



WICKED HEIRS

CROWN POINT ACADEMY BOOK THREE
KRISTIN BUONI

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“KINSEY HOLLAND?” THE CPA SECURITY GUARD—WHOSE name I’d learned was Ken—stared at me with wide eyes. “Your girlfriend is *Kinsey Holland*?”

“Yes, and she’s gone missing,” I said. “That text I showed you earlier wasn’t from her. Someone else sent it. I think they’ve hurt her.”

Panic thrummed in my chest, and guilt crept around the edges of that. I shouldn’t have left Kinsey alone tonight. Not even for a minute. I should’ve come up with a different plan to get into the security office; one which involved both of us.

Ken lifted a palm. “Just back up a little. When you approached me earlier, you didn’t tell me that your girlfriend is Kinsey Holland.”

“I didn’t think it was important for you to know her name when we were looking for her,” I said, narrowing my eyes. “The most important thing was for us to find her.”

“You know perfectly well that Kinsey isn’t allowed on campus without her security escort.”

I took a deep breath and steeled my jaw, trying my best to stay calm. “The escort leaves after school is finished for the

day. Kinsey came back here during the football game, and the school was still open then.”

“She really needed to study,” Erin added. “She wasn’t hurting anyone. Just sitting in there reading books and taking notes.”

Ken’s mouth flattened as he considered our words. Then he rubbed his right temple and sighed. “I’ll admit, this does look quite disturbing,” he said, dipping his chin toward the parking lot. “The phone, the blood... something must’ve happened. I’m hoping it’s nothing more serious than a nosebleed, but...” He trailed off and patted his pocket. “I’m going to call the police. You two hang tight.”

While we waited for the police to arrive, we scoured the parking lot for things we might’ve missed earlier. Unfortunately, there was no sign of Kinsey’s presence anywhere else. Just her phone and the small spatter of blood in one of the parking bays.

“We don’t actually know if it’s her blood,” Erin said when she caught me staring at it again. “Maybe the security guy is right. Maybe a teacher had a nosebleed out here earlier, just before they got in their car.”

I swallowed thickly. We both knew that wasn’t likely. The blood looked too fresh to have dropped on the ground earlier in the afternoon. I appreciated Erin’s optimism, though, so I said nothing in response. Just nodded briefly and kept hunting around the area for clues.

Twenty minutes later, an officer from the Crown Point PD showed up. He spoke to Ken first, and then he came over and asked for statements from Erin and me.

When he was done, he frowned and glanced down at his notepad. “All right, let me see if I’ve got this straight. Kinsey came to study in the library earlier. Fell asleep and got locked in when the school closed. Then she sent you that text you showed me, Jax. You got worried and went to see Erin, and she tracked Kinsey’s phone to this exact parking lot, where you found the phone.”

“And the blood.”

“Yes, the blood too,” the officer said, scribbling something else down on the pad.

I nodded stiffly. “That sounds right.”

“How did you trace Kinsey’s phone, Erin? Find-a-friend app?”

Erin bit her bottom lip and looked down at her shoes. “Um... not exactly. It’s a program I have on my computer. You can find anyone as long as you have their number.”

“That doesn’t sound legal, but I’ll let you off, given the circumstances,” the officer said, forehead creasing. He straightened his shoulders and slipped the notepad into his jacket pocket. “Look, I’m glad you two let me know what’s going on here, but I don’t think there’s much cause for concern. We know that Kinsey hasn’t left the city limits because the alarm on her ankle monitor hasn’t been triggered. She might be on her way home as we speak.”

My jaw dropped. “Are you kidding?” I said, furious heat rising in my chest. “What about the blood over there? It was only a couple of yards away from her phone!”

“Exactly!” Erin said, eyes flashing with anger. “How can you see all that and think there’s no need to worry?”

“We don’t actually know if that’s blood on the ground.” The officer motioned toward a signpost on the other side of the parking lot. “I noticed that sign over there says the art building is quite close. Perhaps someone accidentally spilled a small amount of red paint while they were transporting supplies into the school.”

“Are you serious?” Erin looked aghast. “It isn’t paint! It’s obviously blood!”

“I’m going to take a sample of it before I leave, and our lab will confirm what the substance is,” the officer said, giving her a stony look. “There’s no point in panicking when we don’t have all the information yet. I believe one of you mentioned something about a possible nosebleed?”

Ken nodded and raised a hand. “That was me.”

“Jax, you live with Kinsey. Is she prone to nosebleeds?” the officer asked, looking back at me.

I gritted my teeth. “No, she’s not.”

“Wait, what’s the time?” Erin asked. “Is it midnight yet?”

My brows shot up. Erin had a good point. If it was past midnight, the police would be forced to track Kinsey down via her ankle monitor.

The officer glanced at his watch. “It’s 12:02.”

“That means Kinsey’s broken her curfew,” I said, pulse racing. “You have to track her down and get her home.”

“Not necessarily,” the officer said, lifting a palm. “Those curfews aren’t as strict as you might think. I’d say they’re more like loose guidelines to encourage the person to stay on the straight and narrow instead of spending their nights going out and potentially getting into more trouble. We don’t enforce

them on people who are just a bit late getting home. We can use our own discretion for matters like that.”

“I’m sorry, *what?*” Erin looked flabbergasted. “We’re talking about an alleged murderer who’s out on bail, and you’re telling me you aren’t enforcing the ankle monitor rules? Are you crazy, or just completely incompetent?”

“Calm down, please,” the officer replied, narrowing his eyes. “Look at it from the PD’s point of view. Kinsey has been a model citizen since she was released on bail. She hasn’t gotten into any trouble, she hasn’t tried to leave the Crown Point city limits, and she’s attended all her classes at school. We have no reason to think she’s planning to skip town just because she’s missed the curfew by two minutes.”

“You can’t be serious,” I said, voice dripping with acid. “Where the hell were you trained? At a fucking circus?”

“There’s really no need to speak to me like that,” the officer said, lifting a palm. “I’m trying to help.”

“Excuse me,” Ken cut in. “With all due respect, sir, these kids are right. It seems absurd that your department isn’t dropping everything to investigate the whereabouts of this girl. I’m not saying she’s guilty, but the fact of the matter is, she *has* been charged with murder and is currently out on bail. Most people would agree that that makes her a flight risk. So you really need to have every available unit out looking for her.”

The officer puffed his chest out. “I know how to do my job, thank you very much,” he said. “I don’t need any advice from you.”

“Are you sure about that?” I asked, eyes narrowing. “Tell me, why the fuck aren’t you taking this seriously? Why aren’t

you doing everything you possibly can to find out where Kinsey is when it's clear something has happened to her? Why are you acting as if it's more likely that someone came out here and spilled fucking paint on the ground?"

Erin cut in, hands on her hips. "Also, why did the Crown Point PD decide to send just *one* officer to talk to us about Kinsey going missing? She isn't just a random person who's wandered off somewhere. She's the only suspect in the murder case of the century, so her location and welfare should be your top priority," she snapped. She paused to suck in a breath, slowly shaking her head. "Just wait until the media finds out about all of this. The incompetence is literally staggering."

"You need to calm down," the officer replied. "Kinsey is not officially missing. We really don't need to jump to conclusions."

"Right," I said, tone spiked with sarcasm. "So you think it's normal for someone to ditch their phone in a parking lot, drip blood on the ground, and vanish into thin air. No cause for alarm at all."

He lifted a palm. "Here's what I think happened tonight based on what I've seen and heard. Kinsey fell asleep in the school while studying, like you told me. When she woke up, she found an unlocked door and let herself out. Then she decided to go for a late-night walk on the beach as her message to you suggests. Her phone could've fallen out of her bag when she was leaving, and she simply didn't notice. Once she got down to the beach, she realized the phone was missing and decided to head home. Because she didn't have the phone on her, she didn't know what time it was, so she didn't realize she was going to miss the curfew. She also wasn't reachable for anyone attempting to contact her. Like you two."

“Could you confirm that for us?” I asked, folding my arms. “Can you make a call to whichever department is responsible for monitoring the ankle bracelet data and get them to see if she’s at home?”

“I can do that, yes.” The officer gave me a tight smile. “Give me a minute.”

He stepped away and spent the next few minutes muttering into his cell phone. When he returned, his lips were stretched in a self-satisfied smirk. “Your address is 44 King Albert Parade, isn’t it?” he asked, looking at me.

“Yes.”

“Kinsey’s ankle monitor data shows that her current location is 44 King Albert Parade. According to the data analyst, she arrived there over an hour ago. So she actually didn’t miss her curfew at all.”

I frowned. “Are you sure?”

“The GPS doesn’t lie.” The officer smiled again. I wanted to punch him straight in his smug face. “You should head home now. Kinsey is probably waiting for you.”

“What if she isn’t there?” I asked, heart thudding painfully in my chest. Even though the GPS data from the ankle monitor had confirmed that Kinsey was currently at home, I was still certain something was wrong. I could feel it in my bones.

“I’m sure she will be.”

“You didn’t answer the question,” Erin said in an icy tone. “What if she isn’t there?”

The officer rubbed his brow and let out an irritated sigh. “I don’t see any reason why she wouldn’t be at home, given the GPS signal. But if she isn’t there for some reason, and she’s

still not home by the morning, you can give us another call. We'll send someone out to look for her then."

I stared at him, thunderstruck. "Are you kidding? You won't start looking for her until *tomorrow*?"

"Like I said earlier, it doesn't seem like she's actually missing," the officer said. He gestured around the parking lot. "I honestly don't see any cause for concern here. But I'll take the phone with me, along with that fluid sample, and we'll see what happens. For now, the best thing you two can do is go home."

Erin nudged me. "Let's go," she said in a low voice. "He's never going to listen to us."

The officer pulled some evidence bags out of his pocket and trudged over to the blood spatter on the asphalt. As he stooped to take a sample, I glared daggers at his back. "I can't believe he isn't taking this seriously," I said. "There's fucking blood on the ground and he's acting like it's a joke."

"I can believe it," Erin said bitterly. "The local PD doesn't give a shit about Kinsey because they think she's definitely a murderer, and I bet they're also super pissed that she got bail. So they're probably hoping she *has* done a runner so they have an excuse to track her down tomorrow and throw her back in jail for violating her bail conditions."

"That's a good point," I muttered, rubbing the back of my neck. Erin's theory perfectly explained why that asshole cop seemed completely unconcerned about Kinsey's whereabouts and the blood spatter. "I guess we should go back to the house. See if Kinsey is actually there."

Erin gave me a tentative smile. "Yeah. Who knows? Maybe she really did drop her phone and get a nosebleed," she

said softly. “She might be sitting at home right now waiting for you to show up.”

I tossed one last glare at the police officer. Then I strode over to my car, Erin in tow. We left the school and drove down the coast in silence, lost in our own thoughts.

I expected the house to be dark when we arrived, but it was lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Something’s going on,” Erin murmured, peering through the windshield as I pulled into my usual spot in the driveway. “The front door is wide open.”

I jumped out of the car and hurried up to the front entrance. Anna was crouched in the foyer, yanking on a suitcase zipper. Several other suitcases and bags lay next to her. I recognized one of the cases from Kinsey’s bedroom—dark purple with a floral emblem on the side.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Where’s Kinsey?”

Anna looked up at me. Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy. “I thought she was with you tonight,” she said, rising to her feet. “At the football game.”

“She was, but she left. We’ve been out looking for her.” I motioned to the pile of suitcases. “What’s happening here?”

Anna sniffed and wiped under her eyes with one hand. “He’s back, Jax.”

“Huh?” My forehead wrinkled. “Who’s back?”

She didn’t need to answer. Footsteps echoed in the foyer behind me, followed by a familiar voice.

“Hello, son.”

KINSEY

“LET ME GO, YOU FUCKING PRICK!”

As I shouted, I tried to free my legs from their bindings with an attempted kick at the door by my feet. All I managed to achieve was rolling to the edge of the seat and hitting my head on the back of the front passenger seat.

Mr. Blythe ignored my struggles and kept his eyes on the road ahead. A few minutes later, the car slowed and pulled off to the side.

“We might be here for a while,” Mr. Blythe said as he pushed the handbrake into place.

“Where’s here?” I asked. Given my supine position in the back of the car, I couldn’t see a thing except the night sky outside the windows.

“We’re at your house.”

“What?” My eyes widened. “You brought me home?”

Mr. Blythe chuckled. “Not exactly. We’re parked across the road from the front gate.”

“Why?”

“The signals from your ankle bracelet will tell the analysts you’re at home. They’ll probably be checking soon because

it's not far off midnight, and you have a curfew. We can't miss that, can we?"

"But I'm not at home," I said, forehead creasing. "You just said we're across the road."

"Ankle monitors determine location based on GPS signals being sent from within a certain radius. As long as you're close enough to the correct address, no alarms get raised."

"So what exactly are you going to do with me?" I asked, raising a skeptical brow. "Are you planning to keep me in this parked car forever so no one gets suspicious?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Kinsey." Mr. Blythe glanced at the clock on the dashboard. "By the way, please don't try to scream again. No one will hear you because it's so windy outside, and there aren't many people driving around at this time anyway. All it's doing is giving me a headache."

I narrowed my eyes. "I'll stop if you tell me what the hell we're doing here, asshole."

"Kinsey, *please*. I've had a very long day. Can you just be quiet for a few minutes?" he said in an exasperated tone, as if I were a petulant toddler instead of a tied-up captive. "I'd like to finish my show."

Before I could reply, he pressed something on his phone, and the intro from a popular true crime podcast started playing through the car speakers.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," I muttered. "Why do you need to listen to a true crime podcast when you're literally taking part in a true crime right now?"

Mr. Blythe ignored my remark and leaned back in his seat, focusing his attention on the podcast. It was about a girl who went missing from her backyard in 1992. She still hadn't been

found. The only suspect was a serial killer who'd operated in the area from 1991-1993, but he always denied responsibility for the girl's disappearance and refused to tell anyone where her body was.

It made me wonder if the same thing was going to happen to me. Would Mr. Blythe make me disappear? Or would he kill me and leave my mutilated body out in the open so the media could prey on the situation with all their sick sensationalism? Just like they did with Cerina, whose face was still splashed over the front pages of every newspaper in the country.

I frowned and chewed on the inside of my cheek, recalling Mr. Blythe's earlier claim that he wasn't actually responsible for Cerina's murder. He seemed quite adamant about it. If he was telling the truth, who really killed Cerina? And what did Mr. Blythe have to do with all of it? He seemed to be covering for the guilty party, but I had no idea why, and he wasn't exactly being forthcoming.

My mind continued to whirl, spinning through all the possibilities. By the time the podcast episode finished, I was no closer to an answer. Not one single thing in this situation made sense.

Another podcast episode started playing. Something about a missing truck driver in Canada. A sudden lance of pain went through my skull, and my face scrunched up, eyes squeezing shut.

"You okay back there, Kinsey?" Mr. Blythe asked. He must've noticed my wince in the rearview mirror.

"My head hurts," I croaked.

"Sorry about that. I had to get you in the car one way or another."

“I don’t forgive you,” I said, glaring daggers at him. “By the way, you know Jax will come and find me wherever you take me, right?”

He chuckled. “I know teenage boys always *say* they’ll go to the ends of the Earth to help their girlfriends, but do they ever actually do it?” he asked. “The answer is no. They don’t.”

“Jax will,” I said through gritted teeth. I knew I was right. Knew it in my heart.

Mr. Blythe sighed heavily and looked over at the clock on the dashboard. “Where the hell is he?” he grumbled to himself.

I didn’t ask him who ‘he’ was. I knew he wouldn’t tell me.

Lights flashed behind the car a few minutes later. Mr. Blythe sat up straight. “It’s about time,” he muttered.

Footsteps clunked past the side of the car, along with a dark shadow. Then someone rapped on the driver’s side window. Mr. Blythe rolled it down and poked his head out. “Thanks for coming,” he said.

“Sorry I’m so late,” came the reply. The voice was masculine, but I couldn’t see who it belonged to. “Took a while to get my hands on this thing.”

“No problem. We’ve just been sitting here enjoying a podcast. Haven’t we, Kinsey?” Mr. Blythe said, looking back at me with a smile.

I glowered at him. He turned his attention back to the window. “You’re sure the device works?”

“Yes. I tested it myself. It’s easy to use. Just one button.” The man passed a small black object through the window. I had no clue what its function was; only that it was important

enough for Mr. Blythe to sit on the edge of the road awaiting its arrival for well over an hour.

“Great. Thanks.” Mr. Blythe set the object down on the center console. “Got the rest of the stuff?”

“Yes. It’s all in this bag.”

Mr. Blythe opened his door, and the man outside deposited a black backpack on his lap. “No one saw you leave with her, did they?” he asked.

“No, we’re all good. There are no security cameras on that side of the school, either,” Mr. Blythe replied, moving the bag over to the front passenger seat. “No one will have any idea what happened to her. All they’ll know is that she’s gone.”

“Good. Do you need any help with this stuff?”

“No, I can sort it out. You go on ahead and meet the others. I’ll be there in ten minutes or so.”

The mystery man went back to his car and took off.

“Who was that?” I asked, brows furrowing.

“An acquaintance.” Mr. Blythe didn’t elaborate beyond that. He rummaged around in the backpack for a minute, presumably checking out its contents. Then he picked up the strange black object, climbed into the back of the car, and leaned over me.

“What is that thing?” I asked, skin prickling with apprehension. “A taser?”

“No. Stay still.” He leaned down and held the object close to my left foot. There was a loud clicking sound as he pressed a button on the side, followed by an odd buzzing. The tiny yellow light on the side of my ankle monitor began to flash, and then it turned off entirely.

“The police can tell when you try to remove an ankle bracelet, you know,” I said, eyes narrowing. “So if you keep doing that, they’re going to send a squad car right over here, because they’ll assume I’m trying to skip town. Then you’ll be totally screwed.”

“I’m not removing it,” Mr. Blythe replied. “See? It’s still attached to your leg.”

“What are you doing to it, then?”

He held up the black device. “This neat little thing drains batteries almost instantly. That means your ankle bracelet is no longer sending out any signals. Ergo, your location is no longer visible to anyone.”

I let out a contemptuous snort. “The police will receive an alert about that too. When it was fitted, they told me I have to charge it every day, and they said they’d send a team out to look for me if I let it go dead. It’s a violation of my bail conditions.”

Mr. Blythe held up a hand. “I know. Just listen. Once the police become aware of the dead battery issue, their analysts will check your last pinged location, and they’ll see that it was right here at your home address at 12:19. From that, the police will assume you simply forgot to charge the bracelet before you went to bed. They won’t be particularly concerned about it because they’ll assume you’re here sleeping peacefully. So it’s very likely that they won’t start looking for you until tomorrow, when they realize the battery is still dead.”

My brows scrunched up. I could already think of several things wrong with Mr. Blythe’s plan. “Even if the police are actually *that* lazy, which I doubt, they’ll still show up here at some point tomorrow wanting to know why I haven’t charged

the monitor. Plus Mom and Jax will report me missing as soon as they realize I'm gone."

"We won't be here by then, so it won't matter," Mr. Blythe said, smiling thinly. "The point is to establish your last known location at this exact address. Your home."

"Why?"

"You'll see."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why do you keep saying that? Why can't you just tell me what the hell is going on?"

"It's a long story, and we really don't have time for it. We need to get going." Mr. Blythe moved back to the front of the car and yanked some things out of the backpack—a balled-up sock, a piece of rope, and a black pillowcase. "Open your mouth."

I fervently shook my head and clamped my lips shut. Mr. Blythe sighed heavily and slapped me in the face. When I yelped in pain, he stuffed the sock in my mouth and put the rope on top, quickly tying it at the back of my head to keep the makeshift gag in place.

"Sorry about the slap," he said. He didn't look sorry at all. "It would be much easier if you cooperated with me, you know."

I stared up at him, nostrils flaring. If looks could kill, he'd be obliterated by now. Smashed into a fine pink mist all over the car windows.

He lifted the pillowcase and opened it up. "This is going over your head now," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "You might feel like you can't breathe, but you'll be fine. It's only for a few minutes."

I frantically shook my head and tried to thrash around, but with all four limbs bound, I could barely move. Mr. Blythe's hands descended, and the pillowcase slipped over my head. Everything went black. A moment later, a deep rumble filled the air as the car started again.

I lay motionless on the back seat, heart racing with terror. If I moved now, the pillowcase fabric might move with me and block my nose. Then I'd suffocate.

The car stopped again. Logically, I knew that only a few minutes had passed, but every fraught breath beneath the pillowcase made it feel like hours were crawling by.

I heard one of the car doors open. "I'm going to untie your legs now, Kinsey," Mr. Blythe said. "Then I'm going to help you walk. Okay?"

I couldn't speak. Couldn't even nod. I felt fingers working at the leather jacket sleeves that were wound around my shins, and then my legs were finally free.

"All right. We're almost there." Mr. Blythe pulled me out of the car and held onto my left arm as I wobbled on the hard ground. "Sorry about the gag. We just can't risk you making any sound right now."

That remark—along with the short duration of the drive—told me I was still in Crown Point. Most likely at someone's house, where neighbors might hear my screams for help if the sock wasn't stuffed in my mouth.

"Walk," Mr. Blythe said. "The door is about twenty feet away. Straight line at first, and then it curves to the left. I'll guide you."

He held onto my right arm, keeping me steady as I took small, tentative steps down the path ahead of me.

“Careful now,” he said. “We’ve reached some steps. There’s six of them, going upward.”

I took the steps slowly. On the last one, a wave of warmth hit me, and I saw a faint crack of light at the bottom of the pillowcase. I was inside a building now.

“Did you run into any problems?” a feminine voice said from somewhere to the left.

“No. The ankle monitor is dead, and no one spotted us,” Mr. Blythe replied. “Is everything set up?”

“Yes. You can take her down there now. The key is in the door.”

I frowned, trying to place the woman from her voice. Her imperious tone sounded familiar, but I couldn’t figure out why. Someone I’d only met in passing, perhaps.

“This way, Kinsey.” Mr. Blythe tugged on my arm, leading me to the left. “There’s a staircase coming up. Be careful.”

I thought that meant we were going upstairs, but I found myself stepping downward instead. The sliver of light at the bottom of the pillowcase began to fade when I reached the tenth step, and the air around me grew chilly, making me shiver.

“Stop,” Mr. Blythe commanded.

A door creaked open, and he pushed me forward. Then he yanked the pillowcase off my head and removed the gag.

I looked around with wide eyes. “What is this place?”

We were in a small windowless room with grimy stone walls and a dirt floor. A low cot stood on one side with a dusty toilet beside it. Other than that, the room was empty.

“The previous owner of this house was a Russian mobster,” Mr. Blythe explained as he untied my wrists. “He built this room so he could lock up anyone who got on his bad side.”

“Are *you* in the Mafia?”

He laughed, eyes crinkling at the corners. “No, of course not. I said the *previous* owner was a mobster. He’s been in prison since the early nineties, as far as I know,” he said. “The current owners were made aware of this room when they bought the place. They were going to turn it into a wine cellar, but they never got around to it because there’s already a large wine cellar right next to it.”

“So they just left it here?” I said, nose wrinkling. “Old sheets and all?”

“I believe they actually used it as a punishment room for their daughter when she misbehaved as a child. They’d lock her in here until she promised to be good again.” Mr. Blythe looked around, mouth tugging downward. “It’s not a very nice place, is it?”

My upper lip curled with disgust. “So you associate with child abusers. Why am I not surprised?”

“Get over yourself, Kinsey. We all do what we have to in order to make it in this world.”

I perched on the end of the narrow cot, hugging my arms around myself to keep warm. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on now?”

“I suppose we can talk for a minute or two,” Mr. Blythe replied, glancing at his watch. “Like I said earlier, the police will probably start searching for you tomorrow morning. Your last known location will be at your house, so they’ll think you

purposely ran the ankle monitor battery down before doing a runner in the middle of the night. Your mother and Jax will be questioned, but it'll be obvious that they didn't see anything. It'll seem like you sneaked off the estate in the middle of the night and found somewhere to hide."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why the hell would I run away?"

"Because you're guilty of Cerina's murder, and you know the trial isn't going to go in your favor. At least that's how everyone will see it." He quirked a brow, lips curving into a smirk. "After all, innocent people don't run."

I swallowed hard. "What happens then?"

"We'll get someone to remove the ankle monitor and dump it in Carrington Park on Saturday morning. The police will eventually find it there," he said. "To them, it'll look like you hid somewhere in town for a day or so while you figured out your next move. Then you decided to sneak into Cerina's memorial service at the park, so you could have one last glimpse of the beautiful girl whose life you so cruelly snatched away. After that, you decided to leave town once and for all. Hitched a ride with a passing truckdriver, perhaps. The police will assume you cut off the dead ankle monitor to avoid rousing suspicions in any people you might come across while you're on the run."

"That's such a stupid plan," I said with a scowl. "The police will know I couldn't pull off a vanishing act on my own."

"I don't think so." Mr. Blythe smiled thinly. "I think they'll buy it. Then they'll search the whole state for you. But they won't look right here in Crown Point, will they? Because why would you stay here if you're trying to run?"

“Right.” My heart began to thud painfully hard. “So what’ll actually happen to me? Are you going to keep me in this room forever?”

“What do you think, Kinsey?”

My blood froze in my veins. “You’re going to kill me, aren’t you?” I said in a low voice.

Mr. Blythe nodded. “We’ll stage it to look like a suicide, of course, and we’ll leave a little note where you confess to the murder. To the police and everyone else in the world, it’ll look like your guilty conscience finally got the better of you. You simply couldn’t take it any longer,” he said. “After that, the case will be closed. You—the confessed murderer—will be dead, so there’ll be nothing left to investigate. There obviously won’t need to be a trial either, because you can’t take a dead girl to court.”

“You’re insane,” I said, slowly shaking my head. “You won’t get away with any of this.”

“I think we will. We’ve gotten away with everything else so far,” he said. Before I could reply, he lifted a palm. “Me and my acquaintances, that is.”

“Who are your acquaintances?” I asked, voice rising. “Why did they kill Cerina? And why did they frame me for it? You’ve barely told me anything so far!”

Mr. Blythe glanced at his watch again. “Sorry, we’re out of time,” he said. “I need to get home and get some sleep. I have eight back-to-back classes tomorrow.”

“No!” I stood and tugged at his shirt as he headed for the door, trying to pull him back toward me. “You can’t leave! Tell me what’s going on! *Now!*”

He yanked my hand off his shirt and pushed me backward. “Stop,” he said sharply. “You’ll get your answers after I get some sleep.”

“No. I want to know right now!” I shouted. “Tell me the truth!”

Mr. Blythe rolled his eyes. “I said no, Kinsey.”

“Please,” I said, dropping to my knees and clasping my hands like I was praying. “*Please*. You can’t just leave me here like this. I deserve to know the truth!”

“You will know it. Later.”

With that, Mr. Blythe turned on his heel and stalked through the door, slamming it shut behind him. I heard him twist the key in the lock on the other side. Then he was gone, footsteps echoing in the hall, and I was alone, shivering on the cold dirt floor.

I STARED AT MY FATHER, THUNDERSTRUCK. “WHAT THE FUCK are you doing here?”

He lifted his brows and took a step closer, swirling a glass of whiskey in his left hand. “It’s my house,” he said. “I live here.”

“You know what I mean.” I narrowed my eyes and folded my arms. “You’re meant to be in prison. So why the hell are you here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he replied, smug smile tugging the corners of his lips upward. “They let me out.”

