoned

tomato into his mouth.

The boy shoots Hunter a dirty look. Taking a closer look at him, it's clear his hair isn't the only thing that's disheveled. Like Claudia, his uniform stands out in its messiness. And like me, it doesn't fit quite right. From the too-long sleeves of his blazer to the stained collar of his button-down, he's as worn as the dark circles beneath his eyes.

Unlike us, there's a hint of luxury beneath the mess. A Cartier watch with a crack through the face. The name of an Italian designer etched across his leather messenger bag in delicate gold thread. Ice-blue eyes with a red-hot glare. Luxury so worn it looks secondhand. A boy made of contradictions.

Finally, he notices me. A blink-and-you'll-miss-it tug at the corner of his lips—his already deep scowl twitching even lower.

Hunter holds up his hands in surrender, reining in the boy's attention. "Right, my bad. I forgot Saint Gabe Hughes decided to have morals."

My ears perk. What're the odds Saint Hughes and Dean Hughes are related? At a place like this, probably high.

"Morals can get you places." Gabe pulls a stack of textbooks from his bag and drops them on the table with a *thud* that echoes through the hall. "You should try them sometime."

Poppy, who looks to be back to her usual self, wrinkles her nose at the cloud of dust that puffs off the stack. "What kind of scholarship is this?" She runs the tip of her acrylic index finger along the spine of a chemistry textbook. "The Einstein Reincarnate Foundation?"

Gabe rolls his eyes as he cracks the book at the top of the stack open. "I know this might be a foreign concept to you two, but you need to study to get scholarships."

Hunter scoffs, flipping open one of Gabe's notebooks and mindlessly thumbing through it. "Wasn't the last Hightower Fellow the guy who ran his dad's yacht into a restaurant?"

The mention of the Hightower grabs my attention. I lean in, practically on the edge of my seat. There's no proof that Solina was top of the list for the fellowship, but with her grades she had to be on their radar. It could be a motive. Get rid of the competition.

"They're doing things different this year," Gabe mumbles, never taking his eyes off the chemistry textbook. "Actually basing it on merit and grades

and shit like that.”

Solina didn’t have high hopes for the fellowship. According to her it usually went to kids whose dads rubbed elbows with Ed Hightower on the putting green instead of those with “exceptional academics” like their mission statement claimed. There’s no telling if she listened to all my nagging and filled out an application like I told her, but if Gabe’s right, I know it would’ve been hers.

“Gross,” Poppy exclaims, shoving the sleeve of Gabe’s coat away from her like it’s dripping toxic waste instead of overpriced bean water. “What *is* that?”

Gabe bristles at the sudden attention on his coat, my eyes immediately finding the rip in the seam just above the spill. Couple more wears and it’ll be leaking goose feathers or whatever posh people stuff their coats with.

“Someone bumped into me,” he says through gritted teeth, pointedly glaring at a spot over my shoulder.

Like Poppy moments earlier, I can feel myself going numb at the harshness of his tone, unnerved by the intensity in his eyes as he fixates on something meant to take my place. I chance a peek at Hunter out of the corner of my eye, watching him pick at my mostly untouched mashed potatoes. Does he have Gabe under his spell too? Slapping down anyone who dares to mess with me because I’m his to control? I don’t know much about Gabe beyond his bad attitude and worn-down clothes, but he doesn’t strike me as the type to let others tell him what to do.

And if Hunter *does* have that kind of power—what else could he convince people to do?

A rumble cuts through the silence. Gabe ducks his head sheepishly, one hand coming down to his growling stomach while refocusing his attention on the equations in front of him.

“Dude, just go get some food. The Hightowers aren’t going to blacklist you because you jumped the line to get a bagel,” Hunter says with a laugh, forcibly slamming Gabe’s textbook shut. Gabe only just manages to pull his hand out of the book in time not to get crushed, dust floating through the air like snow.

Gabe shakes his head and opens his mouth to protest, but stops himself when I nudge one of my three plates toward him. He glances down at the food for half a second before turning back to me with a perplexed look.

“There’s no way I’ll be able to finish. I should’ve paced myself instead of letting my stomach do the talking.”

Maybe I don’t know everything about my sister, but I know she hated when people didn’t like her. She could spend hours obsessing over why someone suddenly stopped talking to her, like another person’s brain is something you can puzzle through like a math problem. One of our biggest differences. I can’t remember a time when I cared whether people liked me.

As much as it makes me want to bite down until I scream, I play nice. I ask for forgiveness. I do what Solina would have done.

My nervous laugh dies in my throat when Gabe’s eyes darken from deep-sea blue to almost pitch-black—the color stark against his pale skin. Poppy bites her lip, nudging her knee against Gabe’s until it snaps him out of whatever trance my suggestion put him under.

I rack my brain for any times Solina may have mentioned a Gabe, or a rival, or anyone who even matches his description, but come up empty. When she stopped telling me about the few friends she did have, I assumed it was because they dropped out. But why didn’t I think to question it when she stopped? When she came home begging me not to make her go back? How could I go this long without realizing I barely knew anything about her life outside of Luster?

Kingswood Solina is a blank slate, but all the glimpses I’ve seen so far add up to a picture I can’t process. My sister was kind. Brilliant. Good in all the ways that mattered.

So why the hell do Poppy and Gabe look at her like they want to sink their claws into her?

Gabe pulls the plate over and mumbles a “Thanks” so quiet it’s almost lost in the dining hall chatter. Hunter bristles beside me, looking as though he’s going to say something, when Poppy speaks up first.

“Stella! Since when do you have a tattoo?” She tugs gently on my arm, leaving the inside of my wrist on display. The sunset stands out against the paler underside of my wrist, veins and healed-over scars from working at the diner twisting around the small, intimate design.

Another mistake. I should’ve thought of this earlier, covered it up before anyone could notice, and now it’s too late to pull my sleeve down over my wrist. Panic spikes, but it fades quickly as I realize Poppy’s surprise means they hadn’t already seen Solina’s. I got lucky this time.

“Oh. I-I got it with my sister over the summer.” My cheeks flush as if she caught me in a lie, but for once it’s the truth.

“Didn’t think you had it in you.” Poppy runs her thumb along my wrist with a smirk.

Hunter tightens his grip on me. “My girl’s full of surprises.”

Focusing on smiling helps me push away the thought of Solina hiding the piece of me she always had with her. Keeping the tattoo hidden behind a sleeve or a watch. It doesn’t hurt—not if I don’t let it. And if there’s one thing I know, it’s how to push pain down, swallow it whole, and keep moving forward.

“Speaking of your sister,” Poppy interrupts, leaning toward me. “Still think you can send her my UCLA essays?”

“Yeah, sure, totally.” My staccato replies are enough to satisfy Poppy and give me time to wonder why the hell she’d want to send a college essay to someone who dropped out of tenth grade.

An answer comes without much prying.

“Sweet, thanks,” Poppy says as she settles back into her seat and starts to gather her things. “It’s so freaking annoying. They make you jump through, like, a million hoops just to submit *one* thing. It’s a miracle she didn’t blow her brains out when she applied.”

With her designer bag back on her shoulder, Poppy blows us a kiss and heads off, leaving me to pick up the pieces of the bomb she doesn’t know she just dropped.

“I’m gonna head out too. Need me to walk you back?” Hunter prods my shoulder with his knuckle.

All I can do is shake my head and give him a weak smile, not trusting my voice not to crack. I shovel a bite of steak into my mouth to avoid answering, happily sitting in silence while Hunter pesters Gabe about a party tomorrow night. I’ve already made up my mind to leave too. Not with Hunter, but on my own once enough time has passed. No way I’m sitting here alone with Gabe.

I’d always wondered how much Solina told her friends about us, about *me*. Whether she kept the details to herself, or if she wore them like a badge of honor. We’d been through too much not to feel some kind of pride for making it out alive. Or, well … one of us did.

And she *had* told them about me. But not the sister who worked twelve-hour shifts to pay for her uniforms. The sister who stayed up until 5:00 a.m. when she had a fever last year. The sister who gave everything to her because it was all I had left to give.

Our story has never been easy to tell, but at least I was always willing to tell it.

Shame and guilt and rage pulse through me like adrenaline, nestled so deep I don't know that I'll ever be able to shake it off. I came here to find the truth about what happened to Solina, but it was stupid to think I wouldn't uncover things she never wanted me to find along the way. It makes me sick. It makes me angry. It makes me want to scream.

All because my sister may have been a person I don't understand.

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## CHAPTER TEN

Getting up at 7:00 a.m. isn't a problem. Most days I'm up before five so that I don't have to scramble to make it to the diner by six. The problem is the lump that settles in the pit of my stomach when I pick up Solina's notebooks and realize that I don't just have to be sweet like her, but brilliant too.

A part of me had hoped this would be open-and-shut. The ghost of a dead girl returns to campus, and her killer would have the shock written all over them. Gabe didn't say a word to me after Hunter left, and he didn't come skulking after me when I headed back to Kincaid alone. Poppy wasn't hiding beneath my bed, waiting to pounce once I was asleep. Hunter texted me good night without any suggestions that we meet up alone. I'd forgotten that, wealth and privilege aside, everyone is here for a reason. The kids here are smart. Cunning. If whoever hurt Solina is here, they won't be stupid enough to get caught that easy.

Which means it's only a matter of time before they make their move.

Keeping myself safe means keeping a low profile. On the off chance whoever I'm looking for wasn't in Solina's inner circle, drawing extra attention to myself just puts a target on my back. Flunking out of all her classes the first week back is like wearing a blinking neon-red sign shouting, "BEHOLD KINGSWOOD'S LATEST FAILURE."

Finding the building where most of the senior-level classes are held is my first test, and I make it by the skin of my teeth. It wouldn't have been such a close call if I hadn't spent fifteen minutes studying her schedule in confusion. She told us she had to head back to campus early for an apprenticeship—but there was no biology class listed anywhere on the page. No hint of the professor whose name I vaguely remembered.

I tell myself I must've heard her wrong as I shove the schedule to the bottom of my backpack. Misremembered the details. Chemistry instead of biology, with someone named Mrs. Sutherland. I repeat it to myself as I head to my first class of the day, over and over until the words lose meaning. Even in the jumble, they still feel like a lie.

By the time I make it to first period, I'm already exhausted. Mr. Benjamin, a graying middle-aged man who clearly takes his job way too seriously, based on the loafers and fresh-pressed suit he's wearing to lecture teenagers, glares at me when I stumble into Advanced American Literature seconds before the final bell.

"Thank you for gracing us with such a dramatic entrance, Ms. Flores."

There's a smattering of giggles as I take the last available seat, mercifully in the back of the room. Claudia gives me a shy smile as I walk past her. I'd been asleep when she got back from rehearsal last night, almost giving her a heart attack when I leaped out of bed after the sound of the door clicking shut startled me awake. I'd excused myself to the bathroom, mumbling something about a nightmare and hoping she wouldn't see right through me. She was in bed once I got back. By morning she was already up and gone, so quiet it's like living with a ghost.

Still, it's nice to see a friendly face. Meanwhile, Poppy turns around in her seat to give me a wave that feels more taunting than welcoming.

One small plus is Hunter isn't in this class. I don't think I could handle his constant need to touch me on top of first-day nerves. Chances are I'd chuck up my breakfast granola bar onto his blazer before third period.

"And since Ms. Flores is so eager this morning, why don't we let her start off today's discussion?"

My heart plummets into my stomach. I would've rather it stopped instead—anything to save me from the spotlight. Everyone whips around in their seats, dozens of eyes on me as my hands shake where they're hidden in my lap. Solina once said Kingswood kids could smell fear. I must be mouthwatering.

"I—um ... I didn't, I-I mean—"

"Are you saying you *didn't* do the assigned reading over break?"

I don't even have a clue what the assignment was. All that focus on Solina's friends and patterns, and I completely forgot to pay attention to the one thing she probably spent the most time on: homework.

Memories of the past few weeks come rushing back to mind, the same moments I've replayed hundreds of times, looking for the signs I'd missed. Solina huddled in a booth at the diner with a worn paperback. That Burger King receipt. A story I told myself I'd finish someday.

How the hell did I forget that book?

"I did, I just ... forgot my copy in my room," I lie through my teeth. Maybe I can cobble together an answer out of the snippets of conversation we had. Passages she read to me while I bussed tables. All I can remember is that shit was too cryptic. Why can't writers just say what they want to say?

A hushed murmur breaks out among the class, silenced by the *thwack* of Mr. Benjamin's ruler against the chalkboard. If the attention wasn't stifling enough to kill me, the look in his eyes would.

"Then in that case, why don't you give us your thoughts on the parallels Steinbeck draws in *Grapes of Wrath* between selfishness and altruism?"

I don't even know what "altruism" means, let alone how it relates to a book I've never read.

Claudia's hand whips into the air, waving until she's practically lifting herself out of her seat. Poppy tries and fails to hide a snort behind her hand.

"Thank you, Ms. Bustamante, but I asked Ms. Flores to answer the question," Mr. Benjamin replies without even looking at Claudia.

Her hand drops back to her side with a *thunk*. She turns around to give me a sympathetic frown. It may not have worked, but it at least took the attention off me for a few seconds.

Coming up with an answer feels impossible. Bolting isn't an option. So, I go with the safest choice.

I say nothing.

Mr. Benjamin grins like he just hit the jackpot. "And I'd heard such good things about you, Ms. Flores," he sneers, his upper lip twitching like he's holding back a cackle. "Disappointing."

Something breaks inside me. The thought that this—disappointment—will be his last memory of Solina, is a punch to the gut. Solina didn't have much to leave behind, but we'll always have her memory. I don't know who Kingswood thought she was, but it can't be this. Someone who doesn't

care. Someone too scared to hold their head up high. Someone who has never felt like they're enough.

The snickers from my classmates die down, replaced by a quiet terror as the takedown spooks everyone into pulling their copies of *Grapes of Wrath* out of their bags. Swallowing hard, I grab my notebook and focus on the drone of Mr. Benjamin's voice and tell myself that this is the kind of moment everyone will forget.

They do, for the most part, by the time the bell rings. People file past me without a word, too distracted by their phones and each other to remember my slipup at the beginning of class. Even Mr. Benjamin doesn't bother to make one last snide remark as I leave the room.

"I'm sorry," Claudia says the moment I'm out of earshot of Mr. Benjamin.

I jolt, holding a hand to my chest to calm my racing heart, but all it does is kick into double speed when I meet her eyes.

"It's my fault for forgetting about the reading," I reply with a shrug. Solina would never forget an assignment, but maybe no one here was close enough to her to know. Or to care. "Thanks for trying to save me," I add with a shy smile of my own. Small as it might be, it's comforting knowing there's at least one person here who doesn't want me to crash and burn.

"Of course." Claudia's cheeks flush as she glances over her shoulder at where Mr. Benjamin is flipping through a stack of papers before turning back and leaning in closer to me. "Everyone says he's a huge asshole," she whispers, and I try to ignore the way my skin prickles at the feeling of her breath against me.

"Looks like everyone wasn't lying," I reply with an eye roll, not caring if Solina wouldn't call her professor anything less than lovely. The guy's a dick. We can call it like it is.

Claudia bites back a laugh, tossing one last glance at Mr. Benjamin to make sure he didn't overhear us. The smile she gives me as she backs away is less sheepish than before. Wide enough for me to see her dimples. She takes another step back, right into the path of the sunlight streaming in through a nearby window. Bathed in golden morning light, flecks of dust dancing in the space around her, she looks less like a girl and more like a work of art.

“Good luck today,” she calls out, and I fight the urge to follow her. To chase the feeling bubbling inside me—fizzy and warm and intoxicating. And so much better than tequila.

“You too,” I reply moments before she walks away, even though she probably doesn’t need it.

But I sure as hell do.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

My first few classes aren't any better, but thankfully not any worse either. Calculus is more straightforward. No winter break assignment, but we're hit with a stack of worksheets as thick as my wrist the second we're seated. The teacher, a stout middle-aged woman with a heavy Russian accent, tells us we'll need to hand in the entire packet by Monday. Advanced Spanish II is the only place I'm able to get my bearings. I don't know shit about grammar, but I know the language like I know how to ride a bike. Even if it's been a minute since I last spoke it, it always comes rushing back.

I brace myself during chemistry, waiting for Mrs. Sutherland to ask why Solina never showed up for her apprenticeship as planned, but she doesn't so much as glance up at me when she calls roll. No other teachers approach me in the halls with concern, wondering where I was. Another lie —this time to my face. It doesn't hurt so much as throw me off. What did Solina gain from making up an apprenticeship? I never would've known the difference. I didn't have eyes on her once she left Luster.

Unless there was a reason she needed to get back here early. And another that made her decide not to.

By the lunch bell, I'm drained but relieved that I finally get a break. The day is only half over, and I already have a shot against me. Last month I'd called bullshit on Kingswood starting their semester on a Friday. With tuition prices as high as theirs, they shouldn't be allowed to get away with one-day school weeks. But, today, I'm grateful. If I can barely make it through a day, how am I going to make it through a week?

Tiffany doesn't take twenty-four-hour radio silence well. Our text thread is a one-sided manifesto that's kept my phone buzzing every hour since I woke up.

did you get there okay?

find anything?

helooooooooooooooooooo?

if youre ignoring me I swear to god lu

bitch HELLO you could be dead right now and I wouldn't even know

im sorry for calling you a bitch

especially if youre dead

(please don't be dead)

Once the lunch bell rings, I finally text her back.

Not dead

While everyone races out of the room, I snap a picture of the top page of my Calculus packet and send that too.

Think you could answer these?

Three gray bubbles appear almost instantly.

seriously

you ghost me for a whole day

got me thinking you might be dead

JUST TO POP UP AND ASK ME TO DO YOUR HOMEWORK FOR YOU????

I give it thirty seconds. A new text appears.

ill send you answers tonight

For once, the theatrics are welcome. I'd take Tiffany's drama over whatever spell the kids here are under any day. No wonder Solina always came home with bags under her eyes. It's practically part of the uniform.

The classroom has emptied out by the time I toss my phone into my bag. A woman in a muted sweater and pencil skirt hovers by the door, biting her nail and shifting from foot to foot. I hurry out to give her the room, but she steps into my path as soon as I'm close enough for her to whisper.

"Solina," she says, and my heart leaps at someone finally calling me—*her*—by the right name. "I was hoping you might have a couple minutes for a check-in?"

Her voice is gentle but hesitant. Not afraid but ... concerned.

Everyone here is a stranger, but there's a kindness to her. Unlike the other adults here, her dark brown skin isn't cracked with wrinkles, despite the gray streaks in her neat bun. When her eyes meet mine, I don't flinch and brace to hold my ground like I had with Mr. Benjamin.

"Yeah. Sure."

She nods, giving me a tight-lipped but earnest smile before turning on her heels. I follow her down the hall and up two flights of stairs to a floor that seems detached from the rest of the building. The polished wood banisters lead to a dull gray corridor, its walls missing the portraits of past Kingswood deans or paintings of the grounds through the years. All they have in the way of décor is a water cooler with a busted top, the plastic warped like it got bashed in with a baseball bat. A redundant Out of Order sign hangs from the dented plastic, collecting dust. Guess it won't be back in order anytime soon.

The warm glow from the lower floors' lamps and occasional chandeliers is replaced by harsh fluorescent lighting. The same kind that always flickers in the diner's bathroom, no matter how many times we replace the bulb. A simple bronze plaque at the base of the stairs deems this the Wellness Wing.

Nothing about this says "wellness" to me.

"I know things must be busy with all the first-day chaos, but I promise this'll be quick," the woman says as she ushers me into the room. Charlisa Harold, according to the nameplate at the edge of her cluttered desk.

Three framed diplomas sit on the wall behind her chair. A bachelor and a master's in social work. A second master's in psychology. A younger, less gray version of her smiles up at me from the photo on her desk, holding on to a woman who must be her wife with one hand and cradling a chunky tabby cat with the other.

It feels familiar. The illusion of warmth and openness. They want me to think this is someone I can trust. But I've already made that mistake once.

Mrs. Sanchez's office at my old middle school felt the same way. Diplomas lining the walls. Pictures of her dog snuggled in a basket, or her two-year-old dressed up as a lobster. I was never an amazing student, but she was the only person at that school who made me feel like they weren't disappointed I wasn't as bright as Solina. I had my talents, she said. I'm still figuring out what those are.

I didn't mean to tell her. When she pulled me into her office after Mami died to ask me how I was adjusting, I told her the truth. That it was hard, but Papi had it harder. I didn't tell her everything, that he'd broken ten years of sobriety, because I still didn't understand what that meant. But I said enough. That he was gone most days, started crashing on the couch. Sometimes brought around people I didn't know or trust. She could read between the lines—see everything I wanted to say but couldn't. Within a week, a social worker was knocking on our door. Three days later, they took us away.

I'm not falling for that trap again.

"How was your break?" Charlisa asks as she settles into her seat, shoving protein bar wrappers and empty coffee cups into the waste bin beside her desk. "Manage to get any rest?"

I yelled at my sister until my lungs ached.

The last time I saw her was at the morgue.

If I close my eyes too long, I see her body.

I can still smell the blood.

No one will listen to me.

There's a knife at the bottom of my bag and I want to use it more than I want to be alive.

"It was fine."

She doesn't look convinced, but she doesn't push either. Just gives my bandaged hand and the fading scar on my forehead a wary once-over. I keep

my eyes on my nails, picking at the chewed-up edges of my thumb.

“That’s good to hear,” she says quietly, taking an almost minute-long pause before continuing. “I wanted to check in with you to see how you’re feeling going into this semester.”

Another pause stretches between us. I shift my eyes up to meet the concern in hers. A chill runs up my spine, settling at the back of my throat. Could Solina have talked to her guidance counselor about not wanting to come back this semester? Answers suddenly feel within touching distance, sitting on the other side of the desk. All I have to do is stay calm and play the part.

“Better … I guess,” I choke out. A vague enough answer, I hope, that she’ll fill the gaps in herself.

Charlisa nods, primly folding her hands on the desk. “I know the board’s response to your case was disappointing, but remember that you’re not alone here.” She leans in, her expression serious but kind. “Even if the outcome wasn’t what we wanted, we can still take measures to keep you safe. And you can always come to me if you need to talk. Everything here remains confidential.”

I swallow hard, digging my fingers into my palms to keep them from shaking. Measures to keep her safe? Too little too late.

Still, my gut was right. Someone had hurt her.

“We’ve made some adjustments to your class schedule,” she continues when I don’t respond. She flips open the folder sitting in front of her. I glimpse the label—Solina Grace Flores. Her folder is thicker than the others cluttering the desk. “You’ve been removed from any shared classes for the remainder of the semester. You’ll also be placed in different advisory groups for your senior thesis and college counseling sessions.”

My heart races, my fingers itching to snatch the file so I can find out more. I run through the blur of faces in the classes I’ve had so far, trying to lock on any noticeable absences. But what if the face I’m looking for is one I haven’t seen yet?

Silence stretches between us for miles, and my heart pounds so loud it makes my shoulders tremble. I think of Solina’s vacant eyes. The split in her lip, the black blood on her chin. The answer could be sitting less than a foot away from me and I’m expected to just walk away. My mind races

with pleas and excuses, but fear and something more desperate than any hunger I've ever felt takes over.

And I burst into tears.

Once the dam breaks, it's impossible to stop. All the things I've swallowed down spill onto Charlisa's desk like the contents of my stomach. Sobs rip through my throat, making me ache as my body shakes from the force of it. All the pain and the anger and the fear pour out of the hole Solina left behind when she slammed the door on me that night. All-consuming and blinding as a fever.

It feels like the worst kind of pain.

It feels like relief.

"I-I'm sorry," I choke out in between heaves for breath. Charlisa quickly jumps into action, pulling tissues out of the box in a drawer beside her and handing them to me. "I-I just n-need a m-minute."

"Can I get you anything?" she asks after I accept her offered tissue.

"S-some water?"

Even when I've torn myself open like a half-healed scab, my mission is clear. I'm here for her, to find out who hurt her.

Charlisa's controlled composure breaks as her mouth hangs open and half words stammer out. That cooler out in the hallway won't help her, and the vending machines are at least three floors down. "Of course." She shuffles out of her seat, grabbing a key ring and the only coffee cup without a lipstick stain on the rim. At the door, she whips back around to face me. "I'll be right back, okay?"

I nod and make a show out of whimpering into the wad of tissues balled up in my fist.

Once the door clicks shut, I inhale sharply and exhale slowly. There's a reason I never let myself give in the way I just did. Opening up means leaving scars. The edges of me sear and burn as I struggle to pull myself together. The image of Solina's body in the morgue lingers as I struggle to my feet. My knees are wobbly, unsteady, but at least I'm up at all. The last thing I have is time.

On the other side of the desk, I pull my phone out and spread Solina's file across the flat surface. My vision is still too tearstained to make out the handwriting, but a set of photocopies stops me in my tracks.

Photos of Solina.

With finger-shaped bruises on her throat.

The dark purple marks don't stop at her neck. There are dozens. Scratch marks on her shoulders and thumbprint bruises on her hip. The shape of another person's grip staining the crescent moon on her wrist.

It takes every bit of strength I have left not to tear the copies in half, ball them up, and destroy them so no one has to see my sister the way I was forced to see her. Beaten and bruised like she wasn't the most beautiful person I knew. Like she couldn't light up rooms with her smile and shock you into silence with her wit.

Rage blooms red-hot in the pit of my stomach. I was right. I was right.  
*I was right.*

And now that I've found the proof, I wish I wasn't.

I take pictures of everything. The forms, the notes, the photos that make my body coil so tight the lightest breeze could snap me. Any disappointment I'd felt at not immediately finding who I was looking for dissolves into fresh spite. Someone here hurt my sister. And someone here is going to fucking pay.

The orange label on the folder beneath Solina's catches my eye, the first name scribbled out with red pen.

Isabella "Izzy" Tucker. The girl from Solina's dorm who also didn't make it back to Kingswood this semester.

As little as I know about her, Izzy's and Solina's stories are too similar not to jump at the chance to find out more. After I've rearranged Solina's file back to how I found it, I flip open Izzy's. It's sparser than Solina's, just two pages instead of five, and no photos. I snap as many pictures as I can, ignoring the pounding in my ears as I double- and triple-check that everything's exactly the way Charlisa left it.

I settle back into my seat with barely a second to spare. I'm able to cover my gasp as a sob when Charlisa steps back into the room, and toss my balled-up tissues into the wastebasket.

"I should go," I mumble as I head for the door, making sure to grab the mini water bottle in her hand, but Charlisa stops me in my path.

"Remember that you're not alone in this," she whispers, as if the walls are listening. "You're safe here."

That's never been true. And now I have proof of it.

I give her a stiff nod, wiping at the tears still clinging to my lashes and hoping she doesn't notice how badly my hands are shaking. As soon as she steps out of my way, I make a break for it, rushing as fast as my lungs will let me down the stairs and out of the building.

Nowhere on campus feels safe, not with this kind of truth searing a hole in my pocket. Claudia's probably at lunch with everyone else, but even the empty dorms don't feel safe enough. I walk along the edge of the campus until I reach a row of benches overlooking the sweeping view of the trees at the base of the mountain. Fog rolls over the branches, stretching out endlessly until all I can see is white smoke. Peering over the edge makes my stomach swoop. All that's standing between me and a three-thousand-foot drop is a chipped stone barrier that barely reaches my waist.

It's no wonder Kingswood kids think they're so important. They're already on top of the world.

Checking over my shoulder that no one's around, I huddle on the closest bench and unlock my phone. It's tough enough to make out the writing on the tiny screen, and even tougher when my hands won't stop shaking long enough to let me read. I pinch the screen and zoom in as far as it'll let me, carefully reading through every single word.

It's a report, submitted to the Kingswood Board of Trustees in November.

### ***REPORT OF ABUSE: Case #QC10482***

*JANE DOE, a student at Kingswood Academy, who requests that all names be redacted until further action is taken, submitted a formal report of abuse by another Kingswood student (heretofore known as JOHN DOE), on October 13. The incident involved a sexual encounter in which Jane did not, or was unable to, give informed consent.*

Every word tears a new piece of me open, leaving me raw to the bitter sting of the wind. My knuckles are white around my phone, dried and flaking as the chill seeps through all my cracks. Reading takes more out of me than I expect, each paragraph like pulling teeth.

But I keep going. I read every page, study every photo. The bruises, the cuts, the wounds that'll stay with her forever because someone killed her

before they could heal. A boy who never listened to her. Who took and took and took until it brought her to this. To a box in the ground and a grudge on my shoulders that'll never leave. Even after whoever did this is in the ground with her. Soon enough, a new unanswered question grips me in a choke hold.

Why didn't she tell me?

It rings in my ears like the roar of the chapel bells every hour and sinks into my skin like claws. Someone did this to her, and she didn't think she could tell me?

The answer hits me like a sucker punch to the gut, all the breath flying out of me in a puff of icy smoke.

She did try to tell me. And I wasn't willing to listen.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

John Doe can hide his tracks, redact his name, but I know who he is. His green eyes and sharp jaw and the feel of his hand against parts of me I'd never let anyone touch before.

"Hey, babe." Hunter abandons Poppy and Gabe mid-conversation to pull me in by the waist for a kiss. "Missed you this morning."

"Missed you too," I choke out, the words scraping their way out of me. A familiar nausea washes over me, cranked up so high the edges of the room blur. Tears gather in the corners of my eyes as I cough to cover up the scratchiness. "Can't kick this cold."

It should've been obvious. I shouldn't have needed this many pieces of the puzzle to make out the picture. From the second he first touched me, kissed me like he owned me, I should've known.

He was the one who hurt her.

"Four whole hours without each other. How did they survive?" Poppy's question is aimed at Gabe, who's too busy scribbling notes to pay her any attention.

Charlisa's reassurances echo in the back of my mind. I haven't seen Hunter all morning, and if my gut is right, I won't see him in any of my classes for the rest of the day either.

"Sucks about Mr. Benjamin," Poppy says to me. "You could probably switch out if you want?"

And risk sharing a class with Hunter? No thanks.

I gulp down water as I take the free seat opposite Gabe and Poppy to calm my stomach. "It was my fault. I totally blanked on the reading."

Poppy scoffs and rolls her eyes as she plucks a slice of cantaloupe from her fruit salad. "Please, no one does the break readings. He was just looking

for a punching bag.”

Flashes of Solina on the couch, curled around her battered copy of *The Grapes of Wrath*, cloud my vision. The ache inside me pulses, a living thing. Born from the grief I’ve held in and finally let free to become the monster I know it can make me.

Only a monster can take down another monster.

“You’re fine, babe,” Hunter reassures, squeezing my shoulder. “If he tries anything again, let me know.” His smirk makes my blood run cold. I know he wouldn’t hurt a teacher like he hurt Solina, but it’s hard to ignore the strength in his grip, the cruelty in his smile, when the proof of what he’s done is burning a hole in my pocket.

In my rush to get here, I’d only had a chance to skim Izzy’s file. There wasn’t much to go off of, not like Solina’s. Just a note that she’d been referred to the campus psychologist after an “incident” with her roommate, Laura; a copy of her request for her transcripts; and most importantly, a pink Post-it note attached to an almost completely redacted document labeled Report of Misconduct. *Reach out about SF incident.*

Their stories don’t seem as similar as I initially thought, but it was still valuable info. Izzy knows something—enough that she’s still worth talking to if my guess that “SF incident” from the Post-it note refers to Solina’s report against Hunter. If I can find Izzy, get her to talk, maybe I’ll find the answers Solina’s file couldn’t give me.

While I may have the photos and the report and the nagging, raw feeling in my gut, I don’t have *real* proof. Not the kind that I need, at least. The kind that puts Hunter in Green Hills Park the night of December 20.

Proof means nothing to people like him—people who’re richer than God and act like it too. But the proof isn’t for shitheads like Cartagena. It’s for me. Sticking a knife through someone like Hunter doesn’t come without its consequences, and I’m not going down without the answers I came for.

If he’s as smart as I think he is, he knows what kind of game we’re both playing. That I shouldn’t be here, because he already got rid of me. Whether he thinks I’m her or sees right through my act, I still don’t know, but that doesn’t matter now. He’ll get rid of me either way. He’s had plenty of chances to get me alone, but maybe that’s all part of the plan. The long game. Luring me into a false sense of comfort with all those easy smiles and loving touches. As if I wouldn’t find out the truth.

I won't let him get the final move.

"If you're gonna get him fired, do it before the weekend. It should be illegal for him to assign this much homework the first day back. We've been here for, like, five seconds. Let me breathe." Poppy gestures to the *Grapes of Wrath* assessment that's due on Monday while grabbing a plastic baggie out of her purse.

She pulls a small peach-colored pill from the bag and downs it with a sip of water. The same type I found in the nook beneath Solina's bed. My breath hitches, a question sitting on the tip of my tongue before I remember to swallow it down. I can't go asking about something I supposedly already know. Chances are Solina got the pills from Poppy in the first place.

Maybe they're some kind of birth control. It's not the kind of thing you'd need to keep in a hole under your bed, but this place makes you do weird shit.

Just as quickly as I came up with the theory, Hunter reaches across the table to steal one of the pills for himself and swallows it dry. Still, I let myself breathe a shallow sigh of relief. Whatever it is, it can't be so bad that neither of them feels concerned about taking it in the middle of a crowded room right before class.

"Just get one of the freshmen to do it," Hunter replies offhandedly, jutting his chin toward a group two tables over. Two girls I vaguely remember passing on my way out of Kincaid this morning are hunched over their textbooks. Scholarship kids. Neither of them looks a day over fourteen.

Poppy looks over at the girls, her nose scrunched up. She mumbles something that sounds like "No thank you," but Hunter's voice drowns her out.

"Speaking of the weekend ..." Hunter continues unprompted. His arm falls off me as he leans over to Gabe, my body lighter without the weight of his touch. His shadow stretches across Gabe's chemistry textbook until he has no choice but to look up at Hunter with a scowl. "Are you gonna pull through tonight?"

Gabe scoffs, pulling his textbook out of Hunter's grip to his chest. "I already told you, no."

Hunter, naturally, doesn't give up. "Dude, come on. It's our last bonfire ever and you're just gonna let it flop? Because what? You need to go

study?”

“I’m not doing that shit anymore,” Gabe replies through gritted teeth.

Hunter leans across the table again, his smirk as cruel as Mr. Benjamin’s had been. I half hope Gabe’ll smack him, push him back, anything to put him in his place. “Tell me you don’t still have a stash somewhere in our room.”

The accusation is enough to shut Gabe up. He chews on his bottom lip, glancing over at Poppy, who’s too busy with her phone to give him a way out.

“I guess I can just handle it myself then, right?” Hunter teases. I hadn’t even realized they were roommates until he mentioned *their* room.

Hunter looks as if he’s going to leave the table, most likely to head back to their room and swipe whatever it is he’s trying to get out of Gabe. Before he can make it very far, Gabe yanks him back down by the sleeve. “Fine, I’ll go,” he mutters, so low it almost sounds like a growl.

“Knew you’d come around.” Hunter gives him a wide smile and pinches his cheek. Gabe slaps his hand away with a loud *thwack*.

Hunter’s arm snakes around the back of my chair, his fingers dancing along my arm and tracing mindless patterns. Every touch feels like a burn, a new cut. “Ready for the bonfire, babe?”

“For sure.” I force a smile and fight the disgust simmering beneath my skin. As much as I want to push him away, go back home, and never come back to this place again, running won’t get me what I need. I’m not leaving until I’m done with him.

“What do you think I should wear?” I ask, aiming the question more at Poppy than Hunter. It’s innocent enough and lets me focus my attention off Hunter. Anything to get a break from those piercing green eyes.

“Something you don’t care about,” Poppy replies, finally looking up from her phone. “You’re gonna get dirt in places you’ll never get it out of. Choose wisely.”

Confusion must be written all over my face, based on the way hers morphs into a look of pity only pretty, popular girls can master. “Just come over to my room tonight. Around eight. We can pregame.”

I give her a grateful smile that, for once, is genuine. That’s one less chance for Hunter to get me alone.

Hunter's fingers stop skimming my arm, coming to rest on the side of my face. The edge of his thumb digs into my jaw, his grip on the verge of being too tight. "Don't have too much fun without me." He says it like a tease, but it feels like a warning, and when he kisses me, it's impossible not to see the bruises. The cuts. The scars he left on my sister.

I can taste blood on my tongue. Smell the salt of the air by the river. Hear screams but I'm not sure whether they're Solina's or mine.

I give myself over to the numbness. The real me is locked somewhere dark and cold while the part of me that moved through the past two weeks without shedding a single tear takes over. The me that paid bills, cleaned tables, and fixed all the cracks in our once-perfect life. A soulless autopilot.

When we pull apart, I slide my hand into his and smile at him like he's the only thing that matters. Because, right now, he is. And I'm going to tear him apart.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hunter's social media is as obnoxious as I expected.

Half the photos of him are shirtless. The other half he's decked out in overpriced jeans and hoodies, high-end designers tagged in every post. There are no photos of Solina on his page, though I didn't expect there to be. Guys who earn their following on half-naked photos with hundreds of girls in the comments begging for them to slide into their DMs don't just casually post their girlfriends.

There are no girls on his account, really. Not even a mom or a sister. Just endless photos of him on beaches and rooftops. Shallow glimpses into a glamorous life.

He posted the day Solina died. A posed shot of him leaning against an electric-blue snowboard, with a snowboarder emoji as the caption. Very original. His neon-orange puffer jacket seems tacky to me, but a quick Google search reveals it's worth almost five grand. Guess you can't buy taste.

My stomach drops when I realize the post is geotagged in the Alps, all the adrenaline from finding a lead draining like sand through an hourglass.

