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JENNIFER DUGAN

Author of *Some Girls Do*

"Shocking, captivating,
and utterly chilling."

—JESSICA GOODMAN,
author of *They Wish*
They Were Us



ON SALE 8/15/2023

ONE

IT HAD TAKEN sixteen sutures to close the wound on the underside of Sloan's forearm.

Sixteen threads, woven in and out of her skin by careful hands wrapped in latex, while whispered words had promised, "It's okay. You're safe now." As if anyone could really know that.

Sloan remembered the way the pain had dulled down to a useless ache as the doctors worked, a pressure and tug that she knew should hurt, would hurt, *had* hurt before everything faded to a blur of sirens and lights and hospital antiseptic.

Sixteen stitches holding her together when she could not do so herself.

"Sloan," a voice said, sounding far away and underwater. Sloan ignored it, instead staring down at the puckered pink line running down her arm. She traced the scar with her finger, paying special attention to where it bit into the peculiar patch of raised skin above her wrist. Her mother called it a birthmark, but Sloan had never seen a birthmark like that before.

Not that either of them really knew. When the Thomas family adopted her at the age of four, the mark, whatever it was, was already there. Her social workers were no help, and her biological parents were long gone—a single Polaroid picture and an urgent, whispered “remember who you are” were all they left in their wake. There would be no asking and no answers for anyone.

“Sloan,” the voice said again.

This time Sloan snapped her attention to the woman sitting across from her. “Beth,” she said, matching her therapist’s tone. If you could really call her that. Beth was some new-age hypnotherapist-slash-psychedelic her mother had dug up when Sloan refused to talk to the doctors the hospital social worker had sent them to. She wasn’t even sure if Beth was accredited. She wasn’t even sure if hypnotists *could* be accredited.

“Where were you just now?” Beth asked, trying very hard to keep her face neutral. Beth was always trying to keep her face neutral, and it rarely worked. Sloan had never met a therapist with so many tells, and she had met a lot of them in those first few weeks after the “incident.”

Sloan flashed her patented smart-ass smile. “Here, in this chair, wondering how much more of this beautiful day I have to spend stuck inside your office.”

Beth frowned. “Is that all?”

“Does there always need to be more?”

Beth leaned back in her chair. “It would be helpful to your recovery if there was, at least occasionally, more.”

Her recovery. That was hilarious. What recovery? It felt more like a countdown from where she sat. They had been waiting and watching her for a while now. Waiting for her to snap. To break

down. To tell anyone other than that first police officer what she remembered. What it was like. What she saw. To put the few memories of that night she could manage to scrape up on display for them to dissect like a science experiment.

Her parents, Beth, and all the therapists and gurus and life coaches before her all claimed to want to “help” her process what she’d been through. They wanted to understand. But nobody could, not unless they’d been there too. Sloan glanced out the window to where Cherry’s truck sat glinting in the September sun. As if she could sense Sloan looking, Cherry opened the door and slid out, her long brown hair flipping up in the breeze.

Sloan drank in the sight of the other girl, her entire body relaxing as the person she loved most leaned against the truck with crossed arms. Cherry was safety, warmth. She didn’t pry because she didn’t have to. She was there when it happened, when everyone died except for the two of them: the last girls standing.

Sloan’s loss was her loss. Sloan’s wounds were her wounds. They didn’t need therapists or police or parents wandering around inside their heads—they had each other for that.

“You need to talk about what happened. Let me help you.”

Sloan sighed. It wasn’t that she didn’t like Beth—she did. Or that she didn’t think Beth meant well—she did. Sloan just didn’t see the point. “Help with what?” she asked softly.

“Your mother says your nightmares are getting worse. We could start there—do a longer session and try to reprocess whichever memories are affecting you most. We might be able to take some of the bite out of them. Many of my clients have had a lot of luck with this approach in the past, but you have to work with me. I can’t do it for you.”

“I’ll think about it,” Sloan said, and then they lapsed back into silence.

She was relieved when Beth’s phone alarm chimed, signaling the end of the visit. The truth was that Sloan wasn’t sure she wanted to “take the bite out” of her memories. To reprocess them or share them with anyone else. Because what she remembered most from that day wasn’t fear. It wasn’t the sticky scent of warm blood, although that remained thick and cloying even in her dreams. And it wasn’t even the pain of the cut in her skin.

No.

What she remembered most was love.

TWO

CHERRY PULLED OPEN the driver's side door before Sloan was even down the concrete steps of the Smith Medical Building. It was home to an urgent care, a massage therapist, four empty suites, and, of course, Beth McGuinness, holistic hypnotherapist specializing in traumatic response therapy.

"How was the headshrinker?" Cherry teased as Sloan slid across the long bench seat of her old F-150. Sloan didn't know anything about trucks, and she gathered Cherry didn't either, given that the passenger's side door had been stuck shut for as long as Sloan had known her. The truck had originally belonged to Cherry's dad, and her mom had passed it on to her when he died a few years back. Sloan didn't know if it was a sentimental thing or a money thing that kept them in that truck. Maybe a little of both.

"Shrinky," Sloan answered.

"I don't know why your mom keeps making you go." Cherry shifted the truck into drive and slowly pulled out of the parking lot.

Sloan threaded her fingers between Cherry's and let all the

tension bleed from her body. “Probably because if I had to write an essay about what I did on my summer vacation, it would say ‘survived a mass murder,’” Sloan said, attempting to make air quotes with her free hand. “You know it freaks her out.”

“Then maybe *she* should see someone and leave us alone for once.”

Sloan liked the way Cherry said “us.” The way she always combined them into one now. Nothing happened to Cherry or to Sloan; it only happened to both of them, as if what happened that day at camp had fused them somehow.

“Oh, she does,” Sloan said, twisting in her seat. “I’m pretty sure me going was actually *her* therapist’s idea. Or maybe her guru’s. I can’t keep them all straight anymore. You’d think she was the one who had to get sewn back together.”

Cherry made a little tsking sound. “Sounds like a conspiracy to me.”

“Yeah, a real conspiracy: protecting my mental health.”

“You know I’m always here for all your protection needs.” She puffed out her chest, and Sloan smiled back at her.

“Yeah, I noticed that with the whole hiding-me-from-masked-men-with-machetes thing.”

“Oh yeah, that clued you in? Good,” Cherry said with a laugh. It didn’t use to be like this.

The lightness, the teasing, it was new. Just since Cherry moved to town with her mother a few days ago. Now it was like Sloan could breathe again. Like there was a reason to want to smile.

It was a fluke they had both ended up at Camp Money Springs—two girls on opposite sides of the state just looking for a fun sum-

mer job and a way to earn some cash that didn't involve fast food or retail. They were both fresh high school graduates, and while Cherry was planning on taking a gap year to "find herself"—aka use up her friends' goodwill to couch surf her way across the country—Sloan was just trying to earn some spending money for her first semester at NYU starting that fall.

They had almost nothing in common. Cherry loved punk and grunge bands from the '90s; Sloan would die for Olivia Rodrigo and Doja Cat. Cherry was sure that they didn't need to worry about global warming because nature would heal itself, getting rid of people the way it had gotten rid of dinosaurs. Sloan thought they should all use metal straws anyway, just in case.

They shouldn't have worked, but from the second they met, painting old boats and then clearing weeds at the archery range to prepare the camp for summer, Sloan knew they were meant to be. And to her delight, so did the other girl.

Fate, Cherry had called it, eating slushies made from ground-down ice and cheap syrup by the fire. She had tasted like sugar the first time they kissed.

She had tasted like blood the next.

"Your mom home?" Cherry asked, pulling Sloan from her head.

She had a knack for doing that, and it was especially useful after a session with Beth—even if Sloan barely talked, it was still somehow exhausting. Like it knocked things around in her mind, leaving everything slightly off-kilter. Beth kept poking into the things Sloan couldn't remember—like that gap of time between Cherry finding her and the police arriving. It was just *missing*. Like her brain had deleted it. Like it was a detail as unimportant as the

color of the socks she had worn on the first day of school. There was fear, and then nothing, and then blood in her hair. It felt very matter-of-fact without the middle bits.

Without the important bits.

Cherry had filled her in, of course; they'd gone over it dozens of times. That was good enough for Sloan. She wished it were good enough for Beth. Sloan knew she would likely have another nightmare that night. She always did after Beth poked around in the missing places.

"Sloan," Cherry said again. "Is your mom home?"

"Yeah." Sloan frowned. "She wants me to go to Simon's baseball game later. She thinks we need 'family time.'"

"Right." Cherry sighed. "It would be nice if Allison could at least set the mandatory emotional manipulation aside after your therapy sessions. Let me guess, she turned your little brother loose on you?"

Sloan liked that Cherry called her mother Allison. Sometimes she did too, secretly in her head or when it was just her and Cherry.

"Yep," Sloan said. "It's hard to call her out on it when Simon's standing there with his big, round eyes all 'Sloany, please come.'"

"I love that 'family time' is just code for 'Cherry's not invited.'"

And it was. It was. Both girls knew it. It was Allison's latest invention to keep them separated.

Before, when they were still living hours apart, Sloan's mom had imposed a curfew even on weekends. She claimed it was because she needed Sloan in her sight after what happened; it was just a coincidence it was early enough for Sloan to visit Connor and Rachel, her former best friends, but there was never, ever enough time for her to make it to Cherry's house and back.

“You’d get over this sooner without a constant codependent reminder of what you went through,” Allison had shouted at Sloan, while clutching her latest homeopathic calming tea.

Clearly, Beth needed to work on the recipe.

Thank god Cherry had a truck and a mom who was quick to look the other way, and more often than not she’d climb through Sloan’s window at night like a stray cat that had been fed once and formed a habit.

Eventually, Allison gave up and asked Cherry to “at least use the door instead.”

It was better now that Cherry lived nearby, streets away instead of counties, an entire year for themselves stretched out in front of them ever since Sloan had sent in her deferral letter to NYU. It would be good year, a reset, a fresh start. Even the boxes yet to be unloaded from the bed of Cherry’s truck, battered and sliding around with every turn, seemed somehow hopeful.

If only the rest of the world would leave them alone.

Other people were the worst, even the ones Sloan used to be close to—especially them, maybe. They talked about Sloan and Cherry, and around them—worse yet, they wanted them to share the gory details over lunch or in an interview. They didn’t understand that Sloan and Cherry’s experience—and it was *theirs* because sometimes it was hard to tell where Sloan ended and Cherry began—was not carrion for scavengers to pick through. It was *their life*.

Even Connor, Sloan’s best friend since third grade, had tried to get the scoop under the guise of “being there” for Sloan. But Rachel, his girlfriend, was the worst, demanding Sloan “get over it already” because she was “freaking everyone out.” Sloan had

stopped replying to her texts after that. She had stopped replying to *all* their texts after that.

How was she supposed to explain that she'd hidden while someone else's blood pooled hot and sticky around her hair? How she couldn't get the smell out for days even though her mother swore the only thing she could smell was the lavender shampoo.

(That was one memory she wished her brain *had* deleted.)

"Almost there," Cherry said, as if it hurt her to be away from Sloan as much as it hurt Sloan to be away from her.

But that was impossible.

Sloan cursed the ride home for being so short—just a blink-and-you-miss-it burst of freedom between Beth's office and mandatory family time.

