



Resorts to Murder

RESORTS TO



A KILLER ROMANTIC COMEDY
GRACIE RUTH MITCHELL

Juniper
Bear
RESORTS TO
Murder

GRACIE RUTH MITCHELL

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To those who fear that death is the end: the stars do not cease to exist when the sun rises, and we do not stop praising their light.

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Also by Gracie Ruth Mitchell

CONTENT WARNING

This is a murder mystery, so there are some darker elements to this story. Sexual assault of a side character is mentioned but is not shown on page or discussed in detail.

IN WHICH JUNIPER DEFEATS INERTIA

At some point I have to stop killing people.

I can't very well carry on like this. Here I am, backed into a corner yet again, with no conceivable way out—another body to bury, another alibi to invent, and absolutely no relevant knowledge to speak of. What's the best way to dismember a corpse? Who knows. How long before a body starts to stink? Beats me. So why do I keep doing this to myself? And what does it say about me, anyway, that my main characters keep finding creative ways to die? This work in progress is supposed to be a romance novel. It should have swooning and longing, summer afternoons and strawberry sunsets and reckless love.

And to be fair, it *does* have all of those things—right up until my heroine gets poisoned by her friend-turned-lover.

So...her friend-turned-lover...turned-murderer? Is there a market for a romance novel where the female lead dies in chapter nine?

No. Probably not.

This is better than the last manuscript I attempted, I guess, where the hero didn't make it three chapters before revealing himself to be a villain who bludgeoned his personal trainer to death with a Shake Weight. That particular storyline was fueled heavily by caffeine and the discovery that I'd be unable to cancel my gym membership, since I (wildly optimistically) paid six months in advance.

Maybe I'm secretly a serial killer. Is that possible? Maybe I'm a serial killer, and this is my subconscious's way of getting me to see the light. I figure I'd probably know if I were a mass murderer, and it probably would've manifested in other, less-benign ways—a Shake-Weight-bludgeoned body rotting in my garage, for instance—but then again, does anyone ever *really* know themselves?

No. I submit that they do not.

I certainly don't. Just yesterday, for example, I would have sworn up and down that I'd never go on another date while living in this little Wyoming town. I've met too many man-children masquerading as adults to have any hope left for this particular dating pool.

And yet here I am, parked in the town's fanciest coffee shop, waiting with my friend Matilda for her boyfriend and her boyfriend's friend, so that we can double—something I only agreed to because I haven't seen Matilda in months. We keep in touch, but after we graduated college seven years ago, she moved to the city and got a real big-girl job in a legal office.

I, meanwhile, stayed in our little college town, partly because my brother was attending school here too, and he's some of the only family I've got left. Now that he's graduated, we rent an apartment together on University Street. There's nothing keeping us here, I guess, but two Bean siblings at rest will stay at rest until acted on by an outside force—and so far we've been outside-force-free. Inertia is a tricky thing to overcome.

So when Matilda called last week and said she and her boyfriend would be passing through on their way to the West Coast, of course I said I wanted to see her. And when she called this morning to tell me her boyfriend has a friend in town and *can we pretty please double date*—well, what was I supposed to say? It's not like I'm swamped, and this way Matilda's boyfriend will get to meet up with his friend too.

I was a good friend. I said yes.

“Juniper.”

I jump as her voice, loud and slightly nasally, yanks me from my thoughts. “Yeah,” I say.

She points to my phone with one finger. “Put that away,” she says as the fingers on her other hand drum restlessly against the tabletop, her manicured nails making little *click-click-click* sounds. “They’ll be here soon.”

I close out of Google docs on my phone; my dying main characters are going to have to wait. “Do I look okay?” I say, turning in my chair to look at Matilda.

I guess it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world if my date didn’t like how I look; he might bow out and leave early, and then I could go home and eat chips and guac in my sweats. But my atrocious dating record hasn’t beaten all of my pride out of me; I do have some left, so at the very least I want to look put together.

“Of course you do,” Matilda says, rolling her eyes. “You have the legs of a yoga instructor. I’ve never met this guy in person, but I doubt he’ll object.”

I frown as I register her words. “I thought you’d met him—Daniel?” I say, checking.

Matilda nods and takes a sip of her nine-dollar latte. “Daniel. And no; he and Ned were roommates Ned’s freshman year. I didn’t know Ned then.”

“But you said he was cute!”

“I’ve seen a picture,” she says, laying a reassuring hand on my arm. “And he is. He’s a total hottie. Muscular, but not too muscular. Like, he probably couldn’t bench press three hundred pounds, but he could for sure bench press *you*.”

Well. When she puts it like that...

“I have some breath mints. Want one? In case you get a goodnight kiss?” Matilda says, patting her purse. It’s Louis Vuitton, sleek taupe lambskin embossed with the trademark initials, and easily several thousand dollars.

Do you know how much chips and guac I could buy with several thousand dollars?

“Sure,” I say, glancing down at my own bag, which was *not* several thousand dollars and which does *not* contain breath mints. It was seven-ninety-nine at the thrift store on Main, and it contains a pen, a notepad, and the napkin-wrapped croissant I shoved in earlier. Maybe someday I’ll stop hoarding extra food, but old habits die hard.

I hold out my hand, and Matilda drops one tiny, heart-shaped breath mint into my waiting palm. I pop the little white heart into my mouth and immediately feel that sense of regret that comes when you eat something horrible; this is no polite little wintergreen mint. It’s one of those heavy-duty ones, the flavor as subtle as an oncoming semitruck.

But Matilda is looking at me expectantly, so I just smile and try not to feel sad about how different we are now, about how much better we jive virtually than in person.

It’s something I’ve known about us for a long time. We became friends because we were college roommates, but we have very little in common.

You can’t have everything in life, I guess, and maybe some friendships are just better long-distance.

“Oh,” Matilda says, sitting up straighter. She smooths one hand over her sleek, dark hair, and I follow her gaze to the entrance of the coffee shop. The little bell over the door jingles as I’m hit by a blast of crisp autumn air from outside. I’ve never met the man who steps through the doors, but I’ve seen him all over her social media pages—her perpetual-suit-wearing boyfriend, Ned. He’s younger than us by several years—surprising, considering Matilda’s preference for older men. However, he comes from old money—*not* surprising, considering Matilda’s preference for Louis Vuitton purses and breath mints that strip the taste buds off your tongue.

“There they are,” she breathes, and suddenly I’m hit with the desire to sink down in my chair, hiding myself from view. It’s an obnoxious impulse, because it’s borne primarily from the disparity between my outfit and Matilda’s. She’s in a crisp blouse and pressed slacks, while I have on yellow overalls. If Ned’s friend is anything like Ned, he’s probably also a suit-

wearing, Rolex-buying corporate type who likes blouses and slacks—

But that thought dies a swift death in my mind the *second* Ned's friend steps through the door. It dies, holds its own funeral, and then decays gruesomely, oozing and rotting and dialing my *ick* factor up to eleven out of ten.

Because I recognize that man. Blond, five-foot-eleven, brown eyes, a bad habit of forgetting to put the toilet seat down after he pees.

“Roland?” I breathe, my jaw hanging all the way off my skull as his eyes find mine.

Roland stares at me.

I stare at him.

And then, as one, we react, erupting into chaos.

“Ew!” I say, jumping out of my seat. “Ew, ew, ew—”

“Gross,” I hear him groan. “Oh, gross—”

“*Gah*,” I say, spitting the breath mint out of my mouth like it's cyanide. “I was going to *kiss* you—”

“Gross, Juniper, I put on *cologne* for this—”

“No!” I say, covering my ears and stomping one foot. “Do not tell me that! I don't want to know anything—”

“You put on makeup?!” he cuts me off, his face screwed up with disgust as he eyes me. “Gross, June—*gross*. You wanted me to think you were *pretty*—”

“No. Don't talk to me,” I say, flapping my hand at him. “Don't talk to me, don't look at me—” But I break off when I remember Matilda's description of Roland as a man who could bench press me, and my stomach twists unpleasantly all over again. “Ew,” I groan, squeezing my eyes shut. “No, no, no, no —”

People are staring at us; Matilda and Ned look completely scandalized. We're absolutely making a scene in this fancy-pants cafe that smells like expensive cinnamon pumpkins, and I *do not care*.

Because the man Matilda set me up with? It's none other than Roland Bean.

My. Little. Brother.

"Dude, that's my sister," I hear a disgusted Roland saying to Ned. "Oh, gross, you said she was *hot*—"

My eyes pop open just in time to see Roland wave his hand, spin on his heel, and walk right out the front door again, his legs carrying him faster than I've ever seen him move.

"Oh. My. Goodness. Your brother," Matilda whispers into the absolute silence as I slump back into my chair and chug my water like it can get rid of the bad taste in my mouth.

Only the bad taste is in my brain, not my mouth, and the water can't do anything about it. It's just going to make me have to pee. I'm going to have to use the restroom, at which point I will probably fall in the toilet because Roland never puts the seat down, and *ew ew ew*—

"Your *brother*," Matilda says again, her wide-eyed gaze looking at me and then at the front door and then back to me again.

"I've shown you pictures of him," I wail to her. "I know I have. You *have* to have seen him before—"

"Not in person!" she protests, putting her hands up. "And it was just the one picture that Ned showed me, and it was from when they were roommates—"

"You said his name was Daniel!" I say. Except, I realize, I'm the only person who calls my brother by his first name. His friends all call him by some version of his middle name—Dan or Danny or Daniel. Why didn't it occur to me that Roland might be the guy Ned was bringing?

Because no one expects to be set up with their little brother. That's why.

"Okay, sorry, that one isn't your fault," I say, letting my head drop onto the table. I roll my eyes as the noise in the coffee shop gradually returns to a normal level, ignoring the snickering sounds I hear coming from the tables around us.

What, like they've never been a hot mess in public? Like they've never been set up on a blind date with their own brother? Geez.

I groan, my mind racing and my stomach twisting as I listen to Ned direct his awkward apologies to somewhere around the back of my head.

"You don't even look like siblings," he keeps saying, as though that will fix everything.

He's wrong. We totally look like siblings. But I don't have it in me to argue. "We have different dads," I say instead with my forehead still resting on the table. I ignore the familiar twinge that comes up whenever I think about the mystery man who gave me half of my DNA.

I don't need to know who my father is. I really don't. And I can't think about that right now, anyway.

I have to get out of here. I have to leave this coffee shop, this town, preferably this state. This Bean is no longer an object at rest.

She is in motion, and she is moving—*stat*.



AUTUMN GROVE, IDAHO, IS A LITTLE BITTY TOWN TUCKED just to the west of the Tetons, nestled right up against the Wyoming border. Despite the misleading name, there's very little by way of actual *autumn* in Autumn Grove; at most it sees a month and a half of crunchy leaves and brisk days before the first freeze hits. Then everything dies all at once, and the trees are left bare and skeletal, scratching at the low-hanging clouds like nails snagging fabric.

It's been approximately six years, four months, and ten days since I was last here—not that I'm counting—but as of today, this is my new home. It seems the leaves on the trees are well into their fall cycle now, yellows and oranges and blood reds all shimmering in the crisp wind. This is how I

remember the town I grew up in; chilly, overcast, and just on the precipice of winter.

The drive down Center feels strange knowing that I won't be turning left at the third light anymore. I put my childhood home up for sale not twenty-four hours after my mother passed from a heart attack six years ago. Call me callous; you're probably right. I'm not bothered. That home holds no happy memories for me. I don't want it in my possession.

My new home, on the other hand, will be wonderful! I tell myself this over and over again as I drive, mostly to convince myself it's true, and that everything will be fine. My hands clench tighter on the steering wheel—white knuckles, chipped black nail polish—as I swallow. Then I flick the turn signal and turn from Center onto Main. Behind me a little sedan makes the same turn, riding my tail, and I glare at it in the rearview mirror before returning my gaze to my surroundings. Main Street hasn't changed much. I'm not sure any of Autumn Grove has.

I posted on the Autumn Grove community forum two weeks ago, the day after the Blind Date Incident, asking if anyone knew of available housing. It took several days, but a nice lady finally responded to my post with a listing—a loft bedroom in a house in the suburbs. The price was reasonable, the home looked nice, and she said the roommate was low-key. I told her my preferred move-in date, she responded that it would be available then, and that was that; she sent me the paperwork a few hours later. We set up a meeting through the forum—something you could never safely do in a big city, by the way—and here I am, making my way there, trying not to be nervous.

To distract myself, I call Roland.

“Ew, Juniper,” he says when he answers. “Every time your picture pops up on my phone I feel like barfing all over again.”

“It wasn't my fault!” I tell him for the millionth time.

“I know,” Roland grumbles. “Doesn't change the fact that I can feel my lunch turning over in my stomach.”

“Did you find someplace to stay?” I say instead of replying, because it feels prudent to change the subject.

“Eh,” Roland says. “Not really. I think I’m just gonna go stay with my dad for a while until I figure out my next steps.”

Roland is about five years younger than me. He and I share a mother, but we have different fathers. However, while I was conceived from a one night stand that my mother barely remembered—her words, not mine—she was actually semi-dating Lance when she got pregnant again. As a result, Roland grew up with his father in the next town over, though they gave him my mother’s last name; meanwhile, I don’t even know who my dad was.

My mom had visitation rights, though, so I got to see Roland sometimes on weekends. It was always a bright spot. He was the cutest baby, with these fat cheeks and thigh rolls and dimples where his knuckles should have been. I, on the other hand, was less cute. Not many baby pictures of me exist, but I’ve seen the ones that do. I look skinny, bordering on underfed, with a similar air of discontent to the one my eighteen-year-old mother gives off in those same photos.

“What about you?” Roland says, pulling me from my thoughts. “You sure you want to live in Autumn Grove again?”

“Truthfully, no,” I say. “I’m not sure. But I’m doing it anyway.” I’m not sure how to explain it to Roland. I’m not even sure how to explain it to myself. But there’s something inside me that wants to conquer this town—not in a Genghis Khan kind of way, but in an overcoming-the-past kind of way.

“And when do you move in?” Roland says.

“I’m meeting my new roommate soon,” I say after glancing at the dashboard to check the time. “And I—sorry, hang on. This car is still tailgating me—stop it!” I say, looking in the rearview mirror at the sedan behind me.

The sedan does not stop it. I roll my eyes.

“I’m back,” I say.

Roland hums thoughtfully. “No one is going to be a better roommate than me”—I snort—“but let me know how that goes,” he says. “What about the writing thing? Are you really gonna change genres?”

“Meh,” I say. It’s something I’ve been debating over the past few weeks or so. With characters that keep taking over and murdering each other, how am I supposed to continue writing romance? I’m not sure I’m that great at it anyway. I’ve got a large folder of rejection emails and marginal indie sales; I’m barely making enough to pay my bills, much less save for the future, though I know I’m lucky to even be making that much. “It’s a very real possibility.”

When I first decided I wanted to be a writer, I was planning on traditional publishing. Send the query letters to New York, get a billion form responses, send out another round, on and on until someone liked my work enough to represent me.

But that dream slowly shriveled as the rejections kept coming in, and it began to look less shiny when I began comparing it to other avenues. I ended up finding a little niche in the indie market, publishing my books myself in online marketplaces. It gives me control over every aspect of my work, from my schedule to the covers I use, and that’s something I don’t think I could give up now that I’ve experienced it.

“You’ll probably need a new pen name, then, right?” Roland says, pulling me back to our conversation. “Can you sell romance and mystery with the same name?”

“No one would stop me from using the same name, but I would probably want a new one,” I say glumly. Setting up new personas is kind of the worst.

“You want something a little darker, but not too on-the-nose—”

“SpookyPants McWhodunnit,” I cut him off.

“Subtle,” he says. “Understated. I like it.”

I grin. “Tell Lance I said hello. I need to go; I’m here.”

“I will. Don’t call me again too soon.”

I shake my head and hang up before maneuvering my beat-up old Volkswagen Beetle into a parking spot in front of one of the town’s only coffee shops. I’m coming from the wrong direction for the angle of the parking spaces—my bad—so I end up executing a million point turn before I get into the space. Then I sigh and get out, locking the car and taking a few steps back to check my parking job.

It’s still crooked.

And, I realize with a start, the same little sedan that was driving an inch behind me down Main has pulled in next to me; a couple people in bright pink, staring at me and my car.

Like they know I’m new in town. Like they know I’m not great at parking.

I resist the urge to tell them off, going inside without a backward glance. As far as I’m concerned, if I’m inside the lines, anything goes.

The coffee shop hasn’t changed much in the last six years. There are people I don’t recognize working behind the counter, but the tables are in the same place, and the same artsy pictures still adorn the walls. The menu looks exactly like it used to as well, down to the ninety-nine-cent mini muffins they bake and sell every morning. I inhale deeply and smile at the scent of hot chocolate and scones.

My feelings toward Autumn Grove are complicated, but I have only love for Grind and Brew.

I give the girl behind the counter a vague, nodded greeting before ordering one steaming mug of raspberry-infused hot chocolate and two cranberry-orange scones. Then I find a seat at my favorite corner table and plop down into the chair.

“Three-ninety-nine for the world’s best hot chocolate,” I say to myself as I think back to the cafe where the Blind Date Incident occurred. “And that place wanted nine dollars.” I shake my head and take a sip of my drink, despite knowing better; sure enough, it burns going down my throat. I take another sip anyway, just one more, because it’s been so long

since I've had Grind and Brew's raspberry hot chocolate. Then I put my mug back down and wait for my drink to cool like a sane person, smiling as I watch the wind and the leaves dance outside the window.

Yes, I'm currently failing as a romance writer, and yes, I'm currently living out of my car, but I'm also sitting in my favorite coffee shop on the planet, drinking my favorite drink. I have two delicious scones sitting in front of me. I'll meet my new roommate in a bit, and then I won't be homeless anymore.

After that? Well, the world—or at least Autumn Grove—is my oyster.

So watch out, oyster.

Juniper Bean is coming for you.

IN WHICH AIDEN LAYS DOWN THE RULES

I can't find any freaking toilet paper.

"Rodriguez," I bark over my shoulder as I dig through the supply closet. We're down to the bare bones in here, and as always the sight of our dwindling supplies stokes my temper. "Where's the toilet paper?"

Rodriguez mutters under his breath from behind me, something about "baseball coach" and "stubborn idiot." He just gets his knickers in a twist because I usually call people by their last names, which he says makes him feel like a kid on a peewee baseball team. It's a habit by this point, though, and he's right—I am stubborn.

"It's in the bathrooms," he says after he's finished his verbal mutiny.

I turn to face him. "What, all of it?" I say. "We're completely out?"

He shrugs his burly shoulders. "If there isn't any on the shelves, then yeah."

"For the love," I say, rubbing my temples. "We have a full week left until the end of the month."

Rodriguez shrugs again. I guess it's too much to expect him to get worked up about this situation; he never does, even though we run out of basic supplies every month. The Autumn Grove Food Bank is the most underfunded, understaffed, underappreciated government creation Idaho has to offer; I think they spend more on the landscaping at the post office

than they do on the necessities for us. What makes matters worse is that the current frontrunner in the race for governor will most likely cut our funding even further if he wins. I'd love to march over to the Heights and give him a swift kick in the rear, but Rodriguez says I'm not allowed to, and he's the boss. Rodriguez has been the director of the food bank for the better part of thirty years, and he says he's made his peace with the fact that we're an afterthought.

Of course, he also says that most of his gray hairs have come from working here, so I'm not sure how peaceful he really feels behind his bushy silver brows and black-brown eyes.

"All right," I say. I glance at my watch; I need to meet the new tenant in half an hour. "I have time to run to Forester's before I have to leave for the day. I'll be back in twenty minutes." With that I spin on my heel, edging past Rodriguez—who only reaches my shoulder because his hair adds an inch and a half to his height—and down the hall.

"Get dish soap too," he calls after me, and I curse under my breath, waving to let him know I've heard.

It's not the fact that I'm buying supplies with my own money that bothers me. I'm happy to help out, although the little things do add up, and I'm on a school counselor's salary. It's more just that I shouldn't *have* to. I shouldn't have to buy toilet paper or dish soap or whatever else we've run out of. But I've been volunteering here several times a week for the last ten years, and I can count on one hand the number of times we've finished a month under budget. We're not stupid with money—the state just doesn't allot us enough of it.

And yet, as frustrated as I am with the whole place, I know I'll keep coming back. The class disparity in Autumn Grove is subtle, often hidden behind fresh coats of paint and smiling faces, but that doesn't change the fact that it's real. I've seen it with my own eyes. And maybe it's naive, or wishful thinking, but I just don't want anyone to go hungry.

I can't do much, but I'll do what I can.

I make it to Forester's Market in seven minutes, driving exactly the speed limit the entire way there. Gale Forester looks up when I enter, an expectant smile on his face, but that smile dissipates when he sees me, melting into a disgruntled scowl.

Gale does not appreciate my unasked-for opinion on some of his price points.

"Don't worry, Gale," I say as I pass, not bothering to hide my smirk. "I'm in a hurry today."

Gale slumps with relief and waves me on with a stern look. I book it to the far side of the store where I'll find all the cleaning and bathroom supplies, my brown wingtips squeaking on the linoleum as I weave through the shoulder-high aisles. It takes me ten seconds to grab a bulk package of double ply toilet paper and a three-pack of dish soap, and then I hurry to one of the two check-out lanes. Gale rings me up, and when the cash register display shows me my total of almost thirty-eight dollars, I point my finger at it as I hand over my card.

"We'll talk about that later," I promise the glaring man in front of me. I take the bag he's holding out with one hand and use the other arm to hug the bulk toilet paper to my side.

"I'm always glad when you leave," Gale calls to me as I head for the doors.

"Me too, Gale," I say, and then I'm gone, through the front entrance and speed walking to my car. The toilet paper and the dish soap receive the honor of riding in the back seat among all my stray books, and then I get in. I floor it across the parking lot—and by "floor it," I mean I go six miles an hour in a five-miles-an-hour zone—and pull out onto Main, the stores and shops whizzing past as I drive.

I'm just noticing a truly creative parking job in front of Grind and Brew when my phone rings.

"Are you on your way to the coffee shop?" my sister says when I answer, bypassing any sort of greeting. Caroline is the

type of person who's perpetually in a hurry, even when she has nowhere to be.

"Uh," I say as Grind and Brew disappears in my rearview mirror. "Not quite."

"Aiden," she says, her voice warning. "You want to make a good impression. The new tenant signed a year's lease. You might be living together for quite a while."

"It will be fine," I say as I pull into the food bank parking lot. "He'll understand."

"She," Caroline says.

"Sorry?" I say, distracted. I park as close to the entrance as possible.

"She," Caroline says again. "She. Her. Female."

"A woman?" I say with a frown. I sandwich the phone between my ear and my shoulder as I get out of the car. "Did I sign off on that?"

"You most certainly did," Caroline says cheerfully. "I asked you a week and a half ago."

"I have no recollection of that." I grab the groceries from the backseat and then kick the door closed, hurrying up the steps and to the entrance of the food bank. Rodriguez seems to have been waiting for me, because he opens the door when he sees me coming. "I have to run," I whisper to him as I shove the twenty-pack of toilet paper into his fumbling arms. I set the bag with the dish soap on the floor in front of him and then turn around and head straight back to the car.

"Well, you did," Caroline says, her voice blaring through the phone. "I asked if you would be okay living with a female tenant, and you said, 'I'm trying to finish grading before midnight, Caroline. Do we need to talk about this now?' So then I asked you again if you cared if the new tenant was a woman, and you said, 'I don't know, do whatever you want.'"

"I'd hardly call that agreeing," I say, rubbing my temples. A headache has been brewing since I raided the nearly empty

supply closet earlier, but this bit of information dials the pain up a notch.

“You told me to do whatever I wanted,” Caroline says. “And I *wanted* to find a new tenant so I didn’t lose a thousand-plus dollars of income a month. Are you on your way yet?”

“Yes,” I say with a sigh. “I’m getting in the car right now. Who is this woman?” It’s too late to change the situation now; I may as well prepare myself.

“She’s a lovely young lady with a lovely woodsy name and excellent manners, so you need to be nice to her,” Caroline says, her voice severe.

A lovely woodsy name? What’s that supposed to mean? Maple? Oak? Flowering dogwood?

Am I going to be living with a woman named Dogwood?

“She’s meeting you at Grind and Brew,” Caroline goes on.

“And how am I supposed to know which person is her?” I say. “Is she carrying a book with a flower? Will she be the one in the red scarf?”

“Nope,” Caroline says, once again sounding way too cheerful. “According to our conversation in the forum, she’ll be the one with the yellow car and the pink hair.”

Heaven help me.

“You should have just let me buy the contract,” I say as the ache in my temples intensifies.

“Oh, really?” she says. “So you’re going to pay her full-priced rent on top of your measly discounted rate, plus gas, plus electric, plus internet? Plus HOA, *plus* trash—”

“I’m going through a tunnel,” I say dully. “Gonna lose you here in a second.”

“Oh, shut up. There are no tunnels in Autumn Grove—”

I hang up.

I would never admit it, but Caroline is right. She owns the house I live in, and though she does make me pay rent, it’s

steeply discounted. So she feeds her husband and children with the rent she charges the second tenant, whoever that happens to be. For the last six months it was a guy named Lorenzo, who I barely saw because he worked nights and slept during the day. But Lorenzo moved out a month ago when he got engaged, and the second bedroom has been empty since. I can't afford to more than double my monthly payment, and Caroline can't afford to give me more of a discount. So another tenant is really the best option.

Sometimes it makes me wonder what I'm doing with my life, though.

I'm thirty-five, living in a house my sister owns, suffering through a string of roommates and working at a job that drives me crazy at least half the time. That job, ironically, is the whole reason I'm renting from my sister; my pay is so dismal I can't afford a down payment on a house yet.

Maybe if there weren't such a teacher shortage here, they wouldn't have made me teach along with my job as a guidance counselor—but there is, and they did. So now I teach three hours of college prep literature every day to a bunch of kids who couldn't care less, listening to them hate on the books I love. Stories have always been sacred to me, and the classics most of all. I'd rather just stick to my job as a counselor. Helping these kids figure things out is what I signed up for; high school is such a vulnerable time.

Of course, more often than not what I end up doing is telling them what extracurriculars will help them get into college, but still. At least I'm doing *something*.

I pull into Grind and Brew with exactly one minute to spare, next to a crookedly parked yellow Volkswagen that looks like it will fall apart if I stare at it for too long. I'm going to assume that's the car that belongs to my new roommate. The universe seems to be heading in an unfortunate direction today; it would just make sense that this clunker is going to be my garage companion for the foreseeable future.

I just stand there for a second after I get out of my car, staring at the Volkswagen. There are a few layers of duct tape

surrounding the handle of the passenger door, and several cracks have spidered their way across the windshield. I shake my head and start walking, though I give the front tire a little nudge with my foot as I pass by, just to see what happens.

The bumper falls off.

“Crap.” I jump at the sound of plastic hitting pavement, unreasonably startled considering I was the one who made it happen.

Right? Was that my fault?

I round the car, frowning down at the front bumper and trying to ignore the brisk wind that has me regretting my lack of jacket. As of now I am officially late, but I can't just leave things like this. Especially since this car might belong to my new roommate. Stupid name aside—who names their kid after a tree?—it will benefit all parties involved to maintain a positive relationship. So I kneel down, picking up the bumper and examining it. I'm not an automotive expert, but it's hard to imagine this hunk of plastic staying on this car without some serious help. I guess if I can fit it in place—

“Did you break my car?”

I freeze in place at the sound of a woman's voice coming from behind me. My current position couldn't look more suspicious.

“I think I might have,” I say, not moving. My head is pounding now, but I make myself go on. “I nudged your tire with my foot and the whole bumper just—” But I break off when the woman behind me starts to laugh.

“I'm just kidding,” she says, her voice full of amusement. “It falls off all the time. I have some super glue in my trunk.” Then she laughs again.

A strange feeling washes over me at that sound, almost like *déjà vu*. Her laugh is warm. Husky.

And somehow...familiar.

I let the bumper fall out of my hands and back to the ground. I couldn't describe the feeling that comes over me

then even if I tried—a surreal sense of anticipation, an almost dreamlike inevitability that sends chills up and down my spine.

I stand up slowly. And I know, without knowing how I know, that when I turn around, everything is going to change.

I turn around anyway.

Her pink hair is the first thing I notice—cut short, falling a few inches below her chin.

It wasn't pink the last time I saw her.

The next thing that registers is her clothing—short, black combat boots; jeans with holes in the knees, not the artistic kind; and an oversized, shapeless yellow sweater that shouldn't hang from her frame as well as it does.

It's a mix of conscious and subconscious, the way I look at everything but her face. I take in the chipped black nails, the silver thumb ring. But I finally run out of options, and it's getting weird, the way we're standing here staring at each other. So I drag my gaze up her body until I reach the pink lips, the pert nose, and finally her wide, expressive eyes.

“You,” I say to Juniper Bean.

“You,” she echoes faintly. And then, slowly, she smiles.

I do *not* smile.



THE FIRST TIME I LAID EYES ON JUNIPER BEAN, I KNEW exactly what kind of woman she would grow up to be.

I tutored Juniper as part of my pedagogy class that I took while getting my undergrad in social work. I was sent to the high school to tutor an underprivileged student who was struggling, and that student ended up being a seventeen-year-old girl with scuffed boots propped on the table in the Grove High library. Her head was bobbing along to the beat of whatever music was playing through her headphones. As I rounded the table and looked down at her, she turned and

looked at me too. For a brief moment she seemed startled, but then she smiled at me. It was friendly, cheerful, but also tinged with mischief. She didn't even take off her headphones; she just leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest and watching me, smiling the whole time.

That smile made me nervous. And over the next four months, as I continued to tutor her in English, I learned that that was the kind of girl Juniper was: the kind of girl whose smile made you nervous, because you never knew what it meant.

That much, at least, hasn't changed. The way she's smiling at me now, here in front of Grind and Brew some twelve or thirteen years later, still has nerves stirring in my chest as I try to figure out what's going on.

Is she the new tenant? Am I going to be living with her? Does she really super glue her bumper on?

"Aiden Milano," she says, her smile growing. "It's been a while. Last time I saw you..." But she breaks off, her cheeks turning pink as her smile fades.

Yeah. Last time she saw me, she tried to kiss me—her *tutor*—and I rejected her with a fury.

We don't need to relive that. So I just nod stiffly at her. "Juniper," I say by way of greeting. Then I sigh. "What are you doing here?"

She tilts her head and steps closer to me. "I'm meeting someone."

All right—that doesn't necessarily mean she's meeting *me*. There might be another woman here with pink hair and a yellow car and a tree name. Juniper might be here on a date. Or maybe she's getting together with a friend. There's no need to jump to conclusions when I don't have all the facts—

"My new roommate," she says, and what tiny little hope I had left dies swiftly.

"No," I say, shaking my head. "This isn't going to work."

“Oh, is it you?” she says. She looks delighted; her smile stretches across her face once more, her blue eyes sparkling.

“No,” I say again. “I can’t live in the same house as you.” For so many reasons, but two in particular stand out above all the rest.

“Oh, sure you can,” she says, waving one hand. “I don’t bite. In fact...” She takes yet another step toward me; her smile turns wicked. “Is this fate? Do you think this is my second chance to win you over?”

Aaand she went there—reason number one why we can’t live together. Because there was a time, back when she was still just a kid, that she had feelings for me.

“Absolutely not,” I say. “No.”

“Hmm,” she says. “You had that answer all ready to go. Are you sure? I bet we’d be cute together. You’re positive you don’t want to date me?”

“I’m positive,” I say dryly, sitting on the hood of her car.

“Because you’re missing a real opportunity here,” she goes on as though I haven’t spoken. “Our couple name would be Aidiper.”

“Why Aidiper?” I say, cocking one brow at her. “Why not Junipaide?”

“Because *Junipaide* sounds like the kind of all-purpose cleaning solution they use in nursing homes.” Her answer is immediate and matter-of-fact, like she’s given this a lot of thought already. “Do you want our legacy to sound like a cleaning solution, Aiden?”

I sigh. I’m almost positive she’s teasing right now, based on the mischievous smile and the laughing eyes. But my head is pounding at previously undiscovered levels of pain, and I’m very certain this woman is the cause. In fact, I would bet that something deep in my bones could sense her presence in town before I even knew she was here, and *that’s* why this headache has been brewing like a storm.

Yes. That sounds scientifically plausible.

“We can’t live together,” I say, trying to be patient. “I was your *tutor*, Juniper.”

She snorts. “That was years ago, and it doesn’t mean anything. More to the point,” she goes on, narrowing her eyes, “I already signed the contract. The landlady—”

“My sister.”

“Oh, your sister? Well, she was very nice,” she says with a shrug. “I told her I didn’t care if the current tenant was male or female just as long as he or she wasn’t psycho or anything. Hey, get off my car,” she adds suddenly, gesturing to where I’m half sitting, half leaning against the hood of her VW Beetle. “You’re going to break it again.”

I stand up slowly, turning and looking down at the ground where the bumper still lies on the pavement. “So this is the piece of junk you trust on the highway, huh?” I say, looking it over again.

Juniper rolls her eyes and puts her hands on her hips. “Might want to get off that high horse before you fall and break something.”

“I think my high horse might be the safer option,” I say, still eyeing the car skeptically.

“Could you reliably live out of your high horse for the better part of a week?” she says, pointing to the back of her car. I walk around the passenger side and lean down, cupping my hand over my eyes and peering into the backseat.

Sure enough, it has all the signs of having been a temporary home—a pillow, a freezer bag of toiletries, a neatly folded blanket.

Good grief. She’s been living out of her car. How am I supposed to tell her no? She must have had to cram herself in that little space. Besides, as much as I don’t like it, she’s right; she already signed the contract.

I rub my chest against the twinge of guilt I feel, memories plucking at the emotion like the strings of a guitar. There’s another reason I don’t want to live with this woman, but it

looks like that's a moot point now. My breath whooshes out of me as I sigh.

"All right," I say. "Let's go, I guess. But I have some conditions."

Juniper nods, standing up straighter and looking suddenly serious. "Shoot."

Huh. That was easier than I expected.

"Why do you look so surprised?" she says to me, and I start. "I'm not unreasonable. If we're going to live together, it makes perfect sense that we both lay down and abide by some rules."

"Rule number one," I say. "We're not going to be romantically involved."

"With anyone, or with each other?" she asks, her lips curving into a little smile.

"Each other," I say. "But also," I hurry to add, "any—uh—*private* activities between you and another party should remain...well, private."

"Is that code for *Don't make out with someone in the middle of the living room?*"

"Yes," I say firmly. "Second rule: quiet hours are between ten in the evening and eight in the morning."

She nods. "Agreed."

"Third rule—"

"Should I be writing these down?" she cuts me off. "Or do you already have them somewhere? On the fridge, maybe? Is there a copy of the rules on the fridge?"

"I—no," I say, rubbing my temples. It feels like someone is gouging my brain out with a dull knife. "You don't need to write them down."

"How about this," she says. She's watching me with a serious expression on her face, her eyes fixed on where I'm massaging my temples. "I will do my best to follow the rules of common courtesy and consideration. You will do the same."

If we have any questions or problems, we can talk about it calmly. Deal?”

I hesitate for only a moment. “Deal,” I say. I would really prefer to nail down some specifics, but that’s not going to work right now; I need to take some ibuprofen and lie down in a dark room before I can regain functionality.

She nods, her face splitting into a wide grin. “And I’ll just ask you this one last time—you’re *positive* this isn’t fate?”

“I’m positive.”

She sighs, a theatrical sound that causes a few pieces of hair to fly out of her face. “All right, then. If you insist. Let me get my food, and then you can give me my key.”

THIRTEEN YEARS AGO

It is not easy to procure real-life mistletoe at eight in the evening on Christmas Eve.

It's not easy, but I did it. Because I'm Juniper Bean, and I can do whatever I put my mind to.

Tonight I put my mind to finding mistletoe.

Although it wasn't actually that hard to *find* the mistletoe. Getting permission to take it was what required finagling. Bonnie's Blooms is the only flower shop in Autumn Grove, and they close at six, but I figured they'd probably have some. So I stole Bonnie's number from my mom's phone when she was passed out, and I gave her a call. She confirmed that she did indeed have a few sprigs left, and that I could come by and pick one up tomorrow.

But I kind of needed it tonight.

Anyway, what followed was a long road full of wheedling and begging until Bonnie gave in and grudgingly told me the pin number for the keypad at the shop. She told me to let myself in, grab a sprig of mistletoe, and then let myself out again *without touching anything else, Miss Juniper, or I'll drag you by the ear straight to your mama and she'll sort you out.*

Bonnie knows as well as I do that my mama isn't the *sort you out* type, but I understood the sentiment. It wouldn't have mattered anyway; I would never steal from Bonnie. And she knows that, too, or she wouldn't have told me the passcode.

I look over at the little box in the passenger seat of my car, sighing at the iffy wrapping job. Count your blessings, I guess; at least I found some mistletoe, and at least I can deliver it to the dreamiest guy that has ever walked the face of this planet.

When Aiden Milano first started tutoring me for my senior English class, I had mixed feelings. He was gorgeous, and interesting, and he had this dry sense of humor that I loved. But I was worried he'd recognize me. *I* recognized *him* straight away.

But he didn't, and for the most part, I was glad. I didn't want his pity or anything like that. Though there was a tiny, itty-bitty part of me that wondered if I just wasn't very memorable, and that hurt a little, mostly because I'll remember what he did until the day I die.

It's okay, though. I don't need him to remember the past. Maybe we can just make new memories together. I don't know how he's going to react when I tell him how I feel—I'd say seven times out of ten, his go-to reaction to me is a confused-looking frown—but I've reached the point where I don't want to hold it in any longer. Every time I see him, my heart feels like it's going to explode from my chest. It's not just that he's good-looking—although like I said, he's dreamy—it's that he's the *best*. He's in college. He's patient when he's teaching me. He explains things over and over if I don't understand them. He believes in me.

And he treats me like my own person, instead of like Nora Bean's daughter. I like that most of all.

I pull into the parking lot of Aiden's apartment complex and find a spot, then kill the engine. I've never actually been here before; I only know this is where he lives because I heard him on the phone one time, complaining to his landlord that the thermostat in unit three of Briarview had been broken for forty-eight hours and maintenance still hadn't come.

So here I am, at the Briarview apartments in Valley Hills, which is right next to Autumn Grove and is where Aiden attends college.

I check my hair in the rearview mirror, tucking a few blonde strands back into my ponytail. Then I grab the little box from the passenger seat and get out. I lock my car—a secondhand yellow VW Beetle named Sunshine that took me four years to save up for—and begin scanning the numbers on the sides of the complex buildings. I find his building easily enough, and it only takes me a minute to reach unit three.

I stare at his front door for a solid two minutes before I work up the courage to approach, and some of that courage only comes because it's freezing cold out. I'm nervous enough that I might stand here all night otherwise.

I suck in a deep breath of the cold evening air, pushing it back out in a little cloud that dissipates in front of me. I imagine my nerves doing the same thing—disappearing into the darkness, vanishing into the night.

I clear my throat once. Twice. And then I knock. The whole scene plays like I'm in a movie—the heroine rushing to her man, looking dainty but bundled up in her perfect winter outfit, confessing her love and kissing in the falling snow. I am that heroine; she is me.

Except it's sort of anticlimactic, because no one answers when I knock.

Well. That's okay. I'll just knock a little bit harder.

But no one answers when I knock a second time. In fact, it's only when I pound on the door with my fist—like instead of a movie heroine, I'm the police—that anyone answers, and it's not even Aiden.

“Uh,” I say, looking up at the bespectacled guy glaring down at me. “Is—is Aiden here?”

Aiden's roommate gives me a brief once-over before rolling his eyes. “Aiden,” he calls, already turning around and walking away. “Door!”

From somewhere inside the apartment I hear the padding of feet, and then Aiden appears.

And oh, he's handsome like this—a simple white t-shirt and navy sweatpants. His hair is wet, like he just got out of the

shower.

“Hi,” I breathe, clutching his gift closer with my sweaty hands. Maybe he won’t notice the damp spots on the wrapping paper.

He blinks down at me with surprise. “Juniper?”

“Uh, yes. Hi.”

He leans against the doorframe, folding his arms and looking skeptical. “Does your mother know you’re here?”

“Of course not,” I say. I force my words to sound casual, unaffected. “She’s passed out on the couch.”

Aiden’s eyes narrow, but he doesn’t say anything. So I rally the part of my brain that’s in charge of conversing and say, “I just wanted to bring you your Christmas present.”

Aiden’s eyebrows hitch up his forehead. “My...present?”

“Here,” I say, shoving the little box into his hands. “For you.”

He holds it up, looking warily at it. I see his eyes find the sliver of visible cardboard where I ran out of wrapping paper because I only had scraps; I see him take in the wonky bow that refused to cooperate, even after I tried to make it look nice three different times. I put myself in his shoes for a second and then look down at the gift I’ve handed him, and suddenly my cheeks burn with humiliation.

This is so stupid. What am I thinking? I can’t give him a present that looks like this. I reach out to take the box back. I should have had Bonnie help me wrap it—

But he doesn’t let me take it; he lifts the box above his head just as I’m about to grab it.

“No,” he says gruffly. “You said it was for me.”

“I—fine,” I say. “Open it, then.” I swallow as his fingers begin pulling delicately at the wrapping paper. “I didn’t have a lot of paper to wrap it,” I say. “And I know the bow looks dumb—”

“It looks nice, Juniper.”

It might not sound like glowing praise, but from Aiden, that's a massive compliment. So I shut my mouth and watch anxiously as he pulls off the wrapping paper, crumpling it up and shoving it into his pocket. Then he takes the lid off the little box.

I watch his forehead for the little v-shaped wrinkle that's going to show up—and sure enough, there it is. It comes out when he's confused and his brows furrow, drawing together.

“Open it,” I say, pointing to the tightly folded piece of paper that's on top.

He glances at me for a second, then pulls the paper out. He passes me the little box and then uses both hands to unfold.

“Eighty-eight percent,” I say, my smile breaking free.

“On your English final?” he says quickly, looking at me again and picking up the pace with his unfolding. “So that means you got—”

“I got a B in the class.” I nod, beaming as he scans the print-out of my English grades for the semester.

He smiles then, a real, true smile, and my heart squeezes almost painfully. His teeth are so *white*, and his eyes are so gorgeous when he's looking at me, and I want to marry him and live happily ever after.

“And now this,” I say, holding the box up in front of his face.

This is it. This is my moment. That heart in my chest that was squeezing painfully now starts to pound, an uncomfortable *thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump*.

I can hear my heartbeat whooshing in my ears, and my smile is wavering out of pure nerves. The mistletoe has wilted a bit, I notice when Aiden holds it up, but I'm not taking that as a bad omen.

Although the look on his face as he stares at the little plant...well, *that* might be a bad omen. Only one way to find out.

So I go up, up, up on my tiptoes, place my hands on his broad shoulders to steady myself, and then kiss him straight on the lips.

Or I try to, anyway.

I'm maybe one centimeter away from the most perfect lips in all of existence when Aiden grabs me by the shoulders and pushes me away, gentle but absolutely firm. I stumble back, wrenching out of his grasp and letting out an unladylike yelp of surprise when I trip and then fall, right onto my bum.

"Are you insane?" Aiden says. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I—"

"You're a student!" he cuts me off.

I look stubbornly up at him. All hope is not lost yet, though admittedly my dignity has left the premises. "I'm old enough—"

"I don't care. I don't even care if you're sixty with a beer gut," he says firmly. "You. Are. A. Student." His mouth snaps shut, and in the illumination of the porch light I can see his jaw muscles flexing, his nostrils flared as he breathes, his head turning this way and that as though to check if anyone has seen us.

"I just—" I begin, my voice small. "I just—I wanted—"

"*You* thought? *You* wanted? It's not just about you, Juniper," he says, exasperated. "I could get expelled if someone saw this. They could kick me out of the university. Heck, I could go to jail. You aren't even legal, are you?"

He doesn't even know how old I am? My vision goes blurry as hot tears fill my eyes; I swipe them away furiously, just in time to see Aiden squeezing his eyes shut and taking a deep, steadying breath.

"I'm not angry at you, okay? I'm not mad." He pauses. "I'm proud of you for that English grade. You worked hard, and it shows. But I don't ever want to see you at this

apartment again,” he says finally, “and you are never to pull another stunt like this. Got it?”

I nod, scrambling to my feet. I have to go; I have to get out of here before he sees me cry. I stumble away, away, away, finally turning on my heel and running.

I think he calls after me as I flee, but I don't turn back.

IN WHICH JUNIPER DECIDES
MURDER MIGHT BE THE BEST
OPTION

A iden Milano.
Aiden.

Milano.

The man who taught me to love literature and then broke my little teenage heart, and he's standing here in front of me.

My new roommate.

He's not twenty-three anymore—he must be about thirty-five, I think. He's giving off major sexy professor vibes, wearing a tweed blazer over a dark-red sweater, khaki pants, and some sort of brown dress shoes. He even has the leather messenger bag. His brown hair is longer than it was when I knew him, shorter on the sides than on top.

The writer in me wants to come up with all sorts of evocative descriptions for the masterpiece that is his face—the sharp angle of his jaw, the penetrating eyes, the slightly crooked nose—but the red-blooded woman part of my brain can only manage a wordless, slack-jawed stare.

Yep. He's still my type, and he's still a heartbreaker.

To be fair, he was absolutely right to break my heart. I was seventeen—he was correct, that's not even legal in the state of Idaho—and he was my twenty-three-year-old college tutor. I was headstrong and a little bit broken, and I latched onto someone older and more mature. I'm just grateful he was the

kind of guy who never would have taken advantage of my feelings.

I never saw him again after that Christmas Eve, either, which allowed me to lick my wounds in peace. His pedagogy class ended, and I finished out my senior year fairly well, despite a brief but sudden move to a foster home part way through January. I got accepted to an in-state college, and it was thanks to Aiden's English tutoring that I decided to become a writer after graduating.

Although that's not going so hot now. I'm starting to think it might be worth it to let SpookyPants McWhodunnit have her chance in the sun, because my romance-writing days are feeling limited at the moment. I don't know how to write mystery novels, but I can read a bunch of them to get a feel for plot beats and whatnot. That's a good place to start. I'll certainly give it my best. I'm willing to do my research, too.

Yes, I think as I go back into the coffee shop to get my stuff. I can do that.

My table in the corner is exactly how I left it. I still have one and a half scones left, so I grab them and wrap them in a napkin. Then I finish my last swig of hot chocolate and place the mug in the dirty dish receptacle.

The wind whips my hair around my face as I step out of Grind and Brew again, strands of bubblegum pink flying into my field of vision. I don't have enough length for a ponytail right now, so I tuck what I can behind my ears and hurry to my car. Aiden has managed to get the bumper back in place somehow—did he go in my trunk and get the super glue?—and now he stands next to Sunshine, watching me as I bustle to the rear passenger door. I clutch my scones self-consciously, wrapping them more tightly in the napkin. Then I grab my bag from the backseat and carefully put the scones in, making sure to set them on top so they don't get squashed. I nod, satisfied, and then put the bag back where I got it.

When I turn around, I'm surprised to find Aiden still looking at me. There's an expression on his face that I don't particularly like as his eyes jump back and forth between me

and the bag I just put in the backseat—something curious and analyzing about the tilt of his head and the focus of his gaze.

Do I have food on my face? A hot chocolate mustache? Did he think the scone thing was weird? Or maybe I have a *scone* mustache?

Whatever. I wipe my mouth with the sleeve of my sweater and call it good. “You have a key for me?” I say, holding out my hand to him.

He doesn’t say anything; instead he just gives me a slow nod, still looking at me in that weird way, before reaching into his back pocket, pulling out a single key, and dropping it into my waiting palm.

Just think—this key was separated from Aiden Milano’s buns by a mere one or two layers of fabric, depending on whether he goes commando. My seventeen-year-old self would be over the moon.

“Thanks,” I say, smiling at him. “I’ll be there later. I’ve got a couple stops to make first.” Then, because I don’t know what to do with that look he’s giving me, I break eye contact and round the car, getting in without another glance at him.

When I look in the rearview mirror as I’m leaving the parking lot, though, he’s still watching me go—and the sedan that followed me here is gone.



MY FIRST STOP AFTER GRIND AND BREW IS NAMASTE, THE yoga studio run by a man named Augustus Flanders. It wasn’t there when I was growing up, but I did see it when I was here for my mom’s funeral six years ago. I first got in touch with Augustus when I decided to move after the Blind Date Incident, and after sending him my certification, he told me he’d hire me when I came back to Autumn Grove.

The dream, of course, is to write full time. But even though I do bring in a decent amount from my indie sales every month, it’s not quite enough to live off of. I need

something to supplement it. And if my sales begin to decrease, I'll need to find something with more hours. Either way, a day job is my fate for now.

The yoga studio is on Center, above the hardware store. I have to walk up a narrow, dingy staircase to get there, but when I emerge from the stairwell, I'm greeted by a spacious room with lots of natural light. The hardwood floors are a warm, light brown, and the walls are a soothing cream color. There are plants hanging from several spots on the ceiling, making the whole place feel alive.

"Hello, hello!"

I spin around when I hear the greeting to find a large, muscular man—good grief, this guy is *huge*, with muscles that can't possibly be from yoga alone—striding toward me with his hand outstretched. He has on loose, comfy-looking pants and a t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, and he's smiling cheerfully in a way that makes the room seem even lighter than it already is.

"Hi," I say quickly, shaking his hand—which is quite possibly the size of my entire face. "I'm Juniper Bean. We spoke over email and on the phone. You must be Augustus."

"Call me Gus," he says, and he's still smiling as he goes on, "And I remember you. I'm happy to bring you on board; I need some help around here. Did you bring a copy of your certification? I can get that in your file, and then you can fill out the W-4 today if you're ready. I'd love to have you start as soon as possible."

"Yes," I say. I hold back my sigh of relief, since it might seem unprofessional. But I was a little worried that he would somehow have changed his mind about hiring me or something. I pat my bag, using gentle hands so I don't squish my scones. "It's in here."

"Excellent," he says. Then he gestures to a closed door on the far side of the studio. "This way to the office, please!"

Wow. He's so...happy. So cheery. Almost weirdly so. There's even a spring in his step as he crosses the room ahead

of me. Is he like this all the time? There's no way, right?

But his good-natured smile remains in place the entire time he's talking me through scheduling and hours, and it doesn't even seem fake. He really just seems to be an upbeat, cheerful man—a bit of a strange guy, with all the smiling, but I'd rather have that than someone who frowns all the time. And interestingly enough, by the time I leave the studio, I'm also smiling happily.

But come on. I've got the job thing nailed down, and even though the yoga studio is small, it's well-finished and full of a very positive energy that will create a great environment. How could I not be happy? It's a huge stressor off my plate. Maybe Gus and I could even be friends, if he turns out to be a normal-enough dude.

When I get back to my car, I open my bag to make sure my scones are all right. Then I relax into my seat and buckle my seatbelt. I sit there for a minute, my fingers drumming on the steering wheel as I look aimlessly around. I note the store fronts, the passing cars, the car parked across the street—

My eyes jerk back to the parked car. I blink a few times, frowning. Then my phone buzzes, and I dig it out; it's Roland, checking to see what I think of my new roommate. I don't have an answer to that yet, so I exit the message without answering, placing my phone in the cupholder. Then I look back to the parked car—but it's gone. I'm clearly imagining things.

Or hallucinating.

Or turning paranoid for absolutely no reason.

All good signs, I'm sure.

I shake my head and tuck my hair behind my ear. I know what's going on here, really, and it's not paranoia or hallucination or any of those things.

I'm stalling. I'm stalling, and my brain is filling in details to help me avoid the things I don't want to confront. Because I have one more place to visit before I go to the house and get settled.

Can I put it off?

I could, I guess, but I'm not going to want to go tomorrow any more than I do today.

"No," I say—talking to myself, and no shame about it—before I start the car. It rumbles to life with a few ominous-sounding clanks. "I need to get this over with."

My drive takes me to the outskirts of town, to a medium-sized patch of land located smack dab between Autumn Grove and Valley Hills. It's surrounded by a tall black fence that's partially strangled by creeping vines, tendrils of green and brown and red that curl and suffocate the wrought iron. I'm not entirely sure the fence is necessary—why would people break into this graveyard? It's not like there are any royal tombs to loot—but it is pretty, especially silhouetted against the gray skies.

I never had many opinions about graveyards until my mom died. Roland and I buried her body quietly, with no official funeral, in the cheapest plot we could find. After that I discovered that I actually like cemeteries. Autumn Grove's cemetery is particularly beautiful this time of year. Yellows and oranges and browns dancing in the wind, a carpet of red leaves like blood staining the ground. It's not bad, as far as resting places go.

My mother would probably approve, too. She wasn't a warm woman, or a soft one, but she loved nature. I think she would like her little corner. I make my way there, walking slowly, not quite dragging my feet, but not making good time, either. This is the first time I've been back since her funeral, and I'm not sure I know what I'm doing here. Maybe I should have brought flowers. I wonder if Bonnie is still working at Bonnie's Blooms, or if she's retired and brought in someone else.

Even though I haven't been here in six years, my feet seem to remember the path to my mom without having to engage my brain. They make lefts and rights on their own, crunching through the leaves and the grass until they've delivered me to

my destination: a corner plot, marked by a small, simple headstone.

I stand and stare at that headstone for probably three full minutes before I finally approach.

I don't believe in ghosts; not like you see them in the movies and horror stories. But now, settling myself in the cold grass in front of this tombstone, I can't help but imagine my mother making this corner her own—a welcome mat and lights woven through the tree branches, rearranging plots when she gets bored of the layout, playing house in a way she never did when she was alive. It's a nice image, though one that I will keep to myself forever. I think we all think about weird things sometimes, but we're never sure exactly how weird other people are, and we don't want to give ourselves away for fear that we're the strangest one in the room.

I sigh, letting myself slump a bit as I pick at the grass. The holes in the knees of my jeans are letting in more cold air than I'd like, but this is something I promised myself I'd do.

“Hi, Mama,” I say, staring at a mossy spot on the headstone. “I'm back.”

The weight of expectation sits heavily on my shoulders as I continue to look at the mossy spot. I'm grateful that it's caught my attention; it gives me something to focus on while I try to organize my thoughts.

“I'm not sure exactly what I want to say, except...” My voice trails off as I pull more aggressively at the grass in front of me, blade by blade, chipped black nail polish and shaking hands. I clear my throat. “Except I guess...I'm angry. I'm trying not to be, but I am. But now that we're living in the same town, it sort of feels like we'll need to get along, I guess. So that's why I'm here. To tell you that we need to get along.”

I'm rambling, and if anyone could hear me, they'd probably think I was a crazy woman, carrying on a one-sided conversation with a tombstone. But I'm not sure anyone can be judged by what they say to their deceased. We all keep the dead in our own ways; they never leave us. Not really. The

parting of life from a body can never erase memories or teachings or likenesses.

I'm just one of the people that talks to her dead, I guess. I'm okay with it.

I swallow past the lump in my throat and go on, "In spite of everything, I'm doing pretty well. And I'm going to keep doing well. Everything you put me through—it hasn't held me back." I squeeze my eyes tightly to rid myself of the tears trying to fall.

I don't know how it's possible to miss someone and resent them, to love them and hate them all at the same time. To be glad they're gone and simultaneously wish they were still here. The human brain is little more than three pounds and can be held in two cupped hands, but the emotions it produces are so big, so nebulous and tangled. And sometimes those tangled emotions feel like thorny brambles that I've stumbled and fallen into, scraped knees and scarred palms that constantly remind me of the past.

How much of that past do I keep? How much do I let go? And how do I separate the two?

My mother was consumed by her past, though she never shared any of it with me. She would type away for hours at a time on her old laptop, writing stories she wouldn't let me read; when I was older, she would promise. *Maybe someday*. Telling her truths, she called it. But she hid those truths from me.

Now that she's dead, now that I have them in my possession, I don't want them. And I try to forget about them until I can work up the nerve to throw them away.

"Anyway," I say with another sigh. I finally stop tearing at the grass—at this point I've created a bald patch that the landscaper surely will not thank me for—and lift one hand to the headstone, running my fingers over the grooved letters proclaiming Nora Bean a beloved mother. The stone is cold and rough, but that suits Nora. She's not a marble kind of woman. "I guess I just wanted to tell you that. That I'm doing my best to thrive, and that I'm trying to let go of the past." I

swallow again. “I’m not sure when I’ll come back, or even if I’ll come back at all,” I say frankly. “So behave yourself, all right?”

I can almost imagine my mother laughing at the request. She was a defiant personality; asking her to behave wouldn’t have done much. I was the same way in high school, but I like to think I grew out of it; I’m not sure she ever did.

I sigh, looking around at the weak sun trying to peek through the clouds overhead. I don’t know what to do now; I don’t know where to go or who to be when I get there. Rooming with someone from my past is a development I didn’t see coming, and I’m not sure how to play it; I don’t want to expend energy and effort trying to be the person he remembers, because I’m not that girl anymore. But it’s also sort of scary being truly myself in front of someone that was so important to me at one time, no matter how simple my feelings for him were.

“You know what?” I mutter to myself, shifting where I sit and leaning sideways so that the headstone props up my weight. “I’m just going to stay here for a while.” I dig in my bag—being careful of my scones, of course—and pull out my headphones. They were cheap, and it shows; the plastic casing on the wires is starting to strip in some places, and the left earbud plays at about half the volume of the right. But they get the job done, so I’m fine with it. I put them in and connect them to my phone, going to my classical playlist and finding the song I’m looking for, heaving another sigh when the sound floods through me.

Danse Macabre by Camille Saint-Saëns is a strange, eerie little piece that for some reason I love. It fits my current mood and location, telling the story of Death as he plays his fiddle to call the dead forth from their graves on Halloween night, making them dance until morning, when they return to the ground.

The brisk wind pushes my hair this way and that, but I leave it be, inhaling the faintly musky, sweet-smelling scent of decaying leaves as the haunting violin line soars overhead. The reds and oranges and yellows and browns take flight in

the wind, dancing much like I've always imagined the deceased to do as Death plays for them. Skeletons, animated figures of bone, doing their waltz around the graveyard by the light of the moon—a ballroom festive and dark.

And I imagine Nora Bean dancing along with them, her head tilted back as she laughs at the stars for daring to shine when she's no longer around to see them. She loved the stars.

I squeeze my eyes shut and swallow thickly, taking a few deep breaths to steady myself. Then I pull out my headphones and shove them back into my bag. I give the headstone one last pat before standing up. I've been sitting in the same position long enough that my left foot has fallen asleep; I shake it out, feeling the cascade of pins and needles as I regain feeling. Then I hobble back to my car like an old woman, favoring that foot the whole way. Call me a wimp if you want; that nonsense hurts.

I wipe my eyes and get rid of the smudged mascara before driving away. I sniffle a bit, dabbing at my nose with my sleeve—which is gross, yes, but everyone does it, and snot washes out anyway. I don't want to rub my nose too much or it will turn red, and then Aiden will know I've been crying.

Although maybe he's one of those guys who stays holed up in his room all day. I could see that being the case. Sometimes I feel like staying in my room all day too.

I just hope my room in this new house is as nice as it looked in the photos.

I've been to the neighborhood where Aiden lives—although I guess his sister owns the house?—but it's on the other side of town from where I grew up with my mom. We lived on the west side of Center, where the houses are smaller and the grass overgrown. Now, though, I find myself driving down a picturesque lane, lined with trees and houses with white picket fences. Nothing quite as fancy as the Heights or anywhere over there, but still nice. It's the perfect image of suburbia, something I would have scoffed and sneered at when I was in high school.

But I know better now. The reason this kind of neighborhood is the American dream is not that it's fancy or aesthetically pleasing or whatever. Human beings like those things, but what we really crave is stability. We want to go to bed at night and know that things will still be okay when we wake up. We want to rest easy. And that's the feeling a white picket fence gives off: safety. Stability.

Sometimes it's an illusion, of course. But sometimes it's not.

I find 18 Theabelle Lane with ease, thanks to the numbers posted on the picket fence posts. It's prettier in person than in the pictures online, although that may just be because the leaves are so vibrant right now; they add splashes of color to the white siding and black shutters. There's a porch and a large porch swing, one of those that's more like a hanging platform bed than a bench. I'm already planning to turn that into a prime reading spot when the weather warms up. I smile at it as I walk up the porch steps and to the front door, imagining all the pillows I can justify buying for a swing of that size. Then I check the door handle.