Until I remember that morning in the chapel, the way Poppy teased Hunter for what he'd posted that day. I scroll back up to the top of his account, quickly finding the shirtless beachside "thirst trap" he posted that morning to the tune of three thousand likes and two hundred comments. Geotagged in the Maldives even though he was here.

He knows how to cover his tracks.

What I need is to get into his phone. Go through his texts, his photos, his calls. Find something that puts him in Luster that night. Rich kids are

careless, but not enough to leave their phones and laptops hanging around where anyone can swipe them.

But a drunk rich kid might be.

Going to a party with Hunter in the middle of the woods is risky, but it's the perfect opportunity to lead him toward a mistake. He's already begging Gabe for drugs, and who knows how many drinks he'll knock back. I'll stick close to the crowds. Hold my ground if he tries to get me alone. Keep my fingers wrapped around the handle of the blade, push him off if he so much as holds me too tight.

After class I head straight for the library. I've got four hours to kill until I meet up with Poppy and might as well put them to good use. Public spaces are safe spaces. No one is going to try anything when I'm in the direct view of a security camera and a handful of guards who look like retired Navy SEALs.

I use my time wisely, snagging one of the free computers in a lab off the entrance. Once I'm sure the room is empty, I chase as many leads as I can. Even with someone as high-profile as Hunter, there's only so much you can find on the internet. Brief mentions of him in articles about his father and the family business he'll surely run one day. Photos of him and his mother at soulless charity events. Nothing useful or substantial.

A quick search through Solina's Kingswood email doesn't yield much either. Except that she hasn't taken bio since her freshman year. No emails or mentions of an apprenticeship even in her deleted folder either, a confirmation of the hunch I already had. She lied about needing to come back early. Obviously, at some point she changed her mind and didn't want to come back at all, but the question remains: why lie?

With Hunter's socials giving me a decent lead, I decide to comb through Poppy's and Gabe's too. Poppy's account is as glossy and polished as Hunter's, but with twice the photos and three times the glamour. Her holding yoga poses in front of dozens of sunsets and beaches and waterfalls —snapshots from the yoga retreats she's led across the world. Most recently in Bali. A handful of brand endorsements for protein powders and celebrity-branded athleisure. No surprise, she's done some modeling on the side. Editorial shoots for smaller, but well-respected fashion magazines. Last year she walked in New York Fashion Week, and Milan the year before. She's everything you expect a Kingswood student to be: beautiful, wealthy,

and well-traveled. While her family isn't as high-profile as Hunter's, it only takes a little bit of searching to find out more about the Washingtons. Her dad, a real estate developer, used his own modest wealth to build an empire that catapulted him into the top 1 percent within just a few years of graduating from Harvard with his MBA. Her mom, a lawyer, came from more humble beginnings, but quickly skyrocketed to the top of the payroll as one of the most respected attorneys in "big law."

Gabe, on the other hand, is harder to pin down. His account is locked, and based on the post count he probably doesn't use it much anyway. He's not a public persona the way Hunter and Poppy are—no articles about him or his family to comb through. Besides an announcement on the Kingswood site about Dean Hughes's appointment, I have nothing new to go off of.

After following a few more leads to dead ends, I move on to something more productive—googling answers to the stack of homework I've built up in just a single day. If I'm lucky, I'll be gone by Monday, proof in hand and a knife in Hunter's gut. But there's no guarantee. And as much as staring at equations and rambling questions about metaphors and similes makes me want to tear my hair out, I can't get caught off guard. Not again.

The job's made a lot easier once Tiffany gets off work. Answers to the worksheets and equation packets slowly trickle in one by one after she's left the library for the day.

But the answers don't come for free.

My phone rings for the fourth time that afternoon as I make my way across campus back to Kincaid. I made a decent enough dent in the pile of work that I should be able to finish by Monday, if need be. And I still need to find an outfit for tonight's bonfire before heading to Poppy's.

I glance over my shoulder at the group of girls walking behind me, recognizing one of them from my history class. For the fourth time, I send the call to voicemail. A new text comes in seconds later.

if you don't call me back in the next five minutes I'm coming over there with a gun that I do NOT know how to use

Should've seen that coming.

Walking past the front entrance to Kincaid, I head for the outdoor seating area in the back of the building. Once the snow starts to thaw,

people will probably come here to study or hang between classes, but for now, no one wants to sit on the frozen yard furniture. My fingers sting from the harsh bite of the cold within the few seconds it takes to unlock my phone, already going numb as I hold it up to my ear.

Tiffany picks up on the second ring.

“When I agreed to let you go on this mission, I told you to call me every day. That means *every. Day.*”

The sound of her voice is comforting, even when she’s scolding me. Which, I realize once I hear the hurt in her voice, I definitely deserve.

“I know, I’m sorry,” I mumble, guilt weighing heavily on my shoulders. “It’s just … a lot here. Keeping up with everything.” *Pretending to be her* sits on my lips, but I shake myself off before I can say it. Admitting the truth out loud, even when I’m alone, doesn’t feel safe here.

“Oh, but you’ve had time to send me all the homework you need me to do for you.”

Another hit to the gut. “I’m sorry, Tiff,” I say again, but it still doesn’t feel like enough.

Tiffany says nothing, so neither do I. The cold slices through my fingers with each breeze, and I only have a few more minutes before I’ll have to tuck them into my pocket or risk frostbite. But I stay there and wait for her.

She lets out a sigh, and I can almost see her pinching the bridge of her nose as she says, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I hesitate, unsure what to say next. “Are you?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Her usual teasing doesn’t land the way it normally does—losing its airy fluffiness when she’s still too mad at me to say things without bite. “Did you find anything yet?” she asks, switching up the tenor of her voice this time. She must’ve noticed the bite too.

“I think so …” I inhale sharply at the thought of the bruises, Hunter’s lips against mine. “Solina had this boyfriend, Hunter—”

“The guy with the speedboat?” Tiffany interrupts. Figures I wasn’t the only one Solina had shown her crush off to.

“Probably,” I mumble.

I’ve never seen Hunter on a speedboat, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he had one. At a school where the Notable Alumni list is the longest section of their Wikipedia page, it’s obvious that most kids here are loaded. My

research at the library confirmed my theory that Hunter's got the kind of money that blows even other Kingswood students out of the water. The Sinclairs are as old-school as money can get. Oil, mainly. So long as he doesn't screw up, Hunter's set to inherit a corporation that'll skyrocket his net worth to the eight figures before he can legally drink.

No wonder the people here part for him like the sea.

"She didn't mention anything about him to you, right?" I ask. "That she was dating him?"

"No. At least I don't think so ..." Tiffany pauses, as if to run through her memories. "Do you think he's the one that did it?"

It's strange to hear her voice so meek, so quiet. So unlike the thunderbolt of a person I know.

"I think so," I say, even though every part of me wants to say it *was* him. But I still don't have the smoking gun. As impulsive as everything about this is, I can still be careful. As careful as he was. "Can you look into someone for me?"

"With pleasure," she replies.

If anyone's going to track someone down using the internet alone, it'll be Tiffany. All she needs is a first name and a vague description and she can give you a list of their socials, their full name, and maybe even their address, within twenty minutes. If she ever decides to give up on the library, the FBI would be a very solid option for her.

"Isabella Tucker. She went by Izzy."

Our squeaky kitchen drawer rattles in the background. She must be writing this down. "What's her deal?"

"Girl who lived on Solina's floor and dropped out over the break. She might know something about what happened between Sol and Hunter."

I'd tried to research Izzy on my own, but all I could find was an address in Seattle and an inactive Kingswood email address. The phone number listed in her file from Charlisa's office went straight to voicemail each time I tried it, but even if she had answered, I'm not sure what I could've said to get her to open up. With a super common name and nothing else to work with, all I came up with was dead end after dead end.

A pause while Tiffany fumbles for something on the other line. "I'll see what I can do."

“And do we still have that camera Dede left at our place? The door one?” I add. Hopefully it’s still where we left it: sitting in the garage collecting dust. After Dede caught his first wife cheating thanks to the motion-activated camera he’d attached to his front door, he wanted it out of his sight for good. We always said we’d set it up someday, but no one unexpected ever showed up at our door. Our place wasn’t worth robbing.

“We do … Why?” Tiffany asks with a clear note of skepticism.

I give a noncommittal hum, already knowing how she’d react if she knew what my plan was. “Just a precaution. Do you think you could mail it to me?”

It’s vague enough that Tiffany doesn’t protest—I knew she wouldn’t if she thought it was something that might keep me safe. “Fine,” she mutters. “I’ll send it out tomorrow morning.”

“Overnight shipping?”

“Do I look like I’m made of money?” she snaps.

“Please,” I plead, so quickly I almost cut her off. “I’ll send you the money for it, promise.” I don’t have much, but I don’t need to be precious anymore. Why bother stretching myself thin when I have nothing to save for? No scholarship, no books, no third mouth to feed. Fifty bucks won’t kill me.

It might even save me.

Tiffany grumbles something that sounds like another “Fine” before trailing off. We sit in silence, me with the wind roaring in the background and the din of the TV in hers. I want to ask her what she’s making for dinner, if Dede cursed out the produce delivery guy again, if they finally fixed the coffee machine in the library staff room, but the mundaneness of our before feels shallow in comparison to what we are now.

I’d give anything to go back to the before. To shifts at the diner and arguing with Tiffany about who forgot to defrost the chicken. The thought of coming home to her, to the shadow of our old lives, makes the tips of my fingers warm. But reality locks the chill in, that I might not come back. And even if I did, we wouldn’t be those same people.

“Stay safe, Lu. Send me your location so I can know where you are, just in case. And *call* me. Okay?” Tiffany’s voice cracks this time, wavering after she inhales sharply and whispers, “I love you.”

A sob bubbles up inside me, and I push it back down as quickly as it forms. I've opened the dam once—opening it twice means no going back. There's no way I'll be able to shake it off if I open myself up again, no way the wound will heal enough to let me go even a second without thinking about everything we've lost.

"I love you too," I gasp out, releasing the breath I'd held to keep in the tears.

Four words that never feel like enough for someone like Tiffany. Not family by blood, but so much more. After we left ours, we learned that home can be a person, not a place. Solina. Tiffany. Dede. Hearts and voices that make somewhere as barren as Luster feel like the place you're meant to be.

"Talk to you soon?" She phrases it as a question, even though we both know it's not.

"Talk to you soon," I echo.

After we hang up, I linger on her contact card, staring at her name and the selfie of us she'd insisted I use, wishing she was here so I could hug her until the tremor fades from her voice. I send her my location, pushing away thoughts of what would've happened if I'd made Solina do the same. It doesn't matter now.

Tiffany's reply is instant.

Thank you.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Heat hits me like a tidal wave as soon as I walk into Kincaid, painful at first, but even the three flights of stairs don't warm me up the way I need them to.

When I stumble into my room, I catch a glimpse of Claudia slumped over her desk. She springs up at the sound of the door slamming shut, her reading glasses lopsided on the bridge of her nose.

"Sorry, didn't mean to wake you," I apologize through my chattering teeth.

"'S fine," she mumbles, rubbing her eyes as I head to my side of the room to wrap my hands in the throw blanket at the foot of my bed. She lets out a groan when she gets a look at the time.

While I defrost, she smooths out the creased page of her notebook she'd been leaning against. A smudge of saliva sticks to the edge of the page and the corner of her mouth. Somehow the dark circles beneath her eyes are even more pigmented, like swollen fresh bruises. Each of her callused fingers is wrapped in a neon bandage, the smiling faces on each fingertip a stark contrast to the frown on hers.

"There's a party tonight," I blurt out without thinking, telling myself it's a good opportunity to get closer to her. Because of the investigation. "If you want to come?"

Claudia doesn't strike me as the partying type. Especially not now. According to a flyer in the library, the senior recital is next week—the same one Solina said Claudia spent all her time practicing for. This down to the wire, it's a miracle we've had any conversations at all.

"Oh ..." She stiffens, biting her lip as she keeps her eyes trained on her notebook. "I, uh ... parties aren't really my thing."

"Right. Totally. Sorry, I shouldn't have asked. I mean—I should've known. Not *not* asked." When will I learn to shut up? "Sorry ... again."

Playing Solina has gotten easier around Hunter and Poppy and Gabe, but not around Claudia. Their dynamic is unclear, whether they were good friends or not friends at all. I'm not sure what version of herself Solina was around her. Did she let herself be honest with Claudia? Tell her about what our life was really like, who I was to her? Or did she let Claudia believe what everyone else did? That we were perfect. Fake, but perfect.

Not knowing lets the real me seep out during moments like this. Where I'm so lost on what to say and what to do that I start to appear between the cracks.

Thankfully, Claudia doesn't narrow her eyes and see me for the imposter I really am. Instead, she smiles. It's solemn and shy, but it's there at all, and that makes the pressure in my chest feel ten times lighter. "No, you're fine. I appreciate it." The moment is fleeting, the smile dropping as she turns back to her notes, tapping her pencil against the page. "I don't usually get invited to that type of thing, anyway."

Something unsaid sits between us, something about her and Solina that I still don't understand. Why Solina chose the friends she did and left people like Claudia behind.

I shrug. "Well, they're missing out."

"On someone they don't know sitting in the corner not talking to anyone? Sure." She snorts half-heartedly, looking up to meet my eyes for a second before turning back to her homework. A blush creeps along the apples of her cheeks. "Thank you, though."

Warmth travels up my toes to my collar, bypassing my still-frozen hands. Nerves being unhelpful as ever. Conversation starters and questions flood my mind, but none of them feel right or worth the little time I have before I need to meet Poppy. Yet I can't shake off the nagging impulse to stay here tonight. To ask Claudia another question. To get her to look at me again.

There's a lot I could say, but I don't say any of it. I rub my hands together until they don't feel like they'll break off if I try to clench my fist, and cross over to the closet to start putting together a presentable but still warm outfit. With all that time I spent talking to Tiffany outside, I only have

a few minutes to get dressed and head across campus to meet Poppy, so I grab the first sweater I spot and start to change.

“Be safe tonight,” Claudia calls out to me as I grab a purse from Solina’s closet and head for the door again, twisted around in her chair to watch me with those wide, inviting eyes.

“I will,” I reply, voice barely a whisper.

We hold each other’s gaze for so long it feels like she can see straight through me, through the skin and bone and muscle to my wildly beating heart. I could skip the party, stay here where it’s warm and safe until I can think of a trap for Hunter to walk into. But I know my time at Kingswood is limited. I can’t waste any of it. Not even if it means getting to spend the night looking into those eyes that seem as endless as galaxies.

*I’m here for a reason,* I remind myself when the urge to look back at Claudia prickles along my neck as I step out of the room.

And she’s not a part of it.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Let’s fucking goooooo, bitch!” Poppy shouts in my face after I knock on her door.

Whatever she’s on has her stumbling in her thigh-high boots as she pulls me into her room. I swallow hard as I take in her purple mesh top and matching bralette. My chunky black sweater and jeans are definitely not cut out for tonight’s dress code. At least I had the foresight to throw on a few rings from the box Solina kept on her windowsill. After almost losing my fingers after my phone call with Tiffany, being warm is more important than looking the part.

There’s no sign of any liquor bottles in Poppy’s pristine room. Despite being a single, it’s twice the size of mine and Claudia’s—the attached bathroom alone is big enough to fit my entire half of our room. Everything from the comforter to the curtains to the area rug to the caramel macchiato candle on the vanity is matching rose gold. My nose prickles. Beneath the sweet notes of vanilla and espresso is the familiar scent of freshly flat-ironed hair.

No one else is invited to the pre-party, like I’d thought. Yet Poppy cranks up the volume on the portable speaker on her bookshelf like there’s a crowd to entertain.

“Have some,” she orders, thrusting a Hydro Flask into my hand.

All it takes is one whiff for my stomach to lurch at the all-too-familiar scent of tequila. After my poor decision-making on New Year’s Eve, I’ve sworn off hard liquor for the next decade. I lift up the Hydro Flask just enough to make it look convincing. Poppy reaches into the mini-fridge beneath her bed and pulls out a water bottle filled with something bright

pink, taking a swig before waving my hand away when I try to hand back the Hydro Flask.

“Keep it,” she insists, taking a sip of her new drink before crossing the room toward her closet.

While Poppy’s busy sorting through her clothes, I take a seat at the vanity beside her bed, cluttered with makeup brushes and bottles of perfume.

“A leather jacket probably isn’t a good idea, right?” she calls from inside the walk-in closet.

“It’s ten degrees out.”

Poppy hums in thought, and I turn my attention back to her room. Fairy lights are strung along the edge of the bed, photos and ticket stubs clipped to the lights with wooden clothespins. Closest to me is a Polaroid of Hunter and Poppy on the beach together, winking at the camera while they suck on Firecracker popsicles. Most of the photos are of her and Hunter, I realize. Them roasting marshmallows over a firepit, popping champagne in a hotel suite, sprawled out on the couch at a rustic cabin. There are only two pictures Hunter isn’t in. One of Poppy hugging a pale blond woman with striking blue eyes, and another of her on the shoulders of a dark-skinned man with a shaved head and salt-and-pepper beard. Her parents, I assume.

“Hunter said you two might be headed to the Poconos with his parents for spring break,” Poppy says as she walks out of the closet, a trench coat slung over her arm.

I shrug. That’s the first I’m hearing of it, so I might as well play along.  
“Guess we’ll see.”

Poppy hums again, swaying as she walks toward me and perches herself on the edge of her bed. “Good luck, you’ll need it,” she says with a giggle before taking another sip.

“What do you mean?” I ask with a raised brow. It shouldn’t be surprising that the people who raised someone like Hunter would be tough pills to swallow, but how bad are they that even Poppy can’t put up with them?

Poppy sticks a reusable straw into her drink, swirling it around before laughing to herself and replying, “Let’s just say his mom knows what she wants.”

Before I can push her for more, she's swinging her legs off the bed and pulling me out of my seat, twirling us to the beat of an EDM song and singing along even though there are no lyrics. Some of the drink in my Hydro Flask spills over, making her stop dancing. I'm ready to apologize for staining her carpet when she leans forward, her pupils big as moons as she rests her cold hands on my cheeks.

"You're so pretty," she whispers as she traces the freckles along my cheeks and runs a hand through my limp dark brown hair. "I can see why Hunter likes you so much."

A new song kicks in, and Poppy twirls away with the beat of the music before I can ask her what she means.

"You're really pretty too," I say, having to shout to be heard over the bass. And it's not a lie. Everything from Poppy's room to her hot-pink eyeshadow is picture-perfect. She's the girl they put on brochures, the girl boys dream about.

Maybe she's the type of girl Solina wished she could be.

Poppy smirks, sliding back toward me and taking the Hydro Flask from my hand. "You're sweet," she whispers against my lips before taking a swig. There's something wicked behind her eyes, her smirk more than just cocky. It's jolting, as if seeing her in the right light sent an electric shock through me. I take a step back, my skin vibrating until I put some distance between us. Hunter hurt my sister, but that doesn't mean he was the only one.

"Can I play something?" I ask, gesturing to the portable speaker on her bookshelf.

Poppy hums around another sip of her drink, pulling her phone out and unlocking it before handing it to me. "Better be good."

The bass of the song thrums beneath my fingertips as I quickly tap across the screen. She doesn't watch me for long, quickly focusing her attention back to swaying along to the music, but I still need to move fast. Poppy may be high on who knows what, but I can't risk getting caught looking through her texts when she's barely a foot away from me.

While Poppy loses herself to the beat, I quickly navigate to her phone's lock settings. The layout is somewhat familiar. I'd made sure to study it on my phone on the train ride here, just in case. Disabling the Face ID lock

altogether would be way too obvious. She'd have it back up before I could ever get a chance to snag her phone again to get a proper look.

I make a show of pretending to scroll as I look intently at the camera, waiting for the phone to memorize the lines of my face. A groan gets caught in my throat as it prompts me to tilt my head down, then to the left.

"I'm totally blanking on the name of the song," I say as I mime typing out something new while a loading icon appears on the screen.

Poppy stops dancing long enough to give me a confused look. "You asked to play a song you don't even know the name of?"

I take a sip of my drink to buy myself some time, watching the loading icon spin and spin and spin until *finally* the page updates. *Alternate Face ID added.*

"I thought it had a different name," I say too quickly, some of my drink sloshing down my chin. I tap away from the Security page and close the tab before handing it back to Poppy. "Sorry," I mumble while wiping the sticky underside of my jaw.

All Poppy does is laugh, shaking her head at me before grabbing a miniature pink silk purse off her desk. "Let's go," she says, swaying to the beat as she walks toward the door. "Before they have too much fun without us."

I nod and follow along behind her, grateful that she's too blitzed to notice the sweat dotting my brow or the tremble in my hands. Poppy may seem shallow, but there's no telling what more there is to her. I breathe easier knowing I have a way in now, if I need it.

Hopefully after tonight, I won't.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Kingswood kids aren't as bright as the world thinks they are. Case in point: having a bonfire in the dead of winter.

If I hadn't come along with Poppy, I never would have been able to find the party. She guided our Uber driver all the way across town to the edge of the forest, tipping him fifty dollars in cash before pulling me out of the car and toward an opening in the trees.

Waiting for us at the mouth of the path is an unfamiliar boy in a thick wool coat. Without a word, he holds up a plastic bin full of phones, blocking us from walking any farther.

"Seriously?!" Poppy scoffs, crossing her arms. The boy doesn't say anything, just nudges the bin forward. After several seconds of silence, Poppy finally gives in with a groan. "*Fine.*"

I clutch my phone like a lifeline. In a way, it is. I'm not going into a remote wooded area with Hunter. Sure, the service would probably be nonexistent, but no phone means no chance of getting help if I need it.

"Can I keep mine?" I blurt out. Poppy narrows her eyes at me from her place farther down the path.

The boy grunts in reply and shoves the bin closer to my face. "No."

"It's just my mom's been texting me all night, and if I don't—"

"About time you made it," Hunter calls out before suddenly appearing at my side, practically out of thin air.

"Can we go, please?" Poppy urges, crossing her arms over her chest. Her coat might be fashionable, but nowhere near warm enough.

"I need to keep my phone," I plead to Hunter this time. It's easier to push down the revulsion when the alternative is giving up one of the only

things keeping me safe. “My mom’s been super paranoid lately. If I don’t text her updates, she’ll send the Navy out to look for me.”

Hunter chuckles at my excuse, shaking his head at me like I’m a naïve child. “Babe, you’ll be fine.”

“But—”

“If you need to check your phone, you can go to the cabin and use it there. But don’t use it anywhere else, got it?”

The arch of his brow and purse of his lips feel threatening even though his tone is light. No one else says a word as he keeps his gaze fixed on me, jutting his chin toward my phone. “C’mon. We all had to do it.”

“Even you?” I ask, trying to keep the curiosity out of my voice. Make it sound playful.

“Even me,” he replies, grabbing the bin from the boy and popping it open to reveal his phone, covered by a brown leather case, at the center of the pile.

I inhale sharply to muffle a gasp. There it is, all the answers I need sitting in a pile so large its absence could go unnoticed. I don’t know where this cabin is or what I need to do to get inside it, but it’s a chance I’m willing to take. Hesitantly, I place my phone in the bin, holding on to it for a second longer than I should—Hunter almost snaps the lid shut on my hand.

“C’mon,” Hunter says to me and Poppy before tucking the bin under his arm and ducking into the trees.

“What’s the deal with the bodyguard?” Poppy asks once we’re out of earshot of the boy.

Hunter shrugs. “Just playing it safe.”

“By taking our phones?”

He sighs dramatically. “Look, you can go an hour or two without your phone, okay? The dean’s been looking for a scapegoat after all the shit that went down last semester, and I’m not letting some dickhead’s Instagram story screw all of us over.”

His reasoning is enough for Poppy to huff and cross her arms again, but not protest.

“One girl ODs and now we all have to go off the grid. Fantastic,” Poppy mutters under her breath, while Hunter rushes off to the clearing at the end of the path to greet a group of cheering boys.

Poppy sways, unsteady on her feet as she reaches into her jacket for her drink. “Wasn’t she from your floor? Laura something?” she asks me while she struggles to unscrew the cap. “The one that got expelled.”

I swallow hard, remembering the name tags on the door opposite mine. Charlisa’s file on Izzy rushes back to mind, the mention of an “incident” with her old roommate. That answers one question, but now I just have a dozen more. “I didn’t really know her.”

Poppy ignores my reply and jogs ahead of me, stumbling along the way.

At the end of the path, the party is in full swing. The only thing louder than the music blasting from an unseen speaker is the roar of the fire, warming me up as soon as we step into the clearing. People I only vaguely recognize are huddled together, exchanging sips from red plastic cups and snorting white powder off the backs of platinum credit cards.

Poppy waves to someone across the bonfire and abandons us without another word. She disappears into the crowd, blowing kisses at strangers and taking sips from drinks that aren’t hers.

I’m not alone for long.

I let out a quiet shriek when Hunter comes up behind me and wraps an arm around my waist. “My bad,” he replies with a giggle, his cheeks pink. “Drink?”

He gestures to a row of coolers sitting beside the fire. Unlabeled bottles stick out of the melting ice. I shake my head and pass on a sip from his cup too. With pleasantries out of the way, Hunter gloms on to me like a leech, pressing kisses to my cheek and inching toward my jaw like we’re not surrounded by our classmates.

“Where’s Gabe?” I ask, purely to give him a reason to stop kissing me. I’ll need to kill at least a few minutes before I try to get to the cabin, and I’d ideally not spend them avoiding his too-heavy touch.

He shrugs, pulling away from me to scan the crowd. After all the pressure he put on Gabe to show up, he doesn’t seem to care that he’s not around. We got to the party late, based on the way everyone is tripping over their own feet. A major hazard, considering how close we are to an open flame.

Across the clearing, Poppy leans heavily on a boy I recognize from calculus. She smirks up at him, pulling him in for a kiss that’s all tongue

and teeth. He's stiff at first, unsure until she runs a hand down his chest, then meets her touch with a hunger of his own. Hunter lets out a low chuckle, the sound rumbling through him. When they pull apart, her eyes lock on us, immediately finding us in the crowd, as she wipes her smeared lipstick with the edge of her thumb. A satisfied smirk tugs at her lips.

"He left a while ago," Hunter finally answers, tearing his eyes away from Poppy and her new toy to take a sip of his drink. "He's being such a prick about this whole scholarship thing."

As much as I don't trust anything about Gabe, I can't say I blame him for wanting to stay away from here.

"Can you believe he was *actually* fun freshman year?" The question is rhetorical, but I take the bait anyway.

"Really?"

Hunter nods as he knocks back the last of his drink, crushing the cup in his fist before tossing it into the forest. "His mom used to be loaded. Her family owned, like, a bunch of properties, or something. Then things went sideways after Daddy Dean convinced her to make a bunch of shitty investments. Now Gabe acts like he's Oliver Twist."

That explains the clothes—expensive, but out of date. Stylish, but worn. And the scholarship, one less debt. And it explains the way he looks at me—like he wishes he could crush me beneath his shoe. Solina was the competition.

"He did bring the goods, though," Hunter says before pulling away from me to reach into his pocket. He pulls out a baggie stuffed with thin pink strips. The same type of baggie as the one beneath Solina's bed, I notice. Looking around, there are no peach pills passing between hands, but I make a point to look closer for them. "Want one?"

Fear shoots through me. I may not know what those strips are, but I know I want nothing to do with it.

"I'm good," I mumble, pulling my peacoat closer to my chest, as if that'll hide me from his judgment. Memories of Papi's voice, shouting at me and Solina as we hid from him in our bedrooms, ring in my ears. I can feel the rattle of him pounding on the door beneath my skin.

Hunter lets out a sound that's somewhere between a laugh and a scoff, rolling his eyes as he opens the bag and pops one of the strips onto the

center of his tongue, washing it down with a drink he steals from a girl to our right. “Poppy’s right, you’re no fun anymore.”

I go still in his grip. The thought of him and Poppy talking about me behind my back doesn’t surprise me, but the way he loosens his hold on me does. If this isn’t all some game he’s playing, then he just doesn’t care about keeping me around for long. I’m as disposable to him as the cup in his hand, but I won’t let him crush me. Not before I know what he did, how he did it. Not until I stick him in the throat.

And if this is all a game, I’m going to win.

I kiss him.

His lips part, half in a gasp and half in a smirk as I tug him down by the collar. He meets my lips with ease, fingers curling along the curve of my hips. He doesn’t notice the smooth plains of my body where Solina’s was fuller. Or if he does, he doesn’t care. A body is a body.

When his tongue pushes into my mouth I let him take control again, and he relishes it. Pushes me up against the tree behind us and kisses me hard enough to bruise. I can feel the hard lines of his chest against mine, bark and branches digging into the thin material of my coat.

Something cold splits us apart, colliding with Hunter’s cheek and flaking onto mine. A misshapen snowball, I realize as we pull apart. Snow dips below the collar of Hunter’s jacket, his cheeks as red as his lips.

“Bro, what the fuck?!” he shouts across the clearing.

A bulky boy in a lacrosse hoodie holds his hands up. Snowflakes cling to his gloves. “You’re out of vodka.” He kicks the cooler at his feet. Nothing left but melted ice.

Hunter runs a hand down his face, rubbing his jaw before turning back to me. “I’ll be back in a sec, okay?”

He’s gone before I can reply, disappearing into the crowd. The second I’m alone, I bolt into the trees. No one from the party cares enough to follow me, but I don’t stray far. Close enough to hear the bass of the music beneath my feet, but far enough that no one can see me crouch and spit into the snow. I wish I’d thought to bring water, juice, anything to wash out my mouth. The taste of Hunter lingers on my tongue, and if I’m not careful, whatever was in that pink strip he took will be running through me in the next few minutes.

I spit up until my mouth is as dry as my skin, the sour aftertaste starting to fade. Chances are no one brought a water bottle to a rager in the woods. At least not one that isn't spiked with something. Either way, I don't trust anything here. The lip gloss Poppy insisted I dab on in the car smears on the back of my glove as I wipe my mouth. Sticky pink glitter and sparkles.

Peace has been restored by the time I trek back to the party, fresh bottles of liquor and cans of beer stacked inside the cooler. The music is cranked up as loud as it can go, rattling snow off tree branches and onto unsuspecting couples huddled in the shadows. I stick to the edges of the crowd. Making sure not to leave my back to the woods and staying close enough to other people that they'll notice if I disappear. I crane my neck toward each group I pass, struggling to catch scraps of conversations over the blaring music. I give up when my neck starts to cramp. There's no point. Half the people here are too high to form a coherent sentence and the other half I've never seen before. It's not like someone is going to be bragging about a murder they committed when their victim is at the party.

They're not why I'm here.

Hunter plays the kind and generous host while I fade into the background. He refills drinks from his own bottle of suspect liquid and places pink strips on pretty girls' tongues. He lets people whisper in his ear and grants their wishes, giving them light blue pills from his pocket or another drink.

A god among gods.

What's eerie about him isn't the strength in his grip, or the way he smirks at me from across the clearing, my gloss still smeared on his lower lip. It's the way he smiles. The way he pulls in a guy he recognizes for a hug. The way he throws his head back when he laughs.

It's how carefree he is. That he doesn't seem to care about Solina at all. Three weeks ago, he may have pushed her off the edge of a cliff and either doesn't remember or knows damn well what he did and thinks it all turned out okay, just like everything else in his life does. And now he's throwing a party.

Rage pulses through me, my teeth grinding until my jaw starts to ache. My nails dig crescent moons into my palm. It takes everything in me not to pull the blade out and shove it in between his drug-blown eyes. Hurt him

now and worry about the consequences later. Because unlike him, there will be consequences for me.

I can't afford not to play smart.

My patience is too thin to put up with more of this wallflower bullshit. I'm finding that phone and getting out of here.

The crowd doesn't part for me like it does for Hunter. Bodies slam into me from all sides, almost knocking me into a snowbank, when something solid catches me by the arm.

"Watch where you're going, dick," Hunter spits at the boy who bumped into me. The boy's eyes are bloodshot, but Hunter's voice is sobering enough to make him cower. He stumbles in his rush to put distance between them, smacking into someone and spilling their drink.

The commotion that follows—a drunken shout from the guy who spilled his drink, a defensive one from the guy who made him spill it—is the perfect distraction for Hunter to pull me aside. Looping his arm around my waist, he guides me to the opposite edge of the clearing. The snow is cleared off here, a path snaking into the darkness.

"You okay?" he asks, brushing snow off my shoulder.

"Can I check my phone?" I almost cut him off. The first pangs of a migraine push at my temples, sending sharp stabs of pain down my spine. Too searing for me to worry about not playing the part perfectly.

Hunter nods before wrapping an arm around my shoulders and guiding me down a new path, the sounds of the party fading to a dull hum. My heart pounds faster with each step into the dark. The switchblade is in the pocket pressed up against Hunter's side. I brace myself to push him off and reach for it, my arm bent at the ready. Fantasies of pushing him to the snow and shoving the cool blade into his chest drift through my mind like daydreams. A twisted hunger burns inside me at the thought of making him pay.

The thrill fades when we reach another clearing, a small cabin decorated with string lights that flicker to life once we're close enough.

The interior of the cabin is a travel influencer's wet dream. Subtle but upscale décor, a kitchen so spotless it gleams in the dim glow of the fairy lights, and a back wall made of windows to let in the morning sun. Sitting on the kitchen counter is the bin full of phones.

I rush over to it, popping the lid open and cradling the phone to my chest. As expected, no service. Still, having it is a comfort.

Hunter makes himself at home, tossing his coat on the love seat. “Want anything?”

It’s not until he offers me a sip of the water bottle he’s pulled out of the fridge that I realize he asked me a question.

“I’m good,” I reply, swallowing hard around the lump in my throat.

How the hell am I gonna get him to leave?

Hunter meets my silence with a smirk, sliding across the short distance between us to wrap his arms low around my waist. I take a step back but hit the counter. Nowhere to run, and no excuses to push him away. His fingers reach under my coat to dance along the waistband of my jeans, his touch warm against my cold skin.

When he kisses me this time, it’s rougher. Harder. More urgent. It’s not the first time someone’s kissed me like this. There were other boys, back in Luster. A dishwasher at the diner who moved to Chicago after the summer, and a guy with a bad crew cut who didn’t have anything better to do after school than hit on overworked waitresses. I’d never bothered telling Solina or Tiffany about them, not when everything about those boys felt like running through a routine. Being with them was like scratching an itch. Every kiss and every touch building toward something we both wanted, but not enough to actually talk to one another once it was done.

Still, I didn’t think kisses could start this way—all tongue and teeth and roaming hands. The other boys had one thing on their mind, but they still had the courtesy to pretend they didn’t. Hunter doesn’t waste time on pretense. We both know why he followed me here.

It’s easier to kiss him when I think of the other boys. The revulsion dulls as I give myself up to the routine and move on autopilot. Bending my body the way I know he wants me to.

I meet the force of him. Encourage it. Make him lean so hard into me I can barely keep my balance. If I kiss him hard enough, maybe he’ll let me go. He’ll slide off to the bedroom and I can excuse myself to come up with a plan to grab his phone and leave. Still, I eye the knives on the counter. Keep my right hand close to my pocket. Ready to attack.

We stumble backward until the sharp edge of the kitchen counter digs into my back. “You’re so fucking hot,” he whispers in my ear, nudging my cheek until I tilt my head back.

His lips run along the column of my neck, teeth pressing just hard enough to bruise. Time slows to a crawl, the edges of the world blurring as my body goes slack in his arms. My guard starts to slip, the nerves and spite that fueled me ten minutes ago fading like the noise from the party. Somewhere deep in the back of my mind, a more rational part of me shouts to be heard. I have something to do, something to find.

But what was it again? Why did I bring him here?

When Hunter pulls away from my neck, his face is framed by a forest of flowers. Roses and sunflowers and peonies falling from the sky as he smiles down at me like I'm the only girl in the world. The green of his eyes devoured by the blackness of his pupils.

Has he always been this beautiful? How did I never notice?

Our next kiss tastes like honey, like gloss, like something I never knew I needed. I lean into him, let him pull our hips flush together as my fingers reach up to tangle in his dirty-blond hair. Product sticks to my fingers, but nothing matters except pulling him in closer. Tasting more of him. I fight the urge to bite down, to taste him with my teeth and not just my tongue.

His grip shifts, one hand cupping my jaw while the other curls around the back of my thigh, hooking it around his hip. For the briefest second, his thumb skims the edge of my throat.

That's all it takes for everything to fall apart.

All I see is Solina. The finger-shaped bruises at the base of her throat. The leaves and twigs tangled in her curls. The blood caked under her nails.

The smell.

The sweet bitter scent of rot clogs my throat like the blood found in hers. I shove Hunter back hard enough that he smacks against the counter opposite me. His crown of flowers withers with his smile. Every part of me trembles as I struggle to hold myself up and not claw at my skin.

I can't keep that smell inside me anymore.

His hands find me like nothing happened, grabbing my wrist and then my waist when I try to pull away. The illusion is gone when he kisses me again, as bitter and rotten as the taste I can't get out of my mouth.

"I need a minute. Can we ... just ... take a break ....," I mumble when he pulls back long enough to nip at my throat, pressing hard into the bruises his teeth left behind. Every kiss comes with another memory. Solina at the diner, pale and cold and reading a book she'll never finish. Solina slamming

the door in my face. Solina on the slab, missing teeth and chunks of skin and light behind her eyes. She's everywhere and everything and nothing all at once.

"Stop." If he hears me, he doesn't act like it. All he does is hold me tighter, kiss me harder—bruises blossoming wherever he touches. "I said stop!"

The sound of my own voice startles me. I was loud enough to make my throat ache, but he still claws at me like he didn't hear a thing. Every second he's on me is another wave of her, another thought I can't bear, another step closer to emptying my stomach or my heart, and I can't tell which is worse.

