

UC Riverside

UCR Honors Capstones 2025-2026

Title

MY FLESH & BLOOD

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1kj3c4nr>

Author

Lamberson, Isabella

Publication Date

2026-06-15

MY FLESH & BLOOD

By

Isabella Alexandra Lamberson

A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

October 28, 2025

University Honors

University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

Dr. Susan Straight

Department of Creative Writing

Dr. Begoña Echeverría, Howard H Hays, Jr. Chair

University Honors

ABSTRACT

This literary fiction novel follows a young woman, Delilah O’Conner, from Riverside to Chicago as she survives a journey with her schizophrenic mother and searches for her missing father. As a child, Delilah was told her father died on a business trip to Chicago. When Delilah returns home from work to find the apartment she shares with Ma is trashed, she soon discovers a haunting secret: Her father is alive, and Ma’s only connection to him is a burner phone he left behind. Aided by Coop, their neighbor with a haunted past, the trio take a trip to Chicago where Delilah intends to find her father and bridge the gap that time and distance had created. However, when Delilah receives a call on the burner phone from her half-sister, Missy, she realizes the circumstances surrounding her father’s disappearance are worse than she feared. As the stress of finding Delilah’s father exacerbates Ma’s mental disorder, Delilah must decide whether finding her father is worth the cost of losing her mother permanently. This novel demonstrates how fatherhood is not always defined by bloodline and explores Delilah and her mother’s strained dynamic—unpacking their history of resentment and desperation for safety in a world where the odds are stacked against them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I must give all glory to God for the production and completion of this project. Blessed be God in His angels and in His saints.

I would not have gotten as far as I did without the support and guidance of my mentor, Dr. Susan Straight. Her advice and encouragement have shaped this novel into what it is today. I have learned a great deal under her mentorship, and I am certain her words will continue to shape how I write into the future.

Thank you to my parents and siblings who have supported me from the first day of my writing journey in my freshman year of high school. Mom and Dad, you have always been excited to hear about what I'm writing; now, you can finally read it!

To Julio, the love of my life; thank you endlessly. You held me accountable when I struggled to sit down and draft this novel. Your love and complete faith in me played a significant role in the completion of this book. *Te amo y te amaré.*

To my good friends: Cori, Lauren, Vibha, and Amanda—You all were there with me during the highs and lows of drafting, always willing to lend your support. I can't thank you four enough for the excitement you've shared with me about my project.

Last, but most certainly not least, I have to thank my high school English teacher, Jonathan Sonoda, for being there with me at the start of my writing journey. You were the first person I ever shared my writing with, and your guidance and belief in me gave me the confidence I needed to develop and hone my craft. I wouldn't be half the writer I am without you. Thank you!

JMJ.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
Table of Contents.	4
Description of Project	5
Motivation & Process	6
Research	8
Conclusion	10
Works Cited	11
<i>My Flesh & Blood</i>	12

Description of Project

This capstone project is the partially edited first draft of a 76,000 word literary novel. It explores themes of found family, broken relationships, and mental disorders, and it mirrors the reflective protagonist from M.L Rio's *If We Were Villains* and the strong center around family present in Barbara O'Neil's *When We Believed in Mermaids*.

The protagonist, Delilah O'Conner, is a 20 year-old woman from Riverside, California. Her voice is written in first person, past tense, and we follow her journey to locate her father after she discovers letters from him to her mother that indicate he is still alive. Growing up, Delilah experienced a reversal in the roles between herself and her mother (Ma) who suffers from schizophrenia. Because Ma has been dependent on Delilah for everything, Delilah's *want*—which is explored in this story—is to keep her mother stable and to minimize as many of her episodes as possible. However, when she discovers that her father is not dead, as Ma had told her growing up, she believes that finding him will give her answers she needs as to why he left in the first place and that he may be able to give Ma the help she needs. What Delilah really *needs*, she will discover over the course of the story, is to recognize that she is not failing Ma by prioritizing her own life and happiness.

We follow a second character's life in this book as well: Missy Hughes, Delilah's older half-sister. Missy is on the cusp of marriage to her fiancé, Roman Sharpe, and she lives in Chicago with her parents. After her mom discovers a burner phone under the floorboards in the master bedroom, she entrusts it to Missy in hopes of learning more about what her husband, Missy's father, does for a living. After she gives into curiosity, Missy calls the one phone number listed in the phone; this leads her to discover Delilah, and when the two women run into each other at a bar in Chicago, Missy is determined to do everything she can to protect her family by

preventing Delilah from meeting their father. Later in the story, after Missy has tried her best to keep her family from finding out Delilah is in Chicago, her father discovers the burner phone. Ironically, by wedging herself between Delilah and their father, Missy's family splinters deeply when the secret is revealed. Missy learns that it is not her responsibility to shelter her father from the decisions he made in the past; it is up to him to heal the marriage and family that he has broken.

Motivation & Process

I first had the idea for this book during my second year of college. Originally, the story was going to depict Delilah O'Conner as the atheistic, rebellious daughter of a schizophrenic mother, who had religious paranoia because of her condition. Delilah was going to meet a boy named Emmett, who would show her a side of Catholicism she had never experienced before because of her mother's extreme habits and interpretations of religion. As one can see, this was meant to be a story about a young woman's journey to finding faith despite her circumstances. However, as the story progressed and I dove deeper into my first draft—which I have since dubbed my “zero draft” because it turned out to be more of a character study than a cohesive novel—I realized this was a story more so focused on Delilah's relationship with her mother, with her absent father, and with the concept of family. Faith faded into the background, disappearing from the novel entirely, and it transformed into something completely different.

That was when Missy popped into existence. I never thought this book would become a polyphonic novel—a story told in more than one voice—but Missy showed up one day in my mind as Delilah's half-sister. Her life was very dissimilar from Delilah's, as she was preparing for marriage and believed her family life was completely intact, unlike her half-sister's. From there, the story evolved into more than a book about a mother and a daughter; it became entirely

involved with the concept of family, both natural and found, and I was deeply invested in the sisters' relationship in how it was impacted by the decisions of their father.

In regards to the overall writing process, I had a goal starting out of writing at least 1,500 words per day. Taking the time to sit down and write was very difficult, so I broke my time up into 30 minute "sprints", so to speak, where I would write for 30 minutes without pause and stop definitively at the 30 minute mark. I would return later, after a decent break, to continue writing. It reached a point in my routine where returning to the project after having already written became harder than getting myself to write in the first place, so I decided I would keep the 30 minute timer, but after it went off, I would restart it and continue writing. It tricked my brain into feeling like I was agreeing to write for only 30 minutes, but I inevitably wrote for at least an hour to meet my goal.

This quarter, I met weekly with my mentor, Dr. Susan Straight, to discuss progress and revisions. I sent her the first ten chapters of my book during the summer, which she revised and returned to me at the start of the Fall 2025 quarter. I implemented the revisions over the course of 2.5 weeks, as well as further revisions for two extra chapters she agreed to offer suggestions for, and will submit my project for review during the fifth week of the quarter. During the time Professor Straight has mentored me, she lent me several books, two of which I believe helped me greatly to develop Delilah's voice and the character dynamics in my novel: *The Guest* by Emma Cline, and *When We Believed in Mermaids* by Barbara O'Neil. The protagonist in *The Guest* had a unique voice that matched strongly with Delilah's character, and I drew inspiration from it to guide her dialogue and way of perceiving the world. O'Neil's novel captured a painfully beautiful portrait of a broken family, and I was inspired by her technique of using flashbacks and specificity to draw out the complexities of the O'Connors and the Hughes in *My Flesh & Blood*.

Research

A good deal of research went into learning about the plot structure of this novel and schizophrenia symptoms/the impact of having a schizophrenic mother on a child.

In regards to plot, I structured my story according to the “Golden Fleece” genre from Jessica Brody’s *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel*. My book followed a traditional Three Act Structure—a narrative consisting of a set up, confrontation, and resolution—containing a few elements distinct to the “Golden Fleece” genre: a road, a team, and a prize (Brody). The road in *My Flesh & Blood* is the literal road Delilah takes to find her father (as well as the psychological road she traverses as she reconciles loving her mother and having to leave her), the team consists of Delilah, Ma, and their neighbor, Coop, and the *perceived* prize will be Delilah finding her father. The true prize won’t be Delilah finding her father, as she will discover: it will be the healing journey she takes with her mother along the way.

As I have no personal experience with schizophrenia, nor having a schizophrenic parent, I delved into research articles regarding the experience of children who had either a schizophrenic mother or father. There are two studies in particular that shaped how I approached writing Ma’s character and Delilah’s interpretation of Ma’s actions.

The first of these is a qualitative study entitled, “The Experience of Growing Up With a Parent With Schizophrenia-A Qualitative Study” by Nieto-Rucian, Vanesa, et al. This study was with 6 participants, all who are adults (between the ages of 28-37) with schizophrenic parents. 3 participants were women; 3 were men—5 had schizophrenic mothers, and 1 had a schizophrenic father. The first author (of Spanish origin, and who also has a schizophrenic mother) performed interviews with each participant regarding how their parents’ mental illness affected their

childhood and maturity. There were three common themes discovered in this study: role change and loss, a prison of silence, and “Who am I?”

This source targeted the focus of my story: the relationship between a daughter and her schizophrenic mother. Quotes from the participants gave me an idea as to the grief and suffering children of schizophrenic parents endured. This source aided me in characterizing Delilah effectively. Because I do not have firsthand experience with this mental disorder, let alone with a parent suffering from it, this source enabled me to enter my character’s headspace and see the world through her eyes. Delilah experiences a sense of role change/reversal where she has become her mother’s parent. She is responsible for caring for her and, as a result, feels overwhelmed at the idea of doing so for the rest of Ma’s life. This aspect of their relationship introduces conflict and tension: Ma does not want Delilah to ever leave her side, but Delilah cannot handle this responsibility for much longer than she has already had to.

The second study, entitled, “Parenting Skills of Patients with Chronic Schizophrenia” by Rabha, Anjumoni, et al., assessed the parenting skills of 51 patients with schizophrenia compared to 51 healthy parents (along with their children). They were assessed using the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire meant to measure five dimensions of parenting. The results concluded that the parenting skills of patients with schizophrenia were significantly lower than those of healthy parents. It was found that a “Higher severity of residual positive and negative symptoms in patients with schizophrenia is associated with lower corporal punishment.”

Moreover, the children of schizophrenic parents were also able to assess their parents and recorded similar responses to those of their parents. Recognizing that children of schizophrenic parents are able to recognize how their parents’ parenting skills are not as developed as their healthy counterparts gave me the foundation I needed to write this into Delilah’s character. After

she was exposed to a world outside of her own home through school, she immediately noticed how different other children's parents treated them. What she thought was normal, she learned, was anything but, and this served to ostracize her from her peers and disconnect from people her age.

Conclusion

This book isn't meant to have a happy ending; I find that most things in life are bittersweet as they end, and this story is no different. Delilah and Missy come from messy families, one more obvious than the other, though both are dysfunctional in their own way. The decisions they must make do not come easily to them, nor do many difficult decisions we must make in this life. That being said, the choices are difficult because they *shape* who they are, force them outside of their comfort zones, and make them, ultimately, more human.

My hope is that anyone who reads this first draft of my book can find a piece of themselves within one of these characters—something to connect with, something that feels like home.

Works Cited

- Brody, Jessica. *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel: The Last Book on Novel Writing You'll Ever Need*. New York, Ten Speed Press, 2018.
- Cline, Emma. *The Guest*. New York, Random House, 2023.
- O'Neil, Barbara. *When We Believed in Mermaids*. Washington, Lake Union Publishing, 2019.
- Nieto-Rucian, Vanesa, et al. "The Experience of Growing Up With a Parent With Schizophrenia-A Qualitative Study." *Qualitative Psychology* (Washington, D.C.), vol. 6, no. 3, 2019, pp. 254–67, <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000112>.
- Rabha, Anjumoni, et al. "Parenting Skills of Patients with Chronic Schizophrenia." *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2021, pp. 58–65, https://doi.org/10.4103/psychiatry.IndianJPsychiatry_107_20.
- Rio, M.L. *If We Were Villains*. New York, Flatiron Books, 2017.

Word Count: 72,493

MY FLESH & BLOOD

by

Isabella Lamberson

Adult

Literary Fiction

CHAPTER ONE

Delilah

2015

For a week straight, I walked to school during a thunderstorm. My tennis shoes absorbed the water like sponges, squeaking on the concrete hall where the janitor had forgotten to lay out long black mats so kids wouldn't fall. I entered the classroom while the projector whirled, casting an episode of Bill Nye on the whiteboard. Mrs. Pérez knew, by this point, to expect me thirty minutes late; she watched me find my seat near her desk and sling my backpack across the back of my chair. The girl on my left—Janet—reached over and poked it with a pale, dry finger. Water dripped in a steady cadence, forming a thin puddle behind my seat. Janet wrinkled her nose. "Someone is going to *slip*," she told me.

"Quiet, Janet," Mrs. Pérez said, but her eyes were on me. I didn't like the look in them. It said: *Different. Unlucky. Poor Thing*. I tucked wet strands of my hair deeper into the hood of my sweatshirt, wrung out the hem as the video came to an end, and jammed my hands under my thighs to warm them.

Mrs. Pérez didn't call on me for questions at the end of the video. Her attention skipped over the top of my head like a flat stone over water. When it came time for independent work toward the end, Janet leaned over, bouncy curls dipping in the water that had leaked from my sleeves onto the desk. "Why are you *always* late?" she asked. "Doesn't your mommy drive you?"

Ma doesn't have a car, I wanted to tell her, but I looked at the floor instead, and squeaked my shoe on the ground. Janet's face shriveled in annoyance. "Weirdo."

A foot kicked my shin beneath the table—Janet's twin sister, Hannah, who sat across from me. She sneered. "Her mommy *can't* drive her because she's too busy talking to her imaginary friends."

The girls giggled, and Mrs. Pérez glanced up from her computer. "*Girls*," she said, penciled brows arched. "Do I need to send you to Mr. Steven's office? Or are you going to behave and leave Delilah alone?"

I flushed red under the weight of my classmates' glares and counted the seconds until Mrs. Pérez would send us out for recess. Soon enough, the bell rang, but as I reached for my backpack, she called out, "Delilah? Stay behind for a moment, please."

"Oooooooo," Janet crooned. "Someone's in trouble."

"Shut up," I hissed, pushing past her, thinking the sooner I got this over with, the sooner I could go to the bathroom and grab paper towels to dry my things.

"Pull up a chair, Delilah," Mrs. Pérez said. Her soft voice sent chills crawling down my skin, but I did as she asked. "You've been late since the school year started, and we haven't been able to get in touch with your mom," she said, studying me as if seeking a reaction. She took in my wet clothes. "Did you walk to school this morning?"

I shrugged.

“Have you been walking to school?”

I crossed my arms and looked out the door where Janet and her posse shared Fruit Roll-Ups at the lunch tables, long ropes of colorful leather strung between them.

“Delilah, how are things at home?”

The question caught me off guard.

That was the first time I remember lying to an authority figure. I told her Ma liked to take me with her to the grocery store to pick out things for dinner, that Ma played music in the house every morning to wake me up. I told her I ate three meals a day, and if I was good, Ma took me to get ice cream at La Michoacana.

And things weren’t bad. Not really. But Mrs. Pérez didn’t believe me. She sent me to Mrs. Meyer, the school counselor, who didn’t believe me, either. “You shouldn’t be walking an hour to school at your age,” she’d say. “That’s why we have a bus system, honey.”

I couldn’t tell her that Ma never let me drive with anybody. She said she’d been safe enough walking to school when she was little, and that’s how I would travel, too. As it was, her paranoia tended to spike when I had to leave for school every morning. Ma couldn’t stand to let me out of her sight. It was more than separation anxiety; she held a bone-deep fear that I’d leave her and never return. Years back, there were days on end where she’d call the front office and tell them I was sick just to keep me home. They stopped believing her, after a time, so she made me drink 100 proof whiskey to get me coughing while she spoke with the lady. It was only after the school threatened to contact CPS that Ma relinquished me to elementary school.

I knew Ma wasn’t like the other parents. I didn’t have friends, but my classmates told me they had moms who packed their lunches and dropped them off in shiny SUVs. Their dads came

home from work to help them with math problems while dinner burbled in crockpots. Most kids weren't unkind to me, unlike Janet, but they were confused.

"Your mom talks to walls?"

"What's schiz-o-phrenia?"

"What's it like having a dead dad?"

After school, Mrs. Pérez sent me to the bus stop with a spare umbrella she'd had in her car. The rain had stopped an hour ago, but she had pressed it into my hands anyway saying, "Just in case." I waited until she disappeared back into the front office to head home.

When I pushed the apartment door open, I found Ma rocking herself on the couch, arms wrapped around her legs, her head bent on her knees. Backpack clutched in my hands, I froze. Her skin was flushed red and coated in a damp layer of sweat. At her side, our answering machine blinked a green light, repeating a message:

Hi, Ms. O'Conner, this is Mrs. Meyer from Delilah's school. I'm calling to inform you that your daughter is now required to use our bus system until a safer mode of transportation can be provided...

I dropped my backpack on the floor, and that was when Ma finally met my gaze.

She didn't move, only stared at me from her perch on the sofa. "Bus," she said in a hoarse voice. "The bus? Can't be right—not supposed to..." She trailed off, murmuring, shaking her head.

Oxygen caught in my throat. I wished I could melt into the floorboards. Slowly, as if her joints were aching and it pained her to move, she unwrapped her arms from her legs and rose, approaching. "You said something," she whispered. "You said, you told them, but—no." She grabbed at her hair and started toward me. "No, no, *no!*"

I didn't think. I ran.

Out the front door, down the hall, to the elevator. I punched the button twenty times before the doors parted sluggishly and Ma rounded the corner. I took off further down the hall to the staircase, too scared to scream for help, shaking. I didn't realize I was crying until I hit the first floor.

"Delilah!" Ma shouted from close behind.

I dove behind a parked car, crawling under its belly. My knees scraped the asphalt, my hands bled. I bit my bottom lip to keep from making a noise. *It will be over soon*, I told myself. *She'll leave, and I'll run away—I'll tell Mrs. Meyer everything and never come back.* Ma stumbled into view, bare feet coated in a thin layer of dirt and blackened by the street.

"Where...?" she called. "Not safe—Delilah. Safe, safe." She stopped in front of me, and I held my breath. My skin crawled at her proximity, at the memory of the hate in her gaze, the fear. The paranoia.

"Delilah!" She moved further into the parking lot; her feet spun in circles as she scanned the array of cars. Her voice took on a nervous tone. "Afraid? Don't be scared. Dee, little one."

I grabbed a fistful of loose asphalt in my hand. Ma whirled in my direction at the sound of rocks clicking together, and she bent down at my eye level. When she saw me, I screamed.

She sprinted to me before I could budge and grabbed my feet, dragging me out by my ankles. My shirt rode up, and rocks, bits of glass, and twigs scored my belly. She threw me over her shoulder with inhuman strength, and even though I kicked and beat at her back, she lugged me up the stairs.

No one had left their apartment at the sound of my terror; no one had looked out the window to see what happened. I often wonder how my life would have changed if someone had driven into the parking lot or peered over the balconies above.

Ma slammed the front door and locked it, bolting it at the top where I couldn't reach. She kicked my discarded backpack across the kitchen floor and set me down in the bathroom. By then, I'd wet my pants, and snot poured from my nose.

Ma shook her head, nose crinkled. "Could have been hit by a car, could have run away, could have left, left, *died* like your dad." She turned the dial on the bathtub.

She reached to remove my shirt, and I swatted her hand. "I hate you! Leave me alone—I *hate you!*"

Her hand whipped across my cheek, and I fell back on the toilet seat, landing on the floor. Ma made a strained noise, muttering "*No, no, don't be hurt, no pain, no pain.*" Stunned and bleary-eyed, I barely noticed when she tugged my pants and underwear off, tore the shirt from over my head, and plunked me in the bathtub. I sobbed quietly, curled in the fetal position, my stomach, hands, and knees aching. She tossed my bloodied clothing in the trash and rifled through the cabinet below the sink, retrieving a bottle of rubbing alcohol.

"Go away," I said, but the words were garbled and distorted. My head spun and my cheek smarted from the slap. She unscrewed the cap and poured the clear liquid onto the soft flesh of my stomach.

Pain. Blinding pain—a scream erupted from my throat and I tried to smack the bottle from her hand. Instead, she gripped my wrists in one hand, vise-like. Excess liquid splattered again on my stomach, and my body shook from the adrenaline, from the pain, from the impossibly rapid beating of my heart. She repeated the application on my knees. I lay motionless

in the tub while Ma worked suds into my skin, tinting the water red. A pinkish bubble floated above my ankles, and I focused on it. Until it popped.

CHAPTER TWO

Delilah

I woke to the sound of thumping.

A constant, heavy thud on my door, like someone was lazily bumping into it over and over again. I took a moment. Stared at the ceiling, counting the tiny pieces of putty I'd used to put up glow in the dark stars a decade ago when I cared about that sort of thing. The stars were gone, now, but the putty refused to follow suit.

"Ma?" I called out. Maybe I'd get lucky this time, and she would emerge from her sleepwalking daze, return to the comfort of her bed. The thumping didn't so much as falter. She jostled the doorknob.

"It's locked," I muttered, swinging my legs over the bed. What time was it—like five in the morning? My bleary gaze traveled over the top of my nightstand, searching for the alarm clock's glare. *4:17 AM*. Eh, close enough.

It wasn't the first time Ma had sleepwalked, but usually it happened after a stressful day. Had anything happened? I sighed, rolling my neck, and stood. Yeah—dinner. In-N-Out had fucked up her order again, sending her into a spiral about cheese. It ended with her deciding to turn our kitchen into a Picasso painting of Diet Coke and ketchup. *I really need to start checking her burgers before I leave the Drive-Thru.*

When the thudding didn't stop after another minute, I walked to the door and unlocked it.

Ma stumbled into the room, zombie-like, mumbling incoherently. I couldn't bring myself to move. Should I turn on the lights? Would that freak her out? I barely made out her figure in the dark; a sliver of light from the walkway outside the apartment caught on the strands of Ma's Irish hair, slipping down her body as she moved, revealing the stained white robe, the pink bunny slippers I'd bought her when I got my first job. Her eyes were closed, heavy-lidded, but she seemed to be searching for something. She opened drawers in my desk with a slow, dragging motion, shuffling the papers inside. Most were notices and bills that I'd paid, maybe an occasional photo or two from my childhood that I wanted to hold onto. She grabbed stacks of paper and held them in her arms, turning in circles before beelining to the door.

I followed her into the kitchen, taking my phone off the charger on my desk. My phone's flashlight switched on with the click of a button, and I slid the dial down to the lowest setting to not wake her. The first time she sleepwalked, I'd startled her in a fit of panic and she had woken up in such a state of confusion that she sat on the floor for an hour in tears. I didn't know if this was a common reaction for a sleepwalking person, but Ma's schizophrenia tended to heighten a lot of her emotions and leave her in a constant state of paranoia.

Now, she sifted through the junk drawer in the kitchen, pulling out phone cords, loose batteries, and old pens. “Where?” she muttered, the first sentence I was able to make out. The rest of her words fell into a jumble.

“What are you looking for, Ma?” I whispered to myself, tracking her progress. Even in a state of unconsciousness, she knew her way around the apartment. She sidestepped the table and pushed in the chair I had left sticking out after dinner. When pieces of paper fell from her arms, she’d stoop and pick them up. It wasn’t until she finished with the kitchen that she began to whine, a child-like sound, her voice laden with distress. Clearly, whatever she was looking for, she didn’t feel like she’d found.

She returned to her room, brushing past me. Her proximity sent chills over my skin, raising goosebumps. It didn’t get easier, watching her like this, asleep and utterly unaware of my presence. I doubted it ever would. Though the light was off in her room, her bathroom light flickered in the corner of my vision. She didn’t usually turn on lights when sleepwalking. Was this a first? Or had she left it on before going to bed? My flashlight revealed articles of clothing strewn about the room, drawers pulled loose from her wardrobe and dumped on the floor. If she wasn’t sleepwalking right in front of me, I would’ve thought someone had broken into our apartment. Ma tripped over a pair of lavender heels and bumped into her desk, knocking over a picture frame. It slapped the wood with a sudden clap of noise.

Fuck.

She inhaled sharply and blinked. My flashlight illuminated the signs of consciousness creeping back in—the slight furrow between her brows, furiously blinking eyes. She took in the disheveled state of her room, and her lips parted. When she noticed me, she approached slowly. “Delilah?”

“You were sleepwalking. I was just making sure you were okay.”

“My room...?”

“I don’t know,” I said. What could she have been looking for that she felt the need to ransack her bedroom? “You were trying to find something, Ma. Do you remember?” I winced, but it was too late. Now Ma was digging her hands in her hair, stress taut in her shoulders.

“I don’t—I don’t know why...” she spoke between heaving breaths, trying to piece herself back together, back to reality. “This *mess!*”

“I’ll take care of it.” I placed a hand on her shoulder and steered her to her bed. “Lay down, Ma. It’ll be fine. It always ends up being fine, right? These things happen.”

Ma swiped tears from her cheeks. “I’m sorry, Dee. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry—”

“Don’t worry about it, okay? You’re fine, everything’s fine.”

She sniffed and shook her head, pulling the covers back. “I can’t remember anything.”

Are you sure? The question was on the tip of my tongue, but Ma hadn’t stopped crying, shaking, and I knew if I pushed her more than I already had, she’d break down further. “Okay, Ma. It’s okay, just rest. I’ll put things away.”

“I don’t want you to touch anything.”

She stared at me from her bed, the duvet pulled up to her chest, her robe discarded on the floor. “It’s my room.”

“Really, Ma, it’s no big deal—”

“Are you deaf?” Her gaze pierced me, pinned me down. The dim flashlight revealed cheeks tinged red from embarrassment. My mouth snapped shut. A mood swing. Or I’d taken things too far. As years wore on, it became more difficult to tell the difference. You’d think it

would be the reverse—that I’d be able to make sense of it all—but there was nothing predictable about her. It didn’t seem like I could do much of anything right.

“Only trying to help,” I muttered.

“I don’t need help. I’m fine.” She sat there staring at me, lips pursed. Waiting for me to leave, I realized and turned off the flashlight. Her face was instantly shrouded, but the bit of light peeking through the cracked bathroom door traced a silhouette around her figure. I stood there awkwardly for another few seconds before shuffling my way to the door. I made to turn off the bathroom light, but Ma hissed, “Leave it.”

I wish I’d never opened my door, I thought. I wish I’d left you to wake up on your own. I wish you knew how lucky you were to still have me around. “Good night, Ma,” I said instead, more of a rush of air than anything else. She said nothing when I shut her door and returned to my room.

When things with Ma got tough, I’d lie in bed and wonder how different my life would be if Pa hadn’t died.

Ma told me it had happened before I was born, that he had left one week in her third trimester for a conference in Chicago and three weeks later his body had turned up in a ditch somewhere downtown. That was all she knew for sure, she told me. “Couldn’t afford a funeral.” At five years old, the first time she recounted this story to me, I imagined they had settled Pa back in the ditch, pearly bones in a muddied navy suit, rats nesting in his empty skull. As if the undertaker decided he wasn’t worthy of a funeral his wife couldn’t afford.

Fifteen years after Ma told me he was dead, I still didn’t know what to make of him. Would he be glad I hadn’t left Ma? Or would he beg me to find a better life? Would he tell me there was more out there than working at all hours of the night just to get by? But Ma wasn’t

some burden I could toss over my shoulder like an empty wrapper. We were family, and that had to mean something. It had to, or nothing meant anything at all.

A rattling sound like pills in a bottle broke the silence. I held my breath. Ma was in her bathroom now—the door hinges whined when she pushed it open, the medicine cabinet slammed shut. She rifled through cabinets, her hand smacking the back wall with a thud that echoed in my room. We shared a wall between my room and her bathroom which left very little to the imagination. But it was the urgency with which she dug through things that kept me up for the next ten minutes, the brushing aside of the shower curtain and heavy scraping that made it seem like she was lifting the lid to the toilet's tank. She was looking for something again, and she was awake.

Which meant she'd lied to me when I asked her if she remembered what she was trying to find. She had lied, and she was trying to keep whatever it was a secret. Once she returned to bed, I wondered if she had found what she was looking for and if I would soon discover it myself.

When morning came, I padded into the kitchen and turned on the coffee machine. Ma's snores echoed down our short hallway and masked the sound of the machine preheating, its orange light blinking and taunting. As if it knew the lack of sleep I'd had and took pleasure in making me wait. I grabbed a Disney princess mug out of the cupboard above my head—I'd picked it up at a Goodwill years back when taking Ma out in public wasn't as much of a chore. Now, it was a once-a-week ordeal that our neighbor, Coop, helped me out with.

My slippers clicked against cheap tile as I walked to the balcony facing the pool in our apartment complex, and the city beyond. Through gaps in the blinds, I watched passersby

roaming the waking streets: sleepy students with bookbags on their shoulders, a homeless man pushing a large yellow Food4Less shopping cart, a young mom and daughter walking their labrador puppy along the sidewalk. I imagined myself waiting for the bus with a heavy load of books in my backpack, scrolling on Instagram, one eye looking out for danger in the early morning. What I wouldn't give to go to college. Get a dorm, pretend my life was fine. Once I'd graduated high school, it didn't seem like there was anything left for me anymore, especially not with Ma getting worse as the years dragged on.

"You ever think about going to school?" Coop asked me once after he'd spent the night keeping an eye on Ma so I could work. Coop was a fifty-something mechanic who worked at Gilberto's Auto Parts. He had a beerbelly from hours spent flicking through baseball game reruns with a Modelo in hand and treated cigar smoke and engine oil like cologne. You'd be hard-pressed to find a more unlikely trio: Coop, Ma, and me.

"School?" I'd repeated. "Not in the cards for me."

He'd shrugged, a kaleidoscope of colors flickering across his face from the TV. "Think it'd be good for you. You know—to do something new."

Something new, I thought now, listening to coffee pour into the mug behind me. *Not with Ma ransacking the place*. I scanned the drawers she'd rifled through last night, tugging them open myself to peer inside. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing worthy enough to be concerned over. But Ma *had* been agitated, antsy—more than usual. Secretive. She was notoriously bad at keeping things from me. Her disorder meant things came to light one way or another, whether she wanted them to or not. But I'd misjudged her before, and there was clearly something going on. I needed to find a way to get her out of the apartment so I could search her room. For all I knew, had a gun or taser stored away somewhere, or an equally dangerous object. As silly as it

sounded—Coop and I knew better than to give her anything like that—the 1% chance of it being true kept me on edge.

I glanced at the mantel where we kept a framed photo of Pa. It was the only picture of his we had in the apartment, and it depicted him standing outside of his company's building on his first day of work. He held a brown leather briefcase that matched his suit, grinning ear to ear. Black hair peppered with gray, a clean-shaven face and big, brown eyes—he was exactly what you'd imagine a handsome young businessman to look like. A thin layer of dust coated the frame, and I blew it gently, sending particles into the air. How was it that he'd died in Chicago? He must have been caught in a fray of gang violence. From what I imagined, Pa didn't seem the type to find himself in trouble very often. Maybe that was it. The one time he did find trouble, it overtook him.

So strange.

Like most kids with dead parents, I was always asked if I missed him. I'd never met him before, so I didn't know what to miss. But I did miss the *idea* of him. Ma had had a handful of boyfriends since Pa's death, but I was never able to find a father figure in any of them. Most were junkies, assholes looking for a place to crash. One drunkard of the bunch hit Ma on a couple of occasions: once when he lost his job, and once when she spilled hot bacon grease on his new gray slacks before an interview. It was after the second time that she realized he was freaking me out, and she sent him on his way. Suffice to say, none of the guys held up to the idea I had of Pa. He was a working man, a family man. He came home early from his shifts, if he was able to, for the sole purpose of helping Ma out. He watched football on Sundays but didn't cheer *too* loudly—because he wasn't annoying.

I touched the glass, hovering over his face. “I hope you were perfect.” It would make Ma’s schizophrenia more understandable. And maybe it would make all of this worth it.

Returning to the kitchen, I took my phone out of the front pocket on my pj pants, texting Coop while I grabbed a carton of eggs from the fridge. *Want breakfast?*

Three dots, then: *It’s that time of the week?*

Afraid so. I winced. *Help me out?*

Be there in five.

Down the hall, Ma’s door creaked. She appeared in the entryway, rubbing sleep from her eyes. One side of her face was matted with hair and pillow lines, and she rubbed the hem of her robe’s pocket between forefinger and thumb. It was a little tick she’d developed since quitting cigarettes; she used to keep them in that pocket, and now when she craved them, she rubbed the fabric until her fingers began to hurt. I waited for her to say something, and when she didn’t acknowledge me, I said, “There’s coffee brewing.” I jutted my chin at the coffee machine when she glanced my way. “Want some when it’s ready? Coop’s coming for breakfast.”

She nodded, pausing a moment in thought. Then, she turned on her heel and walked back to her room, the door clicking softly behind her. Odd. Usually rest helped her reset after sleepwalking. I recalled the rattling of pills and shuffling in the bathroom last night. Had she found what she was looking for? Curiosity itched my brain, propelling me to knock on her door and solve the mystery, but I forced myself to pour the coffee instead. If this secret thing was causing Ma stress, I’d figure it out, one way or another.

Two raps on the front door drew me away from cracking eggs over a hot pan. Normally, Ma answered the door, and I waited for her to reemerge from her room. When she didn’t, a groove etched itself between my brows, but I went and let him in. Coop stood in the doorway

wearing jeans and a gray long sleeve with Gilberto's Auto Parts printed on the breastpocket.

"Where's your Ma?" he asked as he walked inside holding an empty coffee mug.

"She's been weird since last night," I said, locking the door. He walked into the kitchen and settled himself at the table with a grunt. "She sleepwalked last night."

"She hasn't done that in months," Coop said, rapping his fingers on the mug. The clink of nails on ceramic filled the apartment, and I took it out of his hands to place it under the coffee machine. "Rough night?"

I thought of the paper towels dripping with soda and burger juices. "Something like that. But this was different—she was looking for something."

"How do you mean?"

"Like—going through all the drawers, tearing the place apart."

"While *sleeping*?"

I crossed my arms.

He sighed, rubbing the stubble under his chin. "I'll see if she mentions anything about it while we're out today. But if you want my two cents, she probably doesn't remember it, and she likely won't do it again."

"What makes you say that?" I scrambled the eggs in the pan, overturning the fluffy mounds.

"I don't know, just..." He trailed off. Looking back, it was moments like these where Coop revealed more of himself than I realized. The way he *knew* things, not just about Ma, but about her disorder. At the time, he wouldn't tell me much about his past, and I wouldn't press. I was just grateful when he offered his help.

"Coop?"

Ma poked her head out of the hallway. I hadn't heard her door open, and I tensed watching her. But she wasn't looking at me—Coop absorbed her focus, and her fingers worried at her pocket again.

“Morning, Bridget,” he said, accepting the coffee mug when I set it in front of him. “Ready for today?”

She nodded. “Groceries, mail, gas, bills...” she listed off a dozen more chores and errands, some that I had forgotten. I made a mental note to buy more laundry detergent for the three loads I had to do today.

Within the next fifteen minutes, I'd assembled eggs, sliced fruit, berries, and microwaved bacon on three plates. We ate in silence, and at the end of the meal, Ma went to her room to take her medication while Coop gathered grocery bags and I checked to make sure the EBT card was in my wallet. Aside from his presence, which calmed Ma, he was also the only person I knew with a functioning car—not that I knew anyone else, really. Once a week, he took us to run errands, and I paid him in meals. He would've driven us around without payment, I knew, but I preferred it this way. It gave Ma and me some company every once in a while.

“Hey, Coop?” I asked as I filled Ma's water bottle, emptying out the Brita. “You think you can hang back with Ma toward the end? There's something I wanna check in her room, but she won't let me if she knows about it.”

He nodded. “Think it has something to do with last night?”

“That's the idea.”

“Sure, yeah. We can grab the mail or something.”

Ma wandered into the kitchen, having donned running shoes and a Dodgers baseball cap Coop bought her for her birthday last year. She was silent and stood off to the side as Coop and I

finished putting things together, wringing her hands, and hummed the “Imperial March” from Star Wars when we packed into Coop’s truck and drove to the Food4Less off Chicago Boulevard. On a Sunday morning, Coop had to hunt for parking like a shark, tailing behind a large family as they strolled back to their RAV4 with two boxes of canned Pepsi and about half a dozen party sized bags of Doritos.

“Here’s your list, Ma.” I passed her a paper slip with produce on it. She liked to shake produce bags out to open them, so I tended to add extra fruits to the list that we didn’t necessarily need, but I knew she’d eat during the week.

We had a system inside the store—I took care of the stuff in the aisles, keeping Ma in sight, while Coop grabbed the meats and household items. Ma had her fun in the produce section, and then we met in the middle. In and out in twenty minutes, then back to the apartment to unload. Every chore and errand followed a consistent schedule. It gave Ma peace, dependability. Once the groceries were stored in cabinets and the fridge (and the table, where Ma kept an ever-growing bowl of Cuties), we filled the tank in Coop’s truck before visiting the CVS pharmacy to pick up Ma’s prescription. The cashier at the pharmacy gave us all blue star stickers, grinning as he pressed them onto the backs of our hands. “Remember that you are all *stars*.” Part of me wondered if he was high, but he had the kind of look about him that just screamed *kindness*, so I accepted the sticker and put it on the back of my wallet when we returned to the car.

By the time we finished picking up Coop’s dry cleaning and picked up lunch, Ma’s energy started to dwindle. She grew agitated, muttering curse words under her breath when we rolled over a speed bump, scratching her forearms. That last one was a habit of hers that I’d tried

to stop by putting wrist braces on her arms or tight long-sleeves, but I found that the best way to calm her was to get rid of the stress. In this case, she needed rest.

“Let’s get the mail now, huh?” I said, watching her in the rearview. “Can you help Coop carry it?”

“Yes, yes, mail, okay, turn the key, open...” She bit her nails, cutting off her words as we pulled back into the apartment complex. Small streams of water poured from Rivergate Apartments’ sign, creating a strange fountain-like ambiance at the front. Someone had left a plastic Big Gulp cup on top of the sign filled with questionable liquid, and I knew I’d likely see the cup for the next month until a passerby decided to do something about it.

“See you soon,” Coop said when I hopped out of his car. Ma watched me go, a slight furrow between her brows, but she quickly forgot me when Coop handed her the mail key.

My keys bounced against my hip as I ascended the stairs to the fourth floor of Building E. The elevator had broken down too many times for me to trust it any longer, and I figured the exercise wouldn’t kill me. I slid the keycard into the slot and shoved our front door open, jogging to Ma’s room.

Since last night, Ma hadn’t bothered to clean, and the afternoon light revealed the true state of things. Pens and pencils were scattered over her desk, books strewn about the room, and I plucked one off the top of her footboard. Her desk chair was overturned, as if it was practicing the downward dog position, and everywhere—*everywhere*—were loose sheets of paper. Some were lined, like from a notebook, and some looked like she’d pulled them straight from the printer.

“What the hell...?” I whispered, reaching for one. I instantly drew my hand back. In the state Ma was in, she’d realize instantly if anything in her room had been moved. Considering

how she was trying desperately to keep me out of here, she'd certainly be paying attention when she returned. I replaced the book on the footboard and tiptoed to her nightstand where, unlike the rest of the room, her drawers were intact, the surface unblemished. A quick tug on the drawer handle—locked.

Of-fucking-course.

Did I have time to pick the lock? I hadn't done something like that in about four or five years, back in high school when I hung out with the druggies who had problems similar to, or worse than, my own. With a huff, I retreated to Ma's bathroom and took one of her bobby pins. I grabbed a paper clip from her desk while I was at it, and knelt in front of the nightstand, peering into the keyhole. In a minute or so, I'd clicked the tumblers into place and wrested the drawer from the nightstand's stiff hold. Re-locking it was a problem for future Delilah.

A dark brown, accordion-looking folder was set at the top of piles of old books, rosaries, paper certificates, and other random trinkets Ma liked to keep close by. Withdrawing it, I sat back on my feet and fished out the papers inside. Most were pieces of lined paper of varying sizes, all written with neat, black-inked handwriting I didn't recognize. Each was dated, most about thirty years back or so, with the most recent right around the time I was born. It wasn't until I skimmed the first one down to the signature at the bottom, my blood running cold, that I figured out what I'd stumbled upon.

Letters.

Letters from Pa.

The words blurred in and out of focus, jumbling together on the page, and I suddenly found it hard to breathe. Whatever I'd imagined Ma keeping secret before, a weapon, a drug, a piece of embarrassing information, now amounted to dust. I had about five minutes until Ma

returned, so I didn't think—I acted, fumbling for my phone and tapping the camera icon on the bottom right corner of the Lock Screen. I centered the camera, snapping picture after picture, front and back, of as many letters as I could. I knew I wouldn't be able to get all of them, so I focused on the oldest and most recent ones, skimming the middle. I wanted to take them and bring them to my room, lock myself in and pore over them, but if these letters were Ma's secret—and they *had* to be—she'd notice their absence.

A text from Coop: *Coming up the stairs now. I'm gonna let her in your apartment and then go to my place.*

Panic fluttered in my throat. I could feel Ma leering at me from behind and whipped my head over my shoulder, taking in the empty hallway. A sound of dread escaped my throat. *Time to go.* I stuffed the papers back in, praying they were in the correct order, and shut them in the drawer. There was no time to lock it—not that I'd be able to with a hairpin and paper clip—so I abandoned Ma's room to stand over the sink with a dishrag over my shoulder, pretending to wash dishes, when the front door squealed open.

Ma had a nose for mischief. It was something I'd realized early on in life when I discovered that it was possible to sneak around when she slept without waking her. I would do the usual, stealing snacks from the cabinets, turning the TV on with the volume low. Ma would rise early in the mornings and lean over my bed, eyes wide as she shook me awake. "You did something," she'd say. The TV remote was in a different place than usual, the multicolored snack clips were mismatched. Once, she'd *counted* the number of Oreos in a bag before bed, unbeknownst to me, and I'd earned a bowl of icy water over my head the following morning.

Now, standing in the entryway, Ma hesitated only a moment before casting the envelopes on the table and hurrying to her bedroom. I winced when I heard the nightstand drawer give without protest.

