



*belong
with me*

JESSICA CUNSOLO

wattpad books 

Belong With Me

Also By
JESSICA CUNSOLO

She's With Me

Stay With Me

Still With Me

Be With Me

Best Vacation Ever

*Belong
With Me*

JESSICA CUNSOLO

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To you, the reader.
Thank you for being *with me* on this journey.

ONE

What's worse than the guy you almost killed actually dying? The guy you almost killed coming back and giving a threatening *I know what you did* speech in front of your entire homeroom class.

Well, technically, *I* didn't almost kill him; it was my fifteen-year-old sister, Gia, who slammed the vase into his head, leaving him unconscious and bleeding out all over a motel carpet, but that doesn't matter, because Gia and I are always in it together.

"What's up, assholes?" Brandon announces from the front of the room after his grand entrance. "You miss me?" His eyes land on mine, and his tone changes when he says, "Because I've missed you."

I shiver as we stare at each other. A mixture of emotions runs through me with the realization that he's alive and well. On the one hand, Gia, Jason, and I won't be investigated for killing him, but on the other, *he's alive*.

"You were only suspended for a week, dumbass!" one of his friends jokingly calls out. "Next time stay away longer to give us more time to miss you!"

His other friends hoot and holler as Brandon throws them a cocky grin. "Is that any way to talk to your football captain and a future pro quarterback?" he says, his large, muscular body taking up the entire aisle as he strides down it to secure his friend in a playful headlock.

I know his words weren't directed to the class. They were directed at me because he knows exactly what happened Friday night, and if I know anything about Brandon, it's that he's *pissed*, his pride is wounded, and he's out for revenge.

Someone taps my shoulder, and I drag my eyes away from the rowdy scene. Warren gestures to Brandon with his head.

“He’s always so dramatic. Why does he think he’s God’s gift to man?”

From the front of the room, Mr. Lewis tries to settle the classroom, but Brandon and his friends are dogpiling and wrestling with each other, and the rest of the class has erupted into their own small conversations.

“Let’s see,” I say, counting on my fingers. “He’s popular, the quarterback, tall, very large and muscular, brags about how many people he can tackle, gets really good grades without trying so he’s smart, has a lot of interest from college scouts, I guess is conventionally good-looking if you can look past the whole *he’s a disgusting asshole who forces himself on girls* thing, and ... did I mention the *he’s very large* thing?”

I know my friends briefed Warren about what happened between me and Brandon at his house before we were suspended, when he forced himself on me and then started rumors about me the next day at school, but we’ve never discussed it. We don’t have that kind of friendship.

Warren and I keep it light and fun.

Warren frowns, considering my words. “You think he’s more popular than me?”

I laugh at his joke even though he kind of means it.

“No one’s more popular than you.” I’ll still never know why Warren bothers talking to me rather than to his other friends. I’m a nobody, the new kid.

“Good, that’s good.” Warren nods, leaning back in his seat and sending me a crooked smile. “You know I have a pathological need to be liked by everyone.”

“Hence why you throw a party, like, every weekend.”

I smile back at him, letting him momentarily distract me from the fact that *holy shit, Brandon’s here*.

“No.” Warren points at me. “That is my intense hatred of being alone.”

Before I can unpack any truth behind our banter, Mr. Lewis finally gets the class under control, getting the football players to release each other. The mood changes instantly as Brandon locks eyes with me and slowly prowls to his seat—the empty one right in front of me—like he’s savoring thinking of new ways to inflict pain and torture.

I have to tilt my neck back all the way to look at him when he stops right in front of me.

How much does he know? What does he remember?

What did he tell everyone when he woke up? Does he know the story we made up about what happened to him?

“Siena,” he greets me coolly.

“Brandon,” I say, matching his tone.

He throws a leg over his chair to sit backward in it, crossing his arms over its back and leaning toward me casually. In this position, he’s practically leaning over me, so close that I can see the brown flecks in his green eyes, the dark circles on his skin under them, the healed scar through his left eyebrow.

Mr. Lewis calls out to him, but Brandon doesn’t care, doesn’t even bother turning around in his seat to pretend to care.

“I had an interesting weekend,” Brandon starts, eyes scanning my face as I school my features into neutral disinterest.

“Is that so?”

Over Brandon’s wide shoulders, Mr. Lewis sighs and gives up trying to get us to pay attention, telling the class to read certain pages and answer the questions at the bottom before he sits at his desk and plays around on his laptop. People shift and scoot their seats over to their friends’ desks, and in my periphery I briefly notice Warren joining his friend across the room.

“It is,” Brandon continues, popping his gum. He’s so close to me I can smell the cinnamon. “One minute I was at the

motel party celebrating my homecoming game win, the next I wake up in the hospital with a bunch of staples in my head.” He turns his head to the side to point at his scalp, where the hair has been shaved shorter and a neat row of medical staples indicates where a piece of the vase was protruding.

“Wow, what happened?” I ask, my voice flat and showing no spark of concern at all.

We’re playing a game here, sizing each other up and seeing who will reveal what first. Maybe I’m a little intimidated by him, but I’m not scared of him. I still remember what happened the last time we were alone together, when he kissed me and basically told me I’d been asking for it, then told the entire school I was a whore before he, Jason, and technically me got in a physical fight in the school halls, which led to us being suspended. *Plus* he got Gia to meet him in a motel room last Friday night, saying he’d give her a fake ID, only to throw himself at her to the point she had to smash him over the head with a vase to get him to stop.

I can get past the rumors and lies he spread about me, and even get past him kissing me when I didn’t want him to, but *nobody* fucks with my little sister. So, he might have been knocked unconscious and bled all over the place, and maybe I feel a little bad about him almost dying, but now that he’s okay, I’m finally allowed to feel pissed.

“That’s the interesting part,” Brandon says, picking up my pencil and tapping the eraser side on my desk a few times. “I was told a bunch of kids from Comack Silver High were pissed they lost the game, so they crashed the party and jumped me.”

That’s the story Jason’s brother, Jackson, made up on the fly. It’s almost scary how well he did it too, how fast everyone started spreading it among themselves, even admitting to seeing that group of kids with their own eyes to officers asking for statements. It makes me wonder how many of the things we think happened *actually* happened, or are they just things we convince ourselves happened?

“I heard. A bunch of kids in black and one in camo.

Crazy what kids will do these days over a stupid football game.”

“So crazy,” Brandon says, his tone still neutral, still testing. “Trashed the room and stole my phone too.”

A phone with a hideous black phone case emblazoned with a large gold “B” on the back—a phone that’s currently burning a hole in my desk drawer at home. The phone I can’t open because he changed his password. I have to physically force myself not to bite my nails and give myself away.

“What a shame, and you had such a cool phone case too.”

I’m being a brat now, I know. But he started it, and I’m not going to cower just because he’s leaning over my desk and touching my personal belongings like he’s entitled to them, like he’s entitled to *me*.

His eyes narrow, and he taps *my* pencil against *my* desk again. “There’s a problem, though.”

“Oh? And what’s that? The doctor said you’re not allowed to force yourself on girls until your wound heals?”

His flared nostrils are a warning to stop poking the bear, but I don’t care. I was so angry with myself while walking home from his house that day, because I wanted to say more. Well, I’m not going to hold back anymore.

“I don’t do that.”

“Don’t you, though?”

His jaw clenches, like he’s trying really hard not to scream at me. “*Every girl* I’ve ever been with has always wanted it, even if they didn’t say it.”

Anger rises in my chest, spreading through my limbs, making me clasp my hands together on my lap to stop them from reaching out, ripping the pencil from his hand, and stabbing him with it. “And what if they say,

‘Hey, stop that, I don’t like you like that’? Then what?”

He leans closer to me, and I force myself to hold my ground and not lean back to give him any more space.

“Every girl wants me like that. Even you. You just don’t know it yet, you frigid tease.”

He called me that last time I turned him down, and it takes a conscious effort to use Anusha’s breathing techniques to calm my anger; otherwise, that pencil really might end up in his eye. He knows he’s gotten under my skin because his lip crooks up in a self-satisfied smirk, and he leans back, giving me some room again.

“As I was saying,” Brandon continues self-righteously now that he thinks he has the upper hand, “there’s a problem with the story they were telling me.”

Shit. This is where he announces that he told everyone it was Gia who assaulted him with the vase and that officers are on their way to question her right now. My heart picks up. Gia’s going to be freaking out, and I’m not there to protect her.

I swallow, still playing his stupid game of nonchalance. “And what’s that?”

He points the pencil at me, sharp point first. “I *swear* I was meeting a certain petite, pixie-haired fifteen-year-old when I was attacked. Weird she wasn’t the first person interviewed about what happened ...”

I snatch the pencil from his hand and slam it onto the desk. “Isn’t it weirder that you’re a senior meeting a fifteen-year-old in a motel room alone?” This time I don’t hide the insinuation and venom in my tone.

Brandon places a hand on his chest over his heart in mock hurt. “You must really think the worst of me. If you recall, *I* was the one who ended up with glass in my head and nearly bled out.” He points at his scalp. “A shit-ton of staples, remember?”

This coy dancing around each other is getting on my nerves. I want to come out and accuse him of cornering, threatening, and hurting my sister, but I can’t do that without admitting she

was there and ruining the story we created. Instead of telling him where to go, I shrug and say, “Maybe you deserved it.”

“Now, now,” he chides, leaning forward and grabbing a chunk of my hair. “You might want to be a little nicer to me, sweetheart.” He examines the fading pink color, then releases it. “I could destroy you, your boyfriend, and your little sister just like that.” He snaps his fingers.

I know what he’s talking about, he knows what he’s talking about, but neither of us is going to come out and say it.

“And how would you do that?” I ask, trying not to hold my breath for the inevitable answer.

That cocky smirk is back. He’s enjoying this. He loves the cat and mouse game. Maybe he thinks it’s some kind of twisted foreplay and has forgotten that the last time he tried something with me, I bashed him over the head with a heavy math textbook to get away.

“When I woke up and they told me what had happened, I told them I couldn’t quite remember, everything was ...” He waves his hands in front of his face and blindly gazes past me, dramatically illustrating his point.

“Hazy.” He drops his hands. “Amnesia isn’t uncommon with head trauma, after all. They told me to stay home from school, but I just had to come and see if something would”—he eyes me pointedly—“jog my memory.”

“But you already know what happened. You were jumped by party crashers.”

“Was I? Maybe something will come back to me that’ll prove otherwise. Maybe your boyfriend lied about walking in on the tail end of everything. Maybe he was protecting someone.”

He raises an eyebrow and makes a face like we both know exactly who Jason was protecting, but still I admit to nothing. Brandon doesn’t mind my silence, though, because he’s in the middle of making whatever point he wanted to make when he sat backward in his seat.

“When they asked me and my parents if we wanted to press charges, I said no, I didn’t want to press charges when I didn’t remember what happened. However ... if I were to suddenly remember what happened, and the story was different from what we were led to believe ...”

He’s always scheming, always conniving ways to make things swing in his favor. Even when all the evidence pointed to him, he managed to make all the adults in my life think I was harassing him and wasting police resources trying to frame him for Lily’s disappearance over a personal vendetta I had against him. *And* he made them all think I was somehow involved in the school break-in.

So I know all this back-and-forth is leading to something, and I’m not going to like it.

I’m not stupid, I know exactly what he’s threatening. And while admittedly it’s what actually happened, and to him we’re the villains, Gia was just defending herself, and we’re already in too deep to not face any consequences.

So, instead of breaking down and giving in, I do the only thing I can and double down. “And then it will suddenly be your word—the guy with the head injury and memory loss—versus all the witness testimonies?”

He smiles, and I realize I’ve said the thing he’s been baiting me toward.

He leans over to his backpack on the floor and pulls out his shiny, expensive laptop, placing it on my desk and opening the lid. “Maybe, maybe not,” he says, clicking around on his computer. “Maybe I happen to find texts, synced to my laptop from my phone before it was stolen.

And maybe these texts are proof of me setting up a meeting with a certain girl, and maybe they also place her with me only a few minutes before your boyfriend called the ambulance, with that girl nowhere in sight.”

He turns the computer around to show me his screen.

It's a messaging app with a number at the top instead of a saved name. The number is Gia's—I'd know it anywhere—and I read the few lines visible on the app. The first text is from Brandon.

I'm in room 114. Come now.

I'll be there in 5.

Are you alone?

Yes. I'm here.

The date and time indicate that they were sent just before Gia called me panicking that she had accidentally killed him. It places her there at the time Brandon was supposedly jumped, and if he shared this with anyone, I'm not sure how we could talk our way out of it. I have a fleeting thought of snatching the laptop and whipping it at the floor, then jumping on it over and over again until all that's left are smashed bits of aluminum alloy, but like he was following my train of thought, Brandon snaps the lid shut and tucks the laptop safely back in his bag.

Keeping my voice steady, I say, "All that proves is that you're a predator, intimidating a young girl into meeting you alone in a motel room."

He shrugs, crossing his arms and placing them against the back of the chair. Casual. Relaxed. In control. "I did nothing illegal. Your sister, on the other hand ..."

This is the first time he's come right out and blamed Gia without any insinuation, and my hackles rise. Sick of the little game, I ask, "What do you want, Brandon?"

His smile is neither genuine nor comforting. It's the smile of a man who craves power over people, who enjoys watching you squirm.

He keeps me in suspense, not answering immediately, and the bell rings, signaling the end of class. Chairs scrape across

the floor as people around us stand and gather their things, but Brandon and I don't move from where we sit staring at each other.

The friend Brandon put in a headlock calls out to him, "Hey, asshole! We gave you enough time to hit on your girlfriend! It's time to go!"

The others hoot and holler and loudly gossip about how Brandon *just banged her a couple weeks ago* and how I must already be *begging for a repeat*, and I have to bite my tongue to keep from saying something that'll get me suspended again. Brandon breaks the stare-off first, standing up.

"I want my phone back," he states, all conniving playfulness gone. "I know you took it. Give it back to me, and I'll consider keeping the amnesia. You have one week." He doesn't wait for my reply, instead swinging his backpack over his shoulder and joining his friends, getting rowdy all over again. They very loudly head out from the classroom, patting one another on the back and generally acting like they're entitled to all the space and everyone else can move out of their way. I sit frozen in my seat, watching them. Just before he exits, Brandon looks back at me with an intimidating glare, then disappears from sight.

TWO

It takes a moment before I recover enough to pack up my things, but right when I'm about to escape into the hallway to find Jason and tell him about Brandon, my name is called.

Mr. Lewis, an ancient man who should've retired from teaching a long time ago, sits expectantly at his desk. "Just a moment, please, Siena."

Warily, I close the distance between us, unsure of what he wants. Did he hear the conversation between me and Brandon? That seems unlikely but not completely impossible.

"Siena," he starts, shuffling through papers on his desk, "since you started here at King, I've seen real potential in you. I know you've been working hard and keeping up with the readings, even going above and beyond when analyzing the text. Your hard work is paying off."

Mr. Lewis picks up a stapled stack of papers and holds it out to me. It's the paper I wrote after the last book we finished. On the cover page, the words *Great work!* are scribbled in red ink, beside a mark of 98 percent.

Holy shit. I stare at the mark like my eyes are playing tricks on me, like it's actually a six instead of a nine. But it's not. I earned a 98 percent. My very first one *ever*. I did it all on my own, and a surge of pride wells up from deep inside me.

"Have you given any thought to what you want to do after you graduate?" he asks, forcing me to rip my eyes away from the glowing mark.

What do I want to do after high school? I know I want to go to college and get a good enough job to take care of Gia, but I haven't given it much thought past that.

"Um, not really. College, I guess."

He stands and walks around the desk. "If you're thinking of college, which I encourage you to do, you need to start

seriously considering your options. Deadlines are coming up for programs and scholarships alike.”

I can't miss the deadlines to apply, especially not for any and all scholarships I can get. There's no way I can afford school by myself, and my father, the man who told me I'm out when I turn eighteen, certainly isn't going to help.

Mr. Lewis's tone softens a bit when he takes in my panic-stricken face. “I'm not trying to worry you, only trying to put things into perspective. My friend runs a scholarship program for students from the community who show academic potential. I always recommend the top student from each of my classes for it, and to be quite frank with you, they always get it. I'm only telling you this because you were on the right track until you got suspended.”

For some reason, him insinuating I'm fucking up makes me straighten my spine and announce, “I'm still on the right track. I'm going to keep my grades up.”

“Good, good.” He nods, then lowers his voice conspiratorially. “I know you're Florence's daughter. The teachers gossip amongst themselves, and you're the spitting image of your mother back in the day.”

Dread fills me, and I hold my breath, waiting for him to tell me that getting suspended only proves I'm exactly like my mother and that my good grades were a fluke, maybe even accuse me of cheating. But he surprises me when he says, “I taught your mom early on in my career, yes, but it's hard to forget a troublemaker like Florence.

However, based on how hard you're working and how you're staying on top of all the work and even the optional course material, I know you're different from her. I can see you trying. If you keep your grades up like this and stay out of trouble, I'd be happy to recommend you for the scholarship. I think you'd be a good contender, and it's a good chunk of change too.”

He opens a desk drawer and holds out what looks like an information pamphlet. I stare at it, stunned.

I never paid Mr. Lewis much attention, but he knew my mom, Florence Bowen, the D-list actress more famous for appearing in tabloids and causing issues than for her few cult movies. The woman who grew up here in King City and has a reputation as the worst kind of person.

But not only does Mr. Lewis know all this, he may be the first person who knew Florence and hasn't assumed I'm exactly like her. He sees me as my own person. He recognizes that I'm trying. He wants me to succeed and is going to help me get a scholarship.

College always seemed like a faraway thing, so I never gave it serious thought, but going to college is possible, and it might be time I give it the thought it deserves.

I finally take the pamphlet from his outstretched hand. There's information about how to apply and some information about other scholarships.

When I find my voice, it comes out rough. "Yes, I'd like to be referred for this. Thank you."

I leave the class feeling a weird mixture of confusion, giddiness, determination, and worry. The first three are because of Mr. Lewis and this new realization that I could really go to college and that I'm going to make it happen no matter what, and the last one is because of Brandon.

He's back and issuing threats, and I need to find Jason and tell him that immediately.



I can barely focus after everything that happened this morning. It doesn't help that I couldn't see Jason all day since we both spent the lunch period writing a makeup test for a class we missed last week, and the brief texting conversations we were able to sneak between classes didn't cut it. When the final bell

rings, I sprint all the way to his car. He's already there waiting for me.

"Siena," he calls, striding toward me, his blue eyes intense as they scan me from head to toe. "Are you okay?"

His hands are firm as he holds me at arm's length like he's making sure I'm all in one piece, and I force myself to focus and not get distracted by the way his gaze pierces through me.

"I'm fine, Brandon only glared at me a little in math, but other than that it was back to ignoring me. Did you see him?"

My reassurances calm Jason a little, and the tenseness in his shoulders relaxes even if the severe look on his face doesn't. He guides me the rest of the way to his car with a firm hand on my lower back. "No. Gia?"

"She told me she hasn't seen him and is planning on steering clear. She's with Chris and Lindsey now, and they're going for milkshakes. But, Jason ..." I stop walking and turn to face him. I've been thinking about it all day, my mind running wild with possibilities, but I haven't told Jason yet because I thought I should do it in person. "Brandon told me he wants his phone back, and he's threatening—" I stop myself when I remember we're in the school parking lot where kids could potentially hear us. I lower my voice. "Blackmail ..."

His eyes narrow. "Blackmail?" He practically growls the word. "Did you confirm you have his phone?"

I shake my head. "Of course not. But I've been thinking, why does he want it back so badly? My initial hunch about the phone must be right! There's something incriminating on it that will tell us what happened to Lily. She disappeared weeks ago, and we're no closer to finding out what happened to her. But I *know* Brandon is involved somehow, and now we may have evidence!"

His phone is still sitting turned off in my room.

When I tried to unlock it at the motel party, it didn't work, so he's obviously changed the password since the time I stole

it for a few brief moments at the Tracks, but there has to be a way in.

“How many times do you think I can guess a phone passcode before it locks me out?” I ask Jason as he opens the passenger door for me.

“I’m not sure. We’ll have to look it up. But I’m a little more concerned with the *blackmail* part. What is he threatening? Are you in real danger?”

I sink into the familiar leather seat, placing my backpack by my feet. “If I try too many times, will everything on his phone self-destruct, or is that just a thing in the movies? I don’t want to destroy any evidence when we’re so close to it.

Maybe I can bring it into one of those stores and tell them it’s mine and I forgot the password? But I think they clear out the phone to unlock it, and as I said, we can’t risk that.”

Jason eyes the crowded lot as I wonder about my odds of convincing a tech person the phone isn’t stolen.

He closes my door before reappearing beside me in the driver’s seat.

“Siena,” he states, his serious tone pulling me from my thoughts, “can we focus on the *blackmail* part for a second? How worried do we need to be?”

Oh, shit. I got so wrapped up in finding information about Lily’s disappearance, I forgot that Brandon and his stupid threats don’t just affect me and Gia—they affect Jason too. He’s the one who took the fall for Gia, the one who said he found Brandon. He lied to the police when they questioned him about what happened, saying he and Brandon were jumped at the party. He’d be in the direct line of fire if Brandon made good on his threat.

“I’m sorry, Jason,” I say quickly, “I should’ve told you right away. I don’t want you getting hurt because of Brandon’s threats.”

“What? I don’t give a fuck about me. I’m not scared of *Brandon*.” He says his name like an angry curse. “What is he threatening to do to *you*? To Gia? Do we need to handle it?”

I pause for a moment before my mind catches up with his words. He truly isn’t concerned about himself, only me and Gia, and butterflies kick up in my stomach.

“No, I’m not too worried about it. He gave me a week before he does anything, and I’m planning to have all the evidence I need before then. If not, I’ll figure out how to deal with Brandon later.”

Jason studies me so intently that I have to resist the urge to squirm in my seat. Finally, he says, “I know you’re used to taking care of everything and doing it all on your own, but you know I’m here for you, right?”

With a pounding heart, I grip his hand and give it a squeeze, trying to communicate all the emotions I’m feeling that are too hard to put into words. I’ve always felt alone, always felt like I had to handle everything myself and could never rely on anyone for anything, but ever since I met Jason, he’s always been there for me, proving over and over again that I can trust him. It means more to me than I can ever tell him.

“I know, Jason. Thank you.”

With a final meaningful look, like he’s making sure I *really* understand that I can rely on him, he gives my hand a gentle squeeze before needing to release it to start the car and shift into first gear. He lowers my window a few inches to let in fresh air before the car even moves.

“Let’s see what we can do about unlocking his phone,” he says, fully on board with my decision. “Maybe try his birthday, jersey number, phone number, a combination of those. He’s self-absorbed, so any numbers to do with himself should be our first try.”

Very smart. That does sound like a Brandon thing to do. “I don’t know any of those.”

“I’ll figure them out and text them to you,” he says, and his support instantly raises my confidence. I *know* Brandon’s hiding something, and if I get more time to snoop through his phone, I can figure out what. The first time I scrolled through his text thread with Lily proved he was obsessed with her, with her constantly telling him to leave her alone and him always refusing. He found me before I had time to dig any deeper, but now I’ll have unlimited time to search for answers.

“You’re the best, Jason,” I reply, but he frowns in response, eyes flicking to his rearview mirror. “Is everything all right?”

“I’m not sure,” he says, changing lanes and making a right instead of a left like he normally would to get to my street. He immediately checks the rearview mirror and lets out a frustrated sigh.

“What’s going on?” I don’t see anything in the side mirror, and just before I’m about to turn in my seat, sirens blare behind us.

“Are we getting pulled over?” I ask as Jason signals and slows to the gravel shoulder of the road. “You weren’t speeding!”

The irony isn’t lost on me that the first time I got in his car, he very much *was* speeding as police cars chased after him with sirens blaring while he refused to pull over, and now he’s driving like a law-abiding citizen and is getting pulled over anyway.

“The car was waiting for us as soon as I pulled out of the school lot. Passed a bunch of other cars and cut people off to get behind me and make that last turn before turning the sirens on.”

Jason shifts into Park and takes his license from his wallet before checking the mirror again and stiffening.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“What?” I ask for what seems like the millionth time today, finally turning around to see what’s got Jason’s jaw grinding. A police car is parked directly behind us on the shoulder of the

road, lights flashing but sirens off, and there's a uniformed officer walking toward us, but the car is too low and he's too close for me to see above his shoulders. The occasional car drives past as we wait, but for the most part we're on a low-traffic street.

The officer stops beside Jason's window and knocks on it, waiting while Jason rolls it down all the way. The officer ducks down to survey the inside of the car, and when I meet his bloodshot eyes, I suck in a breath to stop from cursing.

Officer Liu. My neighbor, Lily's dad, and the man who hates my mom, knows about my past with Stan Roven, and is *convinced* I'm somehow involved with his daughter's disappearance, is standing there with a righteous smirk after pulling us over for no reason, knowing full well there's nothing we can do about it.

"License and registration," he greets us, acting like he doesn't know exactly who we are and like this is any other traffic stop when it clearly isn't.

Jason hands him what he's asked for. "Is there a problem, *Officer?*" The title is said sarcastically, which Officer Liu doesn't seem to appreciate.

He ignores the question and gruffly barks, "Keep your hands on the steering wheel."

It's begrudging, but Jason complies without complaint.

Last time Officer Liu interacted with us alone under the pretense of doing his official duties, he wrongly arrested us, then held me in an interrogation room without a guardian and accused me of being involved in his daughter's disappearance. As much as it pains me, I have to behave, because I don't want to give him an excuse to repeat what happened, and Jason's compliance tells me he feels the same way.

"Do you know why I pulled you over?" Officer Liu asks, and I clench my teeth to stop myself from yelling *because you're an obsessed, power-abusing stalker!*

Jason's much more controlled than I am and evenly replies with a simple "No."

"You were speeding. And in a *school zone* at that. The fine is double."

"He wasn't speeding!" I exclaim, then snap my mouth closed when Officer Liu zeros in on me excitedly like I've done exactly what he wanted.

"Siena." He makes a sweeping gesture with his hand at the space beside him. "Are you going to be a problem?"

Do I need to ask you to step out of the vehicle?"

I sink into my seat like it can protect me from the memory of being pressed against the hood of the car while metal cuffs are tightened around my wrists, from the memory of being trapped in the backseat of a cloying cop car, where there's *no air*.

"I wasn't speeding," Jason says calmly, taking the attention back off me.

"But you were. And I'm an officer of the law, so if I say you were, then you *were*."

"But we *weren't!*" I shoot back before I can think better of it.

His gaze snaps to me, a calculated look on his face.

"Okay, maybe I want to be nice, maybe I want to help you and pretend you weren't speeding. You'd have to give me something I can work with, some information I can use."

"Like what?" Jason grits out.

Officer Liu shrugs casually. "Maybe your girlfriend feels like remembering something that happened the night my daughter went missing. Maybe she decides to confess something that's been burdening her."

"For the *millionth time*," I exclaim, exasperated, "I didn't have anything to do with Lily's disappearance!"

You're wasting time harassing us when you could be finding *real* information!"

To Jason, Officer Liu asks, "Should I add a broken headlight to your ticket as well?"

"I don't have a broken headli—"

In a quick second, Officer Liu whips his baton off his belt, steps to the front of the car, and raises his arm to swing.

"Stop!" I shout, and Officer Liu pauses with his arm raised in the air, poised to strike.

"Keep your hands on the steering wheel!" he demands, pointing the baton at Jason through the windshield even though he made no indication of movement.

"We don't *know* anything!" I cry out, and Officer Liu approaches Jason's window again. "I didn't *do* anything!"

You should be looking at Brandon Scott. He was obsessed with Lily! He—"

"Oh, yes, your gripe with Brandon Scott," he interrupts. "You've already been through this with Detective Dubois, and it didn't work in your favor." He leans closer, pinning me with his bloodshot eyes. "No one is going to believe the straight-A student and star quarterback with multiple college offers has anything to do with my daughter's disappearance, especially when all signs point to *you*."

I'm so frustrated with his stubborn preconceptions about me that I feel like screaming, threat of arrest be damned. Just as I open my mouth to say something that'll probably get me in more trouble, Jason interrupts.

"Just give me my damn ticket and let us go already," he forces out, his fingers so tight on the steering wheel his knuckles are white. He turns to Officer Liu, and I notice how tense the muscles in his back and neck are.

It occurs to me just how hard Jason's been focusing on staying calm instead of lashing out and making things worse like I've been doing, especially since I can feel how powerful

the anger radiating off him is. Knowing that Jason's this pissed on my behalf snuffs out some of my own frustration, and I place a subtle hand on his thigh as reassurance that we're in this together.

Officer Liu's eyes narrow. "Stay right there."

He disappears back to his own car, and Jason and I both release a breath, and with it the tension in our shoulders.

"I'm sorry he's giving you a ticket for no reason, Jason," I say, then amend, "Well, I guess he has a reason, just not the proper one."

"I don't give a shit about the ticket," Jason admits.

"He's clearly going to keep harassing us as long as he's got it in his delusional brain that you're somehow involved with what happened to his daughter."

"I'm sorry, Jason. It's my fault you're always mixed up with him." Hell, he was *arrested* because of me. "I can't believe he was really going to bash in your headlight." He was going to do it too; he wasn't bluffing.

Jason takes my hand from his thigh and intertwines our fingers. "Stop apologizing. I'm not worried about Officer Dickwad just like I'm not worried about Brandon.

We're going to figure it out together, and we're going to figure out what happened to Lily. Then we can stand back and watch everyone eat shit when they realize how wrong they were about you."

My heart squeezes the same way it does every time he says something that makes me want to throw myself at him and never let go.

Approaching footsteps stop me from replying, and then Officer Liu is back at the window. He hands Jason back his documents, along with an undeserved ticket.

"You better hope there's some progress with Lily's case, or I'll be seeing you two real soon." It's a thinly veiled threat, one that neither Jason nor I miss but can't say anything about,

and then Officer Liu is retreating to his car, and I'm left wondering just how far he'll go in the name of his personal vendetta.

THREE

The week that passes is thankfully yet annoyingly un-eventful. Dario's away on a weeklong trip for work, so there hasn't been any more talk about shipping me off like he suggested after my suspension. Maybe sending me to live with his cousin in New York was just a threat to keep me in line, or maybe he meant it, but I'm relieved he's not following up on separating me from my sister.

Zia Stella is staying over to "watch us," and she's much more chill and ten times nicer than he is, so the hours I'm home between work and school aren't the worst. I eat lunch with Nyah or sometimes outside when it's nice enough, joke in class with Warren, spend my spare time with Jason, even get an A on my English pop quiz, and it's almost weird how normal everything seems.

Gia's on track as well. This week she joined the debate team and signed up for volleyball tryouts, seemingly having cooled it with the parties and drinking after everything that happened at the motel and our talk about being in a good place here in King City. She seems *happy*, and it's for that reason I haven't told her about Brandon and his threats. I don't want to worry her unnecessarily, especially not when we're getting along and she's actually getting her act together. Besides, I'm handling it, like I handle everything else, which is why the week has been annoying: there's been no progress with unlocking Brandon's phone.

I've tried combinations of all the numbers important to Brandon like his birthday, jersey number, home address, even his cat's birthday, which I casually asked his younger sister, Brianna, about when she was over hanging out with Gia. I've become so desperate, Jason even got the cheerleader in charge of all the football player locker decorations for spirit day to tell him Brandon's locker combination, and I still had no luck. It is so *frustrating*.

Every time Brandon's phone is in my hand, I just want to smash it on my desk over and over again, screaming obscenities until it shatters into a million pieces. But then the calming voice of reason in my head that sounds suspiciously like Jason reminds me that destroying the phone won't help us find out what Brandon's done to Lily, and I practice Anusha's calming breathing techniques to quell the rage.

But other than that, everything's going so well it's almost too good to be true. This is everything I wanted when I came to King City: a stable house, a good relationship with my sister, a future in which college is actually possible, friends, and even the bonus of Jason, who's incredible in every way. But I can't help feeling like trouble is breathing down my neck, and I'm always wondering when the other shoe will drop.

I find out on Monday, exactly a week from Brandon's threat, as he promised.

Despite the fact that I share two classes and a lunch period with him, Brandon's easy enough to avoid. He's the biggest person in any crowd, so I always know where he is and run in the opposite direction. And in class, he's surrounded by friends, so I can easily slip out before he tries to talk to me. It helps that he doesn't try to talk to me, only glares like he's trying to make my head explode, but I can work with that.

But Monday morning after class is dismissed and I'm heading to the cafeteria for lunch, I let my guard down for just a second while texting Nyah to arrange lunch plans, and I don't notice Brandon searching for me until it's too late. I practically face-plant into his hard chest.

"Time's up," he growls, corralling me to a less populated side of the hallway by some lockers. "You better have my phone in that backpack of yours."

I don't. It's safely tucked away and turned off in my desk drawer at home, hidden underneath some college scholarship pamphlets I picked up from the guidance office last week.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t have your phone,” I reply, keeping my voice calm and my heart rate as even as I can.

He’s not buying it, though. “I know you do. It was ‘stolen’ when I was ‘jumped’ at the motel party.” He uses his fingers to make air quotes and add extra emphasis around the words. “I know you or your bitch sister or your asshole boyfriend have it. I gave you a week, and your time is up.

Give it to me.”

He gets closer to me with every word, and although I’m trying to play it cool, I’ve somehow backed myself into a locker. With him looming over me, so close I can smell his cinnamon gum, I choke out, “You have a new phone. Why are you so obsessed with the old one? It’s gone. The people who jumped you and stole it probably wiped it and sold it off already.”

“That’d be fine if it was the truth, which it isn’t. I know you have it; I want it back. There are things on it I need.”

I knew it. I *freaking* knew it. He doesn’t care if it gets wiped because there’s evidence on it! But as long as he suspects it’s in my possession, data completely intact, with proof of what he did to Lily on it, he’s going to keep fighting me for it.

But there’s something I need to know, something that’s been bothering me. “Why don’t you just use the *Find My Friends* app to track the phone then?”

It’s a risk—maybe he forgot he had that option altogether and I just reminded him of it. But to my utter relief, he mutters, “I turned all location services off on the phone.”

Thank goodness. Now I can keep attempting passcodes without worrying he’ll track the location to my house.

Keeping the smugness from my tone, I reply, “Well, that sucks, but I don’t have it. If you’ll excuse me—”

My attempt to shoulder past him fails epically when he sidesteps and closes the minimal distance between us, his

broad shoulders blocking my entire view of the hall.

“You’re a liar, just like your Hollywood whore of a mother,” he growls, and the words take me by surprise.

People in King City know Florence Bowen, and most who grew up with her don’t particularly like her or have the best memories of her, but not many people know she’s my mom. We have different last names, and I don’t go around advertising our relationship. The fact that Mr. Lewis told me the teachers are gossiping about it amongst themselves should’ve worried me more and warned me that it was only a matter of time until more people realized it. Brandon mentioned something about my acting superior because of my “shitty C-list actress mother” the day I was running out of his house, and I never gave it a second thought. But he’s been doing his digging. It should worry me. It does worry me.

Brandon uses my shocked silence as an opportunity to continue. “Did you forget that I can ruin your sister’s and your boyfriend’s lives and prove she was with me when I got ‘jumped’?” He uses the air quotes again.

It’s almost no fun how predictable he is. I knew he’d say that when he cornered me eventually.

“Yeah, I’m not worried about that,” I reply, crossing my arms and forcing him to take a step back. The small distance created between us helps me feel less claustrophobic, but I don’t suck in air like I want to, instead keeping my cool. I’m in control here, despite him being the one who backed me against the lockers and initiated the conversation.

“You should be. If I show the texts, it proves Gia was there when I was supposedly ‘jumped.’”

It takes everything in me not to slap his hands down when he does the air quotes.

“Which would poke holes in that whole story,” he finishes.

He’s right, but I knew this was coming and prepared.

“Well, I’ve had time to think about it, and as I said, I’m not worried about it,” I say, chin raised in the air.

Confidence is key here to selling it. “Gia wasn’t in the room; I stopped her from going right after she sent the text.

Everyone at the party saw her. She’s in videos and pictures at the party having fun while the fight in your hotel room took place. Your texts are all circumstantial.” Besides, he may be threatening it, but something tells me he doesn’t actually want to get the police involved, not if he’d have to explain why he was trying to get Gia to his room, and also not if he’s hiding something about Lily on his phone.

He believes me. I know he does. His eyes widen, and his head rears back as he scans my face. I stand straight, a defiant spark in my eyes as he runs through his options in his mind. I notice the switch a moment too late.

Rage contorts his face, and his fist slams into the locker right beside my head, making me flinch. “Give me my fucking phone!” he yells directly in my face, veins throbbing in his neck, and panic squeezes my throat. My heart beats out of my chest as he leans down, and I don’t know what he’s going to do to me, how I’ll be able to defend myself against him when he’s barely in control of himself. But as soon as his nose touches mine, he’s thrown back. More and more space appears between us, and I exhale, my chest heaving.

Jason’s there, his hand releasing the back of Brandon’s shirt where he had it bunched to throw him off me.

He stands in front of me protectively, shielding me from Brandon with his body. “You ever get that close to Siena again,” Jason starts, words dripping with venom,

“and you’ll never play football again. I’ll make sure of it.”

Brandon tugs at his shirt to fix his collar, the shock turning to indignant anger. He steps toe to toe with Jason, who meets his eyes directly, not intimidated in the slightest. They’re the same height, both with impressive builds, but Brandon’s muscles look inflated next to Jason’s lean mass. Jason is so

tense I can feel the energy he's using to restrain himself from here.

"You want to be tough, big guy?" Brandon asks, tilting his neck left and right to crack it. "You already want another round where I kick your ass?"

Jason's laugh is humorless. "You? Kick my ass? How bad was your head injury?"

"I did kick your ass." Brandon gives Jason's shoulder a shove, but he barely moves. "Yours and your bitch's."

Without breaking the stare-off with Brandon, Jason addresses me through clenched teeth. "Siena, I need you to go to the cafeteria."

Why does he ... *oh*. He's trying to get rid of me so he can fight Brandon without worrying about me, so I don't get in the middle of it like last time. The only reason Jason got a black eye last time was because he was busy trying to make sure I remained completely untouched.

Though I know he's capable of handling himself, I don't want him to fight. We were just suspended for this exact thing two weeks ago.

"No, Jason," I say, touching his tense back. "Let's just go."

"Not without giving me my phone," Brandon declares, turning to me, but Jason sidesteps, making sure Brandon doesn't even get a clear view of me, never mind get close to me.

"I don't have your phone," I say over Jason's shoulder.

"If you're not going to give it to me willingly, then I'm going to have to take matters into my own hands,"

Brandon threatens, and Jason doesn't like that. He takes a menacing step forward, but I grab his arm, holding him back.

"Jason, please. Let's go."

A few groups of kids on lunch wander into the hall, stopping and whispering when they see the obvious face-off

between Jason and Brandon. Even my sort-of friend Thompson is here with a friend, twirling the strands of hair at the end of his mullet like he's trying to decide whether or not to step in. We're attracting attention.

"Jason," I plead, wrapping both my hands around his arm now, "don't get in trouble for this; he's not worth it."

Brandon's chuckle is dark and malicious. "You going to let your bitch tell you what to do, Parker?"

Jason's muscle ticks under my hand, like he's doing everything in his power to stop himself from ripping it from my grasp and taking a swing at Brandon. Before Jason can decide whether to risk getting expelled, I slip in front of him and poke Brandon's chest. "You know, you are incredibly misogynistic. I have a *name* and it's *Siena*. And just because someone respects the opinion of a woman doesn't make them any less of a man; in fact, it makes them *more* of one."

Jason's hands land on my waist, and he pulls me back from Brandon.

"We're leaving," Jason says to Brandon. "Stay away from Siena, or we're going to have a problem."

"I just want my phone," Brandon growls, pointing at me. "I tried playing nice, but that hasn't worked. Now, you're going to regret this."

Jason steps forward again with a murderous look on his face, almost like it's an automatic reaction and he can't help himself, but I pull him back. More people are walking in the hall now, sending us curious looks, and Jason allows me to drag him away and down a different corridor. Brandon doesn't follow us, but he and Jason don't drop their gazes until we turn the corner and they lose sight of each other.

"I can't *fucking* stand him," Jason fumes, shaking some of the tension from his limbs and taking his place beside me as we head toward the cafeteria.

"He's the worst, but you can't fight him. We were just warned about that, and I don't think you'd squeak by with a

suspension this time. Principal Anderson would expel you if you beat him up.” Because there’s no doubt that Jason *would’ve* beaten him up. I can still feel the anger radiating off him, and so can the kids passing us in the hall, scurrying away quickly to give us a wide berth. I’m not scared of Jason, though. There’s nothing he could ever do that would make me scared of him.

“It would’ve been worth it,” he says, and though I hear the conviction in his words and know he truly believes it, that’s not something I’d ever want for him, especially not on my behalf.

Placing my hand in his, I give it a gentle squeeze. “I appreciate it, Jason, but let’s be smarter than him. We’re going to focus on finding what he’s hiding so we can finally take him down for good and get justice for Lily.”

Jason’s jaw clenches before he relents with a subtle nod, his fingers tightening around mine. My body becomes warm and fuzzy from the action—and from the knowledge that Jason, this loyal, smart, and annoyingly handsome boy beside me, would’ve risked expulsion for *me*. He’s there for me in a way no one ever has been, and I grip his hand a bit tighter.

FOUR

Dario's barely spoken a word to me since he got back from his work trip. He doesn't even *look* at me if he can help it, and I know from his angry confession it's because he can't stand the sight of me, of *Florence*. It hurts, the way he pointedly keeps his head turned the opposite way when passing me in the hall or aimed down at the drink he's swirling in his hand. I'll never have a relationship with my father, and I hate that it bothers me so much. But he kind of talks to Gia, or at least he doesn't actively go out of his way to avoid her, and I try not to be jealous of the way she beams when he asks her a question or takes a minuscule amount of interest in her day.

Like right now, as I'm heating up some sauce Zia Stella left in the fridge to throw over the pasta I boiled for my and Gia's dinner, Dario stops in the kitchen for more ice cubes. He opens the large stainless steel freezer and casually asks Gia, "You make the volleyball team?"

I'm surprised he even remembered she was trying out for that. Gia, who's sitting at the island, instantly comes to attention. "They're posting the official list Monday, but the coach told me I've got a great shot!"

Dario gives a gruff "That's good," before closing the freezer and striding back to his office without a second glance back.

It may not seem like a lot, but from Dario, that's more than we can usually hope for, and Gia's smile speaks for itself.

"That totally means you made it," I tell her, pouring the sauce over the pasta and giving it a mix before serving our portions. "Can I come watch a game sometime?"

"Sure, but I don't think we'll have our first real game for a while, and you might be at work." She twines some spaghetti on her fork. "Why aren't you there now?"

"It's Friday. The restaurant hasn't been scheduling me on Fridays lately," I answer, sitting with her at the island.

When it's only the two of us, we don't bother setting the actual table and eating there. We eat at the island unless Zia Stella is here, and we don't eat with Dario ever. "You want to do something tonight? Maybe watch a shitty scary movie?"

We've been getting along and hanging out more than normal since the motel incident. It's been really nice spending time with my sister without bickering or feeling like she hates me.

"Can't. I'm going out with Brianna and Lindsey."

I shoot her a look at the mention of Brandon's sister, and Gia reads my mind, holding up her hands innocently.

"Not at Brianna's house. We're hanging out at Lindsey's.

She's asked me to dye her hair black, so Brianna's coming to hang out too." She blushes as she pokes at her pasta.

"Brianna's annoyed with Lindsey at the moment, so I think she's coming to spend time with me."

"Oh, really?" I ask, trying to play it cool even though I want to squeal with joy for Gia and for the fact that she's sharing with me like it's no big deal. "Have you told her how you feel yet?"

"No, I'm trying to let things play out and see how it goes. Don't want to come on too strong, you know?"

No, I don't know. I know nothing about dating and relationships and love, and sometimes I wonder why Jason even bothers being so nice to me, but I'm not going to complain, especially not when he walks me to my door and kisses me like he's starving and I'm the sustenance he needs.

"Ugh, you're thinking about Jason, aren't you?" she asks between bites.

"Am not!"

"You so are. You have that goofy look on your face."

"Yeah, well, you ..." My mind blanks on any good comebacks. "You just eat your pasta."

She laughs victoriously, and I can't help but smile at her. I've been worried about her, but she seems to be okay after leaving that motel room thinking she killed Brandon. Even thinking his name kills my vibe, and I don't want to ruin her good mood either, but I can't stop myself from asking, "Have you told any of them what happened at the motel party? Brandon asking you to come alone and meet him there for a fake ID? Him ..."

I leave the rest of what happened unsaid, not wanting to put her through it again.

Her face sours, and I almost regret bringing it up, but when she speaks, it's clear it's directed at the memory.

"No. I would've if it didn't implicate me. If I told them, they'd put it together, and even though they fight, now more than usual, Brianna is still pissed that someone hurt her brother."

"She's fighting with Brandon?"

Gia slurps up a strand of spaghetti that escaped from her neat twirl, splattering sauce on her chin. "She said he's been especially grouchy these last few months and snaps at every little thing. She never invites us over anymore because she doesn't want to deal with his mood swings, which is fine by me because I never want to see his face again. Lindsey and Grace think he's creepy too, but we can't say that to Brianna, especially since we don't need to see him anyway. We'll probably say something if she starts inviting us over again."

"At least you're staying away from him," I say, my own pasta tasting like mush now that I'm thinking about Brandon. He's left me alone this week after Jason threatened him on Monday, though I swear he's giving me migraines with the intense way he hate-glares at me through the day.

"You don't have to worry about that from me. But have you ..." She scrunches her nose like she's trying to decide whether or not it's worth it to bring something up.

She must decide it is, because she continues, “Have you heard from Mom?”

The question is out of left field, and my body stills as I try not to act suspicious.

I got a note under my pillow where she said how proud she is of me, and I swear I've spotted her around King City multiple times. But other than that ...

“No, have you?”

She mindlessly pushes around the leftover spaghetti on her plate. “No. But I thought I saw her in a black SUV leaving the street when we pulled in today after school. Chris was driving and said he didn't notice anything, but ...” She gives a sad laugh. “Never mind. I must be missing her, so I'm imagining seeing her.”

Despite all the horrible things Florence has done to us, despite abandoning us years ago and never looking back, Gia still sees only the good in her, still yearns for a relationship. It's pointless. Florence is a selfish woman who couldn't care less about us, but no matter how many times I remind Gia of that, she still hopes. Maybe it's because we're getting along, or maybe it's because I don't want to keep being the bad guy and burst her bubble, but I admit, “When we first got here, I thought I saw her a few times.”

Gia perks up. “Really?”

I nod. “It obviously wasn't her; my mind was playing tricks on me. Maybe because we just moved here and I was still settling in after everything that happened, and she grew up here, it was too easy to imagine seeing her.”

I place my hand over Gia's in solidarity. “But it's not her, Gia, and she's not going to come back and check up on us. She doesn't miss us.”

Gia frowns, mumbling, “I still miss her.”

It hurts because I know there's nothing I can do to help her. Florence doesn't care, and that's not going to change no matter

how much we want it to. We're going to have to get used to the fact that we have two shitty parents who act like they never wanted us to begin with, never mind to have real relationships with us now.



The rest of dinner and cleanup is quiet, Gia and I both lost in our thoughts until Brianna's mom picks her up. I go outside to say hello, and she's a lovely woman. Based on the brief interaction, it's hard to reconcile the polite woman in the Lexus with Brandon.

Since Jason is making money racing at the Tracks tonight, I spend my evening in my room trying various four-number codes to break into Brandon's phone. I've learned that I get ten attempts before it locks me out for an hour, and so far there's been no threat of destroying the data, so I keep using my ten attempts every hour or so, and I'll keep doing that until I get in.

Between waiting, I try to figure out the math homework and trade texts with Nyah. We've been slowly but surely getting closer, and it's nice to have a friend. She doesn't judge me when I get bored and ask her stupid questions like *What color notebook do you think math is? Blue or red?*

Or *How many bananas do you think is a dangerous amount to consume in a day due to the whole "there's cyanide in them"*

thing? And I look forward to the random horoscope predictions she sends me throughout the week even though I don't put too much stock in zodiac divinations.

Just as I high-five myself for figuring out a particularly hard question, my phone rings.

"So, I've been thinking," Nyah greets me without any preamble when I answer.

"Hello to you too." I laugh.

“You and Jason need to go on a double date with me and Tyler. We just came home from a date, and while I love going out with him, obviously, it would be so much fun going out with another couple! We can play mini golf! Or go bowling! Or is that too cliché? What am I saying? Jason’s literally *drag racing* right now, of course that’s too cliché.”

“Whoa, whoa, slow down,” I say, amused at her enthusiasm, even if it is a bit misplaced. “Jason and I aren’t even dating. I mean, I don’t think—”

There’s a gasping laugh on the other end of the line.

“Are you kidding me? You’re kidding, right?”

“Well, I—”

“Siena, the boy would literally break a dude’s arm for looking at you the wrong way. You’re dating.”

I tell the butterflies in my stomach that she’s exaggerating. Probably.

“I don’t know,” I say, leaning back in my desk chair.

“We’ve never talked about it. But I really like him, more than I’ve ever liked anyone before.”

“Ooh.” Her tone is light and teasing as she singsongs,

“I think you’re in loooooove.”

Love? Do I love Jason? I haven’t known him very long, so I don’t think I’m *supposed* to be in love with him, even though there’s no one else who gets me the way he does, no one else who makes me feel like everything’s going to be okay, or *better* than okay. Everything’s *perfect* when I’m with Jason. Almost embarrassed, I choke out, “What?”

No.”

“I bet you’re making that goofy face you make when anyone mentions his name.”

Dammit, Gia said the same thing. What face am I making? I look at myself in the mirror on my desk. “I’m *not* making a

face. There is no face!”

She cackles, probably picturing whatever face I’m not making. “But for real, do you love him? I knew I loved Tyler after our second date. We had gone to this sports bar that had a burger challenge where you had to finish this absolute monster of a burger and a pound of fries in thirty minutes. He challenged me to do it, and I issued that challenge right back.” She laughs, reliving the memory. “By the twenty-five-minute mark, Tyler was struggling to finish, and I was done. As I took my last bite, he was watching me with this huge smile on his face, all giddy and proud, bragging about how I had done it when he couldn’t to all the other patrons. And, I don’t know, I just *knew*. Maybe it seemed too soon, and I didn’t tell him right then and there, but I knew it in my heart.”

“Wow, that’s beautiful, Nyah. And remind me to never challenge you to a burger-eating competition.”

“Oh, I’d totally kick your ass,” she jokes, then sobers as she asks, “But have you had that moment? Where you looked at Jason and *knew*?”

I search back to all the time I’ve spent with Jason, all the times he’s made me laugh during hard times by saying something completely unexpected, or the way he opens the window a bit any time I get in his car, or the way he knows when I want to talk versus when I just want to sit in his company. “I don’t know, I’ve never been in love before. But if I was going to be in love with anyone, I’d be stupid to not be in love with Jason.”

Nyah squeals, and I hold the phone away from my ear for a second until she’s done. “Well, now we *have* to go on a double date. I want to see you two lovebirds in action! Like, a non-school setting action.” She sighs wistfully, and her excitement turns mournful as she says,

“I always wanted to go on a double date with Lily, but her parents freaked out if she even mentioned a boy’s name.

She wasn't allowed to date at all, only go to school and model and do whatever other extracurriculars they forced her to do. They had such high expectations of her, I have no idea how she didn't have complete meltdowns."

I remember the way Lily broke down in the huge pool house the night of Warren's party after Brandon grabbed her. She pulled herself together so perfectly after that, it was impossible to tell she had been crying, and she rejoined the party like nothing had happened. I wonder if she had to do that a lot, have a breakdown but compose herself again so no one would know what was really going on.

Leaning over, I push back my curtain to look outside at my neighbors' house, at *Lily's* house. There are no cars in the driveway, so I don't think Officer Liu is home. I wonder if he's out harassing other innocent teenagers or if he's doing actual police work.

Resettling in my seat, I say, "Maybe she dealt with it by rebelling in her own way, by going to parties and lying to her parents about it. Her dad had no idea she was at a party the night she went missing; he thought she was at a study group."

A moment of silence falls over us. I know it makes Nyah sad to think about the disappearance of her best friend, especially when no one has any idea at all where she could be or if she's all right. But I'm working on it.

Quietly, Nyah says, "I hope Lily's okay, wherever she is."

I tap Brandon's phone in front of me to wake it from sleep mode, and the text states I'm still locked out for another twenty-three minutes. I resist the urge to slam it against the desk.

"Me too, Nyah," I reply, frowning at the phone that may hold the answers to all our questions. "Me too."

FIVE

I make a few more failed attempts at unlocking Brandon's phone after hanging up with Nyah before I decide to have an early night.

Just as I'm changing into my pajamas, my phone rings. This time, it's Jason. Giddiness flutters through my body, and I remember my conversation about love with Nyah. Before I answer, I do a quick check of myself in the mirror to try to catch the "face" I apparently make. I look like me, maybe just ... happier.

I quickly press Accept and answer the call. "Hey. Are you done already? Isn't it early?" I pull the phone away to check the time out of habit, then remember the top part of my screen is black from when I dropped it.