The door is unlocked, so I let myself in and start looking around. My first, immediate thought is that Chip and Joanna would definitely approve. It's an open floor plan, with hardwood floors and white shiplap on the walls.

Joanna is all about that shiplap.

I wander sort of aimlessly, checking things out. The decor is minimalist but just enough—clean lines, muted colors, lots of light. No seasonal decor, I note, but there's still time for me to change that.

“Wow,” I say when Aiden emerges from around a corner. He's lost the blazer, but he's still in full professor mode, even at home. “This place is nice.” Then I smile at him. “Do I get a tour?”

He raises one brow as he passes by me and moves into the kitchen. “Sure, if you do it yourself.”

I shake my head while also forcing myself not to sniff in his general direction to see what he smells like. “A tour needs a tour guide. That’s a basic rule.”

“They’re called *self-guided tours*, and I hear they’re all the rage,” he says dryly, pulling a glass from one of the cabinets. I watch as he fills it with tap water and then gulps the whole thing down in four swallows, his throat bobbing.

“All right,” I say. “You win. How do I get to my room? It’s in the loft, yeah?”

He places the glass in the sink, staring out the kitchen window and taking his sweet time answering.

“Aiden?” I say when he doesn’t speak. I wait (less than) patiently as he moves the curtains aside, leaning in until I think he might actually press his face to the glass. He doesn’t, though; he just looks out that window for a second longer and then lets the curtains drop again.

He finally turns to me, leaning back against the counter. “Sorry, thought I saw something weird.”

Something weird? What’s that supposed to mean?

I guess it’s not surprising. My day was a little weird too. Aiden being my roommate—the coincidence to end all coincidences—and the slightly strange yoga instructor and my obvious paranoid hallucination outside Namaste.

Maybe Autumn Grove is just a little weird now.

Or, more likely, maybe *I* just got a little weird, and it’s affecting how I see the world around me.

Aiden points to the staircase on my left. “Your room is up the big stairs, around the corner, then up the little stairs.”

“Up the big stairs, around the corner, up the little stairs,” I repeat. “I’m excited about the loft. Hopefully this will give me some space and quiet to work.” I head in that direction; I’ll look around a bit on my way there, too.

I take my time going up the steps, mostly because I stop to look at all the pictures hung along the wall as I climb. They’re a bunch of black and white travel photos, most of them of

easily recognizable sites—the Eiffel Tower, the London Eye, the Colosseum. I examine each one, trying to figure out if Aiden or his sister took them, or if they were simply purchased. I could ask him, I guess, but that feels like cheating.

“What’s the verdict?” Aiden says from behind me, just as I’m squinting at the foreground of the Eiffel Tower picture to see if I can recognize any identifying factors.

I jump, spinning around and wobbling dangerously as my feet lose themselves on the wooden staircase. I throw my hand out to steady myself, clutching desperately at the first thing I find as the world goes sideways.

And look. It’s not my finest moment, okay? Normally I think of myself as a decently poised woman. My balance is good, thanks to the core strength I’ve developed from doing yoga for the last five years.

But we all have off days, and...well, today seems to be one of mine.

Because as I pitch headfirst down the stairs, my wildly grasping hands find one thing and one thing only: Aiden Milano’s ear.

His *ear*.

I am a rock climber at a climbing gym, and Aiden’s ear is the finger hold that will stop me from plummeting to my death. But there’s no chalk on my hands, no safety rope, no harness—and Aiden, it seems, is not interested in taking this fall with me.

He jerks his head out of my grip with a yelp, something I feel rather than see as I tumble forward, down the steps—until I land, breathless and smarting, in a crumpled heap at the bottom.

Silence.

Pure silence.

And no matter how hard I rack my brain, no matter how creative I get, I can’t come up with a way to make this less

humiliating. I am a marionette whose strings have been cut, and this is probably the worst first—second?—impression I've ever made in my life.

It's tempting to simply stay here, my face squashed against the wood floor, until Aiden leaves. With a bit of adjustment I could even make myself comfortable—face down sounds pretty good right about now. But when I hear his footsteps on the stairs, they seem to be coming closer instead of further away. I think he's coming to check on me.

Where was that concern when I was trying to use you as my human handrail, Aiden?

A sort of morbid curiosity is taking over, though, as I lie here in a heap—the desire to see what happens next. So I stay where I am, not moving, even though my body is protesting the unnatural angles going on. I remain still as Aiden's steps draw closer and closer. I remain still when I hear him stop inches away from where I lie. I even remain still when I feel one dress-shoe-clad foot nudge me, right on top of the head.

I do not move.

And then, to my absolute outrage, I hear another sound: Aiden's footsteps, walking *back up the stairs*.

“Hey!” I say, maneuvering myself into a sitting position so fast it makes my head spin. “Hey!” I push my hair out of my eyes, sweeping it impatiently to the side.

“Hey...what?” he says. His voice is flat, his expression unperturbed. One hand is tucked casually into his pocket; the other holds a book. He looks for all the world like a man who did *not* just let his new roommate fall down the stairs—and yet there's a flicker of wicked amusement in his eyes as he stares down at me.

“What if I was dead down here?” I say, frowning up at him. “You nudged me and I didn't move. What if I was unconscious? What if I needed to go to the hospital?” I rub my lower back, wincing as I poke and prod.

“You twitched,” he says, as though this explains everything.

“I’m sorry?”

“When I nudged you with my foot,” he says. “You twitched.”

“I did not,” I say, narrowing my eyes.

“Yes, you did,” he says blandly. “Your left leg. It twitched.”

“And you just let me fall,” I go on, pointing to him. “I grabbed you to steady myself, and you let me fall.”

For the first time since this conversation started, an easily recognizable expression passes over his face: he looks at me like I’m nuts. Holding up the book in his hand, he says, “This is a *collector’s edition*, Juniper.”

“What?” I blink at him.

“It’s a *collector’s edition*,” he says again, waving the book in my direction—now that he mentions it, I do notice the fancy-pants gold leaf on the cover—and still looking at me like I’m crazy. “An old one, at that. The spine would probably crack if I dropped it down the stairs.”

I roll my eyes and heave myself to my feet, muttering under my breath, cursing his pretentiousness while simultaneously wondering how I can get a closer look at that special edition. I climb all the way up to my attic bedroom and flop down on the bare mattress, staring at the sloped ceiling.

The room is furnished already, but I need to put on bedding and set up my desk and closet and whatnot. I need to add my own dishes to the cupboards downstairs and hang some of my own art on the walls. I can make this feel like home. I did it when I moved to the foster home my senior year; I’ve done it in every place I’ve lived since then. I’ll adapt to my surroundings.

And then I’m going to do it. I’m going to write a murder mystery. And if the gruesomely killed victim happens to be a hot young professor named Aiden?

I won’t lose any sleep.

Well, all right. Maybe a little, because I struggle with bouts of insomnia.

But I won't lose *much*.

IN WHICH AIDEN SPOTS A SPUD

Someone is following me.

I have done nothing attention-worthy in my life, and definitely nothing that merits being followed. But I'm almost positive that the car I just watched drive by the food bank is the same car I saw parked outside my house yesterday when Juniper moved in.

I noticed it first from the kitchen window. I'm not in the habit of spotting cars, but this one had several of the bumper stickers we sell at the high school. That's the only reason it grabbed my attention.

Except now that same car just drove past the food bank, looking like every sketchy car in every mystery movie ever—the slow pass, the window rolled down just slightly at the top, the sudden speeding away when I stepped out the front doors to get a better look.

“Hey,” I say now, settling myself on the top step and pulling my blazer tighter around me to ward off the chill. I press my phone more firmly to my ear, talking to my colleague. “Do you know when we stopped selling those dancing potato bumper stickers?”

Rocco Astor is the gym teacher at the high school, but like me, he also wears more than one hat. Where the higher-ups have me teaching English along with my counseling job, Rocco teaches gym, coaches track and field, *and* operates the school store—where we sell our merchandise—during lunch hours. If anyone will be able to answer my question, it's him.

“Hmm,” Rocco says from the other end. His voice is thoughtful as he goes on, “Two years ago, maybe? I think we replaced it with the *Spud Nation* one. The dancing potato sold better, though. Why? Want me to dig around and see if I can find one for you?”

I snort, shaking my head. Autumn Grove High School is the unfortunate home to one of the lamest mascots I’ve ever heard of: Solomon the Spud.

A potato.

That’s our mascot: a potato.

It’s because Autumn Grove is a residential pocket surrounded by farming communities, most of which grow that famed Idaho crop. We produce roughly one-third of the nation’s annual potato supply, and they’re a way of life here, seeping into everything we do. Schools let out for a week near the end of September and early October for harvest break so that all hands can be on deck for the harvest; the legal driving age is fifteen so that teenagers can drive tractors and other farm equipment, though I’d bet my bottom dollar that we’ve got kids younger than that behind the wheel in some places.

So I guess it was only natural that since this area is kept afloat by potatoes, a potato would be the high school’s figurehead, too. When I was there, though, and even when I was tutoring Juniper, the potato mascot hadn’t been named yet. *Solomon* came later, and I’m not sure if it was a step in the right or wrong direction.

“I’ll pass,” I say to Rocco, my eyes scanning the road as far as I can see in both directions. The car doesn’t reappear, though.

Rocco laughs, a deep barking sound that betrays a hint of a wheeze. Rocco’s got something like eleven or twelve years on me, and according to him, he used to smoke half a pack a day. He quit after his wife left him—though as he tells it, it didn’t do him much good, since she didn’t come back anyway—and now you’d never know except for that wheeze that creeps in sometimes.

I give Rocco a few vague excuses about why I wanted to know, hoping he doesn't ask anything else, before hanging up. Then I check the street one last time, going as far as the edge of the small parking lot and craning my neck to look in both directions. As expected, though, the car is gone.

It definitely had the dancing potato bumper sticker, but I think I spotted the *Spud Nation* sticker too. Autumn Grove High isn't a huge school, but it's not so small I can easily narrow down something like this, either. Plus the car was a white sedan of some kind; I couldn't even begin to count how many of those there are in town. So it looks like I'm just going to have to keep my eyes peeled or chalk the whole thing up as coincidence.

I'm not sure I believe in coincidence. It's running rampant in my life at the moment, though. How else could I explain Juniper Bean showing up as the new tenant?

Juniper Bean of the Christmas Eve mistletoe mishap that could have gotten me in absurd amounts of trouble when I was working on my undergrad.

Juniper Bean of the tumultuous childhood that I only know bits and pieces of, though some aspects are still apparent even now. I know for a fact that her mother drank too much; I'm also pretty sure Juniper was hungry a lot, based on the way she hoards food. It's something I spotted a few times all those years ago when I tutored her; she'd open her backpack to pull out her books, and I'd see leftover lunch items wrapped carefully inside. She hasn't changed, either, judging by the scones she saved yesterday. Watching her place them gently in her bag sent a wave of sympathy and pity through me, a twisting of my insides that I usually only feel when I come to the food bank.

Food hoarding often points to disordered eating of some kind, but in Juniper's case I imagine it's a trauma response. I took several psychology courses as part of my social work major, but it doesn't take higher education to realize that a kid who doesn't always have meals to eat will hoard any extra food they come across.

Who knows, though; Grind and Brew's scones are delicious enough that anyone would want to save leftovers, no matter what kind of childhood they had.

"Aiden!"

I jump at the sound of someone calling my name. I turn around, realizing with a start that I've just been standing here at the edge of the parking lot, staring blankly down the road while my mind wanders.

"Yeah," I call. I hurry back across the lot and then up the stairs, taking them two at a time until I reach a perplexed-looking Rodriguez leaning halfway out of the front entrance.

"What are you doing?" he says, his bushy eyebrows lowering.

"Nothing," I mutter. I rub the back of my neck and then slip past him. "Sorry. I'm here."

"Okay," he says, looking unconvinced. "Well, Sandra's supposed to be out in front serving next shift, but she called to say she'll be late, so—"

"I'll fill in until she gets here," I say quickly, trying to remember who Sandra is. Technically my shift ends in fifteen minutes, but I can be here longer. I don't have any grading to do. It's Homecoming weekend; I didn't give my students any homework, because I knew none of them would do it anyway. "I can just stay and help you close after dinner."

On any given evening, there are maybe half a dozen people who show up for whatever we're serving, though that number goes up in the winter. When we're not actively serving or preparing food, we're working on the storehouse part of the job; collecting, organizing, and distributing food items. We coordinate with several of the cities and towns nearby to do food drives; we process paperwork for families applying for the food assistance program, working with local stores and markets.

It's a big, multifaceted operation, and I don't envy Rodriguez the job he has making sure everything runs as smoothly as possible.

When I finally get in the car to go home later that evening, I'm tired and fighting another migraine. This time I don't think it's because we ran out of toilet paper again; I'm pretty sure my body is on strike, protesting the new tenant situation.

Almost like she knows how I'm feeling, Caroline's name shows up as my phone begins ringing.

Which is great, because I have a bone to pick. Several, actually.

"Did she get moved in okay?" Caroline says as soon as I answer. Once again, she's not wasting time on greetings.

"Did you know?" I say instead of answering her question.

"Did I know...what?" she says.

I pull to a stop at a red light, drumming my fingers on the steering wheel as I wait. "That I've met Juniper before."

"You've met her before?" Caroline says.

"Yes," I say, rolling my eyes. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. I tutored her, Care. She's the one who tried to kiss me that one year at Christmas. That's the girl you sold the contract to." *She's not a girl anymore*, my mind points out unhelpfully.

I ignore this, pressing down on the gas with a bit too much force when the light turns green again.

"No way," Caroline breathes. She sounds just as shocked as I felt, which I can only imagine means her eyes are doing that bug-out thing they do sometimes. Caroline's eyes are unnaturally big. It's something I've always teased her about, usually in retaliation for her jibes about my crooked nose.

"Yes way," I say, turning right on Center and heading down the smaller road that leads to the neighborhood. "The tenant now living in the loft once tried to kiss me. When she was *underage*, Caroline."

"Wow," she says. She's silent for a moment, and then she says, "This must be fate, right?"

I shift in my seat, remembering with uncomfortable clarity that Juniper said the same thing. "It's not fate," I say. "There's

no fate.”

“Well, if it’s not fate, what is it?” Caroline says. “Is she pretty?”

“No,” my mouth says.

Maybe, my brain says.

“I don’t trust you. Send me a picture,” she says.

“Absolutely not.” I make a right turn, slowing down now that I’ve reached the neighborhood.

“Why not?” My sister should not sound this whiny, considering she’s nearing forty.

“Because,” I say, pulling onto Theabelle Lane. “A million reasons. It’s weird, for one. And I’m almost home, so I’m hanging up now.”

“Come on, Aiden—”

“Nope. Bye!” And with that I end the call.

Juniper is in the kitchen when I walk through the front door. She’s leaning over the kitchen island, her elbow propped on the countertop as she rifles through a stack of mail. She’s got on leggings and a thermal top, and she does not—I repeat, she does *not*—look pretty. I don’t like short hair or pink hair or leggings as pants. And even if I did, conventional attractiveness doesn’t do much for me in the first place.

So there.

“This is your pile,” not-pretty Juniper says, pushing everything except for a purple envelope toward me as I go to the cupboard for a glass. She doesn’t look at me; she’s still staring at the envelope.

I frown, pointing at it. “Do you have mail already?”

“Yes,” she says slowly, picking it up. When she turns to face me, though, she looks confused, bordering on disconcerted. “Except it only says my name. And I haven’t registered this address anywhere yet.”

My frown deepens, and I abandon my course. I can get a drink in a minute. Instead I hold out my hand. “Can I see?”

She shrugs and passes me the purple envelope. Sure enough, *Juniper Bean* is written on the front in a round, loopy writing I don't recognize. It looks innocent enough.

So why is there a thread of uneasiness niggling at the edge of my mind?

“Do you want to open it?” I say, passing the envelope back to her.

“Kind of no?” she says. Her face twists up as she goes on, “I mean, it's kind of sketchy, right? What if it's anthrax or something? Hang on.” Her eyes narrow on me. “This isn't from you, is it? Did you send me anthrax?”

My lips twitch at this. “I did not, no. I don't think I have access to anthrax.”

“Because you had no problem letting me plummet to my death yesterday on those stairs,” she points out.

“I feel like if you'd plummeted to your death, you wouldn't be yammering so much right now,” I say over my shoulder as I pull a plastic cup from the cupboard.

Juniper gasps, holding one hand to her chest. “You kiss your mother with that mouth?” she says.

“Just open the envelope,” I say. I refuse to be amused by her antics.

She mutters something unintelligible under her breath, but a second later I hear the sound of paper ripping.

I get some water from the tap and then turn back to Juniper. “What is it?” I say.

Her frown has deepened, her brows pulled low, blue eyes narrowed. “It's...an invitation.”

“To...?” I say, taking a drink.

“To the Homecoming dance.” She looks utterly bewildered, and I don't blame her.

“What do you mean?” I say, because she’s not making sense.

“Wow,” she says, looking over the piece of paper she’s holding. “So the high school hands out fancy-pants cardstock invitations to Homecoming now? Back when I was there, they just told us not to spike the punch and called it good.”

“We receive a decent amount of donations from the community,” I say vaguely. It’s just one of several reasons I don’t like Lionel Astor’s promise to divert funds away from welfare programs and toward schools if he becomes governor. That might be great for other places in Idaho, but Autumn Grove doesn’t need it.

I hold my hand out to Juniper, and she passes me the paper without hesitation.

“See?” she says. “Inviting me to Homecoming.”

She’s right. It doesn’t make sense, but she’s right. I recognize the invitation; I think every household with students got one. I’m pretty sure I threw mine away. I hold it up, looking it over.

“Oh,” Juniper says suddenly, moving closer until she’s right in front of me. “There’s something on the back.”

I turn the piece of cardstock over. There, printed in the same round, loopy writing, is one line:

Meet me at Solomon the Spud after the dance if you’d like to hear about your parents!

For one long second, both Juniper and I just stare at the invitation. The only sound in the kitchen is the steady *plunk, plunk, plunk* of the dripping faucet; I reach over blindly and jam the handle more firmly into place, and the plunking stops. Then we’re left in complete silence.

There’s a tension that’s flooded into the room, though I’m not sure why; the quiet feels suddenly alive. So I turn my head slowly to look at Juniper—and immediately find the source of the tension I noticed.

Because she's only lived here for a day, but I *know* she wasn't this pale when I walked in. Her mouth hangs slightly open, her lips parted, her brow furrowed.

I rack my brain, trying to remember what I know about Juniper's parents. Search as I might, though, nowhere in my memories can I find anything about a father.

"I always got the impression your dad was out of the picture," I say finally, when the silence has eaten away my last nerve.

"He is," Juniper says faintly, sounding dazed. "I don't even know who my father was." Then she looks at me, wide-eyed, and says one more thing:

"Who the cuss is Solomon the Spud?"

IN WHICH JUNIPER PONDERES
THE SEXINESS OF LEANING

As it turns out, Solomon the Spud is the mascot of Autumn Grove High School. Back in my day—saying that makes me sound like a grandmother griping about how easy kids today have it, but whatever—the potato mascot didn't have a name. I'm not sure what naming him accomplished, but I guess it's good they've got something to call him now instead of just *the school potato*, which is what we always said.

“What does that mean, though?” I say to Aiden now. “How do you meet someone at a potato?” We've moved from the kitchen to the living room, where he's sitting in a straight-backed chair while I'm lounging on the couch. I don't know why anyone would choose to sit when they can sprawl, but to each their own.

Aiden sighs, pushing his hand through his hair. “It probably means the statue behind the school. There's a Solomon statue on the opposite side of the track, back next to the trees.”

My mind is still reeling, nebulous tendrils stretching this way and that, but one concrete thought emerges. “A potato statue feels wholly unnecessary,” I say.

“I agree,” Aiden says, nodding. “But no one asked for our opinions, so there is indeed a statue of Solomon the Spud.”

That...might be the stupidest thing I've ever heard.

And this whole situation is completely bizarre. What the heck is going on right now? Someone wants to tell me about my parents? Usually anonymous notes are mysterious or threatening; this one really isn't. It sounds like someone is trying to be friendly and helpful, judging by the wording. They even used a little heart instead of a dot at the bottom of the exclamation point.

I stare at that miniature heart for a second, trying to stop my hands from shaking. But my knuckles are white where I grip the invitation, and there's a weird tangle of emotions fighting for dominance inside. They're living entities, all these feelings, and the image pops into my mind of the creeping vines I saw climbing the wrought-iron fence around the cemetery yesterday.

It feels like those vines are growing in my gut now, in my bones, my lungs—squeezing and strangling until I can barely breathe.

My eyes move from the heart exclamation point to the strangest word on the entire piece of cardstock: *parents*.

My mother didn't even remember who my father was. How does someone in this town know what my own mother didn't know? How is that possible?

"I'm going to bed," I say, my voice faint. "I can't think about this anymore. My brain is going to explode."

Aiden hesitates and then nods. He looks like he wants to say something, but I'm grateful when he remains silent. If he asks me how I'm feeling, I'm pretty sure I'll burst into tears. I'm not much of a crier, but it does happen on occasion—usually when I'm overwhelmed or embarrassed. Like my body takes emotional overload and siphons it off in the form of tears.

I drag myself up both flights of stairs, big and small, emerging into the loft. It's little more than a landing with a door. The bedroom on the other side of that door is actually nice, though. I settled in earlier, getting all my bedding in place and my clothes in the closet, tucking away the box with my mother's few remaining possessions. The sloped ceiling is

painted white, coming to the peak in the center of the room, right over the bed. There's a skylight on one side, too; I'm going to have to get used to not having curtains blocking out the light in the mornings, but I love being able to look up and see the sky.

I close the bedroom door behind me, my feet shuffling across the hardwood floor as I head to my bed. I let myself fall straight forward, my body sinking into my fluffy white comforter and my face smooshing up against my pillow. I force myself to relax until I'm melting into my bed like butter in a pan.

I should brush my teeth and my hair. I should put on pajamas. I should turn off the light. But I don't do any of those things. I just close my eyes and wait for sleep to take me.



WHEN I COME DOWNSTAIRS THE NEXT MORNING, AIDEN IS already awake and seated in the same chair he sat in last night. If it weren't for the fact that he's wearing different clothes, I might think he hadn't moved at all. I silently thank the inventor of flannel pajama pants and white t-shirts for his or her impeccable service to our nation before tearing my eyes away. I think Aiden probably would not appreciate being stared at.

So my gaze jumps instead to the little corner he occupies. I was too distracted last night to notice details, but now I take them all in; the bookshelf, the stack of books, the reading glasses. I drift toward that bookshelf, eyeing the contents curiously; there's row after row of classics, most of them with creased spines and blunted corners. There's a small statuette, too, a bust of some kind; upon closer inspection, I see that it's Shakespeare. I shake my head, amused, before looking down at Aiden to see what he's reading.

Hamlet. The play. He's just...reading it. At seven-thirty on a Saturday morning.

I have no words.

“I know I’m devastatingly good-looking, but please stop staring at me,” he says flatly without looking up, and I jump.

“I wasn’t staring at you.”

I was. I totally was.

Then, in an attempt to change the subject, I say, “You realize you look like dark academia personified?”

“I don’t know what that means,” he says, his voice musing. He turns the page and continues to read.

“Tweed blazers and stacks of books and a bust of Shakespeare,” I say. “All you need is a little skull and a typewriter—” But I break off when Aiden looks at me for the first time this morning. My eyes widen. “Stop it,” I say. “Do you have a skull and a typewriter around here somewhere?”

“My sister gave me a skull,” he mutters as a faint flush works its way into his cheeks. “It’s not real.”

Well, this is a delightful development. I smile, bouncing on the balls of my feet. “I should hope not,” I say. “Can I see it? Please?” I add when he hesitates.

He sighs and points to the door right next to the bookcase. “In there,” he says, going back to his book. “On the desk.”

I barge into the bedroom and catch only a glimpse of the decor—navy walls; gray bedspread; simple, functional furniture—before finding the desk. Sure enough, sitting next to the lamp is a life-sized human skull.

“He’s so cute!” I call over my shoulder, my smile widening. “Or is it a she?” I bend over, addressing the skull. “Are you a girl skull?”

“I haven’t really thought about it,” Aiden says, and I turn around to find him in the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest, one finger keeping his place in his book.

“You have to name it, Aiden!” I say. “It needs a name! Something moody and brooding like you.”

He frowns. “I’m not moody and brooding.”

My snort of laughter is unladylike. “Of course you are.” I waltz up to him, pressing my finger into the little v-shaped crease between his brows. “Does that hurt?”

“Does what hurt?” he says, swatting my hand away.

“That face you make all the time. Does it hurt?”

“What face?” he says, and that little crease deepens. “I don’t make a face.”

“Yes, you do,” I say, grinning at him. “You walk around looking like someone who’s just checked the weather and discovered it’s supposed to rain for the next week.”

“I love the rain,” he says blankly.

Of course he loves the rain.

I lean in, invading his space just a touch as I give him a closer inspection. “How come you don’t have any wrinkles when you scrunch your face up like this? You’re probably going to have the audacity to age like fine wine.” I sigh, leaning back again. “I, on the other hand, will most likely shrivel up like a prune in my old age. My mom was only forty-two when she died, but she looked at least twenty years older than that.”

“Maybe,” he says slowly, looking thoughtful. “But if I recall correctly, your mom didn’t take care of her body, either.” He raises one questioning brow at me. “Right?”

“That’s true,” I admit. “She smoked toward the end too.”

He nods, a decisive jerk of his head. “So there.” He pauses, then says, “Speaking of that. What are you going to do tonight? I don’t know if it’s a good idea to go meet a stranger at eleven at night.”

I force myself to take a deep breath, mostly to combat the sudden nerves I feel. Talking with him made me forget, just briefly, what other things were going on in my life. “I don’t know,” I say. “I’m still deciding.”

“Well, I’d recommend against it,” he says. “The whole thing feels unsafe to me.”

“Mmm.” I nod, trying to distract myself by focusing on him. Then—“Hang on,” I say, my eyes widening as I look more closely. It’s possible I’ve gotten carried away in my inspection of his face as my gaze trails over everything I can see—the crooked nose, the defined cupid’s bow, the firm chin. I was wrong to pursue him at the time, but seventeen-year-old me still had *great* taste. I’ve just noticed something new, however. “Is that—do you—” I swallow, reaching up and pointing to his earlobe. “Is your ear pierced?”

“Just the left one,” he says distractedly. He’s still standing in front of me, but he’s got his book open again, reading once more.

“When—how—”

“I went through a phase.”

A phase? A *phase*? I need *so* much more information than that. “When?” I say quickly. “What kind of phase? What kind of earring did you wear? Are there pictures? Can I—”

“There are probably a few photos buried at my parents’ place,” he says musingly. Then he looks up from his book, his gaze finding mine. “But you’ll never see them.”

I will see those pictures if it is the last thing I do. I will run a long con on his mother if it means I get a glimpse of straight-laced Aiden wearing an *earring*.

“I can hear the wheels turning in that brain of yours,” he says, sounding distracted once more as he looks back down at his book. “The earring isn’t even the best part.”

I all but choke on my own spit. “What’s the best part?” I croak. I am a rabid dog, salivating for this information. “What’s the best part, Aiden?”

He looks up at me, his hand pausing halfway through turning the page. A spark of something devilish enters his eyes as the corner of his lips twitches. “There are tattoos,” he whispers.

“Tattoos?” I squeak.

No answer; he just steps into his room and then nudges me out, back through the doorway. Then he closes the door in my face.

“Aiden,” I say, pressing my cheek to the door and knocking hard. “Tattoos? Plural? Tattoos *plural*?”

Faintly, from the other side of the door, I hear him laugh. I roll my eyes, but when I go to the kitchen to eat the scones I saved from Grind and Brew, I’m smiling too.

My smile fades as I sit down at the table, though. What am I going to do? He’s right; going to meet someone I don’t know late at night is stupid.

But maybe if I took some kind of weapon? Pepper spray, maybe?

Parents.

The word pops into my head, still just as strange as it was when I read it last night.

I gave up wondering about my father a long time ago. As far as I was concerned, he wasn’t much of a father if he was never around. But I was also well aware that he might not even know I existed.

I never anticipated that I might get to learn something about him. I never let myself go there. But now that it’s come up...I don’t know if I can set that idea aside.

I march myself back over to Aiden’s door and knock again. “Hey,” I call. “What about if I take pepper spray?”

There’s silence for a second, and then the door opens to reveal an unimpressed-looking Aiden.

“What?” I say in response to the face he’s making. “Is that not a good idea? No pepper spray?”

He sighs. Why is this man always sighing when he talks to me? “I mean, pepper spray is better than nothing, but it’s still not safe,” he says. “It’s dark back there. It will be late. And you’re pretty small.”

“And those are valid concerns,” I say. “But I also think...” I bite my lip, debating what to say; I finally settle for the truth. “I think I’ll experience a lot of regret if I don’t go see what all this is about tonight. Besides,” I go on. “Didn’t that note seem less ominous than friendly, almost? Did you notice the heart under the exclamation point?”

“I noticed,” Aiden says grudgingly. He leans against the door frame, folding his arms.

Why is that so attractive? It’s just *leaning*. There’s nothing sexy about leaning, is there?

I take a step back, trying to get a better look at the full picture he presents. He’s changed out of his pajamas, sadly; gone are the t-shirt and plaid pants, replaced by jeans and an oatmeal-colored cable-knit sweater. He’s not a ridiculously ripped guy—not like Too Happy Gus from the yoga studio, for example—but nor is he puny; I can still see the breadth of his shoulders and the faint shape of his biceps when he’s standing like this—

And I’m staring again. Crap. What were we talking about?

Cut it out, Juniper, I scold myself. You are not this girl anymore. You are no longer seventeen, drooling over your dreamy tutor. Get it together.

Ha. I may not be seventeen anymore, and he may not be my tutor anymore, but Aiden Milano is still dreamy. I doubt he wants to know that’s how I feel, though. When I told him how I felt last time, he was less than thrilled.

“There was the heart,” I say, rallying my strictly platonic, Aiden-free thoughts. “There was the heart on the exclamation point, and the wording sounded friendly too. Like someone was trying to do me a favor rather than threaten me ominously. Didn’t you get that vibe?”

“A little, yeah,” he admits. “Still think it’s a bad idea, though.”

He’s right. I know he’s right.

“So...” I say, staring at the floor as I think it over. Then, as an idea occurs to me, my head pops up, and I stand up

straighter. “Why don’t you come with me?”

“Nope.” He doesn’t even think it through; he just has that answer all ready to go. Then he takes a step back into his room and reaches for the door, clearly planning to close it in my face.

“Wait!” I say, stepping forward and putting my foot in the way.

He stares down at that foot with a *look*, the kind that makes me wonder if his students are scared of him. I can totally imagine him shooting fire out of his eyeballs right now.

“Sorry,” I say quickly, moving the offending foot. “Sorry. But hang on. Can you just *think* about it at least—”

“No.”

“But you’re going to be there already, aren’t—” I break off again, but not because Aiden has interrupted me with his naysaying this time; it’s because the doorbell has just rung.

I look at him with a little frown; he looks at me with the exact same expression. “Are you expecting anyone?” he says. “We need to add that to the rules. You need to inform your roommate if you’re expecting company—”

“I’m not expecting company,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Are you?”

“No,” he says, and his frown deepens. “I’m—”

But both of us fall silent when the front door swings open and a tall woman steps in. “Honey, I’m home!” she calls in a sing-song voice.

“Caroline, for the love,” Aiden mutters under his breath, squeezing his eyes shut. He rubs his temples. “No way. I’m not doing this with you right now.”

I can’t tell if he’s talking to me or to the woman, Caroline.

“Oh!” I say, and it clicks. I turn back to the woman. “You’re Caroline. The landlady? Aiden’s sister?”

“That’s me!” she says, beaming. Her shoulder-length hair is a bit lighter than Aiden’s, but she has similar features—the

same brown eyes, definitely, and a stronger chin than you usually see on a woman. It's hard to say if she and Aiden have the same smile, since he rarely smiles, but hers is nice. I know this because she's beaming at me, practically glowing, like I'm the best thing she's seen all day.

"Oh, you're completely darling!" she says as she approaches.

More muttering from Aiden at this, and more temple rubbing. "Caroline—"

"Are you getting settled in okay?" she says, ignoring her brother completely. "I wanted to come and check on you. Make sure everything was to your liking."

Wow. That's really nice of her. Are landladies usually that thoughtful?

"Uh, yeah," I say, because this is such an unexpected question that I don't have an answer ready. "It's great. It's a nice place, my room is great, the price is fair."

"Wonderful," Caroline says, looking pleased. Then she jerks her thumb at Aiden. "And how's the roommate?"

"A bit on the negative side," I say immediately. Aiden glares at me; I smile sweetly back.

She nods sympathetically. "I know," she says. Then, lowering her voice to a conspicuous whisper, she says, "He's always been like that. It's why no one will date him."

I think she's probably exaggerating there; I'm sure there are plenty of women who would put up with all the frowning for a chance to see this man on a regular basis. But I just nod, because I don't think his sister needs to hear my opinion on that particular matter.

Except...

"He doesn't even have a date to the dance tonight?" I say. I'm not a superb actress; my voice is a little too innocent to be believable, and the way Aiden's eyes narrow tells me he sees what I'm up to.

“Of course he doesn’t,” Caroline says with a snort. She waves one airy hand, a little charm bracelet jingling as she says, “I don’t remember the last time he took a date to a school event.”

“That’s too bad,” I say with an over-the-top sigh. “Because I was just asking him if *I* could be his date—”

“Don’t you dare—” Aiden begins, looking mutinous, but Caroline jumps in.

“Oh, yes, you should!” she says, clapping her hands. “Absolutely!”

“I thought it was a good idea, but he said no.” I do my best to pull a sad face.

And look—if Aiden himself were my real interest, I wouldn’t do this. I’m not going to manipulate my way into a date with a guy I like, especially if I know he isn’t interested. That feels icky to me, too much like forcing my presence on him when he doesn’t want it. But if I can just *get* to the dance with Aiden, I can make myself scarce. He won’t have to put up with me until the very end, when we swing by the potato statue together.

“Aiden,” Caroline says, rounding on him and looking exasperated. “If a beautiful woman asks you to be her date—”

“She doesn’t want to be my date!” Aiden says, throwing his hands up in the air. “She just wants to go meet some weirdo by the Solomon statue.”

Caroline freezes in place, looking confused. Then she turns to me, raising one eyebrow.

“It’s true,” I say, shrugging apologetically. “Sorry. But I’m supposed to meet someone I’ve never met, and I want Aiden to come as backup. Safety in numbers and all that.”

If anything, this new information seems to get Caroline even more fired up. “Aiden,” she says. She wags her finger at him as she speaks, something that makes her seem much older than him. “Are you just going to let your roommate go by herself? What if something happened to her? How guilty would you feel?” Then, turning to me, she adds kindly, “I’m

sure nothing will happen, of course. Still, though.” She gives Aiden a disapproving frown. “I’m going to have a word with Mom about how she raised you—”

“Don’t you dare,” Aiden says for the second time in the last ten minutes. This time, though, his face pales. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Well, she should know that she raised a coward.”

I bite my lip. “That’s not it,” I say. It’s stupid to pretend I know Aiden better than his own sister, but whatever. “I’m sure he just doesn’t want to mess with it—”

“Fine,” Aiden cuts me off. He’s rubbing his temples again; is he getting a headache? “Fine. Look. Here’s the deal.” He turns to me. “I will go with you to the statue after the dance. We will stay for ten minutes. *Ten minutes*. That’s it. Got it? After that, I’m leaving. You can stay if you want—”

“No,” I say quickly. “Ten minutes is perfect. It’s just fine. We can leave after that. In return—” I cast around, thinking of a way I can repay him. “In return, I will provide seasonal decor for the house. I will also cook meals for both of us for the next week. Does that sound fair?”

“That’s fair,” he says stiffly, and he does look a little more placated now that I’ve made this offer. “I don’t care about decorations, though.”

“I figured,” I say, smiling slightly. “That’s why I added the meals part.” I love cooking; it won’t be a problem for me to make a little extra.

“Well, that worked out wonderfully,” Caroline says. Then she smiles at me. “Do you have a dress?”

“Oh, I don’t think I need to wear a dress,” I say. “I’m not planning on actually dancing or anything—”

“Nonsense,” she says, and again I’m taken aback by how much older she seems now that she’s shaking that finger at me. “If you’re going to the dance, you need to wear a dress. Aiden’s dressing up, aren’t you, Aiden?”

“Only because they’re making me,” he says. “I’m getting out of here before I get wrangled into any more nonsense. Caroline, feel free to leave any time.”

“Where are you going?” she says, watching him blankly as he moves in long strides to the front door, where he grabs his keys from the little hook on the wall.

“Food bank,” he says without looking back. “I have a shift. I’ll be back in time to leave at six, Juniper. If you’re not here, I’m going without you. You, on the other hand”—he jabs one finger in his sister’s direction—“I would greatly prefer that you were *not* here when I return home.”

“I’ll be here,” I say, watching him go.

“I’ll leave,” Caroline says, looking grouchy, which only serves to highlight how similar she and her brother are in appearance. I give her a polite goodbye, and then she goes, leaving me alone in the house.

“I didn’t realize he works there,” I murmur to myself as I trail back to the stairs. I’m not surprised, I guess; Aiden has been feeding the hungry since we first encountered each other. It’s strange, though, imagining him working someplace I used to frequent as a teenager. Like two separate parts of my world, colliding without my permission.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I need to go write a murder mystery—or rather, I need to go research *how* to write a murder mystery, since romance isn’t working out.

But slowly, absently, my hand slides around my torso and to the base of my spine—until I feel the thin, raised scar that’s the only remainder of the first time I met Aiden Milano.

TWENTY-ONE YEARS AGO

I'm hungry.

These days it feels like I'm always hungry. It feels like I'm always hungry, and also like there's never enough food. Mama says I'm a black hole, guzzling down everything we have on account of the growth spurt I'm going through. Except I think she might be wrong about the growth spurt, because I'm still short and scrawny like I've always been.

Maybe I just need to eat more.

I ease out of my bedroom door, listening with my ears wide open so I'll be able to hear if Mama wakes. The sun's well past up, but Mama works nights and sleeps a lot during the day. She doesn't like it when I wake her up, so I try to be sneaky quiet as I tiptoe down the hall. I stick my head around the corner and peek into the TV room; sure enough, there she is, asleep on the couch with a couple bottles next to her. She says that's her medicine, but I've never noticed it making her any better.

Mostly it just makes her fall asleep.

She doesn't wake up as easy when she's been drinking her medicine, though, so I stop tiptoeing and start walking regular instead. I check the refrigerator; we ate the last of the eggs last night. There's some cheese that's turning fuzzy greenish-blue and a gallon of milk, plus some flour and sugar and stale crackers in the cabinet. Nothing good for me to munch on.

My stomach twists with hunger.

So I hunt around for some socks, because it's cold outside, but I can't find any. I just grab my shoes and wrestle them on my feet, doing my best to tie them. I'm still practicing, but I can get the bunny ears pretty well, and then I just tie the bunny ears in a knot. My jammie pants are warm enough to go outside, because they're made of a soft, fuzzy material, but my jammie shirt has short sleeves, so I put my coat on. I shove my hair out of my face and pat it down before heading out the front door.

There's a bite to the wind that cuts right through my jammies, and I walk a little faster. The hole in the toe of my left shoe lets in the cold, but at least my right shoe is fine. I shuffle along, pulling my coat tighter around me and moving as quickly as possible. I have a long way to go still.

It feels like I walk forever, but in real life I think it's more like twenty or thirty minutes—that's how long one episode of my favorite cartoon lasts, so I can tell pretty good. My nose starts to sniff delicious smells a full minute before I reach the alley behind the shops on Main Street, and by the time I'm actually there, my mouth is watering. I pass the giant mural on the wall of the alleyway, following that delicious smell until I reach the back entrance of Grind and Brew. I've never been inside, but I've been back here enough times to know that they always have yummy foods.

I *also* know that they get rid of stale breads every morning—only the breads they get rid of are never actually that stale. Sometimes they have a few mold spots, but that's easy to work around. Mostly it's perfectly good stuff.

I eye the dumpster, trying to figure out how to get up there. Usually there are boxes stacked next to it, but today there's only one. Will it be tall enough for me to climb in?

I pull off my coat and set it carefully on the ground in a spot that doesn't look too dirty. I don't want it to get yucky in the trash. Then I clamber up on the box next to the dumpster. I have to jump as high as I can, but I manage to catch the edge of the dumpster with my fingertips, and from there I'm able to climb up. I fall over the side and into the rubbish with an *oomph*, my nose wrinkling.

This is always the worst part: the trashy smells. At least the cold keeps the flies away, for the most part. A few of them buzz here and there, but it's not near as bad as it is in the summer.

I do my best to stand up and then look around, searching for the blue bag that Grind and Brew usually uses to get rid of their old breads. When I don't spot any blue, I bend over and start digging.

Soon I'm waist-deep in stinky garbage, pulling bags aside as I try not to stumble. I burrow in a little further, trying to breathe through my mouth.

I'm just reaching for a blue bag that looks promising when I lose my balance and fall backward. I land on my bum, but I barely notice—I'm too distracted by a sharp pain that slices my lower back. I cry out, tears springing to my eyes as the spot continues to throb.

It takes a bit of wiggling to maneuver myself off my bum and onto my knees, but I manage all right. I whimper as I reach around and touch the place I got scraped, poking it gently. My whimpers turn to cries as my fingers come away slick and red.

I've changed my mind. I don't want to find bread. I just want to go home.

I stumble my way to the edge of the dumpster, pulling myself up the side as best I can, when—

“What are you doing in there?”

Startled, I cling more tightly to the edge. “Help me,” I say. I sound like a baby, asking for help from a stranger, a realization that sends more tears down my cheeks. I sniffle as I try to pull myself up; my back is still throbbing with pain, and my fingers are turning numb from the cold, and I want to go home.

“Hang on,” the voice says. It sounds like a boy, an older one. I hear the sound of footsteps and scraping wood, and then he appears: a face poking up with brown eyes and brown hair. He's the handsomest boy I've ever seen.

“Here,” he says, holding out his hand. I take it, clinging desperately to him as he pulls me up. I topple over the side, landing on top of the boy and sending us both tumbling off the wooden crate and onto the ground.

I break into sobs. Everything hurts and I have a scrape on my back and I didn’t find any bread and my jammies are ruined and I’m cold. This is the worst day ever.

“Hey,” the boy says, righting himself. He crawls over to where I’m lying curled up in a ball on the ground. “Hey,” he says again. “Don’t cry.”

“I got a scrape,” I wail. “And I’m hungry.”

Through my tears, I see the boy’s eyes widen. “Is that why you were in there?” he says. “Were you looking for food?”

I nod, sniffing myself into silence. “I’m hungry,” I repeat.

The boy frowns, scrubbing his hand over his hair and looking around. He’s super tall, much taller than me, and he’s skinny too. “What about your scrape?” he says. “Can I see? Do you need a Band-Aid?”

I swipe at my eyes, trying to stop crying. I don’t want him to think I’m a baby. So I sit up, being super brave, and scoot around, pointing at the spot on my back.

He doesn’t say anything; the only sound I hear is a sort of hissing, like he’s inhaling through his teeth. When I face him again, he’s still flattening his hand over his hair.

“Where’s your mom?” he says. “Or your dad?”

I shrug. “My mom is at home sleeping.”

The boy sighs. “Okay, look,” he says finally. He stands up, his body unfolding to be even taller than I thought. “You stay here, okay? I’m going to go get you some food and something to fix your cut. It’s pretty big. It might scar. But it’s okay!” he says quickly when I begin to cry again. “It’s okay! Nothing wrong with scars. I have one right here, see?” He turns his head to the side and points at what looks like a shiny white line just below his hairline. “I tried to cut my own hair when I was a little kid and cut myself with the scissors. You can cover

up a scar if you don't like it, though. You can keep it covered or even get a tattoo there or something. It's okay."

That doesn't sound so bad. I just nod.

"Stay here," he says again, backing out of the alleyway. "I'll be back in a few minutes, okay?"

I nod again.

"Promise you won't move?" he says.

I sniffle and give him yet another nod.

"Good," he says, holding his hands up toward me. "Stay." And then, without saying anything else, he turns and runs away.

I hope he doesn't take too long.

While he's gone I try to get myself cleaned up. My hands are scraped from falling on the pavement, but they don't hurt too bad, and they're not bleeding. I wipe them off gently on my jammie pants and then stand up. It's cold; I want to put my coat back on. I shuffle over and pick it up, shoving my arms through the sleeves and zipping it as fast as I can. Then I wait, bouncing on my tiptoes and doing a little dance to keep myself warm.

I turn around when I finally hear thumping footsteps growing louder and louder, and I breathe a sigh of relief when the boy rounds the corner, carrying a plastic bag. He's out of breath, but he jogs over to me anyway, holding the bag out to me. I take it.

"There," he says, bending over and resting his hands on his knees. He gulps in air for a second before standing up again. Then he points to the bag. "Open it," he says.

I jump; I was so busy watching him, I forgot to check in the bag. I tear it open now, my stomach rumbling extra loud as the scent of food hits me.

My mouth waters as I dig something warm and wrapped in foil out of the bag. I unwrap it with numb fingers, pulling aside the silver paper to reveal the most delicious-looking

sandwich I've ever seen. I see egg and sausage and bacon and cheese in there, and the bread is grilled and buttery.

Part of me wants to eat it nice and slow, to savor every bite, but the other part of me is really hungry. I wolf it down, bite after delicious bite of cheesy egg and meat, and when I'm done, I lick every single one of my fingers. Then I sigh happily.

"That good, huh?" the boy asks.

"Yeah," I say, feeling suddenly shy. "Thank you."

"Here," he says, and he takes the bag from me. He reaches in and pulls out a Band-Aid, a really big one. "Put this on."

I pull off my coat, shivering in the wind, and feel around on my back. I wince when I make contact with the cut. I hold out my hand, and the boy unwraps the bandage quickly, passing it to me with careful hands.

I manage to get it on okay, even though I can't see back there very well. I'll check in the mirror when I get home and fix it if I need to. I smile up at the boy.

"Thank you," I say again. "That was the best sandwich I've ever had, and I was having the worst day ever."

"You want to know what my mom always says?" the boy says.

I nod. I want to know anything he wants to tell me.

"She always says you'll never come across anything in life that's too difficult for you. Never more than you can handle."

Never more than I can handle. I like that. I swallow, finally working up the courage to ask what I've been wondering. "What's your name?"

"Aiden," he says. He gives me a little smile too, and it's the best smile in the world. "Now hurry on home, okay?"

I nod. "I'll go home." So I head out of the alley, waving at him over my shoulder as I go. I wave until I round a corner and I can't see him anymore.

The journey home feels a lot shorter than normal, probably since I have that delicious sandwich in my tummy. I skip up the stairs to our apartment, humming to myself. I ease the front door open slowly so I don't wake Mama, slipping inside and sighing with relief at the warmth.

She stirs, though, yawning and stretching. "Hi, baby," she says, one eye peeking at me. She waves me over, and I skip over to where she's lying on the couch.

"Hi," I say.

"Did you find some breakfast?" she says, wrapping one arm around me and letting her head fall back onto her pillow.

"Yes," I say happily. My tummy is full of the most delicious meal I've ever had, thanks to Aiden. I wrap my arms around Mama and snuggle into her.

"Good," she murmurs. "I love you, baby."

"I love you too, Mama," I say, smiling.

IN WHICH AIDEN AND JUNIPER
FIND A VERY DEAD BODY

My mother is fond of saying that the Good Lord will never give us more than we can handle.

Usually she says it when we're all seated around the table at one of the few family dinners we have each month, and it usually comes up because Caroline is griping about this problem or that. My mother is a woman of faith—in a higher power, yes, but also in things she *shouldn't* have faith in, like infomercials and clickbait articles—and most of the wisdom she imparts can be traced directly back to the Bible.

My father, on the other hand, doesn't have time for any of that. If you ask for his advice, you're going to get the gospel according to Bernard Milano, and it's probably going to be expletive-laced. He'll tell you you can get through anything if you're patient and you never give up.

This evening, I think both my parents are wrong. Because I don't know what any higher powers are thinking, and I don't know what kind of faith they have in me, but I *cannot handle* Juniper Bean wearing that dress.

And no matter how patient I am, I don't think it's going to get any easier.

In her most boundary-defying move thus far, Caroline showed up at the house at five-thirty. She brought a camera with her, and she was wearing a smile so big I thought it might sprout wings and fly right off her face.

“Absolutely not,” I said when I opened the door to find her there. I tried to shut it before she could get inside, but she was expecting this; she darted past me before I could stop her.

“You are such a little liar,” she whispered to me, looking around—I assume to check that the coast was clear. “You said she wasn’t pretty. But she’s gorgeous!” Then she and her totally unnecessary camera went to the couch, where she’s been waiting for the last ten minutes.

Juniper has just appeared at the top of the stairs, though, and Caroline is already snapping picture after picture, like she’s a proud mom sending her little girl to prom for the first time. She gushes on and on about the dress, and Juniper replies modestly that it’s just something she wore to a wedding one time—which I think probably ended up making the bride look dull in comparison.

It was my sincere hope that I wouldn’t find Juniper attractive this evening. I was counting on the fact that maybe part of me still viewed her as that teenager who tried to kiss me all those years ago. But no matter how I *used* to think of her, it seems that my mind is now very clear on one fact: Juniper Bean is no longer a teenager. She’s a grown woman, and she’s beautiful.

I shouldn’t be noticing these things, and I definitely shouldn’t be feeling attracted to her. She’s not someone I’m interested in romantically, and that’s usually a determining factor for whether my body reacts to a woman. But Juniper seems to be a fluke, one I can’t quite categorize. All I know is that I’m feeling things I usually don’t.

I’ve never seen a dress like the one she’s wearing, but I wouldn’t be opposed to seeing another sometime. It seems to fit her perfectly—a corset-looking top in deep red leading to a frothy, voluminous skirt in some sort of pink fabric that reaches just past her knees. There’s a sheer overlay on the skirt in the same red as the top, dotted with little pink flowers. The whole thing is held up by two ribbon straps, each tied in a delicate bow over her shoulders.

It's those bows that have my thoughts trying to stray. Because the problem with tied ribbons is that my mind automatically pictures *untying* them—a very unhelpful mental image in this scenario. So I direct my attention elsewhere, noting Juniper's easy smile as she chats with Caroline, who's still taking pictures.

“Caroline,” I say with a sigh. “That’s enough.” It could not be clearer that my sister is planning my wedding to Juniper in her head at this very moment, and it needs to stop. “It’s time for us to go.”

Caroline sighs too, but hers is more theatrical than mine. “Fine,” she says dramatically. “Go on, then. I just wanted to take pictures to commemorate your first date—”

“Not a date,” I say, and Juniper grins.

“He says he doesn’t want to date me,” she says to Caroline, “but our couple name would be Aidiper. Doesn’t that feel like a wasted opportunity to you?”

“Definitely,” Caroline says with a decisive nod. “It’s a great couple name.”

“I know,” Juniper says. She looks wistfully at me. “Too bad.” She comes the rest of the way down the stairs, her heels clicking against the hard wood as she walks.

“That dress,” Caroline says, and I swear I can see hearts blooming in her eyes. “It’s gorgeous.”

“It makes me feel like an autumn flower fairy.”

“To the car, flower fairy,” I say grumpily.

“Oh, Aiden,” Caroline says, rushing over to me. She reaches up and pinches my cheeks. “Are your feelings hurt because we didn’t tell you how handsome you look?” she coos in a high-pitched voice, like she’s talking to one of her four-year-old daughters. “You’re *so* handsome. Such a big, strong boy—”

I swat her hands away, and she cackles as Juniper laughs along.

Once a big sister, always a big sister.

I ignore their laughter and make my way to the car, opening Juniper's door before I hop in the driver's seat. I look around at the little bit of clutter I've accumulated—mostly leftovers of the books I teach in my lit class, but also a few stray papers—and forcefully remind myself it doesn't matter if my car is messy. Juniper's not going to care, at any rate; she was literally *living* out of her car.

She brings some sort of citrusy scent with her when she gets into the passenger seat, a sharp but subtle smell that's way more appealing than the air freshener hanging from my rearview mirror. I'm not a big fan of florals or anything too sweet; I much prefer crisp and fresh.

"I know your sister was joking," Juniper says as she fastens her seatbelt, "but you really do look nice." She glances over at me, and I watch as her eyes trail over my linen suit coat and white shirt. "I like the blue. It makes your eyes look extra brown. Sort of soulful."

I blink at her, surprised. Then I duck my head. "Thanks," I say. "You look nice too." It would be rude not to say it back.

"I feel pretty," she says happily. Her pink hair is pin straight tonight, sleek and soft-looking, held back by a sparkly clip on one side.

"You are," I say. I clear my throat, an audible divider in the conversation, and then change the subject. "The dance ends at eleven," I say. "We can go down to Solomon after that. You're free to do whatever you want until then. I will not be dancing, though, so don't ask."

"I would never," she says solemnly, but I see her lips twitch.

Whatever. She can laugh if she wants; it's not going to change anything. I still won't get out on that dance floor. I'm here to make sure the drinks stay non-alcoholic and to make sure no one gets too handsy under the light of the disco ball—that's it.

We drive in strangely comfortable silence, arriving at the high school five minutes later. When we pull into the school

parking lot, it takes a good ten minutes to find a spot; I finally find one in the back lot, and then Juniper and I begin the trek to the gymnasium.

“Wow,” she says, looking around when we make it inside. “It’s been a long time.”

I glance at her, curious. “Have you not been back here since you graduated?”

She shakes her head. “I never really wanted to come back. Not a lot of happy memories.” The smile she gives me is simple, peaceful—not full of self-pity but acceptance. “Still, it hasn’t changed much, has it?”

“Not a lot,” I say, pointing in the direction of the gym. I realize a second too late that I don’t need to show her the way; of course she knows where we’re going. There are streams of high schoolers moving in that direction anyway, gangly boys in suits and giggling girls in shiny dresses. The air is thick with that adolescent tension I hate—the unbearably awkward awareness of your own body, the veritable flood of hormones suffocating everyone within a ten-foot radius, the perpetual scent of body odor and Axe body spray.

I’m *so* glad I’m not a teenager anymore.

We’re almost to the gymnasium doors when I run, quite literally, into Rocco; he comes out of nowhere, and I stumble, righting myself quickly.

“Sorry, man,” I say. Then, grinning as I get a good look at him, I add, “Looking spiffy.”

His booming laugh echoes down the corridor, laced with that smoker’s wheeze. His blue eyes twinkle as he points to his hair. “You like this? I used about half a tube of hair gel.” His hair is thick and dark, graying at the temples, but usually it’s a mess; tonight he’s got some semblance of a part, and his suit fits him immaculately. His smile fades slightly when he notices Juniper, though, a glimmer of interest springing to life in his eyes.

“And who’s this lovely lady?” he says.

I sigh, resigning myself to the inevitable. “Rocco, this is Juniper Bean,” I say, nodding at her. “Juniper, Rocco Astor.”

Rocco just looks surprised for a second; then a wide, boyish smile splits his face, making him look younger than his forty-something years. “Forgive the facial expression,” he says to Juniper. He reaches out and shakes her hand. “I’ve just never seen this guy with a date.”

Juniper smiles back at him. “Truthfully, I just tagged along for fun,” she says.

“Well, it’s lovely to meet you, Miss Juniper,” Rocco says, winking. “Have that fun, all right?” Then, checking his watch, he says to me, “I’ve got to dash.”

“Yeah,” I say, waving him off. “See you later.”

He claps me on the shoulder, gives one last nod to Juniper, and then hurries off.

“What does he do?” Juniper says quietly, watching with an amused expression as Rocco fights through the tide of students and then disappears around the corner. “He looks familiar.”

“Gym teacher,” I say.

“Who was the gym teacher when you were here?” she says, looking over at me. “Ours was Kennedy. Is that who you had?”

“Old guy with grayish-blond hair?” I say, trying to remember. I have vague memories of excessive whistle-blowing and lots of shouting. “Drill sergeant in his former life?”

“That’s him,” she says with a grin. Something swoops low in my stomach at the sight—she’s really, really pretty—so I look away.

This is going to be a long night.



BY THE TIME I STEP BACK OUTSIDE AFTER THE DANCE, I'M ready to call it a night. Heck, I was ready to call it a night three hours ago. But now I'm *really* ready. If I have to watch one more couple having a sloppy makeout session in some dark corner, I'm going to lose it.

Just a quick stop by the statue, and then I can go home.

Juniper trots along next to me as we cross the parking lot, the little *click-click* of her heels percussion against the whispering wind. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes bright, her skin glistening.

"Do you want my jacket?" I say as the breeze ruffles my hair.

"No," she says. "Thanks, though. This feels good for now. It got hot in there, didn't it?" She fans her face. Then she tilts her head to the side, drawing my attention to the smooth line of her neck, the delicate curve of her collarbone, all cast into exaggerated shadow by the parking lot lights.

"Hot," I mutter, tugging at my collar. "Too hot." I pick up my pace; no need to dawdle. "Come on. Let's get this over with."

"Thank you for coming with me," she says, hurrying along after me. I slow down a touch—just enough for her to keep up in those heels—and nod.

"Ten minutes," I remind her.

"Ten minutes," she agrees. Her voice is a little breathy, and when I look over at her, she's gripping her skirt with white-knuckled fingers.

"Nervous?"

"Of course," she says lightly as we start descending the stairs that lead from the parking lot to the track below. "I'd be crazy not to be a little nervous."

We step aside as we pass two of my coworkers coming up from the opposite direction—both of whom were supposed to be chaperoning the dance, by the way, but were clearly elsewhere. With Hailey and Bethany, I'm not surprised. Their

dresses swish in the wind as they talk together, their steps hurried, their voices low. They don't even acknowledge us as we let them by; Juniper watches them rush away for a moment before turning back to our path.

I look at her and swallow, trying to figure out the most tactful way to ask my next question. "So your mom..."

But Juniper takes the matter out of my hands when she answers, even though I haven't finished speaking yet.

"She never told me anything about my dad," she says. "He was a one night stand she barely remembered. A random hookup." She shivers, turning her head this way and that as we reach the bottom of the concrete steps.

"There," I say, pointing straight ahead of us. Solomon the Spud is hard to see at this hour, but he's just across from us on the opposite side of the field. I almost set off through the grass, but then I remember Juniper's shoes. Those heels will sink three inches deep in two seconds flat. So I stick to the spongy red track instead.

The moon is playing peekaboo with the clouds, hiding and reappearing, and the wind rattles the leaves in the trees. Something about the whole scene feels eerie, though I couldn't say why. I can tell Juniper feels it too, though, because she picks up her pace.

As we round the track, the shadowy figure of Solomon the Spud slowly becomes visible, looming in a way that only a potato statue can—bizarre and lumpy-shaped. He's nestled right up against the forest, but every now and then I spot the dull glint of moonlight on metal.

When we reach Solomon, we stand there in silence for a second, looking up at him by the light of my phone flashlight. He's depicted emerging from a vague, blob-like hunk of metal, and his arms are in the flying Superman pose.

"Interesting that they gave him a belly button," Juniper says from next to me, her voice musing.

I sigh, embarrassed on behalf of the entire institution. "I know." Then I stroll forward, my hands back in my pockets to

keep them warm, and seat myself on the plinth of the statue.

“Let me know when ten minutes is up?” Juniper says. She’s turned away from the statue now; she’s so nervous that even a weirdly anthropomorphized potato can’t keep her attention. She paces instead, radiating that same tension I felt when we first read the note on the back of the invitation. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her to *please* sit down, because it feels like all her nervous energy is trickling over to me, but I hold it in. She doesn’t need to hear from me right now.

“I will” is all I say, and then I watch as she continues to pace. She looks around almost constantly, craning her neck, searching in every direction.

But no one is here.

And no one comes.

The minutes tick by almost painfully slowly, and though I would never admit it, I actually don’t speak up until fifteen have passed. It’s getting colder, and later, and something feels...off.