Suddenly, I let go. My body whips forward like a spring coming undone, my fist colliding with his jaw and sending him tumbling into the cabinet door. Blood spurts from the cut on his brow bone, staining the polished wood as he crumbles to the ground, hitting his forehead against the counter along the way. He tries to grab the counter for balance, but winds up knocking the bin to the ground instead. Phones scatter across the carpet. More blood stains the marble, dripping down to where Hunter crumples onto the floor.

My breath comes out in ragged sputters as I collapse against the counter, trembling as I wait for him to get back up, to make me pay for hurting him. Nothing is in my control anymore, my body shocked still by fear.

But Hunter doesn't get up.

He curls in on himself, groaning as he clutches weakly at his bruised face. His other hand moves limply across the floor, searching for something in the sea of scattered phones.

The phones.

Clarity finally breaks through. The edges of the world are still blurred as I rush over to the pile of phones, but at least I have some semblance of control again. I need it to sort through the dozens of iPhones on the floor, all of them starting to blend together after just a few seconds of searching.

Solina's voice returns when I finally find Hunter's phone. She taunts me as I tap it to life, tells me I never cared as I realize with a frustrated grunt that it's locked.

“Wha . . .,” Hunter manages to choke out, his eye swollen shut, as I kneel down beside him.

“Please, please, please,” I chant, holding my breath as I wait and pray for the phone to unlock.

The phone buzzes, still stuck on the lock screen. “C’mon,” I urge, rubbing the screen off on my sweater before holding it back up to Hunter’s face. What if his eye is too swollen for it to recognize him? Or maybe it’s the blood caked on his cheek. Or maybe none of it will matter, because in a few seconds he’s going to pin me to the ground and finish what he started.

Just as I’m about to give up hope, the phone unlocks.

I let out a choked sob of relief as I spring back up to my feet. The room spins as I struggle to steady myself again. Too much too fast.

Hunter makes vague sounds of protest but doesn’t have the strength to move. I quickly navigate to the privacy settings and hold the phone up to him one last time to remove the face ID lock. He pushes the phone away weakly, averting his eyes from the too-bright light of the screen, but doesn’t put up any more fight.

His blood is streaked across the screen, but I couldn’t care less as I tuck the phone into my pocket and rush out of the cabin. I have what I need, and that’s all that matters.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Wind and the melody of Solina's voice whip past me as I bolt out of the cabin and into the woods. Shadows lurk like monsters as I wade through the darkness. All I need to do is put some distance between me and the cabin. Far enough away that Hunter won't be able to follow my path, but still close enough that I can find my way back to the party if I need to.

I settle against an oak tree that spins in and out of view. It's big enough for me to collapse against, to hold me steady as I sink down into the snow. Whatever Hunter took works hard and fast. I wonder briefly if this is what Papi saw when Solina and I were taken from him. If that's why he didn't put up a fight. But I can't linger there, not if I don't want to lose myself.

I start with Hunter's texts.

There are dozens, maybe even hundreds of messages from today alone, sixty-seven of them still unread. Names I don't recognize ask him what time the party starts, and where, and who, and *what* will be there. Pointless conversations that I scroll past as quickly as I can. Beneath the endless party-related texts is a chat with him, Poppy, and Gabe. I tap into the chat, expecting to find months of conversations, but the thread is barely a page long.

Hunter initiates the chain with, *anyone hear from stella?* Followed up by *she hasn't texted me back all break*

The only reply is from Poppy. *new gf ghosted you already? harsh*

I close the thread with a scoff, ignoring the doubt creeping over me like the wind chill. He's just covering his tracks. Any caring boyfriend would notice his girlfriend wasn't responding to him.

Just below the chat is a thread labeled Stella—Old Number. The last six messages are all from Hunter, sent across five days in December.

missing you rn

send pics once youre home?

woooooooow home for one day and youre already back to being a prude?

sorry

call me later?

babe wtf are you being serious rn?

The doubt becomes impossible to ignore. This has to be part of his plan. The vacation photos, the worried texts, the perfect, innocent boyfriend. With shaking hands I close out of his texts and open his photos, scrolling back until I find that top-of-the-mountain backdrop. There are almost a hundred practice shots of Hunter in various poses—from full body to selfies—leaning against the board, propping it up in the snow, holding it up over his head like a hard-won trophy. I click on the only photo that's not just of him. A group shot with what must be his family outside an old-fashioned ski lodge, snowy-peaked mountains looming behind them. I tap on the photo to check the date, prepared to finally debunk his bullshit act and—

December 20. 2:46 p.m.

He wasn't lying.

He wasn't *fucking* lying.

He was the one who hurt her, but not the one who killed her.

My only real lead is gone. I bet everything on this, and now I'm left alone in the dark. Shadows dance between the trees, shaped like Hunter, like Poppy, like Solina on that slab. The forest is silent except for a distant laugh, the sound growing louder and louder as the world starts to spin. It's her—*Solina*—her laugh turned cruel. *Act like you care*, the woods whisper.

“Stop it!” I shout.

Except there's no one to push away but myself. I collapse onto the ground, grabbing at my hair and tugging as hard as I can, trying to replace

one pain with another. It does the trick, and Solina's voice trickles away long enough for me to catch my breath and see clearly for a moment.

Hunter. The phone. His crumpled body on the cabin floor.

I have to get out of here.

I pick myself back up, stumbling blindly in any direction because none of them seem better than the others. I need to get somewhere with service and call Tiffany. She'll know what to do, I tell myself, even though she's hundreds of miles away.

With every step, the world swims farther and farther out of view. The trees swirl together until they're nothing but formless shapes in the endless stretch of darkness. When I trip over a tree root, I don't realize I'm falling until my head smacks against the ground, the half-healed scar on my forehead splitting wide open. This time, the pain just makes everything foggier, the edges of my vision fading to black. My eyes start to slip closed, my body unable to keep up with the fight to stay awake anymore. The world spins endlessly, a voice whispers in my ear, and before I close my eyes, a face comes into view.

Gabe, yanking me up by the wrist.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When I open my eyes, all I see is pitch-black sky.

The last thing I can remember is kissing Hunter at the bonfire, letting him press me up against a tree. Pain shoots through me, my vision blurring. Did he finally try to get rid of me?

“C’mon, get up,” a voice beside me pleads.

I groan, attempting to rub my eyes, but my body’s too stiff to budge, frozen in place by a strange, unfamiliar type of ache and the sting of the cold. Nothing wants to move at first—my hands, my legs, my eyes. Slowly, the rest of the world starts to come into view. Everything is dark, but there’s enough light from a nearby streetlamp to make out some details. Glossy rosebushes and a stone bell tower. Gargoyles leering at me from the edges of familiar buildings. Claudia, panicking as she rubs my fingers between her gloved hands.

Her eyes light up when they meet mine, her hands stilling to cup my cheeks. “Hey—you okay?”

I want to reply—tell her no and ask her how the hell I wound up here—but any attempt at a response is swallowed by the ache in my throat. Claudia’s able to interpret my groan as a cry for help and wraps her arm around my shoulders. Together we’re able to hoist me up into a sitting position, my body sagging heavily against the wood of what I’m realizing now is a bench.

“Here.” Claudia pulls a bottle of Gatorade out of her bag. “Drink as much as you can.”

While I take a few tentative sips, Claudia unwraps the thick wool scarf around her neck and drapes it over my shoulders. I’m not sure how long

I've been out here, but I'm grateful she was able to find me before the frost could settle in. It wouldn't have taken long for things to go south.

Every few seconds Claudia glances over her shoulder. I'm not sure what she's looking for in the darkness surrounding us, but whatever it is keeps her on edge. "C'mon," she urges once I've downed half the bottle. "We have to get back to Kincaid. Now."

I'm not sure I can, but I nod anyway. Staying out here will land me in the emergency room at best, the morgue at worst, and most of the nearby buildings must be locked for the night. Claudia loops her arm around me and helps me stagger to my feet. We don't say anything as we trek across campus, me leaning heavily against her for support. It'd be comforting—the overwhelming smell of apricots and Earl Grey tea—if I weren't aching and heaving for breath with each step. Fighting for balance and control of my stomach as the world continues to spin, everything slightly off its axis.

Halfway through the journey, I wonder if I'll be able to make it back. Claudia senses the strain and stops for us to rest on another bench. She waits until I've caught my breath and taken a few more sips of Gatorade before helping me back up, shouldering most of the burden the rest of the way.

By the time we make it back to our room, I'm ready to collapse into bed, but Claudia has other plans. According to the alarm clock on my nightstand, it's just past one in the morning.

"How're you feeling?" Claudia asks as she helps me out of my soaking wet socks and boots.

I grunt in reply, resisting the urge to look at myself in the mirror. "Not great."

"Do you remember what happened?" She takes a cloth from her nightstand and dabs it along my forehead. I swallow hard when it comes back wet with blood.

I shake my head, trying to sort through the pieces of what I can remember. The roar of the fire. Hunter. Poppy. The pink strip on Hunter's tongue and the taste of it on my mine. The rest is still a blur.

"What were you doing out this late?" I ask while she dabs the cut.

She focuses on cleaning the wound, easing the pressure when I wince. "Rehearsal. I was walking back when I saw you on the bench." Practice

past midnight sounds inhumane, but guess I can't complain when it saved my life.

Her expression is somber, almost tearful as she finishes cleaning the cut. "Security was on their way. If they found you, they would've ..." She trails off, unable to choke out the words.

"Expelled me?" I finish for her. Hunter and Poppy may feel comfortable popping pills in the cafeteria, but there's no world where someone like Solina—who hardly belongs here at all—doesn't get sent packing for something like this.

She nods, tossing the cloth into the hamper and handing me a fresh pair of pajamas from my dresser. "I'm glad you're okay," she whispers, looking as though she's going to say more but decides against it.

There are hundreds of things I could say. *Thank you*, for saving me. *Are you okay*, to ease the worry in her eyes. *Come closer*, because I want to cling to that smell on her collar again.

"Me too," I whisper instead, because it's the only thing I trust myself to say.

Our hands meet as I take the pajamas from her, a spark pricking my skin enough to make me jump, but neither of us pulls away. The room finally stops spinning when I meet those bright brown eyes. Her pupils widen, twitching slightly as if she's looking for something in mine—answers to a question she hasn't asked yet.

I have more control over my body, but not my thoughts. Especially not with her, where just looking at her makes me feel off-balance.

"I'm glad I have you."

The words come out so quiet I'm not even sure I actually said them out loud. For once I'm grateful for the shitty lighting, hiding the color spreading through my cheeks. I can regret it all I want, but at least it's the truth. I *am* glad I have her—someone who doesn't look at me like I'm competition, or worse, prey. Who, when I look close enough, I can see the best and worst parts of my sister in. Brilliance and light. Exhaustion and fear.

Someone who doesn't make me feel afraid.

The only sign that she might've heard me is the subtle part of her lips and the barely-there hitch of her breath. I'm not sure if it's my brain or the radiator or us, but the heat that builds in the space between me and Claudia

feels as sweltering as a sauna. I struggle to get enough breath, feeling a strange tightness in my chest as I look at her for what feels like hours, days, months.

And like the flip of a switch, it's over. She whips around and it's like the power went out. All the light and warmth of the room gone the second she's not beside me.

"Try to get some sleep," she says.

Without looking back, she crosses the room to turn off the lights. Leaving me in the dark.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

A proper night's sleep helps me put my memories back together again. When I wake up, I'm gasping for air and drenched in sweat. The same images of Hunter that haunted me in my dreams come rushing back once I'm awake—his lips on my neck, his grip on my wrist. I look down at my trembling hands, the knuckles on my right hand bruised and covered in dried blood, and realize it wasn't a dream after all.

And neither was what I found on his phone.

The sadness feels ten times heavier sober. Well, hungover. It presses down on my temples like a migraine until my vision blurs. I don't realize that's just because of the tears until one drops onto my hand.

I was so close. All the pieces were falling into place, and now I'm back where I started, with one less suspect. Knowing Hunter didn't push Solina isn't the worst part either. It's the idea of a second person that kills me. That two people had enough hate in their hearts to hurt the person I loved more than anything. Solina was as pure and bright as her namesake. How could anyone want to hurt her?

How could anyone want to take her away from me?

Thankfully, Claudia's already gone for the day, her bed neatly made. I take the opportunity to bury my head in my hands and fight off the overwhelming urge to sob. My body is limp as I roll back onto my side and press my nose to the pillow. It barely smells like Solina anymore.

Everything about Kingswood is exhausting. From playing someone else to keeping up with the breakneck pace to having to constantly look over my shoulder to make sure no one's coming after me. I need a break. I've needed one for a long time now.

But I didn't come this far to quit.

I roll toward my nightstand and reach for my phone. Tiffany'll be on my ass if I don't check in with her this morning. My brow furrows when I'm met with a glass of water instead.

My phone charger sits unplugged beside the water, a bottle of aspirin, and a note.

*Hope you're feeling okay this morning. Take these if you have to.*

I pop the bottle open and down two of the pills along with all the water. With the aspirin washed down, I gingerly hop off the bed and search around for my phone. It's not in the pocket of my mud-crusted jeans, or my jacket —though, thankfully, the switchblade is still where I left it. There's nothing beneath the bed or behind my desk, or even in the drawers of my dresser.

Last night is still a frazzled mess, but I can remember the bin of phones spilling onto the ground. Searching through the mess for Hunter's. Did I put mine down when I grabbed his? I'll have to figure out a way to call Tiffany and ask her to check its location.

I glance over at where I set down Hunter's phone. Unlike my own, I'd had the sense to shove it into my pocket before blacking out. He'll probably have a replacement by the end of the day. Still, I pick it up and navigate my way to his Settings again. I switch on his location services and share it with my number. Before I close out, I make sure to wipe the notification in our sparse text thread.

He's not a killer, but I still don't trust him.

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Tiffany once said the only true hangover cure is food. I'm not sure if the same goes for post-acid blackout, but for my sake, I hope it does.

I take a quick shower, pull on a clean pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, and bolt across campus to the dining hall. While the thought of running into Hunter, Poppy, or Gabe makes my stomach ache with a different kind of pang, I can't hide in my bed forever. A room filled with students and faculty is as safe a place to see them as any.

I'm able to narrowly sneak in ten minutes before they stop serving breakfast. The pickings are going to be slim, but I'm used to taking what I

can get.

Despite the time, the dining hall is more packed than I've ever seen it, most of the tables taken up with trays overflowing with extra servings of eggs and bacon. Saturdays must be for nursing hangovers. The heads that aren't bent over their much-needed carbs turn my way as I step into the room. Conversations and laughter turn to whispers, everyone hiding behind their hands as I make my way to the serving area. I'd brush it off as all in my head if a girl at the oatmeal station didn't run off when I stepped up behind her, leaving granola splattered across the counter. I check my reflection in the steel tin, scanning my face for anything gossip-worthy. The gash on my forehead is pretty nasty, but Claudia was able to clean up the worst of it last night.

The whispers don't stop when I walk out to the dining area. They follow me as I wade through the sea of tables, looking for an empty one that's far enough away from my attentive crowd that I won't feel like a zoo animal while I eat.

Instead, I spot a familiar face across the room, alone and hunched over a textbook. The gaps in my memory of what happened last night slowly start to trickle in. Me stumbling to the ground and hitting my head against the jagged edge of a rock. A face swimming in and out of view. Gabe grabbing my wrist.

"What happened last night?" I ask in lieu of a greeting, slamming my tray down across from Gabe. Oatmeal splatters up from the bowl, dropping onto his notebook. Now that Hunter's off the hook, I have to start looking elsewhere, and I've had a bad feeling about this little shit since the day I got here.

He looks up at me with a scowl, his clothing more disheveled than usual.

"You were the last person I saw last night," I continue when he doesn't reply. "What *happened?*" I take the chance to push my luck. There's no way he's going to try anything when we're surrounded by people. If I can get him to crack, slip up, *something*, I can work out how to take him down. It'll be a fairer fight than going up against Hunter would've been. Gabe barely has any extra height or weight on me.

He rolls his eyes, pushing up the sleeves of his sweater to reveal arms so pale I can see the ice-blue veins along his wrists. "I found you passed out

at the bonfire, so I took you back to campus.”

His answer is nonchalant, but I don’t buy it. “Then how did I end up on a bench?”

He lets out a dry, humorless laugh. “Because you insisted that you didn’t need my help and that I should leave you alone.”

“And you thought that was a good idea?” I snap. “If Claudia hadn’t found me and brought me home, I could’ve frozen to death out there.”

He stiffens, his jaw locked in a deep-set frown as he looks down at his cuffed sleeve. “You made a very convincing argument,” he says finally, before holding up his right hand, revealing a row of teeth-shaped gashes along the edge of his palm, all the way up his pinkie finger.

I swallow hard, running through everything I can remember for anything involving Gabe. I wasn’t myself last night, but I’m not an animal. Hunter got what was coming to him, but I wouldn’t have lashed out at Gabe if I didn’t have a reason to.

Before I can grill him for more details, a hand clamps down on his shoulder—a familiar antique ring glimmering like a wink.

Hunter’s as put together as ever. Thick wool coat over black jeans and brown leather Chelsea boots. Product keeps his golden waves locked in place and high in the air. But the costume doesn’t distract from his swollen right eye, or the purple bruises marring the elegant curve of his cheekbone. The murmurs around us cut short when Hunter and I lock eyes, everyone waiting to see what happens next.

“Looking for this?” Hunter holds up my phone before tossing it onto the table.

I don’t say anything, resisting the urge to lunge for it and tuck it back into my pocket, holding Hunter’s gaze instead. Biting back a smile, I finally let myself take a good look at his eye. Purple bruises dot his brow bone too, and his eyelid’s swollen almost entirely shut. The cut my ring left behind is already fading to a pale yellow, but you can tell it’ll leave a mark.

“Thanks,” I reply through gritted teeth when Hunter doesn’t budge, and grab my phone.

The heat of Hunter’s glare follows me as I pick up my tray and cross the dining hall, the whispers breaking out in full force once I’ve walked away. I’m considering tossing my oatmeal into a to-go cup and taking it back to my room when I spot the only friendly face in the room.

Claudia almost jumps out of her seat when I set my tray down across from her. “What’re you doing?” she says, pulling out her earbuds. She looks around vigilantly, as if my presence has marked us as targets for an ambush.

I take a bite of my oatmeal. “Eating breakfast.”

I’m prepared for her to roll her eyes, but all she does is lean in closer. “How’re you feeling?” she whispers, even though it’s not a secret that I look like shit.

“I’ve been worse.” The ache in my shoulders has dulled thanks to the aspirin. “Thank you again for last night.”

She nods but doesn’t reply, tugging at a loose strand on the cuff of her sweater instead.

“Do you want me to leave?” I ask, holding my hands up in surrender. “I don’t bite, I swear.”

“N-no, you’re fine.” She trails off, glancing somewhere over my shoulder. Whatever she sees is enough to make the color drain from her cheeks. She keeps her head down, letting her hair form a curtain between us as she turns back to her notebook. “You probably shouldn’t sit here. With me, I mean.”

Not for the first time, my stomach twists at the thought of what Claudia thinks of me. Of Solina. There’s still so much I don’t know, or understand, about her life here. Claudia sits somewhere in between. An enigma. A puzzle I can almost solve.

Solina was the kindest person I knew, but I didn’t know the person she was here. The Solinas Claudia and I each knew are as good as strangers. People we’re afraid of. People we don’t know if we can trust.

“Maybe I want to,” I say.

She blinks up at me with those wide brown eyes. “Why?”

“Because I like you,” I reply, testing my luck. There’s no haze to hide behind, no wind roaring beyond our window to mask what I said.

Something changes in her eyes and the set of her jaw. Her shoulders relax, her expression softens, but she still hasn’t let me in. There’s something unspoken—a secret history—between her and the girl she thinks I am. I hold my breath as I wait for her next move, for her to lash out or storm off. But all she does is turn back to her notebook in silence.

She doesn’t tell me to leave.

And that’s enough for now.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

People here flock to gossip like flies to shit. As soon as something fresh comes along, they swarm. The whispers don't stop in the dining hall. Over the weekend they spread like a plague across campus.

The next time I leave my room isn't until Sunday. Just a couple minutes to grab the package Tiffany sent me from the campus mail room. I keep my head down and hood up, but still, the voices follow. Hushed whispers and pointed fingers whenever I make the mistake of meeting someone's eye. I pull the hood tighter around my face as I wait for the mail room attendant to find my package, a group of girls on the other side of the room giggling to themselves as they look at me like I'm a one woman show.

*"Did you hear she punched Hunter in the face?"*

*"I heard she was shit-faced."*

*"I heard she was tripping."*

*"I heard she did it because he tried to break up with her."*

A thousand "I heard"s because no one wants to dig any deeper. It doesn't matter that no one saw what really happened between us—that *I'm* not even sure because my memory of that night still feels like I'm watching it from underwater. People here don't care about the truth. They only care about what keeps them entertained.

I didn't realize how invisible I was until I'm suddenly in the spotlight. People only care about me when Hunter has me glued to his side. And maybe that's what Solina wanted, why she got herself mixed up with people like him. But I'd much rather be no one than someone like this. Where everyone thinks they're entitled to your story.

My stomach churns uncomfortably as I tap my foot and wait for the slow-as-a-goddamn-sloth attendant to come back. Yesterday, after Claudia

headed to rehearsal, I grabbed enough bagels, packets of peanut butter, and bananas to not need to leave our room until Monday. After what happened Friday night, I'm not about to risk wandering around campus without a plan. Thankfully, I'm used to ignoring my hunger.

After what feels like an eternity, I grab my package and book it back to Kincaid, moving so fast I nearly slip on a patch of ice on the stone path, my calves aching by the time I make it up the three flights of stairs.

True to everything Solina said about her, Claudia spends the entire weekend rehearsing. Other than sitting with her at breakfast, the only glimpses I've caught of her are when she stumbled into our room just past midnight last night and when she left this morning close to seven. I unpack the hastily taped-up box and pull out the set of cameras and a note from Tiffany.

*Don't do anything I wouldn't do.*

Technically, Tiffany is absolutely the type of person to use hidden cameras to spy on someone. So, no rules broken.

I triple-check that neither of the two other girls on our floor are lingering in the communal bathroom before making my way over to Izzy and Laura's room. Without any concrete leads, I need to focus on learning as much as I can. Who Solina was here. Why she lied about her apprenticeship. Why she wanted to leave. Getting Claudia to open up will take time, and there's no telling whether Poppy and Gabe will cough up information that'll help me. Not when they could easily be the people who killed Solina in the first place.

There's not much for me to work with, so I have no choice but to focus on the little I do have. Solina's file. The Post-it in Izzy's. *Reach out about SF incident*. Izzy knows something. Something that could be the key to cracking this wide open. I can't walk away from the chance to talk to her without putting up a fight.

Calling her hasn't worked. Claudia said she'd be back to collect the rest of her stuff at some point. I'll just make sure I'm here to catch her when she does.

Hiding a camera in a nearly empty room isn't easy, but there's enough for me to work with. I settle the camera behind a desk lamp on the right side of the room, carefully tucking the power cord out of view along the back of the desk. To be safe, I move the stack of boxes Izzy left behind to the

opposite end of the room, where the camera is completely hidden from most angles.

With the camera in place, I suck in a grounding breath before hitting call on the number I found in Izzy's file in Charlisa's office. Again, it goes straight to voicemail. No one our age answers calls from strangers. I hold my breath as the automated recording plays, my chest tight when it finally gets to the beep.

"Hi, Ms. Tucker," I say in my most professional voice. It's rustier than I'd hoped. Last time I used it was when I helped talk down our landlord when we were two weeks late on the rent. People always say I'm grown beyond my years. Hopefully I sound it too.

"It's come to our attention that you left some personal items behind in your room. We have a new transfer student coming in later this month, so we'll need the room completely vacated by the end of the week. Otherwise, we'll have maintenance dispose of your belongings. Have a great day!" I finish with my widest, most shit-eating grin, before ending the call.

The more time I spend here, the longer I'm in danger. I don't have time to wait around for Izzy to turn up looking for her things. Hopefully, a little nudge is all it'll take to get her to show. I look over at the desk lamp, checking that I can't see the camera from my place beside Izzy's boxes, and open the camera's app on my phone. Switch on the Movement Alert notification.

When she comes back, I'll be the first to know.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

With Hunter out of the picture and my body as bruised as the bananas I swiped from the dining hall, I take the weekend to catch up on sleep—a luxury I haven’t been able to afford since the group home. Even without an alarm, my body jolts awake at 5:00 a.m. on Monday, the sky still pitch-black. Instead of trudging to the bathroom, I roll over and let my heavy eyes slip closed again. When my alarm eventually does go off, the sky is still a dark, starless sea.

It was the first night she didn’t come to me in my dreams. Part of me is grateful—I don’t want to admit that my body isn’t as strong as I need it to be, but years of twelve-hour shifts add up. Throw an acid trip in the mix and you have a perfect recipe for a full-body meltdown. And part of me hates it—that another piece of her is starting to slip away from me. There are only so many left, and I want to hold them tight until they become a part of me.

Even the ones that haunt me.

I still haven’t heard anything from Izzy, but I have to keep moving on my plan. Follow up on the rest of my leads until one of them turns into something concrete. The looks Poppy shot Hunter from over my shoulder, pretending she can’t see me in her way. The bite mark I left behind on Gabe’s hand, fighting him off over something I still can’t remember. Poppy is easy enough. I just need to find a way to get her alone again and distract her long enough to finish going through her phone. Gabe is a tougher nut to crack. Even before whatever happened between us Friday night, he could barely look at me without snarling—and the feeling’s mutual. There’s no way he’s letting me get close enough to him to find anything useful.

Thankfully, I don’t need an invitation to get into his private spaces. Poppy’s already brought me into hers once, it shouldn’t be hard to get her to

let me in again.

Problem is, they're pretending I don't exist.

While the rest of our class has become consumed with whispering about me and my bruised knuckles and when and where and what I did to Hunter, Poppy and Gabe have mastered the art of ignoring me. I avoided them in the cafeteria this morning, on account of them sitting with Hunter, but by fourth period it's clear that I didn't need to avoid them at all—they were taking care of that on their own.

"Look alive, people," Mrs. Sutherland, the AP Chemistry teacher, announces as Poppy swiftly avoids having to face me by tossing today's assignment over her shoulder. Across the room, Gabe doesn't so much as glance my way. "Your first test on Wednesday will determine whether you're really ready for this class level." She pauses to tap her knuckles against the board. "Don't let it sneak up on you."

Once the bell rings, I shove the assignment and the thought of the exam to the bottom of my bag. I thought I'd be out of here before I had to put in any real kind of effort. Doing homework is one thing, but tests are an entire other ball game I'm not prepared for. I'm a shit test taker as it is, and it doesn't help that this chemistry textbook might as well be written in hieroglyphics.

Besides, I have bigger things to worry about. Like how the hell I'm going to get anything else out of Poppy and Gabe now that they're ignoring me.

Any nagging worries about tests, homework, or my so-called "friends" fade once I catch sight of a familiar face waiting by the door. Charlissa, in another gray turtleneck and pencil skirt combo, steps into my path before I can even think about making a run for it.

"Good morning, Solina."

Seeing her again should be a good thing. A chance to try to get a peek at some of the other files in her office. But the tight lines of her smile and the new twinge in her voice set me on edge.

"Am I in trouble?" I blurt out.

She shakes her head. "No."

The amount of time it takes her to answer says otherwise.

Without another word, she turns on her heels and gestures for me to follow. We head back to her office in silence. The water cooler bubbles

when we walk past it, the Out of Order sign gone.

Sweat beads along my forehead by the time I close her office door behind me. She waits until we're both seated to speak up again, folding her hands primly on top of her much tidier desk. No stray files in sight. "How has your first week back been so far?"

Did she really bring me all the way up here to ask me about my day? "Fine. Busy."

"That's good to hear." Her eyes drift down to a slip of paper beside her clasped hands. Something I can't make out scrawled in bright red pen. "I understand that there was an ... incident ... between you and Mr. Sinclair over the weekend."

With the way word spreads around here, it shouldn't be surprising that it got back to the faculty by now, but I'd figured they had better things to worry about.

I plead the fifth, crossing my arms and keeping my head down like I have all day. She doesn't need me to fill in the blanks. The bruises on Hunter's face and the cuts on my knuckles do that for me.

"Solina ..."

I don't respond.

"You're on a good path here. Your grades are great, top of your class. You're still a very strong candidate for the Hightower Fellowship."

My heart skips a beat at the mention of the scholarship. A twinge of pride swells through me at the thought of Solina taking home the Hightower Fellowship. The last memory of her time at Kingswood being her crowned as the best. But that's wishful thinking. Even if I wanted to, there's no way I could make it through the rest of the semester without tanking her GPA. Her story here ends with me—whenever, however I leave.

Still, just because Solina's gone doesn't mean I can't be proud of her. Of who she could've been.

Charlisa sighs, the stern façade chipping away as she takes off her glasses. "But this could be very serious, Solina. Hunter has grounds to press charges."

That gets my attention. I peek up at her, careful not to let the threat get to me. Hunter can do his worst. His family may be loaded, but even the precious Sinclairs can't take a dead girl to court.

“He started it,” I mutter, even if it’s not entirely true. Sure, I’d kissed him first, but he’s the one who made me feel like I had to protect myself. “I told him I wanted to stop, and he didn’t.”

Charlisa swallows hard, the sound of it audible even from across the desk. Something inside her softens, her eyes glazing over as she glances down at the slip of paper. She sniffs, exhaling through her mouth as she lifts her head to look up at the ceiling.

“Please, don’t go down this road again.” Her voice has changed. No more gentle, soothing melody. There’s a tremor to it, as if she’s holding back tears. A sound I know well. “I know, I know it’s frustrating. But ...” When she looks at me, her mask is back in place. Lips pressed into that same tight line. “There’s not much else we’re going to be able to do.”

How many times do I have to hear that same bullshit excuse? If the board of trustees can’t do anything, if a guidance counselor can’t do anything, if the goddamn cops can’t do anything, then who can?

Why am I the only person willing to try?

“What was I supposed to do?” One question, looking for a thousand answers. What was I supposed to do when Solina told me she wanted to drop out? What was I supposed to do when she ran away? What was I supposed to do when I found her?

What am I supposed to do now, when no one seems to care?

“I suggest you apologize. Make amends with him and then try to keep your distance until the end of the school year.”

Why do I have to apologize? A sucker punch barely scratches the surface of what Hunter deserved. That night was about him not knowing how to take no for an answer. A repeat of the same song and dance he’d done with Solina.

“What if I don’t want to?”

Charlisa sighs again, pressing her face into her hands. “Then we appeal to the board a second time. Worst case, we get the same answer as before. Best case, they open an investigation.” Her hands fall back down to the desk with a *thunk*, her eyes focused on me with an intensity that makes me warm under my collar. “Which puts you in the spotlight. They’ll ask you questions that’ll make you uncomfortable. Make you go through everything over and over and over again until it feels like you’re reliving it. No one

saw what happened between you two, which means it's your word against his."

Her voice wavers, tears wetting the corners of her eyes as she finally cracks.

"And people like him will never be the villain."

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Charlisa sends me to my next class with a packet of tissues and a warning: don't cause trouble, and don't fuck with Hunter Sinclair.

Well, not in those exact words.

Thanks to my rearranged schedule, avoiding Hunter shouldn't be a problem. Except that now he's the person I'm looking for.

Charlisa was right. I need to get back into Hunter's good graces. While I'd happily punch him again if he so much as touches me, he's worth more at my side than he is at a distance. If he decides to press charges, I'm as good as expelled, and losing my last chance to investigate what happened to Solina will be the least of my problems.

Playing nice keeps me out of jail and inside Hunter's perfect little bubble. Which includes his perfect little friends. If I want any chance of getting inside Poppy's room again, or Gabe's, for that matter, my only shot is to suck up my pride. I'd rather eat nails than grovel to people like them, but I came here to find the truth. Not stroke my ego.

Step one is forgiveness.

After the final bell, I head across campus to Hyacinth Hall. Same dorm as Poppy. Figures they're all in the same building. Only the best for Kingswood's elite.

While Hunter and Gabe don't have the luxury of singles, they're not lacking for space. Their room is one of four as opposed to Kincaid's twelve per hall—a room in each corner, with a common area in the middle. I double-check Hunter's text from last week. Someone in one of the dozens of group chats Poppy added me to had asked him for his room number to drop off some edibles they'd brought back from Denver.

Tucking my phone back into my pocket, I take a deep breath and head for the room at the opposite end of the hall. It's unnervingly quiet here, my footsteps padded by the carpeted floors. Any other sound is swallowed by the fifteen-foot ceiling. There's a quiet, constant buzz on my floor in Kincaid. Showers squeaking to life, music pouring out of a laptop speaker, conversations muffled by drywall and closed doors. Here there's nothing but the sound of my heart, waiting for me to slip up.

The silence makes the shout that cuts through the air all the more terrifying.

My hand flies up to my mouth, stifling the gasp I couldn't hold in. I press myself up against the wall, as if that'll do anything to hide me. There's a new upset voice, but I can't make anything out over the pounding in my ears. I stay as still as possible, flat against the wall, and will myself to calm down.

I take a risk, inching closer to the room at the end of the corridor. Room 317 comes into view, the door cracked just enough for a familiar voice to carry out to the hall.

Gabe, sounding so small and timid I wouldn't think it was him if it wasn't coming from his room. "I already told Mom—"

Dean Hughes cuts him off, all the professionalism I saw in the chapel long gone. "You told us that this was over."

"It *is* over," Gabe snaps.

"Then what the hell is this, Gabriel?" A pause. Then the sound of something slamming against what I'm assuming is his desk. "Three students were sent to the emergency room this weekend! I've had parents calling the office all goddamn morning. I couldn't hear myself think!"

"Why don't you take it up with them, then?"

Dean Hughes lets out a frustrated sigh. "You know how these people are. These parents would donate twice my salary before they let me give their kid so much as a detention."

"What makes you think they got it from me? I wasn't even at the bonfire. Ask Hunter, check the library cameras." Gabe's a convincing liar. If I hadn't seen him myself, I wouldn't question him. All the more reason not to trust anything he says.

"Don't play dumb with me," Dean Hughes sneers. His footsteps get louder, closer to the door, and I brace myself to bolt. "This ends today,

Gabriel.”

“Right, ’cause you haven’t already taken everything away.”

Dean Hughes’s rage seethes red-hot enough for me to feel it out in the hall. “You do not speak to me that way.”

Fun as it might be to watch Gabe get knocked down a peg, I’m not willing to risk getting caught. After the Hunter incident, I’m sure Dean Hughes would be more than happy to send me packing for being somewhere I shouldn’t. After making sure the coast is clear, I bolt down the hall. I’ve almost made it to the stairwell when the elevator dings open, too late for me to crank the brakes and skid to a halt.

And I crash right into Hunter.

“Watch where—” He trails off once he gets a look at me, his look of annoyance morphing into a snarl. “What’re you doing here?”

My carefully rehearsed apology comes rushing back, but I’m still too out of breath to give it the performance it deserves.

“I came to see you.” Once I’ve caught my breath, I lay it on thick. Let the words ooze with longing. Hunch my shoulders, duck my head. Make myself small.

Hunter doesn’t reply, just arches his eyebrow. Without missing a beat, I run through the script. It’s easier to pretend I’m five years old, coming up with plays and fairy tales with Solina in the living room. Reading off the crayon scripts we spent all morning writing as we perform our magnum opuses to our captive audience of two. I can almost smell the burnt popcorn, feel the scratch of Papi’s stubble on my cheek as he hoisted me into the air after his standing ovation.

I’m a princess, a wizard, a mermaid looking for her mother. Not a girl begging a monster for forgiveness.

“I’m sorry about Friday night. I didn’t mean to hit you—I don’t think I even really knew it was you. I’d never tripped that hard before, and I started seeing all this weird stuff, and hearing voices and I just … freaked out.”

The scared, inexperienced act hits all the right notes. Hunter’s scowl softens, the edges of his mouth curling up in amusement, like he thinks it’s cute. His sweet little naïve girlfriend nailing him in the face because she was scared. Because she doesn’t know how drugs work. It’s almost funny, how predictable he is.

He shrugs, uncrossing his arms. “That stuff was pretty intense.”

“Yeah.” Relief runs through me, but I keep my eyes down, demure and apologetic. “Maybe I can find a way to make it up to you?”

When I finally look up to face him again, he’s a breath away and smirking like he’s ready to pounce.

He adjusts the collar of my shirt, letting his fingers linger along my collarbone. Dread follows his touch, leaving the worst kind of goose bumps behind. “Maybe you can.”

Before I can respond, he takes my hand and pulls me back the way I came. Toward the room at the end of the hall.

I tug his arm with my free hand, digging my feet into the carpet. “Gabe’s in there, actually,” I say, hoping I don’t sound as desperate as I feel. I’m not afraid of Hunter like I was before, but I still don’t want to be alone with him.

Hunter rolls his eyes. “I can just kick him out.” He lets go of my hand to wrap an arm around my shoulders. “He owes me one anyway.”

This gives me the perfect excuse to wiggle out from under his arm. I take his hand this time, pulling him close as I whisper, “I meant he’s not *alone* in there.”

He looks back at their bedroom door in shock, muffling a laugh behind his fist. “Well damn, Gabe’s *actually* gonna get some this semester.”

I shake my head, resisting the urge to gag. “His dad’s in there.”

“Oh.” Hunter’s smile drops. He groans, pushing his hair away from his face. The black eye glimmers in the dim afternoon light. “I’m not getting in the middle of that.” He whips around to face me again. “Your place free?”

I shake my head and give him my best disappointed frown. “Claudia’s there studying.”