What would I tell her? I scrambled to think of a lie, something believable, but my head felt like mush. After twenty years of having nothing but a photo to know my own father, I had a piece of him, of his mind and heart. I could hardly think a cohesive sentence, let alone string together a fib Ma wouldn't be able to dissect. I made a split second decision, shutting off the water and hanging the rag on the back of a chair. Before Ma could return, I grabbed my keys from the little rack beside the front door and left.

CHAPTER THREE

Delilah

Barefoot, I jogged down the stairs and across the parking lot, making for the basketball court on the far side of the complex. The entrance was hidden behind rusty dumpsters and overgrown boxwood bushes, and if Ma decided to come after me, I doubted she would know to look here. I jimmied the lock with my key and slipped inside, trotting down the sidewalk pathway and into the field below. Two guys in their twenties were playing a game of HORSE, poking fun at one another, and they hardly noticed my arrival when I crossed to the edge of the field opposite them, crouching in the shade of a large maple tree.

I put my head between my knees, eyes closed, slowing my breaths. Ma would be furious when I returned. I felt like throwing up, but the last thing I needed was to draw attention to myself, so I tipped my head back on the metal railing, counting each breath, watching the steady procession of clouds drift across the sky. My phone buzzed twice in my back pocket; I tugged it out. A text from Ma.

Come back

My heart ached. Had I misread the situation? Would she regret not having shown me the letters? I ground my teeth. No, she had hidden them from me for long enough. Grass tickled my bare legs, pricking my skin, and I plucked a blade, fiddling with it. I swiped out of my messages and opened Photos. Immediately, a wall of images overwhelmed the screen, row after row filled with Pa's letters. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't come across any addressed *to* Pa, only ones he'd written. I would've thought Ma would have those on hand somewhere, considering he was dead, but perhaps she kept them in a separate area. I scrolled to the top of my recent pictures and tapped the first one, zooming in on the first line.

Dear Bridget,

You'll have to forgive me; I've never written letters of this nature to anyone before, but with the lines being down from the storm, this is my last resort to reach you—

Shit. Wasn't this invasive? Maybe so, but reading the words brought Pa to life. He'd written this letter in his own hand, his mind plain on the page. It was the closest thing I had to a true representation of him. At that thought, I hesitated. What if he wasn't anything like what I'd imagined? What if he proved himself to be like the rest of Ma's boyfriends—a drunkard, a fraud, a liar and cheat. Did I want to ruin my image of him? Maybe ghosts were best left in their coffins.

But what if he was just like me? Ma told me nothing about him, save the way he'd died, brutally and with graphic detail, and resentment welled inside me, brimming. Whatever Ma was hiding, it wasn't her secret to keep. She'd deprived me of my father long enough.

Dear Bridget,

You'll have to forgive me; I've never written letters of this nature to anyone before, but with the lines being down from the storm, this is my last resort to reach you. I wish I did not have to leave you now, of all times, but rest assured that I will return in two weeks. And thank you for the jacket. I didn't realize Chicago would be an ice bucket this time of year.

I frowned. Chicago? I checked the date of the letter. *May 19th, 1990*. And this was his first letter? But there were loads more in that stack...I shook my head. It was likely the case that he traveled multiple times to Chicago for work. I was overthinking, obviously.

This would be a fun tradition, wouldn't it? Writing letters. Impractical when I'm home, perhaps, but romantic none the less. I've worried about you quite a bit since I left. I know you have a proclivity to fall into anxious thoughts. It may help you to hear the good things I've encountered on my trip, to lessen your fears. The hotel is always stocked with breakfast in the morning—eggs, pancakes, sausages, fruits, and the like—so, don't stress! I'm eating well. I've been getting to know my coworkers better, too. Hannah, Tim, Kelechi, and Tanya are all kind, and they've got a good marketing strategy going for the launch event that I'm excited about.

Anyway, you don't want to hear all about that. How have you been? I know the last time we spoke, we didn't end things well. I'm sorry for that. I hope you'll forgive me, and we can move on from this minor hiccup. I've learned not to repeat my mistakes, especially when they lead to your stress. When you write me back, please tell me all that is on your mind. I miss hearing your voice, I miss your laughter, your smile. I'll be home soon enough.

Love, always,

Peter

I dropped my hand on my lap, grip loose on the phone. He felt so real, so...human. I longed to hold the papers in my hands, run my fingers over the indents where his pen had traveled. He'd loved Ma. Relief eased the tension in my shoulders, the pressure forming in the back of my head. None of Ma's boyfriends would've had the intelligence to string together cohesive sentences conveying any semblance of emotional depth. I found myself leaning into the possibility that Pa was nothing like them, entirely different on *all* fronts. Would he have loved me? Ma never told me as much. Then again, his passing had broken her in more ways than one, and for that to have happened, she must have loved him very much. I hoped he'd love me too, if he was alive.

I read the next few letters, tears burning the backs of my eyes, and it seemed like that was the one occurrence of him leaving for Chicago. There were spans of time missing, either because I didn't take photos of all the letters, or because he hadn't written her. He mentioned his mistakes quite often, never referring to them directly, but always apologizing. For someone who claimed to not repeat his errors, he seemed to make quite a few of them. *Human*, I thought, nodding to myself. *He's human like the rest of us, flawed.*

I swiped to the last letter, dated in 2005.

Bridget,

I don't know if you will find this letter. I plan to leave it at your bedside, so that you may find it upon waking. You've left me no choice but to take matters into my own hands.

*I wish I'd known years ago what life with you would turn out to be. What's that saying?
Hindsight is 20-20. Whatever the case, I will move on, and I know you'll be fine without me.
Don't try to find me, and please do not write me. I'm leaving this burner phone for emergencies,
for Delilah's sake.*

*I will always love you; I will always love our daughter. But I can't be what you want me
to be, and I'm tired of failing.*

~ Peter

I couldn't breathe, staring at my name scrawled on the page. *Our daughter*. Was there love in those words? Pity? Resentment? Was I the reason he'd left? No—it seemed like Ma had done something. *I can't be what you want me to be*. Ma had pushed him away. And it was *so* like her—to push and push and push.

A sudden realization choked the air from my lungs.

I will move on...

Was Pa alive?

Had Ma lied to me?

I turned my phone off; my face stared back at me from the black screen, a reflection of unfettered shock. Just because they'd had an argument didn't mean Pa was alive. Maybe he really had traveled to Chicago and been murdered, like Ma claimed. I was overcomplicating things, of course. I tried to tell myself that this information changed nothing, but a kernel of hope had already nestled itself into my thoughts, blooming. *What if, what if, what if...*

I needed to talk to Ma—sort this out. Across the field, the boys had stopped playing and were lounging against the basketball post, squirting water into their mouths from reusable

Gatorade bottles. As when I'd arrived, they didn't take notice when I sidled around the fence back to the main entrance. I was surprised by the lack of follow-up texts from Ma, and she didn't appear to be roaming around the complex searching for me. Her anxious tick this morning, the craving for cigarettes...I'd likely misjudged her mental state. Not anger, then.

Fear?

There was a chance I was only telling myself this to maintain a false confidence as I returned to the apartment, hoping to not be met with a projectile object. When nothing flew at my head, when I spotted Ma sitting on the couch in much the same way as when I had let it slip to the counselor that I was walking to school alone, I allowed myself to breathe.

She lifted her head from where it was bent over her knees. Her eyes were mottled with red splotches, and the earnest quality of her gaze caught me off guard. Like she was embarrassed, afraid. I stood there for a long moment, taking in the sight of her, the reality of what I'd just read cementing, rooting itself deeply into my consciousness. She said nothing, didn't move, didn't even breathe. Waiting for me.

At long last, I broke the silence: "He's alive?"

She didn't hesitate.

"Yes."

CHAPTER FOUR

Delilah

“You told me he was dead.” Sweat broke out along the back of my neck, along my thighs, down my spine. This was a sick, sick joke. Ma had really taken a turn for the worse, and now she was fucking with my sanity. I steadied myself on the wall, my hand slick on the paint. “You lied?”

Ma’s shoulders rose as if she was trying to disappear into her robe. Her eyes darted to the balcony, to the door behind me, to the hallway. Looking for an escape. “You went through my things.”

“I was trying to figure out what was wrong,” I said, voice breaking on the last word. “I was trying to *help* you.” Instead, I’d damned myself with knowledge that I’d been deprived of a father, not because of his death, but by his own choice. By Ma’s actions. My heart thudded in my chest, rattling my eardrums, a rush of blood and anger and grief. “How could you have kept this from me? For twenty *fucking* years?”

She hadn't yet risen from the couch, and I moved closer to the table, a safe distance away. I wanted to strangle her. "Where is he?"

Ma stared at her hands, beginning to rock herself.

"Where *is* he, Ma?"

She hummed. It was a soft melody, one I didn't recognize. It ignited my anger all the more. "Fucking schizo," I hissed.

She chose that moment to stand. I leaned back, tense, waiting for a physical blow or a string of hate to spew from her lips. Instead, like she had this morning, she turned and walked down the hall to her room. Unlike this morning, I marched after her and blocked her door with my body, bringing her to a halt.

"You don't get to leave," I said, hating the desperate note in my voice. I needed to know everything. What had happened? What was so bad that Pa had to leave? That Ma couldn't talk about it after two decades? "That's not fair. You can't drop a bomb on me like this and expect everything to go back to normal."

"I didn't drop a bomb on you," she said, cold and distant. Like she was talking to me, but she looked right through me. "You walked into the minefield and stepped on one all by yourself."

She pushed me out of the way; I let her. My body had gone limp, and I fell back on the wall, utterly overwhelmed. By her words, harsh as they were. By the truth—the *painful* truth—I'd uncovered.

Pa was alive.

Pa was *alive*.

Would he want me to find him? Would that unearth more truths I wasn't ready to hear? What was I going to do—*should* I do anything? I pressed a fist to my mouth, closing my eyes. Behind Ma's door, the shower head turned on, the bathroom fan along with it. A shower. Yeah, I needed a shower. My muscles wouldn't budge. Maybe a nap would help. Maybe I'd go to sleep, wake up, and nothing would've changed. Pa would still be dead.

Did I want that?

I sighed, shaking myself. *Get a grip*. What did this actually change? Whether he was alive or dead, he wanted nothing to do with us. *I will move on, and I know you'll be fine without me*. I pictured him with a new family, a pretty daughter who studied at a prestigious university—Stanford or MIT—and didn't smoke pot, didn't drink, wore pretty dresses that fitted her perfect body. I imagined him happy, with a wife who didn't push him away, whose patience abounded. By any stroke of luck on his side, he'd forgotten me entirely. I wrapped my arms around myself, as if the gesture alone would keep me from falling apart.

I groaned, rolling off the wall and stumbling into my room. *I gotta get out of here*. That thought alone bouyed me, in all the senselessness squirming around in my mind, I knew this fact with certainty. *Out out out*. I needed out. And so I took the fastest shower in human history, threw on a Pink Floyd T-shirt I'd found at a garage sale three years ago and a pair of roughed-up denim shorts, and tucked my wallet and keys in my pockets. My wet hair left a gigantic water stain on the back of my shirt, chilling the skin beneath. It would dry once I stepped into the one thousand degree summer heat. I didn't know where I was going until I shucked my sandals on and left, making it only as far as Coop's apartment.

He answered the door with a coffee mug in hand that read *Might Be Coffee, Might Be Bourbon*. I'd bought it for Christmas years ago at a swap meet, giggling to myself all the way

home, only to realize a year later that Coop was an alcoholic and maybe a joke like that wouldn't sit well. But he'd taken it like a champ, ruffling my hair and chuckling, claiming it was the best mug he had ever owned. Now, he took me in with wide eyes and raised the mug which was, ironically, filled with bourbon. "Want some?"

I laughed, and that single moment of levity loosened the floodgates. I couldn't stop the tears, and I angled my face away, heat pulsating beneath my skin. "Sorry," I said between sobs, shaking myself. "I'm sorry—this is so fucked up—I'm sorry."

"Oh, kid," Coop sighed, opening the door wider to let me in. "Is it your Ma? Want me to check on her?"

I shook my head. "No, she's fine. She'll be fine." I honestly didn't know a thing about how she was doing. Did she feel at all ashamed for hiding a truth this size from me? Did she think she'd been protecting me? From what—a happy childhood?

Coop's apartment was exactly how you'd imagine it: clean enough to navigate, but dirty in a way that displayed characteristic flaws. Dishes were piled on the left side of his sink, bottles of 805 dotted every corner of his living room in such a way that they seemed ornamental. Just put a few fairy lights inside, and maybe it would pop up on someone's Pinterest page. The ashtray beside the couch held a few discarded cigarette butts, and next to it was a black-and-white polaroid of two smiling teenage boys. One was clearly Coop, but the other...

Coop quickly snatched it from the table and slid it into his back pocket, playing at normalcy, but my interest was piqued nonetheless. I'd spare him; now wasn't the time to press the subject.

"Wanna sit?" he asked, gesturing to the couch. He picked up a bowl of soggy Cheerios from the coffee table and swept crumbs from the surface into the bowl. He proceeded to open the

blinds, and when he blinked rapidly at the sunlight's intrusion into his living room, I wondered how often he spent his days in complete darkness.

I perched at the edge of the couch. My problems were momentarily forgotten when I watched him scrambling around to make his place semi-presentable. Coop thrust a second mug, plain white and dotted with water stains, under his dinky Keurig. He swiveled around to face me. "Did you want bourbon?"

Normally, I'd say no. But... "What've you got?"

Moments later, I had a mug with a solid six ounces of Maker's Mark cupped in my hands. I sipped, wincing at the foul taste, the burn traveling down my throat. Coop was still shuffling around his kitchen, piling plates and water glasses and silverware into the dishwasher, wiping the table down, throwing receipts into the trash—which he proceeded to take for the trash valet to pick up, and thank God for it. The smell alone would've killed a blind dog. It was strange to see Coop like this, oddly...responsible? Maybe I should come over more often. He wore Adidas slides, mismatched socks slipping around, sweatpants, and a coffee-stained sweatshirt, the hem of which had loosened so that strings dangled from all sides. I fought the urge to search around for scissors to cut them with.

After ten more minutes of speed-cleaning his apartment, he finally settled down on the lumpy couch adjacent mine. He shifted his weight, the black leather squeaking in protest. "You want a blanket or somethin'?"

"I'm alright, thanks."

"Sure." He tapped his thumbs together, a steady rhythm. "You, uh...you wanna tell me what happened?"

I opened my mouth. Closed it. There didn't seem to be an artful, poetic way to express any of what was on my mind—a hodgepodge of emotions and revelations—so I started with the simplest explanation there was: “I found out my Pa isn't dead.”

“You're kiddin'.”

I leveled a flat stare at him, and he raised his hands. “Sorry, sorry. Not a joke. I'm just...”

“Confused?” I finished for him.

“You could say that.”

And so I explained the nightstand, the letters (he seemed both scared and impressed by my ability to pick a lock), and my retreat to the basketball court. When I got to the actual content of the letters, I realized it was hard to explain what I'd read. “It was all vague,” I said. “They loved one another, but Ma...well, you know she was diagnosed after I was born. Maybe Pa didn't realize she was sick. Maybe he thought she was just plain crazy, and couldn't put up with it.”

Coop nodded, following. “He left, then.”

“No death in Chicago,” I said. I swallowed when I recalled the last tidbit of information. “And he knew about me. Before I was born, he knew me. Wrote my name in the letter and everything.”

“He left while your Ma was pregnant?”

“Seems so.”

“Bastard,” Coop muttered, then glanced at me apologetically. “Sorry, but it's true.”

He wasn't wrong, seeing it from that perspective. That kind of selfish behavior was hard to excuse. An emptiness came over me now that everything was out in the open, laid bare for Coop to see. It struck me then that Coop was the only person I trusted, the only one who knew

the extent of Ma's illness, the history of our family. Maybe he was just harmless, easy to get along with. Maybe he seemed like he'd been hurt, too, and we were just two beat-down people trying to make sense of the world.

"Do you want to find him?" Coop asked. It felt like the question of the year, and judging by the sincerity in Coop's voice, he suspected as much.

"Should I want to?" I looked down at my lap. "I don't know if it would change anything."

"How do you figure that?"

"If he left, I doubt he'll wanna come back. I don't know if I'd want him to, either, if he turns out to be some bastard. And right now..."

"I get it," he said. "You've got one idea of him in your head, right? And if you find him, you're worried the truth might ruin it."

It sounded pathetic, hearing my thoughts come out of someone else's mouth. But it was true. I thought of Pa's picture on the mantle, and my eyes burned anew with unshed tears. *Get a grip*. I sniffed, running a hand through my damp hair. "Something like that."

"So you've got a few options," Coop said, splaying an arm across the back of his couch. "You could try to find him, and maybe he'll want to be in your life, maybe not. Or, you could let this all go." He studied me, and his gaze carried an intense sincerity I hadn't seen before. Then again, we seldom had conversations like these. "Would you be able to?" he asked.

"Able to what?"

"Let this go." He leaned forward slightly. "You'd be fine not looking for him?"

I suddenly felt cold despite the mug between my hands. "I don't know," I said, exhaling. "I really don't know." He let me sit with that question for a moment. I imagined the next few

months of my life and figured out pretty quickly that this wasn't something I'd be able to move past. Sure, given time, I'd likely come to see that as an adult there was little I needed from Pa. Closure, maybe, but not much else—and there was a chance I could find that closure if Ma ever decided to disclose the circumstances of their separation. But a part of me would always wonder, *What if?* In truth, I'd always wondered what life would have been like if Pa were alive, but because I'd never believed him to actually *be* alive, those thoughts were more daydreams than conscious deliberation. If he was alive, as he seemed to be, and if there was a chance I could find him...shouldn't I? Would he want me to find him? After all these years, did he regret leaving us? Leaving me?

"Even if I did want to find him," I said, breaking the silence, "I have no idea where to start."

"I'd think your Ma could help you," he said. "But without any information from her, maybe a DNA test?"

I rubbed my eyes, sliding my hands down my face. "This is ridiculous, isn't it? I mean—so what if he's alive? He left. I doubt he wants to be found."

"But you want to find him."

I felt like crumpling into a ball on the couch, sinking into the cushions, never emerging.

"Yeah," I said at last, my throat clogged with emotion. "I want to find him."

Coop nodded. "Then we will."

"We?"

"You think I have anything better to do around here? I work, I drink, I sleep. Every now and then, I eat three meals a day." He drained the rest of his bourbon. "Do you think finding your Pa might give your Ma some closure? Maybe it'd be good for her."

That was a coin toss. “She’s unpredictable right now. Paranoid. I couldn’t tell you what that would do to her, but it wouldn’t be easy, either way.”

“Fair enough.”

I blew out a long breath. “So. We’re really gonna do this?”

“Don’t see why not.”

“I gotta talk to Ma, then.” I snorted. “What am I saying—she won’t tell me anything.”

“She might.” When I arched a brow at him, Coop sighed. “Yeah, she probably won’t. But maybe there’s something else lying around that can help. You found letters, right?”

“Right.”

“Any envelopes? Your Pa woulda had to write a return address on the front flap or top left corner.”

I stared at him and smacked my palm on my forehead. “Holy shit, you’re right.” Knowing Ma, she must have kept something like that around. I’m sure there was a time when she wanted to track him down. Why she hadn’t tried was beyond me, maybe something to do with my arrival in this world, but I had to try.

Part of me wanted to dash back to the apartment and search; the other part of me, the part that held all the nerves about this change in my life, firmly rooted me in place. There was no telling how Ma would react when I went back. Before, I’d had anger fueling my confidence in returning to the apartment; now, emotional and physical exhaustion threatened to overwhelm me. Coop must have sensed my apprehension because he crossed his arms over his chest and said, “You don’t have to go back right now, kid. If you need time to process everything, that’s fine.”

He inclined his chin at the box of taped baseball games he always lugged around. I only now realized that the box wasn’t the least of his collection—there were large bins stacked high in

the corner of his living room, each labeled with decades. “I can show you the 1988 World Series.”

“As fun as that sounds,” I said, standing, “I’ve gotta get this over with. And I can’t leave Ma alone for long.” I thought of her scratching at her forearms, leaving a trail of red welts behind, and my skin crawled. I set the bourbon down, still mostly full. “See you soon?”

“Sure thing,” he said and walked me to the door. “Keep me updated, alright? I’m a phone call away.”

“Thanks,” I said and crossed the threshold into the Riverside heat.

CHAPTER FIVE

Missy

Everything was as it should be.

Six months ago, beneath a white fringe tree in Chicago's Botanic Garden, Roman proposed. I replayed the moment every day since: his hand knit with mine as he spoke tender words, kneeling, producing a delicate gold band from his jacket pocket—and the *stone*. A glorious oval cut diamond with twin emeralds on either side, gold floral leafwork framing the trio. It seemed the hundreds of engagement ring photos I'd sent him over the past three years had paid off. Then again, I'd always thought Roman possessed immaculate taste.

In the family room at my parents' house, I propped the thick white Wedding Planner atop my lap, my hair wrapped around heatless curlers. Normally, I'd have taken my hair down by now, but I hadn't slept well and decided I was too lazy to be bothered. I flipped through the tabs, double-checking the guest list, jotting notes in the margins around the itinerary for the day-of (*Who will announce cake cutting? Father-daughter dance or mother-son dance first?*), sipping

from my coffee mug in between. I had a widget on my Lock Screen with a countdown reading, *12 Days Until the Wedding!* I'd originally thought the countdown was a cute idea, but with so little time left, each time I picked up my phone a bout of anxiety twisted my guts around. Everything could go right; everything could go wrong.

I stretched. I need a spa day. My pedicure was beginning to chip and grow out, the blush pink lacquer a shade too close to my skin tone. Darker, next time. I traced the ridges on the binder's spine, shifting my gaze to the room. Our coffee table was antique, an heirloom from one of Mom's great-great grandmothers. Dad had left his crystal ashtray on the corner, the charred end of a cigar crushed into the base. That's what the whole room smelled like—high-end cigars and Febreze, and occasionally like the citrus candle Mom lit when she watched her soaps (I hated citrus, it burned my nose). The centerpiece, a vase full of white roses Dad had bought for Mom last night after work, emitted a floral aroma, sweet enough to overpower the cigars if I leaned close enough. Pastels adorned every inch of the house, baby blue curtains with gold fringe, soft greens accents on the white walls made softer when cast under the morning sun. Mom said the light colors made it seem like the space was larger and less crowded. It seemed like a false pretense at happiness to me, but bright colors were some of the littler things that brought her joy.

I studied the ring on my finger, amazed at how it hadn't dulled over the last six months despite my wearing it each day, sometimes to bed. Twelve days until I would become Mrs. Sharpe, and so much to do before then. I sighed and slid the binder onto the coffee table. My parents' door creaked upstairs, followed by the light thud of footsteps on the wooden staircase, and moments later Mom padded into the kitchen. "Good morning, darling," she said, tapping her fingers to her lips as she yawned, a delicate gesture.

That's how everything was with her, painstakingly delicate. Each morning before leaving the confines of her bedroom, she'd wash her face with a simple skin routine and apply her makeup, brush her teeth to perfection. She'd mastered the art of incorporating teeth whiteners into her nightly routine every three months. When she smiled, the white was blinding—especially so when she wore white clothing on a cloudless day. It had all started when Dad came home from a work trip seven years ago with gifts for each of us: a freshwater pearl necklace for me, a box of anti-wrinkle creams and under-eye patches for Mom. Perhaps to anyone else, they would see this as an act of vanity on my father's part, but Mom had been struggling terribly with her self-image, and the gift had given her the start she needed to start taking care of herself. Then came the makeup swatches, the devices for an infinite amount of hairstyles, the nail polishes and upkeep kits, the exfoliating gloves and socks. Suffice to say, the cabinet beneath her sink teemed with a hundred different products. I had joked with her once saying she should become an Instagram Influencer and showcase all of her products. She'd taken me seriously, and now had around 200,000 followers.

She plucked a peach from the fruit basket in the center of the counter and set to slicing it. "Want any?" she asked, plopping the slices into a small bowl.

"Sure, thanks." Usually, Dad left the room not long after, showered and with a pressed suit, briefcase in hand. He was a private investigator and had a meeting with a nice family on the outskirts of the city. Well, I assumed they were nice. Dad kept things private, both out of obligation and because he wasn't much of a talker. He probably had enough skill to be a bigshot detective, but he preferred keeping a low profile. It was probably the only humble thing about him. Pride ran thicker than blood in his veins.

As if sensing the course of my thoughts, Mom said, “He left earlier this morning. There were a few bad accidents on his route, so he had to beat the traffic.”

I deflated a bit. I’d wanted to run through the budget once more with him, but that could wait until tonight, I supposed. “What are your plans for today?”

“I have to set up my content calendar for the month.” Mom bit the edge of a peach, nibbling as she walked to the couches. She handed me the bowl and settled beside me, nestling under the cashmere blanket. “I’m thinking of setting up the garden in the backyard again. It’s been ages since we’ve had fresh vegetables, don’t you think?” She took another bite. The last time we had a garden, Mom had overwatered the plants and they’d drowned in puddles of mud. The only vegetation in the backyard now were untamed grasses and weeds. The only part of the house Mom had yet to touch with her renovations. Something about the impending wedding had sent her on a spiral with redecorating and moving things around. For a whole two months, the house had smelled of wet paint. She was like an expectant mother nesting in her third trimester. Nothing was good enough; everything needed to be improved or replaced entirely.

“What about you, lovey?” she asked, her tongue working under her cheek to release a stray bit of peach. She nodded at the planner on the coffee table. “More preparations?”

“As per usual,” I said with a smile. “Roman and I are actually planning to tour the venue again today.”

She grinned excitedly. “Ah! How wonderful. You’ll be able to see where everything goes—it’ll be a dream come to life.” Her face took on a slight severity indicating she was about to pass on unsolicited advice. “Make sure they tell you where the refrigerator is. No one thinks of these things, but you’ll want to know so you can take the cake home with you after.” She tapped

her temple with a thin finger. “No one thinks of these things,” she repeated. “That’s why you have me.”

“I’d be lost without you.”

“Saracasm?”

“Mom. I know better.”

She beamed, leaning over to pat my cheek. “Good girl.” Sharp, floral perfume she’d applied to her wrist overwhelmed my senses, and I blinked back tears. “You two will have a beautiful time. Will you be eating out, as well?”

“He wants to take me to dinner afterward.” I knew she’d want more detail. “He made a reservation weeks ago at Maple & Ash for 6:30.”

Her eyes practically sparkled. “Splendid, darling. Just splendid.” Another cheek pat. “You two are a *dream*, are you not?”

I blushed. The rest of the morning consisted of a light breakfast and a perusal of the wedding planner. Mom had picked out her dress almost a week after Roman proposed, and she’d asked me to ensure my theme incorporated blush pink. “There’s nothing so tacky as showing up to a wedding completely out of style. While there is nothing wrong with a pop of unusual color, weddings call for an orderliness that must be respected.” She’d winked at me. “Make sure to include that on your wedding website.”

“The tackiness?”

“The *dress code*, darling. The dress code.”

I was insufferable, but the fact of this made her all the happier to take over, to mold the proceedings. I hadn’t realized the importance of a certain style of cloth napkin, but she assured

me it mattered. *Everything* mattered. Silverware, lighting, the flowers—not just for aesthetics. Aroma was of equal import. Not too strong, but not untraceable. Light, airy.

It was a fairytale.

It was a nightmare.

I doubted Mom would get to her content calendar today, not when she seemed so determined to adjust the table numbering and choose sticky note colors for my planner that matched the theme. I left her to her own devices after a couple hours of her tsking and reordering things. It was better this way, to let her have her fun.

Everything was as it should be.

CHAPTER SIX

Delilah

Ma was the only chance I had at finding Pa. I didn't want the hassle of a DNA test, but if that was what it came to, I'd figure it out. Though a DNA test would tell me who my father was, it wouldn't reveal Ma's secrets. Before I entered my apartment, I looked Pa up. I'd never known his first name until now, and O'Conner was too common a last name to search. I should've known Pa would have covered his tracks. I wasn't able to find anything: no address, no place of work—not so much as a LinkedIn account—though I knew he had to be working. I even added Chicago to the search terms. Nothing. Had he changed his name? It was possible.

I needed the envelopes. She must have kept some, and while I doubted Pa would be stupid enough to leave his home address on one, there was always a chance he'd written a PO Box number or something. I had a gut feeling it would lead me straight to Chicago—Ma was all too quick to mention the city when Pa came up in conversation—but I had to be sure.

I stood by myself outside my apartment, fingers clenching my keycard. I took a deep breath to steady myself, but instead—

I smelled smoke.

“*Shit*, ” I said, jabbing the card in the slot and shoving the door open. Inside the living room, Ma had placed a flaming trash can on the table. Pieces of burning paper fluttered in the air, the smoke alarm screamed. Ma huddled in the corner of the kitchen, hands over her ears, watching the chaos with utter disinterest. As if the alarm and the ash and the flying pieces of *fire* were nothing to be concerned about.

“What the *fuck*?” I shouted, coughing, rushing past Ma to the sink. “The hell do you think you’re doing?!” I filled a pot I’d used to make pasta two nights ago, dodging the pieces of paper, stomping them to ash with the soles of my shoes. Ma didn’t stop me from dumping the water into the trash can, didn’t flinch when it rolled off the table and soaked through her slippers. I took the dishrag off the rack in front of the oven and swung it like a propeller under the smoke alarm until the beeping stopped. My ears rang, a thin, static whine droned and rattled my skull. I surveyed the mess.

Water. Everywhere. Ash melted at its touch, though larger bits drifted across the table, landed on the chairs, the floor. My heart raced; I pressed a fist on my chest. “Ma, what were you thinking?”

She stared at the trash can, the sodden paper inside, and smiled. “Now, you’ll stay.”

My body ceased functioning, and as the adrenaline left my bloodstream, I realized what she’d done. “You burned the letters,” I said. The envelopes, too, if there were any. I took note of the empty picture frame lying face down on the counter, and my jaw dropped. The photo. She’d burned the photo. A low moan escaped my lips.

I sifted through the small blackened pieces of paper, peeling them from the floor and table legs. I reached into the trash can, lugging armloads of soggy letters from inside, the ink

smeared from water, unrecognizable from the flames. Helpless, I dug, stripped papers apart, ripping and tearing despite my efforts to be careful. A tremor started in my fingers and worked its way up my arms. “Why?” I asked finally, kneeling in a puddle on the floor. “Why do you *hate* me?”

She knelt in front of me, cupping my cheek in her hand. She didn’t notice the way I flinched at her touch, or if she did, she didn’t seem bothered. “You want to leave me.”

“What?”

“You want to leave me, just like he did.”

I shook my head. “No, no—Ma, I want to find him.” I pressed my eyes shut against tears. “I *wanted* to find him.”

“You would leave me here—you’d *never come back*.” The way she said this—all matter-of-fact—broke something inside of me. Suddenly, I needed her to understand. I wasn’t going to abandon her. And that look in her eyes, the pleading...it reminded me of when she’d poured rubbing alcohol on my wounds. I realized it was the same. The rubbing alcohol, burning the letters. Hurting me, so I wouldn’t leave. She thought she was helping me.

What if I wanted to leave?

What if, when I found Pa, he offered to take me in? What if he found a nice place for Ma, where she could be cared for? I’d join whatever family he’d started, and even if I felt like an outcast, like the black sheep, I’d still be safe. No fires for me to manage. As quickly as the thoughts had come, guilt stabbed my gut. I couldn’t *leave* her. Whatever his reasons, Pa had abandoned his pregnant wife, leaving her alone with nothing. Ma hadn’t healed from that, and it was plain to see, laid bare in the way she thought she was caring for me. Gingerly, I settled my

hand atop hers on my cheek, hating the desperation in her gaze, hating that Pa had hurt her, hating that she wouldn't tell me *why*.

"I wouldn't leave you," I said, squeezing gently. "I want to take you with me, Ma. I want us to find him together. But I wouldn't leave you."

"That's what he told me."

It was hardly a whisper, a breath falling from her lips. Her hand slipped from mine, grip slack. Her eyes were haunted, and though she looked at me, I wondered if it was me she saw. Or someone else, something else. Was she reliving the moment when Pa had promised to stay? Had he knelt like this in front of her, tender and well-meaning, desperate for her to believe him?

Or had he intentionally deceived her?

"There's so much I need to know," I said, and whatever cloud blocked her eyes seemed to clear, her attention returned to me. I swallowed. "I know...I know I've lived my life without him. If I don't find him, that's fine. It's not meant to be. But I have to try, okay? I have to know why he left."

She sat back on her heels, averting her gaze.

"You won't tell me anything," I said. "What do you expect will happen?"

"You'll listen. You'll stay."

I shook my head. "I can't do that."

She looked up. "Why not?"

"Because—" I cut myself off. *Because this needs to have been worth it. Because I want to know if at least one of my parents loves me. Because because because....* "I just can't, Ma."

Her stare hardened, and I knew it wasn't the paranoia talking to me. "You'll wish you'd never looked for him. There's nothing for you there."

“Maybe you’re right,” I said. “But I have to find out for myself.”

She didn’t reply for a long while. Instead, she continued to watch me with an inscrutable expression, though I could tell the gears were turning in her head. Her hand gently scratched at her forearms, a sign she was coming down off her episode. “You’ll stay?” she asked. “You promise?”

I nodded despite the doubt twisting my insides. “I love you, Ma. I’ll stay.”

She rose from beside me and walked to her room.

I watched her leave, one part confused, the other entirely defeated. She didn’t believe me. *Of course* she wouldn’t—not after what she’d endured. But five minutes later, she returned with a thick envelope and pressed it into my hands. The back of it read *Chicago* in Ma’s messy scrawl. “What...?” I started to ask.

“Open,” she said.

I lifted the flap, revealing a stack of \$20 bills.

“My savings from before I met your pa,” she explained in a low voice.

“How much?”

But that was all Ma felt compelled to tell me. For the second time, she returned to her room, and I stared as she pulled a suitcase out from under her bed. She began folding shirts and pants, tucking them into the luggage, tossing toiletries in on top. I counted the bills—around \$4,000.

We could have used this, I thought as the bills passed between my hands. For groceries, for rent, for bills, for phone payments—*we could have used this*. It was as if a part of her had saved this money for this exact purpose. I traced the letters on the back of the envelope. *Chicago*.

“You think he’s in Chicago?” I asked, but Ma didn’t hear. It made sense, then: the envelope of money, Ma packing. She wanted us to go to Chicago.

Your pa died in Chicago on a business trip, she’d told me for the past twenty years. Maybe he really had died to her, in a way. Maybe, in her mind, she had told me the truth for all of this time.

So I pulled my phone out and texted Coop. *Feeling up for a trip?*

Where to? he replied.

Chicago.

A minute passed before he responded: *I think I’ve got a Cubs jersey somewhere around here.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Delilah

No one had ever told me plane tickets were so *fucking* expensive.

Coop had driven me to the nearest ATM this morning to deposit Ma's money into a new checking account. On the way home from the ATM, I checked the balance in my banking app, swiping between that screen and the airlines website. "So expensive," I said, letting out a low whistle. "Maybe it'd be cheaper to drive."

"Depends on the car," Coop said, steering with his left hand, holding the gear stick with his right. "The gas mileage will really determine the cost. Plus, it's a long-ass drive from Riverside to Chicago. Practically across the country."

The next flight to Chicago was set to leave two days from now. We likely wouldn't even get seats next to one another, unless something opened up, and I didn't know how the stress of flying would affect Ma. *So many factors*. I sighed, sinking into the passenger seat. This was off to a rough start already.

We pulled into Rivergate ten minutes later, and I let Coop in to help bring suitcases down to his car. The second I opened the door, he let out a low whistle. “What the...?”

The state of the apartment was in complete disarray. Boxes stacked on the table and couches, the cabinets left open with very little inside—even the smoke detectors were sitting on top of the counter. All the fans were on—the one in the laundry room, the two in the bathrooms. Even the kitchen fan under the microwave whirred at a high speed. I went around shutting them off and asked Coop to wait in the kitchen.

“Ma?” I called. It sounded like she was vacuuming her room.

Ma’s door was cracked at the end of the hallway, and I knocked on it lightly. “Ma? You cleaning?” I nudged it open. Her bed seemed to be the only thing untouched by her cleaning and packing spree, the duvet flattened neatly across all four corners, fluffed pillows set atop it. Her suitcase splayed over the end of the bed, clothes and shoes and medication organized with special care. It seemed she was in her bathroom; the vacuum was tipped over on its side. I tapped the power button with the toe of my shoe, brow furrowing. She’d left it on to go to the bathroom? Even absent-minded Ma wasn’t typically this inattentive.

It struck me then. She had left all the fans on, the vacuum on, to create white noise. To block something out. I crept to the bathroom door and pressed my ear to it, leaning against the wall. Her voice was faint, almost indiscernible, but present nonetheless. Was she talking to someone? Who? Her words were cut off every now and then by silence, as if she was waiting for a response. Maybe it was another episode, she was hallucinating again.

I rapped my knuckles on the doorframe. “Ma? You good in there?”

“Go away!” she shouted over the din. A sudden thud hit the floor, not loud enough to be a body. More like a full bottle of shampoo had been knocked down into the bathtub.

“Who are you talking to?”

Immediately, silence descended, and my ears began to hum as they struggled to adjust. The door swung open. Ma stood there with pinched lips and an equally pinched expression.

“Why were all the fans on?” I asked. “The vacuum?”

She brushed past me. “Cleaning everything out.”

A paltry excuse. It was then that I noticed her hand hidden behind her back. She caught my line of sight and said, “Get out. Out, out, out please. Get out.”

“Not until you show me what you’re hiding.”

Her eyes flared wide. “*Out.*”

I held my hand out. “Ma. Come on.” “Get *out!*”

Coop popped his head in the doorway a second later, arms crossed over his chest. He looked like a beer-bellied club bouncer at a club. “Everything alright in here?”

“Cooper, will you get this girl out of my room?” Ma pleaded. It was then that she made the fatal mistake of gesturing to me with her occupied hand, the one she’d tried to hide. In an instant, there was an old flip phone pointed directly in my face, black and sleek, evidently unused. Well, not as of a few moments ago. She realized her error immediately and thrust her arm back, staring between Coop and I like a wild animal backed into a corner.

She hadn’t lied; it wasn’t a hallucination she had been speaking with. “Who was on the phone, Ma?” I asked. Coop’s arms dropped, hands sliding into his pockets, intrigued.

Ma’s bottom lip wobbled. She swiped at a bead of sweat traveling down her cheek.

“Bridget,” Coop said, head dipped in a placating manner. “That’s a burner, right?”

A burner? It was 2025, who the hell had a burner phone anymore? And how had she left the apartment to buy one? It wasn't like she had an Amazon account or anything. Could you get a burner phone on Amazon? My head spun with questions, possibilities.

Coop continued. "Did someone give that to you?"

Ma ran a panicked hand through her hair. "Please leave. Please get out of my room. Please, please."

"You must have had that for a while," I said, putting the pieces together. Speaking helped; I talked myself through my thoughts. "You kept the phone secret, just like you've been keeping the letters secret." *The letters*. Oh, shit. "Pa mentioned leaving you a phone in his last letter to you. For emergencies." I barely heard myself speak the last words. My voice echoed in my ears, muffled, drowned by a surge of blood and adrenaline. "Was that Pa?"

I didn't move. Neither did Coop. Shock kept me rooted, even as Ma stood there heaving her breaths, tears and snot dribbling down her chin.

She had called him. And he'd answered? Twenty years later, he had answered her call. Surely that was a point in his favor. He still cared. I tucked that bit of hope away in a safe corner of my mind, away from the doubts and fears I'd been collecting the past twenty-four hours.

I swallowed. "What did he say, Ma? What did you tell him?" A bolt of apprehension struck my heart. If she'd told him we were coming, how would he react? A little voice in my head told me the obvious: he'd do everything he could to prevent us from uprooting his life. What if we never found him, now?

Ma shook her head and dropped onto her bed, defeated. "He didn't answer."

What? "Then who were you talking to?"

She bit her lip, chewed on it. "His wife."

Coop sighed, rubbing his forehead with his hand. “Fuckin’ hell, Bridget.”

So he’d remarried. I tried to brush it off. Of course he had. That didn’t mean anything, not really. It wasn’t like I’d expected him to be lonely for twenty years. There was still a chance he missed us. Missed me, at least. The daughter he’d never had the chance to meet.

“Why did you call him?” I asked, sitting beside her. “Were you going to warn him?”

“I just...I found the phone. I found the phone, I found the phone, I talked to her. Nice lady, so nice, *too* nice.” She rocked herself side to side.

My shoulders sank. “Fuck, Ma. You know what this means?”

She shook her head. Coop interjected. “That burner phone connected to a different burner phone he kept in his house. And if he’d left that burner phone in his house, without his wife knowing about it...”

“She’ll be suspicious of him now,” I finished, drawing the same conclusion. “If I was her, I’d think he was having an affair. Or, depending on the type of work he’s in, that he got mixed up with the wrong people.”

The blood drained from Ma’s face. “Oh,” she said, hand raised to her lips. “Oh my.” She clasped my hand suddenly in hers, earnest, trembling. I slipped the phone from her fingers and stowed it away in my pocket. When I looked back at Coop, I knew he’d come to the same conclusion.

She’d seriously fucked up.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Missy

There was nothing quite like the atmosphere at Maple & Ash. We chose to dine on the outside patio to catch a glimpse of the sunset over the city. I rested my purse on a chair to my right, settling across from Roman on a black cushioned seat. A gentle breeze rustled his combed dark hair and my eyes followed, traveling along his buttoned white dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows; he'd roll them back down once the night's chill came on.

"Are you cold?" he asked, as if reading my thoughts. He offered his jacket, and I wrapped it over my shoulders. No, I wasn't cold, but I enjoyed the scent of his cologne and often wished it would seep into my skin so that I would never be without it. He set his phone on the table, spreading the cloth napkin over his lap. "You liked the venue?"

I smiled. "It's perfect." It was an Italian villa positioned between rolling green hills, and our particular ballroom was located on the first floor. Though I had visited months ago, it still managed to steal my breath. I was sure they polished the marble floors daily—I could see my reflection in them, a soft beige that stretched for eons. The open bar would stand in the corner,

the tables set up along the edges of the room to spread out the noise, a live band of Roman's choosing (though, really, Mom had made sure to influence his opinion) would set up at the very end. Gold chandeliers branched out along the ceiling, crystals drooping between them, glittering like stars reflecting the light. It made the white walls and lovely tiling all the brighter. "Don't get me started on the pillars in the patio."