What exactly is going on here?

“Juniper,” I say. My voice cuts through the expectant silence, and Juniper turns to me.

“Yeah,” she says breathlessly, coming to a halt.

I swallow. “It’s been ten minutes.” It’s been seventeen.

“Right,” she says. “Okay.” Her voice is wobbly, full of things she doesn’t need to say. I can only imagine how she’s feeling right now.

And maybe that’s why I find myself speaking, offering something I never intended to offer. “If you want,” I say, “we can look around. Just check and make sure we didn’t miss them. Maybe they hid in the trees.”

I sincerely doubt this is the case, but I know what it’s like to have regrets; even though she pushes my buttons, I don’t want Juniper to leave here with any lingering *what ifs*.

When she doesn't answer, I stand up, smoothing my suit coat absently. "Do you want to do that?"

"Yeah," she says finally. "Let's—" Her voice cracks, and she tries again. "Let's look in the trees for a second. Just to make sure we didn't miss them."

I think she knows as well as I do that it wouldn't make sense for someone to be lingering out of sight in the trees; still, I follow her around the statue and then back to the tree line. I hold my phone up higher so that we can see.

We do not go gently into that good night. We crash through the underbrush, and we may as well just announce our presence with a foghorn. But despite my light, the darkness still hides plenty for us to trip over, and we do—especially since Juniper is in heels.

We've been walking (read: stumbling) for about one minute when something appears in my line of sight. I can't quite tell what it is, but I can certainly tell what it *isn't*: undergrowth or a plant of any kind.

"What's..." Juniper begins, but her voice trails off into silence as we start walking faster, approaching the strangely shaped lump on the forest floor. I lower my light a bit. That looks—it looks—like—

"A person," Juniper whispers, sounding stricken. "That's a girl."

I hurry to get closer, crouching over the figure and using my light to inspect the scene.

Juniper is right. It's a girl.

And she's dead.

She has to be. There's too much blood—it's matted in her hair, thick and glistening grotesquely in the light of my flashlight. Her skin is ashen, half of her forehead and much of her face obscured by the creeping red blood stain. Despite the blood, though, I can tell that she's young. That, combined with the formal dress she's wearing, tells me one thing: she's a student.

Or rather, she *was* a student.

My mind whirls at the implications of this sight. What happened here? Is this—

But a little whimper from next to me reminds me that I'm not alone, and I turn just in time to see Juniper crouched down, hand extended, her fingers hovering under the girl's nose.

Searching for breath.

“Don't look,” I say without thinking. It's the first thing that pops into my head: that Juniper should not see this. No one should see this. I turn off my phone light and shove the whole thing into my pocket.

It's too late, though—I hear the guttural sound of retching, followed by a sickening splatter that makes me wince. I don't blame her for vomiting; my stomach is turning too. When the splattering noise stops, I reach into my chest pocket and pull out the handkerchief, passing it blindly in Juniper's direction. It takes a second of feeling around in the dark before my hand finds her shoulder; I tap gently.

“Here,” I say. “Wipe your mouth.”

I had assumed that without the light of my phone we wouldn't be able to see the body, but I was mistaken; the moon is too bright, and if anything, the faint illumination makes it worse. I can see, but not well; shadows become monsters and men, tree branches turn to greedy, grasping hands. The wind through the leaves plays tricks on my mind, carrying whispers of death and the faint scent of decay.

“Aiden,” Juniper says. I've never heard her sound like this, her voice unnaturally high-pitched and shaky. “That's a dead body.”

I swallow, the chill in the air settling over me. “Yes.”

“Like, *dead* dead. Unalive. She's unalive. She's not breathing. She's too young—Aiden, she's too young—” Her voice rises higher and higher with every word that spills out of her mouth, and I can feel her practically vibrating with panic from next to me. “And what about us?” she says.

I jump when her hands find my arm, clamping around my elbow in a vice-like grip. She shuffles closer to me; I can just make out the shimmer of her dress in the pale moonlight.

“Who did this?” she says. “Are they going to kill us? I’m too young to die—”

“Juniper,” I say firmly.

She continues babbling like a madwoman. “And that girl was too young to die—”

“Juniper,” I say again.

“Didn’t even get to go to college—”

“Juniper!” I finally bark.

She whirls on me, her voice hysterical as she shrieks, “How is she going to get a job?! Higher education is important, Aiden!”

I think she’s spiraling.

And sure enough, a handful of seconds later, she slumps to the ground next to me and begins to cry.

It’s hard to make out all of her words, but I catch snippets.

“I’m so sorry,” she sobs, and I think she’s talking to the girl. “I’m so sorry. You’re too young. You should go to college and fall in love and do stupid stuff—” And then more crying, more words that I can’t quite interpret as a weight settles heavily on my chest.

We need to get out of here. I don’t know what’s going on, but this is not someplace we want to be found.

“I’ll remember you,” Juniper is saying now, her voice still thick and broken with tears. I think she’s still talking to the girl. “If everyone else in the world forgets you, I promise I’ll still remember you. I’ll come play the music for you to dance around the graveyard—”

And even though we need to leave, even though there’s an ominous, creeping sensation slithering across my skin, I can’t make myself stop her. For whatever reason, it sounds like these are promises Juniper needs to make, and though I don’t

understand half of what she's talking about, I find myself filled with a grudging respect for my pink-haired roommate.

We keep our dead, and our dead keep us. We remember them, and they in turn find us at the moments we don't expect—a flash of memory on a summer's day, a snippet of an old favorite song, a long-lost photograph unearthed.

“Juniper,” I say quietly when she finally falls silent, her words fading into soft sobs. “We need to go.”

“We can't leave her here,” Juniper says.

“We'll call the sheriff,” I say, bending over. I give Juniper a little tug, urging her to stand, and end up hoisting half of her weight myself as she stumbles. “We'll call him right now, okay? But we need to get out of here. This would look really bad if someone found us like this. Did you get any blood on you?”

“I don't know. Maybe,” she says, sniffing. Still, she allows me to lead her away from the student, her steps wobbly as she crunches through the leaves and undergrowth next to me. I steady her with one hand on her elbow, my other hand digging out my phone once again. Two minutes later, I've got the sheriff on the phone.

“Garrity? There's a dead body out here in the woods behind the high school,” I say. My words are short, clipped, and they sound strangely detached. Like my mouth is disconnected from my brain.

Garrity swears. “What do you mean, a dead body?”

“Just what it sounds like,” I say, rubbing my temples. “There's a girl back there with a ton of blood on her face. I'm pretty sure she's a student.” I take a seat on the plinth of the Solomon statue, feeling the cold from the stone seeping through the fabric of my pants. Juniper is sitting next to me, shivering uncontrollably; I think she might have gone into shock.

I listen only partially as Garrity shouts out frantic orders on the other end; when Juniper's teeth start to chatter, I shrug off my suit coat and pass it to her.

“Did you touch anything?” Garrity says when he returns on the line.

“Yes,” I say. “Sorry. I didn’t touch the body, but Juniper—my roommate—she might have; she fell over. She vomited, too. And we definitely walked around the area.”

Garrity grumbles but doesn’t gripe about it; he just tells me to stay where I am until he shows up. So Juniper and I sit there, shivering in the cold, our heads tilted back against Solomon the Spud’s potato body. And when Garrity shows up with a couple of squad cars fifteen minutes later, I recount to him everything that happened—the anonymous note, finding the body, Juniper throwing up and falling to her knees, and coming back here to wait.

By the time I’m done talking, Garrity’s pudgy face is set into a grim frown. He just gives me a nod, casts a sympathetic look at the still-shivering Juniper, and then calls for his people to follow him. They disappear into the trees a few seconds later.

We wait for what feels like an eternity. There are still a few cars in the parking lot, from what I can see, but it will be mostly faculty left behind to clean up. That’s what I’m supposed to be doing right now. And I desperately wish that’s where I was—grumbling as I throw away yards of plastic tablecloths and yanking streamers down from doorways. Instead I’m here, sitting next to Solomon the Spud with my still-in-shock roommate, trying to process the dead body I just witnessed. Judging by the fact that Juniper is barely coherent right now, her brain is already working on the processing thing, but I don’t think mine is yet. It doesn’t quite feel real. I think hearing from Garrity will help.

When he appears from the treeline, I stand up, my hands shoved anxiously in my pocket as I wait for him.

His gaze finds mine, though, and a strange spike of anxiety embeds itself in my lungs. He’s giving me a funny look, one I don’t like. His footsteps fall heavy and slow on the carpet of leaves as he approaches.

“I don’t know how to tell you this,” he says haltingly when he reaches Juniper and me. He looks back and forth between us before his eyes settle on me. “But there’s no body back there.”

I blink, and next to me Juniper shoots to her feet. “What?”

Garrity sighs, sending his mustache fluttering. “We found a bit of blood, but not much. We found the vomit too, in a separate area. But in the trees back there, where you pointed?”

I nod as the fingers of foreboding tiptoe down my spine, and Garrity continues.

“We’ll search the grounds tonight. But nothing is back there. There’s no body, Aiden.”

IN WHICH AIDEN REGRETS
SAYING YES

I sleep in later than normal the next morning, due to the horror-tinged nightmares that keep me tossing and turning for most of the night. This is my first interaction with a dead body, so I can't say for certain, but I'd hazard a guess that nightmares are pretty normal in a situation like this; Juniper probably had them too. I was able to keep calm last night—though when I was brushing my teeth before bed, my face was as pale as I'd ever seen it—partly because the reality hadn't sunk in.

Now, though, in the light of day, the truth seems undeniable: that was a dead body in the woods behind Solomon the Spud. It was a girl. And even though she had vanished by the time Garrity got there, I know what I saw.

I shiver thinking about this; for someone to have moved the body in the fifteen minutes before the sheriff arrived, they must have been there when we found her. That doesn't sit particularly well with me.

And I think she was a student. A *student*. What was her name? I don't have keys to the school, but surely I can find out somehow. Right?

I force myself out of bed—and away from these thoughts—and move to the en suite bathroom. I pause partway through brushing my teeth to scrub at a few spots on the mirror with my sleeve; then I continue, splashing an extra bit of cold water on my face when I'm done. Despite the water and the late

morning, though, there are still dark circles under my eyes, and my hair looks especially unkempt.

I'm looking a bit more human by the time I get out of the shower, though. I pull on some jeans and a sweater and then head out of my room.

I'm not sure what Juniper is going to be like today, but I'm a little nervous to find out. Everyone reacts to trauma differently. Will she still be in shock like she was last night? Will she be calm? Hysterical? Somewhere in between? I'm not sure I can handle a hysterical Juniper.

I scrub my hand over my scruff as I think about that, my steps slower and warier as I approach the living room and kitchen areas. What would a hysterical Juniper even look like? Similar to how she was when we first saw the girl?

Crying. There would be lots of crying.

By the time I reach the living room, I'm ready for just about anything. She might shout, she might cry, she might be catatonic—I've talked myself through all these possibilities, as well as formulated a plan for each one. Most of those plans involve a desperate call to Caroline followed by a swift exit on my part.

When I spot my pink-haired roommate, though, all those plans and possibilities fly out of my head as I try to make sense of what I'm seeing.

Juniper is standing in the middle of the room, her eyes narrowed in concentration. She's wearing...well. I don't even know *what* she's wearing. It's some sort of ode to Halloween—black leggings patterned with white ghosts, an oversized orange sweatshirt, and one of those headbands that has two long springs coming off the top. The springs are attached to little pumpkins, which dance wildly with every little move she makes. There's a slightly manic gleam in her eyes that has me approaching slowly, my hands outstretched in a placating gesture. *I come in peace*, those hands say. *Don't bite me*.

"Hey," I say, my voice deceptively calm. "How's it going?"

“Good,” she says breathlessly. “Good. It’s going good.”

“Uh-huh,” I say, concealing my skepticism as I nod and look around. There are fall decorations strewn everywhere, an explosion of fabric leaves and red-orange garlands and fake pumpkins. There’s also an honest-to-goodness *twig* tangled in Juniper’s hair—how on earth did that even get there?—so that it looks like she’s just tumbled out of a tree. Her shirt, I also notice, is on inside out.

It could not be clearer that nothing is good with this woman right now. I don’t blame her; I’m not feeling good either.

“So,” I say. I try to keep my voice conversational rather than accusing or confrontational. “Where did you get all of this?”

“At the store,” she says distractedly. She’s still got that feverish spark in her eyes as her gaze ping-pongs around the room. She tilts her head, considering something, which makes the little pumpkins on her headband flop sideways.

I look at my watch, frowning. “Already? It’s only ninety-five. When did you have time to go to the store?”

Juniper puts her hands on her hips and rolls her eyes. “It’s almost ten, Aiden. Some of us have been panic breathing since six. Every time I close my eyes, I see—I see that—” She swallows, her gaze shuttering briefly, before aiming a bright smile at me. “Well, anyway,” she says. “I just needed something to distract myself.”

“That’s fair,” I say slowly. I’m not sure I want a distraction myself—I need to know who this girl was—but I understand the desire.

“I tried to write,” she says, grabbing the length of garland in a pile at her feet and holding it up. “But I’m sort of stuck on this scene.”

“Do you write books?” I say, blinking at her with surprise.

“I do, yeah,” she says. She begins running her hands down the length of the garland, searching for the end. “I teach yoga to pay the bills, but I write too.”

“I thought you didn’t like that stuff—reading and writing.”

“When you knew me, I didn’t. But you did a good job tutoring me.” The smile she gives me now is more real than the one she tried to force out before; it’s soft, grateful, reminiscent. “Really, you’re the reason I ended up learning that I love to write. It’s what I studied in college. I got my yoga teaching certification alongside it, but in my dream world, I would just be able to write full time.”

“Huh,” I say, nodding. I can’t say I’m not impressed. She’s right; when I was tutoring her, she really struggled in her English class. “What do you write?”

“Ha!” she says, holding up the other end of the garland in triumph. “Found it.” Then she looks at me. “Well, I used to write romance—oh, wait.” She wrinkles her nose. “You’re probably a literature snob, right?”

“A little,” I admit. “But I’m not the kind of person who thinks romance is trash. I think there’s a place for well-written romance. No one said all books have to be deep and moving all the time.”

She shakes her head. “That’s true, but look—you’re already assuming that romance isn’t deep or moving.”

I stare at her, lost for words. She’s right, I realize; I completely made that assumption. But it’s not correct, is it? Sure, some love stories are superficial, but the same can be said of any genre.

“But romance can be deep. It can be moving,” she goes on.

“You’re right,” I say grudgingly. “I stand corrected.”

“Anyway, I used to write romance, but now I’m trying to write a murder mystery—a decision I made before the events of last night, believe it or not. But I’m only in the first scene, and I’m already stuck.”

I nod. “Well, good luck.” I cast one last glance around the living room. “And don’t leave it messy like this, please. Finish decorating now that you’ve got all this stuff.” With that I turn and head back to my bedroom, where it looks like I’ll be

hiding for a while longer now that fall has exploded in my living room. I don't want to get roped into decorating—

“Hang on,” Juniper says, and I freeze.

Crap.

“What?” I say, not turning around.

“You know,” she says slowly, and I can hear the soft padding of her footsteps as she approaches from behind. She sounds far too calculating for my peace of mind. I shove my hands in my pockets, preparing to stand my ground.

When she steps past me and into my line of sight once more, I sigh. Her eyes are narrowed in consideration, and she's giving me a blatant full-body scan—a slow perusal that leaves me feeling too warm.

“Stop it,” I croak.

For a second, she doesn't respond; she still seems to be deep in thought. But then her gaze finds mine again, and she nods, causing the pumpkins on her headband to dance once more. She looks like she's just made a decision. “Hey,” she says. “Do you want to help me research something?”

“I really don't,” I say quickly. “At all.”

“Please?” she says, grabbing my arm when I take another step toward my bedroom. “Help me just a little bit? It really won't take long at all.”

“Use the internet,” I say firmly.

“I tried!” she says. Her hand tightens on my arm, and good grief—where did she get a grip that strong? “But this is more of a hands-on research thing. Come on,” she adds, her voice wheedling now. “I need a distraction. Don't you?”

This is sounding more and more dangerous by the second. And I am clearly insane, because my mind starts running through all the things she could mean by *distraction*, and most of them involve the two of us in compromising positions.

My stupid brain. I don't want that kind of relationship with Juniper. I don't want *any* kind of relationship with Juniper.

“Please,” she says once more. “I need a distraction. I think being with another person will help.” She gestures to the explosion of decorations around the living room. “This isn’t really helping. Please.”

It’s that last *please* that does it. Because her voice cracks when she speaks, and her big, blue eyes seem glossier than usual. Those stupid pumpkins are still bobbing this way and that on her headband, and her inside-out sweatshirt advertises loudly that this is a woman possibly unhinged.

Crap.

“Fine,” I say, sighing. “Fine. Just for a little bit, okay? What do you need help with?”

Her eyes brighten. “Thank you, thank you! And it’s really nothing much,” she says. “I just need your body.”

I swallow.



“I HATE YOU SO MUCH.”

“I know,” Juniper says soothingly from where she’s standing over me. “Lift your left foot a little bit more?”

I comply, glaring at her. “So, so much.”

“I know,” she says again. “It will all be over soon, okay? Now I’m going to try to drag you by the ankles.”

As it turns out, the research help Juniper needs is figuring out how her female killer would move a body.

And guess who was stupid enough to agree to be that body?

I’m lying supine in the middle of the living room floor, glaring up at the ceiling. The fall decorations have all been moved to the couch, so it’s just me down here, feeling ten kinds of foolish. Juniper has both of my ankles held in her weirdly strong grip. She’s repainted her fingernails, I notice dully; they were black before, but now they’re a vibrant pink.

“Okay,” she says, taking a deep breath. “Ready?”

“No.”

She ignores this. “Here I go.” She heaves, and with a decent amount of force, she begins pulling me. I slide slowly along the hardwood floor as she moves backward, her face screwed up with concentration. Despite her efforts, though, I continue to move at roughly the rate of a migrating ice cap.

I think I’d rather be the ice cap.

After only a few seconds of this, Juniper stops. She drops my feet without warning, causing both heels to bang painfully against the floor, and then bends over, panting slightly.

“That’s not ideal,” she says.

“No,” I agree, still glaring. I sit up, rubbing my heels. “It’s not.”

“Let’s try the firefighter’s carry.”

My jaw drops. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I never kid about dead bodies.” I can tell she says this without thinking, because a second later, her mouth snaps shut, and she looks at me, her eyes widening in horror. “Aiden,” she whispers, sinking to the floor next to me and looking dazed. “We saw a dead body last night.” She hesitates, then adds, “Right?” She turns her beseeching gaze on me. “We didn’t imagine that, right?”

“No,” I say heavily. “We didn’t imagine it.” I’m not sure my imagination could conjure up such a vivid mental image.

Juniper settles into a cross-legged position, playing with the hem of her Halloween leggings as she says, “If the body was gone by the time the sheriff went to look for it, that means whoever moved it was probably watching us the whole time, waiting for us to leave.”

I swallow, rubbing my hand absently over my scruff. “I thought of that too,” I admit. How close were we to a potential killer last night? How close did we come to being hurt ourselves?

And what would have happened if Juniper had gone by herself?

Next to me, Juniper shudders—almost like she’s read my thoughts. On her headband, the little pumpkins wave back and forth. Then she claps her hands on her knees. “Nope,” she says. “I can’t sit here and think about this. It will drive me insane. Come on; up. Fireman’s carry.”

I can’t believe this is how I’m spending my Sunday, but I play along anyway—mostly because Juniper is still looking iffy. “If I’m a dead body, shouldn’t I stay on the ground?”

“Oh, good point,” she says without missing a beat. “Right. Okay. Lie down, then.” She considers me for a second before adding, “On your stomach, I think.”

She stands up while I lie face down in the middle of the floor, re-evaluating all my life choices.

“Hang on,” she says, and I turn my head to see her grabbing her phone from the couch. “I need to look up how to do this properly.” She bites her lip, her eyes narrowed as she begins typing. I watch as she scrolls and taps for a couple minutes, an image of bizarre contradictions—her face looks so serious, but those pumpkins on her headband are still wobbling to and fro on their springs, and her shirt is still noticeably inside out.

“All right,” she says, and I start.

I’ve been staring at her, I realize, my eyes glued to the dancing pumpkins and the little crease in her forehead and the curve of her jaw. I yank my gaze away.

“Let’s get this over with,” I say.

“So I’m supposed to stand in front of you,” she says slowly, still looking at her phone. She moves until she’s standing next to my head. “And then I’m supposed to pick you up by hooking my arms under yours.”

Ah. I think things are about to get...physical.

“Okay,” I say, feeling unaccountably nervous. I’m not the type to get awkward around women, but then again...Juniper’s

not like any other woman I've ever known. She's unpredictable, defying logic at every turn and laughing the whole time.

"So I'll just..." she says, trailing off. She crouches down, hooks her arms under my armpits with absolutely no warning, and then attempts to stand.

It does not go well.

My head is dangerously placed right now, for one, pressed up against parts of her that are too soft, parts of her I should not be getting familiar with. "Lift with your legs," I say, an impatient bite to my voice as I close my eyes and focus on any number of unappealing things.

"I'm trying!" she snaps back. "You're really heavy."

She smells like citrus.

"Try harder," I grit out. "Or just drop me."

"I—I can't—oh, all right," she finally says. And then she relaxes her arms, sending me sprawling to the floor.

"No more," I gasp. "I'm done."

"Fine," she says, sounding sulky. "My killer will drag the body, I guess."

The two of us are quiet for a moment, and somehow I know that we're both thinking the same thing: How did that girl's body get moved? Was she carried? Dragged?

It's a morbid train of thought, one that doesn't at all fit with this day or this woman or the mess of festive decorations strewn around the room.

"Where do you think she went?" Juniper asks in a small voice.

I sigh, pushing one hand through my hair as I sit up. "I don't know," I say. "Garrity was going to search the grounds last night. He said there was only a bit of blood, and it wasn't near where you vomited."

"But how is that possible?" she says. She slouches over to the couch and pushes all the unused decorations off, sending

them to the floor. Then she flops down in her newly cleared space. “There was a *lot* of it.”

“There was,” I say, trying to remember. “But most of what we saw was on the front of her head and in her hair. We don’t know where she was injured, exactly. She might not have bled on the ground much.”

“And you didn’t recognize her?” Juniper says, a sad little frown on her face. “I hate that I don’t know her name. I told her I would remember her.”

“I recognized she was a student, but I don’t know her name,” I say, and I’m once again filled with the desire to run over to the school, dig out a yearbook, and memorize every name and face. “I’m going to figure out who she was. I’ve got access to student rosters and photos and all that. I think I’ve got a yearbook or two here as well; I’m going to check there in a minute.”

“That’s good,” she says, nodding distractedly. “That’s good.” Then, in a voice so quiet I barely hear her, she says, “You think she’s the one who sent me the note, right?”

I hesitate, unsure of what to say. In truth, my answer is probably yes; no one else came, and the little heart on the exclamation point seems like something a high school girl might use. “I think it’s possible,” I finally admit.

“I can’t help but feel like she died because of whatever she wanted to tell me about my parents.”

I don’t answer that. That’s what it seems like to me too. But it also seems crazy to be having these thoughts at all; this isn’t a crime show. I’m not a detective. Things like this don’t happen in Autumn Grove, and people like me don’t solve mysteries.

And yet when I finally open my mouth to speak, what pops out is another question. “And you don’t know anything about your father?”

“Nothing,” Juniper says, still looking lost in thought. “Except...”

My heart skips a beat. “Except?”

“Except,” she says, turning to me, and a thrill runs through me at the sudden light in her eyes. “There might be someone who does.”

IN WHICH JUNIPER MAKES A PHONE CALL

“So you’re asking your mom’s ex if he knows your dad?” Aiden says skeptically.

He’s still sitting on the floor, but now he’s flipping through a yearbook that he retrieved moments ago. It’s apparently the only one he has, and it’s from three years ago. It seems unlikely to me that the girl from last night will be in there—or if she is, I’m not sure she’ll be recognizable—but that doesn’t stop me from looking at him every two seconds to see if he’s found anything. Every so often he holds up the book and points to a picture, and I shake my head or shrug. It’s really hard to tell.

“But she was definitely blonde,” I tell him, not for the first time.

He just nods and continues flipping. Half of his body is bathed in a swath of late-morning light coming from the window, making him glow. That light is deceptive; it promises warmth and sunshine, when I know for a fact that it’s in the thirties out there. I looked like a marshmallow this morning, all bundled up in my puffy coat and earmuffs as I hauled my stress-induced shopping haul back into the house.

In between page flips and frustrated sighs, Aiden has been staring pointedly at the fruits of those shopping labors—the pile of fall decorations I pushed off the couch and onto the floor. That’s where he directs his attention now in his most blatant display thus far; he stares at the mass of garland and

pumpkins, then stares at me, and then stares at the decorations again.

“I’ll pick them up, okay?” I finally burst out, rolling my eyes. “Stop with the weird glaring. I’ll leave this room spotless. Happy?”

A spark of devilish amusement flares to life in his eyes, though there’s still a tightness in his lips that I know stems from the yearbook in his lap. “Temper, temper,” he says, tutting. “But yes, that would make me very happy.”

Ugh. So annoying.

“So your mother’s ex?” he prompts, his eyes back on the yearbook as he scans the pages.

“Well, yes, but it’s not quite like that. My half brother, Roland?” I say, and he nods. “It’s his dad. So it’s not just a random ex; it’s her son’s father. His name is Lance. He’s cool; I like him. He’s always been nice to me, and he’s a good dad to Roland.”

Aiden nods slowly, looking up at me. “You think he’ll know something?”

I shrug, playing with the hem of my sweatshirt—which, I notice for the first time, is on inside out. How did that happen? Hopefully Aiden missed that. “He might,” I say. “If anyone would, I think it would be him.”

“Well, call him, then,” Aiden says, nodding at my phone, which is next to me on the couch. “See what he says.”

I’m not sure this is the right direction, but I can’t stand the thought of doing *nothing*. Maybe my imagination is just running wild, but it’s not impossible that that girl was killed because she wanted to talk to me. And until Aiden finds out who she is, I don’t know what else to do besides search for information about my parents, since that’s what she wanted to tell me about.

“Anything?” I ask him, pointing at the yearbook.

“No,” he says in a frustrated voice. “This is either too old, or I can’t pick her out. The photos are in black and white, and

they're small.”

“Keep looking,” I say, resisting the urge to yank the yearbook out of his hands and do it myself.

“That’s the plan,” he mutters. “Make the phone call.”

“Yeah,” I say, taking a deep breath. “Okay.” When I pick up the phone, though, I dial Roland’s number, not Lance’s. I was supposed to let him know I got moved in safely and everything, and I never did.

I debate for a second before turning the phone on speaker. Roland might say something embarrassing, but I don’t want to have to relay everything Lance says to Aiden, and I don’t feel like I have the current presence of mind to sort through a bunch of information on my own—especially since I probably won’t be able to look at my mother’s past with a completely unbiased lens.

Aiden scoots across the floor until he’s next to the couch, sitting at my feet like this is some weird kindergarten classroom and I’m about to read everyone a story. We both stare at my phone as we wait for Roland to pick up. And for a second it seems like he won’t; he waits until the last possible moment to answer.

“You did that on purpose,” I accuse when he picks up.

“I can neither confirm nor deny that I specifically made you wait a super long time,” he says, and I can hear the grin in his voice, the little punk. “You got moved in okay?”

“Yes,” I say, giving him a nasty look through the phone. He can’t see it, of course, but I like to think he can feel it.

“Good. When I didn’t hear from you, I figured your roommate had turned out to be a weirdo who murdered you in your sleep or something.”

“Ha ha,” I say weakly, my eyes jumping to Aiden. I think murder jokes have forever been ruined for me. Judging by the disconcerted expression on his face, he feels the same way. “No. Still alive, still kicking.”

“How’s the house?”

“It’s great,” I say. The tension eases out of me a bit as I start talking about something other than death. “My room is in the loft. It’s small, but it has great natural light. I met the landlady too, and she’s nice.”

“Good,” Roland says. “What about your job? You got that all set up?”

“Yep. I’ll work at the yoga studio.”

“You get good hours?”

I shrug. “Good enough.”

“And how about the new roommate?” Roland says. “You like him?”

“As a matter of fact, I don’t,” I say, glaring at Aiden, who has the audacity to smirk distractedly as he continues flipping pages. “He’s a pretentious pain in the—”

“Ha,” Roland cuts me off, which is probably for the best. “Told you you would never find a roommate as good as me.”

“At least he puts the toilet seat down after he pees,” I say.

Actually, I don’t know if this is true. Aiden has his own bathroom connected to his bedroom, and I’ve never been in there. But he seems like the kind of guy who puts the toilet seat down, based on how clean he wants things all the time.

“That was one time, Juniper,” Roland says now.

“It was not. But one time falling into the toilet in the middle of the night is all it takes,” I say with a shudder.

It feels weird to be talking so lightly to Roland when I feel so heavy inside, but I force myself to continue. “And truthfully,” I go on, my nose wrinkling as I remember the Blind Date Incident, “I don’t think I can ever room with you again. Like, ever.”

“Agreed,” he says immediately. “No way. Not after—”

“Don’t say it,” I say. “Just—don’t say it. I’m trying to forget.”

“What happened?” Aiden says, speaking for the first time since this phone call started. His smirk turns into something more sympathetic. “Did you see him naked?”

“Ew,” I say, and on the other end, Roland says the same thing.

“No way, man,” he says. I’m a little offended that he’s addressing Aiden in such a friendly manner—doesn’t he know that his loyalty is to me, his loving older sister? But he just goes on, “Some stupid friend of Juniper’s set us up on a blind date, not knowing we were brother and—”

“That’s enough of that,” I say loudly.

But Roland, it seems, is not interested in my opinion. He keeps going. “Imagine your old college buddy tells you to come meet some hot friend of his girlfriend’s, and you get there and discover it’s your *sister*—”

“Roland!” I all but shout into the phone. “Focus, please.” I glance at Aiden, who looks horrified; undoubtedly he’s imagining what it would feel like to get set up on a date with Caroline. “I need to talk to Lance about something.”

“You could have just called him directly,” he grumbles.

“I wanted to say hello to you first,” I say, smiling. “My wittle baby brother—”

“Ugh,” Roland says. “Shut it. Here’s Dad.”

I hear a shuffling sound on the other end, and then a familiar voice speaks. “Juniper?”

“Hi, Lance,” I say. “How’s it going?”

“Going just fine. I’m enjoying having Roland home for a bit. What’s up? He said you wanted to talk to me.”

“Yeah,” I say. I take a deep breath, trying to dispel the sudden nerves that are invading my gut—a thousand little needles, prickly and sharp, perforating my innards. “I had a question about my mom, actually.”

The tiniest of hesitations from Lance. Then, “Okay. What do you want to know? I’ll tell you what I can.”

The anxious little needles in my gut move from *pricking* to *stabbing*, and when I press my fingers to my neck, my pulse is racing, my heart working overtime.

“I was actually wondering if she ever mentioned anything about my father.”

Silence.

Then, “What did she tell you about your father?”

“Nope,” I say immediately, shaking my head. “I’m not asking you to tell me the same thing she told me. I’m asking if you know anything more.” I swallow. “Please, Lance. She’s dead. She’s gone. But...I’m not. And I want to know.”

I hear Lance sigh into the phone, a heavy, static sound. “All right,” he says. “All right. Look, I don’t know much, okay? Your mother was not an easy woman to get to know, Juniper.”

“I know,” I say quietly. “Of course I know that.”

“But she got pregnant when she was eighteen, and it happened at a party. It was the summer after her senior year. All she ever told me was that she had a group of friends she hung out with all the time. They gave themselves some ridiculous name—the Elitists? No, the Elites. It was your mom and something like three or four guys. The way she told it, one of those guys is your father.”

The Elites? I never heard her use that name before.

“Okay,” I say. “What else? Anything you remember?”

“No,” he says, his voice full of regret. “I’m sorry. But no. She never said anything else.”

“All right,” I sigh. “Thank you.” I clear my throat. “I appreciate it, Lance. I really do.”

“Just be careful if you’re poking around, Juniper,” he says with a sigh of his own. “Don’t go digging up the past if it seems like it would be better buried. All right?”

“All right,” I say grudgingly. “Thank you. Tell Roland he’s a turd for me.”

Lance laughs, and his voice is lighter when he says, “Will do. Take care.”

“You too,” I say. Then I hang up, still staring at the phone long after the line goes dead.

For a few minutes, Aiden and I sit in silence. I don’t know what’s going on in his head, but mine is a mess—a tangled, thorny bush that’s growing at an alarming rate, painful new possibilities pricking at me with every second that passes.

“There’s nothing here,” Aiden says after a moment. He slams the yearbook shut, looking frustrated. “Or if there is, I can’t find it.”

I worried that would be the case. I just nod. “Do you think anyone has reported her missing yet?”

“I hope so,” he says. “But I don’t know.”

“But wouldn’t the sheriff call us for more information if someone had reported her missing?” I say anxiously. “He would, wouldn’t he?” I check my phone; no missed calls. Sheriff Garrity doesn’t have my number anyway.

“Probably?” Aiden says. “I haven’t heard from him, though.” Then he speaks again. “Why didn’t you tell your brother about what we saw?” he says. There’s nothing accusatory about it; he just sounds mildly curious.

“What, the body? That would freak them out to no end,” I say when Aiden nods. “They’d get here so fast your head would spin, and then they’d move in and start living on your couch.” I stare vaguely out the window, my eyes losing focus as my mind churns.

My mother. Her friends. The dead girl in the woods.

“You know what’s interesting,” I say slowly. There’s a bird outside the window, perching on one of the white fence posts. He’s completely black except for two spots of color, sunshine yellow and brilliant red. “We get so disturbed by excessive gore in movies and all that, but when it comes down to it...” I pull my eyes away from the bird, looking down at my hand. I hold it up to the light, flexing it, stretching my fingers, closing my fist. “When it comes down to it, we’re all just bags of

blood and bone.” I turn my eyes to Aiden, letting my hand drop back into my lap. “The world is populated by people full of blood and plasma and all sorts of fluids. That’s all the human body is. A sack of squishy parts and bony parts, all self-governed by an organ that just makes things up as it goes along. Isn’t that strange?”

For a second he simply looks at me, his face impassive. Then, slowly, he nods. “Yes,” he says. “I guess it is.”

Something about his expression—or lack thereof—has me backpedaling. “Sorry,” I say, forcing a laugh. “Guess that got pretty dark, huh?” Ugh. This always happens. I always open my mouth, something weird pops out, and whoever’s nearby gets scared away.

To my immense surprise, though, Aiden just shrugs. “Not really,” he says. “Even so...” He gets to his feet, yearbook in hand, and heads in the direction of his bedroom. But as he passes me, he looks down. Then, in a voice so matter-of-fact it can only be the truth, he says one thing: “I’m not afraid of the dark.”



I SPEND THE EVENING HOLED UP IN MY LOFT BEDROOM, writing. Now that I know how my murderer would carry the body, I can move forward in this opening scene. Every now and then I hear the bass from the TV downstairs bleeding up through the floorboards, vibrating through the room. You’d think that on a Sunday evening Aiden would be watching some cool action movie, especially with sound effects like that, but he’s not; I know because I stuck my head down about an hour ago to find him immersed in a documentary about the French Revolution.

I smile, my fingers pausing in the middle of typing. Aiden is a strange one. But I bet he wouldn’t run away from me even when he saw how my main characters kept killing each other. It’s like he said—he’s not afraid of the dark.

And there's a little bit of darkness in all of us. I'm convinced that's true. We couldn't shine so brightly as human beings if we never knew the shadows. As a child I never realized that my home life wasn't normal; I never realized that my mother was only minimally functional. It wasn't until I got older that those things occurred to me. But just because I didn't know, just because it seemed perfectly fine to me, doesn't mean I wasn't deeply affected by the way I was raised. My upbringing helped shape who I am—dark, light, and everything in between.

The *clack-clack-clack* of my typing resumes for a moment, but then it stops again. No matter how much I try to focus, my mind keeps wandering away to other things. Or, rather, one other thing.

The Elites.

I sigh, leaning back in my desk chair and staring at the sloped ceiling. I've never heard of a group of friends naming themselves something as ridiculous as *Elites* in real life. That's the kind of thing that happens in high school rom coms from the nineties. The clique of popular girls with the impossibly thin eyebrows and butterfly clips in their hair might have a name like that.

But a group of kids in Autumn Grove, Idaho?

Of course, whatever else my mom was, she was beautiful. There's no denying that. She had this beautiful, naturally blonde hair, for one. It was the kind of hair people pay a lot of money to replicate. But she also had blue eyes, delicate features, and a slim figure. She would never talk about her high school days, but I have no doubt she was popular. She probably had the whole world at her feet.

Until I came along, the plus-one she never meant to bring.

But I'm here. I'm alive. And I'm going to do great things in this life of mine. I don't need to leave a huge legacy; I don't need to change the world. But I'm going to make my little corner of life a really excellent corner.

I stand up suddenly, almost without realizing it, banging my head on the ceiling in the process. My desk is tucked into one corner of the small loft bedroom, and while I can sit and stand easily enough, I do have to be careful to duck.

“Ouch,” I mutter, rubbing the top of my head. I glare at the sloped ceiling. “Rude.” I glance down at my outfit to double check that I’m okay to be seen by Aiden; everything looks fine. I even turned my shirt right side out earlier. Then I spin on my heel and make my way downstairs, my feet thudding heavily on the steps. There’s a strange sense of urgency carrying me, pulling me forward, and I almost trip in my haste. When I reach the living room—where Aiden is now sprawled on the couch, reading a book—I’m out of breath, dragging in the oxygen like I’m drowning.

“Hey,” I say, panting.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Aiden moves his book away from his face and tilts his head toward me.

And look—I’m only going to say this once. No man has a right to look *that* good in sweatpants and a t-shirt, okay? When I lounge on the couch, I look like a sloppy starfish. Spread eagle, inelegant, unladylike bordering on indecent. I *become* part of that couch.

But Aiden just looks like he’s modeling for any number of companies. The sweatpants industry could use him for sure, as could the publishing industry, and the furniture industry may as well just hire him now and then keep him on retainer.

Ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous.

“Can I help you?” he says, cocking one eyebrow at me. He looks faintly amused, like maybe he’s noticed me checking him out.

Whatever. I will not be ashamed.

“Yes,” I say. I hurry over, my sock-clad feet slipping across the wood floor, and sit on the couch next to where he’s lying.

“Make yourself comfortable,” he mutters, scooting further into the couch so that I have more room.

“I will, thank you,” I say primly. Then I say, “You’re going to find out that girl’s name, right?”

“Definitely,” he says, turning his gaze back to his book, which he’s holding up in the air.

“You’re going to do it tomorrow?” I say.

“I’m going to do it today, if I can.” He pauses. “Except all I have is the yearbook. I’m going to look through it again in a bit. I’d look again now, but I really need to prep for class.”

“But if you can’t find her today, you’ll find her tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Tomorrow morning, do you think?”

“Yes.”

“Can you call me when you find out who she is?” I say. I know I’m being obnoxious—when I’m trying to read and someone interrupts me, I usually want to smack them—but I need to know. I need to know who this girl is.

Finally Aiden sighs, closes his book with a snap, and looks at me. “Yes,” he says. “I will call you the second I find out. Any other requests?”

“Just one,” I say, narrowing my eyes at him. “Don’t judge me for how I might handle this situation.” I pause and let my eyes drop away from his penetrating gaze. “Nothing like this has ever happened to me before, and I really don’t know how I’ll hold up. I’m not afraid of death or what happens afterward—whether it involves an afterlife or a hole in the ground. Those things don’t frighten me. But thinking about *other* people dying—thinking about other people being lost, forgotten, becoming nothing more than a faded memory...” I shake my head. “It makes me unbearably sad.”

Then, as something occurs to me, I go on, “Maybe that’s why I feel so pulled to write murder mysteries. So that I can remember the dead, in my own way. So that I can find justice for the pains they’ve suffered, even if it’s only on the page.” I sigh. “Anyway, I know I’m bugging you and asking a lot of

questions. But don't judge me, okay? Even if I cry a lot or lose my mind or something. And for goodness' sake." I point to his impassive expression. "Do something with your face, so that I can figure out what you're thinking. You either look disapproving or completely neutral all the time, and I never know what's going on in your head. It's stressful."

"You have so many complaints about my face," he murmurs, amusement sparking in his eyes. "I've always been told it's a handsome one."

"It is," I admit. Then I grin. "Why do you think my seventeen-year-old self tried to kiss you?"

Aiden snorts. "Cut it out. Don't flirt with me, Juniper Bean."

"I wouldn't dream of it," I say, still smiling. I pause, then go on, "Well, actually, I might have *dreamed* of it a time or two, but I would never flirt with you in real life—"

But I fall silent as a laugh bursts out of Aiden—a real, genuine laugh. "Get out of here," he says, and his smile continues to hover as he shakes his head. "I'm trying to review the chapters I'm teaching my seniors tomorrow."

I tilt my head, looking at him. "Do you like teaching?"

He shrugs. "I don't love it, but I'm willing to do it."

"I bet you're good at it, though," I say, trying to imagine him in the front of a high school classroom. "You were a great tutor."

"Eh, I don't know," he says. He flattens his hair with one hand. "I think I'm better at teaching one on one than I am with a group."

"Well, for what it's worth," I say, patting his arm, "you were a good tutor. You opened my eyes to how great reading and writing could be."

"It's good to hear that," he says, and the look on his face makes me think he's genuine. It's a small, simple smile, but I like it. Sincerity is always attractive.

You know what else is always attractive? Aiden.

Ugh.

“All right, well,” I say, standing abruptly and backing away from the couch. I really don’t need to be noticing how attractive this man is; that way lies heartbreak. “I’m going to bed. Call me tomorrow, please, when you find out about the girl.”

Aiden nods, then turns his gaze back to his book. I assume that’s the only goodnight I’m going to get from him, so I hurry back up the big stairs, around the corner, and then up the little stairs.

And when I finally fall into a restless sleep many hours later, I dream about shadows in the forest, my mother’s laughter ringing in my ears.

IN WHICH AIDEN DOES SOME DIGGING

The next morning I arrive at work a full half hour earlier than normal—and with a plan to find out who the girl in the woods was.

There are dark circles under my eyes, and I can tell I'm more irritable than usual too. But I didn't get much sleep last night, and the sleep I did manage to find was colored with dreams of bubblegum pink and bloody red. I woke up with a start at five-thirty, sweaty and out of breath, and puttered around killing time until I finally couldn't stand waiting anymore.

I won't know until the end of the day if anyone was absent completely. But we keep copies of our school yearbook in the library. The ones we keep aren't just from recent years, either; we've got a whole shelf of them, all the way back to when the school was started. Most of those are covered with dust and haven't had their spines cracked for years, but they're there.

That's the corner of the library I head to now. I can't wait for the end of the day to look—partly because I know Juniper will ask sooner than that, yes, but also because I don't want to wait that long. I pass the librarian and give her a stiff nod before hurrying down the rows of shelves, all the way until I've reached the back corner.

The Autumn Grove High library isn't huge, but I'm far enough away from anyone else that it's quiet back here, the air permeated with a dusty stillness. I grab a step stool from further down the row and carry it to the set of shelves I'm

examining, sitting on the skid-proof surface and making myself as comfortable as possible. I have the next two hours free, so I might be in this spot for a while.

I just need to figure out where to look.

I squeeze my eyes shut, returning with reluctance to the memory of the body in the woods behind Solomon the Spud. The girl had blonde hair. I couldn't say what shade of blonde, and I couldn't say if it was dyed, but...

Crap.

I pull out my phone, find Juniper's number in my contact list, and then press *call*.

"You're sure the girl was blonde," I say when she answers.

"Yes," Juniper says immediately. "Blonde, but I think maybe it was dyed."

I blink, staring blankly at the rows and rows of yearbooks before me. "How do you know that?"

"The color didn't look super natural, but it was hard to tell."

"All right," I say, sighing as I push one hand through my hair. How many blonde girls are at this school right now? Tons. "What else do you remember about her? How old did she look to you?"

"Hmm," Juniper says, and for a second, she's silent. When she answers, her voice is a little shaky; I think she, like me, doesn't particularly love delving into these memories. "I'd say maybe a junior or a senior. She definitely wasn't a freshman, and I don't think she was a sophomore either."

"Okay. So a blonde junior or senior," I say as a feeling of rising desperation hits me. "What about her face? Can you describe it to me?"

There's another silence, during which I imagine Juniper giving me a disbelieving look. I don't blame her.

"I just didn't register a lot of details, okay?" I say impatiently. "There was—it was a lot of blood." I swallow.

“And I didn’t get very far looking yesterday when all I knew was that she was blonde. So do you remember her face?”

“All right, look,” Juniper says finally. “I don’t have any classes to teach until later this afternoon,” she says. “I’ll come over there, okay?”

“Yeah,” I say quickly, relief flooding me. “Okay. I’m in the library, in the corner with all the yearbooks. Hurry. I’ve only got a couple hours.”

Juniper shows up fifteen minutes later. She appears from the end of the row and approaches in a cloud of sweet citrus, her wet hair and fresh face making it clear that she recently showered. She’s wearing an outfit that shouldn’t make sense, but somehow it works—a white shirt with a pattern of quarter-sized red hearts, tucked into a short corduroy skirt in sunshine yellow. The skirt has two heart-shaped pockets on the front, both of them stitched with little black smiley faces.

I think she might be the kind of woman who reaches into her closet without looking every morning but is pretty enough that anything looks good. The kind of woman that petty women hate. Juniper certainly has enough of a presence about her that a lot of people will find her intimidating. She’s bold and unapologetic; sometimes that’s all it takes to bring out the insecurities of the people around you.

“All right,” she says when she reaches me. She gives the shelves a quick once-over before looking back to me. “Since you’re showing no aptitude for this, I’m here to help.”

“I didn’t call you here to badmouth me,” I mutter, but I pass her last year’s yearbook anyway. Then I return to the one from two years ago, scanning the faces with increasing frustration.

“Did you check this one already?” she says as she lowers herself to the floor. I purposely don’t look at her while she does this, because I’m not sure how one sits in a skirt that short, and there are parts of Juniper I have no business seeing.

“I did,” I say with a sigh, “but I may as well not have. All I remember is that she was blonde, and the pictures in these

books are small. Too many of the girls in there looked like they could have been the one we saw.”

“I’ll check it out,” Juniper says. When it finally feels safe to look at her, she’s seated with her legs tucked to the side, flipping through the yearbook with deft fingers. There’s a little crease in her forehead, just above her eyebrows, and her eyes are narrowed slightly. She’s in concentration mode.

She’s in concentration mode, and I’m staring at her. Not weird at all. I whip my head back down so fast I’m going to have a crick in my neck later.

For a few moments we search in silence, the occasional turning page the only thing to break the quiet. I keep my eyes on the book in front of me, and I’m doing my best to focus, but it still seems like all the little faces are blurring together in my mind.

When I’ve gone through the senior and junior classes twice, I finally sigh, setting the yearbook aside and looking at Juniper.

“Anything?” I say. She has to be having more luck than I am.

“Maybe,” she says. “Look at a few of these and see if any of them feel familiar. I think I’ve narrowed it down to three possibilities.”

“Did you?” I say quickly, leaning in so I can better see the yearbook that’s spread open on the floor in front of her. “Who?”

“We have...” She pauses, looking more closely at the page. Then she points to a photo of a girl with blonde hair and a wide, toothy smile. “Helena Matterhorn.”

I nod, trying in my mind to compare the smiling Helena to the girl in the woods. I can’t quite get them to match up, though. “I don’t think it’s her,” I say, shaking my head.

“Okay,” Juniper says. She flips a few pages to where she has one finger holding her spot. Then she points to another photo. “This is Kerry Parson.”

I vaguely recognize Kerry—I don't have her in any of my classes, but I do think she's a senior. I've probably helped her with transcripts for college applications. She has blonde hair the same color as Helena's. "Maybe," I say slowly.

Juniper nods and once more turns the pages to another saved spot. "Last one: Sandra von Meller."

A sharp sense of...*something* pierces me when my eyes find Sandra's photo, a faintly smiling girl with light brown hair. "Her," I say immediately. "It's her." I don't know how I can tell; so much of her face was obscured with blood. But I can.

"I think so too," Juniper says grimly.

"I'll tell Garrity. I didn't pay attention to her because her hair isn't blonde in this picture," I say, leaning in even further. "But I think it's her. And I think..." A chill runs down my spine, despite the stale warmth of the air back here. "I think I know her from somewhere. Maybe just because she's a student, but she looks familiar." I try to force my mind to focus; is she one of the students I've had in my office before for troubles at school? I don't think so; I'd remember. "She's not a senior, is she?" Our school is small, but unless the students have problems they need to talk about, I only have scheduled meetings with the seniors.

Juniper shakes her head, looking sad. "She was a junior."

Was. The past tense hits me like a fist to the gut, and accompanying it is the all-too-vivid image of the girl in the woods.

Blood-matted hair. Red-smeared skin. Limbs awkwardly askew.

The bitter taste of bile hits my tongue, and I swallow it down, almost gagging in the process. I scoot back, away from Juniper and the yearbook, closing my eyes and forcing myself to breathe. I hear the sound of a camera click—Juniper taking a photo of Sandra's picture, I assume—followed by the sound of the yearbook snapping shut. I finally open my eyes again, just in time to see Juniper putting the book back on the shelf.

“How far back do these go?” she says, not looking at me.

“Years,” I say. I push aside the rush of gratitude I feel knowing that she’s changing the subject for my sake, that she’s averting her eyes to give me a chance to compose myself.

She’s surprisingly tactful. I noted it too when we first met at Grind and Brew—I saw her notice that I was struggling with an oncoming headache and then wrap the conversation up quickly so that I could go.

“Huh,” she says now, still looking up at the shelves. “Back to when my mom was here, I see.” She stands up, her body unfolding more gracefully than mine ever does. Then she reaches for the top shelf and trails her fingers over several spines, finally stopping on one from thirty years ago. She hesitates for only a second before prying the book from its spot.

A little cloud of dust erupts into the air when Juniper pulls the yearbook down. She blows on the top, sending another puff of dust everywhere. Then she sits back down, her eyes never leaving the book in her hands.

And for a moment she just stares at it. Her hands are reverent as she runs them over the cover, almost caressing, but they’re hesitant, too, and I can see it in her eyes—she’s still deciding if she wants to look inside. She’s still deciding if she wants to see her mother as a young woman.

“A library, a cathedral,” she murmurs, and it seems more like she’s talking to herself than to me, so I keep my mouth shut. “A sanctuary of knowledge. But this corner is different. Pews made of paper, altars of memory—on my knees in front of the ones who came before me.” Her voice is barely audible now; she’s definitely talking to herself. This is not meant for me to hear.

And yet...I listen anyway. Because something about her words is enthralling, a wandering lilt that tells me what I’m listening to is pure stream of consciousness. Mazes of words, riddles unfinished and trails she follows without knowing their end.

Even though I have no right to observe such an intimate part of this woman, I'm utterly captivated, waiting to hear what will come out next. Is this what her writing is like? Meandering, vivid, nonsensical and poetic?

I want to read her books. I want to capture that beauty in a jar and tuck it into my pocket.

I blink, squeezing my eyes shut as tightly as I can and shaking my head. I'm thinking crazy thoughts. Crazy, stupid thoughts that will get me nowhere.

And anyway, Juniper's beauty isn't the kind you can capture in a jar and save for a rainy day. It's not a conventional prettiness. It's the type you have to experience, the type that doesn't really reveal itself until you understand her a bit better.

I fix my gaze to the floor and swat away those pesky thoughts like they're mosquitoes buzzing around my head. It takes a second for me to feel more clear headed, but then I'm back on track.

"Gonna open it?" I say, letting myself look at her again. "Or still deciding?"

She hums thoughtfully. "Gonna open it, I think," she says after a second. Then she nods more decisively. "Yeah. I'm opening it."

I gesture at the yearbook wordlessly.

With one deep breath, Juniper cracks open the spine of the yearbook. In my head I picture any number of scenes from childrens' movies, where the kids open a book and then topple into its illuminated pages, landing in a whole new world full of magic and adventures.

I don't know what Juniper will find in these pages, but I don't think it's magic. I don't think it's adventure.

It takes me a second to realize I'm holding my breath. I'm nearly as tense as she is. Her posture is stiffer than it was a moment ago, and her hands are clasping the book tightly. She turns page after page, though, almost mechanical in her timing, until she finally reaches what she's looking for.

I know she's found it because the page turning stops, but also because a little sigh escapes her.

"There," she breathes. "There she is. Nora Bean." She points, and I lean closer, noting that sweet citrus scent of hers again. It seems to be stronger when her hair is wet.

"Oh, I see," I say once I've focused. The photos in the yearbook are small, and they're in black and white, but still I can kind of make out the features. The girl is smiling, with blonde hair.

"And here," Juniper says, pointing at another photo, this one larger, part of a collage. It's a blonde girl surrounded by three guys, all of them smiling.

"Wow," Juniper says, her voice cracking. "She looks so... happy."

She does look happy. The girl in the photo is beaming at the camera, a beautiful, carefree smile that has the attention of more than one of the other guys—the boy to her left and the boy on the far right are both looking at her rather than at the camera.

"You could be twins," I say. Even though the photo is black and white, I can tell that Nora's hair is the same blonde as Juniper's was when I was tutoring her. There's something about Nora's smile that reminds me of her daughter's, too—an untamed, almost reckless quality that promises mischief or even trouble.

"Yeah," Juniper says. "People told us that all the time."

When I hear the thread of bitterness in her voice, I realize I've said the wrong thing. It's too late to take it back, though, so I change the subject instead.

"Maybe these are the friends your brother's dad mentioned?" I say, pointing to the guys surrounding Nora.

"They are," she says. She points to the caption, reading out loud. "Laughter at lunch time for the Elite group of friends. Left to right: Cam Verido, Thomas Freese, Nora Bean, Lionel Astor." She snorts, shaking her head and looking at me. "The Elites. What a stupid name."

I nod. Then I frown as something she's just said registers.

"Hang on, let me see that," I say, leaning in.

She tilts the yearbook so that I can see it, and I squint, checking the caption to the photo. Sure enough, there it is: *Lionel Astor*.

"That's Rocco's brother," I say, blinking in surprise.

"Rocco..." Juniper says slowly, like she's trying to place the name.

"The gym teacher you met at the dance," I say. I point at the boy in the photo. "That's his brother. He's a bigshot now, running for governor."

"Oh," Juniper says. She looks at me, her face displaying some of the same surprise I feel. "I knew Rocco looked familiar. He looks like this guy—Lionel." She points. "I've seen Lionel's commercials—the *Home-grown Man* commercials. With the corporate hair? That's this guy?"

"The black hair, yeah," I say, nodding. "That's him. He lives here, over in The Heights." I look more closely at the picture; Lionel is shown in profile only, his head turned to look at Nora. I wouldn't have recognized him if I didn't hear the name.

And holy crap.

If what Nora told her ex was true, *Lionel Astor* could be Juniper's father.

She seems to be coming to the same conclusion. "He—he could be—he might be—"

"Yeah," I say, nodding. I gesture to the photo. "Any of them could, if your mom was telling the truth."

We let that sink in for a moment, both of us silent as we stare at the four smiling students.

"You know, it's weird," Juniper says. She's still looking at the photo, but something in her gaze seems lightyears away now. "I've never really thought about what my mom's life was like before I came along. I mean, I asked her a few times—just

random questions about growing up or whatever, but she never really answered.” She touches the picture, one pink-nailed finger resting on her mom’s beaming face. “She was never this happy when she was with me.”

They’re heavy words, the kind I can’t even begin to answer, and I have no business trying. Nor can I offer meaningless platitudes.

“I think...” she says slowly, still staring at the picture. “I think I’m actually feeling *sorry* for her right now. It’s sad that she used to look like this and yet changed so drastically.”

“It is sad,” I say, and I mean it. I’m starting to think bringing Juniper here was a bad idea, though. She doesn’t look so good. “But I need to get going. I have a class in twenty minutes.” I pause, debating, then say, “Do you want to take a picture of this before I put it away?”

“Yeah,” she says, and she sounds more like herself now. She snaps a quick photo with her phone, staring at it briefly. “Very weird to think that my mother *and* my father might be in this shot.” Then she closes the yearbook and replaces it on the shelf. “I’ll see myself out,” she says, turning her gaze back to her phone. “You go on ahead.”

I nod, mostly because I’m getting the feeling she wants to be alone. “I’ll see you later, then.” I don’t wait for her to respond; I just stand up, shaking my legs to get the blood flowing again and then heading back to my classroom.

The class hour inches by at a glacial pace, and I find myself in possession of significantly less patience than normal. It’s not even noon yet, but already I’m itching to get out of here. It could be because I’m running on decreased sleep, or it could just be because my head is swimming—with names and flashes of black and white photographs, with smiling faces frozen in time. With the note of hurt in Juniper’s voice as she questioned why her mother was never that happy when she knew her.

A pulse of shame hits me somewhere behind my belly button when I think about how good I’ve got it. My parents are alive and well, healthy and happy and living not thirty minutes

from here, in Valley Hills. There's nothing shameful about that, of course, but how often do I take it for granted?

I should go see them soon, I think grudgingly as I watch a senior in the front row sleeping soundly with his head nestled in his open book. Hemingway isn't for everybody. And to be honest, I'd love to be sleeping right now.

At very least, though, he needs to be respectful.

"Macintosh," I bark at him. I stroll over to his seat and tap him on his shoulder.

He startles awake, sitting bolt upright and blinking blearily up at me. He looks beyond exhausted. Some of my sharp, irritable corners soften.

"Sleep at home," I tell him. Then I return to teaching, so that I don't draw any more attention to him or embarrass him in any way. I ignore the snickers from his friends and continue droning on about symbolism that only maybe was intended by the author. I don't like the way we teach *objectively* things that are so *subjective*. One person might read the same book five times and come away with five different interpretations, based solely on what they were going through each time they read the book.

So I try to teach my students the importance—and the value—of subjectivity. I don't know if the carpet was blue because the author wanted to portray something sad. But if that's how it seems to you, what can you take away from that? If you're finding hints of sadness in everything you read, what can that tell you about yourself at this point in time? Those are the lessons that are going to help you in your day-to-day life anyway. In fifty years you're not going to need to know about symbolism in classical literature. But you're definitely going to need lots of tools for figuring yourself out, for deciphering your own emotions and understanding your own mind.

By the time class is over, I don't know who's more done: me or my students. I'm kind of dreading my next step, but at the same time, I just want to get moving on it. Get it over with. I book it out of there, bustling past the stragglers and power walking down the hall.

Despite this itch to get things done, though, when I reach the entrance to the teachers' lounge, I still have to pause with my hand on the doorknob, taking a few steadying breaths to prepare myself.

Although...can you ever *really* be ready to enter the jungle?

I squeeze my eyes shut, go to my happy place in my mind—my bed, curled up with a good book—and then turn the handle, swinging the door open and stepping inside.

The level of noise that hits me is comparable to the noise my seniors make before class starts. The only difference is that the people in the teachers' lounge should know better, since their brains should theoretically be done maturing by now. But that's never stopped the faculty of Autumn Grove High School before.

And to be fair, Autumn Grove does seem to collect weirdos and outcasts like a magnet. Everyone here has a story. Agatha the receptionist, currently cursing fluently at the coffee machine, is in her seventies and is on husband number three. None of us think he'll last very long. Agatha moved to Autumn Grove some twenty years ago as a middle-aged woman following her favorite band on their cross-country tour. Her car broke down here, she met her first husband, and then she just never left—even when husband number one turned into husband number two and then husband number three.

Rocco's seated on the couch by the window, reading a newspaper and eating some sort of wrap or burrito. He's one of the most normal people here, but even he's the odd one out in his family; he comes from old money, his brother is in politics, and yet Rocco is here, teaching PE and coaching, living a "small life," as he calls it.

Then there are the Betties—none of whom are actually named Betty, as far as I know. They're seated at their usual corner table now, lunch boxes open in front of them, holding court with their noses in the air.

And two of them were there the night we found the body, I realize with a start. I freeze in place, a chill running down my

spine. Then I rub the back of my neck, trying to dispel the feeling. I didn't think anything of their presence at the time, when we passed them coming up the stairs as we were going down. Now, though...what were they doing that night when they were supposed to be chaperoning?