He sucks his teeth, waving his hand like she’s dust we can sweep under the rug. “Can’t she just go to the library?”

Another question I’d prepared for. “She’s never in our room. She’ll hate me if I kick her out the one time she’s actually there.”

Our room is as empty as ever. I didn’t have to ask to know that Claudia’s probably going to be at rehearsal until past midnight again. If Hunter tries to call my bluff, I’m screwed, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s never set foot in the concert hall across campus.

Before he can come up with some new bright idea, I pull him in by the lapel of his blazer. “I’ll make it up to you soon, though. I promise,” I

whisper against his lips before closing the last of the distance.

Kissing him still feels like a punishment. But I messed up, and now I have to pay the price. There's at least some comfort in knowing what to expect—rough fingers on my waist, his weight pinning me in place. Plus, it gives me the perfect opportunity to grab his phone out of my blazer pocket and quickly slide it into his.

I double-checked that his location was definitely visible on my phone before leaving. As far as I know, Hunter isn't planning to hurt me. Or, at least not the way I'm most worried about. But knowing where he is makes me feel lighter. Maybe it'll even make sleep come easier.

Naturally, Hunter takes my inch and forces it into a mile, gliding his tongue along my lower lip like the dean isn't just down the hall. I go limp in his grip, give up the fight. Might as well save my energy for the people who matter. Going numb at least keeps the feeling of disgust that consumes me whenever he's around at bay. With my eyes closed, it doesn't even feel like him at all. I'm able to lose myself in hazy dreams of what it would be like to kiss someone who doesn't make me flinch or hold me tight enough to bruise. Someone who didn't hurt my sister. Soft hands and softer lips. The smell of apricots.

Hunter lets out a low groan as we pull apart, struggling to catch his breath as he tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "I'm holding you to that promise."

The gentle touch makes me flinch, my vision still cloudy when I finally open my eyes. For a few fleeting seconds, all I can see is the girl with the brown eyes and shy smile.

Without waiting for a reply, Hunter turns on his heels and stalks off to the common room at the end of the hall. My body sags in relief once he's out of view, leaning heavily against the wall while I catch my breath. Thankfully, I got off easy.

But I'm not done here yet.

I head back the way I came, lingering in the hall beside the stairwell. Waiting to see if Dean Hughes leaves, or if Hunter decides to chase after me. I crane my neck for any signs that someone is in the bathroom just off to my right—the sound of pipes, or a door closing. The corridor is silent, nothing to see except for the dust dancing in the air. I map out my path until it's all I can see, even when I close my eyes, and get into position.

Quick as I possibly can, I pull down the handle on the hall's fire alarm. Within seconds, pandemonium erupts.

*"Residents, evacuate immediately. Residents, evacuate immediately,"* an automated voice commands over an unseen sound system, almost buried beneath the wail of the alarm.

Ignoring the shooting pain in my ear, I shove the handle back into place and run as quickly as I can to the bathroom, locking the door behind me as soon as I'm in. Sure enough, I have the room to myself.

The alarm doesn't let up in here either. Even with my ear pressed to the wood of the bathroom door, I can only just make out the commotion on the other side.

Hurried heavy footsteps that I assume must be Dean Hughes, followed by two familiar voices.

"Can't we just stay?" Hunter says to who I assume must be Gabe. "It's probably another drill anyway."

Whatever Gabe says in response—if he says anything at all—is lost underneath the siren.

It doesn't take long for the rumbling to fade. Less than a minute. A voice that sounds an awful lot like Tiffany warns me to wait another few minutes, until I'm positive the coast is clear. But I don't know how long I have until security figures out that there's no fire and everyone trickles back to their rooms. It could be minutes, it could be hours, and I don't have the patience to find out.

I bolt through the empty corridor to the room at the end of the hall, the door left unlocked in their rush to get out of the building. Thankfully, I'm able to block out some of the sound by closing the door once I'm inside. The alarm is a constant rhythm, like a heartbeat or metronome, but it's dulled enough that I can finally hear myself think.

The room is neater than I would've thought. Hunter's bed is so pristinely made I wouldn't be surprised if he had someone else do it for him. Even Gabe's side, though sparse, is more put together than he is.

I start pulling open drawers and boxes and notebooks, anything I can get my hands on. Finding something that'll tie Gabe to Luster may be a long shot, but it's the best one I have. I can't lure him in with the promise of a kiss the way I can with Hunter, and he's definitely not as willing to open

his door as Poppy. If I'm going to find something on him, it's going to be here.

Turns out the surface of the desk is the cleanest thing about his half of the room. His drawers are stuffed to the point that I can barely open them. Crumpled receipts and coffee-stained study guides and wads of fives and tens and twenties jamming the drawer.

So much for the poor-little-dethroned-rich-kid act. Anyone who needs money the way we do wouldn't leave it balled up in the back of a drawer, like trash you're too lazy to clear out. Beneath the clutter are small clear baggies, empty except for flecks of white powder. If he's trying to cover his dealing tracks, he's doing a terrible job.

Beneath his bed isn't much neater. Clumps of dust cling to abandoned boxes and shoes and tennis rackets he clearly hasn't touched since move-in day. The cleanest thing under there is a black-and-white duffel bag. I pull it toward me, surprised by the heft it takes to lug it out from under the bed. I'm not sure what I'm expecting to find, and *shouldn't* be surprised when I'm met with what looks like hundreds of baggies of pills, strips, and powders.

"Jesus," I mumble as I take in his stash. He must have five figures worth of profit in here—six if he's smart enough to overcharge. People here would never know the difference.

It takes most of my strength to shove the duffel back under the bed—not made any easier by the massive suitcase taking up most of the space. Playing Jenga with the crap under Gabe's bed is a waste of my time, but I can't leave this place looking like I ransacked it. Especially not when it involves a duffel bag full of drugs.

I yank out the suitcase first, rearranging the duffel back the way I found it. I'm ready to push the suitcase into its proper place when the edge of a slip of paper cuts sharply into my palm. I pull my hand back as if burned, making sure it didn't break the skin before examining it closer. It's the edge of a checked bag receipt, wound tight around the handle of the suitcase, the date printed in bold block font catching my eye. December 20. An evening flight from Denver to Maryland.

No, no, no, echoes in my brain over and over until the room starts to spin. Maybe he turned back around somehow, some way, for some unknown reason. Maybe he missed the flight.

But if he did, how did his bag still end up in Maryland?

I kick the suitcase back under the bed hard enough to make it slam against the wall. This isn't what I came here for. I needed to find *proof*, not another alibi.

Or is this what I came for? I'm here for answers. Just because they're not the ones I wanted doesn't mean I haven't found them.

I lean back against a bookshelf opposite the bed, my head pounding and eyes watering. There's no time for me to sit here and wallow. This isn't over. I still have Poppy. I still have Izzy. I still have an entire campus to comb through. I let my head knock against the wood of the bookshelf, hoping it'll jolt me out of my daze and back into reality, only for everything on the highest shelf to come crashing down on me.

A tennis trophy clatters to the ground along with a small black lump that breaks into a handful of pieces once it hits the floor, as if it was made of glass.

"Goddammit," I mutter as I scramble to try to reassemble whatever I just broke.

The cheap plastic fits easily back together, making a small black box, but I can't get them to stay in place. Unless I find some hot glue in the next couple seconds, it's a lost cause. I toss the pieces into my backpack—not wanting to leave any evidence that I was here behind—when I stumble on one last piece I must've overlooked. A cracked bit of glass, stuck into the carpet.

Sparks prick my finger when I pick it up to take a closer look, my stomach churning as I slowly realize what it might be.

A camera lens.

*"Attention. Building has been cleared. Students are now permitted to reenter."*

The automated voice replays on a loop, and my heart rockets straight into my throat.

I can try to figure out why Hunter and Gabe have a camera hidden in their bookshelf once I'm back in the safety of my own room. Moving at lightning speed and mumbling every profanity I can think of, I grab my bag, suck in a breath for luck, and book it. Muffled voices and laughs travel down the hallway as I take a sharp left and head for the emergency stairwell instead, hoping I won't run into anyone on the way down.

I don't let myself breathe until I get outside. Stars dot my vision as I heave for breath, the afternoon air sharp as a razor against my chapped lips and sore throat. Hunter and Gabe may have alibis, but what I found today sets me even more on edge. Both of them have plenty of secrets, but I can't imagine why two teenage boys would need a secret camera stashed in their room. Unless there's something darker I still don't know about them.

Or, maybe I'm not the only one trying to figure out what they're hiding.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

An emergency weather alert wakes me up the morning of the chemistry exam. The all-caps text urges me to shelter in place after 5:00 p.m. An ominous warning that today's going to be shit.

"I'm so screwed." Poppy frantically flips through her notes at breakfast. As expected, after word spread that Hunter and I were still together after all, Poppy welcomed me back to our table with open arms, as if she hadn't practically thrown a homework packet at my head to avoid even looking at me Monday. They all have their secrets, but at least they're predictable. "Do you remember what a tetrahedral is?"

"No idea."

"C'moooooon," she whines, slapping her notebook against my chest. "You're supposed to be the smart one!"

I shrug, skimming my own barely legible notes. A chemistry test had been the last thing on my mind when I was busy breaking and entering into Hunter and Gabe's room. Maybe I would've made more headway in figuring out why there was a hidden camera in their room if I hadn't been cramming for this test before crashing at midnight. "Guess we're both screwed."

I'm more than screwed if I don't figure out how to memorize an entire textbook in the next two hours. Grades shouldn't matter anymore, but an all-star student and potential High-tower Fellow suddenly bombing an exam in her best subject is bound to draw the wrong kind of attention. I've only just made it back into Solina's twisted inner circle. I don't plan to stick around long, but I still need to get Poppy alone. Talk to Izzy. Figure out what's going on with the hidden camera in Hunter and Gabe's room. Follow all the leads I still have.

I need more time. Failing just makes the clock tick even faster.

“Bitch,” Poppy mumbles, giving me a cheeky smile when I turn to glare at her. “Love you!” She presses a kiss to her palm, then pushes it against my cheek—the touch sizzles like a burn.

Poppy’s not the only one who’s frazzled. All through the dining hall, our chemistry classmates are hunched over their notes scrambling to remember what a trigonal pyramidal is.

“I tried to study with Gabe yesterday.” Poppy punctuates the statement with a gag. It’s one of the few mornings Hunter and Gabe haven’t joined us for breakfast, thanks to their floor’s resident advisor calling an “urgent meeting” to discuss the aftermath of the weekend’s bonfire.

What’s the point of confiscating phones if everyone’s going to find out what went down anyway?

I’d hoped to use the alone time with Poppy to dig in a little more. Figure out where she was over break and what she might be hiding. It’s just my luck that today’s the one time she’s actually spending more time looking at her notes than trawling for gossip.

I resist the urge to bite my thumb as my eyes glaze over the longer I look at the page in front of me. I’ll be lucky if I can get a single answer right, let alone enough to pass.

“So annoying,” she continues, unprompted, when I don’t reply. “I trekked my ass all the way out to the library because Hunter’s letting him use this private wing his dad donated to, and all he did was yell at me the whole time. He said the noise from my headphones was too distracting.” She leans in for dramatic effect. *“Headphones.”*

Poppy collapses against the back of her chair with a groan, tossing the packet in her hand down between us. “This thing is useless. How am I supposed to memorize all of this in a day? And I can’t even read Gabe’s notes.”

I peek up at her with sudden interest. The papers are jumbled. Some of them are pages torn straight from a notebook, but I can’t make out what they say from this distance—must be Gabe’s notes. Between the notes are grainy photocopies of what looks like an old chemistry exam. The answers are already bubbled in. I resist the urge to ask her where she got it from. It shouldn’t be surprising that the elite of the elite have access to shortcuts.

The possibility of passing makes my mouth water, my fingers itching to grab the old exam and run. It's not something Solina would've ever done, but there's too much at stake if I fail for me not to take the risk.

Even brilliant kids have their off days.

"Could I take a look at it too?" I ask warily, prepared for her to snatch it back.

Poppy sits up, interest piqued. "Keep it," she says with a raised brow, holding the packet out to me. "Didn't think you had it in you, Ms. Four-Point-Oh." When I reach for it, she tightens her grip and leans across the table, her face hovering inches from mine. "Ready to come down to our level?"

I'll never stoop as far as the people here are willing to go, but I *am* desperate enough to break out of the mold Solina left behind. Thankfully, Poppy lets go as quickly as she leaned in. Settling back into her seat with a smug smile and a whispered, "You're welcome." The satisfaction of seeing me squirm must be payment enough.

Just as I'm about to excuse myself from the table, she snaps her fingers. "Think you can still have your sister read my UCLA essays?" she says once I've turned around.

Shit. I'd completely forgotten about the "favor" Solina promised her. What was her plan, exactly? I don't have anything to say about UCLA, and I can't imagine she knows anyone who does. Was she just going to edit the essays herself and pretend she had some kind of extra layer of wisdom?

"Y-yeah. Email them over to me and I can send it to her tonight," I reply, struggling to keep my voice level. Even through the nerves, I see an opportunity. "I can come over to your place and we can go over whatever she sends back?"

"Perfect." She downs the last of her coffee and pushes back from the table, her none the wiser and me one step closer to finding something that'll get me out of here.

"Good luck," she calls out over her shoulder, turning back to face me with a smirk that's as chilling as the frost on the windows. "But you probably won't need it."

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School has never been my strong suit. Dropping out wasn't the agonizing decision teen dramas and guidance counselors make it out to be. It's the obvious answer when textbooks are worth more than your savings. When you're better at taking orders than balancing equations. Some assholes might think that says something about me—that I don't know what an imaginary number is, or who won the War of 1812. Knowing a bunch of dates in a book about dead white guys written by another dead white guy doesn't mean anything. But knowing how to play their game does.

Solina never liked the idea of cheating, but that didn't stop me from doing it anyway.

"You're never going to learn if you just take a shortcut," she'd say as she watched me brainstorm new ways to sneak answers. Nothing could top stuffing a vocabulary list into the collar of my turtleneck before our seventh-grade English final, but I was willing to try.

"Maybe I don't need to learn," I'd snapped back, sticking my tongue out to prove my point.

Not everyone can be like her and Tiffany, able to hold a thousand facts and learn a hundred more without breaking a sweat. Some of us are a different type of smart. Smart enough to work nine hours and bill for ten. Smart enough to save old clothes to patch the holes that come along in the new ones. Smart enough to make things feel normal, even when they're falling apart.

Cheating was the only thing that got me through three weeks of algebra, and now it's going to save my ass from tanking this chemistry exam.

There's an art to cheating. Writing down the answers on your hand is an obvious trap. Any teacher who gives a shit will be able to spot you from a mile away. Creativity is your friend. After breakfast, I rush back to my room and quickly cut the answer sheet up into small strips, folding each one until they're as small as I can get them. I'll probably be late to first period, but I'll take a scolding if it means I have a chance at passing.

Once I'm down to a handful of small strips of paper, I lay one of Solina's uniform skirts flat against her desk. Washing these for her every semester was a pain in the ass, but at least now they're finally worth the effort. The hemline is perfect—the inner seam thick enough to easily hide all the slips of paper.

The sewing kit I always packed for Solina but she never used is right where I suspected it would be: untouched at the bottom of a drawer. There was no point in her learning how to hem for herself when Tiffany always gave in and did it for her.

I focus on threading the needle, picking a thin gray thread almost identical to the one holding the skirt's hem together. When I reach into the seam, it comes apart easily, like it knew it was always meant to split. My index finger travels down the side of the hem, pulling up loose threads until I hit something sharp.

Pain jolts through my arm as I yank my hand back toward my chest. A drop of blood blooms on the tip of my finger. With my uninjured hand, I turn the skirt fully inside out, peeking at where the seam has come undone. Something is already carefully folded into the gap, crumpled and frayed. I pull it out slowly, careful not to split the seam more than I already have.

An index card, folded in half. Covered corner to corner in Shakespeare quotes and themes and plot points, in that loopy cursive I know so well. The same one on the ornaments we made on our first Christmas with Tiffany. On the wall in the bathroom measuring our heights. On dozens of birthday cards.

I run my finger along the paper without thinking, blood smearing across a quote labeled as from Act Two of *Hamlet*. "Brevity is the soul of wit."

Another hidden piece of her. Another thing I'll never understand.

After wiping the blood off on a tissue, I head straight back into the closet, pulling out the rest of Solina's skirts and laying them out on the desk. I press along each hem, pulling at the seams until the rest of her secrets spring free. Notes and Post-its and bunched-up graphing paper. Dates and coordinates and formulas. Every seam comes apart with barely any give. Years of coming undone and being stitched back up again by someone who never bothered to learn how to sew properly.

I fight back a laugh as I take in the ruined skirts. All that crap she gave me in seventh grade just to take my signature move straight out of the playbook. How could someone I thought I knew better than I knew myself feel like a stranger? How could just a few hundred miles turn my sister into a different person?

How can I play this part when I don't know who the hell Solina was here?

For a fleeting second, I wonder what I would've done if I'd known. Would I have given Solina the same shit she gave me? Called her a bully, a liar, a hypocrite? Throw back that same accusation she weaponized against me and tell her *she* was the one who didn't really care? At least not enough to tell her friends the truth about me.

All that anger fades as quickly as it bubbled to the surface. I'd be lying if I said it didn't hurt, having to uncover so many layers of my sister. Realizing that she wasn't the girl I know.

But I would always love her. Through loss and grief and rage. Even when I can't stand her. Even when she can't stand me.

That's one thing that'll never change.

I work quickly, stuffing as many strips of the answer packet into the skirt's lining as I can. Enough that I can salvage a C. Maybe a B, if I'm careful. I've still got a few minutes to make it to first period. I'm prepared to run as fast as I can across campus when I spot something beneath the door to the room. A note, folded in half, slipped beneath the crack.

How long has that been there?

My brain whirrs as I pick up the note, trying to remember if I'd heard footsteps walking past the room or if I'd seen any signs of a note when I walked in. The hall outside our door is empty, no lingering sound of footsteps in the stairwell. I study the note, checking for a name. The paper is thick, almost like card stock, coated with a fine layer of what feels like dust. Like it's been sitting in the back of a drawer for years. I hesitate, unsure if I should open something that could easily have been left for Claudia. Curiosity gets the better of me—act now and apologize later.

There's no doubt who the letter was intended for once I unfold it. Six words written so roughly sections of the letters are torn—the pen ripped straight through the page—like they're shouting to be heard. The handwriting is shit, but the message is clear.

## ***LEAVE NOW OR I'LL MAKE YOU***

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The message stays with me even after I shove it beneath my mattress. The words are seared behind my eyes, crawling beneath my skin, echoing in the silence as I struggle to get through my morning classes. A threat, a warning, an answer. Written to scare, but all it's done is stoke the fire I'd almost let go out.

There are two possibilities. Either someone was out to get rid of Solina and thinks they need to finish the job. Or someone knows who I am, why I'm here, and they want me gone. Enough to make threats, but not enough to make a move—at least not yet. Either way, it's progress. Proof that I'm right. That whoever murdered my sister is lurking somewhere on this campus. A twisted smile plays at my lips as I head to chemistry. Their attempt at intimidating me has only made me that much more determined. If I play it smart, I can still win. Track them down and make them regret ever sending that letter in the first place. I just need more time.

And that means not bombing this test.

The exam packet is thick. Thicker than any forty-five-minute test should be. I twitch in my seat, but don't dive in as soon as Mrs. Sutherland drops it on my desk. Time isn't on my side, but moving too quick, too sloppily, is riskier than missing a couple of questions. I wait carefully, watching Mrs. Sutherland through the curtain of my hair. Once her back is turned, I pounce—flipping the hem of my skirt and nudging the first slip of paper out onto my lap. After some subtle shifting to give myself the best view without making it too obvious, I'm in business. Around the classroom, my peers aren't as subtle about their attempts at cheating. Poppy tries to peek at me from the desk to my left but gives up once she sees I haven't made much progress yet and turns to Gabe, who's beside her, instead.

Claudia, a couple seats over from me, stares into space. Exhaustion seeps off her like perfume. The bags beneath her eyes are so dark and swollen they look more like bruises than a lack of sleep. She sways as her eyes slip closed for a moment, jolting awake when Mrs. Sutherland saunters past her. Her brown skin pales, tinged a sickly shade of green, as she finally looks down at her exam. The senior recital isn't for another three days, but I can't see how she won't collapse before then. Either from exhaustion, or whatever's making her look like she's about to hurl on her desk. No one can run on five hours of sleep and a bowl of oatmeal for breakfast as long as she has. I should know, I've tried.

When I sneak another glance back at her, she looks like the slightest wind could break her. Her packet is still open to the first page. Blank except for her name in the upper left corner. My fingers twitch at my hemline, wishing I could slip some of the answers to her so she can at least get something down on the page. But I can't save her. I can barely save myself.

This idea isn't foolproof. I did my best to sort the answers in order of how they'll appear on the test, but it looks like Mrs. Sutherland decided to shake it up this year and reorder the questions—but it's not bad for someone who, as of two weeks ago, had never been in a chemistry class before. One subtle flick and the answers are stuffed back into my hem and out of view. Unless Mrs. Sutherland wants to stick her hand underneath a student's skirt, I'm in the clear.

Multiple choice is a breeze. The short answers are tougher. I make sure not to copy them word for word, but it's hard to fill in the gaps when I have no idea what I'm talking about. But at least I'm putting down answers at all.

I stay laser-focused on the packet, never letting my mind wander as much as it wants to. Back to that note slipped under my door, and who put it there. What they meant by it. I could linger on that thought for hours, trying to puzzle together who had the time to run back to Kincaid and out before I could notice them. Who they meant it for—me, Solina, or even Claudia. Questions that could swallow me whole.

I flip to the next page in record time, faster than anyone else in the room. The thrill of actually, maybe, pulling this off makes me swell with pride—an unfamiliar feeling. My hand starts to cramp only twenty minutes into the exam, but I push through the ache. Let my muscles get used to the

strain as I keep my attention focused solely on my paper. No glances at the clock, no more peeking at how everyone else is doing. Just focus.

Which is how I miss the shadow looming over me.

“Care to explain what you’re doing, Ms. Flores?”

Mrs. Sutherland’s voice, a few inches away from my ear, almost sends me out of my seat. My heart pounds as I quickly flip my skirt back, sitting up to find her looking expectantly over my shoulder.

“Taking the test?” I reply weakly. Half the class has abandoned their own exams to turn around and watch the show that’s about to unfold.

Mrs. Sutherland’s lips pucker like she just swallowed a lemon. “So you aren’t hiding answers under your skirt?”

*Fuck.*

How the hell did she find out? I’d made sure the strips of paper were thin enough to not look immediately obvious, studying them from various mirror angles before I sewed them into the hem. How did she know to come up behind me, too? To ambush me from the one angle that would leave me somewhat exposed? She’s a pacer, but there’s not enough room behind the back row of desks for her to casually head back here.

Either she has superhuman vision, or someone ratted me out.

“I—I didn’t—”

“Cheating is never tolerated in my classroom,” she interrupts, snatching the exam off my desk. “I’m very disappointed in you, Ms. Flores.”

*Shit shit shit.* “Can I pl—”

“You’re dismissed. Thank you.” She makes her way to the front of the room, tosses my exam into the waste bin, and shoots a glare at the first row that makes everyone turn back to their work.

Despite her order, I’m frozen in place. Stuck on the edge of my seat as if she’s going to give me a second chance any minute now.

“I said you’re dismissed, Ms. Flores,” she snaps, earning several giggles throughout the room. She doesn’t do anything to silence them.

Saving us both from her having to remove me from the class herself, I pack up my stuff. Claudia’s wide awake now, gripping her desk tight enough for her knuckles to go white as she watches my every move. For once, I shift my gaze away from hers instead of meeting it. I can’t stomach the way she’s looking at me. With pity. Regret.

On the way out, Poppy gives me a strained smile that I'm guessing she wants to look sympathetic. Beside her, Gabe looks more pleased than I've ever seen him, the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his lips as he watches me leave.

"Sorry," Poppy mouths before turning back to her own test. Well, Gabe's. Since peeking at your neighbor's paper doesn't count as cheating, apparently.

Doubt lodges itself in my throat. A flaw I hadn't planned for. No one should've been able to spot the slips of paper on my lap, except for whoever was sitting directly to my left. Poppy and Gabe.

And I'm sure they're anything but sorry.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The promised snowstorm kicks into high gear with an unpredicted wave of hail ten minutes after I'm kicked out of chemistry. One silver lining of getting sent home half an hour before the bell is I made it back to Kincaid before the real storm kicked in. Debris flies across campus as the wind rages against the old stone buildings. An announcement over the campus loudspeaker cancels classes for the day and urges students to get back to their dorms and stay there for the rest of the night.

I'm able to hold it together until the door to my room closes behind me. The second the lock clicks shut, I lunge for my desk chair and hurl it across the room. The sound of it clattering against the closet is enough to mask the scream of frustration I let out before I can stifle it in a pillow. I bury my face in Solina's comforter, wishing I could hold on to the smell of her, and yell until my body is so exhausted I could fall asleep right there, leaning against the bed. There's only so much I can do—Claudia and the rest of Kincaid will be back in the next few minutes—but it's enough for now just to scream. Let out the anger I couldn't show in chemistry. Anger at myself, at Mrs. Sutherland, at whoever the hell ratted me out.

*This isn't over*, I tell myself as my screams die down to ragged breaths. They can't expel me overnight for cheating on a test. Even if they did, they wouldn't do it now. Not in the middle of a storm. If I'm lucky, I'll get off with a couple of detentions and a tanked chem grade. If I'm not, I have a week. If that.

The clock is ticking faster and louder. Until I'm kicked out like every other scholarship kid. Until they realize I'm not who I say I am. Until whoever slipped that letter under the door makes good on their threat.

Within twenty minutes of the announcement, Hunter proposes a “class is canceled” celebration in his room, even going so far as to offer to pick me up and walk me over despite the hail. A modern-day gentleman. Thankfully, he doesn’t put up much of a fight when I turn him down. Surviving Hunter in the middle of the woods was enough—I don’t need to brave a storm with him too.

The shelter-in-place order is a small comfort. Whoever sent me that note probably won’t make good on their threat tonight. The howling wind and sleet would mask their steps, but they’d have more witnesses to avoid once they got here. Kincaid is alive for the first time since I arrived at Kingswood. Music and laughter and the smell of burnt popcorn. I keep my guard up—lock the door, stuff the switchblade into the gap between my mattress and the wall—but breathe a little easier. I’m not alone tonight.

An hour after the official announcement, Claudia still hasn’t made it back to our room. While I’m glad she didn’t have to see me at the height of my post-chem rage, I can’t shake the nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Another hour ticks by, and the thought to go looking for her crosses my mind. It’s not my business where she is or what she’s up to in the middle of a storm. Knowing her, she’s stuck in the concert hall. Students aren’t allowed to practice instruments in their dorm rooms, and it’s not a secret that she puts music before most things. Definitely before sleep. Maybe even before safety.

When I start to drift off, I keep myself angled toward the door. Just in case she comes back soon.

Just in case she needs me.

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I wake up screaming.

Outside, the storm rages full throttle, the sky pitch-black except for the occasional lightning bolt, the wind howling like a ghost’s song. Sweat clings to the collar of my T-shirt, my chest heaving like I just ran a marathon. Flashes of Solina cling to the darkest corners of the room. Her bloodstained teeth, her matted curls, her light-brown skin drained gray.

Screams echo beneath the wind. It takes me a second to realize they're mine.

A cold hand presses against the curve of my back. The screams cut short as my body jumps with a new kind of terror.

Whoever hurt Solina finally came for me.

My hands scramble through the sheets, looking for a weapon but finding nothing. Instead, I clench my fingers into a fist as I whip around to face my attacker.

Claudia lifts her hands into the air. "It's just me!"

My body unclenches but doesn't relax. She turns on the lamp on her nightstand, but the room's still too dark for me to make out more than just the shape of her.

"Inhale with me," she says calmly. I'm still too frazzled to come up with a reply, but she inhales deeply anyway. Does it once, twice, before stepping in closer to me. "C'mon. Inhale on three."

The world is still a blur of Solina and blood and snapped branches, but I do my best to follow her lead, my chest tightening when I inhale too quickly.

"Slower this time," she whispers, laying one hand on my shoulder and the other on the bedspread, inches from my knee. When she starts again, I match her pace. Inhale for four seconds. Hold for seven. Exhale for eight.

We go through it in stages. First with her coaching me, counting out the seconds. Then again, together. It takes four rounds for my heart to stop racing. Two more for the thought of Solina's body to fade. Another for me to relax. It's easy to forget the world when all I have to do is look at Claudia. Match the movement of her lips, focus on the flecks of gold in her eyes.

"Thank you," I whisper once I feel back in control again. "Was I ... doing that long?"

"When I woke up, you were tossing around. Saying stuff," she explains, backing away now that I've calmed down. "I was going to ignore it and try to go back to sleep, but ... you started screaming."

I swallow hard around the guilt and panic swirling in my stomach. "What was I saying?" If I said anything about Solina, I'm screwed. Leave it to my subconscious to try to fuck me over.

She shrugs, crossing her arms across her chest. “I don’t know. It was mostly mumbling. Nothing I could make out specifically.”

Safe for now, but I’ll have to find a way to knock myself out before bed. Something that’ll knock me out so hard I’ll be next to dead.

“Sorry. Must’ve been a stress dream, or something.”

A strand of hair falls in front of her face as she nods.

I fight the urge to tuck it back.

“We all have them.”

She crosses back to her side of the room, opening up one of her desk drawers that’s as cluttered as the desk itself. Crumpled sheet music and smashed granola bars. She pulls out a small pink pouch, decorated with butterflies and sunflowers.

“This helps.” She holds out a packet of herbal tea. An oddly familiar cartoon kitten curled up by a fire declares it “the purr-fect sleep remedy.” “I like it with honey and milk, if you can swipe some from the dining hall.” Another lightning bolt strikes when I look up to meet her eyes. In the pale white light, I can see her skin is still tinged a sickly, sallow gray. A light sheen of sweat across her forehead. “It’s not foolproof, but it’s better than nothing.”

“My mom used to drink this,” I say without thinking, the tea’s label bringing back a swell of memories so strong I can’t hold it back. “She just ... can’t find it at our new grocery store,” I add quickly, remembering that everyone at Kingswood is under the impression that me and Solina are two well-adjusted teens with equally well-adjusted, very alive parents.

I watch her smile bloom as she looks down at the box, the faintest traces of pink coloring her cheeks. “My mom did too. Still does.”

Silence falls over us again as I turn the packet over in my hand. Not like I can go make some tea right now, with the storm, but I appreciate the gesture. A crack of thunder breaks the silence, so loud it strains my ears. My shoulders straighten when Claudia speaks up again, her voice still soft and calm.

“She taught me the breathing thing too.” Her smile falters but doesn’t fade. “Freshman year, I used to have a lot of those types of dreams. I’d wake up panicking in the middle of the night because I thought I slept through a test, or forgot to show up to a midterm, or something.”

A memory of Solina tumbling into the kitchen and struggling to pour herself a bowl of cereal during her first summer back from Kingswood comes flooding back. You could see the dark circles under her eyes from Mars.

“Dreamt I missed my English final,” Solina mumbled as she sat down across from me. Ten minutes later, she was asleep at the table.

In the present, I snort as I push the memory away. “Been there.”

But the memory doesn’t leave. It lingers, slowly taking over my senses the more I dwell on it. That night she couldn’t fall asleep, tossing and turning as she struggled to shake off the nagging feeling that she’d forgotten something, I’d wrapped my arms around her shoulders, pulling her close even though I was still half-asleep. An instinct we’ve had since birth.

Mami loved to tell stories about how cranky we’d get when they tried making us sleep in separate cribs. We needed to be side by side, otherwise we’d cry our heads off until they gave in and laid us down together. Something about a bond identical twins form in utero. We’d brushed it off as an old wives’ tale, but for every storm and bad dream, we’d find each other in the dark.

“My sister used to hug me whenever that happened,” I say, not bothering to hide my smile. “Always put me right back to sleep. Even when we were older.”

Maybe that’s why I screamed. I’d looked for my sister’s hand and found a nightmare instead. A reminder of our awful truth. That we’ll never find each other in the dark again.

“I used to do that too,” Claudia says, her voice more somber than nostalgic. Her smile’s long gone now. Without the box of tea to fidget with, she picks at the bandages on her fingers. Dried blood stains the edge of her index finger. “Whenever I had a nightmare, I’d crawl into my mom’s bed. I did it a lot whenever I was home freshman year.” She lets out a quiet chuckle, her attention still focused on her fingers. “Back when she was still going through treatment, this huge storm passed through. Flooding, shattered windows, the whole nine yards. It wasn’t so bad in our area, though. Some stuff was scattered around in the yard the next day, but not much else. But that night, she came to my room and asked if I wanted to stay with her. In case I was scared ...”

A tremor makes her voice waver as she trails off, tucking her hands under her armpits.

“Guess we all get afraid sometimes,” she says, looking up at me with a smile so heartbreaking I want to pull her close like I did with Solina in my memories.

There are a thousand things I could say, but of course I pick the wrong one. “Your mom was in treatment?”

The lure of a shared pain, watching a parent fall apart, tripped me up. Clearly Claudia and Solina weren’t best friends, but even if they barely interacted, Solina would’ve known that Claudia’s mom was sick. My body goes rigid as I brace myself for questions I won’t know how to answer and accusations I might not have the strength to deny.

But there’s no blowup. No narrowed eyes or gasps as Claudia realizes I’m not who she thinks I am. All she does is shrug, keeping her eyes glued to the floor.

“Was. Stage three breast cancer.”

I stiffen, suddenly realizing that our stories may be more similar than I thought. Mothers taken too soon, before treatment could ever mean anything.

And Solina didn’t even know it.

“But she stopped chemo last year,” Claudia finishes, and I hold in a sigh of relief. Maybe our stories aren’t so similar. If Claudia’s mom is still alive, maybe she got the happy ending ours didn’t.

“Is she in remission?”

This time it’s Claudia’s turn to stiffen. She shakes her head, a curtain of hair hiding her expression. “This place isn’t cheap. Neither is treatment,” she says without looking at me.

The weight of her reply keeps me from prying for more answers. She’s right, and I know because I saw it for myself. Papi took on a second job to try to keep up with Mami’s hospital bills. Eighty-hour work weeks weren’t enough, and neither were the surgeries and chemicals they pumped her full of. Now all he has is an empty home and a debt he’ll never pay back.

And then there’s me. Giving up my possibilities so Solina’s could be endless. Three years’ worth of tips and paychecks right into the pocket of the same place that took her away from me.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, even though I’m not sure what I’m sorry for. That her mom decided to put her first. That I did the same thing and lost my sister in the process. That she just opened up to someone who doesn’t really exist.

That both of us have a burden on our shoulders that could snap us in half if we dwell too long on what we have to lose.

“Me too,” she whispers, her gaze falling to the floor.

More apologies and attempts at comfort sit on the tip of my tongue, but she reaches out before I can say them, taking my bandaged hand in hers. The simple touch sends a chill through my veins, waking me up faster than coffee ever has.

“Are you feeling better?” she asks, and it doesn’t take a genius to know she’s desperate to change the subject.

“A little,” I reply, giving her what she wants. I resist the urge to ask her the same thing, but we both know the answer to that. The clammy skin and dark circles—I’m sure she feels even worse than she looks. Like she’s on the brink of collapsing from a fever or exhaustion or both.

When I flex my hand, the tips of my fingers brush against the underside of hers, and I can’t help but hope the touch sent sparks through her too.

“You have a tattoo,” she says, running the edge of a callused finger along the lines on my wrist.

“I got it with my sister.”

Her expression shifts. Confusion and something else I can’t decipher. “I didn’t realize you two were that close.”

Of course she didn’t. Why would she? How could anyone have known what we meant to each other when Solina made me out to be a caricature of the perfect older sister? Because who I really am wasn’t good enough.

“She’s a pain in my ass,” I say through gritted teeth, pulling my hand away from Claudia’s as I ball both of them into fists.

I’ve felt a lot of anger since I got here. Sometimes I wonder if that’s the only emotion I’m able to feel anymore. It’s always been channeled at other people. Strangers. Cartagena and Hunter and Gabe and Poppy and the hospitals and schools and group homes—systems built to save us just to let us down. And now, Solina. An emotion so complex and unfamiliar I’ve been avoiding it since the first day I got here.

I did *everything* for her. All because I blamed myself for landing us in this mess in the first place—because I got us taken away from home. Our *real* home. And she erased all of it. Turned me into a background character in the perfect story of her life. As if ours isn't miraculous all on its own.

“She’s pushy, and stubborn, and always gets what she wants, a-and ...” I trail off, heaving for breath, my voice reaching a fever pitch as I let those thoughts I’ve been avoiding slowly bubble to the surface. “And ... my best friend. And I miss her every day.”

I swipe at my eyes, avoiding looking at Claudia as I struggle to hold back tears. It’s the closest I’ve come to breaking since Charlisa’s office, and I know I won’t be able to turn it off once it starts this time. There’s no coming back from this—the rage and the sadness and the grief—it’ll consume me whole.

“I’m sorry,” Claudia whispers, running a hand across her damp forehead. She crosses her arms, looking unsteady like she did during chem. “Did you get to talk to her over break?”

“Not much.” I shrug, pausing for a moment before adding, “But she’s not going anywhere.”

Claudia’s brow furrows. “What do you mean?”

“She doesn’t go to UCLA. I’m not sure why I told everyone that. Guess it seemed more impressive,” I reply before I can let myself regret it.

“Oh. Does she go to community college?”

I shake my head. “She doesn’t go to school anymore, but she’d be a senior. Like us.”