He nodded knowingly, sipping from an old fashioned. The orange peel bobbed at the top. "I don't think I've ever seen pillars like those in real life."

"This is really happening, isn't it?"

He laughed. "I would think so." Above him, a string of lamps emitted a muted light. The server brought a house salad for our appetizer and placed a bottle of chilled white wine at the edge of the table with a wink. "Congratulations," he said, nodding to my ring finger. We thanked him, and Roman poured me a glass.

"How's your mom handling everything?"

"Oh, you know," I said, swirling the wine. "She's having her fun."

His phone buzzed twice on the table, drawing my attention. He smoothly ignored it, continuing the conversation. "It doesn't bother you?"

"That she's taking over? Not really. I trust her taste, and I'm more concerned with what happens after the wedding than the wedding itself."

"She did allow us to choose our apartment."

"Exactly," I said, tipping my glass to him. "We should be so lucky." Again, his phone vibrated, this time with an onslaught of messages. I sighed. "Can't you turn it off?"

His brown eyes turned apologetic. "Missy, you know I can't."

“I don’t see why your boss won’t allow you to have one dinner with your fiancé. Can’t he manage the firm for a night? Is he really so dependent on you?”

Roman picked up his phone and pressed it to his chest the way he usually did when he was about to take a phone call. “Baby, if I start slacking off now, how will we pay for our apartment? I’m on the cusp of a promotion, I’m just sure of it.”

“He won’t promote you until you finish law school.”

“And until then, I’m practically on probation.” His smile matched the look in his eyes, an apology written all over it. I’d seen it enough to let it brush over me. “I want to provide for us, and I can’t do it without a job.” Not necessarily true, but I wasn’t in the mood for this argument. I fell into silence, which he took to mean I no longer wished to debate him, and he rose from his stalked to the back of the patio, phone pressed to his ear.

I sulked, sipping my wine, his old fashioned, refilling my glass, drinking some more. Pretty soon, my brain was fuzzy, static-filled, and I couldn’t really remember why I was upset with Roman. He was handsome, wasn’t he? I drank in the smooth planes of his face, always closely shaven, the strong bridge of his nose, cut of his jaw. When I’d first laid eyes on him, it was his eyebrows I’d noticed. Mom liked to joke it was the same with her and Dad. I couldn’t speak for Dad now that he was in his late fifties, but Roman had thick, well-groomed brows. All of him was well-maintained. He started going back to the gym a year back in preparation for the wedding, and I could hardly stop myself nowadays from ogling the muscle in his forearms when he rolled his sleeves up. I giggled at the thought.

Roman returned a moment later, a severe expression on his face. “He’s laying people off.”

“Who?” I said, swiping my fork through the salad dressing lingering on my plate. Had we ordered our entrées yet? I couldn’t recall.

“Mickey, my boss.” His brows rose. I liked his brows. “Who else?”

“Is he firing you?”

“No, not me,” he said, shaking his head. “Thank God for that. But he’s letting Liam go.”

I blinked. I knew that name, didn’t I?

“Liam,” he repeated, cocking his head. “My best friend—Are you okay?” He looked at my empty glass, the half-empty bottle in the ice bucket, and swore. “Jesus, Missy, are you drunk?”

“Tipsy.”

“Same damn thing.”

I frowned. “I’m fine, thank you.”

The waiter came back around and took our orders. Roman had barely looked at the menu the entire time we were here, but he ordered the filet mignon, and I ordered the fettuccine alfredo with chicken and broccoli, hoping the carbs would soak up the alcohol. When the waiter retreated to the kitchen with our orders, Roman leveled a harsh glare my way. “What were you thinking—you’ve barely had anything to eat today.”

“I was waiting for you, and I was thirsty.”

“So drink water.”

“What’s the matter with you?”

“I just told you my best friend is about to lose his job, and you’re asking what’s the *matter with me*?” He scoffed, draining his old fashioned. He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. I watched his chest heave. “Let’s just try to have a nice dinner, alright?”

“It would be easier if you didn’t have to take phone calls every time we had a date.”

His jaw tightened. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.”

How was *I* the selfish one for wanting to have my fiance to myself every once and awhile? He had already spent the entire venue tour on the phone with Mickey, reorganizing the man’s calendar while walking the halls and shooting me annoyed looks when I asked his opinion on something. I considered storming into his boss’ office tomorrow. *Yeah, genius, and then Roman will get fired*, a slightly more amenable voice reminded me. Well, if he was fired, at least he’d spend more time with me. Mickey could get some other poor law student to do his work for him. It wasn’t like law clerks were in short supply.

I massaged my temples. What the hell was I thinking? “Get a grip,” I muttered to myself.

Roman paused mid-bite, salad hanging off his fork. “Excuse me?”

“Sorry, I’m talking to myself.” I sighed. “I know I’m being unfair, I’m sorry.” I reached for his hand across the table, and he reluctantly accepted, folding my fingers into his palm. “I miss you, that’s all.”

“I’m right here.”

“I know,” I said, looking at my lap. “I know.”

Silence yawned before us, palpable, and even the waiter seemed uncomfortable when he brought us our orders, swiftly moving to the next table to ask if the family wanted refills on their drinks. Roman sliced into his steak, avoiding my eyes, chewing like he was taking his anger out on the poor beast. I swirled noodles around on my fork, cupping the tight coil with the curve of my spoon. Food had a tendency to make all things better, to right wrongs and to ease one’s conscience. At least, that was what I had thought. As the minutes passed, the fog in my mind began to clear, and I realized the weight of what Roman had just told me.

“They’re letting Liam go?” I asked. Roman’s chewing paused momentarily, as if he’d forgotten I was there and my sudden interjection had startled him. Slowly, carefully, he nodded. I had met Liam on a number of occasions. He and Roman did almost everything together, when Roman wasn’t with me. The gym, law school—Roman had even tried to convince me that we should get an apartment near Liam’s. He was nice enough, and I liked his girlfriend, though she seemed to not think very well of me, for whatever reason. I stabbed a broccoli. “Did Mickey say why?”

“Budget cuts.”

Still angry, then. I eyed the white wine. What had I been *thinking*? Shame heated my cheeks. I never drank like that, like something had broken within me. I suddenly didn’t feel very hungry anymore, and every bite tasted flavorless.

“I said I was sorry.”

“Apologizing doesn’t make everything better, alright? My best friend is getting fired, and my fiance doesn’t give a shit about my job.”

I flinched. “Why would you say that?” At the table next to ours, an older couple stared at one another, wide-eyed, and I knew in my gut that they’d overheard. I fought the urge to cover my face with the napkin.

He shrugged. “It’s true.”

“I care about your job. I care a *lot* about your job. I know it’s one of the reasons we are able to get married, and I know it’s something you are passionate about. Who was the one who told you to apply? Who was the one who drove you there for two months when your car broke down?” I scoffed. “That was harsh, Roman. I know Mickey gave you bad news, and I know I wasn’t very receptive, but taking your frustration out on me like this is uncalled for.”

Roman leaned back in his seat, fork and knife clutched in either fist, lips pressed firmly together. His knuckles were white. After a moment, he seemed to remember we were in public, and his gaze flitted to the faces around us, some of whom quickly glanced away like children who'd been caught eavesdropping. Exhaustion overtook his anger, drooping his shoulders, slackening his jaw. "You're right, that was unfair. You've sacrificed a lot for me."

"I love that you have your job, okay? I just want some one-on-one time every now and then without fearing Mickey will call you into the office. You can understand that, right?"

He nodded, placing the silverware on the rim of his plate. "Yeah, of course. Sorry—it's just...how am I supposed to keep this from Liam? How am I supposed to show my face in the office tomorrow knowing he's being fired? That they chose me over him?"

"It's not like you wanted this to happen, Roman. He'll understand. If anything, it was kind of Mickey to warn you rather than leave you in shock tomorrow when it happens."

I could tell Roman didn't fully believe me, didn't *want* to believe me. The hurt had seeped too deeply into his heart. "Should I call him?" he asked.

"Liam? No, baby. I'm pretty sure you could get fired for something like that."

"Yeah," he said, half-listening. "Yeah. I suppose."

Again, I reached for his hand and he gave it, less reluctantly. "Maybe we should call it a day," I said, folding my napkin in my lap with my free hand. "We're both tired, and I'm sure my mom will want to talk to me and hear my thoughts on the venue." Only so she could change my plans.

He cleared his throat and mopped up the remaining juices on his plate with a dinner roll. "Okay, yeah. Good idea. I have an early start tomorrow."

I asked for a box to take my leftovers home in, and Roman paid the check, leaving a generous tip. Probably an apology to the waiter for any discomfort. Hand interlaced, we left the restaurant. On the ride to my house, I wanted to ask him more questions about tomorrow, about plans for the wedding. I attempted a bit of small talk only to receive monosyllabic replies. He pressed a swift kiss to my lips before dropping me off, and I watched from inside my house through the window by the door as he drove off.

I shucked my shoes off in the corner and padded into the kitchen. We didn't keep any alcohol in the house, not with Mom's old addiction, so I cracked open a San Pellegrino without checking the flavor and flopped on the couch, holding the pink can to my forehead. Dad wasn't home yet, but he usually didn't come home until half-past nine on most weekdays. Something about being a PI meant he was always out, always in someone else's business. It sounded both exhilarating and highly stressful.

Mom's Lexus was in the driveway, though. She must have spent the day working on her content calendar, after all. Shuffling sounds rose out of the quiet every few minutes; I assumed she was upstairs, likely dragging skincare products out of her bathroom cabinets to prep for the month. It wasn't until her face appeared over the railing on the upstairs landing, a small black device clutched in her hand, that I sensed something was off.

"I've been waiting forever for you to come home," she said, holding the device out as if I could see it from this far.

"I told you, Mom, I went to dinner with Roman after we surveyed the venue."

"Oh, that's right, of course. How was dinner, darling?"

"It was fine," I said, rising from the couch. After all the walking today, my feet protested the idea of standing. "What's that in your hand?"

“A burner phone.”

I balked, staring at her. “Why do we have a burner phone?”

“*We* don’t,” she said, “but your dad does.”

“Why the hell does dad have a burner phone?”

“Language, darling.”

“Sorry,” I said, starting again. “Where did you find that? Did he tell you about it?”

She shook her head, and I was stunned by the fact that she seemed almost gleeful about this revelation. She practically ran down the stairs, taking the last two in one stride, and offered the phone to me. I flipped it open. “How did you find this?” I asked again.

“It was ringing, Missy. A lady called and was asking for him.”

“For Dad?”

“Yes, and I think she wasn’t doing too well, either.”

I studied her, apprehensive. “Why do you seem excited by this?”

She huffed. “Don’t you *see*? This is probably a phone he used during one of his PI cases. This woman was one of his clients.”

“And you know this, how?”

She shrugged, picking at her thumbnail. “It’s speculation, darling. But goodness, doesn’t it make sense?”

“Well, *where* did you find it?”

“In the oddest place,” she said, pointing up at the second floor. “It was in our bedroom under one of the floorboards, close to his nightstand. I heard the ringing and noticed how loose the board was. A strange place to put a phone, I think, but it would make perfect sense for him to put it there so you and I wouldn’t find it.”

And yet, here we were, a burner phone between us. I, for one, was utterly confused.

“Should we ask him about it when he comes home—?”

“No! Absolutely not. That would be a horrible idea.”

“Why?”

Another huff, this one more annoyed than the last. “Because, darling, this is an opportunity for us to really see what your father does. And I’m sure he’d be furious to learn we discovered his secret hiding place.”

“So, you want to spy on him?”

“Not *spy* on him.” She sniffed at me. “Darling, have you been drinking?”

I raised the San Pellegrino. “Just this.”

She didn’t believe me, but I pushed onward anyway. “I think we should get rid of it.”

“I don’t want to get rid of it. Why don’t you keep it in your room?”

“In my room? Why?”

“Well, I can’t very well hide it from him in my room, now can I? We sleep together, after all.”

“Mom, just put it back where you found it.”

She pouted, bottom lip jutting out like a ledge, brows pinched together in concentration. *Oh, screw it.* “Sure, Mom, I’ll keep it. But if he finds out I have it, I’m blaming you.”

She jumped once, clapping her hands. “Wonderful, darling! He never tells us anything, such a bore. Now we can get a piece of the action!”

She scurried back up the stairs, childlike, hair bouncing in a loose bun atop her head. I examined the phone in my hand and took a sip of the sparkling water. *Hopefully Dad won’t miss this*, I thought, slipping it into my pocket.

CHAPTER NINE

Delilah

We were on a plane the following night. I gave Ma a sleeping pill to knock her out for the duration—only about four hours, give or take—which was my first mistake, because she woke with a deep-seated anger for all the world. Coop and I spent about twenty minutes trying to wrangle her in the baggage claim and find a taxi willing enough to drop us off at the motel I'd found in the heart of Chicago. Ma proceeded to conk out the second I pulled back the covers on the second bed; she'd shoved me aside and buried herself under the thin, ratty duvet, mumbling about how ridiculous this trip was. Since she'd agreed to come with us, she had varied between acceptance and rejection of her decision. While waiting for boarding, she'd planned a few things for us to see while in the city. Hours before, she had thrown a fit about getting on a plane. Only the promise of a decent nights' sleep had persuaded her not to shout BOMB in the middle of the security check.

Now, I slumped on the lone, rickety desk chair, knocking over my backpack on the floor. Coop patted my shoulder. "I'll be in the room next door if you need anything, alright?" He had

denied my offer to pay for his separate room, saying he had enough money squared away for a trip to Chicago and back. He'd let me buy his plane ticket, nothing more. "You got a plan for tomorrow?"

I shook my head, bleary-eyed. "I don't got shit." Where was I supposed to start with this? Ma would help, I hoped. I didn't know how we'd find anybody in a city this big. Sure, Riverside was a big place, but it wasn't nearly as congested as Chicago. Two-and-a-half *million* people lived here. How was I supposed to find one person in a city like this? And I had put my job on the line. "What the hell am I doing?" I breathed, realization striking me, and not for the first time. Since I'd found out he was alive, I hadn't stopped doubting myself. Was I acting on emotion? Was there any rationality in my decision-making?

"We'll find him," Coop said. "I'll think of something tonight. For now, just rest, okay?"

I nodded, numb. As stiff as the motel mattresses were, they had an odd appeal when one was jet-lagged and emotionally exhausted. "Did you bring your baseball tapes?"

He cracked a grin. "Of course."

"How are you gonna watch them?"

"Who says I was gonna watch 'em?"

"Are they just, like, emotional support tapes?"

"Something like that."

I snorted, facial muscles aching when I smiled. "You're ridiculous."

He shrugged, adjusting his grip on his duffel bag. "Get some sleep. I'm in 228 if there's an emergency." He made for the door.

"Coop?"

He turned. "What's up?"

“Thank you. For coming. For everything.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said, waving me off, and then he was out the door.

We found an iHOP nearby the following morning. It was oddly comforting; despite the completely unfamiliar surroundings of Downtown Chicago, restaurant chains had the same layout as in California. Blue shingles lined the roof, and the blinds were rolled up as morning light filtered in. I messed with the butter pecan syrup, flicking the lid open and closed, watching strings of syrup stretch wide. Ma passed a finger through the gap, catching the strings, and stuck her finger in her mouth with a smile. I put the syrup back at the end of the table, sighing.

Across from me, Coop folded his hands on the table. He looked tired, like he hadn’t slept all night. Dark circles stood out starkly beneath his blue eyes, and his gelled hair was at odds with the five o’clock shadow creeping through his cheeks, upper lip, and chin. He scratched at it absently. “You two sleep fine last night?” he asked as the waitress returned to the booth, setting three coffee mugs on the table.

I nodded, though I hadn’t slept a wink. Even so, I didn’t feel all that tired—physically, sure, but my brain hadn’t stopped running at 100 miles per hour since we’d stepped foot off the plane last night. Plus, I hadn’t slept in the same room as Ma in years. Memories of her sleepwalking had left me uneasy, and I found it hard to trust the possibility that she’d sleep through the night. Sure enough, she slept like a fuckin’ rock, and I was left with an itch for caffiene. Coop passed me a packet of Splenda and a tiny thing of half-and-half. I poured both into the mug and stirred, sipping. Ma didn’t seem to hear Coop’s question, and instead focused on pouring one of each packet into her coffee. After she’d run through each color, she proceeded to stack the creamers in a tall triangle, humming an old lullaby from my childhood. I fingered the

bottle of pills in my tote bag. Her meds. She'd take them with her meal, and hopefully that would balance her out a little more.

"Did you dream of any ideas as to how we'll find my dad?" I asked Coop.

"If only."

No kidding. And unless Ma gave us clues—if she had any to begin with—we had no leads, no chances, nothing at all to go off of. Though Ma had burned the photo of Pa along with the letters, I had taken a picture of the photo a long time ago. *Just in case*, I'd told myself. In case we'd lost it, in case I was feeling homesick while at work. Or, apparently, in case my mother decided to burn the damn thing.

"Maybe we can make a Facebook account?" I suggested. "Put a photo of him on there saying we're trying to find him."

Coop wiped a dot of spilled coffee with a napkin. "Sounds better than nothing. But...what if he doesn't want to be found? Wouldn't putting something up so public like that mean he has a chance of seeing it?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right." I passed a hand through my hair. "I guess we could do it the old fashioned way. Showing his picture around the city. Feels a little more controlled, but it'll take a long time." I nudged Ma. "The photo of Pa was real, right? Not some stock photo from the Internet." She looked at me quizzically, so I showed her the picture on my phone and zoomed in on his face. "Who is that, Ma?"

"Why, that's your Pa!" she said, taking the phone for herself. "I remember this day."

"Yeah?" I leaned forward on my elbows. Last she'd spoken to me about the photo, she'd said Pa sent it to her in the mail. Was that another lie? At this point, I hardly cared for the lies, as long as the truths led me to more information. "What do you remember?"

Before she could respond, the waitress came back to take our orders. She reminded me of Jess, her mannerisms and playful charisma. Probably got more in tips than the average Hooters waitress. She walked off a minute later, and Ma continued. “He had just started his job at a private investigations company, and I took this picture of him on his first day at work. His boss gave us a tour of the building—such a nice man, always smiling. He had kind eyes.”

“Wait—Ma, you’ve been to Chicago before?”

She blinked at me, at Coop. “Of course I have.”

I ran my hands down my face. *Patience, be patient.* “Do you remember the name of the company Pa worked for? It would be a good lead for us to check out. Maybe if his old boss still works there, he can give us some information on how to find him.”

Coop rubbed his jaw. “Maybe. I don’t know if his boss would have the authorization to give away personal information about a former employee.”

“He could at least tell us where he left to, right? If he left at all.” I turned to Ma. “Did he leave, do you know?”

“I don’t remember,” she said. “He didn’t, I don’t think.”

“But that was twenty years ago,” Coop finished, rapping his fingers on the table. “A lot can change in twenty years.”

Ma finished her stack of creamer containers and flicked the center. The whole thing came tumbling down, scattering across the table. I picked one up that had landed between us on the booth. “It was Hanson Private Investigations,” Ma said, replacing the containers in the white ceramic dish. “His workplace.”

I pulled up Google Maps on my phone and typed the name in. Hanson Private Investigations came up as the first option, about seven miles away. The place seemed fancier,

renovated. They had changed the front entryway where Ma had taken Pa's picture. "You sure about this, Ma?" I asked, showing her the location on my phone.

She nodded. "Positive."

I sighed, looking to Coop. "It's a lead."

"That, it is."

I wanted to leave right now and catch a taxi or Uber. "Ma, we'll go after breakfast. You cool with that?" She smiled, assenting with a dip of her chin. But under the table, barely visible, I watched her wring her hands. Silently pinching the tips of her fingers, counting under her breath. Anxious. Would finding Pa do her more harm than good? He had left *twenty* years ago. If he'd wanted to come back, wouldn't he have reached out? He was a PI—what if he was keeping tabs on us all along? The images of him watching us through camera lenses or following my report cards up until I graduated made me nauseous. Perhaps he wanted nothing to do with us, but I was still owed answers. He knew Ma was pregnant, and he *left*. Like she was nothing. Like I meant nothing. Yeah, there was a chance nothing would come of this.

But I had to try.

Coop mostly picked at his food, and when he did eat, it seemed reluctant. Ma shoveled eggs and pancakes into her face, pouring butter pecan syrup over everything, stopping only to guzzle down gulps of coffee. She asked for three refills before we left the restaurant, sipping the dregs as she swallowed her medication.

I paid the check and we left, returning briefly to the motel to grab a few things. Coop and I waited for Ma outside the room while she finished using the bathroom, and I ordered an Uber.

CHAPTER TEN

Missy

The burner phone hadn't rung since the first time, and if it weren't for the phone number displayed on the screen every time I flicked it open, I would've thought Mom was lying. In my bedroom, I twisted my engagement ring around on my finger, an absentminded tick I'd developed over the past few months. I rolled out of bed and twisted the wand to open the blinds. Dust filtered through the sunlight, drifting across the carpet, and I wiped a layer of it off one of the panels. The view brought me solace most days: towering trees that swayed with every gust of wind, a winding pathway in our yard that twisted around a pool, a barbeque and small seating area with couches and a TV hidden behind a thick black canvas for when Dad liked to watch the Super Bowl. Clear skies, more often than not. When it snowed in the winter—*that* was my favorite. Snow-capped trees, blankets of it coating every surface. During the summer, I came to long for it, but after a few freezing months, I would pray for spring.

I padded to my bathroom and washed my face, pinning my hair back, and changed into baggy jeans and a sweatshirt. I wasn't going anywhere today in particular, so I could stay in with

a book and air conditioning. Inevitably, I would spend the day calling vendors and setting up decorations for the reception, but I'd put that off for as long as I could. After the way I left things with Roman yesterday, a sour feeling settled in my gut every time I thought of the wedding. I put a reminder in my phone to call him after his shift ended to check in. He'd need a drink after Liam was fired, but whether that drink was with me or with Liam, I didn't know.

I brushed out my hair and left the comb on my nightstand. I debated making my bed but decided against it. Any planning or reading I'd do would likely take place in my bed, beneath the covers. A lazy day. Good Lord, I needed one. The smell of sizzling bacon drew me from my room moments later. As I descended the staircase, I took in the sight of my parents in the kitchen. Mom had her morning face mask on, a thick layer of something I didn't recognize—some high-end brand probably wanted her to review their new product—and she bit back curses when bacon grease splattered on her forearms. Her hair was up in curlers, frizzy from sleep, and she looked at me when my head appeared over the railing, waving a spatula at me. "Slice some strawberries for me, won't you?"

Dad sat at the kitchen table with a glass of orange juice, his tie hanging loose around his neck. He swiped through New York Times articles on his iPad, a part of his morning routine I found oddly hilarious. Like he had one foot in an older generation and one foot in the modern times. Reading the newspaper on an iPad. When I emerged into the kitchen, he offered a smile, exhaustion lining his features. "Good morning, Missy. How did you sleep?"

"Like the dead," I replied, though it was far from the truth. I rifled through the fridge until I found the strawberries and placed them on the counter, retrieving a cutting board, knife, and bowl. Mom pressed a swift kiss to my forehead as she passed me to set the table. "Late night at work?" I asked him, to which he nodded solemnly.

“It is the way of things,” he said. “It’s a particularly tough case this time around. Haven’t had one like this in a few years.” It was noticeable, too. His eyes were laden with an emotional weariness, the lines stretching from the corners of his eyes to his temples more pronounced than usual, as if he’d been squinting at a screen for twenty-four hours. There were similar wrinkles around his lips, not only from aging, but from years of pursing them and fighting to maintain neutrality. Professionalism. He and Mom were stark contrasts, in that sense. Mom fought age with a firing squad; Dad had surrendered long ago and wore the creases on his face as a testament to the battles he’d overcome. The people he had saved.

At Dad’s mention of a tough case, Mom shot me a conspiratorial glance, wagging her eyebrows. I rolled my eyes, and said, “Try to get more sleep tonight,” though I knew he wouldn’t. He smiled again, strained, and returned to his reading. Beside me now, Mom leaned her back against the counter, facing away from Dad while angling her face near mine.

“Do you think his case has to do with the burner phone?”

My attention flashed to Dad, but he hadn’t heard her. *Thank God.* “I doubt it,” I said, “and now’s not the time to talk about that.” I dumped a handful of sliced strawberries into the bowl, discarding the tops in the plastic basket they’d come in. “I still think we should put it back where you found it,” I added despite myself.

“You’re no fun.”

“It’s not *about* fun, Mom. You realize he could lose his job if his confidentiality is compromised, right?”

She pouted, returning to the stove and mumbling under her breath about a Debbie Downer daughter.

I finished slicing the strawberries and brought the bowl to the table, pouring a glass of orange juice for myself while Dad and I waited for Mom to finish the eggs. Dad clicked his iPad off and patted my hand. “How are preparations for the wedding coming along? Anything I can help with?”

Roman’s face popped into my head again, his hurt and disgust at dinner last night, and I bit the inside of my cheek. “The venue is beautiful, and I just need to finalize a few things with the coordinator today to make sure everything is accounted for.”

“My suit came in last night,” he replied, showing me a photo of it on his phone. Gray-blue with a white shirt beneath. “Do you think it will match your theme? I tried my best.”

“It’s perfect, Dad. You can be my ‘something blue’.”

At the mention of his suit, Mom dashed over with the eggs still steaming from the pan. “You didn’t tell me you had ordered a suit already! Will it go with my dress? For God’s sake, Peter, you *know* how I like to have a say in these things.”

He touched her arm gently. “I’ve also ordered a tie. It’s blush pink, the color of your dress, right?”

A smile twitched at her lips. “I suppose that’ll do.”

“I can’t very well wear a pink suit to my daughter’s wedding.”

“Yes, yes,” she said with a sigh, lumping eggs onto our awaiting plates. “The tie will work. Did you double check the hex codes to ensure the color is exact?”

“Of course. I’m not an amateur, sweetheart.”

She kissed his cheek. “Exactly why I married you.”

My parents were polar opposites. For Mom, everything had to be in a specific order, and there was rarely room for compromise. One would think this particular trait would make her

entirely undesirable, but Dad seemed to appreciate her orderliness, even if it appeared overbearing at times. “She cares” was his response when I’d asked him about it years ago. “She cares about presentation, about making sure everything meets a high standard. I appreciate that about her because it pushes me to meet that standard, to improve myself.” A cookie cutter answer, if you asked me. Though I was used to the more controlling aspects of her personality because they were all I ever knew growing up, I had to wonder why Dad would choose someone like her for himself. Perhaps there was a freedom that came with not having to think about things like decor and whether or not the guests would be impressed with the dinner spread. He could depend on her, and she on him.

I supposed Roman and I worked similarly in that regard. A pretty thought, until I recalled the phone calls each time I saw him, the apologetic smile angled my way—practiced by now—and realized I couldn’t count on two hands the number of times I was left alone during a meal. My skin crawled, the eyes of strangers lingering on me and the empty seat too long for comfort. It was all I could do not to make eye contact. The first year of dating, I’d sip my drink and politely shrug when a curious onlooker glanced between Roman and I. There was a sense of pride I took in knowing Roman was needed at work, that people saw his value the way I did. Over the years, however, it had begun to feel like he was being used by his supervisors while I was easily discarded.

Was I too complacent? Should I have told him early on in our relationship that I valued our time together, and I didn’t want it to be interrupted so frequently?

“Missy? Is something on your mind?”

Dad watched me with a slight crease forming between his brows and pointed his chin at my plate. “If you stare at your fork any longer, it might shrivel up or burst into flame.”

I laughed, rubbing my chest just beneath my neck. “Sorry, yeah. I’m fine. I had a rough nights’ sleep, that’s all.”

“Want to talk about it?”

Mom sat up straighter, leaned forward. “Did something happen with Roman yesterday?”

Not only did she have a knack for seeing right through me, Mom had a tendency to sniff out any juicy bit of gossip like a hound on a trail. I shot her a glare. “No, Mom, we’re fine.” Warmth radiated under my skin. *Damn*. Irish genes meant a flushed face every time I felt backed into a corner. A dead giveaway.

Mom tipped her orange juice in my direction. She still hadn’t peeled off her facial mask; there was something comical about the way she studied me, like I knew the expressions she made despite her face being hidden from view. “Ah, you know it’s impossible for you to lie, darling.”

“I’m not lying. I just don’t appreciate being prodded.”

“Who’s prodding?”

“*You.*”

Dad raised a hand. “Alright now, calm down, both of you.” He looked at me. “Bad dreams?”

I swallowed and gave a shallow nod, thankful for the cop-out. “Yeah. Bad dreams.”

Mom wasn’t satisfied. “What about?”

“*Jeez*, Mom,” I breathed, sitting back. “I can’t remember. And even if I did, I probably wouldn’t tell you. Not when you’re acting like this.”

She pouted, jutting out her bottom lip so that the face mask flap covering it fell forward. “Perhaps you need more sleep today. I think you’re a bit grouchy.”

It was true enough, but the fact that it came from her irked me all the more.

“Roman’s a busy man,” she continued, swirling a spoon in her coffee. “It can be stressful to love a man who works all the time. I should know.”

Dad’s jaw ticked, a slight flex in the muscle, the only sign that what she’d said had bothered him. He did work a lot, she wasn’t wrong. But if he didn’t work, Mom wouldn’t have this roof over her head, the food on the plate in front of her, the fancy skin care regimens.

“I’m grateful Roman works as hard as he does,” I replied, though the words tasted like sand in my mouth. I should be more grateful, shouldn’t I? “He works for *us*. So that we can have a life together and not worry about what we’re going to eat the next day. While I may want more of his time than I can have, I know his time is well-spent. So is Dad’s,” I added, to which he responded with a tight-lipped smile.

Mom was unfazed. “There’s no need to be dramatic, darling. I’m glad you found a hard-working man, of course. I only hope he remembers to make you happy.”

“He does make me happy.”

“Good,” she said, dusting her hands together. “Well, that’s that. I have a few things to film today. Peter, you’ll pick up dinner tonight.”

“As you wish, my love,” he replied, pressing a kiss to her knuckles as she stood to leave. When she had trudged up the stairs and shut her bedroom door behind her, I released a long sigh. Dad bit into a triangle of toast. “I know you don’t want to be prodded,” he said, “but it’s clear something’s up. Can you talk to me when you’re ready?”

“I’ve got a lot on my mind with the wedding and all.”

“I thought you’d finished your preparations?”

I shrugged. “The major stuff is finished. But I need to put the bouquets together, and I have some DIY things for the reception to prepare.”

“Let me know if you need any help, okay?”

“Thanks,” I said. My appetite had disappeared since the topics of Roman and the wedding had entered the conversation, so I walked my plate to the sink and hugged Dad goodbye. “Have a good day at work.”

“Call me if anything,” he said, returning to his iPad for one last scroll through the newspaper.

I stopped in my tracks a few feet from the staircase and looked back at him. “Dad, were you nervous about marrying Mom?” I instantly wished I could take the words back, fearful he’d think I was getting cold feet or something. Because I wasn’t. I had every intention of spending the rest of my life with Roman. Cold feet were simply out of the question.

If he recognized the hesitance in my voice, he didn’t acknowledge it, but he chewed on his words for a short moment. “I was nervous that things wouldn’t pan out the way I’d hoped,” he said, each word carefully chosen, spoken with a surety that should have brought me more comfort than they did. “I had fought for so long to find your mother, to be present for you during your childhood.”

“Fought?” I echoed, snorting. “Did Grandpa not want you to marry her?”

I had intended to bring levity to the conversation, but Dad’s eyes darkened, and he stared down at his plate. It struck me then how little I knew about him. His mannerisms, his character, his fatherly qualities—in those regards, he was an open book. But I knew little of his history with Mom. Even less about his life before. He spoke of his childhood and adolescence, yet there was something of a gap from his mid-twenties to his early thirties. I hadn’t thought much of it before.

I assumed he was dating Mom, or working hard at his job. Normal things people do in that stage of life, I supposed. I suddenly didn't want to know. Whatever lurked behind his gaze was something for the past, to remain there and not be broached.

"The world will do its very best to stop a good thing from happening," Dad said after a long time. "That's how you know you're doing the right thing. When everything and everyone wants to hold you back, you know you're onto something good." He returned his attention to me, blinking like he'd forgotten I was standing there. "You and your mother are worth everything to me. I'm sure you'll find out soon enough the sacrifices that must be made for love. But know this: those sacrifices are worth it to maintain what you hold most dear to your heart."

This conversation felt like too heavy a pep talk to have this early in the day, so I smiled and said, "You're right, Dad. Thank you." His words had left a chill under my skin, settling around my bones, unshakable. I closed my bedroom door behind me and leaned against it. My fingers felt for my phone in my back pocket, but I stopped. I had wanted to call Roman. *He's at work*, I reminded myself, and aside from the simple 'Good morning' text I'd received, he didn't seem ready to talk just yet.

"Gosh, I'm a shitty fiancé," I muttered and walked to my desk to flip open the wedding binder. I had no energy to call any vendors, drive to Michaels to pick up wire and something to wrap the bouquets in—to do anything, really. My bridesmaids were all working hard, some of them finishing school. No one to talk to.

I pulled the burner phone out of the desk drawer, shuffling around loose sheets of paper until I found it. The phone number glared at me, taunting. What if I called? Would the woman Mom had talked to pick up? If this had to do with Dad's cases, it would be absolutely ridiculous for me to risk such a thing. The conversation at breakfast filtered my thoughts. Dad worked hard

to keep us clothed and fed—there was no way I’d call this number. I should put the phone back where Mom had found it, but she’d only take it out again and do something stupid like try to meet the woman for coffee or pretend she was another PI working the case.

I sighed, tossing it back in the drawer. I’d give it back to Dad, probably. Let him know he needed better hiding spots so Mom wouldn’t start going through his things. I stared at the device sitting among my things in the drawer. *So odd.* For someone who kept his work very separate from his life, it was strange that he’d put this phone in the house. Didn’t they have places at his job for this? Lockers or something?

I resolved to talk to Roman about it later today over a drink. He’d want to air out his day, and I was certain he’d appreciate a distraction. Plus, I needed to apologize for my behavior yesterday at dinner. I nudged the drawer shut with my hip and dropped into my desk chair, spinning in a circle with my head tipped back, eyes fixed on the ceiling, letting the speed churn my thoughts into mush until there was nothing at all.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Delilah

We decided to walk.

It was still early enough in the afternoon that the heat wasn't yet unbearable, and it gave me some time to think. To figure out what the hell I'd say if I somehow met my father in the middle of Downtown Chicago on a Thursday after twenty-some years of silence. Something in my gut told me I'd see him at this place, Hanson Private Investigations. Something told me apprehension wasn't out of the question.

The three of us attempted to walk in a row, side-by-side, but that proved utterly impossible as the day wore on. It seemed pedestrians here had never heard of crosswalks before, or had at least never deigned to walk thirty extra feet to use one. As a result, the streets blared with car horns and the shouts of pissed-off men. Organized chaos. Everyone knew this was the way of things; nobody seemed altogether bothered by the ordeal. They bustled around with expressions that said *If someone hits me with their car, they can pay my hospital bill.*

Ma wasn't a fan. Though she was no stranger to Chicago, apparently, the current stimulation on top of the caffeine from earlier made for an overwhelming mix. Her eyes darted to-and-fro, scanning skyscrapers, cafés, and other food joints for any sign of...danger? I couldn't pretend to know what went on in her head anymore than I could pretend to know what I'd say when we got to Pa's (potentially old) workplace.

Coop nudged my arm with his elbow, drawing my attention. He always seemed to know where my train of thought was going. That being said, I thought of little else but Pa nowadays, so it wouldn't be hard to guess. "Are you hoping he's there?"

"Yes?" I answered, not intending it to be a question, realizing it most certainly was. "No? I don't know. I'm dreading it."

"Figured as much," he replied, chin dipping slightly under the cover of his jean jacket. "We can always turn back."

"We've come too far."

"You ever heard of the sunk cost fallacy?"

I glanced at him quizzically. "The sunk what?"

"You never took an economics course?"

"Sure, in high school," I said with a snort, guiding Ma away from the man offering Starbucks coffee samples on the corner. "I don't remember learning about that."

He sidestepped an open grate, nearly knocking over one of the caution cones as a city maintenance man glowered. "Took a microeconomics course my first year of college. Failed a few times, but that's not the point." He straightened his jacket. "I'll give you a scenario to explain it. Say you've purchased nonrefundable tickets to a concert. You find out a few days later that your grandma has a birthday party—or some shit—on the same day. What do you do?"

“I mean...I already bought the tickets. I should use what I spent my money on, right?”

He shook his head. “See, that’s the thing. That’s why I remembered the fallacy even after I flunked out of college. Think of it this way: the money is gone. You can’t get it back no matter what you do. Whether you go to the party or to the concert, your money is spent.”

“So if the money is gone, you might as well go to the party if it’s more important to you.”

“Exactly.” He nudged me again. “You’d do well in school.”

“You understand the fallacy and you still flunked.”

“I didn’t figure it out until the third time around.”

I laughed. “Alright, well what’s that got to do with anything?”

“You say we’ve come too far to go back,” he said. “But it doesn’t matter. The money we spent to come here is long gone. Either way, we’ll have to get tickets back home. The money’s gone; what happens next is entirely up to you.”

“But it’s not all about the money.” I remembered the photo of Pa on the mantle at home, the years I had spent staring at it in hopes that he would walk through the front door, unharmed, and sweep me into his arms. “If I leave now, the questions will eat me alive. Don’t you see? Nothing will ever be the same.”

He nodded solemnly. “You’re right. Nothing will be the same. But what if it’s better for some questions to remain unanswered?”

I didn’t know how to respond. Of course I knew there was a chance I’d hate whatever I discovered. But I had to *know*. He left when Ma was pregnant. Was it because of me? The final letter said otherwise, but I couldn’t be sure. What had happened all those years ago that would have made him want to leave?

An hour later, we spotted Hanson Private Investigations standing proud, practically a skyscraper among a smattering of financial institutions and law firms. The entrance was much changed since Pa had taken his picture in front of it; a granite water fountain took up the center of the broad walkway, a half dozen koi fish swimming in the basin, and the foyer had been completely renovated. A lounge with plush blue sofas, complimentary coffee, and a massive flatscreen replaced what had once been a rather drab receptionist station. Coop went straight to the coffee machine, Ma following suit with a curious expression on her face, and I stood off to the side in the doorway attempting—failing—to stop the hammering in my heart. Was Pa here?

Was I about to meet him?

Everything in my gut *screamed* to turn away. I shouldn't be here. He had a life by now. What would I ruin by stepping into it? If he had a new family, if they didn't know about Ma and me...they'd be devastated. I shook myself off. No. If he had a new family, that was his fault. Not mine. He was the one who chose to leave. I glanced at Ma, who had helped herself to some of the peanuts and cookies in the lounge while a security guard eyed her warily, and I was suddenly acutely aware that I only really had one side of the story. One-and-a-half, if the letters from Pa counted. Hell—I hardly had Ma's side, since she refused to tell me anything. I was walking into this blind, and a rush of heat in my cheeks confirmed my fears.

I had no fucking clue what I was doing.

“Miss?”

A young receptionist sat at the front, a man around my age, if not one or two years older. He had an earpiece in his right ear and a concerned, pinched look on his face. “Can I help you with something?”

My mouth felt like cotton. I swallowed even though my mouth was dry. “I...I don’t know.” Shoot—didn’t I know? Coop noted the interaction and finished making his coffee before returning to my side, Ma in tow. “I mean...does a Peter O’Conner work here?”

“Peter O’Conner?” His dark brows furrowed. “I don’t believe I know that name. What kind of business do you have with him?”

Was this guy suspicious? It hit me a second later. This was a PI company. Everything they did was confidential and secretive, I imagined, so a girl walking in and asking around for a seemingly random man would likely be an odd occurrence. “He’s an old family member of mine,” I said carefully. “We were in the area and figured we’d stop in.”

Something in his face told me he very much doubted my story. “Would you like me to ask around for you, Miss?”

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

He smiled and gestured with an open palm to the sofas. “Of course not. Please wait in the lounge while I make a few calls.”

The sofas were not as comfortable as they looked. Stiff, like shoes that needed to be broken in, I felt my discomfort grow the longer I sat waiting. Coop sat across from me, Ma kicking her feet beside me. Her short legs rarely reached the floor when she was seated, and the steady *thump-thump, thump-thump* of her heels smacking the sofa’s wood frame put me in a sort of hyperfocused daze.

“I don’t think he’s here,” I told Coop. “The receptionist didn’t know who he was.”

Coop shrugged. “Sure, but that kid is so young he was probably hired last week. I doubt he knows where to park yet, let alone the name of one PI in this massive building.”

A fair point. I looked over my shoulder, knee bouncing. The receptionist spoke on the phone in hushed tones, glancing at me every now and then to offer smiles that didn't quite reach his eyes. Five minutes later, he waved me over.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but nobody by the name of Peter O'Conner works here. Perhaps you have the wrong name?" His lips were pinched tight, and his eyes darted from me to the security guard.

My gut sank. "It's possible he has changed his last name. Is there a Peter around here at all?" I pulled up the photo of him on my phone and showed it to the receptionist, who glimpsed it swiftly. "This is an old photo, but it's from when he started working here. You don't know him?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Miss. I don't know anybody by the name of Peter in this building. Perhaps he has moved on to a different profession. As you say, the photo is old."

I bit the inside of my cheek and heard Coop approach from behind. The receptionist wiped the sheen of sweat from his brow. "I don't mean to be stubborn," I said slowly. "But would I be able to speak to someone else?"

"If you would like, Miss, but you will receive the same answer. I think it would be best if you go on your way. I wish you the best of luck in finding your family member. Perhaps try calling him?"

A test. Why did this feel like a fucking test? And why was I failing? I had known there was a chance Pa had moved on to greener pastures, or whatever the saying was, but something about this interaction felt *off*. Like I was being lied to. I glanced above the receptionist at the security camera, the blinking red light mirroring my heartbeat. There were more in the room—above the coffee machine, next to the security guard, on the left in the hallway entrance.

A crawling sensation crept along my skin. I was being watched by someone on the other side of that camera. I knew it in my bones.

Was Pa sitting there watching me? Had he recognized Ma? Was that who the receptionist had called, and that was why he seemed so nervous? Pa had told him to send us away. My palms fisted at my sides. Coward. Fucking coward.