"I didn't go," he answers, and from the background noise I can tell he's driving and calling me via Bluetooth.

"There was a cop car doing a piss-poor job trying to discreetly follow me, and I couldn't speed to lose them and risk getting pulled over. I also couldn't lead them right to the Tracks, so I gave up. I'm on my way home."

I peek out of the curtain again, the slight breeze coming in from my open window chillier now that it's later and I'm in my skimpy pajamas. There's still no car in the Lius' driveway.

"Do you think it was Officer Liu again?" I ask. He hasn't bothered us since the first ticket, but he didn't seem like he was going to give up anytime soon, especially since someone was trailing Jason tonight.

"It's too dark to tell. It might be him, or he got someone who has nothing better to do to follow me around all night."

So, he lost a night of fun and also a chance to make extra money because of me. I sink onto the bed. "I'm sorry, Jason. It's my fault he's harassing you."

“It’s not your fault,” he replies forcefully. “You can’t control him being obsessed with us.”

“But how long is he going to harass us? Until we find some substantial clues about Lily? What if we never do?”

I’ve constantly been trying with Brandon’s phone, and still nothing.”

“We’ll keep trying. I was hoping to talk with a few people tonight who are known for ... let’s say ... acquiring phones the not legal way,” Jason says, and I catch his drift. An illegal drag racing operation with an organized betting and gambling system is bound to have some sketchy people in attendance. “They would’ve known how to unlock it, or at least pointed me to someone who could.”

With a sigh, I turn off my bedside lamp and slip under the covers. “I’ll keep trying in the meantime.” Trying to get comfortable, I stick my hand under my pillow to fluff it when I graze something, sending a shock through my body as a gasp leaves my mouth.

Jason’s instantly on high alert. “What? Are you okay, Siena? *Siena*? I’m on my way!”

His words shake off my shock, and I sit up in bed.

“No, it’s all right. I’m okay, sorry.”

He releases a shaky breath. “What’s wrong?”

Quickly, I turn on my lamp and throw my pillow across the bed, frozen in a mixture of horror, shock, and awful déjà vu as I stare at what’s revealed. “There’s a note.”

Jason processes for a second. “I’m going to need more context.”

“Under my pillow. There’s a note.”

“From Gia?”

I can’t be frustrated that he’s confused since I’m not really giving him much to work with. “No. My mom used to do this thing where she would leave cute little notes under our pillows

for us to find before bed. I found one when I first got here, and I was so confused about what it meant. I never heard from her again after that, and I certainly wasn't expecting another note. But here it is."

"What does it say?"

The innocent folded-up strip of paper sits starkly against my white sheets, mocking me.

"I don't know. I didn't open it."

"Are you going to?"

It's a simple question, but not so simple an answer. I should rip it up into pieces and throw it out and forget I ever saw it. Mom leaving notes like this is only messing with my head, and I have enough to worry about. I shouldn't add mental torment over her to the list when Officer Liu is harassing us, literally following Jason as we speak, and Brandon keeps glaring holes in my head over his phone. I pick it up, ready to toss it in the trash without reading it.

Don't open it. Don't open it. Don't open it!

I open it.

"My darling Siena," I read out loud before I lose my nerve. "I'm in town. Meet me at Roast Haven Café tomorrow at noon, and don't tell your father or aunt.

Kisses."

Jason and I sit in silence as we digest Florence's note.

I have to silently read it over a few times for the shock to wear off and the words to actually sink in.

"You okay?" Jason asks; his deep voice, which is normally so soothing, does nothing to calm my inner turmoil.

"What the hell is *wrong* with her?" I explode, jumping from the bed and pacing. "She can't just waltz in and decide when it's convenient to see me. She didn't even reach out when I was arrested, and I know she knows about what happened because custody was signed over to Dario, and she *still* never

bothered to check in on me. And now she's all, *Hey, it's totally last-minute, and I haven't seen you in forever, but I'm demanding you come to a secret meeting tomorrow?* The absolute *nerve* of that woman!”

“She didn't say anything about Gia, did she?” Jason asks, and I stop pacing, instead immediately charging out of my room and into Gia's. Before getting ready for bed, I checked her location on the *Find My Friends* app on my phone—something we've recently started sharing with each other after the motel incident—and she was still at Lindsey's.

“Not on the note,” I tell Jason as I flip the light in Gia's room on. It's a mess, like normal, but an organized mess. Her bed is crumpled and unmade, and I flip over the pillows. Nothing. Mom was in the house, but like last time, I don't think she was in Gia's room.

Realization dawns on me. “Oh, shit. At dinner, Gia said she thought she saw Mom pulling out of our street as she was pulling in, but she chalked it up to seeing things because she misses her. If Florence is in town, maybe she saw her as she was leaving our house! Dario wasn't home then, it's completely possible!”

If Florence was a few minutes later or Gia slightly earlier, they would've crossed paths right here at Dario's.

“She didn't leave a note for Gia,” I tell Jason, arranging Gia's bed back to the perfect amount of messiness before retreating to my room.

“Are you going to tell her?”

“No, I can't. I don't trust Florence or her intentions, and if I tell Gia, she's going to get caught up in hope and expectations for things that will never happen.” As much as I tell Gia Mom doesn't care about us and to let her go, I don't want her to be crushed with the realization that Mom actually wants nothing to do with us, especially because it's so clear Gia just wants to be a family. I'm not going to tell Gia because I need to protect her.

“Are you going to meet her tomorrow?”

“Fuck no,” I answer quickly, resisting the urge to bite my nails. “I’m not dropping everything and running just because she deigned to summon me. She can’t even call or text me like a normal person because she doesn’t have my phone number! So instead of ringing the doorbell and actually *talking* to me, she resorted to somehow breaking in and leaving a note, because of course that’s the more theatrical way to do it, which is *so* Florence.”

“I understand it’s frustrating,” Jason agrees, then asks,

“But aren’t you curious about what she wants?”

“Of course I’m curious, but I need to prove a point.

She can’t come back and pretend like she didn’t desert us at her shitty sister’s house all those years ago and never looked back.” Just thinking about the outrageousness of it all gets my blood boiling.

“Definitely,” Jason says in the supportive way he has.

“But do you think you’ll regret not going?”

Why does he have to ask the hard questions? Why can’t he just *Yes, dear, of course, dear, you’re totally right, dear,* like partners do in movies?

Because then he wouldn’t be Jason.

I sink onto my bed. “No. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“I support whatever you want to do, but maybe take some time to think about it before automatically writing it off. You don’t want to regret not going and spend who knows how long wondering *what if*.”

I sigh, some of the fight leaving me as I consider his words. “Why do you have to be so insightful and smart?”

“You forgot incredibly tall, good-looking, and an amazing kisser.”

A laugh escapes me. “That should all go without saying.”

He chuckles before growing serious. “There’s no right answer, but give meeting your mom some thought. You don’t want to have any regrets.”

“I’ll think about it. Thanks for listening, Jason.”

“Anytime,” he replies, and I wish he were here so I could bury my face in his chest and inhale his calming scent until my mind stops feeling like it’s being pulled in fifty different directions. I don’t even have the sweater that I stole from him. I gave it back with the intention of stealing it back once it smelled like him again.

I’m about to reply when I hear a siren in the background, and Jason curses.

“What’s going on?” I ask, though the tension in my gut tells me I already know.

“I’ve got to go; it *is* Officer Dickwad, and for the record, you’re on hands-free and I’m not speeding. I’ll text you later.”

“Wait, Jason—” But he hangs up, and I’m left feeling guilty that he’s getting pulled over and harassed *yet again* because of me, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

After we hang up, I sit and stare at the note for longer than necessary. Even after Jason texts me that he’s made it home safely but has been given a bogus speeding ticket and I can breathe a bit better, I still stare at the note.

Gia pops in to say good night when she gets in just after midnight, and I crush the scrap of paper in my fist.

Gia wants a connection with Florence, and I want answers. Jason’s right; I’m going to regret it if I don’t go and I miss my chance to finally get some form of closure.

I’ll go check it out, but I’m not going to tell Gia until after to protect her. If Florence is here with the right intentions, it won’t matter if Gia sees her at noon or later on tomorrow after I’ve scoped it out and figured out what’s going on.

Settling back in bed with my decision made and my nails all chewed off, I pick up my phone and shoot a text to Jason even

though we've already said good night.

Can you drive me to Roast Haven Café tomorrow?

His reply is immediate. I'll pick you up at 11:30.

After all these years, I'm finally going to see my mother face-to-face. What am I going to say? What am I going to wear? What is she going to think of me? It shouldn't matter, but *fuck*, it does.

I think I'm going to puke.

SIX

I stand outside of Roast Haven Café for longer than would be considered normal, staring at the doors while trying to bolster my courage before I enter.

I'm really going to see Mom. I used to dream of this moment, but as I grew up and realized she was never coming back, I forced myself to stop thinking about it.

I had to harden my heart against her to protect myself from getting hurt, and just because she's here doesn't mean I feel any different. But there's still a part of me, the same pathetic part that was excited about meeting Dario despite knowing better, that wants this *so* bad.

My reflection stares back at me in the coffee shop window. My hair is neatly parted, my winged eyeliner is almost symmetrical since I used a little piece of tape like Gia once showed me, and my pink lip gloss makes my lips look extra pouty.

I look pretty. I look like I *tried*.

I scowl at my reflection, using the back of my hand to wipe away the lip gloss. Then I flip my head upside down and shake my hair out, trying to make it look less perfect, less *I wanted to look good because I care about what you think of me* and more *this is just another day*. I flip my hair back up and settle it around my shoulders. It's frizzy, and chunky strands crisscross through my part, but I resist the urge to smooth it out.

My phone vibrates, and I pull it out to find a text from Jason. Stop stalling and get in there.

Spinning around quickly, I scan the parking lot. Jason hasn't left; he's sitting in a parking spot near the back, with a perfect view of me freaking out. I should've known he wouldn't leave until I went in—it's such a Jason thing to do. But him settling

into a parking spot knowing I wouldn't go in right away does stupid things to my heart.

It almost makes me reply with a text asking him to come in with me. I know he would, but he shouldn't have to. I can do this.

His eyes meet mine for a second through the windshield, then my phone vibrates again.

You look perfect. Go be yourself.

Warmth spreads through me as I smile appreciatively at him. He returns the gesture and nods with his head to the door.

He's right. I've waited years for this moment, and I can't wait any longer. I lied to Gia this morning when she asked me to go over her notes for her first public debate, telling her I was going on a date with Jason, so I can't let that lie be for nothing.

With a parting wave to Jason, I throw open the door to the coffee shop before I can second-guess myself any longer.

I've never been here before, but it looks like every other coffee shop in town: small seating areas sectioned off, hardwood and soft warm colors, and the smell of coffee in the air. Underneath the sound of coffee beans being ground, I can hear a song playing softly in the background, and a laugh escapes me when I realize that it's "Always Be There" by Siren of the Heart. It was playing when Mom dropped us off at Aunt Julie's before disappearing forever. How ironic that it's playing again at our reunion. Maybe this time I won't be too scared to call her out on deserting us.

There are some people working on laptops, a few couples sitting around chatting, and in a dark corner, with a fancy-looking latte in her hands, is Florence. She's wearing a big, floppy sun hat even though it's autumn and chilly here in King City, and large sunglasses, like she doesn't want to be spotted. She smiles big when she sees me, and it takes me off guard for

a moment because she seems so *genuinely* excited, like she's been waiting forever for this moment too.

I have no memory of getting from the door to Florence's table, but suddenly I'm in front of her, and she drops the hat and sunglasses onto the table.

"Oh, my gorgeous Siena!" She stands, engulfing me in a tight hug. "I've missed you so much!"

It's almost surreal to be standing in my mother's arms; it's been years, but it's also like no time has passed at all.

She's still larger-than-life even though she's barely taller than me and just as slim. She smells like amber vanilla, light and feminine, exactly the same as I remember, and her hugs are just as tight and all-encompassing.

I don't return the hug, I couldn't even if I wanted to with her arms trapping mine, so I stand there and let her squeeze me until she lets go. She holds me at arm's length, scanning me from head to toe as I do the same to her.

Even with the very slight signs of aging, she looks almost exactly the same as I remember her. She's beautiful—so, *so* freaking beautiful it's almost laughable that people compare me to her. She's still blond, still has those piercing green eyes, still has those seductive, full, down-turned lips, still makes you feel like the only person in the room when she turns her attention on you. Charisma always radiated from her without any effort on her part, and it's no different now. You can instantly tell she doesn't belong here—she belongs in LA on a big screen.

"Wow, look how *big* you've gotten! You were just a scrawny little thing back then, and now look at you!

You're beautiful! What are you? A 32C? Dress size four?

Six? You look just like me when I was your age! We should get you into modeling, I have a contact who would just love to represent a mini-me. You might have to drop a few pounds, and we'll have to get that dreadful pink out of your hair, but I know the camera would just love you!"

I step out of her embrace, my mind still trying to process what's going on. Was my bra size really the first thing she asked me about after all this time?

“Come, come, let's sit. We have so much to catch up on!” She ushers me to a seat and sits opposite, looking at me expectantly until I finally place my jacket on the chair and sink into it.

“Do you want a drink?” she asks, raising her hand and snapping a few times. “Excuse me? Excuse me? My daughter would like to order something!” she calls to the busy barista on the other side of the shop. To me, she says, “My goodness, they are so slow here. Such a change of pace from LA. I have no idea how I ever lived here. I bought a pack of cigarettes from the convenience store across the street, and I swear if I had gray hairs, ten more of them would've grown by the time I got my change back. *Helloooooo, I need service here!*”

I reach across the table and lower her arm, my face heating from the glares the other patrons give us. “It's okay, Mom. I don't want anything.”

“Well, you're not missing anything,” she huffs, taking a sip of her coffee. “I don't think they used the sugar-free caramel syrup like I asked.”

Since walking in, my mind has been stuck in a whirl-wind of *what the fuck is going on*, but I can't hold back the question any longer. “What are you doing here, Mom?”

Why did you leave that note after all these years?”

She tilts her head. “Didn't you get the first note I left you a few weeks ago?”

I'm so proud of you, sweetheart. Everything will be okay now.

“Yes?” I say, but it comes out like a question because I'm confused.

“Oh, good!” She grabs the sunglasses from the table, folding the arms in and slipping them into her purse. It's a

luxury brand that I know she wouldn't have been able to afford when I was living with her. She follows my line of sight.

“Oh, this old thing? Jim buys me a new one practically every week. You must have heard about our relationship in some tabloid or other by now. He's just the sweetest.

I swear I can do no wrong in his eyes. Just last week he brought me to the premiere of that new superhero movie and got me this gorgeous custom designer gown. The star of the movie even gave *her* designer shit for not getting her something similar! Did you see me in the press on the carpet? I was on every best-dressed list!”

“I never search you on the internet,” I say just to get that dig in. It's only kind of a lie. The last time I searched her was a few months before I moved to King City, and she was in a tabloid for sunbathing topless on her executive producer boyfriend Jim Langley's yacht.

She seems disappointed for only a moment before she recovers smoothly. “Well, it's a good thing we're here in person so we can catch up, then!”

I have so many questions for her, questions I never thought I'd get the chance to ask: *Why did you leave us? Why didn't you ever come back for us? Why are you here? Why now, when I'm settling in and things are finally starting to feel normal? Do you miss us as much as we miss you?*

Florence continues before I have the chance to voice any of that. “How's school? You're a senior now, right? Do you have a boyfriend? What am I saying, look at you! Of course you have a boyfriend. Maybe even several! Do they know about each other? You know, before I got knocked up by your father, I was never a one-man kind of girl; all that commitment just wasn't for me. But, of course, I've changed now that I'm with Jim.” She gives a little laugh and sips her coffee. “Oh, it's so nice talking with you now that you're older. We could've never had a real talk like this when you were younger.”

I still have absolutely no idea what's going on. I wasn't sure what to expect when coming here to meet Florence, but it wasn't this. Pretending nothing bad ever went down? Acting like we're best friends and catching up like it wasn't her *choice* to have no contact with either of her daughters? It all makes my stomach sour as she sits there and talks like it isn't a big deal that she ditched us and is now back, talking about my body and boyfriend status like she's entitled to know any of that. Especially since I haven't really been getting a word in—and not *once* in all the talking she's been doing has she asked about Gia.

Florence continues, “You know, you're so prett—”

“Gia's good too,” I cut her off, unable to take it anymore. “Got an A on her English paper and joined the debate team. She's also signed up for volleyball and will probably make the team since she's been great in tryouts.”

Florence blinks at me like she forgot she had another daughter. “Oh, that's great! I'm so proud of you both.”

Now that the initial shock is wearing off, I'm able to look at Florence with a clear mind and a hard heart and ask, “What are you doing here, Mom?”

She opens her mouth, but I cut her off to clarify, “And I mean what are you *really* doing here? Don't bullshit me.”

Florence frowns and wraps both hands around her coffee cup as if trying to steal some of its warmth. She looks very concerned, genuinely motherly; it's almost off-putting. “I saw everything on the news, and I wanted to check up on you, see how you were doing.”

“That was, like, two months ago.”

“Well, I came back a few weeks ago but no one was home. I didn't want to deal with your father, so I just let myself in. Dario's so predictable, he still hides a key under the front mat, which is *not* the safest thing to do with my daughters in his house. I wanted to stay and chat in person, but I couldn't—I had a networking party with Jim—but I left you a note

somewhere I knew you'd find it. I couldn't just give it to Dario or his annoying sister, they'd never pass it along. I kept it vague in case they found it; I didn't want to give too much away. But I thought they found it and threw it out because you never reached out to me."

There are so many things wrong with what she just said. She came back for the first time in years and left a note under my pillow instead of waiting for me because she had better things to do? Because she didn't want to see Dario or Zia Stella? She thinks living with Dario in his big house with a full pantry in a quiet neighborhood is more dangerous than where she left us with Aunt Julie? And give *what* away? The note didn't say anything! Plus, how could I possibly reach out to her? I don't have her phone number since she changed it when she ditched us in LA.

Is she really here to check in on me? She seems like she cares, in the most Florence way possible. But did it really take killing a guy to get my mom to come back?

"Speaking of," Florence continues, sitting up straighter and leaning forward, "how was all of that?"

What happened? Why did you do it? How did you do it?

Julie barely gave me any details over the yelling, and your father claimed sole custody during the case. I didn't feel like fighting the lawyers."

I take a breath but hesitate. She sounds like a reporter, and even though she's saying she doesn't know much, that can't be true. I was in the news because I'm her daughter, and Florence *definitely* would've seen it if her name was attached to it.

"You know," I start, "all the headlines that came out after I was arrested kept comparing me to you."

She laughs; it's a beautiful Hollywood laugh. "Well, I have seen my fair share of the backs of police cars."

You and me both.

I frown at her words, my hands playing with the fraying ends of my scarf. Officer Liu compares me to her all the time when it comes to our supposed shared criminal history.

“Actually, it’s funny you say that,” Florence says, her eyes brimming with excitement. “Jim is good friends with Lincoln Archer. You know him, right? He did that documentary on Isadora that made her famous again. She was nothing but a washed-up model before him. And he did the same for Allegra Prescott. She was a child star back when I was growing up who faded into obscurity until Lincoln did his documentary on her, and now she’s the face of four designer brands and her new movie has been a box office hit for twelve weeks and counting.”

My hands freeze. Where’s she going with this?

“Lincoln saw you in the tabloids and approached me to do a documentary! Isn’t that great? This could be the comeback I’ve been waiting for! I’ll be known for more than just a few cult classics and whatever narrative the tabloids push. I’ll be an A-lister, Siena!”

I feel my face blanch as I try to keep my expression neutral. If Florence becomes even more famous, then I’ll *really* never see her again. Trying to keep my voice even, I say, “That’s great, Mom. I’m happy for you.”

“You mean happy for *us*.” She smiles, and my heart thumps heavily in my chest. Does she mean she’s going to take us back now that she’s going to get her big break?

Florence clasps her hands together. “You’re going to love being on the big screen! I mean, a documentary is different than being an actress, but you were always so good at running lines with me when you were little, so you’ll pick it up in no time. Especially since after our documentary comes out, agents will come crawling out of the woodwork to sign you and—”

“Wait, wait, wait.” I interrupt her excited rambling. “What are you talking about? Did you say *our* documentary?”

Florence purses her lips. “Well, yes. Lincoln wants to frame the documentary around me and you. Florence and her daughter. How Hollywood corrupts and history repeats itself, and mothers and daughters, and so on. You should hear Lincoln talk about it. It’s beautiful and raw and all that other bullshit that tugs on people’s heart-strings. He’s a genius. The audience will eat it up, and we’re going to shoot to stardom.”

“Whoa, Mom, I’m *not* doing a documentary.”

She’s taken aback, genuinely confused. “What? Why not?”

There is absolutely nothing in the world that could convince me to let some director dig into my personal life and expose every nitty-gritty thing that’s happened just to entertain a bunch of nosy people. Plus, there’s the fact that I didn’t *actually* kill anyone, I just said I did to protect Gia, and I don’t want anyone digging into that.

“I don’t want to.”

Florence’s eyebrows draw together. “But you have to.”

“I don’t have to do anything, and I’m not going to.

Do it without me.”

“There is no documentary without you. It’s about you and me. Mother and daughter. We need *Siena* for it to be Siena and Florence!”

My jaw clenches. Even though she didn’t come right out and say it, I know she needs me because they want the story of what happened to Stan. Despite wanting to keep Gia out of any potential media circus, to test my theory, I say, “You have another daughter. Ask her instead.”

Florence is quiet for a moment. Oh shit. Did I just give her an idea? I want to stuff the words back in my mouth, but it’s too late.

“Lincoln doesn’t want Gia,” Florence says, and my panic subsides. “He wants *you*, the daughter who’s like me.”

That confirms it. They want the Stan story. They want to compare me to Florence, as if everyone doesn't already do that every single day of my life. I'm not going anywhere near any type of documentary, especially not one that gives the world more ammunition to see me as Florence 2.0. But besides confirming my suspicions about why she wants *me* for this stupid project, it also confirms why she's here, sitting in a coffee shop in a town she hates, kissing my butt, and not asking about Gia. She *needs* me. Gia currently provides nothing for her to use to get famous, and that's why she couldn't care less about seeing and reconnecting with both daughters. I'm only a means to an end, and the moment I stop being useful to her, she'll ditch me again without a backward glance.

Dario once told me Florence's selfishness causes her to hurt everyone around her, and now I'm being reminded of it firsthand. She doesn't care about us; she'll never care about us.

I let out an unamused laugh and shake my head. "I'm so stupid."

"Siena?"

"You know, I keep telling myself not to get my hopes up when it comes to you and Dario, but I keep doing it anyway. I keep thinking that maybe you guys actually, I don't know, love your kids? Or at least care about them, even a little bit."

Florence's eyes widen in shock, and she brings a hand to her chest like she's offended. "How could you say that?"

"Of course I care about you!"

"I haven't heard from you in years, and now that some dude wants to make money off me you suddenly pop up again? You don't care about me. You don't care about Gia. You care about yourself and getting famous, like you always have."

It hurts to say, and I really, *really* wish I didn't have to say any of it. I wish I had parents who cared about me; I wish my mother wasn't sitting across from me acting all pretend-shocked that I'm saying all this, like it's come out of nowhere.

I wish it didn't bother me as much as it does, but I force myself not to show weakness as I stand.

Florence stands too. "Wait, Siena, please," she says, dropping the offended act. "I've been getting a lot of renewed interest since your arrest hit the tabloids. This is my chance! Once I'm famous, we can all be together again!"

Yeah, right.

This was a mistake. At least before, I had rose-colored memories of Mom preserved from childhood. But I'm not a kid anymore, and this meeting with Florence just proved I was right to have doubts about her intentions.

Now every time I think of my mom, I'm not going to remember the dancing in the rain and heart-shaped cookies and bedtime stories. I'm going to remember her sitting in front of me, basically admitting that she couldn't care less about me—or Gia—unless she can use me to further her own career. If I wasn't in the media for my arrest, she wouldn't be here at all, and I would've gone through life never hearing from her again.

I grab my jacket from the chair, forcing myself not to cry. Maybe Jason hasn't left yet, and I can process all these emotions from the safety of his passenger seat. "Goodbye, Mom."

"Wait, Siena. Don't go." Florence rounds the table, grabbing hold of my jacket sleeve before I can put it on. "I need this. Just talk to Lincoln, and you'll see it's a good idea."

Not *Don't go, I've missed you*. Not *Don't go, we have so much to catch up on*. Not *Don't go, I'm sorry I abandoned you*. It's *Don't go, I need this*.

I pull my jacket from her grasp and keep my tone neutral. "It was nice seeing you, Mom."

I don't bother putting the jacket on as I turn and stride toward the door. Behind me, I can hear Florence collecting her things and rushing to catch up to me. She hurries in front of me and forces me to a halt.

“At least let me give you my phone number so you can think about it.”

I thought I couldn't get any more pissed, but that statement does it. I don't even have my own mother's phone number, and the only reason she'd want me to call her now is so I can agree to her stupid documentary.

Not because she wants to keep in touch with me, ask me about my day, share her life with me.

I open my mouth to say no, but instead I sigh and relent. “Fine.”

I think the answer surprises both of us. I don't know why I say it. I know not to expect anything from Florence, but I'm still stupid me, and part of me still yearns for a connection with her, still wants to make her happy.

Florence's eyes light up, that beautiful smile back in place. “My beautiful, brilliant daughter! Once you take some time to sit on it and think it over, you'll see it's a dream opportunity for both of us.” She reaches into the purse that cost three times as much as my new laptop and pulls out her phone. “Here, enter your phone number so I don't have to break into my dreadful ex's house just to leave you a note again.”

As if on autopilot, I take the phone from her outstretched hand and save my number—my real number—and hand it back to her.

She pulls me into another hug, one that this time I'm too numb to return. “You were meant for greatness, Siena. We both were. This is our chance.”

“Right ...” I say once she releases me. As I pull my jacket on, I can't stop myself from asking, “Are you going to hang around in King City for a while?”

She chuckles and waves her hand. “Oh *God*, no. You couldn't pay me to stay here longer than these last two days. My driver has been outside waiting to take me to the airport. Jim is going to a party tonight. It'll be the most exclusive party in all of Malibu, and it'll be great for me to network, maybe

cause a scandal or two.” She winks at me, as if any of the scandals she’s caused over the years have been orchestrated on purpose. But then again, maybe they have been. How would I know?

She pulls my hair from under the collar of my jacket before I can and arranges it around my shoulders, touching me with familiarity like it’s an action she does every day. With her hands still smoothing out my hair, she says,

“It was so good seeing you, my gorgeous daughter, but it looks like it’s going to rain, and I want to get out of here before it starts. I’ll call you in a few days.”

There are dark, angry clouds forming outside, and despite still reeling from everything that’s happened today, a smile tugs at my lips. “What? You don’t dance in the rain anymore?”

“Dance in the rain?” She laughs like the thought never occurred to her. “I haven’t done that since you were no taller than my hips!”

I frown at her. That’s impossible; we were always dancing in the rain—it’s one of my best memories with her. “Are you sure? We were always out in the rain, right up until ... Aunt Julie’s.”

She tugs the ends of my jacket together. “Siena, please. I hate sitting in wet clothes that aren’t made for getting wet. We did it a lot when you were a kid because it was cute and you loved it, but as you got older, I would yell at you to get back inside before you got everything muddy. You never had any sense of urgency when we got caught in the rain. Used to drive me crazy.”

I stare hard at her, like I can look directly into her memories to prove that she’s remembering it wrong. No.

We danced together in the rain every time it rained. I was always outside in it, and she’d come outside and join me, and we’d hold hands and spin around ... it couldn’t have just been when I was younger ...

“Anyway, I should get going,” she continues, finally dropping her hands from me. “We’ll connect this week.

Maybe I can send you some notes Lincoln has about the documentary for you to look over, okay? You’ll love it.

Until next time, my beautiful daughter.”

She exits the shop, and I’m both glad and sorry to end this time with her. I send Jason a text asking if he’s still around to come pick me up or if I should find a bus route, and I fiddle with my scarf.

Something nudges the back of my mind, something I need to ask Florence before conceding that this is probably the last time I’ll ever see her in person.

“Wait, Mom,” I call, running out of the coffee shop and down the sidewalk. She pauses and turns back to me, so I continue, “The note you left. What did you mean?”

Her brows pull together. “The first one?”

“Yes. ‘I’m so proud of you, sweetheart. Everything will be okay now,’” I quote, knowing it by heart. “What did you mean by that?”

The confusion lifts from her face as she smiles proudly at me, placing her hand on my cheek in a tender, motherly gesture. “I meant that I was proud of you because you were getting our name out there again. Because of you, I started getting more publicity, and you can see I’ve been leveraging it as much as I can.”

I swallow the hurt, looking down at the ground. So, she wasn’t proud of me for standing up for Gia or staying strong through everything. How could she be? She admitted she doesn’t know many of the details, just enough to warrant wanting an exclusive tell-all documentary.

“And ‘everything will be okay now’?” I ask, almost not wanting to know the answer.

“With the deal, of course. I was giving you a heads-up without saying it in case I got your hopes up too much.”

She steps closer to look directly into my eyes, lowering her voice. “We’re going places, baby, and everything is going to be more than okay now. It’s going to be *perfect*.” She backs away, dropping her hand. Instinctively, I know I’ll never feel it gently placed against my cheek again. “I’ll be in touch.”

No, she won’t. Not after I’ve definitively told her I’m not doing her documentary and effectively ruined her shot at a comeback.

She walks past the other shops to the curb with a Hollywood stride I don’t remember her having before, one that says she’s an important person with important places to go, not looking back once. I stare after her, my heart heavy for multiple reasons that are competing to be processed.

“Siena?” a voice from behind me asks, and I freeze.

Gia and Brianna appear beside me, but neither is looking at me; they’re both staring at the back of Florence’s retreating head. “Is that ...” Gia takes off running. “*Mom!*”

Fuck.

SEVEN

Gia sprints after Florence, and I stand there stunned with Brianna.

“Was that Florence Bowen? Like from *Alien Squid from Jupiter?*” Brianna asks, but I don’t look away from Gia. “She looks more glamorous in person. My mom said she went to school with her and that she got suspended twice for stealing test answers. She also said Florence stole her boyfriend.”

I don’t pay any attention to Brianna. Florence gets in a blacked-out SUV, and it takes off the second the door closes behind her; she never even noticed Gia chasing after her.

Gia runs back to us, panting to catch her breath as she asks, “Was that really Mom? Did you talk to her?”

“Why didn’t you tell me your mom was Florence Bowen?” Brianna asks Gia, then she gasps and says, “*That’s* what Brandon meant when he said your mom was a Hollywood whore! He knew and didn’t tell me! Um ... I mean ... not that I agree with his opinion or anything ...”

No one replies to Brianna, since Gia and I are engaged in a stare-off. She looks curious, excited, and hurt. I, meanwhile, am just repeatedly thinking *oh shit oh shit oh shit*.

“Siena?” Gia prompts.

There’s no proper way to handle this. I’m going to hurt Gia no matter what I say, and since there’s no point lying to her, I reluctantly admit, “Yeah, that was Mom.”

Her eyes light up, and she looks back at where Florence disappeared. “What is she doing here? She came to see us? Is she meeting us at the house? Let’s go!”

She grabs my hand and tries to pull me through the parking lot, and I dig my feet in to stop her. “No, Gia, she’s on her way to the airport right now.”

“Oh.” Gia’s shoulders slump, and her disappointment is a kick in the gut. “What was she doing here? What were you doing here? Did you just run into her, or ... ?”

Either my guilty face gives me away or Gia comes to the realization all on her own, because she drops my hand like I burned her and steps away from me. “You said you had a date with Jason. You lied.”

There’s nothing I can say to make this better. Gia has been telling me how much she misses Mom and I dismissed it, telling her it’s better for us to forget about Mom because she’s never coming back. But here she is, back, and I had a secret meeting with her.

“I’m sorry, Gia—”

“You planned a meeting with Mom and didn’t tell me?”

Maybe it would’ve been easier just to say I ran into Florence; at least it would be easier than admitting that Florence didn’t even care to *ask* about Gia, never mind admitting she didn’t want to meet with her. But lying to Gia weighs heavily on me, and there’s a fine line between telling the truth and hurting her feelings.

“She left me a note and asked to meet me. I didn’t tell you because I was worried about her intentions, and I didn’t want you to get your hopes up. And it turns out I was right; she was only here becau—”

“You *knew* how much I was missing Mom, and you didn’t even tell me she was here!” She cuts me off, not wanting to hear it. “If I had the chance to just *talk* to her, maybe she would’ve ...”

Taken us back? Explained why she left? Wanted to be in our lives? I don’t know where Gia’s train of thought is going, but I can guarantee that no matter what Gia would’ve said to Florence, it *wouldn’t* have made her do anything that Gia’s thinking.

Delicately, I say, “I was trying to protect you from getting hurt.”

Gia's face scrunches up. "Well, you failed, because I am hurt."

She storms off without giving me the chance to explain just as thunder rumbles. Brianna looks at me for a moment before chasing after Gia, exclaiming, "Wait!

Were you *really* not going to tell me your mom is Florence Bowen? Everyone is going to lose their shit when they find out! I'm pretty sure Chris has a poster of her in a bikini taped to his ceiling."

I'm frozen in the middle of the parking lot, watching the two of them cross the street. I stand there long enough to lose sight of them as they head to the mall entrance, long enough to realize it might not rain and is just thundering, long enough to realize I have no idea how to make any of this better.

I have to figure out how to explain that it's better that Gia didn't come see Mom. She would've gotten her hopes up only to be crushed when she realized Florence still wants nothing to do with us. Maybe I should've just told her and let her come see for herself; maybe I can't protect Gia from everything, and maybe it would've been for the best to give her a healthy dose of reality. But she was just getting back on track, and now who knows if this will derail her.

A loud honk scares me out of my trance, and I look over at the headlights of a car I'm blocking, half expecting it to be Jason. But it's not.

I sigh, resisting the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose in frustration as the driver's door opens and he steps out in full uniform.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" Officer Liu, the last fucking person on Earth I want to see right now, asks, closing the police car door behind him. "You've been standing there in the middle of the street staring at nothing for at least"—he makes a show of checking his watch—"five minutes. That's putting yourself and others at risk and being a

public nuisance. Maybe I should bring you to the station for a drug test.”

I do not have time for Officer Liu and his stupid bullying tactics, but I can't help being frustrated that he can do this all he wants, and I can't do anything to stop it. I step away from him and onto the sidewalk in front of the shops.

“I don't need a drug test, and I wasn't blocking any traffic,” I say, keeping my tone even. I really shouldn't make standing in the middle of the road a habit, but we're in a mostly empty parking lot, and the only car's path I happened to be blocking was *his*, and that's because he's stalking me.

“Maybe I should take you in anyway,” he challenges, and I take another step away.

“You can't do that.” I don't know if he can or not, but that sounds like something Jason would tell me to say.

He purses his lips and makes a face like he's trying to decide whether he can get away with hauling me off or not. I take another step away from him.

He must decide it's not worth whatever trouble he might get in because he crosses his arms and leans a hip against his still-running car. Sure, it's okay when *he* blocks traffic with his whole car, but I'm a public nuisance.

“A little bird told me that your mom's in town,” he states, clearly just as obsessed with her as he is with me.

I shrug. “It's a free country. She can go wherever she wants.”

He laughs and looks in the direction her car went, as if he can still see it driving down Fifth Street. Maybe I should hide in the coffee shop until Officer Liu grows tired of me and leaves.

“Maybe not,” he says in answer to me. “I'm pretty sure she's got some Class C traffic violations she's never paid.”

After everything that happened today, I'm too mentally exhausted to think better of it before I reply, “It's weird and

creepy that you remember my mother's traffic violations after almost two decades. Just as weird and creepy as you stalking me."

Thunder rumbles overhead as Officer Liu's eyes darken, and I take another step back. Shit. Maybe I shouldn't be poking the proverbial bear.

"It's been too many days since Lily went missing," he starts, following my retreat with his own menacing prowl. "Every day that passes is another day that makes me feel more desperate, that pushes me toward the edge.

We have no new leads, and every clue we find and person we talk to, it all point us to the only piece of the puzzle that makes sense, which is *you*. So me being *creepy* will be the least of your worries the longer we go without finding her, the longer *you* continue pissing me off by being uncooperative."

That was a thinly veiled threat if I've ever heard one, and it works. I don't know what he's capable of or what he's willing to do past what he's already been doing, but that crazed look in his eyes leads me to believe he truly is getting desperate, and I'm scared.

He's right in front of me now, and I have nowhere else to go. My back is up against the literal brick wall, and he grabs my biceps, squeezing hard enough to bruise.

"Just tell me what you know!" he shouts in my face, finally cracking. "Just fucking *tell me!* I know you're hiding something! What are you hiding?"

"I'm not hiding anything," I cry, tilting my face as far away from him as I can. His fingers dig into my skin, and he smells like sweat. My back hurts from where he holds me against the wall, and I try to push off it only to be harshly forced back against it.

"I know you are! Tell me what you know!"

I've never hated him as much as I do at this moment.

Despite being scared and hurt and knowing I'm pushing it, spite leads me to exclaim, "The only thing I know is that you're a power-abusing asshole who doesn't deserve your badge!"

He pushes off me, and I hate that I flinch. My arms and back are sore, but I force myself not to show weakness, instead standing straight and looking right up at him.

He's not intimidated or threatened by me at all. If anything, my defiance makes him angrier. Slightly more composed, he straightens out his uniform jacket and sneers, "I will get answers about my daughter, and I don't care how I have to get them."

A door opens, and footsteps rapidly approach us.

Officer Liu and I don't look away to check who it is.

"Is there a problem here?" Jason asks, stopping beside me, and *fuck* am I relieved to see him. He's solid and reassuring, and I could kiss him for the daringly insolent way he's squaring off against Officer Liu, completely unafraid. It's tensely quiet except for the hum of Jason's still-running engine and the traffic in the distance. His car is parked in front of Officer Liu's squad car with the driver's door flung open, like he saw the scene and abandoned everything in order to get here fast enough.

Jason's eyes shift to meet mine quickly, a silent check that I'm okay, and I grab his hand in response, squeezing tight. His quiet confidence and unwavering loyalty make my chest tighten, but last time we found ourselves in this predicament, he got arrested, and as pissed as I am, I don't want a repeat.

"There might be, Parker," Officer Liu replies. "Heard there's a drag race going on tonight. Maybe I'll show up ... in uniform."

Jason grits his teeth. The comment is especially malicious since he was tailed yesterday while trying to go to the Tracks and wrongfully given a speeding ticket on the way home. I don't know if there was something planned for tonight, but

there's no way Jason or anyone will be going if Officer Liu somehow knows about it.

Thunder rumbles as the sky quickly darkens, and a few people exit the restaurant we're standing in front of.

Officer Liu takes a step back, breaking the tension and nodding at the family like a friendly neighborhood cop. I use the distraction to pull Jason toward his car.

It's not really a satisfying retreat, because he knows exactly where I live and has power over us because of his job, so I'm not really getting the upper hand. But I'm tired, upset, and sore, and I just want to lie in bed with my face pressed into Jason's chest and forget today ever happened, so I'll take it.

Jason doesn't look away from Officer Liu once as he allows me to guide him to the car. The muscles in his arm and back are clearly taut through his fitted sweater, but his grasp on my hand is gentle and comforting.

I open the passenger door and spare one last glance at Officer Liu. He looks like he hasn't slept in weeks, maybe months. His hair is getting shaggy and is streaked with gray, and his uniform is wrinkled. I don't think he's legally allowed to be working on his daughter's case because of how close he is to it, but I know he is—both on and off duty. He's gone rogue and abused his power multiple times, and I'll never know if he's always been a terrible cop or if it was just triggered by Lily's disappearance. But despite all that, he's a father mourning his daughter. And maybe seeing my own mother has made me emotional, because I feel like I can relate to him, and I feel *sorry* for him. I shouldn't after the way he pinned me to the wall and bruised my arms, but I do, and after this entire day I just don't have the energy to be angry anymore.

“Like I've told you many, many times, I don't know what happened to Lily,” I tell him softly, speaking from the part of my heart that sympathizes with him. “But she was nice to me and went out of her way to be my friend despite not knowing me, and she was kind to my sister when she moved here alone

and didn't know anyone. I hope she's okay, and I want to know what's happened to her just as badly as you do, not because then you'll finally leave me alone but because I *care*. I'm *trying* to find her, and if you put aside whatever grudge you have against me or my past or my mother, you'd see that. We could've helped each other, but it's not too late."

He doesn't say anything, and I'm unsure if anything I said got through to him. More thunder rumbles, and Jason holds the door open wider for me, a silent signal to get in so we can get the hell out of here.

I don't know what response I'm hoping for, but I give up waiting, sliding into the warm leather seat.

Just before Jason closes the door, Officer Liu calls out, "Siena!"

I pause, holding my breath, hoping against all odds that what I said resonated with him, that maybe he'll finally realize we're on the same team here. But then he continues, and that hope shatters.

"I'll find out what you're hiding; I'll find my Lily.

And Jason, you better watch your driving. You have a heavy foot, and it doesn't take much to be charged for reckless driving ..."

Jason's hand on the door clenches before Officer Liu gives him a mocking salute and strolls to his own car.

They don't drop their gazes the entire time, even when Officer Liu is in his car in front of us and buckles in. I don't realize how tense I am until Officer Liu drives off, veering around Jason's car through empty parking spots and passing us to turn onto the main road.

Jason ducks his head in to look at me. "You okay?"

No. Not at all. Everything is crumbling around me, and no matter what I do, I only make things worse. But at least Jason is still here with me, and I'm not completely alone.

“Yeah,” I lie, and he knows it. Thunder cracks, and I wonder how long until the storm descends in full force.

It feels like it’s already started. “Let’s just get out of here.”

EIGHT

Gia ignores me for the rest of the weekend, and Monday and Tuesday too. I found out from Zia Stella that Gia made the volleyball team and had practice after school while I went to work. By Wednesday, I'm still getting the silent treatment through the school day when she doesn't reply to my texts. I don't have work today, though, so as I walk into the house after Jason drops me off after school, I'm mentally running through what to say to Gia to end her freeze-out.

Flinging open my bedroom door, I pause when it reveals Gia. She jumps around from where she was hunched over my desk, slamming the drawer shut and straightening up with a suspicious look on her face, hands hidden behind her back.

"What are you doing?" I ask, sliding my backpack off my shoulders and dropping it onto the floor.

"What did you and Mom talk about?" she asks instead of answering my question. She hasn't pressed me for any details since she ran off on Saturday, and I was wondering when she'd get curious enough to break her silent treatment.

"Absolutely nothing," I say, schooling my features into a cool disinterest like she's done to hers. I'm not going to tell her about the documentary because it will only freak her out. Any time someone talks about me getting arrested for killing Stan, she clams up and breaks out in a nervous sweat. If she knew people wanted to poke into it, she'd lose it, and she's finally stopped her spiral.

She raises a disbelieving eyebrow. "Nothing? She was just in town?"

I shrug nonchalantly. "You know Mom doesn't really think things through. I think she came because she was nosy about what Dario was up to since he left her, and she wanted to brag about some rich boyfriend, Jim, who lives in Malibu. She didn't ask anything about us or care what we were up to. I

barely got a word in.” Not necessarily a lie. Excluding Florence caring about Dario, everything else I said is completely true.

Gia crosses her arms against her chest, not buying it.

“Then why couldn’t I be there? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Nothing I can say will make her not be pissed at me, so I settle with the truth. “I was trying to protect you.”

Gia’s nostrils flare, and she flings her arms out as she exclaims, “I don’t *need* you to protect me. I’m fifteen, Siena! I can make my own decisions; I don’t need you making them for me! You should’ve told me Mom was in town, and I could’ve met with her!”

Throwing her past bad decisions—the school break-in, letting her friends drive drunk, the parties, the attempted fake ID—in her face doesn’t seem like the best choice right now, so I clamp my mouth shut. But the reality is Gia is sensitive and impulsive and sometimes doesn’t think things through. I’m only trying to help.

She shoves her hands through her short hair, and it stands up like she stuck her finger in an electrical socket.

“Just stop thinking you know everything! Stop acting like you’re the only person who can do anything right! Yes, you covered for me with Stan, and yes, you covered for me with Brandon, but at some point, you’re going to have to trust me to deal with things myself.”

“I don’t *not* trust you, Gia, I’m only trying to protect you becau—”

The front door swinging open cuts me off, and from downstairs Zia Stella calls, “Gia! We’re going to be late to your appointment!”

“Oh, look, perfect timing,” Gia says, her dark eyes filled with rage. “I know *exactly* what I want to talk about in my session today.” She marches past me, just narrowly avoiding clipping me with her shoulder. Before she leaves, she turns to

deliver a parting shot. “I would’ve told *you* if Mom was in town.”

And then she’s gone, storming down the stairs before slamming the front door. I release a tense breath, letting myself feel like shit. She’s right. She would’ve told me.

Maybe Gia has a point. Maybe I am sheltering her too much. But she *finally* stopped drinking and acting recklessly and started taking an interest in school. I’m not going to derail her, even if that means she hates me.



It’s a quiet evening for me. Dario’s working late as usual, and Zia Stella and Gia go shopping after her session. Zia Stella texts me and asks if I want to come with them, then grab pizza after, but I don’t think Gia wants to be around me right now, so I decline. But it’s okay, because I can use the time to myself to unwind and de-stress from everything going on lately. Everything with Brandon, Officer Liu, Mom, and now Gia is a lot to process, and I haven’t had a moment to myself in what feels like forever.

In the past, these are the things I would’ve talked to Anusha about. Maybe I wouldn’t have told her the whole truth, but sometimes just talking things out with her actually helped.

A bitter twinge runs through me at thinking about her. I haven’t talked to her since she betrayed me by suggesting to Dario that I’d benefit from being separated from Gia and shipped off to Dario’s cousin in New York. If she thought that was the solution to everything, then she never truly knew me at all. She was only court-appointed to speak with me for a few weeks after I moved here, so I could settle in, but after that, Dario would have to pay.

Obviously, he doesn’t care, and I don’t want to continue with her, so no more therapy for me.

So, since I don’t have Anusha to talk to, I do my own self-care with a bubble bath. With my phone connected to Gia’s

small Bluetooth speaker filling the bathroom with music, I spend so long pampering my skin and hair that by the time I slip out, it's dark out and I'm all pruney.

I didn't bother bringing my things into the bathroom with me since I'm home alone, so I wrap a towel around myself and tuck the end in so it stays up by itself, then wrap another around my hair. There's a face mask in my room that would be a perfect end to my self-care night, so I pad into the hallway to get it, humming along to the music.

Before I get to my room, something makes me pause.

The music from the bathroom drones on, but I strain my hearing past it.

Someone is rummaging around in my room.

Did Gia and Zia Stella get back already? And what is Gia *looking* for that would make her snoop through my stuff twice in the same day?

Ready to catch her red-handed this time, I tighten my towel and slowly turn the doorknob before flinging it open and jumping in. "*Caught y—*"

The words die on my lips as I take in the scene in front of me. My room is *destroyed*—everything is thrown all over the place. All my drawers are pulled out of the dresser and tossed on the floor, their contents scattered.

The bedsheets are stripped, and my mattress is bare and upright on the other side of the room. My entire wooden desk is tipped over, the drawers lying across the room where it looks like they were flung at the wall if the holes in the drywall are any indication. My lamp, which is lying on its side on the floor, provides the only light in the room other than the streetlights and moonlight.

Feathers from the ripped pillows flutter through the air.

A tornado has hit the house, but it's only affected my room.

Before I can fully process what I'm seeing or even reach for the light switch, a huge figure dressed entirely in black

emerges from my closet like a monster from my worst nightmares. Panic squeezes my throat, and I forget how to breathe.

He pauses when he sees me standing there, alone and terrified in only a towel, and his shoulders seem to puff up and tense, making him look even bigger and more terrifying. My heart drops straight into my stomach, and for the briefest of moments, Lily flashes into my mind. A girl my age, who lived right next door, has disappeared without a trace, and here I am, home alone at night, with a menacing intruder in my house, and I'm in *a towel*.

Before I can act, before my legs catch up to my brain telling them to *run*, I open my mouth and let out a bloodcurdling scream.

The intruder is quicker than I am and reacts right away.

He runs.

Right. Toward. Me.

I'm still standing stupidly right in front of the door, and for some reason my legs won't move. Terror has me frozen, and I stand in place as the intruder doesn't slow down, charging at me. Before he bodychecks me into oblivion, I snap out of it and sidestep. I'm not fast enough, though, and he clips my shoulder, sending me tumbling into the wall. Pain shoots through my shoulder, and my hair towel rips at my hair when it falls off. The intruder continues past me, thank *God*, but as he does, I catch a whiff of cinnamon.

He barrels down the stairs without stopping, and I slam my bedroom door shut, sliding what's left of the dresser in front of it. My chest heaves as I try to calm my breathing, but the sound of the front door opening makes me push up to my feet.

I rush to the window in time to see the hulking figure sprint across the lawn and down the street, but even though I can see the distance being created between us, I still can't catch my breath, still can't calm my racing heart.

I sink onto the mess on the floor, hugging my towel tighter around me, thankful beyond words it stayed up during that whole ordeal, and try Anusha's calming breathing technique. The panic doesn't subside, and I try over and over to suck in air.

There was a man in the house. He was rummaging through my things, destroying my room, all while I was right next door, naked in the bathtub. I didn't even lock the bathroom door; he could've come in at any time.

And he can still come back at any time.

Forcing myself up, I move the dresser blocking the door, sprint to the bathroom, grab my phone, and sprint back to my room, pushing the furniture back for extra measure. I'm not sure what good it's doing since all the drawers and clothes are strewn everywhere, but it's an extra layer between me and the intruder, and it gives me peace of mind. I sink down in front of the dresser, leaning against it for added weight, and dial 911.

As I wait for them to arrive, I manage to calm my breathing, and as I replay the events in my mind, something sticks out to me. That hulking body shape, that height, that cinnamon—they're all too familiar.

NINE

An hour later, I've calmed down enough to not jump at every sound. Zia Stella is making tea while I'm sitting with Gia on the couch, fully dressed in sweatpants and a baggy sweater, as the police finish their investigation.

Officer Liu is *not* one of the responding officers, thank goodness, and the man who took my statement was kind and gentle. He even stayed with me in my room while I took stock of anything that was taken for their report.

It's odd, though, because an intruder was in my house, going through my things, and nothing was taken. Not my purse or wallet or laptop or cash stash. But Brandon's phone, which was hidden in my desk drawer, is gone.

I can't tell them about that, though, so I confirm that nothing was stolen, and in my statement, I tell them who I think did it. It's obvious, and I should've connected the dots right away.

Brandon broke into my house.

He seemed more unhinged, and he'd said he'd take more drastic measures to get his phone back. He practically *told* me he'd break into my house! And now the intruder has Brandon's exact same build and smell, and the phone he's been threatening me for has disappeared?

It was him! He was in my room, destroying it, searching through my underwear drawer!

The front door swings open, startling me and Gia.

It's Dario. He steps over the threshold and scans the area, setting his work bag down. "What's going on? What was so important that I had to leave work?"

"Someone broke in," I tell him, pulling the blanket around my shoulders tighter.

“*What?*” he exclaims, frantically looking around before charging into his office. “What was taken? Was anything damaged?”

Zia Stella emerges from the kitchen in time to glare at Dario. “The intruder was in Siena’s room,” she informs him, a warning in her tone. “She was alone, and in a towel, when she discovered him.” She gives him a pointed look with a subtle head nod at me, like she’s trying to convey a message to him that he’s not picking up.

He turns to me, his dark eyes scrutinizing instead of worried like Zia Stella’s were when she arrived. “Well, what happened?”

I open my mouth, but the way he’s staring at me is unnerving. I’ve gone for so long with Dario doing everything he can to avoid me, to avoid *looking* at me, and now I’ve got his full attention.

Apparently, I don’t answer him fast enough, because he sighs and turns, seeing two officers descending the stairs.

“Oh, that’s Gary,” Dario says to Zia Stella about an officer with a goatee and salt-and-pepper hair. “We belong to the same golf club; I saw him just last week. I’m going to ask him what’s going on.”

“He destroyed my room!” I blurt out now that the full force of Dario’s harsh gaze isn’t on me. “He tore it apart, and when I walked in, he charged at me and ran out the door.”

Dario considers my words. “Did he go through the rest of the house?”

He doesn’t ask if I’m okay or if I was injured or if I need anything. I don’t know what I was expecting; of course he wouldn’t ask any of that. He doesn’t *care* about me.

“Siena,” the kind officer who waited with me calls, joining us with Gary. He eyes the group of us. “Can we have a moment alone with you and a guardian?”

Gia stands from where she's been sitting by my side since they rushed home after my frantic phone call. "Why alone? What's wrong?" Despite how we left off, she's been nothing but concerned and supportive, and watching all five-foot-two of her square off with a six-foot-something middle-aged man in my honor makes me feel warm and fuzzy.

"It's all right, Gia," I tell her, standing and letting the blanket slip off my shoulders and onto the couch.

"I'm her father," Dario states, not with pride or concern, just as a fact. "We can use my office."