I'm going to need to ask about that. And I think I can manage it.

Because what Caroline said about no one wanting to date me is not strictly true. I know for a fact that two out of the three Betties—the two Juniper and I passed on the stairs—have been gunning for me since day one. My chief recommending characteristic seems to be that I've never shown any interest; an uninterested man is catnip to the Betties.

Betty Number One, whose real name is Hailey, is their leader and the most unpleasant by far; she's also my most blatant pursuer. Hailey teaches marketing and advertising classes to the juniors and seniors, and she's good at it. She looks the part, too; she keeps her blonde hair styled neatly and sleekly at all times, and she's always dressed in some form of business attire—blazers, button-down shirts, and pencil skirts, mostly.

Betty Number Two, named Bethany, is the follower of all followers; she probably has her own personality and her own sense of style, but I've never seen them. They always seem to mirror whoever is around her. Since she primarily trails along after Betty Number One, she also wears blazers and button-down shirts and pencil skirts. Her hair is blonde too, but it's frizzier than Betty Number One's, which means that those sleek hairstyles don't look quite as polished on her. Betty Number Two is my other less-than-secret admirer; I can't imagine her actively pursuing me, since hierarchy demands that she defer to Betty Number One, but I've caught enough sneaky glances and blushing cheeks to be pretty sure about how she feels.

And then there's Betty Number Three.

Betty Number Three is a bit of a mystery, to be honest. Her name is Nessa, but that's literally the only thing I know about her, despite having worked in the same department as her for the last year. As far as I can tell, Nessa spends her time outside of class in complete, utter silence. She sits with the Betties, eats with them, maybe even spends time with them on the weekends, but I have never once seen her talk to them—or to anyone but her students, for that matter.

The other Betties don't seem to mind. They talk enough for the rest of the faculty combined.

I slink past them all, trying to avoid detection as I get my lunch from the fridge. I'm going to start asking questions in a moment anyway; I want to savor these last few seconds of quiet. I accidentally hit my hip bone on the counter as I'm squeezing through, but I bite my tongue so that I can fly under the radar for just a second longer.

Once I've gotten my lunch from the fridge, though, I shore up my patience and courage and then get to work. I've got questions to ask and things to learn. So I sit down at the Betties' table, plunk my lunch in front of me, and turn to the three of them.

"Where did the name Betty come from, anyway?" I say. I ignore the stares Hailey and Bethany are giving me, instead busying myself with unloading my lunch bag. Ham sandwich, bag of carrots, cheese stick. Not string cheese, because string cheese is gross—just a stick of cheddar cheese. I lay my food out neatly in front of me, and then I look at the Betties again.

Betties One and Two are still looking at me, thunderstruck. I don't blame them; I never eat lunch in here, and when I come in for other reasons, I go out of my way to avoid this table. I don't think I've ever initiated conversation with these women in my life.

Betty Number Three, though, isn't looking at me. She's looking at my lunch, her face twisted into some approximation of confusion. Then she points at my carrots.

"Are you eating those without ranch dressing?"

I freeze with my hand still outstretched to pick up my sandwich; Betties One and Two turn to look at her instead of me.

This is the first time I've ever heard her talk to anyone but her students. Ever.

"Um," I say, like an idiot. "Yes."

"Like, just by themselves? No hummus either? No dip?" she says, looking disgusted now. Her mouth is turned down into a frown; her dark eyes are still fixed on my lunch.

"Yes," I say slowly. What is even happening right now? The first words I've ever heard her direct at me, and she's asking about my carrot sticks?

"Huh," she says. Then she shrugs and goes back to her own lunch.

For probably ten seconds, there's absolute silence at the table. Betties One and Two are staring unflatteringly at Betty Three, and I'm regretting that I didn't think to try hummus with my carrots.

Then Betty Two clears her throat, alerting me that she's about to speak. I glance up just in time.

"So my name is Bethany," she says. "And before Hailey came, Elizabeth was here—but obviously I like you a lot more than I liked Elizabeth," Bethany adds quickly to Hailey. Then she turns back to me. "So Elizabeth thought since she was Elizabeth and I was Bethany, we should call ourselves the Betties."

I blink at her. "Why not the Beths?"

"She said it didn't have the same ring to it," Bethany says sadly.

"Right," I say. I shouldn't have asked. I didn't need to know. "Uh, I saw you guys at Homecoming. Outside, coming up the stairs from the track and field. Why weren't you inside chaperoning?"

It's not tactful. There's no natural lead-in. But screw it; I've asked something I need to ask. All I can do is hope they

answer.

“Uh,” Bethany says, her gaze darting to Hailey. The color drains from her face rapidly, something that spikes my pulse as my heart begins to beat faster. She shifts in her seat, looking more uncomfortable by the second. “Well. It was nothing. No reason.”

Hailey nudges her with her elbow, glaring. They exchange one more glance before Bethany digs into her salad, shoving more lettuce in her mouth than anyone realistically needs in one bite.

“Don’t worry about it,” Hailey says briskly. “We just needed some fresh air.” Unlike Bethany, she still has color in her cheeks—but her face is drawn, tense lines etched around her mouth and eyes. Then she, too, takes a bite of her food.

I stare at them, frankly dumbfounded. I don’t think they could be more suspicious if they tried. When I glance at Nessa, I can tell she’s thinking the same thing; her brows are drawn low over her eyes, her mouth turned down into a little frown.

“All right,” I say, because it doesn’t look like I’m going to get more of an answer than that, and I still have more questions. “Whatever. Did you guys have any absences today?”

The three of them look at me, each of them frowning slightly. Absences aren’t really something they sit and gossip about, apparently. I can’t help but notice, though, that both Hailey and Bethany visibly relax at the change in subject.

“I’ve had a couple,” Betty One/Hailey says. “Did you guys?”

“A few,” Betty Two/Bethany says with a shrug. Then she straightens up. “Oh,” she says, looking at Betty One with wide eyes. “But...Sandy wasn’t here.”

Betty One’s eyes dart from Betty Two to me and then back.

“Sandy?” I say quickly. That has to be Sandra von Meller, right? I clear my throat, trying to sound more casual as I ask, “Who’s Sandy? Is she a bad student or something?”

“No,” Betty One says dismissively after an awkward pause. “Her grades are fine. But she’s a stuck-up little rich girl, a beauty queen type. A complete snob.”

So...kind of like Betty One.

I do not say this.

Instead I say, “I think I know who you’re talking about. Blonde hair? Her name is Sandra, right?”

Betty One and Betty Two both nod. “Sandra von Meller.”

My heart stops; my skin crawls as once again I’m assaulted with the memory of the girl in the woods.

Sandra. Sandra von Meller.

That “stuck-up little rich girl,” as Betty One called her, is dead.

And I thought Juniper and I were the only ones who knew that, but...Betties One and Two are making me question this assumption. My mind flashes back and forth between the photo in the yearbook and the image of her on the forest floor.

And it hits me, suddenly, why she looked familiar.

She volunteered at the food bank. Sandra von Meller worked at the Autumn Grove Food Bank. Not often, I don’t think, but I’m almost positive I saw her there a few times. In fact—my stomach turns, my appetite vanishing—I think she’s the one whose shift I covered the other day.

“I have to go,” I mutter to the Betties. Surprisingly, all three of them seem happy to see the back of me; they really must not have liked the questions I was asking.

I shove my lunch back into the fridge and then hurry back to my office, walking as fast as I can without drawing attention to myself. As soon as the door is locked behind me, I collapse into my chair, pull out my phone, and dial Rodriguez’s number.

“Sandra von Meller,” I say immediately, before his greeting is even all the way out of his mouth. “High school

student. Did she volunteer at the food bank? Do you know her?”

“Yeah, I know Sandy. She comes two weekends a month,” Rodriguez says, sounding confused. “Why—”

“Do you know what kind of car she drives?” I’m flying by the seat of my pants with this hunch, but I fire the questions off anyway. “Have you seen it? Do you remember color or anything?”

“Eh, I don’t know,” Rodriguez says, and he sounds a bit impatient now. “Why are you asking this? It’s some little white thing, I think.” He pauses. “Weird bumper stickers.”

My heart freezes in my chest. It freezes right over, glassy ice halting all operations.

“Thanks,” I say, sounding dazed. “See you later.” And then I hang up, cutting short Rodriguez’s questions but leaving me with more of my own. That’s the car that was following me, I’m almost sure.

Why was Sandra von Meller following me?

I pull out my phone and send a text to Sheriff Garrity: *I looked in the yearbook, and I think the girl we saw was named Sandra von Meller. She’s a junior at the high school.*

He doesn’t respond.

When I get home, I’m tired, grumpy, and full of half-baked ideas that won’t let me rest. But one thing does get a smile out of me: a note on the refrigerator that reads *Caroline was happy to oblige*, and under that, an old photo of me with an earring.

IN WHICH JUNIPER ADDS TO THE MURDER BOARD

Downward-facing dog is my least favorite yoga pose.

It's not that it's difficult, necessarily—it requires strength and flexibility, yes, but really I just hate the feeling of blood rushing to my head. I also hate feeling like everyone is staring at my butt in the air.

Which is ridiculous. No one is staring at my butt in the air, because everyone else's butts are in the air too. We all have blood rushing to our heads right now, and the only things we're staring at are our yoga mats.

I dislike it anyway. But I do it, because I am being paid by one perpetually smiling man to teach yoga classes every afternoon.

And look. The smiling thing?

It's getting a little weird.

I don't have a problem with happy people. In fact, I like them. I like happy people. It's just...Gus smiles *all the time*.

All.

The.

Time.

I bet when that man wakes up in the morning, he's already grinning from ear to ear. At this point I just don't see how that *wouldn't* be true. I watched him get a drink from the drinking fountain yesterday, and the only time that smile stopped was

when his lips actively had to close to swallow the water. Never fear, though; those pearly whites showed right back up afterward.

And they stayed. They stayed for the rest of my shift, they were there when I arrived this afternoon, and they're still there now.

Extra pearly. Extra white.

“All right,” I say, wiping sweat from my forehead with the hem of my shirt. I let it drop and then look at Gus, jumping when I see that he's already watching me. “That was my last class. Am I good to go?”

“You're good to go,” he confirms. He's still smiling, of course.

I get everything back in my bag, rolling up my yoga mat and slinging it over my shoulder. Then I refill my water bottle. You can never be too hydrated.

I stand there at the drinking fountain, staring aimlessly around the small studio while my bottle fills up. The music playing in the background is soft and nondescript, but I like it; I sway along as I listen.

My entire body freezes, though, when my eyes catch on one of the photos on the wall.

It's a picture I've seen every day since I started working here—a group photo taken here in the studio and featuring about fifteen smiling faces, all crammed into this little space. Gus is kneeling in front, but he's still as tall as some of the other people surrounding him. Everyone is sweaty and pink-cheeked, much like me at the moment.

It's none of these things that catch my attention, though. What catches my attention is the smiling blonde on the far right. She's as sweaty as the rest of them, and she looks just as happy, too.

“Hey,” I call, my eyes never leaving the photo. “Gus. Come here for a minute.”

Despite Gus's colossal size, he actually moves quietly; he's very light on his feet. So I don't hear him approach; I just jump when he answers me a few seconds later, his voice coming from right behind me.

"Yeah?"

"This girl," I say, pointing at the blonde. "You know her?"

He leans forward, his head craning over my shoulder just a bit. "Yes," he says after a second. "That's Sandy."

"Sandy," I repeat. There's an uptick in my pulse at the sound of her name, a flurry of motion from that muscle in my chest cavity. "Did—" I break off, correcting myself quickly. "Does she come here a lot?"

From the corner of my eye, I see Gus nod. "She was a regular. I haven't seen her in a week or two, though."

A red flag begins waving in my mind, subtle but unmistakable, though I can't quite put my finger on why. It flutters just out of my grasp, taunting, leaving a sour taste in my mouth.

I clear my throat and try to sound normal as I ask another question. "Were you guys close?"

"Uh," he says uncomfortably. "We weren't...*not* close, I guess?"

I blink, frowning. What kind of answer is that? It was a yes/no question. I turn around, intending to clarify, but my words die when I see Gus.

He's not smiling.

I repeat: he's *not smiling*.

"Gus?" I say, my voice hesitant.

This is brand new territory. Nothing I learned when I got certified to teach yoga prepared me for a non-smiling Augustus Flanders. And I get it now—I get why he's constantly smiling.

Because he's *terrifying* when he's not.

This mountain of a man—I'd put him at probably six-six, honestly, with muscles in places I didn't know muscles existed—is staring at me, his brow furrowed, his mouth set in a tight line.

“Gus?” I say again. My voice squeaks a little, but I'm past the point of caring. I just want to get out of here and come back tomorrow when hopefully Gus's smile has returned.

“Sorry,” he says gruffly. He rubs one massive hand over the top of his head. “There was just a bit of an incident. And I would have brought it up with you if Sandy had returned, but...well, she never did.”

“What kind of incident?” I say as my heart continues to thunder along. We've entered a bit of a Twilight Zone area, where I'm not sure which way is up and which way is down or what's even going on. Gus knew Sandy? He isn't smiling? There was an incident? It's too many things for my brain to make sense of at one time.

“She—it wasn't—I never—” he stutters, and strangely it makes me feel better; stumbling over his words makes him feel more human and less like an iceberg-sized muscle monster. Then he sighs. “Frankly, it's not relevant to your job here. If it comes up again, I'll inform you of anything you need to know,” he says.

What? That's it? That's all I'm getting?

“Because maybe I could help—” I say tentatively.

But Gus shakes his head, his face is still pulled into that tense, scary expression. “No need. Appreciate the offer, though.”

I nod my defeat, suddenly feeling very tired. “I'm leaving,” I say with a sigh. “I'll see you tomorrow.”

I guess I need to put Gus on the Murder Board when I get home.

Aiden and I have fallen into an easy routine in the last week since we learned the name of the girl in the woods. The second half of this week was when Harvest Break began, so he hasn't been at the school; he's been helping at the food bank

instead, throwing himself into his work there with a restless fury.

Meanwhile I write every morning while he's doing his own thing, or I try to; yes, my characters keep killing each other, but it turns out there's a lot more to writing mysteries than just murder. There are logistics I know nothing about, and it's slowing me down.

It's more than the logistics, though, really. I'm brainstorming ways to figure out that stuff, but the biggest problem I'm having is that the book is feeling so... mechanical, I guess. Lifeless. I'm hitting the beats, but everything feels robotic, and I can't figure out why.

So I spend a lot of time staring at the screen and shotgunning chips and guac.

Then in the afternoons I teach yoga and fitness classes until six. After that I go home, and we eat dinner together, usually on the couch while watching something. Recently it's been a series of World War Two documentaries. I complained about this at first, but honestly, it wasn't long until I was completely engrossed, booing whenever footage of Hitler came on the screen.

And then, once we're done eating and booing fascist dictators, we go stare at the refrigerator, which is the home of our Murder Board—just like in the detective shows.

Only this isn't a detective show, and we aren't detectives. So instead of lots of pictures with connecting lines and ideas, we pretty much only have two things: Sandra's name—though it seems clear she went by *Sandy* more than *Sandra*—along with what we know about her, and a list of people who knew her or interacted with her at all. That's as far as our combined investigative prowess has gotten us.

We spent Monday and Tuesday after the dance waiting for Sheriff Garrity to call and say that we were right, that a girl had been reported missing—but he didn't. When Aiden finally called him Tuesday night, Sheriff Garrity said Sandra von Meller *isn't* missing, despite what Aiden told him Monday about her being the girl we saw.

“Are you absolutely certain it was Sandra von Meller?” Garrity said, sounding frustrated as his voice echoed over the speaker. “Can you guarantee that’s the girl you think you saw?”

“I—I can’t—I can’t *guarantee* anything,” Aiden replied, scrubbing his hand down his face. “But she’s been absent, and I really think it was her—”

But Sheriff Garrity wasn’t having it. He talked to Sandra’s mother, apparently; according to her, Sandra is spending Harvest Break on a solo road trip, looking at colleges. Her mother did admit that Sandra left early Sunday morning, several days earlier than planned, and that she didn’t see her before she left—but she says she’s been in touch through text since then, sending updates and even pictures.

Which means that someone has Sandra’s phone and is pretending to be her, sending photos that were either photoshopped or already on the phone. That will probably give me nightmares until I die. Plus, what kind of parent lets their teenager go on a road trip by herself?

So from Wednesday on, we’ve just been trying to learn more about Sandra.

We don’t know a ton about her or what she was like, but everything we do know is thanks to Aiden’s position as guidance counselor at the school. He was able to get a hold of some files and learn a bit more. And honestly? It doesn’t paint a great picture.

She was in pageants since she was a little girl; I looked up photos, and all of them involved big hair and blinding, vacant smiles masking disturbingly dead eyes.

Probably related to the pageant life was the eating disorder she was working through when she was in middle school; Aiden says there are no additional details on that one. He does know that she went to the nurse’s office every afternoon between lunch and fourth period to get her depression medication.

Her grades were good, and she was planning on applying to four or five Ivy Leagues. Among her extracurriculars were student council, cross country, and twice-monthly volunteer shifts at the food bank.

“And you’re sure Rodriguez said her car was small and white with bumper stickers?” I asked Aiden when we first started getting all these details figured out.

“Yes,” Aiden said, sounding annoyed—and, admittedly, it wasn’t the first time I was asking that question.

I asked again anyway. “And that definitely matches the description of the car you saw in front of our house, and the one that was following you?”

“For the millionth time, yes. I checked her intake paperwork, too. The handwriting matches. She’s the one who wrote the note to you.”

So that’s what we know about her: that she had good grades, iffy mental health, a beauty pageant past, and Ivy League ambitions.

And that she died right before she was supposed to be telling me what she knew about my parentage.

To be fair, we have been trying to figure more out—it just hasn’t been working. Garrity said his hands were tied if there was no body and no evidence from their search of the woods. And I guess I get that, but also...does he think we just imagined it? Both of us? A dead body? That’s not something that usually happens to me. I don’t normally see dead bodies where there aren’t any.

Regardless of my rock-solid logic, though, Aiden says this argument will not work on Garrity. So for now we have to wait a few more days until school starts up again, and we’re stuck with our Murder Board in the meantime.

In order to make room for the Murder Board, I did have to find a new home for the photo of Aiden wearing an earring. It’s now taped to the microwave. So far he hasn’t moved it, which I consider a real win, because it makes me laugh.

It also kind of makes me wish he still wore that earring.

“All right,” I say now, turning away from that photo and looking at Aiden. “We have a new name for our list.”

“Who?” he says, his fork pausing halfway between his bowl and his mouth. One long noodle dangles off of it, his bite of fettuccini unraveling slowly, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

“Augustus Flanders,” I say. I go to the refrigerator and use the dry erase marker to add Gus’s name to the bottom of the list. “He knew Sandy. She used to be a regular—” And I break off as it hits me, the little nagging feeling that I couldn’t identify earlier. “Past tense,” I murmur to myself. “He spoke in past tense.”

“What?” Aiden says with a frown. He finally seems to notice that he’s about to lose a big bite of pasta, because he gives a little start and then jams the fork in his mouth as fast as possible, slurping up the escaping noodles. This behavior, combined with the messy hair that looks like he’s been running his fingers through it, gives him more of a Nutty Professor vibe rather than his usual sexy, dark academia thing. He’s got on another tweed blazer today, with honest-to-goodness elbow patches—it should look almost comical because of how cliché it is, but it doesn’t. He just looks hot, messy hair and all.

I mean, I could do without the fettuccini slurping, probably. But other than that.

“When I was at Namaste, there was a picture hanging on the wall of one of the classes Gus teaches. Sandra was in it,” I say. And Aiden is paying attention now—his chewing slows as his eyes lock more firmly on me. I go on, “So I asked Gus, and he said Sandra was a regular. *Was*, as in she *used to be*. He spoke in the past tense. That’s weird, right?”

“Kind of, yeah,” Aiden says once he’s swallowed his food. “Did he say why she wasn’t a regular anymore, though?”

“Kind of,” I say. I slump over to the kitchen table and sit down, stirring my own bowl of pasta as I think. “He said there was an incident.”

“An incident?” Aiden says, frowning. “What kind of incident?”

I shrug with frustration. “I don’t know. He wouldn’t say. He just told me it wasn’t relevant to my job or something and then shut me down when I tried to ask more.”

“Huh,” he says. His brow is still furrowed, and that troubled frown deepens. “That’s...”

“Weird,” I supply. “Yes. But also...Gus is kind of a weird guy. Don’t you think?”

“He is,” Aiden says with a nod. “I’ve known him for years, and he’s very socially awkward.”

“Plus all the smiling.”

He nods again. “Yep. The smiling.”

I don’t ask how Aiden knows Gus; Autumn Grove is one of those towns where you know people simply because they live here and you do too. You see each other at the store, you run into each other walking down the street—it’s a small space we’re all occupying.

I eat my food in silence after that; my mind is too full and too empty at the same time to deal with actual conversation. So I just sit there, twirling my pasta and shoving massive bites into my mouth like a true lady. I see Aiden eyeing me with a vaguely grossed-out expression, but hello—who’s the one that slurped all his fettuccini off his fork like a barbarian?

“Don’t look at me like that,” I finally snap at him through a mouth full of food.

His nose wrinkles. “At least chew properly before you take another bite. You’re going to choke, and it’s gross to watch.”

“My purpose in this house is not to give you something pretty to look at,” I say. Then, because I can’t quite stop myself, I grin. “Although you do have to admit”—I bat my eyelashes at him—“I’m prettier now than I was when I was seventeen, right?”

“I don’t really go for women with pink hair,” he says, twirling another bite of his pasta.

Rude.

“But,” he goes on, sounding completely unaffected, “you turned out all right, I suppose.”

Hmm...that’s a little better.

“Be honest,” I say, pushing my bowl to the side. This conversation is suddenly much more interesting than my food, mainly because Aiden is so fun to tease. “If you saw me and didn’t talk to me or know who I was, you’d be smitten. You’d fall head over heels.”

Aiden nudges his own bowl out of the way and leans forward, a wicked spark entering his eyes. “I’m glad you’re aware it’s your personality that’s the problem,” he says.

My grin turns into a full-blown smile. “With beauty like this,” I say, pointing at my completely average face, “it would be rude of me to have an incredible personality. No one should be good at everything.”

“That’s true,” he says. “Just look at me.”

I nod. “Gorgeous, but absolutely insufferable.”

That spark of amusement in his eyes flashes brighter as a little smirk tugs at his lips. “Insufferable?” He leans over the table further and then says, in a whisper so low I almost miss it, “That’s not what you thought thirteen years ago when you tried to kiss me.”

My cheeks heat. “Yeah, well, you’ve gotten more obnoxious.”

Another cocky quirk of those lips. “And more gorgeous.”

“No.”

“Admit it.”

“Never,” I fire back, but I lean in, too, pulled to him by something magnetic.

“Come on,” he says, his voice coaxing, his lips still pulled into that smirk.

I shake my head. “I will not.”

“Why?” he says, looking more smug than ever. “Embarrassed?”

“Fine.” The word pops out unbidden, escaping into the space between us. “Yes. You’re more gorgeous now. The blazers and the longer hair and the—the—” But I stumble into silence as awareness pricks at me, as I realize that somehow both of us have leaned forward so far that our faces are now separated by no more than six inches. Our food sits forgotten, pushed out of the way, and our breathing is too fast, too harsh, too loud in this kitchen. His lashes are too dark, too long; his eyes are too full of fire as they drop to my lips; that smirk looks too much like something I could lick right off of his face.

Something sharp pulses in my gut then, an electric current that radiates from my bones to my skin to the very air around us, supercharging the space between us, bringing it to life—magnetic, dangerous, full of possibilities.

So many possibilities, all of them tantalizing, all of them dangling in front of me. And he feels it too; his knuckles are white where his hands grip the tabletop, his lips are parted, his gaze hungry as it lingers on me.

“We shouldn’t, right?” I breathe, so quietly that Aiden might not even hear me.

“Definitely not,” he murmurs, sounding as dazed as I do. His voice is hoarse as he goes on, “I don’t even like you.”

And it honestly feels like I’m in a trance right now, or maybe hypnotized—like there’s a little gold pocket watch or some sort of pendulum swinging back and forth in front of me, back and forth, back and forth, only that pocket watch has Aiden’s stupidly sexy face plastered to it.

“I don’t even like you,” he repeats faintly. And then, like he’s coming out of a trance himself, he blinks a few times, squeezing his eyes shut. When they open and focus on me once more, that tension is gone; all that’s left is him staring at me in horror, his jaw dropped, his eyes wide.

He jumps back, stumbling over his chair as he scrambles away. Then, sounding shocked, he says, “You—you—”

“No,” I say severely. I point at him, straightening up and taking a few steps back from the table. “Don’t you dare blame that on me. That was mutual. I’m not your biggest fan either, you know.” It’s partly true; I dislike him sometimes.

Except for when I don’t.

But whatever. He doesn’t need to know specifics. Current incident aside, that ship is just as unlikely to sail now as it was that Christmas Eve all those years ago. So I force myself to stay calm, to keep hidden the rapid gallop of my pulse in my veins and the breath I’m still trying to find.

“Let’s chalk that up to a fluke and pretend it never happened,” I say, keeping my voice light. Then I grab my bowl of half-eaten food and take it over to the sink. “Deal?”

“Definitely,” he says from behind me. I’m tempted to look at him, to see if he looks as normal as he sounds, but there’s no good reason to do that. So I keep my eyes firmly on my bowl, hyperfocusing as I scrub it clean.

“Also,” I say, “I think we should go talk to Rocco sometime soon.”

“Rocco?” Aiden says. When I finally glance at him, he’s leaning back against the countertop, dirty bowl next to him, arms folded over his chest as he waits for me to finish. “Why?”

“Because it’s the only thing I can think of,” I admit. I give my bowl one last rinse and stick it in the dishwasher. Then I move out of the way, and Aiden and I trade places—me leaning against the counter, him in front of the sink. “I can’t think of any other step we could take. The sheriff isn’t helpful because he can’t find a body, and Sandra’s mom thinks she’s on a road trip. But I know she’s dead, and I think she died because she was going to tell me something about my parents. Maybe I’m wrong,” I say. “Maybe she tripped and fell, or maybe something else happened. But Rocco might be able to

tell me about his brother, and I'm going to go crazy if I don't do *something*."

For one long moment, Aiden is silent. I watch from behind as he washes his dish, his broad shoulders hunched slightly, his sleeves rolled up to the elbow. Then he shuts the water off, and I hear a sigh.

"All right," he says, turning to look at me. "If you think it will be worthwhile, I'll go with you to talk to him."

"Thank you," I say. I release the words without frills or further explanation, but...gratitude is all I have right now.

He just nods, drying his hands with the dish towel that's hanging on the oven handle. "I'm going to bed," he says. "Night." He doesn't wait for my response; he just strolls casually out of the kitchen, disappearing into his bedroom and shutting the door behind him.

But I stay where I am for quite a while longer. I stare at the Murder Board on the refrigerator. The list of names is still small:

Hailey/Betty One

Bethany/Betty Two

Nessa/Betty Three

Gus Flanders

According to Aiden, the Betties are the women we saw out near Solomon the Spud on the night we saw Sandra's body. They apparently didn't like Sandy, and they were being sketchy that night; that was enough for us to add them to the list.

Now, though, I find myself thinking further about the situation. I hesitate for a second, biting my lip. Then I grab the dry erase marker and add three names to the list:

Lionel Astor

Thomas Freese

Cam Verido

I'm grasping at straws; I know that. But it's not impossible that Sandra was killed because she was going to tell me about my parents, and that means that anyone who might be my father should be up here. My eyes linger on the name *Lionel Astor* especially; I've got to imagine someone running for governor wouldn't be happy about an illegitimate daughter coming out of the woodwork.

I shake my head, laughing weakly. I'm being stupid. Of course I am. Like I said, this isn't a detective show. Huge, dark conspiracies don't happen in sleepy little towns like Autumn Grove. Besides, how would any of these men have known Sandra anyway?

But when I fall into bed later that night, it takes hours for me to fall asleep. I pull out my phone and find the picture I took of the photo from the yearbook, my mother and her friends. They're all smiling—some at the camera, some at her.

Where are these boys now, with their black-and-white smiles and laughing eyes?

Could one of them really be my father?

And why would that information be worth killing over?

IN WHICH JUNIPER MAKES A HOUSE CALL

School starts again.

The students return from break.

But one student does not.

I follow Aiden around the kitchen as he talks to the sheriff on the phone, craning my neck so that I can keep my ear as close to the receiver as possible. From what it sounds like...

“She texted her mom and told her she wants to extend her visit?” I say, incredulous, seconds after Aiden hangs up.

He nods, looking just as frustrated as I feel. “After chewing me out for asking so many questions—”

“I heard that,” I say with a wince.

“Garrity said Sandra has been sending her mother updates, pictures of herself at the colleges included, and she supposedly even told her mother she would be arriving home a few days later than they’d originally planned.”

“Pictures of her at the schools?” I say, my mind whirling.

Aiden nods.

“Someone has her phone,” I say, dazed. “I figured, but...”

“Yes,” he says, looking grim. “However.” He holds up a finger. “Garrity did admit that it’s suspicious, because apparently he’s checked with some of her friends, and they haven’t heard from her. He also says she hasn’t been active on social media or the town forum. So he told Sandra’s mom to

tell her to come home now. He says he's keeping in touch with her mom, and he's working on finding someone who can analyze if the photos being sent are photoshopped or not."

"They have to be, right?" I say. "Unless—" I break off, swallowing. "It *was* Sandy we saw, right?"

"It was," Aiden says firmly. "I truly think it was."

"That's creepy." I shiver, rubbing my hands up and down my arms. "That's so creepy, Aiden. I hate this. I hate it." We both do.

Which is why, several days later, Aiden and I visit Rocco Astor at his home. It's all we can think to do.

According to Aiden, Rocco's brother Lionel lives somewhere in the Heights, a sprawling but only sparsely populated neighborhood in the wealthiest pocket of Autumn Grove. When I was growing up, it was almost legendary in status; very few kids from school lived there, but theirs were the parties you always wanted to be invited to. Now, Aiden says, it's mostly retirees who live there—people who've come back to Autumn Grove and settled in, well after their own kids grew up and left home.

Where Lionel lives in the Heights, though, Rocco does not. He lives out of the way a bit, on a parcel of land on the outskirts of town.

"So he knows we're coming, right?" I say now, turning to Aiden. We're in his car, which is much cleaner and safer than mine.

"I texted him an hour ago," Aiden says with a nod. He's calm, cool, collected—everything I wish I were right now, and everything that I'm not. My palms are so sweaty that I keep having to wipe them on my jeans, and my insides are jittery with anxious anticipation.

But I can't help it. Unlike Aiden, I don't know Rocco. He's not my friend. All I know is that he might be able to tell me about his brother—a friend of my mother's. Possibly even my father.

“Okay, so remember,” I say, once again shifting in my seat so that I’m facing Aiden more fully. “We’re not telling him about the body. We’re not even mentioning Sandy. Okay?” I’ve taken to calling her *Sandy*, even though her name was *Sandra* in the yearbook. It seems like that’s the name she went by, and respecting that is one of the very few things I can do for her now.

“Just like the last ten times you told me this,” Aiden says, sparing me a glance, “I agree. I will not mention Sandy. You need to chill.”

“I know,” I say as I press down on my bouncing knees. “I’m sorry. I’m trying.”

“Try harder,” he advises. “Rocco isn’t stupid. He’s going to ask questions if you’re acting weird.”

“Yeah,” I say. I force myself to take several deep breaths, and that does help some—although it also means I get a few good whiffs of whatever cologne Aiden uses, something subtle and woody. He seems to have forgotten all about the freak moment of mutual attraction in the kitchen the other night, but I haven’t; for some reason the image of his white-knuckled grip on the table is burned into my retinas.

I’m pretty sure that’s how Aiden would hold onto any lover or girlfriend he had.

“Why are you rolling down the window?” he says five seconds later.

“Just feeling a little warm,” I say, fanning myself with my hand. “I need to get some air.”

“You’re feeling warm?” he says, casting his eyes skeptically over my outfit—jeans and a vintage t-shirt. “You’re wearing short sleeves.”

I am, and his skepticism is valid. The autumn breeze is brisk; the air is crisp despite the clear, sunny skies.

Despite his protests, though, I leave the window open until we’ve pulled off the main road and headed down a gravel side road. We wind through countryside for a few minutes before a two-story house comes into view, one made of warm tan brick.

There's a wooden shed out back, plus a coop and a tractor. He's doing the country living thing, it looks like. It's not for me, but I respect it—I can't begin to imagine how hard it is.

Even though Aiden is the one who's friends with Rocco, he told me before we came that he was adopting a *hands-off* approach to this meeting. When I asked him what that meant, he just said, "Interrogating people isn't in my wheelhouse. You do it." So it's to that end that I'm the one who leads the way across Rocco's overgrown yard, and I'm the one who knocks on the front door when we reach it.

He answers after only a moment of waiting.

"Welcome," he says. He smiles, his white teeth gleaming against his sun-darkened skin. Then he gestures to the yard behind us, to the overgrowth and the random rake cast aside at the base of a large tree. "Sorry about the mess."

"No judgment here," I say cheerfully. "We once had a rose bush growing up that became so overgrown the HOA fined my mom and me." I jerk my thumb over my shoulder at the unruly grass. "This is nothing."

Rocco laughs. "That must have been quite some rose bush," he says to Aiden and me. "Come in."

I watch him carefully as we step inside and follow him to a simple, no-frills living room. He's handsome, I realize with a start as he gestures for us to sit. Tall, fit, thick hair, and clear blue eyes—a total silver fox.

Wait. Is he considered a silver fox if only a tiny bit of his hair around the temples has turned silver? Or is he just a regular fox? He's in his forties, I think, but so are Oscar Isaac, John Krasinski, and Tom Hiddleston. Older men have plenty going for them.

This man might be your uncle, I tell myself. Stop checking him out.

Ew. That does it. All attraction is gone, replaced by wariness. Handsome men usually send up red flags for me. I've met too many of them who have used their looks to get what they wanted, even if it wasn't the right thing to do.

Yep. The jury is still out on this one.

“So what can I do for you?” Rocco says as we all take our seats. He looks back and forth between Aiden and me. “Something I can help with?”

“Kind of,” I say. “Maybe? I hope. I had some questions for you, if that’s okay.”

“Sure,” Rocco says, looking intrigued. “What’s this about?”

I take a deep breath of air that smells faintly like cigarette smoke, trying to figure out how best to go about this. I don’t really have the patience to beat around the bush right now, but it would also be stupid to jump in recklessly when the answers I’m looking for have the potential to be so important.

I can feel Aiden’s eyes on me, and somehow I know that he’s watching carefully to see how I proceed. If I crash and burn, will he jump in and help, I wonder? Or will he just stand by and watch?

I think it will be best if I root this conversation in a very non-threatening place. People condemn being selfish or self-centered, but what they fail to recognize is that sometimes we talk about ourselves to avoid forcing other people to open up. If I start this line of questioning by talking about myself, it will come off less like an interrogation and more like a woman seeking to learn more about her own past.

“So basically,” I begin, making myself more comfortable on the squashy couch, “I was looking through some old yearbooks up at the school, and I saw a photo with my mom in it that I wanted to know more about.”

Rocco nods slowly, his eyes narrowed in contemplation. I take that to mean I can keep going.

“Lionel Astor is your brother, correct?”

Rocco’s contemplative look falls clear off his face, morphing into a scowl. “Lionel? Yes. He’s my brother. Why?”

I stare at him, shocked at this change in expression. Next to me, Aiden gives a snort of laughter.

“Uh,” I say, trying to regain my train of thought. “Sorry, should I not...?” Normally I’d be more tactful, but this man clearly isn’t trying to hide his feelings, so it feels okay to ask. “What’s with the death glare? Why are you making that face at me?”

Another unhelpful snort of laughter from Aiden, and I reach blindly in his direction until I find him. Then I give him a good whack.

“Because Lionel’s a real son of a—” But Rocco breaks off, his expression softening into something more sheepish. “Sorry. What I mean to say is, Lionel and I don’t get along.”

My heart sinks a bit; if he and his brother don’t get along, who knows how much he’ll be able to tell me?

“Well, look,” I say with a sigh. “It’s not necessarily only your brother I wanted to ask about. I just had some questions about—about my mom.”

Rocco eyes me shrewdly; all the boyishness is gone from his face now. “You’re Nora Bean’s girl.”

“Yes,” I say, my eyebrows shooting up. “I am.”

Rocco nods. “I knew it the second Aiden introduced you at the dance. You look just like her.”

“I’ve been told.”

“I bet you have,” he says with a snort. “Your mother was a real beauty, and it got her into trouble sometimes.”

My heart, which is already tripping along uncomfortably, picks up its pace. “You knew her?”

“Of course I knew her,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “She and Lionel and the rest of their little gang—they hung around our place all the time. Our house over in the Heights, the house Lionel lives in now—it was the nicest of the bunch, and my parents mostly left us kids alone unless they needed somewhere to vent frustrations. Your mom and the rest of those guys were at our house almost every weekend.”

“Wait, so you were friends with them too?” I say, curious.

“Nah,” Rocco says, waving one hand. “Lionel and I didn’t get along even then. He would never have let me tag along with them. Nora was always sweet to me, though. I always thought she was too good for Lionel.”

“So their group. It was my mom, Lionel, Thomas Freese —”

“Tommy,” Rocco says, nodding.

I nod too. “And Cam Verido.”

“Yep, that was them.” He shakes his head. “And God rest your mother’s soul, Juniper, but the bunch of them—they were troublemakers. They ran wild whenever they could get away with it.”

I swallow, my throat trying to close around my next question. “And was my mother involved with any of them? Romantically, I mean?”

That shrewd look of Rocco’s returns. “You really want to know? I’m not stupid, Miss Bean; this conversation looks to me like you’re hunting for your father.”

“Yes,” I say. “I want to know. I’m not hunting for him, necessarily, but...I’m not *not* hunting, either.” It’s not a very helpful answer, but it’s the best I’ve got.

“Your call,” Rocco says with a shrug. “It’s like I said; Lionel never let me hang around with them, so I don’t know details. But I think Nora and Tommy had something going on, and I *know* Lionel liked her. Whether she felt the same way—that, I don’t know. But there was about a year in there where Nora and Tommy went to dances together, stuff like that.”

“What about when they graduated high school?” I say. I can’t even keep up with my pulse at this point; my heart is racing, and adrenaline is burning holes through my veins. “There was a party at the end of that summer, after they graduated.”

Rocco shifts uncomfortably. “Look. It’s not that I don’t want to help, but—those four got together every weekend. There was never any big party; it was just them hanging out.

Do you know when specifically you're talking about? Maybe then I could tell you if I know details or not. Or if—"

"No," I say, sighing. "I don't know any specifics." I stand up, suddenly antsy with the need to keep digging elsewhere.

"I can tell you this, at least," Rocco says, and he stands up too. "I don't know who your father is, Miss Bean. I wouldn't be surprised if there were any number of relationships going on in that group—like I said, your mother was beautiful, and those four were always together. And how old are you?"

"Thirty," I supply. "And my mom's ex says that she got pregnant at the end of the summer after her senior year, at a party with her friends."

"And that timing fits?" Rocco says. But then he answers his own question. "I guess it does—Lionel and his friends are two years older than me, and I'm forty-six. Your mother would be forty-eight, and you're thirty—"

"Making her roughly eighteen when I was born," I say, nodding.

"I'm sorry," he says again, rubbing his hand over his messy hair. "Like I said, I wouldn't be surprised to hear any of them might be your father. But I have no concrete knowledge."

I nod. Strangely enough, even though he doesn't know who my father is, it does help to know that I'm on the right track. "Do you know what any of them are up to now?"

"Aside from Lionel?" he says with a bitter laugh as the three of us meander toward the front door. "No, I don't. We weren't friendly; I never bothered keeping in touch or checking in on them."

"And your brother's just..." I say, letting my words trail off and watching Rocco.

"Just being the same self-absorbed, arrogant man he's always been," he says, his scowl firmly back in place. "Surrounds himself with sycophants and beautiful women and laps it all up. Sleeps with models and brand ambassadors and beauty queens and then shows up on my television with his

arm around his wife. Thinks he can get away with anything, and now he has his sights set on a new playground. Idaho,” he adds when I give him a questioning look. “The state of Idaho.”

I shift my weight from one foot to the other, my mind whirring. It couldn't be clearer that Rocco really doesn't like his brother, and because of that, I think most of what we're hearing is at least partially biased.

That being said...the more I learn about Lionel Astor, the less I like him, too. It's not just the snippets of knowledge I'm coming across, either, although Aiden has *feelings* about Lionel's plan to reduce funding to the food bank.

No, my growing dislike comes from somewhere much more...intuitive, I guess. More visceral. I looked him up after I found the photo of my mom and her friends; I watched some of his commercials. And on paper he seems to be doing good things. But when he smiles, his eyes look hollow.

A lot like Sandy's in those pageant photos, now that I think of it—and *hang on*.

I blink as the rest of Rocco's words catch up to me, another little red flag flying.

If he's telling the truth, his brother is involved with models and brand ambassadors and beautiful women. Does he have connections to the pageant world, then, too?

I don't know. But it will be easy to check.

My hand shoots out, grabbing the door handle. “I'm sorry we wasted your time,” I say, smiling at Rocco to soften the abruptness of my words.

He takes it in stride, looking only mildly surprised. “A visit from friends is never a waste,” he says with a shrug. “But you”—he points at Aiden—“contribute to the conversation once in a while, why don't you.”

Aiden just smirks.

“Oh!” I say as we step outside. “I do have one last question, actually. Is Rocco your real name, or is it a nickname?” This question has been bugging me since day one.

Rocco grins, his eyes sparkling. “A ridiculous name, I know. It’s short for Richard. But it could have been worse.”

I raise one skeptical brow at him, and he winks.

“My parents could have called me Dick.”

I laugh. That’s a fair point.

“I think I like him,” I say with a nod once Rocco has seen us out and closed the door behind us.

“Did you not like him before?” Aiden says.

I shrug. “It’s not that, necessarily. I wasn’t sure if I trusted him.”

“Because...?”

“Because he’s a fox. It’s my policy to be wary of charming men with eyes that blue.” Though I would be lying if I said I wasn’t still a *little* wary. I only barely know the man from Adam.

Aiden’s nose wrinkles. “You realize you might be related to him—”

“I’m aware,” I say, cutting him off. “But thank you for the reminder.” Then I pull out my phone, pulling up Google and entering *Lionel Astor beauty pageant*.

“Bingo,” I whisper when the search results pop up.

“What?” Aiden says, leaning closer to peer at the screen. “Watch out, you’re going to trip.” He steers me through the yard and down the dirt driveway with one hand on my shoulder while I keep my nose buried in my phone, scrolling and reading as fast as possible.

“Look at this,” I say quietly, glancing over my shoulder to make sure Rocco is inside with the door closed. I’m not sure why, since he likely knows anyway, but whatever. “Lionel Astor has been a guest pageant judge for years.”

Aiden frowns, that little v-shaped crease appearing in his brow as he opens the passenger door for me. I get in, passing him the phone so he can see for himself.

He closes my door and then rounds the car, climbing in the driver's side with his eyes still glued to the phone. I watch him scroll through photo after photo of Lionel—some of him sitting on a panel, some of him with his arms around pageant winners. I wait patiently as he starts typing and scrolling, typing and scrolling.

A moment later, he looks up at me, his face drained of color. “Your search history is *obscene*,” he says.

“Hey,” I say, frowning at him. “Why are you looking at that?” Then I add, “And what do you mean?” There shouldn't be anything...you know...*raunchy* on there.

He drops his gaze back to the phone, sounding incredulous as he begins listing things off. “Let's see. Best knives for sawing through bone, how to dissolve a body, where to buy lye ___”

“Oh, that,” I say, waving one hand. “I'm a writer.”

He sighs and shakes his head. “Unbelievable,” he says. Then he looks at me, passing the phone back. “Sandy did pageants.”

“She did,” I say with a nod.

“Why was he involved with them?”

“As part of a cultural outreach charity he's apparently on the board for,” I say. “The Idaho Cultural Enhancement and Scholarship Committee.”

“I—all right, look,” Aiden says with a sigh. He glances at my phone again while starting the car. “Doesn't this all seem too obvious?”

“Kind of? But mostly it just feels like a lot of things lining up too well to be coincidence.”

“If you were writing this mystery, how would you do it?” Aiden says.

“Hmm.” That's an interesting question. It doesn't take long for me to find my answer. “If I were writing this, the culprit would have been the one person it seems it *can't* be. The one with the rock-solid alibi. That person would be the key.

However..." I bite my lip, thinking. "My culprit would also be the one with extensive hidden ties to the victim." I look over at Aiden. "I don't know about alibis or anything of the other guys, but it's clear that Lionel Astor occupied at least some of the same circles as Sandy. It's also glaringly obvious that a man running for governor would not want news of an illegitimate child to get out."

Aiden just studies me for a moment. "You're talking about all this like that man isn't possibly your father."

"I'm trying to stay detached," I say, swallowing. "And look at the facts as they present themselves. Now let's go home." I turn my head, looking out the window. "I need to research Thomas Freese." I shove aside the nagging little voice that reminds me about the other person in that photograph, the one we still haven't found anything about: Cam Verido.

Thomas first, I decide, letting my head rest against the cool glass. I can only do one thing at a time.

And first on the agenda? The man my mother was dating.

IN WHICH AIDEN BECOMES
ACQUAINTED WITH JUNIPER'S
WANDERING TONGUE

When I come home from school the next day, I'm covered in ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise. There's chocolate milk in my hair, and I don't think I've managed to scrape all the mashed potatoes out of my ear.

I am fuming.

"Whoa," Juniper says when I storm into the kitchen. Her blue eyes go wide as they trail over me. She wanders toward me as I glare, her socked feet shuffling silently on the floor. It's something I've noticed about her—when she's in author mode, she dresses for comfort. And though she does most of her writing in her loft bedroom, I've seen enough over the last week or two to know the signs: Fuzzy socks. Leggings. Oversized sweater. That's her writing uniform, and it's what she's donning now.

Can't help but notice that none of *her* clothes have condiment stains. Don't see any mashed potatoes in *her* ear. Yeah, I'm feeling salty.

Literally.

Juniper's jaw is hanging open by the time she reaches me. Her gaze ping-pongs all over the place, from my face to my crusty hair to the splotch of red on my shirt.

"There was a food fight in the cafeteria," I say through clenched teeth.

"Whoa," she says again, and at this point I really just don't think her eyes can get any wider. There is an entire ring of

white around those cornflower blues—

But my brain shudders to a halt, all thought of color comparisons for Juniper's eyes disappearing, when she reaches out to touch my cheek. One finger extends slowly, brushing ever so gently against the corner of my mouth, right above my jaw. When she holds that finger up, I'm surprised to see that it has food on it—mayo, I think. I must have missed a spot.

"Hmm," Juniper says, her gaze alight with something that makes my stomach flip nervously. Those eyes sparkle up at me, bluer than anything I've ever seen, as her lips pull into a mischievous smile. "Pudding, maybe?"

And without another word, she steps into me, her body pressing gently against mine—no more than the touch of a butterfly landing on a flower. Then she tilts her head up, looks at me with her laughing gaze, and licks the pudding right off my cheek.

She *licks me*. The flick of her tongue, hooking under my jaw, trailing up until she reaches the corner of my lips. And I knew, I *knew*, that Juniper's respect for personal space was more loose than most, but this—this is—

"Mayonnaise," she says softly, her nose wrinkling. "Gross. And..." She tilts her head. Another flick of her tongue, this time just below my ear, and my hands clench desperately into fists at my sides. "Chocolate of some kind," she says, nodding. "Definitely chocolate."

My nostrils flare as I drag in breath after breath after breath, trying to get oxygen—but it's not enough, because my head is still spinning, and Juniper's body is still pressed against mine, and I can still feel her breath against my skin.

"Do you recall," I say shakily, "telling me that you wouldn't flirt with me?" I don't move. I am a statue, too afraid to move—a sculpture, not of stone but of ice. And if I stand here too long, pressed up against this woman and her wandering tongue, I will melt.

Juniper sighs. "I do remember that, yes."

I nod, no more than a spasm of my neck muscles. “And do you recall rule number one? That we won’t become romantically involved with each other?”

Another sigh—another gusting breath against my neck. “Yes,” she says, finally stepping away, leaving me chilled with the sudden absence of her warmth. “I remember that too.”

“I let the other evening slide—”

“Hey,” she says, her eyes narrowing up at me. “I told you that wasn’t just me.”

I swallow; she’s right. It wasn’t just her. It was a weird spell she wove without meaning to, yes, but I was pulled in with embarrassing ease.

“But this time—”

“This time was me,” she admits, nodding. Then she smiles. “And you don’t even like me. Isn’t that what you said the other day?”

I swallow again. I did say that. It sounds a little harsh now, though, that she’s repeating it back to me.

“All right,” she says with a melodramatic sigh. “I will keep my body parts to myself from now on. Tell me, though”—she gestures to me—“how did you end up in the crossfire?”

I’m still frozen, my hands in fists at my sides, my body tense. “When you do stuff like that,” I say instead of answering, “what exactly is going through your mind?”

And I regret asking immediately, because the change that comes over her is unmistakable. She recoils as though she’s been slapped, her body curling in on itself. The smile she gives me is forced, and even her pink hair seems to wilt like a flower without water.

“I’m sorry,” she says. She takes another step back, her eyes falling to the floor. “You’re right. That was weird of me. I’m weird.” Her voice cracks on the words, and they emerge broken from her lips. “I’m genuinely very sorry. It won’t happen again—”

“Stop,” I say, frustrated. I’m melting, just like I suspected I would, but it’s happening in an unexpected direction. It’s her words, the look on her face, that have my sharp, icy edges succumbing to warmth—not the press of her body or the velvet of her tongue. “That’s not what I mean,” I say, pushing my hand through my hair and scowling when I’m reminded of how crusty it is. “I’m not making fun of you or getting angry. I just...want to know. You can’t—you can’t go around *licking* people, Juniper,” I say, sighing.

“And I know that, right?” she says with a bitter laugh. “My mom always said I was an odd duck. Kids at school weren’t that nice.” She leans over, resting her elbows on the countertop and playing absently with the hair clips I’m just noticing for the first time—bobby pins, I think they’re called. There are a bunch of them in a pile there in front of her, and now she begins separating them, pushing them into a line—a little row of soldiers. “I know that. My brain fully realizes that licking people isn’t normal. Neither is hoarding food or killing all my main characters or—or—ugh.” She shakes her head, pushing the bobby pins more aggressively into their little line. Then she looks up and gives me a tight smile. “I’ll do better,” she says.

“What are these for?” I say, pointing to the hair pins.

“Oh, those,” she says, looking down at them. “I was trying to teach myself how to pick a lock. YouTube.”

I raise my eyebrows at her. In truth, though, I’m grateful for the change in subject. “How to pick a lock?”

She shrugs. “Yeah. My detective needs to pick a lock, so I kind of wanted to give it a try. I’m struggling with something about this book; it feels too neat, or something like that. I don’t know. I just want to do something productive, since—oh!” She starts suddenly, her eyes widening, and she stands up straighter. “I was going to tell you. I even called you earlier, but you didn’t answer. I spent a full hour looking for Thomas Freese this morning before I went to Namaste, right?”

I ignore my twinge of discomfort at this; it makes me a little nervous, her working with Gus, now that I know he had

some connection to Sandy. It wouldn't be so bad if he'd just told Juniper what happened, but since he wouldn't say anything...well, it's easy for my imagination to run rampant.

But come on. When someone admits that there was an "incident" with a young woman I now know to be dead? Yeah, I'm a little suspicious.

"And Gus was normal today?" I say.

She brushes this off with an impatient wave of her hand. "Yeah, he was fine."

"He didn't say anything more about Sandy or what might have happened?"

"No," she says, "but I didn't ask. I was...kind of too scared." She winces. "It's just, he's so big—"

"He's huge," I say.

She nods. "There was a kid in my foster home—I went for a few months in my senior year," she explains, and then she goes on, "and I thought he was the tallest person I would ever meet. He was like six-four. But Gus is bigger. I have truly never seen anyone his size."

"He's massive," I say, trying to shrug off my discomfort. "He could bench press your entire body without breaking a sweat."

"Ew." She spits the word out, her nose wrinkling with disgust. "Ew. No. We will not be using that phrase in this household ever again, please. The last time someone said that they turned out to be talking about my little brother."

Fair enough. "Fine. You looked up Thomas Freese?" I say, leaning with my hip against the counter. "What did you find?"

"Nothing," Juniper says, leaning across the counter. She's clearly anxious to get this out. Her voice is low and significant when she goes on, "Because he's dead, Aiden."

He's...what?

She nods as though I've asked this question out loud. "Yep. He's dead. Six years ago he was reported missing by his

boss at work, and they found him in the shed behind his house. They ruled his death a suicide. I couldn't find any details."

Well, that's sketchy. That's beyond sketchy.

"And how—" I say, unsure of how to voice this. "How do you—uh—*feel* about that?"

Yes, I sound pathetic. A grown man should not struggle asking someone about their feelings. But whatever.

"Um," Juniper says, her face crumpling. "I think it hasn't quite sunk in yet."

"It looks like maybe it's sunk in a little," I say without thinking. But the way her face has fallen, the way her teeth dig into her lip as her eyes drop—she looks upset. "You're allowed to be sad."

I find it's remarkable how many people don't think they're allowed to be sad.

"I know," she says. Her voice comes out a little thicker this time. "I just don't want to get bogged down by a ton of emotion right now, you know? There's a lot to do and a lot to figure out still."

I nod; that's fair, and it's her choice. So I move on.

"And can we find out any more about him?"

"We can," Juniper says, surprising me. She picks up her phone. "I want to ask my friend Matilda for help. The one who set me up on the blind date," she adds, her nose wrinkling.

"Gross." Against my will, a mental image pops into my head of me getting set up with Caroline. I fight against my gag reflex to keep my most recent meal from coming back up.

"Yes," Juniper says, gesturing to my face. "That feeling exactly. Like you're going to throw up. That's how it felt. I had a breath mint in my mouth. I was considering kissing him. My friend said he was hot. And then he showed up, and—and—" She breaks off, shuddering. "Anyway, it's that friend."

"If it were me, I might just set her loose. It feels like a bad omen for a friendship if she sets you up with your brother."

Juniper sighs, looking sad. “We get along better virtually than in person. And now whenever we text, I just feel irritated. I always knew we were different, but somehow that experience seems to have solidified it. Anyway,” she adds, shaking her head as though to dispel all her negative thoughts. “All that aside, we’ve been friends for years, and she’s a paralegal in California. I thought she might be able to help me find more information about Thomas Freese, but I wanted to ask you first. Can I talk to her?”

“Yes,” I say immediately. Why would I not want to dig deeper into the disappearance of a man possibly connected to the dead body that still haunts my dreams? Especially when we seem to be hitting so many other dead ends?

I don’t bring it up, but also running through my mind is what Juniper said yesterday—that if she were writing this mystery, the culprit would be the one who appeared to have an impenetrable alibi.

Nothing more impenetrable than death as far as alibis go. Of course, a dead man can’t be walking around causing problems today. Doesn’t mean I don’t want to know more about him. “Absolutely,” I say. “Ask her.”

Juniper nods, looking relieved. “Good. Okay. I’ll call her.”

“None of this even feels real,” I say, my eyes dawdling absently over the countertop while my mind whirs.

“I know,” Juniper says with a grimace. “Things like this don’t happen in Autumn Grove, and they don’t happen to me.”

“Exactly.”

“Except...”

“Except apparently they do,” I say. “Yeah.” And now I understand why she has a pile of bobby pins in front of her—because when the world is going topsy-turvy around you, you want to do *something* productive. For her that must be figuring out how to write about picking locks.

“Let’s do it,” I say, pointing at the pins. I’m feeling just on-edge enough to explain away this desire to get involved in something I would normally leave alone. “Let’s pick a lock.”

Juniper blinks at me, her big blue eyes surprised. “You want to help me?”

I shrug. “Sure. Yeah.”

“But...” She trails off, her gaze sweeping over me. “I need to call Matilda. And don’t you need to go get cleaned up?”

She’s right, I realize with a start. I’m still covered in food from the food fight one idiotic sophomore started in the cafeteria today.

But for the first time since lunch, I forgot. Juniper made me forget everything.

My frustration, my anger, my burning desire to make these kids understand that food is a precious commodity—my pink-haired roommate made me forget all of those things that were drowning me when I walked through our front door.

“Yeah,” I say faintly, looking down at my clothes. “This shirt is ruined.”

“Of course it isn’t,” Juniper says with a snort. “What’s on there—is that ketchup?”

My eyes narrow as I glare at the big red splotch. “Yes.”

She waves one hand. “That will come out. Take your shirt off. We’ll put some stain stick on, soak it in cold water—it will be fine.”

“What’s stain stick?” I say with a frown.

Juniper rolls her eyes and turns away, sauntering toward the laundry closet. Maybe it’s because I’m still feeling a little warm after she licked me, but my attention is pulled to the hypnotic swing of her hips as she moves, every curve showcased in her leggings.

“I know I’m devastatingly good-looking, but please stop staring at me,” she calls over her shoulder, and I jump, startled to hear her repeating the same thing I said not that long ago. I yank my eyes away from her hips, only to find my gaze clashing with hers. I ignore the little smirk I see, turning around altogether. Staring is going to send the wrong message anyway.

I listen as she rummages around in the closet, only letting myself look at her again when she plops a bottle down on the counter next to me.

“Here,” she says. “Stain stick. Put it on the stain and let it soak in cold water, then wash it.” She pokes lightly at the ketchup stain on my shirt. “That will come out, no problem.”

“Thanks,” I say grudgingly. I’m not quite ready to make eye contact, not since she caught me staring. So I swipe the bottle into my hand and then head to my room. I remove my shirt and apply the stain remover as directed, Juniper’s instructions in the back of my mind as I push the shirt into a sink full of cold water.

And in the shower, I clean my face and my neck several times, first with soap and then with shampoo. But no matter how I scrub, no matter what I use...somehow I can still feel Juniper’s tongue on my skin, staking her claim without even realizing it.

IN WHICH AIDEN REMEMBERS

When I emerge from my bedroom a short time later, it's to find Juniper talking on the phone.

"Yeah," she's saying, her face serious. "All I've been able to find are a couple news articles about his death. Beyond that I can't tell what else happened."

I meander over to the fruit basket, grabbing an apple and polishing it on my new, non-ketchup-stained shirt. Then I lean back against the counter, making myself comfortable as I wait. I take a big bite, my eyes remaining locked on Juniper.

"Yeah," she says again. "So his name was Thomas Freese. *T-H-O-M-A-S*," she spells. "Last name Freese. *F-R-E-E-S-E*."

She falls silent as her friend—Matilda, I think she said—says something on the other end. She bites her lip as she listens, her face growing even more serious. Then she sighs.

"Honestly?" she says, playing absently with the bobby pins on the counter. "Someone mentioned that he and my mom might have been involved right around the time I was conceived."

Another beat of silence as she listens, and then she nods slowly. "Yeah. It's possible. So that's why I wanted to see what else I could find. You know I've never really stressed too much about finding my father, but..." She shrugs. "I kind of want to follow this and see where it goes."

After another moment of listening, her body relaxes, tension draining out of her shoulders. "Thank you," she says,

sounding relieved. “I know you’ve got a lot going on. How’s Ned?”

Matilda’s answer to this question is longer than anything she’s said so far; Juniper is quiet for probably two full minutes. I watch with a growing smirk as her attention visibly wanes, until she’s tapping her fingers impatiently on the countertop. When she finally speaks again, though, her voice is warm.

“I’m so glad,” she says. “You guys deserve to be happy. Let me know when you decide between princess cut and oval. And send pictures!”

They exchange goodbyes and then hang up, and Juniper’s body sags slightly. “You know how some people just require a lot of energy? Matilda is sort of like that. And she cares about a lot of things that I don’t care about, but I always feel like I have to pretend. It involves a lot of nodding and smiling.” She turns to me, looking tired. “That’s why we get along better over text and chat than we do in real-time conversations. She’s going to look into Thomas Freese, though. She said she has a few ideas of places she could search.”

