

REBECCA MAHONEY

THE MEMORY EATER

FORGETTING
COMES AT
A PRICE



ALSO BY REBECCA MAHONEY

The Valley and the Flood



THE
MEMORY
EATER

REBECCA MAHONEY





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*To Mom, Dad, and Keenan, and to our own “Whistler Beach”:
the cliffs we scaled, the lobster breakfasts we never ate.*

*And to the memories we made: those remembered and those
forgotten.*

ONE

I **GAVE UP** on sleep by 4:00 a.m. And if I'd left then, in the predawn dark, I would have easily made it to the front door without being heard. But my family has a rule—one of many, actually. Don't go down to the caves when you can't see where you're going.

I've learned, as I've gotten older, which rules are for bending and which aren't. Even my grandmother didn't obey absolutely all of them to the letter. But that one, I've never touched.

So as usual, my escape attempt begins at dawn.

The floorboards creak traitorously under my feet. Back home, I knew every squeaky spot; I knew exactly how much weight they could take without giving you away. You had to wrangle every part of that house, from the noise to the summer cross breeze through the windows. But with enough patience and box fans, you could make it wholly yours.

I've lived with my best friend, Rue, and her parents, Scott and Mercedes, for four months. And since then, I've learned all the ways in which their house thinks it knows what's best for you. The pipes thrum and sigh and talk. The central air drifts with a mind of its own. And I can never seem to get from the second floor to the first without making at least one sound.

My heart starts going queasy-fast. The problem is, this isn't going to feel good either way, whether I succeed or fail. The Atwood family doesn't have as many rules as mine, but they gave me one when I moved in: I should treat this place like

home. But even when I'm not actively trying to betray their trust, I always get this strange, guilty squirm when I'm wandering alone. It's always going to feel at least a little like trespassing.

I ease my weight down the stairs and slip into the kitchen. Setting my water shoes neatly on the floor, I finally toe them on. And then I reach for the handle of the back porch door.

"Good morning, Alana."

I whirl around. There is no way to whirl around casually. But I give it my best shot.

Opposite the kitchen, Scott Atwood stretches in the living room armchair, refolding his newspaper to lay it on the side table. His windbreaker and boots are already on. And because he is the kind of person you can't get mad at no matter how hard you try, he's smiling at me.

I wave weakly. "Hi, Scott."

"Ready to go?" he says, as if I didn't try to sneak out under his nose.

I smile tightly, hold up a single finger for *one second*. And then I double back toward the stairs. If I'm leaving the proper, well-behaved way, at least I can wash my face.

I meet Scott in the driveway, where he's already got his park service truck running for me. It's only a little over a mile to where we're going, but the warmth is nice. Eases some of the sting of failure.

Whatever my face is doing right now, Scott notices. "Are you angry?"

I consider saying no. But Scott has known me a little too long for that. "Not at you," I say, which is more or less the truth. His daily escort is the least embarrassing part of this entire setup. But it's the one part that isn't explicitly required

of me. So here I am, waging a months-long war against a man trying to give me a five-minute ride.

It would be less excruciating if he weren't looking at me with such understanding right now.

"It's not as if I don't appreciate the rides . . ." I eventually say.

"I know you do," he says. "You've mentioned it. Often."

"But I really can do this part alone." I squirm. And then I regret it. Squirming is not going to make me look like a person who can get herself to work.

He takes his eyes off the road long enough to give me that unfailingly gentle look. "I know you're nervous about tonight."

I sink in the seat. I swear I didn't used to be this transparent. "Not that nervous." At his raised eyebrow, I add, "Five out of ten. At most."

Because I don't have *that* much to be nervous about, do I? They're not going to take the family business away. Not when I'm the only member of the family left to run it. And though that doesn't mean I'm above consequences for my mistakes, no one seems to consider what happened a mistake. They call it "an incident." "An accident." "That day," if you're town council chair Lena Russo and too squeamish to use direct language.

Tonight is a formality, really. A formality where almost all of the adults in my life gather to determine whether or not I can do, without supervision, the job I've had since I was eight years old.

So, you know. Maybe I'm a six out of ten.

"This isn't a punishment," Scott says. "You remember that, right?"

“I know it’s not,” I mumble. *From you*, I add silently. “But it’s not going to happen again, Scott. I don’t think one bad day should—”

“I think one bad day demonstrated that the way we’ve been doing things wasn’t that safe to begin with,” he cuts in, still gentle. “I know you want the council to decide that you’re ready tonight. I hope that they do.”

My smile feels tired. “But?”

“But if they do,” he says, “I’m not going to force you to let me keep driving you, Alana. I just hope you’ll consider it. Not as punishment, or supervision. As backup.”

Scott smoothly pulls the pickup into his usual parking space. My morning headache sends a warning pulse, right between my brows. “I’ll think about it?” I say. I’m going to say no, of course. But I owe him the thinking-about-it part.

He nods, unbuckling his seat belt. “That’s all I ask.”

The narrow beach along Cave’s Echo Cove is almost completely inaccessible. The opening from the ocean side is too narrow and rocky to take a boat into, and the only way to get in by land is to take the stairs down the bluff at the back edge of the Stinnet property. The Stinnet family has owned this house almost as long as my family, the Harlows, have been coming to the cove. I’ve started most mornings since I was eight years old unlocking and unlatching their gate, waving to whoever’s awake as I cross the backyard.

This morning, it’s both Mae Stinnet and her wife, Ayako, drinking coffee in their usual spot on the screened porch. Mae is fully dressed for the day, her close-cropped silver hair glinting in the sun as she nods to me. Ayako, still in her bathrobe and curlers, puts down her coffee to wave.

It’s not unusual for either of them to wake with the sun. But since my accident, I don’t think they’ve missed a day. I smile,

wave, and try not to let their concern itch.

Scott follows me as I make my way back through the narrow line of trees, past the fence built to keep Mae and Ayako's kids from the bluff when they were too young to know better. And finally, we're here.

There's a deck chair set back a safe distance from the edge, and as usual, Scott settles in it with a grunt. Sometimes he brings a book. Today it looks like he's going to be content to watch the pink-gray roil of low tide.

I move to the steps, resting a hand on the banister. "I'm going to head down before Lena gets here." At Scott's look, I raise both my hands. "I'll watch my footing."

"It's not your footing that worries me," Scott says.

"I'll watch the boss's, too." I smile dryly. "Want me to tell her you said hi?"

"You can tell her I said to be good to you," he says.

I smile. She'd only take it as an invitation to be worse. But it's a nice thought, nonetheless.

The trees bow against the force of the sea breeze. But the wood under my feet is as solid as ever. It's not a long way down. But mornings like this, it feels long enough.

The wet sand sinks a little under my water shoes. The tide is just starting to go out: there's only a thin strip at the top of the beach that isn't dark with seawater. The waves are quiet enough today that I can hear the soft humming, drifting all the way down the beach. So if nothing else, the boss is in a good mood.

But unexpectedly, I'm not alone here. There's a beach chair set up so far from the water that it's trying to become one with the rock face. And sitting on the chair, tapping fitfully at her phone, is town council chair Lena Russo.

It's surprising enough that, despite my promise to watch where I'm going, I trip a little over my own feet. Lena Standard Time tends to be about ten to twenty minutes after she said she'd show up—*traffic*, she always says, as if Whistler Beach isn't four miles long. It's rare that she beats me here.

She smiles, and it wobbles. Everything about Lena is a little tremulous, from her petite features to her big blue doe eyes. She doesn't look like one of the most powerful people in town. But there are times she likes being in charge, and times she doesn't. And the closer she gets to Cave's Echo Cove, the more she dislikes it.

"Alana," she says. "How are you?"

The first thing anyone in Whistler will say about Lena is that she's too empathetic for her own good. The kind of person who comes to your relative's funeral and cries harder than you do. But when she asks me, specifically, how I am, she asks like she's afraid of the answer.

"Doing okay!" I say, awkwardly clapping my hands. "I'm gonna go straight in, if that's okay . . ."

"Of course. Don't let me keep you." Lena's uncertain mouth solidifies into a thin-lipped smile. "It's okay if I don't go with you?"

"Of course," I echo. I'm not sure why she still asks. I don't think I've seen Lena venture even halfway down the beach.

At the point where the bluff juts out into the water, there are three caves, carved hollow by time and the pounding surf. The third and final one, right at the edge of the bluff where the rock face swings out into the cove, is wide and high. At low tide, the path to the cave is fully above water. But today, my water shoes and I have shin-deep water to slog through.

I gasp softly as a wave slaps the back of my bare calves. And the humming—a bright, full-bodied rendition of “Greensleeves”—stops.

I take a slow breath in and close my eyes into my exhale. I take ten, maybe fifteen seconds to let the nerves flutter up. And when I step into the cave, I’m calm. I have to be, after all.

It’s quiet for a moment, after my footsteps fade. Then, from the back wall, I hear a sigh, like something uncurling.

I’ve never seen her smile. I’ve never needed to. The air itself shifts when she’s happy, like a front moving in.

“Good morning, chickadee,” she says. “Made it down here safely?”

I reach into my hoodie pocket for my phone and turn on the flashlight app, illuminating the floor of the cave: sand giving way to dark stone, and at the edge of the beam, four little rows of beach rocks, smoothed by waves. I leave the back of the cave in full darkness. There are some things you don’t need to see first thing in the morning. Or ever, really.

“You realize you don’t need to ask that every time,” I say.

“Just making sure, little love.” She laughs. She has a laugh like bells. If you heard it without knowing any better, you would think it belonged to something kind. “You know I love Little Lena—or I would, I’m sure, if she ever came to say hello. But I have to make sure she’s keeping you safe. What would Caroline have thought of me if I let you get seriously hurt?”

Instinctively, I twitch. The thing is, she could be mentioning my grandmother completely innocently—in a way, Grandma was her best friend in a long time. But there’s a reminder in it, too. When you dismount those steps, you’re supposed to be unshakable. Even when she could barely walk, Grandma’s

footing was always so sure across the sand and stones of Cave's Echo Cove.

And then there's me. Who, within two weeks of taking over the business, slipped on a stone on a dark February day and broke my ankle, sprained both wrists, and nearly froze to death right here on the beach. It's frankly *unbelievably* lucky that the only things damaged that day were a few small bones and ligaments—down here, I'm the least important thing that could have been broken. But averted disasters aside, it was also the kind of weakness I've been told never to show her.

I don't think she needed a reason not to see me as a threat, though. She never has.

"You're in a good mood," I say, rather than address any of that.

She clicks her tongue. "Am I not allowed to hum, now?"

"I mean, you can," I say. "But you usually have a reason."

She considers that. "As a matter of fact, I *am* in a good mood. It's the first day of your summer vacation, isn't it?"

I narrow my eyes in the direction of the back wall. "I didn't realize you were keeping track."

"I'm responsible for your education now, aren't I?" she muses. "For lack of better options."

"Ouch," I say. The word rolls lightly off my tongue, even as my stomach does a neat twist. "I think I can be responsible for my own education, actually."

"You Harlows," she says. Not without fondness. "You never think you need my advice. You know I was the one who encouraged your great-aunt Rachel to go to medical school, don't you?"

I'll bite. The biggest threat isn't her bad moods—it's her boredom. "Is that so," I say.

“Her father wanted her to become a secretary,” she sighs. “But she was like you. Always chafed at orders.”

I squeeze my nails into my palms. Lightly, but hard enough to bite. Her easy familiarity never used to bother me, not until Grandma died. Maybe because I never had to think, until now, about where it comes from. All my life, the once-sprawling Harlow family had three members: Grandma, Mom, and me. Grandma’s gone. Mom may be alive, but she’s gone all the same.

Now there’s no one but me to make the daily trek to this cave. And she’s the only living thing left who has known me all seventeen years of my life. Knows things even Rue doesn’t.

“All that aside,” she says. “Can’t I be excited to see you more often for the next two months?”

Abruptly tired of this conversation, I kneel where the stone floor rises out of the water. This is the real danger of her talkative moods. They’ll get you distracted. “Aren’t you just excited to *eat* more often?”

“Well.” The wind skitters against the mouth of the cave. “Food is best enjoyed with company. And you know things always pick up over the summer.”

“Mm,” I say. “People have more time to make appointments.”

“People have more time to think about what ails them,” she says. “It’s like your great-uncle Gregory always used to say. Sadness sells.”

I let myself laugh. “Great-Uncle Gregory also left Whistler to start an accounting firm in New Jersey. So apparently it wasn’t selling well enough.”

I shift my attention to the pattern of rocks against the ground, four rows of eight stones across that stand between me and the sound of her voice. They wouldn’t look like much if

you stumbled in by accident, though thankfully the town makes sure no one ever does. They're beautiful rocks. They don't look like the bars of a prison.

For all that the pattern is terrifyingly fragile, the magic it holds is as deep as roots in the earth—and just as hard to break. The upkeep, on the other hand, is simple. All the heavy lifting was done long before I was born. The spell only needs two things to survive: blood, and the sea.

For the latter, we have tides rushing in and out of the cave and the stones smoothed by generations of surf. For the former, only the blood of the spellworker's line will do. And for the foreseeable future, that's mine.

"But enough of that," she says, as I lay my Swiss Army knife against the rocks. "Have you given any thought to your class schedule for next year?"

"Bold of you to assume I'm going to think about classes before August," I mumble. I need to stay focused for this part. But I've done this enough that I can work and humor her at the same time.

Thankfully, this doesn't require much concentration. Just a little blood, a lot of counting, and as much calm as you can summon. After this long, I'm pretty good at all of them.

There are thirty-two different stones making up the seal. Only four of them need blood. *The spell is a living thing* is how Grandma explained it. *And you don't eat with your whole body, do you? Just with your mouth.*

I could pick out all four by sight now. They look the same as the rest, though after all these years it's hard not to see them as hungry. It's been a long time since I needed the mnemonic Grandma made up when Mom was ten, fussy, and refused to memorize the numbers: *the far-off sea touches every frozen shore*. But counting them out relaxes me a little further. And the deliberateness of it satisfies one more Harlow family rule.

When you touch up the seal, make sure the boss is watching you.

The first letter of each word in the mnemonic corresponds to the first letter of a number: eight numbers in total for four stones. The trick is the numbers come in pairs. *The far* is three and five, meaning the first stone sits three rows up and five stones across. I skim it with my fingertips, but I don't feel anything. It's not hungry today.

"This is your senior year," she nudges. "Colleges are going to be looking at your class schedule."

Off sea: one row up, seven across. Like the rest of my family, I didn't inherit the magic that sealed her here. But it still lies curled in our blood, only just strong enough to sense the movements within the seal. Where the seal is fresh, it feels warm, like laundry from the dryer. Where the magic has started to fray, it feels like an itch.

One-seven is steady, too. So I keep going.

"Ha. Nice try, but you're stuck with me," I say, half paying attention. The most important thing in here is not to react. It's the first thing we learn as Harlows: as weak as what's left of this magic is, it still needs to be handled very, very carefully. And us Harlows have known for generations that if your emotions waver, your magic might waver, too.

Which means that this close to the seal, you need to keep a tight grip on yourself. But I've been doing it for so long now, it's easy enough to work and listen to her at the same time.

"I wouldn't dare to hope otherwise," she says dryly. "But even I know there are schools where you could drive from here. We had a client last week from Bowdoin."

Touches every: two up, eight across. This one feels steady, too. "Which one was she?"

“Pink curly hair like cotton candy,” she says. I hum, remembering. She was a nervous one. Although so many of them are. “Smart kid. You’re smarter, though. Or you could be, if you challenged yourself.”

My hand spasms over the stone. “Is this about the AP Calculus thing? Because I told you, most colleges have special classes. Math for English majors or whatever.”

“I recall,” she says. “It sounded like excuses then, too.”

“Wow,” I say, deceptively light. “Okay, Mom.”

The air in the cave prickles. “Don’t go comparing me to Amber,” she says mildly. “She wouldn’t know what level of math you’re in if I held a gun to her head.”

I laugh. I always laugh when I’m too close to anger—it defuses the tension, calms me before that anger affects the seal. But it’s just as important, Grandma told me, to hide your sore spots from her for their own sake. One day the boss will know how to hurt me better than anyone else. And I should delay that day as much as I can.

To be fair, though, she also really, really dislikes Mom. So maybe she wasn’t even trying to rattle me.

“You shouldn’t bring her up,” I say. “You know it stresses Lena out.”

“And you know she’s not listening to us. Little Lena, your grays are showing.” She waits for a long, demonstrative beat. “See? We could talk about anything. She wouldn’t hear a word.”

“Lucky Lena,” I mumble, shifting my attention to the final stone. *Frozen shore*. Fourth row, six across. And I know, even before my finger falls over it, that it’s coming loose from the tether of the spell. I can feel the itch of it under my fingernails.

My inhale comes in a little short. I never had nerves about this before. About anything, really. But since Grandma's death, I seem to have more than I know what to do with.

Calm, I remind myself. *You're calm*. My six-out-of-ten nerves can wait. Here, at any rate, I know what I'm doing. At least I'd better.

I pick up the cool handle of the Swiss Army knife. I don't hesitate like I used to, when I was little: muscle memory knows how hard to press to puncture the skin, to get a small but workable drop of blood.

"You should swap that out," she says. "It's starting to rust."

My breath slips out of its controlled exhale a little. "Are you going to let me finish," I say, "or are we going to—"

I get a second's warning, a flash of movement from the back wall, before she lunges.

My first stupid instinct is to flinch.

But I catch myself just as fast, snap forward to press my bleeding finger to the stone. I fumble, hit the rock floor, almost miss, but it's only a few wasted seconds of scrabbling. The rush of air, the sound of claws skitters, then stops. A heavy exhale stirs the hair off my shoulders. And we both go still.

My hands are trembling where they're pressed against the floor. I can hear my own nails clicking softly against the stone. My throat burns like I'm drowning, itches to gasp for big ragged lungfuls of air. I control it carefully. Take deep breaths, in and out, until my heart slows.

The seal feels steady, even under my shaking hands. It's still a long, cold moment before I trust it to hold.

My eyes have started to adjust a little, here in the dark. I can see the solid edges of the boss's shoulders now, the outline of her torso. The wisps of the movement always rippling under

her skin. She lets out a hot puff of air, and it curdles as she laughs.

“You’ve got a ways to go, don’t you,” she says. “Your grandmother would have seen that coming even as a child.”

I laugh, too. This time I don’t bother to make it sound all that happy. “I could scream, you know.”

“You really think Little Lena would do anything about it?” It’s not sarcasm. She’s always found sarcasm “crude”—she’s told me that every time I’ve ever rolled my eyes at her. It’s curious. A genuine question. “Technically, dear, it’s not their job to punish me. That one’s yours.”

“Should’ve told Mom that sooner,” I say, carefully light. “If she’d gotten to make you miserable for a living, she might never have left.”

I don’t expect it to hurt her. Or for it to hit her at all, really—I just wanted to make the joke before she did. But she seems thoughtful, for a moment.

“Well,” she says. “Amber had her reasons, didn’t she?”

I pause, halfway to getting up. “What do you mean?”

“Hmm,” she says. And at length, I hear the slow retreat of her claws. “No need to keep me company. It’s your big night tonight, isn’t it? The sooner you prove to Little Lena that you’re all grown up now, the sooner she can move her fidgeting off my beach.”

Gathering my phone and my knife, I take a few steps backward. My legs only shake a little. Small victories.

“First client in half an hour,” I say.

“Josie again?” she says. At my nod, she chuckles. “Wonder what calamity has befallen her this time.”

I make my way to the mouth of the cave, only turning away when the rock dips back into the water and I need to choose

between showing my back or breaking my neck. By the time I've waded through the water and to the beach, she's already humming again.

I head up to the driest sand, near Lena's beach chair. And when I let my shaky legs go out from under me, I somehow manage to make it look like a controlled fall.

Lena glances up from her phone. "How is she today?"

My smile feels a little stiff. But I'm not up close to the seal anymore. There's no need to be perfectly calm, here on the beach. I just have to look it.

"You know," I say. "The usual."

This routine is decades old. Before it was me, it was Grandma, occasionally Mom in her more responsible phases. Before Grandma, it was her own parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts. It was one of our advantages. That we'd always have her outnumbered.

Now it's one-on-one. And she's right: Lena and the council don't really make up the numbers. In the end, it's her and me. And thanks to a deal struck on a stormy sea over two hundred years ago, we're not just jailer and prisoner. We're partners in the family business.

Lena, thankfully, doesn't try to make further conversation. So we wait in silence until we hear footsteps descending the stairs. Early, as usual.

Josie Berenthal—the Atwoods' next-door neighbor and my family's most frequent customer—makes her slow, cautious way across the sand. She's a tall, spindly white woman with a pile of gray hair on top of her head and eyes almost as big as Lena's. Her arms are in the air like she's balancing on a rickety bridge. "You okay there, Josie?" I call, trying not to smile.

"Just watching my footing, dear," Josie says. Her little electric lantern swings in her hand. "After what happened to

you, you can't be too careful."

I smile noncommittally. Whistler Beach is small, and my family has never exactly been low profile. But I try not to think of how horribly, publicly awful my February was.

"I don't think we've seen you in a couple weeks now," I finally say. "I hope that means things are good?"

"Would that it were so, dear," she says. "The gallery's been swamped; I couldn't make the time. Jimmy kept asking me when I'd make an appointment next, poor man. He says I need to clear my head."

"Mm-hmm," I say. If I were Josie's husband, I'd be a little more worried that she was on her way to forgetting her own name next, but what do I know?

"Oh!" Josie's gaze shifts next to me. "I didn't know you'd still be supervising, Lena."

"Harlow family rules, Josie." Lena's smile is brittle. "You know how it is."

"Yes, but that's if the family proves *incapable*, isn't it?" Josie rests a hand on my shoulder. "Alana slipped and fell. It could have happened to any of us."

Somehow Lena manages to pat at my arm without looking at me. "No matter how capable she is, she's still recovering."

"Josie," I say. Somehow I don't scream it. "We should probably get started."

"Oh, of course! Ah, and before I forget."

Josie hands over an envelope, thick with bills, along with a slip of folded notebook paper. "I hope this is going toward your college fund, Alana. Just because you have a business to run doesn't mean neglecting your education, you know?"

I dodge that particular question with a smile and tuck the folded paper into my hoodie pocket. I won't need what's

written there until after the session is finished. “Do you need me to walk you in?”

“Oh, that’s fine, dear.” Josie laughs and hikes up her khaki shorts. “I know the way.”

Josie switches on her little electric lantern and sashes into the cave, her bright green Crocs a cheery beacon in the dark. I make my own way into the water, directly opposite the cave mouth. When Grandma was alive, I was more laid-back about this. I could stay on the shore and read a book during sessions. But now that it’s my responsibility alone, I prefer to watch.

The little lantern light bobbles to the dry patch of rock near the seal. There’s a beat. And finally, the slow uncurling of the boss’s voice. “Josie. I was starting to miss you.”

“It’s my busy season.” Josie laughs again. “I suppose you know how that gets, too, don’t you?”

“I suppose I do,” the boss says. She likes the way Josie talks to her, like some slightly unorthodox hairdresser. “Why don’t you tell me where I’m going today?”

My fingers start to quiver where they’re resting against my thighs. I don’t have to watch every second. If anything goes wrong, the boss understands the consequences even better than I do.

But lately, this job feels like walking down the stairs in the dark of an unfamiliar home. Like I can’t gauge the width of the steps.

“June seventeenth,” Josie says. “Of this year.”

There’s a brief, pointed silence. “That would be two days ago.”

“Does it matter?” Josie’s good-natured voice sharpens to a bite. “It’s a meal either way.”

“Trust me, you won’t hear me complaining,” the boss says dryly. “But one of these days you should try . . . sitting with it. See where that gets you.”

The wind whistles against the mouth of the cave. The boss stirs, like she’s leaning in. “You know how this goes, Josie. When you close your eyes, you will no longer be here, in this cave. You’ll be standing on the Whistler Beach boardwalk, looking down the long line of shuttered stalls. It is night. It is quiet. And you are alone.”

She lets that sit, a moment. “The tide is coming in. You can hear waves lapping against the beams under your feet. Time your breaths with those waves, Josie. Can you hear them? Can you feel them against the wood?”

When Josie’s reply comes, her voice is calm again. “I can.”

“Good.” The boss’s voice goes gentle, gentle. A voice you would hear and immediately trust. “Look back to the stalls. Imagine that each one represents a day in your life. A memory in your mind. The stalls nearest to you are your earliest days. The very last one is this moment, right now. Let’s walk to June seventeenth of this year, Josie. Walk with me.”

Josie’s breath evens; her chin bobs down to her neck. She’s still awake, barely. But nothing can reach her now. Nothing except the sound of that voice.

I try not to move. I don’t know how easily the trance breaks, have never wanted to push it. I’ve never been where Josie is, after all: sitting in the pale circle of light, my mind laid bare and unprotected.

(And I never will. It’s yet another Harlow rule, one of the first. The boss’s services are not for us. And they never can be.)

“All right.” I still can’t quite see the boss. I just faintly see the dark of her outline expanding. “All right, Josie. That stall

that represents June seventeenth of this year—picture it shrinking at your feet. Small enough to cup in your hands. Reach out and pick it up. Are you holding it?”

Josie hums. She’s beyond words now. After all these sessions, she goes deep fast.

“Good,” the boss says. “Hold it out to me.”

Josie shivers. Then slowly, she lifts both arms, palms up like an offering. Her hands are empty. Or they *look* empty, if you didn’t know better.

“You offer it to me freely?” The words are calm and even. But the boss pitches her voice up and out so that I can hear it clearly. It’s for my benefit, after all.

Josie hums, long and low.

Slowly, the light of Josie’s lantern shrinks around her. It flickers, hitching like breaths. Josie’s fingers curl in a little as her hands are swallowed into the dark. But the set of her shoulders is relaxed. Peaceful.

The click of the boss’s claws against the rock floor stops. And I hear the smallest sigh. I hear the hunger in it.

There is a creature hidden in the caves of Whistler Beach, held to the salt and sand by a spell and a deal struck on a stormy sea over two hundred years ago. She has no name that she’s given us. My great-grandfather called her “the boss.” Grandma always called her “our co-worker.” But the people of Whistler Beach—and the clients who seek out our services—they have a different name for her.

The little lantern flickers out. And just as I have for more than half my life, I listen to the Memory Eater take her first meal of the day.

TWO

THE STORY IS this: in March 1801, the *Advent*, a passenger vessel from Liverpool, set sail to New York City. They missed their destination by several hundred miles. And yet every soul aboard survived. Because two of the passengers, newlyweds Joseph and Abigail Harlow, realized that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

A sickness had swept the ship, there in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Their fellow passengers weren't harmed physically. But they were losing massive stretches of time. Important memories. Before long, the captain even forgot the way to their destination.

Whatever was hunting the passengers, Abigail wasn't about to lie down and let it find her, too. She and Joseph followed the strange cries they'd been hearing since the voyage began. And in the belly of the ship, where there should have been nothing but rats and darkness and barrels of trade, they found a passenger that wasn't on the manifest. A passenger that wasn't human.

And there was something that passenger didn't count on. Joseph and Abigail hadn't left England for a change of scenery. They'd left because their neighbors had begun to grow suspicious of Abigail's unusual talents.

We'll never know how the spell worked. Abigail was adamant that her magic die with her—her descendants carry the bare traces needed to keep the seal alive. As far as we know, that's all we're capable of. But Abigail did something on that ship, amid the waves and the rats and the dark. Something that bound the Memory Eater to Harlow blood.

And for reasons Abigail never explained, she left the monster alive.

A deal was struck, instead. The Memory Eater couldn't return the memories she had taken from those passengers, any more than you could pull a whole apple from your own stomach. But though they were young, Joseph and Abigail knew enough of the world to know that not all memories are wanted.

With the way to their destination forgotten, they stumbled on a small fishing town in Maine, a town that would become Whistler Beach. Abigail trapped the Memory Eater in the sea caves tucked away from the rest of the town. And the terms of the deal were decided. They would bring her willing food, people who sought to give away their unwanted memories. She would take the memories offered, and no other. And as long as she could keep to the deal, they wouldn't leave her to starve.

It was never meant to be a family business. They meant it to be a public service, a way forward with the creature they couldn't bring themselves to kill. But unfortunately, this is America. And public service rarely puts food on the table.

Anyway. Whistler Beach became what it is now, a flourishing tourist destination built from the wreckage of the *Advent*. A few of the Memory Eater's victims from the voyage banded together to help Abigail, forming the group that would eventually become the town council. And that became something of a family business itself. Mae is a direct descendant of the first mate. Lena, a distant cousin of another passenger. Even the families who've left council business behind them still pitch in where they're needed. They take pride in the fact that the Harlows, from Abigail down to me, have never stood alone.

But there are things, along the way, that you *have* to do on your own. Like the part where you have to pick your barely upright client off the floor of the cave and wrangle them back to the beach.

We tell clients to expect a little grogginess in the hour after a session. According to some, that was selling it short. Some clients can leave the cave on their own two feet. Some need to hold on to my arm. And then there's Josie, who always emerges from the Memory Eater's spell like a toddler from a warm bath. Slowly and not without a fight.

She's still pretty deep under as I guide her through a low surf, her arm heavy in my grip. When I help her sit on the sand, her eyelids flutter and her head droops.

I drop to a kneeling position in time to catch Josie when she lists to one side. Lena hovers uneasily, half out of her chair. If she's so concerned, she could help me hold her up—but whatever.

I reach into my hoodie pocket for the slip of paper Josie handed me before the session, scanning the two short paragraphs written there. After so many sessions, Josie doesn't label them anymore. The first sentence on the list is the memory she gave up today. The second is our security measure.

Joseph and Abigail realized quickly that they could never truly be sure the Memory Eater hadn't tampered with memories she wasn't offered. But they learned how the Memory Eater's own magic worked. The hypnotic state she draws you into isn't just to keep you calm while she roots around in your head: if you want her to take a specific memory, she needs you to visualize all of your memories as a tangible landscape. It's how she finds her way around.

So when we send clients in, we tell them that as they imagine her boardwalk, they should take one memory—

ideally something unimportant, in case it's damaged—and imagine that it's a padlock and chain, locking away the rest of their memories from her expansive appetite. If that memory has been disturbed, then we know the Memory Eater has taken bites she shouldn't have.

It's never happened before. But that doesn't mean you stop checking.

“Josie, focus,” I say. I try to say it gently. “What's your padlock?”

Grumbling, she raises her head. Her eyes are still a little glazed. “Last Tuesday I went to Marie's for quinoa pasta. Ned Stinnet told me that I should check Shaw's. I suppose they don't want my business.”

Check and check—almost word for word what she wrote on the paper. Poor Ned. They don't get paid enough. “Okay, good. And let's see . . .”

I skip back to the first sentence, the memory she came to give up. *June 17th (of this year), she wrote. 1:15 p.m. I spilled coffee on my blouse during front desk duty at the gallery. My manager David was present. I was wearing white.*

When they tell you, when you're little, that your future job has been decided for you—that you're the only one who can do it, that you're going to be helping people—you react one of two ways, I think. It can make you feel burdened. Or it can make you feel special. Let's just say I never felt burdened.

It helped that I knew I'd be good at this. It helped even more that everyone else agreed—loudly, often. From the time I was little, and it was clear I was good with clients, Mom called me “golden girl.” It was not intended as a compliment. I chose to take it as one.

I still don't feel burdened, exactly. But on mornings like this, kneeling on cold sand on the first day of summer

vacation, all because Josie Berenthal and her husband decided this was easier than therapy—yes, okay, Mom. Understood. There’s only one thing she’s wanted to teach me, all my life. And it’s that there’s nothing golden about this.

I want to sigh. I breathe through it.

Josie still looks hazy. So I reach out and take one of her hands—gently, but tight enough to anchor. I started doing this as a kid, on the days I’d accompany Grandma to the beach. I wasn’t old enough to work, but holding the clients’ hands felt like helping. I don’t do it as much anymore. It’s the kind of thing that’s cute when you’re seven and awkward as hell when you’re seventeen. But some clients insist that it helps.

“Okay,” I say. “Two days ago, around one fifteen. Do you remember anything?”

Josie blinks slowly, her eyes starting to clear. And a glint of relief sharpens her gaze.

“Nothing,” she says, unfurling with a sigh. “Thank you, dear. I feel so much better now.”

I clamber to my feet to help her up. “I’ll pass along your compliments.”

Josie takes a few more minutes to steady herself, then makes her way up the bluff with a cheery wave. I must watch her go just a beat too long. By the time I look back, Lena’s turned her wary-deer stare in my direction. “Do you need a break?”

I shake my head, hard enough to snap out of it. All I’ve done so far this morning was lead one woman in and out of the caves. If that’s enough to get me exhausted, Lena’s never going to tell the council I’m ready, no matter how much she wants to get off this beach.

And if my hands won’t quite hold steady—well. That’ll pass.

We've got four more clients scheduled after Josie, and that's it. No matter how long the waiting list, there's only so much the Memory Eater can consume in one day. Sometimes, especially in peak seasons like the summer, we'll take a few more clients in the afternoon. But Scott and Mercedes, in the world's gentlest hostile takeover, have insisted on keeping my schedule as light as they can.

Today, at least, I'm grateful for it. Something about the Josie session has given my morning headache momentum. By the time the second client steps down to the beach, it's risen from a dull throb to a sharp pound.

It keeps rising.

I white-knuckle my way through the rest of the morning, keep a straight back for Lena and a reassuring smile for the clients. The next three are first-timers; the fourth is a regular. There are always more newcomers in the summer months, but still, this is a lot of them in a row for one morning. Our regulars, both the locals and out-of-towners, are protective of our time. So we don't advertise beyond word of mouth, really. If you know, you know. And if you don't, go hit the boardwalk and enjoy your stay.

Lena gets more engaged as the morning goes on. She's always got this big, open-wound sympathy for the saddest clients. It's not always a bad thing. It's just that she has a knack for crying in front of the people who will feel the worst about upsetting her.

I tried to tell her once, gently, that it was important for us to comfort the clients, rather than the other way around. To which she . . . cried harder. Now I try to distract her a little more subtly.

So I keep a careful hand on the flow of the conversation. I redirect Lena when I need to. I don't rush a single first-timer orientation. Unless you're Josie, you're not going to open up

your mind to a monster if you're not desperate. Gentleness is important, even when I'm having an off day. Especially then.

The repeat client is much lower maintenance. She's an out-of-towner, but she knows the rules. And she knows me well enough to pause on her way to the cave and look back at me.

"You doing okay, sweetheart?" she asks.

It's a fair question. I don't think she's asking about my head, though. When our regulars ask that question lately, the subtext is usually pretty clear. *Can you really manage?*

Grandma always said to keep my business to myself, if I could. We may see people at their most vulnerable, but that's all the more reason to protect our own thoughts. Secrets are easier with the out-of-towners—no police scanners or gossipy aunts to keep them in the loop. But despite Lena's semi-watchful eye, Ms. Weaver is still entrusting her safety to a seventeen-year-old girl. So it's a fair question.

"Oh," I finally say. "You know. Hanging in?" Which I've learned, these past few months, is the kind of noncommittal answer that people somehow accept.

Her session is mercifully fast. I summon my last reserves of customer service as I wave her off from where I'm still kneeling. And if Lena notices that I'm in absolutely no hurry to get up, she doesn't say anything about it as she rises from her chair.

"Is it okay if I leave first?" Once again, I wonder if it's really a question that has to be asked if it's asked every time. "You know Linus gets nervous when I'm gone too long."

I smile and hope I don't look as tired as I feel. "See you tonight?"

"Tonight?" It takes her a minute. But then she laughs. "Oh my God, right, tonight. I almost forgot for a second there."

I watch her make her way up the stairs, a little queasier than I was before. *Lena hates this as much as you do*, I remind myself. She wants off this beach. She'll tell them I'm good to go unless I'm clearly not.

I'm not sure what her definition of "clearly not" is, though. So I wait until she's far out of sight to curl onto my side on the sand.

The thing is, I haven't told Rue about the headaches. Or Scott, or Mercedes. I like to think I don't have to when I know exactly what they'd say: my brain is, at any given time, a Greek chorus of hypothetical Atwoods with opinions about all my decisions. And I don't need them to tell me I should see a doctor, because I already went, back in March after I'd spent too many nights googling increasingly terrifying things about post-concussion syndrome. No one had mentioned me hitting my head when they rattled off the litany of my injuries. But I figured I hadn't listened.

I hadn't missed anything, though. My head was—is—fine. Which came as a surprise to me. Because when I slipped on the beach last February, I came back with more than two sprained wrists and one broken ankle. Or, rather, I came back with less: I had absolutely no memory of the week and a half before my fall. I remembered that Grandma was dead. But I don't remember finding her. I don't remember the funeral. And I don't remember the conversation I had with my mother two days before that, right before she left Whistler.

Mom leaving Whistler is nothing unusual. The three months she was in town before Grandma died might've been the longest she spent here since I was a kid. But according to Rue, she left after the worst fight we'd ever had. I didn't tell Rue what it was about, apparently. All she knew was that I was "upset." Which tracks.

In any case. There was—is—no physical reason for the headaches, the forgetting. And so the nurse practitioner asked the one question I don't have a good answer for. *How's your stress?*

And, well. That's not changing. So there's no use worrying the Atwoods over it.

I slosh my way back into the cave to take one more look at the stones before I head out, just to make sure nothing got nudged out of place. I sink carefully to my knees, trace my way over each of them, mouthing the mnemonic again—*the far-off sea touches every frozen shore*. Everything feels solid under my fingers.

There's a large, curled shape at the back of the cave, the sound of deep breathing. The light extends a little farther than before, to the point where the Memory Eater is faintly visible. I keep my eyes angled down. No matter how many times I see her in full, it's the kind of thing you don't get used to.

I start to stand. And she speaks.

"You look tired," she says.

"Whose fault is that?" I say.

She laughs softly. "Smile, chickadee. It'll all be better soon."

I look up by reflex. And despite my best efforts, I catch a quick glimpse as she shifts to a more comfortable position.

I swallow the surge of nausea. And already turning away, I tell her, "I'll see you tomorrow."

She doesn't speak again until I'm almost out of the cave. "Tell the council I said hi."

The surf skims my ankles as I step onto the shore and make my wet-footprinted way up the wooden steps. Before long, the

top of the bluff comes into view. And as always, with Scott off at work, the figure in the deck chair has changed.

Rue Atwood slides a bookmark between the pages of her latest James Baldwin book, tucks it into her massive purse, and raises her eyebrows at me over her glasses. “Is there sand in your hair?”

I run a quick hand through my hair. “I took a nap waiting for my seven thirty.”

Her face softens a little. “Are you tired?”

“Nah.” At her narrowed eyes, I amend, “Just, like, normal tired.”

She pushes herself fluidly from the chair, the salt air ruffling her pleated skirt and her short black curls. “How was she today?”

“Which one?” I say dryly.

Her lips twitch. “The one whose existence I’ll acknowledge.”

I laugh. Good to know that Rue’s cold war with Lena Russo is holding strong. “The boss was feeling friendly today. Want me to tell her you said hi?”

She gives me a little shove. “*Stop.*”

I laugh and tuck both my arms into one of hers. The Memory Eater has been skirting along the edges of Rue’s life from the beginning. As Whistler Beach State Park rangers, Scott and Mercedes have spent hours of their lives keeping tourists from boating around Cave’s Echo Cove. Even before that, the Atwood family has long been a staple in this town—Scott’s side has been here nearly as long as the *Advent* families.

Mercedes is a more recent transplant: born in Puerto Rico and raised in Charleston, she moved up for college and came

to Whistler Beach with the park service job. She accepts our world, but not without a healthy dose of skepticism. Grandma always said she appreciated Mercedes's perspective more than anyone's. If she had a question she couldn't puzzle out herself, they'd hash it out together.

But the Atwoods aren't involved in the business, not officially. It's just that Rue wants to be. Desperately. She's wanted to be council chair since I met her—and we met in *second grade*. And it's not that I don't think it'll happen. It's Rue, so it definitely will.

She just has to get past two little problems first. Her parents' utter ambivalence to the idea. And her bone-deep fear of the Memory Eater.

"Are we coming back later?" Rue says as I close the Stinnets' gate behind us.

"Nope," I say, slipping into the passenger's seat of Rue's worn but trusty Camry. "The rest of the day is mine."

"Until dinner," Rue says.

"Until dinner," I agree, my stomach sinking. "Though I'm hoping if I pretend that's not happening, it simply won't."

"How's that going for you?" asks Rue, not totally unsympathetically.

"You know, historically it's worked so well." I lean against the cool window and let my eyes flutter shut. "Did Lena say when she'd stop by?"

"Oh, did Lena pass by?" she says innocently. "I didn't notice." When I crack an eye open, she adds, "I told you: I'm on strike from interacting with her."

The back of my head bumps the seat as I laugh. It's not like I'm Lena's biggest fan. But Rue *hates* her. And Rue likes

everyone. “Like, don’t get me wrong—I’m looking forward to not seeing her every day of my life. But she’s not that bad.”

“If you had to listen to her that day, you’d be—” She cuts herself off. But it’s easy enough to know when she’s talking about. She has a Tone for it now.

“Oh,” I say. And I try to say it gently. “She was at the hospital?”

Rue shakes her head once. “She called Dad,” she says. “My parents were talking to the doctor, so I picked up. I kept telling her *I* didn’t even know if you were okay yet, but she—”

I can see her making the conscious decision to lower her shoulders. “She asked me what *she* was supposed to do if something happened to you. As if I . . .”

I watch her as she watches the road. I get Lena, is the thing. Her running for council chair was more her family’s decision than hers. And she just lost Grandma, the one who had always handled the parts that she couldn’t. Mom was gone, and she’d never handled any of it to begin with. And then there was me.

I’m not angry with her for wondering what she would do if I were gone, too. Just for making Rue consider it. I consider it enough for both of us.

Rue’s always so careful, talking about that day. I don’t know if it’d make her feel better or worse, knowing how little I actually remember. All I know is what I know from her, from her parents, and from the doctors. That by the time they found me on the beach, in freezing February rain, my lips were blue, and my eyes were unfocused. I was awake, but I wasn’t really there.

I finally managed to ask, last month, if I’d said anything. Rue’s brow creased before she answered that. *Nothing that made sense.*

I was discharged after a day. In the end, I was admitted for less than twenty-four hours. Such a short length of time to cast such a long shadow.

I grab her free hand, jiggle it a little. “So what are we going to be feeding Queen Lena? She doesn’t like things that taste like things.”

Some of the tension finally leaves Rue’s face. “Mom’s thinking shrimp and grits,” she says eventually. “I’ll run to Marie’s after I drop you off.”

“Oh, thank God,” I say. If I have to get through tonight, at least I get to eat a giant bowl of grits about it. “Wait, no. Why don’t you stay at the house? I’ll walk to Marie’s.”

There’s a little twitch in her brow. “Alana. You’d have to carry the groceries half a mile.”

“Good thing I lift.” She opens her mouth—probably to remind me that I have never lifted—and I take a breath. The Atwoods have kept me alive these past few months, Rue more than anyone. It’s not her fault this dinner is happening. And it’s not her fault I’m supposed to look competent on a day when I feel like gently microwaved death. I am not going to bite her head off.

But this is Rue. So I can go as close to honesty as feels safe.

“Here’s the thing,” I say. “I love you so much. I love your parents so much. But I am supposed to tell these people tonight that I can do this on my own. And right now I can think of maybe four things I have done on my own since February. Five if we’re counting the glass of orange juice I got for myself yesterday morning, but Scott closed the fridge door, so we’re right on the line there.”

She smiles but doesn’t laugh. Which means I should get to the point. “Just—let me hunt and gather some shrimp, please. I swear I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t feel up to it.”

She doesn't look at me, but I can tell she's hearing me. I know she knows that "feeling up to it" has never been a huge concern of mine. But she also knows this is the first thing I've asked her for in a long time.

So she sighs. "Call me at checkout if you're tired."

I poke lightly at her elbow. I'd tell her I'm considering it. But I've lied enough, if only by omission, for one day. "You have better things to do, you know."

Her smile goes a little crooked. "It's summer," she says. "What else am I doing?"



I CONSIDER SAVING the shower for after I've carried groceries half a mile in the summer sun. But then I catch myself in the bathroom mirror. My hair looks like seaweed, lank black waves still coated in a layer of sand. My under-eye shadows have gotten ambitious, skimming as high as my brow and as far as the bridge of my nose. In this light, my blue-gray eyes threaten to sink right into them.

"Jesus," I mutter. And I turn on the water.

The shower doesn't fix everything, but it goes far enough. I throw on a sundress and a pair of giant sunglasses. And I slip out of the Atwoods' house and into the mounting warmth of late morning.

I head straight for the set of wooden, perpetually sand-dusted steps leading from the street to the Whistler Beach boardwalk. It's the straightest shot through town. And at this time of day, it's also the best way to dodge most of the locals.

Whistler's namesake beach is a world away from Cave's Echo Cove, all pale, soft sand and playfully choppy waves. The wind whips down the boardwalk, strong enough to push

me to the balls of my feet. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a family chasing their runaway beach ball down the sand, laughing almost too hard to run.

On the surface, the mood up here on the boardwalk is light and bright as cotton candy. If you know what to look for, though, you'll catch it immediately. Sam Malone is out busking with his ukulele, wearing one of those awful shirts from Missy Braun's souvenir stall: I WENT TO WHISTLER BEACH AND ALL I GOT WAS—UH-OH—I FORGOT! And he's playing the same three chords as always.

Forget your troubles, he croons. Come on, get happy.

There's a particular genius to the boardwalk. If you don't know what's hiding in Cave's Echo Cove, you wouldn't think twice. But if you're not in Whistler for the Skee-Ball or the Beachside Grill, you'll find a very different boardwalk waiting for you. One that no one tries very hard to hide.

Walter Creedy's caricature stand can paint faces you're about to erase from your mind. Melissa Bell's stall of thrifted treasures can pay you a generous fee to offload unpleasant reminders. Sarah Greene has a wishing stand, where people can leave messages to hang on the wall. That one's always been popular. People like to create something tangible before they see the Memory Eater. Makes it feel less like you're leaving something behind.

I take a breath and prepare for the gauntlet. There may be more tourists than locals here on the boardwalk. But when you're a Harlow in Whistler Beach, you don't go anywhere unnoticed.

“Alana! How are you doing, sweetheart?”

“Where you headed? Wanna hang out for a bit? I'm off in five—I can give you a ride.”

“Marie’s? Give me a call when you’re done. I can drive you back to Scott’s. Just gotta unjam this claw machine—”

I handle it the way I always do: I plaster a smile on my face and politely barrel through every offer for rides or company. Even David Liu from Beachside Grill, easily the busiest person on the boardwalk, spends at least a minute trying to talk me inside for a comped lunch. “Come on, Alana. Tender, flaky sole! You look like you could use—ah, that is, we could all use a square meal and a load off for an hour, right?”

The attention, I’m used to. It’s not pleasant, but it’s something you accept. This thread of desperation is new, though. Everyone here does business off the Memory Eater in one way or another. A few of them are regulars, or at least one-time customers: David Liu gave up a memory of his father that had given him lifelong night terrors, and Missy Braun used the Memory Eater to quit smoking, though now she chews through a pack of gum and at least three fingernails a day. Even the ones who don’t make money off the Memory Eater make money off the tourists. And many of the tourists are my clients.

So it’s not just that they want me to be okay for my own sake. They need it for theirs, too.

I finally make it off the Beachside Grill patio when Daniel Stinnet, he of the soulful brown eyes and Rue’s undying crush, distracts David just long enough for me to slip away. He flashes a warm, sympathetic smile as I pass. I’m of the firm opinion that no one is good enough for Rue, but if she and David ever break out of their Beautiful Shy Heterosexual holding pattern, I will grudgingly approve.

By the time I step onto Main Street, I’m out of breath, my sundress clinging to the sweat against the small of my back. And it’s then, unfortunately, that part of my brain finally wakes up. Because I was so focused on doing one single thing

on my own, I forgot who probably has a shift at Marie's right about now.

Well. I did say we should start talking again. So in I go. Like a bird diving toward a broken neck.

Marie's is the rare Main Street store that's as popular with locals as with day-trippers. It's packed with beach snacks and little pouches of wine you can stick a straw through, but also with stock that's a little more interesting than the supermarket by Route 1. And the owner, Marie, realized long ago that if she always had grits in stock, she'd have Mercedes's loyalty forever.

Marie doesn't seem to be at the counter today. Instead, I see Ned Stinnet, Daniel's younger sibling, fifteen now but still looking tiny as ever in their oversized T-shirt. And as I suspected, Charlie Sawyer, my ex-girlfriend, is on bagging duty.

She's holding what looks like an easy, amiable conversation with a customer. I've seen her in the past few months, of course. But only at school, at a distance. She's grown out her pale hair, chin-length and no longer buzzed on one side, and the set of her broad shoulders looks softer in her bright green Marie's smock. The sleeves of her Henley are neatly rolled-up to the elbows. She looks approachable. Professional.

Something gets her attention; her head snaps up. And because the universe is determined to test me today, she looks right at me.

She noticeably stills. I wave, a weak little *Fancy meeting you here* finger wiggle that neatly demolishes any chance I had at playing this off. But at the very least, she doesn't look wholly unhappy to see me.

Hey, she mouths. Then something I don't catch, until she holds up one finger. *Give me a second?*

I nod. *It's summer, I remind myself. She's almost as busy as you are. You can say hi during checkout.*

But as I start to disappear down aisle five, she calls out. "Alana, I—"

Startled, I swing around. To Charlie, I've been Harlow since we met. I used to joke that if she called me Alana, I'd know one of us was dying, but—

—but I don't think she called me at all. Her attention is back on the customer. I watch her for another fifteen, twenty seconds. She never looks up.

The blue-white fluorescents flicker, fuzzing my vision, and I rub at my eyes hard as I disappear into the back of the store. The walk was a bad idea. I got too much sun.

I load three boxes of grits into the basket. They don't feel like much, individually, but their combined weight tugs the handle into the crook of my elbow. My vision shrinks to a dark, narrow circle. I don't know if it's the heat, or the rising understanding that I won't be able to carry this home after all. One thing at a time. Checkout. Talk to Charlie. I just need to catch my breath first. Find something cold to lean on.

I stumble into the nearest aisle. Freezer section. But when I slump against one of the frosted doors, I don't catch my breath. My knees are rattling under me, and I have to drop the basket to hold the glass. I'm going to pass out, I realize. I'm going to pass out right in the middle of this fucking store. Someone's pressing in behind me, crowding me against the door—I can feel their breath on the side of my neck. *Good*, I think dizzily. Fine. Maybe they'll catch me when I drop, make sure I don't hit my head, on top of everything else.

I stay upright, though. Alertness starts to seep back in, sluggishly. It's only then that I realize how close the person behind me has gotten.

Instinctively, I shift against the glass to push them back. But the line of their weight doesn't move. Only their breath shifts, from my neck to my ear.

Then a voice. Barely a hiss. "Why don't *you* tell me what to do now, golden girl?"

I stumble around in an arc, and two hands seize my forearms before I can fall.

Like a sliding door clicking into place, the floor solidifies under me. The fluorescents blare, making my eyes water, but my vision's no longer dimmed at the edges.

I look, first, to the chilly, callused hands holding mine. And then a little higher, right into Charlie Sawyer's concerned face. I have to crane my neck to make eye contact. I've had to since we were thirteen.

I smile. My mouth trembles around it. "Hi."

"Hi," Charlie says carefully. "Do you need help?"