“Miss?” The receptionist asked, gripping the armrests of his chair. “Are you alright?”

I pointed at the camera. “He’s watching us, isn’t he?”

His eyes widened, alarmed. “Our security monitors those feeds. For our clients’ privacy, employees are not permitted to view them unless they have written permission from our head of security. So, no. There is no Peter O’Conner watching the feeds—”

“I KNOW YOU’RE HERE, PETER!”

We all spun around to find Ma at the hallway entrance screaming up the stairway, startling onlookers who clutched manilla folders to their chests or dropped phones into their laps. One woman stopped on the staircase and said into her phone, “Mary, I’ll have to call you back.”

I rushed to Ma’s side. “What are you *doing*?”

“They changed it,” she said, wild-eyed and frantic. She gripped my upper arms, vise-like, and I grimaced. “He’s here, I can feel it, and they’re destroying my memories. Why did they change it, Dee? Why?”

“You can’t scream like that, Ma. Not here. We’re gonna get—”

“Ladies?”

The security guard from the lounge approached with his hands braced on his belt. I didn’t like the way he touched the butt of his gun. “Would you two come with me?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, breaking out of Ma’s hold. Every eye watched us, and I realized how we must have looked. A desperate trio walking into a PI company in search of aid we weren’t going to receive. Not too far from the truth. “She has schizophrenia,” I told the man. “She didn’t mean to cause a disruption.”

His eyes seemed pitying, but when Coop joined us, they hardened once more. “I understand, but I’ve been asked to remove you three from the property. Please come with me.”

Ma raised a fist at him. “My husband will have your job for this!”

It was the first time she’d ever referred to Pa as her husband, and I wondered if returning to his workplace had sparked old memories. Coop raised placating hands. “We’ll leave. Apologies for any disturbance.”

Ma looked ready to pummel Coop into oblivion, but there wasn’t much she could do aside from swat his hands away when he guided her to the door. She marched out on her own accord, chin held high, muttering low under her breath. I felt the stare of every employee in Hanson Private Investigations as we left, my skin burning a bright red, and by the time we made it to the main street, the dizziness began to ebb.

“He was there,” Ma said, seething, wringing her hands. “I know he was there. Some assistant up there keeping him from us. Something up there. A meeting? I know he was.”

“Take a breath, Ma,” I said, rubbing her back in a circular motion. “Take a breath. You’re not making much sense.”

She moved out of my touch, rounding on Coop. “You should have let me go up the stairs. He was in his office. He’s scared—He doesn’t want to see us.”

“Ma!” I said, regaining her attention. A passerby flinched at my raised voice, swiveling his head to glance at us with wide eyes as he passed. I lowered my voice. “He wasn’t there. If you went upstairs, maybe you would’ve been arrested.”

She was mumbling more, growing agitated, scraping fingers across her scalp and arms. I tapped Coop. “We need to get off the street.”

He withdrew his phone from his pocket. “I’ll call an Uber back to the hotel.”

I shook my head. “Later. If she gets in a car right now, we’ll freak the driver out. We need to get somewhere quiet, and fast.”

Coop took Ma by the elbow and led us back the way we originally came. The air smelled of car exhaust and cigarettes, the latter all too familiar. Cigarettes reminded me of Ma, of Rivergate, of one of her ex-boyfriends who would smoke too much and sounded like he’d swallowed lungfulls of gravel. Coop abruptly turned left down an alley with Ma. I was close on their heels, shrugging through afternoon foot traffic, amazed that Coop had remembered an empty alley in the middle of the city.

A chain-link fence closed it off from the public, but druggies and homeless people had easily cut their way through the metal, creating a hole big enough to slip through. The smell of cigarettes lingered in the alley, but the overwhelming stench of piss, shit, and body odor clung to my nostrils. I retched, stuffing a sleeve to my nose. Coop and Ma stood not too far from the entrance. He had his hands on her shoulder and spoke to her in soft, reassuring tones. In the dark quiet between two buildings, away from the rest of civilization, Ma began to steady herself.

“I’m sorry I took you there, Ma,” I said, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “I didn’t realize things would go south so quickly.”

“They were lying to us,” she said, bitterness dripping from her words. “They were lying. He’s there.”

Coop frowned, pitying. “Bridget, I don’t think they were lying. While I was in the lounge, I looked up the staff at Hanson. His name wasn’t there, and none of the pictures looked like him.”

Her shoulders sank.

“Is there anywhere else you two would go when you were here?” I asked her, hoping to steer the conversation to a more hopeful route. “Somewhere you liked to eat at, a view you liked to visit?”

Ma didn’t respond. She continued muttering nonsense under her breath, arms rigid and tight to her body, eyes dazed. If she looked at you, it would seem as though she saw you without processing your presence. You existed, but were not acknowledged. I sighed and looked at Coop. “Let’s go back to the hotel. She needs rest.”

We slipped out of the alley, and all the way back, I couldn’t get the image of Ma screaming for Pa out of my mind. Her desperation pricked the hairs on the back of my neck, churning my stomach. Would revisiting the places of her past do more harm than good? And what about when we finally found Pa?

I had created a new fear within myself. Originally, I’d feared never finding him. Then, if I found him, that he would turn out to be a nightmare.

Now, I worried that finding him meant I would lose Ma to herself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Missy

I decided to drive to North Pond Casting Pier that afternoon.

Roman wouldn't be off work for another hour, and until I met him later in the evening for dinner—a more amicable attempt, I hoped—I had time to kill and steam to burn. They hadn't done much work on this place in the past few years, but that was what I loved so much about it. The cracks in the sidewalks, the grass skirting the edges of the path, the trees begging for their shade to be used. Geese swam by the large concrete dock, waiting close in case an enthusiastic child decided to throw their PB&J sandwich in the water. Animals, I'd learned, had a thing for peanut butter.

I sat on the edge of the dock, braced my arms behind me, and cast my feet over the side, high enough that my toes dipped into the water only if I pointed my feet. I'd bought a torta from the Mexican joint a block south, and now I salivated at the aroma of carne asada and fresh salsa emanating from the to-go box. I flipped open the lid and ate a chip, sprinkling crumbs into the water.

Dad used to take me here when I was little. He said this was where he had taught an old friend of his how to fish, but that friend was dead now, so he liked to come here at least once a month to fish in their memory. He didn't talk much about friends from his past, and I'd latched onto the memory as a child, eager to show him that I was just as capable of fishing with him. "I'm not going anywhere, Daddy," I'd said, staring up at him with big, childish eyes. Five-years-old or so. It was the only memory I had from when I was very little that I knew wasn't a dream.

The last time he had brought me here was before Roman proposed. Roman had just asked for his blessing, and Dad had given it, but I had sensed some reservation in him when he had asked if I wanted to go to the pier the following day. "I want your happiness more than anything in the world," he'd said, his hand encompassing mine. "Does Roman truly make you happy?"

The question had seemed silly to me, at the time. I'd been dating Roman for long enough, we'd had our fair share of disagreements and knew to put our relationship above our differences. In hindsight, I wished I had asked him more about his own happiness. Did Mom make him happy? What had his life been like before her? Before me?

I bit into the torta, juices sliding down my chin and splattering into the box. The burner phone sat heavy in my pocket. Should I have left it at home? Probably. But some part of me felt like this was the only way I could really connect to a side of Dad I'd never seen before. The longer I held onto it, the more I realized that it probably had very little to do with his work as a PI. It was from his life before us—I knew it in my gut—and perhaps I was my mother's daughter after all, but I felt a strong urge to know the identity of the woman on the other side of the phone. I set the torta down, wiped my hands on a rough paper napkin, and fished through my pocket for the phone, flipping it open.

Would I get Dad in trouble if I called? “It’s not a client,” I whispered. “It can’t be.” If I called the number, it was doubtful the woman on the other side of the phone would know who I was. I just wanted to know who she was. Why she and Pa shared a secret that he felt the need to keep beneath the floorboards in our house. I took a deep breath, sweat slick on my palms, and called.

My heart had leapt to my throat sometime between when I’d pressed the number and when I’d raised the phone to my ear. What would I say? What if there was some kind of truth I wasn’t ready to hear? Damn it—what was I doing? I should give the phone back to Pa. Explain what had happened. There was no secret he’d keep from us unless it was for our protection. And here I was, his trust in me utterly misplaced—

A click on the other line.

I held my breath.

“Hello?”

It was a girl’s voice, not quite a woman, though I could see how Mom would have mistaken it. She must have been around my age, perhaps younger. I couldn’t tell, my nerves had jumbled the bites of torta in my stomach. Was I about to puke?

“Hi,” I said, more of a croak than a coherent greeting. “Who is this?”

“I had the same question,” she replied. Her tone was clipped, equally nervous. She hadn’t expected me to answer, and she didn’t know who I was. Had she expected Dad?

She dispensed with formalities. “Do you know Peter O’Conner?”

My brow furrowed. “Peter O’Conner?” Dad’s name was Peter Hughes, not O’Conner. “I think you’re asking after my father, but that isn’t our last name.”

A hitch of breath, something like shock that led to another long pause. “What’s your last name, then?”

I scoffed. “Why the hell would I tell you? I don’t know who you are.”

The girl sighed. “My name’s Delilah. You?”

“Missy.”

“Missy?” she repeated, like she couldn’t quite believe it. I thought I heard her snicker.

I frowned. “Yeah, my mom’s parents used to call her ‘Missy’ when she was little. She liked it.”

“Sounds like your mom is something of a narcissist.”

I shrugged, though I knew she couldn’t see. “A little, sure. Not that it should matter.” I felt dazed just speaking with this girl, like we were circling one another, waiting to see when the other would break. Wary of each other, though we didn’t quite know why. A threat lingered over our conversation. Yes, there was a secret here, and it didn’t seem like either of us were ready for the information.

“Alright,” the girl said. “Now that we’re best friends and all, can you tell me how you found the burner phone?”

“How do you know it’s not mine?”

“Don’t fuck with me. We both know it’s not.”

I flinched at the harsh language. “It’s my dad’s. Who are you to him? How do you know him?”

She chewed on her words. At least, I assumed that’s what she was doing. “I think we should meet,” she said finally.

“Meet?” I echoed. “I don’t know who you are.”

“I just told you.” “Yeah, you told me your *name*. That doesn’t mean I trust you.”

“Well, I think this news would be better delivered in person. You’re in Chicago, right? In the city?”

The blood drained from my face. “I don’t know who you are, I don’t know what you want, but you leave my family alone. Whatever news you have, you can tell me now.” I swallowed. “Are you my dad’s mistress or something?”

She snorted into the speaker. “Oh God, wouldn’t that be rich. No, I’m not his mistress. She sighed again. I could almost imagine her rubbing her forehead, debating herself. “Do you know anything about his past? His life before you?”

A chill swept along my skin. Hadn’t I been traveling down this line of thought all day? “Of course I do,” I lied. Whatever she was about to tell me, I didn’t want to know. My life was perfect right now: parents who loved each other, my wedding in just over a week—I couldn’t let this girl ruin everything. “If I were you,” I told her, “I’d get rid of your burner and never bother me or my family again.”

“Missy, he’s not who you think he is.”

I bristled. “He’s my *father*. That’s all that matters. Leave my family *alone*.”

Before I could second-guess myself, I hung up the phone. I stared out at the water, the geese gliding atop it. In the serene quiet of the pier, I felt the slow trail of each tear. Why was I crying? I couldn’t tell you. Perhaps it was the adrenaline crash mixed with overwhelming emotions. Fear, rage, uncertainty, relief. I had succumbed to curiosity, only to receive more questions than answers.

I should throw the phone in the water, I thought absently. Get rid of it, once and for all. Never look back.

He's not who you think he is.

I tightened my grip around the device, my jaw clenched to the point of pain.

He's not who you think he is.

What did she know? Nothing good. Nothing I wanted to hear.

And nothing could ruin this week for me. Nothing could ruin it—*Nothing*.

I jammed the phone in my pocket and stood, discarding the rest of my torta in the trash can beside the dock. I'd lost my appetite.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Delilah

My hand fell to my lap, the burner phone glaring up at me.

We had finally made it back to the hotel, and Ma was fast asleep on the twin bed near the bathroom when I heard a buzzing sound from my suitcase. I'd brought the burner phone with me. Probably not the best idea of mine, at the time, but now I was beginning to recognize the potential I had with this device.

Missy.

I didn't know what the fuck kinda name that was, but that girl...she was Pa's daughter. My age. Older, younger, I didn't know. I hated to think that she could have been older. That would've meant he had cheated on Ma. Worse, that when he'd left her while she was pregnant, it was for his other daughter. His other woman. My brain swirled with possibilities, each worse than the last, and I glanced over at Ma. She had calmed down since her panic at Hanson Private Investigation and slept more soundly than I had at any point in my life. A sleep deep enough that she didn't wake while I'd spoken to Missy.

“Is this the secret you were trying to keep from me?” I murmured, watching the steady rise and fall of her shoulders beneath the covers. It was bad enough that he’d left us. But for another wife? Another daughter? And he’d changed his last name, too. I thought of my own: O’Conner. The only tie I had to him that didn’t feel superficial, and he’d discarded it completely. Changed his identity to escape Ma. To escape *me*.

My stomach felt leaden under my skin, a sweltering chill. A heat so intense I felt icy all throughout my bones, followed by a wave of nausea. I ran to the bathroom and buckled over, gathering my hair into my hand before vomiting into the toilet. Tears and snot gushed, mixing with bile. I wiped it all away after a few minutes and leaned back on the bathtub, the backs of my thighs cool against the tiles.

In the end, despite telling Missy that Pa wasn’t who she thought he was, I had decided against telling her. I didn’t know a thing about her—she could have been the worst person on the face of the planet. But if I had said it, if I had told her, “I’m his daughter”, what would that have done? Destroyed her. Destroyed her family. And why should she have to suffer for Pa’s actions?

Then again, why should I?

He wants nothing to do with you, a little voice whispered in my mind, followed by Missy telling me, “Leave my family alone.”

I should back off.

Why the hell had I come here, anyway?

To meet my father.

To find out if it was worth it for him, abandoning us.

To learn *why*.

Because Ma wasn't going to tell me. And I needed to know. It wasn't good for me, and it surely wouldn't do Pa any good, or his new—could they be considered new?—family, but perhaps I was selfish. Perhaps I wanted him to feel as destroyed as I did right now, sitting on the bathroom floor of a crappy motel vomiting my guts into the toilet.

I scrubbed my hands over my face and groaned. Fuck this. I had no doubt Missy was going to call me back. Well, unless she'd disposed of the burner phone in the fit of rage I'd left her in. But she'd want to know. Any *good* daughter would want to know more about her dad, and it seemed she was good enough. Putting up a fight for her family and all. I choked out a laugh—she'd asked if I was his *mistress*. And she'd sounded like that was my fault, if it were the case. Like I'd done some evil thing, like her dad couldn't be blamed. I imagined the life she had. Perfect, or as close to it as one could come. Two parents present in her household, imperfect in acceptable ways. Maybe a dog, or a cat. A boyfriend who doted on her. Friends.

I felt the anger seep from my skin, oozing, amassing in an invisible pile before me. It left a gaping hole in its wake, and somehow that emptiness weighed more than the burden of everything I'd recently endured.

Was I jealous of her? No, I didn't think so. I didn't want her life; I wanted the life she'd taken from me.

"It's not her fault," I murmured, pulling my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around them. I pressed my swollen lips into my forearm, hot breath blowing back in my face. "It's not her fault that he left." I repeated the notion like a mantra, staring at the tiled floors until they warped, twisting.

I understood why Ma had told me he was dead. Even if she blamed me, the part of her that loved me had known I wouldn't handle the truth well. Better to think that he had died while

loving us than to entertain the idea that he'd abandoned us for another woman, another daughter. Somehow, death was the more palatable option. Less complicated.

A soft moan rose from the bedroom, and I realized Ma had stopped snoring some time after I'd run over here. I flushed the toilet, closed the lid, and stood on quaking legs to wash my mouth out. I spat bile into the sink and took a swig of mouthwash, swishing it around. It dried my mouth out, stung the tip of my tongue. When I rinsed my mouth again, Ma appeared around the corner, peering at me in the mirror. "What happened, Dee?"

I braced my hands on either side of the sink. *What happened?*

Everything.

I fought the desire to lie and protect her from the truth. She deserved to know; this was her husband. Ex-husband, whatever. "A girl called on the burner phone." I swallowed, my throat pained and raw from vomiting. "His daughter."

Ma quirked her head to the side. "You're his daughter."

"His other daughter." I turned and faced her. "He has a daughter with the woman he married. About my age, I think. She must have found the phone after her mom did. She called."

Ma stared at me for some time. Her lips parted, closed, parted again. Like a stunned guppy fish.

"Is that why he left, Ma?" I asked. "He had a daughter with another woman. He cheated on you. And he felt like he had to leave to be with her?" I shook my head, disbelieving. "But you were pregnant, too, and he knew. It would be one thing if you weren't pregnant—still, a terrible thing—but I'd understand his thought process a little more." I was rambling, pacing in the tiny space of the bathroom, and doubted Ma was processing a word out of my mouth. "There had to be something else, right? Something that would have pushed him away." Or was I giving him too

much credit? Maybe he just *liked* the other woman more. Simple as that. Dickish, childish behavior. But even *that* didn't seem right. Because that kind of character is hard to change, and Missy wouldn't have any respect for a man like that the way she seemed to dote on her father.

There was more to this, and I knew Ma had the information I wanted.

I stopped in my tracks, settling against the counter. Not only was she unlikely to tell me, I wondered if her take on the events of twenty years ago was fully intact. Unbiased. Had she warped the memory to protect herself? To protect me? If she were to tell me what had happened, how much of it would be accurate?

Ma scratched her arms restlessly. She spoke in a low tone that rose gradually with the passing seconds. "Fucking bastard, she's a little child, doesn't know any better, I don't know how this happened, I really don't like those bath towels—scratchy and old and... Where did Coop go?" She turned away after the last comment and padded to the door, taking her nonsensical words with her. I caught up and blocked her path.

"He's in his room resting, Ma. That's why we came back here. To rest and regroup, remember?" Goosebumps rose along the backs of my arms. "Why don't we sit down? Maybe they have something on the TV you'd like to watch?"

"I want to talk to Coop."

"He's resting—"

She shoved me hard into the door. My head cracked against it, sending a sharp jolt of pain down my neck and along my shoulders. My vision swam before me, colorful and muddled. Ma elbowed me out of the way and reached for the door.

I thrust myself in front of her again. "He's *asleep*. He won't talk to you."

She screamed. A loud wail that echoed through the room. It scratched my eardrums, bounced around the top of my brain, and I instinctively planted my hands over my ears. “I’ll get him!” I shouted at her. “I’ll go get him, alright? Will that satisfy you?!”

She fell like a sack of potatoes, screaming into the floor, grabbing fistfuls of her hair. A full fucking meltdown.

Shit—why did I say anything to her? Deserving of the truth or not, that didn’t mean she could *handle* it.

Before I could second-guess myself, I threw open the door and sprinted barefoot across the open landing. The soles of my feet burned on the hot wood, and a splinter jammed itself into the ball of my right foot, but I ran until I found his room. 228? Or 230? I swiveled between the two, groaned in exasperation, and knocked on both.

An old woman poked her head out of 230. Gray wisps of hair stuck to one side of her face, matted with drool. “Need sumthin’?”

“Sorry,” I said between breaths. I hadn’t realized how hard I was breathing. “Wrong room.”

She nodded slowly, as if she didn’t quite believe me, and said, “Naht a prahblem.” She shut the door.

I banged on Coop’s door, eyeing my room down the path, and bounced from foot to foot. “It’s hot out here, Coop,” I ground out between my teeth. “Open up, open *up*—”

He swung it open a second later, shucking flip-flops on. I didn’t need to say a word before he followed me back to my room. I could’ve sworn the old woman watched us running through her window. Probably thought we were high.

Inside the room again, Ma had moved from the floor to the bed, screaming into a pillow.

“Ma!” I shouted, shaking her shoulders. “Ma! Coop is here, alright? Coop is here. It’s time to calm down.”

She whirled on me and lashed out.

Nails raked down the sides of my face, scrambling for purchase. She fell off the bed trying to reach me and crushed her heel into the top of my foot. I raised my arms and covered my head.

Coop lunged, encircling Ma in his arms, locking them to her side. “I know, Bridget,” he said, his tone utterly calm. “We’re all okay. Delilah is safe, you see her? Look at her, Bridget. She’s safe.”

Ma’s chest heaved, and she let out a strangled sound, eyes wild. But she looked at me. She looked at me, saw right through me. Her gaze pierced me in place.

“Why don’t you tell me what you’re thinkin’?” Coop said. He swayed as he held her, like he was rocking a giant baby. It looked insanely ridiculous, but it worked. A steady rhythm that got Ma out of her head.

“She’s not gonna love me anymore,” she blubbered, and now she saw beyond me, eyes glazed and distant. “Nobody’s gonna stay. Alone, I’ll be all alone, and we shouldn’t have come here. I don’t like this one bit. She’s ungrateful—ungrateful for all I’ve sacrificed. And she got this shitty hotel. I don’t like those towels. There’s another girl. There’s another one, and she’s gonna leave me too. They all are.”

“We’re right here,” he replied, relaxing his grip so he could face her fully. “I’m here, huh? Dee’s right over there.” He pointed at me, where I slouched onto the second twin bed. I wanted to cover my face, the red, risen skin she’d left behind, but I didn’t want her to think I was scared of her.

“I love you, Ma,” I said. I inched forward, taking her hand in mine. It wasn’t the first time I’d said the words and doubted them. I just hoped she couldn’t tell. “Do you...do you want to go home?”

Coop looked at me with a raised brow, expression questioning.

Ma didn’t reply. She sank into his arms and cried.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Missy

A bitterness had entered my heart since the phone call this afternoon. Roman texted me an hour ago about a rough day of work and a headache, and he'd agreed to let me buy him a drink. I needed to air things out with him as much as he needed a friendly face to talk to. *But tonight's not about me*, I reminded myself as I drove to Ozzy's Bar & Lounge. *Liam lost his job today, and Roman's going to be upset*. He had been upset since dinner last night, and I couldn't imagine how he had faced Liam today, fully aware his friend was about to lose his job, unable to stop it from happening or offer so much as a warning. *Yeah, it's not about me*. The stuff Delilah had told me over the phone could wait. If Roman asked, I'd tell him. Anxiety hovered under my skin, an unstable tremor that had left me on-edge all day.

I pulled into the parking lot five minutes later, idling while I waited for Roman to arrive. It was pretty busy for a Thursday—shockingly so. A girl slung her arms around her boyfriend's shoulders, laughing into the crook of his neck when he tried to push her off so he could play billiards with his buddies. A group of fifty-year-old men leaned on polished Harleys, clutching

beers that were most definitely not allowed to be outside the bar. Something about burly, tatted men in thick leather jackets made people unafraid of losing their liquor license. A pair of ladies on a girl's night out waved at the bikers, blinking over-lined lashes at them, red lipstick a striking contrast to their white teeth. A few bikers oggled, nudging one another like schoolboys, but most ignored the display, scowling into their beers. Something about the women reminded me of Mom, but I couldn't place my finger on why. It was discomfiting, that's all. I had the sudden urge to pee, sitting here in my car's air conditioning, my leg bouncing against the steering wheel. It was my fault for chugging a bottle of water on my way here. Damn anxiety. I texted Roman to meet me inside. My thumbs tapped all the wrong buttons, but I hit *send* anyway, hoping he'd decipher the message on his own.

Ozzy's never smelled like body odor, even when it was packed full in the evenings, which I appreciated. I meandered through the crowd, sidling between tables, until I found the bathrooms marked *Cowboys* and *Cowgirls*. Quirky, though the bar hadn't struck me as Western-themed. I wondered if the managers had picked the signs up on sale at a Hobby Lobby. There was usually a line for the women's room—wasn't there always?—and sure enough, the pair of women I'd noticed walking in stood outside the door. They flashed their ruby-lipped smiles at me when I approached.

"Aren't you too pretty to be here alone?" the taller one said, clutching her purse to her skinny hip. She jutted her chin at the ring on my left hand. "You gotta man, don't you, honey?"

"He's on his way over, actually."

The short one nodded sagely and tapped her friend's arm. "Remember when boys would pick us up back in the day? Now they got their girls driving out on their own." She shook her head, deeply saddened. "My, how the world's changed."

I bit back a snide remark about women who were too old to be wearing mini-skirts, recalling how Mom liked to wear them once-in-a-while. But she was different—she kept her legs toned, unlike the women in front of me. I frowned, catching my train of thought with a sigh. *No need to be judgy.* The day had taken a toll on me.

In the next three days, I'd find out just how much worse the week could get, and I'd regret ever touching the burner phone. I'd remember thinking nothing could ruin this week before my wedding.

How wrong I would be.

Roman arrived once I left the bathroom, and I found him at the bar talking to a male bartender. I knew it was Roman from his back—he had both arms folded on the edge of the table, his shoulders raised like he was leaning forward. Tense, alert. I'd always liked how I could see the shadows of muscle beneath the shirts he wore to work. I walked up behind him and ran my hand across his back in a soothing circle as the bartender moved onto new patrons. Roman relaxed instantly into my touch and gazed at me with a weak smile. "Hey there."

I pressed a kiss to his temple and slid into the empty stool next to him. "Long day?"

"The longest," he sighed, folding his hand over mine. "I've missed you. I hated the way we left things last night."

My heart softened at his touch, his words. "Me too. I have a lot to apologize for."

He shook his head. "As do I. How about we just have a good time tonight? Move forward?" He said this right before the bartender returned with a beer and a glass of sparkling rosé.

I grinned, nodding at the drinks. "I assume the rosé is for you?"

“But of course,” he said, taking a sip while wagging his brows. His face immediately pinched and he handed me the drink. “God—that’s so sweet.”

I laughed, accepting it. “You know I like sweet wines. Something about a young palate.”

He took a swig of the beer and braced himself on the bar with one elbow, surveying the growing crowd. “I’m not much older than you; still can’t stand the stuff.”

Swirling the wine on the countertop, I followed his gaze. Buzzed groups of men around our age placed bets on the billiards table, some with girls glued their hips, others eyeing ladies around the bar while they lined up a shot. A few of those eyes fell on me, then to the ring on my hand, and quickly moved on to easier targets. I sipped from the wine, sucking in a small breath as I did, aerating the alcohol on my tongue. Delicious. When I returned my focus to Roman, his gaze had darkened slightly, creases forming along his brow, and I remembered why we had wanted to meet here. I swallowed; the drink took on a bitter aftertaste.

“Were you able to speak with Liam after everything today?” I asked, tentative. Would he want to broach the subject? Would he rather ignore it altogether?

He took the bait. “Not much. He left in a rush after packing his things in a box.” Roman spat the last word. Mickey would no longer be in Roman’s good graces after this, I knew. Not that he’d ever been in mine, the way he kept Roman on-call at all hours of the day and night. Roman balanced his bottle flat on his knee. “Liam doesn’t know Mickey had told me, and I think I’ll keep it that way. I feel guilty enough as it is.”

“Guilty?” I said. The volume rose in the bar, a burst of cheers from the team who had won a round, and I frowned, irked. Maybe this wasn’t the best spot for a conversation like this. “Babe—you’re hardly guilty for not being *laid off*. It’s no one’s fault but the firm’s for not allocating their resources effectively. You can’t be faulted for doing a damn good job.”

His lips formed a line. A pained smile. “I know that. In my mind, I know that it’s got nothing to do with me. But...”

“It feels like it does.”

“Yeah,” he said with a sigh. “It does. Maybe I could’ve done something more, you know? Put in a good word for Liam. Maybe I should’ve warned him.” He ran a hand through his hair, shaking his head. “Man, I don’t fuckin’ know. It’s so wrong. He works just as hard as I do.”

“But Mickey likes you,” I said, finishing the sentence he couldn’t say aloud. “He likes you a lot, and he’ll want to keep you on board. Even if it means sacrificing other good employees.”

“It’s messed up.”

I scratched the top of his neck, just under his scalp, and his eyes closed. Again, he relaxed into my touch. There was something about this that felt powerful, like a kind of magic sway I had over him. With simple touches, stress ebbed from him, seeping out of tense shoulders and clenched muscles. He rested his hand on the top of my thigh and squeezed lightly. “I can’t wait to marry you,” he said, cracking his eyes open to peer at me. “You’re so damn beautiful, you know that?”

I laughed, waving him off. “Ten days until the wedding. You nervous?”

He shook his head. “How could I be? It’ll be perfect. You’re perfect.”

“Nonsense,” I said to that last part.

He shrugged, studying me while he sipped his beer. “Perfect for me, anyway.”

The conversation had reached a lull. A pause between one breath and the next. I was hyperaware of the burner phone at the bottom of my purse, the talk I’d had with Delilah this afternoon, and desperately wanted to tell Roman. I couldn’t talk to Mom about this—she’d freak

out at Dad. For obvious reasons, talking with Dad about this was out of the question. Delilah hadn't called me back, and I hoped she had taken my advice and decided to leave my family alone. *He's not who you think he is.*

That bitterness again, in my heart—it surged. I wanted to call her back and berate her for even thinking to say a bad thing about my father. He was a good man, a kind man. A family man, through and through. He'd sacrificed so much for us, and continued to do so day after day.

But those words...

He's not who you think he is.

They had left a seed of doubt in me, one that had sprouted and was beginning to bloom into full distrust. Would I be able to get rid of it, the uncertainty? I should just trust that Dad wouldn't do anything stupid—that he hadn't been stupid before he'd met Mom.

I needed a second set of eyes on this. Or ears, rather.

"Roman," I started, and he instantly recognized the shift in my tone, losing all joviality as he faced me. I set my rosé on the bartop and reached into my purse, fishing around for the burner phone. "There's something I've been wanting to talk to you about."

I produced the phone and handed it to him. He stared at the thing with a puzzled expression. "What's this?"

"A burner phone."

He looked at the thing like it would blow up in flames in his hand. "And why do you have a burner phone in your purse?"

"It's my dad's." I took a breath. "My mom found it ringing under the floorboards next to his side of the bed. She answered it, and there was a woman on the other line. Originally, my mom thought it was one of my dad's clients."

“And you don’t think so,” Roman finished.

“No,” I said, “I don’t.” I swallowed. “Because I called the number today, and a girl answered this time.”

He gaped at me. “You called the number? Babe—that could get your dad in trouble if that’s one of his clients.”

“*Listen,*” I said and put a hand on his arm. “Let me finish.”

He sat back. “Alright, sorry. What did the girl say?”

“Her name was Delilah, and she was...cryptic, at best. She wanted to meet me, said she had something to tell me about my dad.”

Roman pursed his lips. “I don’t want to think this is a possibility, but...”

I knew what he was thinking. “Delilah isn’t his mistress, or anything like that. I asked.”

He exhaled. “Thank God. Then, how does she know your dad?”

“I don’t know.”

“You...” he tilted his head. “Did you ask?”

“Multiple times,” I said, “but she was cryptic and wanted to meet in person. She said my dad isn’t who I think he is.”

Roman’s eyes widened. “You need to stay away from her.”

His reaction took me aback. “I was planning to,” I said slowly, “but why do you say that?”

“Think about it,” he said. “Your dad is a PI, Missy. The work he does probably upsets a lot of people, breaks abusive families apart, that sort of thing. This girl could be trying to meet with you to use you as leverage against your dad.”

“You think she’d hold me hostage? That sounds extreme.”

“Desperate people do desperate things,” he replied and finished his beer. “I want you to be safe, babe. Please, promise me you won’t call her back. Promise me you’ll leave this alone.” As he spoke, a middle-aged man took up the empty stool two seats down from Roman. He nursed an old fashioned and opened his phone to text someone.

I paused, and my hesitance surprised me. I should let this go—Roman’s fears weren’t unwarranted. And I knew my dad, trusted him. But...

“Missy,” he said, leaning forward. “That girl was *lying*. Trying to get into your head, which it seems she did a good job of.” He set the phone on the bartop. “Tell your dad.”

I blinked. “*What?*”

“Someone is trying to hurt your family,” he said, like that was explanation enough. And it was. It should have been. “He needs to know about this.”

“Telling him would break his trust.”

“I hate to say it, babe, but I think we’re past that. Trust was broken when your mom picked up the phone and answered the call.”

I removed my hand from his arm, recoiling. “Trust was broken when my dad hid a burner phone in our house and didn’t tell us.” It hit me then—the truth behind what I’d just said. He *had* broken our trust, hadn’t he? I hated that, and not just because of the sense of betrayal I felt sinking in my gut.

But because it proved Delilah right.

A girl joined the middle-aged man at the bar, sitting next to Roman, and the bartender passed her a Modelo with a lime pushed through the bottleneck.

“Hey,” Roman said, taking my hand back. “You’re not wrong—I’m not trying to pin this on you and your mom. Your dad should have been transparent with you both—with your mom,

at least, since the phone was in their room.” He sighed, a bone-deep, exhausted sound. “I’m sorry. I know I’m coming on too strong with this. It’s...it’s been a long day, and I just want you to be safe.”

Gosh—what an ass I was making of myself. I softened and rested my head on his shoulder. “I know, you’re alright. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Missy. You gotta let this go.”

“It just...it just doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t make sense?”

“My dad shares a phone with these people—this girl and the woman she’s acquainted with. Why? Why would he share in communication with people who would mean him harm?”

Roman hesitated. It was clear I’d stumped him. “I don’t know, but that doesn’t change the fact you should let this go.”

“How can I? What if they show up at my house or something?”

“Do you want to call the police?”

I considered it. “Delilah never made any threats. Plus, this phone is my dad’s property. He’d just get roped into it.”

Roman waved the bartender over and ordered a second beer. “You want anything else?” he asked me, and I asked for a water. I was still sober, for the most part, but the nerves had stirred my thirst. Roman didn’t say anything more until he had a second drink in his hand. He rubbed his eyes, and I noticed how tired they looked. Aged beyond his years. They were working him like a mule at that law firm, and I hated it—the way it drained him.

I patted his arm. “I’m sorry to keep you so late, you should get going.”

He raised his drink as if to say, “I just ordered this.”

“Don’t drink it,” I said, taking it from him. “Go on home, you’ve got an early start.”

He studied me. “I shouldn’t leave you here by yourself.”

“I’m a big girl, I’ll be fine,” I said with a smirk. “I’ll be right behind you. I just need a second by myself.”

That gave him the out he needed. “I can give you space, yeah. I love you, Missy. Text me when you’re heading out, okay?”

In hindsight, I should have let him finish that second beer. I should have never left the burner phone sitting on the bartop, where Roman had left it. At the very least, I should have left with him instead of staying behind.

Perhaps that would have changed everything.

Perhaps it was inevitable that the week of my wedding should be ruined.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Delilah

“I need a drink,” Coop said, feet propped on the motel wall while he splayed his arms out on the floor. The statement was aimed at me, but he stared at the ceiling as he spoke.

I glared at him from the double bed. I’d been here for hours draining my phone battery, trying to find ways to track burner phone numbers. Short of hiring the Chicago Police Department to sniff out the thing, I was running out of options, and I didn’t think Missy would appreciate another phone call. She’d been pretty clear about leaving her family alone.

“We can’t leave Ma here by herself,” I responded. Ma had taken to sleeping the entire afternoon and evening, waking up with frequent bouts of insomnia. She was showering right now, but I had no doubt she’d go right back to bed once her hair was dry. “You can go pick up some liquor at the place down the street if you want.”

Coop rolled onto his elbows, taking his legs off the wall. “Nah, I need a bar. A good bar, a game of pool, and a stiff drink. A place that would put the Cubs game on the TV.”

I snorted. “It’s Chicago, Coop. I’m pretty sure the fuckin’ laundromat has the Cubs game on right now.” I jerked my head to the door. “Go on ahead. I can keep an eye on Ma, she’ll want to knock out again. It’s been a long day for her,”

He retrieved his phone from his back pocket, tapping the Uber app. “You sure you two will be fine?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. You deserve a break as much as anyone. And...thank you. For earlier.”

“What do you mean?”

“You helped Ma to calm down. I’ve never seen you do that before.”

He shrugged, looking at the floor. “I’ve had some practice.”

“How do you mean?”

Coop picked at the carpet, glancing to the door. We were approaching an uncomfortable topic, that was for sure. “Your Ma reminds me of my little brother. He was never diagnosed, but he had similar patterns of psychotic episodes growing up. It wasn’t until I met you and your Ma that I realized he was likely a schizophrenic.”

I stared at him for a moment, dumbfounded. “I—Coop, you never mentioned this before.”

He sniffed. “Not something I usually talk about.”

No shit. I sensed his past beginning to creep up on him; his eyes lined with tears, the faint sheen of water reflecting dim yellow light from the bedside lamp. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“You’re okay,” he said distantly. An automated response. He was no longer in the present: Coop had become entrenched in the past, surrounded by memories. I knew the feeling. It wasn’t until high school that I learned some people didn’t remember their childhoods. I had thought it was impossible, but once I understood that most people had two stable, supportive

parents and a bucketload of siblings, I figured out that my memories were only so memorable because of the trauma they held. *Flashbulb memories*. That was what my AP Psych teacher had called them. A memory so vivid, simply recalling it was like stepping back in time, reliving the experience. The scars on my stomach from years ago twinged.

“He was a good kid,” Coop said thickly. His fingers flexed like he wanted to grasp a drink in his hand. “My parents didn’t know what to do with him, so I sorta was his caretaker. I had to figure out what he wanted, and why. The source of whatever was causing him stress. It helped that he trusted me, but...”

“It’s a lot,” I said. “It’s a lot to handle.”

He didn’t nod or acknowledge what I’d said—he didn’t have to. There was something unspoken passing between us, an understanding. Perhaps that was why he had offered to help me with Ma when we first moved into the apartments, why he was so easy to trust. *You’re like me*, I thought. He didn’t want me to deal with the burden alone, like he had.

Coop’s phone dinged, an Uber notification. He stood, groaning with effort like an old man, and shucked his shoes on. “My ride’s here,” he said, grabbing his jacket from the desk chair. “You sure you’ll be alright?”

“I promise,” I said. “Be safe, okay?”

He gave me a thumbs-up, slipping out. I couldn’t tear my gaze away from the door until Ma came out of the shower. She grabbed the remote and turned on the TV, swiping through channels until she found Bluey. Cartoons calmed her: My Little Pony, Dora—all that shit was a staple of my house growing up. I’d thought it made her a cool Mom, when I was little, but when she never grew out of it the way I did, it made things difficult. Hard to explain to friends in high

school that the reason I didn't want them coming over to my house was because my mom would sit us all down to watch reruns of Max & Ruby.

"Where did Coop go?" she asked, startling me.

"He'll be back soon."

"He didn't say goodbye."

I faced her. She had put her pajamas on—gray and spotted with Winnie the Pooh's and Tigger's faces—and sat at the foot of her bed, knees bundled up to her chest. *She looks like a child*, I thought, and my heart ached at the sight. I crawled off the bed and went to her side, leaning against her. She wasn't always receptive to affection, but in a more relaxed state, she allowed me to do small gestures: laying my head on her shoulder, wrapping an arm over her, or holding her hand. Simple things.

"He wants you to rest," I told her. "Would you like to leave the TV on while you sleep?"

I felt her nod.

"Alright, then." I stood and helped her into bed. Before I turned off her lamp, she grabbed my hand.

"What happened to your face, Dee?" she asked, pulling me closer. Her fingers traced the red lines on my cheeks, spots marked by scabs where blood had been drawn.

I took her hands in mine. "Nothing, Ma. I wasn't looking where I was going, and I got scratched by tree branches down in the parking lot."

"You need to be more careful."

A lump lodged in my throat. "I know, I'm trying."

She patted my arm and promptly settled into her covers. "That's a good girl," she told me.

I swallowed the lump painfully and switched off her lamp, dousing her side of the room in darkness. Five minutes later, she fell into a deep sleep, snoring rhythmically. I sat on my bed, then on the floor, then paced by the window. My body was ansty, brimming with apprehension. Coop was in no stable mind to go out drinking—why had I let him? *Because he's a grown adult*, a voice retorted, but I brushed it aside. Coop had been close to tears before leaving, and drinking alone would only worsen his state of mind.

I texted him: *Where did you end up going?*

He responded quickly, a good sign. *Uber driver recommended a place called Ozzy's. Said they're usually open till late. Everything okay?*

I debated over how to respond. No, I didn't feel okay. I needed a breather just as much as he did. But I couldn't leave Ma alone...could I?

Selfish—no, no I was being selfish. Yet, as I watched the steady rise and fall of her chest, certain she wasn't going to wake up anytime soon, I found myself more and more inclined to leave. She would be fine.

Can I meet you over there? I replied.

Three dots appeared, then vanished. They appeared again a minute later. *You sure it's a good idea to leave your Ma by herself? I can come back.*

“No, no,” I said softly, typing quickly. *She's dead asleep. I need a breather, and so do you. It's the only time we'll have, probably.*

You sure this is a good idea?

No, of course I wasn't. But I itched to leave. The scratches on my face burned, and every part of me needed to just—to just *escape*.

I mapped myself to Ozzy's. Just ten minutes away on foot. I shot a quick text to Coop saying I'd be there soon and left, waiting a minute to see if Ma would come running out the door. When she didn't, I raced down the steps and into the night.

Walking through Downtown Chicago in the dead of night was *not* my brightest idea. I must have had some Guardian Angel watching over me, because when I made it inside Ozzy's Bar & Lounge, the sense of relief that overwhelmed me was so intense, I knew I must have been insanely lucky. Whatever the case, I found Coop sitting at a booth by himself, nursing an old fashioned, and slid in across from him.

"Did you fuckin' walk here?" he asked, accusatory, and I wondered if this was what fathers were like.

"I needed the fresh air."

"Next time, tell me you want fresh air, and I'll walk back and grab you." He shook his head. "Seriously, kid. You'll get yourself killed."

I was about to tell him off when a waitress walked up to our booth. She was a tall, wispy thing, probably in her late-thirties. Her blonde hair was swept up in a high ponytail, and she spoke in a nasally drawl. She frowned when she noticed me, looking me over, and asked, "You got an ID, sweetheart?"

I tugged my fake out of my wallet and passed it to her. She glanced at me, back at the ID, the back at me, lips pursing with each passing second. She sighed and handed it back to me.

"What would ya like?"

"Just a water's fine."

"Want lemon or anything? Ice?"

“Ice is good.”