“Why the fuck would they do that?”

“Kinsey’s credibility has been completely shattered by the allegations made against her. Not to mention the charges.” His smile widened, and he lifted his glass to his mouth to take a small sip of the amber liquid. “My lawyers managed to schedule another bail hearing for me, and the new judge was far more sympathetic to my situation than the last one.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am.” Dad swept his free arm around the foyer. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“We both know your case doesn’t boil down to Kinsey’s word against yours,” I said, nostrils flaring with revulsion. “I’m the one who first noticed what you were doing, and I’m the one who got that video of you in her bedroom.”

“My lawyers are still trying to determine whether that recording can actually be used against me in court. It could be thrown out due to state privacy laws.”

“Bullshit,” Erin interjected. “They can’t do that!”

“They can try. You really aren’t supposed to record people without their knowledge, you know.” Dad paused to take another sip of his drink. “Not that it matters. The video was a colossal misunderstanding. You had absolutely no idea what you were looking at.”

“I know exactly what I saw and heard,” I said, voice dripping with fury. “And Kinsey’s case against you isn’t the only one. Her lawyers are working on reopening that case from the 90s, remember? That poor little girl from the hotel.”

“Oh, you haven’t heard?” Dad’s brows rose again. “So far, they haven’t been able to find anyone connected to that old case. The girl—who is now thirty-five years old—moved to another state with her family years ago, and it’s been impossible to track any of them down. Seems they changed their surname. I’m guessing it’s because they didn’t want to be associated with all the drama and disgusting lies manufactured by James Holland.”

A chill struck at my core. “What does that mean for the trial?”

“They probably won’t reopen that old case, which means the only charges I’ll be facing are the ones related to Kinsey,” he replied. “And like I said a moment ago, with her status as

an alleged murderer, her word is dirt. The charges against me might be dropped entirely, so there might never be a trial at all.”

My hands balled at my sides, fingernails digging into my palms. “You won’t get away with this shit,” I said in a low voice. “We all know you did it.”

“No, Jax. You were right from the start. Kinsey Holland is a damaged young lady who decided to avenge her father after being fed a diet of lies by him during her childhood.” Dad stepped closer and lowered his voice so that no one in the foyer could hear him except me. “*She seduced me*. I was weak and couldn’t resist. She told me she wanted me to come and see her at night while she slept. She said it was what she liked, and I think she must have drugged herself so that those awful substances would be in her bloodstream when you took her to get tested.” He paused for a beat, slowly shaking his head. “The whole thing was a setup designed to destroy my life. That girl is just like her traitorous father. A carbon copy.”

“Bullshit,” I snarled. “You’re a sick fuck, and you’ll be back in prison soon. I’ll make sure of it.”

Dad lifted a palm. “Jax, I’m very hurt by what you’ve done to me, but I’m willing to talk it out and work on our relationship. I’m even willing to forgive you.”

My eyes bulged. “*You’re willing to forgive me?*”

“Yes. You were sucked in by that girl’s malicious lies. I know it’s not your fault.” He lay a hand on my shoulder and smiled. “I’m willing to forgive your naivety and move on.”

I clenched my teeth and shook his hand off. “Go fuck yourself.”

Dad sighed deeply. “I’ve raised you for eighteen years, Jax. Eleven of them on my own after your mother left. You *know* me. You know I’m not a monster.”

“I don’t know that at all,” I said. “In fact, I’d say I know the complete opposite.”

He rubbed his forehead and let out another wounded sigh. “How can you choose to believe some girl you’ve only known for a few months over me?” he asked. “A girl who is most likely mentally unstable, I might add, to the point where she’s the prime suspect in the savage murder of an old friend of yours.”

“Kinsey is innocent,” I said stiffly.

Dad rolled his eyes upward and shook his head. “You’re making a big mistake in choosing to believe her. You’ll come to realize that one day.”

“I doubt that,” I said thinly. I turned to look over my shoulder at Anna. “I’m going with her when she leaves. I’m not staying here with you.”

On the other side of the foyer, Anna finished zipping up a suitcase and pulled the handle out of the top. She hooked her other arm through a duffel bag handle and took three steps toward me and Dad. “You’re very welcome to join me and Kinsey, Jax,” she said in a tremulous tone, giving me a watery smile.

Dad lifted his palm again. “Now, hold on. Anna doesn’t have to leave. Neither do you, Jax.”

Anna’s eyes widened. “You can’t be serious. Of course I’m leaving!”

“But I’m saying you don’t have to,” Dad replied. “And you certainly don’t have to pack up and leave in the middle of

the night.”

Anna dropped the duffel bag and suitcase handle, nostrils flaring. “I don’t have a choice,” she said, crossing her arms. “I’m not letting my daughter stay in this house with you. Not even for a second.”

“Calm down, Anna. We can sit down and—”

“Do *not* tell me to calm down!” she shouted. “And don’t try to stop me from leaving, either!”

Dad exhaled deeply and took a step backward. “All right,” he said. “You can do whatever you want. I’m not going to take you prisoner.”

Anna drew herself up to her full height. “I hope the revenge you got against my dead ex-husband was worth ruining my daughter’s life over,” she said in a low voice. “Mine too.”

“Anna, please listen to me. This is all a big misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding?” she shrieked. Her right hand whipped through the air. “You mother—”

Before she could finish the sentence or land the slap on Dad’s face, Maeve stepped between the two of them and grabbed her wrist. “We’ll have none of that, thank you very much,” she said, giving Anna a stern look. “Just take your things and put them in the car, please.”

Anna lowered her arm and picked up the suitcase handle. “Goodbye, George. I’ll see you in court,” she said, voice laced with venom. “Soon, I hope.”

With that, she stalked out the front door, wheeling the case behind her.

Erin and I stepped over to the other side of the foyer and picked up two of the other cases. Maeve joined us. I glared at her. “What the hell?” I hissed. “You’re defending Dad now?”

“Of course not,” she whispered. “But I’ve worked for him for over twenty years, and I know how petty he can be. I didn’t want Anna to wind up with an assault charge.”

“That’s a good point,” Erin said. “She has enough on her plate right now.”

I turned to her. “Want to grab one of those as well?” I said, dipping my chin toward another duffel bag on the floor. “You can just stack it on top of the suitcase so you don’t have to carry it.”

“Sure.” Her lips tightened in a grim line. “The sooner poor Anna is out of here, the better.”

We stepped outside, luggage in tow. Anna was standing by the trunk of the car, lifting a case into it. I hurried over to help her.

Maeve headed over to us a moment later, wheeling a large black suitcase behind her. “I had a feeling you’d choose to leave with Anna tonight,” she said, looking at me. “So I took the liberty of packing some of your things for you. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

“I packed some clothes, shoes, spare school uniforms, toothbrush, shaving stuff, your laptop, and your phone charger. Anything else you need, just call and let me know. I can drop it off wherever you end up staying.” Maeve gave me a tight smile. Then she turned her attention to Anna. “I want you to know I support you and Kinsey. I’m going to give my two week notice to George in the morning.”

Anna's face fell. "Oh, Maeve. I appreciate it, but you really don't have to do that. I know this place is your home."

"Not anymore," Maeve replied. She looked toward the house. "I won't work for a man like him. The only reason I've stayed since his arrest is to help you and Kinsey. And Jax, of course. But you're all leaving now."

"Wait," I said, holding up a hand. "Don't quit. Not yet, anyway."

Maeve turned to look at me, brows rising. "Why?"

"You should stay here and act like you support Dad," I said. "Then you can keep an eye on him and let us know what's going on."

"That's a good idea," Erin interjected. "You might see or overhear something that ends up helping Kinsey's case against him."

Maeve nodded slowly. "All right. I think I can manage that," she said. "For now, let's go and get the rest of the cases."

"When we're done, you should slam the door in my face and say something nasty," I said, arching a brow. "That'll help to convince Dad you're choosing his side."

"All right." Maeve offered me a small smile. "I'll try my best."

We headed back inside and cleared the rest of the suitcases out of the foyer, putting half in Anna's car and half in mine. When we were finished, Maeve affected a stony expression and looked at me. "Is that it?"

"I think so."

Her eyes narrowed. "You really should be ashamed of yourself," she said, loud enough for Dad to hear. "Your father

deserves a son who believes in him.”

With that, she slammed the door in my face. I smiled thinly and strode over to Anna’s car. She was standing by the back passenger door, face lined with worry. “Where did you say Kinsey is?” she asked, fingers anxiously twining together. “I just realized it’s past midnight. She’s missed her curfew.”

I took a deep breath and haltingly explained what happened at the school earlier tonight.

Anna’s face paled. “So you really don’t know where she is?” she asked, panic-stricken gaze flickering between me and Erin.

“No.” I shook my head. “All we know is what the police told us—that she didn’t miss her curfew. Her ankle monitor data said she arrived here just after eleven o’clock. But she’s definitely not here now.”

“Could she have come home earlier and then left again? That would explain the ankle bracelet readings.”

“Wouldn’t you have noticed if she came home?”

A guilty expression stole across Anna’s face. “Not necessarily.”

“What do you mean?”

She swallowed audibly. “When your father showed up here earlier, I was beyond shocked,” she said, voice cracking with emotion. “I just couldn’t believe it. We ended up arguing for a while. Loudly. Kinsey might’ve come home and overheard us, and when she realized George was staying, she might’ve decided to run away.”

“You wouldn’t have heard her coming through the front door because the argument with George was distracting you,”

Erin said, nodding slowly. “You wouldn’t have heard her leave, either.”

“That’s right.” Anna looked at me again. “Do you think that could’ve happened?”

“It’s possible,” I said, scratching at my jaw.

Anna sagged against the car, scrubbing a hand over her face. “God, why does everything have to go wrong at once?” she said, voice thick with emotion. “I thought George’s return was the worst possible thing that could happen today. But now Kinsey is *missing*? I just... I can’t believe it.”

Erin took a step closer and tentatively patted her arm. “We’ve been looking for her all night, Ms. Holland,” she said in a soft tone. “And we’re not going to stop.”

“Exactly.” I lifted my chin and braced my shoulders. “Wherever she is, we’re going to find her.”

Anna wiped her cheeks. “How?” she asked, voice coming out in a broken murmur. “God, I can barely even think straight.”

“You need to go to the police station and file a missing persons report for Kinsey. They’re more likely to listen to you because you’re her mother,” I said. “Once they hear she’s not at home, they’ll take a look at her ankle monitor data to confirm it. Then they’ll send someone to her exact location and pick her up.”

Anna nodded. “All right,” she said in a tremulous tone. “I’ll head to the station now.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my wallet. “Take this with you,” I said, handing over my credit card. “When you’re done at the station, drive to Woodsen’s Bay. There’s a hotel there that my family has nothing to do with, so they

won't turn you away. We can stay there while we're trying to figure everything out."

"I'm sure the police will find Kinsey as soon as possible," Erin said, leaning in to give Anna a hug. "Everything will be okay soon."

"Thank you, honey," Anna murmured. She glanced over Erin's shoulder at me. "Both of you. I... I can't thank you enough."

I gave her a tight smile. "You don't need to thank me. Just text me updates about the police and let me know which hotel rooms you end up booking."

"Okay." She drew in a deep breath and unlocked her car. Then she turned back, flashing a quizzical glance at Erin and me. "What are you two going to do?"

"We'll drive around looking for Kinsey, just in case she's wandering along the edge of a road somewhere."

Anna nodded, sniffing back more tears. Then she got in the car and slowly headed down the driveway.

When the gate slid shut, Erin turned to me, brows furrowing. "Are we really just going to drive around all night looking for Kinsey?" she asked.

I shook my head. "No. We need to figure out a backup plan to find her."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm worried something's going on with her ankle monitor," I said. "I'm not sure she was ever actually here tonight."

Her eyes widened. "You mean you think someone might've cut it off her and brought it here to trick the police?"

“Yeah, I think it’s possible,” I replied. “And if it’s true, the cops won’t be able to track her down from the data.”

“Okay.” Erin looked over at my car and snapped her fingers toward my jacket, motioning for me to grab my keys. “Let’s go and find her.”

I dug into my pocket and grabbed my keys, letting the cold metal dig into the palm of my hand as I clenched it tight and strode toward my car. I had to make this right. Had to find Kinsey and put a stop to whatever was happening to her right now.

No one fucked with my girl.

Ever.

“I’VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT SOMETHING.” ERIN TURNED TO look at me from the passenger seat, brows knitting. “Something you said earlier.”

“What?” I asked, glancing in the rearview mirror. I kept hoping to see Kinsey running behind the car, frantically waving for us to stop and pick her up, but the road remained dark and empty.

“When you told me how you and Kinsey thought I might be the killer,” Erin replied. “You guys also thought I might be RXorcist.”

“Right. What about it?”

Erin sat up straighter, tugging on her seatbelt to loosen it. “Well, I’ve been thinking about it, and I don’t think RXorcist is the killer. That doesn’t make sense to me. But I do think he or she could help us find Kinsey.”

“Yeah?” My forehead creased. “How?”

“Think about it. The Dirt app probably receives hundreds of messages per day. Tips that people send in about all sorts of stuff.” Erin’s brows lifted. “I mean, there’s always someone around to see or hear things they aren’t supposed to. That’s half the reason the app exists.”

“True.”

“So I was thinking—we could ask RXorcist to put up a post asking for information on Kinsey’s whereabouts. That way, if anyone saw or heard anything unusual tonight, they’ll send it in as a tip.”

I drummed my fingertips on the steering wheel as I mulled it over. “The Dirt app has a huge reach, so that could work. But what if RXorcist says no? Or what if they don’t see our message for a week?” I asked. “Like you said, they probably get hundreds of messages every day. So we could be stuck for ages waiting for a reply. Or we might never get one at all.”

“I already thought of that, and I have a solution,” Erin replied. “We figure out RXorcist’s true identity. Then we threaten to expose him or her to everyone at CPA unless they agree to help us.”

“Blackmail, huh?” I said, looking to the left as I turned onto another street. “I like it. But how can we actually do it? Tons of people have tried to unmask RXorcist before, and no one has ever succeeded. Not even you.”

Erin’s shoulders slumped. “Yeah, I know. That’s where I lost steam with the idea,” she said, rubbing the side of her face. “I was kinda hoping you’d have a suggestion.”

“Are you sure you can’t track them down?” I asked. “You’ve always been great at tech stuff. That’s why we suspected you for RXorcist.”

“Trust me, I’m not *that* good. RXorcist is leagues ahead of me,” she said, rolling her eyes upward. “Anyway, I’ve tried to figure out who they are a couple times, but that sort of stuff isn’t really in my skillset. I guess I’m just not experienced enough.” She paused to let out a sigh. Then she sat up straight

again. “Wait, what about that guy? The one you mentioned earlier.”

“What guy?”

“The one you paid to help Kinsey break into the school security system.”

“Oh. Remy.” I nodded slowly. “He could probably help us, but we won’t be able to get hold of him for a while.”

“Why?”

“He’s based somewhere in northern Africa. It’s eight o’clock in the morning there right now.”

Erin frowned. “So?”

“He’s one of those chronically-online nocturnal people. He stays up on his computer until three or four in the morning, and then he crashes until sometime after lunch. At least that’s what he made it sound like when we chatted.” I glanced at the time on the dash. “So we can contact him, but we probably won’t hear back from him for a long time.”

Erin sighed. “Dammit. I want to do something *now*.”

“Yeah. Me too. Are you sure you can’t think of anyone else who might be able to help us?”

Erin’s mouth tugged down at the corners, and she fell silent for a moment. Then her face brightened. “Do you remember Adam Levitt? He was a senior at CPA last year.”

“Nope, never met him.”

“Figures. He was a huge nerd. Like, even more of a nerd than me,” she said with a wry smile. “We were in Robotics Club together. He’s super smart, and he taught me a ton of stuff.”

“Do you think he’d be able to track down RXorcist?”

“Probably.” Erin hesitated. “There’s just one problem. We fell out of touch because he asked me out and I said no. He didn’t react badly. It was just awkward. So we haven’t spoken in a whole year.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t mind hearing from you. Especially if it’s an emergency.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” She pulled her phone out of her pocket and took a deep breath. “I’ll text him now.”

While she composed the message to Adam, I pulled over on the edge of the road and checked my own phone. A message from Anna was waiting in my inbox.

I went to the police and told them what was happening. They checked Kinsey’s ankle monitor and told me the battery is dead, so they can’t locate her. Have you and Erin found anything yet?

I sighed and messaged her back. ***Not yet, but we’re still looking.***

Anna: This is a nightmare. The police said they’ll send out a team to look for her, but she could be anywhere by now. I don’t know what to do. I feel like I’m losing my mind.

Me: Erin had an idea that might help us find her. I’ll tell you more about it once we have it all figured out.

I slipped my phone back in my pocket and looked over at Erin. She turned her phone screen to face me. “Adam told me to come over. This is his address.”

“He lives in Crown Point?” I asked, brows lifting. “I thought he’d be away at college somewhere.”

“He got offers from all the Ivies when he graduated. MIT and Caltech too. But he rejected all of them,” Erin said. “He’s trying to do his own version of that self-made college dropout thing that so many famous tech people do. Like Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg.”

“Right.” I turned the car back on and swung a U-turn. “He doesn’t mind seeing us this late?”

“No. He’s just like that Remy guy. Chronically-online and nocturnal, or whatever you said.”

Ten minutes later, we arrived at Adam’s place. He lived in a swanky apartment overlooking the coast on the north side of Crown Point. When he opened the door, I realized I actually recognized him. I’d never spoken to him before, but I remembered seeing him around school in the past. He was tall and rake-thin with pale skin, dark hair, and wire-rimmed glasses.

“Wow,” Erin said, casting her gaze around the open-plan living room and kitchen. “This is all yours?”

Adam grinned and nodded. “Sold a little program to Google six months ago and used the proceeds to buy it. No help from my parents. Pretty cool, huh?”

“Yeah, it’s great.” Erin smiled back at him. “I always told you being a massive geek would pay off for you.”

“I’m sure it will for you too,” he said, eyes twinkling as he stared at her. “Anyway, what can I do for you? You said you were having some sort of emergency.”

“Yes. We really, *really* need to track someone down,” Erin replied. “As soon as possible.”

Adam’s brows rose. “Who?”

“Do you remember the Dirt app?”

“Yup.” Adam rolled his eyes. “I never downloaded it, but I remember all the havoc it caused in certain circles at school.”

“We need to figure out the creator’s identity. I’d tell you why, but it’s a very long story,” Erin said. “Anyway, we figured you’d be able to help, seeing as you’re an uber-genius when it comes to this kind of stuff. And we’re willing to pay, obviously.”

“You don’t have to give me a cent,” Adam replied, flashing another grin at Erin. “I love doing this kind of stuff.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Anything for an old friend.” Adam dipped his chin toward the gray sectional in the living area. “It might take a while, so you two can go and sit down if you want.”

We stepped over to the couch as Adam headed down the hallway on our right, presumably to his home office. Erin picked up a cushion and hugged it to her chest, eyes focused on the picture window on the other side of the room. I leaned back and looked over at her, brows furrowing.

“You know, you always talk about how you think you’re a nobody and a loser, but you’re hooking up with one of the most popular guys in school, and this Adam guy is obviously still into you as well,” I said, cocking my head. “I think you’re actually doing pretty well for yourself.”

I meant it as a compliment, but Erin looked stricken.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to offend you,” I said hurriedly. “I was just saying you aren’t a nobody at all. You’re cool.”

“It’s okay, you didn’t say anything wrong.” Erin shook her head, one hand rubbing under her eyes. “It’s just... that’s

exactly the sort of thing Kinsey would say if she were here right now. She's always gassing me up and trying to make me feel good about myself. That's why she's my best friend." She paused and inhaled deeply, hands twisting on her lap. "I keep worrying I'll never see her again."

A hard lump formed in my throat. I knew her fear intimately, because I felt it myself. I knew I couldn't allow it to get to me, though. I had to believe we'd find Kinsey one way or another.

I steeled my jaw and leaned over to pat Erin on the shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll find her."

"But she could be anywhere," she replied, voice trembling. "Anyone could've taken her."

"We need to stay positive," I said. "This idea of yours about finding RXorcist is a good one. I really think it'll help us find Kinsey."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Definitely. Someone is bound to have seen or heard something related to Kinsey tonight. They might not have realized it was important at the time, but when they see the post on Dirt about her being missing, they'll say something."

Erin smiled faintly. "I really hope so."

Adam returned to the living area forty-five minutes later. "I have good news and bad news," he announced, pushing his glasses up his nose.

I sat up straight. "Hit us with the bad news first."

"Whoever runs the app is a total whiz kid. They've made it absolutely impossible for their identity to be figured out with the usual methods."

“Dammit,” I muttered, pinching the bridge of my nose.

Adam lifted a palm. “Hold on. There’s still hope,” he said. “I think we might be able to track them down manually.”

“What do you mean?”

“We might be able to find them in person.” Adam tilted his head slightly. “Like I said, I couldn’t track them down via the usual methods. But I was still able to figure out a few things about their general process.”

“Like what?”

“He or she is smart enough to use a computer at CPA to create all the posts on the app. If they did it from anywhere else—like their house—I’d be able to track their IP address, and from that I could get their name and physical address. But every single post has been made from the same IP address, which belongs to the school.”

“But there’s a thousand students at CPA. So it could be practically anyone.”

“True, but I managed to figure out some other stuff as well,” Adam replied. “I narrowed it down to a specific computer in the CPA library.”

Erin’s eyes widened. “How did you do that?”

“It’s too long to explain right now. But I can show you one day, if you want,” he replied. “Anyway, RXorcist uses this exact computer every single time. They also schedule most of the posts. For example, they might create a post at 8:30 in the morning, but then it doesn’t go live on the app until 11:46.”

I nodded slowly. “That way they always look totally innocent, because they could be sitting there doing nothing

when the Dirt notification hits everyone's phones. So no one would ever suspect them."

"Exactly."

"Do they always use that library computer at the exact same time?" Erin asked. "Like, say they always use it to schedule the posts at 8:30 in the morning. We could just go there and wait for them to show up, right?"

"I had the exact same thought process. Unfortunately, they seem to use the computer at totally different times every day. So you could wind up sitting there for ten hours waiting for them," Adam replied. "But if that's what it takes, and you're as desperate to find them as you say you are, then that's what you'll have to do."

Erin looked over at me. "Do you still have that spy camera?" she asked. "The one you put in Kinsey's room."

"I think it's in my car somewhere," I said, rubbing my jaw. "The cops didn't want it when I tried to hand it in. They just wanted the footage of my dad."

"Well, we should find it and put it on the wall somewhere near the computer. Then, when the Dirt app posts the daily poll about Kinsey, we can get Adam to find out exactly what time RXorcist scheduled the post. Then we can rewind the footage from the camera to that exact time, and bam... we have RXorcist's identity."

My brows shot up. "Holy shit. That would totally work."

"Yeah, that's a really good idea," Adam said. "I had no idea you guys had a full-on spy camera."

"Long story." Erin gave him a tight smile. "I'll tell you all about it when you teach me those tricks about tracing IP addresses to specific devices."

Adam nodded. “Sounds good. I’m looking forward to it.”

I stood and extended my right hand. “Thanks so much for all your help, man.”

“No problem,” he replied, shaking my hand. “I hope you catch this asshole soon. They’ve caused a lot of drama for a lot of people.”

We said our goodbyes and left. As we trudged downstairs to the parking lot, Erin let out a groan.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I just realized something. We’ll need to install the camera in the library before anyone else gets there, because RXorcist might schedule the daily poll post first thing in the morning. If the camera isn’t there by then, we’ll end up missing them.”

“Good point. Let’s go back to the school now.”

“Now?” Erin glanced at her watch. “It’s two in the morning. Everything’s locked up.”

“I know, but that security guard will still be there. We could tell him we need to go into the library to see if Kinsey left anything behind,” I said. “He might be sympathetic to us because he saw how the cops weren’t taking her disappearance seriously.”

Erin shrugged. “I guess it’s worth a shot.”

We headed back to CPA and parked in the closest lot to the entrance. I found the spy camera gear in the glove compartment and explained the setup process to Erin. Then we walked around until we found Ken. He was patrolling around the school’s aquatic center at the bottom of the hill.

When he spotted us heading toward him, he picked up the pace and closed the distance between us. “You’re back again?”

he said, two lines appearing between his brows. “What’s going on?”

“We still can’t find Kinsey, and the police aren’t doing anything,” Erin said, giving him her best doe eyes. “We were hoping you’d let us into the library to see if she left anything behind earlier. Anything that might give us a clue about where she went or who she went with.”

“I know you’ll probably tell us to wait until the morning,” I added. “But we can’t sleep. We’re really worried.”

Ken regarded us with a skeptical expression for a fraught minute. Then he sighed and relented. “I’ll give you ten minutes in there,” he said. “But you can’t tell anyone, okay? If the administration finds out that I unlocked the school to let two students roam around in the middle of the night, my job could be on the line.”

Erin mimed zipping her lips up. “We won’t say a word. Promise.”

On our way over to the library, Erin scanned the map Adam had sent to her, denoting the exact location of the computer we needed to keep our eye on. It was in the center of a row of desktops in the back corner of the building, set far back from the stacks. It was no wonder RXorcist chose it as their main haunt—hardly anyone would notice a person skulking around this end of the library. Even if they did, the person in question could just claim they were using a computer to look up the location of a book on the library network.

Five minutes later, we had the miniature camera set up on a brass sconce on the wood-paneled wall behind the row of desktops. It had a perfect view of the computer RXorcist

always used, and there was no way he or she could possibly notice it.

“Does it still work?” Erin asked, staring at me anxiously.

“I hope so.” I frowned down at my phone screen as I loaded the app that I installed weeks ago to spy on Kinsey. It buffered for a few seconds, and then the home screen popped up. I breathed a sigh of relief. “Yeah, it’s fine.”

I tested the connection three times just to be sure. It worked perfectly—whenever I loaded the app on my phone, I could see the computer, the desk it sat on, and the black ergonomic chair in front of it in HD.

Erin waited for me to finish, leaning back on the desk with wide, anxious eyes. “What next?” she asked when I finally slipped my phone away.

I set my jaw and stood up straight. “Now... we wait.”

TICK. TICK. TICK.

My eyes were glued to the clock on the economics classroom wall, watching the seconds crawl by painstakingly slowly. Every time a full minute passed, I added it to the running timer in my head that was keeping track of how long Kinsey had been missing.

Eleven hours and seventeen minutes.

Guilt churned my guts as I wondered where she was, what was happening to her, what she must be feeling right now. I couldn't stop picturing the worst. Part of my brain did its best to fight off the awful thoughts, but the negative side kept winning, allowing terrible images to break through my mental barriers. Kinsey tied up in someone's trunk. Kinsey face-down in the ocean. Kinsey lying on a forest floor, birds pecking at her unseeing eyes.

The door flew open, and a familiar vanilla scent wafted through the air. I whipped my head around, half-expecting to see Kinsey stepping into the classroom, but it wasn't her. It was just a girl who was late for class because of an appointment.

As she stepped past me to hand in her doctor's note to the teacher, the vanilla scent in the air grew stronger. I sat up straight, skin prickling. The girl probably used the same brand of perfume or shampoo as Kinsey. It was just a coincidence, but it was driving me crazy, making me think that if I just closed my eyes for a second, she would appear beside me, telling me how much she missed me.

I clenched my teeth and turned my attention back to the wall. The teacher started lecturing us about exchange rates, but I barely paid any attention. Just stared at the clock, waiting for what felt like an eternity.