I know I should stop while I’m ahead, shut up before I ruin everything I’ve worked for here, but I can’t help the nagging pull to tell Claudia everything. Just so one person here can know the truth. I bite my tongue before I can continue, preparing myself for Claudia to ask questions I know I can’t answer, but she stays silent. Her eyes are milky, unfocused and distant as she gazes somewhere over my shoulder, chapped lips parting but no sound coming out.

“Are you—”

Claudia’s hands whip up to her mouth before I can finish my question, muffling a gag so intense it makes my own stomach lurch. Before I can offer to help her, she’s running out of the room. I wince at the harshness of the hallway lights trickling into our room, waiting until my eyes have

adjusted to go after her. At the end of the hall, the door to the communal bathroom is locked. I give it a few light knocks, not wanting to draw any extra attention to us by waking up the entire floor. Claudia doesn't respond, but I can make out the vague sound of retching.

"Do you need anything?" I ask as quietly as I can.

"No." A pause as the retching starts again. "I haven't been ..." She trails off, but I can make out harsh inhales and exhales, more like gasps than breaths. "Just ate something weird. I'm fine," she finishes, but we both know that isn't true.

"Are you sure?"

A minute goes by, then two. The retching stops, no sound but the distant wind and the buzz of the overhead lights. Reluctantly, I head back to our room, perched on the edge of my bed. Hopefully it's just a stomach bug she can sleep off. I wait as long as I can, my eyes dipping closed every few seconds until I'm almost tipping off the edge of my bed. I wait for a shadow to appear under the crack of the door. Footsteps or a whispered good night. But she doesn't come back. At least not before I finally give in and crawl beneath my covers.

The memory of her hand in mine soothes the chill as I curl around my too-thin comforter, but guilt cuts through the warmth. I should've seen the signs earlier. The paleness, the glossy-eyed look, the fear. I've seen it once before, etched all over a face I thought I knew better than my own. All I can do now is hope she won't make herself sick from the pressure.

That she won't wind up like my sister.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Claudia's gone by the time I wake up. I'd fallen asleep holding the box of tea, rereading the ingredients until it lulled me to sleep. It's on my nightstand this morning. I double-check the box, the nightstand, and the floor to see if I can find a note from Claudia, and bite down the disappointment when I don't.

So much for hoping she'd take a sick day.

Somehow campus is completely spotless by the time the dining hall opens. All the branches, leaves, and debris have been swept off the carefully manicured lawns. You'd never know there was a destructive storm raging less than three hours ago. No surprise that Kingswood forced its workers to clean up in the middle of the night just to make sure its students don't see how ugly the world can really be.

"You missed it, babe," Hunter says in lieu of a greeting when I join our usual table for breakfast. "Everybody in Hyacinth took over the basement lounge. We hooked up some speakers to the overhead sound system and went ham until the power blew out. It was *unreal*."

I hum in response, giving him a tired smile before tilting my gaze down to the open notebook in front of him. His French notes are surprisingly neat, considering he hardly ever studies. Vocabulary words and conjugations are written in elegant script like he's been holding a fountain pen since birth. Nothing like the rushed, jagged handwriting from the note.

Across the table, Poppy, for the first time since I've met her, looks worse for wear. Despite the extra layer of concealer, you can still see the dark circles beneath her eyes. Highlighter doesn't do much for the lack of color in her cheeks either. Instead of hanging on to Hunter's every word,

she's limply stirring a bowl of oatmeal. She doesn't even bother to look up and give me her usual cheery greeting.

Gabe never looks especially put together, but even he's lost his usual "don't bother me" air. His grip on his fork is so loose it clatters onto his untouched omelet, while his eyes are glazed and unfocused, looking somewhere in the distance.

Hunter's latest story cuts short when he realizes his audience isn't as attentive as he thought. His eyes skim from me to Poppy. Gabe is practically catatonic.

How Hunter doesn't look like death warmed up is unfair.

Smirking, he leans across the table until he's inches away from Poppy's face. She doesn't take the bait this time, keeping her attention focused on her oatmeal.

"Pop had fun last night," he says before pushing her pin-straight hair over her shoulder.

When she jumps back, I spot what she'd been trying to hide—a purple bruise at the base of her throat, barely covered by the collar of her shirt and what I'm guessing is multiple layers of foundation. Not a bruise like the ones in the photos in Solina's file, but something tender. The shadow of lips against her pulse point. While Hunter cackles, she quickly pulls her hair forward again, the bruise carefully covered beneath the curtain of her thick black hair.

"C'mon, no shame," he teases when she turns back to her oatmeal with a huff.

My breath hitches as I watch something in her snap. She freezes for half a second, then throws her spoon into the bowl. Before Hunter can come up with another platitude, she's flipping him off and standing up from the table. Her gaze flickers over to me, something unreadable in her expression as she stands there, staring at me, before ultimately storming away.

Hunter rolls his eyes as he watches her walk off, waiting until she's out of view to pull her abandoned breakfast toward us.

"More for us, right?" he says with a wink before offering me a bite of her oatmeal.

I turn down the spoonful, quickly losing my appetite. I still don't trust Poppy, but I can't help the part of me that aches for her. I've seen that same fear and anger on a familiar face. On a night I'll never forget.

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Charlisa's waiting for me outside my first period English class.

"Fuuuuuck," I mutter under my breath.

At least I don't have Poppy glued to my side this morning. Whatever happened last night has made her keep her distance. So much so that it looks like she's decided to skip first period. I've got my suspicions about what really went on between her and Hunter at the party, but I won't be able to dig any deeper until I get her alone tomorrow. That's assuming she even still wants me to come over to help with her UCLA essays.

Regardless, it's a welcome break from the constant need to be on my best-Solina behavior. Plus, I don't need her going around telling everyone within a ten-foot radius that I was pulled aside by one of the guidance counselors. I knew the chem exam incident was going to bite me in the ass, I just didn't think they'd pounce in less than twenty-four hours.

"Good morning, Solina," Charlisa says as I trudge toward her. There's no trace of her usual smile. She's finally had it with my bullshit. "Can I speak to you for a moment?"

I glance into the half-full room behind her. Every other time she's pulled me aside has been before lunch or a study period. Mr. Benjamin has a strict "no late entry" policy, and something tells me this isn't going to be a quick, thirty-second chat.

"Don't I have to go to class ...?"

"Mr. Benjamin is aware that you'll be missing first period."

Well, there went any hope of getting off with a slap on the wrist.

Charlisa guides me to the end of the hall, but instead of making her usual left toward the staircase, she makes a sharp right out of the building. I skid to a halt and whip around when I realize she's headed in the opposite direction, jogging to keep up with her. We make the trek across campus to a building I've never seen before. The interior is, unsurprisingly, grander than the exterior. Rows and rows of oil paintings of former Kingswood deans line the walls of the entryway, their eyes watching me move through the room. Armchairs and end tables that look like they were plucked right out of a Victorian-era museum sit beneath the portraits.

Charlisa knocks on a set of large polished-wood double doors at the end of the entryway. My heart drops to the pit of my stomach when the

doors crack open, Dean Hughes peeking out at the two of us.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

“Ms. Flores,” he says before ushering us into the room. Not a greeting, a statement. An aggressive one.

Charlisa gestures for me to take the seat opposite Dean Hughes’s desk while she hovers beside him, hands clasped behind her back.

“If this is about the cheating, I swear I won’t do it again,” I blurt out the second I sit down. I’m prepared to beg if I have to. Crawl on my knees. Throw out my dignity and offer them up all the money I have left if it means I can have a second chance. “I panicked because I was behind on studying, it was a one-time mistake!”

Dean Hughes’s expression is unreadable as he holds up a hand to silence my excuses. He waits until I’ve stopped to lower his hand back down, letting me sit in toe-curling silence as he glances down at something on his desk. Every second that passes feels like a knife to the gut. Sweat beads along my forehead as we sit in total silence except for the ticking of the ornate clock on his wall. If I could, I’d pull the wiring out, stomp the clock into the ground until that goddamn ticking stops.

“As I’m sure you know, Ms. Flores, it’s school policy to contact a student’s guardian whenever they’re involved in an incident that has found its way to my desk.”

The sweat rolls down my temples, streaking my cheeks like tears. In all her time at Kingswood, Solina never did anything worth calling home about. Still, I’d fudged the forms to be safe. I’d put down my number beside Papi’s name as her emergency contact. If they called, we had Dede on hand to play the part. They never did, but we were always ready.

“We tried reaching out to your father at the number listed in your file but couldn’t get ahold of him.”

Of course they couldn’t, because my old phone’s sitting in a box under my bed in Luster. No one except Tiffany, Dede, and spambots ever calls me, so I figured leaving it behind was safer than bringing it and dodging questions about why I had two phones. Another hole in my plan I hadn’t accounted for. Another sign that I’m not smart enough to pull this off.

“I can give you a different number. His work num—”

“We found a different number,” Mr. Hughes interrupts. “We contacted his place of employment and were told he hadn’t been there for the past

several years. But we got a direct contact number and still couldn't get ahold of him then either."

Thank God I didn't eat breakfast, or else it'd be splayed out across Dean Hughes's antique desk. There's no way the number Papi's old office had on file is still in service, I tell myself, trying to keep the panic at bay. He could barely cover the bills when he was swiping birthday money out of our piggy banks. If he's not dead by now, his phone definitely is. Either that or he's miraculously cleaned up his act and started fresh.

For once, I hope Papi started a new life. One that has nothing to do with us.

I'm prepared to offer up another number, Dede's cell, when Dean Hughes pulls the landline on his desk toward him.

"You can understand my surprise when I came in this morning to this voicemail."

He presses a button, and Papi's voice fills the room.

*"Who the fuck do you think you are? Callin' me up to talk about some fuckin' suspension bullshit ... You think that shit's funny? Talkin' 'bout her like that?"*

Last time I saw him, he was passed out on the couch, too out of it to notice the social worker taking us away. But even after all this time, even through the muffled speaker, he still sounds the same. Like the Papi who told us stories about the farm he grew up on in Puerto Rico. About how he wanted to bring us there to visit his family someday, to Luster too, so we could meet Angel. The same Papi who named us after the sun and the moon so that even when he was away from home, he could always look up at the sky and find us.

I wish I could blame Papi for everything that's happened, but I know it's not his fault. The same way it's not Mami's for being sick, or mine for telling the wrong person the truth. More than that, I wish I believed in God because then there'd be someone I could blame for everything we've had to suffer through. But there is no God. There is no fate. There's just the hand we're dealt, and the way we play it.

*"Don't ever call this number again! Entiendes?! Don't EVER call me talking about my daughter again!"*

He's done ranting, but he doesn't hang up. He mutters something under his breath about nosy pendejos before the words are swallowed by a sob. A

sound so gut-wrenching it sends chills down my spine. I thought I'd severed the part of me that cared about Papi years ago—when we left the group home, leaving behind any chance of him coming back to get us, like we'd always hoped he would. We cut him off like a dead limb, making our peace with the fact that we might not ever see him again.

But I miss him. I miss his voice and his piggyback rides and the way he always brought home McDonald's on Fridays. I miss our house and our closet full of cheetah-print throw blankets and Mami's scented candles. I miss our life. I miss the person I used to be.

I've tried so hard to hate Papi, but I don't think I ever will. Just because I can't forgive him doesn't mean I stopped loving him.

His sobs are raw, primal. More like a wounded animal than a man with a broken heart. I didn't consider that he might have known about Solina. Cartagena's so bad at his job, I wouldn't have been surprised if he skipped a step and decided telling me was enough.

Papi's sobs echo through the room. Charlisa wipes a tear out of the corner of her eye while I grip the edges of my seat until my knuckles turn white. I won't cry. Not for him. Not now, and especially not in front of them. The message ends, and Papi's voice cuts off mid-sob.

Dean Hughes leans back in his seat, calmly peering at me over the top of his glasses. "Care to explain?"

Where do I start? The truth is as unbelievable as any lie I could come up with, but I start with it anyway.

"My sister died," I say. One of the few true things I've said since I got here. The first time, I realize, that I've said it out loud. Everyone in Luster knew about Solina without me needing to tell them. The words are clunky, scratching my throat raw like they're not mine to share. It's different, saying it as opposed to thinking it.

*My sister died.*

Saying it is worse.

Charlisa softens, holding a hand up to her mouth as tears spill down her cheeks. Dean Hughes seems less moved. He shifts uncomfortably, as if he finds displays of emotion inappropriate. He clears his throat and fiddles with a loose button on his suit jacket as he searches for the right way to respond to me. The girl with the dead sister.

“Over break. My dad took it hard,” I add when Dean Hughes can’t find the words he needs, patching up the next hole in my story. “Really hard.”

That’s not a lie either. Papi’s clearly not taking the news well.

This detail makes Dean Hughes finally get with the program, shaking off whatever jarred him and facing me head-on again. “I’m sorry for your loss, Ms. Flores.” He doesn’t sound sorry at all. “Given the circumstances, we think it’d be best if we could speak with your father in person about your situation.”

Just when I think I’m out of the woods. “You … what?”

Mr. Hughes clears his throat again. “This is a complicated matter, and we think it’d be best to hash things out personally, to avoid any miscommunication. You’re only a few hours’ drive from here, correct?”

Everything about this—the tone of his voice, the way he looks down on me, the thought of making Papi come here—makes me want to scream. Charlisa doesn’t meet my eye, just wipes away her tears like she doesn’t have the power to put a stop to this.

“Y-yes, b-but, my dad, he …” Doesn’t know I’m here. Doesn’t know where I am. Is probably passed out on someone’s couch right now. “He’s been really busy lately. Picking up extra shifts to pay for … everything.”

I don’t need to be specific to play their heartstrings, but Dean Hughes doesn’t let up. No wonder Gabe’s so damn gloomy. He was raised by someone who’s dead behind the eyes.

“We’d be happy to arrange for him to come on a weekend, if that’s easier for him.”

The urge to cry morphs into the urge to throttle him. There’s got to be a way out of this—something I can say or do to convince them that Papi doesn’t need to be here in person. He has to work overnight shifts, or he was recently injured, or something, *anything*, to get them to back off.

“O-okay,” I choke out. Whatever the solution is, I’m not going to think of it here. With this kind of pressure, I’ll only come up with something that’ll land me in even more trouble. Unless I want to pack my bags tonight, I need to play by the rules. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Good.” Dean Hughes nods, uncrossing his legs and turning back to the computer on his desk. At first, I take it as a dismissal—already halfway out of my seat when he speaks up again.

“I’ll be speaking with the Hightower Committee after our meeting with your father,” he says, and I drop right back into my seat. The fellowship doesn’t matter anymore, but I can’t help the tug that lures me to the promise of it. “They’re still very interested in you as a candidate.”

I’m not sure what to say, my voice and heart lodged in my throat. The fact that they’re interested in Solina at all is a testament to the person she was. All that time she spent so worried that they’d go with someone like Hunter, someone who had enough money to fund their own scholarship, and now she’s a front-runner.

If she were here, I’d tell her I told you so.

“Thank you,” I say as quietly as I can. Dean Hughes is the last person I want to thank, but I don’t think he’d take too kindly to me not expressing my gratitude for taking expulsion off the table.

My eyes glance down at the papers on his desk, various forms and documents waiting for his signature. An idea comes to me, the words tumbling out before I can overthink it.

“Can I have a tardy slip?”

Dean Hughes grunts, not looking away from his computer as he reaches for a stack of red slips. He scribbles out the date, time, and his signature with practiced ease before tearing out the slip and handing it to me. Before I can examine it, Charlisa shuffles over to my side, gently tapping my shoulder and gesturing for me to follow her out of the room. She breathes a sigh of relief once we’re out in the hall, wiping at the dried tears staining her cheeks.

“That went better than expected.”

Easy for her to say.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Solina,” she says with a sniffle, resting a hand on my arm. “I had no idea you were going through that. I know it must be making everything so much harder. Please don’t ever hesitate to reach out to me if you ever need to talk, or if you feel like you need help, okay?”

I need a hell of a lot more than help. I nod, shooting her my best grateful smile and a mumbled thanks before heading for the door. As soon as I’m outside, Charlisa headed the opposite direction, I examine the slip. Dean Hughes’s slanted script is harsh, the pen pressed deep, definitely leaving a mark behind on the slip beneath it. But it’s not what I’m looking

for. The loops and curves of his letters are too neat to be the person behind the note slipped under my door. It had been a long shot, but worth checking while I had the chance. I wouldn't be surprised if he wanted to get rid of Solina. Make things easier for his son to swoop in and steal the fellowship for himself—even if we both know he doesn't deserve it.

Tucking the slip into my pocket, I quickly turn off the path—away from the cluster of buildings where classes are held. Campus is blissfully deserted, everyone still in class for another twenty minutes. I put as much distance between me and the dean's office as possible, double-checking over my shoulder that no one is tailing me before settling on a bench and pulling my phone out of my coat pocket.

Tiffany answers on the third ring. "What happened to daily updates, huh?"

I swallow hard, looking over at the looming black iron gates shielding Kingswood from the rest of the world. "I need your help."

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Who would've thought finding a last-minute suit rental would be the hardest part of this ordeal.

you owe me biiiiig time you little shit

my cars gonna smell like moth balls for months

Normally I'd ignore Tiffany's dramatics, but she's right, I do owe her. We still have to pull this off in front of Dean Hughes, but the fact that we were able to come up with something at all is impressive on its own. Let alone within less than twenty-four hours.

Once Tiffany texts me that they're ten minutes away, I head out to the front entrance. Through the black iron gates, I spot a car in the distance, the dents in the front bumper and fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview making it stand out among the sea of freshly waxed Teslas and sleek sports cars.

"Never again," Dede announces as he pulls himself out of the car, his rented suit jacket thrown across his arm. "How the hell do they expect these kids to make that drive twice a year?" He tosses the jacket to Tiffany before hunching over a nearby patch of grass, bracing his hands on his knees.

"Someone couldn't handle all those winding roads," Tiffany explains with a shrug. To be fair, the twisting single-car road leading up to Kingswood would upset even the strongest stomach.

Tiffany's expression shifts after she's thrown the jacket back into the passenger seat, a smile breaking out across her face as she pulls me in for a bone-crushing hug. "Missed you, grumpy."

Nerves have been prickling under my skin since I left Dean Hughes's office yesterday morning, but everything fades once Tiffany's arms wrap

around me. The smell of lavender dryer sheets, shea butter, and the essential oils she claims help her sleep. The scent of her, the scent of *home*.

“Missed you too,” I reply, my words muffled by the fabric of her sweater.

There was no real reason for her to come. All we needed was Dede to pull off the ruse. We don’t exactly look related, but he at least fits the bill age-wise. Now my entire investigation hinges on a prayer that Dean Hughes is the type of person who thinks all Latinos look the same.

But Tiffany came anyway. And even if I tried to fight her on it yesterday, I’m glad she did.

This could all end in a matter of minutes. Dean Hughes could see right through our charade and ban me from campus before I can even grab my stuff from Kincaid. The patter of my rapid heart has been a constant drumbeat since I left his office, but everything slows once Tiffany takes my face in her hands. For a few blissful seconds, the question of my sister’s murder doesn’t hang in the balance. We’re just two people who love one another, finding their way back to each other.

With one arm still around my shoulders, Tiffany takes in the campus and lets out a low whistle. “Damn, why didn’t you tell me this place was so swanky?”

“Figured you’d know that from the price tag.”

She nods, though even I have to admit that nothing will ever do Kingswood justice. This place may be infuriating and rotten to its core, but you can’t deny that it’s breathtaking.

“All right, let’s get this over with,” Dede says through panted breaths, loosening his tie as he rejoins us.

“Well, don’t look so eager, babe.” Tiffany adjusts the knot of Dede’s tie, rewarding him with a kiss on the cheek that makes him roll his eyes. “That’s our cover, by the way,” Tiffany says to me. “If anyone asks, I’m your dad’s younger, but incredibly beautiful, and *very* mature lover.”

“Gee, thanks,” I mumble. “I’m sure they’ll be dying to know the whole story.”

“As they should.” Tiffany walks ahead of us, despite not knowing where we’re supposed to go. “It’s riveting. Sex, drugs, political scandal. Some of my best work, if you ask me.”

“Hey,” Dede cuts in, yanking Tiffany back toward us by the sleeve of her bright red sweater. “I didn’t sign up for dinner theater. I’m here for Lu, and that’s it. Got it?”

Tiffany lets out a dramatic sigh as she readjusts her collar. “You’re stifling my creative energy.”

After the past week of constantly feeling on edge, it’s nice to laugh. *Really* laugh. Not the forced act I put on for Poppy whenever she tells one of her rambling stories about how Nordstrom shipped her the wrong heels. Or the fake smiles I give Hunter whenever he kisses me on the cheek. My body feels lighter next to Tiffany, our arms looped together as I guide her toward Dean Hughes’s office.

“So, what’s the plan here? We tell ‘em your sister died and you’re going through a rough patch, and then what? They let us go?” Dede asks, flipping through the note cards Tiffany went over with him on the drive, giving him all the details on the story we’d come up with last night.

“Hopefully,” I reply. “I still don’t understand why he wants to talk to you in the first place.”

“Maybe he has a poor-people kink,” Tiffany suggests as she pulls a packet of gum out of her pocket. “Like, he gets off on the idea that he’s helping these sad little poor kids from the ‘rough’ side of town.”

Wouldn’t surprise me.

We’re able to make it across campus without calling too much attention to ourselves. Dean Hughes was able to schedule us early on in his “very busy” day. So early Dede and Tiffany had to wake up at three in the morning to make the drive up. They both look worse for wear because of it, but you can’t expect anyone—especially parents—to look put together at this hour of the day. Most of campus is still asleep, with a few early risers making their way to the dining hall. Fewer people around to notice us.

It’s just my luck Poppy decided she still wanted to cash in on her UCLA essay favor today, despite the fact that her answer sheet is what landed me in this situation in the first place. All that work to try to get back into her room to search for answers, and I might not even be here within the next hour.

Charlisa is waiting for us in the entrance hall, dressed up for the occasion in a gray wool suit.

“Thank you so much for coming in, Mr. Flores.” She extends her hand to Dede, clasping his tightly as her voice lowers two octaves. “And I am so sorry for your loss.”

Dede grunts in reply, nodding and keeping his gaze averted from hers. He’s a man of few words, which works to our advantage. The less he says, the less material they have to poke holes through.

Her brow furrows as she turns to Tiffany. “And … you are?”

Before Tiffany can open her mouth, I land a swift kick to her calf that shuts her up. “She’s my cousin,” I answer for her. “Dad’s license expired last month, so he needed someone to help him make the drive.”

As fun as it would be to watch Tiffany and Dede play lovers, we need to check the over-the-top backstory at the door.

Charlisa gives Tiffany a wry smile, but holds out her hand regardless. “Thank you for making the trip …” She trails off, giving Tiffany the chance to introduce herself.

“Chantal. Chantal Witherspoon,” she says with a radiant smile while Dede and I stifle a groan.

With introductions out of the way, Charlisa gestures for Dede to follow her down the hall, holding up a hand when Tiffany and I come along. “We’ll only need to meet with Mr. Flores. This shouldn’t take too long. Please, make yourself comfortable.”

We nod, giving Dede a discreet thumbs-up once she has her back turned. As soon as the door closes behind them, I whack Tiffany in the chest. “Seriously?!”

“What?!” She huffs, cradling her heart like I just stabbed her. “I’ve always thought I’d make a good Chantal.”

Before I can call her out on her bullshit, she turns on her heels and heads out of the building. I glance back at the dean’s closed door, holding for a beat to see if I can hear anything. No screaming or multilingual profanities yet. So far, so good.

By the time I catch up to Tiffany, she’s muttering under her breath as she struggles to get her lighter to hold a flame. She’s kept the thing for years, even though it barely works at this point. Something about how it was the first thing she ever swiped from a store without getting caught. Says it has sentimental value.

She scoffs, settling down on a nearby bench and huddling closer to the flame in hopes of getting it to hold long enough to light the end of her cigarette.

“We need to talk,” she says once she’s given up on the lighter, tossing it onto the bench with a huff.

She makes it sound like she’s breaking up with me.

“About how you said you were gonna quit this year?” I sit down beside her, picking up the lighter and giving it a few half-hearted flicks, but I don’t have the magic touch either.

Tiffany ignores my question with an eye roll. She tucks the unlit cigarette into the pack and pulls out her phone instead, gum wrappers and one of Todd Lowry’s crumpled “IT’S NOT TOO LATE TO SAVE YOUR SOUL” postcards falling out of her pocket and into the snow. “First, found your girl Izzy.”

She hands over her phone, open to an article in the *Seattle Tribune*. “Her socials are all locked, but I managed to find this.”

#### SEATTLE FENCER MOVES ON TO NATIONALS

Smack at the top of the article is an action shot of a girl removing her helmet, saber still in hand. Her dark brown skin glistens with sweat, black-and-pink braids spilling down her shoulder. Her gold septum ring glimmers even in pixel form. Beneath the photo, the caption reads:

*Isabella Tucker, formerly of Kingswood Academy, will be representing Seattle Prep at this year’s Spring Nationals.*

I quickly skim the rest of the article. Looks like Izzy was competing in the tournament on the twentieth, which writes her off as a suspect, but I’m sure she knows something. She didn’t respond to the voicemail I left her on Sunday, so there’s no telling whether she’s going to heed my warning and come back for her stuff. If she does, she’s only got a day left to do it.

“And Mr. McMillion isn’t your guy,” Tiffany continues when I finish reading the article. “He was at some charity ski event in the Alps when—”

“I know,” I interrupt through gritted teeth. “He hurt her … but not that way.”

Tiffany softens, resting a hand on my knee. “I’m sorry.”

We sit in silence, until Tiffany takes my hand in hers.

“It’s time for you to come home, Lu,” she says, her voice so gentle I almost don’t hear it over the wind. But there’s no mistaking what she just

said.

“I can’t,” I snap, anger jumping from simmering to boiling at lightning speed. “There are people I still need to look into, stuff I still—”

“We need to leave, Lu,” Tiffany interjects, cutting me off like she just zipped my lips shut.

It takes me several seconds to respond. I wait for the anger to cool, until I can process what she just said. I run the words through my mind twice and they still don’t make any sense. “W-what?”

“We need to move,” she says, slow and deliberate this time. She bites her lip, waiting until it’s clear that I have nothing else to say before continuing. “The landlord is being a prick and wants to up the rent again. Either we cough up an extra hundred bucks a month, or we need to be out by the fifteenth.”

“But that’s next week,” I protest. “He can’t do that.”

She gives me a withering look. “Just because it’s fucked up doesn’t mean he can’t.”

Another hard lesson in the way the world works. Why do we always have to learn by example?

“We can figure something out, though,” I continue. “I’ll pull some extra shifts when I get back, we have the ...” I trail off before I can finish. The money we would’ve used for Solina. One less mouth to feed, one less bill to pay.

Freedom at the cost of my sister’s life.

Tiffany shakes her head as she lets go of my hand. She pulls her jacket tighter across her chest, burrowing into the warmth of her scarf. “We were barely covering our asses as it is. And we both know the place isn’t worth another grand a year.”

I can’t fight her on that. The busted radiators. The leaky faucet. If anything, they should be paying us back.

“This could be a fresh start for us. A chance to put everything in the past and move forward.”

Her words feel like a slap to the face. I’m not ready for a fresh start. I don’t want to move forward. I don’t want to slam the door on my sister. Not again.

“I’m not leaving yet,” I croak, my voice on the edge of cracking. “I’m close to finding something, I know it.”

Something passes through Tiffany, her expression unreadable as she reaches for her phone again. When she hands it to me, her expression changes again. Pity.

“I found this too ...”

She’s pulled up another webpage. An online obituary for someone named Laura Santiago. I almost scroll past the unfamiliar black-and-white school photo, freezing when I spot the familiar crest on the lapel of her blazer. A Kingswood blazer.

“This was—”

“Izzy’s roommate,” Tiffany finishes for me.

That night at the bonfire comes rushing back. The scoffs and eye rolls at the mention of “Laura something.” Her OD treated as a minor inconvenience, like bad weather or a stomach bug. Is this what really happened to her? The “incident” in Izzy’s file?

Did Kingswood brush a student’s death under the rug like she was nothing more than dust?

“Keep reading.” Tiffany takes the liberty of scrolling farther down the page for me. A message asks that, in lieu of flowers, donations be made to a local suicide hotline in Laura’s name.

I swallow hard around the lump in my throat. That single sentence opens up a whole new set of possibilities. Poppy said Laura was expelled. Claudia hasn’t talked about her at all. Is this what happened to her after she was sent back home? Or did it happen here, on these lush and perfect grounds—the staff working overtime to hide the aftermath from the students?

I wouldn’t blame Izzy if that’s why she decided to transfer. This place is brutal enough as it is.

“Maybe this is what this place does to people,” Tiffany whispers.

My stomach churns at the implication behind her words. This place is cruel, and stifling, and cold, but Solina wouldn’t have done that. She would’ve talked to me. Even if I’d lashed out the night before, she would’ve come back.

“Don’t start coming at me with that bullshit,” I snap, storming away from the bench. There’s nowhere I can go, not when I still have to wait for Dede. But I can’t just sit there and let Tiffany feed me the same half-baked story the Luster police came up with.

“I’m not saying it’s what happened, but there’s something to it, Lu. You can’t ignore that.”

I pace in circles a few feet away from the bench, avoiding Tiffany as she follows after me. “What? You’re gonna team up with Cartagena now? Rat me out to him and get the case closed for good?”

“Jesus, Lu. Not everyone who disagrees with you is out to get you. I just want you to listen to some fucking facts for two seconds.”

“NO!” I shout, loud enough to echo in the silence. I’d be worried about my voice traveling all the way to the dean’s office, but there’s too much rage simmering inside me to care.

Solina wouldn’t leave me behind with this kind of weight on my shoulders. Wondering for the rest of my life if I was the reason she lost hers. I’m still learning that my sister had sides to her that I didn’t know and won’t ever understand. But I know she wouldn’t have done that to me.

“Someone hurt her.” A statement, and I won’t let anyone tell me otherwise. I’m running low on leads, but I’m closer than I ever was now. The letter slipped under my door. Proof that someone here wants her, or me, gone. But I can’t tell Tiffany that. Knowing someone threatened me means she’ll force me back to the car even if my nails bleed from dragging against the cobblestone.

Holding back tears stings as harsh as the bite of the wind, but I won’t break down again. Even if my last lead doesn’t pan out. Even if it means starting at square one, I know the answer is here. Buried under the snow or in a box under a bed or in the back of someone’s mind.

Someone here knows what happened.

“I know it.”

Tension keeps us rooted in place. Our breath comes out in white clouds, mingling and evaporating in the space between us. Quiet enough that the wind’s howl covers up the crunch of the snow as footsteps approach us.

“Thank God that’s over,” Dede says with a sigh of relief, wiping off his brow and immediately pulling his tie loose again. “You’re off the hook, kid. No suspension, just a warning. You can retake that exam next week. And you’ve gotta go to some counseling sessions with the lady that was back there.”

Neither me nor Tiffany turn to look at him.

“Now what the hell did I just walk into,” Dede mumbles when we don’t pay him any attention. “Break it up, break it up.” He waves his arms as he comes between us, batting us in opposite directions. “I did not wake up at the ass crack of dawn for you two to pick a fight the second I walked away. Play nice.”

Well, I’m tired of playing nice with people who want to put Solina in a box.

Tiffany reaches into her pocket, pulling out a thick piece of paper. “I bought you a train ticket.” She holds it out to me. The two of them hold their breath as I reach out to take the paper. A one-way ticket back to Luster, leaving tomorrow. “Come home, Lu. Please. Starting over doesn’t mean leaving her behind.”

I swallow hard around the lump in my throat, tears blurring the words on the page in front of me. I’d thought Tiffany understood. That she wanted to find who did this as badly as I did. But the one person I thought I could trust is just like everyone else. Willing to believe the easiest solution because the truth is too hard to face. I close my fist around the paper, crumpling it and shoving it into my pocket.

“Thank you,” I say to Dede directly, before turning on my heels and walking toward Poppy’s dorm, because I still have a murder to solve.

“What the hell did you say to her?” Dede mutters as I storm off.

I can hear Tiffany push him aside, her boots sinking into the snow. “You’re not the only one who lost someone,” she shouts at me. “You think you’re the only one who’s hurt? We all lost her, Luna. We’re all trying to figure out how to move on from this. And I’m not going to lose you too.”

The smallness of her voice, the lack of confidence or passion or excitement, makes me stop in my tracks. But the reality of what she’s asking me to do keeps me from turning back. I can’t give up now, not when I’ve worked this hard to find the truth. So I keep walking and ignore the call of Tiffany’s voice until it fades into the breeze.

I shove my hands into my pocket and push forward against the wind. Something cold is sitting in my pocket. Tiffany’s faulty lighter. For half a second, I consider turning around and tossing it to her. But what’s the point in giving back something broken that she refuses to throw away?

I let out a humorless laugh as I shove the lighter into my pocket and keep moving, never looking back.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Good news: thanks to Dede, I wasn't expelled on the spot. Bad news: there's no way Tiffany will keep helping me with homework answers.

I've never been on the receiving end of one of her infamous grudges, but I've lived with her long enough to know that it's not pretty. Unless I'm screaming bloody murder in her voicemail inbox, she's icing me out until I come crawling back home.

The train ticket burns a hole in my pocket. Behind my eyes is a gleaming countdown to tomorrow. A little more than a day doesn't come close to enough time to finish my story here. There are still too many unanswered questions. Who slipped the note under my door? Why is there a camera in Gabe and Hunter's room? And, of course, who hurt my sister? This place is full of secrets—any one of which could lead me to the answers I need—but I don't have time to go down every rabbit hole.

Playing Solina has worn me thin, wrecked my body more than any double shift. I know I can't do it forever, but I'm not willing to give up just because I'm tired.

But what happens if I don't wind up on that platform Saturday afternoon? Will I find Solina's killer and come home, bruised and bloody, to an empty apartment? A home that doesn't belong to me anymore?

My grip around the pen in my hand tightens until the cap digs into my palm. I can't rush this. Moving quickly means more room for mistakes, and I've already got two strikes against me. Ticket or no ticket, the clock on my time here is running out. Unless I want to go home exhausted and empty-handed, I need to finish this.

"Someone's having a rough morning," Poppy sings as she flops onto her bed.

As a thank-you for trekking to her dorm this morning to go over her essays, Poppy set up a breakfast spread that makes the dining hall look lackluster. Sliced bagels with a variety of cream cheeses are laid out across her desk, along with freshly sliced fruit and an assortment of pastries towered high on a three-tier display fit for tea with the royal family. Thankfully, she didn't see through my half-assed comments and was grateful for my "eye-opening" input. In the few free spaces on the desk are my textbooks and worksheets, my everything bagel with scallion cream cheese sitting untouched as I scan Poppy's calculus notes that she graciously let me borrow.

"Just a lot to catch up on," I mumble as I toss down her notebook. Just as I figured, her neat handwriting isn't the match I'm looking for.

So far, my second visit to Poppy's room hasn't been as productive as the first. The room is pristine, without so much as a loose thread on the fuzzy pink carpet out of place. Anything worth seeing has been carefully tucked away. The most interesting thing I've spotted in the half hour I've been here is a prescription acne medication in her desk drawer.

"Spring semester's the wooooorst." She groans dramatically. "Isn't senior year supposed to be easy? What's the point of making us do all this? By the time we get our grades, we'll have already gotten into college. Just let us ... I don't know, watch movies or something."

I shrug as I turn to my own calculus notes, the words and symbols on the page blurring the longer I look at them. Playing a confused, defeated student is easier than playing Solina—it doesn't take much for me to look completely out of my depth.

Out of the corner of my eye, I peek over at where Poppy is scrolling through her phone, brainstorming ways to get her to leave it behind long enough for me to get a good look at it, when she speaks up again.

"If you want, I can get you some Addies," she says without looking up.

Not what I was hoping for. "Addies?"

She reaches into her bedside drawer and tosses me a baggie full of peach pills. The exact same I'd found beneath Solina's bed. "Adderall, duh. What, do you live under a rock?"

It shouldn't still sting, knowing that Solina took shortcuts. I saw it for myself when I opened the hems of her skirts. What hurts more is watching the cracks form in the version of her that lives in my memories. In Luster I

would've boasted that Solina could do it all. Even last week, I was still putting her on a pedestal. Refusing to consider that she might not be as different from her classmates as I wanted her to be.

And maybe that's what killed her. Trying to live up to my expectations.

I quickly shake off that line of thought. Can't let Tiffany get to me. "I'm good, thanks," I mutter, and toss the bag back to her.

"Oh, c'mon." She comes to sit beside me on the edge of her desk, her thigh dangerously close to an open tub of hummus. "I know being Little Miss Mary Sue is your schtick, but it's not a big deal. Seriously."

The look I give her answers for me. Something softens inside me. If Solina was taking the pills after all, at least she was being discreet about it. She may not have known not to play with vices, but she knew not to mess with the kind of gamble that could get her expelled.

Poppy rolls her eyes. "Look, all I'm saying is if it's good enough for your new bestie, it's probably good enough for you, Your Highness."

There's no one here I'd consider a best friend, or, from what I can tell, that Solina would have either. "Who?"

Poppy snorts before hopping off the desk and walking toward her closet, changing out of her matching pajama set along the way. "So, you didn't hear it from me, but ..." She pokes her head out of the closet, her top unbuttoned. "Claudia bought some off of Gabe last semester."

Shock must be written all over my face, based on the way she grins. "I know, right?"

"That ... doesn't sound like her," I say, even if I'm not sure that's true. The Claudia I've gotten to know doesn't strike me as the type to break the rules, but then again, I thought the same thing about Solina.