Cherry parked in the driveway but kept the truck running. She was quickly learning to choose her battles with Sloan's mom. Respecting their family time would mean less chance of a fight when she slipped into Sloan's room that night, curling tightly around her like a snake.

"I'll see you later?" Cherry asked.

"You better." Sloan leaned forward for a kiss—strawberry lip gloss, her favorite—and her belly twitched and ached. Goodbye kisses were stressful—being away from Cherry at all was stressful—but she didn't have a choice. She slid over Cherry's lap, knocking their teeth together with one last kiss, before hopping out the door.

Sloan walked to the house with a little wave, disappearing through the door with a frown. She tried to ignore the cold sinking feeling in her stomach that took up residence whenever the girls

were apart. It was okay. She could do this. She just had to get through the next little while.

Cherry's truck would be at the ball field, just out of her mother's sight, waiting, watching, keeping her safe from afar.

"Sloan?" her mother called from the kitchen. "Come eat!"

"Coming, Mom," she chirped brightly, pasting the perfect smile on her face.

She was fine.

She was fine.

KATE ALICE
MARSHALL

THE
NARROW

THEY SAY WHAT THE RIVER TAKES NEVER RETURNS.
THEY ARE WRONG.

ON SALE 8/01/2023

EDEN

1

EVERY YEAR, IN those last hazy summer days before school begins, the students of Atwood go into the woods to cheat death. It's a tradition as old as the school, observed in the strange, liminal week after students begin to arrive but before classes start. We make our way down in twos and threes and fours, some laughing and chattering, some silent with simmering nerves. Not everyone jumps, but everyone knows who doesn't.

The four of us always jump. Veronica, Zoya, Ruth, and I. Even when we weren't supposed to—Lower School students aren't allowed, but in that first year, Veronica and I sneaked out on our own to fling ourselves over the Narrow.

It's our senior year now. Our last chance to leap. And I've almost missed it.

I'm barely out of the taxi that brought me from the airport when Veronica comes striding across the campus lawn toward me,

arms outflung. Her white-blond hair is long on the top and shaved on the sides, which accentuates the sharp angles of her face. She wears a loose white tank that shows off the black sports bra beneath, accessorized with a collection of silver pendants and bracelets. On me, the look would be Witchy Nervous Breakdown, but on her it's pure glamour.

"Thank the goddess you made it! You almost missed the leap," she declares, and I stretch a grin across my face to mirror hers. The cut on my lip has sealed itself to a whisper. The bruise at my lower back is a faint yellow, barely noticeable, but I tug down my shirt anyway. I keep my left hand in my sweatshirt pocket, and as long as I don't jostle it, my arm doesn't hurt.

"I thought about joining the circus instead, but then I remembered there are plenty of clowns here," I tell her. I practiced the joke on the way here, terrible as it was. Fine-tuned it, orchestrating just the right facial expression and tone of voice. I shouldn't have bothered. Veronica is my favorite person in the world, but she isn't exactly observant.

"It's supposed to rain later, so we'd better get moving if we want to get it done before classes start," Veronica says, jerking a thumb over her shoulder. Halfway across the lawn, Ruth and Zoya stand together in a pose of expectant waiting. Ruth raises a hand to wave.

"You go on," I tell Veronica. "I've got to get my stuff to my room." All the way here, I've had a knot in my stomach. I'm not ready to face Veronica—or anyone. I can't explain what happened a week ago—or what was happening all summer while she

swanned around Tuscany and sent texts complaining about how much her parents were smothering her.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You can leave it here. It’s not like anyone’s going to steal it,” she says with a wrinkled-up nose. “Come on. It’s senior year. We can’t not jump.”

The taxi driver has finished unloading my suitcases from the trunk. I take a deep breath. I’m here. I’ve made it to Atwood. All summer, I told myself I just needed to get back here, and everything would be okay.

And it is okay.

I’m okay.

“Help me drag my stuff up on the sidewalk, at least?” I say brightly.

Veronica groans at the prospect of physical labor but obliges. She practically flings my roller bag onto the grass. I move more cautiously, forced to pick up each bag one-handed, still aware of the random aches and pains that ambush me when I move the wrong way. I’ve barely set the last bag down when Veronica seizes my hand and starts dragging me toward the woods.

“It’s been so boring without you, Eden. Just me and these losers.”

“I resemble that remark,” Ruth says. Zoya just offers a tiny finger-wave.

The two of them are a study in opposites, and it isn’t just because Zoya is almost six feet tall and the approximate width of an electron while Ruth is five-three and looks like she could flip a steer by its horns. Zoya looks immaculate as always, wearing

a boldly printed top and fitted trousers she made herself under a tunic-length cardigan. She and Veronica are the fashion icons of the group. Meanwhile, when Ruth isn't in her school uniform, she's usually dressed like she is now, in running shorts and a tank, and according to Veronica, I have the fashion instincts of a nineteenth-century governess, tragically orphaned and tasked with caring for two polite but unsettling British children.

"Why'd you show so late? You're usually the first one here," Veronica says.

"I had some stuff to deal with at home," I say. I paid to have my ticket changed to give the bruises time to heal.

"Everything all right?" Zoya asks softly.

I don't quite meet her eyes as I shrug. "I'm here now." The rest of the world doesn't need to exist, at least for a few months.

"That's right. You're finally here, and we can finally jump," Veronica says with pleasure.

"Say that a little louder, won't you?" Ruth says, rolling her eyes.

"You mean I shouldn't talk about how WE'RE GOING TO JUMP THE NARROW?" Veronica shouts. A few people glance toward us, including Mr. Lloyd, our English teacher, but there are no answering shouts of alarm or any rush to clap us in irons. Technically, jumping the Narrow is forbidden, and the teachers are supposed to stop you if they catch you, but they never try to catch you. Most of them did it, too, back in the day.

"Could you please . . . not?" Zoya says with a little burr of irritation. If she and Ruth are opposites, she and Veronica sometimes clash because they're too similar. Both tall and willowy, the kind

of build you could drape a potato sack over and call it high fashion—not that they ever would, since both of them have a keen fashion sense and the bank accounts to indulge it. Veronica is white, and Zoya is Black, but they even have similar bone structure, with sharp chins and big eyes. But Veronica is all brash energy and charisma, and most of the time Zoya seems like she wants to fold in on herself and disappear.

“Sorry,” Veronica says with a toss of her hair, unconcerned.

We start off together, Ruth taking the lead despite her short stature, thanks to her business-like stride, Veronica and me in the middle, and Zoya drifting just behind us.

The only way down to the Narrow is through a gap in the fence behind the old chapel. In my six years at the school, it’s never been fixed.

“Aren’t the boys coming?” I ask, glancing around for a sign of Diego or Remi—Ruth’s and Veronica’s boyfriends, respectively.

“No boys allowed. Just the four of us, one last time.” Veronica throws an arm over my shoulder.

One last year at Atwood, away from the world.

“Are you okay?” Veronica asks. She’s looking down at me with a quizzical expression, and a lie springs to my lips—yes, of course I’m okay. Why wouldn’t I be?

I’ve been lying to Veronica since the first day I arrived at Atwood. There’s no reason to stop now. My tongue nudges the lingering seam where my lip split, and I look away. “I don’t know. It doesn’t feel like I’m here yet.”

“That’s because you haven’t jumped. The real world doesn’t go

away until you jump," Veronica says confidently. And then we're at the back of the chapel, and we have to break apart to walk single file down the path. We pick our way along in relative silence.

We hear it before we see it. For the deadliest body of water in the county, the Narrow doesn't sound very threatening—no crash and rush of rapids or waterfalls, just a cheerful babble that suggests a friendly forest creek. At first glance, that's all the Narrow is: a thin ribbon of water flowing amid moss-covered rocks beneath a swaying canopy of branches, the banks little more than one long stride apart. But appearances can be deceiving.

Only half a mile up, the little babbling brook is a river, wide and shallow. Then its banks tighten. Through some quirk of geology, they cleave together, forcing all that water through a channel only a few feet wide. Over the years, the river has carved a path not out to the sides but straight down. Essentially, the river turns on its side, running narrow, deep, and *fast*. So fast that it snatches anything or anyone unfortunate enough to fall into the water, and no matter how hard you struggle or how fast you swim, there is no way to fight the pull.

Legend says that no one who's ever fallen into the Narrow has survived. Not only that, but the currents and the pockets and caves in the rock mean that any bodies will likely get trapped, never to emerge. No one who ever goes in comes out again. Or so they say.

Veronica and I know better.

By tacitly letting us get away with the jump, the staff can encourage certain limits. You only jump during daylight when the ground is completely dry, and only at the one small section where

the boulders overhanging the water shrink the gap to a manageable four feet. Lower School students—sixth, seventh, and eighth graders—aren't allowed, and there has to be someone on the other side to grab you if you slip. Officially, no student has fallen into the Narrow in forty years.

By the time we reach the river, there's a crowd gathered. Other students, like us, trying to get their jump in before the rain starts. You can't jump after the first day of classes. It doesn't count.

A little knot of Lower School students clusters along the near shore. A couple of them are already wearing uniforms. A gangly boy in a He-Man T-shirt is bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet, arms swinging as he psychs himself up. I don't recognize him, so I assume he's a freshman—that is, in his first year at the Upper School. Lower School students are either collectively known as Littles or just by grade level. The Upper School is much larger than the Lower School. Not a lot of parents think it's a good idea to ship their eleven-year-olds off to the middle of the woods to learn Latin. Ruth, Veronica, and I are all lifers, as Lower School veterans are called, but Zoya enrolled when she started high school.

"Hurry it up!" Ruth hollers, clapping. "You can do it! Don't think, just leap!"

"Ten bucks says he can't," Veronica calls loudly, and the boy flashes her a panicked look. She folds her arms, one eyebrow raised.

"She's really very nice once you get to know her," I promise him, and Veronica snorts.

The boy gives one last full-body shake, sets his feet, and dashes across the rocks. They're coated with shaggy green moss. Even a whisper of rain could make them treacherously slick, but dry, they provide plenty of traction as he takes three long strides and flings himself across the four-foot gap. He clears it easily, and the crowd on the other side catches hold of him, dragging him in for back slapping, hooting, and hollering.

"My turn!" Ruth yells, and charges forward.

"Go for it, Hwang!" someone yells, but by the time they get out the last syllable, it's already old news. She's on the other side, brushing imaginary lint off her shoulder.

"Let's get this over with," Zoya says, her faint Russian accent sharpening the *th*. She's so tall, she can practically just step over the gap, but she does it in an elegant hop. On the other side, awed freshmen scatter, gawking up at her. She wraps her cardigan tight around herself and stalks over to Ruth.

"Together?" Veronica asks, putting out her right hand for me to take.

Her hand hovers in the air. My left hand stays wedged in my pocket, my forearm pulsing with dull pain. We always jump together since that first illicit mission down to the water. "You go ahead," I find myself saying.

A frown tugs at the corners of her mouth. But then she wheels around, and with a whoop, she runs. She jumps. She lands in an ungainly crouch on the other side, wheezing laughter like a hyena, and bounces to her feet to beckon me.

"Your turn!" she calls.

I'm the last Upper School student on the near side. A group of

jumpers are heading upstream, toward the bridge half a mile away. That's another rule: you only jump once. Jumping back is tempting fate. For the Narrow is greedy and lonely and cruel.