When the bell rang, I slowly packed up my things and trudged outside, feeling like a zombie. A familiar chiming sound suddenly reverberated through the hall, sending a bolt of energy through me like I'd just chugged a double espresso. Pulse spiking, I whipped out my phone and stared at the screen. The Dirt app had finally posted the daily poll post regarding Kinsey's innocence.

I looked up and spotted Erin at the other end of the hallway. She mouthed something to me and tilted her head toward the right, jabbing a finger in the same direction. I nodded and strode toward her.

"Are you telling Adam the post went out?" I asked when I fell into step beside her. She was holding her phone in her palm, fingers flying over the keyboard.

"Yes. I'm sure he already knows because he had to download the app to research it last night, but I'm just reminding him in case he fell asleep or something," she said. She glanced over at me. "Should we go to the library?"

I nodded, heart racing with anticipation. Five minutes later, we reached the library and made our way over to a quiet

corner. Erin plugged my laptop into an outlet while I connected it to my phone with a small cable. Once everything was working as intended, I opened the spy camera app and isolated a portion of the footage from this morning, starting at 6 a.m. just to be safe.

“Did Adam reply yet?” I asked, looking over at Erin as the footage downloaded.

“No, but he’s typing.” She went silent for a moment, frowning at the screen. Then her brows lifted, and she turned the phone to face me. “He says today’s poll post was scheduled at 7:56.”

I opened the video file and dragged the timer to 7:50 a.m., assuming RXorcist took some time to create the post before they scheduled it. Erin pulled up a chair next to me, wide eyes glued to the laptop. “Press play,” she said, voice almost cracking with excitement.

I hit the enter key and leaned forward, watching the screen with bated breath.

Between 7:50 and 7:53, the back corner of the library lay silent and empty. At 7:54, a person finally stepped into the frame. They furtively glanced around for a few seconds, and then they dumped a bag on the desk beside the computer and sat down.

Erin turned to look at me. My own shock was mirrored in her wide eyes.

“No fucking way.”

“NO WAY.” ERIN VEHEMENTLY SHOOK HER HEAD, EYES WIDE as saucers. “There’s no way Bobbi Kesinovic is RXorcist.”

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing either. The shock was like ice water on my skin.

“That’s definitely her on the footage,” I said in a low voice, staring at the laptop screen. “But *how*?”

“No idea.”

My lips pressed into a thin line. “I know this will sound terrible, but—”

“You think Bobbi is the stupidest person on the planet,” Erin cut in. “Don’t worry, everyone else thinks it too.”

“I just don’t get it.” I kept staring at the laptop screen, watching Bobbi as she rapidly typed something on the computer keyboard. “She’s literally the last person I’d ever suspect.”

“Maybe she’s not actually RXorcist. Maybe RXorcist just hired her to work for them,” Erin said, tilting her chin. “So she logs in and schedules the posts for them, but she doesn’t run the whole thing.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Erin leaned forward and squinted at the screen. “Or not,” she muttered.

“What is it?” I said, brows rising.

She motioned to the footage. “Can you zoom in on the video at all?”

“Yes.”

“Zoom in on the monitor. I want to confirm what she’s typing.”

I did as she said. The computer screen quadrupled in size and came into sharper focus. Lines of text appeared. They all looked like gibberish to me. “What is this?” I asked, turning my gaze back to Erin.

“Code,” she replied, eyes wide with incredulity. “In other words—a programming language. It looks like she’s built the app from scratch herself. Right now she’s modifying something on it.”

“Shit. Really?”

“Yes.” Erin looked over at me, brows squishing together. “If Bobbi was actually a total idiot without two brain cells to rub together, she wouldn’t be able to write code like this. And she definitely wouldn’t be able to write it that fast.”

“So she’s really RXorcist.”

“Looks like it, yeah.” Erin exhaled deeply and leaned back in her seat. “I can’t believe it.”

“Me neither,” I said, slowly shaking my head. My mind was utterly blown by the revelation.

Erin frowned and twisted her hands in her lap. “It just doesn’t make any sense. I mean, RXorcist is a total genius. So

if it's really Bobbi, I'd expect to see her name high up in the senior class ranking. But I've never seen it anywhere," she said. "I check it regularly, too, so I can make sure I haven't slipped out of the top ten."

"Maybe you just didn't notice her name because you were so focused on finding your own."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. Bobbi's name would've stuck out like a sore thumb in the top ten because of her reputation."

"Her reputation for being a complete dumbass, you mean?"

"Yeah. I don't think her name even shows up in the top fifty."

"Let's check." I turned back to my laptop, opened a web browser, and navigated to the CPA student portal. A link to the senior class ranking lay on the left side of the homepage. I clicked on it and scanned the top ten. "You're right. No Bobbi."

"Hate to say I told you so, but..." Erin raised her eyebrows and trailed off, letting the words linger in the air.

I slowly scrolled down the page.

"I don't see her anywhere in the top fifty, either," I said, frowning. "It doesn't make sense. Does she purposely fail all her classes to push down her GPA so no one guesses how smart she is? If so, why?"

"Let me try something." Erin leaned over the keyboard. She pressed 'Ctrl+F' and typed Bobbi's name into the little search bar that popped up on the screen.

She hit enter. A dialog box instantly popped up. *No search results.*

“Wait, what?” My brows shot up. “Her name isn’t in the list at all?”

“Apparently not.”

“Try her surname by itself. Bobbi is probably short for something else.”

Erin typed ‘Kesinovic’ into the search bar and hit enter. Once again, there were zero results.

“So... there’s two hundred and three seniors at CPA, but Bobbi isn’t one of them?” I said, forehead wrinkling with confusion.

“Seems that way,” Erin said. She chewed on the inside of her cheek, shaking her head. “I just don’t get it. How is this possible?”

“I have no idea. Bobbi is definitely an enrolled student here, and she’s definitely in the same grade as us too.”

“Are you sure about that?” Erin cocked her head slightly to one side. “What if it’s like that old movie? You know, where the journalist goes back to high school and pretends to be a student.”

I shrugged. “Never seen it. But there’s no way Bobbi is secretly a reporter.”

“It would explain the RXorcist thing, though. She could be working on some sort of exposé about CPA students and cyberbullying. The Dirt app could be a big part of it.”

“I think that’s a bit farfetched,” I replied. “Besides, Bobbi has been here since freshman year. There’s no way a reporter

would spend four whole years pretending to be a student just to write an article about how bitchy other students can be.”

Erin’s shoulders slumped. “You’re right,” she said. “I just don’t get why her name isn’t showing up in the class list.”

“Maybe she enrolled under a fake name.”

“Would CPA let that happen?” she asked, brows knitting.

“Possibly,” I said, nodding slowly. “I think some schools allow it for the children of celebrities and politicians to protect them from the media or anyone who might want to hurt them.”

“Bobbi’s family isn’t important, though.” Erin shook her head and cleared her throat. “Sorry, that sounded horrible. I just meant her family wouldn’t be considered important enough by those standards. They aren’t royalty or politicians, and they aren’t famous for anything either.”

“It’s okay, I knew what you meant,” I said. I leaned back in my seat and rubbed my jaw. “Let’s check all her socials. She might have family members linked on there. We could get in touch with one of them and ask about her.”

“Good idea.”

I opened Instagram and went through Bobbi’s follower list. I couldn’t see anyone with the same surname as her, and she hadn’t tagged anyone in the family photos she’d posted at Christmas and Easter either.

“I’ve got something,” Erin said. “She has her parents linked as family members on her Facebook.”

She turned her phone screen so we could both look at it. Bobbi’s father was listed as ‘Andrew J Kesinovic’ and her mother was listed as ‘Felicia Bailey Kesinovic’.

I squinted at her mother's profile. "Bailey could be her mom's middle name, but it could also be her maiden name, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Wasn't there a Bailey on the class list?"

"I think so," Erin replied, brows scrunching together. "Do you think Bobbi might've enrolled under that name?"

"Maybe. Let's see." I pulled up the senior class ranking on my laptop again. "There," I said triumphantly, pointing at one of the top names on the list. "Roberta Bailey. Number two in the senior class. That's got to be her."

"Oh my god," Erin muttered. "She's a literal effing genius, and she's been hiding in plain sight this whole time."

"Yeah. I just don't understand why."

"Me neither. She always acts like a total idiot," Erin said. Her brows rose. "Maybe that's what she wants—for people to ignore her academic achievements. Or never notice them in the first place."

"Why, though?" I asked, rubbing my neck. "What's the point?"

Erin's mouth flattened. "I don't know, but there's one way to find out."

I nodded and rose to my feet, heart hammering with anticipation. Erin picked up my laptop and stuffed it in my bag while I took the tiny spy camera off the scone and put it in my pocket. Then we hurried out of the library and wandered the school halls until we found Bobbi lingering near the cafeteria entrance.

We marched over to her. She looked up at us, gray eyes wide and vacant. “Um... hi?” she said, tilting her head to one side.

“We need to talk to you,” Erin said sharply, folding her arms.

Bobbi’s lips turned up in a sweet little smile. “Oh. Sorry, I’m kind of busy. Maybe later?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Doesn’t look like you’re doing much.”

“I’m waiting for Harlow. We both have a free period next, so we’re going to watch the Real Housewives reunion,” she replied. “Do you guys watch it too? It’s crazy that Ayanna did all that stuff to Chanel, right?”

“You can drop the act, Bobbi,” I said in a low voice. “We know you’re RXorcist.”

Surprise flickered in her eyes, but she covered it quickly. “What are you talking about?” she asked, cocking her head. “Is this a joke?”

“Cut the crap,” Erin said in a tart tone. “We have proof.”

As she spoke, I pulled the spy camera out of my pocket. “We caught you posting from the library on this,” I said. “It was right behind you on the light fixture. Too bad you didn’t notice, huh?”

The change that went over Bobbi’s face was downright unnerving. The wide-eyed vacant look vanished, and a mask of eerie calm descended in its place. “Come with me, please,” she said, taking Erin by the arm.

I followed the two of them into an empty classroom. Bobbi closed the door behind us and locked it. Then she turned to

face us, eyes flashing. “How did you figure it out?” she asked in an icy voice.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Have you told anyone else?”

“No. Not yet, anyway,” I said, brows rising. “By the way, why are you enrolled here under the name Roberta Bailey?”

“Roberta is my real name. Bobbi is just a nickname.”

“Yeah, we figured that much. But Bailey isn’t your real surname, is it?” I said. “So why are you enrolled under it?”

Bobbi bristled. “That’s none of your business.”

“Come on. Satisfy our curiosity.” I smiled thinly and leaned back on a desk. “Unless you want us to tell everyone.”

She huffed and rolled her eyes. “Fine,” she said, pulling out a chair. “Have either of you ever read any studies about unconscious bias?”

Erin and I exchanged glances. “No,” we said in unison.

Bobbi sighed and sat down. “Okay, so basically, some researchers from Harvard found that a lot of teachers in American high schools and colleges have an unconscious bias regarding names,” she said, crossing one leg over the other. “An essay written by someone with an Anglo-sounding surname—like Smith or Jones—will often be given higher marks than the exact same essay with a non-Anglo name attached to it. The markers don’t even realize they’re doing it. They genuinely believe they’re approaching every single essay and test paper with the exact same mindset, but they’re not. That’s why it’s called an unconscious bias.”

Erin’s eyes widened. “That really happens?”

“Yes. All the time,” Bobbi replied. “Anyway, everyone knows that CPA is incredibly competitive, so my parents wanted to do something to give me an edge over the other students. In the end, we decided that I’d enroll under my mom’s maiden name, seeing as it sounds way more Anglo than my dad’s name.”

“The school allowed that?”

Bobbi nodded. “Mom lied to the admin staff and said she was divorcing my dad soon, and she also told them that I’d decided to change my last name to her maiden name to support her. They asked to see her birth certificate to prove that Bailey was actually her old name, and then they approved my enrolment under it.”

“You did all that just to gain a sliver of an edge over some of the other students?” I asked, forehead creasing.

Another nod. “Uh-huh.”

“But you don’t even need it!” Erin said hotly. “You’re super-smart.”

“No shit,” I added. “You’re number two out of two hundred students. Two hundred and three, to be exact.”

“Yes, but who knows?” Bobbi said, arching a brow. “If I enrolled under my real surname, I might be ranked seventh or eighth instead. Or worse—I might not even be in the top ten.”

“What about all the students here who have non-Anglo-sounding names? Like Kemi Adebayo or Eric Zhang?” I said. “They aren’t hiding who they are to gain any kind of advantage. So what you’re doing is totally unfair to them.”

“Not my problem,” Bobbi replied with an indifferent shrug. “Like I said, CPA is very competitive. I’m willing to do anything to rise above the others.”

“Right.” Erin’s voice hardened. “Next question—what’s with the act you always put on? You’ve managed to convince the entire senior class that you’re the stupidest person alive. What’s the point of that?”

Bobbi’s lips curved into a quarter-smile. “When I first started here, I realized how good it was to fly under the radar. Academically-speaking, that is. Everyone knew Bobbi Kesinovic. Ditzzy party girl. Cheerleader. You get the drift. But no one knew Roberta Bailey, the nerdy girl who outperforms nearly everyone. I realized I preferred it that way.” She paused for a breath and crossed her arms. “See, when people know you’re smart, they actively compete with you. Some will even target you and try to sabotage you to gain an edge for themselves. But that’s never happened to me, because no one has ever known who Roberta Bailey really is. When they see her name on the class ranking, they assume she’s just some geeky nobody they’ve never crossed paths with. It’s a big school, so it’s possible for that to happen.”

“That’s true,” I said. “But I still don’t understand how you’ve managed to get away with it for so long. Surely *someone* wondered who Roberta Bailey was at some point and started asking questions. Especially now that you’re almost top of the senior class.”

Bobbi leaned back in her chair, hands resting behind her head. “I’ve always approached my homeroom teachers at the start of every year and asked them to use my nickname and my dad’s surname whenever they do rollcall. All of them were fine with it, so people here have only ever known me as Bobbi Kesinovic, aside from the teachers in my classes who mark me as Roberta Bailey.” She paused and lifted her brows. “I understand what you’re saying, though. I always thought someone would catch me out eventually. But no one’s ever

questioned anything. No one's ever even asked me whether Bobbi is my real name or just a nickname. So I've managed to keep up the act all this time."

"I see." I narrowed my eyes. "What about RXorcist? What's that all about?"

"My favorite movie is The Exorcist, and my name starts with R, so I thought RXorcist was a funny username. I also figured that no one would ever guess the meaning behind it," she said. "I mean, let's face it, everyone probably thinks my favorite movie is The Kissing Booth."

"Right." My jaw tightened. "So why did you create the Dirt app in the first place?"

"What can I say?" Bobbi replied, smile widening. "I found Gossip Girl wildly inspirational."

Erin folded her arms. Her eyes were narrowed and a vein was popping out on her forehead. "How the hell can you stand to do it?" she said. "You've ruined people's lives with that app! You've even shit-talked a ton of your own friends on it. Don't you ever feel bad?"

"I post whatever tips I get, no matter who they're about. Fair's fair." Bobbi's lips twisted into a smirk. "Plus, the stress from being posted about on Dirt has definitely caused a few people to do worse in exams than they would have otherwise. Another edge for me."

"You sound like a total sociopath."

"I'm not a sociopath. I'm just pragmatic," Bobbi replied, lifting her chin. Her smug smile faded. "Anyway, what do you two want? I'm guessing you're planning on exposing me to the world now that you've figured out who I am?"

“No.” I steeled my jaw and stood up straight. “We have other plans for you.”

“And they are...?”

“Kinsey has gone missing. If you use your power as RXorcist to help us find her, we’ll let you keep your identity secret.”

Bobbi frowned. “Kinsey is *missing*?”

“Yes. She’s been gone since last night.” I cocked my head. “So... are you in? Or would you rather be unmasked in front of the whole school?”

Bobbi went silent for a moment, shrewd gray eyes darting between Erin and me. Finally, she dipped her chin in a curt nod. “I’m in.”

WINCING, I PRESSED A HAND OVER MY ABDOMEN AND CURLED into a ball on the narrow cot. It felt like my growling stomach was eating itself out of sheer desperation.

I wasn't sure how long I'd been trapped in this strange little dungeon. Time had an odd way of slowing to a crawl when there was nothing to do but lie around feeling miserable. I estimated that I'd been here for at least a day though, judging by the level of dehydration and hunger I was experiencing.

I let out a groan and rolled over, facing the dirty stone ceiling. My eyelids were so sticky and swollen from all the crying I'd done that it was difficult to keep them open, so I let them flutter shut and tried to picture myself in a world where this nightmare didn't exist.

It didn't help. My heart was still beating in my throat, and I couldn't stop myself from thinking of Jax and my mom; of what my disappearance was doing to them. They were probably terrified. Unable to sleep. Maybe even angry at the slippery sense of powerlessness they felt as they waited to find out what happened to me.

A fresh set of tears welled in my eyes as I realized I couldn't remember the last words I said to either of them. I

hadn't expected to be taken prisoner the other night—at least not by my damn English teacher, anyway—so it hadn't occurred to me to make any kind of mental notes when I last spoke to either of them. Did I tell them I loved them? If not, did I at least make it clear that I loved them in an unspoken way?

I damn well hoped so.

The sound of a key turning in the lock set my heart racing and my adrenaline spiking. I sat up straight and stared at the door, nausea and dread mingling in the pit of my stomach.

Mr. Blythe stepped into the tiny room, holding a plastic water bottle. The sight of him set my skin crawling with a mixture of fear and revulsion.

“Morning, Kinsey,” he said, tossing the water over to me.

“What morning is it?” I asked, weakly twisting the lid off the bottle. My voice sounded croaky from dehydration.

“Saturday.” Mr. Blythe turned his head over his shoulder and clicked a finger. “Come on, Nick. We can all fit in here.”

Another man stepped into the dungeon. He was short and slim with glasses and blond hair. A black bag was clutched in his right hand.

“Who are you?” I asked after gulping down several mouthfuls of water.

“I'm Nick Barron,” he replied with a pleasant smile. “Nice to meet you.”

I recognized his voice. He was the man who dropped off the battery-draining device for Mr. Blythe on Thursday night. Now that I could see his face properly, I realized I recognized him from somewhere else too.

“You work at CPA, don’t you?” I said, staring up at him. “I’ve seen you there before.”

He nodded. “I teach physics to the junior class.”

My gaze flickered between him and Mr. Blythe. There were still so many messy, wriggling loose ends beneath the surface of the awful thing that was happening to me—questions I’d asked many times and answers that were yet to be given. Now, with the addition of Mr. Barron’s presence, there were even more.

Was there some sort of conspiracy amongst the CPA teachers? What was their goal? Was the entire school staff in on it, or was it just a few of them?

Despite my burning curiosity, I didn’t bother asking either of the men standing before me. I knew they wouldn’t tell me the truth. I’d just get the same answer Mr. Blythe had given me multiple times now. *I’ll tell you later.* Then, of course, later would never come.

“Get up, Kinsey. Stretch your arms and legs.” Mr. Blythe snapped his fingers at me. “Come on. We don’t have all day.”

I did as he said, listlessly rising to my feet. “Why do I need to stretch?” I muttered. “You’re going to kill me anyway.”

“Yes, but not today.” Mr. Blythe smiled thinly. Then he turned to Mr. Barron. “You’re absolutely sure that thing works?”

Mr. Barron nodded. “Don’t worry. It’ll work.”

I stared at the two of them. “What thing?”

I expected them to ignore my question, but Mr. Barron looked right at me and smiled again. “I suppose we might as well show you,” he said. He reached into his bag and pulled

out a cord attached to a small black device. “This is a portable charger. It’s specifically designed for ankle bracelets.”

“So... you’re turning my ankle monitor back on?” I shook my head slowly, brows wrinkling with confusion. “Are you trying to get caught?”

“No,” Mr. Blythe said. “We’ve just had a slight change of plans.”

“Why?”

“Well, we were discussing things last night, and we realized we have a bit of a problem,” he replied. “See, we want this case to be wrapped up as quickly as possible in a neat little bow. But that won’t happen if your ankle bracelet is out of commission forever.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

“Because we need the police to find it at Carrington Park to advance the theory that you went to Cerina’s memorial service, felt guilty, and did a runner.” He tilted his head slightly to one side. “Thing is, though... with the battery dead, it’s completely untraceable. So we can drop it in the park as planned, but we can’t guarantee that it’ll be found straight away. It could take days. Weeks, even. Or some kid could pick it up thinking it’s a toy and then toss it in the trash when it doesn’t do anything for them.”

Understanding finally dawned on my tired brain. “You need to turn it back on so the police can track it down as quickly as possible.”

“Yes. But that presents us with another issue—we can’t cut it off you and *then* turn it back on. It doesn’t work like that, because it breaks and stops sending signals as soon as it’s cut. So we have to turn it back on and cut it off you, in that order.”

“But you can’t do that here.”

“No, we can’t, because then the police would have this address as your last known location.”

“What are you going to do, then?” I asked, heart thudding.

“We’re taking you with us to Carrington Park. Partway through the memorial service, we’ll turn the ankle monitor back on. Then we’ll cut it off and toss it in the bushes near the parking lot. The police will get a notification telling them that you’re trackable again, but by the time they get to the right spot, we’ll be long gone. They’ll find the bracelet and assume you were at the service, watching from behind the shrubs.”

“We’ll also drop that water bottle next to the ankle bracelet,” Mr. Barron interjected, jerking a thumb toward the bottle I’d just finished. “That way your DNA will be found at the scene. It’ll solidify the theory that you were there watching the memorial.”

“Isn’t that a bit risky?” I asked, narrowing my eyes. “There’ll be hundreds of people at Carrington Park today. Any one of them could see me with you.”

“You’ll be gagged and tied up in the back of the car, obviously,” Mr. Blythe replied. “The windows are double-tinted, too, so no one will be able to see in.”

“Okay, but how will you explain the ankle monitor suddenly switching on again?” I asked. “That doesn’t make any sense. The police will realize something weird is going on.”

“They’ll find some way to rationalize it,” Mr. Barron said with a casual shrug. “My best guess is, they’ll think you inadvertently did something to jiggle the battery around. That movement managed to squeeze a tiny bit of extra life out of it,

and the device switched back on. You noticed the blinking light, realized you were being tracked again, and frantically cut the bracelet off. Then you ran.”

“Right.” My stomach growled again. “Can I at least have some food before we go?”

“No, but if you behave yourself, we’ll make sure you get a sandwich or two after we get back,” Mr. Blythe said, lips stretching into a cruel smile. “Deal?”

“Deal,” I muttered. It was hopeless to argue or fight. One girl against two men never ended well. Not for the girl, anyway.

“Hold out your wrists.”

I did as I was told, stomach churning. Mr. Blythe tied my hands together in front of me with a thick strip of black silk while Mr. Barron stuffed a gag in my mouth and fastened it at the back of my head.

“All right.” Mr. Blythe lay a hand on my shoulder and pushed me forward. “Let’s go.”

The two men directed me out of the dungeon and up the narrow spiral staircase beyond it. When we reached the top, one of them opened the thick wooden door in front of us and roughly pushed me through. I ducked my head and blinked rapidly, eyes painfully adjusting to the sudden burst of light.

When my vision finally cleared, I looked around. I was in a vast foyer of marble and gold with an enormous chandelier in the center. A huge staircase wound up to the right, leading to a mezzanine level with a balcony overlooking the rest of the space.

Glancing to the left, I spotted a sideboard featuring a multitude of framed photos. I squinted at them. The closest

one displayed two familiar faces—Ted and Nora Vincent. The one beside it featured the two of them with their three kids... including Cerina.

The revelation hit me like a punch to the gut. I was in Cerina's house. The familiar voice I heard the other night belonged to her mother, Nora. I recognized it from the PTO meeting that Jax live-streamed to me from his phone a few nights ago.

I inhaled sharply through my nose, mind whirling as it tried to parse the shocking new information. I felt the same sickening slide into uncertainty that I experienced when I found Cerina's body lying in front of me in the gazebo—the sensation that some greater force had taken over every aspect of my life, sending it spiraling out of control.

Just how many people were in on this conspiracy to frame me for Cerina's murder? Why did they target me? And why on earth was her family in on it?

“Come on.” Mr. Blythe pressed on my left shoulder blade. I hadn't even realized that I'd stopped walking. “We're not there yet.”

He led me out of the Vincent mansion and over to a silver car with heavily-tinted windows. Mr. Barron unlocked it and roughly pushed me into the back seat. I waited, heart pounding, as the two of them got in the front and pulled out of the winding driveway.

We turned onto the main road, and I stared out the window to my left, watching the world go by and wondering if it was the last time that I'd see any of it. Mr. Blythe had claimed earlier that he wasn't going to kill me today, but I had no way of knowing if he was lying or not. For all I knew, he was going

to throw me off a cliff as soon as we finished at the memorial service this morning.

Ten minutes later, we turned into Carrington Park. It was an enormous expanse of land on the edge of town filled with lush gardens, sweeping lawns, and meandering paths.

Mr. Blythe slowly steered the car into a parking lot on our right. A thick patch of trees and shrubs fringed the far side of the space. We parked in the last spot at the end, next to an enormous oak tree, and then Mr. Barron turned to look at me in the back seat. “Stick your left leg across here,” he said, motioning toward the center console.

“Not yet,” Mr. Blythe cut in, pointing to the clock on the dash. “We’re a little early.”

“Are we?” Mr. Barron followed his gaze to the clock. “Ah, yes, we are. The service probably hasn’t even started yet.”

Mr. Blythe turned to look at me. “Sit tight, Kinsey. We’ll cut the monitor off when the service is halfway through,” he said. “You should actually be able to see it from where you’re sitting.”

I peered out the window again. A crowd was gathering in the distance, surrounded by a purple haze of flowers. A row of police officers stood on one side, watching the mourners like hawks.

“Lots of police here,” Mr. Barron mused, staring in the same direction as me. “They must be here to see if Kinsey shows up.”

“Yes, they’re probably expecting her,” Mr. Blythe replied. “Apparently murderers often show up at the funerals of their victims. I’m not sure why, exactly. To gloat about how they got away with it, perhaps?”

“Who cares?” Mr. Barron said, lifting a shoulder in a nonchalant shrug. “As long as they believe Kinsey was here today, that’s all that matters.”

I took a deep breath through my nose, wishing I could give the two men an earful. Unfortunately, with the gag in my mouth, the only sound I could make was a strangled groan.

A few minutes later, a familiar black car pulled up four spots down from us. My eyes widened and my heart began to race again.

It was Jax.

He stepped out of the car and stretched his arms, mouth dropping open in a yawn. His face was drawn and there were dark circles under his eyes. Clearly, he hadn’t slept a wink since I disappeared.

A powerful rush of love shot through my veins, and I moaned through the gag, wishing Jax could feel the emotion bleeding through the thick metal and glass between us.

Erin stepped out of the passenger side of the car, looking just as drained and worried as Jax. She was followed by Bobbi Kesinovic, who was probably the last person I expected to see hanging out with either of them. I didn’t spend much time thinking about her, though. I was too set on getting to Jax. I had to make him see me. Hear me. Save me.

“Jax! Help!” I tried to scream but my words came out in a garbled, barely-audible squeak.

Jax clicked his key fob. Then he turned and trudged away from the car. *Shit*. I was going to lose him.

I wriggled over on the back seat and smashed my head into the window. A loud thud echoed through the car. I repeated the movement, hitting my head even harder this time.