I trail behind Gary and the other officer as they follow Dario into the office, a funny feeling settling in my stomach. When the door is closed behind us, the kind officer asks in a slightly patronizing tone, "Siena, do you want to tell us what really happened tonight?"

The question catches me off guard. What does he mean? I gave him and Gary my statement, already walked them through the house. "I told you what happened."

The cops exchange a look, and then he says, "Your valuables are all still here. Have you remembered anything else that might have been taken?"

I'm not telling him about the phone, *can't* tell him about it without incriminating myself, so I shake my head.

"Mm-hmm," the officer says. "And did you see the intruder's face?"

Why are they asking me this? "No, I already told you I didn't see the intruder's face, but I know it was Brandon Scott. He goes to school with me."

"And how do you know this again? He ..." The officer checks his notes. "He smelled like cinnamon chewing gum?"

Dario scoffs and shakes his head in disbelief.

The way everyone's exchanging doubtful glances has my heart pounding. The tables are turning on me, so I double down. "Plus, if you saw him, you'd know! He's insanely

muscled for a seventeen-year-old! It's almost unnatural. It's hard to mistake a silhouette like that!"

The officer closes his notebook and levels me with a compassionate look. "Siena, are you feeling like you're not getting enough attention at home?"

"Okay," Dario cuts in, "what's going on?"

Gary speaks for the first time, his voice deep and accusatory. "There was no sign of forced entry, and the only room that was damaged was Siena's. Everything else was fine, and nothing was stolen. We've seen almost everything in our line of work, including tantrums and cries for attention, and to be honest with you, Dario, this seems to be one of them."

"Wait!" I practically yell. "You think I'm *lying*? I didn't make this up for attention!"

Dario sighs, loud and annoyed, rubbing his temple with his hand.

"Dario, I'm not lying!" I plead, though I can tell I'm fighting a losing battle. His nostrils are flaring, and the vein in his forehead is bulging, but he maintains his composure in front of the cops. He's already made up his mind.

"I see," he says simply.

To me, Gary says, "You can't be wasting police time like this, because there are people with real emergencies."

"I'm not lying! I'm not making this up for attention!"

I sound like a broken record, one that they're not bothering to listen to.

Gary sends me a dirty look filled with contempt. "You know you're neighbors with Lily Liu, right? You know she's disappeared. When we got this call, the whole station thought it was another ..." He trails off, letting us fill in the rest on our own. "You should be ashamed of yourself."

I'm so frustrated I want to rip my skin off. I'm so *sick* of people not listening to me. "I didn't make it up!"

Dario, who's seemingly had enough of this, kicks in with his charm. He opens the door and gestures for them to exit. "I'm so sorry for my daughter's behavior, Gary. It's completely unacceptable to be wasting police resources.

She's having a hard time adjusting; she's used to living with her mother, and you know how Florence was when she wasn't getting any attention."

As they head out into the hallway, Gary gives a disbelieving chuckle. "That is textbook Florence. You know, when you told me she looks just like her, I didn't realize you meant she looks *just* like her. It's almost eerie."

"Tell me about it," Dario says as they head down the hall to the front door. I can hear him placating the officers and apologizing for me. He even promises to "control" me better.

I sink into the leather chair in front of Dario's desk, stewing over this conversation, incredibly pissed about how I was just brushed off, at how they're acting like I'm lying because, what, I'm Florence's daughter? Sure, nothing was technically stolen, and sure, there were no signs of forced entry and only my room was destroyed, but I'm sticking by my word, and that should mean something!

Dario reappears in the office, alone this time. He studies me for a moment, like he's trying to decide where to even start. His voice is low and resigned when he says,

"Do you know how embarrassing this is for me? I play golf with that guy, and you're wasting his time. King City may not be a one-stoplight town, but it's still small enough that everyone knows everyone's business, and word travels."

"But I'm not—"

He holds up his hand, stopping me. "I don't want to hear it. Am I angry? Yes. But I'm not surprised. This is something your mother would do, and therefore, something you would do, I should have seen it coming when things seemed so calm for a while."

"But I didn't—"

“I’m not done,” he interrupts coolly. He doesn’t raise his voice, doesn’t do anything to showcase his anger. His eyes are hard and impassive as he regards me with cool detachment. “I stopped putting up with behavior like this from your mother a long time ago, and I’m certainly too old to put up with it now. And to be frank with you, I’m getting tired of the same thing over and over with you, Siena. This is my last straw. Either you get your shit together and act like a responsible adult, or you’re out, and I don’t care where you go.”

It’s clear Dario doesn’t believe me; I don’t know why I expected anything different. He’s never believed me before; Why would he start now?

“I looked in your room after walking the officers out. It’s obvious you either had a tantrum and destroyed your room, and used a ‘break-in’ to try to cover it up, or you purposely destroyed the room for attention like Gary said. I don’t care which it is, because I’m sick of your behavior either way.” He walks around his desk to the bar cart in the corner, picking up a crystal decanter and pouring some scotch into a clean glass. I don’t say anything. I can’t. There’s no point, and I already feel so defeated. Arguing with Dario is only going to make me feel worse.

He swirls the alcohol and takes a sip. “You’re lucky I don’t kick you out right now, because you’d deserve it.

But that would make me look bad in front of Gary when I run into him and he asks me about you. But make no mistake, you are one dirty look away from being out on your ass. Got it?”

He’s not actually waiting for an answer, and I rise from the seat, feeling all kinds of awful and dejected. I wish there was something I could say to make him listen, to make him *hear* me, but I don’t possess the words, especially not when he’s never going to change his mind about me.

“Oh, and you need to pay to replace everything you destroyed. I’m not buying you anything new. This behavior

will not be rewarded.” He takes another sip of his drink, sinking into his office chair. “Close the door on your way out.”

And just like that, the conversation is over. I’m a liar and an attention seeker, just like Florence, and Dario hates me, and nothing will ever change no matter how hard I wish it would.

TEN

After two days of avoiding Dario, which is easy since he's at work but hard because I stayed home from school, I'm glad when Friday night finally arrives. I've put my room back together as best I can, but there's nothing I could do about the damage and dents to the walls and some of the drawers, or the pillows that were cut open. But after being cooped up in my room for the last two days, I'm excited to be going with Jason to a party Warren's throwing, especially since Warren promised me a big bowl of all-red gummy bears if I come.

He's always throwing get togethers or parties, but I haven't been to one since the motel party. Of course, that ended terribly, but I've been assured this is a very small party where Warren personally knows everyone, so it will be a good night to unwind, and boy do I need it.

I'm putting on some lip gloss when there's a knock on my door. Gia's standing in the doorway, her leather jacket in one hand and her purse in the other. "Brianna's mom is here. She's dropping us off at the movies. I'll probably be in before you, so I'm bringing a key." The very same key that Zia Stella forced Dario to remove from under the front doormat, the one Florence, and most likely Brandon, used to get into the house.

"All right, have fun."

After the break-in, Gia and I have called an unspoken truce. We're not back on best friend terms by any means, but we are on decent speaking terms, not fighting and arguing the whole time.

She's about to turn to leave but then sighs and strides toward me, reaching into her purse. "Your eyeliner is two different shapes. Did you use the tape like I showed you?"

She pulls a black liner out of her purse, gives it a shake, then uses my chin to angle my face up. I close my eyes on instinct. "I tried."

Gia scoffs, clearly not approving as I feel the ink glide on my lids. “Well, next time just ask me.”

I didn’t know we were back on *doing my makeup* terms. The break-in must be affecting her more than she’s letting on. As badly as I was shaken having lived through it, I know Gia must be thinking about it too. That’s the only reason she dropped being upset about Mom and is talking to me again.

“All right,” I say, then press on. “You doing okay?”

She clicks the lid back on the eyeliner and steps back.

“I’m fine. Brianna’s outside waiting, so I gotta go.” She backs away to the door and gestures at my face. “That looks way better now. Bye.” And then she’s gone.

I know fixing my eyeliner and updating me on her departure doesn’t mean she’s forgotten about my meeting with Florence, but it feels like a step in the direction of forgiveness, or at least acceptance.

Not even twenty minutes later, as I’m hopping into a pair of jeans, there’s another knock on the door. Zia Stella peeks in. I didn’t realize she was here.

“Hey,” she says gently, entering the rest of the way.

“I’m heading out to work, but I just wanted to check in on you and see how you’re doing after everything that happened.”

She never accused me of making it up for attention like Dario did, even though I know she probably believes the police officers; this isn’t the first time officers have accused me of wasting their time, nor is it the first time I’ve pointed them at Brandon. But even so, I haven’t brought up the fact that I wasn’t lying to anyone since I left Dario’s office. Maybe she believes me, but I can’t bear the chance Zia Stella might outright deny anyone was in the house if I try to talk to her about it.

“I’m fine,” I say dismissively, not looking her in the eye for fear of seeing judgment there. “Jason will be here soon.” He won’t be getting me until eleven, since he’s coming from after

work and I didn't want to go to the party alone, but I don't want to sit around with Zia Stella waiting for her to bring it up. I'm tired of defending myself.

"All right, I'll leave you to it then," she says, getting the hint. "But I just want you to know I'm always here to talk if you want." She turns to leave, then pauses. "Oh, wait. I ordered this last week, and with everything going on I forgot to give it to you. I noticed your phone was broken."

She pulls a small white box from her purse and hands it to me. It's a brand-new iPhone.

"Oh—I—wow," I sputter, too stunned to speak.

"Thank you. You didn't have to do that."

She waves me off, like her spontaneously spending a thousand dollars on me is no big deal. "You should have a properly functioning phone, and you currently can't even see the top half of yours. Anyway, I've got to get going, but as I said, I'm always happy to talk if you want."

I'm too stunned to even reply, and I end up standing in the same spot, staring at the iPhone box for ten minutes after she leaves.

Sure, when I got here, I was given a new room, clothes, and a laptop, but this feels different. I never said I needed a phone, didn't even tell her mine was broken—she just *noticed* it was broken and got me a new one because she wanted to. And she got it *before* everything happened, it's not just a *sorry someone broke in and scared you half to death* gift.

By the time it's dark out and I'm sitting in the passenger seat of Jason's car, I've transferred all my data onto my new phone. It's almost weird that the top of my screen isn't black and I can see everything on my phone all at once.

"Is that a new phone?" Jason asks when I drop it in the cupholder between us.

"Yeah, uh, my zia got it for me," I answer, still feeling weird saying it out loud. I'm not used to getting gifts.

He senses my discomfort and changes the subject. “I didn’t see Brandon today. I’m not sure he was at school.”

Jason was *pissed* when I told him what happened. I’ve never seen him so upset before, and he’s normally a really levelheaded person. “Were you looking for him?”

He answers a beat too slowly. “No.”

“Jason.”

“I just wanted to talk to him, I swear!”

“We’ve been over this. I don’t want you to get expelled because of this; it’s not worth it. We’ll take him down our own way. *Please*, Jason. I’ve already inconvenienced you enough.”

If he wasn’t driving, he’d glare at me for longer. “You’re not an *inconvenience*.”

“I just mean you’ve already gotten in enough trouble because of me. We’ll take him down without you getting expelled *or* charged with assault.”

He grumbles something under his breath about it being worth it, but I let it go, changing the subject to get his mind off it. “I looked into the scholarship Mr. Lewis was talking about, and it’s huge. It would be a big help if I get it. I’m not sure what exactly I want to study, but going away for college is looking like it’s more and more realistic for me. I’m actually really excited about it. I just need to get my math and history grades up a bit.” Ever since Mr. Lewis planted that seed in my head, I haven’t been able to let it go.

“You will,” Jason says. “You’ve been working hard.”

I have been. I’ve gotten a little derailed with Brandon and the break-in, but for the most part, I’ve really been trying to pull my grades up.

“I’ve never really thought too deeply about college because I feel guilty leaving Gia. I always said I’d take her with me, but realistically that can’t happen, I know that, so I pushed it off. But I think Gia’s all right here, and maybe I should put myself first for once and actually do it.” Even as I say it, I feel

guilty. I've never been apart from Gia before, except when it was court ordered while I was arrested, and that was incredibly hard.

Jason turns onto a dark back road surrounded by trees. The lack of streetlights plunges us into a comfortable darkness, and the wind coming in through my window is fresh and smells like pine.

"I know it's hard, but you can't always be there to take care of Gia. She's going to have to learn to take care of herself eventually."

I bite my nails, then rip them from my mouth when he raises an eyebrow at the action. "Are you and Jackson planning on going to the same school?" He's a twin; he's not used to being away from his brother any more than I'm used to being away from my sister.

"I'm not sure yet. We're currently not agreeing on where to go. He's looking at schools based on location, because he wants to go somewhere where it's warm all year round, and I'm actually looking at the quality of programs."

"Would you feel guilty if you chose different schools?"

Jason makes another turn, pursing his lips as he considers the deeper implication of my question. "It's my life, and at some point, you have to stop making decisions because of other people and start putting yourself first.

Jackson is my brother. He isn't going anywhere and he would understand, just like Gia would if you went away to college."

I'm not sure. As much as I've been researching and considering, I've never had a real conversation about it with Gia. I'm not sure how she'd take it.

I'm about to reply when a sound in the distance cuts me off. My eyebrows draw together as I strain my ears to listen.

"Um ... Jason?" I ask, lowering the volume of the radio. The sound of the siren becomes as clear as the deserted

country road in front of us.

“Fuck,” Jason mumbles. The flashing police lights illuminate the forest around us and the inside of the dark car, highlighting Jason’s sharp profile, his clenched jaw, his tensed muscles. “I thought taking the back roads would avoid this.”

He takes a deep breath, and his eyes flash to the rearview mirror, where the police car is trailing us. He grips the steering wheel, and for a second it looks like he’s considering stepping on the gas to lose them, like he did when we first met on a road eerily similar to the one we’re on.

“Jason,” I say gently to break him out of that train of thought, since that’ll do nothing but get us into more trouble and make things even worse.

He exhales the breath he was holding with a sigh and signals to pull over.

“I’m getting really fucking annoyed with this shit,” he grumbles, pulling his wallet out and finding his license. “I was only doing like five over at most.”

“I know,” I huff, equally pissed. “But what can we do?”

Tell his *friends* at the station and hope they reprimand him? They don’t care.”

“Fucking small-town bullshit,” Jason mumbles.

“Maybe I should get a dashcam so I can prove he keeps pulling me over for inconsequential bullshit.”

There’s a tap on his window, and Jason barely schools his expression into mild annoyance as he rolls it down.

The siren is off, but the lights still flash in the darkness, lighting up the car and Officer Liu as he bends to look in the window.

“License and registration,” he says, voice monotone.

Jason’s teeth grind as he hands over the documents.

“You’ve seen my license and registration more times recently than I have.”

“Have I?” The officer doesn’t even glance at the items in his hand. He seems more composed and impassive than the last time I saw him after my meeting with Florence.

“Stay put.”

He strolls back to his car, and Jason watches him from the side mirror.

“How much worse do you think I’d make it if I put the car into Reverse right now and just—”

“Jason!” I exclaim, cutting off the bloody fantasy.

The sharp breath exhaling through his nose serves as protest. “I hate feeling so fucking helpless.”

Guilt claws at my chest, making my throat sore. “I’m sorry, Jason. He’s only doing this because of me.”

He turns his sharp eyes on me, so blue and blazing their attention makes me suck in a breath. “It’s not your fault. He’s not doing this because of you. He’s doing it because he has no leads on Lily and no one holding him accountable, so he’s fixated on harassing you. It’s all on him, Siena, not you.”

Maybe, but Jason’s the one getting all the tickets.

The crunch of gravel alerts us to Officer Liu’s approach. “In the time I’ve been gone, have either of your memories been jogged about some useful information regarding my daughter? Anything you want to tell me?

Anything you want to admit?”

I blink at him. Is he serious? What could we possibly know that we haven’t already tried sharing?

Jason doesn’t bother to address the statement, instead asking, “Can I have my ticket now? I have places to be.”

“Hmm,” Officer Liu mutters, pursing his lips. “That’s a shame.” He presses a button on the walkie-talkie attached to

his chest. “Bring it in, Bert.”

Jason and I exchange a glance.

“Turn off the engine,” Officer Liu commands, and Jason begrudgingly does.

Officer Liu takes a step back from the window, his hand going to his hip, where his handcuffs are. “Out of the vehicle.”

“What? No!” I exclaim, my hand clamping down on Jason’s arm to hold him in place without even realizing it.

“He didn’t do anything!”

Officer Liu shifts to pin me with his hard gaze. “I meant *both* of you, get out of the car.”

Nausea hits me in an intense wave. There’s only one reason he could want us to get out of the car, and it’s not to apologize for wasting our time. He’s going to cuff us, put us in the back of the cop car, maybe parade us through the station again.

My throat constricts, and the walls of the car close in on me, cutting off my access to fresh air.

I can’t be arrested, can’t stand being in the stale cell that smells like bleach, sweat, and regrets with no windows and *no air*. I can’t do it. I *won’t* do it. And yet, like always, I’m helpless.

“Siena, baby,” Jason soothes, taking my chin between his thumb and finger and forcing me to look at him.

So many things pass through his eyes as they bore into mine, and I see the promise in them as much as I hear it in his voice when he says, “We’re going to be okay; we’re in it together.”

I hear his words, and I know he means them, but my breath is coming fast and shallow, and I can’t do anything to steady it.

He lifts the hand that’s not clutching his arm in a death grip, opens my palm, and places it flat on his chest.

He's solid and stable beneath my touch, his eyes holding mine hostage despite the blackness creeping in around the edges.

"Breathe with me, baby. Copy my breaths; feel my chest rise and fall with every inhale and exhale. That's it, in and out." He inhales and exhales deeply and slowly, and I try to imitate him, try to loosen the knot in my throat.

There's commotion outside, beeping and loud machinery and directions being shouted, but Jason never spares it a glance, never once breaks eye contact with me.

"Good, that's good," he praises as I start to get my breathing under control. I didn't realize how close I was to hyperventilating and passing out until the light-headedness starts ebbing away.

I don't know how much time passes with my hand on Jason's chest while he coaches me through breathing, but eventually I've calmed down enough that my heart rate evens out and my hands stop shaking.

Jason must decide I'm okay, because he gently takes both of my hands in his and says, "No matter what happens, we're going to be okay. I've got you."

I nod at him, unable to speak just yet.

I trust Jason. Sometimes I feel like I trust him more than I trust myself.

"We're going to get out of the car," Jason states calmly, "and we're going to be all right."

I don't want to get out of the car, don't want to willingly let Officer Liu cuff and trap me in the back of his car, but Jason's here with me, calm and in control like always. And besides, I don't really have a choice.

With one last squeeze, Jason releases my hands and unbuckles his seat belt. He watches me do the same and gives me a reassuring nod when I tentatively open my car door. Jason presses the starter once to turn on the car without turning

on the engine and rolls up the windows before shutting off the car again.

“What are you waiting for?” Officer Liu’s voice makes me break eye contact with Jason for the first time since I started panicking. “I told you both to get out of the vehicle.”

It’s then that I notice what’s going on. There’s a tow truck directly in front of us, the operator tinkering around Jason’s car, attaching chains and cables to it.

My jaw drops. *That’s* what all that noise was? A tow truck hooking up Jason’s car?

Jason doesn’t seem surprised. He must’ve known what was happening the whole time, but he still made calming me down his priority over blowing up at Officer Liu or stopping the man I now realize is probably Bert from hooking up his car.

“What the hell are you doing?” I exclaim as I step out of the car, my worries taking a backseat to my indignant rage. “You can’t just tow the car!”

Bert, a middle-aged man with a deep tan, white beard, and white hair pulled back in a short ponytail, raises his hands. “Sorry, ma’am, just following orders.”

“What grounds do you have to tow my car?” Jason asks, directing his question to the smug but somehow also bored-looking Officer Liu.

Now that both of us are out of the car, Bert presses a button for the lever that begins lifting the front end of Jason’s car, fully suspending it from the tow truck.

“Hey, stop that!” I demand, but he doesn’t, and the car’s front end continues slowly rising. “You can’t do this! We weren’t doing anything!” That last part is for Officer Liu, who’s standing with Bert on the other side of Jason’s car.

“Yes, I can, and I am,” Officer Liu says, then turns to Jason, who’s standing in front of him. “You have several outstanding tickets, which means I have to tow your car until you get that sorted.” He says it with a neutral tone, like he’s trying to retain

a semblance of professionalism, but it's clear this is bringing him immense joy.

“This is bullshit, and you know it,” Jason accuses, but he doesn't raise his voice, doesn't lose control. “You've continuously been giving me tickets for made-up violations, and now you're towing my car over them?”

“Handle the tickets and call this number, and they'll see about you getting your car back,” Officer Liu says, handing Jason a paper along with his license and documents, probably only giving us any information at all to appear semisane in front of Bert.

It's very clear what this is. He's showing us who holds the power here and how hard he can make our lives with very minimal effort on his part. He followed us here with every intention of confiscating Jason's car—it's obvious by how fast the tow truck got here. Bert was prepped and primed for the job, probably waiting nearby for the signal. This is happening, and there's nothing we can do.

The mechanical whirring of the tow truck stops. “All hooked up,” Bert announces, and Jason rounds on him.

“If there's one scratch on my car, I will end you,”

Jason warns Bert, whose eyes widen despite being more than forty years older than him.

Bert swallows, backing up to the driver's door of the tow truck. “What happens when it's in the lot isn't up to me.”

Before Jason can reply, Bert hastily gets into the truck.

Jason scowls, marching around the car and coming to my side. He yanks the passenger door of the Challenger open and ducks in, grabbing my purse, which I completely forgot about, my new phone from the cupholder, and his sweater from the backseat. He hands it all to me and scans me when he emerges, likely making sure I've got everything, including my shoes, before he closes the door, using his key fob to lock the car.

Jason, though still holding it together with a composure that deserves awards, is too angry to do anything other than accept what's happening. It's clear this is going to happen no matter what, but I still try a last-ditch effort.

To Officer Liu, I say, "You don't have to do this; you've made your point. Just let us go."

He is not moved by my plea. "Maybe needing to walk everywhere for a while will help jog your memory or inspire you to be honest with me."

I feel like screaming until he gets it through his thick head that he's wasting his time with us, but Jason's hand on my back grounds me. It slides around to my waist, and he pulls me against his side, the two of us united in front of the man trying so hard to make my life miserable.

Officer Liu approaches Bert's window and says something, then the tow truck slowly veers onto the road.

Jason and I watch it travel down the dark street, pulling the car I know means so much to Jason along with it.

"Stay out of trouble for the rest of the night," Officer Liu says, going back to his own car.

It takes me a moment to realize he's *not* arresting us, and the relief that washes through me is short-lived when it hits me that he's deserting us.

"You're just going to leave us here? At practically midnight in the middle of nowhere?" I call to his retreating back. Jason pulls me tighter against him, like he's prepared to step in if I throw myself at Officer Liu and get arrested. "What if something happens to us?" *Like what happened to Lily* is what I don't say, but it still hangs in the air between us. "You'd be responsible."

Officer Liu considers my statement for a moment, his nostrils flaring as he looks at us.

"You got a cell phone?" he asks.

"Yes."

“It have signal?”

Confused, I look at my phone, which has full bars.

“Yes.”

“Then you’re fine.”

And with that, he turns around and strides back to his car.

ELEVEN

The flashing blue and red lights switch off once Officer Liu is inside his car, and he drives past us without sparing us even a glance.

We stand there, in the middle of the road, and watch the cruiser disappear, taking the remaining light and noise with it.

I have the overwhelming urge to flip off the retreating car, but I don't in case he's looking in the rearview mirror and decides to change his mind about not arresting us. I'd rather be outside and free in the middle of nowhere with Jason than locked up and panicking in a cell alone.

Jason drops his hold on me and steps away, running an angry hand through his hair.

Guilt forms in the pit of my stomach. "I'm so sorry, Jason."

This is all because of me. Jason is being harassed and just had his car *towed* because of *me*. Jason has been nothing but kind and helpful to me, and I've repaid him by making him a target of Officer Liu's stupid vendetta. I'm dragging him down. All I've *ever* done is drag Jason down.

In the short time he's known me, he's been suspended, he broke into the school and had to run from the cops, he is constantly being pulled over, he's gotten arrested *twice*, and he literally took the fall when Brandon almost died, all because of *me*.

Why is he still hanging around me? How can he even look at me and see anything but a nuisance and someone who's more trouble than they're worth?

The guilt claws at my throat and squeezes, making it hard for me to breathe.

I know Jason's beyond pissed. I know he's thinking of all the different ways he can slowly and torturously kill Officer Liu as he stares at his retreating car with clenched fists. I know

every bone in his body is screaming with rage. But even so, he's keeping it together. His tense muscles give him away, but other than that he's being almost scarily calm and collected, and by the way his eyes keep flicking to me and he forces himself to take a deep breath, I know it's only because of me.

He must know how close I am to losing it again, how I already feel like everything is spinning out of my control, and he's the one who reassures me, who keeps me grounded, like he did earlier in the car. But because I know that he's only keeping it together because that's what *I* need him to do, it makes me feel ten times worse.

"I told you, none of this is your fault, Siena," he says, looking at the paper Officer Liu gave him with information on his towed car.

"I'm sorry I stopped you from pressing charges the first time we were arrested," I say, looking down at my feet to stop myself from tearing up. "I didn't want to deal with everything that came with it. But maybe that would've put a stop to all of this. Maybe we could've avoided it all."

I feel his hand on my arm. "You don't know that.

Maybe it would've. Maybe it wouldn't have made a difference at all. Maybe it would've made things worse.

We'll never know, so there's no point wondering about it. We can only deal with what's going on right now, and we will."

I nod at him, forcing myself to get my emotions under control. I can't have another breakdown, not right now, not while Jason's trying to figure everything out and I'm only serving as a distraction.

Goose bumps rise on my skin from the cool night air, and I realize I'm still clutching my purse and Jason's sweater.

He drops his hand and nods at the bundle. "Put it on, and let's figure out how we're getting home."

I do as he says. The sweater's warm and smells like him. It calms my nerves immediately. I might steal this one too and start a collection of Jason's stolen sweaters. I put on my purse cross-body style so I don't have to worry about it and slip my phone into it.

"There's no way in hell I can call Dario or Zia Stella to come get us," I admit, my cheeks burning with shame.

Dario is a bad report card away from kicking me out, and Zia Stella is at work and won't answer.

Jason pulls out his phone. "Natalia's at a fundraiser; I'm not pulling her away from that. Maybe Jackson hasn't started drinking anything yet."

He clicks around on his phone then puts it on Speaker.

It rings a few times before it connects, loud music filling the phone before Jackson's voice answers with a slurred,

"Brother! Jason! My brother! Where are you?"

Jason and I exchange a look. Clearly Jackson as a driver is ruled out. Before either of us can answer, Jackson says, "Hold on, what? You don't need—all right, fine.

Jason, Tyler wants to know if you can stop and get more limes. *Apparently*, he's decided he can no longer stomach the taste of tequila without a chaser, even though we've been chugging it straight all night."

Jackson *and* Tyler are out.

Jackson adds, "And Nyah's been asking for more soda for the ... oh, never mind, she's drinking the rum straight now with Warren."

And so are Nyah and Warren.

"I might not make it tonight," Jason says.

"What? *Why*? You said you were on your way ... *ohhhh*. I know what's happened. You and Siena have pulled over on some dark, secluded dirt road and are bang—"

“*Goodbye, Jackson!*” Jason yells over his brother, clicking the bright-red button and ending the call. “Ignore him,” he says to me, a statement that’s becoming a standard whenever he ends a call with his twin.

My cheeks heat from the mental image Jackson’s words have produced, and I look down so Jason won’t read my thoughts.

“So clearly our friends and parents are out. Who else can we call?” Jason asks, scrolling through his phone.

I feel bad, since I really have no suggestions to contribute. Gia can’t drive, and the only other person I’d consider calling for help is currently standing right in front of me.

The wind picks up, and I pull the sweater down to cover more of me. Jason barely looks up from where he’s frowning and texting, but he takes a step over, effectively blocking the wind with his own body.

The action is sweet and warms me just as much as his body blocking the wind does.

“We can Uber?” I suggest. “Though I’m not sure where we’d set our location. We can’t really give directions to the middle of nowhere.”

Jason shakes his head, still texting. “No, I’ve got someone. He says he’s on his way.”

“Your other brother?”

“Aiden? Oh no, I wouldn’t ask him,” he says. “I’m not telling him shit about any of this. Plus, he’s not in town.”

“Would he get mad?” I ask. If he’s the one who taught Jason to drag race before he even had a license, I can’t picture him being genuinely mad about this, especially if Jason explains the situation.

Jason tucks his phone away. “Mad? No—well, maybe.

But not at me. Maybe a little at me.” He laughs at himself.

“I didn’t tell him anything that’s going on here.”

I didn't really tell anyone either. But Jason seems so close to Aiden, so I ask, "How come?"

Jason pauses as he considers his response. "Aiden is a lot like how you are with Gia. He's super protective and puts me and Jackson above himself. He'd drop everything to be here and try to make everything his problem so I don't have to deal with it, but I don't want him to do that.

He's living his life now; he's just starting out in his career, and he's already given up so much of his life to raise me and Jackson, so I try not to drag him into any bullshit as much as I can."

I've never met Aiden, but being compared to him seems like the highest of compliments from Jason. Both he and Jackson talk about him with reverence and respect.

"I'm sure he doesn't consider it being dragged into your bullshit. It's a natural instinct for older siblings, especially when it's always been us against the world, like you and your brothers."

Jason shakes his head at the memory. "He was adamant about getting custody and raising us all by himself, but Aiden was just a kid himself. How could he go away to school while taking care of us? We didn't want to be a burden on him."

"I doubt he considers you two a burden. I'd never think that of Gia, no matter how much trouble she causes."

"Yeah, I know." He rubs the back of his neck. "Natalia was helping out a lot, and we grew really close to her.

She was going through a messy divorce, and to be honest, I think having me and Jackson around causing trouble and keeping her busy kept her mind off it and lifted her spirits a bit. Our mom died when we were really young, and having Natalia is really ..." He trails off, his jaw clenching as he looks away from me and down the road at nothing. A lump forms in my throat at the emotion in his voice when he says, "It's nice, having a mom. Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't

trade my upbringing with Aiden for anything in the world, but ...”

“I know, Jason,” I whisper, running my hand down his arm for support.

I should feel jealous—jealous that he has something I’ll never have, jealous that there’s an adult in his life who took him in and loves him unconditionally, and that he gets to experience having someone there to mother him, something I have never and will never experience. But I’m not jealous, not even the tiniest bit. I’m so freaking happy for Jason, glad that after everything he’s been through, he gets that happily-ever-after, that perfect life with the home where he’s always welcome no matter how old he gets and the warm bowl of soup made for him with love on a cold, sickly day.

“Sometimes I feel so damn guilty for not remembering almost anything about my real mom at all, for being happy with Natalia, for forgetting she’s not my actual mom.”

“There’s nothing to feel guilty about, Jason. You have someone you love, someone who loves you in return. Even if she wasn’t the one who gave birth to you, it doesn’t diminish her love for you or make her any less your mother. I’m sure your mom would be happy you have someone who cares about you as much as she did.”

I don’t mean to, but my voice cracks at the end, and Jason’s eyes widen. “Fuck, I’m sorry. That’s so fucking insensitive of me to say. I’m such an ass; I didn’t mean to make it seem like I’m complaining about this.”

“You’re not an ass,” I assure him. “You’re entitled to your feelings, and I love that you’re opening up to me.” I feel shy before I decide to admit, “It makes me feel closer to you.”

Jason’s face softens as he looks at me. “I don’t really open up to a lot of people, but it’s natural with you.

Sometimes I feel like I say too much, that I should shut up before I say something I shouldn’t.”

“Like what?” I prompt, my heart pounding.

He steps closer to me, his eyes holding me hostage.

“Like how I think the weird way you eat pizza crust first is actually really adorable. Or that I love the way the car smells like you even when you’re not in it. Or that you looking at me like you are right now is my favorite thing in the whole fucking world.”

I’m frozen to the spot, unable to move or take a full breath from this spell he’s put me under. “How am I looking at you?”

“Like you feel the exact same way I do.”

There’s no way Jason feels the same way I do. I feel better whenever he’s around, like he’s got everything together so it’s okay that I don’t. I feel happier every time I think about him, and when we’re together, none of my problems even matter. I feel cared for, supported, and *heard* by him. I feel things that I’m too scared to even admit to myself, because there’s no way Jason, this boy who’s so fucking amazing and sweet and thoughtful, could ever really feel the same way about *me*.

But still, even though I know the answer can’t possibly be the same as mine, I torture myself by asking, “And how’s that?”

Jason is so close to me. His hands grip my waist, and mine land on his chest, clutching the material there for support. My eyes flutter closed as his nose skims my cheekbone. “You really want me to say it?”

My voice is barely above a whisper. “I really do.”

His lips brush mine, and I shiver with both anticipation and jitters. “Siena, I l—”

A car speeds past us, honking as it goes, and we jump apart. It continues down the dark road, leaving us in silence with nature again.

Even though I was only standing in one spot clinging to an incredibly handsome boy, my body feels like it’s been running a marathon, and I try to catch my breath and calm my racing

heart. Jason looks just as affected, raking a hand through his hair and inhaling deeply.

I pull the sleeves of his sweater over my hands and wrap my arms around myself. The moment has been broken, and now I'll never know what Jason was going to say. It's a kick in the stomach, but I try not to let it show on my face.

Jason clears his throat. "Anyway, um ... Natalia and Aiden ..." He clears his throat again, trying to regain his earlier composure. "As I was saying, we were happy with Natalia, and we wanted Aiden to live his own life, so, after a mini-intervention, he agreed when Natalia asked to adopt all three of us." Jason's smile is almost sad as he adds, "I think he was more shocked that she wanted to adopt him too. He was over eighteen and was doing fine on his own, but the gesture meant a lot to him, I know it did. He's been alone and always needed to be the tough, strong one for as long as I can remember, and now he has a place to come home to."

No wonder Jason says he sees similarities between me and Aiden. I know exactly how he must've felt when that happened; I've been yearning for that with my own family for as long as I can remember.

"It helped that his best friend, Mason, Natalia's son, basically forced him to agree," Jason adds. "Mason went from being an only child to having three brothers and a half sister from his dad basically overnight. And Aiden went from having all this responsibility on his shoulders to having somewhere to turn and getting to actually be a kid himself, even though he didn't really loosen his grip on us."

"And he never will," I joke, thinking of Gia. "You'll always be his baby brother."

"And that's exactly why I didn't call him. He's done enough for me, and I don't want him to drop everything and come running. I'll tell him after I've gotten the car back and it's too late for him to worry."

"So, who did you call who won't tell Aiden?" I ask.

“All of our friends are drunk right now.”

We turn at the sound of an SUV approaching. One person passing us on this road is already highly unlikely, never mind two. Jason watches the approaching vehicle as he says, “Oh no. He’ll *definitely* tell Aiden, but I can probably bribe him to hold off until I’m ready.”

The car stops right beside us in the middle of the road, and the driver’s window rolls down. “You know, Jason, I can proudly admit I’ve done my fair share of stupid things in my day,” the driver, a guy with dirty-blond hair who looks to be in his midtwenties, says. “I’ve passed out drunk in the principal’s bed when her daughter threw a house party. I’ve had to sneak out a girl’s second-story window in nothing but my socks when her parents came home early one winter. I’ve called a girl I was dating Veronica for a month before someone told me her name was Chloe. But getting my car towed by the cops, leaving me and the girl I’m trying to impress stranded in the middle of nowhere, is *not* one of them.”

“I wasn’t speeding, the cop was just being a dick,”

Jason mutters, not entirely lying but not telling the whole truth either. Officer Liu was being more than just a dick.

The driver laughs, clearly not buying it. “You sound like me when I tried explaining to the principal that it *wasn’t* my puke covering her expensive silk pillowcase.

Or like me when I tried explaining to that girl’s parents that I was only naked because I spilled coffee on my clothes, and she offered to wash them for me. *Or* like me when—”

“All right, we get the point.” Jason cuts him off, leading me around the SUV with a gentle hand on my lower back. He opens the passenger door and gestures inside.

“Siena, this is Noah, one of Aiden’s best friends whom I’ve known forever. Noah, this is Siena. Don’t annoy her to death.”

Noah has a wide smile on his face, and it looks like it’s always right at home there. “I’m also the best looking, funniest, and smartest of his friends.”

“He left out ‘most delusional,’” Jason tells me, helping me into the passenger seat and closing the door once I’m settled.

“Hi,” I say to Noah as I put on my seat belt. He’s staring at me with that goofy, wide smile.

The back door opens, and Jason slides in, sitting in the middle instead of behind me. I have no idea why he gave me shotgun, but I smile awkwardly at Noah as I add,

“Thanks for coming to get us.”

“And miss quality time with Jason and the girl he’s spending all his time with? Never.”

“Shut up, Noah,” Jason grumbles, and Noah’s smile only grows wider. He’s clearly enjoying teasing Jason, and it must mean they’re pretty close if Noah’s comfortable enough to do it and Jason seems to be used to it.

Noah raises his hands innocently, watching Jason in the rearview mirror. “Okay, okay, I’ll play nice.”

Jason gives him a *you better* look before putting on his seat belt. Noah shifts into Drive, and we descend into a slightly awkward silence, with the very low hum of the radio filling it. I want to say something to Noah because he’s sitting right beside me and I feel like I should fill the silence, but nothing’s coming to mind.

Noah’s eyes keep shifting to me like he’s thinking the same thing I am, like we’re both trying and failing to think of a conversation starter.

“So, Siena ...” Noah starts. “I heard your mom was going into porn?”

“Noah!” Jason exclaims, his head popping between us from the backseat. “What the fuck, man?”

“What? Just making conversation!”

“That’s untrue and off-limits. You listen to too much town gossip.”

“All right, all right. Sorry.”

We're silent for only a moment before Noah tries to break the silence again. "Did Jason tell you his dad's a complete deadbeat too? You have that in common."

"*Noah!* What the *fuck* is wrong with you?"

"What? It's a *joke*, I'm *kidding*! Just trying to break the tension here. Geez, you really are the serious twin.

Where'd your sense of humor go? You leave it in the trunk of the Challenger?"

Jason glowers at him from the backseat, but I have to bite my lip to stop from smiling. Noah's kinda weird.

I like it.

"Actually," I say, "it's been mentioned, but we haven't really had the *who has the worst dad* competition yet, so now I'm looking forward to it."

Noah barks out a laugh, his eyes twinkling with mischief that looks right at home on his face. "So it's cool when *she* jokes about it, but not me, right, Jason?"

Jason leans back in the seat, folding his arms across his chest and muttering, "I knew I should've called Julian.

He knows how to keep a secret."

"It's not a *secret* if you already told her, dumbass,"

Noah shoots back with a playful grin. "And take that back! I'm way cooler than Julian. He's become so boring ever since he and Anna got married and started doing adult things, like contributing to their retirement savings and starting debates about the best kind of dish soap." He fakes a gag, then turns to me and says, "If I ever start a conversation about mortgage rates with you, just kick me right in the balls."

"You got it," I promise.

A beat of silence, followed by, "It's Dawn, obviously."

"What?"

“The best kind of dish soap,” he clarifies. “If it’s good enough to use on baby birds, then it’s obviously good enough to use on stubborn, baked-on pasta sauce that—

oh my God.” Noah cuts himself off with a dramatic gasp, then whispers to himself, “They’ve gotten to me.”

I struggle to keep a straight face. “Does this mean I get to kick you in the balls?”

He can’t possibly go anywhere in this car, but he shifts slightly away from me in his seat. “I amend that statement. Not a kick in the balls. Maybe just a soft little tap on the arm — *ow!*”

Jason sits back after punching Noah, a satisfied grin on his face.

“What the *fuck*, Jason?” Noah exclaims, rubbing his bicep. “What part of ‘soft little tap’ didn’t you understand?”

“The ‘soft little’ part,” he deadpans.

“Or the ‘tap’ part, clearly!”

“It was basically a tap. We’re in a confined space, and I’m in the backseat, I got no momentum.”

Noah grumbles, adjusting himself in the seat with his newly sore arm. “This is why Jackson is my favorite twin.”

“And that’s why Julian is my favorite of Aiden’s friends.”

They make eye contact in the rearview mirror, and despite their words, both boys wear goofy, loving smiles that give them away.

“So, are you going to tell me what you did to get your car towed?” Noah asks, then adds under his breath with an amused snort, “Loser.”

Jason doesn’t miss a beat. “Says the loser who was sitting at home alone on a Friday night watching home baking competitions on television.”

“I’ll have you know that watching *Baking Battles: The Cookie Chronicles* is a *great* way to spend a Friday night. Once you hit twenty-one, you’re all partied out. Okay, maybe not twenty-one, maybe twenty-two ... or actually maybe not twenty-two, maybe twenty-three ... or actually—you know what, I’m not the one facing interrogation here!”

I stifle a laugh as Noah turns onto a main road.

Jason ignores Noah’s statement, instead saying, “Turn left on Elm Road. Siena lives on Pinewood Street.”

Noah follows the direction, and I’m assuming he knows where Pinewood is because he doesn’t ask for any clarification. He doesn’t let Jason get away with the subject change, though.

“So, I’m assuming we’re not going to tell Aiden, right?”

“That’s correct,” Jason says.

Noah bites his lip. “I’m assuming that also means we’re not telling Chase, Mason, Julian, Anna, Charlotte, or Thea, right?”

Jason sighs. “Did you already tell them?”

“No!” He’s silent for a moment, then, “But I may have accidentally mentioned something to Mason while I was on my way to get you ...”

“Noah!”

“I’m sorry! It slipped!”

Jason huffs, looking like he’s trying really hard not to face-palm. “Fine. I’ll deal with Mason when I get home. It’s the house on the left with the Mercedes in the driveway.”

Noah pulls into my driveway, and I’m almost disappointed that the ride is over.

So much has happened tonight: being pulled over, Jason calming me during a panic attack, having his car towed, being deserted in the middle of nowhere, Jason opening up to me and almost admitting something that I’ll never be able to unhear, and now meeting someone who clearly means a lot to

him despite their playful bantering. It's a lot to take in, and despite the overall horribleness of the situation, the night isn't ending in the worst way.

Noah shifts into Park, and Jason removes his seat belt.

"Give me a minute," Jason tells Noah, and I remove my own seat belt.

Noah waggles his eyebrows at him. "If you're going to make out, you should take longer than a minute."

Jason rolls his eyes and opens his door. "Shut up."

He shuts the door, and Noah turns to me, urgency in his eyes. "Quick, before he comes back, I like you, so if you ever want to piss Jason off and win any argument, all you gotta do is"—my door opens, and Noah seamlessly switches gears—"really nice to meet you too."

It takes considerable effort to stop myself from laughing out loud. I wanted to hear what he was going to say.

"Thanks for the ride, Noah," I say, sliding out of the SUV. "I hope I get to see you around."

"Oh, me too. I've got a whole photo album of embarrassing pictures of Jason that I would just *love* to show y—"

Jason shuts the door, cutting Noah off.

"No fair." I pout at Jason as he intertwines his fingers with mine. "I wanted to ask him for a sneak preview of those pictures."

Jason groans, but a smile pulls up the corner of his lips. "Oh no. One Noah is enough; I don't need you both ganging up on me."

I laugh as we walk up the driveway and to the front door. The porch lights aren't on, because clearly Dario doesn't care if I get in all right or not, so we're blanketed in darkness and the sparse light from Noah's headlights, which aren't directly in front of us.

"I like him, he's funny."

“Yeah, he’s all right,” Jason says, but there’s love in his voice. “I’ve known him forever.”

At my front door, I turn to face him. Noah can’t see us from here.

Despite my good mood, I sober when I think of the night’s events. “I’m really sorry about tonight, Jason.

And all the tickets. I’ll pay for them and help you get your car back.” We can’t see Officer Liu’s house from here since it’s on the other side of the garage, but I still send it a glare.

Jason waves me off, dropping my hand to place both of his on my hips. “Don’t worry about that and stop apologizing. We’ll figure it out.”

He pulls me close to him, and I’m instantly warmed.

I have to tilt my head back to look at him, and I feel the steady beat of his heart against my own chest, reminding me of earlier.

“Thank you for calming me down in the car. You’re always the thing that makes me feel alive yet keeps me grounded. I’m not sure what I’d do without you.”

Jason’s lips brush softly against my cheekbone, causing shivers to run through me. “Funny,” he says, his deep voice right in my ear, “I think the same thing about you.”

Then he kisses me, deep and passionate and possessive.

Butterflies erupt in my stomach as he pulls me impossibly closer to him, and my mind blanks of anything other than him and how he makes me feel.

The kiss is over too soon, and Jason tenderly tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear.

“I’ll call you when I get home,” he says, and part of me wants to stop him from leaving. “Try not to worry.

We’ll sort everything out.”

I nod as he pulls away from me, seemingly just as reluctant as I am.

“Fine,” I say, wrapping my arms around myself because I immediately miss his warmth. “I’m keeping this sweater, though.”

A smile tugs at Jason’s lips. “Of course you are.”

TWELVE

“Is it just me or does Brandon seem more obsessed with you than usual?” Nyah asks between bites of her pizza, discreetly nodding to where Brandon sits with his football friends.

He’s already glaring at me, taking aggressive bites of his sandwich without breaking eye contact, chunks of bread and lunch meat flying. This is the first time I’ve seen him since he broke into my house last Wednesday.

He hasn’t been in school most of this week, apparently off at some football camp or university tour or something.

But he’s here today, Friday, and he’s focused on me.

“‘Obsessed’ is putting it lightly,” I tell her, giving Brandon my back even though I can still feel the lasers coming from his eyes.

He tried talking to me this morning, but I was packed up and out the door before the bell even finished ringing.

But here in the cafeteria, I’m fair game. If I wanted to avoid him for real, I should eat outside, but then I’d lose time with Nyah.

I’m not sure why he hasn’t come up to me yet—maybe Nyah acts as a psycho repellent—but if the way he’s looking at me is any indication, I’m not confident it’ll last.

I don’t know what he wants, and I don’t care. After everything he’s done and the way no one believes me, I want nothing to do with him unless it’s figuring out what he’s done with Lily and seeing him hauled off. If that really *was* him who broke into my house and ransacked my room and not just me assuming things because I hate him, he has his phone back now. I have nothing on him anymore, and now I’ll never figure out what happened to Lily.

“Brandon better be looking over here like he wants to take a bite out of Siena and not you, Nyah,” Tyler says as he joins us,

dropping into the seat beside her. “Because we all know I’d lose a fight with him in three seconds flat.

Hell, he’d flick my forehead and I’d go through the wall.”

Nyah steals a French fry from his plate. “So, it’s better that he’s contemplating throwing Siena over his shoulder and stalking away with her instead of me?”

He gives her a *duh* look. “Weren’t you listening? Jason could take him. I’d try to defend you, babe, but Brandon’s got like a hundred pounds and a few inches on me. He’d stomp me into the asphalt before I got a swing in.”

Jason joins us, placing his tray on the spot beside mine. “Don’t sell yourself short, Ty. I’m sure you’d get at least one good punch in.”

Tyler shrugs with no traces of bloated male ego, completely unbothered by admitting he’d lose to Brandon. “We all have our strengths, and fighting is not one of mine.”

“And neither are school, video games, cooking, music, public speaking, or swimming,” Jason teases, casually draping an arm over the back of my chair as he sits. “So, what *are* these strengths you speak of?”

“You and I both know damn well I’d kick anyone’s ass in a game of soccer, including yours,” Tyler insists, a suggestive smirk spreading on his face. “Plus, some skills are best kept for my girlfriend’s eyes—or pleasure—only.”

Jason and I groan in disgust, and Nyah slaps his arm.

“*Ty!* That’s no one’s business!” she exclaims, though she doesn’t seem too upset about the admission.

“Oh, come on, I know you love it when I kn—”

“We don’t wanna know!” Jason and I interrupt quickly, and Tyler laughs.

“I was going to say *know when she’s craving chocolate and surprise her with it*, you pervs.” He throws a fry at Jason to

punctuate his point, and Nyah chastises him for wasting good food.

While they bicker-flirt, Jason pulls me closer and leans in to speak in my ear. I try to pretend I'm not affected by his proximity and don't feel that electricity pulling me to him. I fail.

"Has Brandon been bothering you?" he asks.

"No. He's just been glaring at me like he's picturing all the different ways he could stab me with his soda can."

Jason's speaking into my ear, but he's positioned himself in a way that lets him look over my shoulder directly at Brandon. If the way Jason's hand tightens on my arm is any indication, they're currently in a stare-off. "If he touches you and I'm not around, scream bloody murder."

"He's not going to touch me in school. But I do want to know if that really was him who broke into my room.

I'm so certain it was. Part of me wants to march up to him right now and demand he admit the truth." I never saw the intruder's face, but it *had* to have been Brandon.

Like I told the officers, he has a silhouette that's easy to identify.

"If that's what you want to do, I'll be right behind you."

Jason's smoldering eyes are on me now, not Brandon, and a possessive glimmer dances in them. Of course he'd have my back, and it's for that reason alone I keep my butt planted in my seat. The last thing I want to do is cause more problems for him, because us going over there is asking for trouble, and Jason's already using all his self-control to not fight Brandon because I've begged him not to. Going over there with Brandon looking all pissed and Jason being all protective is a guarantee of expulsion.

Plus, I don't want to cause a scene and give the entire school another month's worth of gossip.

“Let’s just steer clear of him in general,” I say. Jason’s jaw is set, but after a few moments, he finally relents with a nod.

A French fry bounces off my nose and lands on the table, breaking up me and Jason.

“Stop wasting food!” Nyah chides, pulling the half-empty basket of fries away from Tyler.

“I had to get their attention somehow!” Tyler defends his actions. “Are you guys coming to Warren’s party tonight?”

“He’s having another party?” I ask. He never mentioned anything to me today, and that’s something he’d usually tell me.

“He just sent us a text while you two were eye-fucking each other.”

My face heats up, and there’s a thump under the table before Tyler jumps in his seat. “Ow! It was a joke; you didn’t have to kick me!”

Jason sends him an innocent smile as he pops a grape into his mouth.

“Are you working tonight, Siena?” Nyah asks, changing the subject.

“I am, so I can’t come. But I’m sure Warren will have another party.”

“He will,” Nyah assures me, though I don’t really mind missing out on it. “I don’t think there’s been a single Friday night that Warren hasn’t thrown a party of various sizes, even if it’s only ten people.”

“He’s lonely,” Tyler says. “Either that or that mansion is haunted and he doesn’t want to be alone in it.

I swear, last time I used his bathroom I could hear a woman singing in this haunted, mournful tone. I hauled ass out of there, but no one else heard anything. It was *super* creepy.”

Nyah waves him away with a laugh. “You were drunk.

It was probably the music from the party.”

“I can be drunk *and* hear a creepy ghost!”

The conversation switches to all the paranormal encounters Tyler *swears* he’s had, and we laugh through the rest of lunch until the bell. But the whole time, I can still feel Brandon’s burning gaze directed my way, and if the way Jason’s arm stays draped over my shoulders is any indication, his hand rubbing my arm every once in a while for comfort, I know he feels it too.



I’m walking from history to math when it happens. A strong hand clamps over my arm and yanks me through a door hard enough to practically dislocate my shoulder.

“Ow! What the fu—” My words die on my lips when the door is slammed shut, and I realize I’m alone with Brandon in an empty classroom, his large body blocking the exit.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” he starts, folding his arms across his chest.

I force myself not to let the panic show on my face. I need to be in control of this situation, so I straighten my spine and look down my nose at him even though he’s much taller than me.

“I’m not *avoiding* you. I just have absolutely no reason to ever be in your vicinity. So, on that note ...”

Mustering all my confidence, I attempt to shoulder past him to leave, but he sidesteps.

“Not so fast.”

I back away before he touches me again, and his eyes track my movement. Shit.

“I want to talk to you, so we’re going to talk,” he states, stomping toward me, and my retreat is involuntary. My tailbone hits the edge of a desk, and he invades my space,

caging me in and making my breathing feel shallow. He does this a lot, and part of me thinks he knows my claustrophobia is my crippling weakness and he's using it to his advantage, while the other part thinks he just does it to feel powerful and in control.

I remember the last time we were alone in my room together, the way he knocked me aside so easily, like I was nothing but a toy doll to him. We're in a huge, empty classroom and there's no *air* in here, and even though the tightness in my chest is suffocating and his face is contorted with barely constrained rage, I force myself to hide my fear.

"We can talk without you practically being on top of me," I state, my voice steadier than I feel.

"Where's my phone?" he asks, but it sounds like a demand. He's less calm and restrained than he has been the other times he's asked me about it. In fact, now he seems almost desperate. "I *know* you have it. Give it to me right now, or you'll regret it."

Why is he asking me for his phone? *He* has it! He stole it from my room.

I don't think he'll hurt me, not here, not in school—at least I hope he won't. There are cameras in the halls, and they'd confirm that I was in this room alone with Brandon.

But still, I can't stop myself from scoping out what I can use as a weapon against him if I need to. My backpack dropped by the door, but there's a reusable metal water bottle sitting on one of the desks behind him, and a heavy textbook on the desk next to the one I'm pressed against.