We jump to defy it. We jump to feel alive and free. We jump because the real world can't follow us across the cold water.

Ruth calls my name. Veronica stares at me, expression unreadable. I've been standing still too long. Gingerly, I take my hand from my pocket, gritting my teeth against the zips of pain that follow. I force myself into motion, running up the gentle slope of the big boulder that hangs out over the water. Dozens of feet have churned up the shaggy moss, tearing at it with every step, leaving small slick patches of brown. I plant my foot at the edge of the rock to leap.

Mud shifts beneath the sole of my foot, twisting my heel maybe half an inch to the left. I push off.

I'm in the air, but my balance is off. I hit the other side. My foot shoots out from under me. I pitch back toward the water. Someone in the crowd screams—

And Veronica catches my right arm. She pulls, and I stumble forward into her arms. Into Atwood's embrace.

"You made it," she says, eyes gleaming with pleasure.

Finally it feels true. I'm here. I'm home.

Everything is going to be all right.

2

"HOLY CRAP, EDEN, you almost died," Ruth admonishes me.

The raw panic of the moment lingers, a tightness in my throat and on my skin, but it's fading fast. I crack a smile. "I didn't almost die. I almost landed on my butt in front of a bunch of Lower School students, permanently damaging my air of cool. Which, if you think about it, is worse," I say, each laughing word a brick in the wall between me and that instant of gut-churning fear.

"If you had died, you would be a legend," Zoya points out. Everyone is flaking off toward the bridge now, us included.

"It would have been *really* impressive if you managed to fall in when no one else *ever* has," Ruth agrees, walking backward so she can smirk at me.

"People have fallen in," I object.

"Tourists," Ruth says dismissively.

“Not *just* tourists. There was that guy from town a few years ago,” Zoya says.

“And the Drowning Girl,” Veronica says. Ruth makes ghost noises; Veronica rolls her eyes. “Just because you’re a boring skeptic doesn’t mean you get to make fun of the rest of us.”

“I’m not making fun. I find your mysticism endearing,” Ruth assures her. “I hate that story, though. It’s so . . . unfeminist.”

“I think it’s romantic,” Veronica protests.

“Throwing yourself into a river because your boyfriend stood you up isn’t romantic, it’s idiotic,” Zoya says.

“What do you think, Eden?” Veronica asks, but I’m distracted as we pass a group of girls whispering to each other. I catch the name *Aubrey* and *Did you hear what happened?* before we’re out of earshot. I glance back with a frown, but Veronica links her arm in mine, and I don’t slow down.

The legend of the Narrow is probably exaggerated, but enough people drown—one or two every decade or so—to make it clear it isn’t all talk. And it’s true that, often, the bodies are never found. A few corpses do wash up downstream or near town where the river empties into the Atlantic, though that doesn’t make as good a story.

And it isn’t true that no one has ever survived falling in. But we never talk about what happened that first night we made the jump.

“White! Hey, Eden White!” a voice calls just as we’re nearing the path back up to campus. It’s a sophomore girl I vaguely recognize—Martha or Mary or something old-fashioned. She’s

picking her way along the edge of the trail, dodging bodies. When she spots me, she stops, planting a foot on a tree root. “Oster wants to see you,” she informs me, a tad breathlessly.

Geoffrey Oster is Atwood’s dean. I’ve spoken to him maybe three times in the last six years. As much as it is possible to blend in at a school with fifty students to a class, I do. I’m not an Instagram star like Zoya or an artistic prodigy like Veronica or a future Olympian like Ruth. I’m not like most of the Atwood students—I didn’t come here because of long family tradition, for the access to influence, the leg up on getting into the Ivies. I came because it was a matter of survival.

I can’t imagine what Geoffrey Oster wants with me.

“You’ve been back for like ten minutes, and you’re already in trouble?” Veronica says lightly.

“He wants to see you *immediately*,” maybe-Martha says, and I shift uneasily.

“We’ll see you at the room?” Zoya suggests.

“Yeah. I’ll meet you there when I’m done,” I say, feigning a lack of concern.

Could Oster know about what happened this summer? The only people who could have told him are my parents, and there’s no way they would.

The dean’s office is in the main administration building, a piece of neoclassical architecture utterly devoid of imagination. A few white columns stand in a plodding row and a clumsy frieze depicts an unspecified scholar above the main entry. Inside, things are tidy and functional, with stately wood paneling enlivened with modern art on the walls.

The door to Oster's office is open, the man himself standing in front of his desk with his back to me. He holds his glasses in one hand and is staring at nothing in particular. I knock on the door-frame.

"Miss White," he says in acknowledgment, turning. "Good. Please come in, will you? And shut the door behind you."

I obey, and Oster moves around to sit behind his desk. I take a seat, memories of the last time I sat in this room echoing in my mind.

It would only be for one night. I have a very important meeting in the morning that I absolutely cannot miss.

I've barely sat down when there's a knock at the door behind me, and gray-haired Edith Clarke enters, a manila folder in one hand. I catch a glimpse of the letters WHI on the tab, the rest of my name hidden under her hand.

"Edith, thank you for joining us," Oster says. He puts his glasses on, and I resist the urge to fidget. He's a big man, with short white hair and lively eyes. He was the youngest dean in Atwood's history when he was hired, but that was nearly forty years ago, and now his face is lined with deep wrinkles, his scalp flecked with liver spots. I don't know much about him other than the fact that he's friends with Veronica's parents.

"Am I in some kind of trouble?" I ask.

"Should you be?" he asks in turn, brows lifted.

"I know a trap when I hear one," I reply, and he chuckles. But honestly, I can't think of anything. Sure, I break a few rules here and there. But I've never done anything that required being summoned in front of the dean.

Mrs. Clarke has adjusted the other chair so she's sitting off to the side. Suddenly, the significance of her presence hits me. Edith Clarke is the bursar—in charge of tuition and financial aid. I've never had to talk to her myself, but Ruth is on partial scholarship, and I've walked with her to Clarke's office a few times over the years when she had to drop off a form or something.

"Miss White, I'm afraid we have a situation regarding your enrollment," Oster says, drawing my attention back to him. His hands are neatly folded on the tabletop. I find myself staring at the hair on the back of his fingers. "Tuition must be paid in full before the first day of classes. Yours has not been paid, and despite repeated attempts, we have been unable to get in touch with your parents."

My heart drops, and a sour taste floods my mouth. "It hasn't been paid? At all?"

"I'm afraid not."

I'm afraid, I'm afraid. He keeps saying that, but he isn't afraid, is he? Sympathetic, yes. His voice is syrupy with that. But the fear here—it belongs to me. "What does that mean? What happens now?" I ask.

"My hope is that you can put us in touch with your parents," Oster says. "I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding."

"Our policies are quite clear," Mrs. Clarke adds. "If your tuition is not paid, you are not an enrolled student and you cannot stay in the dorms or attend classes."

Oster looks at her sharply, but I'm grateful to her for just spelling it out. They're saying I can't stay here. I have to go home.

And I can't go home.

"Miss White—Eden. If your family is experiencing some kind of financial hardship—"

I laugh. It's a horrible, choked sound, and it makes them both wince. "No, we aren't experiencing financial hardship," I say. Though if you asked my parents, they might disagree.

Every few months someone posts a rich guy's monthly budget to "prove" that they're barely getting by, and the internet falls on their head. Who the hell spends a thousand dollars a month on wine, has a two-million-dollar house, and considers themselves poor?

My parents, that's who.

I could break down our budget and set the internet on fire for a day, but I know it would only make my parents feel more victimized by the world. *Don't those people understand that these kinds of expenses are necessary for people like us?* they'd squawk.

So no, we aren't experiencing financial hardship, but I know exactly what's happened. You're not rich if you spend all your money, according to my parents, and they find so many ways to spend it. Normally there's still enough left over to cover Atwood, but this year they've had Luke's legal bills, dealing with his "slipup."

Mom is in charge of the bills. She would have been the one to realize that the tuition money wasn't there. And Mom, believing with all her little heart that if you ignore a problem, it will go away, just rearranged her reality so that "pay Eden's tuition" was no longer a thing she had to think about. She wouldn't tell

Dad—she wouldn't want to get screamed at. She wouldn't call the school because that could lead to conflict, too. She'd just wait and hope the money dropped out of the sky or the school forgot to collect.

"What are my options?" I ask. My throat tightens, but my words are steady.

Mr. Oster is silent a beat. "As I said, we can try to contact your parents again. But if they aren't able to settle the balance, you'll have to find other arrangements."

"Tonight?" I say.

Mr. Oster shakes his head. "We're not going to kick you out on the street. You can stay in the dorms for tonight and attend classes tomorrow while we sort this out. It's Tuesday; I can give you through the weekend to get this handled."

The weekend won't be enough. You have to schedule in the time for Mom and Dad to yell at each other about whether to sell the Jaguar or take a chunk out of the retirement account again. Maybe, God forbid, forgo their third vacation this year. Not that it would help, since the deposits are paid and they're already half-way across the world.

"If we could call your parents right now—" Mrs. Clarke begins.

"There's no point," I say. "They're in Bali, for one thing. And I guarantee you the money isn't there."

I guess it isn't entirely Mom and Dad's fault. They might find all kinds of inventive ways to spend their money, but the six figures on defense attorneys to keep their son out of federal prison were at least genuinely unexpected. After all of that, of course they couldn't cancel the Bali trip. They've been so *stressed*.

I'm rubbing my thumb across my upper arm. I pull my hand away, force it into my lap, hoping no one noticed. The bruises there are long gone, but I swear I can still feel them. "Is there financial aid or something? A scholarship?"

"We have a select number of merit scholarships, as you know, but they've been dispersed," Mrs. Clarke says, not unkindly. "And with your parents' income, you wouldn't qualify for need-based aid."

"Right," I say numbly.

"There is another option," Oster says.

Mrs. Clarke makes a noise, almost inaudible. It might be disapproval or merely acknowledgment.

"What other option?" I ask, hope fluttering in my chest.

"There is a parent at Atwood who pays the tuition of another student in full each year," Oster says.

"Like a scholarship?" I ask.

"Not exactly," he says delicately. "I'm talking about Madelyn Fournier."

Madelyn Fournier. As in Delphine Fournier's mother.

My fingers wrap tightly around the arm of the chair. Delphine was in our year. Still is, I suppose.

Delphine was a prim, delicate thing, dressed like a doll. We were assigned as roommates our first year, and from the start, I resented her presence—resented her intruding on me and Veronica, on our private world. I'd wished, fervently, that she would just go away.

In a sense, she did.

Only a day after becoming my roommate, Delphine got sick. Now she lives in isolation in her carefully climate-controlled suite, the only way she can stay healthy. She has her coursework delivered, and teachers tutor her one-on-one outside of class hours. In return, at least as far as the rumor mill goes, Madelyn Fournier shovels money into the school coffers.

Delphine Fournier might as well be a ghost. She has haunted me for six years—the memory of her face, of her pale white hand slipping from mine.

We have never spoken about what happened that night, Veronica and I, but I have thought of it every day since.

“Ms. Fournier has generously offered to pay the tuition of one student in return for their residence in Abigail House,” Oster says. “You would serve as a sort of companion to Delphine.”

