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Virgin State of Mind

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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English

by

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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Abstract

Virgin State of Mind is a literary young adult thriller about a 17-year-old named Charlie who struggles to maintain normalcy in his life in the months following a devastating sexual assault, and how an unexpected reunion with his assaulter one snowy December night sets Charlie on a path toward destruction he may never be able to escape from. Meanwhile, a 17-year-old documentary filmmaker named Isabelle is trying to decipher the mystery of her older brother through her latest movie when suddenly, and unexpectedly, she becomes a part of Charlie's harrowing journey and eventually comes to discover her brother is a broken, malicious force she never could have imagined.

CHAPTER ONE

Charlie

Charlie sits at the back of a booth in a half-empty Mexican restaurant, his nerves frazzled, his stomach in tight knots, his chilly gaze focused on a pair of black iron entrance doors that look like prison gates. The place has a stale, old-fashioned quality, faded paint chipping off the walls, a stickiness to the hardwood floor. Smooth jazz of yesteryear blasts through a slim overhead speaker, and a pungent aroma wafting through the air smells more like moldy trash than fresh enchiladas. He has sat patiently for twenty long minutes, tapping his thumbs against the oval table, sipping his lukewarm water. There's still no sign of his date.

He was supposed to be chatting up a cute boy by now, the first boy he's ever been on a date with. His best friend Lisa insisted all summer he join Grindr, to step out of his comfort zone, take a risk, maybe find his soul mate, and so, after weeks of hesitation, he finally downloaded the app. He had to fake he was eighteen to complete the registration, and spend nearly an hour taking selfies until he found one he didn't hate, and as soon as his profile went live, he was inundated with a steady stream of perverse messages, mostly from men over forty who wanted to know his favorite sexual position. After a few days he considered deleting the app for the sake of his sanity, but that first message arrived from Jack—*can you believe all the weirdos on here?*—and a sudden connection was born. Jack was thoughtful, charming, a bit of a goof. He was achingly handsome, at least based on his profile picture. He treated Charlie like a human being and not an object, shockingly enough. Jack was young, too—twenty-one—a third-year business student at NYU at home in Reno for the summer. After a few days of chatting, Jack asked if Charlie would meet him for dinner, and Charlie immediately replied yes, more than ready to put himself out there, a little bit terrified but mostly excited to meet this special guy in person.

The excitement remained during his half-hour drive that took him outside of Reno and up the steep, winding roads of Mount Rose Highway toward sunny Lake Tahoe, but lingering sadness has taken over him now, in his head, in his heart. Is Jack even coming?

The doors open, and he sees a brown-haired twenty-something guy in, tall and attractive, a dazzling smile, but he has his arm wrapped around a pretty girl. Charlie sits back, drinks more of the water. He's not sure how much longer he should stay. Five more minutes? The date hasn't even started yet, and any potential Jack had is almost gone.

His waitress stops beside the booth. She has black frizzy hair, bright pink lipstick. "Can I get you anything else, honey? A refill on that water?"

"I'm fine, thanks," Charlie says. "I'm waiting for someone."

"How about some chips and salsa? I'll go get you some."

Charlie wants to tell her he already has chips and salsa, the basket pushed out of reach because the salsa's too spicy and the chips taste like plywood, but the waitress is already gone and it's not like he has to pay for it.

The front doors open again. A pasty-faced woman walks in, her baby asleep in a stroller. Still no sign of Jack.

Charlie feels a slight urge to pee, so he slips to the edge of the booth, banging his knee on the table in the process. He tries to pretend he wasn't just a total klutz as he stumbles across the restaurant, dashing his head in three different directions, suddenly lost among tall white pillars and cluttered tables and strangers not paying him a moment's gaze. After a quick chat with a hostess, he discovers a thin, darkened hallway and hurries inside the tiny men's restroom, the size he imagines his freshman dorm will be in a year's time. He does his business and is about to flush when he notices magazine cutouts of scantily clad women adorning the opposite wall, at

least a hundred or more. Most are wearing skimpy bikinis, beads of water running down their tanned chests, each of their expressions seeming to say, “Hey, baby.” He’d like to slip into the women’s restroom, if only to see what kind of eye candy the ladies get, but he’s been away from his table long enough and he doesn’t want his waitress to think he left.

While he washes his hands, Charlie tries to avoid his reflection, but as soon as he tosses the paper towel in the trash, he gets one proper glance at his face before he has time to turn away. His eyes are noticeably bloodshot, and his light blue hoodie looks more feminine under these harsh lights than it did at home. Otherwise, he thinks he looks fine, his gelled blond hair staying in place, his pale skin free of blemishes. He can’t help wish he looked older—most people assume he’s fifteen—but there’s not a facial treatment Charlie knows of that can make him pass for legal drinking age, no matter how much he’d rather be seen as Jack’s contemporary and not as some closeted high school twink who’s never been kissed.

He re-enters the hallway and sees a man standing at the check-in counter, but it’s still not Jack, it’s someone in his thirties with a beer gut, a tuft of gray in his sideburns, and now Charlie is ready to cry. Why go through all that chit-chat, all that foreplay, if Jack was going to stand him up? Charlie knows there will be more guys in his future, but will there be more handsome, take-your-breath-away studs like Jack, more secret mid-week dinners high up on the hill like this one? When he’s not supposed to be anywhere near here? When his dad thinks he’s at Lisa’s?

His phone vibrates, and Charlie pulls it out of his pocket. He hopes it’s a text from Jack, but alas, it’s another one from Lisa, her fifth so far tonight: *Is he there yet?*

He brings the phone down. Starts walking back to the booth, his arms slumped to his side, not in the mood to keep his friend apprised of every development of this disastrous date.

“Take me with you,” Lisa told him the night before. They were tucked away in her second-story bedroom watching a Marvel movie marathon on FX, but only occasionally did they pay attention to the chaotic action images on the screen. All Lisa wanted to talk about was Charlie’s big date coming up on Saturday.

“I don’t think it works that way,” Charlie said. “What are you gonna do, sit at our table and pretend you’re invisible?”

“No, I’ll sit at the table next to yours, silly. It’ll be great! I’ll text you when you’re doing well. And I’ll tell you what you could be saying if things get quiet or awkward.”

“Yeah, that sounds great, Leese. Like I won’t be nervous enough.”

“And I can call you if you need a way out,” Lisa said. She tossed her bag of potato chips onto the floor, the bag of chips she ate all by herself. “I mean, what if he turns out to be a total creep? What if he turns out to be some pedophile who just wants to have sex with you?”

“He won’t be. I mean, you’ve seen what he looks like.” He pushed his back against the tall headboard and held tight one of Lisa’s silk purple pillows. “You don’t need to come.”

“But what if he’s mean to you? Doesn’t treat you right? I want to be there so I can—”

“I’m seventeen,” he interrupted. “I don’t need a *chaperone*, Leese, I’ll be fine.”

Lisa turned off the TV with no warning and rolled over toward Charlie, a startling movement since she’s so much bigger than he is, a monstrous six feet tall compared to Charlie’s measly five-foot-nine frame. She poked him twice against the top of his chest. “This guy is gonna say whatever he wants to get in your pants. You know that, right?”

“Sure he is,” Charlie said, swatting her hand away. “Because all men are evil. They’re all monsters. Is that what you’re saying?”

“No. But you have to be careful, Charlie. He’s four years older than you—”

“Hey, you were the one that made me sign up for Grindr, Leese. *You* wanted me to do this.” He tossed the pillow across the room.

“I know I did. And trust me, I want you to be happy. I want this date to be everything you’ve ever dreamed of. I just...” She pursed her lips obnoxiously wide.

“What?”

“I don’t want you to get hurt, that’s all. What if he stands you up?”

“He won’t,” Charlie said, before he turned the TV back on. “Jack wouldn’t do that. He’s sweet, genuine. He’s... one of the good ones.”

Their conversation continues to play in Charlie’s head as he moves at a snail’s pace across the restaurant. He can’t look anyone in the eye, not the waitress, not the other customers, and instead stares at the brown, cracked hardwood floor. Lisa was right, as it turned out. Why didn’t Charlie listen to her? Why did he think for one second this might actually go well? That Jack would be the guy he so wanted him to be?

He finds his table near the back, and he stops, hesitates, wants to storm past those iron doors and drive back to Reno and pretend this stupid night never happened.

But then he sees someone, a guy sitting in the corner of the booth, his head tilted down, his fists shoved against his cheeks as he peruses the giant menu.

Charlie stays still, trying his hardest not to start trembling, as he brings his phone back up and shoots a text back to Lisa: *Yep. He’s here.* He stares at the guy for what feels like a full minute, before he asks, “Jack? Is that you?”

The guy sits up straight and pushes the menu away, and when he latches his eyes on Charlie for the first time, his lips curl into the dreamiest smile.

“Wow,” Jack says. “You’re even cuter in person.”

CHAPTER TWO

Charlie

The waitress keeps her eyes focused on her yellow pad as she twirls a pen around her fingers. “What can I get you two?”

Charlie huddles in the booth’s corner, waiting for his date sitting a few feet to his left to order first. “Go ahead,” Jack says. “I’m still deciding.”

Charlie glances at the menu, at the fifty choices staring back at him. He doesn’t know what to do. Order a salad and he looks like a wimp. Order a burrito and he looks like a pig.

“I’ll have the chicken quesadilla,” Charlie says.

The waitress takes his menu, and he sighs in relief, like he survived a physics test. She turns to Jack. “How about you?”

“I’ll do the Cajun shrimp burrito. What beers do you have on tap?”

Charlie listens to the waitress list at least ten different beers, and the only one he recognizes is Budweiser. Jack tells the waitress he wants the oatmeal stout.

“ID?”

Jack hands her his driver’s license and she briefly glances at it before giving it back.

When the waitress walks away, Charlie sets his elbows against the table, but he doesn’t know what to do with his hands. He rests his chin against his thumbs, awkwardly, and not until he rubs his palms together does he notice how much he’s sweating.

“You look nervous,” Jack says.

“What? No. I’m not nervous.”

“It’s okay. I’m nervous, too.”

It's a nice sentiment, but Charlie knows it's not true. Here he is, seventeen and inexperienced, an adorable geek at best, facing someone too gorgeous to imagine, a guy who looks torn right out of the pages of GQ magazine. Jack had a handsome profile pic on Grindr, a black-and-white selfie taken in what looked to be Central Park, but in person Jack is a full-fledged hottie. He's not only four years older than Charlie but also half a foot taller, with short brown hair, well-defined cheekbones, haunting green eyes, a sexy bit of scruff. His dark red sweater tightly hugs his muscled chest, and when Jack pulls on the sweater's top, a waft of spicy cinnamon cologne invades Charlie's nostrils.

"So was the, umm..." Anything. Ask him anything. "Did you have any problems on the drive?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know. Like distance-wise?" Nothing he says is making sense. If he could snap his fingers and stop time, Charlie would use the opportunity to slam his forehead against the table.

"No, it's fine. It wasn't that far."

"Good."

Charlie thinks about excusing himself to the bathroom so he can splash water on his face, pound his knuckles against the wall, and return to the table a different person, more courageous and suave. But then Jack shifts to his right and rests his hand on Charlie's shoulder, and the mere touch of the guy's fingers sends a tingly sensation through Charlie's entire body.

"This is your first date, isn't it?" Jack asks. "With a guy, I mean."

"Is it that obvious?"

"A little." Jack moves closer to him.

"A little?"

“Okay, a lot. But that’s okay. I want you to feel comfortable, Charlie. There’s nothing you have to hide, all right? You can be yourself.”

Jack begins to stroke his fingers along Charlie’s shoulder, the touch soft and inviting, but then he drops his hand when the waitress returns with his pint of beer.

“Here you go,” she says, and sets the glass in front of Jack. “Food should be up any minute.”

Charlie waits for him to take a sip, but Jack leans back and keeps his eyes focused on Charlie’s. The staring match is cute at first, but then Charlie darts his eyes away and asks, “What?”

“What do you mean, *what?*” Jack pushes the glass of beer toward Charlie. “It’ll loosen you up. Make you more relaxed.” He pushes his mouth up against Charlie’s left ear and whispers, “Don’t tell anyone, but I may have taken a shot of tequila in the parking lot.”

Charlie isn’t sure how to react to this news. A smile? A laugh? Scold him for needing to drink hard alcohol to face him? He says, “I see. So *that’s* why you were you late. You were too busy getting drunk.”

Jack’s jaw drops, and Charlie’s insides tighten, not meaning his words to have come out so harsh.

“Jesus, I’m sorry,” Charlie says, and he lets out a quiet chuckle. “I didn’t mean—”

“No, no. Don’t apologize.” Jack caresses his index finger against the bottom of Charlie’s chin, then drags it all the way up to Charlie’s slightly puckered lips. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about. That’s the guy I thought you were. Someone who tells it how it is. You don’t have to be nice to get me to like you.”

Charlie flicks his index finger against Jack's, playfully, and narrows his eyes, not moving his gaze away from Jack's. "Who says I want you to like me?"

"Wow. So direct." Jack nudges his fist against Charlie's side, then reaches for his beer.

"Well, then. I guess you don't need any alcohol after all—"

"No, wait!" Charlie reaches forward. "You said I could have some!"

He grabs the glass, and some of the dark foam spills onto the center of the table. He's underage, and he's only had beer a few times before—like on Lisa's birthday in April, and on the anniversary of his mother's death last month, when he drank enough to keep him puking late into the night. He can spot his waitress, that crazy-haired ID-checker who may try to throw him in jail for this, but Charlie sits up straight, and starts chugging the beer anyway. He doesn't take the time to taste it or enjoy it, downing as much of it as he can to prove he's not some witless, spineless, virginal closet case who's here to sweat nervously through his clothes until the greasy food arrives. Charlie gets two-thirds of the beer down before he passes the glass back to Jack.

"All yours."

"Gee, thanks," Jack says. "You left me sips of your backwash."

"Hey, take that back!" Charlie goes to slug Jack, but his clenched fist comes down too fast, not touching his chest or right shoulder, instead landing on top of Jack's crotch.

Charlie pulls away fast, like a jolt of electricity shot through his fingers, and he brings his elbows back to the table in the hopes that Jack didn't notice the obvious genital contact. Charlie presses his lips together. Tries to appear innocent. Thankfully there's no time for Jack to make any accusations because the waitress is back, two steaming hot plates of food on her tray. She hands the wrong dish to each of them, but Charlie and Jack correct the mistake and no more words are said before Jack starts eating his food, showing no dignity of any kind as he inhales his

monster-sized burrito one guacamole-drenched bite at a time. Charlie takes a more restrained route, politely nibbling his quesadilla, which is lukewarm and without the chicken he requested.

“So are you out to your friends and family?” Jack asks, his voice muffled through his loud chewing.

Charlie hoped that question wouldn’t come up, at least not tonight, and certainly not this early in the date. He doesn’t know how much of the truth he should reveal, truth that might make him appear weak, vulnerable. “Uhh, well…”

Jack sets the burrito down. “I’m sorry. That was super personal, wasn’t it?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“You must think I’m a total asshole. Forget I asked.”

“Jack, seriously, it’s not a big—”

“It’s something I do way too much.” Jack leans back, rolling up the sleeves of his sweater. “I speak before I think. It’s why I’m better talking to guys on Grindr. It’s harder to make a fool of myself.”

Charlie moves closer to Jack, sliding his butt down the padded booth, fear still brewing inside of him, but courage beginning to take center stage. He sets his hand on top of Jack’s. “You’re not making a fool of yourself. Quite the opposite, actually.”

“I’m glad,” Jack says, and then he smiles, latching his eyes on Charlie’s again. “You want to know why I asked you that question?”

“Why?”

“Because I want to know you, Charlie. I want to know everything there is about you.”