She gave a brusque nod and tottered back to the main bar. I had a gut feeling I wouldn't be seeing that water any time soon. Not that I could blame her—the bar was packed full for eleven o'clock at night. The Cubs game had long since ended (Coop must have forgotten the time change), but men of all ages wearing Cubs jerseys lingered around pool tables, smoking cigarettes and wiping beer from their lips with the backs of their hands. The few people who weren't wearing jerseys amounted to a pair of ladies at one end of the bar wearing clothing better suited for college-aged sorority chicks, a smattering of men and women who wore depression like a second skin—watery-eyed alcoholics who breathed into their drinks—and a young couple, also at the bar. The young couple seemed out of sorts with the rest of the crowd, locked in deep conversation. The girl had a diamond on her ring finger, but neither wore wedding bands. Engaged, then. How cute.

Coop kicked my foot under the table. “You doin' okay?”

“Yeah,” I lied, wishing I'd asked the waitress for something stronger. Then again, at least one of us needed to stay sober, and Coop looked like this wasn't his first drink. He swirled it around, watching the orange peel bob next to a large ice cube. “Figured you could use the company,” I said—not a lie.

“We can walk back now, kid. I don't want to leave your Ma alone for too long.”

“She'll be fine.”

He gave me a look like he knew this was far from the truth, especially after the day we'd suffered through, but didn't argue. Miraculously, the waitress returned with my ice water and asked if I'd like anything else. I ordered a Modelo. It wouldn't get me drunk, but I was lightweight enough that I would feel a calming wave of static through my brain once I finished it.

I finished half my water in the next two minutes. “I gotta go to the bathroom, I’ll be back.”

“Bring your phone and text me if anything,” Coop replied, still looking into his glass. He appeared an awful lot like the drunks in the bar, the people with heavy pasts weighing on them, and it stirred up pity in my heart. What had happened to his brother? Did he feel an obligation to help me and Ma because of his past? I wanted to ask him, but some things were better left buried. Until Coop felt like sharing, I wouldn’t push.

I often reflect on this particular moment when I reflect on my trip to Chicago. If I hadn’t gone to the bar, if I hadn’t ordered a water, if I hadn’t gone to the bathroom—how would my life have changed? All it took was one look, one glance at the bar on my way to the back of the bar.

Perhaps it was fate when I spotted the burner phone sitting on the bartop between the young couple. At first, a bolt of panic shot through me: Had I put it there somehow? I checked my pockets—no, it was still there in my right pocket, tucked against my hip. But it was the exact same one, I knew this for certain.

It took everything in me not to stop walking, to change my course and speak with the couple—with the girl.

Missy.

It was her—it *had* to be.

“What are the odds?” I murmured to myself. A numb buzz swept through me. I plopped down on the toilet seat and took out my phone to text Coop. *You see the couple at the bar?*

He responded instantly. *Yeah, what about them?*

They’ve got a burner phone sitting between them. It’s the same model and everything.

You sure?

Positive.

A moment of hesitation. I heard my heart in my ears, blood rushing to all corners of my body. His response was the same question echoing in my head like a fuckin' alarm system.

What should we do?

I don't know, I replied. Do we talk to them?

Too risky. We don't know if it's them, not 100%. We need to be sure.

I bit the inside of my cheek. Go sit next to them.

Seriously? That feel suspicious.

You got a better idea?

I could practically hear him sigh in the booth. Fine, I'll move.

Try to listen into their conversation, I typed. If they don't bring up the phone, we leave it alone. If they bring up the phone, or a guy named Peter, or anything that sounds like Pa...we'll figure that out when the time comes, I guess.

This is a terrible idea.

You got a better one?

Fine—fine, I'm moving.

Alright, I'll be out in a sec.

I finished and all but scrubbed the skin off my hands in the sink. My whole *being* was riddled with anxiety, and I took a moment in front of the mirror to steady myself. Go over the facts.

Missy was here with her fiancé.

Wait—no. I didn't fully know whether or not that was Missy.

But I knew what I'd seen.

Didn't I?

With an annoyed groan, I wrenched myself from the sink and exited the bathroom. Coop had found a spot next to the couple, and he left a seat open nearest the man. And so I sat next to Missy's fiancé, Coop at my left, and began to eavesdrop.

"I'm sorry," the guy was saying. "I know I'm coming on too strong with this. It's...it's been a long day, and I just want you to be safe."

His fiancé leaned closer to him, a doting expression on her face. "I know, you're alright. I love you." She had long, dark-brown hair pinned up in a clawclip, exposing a delicate neck and high cheekbones. She was pretty, and I couldn't deny we had some resemblance. The same brown eyes, the same semi-full lips. Even her nose had a similar curve. Her jaw structure, however, was far more round than mine, and her hair was darker, luscious. Clear skin, too, which I'd never managed to figure out in the past eight or so years since pimples had rather rudely entered my life. Where there were lines on the sides of her mouth from smiling, there were a few between my brows from furrowing them all too often. I imagined we had led very different lives.

I shook myself, realizing I'd spaced out and missed part of the conversation.

The girl continued. "Why would he share in communication with people who would mean him harm?"

The man paused for a long moment before saying, "I don't know, but that doesn't change the fact you should let this go."

"How can I? What if they show up at my house or something?"

"Do you want to call the police?"

And then she said it.

My name.

“Delilah never made any threats. Plus, this phone is my dad’s property. He’d just get roped into it.”

I looked at Coop. He’d heard the same thing and stared into his drink with wide eyes. My mouth had gone completely dry. I took a swig of the Modelo, bits of lime pulp tickling my tongue, and eyed the burner phone sitting between them.

“What do we do?” I asked Coop. “It’s gotta be her.”

“We can’t fuckin’ follow them home or anything,” he said, at a loss. “That’d be creepy as hell.”

“Well, no *shit*. I wasn’t suggesting that.”

“Maybe...do you have the—uh, the phone?”

I patted my pocket. “Right here.”

“What if you called her?”

“And said *what*?”

“I dunno. Something about being at the bar...” He snorted. “Nah, that’s still fuckin’ creepy.”

“Aren’t you helpful.”

He shot me a glare. “Go back to the booth and call her. Yes, it’s creepy, but doesn’t she deserve to know the truth?”

“And what if *he* follows her?” I said, jutting my thumb discreetly in the direction of Missy’s fiancé.

As if my thumb had worked some kind of magic, Missy’s fiancé stood and walked out of the bar. I waited until he drove off before asking Coop, “You mind keeping an eye out in case he comes back?”

Coop nodded, slapping a twenty on the bartop to pay for his drink. He got up and walked outside the bar to sit by the entrance.

Which left me alone at the bar with Missy.

And then I did the dumbest thing known to man. I took up the seat next to her, pulled out my burner phone and set it next to hers, saying, “We need to talk.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Missy

I stared between the two burner phones sitting side-by-side and the girl who'd taken up Roman's stool.

We need to talk, she'd said with such matter-of-factness that I had forgotten how to speak and simply gawked at her, open-mouthed. I remembered myself and shut my mouth, swallowing. "Are you...are you Delilah? The person I talked to earlier today?"

"One and the same," she replied, shifting in her seat. She wore a thick black hoodie and denim jeans, not the sort of thing people tended to wear on humid summer days in the city, and she had several piercings on her ears. A babyish face with no makeup, acne scars around her chin, and hair that looked like it hadn't been washed in a couple of days. What struck me most deeply, however, were the dark circles under her eyes, as if her lashes had cast long shadows over them.

"You look terrible," I said, surprised by my anger.

“It’s been a long week,” she said with a shrug, unfazed by my hostility. In fact, she seemed to expect it. Which wasn’t all surprising, considering how she’d cornered me in a bar late at night.

I clutched my purse on my lap. “Did you stalk me? How did you know I was here?”

“I had no clue you’d be here. Whether you believe me or not is up to you.” She tapped my—no, *Dad’s* burner phone. “I saw this sitting out and took a wild guess. When you said my name while talking with your fiancé...”

I bristled. “How do you know my fiancé?”

She gave me a look that said *Come on—seriously?* and pointed at my hand. “Again. Took a wild guess.”

Oh. A blush crept up my neck. Yeah, that wouldn’t take a lot of sleuthing to figure out.

Now that I was face to face with this girl, she certainly didn’t seem threatening. If anything, she seemed as nervous and afraid as I did, to my confusion. Like she’d swallowed a frog. I stood my ground. “I told you to leave me and my family alone. I know your name, and the cameras in this bar could ID you quickly. I’ll file a restraining order if you don’t leave right now.”

Again, she was unfazed. She sighed, taking her burner phone and slipping it back into her jean pocket. “I don’t mean any harm. If you want me to leave, I will.” She hesitated, chewing on her next words. “Have you thought at all about what I said?”

“What?”

“That your dad isn’t who he says he is.”

Indignation burned in my gut. “How do you know him?”

“If...if I tell you, you need to promise to hear me out. Can you do that?”

“I don’t need to promise you anything.”

“Fair enough,” she said, exasperation propelling the words out in a heavy breath.

“Perhaps I’ll just tell you from the beginning, and you’ll be able to piece together what I’m saying soon enough.”

I hated the vague way she spoke, dancing around the subject like I was a rabbit she didn’t want to spook, beckoning me forward with a carrot. “I doubt I’ll believe anything you say.”

At that, Delilah sat back, a strong furrow between her brows. “Why not?”

“Because you *stalked* me to a bar. You clearly want money,” I added, gesturing to her.

Her face pinched in an inscrutable expression. “Like I said. It’s been a long week, there’s no need to be bitchy about it. And I *didn’t* stalk you. How the hell could I? I’ve got no way of tracking you, and all you told me was your first name. Not a lot to go off of, and I’m no fucking PI.”

My eyes widened at the last word, and before I could school my features, she had taken note of it. “Yeah,” she said. “I know your dad is a PI. Or, at least, he was a long time ago. God knows what he’s doing now.”

At once, my anger dissipated and fear rose in its place, a chill sweeping down my spine. I had been rendered speechless—what could I say to that? Surely, I couldn’t admit that she was right. And I couldn’t pretend indifference, either; she would see right through me. So, I stared at her, dumbstruck, until she had gathered herself and delved into a long explanation of how she had arrived here in the first place.

“I’d been told all my life that my father was dead.”

The *second* the words left her mouth, I knew. I knew exactly what she was going to say about Dad, the—the *accusation* she’d throw on him. I bit my cheek hard enough to draw blood,

just to keep from talking. The longer she spoke, detailing the letters she'd found, the photograph in front of Hanson Private Investigation, and, most importantly, the mystery of the burner phones, the less I doubted her, and the more I doubted my own account of things.

"So," I said once, she'd finished, my mouth thoroughly dried. "Your mom, and my dad, have burner phones. And you think it's because...because..."

At least she didn't gloat about it. There was pity in the expression she bore, like it pained her to say this, but she had to go through with it. "They were married, Bridget and Peter O'Conner. You and I are half-sisters."

Half-sisters.

I suddenly forgot how to breathe. *Half-sisters*. Shock overwhelmed my senses, and before I knew it, I'd begun to cry. My whole life—my whole *life* I had been lied to. Did Mom know about this? No, she didn't—not only was it impossible for her to keep a secret, I don't think she would have married him if she knew.

And Dad *knew* that.

It was why he had changed his name from O'Conner to Hughes.

It was why he spoke of his past with a certain level of ambiguity, always tinged with regret.

And it was why he kept a burner phone under the floorboards, out of sight, in case Delilah's mom had an *emergency*.

My hands shook, nearly fumbling the purse clutched between them. I should never have come here. I should have left with Roman. Should I call him now? Ask him to come back, say I'd been cornered by a lunatic? I scrubbed the tears from my face. "You're *lying*," I hissed.

“You’re a liar—How do you really know him? Was your mother a client of his? This is some ploy to get revenge on him, and it’s not going to work on me.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s nothing like that. I just—”

“You want to ruin my family. Is that it?” I laughed, a pained sound, and the bartender side-eyed me as he walked past. “You’re messed up in the head.”

And perhaps that set something off in her, like I’d scratched at an old wound that had never healed fully, because she lurched forward with vitriol in her gaze. I flinched at her proximity. “Say that again,” she said, “and I’ll *really* give you something to bitch and whine about. You don’t know the first thing about what I...” She trailed off, sitting back. “I’m sorry,” she said on an exhale. “I’m sorry. I don’t have the energy to argue.”

“But you have the energy to uproot my life.”

“I figured you deserve the truth as much as I did.”

“You’re selfish,” I said. “You’re hurt, and you want someone to hurt the way you do.”

She sat there, taking my anger in stride, eyes glazed over and void of all feeling. I hated her for it. I hated that she had come into my life, I hated that I was still sitting here in front of her, and I hated that she was my sister.

My sister.

“How did you expect me to react?” I said, and she looked at the floor. “What am I supposed to do with this information? You want a family reunion, or something?”

She looked me dead in the eyes and said, “I want to meet him.”

Of course you do, a snide voice in my head mocked. It was understandable, though, for her to want to know her father. I thought of Dad with another woman, leaving her while she was

pregnant. That was completely out of his character. “How old are you?” I asked her, deciding to ignore her request.

“Twenty. I’ll be twenty-one in a few months.”

“I’m twenty-one,” I said, realization dawning. “That would mean...”

“He cheated on my mom,” she finished for me, clearly having already arrived at the same conclusion. “He got your mom pregnant, got my mom pregnant after, and for whatever reason he chose your mom over mine.” She spat the last part out, and I couldn’t blame her for it. Her head quirked to the side. “You believe me?”

“Hardly,” I said. I remembered Roman’s beer still sitting on the bar and took a sip. Warm. I grimaced and set it down with a sigh. “I’ll admit, it’s hard to think of another reason why my dad has a secret burner phone. It’s unlike him.”

“To keep secrets?” Delilah said, a wry grin on her face. “I’m pretty sure that’s part of his job description.”

I glared at her. “Whatever the case, I’m sure he had a good reason to leave.”

Her brows rose. “You think he had a good reason to abandon his pregnant wife. To abandon *me*. Do you hear yourself?”

Yeah, the words had tasted foul. “All I’m saying is something must have pushed him to do it. I know you’ve got one idea of him in his head, but I know him. I’ve spent my whole life with him.” That last sentence had a weight to it that I didn’t expect. While I’d spent my life with him, Delilah had spent hers with a schizophrenic mother. Alone. I averted my gaze when she looked at me, feeling oddly embarrassed. It wasn’t my fault Dad had left her. But...*gosh*, it felt like it.

“Do you really know him, though?” she pressed. “I mean, all this time, you never knew I existed. Hell, it doesn’t sound like you *or* your mom knew he was previously married.”

My head spun. Each time it felt like I’d regained my bearings, a new reality would swing around the corner and knock me on my rear. I held up a hand to stop her from talking, not that it looked like she was going to say anything. “Hold on,” I said, feeling suddenly out of breath.

“You’ve had several days to process all of this—and while I don’t deny you’ve had your share of rude awakenings—”

“—like finding out my dead father is actually alive,” she interjected.

“Yes, yeah, that. Again, I don’t deny it. But what took you days to parse through, I’ve heard in minutes.” I leaned on the bartop, my head in my hand. “Just...I need a second.”

She bobbed her head. “Fair enough.”

What was I supposed to do with any of this? My body had gone into shock, but it didn’t feel like I understood the weight of everything Delilah had thrown at me. Call it a self-defense mechanism. My brain entered a deep state of denial, yet there was one thing that was so undeniable: Dad had kept a burner phone secret from us.

This burner phone kept him in contact with Delilah’s mother.

Delilah and her mother lived in California; I doubted they were Dad’s clients.

Which meant...Delilah was telling the truth. Right? I groaned, massaging my forehead. The war rattling in my head had jumbled my thoughts—should I believe her? Should I send her away? What did she want, anyway?

I want to meet him.

Yes, of course she wanted to meet him. I regarded the girl sitting across from me. There were a few similarities, sure enough, and I had no doubt she’d discovered the same. There was

an anxiousness about her, an earnestness I could only imagine had to do with the overwhelming desire to meet her father.

Good God. I had a half-sister.

During my silence, she had pulled out her phone and opened her camera roll. She tapped on the most recent photo, angled the phone in front of me, and said, “This is him, right?”

It was an old photo, black-and-white, one I’d never seen before, and there was no way she would have found this on the Internet—Dad never kept a social media profile, not even a LinkedIn. I had never thought anything of it, until now. Until I sat across from his other daughter, staring into his twenty-something-year-old face. He held a briefcase and gave the camera a thumbs-up, smiling like he didn’t quite appreciate his photo being taken, but he didn’t have any say in the matter. In the background, the old logo for Hanson Private Investigation stuck out like a sore thumb. It was no wonder that had been their first stop in Chicago. Pure luck had driven Delilah to Ozzy’s at this hour. Pure luck, and a damn good eye for the burner phone I’d left on the bartop.

“That’s him,” I said, and my admission made it all the more real.

The screen turned black, and she lowered her phone. Resolve etched itself into every surface of her face. “I want to meet him, Missy. I’d like you to help me make this happen.”

You have no right to ask this of me, I wanted to say. Instead, I said slowly, “You do realize what that would mean for me, and for my family?” I found it increasingly difficult to meet her gaze, which had grown in its intensity over the last few minutes. “If I helped you meet him, it could destroy my family completely.”

“Like *mine* was destroyed,” she said with a scowl. “You would seriously stop me from finding him? He’s my *father*.”

“He’s mine, too,” I retorted. God, I hated the way that sounded, like a whiny toddler fighting over a hairbrush. I shook my head and stood, snatching my burner phone off the table. “I’m sorry you came all this way for nothing, Delilah, but I have to protect my family.”

She stared at me, desperation giving way to rage, then rose quickly to her feet. “I’ll find him. You won’t stop me.”

“Yes, I will,” I said. I didn’t know how I would face my parents when I got home, didn’t know how I would look at Dad the same ever again. But I would keep their marriage, my family, intact. I would forget about this one day. I knew I could forgive him for leaving them—otherwise, my life would have been...well...

Like Delilah’s.

I stowed the phone in my purse and placed \$40 on the bartop next to Roman’s warm beer. “I don’t expect you to understand,” I said finally, “but I’m doing you a favor. Think about it: if he hasn’t tried to find you, I doubt he wants to see you.”

The blood drained from her face, and I realized I’d unearthed one of her worst fears.

It made me hate myself, but only for a moment.

I continued. “You can’t possibly want to break apart my family. Not even for revenge on him, if that’s your goal. My mother and I have nothing to do with this.” I’d left her thoroughly speechless and decided this was my chance to get away. “If you contact me again, or if I so much as *see* you in this city, I’m filing a restraining order against you.”

“You won’t,” she said, “because our father will find out about that, and then you will have sabotaged yourself. So really, there’s nothing you can do to stop me.” She dropped some money on the bar. “I’ll be here until August 1st; call me if you change your mind.”

With that, she turned on her heel and left Ozzy's. I watched her join the middle-aged man who had sat next to her at the bar—a lookout?—and together, they walked out of sight.

After standing, rooted to the spot, for about two minutes, I left, as well, and slipped into the driver's seat of my car. My brain had gone utterly numb with shock, fear, and fury. Because she was right—my threats were empty. There was nothing I could do to stop her. And in my heart I knew one thing with absolute certainty:

It was only a matter of time before Delilah O'Conner tore my life to shreds.

And now, because I had turned her away, she would have no mercy.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Delilah

“What happened?” Coop asked when I stormed out of the bar and down the stairs. He matched my stride quickly, looking back at the door as if to ascertain whether or not we were being followed. “Are you okay?”

“It was her,” I said. Humid air settled heavy on top of me, turning my sweatshirt into a sauna. I itched to take it off, to throw it—to fucking *scream*.

“You told her everything?”

“I did.”

“And by the looks of it, she wants no part in helping you.” I glowered at a passerby who quickly ducked his head and stared at the sidewalk. “She made all sorts of threats.” I laughed dryly. “I don’t know what the hell I was thinking.”

“Hey—wait a moment—”

I ignored him, barreling down the sidewalk. I didn't know where I was going, not that I cared. I needed to move—stopping was out of the question. Coop grabbed my arm anyway and forced me to a halt.

“Let go.”

“Listen to me, kid,” he said, stooping slightly to meet my gaze head on. “Take a breath.”

“I said let—”

“Take a *fuckin'* breath, will ya?”

I clenched my jaw, eyes narrowed, but obeyed, inhaling deeply through my nose. I shook with anger, and the air trembled in my lungs. I blew it back out in his face.

“Real mature,” he said with a frown but didn't budge. “I get you're upset. Doesn't mean you get to take it out on me.”

I didn't respond. I couldn't. Because he was right, but red hot anger burned through my veins, cooking my skin like I'd been placed in a microwave, and if I so much as opened my mouth, I was afraid it would all come pouring out on him. And like Coop said, he didn't deserve it.

Missy did.

Missy, and Pa. They were cut from the same damn cloth—self-preservation at all costs, no regard for the lives they crushed as long as they were kept safe.

If he hasn't tried to find you, I doubt he wants to see you.

Fuck her.

I must have said that last part out loud, because Coop's eyes widened by a fraction, and he said, “Alright, you're angry. Real angry. Let's focus on getting back to the motel in one piece so we can check on your Ma. We'll talk in my room after, okay? Give her space to sleep.”

Ma.

Right. Yes. Of course. I'd left her alone in the motel for—I checked my watch—*shit*. An hour had gone by, and insomnia was no stranger to her. It would be a miracle if she hadn't woken up. If she had, I could only pray to whoever would listen that she hadn't done anything rash.

A car alarm blared in the motel parking lot. Coop and I picked up the pace, hustling across an empty intersection to reach the other side of the street. Two junkies leaned against the wall next to the parking lot entrance: a woman face-deep in a tall glass bong, and a man looking at the stars, a blunt dangling precariously from his lips. They eyed us as we passed.

The alarm was coming from the other side of the lot, blocked by a few dozen cars. Orange lights flashed on and off, illuminating three or four rooms on one side of the motel, undoubtedly pissing off the sleep-ridden occupants. We neared and spotted the culprit—a dark blue RAV-4, a figure jostling it from the driver's side.

My gut dropped.

I rounded the back of the car, peering around the trunk. Sure enough, Ma was using a metal ruler to work the lock, sticking it down the window's frame like out of a movie—which must have been how she got the idea, because I doubted she was anywhere close to unlocking it. She was still in her Winnie the Pooh pajamas, barefoot, her sleep-mused hair pinned up in a claw clip. Her hands and knuckles had taken a beating; the ruler had a faint sheen of blood on the edges.

Another episode? How many did that make in one day—*three*?

She hadn't yet noticed me, and though I didn't want to spook her, we needed to get out of here. "*Ma*," I whispered sharply. She flinched, spinning to face me, and froze like a toddler

caught spilling Cheerios on the floor. Coop held out his hand for the ruler, but Ma tucked it close to her body, staining the fabric of her shirt.

“Ma,” I said again. “What are you *doing*? This isn’t our car!”

Her chapped lips worked, eyes flicking to a thousand different places around us.

“You...you weren’t here.”

My heart twinged. “I’m here, Ma. I’m safe. I only went out for a little while.”

She itched at her forearms, and it was at that moment I noticed the scratches—long, red gashes on her skin from her wrist to the crease of her elbow. Not deep enough to draw blood, but inflamed enough to leave marks for a few days. I fought the urge to grab them, to examine them. It would only make things worse. But, God, I hated myself at that moment. She only did things like that to herself when entering a grave state of panic, and I could only imagine how the fear of unknown surroundings would have aggravated her. *And, it’s nighttime*, a voice in my head added. *It’s night in a city she’s unfamiliar with, and you left her alone for an hour.*

I pushed the voice away and approached her, setting a hand on her arm. “Let’s go up, okay?” I glanced at the damage she’d caused. *Fuck*, those scratches weren’t gonna be buffed out. And she might’ve wrecked the mechanism allowing the window to roll up and down. “We can make a cup of tea, does that sound okay?”

“Where were you?” she asked, chin tucked. She looked like a puppy that had been kicked one too many times, broken and dejected. She let Coop take the ruler from her, and he proceeded to use the sleeve of his jacket to wipe the side of the car. I watched him quizzically, about to ask what he was doing, when he mouthed *Fingerprints*, and I understood.

After the night I’d had, the last thing I needed was Ma in jail for damaging a car. Breaking and entering, too.

She didn't argue when I led her up the stairs to our room. I tried to kick glass out of the way as best I could, horrified that she had walked barefoot on a filthy, likely drug-ridden parking lot. Inside the room, I sat her on the toilet and proceeded to wipe the grime caked on her feet with a hand towel. "You don't have any cuts on your feet, Ma. That's good," I said, trying to fill the quiet. Coop was busy retrieving a bottle of rubbing alcohol from his room—somehow, he'd remembered to bring a First Aid Kit. The TV droned in the background playing reruns of Law & Order as I cleaned her feet. Ma stared dazedly at the mirror. Did she recognize the woman staring back at her? Not for the first time, I wondered what was going on in her head.

"I'm sorry for going out like I did," I said. The guilt ate at me, festering like an open sore. "I shouldn't have left you alone."

"You promised," she said in a hoarse voice. "You said you wouldn't leave me."

"I didn't leave, Ma. Not like that. I told you I'm not abandoning you."

She looked at me, regarding me for some time. Did she recognize me, or was I just another voice in her head? A hallucination? "You're just like him."

A knife in my gut would've been kinder.

I obviously knew who she referred to. And to think I was anything like Pa, anything like the man who had deserted his wife and child. I shoved the thought out of my head. No, she wasn't thinking straight. She was upset, paranoid, confused—angry. I licked my chapped lips. "I'm still here, aren't I?"

"For now," she replied, gaze losing focus. "For now."

I sat back on my heels, tossing the dirty towel to the side. "You really think that?" I asked. "You really believe I want to leave you?"

She looked down at her hands. "Of course I do."

“Why?” My voice broke. “Why, Ma?”

“Because I’m...” She gestured to her head, making loopy signs with her fingers. “I’m different. Difficult.”

I took her hand in mine. “We’re all difficult, Ma. Every person on this planet.”

“I lied to you,” she said. “About your father. You won’t forgive me.”

“What makes you say that?”

Again, she pointed to her head.

Voices. It wasn’t the first time she had heard them—it started when I was little, maybe five? At least, that was when I first noticed it. She talked aloud, pacing through the apartment, and when she hallucinated that a man was sitting on our couch, dressed in a fine navy suit, asking after Pa, I realized there was something different about her than other adults.

“Don’t listen to what your head is telling you; listen to me. I promised you I won’t leave, and I don’t break my promises. It will take me some time to move on from the lie, but...” I chewed on the words. *I love you*. Why couldn’t I say them? Why was it always so difficult to shape those words on my tongue—to even utter them on an exhale? “I will,” I said. “I’ll move on. I’m sure you had a good reason to keep him from me.” I hoped that the last sentence would coax her to open up about her past, since she seemed to be in a sharing mood, but she didn’t reply. I snagged a washcloth from the counter and turned her wrist to expose the reddened skin of her forearms.

She tugged out of my grip. “No.”

“I need to look at the scratches—”

“*No!*” She clutched her arms to her chest.

I raised my hands. “Alright, alright. Will you let Coop see them?”

She paused, relaxing marginally. “Maybe.”

“He could let you clean the cuts yourself while he watched,” I said. As long as she didn’t get an infection, I didn’t care who cleaned her up. I stood, legs wobbling as blood returned to them. “Did you scratch your arms?”

She didn’t reply, not that I needed her to. When anxious, she had a tendency to scratch at her forearms without realizing the havoc she wreaked on her skin. I supposed I’d become somewhat desensitized to it by now, seeing as it was the billionth time she’d done it, but I knew this time, it had happened because of my negligence. While she wasn’t bleeding—at least, not that I saw—the redness indicated she was close to. That alone made a bout of uneasiness well up inside me. *No more leaving her alone, not for long stints of time.* I made a mental note to ask Coop if he could get her to trim her nails.

He returned with the rubbing alcohol. Ma let him see the wounds while I watched from afar. There was a tenderness with which he cared for her, and I was reminded of his brother. It was unlike Coop to reminisce unless it was about baseball, and the way in which he spoke of his brother told me there was more to the story than he’d let on.

When he finished, he rose and turned to me, saying in a low voice, “I don’t think it would be a good idea to debrief at my place.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense. I can’t leave her alone right now.”

He aimed a thumb at the shower. “Why don’t you wash up? I’ll get her settled in the room.”

I glanced at my reflection in the mirror and winced. Missy hadn’t been off the mark at all with her first comment toward me—I *did* look terrible. My hair was simultaneously oily and

wind-whipped, my pale skin sallow, and I doubted it had anything to do with the bathroom lighting. I sure as hell wasn't about to smell my armpits or anything; I knew I reeked.

My stomach growled. When was it that I'd last eaten? Did we ever have lunch today?

Coop must have heard the noise because he raised his phone. "I'll order a pizza."

"Well, we are in Chicago," I said wryly. "Thank you, I need this." I grabbed a T-shirt and athletic shorts from my duffel bag while Coop situated Ma on her bed for the second time today. This time, none of us would leave her. Coop had gotten his drink, though I'd probably ruined it by joining him and crashing into Missy, and I'd had my little escape. I thought of Ma as I stepped under the showerhead, steam rising where the water hit the floor of the tub. What had my actions cost her?

Where were you?

You're just like him.

I wrapped my arms around myself. I would try to be more careful in the future. Coop and I could rotate taking breaks—which was what we *would* have been doing if I'd just let him get a drink by himself like he'd wanted. What had I been *thinking*? Something must have possessed me to think leaving Ma alone at night in a fuckin' motel was a real bright idea. Stupid didn't begin to cover it.

The smell of garlic and marinara sauce had slipped under the sliding bathroom door and reached me. I scrubbed my skin and scalp to oblivion, shampooing twice to rid myself of the day's events, and dried quickly. I barely finished throwing my T-shirt over my head before I was out the door. Coop passed me a plate with two slices of cheese pizza; Ma sat on top of her bed, humming while she chewed a wad of cheese from the top of her pizza. She ate things separately

like that: toppings first, then the cheese, the bread, and the crust. I used to do the same before I realized it wasn't the normal way to eat a pizza.

Coop drew a six pack of Coors from behind the bed. I raised a brow. "Where'd you get that?"

"Earlier today while you and your Ma were takin' a nap," he replied, opening the box with one hand, holding a half-eaten slice of pepperoni pizza in the other. "Want one?" I didn't even respond before he handed me the first one. "Figured they'd come in handy."

"You went to a bar even though you had this in your room?"

He shrugged, cracking the can open. "Wanted somethin' stronger, at the time."

"Can I have one?" Ma asked. She leaned down, exposing the long ridges on her forearms as she did, and I tried my best not to stare.

"You can have a sip from mine," I said. Best to let her unwind a little.

She sniffed at the can and wrinkled her nose. "Nevermind."

I laughed, taking it back, and turned the TV back on to something Ma wanted to watch. It would distract her for a while so Coop and I could talk.

He took a hunk off the crust of his first pizza. "Wanna talk about tonight?"

What was there to say? A lot, I supposed, but after the way I'd ended that conversation with Missy, I hardly felt like unpacking everything. At the very least, my anger had dissipated, overwhelmed by the panic of Ma escaping the room and attempting to steal an SUV, and the shower had eased tension from my muscles marginally. I decided to sum up the conversation in a whispered sentence: "I think she knows I'm telling the truth about Pa being my father, but she doesn't want to help me get in contact with him."

Coop took this in stride. “I figured as much by the way you’d burst outta the bar like hell was on your heels.” He took a second slice from the pizza box and bit into it, saying around a mouthful, “What are we gonna do about it?”

“Well, we have more to go off of now. For one thing, I know Pa is probably still a PI based off of how she reacted when I mentioned it. That, and now I know what she looks like. I would be surprised if there were more than five ‘Missys’ in Chicago, let alone all of Illinois.”

“Sounds like we’re boutta take part in some cyberstalking.”

“Something like that.”

“And you’re...not at all concerned that she doesn’t want you to meet him?”

“How do you mean?”

He became quite fixated on his can of beer. “I only mean...Well...”

Ah. “You think she’ll try to stop me somehow? Thing is, I don’t think she’s feeling particularly inclined to tell her parents about me. If she makes any obvious steps, like placing a restraining order on me, her parents are bound to find out I exist, and that I’m looking for Pa.” I took a swig of my beer. “And she wants to preserve her family.”

Coop seemed puzzled by this—not in the sense that he didn’t understand why Missy would want to keep her family from falling to shambles, more like he was ruminating over an ethical dilemma. I had a gut feeling I knew exactly what was on his mind. It had been on mine ever since I discovered my half-sister’s existence. “You think it’s fucked up, what I’m doing.”

Immediately, he shook his head. “No, nah, not that. Not exactly.”

“Fine, you’re *worried* what I’m doing is fucked up.”

He sighed into his beer. “It just doesn’t sit great in my stomach.”

Ma leaned over me, nearly dripping marinara on my damp hair. “Your stomach hurts? Mine hurts all the time—that’s why I try to eat slower.”

He smiled at her, acknowledging the advice by raising his beer. “You’re right. Thanks, Bridget.”

She sat back, pleased to have been of help, and changed the channel from Law & Order to The Big Bang Theory. The laugh track normally got under my skin, but with everything that had happened today, a numb sense of calm had soothed the angst from me. That, and I’d hit an adrenaline crash in the shower.

Once Ma was thoroughly engrossed in the show, I refocused my attention to Coop, who was halfway through his third slice of pizza and showed no signs of taking Ma’s advice. “I’m not here on some revenge mission to destroy his family.” *The way he destroyed mine*, I didn’t add. “I want to meet him, that’s all. I want to know if it was worth it to him.”

“But that’s not all,” Coop said, and I couldn’t read the meaning in his gaze.

“What do you mean?”

“Delilah—you flew halfway across the country with no real plan just to meet the guy? Now, I believe you when you say you don’t want to mess things up for him. But there’s somethin’ more you want outta this. Isn’t there?”

My mouth twitched, and I found it difficult to meet his gaze. Because there *was* something, though I struggled to acknowledge it. It was the very thing Ma feared more than anything else—enough to cause herself harm over it. I swallowed thickly and spoke in a soft tone that Ma wouldn’t pick up on. “I want to know what my life would have been like, if he’d stayed. It’s selfish, maybe, but a part of me hoped he’d see how far we’d fallen since he left and...I don’t know...”

“Do something about it?” Coop finished. He sat criss-crossed with his forearms braced on his knees, his posture comfortable, relaxed. It was odd to think my family—Ma and I—had become his element. And it seemed he knew me better than I gave him credit for.

“It sounds stupid hearing it out loud.”

“Not stupid; hopeful. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with havin’ hope about all of this. Hell—you just found out he existed less than a week ago. I’ve seen the way you struggle with”—he jerked his chin to Ma, unable to say her name. “You do need help, kid. The burden you’ve been carryin’ would break the backs of adults twice your age. He owes you a debt more than anyone else.”

“He won’t see it that way.”

His lips formed a thin line. “I’d like to ask what makes you think that, but it’s a dumb question. We don’t know how time has changed him.” He nodded to the burner phone sitting atop the desk. “In twenty years, maybe he forgot the thing even existed.”

I held up a hand. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Give me hope.” I picked at the carpet. “Makes me feel like I’m deluding myself.”

Coop was silent for a while, and the conversation fizzled out. He closed the pizza box to put it on the desk, accepting mine and Ma’s paper plates when we finished. “I’ll toss these in the trash outside,” he said, standing. “You guys should sleep, it’s been a day.”

“Understatement of the century,” I muttered, rising with him. Before I could second-guess myself, I gave him a quick hug. He received the gesture awkwardly, arms raised like a scarecrow, unsure of how to react, but he didn’t push me away. “Thank you for coming with us,” I said. “You don’t owe us a single thing, but I’m glad you’re here.”

He cleared his throat, patted my back, and said, “It’s no problem. Get some rest.” He didn’t meet my gaze, but I did see something pained in them, something troubled. I watched him leave and had the strangest feeling that Coop felt he was paying off a debt, after all.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Missy

I couldn't sleep.

Rolling over in bed for the hundredth time that night, I debated calling Roman. But every time I picked up my phone and tapped on his contact, thumb hovering over the Call button, I was reminded of the early start he had tomorrow...well, today. Because it was nearly two o'clock in the morning, and he'd be waking up in five hours to shower and get ready for work.

I stared at the ceiling. Our pool refracted rays of moonlight, causing an ever-changing ripple of white illumination to slip through my blinds, undulating above me until dawn came and darkness snuck away. I tried to make out shapes in the reflections, counting them even as they transformed—an old habit I'd relied upon as a child to try and calm my mind enough to sleep. That, and placing a box fan in my room, or turning on white noise on my phone. Though it hadn't failed me in the past, it inevitably would tonight.

My body refused to cool its temperature, and I'd managed to move to every possible corner of my mattress in search of a cold spot until I'd thoroughly warmed my sheets. Soon

enough, it grew insufferable, and I cast my covers aside, swung my legs over the side of my bed, and tiptoed into the hallway. Normally, I'd have worn my slippers, but both my desire to keep quiet and the fact that I wanted as *little* fabric to warm myself as possible informed my decision to leave them next to my bed for the morning.

As for now, I was parched and struggled to make sense of my evening. When I returned home hours ago, my parents had thankfully already turned in for the night. I'd sat idling in the driveway for half-an-hour, unsure of how I would face them. I was never any good at keeping my thoughts or emotions to myself, and a revelation of this size...it'd be a feat next to impossible. Only when Mom turned off the lights in the entrance and sent a text that she was heading to bed, did I head inside.

I didn't have a craving for anything in particular, so I switched on the weakest light in the kitchen (the ones beneath the cabinets), filled a glass with water from the tap, and drank in large gulps. I poured a second glass, retrieved ice cubes from a bag in the freezer, and sat at one of the barstools in front of the counter. Condensation collected along the outside of the glass, chilling the pads of my fingers as I recounted what had happened mere hours ago.

There's nothing you can do to stop me.

Delilah's final words to me. Ominous, threatening, and I felt the weight behind each one. What Delilah planned, I had no clue, but whichever direction she chose to pursue Dad, it would only wreak havoc on my family. Given how Mom and I had found his burner phone and kept it secret, how would he ever trust us again. How could *I* ever trust him again? If Mom knew, would she divorce him? Would Roman—*No*, he wouldn't leave me over this. Why would he? Still, once the spiral of doubts had settled in, every horrible thing seemed entirely plausible.

Could I blame her? Not really. Putting myself in her shoes, I would probably do the same. I hesitated, reconsidering. No—how could I do something like that to a family? One that was intact, healthy, thriving. Though I didn't have Delilah's life story, her actions were selfish in every sense of the word.

I have to stop her. It was my sole course of action. If she'd managed to find *me* with dumb luck—or, perhaps, fate—I wasn't about to deceive myself into thinking her incapable of figuring out where I lived, or where Pa worked, or what Mom's social media account was. For all I knew, she'd seen plenty of Mom's reels before, and our resemblance alone was nothing short of uncanny.

I wiped condensation from my fingers on my pajamas, leaving damp stains in the silk. *It'll dry*, I told myself, pulling cold portions off my skin. I raised the glass to my lips, and froze.

Upstairs, someone had opened the door to my parents' room.

I debated leaving the glass on the counter and darting to the laundry room. I could hide there until whoever it was, either Mom or Dad, returned upstairs. *Of course the one time I come down for water, the whole house wakes up.* Unfortunately, freezing was my automatic response in stressful situations. Fight or flight didn't apply to me—I was stuck in the middle, wavering between the options, doomed to confront whatever approached. Just as I'd frozen when Delilah sidled into the barstool next to me, I now found myself unable to budge.

Heavy footsteps on carpeted stairs, and I held my breath.

Dad.

How was I going to face him? What would I say? He'd read me immediately. This was a mistake—I should *never* have come down here. I was about to ruin everything and do Delilah's dirty work all on my own.

Dad emerged from the dark hallway moments later. His thinning hair was mussed from a fitful sleep, his eyes puffy and bleary. Unlike me, he'd donned his slippers, the toes peaking out from under baggy checkered pants. Where most men slept shirtless, Dad consistently opted for a T-shirt. It wasn't like he had something to hide—he exercised more than most men his age—but he liked the comfort of it, I guessed. In any case, he started when he saw me at the bar. “Missy! What are you doing up so late?”

I found it surprisingly easy to respond, more than I thought I would. I pointed at the clock on the microwave, the green numbers professing the time as 2:19 AM. “Technically, it's early.”

He rolled his eyes, the corner of his mouth twitching upward, and he padded to the same cabinet I'd retrieved my glass from, proceeding to follow the motions I'd made as if he had been watching me all this time. “You never answered my question,” he said as he perched next to me. That look in his eyes could coax the darkest secret from me. Fathers had the ability to do that, I suspected. Something about the mix of love, concern, and open honesty made him an easy person to confide in. And yet...How could I?

He'd lost my trust, but the worst part was that he didn't know it.

I tapped my fingers on my water glass, wishing I hadn't drunk it so quickly. “My mind's been racing.”

“Mmm,” he hummed knowingly. “Wedding nerves?”

I thanked God for the easy out. “Yeah. I'm excited, of course. I think all of the little details are getting to me though. I'm glad Mom has been able to help me out with this.”

“Roman hasn't helped?”

“He has, but he's been so busy working. His boss keeps him practically on-call. I don't want to stress him out with trivialities.”

“Hardly trivial, but I see your point,” he said, sipping from his water. The ice clinked when he set the glass on the counter. He leveled me with that same fatherly stare again. “You sure that’s all?”

There was so much I wanted to say. *Why did you lie to me? To Mom? Why did you leave your pregnant wife? And why did you think you’d get away with it?* Each word stuck to the walls of my throat, blocked by sheer willpower. It took every ounce of strength I had to muster a close-lipped smile. “It’s just a lot.” *Come up with something*—anything. “Am I...do you think I’m too young to get married?”

He folded his hands together, fingers interlaced on the counter. “Well, Missy, you’re much younger than I was when I married your mother. But that was a special case, too.” I hated the way that I knew what he truly meant by ‘special case’. If we were having this conversation in the past, I would think he was simply referring to how they had met later in life, how his job had made it difficult to maintain a stable relationship. Now, I could read between those lines. ‘Special case’ meant infidelity. ‘Special case’ meant he had to leave California and his wife and child behind.

He continued. “You’ve known Roman for a good while now, and when you know someone is The One, nothing should stop you from being with that person.” I felt suddenly ill. Dad smiled and laid a hand over mine. “Your mother and I want you to be happy more than anything else. He makes you happy, and I trust him to take care of you.” His brows pinched. “Are you having second thoughts?”