“I’ve known a few of those people,” I say. “I think keeping things virtual is fine.”

“Me too,” she admits. Then she brightens. “Enough of that. Are you ready to pick some locks?”

“I guess,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck. I’m rethinking this whole plan, to be honest. This always happens to me; I make a commitment and then regret it not ten minutes later. And while I do still understand Juniper’s desire to research firsthand the things she’s going to be writing about, it’s been a long, food-fight-filled day. I want to sit down and read a book or ten.

I also want to force each and every student involved in that food fight to spend a week volunteering at the food bank.

How can I make those kids understand? How can I make them get it? I can’t send an entire cafeteria’s worth of kids to

Rodriguez. We don't need more workers; we need more funding.

"Hey," Juniper says, waving a hand in front of my face, and I jump.

"Yeah," I say quickly.

"You're spacing out," she says. "There's no time for that. We're on a mission." Then she smiles at me and says, "Let's use your door."

"Oh, no," I say quickly. "No. If you fail horribly and end up breaking a lock, I don't want it to be mine. And you know what"—Ha! A potential out!—"maybe we should check with my sister to see if she's okay with you doing this. She might not want to risk damage to the doors." Yes, that sounds good. Surely Caroline will say no, and then I'll have a socially acceptable way out of the plans I already regret making.

"Ooh, yes," Caroline says over speakerphone three minutes later. "Try it. What are you going to use?"

I roll my eyes, rubbing my temples. What is it about my sister and Juniper that gives me a headache?

"Bobby pins," Juniper says. She's leaning over the counter, speaking into the phone, her chin propped in one hand. "I'm going to try bobby pins."

"And this is for a book you're writing?"

"Mostly, yeah. Although in the interest of full transparency, I do have to admit that part of me is just excited to try it. But if I somehow end up breaking something, I'll pay for a replacement," Juniper says quickly. "Is that fair?"

"Yep!" Caroline says. "As long as you're willing to cover any damages you incur, I think it sounds like fun—oh, hang on." There's a shuffling sound on the other end, followed by the sound of my sister bellowing at her children, "*Hey! No! Do not put that in your mouth—hey.*" She returns to Juniper and I sounding breathless. "I have to go. My kid is eating soap."

"Naturally," Juniper says with a nod. "Go."

“Great,” Caroline says. “I’ll just continue to live vicariously through you.”

Juniper laughs, but it doesn’t sound quite natural. My eyes narrow as I study her, trying to figure out why she sounds so weird. I think...huh. Interesting.

I think she can’t quite tell if Caroline is making fun of her or not.

“Yeah?” Juniper says, running one hand self-consciously over her hair.

“Yeah,” Caroline says. “You’re rocking the pink bob and wearing sexy dresses and writing books and picking locks—*no, Myra, put it back! Put it back on the counter. We do not eat soap, sweetheart*—hey, you two, I have to run. Let me know how it goes.” And then she’s gone, the call ending in a flurry of breathless chaos.

“She was being serious,” I say, because Juniper is still looking like she can’t quite tell. But whatever else Caroline is—loud, nagging, overly involved, nosy—she’s not a bully, and she’s not mean. “About living vicariously through you or whatever. She wasn’t making fun of you.”

“Ah,” Juniper says now, looking uncomfortable. It’s a weird expression on her, one that doesn’t fit quite right. “Glad to know I’m so transparent.”

I shrug, picking up a handful of the bobby pins still piled on the counter. “So are we gonna do this or not?” Changing the subject seems like the tactful thing to do here.

“Yes,” she says, her expression clearing. “Yes. Okay. So if you don’t want to use your door—”

“I really don’t.”

“Then we can use mine. But I need you to go inside the room in case I can’t pick the lock. I don’t want to end up locked out of my own bedroom.”

“So you just need me to hang out in your room while you try to unlock the door from the outside,” I clarify. “That’s it?”

“Yep,” she says, scooping up the remaining bobby pins. She pushes them to the edge of the counter and then catches them in her other hand, and for the first time I notice that today her nails are army green.

Well, sitting in her room won’t be bad. I’ll bring a book.

So I run to my room and grab *Hamlet*, emerging a second later. “Okay,” I say. “Let’s do it, I guess.”

Juniper eyes the book I’m holding, mutters something that sounds an awful lot like “wildly pretentious,” and then heads out of the kitchen, bobby pins in hand. I follow her—up the big stairs, around the corner, and up the little stairs. I wait for her to open the door, just to be polite, and she ushers me inside.

“Go in and lock the door,” she instructs. “Feel free to poke around or lie on the bed or whatever. Make yourself comfortable.”

I nod, stepping into the small loft and closing the door behind me. I turn the lock and then take a second to look around, trying to decide where to land.

And...well. My intentions really are pure at first.

I brought my book for a reason, after all. I fully intend to sit on the bed and read while Juniper tinkers with the lock.

Except...I’ve never been in Juniper’s room before. Not since she moved in. And regardless of my hold-ups about her, I can’t deny that I’m interested. Not *interested* interested, as in romantically inclined. I’m just...interested. I’m curious. This woman frequently leaves me scratching my head.

“Hey,” I call before I can think better of it. When I hear a pause in the clicking and scraping sounds coming from the other side of the door, I say, “Can I really poke around?”

There’s a beat of silence before Juniper answers, “Yes—if you promise you won’t judge me no matter what you find. And...if I can do the same in your room.”

Of course I’m going to say no to that.

Right?

I'm going to say no to that, right?

"Deal," I say. It slips past my lips too quickly, too easily. I press my hands to my cheeks, feeling them burn; I feel strangely naked having agreed to this. Not because of what she might find in my room, either—more because this proves to her that I *want* to learn more about her. I don't need her getting the wrong idea.

But it's too late now. I've opened the lid to my Pandora's Box, the part of me that's almost hungry for more information about this woman. I don't want to count her bras or peek into her underwear drawer; I want to peek into her mind, her heart, her past. She's managed to interrupt my life so thoroughly, and I want...more.

I want *more*.

More interruptions. More pink hair. More insults flung back and forth over the dinner table.

I want more, and I will take that secret to my grave. No one—not Juniper, not my sister, not my solitary friend at work—will ever know that there's something about this woman that I crave.

I can't have a relationship with this woman, romantic or otherwise. We're roommates. She has baggage. And I...

I swallow.

I'm keeping a secret from her.

So no matter how intriguing I find her, no matter how my eyes linger sometimes, it can't happen.

I press my hand over my chest, frowning as I feel my heart pumping faster. I think I must have had too much caffeine at lunch.

The scraping sound from the lock stops, and I turn to look at the door just as I hear her call, "Hey, wait—no underwear drawer."

I smirk, my gaze jumping to the small chest of drawers in the corner. "I'm not interested in your underwear." Is there a drawer where she stores her thoughts? A drawer for her

temper, a drawer for the smiles that promise trouble? A drawer where she keeps her utter disregard for personal boundaries?

“Rude,” she says, though it’s muffled. “But also reassuring, I suppose. Have at it, then.”

For a moment I just stand there, looking around, seeing what catches my eye as I listen absently to the resumed clinks and scrapes coming from the door’s lock. The sun streaming through the skylight has a chilled quality to it, a cold brightness that casts the room in a frosty light and leaves a large rectangle of illumination on the neatly made bed.

This room came furnished, bed included, but Juniper has made all the furniture her own. Her comforter is pure white, but her sheets and pillowcase appear to be striped in various shades of blue and orange and red and yellow—a sort of bohemian pattern that suits her well.

The desk, nightstand, and chest of drawers were already here too, but her personal touches make them seem like they belong to her. There’s a pink file box under the desk; I crouch down and crack it open, expecting to find file folders or papers or something similar. Instead, though, I see several sandwich bags with various different foods inside—half of a sandwich, a few dinner rolls I recognize as leftovers from the other night, a handful of baby carrots that will probably start to shrivel soon. I shake my head, closing the box again and standing up. Then I continue my perusal.

I open the closet and peek inside, but there’s nothing of interest; clothes and shoes and a cardboard box tucked back in the corner. So I move my attention to the top of the desk.

A laptop, a little vase of flowers, and an army of sticky notes. Those are the contents. I smile when I see that the vase is a little grinning skull; maybe that’s why she liked the one on my desk so much.

“Does your skull have a name?” I call without turning around.

The grinding and scraping and clinking sounds stop. “Catherine Earnshaw,” Juniper says from the other side of the

door.

A bark of laughter escapes me at this. “Is Heathcliff around here somewhere?” I say.

“Just Cathy.” I can hear the smile in Juniper’s voice. “I thought she seemed like a character who would enjoy having her skull turned into a flower vase.”

I nod, still smiling. I run my fingers over a few of the sticky notes, reading the snippets scribbled there. *Remember MC’s eyes are green*, one of them says—do authors forget that kind of thing?—and another one reads, *Foreshadow knife reveal starting chapter three*. Yet another has a quote I’ve heard before scribbled on it: *Well-behaved women rarely make history*. Interestingly enough, though, directly beneath this quote is a line Juniper has added: *I have no desire to make history. I want to live a quiet, happy life*.

Huh. That’s...unexpected.

Then there are a couple Post-its that simply have little doodles, like a flower with lopsided petals and a few tiny hearts, and still more that have snippets of what I assume are Juniper’s own words.

And it’s there, in my perusal of these last sticky notes, that I make another discovery: Juniper Bean writes poetry.

I don’t know if she calls it that, or if these are simply lines she plans to use in her books later. Regardless of what she names it, though, it’s undeniably poetry. Some of it is short, no more than a line or two; some of it is longer, two or three stanzas.

Up until this moment, my attention has been floating easily around the room; now it anchors firmly to the desk. My eyes dart hungrily over every Post-it I can find, devouring her words.

They’re stark and blunt in places, meandering in others, full of visceral imagery. It’s her naked mind on display, both light and dark, strange and familiar, and she’s done something incredible with it. She sees her shadows; she weaves them through her fingers. She knows their value.

But she doesn't drown in them. She remains sunshine—not soft, gentle sunshine, but abrasive sunshine with sharp edges. That's how she channels her demons, both in her poetry and her life: she uses them to make her light shine brighter in contrast.

I read them all. Lines and stanzas and snippets of phrases, words that rise and words that fall, melodic and dreamy and evocatively beautiful. And I can't believe I'm saying this, but—I rest one hand on my chest, feeling my heart race—I have never been more attracted to anyone in my life than I am to her, here and now, in this moment.

“Get a grip,” I mutter, stumbling away from the desk. I press both hands to my cheeks in an attempt to cool my body down, but it's not working.

I've always been this way. Show me the most beautiful woman in the world and I'll acknowledge that she's pretty, but show me a beautiful *mind* if you want that prettiness to really affect me. Beauty alone is not enough to make my pulse race and my body react.

It's reacting now.

I pat my cheeks a few times, trying to restore order and regain the upper hand over my physiology. As I sit on the bed, I take a deep breath, hold it, and then exhale. I repeat this process several more times before checking my pulse, sighing with relief when it slows down. My cheeks aren't as warm to the touch now either.

Good. Very good.

I'm setting strict boundaries for myself, effective immediately: no more poetry from Juniper Bean. In fact, no more desk area, period. It's time to move on.

There are two small pictures on the nightstand; when I realize they're photographs, I cross the room and lean down to get a better look. I can handle photographs, no problem.

The first one is a shot of Juniper and a guy who can only be her brother; they have the same light hair in this photo, with

similar face shapes and the same wide smiles. Despite the lack of pink hair, it still looks to be fairly recent.

“Is this your brother?” I call over my shoulder.

“On the bedside table?” she calls back. “With the blond hair? Yeah, that’s Roland.”

I nod, moving on to the other picture. My lips turn down as I study this one, something I can’t quite define tugging at my mind.

It’s a young girl, maybe seven or eight years old, although she could be older. She looks underfed, to be honest, and that can make it hard to tell someone’s age. It’s clearly Juniper, that much I can tell—the same blonde hair, the same blue eyes, and enough similarities that I can recognize her. But she doesn’t look healthy in this photo, despite her bright smile. Her hair is a little stringy, her cheeks a little gaunt.

That tugging in my mind intensifies—flashes of something familiar.

A breakfast sandwich. A large Band-Aid. Two little hands and a messy head of hair, peeking over the top of...

A dumpster.

I snatch the photo up, bringing it so close to my face that my breath fogs up the glass. I stare at the girl, racking my memory. Plucking images out, dusting them off, holding them up and comparing them side by side.

“No,” I breathe. “No.”

It’s not possible. This isn’t possible. There’s no way that little girl dumpster diving was Juniper. There’s no way I would have then ended up tutoring her, no way we would have ended up living together. That level of coincidence simply isn’t possible.

Except...

Except.

It *isn't* coincidence, is it?

I sit down on the bed, my mind reeling with thoughts and implications, staring blankly at the photo until one clear thought emerges:

None of this would be coincidence. If that little girl was Juniper, *none of this would be coincidence*.

I tutored Juniper as part of my pedagogy course.

I took that pedagogy course as part of my major in social work, which I first became interested in when I helped that little girl out of the dumpster.

So, in essence, I became Juniper's tutor *because* I first fed her when she was just a hungry little girl. And she needed a tutor for the same reason she needed food that day in the alley: those needs weren't being met in her home. She was recommended by the school as a student whose family couldn't afford extra reading or tutoring.

I let the picture slip out of my hands and clatter to the floor as my brain keeps making leaps, bounding on ahead as the dominoes keep falling, knocking each other down faster than I can keep up.

My unimpressive salary—for the profession I chose because of my experiences with Juniper growing up—is the reason I'm living in this rental.

She's living in this rental because it has the loft bedroom, separate from the main levels. She said it gave her a quiet place to work and write. And she works as a writer because she said my tutoring helped her fall in love with storytelling and literature.

And I ended up tutoring her *because* I was studying social work *because* I found her that day in the alley—

I stand up abruptly, shaking my head like a dog emerging from water. Cause and effect, cause and effect, running through my mind on an endless loop as I pace, my footsteps nearly silent on the wooden floor.

It's impossible. Impossible.

And yet, incredibly, it also seems to have been inevitable.

I swing my head around to look at the closed door—behind which I can now hear Juniper swearing, by the way. I stare at that door as though I can see through it, considering the woman on the other side.

How tightly wound are our fates, and we didn't even know it? How joined are our lives? I am who I am partly because of her. And she is who she is partly because of who I became after knowing her.

And again her words come, a distant echo in my memory: *Is this fate? Do you think this is our second chance?*

I don't believe in fate.

But I do believe in Juniper.

I believe in that woman's ability to make waves wherever she goes, to force people to grow around her, their own lives changing as they make room for her.

My gaze jumps back to the sticky note on her desk—the one that proclaims her desire to live a quiet, happy life.

I don't know that a quiet life is in the cards for Juniper Bean. She is the stone in the stream that the water must rush around. And those people, whether they want to be or not, are history-makers. Any time your presence causes people to change, you're making history. Sometimes small history, sometimes grand—always worth paying attention to.

I sigh, sinking back onto the bed and running my hand through my hair. I place the photo of young Juniper back where I found it. Then I pick up my book and spend the next ten minutes reading the same page seventeen times in a row.

When the lock finally clicks and I hear Juniper's cry of excitement, I get up and open the door.

I look her dead in the eye and say, "You don't need to keep all that food under your desk. You'll attract ants." I pause at the rapid blush that climbs her cheeks, her look of triumph dying. "As long as you live in this house," I finally go on, "I promise I will not let you go hungry. Okay?"

It's not much of a vow; it shouldn't feel as momentous as it does. But the gravity settles on my shoulders all the same—not stifling but grounding, like the comfort that comes from lying under a weighted blanket. I give her one last nod before making my exit.

The last thing I see is a pair of blue, surprise-filled eyes—the same eyes I first saw twenty-something years ago, peeking at me from over the edge of a garbage-filled dumpster.

Prologue from victim
POV?

10%: inciting
25%: plot point 1
33%: pinch point 1
50%: midpoint
66%: pinch 2
75%: darkest
90%: wrap up

Make sure hair
length stays
consistent

Should I get bangs?

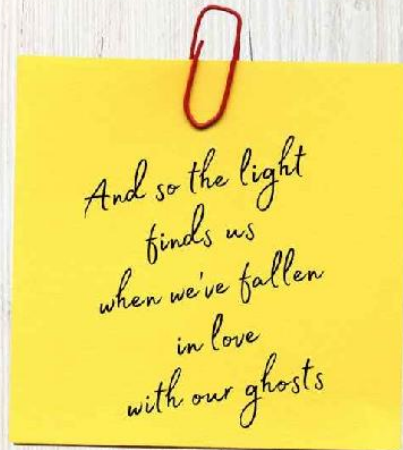


If A asks, he was
the inspiration for the
dead body, not the
love interest



Chapter titles or
numerals?

Remember
MC's eyes are
green



"Well-behaved women
rarely make history"

I have no desire to make
history. I want to live a
quiet, happy life

No chapter in the history
of chapters has ever
sucked as badly as
chapter 7. Redo the whole
thing

WRITING BOOKS
IS HARD

I NEED A NEW
JOB

Why isn't this
working???

IN WHICH JUNIPER MEETS THE WORLD'S MOST GLORIOUS ABS

I am completely, totally, *utterly* stuck, and I don't think I've ever felt this helpless.

I didn't mean for things to turn out like this. But I keep hitting dead ends at every turn. The days keep ticking by with no news. Garrity has to coordinate with someone in Boise to analyze the photos Sandy is supposedly sending, and I still haven't heard back from Matilda with any information about Thomas Freese, the man who was romantically involved with my mother and then bizarrely committed suicide.

I feel like I'm going insane with how helpless this whole situation makes me feel, and I wanted to do *something*.

So I did.

"Aiden," I shout, trying to keep the panic at bay.

It's fine. This is fine. Everything will be fine.

He'll help me.

"Aiden!" I shout again, louder this time, and definitely edging into *screech* territory. I can feel my breath coming in short, sharp bursts, causing my chest to hurt, and—oh, no. Is this a heart attack? Am I having a heart attack? "*Aiden!*"

When I hear the thundering of feet coming down the stairs, my body buzzes with relief. Or maybe it buzzes because I'm losing sensory input; I'm not sure. Whatever the case, I do feel relief, and I am buzzing—an unpleasant tingling feeling that starts in my hands and feet and moves gradually up my limbs.

“Help,” I croak pathetically. “Help me, please. In here.” The tiled floor and walls of the bathroom cause my words to echo slightly, bouncing back, mocking me like mean kids on the playground.

A second later, I hear a tentative knock at the door. “What are you going on about?” Aiden says from the other side, sounding grumpy. “I’m trying to grade papers.”

“Help me,” I say again.

“I’m not coming in there. What you do in the bathroom is your own business. I don’t need to see that—”

“Get in here and help!” I shout. The panic is starting to overwhelm me again, the pain around my middle becoming more and more unbearable by the second. “It’s not locked. Open the door and come help me!”

There’s a solid five seconds of under-his-breath grumbling from Aiden before he cracks the door open.

And I swear, he could not be moving more slowly if he tried. He is molasses running down tree bark on a snowy day, and I *do not have time* for that.

“Aiden!” I snap. “I’m not naked or sitting on the toilet. Open the freaking door or so help me—”

The door flies open with a bang, revealing a glaring Aiden. “Listen up,” he begins, striding into the bathroom. “I do not want to be summoned when you’re in the—in the—in—” But his words fade away as he takes in the situation, his eyes widening, his jaw dropping.

I look down at him from the window where I’m stuck, half-inside, half-outside, legs flailing, my upper body dangling helplessly. “Please help me,” I say as tears start to pool in my eyes. “It hurts, Aiden—”

“For the *love*, Juniper,” he says with a sigh, rubbing his temples in the way he always does when he’s annoyed by something I’ve said or done. He looks up, his eyes raking over me, clearly assessing. “Why are you like this? How did this happen? What on earth are you thinking?”

He hurries over to me, standing directly under the window and lifting his arms. His strong hands grasp me under the armpits, relieving some of the pressure and pain from where the windowsill is digging into my stomach.

“I’ve got you,” he says, shaking his head—probably at my stupidity. “Give me your weight, come on. I’ve got you.”

“I thought I would fit, but I didn’t! It’s because I’m pear-shaped,” I babble like a madwoman. “Pears aren’t supposed to go through windows—”

“I don’t know what that means,” he mutters distractedly as he eases my body weight into his grasp. I wiggle my hips frantically, trying to find a little bit of give.

“It means you’re smaller on the top half and bigger on the bottom half,” I wail. “I’m a *pear*, Aiden—”

“Your bottom half and top half are both fine. Stop talking about fruit.” He pauses, then adds, “Actually, just stop talking altogether.”

I whimper in pain as I force my non-rectangular body to squish through this very rectangular hole. Aiden’s grip under my armpits is starting to hurt too, especially as more and more of my weight falls to him.

“I’ve got you,” he says again as I finally manage to get the widest part of the pear in. And he *says* he’s got me, but I’m not quite sure I trust him—he’s grunting more than talking, and when he takes a tiny step backward, he stumbles a bit.

I don’t have a choice, though, so I finally give in, letting him have all of my weight. Then I pull my legs through the window one at a time, scraping the length of my thighs and shins against the unforgiving windowsill, tears stinging my eyes, until all of me finally makes it in...

And lands squarely on top of Aiden, sending us both sprawling to the cold tile floor.

We land like lovers in the midst of passion, my body directly on top of his, our faces inches apart, our breath knocked out of us—but the look in Aiden’s eyes isn’t the look a man gives his lover.

It's the look a man gives the woman he's just rescued from a very stupid situation.

It's the look a man gives his roommate when he's wondering if he could have her evicted.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to banish the tears of pain. Everything hurts—my legs from scraping through the window, my arms from holding up my body, my torso from the pressure of the sill. That last one will probably bruise.

“Any time you feel like explaining...?” Aiden says from beneath me, and my eyes snap open again.

“I just wanted to know how to best break in through a window,” I say, sniffing.

“Is this another experiment for your book?” he says.

I let my head drop, my face squishing into his shoulder. Maybe that will hide the flush of embarrassment. “Yes,” I say. Then I add, “You smell stupidly good.” Which somehow makes me feel worse. If I'm going to need rescuing, the least he could do is not be so freaking hot all the time. Level that playing field a bit.

“Next time you're going to do research for a novel, tell me first,” he says. “So I can have the fire department ready.”

I give his shoulder a good whack, but I smile, too.

My smile inexplicably widens when I feel his hand patting my back, warm and firm. “Come on,” he murmurs, his lips no more than a hair's breadth from my ear. “Get up. Unless you're planning to stay there?”

“Just one more minute,” I say, taking another whiff of him. “You're comfortable and you smell good. And...everything hurts,” I admit.

“One more minute,” he says with a sigh. When I lift my head to look at him, though, there's a spark of amusement in his eyes, a little smirk on his lips.

“What's that for?” I say quickly. “You're smirking. There's nothing funny here.”

“Yes, there is,” he says, his voice bland. “You got stuck in a bathroom window, landed on top of me, and then shamelessly told me how good I smell and how comfortable I am to lie on top of. I could tease you about this for years, and it still wouldn’t get old.”

I prop myself up on my elbows so that my upper body hovers over him by a couple inches—just enough that I can deliver a nice glare. “You wouldn’t dare,” I say, my eyes narrowed.

But that’s a stupid thing to say. Of course he would dare.

“I absolutely would,” he says—so there’s that suspicion confirmed. His little smirk tugs wider. “Did you not hear me? You were *stuck in a window*. In the *bathroom*. What part of that isn’t funny?”

“At least I don’t have mashed potatoes in my ears,” I say with a smirk of my own. “Unless that’s some sort of mold...?”

Aiden’s face morphs into a scowl, and he reaches both of his hands up. “Stupid high schoolers. I thought I got it all out the other day—which ear?”

“That one,” I say, nudging his right ear with my nose.

“Fine,” he says, pulling his sleeve over his hand and using it to rub furiously at the inside of his ear. “Fine. Maybe I have mashed potato in my ear. But *you*”—his other hand reaches down and pokes me in the side, causing me to yelp—“you called yourself a pear. I’m not the only strange one in this room.”

“Hey,” I say hotly. “*Pear-shaped* is a widely accepted term. Nine out of ten women would know exactly what I meant.”

Aiden snorts, a puff of breath I feel against my lips. There’s something challenging in his gaze, though, a spark of daring that appears two seconds before I feel them: his hands, on either side of me, starting at the outside of my hips and trailing lightly up until they reach my ribcage.

He never strays from his path up my sides, never drifts into territory that would earn him a knee to the groin, but his touch

is full of fire nonetheless—though not even his fingertips burn as hot as his eyes. “There’s nothing pear-shaped about you,” he says.

“Careful.” I drop the word into the suddenly silent space between us, my heart thundering. “You’re moving awfully close to flirtatious.”

“At least I don’t go around telling people how good they smell,” he says, and there’s that smirk again.

“It’s called a compliment,” I fire back. “It’s part of being *nice* and *social*.”

His hands tighten around my ribcage, pulling a little gasp from me, but he doesn’t seem to notice. “I can be nice,” he says as his eyes blaze hotter, full of that stupid defiance that makes me want to slap him and kiss him at the same time. “I can be social.”

“I doubt it,” I say with a snort. “You sit around on the weekends reading Shakespeare—”

“Shakespeare was a brilliant storyteller—”

“He had a cute little earring, just like you,” I coo, leaning down a few inches and nudging his ear with my nose again.

“And maybe he went around licking his roommates, too,” Aiden shoots back immediately. There’s a breathless quality to his voice, and his hands tighten further around my ribcage.

Does he even realize what he’s doing? Does he realize that he’s trying to pull me closer as the fire in our words burns hotter?

And it does continue to burn; there’s no denying that. With every volley we throw back and forth, the electricity between us sparks more dangerously, and that delighted, wicked amusement in Aiden’s gaze flashes brighter and brighter. Despite my position simply lying here, I’m out of breath like I’ve just run a marathon; I can feel Aiden’s chest heaving beneath me, feel each and every one of his fingertips digging into my side.

We're standing on the edge of a precipice, and we're going to fall if we don't move.

"If you don't stop touching me like that in the next three seconds," I breathe, letting my head hang so that my lips ghost over his skin, "I'm going to kiss you. I'm also going to assume you've changed your mind about being involved with me romantically."

And for the briefest of seconds, Aiden defies my expectation: his grip on me tightens. But then I feel a burst of breath somewhere around my hairline, the faintest hint of a laugh. "So reckless," he says, sounding amused. "You would really jump in just like that?" Then he releases me altogether, his hands lingering only long enough to lift my body off of his. He shifts me gently to the floor next to him, and I shiver at the sudden feeling of the cool tile against my skin.

"Go lie down," he says from next to me. "You're probably going to be sore after being stuck up there."

But I don't move. I don't even look at him until his back is turned and he's leaving the room.

Then I rush upstairs to my little loft bedroom, sit down at my laptop, and begin to write. My detective will *not* be climbing into the murderer's house via a window.

She deserves better.

She also deserves a book that works better than this one is working. I finish out the scene halfheartedly, sighing to myself.

What am I doing wrong? Why isn't this working?

I'm laying groundwork for clues. I'm setting up suspects. My detective is finding little snippets of proof exactly where I want her to find them. So what's wrong? Why does it feel like there's something missing?



WHEN I KNOCK ON AIDEN'S BEDROOM DOOR A COUPLE HOURS later, it's with a shaking fist and excuses on my tongue.

My mind is a free-for-all right now. It's nuts in there. There's too much going on, and I can't keep track of any of it. Sandra von Meller, and my mother, and Gus and the Betties and Lionel Astor and Thomas Freese and my murder novel and *Aiden*, Aiden's hands holding me in that white-knuckled grip—

"Hey," I call, banging a little louder. "Can I come in?"

I hear footsteps, and then a second later Aiden's voice floats toward me from inside the room. "Why do you want to come in?" he says, the words muffled. I think he's standing right on the other side of the door.

"I want to ask you something," I say. There's a bite of impatience in my words, but that's okay; maybe it will cover up how nervous I am. "Come on, let me in. I feel stupid talking to the door."

"You probably look pretty silly, too."

I roll my eyes, mostly because he's correct. And he called me reckless earlier, but he's clearly the opposite—he's being careful now, going so far as to keep this physical barrier between us.

Was he right? Was it a reckless promise to make, that I would kiss him if he didn't let go of me?

It's possible.

I'd even say probable.

But I meant it. And I'd say it again. When it comes to my heart, I'm a seize the day kind of girl.

And I was ready to *carpe that diem*.

I'm just lifting my hand to knock again when the door swings open, and I jump, startled. The man whose day I was ready to seize is standing there, looking thoroughly unimpressed as he stares down at me.

Elegance! I demand of myself, straightening my back so I'm not slouching. *Poise! Never let him know he makes you nervous.*

"Hi," I say, shouldering past him and barging into the room.

"By all means, come in," he says in a dry voice.

"You got to poke around in my room," I say as I waltz over to his desk. "Still grading papers?"

"Trying to," he says as he strolls toward me, his hands tucked in his pockets. "Someone keeps interrupting me."

"Sad," I say with not an ounce of sadness.

"Yes," he says. "I can tell you're really torn up about it." Then he cocks one inquisitive brow at me. "What do you want, Juniper?"

"I want my brain to stop hurting," I say. "Everything that's been happening is buzzing around in there. Like flies. Like a million puzzle pieces from a million different puzzles have spilled, and now I'm trying to put them back in the right boxes. Like..." I trail off, biting my lip as I stare absently at the papers on his desk. "Like everything I know is floating, hovering just above my head, and I have to grab all those thoughts before they drift away, lost in the wind."

I turn to him, opening my mouth to speak again, but I freeze at the expression on his face—some sort of interested amusement.

"What?" I say. I abandon his desk and begin wandering aimlessly around the room, taking in details. I point at his face as I walk. "What are you doing?"

He shrugs as he sits on the edge of his bed. "Just waiting," he says, his eyes following me with interest.

I blink at him. "For what?"

He continues to watch me, still looking intrigued. "To see what you'll say next."

I snort, trying to avoid blushing through sheer force of will. Does that even work? Is that a thing? I should look it up. It might be a useful skill to have. “I’m just rambling,” I say, drifting toward a large chest of drawers. I pull the top drawer open, peeking inside—shirts. I close that drawer and move on to the next one—socks, all folded neatly, mostly argyle.

I bet he has one row in his closet dedicated solely to tweed blazers.

When my hands close around the knobs of the third drawer, he speaks again. “Not that one.”

“Third drawer down is the underwear drawer,” I say with a nod. “Good to know.” Then I move my hands to the fourth drawer.

“Juniper,” he warns, and I turn around. “Cut it out.” His eyes narrow on me as he goes on, “Are you one of those people who likes to annoy everyone else when you’re bored? You know that’s the worst kind of person, right?”

“Do you have two underwear drawers?” I say, staring down at my fingers on the knob of that fourth drawer.

“Juniper.”

I sigh, abandoning the chest of drawers. “I’m aware, yes. But I don’t think I’m that kind of person. I’m not bored right now. I just can’t figure anything out.”

He nods. “Great. So you’re someone who doesn’t want anyone else to be at peace if you yourself can’t be at peace either. That’s probably worse—”

“It’s not that,” I say, throwing my hands up in the air. “Ugh. You’re misunderstanding me on purpose. I just need to talk things through with someone, and you happen to be the lucky winner.”

“Then stop poking around and start talking,” he says. He sounds just as exasperated as I do.

“You explicitly agreed that I could invade your privacy in your room,” I say.

“I—yeah, I did,” he begins, running his hand over his hair, “but—”

“However,” I cut him off. “I will let you off the hook. *If.*”

He’s still sitting on the bed, but now he straightens, angling his body toward me. His eyes narrow. “If...?”

“*If* you show me one tattoo.” I hold up a finger. “Just one.”

He lets his body relax again, a lazy smile flitting over his face. “Deal.” He stands up without any further prompting, lifting his shirt.

And...holy abs.

“Wildly unnecessary.” It pops out of my mouth before I can stop it, but come on. If you look that good in a stuffy tweed blazer, you shouldn’t also look good shirtless. It’s just rude. “Where’s the tattoo?” I say, rallying every last brain cell at my disposal.

Aiden points to a little *x* right over his heart. His lazy smile has turned into that signature smirk, but I don’t even call him out; he’s earned this one.

Yep. Smirk away, my friend. That is a *fine* set of abdominal muscles and a *lovely* pair of pecs.

“*X* marks the spot?”

He nods, letting his shirt drop—sad.

“Did it hurt?” I say.

“Nah,” he says. He shrugs and sits back on the bed. “It wasn’t bad.”

“Neither was mine.”

His eyes jump to me, and I watch for a second as his gaze moves up and down my body. Then, with quickening breath, I wait as it settles somewhere right around my belly button.

Like he’s using x-ray vision, and he can see what’s inked over the scar on my lower back. And in my mind, from the recesses of my memory, come the words he spoke all those years ago: *You can cover up a scar if you don’t like it, though.*

You can keep it covered or even get a tattoo there or something.

“Ah,” I say softly as the pieces fall into place. How long has he known? “You remembered.” I move slowly toward him, my pulse pounding through my veins as my mind works to catch up. What does he think of me now that he knows what happened all those years ago? What does he think of the poor, silly little girl who went dumpster diving for breakfast?

My cheeks burn as my eyes sting with unshed tears. I don’t think I want to know the answer to that question. I don’t want to know what he thinks of me now.

“Yes,” he says, unapologetic. “I remembered.” His smirk has vanished; his eyes are still fixed on my torso as I approach.

“When?” I say, tilting my head.

“I saw the picture of you in your room.”

Of course. Duh.

Deep breath in, deep breath out. It’s fine that he knows. No matter what he thinks, I’m okay. I can be okay no matter what *anyone* thinks.

“Did you know who I was the whole time?” he goes on.

“I knew the second we met when I was seventeen.”

He widens his knees as I reach the edge of the bed, allowing me to step in closer. It’s an intimate provision, but I know he’s allowing me this near so that I can show him the tattoo. So I move into his space and then turn around, lifting my shirt just high enough that he’ll be able to see.

A thin, raised scar and six words above it: *Never more than you can handle.*

I don’t jump when I feel his fingers, warm and gentle, tracing the scar. I let him take that liberty, touching me, outlining the scrolling font. I don’t jump either when he lifts his other hand and holds me gently by the hips, turning me around until I’m facing him once more.

I reach out, slowly at first, tentatively, until I see that he's not going to stop me. Then I reach around the back of his neck, feeling along his hairline until I find it: the thin white line he showed me that day, the one he got from trying to cut his own hair as a child. I run my thumb over the spot, only noticeable because I remember where it is, as his grasp on me tightens, his fingers digging into my hips as his eyes hold me captive.

We know each other's scars.

"You're bruised," he says, his eyes narrowing on the strip of stomach still exposed as I hold my shirt up with my free hand. I let the hem fall.

"Yes," I say. "From the windowsill."

"Take some ibuprofen."

"I will."

He nods. Then he points to his desk chair. "Sit. What did you want to talk about?"

...That's it?

He's not going to say anything else?

A wave of relief and gratitude hit me, so potent that I once again have to squeeze my eyes shut to fight off the tears. "I think we need to talk to Rocco again," I say, taking a seat in the desk chair. It's one of those fancy-pants ergonomic ones, the kind that offers lumbar support and a whole bunch of other nice crap.

Aiden nods. "Okay," he says. He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Why?"

"Because." I run my fingers through my hair, sighing. "I can't stand this dead end. Matilda still hasn't gotten in touch with details about Thomas Freese's suicide." Something sharp and mournful plucks at me when I say this, and I push away the thought that my father really could be dead. "Maybe if we asked Rocco, we could somehow set up a meeting with his brother. Lionel has to know something, doesn't he?" The question sounds desperate.

Aiden's brows furrow as he stares absently at the floor, a pensive expression on his face. He's clearly miles away despite sitting not three feet from me. When he finally speaks, his words are thoughtful, like he's still piecing them together. "Which mystery are you trying to solve right now?" he says.

I frown at him. "The only mystery currently in our life. Sandra von Meller."

He shakes his head slowly. "No," he says. "That's not right. There are two main mysteries we're dealing with right now. Aren't there?" He seems to be talking partly to himself. "I agree that they're probably connected somehow, but there are definitely two. So which one is it?" He redirects his attention to me. "Are you trying to find your father, or are you trying to find who killed Sandra?"

I blink at him as my racing thoughts shudder to a stop.

He's...right. He's completely correct.

Those are two different questions.

And I've been trying to answer both of them—at the same time and with the same bits of knowledge we've been able to find so far.

But that's not going to work, is it? I'm missing in-depth details from both mysteries because I keep throwing out the tidbits that don't answer both questions.

"Like a woman interviewing for two separate jobs in two separate fields," I say to myself, trying to straighten these thoughts out. "She prepares for the job interviews by studying *only* the questions that she's likely to receive from *both* interviewers. And in the end she doesn't get either job, because she didn't prepare for the specifics of either one."

"Yes," Aiden says, leaning back and looking satisfied. "Exactly. So I'll ask again: Which mystery are you trying to solve? Which question are you trying to answer?"

"Sandra," I say. I sit up straighter in the absurdly comfortable desk chair. "I want to know about my dad, but Sandy is more important right now."

“I agree,” he says, nodding sharply. Something glimmers in his eye, a grim determination. “In that case, the person we need to talk to is not Rocco Astor,” he goes on. His gaze clashes with mine, sending a thrill down my spine. “It’s Tonya von Meller—Sandra’s mom.”

IN WHICH AIDEN'S HEART DOES INCONVENIENT THINGS

“**A**ll right,” Juniper says the next day, fixing me with a steely gaze. “I have a cover story. But you’re not going to like it.”

Something about the look in those blue eyes has me on instant alert. “I reserve the right to veto any and all proposed cover stories,” I say. Then I turn my attention back to my book. Today was a half day due to a teacher development meeting we had earlier, so now I’m home, seated in my favorite wingback chair, next to my shelf of classics and the bust of Shakespeare. Normally when Juniper interrupts me here, she crouches down by me, but today she just stands there, hovering from above.

“You *could*,” she says, drawing the word out slowly, “except...”

This solidifies my attention. I close my book with a snap, my eyes flying up to find hers again. “What did you do?” I say. “I’m getting the kind of ominous feeling that never bodes well, especially when you’re the cause.”

Juniper clears her throat, looking uncomfortable. And I can tell that she’s right: I’m *really* not going to like this.

“I’ll fill you in on the little details tomorrow,” she says instead of answering my question. “What I’m asking is just that you keep an open mind.”

“Why tomorrow?”

“Because I need to pick something up from your sister first —”

“Nope,” I say immediately. “If Caroline is involved, I’m already out.”

“You absolutely are not *out*,” she says, putting her hands on her hips. “I need your help. This is important. Are you going to abandon me and make me talk to Tonya von Meller all on my own? You don’t even know what my plan is yet.”

“I know you don’t want to tell me, which means that it’s nothing good.”

She ignores this very well-reasoned point. “I need to borrow an outfit from Caroline. That’s the only involvement she has.”

“Nothing of Caroline’s is going to fit you,” I say, returning lazily to my book.

“You don’t know that,” Juniper says, and even though I’m trying not to pay attention, I can practically hear her rolling her eyes. “You don’t know our sizes—”

“Caroline is probably a ten or a twelve,” I say. Then I let my eyes trail over Juniper, taking in the shape of her, displayed fairly well in tight jeans and a time-worn t-shirt. “While I would guess you’re somewhere around a size...four? Six?”

She gasps, looking scandalized and also thoroughly impressed.

I smirk.

“Keep your lecherous eyes to yourself,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest like a shield.

I laugh at this, throwing my head back and letting my book drop to my lap. “If either of us is lecherous, it’s definitely you,” I say. “Your eyes bugged out of your head when I showed you my tattoo.”

“Hey,” she says, stepping closer as her eyes flash with interest. “Speaking of that—”

Oh no.

“What’s in the fourth drawer?” she says, her voice eager.

“I’m not answering that,” I say. She’s been asking me this question at random intervals ever since last night, springing it on me when I least expect it. I think she thinks I’ll answer if I’m caught off guard. “And we aren’t talking about me. We’re talking about you.”

“Meh,” she says. “Fine. But just wait until you see me in one of your sister’s fancy-pants outfits.” She grins. “You’ll be drooling at how wildly attractive I am, and then we’ll see who’s the lecher.”

“My sister wears yoga pants and mom jeans,” I say, trying to ignore the effect that grin is having on my pulse. “Nothing about her is fancy.”

Juniper holds up one finger. “Maybe not now,” she says, “but I called her this morning and asked if she had any clothes that would make me look rich, and she said she had some outfits from back before she got married and had kids.”

I shake my head, rubbing my hand over my scruff and trying to hide my smile.

“Ah,” Juniper says, quiet enough that it almost sounds like she’s talking to herself. When I look at her, her eyes are fixed on me, her gaze soft, a little smile dancing over her lips. “That’s my favorite.”

I swallow as my heart gives a few extra thuds somewhere in my chest cavity. That keeps happening—I keep catching my body responding to this woman in ways it shouldn’t. And I know it’s because I keep discovering new facets of her mind and her personality that fascinate me. “What’s your favorite?” I say. I keep my voice steady, casual.

“That smile,” she says, pointing to my mouth. “It’s one of my favorite expressions of yours. When you smile at me even though you’re trying not to.”

My heart gives another unnecessary thud, and I swallow. This is not a conversation we need to be having.

“All right,” I say, apparently shocking her completely—she startles, her eyes widening and losing that dreamy quality. “I’ll bite. But if we get to Tonya von Meller’s house and I don’t like the plan, I’m throwing you under the bus.”

She recovers quickly from her surprise, batting her eyelashes and giving me a cheeky grin. “I’m too pretty to throw under a bus—”

“Hardly,” I cut her off with a snort of laughter. “I assume, if you’re telling me I can’t veto your cover story, that you’ve already set up a meeting of some sort? How did you do that?”

“I reached out to Tonya and asked if...”

Actually, she doesn’t trail off; she finishes her sentence, but I can’t quite tell what she says, because she’s mumbling, ducking her head.

“Sorry?” I say, frowning.

More mumbling, more bowed head, more shifty gaze dancing away from my suspicious look. “I just...” *Something something, mumble mumble.*

I roll my eyes, even as that feeling of foreboding returns twice as strong. “Juniper.”

She throws her hands up in the air, energy finally exploding from her. “I asked her if my husband and I could come meet with her, *okay?*” she says. “We’re married now, okay? Happy? That is the cover story. We’re married and we want her advice on starting our baby girl in the pageant life.”

I gape at her, completely lost for words.

“I know,” she says, waving her hand at me. “I know. You would never marry me. You don’t even *like* me. But this is the best I could do. She’s not going to just randomly meet two people she’s never even heard of for no reason. We needed an *in*, Aiden.” Then her eyes jump to my phone, which is resting on the bookshelf next to the bust of Shakespeare. “Are you gonna answer that?”

“Huh?” I say. My brain is still processing the fact that I’m going to have to pretend to be married to this woman.

“Your phone,” she says, nodding. “It’s ringing.” Then she begins backing away. “Tomorrow,” she says. “We’re meeting with Tonya tomorrow, okay? And we’re going to be married. Can you get off work?”

“Meh. Maybe.” Probably; I only teach one class tomorrow. I watch her go, picking my phone up only when she’s out of my sight. “Hello?”

“Hey,” Caroline says. “You’re going to be at dinner later, right? Mom keeps bugging me about making sure you come.”

“Yeah,” I say, pushing aside the little stab of guilt that hits somewhere around my navel. “I’ll be there.”

“She says you haven’t been to see them in like a month.”

I rub the back of my neck, feeling even more uncomfortable than I did when Juniper was informing me about my upcoming nuptials. “I don’t know if it’s been that long,” I say.

“Well, whatever,” Caroline says dismissively. “Just come tonight. Jeff and the girls will be there; you can see everyone. You shouldn’t be such a recluse when we live so close.”

“Yeah,” I say with a sigh. “I’ll be there. Six?”

“Six,” she says. Then she hangs up.

I put my phone back on the bookshelf, picking up my book once more and doing my best not to think about what tomorrow might involve. But no matter how hard I concentrate on the words, the only picture that forms in my mind is one of me and my pink-haired roommate.



MY MOTHER IS NOT PARTICULARLY IMPRESSED BY MY LIVING situation—or more specifically, that my new roommate is a woman.

“So...you’re living together?” she says, peering at me with troubled eyes.

“Yes,” I say, rubbing my temples. I came to dinner this evening because I was feeling guilty about not visiting more often, but I think I’m already regretting it. Caroline’s twin daughters are running amok out in the family room, their loud, high-pitched voices the perfect decibel for drilling a hole into my skull. I love them, but they’re pure chaos. I don’t know how Caroline and Jeff keep up. “We’re technically living together. But—”

“She’s the new tenant, Mom,” Caroline says, plunking a large head of lettuce down on the counter. “It’s not like they’re cohabitating in the traditional sense.”

“Still,” my mom says, wiping her hands on her apron and looking fretful. “I think I preferred it when you had that boy you never saw.”

“You and me both,” I mutter. Lorenzo was certainly easier to share the house with. He didn’t take up much physical space, and he took up even less mental space. He kept to himself.

Juniper does no such thing.

My mom pulls two knives from the knife block on the counter and passes one to Caroline, who takes it without speaking. She cuts the lettuce with deft hands, while my mom gets to work on several bell peppers that seem to have materialized out of nowhere. She speaks over her shoulder as she chops, though.

“Well, at least tell me about her,” she says. “Tell me about this new roommate.”

“They have *history*,” Caroline says before I can answer my mother’s request. “She was the high school student he tutored when he was doing his undergrad.”

“Oh, my,” my mother says, her hand freezing halfway through dicing a vibrant red pepper. She sets the knife down and spins to face me, her eyes wide. “She’s that young?”

“I mean, she’s five years younger than me,” I say. I rub the back of my neck, threatening Caroline with my gaze at the same time. “She’s obviously not in high school anymore.”

“Of course not,” my mom says quickly, and her shocked expression relaxes a bit. “Of course. Well,” she goes on, looking curiously at me. “Is she cute?”

“Mom,” Caroline says. She’s still chopping that lettuce with vigor. “*Kittens* are cute. *Babies* are cute.”

“Women can be cute,” I say, my voice absent as I remember Juniper decked out in her Halloween outfit—the inside-out sweatshirt and the ghost leggings and the pumpkin headband. “But Juniper mostly isn’t.”

“So she’s not pretty,” my mother says, sounding relieved. A second later, the sound of her knife starts up again; she seems to have found reassurance where none was meant.

“She’s definitely pretty,” Caroline says. “A little unconventional, but still very pretty. You can be pretty and not cute, Mom. You could be hot and not pretty or cute. They’re all different.”

“Well, then, what is she?” my mom says, throwing her hands up in the air.

“Mom, *knife!*” Caroline and I say at the same time.

The knife clatters to the cutting board as my mom drops it. She once again wipes her hands on her apron and turns to face me. “Tell me, then. Do you like her?”

“She’s a good roommate,” I say, my answer reluctant, my fingers drumming impatiently on the countertop. “But she drives me crazy.”

Now Caroline stops chopping too, turning around and giving me her full attention. She looks so much like Mom, the two of them standing there next to each other, that I have to fight my smile.

“In a good way or a bad way?” she says, her head tilting curiously.

Ah. That’s the question, isn’t it?

And though I’m not going to admit it to the nosy women in my family, I think it’s safe to say both. Juniper drives me crazy in the bad way *and* in the good way.

She's obnoxious; pushy and invasive and snarky. But there have also been a couple times when arguing with her was the highlight of my day, filling me with an almost euphoric amusement—or when I've found myself wondering if kissing her would get her to shut up.

We bicker like cats and dogs, in other words, but there's also a strong undercurrent of mutual attraction.

"It's complicated," I say finally. Then I sigh. I really don't feel like answering all these questions. "Tell you what, Mom," I add. "If I start a relationship with someone, you'll be the first to know. Okay?"

"Aiden doesn't like women because they're pretty," Caroline says—as if she hasn't contributed to this mess enough already. "He isn't really attracted to them physically until he's attracted to them mentally—ow!" She breaks off, rubbing the back of her head.

"I barely touched you," I mutter as I squeeze past her, heading out of the kitchen. "But mind your own business." How does she even know that about me? Sisters aren't supposed to know that kind of thing.

I dart out of the way, smirking as I avoid Caroline's retaliatory swat by mere inches. Then I book it to the family room, where there's more noise but fewer questions. My dad and Jeff are planted firmly on the sofa, their eyes glued to my parents' television, where some football game is playing.

"Girls," I say to the twins, who are now chasing each other around the dining room table and shrieking with laughter. "Do you need to wash your hands before dinner?"

"Yes," Jeff calls without tearing his eyes from the screen. "Hadley, Myra, wash your hands, girls."

They divert course almost seamlessly, two little four-year-old rockets shooting toward the bathroom, hands and faces sticky from sneaking candy. I smile slightly as they zoom past.

They're loud, but they're cute. If I ever have kids someday, I hope they're as cute as the twins.

To give myself something useful to do, I set the table. My parents aren't overly formal, but they aren't like Juniper and I, either, who use plastic plates from Target. The plates I set out are glazed ceramic, the cups glass. A few minutes later my mom and Caroline emerge from the kitchen, carrying what looks like roast beef, mashed potatoes, and a large bowl of salad. The smell of food is what seems to pry my dad and Jeff away from the TV; they mute it, and within thirty seconds everyone is seated. I scowl at the mashed potatoes, remembering the food fight in the cafeteria. At least my mom's food is better than any school lunch.

As my eyes trail over the table, though, an uncomfortable twinge of...*something* plucks at my heart. I eye the mashed potatoes, covered in gravy; the roast beef, surrounded by carrots and onions; the salad, tossed with cheese, tomatoes, and croutons. I take the table in, and then I realize: it has always looked this way.

When I was a kid, and even still today, I have always been able to sit at a table that's loaded with food. We could afford it, yes, but I was also raised by parents who took the time to cook for us. Hunger, especially as a child, has many different sources, but two of them are the lack of money to buy food and the lack of an adult figure to prepare that food.

I grew up with both.

I'm rounding the table before I even realize my feet are moving. And when I reach my mother, enveloping her in a huge hug, my arms are folding her into my embrace before I even give them consent to do so.

"Thank you," I say into her fluffy hair. She smells like dish soap and lavender potpourri.

"Oh, my," she says, sounding flustered. She seems surprised enough by this sudden display of affection that she doesn't know how to respond, but a moment later her arms wrap around me, returning my hug. "For what?"

How do I even begin to explain? How do I tell her that I've been feeling irritable about my high school students throwing food around, and yet I didn't even think to thank the woman

who made sure I was always fed and clothed and happy? How do I tell her I'm slowly learning that it's okay to feel grateful rather than guilty that I grew up with so much?

"Just—the meal," I say, my voice halting. "It looks good."

She chuckles, the sound muffled by my shoulder. "You're welcome, sweetheart. Now sit down, let's eat. The food is getting cold."

I get a few strange looks as I sit back down—mostly from my dad and Caroline—but no one says anything, and I'm grateful. Then, for a few minutes, dinner goes the way dinners always do: the women talk and the men eat. My dad, Jeff, and I are all more on the quiet side, probably because we've got Caroline and my mom to contend with. They chatter back and forth while the three of us stuff our faces, acting like we've never eaten anything good in our lives before this meal. What can I say, though? My mom's cooking is fantastic.

I'm just standing up to refill my water glass when the doorbell rings. I look at my parents, who in turn are looking at each other.

"Is someone else coming?" my dad says with a frown.

"No," my mom says, and she's frowning too.

"Yes," Caroline says.

We all turn to her.

"It's Juniper," she says in answer to our unspoken question. Then she smiles at me. "She needs to borrow some of the clothes I keep in my old bedroom closet."

"What the heck kind of name is *Juniper*—" Jeff begins, but Caroline silences him with a glare.

"She's Aiden's new roommate, and she's very nice," my sister says, "so you will all behave yourselves and refrain from asking any invasive questions." When no one answers, she looks pointedly at our mom. "Mother," she says, the warning clear in her tone.

"Of course I'll behave myself," my mom says, blustering a bit. She smooths her hands over her frizzy, brownish-gray hair.

“I only was wondering why she wanted to room with a man —”

“Nope,” I say. “You definitely are not asking her that.” Then I turn to Caroline. “Why did you invite her here?”

“Because,” Caroline says, exasperated, “I told her she could borrow an outfit, and it’s one of the ones I keep in my old bedroom because it doesn’t fit me anymore.”

“Yeah, but with everyone here,” I say, running my hand through my hair. This has the potential to be a trainwreck.

Jeff clears his throat. “Is anyone gonna answer the door, or...?”

“Yes, I’m going,” Caroline says, hurrying away from the table.

“Why would she think I’m going to be invasive?” my mom says to my dad, looking hurt. “I’m not invasive. Am I invasive?”

“What does *invasive* mean?” Hadley says.

“It means Grandma asks questions that are none of her business,” I say hastily, pushing my chair in. I take my plate to the kitchen and leave it in the sink; I’ll do it later. Right now I need to act as Juniper’s bodyguard, just to make sure she doesn’t get sucked into the Milano vortex.

She’s just stepped inside by the time I get to the front door. She smiles at me before noticing the rest of the family seated at the dining room table.

“Hi,” she says, giving them a little wave. Then she turns to Caroline. “Thanks for letting me stop by.”

“Of course,” Caroline says, waving the thanks away. “This is where I keep some of my old clothes that don’t fit anymore. It was my room growing up. Come on back!”

I follow Juniper and Caroline into Caroline’s old bedroom, watching in bemusement as they chatter like the oldest of friends. When did they get so close? How did that happen?

It makes me a little nervous. Does Caroline know any deep, dark secrets of mine? Do I have any of those? Things I don't want Juniper to know?

My stomach tightens as I realize I do, in fact, have a secret like that. Crap. I don't think Caroline knows, though.

I breathe a sigh of relief. We should be good.

Caroline's childhood bedroom is an ode to the night sky—a deep purplish-blue comforter with faded silver stars, light purple walls, some sort of funky plastic night light in the shape of a crescent moon. She did to her bedroom what I never bothered doing to mine: gave it personality. Only as I got older did I appreciate my room as a space I could cultivate rather than something merely functional.

The closet doors emit a painful-sounding squeak on their tracks as my sister rolls them open, revealing a decently full row of clothes draped over a hodge podge of mismatched hangers.

“Let's see...” she says, diving right in. She rifles through the shirts and dresses and pants, clearly looking for something specific. Nothing I can see looks like what she wears these days; I was telling Juniper the truth. Caroline really does stick to joggers and yoga pants and other comfort-first outfits.

That wasn't always the case, though. It's a weird time capsule, this closet, a reminder of who she used to be.

Juniper must be thinking the same thing. “There's a lot of really cute stuff in here,” she says as her eyes follow Caroline's searching hands. “You don't wear them anymore?”

“Nah,” Caroline says without looking. “These days I just like to be comfortable. I used to be sort of a fashionista”—she nods at the clothes she's still shuffling through—“and I did a lot of fashion blogging and stuff. I wanted to go to Fashion Week and all that, but...” She shrugs. “Things changed.”

“What changed?” Juniper asks, and it's a gift she has—the ability to ask a personal question without coming off as intrusive or invasive. She merely seems curious, her head tilted to the side, hair tucked behind her ears, her teeth digging

into her lower lip as she watches Caroline work. “Why did you give those dreams up?”

“I didn’t give anything up, really.” My sister smiles over her shoulder at Juniper, maybe to let her know she’s not offended. “But my little bunch of humans is so important to me that something like Fashion Week pales in comparison. I still love clothes and style and all that. It’s just less important than it used to be.” She shrugs. “One day when the girls are older and need less hand-holding, I’ll revisit the things I wanted to do before. I haven’t given them up—they just needed to be set aside at this season of my life. Oh, here it is!”

Juniper shuffles forward, craning her neck to see what Caroline is digging out from the back of the closet.

“It was hiding,” my sister says. She maneuvers a plastic hanger out from behind the row of clothing and passes it to Juniper. “There’s a bathroom,” she says, pointing across the hall. “Go change and see if it fits.”

“I didn’t know that,” I say once Juniper has crossed the hall and closed the bathroom door. “About the Fashion Week thing.”

Caroline gives me a little smile, one that pulls apostrophe-shaped dimples to the corners of her mouth. “You never asked.” It’s not accusatory, the way she says it, but I feel accused nonetheless—because she’s right. I never asked.

We sit in silence until Juniper returns, the quiet broken only by the soft thumps and thuds of Caroline hunting for a pair of heels on the closet floor. She sets them neatly on the bed when she locates a pair she likes, turning just in time to see Juniper re-enter the room.

And I guess I was wrong about nothing of Caroline’s fitting her.

“As I suspected would be the case,” my sister says, her eyes on my pink-haired roommate, “that outfit looks much better on you than it ever did on me.”

I can only assume this is the truth.

I'm feeling pretty irritable toward myself all of a sudden. In the past I've sort of appreciated the weird way attraction works for me; I'm literally incapable of being attracted to women I don't at least find *interesting*. That's why the Betties do nothing for me. Betty One and Betty Two are objectively pretty, I can tell that much, but I have never once felt actual attraction toward them. I think even if either of them hugged me or kissed me, I would feel nothing, despite the direct physical contact. It's just how my body and my mind work.

And it seems the opposite is also true. Because even though Juniper Bean is *not* touching me right now, even though she's just standing in front of my sister's mirror, my pulse jumps whenever I look at her. I feel wired, full of adrenaline, and it's only getting worse.

If I'm honest with myself, I've been intrigued by her from day one. It's probably why the way she looked in that ribbon dress had me loosening my tie, noticing twinges of feelings that were normally absent.

"All right," she says, turning away from the mirror and toward where Caroline and I are now seated on the bed. Caroline passes her the heels, which she steps into. "How do I look?"

"Weird," I mutter, rubbing my chest. It's an incredibly strange, disconcerting feeling, being attracted to someone who's wearing my sister's clothes. Not quite as bad as being set up on a blind date with her, but... still not great.

"Ignore him," Caroline says, shooting me a disapproving glare. "You don't look weird. You look perfect. Very classy."

Juniper runs her hands over the outfit—tailored pants that fit surprisingly well; a silky, low-cut blouse; and a fitted blazer. She somehow looks both sexy and professional, and my lungs can't quite seem to reach capacity, my breath shallow in my chest. If anything, the pink hair seems to magnify the effect; it speaks to the parts of her personality that I'm most attracted to.

"You're not allowed to call me weird," she says, tucking some of that hair behind her ear and frowning at me. "I'm your

wife. We have become Aidiper. We have a beautiful daughter ___”

“For the love,” I say, standing up quickly.

“I look good. I look fancy. Be supportive, please,” she goes on.

I exhale slowly, closing my eyes. “You look fancy,” I say. “Now you should go before my family hunts you down and subjects you to an inquisition.”

“This is perfect,” Juniper says. “Thank you so much.” At first I think she’s talking to me, but when I open my eyes, it’s Caroline she’s addressing. “I really appreciate your help. I’ll bring these back—”

“Oh, don’t bother,” Caroline says, waving her hand. “I’ll never fit those clothes again. You keep them.”

“But your fashion—”

“Keep them, Juniper,” Caroline says with a smile.

Juniper bites her lip, looking down at the outfit. “Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

Juniper returns her smile with pink cheeks and then says, “If you insist. Thank you, Caroline.”

Ugh. I think this is turning into one of those *You hang up first! No, you!* situations. They’re going to sit here and thank each other and say goodbye for the next twenty minutes.

I don’t have that kind of patience, and I definitely don’t want my parents to wander back this direction and begin questioning Juniper. She didn’t sign up for that today, and my mother’s respect for boundaries is about as negligible as Juniper’s herself. “Let’s go,” I say to her.

“Rude,” she mutters, wrinkling her nose at me. But she returns to the bathroom across the hall, emerging a few moments later with her original outfit back on, Caroline’s clothes draped over one arm. She follows me out of Caroline’s bedroom, down the hall, and to the front door. My sister brings

up the rear, smiling cheerfully and wishing us luck when we step outside. I glance at the dining room table, where my parents, Jeff, and the girls are all watching with interest, their plates empty in front of them.