“What the hell are you doing?” Mr. Blythe hissed, reaching into the back seat to grab me. “You know no one can see you through that tinted glass, don’t you? All you’ll do is give yourself a concussion.”

I wriggled out of his grip and smashed my head against the window again.

Jax stopped and turned to stare in my direction, brows dipping in a puzzled frown. For a long moment he just stood there, motionless. Then he shook his head and turned away.

A moment later, he was gone.

“DID YOU HEAR THAT?” I TURNED MY HEAD TO LOOK AT ERIN and Bobbi.

Bobbi lifted a brow. “Did I hear what?”

I motioned toward the silver car at the end of the parking lot. “Some sort of banging sound coming from over there. You really didn’t hear it?”

“I think it was just one of their doors slamming shut,” Erin said, glancing over at the car. Her eyes were puffy and red-rimmed from staying up for two nights in a row. I probably looked just as bad, if not worse.

I yawned and nodded. “Yeah, that must be it.”

Her mouth stretched in a reactive yawn, and she smothered it with her hand. “We should get going,” she said. “The service is starting in a few minutes.”

The three of us set off down the path that ran along the edge of the lot. While we walked, I checked the Dirt app on my phone. As promised, Bobbi had pinned a post to the top yesterday afternoon.

Posted by: RXorcist, 1:07, November 25, 2021

Hello, Dirt Lovers. Very important post today—I really need your help!

I've received a tip that Kinsey Holland has gone MISSING. I believe the police are searching already, but her ankle monitor has gone dead, so they can't track her that way. Yikes, right?

Anyway, she was last seen at Crown Point Academy at 10:30 on Thursday night. If anyone has seen or heard ANYTHING at all since then, leave a comment below. Her family and friends are very concerned.

PS: I know I'm probably shouting into the wind here, but please refrain from wild speculation in the comments. It's really not helpful to anyone.

Erin and I had spent hours combing through the hundreds of comments that had been left since the post went live, but we hadn't found anything useful yet. No one seemed to have seen or heard anything at all in regard to Kinsey's vanishing act. Still, I couldn't stop myself from checking the app every few minutes, just in case.

I scrolled to the bottom of the post and went through the most recent comments. Like the others, they were a mixture of speculation, troll responses, and people who were genuinely trying to offer assistance.

***Anonymous Snake:** Yeah I saw her last night... grinding on my dick hahaha*

***Anonymous Lion:** Everyone else is right, she's obviously skipped town! She probably hitched a ride with someone. If she left on Thursday night she's probably made it across the border to Canada already. The police might as well just give up.*

Anonymous Badger: *I saw her yesterday. She was stabbing some cheerleaders up in Woodsen's Bay lol*

Anonymous Cheetah: *OMG shut the fuck up, you guys literally all have the exact same joke. Grow up....*

Anonymous Otter: *I don't know if this is helpful at all but late on Thursday night (maybe around midnight?) I was driving home along King Albert Parade and I noticed a car parked near the Kingsley house. At the time I assumed it was a reporter, seeing as they've been all over the place lately, but now I'm wondering if it was Kinsey. Maybe she arranged for one of her old friends from Oakland to come and pick her up so she could leave town, and that was the car I saw. Could just be a random person though.*

Anonymous Warthog: *I think I saw her on Thursday night at the Cat Café on the Boulevard. It might've just been someone with similar hair but not sure. Whoever it was, she was hanging out with Kira Blake and Tash Marsden*

Anonymous Tiger: *I was at the café too. That girl is Kira's cousin. Their hair is the same for sure. Definitely not Kinsey though*

Anonymous Bonobo: *Does anyone else think it's weird that she went missing from the school?? What the hell was she doing there at 10:30 at night?? Is that not totally suspicious?*

Anonymous Mouse: *She was probably at the football game earlier and was waiting for a ride home. Duh...*

Anonymous Ibis: *She's soooo guilty bro I mean why else would she run away?*

Anonymous Bat: *Maybe Jax got tired of defending her crazy ass and drowned her in their pool haha*

Anonymous Wallaby: Ummm here's a thought, has anyone checked up on Nate Ellingham lately? He HATES Kinsey so maybe he's got her locked up in a cage somewhere haha

Anonymous Eel: That's not funny, dipshit. By the way, Nate was with me and five others on Thursday night so he definitely didn't do anything to Kinsey.

“Anything useful?” Erin asked, nudging me.

I shook my head. “I don't think so.”

“Damn,” she muttered, shoulders sagging.

My phone started to ring. I stopped in my tracks and lifted a palm to signal to the girls. “Hold on. Kinsey's mom is calling me.”

Bobbi and Erin lingered on the edge of the path while I took the call. “Hey, Anna. Have you heard any news?”

“Not yet.” She sounded as exhausted as I felt. “I just wanted to tell you something.”

“What?”

“I spoke to Maeve a few minutes ago. She told me she overheard your dad talking to a friend earlier this morning. Apparently he's somehow heard the news that Kinsey has broken her bail conditions and disappeared, and he's planning on leaking it to the media. So we should be prepared for another onslaught of reporters and photographers.”

“Oh.” I coughed to clear my throat. “Sorry, that's probably my fault.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember when I told you about that app? I got the creator to post about Kinsey yesterday to ask people from CPA

if they've seen anything," I said. "Only students use the app, but one of them could've told their parents about the post, and then they could've mentioned it to Dad."

"Oh, that's right. I completely forgot about it. Honestly, I feel like my brain is melting from the lack of sleep." Anna paused to let out a weary yawn. "Has anyone replied?"

"There's a ton of comments, but nothing useful yet."

"I'm sure someone will say something eventually. At least I hope so. And don't worry about the media. It's probably a good thing that they know about Kinsey being missing," she replied. "The more publicity the case gets, the more likely it is that someone will come forward with information."

"Yeah, exactly."

"I was mostly just worried that you'd get swarmed by reporters again," Anna went on. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, we're all good here. I think the media is staying away from the memorial service out of respect for Cerina's family."

"That's good." She let out a short sigh of relief. "Anyway, I'll let you get back to it. Stay safe."

I ended the call, slipped my phone back in my pocket, and continued up the path toward the expanse of lawn where the memorial service was being held. Erin fell into step beside me again. "Everything okay with Anna?" she asked, forehead puckering.

"Yeah. She was just warning me that we might get mobbed by reporters later today," I said, mouth tugging down in a grimace. "My dad's trying to cause trouble for us by leaking information about Kinsey's disappearance."

“God, he’s such an asshole,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “But in the end, it’s actually a good thing if everyone knows she’s missing, right?”

“Yeah, I think so.” I sighed and scraped a hand through my hair. “I just hope someone will finally come forward with some real information.”

“They will,” she insisted. “I mean, there has to be someone out there who’s seen something, right?”

I nodded, and we lapsed into a tense silence. When we drew closer to the gathered crowd on the lawn, we found a spot near the back and cast our gazes around. Cerina’s killer could be right here at this service. Hell, they could be standing right in front of us.

I wished I knew the exact signs to look out for, but real-life criminals didn’t behave like the criminals in movies. Cerina’s killer wasn’t going to stand around rubbing their hands and shiftily darting their eyes around. They were probably going to emulate everyone else at the event and force themselves to cry in order to fit in. At the very least, they’d look morose and keep their head appropriately bowed.

Bobbi nudged me. “Did you see all those cops?” she whispered.

My mouth compressed into a thin, grim line, and I folded my arms and stared over at the row of police officers on the side of the crowd. It seemed like Crown Point’s entire force was in attendance. “They’re a bit hard to miss,” I muttered, turning my attention back to Bobbi.

“They probably think Kinsey is planning to sneak in to watch the service. Murderers tend to do that,” she said. I

stiffened, and her eyes widened. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. I don’t think Kinsey is guilty. I just meant—”

I lifted a hand. “It’s fine,” I said curtly. “I know what you meant.”

The service began a moment later. Friends and family members got up on the makeshift stage erected in the center of the lawn and shared fond memories and stories of Cerina, one after another. Some sang songs. When they were done, each one took a purple calla lily from a vase near the microphone and knelt to place it at the base of a gilt-framed photo of Cerina.

At twelve o’clock, Ted and Nora took the stage. Nora dabbed at her cheeks with a handkerchief as Ted adjusted the mic to his level with a trembling arm. “Thank you so much for coming out here today,” he said. “We’re so grateful to each and every one of you, and we’re so happy to see how many people loved and cared about our daughter.”

Nora took the mic. “I wanted to tell you all a story about Cerina,” she said, voice cracking slightly. “Everyone remembers how headstrong she was, but here’s something a lot of you didn’t know about her. She had a very soft spot for animals, and when she was a little girl, she’d constantly ask us to donate money to every animal-related charity she came across. One day, we were driving up the coast, and she spotted an injured bird on the edge of the road. We were going to leave it there, because we didn’t think there was anything we could do, but Cerina begged us to take it to a vet. The vet managed to fix the bird’s leg, but it was still quite weak. We brought it home with us, and Cerina put it in a shoebox and nursed it back to health over the next two weeks, feeding it with a dropper every couple of hours. Finally, the bird was well

enough to go outside and fly away. I've never seen Cerina so happy."

"It's my very favorite memory of her," Ted interjected, leaning over to the mic. "She was only eight years old back then, and already she cared more about everyone and everything than most people in this world."

Nora sniffed and wiped her cheeks. "That's right. Our little girl refused to let anyone be taken too soon, even if that someone was a tiny animal," she said, voice cracking again. "I just wish the universe repaid that kindness. I wish she wasn't taken before her time. But I'm still incredibly grateful that we were able to share eighteen years with her. Eighteen years of love and happiness."

"Thank you again for coming today. All of you," Ted said, voice going husky. "I can't tell you how much it means to us."

The two of them left the stage, bowing their shoulders and clutching each other as tears streamed down their pale faces. They glanced in my direction a few seconds later. I quickly lowered my head and turned slightly to the side, not wanting them to notice me. I wasn't sure how welcome I was in their eyes, given my close association with Kinsey.

A moment later, I heard a flurry of activity and looked up again. Several of the police officers had peeled off from the crowd. They were hurrying across the lawn toward the parking lot I left my car in earlier.

"Something's happening," I muttered to Erin, nudging her with my elbow.

She squinted at the cops. "Do you think someone found something?"

“They must have.” I was about to say more when I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. I pulled it out and looked at the screen. Anna was calling again.

I stepped away from the crowd and pressed the phone to my ear. “Everything okay?” I asked.

“I just had a call from the police,” Anna said. She was talking much faster than usual, like she’d had a sudden burst of energy. “Kinsey’s ankle monitor was turned on again, about five minutes ago. It was only for a few seconds, but it was enough to trace her.”

My eyes widened. “So they’ve found her?”

“Not yet, but they told me the GPS data showed that she was at Carrington Park,” she replied. “Are you still there? Can you see what’s going on?”

I craned my neck and looked to the west. “Some cops are running over to one of the parking lots,” I said. “Are they sure the data from the monitor was correct?”

“Yes. The analysts were positive. She was definitely at Carrington Park five minutes ago.”

I whipped my head around, brows furrowing. “I don’t understand. We would’ve seen her if she was here.”

“Maybe she was hiding somewhere,” Anna said. Her voice was tinged with a tone of desperation. “You know that park much better than I do. Is there anywhere you can think of where she could squirrel herself away?”

“There’s trees everywhere, but they wouldn’t make a good hiding place because most of them are out in the open. So even if you went and crouched behind one of them, someone would still spot you eventually.” I looked over at the parking lot again. “Unless...”

Fuck. *Fuck.*

I broke into a run, chest tightening like a fist was squeezing my heart.

“It’s the car,” I panted into the phone. “She was in the car!”

“What car?” Anna said. “Jax? *Hello?*”

“There was a silver car parked near us earlier. I heard a weird banging noise from somewhere near it. Erin thought it was just a door slamming, and I figured that made sense. But what if we were wrong?” I said. “What if Kinsey was locked in the trunk? Or tied up in the back? The noise could’ve come from her. She could’ve been trying to escape.”

“Oh, god.” Anna’s voice thickened. “Please tell me that car is still there. *Please.*”

I kept sprinting, lungs burning from the exertion. When I reached the parking lot, I turned left and hurried down to the far end.

My heart sank when I reached the last bay. The silver car was no longer in it.

“Jax!” Anna was shouting into the phone now. “What’s happening?”

I lifted the phone to my ear again. “I’m sorry, Anna. It’s gone,” I said softly. “She’s gone.”

MY STOMACH WAS GROWLING SO LOUDLY THAT I COULDN'T sleep. It hurt too, like I'd swallowed a bowl of acid and nails. With a groan, I rolled over on the narrow cot, trying to find a position where everything would ache a little less.

I squeezed my eyes shut, picturing Jax in Carrington Park. In my imagination, I was able to make him hear me with my writhing and hammering on the car window. He smashed the window, unlocked the door, and freed me from my gag and bonds. Then he took care of those assholes Mr. Blythe and Mr. Barron, leaving them bleeding on the asphalt while he picked me up, wrapped me in his strong arms, and held me tight.

Tears pricked at my eyes as I thought of his possessive touch. His soft kisses on the top of my head. His dark eyes, always glinting with affection when they turned my way. I was starving for his love... but I knew I'd never get to taste it again. That made it so much worse.

A key turned in the lock outside the dungeon. I sat up, back going rigid.

I expected to see Mr. Blythe open the door, but it was a tall, dark-haired woman instead. Cerina's mother, Nora Vincent.

“Hello, Kinsey,” she said, watching me from the threshold with slightly narrowed eyes. “We haven’t officially met, but I’m Nora.”

“I know who you are,” I muttered.

She patted the tote bag swinging from her left arm. “I heard you were hungry, so I picked up some food for you,” she said. “Are you interested?”

I nodded vehemently. My mouth was already watering.

Nora reached into the tote and pulled out a wrapped sandwich packed with ham, cheese, and salad. She handed it to me and watched as I wolfed it down, leaving no crumbs.

“I brought you something else too,” she said, nose wrinkling as she stared down at me. “You must be feeling quite dirty after spending so much time in here. Am I right?”

I swallowed my last bite of the sandwich and nodded.

Nora reached into the tote and pulled out a packet of scented wet wipes. “You can wash yourself with these,” she said. “I’ll turn around to give you some privacy.”

“Thank you,” I muttered, tentatively accepting the packet.

When Nora turned to face the door, I took off my jacket and peeled my sweater over my head before tossing them on the cot. I pulled out a wipe and ran it all over my face and upper body, lingering on my underarms the longest. Then I removed my jeans and repeated the process, focusing on my nether regions.

It wasn’t the same as a proper bath or shower, but it was still a relief to feel somewhat fresh again. I hadn’t showered since Thursday morning, so I was well aware of how ripe I’d begun to smell.

“Should I put my old clothes back on?” I asked.

Nora nodded. “Yes. I thought about bringing you fresh clothes from Cerina’s room, because you’re about the same size, but I realized that could backfire quite badly on me,” she replied. “When the police find your body and get your mother to identify it, she might notice that the clothes aren’t yours, and then a whole new can of worms would be opened.”

“Right,” I murmured, lowering my gaze to the grimy floor.

She snapped her fingers. “Hurry up, please. I don’t have all afternoon to spend in here,” she said. “I have to get ready for a dinner party.”

I picked up my clothes and slipped back into them, heart hammering painfully in my chest. “I’m done,” I said.

Nora turned around and gave me a onceover. “That’s better,” she said. “Your face looks a lot less greasy now.”

“Um... thanks,” I replied, though I didn’t feel grateful at all. I just didn’t know what else to say.

Nora crossed the small room and sat on the end of the cot. She patted it and raised her brows, silently gesturing for me to join her.

I quietly padded over and sat down, clasping my hands in my lap. Nora pursed her lips and stared at me. The calculating look in her eyes sent chills up my arms. “Has Matthew told you the plan yet?” she asked.

“Who’s Matthew?”

A small smile stretched her lips. “Sorry, I should’ve said Mr. Blythe. Your English teacher.”

“Oh.” My stomach lurched. “Are you talking about the plan to kill me?”

“Yes.”

“He told me it was happening,” I said. “But he didn’t tell me how or why. Or when.”

“I see.” Nora’s forehead creased. “Would you like to know?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll do it on Monday or Tuesday, depending on how things pan out,” she said. “Right now, the police are all over the place searching for you. But a couple of days from now, they’ll start to think you’ve left town, and the search will expand from Crown Point to other areas. There’ll be less police presence around here then.”

“So you’ll find it easier to dispose of me without anyone noticing anything,” I said softly, twisting my hands in my lap.

“Exactly.” Nora smiled thinly and patted me on the shoulder.

I took a deep breath and lifted my chin. “How are you going to do it?” I asked. “I mean... how are you going to kill me?”

“Matthew—sorry, I mean Mr. Blythe—will take you up to his house. He lives near the bluffs on the north end of town. Have you ever been there?”

“I don’t think so,” I said, shaking my head.

“It’s a beautiful spot. Very popular with walkers and amateur photographers. Unfortunately, it’s also quite a popular spot for jumpers.”

“Jumpers? You mean...”

Nora interrupted me. “Suicidal people,” she said bluntly. “The cliffs are very high. Every so often, someone goes there and—” She stopped abruptly and drew a line across her throat with her index finger.

“I get the picture,” I muttered.

“I’m going to need you to write a note for Mr. Blythe to leave at the scene,” she said in a breezy tone, as if we were simply discussing the weather. “If it isn’t in your handwriting, people will suspect something.”

I gritted my teeth. “I won’t do it.”

“Yes, you will. Or else we’ll go after your mother. You don’t want that, do you?” Nora said, smiling sweetly.

A flicker of fear kindled in my gut. I swallowed thickly and shook my head. “Leave her out of this. Please. She’s been through enough.”

“I promise we’ll leave her alone if you do us this one small favor.” Nora leaned down to rummage in the tote bag and came back up with a small notepad and a silver pen. “It doesn’t have to be long and drawn out. A simple ‘I’m sorry for what I did’ will suffice.”

I took the pen and pad, chewing on the inside of my cheek as I considered my next move. I wanted to write something that would trigger police suspicions without triggering Nora’s, but my mind had gone frustratingly blank.

“Come on,” Nora said, clicking her fingers. “Just write ‘I’m sorry for that I did to Cerina’. Maybe add a ‘Goodbye everyone’ at the end as well. Then sign your name.”

Guilt whipped through me at the mention of Cerina’s name, even though I wasn’t guilty of her murder. At the same time, Mr. Blythe’s words from Thursday night flashed back to

me. *I didn't kill Cerina. I didn't have an affair with her, either. You're wrong about everything.*

My eyes widened as a dark realization dawned on me. *Of course.* I finally understood why Nora and her acquaintances were doing this to me. They genuinely believed I was guilty of killing Cerina and they were worried I was going to get away with it, so they'd decided to take matters into their own hands and mete out their own version of justice.

I swallowed hard, heart racing. This was a chance to save myself. I just had to convince Nora of my innocence.

I put the pen down, steeled my jaw, and looked over at her. "I know why you're doing this," I said in a low voice.

She arched a perfectly-plucked brow. "Is that so?"

"Yes. It's a revenge thing, isn't it?" I said. "You want me dead because of what I did to your daughter. What you *think* I did, anyway. But that's the problem—I didn't do it."

She let out a short sigh. "If you say so, Kinsey."

"Nora, please." I reached out and put a hand on her arm. "I'm sorry for what happened to Cerina. So, so sorry. She didn't deserve it. But it wasn't me. I didn't kill her. I swear on my life."

Her lips tightened, and she snatched her arm away from my hand. "I really don't have time for this. Please just write the note."

I kept staring at her, beseeching her with my wide-eyed gaze. "I know you want revenge for what happened, and I completely understand that. If I were you, I'd want revenge too," I said. "But you have the wrong person. I didn't kill Cerina."

“I know, honey.”

My brows shot up. “What?”

“I know you didn’t kill her.” Nora smiled pleasantly and patted my hand. “*I did.*”

JAX

MEET ME IN ROOM 21. IT'S EMPTY.

I stared at the message from Bobbi, brows drawn in a perplexed frown. It didn't contain any hints about why I needed to meet her, but I could only assume it was about Kinsey's disappearance.

The bell rang right on cue. I packed my tablet and books up and strode out of the classroom, jaw set with determination. Halfway down the hall, I bumped into Erin.

She fell into step beside me. "Did you get Bobbi's message?"

"Yeah. On my way there now. I assume you are too?"

"Yes." Her forehead wrinkled. "Any idea what it's about?"

"Nope, but I'm hoping someone finally contacted the Dirt app with a tip."

"Me too. I just don't get why she wouldn't tell us that," Erin said. "Like, why be so cryptic about things?"

I shrugged. "She probably doesn't want any mentions of the app in her messages, in case she ever gets hacked for any reason."

“Good point.” She yawned and covered her mouth with one hand.

I looked down at her, forehead creasing with concern. “Have you slept at all?”

“A few hours last night. I stole some sleeping pills from Mom so I could actually fall asleep,” she replied. Guilt flashed across her face. “I feel like I need to constantly be awake until we find Kinsey, but at the same time, I’m pretty sure you can die from lack of sleep.”

“I know what you mean,” I said, shoulders sagging. “I feel the exact same way.”

“Did you manage to sleep, then?” Erin asked.

“Same as you. A few hours.”

“Better than nothing.” She let out a short sigh. “How’s Anna?”

“A total wreck.”

“Understandable.” Erin gave me a little side-eyed glance. “How about you?”

“About the same. My dad being out of prison isn’t making things any easier, either,” I replied. “He’s threatening to get my trust fund taken away unless I move back in with him.”

Her eyes widened. “Can he actually do that?”

“I don’t know, but I guess we’ll find out soon,” I said, lips flattening.

We stopped at room 21 and peered through the door. Bobbi was perched on a desk, looking down at a closed silver laptop with a purple flower sticker on it. When she heard us in the doorway, she looked up and motioned for us to come inside.

“Shut the door behind you and lock it,” she said. “I have something to show you.”

I did as she said and trudged over to her, brows rising. “What have you got?”

“You’ll see. Take a seat.” She patted the chairs on either side of her.

Erin and I sat down, flashing each other confused looks.

Bobbi cleared her throat and straightened her spine. “So,” she said, glancing at each of us in turn. “I still haven’t had any responses on the app. Nothing that pans out, anyway.”

“Dammit,” Erin mumbled, shaking her head.

“Wait. Just listen.” Bobbi lifted a palm. “I was starting to worry that you guys would expose my true identity to the school, seeing as I haven’t been much help so far, so…” She trailed off for a second and scratched the back of her neck. “I, uhh… I went and did something. Something that might help you.”

“What did you do?” I asked, cocking my head.

She patted the laptop in front of her. “I stole Cerina’s laptop.”

Erin’s eyes widened. “How? And *why*?”

“It was actually pretty easy,” Bobbi said. “I went to her house yesterday afternoon and asked her parents if I could spend some time in her bedroom. I said it might help me feel better because I’ve been missing her so much, and being in her room with all her stuff might make it feel like old times again. They didn’t suspect anything at all, because Cerina and I were best friends. They just waved me upstairs and told me to take as long as I needed.”

“And they didn’t notice when you came back downstairs with a laptop that you didn’t have when you arrived?” I said, raising a brow.

“No. They seemed pretty distracted. Probably because their daughter was just murdered a few weeks ago,” she said, shooting me a withering look.

“Right. So why do you think this laptop will help us?”

“Well, you guys said you think Cerina’s murderer hated her *and* Kinsey, right?”

“Yup.”

Bobbi smiled thinly and patted the laptop. “There might be evidence of whoever that person was on this thing.”

Erin frowned. “I doubt it. I think the police would’ve gone through her computer already, and they obviously didn’t find much if they’ve already returned it to her parents.”

“That’s because they weren’t looking in the right place,” Bobbi said, giving her an arch look. “There’s a secret folder on here. It has Cerina’s diary in it.”

My brows furrowed. “Cerina’s diary wasn’t a secret. She had copies of it everywhere.”

“That was just her monthly schedule,” Bobbi said, rolling her eyes. “The thing on this laptop was more like a journal.”

“I don’t get it,” Erin said, slowly shaking her head. “Why would she write everything on a physical schedule and then have a computerized diary as well? Why not just pick one thing and stick to that?”

“She preferred writing things out in person, so that’s why she did up all her schedules on paper,” Bobbi explained. “But

the diary was a program her therapist recommended to her. That's why she had it."

"She was in therapy?" I asked, tilting my chin.

"Duh, since she was twelve. She had a ton of emotional issues."

"Tell me about it," Erin said under her breath.

Bobbi glared at her. "Can I finish, please?"

"Sorry. Go ahead."

Bobbi cleared her throat. "Okay, so, Cerina's therapist recommended this program to her. It's a daily journal with a section for your mood and then another section where you can dump all your thoughts related to that mood. It has other features as well, but that's the gist of it," she said. "The therapist thought it would be useful for Cerina to use it to sort through her many, *many* emotions. So, my thinking is, she probably wrote down stuff about who she had problems with, who she hated, who hated her, and so on, because that kind of stuff was all relevant to her feelings. Right?"

"Makes sense. But why did she tell you about the diary?" Erin asked. "It seems like something most people would keep to themselves."

"She had to tell me about it, because she needed me to install it in a secret folder that her parents couldn't access."

"Why?"

Bobbi shot a glance at me. "You know what her parents are like. They're so overbearing," she said. "They were always going through her room. Checking her pockets to make sure she wasn't hiding drugs or cigarettes in them. Stuff like that."

"Oh."

“She wanted it to be completely private,” Bobbi went on. “A place where she could write down her thoughts and feelings without being judged. Something for her eyes only.”

“Hold on.” I raised a hand. “Why did she ask *you* to install it?”

Bobbi rubbed her chin. “Uhh... she knew I was really good with tech stuff,” she murmured.

My eyes widened. “She knew you created the Dirt app, didn’t she?”

“She suspected it, yes. But I never confirmed it.”

“That gives you a motive to kill her,” Erin said, sitting up straight. “She could’ve threatened to expose you.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Bobbi narrowed her eyes. “Do you want me to help you or not?”

“Sorry. I was just saying—”

“That I might’ve murdered my best friend? Yeah, I got it, thanks,” Bobbi replied in a scathing tone. She sucked in a breath, exhaled deeply, and lifted the laptop lid. “So, do you want me to access this diary or not?”

“Yes, please,” Erin murmured. Two spots of color had appeared on her cheeks.

Bobbi rolled her eyes and started typing. A couple of minutes later, a triumphant expression appeared on her face. “Here you go,” she said, pushing the laptop slightly forward so we could all get a good look at it. “Cerina’s most private thoughts and feelings.”

“Can you go to the most recent entry?”

“Sure.” Bobbi clicked on the mousepad. “This is it.”

November 10th, 2021

Mood: Determined

Fuck all of this. I'm telling everyone.

“She wrote that two days before she died,” I said, glancing at Bobbi. “Any idea what it’s about?”

She shook her head. “Cerina had secrets. Lots of them,” she murmured, eyes glimmering with tears. She blinked them away, cleared her throat, and lifted her chin. “Anyway, let’s scroll through the rest. See if anything jumps out at us.”

Most of the previous entries followed a common theme. The moods were listed as angry, sad, or disgusted, and the posts were scathing rants about how much Cerina despised her family. One of the posts even mentioned how she was planning to run away from Crown Point as soon as she turned eighteen. After that, she intended to cut off all contact with her parents, brothers, uncles, and aunts.