The staring match goes on and on to the extent Charlie imagines they're playing a game, one of them about to be the victor and the other the loser. But there is no loser here, that much Charlie knows is certain. "I want to know about you, too, Jack."

The waitress appears two minutes later, after Jack's finished his burrito, after Charlie's eaten a quarter of his quesadilla, after Charlie has realized the inevitable, that he might actually kiss this guy tonight.

"Would you like to see a dessert menu?" she asks.

"I don't know." Jack turns to Charlie. "You in the mood for something sweet?"

Charlie can't help but wonder if Jack is referring to something other than food, but when it comes to the dessert front, he is faced with the ultimate dilemma. He's still hungry, even more so since the entrees arrived, and he would happily stuff his face with a deep-fried chocolate treat. But how would that make him look? Charlie says, reluctantly, "I'm okay. I'm pretty stuffed from dinner actually."

"You sure?" Jack asks, before nodding to the waitress. "All right. Just the check, please."

She drops the bill on the table and hauls away the plates. Charlie digs out his wallet. Hunts for his lone twenty-dollar-bill.

But then Jack pushes his wallet aside. "Put that away. I've got this."

"No, no. I'll pay my half—"

"Charlie. Please. Put your money away."

Charlie has never liked being told what to do, not from Lisa, or from his teachers, or especially from his dad, but he's perfectly fine with it now. He lets Jack pay for the dinner—thirty-five bucks, including tip—and they both start scooting toward the edge of the booth, when

a middle-aged woman, wearing a pair of wide-framed glasses, stops in front of them, a professional Nikon digital camera in her hands.

“Hello, gentlemen,” she says. “Hope you’re having some fun here at Abel’s. Would you two like your picture taken?”

Charlie’s mouth opens wide, as he considers her words. The thought stuns him in an instant: he would *love* to take a picture with Jack. But he doesn’t say anything, and he turns to Jack to see what he might say. Jack has a tender grin on his face, and for a second Charlie thinks he’ll agree to the picture, and Charlie will be able to take home a memento from his first date, whether or not he ever sees this guy again after tonight. But then Jack stands up, says, “No, thank you,” and waits for the woman to walk away before motioning Charlie to follow him out of the restaurant.

Charlie pushes his way through those heavy entrance doors and steps into the quiet parking lot, disappointed as to why Jack didn’t want to take the picture, but giddy now that they’re alone. He keeps walking, past his black Toyota 4Runner, past a Camry and a Jeep and a dozen empty stalls, all the way to the red Ford Mustang near the northern tip of the parking lot.

“Well, this is me,” Jack says. He leans against the back bumper.

“This is you.”

He crosses his arms, his sleeves still rolled up despite the surprising chilliness in the summer night air. “Can I confess something?”

“Sure,” Charlie says, with a grin. “Let me guess. You have vodka in your car, too.”

Jack lets out a high-pitched belly laugh, then yanks on Charlie’s sweatshirt and pulls him closer. Soon their chests are touching, Jack’s face mere inches from his. Charlie licks his lips, waiting for an inevitable kiss.

“No, I don’t have vodka in the car. Cheap blow, Charlie.”

“Sorry. Couldn’t help myself.”

“What I *wanted* to confess was this...” Jack nudges his forehead against Charlie’s and whispers, “I don’t want this date to end.”

“I don’t either,” Charlie whispers back.

“So what are we gonna do about that?”

Charlie’s heart starts pounding, and he starts breathing a little faster. “You tell me, Jack.”

Jack nods, stares into Charlie’s eyes a few more seconds, but then he doesn’t kiss him; he steps away and starts walking backward, toward a brown fence that faces a steep hill. “Did you see that park behind the restaurant? There’s a trail that leads to it.”

“A park?”

“Mmm hmm. More of a playground, really.” Jack stops when his legs reach the fence. He waves Charlie forward with both his open hands. “Come on. Come with me.”

Charlie doesn’t take a second to glance back at his car, doesn’t even consider the alternative. He joins Jack’s side within seconds, and before they step over the small fence and head on down to a quiet space they’re about to make their own, Jack gives Charlie a tender kiss on the cheek and grabs hold of his hand.

“Ready?” Jack points to the thin trail that winds down the hill.

“More than ever,” Charlie says, tightening his grip on Jack’s.

“Okay. Follow me.”

CHAPTER THREE

Charlie

The playground's bigger than Charlie realized, with slides, swings, a seesaw, a tetherball pole without the tetherball. A worn teddy bear lies at the foot of a teeter-totter, suggesting kids have been here at some point, but the playground has clearly been abandoned, infested with two-foot-tall weeds, ripped candy bar wrappers, empty soda cans. It's not the most romantic space, not a moonlit walk along the River Seine, but the full moon is out, and the wind is calm, and the cool temperature is perfect for a mid-August night.

Charlie keeps his focus on the tall, metallic swing set they're walking toward—and Jack's ass too, he can't stop staring at it—no words passing between them, the only sound coming from a flock of loud birds darting in five different directions overhead. Jack doesn't so much sit on the first swing but fall onto it, before he lifts his legs into the air and starts to soar. Charlie awkwardly climbs onto the second swing, and as he pushes himself off from the ground, he hopes nothing will happen to make him look stupid or clumsy, or worse, overweight. He stares at the silver chains, looking for any sign of flaws. They're making noticeable creaks, especially the higher he goes, but they appear to be sturdy.

A truck pulls up to the restaurant parking lot atop the hill, but the playground's tucked so far back behind a series of hulking trees Charlie barely notices it. He can make out a light from the restaurant, too, but for the most part, he and Jack are in a small pocket of space effectively hidden from the outside world.

Jack finally slows down and brings his swing to a halt, and Charlie does the same. They keep their heads dipped backward, pushing their feet against the hard patch of dirt below. Jack

clears his throat, and Charlie coughs, and then Charlie manages a subtle smile as he says, “My best friend Lisa knows. She’s known for almost a year now.”

Jack slides his forehead up against his swing’s left chain. “I’m sorry?”

“At the restaurant... you asked if I was out to my friends and family. I’m giving you my answer.”

“*Oh*. Right.”

“Is that pathetic? That after all this time, I’ve only told one person I’m gay?”

Jack shakes his head. “Not at all. That’s way more than I did at eighteen.”

Charlie darts his eyes away, toward a patch of darkness in the woods beyond the playground. He still hasn’t revealed the truth to Jack that he’s underage and still in high school.

“I’m in the same place, pretty much,” Jack says. “A few of my friends know. My sister has her suspicions, I think, but I’ve never told her. My mom would freak if she found out. She has this wish—no, more of a demand, really—that I meet the perfect girl before I finish college and have kids by the time I’m twenty-five.” He stands up, and kicks the swing behind him. “It’s stupid. Gay marriage is legal now. We shouldn’t have to hide anything. We shouldn’t have to pretend to be what we’re not.”

Charlie steps away from the swing, too, and he and Jack start walking toward the closest slide. “Yeah, I’ve been so scared to tell my dad,” Charlie says. “I think he’ll be fine with it. But I’m an only child, and I don’t want him to be disappointed. You know, about no grandkids and all that. At least you have a sister.”

Jack stops beside the slide, which is steep and metal, reaching at least seven feet toward a wooden ladder. “I guess. Even though she’s not *really* my sister.”

“What do you mean?”

Jack coughs, and, clearly avoiding Charlie's question, asks, "What about your mom? Do you think you could come out to her before your dad?"

Charlie stuffs his hands in his jeans pockets. Doesn't say a word.

"What?" Jack takes a step closer to him.

"She... passed away a few years ago."

"Oh. Shit, I'm sorry," Jack says, and he latches his hand on Charlie's arm. "I didn't mean to bring up..."

"It's all right. You didn't know."

Silence ensues, the wind picking up a little as Jack turns away, and for a second, Charlie thinks Jack might leave him there, a sudden tension arising between them he can't deny. But Jack keeps his grip tight on Charlie's, and pulls him closer to the slide. When Jack leans up against it, he slides his hand down onto Charlie's. "Tell me about your mom. How did she die?"

Charlie bites down on his tongue for a quick second, in disbelief. "Really? You want to know about my family?"

Jack pulls Charlie closer to him and wraps his arm around Charlie's waist. "What did I tell you back at the restaurant? I want to know everything about you. *Talk* to me."

Charlie breathes in deeply, not having told the story in at least a year. "She was my everything. She gave her whole world to me, and a life without her never even crossed my mind before that night. I was out of town. I used to play golf in this league for seventh and eighth graders, and we were at one of our away tournaments in Graeagle, up north. We were staying in this motel out of the 1950s, where the water ran brown and cold in the tub, where the pillows had these weird stains, but there *was* a working phone in the room. We got the call at one a.m., on the dot. Someone broke into our house in Reno, through a back window that my dad later said he'd

left open, by accident. The guy only took a few things. A laptop, some jewelry. But he, uhh... he shot my mom in the chest, before he left. He shot her, and she bled out, and we weren't able to make it back in time... before..." Charlie closes his mouth, not able to say any more. It's been four years, and he still can never finish the story.

"Oh, Charlie. I'm so sorry. Did they find who did it?"

"Nope. That's the worst part. There were some leads for awhile, but they never did. The killer's still out there somewhere, leaving his life, probably doesn't even remember what he did to my mom, how he destroyed my family."

"Jesus Christ. That's awful."

"I know. And it hasn't gotten much easier. They say time heals all wounds, or at least that's what my friend Lisa kept telling me at the time, but... I don't really believe it. It's still hard. It still sucks. My dad's never been the same."

"I imagine. I went through something kind of similar."

"Wait, really?" Charlie's eyebrows perk up.

"Yeah, my dad. He died when I was twelve."

"Shit, no way."

"Way. It wasn't a burglary, though. It was something super pathetic."

Charlie pushes his chest against Jack's side. "What do you mean?"

"He went hiking by himself one day. We were on vacation in Hawaii. God, I think that's the last vacation my family ever went on." His hand slides away from Charlie's, noticeably, as he emits a loud sigh. "It's called the Kalalua Trail, in Kauai. It goes through jungles, volcanic slopes, it's absolutely gorgeous. I did it once. But he took off on one more hike, on our last day there, and... he slipped. We found him that night in the rocks down by the ocean."

“Oh my God, that’s insane. You must have been devastated.”

He opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out at first. He focuses on Charlie, turns his head a little to the left. “Nowhere near how you must have been. I wasn’t super close to my dad, but you... *you*...”

“It’s okay, Jack. It was four years ago.”

Jack brings his hand underneath Charlie’s chin, makes a weak attempt at a smile, and says, “Your mom would be so proud of you.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. For... being you. For being *brave*, and staying strong.”

Charlie is suddenly on the verge of tears, the memories of his mother and Jack’s sweet words overtaking him with emotion, and he wants to turn his head so Jack won’t see these tears fall, but his closeness is unavoidable, and only a few seconds pass before Jack drags his thumb across Charlie’s right cheek.

“Charlie, please. Please don’t cry.”

Jack leans forward and kisses Charlie on the same cheek. His lips are soft, and Charlie’s forced to close his eyes. When Jack kisses him again, this time closer to his lips, Charlie drops his hands to his sides, only for a second, before he brings his arms up and wraps them around Jack’s neck. Charlie’s heart starts pounding again, and then he briefly licks his lips before he pushes them hard against Jack’s. The kiss doesn’t break, not for the longest time, Charlie pressing his face against Jack’s like he never wants the kissing to stop, but then he takes a step back and tilts his head down, mortified he actually took charge for once, that he did something he wanted to do without a moment’s hesitation.

“Was that all right?” Charlie asks.

Jack appears in a daze of his own. “Yes. It was perfect. *You* are perfect.”

He dips his head and kisses Charlie more forcefully, this time with his tongue, and then he brings his hand down Charlie’s back and under his pants. Charlie gasps. He tries to catch his breath as this beautiful creature shows him an affection he’s been craving, that he hoped for all day, his first kiss with another boy too perfect for words. Charlie breaks his mouth away from Jack’s again, his whole body shaking, Jack’s hand still grasping his ass tight.

“*Whoa*,” Charlie says.

“Whoa is right.” Jack nudges his forehead against Charlie’s. He starts running the fingers of his other hand down Charlie’s back.

“Shit. Wow.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” Charlie says, sounding out of breath. “That just... feels really good.”

“Well, you deserve to feel good, Charlie. You deserve to feel the very best.”

Charlie licks his lips, more silence filling the space, and then finally, he whispers, “Jack?”

“What?”

“You’re really hot.”

Jack smiles, and kisses him again, first on the mouth, then on his neck. “You’re hot, too. I’ve wanted this since I first saw you in the restaurant.”

“Me too. So much.”

“Good,” Jack says, and he starts pulling Charlie’s shirt up. “I’m glad.”

Jack throws Charlie’s shirt across the playground and starts kissing him on the mouth again, and then Jack’s shirt is off, too, and they’re on the ground, Charlie’s head suddenly

slammed against the bottom of the metallic slide. As Jack runs his tongue along Charlie's neck, Charlie starts to push himself up, but Jack's too big, he's so unbelievably strong. "Okay, okay," Charlie says, and he laughs, he actually laughs, still amazed this guy would even look at him twice, let alone want to touch him and kiss him all over, but then Charlie feels one of Jack's hands pressed against his crotch and the other hand unbuckling his belt and pulling down his zipper. And he's still trying to be calm, wanting so desperately to enjoy this, but then his pants come off, and so do Jack's, and the next thing Charlie knows his underwear's gone. "Whoa, Jack, okay, *stop*," Charlie says, and he slams his fists against Jack's chest but Jack pushes him back down again, his eyes no longer on Charlie's face, his focus instead on what's happening below, and Jack says, "Flip over," and Charlie says, "No," and Jack turns him over anyway. Charlie tries to bring his hands up; Jack keeps them pinned down. He tries to move his legs; Jack's weight stays pushed against them, too. Charlie feels Jack's tongue on his back, then his left ear lobe, and then he hears him whisper, "You want it? You want it?" And then the pain begins, something big entering him too fast, something that shouldn't be there and shouldn't feel like this, Charlie's legs spreading, a hand shoved against the back of his head, and he feels like he can't breathe, too much force against him, too much rapid movement. He can barely see anything before him, only the vast forest surrounding the forgotten playground. Minutes pass, or seconds, Charlie can't tell for sure. Eventually his pain below becomes dulled. Charlie hears muffles and groans from Jack. He can move his hands now, but the desire to push Jack away has long since left. When the movement stops, and Charlie turns over to see Jack already on his feet and pulling up his pants, Charlie doesn't cry, he doesn't scream, he doesn't even demand an apology; he just pulls his underwear back on, not paying attention to the blood trickling down his legs, before he puts on his pants and shirt, too.

“That was super hot,” Jack says. He kisses Charlie on the tip of his nose. “All right. You ready to head back?”

Jack starts walking toward the hill, and Charlie stands up and takes a step forward, wanting to follow him, but the pain is too much, everything from the waist down feeling cut open, violated, exposed. He attempts one more step, but then he collapses back to the ground, both his arms colliding with the corner of the metal slide.

Jack turns to Charlie, his lips pursed. He doesn't come back over. “Hey, are you okay?”

“I'm... fine.”

“Do you need help?”

“No.” Charlie waves him away. “I'm good. I'm *great*.” He forces a smile, then props himself up the best he can. “You know what? I'm just gonna stay here awhile. You go ahead.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It's actually kind of nice out. I'll go back in a few minutes.”

Jack narrows his eyes, then makes a loud sucking sound with his tongue. “Okay. Well, we should do this again sometime. I leave for New York on Friday, so maybe over Christmas break? I'll message you.”

And with that, Jack takes off running, past the swing-set, up the steep hill, back to the restaurant parking lot. There's no intimate good-bye, no final kiss. He's just gone.