"I told you I don't have i—"

"Stop lying to me!" he demands, and a vein in his neck bulges. He takes a breath to regain himself, and in a slightly more composed tone, he says, "I told you if you didn't give it back to me, there would be consequences, and this is your last chance."

My last chance? I don't think so.

With all the strength I have, I stomp on Brandon's foot, taking him by surprise, and when he's distracted by the pain, I shove him away from me. The second there's space between us and I can breathe a bit easier, I sprint to the door, but his words stop me in my tracks.

"You killed Stan Roven in LA. That's why you moved here. You're a murderous bitch, and everyone's going to know the truth."

I don't turn to look at him, and he doesn't close the space between us again. We're both breathing hard in the otherwise silent space, then the bell rings, signaling the start of last period. We're late for math, but neither of us makes a move to leave.

"What?" I ask, schooling my expression to neutral before turning to face him.

"You heard me," he sneers, like *he's* disgusted by *me*.

"I know everything that happened in LA. You killed a man, you were arrested, you faced trial, you were in custody for a month before you were acquitted, but that doesn't change the fact that you took someone's life, just like you tried to take mine. And soon everyone else will know what happened too."

I don't know how he's discovered the truth, but he says it with such confidence, such unwavering conviction, that I know I'm screwed. But I'm a minor, so nothing was ever confirmed. Being Florence Bowen's daughter means an internet search will show you that I was arrested, sure, and there were rumors, but he knows Stan's *name*.

My voice comes out strong, but on the inside I'm trembling. "You don't know shit."

"I know plenty. And I have proof."

"Bullshit."

His nostrils flare, but I hold my ground.

"You can't just go around making stupid accusations."

Sure, this school and this town love their gossip, but when you start saying stuff that ridiculous, the only gossip people will be spreading is that you're a liar who's obsessed with me."

It's a bluff. Even without proof, people will take the story that I killed Stan and run with it, probably even embellishing it to make me seem ten times worse and adding facts that never happened, but it's the only card I can play right now.

Brandon's smirk is vicious, and I hate that I always feel like I'm one step behind him in our interactions.

"It's not a *stupid accusation* if I have proof."

He says it so confidently it makes me hesitate for a moment. But besides a full confession from me or Gia on video, which I know he doesn't have, there isn't anything he could have to back up that statement. "You can't have proof of something that never happened."

His smirk grows bigger. "Is that so? Then what's this picture I have on my phone ready to send out to everyone with the click of a button?"

He presses a few buttons on his phone and crosses the space between us to show me. When he holds out his phone, my heart stops.

What? How can this be?

Not caring that I'm putting myself even closer to Brandon when moments ago I wanted nothing more than to escape, I snatch his phone from his hand and hold it as close to my face as I can to make sure I'm really seeing what I think I'm seeing.

It's a picture of a computer screen, and on the screen is a picture of my file, my *supposed to be sealed* file, as in it shouldn't *exist*. I zoom in on the photo and see the date and time in the corner of the computer, and it's dated from while my case was still ongoing.

That's unbelievable. Someone took a picture of my file while my case was ongoing. Not only is that completely illegal and unethical, but it's a violation of my rights.

Now there will always be a record of what happened, and somehow, Brandon's got his hands on it.

He doesn't even care that I've taken his phone, leaning back on a desk with that stupid smug look on his face like he knows he's got the upper hand. He must have copies of it, because I have his phone, and he knows nothing is stopping me from deleting it, but he's not worried.

"Where'd you get this?" I demand, dropping the innocent act and waving the phone in his face.

Now that he knows he's won, the hostile energy has shifted into arrogant control. He crosses one foot in front of the other and lifts a pompous eyebrow. "From the Apple store. I had to get a new one after you stole the other."

"I mean the *picture*, Brandon. This is completely illegal!"

He shrugs, plucking the phone from my hand and stuffing it into his pocket. "It doesn't matter. I didn't break any laws. What *does* matter is that you want this to stay buried, and the only reason it hasn't been sent out to everyone already is because I need it for leverage."

"You mean blackmail."

"I mean you're going to do whatever the fuck I want, and I won't make sure everyone and their grandmother has seen this picture."

I've always hated Brandon. From the very first moment I saw him grabbing Lily, to when he forced himself on me, to when he spread rumors about us sleeping together, to what he did to Gia, to breaking into my house and ransacking my room, I've only grown to loathe him more and more as he proves over and over what a shitty person he is. And right now, I'm reminded once again that Brandon has absolutely no redeemable qualities.

“How do I know you’re not going to send it out to everyone anyway?”

“Do you even understand how *leverage* works? If I send it out, you won’t do what I want.”

Brandon is one of the least trustworthy people I know. Even if I do whatever he wants, he’s going to send it out anyway. Everyone will know my past, and then I can kiss my dream of being a normal teenager and getting into college goodbye. *Gia* can kiss that dream goodbye.

Not only will this small town hate me, but the internet is a thing, and *everyone* will know. It’ll get back to Florence, and she’ll find a way to make this about her. Maybe she’ll go through with that documentary without me if there’s enough press coverage. *My life with my daughter, the killer!*

And if that happens, I can’t protect Gia if people start digging.

I can’t give in to Brandon. If I let him see how much I don’t want that picture to circulate, how everything would crumble around me if people knew about what happened, he wouldn’t hesitate to continue asking for more and more ludicrous things that I don’t want to do.

I’d be indebted to him forever, stuck doing his bidding while always fearing he’ll drop that grenade if I don’t fulfill one of his requests, and I just *know* I’m going to hate every last one of them.

So, putting to use every acting skill and technique picked up from Mom over the years, I compose myself, projecting an image of cool disinterest. With an arched eyebrow and an even tone that surprises even me, I bluff,

“So? Send it out. I don’t care.”

He snickers haughtily, not buying it for a second.

“You do care. You care so much I can see the panic in your eyes.” He stalks closer to me as he speaks, and my breath stalls. “You think you’re a social pariah now? Wait until

everyone finds out you killed a dude. And maybe I'll tell everyone you attacked me at the hotel too."

I open my mouth to interject, but Brandon cuts me off. "I know what you're going to say, and no, it doesn't matter if all the witness statements discredit me. It's not going to the police to be fact-checked; it's sitting right here to feed the rumor mill. And you know as well as I do what happens once the school gets some juicy gossip.

In fact, maybe Officer Liu won't be the only person who thinks you had something to do with Lily's disappearance. You *did* come to town right before she disappeared, you *are* her neighbor, and you *have* killed before. All it would take is a couple of good whispers and this picture circulating, and you'll *always* be known as the girl who killed Lily, even if you're innocent. Five, ten, thirty years from now, people will look in their yearbook, point at your picture, and say, 'Siena Amato; that's the girl who killed my classmate Lily Liu and got away with it.'"

"You bastard," I hiss as his words replay in my mind, competing for the thing I feel most outraged by.

Everything he said pisses me off, not only because of what he said but because he's *right*. Once people have proof of what happened with Stan, it doesn't matter that it was self-defense, doesn't matter that I was acquitted. It's all they'll talk about and all I'll be known for. And once people start whispering about my connection with Lily, it's game over. It doesn't matter if people have all the facts or not. I'll be labeled a murderer for the rest of my life. It won't end after graduation; it'll follow me forever. People will post on social media, on celebrity or conspiracy forums. If a college searches my name, all of it will come up. If a job interviewer does, they'll know everything.

But how dare Brandon accuse *me* of doing something to Lily when I'm so positive *he's* the one who's involved somehow? And why did he say *killed* Lily? There's no body; she could still be out there somewhere! But he's so sure that

she's dead. He knows something; he must have been involved somehow to say that so confidently.

And not only that, but he brought up Officer Liu.

How does he know Officer Liu? How does he know Officer Liu is convinced I had something to do with his daughter's disappearance? Brandon said it so casually too, like he didn't even realize he'd mentioned his name. Is Officer Liu the one who gave Brandon that picture of my file? Officer Liu couldn't have been the one to take the photo—I was no one to him before I moved here—but he did tell me once he had connections with the LAPD.

Is it possible he talked to the right people and somehow found the person who took this picture? And then he gave it to Brandon? But why?

“Maybe, but at least I'm not a thief or a killer,”

Brandon spits, his voice laced with venom as he gives a disbelieving laugh. “And you thought *you* were too good for *me*, turning me down after teasing me for weeks.

You're nothing but a murderous *whore*.”

It takes everything in me not to knee Brandon in the balls right now, and that's only because there's some part of my brain telling me that will only make things worse.

But my heart rages in my chest, and I try and fail to do Anusha's breathing techniques to calm down enough to speak.

“What do you want from me, Brandon?” I manage to spit out.

“I've been telling you what I want from you this whole time. Fuck, you're a terrible listener.” He crouches down to get directly in my face. “I want my phone—the one you stole from me. If you don't give it back to me before Monday, everyone will know the truth about you, about who you *really* are.”

No one knows who I *really* am, not even Brandon.

Through clenched teeth, I force out, “Even if I wanted to, I can’t. I don’t have your phone.” He took it when he broke in! *He* has it! But he’s so adamant he doesn’t.

Wasn’t it him who broke in? I’m so certain it was; even the cinnamon gum he’s chewing right now smells just like it did last Wednesday in my room. So, if it was him, maybe he didn’t find what he was looking for? The phone wasn’t in my stuff when I cleaned up the mess, I’m sure of it.

Brandon’s eyes narrow. He’s so close to me I could count the freckles on his nose or the flecks of dark brown in his eyes. “Well, I’ve just given you all the motivation you need to find it, then.”

Even if I wanted to give it to Brandon to avoid the picture being passed around—if he even keeps his end of the bargain—I certainly can’t anymore. He wants his phone badly enough to break into my room to find it and to collect blackmail on me. What’s on it? What doesn’t he want people to find out? It must be something about Lily—what else could be so bad he’d go to these lengths?

I bet there’s evidence on there, and I need to see it. Now all I need is to find his phone, and if it’s not with him, I have an idea where I can find it.

“I can’t find something I don’t have,” I tell him, still holding my ground.

“I believe in you. Or rather, I believe in you not wanting the entire community to hate your guts and suspect you did something to Lily. Do you think they’ll throw things at you when you walk by? Or maybe they’ll even run you out of town. That would be fun.”

There are so many curse words I want to call him, but I don’t want him to know how much he’s affecting me, so instead I continue with the breathing techniques and say nothing.

When it’s clear he’s not going to get the reaction he wants, he pulls back. “You have until Sunday night,” he repeats,

heading to the door. He kicks my backpack out of the way and says, "I'll be in touch this weekend. If I don't hear from you, it's going live Monday morning before class starts, and your life is over."

With a final disgusted sneer, he whips open the door and exits the classroom, leaving me standing there with my blood boiling in my veins, clenched fists, and a tension in my body that makes me feel like I'm practically vibrating.

Brandon wants me to find the phone? Fine, I'll find the phone, but not to give it back to him.

He's bluffing about sending out the photo. He said it himself; he won't send it out because then he'll have no leverage. And maybe in the meantime, before he gets pissed enough to do it, I'll play the part. Maybe I'll text him Sunday that I'm trying to find the phone, but I need more time. I might even have to swallow my pride and disgust and beg him to give me more time, stroke his ego enough to get him to agree. And all the while I *will* have his phone; I'll have it unlocked, and I'll discover why he's going to all this effort. By the time he realizes he's been played and should've sent out his leverage, I'll have already taken him down.

Oh, I'm finding the phone, Brandon, and I'm finding what you're hiding.

THIRTEEN

Gia's home from school before me, so I greet Zia Stella in the kitchen where she's preparing dinner, then waste no time knocking on Gia's bedroom door as a warning before waltzing in. She's on her stomach on the bed with her feet kicking in the air behind her, scrolling on her phone with her oversized headphones on.

"Gia!" I call out, but my voice is drowned out by the thumping beats of the headphones that cover her ears. I lean closer and tap on them. She jerks back, eyes wide, and yanks them off.

"Dammit, Siena! You scared me!" she grumbles, tossing the headphones aside.

"I'm sorry, I was trying to get your attention."

She presses a button on her phone, and the faint music droning from the headphones stops. "What's up?"

"Why does your face look like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like ... I don't know." She makes a circular gesture at my face with her hand. "That. Like you're on the brink of having a complete meltdown."

I don't know what face I'm making to give that impression, but I try to school my features appropriately.

People keep telling me I'm making faces, but I don't know what they're seeing.

"I'm not on the brink of having a complete meltdown." I just feel like everyone's always telling me what to do, and I'm starting to crumble under the pressure a bit because everything keeps spinning out of my control, but I'm not having a complete meltdown.

She frowns, unconvinced. “Now that I think of it, you’ve looked like that for a while now. Are you okay?”

Maybe you should go back to talking to Anusha.”

My stomach twists at the mention of Anusha’s name, and I shake my head. “Anusha was court-appointed until a few weeks after the move when I got settled in King City. I’m settled.”

She regards me skeptically but doesn’t push the issue.

“If you say so. What do you want?”

Right, the reason I came before she sidetracked me.

There’s no point beating around the bush, so I ask, “Did you take Brandon’s phone from my room?”

Her face blanches. “What?”

“Brandon’s phone. The one I stole from him at the motel party.”

She continues staring at me like I’m speaking gibberish, and I take an impatient breath.

“I thought it was stolen when my room was ransacked, but Brandon’s the one who did that, and he cornered me today demanding his phone, so he must not have found it when he broke in.”

“How can you be sure it was Brandon who broke in?” she asks, her expression guarded. “You said you didn’t see his face.”

Now I know what she means when she says something’s wrong with my face, because I see clear as day from her face that she’s hiding something from me. Maybe it’s a sister thing, that she can see something’s wrong with me and vice versa. Or maybe it’s just because we know each other so well or have been through so many shitty things together we know what the other is thinking from a facial expression, but right now, I know my hunch is right. She has the phone.

“I know it was Brandon, Gia. He doesn’t have the phone, and it was in my room before he broke in. If he had it, he wouldn’t be blackmailing me to give it back to him. So where is it?”

Her eyes widen in alarm, and she jumps up from the bed. “Blackmail? How is he blackmailing you?”

Shit. The word slipped out without me realizing. I don’t want to alarm her, but I need her to take this seriously.

Reluctantly, I admit, “Brandon knows why I was arrested in LA. He has proof, I’ve seen it, and he’s going to share it with the school if I don’t give him the phone.”

Her face twists with panic as she sorts through what that would mean. “He’s going to tell everyone? Siena, we have to give him the phone!”

I have no intention of giving him the phone. “Do you have it?”

Rushing to her dresser, she admits, “Yes, I have it. You know I do.”

I knew she was snooping through my room! I should’ve realized sooner that she found it, but this is good. This means Brandon really doesn’t have it, and I can find out what he’s hiding. “Why do you have it? Why were you looking for it in my room?”

Gia yanks open her middle dresser drawer and sifts through the clothes. “I wasn’t looking for it. I didn’t know you had it. I found it by accident and recognized it when I was snooping through your things to see if I could find another note from Mom.”

“Gia ...” I start.

“Don’t *Gia* me. Just because you decided we’re better off without Mom doesn’t mean I feel the same way.”

“I haven’t heard from Mom since the last time.” She did end up texting me a few of that director Lincoln’s ideas, which I ignored, but Gia doesn’t need to know that.

“She doesn’t care about us, Gia.”

“So you say.”

“She doesn’t! I don’t know what gives you the impression that she does. She hasn’t tried to contact you at all.”

Gia huffs, turning to face me with a small cloth makeup bag in her hand. “I don’t want to talk about Mom right now. We need to handle this thing with Brandon first. Are you going to give it to him now? Are you meeting up with him?”

“No, I’m going to work. Isla offered to come pick me up before our shift starts since Jason is at work. She’ll be here soon.”

Her brows knit together with a puzzled frown. “What do you mean? Why aren’t you making sure he has the phone right away? He can’t tell everyone, Siena! I’m finally getting somewhere with my social life. I’m *popular*, I’m on teams, I’m invited to *everything*. People love me! What do you think will happen when everyone starts talking about how my sister killed a man? You know what happens with rumors here; they can destroy you. Three weeks ago, a rumor started that Theodore Hartwell sucks his thumb at night, and now not a single person will talk to him.

He eats alone in the corner of the cafeteria, and people *still* whisper about him as he walks by, all over *sucking his thumb*. What’s going to happen to us once people find out? That’s way better gossip than sucking your thumb!

I’m not going to sit in the corner and eat lunch with Thumb-sucker Theodore for three years! And as awful as that is, it would still be the *least* of my problems!”

I know how she feels, and I know people finding out is her worst fear—right after people finding out *she* was the one who actually killed Stan. Gia needs to feel accepted and to fit in, and she can’t do that once the secret is out and we become social pariahs. But lying to her is what caused our fights in the past, so I say, “I’m not giving it to him, Gia. Is that it?”

I gesture at the bag she has in her hand, and she clutches it closer against her chest protectively.

“Why the hell not?” she demands. “You said he has proof. It won’t just be some stupid thing he says that people don’t pay attention to. They’ll believe him and harass us. I don’t want the negative attention, Siena. We have to give it to him.”

“Even if we *do* give it to him, we have no way of ensuring he won’t still send out the picture, and we know him, he’s an ass, he’s going to send it out anyway.”

“But we don’t know that for sure!”

“True,” I concede, carefully stepping closer to Gia since she looks like a baby deer ready to bolt. “But we *do* know that he wants the phone badly enough to break into my room, trash it, and blackmail me. Something really awful must be on it. We can find out what it is and take him down.”

“But we can’t even unlock it! I tried!” She frantically shakes her head. “We’re better off taking our chances and giving it back to him.”

“Give me the phone, Gia,” I demand, holding my hand out.

“No. I’ll give it to him myself.”

“Don’t go anywhere near him.”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” She turns her back to me, but I reach around her to try to snatch the bag away.

“Give it to me, Gia!”

“No! You’re not making the right choice!” She continues trying to squirm away, and even though I’ve got a few inches on her and a bigger frame, she puts up a good fight to keep the bag away.

“This is our best chance to figure out what he’s hiding!”

He definitely had something to do with Lily, and this is our proof! If you give it to him, he’s going to tell everyone anyway!” I finally get my hands on the bag, and now we’re

both gripping it, wrestling for possession. I get an elbow to the ribs and she gets a hip check, but neither one of us relents.

“I don’t care!” she exclaims, grunting as she tries and fails to rip the bag out of my grip. “Everyone finding out that you killed Stan is one of my worst fears! That gets people talking, and it’s one step closer to everyone discovering that *I’m* the one who killed Stan and made you take the fall for it!”

“Wait, what?” comes a shocked voice.

Gia and I freeze, our limbs tangled together and bodies bent in awkward positions. We drop the bag we were fighting over and straighten up, exchanging panicked glances.

Maybe she just walked in; maybe she didn’t hear anything.

“Did Gia just say *she* killed Stan Roven and made Siena take the fall?”

Fuck.

FOURTEEN

Gia hasn't moved; she's still staring at me with that horrified deer-in-headlights look, and her desperation, her need for me to help, is what finally gets me moving.

I turn to face Zia Stella, who's standing in the doorway with her hand over her heart like it needs the extra support.

"Gia didn't mean that," I say, grasping at any semi-plausible lie. "She's playing the *what if* game and being a bit too dramatic."

Gia nods, but her face isn't selling the story.

"No, Siena. No more lies. I know what I heard,"

Zia Stella insists, turning to Gia. It takes an incredible amount of effort to not step in front of her.

"Gia, tell me the truth right now," Zia Stella demands, using her stern, authoritative voice. "Were you the one who killed Stan?"

Gia's lip wobbles, and I feel helpless, so fucking helpless. Everything I've done, everything I've worked for to protect Gia, comes crumbling down with a single hesitant nod.

Zia Stella blows out a breath, putting her hand to her forehead as she tries to process everything this means, what it implies. "*Fuck.*"

"It's not her fault," I cut in, my brain racing to figure out how to make this all better. "Nothing has to change.

No one has to know—"

"That's *enough, Siena!*" Zia Stella snaps, and I take a step back, stunned. We've never heard Zia Stella swear before, or yell at us, and here she is doing both only seconds apart. "Gia, it was *you* who killed Stan, and you let Siena take the fall for it? You let her remain locked away for all that time and never

once thought about coming clean? You both *lied* to authorities. Tampered with a murder investigation. Committed *perjury*.”

Zia Stella’s expression changes from shock to horror as she realizes the gravity of the situation. Her phone rings, but she makes no move to answer it.

This is the worst-case scenario. It was supposed to be over, and Gia and I would’ve taken this secret to our graves. But now our carefully constructed world is crumbling, and I don’t know how to stop it, how to keep Gia safe, how to keep the world from finding out the truth.

Tears stream down Gia’s face. “I didn’t mean to, Zia Stella.” She grabs Zia Stella’s arm, but our aunt rips it away from her, like she can’t stand being touched by her. The rejection hits Gia hard, and she wraps her arms around herself to clutch at her sides like she’s trying to hold herself upright.

Everything coming out now is *much worse* than if it had come out right away. It was all settled and on its way to being pushed behind us. I was the murderer, and Gia was my innocent little sister. But now how will the narrative be spun? Me a liar and Gia a manipulative murderer?

Will another investigation be opened? Will we be taken away and separated? Will we face another trial? Will we be charged?

“You both have been *lying* to me,” Zia Stella accuses, betrayed eyes flicking back and forth between the two of us. “Is there anything else? What other secrets are you keeping? And not little secrets like stealing liquor from your father or staying out late partying, which ... *shit*.”

She rubs her hands over both her temples hard, like her brain hurts from connecting this new revelation with our behavior since coming to live in King City.

Zia Stella’s phone rings again, the only sound in the room other than my strained breathing and Gia’s heart-broken snuffles.

“Nothing has to change,” I try again, but Zia Stella’s sharp eyes cut to me.

“*Everything* has to change.”

Gia gasps and sends me a pleading look that grabs me by the throat and squeezes. Everything is crumbling around us, and there’s absolutely nothing, no sheer force of will, no lie or plea, that I can use to hold the pieces up and keep them off us.

Zia Stella’s phone rings for the third time in a row, and she yanks it out of her back pocket and clicks Accept without looking away from us.

“*What?*” she yells into the phone, startling both me and Gia. In a more composed tone, she says, “Okay, yes, fine, I’ll be right there.”

She stuffs the phone back in her pocket and levels us both with a hard gaze. “This conversation is not over.

There’s a life-or-death emergency at work, and that’s the *only* reason we’re not dealing with this right now. When I get back, the three of us are sitting down and having a real conversation about *everything* that’s going on. What happened, what you did, the implications, and where to go from here. You’re both undeniably grounded and under strict orders not to leave the house until I get back.”

I don’t know how to address any of that. I have no idea what to say to make it better or even where to start.

We’re in very deep shit, and this time there’s nothing I can do to fix it despite Gia looking at me like I can. I can’t take back our argument or Zia Stella overhearing just as much as I can’t take back what happened with Stan in the first place.

“I have work,” I settle on saying, because it’s the easiest thing to address, even though I have no desire to go, not when Zia Stella is freaking out and Gia’s future is at risk.

“I don’t care,” she seethes. “There are consequences to everything, girls, and when I get back, it’s time to deal with yours.”

“But—”

Zia Stella’s phone rings again, and instead of answering me, she answers the call. “*I know, I’m coming!*”

She doesn’t wait for the person to speak before she hangs up and storms to the door. Gia and I are still standing in the same spot, hearts pounding so hard and loud I’d be surprised if the neighbors across the street didn’t hear them.

Zia Stella’s parting words are a bitter shot. “Maybe Dario was right. You really *are* Florence’s daughters.”

And then she’s gone, and Gia lets out a sob, wiping her face with her sleeve. My knees give out, and I collapse onto the bed, as if Zia Stella’s outrage was the only thing keeping me standing.

“We are so fucked,” Gia whispers. “*I’m* so fucked. I’m so fucked it makes all those other times I thought I was fucked look like a fucking tea party.”

No one was ever supposed to find out about this, and the fact that it was Zia Stella, the only adult in our lives who was sort of cool and who I thought kind of cared about us, hurts ten times worse. I never would’ve expected her to blow up like that; it’s so out of character.

“She was so pissed. Do you think she’ll turn me in?

Kick us out?” Gia asks, dropping into the desk chair and putting her feet up on the seat to wrap her arms around her knees, hugging them close. “God, I hope she only kicks us out.”

Not ideal, but preferable to any alternative.

“She was blindsided by something she could never have seen coming in a million years, so she was angry,” I start, my brain turning and processing as I speak. “She’ll have time to calm down and go back to being her normal, levelheaded self. I can reason with her, convince her nothing has to change and no one else has to be told.” I start believing the words as I say them. I know she’ll realize admitting this secret to others will

accomplish absolutely nothing. And even if she sends us to military camp or kicks us out, I won't care as long as Gia is safe.

"I'm not strong like you, Siena," Gia says into her knees. "I can't do it; I can't go through everything you did. I couldn't even deal with Brandon telling the school about *you* doing it; What's going to happen when *everyone* knows it was *me*?"

Hearing her words, seeing her small body curl in on itself and blindly accept her feebleness, makes me feel helpless and want to take care of everything, yes—but another, surprising emotion comes to the surface first: anger.

I stand, marching over to my little sister and pushing her shoulder to force her out of her curled position. "Stop saying you're not strong, Gia. You *are* strong, and you *will* be strong, no matter what happens after this."

She's not crying, but her eyes are puffy and worried, and her cheeks are flushed. "You don't know that. You don't know what's going to happen."

"It doesn't matter what's going to happen. We are going to get through it; *you* are going to get through it."

If I could protect her by taking the blame and the burden, I would in a heartbeat, but that might not be possible this time, and Gia's going to have to keep her head high through it all.

Without me.

"I wish Mom was here."

That only makes me angrier, and I can't keep the spite from my voice as I reply, "Mom is at her very important boyfriend Jim Langley's house schmoozing her way to fame at some stupid networking party and couldn't give two fucks about us and what's going on, Gia."

"She's still our mom. You don't know that she doesn't care."

Oh, she cares, all right; she cares about using us to get famous with no regard to how we feel or how she'd drag us

through the mud to do it. But other than that? She couldn't care less.

"Yes, I do know she doesn't care, Gia, and deep down you know it too."

Gia jumps up from her chair. "But she was here! She asked to see you! Zia Stella is going to turn me in, but I couldn't do it then and I can't do it now. You mentioned Mom's boyfriend's house is in Malibu, and a Greyhound from the bus stop in town goes right there, so we can be there in like a day! I bet if I just saw Mom, she'd take me in, she'd understand, she'd know what to do."

A burning heat scorches my insides as my blood boils.

I don't want to crush Gia's view of Florence, but I also don't want her to hold on to false hope and think Mom will swoop in to save the day. She's too old and knows better than to have fantasies that make Florence out to be something she's not, something she'll *never* be.

"The only thing Mom understands is how to use people to get what she wants. The sooner you accept that, the better."

Gia frowns down at her feet but doesn't argue, and I let it go. We have bigger things to worry about than Mom right now.

My phone vibrates. It's Isla saying she's outside.

"Shit."

I text her back quickly and grab the bag Gia and I were wrestling over from the floor. Unzipping it reveals Brandon's phone, still in its obnoxious phone case emblazoned with the gold letter *B*, and I bring it with me to my room.

"Where are you going?" Gia asks, trailing after me.

"My ride is here."

"You're really going to work? Can't you stay so we can sort this out? I don't know what to do!"

After throwing Brandon's phone in my desk drawer, I grab my purse from where it hangs on my closet door handle and almost bump into Gia when I turn.

"No, I'm not going to work." There's no way I can walk around and smile and make small talk and *of course I can get you more extra salsa for the fifth time in three minutes* when everything is falling apart.

"Then where are you going?" she asks, staying on my heels as I walk through the hall and down the stairs.

My phone beeps again, but it's not Isla asking what's taking so long—it's my phone telling me my battery is about to die. I throw it into my purse to worry about later.

"I'm just going to run in to work and pick up my check for the last two weeks and ask for this week's check now. I'll only be an hour, max. Then I'll be back, and we can make a game plan."

"But why? What do you need the money for?"

"Just in case," I say, slipping on my shoes and pulling on my jacket. I'm not sure if this is the right thing to do, but I need to do *something* other than sit here and feel useless, and at least this way I'm taking some type of action and feeling like I'm in control, something that's slipping from me more and more every day.

Her eyes widen. "In case what?"

I don't want to run through the possible scenarios with her out loud and stress us both out more, so instead I say, "I don't know, Gia. In case."

She worries her lip, and I have to force myself to calm my own inner panic and look at her. "Why don't you start on your homework to keep your mind occupied? I'll be back before you even know it. We'll figure it out. We're in this together, always, okay?"

Without looking at me, she mumbles, "I'm always making your life harder. I can never do anything right."

There's a deep ache in my chest at her words, and I want to wrap her up in my arms and convince her that neither of the things she just said is true. But my phone vibrates in my purse, and this time it's probably Isla wondering what's taking me so long.

I place both hands on Gia's shoulders. "That's not true, Gia. We're stressed, and there's a lot of tension right now."

Gia says nothing, and despite how intensely we were arguing before Zia Stella walked in, I pull her into a hug.

She's stiff in my arms.

"I'll be back soon."

And then I leave.

Maybe I shouldn't be leaving her alone to stress with everything that's going on, but both of us sitting around twiddling our thumbs playing the *what if* game isn't going to solve anything. Plus, if we need to pack up and leave at a moment's notice because we're getting shipped off somewhere, I'd rather have as much money in my checking account as possible.

FIFTEEN

My manager is not thrilled to hear I'm not staying for my shift and is even less thrilled to break protocol and give me my paycheck a week early. She wasn't going to, but I think she can see the desperation in my eyes even though I try to play it cool, because she begrudgingly relents only if I agree to work the shift until at least 8:00 p.m.

I send Gia a quick text to let her know I'll be later than expected and suffer through the four-hour shift. At eight thirty, I finally get my checks and clock out.

Obviously, I can't ask Isla for a ride home when she's in the middle of her shift, so I use the last of my phone's battery power before it completely dies to order an Uber and memorize the license plate. I could've walked, but for some reason I have an anxious feeling in my gut that something is wrong—at least, *more* wrong than everything already is—and that I should get back to Gia as soon as possible.

That feeling intensifies when we pull up to the house and see the wreckage.

I don't even wait for the Uber driver to completely stop the car, hopping out and sprinting to the garage.

"*Gia!*" I yell as frantic panic shreds my insides. Dario's Mercedes, which was parked on the driveway when I left, is *in* the garage. "In" meaning it was *driven through one of the garage doors*. Smoke is in the air with debris everywhere, and it smells like dust and burnt metal. The garage door itself is folded around the car, pinned against the cement back of the garage by the ruined front end of the car, and I rush through the space where it used to be to check the car.

I can't see the driver's side since the garage panel is wrapped around it, and I frantically claw at it to move it. My head is spinning, and adrenaline races through me, sending my pulse into overdrive.

“Gia!” I yell again. Is she in there? Is she hurt? How long has she been here?

Panicked, I yank the warped steel with more power than necessary, and it releases, smashing me in the face with a sharp, sudden force that knocks the air out of me.

“Ow, *fuck!*” Intense pain radiates through my face, like I’ve been punched square in the nose, and for a moment I fear I’ve broken it. But I push the pain aside like I do the steel and peer through the new dust in the air for my sister.

“Gia?”

The driver’s seat is empty, and I force the car door open. It groans as it pushes against the garage door, but I duck in, kneeling on glass, and check every last inch of the car. It’s empty. The windshield is shattered, and the front of the car is crumbled and dented. The airbags are out and deflated, and I just now realize that the car isn’t running.

Gia’s not here.

I’m filled with a relief so intense it almost knocks me over. But if she’s not here, where is she? Is she okay? What if she had to be rushed to the hospital?

I leave the car exactly how it is and run to the front door, unlocking it with shaking fingers, and push it open.

The house is dark and filled with a deathly kind of stillness that has my defenses instantly rising.

Without kicking off my shoes, I dash up the stairs, calling her name even though a logical part of me knows it’s pointless. “*Gia!* Are you here?” Throwing open her bedroom door, I flip on the light switch, and my heart drops.

A tornado has hit the room, completely trashing it.

It almost looks like mine did when Brandon destroyed it, except less damaged. Drawers are open, clothes are all over the place, and there’s no petite teenage girl. It looks like someone came through and made a mad dash trying to find

something valuable through all of Gia's things, discarding the rest anywhere.

Has Brandon come back? No, something seems off, and the chaos is more organized than it would be if it were him.

I stalk through her room to her desk while praying that this doesn't mean what I think it does. Her laptop and charger are gone, and so are most of the pictures that were pinned to the little corkboard above the desk.

Panicked, I whip open her closet door, frantically shoving clothes and books and shoes aside until I find what I'm looking for, or rather *don't* find what I'm looking for.

Her suitcase is gone.

"Shit!"

She can't have gotten far; I wasn't gone too long.

I rush back downstairs and into the garage, lunging for my purse that I've abandoned on the driveway. Back inside, I turn it over to dump everything out until I find my phone. It's completely dead and won't turn on.

Cursing out loud again, I take the stairs two at a time, running into my room and jabbing the charging cord into my phone, willing it to hurry up and turn on.

She wouldn't have taken a whole suitcase or her laptop if she was just going to Brianna's. I grab my own laptop from my desk, because I have a hunch about where she's going, when I see the sticky note stuck to the wall in front of my desk. My heart stops as I read the note in Gia's sloppy scrawl.

I screwed up, Siena. By now you'll have seen the car. I couldn't wait around for Zia Stella to decide what to do, so I was going to borrow Dario's car. I panicked, the stick shift behind the steering wheel is up and down, and I didn't know which was reverse, and now I really can't stay here anymore—he'll kill me. I'm okay. The car clearly isn't, though. A bus from the terminal leaves at 9:00 for LA. I'll tell Mom everything, and she'll know what to do, I know she will. Don't be mad.

I am mad. But more than that, I'm worried for a whole slew of reasons.

Not only did she essentially run away with about fifteen dollars to her name to go to a place she's never been before and has no idea how to find, but my little sister, so tiny she could easily pass for twelve without makeup on, is sitting alone at a probably deserted outdoor bus station in a sketchy part of town. And on top of that, she's going to tell our mother—who asked me to do a tell-all documentary about Stan to help her get more famous—what happened and hope she'll protect her. If Florence knows the truth, she's not going to help keep it a secret like Gia's hoping she will. Florence won't care about what's *best* for her daughter, only how she can exploit it for her own benefit.

If Florence was giddy about me having a story about Stan, I can't even imagine the stars and dollar signs she'll see when she learns it was a cover-up, and the real story is much more convoluted and sellable from a dramatic standpoint than she originally thought. She's going to drag Gia through the mud, then throw her out the second she stops being useful.

It's only a matter of time before I spiral into a full panic, and I only notice belatedly that I'm gnawing on my fingernails. The room spins, and my breathing sounds harsh in my ears. I need to fix this, but I don't know how.

I don't even know if Gia is safe at that fucking bus station all by herself, looking innocent and vulnerable and scared.

I need to get to her before she sets foot on the bus, need to stop her before she does something she'll regret forever.

I frantically tap my phone screen, and thankfully it's charged enough to turn on.

I call Gia, but it goes straight to voicemail. Her phone must be off. I check her location on the *Find My Friends* app, and it was last updated an hour ago and shows she's still at home. An hour ago? What time is it?

It's nine thirty.

All the tumultuous emotions warring inside me drain away as I slump against the desk. Everything, even the pulsing in my face, seems numb.

I'm too late. She's on the bus. I've missed my chance, and now Gia's going to get hurt.

Sinking onto my bed, I stare at my phone, not really seeing it, as I do what I always do when I'm in a shit situation and have no one to turn to; I do the only thing that seems right.

I call Jason.

SIXTEEN

I stand on the driveway, chewing my thumbnail as the twin brothers assess the wreck.

“Well,” Jackson starts, toeing a chunk of what I think is paneling from the garage door, “I don’t think we can hide this with just a fresh coat of paint.”

As if on reflex, Jason smacks Jackson’s arm, and the latter pouts and rubs the spot. “What? It’s true!”

“Thank you for the astute observation, Jackson,”

Jason says, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he moves to the front end of the car and pushes at the garage door. “So glad I brought you here for your expertise.”

“I’m also incredibly charming and good-looking,”

Jackson adds, helping Jason move the remains of the garage door. “Can’t forget that.”

The garage door is carefully set on the floor beside the car. “How can I when you’re so quick to remind me all the time?” Jason quips, not taking his eyes off the car.

“How bad is it?” I ask, not moving from my spot on the driveway. I’ve now gone through all the nails on my right hand, and they feel sore. But compared to my face—which thankfully isn’t broken—and the anxiety sitting tight in my chest, my nails are a distant discomfort.

“Well, the good news is she didn’t do any damage to the wall or the house itself,” Jason says, and that helps me feel just a minuscule amount better.

I stand back with Jackson as Jason starts the car and reverses onto the driveway, then opens the hood and pokes around inside. Jackson and I don’t pretend to know what he’s looking at, or for, so we stand together and wait for the verdict.

“Have you heard anything from Gia?” Jackson asks.

The phone I’m clutching in my hand, now holding a low charge, is as silent as ever.

“No. And when I called again five minutes ago, it went straight to voicemail.”

Jackson frowns, and he must know I’m not in the right frame of mind because he doesn’t crack a joke to lighten the mood. “Try again in another five minutes.”

Jason closes the hood and sticks his head in the car to shut it off. “More good news,” he announces, wiping his hands on a rag as he joins us. “The engine seems completely fine, but when you bring it in, they’ll run diagnostics to see for sure.”

The knot in my chest loosens by another minuscule amount, but compared to the tension held in my body, it’s barely noticeable.

“And the bad news?”

Jason grimaces. He knows how tumultuous our relationship with Dario is, knows this will cause him to lose his shit, but he’s still staying calm and steady like he always does, still being my rock.

“You’re going to need major front body work, a new bumper, and a new windshield.”

“And a new garage door,” Jackson adds, as if he can’t stop himself.

Jason glares at him. “Again, your keen observations are much appreciated, Jackson.”

I knew it wouldn’t be good. I could tell from all the debris and the crumpled look.

If we had a regular relationship with our father, he’d be pissed, yeah, but maybe I wouldn’t be feeling like I’m suffocating under the weight of my anxiety. Maybe if our relationship was normal, I’d be able to call him, explain what

happened, get him to tell Gia she's not in trouble and to come back home. But that would never happen.

Jason's eyes narrow at my mouth, and I rip my fingers from them.

"How much is that going to cost?" I ask.

Jason mulls it over. He was so worried when I called and told him what had happened. He didn't even get to shower after work since I called him when Jackson was just picking him up from his shift, and they came straight here.

Jason did, however, rush to me before he even glanced at the mess in the garage, which is really hard to ignore. He held my face gently in his hands and tilted it every which way, assessing the bruising that was already blooming on my pale skin. He asked me if I was okay and how I was feeling, and his gentleness and worry over my well-being, something no one has ever showed and I'm not used to, brought tears to my eyes, which I then had to assure Jason had nothing to do with my pain level, which made me tear up more.

"I'm not sure," Jason says, answering my question. "If you guys bring it into my shop, I'd convince my boss to only charge for parts at cost since I'd work on it. Can't tell you what that would be off the top of my head. And as for the garage door, I have no idea. We'd have to call a few places and get a couple quotes."

I blow out a breath. Here he is on a Friday at ten thirty at night dealing with my sister's fuckup when he's probably tired from school and work, and he's even volunteering to fix the car for free.

"You don't have to work on the car for free," I tell him, but he sends me a look that makes me snap my mouth shut and leaves no room for argument.

"When does your dad come home from that work trip?" Jackson asks. "Maybe we can get this all cleaned up and fixed before he's back. He'll never have to know."

If I could pull off getting everything fixed and replaced before Dario comes back and hope he never notices, I would.

“Tomorrow morning,” I answer solemnly. “Plus, my aunt is watching us while he’s away, and she’ll be home from work in a few hours probably.”

I almost want to release a pitiful laugh. Not only did Zia Stella, the only adult who didn’t make me feel like a completely unwanted burden, learn the truth about Stan, but she’s going to come home from an emergency at work, where she probably saved someone’s life, to find her youngest niece ran away from home after driving her brother’s luxury car through his house. If she wasn’t already on the verge of losing it from the Stan revelation and our lies, she’s definitely going to have a full-on meltdown when she gets home now.

Jackson winces. “Shit.”

Shit indeed. At this point, there’s nothing I can do but resign myself to my fate. Dario’s going to lose it, and I wonder if he’ll consider letting Gia come back if I manage to convince her to come home once she answers my calls.

Probably not, and there’s no way I’m staying here without Gia. Maybe after Gia confesses to Florence, she’ll let me stay with her, as long as I’m useful to her and agree to whatever new part she’ll come up with for me in the revised documentary. I shudder at the thought. I’d rather beg Warren to let me pay whatever pitiful rent I can scrape up to stay in his guest house than agree to Florence’s exploitation.

Jason’s the first to fill the heavy silence. “Why don’t we try to clean up as much as we can to minimize the initial shock factor? Get the car in the shop, clean up the glass and debris, move the paneling. At least it won’t look *as* horrible when the adults see it.”

I appreciate what he’s doing for me, though I don’t think it will make any difference. But it’s a plan, and it keeps me focused on something other than worrying about Gia and our future. It’s something I can control.

“I’ll grab a broom,” Jackson says, going into the garage and sorting through the various pieces of gardening equipment on the other side.

Strong hands land on my shoulders, and I’m tugged into a warm, comforting hug, one I didn’t even know I needed. Jason’s arms wrap completely around me, enveloping me whole so I disappear in his protective embrace.

He smells like cedarwood and spice and *home*.

“It’ll be okay,” he says into my hair.

No, it won’t be, but it’s okay, because it’s out of my control.

There’s a clatter in the garage, then, “Ow! Fuck!”

Jason exhales slowly, as if praying for patience. “Let me go check on him.”

“I’m going to call Gia again,” I say, and he gives me one last comforting squeeze before letting go.

Her phone might still be off, or if it isn’t she might not answer for fear of a scolding, but I just want to know she’s okay. I don’t even know if she made it onto the bus or if she went somewhere else or if she changed her mind or if something happened and she’s lying in a ditch somewhere, and it’s the not knowing that makes me feel hopelessly out of control, makes the pressure in my chest more unrelenting.

I press Gia’s name and hold the phone to my ear, expecting to be sent to voicemail immediately like the last hundred times. But there’s a ring, and my heart stops for a moment.

She doesn’t answer, of course she doesn’t, but I leave a voicemail begging her to call me back, then immediately click the *Find My Friends* app.

Her phone is on, which means her location will be updated, which means I can see where she is and if she’s okay.

I refresh the app, staring at her name until her location pops up.

As of one minute ago, her location is ... the bus stop?

My stomach drops.

“Jason!” I yell, refreshing the app again as if it was mistaken and will change.

Things clang and rattle, and then Jason is in front of me like he teleported, tense and ready to eliminate any threat.

“What’s wrong?” His eyes scan my face and the dark road around us.

“Gia’s location says she’s still at the bus station. Her bus was supposed to leave over an hour ago—why would she still be there? Did something happen to her? Is she hurt? Does someone else have her phone?”

I should’ve asked Jason and Jackson to take me to the bus stations as soon as they got here instead of resigning myself to the fact that Gia was gone and dealing with the wreck first. Maybe that could’ve been the difference between something awful happening to her or not.

Jason snaps into action immediately. “All right, go lock up. I’ll grab Jackson’s keys, and we’ll go to the station to see what’s going on. Jackson will take care of everything here.”

I’m too busy running through all the worst-case scenarios to argue. Gia’s my little sister, and she’s always depended on me to protect her, and here I am, failing her.

She could be hurt or scared, and maybe she feels like she can’t tell me because she’s scared of my reaction, especially after everything we argued about today, and the wreck, and the way we’ve been disagreeing about Florence.

I lock the front door and run to where Jackson’s car is parked by the curb. Jason meets me there, keys in hand, rushing around to the driver’s side.

“Don’t worry, Siena,” Jackson calls from the driveway, broom and garbage bag in hand. “I’ll clean everything up and drive the car to the shop. You just worry about Gia.”

“Thanks, Jackson,” I reply, hopping into the front seat and buckling up as I try calling Gia again. No answer.

“We’ll be there before you know it,” Jason vows.

He starts the car, then makes good on his promise by breaking almost every speed limit on the way.

SEVENTEEN

Jason pulls up to a seedy part of town that reminds me of the area we lived in with Aunt Julie. Gia always complained about feeling unsafe there, like she couldn't walk two feet without being accosted or followed or feeling like she was being watched, so I'm sure she feels the exact same here right now.

The station is deserted, without a single other person or car anywhere, which adds to the creepy atmosphere. It's completely outdoors with no buildings or workers. There are designated signs for each bus, with a singular dull light barely highlighting them. The entire lot is dark and cold and eerie, and even with Jason, who I know would protect me with every last bone in his body, I still don't want to be here for a second longer than I have to.

Jason illegally parks the car right in the spot where the bus to LA would pull up, and I jump out, scanning the area for a little girl with a sparkly purple suitcase.

"Gia!" I yell, but I'm met with deathly silence and a cold wind in return. "Gia!"

Jason appears beside me, eyes roaming the empty lot.

"I don't get it," I say, refreshing the *Find My Friends* app again. "It says she's here and it was updated two minutes ago."

She couldn't have dropped her phone because it had to have been turned on for the location to update. So, she, or *someone* else, has the phone; it's not lying on the ground somewhere. But Jason and I are staring at an empty, barely lit lot.

The bus lot seems to stretch on forever, and a wave of dizziness hits me. I've been trying not to think about Lily, about how she's a pretty teenage girl who went missing in the middle of the night, but now that I'm here I can't stop my mind from drawing comparisons to Gia, from worrying that Gia could meet that same fate. The thought makes me want to throw up.

“Gia!” I yell again, my fingers shaking as they press her number on my phone. It rings once, then she, or someone, sends me to voicemail.

“Wait,” Jason says, putting his hand on my arm to steady me. “Do you hear that?”

We both freeze, ears straining.

My whisper breaks the heavy silence. “What am I listening for?”

“*Shh!*”

We move stealthily, our footsteps soft against the rough asphalt. I hold my breath, heart racing, as I let him lead me through the deserted lot. Jason clearly hears something, but the only sound I can hear is the distant hum of light traffic on the main street.

Jason suddenly stops at the curb before the grass and trees, and I’m about to shake him and ask what the hell we’re doing when I hear it. It’s faint, but I can make out the sound of muffled music, like when the person next to you is wearing headphones and the stifled beat from their speakers leaks through but you can’t make out what they’re listening to.

My heart thuds with a mixture of hope and anxiety.

We inch closer to the sound, through the grass, and when we round a crop of bushes, I almost fall to my knees in relief and burst out crying.

There, curled up against the trunk of an oak tree, scrolling through her phone while wearing almost obscenely large headphones, is my little sister, safe and sound.

“Gia!” I cry out, launching myself at her. She startles, letting out a surprised shriek as I tackle her to the ground.

We land on our sides on the grass with a soft thud, her headphones askew on her head, music still blaring as I pull her into a bone-crushing hug. I hold her tiny frame tightly, as if I can squeeze away all the fear and worry that consumed me.

“Siena?” She sounds almost out of breath, and her eyes are red-rimmed and swollen like she’s been crying.

We sit up, and Gia pulls her headphones completely off, leaving her hair sticking up in every direction. “What are you doing here?”

“What am *I* doing here?” I repeat. “What the hell are *you* doing here? You can’t just *run away*, Gia! Do you have any idea how worried I was? I saw the car and thought you were seriously hurt! And now you’re here alone at night? Anything could’ve happened to you! And then you go and turn off your phone and screen my calls? You could’ve *at least* let me know you were *alive*! You can’t keep pulling this irresponsible shit!”

Gia sniffs and crosses her arms against her chest, little dirt patches and grass sticking to the sleeves of her baggy sweater. Her voice is raw and timid when she says, “Sorry I can’t be perfect like you.”

Is that what she thinks this is about? Me versus her?

Yelling at her isn’t going to get us anywhere, so I try—and fail—not to sound angry when I say, “I’m not perfect, Gia, and I’m not asking you to be. But at least take a step back to think about the consequences of your actions for once.”

She frowns at her sparkly purple luggage, the wheels caked with mud from being dragged over here, and says nothing. She’s so stubborn, so hardheaded, but I know deep down she’s sensitive and vulnerable and just wants to be accepted. Her note begged me not to be mad, and I know there’s not a single part of her that enjoys facing my disappointment, so I force myself to dial it back several notches.

Softly, I confess, “I was worried about you, Gia.

You’re all I have, all I care about.”

She wipes an escaped tear and wraps her arms around her knees.

“I know you’re scared, but why did you think running away would solve anything? And what are you doing here?”

We're in the forest area behind one of the bus stops, where the dim light just barely filters in. You can't see us at all if you're standing in the lot. Even Jason, standing guard nearby, is swallowed up by the darkness. I stand up, brushing myself off.

Gia turns off her headphones and tucks them away in her backpack, blanketing us in silence. "It's creepy here," she finally answers. "I didn't want to wait out in the open.

I figured it was better to stay hidden."

"Why didn't you get on the bus?"

She mumbles her response, not meeting my gaze.

"I read the time wrong," she admits. "The bus leaves at 9:00 a.m., not 9:00 p.m."

Of course it does. Why didn't I stop to think that a bus leaving for LA from here probably wouldn't leave at night? I was clearly way too panicked to think *anything* through.

"So, you were going to sit here all night?!"

If she says yes to that answer I might start yelling again, so I try to covertly do Anusha's calming breathing techniques.

She stands and dusts herself off. "No," she says like I'm asking a stupid question. "The bus was taking forever, so I checked my phone and found out my mistake. I was trying to figure out what to do next when you showed up and scared the shit out of me."

I'll save the *don't wear headphones in creepy places so you can be completely aware of your surroundings* lecture for another time. Right now, I need to convince her to come back to Dario's and accept that running away to Florence is a bad idea. I could force her to get in the car, even carry her if I have to, but I can't lock her in her room and stand guard 24/7 to ensure she doesn't try to run away again. I have to reason with her, get her to decide to stay the hell away from Florence and come home on her own.

"And what did you decide?"

She shrugs. “I didn’t want to ask Bri if I could stay there because, you know ... Brandon lives there.” She shudders, and I don’t blame her. “Lindsey would’ve let me stay there, but she doesn’t drive, so she can’t come get me, and I used up all the money on my debit Ubering here.”

I take a deep breath, trying to be cautious in my approach. “Gia, you know you can’t go live with Mom, right?”

“I have to go somewhere. Zia Stella is going to tell Dario about Stan, and they’re going to see the car. I’m double fucked, Siena.”

“You don’t know that, Gia.”

“I *do* know that. They’ll punish me, and even if they don’t kick me out, it’s not going to be the same.” Gia looks so young, so vulnerable, when she says, “Zia Stella *liked* me, maybe even *loved* me. For the first time ever, an adult cared about me and treated me like family, and now she and Dario are going to look at me like they look at *you*.”

Her mouth snaps shut, and her eyes widen. She regrets it the second she says it, but it’s too late—the shot landed.

It’s a punch to the gut despite the painful reality of her words, and I struggle to keep the snide tone out of my voice as I ask, “So, what? You think Mom will magically start loving you now? Pretend like the last few years never happened and she didn’t abandon us?”

“She’s our mom! She’s the one person in the world who’s supposed to love us unconditionally!”

“Yeah? She loves us unconditionally? What makes you think that? The way she made our whole childhood revolve around her? The way she dumped us at her shitty sister’s house? The way she never reached out when I was arrested despite knowing what happened? The way she only pops back into our lives now, *years later*, when it’s to exploit us for her benefit? She doesn’t *care* about us, Gia, I don’t know how many different ways I have to say it before you open your eyes and see for yourself.”

“But she was here!” Gia exclaims, desperation creeping into her voice. “If she didn’t care, why was she here?”

Why can’t you just tell me? Why are you trying to hog Mom all to yourself? Why are you so convinced she hasn’t changed and doesn’t really want us in her life?”

All I wanted to do was protect Gia, but maybe sheltering her from the ugly truth is doing more harm than good. My words are bitter when I say, “Fine, you really want to know, Gia? Mom only came back because she’s trying to convince me to do a deep, exploitative, tell-all documentary about what happened with Stan. She has a connection with some director who promised this would be the comeback she needed and told her how he’d spin the documentary to focus on how she and I are the same kind of fucked-up. She didn’t once mention you, and when I tried bringing you up, she changed the subject back to making her famous. She didn’t ask about you, didn’t ask to see a picture of you, and had no interest in you as a person because she can’t currently exploit you to get famous.”

Even in the dim light, it’s clear that Gia’s face pales more and more with every harsh word out of my mouth.

Her voice is barely above a whisper as she struggles to speak. “A documentary . . . about Stan?”

“Yes, Gia. A documentary. Not only about Stan, but about *me*. A film where I’d be exposed to the world, stripped bare of every secret and every emotion that I’ve hidden for years. Where I would become a public spectacle, my story dissected and analyzed by *everyone*.