“Wow, she really couldn’t stand her family,” Bobbi said, brows rising. “I always knew she didn’t get along with her parents, but I had no idea she didn’t get along with her brothers.”

“Any idea why she hated them all so much?” Erin asked.

“No, but whatever it was, it was consuming her. Every second post is about them.”

“It’s a shame she doesn’t say *why*,” I said, shaking my head. “But I guess she didn’t need to because it was her diary. She already knew why, and she didn’t think anyone else would read it, so she didn’t need to explain anything.”

“Exactly. It was just a place to write down her feelings about everything.” Bobbi sighed and scrolled up again. Her

brows rose, and she cocked her head. “Huh. What’s this?”

November 3rd, 2021

Mood: Disgusted

Fuck every single one of these assholes. I’m going to burn it all down one day. They won’t see it coming.

Vincent

Kingsley

Cox

Hanover

Masterson

De Souza

Vaughn

Franklin

Bouchard

Blythe

Ellingham

Randall

Abernathy

Marsden

Woodward

Bellamy

Winters

Dupont

Thornhill

Armstrong

Van der Waal

Middleton

Barron

Erin slowly shook her head, eyes widening. “My name is on there. Yours too, Jax,” she said. “Why would Cerina hate us?”

“I don’t think she was talking about us specifically. I think she was just talking about our families.”

“I know that,” she said impatiently. “I’m just saying—why? What have any of these families ever done to her?”

“No idea.”

“I can tell you one thing,” Bobbi interjected. “Every single one of those families is a founding family. Of Crown Point, I mean. The school, too.”

I peered at the list again. “Shit, you’re right. It’s all the oldest families in town.”

“The richest, too,” Bobbi said, arching a brow.

“Keep scrolling,” I said. “She might expand on what it means in another post.”

Bobbi went to the next entry and inhaled sharply. “This one mentions Kinsey,” she said, looking at me with wide eyes.

I scanned the post, brows dipping in a frown.

November 2nd, 2021

Mood: Angry

Are Kinsey and Jax fucking serious? They just came over and accused me of trying to murder Kinsey out in the woods last night. Something about a Yellowjackets-style spike pit that I

apparently lured her into. Wtf?? I'm so mad at both of them. They already made everyone hate me last night at that stupid fucking party. Now this??? Ugh. I'm so DONE with everything and everyone!!!

“The previous entry mentions Kinsey too,” Bobbi said, clicking the mousepad again.

November 1st, 2021

Mood: Ashamed, annoyed, and stressed

I think I really messed things up at the party in the boys' cabin. I shouldn't have drunk so much or agreed to play that stupid game. Regretting it all now.

I'm seriously disgusted with myself for what I said to Kinsey about putting an innocent man in jail. I know it's not true but I just hate her so much for stealing Jax from me. But I regretted it as soon as I said it, and honestly I actually felt kind of sick saying it when I've always known that George K is a disgusting slimebag. I just really wanted to hurt that stupid little bitch. It didn't work, though. Everyone is obsessed with her now, including Jax, and they're all mad at me. Even Bobbi and Harlow seem like they're pissed at me.

So stressed about it all. I've even started smoking again ugh I am so gross.

“That’s interesting,” Erin said, scratching the side of her cheek. “Cerina knew what your dad was really like, Jax. It sounds like she knew *before* he got caught, too.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I said, rubbing my jaw. “But he couldn’t have killed her. He was still in prison when she was murdered.”

“Right.”

“I have an idea,” Bobbi cut in. “Instead of sitting here scrolling through every single entry, we should search for key words and names.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said, nodding slowly. “Start with Kinsey. It might help to narrow down their mutual enemy.”

“Good call.” Bobbi typed rapidly. “Here we go. Here’s another mention of her.”

September 14th, 2021

Mood: Infuriated and scared

I feel sick. I’m so stupid. I can’t believe this, honestly. I thought Matt and I were getting sort of close. Maybe not so much as friends, but possible accomplices, I guess. That’s probably not the right word either but I can’t think of it right now.

He seemed to agree with me on so much. I really thought he’d help me but I went and talked to him about all of it tonight, and it’s like he suddenly did a total one-eighty. He said I need to consider it very carefully, and then he started going on about what it might do to my life. It actually almost sounded like a threat.

He said he won’t say anything to anyone about the stuff I told him, but I don’t trust him anymore. No way. I bet he’s already told my parents. Everyone else too. They’re probably watching everything I do now. I’ll have to be careful when I write out my monthly schedules or text and call people. If they notice anything out of place, I’m totally screwed.

Also, as if everything wasn’t already bad enough, that smug bitch Kinsey Holland walked in on us when we were talking. Now she totally thinks Matt and I are having an affair. I told her to stay the fuck out of my business but I’m worried she’s

going to tell everyone. I really need to take care of her somehow. Make sure she keeps that stupid mouth of hers shut.

“Holy shit,” Erin said in a low voice. She looked over at me. “That’s Mr. Blythe she’s talking about, right?”

Bobbi’s eyes widened. “Wait, *what?*”

“Kinsey walked in on them arguing one night,” I replied. “She said it sounded like they were having an affair and Cerina was thinking about going public.”

“But she was wrong,” Erin interjected. “She and Jax went to confront Mr. Blythe a while ago, and he explained it all.”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure he lied when he told us what they were talking about.” I clenched my jaw and gestured at the diary entry. “This doesn’t sound like anything he mentioned.”

“What did he say their argument was about?” Bobbi asked.

I gave her a brief rundown of Mr. Blythe’s story—his friendship with Cerina, her unexpected pregnancy, the termination, her guilt over hiding it from her parents.

“That’s what they were arguing about, according to him,” I said, forehead creasing. “He said he was worried about losing his job for helping her get the abortion, so he told her to reconsider her plan to tell people.”

Bobbi slowly shook her head. “That doesn’t track with what Cerina’s written here at all.”

“Exactly. It sounds like she was talking about something else entirely.”

Erin’s face darkened. “I wonder if Cerina was ever actually pregnant,” she said. “Can you search for that in the diary, Bobbi? Any words relating to pregnancy.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “She wrote down all her moods in this thing. So if she was really pregnant, she would’ve been shocked and scared. Maybe confused as well, while she tried to figure out what to do.”

“Exactly. She’d *definitely* mention it in there,” Erin replied, dipping her chin toward the laptop screen.

Bobbi typed rapidly, chewing on her bottom lip. “There’s no results,” she said a moment later. “She never mentioned anything about being pregnant. Nothing about an abortion, either.”

“I don’t think she was ever pregnant,” Erin said. “I think Jax is right. Mr. Blythe lied through his fucking teeth.”

“No shit.” Bobbi’s face was like a thundercloud. “He’d only lie if he had something to hide. Something terrible.”

“Exactly. We need to find out what the fuck it is,” I said.

Erin frowned. “But we can’t just walk up to him and confront him,” she said. “He’ll just lie again.”

“I know.” I clenched my jaw and rose to my feet. “Bobbi... we’re going to need your help again.”

JAX

“YOU WERE NEVER REALLY CERINA’S FRIEND.” BOBBI STARED at me through narrowed eyes, hands placed firmly on her hips. “You never cared about her at all!”

I sighed and rubbed my jaw. “That’s not true and you know it,” I said. “We weren’t close in the last few months, but we were friends for years before that. I cared about her a lot.”

“Bullshit!” She jabbed a manicured finger at my chest. “You never gave a single fuck about her!”

I slowly shook my head. “I never meant to hurt her. I swear.”

“Bull-fucking-*shit*. You used her for everything you could get as long as it suited you, and then you ditched her as soon as Kinsey showed up. Guys like you always have to have the shiny new object, don’t they?”

“Bobbi, none of that is true,” I said, lifting a palm. “Please calm down.”

“Fuck you, Jax,” she replied through gritted teeth.

I took a short step forward. “Let’s just go and eat something, okay? I think your blood sugar is low,” I said.

Right on cue, the bell rang, signaling lunchtime. “Calm down and walk with me. We can talk at the cafeteria.”

“Stop telling me to calm down, you fucking asshole!” Bobbi’s voice rose to a fever pitch. “You used her! Everyone used her! I was her only real friend!”

“Bobbi...”

“Shut up! Just shut the *fuck up!*”

I glanced to the left. Mr. Blythe’s English classroom door had just opened and students were streaming out. Most of them gave Bobbi and me funny looks as they passed, but none stopped or attempted to defuse the situation. A couple whipped out their phones and took photos or videos, but I wasn’t concerned about that. They could send their stupid little tips about our public argument to the Dirt app all they wanted. Bobbi would never post them.

“You’re a stupid fucking prick, just like the rest of them!” Bobbi screamed. Her face was mottled with fury, and a vein was popping out on her forehead. “You don’t even care that she’s dead! No one does!”

I let out a sigh and raked a hand through my hair. “That’s not true. I care.”

“No you don’t! You’re a dirty fucking liar!”

“Excuse me!” Mr. Blythe stepped out of his classroom, face lined with a mix of concern and annoyance. The last of his students trickled out around him. “What on earth is going on here?”

Bobbi jabbed a finger at my chest again. “He doesn’t care that Cerina’s dead! No one does!”

“That’s not true,” I said hotly. “She’s losing her shit over nothing.”

“Fuck you!” Bobbi shrieked. She whipped her head around the hallway, glaring at all the passersby. “Fuck all of you!”

“You need to calm down and stop shouting right now,” Mr. Blythe said, raising his voice an octave. “This is not appropriate behavior *at all*. If you need to talk to someone about Cerina’s death, you can—”

“No one cares!” Bobbi shrieked. “She’s dead and everyone’s acting like nothing happened!”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Mr. Blythe said, shaking his head. “Several hundred people attended her memorial the other day, and everyone here—”

Bobbi cut him off again. “Stop pretending you care! You’re a lying asshole just like everyone else!” she shouted, pummeling her little fists on his chest. Before he could try to restrain her, she sank to the floor in front of him, tears streaming down her face. “No one misses her,” she whimpered. “She’s only been gone for two weeks and you’re all acting like nothing even happened.”

Mr. Blythe crouched next to her and tentatively placed a hand on her shoulder. I looked to the right and dipped my chin in a nod. Erin returned the nod and darted into the English classroom behind Mr. Blythe’s back.

He must’ve caught some of the movement from the corner of his eye, because he briefly turned his head to the left. Bobbi noticed the movement and let out a howl to draw his attention back to her. “I miss her so much!” she sobbed, clawing at the sleeve of Mr. Blythe’s jacket. “Why doesn’t anyone else miss her? Why am I the only one who gives a shit?”

Mr. Blythe carefully extricated his arm from her hand. “I know you miss Cerina a lot,” he said in a soothing tone, patting her shoulder. “Everyone does. What happened to her was an awful tragedy. But you can’t behave like this at school. You need to—”

“Mr. Blythe,” I cut in, cocking my head to one side. “Why don’t I take her to see the school counselor? She’s been acting kind of weird all day, and now she’s had this full-on meltdown. I’m worried about what she’ll do next. I think she really needs to talk to a professional.”

As I spoke, Bobbi continued to sob and rock back and forth on the floor, hugging her arms around her knees. Erin darted out of the classroom behind her and Mr. Blythe. She shot me a grin and a thumbs up. Then she hurried down the hallway and disappeared around a corner.

Mr. Blythe’s eyes flickered with concern as he regarded Bobbi’s state of distress. He briefly raised his gaze to my face and nodded. “I think that’s a good idea, Jax,” he said. “I’ll take her up to the office now.”

“I can take her. You’re probably really busy.”

He hesitated and glanced to the right. His desk was in full view of the open doorway, and I could see several stacks of paperwork sitting on it. “You don’t mind?” he asked, turning his attention back to me.

“No, it’s fine.” I lifted a shoulder in a nonchalant shrug. “I figured you probably have marking to do, so you don’t need the disruption.”

He gave me a tight smile and nodded. Then he turned his attention back to Bobbi. “Are you all right with Jax walking you to the counselor, Bobbi?”

She sniffed and wiped her face. “Yeah, I guess so,” she mumbled.

“Here.” I extended a hand. “Let me help you up.”

She accepted my assistance and rose to her feet on wobbly legs. “Sorry,” she murmured, looking up at Mr. Blythe through her eyelashes.

“It’s all right, Bobbi.”

She took a deep breath and sniffed again. “Am I going to get in trouble for hitting you?”

He shook his head. “I understand that you’re going through some emotional turmoil right now,” he said. “Besides, you didn’t hurt me, so I think we can let this one slide. But no more outbursts, okay?”

“Yes, Mr. Blythe. I’m so sorry,” Bobbi said, voice thick with emotion. She wiped her face with the back of her hand and turned to me. “You too, Jax. Sorry for yelling at you like that. You didn’t deserve it.”

“It’s all right. I understand,” I said. I smiled faintly and hooked an arm through hers. “Come on. Let’s go. I think you’ll feel much better once you’ve talked to someone.”

I escorted her down the hall, briefly casting my eyes over my shoulder to check out Mr. Blythe. He watched us go for a moment, lips set in a flat line. Then he shook his head and headed back into the classroom.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re an amazing actress?” I said to Bobbi as we turned a corner. “I actually thought you were going to blow a gasket on me back there.”

She gave me a watery smile. “How do you think I’ve gotten away with pretending to be a ditzy idiot all these

years?” she said, dabbing at her eyelids and cheeks with her blazer sleeve. “Besides, I wasn’t totally putting on a show. Cerina was my best friend. I don’t think I’ll ever stop missing her.”

“Don’t worry. When we get justice for Kinsey, we’ll get it for Cerina too,” I said softly, patting her on the back.

“I know.” She tilted her head and arched a brow. “Why do you think I’m helping you so much?”

We arrived at the library five minutes later and found Erin tucked away at a table in a quiet corner behind the stacks. When she saw us approaching, she sat up straight, face brightening. “He bought it?”

“Hook, line, and sinker. He thinks we’re at the counselor’s office right now,” I replied. “You have the phone, right?”

“Of course.” She pulled out a black iPhone and held it up, lips stretched in a smug smile. “It was in his top desk drawer with his keys and wallet.”

“Nice.”

She set the phone down on the table and exhaled deeply. “I was really worried it wouldn’t be there,” she said. “I thought he might have it in his pocket.”

Bobbi’s lips tugged upward in a devious smile. “It’s okay. I had a contingency plan for that,” she said. “I totally felt up all his pockets when I threw my tantrum. Just in case.”

“Wow. That’s real commitment to the bit.” Erin grinned and dipped her chin toward the phone. “So... do you want to do the honors? Or should I do it?”

“You can check it out,” Bobbi replied, shrugging lightly. “Just tell me if you need help cracking it.”

Erin picked up the phone and played with it for a couple of minutes, brows furrowed with concentration. “I’m in,” she finally said. “I’ll check his messages first.”

I peered over her shoulder while she worked through the inbox, outbox, and draft folders. “Looks pretty clean so far,” I said.

“Yeah. Nothing in here sets off any alarm bells,” she replied, absentmindedly scratching at her left eyebrow. “His emails look clean too, and there’s nothing weird in his call logs either.”

“So he’s either completely innocent or he deletes incriminating stuff to hide what he’s really up to,” I said, rubbing my chin.

“Yes.” Erin tapped at the screen again. “I’m checking his location history now. What time did you say Kinsey’s last message to you showed up?”

“10:29 p.m. on Thursday.”

Her lips twisted as she stared down at the screen. A moment later, her brows shot up. “Holy shit,” she said in a low voice. “Mr. Blythe was here that night.”

A chill ran down my spine. “What time?”

She turned the phone screen to face me and Bobbi in turn. “He arrived on campus at 10:26. Left at 10:43.”

“That’s more than a little suspicious,” Bobbi said, eyes narrowing. “No way it’s a coincidence.”

“No shit.” A mix of fear and anger flared in my chest. “Where did he go after he left?”

Erin looked down and tapped at the phone again. “Oh my god,” she muttered, brows furrowing. “He went to your house,

Jax.”

“*What?*” I snatched the phone away and stared at the screen, eyes widening. Erin was right. The GPS data showed that Mr. Blythe had arrived at my address on King Albert Parade at 10:57 on Thursday night.

Erin took the phone back. “Let me check how long he was there,” she said, forehead creasing in an inquisitive frown. “Huh, that’s weird. It says he was at your house for over an hour that night. I didn’t see him there when we arrived, though. Did you?”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“Okay, so, I think we can agree that Mr. Blythe was definitely with Kinsey, right?” Bobbi said, hunching over the table. “They were here at the school at the same time, and then Mr. Blythe drove straight to your house after he left. They *had* to be together.”

I nodded grimly. “Yes,” I said, heart thudding hard and fast in my ribcage. “I think he took her.”

Bobbi raised her palms. “I don’t know. Let’s not jump to conclusions just yet.”

“I’m not jumping to conclusions,” I snapped. “The GPS data proves it. You literally just said so yourself.”

“Hold on. Let me speak,” she replied, voice tinged with irritation. “Kinsey obviously left the school with him, but we don’t know if he forced her to do that. Maybe he ran into her out in the parking lot and offered her a ride home. Then, after they arrived, she invited him in for a drink to say thanks.”

“And he stayed for over an hour?” I said, forehead crinkling. “Without Anna, Maeve, or George noticing anything?”

Bobbi chewed on her lip as she considered my question. “I hate to say this,” she finally said. “But is there a chance that Mr. Blythe could’ve been helping Kinsey?”

“Helping her with what?”

“Running away.” She leaned back in her chair, forehead wrinkling. “He could’ve been sitting out in the car waiting for her while she sneaked into the house to pack a few things. That would explain why his location history says he was there for so long. It would also explain why no one saw Kinsey in the house... because she didn’t want to be seen.”

I clenched my teeth. “Kinsey didn’t run away. She wouldn’t do that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. A hundred percent. I *know* her, and I know she’s innocent. She would never try to run no matter how bad things were looking with her case,” I said. “Besides, Anna packed up all her stuff that night, and she didn’t notice anything missing.”

Bobbi raised a brow. “Maybe she only took a few things. Like a jacket, pair of jeans, and some underwear. Her mom probably wouldn’t notice stuff like that missing.”

“I don’t think so. I agree with Jax,” Erin said, face set in a stony expression. “Kinsey wouldn’t run away. Also, we already know that Mr. Blythe is shady. He lied about all that stuff with Cerina, remember?”

“That’s true.” Bobbi frowned and chewed on her bottom lip. “In that case... where did he go next? That could be where Kinsey ended up.”

Erin returned her attention to the location data on the phone. I peered over her shoulder again. “What does it say?”

“After he left your house, he traveled north and arrived at 6400 Pacific Avenue at 12:13 a.m.”

My head jerked back as a fierce chill gripped me. I lifted my eyes to meet Bobbi’s gaze. She looked as shocked as I felt.

“Are you sure that’s what it says?” she asked, turning her attention to Erin. Her voice nearly cracked as she spoke.

“Yes, I’m positive. Why?” Erin replied, staring back at her with wide eyes. “Do you guys know that address?”

“Yes.” I curled my hands by my sides and swallowed hard, heart beating so fast that it felt like it was about to combust. “That’s Cerina’s house.”

KINSEY

“WAKE UP, KINSEY. WE’RE BACK.”

Nora Vincent’s voice woke me from the fitful sleep I’d fallen into a few hours ago. I rubbed my eyes and sat up to look at her. She was standing by the dungeon door, accompanied by Mr. Blythe.

Her eyes flitted around the small space, eventually coming to rest on the note I’d written and left on the end of the cot. “Ah, fantastic. You finally wrote the letter,” she said, lips curving into a sinister smile. “Good girl.”

I swallowed hard and gritted my teeth, dropping my gaze from her face. She knew I had no choice but to write the note as she commanded.

After dropping that bombshell about Cerina on me the other day, she’d promptly left the room without another word. Just a meaningful glance at the pen and notepad next to me. I knew what that look implied. *Write the note or I’ll hurt your mother.*

Now that I knew she was capable of brutally murdering her own daughter, I didn’t doubt for a second that she’d put her money where her mouth was and hurt my mom if I refused

to follow her orders. So, with a heavy heart, I swallowed my pride and picked up the pen.

In the end, I took her advice and stuck to the basics. The fake suicide note read:

To my loved ones,

I'm sorry about what I did to Cerina. Sorry about everything.

I've hurt so many people and I can't take the guilt and pain anymore. Please try to forgive me. I love you.

Kinsey

Nora picked up the note and scanned it. "Very good," she said. She glanced over at Mr. Blythe. "Matthew, did you bring the waterproof baggies?"

He patted his pocket. "In here."

"What do you need waterproof bags for?" I asked in a tremulous voice.

Nora gestured upward. "The weather forecast says it's going to rain very soon, and it'll keep raining on and off for the next couple of days," she said. "It's the perfect time to take you to the bluffs, because no one will be walking around that area while it's storming. But we can't have your note getting washed away, obviously, so we'll put it in the baggie and stick a rock on top of it to hold it in place."

A bolt of terror shot through me, sending chills down my spine. "You're doing it today?"

"Yes, darling. I explained the details the other day, didn't I?" she asked, brows crinkling. Before I could reply, she went on. "Matthew will take you to the bluffs near his house. Then he'll push you off."

“Not too hard, because we need to make it seem as if you jumped,” Mr. Blythe cut in. “So it’ll just be a little push. You’ll go sailing over the edge, and then... goodbye.”

“It should be quick and painless. Most jumpers die instantly.” Nora smiled again, thin lips stretching over her perfect white teeth. “Someone will find you tomorrow morning, most likely. Or perhaps the next day. They’ll also find the note near the scene. The police will rule it as a suicide, and then the world will return to normal for everyone. Well, mostly everyone.”

I gave her a withering look. “You don’t think the investigators will find it suspicious that I have a head injury?”

“Hm?” Nora tilted her chin to the side. “What do you mean?”

“She’s talking about Thursday night,” Mr. Blythe said. “I had to hit her to subdue her and get her into my car.”

“He hit me hard enough to knock me out,” I snapped, feeling the back of my head. There was still a big lump there, and when my fingertips brushed over it, pain lanced through my skull. “When the medical examiners do an autopsy, they’ll notice it, and they’ll be able to tell it happened before today. That’ll raise a red flag, surely.”

Two lines appeared between Nora’s brows. “There’s no delicate way to say this, so I’ll just say it bluntly,” she said. “I really don’t think we need to worry about that older head injury, because once you hit the rocks, there probably won’t be much left of your skull for the medical examiners to look at.”

“Besides,” Mr. Blythe interjected. “The police will want this case wrapped up as soon as possible to make the public

feel nice and safe again. So I doubt they'll get the medical examiners to look too closely."

"You're insane," I said in a low voice, slowly shaking my head. "Both of you. Completely insane."

"Oh, Kinsey. How ironic." Nora sucked her teeth. "Once you're gone and copies of your suicide note are all over the internet, the whole world will think *you* were insane. It's not all bad, though. Think about it this way. Most people dream of fame, but they never attain it no matter what they do. But *you*... you'll be famous forever."

"They'll probably make movies about you," Mr. Blythe added, smiling smugly. "Or a TV miniseries. I wonder who'll play you."

"Fuck you." I narrowed my eyes and squeezed my hands into fists. "I really hope they assign a medical examiner who acts like a dog with a bone when it comes to what's left of my body. I hope he or she refuses to drop it until the police investigate further and catch you and all your nasty friends."

"That won't happen, darling," Nora said breezily. "People like us always win, and people like you always lose. It's the way of the world."

Emotion suddenly clogged my throat, making it difficult to draw breath. "Why are you doing this to me?" I asked, rubbing at my eyes to stop the tears from coming. "I don't understand."

"We didn't actually plan to kill you in the first place," Nora replied, voice tinged with faux sympathy. "The original plan was just to frame you and make you genuinely believe that you were guilty of murdering Cerina so that you'd confess and spend the rest of your life in prison. Unfortunately, the drugs didn't work as well as we intended, and you never

believed you killed Cerina. Then you started digging a little too deep in order to prove your innocence. It was only a matter of time until you found something.”

“So we had to change the plan,” Mr. Blythe added. “That’s why everything’s been so chaotic over the last few days. We’ve been thinking on our feet.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” I said, glaring at each of them in turn. “Why *me*? And why did you kill Cerina?”

Nora rolled her eyes upward. “It’s a very long story, and you won’t be here soon, so it’s just a waste of breath for us to tell you. Don’t you think?”

“No. I deserve to know!” I said, springing to my feet. My hands were still balled into fists at my sides, fingernails digging deep into my palms. “Tell me!”

Mr. Blythe looked over at Nora. “I suppose we might as well tell her,” he said, rubbing his clean-shaven jaw. “It’s only three o’clock, so we have a bit of time before I need to take her. And it’s not like she’ll ever be able to tell anyone.”

Nora considered his words for a moment. Finally, she nodded. “All right, Kinsey. You really want to know the truth?”

I stubbornly lifted my chin. “Yes.”

“It might be a hard pill for you to swallow. It always is for people like you.”

“People like me?”

“People of your... background,” she said, upper lip curling in a disdainful sneer. “You don’t have a big family with a long, storied history. You know nothing about legacy.”

I narrowed my eyes. “So what?”

“So it might be difficult for you to understand.” She tilted her chin slightly to one side. “You see, inheritances don’t just come in the form of genes, money, or property. You can be heir to a tradition, too. That’s what we are.”

“We?” My eyes darted between her and Mr. Blythe again. “You mean the two of you?”

Nora let out a short bark of laughter. “Oh, no. Not just us. Every founding family in Crown Point,” she said. “We’re all heirs to a certain tradition. One that was created to keep us all on top no matter how the markets are faring. It’s evolved over the years, for reasons that will become clear, but the essence has always been the same.”

A pang of fear bit at my guts. “What’s the tradition?”

“I suppose it’s more of a practice, really,” Nora said, shrugging lightly. “It might be easier if I just show you.”

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and tapped at the screen for a moment. Then she stepped over to me and turned it to face me.

Bile rose up my throat at the sight of the image of the screen. I stumbled backward on shaky legs and sagged on the cot, chest heaving. “What the fuck?” I choked out. “Is that...”

“Yes. It’s Cerina.”

“Why is she naked?” I shook my head as another wave of disgust crashed over me. “And why is she posed like that?”

Nora sighed. “I knew you’d react poorly. This is exactly why I didn’t want to tell you anything.”

“Do you really expect people to *not* react poorly when you show them naked photos of your own daughter?” I asked, eyes

wide as saucers. “Especially when she’s that young. How old is she there, anyway? Thirteen? Fourteen?”

“You don’t understand. Let me explain,” Nora said, lifting a palm.

“I don’t think you need to anymore,” I said, tongue practically dripping with acid. “I get it now. You were making her sleep with men for money, weren’t you?”

Nora had the audacity to look shocked and offended. “Of course not! You’ve completely misinterpreted everything.”

“Explain it to me, then,” I said in a low voice.

“As I was saying before, there are certain families in this town that follow certain practices. It’s a way for them to maintain their wealth no matter what happens in the world,” Nora began. “You’re aware of the PTO, aren’t you?”

I narrowed my eyes. “You mean the school organization?”

“Yes. The PTO is entirely made up of people from the founding families. There’s around twenty-five families altogether,” she replied. “Obviously, it isn’t just parents in the PTO. There’s teachers and administrative staff as well.”

“Like me,” Mr. Blythe said, lifting a hand. “Most of the other teachers at CPA are part of the scheme as well. Principal Hanover too. We all stay close.”