Charlie rests his head against the dirt, his breathing heavy, his head already spinning. He stares first at the teeter-totter, then the teddy bear. He notices, for the first time, both of its button eyes have gone missing.

His phone vibrates. He ignores it at first, but then it goes off a second time, and he pulls it out of his pocket. He has a new text from Lisa: *How's the date going?*

More pain shoots through his tired, aching body, and his tears come even faster than before, and as his sobbing echoes into a world of crumbling darkness, Charlie clenches his hands into tight, trembling fists and releases a deafening scream.

FOUR MONTHS LATER

CHAPTER FOUR

Isabelle

Isabelle hates the damn tripod. She hates its weight, its bulkiness, its faulty legs she's forced to kick out before she can safely attach her Canon XH A1 and not worry about it crashing to the ground. She's already in a state of misery, the black clouds not allowing even the tiniest glimpse of sunlight, the temperature so frigid she's shaking inside her five layers of clothing. It's 8:15 in the morning, and all Isabelle wants to do is go back to sleep under her warm covers, no alarm clock igniting, no films to be made, the outside world a distant memory as she happily snores until noon. It's Friday, a school day, and so things could be worse, she could be in Mr. Steiner's AP Physics class reviewing for next week's final. No, she's in no rush to get to school, not today. Especially not with her looming application deadline.

Isabelle shoves the tripod farther down into the snow, the camera already latched tightly to the top, and after she waits a painful minute for an airplane to pass by, she turns on the camera, presses the record button, and shouts, "Action!"

"Action? Seriously?" Her boyfriend Raylon laughs into his gloved hands.

"What?"

"You're filming a house." He steps toward her, his boots sliding through fresh powder that hit Reno hard the night before. "You need to say action when you're filming a *house*?"

"Shh." Isabelle locks her knees together and peers into the camera's viewfinder, her left eye closed and her right eye opened wide. "This isn't just any shot, Raylon, it's an important establishing shot. And plus, I might use some of the ambient sounds. Stay quiet."

Raylon laughs again, this time releasing more of a heavy snort, before he says, "Yes, master, anything you say. When you're done, do you want me to fetch you a coffee, too?"

Isabelle flashes Raylon a measly half-grin, but she's so tired of her boyfriend's sarcasm, she figures ignoring him is the best route to completing her movie, especially today. Yelling at Raylon, even conversing with Raylon, will put a delay in filming she can no longer afford. So she stays focused on the viewfinder, and after a few more unnecessary comments from her boyfriend come and go, Isabelle completes her first shot of the day.

"Cut," Isabelle says, then moves the tripod a few feet to her left. She shoves the legs back down into the snow and zooms the camera closer toward the two-story house.

"You almost done?" Raylon asks. "It's freezing out here."

"Sorry. I need a few more establishing shots. You know how I like options."

"You're a perfectionist, is what you are."

Isabelle shrugs. "There something wrong with that? I think not."

She finishes a second shot of the house, and a minute later she films a third, one that pans down from the dark clouds all the way to the front porch. Then she moves the tripod to the front lawn—where the snow runs even higher—and attempts a shot that starts as a close-up on the two-car garage door and ends as a close-up of the wooden mailbox at the end of the driveway. Isabelle attempts the shot a few times, but she keeps bumping the camera during the difficult panning move, which forces her to re-start again and again. She's completely focused on the fluidity of the shot, when she hears a loud sigh behind her.

"What are you gonna film next?" Raylon asks, his voice deeper, blatant condescension in his voice. "The curb? Their trash can?"

"*Hey.*" Isabelle spins around, nearly knocking over the wobbly tripod. "You don't have to be here. For any more of the filming if you don't want. I made that clear to you last night."

“Do you not want me here?” Raylon crosses his arms and stands up straight, appearing at least six inches taller than his six-foot-four self. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Of course I want you here.” Isabelle keeps one hand on her tripod, as she brings the other hand to her boyfriend’s cheek. “But not if you’re gonna be a smart-ass. Not if you’re gonna crack jokes while I try to do my work, all right? This movie’s important to me.”

Raylon rubs his cheek against Isabelle’s hand, closing his eyes for a few seconds, like he’s pretending to be in a warm private bedroom with the door closed, and not outside in the snow where neighbors up and down the street might be spying on a pair of teenagers who are supposed to be in school. “It *is* important. I’m sorry.” He opens his eyes. “Just two more interviews to go, right? David’s mom, and then your brother? That’s it?”

“That’s it. The movie’s due to USC on Sunday night, then AFI on Monday. I need the weekend to do the rest of the editing, put all the music together. Which is why every second not filming today...” She drops her hand from her boyfriend’s cheek and returns it to the tripod, to complete that next panning shot. “...is a second wasted.”

Isabelle films three more shots, the last of which is an extreme wide of the house, and Raylon not only stays quiet the entire time but even offers to help move the tripod back and forth. Isabelle appreciates her boyfriend’s help, and even though she’s never said the words out loud, she knows she never could have made her latest, greatest film without him.

Since the age of fifteen, Isabelle Pruitt wanted to make movies, and not just any movies—documentaries. Her ninth grade journalism teacher Mr. Massey treated his students not like dumb freshmen but like responsible adult journalists, discussing every day the importance of going after the truth and digging deep into controversial subjects. He showed feature-length documentaries like *High School* and *Spellbound* and *Roger & Me* and *Hoop Dreams* that Isabelle

found to be informative, startling, way more enlightening than any fiction films she had seen. Every week for nearly a year she asked her mother to buy her a video camera, and despite her resistance to Isabelle making movies and her insistence a filmmaking career was next-to-impossible, especially for a woman, especially for an *African-American* woman, she finally succumbed to her daughter's begging and purchased her a tiny Sony Handycam for her sixteenth birthday.

Isabelle made a few short documentaries right away, one about the downtown Reno homeless population, and one about a local theater company producing a young adult version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. When her film about her school's dying band program was accepted to a national youth film competition, her mother bought her a tripod and a much fancier camera: a used but professional, high-definition Canon XH A1. She tried making a fictional film in her junior year about a boy, played by Raylon, who discovers his best friend is a shape-shifting alien, but she couldn't bring herself to finish it because it was badly paced, poorly written, flatly acted. She stuck to documentaries after that, making one about Reno's booming beer industry (her most lighthearted film), and one about female teen suicide (her most depressing and hard-to-watch).

But as Isabelle reached the beginning of her senior year, she grew tired of making movies about subjects that interested her but weren't in any way personal, that didn't have a piece of her own life anywhere between the opening fade-in and the closing credits. And when film school became a serious opportunity, especially when her mother agreed to support her if she received a substantial scholarship, Isabelle recognized she was going to have to make something special for her application movie, a visual sample requirement for her two dream schools—University of Southern California and American Film Institute—to go alongside her personal statement,

recommendation letters, transcripts, test scores. With the deadlines uncomfortably close, she decided to embark on a documentary project she could really pour her heart into.

After she films one last establishing shot, this one of the house's multi-colored Christmas lights strung up along the roof, Isabelle walks over to the front porch, Raylon by her side, and rings the doorbell. They wait thirty seconds, and Raylon rings the bell again.

"Maybe she's not home," he says.

"She's home. I confirmed the day and time with her twice."

"Maybe something came up. The world doesn't revolve around you, Isabelle," Raylon says, in a sweet and loving tone, even though the words themselves manage to sting.

"You know what? Usually I'd agree with you." Isabelle knocks on the door five hard times. "But not today. Not when I have two interviews left. Today, the world *does* revolve around me."

Isabelle rings the doorbell a third time, and then she yanks her phone out of her pocket, ready to dial this lady's number and scream at her for wasting her time, but thankfully she doesn't have to, as a loud honking sound spins Isabelle around toward the street. A large blue Suburban appears, roaring toward them fast, and Isabelle promptly spots Sharon in the driver's seat, a woman she's only met once at a journalism banquet last May, a woman who could make or break her latest film.

The car stops in the driveway, and when Sharon steps outside, Isabelle struggles to stay professional and not start laughing uncontrollably.

"So sorry I'm late," Sharon says as she approaches the porch, the sixty-three-year-old suffering from a makeover disaster. The woman looks like a Barbie doll, her blond hair in long

curls, her lips bright pink, heavy blue make-up surrounding her eyes. She shakes Isabelle's hand. "So good to see you again, Isabelle. Do I look all right? Will this work for your documentary?"

Isabelle's tempted to tell this woman sure, that since beginning the project in October she's been looking for at least one outrageous figure for her movie, somebody who could give her serious film a necessary jolt of humor. But Isabelle drops the idea, knowing full well she's making an important documentary about interracial adoption, about the kinds of unique relationships that exist in the world between siblings like her and Jack; she's not making a lame-brained comedy about failed senior makeovers. Isabelle isn't naïve to think her documentary will be the only deciding factor in being accepted to USC or AFI, but if a final choice needs to be made between her and one other person, male or female, black or white, the required film submission—the *talent*—will be the deciding factor. And she's determined not to screw up.

"We'll talk about it inside," Isabelle says, before she nods toward the front door. "Now, who's ready to make a movie?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Isabelle

Isabelle sets up her camera and tripod in Sharon's living room, where soft shades of light dance against a brick wall, a ceiling fan slowly spins, three vases of fake tulips stay perched on a counter behind the black leather couch, and by the time Raylon has assembled the small but necessary lighting kit Isabelle's used for most of the production, Sharon has removed her excess make-up, now appearing much more civilized and serious for the camera. She's also managed to ask the question Isabelle desperately wanted to avoid, particularly from a grown-up who could make one simple phone call and ruin her week, possibly her entire semester: "So, I'm curious, why aren't you two in school today?"

Isabelle huddles on the brown hardwood floor and searches for her back-up camera battery, trying not to panic or start sweating over its unexpected absence. She has no interest in answering Sharon's question until she finds the pivotal battery she *knows* she put in the bag, *knows* she didn't leave at home still plugged into her wall charger. She's grateful for two things in the following tension-filled seconds—when she locates the battery in a tiny camera bag pocket, and when Raylon takes on the annoying question in the living room.

"Isabelle's documentary has to be done by Sunday, that's when it's due to her schools," she hears him say. "And so we didn't want to chance filming anything after today, especially since you said you're leaving town tonight, right?"

"Yes, that's right," Sharon says, and her tone seems warm and understanding, not combative in the least, but when Isabelle returns to the living room, she sees a slight trace of scorn on the woman's face, her eyes narrowed, a tinge of redness on her cheeks, suggesting maybe she isn't so on board with two high school seniors ditching school to make a movie. "I

understand that, I do. But speaking as a parent? I wouldn't let *my* son pull a stunt like this. Even if it was for a good reason."

Isabelle slides past the camera, recognizing damage control is in order. Every minute counts now, and she can't risk losing her second-to-last interview. "I completely agree with you, Sharon," she says. "Skipping school is never a good thing, but here's the thing—there's nothing going on at school today. Finals are next week, and so the teachers are just showing a movie or having us review for the test. That's it."

Sharon dips her head back, then starts tapping her knuckles together, her dark green eyes fixated on Isabelle's. "Are you saying my David is just watching movies all day today?"

Isabelle and Raylon glance at each other, this conversation moving fast from bad to worse. Sharon's son made this interview happen, Isabelle begging the black adopted sixteen-year-old for weeks if he'd allow Isabelle to interview his white redheaded mother, and so she doesn't want him coming home to an irate parent mouthing off about her and Raylon. "No, no," Isabelle says. "David's a junior, right? The teachers still take the juniors seriously. But the seniors? We've already got one foot out the door, so our teachers don't care as much."

What Isabelle says is the truth, basically, and yet her honesty clearly doesn't sit well with Sharon. Her posture, noticeably slouched when Isabelle entered the room, has improved, her back straightened, her legs crossed, her attention clearly back on the interview. But she also maintains an eye on Isabelle, like she's alert to her mischievous tendencies, particularly when an important filmmaking assignment is involved.

"That's good and all," Sharon says, "but can you two make me a promise?"

Isabelle blurts out, “Anything,” even though she doesn’t exactly have a choice in the matter. She sits in the tall black chair opposite Sharon’s, a folded piece of paper on her lap with her mostly memorized questions, a glass of water by her side.

“Promise me that when we’re done here, you both go straight on to school. I don’t want you to ditch the whole day.”

“I promise,” Isabelle says, with the most genuine smile she can muster, and she actually means it. There’s a quiz in her AP Government class after lunch she probably shouldn’t skip.

Silence fills the room for an awkward moment, and Isabelle glares at Raylon, who remains standing behind Isabelle and the lighting kit. She needs her boyfriend, her assistant, to repeat those important words. “*Oh*,” Raylon finally says. “Yes, I promise, too.”

“Good, thank you,” Sharon says. “Now I feel better.”

Isabelle grins, and she glances over her questions one more time, instantly discarding five of them as ones not to bother with. She runs her fingers through her thick, shoulder-length dreadlocks and tells Sharon to relax, to look at her at all times and not the camera, never the camera. She nods her head at Raylon to push the recording button on the camera.

The interview begins innocuously enough, Isabelle asking Sharon a few questions about her childhood, like what her hobbies were and what her parents were like. If a stranger had walked in during the first ten minutes of the interview, he or she would have assumed Isabelle was making a commissioned documentary about the woman’s storybook life, but she was merely warming Sharon up, getting her comfortable talking in front of the camera, the same way Isabelle tried to put her previous interview subjects for this movie at ease, especially the nervous ten-year-old Patrick she interviewed in November who discussed being the only Asian in a family of six Caucasians. Her new film is mostly talking heads, some interviews in color and

some in black-and-white, featuring individuals between the ages of six and eighty-eight discussing the pros and cons to interracial adoption.

“When did you first know you wanted to adopt a black child?” Isabelle asks Sharon, before she sets her page of questions on the floor. She no longer needs the list.

“Well, that’s the thing, I never wanted to adopt a black child,” Sharon says, a knowing grin on her face. “I wanted to adopt a *child*. My daughter Julie turned ten, and my husband and I, we wanted one more. We had more love to give, lots and lots of love. I didn’t feel like my work was finished as a parent, you know? So we looked into adoption, and I didn’t say from day one, oh, it has to be a child of my race, or of a different race, it didn’t matter to me. If David had come into my life with a giant purple birthmark from his forehead all the way down to his squishy little toes, it wouldn’t have mattered to me. I was going to love him no matter what.”

“But, still, I’m sure you had your reservations.”

“Not, really no.”

“You didn’t have any friends, any family, who objected to what you were doing?”

“Honey, listen,” Sharon says, uncrossing her legs. She shoves her hands down against her knees. “Anyone who would have objected to me adopting a black son got booted out of my life a long time ago, I have no doubt about that. I mean, there’s some things you can’t avoid. The way strangers looked at me, when I was pushing David around in his stroller at the grocery store. They didn’t have to say a word, I knew exactly what they were thinking. It’s human nature to fear the other, you know. To fear something that doesn’t fit in the perfect, routine, everyday mold. But I didn’t let any of that affect me. I focused on loving David with my whole heart, and only good things came from that.”

Isabelle hesitates to intrude on the woman's words—Sharon might be the most articulate person she's interviewed for the documentary, and she doesn't want to impede her line of thinking—but she can't help asking, as quietly as possible, “What kinds of good things?”

Sharon sits back in her chair, and stays silent for the longest time, her gaze not on Isabelle any longer but a small windowsill to her right, one that holds a long stretch of evergreen garland, a giant red bow fastened to its center. “Having a black child to raise, day in and day out, made me recognize my white privilege. It made me see the world through the eyes of someone who doesn't look like me. It's made me a better person, more empathetic. When I hear somebody say words I don't like, I put a stop to it. When my husband and I go to the movies and see a cast of, you know, fifty-seven white characters and not a single person of color, I let it affect me, I let it sit with me in a way I might not have before David came into my life.”