It sounds so Victorian. The Delphine of my imagination is a waiflike girl in stays and a white lace nightgown, carrying a candle. I’ve seen her at her window a few times since she got sick—the pale oval of her face, her coppery red hair spilling over one shoulder.

“I thought that Aubrey Cantwell was already at Abigail House,” I say. My voice breaks.

Oster’s eyes jag left. Mrs. Clarke’s chin twitches toward him, but she focuses on me. “Aubrey will be finishing her senior year at her local school back home,” Oster says.

I don’t know Aubrey well. She started at the Upper School—we weren’t Littles together—and she spends most of her free time at Abigail House, which makes sense, since that’s more or less her

job. *Was* her job. Staying there means everyone knows you're a scholarship student.

At the beginning of our freshman year, Aubrey came across as a bit brash, boisterous and energetic. I don't remember whether it changed all at once or bit by bit, but the Aubrey of later years was closed off. She did her work and vanished back to Abigail House. Sometimes I'd catch her staring off toward the woods, her mouth pressed into a hard line.

I remember suddenly the words I heard whispered on the path. "Did something happen to Aubrey?" I ask.

"There was an accident," Oster says.

Mrs. Clarke shifts in her chair.

"Is she all right? She's not—she's not dead, is she?"

"No, nothing like that," Oster says, though his pinched expression suggests the truth is serious enough. "I'm sure you'll hear rumors, so I might as well tell you that she nearly drowned."

The word *drowned* makes me jolt. "In the Narrow?" I ask immediately, though, of course, that is impossible. No one *nearly* drowns in the Narrow. *Except*, I think, and shove the thought away.

"No. Good lord, we would be planning a funeral then. No student has fallen in the Narrow in decades," Oster says gravely. "It was the pool. She was out for a walk at night and fell in. Luckily, one of the security guards saw her and was able to revive her."

"Thank God," Mrs. Clarke murmurs. There is something oddly rehearsed about the speech and about the haste with which Oster moves on, and it sends a prickle down my spine.

“But in any case, her family has decided that it would be best for her to recover at home. It’s left us in a bit of a bind, as it happened so close to the beginning of classes, and Ms. Fournier is adamant that Delphine have a companion for the school year. You would be doing everyone a great service if you agreed. And you wouldn’t need to worry about your tuition.”

I think of Delphine Fournier in the red beret she wore the day she arrived. I think of her in the window, coppery hair spilling over her shoulder.

I think of her the night Veronica and I sneaked out to jump the Narrow. Mud caking her feet, leaves in her hair.

Cold fingers slipping from my grasp.

The Narrow drowns all it takes.

Not all.

“You might prefer to get in contact with your parents after all,” Mrs. Clarke says.

Oster lifts one finger from the table as if to restrain her. As if to say *Let her decide.*

But it isn’t a decision, is it? It’s this or go home.

And I can’t go home.

But it’s more than that. In the last six years, I have only ever glimpsed Delphine Fournier from a distance, through glass. I’ve never had the chance to ask her if she remembers what happened. I’ve tried to put it out of my mind, but it has always been there, the whisper of a question.

“I’ll do it,” I say, still staring at the unyielding face of the clock. “Abigail House. I’ll do it.”

Oster sits back, looking relieved and satisfied. Mrs. Clarke's expression is different. She looks down at the file in her hands, which she hasn't even opened, and frowns very slightly. And then something else passes over her face—something that almost looks like pity.

Something that almost looks like guilt.

Live a lie or die for her truth.

THE MEADOWS

STEPHANIE OAKES

ON SALE 9/12/2023

CHAPTER 1

I glance up at the eye, a shining black bead atop an old telephone pole. I walk briskly through pelting droplets, head bent. A cascade of water skims off my hood.

I show my face again to the bead on the awning of a shopping center, and again to one on the bus shelter where people huddle like cattle.

Each eye, memorized.

Not to see them. For them to see me.

My face.

I've become very familiar with it since I moved to the city. When I arrived a year ago, I found a book about the muscular system, fallen behind the desk bolted to the wall in my room. The apartment block where I live was a girls' college dormitory once. The book must've slipped back there, forgotten by some long-ago student when women could still attend universities.

I hid it beneath my mattress, memorized the meaty striations bisecting my face, the delicate fish fin between eyebrows, the birds' nests encircling each eye. In front of the mirror—hours of practice—working each muscle like a marionette. Now I can make myself look like anything at all.

The face I show the cameras is my most faithful: placid, thoughtless, empty.

I arrive downtown well before my next adjudication. To pass the

time, I sit in a café, scan my calendar. Colored squares fill the screen—different adjudications around the city, documents of profiles and background information on each of my reformed.

My eyes close for a moment, and my ears range the café—plasticore plates sliding against each other, clink of utensils. A soundscape I never could have imagined where I grew up. In the Cove, only the shush of the ocean, carts on a rocky roadway, the scrape of a tiny knife slipping into the tight mouths of oysters, occasionally slipping into the pad of my thumb, a silent gush of red falling through my hands.

Seated nearby, a man some years older than me scrolls through the endless, bright feed on his screen. I watch his fingers fling past pictures. Palm trees forking the sky. A baby held in a man's arms like a loaf of bread. A woman sitting on artificially green grass in the high-necked, bulbous dress popular with young wives.

And then, an image unlike the others. A white building, rounded and hut-shaped, fashioned from opaque material. Against a backdrop of marshy jungle, the building glows. It makes a light all its own.

I stand from my chair. Water that had collected in the folds of my raincoat unfurls to the ground. I barely notice. My eyes, transfixed. That photo. A facility building. Not from the Meadows, but another, shrouded in overgrown foliage. Above the screen, the man suspends his fingers, engrossed in the image too.

Can't believe it's been well over a decade since I last saw the Glades, the photo is captioned.

"The Glades," I speak, and the man with the screen whips his head around, eyes wide. He doesn't know me, doesn't know if he's been caught.

"The Meadows," I say, placing a hand on my chest.

His shoulders dip, relaxing.

"I haven't met many of us," I tell him, though of course it's not true. By now I've met dozens. Hundreds.

The man scans the café for anyone who might overhear. “Not that you’d know,” he mutters.

He’s right. If we’ve made it here, we’re reformed. What happened in the facilities, what they did to us, are closely guarded secrets.

A gold band encircles his finger. For a moment, his eyes trail to my own wedding finger, bare. “They haven’t matched you yet?” he asks.

I shake my head. “They made me an adjudicator. My time’s up in a year, though.” An adjudicator’s term is two years and already I’m half-done. Then a ring will be my fate too.

“You can’t have been out long,” he says.

I pull my shoulders back, trying to appear my full eighteen years. “About a year.”

“I’ve got almost fifteen,” he says. “Mine was one of the first cohorts.” The muscles beneath his face are controlled but too tight. Hiding something. “I don’t understand reminiscing,” he says, gazing again at the screen. “I’d never go back.”

“I would,” I say, surprising myself.

He frowns. “You would?”

And I nod, an unexpected knot forming in my throat.

For them. For her.

Rose.

The night I first saw Rose, the air was dim, blushing with dusty violet, as close as it got to night in the Meadows. Just past dinnertime. The girls would be filing from the glowing walls of the dining room, having eaten their carefully portioned meals. From where I sat inside the yew tree, I could see for miles, a sea of purple flowers, hazy in the evening, stretching for what I knew was farther than a person could ever walk.

The shuttle was a slim black knife, cutting first with its glint, then with

its sound. The rumble up the dirt road meant only one thing: another girl. Her hair, cut short at the sides. Her body, muscular. Stocky. She wore a shiny black raincoat, thick metal zipper laddering up the front—an alarming contrast to the thin white dresses we wore. Most of us were twelve, thirteen, fourteen when we arrived, but she was older. A dart of grief passed through me. The Meadows would strip all of it away. Her body, forced to be still, would lose its muscle, and her hair forced to grow, and that coat thrown out with the trash.

That coat. I didn't know how it was possible but her coat, I could see, was stippled with rain. No rain in the Meadows. No snow. No weather of any kind.

This girl carried rain with her.

Two matrons met her at the door, bulky white figures with a hand hovering over her shoulders. The girl took a few paces, and paused. She turned, so even from the yew tree, I could see her face. For the first time, I had an awareness of how many muscles must live inside a human face. I could see them all, the anatomy of her.

Every girl who'd entered the Meadows wore the same face: wondrous, bright-eyed. Hands clutching acceptance letters. Minds daring to imagine a future of easy breath in these bright halls and purple fields.

Rose's face—nothing like that. Looking like it could grip the sky and rip it in half. Looking like she wanted to.

CHAPTER 2

Neon sprays of weeds and scabby rust-colored scrub covered the rock-side. I picked over the basalt and peeked over the edge of our cliff where, far below, the ocean had peeled back to reveal a circus of tide pools, the violet blush of urchins, pink sea stars holding the rock like grasping hands. The ocean could sneak up on a person there, surging unexpectedly through blowholes in the pocked surface. You had to listen. You had to be always on guard.

This is the place I grew from, this dirt, this sea wind, this salted air. I didn't look at the ocean much in those days. It felt mean, uncontrollable. Now I know about the tides that pull at it, the moon—forces the sea couldn't possibly understand. I imagine it might've wanted to do something different, to stretch long and thin, to muscle inside the hidden pockets of caves and the every-color cavities of tide pools. To feel itself unfold across the midnight depths that nobody else got to touch. Perhaps it threw itself against the rocks for a reason.

The only cause strong enough to pull my eyes toward the sea was the hope of spotting June's boat. I'd known her since we were little, back when I recognized her only by sight, the fishergirl tying ropes, smelling of ocean and guts. She sailed with her father, pulling creatures from the depths, some grown grotesque from radiation. June saved them for me. "A three-headed crab," she'd whisper as we passed each other on market

day. Or, “An eel with one huge glowing eye. Come by later and I’ll show you. But you have to play for me.” And I’d spend the evening at her house, scratching a song from my shabby violin.

That day, it was nearly dusk before June’s boat bounced through the white-tipped froth, returning to harbor.

“Get back to work, Eleanor,” my mother called.

I tore my eyes from the wooden shape of the *Musketeer* and pointed them toward the ground. I harvested crab squash, and a blushing bouquet of sea radish. I reached over to pull up an apple-shaped kohlrabi, spidering green limbs reaching toward the sky. My mother had fashioned this plot years ago from a piece of land that nobody wanted. She’d hauled dirt, forced the ground here to mean something.

I looked at my mother and longed to ask her the question. The only one that mattered. Now and again I would slide it to her across a silent morning or afternoon.

“Where did I come from?”

She’d avert her dark eyes, continue assembling a candle from old drippings or rewiring a toaster there wasn’t enough electricity to use. “Somewhere else,” she’d say, gruff.

This was all she’d ever tell me. The people in town whispered, though. They said that I was left in a linen blanket on the doorstep of my mother’s cliffside cottage, that I’d simply shown up one day, a squalling pink bundle so incongruous in this windswept place. They said that I didn’t really belong to my mother.

This, the earliest knowing I had, reinforced every trip to market where people would stare and then not, and my mother’s face was still square-shaped and mine still soft and round. Even before I had words, I already knew I was not meant to be in that place.

Nearby, there was a tree, just outside the cottage. My tree—a craggy maple, clawing at the cliff, always threatening to send a root into rock and

crumble us into the sea far below. “Shouldn’t even be here,” my mother complained, kicking at its leaf-fall each autumn.