A loaded question. Probably intentionally so, if I know her. And in the face of it, there's nothing to do but be honest. I heard someone call me "golden girl" just now. And while Charlie always laughed at our respective reputations—*the prodigy and the pain in the ass*—she never would have called me by Mom's name for me. She knew what Mom meant by it.

"I think so, probably." My laugh comes out a little watery. "Yeah."

"Okay," she says. She says it so perfectly neutrally, I could hug her. "Can you hold on to me?"

Historically, no, I think. And miraculously, I stop the hysterical giggle that ripples through me before it can leave my mouth.

Charlie holds my arm with one hand, dips downward to pick up my basket with the other, and in case today wasn't weird

enough already, she steers me through the back, toward the break room. I was a fixture here once, even before we started dating. I'd wander the store and take free samples until Charlie's fifteen-minute break, and then we'd raid the vending machine and mess with Marie's tarot deck. And then, when we were together, sometimes I'd stay here and talk to her all day. I still remember the look she shot me one of the last times, when I propped my elbows on the checkout counter and made big sad eyes until she stopped counting bills and paid attention to me. *Which one of us is the bad influence, exactly?*

"Harlow," Charlie says, and I blink. We've made it all the way down the hall; she's guiding me now through the door and to the rickety table and chairs. It's always freezing back here. I catch her frown at my bare shoulders when I shiver. "You still with me?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure." I try to laugh. The crease in her brow only deepens as she helps me to the chair. "I might've gotten too much sun on the way here."

She delicately raises both eyebrows. "You walked here?"

"Oh my God, Char." I pause long enough to adjust my tone. I want us to be talking again. So—probably best not to dive right into the same old fights. "I can carry a few groceries half a mile. Come on. Look at these guns."

She watches me flex. Weirdly enough, she looks unimpressed. "You look like shit."

Okay, well. So much for not getting too personal. "Aww. Thanks."

She flushes. Which—is a very un-Charlie thing to do. You can see the entire life cycle of a blush in Charlie's face, from two spots of pink to a brilliant red. But it's about as rare as a solar eclipse. "Sorry," she says. "I didn't—just, have you been sleeping at all?"

I take a moment to weigh how honest I want to be. But I just hallucinated in the frozen foods aisle. I don't have much energy for lying left. "I mean, no," I say, rubbing my brow. "But I'm not sure that's the problem?"

She sinks into the chair opposite me, one long leg folded over the other. "Okay," she says. It's surprisingly devoid of judgment. "So what is the problem?"

I wilt under her narrow stare. My fault for thinking I could get away with being vague. "I've been having headaches since February," I admit to my feet. "Not bad ones, though. At least, not until today."

"Since February," Charlie echoes. "Harlow, concussions can really fuck you up. You need to call your doctor."

"I *saw* a doctor," I huff. "Why does everyone assume that I wouldn't see a doctor?"

"So you've told the Atwoods about this?" she asks.

"Well, no. But you know that if I did, they would have said the same thing." I look up long enough to watch her eyebrow arch in real time. "The point is, I never hit my head to begin with. They think it's . . . stress, or whatever."

Charlie looks thrown. Much more than I would have expected her to. "Oh," she says. "I didn't—I assumed. You weren't really . . . making a lot of sense, when I found you."

I squeeze my fingers together. According to Rue, the Atwoods were cleaning out Grandma's house that day. When I didn't join them, they assumed I needed time alone. It never occurred to them to worry. I'd never given anyone cause to, before.

It had been Charlie who realized something was wrong. Who thought to check the beach for me. I had broken up with her just the month before. But Rue says she helped a lot that week.

“Thank you for that, by the way,” I say to my lap. “And, um. Sorry. That I didn’t say it before now.”

She shakes her head. “I didn’t want you to have to think of that day, either.”

“Oh.” My big, thoughtless mouth snaps shut. Oh. I thought we were doing that awkward exes-dancing-around-each-other thing these past four months. But she was trying to be considerate. “Oh, no, Char—there’s nothing to think about. I don’t remember any of it.”

I don’t know what reaction I expect. But it’s definitely not the series of reactions that crosses Charlie’s face in the span of ten seconds. “You—wait. None of it?”

“None of that morning. Or the week or so before it,” I say. “So you couldn’t remind me even if you tried.”

I watch the unmistakable flicker of several sentences she decides not to begin crossing her face one by one. “Rue didn’t mention that,” she says slowly. “That—okay. Okay! That makes sense.”

“Rue doesn’t know. I mean, Rue knows a little, but—” Then my brain stutters to a halt. “Wait. You and Rue talk now?”

That startles a smile back onto Charlie’s face. “I thought you wanted us to be friends.”

“No,” I say, “I think I specifically called the possibility chilling.”

“And,” she says, with a light bob of her shoulders, “we took it as encouragement. And speaking of Rue, I should give her a call.”

“What?” My head snaps up. “No. Char, did you hear a word I said? It’s stress.”

“You’re still white as a sheet,” she says. “If Rue heard that I let you go like this, she’d eat me alive.”

I wave an impatient hand. “We’ve got this whole dinner with the council tonight. I’ll tell her later; I just—need to look like a person who knows what she’s doing for the next few hours.”

Her mouth slants. “And if I told you that you could always cancel that dinner—”

“I would tell you that I love your optimism,” I say.

Her face cracks into one of those rare smiles that show all her teeth. And I’m having a hard time recalling right now why we broke up. “Do you want to know what I think?”

I snort. She’s going to tell me anyway, but I appreciate the illusion of choice. “Go ahead.”

“I think that Scott and Mercedes would handle some of this council bullshit in a second if you let them,” she says. “You shouldn’t have to do this alone.”

“There you go again with ‘shouldn’t have to.’” I mean for it to be light. Teasing. It’s not.

Charlie stills, and I brace myself. There’s a well-worn path to this particular argument. But—she doesn’t follow it. “I’m sorry,” she says. Again.

“No—you’re fine.” She’s being so careful with me right now. Like she thinks she’ll scare me off with one wrong move. And here I am, picking at scabs. “It’s just—literally all people do is help me. And if I go to that dinner tonight and they decide that what I need is more help—please, I’ll tell Rue everything tomorrow. I will let her do her very worst fussing, and I will complain like twice, maximum. Please, Char. One night. Less than twenty-four hours.”

Charlie fixes me with one of her world-class dubious looks. She knows I’m stalling. So I try to look like someone who’ll do the smart, healthy thing. Ask for help. Even accept it.

I see her give in before she opens her mouth. “Don’t make me regret this.”

My smile spreads, genuine this time. And to my horror, it’s a little watery, too. “Do I ever?”

There’s a weird, soft edge to her eye roll. “Did I mention I have one condition?”

“Oh no,” I say.

“If you won’t let me call Rue,” Charlie says, “then I’m giving you a ride.”

Charlie cheerfully bats down every one of my protests. That yes, Ned can cover her for fifteen minutes. That no, Ned probably will not read too much into it. That no, that is *not* wishful thinking on her part. “Stay there while I ring up your stuff,” she says, scooping my grocery basket off the floor. “If you pass out in our store, I think you’re allowed to sue.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for next time.” I dig my debit card out of my purse. “Oh—and—fresh-caught shrimp? One of the big bags?”

“Mercedes’s shrimp and grits?” At my nod, her eyes glaze over. “God. I’ll take six, please.”

“Come to the dinner tonight,” I say. “If you body-block Lena every time she tries to speak to me, you can have as much as you want.”

“Last time I went to one of your council dinners, I didn’t exactly have the best night of my life,” Charlie drawls. I blink up at her. Charlie’s not one to misremember things, but—I don’t think she’s ever been to a council dinner. That would require her to stop picking fights with the council long enough to get through one course.

Whatever she sees in my face makes her back snap straight. “Sorry.” Her voice is oddly staccato. “That was too much.”

“No, it’s fine,” I say automatically. Which is true, because I have no idea what she’s talking about.

“I’m sorry,” she says again. Her smile is back, thinned to a crooked line. “Maybe it’s not the best day to roll out my breakup jokes, huh.”

My brain must be moving a little slowly still. I don’t get what a council dinner has to do with us breaking up. But I don’t want the crease between her brows to deepen.

“I’ll tell you when I’m there, then,” I say. Almost proud of how natural it sounds. “I have some good ones.”

Charlie huffs out a laugh as she turns to the door. “Good,” she says. “Something for me to look forward to.”

I wait until I hear the door open at the end of the hall to start thinking. Too much time around the Memory Eater. Sometimes I worry that if people are close enough, they’ll know what I’m thinking. They’ll hear me crossing the creaky floorboards of my memory. Feeling out the gaps.

I know where the gaps are, though. One ten-day period. And nothing else.

At least, there shouldn’t be. But when I reach for the memory of our breakup, it’s like missing a stair. The swoop of air where solid ground should be. And then the drop.

I remember *being* broken up with Charlie Sawyer. I remember that part very well. I remember curling into Rue’s shoulder for a bad-movie night. I remember avoiding Marie’s. I remember I was thinking about Charlie the morning I realized Grandma was late getting up. Thinking about Charlie, actually, is one of my last clear memories of that morning. Before the blank that follows. But the breakup itself—well. I haven’t thought about it since February. I thought I didn’t want to.

It felt normal not to remember the ten days following Grandma's death. They always tell you that trauma does strange things.

But I broke up with Charlie a month before Grandma died. And I don't remember it at all.

It doesn't feel like trauma. It feels like a carefully carved blank. Like a bite.

And after seventeen years of my life? I think I know the shape of those teeth.

THREE

I COULD BE wrong.

That wouldn't be unheard of, as much as I like to tell people otherwise. Charlie used to ask me that all the time, when we were dating: *Do you always have to be right?* I don't. I'm not. But ideally, I fix it before anyone else notices.

So it's possible that this *is* nothing. Stress. Shock. My mind deciding that it has taken in enough, and that it's cutting me off.

But even when you forget something, you can still grasp the edges of it. This is a nothing. A reach in the dark for something that wasn't where you could have sworn you left it. Grandma was always a big fan of Occam's razor. The simplest explanation is usually true.

My breath catches on the edges of my throat. I untangle it. *You're in charge, now, I remind myself. Which means nothing's going to get fixed until you calm down.*

Control yourself, Harlow. You do it all the time.

Rue taps the side of my cheek. "Alana?"

"Sorry." Somehow, I smile. Even more improbably, I think it works. "Fidgety."

"I'll make it quick," she says. "Close your eyes?"

I oblige. I've managed to keep it together so far, I think. I autopiloted my way through the ride home with Charlie, the grocery handoff. But Rue, hoping to keep our collective predinner nerves at bay, ushered me upstairs to play around with some looks for tonight from her various beauty box

samples. And sitting on the floor, with only the feel of Rue's careful eyeliner application to distract me, I have nothing to do but think.

So: the Memory Eater, in all likelihood, has been in my head. And it doesn't take much thinking to guess when. The week after Grandma's death, my fall on the beach. I think of every dizzy, disoriented client I've had to haul out of the caves, the number of times I've had to catch them before they trip on the rocky shore. There wouldn't have been anyone there to catch me.

The rage is so sudden, I almost choke on it. Grandma was barely gone. Grandma, who the Memory Eater respected, despite everything. She had grieved, too, in her own way. Apparently, she also saw opportunity. She can be cruel. I've seen it all my life. But I thought I knew the borders of her cruelty.

It's not her responsibility to resist her hunger. It never has been. The one who's meant to keep her in check is me.

The Harlow family, at first glance, has a near-endless list of rules. But they're actually all the same rule, in the end: do not break.

And I think I already have.

"Alana," Rue says quietly. "Relax."

"Never been more relaxed," I say automatically. She hums, dubious, and keeps working.

I should tell the council. There would be . . . consequences, obviously. I know that. I've spent my whole life knowing that. Those are my family's rules, too.

But there are two paths that punishment could take. That, at least, will be up to them.

If that punishment falls on the Memory Eater, that path has been laid out, explicitly, by Abigail herself. If the Memory Eater takes more than she's offered, there aren't supposed to be second chances or half measures. I would keep going down to that beach to monitor the seal. But I would never bring clients. I would keep feeling out Abigail's magic, keep bleeding onto the stones. And I would keep the Memory Eater locked up until the day she starved.

And however I felt about it wouldn't matter.

But to starve her is to starve Whistler, too. I'm not sure that's the path Lena would take. Not when she could punish me instead.

I'm already being punished, technically, even though they've never called it that. It was the first step of the would-be probation outlined in the rules. Constant supervision. Never going to the cove, or into the caves, alone. I'm not the first Harlow who's gotten to that step. The next step, though—I would be the first.

Abigail, it's said, left something for the council in the months leading to her death. A way to cut off every last trace of Harlow magic from one of her descendants.

We were never a huge family. But there were enough of us that you could, at one time, threaten a Harlow with real excommunication, from the family and from Whistler Beach itself. For me, when I'm the only one the council has, they'd need to keep me around. They'd let me keep my magic, at least for now. But from that moment on, I would always be watched. I'd stop working with clients; I'd be led on and off the beach for just long enough to give blood to the seal and then be on my way. And one day, I would give the council a shiny new baby Harlow. That baby would grow up, come into their power. And then the need for me would end.

Losing your magic doesn't sound that bad when you could never use it to begin with. But the magic is the least important thing that you lose. What's being taken isn't your power, really. It's your purpose.

Grandma always hated that rule. She was always scared that they'd use it on Mom one day—that's what I always thought. But she also had a different idea of what should happen if something went wrong. At least, that was what she told me a week and a half before she died.

She'll get the better of someone someday, baby, she said. And when that happens—

I shake my head minutely. I should have known, that day, that Grandma was closer to the end than I realized. I don't think she was thinking too clearly. She had high expectations for me. But she wouldn't have asked for something impossible.

Either way, I'm getting ahead of myself. I don't actually know what happened. I won't until I can talk to the Memory Eater. And there won't be any time to talk to the Memory Eater until I can get through this dinner.

"Done." When I open my eyes, Rue's sitting back to survey her work. "Okay. Do you want to do your lips yourself, or do you want me to?"

"I'll do them later." I plaster on a smile. "Let me pick a good palette for you."

She smiles back wryly. "No blue this time."

I wave an airy hand. "I *am* capable of learning my lesson sometimes."

I run the brush across Rue's eyelid. It's a light, glittery lavender, luminous against her brown skin. "Quick pact. I won't start any fights if you don't."

“How is that supposed to motivate me?” she says. “I’ve been waiting for you to fistfight Lena Russo for three years.”

“Okay.” I move on to her crease. “Then I have nothing to offer.”

Rue tries to keep the rest of her face still as her mouth twitches. “Go quietly with my dad tomorrow morning and we’ll call it even.”

We quickly check out each other’s handiwork in the mirror—Rue, as usual, was a bit more successful on my face than I was on hers—and we head down to the first floor.

Between the late afternoon sun and the stove, the kitchen simmers in humidity. Scott has fully settled into his role as sous-chef, chopping collard greens with his shirtsleeves rolled up, and I’m vividly reminded why I had a tiny baby crush on him as a preteen. Mercedes is at the other end of the kitchen, wearing a bright yellow sundress and squinting at her dad’s recipe card. She knows the recipe by heart. But she likes looking at his handwriting.

Her face is sharp when she’s concentrating. Even quiet, something behind her eyes is always in motion, always silently taking notes. But when she smiles, she fully melts into it. It spills from her face down to the set of her shoulders, her spine.

Yeah. I had a tiny baby crush on her, too.

“I set some aside for taste testing,” she says, gesturing at a little ramekin of grits. Rue favors her in almost every way: the same short black curls, the same deep brown skin, and the same soft dark eyes. The only thing Rue inherited from the white, blue-eyed, broad-shouldered Scott is his height. Mercedes always jokes that she’s glad she has me here with her in the Short Person Coalition.

“You are so important to me,” I say, the bite already mostly in my mouth.

Eventually, I make it to the living room, where the heavy French door is already propped open. And for the first few minutes, Rue and I just wait: her on the couch, me trying to wear little circles into the carpet with my pacing.

“Oh,” Rue suddenly says. “By the way. When this is over, we’re going to talk about how Charlie drove you home.”

I look at her balefully. “I thought you were going to be nice to me today.”

She narrows her eyes at me over her glasses. “I’m being *really* nice to you.”

Mae and Ayako, as always, are fifteen minutes early. I pull open the screen door and let them through—the Atwoods aren’t strictly a shoes-off household, but both women toe them off out of habit. Mae, never too interested in formalities, nods at the kitchen and says, “Mercedes need any help in there?”

“I think she and Scott have it covered,” I say. “But do you want a drink or anything?”

“No need,” Mae says, not unkindly. Mae is the kind of flinty New England stock that can stop you in your tracks with one raised eyebrow. She absolutely terrifies me.

“I’m sticking to water tonight,” Ayako says with a wink. Grandma used to joke that Ayako joined the council to fill the “free hour in her day”—she has more going on than anyone I know. She teaches kickboxing at the local Y. She runs the Whistler Beach Trans Poet Collective out of the independent bookstore. She’s been to Antarctica twice. And somehow, she’s the most easygoing person I know. Whatever happens tonight, she’s the most likely to have my back.

Mae shoulders her way into the kitchen, where she offers a rare smile to Mercedes and makes a beeline for the cabinets to lay out the dishes. And by the time I’ve grabbed Ayako her water, the doorbell is already ringing.

Rue catches my eye. “I’ll get them if you need a second,” she says.

I need several seconds. So I might as well get this over with. “I just saw her this morning,” I point out.

“And who knows what’s been ruining her life since then,” she says.

I laugh as I open the door. And if that laugh sounds a little weak, I can blame that on Lena, too.

I would say Chris Broadbent is Lena’s shadow. Except, as always, he enters first, with an air like he’s bravely scouting land mines. Chris is young, tall, and thin, with the kind of dark-haired white guy good looks that make him *extremely* popular at the biannual public council meetings. I actually like Chris okay on his own. He makes me hot chocolate when I’m at the council office. But get him within two feet of Lena and he has to be a big strong man about it.

Lena always seems flightier in his presence, too. She laughs louder, startles more easily. I don’t think there’s actually anything between them except for some horrible gender roles feedback loop, but it weirds me out all the same.

“Is Mae already here?” Lena whispers. Of all the things Lena is afraid of—the Memory Eater, town hall meetings, small talk—Mae ranks near the top. Which, fair enough. But seeing as Lena is Mae’s boss, that does make some meetings difficult.

“She’s helping Mercedes,” I say. “In the kitchen.”

Lena doesn’t look particularly comforted. She twists her copper bracelet, an ever-present family heirloom, around her fine-boned wrist. “She’s still annoyed about the boardwalk permits.”

“If she brings it up, we’ve got your back,” Chris adds. “Right, Alana?”

For a second, I weigh which would be worse. Telling the council everything, and accepting the consequences—the Memory Eater’s, my own, or even Grandma’s nuclear option. Or spending the evening protecting Lena Russo from talking about boardwalk permits.

Honestly, it could go either way.

Eventually, we all converge around the dining room table. Lena arrives last, having stepped aside to heat up an entire Tupperware of spaghetti and meatballs she’d pulled from her purse—“I’ve never tried shrimp,” she laughed, by way of explanation—and she squeezes herself in between Chris and me, creating a buffer from Mae. But Mae, like a cat making a beeline for the most allergic person in the room, seats herself directly opposite Lena. Which unfortunately gives her a pretty good view of my face, too.

I know I look calm. I have years of practice to be sure of that. But Mae’s got the kind of narrow-eyed stare that’ll pick you apart.

“Well!” Chris finally says, lifting his red wine. “Is it too early to offer a toast? Because I have to acknowledge the Atwoods here.”

Scott laughs, waves a hand. “This was all Mercedes,” he says demurely. “I’m just here for collard greens duty.”

“Oh, not just the dinner. Though *definitely* the dinner,” Chris laughs. Rue shoots a quick look in my direction. This is the tone Chris uses for donors and locals with a grievance. I don’t like being on the other end of his Business Voice. “I know this has been a lot for you to take on. But you’ve all really stepped up for Alana.”

All three Atwoods, clustered at one end of the table, go varying shades of uncomfortable. Mercedes takes a long sip of her wine. “Alana is our family,” she says evenly. “It’s our pleasure, always.”

If Chris picks up on the tension, it doesn't show. "Well, here in the council we've always considered ourselves her family, too. So here's to new relatives."

And so the dinner lurches on.

As always, with the council, any conversation is going to be a never-quite-comfortable blend of tourism chatter, weirdly personal comments about my family, and excruciatingly small talk. But that's what happens, I think, when your job is a mix of permits and festivals and potentially catastrophic stakes. The council isn't just responsible for overseeing my family's work. It's their duty, as much as mine, to keep the Memory Eater fed. They even have a long-standing pact, during slow seasons, to feed her some of their own memories, if she needs it.

They haven't had to in years. Business has been solid. But the knowledge that they might have to, one day—it means you get very specific types of people who want to do this. People from council families, like Lena and Mae. People who want to do good, like Ayako. And people like Chris, where you always suspect, just a little, that there's something bigger they want.

So the conversations breeze along their usual tracks. Chris talking about his high school English students. Lena asking Ayako about her most recent trip to "the Arctic" and apologizing for two minutes too long when Ayako kindly corrects her. Mae very rarely interjecting unless it's business related.

It's normal. Aggressively so. Until Lena sets down her fork with a clatter and announces, "We're going to hire someone else. For the beach."

Chris's own fork slows. Ayako's stops altogether. "Well," she chirps. "So much for easing her into the idea."

My water almost slips down the wrong pipe. It's all I can do not to cough. "What?"

“Lena,” Mae says. “You could have phrased that better.”

Lena’s nearly vibrating in her seat next to me. “I’m sorry. I was nervous.”

“Sorry,” I say back automatically. I was so caught up in the idea that the Memory Eater has been inside my head, I almost forgot to be nervous about tonight. They should think I’m doing well. Lena kept saying, every other morning, that she wouldn’t miss the trip to Cave’s Echo when she didn’t have to make it anymore. I know I heard her say that. “By someone else, you mean—”

“Well, we’ve completely botched this, haven’t we?” Chris says with a laugh. “Alana, nothing much would change. We’re talking about bringing in some extra hands. Someone who could take Lena’s place with you in the mornings.”

“Talking about it,” Mae says. “Nothing’s decided yet. I’m still willing to go with her myself. Ayako and I both are.”

Almost imperceptibly, Lena steadies. The thing about Lena is I think she *is* genuinely intimidated by Mae. But there’s one thing that’ll get her to stand her ground. And it’s always when she thinks Mae is about to overrule her.

“You and Ayako are as busy as I am,” she says. “We need to cover our budget shortfall with tourist dollars this season. If Alana had real, dedicated help, she could take more clients.”

“Is that something Alana agreed to?” Rue interjects. If she notices Scott trying to catch her eye, she blatantly ignores him.

Lena worries at her bracelet, around and around. And I realize that I really, really don’t want to hear the answer to that.

“It’s okay, Rue,” I mumble. But Lena’s already opened her mouth.

“It’s not even our call,” she says a little too loudly. “If something goes wrong—if we’re not sure the head of the family can carry out her duties, then we’re supposed to supervise her until we are.” She doesn’t look at me. “I’m sorry, Alana. But I’m just not sure.”

I’m faintly aware that I should be saying something right about now. It’d be easier, I think, if I was angry. If I was angry, I could do what years and years with the Memory Eater have taught me—I could hide it in a laugh.

But this isn’t anger. This isn’t really a feeling at all. It’s just buzzing.

Mercedes is already talking when my hearing swims back into focus. “—should work with someone she’s comfortable with,” she’s saying. Her tone is enviably smooth. “Scott and I would be happy to.”

“We wouldn’t ask that of you,” Chris says quickly. “Not when you have your own work to worry about! And we have someone in mind—you know Lena’s cousin’s son?”

Mercedes opens her mouth. I beat her to it. They already think I’m incapable. Sitting here and letting them argue over my head is only going to make it worse. “Lena,” I say. “Sessions are a weird space for clients. I’d need to be sure he wouldn’t crowd them.”

Lena blinks so rapidly, it’s like she’s signaling Morse code. “He can learn not to crowd them.”

“Colin’s a smart kid, Alana,” Chris presses. “And he’s from a council family! He’ll pick it up in no time.”

I massage one of my temples, sending the right side of my vision up in sparks for a second. I can’t have this discussion right now. It’s more than I can hold at once. “Could we talk about it tomorrow?” I say. “I’d have to meet him first.”

I can't see what face Chris is making, from two seats down. But his laugh rings odd. "Ouch," he says. "Poor Colin."

Next to me, Lena fidgets. "He's very professional," she says, stilted. "He wouldn't bring it up if you didn't."

Across the table, Rue twitches. When I chance a look at her, she's shooting a low, mutinous glare in Lena's direction. She gets it under control quickly. But it's there just long enough to study.

I always joke to Rue that the worst mistake I've ever made was letting the council know that my liking boys was a possibility. Ever since I figured out I was bi, Chris and Lena have gone fully out of their way to tell me, over and over, that whoever I like is my own business. They've also tried to set me up with every council-adjacent cis boy in southern Maine.

The face Rue's making right now isn't one she makes for most people. She doesn't even make it for every boy the council has tried to introduce me to. Just the worst of them.

Whoever Colin is, I think she knows him. Which means that I would, too.

But when I try to remember—

"No, it's—fine," I say quickly. Possibly too quickly. Even Mae is narrowing her eyes at me now. "No, sorry, I misheard you. Of course I know Colin."

Chris wipes some imaginary sweat from his brow. "Phew! I thought we stepped in it for a second. Though, Alana, you really should give some thought to getting back out there, you know? Even if Colin isn't your type—well, of course it's far too early to be thinking about this, but you'll be in college soon. The sooner you get started on that family of yours, the sooner you'll have some help around here."

Lena winks. It looks strange and stiff on her face. "No pressure," she says. "Just remember that if I'm not the

godmother, I'll never forgive you."

Somehow, if only out of sheer, desperate habit, when Chris laughs, I laugh, too. I've been laughing through this particular discomfort since I was ten, since the first time someone commented on my hypothetical future child.

I couldn't have imagined then that Chris trying to plan my family would be the least of my worries.

I don't leave the table right away. Lena's looking at me with such wide baby bird eyes that there's no way I could do it casually. So I wait out a few topic changes, stirring and stirring at the spoonful of grits in my bowl. And when I mouth *be right back* and slip into the kitchen, it's been long enough that it doesn't look like I'm running.

I take my water glass for cover. Turn on the faucet. But I forget to fill it. By the time someone calls my name, I'm still watching water snake around the pile of dishes.

Ayako is standing far enough into the kitchen to be out of the dining room's earshot. And she's looking at me with that soft appraisal she usually reserves for the animals she writes about. She's a naturalist poet. She's there to observe, not to intervene. If she finds something injured, abandoned, starving, she first weighs, carefully, whether or not she'd only make things worse.

To my own horror, my eyes prickle. With Grandma gone, it's too easy to assume that the people who can read me can be counted on one hand. But Grandma and the Memory Eater weren't the only ones to watch me grow up.

"Who's Colin?" I say.

Ayako doesn't look surprised. I can't decide whether that's a relief or not. "He stays with Lena sometimes, when his mom's out of the country. She brought him to a council dinner once, tried to set you two up. I think he wasn't your type."

My laugh sounds as hollow as it feels. So that's it, then. Everything else I've forgotten could be blamed on trauma. But there's no reason my mind would need to protect itself from some cousin of a council family that I turned down for dinner.

The Memory Eater has been inside my head. But I already knew that, didn't I? I just wanted to put it off for one night longer.

"Alana," Ayako says. Her face is so, so gentle. I wonder if she'd look at me that gently if she knew why we were both standing here. "You can talk to me, you know."

I breathe in. This is—well. It's not a good thing. But it's information.

And once you have information, you can act on it.

"Ayako," I say, finally. "Could we—pretend we didn't have this conversation? I'm really fine. Just a little stressed, lately."

I can see the brief, bloody battle play across Ayako's face. She's a parent, after all. If one of her children had said that to her, I know she wouldn't let it slide.

But I already knew, when I asked, that one thing would work in my favor. It's been a long time since anyone thought of me as a child.

"If you need anything," she says, "you know where I am."

"I do," I say, smiling. It's not even a lie, really. I know she'd help me. Of course she would. Without question.

I just don't intend to need help.

FOUR

THE REST OF the dinner passes in a tumble of conversations I don't quite hear.

Scott makes coffee. The group cordially breaks up—or at least, Lena and Chris find their own corner of the room. And then eventually, they filter out. Mae and Ayako leave last, after they strong-arm everyone out of the kitchen to do all the dishes. Mae's out the door first, Ayako second, looking at me over her shoulder. Her smile is a little upturned at the end. Like a question mark.

Scott circles the living room for stray trash. Rue folds into a corner of the couch. And Mercedes perches on the edge of the armchair. It's a recognizable strategy from them, now. Give me space, but don't go far. Wait for me to talk first.

"I'm gonna crash early," I say, hoping I don't stand too abruptly.

Rue watches me as I make my way across the room. "You *do not* have to work with Colin, you know."

I manage to laugh. Maybe one day I can ask for that whole story. "I'll figure it out."

I head upstairs, brush my teeth so hard that the bristles look a little bent by the time I'm done. And then I sprawl, fully clothed, on top of the covers.

For a long, long time, I listen to the sounds downstairs. I hear the Atwoods' slightly raised, slightly quickened voices: a continuation, I think, of the same debate from last week, in which Rue flatly refused to look at schools out of state. I

caught them in the kitchen once, when they didn't think I could hear them. *She needs me here*, Rue said.

She'll have us, Mercedes replied. *And she'll have you, too. No matter where you are.*

Their voices eventually disperse in a series of footsteps. The door to the master bedroom opens and shuts. Rue, in the hall bathroom, is much slower to settle.

Her too-long pajama pants swish across the floor as she passes my room. For a few seconds, there are just a handful of steps between us.

I could tell her everything. The thought is a match strike. I could tell her right now. I even want to.

But then what?

That family who took you in, the Memory Eater told me, one morning in March. My ankle was still in a walking cast back then. Scott had to carry me down the steps every day. *I've seen their type, you know. Always think there's something they can do to help.*

And? I said. Tired and sore and completely, utterly clueless. *What's the problem with that?*

Poor little love. Her smile was audible. *They always give up, you know. It'll always come down to you and me, in the end.*

The Atwoods haven't given up. I'm not sure they ever will.

This time, I think I need to make the choice for them.

I wait for Rue to close her bedroom door behind her. And I watch the clock until the deepest parts of sleep settle across the house.

Then I ease my foot to the floor. Say a quiet prayer to no one in particular that I make it back before dawn. And I slide on my sweatshirt.

Never go down to the caves when you can't see where you're going. The first rule I ever learned.

Just this once, Grandma will have to forgive me.

THE SCARY PART is, it's easy. Scott listens for me in the mornings, even in his sleep. But they'd never expect me to sneak out now. Even when the floorboards bend against my weight, no one stirs.

Outside, humidity hangs like a curtain. I raise the little electric lantern from the front hall closet like a beacon in front of me. And I slip out of the street light, into the mouth of the fog.

There's about a mile between the Atwoods' home and the Stinnets'. It's a long mile.

It's a warm night. The air swims with mosquitos and wisps of far-off summer storm. But I'm shivering, still. I keep cycling through what she took. My breakup with Charlie. Mom leaving. Grandma dying. Who knows what else. This is why we use padlocks, those safety memories to signify whether or not she took more than she was offered. At any given time, a person has more memories than they can carry. You lose them every day without trying. There was no one there to watch my back—so there's no way to tell how deep she went.

And then there are the headaches. The hearing things, as of today. As far as I know, that's never happened to a client before.

Despite my shivers, I can feel a thin line of sweat trickling down my back. I can't leave her to starve. I can't go to the

council and wait for their punishment. And I definitely can't do what Grandma asked of me.

So when I reach the Stinnets' back gate, I only have two clear goals. To know, for sure, what she did. And to make sure the Memory Eater doesn't see that I don't know what to do from there.

But I can only bluff for so long. Before I leave that cave, I'm going to need to figure something out.

I slip across the Stinnets' yard, hewing close to the shadow of the house. There's one second-floor light on, but I don't see any movement. Only the windows seem to be watching me as I approach the woods.

The moon is low in the cradle of the sky as I make my way down the waiting stairs. The low tide laps, glittering black, at the edges of the shore. I quicken my pace. There's no reason to move so carefully. The Memory Eater is already expecting me. I can feel the thread of her attention from the second I dismount to the sand.

When I step through the mouth of the cave, I almost angle the light at the cave floor. It's habit by now, the little ways I avoid looking at her dead on. But the last thing I need her to think right now is that I'm scared. No matter how true it is.

I don't know exactly how she used to look. My family's oldest records described something that looked and moved like a person but could never be mistaken for one. Abigail Harlow's son, retelling the tale from his mother's recollections, wrote that when they faced each other, they were close enough in height to look each other in the eye. That's not true anymore. Not for a while now.

When she's uncurled, she stands nearly two stories tall. When she moves in the confines of the cave, she has to crawl. And every inch of her ripples with something that used to be life. Reaching arms, writhing joints feeling out the boundaries

of her skin. The imprints of faces with dark eyes and open mouths. The first time I saw her, Grandma could barely calm me down. *They're nothing to be afraid of*, she told me. *Those memories she takes—they're just what's left over. They may look like they're in pain. But they don't feel anything anymore.*

The Memory Eater's own face—a pale, perpetually masklike stillness—lifts to meet mine. I don't know if she doesn't smile, or if she can't. But she smiles with her voice.

“So you know,” she says.

I stop to check the seal first. It's as much habit as it is precaution. With a shaking finger, I trace over every anchor stone. *The far-off sea touches every frozen shore.* The spell feels solid under my hands. If I let out the full force of what I'm feeling right now, I don't know if it'll stay that way.

So when I speak, I'm careful. More than I've ever been.

“Did you think I wouldn't find out?” I say.

She hums. Her laughter dances underneath. “I don't presume to know what goes through your mind. Though I suppose I've seen a bit of it now, haven't I?”

“I'm not joking.” My anger is in check, I think. But it takes real effort to hold, like a dog straining at a leash. “You know the rules. What do you think is going to happen now?”

I shouldn't have jumped to threats so soon, not when I don't know what to threaten her with. The way she folds her massive arms tells me that immediately. “What do *you* think is going to happen now?” she says. “Of course I know what's *meant* to happen. But don't think I don't know you. I know your pride, Alana Harlow. I know how badly you want to do well. Are you really going to leave me to starve? Choke the life from your town's meal ticket? Disappoint everyone?”

She lifts her head. The ghost of an open mouth presses against her shoulder. “You're in charge now, my sweet girl. So

don't waste my time. Say what you came to say."

My trembling seeps from my voice to the rest of my body. I tense, trying to smother it, but it spills over. "Just tell me what you did to me."

"Do you need to be told?" she asks. "I should think you know how it works."

"You don't get to play cute," I snap. Despite my waver, the seal holds. "What was different? What did you do wrong?"

"I don't do it wrong. I should think you know that, too." There's no recrimination in her voice. Just—curiosity. "What do you mean, different?"

I watch her expressionless face carefully. She's got this tone when she's toying with me. I don't hear it now. "The headaches," I say slowly. "The hearing things. You really don't know?"

"How would I know?" she says. The air shifts as she leans in a little closer. "What have you been hearing?"

I take a breath, shake my head. "If you really don't know, then at least tell me how you got in my head. It was that day in February, wasn't it?"

And then she does something she rarely does: she pauses. Even the constant roil of memories against her skin has stilled to face toward me. "Poor little Alana," she says. "Always trying so hard to be Caroline. Always missing the mark. She never had to puff herself up to be heard, you know."

"We're not talking about Grandma," I say.

"We're always talking about her. You just don't always realize it." From the back of the cave floor, I hear the dry slide of her body uncoiling. "Would you like to know where you fall short? It's not that you're weak. It's that you're cocky. You

think things can only go wrong if you do them wrong yourself.”

Her breath stirs my hair from my shoulders. “It’s not your fault, though, is it?” she says. “I suppose she never wanted you to find out.”

“She told me everything I needed to know,” I shoot back.

“Not everything, little love.” Her voice curls, like something fond. “Sometimes you do everything right and it still goes wrong. Until the day she died, Caroline never forgot that.”

“Enough.” I need to get us back on track. Because if I don’t, I’m not going to be very calm for much longer. “We’re here to talk about what you took.”

She hums, performatively thoughtful. “Yes. Let’s talk about what I took, shall we? Was it anything you held dear? The sight of Caroline’s cold body? All those ugly things your mother said to you, the day she left? All those ugly things *you* said to that girl when you broke things off? She cared for you so much, chickadee. And you were so cruel.”

My stomach floods cold. *You’re calm*, I remind myself. Though I don’t know how true that is anymore. “That’s all you took?”

“Oh. You don’t mean that boy, do you?” Her voice twists, a grimace. “That one was on me. Abhorrent, isn’t it, that they’re already planning the next baby Harlow? They should know better, after Amber. She had you just to please them, you know. And when it didn’t work—well, that really was the last straw for her.”

You’re calm. You’re calm. You’re calm. You’re calm. “Just tell me every single memory you touched.”

“Do you really want to know?” she says. “All this pain—I think you’d regret it. Taking it all back.”

My anger spikes. I know what I'm supposed to do. To twist that anger into laughter. Defuse and deflect. I think that might finally be beyond me.

"I don't care!" I say. "It should have been my choice!"

In the space of her pause, I can hear waves lapping at the shore, their little murmurs distorted in the night air. Finally, her head tilts. And her voice smiles.

"And are you sure," she asks, "that it wasn't?"

Instinctively, I step back. The wind circles the mouth of the cave like a breath skimming the top of a bottle. And under that, I hear a whisper.

You offer it freely?

I whirl around so fast, I almost stumble into the water. But just like at Marie's, there's no one there.

"What are you doing?" I whisper.

"Oh?" the Memory Eater says. "Is it happening right now? Are you hearing things?"

"Please—" There's fear surging up to replace the anger. So thick it must be coming off me in waves. The seal feels steady, still. That warm-laundry feeling. But if I can't get it together—"Just give me a straight answer, for once in your life!"

She doesn't respond immediately. She chews on the silence first. Savors it. "Would you like to know what I always appreciated about your grandmother? She was generous, under all that steel. Not the warmest person, perhaps. But kind. She and I both knew that your mother was being difficult, all those months she kept 'forgetting' how to fix the seal. Caroline could have punished her. But instead she wrote her a little poem. Do you ever think about that? What an act of love it was?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" I say hoarsely.

“I’m answering one of your questions, of course,” she says. A smile of a voice. “‘Tell me what you took.’ The far-off sea touches every frozen shore—on earth.”

It doesn’t take that long to grasp what she’s said. Seconds, maybe. But by the time I’ve processed every single word, an unforgivably long moment has passed.

There are thirty-two different stones making up the seal, but only four of them need blood to keep the heart of the magic beating. The mnemonic is a simple one. The first letter of each word corresponds to the first letter of all eight numbers to remember. The numbers come in pairs.

The far-off sea touches every frozen shore on earth—that isn’t four pairs and four stones. That’s five.

“On earth.” *O-E*, meaning “one-eight” in Grandma’s code: first row, eight across. I skim the row, and I find it.

There’s this lighthouse in the neighboring town, visible from the top of the bluffs. It’s harder to see on hazy days—you have to turn your head just right. That’s what it feels like, looking at stone one-eight. I turn my head. And it’s like filling in a hole punched in the universe. One moment it’s a shadow on the edge of my periphery. Then suddenly, it exists.

The feeling of an anchor stone that needs my blood is unmistakable. It’s an itch. A pinprick, if it gets bad.

This, all at once, is *claws*. For a second, I think it must be me—my anger, my fear, digging it apart. But I’ve felt fresh cracks to be patched. This is a deep, splintering fissure.

And it’s about to give way.

I don’t have my knife, but I have teeth. I lift my index finger to my mouth and bite, hard enough to draw blood.

The Memory Eater lunges. And I feel the second Abigail Harlow’s magic rips in two.

She catches my wrist and slams me to my back, scattering every worthless stone across the cave floor. I can feel Abigail's shredded magic drifting to the ground around me. Bleeding out. Even as I'm thrashing hard enough to bruise, the dying itch of it sparks against my fingers.

"To be honest," the Memory Eater says, "I didn't know how that would work. I thought, surely even if you didn't remember the full mnemonic, of course you'd notice the stone, right? But it was incredible. It was screaming for you, and you never heard it. Maybe that was what you were feeling, that headache. Somewhere deep in your mind, you knew something was about to break."

"Let me go," I gasp.

"Oh." Her breath is hot on my neck. It smells like salt and the crooks of tide pools, the things that grow out of sight. "Have you finally decided what to do with me? I'm sorry. I got impatient."

Her grip on my wrists tightens. But when I scream, it's more from anger than pain. "You know," she muses, "I expected a thank-you."

I brace my feet against the cave floor, push harder. "For *what?*"

Something ripples within the palm of her hand as she considers. I can feel it flutter against my arm. And little by little, the form of a person, a face inches from mine, takes shape.

It's like looking in a fun house mirror. A dark, gaping version of my reflection.

"Would you look at that," the Memory Eater says. "She still recognizes you."

The me within the Memory Eater's skin reaches forward, as far as her arm will go. The fingertips barely brush the edge of

my face. But the impact hits like a static shock.

And when a wave of vertigo pulls me under, I open my eyes somewhere else.

No—still in the cave. But my position has changed. I'm sitting by the back wall, watching rain lash through the watery gray light outside. And huddled a few feet away at the seal, is—me.

“You offer it to me freely?” whispers someone behind me. A voice I've heard every morning for more than half my life.

I watch myself—the me at the mouth of the cave—lift my arms, the way I've watched so many clients do before: palms empty, upturned, welcoming. My eyes are glazed, looking at nothing. But there's a steel there. One I haven't seen on my own face for a while now.

“I do,” I say.

And then I'm back on the floor, pinned under her. My body feels sluggish when I start kicking again. Like I'm just waking up.

Even the Memory Eater's voice, always so measured, comes slowly. “How did you do that?”

I barely hear her. I barely have space for it.

“No,” I say. “No, I didn't.”

Her voice is that same careful neutral, when she speaks again. “You saw it, too, then?”

“You're lying,” I say. “I wouldn't have—”

“Little love. I don't know what you just did. But we both saw it.” There's an edge to her voice. I'm not used to hearing one. “That look in your eyes—your grandma used to call you a forest fire. One spark, one decision, can light a blaze. Surely you know what decision you made that day.”

“I will put you back here,” I gasp. “And when I do, you’re going to starve.”

The air itself shifts, like a front moving in. “I’m sorry for this,” she says. “I really am. I wish I didn’t have to take so much, when you came to me. But I’m going to have to take a little more.”

I don’t understand what she’s telling me at first. There’s panic in every last ounce of my blood, every word sounds like another meaningless snap of something breaking. It’s the shiver that crosses her face that makes it click. The anticipation.

That’s when I start clawing at her hand.

“No,” I gasp. “No no no no—”

“Don’t be nervous,” she says. “You know how this goes, don’t you? When you close your eyes, you will no longer be here, in this cave. You’ll be standing on the Whistler Beach boardwalk, looking down the long line of shuttered stalls.”

I can *feel it*—the pull of something deeper than sleep. My eyes start to water. I strain to keep them open. With a sigh, she releases one of my wrists to caress my forehead.

“It is night,” she says. “It is quiet. And you are alone.” And she presses her palm across my vision.

The dark, shuttered boardwalk sweeps into view.

I stumble in a circle. But there’s no exit here. There never has been. Just the long lines of stalls, watching me. My own memories at her fingertips.

“The tide is coming in.” She’s not here with me. But I hear her clearly. “There are waves lapping against the beams under your feet. Time your breaths with those waves, Alana. Can you hear them? Can you feel them against the wood?”

“No.” The words feel drunk on my tongue. “I can’t—”

“Be a good girl,” the air around me laughs. “Listen to the waves for a moment. Listen to them go in and out. The sea seems uneasy sometimes, doesn’t it? But it’s actually so calm. All water has to do is go with the pull of the tides. You’re exactly where you’re supposed to be, Alana. Let the tide push you.”

I’m so heavy. Like I’m damp down to the bone. The smell of the boardwalk is sharper now. It has the bite of salt. The oil and brine from the mussel fritters at the Beachside Grill. Grandma’s soap, wrapping around my shoulders.

Why was I trying to leave, just now? This is my home.

“Very good,” says the voice overhead. She sounds like she knows what she’s doing. It wouldn’t hurt to listen. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I say easily. I don’t understand why I wouldn’t be.

“Good,” says the voice again. It envelops me like a hand in my own. “Then let’s take a walk.”

FIVE

THERE'S WATER SEEPING down my back, and a voice above me. *Alana, I—*

I surge upright, and a solid pressure pins me where I am. “Alana.” Not the Memory Eater’s voice. But not the one that woke me, either. “Alana, Alana, it’s okay. Stay still a minute.”

I blink. It doesn’t help. It’s too dark to see who’s holding my shoulders. There’s a low pool under me—I can see it rippling out of the corner of my eye. Oh God. I slipped again, didn’t I? I slipped and did something worse.

“Alana? Do you . . .” Here, the voice shakes, a little. “Do you know who I am?”

I blink again, hard. This time the world rights itself. That’s Scott’s voice. Not Charlie’s. Why did I think I heard Charlie?

I reach up to feel at my head, my scalp. It doesn’t hurt. It doesn’t feel like I hit it. “Scott,” I whisper. “I . . .” Something is wedged between my hip and the cave floor, scraping at my back where my hoodie has started to ride up. It’s just enough pain to spark my brain the rest of the way into motion.

I’m lying on the seal.

“Oh my God.” The ground sways under us as I right myself. “Oh my God.”

“Careful.” He says it so, so gently that for a second, I think he must not understand what’s happened. “Try to focus. Does anything hurt?”

I can faintly make out Scott’s pale face hovering over me now, his eyes wide in the dark. His phone’s flashlight, set

faceup on the rocks behind him, is starting to dim. I almost don't look to the back wall of the cave. Like if I don't see it, it won't be empty. But looking away is what our clients do. Looking away got us here.

She'll get the better of someone someday, baby.

So I turn to the spot the Memory Eater has occupied all my life. And finally, the night becomes real.

“She broke the seal,” I say. “She’s out. Scott, I—”

For every rule and warning and precaution I’ve ever had to memorize, there has never been a *what happens if the seal breaks*. Any given Harlow might be fallible. But the seal wasn’t. It doesn’t matter how else you can fail as a person. You can remember a simple set of numbers, bleed on a few rocks, control your feelings for just a few minutes of every day. It’s easy, in the end. Three of the easiest things a person can do.

Or maybe we always knew the seal breaking was a possibility. Maybe it was that we never wanted to acknowledge the cold, cavernous gap at the center of our business: that we were inheriting a power we would never learn how to use.

But Grandma knew. *She'll get the better of someone someday, baby—*

I thought that what she asked was impossible. But if it’s all I have—

And when that happens—

But after she said that—

You need to—

“I don’t know what to do.” It’s hardly a whisper. It’s hardly a voice.

“It’s okay,” he says. Like we’re at the kitchen table and he’s talking me through precalc. “Alana, we’re going to figure this out.”

“No.” Seawater has soaked through the back of my hoodie. And when it rushes fully through the fabric, the cold floods right into my skin. “Scott—I’ve forgotten what I’m supposed to do.”



WE FINALLY CALL the council. It’s the least of what I deserve.

Mistakes are inevitable. That’s what Grandma told me, over and over. But there are inconveniences, slipups. And then there’s this. And we were never supposed to get infinite chances. We’re only supposed to get one.

Back at the house, losing the business felt like the worst that could happen. I used to have nightmares about it: of being a bitter necessity, of giving more and more blood until one day I could give them a better Harlow to replace me. To give away my magic with a smile, and be content with someone else doing what I couldn’t. It was scarier than the thought of dying. It *felt* like the thought of dying. But if the atoms of the universe could rearrange themselves and reconstruct the tatters of Abigail’s spell in exchange for a power I couldn’t even use—I’d agree to it in a second.

“It’ll be okay,” Scott says again. It won’t, but it’s nice that he keeps saying it.

By the time I see movement at the top of the stairs, it’s a relief. I’ll take whatever punishment they have. I just don’t want to wait for it anymore.

When the council descends, they descend together, a blurry united front in the predawn dark. Mae and Ayako could have been here ages ago. But no matter who sits on the council, no matter how they feel about each other or how many petty feuds they've had, there's one rule that binds them. They act together, or not at all.

As they approach, I catch more movement at the top: three people moving quickly, quickly enough that they catch up with the council at the bottom. One figure sidles past the others and breaks through to the front, and even before the flashlight beams settle, I recognize her silhouette. It's Rue.

I'm pretty sure I don't deserve to cry. My eyes well up anyway.

She nearly slips as she gets to me—I'm not sure if she grabs me for balance, or to get a better look at me, but either way, she gives me a once-over and then a bone-crushing hug. I only see her face for a second. But there's a wild fear there I've never seen before.

"Are you okay?" she says. And then, when I don't answer: "Alana?"

She's holding me so tightly that I can feel, now, how badly I'm shivering. "I did something really stupid, Rue."

"Yeah," she says, in an exhale. It's not unkind. It's not even angry. "I know."

The rest of the group catches up, flashlights circling like curious animals. Chris, inexplicably wearing a blazer over his sweats, grips Lena's arm as she stares at the sand. Mae stands next to them, solemn as I've ever seen her. Next to her, Ayako actually tries to smile at me. Just in case I wasn't close enough to tears.

The last two members of the group make their way up the side to join Scott and me. Mercedes moves to stand with her

husband. I don't catch who's on her heels until she stumbles into a flashlight beam.

I make brief, startled eye contact with Charlie. She's breathing hard. Her cowlick, always tamed by product and finger-combing, sticks outward in a perfect curve.

"Well?" Lena's wavering voice startles me back to attention. "Are you happy now?"

I was braced for this. I flinch anyway. Lena's anger isn't rare, but it's always hidden in the folds of her voice, loud and joking enough to pretend she's not serious. She's serious now.

"Lena," Ayako murmurs. "Of course she's not."

Lena doesn't seem to hear her. She's a hard silhouette against the moonlit tide. "All we've ever tried to do is help you. But you just had to do it yourself, didn't you? Do you still think you know everything, Alana? Do you still think you know better than we do?"

"Lena—" Mae's half-turned to her. But Lena's face collapses like candle wax, and she hits the wet sand knees first and breaks into open-mouthed sobs.

Chris steps to her side and drops into a crouch. "Hey," he says. "We'll get through this."

"How—" Her breath hitches wildly. "How am I supposed to tell all those people?"

"Shh." He rubs her back. "I won't let you do it alone, okay? But we need to focus now. We need our leader, right?"

By the time Chris looks up at me, he's smiling. Chris has a small arsenal of Pleasant Faces, most of which I can recognize on sight. This particular one has two targets. Grannies with pet projects at town hall meetings. And my mother.

(Chris once told me, when he was younger and a few glasses of wine in, how lucky they all were that Mom had me.

Maybe he wishes she were here now. At least Mom never pretended to be reliable.)

“Alana,” he finally says. “Why don’t you start at the beginning?”

There’s not going to be any good way to do that. So for lack of better options, I start talking. I don’t tell them everything the Memory Eater took—especially not with Charlie right there. But I tell them about the lingering symptoms I thought were from my fall. The realization, earlier today, that I was missing other memories. And that when she escaped, she took the last advice Grandma ever left me.

In a fairer universe, this is the point where I would have crumbled into dust. But unfortunately, here I still am.

“Oh, honey,” Ayako whispers.