“Yes, we do.” Nora nodded and smiled. “I was actually a teacher at CPA once upon a time, back when I was still Nora Bouchard. I taught math.”

My head was spinning with confusion. “*You* were a teacher?”

“Yes. The school is a wonderful place to work at for those of us in the founding families. It helps us stay close to each

other and keep an eye on all the kids, so a lot of us had a teaching stint there in our younger years,” she said. She waved a hand. “Anyway, there’s around two hundred of us in the PTO at any given time.”

My heart was beating faster now. “What do you all do together?” I asked. “What’s the grand old tradition?”

“I’m getting to that.” Nora cocked her head. “You’re aware that Cerina was adopted, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I said. “But what does that have to do with any of this?”

“Everything,” she replied. “See, we all have our own children. But most of us adopt one or two as well. We raise them alongside our own and give them wonderful lives. Lives they never would’ve had if they ended up in the foster system.”

“But there’s a cost,” Mr. Blythe interjected. His eyes had turned flinty.

Nora nodded again. “You might not realize this because you’re so young and idealistic, but the world is filled with sick people, Kinsey. People who will pay premium prices for a certain style of photos and videos featuring young men and women.”

My stomach lurched as goosebumps broke out across my arms and legs. I rubbed at them with my fingertips, trying to stave off the shivers. “You people force your adopted children to do porn?”

She waved a dismissive hand. “That’s such a nasty word,” she said, as if she had any right to act prim and proper. “But yes, when they turn twelve or thirteen, they go to work for us. Once a month at the PTO afterparties, they get some photos

taken. Or a video gets made. It could be just them, or they could be posing with one of the others.”

“Oh my god.” Bile rose up my throat again, and I ran to the musty old toilet in the corner, clutching my stomach. I’d never felt so sick and horrified in my life. Not even when I found Cerina’s bloodied corpse lying in front of me in the gazebo.

“They never have to do anything *real*,” Nora continued. “We aren’t prostituting them, so they never get touched by anyone. It’s just lewd photos and short video clips that we can sell to the hungry buyers. It’s a way for them to earn back everything they’ve been given by us.”

I stared up at her in dismay, stomach still roiling. “They’re your *children*,” I said. “They shouldn’t have to earn *anything* you give them!”

“I’m talking about the adopted children, Kinsey. Not our real children.”

“But they *are* your real children,” I said, slowly rising to my feet on trembling legs. “Just because they’re adopted doesn’t mean they aren’t as important and deserving of love as your biological kids.”

She sighed. “As I said before, you’re too young and idealistic to understand the nuances of the situation.”

“No.” I swallowed the bile in my mouth and gritted my teeth. “I’m just a normal person with normal morals. Not a sick, disgusting freak like you.”

Nora rolled her eyes. “You really don’t understand.”

“Oh, I think I understand perfectly. You’re sick deviants who enslave adopted children,” I said, nostrils flaring with

disgust. “When did you force Cerina to start working for you?”

“When she was a young woman.”

I folded my arms. “Be specific.”

“When she turned twelve.”

“That’s not a young woman!” I said. “That’s a child!”

Nora raised her brows. “You know, I’m surprised you two were such bitter enemies. She was so similar to you with all the rage and defiance. She never really accepted the job we gave her. In fact, once we made her aware of her duties, she turned into a little hellion. Always seething with rage,” she said. She pursed her lips and shook her head. “But she was so beautiful. Very in-demand from our regular buyers. She earned us a lot of money. It really is such a shame what had to be done with her in the end. It didn’t have to be like that.”

As her words set in, I felt as if a knife was being plunged into my chest and twisted around. For so long, I thought Cerina was a monster because she was rich and spoiled rotten, but I couldn’t have been more wrong if I tried. She was a weak, helpless victim.

To the outside world, she seemed to have the perfect life, but in reality, she was used, abused, and unwanted by the people who called themselves her family.

What a lonely, terrible existence.

She must’ve been awful to everyone because she was in so much pain. Pain she could never share without fear of retribution. She externalized that pain by lashing out at everyone she knew. She probably even made herself the Queen Bee at CPA so she could feel some sense of power and

control in a world where she had no real power or control at all.

“Why did you kill her?” I asked, looking up at Nora again. “Was she going to tell everyone what you were up to?”

“Yes. At first she abided by our code of silence, because she knew how much trouble she’d get into if she ever said a word to anyone. But over the years, she became angrier and angrier. Started threatening to tell people what we were doing. Ungrateful little rat.” She paused and narrowed her eyes. “Do you know where she was originally from?”

I swallowed hard and shook my head. “No.”

“Some filthy inner city area up north. Her mother was a heroin addict and her father was in prison by the time she was born. She was living in squalor as a baby. We saved her life by adopting her, and *that’s* how she chose to repay us. With betrayal.” Her nose wrinkled, and she shook her head. “After everything we did for her! Dragging her out of the filthy gutter she was born in and raising her in a place like this. Like modern royalty. She was so lucky.”

My brows shot up. “You think she was *lucky*?” I said, voice cracking with fury.

“Haven’t you heard anything I’ve said so far?” Nora asked, putting her hands on her hips. “All of the adopted children in this town are lucky. Without our intervention, they’d have terrible lives with total degenerates for parents. We take them away from all that. Give them a life beyond their wildest dreams. All they have to do in return is a little bit of work. That’s it.”

I briefly let my eyes shutter and put my head in my hands, rubbing at my aching temples. How could Nora and her ilk not

see the terrible irony in their worldview? They claimed they were taking children away from bad lifestyles with awful parents to give them an amazing life, when in reality, they were simply exchanging one bad life for another. In fact, some of them probably would've had *better* lives if they stayed with their so-called 'degenerate' birth parents.

"How did you find out that Cerina was planning on going public?" I asked, finally looking up at Nora again.

"She was stupid. Trusted the wrong person," she replied, arching a brow.

"That would be me," Mr. Blythe said, lifting his hand again.

I turned my gaze to him. "What made her decide to trust you?"

"I was at one of the PTO afterparties a while ago, helping out with the photo shoot, and I was in a very bad mood. Cerina noticed that and latched onto me. I think she thought I was angry at the situation. Disgusted by what I was being made to do in the name of carrying on family tradition." Mr. Blythe paused for a breath and nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders. "In reality, I'd just had a bad day at work. That's all."

"But you became friends with her," I said in a hollow voice. "At least that's what she thought."

"Yes. She started talking to me more and more at the parties. Slowly dropping hints about her views on certain matters. It was obvious that she was turning into a bit of a wildcard, and it concerned me. So I nurtured the budding friendship and made her feel like she could trust me." He paused again, rubbing his chin. "I honestly thought I could talk

her out of it when she started hinting that she might go public. But in the end, I was unsuccessful.”

“So that’s what the argument was about. The one I overheard that night at the school.”

He nodded. “Yes. She came to me that night and asked me to go to the media with her. I did my best to get her to reconsider. You walked in at the tail end of that conversation.”

“She agreed to stay quiet at the time, but we knew we probably couldn’t trust her after that,” Nora cut in. “Matthew warned me and Ted about it, and we started working together to monitor her. Matthew eventually found something strange on her calendar. She obviously thought she could hide it in plain sight.”

“The meeting with the journalist? Jay Ellis?”

Mr. Blythe’s brows rose. “Ah. You found it too,” he said. “She tried to disguise it as a hair appointment. Silly little girl really thought she could outsmart us.”

“I called Mr. Ellis,” Nora interjected, eyes glittering with malice. “I pretended to be Cerina’s personal assistant. I confirmed that they had an appointment, and then I informed the rest of the PTO that we had a major problem. A leak that was about to spring.”

“Then you decided to kill her to stop her from talking,” I said softly, shaking my head.

Nora pursed her lips. “It was our only option.”

“Of course you’d see it that way,” I mumbled. “You’re sick in the head. All of you.”

Nora ignored me and went on. “We had a lot of help with the plan from the others, but Ted and I were the ones who

actually carried it out,” she said. “After all, she was our problem. A monster we created by failing to raise her correctly.”

“So you stabbed your own daughter to death.” Sickness rose up my throat again. “How *could* you?”

“As I said before, she wasn’t our real daughter.”

“But she *was!*” I shouted, jumping to my feet again. “You took her in as a baby. Raised her as your own. She was your child! Your *real* child!”

“We would’ve been happy to keep her alive and treat her as one of our own if she wasn’t so damn ungrateful,” Nora said. She let out a contemptuous sniff. “But she couldn’t manage that. She hated us and planned to ruin our lives. Everyone else’s lives, too. Even her brothers.”

“Right,” I said, fixing her with an icy stare. “So why did you frame me for her murder?”

“Two reasons. One, we needed someone to pin it on so that no one would begin to suspect the truth. Secondly, you were already a problem for us, so we wanted to get rid of you anyway.”

“What? How was I a problem for you?”

“You and Jax took down George Kingsley for his activities, and that almost took down the rest of us.”

I frowned. “How?”

“George is one of us,” she said. “Once he was arrested, we were all terrified that he’d talk to the police about our scheme in return for a deal. But luckily for us, he knows something about loyalty. He kept his mouth clamped shut. In return for

his silence, we figured out a way to get him released and discredit your story about him.”

“We figured it was like killing two birds with one stone,” Mr. Blythe added. “Cerina’s mouth would be shut permanently, and you would be discredited and disbelieved forever while you rotted away in prison for her murder.”

“As for Jax,” Nora went on. “We thought about punishing him for his role in it too, but we decided to give him a pass. He’s still a Kingsley, after all. We think he’ll fall in line eventually. Especially after George threatens to take away all that money. Or threatens to exile him like his mother.”

My eyes widened. “His mother?”

Nora smiled again. “I suppose you’ve heard the story about her running off to Croatia with a toy boy?”

“Yes. Is that not true?”

“No, it’s not. See, Rebecca Kingsley was a stupid little gold-digger. Unfortunately, she was a gold-digger with a conscience.” Nora rolled her eyes. “After Jax was born, George informed her of the PTO’s practice and told her he wanted them to adopt a baby so they could contribute. She reacted with disgust and horror.”

“And that actually surprises you?” I said, upper lip curling with revulsion.

“No. She and Cerina aren’t the only ones who’ve reacted poorly when they learned the truth about our source of money.” Nora lifted a shoulder in a casual shrug. “Usually, the way it works is like this—the biological children of the families are informed of the practice anywhere between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, depending on how their parents think they’ll take it. It’s the same with the husbands

and wives who marry into the families. Some are never told as it's clear they wouldn't approve. It's just hidden from them forever. Rebecca should've been in that category, but George thought she would come around to it eventually. He was wrong, and she didn't. So we dealt with her."

I furrowed my brows. "You mean you killed her?"

"No," Nora replied in an ice-cold tone. "As I said earlier, we *exiled* her."

"So that wasn't a euphemism?"

"No, she's well and truly alive. But we systematically wrecked her life here in Crown Point once we knew she wasn't on our side. Spread rumors to discredit her and took nearly every cent she had. Then we sent her packing to Europe and had her added to the no-fly list so she could never return." Nora raised her brows. "If she ever breathes a word, we *will* kill her, and she's well aware of that. But she's always been good. For Jax's sake, I think. See, we told her we'd kill him too if she ever said anything. We didn't mean it, of course, but she has no way of knowing that."

"So she's stayed silent all these years," I said in a low voice. "For Jax."

"Yes. He thinks she abandoned him, as I'm sure you've heard."

I slowly shook my head. "You won't get away with this. Someone will figure it out somewhere along the line."

Nora scoffed. "The founding families have been getting away with some variant of the practice for over eighty years now," she said, voice dripping with condescension. "So I think we'll take our chances."

Mr. Blythe looked down at his watch. Then he leaned over and whispered something in Nora's ear. Her brows lifted, and she returned her attention to me and smiled.

"It's going to start raining soon," she said, holding out a hand. "Time to go."

JAX

I STEELED MY JAW AND CLENCHED MY HANDS AT MY SIDES.
“We need to go to the Vincent house. *Now.*”

“Wait.” Bobbi lifted a palm. “Sit down. There’s something else we should think about.”

“For fuck’s sake, Bobbi, stop playing Devil’s Advocate for Mr. Blythe,” Erin snapped. “The Devil has enough advocates already, and Mr. Blythe has obviously done something to Kinsey!”

Bobbi rolled her eyes upward. “I know. I agree,” she said, twisting her fingers on the table in front of her. “I just think there’s something we haven’t considered yet.”

“What?”

“The Vincent house was his next known location after the Kingsley house... but it doesn’t mean he actually took Kinsey there. He could’ve gone to see the Vincent family that night for some random reason we have no knowledge of, and Kinsey could’ve been tied up in his trunk outside.”

“Good point,” I said, nodding slowly. “He could’ve taken her somewhere else afterwards.”

“Exactly. So we need to go through all the location data from the last few days. It’ll give us a better idea of where Mr. Blythe goes frequently, where he lives, and where Kinsey might be at.”

“You’re right,” Erin murmured, rubbing her eyes. “Sorry for getting snippy. I haven’t slept much over the last week.”

Bobbi gave her a tight smile. “It’s cool. Can you unlock the phone again?”

“Sure.” Erin tapped at the screen for a moment. Then she clicked her fingers, motioning for someone to pick up a pen from the center of the table. “Write this address down. 802 Bournemouth Crescent.”

“What is that?”

“I think it’s Mr. Blythe’s home address. The GPS data puts him there every single night.”

I nodded and made a note of it. Erin continued to work her way through the device’s location history. “He’s been to the Vincent house four times in the last few days,” she said, glancing up at us again. “That’s kind of weird, right?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Bobbi replied. “I’m pretty sure the Blythe family is close with the Vincents.”

I nodded. “I think you’re right. My dad used to be friends with Sandra Blythe, and she’s Nora’s best friend.”

“Is Sandra Mr. Blythe’s mom?” Erin asked.

“Yeah. Or aunt, maybe. I can’t remember,” I said, shrugging lightly. “Either way, going to visit the Vincents could be a normal thing for Mr. Blythe. He could be comforting them after what happened to Cerina.”

“At midnight, though?” Bobbi said, raising a brow.

“Hm. Good point.” I rubbed my chin. “That *is* weird.”

Bobbi turned her attention back to Erin. “Where else has he been over the last few days?”

“Mostly home, school, and the closest grocery store,” Erin replied, brows drawn in a deep frown of concentration. “There’s a few other locations as well, like a coffee shop near the school, a yoga studio, and... *oh*. Holy shit.”

“What is it?”

Her wide eyes snapped up to meet mine. “He was at Carrington Park on Saturday, and he left at twelve.”

“Twelve?” My brows shot up. “That’s before Ted and Nora started speaking.”

Erin nodded vehemently. “Exactly! Why would he leave before the end of the memorial service? Unless—”

“Unless he was the one who took Kinsey there and dumped her ankle bracelet for the cops to find,” Bobbi cut in.

“Yup,” Erin replied, flattening her lips into a grim line. “If there was ever any doubt about Mr. Blythe’s status as our number one suspect, I think we can safely say that’s gone now.”

“No shit.” I rose to my feet again. “Where do you think we should go first?”

Erin glanced at the phone screen. “We should stick to your first idea and go to the Vincent house. Mr. Blythe went there again after he left Carrington Park on Saturday, so I’d say it’s the most likely spot to find Kinsey.”

“Hold on.” Bobbi slowly shook her head. “Wouldn’t that mean the Vincents are in on this whole thing? Why would *they* want to take Kinsey and hold her captive?”

“Revenge, maybe?” Erin said. “They might think Kinsey is guilty of Cerina’s murder, so they’re trying to get some sort of payback.”

“Their reason doesn’t matter,” I said, narrowing my eyes. “All that matters is getting Kinsey back.”

“That’s true.” Erin stood and looked over at Bobbi. “Are you coming?”

Twin spots of color appeared on Bobbi’s cheeks. “I know this is the worst possible timing, but I have a bio test at one-thirty,” she said. “I really can’t miss it, because my GPA will ___”

I lifted a hand and interrupted her. “It’s fine. I get it,” I said. “You go to your test, and Erin and I will go to the Vincent house. Three people is probably too many anyway. The Vincents would know something is up.”

“You’ve been really helpful,” Erin added. “Thanks a million. Seriously.”

Bobbi smiled faintly. “Call or text me if you need anything else. I’m free after school,” she said. “And let me know what happens when you get to Cerina’s place. I really hope you find Kinsey.”

Fifteen minutes later, Erin and I pulled up to the wrought iron gate that guarded the Vincent mansion. I leaned out of the window and pressed on the buzzer. There was no response.

“Maybe they’re out somewhere,” Erin said, craning her neck. “I can’t see any cars.”

“They keep their cars in the garage behind the house,” I replied. I pressed the buzzer again. Nothing happened. “I guess you’re right. They must be out.”

“You don’t know the gate code?”

“Nope. I’ll text Bobbi. She might know it.”

Bobbi responded five minutes later. *Sorry, I don’t know the code. Cerina never told me.*

“Damn,” I muttered. “She doesn’t know. We’ll just have to wait until someone answers.”

Erin peered out the passenger window. Dark clouds dominated the sky, and a heavy fog hung over the ocean in the distance. “Let’s wait in the car.”

We tried the buzzer intermittently over the next couple of hours. There was still no answer. Outside, the sky was beginning to spit out tiny droplets of rain.

“I don’t get it,” Erin said. “Don’t they have staff? Like a housekeeper or groundskeeper?”

“Yeah, they do. I don’t know why no one’s answering,” I replied, minutely shaking my head. “Maybe they’re all on a break.”

“For two and a half hours? I doubt that.” Erin blew out a frustrated exhale and leaned forward. “Is there some other way in? Like a side gate or something?”

My eyes widened. “Shit. I can’t believe I forgot. There’s a back gate on the other side of the estate. It leads down to the water,” I said. “There’s a narrow coastal drive along there too.”

“So people can come and go that way?” Erin asked, forehead wrinkling. “Without being seen from the main road?”

“Yes.” I turned the car back on and switched the gear to reverse. “Let’s go down there and check it out.”

I was about to pull out of the driveway when the little speaker on the gate crackled. “Jax? Is that you?” a tinny voice said.

I turned the car off again and peered out the window. Nora Vincent’s face had appeared on the little black and white screen above the speaker. “Hi, Mrs. Vincent,” I said. “Everything okay? We’ve been buzzing you for ages.”

“I’m so sorry, darling. I was napping,” she said. “I’ve been sleeping a lot lately. Ever since... well, you know.” She paused and let out a shaky sigh. “We let the staff have an extended vacation to mourn, and Ted is out right now, so there’s no one here except me. But I’m awake now. Did you want to come in?”

“Yes. There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“All right. Hold on.” There was a short grating sound, and the gate slid open.

I pulled the car down the driveway and parked around the side of the house. Nora was waiting at the front door. “Come in,” she said, flashing a tight smile at Erin and me. “It’s a horrible day, isn’t it? This rain came out of nowhere.”

“Yeah, it did. It’s freezing out there, too.” I returned her smile and stepped inside. Erin followed me.

Nora looked at us with a quizzical expression. “So what can I do for you?” she asked. “You said there was something you wanted to talk about.”

“Yes. It’s, uh...” I rubbed my chin as I fumbled for an excuse. “It’s about Cerina.”

“Oh. Of course.” She let out a weary sigh and rubbed her left temple. “I should have known you’d be missing her terribly. You two used to be such good friends.”

Erin cleared her throat and spoke up. “I’m so sorry to interrupt, Mrs. Vincent, but would you mind if I used your bathroom?” she asked. “I think I ate something bad for lunch, and my stomach is just...”

She trailed off, letting the implication hang in the air. Nora nodded. “Of course, darling,” she said, pointing to a doorway on the left. “Go down that way and take the first right. You’ll find the closest guest bathroom there.”

Erin flashed a meaningful glance at me before she took off down the hall. I knew she didn’t really need the bathroom. She was just using it as an excuse to poke around the house while I distracted Nora with our conversation.

Nora turned her attention back to me. “Would you like a drink, Jax?” she asked, lifting her brows. “Coffee, water, juice?”

“Sure. I’d love a coffee,” I said.

Truthfully, I couldn’t stand the thought of putting caffeine in my system when I was already so wired on adrenaline, but the longer I managed to draw this chat out, the longer Erin would have to hunt around the bottom floor of the house.

“Come into the kitchen with me,” Nora said, beckoning me to a wide doorway on the right. “Without the staff here, I have to make everything myself.”

“That must be hard.”

“Oh, it’s not too bad, but I somehow managed to scald my hand on the milk frother yesterday.” Nora gave me a rueful smile and shook her head. “Don’t worry. I’ve got it all figured out now.”

She pulled two white cups out of a cupboard. Then she set herself up by the chrome-coated coffee machine on the far side

of the kitchen. “What did you want to talk to me about?” she asked, looking back at me over her shoulder as the espresso grinder whirred.

I tapped my ear. “Sorry, I can’t hear you properly over the machine,” I called out. That wasn’t true, but it was a believable story, and it would buy a little extra time for me and Erin.

Nora waved her free hand. “Never mind. Let me finish making these drinks first.”

A couple of minutes later, she presented me with a perfectly-made cappuccino. “Here you go,” she said. “Enjoy.”

“Thanks.” I accepted the mug and dipped my chin to take a small sip.

Nora took a sip of her own coffee. Then she set the cup down on the counter and looked up at me. “So what did you want to talk about?” she asked, eyes flickering with curiosity. “Is it something specific, or do you just feel like sharing some memories of Cerina?”

“It’s something specific.” I took a deep breath and rubbed the back of my neck. “I don’t really know how to bring this up without upsetting you, but I found out something recently. About Cerina. I thought I should tell you about it.”

Nora’s forehead creased. “What is it?”

“Well... someone at school told me that he overheard Cerina arguing with Mr. Blythe a while ago. He thought they might be having an inappropriate relationship,” I said. “I know your family is fairly close with the Blythe family, so I figured you had a right to know what might’ve been going on.”

“Oh, honey, no.” Nora let out a tinkling laugh. “Whoever told you that is just a rumor-mongering idiot. I’d trust

Matthew with my life. He never would've touched Cerina.”

Before I could say anything else, Erin stepped into the kitchen. Nora looked over at her. “Feeling any better, darling?”

“A little. Thanks.”

“Let me make you some herbal tea. It'll calm your stomach.” Nora hurried over to the other side of the kitchen and reached into a cupboard.

While she was distracted, I leaned my head close to Erin. “Did you see or hear anything?”

“Nope.” She shook her head, lips set in a thin line. “I couldn't check the second or third floors, though. So I guess Kinsey could be somewhere up there.”

“Yeah, it's possible,” I muttered, racking my brains for an excuse to go upstairs. I could probably try the same thing Bobbi did to get the laptop, but there was a chance that it might make Nora suspicious.

“How are things going with her so far?” Erin whispered, snapping me out of my contemplative reverie.

I briefly relayed the conversation I had with Nora while Erin was poking around the house. She frowned and scratched her chin. “I think she's hiding something,” she said in a low voice. “Why else would she be so quick to defend Mr. Blythe?”

“Yeah. I agree.”

Nora returned with a steaming mug. “There you go, sweetie,” she said, handing it to Erin. “Now, what were we talking about again?”

“Mr. Blythe,” I said. “I'm worried there's something going on with him. There was that rumor about him and Cerina, and

now there are more rumors about him and Kinsey.”

Nora’s face turned studiously blank. “How odd. What exactly are these rumors saying?”

“A few people at school think he might’ve framed Kinsey to cover up the fact that *he* was the one who hurt Cerina.”

Nora scoffed. “That’s absurd. Like I said to you a moment ago, Matthew is a close family friend. His mother and I have known each other for decades.”

“There’s something else,” Erin said. “You know how Kinsey has gone missing?”

“Yes, I’m aware,” Nora replied. There was a distinct edge to her voice now.

“My cousin actually lives across the road from you, and she told me she saw Mr. Blythe here on the same night Kinsey went missing.”

Nora’s brows rose. She had no way of knowing that Erin’s cousin was fictional. “All right. He was here,” she said. “So what?”

“Kinsey was with Mr. Blythe at the school that same night. I know because she texted me about it and said they were together for some reason,” Erin said. Her cheeks were starting to turn slightly pink from all the lies, but her story was believable enough, so I doubted Nora would notice. “I figured if she was with him then, she might’ve been with him afterwards as well. And he was definitely seen at your house.”

“So you think Kinsey was *here*?” Nora’s eyes widened in an incredulous stare. “You really think I’d ever let my daughter’s murderer darken my doorstep?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just wondering why Mr. Blythe was here at midnight. It’s a weird time to visit. Especially when we know for a fact that he was with Kinsey that same night.”

Nora’s eyes narrowed. “Matthew has been a great source of comfort to me and my husband over the last few weeks,” she said. “Sandra—his mother—is ill at the moment, so she hasn’t been able to visit as often as she’d like. Matthew has been coming around instead.”

“At midnight?”

“Grief doesn’t have time restrictions,” Nora said in a testy tone. “Sometimes we feel like we need to talk to someone late at night. The night in question—I believe it was last Thursday?”

I dipped my chin in a curt nod. “That’s right.”

“I remember now.” Nora pressed her lips into a tight smile. “I couldn’t sleep because I was missing Cerina so badly. Matthew offered to go to the school and find one of her old essays from his class. He thought it might comfort me to hear her words. I suppose he must’ve bumped into Kinsey there. But it doesn’t mean he had anything to do with her disappearance, and it certainly doesn’t mean she was ever *here*.”

I exchanged a glance with Erin. Then I folded my arms across my chest and returned my attention to Nora. “Look, this is awkward, but I’m just going to come out and say it. I know for a fact that Kinsey was here on Thursday night.”

Nora’s smile faded. “What do you mean?”

“It’s all on her phone. Someone stole it and ditched it on the edge of the road that night, but I found it,” I said. “I

checked the location history, and the last place she went before the phone was switched off was this exact address.”

None of that was true, but I was hoping Nora would fall for the bluff.

She lifted her chin in an imperious gesture, gaze going flinty. “Phones are funny little things, aren’t they?” she said. “They can be helpful at times, but they can also be completely wrong at other times. Like any other technology, I suppose.”

Dammit. She wasn’t falling for any of my bullshit.

“So you haven’t seen Kinsey?” I asked, looking her right in the eye.

Her gaze didn’t waver. “No, I haven’t, and I don’t think Matthew has done anything to her, either. He’s a good man,” she replied. “Anyway, I think it’s time for you to leave. I’m suddenly feeling quite tired again.”

Erin shot me a helpless look. I looked back at her and briefly shook my head. We didn’t have any solid proof that Kinsey was here at the Vincent house, and Nora had made it abundantly clear that we’d overstayed our welcome. We needed to leave and come up with another plan.

Erin leaned close to my left ear as we headed toward the front door. “I guess we should’ve come up with a proper plan of attack instead of just showing up here like this,” she whispered.

I gritted my teeth and nodded, mentally kicking myself.

When I was halfway through the foyer, one of my shoelaces came undone. I knelt to do it back up. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a long strand of hair on the marble tiles. I ignored it at first, figuring that Nora or Ted had missed it when they last cleaned up around the place. After all, they

were used to having their staff do everything for them, so it made sense that they wouldn't know how to sweep or vacuum properly.

A second later, my gaze snapped back to the strand of hair. It wasn't black and wavy like Nora's hair, and it was too long to belong to Ted. It was straight and a familiar shade of chestnut brown.

Kinsey.

"I fucking knew it. She *was* here," I said, rising to my feet and turning to look at Nora. "Where is she now?"