"That's what I said." She disappears back into the closet. "But I swear, that's what Gabe told us. Even he didn't believe it at first when she asked."

My throat tightens at the thought of it—Claudia, a ghost of a girl, meeting Gabe in a dimly lit hallway or behind a crumbling building. Slapping cash into his hand for a bag full of risks with sky-high consequences. The thought doesn't compute, glitching like a corrupted file. Poppy has no reason to lie, but I can't find it in me to believe her. It doesn't make sense, but nothing here does.

"If you change your mind, let me know." Poppy comes out of the closet clad in a plush pink robe. She shoots off a text before setting her phone

down on the edge of the vanity. “Give me ten minutes to shower and then we can head out.”

The door to the en suite bathroom closes behind her and I’m left with my reeling thoughts, a dozen questions, and, I slowly realize, Poppy’s phone.

Finally, something goes right.

I lean back slightly, carefully glancing over at the bathroom to ensure that the door is fully closed. Moments later I hear the squeak of the shower roaring to life and the metal *clang* of the shower curtain. Biting my lip, I tentatively pick up the phone, prepared to hold it up to my face and pray my Face ID wasn’t deleted.

But the phone is already unlocked.

Brow furrowed, I keep my thumb on the screen, ensuring it won’t lock on me. She left it open on a text thread between her and Hunter.

What’s your problem? the most recent text from Hunter reads, from yesterday morning after breakfast. Read, but unanswered.

Farther up the chain, the conversation starts with Poppy sending Hunter a selfie prominently displaying the hickey he’d called her out for at breakfast. Her face is barely in frame, her neck and cleavage—accentuated by a lacy pink bra—are the primary focus. She’s throwing up her middle finger, hammering in the sentiment with the brief text below the photo: fuck you.

lol my bad babe, reads Hunter’s reply.

Surprisingly, there’s no pit lodged in my throat or twisting feeling in my stomach at the reveal. If anything, all I can feel is excitement.

There’s no hiding the way Poppy looks at Hunter—like the world starts and ends with him. Based on the way he brushes her off like a loose thread, I didn’t think the feeling was mutual. Clearly, Hunter doesn’t care much about treating people with dignity, though.

Still, a part of me aches for Solina, wondering if Hunter was sneaking around with Poppy the entire time they were together. A new rage simmers beneath my skin, aimed pointedly at Hunter. Hadn’t he already hurt Solina enough?

Poppy has never been Solina’s friend—not really. The borrowed clothes and cheek kisses sugarcoated the truth sitting beneath the surface.

Relieved as I feel to find a new concrete lead, a motive as cliché as can be, I can't imagine a world where someone like Hunter is worth killing for.

Did Poppy want me to find this? There's no way someone as smart as her would be careless enough to leave her phone inches away from me unlocked on an incriminating text thread unless this was something she wanted me to know. But why? For revenge? To get me to finally end things with Hunter so she can have him for herself?

Or was it a warning?

Quickly, I close out the texts and return to the home screen. In the background, a summer-tanned Hunter and Poppy grin at me, watching as I swipe through the home screen for something that can help me.

Keeping my neck craned toward the bathroom, I open up her banking app. I can feel the seconds tick by as I scroll through the well-over a hundred charges she's made on her card since we got here. Designer boots and moisturizers, an Emirates flight worth more than our rent. I slow down once I reach December, carefully examining each charge. All I need is something that breaks the pattern. It doesn't even have to put her in Luster, so long as it puts her anywhere but her parents' place in California. A gas refill, or a parking ticket.

My mouth goes dry as I reach the single charge on December 20. Sixty dollars at a yoga studio.

In Los Angeles.

The steady hum of the shower switches off. I don't have time to sit in the disappointment, or find a loophole that still puts the smoking gun in Poppy's perfectly manicured hands. They all have alibis. Her, Hunter, and Gabe. And not even the shitty kind money could buy them. I don't let myself entertain the thought that there may have been some truth to what Tiffany said. There's still the note. Someone here still has a reason to want me—whatever I am to them—gone.

Darkness creeps into the edges of my vision, the room slowly going out of focus. It's not from the thought of a murderer coming after me. Or the thought of having to fight them off or die trying. It's that I found this many leads at all. That this many people had a reason to hurt her.

"Mind if we swing by Hunter's before we head out?" Poppy asks as she steps out of the bathroom, her hair secured in a silk shower cap. "I've gotta grab something from him real qu—"

“Why do you like him?” I interrupt, my heart getting in the way of my head.

That’s the part I still don’t understand. Why would girls like Solina and Poppy—beautiful and vibrant—fall for someone like Hunter? Looks can’t be the end of it. No one’s worth the type of pain he’s put both of them through. Not money either. Poppy has plenty of that. What about him lured them in?

Poppy wrinkles her nose in confusion. “Like who?”

“Him.” I hold up her unlocked phone, open to the home screen photo of the two of them at the edge of a pool. The lack of surprise on her face confirms my suspicion. She wanted me to see those texts.

Instead of hanging her head in shame, or coming up with an excuse for why she’s been sneaking around with my supposed boyfriend behind my back, she shrugs. The faintest trace of a smirk tugs at the corner of her lips.

“Why do you?” she asks without looking at me.

That’s not something I can answer, even as Solina. I could come up with some half-assed reply about his hair or his abs or his smile, but it wouldn’t take much to see right through me. Not when so much of me still wants to hurt him for what he did to her.

Poppy doesn’t wait for me to reply, taking back her phone and texting as if nothing just happened between us.

“He records girls in his room, y’know,” she says as casually as if she’d asked me if I wanted to grab breakfast.

“W-what?” I reply, but my brain connects the dots before she can answer.

The camera on the bookshelf. The one I knocked over when I was looking through Gabe’s things.

“It’s creepy at first, but sorta hot once you’re used to it,” she says with a smug smile that tells me she knows that firsthand. “You could learn a lot from what’s on it. If you wanted to.”

I don’t need to see anything to know what’s there. Dozens of faceless girls. Poppy. Maybe even Solina, I realize.

The thought hits me like a truck. What if that’s the last real piece of Solina left? The last recording of her voice, of her smile, of the way she’d widen her eyes to the size of saucers when she was trying to force herself to stay awake. A video of her with the boy who hurt her.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” I manage to choke out, forcing myself not to dwell on the thought of Solina on that camera.

“This place is brutal. If you don’t fit the mold, they’ll chew you up and spit you out,” Poppy replies after a beat, her voice unusually cold. This is a side of her I haven’t seen—angry, wounded, but not broken. The Poppy I’ve seen at breakfast or classes or parties wasn’t someone I could imagine hurting Solina, but this Poppy, with her deep-set frown and clenched fists, seems capable of anything.

“People like him make it easier. Fitting in. Earning respect. You know that. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be here.” Her words feel like a knife to the throat. A threat. “He picked you for now, but neither of us will make it to the finish line. We’ll never be enough for him. The ‘right’ sort of girl,” she says with an eerie sense of finality.

“Why are you doing this?” I spit out, resisting the urge to push her against the wall and demand answers to their twisted game. “You loan me clothes, you smile in my face, you pretend I’m your friend. Why? What’s the point?”

“Because I’m sick of girls like you,” she snaps back, angry like I’ve never seen her before—something wild behind her eyes. “Acting like you’re one of us just because you’re his for now, but we all know why you’re here. Why you want to be with him,” she spits through gritted teeth. “You’re *not* one of us.”

“And why do you care?” I reply, fingers curling into fists. “You said yourself he’s not going to end up with either of us anyway.”

She lets out a cold, cruel laugh. “You think you’re so different because he parades you around. Because you get to meet his parents. But I promise you, you’re the same as everyone else.” I’m frozen in place, pinned by her gaze as she leans in to whisper, “I know how fun it is. Getting to be on top. Enjoy it. It’ll be over soon.” Before I can reply, she steps back into her closet.

Her words sink through me like a stone, my limbs growing heavier the longer I sit with what she’s said. If I hadn’t seen the proof of her alibi minutes earlier, I’d go after her. Press the switchblade to her flawless skin and hold her tight until she tells me why she *really* hated my sister so much. But I spot something out of the corner of my eye that yanks my attention away from her.

Beneath Poppy's calculus notebook are her notes from the chem exam last week. Her familiar bubbly handwriting tucked between several additional photocopies of the answer sheet. And another set of notes, not written by her.

"Anyway, let me know if you want the Addies or not," Poppy calls out as she reemerges from the closet fully dressed in her uniform seconds after I shove the stack of papers into my bag. "Or you could always get some from your roomie, if she has any left over," she adds with a wink.

Her tone switch is jarring, and the reminder of Claudia makes my blood run cold. I'm caught between wanting to pry for more and finding Claudia to warn her.

When Poppy's eyes meet mine, I don't see the same vapid, pretty girl I came looking for this morning. I see a hunger in her hazel eyes, a cunning edge to her smile. If I were another person, I might find it threatening, but I know the truth now.

She's not a killer. Just a girl, looking in all the wrong places for a way to feel invincible.

Just like my sister.

"I'm good, thanks," I mumble as I throw my bag over my shoulder and rush toward the door.

"Oh, come on," Poppy whines, as if she didn't just admit that she's sleeping with my "boyfriend" less than a minute ago. "Don't get all weird about it. It's chill, seriously. Everyone does it."

Even if that's true, I still have no interest. "See you in class," I call out under my breath and storm out of the room before she can question where I'm going.

Quick as I can, I rush out into the stairwell, leaning against the wall once I'm sure Poppy didn't follow me. I pull the notes out of my bag, taking a closer look at the stack I swiped from her desk. Pages torn from a notebook—the notes Poppy took from Gabe at the library. Heavy chicken-scratch-like handwriting, so rough it's almost pressed through the page.

The same as the letter slipped under my door.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Of course it was him. Out of everyone here, Gabe had the most to gain if Solina was out of the picture. Poppy may get Hunter to herself, but she's right. Solina wouldn't have him for long. Hunter would move on within a week, but Gabe would relish her disappearance. Finally snatch the Hightower Fellowship—focusing all the hard work you needed to spend on academics on pushing her out instead.

Another person who didn't kill her but hurt her all the same.

Buying drugs off Gabe may be the norm here, but I know someone like Claudia would pay a much higher price if Dean Hughes found out. If Poppy knows she bought off Gabe, then she's probably not the only one. I've learned the hard way that you can't talk someone out of making a bad decision. It didn't work with Papi, and it probably won't work now if this is what Claudia's determined to do, but the least I can do is warn her. Before Dean Hughes finds his next scapegoat.

And before Gabe can get rid of me.

The Robert L. Grant Concert Hall is a hulking beast of a building. The red brick stretches on for what feels like miles, thin towers dotted along the exterior walls like commas. Large windows and ornate balconies decorate every other floor. It's one of Kingswood's many crown jewels, a Gothic feat of architecture to impress the donors, alums, and parents who drag themselves to campus for graduation or the occasional performance.

Inside, the concert hall is as massive as the façade promises. The lobby's gilded ceiling takes my breath away when I first step inside, the royal-blue-and-gold trim like something out of a palace. It's easy to see how Claudia can lose herself here. If I weren't here for a reason, I'd stop and take in the grandness of it all—the marvel that beauty like this exists in a

place where the only people who'll witness it are the type who never bother to look up.

Off the lobby is a maze of hallways. I follow the signs to the practice rooms down in the basement. Wide windows peek into the rows of soundproofed rooms, bright white blinds pulled down over some of them. I pass a handful of occupied rooms, no one looking up from their instruments as I walk by. The hall is soundless except for my footsteps. It's eerie, watching fingers move rapidly across keys and strings without hearing a single sound. I move quickly through the halls, scanning each room for any sign of Claudia.

Music breaks the silence. The opening notes of a cello piece that's equal parts slow and melancholy. I follow the music back the way I came, up the stairs and down a hall leading to a large set of cracked-open double doors. I peer through the opening, swallowing a gasp as I take in what must be the main performance hall. A sea of plush velvet seats surrounds a brightly lit stage, adorned with heavy red-and-gold curtains. The ceiling sweeps into an arch that stretches so high up I have to crane my neck to see it, letting the music travel through the room as if on a wave.

Seated at the center of the spotlight is Claudia.

Her eyes are closed, her head swaying back and forth with the rhythm of her body. Every flick of her wrist, press of her fingers, twitch of her jaw, is entirely in sync in a way I've never seen before. The music flows through her as if it's coursing through her veins, controlling each movement like she's a puppet on strings.

It's so captivating I don't notice the blood.

As I step farther into the hall and closer to Claudia, I see it clearly. Dark red droplets trickle down her wrists, staining the cuff of her wrinkled button-up. I don't snap out of the music's spell until she pulls her hand back, a sweeping blink-and-you'll-miss-it gesture as she readjusts her grip, staining the lapel of her shirt.

"Claudia," I call out, but my voice is buried under the music. The closer I get, the more I can make out—the blood soaking through the Band-Aids wrapped around three of her fingers and dried under her cracked fingernails. The subtle tremble in her left hand that, even this close up, seems like it's a part of the music itself.

“Claudia!” I shout this time, loud enough for my voice to echo along with the chords she’s playing.

She doesn’t so much as blink, her eyes still closed as she leans into every note. The piece takes a discordant turn, her fingers moving across the strings in a blur, and I break into a run.

“Stop it!” I yell as I storm the stage. She doesn’t notice me until I’m pulling her wrist back, the bow slipping out of her hand and clattering to the ground.

When the music cuts off, she slumps forward like she’s been unplugged, her body sagging with each labored breath. I take her hand in mine, calluses and worn bandages scratching against my skin. Her left hand is still poised on the strings, as if waiting for the signal to keep playing, a drop of blood clinging to her fingertip.

“You can stop,” I whisper, but she doesn’t respond until I reach for her other hand.

“I can’t.” She pulls away from me, wiping the blood off on her skirt and reaching for the bow. I’m not able to grab it before she can, but I manage to kick it out of her reach, my shadow stretching over her as I step between her and the spotlight. Her eyes don’t meet mine, staring blankly at the Kingswood crest on my blazer’s breast pocket instead. “Why are you doing this?” she mutters, her voice low and hoarse like she’s just woken up.

The light I’d seen in her my first day here is snuffed out, not even a trembling flicker of a flame left. This place has bled her dry—just like it did to Solina.

“Because you’re hurt.” She doesn’t fight when I take her bloodied hand, but lets out a muffled hiss when I uncurl her palm. Two of the blisters on the pads of her fingers have burst, new blood mingling with the brown dried blood smudged on the half-healed calluses.

She stands up and carefully sets aside her cello. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter,” I protest. I don’t have any extra height or weight on her, but I’m at least quicker on my feet. I grab the bow again and hold it behind my back, taking a step back from her until I’m almost to the edge of the stage. “Let me get you some bandages, at least.”

She doesn’t budge, her attention focused on my bent arm.

“I’ll give it back after,” I offer. “But only after.”

The darkness in her eyes softens as she looks up at me with confused scrutiny. I can't tell if she's pissed or doesn't know whether she should trust me, but neither matters when she rolls her shoulders back and nods.

"Fine."

---

Claudia has her own pharmacy tucked under her bed. In a little pink box, the kind that should hold jewelry or makeup or knickknacks from trips with friends, are three rolls of Ace bandages, two wrist cuffs, and four boxes of Band-Aids. She pulls cotton swabs and peroxide out of her bedside drawer, tossing them onto the bed and reaching for a new box under the bed like it's a practiced routine. I watch in silent awe as she grabs a cold compress and holds it to her shoulder before sitting down on the edge of her bed and offering up her hand to me without bothering to meet my eyes.

I dab the peroxide on a swab and run it delicately across her palm. She doesn't wince, even when I pass over the raw, burst flesh of her fingertips. "Do you always use all this after practice?"

"No," she replies, shrugging before adding, "Not usually."

"What is 'usually'?"

She bristles, crossing her arms once I set her hand back down to open a fresh bandage. There's no green-gray tinge beneath her skin anymore, but she doesn't look any less exhausted. "The recital is tomorrow, and the third suite isn't where it needs to be yet."

"You can change that in a day?" From the little I'd heard of her rehearsing, I can't imagine anyone describing her performance as anything but spellbinding.

Once I have the bandage unfurled, she holds her hand back out begrudgingly, eyes still focused on the wall above my head. "I have to."

"Why?" My voice trails off as I focus on wrapping the thin bandage across the angriest cluster of blisters. "It's not like it's an audition."

"But it is," she snaps, wrenching her hand out of mine like I burned her.

My heart stutters, guilt creeping down my spine as I rush to figure out how to fix things. Empathy has never been my strong suit. Solina once told me I'm as comforting as a rock. Tantrums and emotional breakdowns were

reserved for Tiffany. She'd pull you into her arms and whisper exactly what you want to hear before offering you a plate of sliced fruit. All I'd ever do was stare and tell Solina I was sorry, like I was the one at fault.

I decide to give Claudia space. Opening my mouth will just make things worse. And even when I'm not supposed to be me, I can't force myself to pull her in for a hug and apologize. Not if I don't want to sound like a robot.

Claudia runs her uninjured hand through her hair, her breath shaky as she exhales slowly and takes another deep inhale. The same breathing exercise she walked me through the night of the storm. Without thinking, I join her. Both of us taking deep breaths in and out until it doesn't feel like there's a ticking time bomb sitting between us.

"This isn't some kids' concert," she says once she's calmed. "Legends are sculpted here. They told us that on the first day of rehearsal and tell us every day until we start acting like it. When people come to our performances, they're expecting perfection. And if we give them that, doors open. Give them anything less and you might as well shoot yourself in the hand. Your career's already dead in the water."

Her shoulders tremble with each passing sentence, and when she finishes they drop like she's weightless. Free of the burden of holding everything inside her.

"Oh ..." *Stupid*, I scold myself. If I can't pass a math test, you'd think I'd at least be able to hold a basic conversation.

"Sorry." She tucks her hands under her armpits, curling in on herself again. "It's just ... intense."

"That's an understatement," I choke out.

And, to my relief, she laughs. Not a deep belly laugh, or even a chuckle, but something bitter and hollow. It's better than nothing. Neither of us can face one another as we let the silence grow, her looking at the ground with half a bandage on her index finger and me trying to look anywhere but at her.

"They're not just saying it to say it, though. It's true," she says after what feels like eons of nothing, her voice softer now. "You blow the right person out of the water at your senior recital, and you can get the world handed to you on a platter before graduation. Slots in renowned orchestras

without a formal audition. Touring opportunities. Last year's first-chair violinist has played at Carnegie Hall six times."

I can picture it. Any one of the names in the Kingswood brochure could easily open a dozen doors if you rubbed them the right way. Imagine what a whole room of them could do.

But this can't be what they expect? A teenager working herself so hard she literally starts bursting at the seams. It's not something I haven't done. Worked double shifts on two hours of sleep because we were short on rent. Pushing my body to its limits for the sake of something impossibly enormous. But isn't that why she's here? Why Solina was here? Why I had to push my body so Solina could *stay* here? They sold us on this fantasy of ease—of doors being opened, of opportunities people like me would never be able to have, no matter how hard you worked—but none of it is easy. Not for them. Or the dozens of other scholarship kids before them, dropping like flies under the pressure. What does any of it matter if they burn themselves out before they can reach the end?

"Do you really have to do this to yourself, though? I mean, what, if you accidentally play the wrong note or you're ... I don't know, flat or something, you're never allowed to be a part of an orchestra for the rest of your life?"

"Not for everyone, no. The rest of the orchestra will probably play in college. Train a little more and eventually try out for conservatories." She cuts off with a wince, her fingers, curled into half fists, twitching before falling into her lap. "But I don't get a second chance."

She holds her hand back out, the bandage hanging limply off her freshly bloodied finger. I go over her reply while I clean off the wound and refasten the bandage. It's not a secret that students like her and Solina don't get the same kind of second chances Hunter or Gabe or Poppy would have. If they even get a second chance at all.

A place like this can be make-or-break. If Solina didn't get the Hightower Fellowship, we'd be fucked. Paying for Kingswood textbooks was rough enough—affording a whole new set for college would've been a nightmare. We had backup plans, we always do. Other scholarships and grants and whatever we could scrape out of people with too much money who made themselves feel better by giving it to kids they didn't really care about. But what if that hadn't worked either? What if Solina didn't have the

grades or the charisma or the extracurriculars to wow committees and board members into opening those doors for her? Everything we'd done—the running, the lying, the *work*—would've been for nothing.

As I wrap another bandage around Claudia's ring finger, I delicately trace the lines of her palms. The one part of her that's still smooth and warm to the touch.

"Then why'd you buy from Gabe Hughes?"

It's barely a whisper, a question I already wish I'd kept to myself. It's not that I don't understand why she might've done it. Clearly Solina did the same thing, but she's not here for me to remind her that sneaking answers in your skirt and buying pills from the campus drug dealer don't come with the same consequences. Especially at a place so hell-bent on pretending their drug problem doesn't exist.

Claudia's eyes widen as she freezes in my grasp like a startled deer.  
"How do you know about that?"

"He told Poppy. Poppy told me."

"Shit," she mutters. It's odd, hearing her curse. When she looks back up at me, the shock in her eyes has morphed into panic, her hands trembling as she grabs my arms and crowds my space. "Please, *please*, don't tell anyone. I-I didn't even wind up taking any of it."

"I won't tell anyone," I reply quickly, resting my hand on top of hers. Poppy keeping her mouth shut is one thing, but her secret's at least safe with me. "And you should stay away from Gabe," I add. "He's up to something shady that you don't want to be involved in."

Whatever plan Gabe has to take out the competition for the fellowship shouldn't involve anyone besides me, but my gut still urges me to warn her. In case she becomes what the Hightowers want—a musical prodigy who can make your body sing if you just close your eyes. There's no telling who Gabe will try to take down next.

She swallows hard, sliding her hand out from beneath mine to tuck it under her armpit again. But she doesn't step back, so close it makes my heart race. "Thank you."

I swallow hard around my pounding heart, clearing my throat before asking, "Why did you buy it? If you weren't going to use it?"

For a long time, she doesn't say anything. Just runs a hand through her dark brown, almost black hair, her sideswept curtain bangs catching on the

tips of her eyelashes. “Because this place makes you do stupid things. Things you know are wrong. But all that really matters is getting what you want.”

There’s nothing I can think to reply with, so I don’t. We’re close enough to feel the warmth of each other’s bodies but not enough to look each other in the eye. It’s the most unnerved I’ve felt since I’ve been here. Not Hunter’s hands on my body or Gabe’s glares from across the table or Poppy’s subtle but sharp comments. This. Standing a breath away from a girl I’ve been afraid of seeing up close because it just confirms what I knew even from across the room.

That she’s beautiful.

When she turns to look at me, my breath hitches. In the reflection of those golden-brown eyes, I can see myself, more terrified than I’ve ever been.

“You’re here because you want something too.” The words are warm against my chapped lips.

“I want to be a doctor,” I reply, the answer coming easily. Some days it felt more like my dream than Solina’s.

“Not like that.” She shakes her head, the ends of her hair whipping softly against my cheek. “Something you want so bad, if you can’t have it, you’d rather be dead.”

My heart stammers, louder and louder until it drowns out my thoughts. Because I’m taking a step closer. Because she smells like apricots and Earl Grey tea. Because she’s the only person here who managed to see right through me.

All I’ve ever wanted was for Solina to have everything. To give her the future only one of us could afford. What’s left for me to want now? Something better than a dead-end job, where I don’t have to kiss tripper ass all day? A GED? A house with a working radiator and a faucet that doesn’t leak? None of it sparks anything in me other than spite—that I can only have those things because my sister is dead.

Claudia’s right. All I want is an answer. Who hurt my sister and why. I knew when I came here that I might be walking right into a killer’s trap, but I did it anyway. Because I need to know none of it was wasted, that I didn’t spend the last four years of my life giving everything up for her just to push her to the same edge that took her away from us. Even if it kills me.

“Yeah,” I reply, after what feels like hours.

She nods slowly, and when she bites her lip, it takes all my strength not to stare at the curve of her mouth. “What do you want?”

I want answers. I want someone to blame. I want to start over again. I want another life that Solina is still a part of. I want to run away with Tiffany to a city full of sun. I want to stick my knife into someone’s throat. I want hundreds of things and nothing all at once, but all I can focus on is the one thing I want right now.

I kiss her. Soft, at first. Until her teeth aren’t digging into her lower lip and she comes undone for me like a spool of thread. Harder, when she leans into me. My fingers twitch at my sides before reaching out to touch her, one hand on her waist, the other cradling her jaw. It’s not like those other kisses with boys in dark rooms. No taste of cigarette smoke on her tongue or the scrape of her nails against my bare skin. Stars bloom behind my closed eyes when her hands curl around my waist, the smell of her overwhelming every part of me.

It’s easy to imagine wanting things—simple things—when I glide my tongue along her lower lip to taste her peppermint ChapStick. Summer nights on a beach looking up at the stars. Winters on the couch with her body pressed against mine. Days and nights and everything in between.

It’s as easy as breathing—until she cuts it short.

The hand she had on my waist comes up to my chest, pressing on my collarbone until we pull apart. Our chests heave as we struggle to catch our breath, her lips a soft pink that makes me want to kiss her until I can’t remember my name. My thumb coasts the edge of her lower lip, pulling her in again, when she pushes more firmly.

“I can’t,” she says, eyes focused on the ground instead of on me.

“O-oh. Okay.” My hands drop back to my sides. I fight the urge to shake myself and her touch off, shoving my hands into my pockets to keep them from trembling. “I-I’m sorry. I thought ...”

What? That she wanted to kiss me even though she doesn’t know my real name? That I could keep pretending to be a dead girl because people never like me the way they like Solina? That we could walk out of here hand in hand like this isn’t the type of place that destroys girls like us?

Before she can answer, I bolt, hand clamped to my mouth. Regret and panic and the bagel I ate for breakfast come crawling up my throat. I race

down the hall to the bathroom, slamming doors behind me with too much force. In the bathroom, I collapse against the counter and dry heave into the sink. Sweat dots my brow and drenches my hair as I retch and retch but nothing comes out.

Wiping the spit from the corner of my mouth, I begrudgingly blink up at my reflection. The mascara I swiped on this morning is smudged into the creases of the bags beneath my eyes. My hair is a mess of flyaways, any style I'd worked into it undone by Claudia's fingers. A few minutes ago, she'd tangled her hand in my hair and pulled me in until all I could taste was her lips on mine.

How did I fuck it up that quickly?

After spitting into the sink, I rinse out my mouth and run a hand through my hair, willing it to calm down before I head to class.

The clock is ticking and I still have to make it across campus, but I stay rooted in place, stuck watching myself in the mirror. Except I'm not looking at my screwed-up hair or smeared makeup, but at the door over my reflection's shoulder. Waiting, hoping, for Claudia to walk in and hold me close again.

But she doesn't.

And I know she won't.

I try to count the seconds on the water dripping from the tap. Make it to thirty and give up. No point keeping track of time like it's a countdown to something I know isn't going to happen. A quick pulse in my pocket snaps me back to reality. With one hand I wipe the mascara under my eyes, and the other pulls out my phone, the notification on the screen making my blood run cold.

**SAFELINK LIVE CAMERA FEED**

*Motion Detected*

## CHAPTER THIRTY

The hallway is empty. In the stairwell I spot a brief flash of brown hair and sheet music. Claudia doing both of us a favor, running away before I could get back. A door slams on the opposite end of the hall, a familiar girl stepping out of the abandoned room across from mine and Claudia's. Beneath her purple puffer jacket, she's wearing ripped black jeans and silver combat boots. Definitely not up to uniform code. The corner of the cardboard box in her arms is scuffed, the sleeve of a yellow knit sweater dangling out of the open top.

We lock eyes. The girl—Izzy—scoffs at the sight of me, her gold septum ring catching the light when her nostrils flare. The look she gives me is so chilling it feels like all the air has been sucked out of the room. With a roll of her eyes, she whips around on her heels and rushes toward the staircase on the opposite end of the hall.

“Hey!” I call out, but she’s already made it out to the stairwell. “Hey!” I shout again once I burst through the door she went through, my voice echoing in the freezing-cold stairwell.

I peek over the edge of the railing, spotting her two flights down. She moves fast, even with a box in her arms. No point in losing my voice when she’s clearly not going to stop. Instead, I focus on racing down the stairs, skipping as many steps as I can without breaking my neck.

By the time I make it to the first-floor landing, she’s already gone, the door to the stairway propped open with a cinder block.

The world past the door is blinding. Wind lashes at my cheeks and fingers as I step onto the barely shoveled path. In my rush to get down here, I forgot about my jacket, still sitting on the edge of my bed. The sweat

pooling on my forehead from racing down the stairs stings with each gust of wind, locking my face in a permanent sneer.

Thankfully, Izzy didn't make it far.

"I said, hey!" I shout for what feels like the hundredth time, my voice lost under the force of the wind.

If she did hear me, she doesn't act like it. Izzy stomps across the untouched blanket of snow to a car on the opposite end of the building. The thought of sinking into the ankle-deep slush in just my uniform leggings makes me numb, but I'm not gonna let her walk away from me.

Treading through the snow takes more effort than deep-cleaning the diner's fryer. My thighs ache from the pressure of pulling my legs out of the pockets of snow, my shoes and socks soaked within seconds. The cold is a vague, throbbing pain. Dull enough that I can push past it, but not so numb that I need to be worried. Yet, at least.

"So, you're just gonna pretend you can't hear me?" I yell at Izzy once I'm within earshot again. Solina never showed her sharp edges, but Izzy's just put me through some serious hell. Clearly she's not too fond of me—*whoever I am*—anyway.

She grunts as she shoves the box into the trunk of the car. The back seat of the dinged-up copper sedan has been pushed down to make room for trash bags leaking shoes and hoodies, a full-length mirror, and cardboard boxes stacked high with books, bags, and the same homey keepsakes Solina kept on her windowsill.

"I don't have anything to say to you," she snaps before brushing past me like I don't exist, heading back the way we came.

What the hell did Solina do to her?

I keep a careful distance behind her. Close enough to not have to shout for her to hear me, but not enough for her to lash out at me for following. "Whatever problem you have with me, it's not what you think."

Izzy snorts, shaking her head and picking up her pace. "Sure. Whatever you need to tell yourself."

Before she can make it back inside, an idea comes to mind. I probably won't get another shot like this again—a chance to talk to someone who knows about what happened between Solina and Hunter. Details that might help me figure out if he's the reason she was afraid to come back or if

Gabe's note wasn't just an empty threat. Details I need *now* if I want to solve this before the clock runs out.

I think of the article Tiffany found, of the photo of Izzy at that fencing competition, and before I can overthink, I rush forward until I'm blocking her path, ignoring the cold nipping my numb fingers.

"I'm not her," I say, each word punctuated by a thin white cloud. Whipped away by the wind as quickly as they appear.

Izzy stumbles back, startled by either the wild look of me or what I just said. She holds her arm up, as if to shield herself in case I lunge. "What?"

"I'm her sister." I pause when she doesn't immediately cut me off with another question. "Her twin sister."

The anger in her loosens, her brows furrowing in confusion instead of annoyance. She crosses her arms, and my hands twitch at the sight of her wool mittens. "Then where's Solina?"

"Dead." I don't bother sugarcoating it. No one ever did for me.

She recoils like I slapped her. "What?"

"Over winter break. Someone found her on a riverbank a few miles from our house. Cops think she slipped. Either by accident or ..." I stop myself, unable to continue. She gets the idea. "But I don't think it was either of those."

Izzy shakes her head and looks over at the abandoned campus, exhaling slowly and letting the cloud of her breath wash over her like cigarette smoke. She taps the toe of her boot against the ground, shaking off flecks of snow with each tap. When she turns back to face me, her eyes are narrowed to slits. "You're not messing with me?"

Now it's my turn to scoff. "You think I'd come all the way up here to make shit up about my sister?"

It's the most me I've been since I got here, all sweetness and grace stripped away. My slouch returns almost immediately, my lips tugging into my signature scowl. My nerves are on edge but it's the most relaxed I've felt in weeks. An exhale I've been holding since I got here.

The shift startles her enough to make her shrug nervously and pull her jacket tighter around herself. She pauses, opening her mouth and closing it twice before finally replying, "Then what're you hunting me down for? I haven't been here since last semester."

"Because I wanted to talk to you."

Her eyes narrow again. “You don’t think I did something to her, do you?”

I shake my head and shove my hands as far into my blazer pockets as I can. Why didn’t I think to grab my coat before I came out here? “If you did, you wouldn’t be talking to me, would you?”

We hold each other’s gaze long enough for my eyes to water. It takes all my strength to stay standing, to keep my teeth from chattering. Every second I’m frozen in place makes it harder to breathe, each one ticking by in agonizing slow motion. My body begs me to give up, to break the hold I have over her and run back to the bathroom and crank the shower up as hot as it’ll go.

But before I can give in, she walks away. Her braids dance behind her as a harsh gust of wind lifts them into the air, the beads woven onto the ends of each braid clinking like wind chimes. “You coming?” she calls out over her shoulder. “Or do you want to freeze your ass off out here?”

I don’t think twice before running after her.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Izzy takes me down to the Kincaid basement. All hesitation I have about following her into a dark, dank hallway melts when she opens the door marked Authorized Personnel Only and a gust of warm air rushes out to greet us. Every part of me eases up, my body thawing with each step we take into the warmth. The overhead lights come to life as we walk down the hall, revealing a room with simple, outdated furniture. A wooden table with a microwave and a couple of chairs next to a bare-bones kitchenette—cabinets, a sink, and a hot plate on the counter. A ratty brown couch sits on the opposite end of the room beside an end table decorated with a stack of old magazines. All of it goes pale in the fluorescent lighting, highlighting the dust and specks of grime. The light flickers on and off, bathing the room in darkness every few seconds. Leaving me with nothing but the shadow of a girl I barely know and a paper-thin sense of trust.

“How’d you know about this place?” I ask as Izzy opens up a cabinet and pulls out a box of peppermint tea.

“Used to be a study lounge my freshman year,” she explains while pulling an electric kettle out from under the sink, carefully examining the outlet before plugging it in. “Got shut down after they found asbestos.”

“Shouldn’t we not be in here, then?” I’m overwhelmed by the sudden urge to pull my collar around my nose.

She shrugs and continues brewing her tea. “Only way to get privacy around here.” In the blink of an eye, she’s in front of me, holding out a chipped orange mug. “Ten minutes won’t kill you.”

Accepting the peace offering, I head over to the couch while she waits for the kettle to warm up.

“Wouldn’t sit there if I were you,” she warns seconds after I sit down on the edge of the couch.

“Why?” Cotton is leaking out of rips in the cushions, and it smells like a pet store, but I wouldn’t call it dangerous.

“Because that’s the couch everyone used for hookups.”

Izzy stifles a laugh when I leap off it, wiping the back of my skirt in case any dried bodily fluids rubbed off on me. We exchange a wordless glance as I walk over to the equally beat-up armchair opposite the couch. She gives me a thumbs-up, and I settle back down.

While we wait for the water to boil, I go over all the things I want to ask her. What she knows about Hunter and Solina. Why Solina’s incident was listed in her file at all. And Laura … whether she knew about what happened to her, or if even the people closest to her didn’t know the truth.

Izzy’s hostility when she first spotted me brings up its own new set of questions. What went down between her and Solina to make her run away like that? She may be playing nice now—taking her sweet time as she brews her tea—but there’s no telling how long that’ll last.

Once the kettle switches off, Izzy buzzes around the room, opening cabinets and drawers until she finds a half-empty jar of honey. She holds the bottle up and waves it at me, shrugging when I shake my head to turn down the offer.

“Have it your bland way.” She stirs the honey into her tea before bringing the kettle over and filling both of our mugs. Steam fogs up the space between us. When it clears I watch her brow furrow as she gives me a once-over. “Wow,” she mutters under her breath and takes a seat in the armchair opposite me. “You really do look like her.”

“That’s the thing about twins.”

It was meant as a joke, but based on the way she recoils, I’m as awful at comedy as I am at chemistry.

Izzy ducks her head, avoiding my gaze as she runs a finger along the rim of her mug. “I’m sorry about … what happened to her. We weren’t exactly friends, but nobody deserves that.”

I shrug instead of replying. I’ve heard enough “I’m sorry”s to know that nothing I say will ever measure up to what people want out of me. I’m not the grieving, heartbroken sister they’re expecting, holding back sobs and letting them feel self-righteous for acknowledging my pain. I don’t

have time to pretend to be that girl, either. I've spent enough time pretending.

"Did anything seem off about her before you left?" I ask.

Izzy barks out a humorless laugh. "You could say that." My eyebrow arches, urging her to keep going, but she takes her time getting to the point. She blows on her tea, takes a sip, then another, before setting her mug aside and finally meeting my eyes. "Look, we weren't close, if that's what you're looking for. We had two, maybe three classes together. We barely knew each other."

"Then why were you avoiding me when you thought I was her?"

Her posture stiffens as she replies through gritted teeth. "Because the last time I spoke to her it was because I found out she was fucking the guy I was dating."

The shock of it stings like oil popping from the pan. It's been clear since my first day that the Solina who went to Kingswood wasn't the one who came home to Luster. I could understand her wanting to twist the truth about who we are when survival at Kingswood is rooted in the people you know and the person you'll become. I could understand her choosing to ignore Claudia in favor of Hunter and Poppy because of the doors they opened. I could understand her cheating because it felt like the only way forward.

But I can't understand this. Being unnecessarily cruel to a stranger. A stranger who faced the same uphill battle as her—another scholarship student. There's no way to spin it where Solina doesn't come out the villain.

"W-what?"

Izzy sighs before unzipping her puffer jacket and tossing it aside, revealing a Kingswood Fencing crewneck. She makes herself comfortable, crossing her legs beneath her and cradling her steaming mug just below her nose before she continues.