I wrap my arms around my middle, squirm back from her sympathy. Lena’s anger was easier. At least that was deserved. “I didn’t know what to do,” I say uselessly. “I thought that if I talked to her—”

“What’s done is done,” Mae says briskly. She doesn’t sound angry, either. I doubt she wants to waste the time. “Alana, are you sure that Caroline never told you anything about how to repair the seal?”

I guess I can’t be 100 percent sure of anything now. But. “Our family has been trying to figure it out for decades. If Grandma knew, she wouldn’t have kept it quiet,” I say. “But previous heads of the family might have had theories. And if they did, they might be in the journals somewhere.”

Rue, at my shoulder, nods hard. A few summers back, the two of us reorganized the entire Harlow archives. There are enough journals there to fill about three shelves, many of them rote business records. But most Harlows have the same grasping hunger. A need to know if the magic in our veins can

be tapped. Even I experimented, as a bored, curious kid, to see if I had the power to bind a living thing to one place. I couldn't so much as trap a frog in the garden.

"I thought that as well," Mae says with a nod. "We'll be reading the Harlow archives in shifts."

"What about the search?" Scott asks.

"That's for the police to handle," Mae says. "We've put out calls across New England."

"Police outside of Whistler think they're looking for someone's dangerous exotic pet." Ayako grimaces. "Best I could think of on short notice."

"But it's also possible that she hasn't gone far," Chris says delicately. "And if she hasn't—"

Lena lets out another shuddered sob. Chris wraps an arm around her shoulders. "It's always been the council's duty to feed the Memory Eater, as a last resort," he says. "If we can lure her in as bait . . ."

The problem with the worst days of your life is the enormity of them. So many angles only occur to you after the fact, because there's only so much you can feel at once. You can't control it. You can't slow it down. It's a conveyor belt of horror, set to a timer.

I've known my whole life exactly what the Memory Eater would do if she were free. But the full reality of it settles over me now. All those people. All those meals.

"I want to help." It comes out hoarse.

"Haven't you done enough?" Lena says.

"There must be something—" When I swallow, I taste metal. "I know what you have to do now. But even after you take my magic, there are still things I can do."

Chris looks almost shocked. As if that rule hasn't been staring both of us in the face for years. "Good heavens, Alana. How can we fix this if we take your magic? We all know that you didn't mean for this to happen."

He unfolds himself; then he stands, brushes the sand from his knees. Lena's big doe eyes watch him, flat and cold in the dark. "But," Chris says. "There still need to be consequences. I'm sure you understand that. This is about making the people here feel safe again. And their confidence in you . . . well. I'm sure you know it's going to be shaken, after tonight."

I nod, but Chris doesn't seem to notice—he's still watching me like he's waiting. "She gets it," Charlie snaps.

Chris holds up his hands. A defensive gesture. "Well, then. Let's consider this rationally, Alana. I don't think the people of Whistler would be very reassured to see you involved. So we've discussed it. And we've decided the best course of action is for you to go home. Rest. We'll take it from here."

I try to tug Rue back as she steps around me. She slides right out of my grip. "You can't do this without her."

"And we won't," Chris says. "Alana, believe me. Once we have a plan, you'll be our first call. But while there are questions about your judgment—let me put it this way. We can do this, or we can do something drastic. I think we'd all prefer to do this, right?"

"Yes," I say quietly. Because I understand the choice I'm being given. Be shut out now. Or be shut out forever.

"Attagirl," Chris says. "Then if we're all in agreement—"

"We're not." Mercedes's voice startles me. I don't think she's said a word since she got to the beach. "If Alana won't be allowed access to her family's records, then my husband and I will need to be there."

After what happened, I kind of thought the bar for a stunned silence would be higher. But somehow, that shuts everyone up. “Mercedes,” Chris finally manages. “You know we’re grateful for everything you’ve done. But the Harlow records are maintained by the council.”

“Maintained, yes.” Mercedes smoothly steps past me. I can’t quite make out her face, but she’s holding herself in that way that adds a few phantom inches to her height. “But those are Alana’s property. As her legal guardians until she turns eighteen, my husband and I are responsible for them.”

Lena, still on the sand, straightens. “The council acts on the family’s behalf,” she says. Her voice is still thick with tears.

“I understand that’s how you see it,” Mercedes says. “Caroline disagreed.”

I’m looking at Mercedes so intently that I wonder if she can feel my stare against her back. Grandma never disagreed with the council. Ever.

At least, not that she told me.

Lena’s face washes out, blotchy red to white. “Caroline trusted us.”

“She trusted you to keep Whistler safe,” Mercedes agrees. Scott moves to stand by her shoulder, a solid, silent backup. “But she trusted us with her granddaughter. You understand that we take that seriously.”

I can feel Charlie at the edge of my vision, watching my face. Trying to gauge my reaction. I wish my head would stop spinning long enough *to* react. For all my uneasy suspicion that Grandma was quietly declining longer than any of us would like to believe, as far as I know, she didn’t know she was dying. Even her doctor, who she played tennis with every Friday, had been shocked. She worked more than ever, that last

month. She just fell asleep one night and didn't wake up the next morning.

And yet she told Scott and Mercedes something she had never even hinted to me.

"You're going to be busy trying to help catch her," Mercedes adds. "So two extra pairs of eyes on those records would be useful, wouldn't it?"

"It would," Ayako says quietly. Mae inclines her head, barely a nod.

Chris laughs. "Gosh, Mercedes. Did anyone ever tell you that you missed your calling as a lawyer? If it's what Caroline would have wanted, then we'd be happy to. Right, Lena?"

Lena's eyes flick to Chris once, twice. It's rare for him to agree to something before she does. But whatever his reasons, she seems to grasp them.

"Yes," she says. "Of course."

Over the last few seconds, a circle has started to form: the council, Scott, and Mercedes. But it isn't until Mercedes looks over her shoulder and says, "You girls should head home," that I figure out the choreography of it all. The adults on the inside, facing each other. And Rue, Charlie, and me on the outside.

It's a dismissal.

"Charlie." A pair of hands take my shoulders, steer me. Rue is guiding me up the beach, toward where Charlie has migrated to the stairs. "Can you take her home?"

"Got it" is all Charlie says.

"Wait." I blink my vision back into focus. "Where are you going?"

"To get the rest of your stuff from the cave." Rue squeezes my hand. "And to see how long it takes them to realize I haven't left."

It's not a big beach, I try to point out. But between the heaviness of my tongue and Charlie guiding me up the steps, it gets lost halfway.

I'm a little too dizzy to look back at Charlie, but I'm looking at her in spirit. "She's not going to fool anyone."

"Maybe not," Charlie agrees. "But she might hear something helpful before they do."

"We should wait for her," I say.

"She'll find her way back," Charlie says. And then, after a moment: "You should sit down. You're shaking."

I almost protest. Until I glance down and get a look at my fingers. Oh. So I am.

Dawn is still a long way off, but the Stinnet household is fully lit alongside us as we make our way across the yard: Mae and Ayako must have woken up Daniel and Ned. And the rest of Whistler will know soon, if they don't already. I wonder if they've sent out the emergency alert yet. My phone is on the floor of the cave somewhere.

Charlie steers me to the car. I reach for the door, but she beats me to it. "Char," I say.

"Humor me," she says.

She holds on until I'm settled in the passenger seat, then rounds the car and slides behind the wheel. "You're quiet," I mumble as she looks for her keys.

"Sorry," she says.

"Ah," I say. "No, that's not a criticism or anything."

"I know," she says. Her gaze is steady on my face. "On the beach—I should have said more. I didn't want to make things worse."

I breathe in, slowly. Charlie really is trying not to replay the same fights we've always had. And this is one of our first and oldest, back from when we were two thirteen-year-olds in a tight orbit, each too stubborn to make the first move. Back then, there was this council member, the one Chris would replace one day, who always thought he could curry favor with Grandma by jokingly scolding me to take on more of the work. Charlie once told him exactly how hard I worked every day. Shut him right up, actually.

I told her, later that afternoon, not to do that again.

Charlie doesn't like fighting, exactly. She's got a soft, squishy center, deep down. She hates being angry. But she doesn't temper her opinions for anyone, not even me. And she has several opinions on the town council.

So the fact that she held herself back on the beach—well. It must have been hard.

“You don't have to defend me to Chris and Lena,” I say.

“I mean,” Charlie says. “You always defended me.”

I laugh, twisting at my fingers. “That's different,” I say. “I was right.”

She looks so grim. It's a strange look on her. Intellectually, I know she's not unflappable, but it's still so rare to see her rattled. “You're dead on your feet,” she says. “We don't have to talk about this now.”

All at once, my body finally finds a reaction. And I hate that she's being so careful, so gentle, and all I can grasp is white-hot fury. But I've had enough gentleness. I've had so much I could choke on it.

“I didn't even make it two weeks before I let her into my head.” My throat tightens, claws again. Every word twists off the jagged edge. “When you found me that day on the beach—that was what I had just done. And do you know what I did

when I realized that, yesterday afternoon? Why I came here alone?”

She’s watching me evenly. Her knuckles are pale against her grip on the wheel. “You thought you could fix it,” she says. “Without us knowing.”

“All right, well, good. Kinda figured you’d guessed.” I press the heels of my palms against my eyes. “So since we both know how deeply I’ve screwed this up, you can stop being so nice about it.”

It doesn’t have to be out of my mouth long for me to regret it. God, I’m the worst there is. It’s the middle of the night. Charlie’s here when she doesn’t even have to be. And I’m trying to bait her into a fight. Just because I want someone to be as angry at me as I am.

Charlie turns to face me fully. She looks as bone-deep worn out as I feel.

“Okay.” She leans back, drags her hair away from her face. “Do you need me to tell you what a colossal fucking risk you took tonight? That you’re honestly lucky you didn’t get hurt again? Because I don’t think that you do. Whatever punishment you feel like you deserve, you’ve already had it. I’ve watched you go through the worst pain of your life these past four months, whether you remember it or not. I’m not going to help you beat yourself up. I know you want me to, but I can’t. Okay?”

I can’t quite bring myself to make eye contact. My stare settles somewhere around her stomach. “I’m—” Sorry. I already said that. “I didn’t realize you still—”

She delicately arches her eyebrows. “Cared?”

“Well,” I say. “When you say it like that, I sound totally unreasonable.”

She huffs as she backs the car into the street. The sound isn't entirely unhappy.

"I'm sorry," I say. Because it probably is worth saying again.

She shakes her head. "Just tell me what I can do."

"I don't think there *is* anything." I close my eyes against another wave of vertigo. "I should be staying out of the way."

Even without looking at her, I can imagine the face she's making pretty clearly. "You're really okay with that?"

"You're saying I should go behind their backs?" I say.

"I'm not *saying* anything." She audibly shrugs. "Just that whatever your grandmother told Mercedes about the council, I think she was right."

Ah. Just when we were doing so well, too. "They're not bad people, Char. I keep telling you."

"Maybe not." The car takes a smooth turn onto Oarsdip Drive. "But you barely trust Lena with your bagel order. You really trust her to make decisions for your family?"

I close my eyes, lean heavily into the seat. I can't remember being this tired in my life, ever. It feels like losing blood. Like the cold tatters of Abigail's magic draining out from under me.

"I don't really trust my own decisions, either," I finally say.

Charlie's quiet as we approach the Atwood house. She doesn't turn to me again until the car is in park.

"Okay," she says. "But whatever you decide—I want to help."

I smile. I notice there's no doubt in her voice that I'm going to decide *something*. Generous of her, when I'm barely capable of holding my own head up straight.

But I think she's right. Even if I should stay out of this—there has to be something I can do.

“If I actually decide anything,” I finally say, “I'd like that.”

If I'm going to have a plan, though, I'm not going to have it tonight. I might be more tired than I thought. In one blink, Charlie's unbuckling her seat belt and getting out of the car. In the next, she's already opening my door. My traitor legs tremble hard the second I transfer my weight to them, but she takes my arm before I can stumble.

“Where are your keys?” Charlie asks.

“Purse front pocket.” I go to reach for them myself as we approach the door, but Charlie shifts my weight instead, holding my upper arm with one hand and plucking out my keys with the other. She somehow manages to unlock the door one-handed. Show-off.

Finally, she lowers me onto the Atwoods' couch. As she takes a step back, I can see little parts through her hair where she's pushed it roughly back. She's wearing sweats and a T-shirt and nothing else. Little goose bumps have prickled up and down her arms.

“What can I get you?” she asks.

“I don't need anything, Char,” I say, a little uncomfortable.

She lets out a breath. “I'm going to wait here until the Atwoods get back. You can ignore me if you want. But I'm getting you something to drink. Water, or tea?”

It's dark beyond the windows, the blue black of almost dawn. I blink, hard. “Tea is good.”

Charlie vanishes into the kitchen. I move to get up and follow her—she doesn't know where she's going. But I tip over sideways onto the cushions, instead.

I close my eyes, listening to the rustle of dishes and, eventually, the sound of bubbling, boiling water. There's light footsteps, rhythmic as waves, like Charlie's pacing. And it lulls me into a sort of half dream. I'm still listening to her, in the present. But in the dream she's bending over me. Lips pale, neck bundled in a scarf. Her cheeks look red and raw. *Alana*, she says, *I—*

The air-conditioning kicks on, and I jerk awake.

For a long, panicked second, I have no idea where I am. But slowly, I get my bearings. The cushions next to my face are gray, flecked with green like a tweed suit—the Atwoods' couch. The light is low and orange, casting warped shadows across the living room. There's a mug on the table next to my face. When I reach out and graze it with my fingers, it's cold.

I shift to sit up, the fleece throw blanket slipping off my chest. The sun is setting outside. Charlie must be long gone. But I can hear voices in the kitchen. Scott and Mercedes, talking too softly to be heard. And as I uncurl a little further, I find Rue in the armchair. Her head is tipped back, her breathing even. She's fast asleep.

Gathering the blanket up from my lap, I ease my way across the floorboards and tuck it across her lap. She shifts with a soft, questioning noise, but she doesn't wake up.

My stomach does a neat, guilty twist. It was a long night for everyone.

Just as carefully, I make my way across the room and toward the hallway, where I'll be out of earshot of the kitchen. I don't want to leave Rue to sleep there, but I'm not ready to wake her yet, either. Maybe I'll splash a little water on my face first. Give myself an extra ten minutes to prepare for that conversation.

I round the corner into the hall. And standing at the end of the hall, straight down the barrel from me, is a woman I don't

know.

I do what countless mornings with the Memory Eater have taught me never to do. I freeze.

But the woman doesn't move from where she's standing, past the stairs and with her back to me. The hallway light falls across her like jagged fingers: I see a dull, gray dress, brown plaited hair. Her hands are clasped in front of her. We're close enough that she must be able to hear me breathing.

My mouth hovers open. But whatever I'm planning to say—*Who are you* or *How did you get in* or *I'm not alone; there are people in the other room*—it dies in my throat when she turns.

Her mouth is shadowed from view. I can see her eyes, a light, curious blue, looking halfway at me, halfway over my shoulder. Politely questioning, at first. Then slowly widening.

And then I blink, and there's no one there.

The air is prey-animal still. Even the rush of my exhale barely seems to shake it. I take one careful, heel-to-toe step forward. And then finally, there's movement. Just not the movement I'm expecting.

A shadow shifts behind me, away from the French door. It bathes the hallway in the egg-yolk yellow of golden hour. The front doors, facing west, always catch that full blast of sunset light. Unless it's a cloudy day. Or unless there's something—or someone—in the way.

My brain's still moving sluggishly, hazy with shock. But I know that when I entered the hallway, there was light streaming in through every other window. Just not through the doors behind me.

So not a cloud. A something, or someone, waiting.

And the woman who couldn't have been here, who vanished before my eyes—I think she really had been looking over my

shoulder. Right at whatever was blocking the light.

And whatever she saw terrified her.

SIX

THE SECOND-WORST PARTS of the worst days of your life are the mornings after. There's a quick, hopeful second where you don't completely remember why you fell asleep so miserable. And then it hits you.

At least I slept. I didn't think I would, after sleeping most of the day yesterday. But I was only awake long enough last night to get a quick, light-on-the-details update from Scott and Mercedes. They'd spent the day with the Harlow records and were planning to go back first thing in the morning. The council members were spread across town, trying to lure the Memory Eater out of hiding. But it had been quiet all day. No attacks in town. None reported anywhere else.

The Memory Eater is a lot of things. Restrained isn't one of them. If she didn't eat at all yesterday, she must have last night.

I take the stairs two at a time, but I slow as I reach the front hallway. The white paint glows in the sun, soft and unassuming. It doesn't even look like the same space as last night. No slanted shadows. No woman at the window. Nothing blocking the light at the door.

I'm not the Memory Eater. I can't take a moment in time and turn it over, objectively, in my hands. So I can only guess. And right now, I'm guessing that I've progressed from hearing things to seeing things.

There's a soft tapping coming from the living room. Rue's usual cadence. As long as I've known her, she always drums on the side of the couch when she's nervous.

She's half-sunken into the cushions, her hand snaked around the arm where she's been tapping at the fabric. When she sees me, she straightens so quickly that her water glass wobbles on the side table. "Hey," she says. "How're you feeling?"

I consider lying. But after where lying has got me, I'm feeling radically honest. "You know." I shrug, smiling weakly. "Not *great*."

She grimaces as I settle opposite her. "I'm sorry, Alana."

"This is so far from your fault," I say.

She folds her legs onto the chair. "Not sorry like that," she says. "Just—for you to have done that. I knew it was bad, after your grandmother died. I didn't know how much."

I twist my fingers together. Sympathy still feels—*wildly* unearned, to put it lightly. But I remember how much it hurt Charlie to hear that.

"Yeah, well," I say. "No more secrets."

The set of her shoulders smooths like a blanket. "I'll hold you to that."

I take a breath and plow ahead. I still feel way too cracked open for this level of sincerity. "So," I say. "I'm guessing you would have said if there was news?"

"No sign of her. Mae apparently thinks that—well." She cuts off for a moment, looks a little queasy. "That with how much she took from you, she hasn't been hungry."

"That's not really like her," I say. "She *has* to have eaten something by now."

"That's what I thought, too." She folds her hands in her lap. "But even outside of Whistler, everyone is on the lookout for loss of memories. Ayako made it up for the exotic-pet angle. Told them it carried a parasite that causes cognitive symptoms, or something. There haven't been any reports."

I curl into the armchair. That—doesn't feel possible. She wouldn't be venturing too far from civilization, and she's not exactly a forgettable sight. Though I guess if anyone saw her, she could simply take their memories of the encounter.

But would she even *want* to hide? I can't help but think that, after all these years, she's had enough of that.

Rue visibly chews on her words for a moment. Then she asks, "*Do* you think she left?"

Until she asked, I wasn't really sure. Leaving would be the safest thing for her. To take all the memories she wants somewhere no one is prepared for her, and move on before anyone realizes what's happening. It would be smart. And she *is* smart.

But she's angry, too.

"I don't know," I say. "Whistler's been her prison for over two hundred years. If she's going to eat her fill, I think she might start with us."

In the following quiet, I realize that I don't hear footsteps anywhere else in the house. "Are Scott and Mercedes already gone?"

"Ah. Yeah." There's a faint, glazed look in Rue's eyes. I think I scared her just now. But I did say no more secrets. "First thing this morning. Mae gave them a key to the council office."

"I'll bet Lena loved that." When Lena became council chair, she reorganized the perpetually cluttered council chair office into a labyrinth of cabinets, locks, and keys. Some keys even lead to boxes of more keys. She barely likes letting people breathe on them, let alone giving them keys of their own.

I always thought it was hilarious. As if someone's going to use an old census for nefarious purposes. Grandma told me that it was her way of protecting her work.

Until what Mercedes said on the beach, I thought she was being diplomatic. But it seems like Grandma was quietly developing locks of her own.

“I don’t know if they’ll find anything,” I admit. “In my family’s records.”

“Yeah.” Rue watches me pick at the throw blanket. She’s fiddling, too, with the top corner of her book cover. Something we’ve always had in common. “They know there won’t be a record of how the seal works. But they’re hoping one of your relatives had a theory.”

“I mean, they’ll definitely find theories,” I mumble. There have always been Harlows who thought they’d be the one to figure the whole thing out. But there’s only one written record of how the seal worked. Abigail Harlow was a voracious journal keeper. And there’s a cluster of jagged paper edges where the first half of her first journal used to be. The pages that chronicled her journey on the *Advent*. Pages she destroyed.

When she was safely in Whistler, she wrote out the story one more time, in the pages picking up after the torn ones. But the story she wrote was a heavily edited one. *After two days of work, it was done* was all she wrote about creating the seal. *That is all that bears saying.*

I know she thought it was irresponsible, passing on the secrets of how to take away someone’s freedom forever. But some emergency backup planning would have been nice.

Rue visibly tries to perk up. “They might find something that’ll jog your memory.”

“I’m not sure there’s any memory left *to* jog,” I say.

This time, I hear something split when Rue creases the edge of the book cover. She’s going to be so mad at herself later.

“Who knows,” she says. “Maybe the Memory Eater left something behind.”

I watch her stare hard into space, as if the secret to all our problems sits two inches above the arm of the couch. “You can ask,” I say. “I might not know, but you can ask.”

She pauses, clearly trying to decide how *to* ask. Finally, she says, “What did she take?”

I push the poor throw blanket aside before I can completely unravel it. “All of it,” I say. “All of that week, I mean. I remember going to wake up Grandma that morning when she was late, and”—I snap my fingers—“suddenly I’m in the hospital after my fall. I don’t remember finding her, or Mom leaving, or why the hell I decided to let the Memory Eater in my head in the first place.”

When Rue sucks in a breath this slowly, it usually means that she doesn’t like whatever she just thought of. When I make a questioning sound, she squirms. “When I finally got to talk to you, the day you fell,” she says, “you had just come out of surgery for your ankle. I thought it was the anesthesia. But you didn’t—I mean. You asked if your grandmother was coming. I had to remind you. Or I guess tell you for the first time.”

My stomach flips. “Holy shit, Rue,” I say. “I’m sorry I made you do that.”

She exhales softly. “I’m sorry you had to hurt that much twice.”

We’re quiet for a moment. I keep twisting my fingers back and forth, in one hand and then the other. And finally, I admit, “I don’t remember breaking up with Charlie.”

Rue snaps upright so rapidly, the couch creaks with the force of her movement. “Hang on,” she says. “What?”

“Yeah,” I say. “That’s what I said, too.”

“Alana,” she says. “Oh my *God*.”

I scrub at my face with both hands. “I don’t suppose you know what we fought about . . .”

Rue blinks her beautiful long lashes three times. “To be clear,” she says, not unkindly. “Are you asking me if you told me, in detail, about something that upset you?”

“Ah,” I say weakly. “Nothing, then?”

“Nothing,” she confirms.

There’s a longer pause, this time. “And Grandma dying, or Mom leaving . . .”

Her smile slides off. “I didn’t think you wanted to talk about it.”

“Not your fault,” I remind her.

“I know,” she says. “I just wish I’d pushed harder.” She watches me for a long moment, her brow creased. “How does it feel? I mean—are you okay?”

Fine, I come very close to saying. Old habits. “I’m . . . not sure,” I admit. “I’ve been having headaches. The day she escaped, I was hearing things, right up until when the seal broke. And last night—” I know I have to tell her. But this one’s going to sound so much worse than it actually is. “I think I was seeing things.”

“Seeing—” Rue sits up straighter. “Seeing what? When last night? Here?”

“In the front hall,” I say. “This woman, standing next to the window.”

“And you didn’t come and get me?” she says.

“You were exhausted,” I say. “And she didn’t—she definitely wasn’t there. It was just for a few seconds, and then she was gone.”

She leans back in the couch hard. Her cheeks look as bloodless as her knuckles. “And you think the Memory Eater did something to you.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” I say. “And that’s the easiest explanation, but . . .”

“But what?” she says.

I haven’t tried to think of the Memory Eater’s escape since it happened. Not because of what I might find there—because of what else I might find missing. But when I test my weight against the memory, it holds. I remember the pressure of her pinning down my arms, her white, blank face hovering above me. I remember asking her about what I’d been hearing all day. And I remember—

“She was surprised,” I say. “When I told her.”

Rue doesn’t look convinced. “She could have been trying to confuse you.”

“Maybe.” She does like playing with her food, but—she doesn’t lie. She omits. She circles the edges of the truth. Even over the past few months, with the biggest secret she’s ever kept from me, I’m not sure she directly lied even once.

“Whatever you want to do,” Rue says, “we’ll figure it out.”

“What do you mean, we?” I ask. “Whatever I’m going to do, I can’t get you involved.”

“So you have a plan, then?” she says.

“I mean, no,” I say. I know I can’t just sit here. The Alana of four months ago wouldn’t have. But the Alana of four months ago already had dozens of paths charted for her. There was always a Harlow, in the near or distant past, who had tried something first. I’m just barely the youngest head of the family, and not the first to step up in the wake of a tragedy. Whatever I wanted or needed to do, a roadmap existed.

But now? I really am the first. Before Grandma died, I might've been good enough to figure out what to do. That was the Alana that everyone trusted. The one that Mom called "golden girl," even if she meant it as an insult.

That Alana went into her grandmother's room on a cold morning in February. I'm not sure she came out.

In any case. "It's dangerous," I point out weakly.

"Trust me," Rue says, "I will not need encouragement to stay away from the Memory Eater."

"And you're ready to go behind your parents' backs?" I say.

"They didn't specifically tell you not to get involved," she says, entirely too quickly. "They just said you should rest. You can rest *and* help."

My lips twitch. "And this doesn't have anything to do with them wanting you to leave Whistler."

"No," Rue says. She says it so forcefully that her curls bounce a little bit. "That's—I'm not leaving Whistler. They know that. That's a different—we've already talked about it."

I bite back a smile and let it go. Rue has cut me, frankly, superhuman amounts of slack in the past twenty-four hours. If she wants to rebel, it's overdue.

But "how" is still the question. The Atwoods are combing my family's records. The council is out there trying to tempt the Memory Eater into taking a taste. The police are searching what must be the entirety of the state by now. Where do I even fit in?

I'm still not sure. But thinking of the police finally gives me an idea.

"Rue," I say, straightening. "Do you still have Grandpa Atwood's old police scanner in the attic?"

She barely hesitates. I adore her. "Give me a second."

By the time Rue reappears with the bulky police scanner, gray with dust and dangling cords like a beached jellyfish, I've laid out two coffee mugs, some toast, and a giant plate of scrambled eggs. I dig into my portion while she sets up, only realizing as I'm eating just how hungry I was. Finally, Rue flips the switch, then winces against the pops of static as she fiddles with the knob. I take a sip from my coffee mug, then grimace. Grandma loved coffee so much that even after her doctor warned her off caffeine, she drank decaf every morning. I clearly didn't inherit that gene.

Rue gives the dial another careful nudge. And finally, the static warps into voices.

“. . . two stories tall and writhing like a goddamn nightmare,” someone is grumbling. Through the crackling, I recognize the police chief, Tom Flaherty. “And you're telling me that *no one* has seen her.”

“No dice, sir,” says another male voice. “Only calls so far turned out to be raccoons or nothing. I'm gonna stay with Ayako Stinnet for another half hour or so, then escort her to the council office.”

“Just keep your eyes peeled,” Flaherty says. “She'll be getting hungry soon. And it might not be the council she decides to turn into a snack.”

“Ah—sir?” a third man cuts in. “How do we know she's two stories tall?”

Silence wheezes through the speaker. “I don't know, Davidson,” Flaherty finally says. “Could be that I've seen the beast once or twice or a dozen times over the years.”

“Of course you have, chief,” Davidson says quickly. “But Sully says she can shrink down to the size of your ear canal. That's how she gets into your brain.”

Rue arches a single eyebrow. To which I shrug broadly. At this point, I'm willing to consider anything.

"Tell you what, Davidson," Flaherty sighs. "Someone finds a real enthusiastic tick out there, I'll let you know."

"Lord almighty, though," the second voice says. "Caroline Harlow must be spinning in her damn grave right now."

I flinch. The coffee twitches in my mug—a little dribbles down the side.

"Come on, Connolly," Davidson says mildly.

"Come on nothing. He's right," Flaherty says. "Do you want to know why Caroline never took a sick day in her life? Because if that family lets their guard down, even for a second, something like this happens. All her life, Alana's been acting like she knows better than us dumbass townies. And not two weeks in, she fumbles the ball. Thought for all that swannin' around she'd know better than that."

Rue's clutching the arm of the couch so hard, I'm afraid she's going to pull out a chunk of fabric. "They're entitled to it," I say. It comes out as a dry whisper. They're—they're not wrong. The least I can do is accept their anger.

But I've known Police Chief Flaherty since I was little. I never knew he thought I was arrogant. I've never thought the word "townie" in my life. *I'm* a townie.

"I'm telling you, though," says the second voice, apparently Connolly. "Lena's a saint. She keeps reminding me that Alana's just a kid. Probably didn't know what she was doing, really."

A thick, burning taste rises to coat the back of my throat. I'm the last one who has the right to be angry, even at Lena. But it's hard not to notice that to her, some days, I'm an adult until she needs me to be a child.

But she's out there cleaning up my mess. So if she wants to use me to look good in front of some Whistler Beach police officers, maybe I should let her have that one.

Rue jerks forward and, after a moment's hesitation, decisively turns down the volume. She must have realized halfway that we can't turn it off yet. But the revenge attempt is appreciated.

When I meet her eyes, she's scowling. "I hate them."

"They have a right to be angry," I say.

"Still hate them," she says.

The feed is mostly silent as we finish our breakfast, with the occasional litany of updates. Chris is in the archives with Scott and Mercedes for now, while the other three council members take their shifts as bait. Their plan, we find out, is to keep to the busier parts of Whistler, in the hopes that those are the places the Memory Eater will go looking for an easy meal. Lena's on the boardwalk, guarded by Flaherty. Mae is at the edge of the state park with Davidson. And Ayako is at the empty middle school.

"Isn't school out for the summer?" Davidson asks at one point. "Why would she go looking in an empty building?"

"She lives in a cave," Flaherty says. "How's she gonna know the difference?"

Rue smiles grimly as I massage at my temple. "I did tell them they were going to need you."

We also learn that Flaherty and Lena aren't the only ones at the boardwalk today. Apparently there *are* a few tourists out there, braving either the possibility of an exotic-animal attack or a real-life monster on the loose. And so a few of the locals are still at work, stubbornly trying to keep things running.

There's anxiety crawling through me just thinking about that crowd, however small it is. Everything we knew about what the Memory Eater was capable of is about two hundred years out of date. I don't know how much she can take from a person. And if she wanted to hurt someone—physically—what would stop her?

After an hour, it feels like it might be time to give up on the scanner. I'm halfway to the switch when I hear someone gasp.

"Chief." Connolly's voice. "Chief, I—I just heard Ayako scream."

I'm out of the chair before I register I'm moving. The elementary school is three blocks away, at the corner of Oarsdip and Weathervane. A ten-minute walk. A quicker run. And if the Memory Eater already has her, entirely too far.

The Memory Eater knows that school is out for the summer.

Which means she went in knowing she was going to find Ayako alone.

"Get *in* there, Connolly," Flaherty says.

"I didn't see her go in." Connolly's voice shrinks. "Maybe she's not even here, maybe I don't have to—"

"*Max*," Flaherty says.

"I can't," Connolly says. "Chief—my dad died last month. I can't forget him, I can't—"

I reach to finally, finally turn it off. Rue gets there first. Both of us breathing as hard as if we were already running.

I can see the fight playing out behind her face. I can't remember, suddenly, if I've ever told her that there's nothing wrong with her for being afraid of the Memory Eater. She thinks it's a weakness. I think she's just smarter than the rest of us.

“You don’t have to come with me,” I say. But just as she knows exactly what I’m about to do, I know her right back. I know the answer even before she opens her mouth.

“Yes,” she says. “I do.”

SEVEN

MIDDLE SCHOOL IS objectively hell on earth. Or at least it was for Rue, the littlest civil service nerd, and me, the girl with the monster. When we graduated from eighth grade, the two of us ate ice cream on the bleachers, clinked our cones in a little toast, and celebrated the fact that we would never, ever, see the inside of that school again.

Buildings can't look smug. But as the middle school towers ahead, the facade looks unsurprised to see us.

“What now?” Rue's still breathing as heavily as I am. We've beaten the police here, and the parking lot is empty. Which means Connolly left Ayako alone in there.

“We have to go in,” I say.

We approach the double doors, the same chipped-brick red that we used to face down every morning, and I squeeze Rue's shoulder as I sidle in front of her. When something scares Rue, she has to understand it, inside and out. She doesn't understand the Memory Eater. Not fully. Not yet.

I don't fully understand her, either. And I'm not braver than Rue. Fear, Grandma told me, is a good thing. Fear just means you want to be alive. *Honor it*, she said. *And then set it aside*.

I give the door one little push. It creaks backward, a little breath in.

The foyer lights are on, the hall windows too tall and narrow to let in any real light. A gust of wind snakes past our legs as the door closes behind us. But aside from the rattle of

posters lining the walls, there's no sound. No Ayako. No Memory Eater.

“Hand,” Rue whispers, without looking at me.

I offer it. Then very nearly yelp as she seizes my fingers. My clients aren't the only ones who hold my hand for comfort—it was Rue's to hold first. Though I'm not having my hand *held* right now so much as crushed.

“Jesus,” I whisper. “Feel better?”

“No,” she whispers back.

I shift in her vise grip to lace our fingers together. “Me neither.”

So we make our way deeper into the school. And we're careful to move quietly. If the Memory Eater is here—well—best-case scenario, Ayako's hiding somewhere. If we call out, we could draw the Memory Eater right to her.

Worst-case scenario, the Memory Eater is already in her mind. Interrupting her mid-meal would be more dangerous for Ayako than anything else.

My heart boils in my chest. Ayako's mind is always so full: with half-finished poems, with mental snapshots of beautiful remote places, with her to-do lists. The other night, in the Atwoods' kitchen, she told me to come to her if I was in trouble. If anything happened to her just because I was too proud to say yes—

With a sound like a gunshot, the two front doors burst open behind us.

Rue, her hand still in mine, freezes. A burst of adrenaline keeps me from doing the same—I grab her tighter, haul the two of us into the nearby auditorium. The door creaks mostly closed, still open just enough to hear what's happening in the hall.

“Ms. Stinnet?” Police Chief Flaherty’s voice. The echo of boots ricochets down the line of lockers. “Ayako?”

A beat of silence. And then finally, an answering sound, just down the hall. “Tom?”

The relief is so powerful, it almost takes me out at the knees. It’s too early to be relieved, but—but she seems okay. She answered to her name. She knows who Flaherty is.

“Tom”—a set of stumbling footsteps—“she was here. Where’s Officer Connolly? Is he—”

“He’s safe,” Flaherty allows. He doesn’t elaborate how. “Where is she?”

There’s a soft jingling sound. The sound Ayako’s earrings make when she shakes her head. “Tom, she *left*. She didn’t take anything.”

Rue squirms closer to the door, as if she might’ve misheard. “Ayako,” Flaherty says, a little haltingly. “You must be confused.”

“I’m not—” Her deep breath is audible. When she speaks, she’s calmer, but barely. “I remember everything. She cornered me in one of the classrooms. She pinned me to the damn floor, and then she just . . . stared at me. It must have been for about a minute. And then she just . . . left.”

A chill skims my shoulders. There’s a window open behind us somewhere. I can hear dead leaves skittering across the floor.

“Why would she do that?” Flaherty says slowly. “She must be starving.”

“I know that,” Ayako says. “But I swear. She had the chance to feed, and she didn’t.”

Rue’s eyes strain to catch mine. I’m not sure what expression I’m making when I look back at her. My face feels

about as confused as the rest of me.

Flaherty's right. The Memory Eater has to be starving. And Ayako was right there.

"What do we do?" Rue whispers. It's . . . an extremely good question. Ayako's safe. The Memory Eater is, apparently, gone. And Flaherty is bound to have called for backup.

"We should get back to the house," I murmur. "Can we fit through those windows? If we can get out through here—"

I turn around. And I finally see what must have been here for as long as we were. A silhouette against the wall.

My back hits the auditorium doors, shutting them behind us.

The first thing I can make out is the line of the head and shoulders, small and hunched and person-shaped. Its chest is heaving, its mouth open, like it's crying hard. The kind of world-ending wail that you only do when you're alone.

But as tremendously loud as every breath and heave looks, there's no sound. Just those dead leaves on the floor, skittering in that same breeze.

And that's when Rue asks, "What's wrong?"

I chance a look away long enough to see Rue's face. She's looking right at it. But even as the silhouette bends under the force of another sob, she just looks confused. "Alana?"

When the light shifts, the silhouette shifts with it, from a gray outline along the wall to a woman in her twenties or thirties. For a second, I could mistake her for the woman from the Atwoods' house last night—similar age, hair a similar shade of brown—but the similarities end there. The woman last night looked like a snapshot from another time. This one is wearing a novelty Outer Banks T-shirt. Her hair is piled into a messy ponytail. And even though the fine details of her still aren't quite visible, I can see deep shadows under her eyes.

“You don’t see her?” I say.

Rue looks to me again, then follows my stare to the back wall. And slowly, she shakes her head. “Alana, there’s nothing there.”

The clearer she looks, the more her movements seem to . . . degrade. When she doubles over with another sob, she slows a little, like someone moving underwater. She sways, and her knee crumples at an impossible angle, like a liquid. She pays as much attention to it as she does to us—absolutely none at all.

I swallow, and my throat burns. “I’m seeing things again,” I admit. “I think.”

But Rue shakes her head. “When you heard voices the other day—you heard your mom and Charlie, right?”

“What about it?” I say.

“Just . . .” Rue’s still watching the same spot I am, as if she’ll be able to see it through sheer force of will. “What if you’re trying to remember something? Are you sure you don’t recognize this woman?”

“No,” I say automatically. “Why would I—”

Even as I’m saying it, I take a few steps closer, Rue’s iron grip on my hand still anchoring me to the door. I really watch the strange, sliding movements of the woman’s face, the coiling and uncoiling of her frame. “Recognize” is a strong word. But—

“I don’t think I know her,” I say. “But she looks . . . familiar.”

With a little noise, Rue tugs on our joined hands. “You should stay back.”

“I don’t think she can see us.” I carefully slide my hand out of hers. I know I promised total honesty. But I don’t think Rue

needs to know that we're now standing just inches from the woman's face.

With a slow, held breath, I lean in. She doesn't seem to notice that I've come any closer—or that I'm here at all. I scan her face. There's a thin, angry red line bisecting one of her brows. I can see the ghost of stitches in the lines of her skin.

I think I've seen that injury before. Much later, when it was a pale white scar.

“Rue,” I breathe. “I *do* know her.”

And then the woman's gaze snaps to mine.

My throat sticks closed. “Alana,” I faintly hear, behind me. “What's happening?”

The woman's gaze flicks to Rue, and then back to me. Something else I can make out from this close: the colors and shapes of her are a little flattened, a little dull. Like she's been sketched into the world with old, dark paint. Her eyes are alert, though. A little red and swollen. There are tear tracks staining her face.

She tilts her head like a lizard, as if sizing me up. And then, in one unsteady motion, her arm unfurls toward mine, her palm facing up.

“*Alana*,” Rue says again.

“It's okay,” I whisper. I don't actually know if it's okay. But when someone asks for my hand, I give it to them.

There's a long, weightless moment before the gym dissolves into a shower of white. A hover, like the highest point of a roller coaster. But if I drop, I don't feel it.

THERE WAS A very long-ago day, when I was six or seven, where Grandma left me in Mae and Ayako's house to play with the children of a client. That in itself was normal. Until the client disappeared through the Stinnet back gate after her session and left those children behind.

I was too young to remember the fallout. I know it from how Grandma described it to me, years later. The woman, Sara Whittaker, had told Grandma she was there to forget her husband. For a few horrible hours, Grandma hadn't believed the Memory Eater when she'd told her the truth. She thought the day had finally come when the Memory Eater took too much. But that evening, she found a note from Sara Whittaker, slipped into her coat pocket. Sara apologized for the trouble. And she confessed to everything. It was never her husband she'd wanted to forget. It was her children.

Grandma tried just once to call Sara, right before Mae and Ayako decided to take Daniel and Ned in as their own. The male voice on the other end of the line, with his cool, firm voice, had two things to say to Grandma. That he and his wife didn't have children. And that Grandma shouldn't call again.

Mae and Ayako don't talk about that day. Ned's not very talkative to begin with. And Daniel and I are friendly, but not close. All I have is Grandma's account, and a fuzzy memory of a woman closing the Stinnets' door. I don't remember her face. I just remember the little scar across her brow. White like a lightning strike.

The gym drops out from under us. And when she opens her wide, soundless mouth again, this time there are words.

I asked. I swear, I asked, but they can't get me more shifts. She's standing in the middle of a dark brown living room, almost bent over double. There's a man watching her from an armchair, aggressively pulled together. He looks faintly

annoyed. Stuck-in-traffic annoyed. Inconvenienced. *Maybe if you went back to work—*

The room twists, quick as fingers snapping. Same living room, same dark-wood-and-corduroy chair, but their positions are different. Sara's kneeling on the floor, her legs folded under her. The man is standing now, watching her.

—saying you have to live with it, he snaps. I'm saying you don't. Martin used them last month to forget his ex-wife. Once it's gone, it's gone.

Sara is slow to look up at him. But when she does, the anguish has shifted into a hunted wariness. *And the kids?*

There's something about his stare that makes the world run cold. It's how normal it looks, I think. How matter-of-fact. *Someone always wants kids.*

Snap. One scene whirls into the next like a patterned umbrella, shades of brown into bright blue and white. Sara's sitting in a vinyl booth, drumming a beat against the unmistakable logo printed on the table. This is the Beachside Grill over on the boardwalk. And Sara's not eating alone.

The kids sitting opposite Sara are clustered close to one another, eyeing their food with a sort of hopeful suspicion. The younger one picks at a plate of fish and chips. The older one, just slightly more at ease, is dipping fries into a milkshake.

It's Daniel and Ned Stinnet. Daniel and Ned Whittaker, then.

Anything you want. Sara's smiling across the table. If she notices the tears rolling down her own face, she doesn't do anything to stanch them. *Mommy's going to let you have anything you want today, okay?*

The scene narrows and twists into smoke. And when my legs buckle, they pitch me right into a pair of waiting hands.

“*Alana*,” Rue says. It does not sound like the first time she’s had to say it.

The room flickers in and out of focus. I try to transfer my weight back to my feet—bad idea, Rue has to hold on tighter just to keep me upright—but finally, my legs hold me, even if they have to shake to do it.

“I’m good,” I say nonsensically. I can see Sara Whittaker at the edge of my vision, calmly inspecting her outstretched hand. “What happened?”

“You went really, really white.” Rue’s grip tentatively eases up. “And you didn’t answer me for like a minute. Are you okay? Do you need to sit down?”

I shake my head to both. And then I regret it. But the dizziness is receding almost as quickly as it came on. Within a few more seconds, I feel almost normal. “That’s Sara Whittaker,” I say. “Daniel and Ned’s birth mother.”

The blood washes out of her cheeks. Rue and Daniel have been dancing around a mutual crush for nearly two years now. Daniel hasn’t talked about Sara to me. But he might have talked to Rue.

“How do you know?” she says.

I shake my head. *I* still don’t know what I saw. And I don’t want to stay in this gym long enough to parse it. “Let’s get out of here first?”

I didn’t mean for it to be a question. But there’s a thin, pleading note to my voice that I didn’t put there. Rue’s face softens.

“Hang on,” she says. “The police might still be out there.”

She darts to the window. I keep an eye on Ms. Whittaker, who’s still inspecting her hand. Her movements look . . .

disparate, somehow. The separate parts of her aren't quite moving in sync.

It's unsettling. But it's also weirdly, powerfully familiar.

"Okay," Rue says. "I can see the parking lot from here."

"What's happening?" I say.

"Flaherty called for backup," she mumbles. "Two more cruisers just pulled in. Maybe three?"

"Then we should be gone before they come in," I say. Though I don't know how we'll leave unnoticed. Either Flaherty or Ayako is still nearby. Probably Flaherty. The footsteps in the hall are too heavy for Ayako. "Once we hear Flaherty move off, we have to make for the back."

The line of Rue's shoulders stills against the window. "Flaherty?"

I falter. "Right," I say. Did she forget? I mean, I guess Flaherty was the last thing to be worried about for a second there. "I can still hear him moving out there."

Rue only ever went all the way down to Cave's Echo with me once, when she was fifteen. The second the Memory Eater looked at her, she fully froze, right on the spot. Three years and a lot of work later, she can walk down to the beach with me, even if she can't round the corner into the caves just yet. I keep telling her she never has to get past it, if she doesn't want to. Plenty of council members don't like looking at the Memory Eater, either. Every time, she tells me that one day, it's just not going to bother her anymore.

Maybe not. But I'll never forget how her eyes looked, that first time.

It's exactly how her eyes look now.

"Flaherty's in the parking lot," she says. "I'm looking right at him."

There's one last shiver of movement behind the door. But before I can ask the question, I get the answer. Someone starts humming. A bright, full-bodied rendition of "Greensleeves."

Rue doesn't need to be told what that hum is.

"Alana." When I was little, my mom used to throw rocks at the deer when they passed by the edge of the woods. Rue looks a little like one of those deer right now. "Alana, it's her."

"Shh." I can't tell where it's coming from. This place has a horrible echo. Every sound is down the hall and right on top of us at the same time.

"Alana." Rue tugs frantically at my arm. "She's outside."

"It's okay," I say. It's not true, of course, has never been true. She's not safe; she's familiar. I may know every writhing limb on her body, but that doesn't mean she won't hurt us.

My eyes dart around the auditorium, and I remember—there's a closet in the back with the PE equipment. We'd be able to hide there. But we'd also be cornered.

But we're cornered here, too. So I grab Rue's arm and drag us both inside.

The door doesn't lock. It doesn't even *shut* all the way: the hinge bounces back a little when I try to close it. There are plenty of things to build a barricade, but there's no time. I've barely had a chance to look for something sturdy before the auditorium doors start rattling.

The Memory Eater always knows when there's someone there. It's one of those little legends I've repeated to myself enough to sound real. But it isn't quite the truth. When I make the trek to her cave every morning, there's no ripple in the universe that she can sense. She's like any other creature that hunts. She listens for the movement of her prey.

So we're going to have to be very, very quiet.

Through the dark, I reach for Rue's hand. She clutches back hard enough to hurt.

The double doors drift open.

It was strangely easy, back in the cave, to forget how huge the Memory Eater was. She was almost always coiled, very rarely stretched to her full height. Through the sliver of an opening in the closet, I can see to the front of the auditorium. I glimpse her legs through the double doors.

I'm hopeful, for a dizzy moment, that she won't fit. But then she contorts, shivers in the air. And with a dusty glide like a snake's belly across the floor, she slithers inside.

I guess Officer Davidson's tick theory wasn't wholly off base.

The Memory Eater straightens. An arm ripples under her skin, the elbow bending nearly backward as it reaches. It sinks back into the whole of her, as if it had been feeling out the bounds of its cage.

I can see the edge of Sara Whittaker, too. And now that they're side by side, I know exactly why her movements had looked so familiar.

The remnants of memory that make up the Memory Eater's body—Ms. Whittaker moves just like they do.

I think the Memory Eater must see that, too. Because she stops moving.

“Well.” It never occurred to me that so much of the voice I grew up with was a performance. Her voice now lacks the teasing dance of it—it's neutral, a little gravelly. “How did you get out here . . .”

There's another shift of the air. In the sliver of the door, I can see the Memory Eater's massive hand descend to touch Sara Whittaker's cheek with one careful finger—

I feel that top-of-the-roller-coaster hover. And the snap and twist of the scenery throws me down to my knees, to sunlight and rough blue carpet.

I'm back in a living room. Not shades of brown this time. Whites and blues and oranges. Paintings, prints, and found poetry. The Stinnet house, complete with three kids sitting in a little cluster around one puzzle. Daniel, Ned, and me.

Danny. Behind me, Sara Whittaker stands at the Stinnet front door, her knuckles wrapped white against the frame. *Keep an eye on Ned until Mommy gets back. Okay?*

Then I'm kneeling on tile, and someone is shaking me.

"Alana." Someone's whispering—almost a hiss. Rue, pressed close enough that I can feel her trembling. For a horrible second, I think I'm going to pass out. The world doesn't right itself for several long, slow breaths.

My vision is still washed out in gray. But I can faintly see the Memory Eater's shadow across the floor. She doesn't look as if she's moved.

I hear her open her mouth. It's the only reason I've ever known she had a mouth past the white, motionless mask of her face. It makes an audible sound before she speaks. The pop of lips.

"Chickadee," she murmurs. "You've been holding out on me . . ."

We hold very, very still for a long time. The next noise, when it finally comes, is a dusty, reptilian slide. Moving away.

The double doors of the auditorium click. And for the first time since we walked into the auditorium, we're alone.

EIGHT

THE POLICE DON'T find us, somehow. They don't even search the closet. Someone got close, for a few seconds. Then someone else laughed and called out, "Davidson. She wouldn't fit in there."

And Davidson backed off. He should really have more confidence in his tick theory.

They move off as quickly as they came. Another report comes through on the radio: the Memory Eater was glimpsed around back, vanishing into the woods.

I watch them go through the crack in the door. They're armed. But it's never been clear whether or not the Memory Eater can be hurt. The memories themselves are what keep her alive, we've always figured: memories live several lifetimes, and so does she. But I don't know whether or not they'd make her invulnerable.

So if they find her, they might be able to subdue her. Or they might not. Either way, I don't think she'll be afraid of men with guns.

With the police gone, we really are alone now. The vision of Sara Whittaker is long gone, too, having vanished not long after the Memory Eater herself. It's quiet.

I squirm. There's a field hockey stick digging into my back. But I'm not totally confident that my legs will support me if I try to stand. "I think it's safe now."

"How do we know?" Rue's still flattened against the back wall like a cornered cat. "What if she's still looking for you?"

I close my eyes and let my head rest against the wall. I wish I could say for sure whether the Memory Eater is looking for me or not. I'm not sure what I'd prefer, actually. That I know where she's going, even if it's directly toward me. Or that I don't know anything at all.

In either case, she seemed to think that whatever happened with Sara Whittaker, I made it happen. And I don't think that was an act. Not when she didn't know we were watching.

When I open my eyes again, Rue is frowning down at me. "Are you sure you're okay?"

I bite my tongue on my reflexive "yes." Okay might be a bit of a stretch. But I can turn my head without my vision sparking, so I'm going to call it progress. "I think so," I finally say.

Her mouth forms a dubious twist. "Could the broken seal still be affecting you?"

I shrug. We've never been sure if the seal actually affects our health or not. My great-uncle Gregory, before he left town, wrote that he'd suffer debilitating vertigo if the seal was weakening. My great-great-grandmother claimed she could feel the water against the stones during high tide. I've always thought they were just playing it up for the journals, but—if the seal caused my months of headaches, that would make the most sense.

Still. "Abigail's magic is gone," I say. "I shouldn't feel it at all anymore." Then again—Sara Whittaker's memories should be gone, too. And yet I saw those as clearly as if I were there.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I grab for it so quickly I nearly drop it. Anyone texting me right now is either going to have good news or bad news.

It's not any news at all, though. It's Charlie.

Hey, the text says, I'm outside the Atwoods' place. You here?

Sometime much, much later, I'm going to unpack that she came to check on me. I glance over to Rue, whose eyes are still fixed on the door. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to convince her it's safe out there.

I'm nearby, I type back. Can you do me a huge favor?

Fifteen minutes later, the door swings open hard enough that it bounces off the wall.

"Jesus Christ," I gasp. "I thought you were checking outside."