“You’re thinking hard about something,” Juniper says when the front door closes behind us.

Am I that obvious? “How could you tell?” I say, more curious than anything.

Juniper reaches up and touches my forehead. “There’s this little v-shaped crease you get right here. So what is it?”

“Ah,” I say with a sigh. “Nothing. Or I guess—I’m just thinking about the food fight my students had the other day.”

Juniper raises her eyebrows at me, something I only barely see because of the wind whipping her hair around her face.

“My mom made mashed potatoes,” I explain. “It reminded me.”

She nods as we head out to the driveway, past the flower beds that have succumbed to fall weather. “What about it?” she says over her shoulder.

“I don’t know,” I say. “It’s just frustrating. I get irritated every time I think about it. And I’m worried about the food bank, I guess. Our funding is already abysmal, and Lionel Astor will cut it more if he wins.”

“Raise money,” Juniper says.

I snort. “Because it’s that easy.”

“Well, no, but there are ways. Hold a fundraiser. A silent auction. Or do a hunger banquet. Something like that.”

I come to a stop next to her questionable little yellow Volkswagen, parked in the driveway much straighter than when I first saw it out in front of Grind and Brew. “What’s a hunger banquet?”

“Are you about to open the door for me? Like, chivalry?”

“What?” I look down, and sure enough, that’s exactly what I’m doing—my hand is outstretched, reaching for the handle

to the driver's side. I snatch it back, ignoring the little grin on Juniper's face. "No," I say. "What's a hunger banquet?"

She nudges me out of the way, and I step aside.

"It's basically a banquet where three economic tiers are represented statistically," she says, opening the back door and laying Caroline's clothes neatly across the seat. "Upper, middle, and lower. You're assigned one of those tiers at random when you arrive—pick a piece of paper out of a hat, that kind of thing. And then whatever economic tier you've ended up with determines the meal that you get. But it's all based on the most recent statistics on poverty, see?" She stands up, closing the door to the back seat.

"Okay..." I say, gesturing to her, indicating to keep talking.

"So only a very small number of guests at the banquet will be fed a super nice meal—fifteen percent, I think," she goes on. "That fifteen percent represents the upper class. They sit at nice tables with tablecloths too. And then thirty-five percent of the attendees represent the middle class, and they get a middle-class meal with middle-class seating. The other fifty percent represent the lower class, and they basically sit on the floor and get rice and water." She shrugs. "I went to one in college. The percentages might have changed since we did it, but that's the gist. It's pretty impactful, honestly, and it's a good way to raise awareness. Your high schoolers might benefit." Then she looks at me, frowning. "Are you coming with me? Didn't you guys just start dinner?"

"Huh?" I say. "Oh. Yeah." Why is it my first instinct to follow this woman? "Do you, uh, want to join us?" I don't really want her to, because I'm not ready for my family to meet her when I'm still figuring out my feelings, but it seems polite to ask.

She laughs, though. "No, I'm good. Thanks, though."

I nod. "Drive safe." I cringe at my own lameness, waving her off awkwardly once she gets in, starts the car, and pulls out of the driveway.

I'm able to field off questions relatively well when I return inside, but I spend the rest of the evening wondering how I could convince a bunch of high school kids to pay to come sit on the floor and eat rice.

IN WHICH JUNIPER DOES NOT CALL ANYONE PAPA

In preparation for our meeting with Tonya von Meller, Aiden transforms from dark academia professor into Dapper Dan. And while dark academia professor is who I'd much prefer to live with, I can't deny that Dan has his own kind of charm. Who knew that Aiden in pastel would be so worth seeing? I have to fight off heart palpitations when he puts his hand behind my headrest and turns in the driver's seat to back out of the driveway. My eyes follow the curve of his arm, the lazy way it rests over the steering wheel, and finally he throws me a look.

"Cut it out, Juniper," he says. "You're driving me crazy."

"Good crazy or bad crazy?" I say, since I can't very well deny I've been staring.

His head whips toward me, though, his foot coming down hard on the brake—like a maniac. The entire car shudders and jerks. "What did you say?" he says with his wide eyes on me.

"Whoa." I give the dashboard a few gentle pats to make sure it doesn't get mad at us. He might think cars are inanimate creatures, but I have stories that prove otherwise. Sunshine in particular is a vengeful lady; it's a good thing we're taking Aiden's car instead. "Drive like a normal person, please. We have someplace to be."

He sighs, and even though he doesn't give any indication he's getting a headache, I bet one will show up soon enough. He always seems to get headaches around me, especially when he's sighing like that.

“Here’s the GPS,” I say, propping my phone up against the dash. Then I look down at my outfit, making sure everything looks fine, smoothing out a few stray wrinkles with my hands.

These clothes make me feel like a sexy lawyer or something. I kind of like it. It’s not my normal, but there’s just something about a power suit. And this one is elegant and sexy, but it means business too, with the blazer and the fit of the pants and the closed-toe pumps.

“All right,” I say as I run through all the details in my mind, trying not to leave anything out. “Your name is Bentley —”

“*Bentley?*”

“Shh. I needed something fancy. And my name is Victoria. We’re deeply in love—get rid of that facial expression—and we’ve got some questions about starting our daughter in the pageant life. Sound good?”

He just grumbles under his breath, which I’m going to take to mean yes.

“Our main purpose today is to learn more about how the killer is making Tonya believe Sandy is still alive. I’m also curious what Tonya thinks is going on, like if she’s suspicious at all. If we can nudge her in the direction of reporting Sandy missing, that would be ideal.”

“Wow,” Aiden says dryly as he slows to a stop at a red light. “You’ve thought about this.”

“Of course I have. We’re getting one shot at this, and it probably won’t happen again.” I slide my hands under my thighs as my knees bounce. “I’m nervous. Are you nervous?”

“A little,” he says, easing down on the gas when the light turns green again. “My main concern is making sure we stay under the radar, though. I don’t want to go barging in and make a big scene today.”

“Me either,” I assure him. “There will be no big scenes.”

We spend the rest of the drive lost in our own thoughts, emerging only when Aiden pulls to a stop in front of a large

gate and rolls his window down.

Wait a minute.

“You didn’t tell me we were going to the Heights.” Aiden gives me a disapproving look.

“I didn’t know,” I say honestly, my eyes wide as I look around. “She must work out of her home. Wow, these houses are huge. Oh, hang on—she gave me a code.”

“And that didn’t tip you off?”

“Lots of places require codes,” I say. “Type this in: three, five, five”—I wait a second for him to punch the numbers in—“eight, three, three.”

The little box beeps, and the gate in front of us lurches open. This must be the visitor’s entrance. We pull into the Heights, and my eyes bug out of my head the whole time. “Wow,” I say again.

Aiden grunts from the passenger seat.

“You’re such a snob,” I say, shaking my head and smiling a little. “People are allowed to have nice houses. You can’t judge them for that any more than they could judge me for growing up dirt poor.”

He sighs—and surprise, surprise, he’s rubbing his temples again, one hand kneading little circles while the other rests on the steering wheel. “It’s not the size of the houses that bothers me,” he admits. “It’s just frustrating that in a town with this much wealth there are places and people struggling to hang on.”

I nod. “I understand that. But what to do about it isn’t so easy to determine.”

“No,” he says, “it’s not. And I know that. It still frustrates me, though.” His mouth presses into a grim line.

“That’s fair,” I say with a shrug. Then I frown. “Did you know Sandy was from the Heights?”

“No,” Aiden says. “But this is where Lionel Astor lives. Coincidence?”

“I mean, maybe?” I say, but somewhere behind the waistband of the fancy-pants fitted trousers I’m wearing, my gut churns uncomfortably.

Aiden eases us down the street slowly, and I crane my neck to get a better look at every house we pass. Most of them are what I would call *stately*, with pristinely kept lawns and unnecessarily long driveways. There are a couple that even have fountains in front.

It leaves me once again feeling grateful that we didn’t bring Sunshine instead of Aiden’s sensible little Toyota Camry. Sunshine might be a pearl to the swine of the Heights. Her personality is her best feature, but not everyone can appreciate her quirks.

The GPS leads us around a bend. We seem to be climbing gradually upward, and from the dusty recesses of my mind I pull out the information that the Heights is built on a hill, with the most expensive homes at the very top. Not sure why I know that—it must be something I remember from growing up here. Thirty seconds later, as we pull up in front of a large, white home with columns and emerald green shutters on the windows, the phone announces we’ve arrived. There’s a mother-in-law cottage just visible behind the house, and I point.

“There,” I say. “She said it’s the smaller building. It must be there.”

The mother-in-law add-on, like the main house, has white siding and emerald shutters. It’s smaller, of course, but still a decent size. I tuck my hair behind my ear in an attempt to make it look neater; it was fine before we got here, but now it’s been subjected to the wind. I pull the blazer tighter around me, too, grateful for the extra layer, especially since the silky top underneath has no warming properties to speak of.

We trail up the sidewalk to the little building, me leading the way, Aiden following closely behind. I feel better knowing he’s with me.

When we reach the front door, I knock three times—brisk, efficient raps of my fist. Then, quickly, before anyone can

answer, I grab Aiden's hand in mine, twining our fingers together.

And look. I expected him to fight it, expected him to glare at me or make a fuss.

But he doesn't.

He doesn't say a single word.

He doesn't even look at me. He just holds my hand as though it was already on his agenda for the day, his thumb trailing lightly over my knuckles, his grip steady and firm.

He watches the door, waiting for it to open, and I watch him, trying to piece together all the things I know about him.

I have this theory—I've always had this theory—about Aiden. My theory is that he's a prickly, grumpy, miser of a man. But I think that if you break through all those outer shells, if you get down to the tender underbelly, he's the kind of man that follows his lover around the kitchen as she cooks, his arms wrapped around her from behind the whole time. I think he's the kind of man that doesn't let go once he's grabbed on.

And a splash of realization paints the inner walls of my mind—a realization that rearranges my organs to make room for this new truth: I want to be the woman he follows around the kitchen. I want to be the woman he grabs onto and doesn't let go.

"Hey," I whisper, my eyes still on the door. "Remind me later that I want to talk to you about something, okay?"

In my peripheral vision I see him look at me, see him nod. And then, like I'm still doing, he turns his gaze back to the door and waits.

Tonya von Meller answers thirty seconds later, opening the door wide and disappearing behind it to let us in.

"Welcome," says her voice from behind the door. "Please come in."

You don't need to tell me twice. It's chilly out here.

The office is spacious and brightly lit, natural light pouring in through the large windows. It's decked out in sumptuous furnishings—velvet chairs and couches, a crystal chandelier, and a large desk with what looks like a marble top.

Probably not real marble, though, right?

Tonya ushers us further in, smiling through very white teeth, and I take a second to look her over. She's maybe in her fifties, bottle blonde but elegant. I think I expected obvious signs of plastic surgery, but there aren't any—no too-smooth foreheads or puffy lips or swollen cheekbones. She's lovely, but she also seems to be allowing herself to age. I respect that.

I wonder if I'm going to find anything else about this woman that's respectable.

“Have a seat,” she says as she leads us to the sitting area.

I settle on one of the sofas, and Aiden seats himself next to me like the dutiful husband he's pretending to be. We're still holding hands, but I pull mine away from his now, resisting the urge to flex my fingers a few times like Mr. Darcy in the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* adaptation.

“Thank you so much for meeting with us,” I say, scooching my bum back on the velvet couch. It's hard as a rock, this sofa, like I'm sitting on a slab of fuzz-covered stone. What's the point of a couch if you couldn't sneak a nap on it?

Maybe Tonya isn't a middle-of-the-day napper. Or maybe she's one of those people who sleeps only in her bed. Most doctors recommend that avenue.

Yes. That's probably it. Tonya is up to date on what all the doctors are saying.

“This is my husband, Bentley.” I reach over and pat my fake husband on his very real thigh, which I know he appreciates based on the flexing of his muscles beneath my palm. I'm sure he also appreciates the name I've given him. “We've been married for seven years”—that thigh muscle flexes again, and I give it a little warning squeeze, clamping my hand down—“and we'd love to get our little girl started in

some pageants, but we're a bit hesitant. That's why we wanted to talk to someone with personal experience."

"Of course," Tonya says. There's a warmth in her voice that doesn't extend to her eyes as she goes on, "Well, I'm on the board for the Idaho Cultural Enhancement and Scholarship Committee, so you chose well. I can get you started with a few informational pamphlets. Tell me about your daughter, too. What does she look like? What's her name? How old is she?"

Super creepy that the first thing she's asking is what my imaginary daughter looks like.

"Her name"—I glance briefly at Aiden, forcing myself not to grin at the ridiculous name I've chosen—"is Pansy."

"Oh, how darling," Tonya says, clasping her hands together in a way that makes her diamond ring stand out. That hunk of rock is like a disco ball.

"She is," I gush, and I clasp my hands too, trying to feed into the energy Tonya is giving off. "She's five years old, and she has this lovely blonde hair and green eyes—"

"A regular JonBenét," Tonya says, and I throw up in my mouth a little bit, then force a smile.

"Something like that," I agree.

"Well, what questions did you have specifically?" she says. She leans back in her seat, resting her hands daintily in her lap. "What are your concerns?"

"We're just a little concerned about the parent end of things," I say as my heart begins to speed up. The time for manipulative finagling has come. "Might it detract from her schoolwork later on? We want her to stay on top of her education," I say. "And of course we're concerned about how it might look on college applications."

Bait dropped.

Wait. Dropped? Dangled? What does one do with bait? Or am I thinking of a lure?

If someone went fishing for a Juniper fish, all they'd need is a bag of chips and a big tub of fresh guac.

“I assure you,” Tonya says with a breezy laugh, “that’s not something you need to worry about. Girls who are involved with pageants are often involved with other charitable activities that actually increase their college opportunities.”

“Oh, is that so?” Aiden says, and it sounds like he’s struggling big time to keep his voice neutral and friendly rather than overtly hostile. He wraps his arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his side with more force than is strictly necessary. “My *wife* is so concerned about this kind of thing.”

“Yes, definitely,” Tonya says with a nod that sends her silver earrings jingling. “Many pageants are even part of larger scholarship programs.”

Do not make a Miss Congeniality joke, I tell myself firmly. Resist the urge. You are a strong woman with impeccable impulse control.

Well. That might be stretching things a bit much.

I can for sure keep my marginally funny jokes to myself, though.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” I say, leaning forward a little, “have you had good experiences putting your daughter in pageants?” Then I realize that leaning forward causes the front of Caroline’s silky blouse to gape open, and I sit up straight again. Tonya has not earned that visual, and I don’t think she notices anyway.

Aiden definitely notices, though. His eyes drop before he yanks them away again, his cheeks turning the most intriguing shade of red.

I can’t figure this man out. I really can’t. Sometimes he seems to dislike me; sometimes the opposite seems true. He held my hand with no complaint. And right now, despite the fact that he’s not looking at me, his arm is still around my shoulder, no longer squeezing so tightly. His thumb rubs back and forth, back and forth, little patterns that I can feel despite the blazer separating my skin from his touch.

No time to think about that, though. My attention is riveted on Tonya as I wait for her to answer the question. She seems to be choosing her words carefully. Finally she speaks.

“The pageant life can be difficult on the girls, I admit—”

“But your daughter was okay with that?” Aiden cuts her off, and I elbow him as discreetly as possible. He needs to dial back the aggressiveness by like 200 percent.

“She’s been in pageants all her life. She doesn’t know any different. When she was a little girl I told her it would be fun—like playing dress-up. But ultimately she’s learned and grown so much.”

“So you lied to her.”

“Parents lie to their children if they think it’s what’s best for them,” Tonya says to Aiden, the words clipped. “I’m sure the two of you are no different.”

A strange prickle of foreboding plays over my skin when she says this; somewhere deep down inside, an uncomfortable chord twinges. But I force a smile and nod. “Of course,” I say.

The ice in Tonya’s expression thaws a bit as she goes on, “And my daughter has had lovely experiences for the most part. She’s very beautiful and very intelligent—”

“So her time in the pageants will help with her college applications as well,” Aiden says; he clearly can tell that he needs to tone it down a bit.

“Oh, yes,” Tonya says, nodding. “In fact, she’s currently touring schools and speaking to admissions faculty. She’s going Ivy League, of course—”

“Of course,” Aiden echoes with a hearty smile that doesn’t suit him at all.

“And she told me just yesterday that the interviews have been going very well. The thing is, these girls learn social skills, grace, poise under pressure—all highly relevant skills.”

“Ah,” I say, swallowing. The velvet friction of the couch tugs uncomfortably against the fabric of my pants as I shift.

“So she’s been keeping you updated; that’s wonderful. How does she sound when you talk to her on the phone?”

And for the first time, Tonya von Meller’s immaculate expression falters. “I—well—we haven’t spoken on the phone yet,” she says with a tinkling laugh that falls just shy of convincing. “I’ve called, of course, but she’s a responsible girl, so she doesn’t like to talk while driving, and of course she’s very tired at the end of the day.”

“Oh, dear,” I say, letting overt concern drip from my words. “I do hope everything is all right.” A stab of guilt hits me square in the gut on that one; everything is *not* all right, and Tonya has no idea, and I’m here pretending anyway.

But it truly would be helpful to see exactly what Sandy’s killer has been texting her mother. Pictures especially would be good; any information we can glean will only help at this point. Even better would be convincing Sandy’s mom that something might be wrong.

“Of course everything is fine,” Tonya says with another one of those laughs. She doesn’t believe her own words, though; she’s starting to fidget, her bony fingers fiddling with the gaudy silver bracelet draped over her wrist.

And my heart breaks unexpectedly for her. Because all the worries that might be going through her mind, all of the worst-case scenarios she might be talking herself out of—they’re true. They’ve happened.

Her daughter is gone, and yet somehow, somewhere, the killer is pretending to be her. It’s a nightmare. I don’t have children and it still sounds horrible. I can’t imagine what it would actually be like to experience that.

“Well, if you say so,” I say. Now I inject my voice with just enough skepticism to leak through. “If *you’re* sure, that’s all that matters.”

“Of course I’m sure.” Another laugh, clipped this time, and forced and sharp around the edges. “Why, look—she texted me just this morning. A nice photo, see?”

My gut twists at the clear desperation in her voice, at the coaxing, convincing tone that I know she's using only on herself. But I lean forward, ignoring my gaping top this time so that I can see the photo she holds up—one of Sandy with her hair pulled into a ponytail, making a peace sign at the camera. I try to look more closely, but then Tonya scrolls sideways.

“And another from the other day, see?” she says as a new photo appears.

Another Sandy von Meller, smiling again, the sun casting her in a halo of light. She's got on a fuchsia hoodie, a color that looks good on almost nobody—but it looks good on her. The hood is pulled up, the strings tied so that it scrunches around her face, but her blonde hair peeks out nevertheless. Even like this, she's truly beautiful. There's something almost defiant in her smile, too, a glint in her eyes that makes me think she would have been a handful. Maybe that spark means that she fought back against her attacker, at least.

I commit the photo to memory as well as I can, since it would be too weird to ask for a copy. I wish she would show us one that might have been photoshopped, but I can't ask for that either. When I lean back into place, though, finally tearing my eyes away from the picture, Tonya is still looking at it. Her face is a mask of stone, the only hint of concern betrayed in the lines around her mouth, the tight press of her thin lips.

Yes. Whatever she's told Garrity, she's worried.

Is it a mother thing, I wonder—that instinct that something is wrong? Or is it a human instinct? The human brain is incredible. One theory is that gut feelings and intuition are actually our subconscious mind connecting dots and spotting patterns that our conscious mind is unaware of.

What patterns is Tonya von Meller spotting? Which dots has she been connecting in the dead of night when she can't sleep?

The three of us jump when Tonya's phone rings.

“Excuse me for a moment,” she says, her perma-smile back in place. She looks relieved, frankly, to have an excuse to take a break from this conversation; she shoots up out of her chair with surprising dexterity and hurries to the marble-top desk, where a landline is stationed.

“Hello,” she says, her voice breathless. She listens for a second or two and then says, “Yes.”

More listening—both by her *and* by Aiden and me. I have no shame. If you are the in-denial parent of a girl I know to be dead, and you are on the phone in the same room as me, I will eavesdrop with every ounce of listening power I have.

“Yes,” she says again after a stretch of quiet. “Any time today would be—” She breaks off, her eyes darting over to where Aiden and I are sitting on the world’s least comfortable couch, watching her with rapt interest. Then she turns her back on us and says, in a much lower voice, “Now would be perfect, actually. Head on over now. Yes. See you in a few.”

Aiden looks at me; I look at him. It seems we’ve officially overstayed our welcome.

When she returns to the sitting area, Tonya doesn’t even bother pretending she’s sorry to see us go. “Unfortunately,” she says through the first genuine smile I’ve seen from her thus far, “I’ve got a rather important guest who needs to swing by for a few things. It’s terribly rude of me, but I’m going to have to ask if we can wrap this up a bit early.”

“Of course,” Aiden says, his voice desert dry. “Wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.”

“So kind of you to understand,” she says. “If you will?” She gestures to the door, her bracelet jingling with her movements. A ray of sun catches the massive diamond on her ring and reflects right into my eye, rendering me blind for probably the next hour. But I stand anyway, Aiden following in my wake, and together we see ourselves out.

The door shuts behind us with an awful air of finality. I don’t think she’s going to be willing to meet with us again.

“Was it necessary to attack her?” I say, rounding on Aiden.

“I didn’t attack her,” he shoots back. “I just asked questions that *someone* should ask—”

“But not you,” I say. “Can’t you tell she’s worried? She knows something is wrong. She just doesn’t know what or why, and she doesn’t want to admit it. Especially since she’s the one who let Sandy go off by herself.”

“It’s not her fault her daughter was killed—”

“I know that,” I say gently. “But I have to assume that she would still feel responsible. I think that’s a parent thing.”

Aiden grunts but doesn’t respond further, which is probably for the best. This is not a conversation we need to have right here or right now. I head down the path instead, making my way back to the driveway as I watch a shiny black town car pull up to the front curb.

Fancy, fancy.

I continue walking, keeping my eyes on the ground mostly so that I don’t trip in these heels. That would be the icing on the cake here—falling on my face in front of Tonya von Meller’s VIP guest. When I look back up, though, it’s in time to see a large figure unfolding from the back of that fancy-pants town car.

I freeze in place, my eyes narrowing as I try to get a clearer look. Aiden steps up from behind me, nudging me lightly with his elbow.

“Come on,” he says, crouching down to tie his shoe. “Why’d you stop?”

“Aiden,” I hiss, tapping him on the shoulder. When he doesn’t respond, I tap him again. My heart has dropped to my stomach, and there’s a zoo’s worth of hyped-up animals rioting in my veins—stampeding masses in the strangest fight-or-flight dance my body has ever done. I’m somehow both frozen in place and full of purely adrenal energy at the same time. “Aiden!”

“What?” he whisper-yells, finally standing up again. “Stop *poking* me—” But he breaks off when he sees what I’m staring at.

Or rather, *who* I’m staring at.

“Aiden,” I whisper as my eyes catalog every inch of Lionel Astor I can see. “That’s *him*.”

“It is,” he says, sounding dazed. Slowly he reaches into his pocket.

My brain whirs, tying itself in knots, until one crystal-clear thought emerges: this man might be my father.

Unfortunately, somewhere between my mind and my mouth is a disconnect. So instead of commenting that Lionel Astor might be my father, what pops out is this: “Should I go introduce myself and call him *Papa*?”

Aiden snorts as he pulls his phone out, holding it up. “I would pay good money to see that.” Then he starts snapping photos of Lionel.

“What are you doing?” I say, my body still buzzing unpleasantly.

He zooms in, his brows furrowed as he concentrates. “Gonna blow one of these up and use it as a dartboard later.”

I almost laugh out loud at this, catching myself at the last second and slapping my hand over my mouth instead. “He might be completely innocent in all this.”

Aiden raises one skeptical brow. “Sure, he might be,” he says, though I can tell he doesn’t actually mean it. “Probably going to do it anyway. He just has one of those faces you want to punch.”

He’s not wrong there. “Your brain works in mysterious ways,” I say with a little smile.

Aiden’s finger, just about to snap another photo, pauses briefly over his phone’s screen. He shoots me a sideways grin. “Yours is pretty interesting too.” Then he turns his attention back to the pictures he’s taking. “He’s heading this way,” he says. “Are you gonna say anything?”

“Yes,” I say, taking a deep breath. And normally I have no problem breathing, but currently the air feels clunky, difficult to find—I keep wheezing and pulling until enough oxygen has toppled down my throat like a child’s falling tower of blocks. “I’m going to talk to him.”

“I do need to tell you, though, that if you call that man *Papa*, we can no longer be friends.”

“Are you sure we’re friends? You don’t even like me, remember?” I throw the jab with zero hesitation, and I don’t feel bad about it, either. It was a harsh thing for him to say, yes, but more than that, I want to see how he responds. If I’m going to broach the subject of my feelings later, I need to know what I’m getting into.

But he doesn’t answer. He doesn’t say a single thing.

I swallow, take a deep breath, and give myself permission to worry about it for exactly five seconds. Then I put all those concerns about Aiden somewhere where I can look at them later. Right now I have other things to focus on.

Time slows to a molasses crawl as Lionel approaches us. He moves up the driveway and past the sidewalk that leads to the front of the house, heading instead for Tonya’s home office just like we did—he’s obviously the one Tonya told to come over straight away in order to get rid of us. His shoes make a pleasant sound on the pavement, his tan peacoat pulling this way and that in the crisp autumn wind. My eyes narrow as I study him more closely.

He’s impossibly tall, with thick, black hair and an icy blue gaze. I do see the resemblance between him and his brother, but where Rocco is warm and smiling, the man heading toward me is not.

He is arctic. Smiling, yes—it appears as soon as he makes eye contact—but cold.

That unnaturally white smile begins to fade as he zeroes in on me, though, his eyes sharpening.

I tilt my head, approaching him slowly. I don’t know what I’m doing or how smart it is. My body can certainly tell that

something's going on; it's hovering between fight and flight, and I can feel my hands shaking, my legs wobbling as I stare down the man in front of me.

We come to a stop, mere feet apart, in the middle of the sidewalk.

“Do I look familiar to you?” I say to him.

I don't know why this is what I lead with. A greeting would probably be more standard. From behind me, I hear Aiden sigh. I imagine he's also rubbing his temples again. He really has no faith in me.

“Yes,” Lionel Astor says. His eyebrows, two dark slashes, climb ever so slightly as he looks me over. Then those icy shards return to meet my gaze once more. “I imagine you must be Nora Bean's daughter. You look very like your mother.”

I nod, little more than a shaky wobble of my head. “I'm Nora's.”

Lionel's head tilts to the side, and I swear I've never felt more like prey than I do in this moment. But when he speaks again, it's accompanied by another glacial smile. “I do have to be going, but it was lovely meeting you, Juniper. I'm sure we'll cross paths again soon.”

And then he brushes past me, not giving Aiden so much as a passing glance, and I'm left to wonder how he knows my name—and, more concerning still, when he plans to see me again.

IN WHICH AIDEN PONDERES THE
HUMAN INCLINATION FOR
WARMTH

Juniper asks if we can make a stop on the way home from Tonya's house in the Heights. At first I'm hesitant—I want to get out of these clothes—but when she specifies that she wants to visit her mom's grave, I relent.

You can't really refuse if someone asks to see their mother's grave. That makes you a huge jerk, and I already have a lot working against me. I don't need to add to the list.

"Hey," I say now, because something she said earlier has been bothering me. There's still an ugly taste in my mouth from running into Lionel Astor, and even more so from his comments to Juniper. "I know I said I didn't like you that one time"—that one time when I swear we almost kissed—"but I just meant...you know. Romantically. You're a fine roommate. I don't mind living with you."

It's more or less true.

Apparently Juniper is skeptical too, because she snorts. "In over half of our conversations, you rub your temples like I'm giving you a headache."

Okay, well, that's *definitely* true.

"I'm headache prone," I say. "It's not personal."

And we're back to half truths.

I sigh. "Honestly, Juniper, I'm just used to being on my own. Spending a lot of time around anyone is going to be an adjustment for me, much less someone so—" My voice falls

away as I hunt for a word that's neither offensive nor too revealing. When I come up blank, I just gesture at her instead, hoping maybe she'll understand what I mean.

"I know," she says quietly. "I'm a lot. Too much sometimes." She doesn't look at me; she keeps her head turned, staring out the window so that all I can see of her is her hair, her ear, and the faint curve of her cheekbone.

"It's not that. You're not too much. I'm just—" But I break off once again. How do I explain that she's not the problem—I am? "This is going to sound stupid. But it's not you. It's me."

This, finally, is what gets her to look at me. She gasps dramatically, clutching her hand over her heart—over the tauntingly low neckline of her silky blouse. "Are you breaking up with me?"

I allow my smile to break through, little more than a twitch of my lips, and redirect my eyes back to the road. "No," I say as we wind through the Heights. "I'm just trying to explain. We're roommates, so it's important that we avoid misunderstandings wherever possible. That's all."

"I understand," she says, and her voice is back to that light, detached tone she's been using. "You like me but not romantically, and you want to maintain a peaceful roommate relationship."

"I—yeah. I guess. I think so." Something about her assessment doesn't sit quite right with me, but it all *sounds* okay, so I don't say anything else.

The smile she gives me is bright, but her eyes don't crinkle or squint. Maybe they always look like this, and I'm imagining things? "I understand," she says again. "And I'm completely fine with that. I appreciate you speaking up. Communication is important when we're living together."

And once again, everything she's saying sounds fine. It all sounds accurate. But...her words curdle in my stomach like sour milk, making me feel faintly sick.

"And you said you wanted to talk to me about something earlier...?" I say, because I don't want to leave things like this.

“Oh,” she says, sounding surprised. She hesitates a few seconds too long before going on, “It was nothing.”

I just nod.

But that sick, sour feeling slithers further down into my gut, churning and squeezing. It continues to worsen as we drive to the little spot of land between Autumn Grove and Valley Hills where the cemetery is located. The miles pass in silence, and not the comfortable kind.

Strangely enough, it’s not even Juniper making things uncomfortable. She’s just looking out the window, glancing through the windshield every now and then.

It’s *me*. I’m the issue here. The quiet is torturous, and for the first time in probably my entire life, I’m desperate to say something—anything—just to fill it up.

A reckless, idiotic part of me wants to take back what I said, to tell her I was wrong. But that doesn’t make sense; I’m pretty sure I meant what I told her. Maybe I just want to say something that will get rid of that lukewarm expression on her face, the polite, distant, perfectly acceptable voice that somehow doesn’t suit her at all.

But who am I to decide what suits her? Who am I to tell her she can’t look at me like that?

So I bite my tongue and try to ignore the brewing discontent in my gut.

We arrive at the cemetery ten (painfully silent) minutes later. It’s not big enough to be webbed throughout with any sort of road or street or trail; you park in the front and walk wherever you need to go. The lot is lined with trees, all of them in the midst of their color change, and the grass is that unpleasant yellowish-brownish that comes from needing more rain than we actually get.

“Want to meet my mom?” Juniper says when we’ve pulled into a parking spot.

“Oh,” I say. It would probably be rude to say no, right? “Sure.” Then I look at her high heels. “Are you going to wear those?”

Juniper looks at the heels too, shrugging. “They’re the only shoes I’ve got right now. It will be fine.”

I personally think she’s going to sink right into the ground, but I guess a little extra aeration never hurt anybody.

“So,” I say as we get out of the car. “Lionel was a little creepy.”

“Ha,” she says, her voice dry. “He’s about what I expected, honestly. Taller, maybe. What he said was weird, though, I agree.”

“About seeing you again soon?” I say, looking around as I wait for her. It’s been a long time since I’ve been here, and I don’t know where Nora Bean is buried.

“Yeah,” she says, setting off. “And how he knew my name.” Maybe I’m imagining things, but I swear I see her shiver at that. She just pulls her blazer tighter around her slim frame and begins to walk. I follow her across the parking lot until we reach the burial plots, and together we thread through the rows of headstones.

“Maybe he kept tabs on your mom,” I say, slowing my pace. As I anticipated, Juniper’s heels are a problem—they appear to be perforating the ground with every step she takes, something that’s never ideal, but especially in a cemetery.

“Maybe?” she says, and it’s clear she’s only partially paying attention to me; she’s frowning down at the shoes Caroline gave her. They make her legs look incredible, but they don’t seem very practical. “But I haven’t kept track of what my old high school crushes are up to,” she goes on.

“Me either,” I say, “but Rocco said Lionel had a thing for your mom. If the person you liked got pregnant *while* you liked them, you’d probably remember the name of the baby at very least.”

“Oh,” she says, looking up at me with wide eyes. “Duh. Of course. That’s a good point.” Then she turns her gaze back to her shoes.

I take pity on her just when it looks like she’s about to give up. She huffs a sigh that sends her pink hair flying out of her

face, and her shoulders sag.

“Here,” I say then, turning around so that my back is to her. I reach around and pat myself awkwardly between my shoulder blades. “Hop on.”

“Are you sure?” she says after a second’s hesitation.

“Yeah,” I say, speaking over my shoulder to her. “It’s fine. It’s not far, is it?”

“No,” she says with a little shrug. “Okay. Thanks.”

I’m about to crouch down so she can reach better, but she leaps before I get the chance; her arms band around my neck, and instinctively I reach back to grab her legs as they wrap around me.

“That’s my butt—”

“Yep. Sorry.” I adjust my grip and ignore the flush of heat rushing to my cheeks. And then we’re off again, her pointing the way and leading me like I’m her faithful steed.

And it’s strange that simple body heat should be so intoxicating. But then, I suppose, humanity is the creature that clawed its way through the ranks of evolution and stole its crown with the creation of fire. Our higher brains have been propelling us toward warmth literally since the dawn of time.

No fire I’ve ever sat next to has felt the way she feels, her citrus-scented hair a slash of pink in my periphery, her breath on my skin as she directs my path.

You don’t like her romantically, huh? a little voice in my head says.

I drop kick that little voice clear out of my mind.

We reach Nora’s plot only a minute or two later, and Juniper slides down the back of my body, taking all her body heat with her. I fold my arms across my chest to ward off the chill she leaves behind, watching as she approaches her mother’s grave.

“Hi,” she says to the small headstone. “I brought a friend. You want to meet him?” She turns and points at me, and I step

closer, feeling unaccountably nervous.

I've never met a woman's mom before.

"This is Aiden," she says, grabbing me by the arm and dragging me closer once I enter her range of motion. I stumble into her, and she wobbles dangerously in her heels for a second. Her arms windmill and flail until I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her tight against me.

"Oof," she says, looking up at me with wide eyes. "Thanks. Almost ate it there." Then she turns back to her mom. "This is Aiden," she repeats. She pats me on the chest. "He thinks I'm a good roommate, and he promised he won't let me go hungry."

I shift uncomfortably, my grip around her waist tightening, the silk of her top smooth beneath my fingertips.

Why is it that calling her a roommate *sounds* right but *feels* wrong?

And why does calling her more than a roommate sound *wrong* but feel *right*?

"You're hurting me," she says, snapping me out my thoughts. She taps my hand. "Too tight."

"Sorry," I say quickly, letting go of her as though I've been shocked. I back away a couple steps. "Sorry."

She smiles. "It's fine." Then she crouches down so that she's eye level with Nora's headstone, and that smile fades. It falls away from her eyes first, then her lips, until what's left in its place is something like concern. "Did you lie to me?" she says.

I blink. "What?"

"Not you," she says. She jerks her chin at the headstone. "Her." She swivels her head up to look at me. "That's what Tonya said, wasn't it? That parents lie to their children if they think it's for their own good?"

I nod slowly. "Yes," I say. Then I shove my hands in my jacket pockets to protect them from the biting wind. "Something like that."

“That’s what I thought.” She turns back to her mother now. “When she said that, I got the strangest feeling. The hair stood up on my body. And it made me wonder...” She doesn’t finish her sentence, but she doesn’t need to. It’s clear what she’s wondering.

Did her mother lie to Juniper in order to protect her? And if so, what would she have lied about? Juniper’s dad?

After a few more seconds of staring at the headstone, Juniper sighs. Then, in an awkward manipulation of arms and legs and shifting weight, she seats herself on the ground, leaning back against Nora. She looks unbearably tired all of a sudden, like she could close her eyes right there and be asleep in moments. I’m entirely unsurprised when her lids drift shut, her lashes fanning over her pale skin.

I guess we’re staying for a while.

So I approach the Bean women once more, lowering myself to the ground next to Juniper and sitting with my arms wrapped around my knees. Earlier I wanted to fill the silence, but now it seems inappropriate to do so; I wait quietly, taking my cues from the woman next to me. I watch the leaves scattering in the wind; I note the headstones around us that seem well cared for and the ones that don’t. I remember what Juniper said about feeling sad for people who are forgotten after they die, and I promise myself that when I someday lose the people I love, I’ll bring flowers to their graves.

“Want to listen?” Juniper says some time later, startling me. When I look at her, she’s holding out an earbud; the other is already tucked into her ear. I take what she offers without question, putting the single headphone in and listening to the music that floods through my mind.

“It’s called *Danse Macabre*. It tells the story of Death on Halloween night,” she explains, letting her head drop back to rest against Nora’s headstone once more. “He appears at midnight and begins playing his fiddle, calling the dead forth from their graves. They dance until dawn, and then they return to the ground until the same time next year.”

I nod, imagining the scene. “What about Nora?” I say. I wrap my arms more tightly around my knees. “Does she dance with them?”

“Not sure. She loved to dance, but if someone told her to, she’d be less likely to do it.”

“Defiant.”

“Very.”

“What kind of dance are we talking?” I cast my eyes around until they fall on an empty plot. “There’s room over there,” I say, pointing.

“Mmm, no,” Juniper says, shaking her head. “You know that scene in the animated *Anastasia*, during ‘Once Upon a December’? When she imagines all the people dancing, but they’re kind of waltzing around in the air?”

“Incredibly, yes,” I say dryly. “I know exactly what you’re talking about.”

“That’s sort of how I’ve always pictured it. A bunch of skeletons, bowing and curtsying and spinning and twirling above me.”

“Just skeletons?” I say. “Not zombie-looking people?”

She shakes her head at this. “That’s too scary. In fact, if you think about it...” She pauses, her eyes narrowing as she thinks, the wind playing with her pink hair. “The scary part about a corpse is that it *resembles* life. It’s that juxtaposition between what it looks like versus what it actually *is*. I think your average adult would not say that a skeleton is scary, right?” she says, looking at me.

I ponder for a second. “I think I agree.”

She nods. “Because once a body has reached skeleton stage, all humanity has vanished. There’s no question, conscious or subconscious, of whether that body is dead. It’s obviously dead. What freaks our brains out is seeing something dead that still has *hints* of aliveness about it. It’s the same as the concept of the uncanny, right? Not Freud’s uncanny—Uncanny Valley.”

I swallow at the sound of her warm, husky voice talking about Freud and the Uncanny Valley and dancing skeletons. “Yes. Exactly.” My body is coming alive with electricity, sparks dancing in my veins, and I could honestly kick myself. But the way her mind works is fascinating. I want to take out a monthly subscription to her world view.

Yes. The way she sees things is intriguing. She’s smart, she’s irreverent. She’s beautiful, and I still retain the very visceral memory of her pressed up against me. It’s normal that I’m feeling these things. But what exactly do they mean?

Ugh. I almost groan out loud as I realize I might need to ask Caroline for advice.

“So no zombies,” Juniper says, happily oblivious to my inner dilemma. “Only skeletons.”

“All right.” I nod, then direct my gaze to the sky. “Only skeletons.”

We listen to the piece on repeat for long enough that I lose track of time. And when Juniper’s head nods onto my shoulder some time later, I remove the headphone from her ear. Then I pick her up and stand as gently as possible, carrying her in my arms all the way back to the car. I carry her from the car to her bed once we arrive back at the house, and she doesn’t wake up once—not even when I remove her shoes and place the covers over her.

I can only assume she’s dreaming of dancing skeletons.

Once I’m done tucking her into her bed, I go back downstairs and make a phone call.

And here’s something you should know about me: I hate talking to people on the phone. *Hate* it. I find it stressful to have to respond in real time without being able to sit and think of a reply. I am not my best self on the fly. I am at my best when I can mull things over, look at all sides, maybe do some research.

It’s a trait I keep thinking I should grow out of at some point, but so far that hasn’t happened. If anything, my aversion to talking on the phone has only grown the older I’ve gotten.

But it's Rodriguez I need to talk to right now, and unfortunately, Rodriguez is the opposite of me. He hates texting, and he rarely checks his text messages.

So call me stupid, but I make a list of things I want to ask about before I call him. I do the same thing before I go through the drive-thru. Preparing ahead of time helps me feel less frazzled when the time for action comes. Because when I get put on the spot, I end up either looking like an idiot or letting my true personality shine through—impatient and slightly abrasive. I don't *mean* to come off that way; I just get flustered and those things come out.

So yeah. Preparation is best. I make my list, dial his number—just kidding, I have exactly one phone number memorized, and it's my mom's; I pull up Rodriguez's contact info—and wait as it rings.

And when he answers, I jump right in with my question: “Hey. What do you know about hunger banquets?”



WHEN JUNIPER COMES DOWNSTAIRS A FEW HOURS LATER, messy haired and bleary eyed, I'm several texts deep into a very one-sided conversation with Rocco.

It started when I messaged him after I got off the phone with Rodriguez—who was surprisingly helpful, by the way. All I meant to do was tell Rocco I met his brother, and that he was right about him. He's a creep.

I didn't expect our conversation to spiral, but it did, his texts coming in one after the other, questions and warnings and general wishes of ill will on his brother. And maybe I should have expected it; Rocco has some *strong* feelings about Lionel.

But it sends a prickle of fear through me, a chill on the back of my neck that has me shifting in my kitchen chair to look around the kitchen.

No one is here, of course. I'm being stupid. It's just...what does Rocco know about his brother that we don't, for him to be warning us so thoroughly?

It's not something I can really focus on at the moment; not if I want to get any sleep. So I reassure Rocco I'll be careful. Then I set my phone aside.

I watch Juniper shuffle sleepily over to the refrigerator, where she pulls out a carton of orange juice with her name scrawled across the front. My nose wrinkles as she unscrews the top, puts it to her lips, and drinks straight from the container. Then she sits down at the table across from me, eyeing my half-eaten orange with interest; I stand up and grab her one from the basket on the counter.

"Hungry?" I say, returning to the table and plunking the orange down in front of her.

"Mmm," she mumbles as she begins to peel it. "I'm so tired, but I can't sleep."

"A lot on your mind?" I say vaguely as I watch her. With the way she's peeling, I think she's going to demolish that entire piece of fruit in less than one minute.

"Yeah, but also insomnia."

"Oof," I say sympathetically.

I watch every single bite she takes. She barely seems to notice me after we're done talking. And when she trails back up the stairs, looking like she's headed to bed again, she doesn't see me smile.



BUT THE NEXT MORNING TAKES ANY PLEASANT FEELINGS FROM the day before and stomps all over them. Because when I open the door to go to work, the first thing my eyes land on is something small and fluffy and wrong.

There, lying on the welcome mat, is a chicken—head at a horribly crooked angle, blood matting its brown feathers.

From somewhere behind me, Juniper screams.

IN WHICH JUNIPER REFUSES TO LIVE IN FEAR

The buzz of squad cars and the attention of curious neighbors are more than I feel like dealing with, so I scurry up to my room to hide. Aiden is talking with Sheriff Garrity; there's nothing I can really contribute at this point anyway. I just open my window, keeping my ears tuned for any relevant snippets that might float up toward me.

Mostly it's just a lot of yelling. Aiden at Garrity—*“I told you we saw a body in the woods, Todd, and you're still not taking this seriously!”*—and Garrity at Aiden—*“Give me a body if you want me to investigate a murder! We're working on what we can! We had a report of stolen chickens from Rocco Astor. This is obviously some kind of prank!”*

I do not do well with screaming. I can handle snide, sarcastic, argumentative, and downright rude. But something about screaming makes me want to curl up into a little ball.

You know what else makes me want to curl up into a little ball?

Dead poultry on my doorstep.

Who even does that? Is this a mafia movie? Are we threatening the local gangs? What kind of person steals a chicken and then leaves it nice and bloodied and broken on another person's front porch?

Most of me is outraged about any number of things—the poor dead chicken, the welcome mat that's now ruined, the *audacity*. But there is a little part of me that's wondering, over

and over again on a loop, if we provoked someone enough for them to want to send a message.

There was no note left with it, but there's not much to misinterpret about a bloody dead animal.

It's a warning.

I finally sit up, unrolling myself from where I'm curled in the fetal position on my bed. I push myself up just far enough to peek out the window. The yelling has died down, which is good, but it also makes it so I don't know what's going on out there anymore.

As it turns out, Aiden and Garrity are still talking, but another party has joined the chat: Rocco Astor, looking *rough*. He's rubbing his hands over his head without stopping, making his already messy hair look messier. I can't see all the minute details of his face from up here, but I can tell that he's wearing some sort of frown, and his body language is agitated—he can't seem to stop moving, shifting his weight from one leg to the other.

And maybe he just needs to pee.

But maybe...maybe he suspects the same ridiculous thing that I do: that his brother somehow stole one of his chickens and dumped it on our doorstep to get us to stop digging around.

It's insane. It just seems absolutely *insane* that anyone, much less Lionel Astor, would do something like that. Aiden and I are hardly a threat. We're not doing that much digging. We don't have law enforcement on our sides. We don't have unlimited resources, or even many *limited* ones.

So why is someone out there scared of us?

I narrow my eyes on the trio of men standing in their little clump, talking seriously. I need them to speak up so I can eavesdrop.

No, that's not right—eavesdropping only happens when you're not supposed to hear something. I have every right to hear that conversation. I just would prefer to listen from the

comfort of my bed, where I can hide from any shouting or attention that comes my way.

And unbidden to my mind comes a memory that I'd much rather leave in the past—my mother, stumbling drunk around our gravel driveway at ten at night, screaming at the top of her lungs about the neighbors reporting her to the HOA for an unkempt yard and improperly disposed of garbage. I was fifteen, and I came home late from an evening at the library to find her there, the neighbors all out on their porches and in their yards, watching with scandalized faces.

I had never been so humiliated in my life. She turned her yelling on me when I hurried to take her inside, coaxing and wheedling and outright begging until finally she relented and shuffled back in, closing the door behind us with so much force that the windows rattled.

When I peeked out the window, though, the neighbors were still watching. It always felt like everyone was watching. So I let the curtain drop and helped my mom get into bed, removing her shoes and making sure she had a trash can in case she threw up.

"I'm so sorry, baby," she murmured as I pulled the covers up around her. "I just got so angry."

"I know," I said.

"Did you have a good study session?" The words came out garbled.

I swallowed back my tears. "Yes."

"Find yourself some dinner."

"Mm-hmm." I closed the blinds tightly, turned out the light, and closed the door.

Then I sat in my room and cried, wondering why someone who obviously loved me so much could be such a terrible mother.



WHEN I FINALLY GO DOWN TO THE DRIVEWAY, I'VE SPLASHED my face with water and held a cold compress over my eyes for a few minutes so they don't look swollen. Aiden's eyes only linger on me a second longer than normal, so I think I've pulled it off for the most part. Either way, no one says anything or asks why I seem to have developed a head cold.

"What's going on?" I say to Rocco, coming to a stop next to Aiden. Garrity has gone, as has the dead chicken, thank goodness.

"I'll tell you what's going on," Rocco says, turning to me with a severe look on his face. This is the serious version of him, the one I saw when we went to his house that day, asking about his brother. "Whatever you two are poking around in, you need to stop."

This clearly isn't the first time he's told Aiden this, because my roommate doesn't look surprised; he's just rubbing his temples. It's nice to see him do that because of someone other than me.

I hold my hands up, trying to placate him. "I don't think we're *poking around* so much as—"

"Oh, come off it," he snaps at me, his blue eyes harsher than I've ever seen them. "You two are running around doing heaven-knows-what, digging up the past, and you're going to get hurt. Some nutter stole my chickens this time, but next time *that could be you*."

An image pops into my mind of myself, covered in feathers and lying glassy-eyed on someone's front porch. I shake my head to get rid of it and then say, "When did your chickens go missing? You didn't see who took them?"

Some of the fight drains out of Rocco at this question; his shoulders slump and his face falls. "Last night sometime. I didn't see anything. Didn't even hear them. I should've installed security cameras," he says. "If I had just installed security cameras like I'd been planning, I would at least be able to see who it was. Should've installed them. Gotten a better lock, too—"

“All right,” I say quickly. “Calm down. We’re not mad.” I look at Aiden.

“I mean, I’m a little pissed—*oof*.” He breaks off when I elbow him in the ribs. He glares at me and then turns to Rocco. “Obviously it’s not your fault someone stole your animals,” he says, sounding grumpier than necessary. “I’m just mad that someone did this.”

“I know,” Rocco says, and somehow he droops even further, deflating completely. “I feel horrible that I had any part in this. And I’m so terribly, *terribly* sorry. Just—stay safe, kids. All right?” He’s more earnest now, his voice beseeching. “Stop whatever it is you’re doing and stay safe. Don’t meddle, don’t get hurt.”

“Let me ask you one thing,” I say. It’s partly to avoid making a promise I don’t intend to keep, but I also really do want to know. “Do you think this is something your brother might do? I’m not saying that he’s responsible for this”—I gesture vaguely at the door mat that I will most certainly be throwing away—“but just...do you think this is the kind of thing he *could* do?”

Rocco heaves a sigh. “I don’t know,” he mutters, running his hand over his hair again. “I don’t want to believe he would stoop this low. But he’s a son of a—ah.” He shoots me a self-conscious glance. “He’s a power-hungry scumbag, and he’s surrounded by power-hungry scumbags. So if you’re messing around with him”—he’s back to looking severe now, and I half expect him to start wagging his finger at me—“you just cut it out and leave it alone, all right?”

I garble out something nondescript under my breath, and I can’t help noticing that Aiden doesn’t reply at all. It seems neither of us want to promise him we’ll walk away.

What about Cam Verido? a little voice in my brain asks. Where is he in all this? And what about the incident Gus mentioned? How much do we really know about those two?

Not much. I can admit that. And it’s a thought that has my insides squirming with discomfort. I think back to the rest of the people on our Murder Board too before deciding to erase

the Betties later. There's no way a few small-town teachers would be involved in something like this, right?

When Rocco finally leaves, Aiden and I go back inside, although we make a quick detour to the dumpster first. Aiden holds the chicken-blood welcome mat pinched between two fingers, his arm extended as far away from his body as it will go, while I follow behind with a look of disgust on my face. I do feel better once the mat is safely at home in its trash heap, though, mingling with the company of old banana peels and grease-stained pizza boxes.

"Don't you need to go to work?" I say once we've returned indoors. Aiden stands at the kitchen sink, scrubbing his hands with dish soap and a sponge. He's using the bristly green side, not the softer yellow side, which makes me think he feels more violated by this ordeal than he's letting on.

"I'll go." Short, to the point, quiet. But then he looks over his shoulder at me. "Will you be okay here by yourself?"

It's a good question, and I don't know if I have an answer. Will I be okay? Yes. I will emerge from the end of this day in one piece. But will I feel comfortable here alone, knowing that someone out there knows where I live and likes to play ding-dong-ditch with dead chickens?

No.

"I'll be fine," I say, smiling at him.

He pauses, like he doesn't quite believe me, and then grunts, turning his attention back to his hands. I don't even think they got any chicken blood on them, but I don't blame him. I'm going to do the same when I take a shower. Scrub the top layer of skin off my body, watch it swirl down the drain, convince myself that the only sound I'm hearing is the thundering of the water as it beats against the glass.

"Why did you cry earlier?" He shuts the water off, shaking his hands over the sink before grabbing a towel from the counter and patting them dry. They're the same red as my skin when I've been in a hot tub for too long.

“I just remembered something,” I say, keeping my voice light. “A bad memory. I’m fine.”

Aiden’s eyes fix on me for one long moment. I lie to him with my smile until finally he nods and heads to his bedroom, leaving me alone.

I don’t bother washing my hands at the sink. I just rush to the bathroom and strip immediately, kicking my clothes over to the corner of the tiled floor. I’ll wash them and then decide if I’m keeping them. Like Aiden’s hands, they didn’t get any blood on them, but they still feel irredeemably dirty right now.

Then I bolt into the shower like I’m the side character in a B horror film searching for the most obvious hiding spot she can find. You hide in the shower, you’re going to die, Side Character, but that never stops you. The shower is my salvation, though, and I turn the water all the way up to scalding, darting in and out of its path until I’m used to the temperature. Then I immerse myself as completely as possible, grabbing my citrus shampoo and squeezing out way more than I actually need.

Lather, rinse, repeat; lather, rinse, repeat; lather, rinse, repeat.

And as the water rains down, cleansing everything it touches, I tell myself I’m crying because I have soap in my eye.



WHEN I EMERGE FROM THE BATHROOM THIRTY MINUTES LATER, I’m a woman on a mission.

Once my shower tears subsided, I started getting really, really angry. I’ve worked hard for my entire adult life to provide a safe space for myself—my home. It’s something I didn’t have as a child, so safety is priceless to me now.

And someone has come and trampled it under their stupid, stinky, chicken-wielding feet.

I am not okay with that. And I refuse to live in fear.

I stomp my way into my room and get dressed, pulling out clothing at random and wrestling it over my sticky, shower-damp skin. Then I march back downstairs with my phone in hand and make a call.

“Matilda,” I say when she picks up. “How’s it going?”

“Oh, hi!” she says, her voice cheerful. “It’s going well. How are you?”

“I’m fine,” I say. Like the contestants on every reality show ever, I’m not here to make friends, so I get right down to business. “I was actually calling to see if you’ve found anything about Thomas Freese.”

“As a matter of fact, I have. I was going to call you tonight,” she says, her voice suddenly lower. “Hang on.”

I listen to a series of shuffles and clatters and clanks until finally she returns.

“Okay. Juniper,” she says, a whispering, out-of-breath sound that makes me wonder if she’s lowering her voice on purpose. “Is this guy really your dad?”

“Uh, I don’t know,” I say. “Why? What did you find?”

“Okay, so, first of all,” Matilda says, “I had to pull several strings to find this information, so I hope you’re grateful.”

“Very,” I say. “What did you find?”

There’s a pause, and then she says, “It’s just weird, Juniper.”

I wait for her to elaborate, but she doesn’t.

Good grief. I’m going to have to pry every detail from her at this rate. Matilda likes the drama of a good reveal, but I wish she’d save it for a less-important conversation.

I rub my temples, taking a deep breath. *Patience, patience, patience.*

“Weird how?” I say—*patiently.*

“Well, so, okay. Didn’t your mom die six years ago?”

“Six and a half, yeah.”

“In May, right?”

Rarely does Matilda surprise me, but every so often, it happens. “How did you remember that?” I say.

“Because you texted me to tell me when I was online bidding for that vintage Givenchy bag—the black one, remember? And I got the notification that I won, like, literally three seconds after your text. That was in May.”

Ah. That makes far more sense. “Yes, okay. What about it?”

“This guy died like a *week* later. Suicide.”

I shiver at her words, rubbing my arms for warmth. Did Aiden turn on the AC or something?

“I read a bit about that. Tell me more.”

“Well, he was fine, for one. His wife and his coworkers said he didn’t show any signs of depression or suicidal ideation. It sounds like he was pretty stressed at work, there were going to be layoffs and he was trying to be extra productive to make sure his position stayed safe, but other than that—”

“Why did they call it a suicide, then?” I say, looking around the room and trying to decide where to sit. My eyes catch on Aiden’s reading chair in the corner, empty and inviting, and I hurry over. I want a turn sitting next to the bust of Shakespeare and feeling generally superior to everyone in the vicinity. That might help ease some of the turmoil I’m experiencing.

“Because he left a note.”

She drops this piece of information right as I’m trying to seat myself elegantly—a must when wearing a shorter skirt—but when her words register, I abandon that desire and let myself free-fall into the chair, squirming around to get comfortable. I end up with my legs crossed criss-cross-applesauce, and anyone standing in front of me would definitely see things they did not have permission to see.

But Aiden's not here anyway. It's fine. I need to settle in for this conversation.

"He left a note?" I say, just to make sure I heard her correctly. "The reports I saw never mentioned that."

"Mm-hmm," Matilda says, and I can hear in her voice how much she's enjoying this. She's not a bad person, but she does love being the one to pass along anything juicy—frequently without considering how her news might be received. She's not mean, she's just careless and self-centered. "There was a note."

If it were anyone else telling me this, I might stay quiet, assuming they were naturally going to tell me what the note said. But I know Matilda; she's going to wait for me to ask. And I want to know badly enough that I'll humor her.

"What did it say?" I drape my legs over the arm of the chair, still trying to find a position that's comfortable. How does Aiden sit in this thing all the time? It has no lounging capabilities at all.

"Among other things, he said he was distraught over the death of his *lifelong love*."

"His lifelong...?"

"Yes!" she squeals, so loudly that I yank the phone away from my ear. "That has to mean your mom, right?"

"What?" I say as my thoughts spin. "No. That doesn't make sense. He was married to someone else. He hadn't seen my mom in—"

"How do you know?" she cuts me off. There's a challenge in her voice, one that I don't have the energy to deal with. "How do you know he wasn't at least in touch with your mom? She wouldn't have told you. She never told you anything about her past."

"What about the other things in the note?"

"Right, yeah. So he said his lifelong love had died and he'd never gotten to atone for his sins against her and he couldn't stand the guilt."

My brain continues to hum with every piece of new information she feeds me, my thoughts becoming louder and more tangled until I shake my head violently—like that’s going to help.

This all feels too...neat, I guess. Too perfect.

Was my mom in touch with her old boyfriend? What were his sins against her?

Or—*or*—did Thomas Freese even kill himself at all? Did someone murder him and try to make it look like a suicide? Why?

“Juniper?” Matilda’s voice yanks me from my thoughts.

“Yeah,” I say.

“So you don’t know anything more about this guy? Or where you could find more information about him, or about your mom?”

I sigh. There’s a little thought eating at the edge of my mind, a caterpillar nibbling on the edge of a leaf. But that thought worms its way in, further and further, until it’s all I can see.

“I might be able to,” I say with another sigh. “Thank you so much, Matilda. I appreciate all the trouble you went to.”

“No problem!” she says cheerfully. “You know I love hot goss. Anything else?”

“Uh, maybe,” I say. “If you’re able to find anything about someone named Cam Verido, that might be helpful?”

“Spell it.”

“I’ll just text it to you.”

“Sounds good. This is fun; I feel like a PI or something.”

I have no response for this, so I just thank her one more time and then hang up, texting her Cam’s name and then setting my phone aside.

My eyes drift up, up, up, until I’m staring at the ceiling, as though I can see through it and into my room. As though I can

spot the small cardboard box on the floor of my closet, the one that contains my mother's few remaining belongings...

And her laptop.

I'm not ready. I don't *feel* ready. That box has been living an out-of-sight-out-of-mind existence, and I'm happy to leave it out of my mind. Thinking about the stories my mother told herself in feverish bouts of writing...I don't want to know more.

But I'm not sure I have a choice. So up the stairs I climb, a woman in a trance of dread and anticipation. I think I probably look possessed or something, but I can't bring myself to snap out of it. I'm building last-minute reinforcements in my mind, patching the roof before the storm hits. When I arrive in my room, I stare at the closet for a good five minutes before finally moving forward and opening it.

Pull out the box. Remove the lid. Shuffle past old legal documents and folders until my fingers meet cool plastic casing wrapped boa constrictor style by a charge cord. Heft it out, plug it in, and wait. Pace restlessly. Wait. Pace some more. Until finally the welcome screen pops up, the tinny sound of that opening chord filling the room.

I know exactly where the file is; on her desktop. I let the cursor hover over the icon only a moment before clicking. And then I dive in, my eyes finding the first line:

Once upon a time there was a girl. She had three friends...



WHEN AIDEN FINDS ME TWO HOURS LATER, I'M CURLED UP ON my bedroom floor, snot and tears covering my face. My head is pounding from crying so hard; my body aches and protests the hard wood beneath me.