Isabelle leans back in her chair, brushing her index finger against her chin. She's always been able to cut her documentaries in her head long before she sits down in her bedroom editing bay, and even though ninety percent of her new film is already edited together, already has had its ending mapped out from the start, she's itching for a last minute surprise. Something. Anything.

“Twenty years ago, I wouldn't have noticed,” Sharon continues, her palms connecting, her gaze back on Isabelle, “but today, I do. And with all these important matters at the heart of our country, like racial injustice, like police brutality, I feel so lucky to be at a place of my life where I can join the conversation, and maybe change a few minds. Not just for the sake of my son, but for the sake of all of us.”

Isabelle receives a surprise after all, as Sharon brings her trembling hands toward her cheeks and starts to sob. Raylon brings his hand to Isabelle's left shoulder, and she doesn't

speaking, doesn't move, smiling up at her boyfriend and allowing her gracious interview subject to have her moment.

"Thank you so much," Isabelle finally says to Sharon, after Raylon hands her a Kleenex.

"For what?"

"For everything. For what you just shared for us. For your time this morning. It really means a lot."

"Oh, it's my pleasure. Are we already done? Is that all you need?"

"That's it for the interview, yes. I just need one more shot." Isabelle unlocks her camera from the tripod and steps closer to Sharon. "So I've been doing this thing where I film my subjects doing what they love. Something that embodies who they are. For example, I filmed a boy reading on his bed, surrounded by books. I filmed your son playing basketball, because we both know he *loves* playing basketball..."

"That kid's obsessed with that stupid sport."

Isabelle laughs, and taps her similarly basketball-obsessed boyfriend on the butt. "And all these little pieces are going to end the film, in a montage. It's going to help show that no matter the color of our skin, and what family some of us are adopted into, we're all much more similar to each other than we are different. That's the message of my movie."

Sharon wipes the last of her tears, as a quiet gasp escapes her lips. "Wow, that is *such* a cool idea, Isabelle. I love it."

"I think so, too." Isabelle glances toward the kitchen behind her, then the long hallway that leads to the master bedroom. "So. Sharon. What screams *you*?"

Sharon mentions her love for tennis, but any nearby courts would be closed due to the snowstorm. She says she enjoys sipping her coffee and reading the newspaper in the morning, a

shot Isabelle assumes would work fine, if not particularly unique, but then Sharon stands up and guides Isabelle and Raylon down a staircase, into a carpeted basement area that works as a laundry room, a wine cellar—and an art studio. Various watercolor paintings clutter the back of the room, some abstract, some more literal, including one that looks like a portrait of David.

“I come down here to paint sometimes,” Sharon says. “To relax, mostly. Find my center.”

Isabelle turns on a dim light directly over a blank white canvas and backs up against the wall. She already has her left eye pressed against her camera viewfinder. “This... is perfect.”

She films Sharon painting a new watercolor portrait for nearly twenty minutes, this one of two figures instead of only one. As Isabelle circulates around her, trying to keep her camera steady and not catch her patient boyfriend in the shot, she slowly realizes Sharon isn't painting merely anyone. In the center of the canvas is a black girl with dreadlocks standing under a golden sun, holding hands with a white boy, one with brown hair, thick eyebrows, a goofily huge smile. Whether she knew it or not, Sharon just painted Isabelle and her brother, Jack.

Isabelle lowers the camera, not able to zoom in on the canvas like she originally planned to. She can feel tears coming, but she suppresses them, unleashes a loud cough, and says, “Uhh, cut. That's a cut.”

“All done?” Sharon asks.

“Yep. *Now* we're done.”

After the trio heads back upstairs, Isabelle breaks the tripod down, Raylon busy dismantling the lighting kit across the room.

Sharon leans against her leather couch, her hands in her pockets. “Was that all right?”

“It couldn’t have gone better, honestly,” Isabelle says. “This footage is fantastic. It took me awhile to get David to open up, to feel comfortable with me, but you didn’t have that problem at all. You’re so natural on camera.”

“Agreed,” Raylon says. “That might have been my favorite interview of all.”

“Really? Well, thank you. Both of you. David and I love watching all your movies, Isabelle, and I was delighted when you asked us to be a part of one.”

“It was my pleasure.”

Isabelle stuffs her tripod back into its guitar-sized case, and once the lighting kit and camera are put away, too, Isabelle and Raylon carry the heavy equipment down the entrance hallway.

Sharon steps in front of the teenagers, opens the front door. “You sure you two don’t need any help?”

“Nah, we got it,” Raylon says.

“Okay.” She brings her hands to her hips. “So, Isabelle, I’m curious.”

“About what?”

“Well... *you’re* adopted, right? That’s what David told me. You have white parents, a white older brother.”

She gives a knowing glance to Raylon, who simply shrugs, before she stops in the doorway and turns to Sharon. “Uh-huh.”

“Is your story going to be in the movie, too? I feel like it has to.”

Isabelle laughs, Raylon following along a second later, before she says, “Oh, God, no. The thought of myself on camera makes me want to throw up.”

“Really?” Sharon asks. “But you’re so pretty. So photogenic.”

“Thank you for saying that. I did think about it, at the beginning, at least maybe narrating or something, but I decided my compromise would be this: I’m not in the movie, but my *story* will be. I interviewed my mom back in October, she was my first interview, actually. And later today, my very *last* interview’s going to be my brother.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” Sharon says. “God, I’m so impressed with you. You know what you want, and you’re going after it. Not many kids your age can say that.”

“Certainly not me,” Raylon says, as he steps foot on the front porch. “Isabelle has her whole future mapped out, and I don’t even know what I want for lunch.”

All three of them chuckle, Sharon loudest of all, as Isabelle heads toward the driveway, holding her tripod case in one hand and her camera bag in the other, a shiver from the bitter December cold ripping through her. After all the bags and cases are shoved into the back of Isabelle’s Volkswagen Jetta, Sharon gives hugs to the couple, then tells them good luck on finishing the movie and to have a safe holiday break.

They’re almost inside the car, both front doors already open, when Sharon says, “Now keep your promise, all right? Go straight to school.”

Isabelle could say anything this woman wants to hear and just go home, slam herself down on her computer chair, edit together the morning’s footage, before she picks up Jack at the airport at three, like she told him she would. She taps her thumbs against the car door, her desire to be somewhere warm taking over the same time as her annoying conscience. She needs to take that government quiz. And she should probably sit through English and journalism, too.

But that’s it. Nothing more. Isabelle has a brother to interview, and a movie to finish.

“Consider it kept,” Isabelle says, opening her car door. “Thanks again.”

After she and Raylon take their seats, Isabelle speeds out of the neighborhood, and it only takes her a few minutes, complete with five signals and an abrupt illegal U-turn, for Isabelle to pull into the crowded Galloway High parking lot.

CHAPTER SIX

Isabelle

Isabelle keeps a big, stupid grin plastered to her face as she walks down the packed hallway to her sixth period English class. This is one of her best days of school ever, especially after she learned that the three periods she skipped were all taught by substitutes, none of them concerned about taking roll or having the students do work of any kind. The quiz in AP Government was multiple-choice, not fill-in-the-blank like she expected, and there was nothing to do in journalism except have a long chat with David about how great of a job his mother did on camera. Isabelle found the day ahead super intimidating when she woke up, but all the parts have been falling into place.

When Isabelle enters her English classroom and spots Raylon in the back, her smile grows even wider. She takes the seat next to his, then sees her teacher Mrs. Wickers holding up a tall packet of papers, one that suggests this period won't be a fifty-minute nap session. Not that Isabelle cares. English has always been her easiest subject, and so there's nothing Mrs. Wickers can throw at her to ruin her good mood, not those papers, not her pathetic little Christmas tree on her desk, not even that archaic overhead projector she keeps tucked away in the corner.

"I've missed you," Raylon says, taking hold of Isabelle's hand.

"You miss me? What has it been, an hour?"

He kisses her on the cheek, as the bell rings. Two students make a dash into the room—two stoners named Karl and Pete, both repeating the twelfth grade—and as they take their seats, Isabelle notices all the empty chairs, at least six or more. Usually the classroom is packed but it appears so empty this afternoon, like winter vacation has already started for a select few.

Mrs. Wickers begins passing out the papers. Most of the students ignore her, all having their own one-on-one conversations, everybody checked out of the semester even though there's another week to go. Only Kaylee, at the front of the room, seems to be paying attention to the teacher. Kaylee, and that quiet kid who sits next to her. The one who never says a word. She can never remember his name.

“Quiet down, everyone.” Mrs. Wickers drops the last of the papers on Isabelle's desk. The teacher is in her late forties but looks closer to sixty, her hair frizzy and gray, sad droopy bags under her eyes. “Here's the deal. You aren't taking your final until next Friday, and so it's my job to keep you sharp and focused as we head into the weekend. A lot of you have an A in this class, but don't forget—the final is twenty-five percent of your grade. If you don't study, if you just wing it, I guarantee you can kiss that A good-bye...”

Mrs. Wickers keeps ranting about the importance of the final, and Isabelle is already fixated on the big clock above the door, the one that's slowly ticking down to 2:30. She can't wait to race out of the room and sprint down the hall, so many more important things to be done this afternoon than sitting through another one of Mrs. Wickers' self-important lectures.

“...And since more than half the final is on the last text we read, I thought it would be helpful today to go over the themes one last time. Remember, big chunks of the final are going to be short essay responses, not multiple choice, or true or false, or any of that bullshit.”

A few laughs ring out in the classroom. One thing everybody loves about Mrs. Wickers is her occasional profanity.

“I've given each of you a piece of paper with a theme from *The Count of Monte Cristo* written at the top, and what I want you to do first, before we break into groups, is jot down anything that comes to mind about the theme and how it was used in the book.”

Isabelle's smile has officially faded, her desire to be anywhere but this classroom growing larger by the second, especially now that Mrs. Wickers will eventually be splitting students into small groups. The one negative of sitting next to Raylon is that they never get put together.

She takes an orange pen out of her backpack—it's the only one she can find—and starts tapping it against her paper. She reads the words at the top carefully: *the futility of revenge*. She reads the second word as *futuristic* at first, making her panic and think she's been reading the wrong book, but then the letters come into focus. She starts writing right away, thankful the theme she was handed is one of the more obvious ones from the text and not something unusual she'd have to go hunting for in the book's 500 pages.

Ten minutes later, Mrs. Wickers splits up the students—by theme this time and not by last name—and when Isabelle finds her group on the other side of the room, she breathes a sigh of relief. Kaylee and Luna, not only the two smartest kids in the class but probably the smartest seniors at Galloway High, sit to her right. The quiet kid is there, too, his chin resting against his desk. Isabelle nods to him, but then pays more attention to Luna and Kaylee, who are already discussing their theme from the text.

“It's futile because of Villefort's dead son, of course, but it's also futile because Dantes can never be himself,” Kaylee says, as Luna nods and frantically writes on her sheet of paper. “He goes around in all these disguises, taking vengeance on those who wronged him one by one, but I think Dantes realizes that no matter how good the revenge feels in the short term, he can never become one with himself as long as he keeps lying to others.”

“Yeah, and going off that,” Luna adds, keeping her focus on Kaylee, and only Kaylee, “although we sympathize with everything he goes through, and we want him to take revenge, of

course we do, I think Dantes recognizes he's on a path to nowhere, that no matter the justification for what he's doing, his road can't lead to true happiness. That's why he tries to commit suicide in the end, but Haydee makes that speech that changes everything—”

“Wait,” Isabelle interrupts. “Dantes tries to kill himself at the end of the book? I don't remember that.” She doesn't have her book on her, or otherwise she would quickly flip to the end. “Was that in the movie? I watched the movie, too, the one with Guy Pearce.”

Luna and Kaylee narrow their eyes at Isabelle like she just spoke a series of unintelligible grunts, and then go right back to talking to each other, this group officially two students instead of four. Not that Isabelle minds; she shrugs, rips a loud yawn, then clicks her pen and starts voraciously writing down as much of Luna and Kaylee's back-and-forth dialogue as she can. She notices the guy next to her hasn't written a word, that he's merely twirling a pencil around his fingers, but she tries not to pay attention to him. Is he even passing this class? She figures he has to have taken advantage of every extra credit opportunity Mrs. Wickers has reluctantly offered, because all he does every class is silently mope in the corner, like he's had a death in the family.

The two girls keep talking and talking. When Isabelle reaches the end of the page, her notes scribbled all over, she glances at the clock again. The time couldn't be moving any slower.

“I mean, me, personally,” Kaylee says, her body still turned toward Luna's, “I don't think revenge is *ever* truly justified. That's why we have laws in this country. It's why we have the court system. Taking it upon yourself to ruin someone's life, or *killing* another person, for the sake of revenge? It can never be right, not under any circumstance.”

“It's like that old saying,” Luna adds, her voice louder, more impassioned, since Mrs. Wickers is currently circulating their group. “An eye for an eye leaves everyone blind. If someone does something wrong to you, you don't do something wrong to them. It becomes a

vicious circle where there's no light at the end of the tunnel, where in the end everyone is left with nothing. I believe that, too. Revenge is never justified."

Mrs. Wickers nods with her approval as she makes her way to another group, and Isabelle finally opens her mouth to say something: "I disagree. I think revenge can be totally justified, in a variety of circumstances. I don't know what you two are smoking."

She doesn't mean for her words to come out so harsh, but when Luna and Kaylee look at her—*really* look at her for the first time since everyone split into groups—Isabelle slumps down in her chair a bit.

"Wait, are you serious?" Luna asks.

Kylee leans against her desk. "Yeah, give us an example. What kind of situation, Isabelle, do you see revenge being the one and only option?"

"Whoa, wait a second." Isabelle puts her hands up, like the tall, know-it-all white girls across from her have semi-automatics pointed at her chest. "Now you're putting words in my mouth. I didn't say it's the *only* option. I just think it can be justified."

"Okay, like when?" Kaylee asks.

Isabelle shrugs, plenty of ideas striking her at once. "Say someone close to you was struck dead by a drunk driver. Say it was one of your parents. You're telling me you wouldn't want to take revenge on that driver? You'd want to let him go free?"

"Okay, now you're putting words in *our* mouths," Luna says, waving her index finger at Isabelle. "Of course the driver shouldn't go free. I'd want him to be prosecuted to the furthest extent of the law. But would I want to take personal vengeance on him? Would I try to hurt the guy for my own satisfaction? No."

"Yeah, but you'd want to."

“I wouldn’t.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

“Even if it was your own mother who was struck down like an animal. Even if the driver *knew* he had too much to drink but got behind the wheel anyway. There’s not a tiny part of you that would want to hurt him? Even just a little bit?”

“This isn’t getting off topic,” Kaylee says, but Luna doesn’t pay her any attention.

“I wouldn’t, okay?” Luna leans against her desk, her elbows striking both corners, her head coming closer to Isabelle’s. “I’m not like you. I believe in forgiveness. Every one of us, at one point or another, can make a mistake that can’t be undone—”

“A *mistake*?”

Everyone stops. The words come not from Isabelle but from the lone male in the group, the one who’s kept his head down for minutes on end and has been content staying invisible. The young man lifts his head and stares into Luna’s eyes coldly, his arms crossed, his tongue sliding along his bottom teeth. His greasy blond hair is parted to the left side, clearly not by a comb since the part itself has no foreseeable beginning or end point, and his t-shirt is noticeably wrinkled, a black stain visible near the pocket protector. His skin is pale, including his lips. Isabelle can’t help thinking this kid, whatever his name is, resembles a ghost.

“Well, well,” Luna says, shooting a quick smile at Kaylee. “Look who decided to join the conversation.”

“Your mom or dad gets killed by a drunk driver,” he says, his voice at least two decibels too loud, his words coming out slowly and thoughtfully, “and your first instinct is to forgive the

guy, to go to sleep that night thinking everything's all right, that things happens for a reason, that people make mistakes? Bullshit."