"Hunter and I were a thing for most of last year." I can't help the way my nose wrinkles. The thought of Hunter with anyone makes me uneasy. Izzy laughs bitterly when she notices my expression. "I know. *Big* mistake."

Her gaze locks somewhere across the room as she trails off. After a long, slow exhale, she speaks up again.

"Dating Hunter isn't like dating other guys. You're not *really* his girlfriend. No hand-holding while he walks you to class or weekend dates

or forehead kisses or any of that Hallmark bullshit. You’re a flavor of the month. He gets rid of girls faster than he goes through clothes.” She shudders slightly. “But I held on longer than the others. Probably because I was one of the only girls he ‘dated’ who didn’t care that he was screwing Poppy on the side the entire time.”

No surprise there. I figured Poppy and Hunter’s story went back way further than his and Solina’s ever did. On the edge of my seat, I wait for her to continue—waiting so long the muscles in my neck start to ache from craning to look at her. When she does, her voice is quiet. Shaky. Like the wound tied to the story is still fresh.

“Hunter can be … pushy. He’s gonna be a great businessman someday—he knows how to get what he wants. But it could be scary, sometimes. Telling him no.”

I swallow hard. “Did you?”

“Sometimes. Or, I tried to … Things always seemed to go his way in the end, though. Most of the time it was just easier to say yes.”

“Did he ever hurt you?”

“No,” she answers quickly. “But a guy like him doesn’t need to use his hands to hurt you.”

The purple bruises on Solina’s throat would beg to differ, but I’d thought the same thing after watching him shut down Poppy. He doesn’t need to use force to get what he wants, yet he still did anyway.

“We were at a party the first week of the semester near this cabin Hunter’s parents have out in the woods. Shit was creepy, like something out of a horror movie.”

Chills trickle down my spine at the thought of that cabin. Hunter’s hands on me, fingers gripping me so tight the bruises have only just started to fade. My fingers clench around my mug until the heat starts to burn. A much-needed distraction.

“Hunter always pregames. Thanks to Gabe, he’s got hookups for the good stuff. But he was going extra hard that night. Wanted to ‘start senior year with a bang.’ ” She rolls her eyes. “Parties aren’t really my thing. The music sucked, and it was freezing even though it was September. I didn’t want to leave, though, because it seemed like everybody from our class was there … including your sister.”

“Did she not usually go to parties?”

"If she did, I never noticed her. She mostly kept to herself. That's probably how her and Claudia wound up as roommates. Makes sense too. To be the best at anything around here, you've gotta give up your social life."

"Was she there with anyone?" I press, digging for that missing link.

She shakes her head. "Not that I saw. But I wasn't really paying attention to her. Not that night, at least." Her body shudders as she inhales deeply, her breath ragged when she exhales. "Hunter, uh ... brought me over to the cabin. No one really noticed, since some guy had just started passing around shots of Fireball. I hoped he would just let me crash on the couch in the cabin and call it a night. But ..."

The silence stretches on for what feels like hours, our tea going cold while I watch her from the edge of my seat. Her dark brown eyes are glossy, full lashes blinking back tears. Even though none of them break free, she still wipes at her cheeks with the back of her hand, a silver ring in the shape of a bat glinting in the dim light of the room.

"You don't have to tell me," I say, later than I should have. While I still want answers, I won't find them by forcing a stranger to relive her trauma.

"N-no, it's fine," Izzy replies, shaking herself off and setting her mug aside. "He wanted to have sex," she says bluntly, like ripping off a Band-Aid. "I didn't. You can imagine how that went."

My throat tightens at the familiar pattern, the memory of those photos of Solina coming back full force this time. "You said he didn't hurt you?" I choke out, clinging to that small assurance to keep me afloat.

"He didn't," she says quickly, the sadness hardening into anger. "It wasn't the first time something like that had happened. Most of the time, I just gave in and it would be over pretty quick. But something was just ... weird. Maybe because the woods were so damn creepy or because half the class was partying twenty feet away, but I couldn't do it. So, I said no. Next thing I know he's flipping out and begging and pleading like a goddamn dog in heat."

From the corner of my eye, I can see her grip on the arm of her chair tightening until her knuckles go as white as her mug.

"Someone came pounding on the door all freaked out. My roommate, Laura, she ..." Izzy pauses to inhale sharply and wipe at her cheeks. "She wasn't used to parties and got in over her head because some guys kept

giving her stuff to try. Things went south pretty fast, and of course none of the guys wanted to take responsibility. I went with her to the ER, made sure she was okay, before I caught an Uber home. I crashed and thought I could talk to Hunter in the morning, start fresh. Next day, I went to go meet up with him at our usual spot behind his dorm and guess who's there with him instead." She turns to face me with a deadpan look, nudging her chin for me to actually give a guess.

"My sister?"

"Mm-hmm," she hums. "Turns out she was happy to take my place after I left the party. Pounced on him as soon as I left, apparently. Hunter couldn't give two shits about me at that point. A warm body is a warm body. So, that was it. She was in, I was out. But she was different. Not just from me, but all the flavors he tried before me. She's the one who got to hold his hand. Sit with him and his little crew in the dining hall. The forehead kisses, the insufferable need to touch each other every two seconds. She got *everything*."

"Why her?" The phantom memory of Hunter's lingering hand sends chills through my body, to all the places he once touched. "Why not just date someone like Poppy?" I ask, still not sure why he bothers with girls like us when he already has someone like her—beautiful, loaded, and willing to drop everything for him.

Izzy scoffs. "Apparently Hunter's mom never liked Poppy."

My brow furrows as I remember the conversation with Poppy before the bonfire, her hinting at Hunter's mom being tough on his girlfriends. "Why?"

Izzy lets out another humorless bark of a laugh, giving me a scrutinizing once-over before replying, "The same reason he was never going to date *me* for real."

At first, it's puzzling. Why Solina was so different from the two of them. Why she got the touches and stolen kisses and trips to meet his mother over spring break. I think back to the first time I was in Poppy's room, the way she ran her hand along my cheek and called me pretty. As I take in my reflection in the mirror slung over the door to my left, I understand what Izzy means. Finally able to read between the lines of what Poppy said that night.

Suddenly, I can see why Hunter flaunts me while sneaking around with them. My pale skin. Limp brown hair and dull amber eyes. If you don't look at the frayed threads on my blazer or the ill fit of my shirt, I fit in easily. Going by a name like Stella, I don't even have to explain our roots—how our names have special meaning in our first language. I'm not Solina, not a runaway, not Puerto Rican, not a scholarship kid whose sister has to work eighty-hour weeks for me to survive. I'm a blank slate.

I'm exactly what he wants me to be.

I'd made the mistake of thinking Poppy was just like the others. Kids with money and little consequences. She may be rich enough to run with the elite, but they'll never look at her the way they look at Hunter. Or Gabe. Or me. They'll see the color of her skin and decide she's too "other" to *really* be one of them.

Poppy's right, though. Neither of us will make it to the finish line with Hunter. He'll leave both of us behind when he finds the real girl he's been looking for. White, blond, and with a bank account that rivals his. The type of girl his parents expect him to bring home. The type of girl he thinks is worthy of being the one he ultimately chooses.

Biting my lip, I weigh how much I'm willing to tell Izzy. I've already given her the biggest secret—the truth—just to get her to talk to me. But I've still got some cards close to my chest. The pictures, the bruises, the report. I don't know how much she knows, or what Charlisa told her when they brought her in. Being with Hunter may have come with its perks, but Solina didn't get everything without paying her own price.

"Hunter hurt her," I say, my voice coming out a croak. "I don't know the details, but I know there were pictures. Of bruises. Lots of them. On her neck." I run my hand along the column of my throat, my skin prickling under my fingers like I'm leaving those same bruises down their path. "She went to a guidance counselor about it, tried to file a complaint with the school board. But they shot her down. Said there wasn't enough evidence, even though they had the pictures."

I can hear Izzy swallow. "Oh."

"I saw your name," I say, making sure to keep my voice carefully controlled. "They talked to you about the case."

Izzy shakes her head, her eyes frantic. "I didn't know it was about her, I swear."

“What did you say?”

She inhales sharply, pinching the bridge of her nose. “They asked me if Hunter ever tried to push me into … stuff. Things I didn’t want to do.”

The truth clicks into place. “And you said no.”

Tears dot the corners of her eyes when she looks back up. “I didn’t know,” she says again, the words holding new weight. “They never said there was an open case. I-I just thought there was a rumor going around or something. It wasn’t a secret, not if you knew him. And I knew it wouldn’t matter anyway.”

I want to reply that maybe it *would* have mattered, but I bite my tongue. She clearly has more to say.

“Hunter could shoot someone dead in the cafeteria tomorrow and get off with two weeks of detention.” She leans in close enough that her braids graze my arm. “And she’s probably not the first girl he hurt either.”

A combination of nausea and hope shoots through me, making my spine straighten and stomach churn. Other girls going through what Solina did isn’t a win, but it could still mean something. Administration wouldn’t listen to one girl, and there’s no guarantee they’d listen to two, or three, or even more, but there’s strength in numbers. A case that we could build. Hunter isn’t the one who pushed Solina off the side of that cliff, but I can still make him pay for the other ways he hurt her.

“Would you come forward?” I ask urgently, already thinking up ways to collect names, stories. Proof. Anything to get Charlisa and the board to listen. “If we spoke up together?”

Izzy shakes her head, and my confidence leaks out of me like air from a flat. “I already tried.”

That brings my brainstorming to a halt. I can’t think of any other reports in her file. Anything that might point to her trying to bring him down. “You did?”

Her gaze drops to her ring-clad fingers, picking at the remains of the black polish on her nails. “Hunter … has this camera …”

“He records girls,” I finish for her when it’s clear she can’t do it herself. She blinks up at me with confusion and what looks like concern. “Poppy told me.”

She stays quiet at first. Takes her time chewing on her bottom lip before continuing. “I told a guidance counselor about it. After we ended

things. Tried to get them to look into it and get him to stop or erase everything on his drive. But they didn't do anything. Didn't even ask him about it. They thought I was some pissed-off ex and brushed it off within a day. A day." Her voice cracks and her hands tremble as they curl into fists. "Then told me not to cause any more trouble."

Anger bubbles up until my skin prickles and hums. How could this place promise so much just to let so many people down? Or were those promises never meant for girls like Solina and Izzy and Laura? Did they let them believe they could have everything just to crush them?

"Do you know where he keeps it? Whatever he's filming?"

She nods shakily, wiping at her cheeks. "There's a purple flash drive tucked at the bottom of a watch case he keeps on his bookshelf. I think that's it. I saw it once when he accidentally left the case open."

I nod slowly, committing that to memory.

"I could've taken it ...," Izzy says, trailing off.

"Why didn't you?" I ask with a raised brow.

"Because nothing ever happens to him." Her voice quivers and, finally, breaks. "I *hated* him ... but I loved what being with him meant. For the first time in three years, I understood what it was like to be *them*." She waves her arm behind her. Toward the direction of the dorms that feel like they're miles away from here. "To get everything easy. To not have to try to get what you wanted. Being with Hunter *meant* something. People who didn't even know my name at the beginning of the year acted like I'd been one of them for years. Invites to parties with kids whose parents have Wikipedia pages. Passing answers to exams around like party favors. Study sessions with tutors who wrote the goddamn textbooks. Then, less than a day after that party, I'm nothing to them again. Like the last six months didn't even happen. I'm back to square one, while he gets to keep everything."

Izzy staggers to her feet, her hands trembling as she sets her mug down on the table. "I don't blame your sister for taking him from me. I would've done the same thing."

Before I can respond, she grabs her coat and heads for the door. "This place fucks with your head," she says, stalling in the doorway but not looking back at me. "Until you start doing shit you never thought you'd be willing to do. My roommate killed herself because she got expelled over an OD *they* caused. Everyone at the bonfire treated her like a circus act,

pumping her full of stuff she had no idea about because they thought it was funny, until it almost killed her. And *she's* the one who got punished for it, not them.”

I swallow hard at the mention of Laura, questions sitting on the tip of my tongue, but I don't dare ask another one.

Tears roll down her cheeks, her grip on the doorknob so tight her entire arm vibrates from the force of it.

“That's why I left,” she spits, already turning to walk up the stairs. “Because this fucking place ruins you. And I'd rather give up and go back home than stay here and let this place rot me from the inside out. Because if I didn't, I wouldn't be standing here at all.”

Izzy slams the door behind her, the force of it rattling a frame on the wall so roughly it tumbles to the ground and shatters. Glass sprinkles across the dingy tile, some of it skittering over to the stained carpet. I don't try to fix it. Don't try to go after Izzy to stop her. All I can do is sit there with everything she's told me, wonder what it all means and if it's gotten me any closer to finding who did this to Solina.

Still, one thing is clear now. Kingswood wants us to think we're all welcome, that we all have the same opportunities, but none of that was ever true. This place has only ever been made for one type of person: boys like Hunter.

Minutes or hours go by. Long enough that the overhead lights turn off, not detecting any movement. I've spent enough time here that the dust starts to settle in my lungs. The urge to hack into my sleeve is so strong it feels like a hand around my throat, but I stay frozen in my seat. So lost I can't even pick myself up again.

This place ruins good people, and it ruined my sister. Made her someone who used people like pawns. Who made up a version of me that fit her narrative because the real me wasn't enough. The whole reason I came here is because the Solina I know never would've thrown herself off the edge of that cliff. Never would've left me with the loneliness and the fear and the guilt after everything we'd been through together. But the girl I'm pretending to be isn't the girl I know. My sister was a stranger, and maybe that stranger did have it in her to hurt me.

Who wouldn't want to hurt someone like me? The overbearing sister with the smart mouth and bad attitude who gave up everything without

being asked because she was never brave enough to tell you she was the one who cost you your home. Who acted like you owed her the world because you were hers. A sister who claimed to love you enough to build a life around you, but didn't notice the fading bruises on your neck or the tremble in your voice.

A sister who wanted to send you back to the place that hurt you.

What if I'm out of leads for a reason? Maybe I'll never know what happened to Solina. Whether I pushed her to the edge of that cliff or someone else did. I can stay here and eavesdrop on more conversations and look through rich kids' dirty laundry until I find an answer, or accept that maybe there's nothing to find.

I can go home. And try to start my life over for a second time.

Part of me still thinks leaving Kingswood means leaving Solina behind. But there are sides of me I locked away after we first moved here and I decided to put Solina first. The girl who plucked untuned guitar strings while sitting on her dad's lap and loved planting fresh strawberries in her mom's garden. I'd like to get to know that girl again. With the people I *do* still have, the people who made Luster a home.

Picking myself back up, I trudge up the stairs. Every step takes so much of my energy, I slump at the top of the landing just to recharge. Making it all the way back to my room takes nearly twenty minutes, sweat beading along my forehead despite the chill that seeps through the cracks in the windows.

Our room is empty and freezing thanks to the window Claudia must've cracked open after I left. The cold sinks its claws into me quickly, my teeth chattering by the time I make it across the room to slam the window shut. My forehead feels tacky and stiff from the cold sweat. With my luck I'll have a hundred-degree fever by the end of the night.

Across campus the chapel bells start up their song. Another hour gone, but getting to class is the last thing on my mind now. Sitting on the edge of my unmade bed, I pull my knees up to my chest and calm my racing heart before I pick up my phone and start writing a text.

Tomorrow I'll head home and put Solina to rest the way I should have almost a month ago. The thought makes my knees weak, and in some ways still feels like I'm betraying her. But I'm ready to learn how to make peace with the truth, and the answers I'll either never get or never understand.

Before I can go home, though, and pick up the pieces of the life I left behind, I've got one more loose end to deal with.

Think I can come over tonight?

His reply is instant.

You're always welcome babe ;)

Making sure Hunter goes down for good.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

When the final bell rings, I'm already waiting in Hyacinth, leaning up against Hunter's door. He looks up from his phone just in time to not run into me, his brows shooting up to his hairline.

"H-hey," he greets. The way he jumps back like a startled cat shouldn't make me smile the way it does, but I can't help reveling in the feeling of having control over someone like him.

"Hey," I reply, keeping my voice as low as I can. Last year I had a cold so rough it left my voice shot for a month. Tiffany said if the rasp stuck around, I could quit working at the diner and get a gig as a phone sex operator. I don't have the rasp, but I can remember the timbre, the way I had to work my throat to choke anything out. I'd rolled my eyes at Tiffany, but she may've been onto something—Hunter's eyes light up like a Christmas tree.

"Didn't see you at lunch today," he says with a smirk as he leans in closer to me, his usual confidence back.

I shrug, letting my jacket fall off my shoulder, revealing the wool sweaterdress I dug out of Solina's closet. It's the only thing I could find that wasn't borrowed from Poppy or covered in patched-up holes. "I didn't feel great this morning, so I went back to bed after breakfast."

"Poppy mentioned you were being weird."

I fight the urge to grit my teeth. Figures Poppy would tell Hunter about me running off this morning.

I slide my hand down Hunter's silk royal-blue tie, tugging him until he braces an arm on the wall beside me, our lips a breath apart. "But I'm feeling much better now."

When he smirks, his lips catch against mine for the briefest second.  
“Oh really?”

He doesn’t wait for a reply before closing the distance, the arm holding him up coming down under my coat to wrap around my waist. It doesn’t take long for us to go tumbling into his room, or for him to paw at my coat. I break the kiss when he tries to push off the sleeve, pulling the coat back onto my shoulder. The weight of the switchblade in my left pocket grounds me, a small comfort I won’t let him take away.

He uses the opportunity to loosen his tie, moving at breakneck speed to get me closer to the bed on the opposite end of the room.

While he trails too-rough kisses down the slope of my neck, I reexamine the bookshelf over his shoulder. The sturdy polished-wood frame houses dozens of books, family vacation photos, and medals for lacrosse and track. The trophy that once hid the camera I broke is knocked over on its side.

Right next to a watch case.

My breath hitches, which Hunter takes as positive reinforcement, his kisses getting hungrier as his hands start to tug at the hem of my dress. As much as I want to push him away and get as far from this place as I can, it’s too soon to make my move. So, I give him my best performance. Pulling him away from my neck, I close my eyes and lose myself when I kiss him as hard as I dare. Playing the part comes easier when I give up my body to his touch and let my mind float somewhere else. Imagine that his lips are softer, plumper. His hands callused and bandaged. His hair thick and full and slipping through my fingers like silk. When he breaks the kiss, I’m lost in the smell of apricots and the warmth of a girl I’d foolishly thought could be mine.

“Damn,” Hunter mumbles under his breath, breaking the spell. “You’re something else, aren’t you?”

He doesn’t know the half of it.

His voice pops the bubble I’d made to distract myself. It’s harder to give in when he kisses me again. I can’t ignore the rough scratch of his stubble against my cheek, or the way his ring digs into the curve of my jaw. All I have left of my daze is the ghost of Claudia’s hand against my chest, pushing me away. The look in her eyes when she told me we should stop.

“One second,” I choke out in between kisses. I’d originally planned on waiting a little longer, letting him get so desperate and needy that I had him right in the palm of my hand, but I overestimated myself. I can’t keep doing this. Forcing myself to lean into his touch and smile into his kiss.

As expected, Hunter doesn’t stop. Just brushes his lips along my neck again, and tugs on the collar of my dress until he can move down to my clavicle. Every press of his mouth against my skin feels like a punch to the gut.

“I forgot to take my birth control,” I blurt out, breathless and desperate for him to move off me.

My entire body exhales with relief when he does, looking at me with a quirked brow. “Uh, okay? We’ll just use a condom, then.”

The thought of Solina *not* using one with him is enough to make me want to hurl, but I swallow the lump in my throat and push that nauseating thought as far down as I can. “Right, but this is a super-risky time of the month, and I don’t want to take any chances.”

The concept of ovulation and menstrual cycles throws Hunter for a loop, his nose wrinkling as if I *did* throw up all over him. He shoves his hands into his pockets, suddenly repulsed now that I’m not a wide-open possibility. “So, what do you want to do?”

I shrug, putting on my best attempt at demure as I run a hand down his chest. “If you run back to my room and grab it from my nightstand, we can pick up where we left off.”

Hunter seems entranced by the idea until he glances over at his window, a light dusting of snow sticking to the glass. “I’ll freeze my balls off by the time I get back,” he whines, collapsing onto his bed with a huff.

Soon as he falls back, I strike, gliding over him until I’m straddling his waist. He’s immediately back at attention, physically and mentally. The hand he’d thrown over his face comes up to grip the back of my thighs, the annoyance in his forest-green eyes replaced by a hunger I’m sure makes other girls swoon.

Leaning up on his elbows, he goes in to kiss me, but I move my head out of his path just in time. His grip on me tightens, like he’s preparing to hold me down, when I lean in to his ear.

“I’ll make it worth your while,” I whisper, my lips close enough to graze his earlobe.

The promise is enough to send a shudder through him, his body shivering beneath my touch. It's oddly intoxicating, knowing how little it takes to turn a ringleader into a puppet.

He's up and tugging on his coat without having to be told twice. He layers up for the journey, pulling on a hat and gloves before crossing the room to place his hands on my cheeks and pull me in for a bruising kiss.

"Stay right there," he commands, and I give him the sultry smile he's looking for before he leaves.

The second the door clicks shut, I spring up from the bed and try to shake the lingering sense of his touch off me. According to my phone's stopwatch, it took me fifteen minutes to speed walk here from Kincaid. But Hunter's legs are twice as long as mine, and a horny teenage boy can easily move at the speed of light.

Once I've shaken off the disgust, I get to work.

The watch case is, predictably, locked. Muttering every curse I can think of under my breath, I scan the room for a place to start. The desk is unusually sparse. Nothing in the drawers except for chewed-up pen caps and untouched notebooks. A wastebasket sitting beside his bed serves as a graveyard for used vape pods. I run my hand along the edge of his mattress and the bed frame, finding a packet of white powder that I'm sure is cocaine, along with a baggie of the same pink strips he had at the bonfire. Tossing those aside, I try prodding at his pillow for any lumps, finding a ragged stuffed bear beneath it. Amusing, but not helpful.

Inside the nightstand is a mess of crumpled twenty-dollar bills, busted Rolexes, and two boxes of condoms. I wrinkle my nose and push the boxes aside to dig into the back of the drawer. A strange sound catches my attention, one that doesn't match the scrape of the boxes and watches being shoved to the side. I reach for one of the condom boxes, bracing myself to find something gross and unhelpful. The first box is light, only two condoms left, but the second is much heavier. Heavier than it should be. Shaking the box, I hear that same rattling sound. My heart races as I empty it onto the bed, a strip of condoms unfurling and revealing a small silver key nestled between the folds.

I don't get too ahead of myself, or dwell on Hunter's choice of hiding spot, as I rush back to the bookcase. My knees go weak as I slot the key into the lock, hands unsteady as I turn it, and hear—

A click. And the box slides open.

If I had time, I'd let myself celebrate, but I've wasted enough of it searching for the key. Like Izzy said, buried underneath the velvet cushions holding the watches in place is a purple flash drive. I cradle it in the palm of my hand, examining it as if to make sure I didn't just imagine it. Once I'm sure I'm not stuck in a daydream, I head for the desk, plugging the USB into the side of Hunter's laptop and clicking the space bar until the screen comes to life. Thankfully, it doesn't ask me for a password.

There's only one folder on the flash drive, no name associated with it. Inside it are dozens of video files, all labeled with random strings of letters and numbers. I click on the first one, filmed earlier this year, and hold my breath as the video player loads agonizingly slowly.

The quality of the video is grainy at best, and thanks to the angle, it's tough to make much out the first few seconds. The focus is mainly on Hunter's bed, with a bit of Gabe's side of the room in the left corner of the shot. My pulse quickens as two people come into frame.

It's hard to make out the details when half the screen is grayish pixels, but I can tell from the hunched slope of the boy's spine and softer edge of his jaw that he's not Hunter. His hair is darker, his clothes not as flashy, from what little I can see. Gabe, I realize with a furrowed brow. The girl across from him is covered almost entirely by the shadows clinging to the corners of the screen, but I can tell from the look on his face that whatever they're talking about, he's not happy. All I can see is the side of her head, dark hair skimming her shoulders.

"I know that, Mom, and I'm working on it," Gabe says with a groan, his voice muffled. But the voice isn't coming from the laptop.

I hear the sound of keys jingling and move on pure gut instinct, going to yank the flash drive out of the laptop, but it won't budge. The grainy video stays on the screen as Gabe's voice comes closer. I slam the laptop shut, giving the flash drive one last yank. It's too effective, sending the drive flying across the room and under Gabe's bed.

Fuck.

I don't let myself second-guess, just dive straight for the bed. It's either hide or serve myself up to him on a silver platter. He'd be at the dean's office before I could ever explain myself. My foot vanishes from view a

split second before the door flies open, Gabe storming into the room with a huff.

“Yeah, I know,” he repeats, sounding more and more annoyed with each syllable, snow dripping off his drenched coat and onto the carpet. I quickly grab the flash drive from where it’s wedged between his bed frame and the wall, tucking it into my pocket and carefully sliding farther back into my hiding spot.

There’s dust tucked into every corner of Gabe’s bed. My skirt is covered in it just from the few seconds it took me to slip into my hiding spot. My nose twitches, the prickle of an oncoming sneeze. I clamp my hand around my mouth as he stomps toward his side of the room, tossing his damp coat onto the ground like it’s not worth a couple hundred bucks.

“Could you just try talking to him?” Gabe blows a raspberry, and I can hear his fingers raking through his hair, scratching against the product holding it in place.

A new voice, distant and staticky, speaks up as Gabe switches the call to speaker and crosses the room. “*Sweetheart, you know I’ve already tried talking to him.*”

Must be his mom, her voice as ice-cold as his.

“*How can you expect him to come around when you’re still doing the same things you were last year?*” she continues.

Gabe groans. “I’m *not* doing that stuff anymore, I already told you.”

“*Then what’s all this about a party in the woods? Kids ending up in the emergency room?*”

“That ...” Gabe trails off. I can hear him suppress a scream—either against a pillow or his fist. “That wasn’t me. That was someone else.”

“*And this someone else just happened to deal the same drugs to the same group of kids you dealt to?*”

Gabe shifts around the room as he replies, shrugging off his clothes and tossing them into a pile at the foot of his bed. “Yeah, Mom. This shit isn’t liquid gold, they don’t need me to get their hands on some.”

His hand reaches out to grab a pair of gray sweatpants off the ground a few feet in front of me. I tighten my grip around my mouth, my heart pounding so hard I can feel it in my fingertips as he stoops down to grab the sweats. A little farther and he’ll have the perfect view of me curled beneath

his bed. Without thinking, I reach into my pocket for my switchblade, prepared to strike if he gets too close.

His face comes into view, wrinkled up in annoyance, and the world starts to burn an angry shade of red. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*, he's close enough to

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"*Watch your mouth,*" Gabe's mom's razor-sharp voice cuts through the silence.

"I'm sorry, I just ..." Gabe stills, sighing as he straightens back up again and runs his outstretched hand through his hair instead. I don't let myself relax just yet, but the pressure in my chest loosens. "Could you help me out again? Just for this month?"

"*For what?*" his mom snaps. "*Your father already handles your tuition, and room and board. What else could you possibly need?*"

"It's different here, Mom. I can't keep up with everyone else with two hundred dollars, I've—"

"*That's more than enough, Gabriel. Money is tight as it is, and you shouldn't be 'keeping up' with anything other than your work, especially if you want any chance at this fellowship.*"

"Fine." He sucks his teeth, grabbing a different pair of sweatpants on the opposite end of the room so quickly I don't have time to panic. "Then what am I supposed to do for college, huh? Is two hundred dollars enough to get me through four years at the Ivies? Or did you forget that *I'm* the one who's had to keep myself afloat since sophomore year?"

"*You do not speak to me that way. I'm your mother.*" Her voice is boiling over with a quiet, subtle rage. You can practically hear how tightly she's gripping the phone, while her voice stays at a controlled, respectable volume. She pauses, exhaling sharply while Gabe stays frozen in the middle of the room with only one pant leg pulled on. "*I'll send you something next week, but that's it. I don't care what the other kids in your class are doing, or how much they have to spend. We don't have the type of money for you to go off and blow it hanging out on the weekends anymore. Do you understand me?*"

Gabe lets out a muffled sigh of relief. "Thank you, Mom. Seriously, I  
\_\_\_\_"

"*Don't,*" she interrupts. "*I'm not making any more excuses for you after this. If your father winds up having to expel you, it'll be your own fault.*"

Before he can respond, she hangs up.

While I'd love to see the look on Gabe's face after getting his ass handed to him, I don't dare move a muscle. He was already desperate enough to try to scare me into leaving Kingswood with that note he slipped under my door. There's no telling how far he'll go to get rid of me.

He pulls his sweats on the rest of the way and starts to pace the room, mumbling something to himself that I can't make out. He lets out another muffled scream before slamming his fist down on his desk. The shock of it forces a squeak out of me that's thankfully drowned out by the sound of the bed creaking beneath him. Still, I clamp both hands around my mouth, willing my body not to pull any more surprises.

Suddenly, Gabe leaps off the bed. He storms around the room in a new type of rage, grabbing things off his desk and throwing them erratically into his messenger bag. Between the slamming drawers and crumpled papers is the sound of his phone unlocking and then ringing. With the call set to speaker, he keeps up his tirade while he waits for it to connect, crossing from one end of the room to the other as he alternates between pacing and grabbing things from random corners of the room. For a second, I start to panic that he might check under the bed next, when the call connects to a voicemail box.

*"You've reached Claudia Bustamante. I'm not here to take your call right now. Please leave a message at the beep and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."*

Before I can process what's going on, Gabe explodes.

"Enough of the bullshit excuses, Claudia!" he shouts, spittle flying from his mouth and onto the floor in front of me. "You told me this was going to be settled weeks ago, but she's still here. Apparently she even gets to take that chem test over again. And what the hell was that all about after the bonfire? Security was on their way. I told you I had things handled, and you just decided to mess that up too? And what's going on with the letters? I left another one yesterday, but she's never even mentioned them to us." He sighs, stalling in place, and I'm worried he'll be able to hear how hard my heart is pounding, threatening to burst out of my chest.

"I've given you way more than enough time. Either hold up your end of the deal, or I'm sending everything on Monday."

The threat lingers in the air before I hear the *click* of his phone locking again. Once the call ends, he grabs his bag and coat off the floor and leaves the room before I can let out the breath I was holding. The second the door slams behind him, my body crumples to the ground. The carpet soaks up my tears as they stream down my cheeks and across the bridge of my nose. I don't know when I started crying, or if I even really understand what I just heard. My body knows what my mind hasn't caught up with yet.

Claudia isn't who I thought she was.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I don't sleep.

Claudia probably wouldn't do anything tonight, not when she's had me asleep across from her every night since I got here. And especially not the night before her recital. Still, I stay awake. Fingers curled around the handle of the switchblade, watching her chest rise and fall in the dim glow of the moon. The tension she carries with her wherever she goes finally melts away, her arms splayed out in front of her, cradling a frayed Piglet doll to her chest.

It's the most beautiful she's ever looked, and I can't fucking stand it.

I wish I could shut down the part of me that still feels drawn to her. The part of me that wants to push her hair back from her forehead and run my fingertips along the bare skin of her arm and watch goose bumps bloom. I'm weaker than I give myself credit for. All it took was a girl with big brown eyes and lips that made my toes curl for me to lose sight of what I was here for.

She was already in bed by the time I got back. Earlier in the day, I would've been relieved that she was finally giving her body the rest it deserves, but now it's just a nuisance. I have to wait until the morning to search her stuff.

The ticket, I reminded myself over and over again as I trudged back to Kincaid, ignoring the dozens of pissed texts from Hunter. I had bigger things to worry about than a guy with blue balls. The ticket on Claudia's desk proves she wasn't in Luster that night. All the signs—luggage tags and photos and credit card charges, the way no one questioned a dead girl reappearing—point away from here.

Claudia is a liar. But maybe, maybe, *maybe* she's not a killer.

Lying there, alone in the dark, gives me time to think. To wonder what her role in all of this is. Gabe's narrative is easier to piece together. A desperate kid who once had it all, looking for his chance to get it back. Gabe once had a taste of what it was like for things to come easy, and he thought he could have the same thing now. If he got rid of Solina, the fellowship would be his. Not getting his hands dirty by preying on someone with more to lose instead.

But if that's true, then what happened the night of the bonfire? Had Gabe called campus security on me before leaving me on that bench? Waiting for them to find me and have me expelled by morning? And if it is, why did Claudia save someone she was supposed to be sabotaging?

The sun has barely risen when her alarm goes off. Our room is still dark, only a few bits of light peeking through the blinds over my bed. I flip over before she can spot me, keeping a close eye on her in the pocket mirror I stashed underneath my pillow, next to the switchblade. Pulling the comforter up to my shoulders, I angle the mirror so I can watch her rummaging through the closet. She spends ten minutes pulling out blouses, skirts, and dresses, holding each option up to her body in the mirror before ultimately throwing it onto a rapidly growing pile on the floor.

In the end, she decides on a simple black dress with bell sleeves and a ribbon-like collar. The recital isn't until ten, but according to the clock on my nightstand, she's showered and dressed with freshly manicured nails and a full face of simple but eye-catching makeup by eight. She stalls by the door, one hand on the knob and the other holding her coat and purse. She inhales sharply and exhales softly. Walking herself through that same breathing exercise she showed me the night of the storm. Without thinking, I match the pattern of her breath. Instead of relaxing the tightness building up inside me, all it does is make the room feel smaller. Every second she's still here feels like the walls are closing in. Like I'm seconds from lunging and demanding she tell me everything she knows.

As soon as the door closes behind her, I throw the sheets off, but I don't move yet. I wait five minutes, then another and another, prepared to dart back under the covers in case she comes back because she forgot something. Almost half an hour has gone by when I slide off the bed and dead bolt the door. With the door locked and Claudia gone, I head toward her side of the room and start pulling everything apart.

Searching through Claudia's stuff isn't as nerve-racking as searching Hunter's and Gabe's had been. There's no ticking clock holding me back. I can take my time. Read through all the papers on her desk and flip through every notebook in her backpack.

I'm not sure what I'm looking for, or what I should expect to find. More drugs, maybe. A threat from Gabe written on the back of a napkin. A plan to sabotage Solina. But all she's hiding are half-finished mugs of tea and bloodstained sheet music.

Claudia's space is neat but sparse. Nothing sentimental, just the essentials. Except for the framed photo on her desk. I pick up the ticket again, examining it more closely this time. The date is still the same, but I can see it with new clarity now. Everything else I found on Hunter, Poppy, and Gabe is concrete. Geotagged photos in the Alps, credit card charges in California, or a flight across the country. A paper ticket doesn't hold the same weight.

This wasn't proof. I just let myself believe that it was.

Setting the frame back on the desk, I turn my attention to Claudia's bed. I tear off the sheets and dig in the crevice between the mattress and the frame, but don't find anything except dust. The drawers of her nightstand are mostly empty. Extra charger cords and throat lozenges. Nothing under her bed except an empty suitcase.

"Come on," I mutter after opening the last empty suitcase pocket. There *has* to be something. Unless she and Gabe have mastered covering their tracks.

All that's left is Claudia's closet, and there's not much there to begin with. A two-drawer dresser shoved into the closet for extra space. One blazer instead of the standard two. Three uniform skirts—two plaid, one wool. One Kingswood pullover sweater. Two pairs of jeans, a couple of sweaters stacked on top of each other, and two coats—a thin black peacoat and a denim jacket.

There's nothing beneath the stack of sweaters or hidden in the drawers of the dresser. Nothing behind it either. Nothing in her blazer or hidden in the lining of her skirts. Nothing tucked inside the sweaters or the pockets of her jeans.

The denim jacket is all dust and crumpled dollar bills, but the black peacoat has plenty to find in each pocket. A set of car keys in one, an empty

wallet in the other. Loose change and receipts from a grocery store in Spokane. A note from her mom telling her to call once she got to campus, signed with a lipstick kiss print. I'm ready to call it a bust when my fingers catch on something as I set the coat back on its hanger, something sharp beneath the fleece inner lining.

Setting the coat back down on the ground, I turn it inside out. Two hidden pockets, one on each side, just below the armpit. The first pocket is wide open and empty. The other is zipped shut, and as I run my fingers along the edges of the pocket, I feel that same sharpness. Not sharp as a knife or the edge of a key, but something thinner. I hold my breath as I pull the pocket open, preparing myself for the possibility of nothing and everything.

There's only one thing in the pocket. A folded-up postcard.

The world falls out from under me as I unfold the card, already knowing what it says. Neon-yellow-and-green eyes staring up at me, hands folded in prayer. A phone number that leads nowhere, and a message I know like the back of my hand.

*IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO SAVE YOUR SOUL*

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The concert hall is packed. Parents, professors, and modern music legends mingle and sip champagne in the ornate lobby. It's just like Claudia said. You can tell from the way they scan the program eagerly that these aren't just parents here to see their kids perform. These are people who care, whose attention means something.

I stick out more than usual. Whatever the dress code is, my drenched black jeans and snow boots aren't up to it, based on the looks I get as I push through the crowd. They move swiftly out of my way, avoiding the rain dripping from my damp clothes. I keep my hands burrowed in my pockets, fingers closed around the switchblade. Soft music trickles from the main amphitheater, the opening notes of a violinist's warm-up piece. I follow the same path I'd taken the first time I came here, going down to the practice rooms. Every room is occupied this time. Students pacing around their instruments while dressed in their best blazers and slacks, half of them wearing the same watches and diamonds as the crowd waiting to see them.