Aiden curses when he sees me, but he doesn't say anything else. He simply leans down and lifts me, hefting me up until I'm bridal style in his arms. He smells like the woods and

crisp, fresh air, and I press my face into his neck, breathing him in more deeply.

He carries me down the small stairs, around the corner, down the big stairs, and finally to his bedroom. There he sets me gently on his bed, propping pillows up behind me and spreading a large blanket over my legs. Then he hurries to the chest of drawers, opens the fourth drawer down, and digs around for a moment. I have just enough presence of mind to keep my eyes on him; this is the elusive fourth drawer, the one whose contents he won't reveal. But now he pulls out three things: a packet of crackers, a protein bar, and a miniature piece of chocolate.

Food, I realize dazedly. He keeps food in there.

For...me?

My eyes flutter closed as a fresh wave of tears finds me, and I burrow back into the pillows. This blanket is so warm, and the bed is so soft, and there's food nearby so I'm not going to starve.

Safe. I feel safe.

It's the last thought that flutters across my mind before I drift off, finding sleep easily for once in my life.

IN WHICH AIDEN ASKS FOR ADVICE

My heart hurts for the woman curled up asleep on my bed, and I didn't know I had the kind of heart that could do that.

My heart aches for the hungry and the cold and the lost. It aches for the people I can help and the people I can't. My aching heart is the catalyst behind most of my life's actions.

But it's never ached so *personally* before. It's always been a detached sort of hurt, a hurt that I could walk away from at the end of the day and still manage to be okay.

This hurt, though, this pain...it isn't just in my heart. It's in the blood being pumped and oxidized and sent throughout my body, branching and spiraling and reaching to the furthest tips of my toes and fingers. This pain I'm feeling for her isn't the kind of pain I can put into the top drawer of my desk when I'm done working for the day.

It is the kind of pain that ties itself to my ankle and follows me home, trailing behind as I drag. It is riding piggyback, its arms tightening around my neck.

That is this pain. It hurts because she hurts, and I want to make it better, and I can't.

It's just...her life has been so rough already. She doesn't need this mess.

Usually I find my desk chair very comfortable, but right now there's a weight on my shoulders that makes me squirm.

That weight comes primarily from the laptop that's sitting open on my desk, taunting me.

Whatever is in this document tore my roommate apart. And that's the kind of knowledge that makes me hesitate. Some things are better left unknown.

But as my eyes drift to Juniper again, her face troubled even in sleep, her eyes still red, her nose still swollen, I make my decision.

I'm going to read it.

No, it's not mine to read. But I don't want to wake Juniper up, and I have a feeling that what's in here relates to the things going on in Autumn Grove right now. So I'm going to ask forgiveness rather than permission if need be.

I debate for a second before unplugging the computer and moving to the bed. Juniper is lying on the right side, where I usually sleep, so I sit on the left side instead. It's only a few feet removed from my normal position, but it feels wrong, a new world view I'll never get used to. If I ever get married, that will have to be one of my wife's characteristics. *Man seeking woman. Must be well read. Must sleep on the left side of the bed.*

I sigh, settling grudgingly into my spot. Is it colder over here? It feels colder than I usually feel on the right side. Is there a heat vent on the ceiling that I'm missing?

I'm being stupid. I admonish myself silently but firmly to cut out the whining, and then I return my focus to the laptop resting on my outstretched legs. I click the little magnifying glass at the bottom of the page so that the size-twelve font shows up larger for my old man eyes—though I will tell no one—and then begin to read. It's best, I think, just to get it over with rather than dragging it out.

And as my eyes trail over page after page of what appears to be a novel—unfinished, judging by the word count—one thing becomes crystal clear.

This is not a manuscript written by a gifted writer. It's not written by someone with talent or someone who understands

the craft of writing.

It's written by someone *consumed* with a story.

That is the beginning and the end of the strength this manuscript boasts—and yet it's enough. I'm pulled through the choppy sentences, the run-on sentences, and everything in between. This story is *real*, raw and livid and vibrant. It jumps off the page, clawing and fighting and drawing ragged breath.

A high school girl, named Cora in the story and clearly a sketch of Nora. Three male friends. And a night in which she is drugged, assaulted, and left alone.

Three weeks later, the pink line appears.

I tear through the story, my eyes growing wider and wider with every line I read. I think I am probably the second person in the world to walk this path, reading these words, but I don't take them for granted. They settle heavy on my soul, and I'm an outsider; I can only imagine what they did to Juniper. I saw the aftermath.

If this story is to be believed, the story Nora Bean was writing, Juniper is a product not of love, or even mutual, consensual lust. She is a product of sexual assault.

And she has probably been fundamentally changed by that knowledge.

Another strange twisting of my heart wrenches my chest, and I want nothing more than to push the laptop away and get rid of the story it's telling. But somehow I also know that it's my duty now to bear witness to what really happened; to read these words, recognize their truth, and acknowledge them. To remember this story, the same way Juniper remembers her dead.

We are all record keepers.

We all bear witness to our days and nights and lives and loves here in this world.

So I will be a keeper of this truth: that thirty years ago, a young woman suffered immensely from one of the most

terrible things that can happen, and as far as I know, she never told anybody.

The story is set up a bit like a mystery novel, though watered down; it couldn't be clearer that this project was more like a diary than a book that was ever meant to see the light of day. It follows what I assume was Nora's real-life journey as she searched for which of the boys did this to her; the main character hunts ceaselessly for that secret, running into roadblock after roadblock.

There's a stirring of motion from next to me, and I startle back to the present—where I'm sitting next to Juniper instead of following her mother as she tries to hunt down her assailant with little to no support.

"You read it?" Juniper's voice is thin, watery, muddled with sleep. She doesn't sound upset.

"I'm not finished yet," I say to her. I lean over, trying to get a closer look. "How do you feel? Physically," I clarify.

"Tired," she says. "And I have a headache."

She *looks* tired. Maybe it's just because she was crying, but her eyes are red, and even her pink hair seems duller and less saturated than usual. She's curled on her side, facing me, my gray bedspread tucked up around her head and shoulders.

"You should sleep more," I say. It's on the tip of my tongue to suggest returning to her own bed, but I can't quite bring myself to kick her out. I can handle Juniper Bean in my bed for one night. I'll sleep on the couch and then wash my sheets and pillowcase so that none of her intoxicating citrus scent is left behind.

"I can't sleep right now," she says, shaking her head a little. Then she nods at the laptop still perched on my lap. "Finish reading, and then we'll discuss."

Like it's book club.

I just nod, though, and return my attention to the computer. I find my spot easily, and for the next fifteen minutes, I read Nora Bean's unfinished manuscript. Every now and then there's a snuffle from Juniper, but I don't let myself lose focus.

When I finally reach the last page, the cursor blinks at me expectantly, eerily, waiting for someone to tell the rest of the story. It's unfinished; Cora, the narrator, is still hunting for who assaulted her.

Did Nora ever find out?

"Done?" Juniper says.

I nod. I think ten years have been added to my age tonight.

"Thoughts?" she says.

"First thought: Are you sure you don't want to talk about this another time?"

"I'm not sure," she admits, and even though she's backlit by my bedside lamp, I can still see the sheen of tears that enters her eyes. "But I kind of get the feeling that now is the best time. While it's fresh. I'm not going to be able to put all this behind me until we figure out what's going on, and to do that we need to discuss. I don't trust my brain at the moment."

"All right," I say, not bothering to keep the grudging note out of my voice. I'm not convinced this is a good idea, but she's in charge. "Go on, then."

"Right." She takes a deep breath; I hear it, see the rise of her shoulders in her silhouette before she puffs it back out. "Okay. So what did you get from that?"

"Are you comfortable assuming it's autobiographical?" I say quietly.

"Yes," she says. "I have no proof, but the similarities aren't subtle. *Cora* instead of *Nora*. The story matches bits of what she told me and everything Lance said."

"I agree," I say. I hesitate. "But that means..."

"That she was assaulted," Juniper says. The words, spoken softly, vibrate through the space between us. "And got pregnant."

I nod slowly, keeping my eyes trained on Juniper. I'm not sure what I'm expecting; I guess nothing would surprise me right now. I'm taking my cues from her, though, and she seems

to be holding it together for the time being, so I keep going. “Yes. That’s what I understood too. But she didn’t finish the book. She didn’t say who did it. So one of those three—Lionel, Tommy, or Cam...”

“Was my father. *Is* my father.”

“Yes.”

A heavy silence permeates the room, settling over us like a thick blanket, muffling and dampening everything. I’m still sitting up, looking over at Juniper, who’s still curled up on her side. Now, though, I move the laptop, setting it on the floor next to the bed with a grunt that makes me sound like I’m seventy. Then I sit back up and look at Juniper.

Her eyes are glazed as she stares vaguely at my pants, her thoughts clearly a million miles away—with Lionel, maybe, or Tommy Freese or Cam Verido.

“My mom,” she whispers, the words cracking. “She *did* lie to me. Probably to protect me, just like Tonya said. No child wants to know that she’s a product of—of—”

“Regardless of who your father was,” I say, “your mother loved you.” It’s a rash thing to say, maybe, but something tells me it’s true.

“I know she did,” Juniper says. “She wasn’t a good mom, though.”

“I know.”

She sniffles as a few more tears leak out of the corners of her eyes. I watch their path, a salty trickle over the bridge of her nose and down her cheeks, melting into the pillow. “That’s probably why she drank so much.”

I don’t say anything. I think she’s probably right.

“I talked to Matilda today.”

“Did you?” I say, surprised. “About Thomas Freese?”

“Mm-hmm. He committed suicide a week after my mom died, saying that he felt too guilty about the love of his life

dying before he could make amends for the terrible things he'd done to her."

My eyes narrow as I digest that. "So..."

"So"—she takes a deep breath—"what I think happened is that Tommy heard my mom died and felt guilty because he'd assaulted her, *or* he found out what one of his friends did and they killed him."

A chill settles over my skin. "Which do you think it was?"

A grim smile pulls at her lips. "Are you sure you want to hear? It's far-fetched. An extrapolation of what we know mixed with intuition and guesswork."

"Tell me."

Her shoulders twitch in what I think is a little shrug. "I think my mom finally figured out who my father was. I think she told Thomas. And then I think whoever did that killed both of them."

I blink, stunned. "Didn't your mom die of a heart attack?"

Another little shrug. "Supposedly. There would be ways for someone to do that to her, though."

That's true. We sit in silence as my mind reels, working through possibilities and implications and loose ends.

I wish I had something to say, but I'm searching and searching and coming up blank. Nothing in my years of school prepared me for what to say to her right now.

"Aiden," she says, so quietly I barely hear.

"Yeah."

Another snuffle, and then three little words: "My heart hurts."

So does mine.

But I sigh heavily. "I know." I reach out without thinking to stroke the top of her head, but I freeze when my fingers are inches away. I debate for only a second before giving in and closing the distance. Sometimes it's best to follow your

instincts, especially in situations that are as emotionally sensitive as this.

So I stroke her hair lightly, feeling the softness, the warmth. “Let yourself grieve,” I say. “It might take some time.”

She nods. Then she speaks again. “Aiden.”

“Hmm.”

“Do you keep food in the fourth drawer for me?”

A hint of a smile touches my lips. “If I say no?”

“I won’t believe you.”

“Why ask if you’re not going to believe what I say?”

“Such a pain in the butt,” she murmurs sleepily, pressing her head further into my palm like a kitten begging for affection. My smile blossoms, but I just continue stroking her hair, silky against my fingertips.

We stay like that until she falls asleep.



THE NEXT MORNING I SLIP OUT OF BED BEFORE JUNIPER wakes. It’s not hard to do, since I’ve spent the entire night hugging the edge of the bed for fear of crossing boundaries. I grab some clothes and dress in the bathroom, trying to be as quiet as possible. Then I head out to the kitchen, my laptop in hand, and shoot off an email proposal to the principal, explaining the hunger banquet idea I’ve been working on. There’s no point in doing more work on it without her go-ahead. Hopefully I’ve compiled enough compelling research and planning to catch her attention.

When I leave the house twenty minutes later, Juniper is still asleep in my bed.

It’s weird, that knowledge. I haven’t had a woman in my bed in years. And even though her presence there wasn’t

sexual, it still feels intimate, somehow; my bed is a space where no one else goes.

But she's there. Her tears and probably snot are on my pillow, which probably smells like citrus.

I'm going to wash it, though. I'm definitely going to wash it.

Eventually.

At some point.

I huff at my absurd thoughts; this is getting ridiculous. As much as I hate the idea, I need to talk to Caroline. Goodness knows I can't make sense of everything going on in my heart and my mind.

I call her just as I'm pulling out of the neighborhood.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi," she says back. "You never call me this early."

"Yeah. I need—well." I flex my hands on the steering wheel. "I need your help," I say, my voice grudging.

"Okay," she says. "What's up?"

I clear my throat once. Twice. "I—well—it's complicated."

"I'm not surprised," she says without pity. "You make everything more complicated than it needs to be. But I'm not dumb. Break it down. I'm sure I can keep up."

"Fine," I say, rolling my eyes. There might be some truth in what she says. "Fine. I feel like a stupid teenager asking you this. But...how do normal people know if they have feelings for someone? I don't seem to operate like other people," I add quickly. I'm positive my cheeks are a vivid red right now. "You were right. I don't really become attracted to someone physically unless I'm attracted to them mentally."

There's silence on the other end, and I can picture exactly the struggle Caroline is having. Her first instinct will be to tease me or make fun of me—she's my big sister, after all—

but I hope she'll also be able to hear in my voice that this is something I don't want to be teased about. I just want answers.

Finally she speaks. "Is this about Juniper?" I'm relieved to hear that there's nothing but curiosity in her tone.

"Yes," I say, the word escaping immediately. I push one hand through my hair, keeping the other on the steering wheel. "I can't really figure out how I feel about her."

"Well, you're attracted to her, aren't you?"

I swallow all the protests that rise in my throat, giving favor instead to the truth. "Yes. Is it obvious?"

"Maybe only to me," she says. "But I know how you usually look at women, and the way you look at Juniper is different."

Crap. Is it? "Different how?"

"Usually your eyes just skip over women. On Juniper they linger."

Well. I can't argue with that. I also can't believe I'm having this conversation with my sister.

"So if you're attracted to her, that means you like her on some level, right?" she goes on.

"Yes," I say, trying to quell my frustration with my weird brain. "But that's not enough for me to go on. *Liking her on some level* doesn't mean I should pursue her. So how do I know?"

"I don't know," Caroline says with a sigh. "You just...*like* her. You miss her when she's not around. You're excited to see her. You want to take care of her."

"But we argue all the time."

"Well, do you *like* arguing with her?"

I do. I really do.

"And is it really arguing? Or is it *bickering*? Because there's a difference."

"What's the difference?"

“Bickering is petty back-and-forth stuff. Arguing is like, actual *arguments* that get heated or whatever.”

Our arguments do get heated, on a certain level—just not the way Caroline is probably thinking.

She doesn’t need to know that.

Another thought springs to mind, though, one that has my heart pumping with anxiety. “And what if—what if there’s something I’m keeping from her?”

“Hmm,” Caroline says. It’s not even a full word, but I can tell she’s dying to know.

“I’m not going to tell you,” I say, my voice gruff. “Don’t bother asking.”

When she answers, she sounds surlier than normal. “Fine. Is it something big?”

“Kind of.” I swallow. “Yes.”

“Will it change her opinion of you?”

“Possibly.” A few weeks ago I would have given a definite *yes* to that question, but I’m not so sure now.

“Then you absolutely cannot pursue her until you tell her. Under any circumstances.”

My heart sinks to hear her confirming the thought that’s been peeking around the corners in my mind. “Yeah,” I say, my voice heavy. “Okay.” I pause and then add, “Thanks.”

“Of course,” she says cheerfully. “This is what sisters are for.”

“Really? Because I seem to recall you telling me one time that your primary role in my life was to keep me humble,” I say.

“Well, that too,” she says. “Let me know how it goes. And by that I mean, let me know if you feel like sharing more details. There are questions I’m *dying* to ask.”

“I bet you are,” I mutter. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye!” she says, and then she hangs up.

And I'm left with my racing thoughts. How do I tell Juniper what I've been keeping from her? And how is she going to feel about me when she finds out?

IN WHICH JUNIPER FINDS THE FUCHSIA

Waking up in Aiden's bed feels weird and surreal and way too good. This is not something I should get used to. But that doesn't stop me from memorizing every inch of how I see the room from where I lie sprawled starfish-style. The side he slept on has long since gone cold, and I've migrated to the middle of the mattress. I take in the ceiling fan, impressed by how quietly it rotates, and I examine the way the dust particles dance in the stream of light coming through the window.

I wonder if Aiden has laid in this exact spot looking at that exact stream of light. Did all the dust make him want to clean?

I bet it did.

I am afflicted with no such compulsion. I stretch and then sit up, rubbing my eyes. The revelations from yesterday are nudging and pushing at my mind like passers-by on a crowded street—trying to make room for themselves, forcing me to rearrange the contents of my brain like Tetris blocks so that everything fits and everything makes sense. The fresh infusion of grief is potent, a stain in my heart.

For weeks after my mom died, I would wake up every morning and remember she was dead, and it was like she had died all over again. The same thing seems to be happening now. My time-worn heart shreds itself, tears and rips and busted seams as the full weight of her death hits me once more. It's heavier, somehow, and more tragic, knowing the

truth about what happened to her. Knowing that she was assaulted and possibly even killed by someone she had considered a friend.

I sigh, scooting to the edge of the bed and letting my feet dangle over the side. I just stare at them for a second, at my stubby toes and chipped polish, and then finally get up and moving.

I have things I need to do. I can't sit here thinking about my mother, or about the dead chicken someone dumped on my doorstep, or about any of the things that are haunting me. I need to find answers, not wallow in my hot roommate's bed.

As tempting as that sounds.

So where to start?

I bite my lip, staring around the bedroom as I think, trying to organize my thoughts.

It's my suspicion that Lionel Astor is my father, and that he killed Sandy because she found out he had a daughter. There are other possibilities, but I'm not sure how they would work. So I think it's best to start with this assumption. And when I fill in the blanks with those answers, I'm left with fewer holes in the narrative.

But one of the biggest is that I have no clue how specifically Lionel and Sandy crossed each other's paths. It's a long shot, but maybe I could find more about Lionel's history with beauty pageants and start there.

So with one last look around Aiden's room, I walk out the door and head back up to my own room. I need my laptop.

I take the big stairs two at a time. At first I take the little stairs two at a time as well, but my leg muscles quickly talk me out of that unnecessary exercise. I just hurry up them instead, bursting through my door full of breathless anticipation. I grab my laptop from my desk and then settle on my bed, propping up the pillows behind me so that I can work comfortably.

And then I pull up my search engine.

I run through every variation of Lionel's name combined with beauty pageant terms that I can think of. And what I'm able to determine, after ten minutes of the kind of googling only an author can manage, is that Lionel Astor has a type.

Tall, busty, and brunette. Sort of like if the Kardashians were super tall. It's *that* kind of woman he always seems to have his arm around. And, when I start digging into family photos, it's clear that his wife is cut from the same cloth. She's older now, of course, but she has that same look about her.

I continue scrolling through family photos, pulled along by morbid curiosity, past pictures of Lionel and his wife that have been taken over the years. They don't have any children, which I find curious—

Well. I guess Lionel might have *one* child. Me.

I clear the search bar and enter a new search term: *Lionel Astor children*. Maybe he's talked about it in interviews before. Someone has probably asked, as rude as it would be. It's no one's business why a couple does or doesn't have kids.

I would argue, however, that in this case it's at least *partially* my business. So I proceed with my search, scrolling slowly at first and then faster as I pass by the string of irrelevant articles.

I switch to an image search instead, sitting up for a moment to adjust the pillows behind me. Then I resituate myself and resume scrolling, slower this time.

Most of what I see are pictures of Lionel Astor with various groups of children—him in front of a school for some kind of ceremony, an orphanage fundraiser, that kind of thing. But my hand freezes when something different shows up, my fingers twitching to a halt as they hover over the laptop.

It's a photo of Lionel Astor as a child—four or five years old, probably. He has dark hair, bright eyes, and cheeks that still haven't completely lost their baby roundness. He's completely cute.

That's not what stops me, though. What stops me is the bolt of recognition that hits with that photo.

Because Lionel Astor as a child looks very much like *me* as a child.

I grab for the photos on my nightstand without looking, fumbling for a second and knocking one over before I reach the other—cold metal and smooth glass clutched in my hand as I pull it to me, lifting it to inspect the picture more closely than I ever have before. I'm older in this photo than Lionel in his, but even so—yes. My eyes dart back and forth between my computer screen and the picture in my hand, and it takes less than three seconds to realize that we look alike. More alike than we should if we aren't related.

Though my hair is blonde and his is dark, we have the same eyes, I realize with a start. The same vivid blue. We have the same smile, too, even despite the pictures' age differences.

And the truth settles in my chest, a heavy, terrible weight: Lionel Astor is my father. He has to be. There's no way we can look so similar and *not* be related.

He assaulted my mother and got her pregnant. He most likely killed Sandra von Meller because she found out. He may even have killed my mother and Thomas Freese. This smiling, sparkling-eyed little boy grew up to become that kind of person.

I push my laptop away, slamming it closed as a sudden disgust fills me. I don't want to look at him, not as a sweetly cheerful child or a grown man or anything in between. I don't want to think about the half of my DNA that comes from him.

"Nothing has changed," I tell myself firmly as I push the laptop even further away, until it's all the way by the foot of the bed. "I'm still exactly the same as I was an hour ago. I'm the same person with the same brain and the same body and the same thoughts. My parents are still the same as they always were. I just know more now."

But how is it possible that our thoughts don't change our bodies on a cellular level? It seems inconceivable that the workings of my blood and bones and organs aren't affected by the knowledge I obtain. How can information that shakes your reality be limited to the thoughts that dwell in your mind?

I jump off my bed, feeling somehow wired and exhausted at the same time. Like I've been awake for three days but have also consumed copious amounts of caffeine. It's not a pleasant sensation, but I don't know how to get rid of it, so I just go with it for now. Maybe later I'll be able to sleep. I know that if I tried at the moment, I would lie awake for hours, my thoughts rushing like big city traffic.

I check the clock, calculating. I have forty-five minutes before I need to leave for work. What can I do between now and then? How can I be productive?

I run through a list of ideas—search more for the relationship between Sandy and Lionel; hunt for details about my mother's death; work on my book.

In the end, I abandon all of those possibilities and lie on my bed instead, motionless, staring at the ceiling and listening to music. I have to remind myself every ten minutes or so that rest *is* productive, and that I'm allowed to sit here and do nothing but process information.

It's a nice thought, and I do applaud myself for thinking it. But I rest productively for a total of thirty minutes before I can't stand it anymore. So I reach for my phone to call Aiden.

"Hey," I say when he picks up. "Are you busy?"

"Prepping for my next class, so no."

I snort. "You're quite the teacher."

From the other end comes a little bark of laughter. "I know. What do you need?"

I hesitate, debating how best to lead into my news before finally deciding to just drop it on him. "I found a picture of Lionel Astor as a kid," I say, "and there's no way I'm not related to him."

"Really?" Aiden says after a second of silence. He sounds both skeptical and intrigued. "You look that much alike?"

"We really do," I say with a sigh. "I'll send you a side by side. Hang on." I lower my phone from my ear and do a quick search to find the photo of Lionel as a boy. Once I send Aiden

the screenshot, I take a photo of the picture on my nightstand of me as a nine-year-old, sending that one too. “Okay,” I say. “I sent them both. Look at them and tell me what you think.”

Another second of quiet from Aiden, but when he returns, I can tell he’s on the same page as I am. “Wow,” he says, his voice heavy. “Yes. You look incredibly similar.”

“It’s weird, though, isn’t it? Because I look so much like my mom now. But as a kid, I looked like my—like him.” I can’t quite bring myself to call Lionel my father. I might never be able to do that.

“So what do we think—that Lionel—” He breaks off, and when he begins speaking again a second later, his voice is lower, more hushed. “It’s looking like Lionel killed Sandy after she found out that he was your father. We know she was the one who wrote the note to you about your parents. And Lionel is the one who has the most to lose if news breaks about a decades-old assault that resulted in a child. Right?”

“I think so,” I say. “I just don’t know how Lionel and Sandy were connected. I don’t know if it would have been something she overheard, maybe? Since Lionel dropped by Tonya’s office that one day; maybe they crossed paths through her mom?”

“Maybe,” Aiden says, his voice musing. “Or at something pageant related.”

We lapse into silence, a line full of things we don’t know and aren’t saying. We’ve gotten close enough that our silences are usually comfortable, but this one isn’t; it’s expectant, waiting, wanting.

“Oh,” Aiden says suddenly, and my heart sinks at the almost desperate note in his voice—he feels it too, the weirdness.

I swallow my disappointment. “Yeah?”

“I got permission to turn the prom dinner into a hunger banquet.”

“That’s great!” My voice sounds horribly cheery, chipper and excited in a way that I don’t feel. My words should be

genuine, because it really is great news, but I can't muster the emotions.

Why am I being like this? Where are these feelings coming from? We're just talking on the phone. Two roommates chatting about murder and paternity. There's no need for the gloomies that have latched onto my heart and started feeding.

All I know is that I want to be talking to Aiden about things that don't involve murder or whose turn it is to restock toilet paper. I want our silences to be comfortable and easy.

"How will you do that?" I say, trying to will myself to feel happy or excited or something positive.

"We'll use the prom budget. It will still be the dance, but the meal portion will be the hunger banquet. I'm meeting with the prom committee next week."

"Can I come to the banquet?" I say.

He makes a little humming sound. "The last time I took you to a school dance—"

"Someone died," I say dully. "Yeah."

"I wasn't going to say that," he says, his voice quiet.

I blink. "What were you going to say? The last time you took me to a dance..."

His sigh sends a burst of static down the line. "It doesn't matter."

"Are you sure?" I say.

"Yeah."

"Well, if you take me with you this time, I'll buy us matching earrings."

"Tempting," he says, and I take it as a good sign that I can hear the smile in his voice.

I sigh. "All right, I need to get going. I'll see you tonight."

"Yep," he says, and then he hangs up.

I toss the phone away from me and close my eyes, forcing myself to take a few deep breaths. Logically, pretty much any

emotion from me would make sense right now. I'm in the middle of learning terrible truths about myself and my parents and my past. I still see Sandy's dead body when I close my eyes. There's no emotional reaction that wouldn't make *some* sort of sense in this situation.

But my frustration and disappointment are still sharp and biting in my chest, welling up from who knows where and for who knows what reason.

Usually when I'm feeling off, I look forward to yoga—endorphins and all that. Today, though, I dress sluggishly, dragging my leggings up my legs and getting tangled in my sports bra for longer than a grown woman should be tangled in any sort of clothing.

Although...

I perk up a little at the thought that occurs to me. I could take another run at Gus. Figure out what "incident" stopped Sandy from coming to yoga.

I can hear the more mature part of my mind telling me to slow down, to stop hunting for new information when I'm struggling to process the things I already know. But the other part of me, the louder part, is grasping at straws in the dark, trying to make sense of everything that's happening. To find reasons and logic in the things that keep me awake at night.

Because maybe, if I can figure the scary things out, they won't be so scary anymore.

When I arrive at the studio, I'm pleased to see that Gus is smiling his usual too-happy smile. He chats here and there with class members in between classes, disappearing into his office every now and then. This should bode well for my possibly invasive questions later.

Right? A good mood should mean it's easier to get him to talk. I just need to try to be subtle. I bite my lip, thinking as I watch him moving around. It might also be time to fill him in just a little bit on what's going on. That will help him realize that I'm really not being nosy; I just need to know.

I do take a few minutes to eye his muscles nervously, though. Those babies could do some serious damage if he decided to pick me up and chuck me down the staircase or something. I smile as Matilda's words come to mind—that my blind date “probably couldn't bench press three hundred pounds, but he could for sure bench press *you*.”

Gus could bench press three hundred pounds, and me, and the whole bench—all at once.

I keep an eye on him for the remainder of the afternoon. Partly it's to stay apprised of his mood; partly it's because if I let myself sink into my thoughts, I'll inevitably end up stewing over all the troubling things that have been happening lately. So I choose to stare at my unsuspecting boss instead, like a weirdo, while going through the motions of my classes. I wait halfheartedly for the endorphins to show up, but—and maybe it's just the state I'm in—they're conspicuously absent.

When the last class lets out and the studio is filled with the bustle of sweaty yogis rolling up mats and chugging from water bottles, I begin solidifying my approach. I smile and wave to everyone who leaves, my mind barely engaged with the interactions, my eyes once more lingering on my boss. His mood hasn't changed; he still seems happy and cheerful as per usual, that perma-smile plastered firmly in place.

It doesn't take long for the studio to empty until it's just the two of us again, and that's when I approach Gus.

“Hey,” I say to him, gathering my fleeing courage like a cowgirl with a lasso, reining it in and forcing it to stick around. It's time to do this. “I wanted to talk to you. Do you have a minute?”

“Sure,” he says. It's hard to tell exactly how he feels about this request, because while his eyes seem curious, his mouth is still smiling. So...maybe pleasantly curious? Happily curious? Or maybe he's not happy but it just takes a few seconds for the smile to fade?

He looks around awkwardly for a second before gesturing to his office. “Come in, I guess.”

“Oh,” I say, holding up one hand. “It’s not official or anything. I really just—well. I wanted to talk to you about Sandra. Sandra von Meller.”

Gus’s posture shifts so minimally I almost don’t notice, but it reminds me of a cat when its ears swivel toward you and its entire body freezes. Alert, wary, paying attention to see what happens next.

“Gus,” I say, sighing when I see the slight stiffening of his shoulders. “Please. I really need to know about the incident with Sandra. Something—she’s—I think something happened to her.” I swallow, following my instinct to tell him at least part of the truth. “She’s missing,” I say. “So if you know anything that could help, anything at all…” I turn my pleading eyes to him. I’m not normally someone who begs, but I’m willing to right now.

Gus just looks at me for a moment, his eyes narrowed, his mouth tight. “What do you mean, she’s missing?”

Crap. This is not working. His expression couldn’t be more skeptical or suspicious if he tried.

I sigh, running my hand through my hair and frowning when I remember how gross and sweaty I am. “The last time anyone has seen her was at the Homecoming dance. Her mom thinks she’s on a road trip, but…” I trail off, debating how much to tell him. “But she’s not,” I finally say, the words heavy on my tongue. “I can’t tell you how I know. I really can’t. It’s too crazy of a story. But I can promise you that something happened to her, and whatever you know might help me figure out why.”

He continues to stare down at me, and his expression doesn’t change, but I do notice with rising hope that his face has paled a bit. Maybe I’m getting through to him after all.

He finally breaks eye contact, his gaze darting away as he looks at the photo above the water fountain.

“Did something bad really happen to her?” he says in a quiet voice.

I swallow. “Yes,” I say.

His eyes cut back to me. “Did she—is she—” His voice breaks, words cracking jaggedly in half before he finds them again. “Is she gone?”

“Yes,” I say, because I know what he’s asking. “She’s... gone.”

“And you’re sure.” It’s not a question.

I think back to Sandy’s body, lying on the forest floor. “Yes,” I say softly. “I’m sure.”

“Why haven’t you told the police?”

That’s a fair question. “I have,” I say with a sigh. “But someone has Sandy’s phone and is using it to impersonate her. Her mother refuses to admit she’s missing, and there’s no...no body.” I swallow again. “So the sheriff isn’t convinced.”

“It’s a small town,” Gus says, rubbing one hand over his face and looking more tired than I’ve ever seen him. “Their resources have never been great, and they’re understaffed. It doesn’t surprise me.”

I nod. “I know. So...will you help me?”

He nods without hesitation, and I try to clamp down on the relief that floods through me.

“Sandy was seeing someone,” he says bluntly.

“I—what?” I say, my eyes widening. “How do you know? Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” he says. His words are weary as he goes on, “And it wasn’t a high school boy, either. It was a man.”

“A...man?” Lionel? *That’s* how she knew him? They were sleeping together? “You’re positive? How do you know?”

“I saw a picture on her phone,” he says, looking uncomfortable. “She left it on the bench”—he points to the bench lining one wall of the room—“and I picked it up just as it started ringing. His contact picture was the two of them in matching pink hoodies. Their hoods were up, and I didn’t recognize the guy, but I could tell he wasn’t a kid her own age. He looked older.”

“He could just be a tall student,” I say, thinking.

Gus nods slowly. “I thought that was possible too, until she answered the phone. I—well, I sort of eavesdropped.”

I raise my eyebrows, silently telling him to go on.

And then Gus drops a bomb that obliterates everything in my mind, every racing thought and half-formed idea. Four words, immeasurable impact.

“He was a teacher.”



GUS'S WORDS PLAY THROUGH MY MIND OVER AND OVER AS I rush from the studio, flying down the stairs and jumping into Sunshine.

She called him 'Teach,' and then they started arguing about her calling him that when someone might hear. She told him he was acting like a crotchety old man and then started teasing him about his gray hairs. I think maybe she was trying to calm him down. She told him she would see him at school the next day. I was about to stop listening when she started saying a bunch of lovey-dovey stuff—I really was. But she, uh...well, she caught me listening. It was awkward, and she got really angry.

My brain is buzzing so loudly that I almost miss the correct turnoff—twice. I do manage to make it to the high school, though, maybe miraculously. The student lot is small but mostly empty now that the school day has ended; I park at the edge of the lot overlooking the track and football field, not bothering to adjust my car within the space. Then I hop out, slamming the door shut behind me.

I'm not even sure what I'm doing here. All I can think about is the photo of Sandra her mother showed us, the one of her in the fuchsia hoodie. That image keeps flashing through my mind, alternating with the faint memory of the first day I arrived here in Autumn Grove—the bad parking job in front of

Grind and Brew, and the one thing that was just obnoxious at the time:

The car that was following me.

I search that memory more frantically, playing desperately through every detail I can conjure. The car followed me down Main and to Grind and Brew, and I thought I saw it when I left Namaste that day, too. It was white, I remember, so it could have been Sandra's, especially since I know she was following Aiden later.

The people in that car were wearing some kind of obnoxious pink, but was it that same fuchsia? Was that them—Sandy and her mystery man? But if she was dating a teacher on the downlow, why would they be in public together?

Although...they were in a car. They might have assumed that would be safe, especially if they were just stopping by.

I turn around as I hear the sharp blast of a whistle. There are students down below, probably the cross country team—some of them are sitting in the grass, stretching; others are jogging around the track. A couple more are standing by the goal post, chatting.

Those things aren't what catch my attention, though. What catches my attention is the number of vivid fuchsia shirts I see; several t-shirts and two long-sleeved shirts. My gaze darts more intently over the scene below.

And then a chill runs down my spine that has nothing to do with the brisk breeze and everything to do with the cross country coach, who I've just spotted.

He's standing at the edge of the track with a clipboard in hand, the other hand on his hip. Dark hair, graying at the temples. Charismatic smile. A bright fuchsia hoodie.

A man who knew my mother and her friends.

A man who I know to have the same clear blue eyes as the brother he so loathes.

The same eyes, in fact, that I see when I look in the mirror.

I swallow my scream as the man in question looks up suddenly, waving when he spots me. I force my trembling body to respond, lifting my hand and waving in response.

Rocco Astor smiles.

IN WHICH AIDEN FINALLY CAVES

I'm just about to leave my office when my phone rings. It's been a long day, mostly because the image of Juniper asleep in my bed keeps popping into my mind at the most inconvenient times—not an angelic sight, but more like the troll beneath the bridge, her mouth gaping open, emitting a faint snore that likely came from how congested she was after all that crying. Her hair was a messy shock of pink spread all over my pillow. There was nothing particularly beautiful about the visual.

And yet I'm still thinking of it eight hours later. I'm still half wishing that I could return home and find her in the exact same spot.

I shake my head, trying to banish the image. It's tempting to ignore my ringing phone so I can leave faster, but I answer anyway, primarily to distract myself.

“Hello,” I say, wedging the phone in between my shoulder and my ear so I can finish getting my papers into my bag.

“Hi.” The voice is familiar but only just; I pause, waiting for the caller to go on. “This is Gus Flanders, from Namaste?”

“Oh,” I say, frowning. “Hello.”

“Hi,” he says again. “Uh, I called because I was concerned about Juniper.”

My hand freezes in the process of shoving a book in my bag. “What do you mean? Concerned how?”

Gus sighs. “She rushed out of here a bit ago after—after—we had a conversation that I think upset her—”

“What did you do to upset her?” I say, abandoning my bag. I let it fall to my desktop before straightening up and holding my phone in my hand.

“I didn’t *do* anything,” Gus says. There’s an affronted note to his voice, so I rein in my quick temper.

“Sorry,” I say, forcing myself to breathe. “Just tell me what happened, please. Why are you concerned?”

Another sigh. “She was asking me about someone who used to come to the studio—”

“Sandra von Meller,” I cut in as my pulse trips. I start pacing the length of my small office.

There’s a brief silence, and then Gus says, “Yes. I guess you’re aware of all that—”

“I am,” I say impatiently, still pacing. “Go on.”

“I told her that Sandy was seeing someone. An older guy; a teacher, I think. And then Juniper started talking to herself about fuchsia sweatshirts and ran out and—”

“Hold on,” I say. I’ve frozen in place, two steps away from my office door. “She was seeing a *teacher*?”

“I think so,” Gus says. “So I told Juniper that and she started muttering to herself—she sounded unhinged, really—and then she ran out before I could stop her. I’ve been trying to get a hold of her, but she isn’t answering.”

Crap. *Crap.*

I fling my office door open and begin sprinting down the deserted hallway. “Tell me exactly what Juniper was saying.” If she was thinking about a teacher, would she have come here? Just barged on over without a plan? What was she going to do—ask everyone she could find if they were sleeping with their students?

“She said something about fuchsia sweatshirts. Fuchsia hoodies.”

“Fuchsia hoodies,” I repeat as I turn a sharp corner and continue on my path to the front entrance. I rack my brain. Does that mean anything to me? Sandy was wearing a pinkish-purplish hoodie in one of the pictures her mom showed us; would that be considered fuchsia? I guess I’m not entirely clear on what fuchsia looks like. And what about magenta; are they the same?

“What else?” I say, because this is getting me nowhere. My feet echo against the tile as I shoot across the foyer before bursting out of the front doors. I need to check the parking lot; I need to know if Juniper is here. Her yellow clunker will be easy enough to spot.

“Nothing else,” Gus says, sounding regretful. “That was it.”

“Thanks,” I say, my voice breathless and distracted. I hang up without saying goodbye, craning my neck this way and that as I search for Juniper’s car.

The parking lot in front of the school is about half-full, but there’s not a single yellow car to be found. The air I’m dragging into my lungs is knife-sharp and painful, but I don’t slow down. I hurtle down the length of the building, red brick a blur in the corner of my vision, and then turn the corner, emerging into the back lot. This is the only other place she could have parked; if she’s here, I’ll know.

This lot is emptier, dotted with a few generic sedans. Red, silver, white, black, black, dark green—

Yellow.

There it is.

A yellow VW Beetle, bumper tilted askew, patched with duct tape.

It takes me an impressive six seconds to reach the car on the other side of the lot. I lean down and look through the windows, checking to make sure she’s not there, but it’s empty. There’s nothing inside that gives me any hints or clues, either; no scraps of paper with her exact location, no conveniently placed pictures of the culprit. I stand up straight

again, pushing my hand through my hair and looking around while I catch my breath. Rocco and the cross country team are down at the bottom of the hill, running the track that circles the football field. I can ask him later if he knows anything about Sandra or any teacher she might have been hooking up with; right now I just need to find Juniper. So even though I'm still breathing hard, even though the autumn air is harsh in the back of my throat, I turn around and begin running again, toward the school this time.

The halls are mostly empty; students have long since left, except for those who are doing clubs or practices. I slow down as I pass open doors, not bothering to be inconspicuous as I stick my head in each classroom. But look as I might, I can't find Juniper, and ugly pictures are beginning to form in my mind's eye.

Juniper charging recklessly to accuse someone in person—some massive, faceless figure that overpowers her with ease.

Juniper unconscious, bleeding, or worse.

Juniper on the floor of the forest by Solomon the Spud—

“Stop it,” I hiss to myself as I continue to hunt through every hallway I come across. “Just *stop it*—”

But I freeze in my tracks, tripping over my own feet and stumbling to a halt as I pass by the large library window. I blink my eyes rapidly, trying to confirm what I see, before spinning on my heel and bolting to the entrance.

The librarian isn't at her usual desk, which I'm beyond grateful for. I speed past the shelves, row after row, before the lone figure I saw through the window becomes visible once more.

It's her. *It's her.*

The most powerful sense of relief floods through me, a rush that leaves me lightheaded and struggling for breath. And maybe it's not *just* relief; it's something more potent. A contradicting tangle of frustration and solace, the desire to shout and the desire to hold her close.

She's crouched down, or maybe sitting—I can't quite tell through the stacks—but I recognize the strips of her that I can see. I recognize the flash of bubblegum pink and the blur of yellow that's most likely her favorite yoga tank.

Less familiar to me is her posture, though; as I round the last row of shelves separating us, I see finally that she's seated on the same step stool I used last time we were here together. Her head is bowed, her shoulders slumped in defeat.

A spark of something hot ignites deep in my chest as I stride toward her. Juniper is not a woman who should ever look so crushed.

“What are you doing here?” The words burst out of me well before I've reached her, but I don't stop moving. I continue my approach until I'm standing right in front of where she's perched on the step stool, looking up at me, her chin set defiantly even as her eyes flash. The corners of her lips curl down ever so slightly, and *crap*, I want to kiss them.

I want to shake her for coming here so recklessly.

But I want to kiss her for being safe.

I pull in a deep breath, turning away from her as I begin to pace. I need to get my head on straight. “I don't care what Gus or anyone else tells you,” I say finally, spinning on my heel to glare at her. “I don't care if he delivers you the killer's name and address and social security number all wrapped in a pretty bow. You don't just rush over recklessly, without a plan, without *telling* someone first—me!” I throw my hands in the air. “Without telling me! Where's your sense of fear? Where's your sense of safety?”

“It's here!” she says, surprising me as she shoots to her feet. She returns my fire with her own, her fists clenched at her side. “Why do you think I'm hiding in the back of the library like a coward? Because I was scared, Aiden. Because I saw him and I realized and I didn't know what to do, so I—I—I hid.” A muscle jumps in her jaw, her blue eyes glossy. “I wasn't stupid.” She steps closer and lifts one hand, jabbing me painfully in the chest with her pointer finger. “I wasn't

reckless.” Another jab, even harder this time. “So don’t *yell* at me when it’s already been a crappy week—”

And I can’t. I can’t do this anymore, I can’t stop this, and I don’t want to.

My hand lifts of its own accord to grab the finger that’s jabbing me, a move so sudden she stops speaking. I close the distance between us in one step.

And then I crash my lips down on hers, swallowing the rest of her words.

She gasps into my mouth, but there’s no hesitation in her response. She’s kissing me back in point-two seconds, her hands fisting in my shirt and yanking me closer, a storm of lightning in my veins at her eagerness, because good *grief*—she kisses me like she’s been waiting forever to do it. I let go of her finger and grasp her face in desperate hands, tilting her head left, right, up, searching for the perfect angle—

There. There it is. She’s managed to step back onto the bottom step of the stool, bringing her to just the right height for me to explore her mouth. She tastes absurdly like strawberries—of course she does—and her lips are impossibly soft, impossibly perfect, chasing mine as we tangle and tussle. There’s a bite of frustration in the way she wraps her arms around my neck, her fingers digging into my skin a touch too hard—she’s still annoyed that I was chewing her out.

Which is fine. I’m still annoyed she came here by herself.

“Trying to leave a mark?” I breathe against her mouth before ducking my head, letting my lips skim her jaw. I move up to the perfect patch of skin at her temple, pressing hard kisses along her cheekbone.

“Maybe,” she mutters, turning her head. I grin when I feel her nip at my ear, a sharp sting of pain. “But you’re being a jerk.”

I roll my eyes even as I swerve my head away from her bite. “*Jerk* is a strong word.”

“It feels accurate to me,” she says breathlessly, and a bark of laughter escapes me when she pinches the back of my neck,

bringing me back to her.

“I don’t think so,” I say, grinning as I reach up and unwrap her arms from around my neck. “We’re playing nice right now.” Then I tangle my hands in her hair and begin kissing her once more, swallowing the laugh that she puffs against my lips.

I want to do crazy things with her, the kind of crazy that would only come from Juniper and I. I want to whisper poetry with my kisses, passing sonnets and verses back and forth between us. I want to consume the words on her tongue. I want to lick her stories from her lips.

They don’t make sense, these half-formed desires, but I want those things anyway. I want everything she has, greedy in a way I’ve never felt before.

She can direct all of her anger at me, and I’ll take it gladly. She can give me all of *everything*, all the bad and the good and the dark and the light, and I’ll take them all and keep them all and *cherish* them all—all the parts of this woman whose life has been entwined with mine since we were children.

I know that soon we’re going to have to talk about what she’s discovered. And soon I’m going to have to tell her what I’ve been keeping from her.

But for now—just for this little pocket of time, hidden in the back of the library—I give myself and my attention to her and her alone.

Our kisses slowly fade from passionate and full of fire to something slower, deeper, more languid and exploratory. Lazy and lingering instead of hurried and desperate, although I can’t quite bring myself to loosen my grip. There’s a corner of my heart that’s still racing not because I’m kissing her but because it *scared* me, receiving that call from Gus and then not being able to find her.

I give her waist a little tug, and she stumbles down from the step stool. Then I settle my hands on her shoulders, pressing one last kiss to her lips, forcing myself to breathe deeply and trying to get that last little corner of my heart to

process the feel of her—trying to get my remaining fight-or-flight instincts to calm down. I let my eyes devour every part of her I see, just to make sure she’s okay.

She’s a bit sweaty, and she’s been thoroughly kissed, but she’s whole. When I’ve arrived at this conclusion, I let my head fall onto her shoulder—falteringly at first and then with abandon. My forehead drops to that intimate junction where her neck meets her shoulder, cradled in the space that seems perfectly designed for me, and for a second I just rest there.

Just to listen to her breathe.

Just to feel her warmth and the soft give of her skin, the tickle of her hair and the gentle rise and fall of her chest—all those things that tell me how *alive* she is.

How surreal is this? How strange has my life become that one month ago I was griping about teaching literature to my seniors, and now I’m merely feeling grateful that this hurricane of a woman is alive?

Autumn Grove should not be a town where I worry about people dying.

She clears her throat, a nervous sound that’s amplified by the press of my ear against her neck. “Hey,” she says.

“Mmm,” I hum, my hands sliding from her shoulders to her upper arms.

She clears her throat again. “What—what are you doing?”

“Just...making sure.”

She doesn’t ask me what I’m making sure of, and I don’t know that I could answer if she did. There are so many warring thoughts and feelings, so many opposing instincts that are battling for dominance.

I want to kiss her again.

I want to hold her.

I want to push her away and keep myself safe.

I want to pull her close and keep *her* safe.

“You interrupted me,” she says finally. “I’m not—I wasn’t done being mad at you.”

“I didn’t hear any protests,” I say, and it might be a good thing that she can’t see my smile. “But you bit my ear. You pinched me. Did you need more?”

“Yes,” she says. “I wanted to use my words instead of resorting to violence.”

“That’s fine,” I say. “You can keep going.” The bridge of my nose presses into her collarbone as I speak, a sharp ridge I want to trace with my tongue. I tighten my grip on her upper arms, trying to ignore the shiver that courses through her at my touch.

Intoxicating. She’s intoxicating.

“I—you can’t—” She swallows, something I feel and hear rather than see. “It’s hard to tell you off when you’re being like this.”

My sigh is heavy, but it’s also accompanied at last by a sense of relief. It finally seems to be sinking into my system that Juniper is okay. “All right,” I say, lifting my head. “Go ahead, then.”

She looks pointedly at my hands on her upper arms. “Are you moving those, or are they staying?”

Ha. Let’s not get crazy.

“They’re staying unless you want them to move,” I say.

Juniper tilts her head as she looks up at me in a way that makes my pulse spike all over again; this is a curious look she’s giving me, intrigued, searching for...something.

“You know,” she says slowly, a faint smile curling her lips—lips still red from being kissed. “I have this theory about you. And I think you might end up proving me right.”

“Of course I won’t,” I say, fully aware that I’m spewing nonsense. “Now are you going to be mad at me?”

“Yes,” she says immediately. “Just don’t be obnoxious, Aiden. Don’t shout at me, and don’t make assumptions.”

“Is it an assumption if it’s true?” I say, my eyes narrowing on her. “Because I have it on very good authority that Gus told you about Sandy and you immediately booked it out of there to come here.”

“Gus is a little snitch, I see,” she mutters under her breath.

I clamp down on the laugh that wants to escape. “I will try not to make assumptions,” I say instead, “if you will promise not to run recklessly into situations that could be dangerous.”

“I *didn’t* go recklessly into a dangerous situation,” she says, rolling her eyes. “That’s my *point*. I hid in the library.”

“You did,” I say with a nod. “*After* you went to the dangerous situation.”

“Well, it’s not like I could just go sit at home, either,” she says, fisting her hands on her hips as some of that spark returns to her eyes. “And it’s not like I was going to go around asking people stupid questions. I’m not dumb. I have a well-developed sense of self-preservation. Thus”—she gestures at our surroundings—“the library. So don’t be a jerk.”

I swallow, my eyes dropping to her lips. “I want to kiss you again.”

She blinks in surprise.

“Except...” I say slowly, and now my heart is starting to pound for a different reason. “There are things we need to talk about first.”

Juniper sighs. “Just one more, then, before you overthink everything.” And before I can respond, she goes up on her tiptoes and presses her lips firmly to mine.

And it’s so tempting. It’s so tempting to forget about all the things she needs to know, to just be with her and forget the rest. But—

“Goodness gracious!” a voice gasps from our left. I start, and pressed against me, Juniper does the same. We break our kiss as our heads swivel to look at our intruder. It’s the librarian, her glasses perched at the end of her long nose, her hands disapproving on her hips as she marches toward us from

the end of the row. “Students kissing in the library after school ___”

“Not students,” I say quickly. Juniper moves to pull away from me, but I hold onto her with tight hands until gradually she relaxes against me once more. “A teacher and his legal, *non-student*—” Crap. His... girlfriend? Friend? Roommate?

A deafening silence falls between Juniper and me as I search for the right term. I look at her quickly, only to find that she’s turned her gaze back to me too.

“Gonna finish that sentence?” she says, arching her brow at me.

I shrug helplessly. “I am not capable of kissing you like this one time and never doing it again.” I hesitate. “I also am not capable of casual relationships. So *friend* and *roommate* both feel wrong. But...” I can’t date her. Not yet, anyway.

I sigh internally as our little bubble of bliss pops, thanks to the librarian and also thanks to the reminder that Juniper and I have things to talk about if we want any sort of romantic relationship. “Let’s go,” I say, finally releasing her and stepping away. I hold out my hand for her to take. I don’t want to forfeit contact completely. “I guess we’ve got things to figure out.”

IN WHICH AIDEN TELLS THE TRUTH

“Tell me.”

It’s the first thing I say when Juniper slides into the driver’s seat of her car, closing the door quietly. She’s jumpy, looking around with a tight, nervous expression, and that’s part of why I chose to get in her car instead of going to my own. We can come back and get mine later sometime. Right now I just want to stay close to her.

She’s silent for a moment as she buckles, the belt snapping into place with a *click* that somehow seems too loud.

“Juniper,” I say when the silence stretches on. “Just tell me.” I’m well aware that the next words out of her mouth will be shocking, but that just makes the anticipation worse.

It’s a relief when she finally turns to me. “How well do you know Rocco?” she says.

In my head, my brain produces the same sound you see in cheesy comedies—that sound like a record scratching that happens when a character is taken aback or when something unexpected turns up.

How well do I know Rocco?

How well do I—how well—Rocco—*what?*

She must be able to tell that this one question has reduced my intelligence to a pile of scrambled eggs, because she sighs, and the look she gives me is almost pitying.

“Rocco Astor,” she says, her voice betraying a slight tremor. “I think it’s possible he’s the man Sandra was seeing.”

I blink once. Twice. “Explain,” I finally say.

She sighs again, starting the car. “I’m not sure I can,” she admits. “Not properly, anyway.” She looks over her shoulder as she backs out of her parking spot. “It seems sort of...I don’t know. Sort of nebulous, I guess, in my mind.”

“Try,” I say. It comes out as more of a croak.

She shrugs, but the movement is tight. “When I first came to town, I went to Grind and Brew. I was waiting for you, right? But someone followed me there. I didn’t think anything of it; I just figured we were going the same place and they were riding my tail. It was a couple sitting in that car, or at least two people. They were looking at me sort of surprised, and I thought it was because of my bad parking job.”

My first idiotic thought is that I remember that parking job, and it *was* bad. But the thoughts keep flowing, and her words register. “You actually saw them together?” I say, my eyes widening. “It was Sandy and Rocco?”

“The thing is,” she says, “I’m really not sure it *was* them. I didn’t know Rocco yet, and I hadn’t seen or heard of Sandy. I did think Rocco looked familiar when I first met him at the dance, but then you told me he was Lionel’s brother, and I figured that was why—because there’s a resemblance between them. All I remember about the people in the car is that they were wearing matching tops, some sort of bright pink color. It was hard to tell exactly what shade through the window, and I only saw them briefly.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, my brow wrinkling as I try to figure out what I’m missing. “But why would they have been following you? No one knew you were in town.”

“That’s not true,” she says as she shakes her head. “I posted on the town forum about a place to live. I set up the meeting with you through your sister in the comments on my original post. It’s a bit of a stretch, maybe, but we definitely

talked about the move-in date and the color of my car and the place and time of our meeting at Grind and Brew.”

“Okay...” I say, trying to put everything together.

“But when I spoke to Gus,” she goes on, “he told me about the man he saw on Sandy’s phone. The contact picture of the guy was him and Sandy together, wearing matching pink hoodies. He didn’t describe exactly what color pink. But it reminded me of the photo Sandy’s mom showed us, of her in that fuchsia hoodie with the hood pulled up, the drawstrings tied so it scrunched around her face. You remember?”

“I remember,” I say after a second. “So...your reason for suspecting Rocco...is a pink sweatshirt?”

“I told you I can’t explain it,” she says, sounding frustrated. “Not fully. It’s just—I guess it’s intuition. Have you ever heard the theory that gut feelings are really just your subconscious brain noticing obscure details and making connections?”

“I have,” I admit.

“All I can—” But she breaks off, her eyes widening, her mouth forming a little circle. “Oh,” she breathes. “That’s it. *That’s* what I’ve been missing.”

I blink. “Sorry?”

“In my book,” she says, turning to me excitedly. “It’s all been feeling very mechanical and neat and just too—too—*something*. But it’s the human element! That’s what I’ve been missing. The humanity.”

“I...don’t follow,” I say.

She sighs. “I need more right brain in a book that so far has been very left brain,” she says. “I need intuition and instinct and feelings. Not just facts and observations and proof. Does that make sense?”

“Yes,” I say. “When you explain it like that, it does. But what does this have to do with Rocco and Sandra?”

“Oh,” she says, looking startled. “Sorry. I got distracted. But it goes back to the instinct thing.” She sighs again. “All I

can really boil it down to is that Sandy did cross country, and Rocco is the coach. The whole cross country team wears shirts in that same fuchsia color. I saw that couple in that car the day I arrived in town, and barely any time later Sandy got in touch with me. A lot of the people in Autumn Grove didn't know who I was or that I had moved here by the time Sandy was asking to meet with me. Plus..." She trails off, glancing over at me before looking back to the road. "Rocco knew my mom. He looks like his brother, and his brother as a child looked too much like me for there not to be *some* relation. We all have the same eyes."

I swallow as something sick and nauseating slithers into my gut. "Rocco keeps chickens," I say, staring blankly out the window as my mind works furiously.

"He does," Juniper says, in a way that tells me she's already thought about that too. "And he wanted us to stay away from all of this. He was very insistent."

I shake my head, pushing one hand through my hair. "But that doesn't make sense. Rocco never hung around with them—your mom and her friends."

"Aiden," she says, her voice patient. "Who told us that? Who gave us that history?"

Crap. I'm an idiot. "Rocco," I breathe as my stomach churns more violently still.

"Yes."

All right. I understand what she means. There are no huge clues, no neon signs pointing to Rocco proclaiming him as the killer, but there are lots of little things—too many to be coincidence. He fits in a way no one else has so far.

"So how well do you know him?" she asks again.

"I mean," I say, running my hand through my hair once more, "obviously not well enough to guarantee he's not secretly a psychopath. I don't know much about his past, and I'm not sure I could trust the things he has told me."

We fall into silence, and I'm sure her mind is spinning the same way mine is. I jump when her phone begins to ring,

vibrating and blaring loudly from the cupholder in the center console. I pick it up and press it wordlessly into her outstretched hand. After she looks at it, though, she puts it back in the cupholder.

“It’s Matilda,” she says. “I’ll call her back later.”

We’re quiet for the rest of the drive, and I’m so lost in my thoughts that when the car comes to a stop, it takes a full thirty seconds for me to realize we aren’t at home.

“What are we doing here?” I say, blinking up at the entrance to Forester’s.

“Getting groceries,” she says.

I blink again. “Right—right now?”

She shrugs. “Dish soap doesn’t magically appear just because you think you’ve figured out who the bad guy is. Plus,” she adds lightly, “I need chips and guac.” As nonchalant as her voice is, though, her face is paler than normal, and that’s the detail that convinces me to play along.

“This is true. All right.” I hesitate before saying, “But you should know, Gale Forester and I don’t get along.”

“I know,” she says with a little smirk. “He’s mentioned it to me before. He always grumbles about you when he sees me, ever since he found out we were roommates. He loves me, though.”

I sigh, unbuckling. “Of course he does.” Then I get out of the car, closing the door gently behind me so that it doesn’t fall off or something. That always feels like a possibility with Juniper’s car. She does the same on her side, and then we head toward the entrance.

“It’s because I’m delightful,” she says, walking backward toward Forester’s and grinning at me.

“Of course you are.”

“Just wait until he hears we’re dating.”

“We aren’t dating.” The words pop out of my mouth before I think them through, before I can decide whether

they're a good idea.

Spoiler alert: they're not.

"Ah," she says, her face falling as her steps slow. "I see." She hesitates while I mentally drop-kick myself in the face. "Is it going to be one of those 'for your own good' situations? I've written one of those. I liked it in my book, but..." She breaks off, frowning as her gaze drops to the ground. "I don't like it so much in real life."

"It's not that," I say, sighing and running my hand through my hair. "I just—there are some things we need to talk about first. That's all."

"Uh-huh," she says, and her eyes narrow. Then she moves back toward me, slowly, and I swear she's swinging her hips like that on purpose—or maybe it's just because her yoga tank and leggings don't hide as much of her figure. Either way, my mouth has gone completely dry by the time she's planted herself right in front of me.

And then that same rush of emotions comes flooding back, the same internal battle, the emotional version of fight or flight—pull her close or push her away? Kiss her or run?

It's a stupid question. I've already kissed her. I've already told her I plan on doing it again. And I meant it when I said I'm not capable of casual relationships. I've tried, and by the time I like a woman enough to consider any kind of relationship—casual or otherwise—I'm already in too deep to keep things light.

It's just that my first instinct when it comes to this woman is to hide, because there's so much about her that scares me. She has a mind that I want to unfold, a heart that I want to keep safe, a fiery streak that I want to be burned by. I want to follow her around, just to see what she does and what she says. I *care* about those things. And caring...it's scary.

"So we aren't dating," she says now, tilting her head as she looks up at me. It's not a question.

"No," I say, swallowing. "Wouldn't you agree that we haven't made things official?"

She hums, stepping closer to me and wrapping her arms around my waist. “Technically I guess you’re right. You don’t want to date me?”

“It’s not—” I break off and try again. “We just need to talk about things first. That’s reasonable.”

She nods solemnly, her arms tightening around me. “Very reasonable. Though it kind of sounds like an excuse.”

“It isn’t. I mean, I don’t think it is. I think I want to date you.” I’m pretty sure I want to, anyway. I definitely have feelings for her, judging by the way my heart is pounding.

“I’m flattered,” she says dryly. “Well, do you want me to go back to how things were before?”