It's the second time that word's been uttered in sixth period today, and it's also the first time Isabelle's heard this kid talk for more than two seconds. She keeps her focus on him, not sure whether to be frightened or impressed.

Luna sighs. "Look. You don't know me. You can't get inside my head. I guess we can feel free to disagree—"

"What if your mom was killed in a robbery? What if some scumbag broke into your house, shot your mom in the face, and stole her purse and jewelry and got away scot free? Would *that* justify vengeance?"

"No," she says, visibly shaking from this guy's words but still staying strong. "Because that would never happen to my mom."

"Of course it could. You're telling me there wouldn't be a small part of you wishing you could find that guy, wherever he's hiding, and slash a knife across his throat?"

Kaylee swings her right arm down in front of Luna and says, before Luna can get off another word, "Okay, that's enough. We're way off topic now. We're supposed to be discussing *The Count of Monte Cristo*."

"We're discussing the revenge theme," Luna says, pushing her arm away. "It's not off topic. Charlie is just taking our discussion to the extreme, that's all."

Charlie. That's his name.

"To the *extreme*? Please." He grins, but not in a peaceful way. His smile appears slightly sinister. "If someone murdered your mother in cold blood, you really wouldn't turn to revenge? You're one-hundred-percent certain?" Charlie asks, his attention fully on Luna.

“No.”

“What if someone killed your entire family?”

“No! Revenge isn’t the answer.”

Mrs. Wickers claps her hands at the front of the classroom, and most of the students stop their discussions and turn to face her. But not Charlie, not Luna.

“What if someone tried to kill *you*?” Charlie asks. “What if some creep stalked you for months, only to threaten your life?”

“I would let the authorities handle it,” Luna says, “like I said before. I would call the police, I would try to stay safe, I would never, ever, ever bring harm to another person even if they tried to hurt me or my—”

“What if someone raped you?”

The whole room goes eerily quiet, and Charlie, for the first time in a long while, looks away from Luna and peers at the other students. Everybody’s staring at him, including Mrs. Wickers, who was doing her best to keep the students’ attention on her and not the argument taking place in the corner, but now she’s given up, biting on her tongue, her eyes piercing into Charlie’s as she takes a step in his direction.

Isabelle slinks down in her chair a second time, enough to stay hidden as Mrs. Wickers approaches the group.

“Charlie? Can I see you after class, please?”

“Sure,” he says, his voice shaky, no longer confident. “Uhh, sorry. I’m sorry.”

Mrs. Wickers shakes her head, then turns to the other students. “All right, show’s over. Get out your notes. I’m going to talk about your final, and then, yes, I have a little homework assignment for you.”

That dreadful piece of news forces at least half the students to let out audible groans before the teacher resumes talking, and as the final minutes of the class tick away, everyone frantically writing down all that Mrs. Wickers expects of them, both for their final and for their three-page essay due Monday analyzing themes from *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the momentary fixation on Charlie has evaporated, for everyone—except Isabelle. She writes the necessary notes, but she continues to look in his direction, noticing how he keeps fidgeting in his seat, keeps biting on his fingernails. He’s been quiet for so many weeks Isabelle assumed he was absurdly shy, but something happened in that conversation that snapped him back into a person, someone with intense thoughts and passionate feelings, an overwhelming desire to have his opinions heard. A cloud was lifted for a rare moment, but that cloud is back, hovering over him like it may never go away again.

The bell rings. Raylon joins Isabelle at her side within seconds, pulling her toward the open classroom door with a hearty laugh. Isabelle yanks him off, playfully, then runs to the other side of the room and grabs her bag.

The weekend is finally here, and Isabelle should be laughing along with her boyfriend, should be fixated on her important final interview to be shot this afternoon, but she glances back at Charlie, who hasn’t moved from his seat, clearly awaiting a lashing from Mrs. Wickers. A tight knot forms in Isabelle’s stomach, the pain suggesting she’s responsible for what that poor guy is going through. The feeling lasts a few miserable seconds, and then it passes, and she sighs, aware that obviously she’s not at fault for his behavior. She barely knows the guy after all. She didn’t even remember his name until a few minutes ago.

But as the door shuts behind her, Isabelle looks at Charlie one last time and wonders, in the deepest core of her being, like the inquisitive documentary filmmaker she is and forever will be: what the hell happened to that kid?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Charlie

Only the slightest trace of sunlight streams into the dark, empty classroom, all the chairs in disarray from the previous session, none of the sixth period students having bothered to put the chairs back to their proper place. Charlie returns his where it belongs as his teacher motions for him to join her at her desk. The bell rang only two minutes ago, but the hallway commotion is already dying down, the students happily fleeing the school to begin their weekend. Charlie remembers what weekends use to be like. He remembers what it was like to feel free.

He shuffles toward Mrs. Wickers, who's staring at her computer screen and eating a cinnamon graham cracker she pulled out of a drawer. He takes the seat closest to the teacher's swiveling chair and brings his hands to his sides, his head tilted back. He attempts a smile, but it appears more like a frown, his chapped lips curled down and not up.

"Hi, Charlie," the teacher says. "Thanks for staying."

He wants to ask if he had a choice in the matter, but he decides now's not the time to create more problems. "Of course. Sorry for the way I was acting before. Luna got under my skin, and so I said some things I regret."

"I understand. Completely." She tosses the last crumb of the graham cracker in her mouth and faces him, bringing her arms down to the gray metal desk. "This book gets people fired up, I get that. But you have to be careful. You can't say the word *rape* out loud like that, especially among so many female students. What if something had happened to Luna? What if you triggered something?"

Mrs. Wickers goes on and on about the severity of rape and how there was a case with a female student of hers years ago who took her own life after a sexual assault, and that Charlie

needs to think next time before he speaks, be more considerate, show some respect, and he listens, nods his head, keeps his mouth shut as he struggles not to scream. When she finally stops talking, he presses his palms together and looks down at her desk. It's so cluttered Charlie wonders if she's cleaned it once since becoming a teacher at Galloway High, with all the Christmas décor and stained coffee mugs and unused Kleenex boxes. He notices a tiny black teddy bear on the backside of her computer monitor.

“Mrs. Wickers?”

“Yes?”

“I'm curious... why do you have a teddy bear on your desk?”

She keeps her focus on Charlie for the longest time, like she's studying all three of his burgeoning forehead pimples. She leans back and glances at the teddy bear. “Oh. That was my daughter's. Took it to bed with her every night for five years, at least. But she's a teenager now, and I guess... I didn't want to give it away. Too many memories.”

Charlie keeps his focus on the bear. He doesn't mean for it to happen, but a glimpse of that night on the playground attacks him in a flash, and his eyes start welling up with tears.

He turns his head away, as soon as the unexpected emotion overtakes him, but he's not fast enough, and his teacher asks, “Is there something you want to talk about, Charlie?

Something you want to get off your chest?”

“No,” he blurts out. “I'm fine. I'm great.”

“Or you could speak with the school counselor? I'd be happy to make you an appointment. Totally confidential—”

“I said I'm fine.”

Mrs. Wickers taps her thumbs against the desk, allowing silence to fill the room for a few seconds. Then: “I know you’re hurting, Charlie. I’ve been a teacher a long time. I know when I have a student going through something, but I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what it is—”

Her phone starts ringing. They both stare at it, Charlie waiting for her to pick it up, for her to kick him out of the room. She doesn’t. She lets it ring and ring until the quiet resumes.

“Can I go now?” Charlie asks.

She shrugs and pushes chair back against the wall. “Of course you can. Just... please be considerate to the other students, all right? Next time I’ll be forced to give you detention. And neither of us wants that.”

“No. Definitely not.”

Charlie stands up and goes to grab his backpack. He left the front zipper open, and somewhere between changing desks and removing his notebook, a few pens fell to the carpet. He picks them up one by one, then drops them in the pouch and begins to zip it up tight, when he feels a hand touch his right shoulder.

The reflex is unplanned, and immediate. He cocks his elbow and slams it back hard, against Mrs. Wickers’ nose. She lets out the tiniest whimper, then stumbles back a few steps, bringing her hands to her face. Charlie’s eyes open wide as he takes in the sight of his injured teacher, a trail of blood erupting from her left nostril.

“Oh, God,” he says. “I’m so sorry!”

He rushes to her desk, grabs five Kleenex, and shoves them toward her. She takes them, dabs them at her nose, then tilts her head back.

“I’m sorry,” he says again. “I didn’t expect anyone to touch my—”

“*Now* you can go,” she says.

His English teacher returns to her desk and slides her chair over to her computer, the ball of Kleenex still pressed against her face. The last thing he needed to do was inflict violence on Mrs. Wickers, not with his lousy grades, not with the way she offered to help. He considers sitting back down, and telling her everything. Going over in detail beat by beat what happened that night in August, when Charlie's world came crashing down.

But Charlie hasn't even told Lisa about what happened with Jack, still hasn't said a word to his father either, and he's not about to break his silence with a teacher, especially one he just assaulted with a fidgety elbow. He didn't want to feel pressure about when and if he would come clean about the rape, and telling Mrs. Wickers could offer a whole series of problems, like the secret getting out to the entire school, the senior jocks laughing behind his back, his teachers treating him like a delicate flower, his best friend mad at him until the end of time for not telling her the truth sooner. Holding this in has been Hell, but announcing what Jack did to him to the world would be a fate worse than death.

He approaches Mrs. Wickers' desk, tells her he's sorry one last time, and then slips into the hallway, which is now completely empty, not a single student in sight. Charlie is grateful for this, because the temporary isolation gives him the motivation he needs to go from a sad shuffle of a walk to an all-out sprint, racing down the long hallway to the main stairwell like he's trying to outrun an exploding fireball. He runs and runs until he bursts through the front entrance doors and plants his shoes into at least a foot of heavy snow. The cold wind sucker punches him, his thin orange sweatshirt not enough to outwit the freezing temperatures that have failed to leave Reno for the past two weeks. He knows it's December and that he's not putting on the swim trunks anytime soon, but as he continues toward his 4Runner in the eastside parking lot, he wishes the biting cold would stop replicating all the nasty thoughts and feelings he holds inside.

Charlie soon finds the icy parking lot pavement, only a few cars remaining before him, when his phone begins to vibrate in his left pants' pocket. The vibration startles him almost as much as the touch to his shoulder, since he can't remember the last time his phone rang, nobody besides a telemarketer having reached out to him in days. He pulls out the phone and glances at the caller ID. It's Lisa.

He taps the phone against his chest. Wonders if he should let the call go to voice-mail, where she can say what she needs to say, and he can call her back later, when—*if*—he feels like it. But on the fifth ring, he shakes his head, accepts the call, and shoves the phone to his right ear.

“Hello?”

“Charlie, hey. Is everything all right?”

“Everything's fine.” He walks toward the tall lamppost on the sidewalk, a few yards from where his car is parked, and says, “What's up?”

“Oh, nothing. I waited outside your English class for the longest time, and you never came out. Did you go home early or something? Are you sick?”

“I'm not sick. Mrs. Wickers wanted to see me after class.” He regrets saying the words as soon as they come out. Now he's going to be bombarded with more questions. Lisa's never been one to allow him to keep secrets from her—even though he's kept the biggest secret of his life from his friend for four mouths and counting.

“Something to do with your grades?”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“I'm sorry. That must have been awkward. She's the teacher you hate, right?”

Charlie glances at the second story of the high school, at a large window he believes peers into Mrs. Wickers' room. He wouldn't be surprised if she was standing in the dark staring at him, a lit cigarette in one hand, a pair of binoculars in the other.

"I don't hate her. Her class has just been hard, that's all." He looks back toward his car. "Sorry I made you wait. You should've told me you were coming by."

"I wanted it to be a surprise. Take you out to Fro-Yo or coffee or something. I haven't seen you in *forever*, Charlie."

"Leese. Come on. You know I hate coffee."

"See, exactly! It's been so long I can't even remember the things you like and don't like. I don't know even who you are anymore. You're like an alien! From a foreign country!"

Charlie starts walking forward, the wind picking up, the air super chilly. "What are you talking about? We see each other all the time."

"At school, sure. But we don't really hang out anymore. I miss you. I want to spend more time with you, especially with Christmas coming up, all the holidays. Before you know it, we'll be graduated and off leading our separate lives, and I won't even get a call from you on my birthday."

He manages a faint laugh. "You're so *dramatic*. Jesus. How come you never acted in a school play? You'd be perfect."

"I'm only dramatic with you, Charlie. Because I love you."

He glances at the Volkswagen Jetta about five stalls down from his. He doesn't have to look closely. Two black teens are kissing in the front seat. One of them is Raylon Brinkman, the bald, hunky basketball player who's one of the hottest guys at Galloway. He can only see the back of the girl's head beside him, but there's something familiar about her.

“I love you, too,” Charlie says, not able to take his eyes off Raylon and those succulent lips he’s kissing that girl with. “As a friend, just to be clear.”

“Of course, as a friend. I have my pathetic qualities, but I’m not about to sink low enough to crush on my gay bestie. Even if you *are* the cutest little thing in this town.”

“Well, thanks... I guess.”

“What are you doing now?” Lisa asks.

“Nothing,” he says, as he turns and keeps walking toward his car. “I’ll probably swing by the gym for a bit. I haven’t done a hard work-out since Tuesday.”

“Fun. What time will you be home?”

“Why?” Charlie clicks the unlock button on his car keys.

“I want to swing by. I have a surprise for you.”

“You have a *what?*”

“It’s nothing big. I think you’ll like it.”

“It’s not my birthday, Leese.”

“It’s nothing like that. It’s not a present. It’s just... something you need. Even more than I do.”

Charlie sighs. He’s never been able to talk Lisa out of anything, even after numerous attempts, so he checks the current time and tells her, “I’ll be home by 4:30.”

“Sounds good. See you in a bit.”

She doesn’t say a word to suggest she’s gone. One second she’s talking and the next second the call’s been dropped. He turns the phone to silent, and shoves it back in his pocket.

Charlie’s almost at his driver’s side door, when a voice yells, “Hey, Charlie! That you?”

He turns to his left. It's not Mrs. Wickers, thank God. And it's not Lisa either, bursting out from a mountain of snow to give him her surprise hours early.

It's that black girl from his English class, now wearing a rumpled yellow coat over her sweater and jeans. Isabelle Pruitt, the one with the long dreadlocks and strawberry red lipstick and blemish-free skin. The one who was kissing Raylon in the car. The one who makes *movies*.

She's outside the Jetta and walking toward him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Isabelle

Of all the students still hovering around the school at three o'clock, Isabelle didn't expect Charlie to be one of them.

When her feet reach the icy sidewalk, she gets a better look at the guy from head to toe, and although he's awkward in his appearance, with his vomit-orange sweatshirt, his slicked-back blond hair, his deathly pale skin that resembles a centuries-old vampire, she recognizes, for the first time, the impressive muscle in his arms. She thinks about asking what gym he frequents, but she doesn't want to come off like she's attracted to him, not with Raylon watching close by, so instead she blurts out what wanted to tell him in the classroom: "I wanted to thank you for what you did back there."

Charlie stares into her eyes, studying them like he hasn't made a final decision to stay and chat or run the other direction. He scratches his left cheek and says, "For what?"

"For sticking up for me back there. Luna and Kaylee? They weren't ever going to agree with me. You helped me change their minds."

"You think? I'm not sure I did. I think I scared them more than anything."

Isabelle tightens her warm gloves around her hands as a tender laugh erupts from her mouth. "I think you scared everyone in the class. Still. It meant a lot you didn't try to gang up on me, too."

"It... wasn't a problem." He glances at the pavement for a few seconds, clearly deep in thought, before he looks back at Isabelle. "How would you answer my last question?"

"What question?"

“You know... about what you’d do if someone raped you. If someone you trusted took advantage of you. Do you think vengeance would be justified?”