And when it’s over, there will be no escaping it. I’ll be in the public eye again—as if the first time wasn’t horrible enough—with every reporter and journalist hounding me for a soundbite and everyone judging me more than they already do. People already think they know me from what they’ve heard, from what they know about Mom, and how I’m so much like her. A documentary that explicitly draws parallels between me and her will be just what everyone needs to cement their opinions about me.

And all the while Florence will get her moment of glory and a new blooming career, and I'll be left to pick up the pieces of my shattered privacy. The documentary will be out there forever, and no one will ever forget about that night with Stan like we want them to."

Gia stares at me with wide eyes, processing all the information I've unloaded on her. She tries and fails to speak a few times before she finally stutters, "S-so ... if Mom knew the truth ... then I ... ?"

I don't sugarcoat it. "She's going to use it to cause the biggest scandal she can and get herself more attention. Mom's not going to keep your secret. *Everyone* will know the truth, Gia. You'll go through everything I went through but worse because we hid it the first time.

They'll think you're a liar *and* a manipulator as well as a killer."

She looks absolutely horrified by the thought, stumbling and leaning against the tree trunk like the realization is a physical blow.

Maybe I'm being too mean; maybe I shouldn't have laid it out so abruptly for her, but clearly sheltering Gia is only hurting her. Maybe Gia doesn't make the best decisions, but I can't hide things from her and expect her to act like she has all the pieces of the puzzle. If I'm really going away to college, Gia won't have me around to look after her. I'm going to have to trust her to make her own decisions, but I can't do that and also shelter her from the truth for her own good. The only person who will protect Gia like I would is *Gia*, and she needs *all* the facts to do that.

Gia stands from the tree, shaking her head. "Okay, but maybe ... maybe I don't have to tell her anything.

She must have changed since we last lived with her; she'll still take me in even if I don't tell her why. She's our mom, she loves me."

I pin her with a hard look.

“She’s our mom!” she repeats, as if trying to convince herself. “Of course she wants me there, even if she can’t use me to get famous.”

I thought the truth would hurt her, but unless she learns the hard way, she’s going to cling to these fantasies that idolize Mom, and that’s not reality.

With a defeated but firm tone, I finally say, “Then call her.”

Gia blinks in shock, and I even feel Jason turn to look at me briefly before resuming guard duty. But I’m so exhausted and over all of this. I’m tired of having to justify my actions and be the villain. If I have to shatter Gia’s illusions with a harsh dose of reality, then so be it.

She eyes me skeptically. “Call Mom?”

“Yeah, call her. Tell her you’re getting on a bus at nine o’clock tomorrow morning to come live with her. I’ll give you her number.”

Doubt flashes across Gia’s face for a moment before she squares her shoulders and doubles down on her misguided confidence. “Fine. You’re going to feel so stupid when you’re wrong about Mom. If I tell her I’m in trouble and I need her, she’ll come through for me.”

I don’t bother arguing because she’s going to learn the hard way soon enough. I only pull out my phone and read the number off as she types it into her own.

Gia holds the phone to her ear, and I step back and cross my arms against my chest, feeling my heart beating fast and furious against them. The woods around us fall silent as Gia waits, her breath shallow and rapid.

After what feels like an eternity, Gia frowns at the phone. “She sent me to voicemail.”

My voice is flat and emotionless when I say, “She must not answer unknown numbers. Text her and tell her it’s you.”

“Good idea. I’ll tell her it’s an emergency and I need help.”

Gia sends the text, and neither of us says anything until she does a double take at her phone. “Her read receipts are on, it says she read it. She’ll probably call me back any minute now.”

One minute turns to two, then three, then four, and after five minutes of us standing in silence and Gia staring at her phone, willing it to ring, she announces, “I’m going to call her back.”

She does, but only seconds later she glares at her phone like it personally offended her. “She sent me to voicemail again.” She calls again, then again, growing more and more agitated, but the results remain the same.

There’s no part of me that takes joy in hurting Gia, and I almost want to make some excuse to cover for Mom and force Gia to come home, but this has to happen.

I click Florence’s name on my phone and put the call on Speaker. It rings once, almost mockingly loud in this little wooded area, then Florence’s honeyed voice fills the space.

“Siena! My gorgeous, wonderful daughter!” She’s clearly at a party or something because there’s loud music and talking in the background, and she’s half yelling into the phone. But she must move somewhere quieter because I can hear her better when she says, “If you’re calling, that means you must’ve thought about my offer and realized it’s the best move for you. You and I are going to be *famous*, sweetie! You’ll see! Everyone’s going to be talking about Florence and her mini-me once Lincoln is done with us.”

Gia stands stock-still as she realizes what’s happened.

I want to yell at Mom for ignoring Gia’s text when it clearly said she’s in trouble and needs help, but I’m trying to prove a harsh point.

“No, Mom, I’m not agreeing to the documentary. I’m actually calling because I’m with Gia, and she’d like to speak with you.”

The pause is so long I’d think she hung up on me if I didn’t still hear the party.

“Gia?”

“Yes, your daughter Gia.”

Her entire tone shifts from the overly warm and bubbly welcoming one to something cold and indifferent.

“Oh, well, I’m actually really busy at the moment and—”

“Hi, Mom!” Gia interrupts, stepping closer to the phone. She’s a lot more unsure than she was before, but she still forges ahead. “It’s not going to work out here in King City. I’m boarding a bus tomorrow morning to come stay with you. Is that ... okay?”

The line is quiet for a moment before Florence forces out, “Oh, darling, I know King City isn’t the greatest, but you’ll love it if you give it a chance.”

“But I miss you, Mom. I want to come stay with you,” Gia declares, and I press my lips together to stop from saying anything.

Someone on the other line starts a conversation with Florence, and she laughs and turns on the charm as they discuss some movie. Gia shifts nervously from foot to foot as Florence takes her time, completely dismissing how important this moment is to her daughter.

Finally, Florence says into the phone, “What were we saying again? Oh, right. You coming here is not a good idea, sweetheart. I’ve moved in with Jim, and he hates kids. And it’s your father’s turn to take care of you and your sister. You guys need bonding time and all that.”

“But, Mom—”

“I’ve got to go, baby. But tell Siena to think about my offer. Be good for your father!”

This time she does hang up. The sounds of the party are completely cut off, and we’re wrapped in silence once again. Gia stares at the phone in disbelief, and you can see the heartbreak all over her face from a mile away.

That was the first time she's had any interaction with our mom in years, and Florence completely brushed her off.

I tuck the phone into my pocket, keeping my facial expression stoic. I'm not going to gloat or say *I told you so* or hammer the point home. Gia knows what just happened, and now she has to process it on her own.

I know she realizes Florence couldn't care less about her when she wipes the tears from her eyes and a hardened expression takes over her face. "Take me home."

She picks up her backpack and pulls the handle of her suitcase, marching past me as best she can while dragging the luggage across the uneven terrain.

I want to hug her and comfort her and assure her that Florence doesn't mean shit to us, but I'm not sure that will help right now. This can't come as a total surprise, but now she can't live in blissful ignorance. Now she has to acknowledge that her fantasies about Florence are just that—fantasies—and it's not easy.

"I'm sorry, Gia," I say because I can't help myself, following her through the bushes. Jason attempts to take Gia's bag for her, but she shrugs him off.

"No, you're not. You were right, Mom couldn't give less fucks about me. No one cares, and now Zia Stella and Dario won't either. She knows the truth, and she's about to implode my entire life. Dario's going to see the car. I have no one."

Heat flushes through my entire body, and her words finally crack my impassiveness. "You have no one? What the fuck am I? I do absolutely *everything* for you, Gia, and it goes deeper than making your lunches and putting money in your accounts. I took the fall for you because you needed me to, *twice!* I lost weeks of my life locked away for you, and I'd do it again because I love you. So don't you dare say you have no one."

She doesn't look at me, instead yanking her suitcase over the curb and onto the asphalt. "You don't count. I just want—I don't know what I want! Just take me home where I can

pretend tonight didn't happen before morning comes and everything changes.”

“Gia—”

“Leave me alone, Siena! You're always—what the fuck happened to your face?”

Now that we're on the paved lot, the dim lights from the bus stops aren't blocked by the trees, and Gia is seeing my face properly for the first time. I haven't looked at it since that first time to make sure nothing was broken, but I can only assume the bruising has gotten deeper and more developed in the hours since it happened.

“It doesn't matter right now,” I tell her, not wanting to pile more onto all the shit that's happened today.

Gia, my little sister who was pissed and yelling at me only a second ago, rounds on Jason, who's standing beside me, the silent, angry accusation clear on her face.

The action makes my heart flutter.

Jason's horrified at the thought and steps back with his hands raised. “I'd never.”

That answer doesn't appease Gia. “Did you kill whoever did it? Was it Brandon?”

“No, Gia,” I say, stepping between her and Jason. “It was an accident. It doesn't matter.”

She scans my face for a moment before relenting.

“Fine. Can we go home now?”

She turns and pulls her luggage to Jackson's vehicle, the only one in the entire lot, leaving me stunned.

“I wasn't expecting that,” I tell Jason, who comes to my side as we watch Gia stomp away. She was genuinely upset at the thought of someone hurting me. I've never seen her act like that before. I'm the one who defends her, not the other way around, and her reaction completely erases my anger at her earlier statement about feeling like she has no one.

“She loves you,” Jason says simply.

“Was I too hard on her?” I ask him. He was giving us our space, but he still heard every single word.

Jason thinks about it for a moment. “She needed to hear it. You couldn’t keep her in the dark forever, even if it was for her own good.”

I don’t regret bursting Gia’s bubble, but I hope she doesn’t hate me for it.

From beside the car, Gia yells, “Are you going to come or what? I’m tired! Unlock the trunk already!”

Jason points the keys at the car, and the trunk starts opening. Gia lifts her suitcase into the trunk then slams the door to the backseat when she gets in.

“Let’s get going, it’s been a long day,” I say, but Jason stops me with a gentle hand on my elbow, forcing me to look right into his intense eyes.

“For the record, I would.”

“You would what?”

“Kill whoever it was that did that to you.”

He says it with so much conviction and fierceness that a shiver runs through me. I believe him.

I flush and look away, unsure of how to respond.

Before him, no one would have cared. I have to stop myself from throwing myself at him and sobbing into his chest.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t do that. I need you here with me, not rotting in some cell.” It’s kind of a joke, but not really. I’ve grown too attached to Jason, and he means too much to me now. I won’t be able to go back to life without him, ever.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he promises, and I’m going to hold him to it.

Maybe forever.

EIGHTEEN

As Jason pulls up to Dario's house a bit after midnight, the street is shrouded in darkness and silence. Dario's car is gone, and there are no visible signs of the accident besides the missing garage door. Jackson did an impeccable job cleaning up the debris, leaving a black garbage bag by the curb for garbage collection in the morning. The scene looks infinitely better than it did when we left, and I send Jackson a quick thank you so much text.

When Jason parks in Dario's spot, Gia quickly exits the car, surveying the scene. Jason and I follow.

"Is Dario home already?" she asks, breaking her silence after spending the ride listening to music while gazing out her window. "What happened to the car? I left it right here. Fuck, he's inside waiting to kill me, isn't he?"

I can feel her anxiety rising from here. And while maybe he'll eventually kill her, at least she doesn't have to deal with it right now after that hard revelation about Mom. "Dario's not home. Jackson cleaned up and took the car to Jason's shop."

Gia perks up, hope in her eyes. "Do you think we can get it fixed before he ever finds out? Maybe we don't ever have to tell him. Can you do it, Jason?"

Jason and I exchange a look. Not wanting to quash her hope, he says gently, "It's going to take time to get the parts, and your dad gets home in the morning." As in only a few hours from now.

She instantly deflates. "Oh."

I don't pile on that Zia Stella will probably be home soon too, and Gia's going to have to face the consequences regardless. Not long ago, she yelled at me about being able to make her own decisions, and part of that is dealing with the repercussions of those decisions.

Gia opens her mouth and closes it again, looking young and vulnerable when she finally works up the courage to ask, “Will you come with me if he sends me away? Even if you’re allowed to stay?”

The sincerity of her question breaks my heart, and I tilt her chin up so she can see the conviction in my eyes when I choke out, “You’re stuck with me forever, Gia, even if you hate me or we argue sometimes. I’m not going anywhere without you.”

She chews on her cheek and considers my words before nodding once. I let my hand drop as she opens the trunk and grabs the handle of her suitcase. Jason appears at her side, taking the suitcase out for her and placing it on its wheels by her feet.

“Well, I’m exhausted, it’s been a long day,” Gia says, still not looking at me as she extends the suitcase handle.

“I’m going to get some sleep before shit hits the fan in the morning.”

Or in a few hours. I guess it depends on who gets home first, Zia Stella or Dario. At this point, I’m not sure which I’d prefer.

As she heads toward the garage, I call out, “You’re not going to run away again, right? You don’t need me to give you a lecture on how dumb that was, right?”

“No, I’m not going to run away again,” Gia concedes, saving me from reciting the whole lecture. She bites her lip and asks in a soft voice, “You’re not going to agree to the documentary just to live with Mom, right?”

“I have no desire to ever live with Mom, and there’s not a single thing in the world she could offer me to get me to agree to a documentary.” Gia nods then enters the garage, punching in the code to the door and disappearing inside the house.

I stand there and stare at the empty space she just vacated. It’s been a long day filled with emotional outbursts and painful revelations between me and Gia. My emotional tank is completely empty, and there’s nothing more I want than to

crawl into bed and sleep for the next few days and pretend this day never happened.

But amidst all the chaos, at least Gia can make her own smart decisions for when I'm inevitably no longer around. It's not easy for her to trust anyone after a lifetime of loved ones walking out on her. We've never had stability, and all she's ever known is people proving that they don't care about her. At least I could give her some reassurance that I'm never going anywhere.

"Want me to stay?" Jason interrupts my thoughts, his voice gentle and comforting.

He would, if I asked him. He'd probably stand in front of me as Dario inevitably turns to me and somehow manages to blame me for what's happened. "No, go home, Jason. Thank you for everything tonight. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Jason steps closer, and I resist the urge to wrap my arms around him and cling to his comfort. "You're strong, Siena," he tells me with conviction. "No matter what happens, you're going to be okay."

I believe him. I've always been able to handle things on my own, but it's comforting to know that Jason is here for me. "Yeah, it will be."

"Plug your phone in to finish charging when you get in," he orders, brushing a lock of hair behind my ear. His fingers are warm, and I miss the contact immediately.

"I'll have my phone on me all night. If you need me, no matter what time, I'll be here right away."

I know he will, and butterflies start up in my stomach. Jason's always there for me when I need him, and even when I don't, and for some reason that makes me want to burst into tears.

"Thank you, Jason," is all I can force out without getting emotional. He places a gentle kiss on my lips, and I melt into him.

“Call me in the morning, okay?”

“I will,” I promise.



Despite being exhausted, Gia and I find ourselves sitting at the kitchen island eating a comfort snack of rocky road ice cream in silence when we hear the door from the garage slam shut.

Dread creeps up my spine, and Gia tenses beside me as we realize it’s probably Zia Stella. She *must* have noticed the missing car and garage door since she came in through there.

It is Zia Stella, and she pauses when she enters the kitchen and sees us sitting there. Her hair sticks out everywhere from her messy bun, and she didn’t change out of her scrubs before coming back. It’s only been a few hours, and she looks like she hasn’t slept in days.

“Girls,” she greets, a lot calmer and less furious than she was the last time we spoke. She drops her keys and purse on the counter. “What in the world happened outside? Where is your father’s car?” When she looks at me, her eyes widen in alarm. “Siena! What happened to your face? Are you all right?”

I shift away when she tries to grab my face to examine it closer. “I’m fine, just bumped it.”

“You bumped it?” she repeats, shifting her gaze from me to Gia, who’s sitting so tense and still beside me she’s basically a statue. “Does it have anything to do with the mess in the garage and Dario’s missing car?”

No one says anything, and Zia Stella prompts, “Siena? Gia?”

At her name, Gia’s hand clasps mine under the counter. She’s trembling, and I can feel her panic-stricken eyes pleading with me before I even glance over at her.

Shit. I shouldn't do it, but I can't stop myself from standing, opening my mouth, and confessing, "The car is at the mechanic shop. I drove it through the garage door. Jason said the engine seems fine, but it needs a new windshield and some front body work."

Gia lets out a relieved breath and gives my hand a thankful squeeze before dropping it and scampering out of the kitchen, leaving me alone with Zia Stella to clean up her mess, like usual.

Zia Stella's so stunned at my admission she doesn't say anything to Gia as she passes.

She eyes me skeptically. "You stole your father's car and crashed it through the garage?" she repeats like she needs clarification that she heard me properly.

I understand what's going to happen. It'll be the last straw for Dario, and despite us not getting along, I don't actually *want* to be kicked out. This was supposed to be my chance at normalcy, my chance at having a stable household, my own room, a full kitchen, a family that cares about me. Maybe the family part was asking for too much, but I had the rest of it, for the most part. All I had to do was stay out of Dario's way until I turned eighteen and I'd have a proper home that would give me the best chance of getting my grades up enough to get some scholarships. How am I supposed to do that when he comes home and learns what happened? He warned me after the break-in that it was my last chance. Yet I stand here, looking Zia Stella in the eye and giving her the last nail Dario needs for my coffin when I say, "That is correct, yes."

She blows out a breath and pinches the bridge of her nose, mumbling, "As if we didn't have enough to deal with."

I've disappointed many people in my life, but I've never felt the same level of guilt as I do right now. I like Zia Stella; she took an interest in me and Gia, talked to us, cared for us, even bought me a phone just because, and now I'm doing even more to prove to her that I'm not worth the effort, that I really *am* just like Florence.

“I’m sorry, and I take full responsibility ...” I admit, trailing off when she drops her hand from her face and narrows her eyes at me. Keeping my shoulders square and my head high even though I feel like cowering under her penetrating gaze, I continue, “I’ll pay for all the damages and accept any consequences. It was irresponsible of me, and I understand that.”

“*You* understand that?” she asks, her emphasis confusing until she adds, “Are you sure that is what happened?”

You, *Siena*, stole your father’s car and crashed it? You’re not falling into old habits and covering up for someone?”

The outright accusation takes me aback, and because I apparently keep making faces that give me away, I try to school my features. I’m used to people not believing me, but it’s usually in favor of thinking the worst of me, and the switch is disorienting.

Her not believing me is an unexpected curveball, but I’m not going to sell out Gia, even if doing so would protect me. Maybe it’s stupid of me, and maybe it goes against every self-preservation instinct we as humans have, but I open my mouth and say, “Um, yes, I’m sure that’s what happened.” I manage to make it sound like a statement instead of a question, but she still doesn’t let up with the inquisitive stare.

“No, it’s not what happened!” Gia exclaims, running into the kitchen and standing beside me.

What the hell is she doing? I have this. Zia Stella can doubt all she wants, but if I stick to the story, I can protect Gia like she wants. “Gia, you—”

“No.” She cuts me off, her voice steadier than she looks. “This isn’t right. You shouldn’t have to take the fall for me, even though I want you to.” She turns to Zia Stella with a determined look and shocks the hell out of me when she admits, “I was going to borrow Dario’s car, but I panicked and mixed up the forward and reverse. It was me, not Siena.”

If Zia Stella is stunned, she does a better job hiding it than I do. My little sister, the girl who pleads with me to cover for her and cries that she's not strong enough to face judgment, just took accountability for her actions even though I had already taken the blame.

"Thank you for admitting that, Gia," Zia Stella says after a moment. "Can you give me a few moments alone with your sister? I'll be up to talk to you in a bit."

Unsure, Gia glances between me and our aunt before relenting and leaving the room. Zia Stella doesn't speak until we hear Gia's bedroom door close.

"I cannot believe you," she starts. "You lied about what happened in LA, and you were going to lie again."

A lot has happened tonight, and there's a lot to process, but since she brought up LA, there's no better time to have the inevitable conversation about it.

"We lied to protect Gia. Maybe it wasn't the right thing to do, but I'd do it again."

She sighs and rubs her temples, and I have a feeling I'm about to make her headache worse when I add, "You might not agree, but I'm begging you, *please* don't tell anyone about Gia. Yes, we lied, but it was always to protect her, not to hurt anyone." I step closer to her, and desperation leaks into my voice as I plead, "If you tell people now, if you report us, it's not going to do anything other than hurt her. I've already been cleared of what happened with Stan, and nothing good will come of you turning us in. You'll be making us go through that entire awful process again, except this time we'll probably get charged. *Please*, Zia Stella, no one has to know. It's done.

Nothing has to change."

Zia Stella studies me, but I hold my ground. I mean every single word, and I need her to believe me, to choose to keep our secret. She was really upset when she thought we were lying to her, so I'm not sure how she'll feel about lying to her brother and everyone else, but I know she's a brilliant doctor,

and if she thinks it through, she'll understand where I'm coming from.

Our staring contest lasts a few moments before Zia Stella says, "You're a smart girl, Siena." It's hard to read her tone. She's doing that thing Anusha does when she's trying to sound neutral but still somehow seems patronizing, which makes it difficult to figure out what answer she wants. "You can see that Gia has been affected by everything that happened. The partying and drinking have gotten better this past little while, but she's clearly having trouble working through what she's done. If I'd known, maybe I could've helped better. I hoped she'd sort it out with time and by talking to her therapist, but if she's not being honest in her sessions, I don't think it's really helping the way it should."

This is good. This is a different Zia Stella than the one who left the house frantic and yelling. This is a Zia Stella who is concerned with *helping* Gia, not hurting her. I can reason and rationalize with her.

"I've thought about that, but Gia's strong, she can handle it. If it came to hiding it and working through it herself or having the truth come out and facing charges and a trial and public scrutiny from people she knows *and* strangers with no filter on the internet, I know what she'd choose. I know what *anyone* would choose. *Please*, Zia Stella. Going to the police isn't going to help." I will get on my knees and beg her if I need to, but when she blows out a breath and drags a hand down her face, I know I've gotten through to her.

"I've had time to think and calm down since I first learned what happened, and I'll admit I may have been a bit too harsh." Even though she sounds a bit sheepish, she mostly seems overwhelmed. It's been a long day for everyone. "I'm sorry for my initial reaction, but I was so shocked by all these warring feelings. I felt like a bad guardian because I didn't realize it sooner or see the signs.

Stressed because I didn't know how to handle it. Pissed because my brother has clearly been doing the shittiest job

imaginable of taking care of you girls. Scared for what will happen to the two of you if the truth ever does come out.”

The honest admission shocks me more than anything else she could've said. She knows Dario's a shitty father and feels bad about it? She's scared ... for *us*? I've always known that she cared about us, but thinking it and having it confirmed are two different things. There's a warm, fuzzy feeling in my chest that I try not to get too excited about.

Even though she hasn't explicitly said it, I'm pretty confident as to what her answer is going to be when I speculate, “So, you're not going to tell anyone?”

“I've had some time to cool off and really contemplate the next steps, but no, I don't think telling anyone will do any good ... for now.”

The relief hits me so hard it almost knocks me over.

Gia's going to be okay. No one else is going to know the truth, and she can continue living her life as normally as possible. The foreboding *for now* she added doesn't scare me. That's future Gia and Siena's problem, and if there's one thing we're good at, it's acting now and worrying about the repercussions later. I've convinced Zia Stella to keep the secret, and the more time that passes between what happened with Stan and the present, the more likely that people will lose interest in it. Plus, even if she did tell people, there's no evidence to prove her claim, and I can always deal with that threat if it really comes down to it. But I'd rather it not come to that. We're in a small enough town that people still gossip about Florence when she hasn't lived in this town since before I was born, so I don't want gossip about us spreading that will make Gia's life here harder than it already is.

Because I need the clarification, I ask, “Not even Dario?”

Her molars grind before she agrees, “No, not even your father.”

Throwing myself at her while jumping up and down seems a bit excessive, so I contain my knee-jerk reaction and settle

for an understanding but enthusiastic nod.

“But he *is* going to find out about what Gia did to his car, and he’s not going to be happy.”

The thought of his reaction, imagining him looming over a cowering Gia, bursts my happy bubble. “I know.”

Her eyes, still hard and unreadable, search my face, then she sighs, and her expression softens. “I’ll try to talk to him and calm him down before he does something really stupid, but he never really listens to me or cares about my opinion. We’re not exactly close. Hell, I’ve seen him more in the past few months you girls have been here than in the rest of the thirty-eight years I’ve been alive, and he’s barely even home. So, don’t get your hopes up, but I’ll see what I can do.”

A lump forms in my throat. “Thanks, Zia Stella, Gia could use the help.” I’m not sure it’ll do much, but it means a lot that she’ll try, that she *wants* to try. It means a lot that she’s only hanging around her insufferable brother because of me and Gia. I never considered that she was only coming over as often as she does because of us, and that she never did it before we came to King City. Maybe I should’ve realized it sooner, since it’s not like she ever really talks to Dario, and he doesn’t seem particularly close to her.

To know that she’s putting in the effort to see us makes me want to bury my head in her shoulder and cry.

“I should go talk to Gia,” Zia Stella says, trying to wrangle her hair into a neater bun. “She’s probably worried sick.”

She is. She’s stressing really badly after everything that’s happened, and knowing that prompts me to say,

“You know, Gia may act tough and try to seem cool and like she doesn’t care, but really, she’s just a little girl desperate for love from a mother or a mother figure.”

She blinks at me like she has no idea where this is going or why I’m bringing it up. And maybe I shouldn’t say anything, but this weight on my shoulders is so freaking heavy, and I can’t keep doing everything on my own.

I think I can trust Zia Stella, especially after tonight's revelations, and especially after she looked at me like she saw me, like she knew me well enough to know I was covering for Gia. Plus, I think she'll genuinely look out for Gia's best interests. With that in mind, I continue,

"Gia was so upset at disappointing you, someone I think she sees as a mother figure, that she tried to run away from home tonight. That's why she borrowed Dario's car."

A little gasp is the only noise Zia Stella makes, so I continue candidly, "Florence and Aunt Julie were awful, and you know Dario's not winning any father of the year awards, but Gia really looks up to you. So please keep that in mind when talking to her tonight. What you think of her means a lot to Gia, and I don't want you to hurt her."

The unexpected confession seems to really hit Zia Stella. She's frozen to the spot as her eyes glisten with unshed tears.

"You ..." She takes a moment to gather her thoughts.

"You really think Gia looks up to me like that?"

I nod. "She does."

She swallows and recovers her composure, clearing her throat and straightening her clothes. Avoiding my eyes, she busies herself with collecting her things. "Well, I ... um ...

I understand. I'm going to go talk to her now. Try to get some sleep, Siena." When she meets my eyes, her own seem raw and vulnerable. "Thank you for telling me."

Thank you for keeping our secret or Don't make me regret it don't seem like the appropriate responses right now, so instead I say, "Good night, Zia Stella."

She heads to the stairs, and there's a frantic scampering above us as Gia scrambles to get into bed, no doubt having spent the last twenty minutes with her ear pressed to her door. Zia Stella and I exchange brief amused glances before she goes upstairs, and that's when I know Gia is going to be okay. No matter what happens to me today, tomorrow, years from

now, Gia will always have Zia Stella, and the thought that I don't have to do this alone anymore helps me take the first full, real breath of the day.

NINETEEN

It's a dark and gloomy Saturday morning when Dario's taxi pulls up in front of the curb, like the weather was warning me of his arrival. I slept like shit and woke up early enough to learn Zia Stella had to go back to work, and therefore no one warned Dario before he walked in and was blindsided. The wind carries his curses through my cracked-open window even over the slight rain. I listen as he tries—and fails—multiple times to call Zia Stella and find out *where the fuck my car is and what the fuck happened to my garage!*

I was kind of hoping Zia Stella would get to him before this happened, or that she could at least be here for moral support while we get ripped to shreds.

My bedroom door opens, and Gia peeks her head in.

Her pixie hair sticks up in all different directions, and the oversized concert T-shirt she wears as a pajama shirt slides off a narrow shoulder. “Dario's home.”

“I know.”

She pads over to me while rubbing the sleep from her eyes, sinking down onto the bed. Side by side, we sit with our legs dangling over the side of the mattress, facing the open window and listening to the rain and Dario clattering around in the garage.

Gia breaks the silence first. “Zia Stella talked to me last night.”

After the day I had, I was so mentally and physically drained that I passed out as soon as my head hit the pillow, and I didn't overhear any tidbits from their conversation.

“How'd it go?”

She puts her feet up on the bed and wraps her arms around her knees. “Good. Really good, actually. We talked for, like, an hour. She was upset I tried to run away and said I can always

depend on her. She's also not going to tell anyone about what happened in LA."

A shy, wistful smile grows on her face. "She told me she loves me."

Warmth spreads through my chest. "She does, Gia."

"You're the only person who's ever told me they love me. Not even Nora told me when we were dating."

It's a sad reality, but it's true for the both of us. "Just because people don't say it doesn't mean they don't feel it."

She leans her head on the tops of her knees, her eyes sad. "I don't remember Mom ever saying it, and if she did, I'm not sure she really meant it." She pauses for a moment then adds, "I think Zia Stella means it."

"I think she does too."

The rain starts picking up, some of it pooling on the windowsill, but I don't move to close the window.

"I'm scared, Siena," Gia admits.

"Of what?"

"I know I said I wanted to leave and go live with Mom yesterday, but that's not really what I want. I want to stay here, with Zia Stella. I don't want Dad to send me away."

"I know, Gia. Dario's not going to send us away."

There's a loud clattering and another "Pick up my goddamn phone calls, Stella!" yelled from outside, and Gia winces.

"Are you sure about that? He doesn't want us in the first place, and I've never heard him that pissed before."

Quietly, she adds, "He's kind of all we have."

I can't deny that, and I don't want to lie to her, so I settle on: "We'll be okay no matter what happens. We always are."

Gia's voice is almost inaudible when she asks, "Why did you tell Zia Stella you did it?"

I study her face. “Isn’t that what you wanted me to do?” I don’t say it accusingly or maliciously. I’m only stating a fact.

My words float around us for a moment before she mumbles, “That makes me a terrible person, doesn’t it? I shouldn’t have made you do that for me ... *again.*”

“You didn’t make me do anything. And besides, you came back and told the truth. I’m proud of you; I know that must have been hard.”

She picks at the fleece of my bedspread. “I didn’t want to; I wasn’t going to. But I kept telling you that I didn’t need you to protect me when it came to Mom, yet I keep expecting you to protect me when I screw up. It didn’t feel right.”

She still looks so young, so much like the little girl I grew up taking care of, yet she looks more mature, more determined, like she’s grown overnight.

The door to the garage is pushed open, and Dario stomps in. We startle when the door slams shut.

“Are you ready to tell him?” I ask.

She jerks at the thought, her eyes wide and terrified.

“No. Even thinking about looking at Dad and telling him ...” She trails off and shivers. “But I guess I have to ...”

This is going to be hard no matter what. Gia has some kind of relationship with Dario. Not a *good* relationship, but it doesn’t seem like he’s completely repulsed by her presence like he is by mine.

“I’ll be there with you every step of the way. You don’t need to do it alone,” I reassure her. “He’s going to be pissed, but he’ll calm down soon enough. This is going to be the hardest part.”

“Girls!” Dario rages from downstairs. “I know you’re home! Get down here right now!”

Gia tenses, and I know what she’s thinking.

“You’re plenty strong, Gia.” I stand up. “I love you, and I’ll always be here for you. You can do this.”

“*Siena!*” Dario bellows, and Gia winces.

She takes a deep breath for courage and stands. “What do you think is going to happen to me?”

“*Girls, if I have to call you one more time ...*”

“Coming, sorry!” I call back to Dario, then tell Gia,

“I’m not sure, but it’ll be okay no matter what happens.”

I hold out my hand, and she takes it. Together, as sisters, we face fate.

Dario’s impatiently waiting for us at the base of the stairs, tapping his foot with his arm resting on the banister.

He’s still in the fitted suit he wore for work, but the tie is loosened, and the top few buttons on his dress shirt are undone. He’s glaring that special glare that’s a mix of revulsion and bitter contempt he reserves just for me that makes me feel three inches tall, except it’s somehow angrier. But even looking undone and tired and incredibly upset, it’s almost annoying that he’s still a handsome man.

Sometimes I wonder if he and Florence ever had any real conversations or if they were just two good-looking people who were together for that reason alone.

When I’m close enough, he asks, “Can you tell me what happened to my garage? And where the *fuck* my car is?!”

Gia drops my hand and stares at him with wide eyes, freezing on the stairs, while I force myself not to grimace at the sharpness and the way he raises his voice. I don’t push Gia forward, especially since stopping a few steps before the bottom stair so we don’t have to look up at him helps make him seem the slightest bit less intimidating.

Gia opens and closes her mouth, struggling to get the words out, and Dario presses, “Siena?”

Better to rip the bandage off. “Your car is at the mechanic. It needs a new windshield and some front body work.”

He stiffens like he wasn’t expecting my abrupt honesty.

“Why?”

Gia squeaks from beside me. “I ... um ... wanted to borrow it, but I got mixed up with the gears and drove it straight into the garage. Siena cleaned up the mess outside, though. We just need to search for a garage repair place to come and take a look.”

Dario stares at her, intense and unblinking. I think that was the logical answer Dario was expecting based on the evidence, but now that it’s been confirmed out loud, he’s not sure how to process it.

It’s so silent for a moment that the only sounds are his ragged breaths and the creaking of the house settling.

His furious gaze swings to me. “You *stole* my car and *crashed it?*” he yells, making us wince. “Then forced your poor sister to take the blame?”

“Wait, what?”

“Don’t play stupid! You didn’t think I’d see right through this?”

I’m too stunned to say anything, but Gia speaks up.

“But it wasn’t Siena! It was me! I did it!”

“Shut up, Gia,” he commands. “I know you had nothing to do with this. You don’t have to lie for your sister.”

“But I’m not lying! It w—”

“That’s enough, Gia!” he shouts, then shakes his head with a bitter laugh. “Your sister is so young and innocent, and you’re taking advantage of her. That’s a new low, even for you, Siena.”

This shouldn’t come as a surprise to me, but it still does. I should’ve known Dario would blame me whether Gia

admitted to it or not, either saying it was my fault for

“corrupting” her or assuming that I manipulated her into taking the blame for me. He already thinks the worst of me, so really, it’s my fault for thinking Dario wouldn’t use this as an opportunity to make me the villain.

The realization settles over my shoulders like an invisible weight, and I straighten to face what’s about to happen.

“That is awful of me.” My voice sounds flat even to my own ears. “You’re right, it was me who stole your car and crashed it.”

“No, it wasn’t!” Gia tugs on my arm and hisses,

“Siena, what are you doing?”

“Gia, go upstairs so I can deal with your sister,” Dario demands, seemingly five seconds away from exploding.

Gia remains planted beside me, confused. “Siena?”

“It’s all right, really,” I tell her. “Go upstairs.”

She frowns. “But—”

“*Now*, Gia!” Dario yells, and we both flinch.

I give Gia’s hand a squeeze before gesturing at her to go upstairs. She doesn’t want to, and I love her for that, but we’re fighting a losing battle. Dario’s going to believe what he wants to believe, and there’s no point prolonging the inevitable.

With a heavy sigh, Gia turns and ascends the staircase.

Once she’s gone, Dario asks, “Where the hell is my car?”

“They’re working on it already at Wilson’s Garage in town, and I’ll pay for all the damage. And I’ll pay for a new garage door. I’m really sorry; it will never happen again.”

“You’re damn right it’ll never happen again!” he fumes, the vein in his forehead bulging as he rants. “You were going to *steal* my car, Siena. Not only did you not have permission, a license, or insurance, but you don’t even know how to drive! You could’ve hurt someone! You didn’t even make it off the

driveway before crashing! Do you know how exceptionally irresponsible and stupid you need to be to crash a car without leaving the driveway?”

I don't argue with him; I couldn't even if I wanted to.

“What the hell were you doing stealing my car, anyway? There isn't a single valid reason on this planet to justify taking my Mercedes. What? Were you missing some party? Did your boyfriend have a free house and tell you to come over? Did whatever punk friends you hang out with score some booze?”

The condescending examples are clearly rhetorical, so I stay silent and lace my fingers together to stop from biting my nails.

He doesn't need me to answer, because he continues,

“You are *so* goddamn lucky my Corvette has been at the shop for the last few months and you didn't hit that. It's a 1953! That's the first year they made Corvettes, Siena, and it's so expensive you can't even fathom! You can't just hit that and expect it to be fixed without jumping through a shit-ton of hoops and spending lots of money!”

He reaches out and clenches his fingers with an angry growl, like he's trying to restrain himself from strangling me. “You are *so* fucking irresponsible, Siena. What? The first attention grab where you trashed your room and tried to pass it off as a break-in wasn't enough? You had to go and wreck my property? Do you even think before you do anything, or do you only care about following whatever impulse crosses your mind and fuck everything and everyone else?”

“I'm really sorry,” I breathe, but he's not having it.

“And you can't just *replace* the garage door! You need to redo *both* of them. It's not going to match if you just redo one even if you get the exact same one because the sun changed the color, and it devalues the house to have one new garage door and one older one.” He's pacing now, his face red.

I don't know what I can say to defuse the situation.

He's clearly making himself angrier the more he thinks about it, but I don't think there's anything I can do to fix it.

"I *knew* taking you in would be a bad idea. I knew you'd been too corrupted, too much like your mother, right down to manipulating your little sister. I couldn't stand Florence—why did I think I could deal with her literal double, except worse, because now you're *my* problem, and it's *my* things you're ruining."

My voice comes out shaky when I plead, "I'll fix everything, I promise."

He stops pacing and stares me down with his intense eyes that are identical to Gia's in color but much harder and more apathetic. "You clearly have no respect for other people's possessions. I can't trust you in *my* house with *my* things! So, you are no longer welcome here." He walks away like he's done with this entire conversation, then stops himself like he's just had a thought and turns back.

"You know, Florence did this exact thing all the time when we were together. She took my things with no care for how she returned them, *if* she even returned them at all. She had no regard for anything or anyone. This is *just* like the time she threw out my Wayne Gretzky rookie card because it was 'stupid' and 'taking up space.' Do you even *know* how much that card is worth right now?"

"I—I don't—"

"Two hundred thousand dollars! It's worth *two hundred thousand* dollars now, Siena!"

I can't help myself from saying, "I feel like we're getting derailed from the actual issue here ..."

He points an accusing finger at me. "The *issue* is that I hate your mother, and quite frankly, I hate *you*, Siena.

You look like her, you act like her, you *are* her. In fact, you're *worse*, because I don't even think you're doing it on purpose. Just looking at you makes me physically sick."

I didn't expect his words to sting so much, didn't expect to *care* about anything Dario said to me, but those words are a slap across the face followed by a swift kick to the stomach. They hurt so much I actually stumble back on the stairs and have to grip the banister to steady myself.

I hear myself say, "I'm sorry."

His expression doesn't soften, and for a moment I feel like I'm seven years old and disappointing my father seems like the end of the world.

"You have ten minutes to get your stuff and get out of my house."

My heart stops. This is really happening. He's really kicking me out. This is one of my worst fears. As much as I dislike Dario and don't feel like this is my real home, I never really wanted to leave.

I feel something wet trail down my cheek and lift my hand to discover a tear has escaped. My voice is a whisper when I say, "But where will I go?"

Dario isn't moved by my emotion. If anything, his face hardens more. "I don't know, and I don't care. I'm going to pour myself a drink and call that mechanic to figure out what the hell is going on with my car, and when I get back, you better be gone." He pauses, his eyes scanning my face like he's revolted by the sight of me, and he finishes with the parting shot, "You don't belong here.

You never have."

He storms into his office without a backward glance, slamming the door behind him. I sink onto the stairs and take a deep, steadying breath. I'm not entirely shocked by his reaction. What I wasn't expecting, however, were the words he threw at me, and how deeply and immeasurably they impacted me. They sank deep into my bones and embedded themselves into my skin, making me afraid to look in a mirror for fear I'll see them etched there.

I've never been wanted, not when Florence was pregnant, not when they lived together, not at Aunt Julie's, and definitely not here. I've never been wanted anywhere I go.

I don't belong anywhere, and that is a knife to the heart.

"Siena?" Gia's voice is a hoarse whisper, and I look up to see her head peeking out over the second-floor banister.

"Are you all right?"

I wipe any residual wetness from my cheeks, glad that I'm not actually crying.

"I'm fine, Gia," I answer, standing and joining her at the top of the stairs.

Her face is pale, and she seems just as shaken as I am.

"That was ... rough," she says, wrapping her arms around herself. "I don't understand what happened. I'll talk to him again, get him to see it was me and let you stay."

"Don't bother, there's no point," I say, heading to my room, which I guess is no longer my room. "He's never going to believe you no matter what you say, and I don't want to come back anyway. There's no point in you ruining your relationship or chance to live here over me."

Gia trails behind me. "What do you mean you don't want to come back? Are you really leaving?"

I find a duffel bag stuffed in the back of my closet and unzip it, then place it on the bed. It's ironic how less than twenty-four hours ago, Gia was the one packing to leave this house, and now I'm doing the same. "He made it pretty clear I'm not welcome here."

She watches me travel from my drawers to the bed, stuffing the bag with random clothes I'm not really seeing but probably wear the most.

Gia chews on her lip. "But isn't he like, legally responsible for you? Maybe just spend the night away and he'll cool off and you can come back."

The bag is completely full, but I still remove my underwear drawer from the nightstand and turn it upside down to empty its contents into the bag. “I don’t think I’ll ever be welcome back, Gia. I was never wanted in the first place.”

She knows I’m right, but she still lies by denying it.

“That’s not true.”

After some coaxing, the zipper to the duffel closes, and with a sigh, I turn to Gia. “When I first met Dario, he explicitly told me that he only took me in because he had to, but that he wanted nothing to do with me. He said to stay out of his way until I turned eighteen and was no longer his problem. I was *never* welcome here, and I would’ve been out once I was a legal adult anyway. It’s just happening a bit earlier now. I never told you because you were already having problems fitting in, and I didn’t want to stress you out.” I close the distance between us and place my hands on her shoulders, looking directly into her concerned eyes. “Dario never liked me, and he never will based purely on the fact that he only sees Mom when he looks at me. There’s nothing I can do to change that.

But he likes—or at least tolerates—you. He sees *you* when he looks at you, but he and almost everyone else never really see *me* when they look at me. It’s fine, I’m coming to terms with that, but with all of that said, you can stay here and take advantage of it.”

Gia’s eyebrows draw together. “You’re not making me come with you?”

I drop my hold on her arms and go back to my closet to find my backpack. I already know the answer before I ask, “Do you want to come with me?”

She considers it for a moment before asking, “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you leaving town?”

“I don’t think so.”

Gia toes the ground and doesn’t look at me when she asks, “Then would you be mad at me if I stayed? At least until I can take some time to sort out everything that’s happened?”

I drop my backpack on the bed. Gia peers up through her lashes and looks like she regrets asking the question out of guilt alone.

“If I didn’t want you to stay here, I would’ve kept arguing with him about what actually happened.”

Gia doesn’t say anything as I finish gathering my things. I contemplate leaving my laptop because it’s not really *mine*, but then I figure Zia Stella was the one who bought it for me, not Dario, and stuff it into my backpack with the charger and my textbooks.

The rain outside is still going strong, and there’s a puddle of water building up on the wooden windowsill.

The white paint there looks like it’s starting to bubble from how often I leave the window open no matter the precipitation, and I don’t bother closing the window now that I’m vacating the room.

“Once Zia Stella figures out what Dad did, she’s going to be pissed. She’ll convince him to take you back,”

Gia asserts, whether because she genuinely believes it or because she’s trying to make herself feel better. I don’t bother repeating that I have no desire to come back.

I thought that being kicked out would be the absolute worst thing that could happen to me in King City. Here I had stability in a good neighborhood with a full kitchen and a room just for me. I had a safe place for me and Gia, one that didn’t require me to cook and clean and be the sole caretaker, one where parties weren’t being thrown all the time and creepy men didn’t try to get into our room. I had a chance at being a real teenager here, but now it’s clear that never would’ve been the case. Nothing I did would’ve been good enough to outweigh Dario’s preconceived perceptions of me. At least

now that the worst thing that could've happened has actually happened, I no longer have to walk on eggshells wondering when I'll finally push Dario's last button and face the consequences, because now I've actually done it. I'm free, in a sense, though it doesn't feel good—it feels heavy.

“Maybe,” I tell her instead.

I pull my backpack on and take a look around the room. It's pretty, and Zia Stella really did try her best to decorate it and make it feel like home for me. The fluffy baby blue comforter with the various-sized decorative pillows that survived Brandon's attack, the desk with the empty corkboard where pictures should've gone, and the plush baby blue carpet in front of my bed were all personal touches that made me feel comfortable here. But as I look around, something deep inside me knows this is the last time I'll ever see it.

Gia's right on my heels as I grab my duffel and phone and head down the stairs.

“Do you think Dad meant all that stuff he said about you ... or the person who smashed his car ... being irresponsible and stupid and only caring about themselves?”

Gia asks, a blush spreading across her face as her eyes dart everywhere but on me.

We come to a stop in the front foyer, and I drop my duffel. Dario's office door is still closed, but we can hear him yelling on the phone at someone named Wilson, who's apparently a “jack-off” who “isn't fit to run a paper route, never mind a mechanic shop.”

Gia's in front of me, looking small and fragile and guilty. I don't want to hurt her feelings, but maybe tough love is what she needs to get her shit together.

“He was being overly mean because he was addressing me, Gia, and he already hates me.” He even admitted it himself, though I force myself not to dwell on that too long in case the part of me keeping me numb fades and I'm left with how that makes me feel. “But that doesn't change the fact that stealing

Dario's car *was* selfish and impulsive and reckless." I close the space between us and duck down to her eye level, lowering my voice in case Dario overhears. "But because you came clean, you already know that. You tried to do the right thing; Dario just didn't want to listen. I'm proud of you for being brave and trying to be accountable for your actions, even though I know you were terrified."

The door to Dario's study swings open, and Gia and I jump apart. "Yes, I *just* told you that—" He pauses when he notices us standing there, and Gia hastily wipes her watery eyes with her sleeve.

For a moment, I think Dario might have cooled off enough and changed his mind, that he's going to tell me to stay. But then I catch sight of his face and realize the haughty indifference mixed with slight disgust he directs at me is as present as ever, and that thought dissipates.

"Hold on, Wilson," Dario says, pulling the phone away from his face and pinning us with his unfeeling eyes. "Are you really going to use your innocent sister as a pawn *again*, Siena? Get her to turn her big brown eyes on me and plead your case to stay? Well, it's not going to work. Get out of my sight, your ten minutes are up." He turns to Gia and brings the phone back to his ear. "Gia, go back to your room unless you want to end up like your irresponsible sister here."

He doesn't spare us a second glance, as if us not following his orders isn't even a possibility.

"That was *barely* three seconds, Wilson, I told you I'm getting it. But now I remember where I know you from: you're the dumbass who streaked across the field at my senior football game and delayed us an hour. And *you're* the one I'm supposed to be trusting with my car?"

No wonder you ..." Dario's voice trails off as he ventures through the house, and it doesn't surprise me that Dario went to school with the mechanic. In a town big enough to not be considered a small town but still small enough that everyone knows everyone's business, it's more common than not.

Sometimes I wonder why Dario stays here when he clearly hates Florence so much and everyone here still remembers her, but I think that's why he travels so much—he's rarely ever around.

"I'm sorry, Siena," Gia whispers. "I tried. I really did."

"I know you did, Gia. I'm okay with leaving, I swear."

Dario's booming voice comes from the other room.

"Siena, am I still hearing you in my house?! Are you trying to figure out what else of mine you can break or steal?"

I told you to *get out!*"

"I'm leaving!" I shout back. I want to swear at him.

I want to cuss him out and tell him exactly why he's the shittiest father and human on the face of this planet, but I catch a glimpse of Gia's face and hold back. I don't want him to take anything out on her. For some reason, she still wants to have a relationship with him, and I don't want to ruin her hopes like I did yesterday with Florence.

"I'll see you Monday at school," I tell Gia. "Be good."

Before Dario shouts at me again, because I know he's gearing up to, I hoist up my duffel and waltz out the front door. It slams shut behind me, heavy and final.

I wait for the relief to come, to fill my stomach and relieve my chest of the oppressive heaviness, but it doesn't.

Neither does the anger or indignation or hatred. I just feel sad. And lonely.

The rain pelts down outside, and I stand on the covered porch, watching it fall. I really don't have a plan or anywhere to go, and it intensifies the sad, lonely feeling.

Where can I go? Who can I turn to?

There's only one person who I would ever turn to for help, who makes me feel safe and free and seen, and though I feel

bad dumping my mess right on his front step, he's the only one I know I can rely on.

I pull out my phone and press his name, and he picks up on the second ring. "Are you all right?"

His voice is an instant relief from the turmoil of emotions flowing through me. "Yeah, I ... how did you know something was wrong?"

His silence is thoughtful before he says, "Well, didn't you take the blame for the car?"

My mouth drops open. "How did you—?"

"I know you, Siena, and I'm starting to see a pattern here."

A warmth spreads through my body at his words, and my stomach flutters. I control the weird elation I feel and announce, "Well, I did take the blame, but then Gia confessed, but Dario didn't believe it and blamed me anyway.

Apparently, that was the last straw. I've been kicked out."

There's shuffling on Jason's end. "Fuck, I'm sorry, Siena. I'll be there in ten. Are you still at home?"

I take a seat beside my duffel on the porch step, only slightly out of reach of the rain. A slight mist hits my face, but its coolness is refreshing. "Yeah, I'll be outside, unless Dario comes out here with a broom and chases me off."

He doesn't laugh at my poor attempt at a joke. "Stay put. And call me if you go anywhere else. I'll be there."

I know he will, and my heart skips a beat. "I'll be here. And thanks, Jason."

"Anytime, Siena. Anytime."

We hang up, and I miss the comfort of his voice immediately. He didn't even hesitate to come get me; in fact, I think he was already getting up to find his keys before I even finished my sentence. He also knew I'd cover for Gia even though *I* didn't even know I'd do that until the very moment

the words came out of my mouth, *and* he knew I'd face severe consequences from doing it.

He *knows* me, maybe even better than I know myself, and that makes me want to hug him and cry into his chest and never let go.

My toes are cold and wet, and when I glance down, a sad but amused laugh escapes me.

I've forgotten my shoes.

TWENTY

The ride to Jason's house is quick and quiet. He glances over at me every once in a while like he wants to ask me more questions, but he must sense I'm not ready to talk yet and doesn't push it. It's such a classic Jason thing, and it helps release the tension in my body.

I know Jason; he's a stable presence at this time of uncertainty. The way he got out of the car and ran over to me with a big black umbrella, scanned me with that concerned look on his face, and pulled me into a hug made me feel instantly better. Even the way he noticed I was standing there in nothing but my socks and sighed an exasperated but unsurprised sigh and asked, "Why are you never wearing any goddamn shoes?" made me feel like I was right at home. I know who he is and how he makes me feel, and that certainty makes this entire messed-up situation seem less stressful.

Jason pulls into the driveway of a beautiful two-story home not too far from Dario's and kills the engine.

"Are you sure Natalia's okay with me coming to stay here?" I ask Jason for the third time. I feel like asking a woman to take in a girl she's never met is a lot.

"Please, Natalia's overjoyed to have some 'feminine energy in the house for a change,'" Jason says. "It's all good."

I eye him skeptically. "Are you just saying that, or is it actually okay?" I really, *really* like Jason, so I absolutely do not want to make a bad impression on his mom by running into her in the morning wearing my pj's and holding my toothbrush if she made it clear I wasn't welcome there.

Jason gives a small laugh. "It really is okay. Besides, Natalia loves taking in strays," he jokes, referring to himself and his brothers, though I guess I've always been a stray too. Jason gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. "She thinks the more people in the house, the better. I promise."

Still, I hesitate before exiting the car. “And are you sure *you’re* okay with me staying here?” The last thing I want to do is make Jason feel like he was cornered into letting me stay with him and have him get sick of me after the first few hours. I don’t want him to think I’m a clingy girlfriend—well, not girlfriend, but *friend-who’s-a-girl-that-he-kisses-occasionally-and-spends-lots-of-time-with*.

Jason shakes his head. “Get out of the car, Siena.”

He doesn’t wait for me to reply and exits the car, grabbing my duffel and backpack from the trunk and opening my door for me all before I even have time to process what’s going on. It’s stopped raining in the short time it took for us to drive here, and the sun even peeks out a bit from behind the gloomy clouds.

“But you didn’t give me an answer,” I say, turning in my seat to face him. In Jackson’s SUV, I’m almost at eye level with Jason standing on the interlock, and he pins me with a hard look.

“Because it was a stupid question.”

“But I jus—”

He steps closer to me and pushes my door open wider. “Of course I want you here. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have insisted. Now get your butt inside before it starts raining again.”

A stupid grin slips over my face, and I try to hide it as I step down.

As soon as my feet touch the ground, Jason glares at my destroyed and muddy socks like they’ve personally insulted him. “I should’ve known to bring you shoes,” he mutters as he closes the door behind me, and my grin grows even wider. I wonder how he’s going to feel when I tell him I don’t think I packed a single pair of shoes. In fact, I don’t even remember what I packed at all; it was all a blur.

Jason carries my bags to the front door, and I squelch through the puddles behind him. The yard is perfectly landscaped, and there are some pretty purple flowers in

decorative pots by the front door. It's not locked, and Jason pushes it open, gesturing for me to enter first.