I shook my head. “No, nothing like that. I just...wanted your perspective.”

“Well, you know I’m always here to talk, if you need anything.”

He was so *sweet*, and it made me sick. The accusations bubbled on my tongue, demanding to be released, to turn his sweetness into shock. For one moment—one *fraction* of a second—I thought I knew what Delilah was feeling. Someone who should have been there for her had turned his back on her, and her mother had lied to her. And for the past twenty-one years of my life, Dad had kept his past completely under wraps. A war brewed within me, caught between the natural, habitual desire to love my father and the genuine fury I felt for how he had lied. I felt the terrible urge to revisit my past and look for signs of the truth, but that would only end up poisoning me completely against him.

I tried to smile again, but failed.

His hand fell on my back. “You sure you’re o—?”

“I’m super tired,” I said, peeling my legs off the stool to stand. “Thanks for the pep talk, Dad. I’m going to try to sleep, and you should, too.”

He studied me for a moment with an inscrutable expression, then bobbed his head. “Sleep well, sweetheart. I’ll see you in the morning.” I turned and ducked into the hallway. When I reached the stairs, I heard him call after me: “I love you.”

I pretended not to hear.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Delilah

For everyone's sake—most especially for Ma's—we decided to take the next day to ourselves and recuperate. We slept in, or tried to, and once Coop was awake, let him back into the room. Call me crazy, but the leftover pizza tasted better after sitting out all night. At least, Ma certainly thought so. She had about three slices in the span of fifteen minutes, leaving three in the box for Coop and I to divvy amongst ourselves.

Ma was uncharacteristically quiet all morning. She responded in monosyllables when Coop tried to make small talk with her, if she responded at all—which she didn't, to me. I wondered if she was punishing me for leaving last night, returning the favor. Though she was fully capable of being petty, I knew her well enough to recognize her actions were rarely out of spite, and often an internal response to a stressor. And after she'd revealed the voices had returned last night (it was likely they had never left, and I didn't realize until yesterday) I had a gut feeling she was deliberately isolating herself. The only question was why. Was it some

self-defense mechanism to prepare her for when I chose to leave? Or did she feel she was protecting me and Coop? Whatever the case, I vowed to keep an eye on her from here on out.

I'd prove her wrong; I was *nothing* like Pa.

Coop returned to the room after dumping the pizza box in the dumpster outside. As he walked to the bathroom to wash his hands, he asked me, "Got a game plan for today?"

I eyed Ma. She seemed not to have heard him, resolved to stare at the TV even though it wasn't on. "I figured I could take the day to do some research on Missy. If nothing comes up, which I don't think is likely, then I'll think of something else. Maybe we can pay another visit to Hanson Private Investigation."

He popped his head out of the bathroom. "I don't think it'd be a good idea for all of us to go back there." He jutted his chin pointedly at Ma.

"Just me, then," I said. "And that's only if nothing comes up today. At the very least, we know Hanson PI was part of his life in Chicago. Plus—didn't you think the receptionist was acting weird last time?"

Coop emerged from the bathroom, toweling his hands on the sides of his jeans. "Yeah, somethin' was definitely off. Couldn't tell you what, though."

"It felt like he was protecting Pa. Or his own ass."

"One of the two for sure," Coop acknowledged, leaning on the wall next to the bathroom. "Want any help looking into Missy?"

"I think I can do that pretty easily by myself. Maybe you can keep Ma company?" I nudged Ma's knee playfully. "Would you like that, Ma?"

She didn't so much as blink.

“Why don’t you go with Coop and he can help get some water for you to take your medication?” I asked, and Coop immediately went about unscrewing the cap on a plastic water bottle. He handed it to Ma, who accepted it robotically, and rifled through her purse until he found the orange prescription bottle. He dumped one in her open palm.

She looked at it for a good while, emotionless, then wrinkled her nose. “No thanks.” She tossed the thing into the trash next to the desk.

“Ma! Do you know how much those things cost?!” I scrambled to the trash can. But all I had to do was catch one reeking whiff as I bent over it to stop in my tracks, defeated. There was no way she could swallow this without contracting some whacky disease. Coop sighed, and I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes. “That was a *day’s worth* of medicine, Ma. We had enough only for this trip, and now you’ll have to spend a day unmedicated.” I rounded on her. “You took it just fine yesterday. What the hell changed?”

“Delilah,” Coop said, cautious. “Take a breath.”

I ground my teeth but knew he was right. If I lost it on her right now, it would only make things worse. But all I could think of were the hundreds of dollars I’d spent on that single bottle of medication. She’d tossed forty bucks, at least, without a second thought. I dug my nails into my palms, switching my focus to Coop when I said, “Why don’t you both grab us some coffee? I need a minute.”

“I’m staying here,” Ma said, crossing her arms. I was tempted to knock her off the bed entirely.

“Coop will let you get whatever you want,” I told her. “And then you’ll come right back.”

“You’re just trying to get rid of me.”

Again, with this? “Do you want coffee?”

“No.”

“Alright,” I said evenly. “Alright, we’ll stay here. Would you please take one of your pills?”

She shook her head.

“Can I ask why not?”

She didn’t respond. I looked at Coop, and he crouched down in front of Ma. “Bridget,” he said. “What’s wrong with the pills?”

“They’re bad for me,” she said while continuing to stare into the black void of the TV. “They make me less of myself. Numb and drowned. Breaks off pieces, little pieces, one at a time. Chipping, chipping, slowly, chipping...” her words faded off into silence, though she continued to move her lips as if she were speaking. At that point, I was entirely convinced she was hearing things again.

I pulled Coop aside, leaving Ma on the edge of her bed. She didn’t seem to notice we’d moved to the corner of the room near the door. “She can’t have coffee in this condition,” I told him. “We’ll just have to make sure she’s eating well, maybe take her out for walks to get some fresh air.”

“Sounds good,” he said, glancing at Ma over his shoulder. “I’ll swing by the store and grab some Vitamin B supplements. Think she’ll take those?”

“It’s worth a shot,” I said. “Actually, that gives me an idea. Grab a pill bottle for multivitamins. We’ll put her meds in that bottle and take the multivitamins out.”

“She won’t immediately recognize the pills?”

“I hope not. Otherwise, the supplements might help.”

He slipped on his shoes. “There’s a CVS on the corner. I’ll be back in thirty minutes, tops. You good with her?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

He left seconds later, and the room was quiet. Thirty minutes would likely give me all the time I needed to find Missy online, so I laid back on my bed and did a quick search on Safari for girls named Missy in Chicago. As one would expect, there were several dozen Missy’s from all over the world who popped up if they had so much as mentioned Chicago at least once on a video or in a post. I refined my search a few times until *girl named Missy in Chicago gets engaged* bore a fruitful result.

On Instagram, as most ecstatic fiancés do, Missy Hughes (a last name, finally) had posted her engagement to a guy named Roman—the same man I’d seen with her at the bar. A little spark went off in my gut, a kickstart to an adrenaline rush. Finally, something new. An answer, a lead. I made an Instagram account and was pleased to see her account wasn’t private. Though I knew the goal of my search was to find Pa, I couldn’t help scrolling through her engagement photos. They were in Chicago’s Botanic Garden, I read on the post right beneath her handle, and the couple looked...happy. Not *happy* like a kid getting their dream car, or like someone finding out they got accepted to a top university. Maybe happy wasn’t the right word—they were downright *joyful*. Love glistened in their eyes, or maybe tears, and they seemed completely enraptured in one another. I found myself lost in a scroll, clicking on the dozens of pictures she’d posted with Roman, with her friends, of trips she’d taken. She’d been to Paris before, I discovered. A whole life summed up in a single social media account.

And here you are, hell-bent on ruining it, a voice drolled in my mind.

No, no, I needed to do this for myself. I wasn't going to ruin anything. Was it unfortunate Missy had been caught in the crossfire? In my opinion, she deserved to know our father's true nature—but, sure. It sucked for both of us. That being said, I had no interest in meeting the woman Pa had decided to marry. I only wanted to meet him. One-on-one. Missy would still be married, she'd still get her Happily-Ever-After storybook ending.

She'd just never look at Pa the same.

And maybe that was my fault. *Of course* that was my fault. It was just something I'd have to live with.

I returned to her pinned photo, the one of her and Roman on the day of their engagement. There weren't any photos of Pa; I felt certain he'd told her not to post him, probably with a stupid fib about protecting his confidentiality as a PI. The engagement photo, however, did lead to a few clues. For instance, the caption read the date of their wedding.

7/28/2025. It had a little ring emoji next to it.

It hit me a second later that it was July 20th. Including today, there were only nine days until Missy's wedding. Did that put a limit on the time I'd have to find Pa? Not that I saw, but the wedding would perhaps provide an opportunity to seek him out. If I only knew what venue they'd chosen...

I stopped myself.

What was I thinking? That I'd *crash* her wedding?

Absolutely not—*that* was out of the question. My goal was to be discrete, not to upend every social connection the Hughes had made in Chicago. Missy and her mom, despite the selfishness of the former, were victims in this, same as I. I had no intention of wrecking what

would certainly be the best day of Missy's life just to find Pa, who likely wanted nothing to do with me as it was.

I took a different turn. The wedding wasn't the only new piece of information I'd gained; I now knew her last name. Returning to Safari, I typed *Peter Hughes private investigator Chicago* into the search bar. Lo and behold, Hanson Private Investigation was the first search result, and it took me straight to their Staff tab. It wasn't the first time I'd searched for his name on this website, but without the confirmation of his new last name, I'd cast Peter Hughes aside as an option. There was no profile photo and minimal helpful information. Just a list of what he specialized in, but nothing that could lead me to him.

But it *was* him.

Meaning the receptionist at Hanson PI had either lied to me, or he was seriously terrible at his job.

But why? Why keep him a secret? Sure, PI work wasn't exactly the most public-facing career on the planet, but how else did people get in contact with their PIs—?

And therein lied the answer to all of my questions. It struck me so squarely in the face, I wondered how I'd never considered it before. When Coop returned fifteen minutes later, pills in a plastic bag with a mile-long receipt hanging out of it, I practically sprinted to the door. Even Ma started at my reaction.

"What's wrong?" Coop said, dropping the bag. His eyes swiveled between Ma and I. "You alright? Somethin' happen?"

"I know how to meet with Pa."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Missy

Because of all the chaos the past few days had thrown on me, I had completely forgotten the importance of today. Months ago, I'd planned it so that nine days before my wedding I would bring most of the decor to the venue and begin setting up. Not only had I asked Roman to join me, but earlier last week, my parents had both cleared the day on their calendars to help out.

Meaning I was going to spend all day with my parents.

I hadn't told Roman anything about last night after he had left, and this wasn't a conversation to have over text. I would be fully on my own in facing my parents, knowing everything I'd learned. Part of me wanted to postpone, or to at least tell them they didn't need to help, but they were busy people with very little time for things like this. And, in truth, I would need all the help I could get. My bridesmaids would be joining us, along with a few of Roman's groomsmen. "I should've made this a multiple day thing for Roman and I," I mumbled, rolling out of bed.

In the shower, I consoled myself. Nothing had changed, really. Mom and Dad were still my parents, and they loved me more than anything. I simply had to believe that Dad had our best interests at heart, to make him leave his family. Surely, it hadn't been an easy decision. And didn't Delilah mention something about her mother being schizophrenic? I couldn't imagine she was an easy person to live with. Perhaps Dad had tried to get her help—yes, *yes* this made sense. A part of the story Delilah would surely hold from me to turn me against my own father. I blistered with anger at the thought. Of course Dad would've tried to get her some kind of treatment, maybe put her in a facility himself so that she wasn't a danger to herself. He would want only the best for her.

Something had happened then, to push him away. What if Delilah's *mother* had called things off? Dad would not be to blame for that; after all, he must have loved her very much to care for her the way he did. In the state she must have entered into, not even *I* could fault her for wanting things to end—how could she know better? And so, Dad had found solace in my mother, and their love led them to me. He had felt horrible, because he still loved Delilah's mother, and not long after, she found herself pregnant with a child of their own. But this news had driven Delilah's mother into a deeper state of paranoia to the point where Dad had had to make the only choice that would preserve himself: He had to leave.

He changed his identity for his safety and married Mom. They raised me together while Delilah's mother cared for her daughter herself. I wouldn't know the rest of their story, not from simple deductions in my mind like the ones I made based off of Dad's character, but I could imagine their lives were quite difficult.

But, I couldn't blame Dad. He'd had to protect the only source of safety and normalcy he'd had in his life, even if it meant leaving his wife and daughter behind. And, out of the

kindness of his heart, he wouldn't have wanted to take Delilah with him in the process. After all, her mother would need some form of companionship in her life, and what better source of that than her own flesh and blood?

This story made such perfect sense to me, at the time, that I didn't realize the delusions I was spinning. Some would call it a self-defense mechanism my brain had put in place to protect myself from emotional, mental, and even physical distress. To this day, I find it difficult to be too ashamed of how far I let myself go in this direction. I had a family I loved and desired to keep intact. As humans, we will believe whatever we want to, so long as it means we don't have to change a single way we live our lives. So long as it preserves whatever semblance of peace we believe we hold.

I hopped out of the shower and threw a towel around myself, checking my phone.

Roman had texted me, *Are we still on for today? I can meet you there around 1:00, Mickey's letting me off early.*

Not as early as I would've liked, but considering Mickey's definition of early was sometime after hours, I couldn't be too bothered. It wouldn't change my mind that we would seat the man between my two bickering grandparents at the reception, but I'd not give him an earful about Roman's hours for at least another week.

Thank you for the help, babe. I'll see you at 1:00. I added a kissy face emoji and hit send.

Three dots popped up, and then: *How did things go after I left you last night? You feeling okay?*

I retyped my response several times before leaning toward brevity. *I'm alright, but there's been a new development. I'll tell you tonight.*

Why not at the venue? he replied.

Because my parents will be there.

Ah, it's one of those conversations.

I'm afraid so.

Well, I love you, and I promise things will work out. Call me if anything.

And that was that. He knew very well that I would not call him unless someone had set my car on fire and I was inside, but I appreciated the sentiment. At least this way, Roman knew something was on my mind. If he didn't know what, exactly, he'd still be a support I could lean on.

I felt revitalized as I changed into a lavender blouse and wide legged jeans, slipping on a pair of sandals that I'd bought to match my brown leather purse a few months back. With this new outlook on my Dad's past, and assurance of Roman's safe presence during the set up, things were getting back on track. I slipped my engagement ring on my finger and allowed myself to smile, to breathe, to *be*.

I will be married in nine days, I told myself, and nothing will interrupt the happiest day of my life.

My maid of honor, Lila, arrived at the venue fifteen minutes early. Though she wasn't my best friend in the whole wide world—that spot was reserved for Roman, plain and simple—I'd chosen her for two reasons: she knew me well, and she was overwhelmingly organized. I used to think girls who chose different colored pens for their notes were meticulous; they had nothing on Lila. She was the kind of woman who divided up a recipe book based on *flavor profile*, not traditional categories like dinner or breakfast. She ate at specific times each day, was *never* late to anything in the history of her existence—not even by accident—and was the most highly

disciplined individual I'd come across in my twenty-one years of life. Unfortunately, I hadn't recognized the glaring drawback of asking Lila to step into this role, and the drawback had a name:

Mom.

If you've ever put two headstrong women with different preferences in a room and asked them to plan an event together, you'd know *exactly* the kind of drawback I'm referring to. Often, I found myself pitted against Lila or Mom for the smallest details, such as the ratio of baby's breath to statement flowers in the bridal bouquet versus the bridesmaids' bouquets. Personally, I was fine with grabbing a pretty bouquet at a Jewel-Osco on my way to the ceremony, but I had to appreciate the effort both women put into the event.

My parents had decided we'd all drive together to the venue, and by the grace of God, they hardly spoke to me on the thirty minute drive. Mom had remembered to bring the wedding planner and spent the entire drive talking Dad through the itinerary for the day. A lavish ceremony on the lawn officiated by a good family friend of ours would kick the day off at twelve o'clock sharp, followed by several hours worth of photographs—Mom was *particularly* excited about orchestrating the photo shoot, and I'd spoken with the photographer beforehand to make sure she knew what she was getting into (blessedly, she did not have Lila's or Mom's disposition). A cocktail hour in the foyer of the venue would kick off the reception; Roman and I had tasted at least ten courses of hors d'oeuvres to select six that would be served with our chosen cocktails. After the cocktail hour, we'd go upstairs for dinner in the main room and spend the rest of the event there with all of the little events sprinkled in the remaining four hours.

The one part of the whole day that I had complete control over was the private dance at the end. Nobody knew the song except for Roman and I, no matter how hard Mom begged to have a say in it. On this, I would not budge. Perhaps I was more like her than I realized.

We parked on a gravel lot just outside the venue. Lila waited for us on the lawn, likely surveying the landscape or attempting to predict the weather for the day of. She wore a simple dusty blue midi dress and a pair of sandals with a slight heel, her blonde hair tucked up in a kerchief-wrapped bun. She'd always appeared bird-like to me, thin and dainty, completely at odds with her character. Lila heard our approach and greeted me with a smile. I'd always found her smiles a little off-putting. Perhaps it was the too-white teeth, or the wideness of it.

"Missy!" she exclaimed, embracing me. "I know it's not the first time I've seen this villa, but it continues to grow on me."

"It's gorgeous," I agreed, taking in the long sloping hills, the Italian-style villa overlooking a winding river. Trees that looked like weeping willows adorned the property, contributing to the whimsical air surrounding the place. In the distance, a man rode a lawn mower across the fields, evening out the land, and I wondered how long it would take to complete such a task.

"Of course it is," Mom said from behind me, arms folded over her chest as she regarded Lila, who sized her up in turn. "I found it myself."

"You have impeccable taste, as always, Mrs. Hughes," Lila replied dryly, and Mom didn't fail to note the hint of sarcasm in her tone. She chose to ignore it altogether and wound her arm around Dad's, leading them both to the venue, calling to us over her shoulder that she would go to speak with the coordinator.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Lila said after my parents were out of sight. She shook her head, placing her hands on her hips. “You’d think she was planning her second wedding, the way she controls every detail. What about what *you* want?”

I shrugged. “I want to marry Roman, that’s all.”

“There’s no way you’re indifferent to the way things go, though. I know you’ve been dreaming about this moment for years, long since he ever proposed.”

“True, but I know both you and my mom will make things look spectacular.”

“I hear she’s trying to get all of the guests to wear black.”

“She was only joking.”

An arched brow. “Are you so sure about that?”

“Yes,” I said, exasperated. “Now, we should get inside before she starts setting up by herself.”

Lila and I started up the hill. A few of the other bridesmaids had arrived, daughters of old family friends, most of whom I wasn’t close with, but Mom had chosen my bridal party specifically to maintain certain connections. She’d allowed me to choose Lila as my maid of honor, and I had a few friends from college who greeted me at the entrance. The coordinator ushered everyone inside quickly, and we went about stringing fairy lights, wrapping white tulle around the upper banister and railing, and writing on mirrors with white paint pens. I was tasked with the centerpieces—well, I’d requested to work on them. It was one of the only ideas I’d had that Mom had truly appreciated, even if she believed it leaned toward tackiness: A small stack of antique books surrounded by white roses with a small vase on top filled with more roses, baby’s breath, and eucalyptus. For obvious reasons, we weren’t going to put the flowers in today (dead

flowers on the table would give Mom a stroke) but I wanted to get the books set up at the very least, and the table numbers.

It would have been a calm event, all of this, if it weren't for the moment Mom decided to join me at the table. We were secluded from most everyone else, and I could tell by the mischievous glint in her eye, the quirk of her lips, that she was about to bring up the burner phone. The emotions from last night began to resurface, heating my face and I stacked a pile of vintage Jane Austen books together, focusing on the angles, dusting them with gold glitter. I tried to remind myself of the resolve I'd had this morning. *Dad loves me, and he loves Mom—he would do anything to keep us together.*

"How are you doing, darling?" she asked, a slight coo to her voice.

"Just fine," I replied, a little too curt. I cleared my throat. "And you?"

She wasted no time. "You haven't received any calls, have you?" she whispered conspiratorially, glancing at Dad. As the person with the best penmanship, he was tasked with writing on the mirror with the paint pens in a looping scrawl. *Years of writing reports by hand is finally paying off*, he'd said to me in the car with a wink, one of the few times either of my parents had addressed me during the drive.

"I think we should put the phone back," I told her. "He will look for it eventually."

"That's the thing," she said, scooting closer to me. "I'm starting to think he never will look for it. In fact, I don't believe this phone is from his work as a PI at all."

My blood chilled. I'd left the phone at home—away from Pa in case Delilah was stupid enough to call me—but I felt it pulsating in the back of my mind all the same, an unwavering presence. I couldn't find the right words to respond, but Mom continued anyway, undeterred.

"Do you think...?" She clasped her hands together. "Do you think he's having an affair?"

I whipped my head to look at her, stunned. Did she seriously just suggest—No, she was teasing me. Another joke, like the black dress code. I very much wanted to laugh it off, but the severity of her expression, the earnestness. I took a few seconds to steady myself before responding. “Why would you ever think that?”

“It makes *sense*, doesn’t it? A mystery woman on the other side of the phone, and she sounded roughly around my age.” Mom frowned. “Well, if he were to ever cheat on me, I doubt it would be with a woman the same age as him. Probably younger.” She touched her glassy skin, pressing the pads of her fingers into her Botoxed cheekbones, the smooth skin of her forehead. In that moment, I sensed that she was beginning to understand the weight of her words—the *accusation* she was making. While I didn’t fully know if the truth was much better, that Mom was really the Other Woman, there was at least some room for explanation there.

“Like you said, Mom, he forgot about the phone. That doesn’t strike me as the action of a cheater.”

“I never said this was a *recent* fling.”

I held up a hand. “Mom. If you actually think this is the case, why are you talking to me about this? I’m your *daughter*. You think I want to be caught up in your wild idea that my father is a cheater?”

She paused. “I...”

“I’m going to put the phone back sometime soon, and we can just forget this ever happened.” I put my hand over hers. “Dad would never be unfaithful to you, Mom. He loves you too much to disrespect you in that way. Trust me when I say that.”

I must have said too much, or the last sentence must have taken on a very knowing tone, because her brows furrowed—or, they tried to. Botox had a weird effect on incredulous expressions. “Do you know something? Did the woman call again?”

And for the first time in a long while, I lied: “I don’t know anything more than you do. Now, please. Go help Dad with the writing. I think it’s a little crooked.”

She certainly didn’t believe that I was completely oblivious, and I think it had everything to do with her wanting to find some kind of dirt on Dad. She hoped he would have some kind of secret life just as much as I hoped for the opposite. And if I wasn’t careful, her curiosity would lead to undesirable answers before I could figure out how to shake Delilah.

Mom looked at Dad over her shoulder, no doubt recognizing his writing was anything *but* crooked, but she left all the same with a huff and a sigh. Two of the bridesmaids approached her as she walked to him, daughters of old family friends, probably trying to pick her brain about the latest facial technology. One of the girls notably suffered from acne, an ailment that tended to disgust Mom (judging from how she rarely let me see photos of her as a young teen, I often wondered if she had been afflicted by it herself). I returned my attention to the stack beneath my lingering fingertips, unsure of where I had left off. Ah, more gold flakes. I shook them out like a child adding fish food to their pet’s water tank.

A gentle hand settled on the nape of my neck, and I flinched.

“How’s it going?” Roman asked, settling himself in the chair Mom had recently left. His hair was mussed by the wind, a few gelled strands dangling on his forehead, and he looked extremely tired despite his shorter workday.

I grasped his hand, squeezing. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too,” he said, leaning closer. “Are you okay? You look a bit nauseous.”

Though I had wanted to wait for this discussion, I felt a string of sentences burble up the column of my throat. “I need to talk to you.”

“Is this about what you said over text? I thought you wanted to wait—?”

“I don’t think I can wait any longer.”

Sensing the alarm in my voice, he rose, holding my elbow as I followed suit, and we made our way downstairs to the outdoor patio. Mom and Dad had watched us leave with questioning expressions but were quickly swept away by my bridesmaids into a frenzy of decorating. We passed two of Roman’s groomsmen on the way down the stairs and told them the rest of the group was in the main reception hall. I only hoped we wouldn’t run into Liam, Roman’s best man; he knew us well enough to sense something was amiss.

We stole out the back door and onto the patio. This patio was one of the reasons I’d originally fallen in love with the venue. Fireplaces were scattered from one side to the other, surrounded by plush seats overlooking the vividly green hills and sparkling river below. A family of ducks wandered along the riverbank, the cluster of ducklings swarming behind their mother, straying too close to the edge of the river for comfort. It was the sound of the wind rustling the grass, the river’s swell, and the animals calling to one another that finally set my heart at ease enough to speak clearly to Roman. We leaned on the stone railing, surveying the landscape.

He pulled me close with an arm around my back and said, “Tell me what’s on your mind.”

I sank into his warmth. “After you left the bar last night, I spoke with Delilah.”

Roman tensed. “You called her? Or she called you?”

“Neither. She was in the bar sitting next to us, and saw the burner phone on the table. It only took a few dots to connect for her to figure out it was me.”

“What are the odds?” he breathed. He leaned closer to my face, examining me closely.

“Did she follow you there somehow? Did she hurt you?”

Not in any physical way, no. “I’m fine, and no, I don’t think she followed me.” *I think it was fate*, I didn’t add. “She told me...” I swallowed the words.

“Tell me, please. I can see this weighing on you, Missy.” He pressed his forehead against mine. “We’ll be husband and wife soon, remember? We can’t have any secrets between us.”

I nodded soberly, attempting to organize disordered thoughts. “You know how she’d said something about my dad over the phone? That I wasn’t who I thought he was?”

“I remember.”

“She says he’s her father.”

There wasn’t an easier way to put it, nothing I could say that would smoothly transition into the revelation. Roman stepped back as if my words were a physical blow, then caught himself with a shake of his head. “She’s lying, obviously.”

“That’s what I had thought, but how else would you explain the burner phones? They had each others’ numbers in them, and no other. Delilah said her mom was married to my dad, that he left her while she was pregnant with Delilah—left her for my mom and I.”

“There’s gotta be some other way to explain the phones, Missy. I just can’t believe...there’s no way...”

I reached for his hands. “You think this is something I want to believe? Of *course* I don’t! But what other explanation is there? He would never have a burner phone to communicate with a client, and these phones are decades old. Modern burner phones look way different. As much as I hate to admit it, her story checks out.”

Roman put his head in his hands, elbows bracing him on the stone railing. “Okay, okay,” he said. “I just need a second to process. I have so many questions—”

“So do I,” I said, rubbing his back in soothing circles with my fingernails. Little things to calm him, light touches. It came to me instinctively now, this way of calming him. “I’m sorry to drop this on you all of the sudden. I know this hasn’t been an easy past few days for you.”

His head whipped to me, forehead scrunched. “No, Missy, don’t apologize.” He immediately folded me into his arms. I breathed in his cologne, fighting the wave of tears that threatened to break my carefully controlled appearance. “I’m sorry,” he murmured into my hair. “I’m sorry this is happening, I’m sorry she ever came to Chicago. I’m sorry I left you at the bar when I should have walked you to your car.”

I started to cry. Heavy, aching sobs that wracked my whole body. I was fully aware that we were in plain sight of the upstairs windows, and anyone who peered out would see us and assume the wedding was off. I buried my face into his chest, holding onto his jacket as if letting go would mean I’d slip away completely. He continued murmuring apologies into my hair, tightening his embrace, planting small kisses to the side of my head.

After several minutes, the tears slowed, replaced by a numb sensation that started in my brain and spread throughout my body. We swayed in spot, a gentle rocking motion, allowing the minutes to pass us by, praying no one came downstairs to bother us. I broke the silence a moment later: “None of this was your fault, Roman. Please don’t apologize.”

“I’ve been too preoccupied with work to be here for you. I brushed off your worries about Delilah when you brought them up last night.” His throat bobbed. “I have plenty to apologize for.”

“We can’t change what happened.”

“I know,” he said, voice softening. “I know, my love.” A few more beats passed. “Did she say what she wants? Why she’s here?”

“It’s not hard to imagine.”

“Well, there’s a few possibilities that come to mind, but I think the most likely is that she wants to meet your dad.” When I nodded, he continued. “Do you think she’ll find him? I wouldn’t blame you at all for hoping she doesn’t.”

I looked up at him, and he wiped away the wet streaks on my cheeks with his thumbs. “Does that make me a horrible person? If he really is her father, shouldn’t I want her to have the opportunity to meet him?”

“You’re not a horrible person, Missy.” He stared deeply into my eyes. “Not for wanting to keep your family safe from someone who might mess things up. It’s not an easy decision to make, but it’s an understandable one.”

Understandable, maybe. But was it right? “To answer your question, I think if she tries hard enough, she’ll find him. Dad doesn’t have much of an online presence, but she knows where he works.” I thought more about how he always said he hated social media, never wanted to have his photos posted publicly, and a sick feeling entered my stomach. The more I thought of the possibility he had a previous family, the more his actions made sense.

“What if we convince him to take some time off work?” Roman pondered aloud, stroking my arms. “If that’s the one way she can find him, aside from random coincidence, then we just have to make it to where she can’t get in contact with him at all.”

“She’s here until August 1st,” I said. “There’s a possibility we can keep him away until the wedding, but after?”

“The wedding is on the 28th, Missy. I’m sure he’ll need a couple days to recuperate. We just need to convince him that’s the case. Maybe we can get him and your mom a hotel somewhere. They’ll have a little vacation.” The more he talked, the more he seemed convinced this was the best course of action. “I mean—think about it: Their only daughter will have just been married, and a vacation would be the perfect opportunity for them to process whatever emotions they’ll have while in one another’s company.”

It wasn’t a bad idea at all. In fact, it was the *only* idea so far that didn’t involve telling either of my parents the truth, which immediately put it at the top of the list. “It will be a parting gift from us, in a sense,” I said. “They’ll have no choice but to accept it.”

He nodded. “It will work out, Missy. You’ll see.”

I hoped he was right. But even if Delilah left, what was to say she’d stay away forever? How would I ever sleep easily at night knowing she was out there, determined to bring an end to everything I held dear?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Delilah

Two days later, Ma still wasn't taking her pills. Suffice to say, the trick with switching the pills in a bottle didn't work—Ma had recognized them instantly, which sent her into a panic about being able to trust both Coop and I. She took the Vitamin B pills with some convincing, but that did little to help. She was fine for most of yesterday evening, which had allowed Coop and I to do a little digging into my idea. The slightest mention of Pa, however, would set her off again.

I was beginning to regret bringing her along. Everything that had happened so far on this trip has only served to worsen her state of mind, causing her undue stress and anxiety. But what was I supposed to do? I was so close to finally finding Pa; I couldn't leave now. "Soon," I would tell her, stroking her back as she fell asleep. "We'll go home soon, okay? I promise."

She'd finally settled down for a nap later in the afternoon, and I called Coop over to discuss next steps. He shut the door quietly behind him, wincing at the squeal of hinges, and sat

on the floor next to me. I had Hanson PI's website pulled up, and my thumb hovered over their phone number.

"If I can get a meeting with him," I said, "then this will all be over, and we can go home. I'll get all the answers I need." I swallowed and looked at him. He studied me, the corner of his mouth tipped downward, and I couldn't tell if it was pity on his face, or worry. "Are you okay with this?" I asked.

"It's the only way to talk to him, Delilah," he said, nodding. "Make the call."

And so I did. I hit the phone number and put it on speaker.

A click on the other line, followed by a woman's voice: "Hanson Private Investigation, how may I direct your call?"

I instantly felt a wave of relief. It wasn't the other receptionist, the suspicious one, and that would make what I was about to do a heck of a lot easier. "Hi, I was wondering if I could set up a consultation with Peter Hughes? I saw on your website that he specializes in family cases."

"Of course!" the woman said, and I winced at her enthusiasm. She sounded like one of those cartoon characters, too spirited to be real. "What is the nature of the investigation?" She clacked away on her keyboard.

"I...um...I'm looking for my father." I eyed Coop. "I think his name is Cooper Graham." Coop had agreed to pose as my father for a fake investigation. I would give a fake name for myself, when she asked, otherwise Pa would figure out who I was before I could meet with him. I hated to think he'd throw the case out if he realized who I was, but I couldn't take the chance.

"I see," the receptionist said, her voice dripping with pity. Maybe she was new—I couldn't be the saddest case she'd come across. "And your name, miss?"

"Casey Perez."

More typing. “Peter Hughes is booked for the month, but I would be more than happy to find someone else to assist you, if you’d like?”

Fuck. This was what I was afraid of. Seven days before the wedding was such short notice. “I don’t think a consultation would need more than ten minutes,” I told her. “Peter Hughes worked on a case for a friend of mine, and I’m really only comfortable discussing this with him. I’m only available for this week—is there a way you could provide his phone number so I could reach out to him directly?” I hoped she didn’t take note of the slight tremor in my voice.

“I’m so sorry, but I don’t think I could get you a consultation this week—”

“Please,” I said. I glanced at Ma, hating myself for what I was about to say next. “My mother is dying, and I have no one to help me. I need to reach him soon, and I need Peter Hughes to take this case.”

I had rendered her speechless, evident by the long pause. Then, “Can I put you on hold?”

“Sure,” I said, then muted myself. I sighed heavily. “This isn’t going to work.”

“You don’t know that,” Coop replied. “I think it will.”

Ma stirred in her bed, flipping over to face us. I tensed, but she was still sound asleep. Would she want to meet Pa? Could she handle something like that? I didn’t think so. She would have to stay home with Coop while I went to see Pa, if this somehow worked. And what if things went well? What if he was happy to see me? What if he’d missed me for all of these years, claiming Ma had kept me from him? I quickly derailed that train of thought. I had promised Ma I would never leave her side. I touched my stomach, tracing the scars there. But what if Ma needed help that I couldn’t give her?

The line clicked again, and I hit the unmute button. “Okay,” the receptionist breathed.
“Mr. Hughes can squeeze you in the day after tomorrow at 3:00 PM. Does this work for you?”

I sat back, stunned.

It worked.

I almost forgot to respond, and the receptionist said, “Miss? Are you there?”

“Sorry—yes. That works for me. Would he be able to meet outside of his office? I would feel more comfortable this way.”

“I’m sending your information to his secretary so she can schedule the details with you. Do you have an email that works well for you?”

I told her my email—an old one I’d set up when I was twelve that I used for coupons and discount codes from restaurants and clothing stores, mostly.

“Alright, Miss Perez. Mr. Hughes’ secretary will reach out to you shortly.” I’d worn her out, clearly, because she’d lost all enthusiasm. “Have a good day.”

I barely finished saying “You too” before she hung up the phone.

Hours later, his secretary emailed me with information about the location of our meeting: The Sunset Café, just around the corner from his office. It meant I wouldn’t run into the suspicious receptionist, and I would have time to figure out how to get Ma back on track with her medication.

Coop left to grab take-out Chinese food for lunch, and I laid next to Ma in her bed. She blinked at me through sleep-laden eyes. “Delilah? Why are you smiling?”

I didn’t realize I was. “I’m going to book our flight home for three days from today. We’re going home.”

And finally, *finally*, I felt like Ma actually saw me when she looked at me. The dazedness was gone. “But what about your Pa?”

She wouldn’t know, I’d decided. She would never know that I’d found him, that I was going to meet with him. After two days, I would find the closure I needed. Maybe Pa would be willing to help me support Ma financially, or find a place to get her the care she needed. If Missy was any good judge of character, Pa seemed to be an honest-enough person now. Who knew how time had changed him? “We’ll forget about him, eventually. We can get rid of the burner phone and put everything behind us.” I took her hand in mine. “I told you, Ma. I’m not leaving you. I hope you believe me.”

Her lips pinched, but she didn’t shut me down. “I want to” was all she said. Then she turned over and promptly fell back asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Missy

I made it my mission for the next six days before the wedding to get Dad away from work as much as possible. Roman and I had bought my parents tickets to Hawaii yesterday and told them they deserved a nice vacation after everything they had done to help us. It wouldn't be too expensive, since we already had the family timeshare at the island of Oahu, and it would last just long enough to ensure Delilah was no longer in the picture. At least, for the time being.

In the morning, at breakfast, I sat beside him as he scrolled through the news on his iPad, biting into a piece of sourdough toast lathered with strawberry jam and butter. I nudged him with my foot. "So, what've you got going on today?" I hoped that if he told me some of his schedule, I could figure out whether it would be likely for Delilah to catch him at Hanson PI.

"Mostly house visits," he said, washing down toast with hot coffee. "Old clients of mine who want to check up on family members."

Old clients. That was good news. Mom watched me out of the corner of her eye, suspicion creeping into her narrowed gaze. I had to be careful about how I framed things. She

already believed I knew more than I was letting on, and because I wasn't giving the burner phone back to her anytime soon, the only way she could glean information was from me. And if slipped up, it would all be for nothing. I waited to speak until she poured the liquid eggs into the hot pan, my voice obscured by the loud sizzle. "You've been meeting with old clients a lot," I said, which wasn't necessarily true. "Have you taken on anyone new?"

"Missy. You know I can't talk about my cases to you."

"I know, I know," I said, hands raised. I didn't like the way he didn't just tell me, *No, I haven't taken on any new cases*. "I'm not asking about the content of your cases, or who your clients are. Just..."

He was about to bite into the toast again, but set his hand down, regarding me. "What's with the newfound interest in my clients?"

I should have known better than to pry; he was always so secretive about things like this. It was a boundary Mom and I knew not to cross. "I just wanted to see if maybe you and I could go fishing today or tomorrow at North Pond," I said, acting defeated. "I know when you take on someone new, things are a little more pressing, and you can't push the schedule around much. But with old clients, you have more leeway."

His expression softened, and he sighed, smiling. "Of course, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shut you down. I have time today to go fishing with you, if you'd like, but I did just take on a new client for tomorrow." He sipped from his coffee, lips pursed in annoyance. "I would have time tomorrow, but this client wants to meet urgently, and the new receptionist is too kind to shut anyone down."

My blood ran cold.

A new client. One who wanted to meet urgently.

It could be anyone, I told myself. But that did nothing to ease my nerves. What if it was Delilah? She already knew he worked for Hanson PI, and it wouldn't take much sleuthing to figure out our family name. She could have found Mom online and made that connection. My brows furrowed. She could have found *me* online—on one of my social media pages—and at this rate, she knew what I looked like well enough.

Had I led her right to him?

It could be anyone, I thought for a second time. And what if it was? If I tried to dissuade Dad from meeting with someone who really *did* need him, all because I was scared Delilah would find him, what would happen to that person? What if they were unsafe, or someone they knew was being threatened? *If that's the case*, I rationalized, *they should go to the police*. When thinking this way, it couldn't possibly be *that* much of an emergency.

Mom came around to dump heaps of steaming eggs on our plates, lingering a bit to see if we would continue our conversation. But Dad was set on finishing his toast, and I grabbed a slice of my own and took my time lathering it up. She turned around, disappointment heavy on her shoulder, and returned to the stove.

"It's not fair for people to adjust your schedule like that, Dad," I said, hoping I sounded aggravated on his behalf. "If someone is in any kind of danger that makes it urgent, that's not something you have to deal with."

"It's not that," he said, dusting crumbs from his fingers. "She can only meet during a specific timeframe, and—" He cut himself off, shaking his head. "No, I've said too much. I can fish with you today, Missy."

She.

Specific timeframe.

It was Delilah.

I knew it in my gut—she had finally found a way to contact him. I didn't know what charade she was running, but she planned to corner him. That much, I knew. What did she want from him? A relationship? Money? I could imagine she was in want of the latter, seeing as her mother was schizophrenic and likely required medical assistance in some capacity.

I had a choice.

I could let this meeting happen, and at least Mom would never find out, unless Dad said something, which—judging by how he'd kept his old family a secret all this time—he wouldn't. Maybe Delilah would get what she needed, maybe she'd blackmail him and bleed him dry of his money, otherwise she'd tell Mom about her existence. And Dad would do whatever he could to keep this family intact, same as I.

Or...

If I couldn't get him to cancel his meeting, I could simply stop her from being able to attend it.

Mom returned to the table to eat with us, and I watched my parents interact. The love they held for one another, the joy in their eyes as one beheld the other...it led me to a single decision.

I knew what I had to do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Delilah

3:00 PM took its sweet damn time to come around.

I spent the day with Ma packing everything we'd brought. I wouldn't buy the plane tickets until after my meeting with Pa, just in case of...anything. I didn't know why I was so hesitant to return home, but I chalked it up to nerves. Coop tried his best to distract me with random baseball facts and a second trip this week to Denny's for lunch, and I appreciated the effort. But every hour that ticked by brought me closer to meeting my father for the first time in my life, and I couldn't tell if I was nervous, excited, or getting cold-feet.

Ma doodled on one of the kid's menus, expertly coloring in a group of koi fish swimming in a pond, and Coop leaned over to speak to me. "You sure about this?"

"Of course not," I said, staring into my coffee. The ceramic mug singed my fingertips. "But it's what I came here to do."

"I get that," he replied, and maybe he did understand. "Like I said before, though. If you're not ready..."

“Sunk cost theory?” I said with a wry grin.

“Exactly.”

“What isn’t she ready for?” Ma said, swerving from the picture she was coloring to cut a stack of pancakes with the side of her fork. “To go home?”

Coop quickly rescued the situation. “Of course she’s ready to go home. We all are.”

She turned to me, scanning my gaze. “Then, what?”

“To go back to my job,” I told her, an easy lie. “My boss wasn’t exactly happy with me when I left.”

She patted my hand with syrup-sticky fingers. “You’ll be alright. Wilbur thinks so.”

“Wilbur?” I echoed.

“Yes, Wilbur.” Ma looked across the booth next to Coop, her focus zeroing on the blank area. “That’s what you think, right? That she’ll be okay?”

Silence ensued.

She nodded, satisfied with whatever response her hallucination had provided. “Exactly as I thought.” She looked at me again. “Wilbur knows a lot about a great many things. If he thinks you won’t have any problem returning to your job, I would believe him.”

Wilbur. So now her hallucination had a name. I stared at the space he was supposedly sitting in, right next to Coop, knowing he was a figment of her imagination but unable to shed the discomfort settling in my gut. Coop seemed similarly uncomfortable and shifted closer to the wall.

“You sure you won’t take your pills, Ma?” I said, reaching for the bottle in my tote.