The tree was not native to the area—leaves with points like daggers that flushed crimson in autumn—suited to a different climate, perhaps even from across the sea. How it came to grow in that spot, no way to know.

I’d imagine, though. A green seedpod blowing in on a strange, wayward wind from northern parts. Or clinging to the wagon wheel of a traveling man trading radishes and copper trinkets, unsticking when it arrived in the Cove. Or carried in the pocket of a girl fleeing her town as it receded under water, like so many towns had in the decades before I was born.

The tree and I were both transplants, growing in dirt not our own. We were both meant for other things.

On the cliff nearby stood our cottage, abandoned for years before my mother made it a home. “How’d you do it?” I would ask her.

“No choice,” she’d say. “Nowhere else to go. Nothing to do but make the most of it.”

“Look at you now,” I’d said once, smiling.

“Look at me now,” she’d grumbled. “I’ve got a shack, a deviant maple tree, and a plot of rock the size of a football field that really, *really* doesn’t want to grow carrots.”

I didn’t reply, didn’t put voice to the flare of pain that filled my chest, didn’t say *But you’ve got me*. Instead, I asked, “What’s a football field?”

She waved me off, in that way of adults when they didn’t have the energy to explain about Life Before.

I placed the vegetables I’d gathered in my mother’s knit sack. There was an oval of dirt printed just above her cheekbone, placed there by one of her thumbs, those tiny squared trowels. I lifted my own thumb, already calloused and careworn at twelve, and, without thinking, placed it on the dirt-shape on her cheek.

She swatted my hand away.

“I just—I wanted to see if my thumb would fit. If our thumbs were the same size.”

“You can see plainly that they’re not,” she said. And with that she bent at the waist and meshed her fingers into the winding petals of lamb’s tongue.

People lived like this now, like ancient pictures I’d seen of feudal times, women bent over, plucking bits of wheat from a field, their task stretching for acres. I wonder if they ever recovered from a life facing the ground.

At sundown, too dark to work, we walked the short distance to our cottage, folded our limbs onto the threadbare couch, and turned toward our state-provided screen to watch dispatches from the city. The screen flickered to life, the picture ebbing and flowing with the unreliable current of electricity. The announcers were never named, but we knew they were important—messengers for the state. The women especially resembled each other, like dolls pressed from the same mold, merely in different colors, with glossy hair, thin limbs, delicate features. Not like in the Cove where people had the option of growing wild—fishermen with beards to their sternums, women whose faces were cracked by weather and time. A very few wore makeup and tamed their hair, but most didn’t bother.

This night, two announcers spoke in front of a blurred white background. A man with a waxen face, as though carved from soap, and a woman whose brown skin was buffed with makeup. The dispatches had told us that, during Life Before, all people hadn’t been treated equally. But, by the time I was a baby, the state had officially eradicated discrimination based on race. Their words, the certainty of them, reassured me, even as they snagged in my mind.

On our screen, the announcers said what they always said. *We’re working hard to fix this. We care about each of you, so much.* The tone was of a parent consoling a sick child. What was wrong in our country was a

malady that needed to run its course. *We are so sorry for your hunger, for your aches and pains. If we could take them, we would. If we could put them into our own bodies, we would. We are trying our best.* My mother made a gruff sound with her throat, but she didn't speak her true feelings, though there were no ears in our cottage. Illegal, to speak ill of the state.

I knew what she thought already. My mother didn't approve of the state, though I always wondered why. They'd saved us after the Turn, when nature rebelled, swallowing whole cities beneath oceans, the sun burning so hot, it turned much of the country to wastelands. The Turn happened slowly. People could ignore it, put it out of their minds. And then, fast. The country collapsed within a few years, and for a long time, all anybody did was survive. Until the Quorum took over.

My favorite part of the dispatches was any mention of the facilities, the schools where the most remarkable children in the country were sent. I watched hungrily for the occasional video of a child tearing open their letter of admission. "Congratulations! You have been accepted to the Estuary, a place where the best and brightest of our country learn to burn even brighter."

I'd never been in a car—had never traveled beyond the Cove—so the dispatches were my only means of seeing how others lived. Sometimes, enormous houses out of my dreams—screens that took up whole walls, slick self-driving cars shaped like bullets, bowls mounded with fruit in colors brighter than anything we got at the market. Other times, dim huts, worse off than any place I'd seen in the Cove. And it was those that gave me the greatest thrill. Because *any* child could be chosen for a facility. The state knew each of our names, could track us on satellites and cameras affixed to roofs and defunct telephone poles. The algorithm conducted intelligence tests just by watching us handle everyday problems, Mrs. Arkwright told us, always compiling and weighing results.

It didn't matter where the child was going—the Estuary, the Pines, the

Archipelago. Their faces beamed when they opened their letters. Parents wrapped them up, crying proud tears.

That is how I grew up, dreaming of a place beyond the Cove. Each night, lying beneath my woven blanket, wishing alternately for June, imagining the soft places of her, imagining her touching the soft places of me, and for one of those letters. Wishing with every muscle of me, every cell.

There was no camera crew like in the dispatches, but otherwise it happened remarkably the same. Thick envelope, an unbelievable white. Same words: *The Meadows, a place where the best and brightest of our country learn to burn even brighter.* Same gasp from my mouth. Same eyes searching for my mother's. There, the comparison ended. No joy in her gaze. No feeling at all but a sullen mouth, drooping in a familiar frown. I swallowed disappointment. No matter, I told myself. In days, I'd be gone.

The Meadows. I tasted the word.

Next morning, I ran down the hill, through fields of waist-high thistle that scratched my fingertips, toward the market square, ignoring the threat of gopher holes that could snap an ankle in a heartbeat. Had to reach the dock before the boats went out.

I pulled up in the market square, huffing. There—her father's boat, still rocking against the dock. June would be here soon, in her leather overalls, waxed and thick-smelling from seal fat, but beautiful. Perfect.

The square felt strangely hollow, market stalls covered with tarps, the only sound the wind faintly flapping a canvas poster hanging above the marketplace. The poster was secured to the wall of an old brick cannery. Stenciled across the top, in enormous red letters, *Strong Families Build a Strong Nation*, and beneath that a giant-sized illustration of a family. A man, smile cutting his meaty pink cheeks. Beneath him, two white children, plump and healthy-looking, one boyish and one girlish in the

obvious ways, blue gingham and pink gingham, as though masculine and feminine were perfect inverses. And beside them, a woman.

For as long as I could remember, my eyes had drawn to her. Her gaze was positioned permanently sideways, peering adoringly at the man and children, her mouth red-glossed and smiling toothlessly. Something in her carefully arranged face felt like a riddle I could solve, if only I looked long enough. One of these days, she'd break character and show me who she really was.

"You're leaving."

June's raspy voice. It sent a shiver through me. She stood in the doorway of an alley, backlit by sun. Her hair made a fraying halo around her head.

"Not till tomorrow," I said.

June's face was downcast, a wrinkle between her brows that had deepened in the last year since her mother had died. June's mother, smile eternally dimpling her amber cheeks, voice slightly accented from the island where she'd been born, had come here after that same island was erased by the sea. She fell for June's father, with his scrub of red beard and fair skin permanently flushed from the wind. After June's mother died, he remarried within the legally permitted six-month grieving period. It was customary.

June's face was already becoming copper like it did every summer, a scattering of freckles across her nose. The color she got from her mother, the freckles from her father. I thought about this often, the particular blending of features, and how much more sense June made, knowing what she was made of.

And me. Who did the brown of my eyes resemble? Who the lobe of my ear? Who the squirming in my chest, longing to be free?

"When did you get your letter?" June asked.

"Last night," I told her. "News travels fast."

“Stella the spinster’s daughter chosen for a facility—bound to be the thing on everyone’s lips.” She cocked her hip to the side. “What’s it called? Oh, yes, the *Meadows*. Sounds lovely.”

“You could be happy for me,” I suggested.

The intensity on her face melted a little. “It’s just that I’ll miss you.”

“You’ll miss me?” Most of our lives, we never went more than a day without seeing each other, in the market or at the schoolmarm’s. Still, I felt a punch in my heart from surprise.

“Of course I’ll miss you,” she said.

Sometimes, on community devotion day, my mother would have us trudge to the rough-hewn sanctuary building for a service. The state had eradicated every shred of religion, but this was allowed, this sitting together in silent thought. It was always hair-pullingly dull until my favorite part, the Wanting Hat. Down every bench, the brown felt hat passed between hands—gnarled hands and salt-chapped hands and young hands not yet thick with calluses. The hat filled with whispered wishes, hushed desires. When it was my turn, I’d lower my mouth to the hat’s empty hollow, and wish for June. To do what with, I hardly knew. To be close to her, was all. Facing her in the market that day, I wondered, had she ever wished for me?

“What will I do without you? Nobody else cares about my daily catch,” she said. “Who else will I show the fish with no eyes?”

I smiled. “Who else will play music for you? Who else will draw you crass pictures of Mrs. Arkwright on their chalkboard? Or pick you a flower from the field and put it behind your ear before you even notice?”

Her face brightened as I spoke, then clouded, like the sky does. “No one.”

The buoyant feeling in my chest dissipated. I had always thought of June as permanent. Imagined our childhoods stretching out before us—walks among the junipers and cliff-diving and one day being brave enough to reach out and touch her skin.

“We could’ve had all our lives,” she said. “We could’ve had a million years.”

I took a step closer. “I’ll see you again—” I started, but bit off the rest. I didn’t know if it was true. Instead, I looked around, and walked backward into the alley, unobserved by any villagers. “Come closer.”

Her face rearranged, a smile breaking through her dubious expression.

When she moved close, I leaned near to her ear, cheek brushing hers. “June.”

I felt her shiver beneath my breath. Slowly, I moved my mouth from her ear, and she moved her mouth to mine. Our lips touched, softly. She moved closer, the movements like an unwritten language that we never needed to be taught. I cupped her bottom lip in my mouth, held it like something precious.

Five years have passed, and it occurs to me, the most miraculous thing about that moment: not June’s breath in my mouth. Not the current that arced through my body. Not the way she looked at me when our lips pulled away, her eyes wide and wondrous and reinventing the world.

Just this: Not once, not even for a second, did I think I was doing anything wrong.

YOUR LONELY NIGHTS ARE OVER

"Twisted, hysterical perfection—I couldn't read fast enough to outrun this killer thriller."

—RYAN LA SALA,
bestselling author of *The Honeys*



ON SALE 9/12/2023

CHAPTER ONE

DEARIE

I'M PROBABLY THE ONLY person in school not obsessed with that Sandman show. I can't escape it. Popular kids, nerds, teachers, janitors—since the show dropped, everyone's become an amateur detective. Yesterday, AP Bio didn't start for fifteen minutes because Mr. Kirby was theorizing about the killer's incomplete shoe print. He and my best friend, Cole Cardoso, went on and on about how modern technology could recreate the print better than seventies computers (if only the evidence still existed).

"It's a shame San Diego PD didn't keep better records before the FBI got involved." Mr. Kirby sighed.

Cole was trying to convince Kirby that Mr. Sandman knew someone in the force—a father or friend—who messed with the evidence. But Mr. Kirby just shook his head. "Never ascribe to malice what can be explained by incompetence."