Before we go in, I pause and turn to look at him.

Like every time I see him, I'm almost physically stunned by just how handsome he is. His short hair is messy like he just woke up, and for the first time, I notice he's in gray sweatpants and a rumpled T-shirt, like he quickly grabbed the first clothes he touched.

My eyebrows draw together, and a twinge of guilt twists my stomach. "Were you in bed when I called you?"

He shrugs a shoulder, unbothered. "It's Saturday morning."

"Oh, shit. I'm so sorry, Jason. I ruined your Saturday morning with my bullshit."

"Hey, it's not bullshit, Siena. It's your life, and I'm here for you, no matter what." His eyes are commanding and filled with promise. "And you didn't ruin my Saturday. I get to spend it with you now. You've enhanced it."

His crooked smile and earnest sweet talk make me laugh, and the last of my tension from the morning melts off my body.

Because I can't stop myself, I gently run my hand over his cheek and jaw, and the connection instantly makes sparks run all the way up my arm and straight down to my toes.

"Thank you, Jason. For everything."

The smile on Jason's face melts into something serious and intense. "If I wasn't holding these bags"—his eyes briefly flick behind me—"and if Jackson wasn't staring at us while eating dry cereal directly from the box, I'd kiss the shit out of you right now."

I drop my hand from Jason's face and spin around.

Through the wide-open front door, Jackson, shirtless and in plaid drawstring pajama pants, is standing in the hall with a perfect view of us.

He stuffs his arm back into the box of Froot Loops and pulls out a handful of cereal. With a full mouth, he asks, “Is it just because of the cereal? What if I was eating an apple or something, would you do it then?”

I bark out a laugh, and Jason rolls his eyes beside me.

“You’re an idiot,” Jason tells his brother, stepping over the threshold into the house, where he sets my bags to the side. “And now you’ve contaminated that entire box of Froot Loops.”

I follow Jason and close the door behind me to make room in the small foyer. My feet are on the soft rug, which I’ve immediately dirtied, and now I feel bad about not avoiding the puddles.

“Well, joke’s on you, because this is how I eat all the cereal in the house.”

“You’re disgusting,” Jason tells his twin, then turns to me and says, “We’ll get our own private stash of cereal.”

“What’s wrong with this one?” Jackson asks, licking his fingers then foraging through the box with that same hand.

Jason gives him a pointed look, to which Jackson responds, “We’re identical twins, we have the same DNA!

It’s basically your spit all over these Froot Loops.”

“I don’t know where your mouth has been,” Jason remarks, removing his shoes as I carefully peel off my socks to avoid tracking more dirty rainwater through the house. Jason walks through a door, but I don’t follow since my feet are soaked.

“Well, apparently yours has been on Siena—ugh!”

A small towel launched at Jackson’s face from the room Jason disappeared into cuts him off.

“No, it *would* have been on me if you weren’t creepily watching us while ruining a perfectly good box of Froot Loops,” I joke as Jackson hands me the towel.

“You’re the ones who left the door wide open so anyone could eavesdrop,” he shoots back, crunching on the cereal loudly.

I dry my feet with the towel and fold my ruined socks together, and Jason hands me a fresh pair, which I slip on while he takes the dirty items to what I’m now assuming is the laundry room.

Before Jason returns, Jackson, in a moment of seriousness asks, “Hey, but for real, are you okay?”

Until Dario decides if he’s shipping me off to live with his cousin or taking me back or leaving me be, I’m technically homeless, but between Jason and Jackson in the last ten minutes, I’ve completely forgotten the reason I’m here.

“Yeah, I’m all right, thanks.”

“You hungry?” Jackson asks, offering the cereal box to me.

My stomach growls—I hadn’t realized how hungry I actually am. With everything going on, the last time I ate something, other than stress-eating the late-night bowl of ice cream, was at lunch yesterday.

“Don’t accept that,” Jason warns, joining us. “I’ll make us breakfast. Lunch?” He looks at his phone to check the time. “Brunch. You feel like grilled cheese?”

“I love grilled cheese,” I say, following him through the hallway. It’s clean and nice and very homey. The hardwood floors are light gray, and the walls are painted an off-white with lots of family pictures hanging on them.

There are big windows that allow for natural light, and it helps me feel less claustrophobic. The kitchen and living area are open concept, and big glass doors lead to a large patio outside. The entire house is open and airy, and I immediately feel comfortable in the space.

Jason grabs a pan from a drawer and gestures for me to sit as he gathers ingredients.

“I also love grilled cheese,” Jackson says, sitting beside me at the kitchen island as he loudly whispers,

“Of the two of us, he’s a way shittier cook, but we can indulge him.”

“That’s a lie and you know it, Jackson,” a woman’s voice interjects, and I jump up from the stool, self-consciously smoothing my hair into place and straightening my clothes.

A middle-aged woman with thick dark hair, warm brown eyes, and naturally tan skin joins us in the kitchen holding a laundry basket on her hip. She greets me with a welcoming smile that eases the nerves in my stomach.

“Jackson burns toast before he even puts it in the toaster. Jason’s the one who’s always helped me cook growing up and now knows all my secret recipes,” Natalia tells me, a sparkle of affection in her eye as she regards both boys.

Jackson humphs, though there’s no real outrage behind it. “I thought you could tell the difference between us this whole time?”

Natalia picks a rumpled shirt from the hamper she’s holding and throws it at Jackson. “Well, put on a shirt, whoever you are, you’re being rude in front of Jason’s girlfriend.”

I feel my face heat and know it’s beet red, but I do nothing other than awkwardly smile at her while standing stiff as a board.

Though we’ve never had the “what are we” talk, Jason doesn’t correct her when he says, “Natalia, this is Siena.

Siena, meet my mom.”

“Hi, Natalia. Thank you so much for letting me stay here. I’m sure it won’t be for long, and I’ll be out of your hair soon.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous.” She waves me off, shoving the laundry hamper into Jackson’s arms. “You’re welcome here for as long as you want to stay. You’ll have your own room since my son Mason moved out—I just changed the sheets for

you—and I’ll finally have a full house again, except now I won’t be outnumbered by boys. Can I give you a hug? I’m a hugger.”

I was not expecting this level of acceptance and welcoming, so I take a second before nodding.

She engulfs me in a tight hug, holding me to her and rubbing my back affectionately. It’s a mother’s embrace, one I haven’t felt in years, or maybe ever, and it makes me feel safe and loved though I’ve just met Natalia. She makes me feel welcomed and cared for despite the fact she doesn’t know me, and now I see why Jason’s eyes soften every time he talks about her.

From over her shoulder, Jason mouths *Strays* at me with a crooked smile as he butters a slice of bread.

She pulls back, and her hands squeeze my arms before releasing. “If you need anything at all, let me know, all right?” She reclaims the laundry hamper from Jackson.

“And don’t let the boys team up on you to get their way.

You’ll get stuck watching four plotless action movies based on a stupid video game in a row if you allow them to outvote you.”

“*Return of the Zombie Aliens* isn’t stupid or plotless!”

Jason defends the video game with the admittedly stupid-sounding name.

“Yeah!” Jackson adds, stealing some of the cheese Jason is grating and dropping it into his mouth. “You clearly weren’t paying attention. There was talking between all the shooting and killing.”

“If you say so,” Natalia says placatingly, also reaching for Jason’s pile of cheese and stealing some.

Jason glares at the two of them, “If you guys keep stealing the cheese as I’m grating it, there’s going to be nothing left for the sandwiches. And why are you all done up?”

Where are you going?” Jason directs the last part to Natalia, who I’ve just realized has her hair and makeup done.

“I’m going out for lunch. I’ll be back for dinner; maybe we can order takeout to celebrate Siena arriving.”

She wants to *celebrate* me being here? Every other time I’ve moved somewhere, it’s been very clear I was unwanted. I wrap my arms around myself to contain my swirling emotions.

Jason and Jackson don’t pick up on the importance of her words like I do, and Jason asks, “With who?”

“And is it a date?” Jackson adds. Both have demanding, protective frowns on their faces.

“None of your business times two,” Natalia says, sending me an amused smirk. “I swear, it’s like I’m the teenager here, living with my father again.” She backs toward the hall and nods at the laundry in her arms. “I’m throwing these in the machine, then I’m taking off. One of you remember to put them in the dryer when they’re done, all right?”

“Got it,” Jason says from where he’s placing the assembled grilled cheese on the pan, and Jackson frowns and sniffs the shirt he just put on. He must decide it’s not the dirtiest because he shrugs and steals some more grated cheese.

“Make yourself at home, Siena,” Natalia says sweetly, then orders, “Be good, boys!”

“Bye!” they call out simultaneously, and with her gone I suddenly remember how to function and take my place back on the stool. When the washing machine beeps and what I’m assuming is the door leading to the garage closes, Jackson deadpans, “I bet it’s Alan. She’s been spending an awful lot of time with him since he got you and Siena out of jail.”

Jason grimaces like he doesn’t want to remember the time Officer Liu wrongfully arrested us. “If it is Alan, then he’s a good guy. She’s dated a lot worse.” He slides two grilled cheeses onto plates and places them in front of me and his brother.

“Thanks, Jason,” I say before I take a bite as he digs into his own on the other side of the island. Flavor erupts over my tongue, and I gasp in surprise. “Either I’m so hungry everything tastes amazing or this is the best grilled cheese I’ve ever had.”

“I used three different kinds of fresh cheese and a garlic butter spread.”

“Well, it’s amazing. My new favorite sandwich.”

“You’re being dramatic,” Jackson says from beside me, even though he polishes off a half in two bites.

“If you don’t like it, give it back,” Jason says, reaching for his brother’s plate, but Jackson thwarts him by snatching the last half and stuffing it into his mouth.

“Just for that, you’re on cleanup duty.”

Jackson mimics his twin but doesn’t argue, and I laugh as I eat my grilled cheese.

Everything in this house just seems so *easy* and *comfortable*. Jason, Jackson, and Natalia have something that I’m not used to. The way they move around one another and this space with familiarity, like they all know exactly who they are, like it’s their *home*, is so inspirational, and only serves to point out how glaringly different my home experiences have been. The love they show each other, even while bantering and teasing, is so clear. It makes me happy for them but also sad for myself, because no matter how much I want something like that, it’ll never happen.

“So,” Jackson starts as he does the dishes, “who wants to watch *Return of the Zombie Aliens: Part 1*, the movie?”



After dinner, Jason brings my stuff up to the bedroom I’ll be staying in so I can get settled, and I sort through my duffel while he hangs out on the bed and plays on his phone.

Jason, Jackson, and I spent the day together fooling around and goofing off. The two of them together are so funny and ridiculous it helped keep my mind off everything that happened today and everything Dario said to me.

I shouldn't care about what he says, shouldn't put any value in his opinion of me, but I can't help but be hurt by his words. He's my *father*, and he said that he *hates* me.

Before we moved here, when he wanted nothing to do with us, at least I could console myself with the fact that he was an asshole who didn't want me, but it was okay because he never got the chance to actually know me. But now he *does* know me—at least he kind of does—and he *hates* me. I wish I had never gotten to know him. At least I could've lived my life not knowing he *hates* me and told myself he was missing out.

“What are you thinking about?” Jason asks, looking up from the game on his phone as he lounges on the— *my*—bed.

The room I'm staying in is very clearly a boy's room, even though it's obvious Natalia has had some decorative influence to keep it looking so clean and cohesive. The walls are off-white except for the back accent wall that the bed's headrest is against, which is a deep green. The comforter on the bed is gray, and so is the fluffy rug covering the hardwood around the bed. There's a black desk by the wall, and a black dresser that's empty. There aren't really any personal items or clothing left from her son, so I'm assuming he took all of that when he moved out.

The best part of the room, however, is the huge window overlooking the front of the house, which I've slid up a bit to let in some air. I wonder if Mason ever used this window to sneak out. It slides up instead of out like my window at Dario's, and it's large enough that a person could easily fit through. A very motivated person could jump out onto the garage from here and shimmy their way down.

From what I know of Mason from the twins, I could see him doing that back in the day, but then again Natalia is so cool

that Mason probably never needed to sneak out; he could just walk out the front door.

“My dad,” I answer Jason, continuing to sort through the clothes I brought. I dumped them all out on the bed since I was so dazed I don’t remember what I put in, and I’ve realized I did a terrible job packing. So far, I’ve counted seven pairs of jeans, three pairs of yoga pants, five shirts, two pairs of shorts, one bra, and forty-two pairs of underwear. No socks, no shoes, no pajamas so far. At least I was coherent enough to grab Jason’s hoodie I kept from when the car was towed, which I carefully hid in one of the empty drawers before he could see it and decide he wants to reclaim it.

“Has he called you?” Jason asks.

“I turned off my phone after lunch, but I doubt it.”

I try not to let the hurt show on my face as I fold the eighth pair of jeans, but Jason sees right through me.

“He’s an idiot, Siena.”

“Logically, I know that. But my heart isn’t listening.”

Jason pulls the pants out of my hands and tugs me down to sit on the bed with him, scattering all the neatly folded clothes. I throw the pile of thongs that was hidden from his view into the duffel before he spots them.

“That man and what he thinks of you has no bearing on who you are. What *anyone* thinks of you doesn’t matter.”

“I know,” I say, getting comfortable against his chest.

It’s easier to open up and be vulnerable when I don’t have to look directly at his piercing eyes. “But after Mom and Aunt Julie, he was my last chance at a family, at feeling like I belonged somewhere, and he wants nothing to do with me. It sucks.”

Jason’s body is tense, and his voice is hard when he says, “He doesn’t deserve you.”

“Maybe not. But I can’t stop myself from mourning what I never had. I always wanted a real family, like what you have here. You and Natalia and Jackson are so at ease and comfortable with one another. You’re a *family*, and you belong together. I’ve never had that; I’ve never belonged anywhere.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is. I didn’t belong in LA with my mom or later with Aunt Julie. I don’t belong with my dad or at school or even here in King City. I don’t belong anywhere.”

Jason tilts my head up and pins me with a hard look, his blue eyes blazing when he states, “Hey, you belong with me. There’s nowhere in this entire world I could possibly be that feels as right as when we’re together.”

Butterflies surface in my stomach, and I try to look away, but Jason holds me in place. I hastily wipe a tear that escapes. “I’m sorry, I don’t know why I’m crying.”

“You’re allowed to feel your emotions, Siena.”

“I know, but I don’t *want* to let Dario make me feel like shit. My own father *hates* me. He said looking at me makes him physically sick. He kept comparing me to my mom, and he’ll never even bother getting to know the real me because of that. I don’t want that to bother me, but it really does. Why am I so unlovable?”

Jason wraps his arms around me and pulls me to his chest. The force of it pulls us off-balance, and I fall half on top of him on the bed. He doesn’t do anything to adjust or push me off him, instead settling me into his chest.

He smells like cedarwood and spice, and his arms tighten around me as he says, “You are not unlovable.”

“That’s the third house I’ve been kicked out of.” It’s not a complaint or something that can be left up to interpretation—it’s a fact.

Jason’s sigh is understanding. “Sometimes that’s for the best. Sometimes we’re better off without certain people in our

lives, even if it makes us a little sad at first.”

“Who are you better off without?” I ask, my fingers playing with the soft fabric of his shirt.

“Lots of people. But the people I have in my life now more than make up for it. I wouldn’t change a single thing.”

He has amazing people in his life, and I’m grateful to be one of them. I can’t stop myself from asking, “Did you have an absolutely horrible excuse for a dad too?”

“Sure did. My dad tried to kill me.”

He says it so casually and tonelessly that a small laugh escapes me. “You’re always trying to break the tension with some ridiculous joke. Thank you.”

Jason chuckles, brushing my hair away from my forehead as I settle back against his chest. “One day you’re going to be so shocked when you realize I’m usually being completely serious.”

“Are you being serious right now?”

“My father’s in jail.”

I push off his chest and shift to look down at him.

He’s lying with his head on the pillow, looking up at me with this little unbothered smirk, making it impossible to tell if he’s joking or if he’s just so unbothered by it all that it truly doesn’t matter.

“Did he actually try to kill you?”

“Yes. My brothers, too, and Aiden’s fiancé, Thea.

Multiple times.”

My jaw drops. “Holy crap! What? Why? Are you all okay?”

He reaches for my waist and skims his finger along the skin that’s exposed from my shirt riding up. Tingles immediately trail behind his finger, but I force myself not to shiver at the contact and to stay focused on the conversation.

“We’re fine; he’s locked up now. It’s a really long story.”

“I’d love to listen if you want to share.”

His lips tug up at the side, and his finger continues tracing unidentifiable patterns on my skin. “With you?”

I’m happy to share. But that’s a shitty story for a different day, and we have enough sadness for today.”

He doesn’t feel like rehashing the past right now, and I’m not going to push him. He’ll tell me in his own time.

“Well, I’m here whenever you want someone to listen.”

Jason studies my face when he admits, “His name was Andrew Kessler.”

I purse my lips in thought. “Is that name supposed to mean anything?”

“He was the mayor of King City. And he was running for governor before he was arrested.”

A strangled gasp escapes me. “How did I not know that? How does no one harass you about it like they do with my mom being Florence?”

Jason shrugs, and his other hand lands on my waist.

Now that both his large hands are on me, it’s almost impossible to focus, and I can’t tell if he’s doing it on purpose to distract me or not.

“I’ve lived here my whole life; I’m old news. You’re the shiny new toy in town.”

I playfully tug the collar of his shirt. “Is that what I am to you? A shiny new toy?”

Jason’s smile shows off his perfect teeth and transforms his face so lethally, it should be a crime to look that handsome without even trying. “Please, I’ll never get bored of you.”

“That wasn’t a no—” My own squeal cuts me off when Jason suddenly tightens his grip on my waist and throws me onto the bed, quickly shifting us and pinning me under him.

His eyes are lit up mischievously, and his lips graze mine when he whispers, “It was a stupid question.”

My heart picks up speed. His body is practically flush with mine so I can feel him everywhere, and all I want to do is lift my head and close that minuscule distance between his lips and mine and do what I’ve wanted to do all day—kiss him.

He moves to put me out of my misery by slowly bringing his lips to mine, and my eyelids flutter closed.

Before our lips really properly touch, a voice pours ice-cold water down my spine, shocking us apart.

“Natalia sent me up here to remind you that there should be no ‘hanky-panky.’ Her words, not mine,” Jackson says from his spot in the doorway, where he’s averted his gaze and blocked his peripheral vision with his hand. “But if there is, she said she put condoms in the bedside drawer, but I’m right next door so try to keep the moaning down—”

Jason silences him by lobbing a decorative pillow at his head, and Jackson ducks into the hallway, his delighted cackling following his retreat.

Beside me now, Jason releases a disgruntled breath before saying, “Sorry about him.”

I turn on my side to face him, disappointed we were interrupted but amused by the brothers nonetheless. “You apologize for him a lot.”

“He does things that deserve being apologized for a lot,” he states seriously but with a hint of affection.

“I think he’s funny.”

“Maybe funny-looking,” he mumbles.

I bite back a smile. “You know you’re identical twins, right?”

His brow furrows adorably. “I’m way better-looking than he is, and that fact won’t change no matter how many times he alters his contact name in my phone.”

We erupt into laughter, and peaceful warmth settles over me. Here we are, talking about absolutely nothing substantial and being silly, and I feel so happy and content.

I could lie here talking about nothing with Jason forever.

When we calm down a bit, I say, “So, we both have infamous parents from King City, huh? Florence and Andrew.”

He tugs on a strand of my hair. “We have a lot more in common than you’d think.”

“Yeah, but your dad tried to *kill* you. And here I am complaining about *my* father.”

“We’re both allowed to have shitty fathers, it’s not a competition.”

“You might win if it were.”

He chuckles, pulling me back to lie with him. “I do like winning.”

I settle against his chest, and his arm wraps around my back to pull me close. He’s so warm and solid beneath me, and his heart beats steady against my resting palm.

I snuggle my face deeper into his side and inhale that calming masculine scent that’s so distinctively Jason, until my entire body relaxes. This may be my new favorite spot in the entire world.

“Thank you for sharing that with me,” I say.

“Thank you for letting me be a part of your story.”

“Even if it’s a shitty one where everyone hates me?”

We’ve finally settled into a comfortable position, so when he pulls away, it instantly makes me want to complain about missing him.

“You hear that?” he asks.

I try to focus and listen, but all I hear is the television downstairs, blaring what sounds like a shooting video game

underneath Jackson swearing and talking to someone on what I assume is a headset.

“It’s raining,” Jason answers for me.

I glance at the window. It’s dark out, but we still hear the steady, unmistakable stream of rain, none of which spills inside past the mesh screen.

“So? It’s been raining off and on all day.”

Jason pulls off his socks, tossing them to the corner of the room. As he reaches for my borrowed ones and peels them off, I sit up.

“What are you doing?”

He grabs my hand and pulls me off the bed. “You need cheering up, and I know exactly what’ll do the trick.”

“And what’s that?”

“We’re going to dance in the rain,” he declares confidently. “You love that.”

He wants to voluntarily go outside in the pouring rain in the dark in the middle of a suburb and dance to no music with me?

“But you don’t.”

He looks affronted by the statement. “I do so. If it’s with you, watching you smile and laugh and do that little shoulder wiggle while you dance, then it’s the happiest place in the world for me.”

A fluttering sensation fills my chest, leaving me giddy with excitement. He is the sweetest boy imaginable, and I can’t believe I’m standing in his house.

“I’ve always loved dancing in the rain, being barefoot and connected to the Earth, feeling calm and at peace and like all your problems don’t matter. I’ve loved it ever since I was little. But when I got older, I kept doing it because it made me feel connected to my mom.” A sad ache replaces the giddy feeling in my chest. “But apparently, I made that all up. Dancing in the rain wasn’t something I did with my mom. I

wanted to hold on to the good memories so badly that I forgot she stopped dancing with me forever ago.”

Jason tilts his head, considering my words. “Does dancing in the rain make you happy?”

“My mom—”

“Forget your mom. Does dancing in the rain make you, seventeen-year-old Siena Amato, happy?”

I think back to the last time we danced in the rain together. Not the times we were caught in a downpour, but the last time Jason and I twirled around and jumped and rolled in the rain together. It was after I ran out of Brandon’s house, feeling the lowest I had in a very long time. But in that moment, dancing in the rain with Jason, I didn’t just feel genuinely happy, I forgot about all my problems. And I’m not naive enough to believe it was solely because of the rain.

I finally answer, “If it’s with you, yes.”

Jason’s smile is freeing and breathtaking. “Then screw your mom. It doesn’t matter if she did or didn’t dance with you. Maybe you created happy memories in your mind, but we’ll replace those with real ones.” He tugs me closer to him, and I melt into his embrace. “It’s going to be *our* thing, and every time it rains, you won’t think about your mom or feeling out of place. Instead, you’re going to think of *me* and how you’re right where you belong.”

Tilting my head up, I trail an adoring finger along his strong jaw. “How are you real? How are you so perfect?”

Jason’s chuckle is soft and gentle. “I’m not perfect, but you and I together are.”

Before I can swoon over how amazing he is, Jason pulls me from the room, and I trail behind him all the way down the stairs and out the front door. Before we can step off the covered porch, I yank him to a stop.

“Wait, Jason. Natalia just cleaned today. Isn’t she going to be upset when we come back soaking wet and get the house all

muddy?”

Jason waves the very valid concern off. “Please.

Natalia raised three boys, sometimes four if you count Aiden, plus she always had the house full of Mason’s and our rowdy friends. She’s seen way worse and loves it.”

Before I can protest any further, Jason’s fingers entwine with mine, and he tugs me from under the covered porch.

I squeal as the cold water hits me, but Jason is unaffected, laughing as he leads me to a spot in the middle of the lawn. My toes squelch in the grass, my hair hangs limp and heavy around my face, and my shirt plasters to my skin, but all those sensations disappear once Jason yanks me into his chest and wraps his arms around me. Now all I feel is his chest against mine—our shirts so soaked through we might as well be naked—and his palms rough and reassuring on my back. My stomach drops when his eyes, so beautiful and sincere, peer deep into my soul.

“You’re ridiculous,” I say when he starts swaying us side to side to a song only he can hear.

“And you’re beautiful when you look like a drowned rat,” he jokes, and I feign indignation.

He’s probably right, especially when I’m beside someone who looks like he should be wielding a hose and posing for an erotic firefighters calendar. The rain only enhances his sharp edges and sculpted shoulders, and even though it’s dark out, his eyes seem to shine extra bright.

But though I’m sure I do look like a drowned rat, I don’t feel ugly. In fact, with Jason here spinning me around and looking at me like there’s not a single other thing in the universe more important than this moment with me, I feel like the most beautiful person in the world.

We dance together, hold hands, jump through puddles, twirl each other around, spin in sync with the raindrops falling from the sky, and create random dance moves that should never see the light of day on a real dance floor.

“Are you cheered up yet?” Jason asks as he spins me and then, smoother than a man his size has any right to be, transitions the spin into a dip.

I laugh when he sweetens the deal by planting a kiss on the tip of my nose.

Still suspended hovering over the ground, I say, “Yes.”

Jason’s eyes narrow at me. “We can do better than that.”

He rights me and releases me, and I want to ask in what world is him letting go of me the answer, but he takes a few steps backward and holds his arms out toward me.

Bending his knees slightly, he gestures with his hands.

“Run at me.”

Did I hear him correctly over the rain? “What?”

“Run at me. I’m going to lift you, maybe spin you around a bit. It’ll be romantic as fuck.”

I burst out laughing at more than just the words *romantic as fuck*. Jason wants to lift me in the air suspended over his head with straight arms?

“Like the scene in *Dirty Dancing*?” I ask, and his grin is so charming and confident I want to squish his face.

“Yes, but better, because we’re in the rain.” He curls his fingers again, summoning me. “Come on. The worst that happens is we fall, and I catch you and I still get to hear your laugh, so we have nothing to lose.”

I don’t doubt his ability to physically lift me—but I do doubt my own ability to hold my body straight, *plus* we’re soaking wet and slippery.

“Don’t overthink it,” he orders, “don’t think about *anything*. Clear your mind and just be in this moment with me.”

He’s right. I’m still holding on to the tension from Brandon and Gia and Zia Stella and Dario. I’m way too stressed for a

seventeen-year-old, and I'm sick of that constant crushing feeling that stops me from taking a full breath.

I blow out a breath and shake the tension from my shoulders. Jason must realize I've relented because he gets into position again, an excited yet determined look on his face.

"Ready?" I ask.

"Do it, baby," he urges, and with that, I clear my mind and run at him.

I don't even know what happens, but one moment I'm running at him and the next I'm suspended in the air, my arms out straight beside me, and the flood of adrenaline makes me feel invincible, as if I can conquer anything.

"Holy shit!" I exclaim, then start laughing, but the laugh causes me to lose my balance and pitch forward, and my life flashes before my eyes. Before I go headfirst over Jason's shoulder and destroy my face on the ground, he quickly adjusts to save me, so we both tumble to the lawn. We land in a pile together on the grass, Jason taking the brunt of the fall, but neither of us is hurt too badly if the laughing is any indication.

"That was so stupidly dangerous," I gasp from where I'm sprawled on top of him.

"It was." He grins. "Let's do it again."

"Absolutely not!"

"But I think we can—"

"We're not doing that again." I cut him off, and he relents with a chuckle.

"Fine. But you weren't going to get hurt. You know I had you, right?"

The humor slowly fades with that statement as I gaze at his face. I know he had me. Jason always has me.

"I know you did," I tell him, brushing back the hair plastered to his forehead.

He sobers up at my words, and I'm drawn in by the intensity in his eyes, completely incapable of looking away. His chest rises and falls beneath me, and one hand grips my waist to hold me in place while the other runs up my spine and clutches the back of my neck. He smells like earth and dampened soil and something entirely Jason, and my stomach somersaults when his hand tightens its grip on my neck. His lips are full, and his nose is straight, and even though he's so devastatingly handsome that it's almost overwhelming, it's who he is as a person that makes me feel so weightless and complete.

Sometimes I feel like he's so perfect for me, I was never actually acquitted for Stan's death, and I'm still locked up, just making Jason up in my mind.

His voice is a husky whisper when he asks, "Do you always stare at boys who are completely and utterly in love with you, or just me?"

My heart stops as I take in his words. "You're in love with me?" I whisper.

"Completely and utterly," he repeats. "I'm so in love with you it sometimes scares me."

My breath hitches and my mind blanks, and for a moment I fear I may burst into tears.

Jason is in love with *me*. Me! This boy, who's so caring and intelligent and sweet and thoughtful and considerate and can have his pick of any girl, is in love with *me*!

Other than the rare occasions Gia does, I haven't heard someone tell me they love me in so long. A small part of me thought that maybe I was the problem, that I was unlovable, but that can't be true because *Jason* is in love with *me*!

And as we lie here in the mud and rain, and I look right into his beautiful eyes, I know for certain how I feel about him. He listens to me, truly listens, and makes me feel heard and understood like no one else ever has.

His presence is an instant comfort, letting me know that everything is going to be okay just because he's here now. I'm

captivated by his smile, by his laugh, by that spot between his brows that furrows when he's deep in thought, by the way his voice softens when he speaks to me. All my worries and problems, even the whole world, fade away when I'm with him, and all that matters is me and him and the way we make each other feel. He's the only one who's ever really seen me for *me*, and I know that I am, and probably always have been, in love with him.

"I love you too," I admit with a shaky voice, like I'm scared that saying it aloud will burst this dream I'm in and send me hurtling back to reality. But those fears are baseless, because this isn't a dream, and Jason smiles that perfect smile he reserves just for me and blows out a relieved breath.

"Thank fuck," he says, making me laugh before he pulls my head down to meet him for a kiss.

The moment his lips touch mine, my entire body is overcome with a feeling of joy, of *rightness*, like it knows Jason is and always will be the person for me. His lips are soft and warm, moving against mine with a tenderness that makes my heart flutter and sends electricity through me. Our mouths fit together perfectly, as if they were made for each other, and I lose myself in the taste of him.

He deepens the kiss, and it becomes more urgent and passionate as we ride the high of our admission. We've kissed plenty of times, but this time feels different. This time, we're kissing as two people who *love* each other, and that magnifies every touch, every taste, every sensation.

We're completely lost in each other as time stands still, like we're the only two people in existence. Jason's heartbeat is fast against my chest, mirroring my own, and it only fuels the fire burning within me.

The rain falls harder, but it only adds to the beauty of the moment. How beautiful that the first time I met him, I was alone and sad while lying in the rain, and now here we are, lying in the rain together, in love.

We finally pull apart, but Jason doesn't release his hold on me. I rest my forehead on his, our breath mingling in the damp air. His eyes lock with mine, and his are filled with the same love and desire I feel in my own heart.

"I think dancing in the rain is my new favorite thing to do in the universe," Jason admits. "Especially if it always ends like this."

My laugh is giddy and free, and I'm so high on Jason I never want to come down. "I didn't think it would get any better, but like everything, it's ten times better with you."

A boyish grin spreads across his face as he states, "You know you're stuck with me now, right?"

It's the best thing I've heard in forever.

"Promise?" I ask.

He leans in, capturing my lips once again, sealing the vow with a kiss that leaves me breathless and wanting more.

"Promise."

TWENTY-ONE

Despite the weekend being one of the worst of my life, but also one of the best, I somehow manage to go to school on Monday morning. I *am* still trying to qualify for scholarships, and that means attending school and getting my grades up.

Jackson drives both me and his brother to school, and we split up once inside to go to our lockers. But just as quickly as we separate, I wish we hadn't, because something very strange is going on. The usually noisy hallway is dead silent as I approach groups of kids who whisper and stare at me, giving me a wide berth as I pass them.

Even Thompson won't meet my eyes, and we've always had an amicable but silent friendship.

It's different than the first time this happened, when Brandon told the school I slept with him and shared explicit details that never happened. That time was excited, curious gossip; this time the silence and stares feel deeper, more pronounced.

I find Nyah at her locker, sorting through it, and rush to get to her. "Nyah!" I exclaim, glad to be with a friendly face, but she startles.

"Oh, hey, Siena ..."

I duck my head to escape the unnerving stares and whispers. "What the hell is going on?"

Nyah's eyes shift from side to side, and she takes an awkward step away from me. "You, uh ... haven't heard?"

I'm more confused than ever, and her behavior isn't helping. "No, please tell me."

Nyah closes her locker and chews on her lip, like she's debating exactly what to say. She's spared, though, when I notice Gia at the end of the hall. My sister spots me and breaks

into a run. Everyone sidesteps her, pointing and whispering like they were doing with me, and my heart drops.

“*Everyone knows!*” Gia cries breathlessly when she reaches me.

Everyone knows? Oh, shit. Everyone *knows*.

The blood drains from my face as realization dawns on me. Brandon did it: he sent out the photo evidence of what happened in LA, of my past and the fact that I was arrested, *why* I was arrested. With everything else going on this weekend, I completely forgot about Brandon and his threats, and clearly so did Gia.

“Everyone is talking about how you killed Stan!” Gia exclaims, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Oh, fuck,” I mutter, my temples pounding. I thought I’d have this under control, thought this scenario would never happen. Even though Brandon threatened me with it, I didn’t think he’d do it.

“They’re also ...” Nyah clears her throat, and she can’t look at me as she tries again. “They’re also saying you had something to do with Lily ...”

I stare at her, and she tucks her arms across her chest.

I can’t tell if Nyah’s not looking at me because she feels bad telling me or if she kind of believes it.

I’m stunned I even have to clarify, but I still declare,

“I had nothing to do with Lily!”

“Everyone is saying you did!” Gia says, dragging a hand down her face to wipe at the wetness. “Everyone keeps asking me what happened with Stan, if you really did something to Lily, and I’ve only been here for five minutes!”

The whispers and stares seem to be louder, more intense now that I know exactly what everyone’s saying.

The walls of the school close in, and my head spins. I reach out a hand and plant it on a closed locker when a wave of

dizziness hits.

They know I was arrested for killing Stan, and they know Lily disappeared when I showed up. Rumors have spread farther and faster with less information than that, and now my reputation here in King City is marred forever. Nobody will ever think differently of me no matter how much I protest or get to know them. Even *Nyah*, one of my only real friends here, has changed the way she views me because of this. The kicker is that she actually *knew* me, so I can only imagine what all the people who *don't* are thinking.

“There she is,” Brandon announces as he passes with his friends. “There’s the murderous whore.”

I don’t want to deal with Brandon right now; I’m too busy trying to breathe through the squeezing of my chest in the shrinking hallway where everyone is looking at me like a circus attraction.

Brandon stops in front of me, and I try to turn away from him. Unfortunately, he either doesn’t take the hint or simply doesn’t care, because he moves so he’s right in my face.

He looks at me like the dirt under his shoes when he says, “Everyone knows the truth about you now.

Everyone knows who you are. You were run out of LA, and now the same thing is going to happen here.”

Gia disappears at the sight of him, and I’m glad, because I don’t want her anywhere near him. But Nyah takes a step away, twisting her hands in front of her while chewing on her lip.

Brandon steps closer to me, but I still feel like there’s no air in the hall, so I back away. He follows, and I end up against the locker. He slams his palms beside my head, caging me in like he loves doing, and lowers his head to my eye level. His eyes are bloodshot, and the cinnamon of his gum fans my face when he whispers, “I told you what would happen. You sent me to voicemail every time I tried calling yesterday. All you

had to do was give me my goddamn phone back and this could've been avoided.”

My phone was off all weekend. It's *still* off.

I try to shove him away, but he resists, instead pushing against my hands and demanding, “Where is my *fucking* phone? I can make this so much worse for you than it already is.”

Not a single person in the crowded hallway intervenes, and anxiety squeezes my throat as I force out, “Get *off* of me, Brandon.”

He shifts his foot away, having learned from the last time I stomped on it to remove him from my space, and my brain whirls as I try to think of my options.

“Siena!” a voice calls from down the hall. It's Gia, and she's with Jason.

Brandon doesn't move from my space, nor does he lift his arms from where they've caged me in. He only turns his head to find Jason storming down the hallway. He's so pissed I can practically feel the steam coming out of his ears from here, and relief floods my body.

The only reason Jason hasn't killed Brandon like he's been itching to yet is because I've pleaded with him to drop it, begged him not to fight him and jeopardize his own future. Because he respects my wishes over his own need for vengeance, he's stayed away, but judging from the way he's storming down the hall, I think that's completely gone out the window. He's focused on Brandon with a look that promises pain, promises to *destroy* him for the way he's backed me into the lockers *again*.

Brandon must have *some* sense of self-preservation because he backs off me slightly, and that gives me my opportunity. Focusing energy and strength, I drive my leg up and knee him right in the balls.

“Oh, *fuck!* You *bitch!*” he shouts, stumbling away from me.

His friends are standing back watching us with wide eyes. They didn't hear anything Brandon said about his phone, but they sure do hear the swear words leaving his mouth as he hunches over.

Jason's here now, and I grab his arm and clutch it to my chest as he passes, forcing him to abandon his single-minded goal of getting to Brandon.

Brandon straightens up, rolling his neck out like he's preparing for the imminent fight, and I squeeze Jason's bicep harder to my chest. I'm not worried about Jason getting hurt; I'm still worried about him getting in trouble.

Before either boy can decide what to do, a commanding voice demands, "What is going on here?" It's a teacher who's emerged from her classroom. Another stands beside her, and they both look around at the scene expectantly.

"The bell will be ringing any second now. Get to class, everyone!"

No one moves. Brandon and Jason don't drop their gazes, and Brandon's nostrils flare as he takes a step forward.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Jason says. "You think you're the only one with blackmail material? What do you think will happen when everyone finds out what you've been doing? What you've been hiding from them?"

Brandon's face morphs as rage takes over, and he attempts to lunge at Jason, but his friends grab him, holding him back, reminding him there are two teachers herding kids to class only a few steps away.

Over his friends' shoulders, Brandon, red-faced and fuming, shouts, "I knew you had my phone! I fucking knew it! I want it back! I'm *getting* it back!"

His friends drag him away as the teachers force everyone to disperse, and Jason stands guard beside me until he's out of sight.

“You okay?” he asks me, and I release my death grip on him.

“Yeah, he technically didn’t touch me,” I say as we move to the side so we’re not directly in the middle of the hall. People are still gawking and talking about us, and Gia’s friend Lindsey runs over to her.

“Do you know something I don’t?” I ask Jason. “Did you see how he reacted? He was *furious*. What were you talking about?”

“Nothing at all. I was bluffing.”

“Well, it worked. He basically confirmed he’s hiding something on his phone that people would freak out about if they learned the truth! We have to get into his phone. Tonight, we should—”

A beep sounds before a woman’s voice fills the hall from the school-wide intercom system. “Siena Amato, please come to the principal’s office immediately. Siena Amato to the principal’s office.”

“Shit. Do you think they’ve heard about everything going on? Have you heard about the picture?” I ask Jason, who grimaces in response. That must be a yes.

We walk together to the office, and with Jason beside me, the gawking and stares don’t seem to bother me anymore. Jason says, “When Gia came to grab me, she explained that Brandon was blackmailing you for the phone in exchange for not releasing the picture. Why didn’t you tell me?”

He’s not angry, but he seems worried, even slightly hurt.

“I didn’t intentionally not tell you,” I admit, stopping in front of the office. “With everything going on, it was the least of my worries, and it slipped my mind.”

When he frowns slightly, I add, “You know I trust you with everything, and if Gia hadn’t run away and I hadn’t gotten kicked out, I would’ve told you. But I wasn’t planning on

giving in to his demands anyway, so this was always a possibility.”

The door to the office swings open, and Zia Stella comes out, followed closely by Principal Anderson.

“Siena!” Zia Stella runs to me, engulfing me in a tight hug that knocks me slightly off-balance.

I’m too confused to return the hug. “What are you doing here?”

She pulls back to examine me. The bruising on my face has developed into an ugly deep purple, and my one eye is slightly swollen.

“You haven’t answered your phone all weekend,” Zia Stella says. “I’ve been so worried about you! The only reason I didn’t start a manhunt was because Gia told me she saw Jason pick you up and that you promised her you’d come to school today.”

She tried calling me? She was *worried* about me? I didn’t think anyone would be trying to get in contact with me, didn’t realize my disappearance would affect her so much. I’m not used to having someone worry about me or having to keep people updated on my whereabouts.

“I’m ... sorry?” I say, though it comes out like a question.

Principal Anderson steps forward. She’s still as intense and commanding as I remember her. “Let’s talk in my office, please.” She ushers us into the main office, where the secretaries gawk at us before hastily pretending to get back to work when Principal Anderson glares at them, then into her private office. I must still be in shock, because I follow without any complaints or questions, without even saying goodbye to Jason, and sit in the chair beside Zia Stella.

From the other side of the desk, Principal Anderson levels her stare at me. “I’m assuming you know why I’ve called you in here?”

Is it because I kneed Brandon in the balls? But Zia Stella is here, and she wouldn't have gotten here so fast over that. Instead of guessing, I do what Jason has advised me to do in the past and don't admit to anything.

Principal Anderson fills the silence. "Last night, I was made aware of some rumors spreading about you. I called your guardian as soon as I got in this morning. The first one didn't answer, but your aunt is listed as your second emergency contact."

I glance at Zia Stella, whose eyes are watering. She worried about where I was this weekend. She dropped everything to come into school for me today.

"And I'm glad I called," Principal Anderson continues. She intertwines her fingers on the desk, leaning forward and getting *more* serious, if that's possible. "I'm very sorry for the picture that's circulating. It was clearly a violation of your rights and privacy, and it shouldn't have been taken in the first place. I'm having meetings with all teachers on their lunch breaks to instruct them on how to proceed should it come up in their classrooms."

That's nice of her, I guess? Principal Anderson hates me after the last time I wound up in her office, so it's kind of cool of her to be on my side for this, or at least to do her job as principal.

"And what about everyone who keeps sharing the picture?" Zia Stella prompts. "There has to be something we can do about that, right?"

"Unfortunately, there's nothing we can do about that," Principal Anderson says, and it isn't a surprise to me. It's not a private school network; you can't cut people off from the internet. "We can help you file an investigation report with the police to find who took the actual picture, but that would probably need to be done in the city where the case was handled."

And the odds of them finding out who took the photo are probably slim to none. It's just another headache on top of everything else there is to deal with.

Zia Stella leans forward, completely focused. Mom never showed up if she was called to school for us, Aunt Julie didn't even know which school we went to, and apparently Dario didn't bother answering when he saw it was the school calling. Yet Zia Stella is here, asking questions and taking an interest as if what happens to me matters to her. It makes me feel weird, like warm and fuzzy but also light-headed.

"So how do we proceed from here?" Zia Stella asks.

"I know how awful kids can be, and I've been reading the comments and seeing what people are posting about Siena, and they're ..." She trails off, wincing apologetically when she looks at me. "What happens now?"

Principal Anderson clears her throat in a way I instinctively know is her preparing to deliver news parents won't like. "We're suggesting that Siena be removed from school for the time being."

"What?" I exclaim, jumping up from my seat. "I'm being expelled?"

I take back thinking she was cool and nice for taking my side. This is not taking my side! This is getting rid of the problem by kicking it under the couch and pretending it doesn't exist. I've been hounding Jason to leave Brandon alone in case this exact thing happened to him, and it's happening to me anyway. I didn't even do anything!

"No, not expulsion. Please sit back down," Principal Anderson calmly says, and I begrudgingly sink back into the seat even though I feel itchy and hot. "For your own comfort and safety, this might be the best course of action.

We can arrange for homework to be sent home, and you can email your teachers any questions you may have."

"So, you *are* kicking me out."

This is a joke. I was trying so hard to be good, and everything is being taken from me anyway. I finally decided that school actually matters and that I want to take college seriously, and I'm getting kicked out. All I wanted was to be a normal teenager, and now not only does everyone know what happened in LA—and no doubt it has already spread all over the internet and ruined my life and any chances of anonymity—but I'm also being forced out of school. I've been kicked out of my house and school all in a matter of forty-eight hours.

Zia Stella must realize how upset I am, because she gives my arm a reassuring touch and says in her calm doctor voice, "We don't have to decide anything at this very moment, right, Principal Anderson? Why don't we take the day to think about it before deciding if being pulled from school is really the best option?"

The question is directed at me, but Principal Anderson is the one who relents. "All right. Take the week, and we can revisit the issue then. Hopefully, things will have calmed down, and it will be safe for Siena to return."

That's a bullshit answer that I see right through; I'm not going to be allowed back.

The realization travels through me in a burning rage. I can't sit here any longer and let the resentment and irritation continue brewing, so I jump up and storm out of the office, not caring if I've been dismissed or not. It doesn't matter; I'm not going to be allowed back anyway.

The secretaries jump to attention when I open the door, quickly going back to their computers as if they weren't all wondering what was being said behind the closed door, and I stomp through the office.

"Siena!" Zia Stella chases after me, but I don't stop until I'm in the hall. Kids are all in class, so it's deserted, but Jason's still there, leaning against the wall. He straightens when he sees me.

"Hey, what's going on?"

“I’ve been expelled!”

His jaw drops. “*What?*”

“She’s not expelled,” Zia Stella says, appearing by my side. “She’s taking the week off to let this blow over a bit.”

It’s not going to blow over in a week. People still talk about shit that happened years ago, and that’s small stuff like people streaking during a football game or planting a tree in the middle of the soccer field. It’s not going to blow over, and I’m not going to be allowed back.

“Yeah. Brandon releases the photo, and I get expelled.

Absolutely ridiculous.”

“Wait, what?” Zia Stella asks. I was so pissed I forgot she was still here.

I open my mouth to brush it off, but she beats me to it. “No, don’t ‘nothing’ me. Let’s get out of here and talk about it in the car.”

Her stern voice doesn’t leave room for argument, and I sigh. I tell Jason I’ll text him later and follow Zia Stella outside.

When we’re seated in her car, she turns her brown eyes on me, staring deep into my soul. “Tell me everything, Siena. From the beginning.”

We stare at each other for a long moment; the only noise is our breathing, the purring of the engine, and faint nature sounds coming in from my cracked-open window.

I don’t know if it’s that I’ve had an emotional morning or if I’m cracking from the pressure or if I’m sick of having to do everything on my own or if I just trust Zia Stella, but some part of my brain decides to open my mouth and confess the need-to-know things. I tell her I have Brandon’s phone because I’m convinced there’s evidence of Lily’s disappearance on it, that he broke in to steal it back but didn’t find it, that he threatened me with the picture if I didn’t return it, and that I forgot about it after what happened with Dario.

She listens intently, not objecting or giving anything away with her facial expressions. When I'm done, I take a breath and melt against the seat, feeling lighter even though I've just confessed to stealing Brandon's phone and withholding information from her, which I know she hates.

Zia Stella doesn't ask how I got Brandon's phone or poke holes in my claims about him. She does, however, take a few moments to process before she asks, "Why didn't you tell me? You could've come to me after what happened with your father, after Brandon threatened you with the photo."

I shrug, suddenly feeling too hot in the small space despite my open window letting in the cold autumn air.

"Why would I have come to you?"

She looks like she wants to pull her hair out, and she raises her voice slightly. "Because you're supposed to go to your parents with stuff like this!"

I can't help the bitterness from leaking into my tone when I say, "I don't *have* parents. Florence is Florence, and Dario told me he hates me before he kicked me out."

Zia Stella's anger deflates instantly, and she's quiet for a moment before saying, "You're right."

I don't say anything else, and she seems lost in thought as she puts on her seat belt and drives us off school property.

"Where are we going?" I ask when she turns in the direction of Pinewood Street.

"I'm bringing you home."

"Dario's house is not my home."

"Your father's an idiot. This is your home, and you're welcome here."

She's right about the first half at least, but not so much the second. "No, I'm not. I'm not staying anywhere I'm not wanted, and this house has never felt like a home to me. Even if I were welcome, I don't want to stay here."

Zia Stella pulls into the driveway in front of the missing garage and parks. “Please, let’s just go inside.

You can think about it a little more, and we can talk out everything that’s happened. Dario will be working late, so we won’t be bothered. I’ll call work and tell them I can’t come in today so we can sort it all out.”

I don’t want to talk to Zia Stella, and I don’t want to sort it all out. I want to be left alone and stew in peace.

“Don’t bother,” I say, taking off my seat belt. “I’ll go inside, but only because I need more clothes—I packed terribly, these aren’t even my shoes—but then I’m leaving.

Jason will get me after school.”

Zia Stella searches my face, and whatever she sees there makes her sigh in defeat. “I’m not going to push you, but I am going to find a way to fix this. If you want to be alone today, I get it. I’ll see what I can do about everything going on. Thank you for trusting me with the truth.”

I don’t look at her, *can’t* look at her. She’s speaking so earnestly, so fervently, that I believe her. Instead of replying, I exit the car before I’m able to decipher any of the emotions swirling around inside me that make my throat feel tight.

Shutting the door and turning, I still when I spot Officer Liu standing in his driveway, wearing his uniform and a smug smile.

He doesn’t move closer to me, and I don’t move closer to him. We just stare at each other from the driveways, separated by a lawn of green grass, just like that very first day all those weeks ago when I first came here, when I first met Lily.

“I’ve seen the picture,” he starts. “It’s viral all over the internet because you’re Florence’s daughter.”

Even though I’m already certain, I still ask, “Are you the one who gave Brandon the photo?”

Officer Liu only shrugs. “Everyone knows you’re a killer, and now it’s only a matter of time before the truth about what

you did to Lily comes out.”

Before I can screech that I’m not involved with what happened to Lily, Zia Stella rolls down her window. “Is there a problem here?”

I don’t think she heard anything he said, or she wouldn’t be acting all polite, but she can definitely sense the tension in the air.

Officer Liu twirls his keys around his finger. “Nope.

See you around, Stella.” He unlocks the door and enters his house, and Zia Stella doesn’t back away from the driveway until after I punch in the code to the door in the garage and close it behind me.

TWENTY-TWO

I take advantage of being home alone for the day by taking my time to properly pack. Not only that, but I also help myself to whatever food is in Dario's fridge and pantry, and even take a steaming shower to de-stress. By the time Gia gets home from school, I'm clean, slightly less angry, and have most of my things packed.

"Siena?" she calls, running up the stairs and finding me in my room, trying to shove my shoes into an over-stuffed drawstring bag.

"Hey, you okay?" I ask, taking in her disheveled state.

"Oh my God, it was awful today! You're all everyone can talk about. Everyone kept asking me about what happened, and I just kept yelling, 'It was self-defense!' before running away." She collapses onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. "I think I'm going to stay home tomorrow; I can't go through that again."

Well, she can join the club, since I'm not going to school either.

"Did Brandon bother you?" I ask. He was *pissed* at me today, and I don't want that anger transferred to Gia.

Jason assured me he'd look out for her.

"No, I didn't see him after this morning. But you should've seen how worried Jason was when I ran to find him and told him Brandon was harassing you. He shoved a few kids out of his way and everything." She gives a small laugh before frowning. "Brianna said people were telling her about how you kicked Brandon in the balls this morning. I told her he deserved it, and now I think she's a little angry with me even though she agrees he's been an ass lately."

I pause my failed packing attempts to look at her.

She's the same girl she was last week, still a pixie cut that's starting to grow out, still tiny, still big, innocent brown eyes, yet she's like a different person lately. The last time Brandon and I got into it, Gia took Brianna's side, and now not only is she trying to be accountable for her actions, but she also defended me to her friend and had my back when the entire school questioned her. She withstood the stares, whispers, questions, and accusations all day, by herself, when she always said she'd never be able to. And sure, she doesn't want to go to school tomorrow, but she shouldn't have to, and that does nothing to take away from the fact that she *is* strong, and she *is* capable of standing up to scrutiny.

Before I can express any of that, there's a pounding on the front door, so hard it feels like the whole house rattles.

"That must be Jason," I tell Gia when she sends me a questioning look. "Why's he banging like that?"

Gia jumps up from the bed. "I'll let him in."

"Thanks. And, Gia, you did amazing today. I'm really proud of you for holding your head high amidst everything going on."

She purses her lips, as if she hadn't considered that before, and the aggressive banging starts up again, this time not letting up at all.

Gia rolls her eyes at the noise. "He must be really eager to see you or something, but that's really rude. I'll be back."

He's been messaging me throughout the day, making sure I'm okay and triple- and quadruple-checking that I'm sure I don't want him to leave school early to come get me. I've been reassuring him that I'm all right and to stay to watch over Gia, that I'll be upset if he skips out on today's history test because of me, but it meant a lot that he'd drop everything and stay with me if I let him. It doesn't matter that he wasn't here because I'm still going home with him, still making paella with Natalia for dinner, still goofing off with Jackson, still

spending time with Jason talking about nothing and everything before bed.

Gia's voice carries up the stairs as she opens the door.

"You know, you really shouldn't be—" Her gasp cuts off whatever she was saying, and I hear something bang.

"Hey! Stop! You can't do that!"

I drop the bag in my hands as heavy feet stomp up the stairs.

"Siena!" Gia screams from downstairs over the thunderous footsteps, her own steps echoing behind. "He pushed past me!"

I only make it a few steps before Brandon, as large and angry and unhinged as ever, storms into my room.

He doesn't stop until he's grabbed me by the biceps, shaking me so hard it makes me dizzy.