Isabelle opens her mouth, but nothing comes out at first. All she wanted was to give Charlie a quick thank you, not realizing she’d have to answer a question so controversial, so personal. She’s never given the topic much thought, actually. Raylon’s always been a gentleman, has never forced her into doing something she didn’t want, and she couldn’t imagine putting herself in a position where another man could touch her the wrong way, let alone assault her—but isn’t that the horror of rape? That it can happen to a girl anywhere, anytime? She glances back at Raylon, whose eyes are super narrowed behind that windshield in her Jetta, obviously bewildered why she’s talking to this weird kid in the first place.

Isabelle returns her gaze to Charlie. “It’s not even a question. Of course it would be justified. If a guy sexually assaulted me and tried to get away with it, I wouldn’t be like Kaylee and Luna. I wouldn’t go to the police, or hope the law might maybe, *possibly*, put the guy behind bars, where he belongs. I’m not stupid. No—I would risk everything.”

“How do you mean?”

She steps toward him, a surprising strain of rage brewing deep down. “I would hunt the guy down. Tie him to a tree. I’d beat him, torture him, and honestly, I’d take pleasure in it. And right before his dying breath, I would take a pair of scissors and cut off his balls. *That’s* what I would do if a guy ever raped me.”

Isabelle didn’t think it was possible, but Charlie’s skin somehow turns even whiter.

“But, you know, that’s me,” she says. “The way I look at it, rape is one of the most cowardly, reprehensible acts a man can do. There’s no apology that could make it better. No jail sentence that could make the act go away. No, I would go bat-shit crazy on the guy, and you

know what? So would Luna, and so would Kaylee. They're full of shit, Charlie. They believe in revenge the same way that we do."

He doesn't respond right away, just stares back at her. She thinks he might collapse, slump to his side, land unconscious at her feet. But he stays upright, a tiny curl of a smile forming. "Thanks for answering that honestly. Not many people would."

"Of course. But what is it to you? Is there someone *you* want to get revenge on, Charlie?"

His eyes focus on something to the right of Isabelle, but she can tell in the way he's staring he's not looking at anything specific. He bites on his bottom lip, only for a second, before he lets out a violent cough and says, "I did, for awhile. But not anymore. He's not worth it."

His words imply that he's gay, it's so obvious, but she doesn't want to probe into his personal life any further than she already has. Especially since this is the first time they've said more than a few words to each other. "Yeah. I get that."

"So why are you still at school?" Charlie asks, clearly taking more of an interest in Isabelle, either because he wants to get to know her better or just wants someone to talk to, she can't tell. "Your parents won't let you and your boyfriend kiss at home?"

Isabelle laughs again. "Nothing like that, although my mom *hates* PDA. We've been waiting because I have to pick my brother up from the airport. His flight got delayed and doesn't land until 3:30."

"Makes sense. Older brother or younger?"

"Older. He's coming home from college, for Christmas."

"Cool. What's his name?"

"Jack."

Charlie's body flinches. He shuts his mouth, and he looks down at the the pavement, shuffling both his feet against a tiny mound of black ice. He looks almost in a panic, like he might scream or confess something—possibly both—but then he starts walking toward the parking lot, away from Isabelle, an unmistakable urgency to his step. “Sorry,” he says, his voice so quiet she can barely hear him. “I just realized I... I have to go...”

“Oh, that’s fine. Is everything all right?”

“It’s good. It’s *great*. See you Monday?”

“Yeah. See you Monday.”

He rushes over to his 4Runner, tosses his loaded backpack on the passenger seat, then speeds out of the parking lot in a matter of seconds. By the time Isabelle returns to her own vehicle, Charlie’s vehicle is long gone. She gets back in her driver’s seat and turns to Raylon, who’s tapping his phone against his knee.

“That was odd,” he says. “You just randomly get out of the car to talk to that weirdo? What was that about?”

“I don’t know. He seems lonely. Like he needs a friend.”

“You want to be that guy’s friend?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

Raylon glances at his phone, then shoves it in his pocket. “It’s 3:10. We should get going.” He puts on his seatbelt.

Isabelle clicks in her seatbelt, too. “Good idea.” She turns on the ignition. Puts the car in drive. But she doesn’t unlock the emergency break, not yet.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m... nervous. Isn’t that funny?”

“Why are you nervous?” Raylon leans toward his girlfriend. Starts rubbing his hand against her upper back. “You’re all sweaty. You’re sweaty, and it’s, like, two degrees outside.”

“I know, I know. I just want this last interview to go well. I haven’t seen Jack in four months. What if he’s different?”

“Different, how?”

She brings her hands to the steering wheel, as she unlocks the emergency break and drives toward the parking lot exit. “What if he doesn’t want to be in my movie?”

“What do you mean? You haven’t *asked* him about it yet?”

Isabelle shakes her head. “I tried calling him last week, but it went to voice-mail and I felt weird asking him to do something this important that way—”

“Are you serious? You’re gonna surprise him with this when you see him? That’s kind of risky, babe, even for you...”

“Raylon, he’s my brother. He’ll do this for me. He has to.”

Isabelle pulls onto the street and heads toward the freeway on-ramp ahead.

“Maybe you should interview him tomorrow,” Raylon says. “Like, in the morning. He’s going to be exhausted today. You know, from all that traveling—”

“No way. He’s gonna have a late night tonight with his friends, that’s a given, and then he’ll be hung-over tomorrow and won’t be able to get out of bed, let alone be lucid on camera answering all my questions. The movie’s due Sunday, and I should’ve finished filming weeks ago, seriously. I can’t risk more waiting.”

“But what if he doesn’t want to be interviewed today? What if he has plans?”

“Then... I’m in trouble.” She stops at the signal, which has just turned red. “There’s no movie without my brother. It won’t even be worth submitting if he doesn’t agree to do it.”

“What? Oh, come on. Now you’re talking crazy. You don’t mean that.”

The light turns green, and she makes a sharp left, speeding up to sixty in a matter of seconds. She keeps her mouth shut, not responding to Raylon.

“You *are* joking, right, Isabelle? We’ve been working on your movie for months. Don’t tell me I’ve been wasting all this time on something that won’t ever be seen.”

“You haven’t, I promise,” she says. “Don’t worry. My brother’s gonna talk. I’ll force him if I have to.”

The freeway’s mostly empty so Isabelle feels comfortable speeding even faster, flooring her vehicle all the way to eighty. She turns away from her boyfriend and glances out her driver’s side window, one of the tall airport towers already within her sights.

CHAPTER NINE

Charlie

Charlie drives over a mound of hard ice and parks in one of the last empty spaces to the right of the gym. He's tried his best to forget the conversation he had with Isabelle. It had been so random, her coming up and treating him like they were best friends, even though they've been in three classes together throughout high school and yet have barely said a word to each other. He, for instance, didn't know Isabelle was dating the basketball jock Raylon, didn't even have a clue. And he also had no idea she had an older brother named Jack.

When Isabelle told Charlie she was picking up her brother Jack from the airport, his brain went there automatically, it had to. Naturally his former date had to be returning from New York around now, would soon be in the same city as Charlie, the ability for the two to bump into each other likelier than ever. He doesn't know the day Jack's coming home to Reno, or even if he is returning. Charlie knows next to nothing about him, not even Jack's last name.

He puts on his gym clothes, straps on his iPod Nano, and grabs his water bottle and towel before he steps outside into the frigid cold. He glances around the area for Jack, the notion that he could be standing somewhere in the parking lot watching him making his heart pound a little faster. Charlie shakes his head and walks, carefully, down the icy sidewalk toward the gym's entrance, confident that Jack's nowhere close. Jack is a common name, after all. Millions of guys have it. Isabelle isn't picking up *that* Jack from the airport. The brother she's picking up probably looks like her. African-American, dreadlocks, green eyes, closer to five-foot-four than six-foot-three. It's impossible for Isabelle to be related to the Jack that pushed him to the ground and tore off his clothes and yanked him out of his calm existence, and so Charlie tries to relax, breathing purposefully, as he opens the door to the greatest healer he's had since that awful night

in August—Fitness Body Workout, the spacious, twenty-four-hour gym that’s become his home away from home.

He presses his membership card to the electronic reader, and when he hears the loud double beep from below, he hurries up the staircase and stakes a claim on the treadmill farthest to the back wall, away from the two girls chatting loudly with one another and walking on their side-by-side treadmills at the lowest speed imaginable. He turns on his Nano and scrolls through various artists, stopping at Arcade Fire. The song “Keep the Car Running” begins to play, and he starts running on the treadmill, the setting at his usual 6.5, Charlie not taking time to stretch or walk, or pay any attention to the timer below. He looks away from the beige wall before him and closes his eyes as he continues sprinting in place. Everything’s black at first, as it should be. But then he sees flashes of Jack—first at the restaurant table, then right before they kissed for the first time. It’s been four long months and yet Jack’s face remains imprinted in Charlie’s memory better than the face of his own father. It’s the face that never leaves, his tormentor long gone but still grinning at Charlie from the darkness, staring into his eyes like his work isn’t yet finished. As the song reaches its conclusion, the flashes of the rape appear before him like a malfunctioning picture slideshow, Charlie seeing a glimpse of Jack’s hand, a few strands of Jack’s hair, that metallic slide at the playground that looked to stretch twenty feet in the air.

Then he sees the blood.

His eyes shoot back open, as a young man ambles up to the treadmill beside his. He’s at least six feet tall, with short red hair, and looks twenty-five or twenty-six. He’s wearing the thinnest of tank-tops, as well as tight black shorts that hug his butt in a way Charlie can’t look away from. Charlie’s still running at top speeds, sweat already forming even though the second Arcade Fire song “Intervention” is barely half over, and instead of thinking about Jack and that

awful night, for once he's thinking about a cute specimen working out before him. He waits for something to prove his feelings might be reciprocated—a smile would be nice—but the stud keeps his focus on a CNN roundtable discussion projected on the small TV above him.

A song called “No Cars Go” starts blasting through his headphones, and Charlie gains more speed, the treadmill setting now up to 7.0. He makes sure not to close his eyes again, his focus on the auburn-haired beauty more pleasing than any images or thoughts of Jack. Charlie hasn't gone on a second date since August. He still chats with guys online, and he certainly likes to *look*, the gym the best place of all to goggle attractive male bodies without being bullied or pushed to the ground and taken advantage of. Staring at cute, muscular guys wasn't the main reason Charlie joined the gym in September, but it's remained an added bonus that keeps him coming back almost every day.

No, the real reason he joined the gym was that after a month of languishing in his room, sleeping in until noon on the weekends and watching bad romantic comedies and skimming dumb John Grisham thrillers that all read the same, only going outside to walk to and from school, his father Vincent demanded Charlie find a hobby. His father was and has always been a workaholic, a Reno real estate developer with his own company and staff of more than fifty people, and so it took him awhile to notice anything different about his only child, his feelings about Charlie pretty neutral as long as his boy kept his head down and stayed out of trouble.

But then his father received a call from Galloway about Charlie's dropping grades, finally prompting him one night to come home early and share a long, intimate talk with his son. He asked if everything was okay, if something bad had happened, with a *girl* perhaps, and Charlie hurt so deeply inside, holding in too many secrets to count, his eyes lately wandering toward the razor blades in the master bathroom and the loaded handgun tucked away in his father's office

drawer, that he got up the nerve to tell his dad his big secret. Not about Jack and the assault—he hadn't said a word of that to anyone, not even Lisa—but that he was gay.

“Oh,” his father said, a dancing dog commercial playing in the background, a glass of chardonnay in his right hand. He brought his elbows down to the glass kitchen table. “All right.”

Charlie wanted to throw up. He might have, if the trash can wasn't on the other side of the kitchen. “I'm sorry I haven't told you before.”

“How long have you been... you know... gay?”

Charlie wanted to laugh at that question, but didn't. “A long time. Years.”

“*Years?*”

“Uh-huh.”

His father stood up, and at first Charlie thought he might start screaming, or worse, leave the room without another word. Instead he grabbed the remote control on the nearest leather couch and turned off the TV, before returning to the table. He didn't say anything at first, simply stared at the fruit basket between him and his son, before he said, “Listen, Charlie. I love you. No matter what.”

Charlie looked into his father's eyes for the first time that night. The nausea lifted. “I love you, too, Dad.”

“I really wish your mother was here. She'd be able to handle this better. I don't... really know what to say.”

“You've said enough. You don't need to say anything more—”

“No, but I do.” His cell phone started to ring, and he looked at the caller ID. Charlie was sure his father would answer it, the way he did every call every time, but he stuffed the phone right back in his jeans pocket. “I know I haven't been around that much. I'm always so busy. But

I've seen the way you've been hurting. The way you've isolated yourself in this house—it's not healthy. I think telling me this is a good first step, but I'm not sure it's enough. Your friend doesn't come around here anymore, your grades are slipping. You need some kind of outlet. I think you should join a club at school or something. Or what about trying out for a sport? Like football, maybe, or baseball?"

His father was saying more to Charlie in that incredible moment than he'd said to him in weeks, and so Charlie didn't want to dare interrupt him, but he struggled making sense of his words. "Dad, I'm a senior. I can't just try out for a sport now. It's too late for that."

"Why? Who says it's too late?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm not interested in sports. I never have been."

"Sure, you have. You played golf for a while. Why not take that up again—"

"Dad, please."

His father bit down on his tongue, looking like he was trying to quell an inner scream.

"*But,*" Charlie continued, a smile forming on his face for the first time that night, "There is a little something I'm interested in. I want my confidence back, I do."

His father leaned his arms against the table. "I don't follow."

"Dad. I want to join a gym."

His father laughed at his request, the stick-thin seventeen-year-old never having worked out a day in his life, not an ounce of muscle to be found in his arms or legs. Charlie's lack of strength had allowed Jack to easily push him to the ground, and *keep* him on the ground. But after his father re-grouped and studied his son's face, recognizing within seconds he was being dead serious, he approved of the gym Charlie wanted to join—it was inexpensive, close to his house, and came with three free personal trainer sessions—and signed him up for a full year.

After fifteen minutes on the treadmill, Charlie turns off the machine, downing half his water in a matter of seconds. He keeps his gaze on the guy beside him, who's now running even faster than Charlie was. Charlie grabs the bottom of his white t-shirt and rubs it against his chin, trying to soak up the last of the water that spilled past his lips, and he catches a glimpse of his own stomach, his belly fat long gone, a tight six-pack hopefully here to stay, as well as a tuft of thick hair that's been sprouting the last few weeks at the top of his chest. He clenches his hand into a fist and hits his hard stomach, only for a second, hoping the red-haired guy might catch a glimpse of him, but he doesn't, and it's not as if Charlie would know what to say. He brings the shirt back down, and heads to the first floor of the gym.

Yesterday Charlie worked on his legs and back so today he focuses on his arms and shoulders, starting with the pull-down machine for a few minutes, then three sets of the dumbbell deadlift. He takes a water break and then performs 150 sit-ups, his back pushed against a giant blue stability ball, his breathing steady and deep. At least a dozen men surround him, all older and taller and more ripped than he'll ever be, but Charlie doesn't care about them, tries to ignore their bulging biceps and behemoth ankles and thick veins ready to burst from their foreheads. When he first started working out, he had trouble even existing around these powerful men; every time he turned toward the wall to stretch or bent down to pick up his towel and keys, he imagined five of the biggest ones grabbing him and pinning him to the floor, one pair of hands on his head, one pair on his back, a third ripping through his underwear. His mind wandered to this kind of horror the first few times at the gym—his trainer was a 250-pound bear of a guy who gave him orders like an army drill sergeant, which didn't help matters—but eventually the fears subsided and he managed to find his inner peace during his work-outs, sometimes staying at the gym for up to two hours at a time, enjoying the rush that soared through his system every time he

finished that final bench press or push-up or underhand kickback. He always walked out of the gym feeling capable of anything.