"I did. I thought you'd feel safer if I walked you out, but—yeah, I probably should have knocked." Charlie arches one perfect blond eyebrow at our tableau. "So when I said whatever you were planning I'd like to help, and you said 'yeah, I'd like that—'"

"If it makes you feel better," I say, "there was zero planning involved."

"Baby," she says, her nod taking in the whole of the closet. "Trust me, I can see that."

I clear my throat neatly. I'll unpack that "baby" later, too. "Right. Well. Would you mind helping me up?"

She lifts me to my feet with an ease born of three years of hauling artisanal groceries. And if I can feel myself flush down to my neck, well. At least it's dark.

Charlie glances back to the wall, where Rue has barely just stopped choking on air. "You okay?"

Rue looks back at her with impressive dignity. "I'm good. Thank you."

Everything is how we left it when we sidle out of the closet, save for a few scuff marks on the floor from the officers' boots. And as I'd guessed, there's no sign of Sara.

"So," Charlie says. "How was your morning?"

My laugh takes me by surprise. It's something I've always appreciated about Charlie. No matter what I throw at her, she's never shocked.

"Mind if we talk about it somewhere extremely far away from here?" I say.

She makes a grand gesture toward the door, and her usual, easy grin unfolds. Maybe the first I've seen since the breakup. "Lead the way."

FOR SOMETHING I'VE been thinking about half my life, the idea of the Memory Eater escaping was a surprisingly vague concept until this week. More nightmare than reality. Just a looming sense of the total systematic destruction of everything I've ever known.

So when we pass all those little pockets of Whistler determined to continue business as usual, it's almost as jarring as seeing the Memory Eater herself out in the world. The boardwalk crowd is dramatically thinned, but it's not empty. A few locals sit stubbornly in their stalls, their smiles pasted on when the tourists are looking. Rue and Charlie steer our group carefully, shielding me from their view.

It's too easy to see how exposed they are. To understand how little those stalls would protect them. If she wanted to get in, she'd be in. The only reason she hasn't turned this boardwalk into a buffet is because, for some reason, she's chosen not to. Just like, for some reason, she chose not to feed from Ayako.

But I live by the ocean. I've seen how surfers flock to storm surge. Some people don't have any idea that they're as breakable as anything else. Before Grandma died, I was one of them.

Maybe I still am, at least a little. Because I'm not ready to go back to the safety of the Atwoods' house yet.

We end up at the Beachside Grill. Which is probably a terrible idea. First of all, nobody wants to see me. Second of all, I probably shouldn't reward David Liu for keeping the place open. But at least he's got the doors and windows barred. Which does, oddly enough, make it feel a little safer in here. Like eating an ahi tuna burger in a fallout shelter.

"So . . ." Charlie pauses as I take an unwisely sized bite of my lunch. "You actually saw her memories?"

I take a quick look around. Rue seemed to think Daniel didn't work Tuesdays, which—I'll ask her later why she knows his shifts by heart. It looks like she's right, though. The only striped Beachside uniforms I see belong to Lili Thompson and David himself. The rest of the thin crowd is made up of boardwalk employees, clustered around the biggest table. Not quite close enough to overhear.

I haven't attracted their attention yet. I don't think they'd be nearly as excited to see me here as David was. He keeps shooting hopeful glances at our table, like we must be in the midst of fixing this as we speak.

Hopefully he's not too far off.

"I saw her memories when I touched her. Including memories of Daniel and Ned," I say. "And then it happened again when the Memory Eater touched her. I think we both saw it that time. At least, she reacted like she saw it, too."

I take a few more bites as Charlie mulls that over. "Not to be a smartass," she says, "but I thought the whole point was that once you give her your memories, they're gone."

"They *should* be gone," I say. "Like, forget how I'm seeing them—how do they even still exist?"

“Your grandmother called those things in the Memory Eater’s body ‘leftovers,’” Rue says. “Could those actually retain some traces of the original memories?”

“It would make sense?” I say. “There’s so much we don’t know about her.” We’ve had our fair share of clients over the years—biologists, zoologists, even therapists—who’ve asked to run tests on the Memory Eater. The Memory Eater was even interested, some of those times.

But that was always a hard line for the council. It was too dangerous, they said, for the Memory Eater to have such prolonged close contact with someone. Which I always thought was an excuse not to do the paperwork, but maybe they had a point. I’ve had more close contact with her than anyone, and look what I did.

Rue takes a sip of her Meng Po Soup. Which is actually just the soup of the day, but like most people in this town, David can’t resist a sly reference. He’s got a mocktail called Waters of the Lethe, too. “If Sara Whittaker is one of the leftovers, then how was she in the auditorium? She should still be part of the Memory Eater’s body.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “The whole thing was just . . . weird. Why didn’t she feed from Ayako? She was right there.”

“Hm,” Charlie says.

I look up at her sharply. I know that “hm.” “What?”

“I don’t know.” Charlie chews on her thought for another few seconds. I wait her out. It’s not that she doesn’t know—not when she gets that look. It’s that she doesn’t know how to say it just yet.

“You both saw the same thing,” she says. “Something Rue couldn’t see at all. And you said the Memory Eater sounded . . . surprised, when it happened. Strange things have

been happening to you since the seal started to break. What if strange things are happening to her now, too?"

I shift my weight, the vinyl seat creaking under me. It makes a horrible kind of sense. "You think she *couldn't* feed from Ayako?"

"I don't know," Charlie says. "But whatever's happening, I think it's happening to both of you."

"I wonder," Rue says. "The Memory Eater has never fed from a Harlow before. And she's been under the influence of Harlow magic for over two hundred years. What if your magic just—doesn't mix with her, somehow?"

"But my magic isn't strong enough to do anything," I say.

Rue shrugs. "Maybe it's strong enough to cause some kind of . . . I don't know, feedback loop?"

"Maybe," Charlie muses. "But if Sara was caused by some kind of mixing of their magic, why isn't Alana seeing more of those leftovers?" At the questioning rise of my brows, she adds, "It's been a day and a half since she escaped. You saw someone in the Atwood house last night, and then Sara Whittaker at the auditorium. Why aren't they everywhere?"

She's right. Even if I slept most of yesterday, I had plenty of time to see something this morning. There are thousands of memories within the Memory Eater. Why have I only seen two?

I don't think the memories themselves are connected. The woman from last night was clearly from decades ago. I didn't get a chance to touch her like I did Sara; I can only guess at who she might have been. All I know for sure is that she looked scared.

And that, like Sara, she eventually seemed to realize where she was, too. She looked right behind me, at that shadow in the door.

The shadow in the door. In all the chaos, I'd forgotten about it completely.

"I think the Memory Eater was near me," I say faintly. "Both times."

Rue twists in the booth so quickly that she almost spills all three waters. "Hang on," she says. "You didn't tell me that the Memory Eater was at my *house*."

"I kind of just pieced that together," I say.

She groans and buries her face in her hands. "The Memory Eater knows where I *live*?"

"She can't have known it was your house." I rub awkwardly between her shoulder blades. "She's been in a cave for two hundred years."

Across the table, though, Charlie's mouth has thinned. It's a softer, more hesitant look than I might have seen from her when we were dating. Back when she was still pretending that we didn't both know she wasn't as tough as she sometimes wanted to be. "What?" I ask.

"I don't want to scare you," she says.

I laugh. It hitches. "You're kind of scaring me now."

She's silent for a beat. Then she says, "The Memory Eater has been in more than half of the heads in this town. Josie lives next door to the Atwoods, and the Memory Eater probably knows her whole route to work at this point. I think she knows exactly where you are."

I stare into the depths of my plate. My burger is only half-done. Unfortunately I'm fairly sure that I never want to eat again. "Oh," I say uselessly.

Charlie smiles. Or tries to, anyway. "Sorry."

I reach down and squeeze at the back of Rue's hand. "If she wanted to hurt me, she had plenty of chances. Whatever she

wants, I'm not sure that's it." And I have a horrible suspicion that of all the Memory Eater's reasoning, that's the most straightforward. She's still here, I think, because she has plans for this town. And whatever they are, she'd like me to watch.

Either way. There's nothing I can do to put her back in that cave, at least for now. But maybe I can start by figuring out what's wrong with us.

Because if something did hold her back from feeding from Ayako, somehow—then I can't let her be the one to figure it out first.

Across from me, Charlie starts to speak. But before she can get the words out, there's a cold, wet shock down the back of my shirt.

Rue recoils like she's been hit, but after the day I've had, my startle reflex appears to be broken. I blink, uncomprehending, at my soaked clothes, then at the upended water glass in front of my face. By the time I think to look at the arm holding it, Lili Thompson's hard stare is waiting to meet mine.

"Sorry," I say automatically. But even with my brain scrambling to catch up, I know that's not right. Lili's pretty graceful. I remember that from my brief crush on her in middle school.

Then I see her knuckles going white around her grip on the cup, and I think, *Oh. That makes more sense.*

"Sorry," I say again. Much quieter this time.

Lili's nostrils flare. "I'll bet you are."

Charlie seems to grasp what just happened, too. Or maybe I was the only one who needed to catch up. "What the hell are you doing?"

“It’s okay.” I wring the excess water out of my skirt. My hands only shake a little, too. “She’s—she’s entitled to—”

“She’s entitled to her anger,” Rue says. “Not to assault.”

“Oh, I’m allowed to be angry?” Lili’s eyes go wide and mocking. “Thank God.”

“Lili? What are you—” David Liu’s voice, somewhere over my shoulder, cuts off in a flurry of footsteps. He’s at our table in seconds. “Lili, apologize.”

She rounds on him, her brown curls swinging like a fist. “Apologize to *her*?”

“Alana is working,” David says.

“Working, is she?” David reaches for her arm, but she smacks his hand away. “Kind of looked like she was just taking advantage of the free food you always give her.”

“I’m not—” My face is still boiling hot. Over by the table of locals, I can hear shuffling, the creak of chairs, but no one moves to speak up. “I’m going to pay. I was going to pay.”

“Oh, good. I’m sure that’ll be more than enough to keep David open when this town goes under.” She tosses the empty cup of water to the side, leaving it to bounce across the tile. “How about my father, Alana? Are you going to keep him afloat, too? Take his whale watch tours, maybe? How many whales do you think we even get out here in Whistler? People take his tours because they’re bored. Because they’re waiting for appointments with you.”

I should look up again. Grandma would have looked her in the eye. She wouldn’t be sitting here staring at her useless wet lap. “I’m going to fix this,” I say.

“Are you? Because everyone knows you have no way to put her back in there,” Lili says. “So tell us. You know everything,

right? What is my father supposed to do? What are any of us supposed to do?"

Charlie's already on her feet. "Back off, Lili."

She scoffs. "You're not her girlfriend anymore, Sawyer."

"Yes, thank you for reminding me. I was the first to know, actually," Charlie says. "Now I'd love to remind you of a few things. I don't know if you know this, Lili, but this entire coastline? All beach towns. None of those towns have monsters to bring in extra tourist dollars. And somehow those towns survive, right?"

Lili is a few inches shorter than Charlie. For a second, when she surges up to her full height, you wouldn't know it. "Sure," she says. "There are plenty of beach towns. Without the memory business, why would anyone choose us over them?"

"Absolutely no idea," Charlie says blithely. I try to catch her eye, signal for her to stop. But I should know better by now. Nobody stops Charlie when she's on a tear. "Sounds like a you problem. Do you know the percentage of tourists who came here for the Memory Eater, Lili? Sixty-one percent last year. That's the kind of thing you know when you're dating a Harlow. The other thirty-nine percent thought they were in a perfectly normal town. So why couldn't they be?"

"It's a little late to be a normal town," Lili snaps back.

"Hard to say. No one here has ever actually tried." Oh. Charlie *is* angry. "You just count on things going along as they are. The Memory Eater's still alive, so you assume she's going to live forever. The Harlows have never struggled, at least not that you've noticed, so you assume they never will. Alana made a mistake. She knows that. But she's been doing this all alone. If the survival of this town depends on her being perfect every day of her life, then this town doesn't deserve to survive."

Lili's face has gone from furiously red to gray. Her fists are balled by her sides, trembling. For a moment, I think she's going to actually take a swing.

When she finally speaks, her voice has gone shaky. "Screw you, Charlie."

"Lili," David says. "I'll pay you for the whole day, but—I don't think you should be here."

Something wild crosses Lili's face. "You know you don't owe her anything, don't you?"

David's face blanches. "That's enough," he says.

"Is it?" There's a dark anticipation in her laugh when she turns back to face me. "You should know, Alana. Your family didn't do anything to help David. That night terror he came to you to get rid of? He's still having it."

"*Lili.*" I've never heard David Liu angry before. He's so quiet. Quieter, I think, than I've ever heard him speak. "Go home."

Lili, for her part, looks beyond her anger now. She's laughing as she tosses her pen and pad to the table, directly into the puddle of my water. "Fine," she says. "Keep coddling her. See how that goes for you."

Then she swings on her heel and storms toward the staff room. She slams the door so hard behind her that the lines of pictures on the walls rattle.

In the long pause that follows, Charlie's attention falls to the table of locals, who've gone completely silent. I can't see them from where I'm sitting. But after a few moments of silence, I hear forks clinking and quiet muttering among themselves.

"Alana . . ." David's slow to turn back to me. "What she said—"

I shake my head numbly. I've been coming here for years. *Grandma's* been coming here for years. He could have told her, if he wanted to spare my feelings. But he never once —“What did she mean, you're still having it?”

“It did work,” David says quickly. “I swear, it did. I do still have the dream. But I never remember it afterward!”

There's a tidal swell of blood in my ears as I look at him. He's still smiling at me. Still so, so confident. “And hey,” he says. “You know you never have to pay, right? Harlows eat free, always.”

I stand, fumbling for my wallet. We shouldn't have come here. I should never have told myself I could help. Apparently I never really have. “Here,” I say, pulling out a handful of twenties.

“Alana—” he says.

“No, I'll pay. I'm sorry.” I press them to the table, in David's direction. And then I run. The table of locals watches me the entire way to the door.

My eyes water in the sand-reflected light as I stumble out onto the boardwalk. It's another boiling afternoon. The ocean should be packed from shore to shore on a day like this. But there's just a single surfer, taking advantage of the quiet. Like whatever's loose, it can't touch him out there.

When Charlie and Rue slip through the door a few seconds later, Rue pushes a few twenties back into my hand.

“He says you overpaid,” she says gently.

I'm slow to fold them back into my purse. I think I might have a bigger tab than I can possibly pay.

“Hey,” Charlie says. She doesn't finish the thought until I meet her eye. “If something went wrong with David, you'll figure it out. Later. Okay?”

I take a shaky breath, and I blink hard. Hard enough to blink Whistler to the way it was last week, if that was remotely possible.

“Yeah,” I whisper. Because Charlie’s right. We don’t have time for this right now. I’ll have plenty of time to think about David Liu’s night terrors after we fix this.

But it’s hard not to wonder, standing here, if nothing went wrong at all. If David isn’t the only client waking up in the grip of dreams he can’t remember. I felt it, too, all these months, didn’t I? The ghost of a feeling that I couldn’t place.

Maybe it was unrealistic, the idea that you could take a memory and take out all the pain with it. Maybe there was always going to be something left behind.

But maybe Lili was right, too. This is how Whistler is, has been for over two hundred years. It might be far too late for it to be anything else.

NINE

WE WALK CHARLIE back to where she parked her old, rusted Subaru in the middle school parking lot. She seems uneasy about splitting up for the day. But as much free rein as her grandfather gives her, even he's going to start asking questions after a while.

Charlie and her grandfather live on the other side of Whistler. Just a few miles from Cave's Echo, but their little neighborhood could be another town for how little attention they pay to the Memory Eater. Mr. Sawyer himself is a lobsterman. He joked to me once that our jobs aren't that different when you think about it. We both check every morning to see if the traps are full.

She moved to Whistler when we were in middle school. And right away we had a lot in common. We were both raised by grandparents. As much as her grandfather loves her, Charlie says he'd be the first to admit that he's not much of a parent. There were things he'd always relied on Charlie's grandmother for: buying the food, paying the bills, understanding what he was feeling even when he didn't himself. And when she died, he never learned. He just relied on Charlie instead.

That, more than anything, was something we recognized in one another. That we were thirteen years old, and that we had the gnawing sense that we were supposed to be older.

But then we did get older. And it turned out that there was such a thing as too similar. I loved Charlie's sense of responsibility. I understood it. But I never expected her to try to be responsible for me, too.

Rue and I start the short walk back to the house. We're almost home before she finally speaks.

"So," she says, clearing her throat much louder than necessary. "Charlie."

I'm not sure I like that opener. "What about her?"

"Nothing," Rue says. "Just glad you're talking again."

I turn to look at her. She watches the road ahead. "That's all?"

"Yeah. Of course." She takes a few more steps. Then finally, deliberately: "*Is* that all?"

"We're not back together, Rue," I say.

"I didn't think you were!" she says. "I just meant that she cares about you. And you care about her. So—if you could keep caring about each other, that would be cool, I think."

I laugh, genuinely. "That is a lot of words to say 'you should consider getting back together.'"

"I just know she wants to be in your life," she says. "Even if you're not dating. And I think you want that, too. Am I wrong?"

I don't know why she asks. She never is. "I do care about her," I say. "But she wants to protect me."

"Is that a bad thing?" Rue says.

"It is if it keeps me from doing my job." Now I'm the one who won't look at her. "I may not remember why we broke up, but I'm pretty sure that was the idea."

I can hear Rue's frown. "I don't think she'd expect you to stop doing your job."

"Maybe not?" I say. "She wanted me to—I don't know. Confront the council. Tell them they were asking too much. I kept telling her, there's no changing it, it just *is*. But she'd just

get more upset. She said it felt like she was watching them suck me dry and I wouldn't let her do anything about it."

"Hmm." Rue's quiet, for a minute. "You don't think the council asks too much sometimes?"

"I mean, they always have," I say. "They're not the easiest to deal with, but they're not *evil*. And if I couldn't handle it, I would have—"

Rue gives me a soft, slant-mouthed look. "Been born into a different family?"

I exhale, hissed, through my teeth. Okay, yeah. "It's not like I do everything they say," I add weakly.

"Okay," she says.

"I mean, I *have* to do most of what they say. But it doesn't —" Rue really can channel Mercedes when she wants to. I swallow. "Okay, it bothers me sometimes. But I'm—"

Used to it. So I guess the Memory Eater didn't take all my fights with Charlie. Because I remember the last time I tried to tell her that, the look on her face. I was so frustrated with her that day. I was trying to reassure her, and she was trying to nitpick my wording. *Are you actually used to it?* Charlie asked. *Or do you just think you can't do anything about it?*

"We get used to it," I finally finish. "Every Harlow gets used to it."

Rue's hand folds into mine. I'm startled, for a second. It's rare that I'm on the receiving end of one of these.

"You never told me this before," she says.

"You already didn't like her," I say. "I didn't want to make it worse."

She looks thoughtful at that. "It wasn't that I didn't like her," she says. "I kind of thought the same thing as you did, actually. When she criticized the council, or Whistler, I

thought it was a bit of an act, at first. I knew that she cared about you, but—I thought she was doing the whole ‘I’m a contrarian loner’ thing.”

I grin weakly. Charlie’s grandfather is a kind person under his perpetual scowl, but he’s a hardened crag of a man who would sooner drink seawater straight than discuss that “foolishness at the caves.” Most people assume Charlie’s not that different. She lets people think that, too. There aren’t really many places to hide in a town this small. Sometimes the next best thing is playing along with what people believe about you already.

Charlie doesn’t criticize because it’s what’s expected of her, though. She does it because she wholly, excruciatingly cares. It’s not as if I hated it, having that care directed at me. I didn’t hate it at all, actually.

But what she’s trying to protect me from is part of me. That’s not how it works, is it? It can’t be.

“You don’t think that anymore?” I finally ask.

“When you got sick last fall—that was the first time I realized how much she worried about you.” Rue scratches the back of her neck. “And she never stopped. Even when you weren’t talking.”

We reach the Atwoods’ door, and I fish for my keys to give myself a chance to decide what to do with my face. I know she’s still worried. I’ve seen it, even through all her careful patience. Maybe she’s trying not to crowd me. Or maybe she’s afraid that if she rises to the same old fights, she’ll scare me off from whatever tentative thing we have now.

I don’t know how the Alana Harlow of four months ago decided to end it. I think it might have been the right decision. But however she hurt Charlie, I might hate her a little for it.

It's not until I shut the door behind Rue and me that the rest of her sentence sinks in.

I meet her eyes, finally. They're soft, round, sympathetic. She doesn't seem to realize that she's said something that doesn't make sense. Which means—

“What happened last fall?” I say.

There's just enough time for that to hang between us before we hear the garage door.

“Shit.” Rue's eyes dart around the room, but just about everything is in place—except for the giant police scanner on the coffee table. “I'll hide it in my room.”

“Yes, please,” I say.

She hurriedly unplugs everything and bolts. I drop onto the couch, assuming what I hope looks like a comfortable position. By the time the door unlatches, I'm doing a half-decent impression of someone who's been here all day.

Scott's ever-present smile is firmly in place. But there's a drawn look to him that I've never seen before. “Did you hear that?” he says. “My neck just popped.”

Mercedes never really looks tired, even when I know she is. But there's a tightness to her smile. “It wouldn't be doing that if you'd gotten up to stretch every hour.”

“Go easy on me. This is my first office job.” As he catches sight of me, he straightens. “Alana! How are you feeling?”

“Better,” I say. And then, realizing I'm not supposed to know what's going on out there: “Anything?”

Mercedes shakes her head. “She hasn't fed today. At least not that anyone knows of.”

I try to keep a straight face. She didn't mention Ayako. Which means that either they haven't heard yet, or the council isn't telling them everything.

“Where’s Rue?” Scott asks.

Shit. Rue, as far as they know, is supposed to be distracting me. “Upstairs,” I say quickly. “Picking out a movie.”

“Oh?” His face lightens a little. “I’ll go make a few suggestions. I love my child with all my heart, but I am not up for anything that requires brainpower.” He leans in and kisses Mercedes’s cheek. “You in, babe?”

“Maybe for a little while,” she says. Scott squeezes her shoulder and disappears down the hall toward the stairs.

Which just leaves Mercedes and me. And now that I’m getting a longer look at her, I see that she looks pretty wrung out, too. “Mind if I join you?” she says.

I scoot over a little on the couch. “Fair warning that I’m not great company right now.”

“Good.” She sinks into a graceful heap. “That makes two of us, then.”

Next to her, I can see just how rigidly I’m sitting, and I let my shoulders unknot themselves. This is Mercedes. Even if I can’t tell her everything, I can trust her.

“How’s it going over there?” I ask.

“Mae and Chris are taking a shift in the archives,” she says. “Scott and I are going back in a bit. Probably very, very early in the morning.”

Mercedes isn’t usually one to deflect. But I can’t help but notice that she didn’t quite answer my question. “You haven’t found anything,” I say.

“We’ve barely scratched the surface.” She cracks a weary smile. “You come from a family of prolific journalists.”

I laugh. “Sorry about that. Should’ve warned you about Great-Great-Aunt Thomasin.”

Mercedes's smile shifts into something thoughtful. Her deep brown eyes, usually smiling or searching or a little wry, look strangely grave. "You have nothing to apologize for."

Ah. So it's that conversation, then. "I have a little to apologize for."

Here's the part where she's meant to admit that I made a mistake. It's kind of undeniable. But instead, she says, "You should have had more help after Caroline died. We should have made sure of it."

"Mercedes," I mumble, embarrassed all of a sudden, "you did everything for me that week."

"Everything we could think of," she says. "When your grandmother came to us about becoming your guardians—it wasn't as if we thought we'd get everything perfect. But looking after you meant looking after your work, too. We underestimated that."

Heat creeps up my neck and across my cheeks. Even when Grandma was alive, Scott and Mercedes always wanted to make this house a place that would be safe for me, a place where I had no rules to follow except "don't break your neck." I know they want to help me. I know they want to do it without becoming another set of expectations for me to meet. But they've been feeding me, putting a roof over my head. That's more than I ever wanted to ask of them.

"What you said on the beach the other night—" I say. "I knew Grandma asked if you'd be my guardians, if something happened. But I didn't realize it was such a . . . conversation. I guess it kind of made me wonder—um—did she know that she was . . . you know."

She watches me steadily. "No," she says. "I don't think she knew she was close to the end. I just think she knew it would be sooner than she would want."

I nod to my lap. It's not as if Harlows usually die young, but —sometimes it seems like they don't get that old, either. Grandma's relatives lived into their sixties, early seventies. She was seventy-four. Maybe it was on her mind more than I realized.

"I think as parents," Mercedes adds, "it's always too soon."

We're both quiet for a while, after that. Long enough that I start to think we're done talking. But eventually, she says, "I'm sorry if Scott and I are slow to get it sometimes. Your work, I mean. I didn't always understand, when I first moved here. I promise that I do, now."

She presses her fingers together, then back. Even her nervous fidgeting looks graceful. "But one of the first things I understood after I had Rue was that not everyone was going to put her well-being first. They didn't even have to be bad people. They rarely are. They just have to care about what they want more than they care about keeping her safe, and happy."

I swallow. The dust in my throat feels like gravel, tumbling all the way down. "I know you want her to leave."

"I do," she says. "Not for good, if she doesn't want that. But when Rue cares about something, she gives her whole heart to it. And Whistler isn't always careful about how much it takes." She breathes, gently pries her hands apart. "And she's not the only one we worry for."

I straighten. It's a little physical reminder not to bury myself in the couch cushions. When I first came to live here, I thought —well, that week I wasn't clearly thinking much of anything at all. But I thought I'd be more like a succulent than a second child. Low-maintenance. Minimal watering. Only moderately spiky. And now look at me.

"You should know," Mercedes says, "that your grandmother asked something else of me, too."

“Asked what?” We haven’t been talking that much, but my throat feels a little ragged.

“She said that we couldn’t always shield you. Sometimes you would need to go to places that we couldn’t go for you.” She smiles, not quite happily. “But she said, ‘Alana doesn’t need that from you. Just take her hand, and don’t let go.’”

Mercedes looks away for a moment, out to the yard. She’s known me for so long now. So I think she knows that I’m not always good at letting whatever I’m feeling show on my face. At least when other people are watching.

But here’s the problem with controlling your emotions several times a day for most of your life. Sometimes they’re slow to come back to you. Sometimes, even when you can feel the shape of them, you don’t know exactly what the feeling is called.

I don’t know what she sees when she looks back. But she takes pity on me. “Why don’t you go check on that movie?” she says.

I take that incredibly generous opening, and I make a break for it. I don’t know how much longer I could have sat there like I hadn’t irrevocably changed the Atwoods’ safe, quiet life in Whistler.

Like I’m not just another person taking from their daughter.

I get out of sight, and I breathe until I no longer taste barbed wire. I may have control of absolutely nothing else right now. But as long as she’s right next to me, I can protect Rue. I can make sure she doesn’t give too much.

And when this ends—however it does—I’ll talk to her about leaving Whistler. It’s the least of what I owe Scott and Mercedes.

By the time I’ve finished climbing the stairs, my heart has slowed to a steady gallop. It’s not until then that I remember

what Rue said, right before the garage door opened. *When you got sick last fall.* That increasingly familiar sensation of running a search in my brain and turning up *file not found*.

But Scott's laugh echoes down the hall from Rue's room. Mercedes is downstairs, waiting for us. I won't get a chance to ask Rue tonight, not alone.

So I give myself the gift I should know better by now than to accept: I forget about it.

WE DON'T MAKE it through the movie. It's hard to tell who flags first: Scott and Mercedes, or Rue and me. They're the first ones to call it a night, though. They have plans to be back at the council offices by about 4:00 a.m.

Rue tries to catch my eye as we ascend the stairs, but I shake my head and mouth, *Tomorrow*. She looks tired, too. And listening to the scanner won't help us stop anything, really. It'll just tell us what's already happened.

What we really need is to figure out why the Memory Eater didn't feed from Ayako today. If she wouldn't, or she couldn't.

Maybe once I've slept, I'll have more ideas than I do right now.

I shut the guest room door behind me. And then I make a long mental list of today's disparate bits of half information. Sara Whittaker. The confrontation with Ayako. The possibility of some latent magic of mine mixing with the Memory Eater's, somehow. David Liu's night terrors. Lili's anger. Charlie's worry. My grandmother telling Scott and Mercedes not to let go.

I scrub at my face. None of that is going to help me. But it's not so easy to just stop thinking about something. We wouldn't

have a business if it was.

“This is useless,” I mutter. There’s nothing I can do right now. So I shut my eyes, just as a treat.

The wind howls along the top of the roof, tugging a wave of cricket song underneath. The night air is alive in Maine summers, swimming with mosquitos and bats and the marine layer settling in to sleep. People leave their windows and blinds open. All through the night, something is always singing. Person or otherwise.

I’m halfway to sleep when I feel it: a faint sense of wrongness. It’s a familiar wrong, though—a gradual prickling rise of the hairs on my arms. My sleep-drenched brain almost bats it off. I’m muzzily certain that I have this feeling all the time, and it’s never a problem.

But I make myself wake up, just enough to think. And on the heels of awareness, it hits me. I do have this feeling all the time. It’s the feeling of dismounting the stairs at Cave’s Echo Cove and knowing I’ve been heard.

When I jolt upright in bed, the crickets have gone silent. But I do hear music now. A low, full-bodied hum. Not “Greensleeves” this time. Just one high tone, one low.

Come here.

I should know better, after all these years, than to freeze. It’s yet another rule. Never let her get you cornered.

She’s got me cornered now, though.

I ease my way out of the bed and cross the room. I don’t know why I’m moving so quietly. She called to me. I can feel her waiting, the way I always can.

But I leave the blinds where they are, and I crouch low enough to see through the sliver at the bottom. Even if she knows where I am, I don’t want her to see me.

The dark mass of her body all but disappears into the night. I can see the writhing outline of her, coiled at the base of the house like a snake. The mask of her face watches me, suspended in the black.

“Chickadee,” she says. “You almost had me fooled.”

I ease the window open just enough to be heard. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re far too old to be cute with me,” she says. “The woman in the middle school? That stunt with Ayako Stinnet? I suppose I should congratulate you. I’ve been in your *mind*, and even I didn’t guess that you’d figured it out. So what’s your poison? Being a pain in my ass? Because you’re excelling.”

In my confusion, I almost shift farther into view. “You’re not making sense,” I say.

There’s a pause. Faintly, I can hear her uncoiling. “Do you think I can’t tell when a Harlow is using their power on me? Just spit it out. I won’t be angry.”

This has always been the problem with searching the Memory Eater’s face for answers. Even if her composure slipped for just a moment, I wouldn’t be able to see it. But I know what it sounds like when she’s toying with me.

I don’t hear it now.

Maybe it’s the distance that makes me brave. Or maybe I’m just trying to find my footing in anything, even terrible ideas. But I say, “If I could use Abigail’s power, you’d be back in that cave by now.”

I know, the second it leaves my mouth, that it’s a mistake.

Abigail Harlow doesn’t come up often within the confines of Cave’s Echo. I’ve always assumed it was a sensitive subject, I guess. So I expect to hear anger in return. Bitterness.

Maybe even the strange, sharp-edged fondness that she carries for so many in my family.

But when the Memory Eater speaks, I could swear I hear hurt.

“I wanted to be nice, you know.” It’s more clipped than her usual rolling cadence. “I thought, maybe we can do this civilly. I thought you’d be better than Abigail, at least.”

The night around her forms into a hand, resting against the side of the house. She tilts her face up. Behind her mask, she’s smiling. I can feel the prickle of it.

And she straightens to her full height.

My hands freeze halfway to closing the window. She must know which room my voice was coming from. I could run, though. By the time she gets through the window, I could be halfway down the hall.

And then she’d follow me. To Scott, to Mercedes. To Rue.

Or: I could stay right here. I could tug the blinds right up to the curtain rod and let her see exactly where I am. This is what I wanted, after all. To find her.

I hoped by now that I’d know what to do with her. But did Abigail really know, when she confronted her in the belly of the *Advent*? Or did she just try?

I reach to open the blinds. And when I do—the Memory Eater freezes. She goes just as still as she did the night she escaped.

And I know better than to think she’s gone that still for me.

“*You,*” she says.

I can feel where her attention falls—I always have. And there’s an unmistakable shift. From me to the bedroom behind me.

The most frightening thing I can think of should be right outside this window. I don't want to see whatever can put horror in her voice. But what can I do but turn?

The first thing I see is the wide, unblinking stare that's waiting for me. A pair of pale eyes belonging to a woman about my height. Washed out in gray, wearing a plain dress. The same one I saw her wearing when she appeared in the Atwoods' back hall.

My mouth opens. Nothing gets a chance to come out. Her hand snaps forward like a snake. Her fingers latch around my wrist. And I get just enough time to grasp that now familiar, top-of-the-roller-coaster sensation.

This time, I feel every second of the fall.

TEN

THERE'S WIDE, ENDLESS ocean in front of me, and I'm going to be sick.

The woman in gray is standing next to me now. And at least she looks as miserable as I feel. She's clinging to a railing, her stare fixed hopefully on the horizon. But as far as my shaky vision can see, there's no land in sight ahead.

This time, I know where I am, I think. This is a memory, just like when I touched Sara Whittaker. The nausea, the sea air, the rocking of the ship—nothing here is real. Or at least it hasn't been for a long time.

"Mrs. Stinnet." A smiling, broad-shouldered man looms up in the corner of my view. Even when I flinch, he doesn't so much as glance in my direction. "My wife had me send this up," he says, tucking a sachet into the woman's hands. I can smell the herbs from here. "If you can boil some water, drink it with your tea."

The woman closes her hand around it with a smile. "Very kind of you both, Mr. Harlow."

Until that moment, I hadn't looked at him closely. By the time I've whirled around, he's already half-turned away. But I catch a familiar broad nose, a strong brow. I've seen them in the portrait at Grandma's house.

"It won't be much longer now, Mrs. Stinnet," Joseph Harlow calls over his shoulder. "Before you know it, you'll be on land."

Mrs. Stinnet manages a laugh. She sounds, for a second, just like Mae. “Suppose that’s why they call it the *Advent*,” she says. “All we can do is wait.”

With a snap and a twist, the *Advent* disappears. And then I’m lying on my back, watching red and blue light scatter across the ceiling.

I roll to my hands and knees. The carpet prickles at my bare skin. The woman’s—gone. I think I’ve been lying here awhile. My foot is asleep.

And the Memory Eater—

My legs shake wildly as I clamber onto them and over to the window. The only movement against the side of the house is that red then blue light. My thoughts feel slippery under me. It takes me a second to piece together what I’m looking at, parked on the curb. A police cruiser. Two of them.

I take off down the hall at a sprint.

The floor sways under my first few steps, my body still convinced I’m on the ship. I have to hold on to the wall every few paces, hold on to Rue’s door frame as I reach her room. She sits up so immediately, she can’t be fully awake as she does it.

“Alana?” She fumbles the light on, her glasses still on her bedside table.

I’m still unsteady, when I go to her. I have to catch myself on her bed. “Tell me your name.”

“Alana,” she says again, and I could cry. She knows mine, at least. She knows mine, but—“What’s happening?”

“Please just tell me you know your name,” I say.

Her eyes look huge and utterly lost. Not unmoored, like clients after a session. Normal lost. Scared lost.

“Rue Atwood,” she says. “Seventeen years old. From Whistler Beach, Maine.”

“And mine?” I say. “My full name.”

“Alana Harlow.” Her voice wavers. “Also seventeen. Also from Whistler Beach. When we met, I was seven and you were eight. I had a panic attack dissecting an owl pellet. You held my hand. *Please* tell me what’s going on.”

Behind me, someone bumps the door open. Scott, blearily disheveled. Mercedes in her bathrobe, her curls secured in her silk bonnet. “What’s wrong?” she says. “Alana?”

They look—not alert, but like three people who’ve been woken up in the middle of the night. None of them have the glaze of someone who’s just been fed on. But the Memory Eater was *here*.

“Where is she?” I gasp.

Even in the low light, I see Scott’s face pale. “Kiddo,” he says. When’s the last time he called me that? “There’s no one here. It’s just us.”

“Rue,” Mercedes says, “what—”

“She was like this when she got here.” Rue tugs me down to sit on the bed, gently turns my shoulders to look at her. “Hey. You’re okay. Breathe.”

I’m not sure I’m okay. But breathing, I can do. I’m a champion at breathing.

“She was here,” I try again. “I don’t know where she went; I—I saw the police car, and I thought—”

“Police?” Rue swings herself out of bed and slips to the window. Her room doesn’t look onto the neighborhood, like the guest room does. She has to open it, brace herself, and lean a little out.

Mercedes says Rue's name, then something in Spanish—*careful*, I think. Mercedes's Spanish slips out when she's happy, or when she's half-asleep, or when she's talking to her parents on the phone. I'm not used to hearing it sound this tense.

Rue murmurs something half-audible in return. Whatever's out there already has most of her attention.

Slowly, she withdraws from the window and turns to face us. I know that look. It's one of the few things I haven't forgotten from the week Grandma died. "They're parked outside Josie's house."

When Mercedes's hand touches my arm, it's cold. "We don't know anything yet," she says softly.

But I do know. The Memory Eater came here convinced that I'd done something to her. Which means that what happened this afternoon wasn't a trick, I think. For some reason, she couldn't feed on Ayako. Which means she must have been starving.

So—so she went to what she knew. Where she'd always found food before.

"I need to go over there," I say.

"Alana," Scott says, "I don't know if—"

"I know she won't want to see me," I say. "I should—I should at least go see."

Scott and Mercedes exchange a look over my head, where they think I can't see. This must be what Mercedes was talking about earlier. The difference between caring for Rue and caring for me. If it was Rue, they wouldn't let her go. Not if they could help it.

But me? These aren't my family records. They can't look at the consequences of my mistakes for me.

I can see, all over Mercedes's face, how much she'd like to tell me no. But I know she's thinking of what Grandma asked her, too. *Take her hand, and don't let go.*

"Let me get dressed," she says. "I'll come with you."

Scott nods. "Let's meet downstairs."

Rue, hovering to my right, glances back and forth between her parents. "Mom . . ."

I catch another glance pass between Scott and Mercedes. And I know they don't blame me, but the guilt takes root anyway. Whether it was intentional or not, I've dragged their daughter into my world. The one thing I know they didn't want.

"You two stay close to each other, understood?" Mercedes finally says. Rue nods.

We get dressed, and the Atwoods and I converge at the foot of the stairs in silence. Mercedes hands Rue and me our jackets, then wraps a scarf around her own shoulders. If not for the dark outside, it would look like we were all going out as a family. Like we were doing something nice. Not following the path of police lights to Jim and Josie Berenthal's driveway.

"No." I hear the voice before I see the silhouette against the Berenthals' floodlights. Police Chief Flaherty, watching our approach with a firm crease in his brow.

"I know," I say. He has no idea how much I know. "I'm not here to make trouble."

"Kind of think it's a little late for that," Flaherty says.

"Tom," Scott says. It's not often there's a warning in his voice, but here it is. "We just want to help."

Flaherty stands down at that, if only a little. His shoulders sink as he pinches the bridge of his nose. "Look," he sighs,

“Lena’s terrified that the kid’s going to make things worse, and I don’t know that I really disagree with her right now.”

Unconsciously, I start to step back. Scott’s hand falls onto my shoulder, holding me in place. “We won’t get in the way,” he says. “But if there’s anything we can do for Jim and Josie, we’re here. And even if we can’t—Alana still needs to know what happened.”

There’s a lengthy pause. I can’t quite make out Flaherty’s face, but I can see how still he is. Finally, he says, “You’ve been neighbors with the Berenthals a long time. They could probably use the company until the council gets here.” After a beat, he adds, “But not the kids. Deal?”

Mercedes looks to me quickly, and I nod. I know Josie. Right now, she’ll want a familiar face more than anything else. And Flaherty seems to think she’ll recognize them. Which is a good sign.

I hope it’s a good sign, at least.

“We’ll be out in a bit,” Mercedes says. “You two should wait back at the house.”

I shake my head. “I’d rather stay. If that’s all right.”

Flaherty lets out another grunt of a sigh at that but doesn’t protest. “Scott, Mercedes, I’ll take you in. Davidson—keep an eye on the kids, will you?”

“Ah?” A younger cop, who must be Davidson of the semi-correct tick theory, perks up. “Oh! Yes, chief!”

Davidson hews close to us as Flaherty leads Scott and Mercedes in through the front door. He’s not exactly a comforting presence, constantly shifting from foot to foot. But when he looks at me, it’s with more curiosity than anger.

“I’ve never seen you up close before,” he says. “Ah, until now, that is.”

I smile thinly. "I'm shorter in person."

"Ha! Shorter in person, that's good." He fumbles with his pad a little as he puts it in his inside coat pocket. "Sorry. I'm a little—you know, we always talk about this possibility, that she could escape. Not that we don't trust you, but, yeah. But I didn't realize it was going to be this . . . bad. Ah, sorry. That's a silly thing to say."

I shake my head. Honestly, it's one of the truest things I've heard in the past forty-eight hours.

Davidson is young. Definitely a Whistler boy, but not the usual type. I've known plenty of Whistler boys who wanted to become cops. Most of them hungry for the chance, one day, to prove themselves stronger than a monster.

Davidson looks earnest, at least. And I think on the scanner earlier, he defended me.

"I understand why Chief Flaherty doesn't want me in there," I say. "But if I know what happened, I might be able to help."

"Ah? I didn't think there was anything you *could* do." He flinches at the same time I do. "Sorry. I just meant, I thought that was the whole deal, right? Once those memories are gone, they're gone forever."

The wind skims the back of my neck, and I shiver. So whatever protected Ayako didn't protect Josie, too. "How much did she take?"

Davidson shrinks. He's tall enough that it looks ridiculous, like he's a giraffe trying to hide behind a bush. "I don't think I'm supposed to talk to you about this."

"Officer Davidson." I'm pleading now. A few months ago, I would have died before pleading in front of anyone in this town. But earlier today on the scanner, Flaherty called me arrogant. Maybe that's what Davidson thinks, too.

I never realized that everyone believed that. I just thought it would scare them if they knew that I got scared, too.

“It’s my fault,” I say. “I know it’s my fault. I just need to know what happened. Please.”

Davidson’s got such an open face; I can see every stage of his argument with himself playing out across it. I’m not sure what breaks the tie for him. But eventually, something does.

“She got Josie out back, in the yard,” he says. “I guess she was checking on her plants.”

My stomach drops. Josie always pokes around in her garden at strange hours. I see her out there sometimes when I can’t sleep. I’ve always wondered, with her shedding her bad memories like split ends, what’s left to keep her up at night.

“How much—” I don’t finish. Rue squeezes one of my shoulders.

“We can’t be sure,” he says. “Not without your padlock thing. She remembers her name, her husband, her parents. She knows what the year is and that she’s lived in Whistler all her life. And she’s recognized everyone so far. So that’s good news.”

It is. But it’s hard to call it a relief when I don’t hear any relief in his voice. “But?”

He shifts his weight left, then right, like he could shift right out of this conversation if he tried hard enough. And then, finally: “Did you know that Josie was a young widow?”

For an unforgivably long moment, I don’t comprehend what he’s saying. For an even more unforgivable moment, I want to tell him that he’s wrong. I may not be the one going in Josie’s head, but I know a decade’s worth of her bad memories. The death of someone she loved—I never knew. She never said anything.

“Apparently she always told the monster it was off-limits,” Davidson says. “She remembers that much. But when we sat her down next to the picture she keeps in her office . . . well, she asked who it was.”

The faces we’re making must be awful right now. He waves both his hands, like the horror of this is something he can shoo away. “But she seems to remember most everything else,” he says, the words tripping over themselves. “If that’s all she lost, she got—lucky’s not the word, is it.”

I nod, sending a rush of pins and needles through me, like I’ve gone numb all the way to my blood. No. Lucky is not the word for it. Josie had an entire first life she’d wanted to protect. And now it’s gone.

“Thank you for telling us,” I manage to say.

I would have thought Davidson would welcome the chance to make a break for it. His rigid, spindly body is a little angled, like he’s straining to stay put. But when I look up, he holds my stare. “Are you okay?”

For that, I manage a smile and a nod. I’m not. But that’s fine. I shouldn’t be.

Eventually, the silhouette of an officer sticks his head out the front door, summons Davidson back into the house. Even in his retreat, he’s watching us.

Once he’s gone, Rue tugs me into the shadow of the house, out of the pool of the floodlights. I don’t know what she’s doing, at first. And then I realize: she thinks I’m holding back. She’s trying to move me away from everyone’s view. Trying to give me a moment to react.

But this isn’t Cave’s Echo. I’m not holding anything back, at least right now. I remember this much from Grandma’s death: some terrible things are too enormous to hold in their entirety. You have to grasp them in stages.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Rue says.

I shake my head. It might’ve been my fault. It might be that this was inevitable, and my family kept doing it anyway. I’m not sure one is better than the other.

I think Rue gets that, too. She wraps her arms around me tightly, and she doesn’t try to argue.

It’s hard to say how long I spend pressed against her shoulder before a light clicks on ahead, illuminating our position. Rue pulled us farther away from the front driveway than I realized. We’re close enough to the back of the house that I can see the deck, Jim Berenthal’s pride and joy, jutting out into the yard. And at the edge of the deck, standing on her little island in the dark, is Josie.

“Alana?” she calls. “That’s you over there, isn’t it?”

I understand now why deer freeze in the path of your high beams. It’s entirely too late to go back where you came from. But there’s not much else you can try at that point.

Rue recovers first. “Josie,” she says, “I’m—”

I reach back for whatever part of Rue’s arm I can squeeze. “I should talk to her.”

“Are you sure?” Rue’s wary eyes flicker to the deck.

“It’ll be fine,” I say. And if it’s not—well, I can’t say that I won’t deserve it.

I see the moment Rue gives in. Though I can tell she still doesn’t want to. “I’ll be out front.”

Josie watches the two of us: me approaching, Rue retreating. It’s unusual to see her so steady. She usually reminds me of a Chihuahua, always shaking under the force of her own energy. She looks more like an owl, watching me approach. Straight-backed and still.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I know it’s a nuisance, now that you’re older. But . . . I don’t suppose you’ll hold my hand for a bit? It really does help.”

I reach for her hand, hanging slack by her side, slowly. I half expect her to flinch away at the contact. But she lets me take it.

“I’m so sorry, Josie,” I say.

“Oh.” She lets out a flutter of a laugh. “No, dear. I didn’t ask you here for an apology. Did you know, tonight is the first time it really struck me how massive she is? All those years going to her, and she never seemed very large to me. But tonight I looked at her, and I thought—goodness. We never had a chance of keeping her trapped forever. Isn’t that silly?”

I think of the auditorium, and I shake my head. “I thought the same thing.”

“After she was done with me,” she says matter-of-factly, “the first clear thing I thought was, *She should have killed her. Abigail should have killed her on that horrible ship.* Isn’t that terrible? I like her. She knows more about me than my own husband. I shouldn’t wish her dead so easily.”

“I think that’s normal,” I say. In a lot of ways, the Memory Eater might be Josie’s best friend. She might not feel too differently than I felt, when I realized the Memory Eater had escaped: half-betrayed, half-foolish for feeling that way. No matter what our reasons, we kept her prisoner. Would I be gentle with the people who did that to me? She should want to hurt us. And I should want to hurt her back.

Though even now, I’m not totally sure that I could.

“I’m sorry,” Josie laughs. “That wasn’t what I wanted to ask. I know it’s only been a few days since you found out what happened. But you’ve been living with this for months,

haven't you? I just—did you feel different, after? After she fed from you, I mean.”

I blink. Josie knows better than anyone how it feels. “Different how?”

“Well,” she says. “Everyone from that voyage is long dead. Your clients are always willing. We're the only two people alive who know how it feels to have her steal from you.”

“That's not—” I say. “It, um. Wasn't stolen, for me.”

“She took more than you offered,” she says. “Isn't that stealing?”

I feel oddly exposed, standing here under the porch light. Josie's close enough to see every minute shift of my face. “I don't think you can really compare it,” I say. “She took enough to escape, but . . . I think most of it, I gave to her willingly.”

I don't think I've said that out loud yet. Not in so many words. Strange, to be telling Josie of all people first.

Josie's looking past me a little, like when I saw that woman from the *Advent* at the Atwoods' house. But unlike with that woman from the *Advent*, I don't think Josie's seeing much of anything out there. “You know that I don't blame you, right? I've always been a worrier, since I was little. So Jimmy and I always figured, if I didn't have to worry, why should I? We're comfortable, thanks to his job. So if something was bothering me, I just gave it away. Never thought much of it.

“But . . .” Her brow crinkles. “That man in the photos. Oskar, they tell me. I don't remember him, obviously. All I remember is that no matter how many memories I erased, I didn't want those ones touched. Jimmy kept telling me, if it makes you so sad, just get rid of it. We were only married two years, apparently. I've been married to Jimmy ten times longer. But I—I think I lived an entire life in those two years. I

remember how it felt, when I thought about erasing those years. I thought, if I'm not a person who knows him anymore, then I'm a different person. Right?"

Josie's sentences always tilt up a little at the end. Like everything's a question, even the statements. But this, she sounds sure of. I don't think I've ever heard her sound sure of anything.

I wish I could sound half as sure when I tell her, "You're the same person, Josie."

"Am I?" she says. "We were married. I must have had some of his habits, or say things he used to say. If he's gone, are those habits gone? Do I still say those same things? I've never thought about it before, Alana. But memories don't stand alone, do they? They're a spiderweb. They're all linked. When I surrender a memory, where do all the memories connected to it go? If I lost those memories, how would I ever know?"

I want to say that I don't follow her. I wish I didn't. I wish I hadn't spent the last few months thinking about the Alana who never lost her grandmother and feeling as if I was thinking about a stranger. Maybe I *am* still that same Alana, minus a plank or two in the floorboards. An unsteady structure, but not a different one.

But maybe Josie's right. There's no way you can account for every memory missing, or damaged. All these years, our clients could have been losing more than they ever meant to. Maybe what you really give to the Memory Eater is a version of yourself who lived that life. And maybe, like David, you keep having the nightmares anyway.

I can't know for sure. But if I did offer the Memory Eater the old Alana—the one who knew what she was doing—I have no idea where that leaves me.

Josie's still waiting for my answer. So I do what's becoming unnervingly common, lately. I tell the truth.

“I don’t—” I say. “Really know. Yet.”

Josie’s smile is not quite enough to hide the flicker of disappointment. “Of course. I’m sorry. You should get back home. You look exhausted.”

“Are you sure?” I say. “I can stay.”

She squeezes my hand, then lets go. And all of a sudden, I really do feel that tired. “I should pull myself together before I get back in there. Though if you have any tips, I wouldn’t say no. All those times you’ve had to keep your wits about you in that cave. I never knew how you did it.”

I smile weakly back at her. I wish I had real advice to give right now. But there’s only one thing that’s ever worked. “Fake it till you make it?”

She actually laughs. “Truer words, dear.”

I’m a little slow to move down the stairs. Partially to give her time to change her mind, and partially so my wobbly legs don’t pitch me face-first to the yard. My foot has barely touched the grass by the time she says, “Wait.”

When I look back at her, her eyes are wide and startled and clear. Like when you wake up, in the middle of the night, and realize that you didn’t lock your door.

“She had a message for you,” she says.

I freeze. The wet grass pricks at the sides of my ankles. “What?”

Josie falters. Not like she’s trying to remember. The look on her face says she remembers it word for word.

“She says she figured out what happened, with Ayako,” she says. “And she said—‘Sadness really does sell.’ Do you understand that?”