"Where is my phone?" he yells in my face, spittle flying. "Give me my fucking phone!"

His shake is so forceful that I slip on the rug, and we both go tumbling to the floor. He lands on top of me, his heavy body crushing the air from my lungs. Pain shoots up my arms from how tightly he's gripping me, and the pressure on them intensifies when he pushes against them to kneel, his knees on either side of my body, trapping me.

"I swear to *fuck*, if you don't give it to me right now, I'll fucking end you!" he yells, rattling me so my head bangs against the floor.

He's still yelling, his mouth aggressively opening and closing inches away from my face, but I can't comprehend what he's saying.

Blackness edges in around my eyes, and it's so hard for me to breathe that my chest hurts. My head throbs, I'm disoriented, my lungs are tight, and panic sets in. Is this how Lily felt? Is this what he did to her?

I try everything I can—squirming, kicking, pushing—but he doesn't budge, just stays hovering over me, yelling and shaking me. I don't want to go out like this, not after everything, not in Dario's house, not with Gia in the room, crying and yelling something that sounds foreign to my ears.

Forcing myself to breathe, I calm the panic enough to hear him demand, "Where is it? Tell me!"

"And what if I don't?" I shoot back, unable to help myself. "What are you going to do? Are you going to hurt me like you did Lily? Do to me what you did to her?"

He's confused for a moment and lets up the tiniest bit. "Lily? What are you going on about? I just want my phone, and you're making this so fucking difficult!" His eyes are wild as he scans me and the room around me, like the phone will pop out at him. He doesn't seem like himself right now; he seems frantic and out of control, and that scares me more than the cold, calculated Brandon I first met. It was easier to read that Brandon. I have no idea what the frenzied boy on top of me will do.

He releases a hand from my arm to bang a fist beside my head, making me flinch. "Just give it to me and I'll leave you alone. What don't you understand? This is important! Do you know what would happen if anyone found out I've been using? Scouts and colleges run if they even *hear* the word *steroids*! My life would be over if they found out. Give me my goddamn phone!"

What is he talking about? Using? Steroids?

He pounds his fist again, this time so close to my face I have to jerk to avoid being hit, and my heart rate triples.

I don't know what to do: I can't struggle against him, can't get him to budge off me. He's so heavy, so strong, I feel weak and so fucking useless against him.

There's noise behind us, Gia and something else, but my pulse is racing too fast in my ears to make out the sounds. I

can see her over Brandon's shoulder, and she creeps up, holding something high in her hand.

Oh no.

I have flashbacks to the motel, when she bashed Brandon over the head and almost killed him. I want away from Brandon, but I don't want Gia to accidentally kill him in the process. We got away with it twice—once with Stan and once at the motel—but we won't be able to a third time.

Slipping my free arm out from between us, I splay my hand over Brandon's face and push. "Gia, no!" I yell as she stands over Brandon, a terrified yet determined look on her face. "Don't!"

She's right over him now, and just when I think she's going to swing, sealing her fate, my mind catches up to my eyes. The object in her hand isn't something to whack him over the head with, it's her phone, and the other sounds I noticed earlier are coming from it.

"—off my sister!" she's crying, and someone from the phone is calling Brandon's name.

Brandon's not paying attention, he's still spiraling, and my confidence grows now that I've gotten an arm free and am still using it to push at his face.

There's thumping up the stairs as Brandon and I wrestle for dominance on the floor, him yelling about the phone and Gia yelling something about recording.

Someone else enters the room, and when I hear his voice, relief spreads through me.

Brandon doesn't hear him, though, and he's not prepared. There's a blur over me, and Brandon is tackled to the ground.

Rolling out of the way, I struggle to my knees and breathe through the panic, trying to calm my heaving lungs. Jason is holding Brandon down, a furious look contorting his features as he punches Brandon in the face once, twice, three times.

There's a crunch, and blood splatters. I think he broke Brandon's nose.

"What's happening? What's going on?" the voice from Gia's phone asks as she quickly points the camera away from the boys, and now that my brain fog is clearing, I realize what's happening.

"Jason!" I yell, but he's given in to the fury. He and Brandon are finally getting their shot at each other after all this time, and neither guy is letting up. They're both standing now, throwing punches and circling and grabbing each other. Brandon's face is all bloody, but he doesn't seem to notice.

"Jason, stop!" I try again, grabbing his arm. He glances at me, his eyes just as crazed as Brandon's, but they soften as they take me in. "Please."

Like it takes an obscene amount of effort, Jason pushes Brandon away and pulls me back with him, standing in front of me in case Brandon charges. But just because Jason's decided to stop fighting doesn't mean Brandon has. He continues his rush at us, and Jason meets him halfway, restraining him.

"I'm recording!" Gia yells, stepping closer to them and holding the phone up. "I video-called Brianna when I followed you up the stairs! I've been recording this whole time!"

Brandon doesn't hear her, not at first, not until another, more mature voice shouts, "Brandon Nathaniel Scott!"

I know the moment he hears it, the moment he realizes it's over for him, because all the fight leaves his body.

He slumps, and Jason's grip is the only thing keeping him upright.

Gia turns around so we can see her screen, revealing half of Brianna's face and, beside her, a middle-aged woman with Brandon's chestnut-colored hair. They're in a car, and the trees in the background are blurring by.

The woman, whom I recognize as his mom, speaks again. “We’re two minutes out! Brandon, you are in so much fucking trouble! Just wait until your father hears about this! How dare you act like that to Gia’s sister?”

You were hurting her, Brandon! And did you say *steroids*?

You’re on *steroids*? I swear to—” She continues, but I stop paying attention, meeting Jason’s eyes over Brandon’s shoulder.

Instantly, Jason releases him, and Brandon stumbles to hold his own weight. He’s completely still, all the rage and fury drained from him as he must be replaying everything that happened after he forced his way past Gia and up the stairs, along with everything he said.

Jason’s arm wraps around my waist, holding me up against him. He angles himself between me and Brandon even though the large boy is now sinking onto the floor, holding his head in his hands and muttering something that sounds like “I’m so fucked.”

“You okay?” Jason asks, brushing my hair from my face. His eyes are large and worried, and his chest is heaving like he’s still trying to control himself. “I dropped Jackson off at work, and when I pulled into the driveway, I saw the door wide open. I was so fucking scared. I don’t think I’ve ever run so fast in my life.”

He tilts my face to assess any damage, but it’s all still left over from Gia’s accident.

“I’m all right, just shaken up a bit,” I answer; the pounding in my head and shooting pain in my arms don’t feel as intense now that Jason’s here. “Thank you for coming when you did.”

His grip on my waist tightens. “I should’ve gotten here sooner, especially after what he said in the hall. I should’ve known he’d do something like this.”

“This isn’t your fault, Jason,” I say, trying to erase the guilt in his eyes. He has no reason to feel guilty. If he wasn’t here,

nothing would've stopped Brandon, and I don't know how far he would've gone. "It's no one's fault but Brandon's."

Gia edges over to us, her phone in her pocket, so I'm assuming she's hung up on Brianna.

"I'm sorry I couldn't do more. I'm sorry he hurt you,"

Gia says, tears streaming down her face. Jason releases me so I can reach for her. She's still shaking, still looks terrified. "I—I was going to knock him over the head with your lamp but then I thought about the motel and I didn't want to ... didn't want to accidentally ..."

"Are you kidding? You're amazing. You did the best thing you could've done," I tell her, pulling her into my chest, and she burrows in, holding tight. "You even protected Jason by moving the camera away to not record him hitting Brandon. That was so smart, Gia, just like calling Brianna was. I'm so proud of you."

"Brandon Nathaniel, where the *fuck* are you?" a voice screeches from downstairs, and Brandon's face pales.

His mom is here.

TWENTY-THREE

After everything I went through on Monday, I spend Tuesday and Wednesday with my phone off, ignoring the world at Jason's house, hanging out with him, Jackson, and Natalia, who were really sweet and concerned after hearing what happened. Natalia even offered to let Gia come stay if she was feeling rattled and didn't want to be apart from me, but Gia opted to stay at Dario's with Zia Stella after I assured her I wouldn't be mad if she wanted to stay.

It's nice, being with a caring family, people who are genuinely concerned about how I'm doing. Jason stayed home with me on Tuesday despite me nagging him to go to school, and Jackson brought home an assortment of desserts and chocolates, even a new box of Froot Loops that he wrote my name on and guaranteed was for my personal use only. Natalia even made me this amazing chicken soup from scratch that was so comforting it felt like a hug and a delicious meal all in one.

But by Wednesday night, I'm tired of hiding and avoiding everyone, so I go into work like I'm scheduled to. Jason doesn't try to talk me out of it or tell me it's a dumb idea, and I love that he's not treating me any differently. He drops me off ten minutes before my shift, kissing me goodbye, and I walk in with my head held high, pretending it's just another day.

For a Wednesday night, it's already pretty busy, and I rush to the back to clock in and get started. Isla is there, putting her serving apron on, and she freezes when she sees me.

"Hey," I greet her, stuffing my things in a locker. "Is there a party or something going on tonight?"

"Oh ... hey, Siena ..." She shifts from foot to foot anxiously, and my heart drops. "I think there are a few birthdays ... yeah."

Is this how it's going to be from now on? Everyone too scared to even look me in the eye? I can't live like this. Isla is kind of a friend to me; she makes these shifts bearable, even when we have the worst kinds of customers, like kids who throw stuff or moms who demand to speak to the manager about things we have no control over.

"Isla, you don't need to treat me any diff—"

"Siena," says my boss, Hannah, cutting me off when she enters the back room.

I've always been slightly scared of Hannah. She's no-nonsense in the way that leaves no room for joking around or screwing off while you're supposed to be doing your work. But she cares for her employees and treats us well, so I kind of like her even though I'd never want to piss her off.

"Have a moment? Bring your stuff." She doesn't wait for me to confirm, just walks to her office and assumes I'll follow her. I do.

She doesn't sit once in her office, so I don't either.

"I know you're probably not having the easiest time right now," she starts. "I hear the staff and customers talking, I have internet connection, I know what's going on."

Oh no.

"Please don't fire me," I jump in before she says what I know is inevitably coming. I don't want to be fired. I like this job, I make good tips, and I need the money.

Even applying to every scholarship under the sun doesn't mean I'll have enough money to go to college.

Hannah sighs and rubs her forehead. "I'm not firing you, but you should take the week off."

"I don't need to take the week off, I swear. I'm good to work."

"Let me rephrase. You're not scheduled to work this week."

At my crestfallen face, she adds, "It'll be safer for you."

I'll email you a new schedule for next week once this has had some more time to simmer down, so you won't be harassed at work." Softer than her normal hard tone, she says, "I'm sorry, Siena. Go home."

Well, that's just great. I can't go to school, can't go home, can't go to work; my entire life is changing against my will, and there's nothing I can do about it.

None of the other staff look at me as I trudge through the restaurant, and the customers either gawk or continue eating their meals, oblivious to the town gossip. I appreciate those ones more than they know.

Outside, I sink onto a bench, pulling Jason's hoodie over my work uniform. It's cold out, and the sun hasn't even started setting; people bustle through the parking lot, not wanting to stand outside for longer than necessary. But I enjoy the fresh air and take deep breaths, allowing it to clear my racing mind.

I left my phone at Jason's house after not touching it for days, so I can't call an Uber or even Jason, though I wouldn't bother him at work. I'll have to walk home, but I'm not entirely sure how to get to Jason's from here.

The door to the restaurant swings open, and a guy carrying a pile of take-out containers in brown paper bags exits, the pile so high it's almost above his head. He peeks around the stack to check where he's going, and our eyes meet. It's Warren.

He's going to ignore me and pretend he didn't see me like everyone else has been doing, and I prepare myself for the rejection, but he surprises me by striding straight toward me.

"Hey," he greets me.

"Hey?" I repeat back, but it comes out as a question.

He's talking to me? Like normal?

"What are you doing out here?" he asks, shocking the hell out of me when he places the food beside me and shakes his arms out like he's preparing to stay a while. "Is everything okay?"

“Um, not really,” I reply, catching the couple walking through the parking lot whispering to each other when they see me, one pointing me out to the other. Warren doesn’t seem to notice or mind, though, just waits for me to elaborate.

“I’m not allowed to go in to work because of everything going on, and I don’t have a phone to order an Uber, and I’m not entirely sure how to get to Jason’s from here—I’m crashing there.”

“That’s easy enough to solve,” Warren says, picking up his food. “Let me drive you.”

Did he not hear about everything going on? That’s impossible, he’s *Warren*, he talks to everyone. He has to know. Does he not care? “Really? Are you sure?”

“Yes, now hurry up and get in the car before my food gets cold.”

I’m not going to sit around and wait for him to change his mind, so I grab my purse and follow him toward a shiny, expensive-looking Bentley.

“You must be hungry.” I attempt to joke to break the weird air that might be only in my mind.

He laughs. “Oh, yeah ... I haven’t eaten all day, so I might have overcompensated.”

A car door opens, and kids in King City letterman jackets get out. They’re Brandon’s friends. Warren and I share homeroom with two of them.

As we cross paths, they glare at me.

“Brandon’s off the team because of you; he had the best chance of all of us to go pro,” one says as the other coughs while muttering, “Murderous whore.”

I don’t know what’s been going on at school, but people must have found out about what happened between me and Brandon on Monday after school. He was on steroids, so if he’s off the team, that’s *not* my fault.

So, before they pass, I shoot back, “Brandon’s off the team because of *himself*.”

They clearly weren’t expecting me to say anything, because they scamper away into the restaurant without replying. Good. I’m sure Brandon got more than just kicked off the team. His mother was so pissed when she grabbed him by the arm and dragged him out of the house, apologizing to me along the way and begging me not to press charges, promising she’d handle Brandon and would call Zia Stella to explain everything.

Beside me, Warren explains, “Brianna’s going around telling everyone Brandon decided to go to military school, but other people are whispering that was his parents’ last-ditch effort because they found out he was using and fucked up his college offers. Not sure what Brandon told his friends or why they’d say it was your fault.”

Not wanting to get into it all here in the parking lot, I answer with a simple, “Well, I can’t say I’m disappointed to see him go.”

At the car, he places the food in the back while I put my seat belt on. We still haven’t addressed or even glanced at the elephant in the room, and when he closes his own door, I can’t hold back my curiosity anymore.

“You’re like the only person to talk to me since Monday, other than the Parkers. Don’t you think I’m a *murderous whore* or whatever else they’re calling me?”

Don’t you think I had something to do with Lily?”

Warren waves me off. “That’s ridiculous, you didn’t have anything to do with Lily.”

“And what about the other stuff?”

Warren turns to me, his brown eyes uncharacteristically intense and serious. “I read the text in the picture.

Maybe I shouldn’t have because it clearly wasn’t meant to be shared, but I couldn’t help myself. Anyway, it was clearly

self-defense. So, I don't care about what happened as long as you're okay. Nothing about you has changed in my eyes."

I'm stunned into silence by his admission. Outside of Jason and his family, Warren's the first and only person to say that and to not treat me any differently.

"Seriously?" I finally sputter out.

He shrugs like it's no big deal, but to me, it's a super big deal. "Yeah, I don't care. I know who you are, and you're my friend."

"Wow" is all I can think to say. I've always thought highly of Warren, especially since he's kind and popular and friends with everyone yet still went out of his way to be friends with me when I was new, but he's just moved up several notches in my mind.

In a rare instance of perceptiveness, Warren says,

"Listen, I know that we keep it light and fun and don't get too deep about stuff, but if you want to get something off your chest, then tell me. Nothing said will leave this car."

Maybe I shouldn't tell him, but I believe him, and it would be nice for another friend to know some of what I feel like I'm carrying on my shoulders. So, I tell him about Officer Liu and how he knew about what happened in LA from the very beginning, and how he thinks I had something to do with Lily's disappearance. I tell him how he's harassing me and Jason over it and keeps pulling us over and even had Jason's car towed, which is why Jason's now sharing Jackson's car. I tell him how everyone's looking at me funny thinking I was involved with whatever happened to Lily, and how we thought Brandon was to blame, but it turns out he had his own stuff going on.

Warren listens thoughtfully through it all, and when I'm done, just like when I opened up with Zia Stella in her car, I feel lighter.

"Thank you for sharing," Warren starts, "but you want to know what I think? People are always going to talk, and

there's nothing you can do to change what other people think of you. You can only stay true to yourself and your path and do whatever you need to do in order to get wherever you want. Fuck everyone else."

That's all easier said than done, but maybe he's right.

I'm going to have to get used to the way everyone acts around me, since there's nothing I can do to change it.

"I just wish we knew what happened to Lily," I say.

"People wouldn't be as interested in me if we knew where she was, if she's okay."

"Maybe," Warren says. Then, because we'll probably never know and dwelling on it won't help anyone, he says,

"We were assigned a partner project yesterday in English.

I didn't pick a partner because you weren't there. Be my partner?"

He waited for *me*? "You can have your pick of anyone—you're *Warren*—and you're choosing to be partners with the school social pariah who was told she should be homeschooled for her own safety?"

Warren simply shrugs again. "You're my friend, and I have fun with you, and we'll have fun on this project."

He says it so simply, like there's not more to it, and the more I think about it, the more I realize he has a point.

I need to refocus on what *I* want and what's important, which is college. I still want that scholarship reference from Mr. Lewis, still want to go to college. I'm not going to simply give up and let this drive me out of school. I'm strong enough to face whatever everyone is saying about me. I don't care about their opinions, and it helps that I have friends like Warren, and obviously Jason, who has my back. I'm not alone, and since meeting Jason, I never have been.

It's nice that Warren understands. He's the first person since the news came out who's treated me normally and not backed

away or spoken gently to me or acted like I was going to flip a switch and attack them randomly. If he can do that, so can others.

I'm not going to switch to homeschooling like Principal Anderson suggested. I'm going to hold my head high and show everyone it doesn't matter what they think of me.

I'm going to go back to school, pull my grades higher than they've ever been before, ace this project, apply for scholarships, and set myself up for my future. And I'll still find justice for Lily, because I promised I would.

Warren's been patiently waiting for my answer, and he smiles victoriously when I say, "All right, I'll be your partner. We're going to kick ass."

"That's what I'm talking about!" He laughs and starts the car. "Now, let's get you to Jason's before I have to reheat all my food."

"Right." I laugh along with him then, softer, add,

"Thanks for being here and listening to me."

"That's what friends are for," he replies, and I smile because for the first time in a long time, I realize I truly do have people in my life besides Gia that I can count on.

TWENTY-FOUR

Since I wasn't formally suspended or anything, I go to school Thursday and Friday. I'm still a social pariah, but I ignore the stares, focusing on the actual schoolwork and researching more scholarships and college programs. Most people don't have the balls to say anything to my face anyway, not with Jason around acting like he's one wrong look away from breaking someone's face. Besides, Brandon was the only one who bothered harassing me in the hall, so other than the stares and sidesteps, it's pretty easy to adjust to my new life, even with Officer Liu unjustly pulling Jason over each morning on the way to school.

I don't eat lunch in the cafeteria, instead enjoying the crisp air outside on the bleachers with Jason. I'm not avoiding the cafeteria, not really, but I don't know what I'd do if I sat at our lunch table and Nyah refused to look at me. I haven't seen her these last two days I've been in school, except once Friday morning when I thought she was waiting by my locker, but I was too cowardly to pass her, so I avoided my locker altogether.

Before I know it, it's Friday night, and Jason's dropping me off at Warren's to work on our project on his way to work. The last time I was here, I was blown away by just how huge and extravagant Warren's house is, and today is no exception. The gate is open, and Jason pulls up the long driveway and around the water fountain, which isn't filled with bubbles this time. The lawn is immaculate, and everything is beautifully landscaped, looking like it's straight out of a movie. Unlike the last time I was here, there are no cars parked all over the place or people milling around, and no laughter filling the air. Instead, the place is almost eerily empty and quiet. It makes the yard and house seem even larger and more intimidating.

Jason shifts the car into Park and hands me my bag from the backseat. "Give me at least a thirty-minute heads-up before

you're ready to leave so I can get here from work. I'm not formally scheduled, so I can leave whenever."

I unbuckle my seat belt and take my bag from him.

"You don't need to come back for me. I'll Uber. Or maybe Warren will drive me home."

Jason lifts an eyebrow at me like the thought of him *not* coming to get me isn't plausible. "Just give me a heads-up."

I roll my eyes at him, though I secretly love spending all this time with him. No one worries about how I'll get to and from places except him. "You're not my chauffeur, Jason."

"No, but I'm your boyfriend."

I freeze, my hand on the handle in the middle of pushing the door open. We've never had this discussion before, and I never realized how much I wanted to hear that until right now. I mean, we confessed we loved each other, sure, but we never labeled it. I swallow, trying to stay calm instead of jumping up and down with excitement and scaring him away.

"You're my boyfriend?"

"Well, yeah ..." He hesitates, and he's so fucking handsome in this moment I want to throw myself at him.

"Unless you don't want me to be?"

I frantically shake my head before he even finishes asking, and he breaks out in a laugh. His smile is glorious, and I feel so warm and giddy and lucky that Jason, this wonderful, sweet, thoughtful boy, wants to be with *me*.

I'll definitely do a little shriek and a happy dance once he pulls away, but for now I try to pretend like this isn't a superhuge deal and say, "Well then, *boyfriend*, if something comes up and you can't make it, it's no big deal, just let me know."

"I'll be here," he states with finality. His eyes gleam as he gently takes my chin and leans toward me, planting a kiss on

my lips. “Depending on the time, maybe we can grab some ice cream.”

I want to pull him back to me and exclaim, *More!* but instead he lets me go, and I open the door. “Ice cream is on me, then.”

He sends me a look that says, *We’ll see about that*, and I laugh as I exit the car. I bend down to tell Jason he’s going to have to fight me for the bill when the large front door opens.

“Hey, Siena! Hey, Jason!” Warren calls from his grand entrance. He walks down the steps to meet us, leaving the front door wide open behind him. Jason exits the car, leaning his forearms against the roof as Warren says,

“You wanna come in, Jason? I can order a pizza and some wings. I’ll call Tyler and Nyah, maybe a few others too, make this a party!”

Jason shakes his head. “You’re supposed to be working on an assignment, so no parties.”

“Not even a little one?” Warren jokes, coming to my side and throwing a casual arm over my shoulders.

“Not even that. My girlfriend is trying to get her grades up, so get it done.” Jason says it casually, telling someone for the first time that I’m his *girlfriend*, but his lips turn up at the corner.

Warren raises an eyebrow at me as I bite back a smile.

I’m Jason Parker’s girlfriend! I can’t wait to tell Gia. And Nyah! She’s definitely going to jump up and down with me, then plan a double date—or, at least, she *would’ve*, if she wasn’t avoiding me. The excitement fades a little with that thought.

Warren removes his arm from my shoulders and raises both hands in a *message received loud and clear* gesture. “All business, no pleasure, got it,” he jokes, then taps the roof of the car. “We better get started, then. See you later, Parker.”

“Later,” Jason says, then looks at me. “Text me.”

I assure him I will even though I feel bad making him come back to get me. But the larger part of me is just too giddy to put up much of a fight. *I'm going out for ice cream with my boyfriend!* I wonder if that will ever feel normal or if I'll always feel like squealing when I think of Jason and *boyfriend* in the same sentence.

Jason gets back in the car, and Warren closes the passenger door. We stand together and wave as Jason rounds the fountain and disappears down the driveway, which is so long I lose sight of him before he reaches the front gate.

“Girlfriend, huh?” Warren asks me in a teasing tone, wagging his eyebrows.

“Shut up.” I bump him with my shoulder. “But yeah, it’s kinda new.”

“No, no, it’s cool.” Warren laughs as we head up the stairs to his house. “But he sure was real quick to pull that possessive, growly *hands off my girl* card.”

“He was not growly!” I defend Jason, but Warren’s teasing is lighthearted and fun, and the smile on my face is so big it almost hurts.

“Metaphorically, he was.”

“How can you metaphorically growl?”

“Easy. It’s what your boyfriend did outside just now.”

I roll my eyes, giving up on arguing with Warren’s made-up logic, though I’m still living on the high of Jason being my *boyfriend* as we step into the house.

I’ve never been inside Warren’s house, and it’s just as large and extravagant as the outside. The foyer alone is as big as my old bedroom, with a fancy table in the middle holding a sculpture of a large head with three horns balanced on a skinny neck. It rattles when Warren shuts the door, and I jump to catch it before it falls, but it steadies itself.

Warren notices my reaction. “Oh, don’t worry about that thing, it’s practically indestructible. My mom got it from a

local on one of her trips to Nigeria a few years ago.

Every time my parents visit, they bring back some piece of art.”

“Oh, okay,” I say, giving it one last doubtful look as I remove my shoes and follow Warren through the rest of the house. The statue wobbles with every step we take past it.

Warren’s home is beautiful and looks like something you’d see in a movie. The floor is white marble, and the ceiling’s so high I could sit on Warren’s shoulders and still not touch it. I swear the house is so large our footsteps echo as we walk. It’s an eerie feeling, and it makes the house feel grander and more imposing. Every few feet, there’s a sculpture or a brightly colored painting, and though the brightness should liven the place up, the pieces of art only serve as a reminder of how empty it feels.

“They must go there a lot then,” I say, gesturing to the walls, evidence of all the trips his parents have taken. In this one huge hallway alone, there must be at least sixty pieces.

“Yeah,” he says, leading me to a large, spotless kitchen with two islands. “They own a few hotels in Nigeria and West Africa, and they’re always expanding, so they travel a lot.”

“They own hotels? Wow, that must be really cool.”

That explains this house, and why Warren seems like he’s always home alone. Even the pool house, which I can only kind of see through the huge sliding doors, is like a small apartment, impressive in its own right. Owning hotels must mean Warren’s parents have *money* money, more than I can even imagine, more than I’ll probably ever see in a lifetime. But besides the extravagant parties Warren’s always paying for, you’d never know it. He’s so humble, so kind, and not at all douchey like I imagine Brandon would be if he had Warren’s status.

“Yeah.” Warren shrugs like it’s not a big deal, opening an industrial-sized fridge to grab a water bottle. The inside of it looks like it’s straight out of a *how to organize your fridge*

magazine article, with everything perfectly lined up and in a container in its perfect spot.

“You want something?” Warren offers. “Water? Juice? Pop?”

“Water’s fine, thanks.”

He passes me a bottle and sticks his head back in the fridge. “You hungry? Sola just made chicken stew yesterday, it’s one of the best things she makes.”

“Sola?” I ask.

“Yeah, my nanny—or housekeeper, I guess,” he adds sheepishly. “She *was* my nanny, but now she comes every other day for a few hours while I’m at school to cook, clean, do laundry, that kind of stuff.” He rubs the back of his head, seemingly uncomfortable for the first time I’ve ever known him. “But yeah, I can heat up some stew if you want. Or some rice, or I can order out if you’d prefer.

Pizza and wings like I offered Jason?”

“I’m all right, thanks, Warren.”

“Are you sure? I’ve got a lot of food here.”

He *does* have a lot of food, more than enough for only one person. “You really do. You must eat a lot, or Sola just really loves cooking.”

Warren laughs as he closes the fridge. “Recently, I’ve told Sola to double everything she makes. I’m trying to bulk up, which means I’ve gotta eat more.”

I poke the arm he’s flexing. He’s not as big as Brandon or as sculpted as Jason, but it’s a good-sized bicep.

“Bulking? You work out?” I tease him.

“Oh, come on!” he exclaims, and I’m glad any embarrassment he had from earlier has completely disappeared.

“They may not be as impressive as your *boyfriend’s*, but they’re functional enough!”

“They’re *very* impressive,” I placate him, suppressing a giggle.

“Hey, no need to patronize me. I know I’m sexy.

Maybe not to you, because you have a growly boyfriend now—”

He cuts himself off with a laugh when I shove him. I know his teasing is in good fun, and that’s the only reason the shove isn’t hard enough to send him into the bronze sculpture of a woman dancing behind him.

“All right, all right. Have your fun now, but when you get a girlfriend, be prepared for retribution!”

“Aw, that’s cute. You think I’d let my future girlfriend anywhere near you.”

“You are being so mean to me today,” I joke as I follow him down the hall and up the stairs, our footsteps practically echoing in the huge home. There’s more art-work displayed all over the place, and a giant chandelier hangs beside the stairs at the top.

“I’d never be mean to you. Your very growly boyfriend might beat me up.”

I snort out a laugh at his ridiculousness. He’s said Jason’s my boyfriend more than I have, and even though he’s teasing me, I don’t think it’ll ever get old.

“He also said we should finish this project, so we better get to it,” I say, following him into a bedroom I assume is his. It’s huge, maybe the size of Dario’s entire second floor, which isn’t exactly tiny to begin with. Everything is very clean, neat, and organized, almost looking like a showcase house that no one lives in, which I wouldn’t have imagined for a boy’s room, but it’s in line with the rest of his house. His king-sized bed is perfectly made with more show pillows on it than necessary, the furniture is a deep walnut without any clutter on it, and the

only things on the hardwood floor are strategically placed rugs, no piles of clothes or books or loose papers like my old room at Dario's. There's a desk with a big PC gaming setup, but Warren leads me to a sitting area where there are comfy-looking couches in front of a coffee table and a huge flat-screen television mounted to the wall. It's like there's a literal living room in Warren's bedroom.

"Make yourself at home." Warren gestures to the couches, and I try to act like I'm not completely out of place as I sink down onto the leather, pulling my backpack onto my lap. I almost feel like I'm not supposed to touch anything because everything looks so pristine, without a single speck of dust. It's such a stark contrast to Warren's laid-back demeanor.

He uses a remote to turn on the television to a channel that plays music before lowering the volume to an appropriate background noise.

"You have a lot of company up here?" I ask, since the space seems set up perfectly to entertain. "Everything is so neat."

He lounges beside me on the couch. "Not really. I spend almost all my time up here, though, so I keep it organized. It's easier for Sola when she cleans too." He grabs a bowl set up on the coffee table that I overlooked before. "Chip?" he asks, crunching one in his mouth.

Along with the chip bowl, there's a popcorn bowl, some cut-up veggies and dip, a few small bowls of different candies, and his notebook set to the side.

For some reason, the snack spread makes me relax a little, feeling less stiff in Warren's pristine house. I peek into the candy bowl and laugh, calming completely. I set my backpack on the floor and grab a gummy bear. "Did you really get a bowl of all-red gummy bears for me? Or did you pick out all the other colors?"

His smile is wide. "I got an all-red bag. You know I aim to please."

I pop more into my mouth. "Ever the entertainer."

My phone chimes, and I pull it from my pocket to find a text from Jason.

Officer Dickwad just pulled me over again. Wasn't even speeding. Didn't give me a ticket, he was just being an ass and wasting my time.

That's the third time this week.

"Why are you frowning like that?" Warren asks, studying me.

I set my phone down on the table. "Officer Liu is being a nuisance still. He keeps pulling Jason over for no reason and harassing him, and there's nothing we can do.

I don't know how I can convince him I had nothing to do with Lily's disappearance, but I have a feeling it's only going to get worse unless I can prove it to him."

Warren frowns down at his lap. "And you still don't want to tell your dad?"

I scoff. "Dario's washed his hands of me. And even if he hadn't, he'd probably believe Officer Liu. Nobody ever listens to me." Well, at least *most* people never listen to me. Zia Stella's all right. Jason's been a shining light in my life since I met him, and Warren's been a good friend too. "But you always do," I amend. "Thanks for always letting me vent."

His smile is still that friendly, wide Warren smile, but it seems a little tight. "I'm all ears for you."

I'm not sure if I made it awkward, so I change the subject, pulling my book out of my bag and opening it.

"Well, we better get started before my *growly boyfriend* comes back to get me."

That eases the tension, real or imagined, and Warren picks up his own book.

"I hope you've read this thing," Warren starts, holding up his copy of the Shakespeare play, "because between you and me, I've been using it as a paperweight."

I groan. “Maybe I should’ve rethought who I chose as a partner.”

“No, you should not have. Because your partner is better than someone who read the book: you chose a partner with charm, and we’re going to blow the socks off Mr. Lewis and the entire class with our presentation on ...

I wanna say ... Juliet?”

“The play is *Othello*.”

“She’s in *Othello*, right?”

I sigh, but secretly I’m laughing. Sure, we have a lot of work ahead of us, but at least I know I’m going to have fun with my friend along the way.



Hours pass, and Warren and I have not only finished the entire bowl of red gummy bears, the bowl of chips, and most of the popcorn, but we have pages of notes between us and a pretty good idea of what we’re doing for the presentation. Considering one of us didn’t even know what play we were reading, I’m confident this presentation is on track for an A-plus. Scholarship, here I come.

“Let’s go look in my closet for a costume,” Warren says as he stands and stretches. “They’re going to be so impressed with our presentation, they won’t even notice if what we’re saying makes sense or not.”

I laugh as I stand and roll out my neck. Costumes are fun. I can pretend to be someone else when I need to stand in front of the class, all of whom are watching me, judging me, *scared* of me, wondering if I was involved with Lily’s disappearance.

I follow Warren to his closet, but when he opens the door, it’s *not* a closet. It’s a room, bigger than mine at Dario’s house, that Warren’s converted into a closet. There’s an island in the middle with drawers, and built into the walls around the room are stylish floor-to-ceiling cabinets. There’s even a huge

mirror with the sides folded in a little for a better view, and a sitting area beside it. Like his bedroom, this room is impeccably neat and organized, with nothing out of place. I'm so impressed that part of me considers asking him to come organize my stuff when he's bored, but then I remember I don't really *have* a room at the moment.

"I think I have miscellaneous stuff and costumes over here," he says, leading me to the back wall. He opens the cabinet door and reveals racks of various hanging clothes, with open shelves beside them storing more items. It's not as neat as I was led to believe, with things stuffed in every which way and clearly overflowing from the sheer volume of stuff in this one section.

"Ah, so the trick is hiding everything behind closed doors."

Warren's head snaps to me. "What? I'm not hiding anything."

I point to the chaos in the closet. "Yeah, the mess." I laugh. I hope I didn't make him feel insecure about it. It's still ten times more organized than my closet.

"Oh." His shoulders relax a bit. "Just the miscellaneous section. If you open the other cabinets, it's all color coordinated and sectioned by occasion."

I don't doubt it. Now that I think about it, I'm not sure I've ever seen Warren in the same outfit twice.

"I don't see anything for women in here," I say, trying to sift through the packed-in clothes on the hangers. "But we might be able to find you something."

"My mom might have stuff in her closet," Warren suggests. "Let me check in there, and you keep looking for me. Find something that screams sophisticated and historical, yet roguish and appropriately sexy."

I pull out a full fluffy bunny onesie, complete with a butt flap and a hood with long, floppy ears, and hold it out to him with a raised eyebrow. "I'm sure I'll find the exact

combination you're looking for in here if I have stuff like this as my options."

He laughs and backs out of the room. "I'm sure there's better stuff buried in there. Yell if you find something, I'll be a few doors over!"

Warren leaves, and I'm left staring at the organized mess of clothes that I don't even know how to start going through. Maybe I should search the internet for inspiration before going through everything, so I have an idea in mind.

I pull out my phone and search for Shakespeare-inspired costumes, pushing aside a hanging clown costume when something on the floor catches my eye.

It was thrown there haphazardly, but it catches my eye because it's so out of place here in Warren's closet.

I freeze.

I can feel every single beat of my heart as I stare down at it, my mind connecting what I'm seeing with what it means.

Slowly, like I'm scared it'll get up and run if I move too fast, I bend down to pick it up. I grasp it carefully and straighten, staring at the object in front of me, trying to comprehend what I'm seeing.

It's a coincidence, it must be. This can't prove anything—but it has to. It's the only evidence I've found after all the digging and hunches and pointing of fingers.

My breathing is unsteady as I turn it in my hand, and my brain registers without a doubt that this is what I think it is.

I'm holding Lily's red stiletto heel, the very same one she was wearing the day she went missing.

And there's a splatter of blood on the toe.

TWENTY-FIVE

My phone slips from my hand and slams hard onto the hardwood floor, the sound jarringly loud against the rushing in my ears.

Lily's other shoe is also on the floor of Warren's closet.

Lily's shoes.

In Warren's closet.

Warren, my *friend*, has Lily's shoes. And this one has *blood* on it.

I know they're her shoes. The first thing I noticed about her were these red stilettos and how she strutted around in them all night like she owned the place and her feet didn't even hurt. These are *hers*—there's even some dried mud and grass caked on the bottom from walking around Warren's backyard that night after a storm had just passed.

"You okay? I heard a bang."

I jump and spin around at Warren's voice.

His eyes land on the shoe clutched in my hands and then zip up to my own widened ones.

"Siena ..." he starts, and his whole demeanor toward me changes. I don't recognize him after this shift: his voice is low and even, his hands raised in an innocent gesture, his face masked and calculating. I no longer feel like this is Warren, my friend, the one I can joke with and tease, the one who helps me forget about everything.

He takes a cautious step forward, and I reflexively take one back. Any benefit of the doubt I could've given Warren went right out the window with that action, with him carefully stalking toward me like a lion skillfully cornering its skittish prey.

If he'd just found her shoes at the party, then he wouldn't be acting like I've stumbled on a secret. *And* they would've been given to the police as evidence. But they weren't—they're sitting in Warren's "miscellaneous" closet where he thought they would never see the light of day until he forgot that they were there.

Calmly, so fucking calmly, like he's trying not to scare me off, he says, "It's not what it looks like."

"This is Lily's shoe."

"Yes."

"And that's blood on it."

"Yes." His hands are still raised, his eyes darting from me to the shoe to the door behind me, then doing it over again. The air is so thick it squeezes my throat, presses on my rib cage.

He's eerily composed as he takes another calculated step toward me, and I watch him, my mind all over the place.

"Let's just talk about this," he says, taking another step, and that finally pushes me over the edge and gets my brain working.

He must sense my subtle shift, because his eyes widen, and he drops the slow and careful act, instead rushing toward me. "Siena, don't!"

I whip the shoe at Warren's head, turning and sprinting for the door. I only know it connects because I hear the thump and Warren's curse over my own heavy breathing.

I make it into Warren's bedroom, but his thundering steps are right behind me. He's calling my name, but I'm not slowing down to find out firsthand what happened to Lily. Terror rakes my spine when I feel him gaining on me, and suddenly I'm tackled to the floor.

I scream all the way down, but it's just me and Warren in this huge, lonely house, and no one's around to hear me. I land on my stomach on the rug with Warren's heavy body on top of me.

“Stop it!” Warren wrestles me as I squirm, while I claw at the carpet to get away, bucking and kicking him off me. “Siena ... I’m trying ... not to ... hurt you!”

That’s a straight-up lie considering he’s trying his damn best to restrain me. He’s pressed against me, keeping me face down on the carpet, his heavy weight pressing on my rib cage, making it hard to breathe.

My heart beats wildly, and I know deep down that if I don’t get out of here now, I may never make it out at all.

I elbow him hard in the head, and the shock of it loosens his grip just enough that I’m able to slip out of his grasp. I scramble on all fours and finally get up on both feet when he grabs my ankle and yanks. The momentum makes me lose my balance, and I fall forward. I can’t get my hands under me fast enough.

“Siena!”

I don’t remember landing. Just sharp pain, then blackness.



My eyelids are so heavy it’s an effort to drag them open.

I try and fail multiple times, especially when I register the dull pounding of my head. Everything feels sore, and when I try to move my arms, I find that I can’t.

So strange.

It would be easy to drift back to sleep, but there’s a nudge at the back of my mind telling me that something’s wrong, that I need to get up and get out.

When the grogginess wears off slightly, I finally force my eyes open, waiting patiently for my sight to clear.

When the blurriness subsides and the brain fog clears, Warren’s room comes into focus.

Warren. The red stiletto. Lily.

Shit!

It all rushes back to me, and I try to stand only to discover that I'm anchored in place. Confused, I glance down.

I'm sitting in the cushioned chair that was in Warren's closet, but I'm in his bedroom. There's rope around my wrists, securing them to the armrests, and panic rises.

"Oh, thank goodness, you're up!"

Warren sets down a pack of frozen peas that was pressed against his head, standing from where he was leaning on the couch.

I look around the room in a last-ditch effort to prove to myself that this is all a huge misunderstanding. The television behind him is still set to the same music channel, softly playing a song I've never heard. The snacks are still on the coffee table, and my notebook is still open to the page we were working on. Everything about the scene in front of me looks normal—everything except me tied to a chair in the middle of Warren's bedroom.

Without looking away from Warren, I subtly move my feet, making a mental note that my legs aren't tied down, only my arms. Maybe I can come up with some sort of plan to get out of here.

My hope isn't lost, and neither is my will to fight. I don't know how I'll get the bindings off my hands, and the last time I saw my phone it was face down on the floor in Warren's closet, but there has to be a way out.

"You were only out for a few minutes, if that," Warren continues, then points to a bag of frozen corn on the table. "I brought that for you; I figured you'd have a killer headache, and we only had one bag of peas."

Is he actually trying to *joke* with me right now?

"What the hell, Warren? Let me *go*."

His eyes widen as he straightens up. "Oh no, Siena, that's not ... I just want to explain. I'm sorry for tying you up, but I think you put a dent in my head, and I didn't want a repeat."

I put a dent in *his* head? I'm the one who blacked out and woke up tied to a chair!

"Okay, fine, you just want to explain. Why can't you do that *without* strapping me to a chair like I'm a damn hostage? I thought you were my *friend*, Warren!"

It was supposed to be a fun day with my friend, then ice cream with Jason. A thought occurs to me. "Jason knows I'm here, and he's going to wonder why I never called him to come pick me up. Let me go before you make things worse for yourself."

Warren chews on his lip, mulling it over. "If I untie you, promise you won't run?"

"Promise." The lie slips quickly from my lips, maybe too quickly to be believable.

Warren grimaces, like he knows I'm not going to like what he's about to say. "I will untie you, I swear, and I'm sorry for hurting you, that was never, ever my intention.

But just hear me out first, okay? I didn't hurt Lily."

He didn't hurt Lily? He *didn't hurt Lily*? The statement is almost laughable.

"If that's true, then why do you have her shoes? They were one of the last things she was seen wearing. And why is there *blood* on one? Why is it hidden in your closet instead of with the cops as evidence? And why am I tied up in your goddamn room?"

"Okay, yes, I realize this all looks really bad. See, the thing is ... I mean ... oh man, how do I say this? Lily is ..."

"Right here."

My whole body stiffens at the voice I thought I'd never hear again. I twist in my seat to confirm my mind isn't playing tricks on me.

Lily walks into Warren's room, of her own free will, in comfy-looking black yoga pants and a baby pink cashmere

sweater. Her hair, which was dyed auburn, has grown out, revealing black roots, but it doesn't look unkempt. It hangs naturally straight, framing her face, which seems to have filled out a bit since the last time I saw her. In fact, she looks *good*, with no black under-eye bags and a slight, healthy flush to her cheeks. For some reason, I notice her toenails are painted a sparkly pink.

She hands Warren another frozen vegetable bag before facing me.

I sit there, tied to this stupid fucking chair, processing what I'm seeing in front of me.

Lily is *alive*. Not only alive but clearly doing extremely well.

Lily sheepishly tucks a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Hey, Siena.”

The two of them stare at me with bated breath.

Warren looks so guilty he could keel over and puke any moment, and Lily looks like a kid who got caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

After a few beats of trying and failing to wrap my head around this new development, I exclaim, “Can someone please tell me *what the fuck is going on?*”

Lily grimaces. “I know this is probably a lot for you to process, I get it. We just ... oh, damn. It was never supposed to go this far.”

“Never supposed to ...” I repeat, stunned. “Lily, do you even know how worried people are about you? People think you're *dead*! What the hell are you doing here?”

Lily wraps her arms around herself. “I'm fine, obviously, and I never wanted anyone to worry about me. This all just got out of hand—spiraled—and now we're in too deep.”

Warren nods along with Lily, echoing her statement.

“We were trying to bide our time and figure out how to tell everyone she’s right here, but the more time we waited, the worse it seemed to come out with it ...”

They’re explaining what’s going on, but it’s so absurd it’s hard for me to make sense of it.

“So let me get this straight. There was nothing wrong with Lily? You were just hiding here the whole time? And Warren, you knew everyone was worried about Lily and never said, ‘Hey, it’s okay, guys, she’s just sleeping in my guest room’?!”

“Actually, it was the guest hou—”

“And why am I still tied to this fucking chair?!”

They jump into action, each taking a wrist and untying the rope, which ends up being a jump rope Warren apparently uses for cardio.

Warren gets the last knot out. “I really didn’t mean to scare you or tackle you or tie you up. I feel awful about that. But you were going to run before I could explain anything and tell everyone about Lily.”

I stand and rub my wrists now that they’re free. The rope wasn’t so tight that it caused any pain, but the action makes the guilt on Warren’s face deepen, so I do it anyway.

“You’re damn right I would’ve told everyone about Lily!

Everyone thinks I had something to do with it! Officer Liu harasses me and Jason every time we step out of the house, and you *knew* that, Warren.”

I storm off to the closet, picking up my phone from the floor and sending Jason a quick text.

Hey, can you come get me ASAP if you can? Come inside too, you need to see this.

Jason’s going to be pissed too. Of all the scenarios I imagined, this was *never* one of them.

On my way, everything ok?

His text comes in as I march back to Warren's room.

They're still standing where I left them, both looking down at the floor.

"And you, Lily," I start, closing the distance between us, "how could you do this to your parents, to your friends? Nyah hasn't slept properly in forever. I can hear your mom crying every day from my bathroom window!

And your dad has broken so many laws and police procedures for you it's a wonder he's still employed! He's harassed me *and* Jason! Arrested us and interrogated me.

Pulled us over and towed Jason's car, leaving us stranded practically in the middle of the forest at midnight! This is so fucked-up on so many levels."

The two of them at least have the decency to look ashamed, but it doesn't appease my anger. I confided in Warren. He knew that not only was I worried about Lily in general, but her father was making life incredibly difficult for me and Jason. Just a few hours ago, he pulled Jason over! And all the while, Warren knew the truth, knew that Lily was perfectly fine, and he could've ended my harassment with a single phone call. Did he even care?

Did he feel guilty knowing the truth? Thinking back, there must have been signs that he was uncomfortable, but apparently not uncomfortable enough to come clean.

How long would this have gone on if I hadn't stumbled upon it?

"It's complicated, Siena." Lily drags her hands over her face and sinks onto the couch. "You don't know what my life is like. My mom is always pressuring me to be something I'm not, and my dad is always on my case to be perfect. I can't even go to Taco Tuesday with my friends without my parents on my ass. I'm just so *tired* all the time. The morning I saw you, my mom lectured me on the drive to my dress fitting—which I apparently gained too much weight for, by the way—saying she knew your mom back in the day and that if you

were anything like her, you would be a bad influence and not on my approved list of friends. I have an *approved friends list*, Siena! I just couldn't take it anymore. They control every aspect of my life, and the thought of going home Friday night after Warren's party made me sick to my stomach. Warren let me crash for the night, and I turned off my phone because I didn't want to deal with anything."

"And the blood on your shoe?" I ask.

Lily holds up her palm, a jagged scar running through it. "I accidentally sliced my hand making a late-night 'feel better' snack. I realized I was still wearing my shoes and I took them off so I could more easily find the first aid kit.

Warren must have found them strewn in his kitchen and hidden them away."

Warren nods to confirm the story, and I press on. "So then what happened?"

Lily picks at the nail polish on her thumb, the same sparkly pink as her toes. Her shoulders slump, and her chin quivers as she continues. "I was just going to stay away for the weekend, unplug from life like I always do, then get back to it. But Monday I wasn't feeling the best, so I stayed here, and then there was an assembly at school announcing my disappearance, and the police got involved, and everything was so escalated I just didn't know how to go back."

I feel for her, I do, but not enough to excuse what's happened. Her parents are tough and demanding, and I know the pressure they put on her and the lies she told to make them believe she never partied or drank and only went out to study. I get that she wanted a break from her life—hell, I get it more than most people—but faking your disappearance for weeks on end is not the way to handle it. She's being so incredibly selfish, making her parents, two people who love her, think she was dead, all because she wanted a break.

"What do you mean you didn't know how to go back?" I ask.

“What was I supposed to do? Just go home and say,

‘Oh, sorry I scared you and turned this into a missing persons case, I was just throwing a teenage tantrum?’”

“Yes! That’s exactly what you should’ve done!”

Lily crosses her arms and straightens her back defiantly.
“That would’ve made things worse.”

“And drawing it out for all this time wouldn’t?” I am so dumbfounded and angry that I feel restless, like I can’t decide if I want to yell, pull my hair out, or shake some sense into them. “And Warren,” I continue, whirling on him, “how can you be okay with this? You should’ve been the voice of reason!”

Warren rubs the back of his neck. “I just wanted to help, and I have the space. I didn’t want to pressure Lily into doing anything she didn’t want to, and she didn’t want to go home.” He hesitates for a moment before adding, “Plus, it gets lonely here by myself; it’s nice to have someone here with me.”

Lily gives Warren a timid, grateful smile. “Don’t blame him, Siena. He was just trying to help.”

He was trying to help, fine. I guess I’m glad Lily had someone she trusted enough to confide in, and Warren didn’t know it would turn into a missing persons case.

“You were at the assembly, Warren. You knew they were looking for Lily. You even talked to detectives! How could you not say something?”

Warren bites his lip. “I don’t know. I panicked. I told them she was at my party, and from the way they were talking it sounded like if I came clean, I’d get in trouble, so I just went with it ...”

I don’t want to hear it. “You derailed an actual investigation! When you learned about it, you should’ve stepped up and told the truth, or at the very least talked to Lily, not encouraged her to continue with the charade.”

“Don’t blame him,” Lily defends her friend again.

“I don’t blame him; I blame both of you. This was so incredibly selfish.”

Even if you take out the fact that I’ve been harassed by Lily’s father because of this, I’d still be pissed. So many people were worried about Lily, thinking the worst about what’d happened to her, and this whole time she was, in her own words, throwing a *teenage temper tantrum*.

Warren’s stuffed his hands under the opposite armpits, looking down at his feet, and Lily has grown pale, picking at her nail polish in earnest. I take a deep, calming breath.

It’s clear they’re both feeling guilty and are in too deep.

The two of them remind me of different stages of Gia’s guilt when she’s done something and turns to me with her tail tucked between her legs, needing help but not sure how to proceed. I rub my hands on my forehead, and my cool fingers help me think.

If I have to put on my big-sister pants and be the voice of reason, then so be it.

I sigh, trying to tame my anger. “I get that it’s scary, facing everyone after what’s happened, but the longer it’s drawn out, the worse it’ll be.”

“I’m not ready to go home yet, though,” Lily says, and Warren pats her comfortingly on the shoulder.

I think for a minute. I’m not going to force her into a situation that may cause her more harm than good, but staying hidden isn’t an option. Part of me thinks the two of them are *relieved* I caught them. “Maybe you don’t have to go home yet, but this has to end. Staying here, hiding away, isn’t going to solve anything. The least you can do is call your parents and let them know you’re okay.

They’re worried sick about you.”

Lily opens her mouth to interject, but I know what she’s going to say and address it before she can say anything. “No, you don’t have to tell them where you are just yet. But make

sure they know you're *safe* and that you'll come home when you're ready. Your dad probably won't give up until he knows exactly where you are, but, Warren ..."

I trail off, looking at Warren's stricken face. Even though I'm upset with him, I feel bad for him for a moment. "Warren, I think you should talk to a lawyer.

Maybe both of you. I'm not sure if you'll be in any trouble for harboring Lily and lying to detectives when asked about her whereabouts. You both knew what was going on and never said anything, and I'm not sure if there are any ramifications for that, but ... better to be prepared than blindsided."

Warren and Lily exchange wide-eyed glances. I doubt either of them has thought of that before.

"Um ... yeah ... maybe I should call my parents,"

Warren stutters, picking up the defrosting pack of peas on his way out of the room.

"Oh, shit, this is all such a mess," Lily groans, running her hands through her hair. "You're right, Siena, I should call my parents. But they're going to be so pissed.

So pissed."

They will be, as will countless other people. But they deserve to know she's okay. Whether she wants to go home afterward is up to her.

"I guess I should rip the bandage off, huh?" Lily asks, giving a pitiful, humorless laugh. "Siena, would you—I know it's asking a lot—but would you stay with me while I call them? Or maybe I should video-call them, so they don't think I'm being forced to make a call."

What would Officer Liu think if Lily called him with me standing beside her? Probably that he was right all along and that I've kidnapped her and forced her to make the call. I shiver at the thought.

"I'll stay here, but don't get me on camera or mention my being here."

“Okay.” She nods. “I’m not going to mention where I am, just that I’m safe, that I ran away to get some time to think, and that I’m not sure when I’m coming home. Yes, that’s what I’ll say. Dad’s going to ask who I’m with, and I’ll just say with a friend, and that I’m safe.” She’s talking to herself, her eyes glazing over as she runs through the scenarios in her head. “I’m going to grab my phone and turn it on for the first time since Warren’s party. Oh, shit, I don’t even want to see all the notifications. I’ll be back.”

She disappears from the room, then it’s just me and the soundtrack in the background from the television. I stare at the chair I was tied to, then pick it up and carry it back into Warren’s closet room, closing the door behind me. I never want to see that chair again. I open a random drawer and throw the skipping rope in for extra measure.