Cole rolled his eyes. "Corrupt *and* incompetent, then."

Mr. Kirby clumsily tied his obsession back into the bio lesson for the day, but nobody was mad at the distraction.

For the first time in his teaching career, he had his students riveted.

Anyway, because Mr. Sandman was never found, this show has my classmates thinking he's behind every corner. But the slayings happened in San Diego, California, and this is Stone Grove, Arizona: a rusty, dusty canyon town of twenty thousand. A lonely place to live, sure, but unlikely to see the return of a famous boomer slasher. I don't blame people for gossiping. They like thinking something exciting could happen here.

But Stone Grove isn't that special.

Which is why I'm not bothered about these death threats that have been popping up. They're a prank, as simple as that. Today, Queer Club is meeting about the texting drama during free period, and I'm here to make sure they stop believing the whispers that Cole and I are behind these anonymous texts. This happens a lot—people blaming us. Looking cute and inspiring jealousy are kind of our thing. But death threats? That warrants a public denial.

Maybe we should get publicists! High school reputation publicists should be a thing, but until that day comes, I have to make my own statements. So here I am in room 208, the Queer Club's regularly reserved space—where the band and choir rehearsed before they built the new auditorium. It's a theater-in-the-round classroom with desks scattered across three levels of crescent-shaped stadium platforms. Since the

auditorium opened, it's become a flex space, either for clubs or a quiet study area—which is why I'm a stranger here. I study in my own time.

Just kidding, I have extremely bad senioritis.

Actually, that's also a lie. I got early acceptance to my top-choice theater school in LA, so I don't have senioritis; it's more like *I'm ready to leave this town so I can start living my life*—itis.

"I didn't see you at the meeting last week," says a pretty, upbeat white girl with long, silvery hair. Her name is Em. She's a trans sophomore whose cheerleading social circle has never quite bumped into mine—which is a circle of just me and Cole. Em and I wait alone in the cavernous classroom, which usually hosts a dozen Queer Club members but so far is shockingly empty.

Typical. I finally come back to this damn club and everybody ditches.

"I used to come to these Queer meetings when I was a freshman, but I just wasn't a joiner," I admit, brushing on a coat of cherry ChapStick. Em nods in awkward silence at her desk atop the room's highest platform. "I'm Frankie Dearie, but everyone just calls me Dearie."

Em smiles. "I know. You're a big-boy senior now." Her brow furrows. "Boy, right?"

Chewing my lower lip, I give my outfit a cursory scan: a black cropped tank with cutouts on the sides, calf-high

boots, and a sheer lilac bandanna worn tightly around my throat. I snort. “Yeah, boy, but . . . I’m figuring it out.”

Em sighs into her resting palm. “I feel that.”

Tick. Tock. Where is everyone? Where’s Cole? He was supposed to be my buffer.

Em taps her pen against her cheek, watching me, clearly about to ask what she’s wanted to since I sat down. “You know . . . It’s okay if you did it as a prank—”

“JESUS,” I groan. “We didn’t send those threats.”

Em throws up innocent palms. “Hey, I thought it was kinda funny . . .”

“Believe me, if it was us, we’d claim credit by now. Our primary goal is always attention.”

Em returns to her phone, and I return to mine. No response yet from Cole to my *HELP MEEEEEE, ARE YOU CLOSE?* texts. I open a saved screenshot of the reason I’m sitting here in purgatory: the death threat texted from an anonymous number to two members of Queer Club.

Your lonely nights will soon be over.

Mr. Sandman used to mail the words in a note to his victim the day before he killed them. If you saw that message, you were as dead as hamburger in twenty-four hours. On the bodies, he’d leave a second note—*Your lonely nights are over*—closing the deadly circle. That’s how the news gave him the

name Mr. Sandman. It's the title of a creepy 1950s song that uses that "lonely nights" lyric.

So, half a century later, two states away, and after a show glorifying the killer starts streaming, this cursed message is sent to two of the most exhausting people in school: Grover Kendall (Queer Club's secretary) and Gretchen Applebaum (treasurer). Now those two believe they're either hours away from being slaughtered or the victims of a cruel prank.

Grover, Cole, and I used to be friends years ago (all of us in Queer Club used to be, actually), but it got complicated in middle school, and by high school, Grover had such a falling-out with me and Cole that he will now never miss an opportunity to shit-talk us. Who knows what Grover has been saying privately, because the dirty looks we get in public are constant. His bad vibes for us are so well known that all he had to do was put out a TikTok saying he's the victim of bullying and the whole school jumped to us as suspects.

I thought that Cole and me showing up at Queer Club would smooth things over, or at least help everyone see the truth: we don't care enough about these people to prank them.

Yet here I am, with no Cole, no Grover, and no Gretchen. Nobody but me and Em.

"Is this the L . . . GT . . . B club?" asks a small, dark-skinned Black freshman who has wandered inside the classroom. A janitor with a bushy mustache holds the door open for him.

Em perks up. "Yep!" The boy cautiously hugs his

overstuffed backpack. “Well, it’s just G and T so far.” She chuckles. “I’d love a G&T.”

I courtesy-laugh, and she can tell. Her face falters. “I’ve never had one. My mom, um . . . loves them.” She groans to herself. “Ah, God, I gotta get out of this town.”

“SAME,” I mouth to Em.

The freshman boy has already left, in—I can only assume—fear.

The door bursts open again, and my heart lifts. Cole Cardoso, an eighteen-year-old boy with light brown skin, a swoop of inky-black hair, and a sharply handsome face, sneaks in wearing a maroon bomber jacket over a tightly fitting white tee. A gold chain drapes over the top of his muscular chest. At the sight of him, I thrust my fists in the air victoriously. Em starts compulsively brushing her hair. Cole’s beauty can be debilitating.

“Thank God you’re here,” I moan luxuriously.

“Got behind, sorry, was running to my venting music,” Cole mutters as he slips his AirPods into their case. His tone is oddly self-conscious. He eyes Em like she’s an enemy combatant, which isn’t surprising. I dragged him back to this club, which is probably still nothing but snippy, humorless debates or news about the latest inhuman bill from our ogre congresspeople.

“I thought there were like ten people in this club?” Cole asks.

“Right?” Em laughs. “This is my second meeting.”

“Apparently, it’s down to just us three,” I say, hugging my bestie. He certainly smells like he’s been running, and his hands are bone-cold, so he must’ve been outside. Even in a desert town, February gets chilly.

Cole doesn’t sit. His sculpted eyebrows arch as he scans the room. “No one’s here?” he asks. “Byeeeeee. Dearie, let’s go.”

“Maybe they’re running behind!” I open my phone to text Lucy, the club’s vice president. “Five more minutes and then we’ll go.”

Cole boops my nose. “We don’t need to be here. You’ve been manipulated. We didn’t send those threats, and Grover made this a character assassination because he’s a jealous FLOP.” My friend sighs, as if disappointed in me. “The Flops called the shots and you came running.”

I can’t even look him in the eyes, that’s how correct he is. “Then why did you come?”

“Every statement you make on this rolls the dice with my reputation too.”

My ears get hot. I forgot again.

When you’ve been best friends as long as Cole and I have, it’s easy to forget you’re not twins. Well, it’s easy for the white friend. As time has gone on, more every year, I’m reminded with a painful spasm that Cole is not my twin and this bullshit jealousy people have for us lands differently on his shoulders.

“I was gonna deny *everything*,” I whisper, hooking Cole’s pinky in mine.

Smiling, he takes my frail shoulders in his strong hands. “You have a soft heart, and snakey bitches can smell that. They’ll tell you how scared they are. You’ll apologize even though you had nothing to do with those threats. But not on my watch! If I hear one ‘I’m sorry’ leave your lips, I’m going to sit on your face in front of the whole club.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.” I kick his shin playfully.

Em stares, wide-eyed, and my smile falters. “He’s kidding!” I tell her. “We’re just friends.”

Em holds up *say no more* hands, but Cole says, “See, that’s the stuff I’m talking about.”

“What stuff?”

“*We* know we’re friends who talk sexy for fun without it meaning anything. You care *so* much about how you come across!” Tsk-tsking, he slips off his jacket and gets comfortable next to me.

Chewing her pen, Em asks, “So, who do you think sent those death threats?”

“Who?” Cole asks, flipping hair from his eyes. “How about they sent them to themselves?”

“Why would they do that?”

“For the *attention*?” Cole snorts, as if he’s the only rational person left on earth. “This is something everyone in

a so-called Queer Club should be suspicious of: attention-seeking. That's what we are. That's what we do. It's the oldest motivator in the book besides, like, money."

"I mean, that could make sense," I say. "Grover and Gretchen feel invisible."

Ever since Grover made that video where he sobbed about what he called his "death message," I've had this lump of dread in my chest. Grover's *not not* cute, and his vulnerability about feeling unloved made him . . . I don't know . . . I got this overpowering impulse to take care of him. But was that his intention? A thirst trap of guilt?

To paraphrase Ms. Spears, there are two kinds of people in the world: ones who attract through confidence and ones who attract through self-pity.

Cole is the epitome of one, Grover of the other. That's why they're perfect enemies.

Em, deep in thought, slaps her pen against her open palm. "There was no tragedy mask."

"THANK YOU." Cole thrusts his hands toward her. "Where's the tragedy mask?"

"Wait, what?" I ask.

Cole scoffs to Em, "He doesn't watch the show." She smirks, seemingly pleased to finally have an inside track on Cole that I can't access.

"Sorry I'm not a death addict like the rest of you," I say, playing with my neckerchief. "Explain the tragedy mask."

Cole takes my hands and brings them to his lips. “My sweet friend, you live on Jupiter. It’s the poster for the show. The main symbol of the killer. Mr. Sandman signed all his victims’ messages with a doodle of a tragedy mask. You know, the theater kind . . .” Cole scrunches his face in an exaggerated frown. “The few witnesses and survivors all saw Mr. Sandman wearing the mask. It’s his thing, and it is *not* present in the fake-as-hell messages those Flops sent to themselves.”

“But . . . that was in the seventies. He’d be a grandpa now. What if he can’t master a phone, and this is the way he does messages now, with no doodle?” Cole’s blank stare cuts me deeper than any words could. I run my hand through my mop of dark curls, embarrassed that I’m taking this circus remotely seriously. Standing, I pull on my black leather jacket that’s decorated across the back with hot-pink roses. “Okay, enough scary stuff, no one’s coming.”

“Thank GOD!” Cole bellows. Even Em seems grateful someone finally made the decision to pack it in. She slides her notebook into a canvas tote and flings it over her shoulder.

Leaving the room how we found it—lights on and door open—the three of us step into the empty hallway. Large shafts of afternoon sun cut through the circular overhead windows, casting spotlight shapes across rows of hunter-green lockers. In the distance, a smattering of footsteps

squeak over the linoleum, but otherwise, for two in the afternoon, there's surprisingly little going on.

Cole and I sling our arms around each other's waists, as Em tags along two paces behind. "Ugh," Cole says, "dealing with Grover was so much easier when we were kids, and I could just titty-twister him into shutting up."

I elbow him and whisper, "I'm sure he'd love it if you did that now."

"I would jump into traffic first."

"Maybe he just needs some smooching to calm down."