The night stretches out ahead, damp and wriggling. The mosquitos and the crickets have taken their places again, the

threat already forgotten. I listen to them whir away in the dark.

“I’m not sure,” I say. Though I have an idea.

With one last nod to Josie, I disappear along the side of the house.

Sadness sells. The old joke during the busy seasons. But also, apparently, the answer to the question we’d both been asking. The memory of Oskar was something that Josie treasured. But that didn’t mean it wasn’t painful.

For over two hundred years, the Memory Eater has only taken the food offered to her. And when you choose to forget something, it’s usually not a happy memory. She should be able to eat anything now. But what if she can’t? Either through some backlash of Abigail’s magic or some strange side effect of mine, something is happening to her. And maybe she can’t eat anything except for what she’s been eating this entire time.

If I’m right, it’s good news. Even if she’s figured it out, this should slow her down, unless she finds a way around it. But it’s hard not to feel some dull horror, thinking about it. Being forced, one way or another, to eat the same thing all your life. To live on pain and nothing else.

I don’t get long to dwell, though. The light in the living room flicks on, and I have to duck forward, away from the window.

“—said to your wife,” I hear someone say. Flaherty, his voice softer and more solicitous than when he was speaking to me. “Someone from the council will be here soon. They’ll know more than I do about the creature.”

“And we’re much obliged for that.” Another man’s voice. When I crane my neck to get a quick look, I see the top of Jim Berenthal’s neat gray head. I don’t think I’ve actually heard his voice before now.

“—those memories,” I hear Jim finish. “I know the drill, Tom. But—she won’t get them back, right? I mean, there’s no way to reverse it.”

Against my will, I falter.

People don’t react the way you think, when something unexpected happens to them. They don’t always mean what they say. I know this. I see it every day.

But sometimes they mean it more than they’d like you to think.

Flaherty lets out a breath. The vocal equivalent of taking off your hat at a funeral. Like he didn’t just hear what I did. Or like he’s pretending he didn’t.

“That’s what I’ve always been told,” he says. “I’m sorry, Jimmy.”

Jim laughs. One single, dark chuckle. “I always told her, don’t you think it’s time to let him go? If she’d just done it herself—well. She could’ve felt a hell of a lot better about it.”

I walk faster. I don’t want to listen to another second. I don’t stop until my shoes reach the driveway and until I can hear only the faintest lilt of voices through the living room window. I can’t make out the words. I don’t want to make out another word of Jim Berenthal’s again.

Davidson’s not out front anymore. Rue’s not here, either. It leaves no one to watch me slump against a cruiser.

Jimmy kept asking me when I’d make an appointment next, poor man, Josie had told me, just a few days ago. He says I need to clear my head.

Josie Berenthal is our most frequent customer. I’ve always known that her husband not only knew this but supported it. Even now, I’m trying to remember half of the memories she wanted gone. The spilled coffee on her white blouse. An

argument over dishes. A vacation that Jimmy had to cancel for work. A lot of little things. Some of which she wanted to forget. Some which were convenient for her to forget.

And I was letting him get away with it.

No matter what was happening with my family, I was always firmly, naively confident that we were helping people. It never occurred to me to wonder who, exactly, we were helping.

“—ashamed of yourself.” I get about two seconds to take a breath before the front door opens with such force, it bounces off the opposite wall. Lena’s escorting Rue out, her hand fluttering ineffectually at Rue’s shoulder. “Spying on these poor people just so you can report back to your friend—”

“I was just telling my parents that we were leaving,” Rue says. It’s that careful, polite tone she gets when she doesn’t want anyone to know she’s angry.

“Lena, she’s telling the truth.” Mae is following behind the two of them, her expression shuttered. It hits me, when she crosses into the light, how similar she looks to her ancestor on the *Advent*. They have the same nose, the same brow. “I heard her.”

But Lena’s hackles are still fully raised. When her red-rimmed eyes find mine, she goes a horrible shade of white. “We asked one thing of you, Alana. One thing. How do you expect to regain our trust if you can’t stay out of this?”

We have an audience now: I can see Flaherty and another officer peering at us through the windows. “Lena,” Mae says, sharper this time. “Calm down.”

Real anger flashes across Lena’s face for a second. But it crumples in on itself. Dissolves into tears.

“Do you think I don’t know how hard this is for you?” she says. “But this isn’t about you right now, Alana. This has to be

about Josie. You understand that, don't you?"

I look back at her. At the growing crowd inside, their drawn, grim faces watching us through the windows. Not without sympathy, though. Sympathy that's most likely for her.

They're entitled to their anger. I know that. I've said it over and over today. I'm probably not entitled to much at all.

But of course this isn't about me. I'm a container for blood, for DNA, for a magic I'll never understand. When have I ever needed any of that explained?

"We'll go," I say. It's all I trust myself to say.

Lena's still wiping furiously at her eyes as she disappears through the front door. But Mae lingers, for a moment.

"You two okay?" she says.

It stops me short. I've never been completely sure Mae likes me. She doesn't *dislike* me. I just don't get the sense that she likes many people.

Too tired for anything but honesty, I say, "I don't think so."

I expect to get one of those flinty Mae laughs—low, smooth, never quite happy. She reaches forward and hugs me instead. It's a quick one. But it's tight enough that when she pulls away, I feel the imprints of her fingers on my back.

"There're still things you can do to help." She pats lightly at my side. "Keep looking for them."

And with that, she follows Lena back into the house.

Rue stares after her for a long time. "That was strange, right?"

"Mm," I say. Mae's a kind person. I've always been sure of that. She's never been particularly nice, though. "Let's go back. I think I know what happened with Ayako at the school."

So we cut across the driveway, making our way to the strip of lawn that separates the Berenthal house from the Atwoods'. Shivering, I push my hands into my jacket pockets as we come up on the doorway.

And then something under my hand crinkles.

I stop first. Rue stumbles to a halt when I do, watches me extract the piece of paper from my pocket. "What's that?"

"I don't know," I mumble. The only things I ever put in my pockets are notes from sessions. But I always tear them up when I leave the beach. I don't like the idea of anyone finding them.

The paper looks like a piece torn off a larger sheet, a little triangular shred. I wave a hand, triggering the Atwoods' motion detection light. And when the page is illuminated, there's a short sentence in careful cursive, waiting to be read.

12 p.m. tomorrow, my house

Mae

ELEVEN

INSOMNIA HAS BECOME my roommate since the Memory Eater got in my head. But when sleep finally does hit, it hits quick. It means dreams can sneak up on me lately. So quietly that I sometimes don't realize until midday the next day that I was dreaming at all.

But tonight, I don't think my brain shuts off, not really. Because when I close my eyes on the guest room and come to hazy awareness on the deck of a ship, in the wide palms of a roiling sea, I think immediately, the *Advent*.

So definitely a dream.

It helps that I saw this before, just a few hours ago. This is exactly where I stood in Mrs. Stinnet's memory, right on the bow. The moody skies are just as Abigail described them in her journal: the green-gray clouds lingered for weeks; the storm itself was circling like an eel. But even if I hadn't seen it earlier, maybe I would have known the *Advent* on sight anyway. Being here feels a bit like being in the presence of Abigail's magic. There's a pull.

Mrs. Stinnet is holding the sachet of herbs, watching the waves take hungry little tastes of the ship's hull. She shudders, as if she knows what's next. But she hasn't read Abigail's journals. She doesn't know yet that by the time the Memory Eater is finished with her, she'll no longer know what an ocean is.

"I wonder if you ever got to brew those herbs." The sound of my own voice startles me. It doesn't sound the way I

usually sound in dreams, talking without moving my mouth. It sounds like real words.

Mrs. Stinnet turns and looks. Not somewhere past my shoulder, like she did in the Atwoods' stairwell. Right at me.

"Excuse me?" she says.

I wake to predawn light and the sheets twisted around me.

I ease myself up, just enough to pour some water down my dusty throat. I should have expected weird dreams tonight. But that was—well. Vivid. Vivid enough that just for a moment, I thought I had touched her again.

But I'm as alone as I was before.

I settle the sheet back over me. It did feel real, for a second there. But when I spoke, she looked right at me. So it definitely wasn't a memory.

Because there's one thing you can trust about memory. It's a closed loop. A dollhouse built by history and your own hands. You can change it, whether you mean to or not. You can shift the furniture, or the positions of the people within, and swear that they've always been there.

But you can talk to it all you want. It will never, ever hear you.

THE ATWOODS LEAVE sometime before dawn. And then, like almost every day of my life, I crawl into some clothes, splash a little cold water on my sleep-deprived face, and set out for the Stinnet house.

This is the first time I've made the trek in Charlie's sedan, though. Even when we were together, I always insisted on walking.

When I open the passenger-side door, Charlie arches one thin blond eyebrow. “You okay?”

I blink uselessly. I haven’t talked to Charlie since yesterday afternoon, except to text her a rambling summary of the events last night. So standing here in the full force of her attention, it hits me that I’ve had absolutely zero time to process what Rue and I talked about after she left. Namely, that she thinks Charlie and I still have feelings for each other.

I step aside and open the door to the back seat, leaving the passenger seat for Rue. “Not the overall best night of my life.”

Rue doesn’t mouth *coward* as she gets into the car, but she definitely thinks about it.

“And now you’ve got covert messages to keep things interesting.” Charlie starts the ignition. “Do you think Mae’s going to tell you to stay out of it?”

“As far as Mae knows, I’m already staying out of it,” I say. “But whatever she wants to tell me, she doesn’t want Lena to know.”

“I didn’t think Mae would be intimidated by Lena,” Charlie says.

“It doesn’t matter if she’s intimidated or not.” I can actually appreciate, in a way I never did when we were together, Charlie’s impatience with council politics. I’m starting to wish they’d just talk like normal people, too. “The council moves together, or not at all. And Lena’s the chair.”

Charlie glances at me through the rearview mirror. “And you trust Mae?”

There was a council member, before I was born, who wondered aloud if Grandma’s knee surgery could be rescheduled for the off-season. One, when I was little, who suggested that my mother’s infinitesimal presence in my life could be reduced to nothing, so as not to “distract” me. Mae,

for all her laser focus on keeping things moving, never forgets that we have limits. Before Ayako joined the council, she was the one who looked out for us. I do trust her. I can't not trust her.

But under Charlie's stare, certainty feels like tempting fate. So I say, "I think I do."

Charlie takes that in. "Do you know why she didn't run for council chair? Everyone wanted her to, right?"

Huh. I'd actually forgotten that until now. I can't believe Charlie remembered. "Right," I mumble. "Grandma tried to stay out of council stuff, and even she told Mae she should run. Mae said thank you, but never."

"Wait, really?" Rue twists in her seat, craning her neck to look at me. "Why?"

I shake my head. "She didn't say."

It doesn't take long to reach the Stinnet house. Charlie waits until we're fully parked to turn and face me. "Harlow, if anything feels off—just be careful of what you tell her."

I nod. Charlie's always been naturally suspicious, as long as I've known her. I've always wondered if it was as coded into her DNA as the dimple in her right cheek, or the little flush along her collarbone when she's embarrassed. Or if she learned it somewhere along the way, before I met her.

It used to drive me up the wall. But it's hard not to feel like she was right about more than I knew.

But Grandma trusted Mae. I want to remember that, too.

Someone's already waiting for us on the front steps. Daniel Stinnet, his usual sunshine smile a little tentative. If not for my hand on her shoulder, Rue would have frozen like a squirrel in traffic.

“Alana!” His hair is wet. There’s a towel draped around his shoulder catching the droplets. I tighten my grip on Rue so that she doesn’t drop dead. “Charlie, Rue. How are you all holding up?”

There’s such open concern on Daniel’s face that for an awful second, I think I might tear up. I’ve come close to crying far too many times in the last few days. “You know. Thriving.”

Daniel’s brown eyes go even softer. “Mom sent me out here to wait for you. She’s on the porch.”

I haven’t been inside here since I was a kid. Probably since the day Daniel and Ned arrived. It’s become a mix of the whole family since then: Ayako’s poetry and paintings, Daniel’s trophies from swim meets, Ned’s sculptures. Mae is the one who’s not represented much on these walls. Her touches are the framed documents and articles, the furniture carefully preserved over decades. Her presence in the house is a lot like her. Quietly watchful.

Ned is cross-legged on the living room floor, curled around an open book. They acknowledge Daniel without really looking up. And then they see us.

Ever since they were little, Ned has had a dubious little crease in their brow that never seems to really go away. They’re fifteen this year, I think. Their cheeks, which were always round and solemn, have finally started to thin out with their growth spurt. It hasn’t stopped me from wanting to pinch them.

Their darting stare finally comes to rest on Charlie. They’re still shy around Rue and me, but after working with Charlie for a year, Ned’s warmed up to her. *I just pretend that they don’t have a corporeal form*, Charlie explained, when I asked what her secret was. *Now we’re best friends.*

“Is there any news?” Ned asks.

Charlie smiles, her usual wry twist. “Nothing new.”

“Did you hear about Josie?” Rue asks.

“We heard this morning.” But when Daniel turns to me again, the warmth in his face hasn’t wavered. “Alana—you know that we’re with you, right? I know my moms feel the same way.”

It’s hard not to see little Daniel Whittaker in that look. His trusting stare at the Beachside Grill, across the table from his mother. I wonder what it takes to trust again, after something like that. I don’t know if I’d have it in me.

“Thank you,” I say quietly.

“You let me play with your Hot Wheels when we were kids. That’s a lifelong bond right there.” His grin dims a little. “Anyway—Mom’s probably waiting.”

“Did she say what this was about?” Charlie asks.

“You know Mom,” he says with a shrug. “Not usually the one to start the conversation.”

I nod. Although she’s the one starting the conversation today. “Charlie, Rue, do you mind waiting here?”

Charlie nods. Rue gives me a look like I’ve just announced my intention to drop her off a cliff. *Who’s the coward now?* I think. “Are you sure?” Rue says. “I could—”

“I think Mae wants to talk alone,” I say. Somehow, my straight face holds. “Why don’t you stay with Daniel and Ned?”

“Yeah, Rue.” Daniel’s easy smile slides back into place. “We could use the company, honestly.”

I can actually see the moment her resolve melts. “I—” Her smile is a bit shier than her usual. But she’ll get there. “Of course.”

Before I turn, I catch just a hint of a flush at the tips of Daniel's ears. If we all remember who we are by the end of the week, I'm going to push their beautiful faces together.

I reach the home office that Mae and Ayako share much sooner than I'd like. It's as meticulously tidy as I remember it, the sunlight winking off the clear, polished desk. Reclaimed wood from the *Advent*.

The screen door through the back leads to the porch. Even before I enter, I can see Mae seated in the chaise, her back to me, her coffee in hand. The way I've seen her every morning for years.

Without turning around, she gestures at the opposite chair when she hears me come in. "Sit."

I perch precariously on the edge, at first. But then I smooth a little of the tension back. Mae held me when I was a baby. She may be intimidating, but I'm not scared of her.

"You're alone?" she says.

"Rue Atwood and Charlie Sawyer are down the hall," I say.

Her mouth thins. "They're good kids," she says. "But they're still outsiders."

Classic Mae. Getting right to the point. "They want to help."

"Not a judgment," Mae says. "I'm just saying. Outsiders don't always have the stomach for this."

"Rue's going to be council chair the second she can qualify," I say. "Charlie dated me for six months. They haven't run yet."

She sets her coffee mug aside with a light click. "But I knew Caroline a long time, Alana. Knew your mom, too, back when she tried to make it work here. They had friends come and go. Boyfriends. Caroline was married for years, of course, to your grandfather. Over and over, they ended up alone."

She folds her hands in her lap and looks at me, long and level. “I’m not saying your friends will do the same. Just that if you’re not sure, might be better to leave them at home.”

The chair creaks as I lean into it more heavily. I met some of the men Mom dated, though never the one who got her pregnant. I knew that my grandfather, who I’d never met, left Grandma for a woman in Portland. He died three years ago. None of us went to the funeral.

I knew all that. But I’d never considered it a condition of being a Harlow, to end up alone. When it comes to Rue, or Charlie, or Scott and Mercedes, I’ve only ever worried about the opposite. That they’ll do exactly what Grandma asked of them. That they won’t let go—even when they should.

“I’m sure,” I say. “About both of them.”

Mae chews that over. Then she sighs. “Good, then. You’ll probably need ’em both, before this is over.”

I laugh. It’s what years of working with the Memory Eater have taught me to do, when I want to hide that I’m frustrated. “Mae . . . you didn’t ask me here to talk about my friends.”

“You know we don’t do sass in this house,” she says, almost automatically. Most of her attention is behind her, through the screen slider. She’s checking the office door. Making sure I shut it tight.

Finally, she says, “Your family’s journals. Scott and Mercedes are wasting their time.”

I blink, nonplussed. “I mean, we knew there weren’t going to be details,” I say. “But there might be—”

“There won’t be anything you can use,” she says. “Plenty of guesses, sure. But there’s only one written record of what Abigail did. And you’re not going to find it in that library.”

“If you mean the missing pages from Abigail’s journal,” I say slowly, “then of course they’re not there. She tore them out and burned them.”

Mae checks behind her one more time. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen her so nervous before. I don’t know that I’ve seen her nervous at all.

“Yes and no,” she says.

“Yes and no what?” I’m starting to forget to laugh. “Mae, you’re not making—”

“Yes, she tore them out,” she says. “No, she didn’t burn them.”

For a long moment, the only sounds are the ticking clock in the office and the ever-present hum of the mosquitos. It has to be a joke. Even if Mae Stinnet has never joked in her life.

“Of course she burned them,” I say weakly. “She—”

“Wrote that she did?” she says. “No one’s above lying, Alana. Not even your family.”

“Grandma would have known,” I say.

Mae takes a long sip of air through her teeth. “It wasn’t for her to know. It wouldn’t have been for me to know, either, had Effie Baker never said anything.”

My mind whirs. Effie Baker was council chair before Lena—they’re both descended from the same *Advent* passenger. She used to babysit me, sometimes. She made these horrible sugar-free lemon drop cookies, but she was so proud of them that you’d just have to pretend to eat them.

She had the kind of bright, open face that didn’t seem to hold secrets. At least that’s what I thought.

“You’d have been too young to remember this,” Mae says. “But Effie and I were friendly. She’d come over from time to time, especially before I met Ayako. This big house got pretty

empty back then. Anyway, we'd get to talking, and we'd get to drinking. Usually not shop talk. But one night she was feeling tipsy and maudlin."

Mae smiles. Her face twists into something brittle. "She told me she'd been keeping a secret. The day she became the council chair, her predecessor handed her the missing pages from Abigail's journal. The full, unedited record of the events on the *Advent*. And the only person she was ever allowed to tell was her eventual successor as chair. Not the rest of the council. And definitely not your family. But it was tearing her up, she said. She just wanted someone else to know."

I shake my head. "Then she was joking."

"Honey," Mae says. I flinch. I think the last time Mae called me honey, I was young enough to be held. "She was serious. If you saw her face, you'd know."

She looks ahead, to the rolling green of her backyard. The same grass I've crossed, over and over, all my life.

"Did she tell you what it said?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "Just that I was lucky I didn't have to read it. She called it abhorrent. I've always wondered why she was so surprised a few years later, when I refused to take her job. She must have been drunker than I thought. More than one way to forget a night, you know?"

She looks back at me, then. And I know it's the truth. It's the wall at the end of the cave. Inescapable.

"And once you knew . . ." I hate how small it sounds. Grandma could sound angry, when she needed to. I'm only ever angry at the people who don't deserve it. Never when I need to be. "You didn't tell us."

Mae glances, one more time, toward the yard. Maybe she's thinking, too, about all those years she watched us go past.

“I don’t expect you to understand this,” she says. “Or forgive it, for that matter. The council and the Harlow family—we’re not here for the same reasons. Sure, we’re both just following Abigail’s orders. But she asked different things of us than she did of you. She asked the council to protect Whistler first and foremost. Even if it meant protecting it from her own descendants.”

“We’d never do anything to hurt Whistler,” I say. Even Mom, entwined for years with her bitterness, wouldn’t have thought to.

“No,” Mae says. “But you don’t have to be your mother to be a risk. You’ve just gotta be human. Do you really think your grandmother was as healthy as she wanted you to believe? Hell, even you started getting sick last year. Some of your ancestors thought you were cursed. Thought that magic in your blood was a poison, wearing away at you. But it was always just this job. The stress of it. Anyone would buckle.

“I trusted Caroline with my life. Trust you, too, for that matter. But your hands are already full. And when Effie told me about those pages, I knew. Whatever was meant to happen to you if you failed, it’s the council chair who hands down that punishment.”

She leans back in the chaise and exhales. “And I didn’t have the stomach for that. But I was married by then. We had Daniel and Ned. I thought the best way to keep them safe was to say nothing, and hope that things would go on as they had. I was wrong about that. And I’m sorry.”

It’s a long, long moment before I know what to say. I almost let myself forget what Rue said yesterday. *When you got sick last fall*. Things should have been easier last fall. Mom was back in Whistler, seeing some new boyfriend in Wells. She wasn’t helping with the business. We weren’t seeing her much. But things were . . . fine. Almost cordial.

But for some reason, I was struggling. And I don't remember why.

I wish I could be furious at Mae right now. But she was living in a crumbling house, and she had people to protect. She didn't want to be the one to tip the balance.

"Then," I say, "why did you change your mind?"

"I don't know that I have," she says dryly. "But it's only sheer luck that Ayako didn't get hurt yesterday. And here Lena is having Scott and Mercedes dig through journals that she knows won't help. So I finally told her, I know what you've got hidden. Told her I didn't blame her for keeping it secret until now, but if whatever was in those pages could help, she needed to come clean. To everyone."

She pauses. "And she started to cry. Told me she couldn't believe I'd think that of her."

I lift both eyebrows at the way her face darkens. This is Lena. Not some kind of mastermind. "Maybe she was panicking?"

"Tears aren't always tears," Mae says. "Sometimes they're just a way to stall."

It feels ridiculous to even consider. Lena's flighty, squeamish, infuriatingly unhelpful. Controlling sometimes. Maybe even manipulative. But what Mae's suggesting feels beyond that.

"So you don't trust her?" I say slowly.

"I don't think much of her," Mae says. "But I'm good at reading people. Until last night, I always felt pretty sure of where she was coming from. But now? I have no idea. And that's unsettling."

I rub at my temples, hard. The old headache is rising. This time, I feel like I've earned it. "I'm not even supposed to be

involved. I can't just confront her."

"That's the only idea you have?" she says. "Confronting her?"

"I mean," I say. "I'm pretty sure you wouldn't approve of anything else I can think of."

Her gaze lightens a fraction. "Then you could stand to know me a little better, Alana Harlow. Do you think I really want you sitting at home?"

"Well . . ." As long as we're being honest. "I haven't been sitting at home."

"I'm shocked," Mae says flatly.

I laugh. This time, it's not to cover for frustration. Because as long as I have Mae's blessing, I might have an idea.

"So if I told you I'd like to get into the council offices . . ." I say.

"The pages won't be there," she says.

"Maybe not," I say. "But you know how Lena prints out everything? Even emails?"

Her eyes flicker. "That's a lot of ground to cover."

I'm still smiling, though. Ever since February, I've been a step behind. Maybe this time I can finally catch up.

"I'm a fast reader," I say.

Mae's genuine smile is a languid, satisfied stretch. "If they see you, tell them I needed my laptop. And bring those friends of yours with you."

"They won't give me a choice there," I say.

"Good," she says. "They'd better keep it that way."

I've known Mae long enough to know when, even mid-conversation, I'm being dismissed. But I'm halfway to the

door when she calls my name one more time.

It's another few seconds before she meets my eyes. "I understand if you trust me less, after this. But I never told Ayako what I found out. I just want you to know that."

I hover, already half-turned. My hand rests on the screen slider. "She deserves to know, too."

Her gaze flickers back to the yard, to the line of trees that leads to the steps. "She took this job because she wanted to help your family. Because she says it breaks her heart, how much you all have to carry. She wanted to carry as much as she could for you. I . . . wanted both of you to have that. For as long as possible."

The line of her shoulders hardens again, the longer we're both silent. The thing is, I really don't think I'm angry with Mae. I don't think I have a right to be angry at someone for wanting to forget that something terrible exists.

As for Lena—well. I don't know what she's kept from me. Not yet.

I guess that's for us to find out.

TWELVE

IF THE BOARDWALK was quiet yesterday, today it's a ghost town. Maybe the Memory Eater's escape wasn't quite real yesterday. Or even if it was, I think the residents of Whistler have long thought they held a certain kind of invincibility against her. She was a monster. But she was ours.

Maybe Josie's attack drove it home. No matter how familiar something is, it can still hurt you.

Through the windows of Charlie's car, the empty boardwalk sails by, stall after shuttered stall. I glance up to the front seat, which has been quiet since I finished recounting my conversation with Mae. Rue looks particularly pale, from what I can see of her face. She would have been council chair one day, if everything had gone according to plan. And then she would have been handed a set of pages that have been hidden from me my entire life.

It doesn't matter that this is some alternate-universe Rue, one who will never exist. Rue's the kind of person who has entire debates in her head and gets just as upset as if she'd had the conversation for real.

"Harlow . . ." Charlie starts. I think she's more worried that I don't seem upset. It's not that I'm *not* upset. But this is one of these times the Harlow training comes in handy. I don't want to waver, not yet. Not until I'm sure.

"I'm okay," I say. "I just hope we can find something." The Memory Eater will be hungry again soon. And if I'm right, she now knows exactly what's been slowing her down.

It's good news and bad news for both of us, as long as she's still in Whistler. There's never a shortage of pain in the world. She'll find someone to feed from, eventually. But so much of the pain here has been fed to her already. It's hard not to wonder what's left.

"How do we get into Lena's office, though?" Rue says. "Even with an excuse from Mae, they're not going to let us search the place."

"The excuse is for if we get caught," I say. "Your parents will be there, in the archives room. But it should be quiet, with most of them trying to lure the Memory Eater out. I think I can get in and out without being noticed."

Rue doesn't look convinced. "It's a really small suite. What if someone hears you?"

She's giving me the look: the one that's already scanned my plan and found about a dozen holes in it. The kind of look that I would have seen just an hour ago and thought, *I can't wait until she runs this town.*

It gives me an idea.

Whatever changes on my own face, Rue straightens in her seat. "What?"

"Just thinking." I reach up and give her hand a squeeze. "But they might not hear me coming if they're already distracted."

"WE'RE GOING TO get caught," Rue says.

I hold up one finger, shift us farther out of view of the street, and then go back to soothing her. "We're not going to get caught."

“You have seen me try to lie,” she hisses back. “You have seen it *multiple times*. The only reason we are still out here doing this is because my parents didn’t ask me point-blank what we were doing yesterday. I would have sold us out if they so much as looked at us funny.”

“I think you’re underestimating yourself a little here,” I say. She wouldn’t have told them *everything*. She would have pretended that all of it had been her idea. Ideally I’m going to be able to keep her from leaping on her own sword. “Just say you want to help. That’s not even a lie.”

Rue’s face darkens. Possibly because she’s not too inclined to help the council anymore. I adore her. “And my parents?”

“Oh, avoid them at all costs,” I say, gently turning her in the direction of the office building. “One look from Mercedes and you’ll crack like an egg.”

“Thank you.” Her voice is starting to go a little high. “Good talk.”

“You’ll be fine,” Charlie says firmly. “I’ll be listening. You need an out, I’ll think of something.”

Charlie waits until Rue has steeled herself and walked, shoulders stiff, through the double doors. Then she turns to me, both eyebrows raised. “Crack like an egg?”

“Yeah,” I say. “That wasn’t helpful.”

We give it a few minutes. Just enough time for Rue to get to the third floor. And when it feels like we’ve been waiting long enough, we start walking.

I haven’t been in this building since before Grandma died. I’ve always avoided it when I could. When I was young, it was because it was boring. And then I got older, and little by little, it felt weird. I’ve always thought of the Memory Eater as a job. For one, Grandma started paying me as soon as I started

working with clients. I was the only second grader with a salary.

But the way I thought of a job was different from my classmates' concept of the word. I was never going to be Daniel Stinnet handing out mussel fritters at Beachside Grill, or Rue picking up a shift at the bookstore around Christmas. I wasn't going to be my classmates with summer internships, with their cardigans and pencil skirts. In another life, I might have been ambitious. But I'm in this life. I'm not going to have a job. Just the beach, the caves, and her.

And once that fully sunk in, the aggressive, bland bureaucracy of the council offices never felt wholly comfortable again. The light gray walls, the rows of file cabinets, Lena's byzantine system of key rings—it was all just normalcy cosplay.

Charlie and I move through the foyer, then, by silent agreement, bypass the elevator and head to the stairs. Just for another layer of strangeness, the office that apparently holds the decades-kept secrets of my family doesn't even take up the entire building. I used to get my teeth cleaned in the dentist's office off the lobby.

We slip into the stairwell, and Charlie spots something along the wall: the circuit breaker, tucked into the back corner. She scans the labels, muttering them out loud to herself. Then she reaches out, flicks one of the switches, and plunges the two of us into darkness.

As if she can see the way I'm looking at her, she says, "There's nowhere to hide in here. Anyone who comes into the stairwell would see us."

"Ah," I say. "And this way they'll fall and die before they can spot us."

She's close enough that I feel her shrug. "Whatever works."

I gingerly feel my way ahead with my right foot until it grazes the bottom stair. When I step up, it's just a little higher than I anticipated. "If I trip and die, remember that I want my ashes scattered at Halloween Horror Nights."

There's one short laugh. And then a cool hand, coming to rest on my elbow. "I've got you."

I don't know why I thought climbing in the dark would be a bad idea. It's the best one anyone's ever had. If all the blood in your body rises to your cheeks and no one sees it, it's like it never happened.

So I make my careful way up, tugged along by Charlie's guiding hand. "This is like sophomore year," she says quietly. "The old theater."

Another careful step. I'm starting to get the hang of this now. "Oh my God," I say. "I can't believe I let you talk me into that."

She snorts. "Harlow, that was your idea."

I stumble, just a little. Her grip tightens. "I suggested it. Jokingly, might I add."

"Unbelievable," she says. "And everyone thought I was the bad influence. It's literally an injustice."

I grin into the dark. It was a good night, whoever's idea it was. The theater was going to be cleared and bulldozed the following week, and we wanted to take a look before it was gone. What I remember most is how full the building looked. Everything was still scattered around, just as someone had left it. The history of the place was tangible. Like even without any people there, the Memory Eater could have eaten her fill from the atmosphere alone.

Charlie and I didn't get it together and kiss until six months afterward. I almost kissed her in that theater, though. I don't think I ever managed to tell her that.

Anyway. We don't have far to go, even as slowly as we're moving. So thankfully, that's not a lot of time to dwell.

The elevator would have brought us to the front desk, but the stairwell puts us by the back door. Much farther away from anyone's office. But unfortunately, right next to the archive room.

I let Charlie be the one to ease the door open. Her hands are much steadier than mine.

We enter to the soft rattle of window air conditioners, and two voices drifting through the archive room door. Whatever Scott and Mercedes are talking about, they're not quite audible. I catch my great-uncle Gregory's name, though.

Mae's right. There's not going to be anything in there for them to find. Though I know Scott and Mercedes. They're not going to stop until they're sure.

Charlie and I move, as quietly as we can, in the direction of Lena's office. And as we draw closer, we hear one more pair of voices. The first is Rue's. The second is Chris Broadbent's.

"—said," Chris is saying, "I'd be more comfortable having this conversation with your parents."

"Please don't tell them I'm here," Rue says in a rush. A little too much of a rush, but she recovers quickly. "You're actually the one I was looking to talk to. You or Lena."

"Well . . ." Chris falters. Carefully, I rise to the balls of my feet, searching Lena's door frame for her spare key. Charlie, who infuriatingly has several inches on me, reaches up over my head and plucks it from its hiding place. "It's not really the best time, Rue. With everything—we're pretty flat-out here."

"But that's why I'm here," Rue says. I use the cover of her voice to unlock the door. "You need all the help you can get, right?"

Charlie tugs me into the darkened office. The chaos of the last several days is clear: there are scattered papers on the usually meticulous desk, a creased-open notepad, a half-eaten muffin sitting by the phone. Whatever's going on with Lena, it's not that she's not trying. There's panic evident in every crooked file. Even her snow globe music box is knocked out of place.

"Watch the door," I whisper to Charlie. She nods.

Lena paid me fifty dollars one summer to help reorganize her filing cabinets, when she declared that she was having nightmares about Effie's system. I spent a week marveling at her labyrinth of keys, how locked drawers just led to more jumbled boxes of lanyards and key rings. Some of those drawers were deemed too confidential for me to reorganize. I'll start with those.

First, I have to get the right keys. I start with the little silver key in her left desk drawer, the one that unlocks the long set of drawers in back. And as quietly as I can, I withdraw the box of file cabinet keys. They all look the same. But one thing I noticed, during that monotonous summer, was that there were numbers etched on the cabinet locks corresponding to numbers etched on the keys.

Behind me, Charlie eases the door most of the way shut. She's listening for the sound of the suite's front door. If Lena comes back and we don't hear it, we'll have nowhere to hide.

"—that I don't appreciate it," Chris says. And if *he* doesn't keep it down, we'll have Scott and Mercedes overhearing, too. "I've always been impressed by you, Rue. You've really got things figured out. I sure wasn't so together at your age."

"Then I don't understand." Here, at least, Rue doesn't need to put on an act. She knows she's being dismissed. The frustration in her voice is real. "You need help, and I'm here."

“Trust me, we could use you,” he says. I quickly slide a file out of the first off-limits drawer, but—these just look like receipts. “But there are rules. And not just the rules of Alana’s family.”

I scan the next level of files. Council applications. Across the hall, there’s a pause. “I know Alana can’t be involved.”

I flinch, automatically. I can tell that Rue doesn’t want the conversation to shift to me. It was inevitable, of course. But I don’t know that I want to hear it, either.

Unfortunately, Chris’s voice carries.

“You know,” Chris says. “I hope you’re not concerned that your closeness with Alana would be an issue.”

I determinedly scan the next set of files. Mae was right. There’s more here than I can possibly read, and none of it looks very incriminating. I need a quicker way to look around.

Maybe I’m looking at the wrong thing, though. Lena’s fastidious. She’s not going to keep anything incriminating where another council member could find it.

But her files aren’t the only thing she keeps locked up here. Her keys themselves are locked away, too.

And if one of them doesn’t fit any of the locks in this office, it might fit a lock somewhere else.

Distantly, I hear when Rue falters. “I’m not concerned.”

“Good. That’s good,” Chris says. “Because having her trust would be . . . advantageous, in the long run. Do you know what I mean?”

Focus, I remind myself. But every key looks almost identical: same size, same printed numbers. “I—” Rue says. *Don’t break character*, I think at her uselessly. “I don’t think I do. Know what you mean.”

“You’re a smart girl, Rue,” Chris says. “I think you get it more than you might think.”

The last box of keys is finally different: a jumble of mismatched shapes and lengths. Most of them are marked. Secretary’s office, conference room, archives. Chair’s bathroom, which almost punches a real audible laugh out of me.

I miss the first part of Rue’s reply. All I hear is the tone of her voice. I don’t think anyone but her parents and I would hear anger in it. “Alana made a mistake,” she says. “But she’s good at her job.”

“Oh!” Chris says. “No, no, Rue. Lena—she’s just upset, you know? But she doesn’t want to push Alana out. None of us do.”

I don’t know how much longer Rue can stall. And the last key—it looks like a toy. It’s delicate, silver, small enough to pinch between my fingers. It doesn’t look like it could really unlock anything, but I scan the room looking for possibilities anyway.

“What is it?” Charlie whispers.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe she doesn’t—”

But something flickers at the corner of my vision as I turn to face her. The tiniest glint off the bottom of the San Diego Zoo music box.

The trim is the same silver as the key.

“—Abigail’s wish was that the council would watch over the family,” Chris is saying. “Step in, if need be. And if Alana opens up to you—well. You’d know exactly when you’d need to step in, wouldn’t you?”

I cross the room to Lena’s desk. The keyhole is a tiny little thing. The barest sliver near the hinge.

I slide the little key into the lock and turn, popping the bottom open. And sitting on a little velvety interior is one last set of keys. This time, they're attached to a flat plastic keychain.

Whistler Beach Storage, it says.

Chris laughs. It's his laugh for donors and students. The one that never quite reaches the back of his throat. "Ah—ignore me. It's too early for you to worry about this, right, kiddo? Time to enjoy that childhood while you have it."

We slip through the door and shut it behind us. The archive office sits just as we left it—I can hear the faint murmur of Scott and Mercedes's conversation. With a quick, silent thank-you to the universe, I lead Charlie back toward the stairwell.

As we pass Chris's office, I catch Rue's soft voice one more time. "Of course," she's saying.

The chair creaks. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a flash of movement as Chris stands. "Don't tell anyone I said this—you'll have to get the votes first, of course. But you're going to be a great council chair one day, Rue." As we open the stairwell door, I hear one last carefully constructed laugh. "Just not today."

THIRTEEN

“I HATE HIM.”

There’s something deeply surreal about seeing Rue angry. When I want to yell, I laugh. When Rue wants to yell, she writes out a careful, well-reasoned argument that she never shows anyone else. Sometimes she includes citations. She’s not stopping for citations now.

I glance over to the kitchen, where Charlie has retreated to look up the number for Whistler Beach Storage. Really, I think she’s trying to give both of us a second alone. She doesn’t want us to read *I told you so* in her face.

Charlie would never say that to begin with. Even if I deserved it.

“I *hate* him,” Rue says again. If she keeps pacing like that, she’s going to wear a little Rue-shaped path in the carpet.

“I know,” I say uselessly.

“*Advantageous.*” She looks more than angry now—she looks scared. “Alana, I would never. I swear that I would never.”

I always thought people were exaggerating when they said that heartbreak had a feeling. “Rue,” I say, “oh my God. Of course you wouldn’t.”

It doesn’t land. Not for Rue, who gets just as upset about things that might happen as things that happen for real. She wanted to be council chair. It doesn’t matter to her just yet that she didn’t know what that meant.

“Rue, we asked you to stall him, and you did,” I say. “You did great.”

“I wanted to help. I thought it’d help.” She’s talking in a rush now. “You were always so tired, Alana.”

My stomach clenches. Last fall, whatever illness I let myself forget. I’ve been worrying Rue long before Grandma died. “That’s not on you to fix.”

“Who else was going to?” she says. “That summer I helped you reorganize your family’s journals . . .”

She doesn’t finish the thought right away. So I prompt her. “I remember.” I remember it really well. We were stuck in an un-air-conditioned storage room for two weeks. We drank flat soda and did dramatic readings and tried not to get heatstroke. It wasn’t anything that would put this look on her face. At least, I didn’t think so.

“We were reading your great-great-uncle’s journals,” she says carefully. “And I was surprised, because I didn’t realize he’d died so young. And you said—” Her fingers twist together, in and out. “You said, ‘Oh, yeah, Harlows don’t get that old.’ I don’t think you were really paying attention, when you said it.”

Against my will, I laugh. Reflex. I’m not masking anger this time, though. What I feel is thinner, more delicate. “Rue,” I say helplessly. “He was like sixty-five.”

Her brow creases. She’s not angry anymore. Anger doesn’t have this kind of bare confusion. “Sixty-five is *young*, Alana.”

She’s giving me that look. The one where I’m never sure what face I’m supposed to make back. Of course sixty-five isn’t that old. And whether it’s the weight of these powers we can’t even use—or, like Mae theorized, the stress of maintaining the business—plenty of Harlows throughout the years haven’t lived much longer than that. It used to terrify

me, too. I remember crying myself to sleep as a kid, the first time I learned how old Grandma was. It felt so close to all those ages in the death dates.

But Grandma lived for years past sixty-five. Not as long as either of us wanted, but for years. And I got used to the idea that, well—“That’s just the way it is,” I say.

Rue shakes her head once. “That’s not good enough for me.”

We’re silent for a moment, after that. I can hear Charlie’s voice in the kitchen. So I guess she found that number for Whistler Beach Storage. “I’m sorry,” I mumble to my lap. “I didn’t realize you were that worried.”

“I didn’t want you to know.” I can hear in her voice that she’s trying to smile. “I didn’t want to be another person whose hand you needed to hold.”

That gets me to look up. “You’re not a *client*, Rue. You’re my best friend. You get hand-holding privileges whenever.”

“I mean. I guess.” I slide down the couch enough to nudge her foot with mine, and the line of her mouth relaxes a little. “But—sometimes it’s like you think you need to let everyone else be upset first, and you can take whatever’s left. I didn’t want to be upset before you were. If that makes sense.”

I think it does, actually. It was something Charlie and I argued about often enough, when we were dating. She wanted me to be angry when there was something worth getting angry about. I just wanted to put it away. Tuck it all under a neat little lid somewhere. Crack it open one day if I ever had time.

That’s not how it works, she’d tell me. Another thing she was right about.

I have to do this either way, I’d fire back. *Why do you want me to be mad about it, too?*

I swallow, and my throat burns. Kind of the Memory Eater to leave that one perfectly intact.

“I don’t know if I’m upset yet,” I finally say. “But I’ll let you know when I am?”

I’m not sure, at first, that that’ll be enough for her. But she relaxes the rest of the way. “Deal.”

I swing myself off the couch, and then I lace our fingers together. She’s getting her hand held whether she wants it or not. “Let’s check on Charlie.”

I tug her as far as the kitchen threshold. Where we immediately stop dead at the distinctly non-Charlie tone that greets us at the entryway.

“And that’s the unit number?” Whatever else I expected to learn today, *Charlie Sawyer is a method actor* was not among them. But even though whoever she’s speaking to can’t see her, she’s putting her entire body language into this. Her eyes are round and wide. Her shoulders bow inward. “Oh my God, thank you. I had it written down, but I have no idea *where* I put it. You’re a lifesaver. Thank you so, so much. Yes, thank you. We’ll stay safe. You do the same.”

She hangs up. And the wide, doe-eyed look slips off like a curtain.

I blink. “Did you just convince another human person that you were Lena?”

“Yes. And no, I did not know I had that in me, either.” Charlie jingles the storage key. “Unit four twenty-three.”

“Four twenty-three?” At Charlie’s nod, I huff humorlessly. “Abigail Harlow’s birthday. Cute.”

“We should get going now,” Rue says. “Should we drive or walk?”

“It’s already late afternoon,” Charlie says. “We’re lucky your parents haven’t come home.”

“We can’t wait another night,” I say. “After what happened to Josie—”

“I know,” Charlie says. “But the only reason we’re in a position to help is because the Atwoods think Rue has you here watching movies. Do you think they’re going to leave you on your own tomorrow if they catch you sneaking across town?”

I barely have a chance to consider it when Rue jumps, her hand flying to her skirt pocket. Her mouth quirks as she takes a look at the screen. “Speaking of my parents,” she says. “Be back in a second.”

She ducks back into the living room. And it’s not the first time today that Charlie and I have been alone together. But it’s the first time we haven’t had anything to focus on but each other.

She clears her throat. I know the feeling.

“I really am sorry,” she finally says. “About the council.”

“Yeah. I know you are,” I say. My smile turns rueful as I add, “I wouldn’t have thought you’d be.”

“Took me by surprise, too.” At my arched eyebrow, she adds, “Not that I thought I’d be happy about it. But—I knew it wasn’t going to be some kind of Scooby-Doo ending, where someone whips off their mask, and you see who they really are, and then they’re whisked off-screen never to bother you again—”

“But you kinda hoped?” I say.

“I’m an optimist,” Charlie drawls. She’s smiling back at me. But by the time I stop laughing, something in her face has shifted. “I thought if you knew that they were using you,

things would get easier. Kind of seems like knowing that for sure just created more problems.”

The Atwoods’ kitchen table is short and narrow, more for mail and vegetable chopping than for sitting at. When I sit opposite Charlie, even with my short legs, my foot grazes hers.

All those useless little arguments we had. All those times we didn’t argue, but I kissed her cheek and said *I love my anti-establishment girlfriend* and laughed so I wouldn’t think about it too deeply. She was trying to convince me that I was being hurt. And I was laughing at her.

“You know how it is for me,” I say, rather than address any of that. “Behind one to-do list hides an even bigger to-do list.”

Her mouth slants, dimly amused. “Yeah,” she says. “I was hoping that’d be the first to change.”

“What do you mean?” I say.

“When you met Mae earlier,” she says. “She didn’t offer to help, did she?”

I blink. “What, with the council offices? She couldn’t. Not with Lena watching.”

“Maybe,” she says. “But don’t you think she could’ve done more than say, *hey, there are some secret pages out there, good luck with that?*”

I stiffen a little in my chair. My first instinct is to defend Mae. But this is also the closest we’ve come to the usual fight since we’ve been talking again. I don’t want to push too hard. Not when I don’t know what the tipping point was.

“I can’t just sit still, Char,” I say. I hope I say it calmly.

“I get it,” she says. “I know you think I don’t, but I’m trying. Mae cares for you. I’ve seen that. But when’s the last time someone told you *we’ll take care of this? Don’t worry.*”

You've done enough. And not as punishment. Just to do something for you.”

“I don't need them to do anything for me,” I say. “I'm not —”

“A child?” Charlie asks.

I can see, now that we're sitting so close, that the circles under her eyes are almost dark enough to match mine. Charlie can make the most of four or five hours of sleep. She wakes up with her grandfather at dawn, when the only lights in Whistler are the lighthouse and their kitchen, because sometimes he doesn't remember to eat unless he's feeding her, too. She's always the last awake. She stays up into the early hours of the morning, when her grandfather is long asleep and the house is hers for a few dark, quiet hours. Some nights I'd fall asleep to the sound of her voice, my cell phone tucked next to me on the pillow.

I didn't think either of us thought of ourselves as children then. Maybe I was wrong.

Or maybe she changed her mind.

“I don't want to argue,” Charlie says. I'm not going to, but I don't blame her for bracing for it. “But they expect the world from you. More than they've ever had to give. And they've never asked what you want. I just . . . think it might be good if you thought about what that was.”

Our ankles are crossed now, under the table. Not quite touching, but close enough to feel heat. It's a good question, I guess. I'm starting to wish I had an equally good answer. But Charlie already knows that I don't.

“The same goes for you, by the way,” I say. “Both of you.”

“Hm?” she says.

“Being here.” I make a vague, broad gesture that I hope takes in more than the Atwoods’ kitchen. “If it’s not right for the council to expect without asking, it’s not right for me to, either.”

“What exactly have you expected from us?” Charlie’s eyebrows shoot into her hairline. “We didn’t give you a chance to say no. That was strategic, by the way.”

“You live with a seventy-five-year-old widower,” I say. “You do things you don’t want to all the time.”

“Yeah,” Charlie says, “but that’s making scrambled eggs without salt, not helping my friend.”

“Charlie—” I start.

“Okay, okay. Oh my God.” She roughly combs her hair back, laughing. She hasn’t styled it again today. “If this is you asking, I’m saying yes. Better?”

I don’t get a chance to answer her. Or to untangle the aching warmth that takes root when she calls me her friend. (Relief, mostly. I think.)

But Rue re-emerges. And then I catch the look on her face.

You’d think after enough horror, the feeling would start to dull. But if that point exists, I’m not there yet.

“There was another attack.” There’s a strange, practiced quality to her gentleness. Like she thought hard before she walked in here about how she was going to sound. “Walter Creedy.”

Ringling roars up through my ears. Walter Creedy lives near Grandma’s old house—my old house. It’s on the opposite side of Whistler, nestled against a thick patch of woods. I just walked by him on the boardwalk the other day, bent over in his booth, tongue poking against his teeth as he sketched. It might have been a normal tourist, another caricature. Or it might

have been his specialty. A future client of mine, and a face they were about to forget forever.

I've watched him during those sessions. He takes those requests with a voice lower and quieter than regular. He asks about freckles, and wrinkles, and shadows underneath the eyes. He carefully etches every detail of that face, knowing whatever he draws may be all his customer will have left.

And he makes good money, too. When Grandma died, he was converting his porch into a four-season room.

It could be revenge. It's the kind of joke that the Memory Eater would make: Walter fed off her, all these years, so it's only fair that she do the same. But Walter's never been one of our clients. She's never seen him before; she couldn't possibly know what he does.

But she doesn't have to know, does she? When so many people in this town have profited off her, she doesn't have to plan that hard. She just has to spin the wheel.

"What did she take?" I say.

"Alana," she says, "we don't have to—"

"Rue." I have to take a careful breath before I ask her again. "Please."

Her shoulders tremble, then fall. I don't think it's just that she's trying to spare me the details. If she says it, after all, it's real. But we don't have time to pretend it isn't.

"He knows where he is, and what year it is," she says. "He still knows everyone's faces and names. He even knows what happened to him, exactly. But—it's like he doesn't remember *himself*. He knows his name, but not his own personality, or mannerisms. He keeps asking what kind of person he is."

I can still feel the weight of Charlie's leg crossed with mine, tensed now that she's leaning closer to me. I don't meet her

eyes. I'm not sure I deserve comforting.

God, I'm naive. I thought it would slow the Memory Eater down if she could only take unhappy memories. But there's all sorts of things that can make you unhappy. Including yourself.

"My parents probably won't be home until the morning," I catch Rue saying. "They think they can finish the journals if they read through the night." She falters. "Alana?"

They're not going to find anything in those journals. They might be starting to suspect that by now. But they also know they can't afford to take their time.

And neither can I.

"Charlie," I say. "How late can you stay out?"

WE WAIT UNTIL after dark. The Atwoods may not catch us, but that doesn't mean no one else will.

The night is carefully still when we step out into it. The mosquitos, the crickets, the frogs: everything's moving very quietly. Aware, in the way that nature always is, where the predators are.

Charlie's already idling at the end of the driveway. She went home just long enough to throw together dinner and make sure her grandfather was asleep. Rue hovers at my back until I'm safely in the car. I think she knows she couldn't actually protect me, if the Memory Eater were here. But I understand. Being out in the dark and the quiet feels exposed.

Whistler Beach Storage is on the border of town, off Route 1. Mom dated some guy in the boxy apartment complex across the street. I had to come by to bring some mail to her, once, and the hallway smelled like mildew and beer. For all that

Mom hated Whistler, she couldn't ever stay away for good. She'd cast herself out. Reel herself back in. Fight her expectations tooth and nail, then give in to them. She had me. She resented every second of it.

If she knew that she'd spent months across the street from a missing piece of our family history—and yet I was the first one to find it—I think she'd be too angry to speak.

Charlie pulls into the empty parking lot. The building ahead glows with orange moth light.

With a grim smile, Charlie dangles the key between her thumb and index finger as we step out of the car. “Do you want to do the honors, or should I?”

Part of me really, really wants to let her. Maybe later. This door is for me to open.

Still. As I take the key and lead us to the front, a wholly illogical part of me hopes that we'll be too late. The door will be barred or dead-bolted, and we'll have to come back in the morning, when it's light out and I'll be miraculously prepared for whatever's ahead.

But the teeth slide easily into the lock, and the door pops open. And the fluorescent cavern of the front lobby yawns ahead.

It doesn't look like this place is crowded even at the best of times. I know they hold auctions sometimes for abandoned units. Most of our clients pawn the things they don't want to hold on to. But some leave them here. And by the time someone picks it all up for cheap, months later, there's no real record of who these things belonged to.

Charlie rests a hand on my shoulder, drawing me to the present. She's always been good at noticing when I'm too deep in my own thoughts to find my way back on my own.

We make our way to the fourth, highest floor. The air here has the weight of a room that hasn't been disturbed in a long time. There's a fine layer of dust on the doorknob from the stairwell.