I never answered Jason’s text before, and even though he’s driving and shouldn’t check his phone, I know he’s probably worried. I don’t want to tell him about Lily over text, so instead I hint.

Yes, I’m fine. But you’re never going to believe what you see when you get here.

Cryptic. I’ll be there soon.

“Okay, I’m ready,” Lily says as she reenters the room, holding up a cell phone. “Well, I’m not *really* ready, but as ready as I’ll ever be.”

She sits on the love seat, and I sit on the bigger couch perpendicular to her. I can reach out and hold her hand if need be, but I won’t be in the camera frame.

“Warren turned off the location tracking that night, so they won’t be able to see my location when I call. I’m sure my dad could track me if he’s at work, but he’ll be at home with Mom today. Unless something’s changed with his schedule.” A few hours ago, he pulled Jason over for nothing, so who knows if he’s home or not.

She takes a deep breath to gather her courage, then presses the button to turn the phone on. We wait a few moments in silence, then the beeping starts. Countless notifications come in so fast that it's making Lily's phone glitch, so she turns the sound off. It continues vibrating as it loads all the messages and voicemails Lily's missed.

"I can't look at them," Lily says, placing the phone face down on the table while it continues vibrating. She sits on her hands and looks forlornly at her phone. "I'm such a coward," she whispers, and I lean over and give her forearm a supportive squeeze.

"You're doing the right thing now," I reassure her.

She nods and takes a deep breath. "Okay, let's do this."

Lily picks up her phone and clicks a few buttons before holding it up to her face. Her hand shakes, and she uses the other to fidget with her hair, placing it the way she deems more presentable.

The video call rings twice before the connected tone sounds.

Lily's timid when she says, "Hi, Mom."

"Lily?! *Lily!*" Lily's mom bursts into tears, then speaks so fast in Mandarin that Lily can't get a word in. In English, she yells, "Shen! Shen! Lily's on the phone! It's Lily!"

"I'm all right, Māma. I'm okay. I've been okay this entire time," Lily says, her hand still shaking.

Lily's mom continues wailing. I've never had much interaction with her, only Officer Liu—Shen, apparently—but even so, the sound is gut-wrenching.

"Where are you, Lily? Tell us, and your father and I will come get you right away! *Shen!*"

There's a heavy thumping on the other side, then the voice I know so well booms over the phone. "*Lily?!* Where are you? Are you all right? We've been so worried about you!"

"I'm *fine*, Bàba, I'm fine. Nothing was ever wrong."

“What do you mean? Tell me where you are,” Officer Liu demands.

“I—I can’t. I’m not ready yet.”

“What do you mean?” Lily’s mom asks, her voice shaking. “Of course, you can come home. You belong with us, Lily. We’ve missed you so much.”

Officer Liu takes over again. “Is something wrong? Is someone monitoring this call?” He switches to Mandarin, probably giving her instructions in case she’s being held hostage and this is a ransom call.

“No, I’m not—everything is *fine!*” Lily interrupts.

“No one is here! I’m making this call of my own free will.”

“Then why can’t you tell us where you are? Where have you been this whole time?” he demands.

Lily’s hands have stopped shaking, and she seems more confident now that the initial shock is over, but she still hesitates before she says, “I ran away. A friend took me in, and I’ve been staying with them this whole time.”

“You . . . you *ran away?*” Officer Liu repeats completely bewildered. “No. That’s not like you. Someone *is* there. My Lily wouldn’t *run away*. Are you reading from a script? Is someone telling you what to say. Lily, you—”

“Bàba, *stop!* I’m telling you the truth. I was sick of you and Māma controlling every aspect of my life! I hate modeling! I hate dress fittings and auditions and posing and always being conscious of how I look. I hate having a 9:00 p.m. curfew except for study groups. I hate having so many expectations and always having to be the *perfect daughter*. So I went to a party, yes, a *party with alcohol*, and decided not to come home. And I’m sorry for hurting you and Māma, and maybe I could’ve handled this whole thing better, but I can’t take it back.

I’ve never felt so free as I have since I left. I just couldn’t live with the pressure anymore.”

Lily's breathing hard, and the other end of the phone is so quiet I would think they hung up if not for Lily's mom's quiet sniffles.

"Let me get this straight," Officer Liu starts. "You've been *fine* this whole time, just sitting at a friend's house, partying and living it up while we've been worried sick?!"

And you're calling us *now*, after letting your mother and I think you were *dead*?! Do you even understand what you've put us through? How much trouble you've caused?

Lily, there's an ongoing investigation into your disappearance! Do you even know how many rules I broke to learn any information I could? I abused all my power to find answers!"

Lily flinches with every statement, shrinking into herself more and more. She blindly reaches out for me without looking away from the screen, and I grab her hand, giving it a squeeze. Officer Liu isn't wrong, and hearing that he's aware of the way he abused his power fills me with a weird sense of righteousness and closure.

"I'm sorry, Bàba, I really am. I never wanted to hurt you or Māma, I just wanted some time to figure myself out. I was too scared to face you both, and I still am. I don't think I'm ready to come home. But I want you both to know I'm safe, and that I love you."

"Lily! Wait, Lily!" It sounds like there's fumbling for the phone on the other end, and short, muffled arguing before Lily's mom's voice is clear. "I don't care that you ran away. I don't care about any of that. You aren't in trouble, just come home, please."

"Yes, she *is* in trouble!" Officer Liu's voice bellows in the background.

"*Shen! Stop it!*" Lily's mom scolds him, her voice turning gentle as she says, "Don't listen to your father, Lily.

Just come home, please, and we can work it out together, okay?"

Her mom's pleading causes Lily's lip to wobble, but her back is still ramrod straight, and there's a determined set to her shoulders.

Officer Liu is ranting in the background about how irresponsible Lily is and how he can't believe she's done this.

Ignoring her father, Lily tells her mom, "I'm sorry, Māma, I still need some time to figure things out. And I think it's best if I give Bāba time to cool off and process everything. I'm really, *really* sorry for scaring you guys.

Please call off the search for me."

Sensing the conversation coming to an end, Lily's mom rushes to say, "Please call us again tomorrow, okay, Lily?"

"I will. I love you."

Lily's mom repeats the sentiment, but her father is still ranting in the background. I know how pissed I was when I found out, so he must be feeling that times a million, and part of me can't blame him. It's a weird sensation, to feel like I understand Officer Liu when we've spent so much time on opposite sides.

Lily ends the call and releases the grip she had on my hand, which I completely forgot about. Now that she's not holding my hand, I realize just how hard she was squeezing it.

Lily blows out a breath, shutting her phone off again and shaking the tension from her arms and shoulders.

"That was both better and worse than I thought it would be," she says.

I take a deep breath too, an overwhelming feeling of relief hitting me. It's over. Lily's fine, and her parents know it too. Soon everyone will, and they'll all feel the same relief as I do. Does this mean it's over with Officer Liu? He'll leave me and Jason alone?

"Thanks for being here with me, Siena," Lily says.

“You didn’t have to do that, especially since my dad has been making your life miserable. Warren never told me.”

The admission is like a stab of betrayal in my gut. Did he ever think about it? Did he not care? Did he think it wasn’t a big deal or that I was exaggerating?

Lily wraps her arms around herself. “I’m in so much shit. That stuff with my parents was just the tip of it, I’m sure. Even though it’s going to be hard now, part of me is glad you caught us today, because it forced me to come clean. While I’ve been enjoying my time away from home, how I went about it has been weighing on me. I never would’ve called my parents if you didn’t make me.”

She heaves out a sigh. “But now it’s over, and I’ll just deal with whatever comes the best I can.”

“I’m just glad that you’re really okay and that they know the truth. Honestly, I was convinced Brandon was involved somehow. He’s an ...” How do I accurately describe Brandon?

“Asshole?” Lily finishes for me.

“That’s putting it nicely.”

She laughs humorlessly. “Brandon’s a prick, and he’s always been that way. He’s so obsessed with me, even more every time I turn him down for a date. It’s like he thinks being turned down is a challenge to work harder to get me to say yes, but I’ll *never* say yes. He only wants to date because he thinks we’d look good together, the quarterback and the model, but he doesn’t even know me, just keeps blowing up my phone with propositions.

But despite how forceful he is, I don’t think he’d kidnap me.”

“He forced himself on me, and Gia,” I admit, still pissed about it.

Lily’s eyes widen as she stares at me. “Fuck. I’m sorry.

He’s such a piece of shit.”

“Hey.”

Lily and I turn at Warren’s voice, and he enters the room, looking equal parts nervous and guilty. Jason walks in behind him. His eyes meet mine first, and the tension I didn’t realize I was holding melts off just seeing him here with me. Jason always makes everything better.

The moment he notices Lily, he freezes where he is, like he hit an invisible brick wall while he was walking.

His jaw drops open as he processes, looking from her to me and back again.

“*Lily?*”

She gives a timid wave. “Hey.”

“What the *fuck* is going on?” he exclaims, looking at me like he’s finally made sense of my strange texts. But Jason’s smart, and he pieces the puzzle together faster than I did. To Lily, he says, “Have you been here the whole time? *Hiding?* Did you know there’s a whole missing persons case for you? You must have, Warren would’ve told you. *Fuck*, this is so messed up.”

“I know I owe a lot of explanations to a lot of people,”

Lily says, wringing her hands together.

Warren hovers by the door, watching the scene in front of him, but I feel his eyes drift to me occasionally.

He wants to talk to me, and part of me wants to talk to him before I leave, so I stand as Jason closes the distance between us.

“Yes, you do,” Jason says to Lily. “Does Tyler know?”

No, he can’t. He can’t keep a secret for shit.”

He caresses my hip as we pass each other and looks directly into my eyes, making sure I’m okay. I nod at him, and we continue on our paths, me to Warren and him to Lily.

“Did—uh—did she call her parents?” Warren asks when I reach him, gesturing to Lily, who’s talking on the couch with Jason.

“Yeah. I’m sure she’ll tell you about it. She didn’t tell them she’s here.”

The relief on Warren’s face makes him seem younger.

Were there any warning signs that Warren was stressed about all this? He was always joking around, still throwing parties, and wasn’t really acting any different. But then again, I only really got to know him after Lily disappeared.

“That’s good. My parents are pissed ... they’re cutting their trip short. If I had known all I had to do to get them to spend some time with me was tell them I’m an accomplice in a missing persons case ...”

He’s joking, but it’s a sad half-truth.

“A lot of people are going to be pissed, not just them,”

I tell him honestly.

He bites his lip. “Do you think you’ll ever forgive me?”

Will I? That’s hard to say. I don’t want to hold a grudge, and I cherished my friendship with Warren. He was goofy and fun, and we teased each other. But he’s betrayed my trust, and that’s not easy to get over.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” I admit. “This was pretty messed up. I know that I’ll never trust you again, that’s for sure. Maybe one day we can go back to normal, but for right now I need to process, and I’m sure that’ll be true for all your friends.”

He nods sadly, but he seemed to expect that answer.

“Yeah, I get it.” His phone rings, and he fishes it out of his back pocket. “I’ve got to take this; it’s my parents again.”

He leaves to answer, and Jason joins me by the door.

“Holy shit,” he says. “This is all just ... wow. How did you find out?”

“I’ll tell you on the way home. Are you ready to leave?”

I’m drained, and my head still hurts.”

Jason frowns and pushes my hair aside to reveal my forehead. I wonder if there’s a bump from where I hit the floor. “What happened?”

Lily appears and hands me a bag of the defrosting corn, the outside slick from condensation but still cool to the touch, so I put it on my sore forehead. It immediately makes me feel better.

“I’ll tell you when we leave. I don’t want you to beat up Warren.”

Any humor drains from Jason’s face, leaving him looking intimidating. “Did he touch you? I’ll fucking kill him.” He tries to storm past me to get to Warren, but I grab his hand, intertwining his fingers with mine. I’ve missed him, and maybe part of me should worry that I’ll become too dependent on him, but mostly he just makes me feel like I’m home, like everything will be okay.

“Let’s go, Jason. I’ll tell you everything in the car.”

His jaw clenches, like he’s fighting against his desire to go kick Warren’s ass. Finally, with an angry sigh, he relents, dropping my hand only to collect my things and stuff them back into my backpack for me. He swings the bag over his shoulder and returns to hold my hand.

“Come on,” Jason says, leading the way out. We see Warren in the hall, and Jason sends him an *I’ll kill you if you look at Siena the wrong way* glare as we pass him.

Before we turn the corner, I pause and look back.

Lily’s watching us from the doorway of Warren’s room, picking her nail polish. “Hey, Lily. You should call Nyah.”

Her forehead creases with worry, but I'm exhausted from this whole mess. I have enough things to worry about, and what happened to Lily is no longer one of them. Now it's up to the two of them to figure it out and make it right. So, I don't say anything else, instead letting Jason lead me outside to his car. I get in, still pressing the bag of corn to my head, relieved to have finally gotten some closure.

TWENTY-SIX

It's bright and early on Saturday morning when the doorbell rings.

"Natalia will get it," Jason mumbles, his chest vibrating under my cheek.

He's been sneaking in at night after Natalia goes to bed and spending the night with me in Mason's room.

I'm sure she knows, especially since Jackson has a loud mouth, but I think it's easier for her to pretend we're staying in separate rooms when we're not blatantly going to bed together.

It's comforting, being here with Jason. I've spent most of my life feeling like I'm alone, and now here's this person whom I love, who loves *me*, who makes me feel so fucking happy it's almost hard to imagine this level of joy exists. Even after everything I've been through these last few weeks, it all seems inconsequential in comparison, because I have Jason. We can get through anything as long as we're together.

"But we should get up before she comes up here," I say, though getting up is the absolute last thing I want to do.

I try to pull away, but Jason's arms are a band around my torso, and he holds me close. "Five more minutes."

"Siena!" Natalia calls from downstairs. "I can hear you're up. Can you come down, please?"

Jason huffs dramatically as he releases me, his plans foiled.

"I'll be just a minute!" I call back from the door, throwing Jason's sweater on to fight the chill of the early-morning air breezing in from the cracked-open window.

Jason props himself up on his elbows, watching me.

He looks unbelievably hot in the morning, with messy hair and sleepy eyes, his naked chest and abs on full display. It's a

wonder I ever manage to stop staring at him long enough to get anything done.

I run into the bathroom to quickly brush my teeth, and when I return to the room, Jason has unfortunately put a shirt on.

“I’ll be down in a minute,” he says, giving me a quick kiss before I go downstairs.

When I reach the bottom step, I pause. Natalia’s at the front door, speaking to my aunt.

Zia Stella’s eyes shift to me, and they rake over me from top to bottom. I haven’t spoken to her since she picked me up from school on Monday.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. If she’s here to tell me Dario’s changed his mind about everything, she wasted her gas.

“I’m here to talk. Let’s sit on the porch,” she says, holding the door open for me.

I glance at Natalia for some reason, and she nods her head encouragingly, her kind, motherly smile just the reassurance I need to slip on shoes and follow Zia Stella out.

She sits on one of the porch chairs, and I sink onto the one beside her, waiting for her to start.

“I’ve been trying to give you your space,” she starts,

“but it’s time for you to come home.”

Before I can tell her Dario’s isn’t home, she cuts me off. “I don’t mean Dario’s. I mean home. *My* home. Your and Gia’s new home.”

My and Gia’s new home. Is she saying what I think she’s saying?

Before I can process anything, Zia Stella continues.

“I’ve been using this week to run around and solve everything. Gia and I have been having really good conversations about what happened in LA, and I think I can

help her process and find a way to exist with everything that's happened. It may not be easy or fast, but she's on the right track. I'm pulling her from the therapist Dario picked out because he didn't care who she went to or make sure they were a good fit, he just picked one at random from a list on the internet. All he cared about was that she was going and not who she was with, which isn't working anymore."

"So, she won't go to therapy anymore?"

"No, she will. She and I both agree she'd benefit from talking to someone and talking to them *honestly*."

"But she can't speak to one *honestly*," I say, the insinuation clear in my tone. Speaking honestly would be admitting she's the one who killed Stan and that I covered for her, which we've been doing everything in our power to keep a secret.

She nods, not concerned in the slightest. "My best friend since kindergarten is a therapist whom Gia has met before. I think it would be best if Gia talks to someone who knows everything so she can properly process everything. Tyra won't tell a single soul; I trust her with my life.

We've been through our own stuff together."

I want Gia to be on the path toward healing, and though it seems like she already is, I only want what's best for her. So, reluctantly, even though it worries me, I say,

"It's risky to keep telling people, but if you and Gia trust her and she can help Gia heal, then I'm okay with it."

Her smile is relieved. "Thank you, Siena. And if you'd like to speak to someone as well, I'm sure Tyra could recommend someone."

I do kind of miss having someone to talk to, and having someone to speak to honestly about everything would be a nice change from my last therapist. But I'm not sure if I'm ready yet. "I'll think about it."

"All right, and you know whether you say yes or no, you always have me to speak to. I'm here for you, and I want that

to be more apparent than ever. That's also what I was running around doing this week."

My eyebrows draw together as I try to make sense of her words.

"I'm taking custody of you and Gia. The paperwork is in motion, and your father has already signed off on it."

My jaw drops as I stare at her. This isn't a joke; she's being completely serious.

"You—you want custody?"

Her eyes get glassy, and she puts a reassuring hand on my arm. "Yes, I want it more than anything."

I hear her words, I understand their meaning objectively, but I can't process them in the context of what she's saying. She wants custody of me and Gia? She *wants* it?

It wasn't pawned off on her like our last two guardians?

Like she's been so good at doing recently, she knows where my mind is spinning. "I was trying to let my brother take responsibility and give him time to adjust, because I wanted you girls to have a relationship with your father, but it's clear he doesn't have the will or capacity to be the father you need. He'll never be who he should be for you, and I wish it could be different, but it's never going to happen. I absolutely hate the way he's treated you, and I should've stepped in sooner."

Still at a loss for words, I manage to get out, "It's not your fault."

Zia Stella sighs, the guilt on her face clearly disagreeing. "I was trying to let you have your space without interfering too much, but I kept finding myself coming over more and more and being the parent to you both that I wanted to be, even though I was trying to let Dario do it."

She straightens up, grasping both my hands confidently in hers. "I'm done pretending. I'm done waiting for Dario to wake up and be the man he doesn't want to be. I'm done

trying to keep my distance and not interfere. I *want* custody, and I've spent this week making it happen."

I stare at our connected hands, the hands of the aunt I never knew existed before moving here, the hands of a woman who decorated our rooms, who kept the fridge full for us, who spent time with us, who was concerned about us, who cared about my well-being and my problems—the hands of a woman who wants to be my *parent*.

I don't realize how long I sit there silently, but it must be a while because Zia Stella shifts uncomfortably, clearing her throat.

"Is that, um ... is that something you'd like?"

Zia Stella is practically the only adult in my life who actually cares about me, but doubt causes me to ask, "Do you want me just because Gia and I are a package deal?"

"What? *No!* I don't want you to ever think that!" she exclaims, seemingly horrified at the thought. She squeezes my hands like she's trying to make sure I'm paying attention. "You're strong and brave, especially after everything you've been through. You've carried so much alone on your shoulders, and you don't have to do that anymore—you don't have to put yourself second to your sister. I admire you so much, and I love you, and you don't have to feel like it's you against the world anymore. We can be a proper family. I *want* us to be a proper family."

My throat thickens, and I don't trust myself to speak even if I could.

A *proper* family. Something I've always wanted but never got no matter how much I wished for it. And now it's being offered to me by a woman who *loves* me, who loves Gia, and whom we love in return.

My voice is bolder than I feel when I admit, "Then, yes. I think I'd like that very much."



Zia Stella and I spend an hour on the porch talking through everything, and I tell her what happened Monday night with Brandon, about deciding to go back to school against Principal Anderson's suggestion, about Officer Liu harassing us, and about Lily.

She's shocked by all of it and promises to see what she can do about Officer Liu. I feel better after telling her, like I'm able to take a full breath of air for the first time in weeks, and the pressure pounding on my temples that's seemed like a constant background pain finally lessens.

Afterward, I pack my things and thank Natalia for letting me stay here. It's emotional for me, leaving the first house I really felt at home in, but I know it's going to be even better at Zia Stella's, and I'll always be welcome to visit. Jackson even hugs me and, like the pain in the ass he is, loudly fake cries, "I'm going to miss pretending I didn't hear you and Jason fooling around at night in your room!"

That earns him a thump in the back of the head, along with a "Shut up, Jackson!" from his brother.

Now, standing in a room in Zia Stella's house with the biggest windows, which are already cracked open for me, a room she promised I can decorate any way I want, a feeling of contentment settles over me. It lasts while I unpack and right up until I turn my phone on for the first time all week. It happens to ring in my hand, and the caller ID mocks me. It's like she knew I was happy and needed to remedy that immediately.

I contemplate ignoring it, but this conversation has to happen eventually.

Answering, I put it on Speaker so I can continue sorting through my things.

"Hi, Mom."

"Siena, darling! You finally answered; I've been trying all week!"

“Yeah, I’ve been busy . . .” I trail off, but I don’t think she hears me because she bulldozes on.

“You’re all over the internet! Everyone is talking about you and Stan! I’ve been getting harassed to talk about it from everyone. You’re famous, or at least famous right now. We need to get a move on and capitalize on these fifteen minutes of fame before it all blows over and people are talking about the next big thing. We need to get started with Lincoln ASAP! He’s seen the picture too, and now with what everyone is saying, it’s gotten his director’s brain wheel spinning. It’s going to be amazing, and we’re going to be *stars!*”

Unable to take it anymore, I exclaim, “I’m not doing the documentary! I’m not letting you use me, Mom.”

Florence feigns indignation. “Use you? You’re my daughter, I’d never do that! This is for both of us; it’s for your future.”

She is so full of it, and the more I realize it, the more it hurts. “Don’t pretend like you care about me or my future.”

“I’m not pretending; of course I care about you!”

Keeping my voice steady, I let go of some of the pent-up anger I’ve been holding on to. “No, you don’t.

If you did, you would’ve taken a second to ask me what I *actually* want for my future, how I feel about being plastered all over the internet and having to read what everyone is saying about me. If you *cared* about me, you wouldn’t even entertain the idea of doing this documentary, you’d know it was an awful idea. And if you *really* cared about me, you never would’ve pawned us off on Aunt Julie and Dario, and you wouldn’t be coming back into my life now just because you can get something out of it.”

“That’s—that’s not what’s happening!” she sputters, probably in complete disbelief. She never expected me to call her out like that, but *damn* does it feel good, and I’m only just getting started.

“You are *so* selfish, Mom. You know nothing about me or Gia, who wanted to connect with you even though she knew

she'd only get hurt. And what did you do when she called you begging for help? You hurt her! You only ever think about yourself.”

There's offended sniffing on the other line, but it's not crying even though the haughty tone she uses cracks.

“Some people just weren't *meant* to be mothers, Siena. I tried, I really did, but every time I thought about having to go home to you girls, I felt tied down, like you were holding me back, even though you were just kids.”

Now my own eyes are tearing, and I angrily wipe them away. She doesn't deserve my tears, doesn't get to make me feel bad for existing.

Like she's trying to justify herself, she continues,

“I never wanted kids in the first place, so I did what I thought was best for you girls.”

Listening to her is only making me feel worse, and I am choosing to be happy. “No, you did what you thought was best for *you*, like you always do.”

She must sense she's losing me; the Hollywood voice is back. “Siena, darling—”

“I'm not doing your documentary. I want nothing to do with you.”

“But can't you think about it some more—”

“Goodbye, Mom. Unless you decide to make an effort and actually take an interest in me and Gia, actually care about us, don't ever contact either of us again.”

And with that, I stab the End Call button, relief flooding through me. I've closed the door on Florence, and with it any hope that maybe things can be different, but I don't regret it.

There's a creak in the floor, and I turn to find Gia standing in the doorway. She has her own room across the hall from mine, but I thought she was out for lunch with her friends.

“How much of that did you hear?” I ask.

She gives a sad shrug. “All of it.”

“I’m sorry, Gia. I know how much Mom meant to you.”

Gia crosses the room, sitting with me on my new bed.

Something about her seems different, more mature. Maybe because of what we’ve been through these last few days, I’m imagining it, or maybe she’s actually holding herself differently. Either way, looking at her now, I’m reminded that she’s not my eight-year-old little sister who looks up at me with her pleading big brown eyes to ask me to open water bottles for her or play checkers with her.

“You know,” Gia starts, picking at the fleece of my bedspread, “I don’t think it was even really about Mom specifically. I was projecting my hopes onto her even though I knew she’d never be what I wanted.”

“What did you want?”

Gia’s smile is sad and wistful. “I just wanted a mom.

A dad. A parent. Someone. And yeah, I’ve always had you, but it’s different. Yes, you’re great, and you always have my back, obviously, but you’re still a kid too, and no offense, but you’re just as fucked-up as me; you’re in no place to be my parent when you’re trying to get your own shit together.”

We both laugh at that.

“You’re right. I did my best, but I had no idea what I was doing. I was barely holding it together as it was.”

“I know,” Gia jokes even though she’s not really joking, and we laugh again. It feels good to talk about this with her from a different perspective now that it’s all over.

Sobering up, Gia lays her head on my shoulder. “You did pretty great regardless.”

My throat is tight when I say, “Thanks, Gia.”

She clears her own throat and removes her head from my shoulder. “But now you don’t need to worry about me, and you can focus on figuring out your own shit.”

“I’ll always worry about you, you’re my little sister.”

“Okay, fine, but now you can worry about me *less* because we have Zia Stella, and she’s kind of awesome.”

It’s safe to say she’s more than awesome. She *wants* us.

She *cares* about us.

“She really is, isn’t she?”

Gia takes in my new room, a blank slate to decorate however I want, with my own en suite and corkboard to fill with new memories. She puts her head back on my shoulder, settling in for a comforting moment.

As I place my arm around her, she says, “We’re going to be okay here—better than okay, even if the Stan stuff doesn’t blow over anytime soon. We have each other and Zia Stella, and we can handle whatever else gets thrown at us, together.”

“Together,” I vow.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The smooth hum of Jason's car is a sound I never thought I'd miss, but sitting in it now, in the passenger seat on a rainy Sunday evening, I realize just how much I've come to love it. Jason was completely overjoyed when he got it back, pulling up in Zia Stella's—*my*—driveway with a huge *look at this!* smile. After spending Saturday settling in and today furniture shopping with Zia Stella and Gia for our rooms, I'm excited to go out to dinner with Jason, my *boyfriend*. I still can't believe I have a boyfriend, especially a boyfriend who's *Jason*. I pinch myself in case he disappears, but he doesn't. He's still sitting there with those high cheekbones, straight nose, and strong jaw.

“Do you always stare at your boyfriends, or just me?”

Jason teases, barely needing to look away from the road to catch me in the act.

I give him a playful shove. “If your boyfriend was as handsome as mine, you'd stare at him too.”

“Oh, really? Is that why you moved out? My good looks were distracting you from getting anything done?”

He's joking, but I play along. “That's *exactly* why.”

He chuckles and gives my thigh a squeeze. “You're welcome to move back in whenever. Natalia already misses you.”

I feign indignation. “And you don't?”

“Oh, I do, but I'm a long game kind of man. I know we'll be living together eventually. Maybe not today or next year or immediately after college, but we will.”

He says it so confidently, like there's not a doubt in his mind that we're going to end up together, and I have to contain the way my excitement threatens to bubble over, along with the speed of my heart.

“Speaking of moving,” Jason continues, “I drove by your old house today, and there was a for-sale sign at Officer Dickwad’s.”

“Wow, really?” I wonder if after everything he went through with Lily, they feel like they can’t live there anymore. It reminds me of a conversation I had with Zia Stella today. “My zia told me she went to the station yesterday to file a complaint against Officer Liu, and he’s been placed on administrative leave while they investigate. But she said even though the town isn’t tiny, it’s small enough that word will get out that he’s been going overboard during the investigation into Lily’s disappearance, which he never should’ve been a part of due to the conflict of interest. Anyway, she said there’s already talk that he’s going to resign.”

Jason gives my thigh another squeeze, and though it’s for support, I get tingles from the action. “I’m glad you trusted her enough to tell her what was going on.”

“Enough was enough,” I tell him. “Part of me was scared that she wouldn’t believe me like every other time I’ve tried to talk to an adult, but not only did she believe me, she was pissed enough on my behalf to storm into the station and not leave until they took her seriously.” I grab his hand and hold it. “I’m sorry I never let you tell Natalia what was happening.”

He’s gentle as he intertwines his fingers with mine.

“Everything worked out the way it was meant to.”

My phone vibrates in the cupholder, and the screen lights up with Nyah’s name. Jason notices.

“You girls friends again?”

“We were never *not* friends, but after the way she brushed me off at school, we’ve been trying to get back to normal.”

My phone’s been off practically all week, and after I hung up with Florence yesterday, I went through all the texts I missed. Nyah sent me one Monday when I was sent home from school after our weird interaction that morning.

Sorry for my reaction earlier. I don't care what everyone is saying. I was freaked out at first, but then I realized that I know you and shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. I don't know what happened, but I should've talked to you. Call me please.

I can't lie, I was upset by her reaction. She was supposed to be my friend, and she acted like she was ashamed of me, like she actually believed what people were saying about my being involved with Lily's disappearance, but I appreciate that she apologized and reached out. If I had seen it, I would've replied, but since I didn't answer all week, she continued sending texts. On Friday morning, she said she heard I was back at school and wanted to grab lunch. On Friday night, she sent a text in all caps.

HOLY SHIT I JUST GOT A CALL FROM LILY!!! SHE SAID SHE'S STAYING AT WARREN'S AND GOING HOME MONDAY! WTF? THIS IS CRAZY! I'M GLAD SHE'S OK BUT ALSO PISSED AT BOTH OF THEM. CAN YOU CALL ME PLEASE?

Her follow-up texts were her sharing that news had spread about Lily being fine and that she ran away.

Apparently, Lily posted on social media explaining the situation but leaving out Warren's name, and the entire school has been messaging Nyah about it. We've been talking ever since.

"We're going to get dinner after school tomorrow," I tell him.

"And you're sure you're fine with dealing with the kids at school?" he asks, checking in. "Everyone may have moved on and started talking about Lily's reappearance, but they're not just going to drop Stan."

"I'm done caring what other people think of me.

Whether they think I'm a mini-Florence or a murderer, I don't care. I know who I am, and the people important to me know who I am, and that's what matters."

His smile is so beautiful it almost hurts. "Good. And don't you ever forget it."

I feel so lucky at the moment, I wish he wasn't driving so I could jump on him. "Thank you for having my back, Jason."

"Always. And I'm assuming we're taking what really happened with Stan in LA to the grave?"

"Yes. Zia Stella knows, and Gia's talking to a therapist she trusts, but other than that, no one will ever find out."

Jason purses his lips. "Huh, so Jackson and I aren't the only siblings who got away with killing a guy and taking the secret to the grave."

I laugh since it's such an oddly specific joke, but it's so Jason. Except he doesn't join in, and I remember what he said at his house about how one day I'll realize he's not joking when he makes those comments, and I sober up.

"Wait, are you serious?"

Now he laughs, and it only piques my interest more.

"Jason!"

"It's a long story. Aiden was prepared to do what you did for Gia, but it never came to that."

I shift in my seat to give him my whole attention.

"What? I need details, Jason! You have to tell me!"

More casually than he has any right to, he changes the subject. "Oh, look, this is the road where we met."

It's a dark gravel back road surrounded by trees in the middle of nowhere. Just like that night, the rain is coming down harshly, and it's filling the car with the pine-and-fresh-earth smell I love.

"You mean where you almost ran me over," I correct, but Jason doesn't concede.

"I think you mean where you were lying in the rain in the middle of the road for fun."

"I told you the rain was refreshing!" I exclaim, but I can't wipe the smile off my face. If it wasn't for that night, I

wouldn't be sitting here now with my boyfriend, completely and totally in love.

Jason signals and pulls over to the side of the road, though there's no one around.

"What are you doing?"

He unbuckles his seat belt and throws his shoes and socks in the backseat. "We're going to dance in the rain."

I smirk at him as he removes his sweater, leaving him in just a formfitting T-shirt. "I think you like dancing in the rain more than I do at this point."

He means it when he declares, "Only when it's with you."

Butterflies that erupt only for him dance in my stomach as he opens his door. "Come on."

He's halfway out of the car when I call, "Wait! Aren't you going to address the whole *you got away with killing a guy* thing?"

His smirk is mischievous. "If you come out, I'll tell you." And then he's gone, and I'm left scrambling to remove my shoes and socks and follow him out.

I'm instantly drenched, my hair sticks to my face, and my feet get muddy, but as Jason spins me around and skips through puddles with me, smiling in that carefree way of his, I've never felt freer. Everyone may know about LA and be talking about me, and I don't know what the future holds or if I'll get any scholarships or even get into college, but as Jason picks me up and I spread my arms wide in the rain, I do know one thing: I'm exactly where I belong.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica Cunsolo's young adult series, *With Me*, has amassed over 215 million reads on Wattpad since she posted her first story, *She's With Me*, on the platform in 2015. The novel has won a Watty award, has been published in multiple languages, and is in development with Wattpad WEBTOON Studios. Jessica lives just outside of Toronto, where she enjoys the outdoors and transforming her real-life awkward situations into plotlines for her viral stories. You can find her on Instagram @jesscunsolo, on Twitter @avaviolet17, or on Wattpad @avaviolet.

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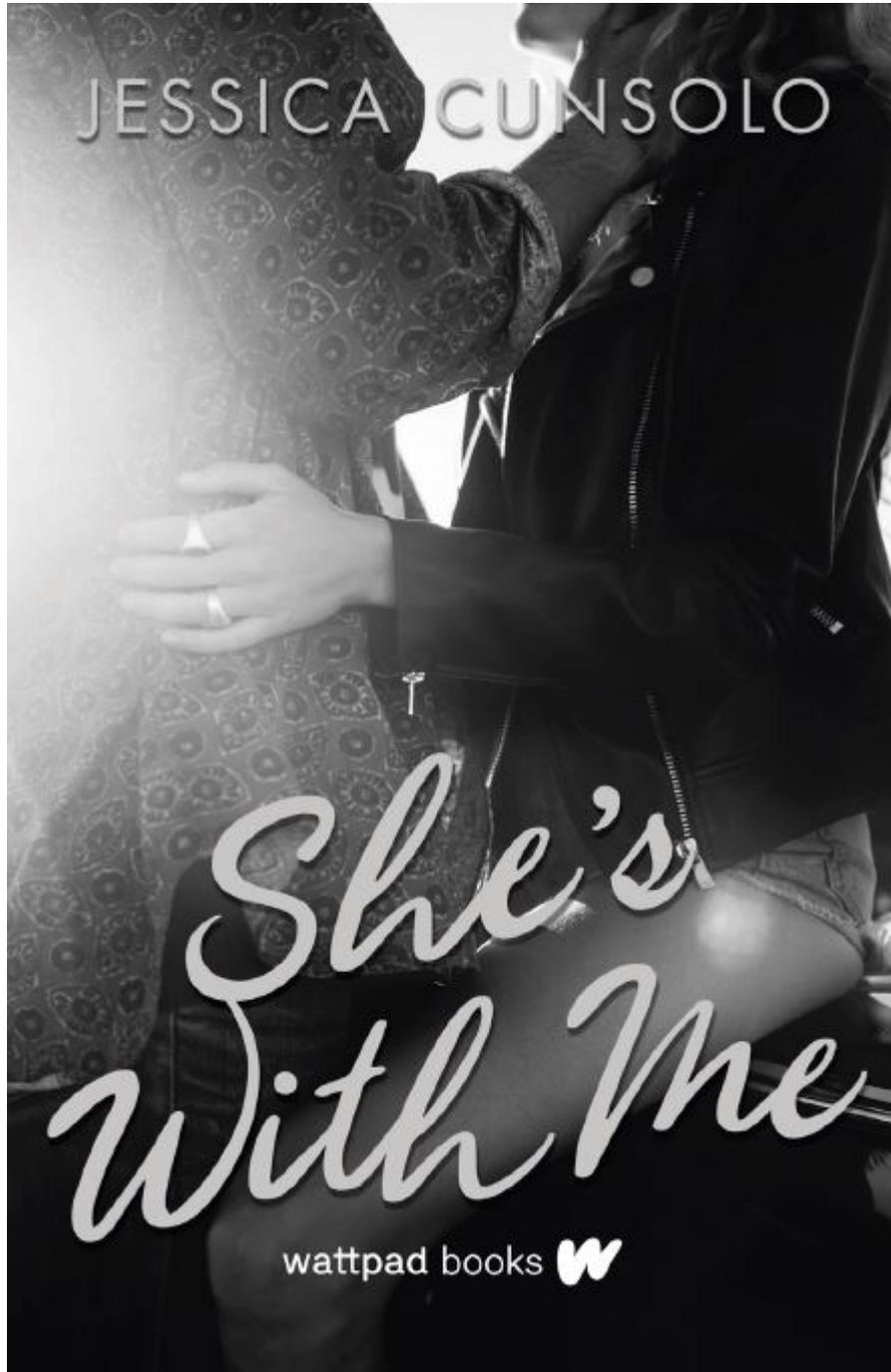
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Meet the original Parker brother, Aiden, in Jessica Cunsolo's debut novel,
She's With Me



Available now, wherever books are sold.

1

I've always suffered from this horribly disadvantageous condition—it's called being directionally challenged. It's self-diagnosed of course, but I'm almost positive it's an actual thing, so it's not really my fault that I'm having trouble navigating this maze known as King City High School.

The warning bell rings and animal-like students scramble from their assembled groups and lockers and head to class. Shit. I'm going to be late and I still have no idea where my first class is. It doesn't help that I can only walk so fast since I hurt myself a few weeks back, and that injury is still healing.

When I got here this morning, the curt secretary sent me off with no more than a map and dismissive "Good luck." Starting a new school a month and a half into first semester is hard enough—having my face planted in a map would just scream *New girl, eat me alive!*, not to mention trash my plan to get through senior year without drawing too much attention to myself. Not that I'd be able to read the map anyway. As I said: directionally challenged.

Pulling out my schedule again, I see that the name printed at the top reads *Amelia Collins*. It's a pretty name this time, but it'll still take some getting used to.

I reread the room number that I've already committed to memory, as if reading it again might magically transport me to it. Glancing at my brand new cell phone, I huff out an aggravated breath as I realize I only have five minutes to get to class before I'm late.

"Screw it," I mutter as I rush aimlessly down the hall while searching my shoulder bag for the school map—I really hate being late.

Not really paying attention to where I'm going, I'm blindsided by a group of giant walking trees slash teenage boys. They're talking and joking among themselves—walking

through the halls as if they own the whole school. Without slowing down, I hug close to one wall, and reach into my bag to grab my map. Instantly, I'm thrown back as I collide with an outcrop of bricks, stopping just short of falling on my butt. Who designs a stupid wall to stick out like that?

My belongings have poured out everywhere, and I grab them hastily before quickly turning around, only to come face to face with something both hard and human, if the colorful curses are any indication. My stuff crashes onto the floor again as the pain in my ribs intensifies.

Great. Just freaking great.

"Are you blind? Can't you see I was walking here?" a voice growls.

My eyes meet the agitated gray ones of the most breathtakingly gorgeous guy I have ever seen. He's a member of the walking trees I saw before—tall with broad shoulders, a scowl plastered on his face.

His attitude sucks. He was equally at fault, if not more, since the skyscrapers had to walk in a horizontal line in the hall, but I seriously don't want to draw any more attention to myself.

"I am so sorry." I apologize as we bend down to retrieve our belongings.

"Is your brain not able to communicate to your legs where you can and can't walk? If you didn't notice, there was someone in front of you, which means you move out of their way," he shoots back as he stands up with his binder.

A small crowd is gathered around us, clearly interested in seeing the poor girl stupid enough to incur the wrath of this intolerant jerk.

Think first, Amelia. Don't say something stupid. You're supposed to keep your head down and get through the year unnoticed.

“Sorry. I’m new and really don’t know where I’m going.” I stand up with my now-collected belongings and push my strawberry blond hair out of my face. “You wouldn’t happen to know where room 341 is, would you?”

“You’re new, not blind. Don’t use excuses to cover up your stupidity. Get out of my sight while I’m still being nice,” he scoffs, and runs a hand through his blond hair.

This is him being nice? Bemused faces of the other walking trees and the larger assembling crowd surround me, and I’m doing the exact opposite of blending in. Not wanting to stand out any more, I contain my anger and don’t even glance at him as I stride by.

“Oh look, she does have some good ideas in that otherwise useless brain of hers,” I hear him say to his friends, like being a jerk is part of his genetic build.

That’s it. I turn and walk back to him, looking straight up and into his gray eyes with my narrowed hazel ones.

“Oh, I guess her brain is a hundred percent useless after all,” he says to his friends.

He bends down to match my full height, three inches taller than usual thanks to my gorgeous tan wedges, and looks me straight in the eyes, talking as though he was speaking to a toddler.

“Do you need me to draw you a map of how to get the *fuck* out of my face?” he slowly asks, putting emphasis on the curse.

“No, thank you,” I say evenly and calmly. “But I can draw you a map, so when I tell you to go to hell, you’ll know exactly where to go.”

Everyone standing in the now-crowded hall takes an audible inhale and stops breathing as they absorb the scene. By the looks of this stunned blond asshole and his friends, it seems like no one has ever said anything that daring to him before.

He gets up really close to my face and growls, “Now you listen to me, you little—”

“No, you listen to me asshole,” I say calmly. “First of all, get out of my face, your breath stinks from all the crap that spews out of your mouth. Second, your dick belongs to your body, not in your personality,”—I push him out of my personal space—“so I suggest you pull your head out of your ass and realize that you’re not the only person in the damn school. Maybe if you and your walking skyscrapers didn’t bulldoze down the hall in a straight line people wouldn’t have to dive out of your path to avoid destruction. I’m sorry if someone pissed in your Froot Loops this morning, but please do us all a favor and check your issues at the door. Finding a hobby or going to group therapy could really help you with your social problems. So thanks for the friendly welcome to your school, but I’d like to get to class now.”

The hallway is hushed still and quiet. Blondie looks completely stupefied.

His friends are laughing—like, out-of-breath-gasping-for-air cackling. These other mountains are all just as breathtakingly gorgeous as asshole number one. The late bell rings. Great. I’m late for class.

Confident that my point was made and this jerk face was properly put in his place, I spin on my heel so my hair hits him on the shoulder and walk through the parting crowd, leaving him steaming.

“Oh my God, she so told you, Aiden! That was *hilarious!*” one of his gorgeous friends says through bursts of laughter.

So, the jerk’s name is Aiden. It’s a shame really that such a pretty name and face is wasted on such an ugly personality. So much for going unnoticed; I have a feeling everyone is going to have something to say about me after this. Well, at least I look cute in my skirt and heels.

Now that the entertainment is over, the crowd departs. As I strut down the hallway and turn a corner, I realize that I still

have no idea where the hell I'm going. Taking a minute to collect myself, I check to see if maybe there's someone left who might know where to find my classroom.

Anxious at the best of times, hearing rather large and determined footsteps stomping behind me catches me off guard, and then I'm suddenly turned around and hoisted up and over Aiden's shoulder. With my face planted firmly against his back, my butt in the air over his shoulder, and my bag hooked through his arm, he takes off down the hallway.

"What the hell are you doing? Put me down right now!" I yell.

Aiden's stride doesn't slow, and he chuckles beneath me, the bastard. I strain my neck to see the bemused faces of two of the three gorgeous tree friends who were with him in the hall.

"Can't you two talk some sense into him?!"

"Sorry, babe," the one with short brown hair and chocolate-colored eyes yells back at me with a grin of thorough amusement.

"Skyscrapers aren't much for talking."

I can't help but see that Aiden really does have a very nice back.

His muscles are noticeable under his tight, but not too tight, plain black T-shirt. We round a corner and I'm met by the curious gazes of some people still in the halls—they clearly have no desire to help me either.

Pain shoots through the left side of my chest. Shit. Running into the wall, followed by the very muscular Aiden hoisting me up, coupled with this uncomfortable position is not good. The pain spreads. I have to get down before I make things worse.

"Listen, bud. I'm sorry about what I said before," I lie. "But kidnapping people is not the way to deal with your problems."

He adjusts my body, causing a burst of pain in my ribs. Without even slowing his pace, he runs up a flight of stairs. Man, this guy is like the Energizer Bunny, not even tiring once. I'm having trouble breathing. "Please," I gasp. "Put me down and we can talk this out."

He ignores me and continues his unwavering stride.

"Can you just let me go gentl—"

Aiden abruptly stops moving and deposits me on the floor.

I look up at him, the wind knocked out of me. The left side of my ribs are on fire—yup, I hurt them again.

"Room 341," he says, dropping my bag beside me and turning to leave the now-deserted hallway.

Dazed, I try to get up but pain shoots up my left side, forcing me back down to the floor. This isn't going to end well. Determined not to lie on this gross floor a second longer, I try again, but the pain spreads through my chest. Sprawled on the floor, I'm incapable of moving. Damn it. Looks like this isn't going to be my first day after all.

I've hurt my ribs three times now, which is less than ideal.

Reaching into my bag beside me, I fish around for my phone and pull it out. My mom ignores my first call. Typical. The second time she answers on the third ring. "Hello? Haile—I mean Amelia?"

"Hey. I think I hurt my ribs again. I'm going to drive myself to the hospital. I'm only letting you know so you don't freak out and think the worst when the school calls saying I didn't show up for class even though I was here today," I say from my position on the floor.

She sighs as if she's wondering how I managed to screw up on my first day of school. "How did that happen? You need to be more careful. He's still out there and this isn't ove—"

"I know. It doesn't matter. I'm just letting you know." Even talking hurts. "I'll call you when I get the—" My voice cuts off when the pain becomes too much.

“Amelia? You can’t drive yourself.” I try to ignore the hint of annoyance creeping into her tone. “I’ll come pick you up from school—I’ll be there soon. In the meantime, try not to draw even more attention to yourself.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you in the parking lot.”

Hanging up the phone, I shove it back into my bag. Staring up at the ceiling, I think of the most logical way of getting up.

“Okay, Amelia. You have three broken and two bruised ribs healing—you got through it the first time, you can do it again.” I psych myself up.

Bending my legs at the knees, I pull off my heels and shove them into my bag. Before I can change my mind, I quickly roll from my right side onto my stomach, careful to avoid making my left side touch anything.

With my arm through the strap of my shoulder bag so I can avoid having to bend down and get it later, I place my arms near my head in push-up position and use my knees at the same time.

Getting my feet underneath me, I stand up carefully and lean against the lockers.

“Great, you’re up. Now you have to find the damn exit from this maze-school,” I say to myself.

I’m trying to get my bearings when my eyes lock with a pair of familiar chocolate-brown ones. Shit. How long has he been here?

Aiden’s brown-haired friend who remembered my skyscraper line is standing beside an open locker, staring at me. The dirty blond-haired member of the walking trees is beside him, eyes wide and unblinking. Swallowing my pride and refusing to show weakness, I break my gaze and walk in the opposite direction.

“The exit’s the other way.” A hesitant voice calls from behind me—it’s the dirty blond.

Damn broken internal compass.

“How much did you see?” I ask as I make my way toward them.

“Well, pretty much everything since Aiden turned and left you,” he answers hesitantly.

Great, so all of it.

“And it didn’t occur to either of you to *help the girl lying on the floor in pain?*”

That snaps them out of their stupor. The brown-eyed one quickly closes his locker, and they rush toward me.

“I don’t need your help now!” I exclaim, wincing from the pain and causing them to freeze in their tracks.

“Are you sure you don’t need our help?” asks the brown-haired one with a smirk.

Cocky bastard, way to kick a girl while she’s down. It didn’t help that they both look like male models, and now I look like I was dragged through a restaurant’s dumpster. I’m about to tell him where to go, but my breathing starts to get worse, and I realize I still didn’t even know how to get to the parking lot to meet my mom.

I take a deep breath. “Can you point the way to the parking lot, please?”

“We’ll help you there,” says the blond.

“Shouldn’t you be in class?”

“Nah,” he says. “We’re in this class with you. It’s the most boring thing ever, and this is much more interesting.”

“Glad my misery can break up the dull monotony of your day,”

I say dryly.

“Damn, I didn’t mean it like that,” he says sheepishly, moving to my left to put my arm over his shoulder as the brunet does the same on my right side.

“*Ow!*” I exclaim to blondie as the pain pulses through my side.

“That’s the side that hurts, just leave it.”

“Shit, sorry,” he says as we make our way down the hall painfully slowly, blondie in front and my right arm around the brown-haired model, who is helping me walk.

“Screw this,” the guy my arm is slung over mutters. He stops walking and scoops me up bridal style into his tanned, muscled arms, and starts walking again.

She’s With Me

“Noah, get her bag and open the doors for us,” he says, clearly tired of our slow descent.

Grateful for not being on my feet anymore, I hold my tongue uncharacteristically, too tired and in too much pain to argue. We get to a pair of heavy-looking doors that lead outside to the parking lot. Noah holds them open as we walk through, and I shield my eyes from the sudden blinding sunlight as I look for my mom.

“You can put me down now; my mother should be here soon.”

He sets me on my feet but keeps an arm around me, making no move to leave. “You don’t have to wait with me.”

“We can’t leave you standing here alone, right?” Noah says, taking a seat on the concrete steps and looking at his friend, who nods in agreement.

“Aren’t you guys going to get in trouble for ditching school?” I ask curiously.

“Nah. I’m Mason, by the way.” He smiles and helps me sit down on the step. “And you’ve met Noah. You are?”

“Amelia,” I reply.

The ache in my chest hasn’t let up, and although I don’t want to admit it, I’m kind of glad they’re keeping me company.

“You know,” Noah starts hesitantly, glancing at me with pale-green eyes, “Aiden’s really not a bad guy. He didn’t know he’d hurt you.”

“If he knew you were healing from broken ribs already, he wouldn’t have picked you up. It’s just guys fooling around, you know? He’d never intentionally hurt anyone, especially not someone smaller than him.”

I really wish they hadn’t heard me talking to myself in the hall.

“He seemed perfectly fine tearing an innocent girl to shreds verbally. And from what I can tell, it seems like it’s not the first time,” I reply.

“He doesn’t do it often—he’s easily aggravated and having a rough time right now. Plus, he was in a really bad mood this morning, so naturally he snapped at the first thing that gave him a reason—you,” Noah says, as if this is a perfectly acceptable excuse.

“Besides, you handled yourself amazingly. Watching you tell him off was by far the best thing I’ve ever seen.” Mason smiles.

“Really?” I ask cautiously.

“Seriously. The drawing him a map to hell? Priceless! And did you see his face when you told him how to fix his problems?” Noah laughs.

“My personal favorite part was when she told him where his dick belongs.” Mason winks at me.

“You guys aren’t mad at me for what I said?”

“What? The comment about how we’re walking skyscrapers that bulldoze down the halls and destroy everything in our path?”

Noah asks with a cute smirk.

“Something like that,” I murmur.

“Nah, it was funny, plus totally worth seeing someone other than us rip on Aiden. Especially a teensy little girl like you,” Mason replies with a chuckle.

“I was getting sick of listening to his bullshit,” I say.

“He isn’t a bad guy, really.” Noah chuckles. “And he’d feel horrible if he knew he’s the reason you’re going to the hospital right now.”

“It’s not his fault, I’m not mad at him. Annoyed by his attitude, sure, but I get that he didn’t mean to hurt me,” I confess. “If my ribs were normal, I would’ve just gotten up, gone to class, and called him a slew of bad words the next time I saw him in the hall.

“Plus, I’d rather this stay between us,” I tell the two gorgeous boys beside me. “No one needs to know about my injuries, okay?”

The boys share a look, and Noah studies me. “How did you break, what was it, three ribs? And bruise another three?”

“Broke three, bruised two,” I say, purposely not answering his question.

“Right, so how’d it happen? The classic singing in the shower and then slipping?” Mason jokes.

Memories of that dreadful night make me shiver, and I think about the dead, brown eyes that still haunt me—he’s the reason I had to move states, *again*.

“No, honestly, I’m just accident-prone,” I say, trying to get them to drop it.

“That must have been a pretty bad klutz moment,” Noah chuckles.

My mom pulls up in front of us, sparing me from having to respond. The disapproving look on her face makes me immediately tense. Crap, I should’ve fought harder to make these boys go to class. I’m going to get a lecture from my mother now. All five foot four of her gets out of the car, and she lifts her sunglasses to the top of her head, pushing back her

shoulder-length brown hair as she glares at Mason and Noah. “Thanks for helping her, boys, but I can take it from here. Get back to class.”

They look at each other hesitantly, but I reassure them that I’m fine, and thank them for keeping me company.

“Really, Amelia?” my mom says as she tears out of the school parking lot, her fingers tight on the steering wheel.

“It’s not what it looks like.”

“It better not be. Do you really want to move again?”

I grind my teeth to stop myself from shouting at her. I know. I know all of this. I don’t need her to remind me.

“No.”

“Then remember what you promised. No boyfriends. No social media. No teams or clubs. You’re allowed to go to the gym and practice your jujitsu. I can’t stop you from making friends, but you need to be responsible.”

We’re silent for the rest of the ride to the hospital. I *know* what needs to be done. I have to keep my head down, at all costs.