Charlie sees a teenage girl saunter into the weight room and sit on the closest bench, her long black hair tied into a ponytail, her abs as hard as they come. He wonders if she ever gets scared with these men around, but he knows she doesn't, her ability to dropkick any one of them assuredly a weapon in her arsenal. She has no care in the world about the guys in here, the same way Lisa kept her focus on Charlie, and only Charlie, when she came to the gym in late October. Fitness Body Workout offered one free day for guests of paying members, some kind of random Halloween special, and Charlie convinced Lisa, who wasn't exactly lean at more than two hundred pounds, to join him even though she's always hated anything to do with exercise.

He thought she'd spend her time on one of the easy elliptical machines, but she strutted right past them and pulled Charlie to the weight room. She was almost too confident, trying to curl with eighty pounders and perform endless sit-ups without taking a break. But then she was done in ten minutes flat and spent the rest of the exercise session taking tiny sips from her water bottle and engaging in a rapid-fire conversation Charlie.

"You do look better. Hotter, even."

"You think I look hot?" Charlie asked, struggling not to laugh.

Lisa started stretching out her legs and grinned as the speakers blasted "Monster Mash" overhead. "I didn't say you were hot. I said, hotter. There's a difference."

"Yeah, sure there is."

"There *is*!"

“You want me. Just admit it.” Charlie started curling with fifty-pound weights, the sixty-pounders still out of his comfort zone. “Stop pretending you only want to be my friend. You want to jump my bones, don’t you, Leese? Now that I finally have muscles?”

“Charlie, please. You could have the most bulging biceps of any guy at Galloway, and I still wouldn’t look twice at you. You’re... short. And gay, you’re so gay.”

“I am,” he said, glancing at a hot bearded guy doing bench presses across the room. He waited to see if the guy would look in his direction—gay until proven straight was always Charlie’s motto—but when he sat up, his attention went straight to his phone and nobody else in the room, not a good sign. “That’s what happens when you’re attracted to men. You become super gay.”

“Yeah, yeah, good for you.”

The words came out low and so harsh, not playful in the least. Charlie dropped the weights against the mat below and turned to his friend. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Lisa puckered her lips dramatically, like she was suffering an allergic reaction. But then she shook her head and said, “Nothing. Forget it.”

“No. What’s on your mind, Leese?”

She shoved her feet down against the mat and grabbed hold of Charlie’s hand. “I didn’t want to talk about this here, around all these people, but... I *miss* you.”

“You miss me? What are you talking about? We see each other all the time.”

“At school, yeah. But it’s not the same. You’re spending, like, every waking minute at this gym, bulking up, exercising. And that’s good and all, but what happened to hanging with me, you know, on weekends and stuff? You’ve changed. Ever since you had that date...”

He let go of her hand, dipped his head, looked anywhere in the weight room but at Lisa. “I know I have. I’m sorry. We’ll hang out more, okay? I’m trying to take better care of myself, that’s all. Build up some strength for once, just in case...” His voice drifted, his mouth frozen in place.

“Just in case of what?”

Charlie had to think fast. “In, uhh... in case I go on a date with someone I actually like. Someone I might want to be with one day.”

“What? Are you crazy? That’s a terrible reason to go to the gym. You shouldn’t have to change your body to get someone to like you. You shouldn’t have to be someone you’re not.”

“I know,” Charlie said, and then he picked up the weights. He was ready to do three more sets. Hell, maybe even four. “Leese. Trust me. At the end of the day, I’m doing this for me, not for anyone else. And certainly not for—”

He almost said his name, was so close to blurting it out, even though Charlie hated to say it, or even think it. He didn’t want to go down that rabbit hole of talking about Jack, certainly not with Lisa, and so he changed the topic to scary movies they could watch later, like *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2*, which Charlie had recently read was the most homoerotic horror film ever made, and she backed off their little argument and actually managed a few laughs at the gym and later that night in Lisa’s upstairs bedroom. And as much as he wanted to tell her everything about Jack, he wasn’t ready, at least not yet. Lisa would demand Charlie track Jack down and press charges, but where would that get him? He’d done his research. He saw the Hell victims of sexual assault—young girls, mostly—went through to punish their perpetrators, especially if there were no eyewitnesses. And nobody would fault Jack for what happened. Charlie had consented to everything—the Grindr messages, the dinner, the walk into the abandoned

playground. How could he possibly prove wrongdoing? Plus, it's not like the police had helped him before, the man who killed Charlie's mother still on the loose four years since her murder. The police weren't going to help him about Jack, even if he *wanted* to tell the world what that creep did to him.

Charlie takes a chug from his water bottle, sits on the gym's one and only rower, and locks his feet in. He turns the setting to Just Row and he begins the exercise he loves most of all, a predictable motion that lets his thoughts run wild, no need to be fully present or focused on the task at hand. He watches a few guys walk by him, and at least three of them are gorgeous *and* age-appropriate, as young as nineteen or twenty. Charlie has no trouble looking at their faces, chests, butts—everything—but he won't talk to them, he won't say a word, he'll just keep moving on his rower, pulling the handlebar toward him faster and faster, sweat dripping off his cheeks, his heart rate quickening, his arms and legs already aching. He remembers something his mother told him a few weeks before she died. It was a throwaway comment one night after a delicious steak-and-risotto dinner, when Charlie collapsed against the family room couch and turned on the TV. She tapped him on the shoulder and told him to go clean off his plate, and when he insisted he'd do it later, she replied, in the sweetest possible voice, "Hey, I'm not gonna be around forever, mister. One of these days, you'll have to learn to take care of yourself, understand?" At the time he thought she was just being dramatic, saying what she needed to to get Charlie off his ass and into the kitchen to clean his dirty plate, but they were the words that stuck with him more than any others from his mother throughout the last few years, the undeniable truth that it was up to him and him alone to move past the assault, to get over the torment and anger still hibernating deep inside. And as he continues to row as fast as he can, the sweat intensifying, his arms aching and his legs already sore, the pretty boys disappear before

him, and the only person he sees is his mother at a distance, leaning against a cable triceps bar, her arms crossed, a widening grin on her face telling him she's confident he'll pull through this. He says he will. He *promises* he will. Charlie's stronger than ever before, after all, and he's smarter, and tougher, and he refuses to be a victim, because no one, not least of all Jack, will ever bring him down again.

CHAPTER TEN

Isabelle

Isabelle and Raylon have to wait thirty minutes in the cell phone waiting parking lot, Jack's plane delayed longer than they originally thought. Raylon plays on his phone while Isabelle studies her list of questions she plans to ask Jack for the documentary. She doesn't want to overwhelm him, so she whittles the questions down from twenty to twelve, the first few innocuous, barely even pertaining to her film's subject, only there to make Jack feel comfortable and forget a camera is focused on his face. By the time she gets to the real questions, the ones she's wanted to ask him for years and not just for the movie, he'll be so at ease that he won't mind her bluntness, her probing for intimacy, and find it in his heart to give his sister everything she wants and more.

A text finally comes in from Jack that says he's off the plane, so she drives to the arrivals lane and pulls to the curb. She stares at Raylon, who looks so comfortable in the passenger seat, his left foot shoved against the glove compartment, his right foot on the dash. Still, Isabelle asks the question anyway: "Can we switch places for the drive home?"

"What? Why?"

"I don't want to be distracted when I talk to Jack."

"You can't drive and talk at the same time?"

"Of course I can," Isabelle says. "But I don't want to screw this up. If I say the wrong thing, Jack might blow off the interview, might make other plans..."

"What if he's already *made* other plans?"

"You mean, tonight?"

"Uh-huh."

Isabelle shakes her head, her hand already grasping the door handle. “I don’t know my brother that well, certainly not the way I used to, but I do know one thing: travelling wipes him out. We went to Orlando for his sixteenth birthday. And Hawaii once, when Jack was twelve, and I was eight. That was a... horrible week. Worst week of my life—”

“Isabelle,” Raylon interrupts.

“What?”

“I know about Hawaii. You told me about your dad on our first date.”

“I did?”

“Yeah. You said your brother and your dad went on some hike, and that your dad slipped, he fell to his death.”

“That’s right,” Isabelle says. “I’m sorry. I must’ve forgot. *Anyway...*” She’s forced to regain her composure, trying not to slip into momentary melancholy about the father she barely got to know. “The thing with Jack is that every time we get to a hotel after a long flight is that I want to go explore, and all Jack wants to do is go to bed.”

“Really? Well, that doesn’t help you, either, does it? How are you gonna finish the movie if your brother *sleeps* the rest of the day?”

“That’s the thing. It’s never for the whole day. He just takes a long nap, usually. And when he’s finally up and groggy, not paying attention in the least, that’s when I’ll point the camera at his face. It’s the only way he’ll be honest with me.”

“I see,” Raylon says. “So you want to manipulate him... to get him to tell the truth.”

“Exactly.”

“Why don’t you just get him drunk? Isn’t that easier?”

Raylon laughs at his own suggestion, but Isabelle doesn't join in, her focus currently on the tall, handsome twenty-two-year-old stepping out of the closest airport terminal. Jack's wearing a black leather jacket and blue jeans, and he has a pair of sunglasses on, even though the sky is littered with black clouds. His hair's longer and curlier than it was when he left for school in August, stopping just above his shoulders, and he's also grown the slightest trace of a goatee, but it's him.

"Raylon, hurry up," Isabelle says. She pounds her fist on the steering wheel. "Get in the driver's seat, please."

"Fine." He removes his seat belt and steps out on the concrete. "But if I crash, it's your fault, not mine."

Isabelle snickers at her boyfriend, then steps out of the car too, all the way to the sidewalk where she catches Jack staring in the wrong direction. She yells his name, louder than she needs to, and he quickly locks his eyes on hers. In her imagination he comes running toward her in that moment, his giant smile glistening in the winter gray haze, his arms opened wide to embrace his little sister. Instead, he simply nods and gives her a lame, half-hearted wave, before he looks down at his phone.

"There you are," Isabelle says. "Long flight?"

"Don't even get me started." He shuffles up to her, his eyes still glued to the tiny screen. He keeps a tight grip on his behemoth black suitcase.

"Can I grab your bag?"

"No, no. I've got it." He shoots off a text, then shoves the phone in his pocket. He removes his sunglasses and, finally, takes a good look at his sister. "Izzy, Izzy, Izzy. When did you get to be such a knock-out?"

Isabelle steps to the back of her car and opens the trunk. “You know how much I hate you calling me that.”

“What? A knock-out?” He shoves his backpack and suitcase inside. “That’s a good thing.”

“No. *Izzy*, doofus. Makes me sound like I’m a coked-up rock star or something.”

“Well, aren’t you?”

Isabelle slams the trunk shut, and punches Jack in the chest, playfully. He wraps his arms around his waist and laughs, awkwardly, a kind of brou-ha-ha that sounds downright sinister.

She sighs, and reaches her arms toward him. “Seriously. You gonna give your sister a hug or do I have to force one out of you?”

“My sister? Wait a sec... we’re related?”

“Last time I checked.”

“But you’re, uhh...” He looks to his left, then his right, all dramatically, his lips pursed, his shoulders hunched. He takes a goofily slow step forward and brings his mouth up to her right ear. “You’re *black*.”

She brings her arms down, and slugs Jack again. “Ha-ha-ha, you’re hilarious. You’re so goddamned funny, Jack.”

“What? I just wanted to double-check you knew.”

“You don’t have to joke about it. Do you know how many times I’ve gotten shit for being related to you? The way people have stared at us over the years?”

His grin alleviates, like he’s actually hearing her for the first time. “You’re right, I’m sorry.” He leans down toward her far—she’s nearly a foot shorter than he is—and kisses her on the forehead. “It’s good to see you. It’s been a long time.”

“Yeah. It has.”

She offers Jack the front seat, which he takes without hesitation, and Isabelle slips into the back.

“Your name’s Raylon, right?” Jack asks as soon as he buckles his seatbelt, and then he and Raylon shake hands. Isabelle waits for the two tall, strapping men to begin a friendly conversation, one that lasts at least a minute or two, but those are the only words shared between them before Raylon turns toward the airport’s exit and Jack pulls his phone back out to answer another text.

Isabelle leans forward and tries to see the name of the person he’s texting. She squints and tries to read the tiny letters, but then he brings the phone closer to his lap, like he can sense his sister spying on him.

Raylon speeds through the first of many traffic signals and finally ends the awkward silence: “So Jack, how was your flight?”

“Miserable.”

“Sorry to hear that.” More silence. Five seconds. Ten seconds. “Uhh, happy to be home for Christmas?”

He doesn’t answer. He finishes writing yet another text, and after he sends it, he tells Raylon, “Sure. Christmas. Yeah.”

“You sound thrilled.”

Isabelle taps her index finger against Jack’s shoulder, at the same time she glares at her boyfriend for his not-so-subtle sarcasm. “Tell me about New York. Has it been snowing there, too?”

“One sec,” he says, typing what looks to be the longest text message ever recorded. Isabelle finally sees a name above the huge paragraph Jack’s writing—Nick Crenshaw, one of his best friends from high school.

Isabelle tries to keep a smile on her face, but she finds herself struggling with Jack’s enduring rudeness, a painful knot forming in her stomach unexpectedly, the desire to rip that goddamn phone out of his hand and throw it out the speeding car increasing by the second. But pissing him off is no option right now, so she keeps her cool, waits for him to send the text, and then asks her question again. He tells her how much he loves the city, how it’s been snowing like crazy, how he’s had a girlfriend since September—Talia Robinson, a junior communications major at NYU—but he doesn’t open up as much as she’d like.

Of course getting him to open up on camera is now more a question mark than a concern since Jack’s on the phone yet again, still texting back and forth with Nick, and the realization sets in that he might be making immediate plans after all, that he might not be taking that predictable nap. She needs to delay him and keep him around the house, at least for a little bit.

“So what do you have planned today?” Isabelle asks, faking a touch of enthusiasm. “Anything exciting?”

“Not really,” Jack says. “Just gonna hang out with some friends. What about you?” He turns his head around, for the first time since he got inside the car. “Making another movie?”

Isabelle smiles. She likes where the conversation is headed. “I am, actually.”

“You know I showed your documentary to Talia awhile back. You know... the one about the Reno breweries? She couldn’t believe you were only seventeen. Said you’re super talented.”

“Oh. That’s nice of her.” She leans back against her seat, in complete shock at what he’s told her. “You showed your girlfriend one of my movies? You didn’t have to do that.”

“She asked to see it. She thinks it’s cool you make documentaries.”

Isabelle waits for him to say more, but he keeps his mouth shut. “And... what?” she asks. “You don’t?”

“Honestly? I’m waiting for you to make a big Michael Bay-style action flick, with gun battles and car chases and fights to the death. But, I don’t know, that’s just me.” He scratches the top of his head, yawns, then asks, “So what’s your new movie about? Kids with cancer? Sick puppies? Some kind of killer disease floating around Reno I don’t know about?”

Isabelle doesn’t appreciate his sarcasm—she already gets an earful of it from Raylon a hundred times a day—but she manages a grin anyway, and says, “No, nothing like that.”

“All right. Then what’s it about?”

She thinks about keeping it a secret, at least until she begins the interview. But the quiet ticks on, and she doesn’t have a good enough reason to stay coy. “The last one I did, over the summer, was about teen suicide. And the one I’m currently shooting is about interracial adoption.”

“Interracial adop...” His voice drifts, and he doesn’t finish the second word. He wrings his hands together, for once without the phone in between them, and darts his eyes back at his sister. “Oh. So you’re telling *our* story.”

“Indeed she is,” Raylon says, adding his two cents to the mostly two-person conversation. “I’ve been helping her film it. It’s almost done, and it’s really good, it’s fascinating.”

“Fascinating?” Jack asks, in a condescending tone.