Unit 423 sits at the end of the hall. It feels like a strange place to stop. A lopsided number, like someone cut off mid-sentence.

"Harlow," Charlie says quietly. But I don't need her to unlock this door for me, either.

It pops open with a guttural creak and swings through cool, stale air.

I expect, when the light flicks on, to see more filing cabinets. But what's waiting for us isn't even locked. When we lift the lid from the box sitting off-center in the middle of the room, it unsticks with a little sigh. It's small enough to brace between my knees. There's only so much you can write about eight weeks at sea with your husband and half a dozen strangers, even if they changed every course your family could ever take. But it's startling, how little space it takes. Far too small for how much I've wondered.

"Good," I whisper. My voice barely stirs the dust. "If there were more keys, I was going to be so mad."

Rue and Charlie lean in behind me. Far enough not to crowd, but close enough to see. "That's it?" Charlie says.

I lift the delicately bound papers into my hands. Even if there was any doubt, I recognize the side, the jagged edges. I'd know the shape of Abigail's journal in my sleep.

I'd know the hand that wrote this first sentence, too. *Clara nearly got us caught again.*

"This is it," I murmur. "But—"

I scan the next sentences. *Joseph and I have agreed: we've tested our luck too many times. We've obtained three tickets to New York next week. Liverpool has been good for business. But Clara grows less cautious every year. Perhaps America will be vast enough even for her.*

“What is this?” I murmur. Clara? Three tickets?

“Wait—here.” Rue reaches past me and plucks something from the bottom of the box: when she withdraws her hand, she's holding two thin, yellowed sheets. Little sketched portraits. Old enough that for a second, I'm afraid they're going to crumble in her careful fingers.

The first is a young girl in a light-colored dress. A thick ribbon holds back the dark waves of her hair, and she clutches a teddy bear in both hands and aims a surly look at the artist. It's the scowl that makes her immediately recognizable in the second picture, even about a decade older.

She's a teenager here. Her dark waves are shoulder length, no longer neatly bound. She doesn't—she doesn't look like me, exactly. Where my face and my hips are round and soft, hers are angular, lean, wiry. But—the hair, the shape of it, is the same. The nose is similar. There's no color to tell for sure, but the eyes could be mine, too.

She's standing flanked by two adults. I'd know their faces in my sleep, too. It's Joseph and Abigail.

I turn the photo around. The back reads: *Joseph, Abigail, and Clara Harlow. March 1801.*

The yellowed paper curls around the edges of my fingers. I know my own family tree. Abigail's children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren. They were newlyweds when they boarded the *Advent*. They had three sons here in Whistler. Never a daughter. “Abigail and Joseph didn't have a family,” I say. “Not when they left Liverpool.”

Charlie's hand rests on mine. Steadies the photo between my trembling fingers. "If they didn't," she says, "then who is this?"

FOURTEEN

February 25, 1801

Clara nearly got us caught again.

Joseph and I have agreed: we've tested our luck too many times. We've obtained three tickets to New York next week. Liverpool has been good for business. But Clara grows less cautious every year. Perhaps America will be vast enough even for her.

Clara believes that we are punishing her. Joseph reassured her that this was only to be safe, that we know her heart was in the right place. He's too soft with her. But he's better suited to deal with her moods. Clara is already too emotional by half. The last thing we need is for me to lose my grip, too.

The journey ahead is not our first, but it is the longest by far. Perhaps the untidiest break. Clara's friends will forget her soon enough, but I doubt her customers will. The curse, as Mother always called it, continues to treat Clara marvelous well. Her skill grows as quickly as her stubbornness. She may well make us rich one day, if she doesn't get us hanged first.

Losing her customers will be quite the blow. They have kept us fed this past year. My own customers only come once, if I do the job right. Not Clara's. The things she shows you, you can't help but want to see them again.

The Advent will depart next week, if the weather holds. Let's hope she doesn't live up to her namesake. I don't know how long we can afford to wait.

March 5, 1801

The Advent is nothing to write home about. Quite literally. If Mother knew how many rats I've seen, she'd faint dead away.

But Mother still thinks it's Joseph's business that keeps us traveling. She'd do far more than swoon if she knew what was putting food on our table. She's made her opinions on the curse quite clear. As far as she knows, I'm trying what she has tried all these years: to ignore it, to starve it, to let it die. As if that would wish it away. If you ignored one of your arms, it might grow weaker. But it would still be there, wouldn't it?

Either way, what she doesn't know won't hurt her. Mother believes it's a special kind of hell for your safety to depend on conducting yourself so carefully. Mother should meet Clara one day. They'd have much in common.

Clara is still upset with me. I really did try not to fight with her, that night before we left Liverpool. As always, she is the one person with whom I can't leash my frustration. She knows as well as I do that strong emotion can make our power . . . erratic. It's a fragile thing, working with people's minds. Erratic's not the wisest thing to be.

And yet she's always pushing. Pushing me and pushing herself. If her feelings were the only thing at stake, I'd let her push all she wants. But she's a Harlow. A feeling is a weapon, if you let it be.

Joseph tells me that Clara sees a different world than I do. She is young. Her power makes people happy. She does not have to see the ugliness that I do.

Even if that's true, that's all the more reason not to coddle her. I might like to be softer, too: with her, with Joseph, with the customers at our doorstep. But that's not an indulgence I've been able to afford.

Perhaps Mother, in all her superstitions, had one thing right. Perhaps the nature of our curses do reflect on us. Clara

helps others dwell in moments past. Maybe they draw her into dwelling, too.

I hope that for once, Mother is right. Perhaps I can do for myself what I do for my own customers. Make a decision. Shut the door. And let that be the end of it.

March 13, 1801

In the past few days, an illness has swept the ship.

We were asked our occupation, when we boarded. We told everyone that I was a healer, which felt close enough to the truth. I did not expect that anyone would come to ask for my aid. Let alone the ship's captain.

I asked him if he had no physician to ask. But that would be no help, he told me. The physician was one of the afflicted. Physically, he's as hale as the day he stepped onto the ship. But he swears that he has forgotten all knowledge of medicine.

He isn't the only one. There's a young woman who has forgotten her mother's name. Poor Mrs. Stinnet, who has been seasick since the day we set sail, has finally been cured of her affliction—but she has forgotten the sea. Not just the name. The entire idea of it.

Their bodies, too, are unaffected. But their minds are unquestionably altered.

Joseph thought that perhaps I could help them at first. I was not so certain. It is difficult to explain the nature of my skills, even to myself. I tell my customers that sometimes, people build walls in their minds between themselves and what they must do. What I can do is tear down those walls.

In reality, it's coercion. An uglier word, to be certain. I cannot force someone to do something fully out of their nature. But I can give them a push.

Customers rarely come to me for themselves. They bring people they wish to marry. Relatives whose inheritance they desire. Some of them are brought to me under false pretenses, though I don't know how many. It's not my business to inquire.

My magic isn't Clara's, in any case. It doesn't bring good things into the world. But I thought perhaps I could compel my fellow passengers to remember.

I was wrong. Or rather, you can't compel someone to walk to a point that doesn't exist. There were no walls to tear down for them. On the contrary, I found their minds oddly blank.

It may be nothing to worry about. People get a little strange at sea, I'm told. Either way, I've told Clara to stop her wandering. She's scattered enough as it is.

April?

The captain is afflicted. Clara thought he was dead, when she found him. I thought it myself, for a moment.

There was not much relief to be had when we roused him. He no longer knows the way to New York. He does not even know where we are.

It has rained for days. This morning I stood on the edge of the bow, and I could not find an end to the clouds. So we have confined ourselves to our cabin. It may not protect us. But at least we'll be dry.

Clara hasn't taken well to confinement. There is more color in her cheeks than I have seen in days. But when she slowed her pacing enough for me to touch her, she didn't feel feverish.

I have never entered Clara's mind before. Mother always believed that Harlows must never use their curses on each other. I'm unsure about that. But I'm likewise unsure, in all my uneasiness, if it would be safe.

But it doesn't matter, does it? Whether or not the illness has taken hold, it's the same either way, isn't it?. There's nothing I can do.

April, 1801

I have kept a journal since I was sixteen.

My first was just a few pages long. Mother made me burn it, when she found out. Even now, she says that it is the most foolhardy thing I have ever done. To accept what we are is one thing. To leave a record of it is another. It turns your heart into a thing one can hold. Can find. Can harm.

But Joseph has not spoken since yesterday. And if I do not tell someone that my child is gone, it will never feel real. Even if, in the end, I am only telling myself.

We had been in our quarters for two days. All that time, I couldn't figure out what was happening to Clara. She wasn't lucid enough to tell me if she had forgotten anything. All she seemed to want was to leave our cabin.

For the first day, at least, Joseph and I kept her calm. But while we slept, she found the provisions we had stockpiled. They would have lasted us days. Two weeks, if we were mindful. By the time we woke, she had eaten them all.

The second day was the worst. I held her to sleep that night, the way I hadn't done since she was a child. I thought it had helped. It felt as though it did.

I still do not know what woke me, hours later. But Joseph and I opened our eyes to moonlight, our barricade dismantled, and the door hanging open.

It did not take long to find Clara. An unforgivable part of me wishes we never had.

She was on the deck, clutching the hands of a woman. Mrs. Baker, I think. She had the cabin two doors down from our

own. I thought her vain that first week, before the illness. But despite the rain lashing at her, she was so still. There was no color in her face. When Clara let her go, she slumped like a doll.

I have seen Clara with customers. I've seen their dazed faces after Clara's been in their heads. But Clara's power helps people relive their memories. And yet when we went to Mrs. Baker, she didn't understand who or where we were. She had no memory of the past month.

I looked to Clara. And I saw something move within her skin. Like a mouse within a rattlesnake.

And far too late, I understood. It was never a sickness that ravaged this ship.

It was always our daughter.

We have moved her to the cargo hold. There are restraints we can use here. And in the dark, I cannot see her. I cannot see the hunger where my daughter once stood.

She has been quiet for a while now. The last time she spoke was earlier, when I asked her how it happened. A feeling is a weapon. We both knew that. Whatever she felt on this horrible ship, it swallowed her whole.

She told me she didn't remember. But I can still guess at the shape of it. Clara dwells. It's who she is.

Perhaps this time she dwelled too deep.

1801

Still April, perhaps

I did not write here faithfully, the last days of the voyage. There are things you can bring yourself to do. But that does not mean you can stomach writing them.

I am not a good person. This, I already understood. But I believed I would do anything for my family.

We did not find New York, but we found land. The captain no longer remembered his destination, and the first mate no longer remembered his own name, but their knowledge of their ship remained intact. We found a port well to the north, a small community of fishermen. There was no dock large enough to hold the Advent, so we left it in the water and took rescue boats to shore.

That night, I gave Clara laudanum to make her sleep. Mr. Baker and Mrs. Stinnet helped us put her in a dinghy. And we brought her to a narrow cove we found along the cliffs. There are caves there. Far from where anyone lives.

She's still asleep. I still have her restrained, but I'm not sure I need to anymore. Real food no longer touches her hunger. She's weak. And she's starving.

These fishermen have been kind to us. Hospitable. That won't last if they know what we've brought to their shores. So that's my choice, now. Their wrath, or my daughter.

I can't help but think of what Mrs. Stinnet told me last night, keeping watch over Clara with too little food and too much wine. She told me, laughing, that she discovered a letter from her brother in her things. That in it, he mentioned her fear of the water. She told me, "If nothing else, I'm not afraid anymore. No matter how hard I try, I can't remember the ocean long enough to fear it."

I cannot bring Clara unwilling food. But what if not everyone would be unwilling?

First things first. If she is to live, she can't stay chained like this. But she cannot be wholly free, either.

But I have an idea, too. Perhaps every curse has two sides: this give and take. It seems Clara went too far. Felt too much, lost control of her emotion and her magic alike. Perhaps my magic has another side to it, too. And perhaps, if I approach it carefully, I can control it.

And if all I need to find that other side is to feel too deeply, then that's hardly a challenge. Every thought I've kept at bay all these weeks is already howling at the door. All I need is to let them in.

Joseph worries, as he always does. But I am not Clara. I am not kind. I do not think I have any farther to fall.

I have been monstrous for a long time now.

The next page is still Abigail's handwriting. But shakier now. Almost illegible.

March 1, 1851

I should know better, by now, than to write such things down. I thought I'd let those habits go the day I tore out those first pages. My journal is for my sons, my grandchildren, my descendants. They exist to tell the story I crafted for them. It is no longer a place for my own thoughts.

But you—you're not family, are you? And to do your job, you need my honesty.

You must be wondering. I think Joseph wonders, too, some days. Where did the woman from the Advent go? She wasn't kind; she wasn't soft. But she mourned, didn't she? She mourned her daughter.

That woman had other children. New mouths to feed. And if she could feed them and her daughter in the same fell swoop, that's not so wicked, is it?

I have told the Memory Eater that I'll be telling you everything. She will taunt you about it. You know her. But she will not tell the truth any more than you will. She sees her siblings, her nieces and nephews, every day. She has never once tried to confess who she is.

True, that's part of our bargain. But she's ashamed, too.

The look of her grows stranger with each memory she consumes. By the time Phillip was born, she no longer looked like my little girl. Didn't even look like a person anymore. I wonder how she will look by the time you read this.

Business thrives. That is the least surprising of all of it. Clara was always far more popular than me.

Where the seal is concerned, be assured, but be wary. So long as my descendants give it blood, it will not break. But the seal, too, is Harlow magic. I have told my sons, their children, that strong emotions could disrupt it. They conduct themselves well in that cave. Make sure they stay that way.

My sons hope that I'll change my mind as I live out my final years. That I'll teach them to wield the magic I hold. They hold it, too—some weeds grow even as you starve them. But God willing, they won't figure out how to grasp it. They're not as smart as their sister.

But their children and their children's children may be smarter. Be ready, always. The tool enclosed with this final message is for you. Do not hesitate to use it. Even if in my last hours, you need to use it on me.

I don't think you need to worry, though. Since the day I left my daughter in that cave, I haven't touched my power once. Mother was wrong. It's not such a hard thing, to shut off your heart. I've lived that way for many years now.

And if this may ever fall into unintended hands

The last entry concludes with four unfinished sentences.

~~*you wouldn't understand*~~

~~*you should know what I've had to*~~

~~*if there was a better way*~~

And then, most definitively crossed out:

~~*Tell Clara that I*~~

And then it ends.

FIFTEEN

I **USED TO** have this dream, when I was young.

I started having it during one of my mother's Responsible Phases, when she decided it was time to be part of my life again. I spent most of my afternoons, those three months, waiting outside the school for her to pick me up. She always showed up eventually. But when was anyone's guess.

My dream would start there, at first. Me, sitting on the benches facing the pickup area, waiting.

But the person who came to pick me up was never my mother, but the Memory Eater, shambling up the long pickup road. Faces would ghost through her skin like looking into a river after dark: life after life, drifting in the currents. Those faces wouldn't struggle, like they usually did. They looked calm. Content to be caught.

The Memory Eater would walk right up to me, there on the bench. She'd wait for me to collect my bag. And then she would lead me home.

I wonder if I knew even then, deep down, that my family was never as small as I was told. That there weren't three generations of Harlows in Whistler Beach.

There were four.

The pages drop from my nerveless fingers.

"Alana—" Rue starts.

My hands jerk forward, pushing the box of pages away. Like that would help at all. Abigail's daughter. My great-great-great-aunt. *Is that enough greats?* I think wildly. I don't know.

Even if I could feel anything but my hammering heart, I wouldn't be able to count.

A pair of hands comes to my elbows as I scramble to my feet. "Hey," Charlie says. "Breathe for me."

I mean to. I really do. But I shake my head, and the motion leaves sparks. She's a person. She's a person, and Lena's known it from the start. Effie before her. Someone else before her. Over and over and over, someone has known, and they've never—

Okay, Mom. That's what I'd said to the Memory Eater—to Clara—the morning she escaped. It was a joke. It was a thoughtless joke. But I—

"Is she okay?" Rue says.

I don't see if Charlie nods or shakes her head, but I feel the motion. "Let's get her some air."

With my lips numb and my legs shaking, there's not much to do but let them steer me outside. I get my first gulp of the cooling night. My lungs seize around it.

I sink into a crouch. There're two sets of hurried footsteps, and then Rue and Charlie are kneeling in front of me. "Listen to me," Charlie says. She was reading over my shoulder. I hear it in her voice. "You didn't know."

When I shake my head this time, it feels steadier. Does it matter what I knew? I knew she was a living thing. And I was fine with keeping her in that cave, controlling her food, her schedule, her life. Even if she was never a person, even if she always was what she was—why did I never once ask if any of it was right?

"She could have told me," I whisper. But if I'd known, what then? After two hundred years, how much goodwill does Clara Harlow have to give? The two fundamental facts were still true even before I was born. That we took everything she had.

That we hurt her, over and over, for so long. I can't bring myself to blame her for wanting to hurt us right back.

But I can't let that happen. So where does that leave us?

"Keep breathing," Charlie says quietly.

"I'm breathing." I laugh as she helps me to my feet. I wish I could stop that. I just want to react, for once in my life.

"Let me take you home," Charlie says. "Okay?"

Some horrible, automatic fury surges into my throat. *You're not responsible for me.* If I snapped that right now, she'd probably let it go. That's the worst part.

She's scared. That's what Rue had been trying to tell me yesterday, right? I can't be angry at her for being scared. It's cruel.

But I can't think with so many eyes on me, either. And right now, I really need to think.

"Could I . . ." I swallow to wet my throat. "Could I have some time alone?"

It's not the most popular idea I've ever had. It's late, they remind me. It's cold; the Memory Eater is still out there; it's not safe. I nod through every one. I know it's not safe. If Clara really is looking for painful memories, she could have her fill with me. But something happened to the both of us when she fed from me. Something we haven't worked out yet. I don't think she'd risk taking bites from me again.

Charlie's the one who points out that she could still hurt me the old-fashioned way. It's crossed my mind in the past few days, what she could do to a living person if she tried. She could take me apart if she wanted to. And if I were her, I'd want to.

But she hasn't done it yet. I don't think family means much to her anymore—at least, it shouldn't. But whatever it is she

wants, I don't think it's to kill me.

Rue still looks deeply uncertain by the time I've finished talking that out. Charlie's face is much more unreadable.

"If we leave you," she finally says, "will you walk straight home?"

"Straight home," I echo. And while I'm not too sure that's good enough for her, she accepts it. Though even after they climb into the car, I think I feel the weight of their backward glances well down the road.

It's not going to be a long walk. Main Street is right around the corner. Marie's is a few blocks down. Half a mile from here, over by the woods, is the house where Grandma raised me for most of my life. Every place that's ever been familiar to me, just around the corner from those pages.

I take Main Street, at first. That's the route Rue and Charlie would want me to take. But I only make it a few blocks before I take a right onto one of the dirt paths. The boardwalk won't be any less empty. But the ocean air might ease my nausea a little.

I still can't remember what it looked like, in the boardwalk of Clara's mind. A little like this, probably: the moonlight, the emptiness, the long lines of shuttered stalls. But I think it was high tide in Clara's boardwalk. I remember the waves breaking against the support beams like little mouths. I remember how it felt. That hunger Abigail wrote about, dripping from the air.

I tap my cheeks a few times. I'm not on Clara's boardwalk. I'm wide awake now. Which means I need to think.

So. If nothing else, I have my hands on the pages. After all that, Abigail didn't even describe how she'd made the seal, though that seems so far beyond the point now it's almost funny. If the seal were still intact, I'd break it myself.

All I've really learned about our magic is how desperately Abigail wanted to keep us from using it. All those rules about controlling our emotions around the seal—I don't think those were a lie. But I think Abigail was more afraid of us feeling too much at all. That if we learned to bring our emotions to heel day after day, maybe we wouldn't make Clara's mistakes. Maybe we wouldn't dwell too deep.

It's hard to say how much of that I should believe. If feeling too much makes you a monster, I should have become one four months ago.

Then again. I don't exactly know what happened to me four months ago, do I?

I push that to the back of my mind. Even if the pages were a dead end, there's someone who has more information than me. It was clear who was meant to receive Abigail's final entry, the tool she wrote about there. Those were instructions for the people meant to hold her secret. The council chairs.

Abigail didn't explain what that tool was made for. But I think I have a pretty good idea. There's been an ever-present consequence hanging over me all my life. A method, known only by the council, to seal a Harlow's power.

But after tonight, I'm not feeling very intimidated by the thought of Lena Russo. No matter what she'd like to threaten me with.

The boardwalk stretches ahead of me, patient. The turnoff into the Atwoods' neighborhood is just a quarter of a mile ahead. But the Russo house, nestled into the fancy Anchor Point cul-de-sac, is just minutes away, too.

I don't want to worry Rue and Charlie.

But with any luck, this won't take long.

LENA NEVER RINGS the doorbell when she comes to see you. She just tap-tap-taps on your door with her little rabbit knocks. It's never made sense to me. No one can even hear her.

She may have been onto something, though. Because when I pound at the Russo's front door hard enough to rattle her hanging plants, I can't deny that it's a little satisfying. And unlike Lena's knocking, mine makes itself heard.

The door slips open while I'm winding up again. Linus Russo, Lena's husband, blinks into the porch light. "Alana?"

I have to take a few breaths before I answer. I like Linus, usually. But there's not much room in me for like right now.

"I need to speak to Lena," I say. And oh. I *can* sound angry. Angry enough that even this tall, broad man rocks onto his back foot.

"It's all right, Linus." I don't see when Lena enters the room behind him. Only when she steps out from behind his shoulder. It's the least pulled together I've ever seen her. She's got on a flannel nightgown, the one she always jokes that Linus hates. She's wearing her glasses rather than her contacts.

But she meets my anger dead on. I've seen Lena flinch when someone looks at her wrong. She doesn't flinch now.

"Are you sure?" Linus shifts a little, putting just enough of his body between me and her. So either he's not seeing what I am, or he doesn't care. "I can stay."

"I'll talk to her," she says. "Go back to bed."

By the time he turns to look at her, though, she's wearing a look like the usual Lena: shoulders knitted together, hands clasped. There's still a wrongness to it, though. It's in her eyes. Wide as ever, but strangely lifeless.

He makes his slow, wary way back into the house, in the direction of the bedroom. And when Lena turns to face me fully, the mask drops.

“Well?” she says. “Who told you?”

I’m the one who flinches this time. It feels ridiculous. She knew from the beginning what had happened to Clara. I shouldn’t be so surprised that there’s a hardness in her that I never knew.

But I expected a reaction I’d recognize from her. Tears, excuses, defensiveness. But there’s a coldness to this look. Like the hard, flat gaze of a bird.

“Nobody told me,” I say. “I found your key in your office.”

“Don’t give me that,” she says. “Was it Mae? She didn’t even *want* this job, and now she’s trying to sabotage me?”

“Is that what you’re worried about?” I say. “You knew the entire time, and you still—”

“What would you have done?” For a second, she sounds disconcertingly like the Lena I know. Like she’s about to burst into tears. “No, really. Tell me why I should have said something. Who was I supposed to trust? Your bleeding-heart grandmother? She would have set that thing loose on the beach. You? I think you’re well aware that you haven’t been a whole lot of help to me.”

“I’m not here to help *you!*” I say.

“You’re not the only one who inherited a business, Alana,” she snaps. “If you’re from an *Advent* family, you’re expected to run for council chair, and Perfect Ms. Mae apparently wasn’t up for it. Do you know my ancestor had a job lined up in New York? Thanks to your family, he never made it off this stupid beach. And then you repaid our hard work by setting that monster free.”

I'm breathing hard enough that my ribs hurt now. "That's not what we're talking about."

"Isn't it?" she says. "Everyone thought it was your mother we needed to worry about. At least Amber knew she was worthless. But you? You're a spoiled brat, Alana. Always thought you knew better than everyone else. Think about it, if you're so smart. Why should I have trusted you? You and your favorite ancestor have a lot in common, you know. You've already done just about as much damage as she has."

"What does that have to do with anything?" I say. "I can't even *use* the Harlow curse!"

"Really?" Lena draws herself up primly. "Because your grandmother always thought you'd find a way."

It lands. It shouldn't. "She wouldn't have said that. Not to you."

"Wouldn't she?" she says. "She was trying to brag about you, as always. Never could shut up about her precious brilliant granddaughter. She said if anyone would figure it out, it would be you. She didn't stop to think about what it would mean for the rest of us."

"She cared about this town," I say. "A lot more than you do."

"You wanted me to be honest, Alana. So let's be honest," Lena says. "Your grandmother had to understand, deep down, that there was a reason those powers had been buried. If she thought there was any possibility you'd use them—well. Either she believed in you less than she pretended to, or she cared about Whistler less than you thought. Take your pick."

I'm dimly aware that my hands have balled into fists. Even when I uncurl them, press them back to my sides, they're shaking so hard that I can't hold them still.

“Don’t give me that look,” she says. “I didn’t want this, either, but when does anything ever go my way? But some good can come of this. You have the rest of Abigail’s journals now. If you’re so smart, just use them to fix the seal.”

Focus, I remind myself. This is still Lena. Maybe the Alana Harlow of four months ago was arrogant, but she was right, too. Lena isn’t smarter than me.

“Abigail didn’t explain how her powers worked,” I say carefully. “Even if she did, do you really think I’d put Clara back in that cave?”

Lena does flinch, this time. But something in the pit of my stomach knows I don’t have the upper hand. She repeats the motion a second time, deliberately—a twitch of her wrist. Then she pushes her nightgown sleeve back to her elbow, freeing her ever-present bracelet from the fold of the cuff.

At my blank stare, a flicker of satisfaction crosses her face. “Don’t you recognize your family’s work? Joseph Harlow was an amateur metalworker. Didn’t your grandmother have candlesticks from him?”

She’s been wearing that ugly thing for so long that I honestly stopped noticing it. But now that I’m looking right at it, I see the little filigree along the outer edge. It does match the neck of Joseph’s candlesticks.

“That’s the tool Abigail left you,” I say.

“When she created the seal, she learned how to transfer her magic into objects. I like this better than those rocks, though. A little ugly, but portable.” She gives her wrist another flick. “I suppose you’ve guessed what this does.”

I have. I did, back on the boardwalk. But in the face of something this small, I second-guess myself for a minute.

“Was it meant to be a surprise?” I say. “You’ve been threatening to take my powers since I was eight.”

“You’re saying that doesn’t scare you anymore?” she says. “Abigail honed her magic at the end of her life, you know. This bracelet doesn’t need to be fed to keep working. It just needs to be worn once.”

I knew it didn’t scare me. But I don’t realize until she says it just how much it doesn’t. It used to feel like a knife at my throat. Now it just feels like the promise of relief. “If you want my magic, you can have it,” I say. “I’m not fixing your seal, so you might as well.”

She watches me with that hard stare. In the low light, her eyes are a bloodless pewter. “Losing your magic would be the least of your worries.”

A shiver passes through me. I keep it at bay. “You really expect me to believe you don’t want me to fix that seal?”

“Of course I want it,” she says. “But that doesn’t mean I haven’t thought about what this town looks like without your horrible family. Chris and I talk about it all the time, you know. Abigail created that seal because she didn’t want her daughter in chains all her life. It’d be trickier now to hold her down. She’s not a teenage girl anymore. But the council isn’t three people in a cave anymore, either. We’d manage.

“Unfortunately,” she adds, “it’d completely screw with the ambiance. Customers know that she’s trapped, of course, but there’s a difference between knowing and sitting down with a beast in a cage. I’d love to be rid of you, but the ideal plan is still the first one. You fix the seal. The monster goes back into that cave. And we carry on as normal.” She crosses her arms. “But if you think that I need you? Trust me. I’d figure it out.”

For a long moment, the only sound in the house is the ticking of a kitschy little sailboat clock. I don’t want to speak, at first. I don’t want to risk how small I would sound.

“I’ll tell everyone what’s in those pages,” I say.

“You think they’ll believe you?” Lena says. “You’re not the golden girl anymore.”

“Scott and Mercedes,” I say. “Mae and Ayako. My word might not mean anything anymore, but theirs would.”

She shoots a quick look over her shoulder, down the bedroom hallway. Making absolutely sure that Linus isn’t listening. “It wouldn’t for long,” she says.

In one of my earliest memories, a late-January wave caught me in the back on one of my first visits to Cave’s Echo Cove. Almost pulled me under with the force of it. It took me hours to get warm. But even that wasn’t half as cold as I feel now.

Losing my magic would be the least of my worries, she said.

“I know what you’ve always thought of me,” she says. “You don’t think I have any real power, do you? You don’t think I could get Mae or Ayako recalled. Or make a few quick calls to the park service about Scott and Mercedes’s jobs. Is the mortgage fully paid on that cute little house where you’ve been living? I could give their bank a call. I’m pretty sure it’s local.”

I shake my head. “No one would do that. No one would just —”

“Take my word over theirs?” Lena says. “Mae thinks I’m so stupid. But she’s never tried to make allies in this town. You and she have that in common. But if I wanted to make sure there was no place left for you in Whistler? They’d listen to me.”

“I don’t believe that,” I say.

Lena sniffs. “You should. We’ve done it before.”

“You—” I swallow around a sudden clench in my throat. “You’re not going to scare me by lying to me.”

“Who’s lying?” she says. “I told you, Alana. You’re not that special. If you do figure out your magic one day, you won’t even be the first to do it. Your great-uncle Gregory? Smarter than he looked, but he just couldn’t help himself. Thought he’d turn it into a side hustle. As if the council would never find out. I hear the vote to seal his power went pretty quickly.”

“He left Whistler to start an accounting firm,” I say weakly.

“And you see how quick everyone was to believe that.” The corner of Lena’s mouth curves. “People liked him a lot more than they like you right about now. Imagine how they’d explain your absence?”

I let out a long, shaky breath. I’d like to tell her, again, that she’s lying. That there’s no way they could send an entire member of the family away without word getting out.

But Lena and Clara have one thing in common. They lie by omission. Not directly.

“So.” Lena never quite looks away as she tucks the bracelet back into her sleeve. “You can use that big brain of yours and fix the seal. Or you can burn it all down, and leave that monster of yours without any allies at all. What will it be?”

“She’s a person.” I hate the way it sounds, coming out of my mouth. Like pleading. If pleading was going to reach her, it would have long before now.

As she turns her face to mine, I think I do see the Lena Russo I recognize, for just a moment. It’s the same quick furrow in her brow that she gets when Mae makes her answer tough questions at town meetings. It’s the look that ensured Rue would never trust her.

Lena has always liked being in charge. She’s always laughed that it’s too much stress, being in power. But power is the part she likes. It’s responsibility she doesn’t want.

And I see it in the way her face shutters. Whatever has happened—will happen—to Clara, she'll never feel like any of it was her fault. She'll find someone else to carry that weight.

I don't know what'll happen if I leave Clara alone with a person like that.

"She's a person," she says. "Fine. She's a person that you've kept in that cave for half your life, without question. As far as she's concerned, you're still her jailer. She doesn't want a family reunion. She wants to devour this town from under your feet."

Through the windows, the sky has gone the lightest shade of blue. Another hour closer to Clara's next meal, if she's not already out there eating it.

Lena's right about one thing. She may have been the one keeping this secret. But it was my family's secret to begin with. My mistake to fix.

And for now, fixing it means playing along.

"I won't let that happen," I finally say. Because at least that much is true.

"Well." She smiles, as flat and even as the surface of a coin. "It sounds like you'd better get to work."

SIXTEEN

WHEN I WALK through the Atwoods' front door, I almost run headfirst into Charlie and Rue. Their coats are on; their faces are grim. And I realize that however long I was at Lena's house, it was a lot longer than ten minutes.

I try to smile. I think I manage a twitch. "Sorry."

I must look a lot worse than I realized. Because neither of them starts yelling, as much as they might want to right about now. They just take a step back, clearing my path to the couch.

I sink down onto the cushions, hard. "I went to Lena's."

Charlie blinks pointedly. "You did what?"

"We just talked," I say. "I mean, technically we threatened each other, but that's still talking."

"Threatened you?" Rue plunks herself into the armchair opposite me. "Alana, if she tried to hurt you—"

I pinch at the bridge of my nose. Even my eyes feel sore. "Not that kind of threat."

So I tell them everything. Honesty doesn't feel much more natural than it has in the past few days. But there's something grimly satisfying about it. At least now everyone's as lost as I am.

"You're not putting her back in that cave, though," Rue says.

I let my head fall back onto the cushions. "I'm not. I just don't know how I'm going to not."

“She could be bluffing,” Charlie says. “Even the council doesn’t have all that power.”

“No,” I admit. “But like she said, she’s got allies. The police are on her side for sure. And if she can position herself as the one who saved Whistler? People will listen to whatever she says.”

“So what are you thinking?” Charlie asks. A tired smile flickers across my face. Bold of her to assume I can rub more than two thoughts together right about now.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Even if I wanted to fix the seal, if only to buy us a little more time, I still don’t understand Abigail’s magic. She wrote that there was a ‘give and take’ to the Harlow power. Clara’s, I understand—she can help you re-experience a memory, or she can take it away. But Abigail? How do you get from convincing someone to get married to sealing your daughter in a cave?”

“She wrote that it was a kind of coercion,” Rue muses. “Convincing people to go through with a marriage, or put someone in a will—it’s like she gives them a push. Sealing away someone’s freedom isn’t that different.”

“But how did she attach that coercion to an object?” I say. “First the seal, and then apparently this—”

Even after the night I’ve had, I’m a little embarrassed that it takes this long to click. I jolt up straight. “The bracelet.”

“I mean, she had a lot longer than Clara did to figure out her magic. Maybe after all those years—” Charlie glances up. And she finally notices the look on my face.

“What?” she says.

I bounce to my feet, so suddenly and fully awake that I can barely remember being tired. “The bracelet *seals a Harlow’s powers*. Clara’s a Harlow. If I put it on her—”

Rue's not far behind me. Her eyes fully light up. "And if it can't be undone—"

"Then she won't need to feed on anyone anymore," I say. "She'd be free."

Charlie's the only one of us who doesn't look quite sure. "How, though?" she says. "You don't have Clara, and you don't have the bracelet."

I shake my head, a little impatient. It's true, but it's a minor speed bump. I needed a way to protect both Clara and the town. This is it.

It's a full-body feeling. Maybe like how the Alana of four months ago would have felt, before her life crashed around her. Like I'm throwing myself at a door instead of a wall.

"I just have to get Clara and Lena into the same place," I say.

"How are you going to do that?" Charlie says.

"That's the easy part," I say. "Clara's starving. So first, we get her the perfect meal."

IT'S MERCEDES, INADVERTENTLY, who pushes the rest of the plan into place. She calls sometime before dawn to let us know that she and Scott don't expect to be home any time soon. "Maybe you two should think about going to the Stinnet house for a while," she says. "They're on their own, too."

If there's a perfect meal for Clara in Whistler Beach, it's Ned and Daniel Stinnet.

That is, if they agree to it.

It's then that I have to grudgingly admit that nothing's getting done until morning. Ned and Daniel are sleeping. If

we're going to pull this off, we should probably get some rest, too.

I might not have been as awake as I thought. I close my eyes for a second on the couch, just to think, for one more second, of the lie I'm going to feed to Lena in the morning. And when I open them, I'm at a booth in the Beachside Grill. Staring right into the wide, questioning eyes of little Daniel and Ned Stinnet.

And next to me, Sara Whittaker. Not facing her children anymore. Looking right at me.

"It's you again." Her eyes, the lines of her face, are clear, sharp. It's only her voice that's a little fuzzy, as if her mouth is full of cloth. "You were here before."

I'm dreaming again. And just like the dream I had about Mrs. Stinnet, it's oddly lucid. But stranger things have happened to my brain since Clara's been in it. We're still not completely sure if, somehow, her magic has tangled with mine.

I shift on the vinyl bench, and it creaks. "I'm not really here," I mumble. Half to myself, since apparently I need the reminder. And half to the Sara Whittaker of my mind. She may not be real. But she's looking at me so expectantly that I feel like I should say something.

She seizes me by both hands. And—this is a bit sharper than the usual dream, too. It lands like a punch. Like screwing your thumb directly into a bruise. It's barely pressure, but it *hurts*.

"I didn't want to do it," she gasps. "Tell them that I didn't ___"

My hand is empty when I flinch myself awake.

"Harlow?"

My vision is still fuzzed from sleep. I don't see exactly where Charlie is standing. But I wave in the vague direction of her voice. The ghost of that bruised feeling still lingers in the bones of my hands.

"I'm okay," I say. "Dream."

I blink my eyes clear just in time for Charlie to drop into a squat in front of the couch. I nearly flinch back. She practically carried me into the house the other day, but—this still feels a lot closer than she's gotten all week. "What are you —"

Charlie's hand, raised in an aborted half gesture, jerks back. She clears her throat, gestures broadly to her own face. "You're . . ."

Confused, I raise my hands to my cheeks. They come away wet.

Oh. "Sorry." I scrub a sleeve across my face. "*Really* weird dream." And then, if only so I don't have to dwell on that a second longer: "Did you sleep here last night? What about your grandpa?"

"I told him I was here. You know him. Not really big on questions." Her mouth thins. "I heard a sound in here. It kind of seemed like you were in pain."

"Huh," I say. As if I don't remember exactly how it felt the second Sara Whittaker grabbed my hand. But I've put a lot on Charlie and Rue these past few days. This—well. There are more important things going on in my head than this. "Maybe this couch isn't as comfortable as it looks."

The line of her shoulders eases a little. "I tried to tell you to go to bed."

"Carry me next time, then." I stretch, and something pops. "I'll be your new dead lift record."

She doesn't laugh. She just looks more serious, if that's possible. "I didn't want to wake you," she says simply. As seriously as she's ever said anything.

Rue, thankfully, makes the timeliest entrance of our friendship. Charlie looks away from me long enough that I can take a deep breath and try not to pop like a grape.

I didn't want to wake you. Who just goes and says things like that?

"Eat this," Rue says, by way of greeting.

I blink blearily down at the plate of omelet. My stomach doesn't feel quite settled. But she's giving me one of those Looks borrowed straight from her mother.

I can see her chewing on something she wants to say. She waits until I've set my plate aside, though. "Hey . . . this'll be okay, right?"

I smile, give her hand a little tug. And it settles whatever's left of the tightness in my chest. Whatever I felt with Sara was just a dream. This is what a hand feels like.

"That's your future husband and sibling-in-law we're talking about," I say. "I won't let anything happen to them."

I must not look *that* tired. When she winds up and hits my shoulder, she doesn't really hold back.

It's not much longer before the series of hesitant taps at the front door. I give my face a few taps of my own, as if that'll take me the rest of the way to feeling human again. Results are mixed.

When I open the door, Daniel and Ned are standing side by side, doing an incredible job of politely masking their confusion. I didn't say too much in my text. I didn't want to scare them off before I could explain everything.

“Here, sit.” Rue flutters a hand at the couch. “Do you like coffee? I made coffee.”

“You drink coffee?” Daniel flashes his easy grin. “Badass. I tried milk and sugar and all that, but it was still too bitter for me.”

“I don’t really like it, either,” Rue blurts out.

“Oh!” Daniel barely raises an eyebrow. “Good. We can suffer through it together, then.”

“What’s this about?” Ned says. To the point, as always. Daniel’s the one who loves to talk; Ned goes through life focused on the shortest way from point A to point B. I think it’s how they both survived what they did. Daniel easing the way, making sure that they were liked, that they were welcome. Ned always keeping them moving forward.

“Thank you for coming here,” I say, first of all. “I know this must have been a . . . weird request.”

“Not that weird,” Ned allows. “We kinda figured something was going on when you came to see Mom.” They watch me for a beat. “The Atwoods don’t know you’re doing this, right?”

I laugh. I’m not sure if Ned picked up Mae’s directness, or if they come by it honestly. “The only reason we’re getting away with any of this right now is because they think we’ve been safe at home this whole time.”

Ned inclines their head but doesn’t say anything. Daniel watches my face, grimacing good-naturedly between sips of coffee. No more time to stall, I think.

This might be a mistake. After everything I’ve learned in the past twenty-four hours, I feel like I should be trusting fewer people, not more of them. Mom told me more than once that people in Whistler were nice enough, but their knives were always in hand. I understand why she said that now.

But here's the worst thing about trust. All you can do is gather evidence from where you're standing. Guess, as best you can, whether or not the ground ahead will hold you.

"There's something wrong with the Memory Eater," I say.

Daniel's ever-present smile recedes. "I'm guessing that's not *good* wrong."

"Honestly, it could go either way," I say. "Something happened after she fed from me, or after she escaped. And she's only been able to consume unhappy memories."

I slosh the coffee around in my cup. That was the easy part. "That's not the only thing," I say. "I've also—been able to see fragments of the memories she's consumed."

"Man," Daniel says, his eyes wide. "That must be intense." It's a good thing Rue's sitting next to him. I don't think he notices her bracing for the blow I'm about to land.

There's no good way to do it. So I do it quickly. "I saw your biological mother's memories. I'm sorry."

I think this might be the first time I've ever seen Ned Stinnet's closed-off little face waver. The set of their mouth, their jaw, their eyebrows barely shifts. But they go white.

Daniel's arm jolts toward theirs, finds their hand. He doesn't even need to look to do it.

"I'm sorry," I say again. I couldn't help prying into their lives. That doesn't mean I feel a whole lot better about it.

"It wasn't your fault." Daniel's reassurance is almost automatic. My heart splinters a little further. "If you don't mind me asking—I mean. Ned and I don't really remember that much."

"I didn't see much, either. A little of your biological parents fighting about money." I pause. "I know this probably doesn't help at all. But it seemed like your father forced her into it."

“Sounds about right,” Ned says faintly.

Daniel squeezes his sibling’s hand. “Like, you never want to say these things happen for a reason, right? That’s just what people say when they don’t want to have to feel bad. But it’s good here. Our moms are good to us. I . . . don’t really remember being happy in that house.”

I had a feeling. Which is why I don’t want to ask what I’m about to ask. Looking into their family’s pain was an accident. But this next part won’t be.

“I’m so sorry,” I say yet again. “I wouldn’t ask this of you if I could think of something else. But if the Memory Eater is drawn to unhappy memories—I don’t think she’ll be able to resist you. Either of you.”

Daniel’s brow crinkles, not quite there yet. Ned is a little quicker. “You want to use us as bait.”

“I think I know how to stop her,” I say. “But if I’m going to do it, I need to draw her out.”

“No,” Daniel says. He pauses just long enough for my breath to catch in my throat. “No, I mean—I’ll help you. Of course I will. But Ned—”

“But I what?” Ned turns to face their brother. For once, they really sound like the younger sibling. “Why wouldn’t I be able to do this?”

“Of course you’d be able to—” Daniel starts. “I mean, it’s not about that. I should be enough to draw her out on my own, right?”

“We’ll have a better chance if we give her a buffet,” Ned says.

“*Ned*,” Daniel says.

“That’s what we are to her, aren’t we?” Ned says.

“It wouldn’t be safe,” Daniel says.

“And it’d be safe for you?” Ned asks.

“No!” Anger sounds restrained, coming from Daniel. Like, even as he raises his voice, he wants you to understand, somehow, that it’s not really you he’s angry at. “But I’m your older brother, so I’m doing it!”

But as it turns out, Ned can raise their voice, too.

“When Mom left us,” they say, “you told me whatever we did, we would do it together. And now you want to act like you’re in this alone?”

Daniel goes still. I can see the gears turning in his head as he grasps to counter that. But for all that I haven’t spent much time with Daniel, I’ve heard him say more than once that Ned is the smarter of the two of them. The fight goes out of him long before he finally turns to me.

“I can’t let anything happen to them,” he says.

I nod, hard. “Nothing will happen to either of you.”

“Charlie and I will be there, too,” Rue says. “We’ll keep you safe.”

Daniel’s smile, as he squeezes her arm, is a little weaker than his usual. But it’s no less warm for it. For once, when he looks at her, Rue’s own stare doesn’t dart to the floor.

“So what do we need to do?” Ned asks.

“For now? Nothing,” I say. “Go back home, lock your doors, stay safe. We’ll come get you later this afternoon. We have a few things to prepare first.”

“Anything we can help with?” Daniel asks.

I bite back a grimace. I wish. It would be nice if there was someone, at least, who could slide the last piece of this plan into place for me. After last night, I’ve listened to Lena Russo’s voice enough for the next two months.

But. “No,” I say, on a heavy sigh. “I have to do this part myself.”

“I **DON’T UNDERSTAND** why I need to be there,” Lena snaps on the other end of the line.

I take at least two deep, slow breaths, and I remind myself, too, why she needs to be there. If I don’t have the bracelet in reach, all of this is for nothing. But still. I wish I had the presence of mind last night to pluck that horrible thing right off her bony wrist. I could have taken her. I may be short, but I have body mass on my side.

“Once I have her sealed again,” I say, “I’ll need the council’s help moving her. And if I asked Mae or Ayako, they’d try to stop me.”

“Then why not lure her right into the caves?” she says.

It’s funny that Lena, who knew the entire time that Clara was a person, has always been the first to forget that she’s not some mindless animal. “She’s not a cat, Lena,” I say. “We can’t just lure her into her carrier with treats. We need a location she’s not going to suspect.”

“And you’re *sure* you have the seal figured out,” she says.

That was the hardest lie to come up with. I’m surprisingly terrible at bullshitting. Thankfully, Rue is surprisingly great at it when she’s not doing it to someone’s face. She spun me a story in about ten minutes: one where we took a closer look at Abigail’s journal and found a tiny drop of blood on one of the pages.

“We tore off a piece of the bloodstain and tested it on the seal,” I lie. “It’s working. I felt it reawaken her magic. But we

don't have much of that bloodstain left. We have to get this right."

Silence on the other end of the line. "If you're afraid to come alone," I allow, "you can bring Chris. But no one else. And no police, okay? She'll hear them coming."

"I'm not afraid," she shoots back. I'm not entirely sure she heard anything after that, but I guess I'll have to chance it.

"Good," I say. "Then I'll see you on the boardwalk at five."

She doesn't give me an answer before the line goes dead. But she doesn't say no, either. So I'm 90 percent sure that everything is in place.

"She hung up on me," I say, turning around.

Behind me, Charlie has just finished unloading all our bags. It's a cloudless day in Whistler Beach. And even with us fully underneath the boardwalk, the sun is bright through the wood slats, catching on the smooth edges and little mineral fragments buried in the thirty-two stones of Abigail's seal. They look innocuous, sitting there in the sand. They don't look like they could hold anybody anywhere.

Charlie must be thinking the same thing, because she says, "Are you sure it's okay to move these around?"

"Move them all you want," I say. "I'm never going to use them again."

But if we're going to convince both Lena and Clara that we've fixed the seal, we need to recreate the conditions. There were three things Abigail said were needed to maintain it: the stones, Harlow blood, and the tides. And if we can't use the caves, there's only one place with access to the tides: Whistler Beach itself.

So while Rue goes to the Stinnet house to collect Daniel and Ned, it falls to Charlie and me to perfectly rebuild the seal. I

don't think Lena's looked at it long enough to notice if one or two are out of place. But Lena's already surprised me more than once in the past twenty-four hours.

"Glad you had a picture of this on your phone," I mumble, tilting Charlie's screen. "Why *did* you, anyway?"

"It was my first time coming to work with you," Charlie says. "I wanted pictures of my hot girlfriend doing magic."

I look up at her. She blinks back at me innocently. "We weren't dating then," I say.

"I'm an optimist," she says.

I kick a little sand in her direction before I go back to studying the image. "Would help if it was a little less grainy."

"It was dark," she says. "And I had a shitty phone back then. Will this be enough?"

"Hmm." It's not the clearest. But it'll do. "Yeah, it will be. And I wrote down that mnemonic to stop myself from forgetting it again."

"The far-off sea touches every frozen shore on earth," Charlie recites.

"Ah." I'm pretty sure my swallow is audible. "You remember it."

"Baby," she says. We are going to need to talk about this "baby" thing at some point. "You're going to hurt my feelings."

"I know, I know." I move the first four rocks into place. It gives me an excuse not to look up. "I just wasn't always sure you were listening."

She falters. I can hear it in the way she's moving, in the way she lays the next few stones. "Harlow," she says. "I didn't hate your work. I don't know how else to tell you that."

I suck in a breath through my teeth. I know that, now. I think I do. But when I still don't know what the final straw *was*, it's hard to be wholly confident in anything.

"You didn't like it, either, though," I say. "Right?"

I'm worried, at first, that it sounds more like an accusation than a question. But she considers it. "I liked some of it," she says. "I liked watching you work. I liked watching you confident."

"You might be the only one." I set the next few stones into place. "If I could tell you the number of times I've heard, this week alone, how arrogant I used to be."

"Mm. You could be, a little." Charlie tucks the low swoop of her bang behind her ear. "I liked that, too."

When I stare for just a beat too long, she points at the seal. "That one goes there."

"Yeah," I mumble. "Thank you." Another beat. I'm not sure whether I want to open this door, but—as long as we're here, being honest. "You can talk about what you didn't like, you know."

I expect a quicker response to that. A floodgate opening, if I'm being honest. But Charlie just purses her lips. "I don't think you need to hear it again."

"I just—I don't know." I'm starting to regret saying anything. But even without my memories of our breakup, it still feels like there's something not quite normal between us. A caution that wasn't there before. "You're being so nice to me."

Charlie blinks. "You don't want me to be nice to you?"

I needlessly adjust one of the stones. It gives me something to do besides stare. "No. I mean, yes, I do. But I feel like I just keep doing all the things that used to make you angry, and—

you're just being so patient with me. You can still be mad at me, if you want."

She falters, for a minute. Rakes back her hair. I always thought she was doing that to look cool—as if she needed to. I can't believe I never realized it was a nervous habit.

"You still think I was angry?" she says.

I look up then. "You weren't?"

"Harlow, I was *scared*," she says. "Watching you back then, it was like—all day you were switched on. Constant customer service mode, with everyone. The clients. The council. The people who live here. Everywhere you go, you're doing this constant mental math, just trying to make sure you're keeping everyone afloat. And I'd just watch you and think, *How is she not exhausted? I'm exhausted looking at her.*"

Charlie shifts. The sand sinks a little under the two of us. "And then, of course, you *were* exhausted. You just managed to fool me, too."

I have to remind myself to put the next stone down. The whole time Charlie was talking, I was holding it in my fist.

"I'm sorry." I smooth it into place on the sand. "I think—on some level, I probably knew you were right. Mom always told me that the council was so lucky that she had a sucker for a daughter."

Charlie darkens. But I keep going. Sorting through all my mismatched feelings about Mom is going to take a lot more time than we have. "You said it much more nicely than Mom did," I add. "Just to be clear. But if I admitted it was true . . ."

She's the one to finish, when I can't. "You would have had to do something about it."

"That's the one," I mumble. And I'm doing something about it now, of course. But I'm doing it for Clara. I don't think I

would have ended this for my own sake.

We've been working in silence a few more minutes when Charlie clears her throat. I go still, two of the last stones in hand. I know that throat clear. "Hey," she says. "Are you sure about this?"

The stones match the picture. But I'm pretty sure the "this" she's talking about is a little broader than that. "Not really," I say, "but I'm improvising."

"No, I mean . . ." I can see the old frustration bubbling up, just a little. "Using the bracelet on Clara."

"It shouldn't hurt her," I say. "If it works like Lena says, it should just stop her from taking any more memories."

"Even if it won't hurt her physically," Charlie says, "it's still inflicting her mother's power on her. Again."

Oh.

I think about coming up with a nice-sounding rationale. Anything that will smooth her furrowed brow back into place. But that's what Charlie was talking about, too—me treating everyone like they're a customer. Charlie's not a customer. She's one of the two people who know me best in the world.