Claudia is in the second-to-last room. Unlike the others, she's using the room for what it was intended for. Same as on the stage, her eyes are closed as she moves in time with the piece—her body more of a vessel for the music than the cello itself. She doesn't notice when I open the door, or when I step into the room. Only when the door clicks shut does she stop. Her eyes fly open, startled and panicked.

"H-hey," she says, her voice equal parts nervous and relieved. While she's turned to set her bow on the music stand next to her, I lock the door and pull the blinds shut.

When I face her, she doesn't comment on the blinds. All she does is take one step closer, looking as though she's going to close the distance,

when I stop her in her tracks.

“What did you do to her?”

My words knock her back like a shove, her brows furrowing as she gives me a once-over. “W-what?”

She doesn’t ask *who*.

“What did you do to my sister?” I press. When I step forward, she takes two steps back, almost tripping over her music stand.

Still, she doesn’t ask the question I hoped she would. *What sister?* If she had, maybe I would’ve been able to convince myself that this was all a misunderstanding. But she doesn’t say anything. The look in her eyes answers for her.

“I don’t ...” She doesn’t finish that thought. Either because she can’t think of a lie, or she’s tired of doing it to my face.

“Why do you have this?” I hold up the crumpled postcard, waving it in front of her before throwing it down on the ground between us. “Why were you in Luster?”

“I-I ...” Tears stream down Claudia’s cheeks, bringing clumps of mascara with them. Her shoulders tremble as she struggles to choke out an answer, but she can’t get more than a single stuttered sound out. Her eyes fall to her bandaged fingers, and I wonder what else those hands have done. Did she push my sister off that cliff with the same fluid movements she uses to play her cello?

Time slows to a crawl as I reach into my pocket and flick open the switchblade. I press Claudia up against the wall, our bodies pinned together as I hold the edge of the blade to her throat. We’re close enough that the smell of her overwhelms me the same way it did when I kissed her. The sweet scent of apricots turned sour.

“Tell me what you did to her!” I shout, resisting the urge to dig the blade any deeper.

Claudia shakes so hard I’m not sure she’d be standing if I wasn’t holding her up. “I didn’t—”

“What were you doing in Luster, then?!” I cut her off before she can finish. My voice cracks as I shout even louder. I’m so close to the answer, I’m willing to scream myself raw until I get it.

“Trying to help her!” she chokes out around a sob.

Without thinking, my grip loosens. Claudia uses the slack to her advantage, reaching up to grab the arm holding the switchblade.

“Please, I swear, I’ll tell you everything!”

As much as I know I shouldn’t trust her, I came here for answers first. Revenge second. I lower my arm but tighten my grip on the blade. Every part of me is wound tight as a coil waiting to spring, just in case she tries to make a run for it. Or worse.

I step back, giving her space to breathe as she slumps back against the wall. She takes in several ragged, half-sob breaths, holding a hand to her throat.

“You have five minutes.” The words come out as low and biting as the wind. Harsh enough to make Claudia’s glossy eyes go wide with fear.

“O-okay, okay,” she says around deep gulps of breath, her hands trembling as she smooths out the wrinkled front of her dress. I can’t let her keep stalling for time. We may be locked in a soundproofed room, but someone’ll come looking for her soon enough. And I’m not leaving this room without the truth.

Claudia pushes herself off from the wall, having regained some of her balance. When she finally looks me in the eyes, I can see that hers are bloodshot. All the makeup she applied this morning is smeared down her face. Glitter eyeshadow smudged across her cheeks like galaxies.

“Your sister was in trouble,” Claudia pants out.

When she doesn’t continue, I hold up the switchblade in warning. For a flash of a second, I wonder if I could really do it. Shove the blade into the soft flesh of her neck like the thought of kissing her wasn’t the closest thing I’ve felt to hope in years.

I’m the one holding the knife, but she has all the power.

“She was going to win the Hightower Fellowship,” Claudia blurts out, speeding up her story until she’s rattling almost a mile a minute. “She was trying to be humble, but we all knew it. The committee wanted to give it to someone who actually deserved it this year. She’s been at the top of the class since freshman year and no one’s even come close to beating her GPA.”

“Gabe wanted her out of the picture so he could have it,” I finish for her, my theory confirmed when she nods quickly. Rage pulses through me at the memory of how close I was to him last night. How easy it would’ve

been to pin him down the way I did with Claudia and press the blade into his gut until he squealed like a pig.

“He made me help him,” Claudia says, tears brimming in her eyes again. “H-he said he had a video of me. When I went to his room to buy the Adderall. And that he’d send it to his dad if I didn’t help him.”

My stomach churns, making my grip on the blade slacken. Hunter’s cameras. The grainy video on the flash drive of Gabe and a girl I could barely make out. There’s no way he could’ve outed Claudia with how shitty the video quality was, but who knows what the dean would be willing to believe. Especially if it meant giving him his scapegoat.

“He said his dad was looking to make an example out of someone, and that person would be me if I didn’t do what he said. All I had to do was get Solina to fail her History midterm.”

“And what?” I snap, waving the blade in her direction. “You killed her because she wouldn’t fail on purpose?”

“N-no!” She holds her arms up in front of her face, not lowering them until the switchblade is safely back at my side. “Gabe gave me some pills before the midterm and told me to convince her to take them. I-I think they were laced with LSD, or something. He said they wouldn’t hurt her, but she’d probably flunk. Or get suspended if they found out she took something.”

The pills beneath Solina’s bed. My breath hitches with anticipation and relief. “But she didn’t take them,” I say, the words not coming out as a question, but as a statement.

Claudia nods. There’s little peace in knowing I was right, that Solina wouldn’t have gambled everything we built for the same type of vice that tore our family apart. But it’s a small comfort. Some parts of Solina didn’t change here.

“Gabe told me I had to think of something else to take her out of the running for the fellowship,” Claudia continues when I don’t reply.

Her words are an ice bath back to reality. “What did you do?” I spit out, every word sharp as the knife in my hand.

The tears trickle slowly this time, her sobs replaced with soft sniffles. “Solina wanted to leave. The last day before break, she told me something happened with Hunter. That he hurt her, and she tried to file a report against him but it wasn’t going anywhere. He assumed one of his exes did it to

mess with him, but she had a gut feeling he'd find out the truth. She knew if she came back she'd have to still be with him—that if she broke up with him, he'd know it was her. Because nobody breaks up with him." She stalls, hands shaking as she looks down at the ground. "She was terrified that he'd do something even worse if he found out it was her. But she didn't think she could stay home. She said ... her sister wouldn't have let her get away with dropping out."

That hits harder than any punch or kick ever could. It was bad enough learning Solina didn't want to be herself here, that she wanted to erase who I was to her. But knowing that the *real* me, the one who braided her hair before bed and taught her how to ride a bike and spent endless summers looking up at the clouds with her wishing for something different, was someone she was afraid of ... It's like Claudia took the knife and shoved it right through me.

"I told her I could help her. That she could stay with my mom in Spokane this semester so she could tell you she was still at Kingswood. If she wasn't here, she wouldn't get the scholarship, and Gabe would leave both of us alone. She was going to come up a few days before break ended so I could help her get settled."

The truth about Solina's "apprenticeship" hits me like a truck. An excuse to get her out of Luster early, safely hidden away in Spokane while Claudia and the rest of Kingswood headed back to campus. All that pride—from me and Tiffany and Dede—wasted on a lie. I push through the hurt to reply, "Then why is she dead?" through gritted teeth.

That breaks Claudia. The quiet sniffles turn into full-body sobs, her entire body shaking as she grabs at her hair like that'll save her from the truth. "I-I didn't mean to ..."

Fuck this shit. I'm tired of waiting for some goddamn answers.

Pushing Claudia to the ground doesn't take much effort, but keeping her down does. She wriggles beneath me, screaming and crying like we're not in a soundproof room designed by millionaires. Her hands reach for my hair when I straddle her waist. Not gentle or tender like yesterday, but rough—pulling and clawing at me to get off her. She's stronger than I would've thought, yanking my head back hard enough to make me yelp. But rage is a stronger motivator than fear.

I pin her arms down with my elbows, leaning in so close to her I can feel my breath hit her tearstained temple. I press the switchblade to her cheek, edging it as close as I dare as I shout in her ear so loud it makes my entire body vibrate.

“What did you do?!”

“It was an accident!” she shouts back.

Her fear is palpable, sticky in the air like humidity as she thrashes against me. The blade nicks the edge of her cheekbone hard enough to break the skin, a drop of blood staining her tears red. She stops squirming, finally realizing what she stands to lose if she tries to get away from me, and keeps talking.

“She called me while I was at a show, crying and saying she wasn’t sure she could do it anymore. I left and drove down as fast as I could to try to convince her, but by the time I got there, she’d already made up her mind. We were in the car driving back. She said she’d told her sister the truth and realized she couldn’t leave. Even if it meant facing Hunter again, she had to finish what she started … because it was what her sister wanted.”

I’m not sure when the dampness on my cheeks became tears instead of rain. Maybe when I walked into the room. Or when I pressed her against the wall. Or when she confessed between sobs that she knew what happened. I only notice when the tears slide off my cheek and onto hers. Dripping like the leaky faucet I could never fix.

“I tried to convince her not to. She stormed out of the car and ran off into this park and I-I begged her not to go back, tried to warn her that something might happen, but all it did was make her angry. Sh-she was s-so angry … a-and I couldn’t tell her the truth. I was so ashamed and so afraid, and I didn’t know what to do because I couldn’t let her go back. Not just because Gabe might hurt her, but because of what would happen to *me*. They would’ve expelled me. Everything I worked for would’ve been for nothing, and my mom …”

She doesn’t need to finish that thought. I think of that night in the middle of the storm, the way she stiffened when she talked about the sacrifices her mother had made for her to be here.

“I pushed her. I didn’t mean to do it, I swear, but … she was yelling in my face to tell her what was going on, and I couldn’t, a-and I was scared, so

I pushed her back a little, and ... she slipped on a patch of ice, a-and ... she fell over the edge."

There are things I'll never be able to understand about my sister. Things I'll never get to ask her about, and apologies I'll never get to make. If I'd just held her that day and told her everything would be okay, or asked her what was wrong, I wouldn't be here.

We'd be sitting on the couch with Tiffany, bitching about how there's nothing good on TV anymore. She'd follow me to work and sit in her usual booth, ordering Diet Cokes and crust-less sandwiches and promising to pay this time, even though we both know Dede would never charge her. We'd fight. Yell and scream until we lost our voices and Tiffany locked us in separate rooms till we managed to calm down. Some days I'd wish she was back at Kingswood, that she could've made things work so we wouldn't have to rebuild from the ground up.

But she would be alive. And that's all that would've mattered.

Claudia may have given the shove that knocked her over the edge, but I'm the one who sent her there in the first place. If I'd listened, she would've stayed home. Claudia would've gone back to Kingswood with her half of the deal completed, and Gabe would have his precious fellowship.

We'd all have our twisted form of happiness.

Beneath me, Claudia starts to fall apart. Her body goes slack, and her voice is barely a whisper. Those wide brown eyes that first drew me to her glaze over as she looks up somewhere past my shoulder.

"I could've helped her. When she slipped, she held out her hand and I ... I just stood there."

This time, we break together. All the rage and loneliness and sadness I've kept locked up inside of me comes pouring out all at once. Like that day in Charlisa's office, once the tidal wave comes crashing down, there's no way to stop it. My body seizes up from the force of it until I'm curling in on myself beside Claudia, sobbing into the sleeve of my damp coat. A thousand different emotions run through me, tearing apart everything they touch until all I can do is go limp and sob and sob and sob.

Because my sister wouldn't be dead if I had just listened to her.

Because Claudia had to do something unthinkable so she wouldn't lose everything.

Because the one person I allowed myself to want took away my best friend.

“I-I thought you were her,” she chokes out, wiping at her muddied cheeks and looking down at my bandaged hand. “I thought maybe she was okay after all and she’d forgotten what happened. After that night, when I saw your tattoo and I realized who you were, I tried to stay away, but ...”

I kept pulling her back in.

“Why did you save me? That night after the bonfire?” I croak out. “They would’ve expelled me. You both would’ve gotten what you wanted.”

Her body shivers beneath mine, the sobs quieting down to choked breaths. “Because I couldn’t hurt her again.”

My grip goes slack, the blade almost sliding out of my hand. It’d be so easy to lean over and press it to Claudia’s chest, to tear her apart the way she did our family. Make her feel the same pain Solina felt when she fell off the edge of that cliff. Do what I set out to do—make whoever killed my sister pay.

But I can’t. Watching Claudia tremble, her mouth open but no sound escaping, all I can do is wail that much harder. For her, for me, for Solina. Because the world is fucked and we were all dealt a losing hand.

I hate her. I hate that she cared more about herself than saving my sister and that she let some prick like Gabe intimidate her into doing something she’ll never forgive herself for. I hate that she lied right to my face. But I wish I hated her more. I wish I didn’t understand the threat of losing everything you’ve worked for. Or the fear of failure, knowing someone gave up everything just for you to succeed. Didn’t Solina do the same thing? Put herself at risk because she needed to be here? Because if she didn’t, it meant everything I did was for nothing.

Izzy was right, this place rots you from the inside out.

“I’m so sorry,” Claudia chokes out. “So, so sorry.”

Most of all, I hate that it sounds like she means it. All this time I’d pictured someone like Hunter pulling the strings behind the scenes. Someone cruel and uncaring who crushes people under their shoe like bugs. But never someone like her—fragile and broken in all the same places as me. Even now a part of me still wants to hold her, run my fingers through her hair. That’s what I get for wanting something for the first time in years. It’ll always wind up ruined in the end.

But there is someone else. Someone who hurt Solina a different way. Who made her think that her greatest accomplishment was being loved by him. Who made her into a person I didn't recognize. Who scared her so much she was willing to run away from me. From our family. From the future we'd worked so hard for.

And I'm not done with him yet.

Claudia startles when I pick myself up. I'm unsteady on my feet, sagging against the wall to keep myself upright. My nerve endings are frayed, too damaged to feel anything but numb anymore. Every slow step forward feels heavy as mountains. But I keep going, the way I always have.

"Where are you going?" Claudia calls out.

I don't answer, and she doesn't stop me.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

A crack of thunder swallows the sound of my steps. I look down at my phone again, rain blotting the screen, to confirm that I'm in the right place. The gray cursor marking Hunter's location hasn't moved since I left the concert hall, but I never would've expected to find him here: a library on a Saturday morning. I step out of the rain and under the cover of the library entrance, my grip never loosening on the weapon in my pocket. My palms sting, the edges of the blade digging into my skin, but the pain is a faraway whisper. There's no room left in me for anything but hate, spite, rage.

A security guard glances at me. A few students do too. I can feel the heat of their eyes on me, but all I see is a world bathed in red. Tunnel vision carries me forward, keeps my breath coming out in labored pants, my body wound tight and ready to snap when I find who I'm looking for.

The first two floors of the library are mostly empty. I move quickly, making sure to scan every table and study room before moving on. By now Claudia is either taking the stage or ratting me out to security. They won't know where to look for me, but it's only a matter of time before they figure it out.

The third floor is sparser than the first two. Only a handful of desks sit crammed up against the railing beside a smattering of poetry shelves. A sign on the large door at the end of the hall reads *Reserved for H. S. III*, and I feel my breath catch in my throat.

Behind the door is a room that feels out of place in the modern, sleek library. Antique round tables are spread throughout the room, polished until they're gleaming. The rows of shelves are made of wood instead of metal, ornate carvings on the corners of each. Even the books sitting on them seem impressive, with gilded spines and enough dust coming off them to know

they're at least a few decades old. Beyond the stacks are glass cases displaying preserved teacups and jewelry and letters, plaques above each item labeling them as pieces of Kingswood history.

*Gifted by the Sinclair Family*, written on the largest copper plaque.

Right in the center of the room his family helped build is the person who broke my sister.

Hunter's hunched over a textbook and wearing headphones. He doesn't hear the click of the door locking behind me, or the creak of a loose floorboard. Or the quiet swing of the switchblade coming unsheathed.

This place, with its glimmering trophies and Gothic buildings and perfect, polished students, ruins people but it'll never ruin him. Solina tried and wound up dead in the process. He could hurt a thousand girls and never experience the pain he left me with. The pain of knowing I pushed my sister back to the place that broke her.

This place won't ruin him, but I can.

I dig my fingers into the back of his head, getting a good grip on his hair. He doesn't even process the touch until I'm slamming his face down onto the table. A satisfying *crack* echoes in the empty room when he collides with the wood, blood splattering across the notes spread out in front of him.

The left side of his headphones slides below his ear, EDM buzzing beneath the sound of his screams as he scrambles to stop the blood gushing from his nose.

"What the fuck?!" he screams, one hand applying pressure to his swollen nose and the other trying to get a hold on me.

I shove my forearm against the back of his neck to pin him against the table, using my free hand to press the switchblade to his back. "You hurt my sister," I whisper into his ear.

"Who are you?" he growls as he squirms beneath my hold, trying to get a look at me. Despite the extra height, he doesn't have the same fight in him that Claudia did.

I don't bother replying. No point in him knowing my name, my story, my pain, when I'm about to make him feel all of it for himself. I press down lightly against his back, letting the tip of the blade dig through his sweater until it meets skin. Books and papers clatter to the floor as he thrashes

against my grip, screaming and shouting like I just stuck the knife straight through his chest.

A thick weight crashes against the side of my torso, knocking the breath out of my lungs and the blade out of my hand as I topple to the floor.

“Stella?” Hunter’s mouth gapes open like a fish out of water as he leaps out of his seat, textbook in hand. “What the fuck is wrong with you?!”

The knife is just a few inches in front of him. Close enough that I might be able to nudge it over with my foot, assuming he doesn’t notice and try to grab it for himself.

“Her name was Solina,” I spit through gritted teeth, fixing my gaze on the shelves of dusty books behind him because I know I can’t meet his eyes. Subtly, I extend my foot forward until the tip of it rests over the handle of the switchblade. Instead of pulling it back, I hold, waiting to see if he notices.

“What’re you talking about?” he spits as he brushes strands of bloodstained hair out of his face.

“My sister’s name was Solina.” Rage vibrates in each syllable, my body clenching so tightly I’m locked in place, my foot refusing to budge.

Hunter shakes his head in confusion, squinting at me as if that’ll help him see more clearly.

“Wait, so you’re not Ste—”

Whatever he says next is lost as I yank my foot back toward my body and reach for the switchblade. Hunter’s instincts are quick as a cat. Before I can grab the knife, the textbook he’s holding comes crashing against the side of my head. I taste blood on my tongue when my head slams into the legs of a nearby table. My vision blurs, the world spinning off its axis as I spit onto the floor, more blood than saliva. Between his legs I spot the switchblade, kicked off to the opposite side of the room.

“I’m only asking one more time,” Hunter sneers before squatting down in front of me. Thick, dark blood smears his upper lip, stains his teeth. The bridge of his nose is warped, jagged and twisting in an unnatural direction. The blood has already started to clot. His perfect, flawless façade, finally broken. “Who are you?”

Somewhere deep inside me, I find the strength to hold his gaze. Our eyes meet and I put all the things I refuse to say out loud into the force behind my glare. All the pain and the lies and the suffering he’s caused.

How he didn't just hurt me, but Solina, and Izzy, and Poppy, and all the faceless girls on that flash drive.

All I get back is a blank stare.

When I don't reply, he scoffs. "Fine. You can tell it to the cops."

He keeps the textbook locked tight in his grip as he backs away slowly, never taking his eyes off me. While his free hand searches the table behind him for his phone, I brace myself to run. Phone in hand, he turns his head for the briefest second to unlock it. Soon as his head is turned, I bolt.

I grab the switchblade off the ground and lunge before Hunter can finish dialing. His arm comes up to block me, the edge of the blade hovering between his eyes. He's got enough strength in him to throw me back, but his phone clatters to the ground in the process. It's my turn to kick it aside, sending it flying somewhere in the stacks.

"Bitch," he mutters, shoving a chair into my chest before taking off after the phone.

The chair lands square between my ribs, knocking me back but not over. In the few seconds I closed my eyes to wince, Hunter disappears. When I open my eyes again, all I'm met with are bloodstained papers and knocked-over chairs.

"What the—"

Before I can finish, a roaring shout comes barreling toward me. Hunter, hidden between the bookshelves behind me. We go toppling onto the ground, the switchblade clattering out of my hand as Hunter attempts to pin me down by the wrists. His fingernails dig into my skin as I try to push him back, finally landing a kick to his abdomen that leaves me with enough wiggle room to get on top of him instead.

The element of surprise only lasts so long. In those few moments of confusion, I grab the switchblade, hold it high over my head, close my eyes, and plunge down into his chest. The primal, guttural scream he lets out doesn't make me feel alive. The feeling of the knife slicing through skin and muscle and bone isn't satisfying, just terrifying. There's no weight off my shoulders, or that sudden clarity I've been looking for. The world doesn't feel any different now that I've hurt him. Everything still feels just as hollow.

I crack open one of my eyes, afraid of what I'm going to see. It's more horrifying than I ever could've expected.

Hunter's hand is folded in front of his face, blood dripping into his open mouth. The stained tip of the blade flickers as he flips his hand over, the switchblade nestled cleanly through the center of his hand. His screams pierce my eardrums, loud enough to make me wince, as he takes in the sight of his hand. No matter how empty the library is, there's no way someone won't come looking for us now.

I could end it. Stop the screaming and shut him up for good. All it would take is a nudge, push his hand back against his chest and finish what I started. He wouldn't even have the strength to fight back. After everything, it'd be so easy. Just one push.

Instead, I double over and retch. Nothing comes up, I don't have anything left to give, but my body tries its best anyway. I lose my breath to the coughing, to the ache of wanting to expel all the hurt and the anger that's been sitting in the pit of my stomach since Solina left that night. I come up empty every time.

All this time I thought what I wanted was to make the person who hurt Solina hurt just as bad. Hunter won't forget a knife going straight through his hand, but that pain will fade eventually. Not like the wound his actions left behind. I don't have it in me to kill him, like I didn't have it in me to hurt Claudia. I thought I didn't care about what comes next, that I'd be fine with living with the consequences of what I'd done so long as it meant whoever hurt Solina was gone. All I really want now is to go home, to forget this ever happened. To hold Tiffany close and tell her I'm sorry.

Before I can go too far down that path of thought, Hunter pushes me back against the ground. My cheek is pressed against a pool of his blood as he holds my head down with his uninjured hand.

That's one thing that hasn't changed—his touch still makes me sick.

He straddles my waist, keeping my left arm pinned under his knee. His eyes are dark, wild, and bloodshot as he leans down to whisper against my cheek, "I'm going to fucking kill you."

Unlike me, he would really do it.

He leans back, holding his hand up to the light, examining the blade sticking out of it before reaching for the handle. Closes his eyes. Pulls. Another scream rips through the room, followed by the wet *squelch* of the blade slicing back through him. I'm overwhelmed by the urge to gag again, but I only have a few seconds to figure something out or have him slit my

throat. I scan the floor beside me, looking for something I can lob or hit him over the head with, but the scattered books on the ground are all too light to pack a punch. Something silver catches my eye, trapped beneath an open book. I reach for it and pray to a God I don't believe in that it's something I can use.

But it's just Tiffany's shitty lighter.

The blade springs free from Hunter's hand with a snap, blood dripping between his trembling fingers. With the knife now in his uninjured hand, he lets out a chilling, desperate laugh before lunging straight for my throat. I flick the trigger on the lighter, hoping for a miracle but expecting nothing, and hold it up in front of my face like a shield.

A flame bursts to life. So small I don't even feel the heat of it. So small Hunter doesn't notice it either. Not until the edge of the flame catches on a loose thread on his sweater—the entire sleeve igniting within seconds.

"Shit!" he exclaims, keeping his grip steady on the switchblade as he waves his arm in the air, attempting to put out the fire.

I use the distraction to my advantage, pushing his chest until he topples back against the shelves behind him. The shelves don't hold up against his weight, toppling over one after the other like dominos. The shelf behind me wobbles unsteadily just as I spot the switchblade on the ground between me and Hunter. I bite my lip, the smell of smoke clogging my throat, before moving out of the shadow of the shelf seconds before it comes crashing down where I just was.

In the mad flurry of limbs and blood and smoke, I didn't notice that the flames have spread. They move quickly, traveling across the dust-covered books and to the scattered pages on the ground. Within seconds the smoke is thick enough to cloud my vision, the room nothing but a blur as I pull the collar of my coat over my mouth and nose. Overhead a fire alarm begins to blare, but the sprinklers catch before they can release any water. A thin sprinkle comes raining down on us for half a second. All it does is make the flames angrier.

Between coughs I hear Hunter's calls for help, his voice loud enough that I'm sure he's only a few feet away. Through the smoke I can just make out the shape of him, still lying on the ground, his legs trapped underneath the fallen bookshelf. Beyond him, the fire spreads across the shelves like a fuse, moving faster than I can keep up with. Overhead the alarm wails in

warning, but no sprinklers come to life to hold off the fire. Hunched over, I scan the room for a way out, the entrance lost in the thick, dark smoke.

“Help, please!” Hunter cries out, his voice hoarse.

Over my shoulder, I spot something in the light of the fire alarm’s brief, bright flash. An exit sign. I move as fast as I can toward the door, heat clawing at every strip of exposed skin. Hunter cries out again once I reach the door, an emergency exit to a back stairwell.

“Please, I swear, I didn’t mean to hurt her!” he calls out into the smoke, extending his hand into the darkness.

In the few seconds I stand there, stalled at the door, a dozen images flash before me. The dirty looks Gabe sent my way. Poppy cradling my cheek with anything but tenderness. Claudia pushing my sister because it was all she could think to do. Hunter’s hands on my shoulder, the small of my back, my throat. The bruises on Solina’s.

Suddenly, I’m on that cliffside, watching Solina go tumbling toward the edge. Her hand stretches out toward me, waiting for someone to come along and save her. I think of what I have to lose if I hold out my hand, whether I’ll make it out of here alive if I do. When I open my eyes, she’s gone. All I’m left with is the smoke and the heat and the screaming. I glance over at where Hunter is still trapped on the ground, his body going limp, his voice too quiet to make out over the crackle of burning wood.

And close the door behind me.

## EPILOGUE

Beneath the melting snow, seedlings sprout up from the ground beside Solina's grave. Small buds that'll blossom into something beautiful once I'm gone. I won't be around to see them, but it's comforting to know they'll be here.

I run the rag I brought with me along the bottom of the headstone, wiping off grass clippings and flecks of dirt until the engraving gleams in the afternoon sun.

SOLINA GRACE FLORES

*Just because the sun has set doesn't mean it'll be  
dark forever.*

I'd thought Tiffany was full of shit when she first came up with that for the engraving. Then, it was impossible to imagine a world without Solina that wasn't defined by darkness. I didn't realize that, in my world, the sun rose and set with her until she was gone and I was left to find a path home in the dark.

But Tiffany was right, like she always is. I wasn't alone in the dark. I had others to help light the way—her, Dede. The family we carved out for ourselves in this shitty little roadside town we call home.

The grass is damp, slick with dew and the rain from last night's storm, but I sit down anyway. Cross-legged and leaning against the headstone like it's Solina's shoulder, like we're sitting in front of the TV again. Complaining about the shitty connection or arguing about what to watch or dreaming about the day we could afford Netflix.

"I'm sorry I haven't come to visit yet," I say out loud.

I'd worried it would feel awkward, talking to a slab of marble and pretending it's someone who's never coming back. But it feels just as

natural as it did on the couch, like I'm picking up where we left off. For once, I'm grateful that Luster isn't a place for sentimentality. The cemetery is on the smaller side. People who die here must be sent off to rest somewhere else, and if I could've, I would've done the same for her. No one wants to rest forever in a place like this. The headstones are decently maintained, but there are no balloons or roses at their feet. No mourners stopping by to say hello to someone they lost. It's just us—me, Solina, and my whispers on the wind.

"I didn't think I could handle seeing you here. But it's not so bad. You've pretty much got the whole place to yourself." I let out a humorless laugh. "I miss you. A lot. So much it hurts. I don't believe in much, but I'd like to think you're somewhere good. Wearing those awful bell-bottoms you were obsessed with, and eating crust-less peanut butter sandwiches every single day."

My heart feels lighter imagining her somewhere beyond the bubblegum-pink sunset, wearing a cocky grin as she watches me finally say all the things I couldn't a month ago.

"We're leaving Luster today, but don't think we're leaving you. If I could, I'd bring you with us, but I'm pretty sure that would get me arrested." My smile is genuine this time, the muscles aching as if from a lack of use. "We just ... need a change."

When I close my eyes, I can feel the warmth of the sun on my skin. A taste of what's waiting for me and Tiffany in the cramped two-bedroom apartment we found in a town an hour outside of Los Angeles. We needed more than just a change. Ever since I came home with my split lip and soot-covered jacket, we both knew we'd need to leave. I was hesitant to look into what happened to Hunter. When I closed that door behind me, I turned my back on Kingswood for good, but Tiffany did the work for me.

An article in the local paper declared the fire the biggest tragedy to hit the campus since a chemical explosion in one of the science labs during the eighties. As if one of their students hadn't died by suicide just earlier this year.

Hunter made it out of the fire after all, but not unscathed. From what Tiffany's found online, he's in a medically induced coma while he heals from the third-degree burns. Chances are he'll pull through, and give his side of the story once he does. Soon enough Cartagena will come knocking

on our door, wondering why a dead girl is being accused of attempted murder. Leaving might not solve everything, but it's sure as hell better than staying put.

There was one piece of Kingswood I went looking for after I left that morning, though. A few days after the recital, the full performance was uploaded to the music department's socials. I'd scrubbed through the two-hour-long video until I found her, thirty minutes in. Claudia's makeup was smudged and her dress wrinkled, but you'd never know it because the world faded away the second she sat down at her cello. For seven minutes and fourteen seconds, she commanded the room in a way that left me breathless even through a computer screen. I'd only been able to watch it once, despite the urge to play it on a loop and watch the way her eyes slid closed as she gave herself over to the music again and again and again.

It's a fitting goodbye. Watching her do what she risked everything for.

"We finally found a place in California. Not near the beach like Tiffany always wanted, but maybe we'll get there eventually. We'll make the drive down on weekends. I'll touch the ocean, like we always said we would." I inhale sharply, watching my breath come out in wispy tendrils. "I'll do all of it, for you. All those things we said we'd do someday."

I'm still not sure what I want out of life. Whether I want to try school again or wait tables until my joints give up on me. But for now, curiosity is enough. The *wanting* to want. Something I don't think I've felt since Mami kissed us goodbye and I gave up on dreaming and praying for things to change. I'll never be the kid I was when she was alive, before all the shit that defines who we are now tore us apart. But I changed once, when we left the foster home and came here looking for something better. I think I have it in me to change again.

"I'm sorry too," I add, closing my eyes this time. "For not listening to you when you said you wanted to leave. If I had ..."

I don't finish that thought. I've wasted enough of my time wishing I'd done things differently, especially now, with the truth laid bare. "I'll do better."

I'll never be able to have another conversation with Solina, but I can carry the memory of her with me instead. The real Solina—not the one I'd constructed to fit what I wanted out of our future. My sister, who could light up a room with her smile. My sister, who was so brilliant she almost landed

the most prestigious fellowship at a school for kids who are handed the world. My sister, who lied and cheated to stay afloat, the same way I did. My sister, who faced a monster and was brave enough to fight back.

My sister, who always found me in the dark.

I hoist myself back up, brushing grass and dirt off my jeans before tilting my head up to the sky.

“Say hi to Mami for me?”

The wind responds with a howl, whipping my hair up toward the clouds. I don’t believe in signs, but these days I’m willing to make exceptions.

I smile as I hold my arms up into the air, letting the breeze travel through my fingers, and imagine it’s Solina, taking my hand one last time.

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I walk along the edge of the Luster roads toward my last goodbye. Along the way, I stop at a mailbox and pull a manila envelope out of my pocket, Izzy’s name and address scrawled across the front. I bite my lip, wondering for the hundredth time if this is the right thing to do. Taking the flash drive to Cartagena myself isn’t an option, not when it could raise questions about how I got it in the first place. It was risky enough sending Charlisa the clip of Gabe dealing to Claudia. Tiffany had made sure the burner email we sent it from was secure, and I’d cropped the video just enough to keep Claudia out of the frame. But I’ve still been half expecting her or Gabe to come knocking on my door any day now.

It was worth it, though. Making sure the fellowship doesn’t go to someone like him. There’s no telling who they’ll give it to now, with their top contenders out of the race, but I can hold on to the hope that it’ll go to someone who deserves it.

Sending the rest of the drive to Charlisa wasn’t my choice to make. Not when it might force all those unnamed girls to come forward. Or to find out about a crime they might not have even known was committed against them. Izzy came forward, just to be called a troublemaker. Mailing her the proof she needed doesn’t change how they decided her story should end, but it’s the only thing that feels right. Give the power back to someone he hurt.

Maybe now she can rewrite that ending, if she wants to.

I take a deep breath and push the envelope through the slot, watching it disappear from view before walking away. As promised, Tiffany is waiting outside the diner, leaning against the hood of her car. She doesn't notice me at first, too busy dotting at the corners of her eyes with a balled-up napkin. Her Visitor sticker from the prison is still stuck to the hip of her sweatpants. She had her own goodbyes she needed to make before we left.

"How'd it go?" I ask, the sound of my voice almost startling her out of her sneakers.

"Jesus," she mutters, holding a hand to her chest. "You can't just go sneaking up on me in the wild like that."

I shrug in apology and lean beside her.

"It went ... better than expected," she answers hesitantly, her eyes fixed on her fresh French manicure. "He was disappointed, obviously. But understanding." She sniffs, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. Her voice cracks when she speaks up again. "He was happy for us. Said it was about time we got the hell out of here. And that I should've left years ago." She chokes out a watery laugh, a tear rolling down her cheek, leaving a streak in her foundation.

"He's right," Dede calls out from the back door leading to the kitchen, making his way over to us. "Been tellin' you since he got locked up that you should've hauled ass out of here."

Tiffany rolls her eyes and slaps Dede lightly on the chest. "You're just dying to get rid of me."

"You got me." He holds up his hands in surrender. "But once you're gone, who's gonna remind me to tuck in my shirts?"

Tiffany lets out one of her loud, obnoxious cackles, earning us a few weird looks from a couple getting out of their car. "Find yourself a wife, all right, big boy?" Tiffany says with a wink. "One who isn't gonna steal your credit card and move to Costa Rica this time, though."

Dede groans, rubbing the back of his neck. "Why don't you go on and get outta here so you can stop holding that one over my head."

"Oh, don't worry," Tiffany purrs. "I'll be holding this one over your head all the way from the Golden State."

"Great," he mutters dryly.

Gotta admit, I'll miss their banter. And I'm sure they will too. Tiffany could find a way to heckle a brick wall, but there's something special about the way they're able to get under each other's skin—the way only family can.

With his and Tiffany's goodbyes wrapped up, Dede holds out a brown paper bag toward me. "One last snack for the road."

I don't need to open the bag to know what's in it, but I do anyway. Two peanut butter sandwiches, crusts cut off, wrapped in wax paper.

My body says what my voice can't. I set the food on the hood of the car before pulling him in for a hug, squeezing him so tight it knocks the wind out of him.

"Whoa, whoa," he warns with a chuckle, steadyng himself before wrapping his arms around me too. "Can't be giving me a heart attack right before you leave."

I don't say anything, and neither does he. We just bask in the warmth of each other, in the smell of that shitty cologne and the oil from the fryers. I wonder if anything will ever smell like home the way he does.

"Stay safe, okay?" he whispers against my hair, his voice somber the way Tiffany's had been earlier. Behind us, I can hear her start to sniffle again.

"Ah, bring it in," Dede teases before dragging Tiffany into the embrace, the three of us holding on to each other so tight I'm not sure we'll ever let go.

When we do, our cheeks are damp and our hearts are aching, but we all put on brave faces, smiling at each other like this isn't the end of the most comfortable thing we've ever known. Life here was never easy for any of us, but having each other made it worthwhile. I'm not sure I'll ever see Dede again. For all we know, Cartagena could be on his way over now, and I'll never make it out of here. But I've learned that you don't need someone next to you to carry them in your heart.

"Don't have too much fun without me," Dede says with a watery laugh, his FAITH tattoo waving goodbye to me as he wipes his cheeks.

"We'll do our best," Tiffany replies before heading to the driver's seat.

I take my time getting into the car, giving Dede another hug before taking in the diner one last time. In another life, I'd be getting ready for my closing shift and ignoring texts from Solina while I refill the sugar packets.

It'd be easy to lose myself to those could-be lives. Ones where Mami never gets sick, or Papi never relapses, or I stop Solina before she can walk out the door. But I'm done living in the *could-bes*. I'm ready to explore the *what-ifs*.

"C'mon, grumpy," Tiffany calls out from behind the wheel, pulling her favorite sunglasses from the glove compartment. "By the time we make it out there, I'm gonna be in my forties."

I stifle a laugh as she gags at the thought. Dede says something about how being forty isn't so bad while I pack up my things and get into the passenger seat. We roll up our windows and pull out of the lot, lingering at the stop sign leading onto the main road out of town.

"You ready?" Tiffany asks, peering over at me.

In truth, no. You're never ready to leave the life you know behind. Still, I nod and relax in my seat as Tiffany steps on the gas and the car goes flying down a road I've only ever seen other people travel. Glimpses of the world I've known for the past four years go whizzing past my window. It's bittersweet, watching it all melt away in flashes so brief they're already fading from my memory. I roll the window down, leaning my head against the ledge so I can look up at the sky. On the horizon, the crest of the moon peeks out from behind a cloud. I watch it grow bigger and bigger as we drive farther and farther, until the cloud finally starts to fade.

All that's left is the sun and the moon, sharing the same sky.

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