Cole squints. "Dearie, guys who do the wounded sparrows thing are manipulators. If you fall for it enough times, you're gonna marry some dickhead who controls every breath you take."

"Okay, harsh!" I flick his ear and he hisses.

"I'm sorry! He's just . . . Ugh, Dearie, don't like Grover. He sucks."

"I can handle myself." I lace my cold, slender fingers into Cole's, which are warm and soft, despite all his dead-lifting. Cole is sporty, but he also knows proper skin care.

We swing our arms lazily. Em is probably baffled about what our deal is. Most people are.

"Don't worry," I whisper, "I'm not marrying anybody until I'm fifty."

Cole's dimples pop. "Me, right?"

I nod. "For the taxes."

Our chortling is interrupted by a flurry of footsteps. Ms. Drake, a fortysomething white woman in a blue polka-dotted jumpsuit, rushes past, clattering her hip against the school's double exit doors before running into the parking lot. A gust of bitingly cold wind rushes in.

"Ms. Drake?" Em calls.

Ms. Drake is our librarian and the Queer Club's faculty sponsor. Whatever her reason is for not showing up today, something has her terrified. She shouts into her phone: "HELLO? We need an ambulance right away! Stone Grove High School!"

Every muscle in my body freezes.

By the time Em, Cole, and I look at each other, the screams begin.

We turn toward the sound. Students are clutching their faces as they run sobbing down the corridor—away from a place we can't quite see. "A shooter?" I whisper.

"We would've heard shots," Cole whispers back uneasily.

I can barely speak with this lump of fear in my chest. "What do we do . . . ?"

Cole's grip on my hand tightens as the three of us wait against the lockers.

My mom is a detective. If I text her, maybe she can get here faster? Slowly, with a sweating hand, I open my phone to text Mom, when Ms. Drake bolts back inside.

“They can’t be dead!” Ms. Drake mutters to herself as she rushes past us.

Dead. Who?

“Get out of here,” Cole says, pulling me away urgently, but I rip free and sprint after Ms. Drake, her courage contagious. I have to help. Cole yells, “Dearie, wait!” and chases me until we round the corner.

A dozen students swarm around someone on the ground whose tennis shoes stick out of the crowd like the legs of the Wicked Witch’s sister under Dorothy’s house. The shoes squirm on the ground, so whoever it is, they’re still alive. As Ms. Drake parts the group, a young boy with thick glasses and light, tawny-brown skin runs out, sobbing incoherently. It’s Benny Prince from Queer Club. A crimson streak of blood stains the shield on his Captain America shirt.

“Benito?” Cole asks, horrified, as he stops the boy. “Oh my God, you’re bleeding . . .”

“Cole, he’s . . .” But Benny is in too much shock to finish what he was saying. He whispers something softly in Spanish and Cole nods, his eyes laser focused.

“Then whose blood *is* it?”

Another person wrestles free of the crowd: Lucy Kahapana—a small girl with light bronze skin, a side-buzz haircut, and rumpled skater boi clothes. Her hands are stained red, and her eyes are puffy from crying.

“Lucy, what happened?” I ask, stepping into her path.

“We need an ambulance!” she shrieks as she moves to run down the hall. But almost immediately her sneaker slips, sending her hurtling backward into me. Before I can correct my balance, we both collide with the linoleum. Pain rockets through my shoulder. From my vantage point on the ground, the crime scene becomes clear: two more Queer Club members—Mike and Theo—crouch over a boy shaking uncontrollably, sitting with his back against the lockers. The shoes I saw. It’s Grover—I recognize his blond hair and beefy arms. Ms. Drake shushes him. He’s alive but drenched in scarlet. Barbed wire is wrapped around his neck like a noose. Puckering gashes have turned his throat into a waterfall.

It’s like *Saw*. I’m breathless.

“They’re coming, sweetie,” Ms. Drake says. “Don’t touch it. Don’t touch the wire. Mike, HOLD HIS HANDS DOWN.” Mike does as he’s told and presses Grover’s hands to the floor. Grover fights him—he very badly wants to pluck the barbs out of his neck, but Ms. Drake is right. If he dislodges them, there’ll be no stopping the bleeding.

Grover blubbers in a panic: “He—he—he—had a mask.”

“Don’t talk,” Ms. Drake says forcefully. “Your neck, remember?”

Assurance has swept over her, crowding out any fear or doubt. My fear and doubt, however, aren’t going anywhere.

If someone doesn't come soon, Grover will die—twenty-four hours after getting that text.

Still on the floor, Lucy covers her face as she cries. Cole's confident hands wrap under my arms, and he lifts me . . . but not before I spy another body.

Gretchen Applebaum. The other club member who received a Mr. Sandman message. She lies next to Grover, motionless and ignored. Her eyes stare open vacantly. Her blond pigtails lie soaking in the pond of blood that seeps from the barbed wire wounds across her neck.

She's dead.

At the edge of her body is a note made from sandy-brown cardstock, which sits tented on the floor like a dinner invitation. Written in neat cursive is an unmistakable message: YOUR LONELY NIGHTS ARE OVER. Next to the handwriting is a doodle of a tragedy mask—the symbol Cole and Em said kept it from being a true Mr. Sandman message.

The texts were real. They were a threat.

The killer from TV has found our Queer Club.

CHAPTER TWO

COLE

QUEER CLUB GOT US to come to a meeting after all. After Gretchen's body was taken away and Grover was rushed to the hospital, police escorted the surviving members of Queer Club back to room 208. Almost two hours later, we're still waiting to be questioned.

It's the Slap all over again.

Back in sophomore year, our racist history teacher called the cops on me for slapping Walker Lane—Walker, who hit *first*, had a slap coming after a day of trash-talking. He was jealous I beat him out for captain of the Rattlers. But unlike me, Walker got to go home right away. I was never arrested, but the police interrogation lasted hours. *Hours* spent on a slap. Scariest day of my life—until today.

By the way, that racist teacher ended up getting the chop. Benny from Queer Club did some digging and found out that teacher had a history of aggressively racist tweets under an alt account tied to their personal email. Amateur. And Dearie helped us leak said information to

the superintendent—and to the masses over at his anonymous finsta. For a moment, Benny, Dearie, and I got our old friendship back as we took that asshole down.

Although, today, we're not talking slaps, we're talking murder.

At least this time, there's fingers pointing all around. It's not just me alone, sitting for hours, too terrified to move from my chair. Ms. Drake is being interviewed in the next room, an attached side office we discovered is tragically soundproof. Barely a murmur has escaped that door, even with our ears pressed flat against it.

"They could've at least let us wash our friends' blood off our hands," grumbles Mike Mancini, a short and cubby Italian senior with swooping black hair and a patchy half beard. He's single-handedly destroying the myth of the fashionable queer. No one responds to him. Eight students sit quietly and separately across the raised tiers with at least two desks between, each of us islands apart—except for me and Dearie. I gently pet my bestie's tangled curls, which always calms my heart. He's my pretty, smooth fawn, and after tonight, he and I might need to do our annual hookup, because I've got some seriously bad hormones I've got to release.

I think he needs it too. The more I pet Dearie's hair, the more he keeps staring through the wall at nothing.

Above us on the top tier, Em waits near Theo, a small, white nonbinary senior with short, choppy red hair and a

flair for fashionable bow ties. They'll be questioned first; their parents rushed over as soon as they got the news and are being held just outside. The rest of us either have parents too poor to bounce out of work so quickly, or in mine and Dearie's cases, our parents are involved with the crime. One of my moms is a surgeon currently operating on Grover. Dearie's detective mom is questioning Ms. Drake. As for the other four members, Mike Mancini's father runs the body shop in town, so closing early is a struggle; Lucy Kahapana's divorced mom is a nature photographer, and she's been in Mooncrest Valley all day with no cell service; Benny Prince's dad runs Tío Rio's, a local restaurant and karaoke bar, and is on his way over as soon as his waitstaff can be left alone; the last Flop—er, Queer Club member—is Justin Saxby, a senior I've mistaken for Grover a million times. Blame it on white-boy-face blindness, but they're both tall and vaguely husky blondies. Only Justin is much cuter (and nicer), with a small shamrock tattooed on his upper thigh.

How do I know about such an intimately placed tattoo?
How do you think? Grow up.

"I just wish we knew if Grover's okay," Lucy moans into her palms.

"Me too," Benny adds.

"He will be," Dearie says lifelessly. "Cole's mom is the best."

I clench Dearie tighter. At least he's talking again.

Dearie's compliment is muted by my worry that while my mom *is* the best, I don't know if medical science has found a cure yet for twenty throat wounds. Half of that Flop's blood was on the floor, and the other half is splattered over the rest of us. If she saves Grover—if he lives to irritate me another day—then maybe we'll have some answers about who did this.

I could've sworn those messages were bullshit.

I'm almost never wrong. I hate this.

"A successful surgery takes at least a few hours," I say, "so the longer we don't hear anything, that's good news."

"Hmm," Justin snorts viciously.

The needle breaks on my Bitch-o-Meter, and I stiffen. "What?"

"Nothing." Justin munches his nails casually. "Just funny how you're trying to care."

I stifle the urge to cuss him under his desk. It's bad enough Justin was a boring hookup (he just lay there like I was supposed to be his masseuse), but now I've got to deal with this attitude?

"I do care," I say.

Theo groans from the top tier, rolling their eyes at Em, who does not return the gesture. Good for her recognizing an asshole when she sees one. Theo is second only to Grover in being the reason why I put thirty football fields between myself and this club. Scolding, self-important closet

Republicans. Just because Dearie and I meet up with boys from other schools—and *not* for little milkshake dates—we’re what’s “destroying the queer community” (i.e., why they can’t get a date). Same old envy-fueled slut shaming from the Pilgrim days, just with a new Pride flag filter.

“Oh, PLEASE,” Mike chimes in, a hungry glint in his eye. “Don’t act like you’re concerned about Grover.”

I raise a finger. “No one’s talking to you, babe.”

“I’m not your babe.”

“Absolutely right you’re not, sweetie.”

“Not your sweetie, either!”

Dearie slowly leans back into his seat, our cuddle time over. The rest of the club awaits my response, but I just roll my eyes. “Mike,” I say calmly, “I know you’re like three seconds out of the closet, but this is how a lot of us talk, so you should know it really doesn’t mean the flirty stuff you think it means. But I respect that you don’t want to be called these names anymore, so I’ll stop and go back to when you didn’t register in my mind in any way.”

He stares, gagged and slack-jawed. Baby’s first reading.

“You’re treating us how you treated Grover,” Justin sneers. “Like insignificant bugs to be squashed.”

“Girl, stop right there,” I say with my deeper vocal register. Dad voice, but without volume. Not loud enough to draw in the doofus cops from outside, but tough enough to make these Flops go silent. Em holds her pen between her

teeth. Dearie is finally alert, a strawberry hue returning to his sun-kissed white cheeks. We must sense the same thing: the club *definitely* still blames us for those messages.

“One Cardoso cuts him up, the other Cardoso sews him up,” Mike grumbles.

Benny and Lucy gasp. Theo snaps their fingers in support of Mike.

My throat tightens. They can’t really think I did this, right?

“Enough!” Dearie barks, his cheeks reddening. My breathing is shallow. Oh God, Dearie, maybe don’t escalate right now.