“What?” I say, shocked. “No. Don’t.”

“Mm-hmm. And do you want me to date anyone else?”

“No,” I growl, feeling suddenly irritated. “Don’t do that either.”

“Do you want to kiss me again?”

I sigh. “I can’t stop thinking about it, so yes.”

She nods decisively, and something in her eyes changes. “You definitely want to date me,” she says, her lips tilting into a lopsided smile. “Do I have to wait for whatever you want to talk about, or can I hold your hand now?”

She could do so much more than hold my hand and I wouldn’t stop her. But I just swoop down and kiss her forehead. “Now,” I say. “You can hold my hand now. Now let’s go get your chips and guac.”

“Do you realize,” she says as she lets go of my waist and takes my hand instead, “that we are *this close* to Aidiper territory?”

I just smile.



WHEN WE ARRIVE HOME THIRTY MINUTES LATER, WE'RE STILL holding hands, and I'm collecting valuable information. How well can I put away groceries one-handed? What does it feel like to run my fingers over a nail that's coated with chipped polish? How much smaller is Juniper's hand than mine?

These are all questions I'm answering as we swivel around the kitchen like we're handcuffed, an odd swing dance playing out on our tiny stage.

It's embarrassing, is what it is.

Probably gonna keep doing it anyway.

Juniper doesn't appear to be feeling any of the embarrassment I am, though; in fact, every now and then she looks at our clasped hands and smiles, a tiny slash of her lips that's both amused and, for some reason, smug.

"Okay, enough," I say finally when she does it again. I close the refrigerator and then nod at her. "What's with the smirking?"

Her smile widens as she attempts to pull her hand away.

"Mine," I say with a frown, holding tighter. "Are you gonna answer the question?"

"I knew you would be like this," she says, now looking nothing short of radiant. She gives our intertwined hands a little shake. "I had a theory that you were prickly on the outside, but if I managed to get through all that, you'd be the kind of guy who never let go. Following me around the kitchen with your arms wrapped around me from behind—or keeping my hand in yours even though you'd be more efficient without it."

She's right, I realize with a start. I am doing that—hoarding her touches, storing them up in case of a long winter without them.

Or, in other words, in case she changes her mind about me.

"So just tell me already," she says with a sigh, interrupting my thoughts. "Say whatever it is you need to say. So that we can keep holding hands."

And I'm not sure I want to, not sure I'm ready to, but we're floating in this strangely shaped space where we can't move forward and we can't move back.

"I'm concerned," I say, my voice hoarse, "that it's going to change how you feel about me."

Juniper rolls her eyes, pulling her hand out of mine. She scrubs both hands down her face and then glares at me. "You're just gonna have to deal with that. Spit it out now, before I get any more attached to you. If I end up hating you it's already going to hurt."

I can feel the blood draining from my face as my eyes go wide. "Are you—is that supposed to be helpful? Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"Of course not," she says. "This isn't all about *you*. Now just tell me. What is it? Were you secretly married before?" Her eyes narrow on me. "Do you have a kid somewhere? It wouldn't be an immediate no, but—"

"Good grief." The words burst out of me, echoing around the kitchen. Then I point to myself. "I'm sorry, but I have to ask—do you really think I could keep a child secret?"

"You can do anything if you put your mind to it," she says solemnly, with just enough sparkle in her eyes that I know she's joking. It doesn't erase the tense lines around her mouth, though, or the rigid set of her shoulders.

I sigh, gesturing to the bag of groceries still on the counter. "Grab your chips and guac and let's talk."

I move into the living room with slow, dreamlike steps, a lamb to the slaughter, while Juniper trails behind me clutching her tub of guac to her chest as the bag of chips swings from one hand.

I don't know how she's going to take this, so I'm just preparing myself for a little of everything. She might hate me, I guess. She might be apathetic. She might cry. I really don't know.

I sit.

She sits.

I take a deep breath.

She raises her eyebrows at me.

I speak.

“When you were in high school,” I say, “you went to a foster home for a few months.”

Something in Juniper’s eyes sharpens; alertness enters her frame. “Yes,” she says without inflection. “That’s correct.”

I rip the Band-aid off. “I was the one who reported your mother to CPS.”

There are different kinds of silences. Some are warm. Some are cold. Some are heavy, and some feel like they could blow away in the breeze.

The silence that falls over the room now is a death silence—cold and motionless and heavy. Another dead body, one of my own making this time, lying in the space between Juniper and I.

“You—reported her?” Juniper’s words are hollow, her eyes far away. We’re both sitting on the couch, and she’s close enough that I could reach out and touch her, but I don’t. Her hands are white-knuckled as she clutches the tub of guacamole to her chest; the bag of chips crinkles loudly as her grip tightens there too.

“Yes,” I say. “I reported her.” I swallow past the impossible knot in my throat. “I was worried about you. That’s all I told them. That I was concerned.”

And *that* is the other reason I didn’t want to live with Juniper. That is the reason I still feel guilty sometimes, especially when she talks about her time in foster care. Because I uprooted her life and sent her into the system, and she never even knew. I thought I was doing the right thing at the time, but I’ve wondered ever since.

Juniper inhales shakily, holding it for a second as though she’s about to speak. But she releases her breath instead, her eyes turning glassy as she turns her gaze on me.

She scoots closer, shuffling toward me on the couch. She leans down and sets her chips and guacamole on the floor.

I tense, preparing myself.

But I'm not ready for the soft touch of her hand on my thigh. I'm not ready for the arm she threads around my torso or the way she buries her face in my shoulder.

I'm not ready for the two words she whispers: "Thank you."

I sit for a moment, stunned, before I'm able to react. I wrap my arms around her and pull her onto my lap, where she folds perfectly into me—my origami heart.

I don't want to ruin the moment by asking her what the heck is going on right now, but...

"What the heck is going on right now?"

She gives a watery laugh, a puff of breath I feel just above the collar of my sweater.

"What did you expect?" she says.

"I don't know," I say, still feeling dazed. "I wasn't sure."

"My foster parents were really, really wonderful." The words are quiet but tinged with unmistakable fondness. "I know a lot of kids don't have that experience. But I did. I was never hungry, the house was warm, no one was drunk. My caseworker was great too—Mr. V. I still send him a letter every Christmas."

I swallow, feeling the softness of her hair against my face. "Did you miss your mom?"

She gives a humorless little laugh. "Horribly." She exhales a shaky breath. "I *still* miss her. Isn't that crazy? But she's my mom."

"You can borrow my mom if you want," I say, reaching up and stroking her hair. "It won't be the same, of course. But she's pretty great, and she has love to spare." I pause, then say, "So...to clarify. You're not upset?"

"That you reported my mom?"

I nod wordlessly.

“I’m shocked,” she admits. “And it will take a little time for me to wrap my head around it.” Her eyes dart to me and then away again. “And I can’t promise that I won’t be upset at some future date.”

“That’s absolutely fair,” I say quickly. “I would understand completely.”

She nods. “But right now...” She gives me a little shrug and goes on, “I’m not angry.”

“Wow,” I say, leaning back. “That was so...anticlimactic.”

She laughs. “Sorry. Do you want me to pretend to be more upset?”

“No,” I say, unable to suppress my own grin. “No need.” I press a kiss to the top of her head, just because I can. “Let’s eat chips and guac and figure out our next move.”

“Are you gonna date me?” she asks with a little smile.

“Mmm,” I hum. “Yeah. I’ll probably have to date you.”

“Are you gonna feed me food out of your secret fourth drawer?”

Crap. I forgot that she saw that. “That’s for emergencies only,” I say, my voice gruff. “Now pass the chips, Junipaide.”

IN WHICH JUNIPER MAKES ANOTHER HOUSE CALL

“**Y**ou can’t just *visit* someone like Lionel Astor.”

Aiden’s words go in one ear and out the other.

Actually, if we’re being truthful, I’m not sure they make it in that first ear at all. They might just bounce right off the side of my head.

“I don’t see why not,” I say. Nothing is going to deter me from this mission. If that means living in relative denial until I’m smacked in the face with reality, so be it. Maybe if I just manifest like crazy, I can will into being a reality where someone like me can march up to Lionel Astor’s front door and manage to actually get a meeting with him.

Crazier things have happened.

The passcode to the visitor’s entrance in the Heights hasn’t been changed since we came to see Tonya von Meller, which seems a little irresponsible, if you ask me. Any old loon could drive through this neighborhood to drop in on an unsuspecting virtual stranger. We pull in with ease, Sunshine clanking and clunking cheerfully as we go.

I didn’t have to drag Aiden to the car with me when I left, but he wasn’t exactly thrilled by my plan, either. I’m pretty sure he only came along to keep me from getting in too much trouble. He’s currently sunk down in the passenger seat as low as he can go, his head barely high enough to see out the window, his long legs wedged comically in the front seat of my Volkswagen Beetle. He keeps rubbing his hands over his

face and muttering to himself, every now and then shooting me dirty looks.

“That’s not a very nice facial expression to make at your girlfriend,” I say in a singsong voice, mostly just to push his buttons.

“I regret everything,” he says darkly.

I shake my head. “It’s too late. We are one. We are Aidiper.”

“I take it all back.”

“And we’re so *cute* together—”

“Everything. I take everything back.”

“No take backs. Sorry.” I shrug, looking over at him. “I don’t make the rules, I just follow them.”

“*I* make the rules,” he says, and I laugh.

“No. No way. Last time you made the rules, you said we would never be romantically involved. Remember that?”

“Meh,” he says, turning to look out the window.

“And if you’ll recall, I never actually broke any rules or crossed any lines,” I say reasonably. “That was all you.”

His head whips around as he looks at me in outrage. “It was not *all me*,” he says. He might look formidable if he weren’t still slouched down in his seat like a teenager who doesn’t want to be seen with his parents. “What about when you got stuck in the window?”

I gape at him. “I did nothing then! You, on the other hand—your hands went all Lewis and Clark and started exploring ___”

He snorts loudly, struggling to sit back up, wrestling with his seatbelt. “They didn’t explore,” he says, glaring at the lap belt that’s currently holding him hostage around his rib cage. He fumbles around, finally releasing the seatbelt with a loud click. Then he resumes his proper seat, straightening up and refastening the seatbelt.

“That,” I say, “was hard to watch.”

“Shut up.” He swivels his upper body to face me. “After you got stuck in the window, do you remember what you said? You said if I didn’t stop touching you, you were going to kiss me. How is that not crossing the line?”

“But I didn’t,” I say. “I didn’t kiss you. And I only said that because you were holding me very—very intimately.”

A flash of silence, during which I know we’re both remembering the same thing: our bodies pressed together, his hands tight on my rib cage, my lips skimming his skin.

When he speaks again, I know I’m not imagining the hoarse note in his voice. “All right,” he says. “That’s fair.”

I nod, fanning my face. “It’s more than fair. And you kissed me in the library, too. You practically attacked me.”

He hums, but there’s a spark of amusement in his eyes when he says, “Hard to argue with that one. Turn here.” He points to the left turn I’m just about to miss.

Sunshine doesn’t do well with last-minute decisions, but I manage to make the turn, and we continue our ascent. The Astor home is at the very top of the hill that makes up the Heights. Everyone in town knows this. Most of us have never been to the Astor home or even set foot in the Heights, but we all still know who lives in that house.

Funny how that works, isn’t it?

We wind round and round, corkscrew-style, until we’ve reached the top of the hill. Lionel’s home is at the end of the drive, and I’m pretty sure we’re going to have to pass through security of some sort to get there. Bodyguards? Metal detectors? What kind of protection does a man like Lionel Astor have?

The answer emerges as we approach the end of the drive, though: it’s a security booth, manned by a stern-looking man who is for sure going to tell us to turn right back around if I can’t convince him otherwise. Crap.

I pull up and roll down my window, ignoring the judgmental looks Mr. Security is giving my poor car—it's not her fault she's beat up; she's doing her best just like the rest of us—and smiling at him.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hi,” he says, looking thoroughly unimpressed. “What brings you here today?”

“Um.” The words sound just as stupid in my head as I know they will out loud, but I spit them out anyway. “I was hoping to talk to Lionel. Mr. Astor, I mean.”

Another judgmental look, this time tinged with incredulity. “Uh-huh,” he says. “You wanted to meet with Mr. Astor.”

I clear my throat, trying not to feel small. “Yes, please. It's important.” Should I make up something outrageous so they'll let me in? Should I tell him I'm pregnant with Lionel's baby?

Ew. No. I think that man is my uncle. Gross.

“All right,” the man says, looking smug and amused and frankly just very punchable. I know he's only doing his job, but that smirk needs to exit stage left immediately. “Well, I'm going to have to ask you to set up an appointment. You'll need to get in touch with—”

“Please,” I say. I'm getting ready to scrape the bottom of the desperation barrel. “Please. Can you just—can you ask him if he'll see me?” Because I truly think he might.

Something in my expression must convince Mr. Security, because he sighs—although I do notice him shooting a look at Aiden that specifically seems to say *Control your woman*, which I do not appreciate. Aiden, smart man that he is, just shrugs at the guy.

“I can ask,” the man says, sounding reluctant. “But if they say no—”

“Then we'll go,” I say quickly. “I promise. Just tell him Nora's daughter wants to meet.”

The man narrows his eyes at me before nodding once. Then he disappears inside his little booth.

“I have to admit,” Aiden says, frowning at the dash, “I’m surprised this car made it all the way up that hill.”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t talk about her like that. She’s trying her best.”

He snorts. “An admirable effort.” Then he looks out the window past me, narrowing his eyes on the security booth. “You think we’re actually going to be able to get in?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “It’s a long shot, I’m aware of that, but I still think we need to try.”

“And what exactly do you plan on saying to Lionel if you manage to snag this meeting?”

“Nothing that will make him very happy,” I say, my voice grim.

“As long as he doesn’t call the police on us or anything,” Aiden says. He looks and sounds more concerned than necessary—like he doesn’t have any faith in me at all.

“He’s not going to call the police on us—oh.” I stop talking as the guard’s head pops back out the window of the booth. He still looks slightly incredulous, but gone is the smug expression that went with it. Now he just seems confused.

“Go on ahead,” he says as the security bar lifts mechanically, clearing the road for us to proceed.

“Wait, really?” I say. Then I turn to Aiden. “Ha.” Looking back at the security man, I add, “Thank you!”

And with that, we’re in. I am fairly certain no car of Sunshine’s (lack of) caliber has ever been on these grounds before. We’re making duct-taped history.

I pull up the drive, heading toward the mansion just visible at the end. It’s a monstrosity of red brick, white columns, and stately shutters. Definitely nice, definitely classy, but bigger than probably three of my childhood houses all put together.

There’s no parking lot, of course, so I end up just parking in the fancy circular driveway, letting my little clunker sputter to a halt right in front of the house. Then Aiden and I get out, both of us staring up at the mansion.

“Maybe I should run for governor,” he says, sounding dazed.

“That would be your worst nightmare,” I say back, examining the lion statues on either side of the double front doors. “You’d have to schmooze and talk to people and make them like you.”

“You’re right,” he says. He frowns. “That sounds awful.”

I nod. Then I take a deep breath. “Let’s go.”

“I’m glad you showered and changed out of your yoga clothes,” Aiden says as he follows me up the brick steps.

Me too. I don’t necessarily care what Lionel’s opinion of me is, but I’d like to at least feel good about myself when I’m coming in at such a disadvantage.

A nice-looking lady answers the door when we knock, but her niceness is thrown into question when she gives us a quick once-over, sniffs, and then swings the door open wide and retreats without waiting. I hurry in after her, Aiden at my heels.

“This is most irregular,” she says over her shoulder. “I advise you not to make such visits a habit. Mr. Astor is a very busy man.”

“We won’t,” I murmur, taking in every inch of the place I can see. It’s decorated in deep reds and golds, heavy fabrics and brocade—sumptuous and gaudy, somehow sucking in the natural light and making it feel darker than it really is. It’s not someplace I would want to live, or even work. But maybe Lionel Astor likes that stifled, starchy feeling?

The lady leading us slows to a stop in front of a set of wooden doors, imposing and intimidating. She knocks twice, and a deep voice immediately responds:

“Enter.”

Seriously. That’s what he says. Not *Come in*, or *It’s unlocked*. Just *Enter*.

“This man might be more pretentious than you,” I say over my shoulder to Aiden, who looks affronted.

“I’m not pretentious—”

“Bust of Shakespeare, *Hamlet* on the weekends, collector’s editions,” I say, ticking items off on my fingers.

“There’s nothing pretentious about collector’s editions—”

But he falls silent when the lady clears her throat loudly, giving us a stern, pointed look. I guess she wants us, her audience, to be paying attention when she opens these crazy-big fancy-pants doors. So I nod with more deference than I feel, and she turns the handles, swinging the doors open wide.

And look. The interior of Lionel’s house is kind of the worst. But I have to admit: the man knows how to decorate a study.

There are floor-to-ceiling windows and warm wood paneling and bookshelves, *so* many bookshelves, lined with books in every size and color. It’s not quite Belle’s library in the beast’s castle, but it’s still gorgeous.

Aiden, the snob, looks impressed against his will, and I can see his gaze eating up those bookshelves. I bet he wants to explore just as badly as I do.

Unfortunately, we are not here to explore. We are here to talk to the man seated behind the mahogany desk at the head of the room.

He doesn’t stand up to greet us, even after the lady who brought us in has left and closed the door behind her. He just looks up, over the top of his glasses, and gestures to the chairs opposite his own.

“Hi,” I say, because someone has to say something. “Thanks for meeting with me.”

Lionel Astor’s bright blue eyes trail slowly over me and then Aiden. “I figured if I turned you away today, you would show up again another time,” he finally says, setting down the pen in his hand. “If you’re anything like your mother, that is.”

Aiden snickers under his breath, but I just nod.

“I’m not much like my mother, but you’re probably correct,” I say.

Lionel sighs. “Sit,” he says, once again pointing to the chairs. “And tell me what this is about. I don’t have a lot of time, so please be brief.” He reaches for the glass of water at the edge of his desk.

So I settle into my chair, and Aiden does the same. I take a deep breath.

And then I drop my bomb—keeping it brief, like he asked.

“It is my belief that you are either my father or my uncle.”

In hindsight, maybe I should have waited to speak until he wasn’t in the middle of taking a drink. But it’s too late now; I watch as the water he’s just drunk appears to go down the wrong pipe. He begins coughing, wheezing and choking and turning beet red.

Aiden rolls his eyes and then stands up slowly, rounding the desk. He thumps Lionel on the back several times, way harder than necessary. “Your delivery could use work,” he says to me.

Despite the violent hacking and spewing going on on the other side of the desk, Lionel still manages to push Aiden away from him. Aiden just shrugs and then returns to my side of the desk, the corners of his lips tilted into a little smirk. I wait for him to sit down, but he doesn’t; he moves to stand behind me instead, his hands coming to rest on my shoulders, his thumbs stroking lazily at the skin just past my neckline.

“He just has one of those faces, doesn’t he?” he murmurs to me. “So smug. Makes me want to piss him off, just for the heck of it.”

“Mmm,” I say, because he’s kind of right.

When Lionel finally stops coughing, he’s red faced and wide eyed and nothing like I’ve seen on any of his commercials.

“That,” he says in a choked but haughty voice, “is absurd. I am not your uncle, and I am very certainly not your father.” He settles back into his chair, folding his hands in front of him on the desk and staring at me.

“You and my mother—”

“Were never intimate,” he says sharply. “We never had that kind of relationship.”

“But you wanted one, didn’t you?”

If it’s possible, Lionel’s face flushes even redder. “I did,” he says, the words short and biting. “But Nora did not feel the same way, and I value consent. Now either explain yourselves, or leave.”

I stare at him for a second, looking for any similarities between us that might be hiding behind my clear resemblance to my mother. Unlike in the childhood photo, however, all I can see now that links us is our eyes.

I think I’m going to have to tell him.

“I am going to take a giant risk,” I say slowly, “and have a very frank conversation with you. I don’t care that you’re a hotshot politician or whatever. I don’t care. I just need to know the truth.”

He raises one brow at me but says nothing, and I don’t blame him. Who the heck do I think I am, barging into his office like this and saying these things?

But this is the only thing left I can think to do. So I’m going to do it.

“Do you know Sandra von Meller?” I say.

His eyes narrow, his forehead wrinkling with confusion. “Sandra...yes,” he says. “The daughter of Tonya von Meller. What about her?”

“She’s dead,” I say. It’s difficult to keep my voice so flat, so emotionless, but I think infusing my own feelings into this situation will only make it harder to read Lionel’s.

And his surprise is unmistakable. Unmistakable—and undeniably genuine. His brows hitch just slightly, his vivid eyes widening as his jaw falls open. “I’m sorry?” he says.

“She’s dead,” I repeat, even as I do my best to push away the mental image of her body. “She was killed, presumably

because she asked to meet with me about my parents.”

Lionel’s eyes go from wide with shock to completely blank. “Your parents? Nora never said who your father was.”

“What did she tell you?” I say, and now it’s hard to keep a note of curiosity out of my voice. I’ve been wondering about this. If she thought she was assaulted by one of her friends but didn’t know which one, what would she have told them about her pregnancy?

“She told me she slept with someone that summer. Someone she met passing through town. I always assumed she was lying.”

“What did you think was the truth?”

“A friend of ours,” he says, his eyes narrowing on me.

“Thomas Freese? Another one of your *Elite* friends?”

The split second of hesitation is the only indicator of his surprise. “Yes,” he says in a reluctant voice. A muscle twitches in his jaw, but he doesn’t look away. “We were idiots. Teenagers give themselves stupid names.” He pauses, then goes on, “Nora knew I liked her, but she and Tommy were always on and off. I thought Tommy was probably the father, and she didn’t want me to be upset.”

“I suppose it’s technically possible that Thomas Freese was my father.” I swallow before speaking again. “But when she died, my mother left behind the claim that she was sexually assaulted.”

Silence. Terrible, horrible silence. Even Aiden’s hands have tensed on my shoulders; I’m barely breathing as I wait for Lionel’s reaction.

But he seems to have frozen—not to ice but to stone, his eyes wide, his face draining of color. Even his gaze is unmoving, glued to me.

“That,” he says stiffly, “is not possible. She would have told me. She would have told us.”

“Maybe,” I say, “if she knew who had done it. But she didn’t. It happened at your home,” I go on, tracking every

twitch of his muscles, every fleeting emotion that passes through his eyes. “Here, in this house.”

Oh my goodness. I didn’t think of it like that before this very second. I am sitting in the home where I was conceived, where my mother was attacked.

My stomach turns as bile rises in my throat, and I slap my hand over my mouth, forcing deep breaths in and then out until I’m positive I’m not going to hurl all over this man and his fancy desk.

Then I go on. “From what I’ve cobbled together, she was here with you, Thomas, and Cam Verido. It was the summer after your senior year, shortly before the three of you left for school. That night she was drugged and assaulted. She learned she was pregnant several weeks later.”

“In my—” Lionel says, and it sounds like he’s choking on his water once more, only he hasn’t taken another drink. “In my home—”

“I believe so, yes.” I blink several times, trying to push back the tears that burn in the corners of my eyes.

And then Lionel erupts out of his chair—he stands so suddenly that I jump, and from behind me, Aiden’s hands tighten on my shoulders.

“We would never,” Lionel says through gritted teeth, bracing white-knuckled hands on the edge of his desk and knocking over his glass of water. It empties quickly all over his desk, staining folders and papers and pooling under his keyboard, but he doesn’t seem to notice. “None of us would ever have done that. *Ever.*”

The truth hits me then as his eyes blaze down at me: this man loved my mother. It’s plain as day.

Did he love the woman she became, sad and broken, whose best still wasn’t enough? Because that’s the unfortunate truth about my mother: she tried. I really think she did. And she loved me. But *love* and *trying hard* were not enough.

Sometimes those things are not enough.

And is love more than the sum of its parts? If you lose all the parts of yourself that someone fell in love with, will they still love you?

Is there a love that says simply *I love you because you exist?*

I don't know. I don't know any of that.

But I think...I think I believe Lionel.

"Fine. In that case, what was my mother's relationship with Rocco like?"

"With—with *Rocco?*" he splutters.

I nod. "Your brother has a lot of feelings about you. But I'm not sure I believe what he's told me."

Lionel pushes off his desk, standing up straight and rolling his eyes. It seems like he's taking a second to collect himself; he runs his hand through his hair and takes a few deep breaths before returning to his seat. Only then does his gaze return to mine, studying me and every now and then jumping up to where I know Aiden is standing behind me.

Finally he speaks. "I am not, strictly speaking, a *good* man," he says. He sounds tired. "But I can guarantee that I am nowhere near as evil as my brother likes to claim, and I *certainly* am not a rapist."

"Then tell me about Rocco," I say softly.

"Your mother didn't like Rocco," he says. "He made her uncomfortable. So I never let him hang around us. I kept him away."

"He made her uncomfortable?" I say, my pulse jumping. "How so?"

"Rocco was very open about his appreciation of your mother. She rejected his advances, but he still came onto her. Over-the-top compliments, little touches, that kind of thing. He refused to take a hint." He pauses, disconcertion twisting his face, lending wrinkles to his brow. "Explain to me what happened with the girl, please."

“We aren’t—we’re not completely certain,” I admit. “I can tell you what I think might have happened.”

Lionel nods slowly but doesn’t speak, which I take as my cue to go on.

“I think your brother was sleeping with Sandra. I think he killed her when she threatened to tell me that he was my—my—father.”

The only change in Lionel’s expression is a slight narrowing of his eyes. “What evidence do you have for all of this?”

So I tell him. I start at the beginning, with the couple at Grind and Brew, and work through everything that has happened since then—Sandy’s note, her dead body, the texts Tonya is still receiving. The manuscript my mother left behind, Thomas Freese’s suspicious death, Gus’s claim that Sandy was seeing a teacher, the fuchsia sweatshirts, the dead chicken—I take all my rambling thoughts and dump them out on Lionel Astor’s desk in a pile of word vomit and half-formed conclusions.

“So my question,” I say when I’ve finished, “is whether you think your brother is capable of those things.”

“My brother,” Lionel says through gritted teeth, his hands white-knuckled around the now-empty glass of water, “is capable of a great many things. He can be genuinely kind and charming. But he can also be genuinely cruel and manipulative. He’s volatile like that. He’s not malicious—except toward me,” he adds with a bitter laugh. “But I have no doubt that he will easily dispose of anyone who threatens him. I imagine—” He breaks off, swallowing hard. “I imagine if my brother ever killed anyone, he would cry afterward. But he would do it again without hesitation if he thought he needed to.”

I just look at him for a second, trying to gauge his sincerity, trying to think through everything I know and everything I suspect. I jump, though, when Aiden speaks for the first time.

“You know this, and yet you’re letting him work at a school?”

Lionel bristles. “I keep an eye on him—”

“Not closely enough, it seems,” Aiden snaps.

“All right,” I say, reaching up quickly to pat Aiden’s hand on my shoulder. “All right. Let’s calm down.”

Aiden sighs. “Are you willing to take a paternity test?” he says, and I’m not surprised to hear him still sounding abrasive, bordering on combative.

Lionel bristles again as his eyes jump back and forth between Aiden and me, but then he sighs. “If you’ll sign an NDA...then yes. I’m not your father, Miss Bean, but I do need to know if my brother is.” He pauses, then adds, “You’re absolutely sure that Sandra von Meller is dead?”

“Technically, no,” Aiden says. “We didn’t see a coroner pronouncing her dead. And the sheriff didn’t find a body. But she hasn’t been seen since, and I don’t see how it’s possible that she survived. There was...” He clears his throat. “There was a head wound, and she was motionless.”

“And not breathing,” I add quietly. “I held my fingers under her nose.” I pause. “And *you’re* absolutely sure that you’re not my father?”

“Your mother and I never slept together,” he says with finality. “But more than that...” He trails off delicately before saying, “I am unable to have children.”

I swallow. I wondered about that. “All right.”

Lionel nods briskly. “Let me see what I can do.” Then he looks at me. “Don’t move. I’ll call for my lawyer.”

IN WHICH AIDEN LOSES SHAKESPEARE

Lionel Astor and Juniper don't end up submitting a paternity test. Instead they submit samples for an avuncular DNA test—a test that will tell them if Lionel is Juniper's uncle. I didn't realize that was a thing, but apparently it is. If he's her father, the test will reveal that as well, based on a number of genetic markers. It must be sweet being rich and well-connected, because Lionel has an NDA drawn up and ready for us to sign within two hours of our meeting, stating that with the exception of law enforcement, we're not allowed to disclose to anyone the potential relationship between Lionel and Juniper, or the fact that he and his wife apparently can't have kids.

Personally, I think he's telling the truth, at least about not being her father. Granted, I'm not an expert on body language or anything like that, and I don't trust the honesty of a politician, but in this matter, he seems sincere—especially since he was so ready and willing to take the DNA test. He seems just as disturbed as Juniper does about what might have happened to her mother; it's that, more than anything, that convinces me. It's clear that he cared for Nora Bean.

News spreads fast about the disappearance of Sandra von Meller. Lionel's clearly been successful in convincing Tonya to report her daughter missing; it's all over the local news and in the local gazette. Sheriff Garrity calls Juniper and me in to give our statements, looking both sheepish and defiant, and I don't hold myself back from giving him a swift dressing-down. Once I'm done with that, though, I tell him everything I

know. Juniper takes even longer than I do when she talks to him, and by the time the two of us head home for the day, the sun is setting.

“I’m so tired,” Juniper says when we get inside. She throws herself face-first onto the couch, groaning on impact. “But my brain won’t shut up.” Her stocking-clad feet dangle off the edge of the sofa, wiggling to the beat of some unheard song. She’s got on a skirt made of corduroy, a dark red color, with a white turtleneck underneath. It doesn’t look comfortable, but I can admit it’s very *her*.

“I know,” I say, my voice grim. “Mine won’t either. We should try to get some sleep, though. Maybe take some Benadryl or something.”

“Meh,” she says, turning her head so that she’s looking at me. “I’ve got some insomnia medication somewhere. It makes me kind of loopy, but it works well.”

“Take that,” I say, nodding.

“I don’t like feeling groggy when I wake up.”

“Are you going to be able to sleep on your own?” Because I know I won’t. My mind is racing with everything that’s happened. I’m still having trouble reconciling my friend Rocco with Juniper’s potential psycho father Rocco.

“No,” she says in a dull voice. “I’ll stare at the ceiling and jump every time I see a shadow.”

I shrug. “Your call.” Then I sit down on the couch, right on top of her legs. “I’ll just rest here until you decide.”

She laughs, wiggling her legs. “You’re such a child.”

“Am I?” I say with a grin. I let her continue to muscle her legs back and forth until she finally manages to topple me off of her. I slide to the floor, still smiling. Then I look over my shoulder at her. She’s sitting up now.

“Hey,” she says, her eyes sparkling, her hair somehow extra pink. “I like you.”

“Yeah,” I say as my smile fades into something softer. “I like you too.” These aren’t words I’m used to saying; I don’t

have these kinds of conversations. But this thing with Juniper...I've fallen into it. Slipped into it, really, with astonishing ease. Maybe because she found her way here first, and I simply held on for dear life while she dragged me along after her.

Her mind is magical, and her heart is strong.

How could I not follow her into whatever rainbow dimension she hurled us toward?

"Go to bed," I say, reaching up and curling my fingers around hers. "Tomorrow is a new day."

She nods and swings her legs off the couch. Then she stands up, lifting her arms high over her head as she stretches. It causes her shirt to ride up a few inches, and on her back I can just make out a hint of the tattoo that's inked over her scar.

What if I hadn't found her that day, all those years ago, digging through a dumpster for her breakfast? Would we still be sitting here like this? Would we have traveled separate paths?

Or would fate have brought us together in a different way?

"You look like you're thinking big thoughts down there," Juniper says, and I realize with a start that I've just been sitting here, staring up at her and zoning out.

"Do you believe in fate?" I say. I don't know where the words come from.

"I believe in people," she says, like my question isn't strange at all. She holds her hand out to me, and I take it, letting her pull me to my feet. "I do believe in a higher power of some kind, but mostly I believe that people create their own luck and chances and fortunes."

"What about soulmates?" I say, because I'm interested to hear her answer.

She smiles at me. "No," she says. "I tend to think that almost any two people could be happy together if they were both determined enough. But"—she shrugs—"really, what do I

know?” Her smile turns mischievous as she reaches up with both hands and pulls my face down to hers. “Why?” she says, planting a kiss on my lips. “Do you think we’re soulmates?”

I grin, prying her vice-like grip off of me. “That’s way above my pay grade.” I kiss her right palm, then her left. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Mmkay,” she says with a little smile. “I probably won’t be up before you leave.”

“That’s fine. Get some sleep.”

She nods, blows me a kiss, and then heads toward the stairs. I watch her until she’s disappeared from my view, a dopey smile on my face the whole time, like a lovesick fool.

I putter around in the kitchen for a bit after that, staring at our refrigerator, which still has all the notes we’ve made on it. That stresses me out, though, so I pace aimlessly instead. I open the fridge, peek in the pantry. Do a lap, then look again. Surprise, surprise, no new foods have magically appeared.

I look several more times anyway. Then, remembering something Juniper said, I pull out my phone.

“Ma,” I say when she answers.

“Oh, don’t call me that,” she says, and I picture her waving her hand at me. “You sound like one of those *New Jersey Shores* boys.”

“*Jersey Shore*,” I say, amused.

“Whatever it’s called. Those kids needed a parent or two,” she mutters.

I smile. “That’s actually why I called,” I say.

Silence.

“Not because of the show,” I say quickly. “It’s because—ah—I’m dating someone.” I stumble over the words, but I know my mother hears them, because she gasps.

“Is it this woman you’re living with?” she says. “Caroline—Caroline!” she shouts, and I stifle a groan. “Your brother has a girlfriend!”

From the background, barely audible, comes Caroline's response: "It's about time. Details!"

"No details right now," I say firmly. I can't handle that conversation at the moment. "I just wanted to let you know, because her mom has passed, so I told her she could borrow mine. I told her—" I clear my throat. "I told her my mom is pretty great."

"Oh," my mother says, her voice suddenly wobbly. "Oh, dear. Her mother passed away?"

I nod. "Years ago."

"What about her father?"

I think of Rocco and Lionel Astor, frowning. "No father is in the picture."

"Oh, dear," my mother says again, and I can just picture her fretting. "That won't do. Caroline? Caroline!" she shouts.

"What?" my sister's voice says, sounding exasperated. "Why are you yelling? I'm right here."

"Oh, sorry, sweetie; I didn't realize. Just listen up. Aiden's girlfriend—what's her name?"

"Juniper," I say, and Caroline echoes the same thing.

"Juniper," my mother says. "Juniper needs a family. I want you to go over there tomorrow morning, Caroline, and tomorrow evening we can all have dinner together—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," I say quickly. "Slow down. She has a brother; they get along well. She's not completely alone. So no one needs to come over here in the morning. And we've got a lot going on this week, so probably no dinner tomorrow." Inexplicably, a lump has begun to form in the back of my throat, spurred by my mom's immediate call to arms—no hesitation, no questions, just love. I swallow thickly. "I just meant that I'm dating her, and I like her, and I hope you'll be welcoming. That's—" I clear my throat, squeezing my eyes shut a few times to get rid of the sting. "That's all I meant."

"Oh," my mother says, and her voice softens. "Of course, sweetheart. Of course we will. Although"—now her words

turn stern—“we should discuss how you’re living in sin.”

I can’t help it; I smile.

She’s truly the greatest mother in the world.

When I’ve finally maneuvered the phone call to an end, I return to the living room and sink into my reading chair, swiveling just briefly to pull a book from my shelf. I grab one without looking, my mind lost to my exhausted thoughts.

I open the book and am pleasantly surprised to find that my random grabbing led me to Shakespeare once again; *As You Like It* this time. One of my favorites, actually. I begin to read, trying to force my brain to pay attention.

It’s slow going.

At some point, I hear several disconcerting thuds from upstairs; a few seconds later, Juniper blunders down the stairs, dressed in her pajamas. Her eyes are more closed than open, and she’s moving like a zombie.

“Juniper?” I say as she lurches dazedly into the bathroom, only barely missing the doorframe. But she doesn’t answer; she just closes the door behind her, and I look back to my book. We haven’t reached the converse-through-the-bathroom-door stage of our relationship yet. So I once more turn to my reading, trying to focus.

And I try hard. I cross my legs. Uncross them. Rest my ankle over my knee. I even manspread for a bit. But no matter what I do, I can’t get comfortable. And it’s not because my body is restless, either; it’s my mind. Pretentious as it might be, Shakespeare never fails to grab my attention. But tonight he’s falling short, and my brain is jumping to every whispered shadow I see, startling at the most innocuous of sounds. The slam of the neighbor’s car door, a dog barking, the refrigerator running; they all make me jump out of my skin.

I’m on edge.

Why am I on edge?

When I hear the sound of the front door lurching open, honest to goodness, I almost wet myself.

“Caroline,” I mutter, saying her name like a curse as I stand.

“Not Caroline.”

Two words, spoken in a soft voice. Friendly, even. But the hair stands up on the back of my neck, and it feels like someone has poured ice water into my lungs.

I hold back my sigh. I’m so dang tired; I do *not* need this today.

I look around grudgingly, hunting for anything that could be used as a weapon. My gaze scans the room and finds exactly nothing of use—why have I filled this home with unhelpful items like books and pillows and lamps?—so I turn on my heel to go to the kitchen instead.

Except my path has already been blocked—by Rocco freaking Astor.

My psycho murderous coworker, in my living room, holding—holding—is that a knife?

“Holy crap,” I say without thinking as my eyes narrow in on that blade. “Are you gonna stab me? *Seriously?*”

All right. I would not be a good hostage negotiator.

But Rocco just barks a laugh, a sardonic, wheezing sound, before holding the knife up. It’s not huge, but it doesn’t need to be; that’s four inches of razor-sharp metal that will pop me like a balloon. Crap. I am *not* prepared for this.

“Hey,” I say, holding my hands up. “Let’s slow down, okay? That’s a pretty creepy knife you’re pointing at me. Can you put that away?”

“Sorry,” Rocco says with a shrug as he steps closer. “But no.” Then he sighs, and it’s the craziest thing I think I’ve ever seen; he’s looking at me like he always does. He looks completely normal, he sounds completely normal—except there’s a knife in his hand, and he’s very plainly threatening me with it. “But I told you, didn’t I?”

I clear my throat, shuffling backward toward the kitchen. “Told me what?”

Another laugh, casual and breezy. “I told you to stay out of it. I told you to stay away from my brother.” His smile vanishes as his eyes turn pleading. “Why didn’t you listen?”

And Rocco’s not a huge man, but something about the knife in his hand has elevated him to giant status. There’s also an uncomfortable feeling he’s giving off that makes me want to keep my distance even more—a weird cloud of chaos floating around him, like the dirt that surrounds Pigpen in the Charlie Brown comics. I skirt further back, trying to move slowly so I don’t set him off.

“Why didn’t you listen?” Rocco says again. His eyes, the same blue as Juniper’s, swim with unshed tears. “I *like* you, Aiden. You’re a great guy.”

Insane. He’s insane. And—holy crap—he might be my father-in-law one day.

My panicking brain takes this thought and runs with it. *MY FATHER-IN-LAW IS INSANE*, it screams. *WHAT SORT OF FAMILY ARE WE MARRYING INTO?*

No. Focus.

“Where is she?” Rocco goes on, wiping his eyes with the hand that isn’t holding the knife. “I like her too. This is so sad. Where is she? Her car was here.” He steps sideways and flings open my bedroom door, glancing inside only briefly before moving to the door of the coat closet. He throws that door open too, swearing under his breath when he sees the rows of jackets and piles of shoes.

My heart thunders in my chest as his eyes land on the bathroom door—behind which I know he’ll find Juniper, though I don’t know what she’s been doing in there all this time. I can only hope she’s heard what’s going on and is preparing herself.

Rocco grasps the doorknob and eases the door open, giving it a nudge so that it swings wide. He sticks his head in; I shuffle hastily to the side so I can see too.

And there, sitting on the toilet, naked as the day she was born from the waist down with her pants around her feet, is

Juniper.

And she's asleep.

That stupid sleep medicine. Why did I recommend it tonight, of all nights? Her head is propped in her hands, elbows on her knees, and she's snoring slightly, her mouth gaping open.

"Juniper!" I shout, turning my body and slipping my hand into my pocket for my phone.

Juniper startles awake in a flurry of chaos, blinking rapidly and looking completely out of it. She peers up at Rocco and I, frowning. Then she reaches one hand out.

"Papa?"

Rocco yelps and scrambles backward, slamming the door shut, breathing hard, looking horrified.

For one eternal second, there's complete silence, broken only by the sound of our breathing and Juniper's clumsy stumbling on the other side of the door. Then Rocco rounds on me. My breath catches in my throat at the look on his face, and in that moment, it finally becomes real—it finally becomes undeniable.

This man is a killer.

Gone are the tears; gone are the twinkling eyes. No smile, no amusement. Just cold indifference and a maniacal gaze. He advances on me, the knife raised—

Just as Juniper bursts out of the bathroom.

"Hey!" she shouts drunkenly, jabbing her finger in Rocco's direction as she stumbles toward him. "Hey. When someone is naked on the toilet, you don't just burst in. That's rude. It's *rude!*"

Rocco swivels away from me, holding the knife up in her direction instead. She gasps when she sees it.

"Hey," she says again. "Hey—"

I yell an incoherent warning as Rocco takes a swipe at her. But her addled state has rendered her slow, and she doesn't

move in time—I watch with horror as the knife slices her upper arm. It begins bleeding immediately, and for a second, Juniper just stares at it in shock.

She blinks once. Twice. And then she looks back at Rocco.

“Hey!” she screams—and I do mean *screams*. “I am the *fruit of your womb!* You can’t *stab me*—give me that. Give me that!” She rushes at him, reaching for the blade with her bare hand, grabbing it and wrenching it from his grasp, which is clearly limp from shock.

Drug-addled Juniper is not the brightest Crayon in the box, but I’ll give her this: she’s fearless.

The whole scene plays out strangely. It’s not like an action sequence from a movie; there’s nothing rehearsed or choreographed or smooth about what’s happening. There’s no intense background music, no theatrical lighting. It’s all chaos and shouts and confusion by the light of my reading lamp. I’m screaming at Juniper not to grab a knife by the blade with her bare hand, Juniper is screaming at Rocco about how good fathers don’t try to murder their daughters, and Rocco is looking more and more confused by the second as his head whips back and forth between the two of us. There’s blood everywhere on Juniper—streaming from her hand, staining her shirt—and tears are streaking down her face.

“You killed them!” Juniper screams, dropping the knife and cradling her sliced hand to her chest. “People *died!* Get out. Get out! You’re not welcome in this house!”

“Ope,” I say quickly, holding my hands up. Then I look at Juniper. “Absolutely support you in however you choose to involve your father in your life, but we do sort of need him to stay here until the police come.”

“Oh,” she says, blinking at me. “Are the police coming?”

I glance at Rocco, whose face is running a wide gamut of colors and emotions. “I called them when we were bursting in on you in the bathroom.”

“Oh,” she says. “Okay.”

Rocco resembles nothing so much as a cornered animal now. He lunges for the knife on the floor, but Juniper turns and grabs from behind her the bust of Shakespeare that sits on my bookshelf.

My lovely, expensive, very heavy bust of Shakespeare.

I know a moment of both regret and relief—regret for the Bard, relief for my girlfriend—as Juniper brings the bust down on Rocco’s head just as he’s scrambling to his feet, knife in hand. It connects with his skull, giving a sickening *crunch*, and he falls immediately to the floor—still and silent.

“William,” I say faintly to the blood-smeared bust, cracked in half on the floor. “Did you kill my father-in-law?” I’m not sure I’m completely in my right mind anymore; in fact, I can feel my hands and legs shaking. I think I’m probably going into shock.

Juniper falls clumsily to the floor, buries her face in her hands, and begins to sob.

In the distance, sirens sound.



EVERYTHING HAPPENS IN A BLUR AFTER THAT.

Sheriff Garrity sends an unconscious Rocco Astor away in an ambulance, handcuffed to a stretcher and escorted by three policemen. Lionel Astor shows up some fifteen minutes later, dressed in suit pants and a white shirt despite the late hour, with several lawyers in tow. I guess he’s keen to keep quiet all news about his little brother.

I didn’t even know he knew where we live.

He bustles around, speaking in clipped tones to the various people who are transforming our house into an official crime scene. I think this must be every single officer the sheriff has; I’ve never seen this many people with him. They all watch Lionel with looks of mingled irritation and respect as he does his thing, probably stepping on toes left and right.

Juniper and I sit on the stairs, watching the hubbub in decidedly different states of mind. She's somehow half crying, half dozing, so I've got her propped against me, her head on my shoulder. I've already talked to Garrity, and Juniper has spoken to him too, though she didn't have a ton to offer. I'm not sure how much she'll remember of this when she wakes up and the sleep medicine has worn off. For now I think she just needs to rest. Turn her off and then turn her back on again in order to get her functioning again. Maybe put her in a vat of rice if she can't stop crying.

When Lionel finally approaches us, though, I nudge her with my elbow. "Juniper," I say.

"Hmm?" she says into my shoulder.

"Wake up."

She sits up slowly, her eyes bleary as she looks at me. I point to Lionel, who's standing in front of us at the base of the stairs.

One of the men behind him passes him a large manila envelope, which he in turn holds out to Juniper.

"You are, I'm sorry to say, my niece," he says.

She blinks at him, taking the envelope. "No need to be rude," she says, her voice slurring slightly.

And for the first time since I've met him, a tiny smile quirks at the corner of his lips. "I simply meant that the circumstances were unfortunate."

"The fruit of his womb," Juniper mutters, letting her head drop back onto my shoulder.

One of Lionel's brows hitches. "I'm sorry?"

"She's not entirely lucid," I say. "And she's having trouble processing the events of the night. It would probably be best if you spoke again at a later date."

He nods, looking frankly relieved, before turning and striding off, down the hallway and out the front door. His bevy of legal minions follows, their shoes clicking on the wood floor.

I turn to my very drowsy girlfriend. “Let’s put you to bed,” I say with a sigh.



MATILDA CALLS JUNIPER THE NEXT DAY. I CALL IN SICK, LYING through my teeth—though to be fair, if we were able to acknowledge the need for mental health days, I wouldn’t have to be so dishonest.

Juniper puts the phone on speaker as soon as she answers. We’re curled up on the couch together, pretending to read our own separate books while secretly stealing glances at each other. I’m captivated by the shadow Juniper’s lashes cast over her cheeks when she’s looking down at the book in her lap, and I can’t quite look away.

“Hi, Matilda,” Juniper says into the speaker, sounding tired. She shuts her book without marking the page, and I do the same with mine.

“Juniper,” Matilda says in a nasally voice. “I’ve been trying to get a hold of you.”

“Yeah,” Juniper says. “Sorry. It’s been a bit crazy. What’s up?”

“What do you mean, what’s up? You asked me to see what I could find about some guy named Cam Verido. I asked around.”

These words manage to pull my attention away from Juniper’s lashes; I look at the phone in her hand. Her body stiffens against me, and she straightens up.

“Okay,” she says, her voice quivering slightly. “Did you find anything?”

“I did, actually,” Matilda says. “He lives super close to you. You’re in Autumn Grove, right?”

“Mmm.”

“Next to your town is a town called Valley Hills. He lives there. 405 Atlas Lane, Valley Hills—”

“What?” Juniper says, cutting her off. “Say that again.”

“The address? 405 Atlas Lane.”

Juniper’s eyes flutter closed, and my heart stutters; that address clearly means something to her. “Thanks, Matilda,” she says. “Anything else? Job or family or anything?”

“He’s a social worker,” Matilda says. “Wife and two kids. That’s all I was able to find.”

But Juniper is already nodding. “That’s perfect. Thank you so much.”

They say goodbye and then hang up.

“You know that address,” I say. It’s not a question.

“I do,” she says quietly, her gaze far away. “I send him a Christmas letter every year.” Then she turns her head to look at me. “My case worker. Cameron, I’ve always called him.”

I blink at her. “Your—what? Your case worker?”

She nods. “He settled me in my foster home, kept in touch, checked in on me.”

Her case worker? He was her case worker? What are the odds of that? What are the odds of him being nearby the whole time? Minimal, right?

“But...” I trail off, frowning as I think. “Why didn’t you recognize his name? Or his face in the yearbook?”

She shrugs, her shoulders brushing against my chest. “We called him Mr. V. I didn’t put those pieces together. And he looks different than he did in high school, but—” She shakes her head. “I haven’t seen him in years. Since my senior year.”

“How did that happen?” I say, my mind working through possibilities.

“I don’t know,” she says. “I’ll write him and ask. Later, maybe.” Then she pats my leg. “Want to help me research something for my book?”

“Don’t you want to know?” I say with surprise.

“I do, yeah,” she says. She swallows. “But not right this second. I can’t process anything else at the moment. I’ll write him a letter tonight.”

That’s fair. So I raise my eyebrows at her. “What’s the book research this time?”

“Zip ties,” she says with a little grin. “Escaping zip ties.”

I laugh. “Tempting.” I pause, then go on, “Is there romance in this book?”

“Of course,” she says, rolling her eyes. “I don’t write books without romance in them.”

“Silly me,” I say. “Then let’s research that instead.”

“What, romance?” she says, and her smile widens.

“Romance,” I say, leaning in for a kiss. I press my lips to hers, threading my fingers into her pink hair.

She laughs before kissing me back.

I don’t know what the coming days will hold. I don’t know how Juniper is going to make peace with all the things that have happened over the last month. But I’ll be by her side through it all.

My fate.

EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER

“Just tell me where we’re going.”

“Mmm,” Aiden hums from the driver’s seat. “No. I don’t think I will yet.” I can hear the amusement in his voice, but thanks to the blindfold around my eyes, all I can see is a faint strip of gray at the top and bottom of my vision.

“Did you ever stop to consider that this is ruining my eye makeup?” I say. “My makeup looked amazing.”

“It did,” he says, still sounding amused. “So does the dress.”

I smooth my hands down the front of my prom dress, smiling a little.

The prom-turned-Hunger-Banquet was a surprising success. Aiden worked his butt off to put everything together, but I was worried the kids would give him a hard time. And they did at first, but the statistics he rolled out and the bowls of rice and beans and whatnot had their faces turning from disgruntled to solemn. They perked up in time for the dance, though, and we were bombarded by the usual stench of teenage body odor and raging hormones. The Betties chaperoned properly this time, too—as it turns out, during the Homecoming dance, they snuck down to the woods to vape.

To *vape*.

They saw Sandy briefly by the Solomon statue, still alive, when they first went down, but not when they returned. I felt kind of bad for them; they looked sheepish and drawn all

throughout the *in memoriam* slideshow honoring Sandy. They clearly felt horrible.

Rocco Astor did not get a slideshow.

Once Sandy's body was found buried behind his home on his sprawling country property, Rocco pleaded guilty to three counts of murder: Sandy, my mother, and Thomas Freese. The whole story came to me in bits and pieces after that, based on Rocco's confession and the blanks the police filled in.

Sandra found an old picture of my mother that Rocco had kept. He told her it was an old girlfriend who had died. The police think Sandy saw my post on the town forum and then told Rocco she'd seen someone who looked just like his old flame. From there she began following me and then Aiden. I guess Rocco's reaction was suspicious enough to her that she ended up tricking him into admitting the truth—using copious amounts of alcohol, he says. Once she knew the whole story, she decided to tell me. He killed her the night we were supposed to meet, when he found out what she was planning—a blow to the front of the head only moments before Aiden and I crashed into the woods. He hid from us and then carried her body away once we'd gone; I don't know how he made it to his car without anyone seeing him, but he did. The photos he sent Tonya von Meller were, of course, photoshopped—something Garrity's contact in Boise was able to prove.

On the whole, an incredibly sad, incredibly scary story. She was smart and beautiful with a healthy disdain for what she perceived as the absurdly wealthy lifestyle she and her family led; I imagine this is part of why she and Rocco bonded. He truly hated the wealth he was raised with.

I wish he could have just done something good with it. Ten minutes with Aiden would have convinced him to donate to the food bank, for starters. He's always going on about how they run out of toilet paper every month. Of course, he's also been nagging Lionel—who staunchly refuses to let me call him *Uncle Lionel*, despite his reluctant agreement to have dinner with me once a month—about more funding, so we'll see where that gets him.

I, as it turns out, have been on Lionel's radar for far longer than I thought. He kept an eye on me and my mother over the years. When he found out I was going into the system, he pulled a few strings to make sure his old friend, Cam, was assigned to my case. He was looking out for my mother even then, in his own, weird way. I met up with Cameron for lunch a few weeks back, and it went well; maybe we'll meet up again in the future, when the past doesn't feel so raw.

The car is silent as we drive, and I let my eyes flutter closed beneath the bandana Aiden has around my eyes. It's been a long evening; first the banquet, followed by the dance. It must be nearing midnight by now, and the corsage on my wrist is wilted.

But I guess Aiden still has something he wants to show me. So I wait, my hand tucked in his as his thumb absently strokes my knuckles.

I sit up straighter a few minutes later when I feel the change in our path—crunchy gravel beneath the tires instead of smooth pavement.

“Aiden,” I say, reaching for the bandana. “Are we—”

“Wait,” he says. His hand comes up to still mine, pulling it away from the bandana. “Hear me out, okay?”

I clear my throat. “Okay.”

“We are at the cemetery.”

My heart sinks; I knew it.

“If you aren't ready to be here,” he says in an unusually sincere voice, “we can leave right now. But you've been telling me for months that you want to come see Sandy and your mother, and you've been putting it off. If you still truly aren't ready, that's okay; I'll turn this car right around.” He hesitates, and his voice is stronger as he says, “But if you've reached the point where you're running away rather than still healing, you might consider getting out of this car with me and going to see them.”

The silence that falls between us is loud, but my heartbeat is louder.

“Take your time deciding,” he says. “Take off the bandana if you want, or leave it on. You decide. Let me know when you’ve made up your mind.” He sighs and shuffles around in his seat. “I’m going to close my eyes and rest for now.”

I reach up and untie the bandana immediately, letting it fall away just in time to miss the sharp sting of tears that comes to my eyes. Then I look over at the man in the seat next to mine.

He’s leaned his chair back, one hand resting comfortably over his stomach. The distant lights of the cemetery illuminate the night just enough for me to see that his eyes are closed, but the hand that’s still holding mine is tight.

He’s awake. He’s just giving me privacy.

And he’s right; I have been putting this off. It’s not a matter of being ready anymore; I’m just scared.

I’m scared to look at the tombstone of Sandra von Meller, who died because she saw me pulling into town.

I’m scared to look at the tombstone of my mother, whose story I now know completely.

I’m scared of what I might feel. It was easier when I felt like Nora Bean had wronged me. What if I still feel angry?

You’re allowed to feel angry, my therapist has told me time and time again. You’re allowed to feel compassion for your mother while also taking issue with how she treated you. You’re allowed to love someone while also being glad they’re no longer part of your life. You can understand why someone treats you badly while also refusing to allow them to treat you that way. Those things are okay.

I believe her. I really do. But understanding something with my brain and understanding it with my heart are two different things, and I still have a ways to go on that front.

I take a deep breath, my eyes searching everything I can see of the cemetery from the car. Then I turn to Aiden.

“Let’s go.”

His eyes pop open immediately, and he nods, putting his chair into the upright position. When his hand lets go of mine

and reaches to turn the keys in the ignition, though, I smile.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “I mean let’s go *in*.”

“Oh,” he says. In the darkness I can see his gaze darting over my face. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” I say, a strange peace settling over me. “I’m sure.” Then I look down at my shoes—pink heels that will sink right into the ground. “You gonna carry me?”

A little smile pulls at Aiden’s lips. “Of course,” he says.

I nod, and we both take that as our signal to get out of the car. We drove Aiden’s, sadly; I wanted to take Sunshine to her first prom, but my grumpy boyfriend said everyone would laugh at us if we rolled up in a yellow clunker. That started a long, heated debate about not caring what other people think, which ended with us sprawled on the floor, laughing and kissing and laughing some more.

Aiden rounds the car and pulls me just close enough to drop a kiss on my forehead. Then, without warning, he leans down and scoops me into his arms, the tulle of my skirt spilling everywhere.

“Hey,” I yelp. “Some warning, please.”

“I’m about to pick you up,” he says as he starts out across the gravel parking lot, his voice bland.

I roll my eyes.

He continues to carry me past the parking lot, past row after row of graves, heading toward the back corner where both my mother and Sandra are buried.

We reach Sandy’s grave first; it’s a large, marble affair that shines with the reflected glare of the lights placed here and there around the cemetery. Aiden sets me gently on my feet.

I approach Sandy’s grave with unsteady steps, forcing myself to breathe deeply. And for a few minutes, I just look.

“I’m sorry,” I say to her finally, my words catching in my throat. “I’m so, so sorry.” I swallow past the lump in my

throat. “I will remember you.” It’s my promise to her, the only thing I have to offer. “I will remember you, Sandra—Sandy.”

I tell her about prom, about the slideshow and the Hunger Banquet. I tell her about my dress and my shoes. I tell her about my newest book, a mystery romance, which is dedicated to her, a book full of heart and emotion and a detective following her gut. It’s also a book with a love interest who undeniably resembles Aiden; I tell Sandra that too. I tell her all the things I think a high school girl might be interested in.

I tell her that Rocco Astor will rot behind bars for the rest of his miserable life.

And then I tell her goodbye for now. I’m not sure when I’ll visit her again. My heart hurts.

Aiden follows me wordlessly when I turn away from Sandy, heading toward my mother. They’re close, but not close enough to protect my shoes; I sink into the grass several times before I reach her corner.

I plop to the ground in front of my mother’s grave, ignoring the fact that my dress will probably be ruined. I look at Nora’s headstone, at the mossy patches and the rough texture. And then I speak.

“I’ll remember you too,” I say. I swallow. “But I will forget the parts of you that hurt.” My voice is hoarse, threadbare in the silence of the night. “I will keep you, but I will let go of the things that are hurting me to carry. That’s what I can do for you.”

And in the spring breeze that plays with my hair and my skirt, I can almost hear her response: *You don’t owe me anything.*

I cry for a long time. I cry for Nora and Sandy and Thomas Freese. I cry for Lionel Astor, who loved a woman that did not love him. I cry for myself, because I’m sad, and because I’m learning that I’m allowed to be unhappy.

I don’t know how long I sit there. But when my tears have faded into silence, broken every so often by sniffles, I feel Aiden’s warmth from behind me.

I lean back against him, my head resting somewhere around his knees, and I tilt my head back to look up at him.

“Want to dance?” he says.

It doesn't make sense, but I nod anyway. I take his outstretched hand and stumble to my feet in front of him. He holds me at arms' length before brushing the dirt and grass from my dress.

Then, from his suit pocket, he pulls his phone. He taps around for a moment until the beautiful, eerie sounds of *Danse Macabre* begin to play, floating out of his phone speaker and into the night around us.

He holds out his hands, and I take them, smiling as he pulls me close. We twirl slowly, pressed together as the music soars.

And somewhere in the darkness, just beyond the stars, Nora and Sandy dance along.



THANK YOU FOR READING *JUNIPER BEAN RESORTS TO MURDER*. If you want to keep updated on my latest projects, follow me on [Instagram](#) or subscribe to my [newsletter](#) for a free bonus scene from *Maid of Dishonor* (I won't spam you, I promise). And if you loved this book, please consider leaving a [review](#). It is more helpful than you know!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book took a lot out of me, but it also was very life-giving and invigorating at the same time. I was itching for something new and challenging to sink my teeth into, and it was amazingly fulfilling to be able to do that. I spent most of this novel muttering “What the heck am I even doing?” while typing feverishly into the night. Thankfully, I have the best support a gal could ask for.

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And my Creator instilled in me the insatiable desire to create, to learn and grow and progress so that I can help other people do the same.

I'm very blessed and very lucky.

ALSO BY GRACIE RUTH MITCHELL

Maid of Dishonor (Love Mishaps 1).

Say Yes to the Hot Mess (Love Mishaps 2).

Move It or Lose It (Love Mishaps 2.5).

A Not-So Holiday Paradise

Eye of the Beholder (Stone Springs 1).

City of Love (Stone Springs 2).

No Room in the Inn