She waved me off. “Don’t need them. Wilbur thinks I function perfectly without them, and I’m inclined to agree.”

“Wilbur isn’t real.”

She instantly covered her mouth with her hand. “Wilbur—I’m so sorry, don’t listen to her.” The glare she threw my way could’ve leveled a city. “Don’t be disrespectful. He’s been with us this whole time, and unlike you, *he* hasn’t left my side.”

A sharp stab of guilt, right in my stomach.

Coop cut me off before I could respond. “The pills keep you healthy, Bridget. They might make Wilbur go away, but we will be here to keep you company.”

Ma brandished the red crayon at him. “I don’t *need* medicine.”

I held up a hand. “Fine. Let’s not argue about this right now.”

We ate in stilted silence, mostly broken when Ma addressed Wilbur or responded to whatever voice she was hearing in her head. If I put the pill in her coffee, would it dissolve and have the same effect? Or would the caffeine negate it? I washed down a bite of pot roast sandwich with a gulp of Diet Pepsi. *We’ll be home soon*, I told myself. *This can be a problem for future me.*

Ma walked ahead of us on the trek back to the motel, kicking rocks and hopping over cracks. She continued to prattle, likely to Wilbur, while I confided in Coop.

“You’ll keep an eye on her while I’m out?” I asked him.

“She’ll be wondering where you are.”

“I know,” I said, stuffing my hands in my pockets. “I know she will. Just...keep her distracted. Say I’m buying luggage, or something. With any luck, she’ll sleep the day off.”

“I’ll do my best. But if anything happens, don’t hesitate to call me.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” I said, snorting. “Worst thing I can think of is he walks out cursing my name, saying he’ll file a restraining order. I think I can still manage to grab an Uber back after that.”

“Still,” he said. “Keep your phone on you.”

“I will,” I said, and for some reason, fought the urge to tease him and call him *Dad*. That’s how he was acting, wasn’t it? It struck me, then, that Coop was the closest thing to a father I’d had at any point in my life. None of Ma’s old deadbeat boyfriends had amounted to much of anything in my life, though one would buy me ice cream from La Michoacana on occasion (usually when he was looking to score with the dealer outside the shop). As much of an oddball as he was, Coop had been nothing but genuine all the years I’d known him. I was reminded again of Coop’s brother and the look that had haunted his gaze only a few nights ago, and I wondered if Coop felt obligated to help us after whatever had happened in his past. Would he still want to be around us if Ma was taken care of? If Dad helped me to put her in a facility, to get her the help she needed? Would Coop consider his mission over and move on with his life?

I hoped he’d move on from whatever guilt chased him. But I also hoped that he didn’t have to distance himself from us. I’d learned to lean on him now, learned that he could truly be dependable. Wasn’t this what Pa was supposed to be for me? Again I was faced with the glaring question—Why had he left? There were a thousand answers, but I still didn’t know what had driven him to cheat on Ma in the first place.

Today, I’d find out.

My resolve strengthened as the walk wore on, and once we got back to the motel, I wrapped Ma in a brief hug. “I’ll be back soon, I have an errand to run.”

She didn't say anything, though a look of panic entered her gaze when Coop led her up the stairs away from me. He called over his shoulder one final time: "Keep your phone on you, kid."

I gave him a thumbs up and waited until the door shut behind them to call an Uber.

The Sunset Café could've popped straight out of an Instagram reel. Words like *spacious* and *aesthetic* came to mind—the place was painted floor to ceiling in white with green and gold accents livening up the space. Even the metal chairs were gold with green cushions, and a long cream-colored couch took up the wall nearest the front door. The baristas were mostly young and tatted, sporting nose rings and an assortment of ear piercings that made me itch to get more. There wasn't any line, though most of the seats were filled with college-age students, and the barista at the register eyed me through the window where I stood outside, hesitant to enter.

Pa wasn't inside yet.

There was an empty chair. Should I sit and wait for him? Should I wait until I saw him? How would he know who I was? Would he know who I was if I sat down? Questions assaulted me, a barrage of options and outcomes. I decided to wait outside until he entered. We had about ten minutes until our meeting, anyway. There was no need to rush anything—plus, my stomach flipped and churned with each car that pulled into the lot. Even though I knew it wouldn't be him, or I tried to tell myself it wouldn't be, the passing minutes dug deeply into the pit of my stomach.

Could I do this?

Could I meet him? Finally?

Would he even show?

A part of me didn't believe he would. After all—where had he been all of my life? But this was different. This was his job. He didn't know he was meeting with his daughter—would he recognize me? I wondered what that would be like if I sat in that chair and he saw me as he walked in, his face paling, his hands slackening at his side. Did I look enough like Ma to startle him? I didn't have her red hair, so perhaps not.

I checked my phone.

2:56 PM.

Four minutes.

"Fuck," I breathed, feeling intensely nauseous. "Fuckshitfuck." A girl exiting the café shot a backwards glance over her shoulder at the string of curses spewing from my lips. I ducked around the corner, heading for the alley around the bend. It would give me space to calm down, to regroup before I faced him.

There was a chainlink fence blocking the entrance to the alley, but the door gave with a shove, rattling the razorwire strung across the top. The area was completely empty, save for a few molding cardboard boxes, a questionable syringe, and the reek of urine and filth. But it was quiet, secluded. I propped my back against a relatively clean portion of the wall (it was desperate for a good powerwashing) and sucked in a deep breath. God, I craved the sweet tang of pot right about now. I should've stopped at a dispensary on my way here, but Pa would've smelled it on me instantly. I didn't want him to get the wrong idea about me.

I was desperate, but I wasn't a junkie. I needed to get Ma help, but if I showed up high the first time I met him, he'd assume I wanted to blow his money on weed.

“I’m overthinking this,” I mumbled, pressing a palm over my racing heart. “I don’t even have to tell him who I am right now. I can sit down for a conversation about finding Coop and just see what kind of person he is. No pressure. He doesn’t know anything—”

A click of heels on cement drew my attention to the space outside the fence. I’d heard them nearing, but it wasn’t until they stopped in front of the fence that I realized I was being watched.

I looked up.

Missy stood on the other side, a bike lock in her fist, her jaw clenched tight to the point of pain, and she stared at me in the dead-end alley holding my fate in her hands. I knew instantly she’d found out about Pa’s plan to meet with me, and I knew she would stick to her word and protect her family.

I lurched off the wall in time for her to secure the lock around the fence door and jam it together. I threw myself against it. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I seethed, pulse hammering in my throat. “Missy—what the *fuck*?”

“I told you,” she said in a shaky voice. “But you didn’t listen to me.”

“I’ll fuckin’ scream—let me out!”

“You won’t,” she said, throat bobbing. “You won’t, because you don’t want him hearing you scream to be your first impression. You wanted to meet on equal footing. That’s why you set this meeting up in the first place, outside of his office.”

I ground my teeth. “You make me sound like *I’m* somehow in the wrong for trying to meet my father.”

“*He’s not your father,*” she hissed, stepping closer to the gate. “You don’t know him. He may be the reason you’re on this planet, but he wants nothing to do with you. He left. He doesn’t

want your family; he wants the one he already has. Can't you just leave us alone?" The last sentence left her in a broken way, vulnerable and cracked.

If I reached out, I could grab her hair. Grip it tight and hold her against the gate until she let me out. But hands didn't fit well through the gaps in the fence, and I would be too slow to reach her. I rattled the fence, startling her, and she backed away a step. "You don't know the *first thing* about my life. About what I've had to go through to be here. I'm not here to destroy your family, and if you let me meet him—in *private* away from your mom, who will never know I exist—then I can leave. *Only* then. Just let me out, Missy."

Her head swerved left as a car entered the parking lot: a long black sedan with tinted windows and a sleek, polished look to it. Missy ducked her head and said, "I have to go. Stay put, and I'll let you out in an hour."

"An hour?!" I shook the fence again, but she had already stormed off down the side street away from the car, ignoring me. "I don't have an hour! I have to get—" She turned the corner and disappeared.

I kicked the fence, a scream building in my chest. The sedan parked within sight of the alley, and I watched as it was put in park and a man exited the vehicle. My breath caught in my chest. He had balding silvery hair, the same pale skin I had inherited, along with Missy, and kind eyes pinched with crow's feet. He checked his watch, frowning, and began to walk toward the café. He buttoned the front of his suit jacket, tapping both of his cuff links as if to ensure they weren't missing.

I opened my mouth.

And hesitated.

I could call out to him. I could explain that I had lost my way when trying to find the café...but what could he do without a key to the bike lock? Call the cops? Buy a pair of bolt cutters? We would have our first meeting in a fuckin' alley, and I felt like a soldier standing at the bottom of a hill, watching the opposing army charge down at me. I had the low ground, and there was no way I could admit to him that I was his daughter. His daughter, stuck behind a chain link fence in an alley, disheveled and apparently clumsy. I'd wanted some kind of power over him—to face him on equal footing, as Missy had said.

I watched him enter the café, the door easing shut behind him, and the scream died in my throat, burying itself in a hole in my heart.

I had failed. There was no way I would be able to call and reschedule a meeting, no way I could show my face at Hanson PI without alerting security. There was nothing to be done.

I fished my phone out of my back pocket and dialed Coop's number. He picked up immediately. "What happened? Are you alright?"

Emotion welled in my throat, heating my face. I took a steadying breath. "Missy locked me in an alley. I need you to get bolt cutters and let me out."

There were sounds of scrambling on the other line, like bottles clinking. "Missy what? How did she...?" A long pause. "I'm getting an Uber."

"Wait—hold on. Are you drinking right now?"

"I had two beers. I'm fine." A beat of silence. "Want me to take your Ma with me in the car?"

"No." I shook my head, not that he could see me. "If she's asleep, leave her a note to call me when she wakes up and I'll make up some excuse. But the last thing she needs is to see me

locked in an alley. There will be too many questions. Plus..." I swallowed, eyeing the café entrance. "I'm not entirely sure she won't run into Pa."

"The Uber is on its way. You didn't meet with him?"

"Missy sabotaged everything." I pressed a hand to my forehead. "I walked to this alley near the café to catch my breath, and she fuckin' showed up outta the blue and locked me in."

"She's determined, that's for sure."

I couldn't reply. Though I had tried to push everything down, the sense of helplessness and hatred, it all came welling up in a chest-wracking sob. I clenched my jaw hard against it.

"So..." Coop said, and I knew what he was thinking.

"I don't know where to go from here," I whispered. Anything louder would have broken me completely. "But I...I can't leave. I can't."

"Delilah—"

"I need to know *why*, Coop!" I said, leaning on the wall, squeezing my forehead in my hand as if applying pressure would stop a massive headache from forming. "Was it all because of Ma? Was I not enough for him? If I can't talk to him then, then..."

"Then you will be back where you started," Coop finished in a soft voice. "In an apartment with a schizophrenic mother who can't fend for herself, with no way of knowing when anything will improve."

I cried hard, heaving breaths as if I couldn't get the air down. "I can't go back to how things used to be. I can't keep living like this, waiting for the day Ma finally loses it completely and does something rash. She was breaking into someone's *car* just a few days ago!"

I heard a car door shut, then the sound of moving traffic. “I’m in the Uber now,” Coop confirmed. “Delilah, things will work out one way or another. We can talk about next steps back at the motel, okay? Just hold on.”

I hung up the phone, and as I did, the café door swung open. Pa was shaking his head, muttering something under his breath as he returned to his car. I cupped my mouth with my hand, unable to stop the sharp cry before it slipped from my mouth. Pa stopped, a hand on the car door, and faced me.

I flattened against the wall.

“Is someone there?”

His voice. Deep, smooth, fatherly. A sound I had missed all of my life, the voice that should have comforted me during Ma’s episodes, advised me when I was trying to figure out what to do after high school, praised me for the little things I accomplished. It felt so tender, yet so foreign. Like it wasn’t for me. It was never meant for me.

The car door shut, and I slid to the ground when he pulled out of the parking lot.

Coop picked me up, thirty minutes later, bolt cutters in hand, and let me out. The Uber driver raised a brow but didn’t say anything. I entered the car and scooted across, strapping myself in mechanically. Coop observed me from the other side of the car, but he could tell I didn’t want to talk.

What was there to say?

I had failed. The reminder echoed in my mind on the drive back to the motel. What was I going to do now? I could leave like I’d told Ma I would, and go back to the way things were. Immediately, a deep, overwhelming dread pooled in my chest, pulling it tight like a cord. It

wasn't an option. Not for me. Coop could take Ma back, if that was what she wanted. But that would mean putting her under the stress of thinking I would never come back to her. And I'd promised to never leave her.

It felt like a promise I was destined to break.

We reached the motel, and Coop doled out a hefty tip to the driver. Likely hoping the man would forget about this particular interaction.

I often replay this next moment in my mind. The steps I took to reach the motel door, completely unaware of what lay behind it. I slid the card into the reader. A green light flashed, and I leaned my weight on the door to open it.

The first thing I saw was blood.

The rooms weren't anything special. A beige, taupe-ish paint and a dark gray carpet (to hide all the shit that got stained in here, I reckoned) left the eyes feeling a little sore, so the stark crimson handprint smudged on the wall next to the bathroom didn't simply *jump out*. It leapt and screamed.

I immediately forgot everything from my day and bolted to the bathroom, Coop on my heels.

"Ma!" I shouted, hammering my fist on the door. There was more blood on the handle, on the door, even a faint glimmer of it on the carpet. I threw my weight into the door and only succeeded in knocking the wind from my lungs. I regained my composure quickly. "Ma! Open the door! Open the *fucking door!*"

A low moan on the other side was my only response.

"Stand back," Coop said, pushing me to the side. The bathroom door was a sliding door with a notoriously shabby locking mechanism, and Coop crouched to the floor, slid his fingers

underneath where the carpet met tile, and lifted the damn thing near off its tracks. The lock gave with a powerful tug and slid free.

It was a scene straight outta the *The Shining*.

On the mirror, on the toilet, on the floor, on the shower panels, on the counter, in the sink—*everywhere*.

Blood.

Not pools of it, but streaks, like a hand had smeared it over each surface with wild abandon. She'd even managed to get it on the lightbulbs just above the mirror so the room was cast in a sick, pinkish haze—a masochist's mood lighting. The ceiling swirled with color, untouched by the madness if it weren't for the lights.

Coop threw open the shower door, and it wasn't until then that I realized the shower had been on, which explained the steam. Blood streamed around the drain, whirls of red muddled by the water. Ma sat on the shower floor, barely conscious, soaked through with water. Her forearms were torn to shreds.

I choked on a sob, bending down at her side. "What happened? Ma!" I shook her, and her eyes rolled to look at me. "What did you do?"

"Wil... Wilbur said... alone... you... gone..." Her hand trembled and reached for me. "Where were you?"

"Get me a towel," Coop ordered, and I swiped one from the counter. It, too, was splotched with red, and quickly absorbed the wounds on Ma's arms.

I sat back, shock overwhelming my senses, the night's events forgotten. "I didn't bring a razor," I muttered to no one in particular. "I didn't... how did she...?"

Coop didn't miss a beat. "Her nails."

I looked down.

They were scabbed, bloodied, pieces of flesh hanging from the ends, and I immediately swiveled to vomit in the toilet.

Coop wiped his hand on the only clean part of the towel and took out his phone to dial 911. “I’m at the Downtown Motel in room 230. I need an ambulance immediately for an attempted suicide...”

The rest of his words after that drowned out. I stared at Ma. She was pale—oh, so pale. She’d managed to get blood on her cheeks, in her hair, all over her clothes. Though she breathed in short, soft gasps, the rest of her body appeared unnaturally still like her muscles had simply forgotten how to work. Her head lolled to the side, rivulets of water dripping from her hair to stream down the bloody walls of the shower.

Where were you?

My fault. Fuck—this was my fault, wasn’t it? I had told Coop to leave Ma behind to come and get me. And now Ma was so pale, corpselike, and suddenly the world returned to me tenfold. I clutched at my shirt, tears streaking across my cheeks, and said through a sob, “What can I do? Tell me what to do.”

Coop put the phone on speaker. The dispatcher said, “Go to the door and wait for the ambulance to arrive. You can wave them up—it will save them time trying to find you.”

Somehow, standing was an ordeal in and of itself, but I pushed myself off the floor and stumbled to the door, wrenching it open. After sitting in the steaming bathroom, the burst of dry Chicago air shocked my nervous system. Another dose of reality hitting me straight in the gut.

Focus.

I heard the ambulance a moment later, and though I didn't see them, began waving frantically. It swerved into the parking lot moments later, dispersing the junkies in a frenzy with its presence, and a pair of EMTs dashed out a moment later with a stretcher.

The rest of that moment is difficult to recall. I had said that thing about flashbulb memories, the kind that are vivid enough to stick with you for decades, but in the thick of the moment, everything moved too quickly. One instant, I was at Ma's side while they thrust her onto the plastic yellow stretcher; the next, I was standing in the parking lot, Coop's arm around my shoulder while the paramedics hurtled down the street, sirens screaming.

"I'll call someone to take us," Coop said and walked a few feet away. I barely heard him. The image that stuck with me, a brand on my retinas, was Ma's bloodless face. Her whispered, *Where were you?* Because this was my fault. I had pushed her aside to pursue a man who wanted nothing to do with me, neglected her on every count. All this time, she had feared me leaving her. Feared it so much that she had decided to leave before I could. A sob crawled up my throat. "What have I done?" I murmured, a numb chill unfurling from my core, rendering me senseless. "I'm so sorry, Ma. *God*—I'm so sorry."

"Hey."

Coop had returned and pulled me into a hug. He smelled like beer and sweat, and the warmth from his body was at odds with this whole situation. Warmth had left me thirty minutes ago, and I doubted it would ever return.

"She'll be okay," he said, rubbing my back briskly, the action fueled by adrenaline. "She'll come out of this stronger, you'll see. Not everyone does, but she will."

Not everyone does. My throat had dried. "What happened to your brother, Coop?"

His hand stilled, and I felt his breath hitch where my cheek was pressed to his sternum.

“That’s different, kid.”

But I knew. I didn’t have to say it, and he didn’t have to admit it. The way he’d spoken of him earlier, the ghost haunting his gaze, keeping him neck-deep in alcohol...death did that sort of thing to a person. I dropped the subject, but when I closed my eyes, the darkness was tinged with red.

I should have been there for Ma. I shouldn’t have left her, I shouldn’t have asked Coop to pick me up, I should’ve just waited for Missy—

Missy.

She was the one who locked me in. If she hadn’t intervened, I would have met with Pa, gone home, and booked our flight back to California without a hiccup. I clenched my fists, brimming with visceral hatred. I scrambled to pull the burner phone out of my pocket. Coop watched me with a wary expression, and when he saw the phone, his eyes went wide. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to let her know,” I said, seething. I flipped the phone open. “I’m going to let her know exactly what the fuck she’s done.”

Before Coop could stop me, I dialed her number.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Missy

Dad came home late from work that night.

Mom had left his food sitting on the table to go cold, saying, “If he doesn’t want to show up for dinner, he can heat it up himself.” She promptly retreated up the stairs to her room, slamming the door behind her. I toyed with the last green bean on my plate, rolling it around, unable to escape what I had done today. The memory was all too fresh.

I’m not here to destroy your family.

I set my fork down. Delilah’s voice would continue to disturb my peace if I didn’t do something, go somewhere. I laid my dishes in the sink, telling myself I would wash them later, knowing I wouldn’t, grabbed my keys from the bowl near the door and left the house.

Just yesterday, Dad and I went fishing at the casting pier. It was peaceful, special. I longed for that same feeling, so I drove there automatically and parked my car near a grassy clearing. Lights from tall lampposts illuminated the path, and though the dock was closed at this time of night, it wasn’t difficult to maneuver under the blockade. Water lapped gently against the

dock, though the surface out in the distance was still. I sat on the edge, legs hanging over the side, and breathed with my eyes closed.

In.

Out.

In.

What had I done?

Out.

I'm not here to destroy your family.

I opened my eyes. When I had driven to the Sunset Café earlier today after glancing at Pa's schedule, I hadn't expected to find a way to prevent Delilah from meeting with him. I'd had hopes, a dream, and a whole lot of luck. I sat in my car for a long while just watching her fidget and work herself into a nervous frenzy. When she disappeared into an alley that I knew had no exit (I used to frequent this café after long days in high school while I waited for Dad to get out of work, so I was familiar with the area) I took my chances, grabbed the bike lock out of the trunk of my car, and approached.

She wasn't there an hour later when I returned. The bike lock was still fixed in place, so I removed it, but the fencing was cut through. The sight left me with a number of questions.

Had she called out to Dad?

Had he helped her escape?

Had someone else helped her?

Were there bolt cutters, or something else, in the alley that she had used to break free?

In essence, every question led to the same one: Had she spoken to Dad? Perhaps that was one of the reasons why I couldn't stand to be in the house, waiting for him to come home. Like

the night when I'd found out about my half-sisters' existence, the last thing I wanted to do was face him right now. What would she have told him? "*Your psychotic daughter locked me in a damn alleyway to keep me from meeting you.*" I sounded evil.

What had I become?

"I thought I'd find you here."

I swiveled around, nearly falling forward into the water. Dad stood behind me, his hands in his pants' pockets, a slow breeze pushing his hair to one side. I hadn't heard him walk toward me, but I should have. Not even a cat could prowl across a dock quietly—was I really so far into my own head?

I tucked my beige cardigan around myself, suddenly cold. "Just wanted to clear my mind."

"Wedding nerves?" he asked. He groaned when he crouched down to sit next to me. As time wore on, his mannerisms shifted, and he seemed older—not simply in his appearance, but in the little things.

Goosebumps prickled my legs. "Can't seem to get my mind to turn off."

"Hmmm," he said, staring out at the waters. He rolled up his pants to dip his toes in the water, his unbuttoned suit jacket spilling out around him, and he looked for all the world like a man who had his life together. A man who had made peace with his past and focused on his future. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to be with you today," he said after a moment. "It would have been a better use of my time, to spend it with you."

My heart ached. "What makes you say that?"

He shrugged. “Well, it’s always better to spend time with you than with my clients. I had a no-show today after clearing my schedule for her.” He looked at me finally, gaze soft. “It’s time I could’ve spent with you.”

I peered at my toes, unable to meet his gaze. “I won’t fall off the face of the earth when I’m married, you know.”

“I know,” he said, more to himself than to me. “I know. But, still. Things will be different. Married life changes you.”

At that, I looked at him. “For better, or for worse?”

He pursed his lips in thought. “That depends on how you handle what life throws at you, and on who you marry.”

In that instant, I wanted to tell him everything. I wanted to spill everything I’d been keeping secret for the past week—the burner phone, Delilah, her mom, the way I’d sabotaged his meeting with his daughter. I wanted to let go, to trust that he would hold me and explain everything away. It felt like our family’s foundation was built on sticks and straw, but I was the only one who knew. And if I told him everything, would that foundation burn? Or would it give way to reveal a stronger one beneath.

For better, or for worse?

That depends on how you handle what life throws at you.

I didn’t think my family could handle this kind of revelation. I think Dad knew, and that’s why he kept it a secret for all of these years. To protect the safety he had found. To protect Mom.

To protect me.

“You know, I thought I saw you earlier today at the Sunset Café.”

My muscles went rigid.

Dad continued. “I was pulling into the parking lot, and I could’ve *sworn* I saw you near the alley. I thought you saw me, too, but then you walked down the other way.”

“I don’t think that was me,” I said, but the hesitancy in my voice, the tension, gave me away.

He laughed nervously. “What do you mean? I’m pretty sure it was. You weren’t meeting Roman there? Or a friend?”

“Ah, yeah. I was meeting with Lila.” I offered an apologetic smile. “Sorry, I forgot.”

“That’s okay,” he said. But he was frowning now, sensing something was off, but he didn’t quite know what it was. “You recognized my car, though. You saw me, and you turned away. Are things okay between us?”

No, but that’s not why I turned away. “Of course they are—I don’t think I knew it was your car, Dad. I didn’t realize you were meeting your client there.”

He fell dead silent, as if he was holding his breath, and the shift was so sudden that I glanced at him. He was staring at me like he didn’t recognize me, like I had grown horns. “I never said I was meeting a client there,” he said on an exhale. “How on earth did you know that?”

My fingers dug into the edge of the dock. *Gosh damn it—now I’ve done it.* “I saw it in your planner before I left the house—I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have looked.”

“But you...you said you didn’t know I was meeting a client there,” he said, catching my blunder again. “Now, suddenly, you did know? Which is it? Why are you acting this way?”

No—why was this happening? Not like this, I didn’t want to tell him like this. I *never* wanted him to know. “It’s been a long day,” I said, standing. He quickly followed suit, water sluicing down his shins. “We should get—”

“*There* you two are!”

Mom emerged at the top of the dock, peering out at us over the gate. “What’s going on? I saw your locations, but I didn’t want to believe that you both would have a secret little outing before the wedding without *me*.”

Good God.

This day just kept getting worse.

I flashed a smile. “Sorry, Mom, we were just about to head back.”

“Why?” she asked, ducking under the gate to join us. “You both looked so peaceful! I’d love to join—”

“We’re going home,” I said. Sweat stuck my clothes to my back, and I thought I would drown in a puddle of it. “Maybe we can talk at home?”

I should have kept my cool. Should have acted like nothing was amiss.

So many things I should have done, but reflecting back on this mess of an evening, I don’t think anything would have stopped the call from happening. I think fate had its hand elbow-deep in my life, and it was never going to let go.

Mom opened her mouth, expression inquisitive and slightly hurt by my tone, but she was cut off by the sharp buzzing in my back pocket. Both of my parents looked at me, then to *my* phone, which was in my hand.

“What’s that sound?” Dad asked. “Missy—what is that?”

It’s a bug, it’s a boat, it’s nothing—so many things I could have said, but no excuse would turn their attention away from me. Of course, Delilah would choose this one time to call me. She would ruin my life after what I had put her through today.

As I had said: fate.

“Oh, darling,” Mom cooed pityingly. “You didn’t bring it with you, did you?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. *God, end this. End my life right now. Wake me up if this is a dream.*

Dad walked around me and plucked the now silent phone out of my pocket.

And froze.

“What,” he breathed, “is this?”

I tried to grab it from his hand, but he held it out of arm’s reach. “I bought it to talk to Lila about wedding prep. It’s much easier, since she has so many phones with her job—”

“This is mine,” he said, turning it over in his hand. “I recognize the model and the scuff on the front of it. This is mine—*why* do you have it?”

“I found it,” Mom said, stepping forward, her chin jutting. “I know you’re having an affair, Peter, and I think it’s best you come right out with it.”

“No, Mom,” I groaned under my breath, head in my hands. *God*, this was a nightmare. I had to be stuck in some kind of simulation, some sick joke. This was an alternate universe, and I would switch back into my real life in a few seconds.

Dad stared at Mom, his lips parted in shock.

And then he laughed.

It’s the laugh you never want to hear from someone you love, someone you admire. The sound was purely pained. It wracked his whole body until he trembled, and I could only watch with horror as the laugh descended into a panicked wheezing of air. “You think—” he choked on his words, sputtering. “You really think I would cheat on you? After everything I’ve done for you? After everything I had to do to give you the life you wanted?”

He could have crushed the phone in his fist. I saw only rage in his eyes—no, rage and hurt. Like Mom had taken a knife and stabbed him repeatedly, twisting it deep into sinew and bone.

Mom's eyes darted between us, and she wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly unsure. "Well, then. What's the phone for? A woman called over a week ago asking for you. Who is she?"

Dad stared at her, his eyes going blank, and I knew he was reliving the past he had buried so long ago. "She...she called?" He looked at the floor and muttered, "After all this time..."

My stomach churned at the tone his voice took on. Longing, regret, and another layer of pain. He was unraveling, like a stone wall breaking down after spending decades settling deeper and deeper into firm soil. Brick by brick, he was falling apart right in front of me.

I didn't want to hear this. I didn't want to know why he had left his pregnant wife, and I didn't want to hear the ache in his voice when he spoke of her. The story I had carefully constructed teetered on a dangerous precipice, and I knew whatever he said next would send it crashing down around me.

He cradled the phone in his hand. "Did you want it to be true that I had cheated?" He looked at Mom. "Did you want that?"

"Your heart has always been divided," she replied. "It made it easier to think you were the problem than to think...to think something was wrong with me."

He shook his head. "We're not having this conversation—not in front of Missy."

"I'm a grown woman," I interjected. "And the only reason we're having this conversation is because you chose to keep *this*—" I gestured to the phone "—a secret."

Dad scoffed, pocketing the phone. “This is part of my private life. It doesn’t concern either of you.” He glared at his wife. “I wish you would have brought the phone to me, when you found it, instead of roping our daughter into your sick fantasy.”

And with that, whatever light was left in my mother’s eyes faded, and she appeared dull, a husk of herself. Without another word, she turned on her heel and ascended the dock. Dad watched her leave, his jaw hardening with every step she took, but he didn’t follow her. She didn’t look over her shoulder to see if he did.

A tear slipped down my cheek. It was happening exactly as I’d imagined it. My family was breaking apart in front of me, irreparable damage caused by Delilah’s selfishness and my father’s past coming to light. “I wish Mom had never found that phone,” I found myself saying.

“Me too,” Dad said. “And I wish you had trusted me enough to talk to me instead of going behind my back.”

It was the final nail in the coffin, and when the tears came, he walked away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Delilah

I hated hospitals.

Taking Ma to the hospital when growing up was like pulling teeth. She distrusted the doctors, the needles they prodded her with and the medication they prescribed. Even the most basic questions were met with animosity, and the environment of strong fluorescents and chatter put her on edge. As a child, I struggled to advocate for her when her doctors would not. Who would think a ten-year-old would know the first thing about caring for a schizophrenic woman? Why should the child have to? It was a thin line to balance on: I had to act in such a way that would get questions answered without triggering the hospital staff's attention to the fact that I was most definitely not in a healthy living situation. Ma's worst fear was that I would be taken from her, a fact she had never failed to remind me of. It was only fitting that now, her worst fear wasn't that I would be taken, but that I would leave of my own volition.

This trip was different from the others.

Though her condition had everything to do with her disorder, none of the doctors were concerned with that when we breached the hospital doors. Immediately, the two paramedics rolling Ma on a gurney brought the nursing staff up to speed, and a doctor took over, transporting her to an empty bed.

My brain was static. Everything moved at either glacial or break-neck speed, varying dramatically between the two, and my brain couldn't pick up the slack. There was a vast divide between what was happening in front of me, and what was registering in my mind. Once I'd processed a single moment in time—say, an interaction with a doctor—time had already dashed ahead of me, out of grasp, and I was left floundering. Coop's hand on my shoulder was the only thing steadying me in the present, grounding me as much physically as it was mentally.

A nurse wrapped Ma's forearms with a thick pad and tight gauze, continuing to apply pressure as the EMTs had while the doctor ordered two large-bore IVs. She sent for labs to be ordered and kept an eye on Ma's blood pressure and heart rate. After a few seconds, she shook her head and spoke to her companion. "I don't like the way her BP is dipping—she should be stabilizing by now. I think she hit an artery. I want a crossmatch, prep her for surgery."

Surgery.

My legs turned to jello, and one of the nurses must have noticed how pale I'd gone; he approached me with concern in his eyes. "Miss, would you like to sit?"

The words left me in a rush: "Is she going to die?"

His eyes darted to the gurney, the blood staining the sheets. "I will let you know when we have more information. Doctor Kim will take great care of her—she is in safe hands."

Nothing felt safe. The nurse was pulled away by another emergency, and he looked grateful for the distraction. I couldn't imagine dealing with grieving family members was a

favorite part of the job, if a necessary one. The doors to the OR shut definitively behind Ma and her escort of hospital staff.

I took a step toward the door. A second one. A third. I nearly made it, walking slowly in a trance, until Coop caught up and took my arm in his hand. Suddenly, the world came flooding back to me in full force. I tried to shake free of him, a cry clawing its way up my throat, guttural and devoid of shame. He wrapped his arms around me, a vise-like embrace, but it didn't feel comforting.

It was a restraint. A shackle.

I buckled, and he let out an *oomph* as I dropped to my knees. "Let me *go*," I said through my teeth. Heat burned my cheeks. My skin was aflame, my clothes a sweltering furnace. "I didn't say—" I choked on my words, a sob wracking my body. I felt the world slow around me, growing quiet. The onlookers stared as if watching a car wreck, too horrified to look away, utterly frozen.

"I know," Coop said into my hair. "I know."

"I didn't—"

"I know," he repeated a third time, and it finally clicked. He did know—he knew what I was saying because he had said the same thing himself at one point. Though he hadn't told me at the time, he would later sit with me at a bar in Riverside and tell me about his brother over a glass of whiskey. He would detail the life they'd had together, cut short by a swift and brutal death. Ma had given Coop an opportunity to try again, to honor his brother's memory. I couldn't begin to tell you how this night affected him to his core.

I didn't get to say goodbye.

The words hurtled through me, and I thought I would drown in them. Blood thrummed in my ears, pulsating beneath my skin. There was so much I could have done differently. I had prioritized finding Pa over anything Ma was going through—put the father who had abandoned me before I was *born* above the wellbeing of my mother. She was far from perfect, and very little of that was her own fault, but she had stayed. She'd stayed when everyone else had left.

And I had left her.

Maybe not in the way Pa had, but I had neglected her in every sense. How many times had I left her alone on this trip? How many times had she asked me to stay, begged me not to walk out on her? As she'd slipped further into herself, I had pushed myself further away from her. Perhaps she was right, perhaps that was what I had wanted all along—to be rid of her.

Sound came rushing back to me all at once: squeaky wheels of gurneys and wheelchairs, chatter from patients and their doctors, rhythmic beeping like a pulse. I had gone still in Coop's arms, silent tears running down my cheeks, and he said in my ear, "Come on, let's go sit down. We can talk."

I didn't want to talk. But kneeling in the middle of the ER wasn't ideal, and doctors were trying not to trip over us, so I let him guide me to the waiting room. We found a pair of seats away from the huddle of coughing children with running noses. He eased me into the chair, then took up the one beside it.

"She'll be okay," he told me, a broken record. "Do you want anything to eat?"

I shook my head, numb. I doubted I would ever feel hungry again.

He paused for a long moment, studying me. "Delilah...none of this is your fault."

I scrunched my nose and pinched my eyes shut against the wave of tears threatening to return in full force. I counted to ten, slowly, focusing on anything else. Anything else but what Coop was trying to tell me—

“You never could have known she would do this,” he said, then looked down at his hand. His jaw worked, teeth grinding against one another, and it drew my attention. He was fighting tears. “*I*, on the other hand...” He shook his head. “I knew the signs. I’d seen them before, and I should have seen them this time.”

My words came out in a rasp. “Coop, no. It’s not your job to take care of her. That’s my responsibility—none of this is on you.”

He tapped his thumbs together, a soothing repetition. “It shouldn’t be your responsibility, kid. You’ve been living in reverse roles your whole life.”

“It’s just the way it is.”

“Maybe so,” he said. “You know, when you came into my apartment and told me your dad was alive...I was pissed.”

I sat back. “Why? At Ma?”

“No, not at your Ma. She did what she felt she had to do to protect you. Even if you don’t agree with it, you can’t blame her for wantin’ to give you a better dad to look up to, even if that meant tellin’ you he was dead.” He sighed, a bone-deep, weary sound. “I hated that he had left you both. I don’t know his reasons, but at the end of the day, he could have tried to be there for you. Sent money, got your Ma help, took you in.”

Coop faced me more fully, pivoting in the chair. “I’ve kept my two cents to myself for most of this time, but I’ve gotta tell you now, Dee. He’s not worth it. I know you’ve got hopes that he’ll have changed, and I know you’ve got a picture of him in your head that won’t ever

leave because that's safer than facing reality." He leaned closer, imploring. "But this man is *not* your family. He's a coward. I wanted to help you find him to give you closure, but...but sometimes, closure doesn't mean things need to be fixed. And sometimes, you have to hit rock bottom to realize it." He sat there for a moment, letting the words wash over me, and I absorbed them like a sponge. Only, now I felt overloaded—dense, heavy, seeping out at all the sides, and I struggled to contain myself. "Is it worth it to you?" he asked. "Really, Dee, you gotta ask yourself. Is finding him worth all of this?"

"Of course it's not," I breathed, too tired to cry, even though I felt like melting on the floor. "Of course it isn't worth this—*nothing* is worth this." How could he even ask that? I stopped myself. Hadn't I just admitted to myself that this entire time, I'd been prioritizing Pa over Ma? Since the moment I found out he existed, I threw him on a pedestal above her. Coop, I realized, needed me to say it out loud. To hear it. To fully recognize reality and get out of my head.

"This is it, then," I said. "We're done. If Ma pulls through—" I choked on the words. "When Ma pulls through, we'll do what needs to be done for her to heal, and then go home. No more Missy, no more Pa, no more searching and stressing. It's over." The words hung over me like a guillotine, the end of my journey, the end of everything I'd set out to do. Everything I'd failed to accomplish. "It's over," I repeated. The fall of the guillotine.

But I didn't feel defeated, my head lopped off.

Instead, I found myself staring at the doors Ma had passed through, longing to see her again and hold her hand. I hadn't apologized to her. I hadn't sat beside her unless it was to babysit her. When was the last time I'd treated her like a human fuckin' being? Like my mother? When had I started treating her like a burden?

Coop bumped my arm with his and stood, drawing me from my thoughts. I didn't doubt that was his intention. "Let's take a walk."

"But Ma—"

"A walk around the hospital. Not far, and they have my phone number in case of anything. But we can't sit here and stew, okay? Let's get some air."

"Yeah, okay," I said, standing. I felt the burner phone shift in my pocket and hesitated. "Actually, there's something I need to do."

"What do you mean?"

"Closure." I pulled out my phone and found Missy's page on Instagram. I could only imagine something had happened to her burner phone, for her not to have answered before, but I figured this would be better anyway. Simpler. I shot her a message: *Can we meet tomorrow morning?*

Her response was immediate. *Delilah?*

Yeah. And because I knew she wouldn't trust me to be kind after the shit she'd done to me, I added, *I just want to talk, that's all. I'm not angry with you.* I was, obviously. I wouldn't have called her on the burner phone back in the parking lot, otherwise. But I knew she never intended this to happen to Ma. Enough time had passed that I could swallow my pride and bite the bullet: Everything that had happened to Ma was my own fault and couldn't be placed on anyone else. It was difficult to be pissed at someone who was just trying to protect her family.

A moment passed before Missy replied.

Alright, tomorrow at 8:00.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Missy

My house was deadly quiet.

I had arrived at the house last night after both my parents. A quick check of their locations showed Mom had bought herself a very upscale hotel for the night, meaning Dad had locked himself in their room. He never showed his face at any point before I went to bed. Not that I was able to sleep. I was up until 1:00 AM on the phone with Roman, filling him in on everything that had happened. He tried his best to convince me that I hadn't ruined their marriage, that Dad had done that well enough on his own by keeping a secret family from us, but I couldn't shake the feeling that everything could've been prevented by ignoring the burner phone in the first place.

"Does he know?" Roman had asked. "Does he know Delilah and her mom are in town?"

"I don't know," I said. "He'll figure it out soon enough, if he hasn't yet. And he has resources, in his line of work." I wondered if he had been keeping tabs on them, secretly. I

wouldn't put it past him, but it felt like a scientist watching his experiment develop. If he'd been keeping tabs, wouldn't he have intervened before things got worse for Delilah and her mom?

I really didn't know him at all.

I decided to tell Roman I was meeting with Delilah the following morning. I needed something else to focus on—something that *wasn't* my parents' broken marriage, and from the tone of Delilah's text, she felt just as defeated as I did.

"Is that a good idea?" Roman had asked. Understandably, he hadn't been the biggest fan of me locking Delilah in the alley (I'd told him after the fact, which was another thing that had dug under his skin). "She could be planning her revenge."

"I thought so," I'd said, "but we're meeting in a hospital, of all places. She hasn't told me why, but I figure unless she's planning to stick me with a scalpel, a hospital is one of the safer places for us to meet."

"You think something happened?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, her mom's schizophrenic, right? You think that's why they're at the hospital?"

I hadn't thought about it (my mind was a bit preoccupied, at the time) but it did make sense, now that he'd mentioned it. I hoped it wasn't the case. I didn't know much about schizophrenia, aside from hallucinations and stuff like that, but being hospitalized for *anything*, mental disorder or no, couldn't be good.

I spent the rest of the night tossing and turning, debating whether or not to go talk to Dad. Had he tried to use the burner phone at all? Fat chance of me seeing that thing again. He'd probably destroyed it. If he hadn't cared to check in with them before now, would the fact that his past was out in the open change his heart? All things considered, there wasn't much point in

trying to prevent Delilah from meeting him. The damage had been incurred and, short of using a Neuralyzer from Men in Black, nothing would change that. Maybe that's what this meeting was about. One last shot she'd decided to take to change my mind before she booked a flight and left.

In the end, time made the decision for me: the sun rose, warm light threading through the cracks in my window blinds, and I lost my chance of going to see Dad. I figured he'd do whatever he could to leave early before I could catch him.

I wish you had trusted me enough to talk to me instead of going behind my back.

Could he really not see the predicament Mom had put me in? How was any of this my fault? The more time passed, the less I felt like I knew him. He was becoming a stranger in this house, both to me and Mom, and though I knew it was his responsibility to fix the trust he had broken, his words lingered in my mind, festering like an open sore.

I wish you had trusted me.

He didn't know half of it—the lengths I'd gone to to protect this family. The burden I carried for his sake, for Mom's.

I had no chance of sleeping, so I started a shower and stripped in my bathroom. Maybe it was the pale morning light, or perhaps I hadn't looked at myself in a mirror recently, but my skin had a sickly quality to it, pallid and yellowish. I had always been pale, and yet I did not recognize the ghostly woman standing before me. My face was inflamed and swollen, my stomach bloated, and I gingerly touched the skin around my neck. Had I gained weight? I felt heavier, but I hadn't changed any of my habits. *Stress*, I thought, prodding my cheeks. *Stress and exhaustion*. I hated what I saw in the mirror, but I couldn't look away. I watched emotions flicker across my features: disgust, resignation, sorrow, anger, shame. Each visible in my taut brows,

pinched lips, wide eyes. My hands traveled over my breasts, my abdomen, my thighs. Foreign, invasive, unwelcome. And I was to be married looking like this?