But it works. Mike visibly cowers. The queer newborn has an obvious crush on my bestie, but his confidence has all the sturdiness of a baby deer crossing an icy pond. Mike licks his lips as his eyes dart around the room. “Just a joke . . .” he mutters.

“Oh, it was a knee-slapper, hon,” I say. “Netflix stand-up special any day now.”

“OKAY,” Lucy shouts, leaping from her seat. She paces the room in some vain attempt to burn off her excess energy. “So happy I’m stuck here listening to my favorite show, a bunch of mean gays complaining!”

“Cole’s the mean one,” Justin mumbles.

“I’m bi,” Mike scoffs.

“Don’t get cute, you know what I meant,” Lucy says,

jabbing her finger. After a deep cleansing breath, tears still hanging in her eyes, she smooths back the unbuzzed side of her hair: “My friend is dead. Maybe two friends.” She shakes her head. “They never caught Mr. Sandman back then. And by the way? The show said his body count was so high because he probably had copycats.” On the ground tier, she spins around to look at each one of us. “Did one of you feel like being a copycat tonight?”

Dearie, Mike, Justin, Em, and Benny glance away. Only the meanest ones present—me and Theo—don’t blink. Lucy swallows hard, her courage plummeting the longer we stare back.

Lucy takes another breath and turns to me. “While we’re here, I want to know what I was gonna ask at today’s meeting,” she says. “Why did you send those messages?”

Emotion cracks Lucy’s tough facade.

It’s difficult to feel defensive around such a brokenhearted person.

“It wasn’t us,” Dearie says, his throat sounding dry.

“He’s right,” I say. “We didn’t send those messages. We were coming here to tell you the truth. Not that we should’ve had to.”

Mike and Justin bristle at my defense, as if they blame me alone, not Dearie. Of course they do. This is going somewhere bad fast.

In the corner, Benny hides his true feelings beneath his

enormous glasses. It's hard to get a read on him from this distance. Mostly, he's been keeping to himself.

"You hated Grover," Lucy says, not breaking eye contact.

"*Hate*," I correct. "He's still alive. And you can think someone's a prick and not want them dead. 'Not liking someone' and 'murder' are two"—I make bunny ears—"different things."

Lucy snorts back tears. "So, where were you during free period?"

Smiling, I lace my fingers under my chin. "I'll save my answers for the detective."

"Seems like an easy question to answer," Theo butts in. "Unless you're hiding something."

"No," I say, flashing my dimples, "I just don't want to validate Lucy's authority to question me like I'm a criminal."

Theo's lip curls. Em giggles into her fist.

Until this is figured out, *all* of these Flops need to get it through their victimized heads that I will not be treated like a criminal.

As Lucy seethes, Dearie stands abruptly. "Cole was running track, listening to music."

"Dearie," I groan. This is everything I warned him would happen if we came to Queer Club today. They'd treat it like an inquisition, and he'd crumble under questioning because he wants to be seen as whatever their version of "good" is.

“What?” Dearie asks. “It’s not a secret.”

I stand up, towering over Dearie and Lucy. “I’m trying to mind my business until your mom—the actual investigator here—needs me.” I turn to the others. Em is the only one not glowering in my direction. “Grover and Gretchen got death threats, and you all accused us without an ounce of proof. That is *serious*, children. Dearie and I don’t need to say a thing to any of you.”

Dearie shuts his eyes and exhales. “You’re right.”

He sits back down, and so do I. “You’re goddamn right I’m right. It’s serious and—given that everyone remembers how I was treated after Walker’s slap—gambling with my life.”

Across the room, Benny nods miserably. He gets it. The others—most of them white—look anywhere but in my direction, as if they’re trying to pretend no one said anything.

Complicity does that.

Dearie plants a quick cherry-scented kiss on my knuckles. I can breathe a little easier.

With a swirl of my finger, I turn the tables on Lucy. “When *we* were here with Em—when Queer Club was supposed to start, where were you all? You’re all such perfect babies, I’m amazed you weren’t five minutes early. And it can’t be because you already found Gretchen, or we would’ve heard the screams sooner. So. Explain.”

So Lucy does. “Gretchen texted me and Theo to meet

her outside fifth period so we could walk over together.” Her shoulders deflate. “She never showed.”

Like an Agatha Christie detective on too much caffeine, my accusatory gaze shifts rapidly around the room. Each time I land on a new Flop, they confess instantly:

“Grover texted me,” Justin says. “He wanted me and Mike to meet him in the cafeteria. He was nervous you were gonna be at Queer Club today and wanted emotional support.”

Grover. No one acts wounded better than him. I wouldn’t trust those cuts in his neck were real without putting my fingers in them.

Now it’s Benny’s turn. He burns holes into the classroom carpet, his jaw angrily set. “I heard Mike and Justin talking about meeting Grover,” he says. “But Grover didn’t ask me for any support.” He holds back tears. “I felt left out. I’ve been Grover’s friend longer than them. I don’t know, whatever. I didn’t feel like going to Queer Club anymore, so I went to the library. Then Ms. Drake and I heard screams.”

Cool friend, Benny.

If I knew Grover was going to live, I’d have said this out loud. Benny deserves real support, not some one-sided friendship. He and I know each other better outside of school. Our parents hang out, and my other mother is their family doctor, so Benny has always been more like my cousin from the other side of town than a friend. Because I’m always with

Dearie, and Benny's on the shyer side at school, Grover probably pissed in his ear about me enough to keep our social circles separate.

But if those two are so close now, why would Grover leave Benny out from his lunch table therapy? Wouldn't he want as many sycophants gassing him up as possible?

"So." I clap my hands once. "Now we know where we all were. Dearie and Em were here on time. I was running laps to blow off steam before coming to this awful, blamey, bad-friend (apparently?)"—I glance at Benny, who cracks a smile—"club."

"And no one can alibi you," Justin says singsong-ily.

Pivoting slowly to Justin, I present him with my open palms. Clean. Unblemished. "A medical examiner will tell you that strangling someone with razor wire tends to leave a mark."

"Ever hear of gloves?" Mike asks.

"Ever hear of deodorant?"

All mouths drop open at once. Mike is speechless. Whatever goodwill I may have gained with the Flops is once again flushed—but I don't care. Sure, it was mean, but what do you call accusing me of FULL murder just because you don't like me or are jealous of how much time I spend with Dearie? Is an insult only mean when it's coming out of a popular boy's lips?

Sighing, Dearie turns softly to Mike. "Cole couldn't

have been wearing gloves. When he came into the room, his hands were freezing. He was outside, where he said he was.”

We share a smile. I’m happy to be vindicated. Less happy Dearie is still taking their arguments seriously, as if they’re based on merit and not jealous Floppery, but whatever.

A door opens behind us.

Benny jumps with a gasp as Ms. Drake walks out of the back office. Her graying dark hair sticks out in wild, exhausted directions, and her blue polka-dotted jumpsuit now features two scarlet streaks down the front, like tire tracks.

My heart thuds. Ugly reality returns, forcing out my petty arguments with the Flops.

“I’m sorry that took so long,” Ms. Drake says weakly. “Your parents should be here—”

The door to room 208 bursts open from the hallway, and poor Benny jumps again. An older, stern-looking white man with a pearly-white beard stomps inside wearing an overcoat. While the door is briefly open, police hold back a swarm of haggard, desperate-looking families. When Ms. Drake sees the old man approaching, she sighs. “Leo, they’re keeping everyone outside. Their parents aren’t even—”

Ignoring her pleas, the man—Leo—wraps her in a hug, which Ms. Drake immediately squirms out of. “Is it him?” Leo asks desperately. “Tabatha, was it *him*?”

“I’m taking you home. NOW.” Gripping Leo by the elbow, she shuffles him outside. She’s so livid, she doesn’t say goodbye.

Who is this guy? Something about him seems familiar.

“Cole, honey?” a strong but welcoming voice calls from the office. Detective Dearie, my bestie’s mother, stands in the doorway. She’s as short and raven-haired as her son, but where my friend is paler, she always sports a rich tan. She has impeccable nails and wears a crisp indigo pantsuit. She’s compassionate, but it’s her job to make us feel like whatever’s happened, we’ll get through it okay.

At least, that’s how she makes me feel. My back finally unclenches at the thought that, with Mrs. Dearie running things, this will *not* be like the Slap incident.

With a flash of her lavender nails, Mrs. Dearie beckons me into the office, which has been vacant since our old civics teacher retired last year. When I sit, the room feels less like an office and more like an apartment someone moved out of hastily. The bookshelves are blank except for a copy of last year’s student handbook. Mrs. Dearie shuts the door gently, sits behind the desk, and smiles pleasantly before asking, “How are you feeling?”

“Overwhelmed,” I say with a nervous laugh.

“I know.” She leaves a long silence as I dig my nails into the chair’s wooden armrests. “Cole, you and Frankie are . . . schemers.” She winces comically, forcing a small laugh from me. Her son and I have been partners in crime since we could form long-term memories. Before continuing, Mrs. Dearie raps her nails against the desk. “But you’re harmless.”

Why is she tiptoeing? Why isn't she just launching into questions about what I saw?

"Mrs. Dearie, what's wrong?"

"A girl's dead."

I nod. Gretchen, we know. My heart hasn't left my esophagus since I saw her. "Something *else* is wrong."

"Cole, you're the smartest kid I know." Mrs. Dearie laughs hollowly. "So, what I'm not gonna do is ask you where you were at two o'clock, because I'm sure you've got an answer, and I'm not gonna ask why you boys suddenly came back to this club after years of making fun of it—because I know about the text messages."

The air thickens.

Mrs. Dearie pulls on a blue surgical glove and opens Mrs. Benson's side drawer, which should be totally empty. "Because of the . . . rumors, we did a locker check of everyone in the club," she says. "I didn't want to discourage the idea because it might show bias toward Frankie. I don't even think he's been to his locker in months."

I laugh to be polite, even though I'm seconds away from peeing my pants if she doesn't get to the point.

In my mind, that ugly officer's face reappears—tattooed on my brain since the Slap. I have an intimate understanding of when a cop is playing with their food. The coyness, the patently fake ignorance. It isn't them doing me a kindness; it's aimed at unsettling, inducing stress, and getting their target to crack.

With a shiver, I realize Mrs. Dearie isn't taking my statement. I'm being interrogated.

"I assumed we'd find nothing and move on," Mrs. Dearie says, exhaling slowly and reaching into the drawer. "But when I opened Frankie's locker, I found this . . ." Finally, she pulls the mystery item from the drawer and lays it on the desk. An old flip phone—ancient model but new. A burner. Breath flies out of me as her smile falls. "Do you know the last text this phone sent?"

Your lonely nights will soon be over.

We don't need to say it. We both know it's true.

"It texted Gretchen Applebaum," Mrs. Dearie confesses, her chin quivering as she attempts to remain professional in the face of a clue that points to her son as the person who sent the death threat. A threat that has come true.

She has to know this phone was planted. She can't suspect Dearie.

Then my thoughts jump to a logical—if agonizing—conclusion. "Is that the same phone that texted Grover too?" I ask. Steeling herself, Mrs. Dearie reaches again into the drawer, pulls out an identical burner, and places it next to the one from Dearie's locker.

The phones are cute twins. Schemers. Besties.

"This is from your locker," she says.

There it is. Evidence framing Dearie and me for murder.

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