"If I want to set her free," I say, "I have to make sure she won't hurt anyone."

"And I get that," she says. "But there's one thing we haven't looked at. Your grandmother told you what she wanted you to do, if any of this ever happened."

I narrow my eyes at her. "She did. And Clara took that."

"You've been able to look at other people's memories," she says. "I know I'm not asking for something easy. I'm just thinking—your own memories might be in there somewhere."

Her phone, still in my hands, drops from my nerveless fingers.

I pick it up, brush the sand off. It gives me two seconds to process. It feels so obvious, thinking about it now. That of all the memories at the tips of her fingers, somewhere in there is Grandma, telling me what to do.

And somewhere in there is everything else, too.

“I can’t,” I say.

“I know you gave them up for a reason,” Charlie says, “but ___”

“No, Char, that’s the *thing*,” I say. “Who I was then—we’re here in the first place because of what my past self did. We can’t get her involved. Not again.”

“I don’t understand.” Her hand is hovering near my shoulder, though not quite close enough to touch me. “What do you mean, her?”

I don’t know how to explain this without laying out every inch of it. The entire awful story. Everything that I gave up, willingly or unwillingly—I guess I’ll never know for sure which was which. I spent months trying to be that Alana. The Alana who was sick with stress even before her grandmother died. Who couldn’t accept her girlfriend’s concern without lashing out. Who put everyone she knew at risk just because she didn’t want to grieve like a normal person.

“The other night,” I finally say, “Josie asked if we’re still the same people if we’re missing some of our memories. What if she’s right? What if I was someone different then? We know now that whatever happened to Clara, it was because she felt something too deeply. The Alana of four months ago—she already put everyone in danger because of what she was feeling. How do we know she won’t—”

“Harlow,” Charlie says, her blue eyes huge. “All we have is Abigail’s side of the story. We don’t know exactly what

happened to Clara. And even if it all *was* true, you're not a different person. I know you."

I shake my head. I know that Charlie knows me. She knows me better than almost anyone.

But even if Charlie's right—even if we don't know exactly what Clara felt in the depths of that ship—we know what happened after she felt it. We know that she couldn't take it back, however many times she tried to. I don't think there's any room for trial and error in the Harlow magic. I don't think I get any errors.

"I know what I'm doing," I finally say. "Whatever Grandma asked—I don't remember what it was, but I remember that it was impossible. This, on the other hand—I can do this."

She pulls her hands back from me, holds them both up. A little gesture of surrender. Though her face looks more resigned than anything.

"I don't know how you can't recognize yourself right now," she says, with a low laugh. "You're not any less stubborn than you were."

I rub both my hands over my face. "Char—"

"Listen. I trust you." Charlie's long legs uncoil into a sprawl under her. "I just want you to do this because you're sure. Not because you think it's your only option."

I rub at my temples again. I know I'm getting sand all over them. *Good*, I think, a little hysterically. *Extra camouflage*.

This *is* my only option. In this case, I think, that's the same thing as being sure.

"I can take responsibility," I say. "For whatever happens."

Charlie smiles. Her face is patient, in the way she has been these last few days. And I think I can finally see everything

simmering underneath it. Frustration. Fondness. A quiet, ever-present fear.

“I know,” she says. “I liked that, too.”

SEVENTEEN

CHRIS TELLS US we're doing the right thing. He tells us about five times. He's far less concerned with the fact that we've been successfully going behind his back than with the fact that, as far as he's convinced, this is almost over. It helps that he seems to think his conversation with Rue in the council offices motivated this somehow. He keeps shooting her approving looks.

For a few queasy seconds, I think that he's going to ask questions about our completely fake plan. But he takes one look at our little jar of fake bloodstained paper, and that seems to be enough. I'm starting to think I could have told them anything. I could have told them that Mercury retrograde was going to repair the seal.

I'm starting to understand why, all these months, no one realized anything was wrong. No one's ever taken the time to understand Clara. No one pays a lot of attention to what I do as long as I seem confident about it. They don't really care how it works, as long as it works for them.

It's been hard not to think of Great-Uncle Gregory these past few hours. Sent away from the only home we were ever supposed to have for figuring out what the rest of us couldn't. I've always been told he was a businessman. But if he really did try to make a few extra dollars off his curse, I think it was more than that. All our lives, everything we've had was something to be used. Maybe he just wanted to be used on his own terms, for once.

Lena and Chris agree to wait out of sight, inside one of the shuttered stalls. Which is for the best—I don't want Lena to

get suspicious about the seal. But if Clara takes the bait, I'm going to need to get to that bracelet. And I need to get it quickly.

Rue and Charlie join me under the boardwalk, tucked next to the seal. I try just one more time to convince them to move farther away. According to Charlie, that was cute of me.

So we watch Daniel's and Ned's backs. And we wait.

We wait for a long time.

These past few days, Clara's been much more cautious about her movements than I would have expected. All those years she towered over me at Cave's Echo, I wouldn't have thought she'd be intimidated by anything, let alone Lena Russo and a handful of Whistler Beach police. But Clara must remember those chains on the *Advent* perfectly well. She knows the Harlow curse isn't the only way to hold her.

It may not have been smart for her to stay, in the face of that. Stories of escaped exotic animals aside, some other town out there would have been less prepared for her. But as long as whatever's happening to us is still affecting her, she's not completely free. One way or another, the two of us are still entangled.

Until she can sever that last tie, I don't think she's going to leave.

Charlie's looking at me closely. Even if I didn't feel her eyes on me, I'd be able to tell. "I know it all feels different now," she finally says.

"Is it not?" I say.

"For you, it is," Charlie says. "Just remember that for Clara, nothing's changed."

I settle farther back into the shadows. I know what she's saying. This is only new to me. To Clara, we've been family

this entire time. That has to mean very little to her by now.

It's surreal, waiting here. Without the context, this would be the most familiar thing in the world, sitting on the beach and waiting for the Memory Eater's hunger. But the main beach could never be mistaken for Cave's Echo Cove. The sand is soft and fine grained. The waves slam at the shoreline, then wind up again, rocks and clams skittering along in the tidal inhale. I can see the little spines of the rip currents farther out. When I was just old enough to walk, Mom almost drowned here. I was too young to remember most of it. But for years, I dreamed of lifeguards hauling her body out of the grip of living teeth.

We've been waiting for half an hour, I think, when Charlie finally speaks. "What do we do when the tide comes in?"

"We've got a little longer," I say.

Charlie shakes her head. "I'm not saying give up," she says. "I'm saying—if she doesn't show up. What do we do then?"

I can only smile thinly to that. Because if Clara doesn't take the bait, that means I'm officially out of ideas.

A yelp from down the beach startles all of us. Laughing, Daniel jumps to his feet, reeling back from the wave that just hit him. "Sorry, sorry! That was *cold!*"

For the first time all day, Ned seems to relax. They're visibly suppressing a laugh as they lift their linen culottes a few inches above the surf. "We should move. We shouldn't sit too close to you, right?"

Daniel's eyes find the shelf of the boardwalk above us. "What if we move above you? Then you can stay with the seal, and we're still in sight."

Rue's mouth thins. "We wouldn't be able to see her coming."

Daniel's smile takes on a nervous slant. "Then if you could listen really carefully, that'd be great."

I watch them trek up the wooden steps with a twist in my stomach. Rue's right. This makes things much riskier. And Daniel and Ned have given me a dizzying amount of trust, just being here. Even after all these years with Mae and Ayako, trust can't be an easy thing for them to give.

But for everything else I've screwed up, I've never once let a client get hurt. I'm not about to start now. So when we hear signs of life echoing down the wood above us, I'm ready.

These aren't the heavy footfalls of Clara's movements, though. It's not until I round the corner and step into view of the boardwalk that I realize what I *am* hearing. Human footsteps. Two pairs of them.

"Daniel? Ned?" Ayako Stinnet, as exhausted and disheveled as I've ever seen her, is coming toward us down the boardwalk. Mae, next to her, looks just as tired. But there's an understanding in her stare that hasn't hit her wife yet. "Alana, what are you kids *doing* here? It's not safe!"

"Mom?" Daniel says. "What are you—"

"Scott and Mercedes said you were at our house," Ayako says. "But when we all headed over to get you, there was no one there. We thought something happened!"

"My parents were with you?" Rue's now rounded the stairs, too, hovering behind my back. "Are they—"

Daniel opens his mouth then. And for a second, I think we'll be okay. He knows his parents. He's got one of the most trustworthy faces I've ever seen. Maybe he's thought of an excuse.

Unfortunately, he's about as good at lying as Rue. Because he blurts out, "We were getting some air!"

The curve of Mae's eyebrow is a little softer than the one for her coworkers, or people asking ridiculous questions at town hall meetings. But only a little. "Plenty of good air back at the house, kiddo."

Ned opens their mouth, and I feel a second, significantly smaller stab of hope. It doesn't last. "We're whale watching."

I smile creakily at Mae's and Ayako's twinned stares. Apparently you can be cool and collected in the face of potential monster attack but completely self-destruct at the prospect of simple improv.

"Mae! Ayako!" Oh, thank God. Chris is here. I will never again be this happy to see Chris.

Lena scurries at his heels, her big doe eyes firmly in place. I can't totally bring myself to be happy to see *her*, but at least she must have an out for us. This was her idea. Or at least, my idea in the face of her threats. She has to know that I'll never get another chance if I'm locked in the Atwoods' guest room.

At least, she should know that. But when she turns to me, I realize seconds before it happens that I'm about to be thrown under the bus.

"What are you all doing here?" she quavers.

I'm going to throw all her keys into the ocean. I am specifically going to survive this so that I can throw all her keys into the ocean.

"Alana," Mae says. Daniel and Ned have nerves of steel. If I was on the other end of this look on a regular basis, I would simply let the earth swallow me. "What's this about?"

"We just wanted to get out for a bit," I say. "We were getting a little nervous in our empty houses. Figured there'd be safety in numbers."

“I see.” Lena’s little-bird stare lands on Charlie. “I think *your* grandfather is at home, Charlene.”

I don’t dare to look at Charlie. But I think her expression must rival Mae’s right now. “I can’t keep my friends company?”

“Of course you can,” Lena says, lifting both her hands as if she’s about to be hit. “I just didn’t think you two were—*friends*, anymore.”

In the next moment, Lena gets very lucky and very unlucky. Lucky because Charlie doesn’t get a chance to respond. Unlucky because the next sets of footsteps sprinting toward us belong to Scott and Mercedes.

“Alana? Rue?” Scott’s legs may be far longer than hers, but Mercedes is the first to reach us by a good twenty seconds. “What the hell are you two doing?”

“Mom?” Rue blurts out. “How did you—”

“I texted them,” Ayako says. “They were frantic.”

Rue grips my shoulder as Scott jogs up beside his wife. Unlike Daniel and Ned, she doesn’t even try for an excuse. Scott and Mercedes already know, after all. Rue’s been fighting them for years, trying to live in my world. She may not understand exactly why they keep pushing back. But I do. Mercedes told me, barely two days ago.

And I went behind her back.

I should say something. But I’m just as frozen as Rue is. Since the day they let me into their home, all I’ve done is get the Atwoods tangled up in my life. They may have forgiven it so far, but they’re not going to forgive this.

“It’s not her fault,” I say.

That, somehow, is enough to jolt Rue back to life. “Alana didn’t force me to do anything.”

“You’re my responsibility,” I say.

“I’m my own responsibility!” Rue says. “Half of this was my—”

“What’s this?”

We all turn, more or less in tandem, to where Lena is hanging over the side of the boardwalk. She knows exactly what we’re hiding there, of course. She inspected it closely enough when she got here.

When she looks away from the seal to face me, I finally begin to understand why she’s looking at me with that wide, feigned shock. Why she’s pretending she knew nothing about this. Lena is the council chair. And she agreed to use her colleagues’ children as bait.

But this is Lena. Flighty, too-sensitive-to-function Lena. Even Mae might not think she’s capable of that. And if Lena plays this right, no one ever will.

“Alana,” she says. Even I almost believe that waver in her voice. “Explain what’s going on here.”

As I catch a glimpse of Mae and Ayako, I suddenly, wildly wonder if losing every memory in my head will be that bad. At least I wouldn’t remember the horror on Ayako’s face right now.

“Alana told us everything,” Daniel says quickly. “We agreed. It’s the council’s duty to act as bait, and we’re a council family—”

“That’s not your job, Danny,” Ayako says.

“Mama,” Ned says quietly. “You always say that you and Mom have had a good life here. That you hardly remember the bad stuff anymore. What Clara wants is pain. And she can get that from us.”

“Hang on, hang on,” Scott says. “Who’s Clara?”

“Let’s all calm down.” Chris apparently isn’t fully on board with Lena’s exit strategy. He keeps shooting her meaningful looks. “We can talk about this without jumping to conclusions, right, Lena?”

Lena’s having none of that, though. “What conclusion am I jumping to here? She’s admitted it. She’s putting *children* at risk.”

“If that’s how you felt,” Rue says, “why didn’t you walk the two feet from your hiding place to stop us?”

“Rue,” I mumble. It’s automatic at this point. Too many council dinners trying to defuse conflicts that I should have just let happen.

“You don’t have to cover for her, Alana,” Rue shoots back. “Tell them what she said to you last night.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Lena says. “I haven’t seen Alana since Josie Berenthal was attacked.”

“Unbelievable,” Charlie says. I make a half-hearted gesture in her direction—if we’re going to calm everyone down, letting the truth come out will do the opposite. But Charlie’s been patient for days. Apparently that was enough. “You’re really going to sabotage your own plan just to make Alana look bad. You know, she always defended you when I told her you were jealous.”

“I’m not jealous,” Lena spits. “Why would I be jealous of a spoiled brat?”

“Last night?” Chris says. “Lena, you didn’t tell me—”

“Oh, that’s not the only thing she didn’t tell you,” Rue says. “Would you like to know who you’ve had locked in Cave’s Echo all these years?”

Charlie was right about my customer service brain. Even now I’m still feverishly checking everyone’s reactions,

gauging how upset they're about to be. It's ridiculous. I'm supposed to end this. If I do this right, everyone's going to be upset.

It's in looking around, though, that I finally notice. There's one more person in our circle than there should be: Sara Whittaker is standing between Scott and Ayako, staring right at me. I don't know if she's conscious of where she is, or if, in her mind, she's caught in that terrible, forgotten weekend. Her horror could be for either.

Because if she's standing there, we're not alone.

"She's here," I manage. "She's already—"

It's as far as I get before a huge, writhing hand slams Chris flat against the wood.

EIGHTEEN

THE FORCE SMASHES our cluster apart. Ayako and Mae pull their children back by the arms; Scott sweeps Rue and Charlie behind him. Clara's free hand sits, claws splayed, just inches from Mercedes. I can see Mercedes glancing from it to me. Probably trying to calculate if she could reach me without Clara noticing.

Right now, I'm more concerned about Lena. She's scrambled fully out of my reach. The bracelet glints at me in the late afternoon sun.

Clara hasn't looked up yet, though. She leans closer to Chris and takes an audible breath.

"Hm," she says. "I thought the council was supposed to keep me fed if the need arose. I have to say, I'm not impressed."

"Don't hurt me." It's a sound I wouldn't have thought Chris capable of. "Please don't hurt me."

"Hurt you?" Her blank face traces the curve of his neck. "How exactly would I hurt you? Do you know what you smell like to me? Nothing. No flavor. No genuine feeling. What am I meant to eat here, Christopher? You're a ghoul. If I cracked you open, I'd find nothing but years of licking boots."

She does lift her head, then. And it swivels to where Lena stands, frozen, opposite me.

"I could always try Little Lena for size," she says. "I always thought you'd be as tasteless as you like your meals. But these

past few months—well. You’ve certainly collected some regrets, haven’t you?”

Blood pounds in my ears. As much as Lena might deserve it, I can’t let Clara feed from anyone else.

I have to distract her.

“Clara,” I say, “stop.”

It’s not often that the Memory Eater goes completely still. Maybe once or twice in my entire life. But when she does, every disparate movement of her body shivers, then smoothes. Even as Grandma told me the fragments of memories within her weren’t aware of their surroundings, I think I knew it wasn’t true. In moments like this, you can feel dozens of eyes on you.

“You know,” she says, “I knew if anyone would figure it out, it would be you. Caroline had the smarts, but she was far too proper. And Amber may have hated this town in her lowest moments, but she never stopped wanting them to love her like she thought they loved you. Neither of them were going to poke their noses where they didn’t belong. You, though . . . you never leave well enough alone, do you?”

“I’m sorry, Clara.” It’s brutally inadequate. But it’s all I’ve got. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Heavens,” Clara says. “Are we going to speak as family, now? Just days ago you reminded me that I was not your mother. I had quite the laugh about that, after you were gone.”

“But I know *now*.” It sounds horribly like begging. The one thing I was never supposed to show her: my unprotected stomach. “Let me help you.”

“Oh, my little love. I think you’ve helped enough,” she says. “Do you think this is what I wanted? Can you imagine eating the same terrible thing for decades upon decades, and when you finally walk free, you find you can’t eat anything

else? I hate the taste of pain, Alana. It tastes like needles and ash.”

I hold both hands where she can see them and take a step closer. Somewhere on the other side of her, Charlie makes a sound in the back of her throat. “I promise you. I didn’t do anything to you, not on purpose. I’m the first Harlow you’ve fed on, right? We think that maybe—if Harlow powers aren’t supposed to mix with one another, like your grandmother said —”

“Chickadee.” She lets out a low roil of a laugh. “If that was true, how would my mother have managed to trap me in that cave? My grandmother had plenty of theories about our curse. Very few of them carried any truth.”

I suck in a breath. That was the only theory we really had. And I certainly don’t have time to come up with any others right now. “We can figure it out. But until then—I think I’ve figured out another way. A way you don’t have to be hungry anymore.”

But Clara’s empty eyes have drifted back to Lena. “Little Lena hates you,” she says. “You know how I know that? I told her that you let me feed from you. I told her that *months* ago. I thought it would keep the both of you busy while I wore away at the seal.”

Lena lets out a sob. Clara skims a claw across her face with a shushing noise. “But do you know what she did? She kept it to herself. Never said a word. And I realized—she was biding her time. Waiting for the worst possible moment to tell everyone. I don’t think it was enough just to expose you. She wanted the respect you had. The power.”

“Please,” Lena gasps. “Please—”

“Can you imagine that? Nearly fifty years old, and she’s boiling with jealousy for a teenage girl. You make her feel stupid. I’ve been able to smell it on her from the second she

became council chair.” Clara slides in a little closer to Lena’s face. “Do you know what you are, Little Lena? I’ve always wanted to tell you. You’re a grackle who thinks she’s a hawk.”

I take a shaky breath. This could be a trick. A way to distract me. The look on Lena’s face says otherwise.

But I don’t have time to take this in. I barely have time to hear it.

“You’re lying,” Lena whispers.

“Aw,” Clara says. “Are you ashamed?”

When Lena lets out another sob, I hear the parting of lips behind Clara’s mask. I’ve never had to see her smiling. I can feel the unmistakable stretch of her mouth in the pit of my stomach.

“I’ll take it off your hands,” she says.

In one fluid motion, she seizes Lena around the waist and disappears over the edge of the boardwalk.

It’s not a conscious decision to throw myself after them. Or if it was, it was one I made long before now.

I hit the knee-deep water hard enough that my legs almost buckle under me. There are voices somewhere above me, Charlie’s the loudest of them. But I don’t have enough time to look. A wave cracks my chest hard, nearly throws me onto my back, then sweeps under the boardwalk to bury the seal. There’s no time to bluff about fixing it anymore. There’s only one thing left to do: get to the bracelet.

Clara’s moved fast—she’s standing where the water’s waist deep, holding Lena off the ground. I don’t so much throw myself at Clara’s legs as crash into them. When I dig my nails into her skin, it barely gives. It doesn’t feel like something living. More like solid fog.

She barely flinches. *That's okay*, I think wildly. I don't need to get her to drop Lena. I just need to get close.

I get my wish. Clara's free hand envelops me. When she lifts me, she's oddly gentle.

Scott is halfway into the water when I chance a look back at the boardwalk. I lock eyes with him and shake my head once. *Not yet*, I hope it says.

I don't get a chance to see if he gets it. Clara settles into a sitting position, shifts me in the palm of her hand. And then her face is all I see.

I blink back a rush of vertigo. It's one thing to see how tall she is, and another thing to be held in her hands. Next to me, Lena's fully limp, like she's playing dead. The only signs of life are in her wide, terrified eyes. Her bracelet-clad arm dangles on the side closest to me.

"You know," Clara sighs, "I thought this would be a peace offering, of sorts. I clear out your boss's odious head; you figure out how to free me; we part ways with a professional little handshake. Isn't that the way a partnership should be broken? Or is there something else you want from me?"

She swings us just a little closer together as she speaks. And I know that if I'm going to do this, I have to do it now.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. And I twist my weight toward Lena, wrench the bracelet from her wrist with both hands, and jam it down Clara's closest fingertip.

It slides shockingly easily. The fog of Clara's skin barely offers resistance. It ripples around the metal, then re-forms.

Everything goes very still.

Something in Clara's palm twitches, brushing against my ribs. A few memory fragments are rippling through her wrist, gathering around the ring as if curious. They don't seem

affected. I didn't think they would be. Even without her powers, this is Clara's body now. Those memories are part of her.

But I expected more than this. Anger, confusion. Any kind of reaction. Instead, Clara looks almost . . . thoughtful. She loosens her grip on me just enough to lift the finger wearing the bracelet. And she studies it.

"Ah," she says. "So you don't understand my mother's power yet, do you?"

Her grip is still gentle, gentle. But my breath sits at the top of my throat, like she's squeezing.

"How did she describe it in that journal of hers?" she says. "The usual spiel about walls and doors? She used to spin that one for her clients, too. She always said that she never knew how to explain her powers, not exactly. She said that it was my transformation that taught her there was a give and take to the Harlow power. But I think she understood both halves of her power from the beginning. She dealt in choices. She could give you a decision. Or she could take a decision away from you. Something as small as the ability to leave a cave."

"What do you mean?" I say.

"I mean that she could never give an object power," Clara says. "This bracelet, those rocks, they were just props. Her real power was in her words. She could make you believe whatever she needed you to believe. She wasn't all-powerful, though. She needed something tangible to reinforce that suggestion, especially if she wanted it to last. Something like an intricate ritual that happens every day."

Out of the corner of my eye, the waves crash over the painstakingly constructed form of the seal, almost hidden out of view under the boardwalk. If the tide gets much stronger, it might bring the stones right out to sea.

It wasn't going to matter. I was never going to use those stones again.

But I had never really used them at all. I never could.

"The seal is—" I manage.

"Complete theater," Clara says. "I figured that out a long, long time ago. But it's amazing how strong a suggestion can be, even when you know it's a false one. As long as you all continued your blood and your counting, I couldn't cross those useless rocks. So real or fake, the plan had to be the same. I had to break the ritual to break the suggestion.

"And by the way. I know exactly what this bracelet was meant to do. Little Lena's predecessor was a talker." With a smile curled into her voice, she plucks the bracelet off her finger and lets it drop into the water. "But now that I've broken one of my mother's suggestions—turns out it gets easier with practice."

I don't know why I'm shaking my head. I know, as soon as she says it, that it's the truth. "I could feel it. I could feel the seal."

"You could feel her magic, little love. You were taught to recognize the feeling of her suggestion waning. It was never those rocks. It was always her." She sighs. "Isn't that just awful? All that blood you gave to this town, all these years. And it was theater for all of you, too. A way to keep her descendants in Whistler, in case that power she tried to bury ever surfaced again. You were prisoners, too. Though you'll excuse me if I argue that you had better conditions."

Her grip has been tightening, steadily, this entire time. "Now. We can figure out what *your* power is doing to me later. But I'm afraid all this excitement has me feeling a little ravenous."

“Clara.” I try to struggle, but she only clamps down. “Clara, wait—”

“Hush.” Clara turns to Lena, frozen in her other hand. “Little Lena, listen closely now. You are standing on the Whistler Beach boardwalk, looking down the long line of shuttered stalls. It is night. It is quiet. And you are—”

I think I’m the one who notices it first. At least, I’m the first one who looks. Maybe Clara feels it at the same time as I see it. Because as I watch the figures taking shape under her palm, she goes very still.

“Quiet, now,” Clara murmurs. “Mommy’s working.” They don’t have awareness to hear her, not really, but they usually hear the command behind her voice. When she tells them to stop, they stop.

They don’t stop this time. They pick up speed. The movements gain definition: arms, hands, fingers.

And by the time they slow, they’ve formed a circle around me. Some are just faces, quietly upturned in my direction. A few reach for me, pick at my clothes.

“What are you doing to them?” Clara snaps.

“How could I do anything to them?” I look around wildly. Lena is motionless, already deep in Clara’s thrall. On the boardwalk, Scott is running again, as if there was anything he could do here. We’re so far into the water now. He’s so far away. And I have no idea what he’ll do when he gets here.

“Put us down!” I say. Whatever’s happening, the fragments aren’t settling. They’re only moving faster.

Then a hand stretches the bounds of Clara’s skin and latches tight around my wrist.

I scream. For once, it doesn’t matter if Clara sees me scared. Even in her blank face, I can see it reflected back.

The fingers around my wrist ease, slide downward until they reach my palm. The swarm of hands around us keeps grasping for any part of me they can reach. But this one is deliberate. It traces out each one of my fingers, then laces them together.

I get just long enough to see the outline of the face: round, curly haired, a mirror of mine. And then I plunge downward.

Right into the center of those reaching, grasping hands.

Baby. My vision slides like an optical illusion. I look one way, I see the crush of memories pulling me under. I look another, I see Charlie's frowning face. *You getting enough sleep?*

Hmm. My own voice. Not coming from my throat, but the dark shape in the circle of her arms. *You first.*

I flinch back, but the hand around mine isn't going anywhere. It gives me another tug, and the scene whirls in that sickeningly familiar way. The familiar backdrop of Cave's Echo Cove, clearer than the last memory: a stranger sits kneeling in the sand, hands linked with—mine. My past self's. The way I've done dozens of times before.

But my past self doesn't withdraw her hand gently. She yanks it back.

Whoa, the client laughs. *You okay?*

Oh my God, sorry. Past Alana smiles sheepishly, flexes her fingers. *My hand spasmed, or—*

Another tug at my hand. The scene flips faster this time: the halls of our high school, a cluster of people standing in a circle. I have to shift to see the center of it. To see myself, dead pale on the floor, lying in Charlie's lap. Charlie's eyes are wide, terrified. My past self looks nearly as lost as I feel now.

You're okay, Charlie says. She doesn't sound sure of it. Don't sit up yet.

Char? My past self rubs at her face. What—

I try to brace myself against the floor when the next pull comes. No. No no no no. I don't want this back. I don't need any of this back, I can't—

—exhausted, Charlie is saying in a low voice. I can't quite see her, from where I am. My past self is standing at a mostly closed door, listening. This conversation wasn't meant for her to hear. Please. She doesn't want to believe she's sick, but I don't—she won't listen to me. She'll listen to you.

I don't see who she's talking to. But I know the sigh by heart. *Thank you for telling me, Charlie, Grandma says.*

Another tug. Another spin. It's the same night. Charlie's clothes are the same.

—supposed to do? she's saying. Wait until you collapse again?

That wasn't your decision! Past Alana says. My family's been doing this for years, okay? We know what we're doing.

And you used to have more people in your family! Charlie says. It was never supposed to be one person alone!

I don't have a choice in that, Past Alana says. Grandma's been working herself to death all these years. It's my turn, okay?

And we're all just supposed to be fine with that? Charlie says. I can't watch this!

Then don't watch! Past Alana yanks, hard, at her hair. I'm not someone else for you to be responsible for!

Another tug. It feels less like a hand now and more like a rip current. The memories come fast, thick, hard to breathe through.

—shame in this, Alana. Take a couple weeks off. Trust your old grandma to take care of things for a while.

Grandma? It's almost ten. Are you awake?

The silence that answered me that morning.

And then, one more time, the scene solidifies. A hospital lobby. My mother's face, white and red. Her voice, shaking.

—years old, she's saying. She could barely get down those stairs. And you were doing what, all those mornings? Sleeping in?

She told me to, my past self whispers. She wouldn't let me—

You didn't take enough? Mom's shaking, I think. For all the times I've seen her yell, I've never seen her shake. You took my childhood, my stupid job, and now you're going to take my mom?

Mommy— My past self barely sounds like me right now. She sounds like a little girl.

And what do you expect now? Mom says. For me to save you? To take over the business?

My past self wraps her arms around herself. *I don't expect anything.*

Then why are you looking at me like that? she says. I'm the fuckup! You're the brilliant one! Why don't you tell me what to do now, golden girl? How are we supposed to—

This time, when the pull comes, I press my full weight into my feet, into the hospital tile. I wrench my hand back. And I slip backward, not forward.

Out of the memory. And back into the avalanche of hands.

I'm not in Clara's palm anymore. I'm somewhere within the mass of memories—somewhere deep enough that I can't even hear the waves anymore. I can't get my bearings—there's no

more floor, just writhing, grasping. Every time a fingertip brushes mine, I catch a voice, an image, a burst of static. I can't keep up. I can't hold it in my head.

I gasp for air, try to push myself upward. And in the maelstrom, I can see something at her center, perfectly still as the eye of the storm. Not gray black, like the memories. The shape and color of a person. Shoulders. A head. Deep black curls.

Then something seizes me around the ribs. And I'm half dropped, half thrown into the water below.

I hit the surface with a crack, and a wave takes me under. I claw my way back, sputtering, coughing salt. There's nothing holding me anymore. I can move. But my limbs are sluggish, barely listening.

Another wave crashes over me, and I struggle to my feet in the waist-deep surf. I can see distant figures making their way toward us in the water. Lena floating a few feet away, whimpering. And back toward the boardwalk, the retreating form of Clara Harlow, trying to put as much distance between us as possible.

I manage to make my way to Lena, to push her up before the waves bob over her nose and mouth. Her wild eyes find where my fingers are gripping her shoulders. "Don't."

"I'm saving you," I mumble.

"It hurts," she gasps. "I—" And then she shudders and stills, her eyes rolling back to the whites.

That sounds good right about now, I think numbly. For once, Lena's got the right idea. Scott could probably carry me back to the shore if I fainted dead away. He's pretty strong. Charlie might not have the arm strength yet, but I'll bet she'd try.

“Alana?” Ah. Here he is. I guess his hands are going to be full, though. Someone should take Lena before she drowns.

“Here.” I push her toward him. That probably wasn’t gentle enough. I should probably be gentle with her, even if she sucks.

Mercedes, Rue, and Charlie catch up with him as he’s hoisting her out of the water. My vision is clearing enough that I can see back to the beach, to the blurry outlines of the Stinnet family’s terrified faces. Chris seems to be gone. Figures.

I’m just aware enough to know that I shouldn’t be so calm right now. I’m in shock. That would make the most sense. I don’t know what shock feels like, though. I’d probably know for sure if I hadn’t made myself forget what killed my grandmother.

That it was my fault.

When I blink, Rue’s reaching for my shoulder. When she touches me, it feels like a little static jolt.

But she doubles over into the water, clutching her hand.

That’s enough to wake me up.

“Rue?” I say. Mercedes flinches toward her, arms out to help her up, but Rue stands on her own. She’s breathing hard, but she looks more shocked than anything.

“I’m fine,” she says. “Is there—did something sting me?”

It would be surreally funny if a jellyfish floated up in the wake of everything that just happened. Except my brain is fully, horribly online now. And it’s finally processing what Lena said to me just now.

Don’t. It hurts.

“Don’t touch me,” I whisper.

“Alana.” Mercedes’s hands are up, like she’s approaching a wounded animal. “You’re safe now.”

“You can’t touch me.” I shake my head. “Something’s wrong.”

“Harlow.” Charlie reaches for me. My sluggish limbs aren’t quite quick enough to shrink back. “We need to get you back to—”

Her fingertips reach my forearm. And then she goes as white as I’ve ever seen her.

“Charlie!” I hover uselessly. But just like Rue, she recovers fast, clutching her fingers where they met my skin. She doesn’t back up. She doesn’t reach for me again, either.

“It hurts,” I say. “Doesn’t it?”

She’s giving me that Look again. The one that calls me *Alana* instead of *Harlow*. And even if I was the one to ask the question, I don’t want the answer.

But that’s not the way it works.

“It hurt,” Charlie says. “As soon as I touched you.”

NINETEEN

SO. I DO have a Harlow curse. And whatever Clara did in the belly of that ship to change her power—I'm already there. There's no give or take. Right now, whoever touches me feels excruciating pain. And I can't make it stop.

It doesn't feel like pain to me, though. If I feel anything, it's a little static shock. I save the pain for everyone else. Which feels pretty fitting, after everything my fragment showed me.

So I come up with one more plan, when we get back to the Atwoods' house. I shut myself into the guest room, and I lock the door.

Probably not a finite solution. But it was only after Clara fed her powers that she started to change. I'd rather not feed mine.

The Atwoods pass information through like scraps of food. There's been no sign of Clara since she escaped from the beach. Whistler Beach has finally, fully shut down. I got that notification on my phone, actually. Residents with traumatic memories are advised to shelter in place.

The latest update comes from Scott, telling me that Lena's been released from the hospital. She's fine, apparently. Whatever I did, there was no lasting damage.

Scott then asks, a little hesitantly, if I'd be willing to see a doctor, too. I'm not sure how anyone could check me out when they can't even touch me. So I told him no thank you.

He also said that no one's going to force me to come out. Which is nice. This door locks from the inside, so I don't

know how anyone would force me, but it was a sweet thing to say.

I'll have to leave this room eventually. I just don't know *how* I'm going to leave. The drop from the window isn't too bad. Might hurt a little. But probably not worse than touching me.

Maybe that's what Clara thought, too. That she could fix it by getting farther away. Abigail wrote that she wandered the *Advent* late at night. Maybe being dangerous, in the end, isn't that distinguishable from being in danger. Either way, you run.

There's another knock. I stay where I am.

"What is it?" I call.

A pause. "Alana," Rue says. "Will you open the door?"

I nestle a little farther into the corner between the bed and the wall. "I can hear you from here."

Sound travels pretty well in this house. When she exhales, her breath echoes a little. "Alana, on the beach—I'm sorry."

I let out a strangled laugh. "Are you apologizing for flinching? Rue, I hurt you."

"You didn't," she says. "I mean, it did hurt. But I was just surprised. You didn't do it on purpose."

I shake my head, even though she can't see it. "I still hurt you."

"Alana," she says, "I don't—"

"I saw my memories." It's the first time I've said it out loud. Though to be fair, I haven't had much of a chance. "Flashes of them, anyway."

I let my head drop against the edge of the bed. The white-painted ceiling swims a little in my vision. God, I'm tired. I don't know the last time I wasn't. "I know I got sick last fall. I

know Grandma made me take a month off. I know she died not too long after that.”

Another audible breath in. Rue’s voice is so, so soft when I hear it again. “Alana . . . it wasn’t your fault that she died.”

“Mom felt differently.” I scrub at my eyes. They’re still stubbornly dry. “I know why your parents want to send you away, Rue. It’s not because they don’t think you’re capable. It’s because they know *I’m* not. This place is going to crumble, and I’m not going to be able to stop it. You don’t have to stick around to watch.”

Rue’s voice wavers when she speaks again. Like anger, but softer. “That’s not what they think. That’s not what *any* of us think. I can’t imagine how much pain you’re in right now. But you have to believe me—your mother was wrong. No one here feels that way. Not me, not Charlie, not my parents. And definitely not your grandmother.”

“Grandma didn’t tell me everything,” I say. “Maybe she didn’t trust me, either.”

The door creaks and bends a little inward. Like Rue, on the other side, just pressed her weight against it. “You were everything to her. Whatever she hid from you, it wasn’t out of lack of trust. And whatever my parents want to protect me from? You would never be one of them.”

Rue doesn’t give up, exactly. But when I’m quiet for long enough after that, I hear her take a step away from the door. “I’ll be back,” she says. And then her footsteps retreat down the hall.

I lean forward to tuck myself a little tighter. Maybe I don’t have to stay in this room forever. Abigail Harlow’s bracelet is probably still on the beach somewhere, wherever Clara threw it. I know it’s just a prop. But Clara knew the seal was a prop, too. And I could try really, really hard to believe it works.

As for what to do with Clara—Charlie was right. It would have been cruel, putting her under her mother’s thumb one last time. But it was the last idea I had. I want Clara to be free. I don’t want anyone else to get hurt. I don’t know how to make both of those things happen.

And after all that, I didn’t even get the one memory back that might have helped. Of all the fragments I saw, I didn’t see the impossible thing that Grandma asked me to do if Clara ever escaped.

Another knock on the door. “Still alive, Rue,” I say. “Thank you.”

There’s a beat. And then a voice that’s emphatically not Rue’s. “It’s me.”

Of *course* it’s Charlie. And now I get to remember, in bullet-time detail, that I rejected her for trying to protect me.

“Go home, Charlie,” I say. “I’m okay.”

“I know you saw your memories. Rue just told me.” The floorboards creak outside. “Listen—will you let me in?”

I scrub at my face. Typical Charlie. Never knows when it’s time to give up. “If you want to tell me something, tell me from there,” I say. “I’m not opening that door.”

There’s a long enough pause that I start to wonder if I’ve missed her footsteps, walking away. The problem is, I know I haven’t. Even in the height of summer, Charlie wears Docs. You’d hear her coming in a padded room.

I’m about to ask what she’s planning. But she saves me the trouble. The door blasts inward with a deafening *crack*.

Charlie’s huge, shocked eyes meet mine, her foot still half-raised in a kick. There’s a perfect triangular splinter of door frame by her other foot. She follows my stare down to it.

“I—” she says. “I will pay for that.”

“You’d better,” I say faintly. “This isn’t my house.”

I’m not sure which of us starts laughing first. But it hits hard, and it spreads like a fire. There are tears streaming down my cheeks. I’m pretty sure that if I tried to move, I’d end up flat on the floor. “Well. Okay. So glad you’re not skipping leg day.”

She’s still catching her breath, her cheeks a deep apple red. And I’m caught again, for a second, in the wonder that she’ll wear this look so openly. It’s why she feels so different now, I think. She hasn’t changed at all, really. She’s just pulled away her layers of spikes.

But back when we were circling each other like koi, I used to have to dig for this face. That night in the abandoned theater, that first time I almost kissed her, that was the first time I saw the soft underbelly beneath her scowl. It wasn’t hidden all that well in the end.

I might’ve been in love with her already, that night. At least, that was the first time I had a guess at what love felt like. A hand on my lower back. The warmth of soft fingers on my spine. A light pressure, and then a give.

My regained memories still feel like strangers in my head. But even when we were breaking up, I loved her the entire time, as hard as I tried to ignore it. I still love her now, after all.

Nice fucking timing, Harlow.

“Can I sit down?” she says.

“You shouldn’t,” I say. “We don’t know the reach of my power yet.”

“Hmm.” And then, because she’s Charlie, she sits down anyway, cross-legged, just inches from my own feet. “I don’t feel anything here.”

I shift back. “Whatever. Just don’t test it.”

We pass a few more moments in silence before I realize that she’s not going to ask. Not because she doesn’t want to talk about it. But for the same reason Charlie’s good with kids, or stray cats. She doesn’t chase. She lets you come to her.

I can’t believe I’m about to fall for the same trick as a stray cat. But I’ve been stewing on this floor for almost two hours now. Talking might not feel better, but I don’t think anything could feel worse.

“I hate to say I told you so, but . . .” I shrug weakly. “I did say we shouldn’t get my past self involved, right? She already screwed things up with her feelings once. It was only a matter of time.”

“It’s not hopeless.” She shakes her head once, hard. “It can’t be. I refuse to believe you lose control of a single feeling and that’s it for the rest of your life. There has to be another reason that Clara couldn’t fix it.”

“She must have tried—” I start.

“Maybe,” Charlie says. “But she was alone. You’re not. So talk to me. Tell me what happened.”

Well. Historically, when she asks in that voice, I’m not too great at saying no. “I mean,” I say. “What do you want to hear? I remember everything except for the memories we actually need. I don’t remember what Grandma told me to do. All I remember is all of the ways in which I’ve hurt all of you.”

She twitches. I think she’d touch me right now, if she could. God, that’d be nice. She gives the tightest hugs. I’m not so sure she’ll want to hug me when I keep talking.

“I didn’t tell you all the memories I gave up, Char,” I say. “It wasn’t just Grandma dying and Mom leaving. I didn’t

remember getting sick last fall. And—I didn't remember breaking up with you. I'm so sorry."

But Charlie nods, like it makes sense. Barely any surprise, even. Just that easy acceptance.

"How much do you remember now?" she says.

"I—flashes, mostly," I say. "Just the moments the fragment showed me." I pause. "If you want to talk about it . . ."

"Aren't we talking about *your* feelings right now?" But even as she smiles, there's a distant sort of look to her, like half of her is somewhere else. And after a moment, she does keep talking.

"It was November and December of last year," she says. "You weren't sleeping. You weren't eating much. That day you passed out at school—until the day I found you on the beach, the day you fell, I'd never been so scared."

She smiles thinly. "You asked me not to tell anyone. Which, sorry, I was never going to do that. But you were always so worried about your grandmother taking on more. I shouldn't have gone to her behind your back."

My smile wobbles. "I would have done the same thing."

"Well. As long as we're both stubborn." Charlie relaxes into a sprawl. I slide a little farther back so that our ankles don't touch. "I think you probably don't need me to tell you what I think you were feeling, when your powers manifested. Right?"

I scrub at my temples. As always, she's right. I know exactly what I felt when I touched my memories. I'm still feeling it now.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," I mumble. "I *should* feel guilty."

"So what," Charlie says. "You'll just never touch anyone again?"

“Why not? That feels doable.” I tuck up my legs for good measure. But she’s still almost touching me. “Even if I stop feeling guilty, we don’t know that it’ll do anything to fix this.”

“Maybe not,” she says. “I don’t understand your power as well as you do. I never have.

“But feelings aren’t *permanent*. You don’t flip a switch and that’s it, they’re stuck that way forever. And if your powers do fluctuate depending on your emotions, like Abigail’s diary said—I just can’t believe that you’re stuck like this, either. Maybe it’s just that they’re still out of balance.”

I frown. “Out of balance how?”

“Think about what you just said to me,” she says. “That when you touched the fragment, you remembered hurting us. I don’t think that your feelings corrupt your magic. I think they just change the shape. And when you feel like this, doesn’t it make sense that your magic is literally causing pain?”

My hands tighten around my knees. “Even if you’re right,” I say, “that means my feelings are hurting people. Kinda seems like I should try to feel less.”

“Harlow, come on.” Charlie makes a frustrated sound in the back of her throat. “You’re the smartest person I know. Abigail’s powers were about choices. Clara’s are about memory. If the Harlow curse has a give and take, what’s the other side of your coin? Because I don’t think this just started for you today. I think you’ve had more power than you realized for a long time.”

I’m starting to get frustrated right back. If my guilt really is fueling my power, then Charlie should be on the other side of the door, not here on the floor trying to figure things out. But if the only way to get her to leave is to think about it, I’m not sure I have a choice.

So. Clara could draw memories out, or take them away. Abigail could give you a choice, or take your choices away.

So if I can give pain . . .

I look at my palm, lying half-curved at my side. And in the back of my head, I remember Josie's hesitant voice. *I don't suppose you'll hold my hand for a bit, dear. It really does help.*

"I can take pain," I say slowly. "Or I can give it."

"I think it's even more than that," Charlie says. "I don't think you're creating pain, or destroying it. I think you're directing the flow. You can take on someone else's pain for yourself—which I'm guessing would make you really, really sick, if you take on enough."

She falters. "And maybe right now, it's not that touching you hurts. It's that whoever touches you feels the pain you're feeling. And it seems like trying not to feel it got you in this much pain to begin with."

I lift both palms. Study them a bit closer, as if that'll do anything. They look normal to me. Not like things that could take or give anything. But—

"How can you be sure?" I ask softly.

Charlie shrugs. "Can't be," she says. "I just know you. That's all."

And then she reaches forward and grabs both of my hands.

"Charlie!" I rear back. But with the bed behind me, I have nowhere to go. And her grip is gentle, but she's not letting go.

"Hm." She's out of breath, but her voice barely shakes. "Yeah. Feels like yours."

"Let go!" I pull harder. What the hell. For someone in excruciating pain, she's still *strong*. "What are you doing?"

"I've got it," she gasps.

“You’re sweating, you maniac!” I’m laughing as I’m struggling, now. “Charlie. Char, let go. There’s something I want to ask you.”

Charlie’s smiling, too. Pain crooked, but soft. “Then ask. I’m good right here.”

I stop struggling, if only to regroup. God, she’s right. We really are stubborn as hell. Absolutely insufferable. The two biggest pains in the ass in town.

“There’s something I keep feeling like I’m trying to remember,” I say. “At first I thought it was the memories I gave up. Like they were trying to come back, or something. But—I think this is from after that. I remember being cold, and wet, and you hovering above me. I think it’s when you found me, that day on the beach.”

For a second, I think she’s letting go. But she only releases one hand long enough to brush back a stray wave of hair from my face. “You were pretty out of it.”

She transfers her free hand back to mine before I can pull it away. Absolutely unbelievable. “Tell me what happened,” I say.

“Tell me what you remember,” Charlie says.

I really am going to kill her. Flirting with me while she can barely sit upright. “Just that you were there,” I say. “You were calling my name. And you looked really, really scared.”

“I was,” she says. “Your lips were practically blue. I panicked. I couldn’t decide where to get help. And then you —”

She pauses. I think, for a second, that the pain’s finally too much. But she’s more red than white.

“What?” I say.

“Like I said, you were really out of it,” she says. “You didn’t know what you were saying.”

My heart hammers so hard, I can feel it in our joined grip. “Tell me anyway.”

She clears her throat. Her fingertips quiver a little in mine. “You looked up at me, and you smiled. And you went, ‘You *like* me.’ And you were teasing me. But, like, you weren’t wrong. So I said—”

Alana, I—

Maybe it’s my other memories, getting just a bit sharper in my mind. But all Charlie had to do was lead me up to the edge. I do remember this. It’s just that all these months, whatever was left of it felt more like a dream than reality. It still feels a little dreamlike, even remembering it in full.

“Alana,” I say, *“I worship you.”*

Her face colors a little deeper. But she shrugs. A tiny, can’t-help-it kind of gesture. “I did,” she says. “I do.”

I swallow, and I taste the Atwoods’ central air and hours-old seawater. “Charlie Sawyer,” I say. “It is so fucked up that I can’t kiss you right now.”

She looks back at me, then, and holds my gaze. Slowly, finally, she releases my hands.

I see the quick release of tension when she lets go, and then the instant return when she reaches up to touch either side of my face. She never stops smiling.

“Quitter talk,” she laughs. And then she leans in.

I meet her in the middle. The responsible thing would be to pull away. But I have it on good authority that I need to be less responsible.

It’s clumsy, at first. We’re out of practice. I’m out of practice with everything, with being close or holding

someone's hand for the sake of it or inhabiting my body much at all. But she shifts, tilts her head farther, and I make a sound that I didn't know could come from my throat. I reel her in deeper. Who said I could go the rest of my life without being touched. I want to be touched like this every day. Every hour. I'll walk to her house in the middle of every night just so she can kiss me at the door.

She pulls back with a gasp. And laughing, this time I gently pry her away.

"Take a break," I say.

Her grin looks a little dazed. "I could have kept going."

I would shove her right now, if I could. But I'll make up for that later. I'll keep a tally. "We are not doing that again until I'm fixed. Kissing me should be nice."

Charlie stirs then. For a moment, I think I'll have to hide my hands just to get her to stop holding them. But she doesn't reach for me this time. She stands.

"You're not going to fix it if you don't leave the room," she says.

My legs shake a little when I ease myself up. My chest may feel looser and lighter than it has in days—months, maybe. Physically, I'm still exhausted. But I feel completely, wholly awake.

Because if Charlie's theory is right—if I can take pain as well as give it—then I may have a theory, too.

TWENTY

“**CHARLIE SAWYER,**” I say. “If you do not back off, I’m locking you on the porch.”

Charlie, at the other end of the couch, blinks at me. Ridiculous. Even when she was thirteen and all limbs, she couldn’t pull off that wide-eyed look. I cannot believe it’s working on me right now. “I’m nowhere near you.”

Literally what the hell. Absolutely absurd that I’m sitting here acting like someone who had never been kissed by Charlie Sawyer until today. “No touching until this is over. Do not test me.”

She raises both hands in the air and grins, and I look away before I try to hold her big smug hand myself. Maybe this *is* the first time it’s been like this. Before, even when we were happy, we had the weight of my responsibilities between us. They haven’t gone anywhere, not yet. But now they’re balanced between us, each of us supporting one side.

Either way, we need to tone it down. The Atwoods are sitting about two feet away. It’s not that Rue doesn’t look happy for us, but I think if we flirt for two seconds longer, she’s going to get the garden hose.

“Sorry,” I say. “If you’re all ready, I can try to explain.”

Rue and Charlie, at least, look ready. Scott and Mercedes look much less so. I don’t think they’ll be comfortable with anything I’m doing that’s not staying safely at the house, but I think they also know it’s a little late for that.

“If you’re trying to reach out to your memory fragment,” Scott says, “doesn’t that mean you need to get close to Clara again?”

I can’t help but smile at that. Neither Scott nor Mercedes needed any prompting to start calling the Memory Eater “Clara.” “We don’t need Clara,” I say. “Not yet. I’ve had vivid dreams about some of the memory fragments within Clara these past couple days. I’m starting to think they weren’t dreams at all. If Clara is made up of memories, then essentially, she’s a being made up of pain. What if, when we came into contact, I didn’t just take pain from her—I took on some of those memories themselves? It might even explain why her powers have been acting strangely. I’m basically destabilizing parts of her body.”

“When they swarmed you back at the beach,” Rue says. “Do you think they were drawn to you?”

I nod. “Those fragments are essentially isolated moments of pain. Touching me must be the only relief they can get.”

“And you think you can reach out to those fragments,” Mercedes says.

I nod. “If I did it to Mrs. Stinnet and Sara Whittaker by accident, then maybe I can reach out intentionally, too. And I’ve touched my own fragment now, so—part of her might be back with me, somewhere.”

“But now we know that your magic made you sick,” Mercedes says darkly.

Rue’s giving me an uneasy look, like she expects me to disagree. But I know perfectly well that the Harlow curse isn’t something I’m supposed to use.

This is where Abigail was wrong, though. Nothing disappears if you pretend it doesn’t exist. To leave something behind, you have to understand it first.

“I’ll be careful,” I promise. “But this is my own pain. I think it’ll be okay if I take that back, at least.”

I look at the faces around me, all varying shades of dubious. I’d be dubious, too. But somewhere in my past self’s memories is something Grandma told me to do. Something that I dismissed as impossible the night Clara broke free.

And until I know what that is, I haven’t tried everything.

“Anyway,” I say. “It only worked when I was dreaming, before. You don’t have to stay for this part.”

“We’ll stay,” Scott says. “In case anything happens.”

“Dad,” Rue mumbles, “she’s not going to be able to sleep with us staring at her.”

“It’s okay,” I say. It’s going to be absolutely no trouble for me to sleep right now. Lena Russo could be watching me, and I’d still be out cold in thirty seconds.

So Charlie gets up off the couch, and I make myself comfortable. I let them all fuss for a good ten minutes or so. Scott keeps fluffing the cushions behind my head, which is both super sweet and extremely distracting.

“Honey,” Mercedes finally says, catching my eye. “Enough.”