Nora stared back at me with a puzzled expression on her face. "What?"

"Kinsey was here. That's her hair," I said, jerking a thumb toward the strand on the tiles. "Now tell me—where the fuck is she?"

"Jax, I know you're feeling very emotional over everything that's been going on, but that's no excuse for rudeness," Nora replied in an icy tone. "That hair could've come from anyone."

My mind kept whirling. "I just remembered something," I said. "Cerina told me this place used to belong to some sort of criminal. A mob boss. She said he built an underground cell for his enemies somewhere here."

"And you think Kinsey is in there?" Nora asked, nose wrinkling.

I gave her a hard look. "She could be."

"Well, she's not. If I had to guess her whereabouts, I'd say she felt guilty about what she did to my daughter and ran away to try to escape that shame. She's probably halfway to Seattle

by now,” she said. “I think she’ll find that she can never outrun what she did, though.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Can we confirm that she’s not here?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Nora replied. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

She stalked over to the large sideboard on the edge of the foyer and rummaged in one of the drawers. “Here,” she snapped, briskly stepping back over to me. “This is the key to the cell. You can go and see it with your own eyes.”

I stared down at the small key in her palm. I had a feeling she was bluffing; hoping that I’d view her offer as proof of innocence, because a guilty person wouldn’t dare to offer me access to the cell on a silver platter. From there, she probably expected me to reject the offer and apologize for accusing her of participating in such a dark act.

I snatched the key from her hand. “Where is it?” I asked, choosing to call her bluff.

“It’s on the basement level, right near the wine cellar,” Nora said, motioning toward a doorway on the other side of the foyer. “I’m sure you know where *that* is from all the times you and Cerina sneaked down there to steal wine for parties when you were younger.”

I turned to Erin. “Let’s go.”

Nora followed us as we dashed down the spiral staircase that led to the mansion’s basement level. A long, narrow hallway stretched out before us at the bottom of the stairs. Halfway down the hall was a wooden door I recognized as the entrance to the wine cellar. Another smaller door lay at the end. I’d never noticed it before. Then again, I never had a reason to think about it when I came down here in the past.

I hurried down to the end of the hall and fitted the key in the lock. When it clicked, I turned the handle and threw the door open. “Kinsey!”

My voice echoed through the tiny, gloomy room that lay before me. No reply came, and no one jumped up to greet me.

Nora wasn't lying to us before.

The cell was empty.

JAX

“SEE?” NORA FOLDED HER ARMS AND LOOKED AT ME, BROWS lifted high. “Are you happy now?”

I stared back at her with a stony expression. I wasn't happy at all, and she knew it. “Kinsey could still be somewhere else in the house,” I said in a low voice. “But I'm guessing you won't let us look anywhere else, will you?”

Nora scoffed and rolled her eyes. “You know what? I actually will,” she replied. She clicked her fingers. “Come on. Let's go.”

“Wait... what?” Erin said, looking uneasy.

“I said let's go,” Nora said sharply. “Let's search every other room in this place so I can prove that I know nothing about this Kinsey situation. I'll even let you check all the outbuildings on the property.”

She turned and swept back up the gloomy hall, heading toward the spiral staircase. Erin and I exchanged glances. Then we followed.

Over the next half-hour, Nora marched us through every single room in the three-story mansion, including all the walk-in closets and half-baths. When we came up empty, she took

us outside and let us check the garden shed, garage, greenhouse, and guest cottage.

“There you go.” Nora crossed her arms, watching me with beady eyes as I emerged from the guest cottage bathroom. “That’s the very last room. Are you satisfied now? Or do you want me to dig up all the floorboards and tiles so you can check underneath them as well?”

I swallowed hard and gritted my teeth. Bobbi was obviously right earlier—Mr. Blythe *did* come here last Thursday night, presumably with Kinsey in tow, but he’d since taken her elsewhere.

“I don’t...” Furious words rose up my throat, but I let them die on my tongue. I knew it would only worsen the situation, and I’d already fucked things up badly enough.

Nora’s face softened as she looked at me, and her arms fell back to her sides. “Look, Jax, I understand how awful you’re feeling right now. You really care about Kinsey and want to find her. But you won’t find her here,” she said. “I have no idea why her phone said she was at this address, but I’m sure there’s a valid explanation. Maybe she happened to be in the area when she turned it off. Or maybe someone stole it and decided to hang around here that night. I really don’t know.”

“Yeah. Maybe,” I muttered. My jaw was clenched so hard my teeth hurt.

“I really do understand what you’re going through,” Nora went on in a simpering tone, reaching out to touch my arm. “I just lost my daughter so I know those feelings of despair and turmoil better than anyone. But you can’t just lose your mind and run around accusing everyone of ridiculous things.”

“I know,” I said gruffly. “I’m sorry, Nora. You’re right; I feel like I’m losing my mind. So much stuff has happened lately. There was that thing with my father. Then Cerina died. Then Kinsey was accused of having something to do with it. It’s just... it’s a lot.”

I wasn’t actually sorry at all, but I knew it was best to play along for now and pretend to be contrite.

Nora gave me a tight smile. “I understand. It’s hard, isn’t it?” she said. “So much has happened recently, and it’s shocked everyone to the core. We all have so many questions about it.”

“Yeah. I just want to know what really happened,” I replied, rubbing the back of my neck. “And I want to know where Kinsey went. That’s why I came here today. But I shouldn’t have acted the way I did and accused you of anything. I really am sorry.”

“It’s all right. I completely understand,” Nora said soothingly, rubbing my forearm. Her eyes flickered over to Erin. “It’s Erin, isn’t it? Your parents are Jessica and Todd Middleton?”

Erin nodded. “Yes.”

“I know you’re good friends with Kinsey, and I know you want to find her just as much as Jax does. But that doesn’t make today’s behavior acceptable. You see that, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Erin’s face crumpled, and she burst into tears. “I’m sorry. So sorry. Please don’t call my parents,” she choked out between sobs. “They’ll be so mad at me.”

Nora moved her hand to Erin’s shoulder. “Oh, honey, don’t worry,” she said softly. “I won’t tell them. It’ll be our little secret, okay? As long as we can all agree to keep quiet about

it. No one needs to hear any more of these silly little rumors about Kinsey or Matthew.”

“Okay. I won’t say anything.” Erin sniffed and wiped her face with the back of her hand, shoulders still trembling with sobs. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Like I said, I understand what you’re both going through right now,” Nora replied. Her lips turned up in a small smile. “If you ever need to talk to someone about it, you’re welcome to come back here. Lord knows I could use more people to talk to right now.”

“Thank you,” Erin repeated in a tremulous tone.

“Unfortunately, I really am feeling quite tired right now,” Nora went on. She paused to yawn and cupped a hand over her mouth. “I’ll have to let you two go so I can take another nap.”

“All right.” I cleared my throat and straightened my shoulders. “Again... sorry for bothering you. I promise it won’t happen again.”

An awkward silence settled over us as we stepped out of the guest house. Nora finally said her goodbyes and headed back toward the main house with a wave and a smile.

“Those tears are totally fake, right?” I murmured to Erin we strode over to my car.

She nodded and wiped her cheek. “Of course,” she whispered. “What about your apology?”

“Fake as well.” I glanced back at the house and pressed my lips into a thin line. “Nora obviously knows something, but I figured it’s better if we play along with her bullshit for now.”

“That’s exactly what I thought,” Erin replied, drumming her nails on the passenger window as she waited for me to

unlock the car. “I figured if we kept antagonizing her, she’d probably call Mr. Blythe or whoever else is involved and tell them we’re onto them.”

“Yeah. Then they might move Kinsey again. Somewhere we’ll never find her.”

Erin nodded slowly. “She was definitely here at some point. Did you see that look on Nora’s face when you accused her?”

“Yup.” I gritted my teeth and pressed on the key fob. “She was lying the whole time.”

“Except for the part about that creepy dungeon near the wine cellar,” Erin replied, sliding into the passenger seat. “She was telling the truth about that. Kinsey isn’t there... but she totally *was*. Did you see the trash?”

My brows furrowed. “No. What trash?”

“Under that little bed in the cell. I saw a couple of empty water bottles and some wax paper. From a sandwich, maybe.” She lifted a brow and went on. “I guess it could be old stuff, but I doubt it. I think they’ve been keeping Kinsey there.”

“Me too,” I said, pulse spiking as I switched on the ignition. “That hair I found on the floor—it’s hers. I just know it.”

“I think so too. We were just too late to get to her,” Erin said, looking down at her lap. She let out a weary sigh and raked a hand through her long hair. Then she looked over at me. “What do you think we should do now?”

“We need to check out the rest of the locations on our list, starting with Mr. Blythe’s house,” I said, glancing at the rearview mirror as I pulled out of the driveway. “What was the address again?”

Erin fished a piece of paper out of her pocket and looked at it. “802 Bournemouth Crescent. It’s on the north end of town, near the national park.”

Outside, the light afternoon shower had turned to heavy rain and hail, battering the windshield and roof overhead. I turned the wipers onto full force and gripped the steering wheel tightly, keeping a careful eye on the road ahead.

When the GPS finally informed me that we’d arrived at our destination, I pulled the car to a stop and peered out the window. “Surely this can’t be it,” I said, frowning up at the house in front of me. It was two stories of white-washed brick with a red-tiled roof and multiple terraces with wrought iron railings.

“It’s definitely the right address,” Erin replied, looking down at her phone.

“How can he afford a place like this on a teacher’s salary?” I asked. “It must be worth at least two million.”

“He’s a Blythe, remember?” she said, lifting her brows. “That whole family is super wealthy. Also, CPA teaching positions are really prestigious. They pay a lot more than most other teaching jobs in the country.”

“Right,” I said, nodding slowly. I pulled the key out of the ignition and opened my door. “Let’s go and talk to him.”

“Wait.” Erin reached over and yanked on the hem of my shirt to keep me in the car. “We can’t just knock on his door for no reason. It’ll make him suspicious, and considering what just happened with Nora, we’re lucky he isn’t already suspicious of us.”

I rubbed my chin. “We’ll tell him we found his phone at school and came to return it,” I said. “We can make a big show

of being cold and wet from the rain. Get him to invite us in. Then you can ask him for advice on your next English paper while I excuse myself to the bathroom. I'll hunt around the house then."

"All right." Erin gave me a tight smile. "Let's do it."

We headed up to the front entrance and pressed the doorbell button above the lock. No one answered.

"Try again," Erin said, glancing over at the driveway. "There's a car here, so I'm pretty sure he's home. He probably just can't hear the bell over the storm."

I pressed the button again. Then a third and fourth time. There was still no answer.

"Maybe he went out with a friend and they picked him up from here," Erin said, brows dipping in a frown. "That would explain why his car is still in the driveway."

I jiggled the door handle. It was locked. "Let's check around the back and sides," I said. "We might be able to find a way in."

Erin's brows shot up. "You seriously want to break in?"

"We might as well try if he's not here, right?" I said, voice tinged with the same urgency that was making my heart hammer against my ribs. I knew Kinsey was close. I had no tangible evidence to prove it, but I could feel the truth of it deep in my bones. She was somewhere on this property. I just needed to find her.

Erin nodded. "All right. Let's go take a look."

We headed around to the right side of the mansion, trying all the doors and windows as we went. All of them were locked.

“Holy shit,” Erin said breathlessly as we arrived at the back of the house. “Check out that view. Mr. Blythe is seriously loaded.”

I followed her gaze to the ocean. Thick white fog hung over the dark expanse of churning water in a hauntingly beautiful display. The cliffs before it were a tower of gray rock, standing sentinel over the murky depths as they stretched all the way up the winding coastline.

A blurry shape in the corner of my eye caught my attention. I squinted and spotted a small jutting promontory on the bluffs toward my right. Something was on it. A dark figure in the pouring rain. No, *two* dark figures.

I broke into a run, heart pounding like mad.

“Hey, where are you going?” Erin shouted behind me.

I kept my eyes on the promontory. “There’s someone over there!” I called back to Erin. “It could be Kinsey and Mr. Blythe!”

“Jax, stop! I can’t hear you!”

I ignored her and kept running. I couldn’t wait.

The rain eased slightly. With the increase in visibility, the figures out on the promontory took on distinct forms. One was tall and masculine while the other was smaller with a feminine shape and long hair. Both were standing near the cliff’s edge, right next to a hundred foot drop.

A high-pitched shriek suddenly pierced the air. The familiarity of the voice sent a burst of adrenaline flooding through my veins.

“Kinsey!” I shouted, running so fast it felt like my legs would give out at any second. “I’m coming!”

KINSEY

THE RAIN WAS COMING DOWN IN SHEETS, DRENCHING MY HEAD and body. It was freezing and felt like hundreds of tiny needles smashing into my skin, but there was one positive—the water acted as a sort of lubricant to help me wriggle out of Mr. Blythe’s grip.

“No!” he shouted over the roaring wind as I sprinted away from him. “Don’t you dare!”

A large hand shot out and grabbed my hair, yanking me backward. Grimacing, I reached upward and clawed at the hand, but it didn’t work. Mr. Blythe had me back in his firm grip only seconds later.

“Try that again and I’ll let Nora and the others know,” he hissed in my ear, tightening his fingers around my arm.

I winced at the pain and glowered up at him. “Why would that stop me?” I asked. “You’re going to kill me anyway.”

“Yes, but if I let the others know how much you misbehaved, they might decide to do something to your mother. Or maybe Jax. Maybe even one of your little friends.” His lips stretched in a thin smile. “Or not. It depends on what you choose to do now. Are you going to stop struggling?”

A lump appeared in my throat, and I nodded. “Please don’t hurt them,” I said in a low voice.

“Be a good girl, then.”

I nodded again and let him pull me across his spacious backyard, toward a stony path on the right. It led toward the bluffs overlooking the ocean. Out on the water, the gusting winds were whipping up whitecaps and smashing waves against the lower part of the rockface that stretched up the curved coastline. When the water receded for a second, I saw the jagged rocks at the base of the bluffs, and a chill that had nothing to do with the stormy weather shot down my spine.

“Please, Mr. Blythe,” I whimpered, coming to a halt on the slippery path. “Don’t do this.”

“You know I have no choice,” he replied, moving his hand to the back of my neck. “Walk.”

“Please!”

“I said *walk*,” he commanded, squeezing my neck until pain lanced through me.

I gulped and took another trembling step down the path. Then another. Mr. Blythe maintained his grip on my neck as he stood behind me. I noticed he wasn’t forcing me to walk any faster than a snail’s pace. Was it because the path was so slippery and he didn’t want to fall? Or was he more reluctant to hurt me than he was letting on?

I could find out. I just had to buy myself some extra time. Keep him talking.

“If you aren’t going to let me go, can you at least answer all of my questions?” I asked as the winding path veered toward the left. “There’s still so much I don’t understand about all of this. So many things I don’t know.”

Mr. Blythe scoffed. “I’m not stupid, Kinsey. I know you’re trying to buy time.”

“I’m not. I just need to know the answers. That’s all.”

“You *need* to, huh?” he said, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Is it going to make a difference to the way you die?”

“I just mean... I want to know. Please,” I said, trying to turn my head over my shoulder to get a proper look at him. “I’m curious, and it looks like this path goes on for another few minutes, so we might as well do something to fill the time.”

“I suppose it’s better than awkward silence,” he said in a grudging tone. “All right. Here’s the deal. I’ll answer anything you ask until we get up to that promontory over there. You see it?”

I squinted into the misty distance. “Yes.”

“So what do you want to know?”

I swallowed hard. “I want to know what happened that night with Cerina. All of it.”

“The night she died?”

“Yes. Obviously.”

“All right.” Mr. Blythe paused for a beat to clear his throat. “You already know this, but Nora and Ted were the ones who actually did it. They stabbed her.”

“But you facilitated the whole thing,” I cut in.

“Not just me. Others too. But yes, I did a lot of the heavy lifting,” he replied. “Somewhere around eight, I started texting Cerina from a burner phone pretending to be you. At the same

time, I was also texting you pretending to be Cerina. That way we could lure you both outside at the right moment.”

“How did you manage to make the texts to Cerina sound like they were actually from me?” I asked. “The cops really used that against me, you know. They said the texting styles from my phone and the burner phone matched perfectly.”

“I know. That was all part of the plan to frame you,” Mr. Blythe replied. “Remember, that was the initial idea—we were just going to frame you. Nothing more.”

“So how did you do it?”

“Do you remember losing your phone a few days before the dance?” he asked.

I frowned. “No.”

“You thought you left it at your friend Erin’s house during a study session. She returned it to you the next day.”

“Oh.” My eyes widened. “Yes. I remember that.”

“Her parents, Jessica and Todd, are part of the PTO. So they were in on the whole scheme,” he said. “Jessica stole your phone while you and Erin were distracted with your books. Then she gave it to Nick.”

“Nick?”

“Nick Barron. The junior physics teacher. You’ve met him, remember?” Mr. Blythe replied. “As I’m sure you’ve noticed, he’s our go-to tech guy.”

“Right,” I muttered.

“Anyway, he cloned your phone onto another device. That way we had a copy of your messaging history. I studied it so I could replicate your voice as much as possible in the messages

I sent to Cerina,” he went on. “Once your phone was cloned, Jessica gave it to Erin and said she found it lying around the house. Erin was none the wiser. She thought you must’ve accidentally left it behind, and she returned it to you the next day. Neither of you had the faintest idea what really happened.”

“God,” I said, shaking my head. “So much effort just to fake a few texts.”

“Well, we were trying to set you up to take the fall for a murder, Kinsey. It required a lot of planning and effort.”

“Right. So what happened next?”

“You and Cerina both fell for the texts I sent at the dance. When I knew you were about to go outside to meet her, I drugged your drink.”

“When you and Ms. Vaughn were checking everyone for alcohol?”

“Yes.” A smug tone crept into Mr. Blythe’s voice. “I thought we played that one quite well. You and Jax didn’t notice a thing. You just handed your cups right over to us.”

“Well, we weren’t expecting our teachers to be psychopathic drink-spikers,” I said in an acid tone. “We trusted you.”

“Sorry about that.” He didn’t sound even remotely sorry. “Anyway, after that, you went outside to meet Cerina. I alerted Ted and Nora, and they went to meet the two of you.”

“Then they killed her,” I said in a hollow voice. “Their own daughter.”

“That’s right. They also did their best to make you think you did it,” Mr. Blythe said. “You were completely out of it on

the drugs, as planned. Hallucinating and gibbering. They repeatedly told you that you did it. Told you that Cerina deserved it. Told you she needed to pay for everything she'd done to you. Then they put the knife in your hand."

"But it didn't work. I always knew I didn't do it," I said.

"The rest of the world will never know that," he replied. "Not after today. That note you wrote will convince even your most staunch supporters that you were guilty."

"I know," I murmured. The thought of my mom and Jax reading the fake suicide note was like a dagger plunging into my heart.

"Is that all?" Mr. Blythe asked.

I coughed to clear my throat. "No. I want to know about you and Cerina. Were you lying when you said you didn't have an affair with her?"

"No. I might be young, but I'm not interested in high school girls. I prefer women my own age."

"But you *were* friends with her, right?"

"I pretended to be when I realized she might be on the verge of betraying the PTO, like I told you earlier. I'm not sure that counts as friendship."

"Did you like her?"

Mr. Blythe was silent for a moment. "Sure," he finally said. "She was smart. Funny. Determined. Nicer than she let on to her fellow students."

"If you liked her so much, how could you turn around and stab her in the back the way you did?" I asked. My voice had thickened, betraying the emotion bubbling up my throat. "How could you let her die like that?"

“I didn’t want her to die, Kinsey. I don’t want *you* to die either. But sometimes things have to happen for the greater good.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I just don’t get it,” I said in a low voice. “How can you stand to take part in all the horrible stuff the PTO does? What the hell do you get out of it?”

“The same thing we all get out of it,” he replied. “Money. Prestige. Power.”

“But you hurt kids! You ruin their lives. Traumatize them. All for a bit of money. How can you think that’s worth it?”

“It’s not just a bit of money,” he said. “Believe me, I felt bad when I first learned of the whole scheme, but then I realized the benefits far outweigh the costs.”

“The human costs, you mean.”

He sniffed. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“You seriously have no soul,” I muttered. “None of you do.”

“If you say so.” Mr. Blythe was beginning to sound bored. “Anything else you want to ask?”

I squinted through the rain again. We were nearing the promontory, which meant my time was almost up, but if I managed to keep the conversation going for a while longer, I might be able to figure out an escape plan.

At this stage, I doubted that I could manipulate Mr. Blythe into letting me go—he was clearly too dedicated to the PTO to ever betray them—but I could probably struggle enough to push him off the cliff instead of plummeting over the edge

myself. It wouldn't be easy, but it was worth a shot. Anything was when it came to survival.

“How many people know?” I asked in a low voice. “How many of you are willing to let me go down in history as Cerina’s murderer when you know I’m totally innocent?”

“The entire PTO is in on it,” he replied. “But I think you already know that. You’re just trying to buy time again, because you know we’re getting close to the edge.”

The temperature around us had dropped, and the wind was coating my skin in a fine mist of brine from the nearby ocean. Mr. Blythe moved his hand to my arm and stepped ahead, yanking me behind him.

“W-wait.” My voice was shaky with panic now. “I... I still have more questions!”

“Time’s up, Kinsey. You remember the deal.”

“But—”

He rolled his eyes upward and cut me off. “How could you possibly have any more questions about what happened that night?” he asked. “I’ve told you everything.”

“I...” I scrambled for an excuse to keep the conversation going. *Anything*. “The spike pit!” I blurted out. “Who did that?”

Mr. Blythe frowned. “What?”

“On the senior trip to Lake Tahoe. Someone lured me out in the middle of the night and tried to kill me. I thought it was Cerina, but she always denied it.”

“Oh, *that*.” Mr. Blythe chuckled, eyes crinkling at the corners. “I almost forgot about that. It was so long ago.”

“So it was you?”

“Me and some of the other teachers, yes. We set it all up.”

My mind was whirling now. “But.... that doesn’t make sense. You said the initial plan was to frame me for Cerina’s murder. Not kill me.”

“Yes, but this was *before* we decided on that whole plan,” he said. “Besides, the pit wasn’t designed to kill you. It was designed to scare you. Maybe maim you a bit.”

“Why?”

“It was a message of sorts.”

“From who?”

“George Kingsley. He was in prison at the time, remember? Because of your sexual assault case against him,” Mr. Blythe replied. “He asked a few of his fellow PTO members to scare the living shit out of you. He thought it might be enough to make you drop the case against him and leave town.”

“God,” I muttered. “I should’ve known.”

Mr. Blythe dragged me closer to the edge of the outcrop, where the rocky surface was slick with rainwater and foam from the ocean. One wrong move and he could tumble over the edge. I just had to extricate myself from his grip so I didn’t go with him.

Before I could try to figure out a way to get his hands off me, he spun me around so that I was standing right on the edge. My stomach plummeted, and I tasted an acid wash of fear. “Stop!” I shrieked. “Please!”

“Sorry, Kinsey,” he replied. “You know it’s time.”

“No!” I screamed, struggling to push him away. “Don’t!”

“Kinsey!” The rain-soaked wind carried a familiar masculine voice to my ears. “I’m coming!”

My heart soared. It was Jax. Somehow, against all odds, he’d found me. He was coming to save me.

No, a little voice in the back of my head told me. You’re hearing things. It’s a coping mechanism. Just a primal part of your brain trying to inject a last bit of hope into the situation.

“Any last words before you go?” Mr. Blythe asked, eyes narrowed on my face.

“Please,” I choked out in a last-ditch effort to change his mind. “Don’t do this!”

“Kinsey!” The familiar voice rose out of the gusting wind again. “I’m here!”

Mr. Blythe whirled around, keeping his hand fisted in the fabric of my jacket. “What the fuck was that?”

My eyes bulged. I wasn’t hearing things. Jax was really here.

I craned my neck to look over Mr. Blythe’s shoulder. My heart lifted again at the sight of Jax dashing through the rain, heading straight for the promontory. Erin was there too, several yards behind him.

“Help!” I screamed. “He’s going to throw me off!”

Mr. Blythe scrubbed his free hand across his face, wiping the droplets of rainwater away. “What the fuck are you doing up here, Jax?” he shouted.

Jax was at the base of the promontory now. He slowed his pace and lifted a palm. “I just came to return your phone,” he

said, patting his jacket pocket with his other hand.

Mr. Blythe's brows shot up. "What?"

Jax reached into his pocket and pulled out a black cell phone. "I have your phone," he said. "Found it at school earlier. Do you want it?"

On the last word, he tossed the phone toward us in a smooth arc. Mr. Blythe reflexively reached out to snatch at the air as the phone sailed through it, loosening his grip on me in the process. I took the opportunity to weasel my way out of his grasp, which must've been Jax's intention when he threw the phone.

"Go, Kinsey!" he shouted, rushing forward to put himself between me and Mr. Blythe. "I'll keep him back!"

I dashed over the slippery rocks, praying I wouldn't slip. When I made it to the base of the promontory, Erin grabbed me and pulled me into her rain-soaked arms, shoulders quaking with sobs. "Oh my god," she said in a tremulous voice. "I can't believe you're really here."

"Me neither," I choked out.

I turned my head to look back at the promontory. I expected to see Jax hurrying toward us now that I was safely away from Mr. Blythe, but he was still out near the end, only a foot or so away from the edge. Mr. Blythe's right hand was going for his throat.

My eyes bulged. "Jax!" I screamed. "Watch out!"

"Don't worry!" he shouted back to me, blocking Mr. Blythe's hand. "I've got him! Just stay there with Erin!"

He blocked another attempted hit from Mr. Blythe. Then he swung at him, knocking him back. Mr. Blythe reeled to the

left, stumbling precariously close to one side of the promontory. He regained his footing, and then he lowered his head and charged at Jax, clearly intending to push him off the other side.

Jax waited until the last second. Then he stepped aside. There was nothing in Mr. Blythe's path to block him now, and his momentum sent him sailing right over the edge of the promontory.

Relief swelled in my heart, followed by a jolt of horror as Mr. Blythe flailed and grabbed at Jax's ankle on his way over the edge. He managed to get a good grip on the hem of his pants in that split-second, causing Jax to stagger backward and tumble over the edge with him.

The last thing I saw was his shocked face.

Then he was gone.

KINSEY

“JAX!” I SCREAMED AS HE FELL OUT OF SIGHT. “NO!”

I leapt into action, sprinting toward the promontory. My heart was pounding so hard it ached, and there was a lump in my throat that made it difficult for me to breathe.

“Kinsey!” Erin shouted. “Wait! It’s slippery!”

She caught up to me and grabbed my arm, trying to pull me back. I shook her off. “We have to help him!”

She grabbed my arm again. “You won’t be helping anyone if you fall over the edge as well.”

“Erin, we have to go!” I shouted, staring at the spot Jax had fallen from. I kept seeing him there in my mind’s eye, eyes wide and mouth dropping open as he tumbled backward.

Erin nodded, chin trembling. “I know,” she said softly. “We just... we need to prepare ourselves for what might be down there, okay?”

I swallowed thickly and stared at her, knowing exactly what she was getting at. She knew—just like I knew, deep down in my heart—that we wouldn’t be able to help Jax. He’d plunged off a hundred foot drop onto a pile of jagged rocks.

“He’s dead,” I said in a hollow voice. “Isn’t he?”

“I... I think so,” she murmured.

Emotion clogged my throat, making it even harder for me to breathe. “What do we do now?” I choked out.