That last thought shut me down entirely, and I stepped into the shower feeling ill. Oddly enough, the wedding was the least of my worries. *One step at a time.* Today, I would meet with Delilah and hopefully let bygones be bygones. Locking her in the alley hadn't been my finest moment, especially now that all of my effort had amounted to nothing. Would it have been better for me to have let that meeting happen? Mom would never have found out Delilah existed; Dad would never know that I knew his secret. So, really, I'd messed everything up. Ironic.

The rest of the morning moved in a sluggish blur of time. I trailed water from my bathroom to my bedroom, hair loose and dripping down my back, my thin towel soaked through. I stood in front of my closet for ten minutes, staring at the piles of sweaters and tiny tops. The colors melded together, a soup of indecision, and I opted for an old hoodie Roman had bought me in our first year of dating. He'd had a photo of us at the pier embroidered on the front, our heads bent together as if in prayer. I ran my fingers over it and suddenly wished the sweatshirt smelled like him. Wouldn't it be so much easier to run to him now? To be enveloped in his arms, safe from the family I'd destroyed and the other family I hadn't allowed to heal? I hugged my arms around myself and found an unwashed pair of baggy jeans. Comfort. I didn't bother putting a bra on and amassed my hair in a tangled, wet lump on top of my head.

It was a good thing I wasn't hungry. With Mom gone, the kitchen was oppressively silent. Dark, abandoned. There was no sizzle of bacon on a pan, no steaming pile of eggs in the center of the table. Our home had become a house, a shell of its former self meant for occupancy, not joy. For shelter, not love. I didn't expect to see Dad sitting in his usual chair, hands clasped at the table around a mug of lukewarm coffee, but when I spotted him, I couldn't find it in myself to

dredge up any semblance of panic. One would think I'd feel nervous to face him after last night, but the worst had already happened. I didn't think anything could hurt me now.

For what it was worth, Dad didn't seem to have slept, either. It comforted me, knowing he was haunted. Perhaps that made me a terrible person, but I didn't think so. It showed his humanity: if he felt no remorse over last night's events, then the worst things I'd feared about him were true. That he really was heartless enough to leave his pregnant, schizophrenic wife to fend for herself. It only conflicted me more to see him stooped over the table, shoulders high up to his ears, hair uncombed, dark rings beneath his eyes. *What are you?* I thought, standing at the kitchen's threshold. *Are you the man I looked up to as a child, or was that all a lie? What other secrets are you hiding?*

I strode past him to the backyard sliding doors and threw open the curtains. Sharp sunlight flooded the room, and Dad blinked bleary eyes at me when I walked to the fridge. He did not speak, nor did I. What was there to say? "Good morning" would be a lie—it was anything *but* a good morning. We were left at a standoff, neither of us willing to succumb to the silence, because to succumb would be to forgive, to attempt to fix things. Though I couldn't speak for him, I was not ready to forgive. So he watched me slop yogurt into a bowl, rinse leftover sliced berries Mom had prepared for breakfast yesterday morning and dump them on top, lathering the mixture with granola and agave. His eyes pierced my skull, but every time I looked up from the counter, I found him staring deeply into his coffee. It was untouched, as if he'd poured it but couldn't figure out how to drink it. His iPad lay beside him on the table, the blue protective flap open, indicating he had considered reading the newspaper this morning. But the screen was black, devoid of fingerprint blemishes.

I returned the ingredients to their respective places, wondering how long Dad had been sitting there. What was he waiting for? Mom would not come home to prepare his breakfast, as she always did. He knew how to cook well enough, but he likely felt like he was invading her space by doing so, taking up a role that was not his to fill. So he sat, completely still, and stared.

I took my breakfast into the living room and ate while I tied my shoes. It wasn't until I'd swallowed the last spoonful that Dad decided to break the silence.

"Where are you going?" His voice was a low rasp, as if he hadn't spoken since last night. His gaze slid to mine, weary. Haunted.

"I'm meeting a..." I hesitated before saying *friend*. Not only was Delilah not my friend, but I didn't feel I had anything left to lose. His secrets were out in the open. What was another added to the growing pile? If there was anything this past week had taught me, to keep secrets was to walk through life with a guillotine hanging from your neck. I was too tired to live like that any longer. "I'm meeting your daughter."

He looked like I'd shot him point blank. His lips parted in shock, and his eyes widened like saucers. But he did not move from his seat. He mouthed something that looked like *What?* but no sound escaped his lips.

"She's here," I told him, adjusting one of the loops on my Adidas. "Her name is Delilah. She's almost my age, but you knew that, didn't you?"

"How," he said finally, a croak more than a question. "How did...?"

And so I told him everything. I told him how Mom got a call—from Delilah's mother, I knew—and how she gave me the phone to keep an eye on. How I had called Delilah for the first time six days ago (had it really been less than a week?), and how she found me at Ozzy's with Roman. I told him about her schizophrenic mother, about the life she'd had to live without a

father to guide and protect her, and I finally told him about the meeting she'd scheduled with him.

"That wasn't a prospective client," I said. "Delilah found you. She was planning to meet with you yesterday for the first time. And I..." I cleared my throat "...I stopped her. I locked her in the alley, where you saw me, so she wouldn't be able to meet with you." I swallowed the emotion building in my throat, the shame. "Now, she's asked me to meet her at Mount Sinai Hospital."

"Is she okay?" he asked, a breathless quality to his voice. "Is she safe?"

"I'd assume so," I said dryly. "Otherwise she wouldn't ask me to meet her, would she?"

"And her mother...she's here, too?"

I nodded.

He adopted the same expression from last night upon finding out Delilah's mother had called the burner phone. A new layer of surprise twisted with longing and a deep, deep sadness present in the furrow of his chin, the dropped corners of his lips, the far-off stare.

"I have so many questions," he said softly, and I looked away when I saw tears lining his eyes. "I have so many questions," he repeated, "but I can't imagine how many you must have had this past week."

My eyes snapped to him. Was that...shame? Did he finally realize the damage he had wreaked on me? On Mom? On the family he'd built on lies?

"You must hate me," he said, no louder than a whisper. "You must think I'm a sick fool who abandoned his wife and daughter." When he looked at me, there was an earnestness in his gaze that twisted my guts in a knot. "Do you? Is that what you think of me?"

Again, I chose honesty: “I don’t know what I think of you. I love you, Dad, but this...” I shook my head. “Why didn’t you tell Mom? Why did you leave in the first place?”

He took a long moment to reply, and when he did, it was a half-answer. “I couldn’t be in that house anymore with everything going on. As for why I didn’t tell your Mom, well...” He trailed off, eyes growing distant. “I couldn’t ruin what we had. Maybe that made me a coward, but as time wore on, it became less and less pressing to tell her.”

“Did you really think we wouldn’t find out?” I pushed. The words echoed back to me, a reprimand of my own actions. *Did I really think my parents wouldn’t find out Delilah was here?* I shut my mouth, cutting my accusations short. Perhaps I was more similar to him than I now cared to admit.

He angled his head to look at me, imploring. “I never wanted any of this to happen. I wanted to keep this family together—nothing is more important to me than you and your mother.”

What about Delilah? What about her mom? Why did you ruin your family for the sake of one you never should have had? Again, I felt hot shame slide through me. Because I had done something similar, hadn’t I? Ruined one family for the sake of my own. No—No, I was nothing like him. Because this *was* my family. Mom wasn’t meant to be his wife; I wasn’t meant to be his daughter. My brain scrambled the words, and suddenly, I couldn’t make sense of this moment. How would any of this be fixed? How were we supposed to go forward from here? The impending wedding now seemed trivial.

I stood, antsy. “I have to go, she’s expecting me.” For a brief moment, I considered asking if he’d like to join. Delilah had come here to see him, after all, and now that the damage was done, what else was there to lose? But I thought about what he had just told me: *I couldn’t*

be in that house anymore with everything going on. As for why I didn't tell your Mom, well...I couldn't ruin what we had. How could I subject Delilah to that truth, as pitiful as it was? So simple, so inadequate. Dad had cast them aside like a used towel. He watched me, now, as if he suspected the words sitting on the tip of my tongue, the offer. Would he even want to see them? I doubted he knew.

"They didn't deserve what you did to them," I said, finally. I spoke with balled fists, nails pressing tiny crescents into my palms. I breathed deeply to steady myself. "I worked so hard to keep everything together—to keep your and Mom's marriage from falling apart. I wanted so much to believe that you really hadn't done anything wrong. Maybe *I'm* the sick fool who thought there was any reason good enough to warrant lying to your wife and daughter. But now...now, I'm done." I couldn't bring myself to look at him, the pain stricken on his face. "This family is far from perfect, and it always has been. I thought if I pretended otherwise, it wouldn't be the case, but I see now that I was wrong. It's not my responsibility to fix what you broke." I grabbed my purse and slung it over my shoulder. "This is on you. It's your turn."

I made for the door, but his voice stopped me in my tracks. "Don't go," he said. "Stay here and talk with me, please."

"I can't do that," I told him, unlocking the door. "Because unlike you, I am fully aware of the damage I've done to Delilah and her mom, and I intend to fix what I broke."

I left without a backward glance.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Delilah

I sat outside the hospital on a cement bench, waiting for Missy to park. Ma had pulled through overnight and now lay in one of those white-sheeted hospital beds, the ones with adjustable armrests and thin pillows. An IV transferred fluids into her system, and though she had tried once to claw it out this morning, Coop was able to convince her the IV was there in her best interest. She'd been sleeping ever since, waking occasionally to ask for me. I was always there, by her side. I owed her a long apology when she was stable enough to function without drugs sedating her, but for now, while she rested, I could make amends with Missy.

She pulled into the lot five minutes past 8:00. The same black sedan her father drove to the café, and seeing it spurred an anxious twinge in my chest. I had the sudden fear that she had brought him with her. That, after everything, she'd given in to my demands. Little did she know how I'd changed over the past twenty-four hours. *Longer*, I thought. I'd been slowly evolving, recognizing how Ma needed help, trying to deny it. It just took her nearly dying for me to wake up from the trance I'd been in.

Missy exited the car alone, her hair frizzy as if dried in the car's AC. Compared to the first time I saw her—and yesterday—she appeared frazzled and unkempt, her cheeks hollow, her eyes sunken. Not the blushing bride she used to be. She scanned the lot, eyes skipping over the hospital doors, and when her gaze landed on me, her body seemed to go loose. I waited to say anything until she'd crossed the empty street and took up the space beside me.

"Thanks for coming out," I said. Upon closer inspection, I noted a red ring around her eyes. Had she been crying?

She crossed her legs, hands clasped together on top of her knee. "Yeah, sure. You...you wanted to talk?"

That had been my intention. I fought the urge to tell her then and there that I wanted nothing to do with her family anymore; I would leave her father alone. Although I had asked her to meet, I sensed she had more to say than I did. "Something happen?" I asked tentatively. I didn't know where we stood, especially after yesterday. We were blood relatives—half-sisters—but the distance between us yawned open like a chasm.

She started, looking around: at the ground, at the bench, at the dirt under her nails. Anywhere but at me. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know," I said, feeling unsure. What was I *thinking*? "Sorry."

"You're fine," she said, waving a hand. "It's just...It's been a long week."

Yeah. This was it, then. "I wanted to tell you I'm sorry," I said, "for everything I put you through. You were trying to protect your family, and I—"

Missy burst into tears.

Big, heaving breaths—as if she was drowning inside herself. Once she'd started, she couldn't stop. She clutched her chest, wrinkling the fabric of her sweatshirt in her grip, and

shook. Though she angled her face away from me, I felt a strong desire to comfort her, to lay an arm around her shoulders and tell her everything would be okay. But I didn't. I sat there on the bench, awkwardly watching her display of emotion, floundering for a way to break the tension.

"I'm—I'm sorry," she said during a hitch in her breathing. "I—This is so embarrassing."

My heart softened. "Don't worry about it." I glanced at my shoes, then back to her. "You know...you can talk with me. I know we didn't get off on the best foot—" she managed a laugh at that "—but I'm not here to ruin your life. I don't want anything to do with Pa—with your dad," I corrected myself. "Like you said: If he had wanted to be a part of my life, he would have reached out by now. I'm better off without him." I wanted to take her hand, to let her know I was speaking with sincerity. "We're sisters, you know. You can talk to me."

After a moment's hesitation, the words came flooding out of her. The burner phone was now in her dad's possession, and he knew Ma and I were here to see him. Missy's mom wasn't staying in the house anymore, and she couldn't look at her father the same way anymore. "It's like I never knew him to begin with," she said, disgust dripping from her voice. "He lied to us from the start. You should have seen—" She cut herself off, teeth grinding, and took a breath. "He seemed so *small*, Delilah. Like such a small, cowardly man."

I'm sorry. How many times had I apologized now? Endlessly.

"And I'm getting married in *days*," she continued. "The timing could not be worse." She winced, realizing what she'd implied. "I know you didn't mean for any of this to happen. Despite everything, I know that."

"I get it," I said. "And yeah, I really didn't want to hurt your family."

She shook her head. "You had every right to seek him out. I shouldn't have stopped you in the first place."

“You were doing what you thought was right, same as I.” I leaned back on the bench, arms sprawled over the back of it, and tipped my head to the sky. “It’s up to him now, you know? I’ve spent my whole life cleaning up my Ma’s messes. It’s something I’ll have to unlearn in order to live my life, but the last thing either of us need is to clean up after him, too.”

“I said as much to him when I left this morning,” Missy agreed, propping a foot up on the lip of the seat. One hand toyed with her shoelaces while the other wiped tears from her cheeks. “I guess I just don’t know how to move forward from here.”

I shrugged. “There’s only one way we can go.”

“Where’s that?”

“Forward,” I said, and though it sounded cheesy, it fit well enough that I let myself say it. “Get married, Missy. You and Roman deserve happiness, and I’m sure you’ll find it together. Let your dad pick up the broken pieces, otherwise you’ll cut yourself on them.”

She flashed a wry grin. “That was kind of poetic.”

“Eh, what can I say? I did well in English.” *Only* English, I didn’t add.

She studied me. “And you? What are you going to do?”

Well. That was the question, wasn’t it? I’d go home, obviously. Chicago had no love for me, nor I for it, and Ma needed stability more than anything. Coop would return to his job; I’d return to mine. Was that it? Was everything going to go back to the way it was? I recalled sleepless nights, tiptoeing around the apartment so as not to startle Ma. She was a minefield, and I was trapped. *I can’t go back*, I realized. *Not to the life I lived before*. Missy watched me, waiting for a response. I had no choice but to speak.

“I don’t know,” I said. But that wasn’t fully true, was it? “I—I have an idea of something I should do for my Ma, but I don’t think I’ve got the guts to go through with it.”

She bit her lip, eyebrows pinched in thought. “Well. Would it help you?”

“I think so.”

“And your mom? Would it help her?”

“I hope so.”

She shrugged. “It’s worth a shot, the way I’m seeing it.”

It was, when she put it like that. But all I could see were Ma’s vacant eyes and bloodless expression.

“You know,” Missy said, “I never asked why we were meeting here. Why the hospital?”

Ma tried to kill herself. I mouthed the words. They echoed and clanged in my skull, but I couldn’t speak them into existence without forcing myself to relive the moment. “My Ma,” I said finally. “But she’ll be okay.” As close to the truth as I could get, and Missy didn’t prod.

We sat in silence for a long while. The occasional ambulance skittered by, and we watched the EMTs drag gurneys out of the back. *That was Ma a few hours ago*, I thought. I couldn’t shake her face from my mind. *Where were you? Where were you? Where were you where were you where—*

“Hey.”

It was Coop. He’d walked over and rested a heavy hand on my shoulder. Missy took him in, seeing him for the first time, and I wondered if she recognized him from the bar. He offered a polite nod, which she returned, and then refocused his attention on me. “It’s your Ma.” My stomach gave a jolt, but he continued. “She’s awake and askin’ for you.”

“Thanks. Can you tell her I’ll be there in a sec?”

“Sure,” he said and walked back to the hospital’s main entrance.

Missy blew out a long breath, her face scrubbed free of tears. “I guess this is it, huh?”

“Guess so,” I said. “You know...you know you can text me, right? I know we’re not friends or anything, but...”

She put a hand over mine, bending forward slightly to smile at me. For the first time in my life, I let myself wonder if this was what having a sibling was like. An older sister to look up to. Maybe there was still a chance for me to have that connection. To have a sister, a friend.

“Give me your number,” she said, pulling out her phone. “I keep my social media notifications turned off, so I wouldn’t be able to see a DM from you.”

DM? I wanted to ask. Better not to. I typed in my phone number and added my contact. “Maybe I can visit you sometime. When things have cooled down.”

“I’d like that,” she said. “I know Roman would like to meet you.”

And just like that, I felt a sea of possibilities wash through me. I had traveled halfway across the country to find my father, and instead of meeting him, I’d found a sister. Though I would always have unanswered questions, I felt...peace. Closure came in different forms, and I finally felt strong enough to stand on my own and leave Pa in the past where he belonged.

I had resisted the urge to comfort Missy earlier, but now I hugged her, squeezing tight. Her hair was still damp near the nape of her neck, and it smelled of coconut and vanilla shampoo. “It’ll be okay,” she murmured in my hair, and somehow, I believed it. She pulled away, hands on my shoulders. “Do what you have to, yeah?”

“Yeah. You too.”

We stood and said goodbye, and she sidled into her car a moment later, waving as she sped down the street. I stood there on the sidewalk. Breathed in. Breathed out. Again. Again.

Then I returned to the hospital to speak with Ma.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Delilah

Tiny electronic beeps sounded from Ma's room, a steady rhythm that faded into the background with time. Her body appeared stiff on the bed, as if she were unable to relax into the mattress, but she didn't move much at all. Just tilted her head this way and that depending upon who was talking and where they sat. Her eyes, however, were restless.

At first, when I sat in the chair beside her bed and held her hand, she blinked languidly, emerging from the thick soup of whatever sedated dream she'd slipped into hours ago. Now, she sucked in a deep breath, and her eyes roved, taking in the space: the long stethoscope hanging on the wall, the IV buried in the crook of her left elbow (the least damaged of the two arms), the slow drip drip drip of morphine in the bag hanging off to the side. Human anatomy posters dotted blank spots on the walls, and I wondered why they put them in rooms like this. A map of a human's insides was the last thing someone who had been cut open during surgery would want to stare at.

"Delilah."

Her attention had settled on me, fixated and relieved. I ran my thumb over her knuckles; I wanted to squeeze her hand to show her I was here, present with her, but I imagined that would only cause her more pain in her arm. “Hey, Ma. How you feelin’?”

“Where were you?”

My gut twisted. I hoped she wasn’t referring to yesterday. *Where were you?* Images of blood on shower tiles burned themselves on my retinas, pale skin tissue open and weeping across the floor. I swallowed. “Talkin’ with a doctor, Ma. Checkin’ in on you.”

Her chest sank visibly, like she’d released a long-held breath. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Me too, Ma. “I’m sorry I wasn’t,” I said softly. I focused on the sensation of her cold knuckles under the pad of my thumb. I counted each as my thumb brushed across them, over and over, until her skin began to warm under my touch. “I’m sorry I wasn’t at the motel with you last night. I’m sorry I let things get this far.”

Her gaze shifted to the thin curtain separating us from the rest of the hospital. Did she hear the shuffle of doctors passing by, jotting notes on tablets, murmuring to colleagues? A laugh echoed from the lobby—a female nurse telling her friend a story about a date gone wrong. Did Ma hear me at all? I bit back a wave of tears, clearing them with a cough. “Ma, I want to talk to you about something—”

“Did you find him?”

My thumb stilled. “What? What do you mean?”

“Your Pa,” she said wistfully. “Did you find him? Did you tell him to come back? Wilbur... Wilbur said... said you wanted... Where is Coop?”

She muttered indiscernible words under her breath, and I let my shoulders drop. Was she aware of the questions she asked? The significance they held? I didn’t know if she would process

what I was about to tell her. After what she'd endured, what I'd put her through by neglecting her, would she ever be the same? Or *was* she unchanged, the same woman I'd allowed to break herself down into oblivion? "Coop is in the lobby. He wanted to give us some space to talk about something."

"Something, something," she said. She tried to wrap her hand over mine, but pain contorted her features and she whimpered.

"Careful," I said. Her skin was sewn together along her forearms, black stitches poking out like a long black caterpillar. I shuddered. Within a month or two, those stitches would become scars. Her arms would never feel the same; a ridge would form—a long, thin hill of scar tissue. A single thought ran through my mind in a loop: *You did this*. It was as if I'd raked my nails down her skin myself, dug beneath her flesh, ripped her open. *You did this, you did this*.

I did this.

I wanted to run out. How could I fix what I'd broken? She would never trust me to be there for her; every day from here on out would be the same question, over and over: *Where were you?* And I'd never be able to live with the guilt that accompanied those words.

"I don't think I can do this anymore."

Though she didn't seem to fully register what I'd said, her body tensed, prepared for a blow. I had resented her for so long because of how she'd made me her keeper, and now, the admission felt like a shock wave through my body. I didn't want to resent her, to resent the life we'd had together. But I couldn't help her in the way she needed, in the way she wanted me to. I couldn't be that for her. So, I said again, "I need to talk with you."

She shook her head.

"Ma—"

“No.”

“Ma—”

She recoiled from my hand, leaving my palm empty on the bed.

I hung my head, eyes squeezed shut. *Just say it. Say it now.* I breathed in, breathed out.

Twice. Looked at her. “I want to start looking at facilities that can care for you.”

I may as well have gutted her then and there.

“You promised,” she said, staring at me, a thousand emotions rampaging across her face.

“You *promised*. You’re just like him—You’re just like *your father*.” She spat the final two words, saliva dribbling down her cheek.

“Don’t say that,” I whispered. “Please don’t say that.”

“I knew you were trying to get rid of me. This whole time—Wilbur told me—he *told* me.” She shook herself. “I didn’t believe him. You know I didn’t want to believe him. But he *sees* these things. He knows your heart.”

“Wilbur is a hallucination, Ma!” I said, voice rising in pitch. “He’s *fake*. And I’m not leaving you. I just can’t give you the help you need. I can’t do that and try to—to find my place in life at the same time, okay? You need people who will be there 24/7, and I can’t do that.”

“You can,” she said. “You just don’t want to. You don’t love me.”

“I love you, Ma,” I said with a slight hitch. “It’s *because* I love you that I can’t let you hurt yourself anymore.”

She slung a string of awful accusations my way. *You hate me. You were never there when I needed you.* The worst of the bunch: *You probably wish I’d killed myself yesterday, don’t you?*

I cut her off by standing. “I love you. Maybe you don’t believe me, but I love you. I’m going to talk with the doctors about options. I’d like your input. I want you to be somewhere nice, somewhere I can visit you and know they’re taking care of you.”

She glowered at me, cheeks red with anger. “I wish I had died yesterday.”

I couldn’t stand there any longer. I fled from the room, tears burning my eyes, guilt clawing my insides to shreds. Coop spotted me instantly when I emerged into the lobby, and he bolted up from his chair to meet me halfway. He instantly wrapped me in a hug. “It’s okay,” he said. “It’s okay. You did what you had to. It’s okay.”

“She hates me,” I said, through tears. He walked us out of the lobby into the empty space between buildings where medical staff went to find peace and eat their lunch. “She hates me, Coop,” I repeated when we stopped at a bench. “How can I do this to her? How can I—?”

“She doesn’t understand,” he said. “You hear me? She doesn’t understand the weight you carry, and she doesn’t understand the help she needs. And she *needs* help.”

“I’ve failed,” I said, throat hoarse. “I’ve failed her.”

He shook his head. “If you didn’t do this, you’d be failing yourself. And you’d fail her by being too prideful to see that you can’t do this on your own.”

He’s right, I tried telling myself. But all I could see was the hate in her eyes. The disappointment, the fear.

“She’ll come to,” he said. “When you visit her, something her husband never did, she’ll learn to trust you. Right now, we have to get her taken care of.”

I blew a shaky breath. “Yeah. I just...I just...”

He put his chin atop my head and rubbed my arm repeating affirmations that simply wouldn't stick. He let me cry. He let me melt on the bench and drown the way Missy had only an hour ago. Yet, in the depths of my heart, a little bloom rose from the grief, budding.

I knew what it was, even if I would never voice it aloud to anyone. It was a chance. It was a door opened, a possibility I never would have allowed myself to consider two weeks ago.

It was hope.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Missy

The ceremony went without a hitch. Everybody arrived on time, and though I'd tried my best to steer clear of my parents, there was only so much I could do. Mom sat in the corner of my dressing room, clutching a purse tightly in her lap, while a makeup artist brushed powder and blush across my cheeks. She offered the occasional compliment: "That color suits you well, darling", "Your shoes are very elegant", "I love what she did with your hair—the pearls are a nice touch". I didn't know if she isolated herself out of shame or guilt. I wanted to tell her she'd done nothing wrong, apart from involving me in the whole scandal to begin with, but the words never sounded right. After all, she'd almost *hoped* Dad was unfaithful. Though she was as much a victim of Dad's secret as I was, she had her fair share of blame to add to the pile. About halfway through my preparations, she left, pressing a soft kiss to my temple. "I'll see you in the church" was all she'd said, and then she disappeared out the door.

I lied to the wedding coordinator that I was taking too long to get ready, and we'd have to skip the first look I'd planned with Dad. She'd squeezed my arm apologetically, saying, "Take

your time; he will still be able to walk you down the aisle, and that's special enough." My stomach flipped at the realization, but I couldn't very well change the order of the ceremony last minute without raising alarms. *He's your father*, a small voice reminded me. When that didn't work, and I couldn't find it in myself to forgive him, the voice changed tactics: *It's one day. After this, you won't have to see him if you don't want to*. It brought me enough solace to grit my teeth and bear it.

At the entrance to the church, Lila straightened out the train of my dress, expertly lifting it to billow around me in a wave of ivory satin. I touched manicured fingers to the delicate flowers embroidered on the bodice, the basque waistline's swoop, the sheer blusher draped over my face. I was protected behind this thin layer of the veil; it acted as a buffer between myself and onlookers. Between me and Dad. Indeed, when he walked out of the church to greet me, I barely noticed the tears glistening in his eyes, the apologetic twist of his brows. They were things for me to process weeks later when looking at photos—things I blocked out in the moment, a survival mechanism. Dad looped my arm through his, and his grip was loose, as if he could tell I didn't want him close to me.

"You look beautiful," he said, leaning close to my ear. He drew back. "Roman is a lucky man." He paused as if tasting the words on his tongue before he spoke again: "Thank you for letting me walk you down the aisle."

Emotion clogged my throat, and I couldn't speak. I nodded stiffly.

Gratitude flooded through me when the organ started up, playing the traditional Wedding March, and my grandparents entered the church first, followed by Roman's. The wedding party, soon after, and when it was time for Dad and I to move, I gripped my bouquet tightly and let him lead me down the aisle.

I focused on Roman.

His black tux, a single white rose pinned to his lapel, hair combed and styled, his beard freshly shaven. I absorbed the sight of him, the way his lips were pursed and trembled as he fought back tears, the way he pinched the top of his hand to steady himself. I grinned, recalling a bet we'd placed months ago. "I bet you're going to cry," I'd told him as we lay on a picnic blanket in a park during sunset. He had just hung up the phone after a grueling conversation with Mickey, and I'd wanted to make him smile.

He puffed his chest out, smirking. "No, I don't think so."

"*Really?*" I said, poking his bicep. "Not even a little?"

"I'm a very controlled man, Missy," he said, propping himself to lean over me. He peppered soft kisses around my face. "Not prone to giving into my emotions, you know?"

Liar, I'd thought, but then he swept me into his arms and the world melted.

That was what I thought of now, as Dad gave me away and hugged Roman. *Liar*. A tear slipped from the inner corner of his eye before he could swipe it away, but even then he didn't seem to mind. His whole attention centered on me, a gravitational pull he couldn't resist if he wanted to. Once, about three months after we started dating, he pressed his forehead to mine in the backseat of his car and said, "I never really understood what it meant to be lost in someone's eyes, until I met you. It's like the world fades into the background, and it's just us. I forget my name, everything I ever knew, completely *lost*."

It was the same expression Roman wore now, as if he didn't hear the priest speaking in low tones, the call-and-response from our friends and family in the pews. He saw me, and nothing else. His hand threaded through mine, and together, we knelt in front of the altar.

Hours later, we stood outside the main reception hall, twin gold bands gleaming on our fingers. Our wedding party stood off to the side to practice their grand entrances—Lila had gleaned the idea from TikTok: each pair would go into the room with their own mini-entrance. Liam practiced a backflip, nearly knocking a mirror off the wall while the rest of them *ooed* and *awed*. Mine and Roman's parents had already been announced, leaving the rest of us to wait. I tugged Roman's hand. "Can we talk?"

A look of concern flitted across his features, but he nodded. "Of course. It's not like they can start without us."

We traveled to the end of the room, out of earshot from the wedding party who were too distracted to notice.

"Is something wrong?" Roman asked, twisting the ring around my finger. "We don't have to go in right away, if you need a minute."

"No, no," I said, smiling, though it didn't quite reach my eyes. "I'm fine. I just...I imagined things differently."

"How do you mean?"

I thought of Mom leaving the dressing room, Dad's final words to me before we entered the church. "It feels like my family is broken on the most important day of my life," I whispered.

"My love," he said, and drew me into his arms. I wouldn't cry—*couldn't* cry. Lines of mascara streaking down my face would ruin the entire reception, so I blinked up at the ceiling, counting candles in the chandeliers until my eyes dried. "Your parents love you. I know this hasn't happened the way you wanted it to, but they are *here*. They wouldn't be if things were broken, and they love you more than whatever anger or hurt or guilt they may feel. Focus on

that, okay?” His lips grazed my forehead. “There is still time for healing. Let tonight be the start.”

The music in the reception hall quieted for the MC to speak, and he began announcing the wedding party. Lila waved us over, and I gripped Roman tightly, his ring tucked into the skin between my knuckles. Soon, it was just the two of us, and I took a deep breath.

This is it, I told myself. The beginning of a life I’d dreamed of, a fresh start with Roman at my side. And he was right—there would be time for healing. My parents were here. They smiled and clapped, even if they wouldn’t speak to one another, and for now that would simply have to be enough. We weren’t pretending to be perfect. We were raw, open, honest. Fractured, but unbroken. Hurting with a chance to heal. *Let tonight be the start.*

Inside, the MC’s voice boomed: “I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Roman Sharpe!”

The doors swung open, and a swath of light enveloped us. People swung cloth napkins over their heads, whooping and cheering, and in the middle toward the back, my parents did the same. There was still pain in Mom’s eyes, despite her red lipsticked grin, and Dad stood slightly away from her as if, like he had with me, he knew she wanted distance. But I found hope in the way Mom looked back at him, briefly, in an instant of pride shared between parents. I found hope in the way her gaze softened, something akin to forgiveness creeping in. Not fully, not enough to mend the trust Dad had torn, but enough. *Enough.*

I held onto that moment, fingers enveloped in Roman’s, and a single thought ran through me as it had nearly two weeks ago: *Everything is as it should be.*

CHAPTER THIRTY

Delilah

Two Weeks Later

Riverside hadn't changed at all since we'd left. The sky still had the grayish tint of Los Angeles' haze, and the sun beat down with oppressive heat when Coop and I stepped out of his truck in the psychiatric hospital parking lot. Ma, arms crossed in the backseat, didn't so much as budge. If it weren't for the fact that her forearms were still sore and healing, I don't think Coop would have been able to pry her hands off of the seatbelt button.

Ma and I had come a long ways in the past two weeks. Though she wasn't a fan staying in the hospital long term, she had moments where she recognized she needed help. They were brief and infrequent, but when she'd come into my room, curl up beside me on the bed, and whisper *I'm sorry*, I didn't have to ask what she was sorry for. I just stroked her hair and told her it wasn't her fault, that I loved her. "You know I want to help you, right?" I'd ask. Sometimes she nodded; other times she acted like she didn't hear me.

I helped her out of the car, careful not to squeeze her hand too tightly. “I’ll visit you tomorrow, if you’d like.”

No response.

Guilt had followed me since our conversation in the emergency room. I’d thrown up twice already because of it. *You failed, You failed, You failed* the voice clamored in my skull. It would take a few more years for reality to sink in—that this was something that *would* help her. That I had nothing to feel ashamed about. I knew I wouldn’t leave her in the way she feared, and once enough time had passed for her to recognize this, she’d grow comfortable with her new routine.

“I heard the nurses here are nice,” Coop offered, hand resting on Ma’s shoulder as we walked to the main building. “And they have lots of things to do. Games, fancy meals. People you can talk with.”

“I don’t like people,” Ma bit out.

Coop fell silent.

The psychiatric hospital had a sprawling green lawn, and a thick column of white rosebushes lined the pathway to the door. Ma touched one of the petals gingerly as we crossed the path, the first sign of interest she had shown. “You know, Ma,” I said, and she withdrew her hand sharply, as if I’d pricked her. “I think they have gardening classes here you could take. Want me to mention that to the nurse?”

She looked from me to the rosebush. After a moment, she trained her gaze on the floor and continued walking to the lobby. *Patience*, I reminded myself. *Give her time*.

The hospital wasn’t like I expected. Maybe I’d watched one too many movies featuring mental hospitals in my childhood, picturing Ma wandering those halls, but Fairview Psychiatric

Hospital defied the stereotype. Nurses wore warm smiles and chattered at the front desk. A man who seemed to be a patient passed by us, a chaperone walking a comfortable distance before, but the man didn't seem to mind. He waved at us, polite, and Ma dipped her chin in reply. I nudged her. "Seems nice, right?"

Her frown returned, and I sighed inwardly. Maybe I was pushing this too hard. She needed to experience it for herself without mine or Coop's commentary. Coop must have realized the same, because he beckoned the two of us forward, not saying a thing to Ma about the nice portraits hanging from the wall by the entrance or the list of activities planned on the schedule next to one of the receptionists.

The pretty blonde receptionist grinned as we approached, and the nurses she'd been chatting with caught sight of us and did the same.

I looked at the receptionist's nametag: *Greta*. "Hi!" she said. "How can we help you?"

"I'm checking my Ma—mother in. Bridget O'Conner? The woman I spoke with on the phone said she was scheduled to come in today." "Let's look her up," Greta replied, clacking away on her keyboard. She had dainty acrylics on each finger, a sort of pastel pink, and an engagement ring adorned her left hand. Maybe that's why she was so cheery. I thought of Missy and her wedding. She'd called me a few days ago to check in on me and Ma, asking how she was doing. I still hadn't told her what had sent Ma to the ER, and thankfully, Missy didn't pry. She did give me details of her wedding ceremony and reception. Her parents weren't speaking to one another, but she held hope that they would soon.

It was strange. In less than a month, I'd gone from having only Ma as a blood relative to discovering I had a *sister* halfway across the country. I used to wonder what it would be like to

have an older sibling. It seemed like a hit-or-miss thing—they either protected you or wanted nothing to do with you. So far, Missy fit strongly in the former, and for that, I was grateful.

“Aha!” the receptionist exclaimed. “Your mother is in the left wing, room twenty-nine.” The printer next to her on the desk whirled and clicked, producing three sheets of paper with Ma’s information. She stacked the sheets and slid them into a clipboard, which she handed to one of the nurses. “Nurse Riley will show you the way, and if there are any keepsakes you’ve brought with you, those can be brought to the room, as well.”

“Thanks,” I said, and we followed Nurse Riley down the left hall.

I watched Ma the entire time. Her gaze tracked the paintings hanging from the walls, signed by patients from different points in time. In one of the rooms we passed, a group of patients sat at tables and played board games with one another. What struck me most was the laughter. *Nothing like the movies*, I thought again. Ma stared at the jovial display, slowing her steps to linger near it a moment longer. Her foot angled toward the door as if she intended to join them. She caught me watching her and rushed ahead to follow the nurse.

Coop hung back beside me. “She’ll be okay here.”

“I hope so,” I said. “I really hope so. And I think she’s realizing it’s not so bad here.”

“It’ll take her time to adjust,” he replied, “but you can see she’s at least curious.”

I nodded, suddenly choked with emotion, and Coop patted my back. “Come on, let’s catch up.”

The nurse opened a door, identical to all the rest on this side of the hall, and gestured for us to go inside. “There’s a bed prepared for her on the left,” she said, pointing to the thick mattress with a fluffy silver duvet and pillow. “A wardrobe for her clothes, a bookshelf in case she likes to read, and a desk for any writing or creative activities she takes a liking to.” There

were a few plastic sleeves taped to the wall, and I pointed at those, a question on my tongue, but she beat me to it. “We try not to keep sharp objects or glass in the rooms, so picture frames aren’t allowed, but if patients have any family photos they would like to hang, we slide them into those sleeves. Works the same!”

I remembered Ma’s forearms, the jagged line of stitches. *No sharp objects*. I felt a burden ease from my shoulders, a weight lifted. Already, I could picture her thriving here, surrounded by people who knew her situation better than I could. She would always have food to eat, something to do, people who could check in on her. *But what does she think?* I studied her again. She traced a finger over the embroidered patterns on the duvet, which looked almost like a silver tortoise shell, and pressed down on the mattress with her hand. “It’s comfortable,” she said, and I found myself holding my breath. Ma looked around the room, opened the wardrobe and desk drawers. “I can put my shoes in here.” She pointed to a drawer in the wardrobe. “My dresses and shirts in here.” She faced the nurse. “Do you have a Catholic church nearby?”

The nurse nodded. “We have a shuttle that takes patients to the churches on Sundays. There is a group of Catholic patients who have a Bible study, as well, if that’s something you’re interested in?”

Ma nodded. “My Bible.” She set her hand on the corner of her desk. “Yes, I’ll put my Bible here.”

I swallowed. “Would you like Coop and I to bring your things in so you can start organizing?”

This time, she didn’t look at the ground. She looked me right in the eye, and though there was still a significant level of uncertainty in her expression, I saw excitement there, too. A world of possibility opening in front of her. “I’d like that,” she said slowly, tasting the words on her

tongue, as if the notion was foreign. And perhaps it was. Perhaps she didn't think she'd fit in here, and now she was discovering her place.

Coop and I brought boxes of clothing, books, and trinkets to her room. Some things couldn't stay in her room, like the pens, pencils, and heavy metal crucifix, and instead had to be placed in a locker only the nurses had access to. "If she'd like any of these items," Nurse Riley said while Coop set a large candle in the locker, "she can ask one of the nurses to get them for her. She will need to be chaperoned while using them, for her safety, but as long as our patients give us no cause for concern, we try to give them as much freedom as possible."

Again, I thought of Ma's scars, the blood in the shower. "What if she has an episode and tries to hurt herself?" I asked.

"We will move her to the right wing of the hospital to be monitored. Our more unstable patients stay there, those suffering from severe disorders that either impair their ability to function or are known to harm themselves or others."

"And I'll be kept in the loop? I'll know if anything happens to her?"

She nodded. "Of course. If there is so much as a change in her medication, you will know about it."

It took Ma thirty minutes to situate everything to her liking. She had put a photo of the two of us in one of the sleeves on the wall. I couldn't have been more than five in that photo, eating a piece of chocolate cake Ma had bought for me at the bakery across the street. Chocolate icing was smeared across my cheeks, and I raised a hand to block my face from the camera lens, but it seemed Ma had managed to get the photo anyway.

Nurse Riley stepped out of the room to give us a minute to say goodbye. Coop sat on Ma's bed, and he flicked a piece of lint off the pillow. "I like what you've done with the place, Bridget."

Hands on her hips, she inclined her chin like a soldier having won a battle. "I've always had an eye for decoration."

"So...you like it here? You think you'll be okay?" I asked. My hands were clasped behind my back, squeezed tightly. *Please say you like it, please tell me you'll be okay.*

"I..." she began. "I...I think I'll try the gardening class you mentioned. I've never had a yard before to pot flowers or vegetables, and I've been wanting to learn."

It was as close to a *Yes* as I would get.

I hugged her tightly, breathing in her scent. "I love you, Ma. I'll visit you soon, okay? Whenever you want to call me, ask one of the nurses, and I'm sure they'll let you."

"You promised me you wouldn't leave," she said, and I closed my eyes, burying my face in her hair. "You'll keep that promise, right? You won't...you won't be like..."

"I'm nothing like him," I told her. "I want you to be in my life, Ma. You—" my voice cracked, and I pulled away to look at her. "You protected me for so long. When Pa left, you made up a story about him dying so that I wouldn't feel unwanted. That was why, wasn't it?"

She nodded, eyes wet with tears.

"You knew what I would find in Chicago, but you didn't want to be the one to break my heart the way he had broken yours. You never gave up on us, and I won't, either. This situation isn't for forever, okay? Just so I can get on my feet and find a better place for us."

"I know," she said softly. "And...I believe you. I want to believe you."

"You can," I said, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "I'll be back. I'll come back."

Coop stood, and Ma turned to hug him. “Take care of my little girl,” she told him.

“I will,” he said. “I never stopped.”

It hit me, then. All this time, I’d thought having Coop around to keep an eye on Ma was for her sake. But she trusted him because she knew *I* trusted him. And she wanted me to have that, to have him there. So she kept him around, looking out for me when she wasn’t able to.

Nurse Riley escorted us out, and Ma held my hand as we walked until we reached the front door. “I’ll be back soon,” I told her. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she said. “Can I call tonight?”

“Of course,” I said. “Of course, Ma. I’ll keep my phone on me.”

A minute later, Coop and I walked down the rosebush pathway, and I felt a vibration in my back pocket. I stopped and took the burner phone out.

“A call?” Coop asked, as stunned as I was. “I thought Missy said...”

“Yeah, her dad took it from her.”

We stared at the phone vibrating in my palm. *It’s Pa*, a voice told me. *He’s calling after all this time*. I looked back over my shoulder. Ma stood there, still, watching us leave. *I’m nothing like him*, I’d told her. And it was true. “He doesn’t deserve to be a part of my life,” I said, voicing my thoughts to Coop. “If he wants to be, he knows where to find me.” As for now, I wanted nothing to do with him.

I snapped the phone in half and tossed it in the trash can at the end of the path. Coop and I stood staring at the trash can for a moment, my only connection to Pa gone forever.

“I’m proud of you, kid,” Coop said, breaking the silence. “Real proud.”

“Me too,” I said, and we walked back to his truck.

I thought of Ma, standing there in hopes to see me soon; Missy, waiting on me to call her back and tell her how everything went with dropping Ma off; Coop, driving us back to Rivergate, steady and dependable.

I looked out the window as Fairview disappeared behind a hill. *My family.*

This is my family.

THE END