Someone’s weight settles onto the arm of the couch. When I look up, Charlie’s towering over me. There’s a rare nervous look on her face. She’s obediently not touching me. “How will we know if something’s wrong?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “If I look like I’m in pain, that probably means I’m doing it right.”

“Baby,” Charlie says. “I’m gonna need more of a task than that.”

I laugh. Now that I’m horizontal, my voice already sounds a little slurred. “Just be here.”

As I close my eyes, I feel the unmistakable brush of lips against my forehead. *That's cheating*, I want to tell her. *Touching me while I'm sleeping is still touching*. But sleep already has me by the ankles, pulling me deeper and deeper down.

When I open my eyes, I don't see my memories. Or Mrs. Stinnet's. Or Sara Whittaker's.

I see the boardwalk. Not the boardwalk as I left it earlier today. It is night. It is quiet. And I'm alone.

I let out a breath. I must have touched so many fragments earlier today. Because unconsciously, I did exactly what Clara does when she's trying to find a memory. I laid them out into the shape of the boardwalk.

Which means that what I'm looking for is in one of these stalls.

As I start to walk, I can make out voices, too. Some are my neighbors'. Some are strangers'. A whole lot of them are Josie Berenthal's. Poor Josie. Maybe I can help her, somehow.

But first things first. I keep going, keep listening. Not for my own voice. My own voice won't be the loudest, where I'm going. I think, if I'm going to take all my memories back, I need to start where I left off.

Before too long, I hear it, echoing to every corner of the stall that contains it. *Why don't you tell me what to do now, golden girl?*

With fingers that only shake a little, I take the handle at the bottom of the window and lift the heavy shutter. It collapses upward with a series of clicks, like a roller coaster climbing a track.

I take a breath, vault the counter, and drop into the dark.

My feet hit hospital tile. My eyes water against the shift from moonlit dark to fluorescent light. But I'm exactly where I need to be: directly in the path of Amber Harlow's furious stare.

"What do you expect now?" she's saying. "For me to save you? To take over the business?"

I was panicking earlier, when I saw this. I'm not *not* panicking now, but I make out the details more clearly this time. I can see just how ragged my past self looks. Like she's holding herself together with nothing but the pressure of her own hands.

"I don't expect anything," she whispers.

I hover awkwardly between my mom and my past self. It's not going to change anything. Not in the bounds of this memory. But I have the faint sense that it would have been nice, if someone had stood between us like this.

"Then why are you looking at me like that?" Mom says. "I'm the fuckup! You're the brilliant one! Why don't you tell *me* what to do now, golden girl? Or are you going to let this place burn us up, too?"

My past self shakes her head. "I don't understand."

Mom clutches at her hair. If she didn't look afraid before, she looks it now. "Are you such a teacher's pet that you haven't noticed? They used your grandmother to death. Every bit of her they could take. And if you think I'll let it happen to me—"

"Stop," I whisper. I don't know that that'll work, exactly. But this is my head. And if nothing else, I'm entirely too good at controlling what's in my head.

I'll still need to take this memory back. But Amber Harlow isn't the person I'm here to listen to.

The memory obediently freezes around me: Mom stands with her body angled toward mine, mouth open, fully motionless. Someone's still watching me when I turn, though. A little of the anguish slips off her face as she realizes we're alone now.

"Oh," she says. "Good. You came back."

I go still, too. Mrs. Stinnet and Sara Whittaker had been able to see me in their memories before, but there's something different about my past self. Her eyes are a little clearer. "You remember me?"

"I'm the one who tried to show you this today," she says a little dryly. "Give me some credit. I've had some time to figure out how this works."

"So you've been . . . aware?" I say. "You know what's happening?"

"Not always," she says. "But I'm part of your brain. We're pretty smart, you know."

I laugh. This is what I assume people meant when they said I was arrogant. At least the people who matter seem to like that. "Okay, then. Tell me what you've learned."

It's a little bizarre to see my thinking face from the outside. "Well, obviously memory fragments have some awareness. I don't know how much time has passed, or how I got here. But I'm still you. I can still think like you. Even as I go through this day over and over, I know that it's something that's already past. Something I can't change. So I just . . . go along with it."

"That sounds awful," I say quietly.

"It's not that bad," my past self says. "It's actually pretty easy to just . . . float, if you want to. Lose track of why this is happening."

The waiting room chairs feel strangely solid under my hands. And when I collapse into one, it holds. “But you do know why this is happening,” I say. “Why Mom is saying this.”

My past self finally falters. “I mean, yeah,” she says. “Grandma’s dead, and it’s our fault.”

“Come on,” I say. “We’re pretty smart, right? You’ve had time to think about this. Grandma already knew she was getting close to the end. I know you realized that. Even if you didn’t want to accept it.”

I can see her bravado start to waver. But she quickly looks away. Poor Rue and Charlie. Has it always been this hard to make me listen?

“I did know,” she says quietly. “And I let her take on my work anyway.”

“You did,” I say. “Because you were exhausted. Mom wasn’t wrong about everything. This town has always seen us in terms of how well they can use us. It’s why Grandma didn’t want you to get used up, too. And it’s why Mom could never figure out how to love you. She may not have wanted to be used, but it was all she’d ever been told she was good for. And when we were born, this town essentially told her that we were a better tool than she was.”

She curls in on herself, enough that I have to duck to catch her eye. “But none of that is your fault. She saw you as someone who took what should have been hers. She should have fought harder to remember that you were her daughter.”

When I take a step toward her, she flinches back. “You’re going to take my hands, aren’t you?”

“You figured that out, too,” I say.

“I felt it when I touched you. Suddenly it just . . . hurt less.” She hovers out of my reach. “But it hurts *you*.”

I close the distance between us. She doesn't pull her hands away as I lift both her wrists. But I can feel the tension in her arms, ready to shrink back.

I slide my fingers down to her hands. And I hadn't been imagining this before. It *hurts*.

I don't know how I never noticed this before. But I think you can write off any amount of pain when you think it's just how things work.

"I've got you," I say.

My past self studies my face. She's cooperating, for now, but if she catches how painful this is, I think she really will pull away.

"When people said this helped," she mumbles, "I kind of always thought it was bullshit."

"Yeah." I laugh. "Me, too."

Her eyes dart back to our mother. "Why aren't you doing this for her?"

I follow her stare. And for a second, I trace every line of pain on Mom's face. This is the narrow crevice she's been jammed into all her life. Is probably still trapped in now, even halfway across the country.

But this is my memory, not hers. I can't reach her. And even if I could, I think I've already taken on enough of her pain.

"She'll have to do this for herself," I say.

Slowly, my past self's grip relaxes in mine. Her face goes softer as the pain leaves her, flows from her hands to mine. She's exhausted. I can feel it as well as I can see it. "Hey," she says. "That person at the center of the Memory Eater. Have you figured out who she is yet? I've been wondering."

My grip loosens. "Person?"

The overhead fluorescents seem to be dimming, a little. But in the vanishing light, I see my past self tilt her head. “Huh,” she says. “You didn’t see her?”

The words blur into a rush of warmth, up my arms and into my core. It’s not a comfortable feeling. But it doesn’t hurt anymore.

The hospital narrows in on itself, like we’re standing in the palm of a closing fist. And then it’s gone.

I’M NOT TELLING you this to scare you.

I’m not scared. I just don’t understand.

The memory isn’t as clear as the others. It’s more like a sketch than a vivid scene. The impression of two voices.

I did us both a disservice, you know. Grandma’s voice. So, so gentle. I didn’t spend enough of my life asking questions. At least, not about the way things were. I kept thinking, it’s an ugly thing sometimes, what we do to her. But it’s the only compromise we have. There’s a rush of breath. But lately—I don’t know, baby girl. I don’t know that we can do this forever. I don’t know that she can.

Grandma. My voice, confused. We can’t leave her to starve.

No. A pause. But she’s going to get the better of someone someday. And when that happens, you’ll never be able to go back. Even if the seal holds, even if she’s still in that cave, there will be an irreparable break in that deal we made. It’ll keep crumbling. Keep growing. What will you do, if it collapses in your lifetime?

I don’t know what you’re asking me to do, I say.

I wish I knew what to ask. A soft sound. Like the brush of a hand through hair. *You've always been smarter than me. All I can ask you to do is think. Will you really be able to hurt her, if it comes to that? Or will you find a way to let her go?*

I open my eyes, and I'm back on the Atwoods' couch.

My arms shake a little as I push myself up. But I barely get a chance to hold my own weight. In the next second, I'm enfolded in the tightest hug I think I've ever felt.

"I've got you," Charlie says. "I've got you, Alana."

That night Clara escaped, I called what Grandma had asked of me impossible. As always, it was just that she had been way ahead of me this entire time. She didn't even know what I know now. She'd just known that sooner or later, this would need to stop.

Then again, it took her entire life to get there. That day, she was trying to give me a head start.

I laugh weakly. "I thought I told you not to touch me."

She doesn't move away, though. Her fingers press, then loosen on my skin. Just when I'm about to gently push her back, her lips press against the side of my head, hard.

"It doesn't hurt," she says. "All I feel is you."

Her grip solidifies around me. I'm still slow to sink into it. If this is the balance Charlie talked about, the way to manage my emotions—for a second, I don't trust it. *It shouldn't be this easy*, I think, just long enough to realize that's not true. I felt every ounce of my pain. Welcomed it home. There was nothing easy about it.

But I had what Clara hadn't, on that long, stormy voyage, when her emotions turned her powers inside out. I had people who would hold on and not let go.

"Alana," Charlie says again, quietly.

“What?” I say. And I don’t realize, until I scrub at my eyes, that my cheeks are soaked with tears. “Oh.” I laugh wetly. “Sorry. Sorry, I’m okay. Whew, that was intense.”

There’s a rustle of movement and a soft voice—Mercedes tapping Charlie’s shoulder, murmuring her name. Charlie obediently slips aside; Mercedes takes her place, and Scott sinks onto my other side with one of his dad grunts. I attempt another laugh.

“You guys,” I say. “It’s really—”

“Shh,” Mercedes says. “Honey. It’s okay.”

There is a flicker of a moment where I’m embarrassed at how hard the floodgates open. But it’s really only a moment. Even I can acknowledge that after all these months, I’m allowed.

Scott and Mercedes envelop me so completely that the living room folds around us, shrinking into the circle of their arms. And until my sobs burn themselves out, they hold on to me like I haven’t been held since I was a child. Technically, I guess they do think I’m a child. Technically, I guess they’re right.

There must have been an agreement, somewhere above my head. Because the next thing I know, Charlie’s slipping next to me again, and Rue’s kneeling in front of me to hold one of my hands. I run my free hand over my eyes again. This time, it does come away dry.

“I’m okay,” I whisper. “Thank you.”

“Let’s take a break,” Scott says meaningfully.

I shake my head. It’s dark outside, finally—it’s mid-June now, deep into the longest days of the year, and I think I’ve managed to cram a whole lifetime into the last twenty-four hours. I haven’t eaten. I haven’t slept, really. I’m just not ready to stop, either.

Grandma may not have known what to ask of me. But her advice wasn't the only thing I remembered just now.

That person at the center of the Memory Eater, my past self had asked. Have you figured out who she is yet?

I didn't know who she was, then. But I *did* see her. Someone at Clara's center who didn't look like the other fragments. A head, a pair of shoulders. Shoulder-length black curls, like mine.

I've seen her before. Not in person, but in a picture.

Over two hundred years ago, Clara felt something that changed her powers forever. And there was no Charlie to explain to her why. No Atwoods to hold her hand through it. All she could do was hold on to that pain alone. I think it's time I felt that pain for myself.

I'll find a way to let her go. But first, I want to try holding on.

IT'S SURREAL, THE difference between standing in front of Lena's door last night and standing in front of it now. I'd been so angry, then. So scared that I felt sick. And I didn't even know everything then.

I have all my memories back now, though. So I can confidently say that everything I have ever been afraid of has already happened. If none of those killed me, Lena Russo won't.

When we ring the doorbell the first time, there's no answer. Chris, standing next to me, fidgets. "She might be asleep," he says meekly. "She's had a long day."

I shoot him a flat look. If Lena was looking for sympathy, she probably shouldn't have plotted to ruin my entire family. Chris might have even supported her, had he known about it. But if he wants to get through the night with his reputation intact, he should pretend to be horrified with the rest of us.

He seems to understand that. And if he didn't, the collective power of the Stinnets, the Atwoods, and Charlie at my back would have taken him the rest of the way. He steps up to the door and calls, "Lena—I think it's best you open up."

It's Linus Russo who finally answers the door, looking drawn and disheveled. "Chris," he says. "Lena's supposed to be resting."

"Enough, Linus." Linus twitches aside just enough that I can see Lena behind him, on the couch. She's back in her flannel nightgown, a throw blanket spread across her lap. Even from a distance, she's not looking great, either. "Just let them in."

So he does. And when he hovers by the couch, as if ready to stand between us and her, she snaps, "Jesus, Linus. This is council business."

I don't miss the startled jolt that passes across his face. So maybe we weren't the only ones who didn't really know Lena Russo until this week.

She watches him leave with that flat birdlike stare I'm becoming more and more accustomed to. And it's then, finally, that she rounds on me. "You must be so pleased with yourself."

Rue and Charlie are hovering on either side of me. I let them. It's a handy way to keep either of them from lunging at her. "I'm not you," I say. "I haven't been waiting for you to fail."

“I can’t believe you,” Ayako says. She’s been quieter than anyone, since the beach. She’s so quick to see the good in people—it’s what makes her a great poet, a good person. I don’t think she knows how to swallow this. “We’re here to help Alana.”

“We’re here to keep her under control,” Lena snaps. “I knew that if I told you the truth, you’d make excuses for her. I needed to make you understand the severity of what she’d done.”

“What you *needed* was for Alana to fall as far as you could drag her,” Mae says. “And all you cared about was finding the worst moment to do that.”

“I needed people to realize she was dangerous!” Lena says. “And was I wrong? She could have killed me today!”

Well. That seems like a slight misrepresentation of my powers. Charlie gave me the best kiss of my existence and barely broke a sweat. “It was only pain, Lena,” I say. “And it’s gone. I got it under control.”

“For now.” Her hard eyes shift behind me to take in the others. “You’re really all going to act like you’re better than me? Chris, would you like me to tell her about all the dinners you spent gossiping about things Caroline or Amber told you in confidence? Mae, would you like to pretend you didn’t know, this entire time, that there was something very wrong? Ayako, would you have had the freedom to be a dear, dear friend to the family if you hadn’t had me making the hard decisions? Go ahead. Let Alana run things however she wants. I’ll accept your apologies when she becomes the next Clara Harlow.”

Scott takes a step forward, and I shift to block him. This is the only problem with the people-who-want-to-protect-you thing. You can’t opt in and out. “I’m not going to run

anything,” I say. “I’m ending the business, Lena. Very, very soon.”

“You wouldn’t,” she says. “There are people who rely on you.”

I smile. I can tell that she really thought that was going to shake me. As always, she assumes I haven’t thought about this much more than she has.

“Whatever happens to this town is up to the council,” I say. “And the people who live here. Keeping Whistler alive is their job. It was never mine.”

I turn a little, so that this encompasses Chris, Mae, and Ayako, too. I think we’re all on the same page now. But just in case. “My only responsibility is to Clara. Is that clear?”

Ayako nods. There was never going to be any question there, though. Chris was the biggest uncertainty. But he seems to know when he’s been beat.

Though it’s Mae who finally says, “What do you need us to do?”

I nod. I didn’t think I was nervous, exactly. But it’s still a relief to have that part over with.

Though what’s next isn’t going to be much easier.

“Mae, Ayako,” I say. “I need to come back to your house with you. Chris, you have access to the emergency neighborhood PA systems, right? The ones for the evacuation warnings?” I barely wait for his nod. “I need you to send out a message at dawn. Tell Clara Harlow that I’ll be waiting for her in Cave’s Echo Cove. Tell her I have what we both want.”

“I . . . suppose,” Chris says. “Why dawn?”

“My family’s first rule,” I say. “Don’t go down to the caves when you can’t see where you’re going.”

“Well. Sounds like you’ve got it all figured out, don’t you?”
Lena bristles. “So if you’re quite—”

“Oh. No, Lena.” I know I said that I wasn’t waiting for Lena to fail. But I think I deserve just a little satisfaction right now. “I have a pretty important job for you, actually.”

She blinks. For a very brief second, as she takes that in, she’s wide-eyed Lena again. “What job?”

“Well,” I say, “there’s something else you should know about Clara. She hates an unfinished meal.”

TWENTY-ONE

FOR THE FIRST time in days, I climb into Scott Atwood's SUV in the early-morning dark. But this isn't exactly the same well-worn path as usual. It's not me in the passenger seat, but Mercedes, her grim face blazing in the streetlights. I'm in the back, nestled between my best friend and my no-longer-ex-girlfriend. And unlike every day for the past four months, Lena's not waiting for me down on the beach. She's two car lengths behind us, in the back of the Stinnets' sedan. If I concentrate, I'm pretty sure I can feel her trying to bore holes in the back of my head.

She can keep glaring, if it makes her feel better.

The Stinnets agree to wait in the house until this is done. The Atwoods and Charlie, on the other hand, flatly refuse. Even Daniel Stinnet in his cute stripey pajamas isn't enough to keep Rue away from Cave's Echo Cove. So I make a compromise with them: they can come, but they have to wait out of sight, in the caves. Clara will be fully focused on me. At least, she will be if I do this right.

So we make our way down the steps, Lena boxed into the front of the group in case she tries to run. The wind picks up as I move to the top step. It's one of those unseasonably cool days that always dot the summers here. Cool and gray, with thick air that promises rain.

Charlie holds my hand the whole way down. And it's not until my feet hit hard, wet sand that the fear sets in.

But there's a certainty that holds through it. One that I haven't felt for a long, long time. It keeps me smiling as I lift

Charlie's hand and press her knuckles to my lips.

You asked me to think about what I want, I would say, if we had time. I want you to kiss me again. I want to hear about your day. I don't want children, I think; I don't know—ask me again in five years. I want to think about college, but later. I want to think about nothing for at least two weeks. I want to crawl into bed in the Atwoods' house, in the room I've been calling the guest room. I want to say it right this time. My room. My bed. My home.

But we don't have time. So I tell her, "I'll be okay."

She must understand some of it, though, because she does kiss me again. Not always an easy thing to do when we're standing toe to toe. Charlie's taller enough that she has to lift me a little. Even when she moves back, she's still holding on to my weight.

"You'd better be," she says.

The Atwoods hug me in turn, quick and tight. Mercedes is the last to look away as they move off into the caves. Probably still thinking of what Grandma asked her. *Take her hand, and don't let go.*

Maybe she feels like it's not good enough, holding on from all the way over there. Maybe later I can tell her it's always been good enough.

But for now, it's just Lena and me.

"You're not afraid I'll run?" Even at her most brittle, the quaver in her voice never really goes away.

I shrug. "She's going to find you either way. You probably know that the safest place to be is with me. Right?"

I'm pretty sure that if she could, Lena would wring my neck right now. I feel completely fine with this, somehow. "You still

think you're so important, don't you," she says. "You're going to hurt so many people if you have your way."

"I told you," I say. "This town is your responsibility to fix, not mine."

"Not just the town," Lena says. "Your clients. You're really just going to leave them alone?"

Even just yesterday, I think that would have been enough to stop me mid-plan. Enough to make me stumble, at the very least. The town's survival, the tourism dollars, the T-shirts and caricatures and thrift shops, those were pressure, but they always came second. The important thing was our clients. That much, I can't argue with.

But I think of Josie and Jimmy Berenthal. David Liu and the night terrors he couldn't remember. Even Missy Braun, who quit smoking and replaced it with biting her nails. We never took pain away, really. Not completely. Even Clara isn't that powerful.

"Why *did* you run for council chair, Lena?" I say. "You hate the meetings. You hate Clara. You don't even seem to like the clients very much."

Lena sniffs. "I'm an empath. Do you know how hard it is to be around that much pain?"

"Oh, I do," I say. She has no idea how much I do. But as I look at her now, it hits me: the only times I've ever seen Lena Russo happy were in the warm glow of someone else's sympathy. "But I don't think you wanted to share anyone's pain so much as pass it off as your own."

"You always think you know best, don't you," she says. "Your entire horrible family. Do you know what your precious Clara did, the first time I met her? She leaned in, smelled me. She laughed, like I was a joke. And she asked, 'Do you know what you are, Little Lena?'"

Her hands crumple together. “I was nine years old. I didn’t stay to hear the answer. But I have it now, don’t I? Whatever the hell it means.”

Ahead, above the water, a fraction of sunlight slips past the clouds. *A grackle who thinks she’s a hawk*, Clara had said yesterday. She’s always been good with words like that.

But Lena was nine, then. And Clara wouldn’t have been cruel to a child, even one from a council family. So I ask, “What if that wasn’t what she was going to say, back then?”

Her stare glints gray in the morning light. “Why wouldn’t it have been?”

I smile thinly. For all that she never seemed to like it much, maybe Lena *is* the perfect chair for the kind of town that Whistler is. Every role is predetermined: the monsters, the jailers, the protectors. And if she could have been different, back then—if she could have been a person who cared about anything beyond herself—she no longer remembers it.

“No reason,” I finally say.

There’s a shudder across the bluff, then. And with her liquid grip holding her to the rock face, Clara Harlow makes her slow, slithering way down to the cove.

Lena takes a step back. Guess she’s already forgotten that whole safer-next-to-me thing.

“You came,” I say, as Clara settles onto the beach.

“How could I resist such a dramatic invitation?” Clara’s voice, as always, does the smiling for her. But the fragments within her are straining against the line of her shoulders, her legs, the boundaries of her skin. Still trying to reach me even now.

Good. If they’re as desperate as I think they are, then this can happen quickly.

“You know, Alana,” she says. My name. Not one of the revolving door of nicknames she’s had for me since I was born. Maybe it helped, all this time, not to think too hard about who any of us were. “I always had a bit of a dream, you know. Of who your mother would have been, had she stopped caring quite so much about who she wasn’t. I knew a long time ago that she’d never be that person. But—the woman you’ve been, these past few days. It reminds me a little of that dream.”

It would have been my worst nightmare a few days ago, to be compared to my mother in any way. But to think that I can be what she couldn’t—I don’t know. It feels a little like all my memories pouring back in. An ache, but a wholeness.

And Clara and I both know who I am. Not Mom. Not Grandma. Just myself. The last head of the Harlow family.

“What did you mean, in that message?” Clara finally asks. “When you said you’d give us what we both want.”

“Well,” I say. “I have your unfinished meal.”

She chuckles. Lena twitches next to me. “I can see that much.”

“But I have a gift for you, first,” I say. Her blank face studies me. And I can feel the interest stirring under it. The hunger. “I think I figured out what’s happening to your magic. And I know how to end it.”

A shiver ripples through her. This time, it’s hard to tell how much is the memories, still straining to get to me, and how much is her. “If this is some kind of trick—”

“No trick.” I hold up both my hands in surrender. “I have my magic under control now. All you have to do is come closer.”

I don’t know if the memory fragments understand me, exactly. But they seem to understand the intentions of the body that holds them. Even before Clara takes a step closer, their

movements shift. Limbs sharpen into hands. Hands split into fingers.

“If I come closer,” Clara says softly, “you may regret it.”

My breath shakes on its way in. She doesn’t need to come closer for me to regret it. But this worked before. I just need it to work one more time.

“Don’t worry about them,” I say. “Just come here.”

She laughs. Her private laugh—a soft huff. The one that has always sounded uncannily similar to Grandma’s. I wonder which of them got it from the other.

“Fine,” she says. “Then let’s get you out of my head, chickadee.”

The memories strain harder as she takes another step closer. Their thrashing flays her chest wide open—it’s a harsh, violent movement, but if it’s painful, she doesn’t flinch. Up close, the core of her is more structure than body, like the high ceilings of a church. She looks intentional. Like she wasn’t made so much as built.

And I can see exactly where I’m going. The cool, pale skin against the black gray of the fragments. The waves of dark hair. The placid look on her face. It’s hard to say if she’s a person or a memory. If she’s seeing me through those empty eyes.

She looks almost alive. And I’ve only tried this on fragments so far. But after all these years, maybe she’s both. Human and memory.

“What’s the catch?” Clara says.

“No catch.” She’s not quite within my reach yet. A few more steps. “I want to stop this, too.”

She pauses just short of where I need her. The outstretched hands of the memories are skimming my hair, the edges of my

clothes. But the gaping mouth of her is just a few steps away. I'm going to have to close the distance myself. "Well. Work your magic, then. It'll be over soon."

That's the most open invitation I'm going to get. So I look up at the pale oval of her masked face, and I summon my best customer service smile. Hopefully for the last time.

And then I take the last few steps and plunge into waiting hands.

There's too many of them to feel at once. I think that's the only thing that keeps me upright. I can feel little moments of their pain, little needles and flashes at the edge of my vision, flickers of pain that have waited for so long to be known. I have to push past them. I don't have time to feel them.

Finally, the figure at the center of the Memory Eater blinks. Her eyes land on mine. And when her mouth moves, her familiar voice echoes through the body around me. "What are you doing?"

Clara, I think. Found you.

She's almost within reach. But the closer I get to the center, the more desperate the memories get. One of them yanks at my hair so hard, it pulls me up to the balls of my feet.

A pair of arms wrap around my waist. Then another pair, on top of the first, both straining against the tide. Not the sensationless pressure of the fragments. These arms are warm. Living.

Charlie gasps into one ear. In the other, I can hear Rue straining to hold on.

So much for staying in the caves.

I look over my shoulder as much as I dare. "I need to go closer."

“Do it,” Charlie says. The two of them shift their weight in turn, inching us toward her center. “We’ve got you.”

Both Claras are thrashing—the great structure of her, and the teenager at the center of it, both straining to crawl away from me. But the mass of memories is still straining toward me. She can’t get far. “Get away,” she’s howling. “Don’t touch me!”

I don’t have the time or the breath in my lungs to apologize. I don’t want to be just another Harlow making decisions for Clara. But I think it’s time for me to see what she’s been carrying, all these years.

There was no one to ask her, back then, what went wrong. What she felt that started all this.

I can ask now.

I reach as far as my arm will go. Charlie has to lift me a little to take me the rest of the way. And I grab Clara by the hand.

That familiar, weightless feeling hits like a wave. This time, I let myself fall.

TWENTY-TWO

I DIDN'T MEAN for it to happen.

The world is still a blurry corridor around me. But the voice is clear. Younger. Accented, in a way it isn't anymore. I'd still know it anywhere.

Then the scene snaps into place. A cramped little kitchen, walls browned with age. There's a woman chopping carrots and onions, her brown hair pulled into a painful-looking bun. In the photographs and paintings of Abigail Harlow, she had wisps of hair framing her cheeks. There's nothing to soften her severe face right now.

And huddled at the stove, fussing at a boiling pot, is Clara Harlow.

Does it matter if you meant to? Abigail says. We're still finished here. If you were going to get us caught, you should have at least made her pay.

She's my friend. Clara's fully focused on the pot, still. It's plain broth. It doesn't need to be stirred. She drags the wooden spoon through it anyway, over and over. *She just wanted to see her father again.*

You're too old to be this naive. Abigail drops a handful of carrots into the pot, forceful enough that Clara flinches back. *Or maybe you're not. If you really thought she would keep her mouth shut, you wouldn't have hidden this from me, would you?*

Clara looks up, finally. In all this time working with clients, I've gotten very good at tracing the minute flickers of people's

faces. Clara's barely moves. Abigail's journals described a willful, impulsive daughter. But the Clara of this memory looks frozen.

I taught myself to laugh when I was upset. Maybe Clara taught herself to go very, very still.

Mama, she says quietly. I don't know what you want from me.

Abigail barely looks at her daughter as she seizes a rag to wipe down the counter. *You're grown now, she says. Grown children help their parents. How about you start there?*

I . . . Clara does falter this time. I do want to help.

With a snort, Abigail tosses the cleaning rag aside. *Well, little bird, she says. Try harder. If all I wanted was another mouth to feed, I would have gotten an animal.*

There's a quick, wry laugh from the corner behind me. "Ah," says the voice I know even better than this one. "Is this how it happened?"

I turn. And I'm face-to-face with another Clara Harlow, leaning against the peeling wallpaper. She looks exactly like her counterpart at the stove, down to the last detail: same blue dress, same cowlick on one side. But as young as she looks, there's something behind her stare that's impossibly old. Older than any person should be.

"I'm sorry," I say. "About everything she did to you."

"Oh, you know." She sighs, lets her head tip back against the wall. "I think if I'd never become a monster, we would have been more normal than any two women who could shape the minds of strangers had any right to be. Not happy, of course. But normal unhappy. Mothers and daughters, chickadee. It's a wonder any of them turn out all right.

“Back then, though?” She looks at her tableau, herself and her mother. Her face almost mirrors her past self’s. But if there’s still pain, it’s far beneath the surface. “I really was trying. So hard. And when she said that to me, well—I felt like I’d failed. Really failed, that time.”

I take one cautious step forward. As if I’ll move too fast and scare her off. “Clara—what happened on that ship?”

Her eyebrows dance upward. “Oh,” she says. “You haven’t figured it out yet?”

I draw in a slow breath. The memory has stilled, as if watching us. The same way the hospital did earlier when I was talking to my own fragment.

“You ate your own memory?” I say.

“It was the first,” Clara says. She laughs at the look on my face. “I didn’t know what would happen, of course. All I knew was that I felt awful, and I wanted it to stop. I didn’t think I could be who Mother needed if I felt so miserable. Amazing, isn’t it? Even before there was a Whistler Beach, if you were a part of our family, you could count on feeling responsible for the world.”

“How did you figure out what to do?” I say.

“The way any of us figure anything out, chickadee. Purely by accident,” she says. “I thought, at first, that I’d use my power the way I always had. That maybe if I watched that moment, one more time, I might somehow get used to it.

“And when I got upset, and tried to stop it . . .” Her smile calcifies. “It shrank instead. To the size of my palm. It was the strangest thing. Holding it like that, it smelled just like the stew Mother was making.”

Something flickers behind Clara’s eyes. Quick as a flash of scales in a river. “Don’t ask me how I got the idea. Maybe it

was Mother's little jibe, about me being a mouth to feed. And she got her wish, didn't she? She got an animal."

"You were never an animal," I say.

"Ah, well," she says. "You and I know that. But things happened as they happened. I had one night of forgetting. The deepest relief I'd ever known. But gradually, that emptiness I'd left behind started to feel like something else. It became a hunger I couldn't sate. I suppose you know the rest."

She looks away sharply. There's a disconcertingly young curve to her mouth.

"I tried to fight it," she says. "No one believed that, after. But I'd gone hungry many times in my life. It never felt like that before. And if I couldn't stop it, I thought maybe I could mitigate it. I tried to take things that they didn't want. That ship's doctor wanted to be an artist; I took his medical knowledge. Mrs. Stinnet was afraid of the ocean; I made her forget it existed. None of it was enough. Mother always said that the curse was smarter than us. But I never expected it to know how to punish me."

I shake my head hard. "This isn't a punishment."

"Not to be condescending," she says, "but I've had a bit more time to think about the Harlow curse than you have. It's no matter. We're both here now. Whatever your plan is to put me back in that cave, go ahead and carry it out."

"Trust me, I have much less of a plan than either of us would like," I say. "But you're never going back in that cave, Clara, I promise. I'm here to talk. That's all."

Her eyes narrow. "We've spent all our lives talking, chickadee."

"Which is why I'm not talking to you back on the beach," I say. "I'm talking to the seventeen-year-old girl in this kitchen. The one who's just been hurt. What happened to your powers

happened to mine, too. But I had people to talk to me. Charlie, and the Atwoods. Did anyone try to talk to you?"

I think I see her falter. I hope I do, anyway. "What's done is done," she says. "It doesn't weigh on me anymore."

"Doesn't it?" I say. "We've always known that emotion fuels our magic. But I don't think it does in the way we think. The guilt that affected my magic yesterday, it's not *gone*. I don't think it'll be gone for a long time. I just let myself feel it. I let my friends help me carry it. It's not about controlling what you feel. It's about balancing it. And—and I guess trusting that even if it ever gets out of balance, it's not going to stay that way."

"Even if you're right," she says, "I've long since settled my emotions."

"I don't know that that's true," I say. "Back on the *Advent*, you tried to take the memories that made people unhappy. Isn't that what you've been doing since you escaped? I think it's not just that our feelings change the shape of our magic. Our magic listens to how we feel, too. Whether we want it to or not. As much as you want to hurt Whistler, you're the same person you were then. Still trying to mitigate the damage."

Her face darkens. And on some level, I remember for the first time who I'm talking to. "My whole life, these people have picked my bones," she says. "Why shouldn't they be miserable? Why should I give them mercy when they never gave me any?"

"It's not fair," I say quietly. "It's not fair that all this pain should end with you. I don't know how this town can begin to make this up to you. And it's not my place to say you shouldn't want revenge. But if that's not what you want anymore—then haven't you spent long enough doing things you don't want?"

She scowls. Another look far younger than her two hundred years. “It doesn’t matter, does it? I have to hurt people to survive. Whether I want to is beyond the point.”

“Maybe.” I shrug. “But if what you want is for it to stop, then we can try.”

Clara watches me for a long, long moment, the furrow in her brow deepening. “Balance, was it?”

“That. And a little shortcut.” I unfurl my hand, hold it in her direction. She keeps a wary eye on it, the way you would a poisonous snake. “My Harlow curse is pain. I can make someone feel mine. Or I can take on some of theirs. I may not have understood the pain I was causing you. But the least I can do is offer to share some of it.”

She keeps studying me, one eyebrow arched. “You risked your life,” she says slowly, “just for a chance at feeling my pain. With a power that, apparently, you only unearthed yesterday.”

Well. When she puts it like that. “If it helps,” I say, “I’ve been practicing a lot longer than I realized.”

But she looks unmoved. “Pain is what holds this body together,” she says. “And we’ve seen what just the slightest touch did to both of us. What do you think will happen to me if we try it for real? Because I have no idea.”

I know that, too. It’s the one thing holding me back from reaching for her right now. “That’s why I’m not here to force you,” I say. “It’s your decision. If you want to go on the way you are—then we’ll find a way that you can be free without hurting people.”

“So this is a rebranding, then,” she says. “You fix me, and the Harlows reopen for business with a free-range monster. A kinder, gentler memory service. Is that it?”

“Hmm,” I say. “No, I’m pretty done with the business, actually. But if that’s what you want, I’ll bet Mae and Ayako would partner with you.”

She makes a low, frustrated sound. “You want, you want, you want. Why do you keep asking that? When has it ever mattered what I want?”

“I know,” I say. “That’s why I keep asking. Someone should have asked you long before now, Clara. What do you want?”

Another silence. Her hard face twitches. “You really plan to give up the business.”

“Mm-hmm,” I say.

“That was meant to be for your college fund.”

I throw my head back and laugh. Really, it seems impossible now that it took me so long to recognize her as family. “Let me worry about that.”

Her eyes slide behind me. I don’t dare to look away long enough to see her: the Clara hunched over the pot, her eyes on the floor. Less than two weeks away from the decision that will lead us all here.

I’m not sure what to expect. A fight, maybe. That’s Clara as I’ve always known her: arguing just to argue. But when she looks back at me, I can see how bone-deep exhausted she is.

However tired I am, she’s been tired for far longer.

If I were her, I think I wouldn’t want revenge anymore, either. Sometimes you hold the same pain for so long that all you are is sick of it. Your body, down to every cell, just wants to let it go. Especially when the person who hurt you is long gone.

“How does this work?” she says.

“Hold out your hands,” I say. “Let yourself feel what you feel. I’ll do the rest.”

“And then what?” she says.

“Then I’m not sure what,” I say. “But either way—I think the part of you that you left here shouldn’t be alone anymore.”

She stiffens a little, as I come close. “Just—careful how much you take. I’m still your elder, you know. I don’t need you feeling all my pain for me.”

“I’ll just help you carry it,” I say. “That’s all.”

Her flinch is almost too small to be seen. Almost. “Just don’t be disappointed. If there’s nothing left of me after this.”

I move closer. She hasn’t extended her hands to me just yet. But I can wait. “Whoever you are after this, we’ll figure it out,” I finally say. “But there’s more left of you than pain.”

Clara huffs. “It’s ‘we’ now?”

But the tension in her face has smoothed. And when I close the distance between us, she lets me. “It should have been ‘we’ from the beginning.”

Her hands finally lift. Slowly, as if magnetized to mine. Though when I start to touch them, she freezes. “Not yet.”

I wrap both my hands around hers. “Then I’ll just hold your hands normally, for now.”

So we stand there for a moment, wrapped in the first memory Clara Harlow ever took. I feel the hands of her lost body in mine—not warm, not cold, just pressure. And I wait.

I see, in the set of her shoulders, the moment she realizes she’s ready. But I wait for her to say it, first.

“Now,” she whispers.

I smile, tighten my hands in hers. And I begin.

“ALANA?”

I surface to an ache like I’ve never felt. Not like the aftershock of Sara Whittaker’s grip, or the sharp point of grief in my own. This one is muscle deep. Like I’ve been carrying something for a long, long time.

I open my eyes. And then immediately shut them against the full force of overhead light. My still-spinning brain thinks someone’s shining a flashlight into my eyes, at first. But little by little, I recognize the watery sunlight of a cool, humid morning.

“Alana.” Someone’s brushing my hair back. My lips twitch. I’d know those calluses anywhere. “Baby.”

I open my eyes again, much more carefully this time. And I find myself looking directly up at my girlfriend, my head cradled in her lap. I can see shapes hovering somewhere past her shoulder. My vision’s a little too blurry to make them out. But I know exactly who they are. My family.

Charlie strokes my hair again, entirely too anxious to be soothing. “Are you okay?”

I tip my head back to look at her more fully. I’m a little dizzy, still. Sorer than I’ve ever been. But I’m laughing. And this time, I mean it. “You *like* me,” I say.

She makes a sound like she can’t decide whether to cry or throw sand in my hair. She settles for kissing me, hard, against the side of my head.

The world starts to solidify over my head. Despite the flurry of hands trying to keep me horizontal, I push myself up. “I’m okay,” I say impatiently. “Where’s Clara?”

Rue’s is the first face I see. For a stomach-plummeting moment, it looks as if she doesn’t know what to say. Then she shifts. And I see, for the first time, who’s standing behind her.

The same messy black waves. The same blue-gray eyes. Sheet pale, as if the sun hasn't touched her face for a very long time. She looks nearly sheepish. That's not a look I'd associate with Clara Harlow.

"I told you," she says with a shrug. "That body was held together by pain."

I must still be a little dazed. Because I don't realize I'm smiling until my cheeks hurt. "And I told you," I say. "There's more left of you than pain."

She smiles. Her smiles don't look how they sound, exactly—at least this one doesn't. It looks hesitant. Unpracticed.

Relief lands like a rush of vertigo. It nearly takes me right back down to the sand, back into Charlie's lap. But—"Where *is* the rest of you?"

I don't understand, at first, why Clara is looking to the water. Charlie has to take me by the shoulders and turn me around to follow her stare.

And I notice, finally, that we're not alone. There are rows upon rows of people standing in the waters of Cave's Echo Cove, calmly watching our little cluster on the shore. The sun and the rising tides alike barely seem to touch them. There's a faint sense, looking at them, like they're not entirely present in our time.

They're not a black-gray warped mass of limbs and mouths anymore. But I would know the memory fragments anywhere, now.

The sun slides through one more gap in the clouds, throwing a glittering sheen across the sand. And as Charlie helps me to my feet, Scott finally asks, "So—what do we do with them?"

Clara smiles again. And this grin looks exactly like it sounds. "You know," she says. "I have a thought."

TWENTY-THREE

THE DAY BEGINS with sunlight against white paint, and a hand on my shoulder. “Kiddo,” Scott says, his voice pitched low. “Charlie’s here.”

“Mmph.” It’s tragic, really, how quick “rest as much as you want” turns into “it’s noon and you should wear real clothes for at least six hours.” A betrayal, honestly.

“Alana.” Now he’s laughing at me. Absolutely cruel and unusual. Cannot believe I agreed to join this family. “You’re going to be late for Josie.”

There’s something I’ve discovered about Morning Alana these past few weeks, now that she has the freedom to sleep in: she cares very, very little about customer service. She would betray every customer she’s ever had for five more minutes of sleep. According to Charlie, I should give Morning Alana everything she wants.

But Josie, at least, I don’t want to keep waiting.

By the time I get dressed, Charlie’s downstairs at the kitchen table, skillfully batting down Mercedes’s multiple attempts to feed her a second breakfast. I devour some garlic toast and three pieces of bacon while hovering over the table, much to Scott’s visible dismay. “You’re the one who said I was late,” I say.

Mercedes looks meaningfully down at the breakfast spread in that way I have come to understand as *Take more protein*. So I dutifully grab a hard-boiled egg and a yogurt cup as Charlie stands from her chair.

“Don’t forget,” Rue calls after me. “We’re doing personal statements later.”

Rue has decided we’re going to keep each other accountable on college applications. Which mostly means Rue tackles everything at full speed while I sprint after her. “I still don’t know what to write about, though.”

She swallows a mouthful of toast and shrugs. “Just say the monster is a metaphor.”

We make our way out to the driveway in the simmering late-morning heat. And as I slide into the passenger’s seat, Charlie leans across the console and kisses me good morning.

It’s commonplace enough now that I could get used to it. I hope I never do.

When I pull back, she’s smiling. “You taste like bacon.”

“You taste like egg,” I counter.

“Grandpa’s on an omelet kick,” she says. “I think he’s practicing his flip for the next time you come to breakfast-for-dinner.”

“Hmm,” I say, buckling myself in. “So I’m still omelet worthy? I kind of thought I’d be getting a ‘you broke my granddaughter’s heart’ talk.”

I’m joking, but not really. As always, Charlie catches the nerves underneath it. “I think he’s just grateful I’ll be abandoning my breakup projects.”

“Wait,” I say. “There were breakup projects?”

She grimaces. “I tried to refinish a bookshelf. Results were mixed.”

I lean against the seat. Unconsciously, she reaches to hold my headrest as she backs into the street. “I’m obsessed with you,” I say.

I'm treated to a full Charlie blush for that one. The kind that you can see from beginning to end. I hope I never get used to that, either. "Well," she says, adorably precise. "Good."

As always, the drive to the Stinnets' place is a quick one. And when we unlatch the gate and make our way across the yard, it's late enough in the morning that the entire household is awake, lounging on the screened porch: Mae and Ayako with their books, Ned hunched over a sculpture, and Daniel on his phone. I meet their waves with one of my own.

"Have Daniel and Rue gotten it together yet, by the way?" Charlie says, raising her own hand.

"I'm about to smack their beautiful symmetrical faces together," I say. "But they're going out to dinner tomorrow. So, progress."

We cross through the trees, walk the short distance to the edge of the bluff. Of all the things I thought would change in my lifetime, the view of Cave's Echo Cove isn't one of them. But from here, you can see every single one of the memory fragments standing in the water. I don't know that they actually know I'm here. Some mornings it looks like they do.

It's here that Charlie turns to me. "Do you want me to come with you?" The same question she asks every time we come here. Sometimes the answer is yes, sometimes it's not—she accepts it either way. The only thing she asks is that I consider it seriously.

"Let's give Josie a little space." I pop up onto my tiptoes to kiss her again. "But thank you for asking."

Charlie sinks into the rickety chair a few feet back from the edge. By the time I reach the landing, she's already settled in, one long leg bent and braced against the edge of the chair. My foot hovers halfway to the first step.

She stills when she catches me looking. "What?"

“Just wondering what we’re going to do with our mornings when you don’t have to drive me here every day.” I’m laughing as I say it. But as always, she understands that the question is serious.

“Hm,” she says. “Drive you anywhere else you want, probably.”

I swallow hard. Absolutely unbelievable. Complete and utter menace to society.

“Good answer,” I say. And as I take the stairs two at a time, I can still hear her laughter at the top of the bluff.

I’m usually alone by the time I reach the beach these days. But this morning, at least, someone’s beaten me. Josie Berenthal is settled, neatly cross-legged, drawing nervous little patterns in the sand. When she sees me coming, she lights up.

“You’re early,” I say, slinging my bag down to the sand.

“I know! I’m as surprised as you are!” I don’t think it’s possible for Josie to be here without getting at least a little nervous. But there’s been something different about the way she’s carried herself since she made this appointment. She looks straighter, taller. “I thought I’d be dreading it. But it’s a little exciting! And with everything going on with Jimmy—well, it’s nice, isn’t it, to have something I’ve decided for myself?”

I very carefully say nothing except for a supportive hum. I know what *I* want Josie to do about her husband. But she hasn’t decided yet, whether she’s staying with him or not. All she knows is that what happens to her memories is her own choice, first and foremost. That’s the important part.

I still really hope she dumps his ass, but. All in good time.

“Remember we’re not doing all of it today,” I say. “Just your memories of Oskar.”

“Trust me, dear, I’m perfectly fine taking things slow.” Josie shivers delicately. “I’ve only just wrapped my head around the idea of having all of this back. Ah—all that aside, I heard Scott and Mercedes sold the house?”

I nod. “They’re closing on a place in Wells soon. So we’ll only be a few miles away.”

“It’ll be so strange, not having any of you in Whistler,” she says. “Everyone will come around, you know.”

“Maybe,” I allow. Once it came out who Clara really was, I don’t think anyone in Whistler Beach was callous enough to try to argue that we should continue as is. At least, no one said that out loud.

A few people have been sympathetic. Some less so, though I can tell that they’re trying. But others are going to be angry for a long time. And when Scott and Mercedes told me, a few weeks ago, that we didn’t have to stick around for that part, it was surprisingly easy to agree. I don’t know that Whistler was ever really home, anyway. It’s always been a place where I worked.

Sometimes I do almost feel guilty. That I can live with the Atwoods, live close to Charlie, drive to Cave’s Echo whenever I need to. But whatever Whistler will be from here on, I’ve let that be the council’s problem. It wasn’t a hard choice. It definitely wasn’t the wrong one. I think that’s what doesn’t feel right about it some days. I’m not used to getting to do the easy thing.

At least I’ve made someone happy. I thought Chris would take Lena’s firing a lot harder than he did. But as it turns out, he’s always wanted more responsibility.

“I’ll still be here almost every day,” I finally add. “At least for now.”

It's a hum that finally draws our attention to the stairs. A bright, full-bodied rendition of "Greensleeves."

Clara Harlow hasn't really accustomed herself to the idea of living in a house yet. We've set aside Grandma's place for her whenever she's ready—my inheritance, though I don't know that I'll ever claim it for myself. It's isolated enough that she can have her space. But for now, she's been camping in the Stinnets' woods, where she can look at the stars and feel the grass under her feet. As always, she's dressed in a wholly new style than she was yesterday. She's been cycling through different hand-me-downs from Mae and Ayako: new hairstyles, new soaps. She still hasn't agreed to shoes. We're working on it.

In the past few weeks, she's aged five or six years. We've been moving quickly ever since Clara had her idea: to put the word out to former clients and invite them to welcome their memories home again. The fragments may not be part of Clara anymore, but they're still connected to her. Every time we reunite a memory with the person who once held it, Clara gets a little older.

The initial wave is slowing down, though. There are fragments who will never be wanted again, or fragments of people long dead. Clara's determined to help every one of them move on, however she can. I was a little worried, at first, that she felt obligated. But as old as Clara is, I think she's unearthed that girl who boarded the *Advent* all those years ago. The one who showed her friend a memory just to bring her some peace.

I want to help, too. But it's hard sometimes not to think about what'll happen once they're all gone. What'll happen when there's nothing left to prolong Clara's long, long life.

I think she's ready. Or at least she knows that she will be, by the time that day comes. I don't think I'll ever be ready at all.

“Clara, dear,” Josie says in greeting. I never would have thought before that Josie was the most sensitive person, but she’s never needed to be reminded to use Clara’s name. And when Josie came to us to ask for this, she pulled Clara aside to talk for about twenty minutes. And after that, it seemed, all was forgiven. “Good morning.”

Clara smiles. Another thing that’s never quite the same, from one day to the other. I think she’s still trying those out, too. “Sorry to keep you waiting.” That voice, at least, is always the same. “Ayako made something new today. Oyakodon?”

I laugh. Since Clara came back to her body, her appetite has been bottomless. If I’d eaten nothing but pain for two centuries, mine would be, too. “I think Josie’s ready.”

“I am?” Josie blinks. “Ah—well—of course I am.”

I touch her shoulder lightly. “You can hold my hand, if you want.”

Josie’s pale face blanches a bit more. “Oh, no, you shouldn’t. That hurts you, doesn’t it?”

I shake my head, hold my hand out to her palm up. “No magic,” I say. “Just something for you to hold on to, if you want it.”

She looks a little dubious. But she takes my offer, in the end. If there’s one thing Josie hates, it’s feeling alone.

Clara settles opposite us. “Where are we starting, then?” she asks. “With Oskar?”

Josie smiles. Her mouth trembles a little. “Yes, please.”

Clara turns to the water in a motion that’s practiced after all these weeks. “You heard her, Josie. Come here.”

It was funny, at first, just how many Josies there are in Cave’s Echo right now. The longer I thought about it, though,

the sadder it's gotten, thinking about how fragmented she thought she had to be to survive. Clara's not the only one who's determined, though. One day, Josie wants to welcome every one of her fragments home. Even if it takes her years.

Clara's told me over and over that I don't have to be here every time she does this. For Josie, though, I'll come to watch as many times as I can.

One of the Josies leaves the water, settles into our little circle. Like all the fragments, her face is placid, waiting. But there's a little thread of Josie-like nerves, barely visible underneath.

"So," Josie says. The wind stirs, and the humidity of midday enfolds us. "How is this done, exactly?"

"Simplest thing in the world, Josie," Clara says. "Take her hand and don't let go."

Even as Josie takes her past self's hand in hers, she clings to mine with the other. Then her face steadily, slowly relaxes. For the next few minutes, at least, she won't hear us. She's deep in her own memory.

She shifts her weight, makes a soft sound. And slowly, her fragment starts to flicker.

I don't see Clara looking at me until she lets out an archly long-suffering sigh. "You know," she says. "I don't know how you could stand all of this."

I blink. "All of what?"

"It's hard for Josie, isn't it? For all of them," Clara says. "The forgetting. The remembering even more so. I know you said all I need to do is be here with them. But are you sure it's enough?"

It's dismissive, on its face. But I'm starting to know her genuine questions when I hear them. "Sometimes it's not

enough,” I say. “But it’s the first and most important thing you can do. And as for what they need from there . . . you figure it out as you go.”

She narrows her eyes. “You do an awful lot of guessing, don’t you?”

“Maybe,” I allow. “In the end, I’m usually right.”

She finally laughs. The laugh that sounds a little like Grandma’s. A little like Mom’s. And a little like my own, too. “Don’t sass your elders, chickadee.”

We close in on either side of Josie, watching the outline of her fragment grow fainter and fainter. “She’ll be awake soon,” I say quietly.

“Yes, yes.” There’s a faint smile still creasing Clara’s face. “I’m ready.”

And as we have nearly every morning of my life, Clara Harlow and I get to work.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Mahoney is a young adult and middle grade writer, and the co-creator of audio drama serial *The Bridge Podcast*. She's a strong believer in the cathartic power of all things fantastical and creepy in children's literature—and she knows firsthand that ghosts, monsters, and the unknown can give you the language you need to understand yourself. She was raised in Windham, New Hampshire, currently resides in Massachusetts, and spends her spare time watching horror movies, collecting cloche hats, and cursing sailors at sea. She can be found on Twitter @cafecliche.



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