“I don’t...” Erin sniffed and shook her head. “I can’t...”

For what was probably the first time in her life, she didn’t have an answer.

My knees felt weak. I almost sank to the rainswept ground, but I sucked in a shaky breath and turned back to the right side of the promontory. “I’ll put my coat down on the edge,” I said. “We can kneel on that so we don’t slip.”

Erin nodded and kept her hand on my arm. “Good idea. But let’s use my coat,” she said. “You’ve been out here longer than me. You’re freezing.”

She removed her blue coat and lay it at our feet. Lightning flashed on the horizon as we knelt on the fabric, followed by a growl of thunder.

I grabbed Erin’s hand and squeezed it tightly. “Let’s look at the same time,” I said, voice hoarse with emotion.

We crawled to the edge and peeked over. I expected a horrifying vision of blood, twisted limbs, shattered bones, and brain matter splattered over the rocks below. Instead, I saw a ledge about ten feet down. I didn’t know it was there earlier because Mr. Blythe and I had approached the promontory from the other side.

Jax was lying on the smooth rock shelf on his back, eyes closed. One of his arms was sticking out at an odd angle, clearly broken, but his chest was slowly rising and falling.

“Oh my god!” My pulse spiked, and I turned to Erin. “He’s breathing. He’s breathing!”

Ten feet was a long way for Jax to drop, but it seemed like most of the blow had been cushioned by Mr. Blythe's body, which lay beneath him, all bloody and mangled. He must have landed right on top of him.

"Holy shit," Erin said, eyes wide as saucers as she took in the scene. She swallowed audibly and scrambled backward. "I'm going to call 911. You stay here and call down to Jax. Try to wake him. Okay?"

I nodded and scooted a little closer to the edge. "Jax!" I shouted over the blustering wind. "Can you hear me?"

He didn't answer, but his chest was still rising and falling.

"Jax!" I raised my voice an octave. "Erin's getting help! Just stay right there. Don't move at all!"

His eyes fluttered open. "Kinsey?" he said. "Are you here?"

"Yes!" Relief swelled in my heart. "I'm right above you. Just don't move, okay? You'll roll right off the edge."

"Got it." He blinked and sucked in a deep breath. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Tears sprang to my eyes as I stared down at him. He'd fallen off a cliff, but he was still worried about whether or not *I* was all right. "How are you feeling? Are you in a lot of pain?"

"I feel great."

My brows furrowed. "Jax, I think your left arm is broken. You must be in shock if you can't feel it at all."

"I can feel it, but I don't care." A slow grin stretched across his face. "I found you, Kinsey. I feel fucking fantastic."

The tears were splashing down my cheeks now. I wiped my face and returned Jax's smile. "I love you," I called down to him. "You know that, right?"

His lips moved again, but his words were drowned out by a crack of thunder. I didn't need to hear what he said, though. I already knew, and I'd never felt luckier in my life.

Jax Kingsley loved me.

RXORCIST

POSTED BY: RXORCIST, 11:04, NOVEMBER 29, 2021

HELLO DIRT LOVERS,

Today marks my final post. That's right, I'm shutting things down for reasons that will become obvious fairly soon (to those who aren't already in the know). I want to go out with a bang, though, so I'm going to share one last piece of dirt with all of you.

Firstly, I want you to know that this isn't actually my story. It's the story Cerina Vincent wanted to tell. The story that got her killed. So, without further ado, here it is.

The PTO at Crown Point Academy has been running a minor exploitation scheme for several decades. Every single member is (or has been) complicit in the scheme—teachers, parents, school administrative staff.

They used to hold their regular meetings at the Kingsley Hotel, where they discussed all of the usual school-related things. Non-PTO members were always welcome at those events if they wanted to show up for whatever reason... but they weren't welcome at the afterparties in the cocktail lounge.

Now we know why.

At those parties, minors were forced to participate and perform in the production of pornographic materials (FYI—I will not give any details regarding the identities of these victims as I do not want any victim blaming or shaming to occur. Comments on this post will also be disabled so no one can speculate there). The pornographic materials raked in millions of dollars every month on the black market for the PTO to split amongst its members. The minors involved were emotionally abused and threatened with physical violence in order to ensure their silence and compliance. Those who threatened to come forward anyway were silenced permanently.

That's what happened to Cerina.

She was abused from the day she turned twelve. Exploited, threatened, and hurt. She made the brave decision to go to the media anyway, knowing what might happen to her, in order to save future children from the treatment she endured at the hands of the PTO. Unfortunately, she trusted the wrong person to help her—Mr. Matthew Blythe.

Mr. Blythe betrayed her and told her parents (who were the heads of the PTO) what she was planning to do. They threatened her, but that was only enough to keep her silent for a few more months. Eventually, she decided to approach a media source to tell her story. Her parents found out, and they killed her.

Yes, you read that right. Ted and Nora Vincent murdered their own daughter in cold blood.

The PTO set the events of that night up to frame Kinsey Holland for the murder. Mr. Blythe drugged her while he and Ms. Vaughn were going around the ballroom checking

everyone's drinks for alcohol. Then Kinsey and Cerina were lured to the gazebo outside. Cerina was killed right in front of Kinsey, who was too dazed and confused by the drugs to know what was really happening. After that, the murder weapon was placed in her hand... and you all know how that story goes.

However, the story doesn't end there.

I'm sure you all remember my recent post about Kinsey going missing. It turns out the PTO had another plan for her that would allow them to cement the frame-up job against her. A few days ago, they spirited her away in the middle of the night and held her in a basement room at the Vincent house, where she was starved, mentally tortured, and forced to write a suicide note where she apologized for what she did to Cerina. They intended to throw her off the bluffs on the north side of town and leave the note behind to serve as a confession to Cerina's murder. Thus, everything would be tied up in a neat little bow for them, and no one else would ever know the dark truth.

Unfortunately for these greedy PTO pricks, they underestimated the power of this generation to get things done.... and that's exactly what Jax Kingsley and Erin Middleton did. They worked tirelessly to track Kinsey down and saved her at the very last minute.

Jax was injured in the process with some head trauma and several broken bones (personally, I think that makes him even hotter, because it shows how he was willing to die to save his girl) and Mr. Blythe was killed by blunt force trauma from a fall off the same cliff he meant to throw Kinsey off (good riddance, you slimy prick). Erin the heroine (hey that kind of rhymes!) ended up with a mild case of hypothermia, but my sources tell me she's totally fine.

As for Kinsey, she's fine too. All charges against her will be dropped, and she'll be testifying against the PTO members whenever the case finally goes to trial. It's going to be a big one (maybe even the biggest in state history?) so I'm sure you're all going to start seeing and hearing stuff about the case in the media pretty soon. Of course, you'll already know all about it because you got the scoop from me ;)

Anyway, time to wrap things up. CPA is going to be in shambles by tomorrow, seeing as a large portion of the staff will be under arrest, so it looks like school might be out in Crown Point forever.

Without CPA, the Dirt app doesn't need to exist, and to be honest, I've been thinking about moving on for quite some time anyway due to time constraints. Having said that, I've LOVED doing this, and I know you've all loved and hated me in return. Thank you for keeping the app alive for so long with all your tips, and thank you for being such loyal readers.

One last thing. You're all aware that I based myself on Gossip Girl... but there's one major difference between the two of us. Gossip Girl's identity was revealed at the end of the show, but MY identity?

I'll never tell...

(Well, except for the select few who are already in the know. But I have a feeling my secret is safe with them).

Goodbye Dirt Lovers, and thanks again for all the support! Enjoy the rest of the school year!— RXorcist

KINSEY

5 MONTHS LATER

A SOFT KNOCK AT MY BEDROOM DOOR STARTLED ME OUT OF MY contemplative reverie. I glanced at the red digital numbers on the clock on my bedside table. It was 1:36 a.m.

Muffling a yawn with one hand, I padded over to the door and opened it a crack. Jax was standing there with a wicked grin on his handsome face.

My brows shot up. “Jax!” I said in an urgent whisper, peering up and down the hall. “Careful. You could wake my mom!”

“You should probably let me in, then,” he said, grin widening.

I stepped aside to let him in and carefully shut the door so it didn’t make a sound. He turned around, reached down, and pressed the lock until it clicked. “Don’t worry,” he said, still grinning wolfishly at the expression on my face. “I heard your mom snoring like a freight train on my way past her room. I think we’re safe.”

I let out a soft giggle. “That was Erin.”

It was Jax's turn to raise his brows. "But she's all the way downstairs."

"I know. She's a loud snorer."

"So you're telling me that noise I've heard every night for the last few months is actually *Erin*?"

"Yup." I tilted my head to one side. "Like I said... she's a loud snorer. *Very* loud."

Jax slowly shook his head and scrubbed a hand across his jaw. "Wow. This whole time, I thought it was your mom."

With another laugh, I turned and headed toward my bed, knowing Jax would follow. This had become a pattern for us every night for the last several months. He'd sneak up to my room late at night, I'd briefly pretend to be scandalized, and then we'd spend the rest of the night together until Jax sneaked out again at the crack of dawn.

It wasn't easy to sneak around without getting caught, because our new house was much smaller than the Kingsley mansion in Crown Point. It felt much more 'homey', though—especially as there was no risk of us getting thrown out on our asses.

After George was arrested along with the rest of the PTO five months ago, his lawyers presented us with a formal eviction notice to ensure that we'd never return to his mansion (as if we'd ever want to go back there anyway). Mom started working on securing some loans, and she eventually found us a new place up in Woodsen's Bay.

The old ranch-style place was cheap enough that she could afford the mortgage along with her loan repayments for the small pharmacy she'd taken over in town, and she still had enough left over to take care of me along with Jax and Erin,

whose respective PTO parents were currently sitting in jail awaiting trial.

Neither one of them could contribute much as their trust funds had been frozen along with their family's other assets, so both of them had offered to get part-time jobs to help out, but Mom insisted that we all remain unemployed for the rest of senior year so we could focus on the remainder of our education as much as possible.

All three of us were at Woodsen's Bay High to complete the year now that CPA had shuttered due to the massive PTO scandal. A lot of other ex-CPA students had wound up at Woodsen's Bay High too, while others had scattered to schools farther afield.

Woodsen's Bay High wasn't a bad school to attend. It was public and therefore didn't carry the same prestige that CPA once did, but it was a decent place with good teachers, and thankfully there were no crushing conspiracies or scandals lurking around every corner. It was just a regular old high school, which was exactly what Jax, Erin, and I needed after all the upheaval we'd faced at CPA.

"Have you slept at all tonight?" Jax asked, forehead crinkling with concern as he looked down at me.

I shook my head and wiped my bleary eyes. "Nope. I've just been lying in bed thinking. How about you?"

"No sleep for me."

"Why?"

He raised a roguish brow. "Couldn't stop thinking about what I want to do to you," he said, reaching around to slap me on the ass.

I let out a reflexive yelp. Then I clamped a hand down over my lips, eyes widening. “Shit,” I whispered through my fingers. “That was loud.”

“Relax,” Jax said, pulling me into a warm embrace. “I’m pretty sure your mom knows exactly what we’re getting up to every night. She’s always known that we’re together.”

My cheeks flushed with heat. “I know. But still, I don’t want her to walk in here and see us—”

“See us *what?*” Jax muttered against my ear, hands roaming beneath my satin pajama top.

“Doing this,” I replied breathlessly, tilting my head back so his mouth could pepper kisses along my throat and collarbone.

His warm lips moved upward before crashing against mine in a kiss so hot I could picture flames dancing around us and licking their way up the walls. I moaned into his mouth and moved a hand down to his boxers, palming the hardness I felt beneath the soft fabric. At the same time, Jax yanked on the thin satin straps of my top, pulling it down to expose my chest to the cool night air. My shorts followed seconds later, landing on the floor at my feet.

Jax’s hands squeezed my breasts, and then he broke away from the kiss and moved his mouth downward again, teasing a nipple with his tongue.

“Oh, god...” I moaned, head lolling back. “Keep doing that.”

“God, I’ve missed this so fucking much,” he rasped in response.

“It’s only been a few hours since we last did this,” I whispered, core pulsing as he sucked my other nipple into his hot mouth.

“A few hours too many.” He rose back up to his full height, lips curling in a playful smirk. “I miss this body of yours every time I’m not touching it.”

I let out another moan. “Show me how much.”

Jax picked me up in his strong arms and walked me over to my desk. My arms wound around his neck as he set me on the edge and murmured in my ear. “Spread your legs.”

I did what he told me as his hands slid under my ass, angling me into the right position. His cock brushed up against me, and then he drove inside me in one powerful thrust. My eyes widened, and I let out a strangled sound. “Oh, *fuck*.”

Jax’s groan was low and feral. “You feel so fucking good.”

Pulling back, he slammed into me again, harder this time. Then again, and again. My desk started to bump up against the wall, making a loud clunking sound in rhythm with Jax’s thrusts.

“Harder,” I whispered, nails raking down his back. “Fuck me harder.”

He obliged, and the desk knocked harder on the wall behind us. I knew my mom could wake up from the sound at any second, seeing as her bedroom was only two doors down from mine, but I no longer cared. Jax was so good at what he did to me that I’d do anything he wanted in this moment.

His lips crushed mine in another rough kiss, and I moaned and rocked my hips, faster and faster with each passing second to match the intensity of his thrusts. Pleasure zipped up my spine. I broke the kiss and let out a gasp, and my muscles began to contract as I clung to Jax’s shoulders.

“Come on me,” he rasped, reaching one hand between us to rub my already-swollen clit.

That was the only push I needed. My body shuddered and I swallowed my scream as the tension snapped and released inside me, making me come so hard I almost fell off the edge of the desk. Jax let go too, eyes squeezing shut as he pulsed inside me.

I peppered kisses along his jaw as the last spasms left his body. He grinned and picked me up again, carrying me back over to my bed. I could see a thin sheen of sweat on his face and his cheeks were slightly flushed, too. He'd never looked sexier.

I let out a breathy sigh and fell backwards on my duvet, pleasure still sizzling my nerve endings. Jax followed and lay down beside me. "I forgot to ask," he said, reaching out to stroke my hair. "Why couldn't you get any sleep? Are you nervous about graduation tomorrow?"

I shook my head. "It's not that. It's just..." I paused and bit my bottom lip. "It's about the interview. I think I'm going to do it."

"What?" Jax sat up straight. "You mean the interview Channel Six offered you about the PTO and Cerina?"

I nodded. "Yup."

"But you turned them down already," he said, brows furrowing. "I thought you said you'd already had enough attention for a lifetime."

"I know, but they kept asking, and they kept upping the offer as well," I replied. "They also told me I can have my pick of interviewers. So I was thinking of telling them to hire Jay Ellis. Remember him?"

"Yeah. He really helped us figure out what the hell was going on last year."

“Exactly. So I figured he deserves a break. Something like this could really make his journalism career.”

Jax nodded slowly. “That’s a nice idea,” he said. “How much is the network offering you now?”

“A million dollars.”

His brows shot up. “Holy fuck. Seriously? A million?”

“Yup. That’s why I’m considering it now. I figured I can use the money to help Mom pay off the mortgage. Also her business loan for the pharmacy. Then I can keep the rest in savings for stuff like college.” I paused again and looked down at the sheets. “There’s something else, too. But I’m not sure if it’s a good idea.”

“What is it?”

“Well... I was thinking of buying us plane tickets for a vacation once we’re totally done with graduation and everything else. But not just any vacation. I want to go to Bali.”

Understanding dawned on Jax’s face. “Is this about your dad?”

I nodded. “Bali was his favorite place, and I always wanted to spread his ashes there. But that’s the problem. I don’t have his ashes anymore. Not since Cerina... well, you know what she did.” I sighed and shook my head. “So here’s what I was thinking. I still have the urn, so I figured I could take that to his favorite beach and bury it there. But... I don’t know. Maybe it’s just a silly idea. What do you think?”

“I think it’s a great idea,” Jax said, squeezing my arm. “I bet your dad would’ve loved it.”

“You really think so?”

“Yeah. For sure.”

I nodded slowly. “Okay. It’s settled, then. I’m doing the interview, and I’m using some of the money for a Bali trip. For Dad.”

“And some of the rest for your Mom.”

I nodded. “Yeah. She deserves it,” I said. “By the way, speaking of parents... when is your mom arriving?”

“Her flight gets in at eleven. So she’ll miss the first half of the graduation ceremony, but she’ll be there for the rest,” Jax replied.

“You don’t mind her missing part of it?” I asked in a tentative tone.

Now that Jax’s mom was off the no-fly list that she’d been placed on courtesy of her ex-husband and his shady connections, she and Jax had slowly been working on rebuilding their relationship. He didn’t talk about it much, though, so I wasn’t sure how he felt about it all at the moment.

I understood that well enough. George Kingsley exiled and smeared my father the exact same way he did Jax’s mother, and I had no idea about any of it for a very long time. No one did. Even after I discovered the truth, it was difficult to reconcile the version of my father that I knew with the other version I’d learned about. I’d thought of him as one thing for so long, so to discover that there was this whole other side I never knew anything about was jarring as hell.

Jax was going through exactly the same thing with his mother—he thought she was a terrible person who abandoned him for such a long time, only to find out it was all a lie manufactured by his father and the PTO. It wasn’t easy, but

he'd get through it. He had support from everyone around him, just like I did from him and all my other loved ones.

His lips curved in a small smile. "Nah, it's cool. She'll still be there. Plus I'll have your mom there for the first half.

I raised a brow. "And Paul."

He grinned. "Yes, Paul too. I still can't believe she's dating him. I mean, he's nice, and he's a good lawyer too, considering how he got you out on bail when you were up on a murder charge. But he's so—"

"I know you want to say boring, but I'd say stable," I cut in. "Honestly, that's what Mom needs in romantic terms right now. A nice, stable guy."

"True. He's definitely a much better option than the last guy," Jax said, lifting a brow. His smile had faded now.

"Speaking of which... have you heard from George lately?" I asked.

"Nope, and I prefer it that way. He might be my father, but I don't see him as family at all. I want nothing to do with him," he said, clenching his jaw. "He can rot in prison. I won't be visiting. Ever."

"I don't blame you," I said, lips pressing into a thin line. "I wouldn't want to visit him if I were you either."

Jax settled back against the bedhead and pulled me into his arms. "We've really been through some shit, haven't we?" he said.

"Yup. But I think you've had it worse."

"Me?" His forehead wrinkled. "You were framed for a murder. Then you were almost murdered yourself."

“Yeah, but you plunged off a cliff and broke a ton of bones.” I playfully poked his now-healed left arm. “I think you definitely had it worse.”

Another smile lit his face. “Let’s call it even.”

I returned his smile and nodded. “Deal.”

He started stroking my hair again. “So... you’re really not nervous about graduation tomorrow?” he asked, brows puckering. “Walking up there in front of everyone?”

I snorted. “Hell no. I’m excited. I mean, I spent half the year assuming I wouldn’t graduate. Or even *live*. So I can’t wait to get out there and throw my cap in the air.”

“Fair enough. That actually reminds me,” Jax replied. A conspiratorial gleam had entered his eyes. “I have to tell you something. But you have to promise you won’t tell Erin tomorrow.”

I raised a brow. “You want me to keep a secret from my best friend?”

“It’s a good secret. I promise.”

“Okay. What is it?”

“You know how Brent’s uncle offered him that internship at his company in Silicon Valley?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he didn’t want to be away from Erin for so long, so he got his uncle to find him a spot in their Boston office instead. So when she heads there for college in the fall, he’ll be there too.”

My eyes widened. “Oh my god, she’s going to be so happy! She was getting worried about the whole long distance

thing.”

“He’s telling her right after graduation.” Jax placed a finger over my lips. “That’s why we have to keep quiet about it for now. Don’t want to ruin the surprise.”

“Got it.” I yawned and pretended to gobble up Jax’s finger. Then I stretched and took a deep breath. “Remember all that sneaking around they used to do?”

“Yeah.” Jax let out a snort of amusement. “I can’t believe we didn’t see it for so long.”

“Me neither. I’m so glad they finally admitted they’re together,” I said. “There’s only so many times Erin can fake food poisoning.”

“That really is her go-to move, isn’t it?”

I grinned. “Yeah. It got to the point where I just assumed she was lying and sneaking off to bang Brent in a broom closet every time she said she had a stomachache or headache.”

“To be fair... we didn’t exactly have the greatest start to our relationship either, did we?” Jax said, arching a brow.

I tapped a finger on my chin and pretended to think deeply. “You mean you don’t think actively threatening me in a trailer was romantic at all?”

He chuckled and ruffled my hair. “If you aren’t careful, I might have to threaten you again.”

“Oh yeah? With what?”

His hand moved down between my legs. “Another orgasm.”

I feigned shock and dismay. “Oh, no! Not that!”

Jax slid down the bed so that his head was between my thighs, looking up at me with a mischievous smirk. I spread my legs as wide as possible and let him have his way, raking my hands through his hair and sighing with bliss as he worked his magic with his tongue. He always made me feel so fucking good. So amazingly *alive*.

It was a wonderful feeling; being alive and feeling my heart race. When I went up on that cliff five months ago, I genuinely thought I was going to die. I wanted to fight until my last breath, but in the end I was still certain it would be the last—out there in the freezing rain as I plummeted to the jagged rocks at the bottom.

Thanks to Jax, that didn't happen. I survived the harrowing experience, and the only scars I was left with were mental ones. I wasn't going to let them destroy me, and I planned on being there for Jax just as much as he'd been there for me when I needed him.

There were still a couple of dark clouds hanging over our lives—mostly because everyone knew who we were and what had happened, leading to us *still* being the number one gossip topic in the country all these months later—but the storm had passed. We could easily get through the rest together.

We could get through *anything* together.

I arrived in Crown Point last September with a heavy heart, scared that I'd never fit in because I wasn't rich like everyone else in town. Now, my heart was still heavy, but not with fear or regret. With love.

Meeting Jax and being with him was more than I ever could've wished for. He loved me and looked out for me even when I was barely capable of loving myself, and I knew that

was going to last forever. He was my rock. My savior and protector.

I was the luckiest girl in the whole damn world.

EPILOGUE

JAX

“KINSEY HOLLAND!”

Pride swelled in my chest as I watched Kinsey step across the stage to accept her diploma. I cheered my lungs out along with Erin, who was sitting a few spots down from me as we waited for our own names to be called.

Kinsey looked over her shoulder and flashed me a sassy smile before turning back to face the camera for her graduation photo with the principal of Woodsen’s Bay High. Then she stepped off the stage and ran over to the edge of the audience to greet her mom and Paul.

My phone vibrated in my pocket a minute later. It was her.

Kinsey: You look really hot up there...

Me: Not as hot as you strutting across that stage a minute ago. Even in that robe, I couldn’t stop staring at your ass.

Kinsey: Wow, pervert! I meant you look hot temperature-wise. It’s a billion degrees outside today. I’m sweating so much under this robe.

Me: Liar. I know what you really meant. PS. If you’re sweating so much, just take the robe off ;)

Kinsey: *Probably not a good idea. With the robe off, people are more likely to notice that I didn't wear any underwear today.*

Me: *I know you're still lying but holy fuck.... You little tease. Just wait until I'm off this stage...*

My name was finally called a moment later. Kinsey clapped and whooped down in the audience as I headed over to the principal to grab my diploma and pose for the photo. When I reached the other side of the stage a few seconds later, she was there to greet me, gorgeous green eyes gleaming with pride.

“We did it!” she said. “We actually managed to graduate!”

“I’m just as surprised as you are,” I said with a teasing grin. Then I shook my head. “Nah, just kidding. You’re smart as hell. You could graduate under any conditions.”

“So could you.” She wrapped her arms around me in a tight hug. “God, I can’t believe it’s actually over!”

“Honestly, me neither.” I drew back to plant a kiss on her forehead. “It totally flew by.”

“I guess time flies when you’re—” She paused and tilted her head to one side. “Getting arrested for murder, exposing gross PTO scandals, and falling off cliffs.”

I chuckled. “Apparently, yeah.”

We watched and cheered as Bobbi and Erin received their diplomas. Then I grabbed Kinsey’s hand and led her away from the edge of the stage.

“Where are we going?” she asked, eyes wide with confusion. “We’re going to miss the rest of the ceremony.”

“This’ll only take a minute,” I replied, leading her to a thick oak tree several yards away from the sports field where the ceremony was being held. “I was going to wait, but I don’t want to anymore.”

“Wait for what?”

I didn’t reply until we were safely behind the tree in a private little spot. Then I took a black velveteen box out of my pocket and popped it open. “I got you a graduation gift.”

Kinsey’s mouth dropped open in shock as she stared down at the green gemstone glimmering on the silver ring.

“Don’t worry, it’s not *that* kind of ring, so you don’t need to say anything,” I said. “I know we’re only eighteen, so we should probably finish college and figure out our lives before we think about getting married. But I promise you... that kind of ring *is* coming one day.”

“Oh my god, sorry!” Kinsey said, vehemently shaking her head. “I wasn’t shocked because the thought of getting engaged to you horrifies me. It doesn’t at all. I was just wondering how you could afford such a beautiful ring!”

I grinned. “Well, I know your mom didn’t want us to work while we were still at school, but I secretly picked up a bit of early-morning football coaching work for some of the younger guys. I’ve been saving up just for this.”

“Jax, it’s amazing. Thank you so much.” Kinsey’s cheeks flushed as she accepted the ring. “I love it.”

“I love *you*.”

“I love you too.” She stood on her tiptoes to kiss me. Then she pulled back. “Oh my god. I just thought of something.”

“What?”

“If we actually get married one day... will I have to change my name to Kinsey Kingsley?”

I laughed. “Maybe we should just invent a whole new surname for ourselves. Or you could keep your own name.”

“I guess we have a while to think about it,” she said, admiring the ring on her right hand.

“Yeah. But like I said...” I paused and winked. “A proper ring is definitely coming one day.”

“Glad to hear it,” she said, eyes sparkling. “Anyway, should we get back to the ceremony before they send out a search party?”

“Yup.” I smiled and took her hand in mine. “Let’s go.”

I stole another glance at the ring on Kinsey’s other hand as we walked, heart lifting with pride. I didn’t have a cent left in my bank account after buying it for her... and I didn’t regret it one bit.

Growing up, I never had to worry about money. Hell, I never even had to *think* about it. Then, when all the shit went down with my dad and the PTO, and all our accounts and assets were stripped from us, I started to worry about how things would turn out. But it turned out I didn’t have to worry at all, because being with Kinsey made me come to a realization.

Money was very useful, but it didn’t make you rich in the end. It was people who made you truly rich. People who loved and cared for you. People who’d always be there for you.

I had that sort of love in spades thanks to Kinsey, and I’d never felt richer or luckier. She was worth everything in the world to me.

High school was over for us now, and this chapter in our lives was ending, but we still had a lifetime of other chapters to experience together.

I couldn't wait.

THE END

WANT A BONUS CHAPTER TO SEE WHAT KINSEY AND JAX ARE UP to a few years down the track? Get it here by signing up to my newsletter: <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/ck4j7rukqo>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristin Buoni is the shared pen name of bestselling dark romance author Stella Hart and her romance-loving sister-in-law, K, who has always wanted to write something (especially angsty high school bully romances with tinges of mystery and suspense!).

S and K both love to come up with fun ideas and gut-wrenching twists, so it was only a matter of time before they decided to team up and write books together. When they aren't plotting, reading, or writing, they're hanging out with their cats and bingeing their favorite TV shows.

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