Isabelle bites on her tongue, not wanting to bring this up until they get home, but she just blurts it out: “Speaking of, there’s one more person I’d like to interview before I finish the film.”

“Yeah? Who’s that?”

Isabelle shoves her chin against her palms. “You, stupid.”

“*Me?* No way. You don’t want to interview me, Izzy. I’m boring.”

“You’re not boring. What are you talking about?”

“If I’m gonna be completely honest, this sounds kind of like a step-down for you. Who wants to watch a movie about interracial adoption? Is that really much of an issue? Especially in Reno?”

“You’d be surprised,” Isabelle says. “I’ve interviewed more than a dozen people the last several weeks, some in Reno, some in Tahoe, two in Sacramento. I interviewed Mom, and a black friend at Galloway who has white parents. And I wanted the last person I interviewed to be the person I... love the most.” She emphasizes those last three words hard. “That person is you, Jack. This is the film I’m sending in with my college application, my visual sample, the film that defines *me*, and everything rests on it being my best work yet.”

“Whoa,” Jack says, before he releases a quiet chuckle. “That’s... a lot to process. For starters, you seriously love me more than Mom?”

Not exactly, but she responds with, “Sure. Why not?”

“And this is the film you’re submitting with your applications? *Really?*”

“Really.”

“Wow. Talk about pressure, Izzy. I... don’t know.”

“Please, Jack. Don’t make me beg.” She rests her hand on his left shoulder. “The film is in many ways about us, about our relationship, and it would mean the world, it really would, if you’d be in it. I’ve never asked you to be on camera before, and I won’t ever ask you again. Please? Just this once?”

Jack purses his lips, and slides his fingers through his thick, wavy hair, like he's thinking deeply about his final answer. Then: "Fine. If it means that much to you."

"Okay, great! That's great!" She's on the verge of turning up the radio and singing, she's so relieved.

"When do you want to film my part? Like, next week sometime?"

Isabelle moves her hand down Jack's shoulder, all the way to his arm. She expects him to pull away, almost as a reflex, but he lets the hand stay there, no desire to keep her at a distance.

"Actually, can you do it today? I need the movie done by the end of the weekend."

"The end of the... *Jesus*. Okay, I guess. But you have to do it soon, I'm meeting up with my friends in a bit." He peers deep into her eyes, not breaking his concentration. He finally doesn't seem concerned with the damn phone any longer. "I do have one request, though."

"Anything. Name it."

"Can I take a quick nap when I get home? I'm exhausted."

She laughs, sharing a quick and knowing glance with Raylon, before she kisses her brother on the cheek. "Absolutely."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Charlie

It's a few minutes after four o'clock and the sun is already beginning to set as Charlie pulls up to his snow-covered driveway in south Reno. He's had his windows rolled down the entire ride home, the chilly winds turning the sweat on his face into an unpleasant stickiness. He pushes the automatic garage door button and sees his father's Volvo S60 missing from the right side of the cluttered garage.

Charlie parks his 4Runner where the gray Volvo usually sits, his father preferring for years to keep it as pristine and at low mileage as possible, but as soon as he started dating Jacquelyn last month—a frizzy-haired cocktail waitress who works at the Eldorado Casino—he noticeably took his immaculate vehicle out of the garage more and more. When Charlie walks into the kitchen, he finds a note from his father on the refrigerator saying he will be gone with Jacquelyn until Sunday and that there is leftover lasagna in the fridge. The note ends asking if Charlie can shovel the snow off the sidewalk and driveway when he gets a chance.

Charlie sighs, then takes off his t-shirt and gym shorts. He tosses them in the laundry room hamper and wanders down the main hallway at a glacial pace. He's never walked around his home wearing only undies before, too nervous his father or his new girlfriend might come home unexpectedly and catch a peek at his buns of steel, but he has the place to himself for two whole days, and he's about to make the most of it.

He starts by taking the longest shower of his life. Thirty-four minutes, possibly a new record. He loves every second spent behind that tall pane of glass, the rush of the water against his face keeping him centered and calm. After he finishes, he throws the towel on the floor and exposes his complete nakedness for the world to see, entering his bedroom and closing the door

behind him. The blinds on his one main window are open, but he doesn't care; his house is the last on the neighborhood street, behind it a forever-long stretch of dirt lots that still remain to be built on. There's nobody around. Nobody to snap an explicit photo. He takes a seat at his corner desk and turns on his laptop monitor.

The Wi-Fi works, unlike yesterday, and he can click on any webpage he desires, but the only one he clicks on is OKCupid. He still can't believe he joined it, even after all the typical, unnecessary prodding from Lisa, who said the dating website was way more legit than Grindr. She said it could help him find someone of substance, someone the complete opposite of Jack, the man who in Lisa's mind broke her best friend's heart when he never called him back. When Charlie refused to sign up for OKCupid, after having already deleted Grindr and insisted he didn't want to date guys until college, she did what any crazy friend would do: she created a profile for him, complete with a list of hobbies and favorite movies and three current pictures she'd taken of him over the summer, and sent him the link. Most of the initial messages were short and groan-worthy—"how are you" was the most frequent icebreaker—but a few gave him more to work with, like a twenty-year-old in Los Angeles who said he was "the cutest thing I've ever seen" and a twenty-five-year-old in South Africa who said "you're like the offspring of Timothee Chalamet and Robert Redford," whatever that meant. There were so many messages Charlie wondered if one might be from Jack; it was certainly possible. The guy had found him on Grindr, so what would prevent him from finding him on OKCupid? He had no doubt Jack would click on his profile sooner or later, and so despite some of the nice messages, he went to delete the profile for good.

But right as he scrolled toward the Cancel button, a new message alert came in, from a guy named Oliver who lived in Oregon. A tiny icon appeared in the bottom corner, complete

with a photo of a shirtless guy on a beach, two giant waves crashing behind him. Charlie's brain told him to do one thing, but his fingertips did another, and soon he clicked on Oliver's message and was stunned to see three paragraphs that went into their shared interests, how Charlie was his type, that throughout years of searching Oliver had never found someone in person or online he ever clicked with. The message was so thoughtful and detailed that Charlie had to step away from it at first. Even though Oliver seemed like the perfect guy, Jack had seemed like the perfect guy, too. And Oliver resided in Portland, more than 500 miles away. What were they going to do, meet halfway in Nowhere, Idaho?

Alas, the distance between them gave Charlie the level of comfort he needed to put himself out there a second, safer time. This relationship was going to be about conversation, and only conversation, and so Charlie wrote him back that night, and then Oliver wrote back the next morning, and the two wrote back and forth for weeks, sometimes long messages that could fill a chapter in a book, sometimes funny quips that lasted all of a single sentence. For the longest time Charlie loved the lack of expectations. No desire from either to physically meet, at least in the short term. It had been a relationship of words, something that was his and only his.

But lately it's been a lack of words that gives Charlie pause. He messaged Oliver five days ago, and then again yesterday, and he still hasn't heard from the guy. He thinks about messaging him a third time, but wouldn't that look desperate? Charlie clicks on Oliver's profile and stares, again, at his fourteen beautiful pictures. The one he's come to love the most is the last one, probably the oldest since Oliver's a little heavier and his hair is styled different, a touch blonder and wavier. He's sitting on a park bench, his arms wrapped around his mother.

Charlie rests his elbows against the desk. Slides his index finger against the monitor. He closes his eyes, and wishes Oliver could be sitting here next to him, his head leaning against

Charlie's shoulder. If Oliver lived in Reno, Charlie would want—no, *demand*—a second chance at love. The kind that doesn't end in a brutal attack he still can't shake from his memory. Not when he wakes up in the morning, or when he sits for hours at school, or when he goes to bed at night. Not when he closes his eyes, even now, Jack's face still lingering even as Charlie tries to fixate on Oliver. He continues to hear Jack's voice, the way he said so nonchalantly, "Flip over." Flip over. Two words that meant nothing before August. Two words now that mean death.

Charlie keeps scrolling through Oliver's pictures, does everything he can to let images of Jack slip far from his mind, when he hears a noise outside his bedroom window.

He spins his chair around and keeps quiet, staring at the window, waiting for Jack's ominous face to appear. His work-out gave Charlie a much needed jolt of confidence, enough that upon returning home he actually thought he could walk around naked, nobody around to make fun of him, to hurt him, but Jack's here, of course he is, he finally found him, how could Charlie be so stupid? He won't have time to even grab for his underwear before Jack breaks through the window, pins him to the carpet, and does what he wants, Charlie's newfound strength still not enough to fight him off.

He hears a second noise, this one even closer, a faint shuffle of a footstep, and a second later Charlie's out of the bedroom, rushing down the hall toward his father's office, where he keeps the gun. After they moved to their new smaller house after his mother was killed, his father showed him where he stashed his S&W Governor in case Charlie was ever alone at home and needed to defend himself. Charlie practiced using the gun at a nearby firing range a few times, always with his father, Lisa joining the two of them once after endless begging. When he pulled the trigger the first time, the force of the bullet nearly knocked Charlie to the ground. But he fired it a second time, and a third, and eventually he not only got used to the slim weapon the

best he could but also got fairly adept at using it. The knowledge that a loaded gun was kept close by gave Charlie a level of comfort he needed throughout the last four years, and especially since Jack's brutal attack.

The first few days following the rape, Charlie refused to get out of bed, or eat, or shower. He told his father he had a severe case of the flu, and Vincent let him be. He only left his bed to use the bathroom and eat dinner, and, on occasion, crawl into his father's office, open the bottom drawer beside his desk, rummage past the hundreds of file folders, and pull out that trusty handgun. Charlie never pressed the gun to his head, even though the thought crossed his mind a hundred times that first week, and instead he rested the gun against his hands, none of his fingers coming close to the trigger. He liked having the gun just sit there, pressed against his palm. Jack couldn't come at him a second time, not with this gun within his grasp. Jack would never have a chance.

He hasn't been in his father's office for at least two months, but he's back inside of it now. Charlie drops to his knees, and when he opens the bottom drawer, empty folders spill onto the hardwood. He shoves his right hand underneath the rest of the folders and hundreds of miscellaneous papers and reaches deep for the gun. He doesn't feel anything at first, only the rough surface of the drawer's bottom, and the startling realization sets in that his father's moved the gun, possibly taken it with him and put in in the Volvo. But then he feels something cold and smooth, his thumb sliding against the muzzle. He removes the S&W Governor, grips it in his hands, and aims it toward the hallway, his grip tight against the magazine and back strap, his index finger resting firmly against the trigger. He keeps the gun pointed in front of him as he re-enters the hall and starts back, one cautious step at a time, toward his bedroom.

He tries to stay focused but part of him feels ridiculous, walking down an empty hallway butt naked holding a loaded gun in his hands. He glances toward the kitchen, the living room, the laundry room. There's nobody. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Charlie stops in front of his bedroom door, which is only partially opened, enough so he can listen for more footsteps. He keeps his mouth shut, the gun close to his chest, as he hears someone kick a rock outside his bedroom window.

He holds his breath, takes in one final moment of silence, then punches his door wide open and points the gun at the window. Someone's peering in from the other side, someone wearing a black coat and red gloves, and as soon as she catches sight of Charlie—his balls or his gun, he's not entirely sure—Lisa screams and drops to the ground.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Isabelle

After Isabelle uses the upstairs bathroom, she walks down the hallway and checks on Jack again. As soon as they arrived home, he collapsed on the bed first thing, and now he's snoring, his head sandwiched between two green velvet pillows, his right leg dangling off the bed. Isabelle stays in the room longer than she needs to, unable to shake what could have been. Jack's bedroom door stayed forever closed as she grew up, and whenever she attempted a quiet knock to get her brother's attention, he either ignored her or shouted, "Go away!" One night he caught her in his bedroom searching through his things—she was only trying to find her missing camera battery charger—and he shoved her into the hallway, demanded she be more respectful of his privacy, and slammed the door in her face.

He had his mean streaks and violent tendencies over the years, especially during the rare occasions when Jack had to babysit her and he chose to really twist the knife in her back. Seven years ago, after Isabelle ate the last of Jack's chocolate birthday cake, he cornered her in the family room, chocolate crumbs still stuck to her lips, and asked her, his voice cold and modulated, "Why couldn't you have just stayed an orphan?" Isabelle told her mother what he said the next day but she didn't believe her, especially when her beloved Jack viciously denied it. Her mother always believed Jack over her, of course. Her child by birth. Her *real* child. Growing up Isabelle only occasionally felt a part of the Pruitt family, barely knowing her father before he died in a tragic accident, never much connected to Jack or her mother. So often Isabelle thought of herself as a charity case, something her parents had done on a whim, wanting to show their hearts of gold to the world and boast to their friends what good Christians they were by adopting the black orphan child. They could have taken Isabelle's side more, not always believing Jack.

And they could have made her believe, even if they had to fake it, that Isabelle was worthy of their time and love.

All of these issues made Isabelle finally want to confront her topic for her newest movie. Her mother had opened up more on camera than she thought she would, and now she needed Jack's side.

Isabelle quietly shuts Jack's bedroom door and heads down the long, winding staircase, these flashes of her childhood making her more anxious than sad. She enters the kitchen, cracking her knuckles and emitting a loud yawn, Jack's snoring from upstairs clearly having an effect on her, when she spots her mother Annette talking to Raylon at the dinner table.

"Hi, honey," her mother says, tapping her red-painted fingernails against her mug of hot tea. Her raven black hair is big and curly, like she stuck a whole fist into a light socket. "Thanks again for getting Jack. That helped me a lot today."

"It wasn't a problem. The airport's not even ten minutes away from school."

"It's like fifteen," Raylon adds. "But Isabelle drives so fast—"

"Hey." Isabelle points at her boyfriend, her eyes suddenly narrowed. "Watch it."

"Listen, however fast you got there, that was very thoughtful of you, *both* of you, and I appreciate it." She shifts her chair a little closer to where Isabelle is standing. "So how's the new movie coming? Is it done? You don't make me look like a complete idiot, do you?"

"No, no, you were great, Mom. I'll be able to show you the whole thing pretty soon."

Even though Isabelle still has more filming to do—and lots more editing, with a few music tracks still undecided—the reality that this two-month project is finally reaching its end gives her a sweet sense of relief.

“That’s great, sweetie. I can’t wait to see it.” Isabelle’s mother steps away from the table, then grabs her keys and purse off the kitchen island. “I’m gonna swing by the grocery store. And I have to go to the post office, too, before it closes. You two want to join me?”

Isabelle considers the invitation—Jack will probably be asleep for at least another hour, and spending some quality time with her mother sounds pleasing, Isabelle free to put most anything in the cart at the local supermarket, like peanut butter cookies and mint chocolate gelato—but she also doesn’t want to risk coming home to find Jack long gone for the night, so she says, “Maybe next time, Mom. I still have some filming to do.”

“Oh, okay. Not a problem.” Isabelle’s mother shakes her keys, a smile growing on her face. She looks so much like Jack, with her lofty cheekbones and big green eyes. “I can’t wait to see the final cut!” She kisses Isabelle on the forehead, then answers her vibrating phone and disappears into the garage.

Right away Raylon starts rubbing his fingers on Isabelle’s right arm, but she remains focused on the long, empty hallway. Her mother didn’t have to say those last two things, could have simply said good-bye and see you later, but she did, always encouraging Isabelle to pursue her passion in film no matter the odds. The only person Isabelle would cherish saying those words more is Jack, who has yet to care much about her moviemaking dreams, but maybe someday. Maybe even by the end of today’s shoot, if all goes well.

She pushes Raylon’s hand away and walks into the living room, where the camera equipment is safely stored. She unzips the camera bag and takes out her tiny HD camcorder. She turns the power on and double checks that the HD card has room for one more interview—160 minutes left of footage, more than enough—and that the battery is full. It has about ninety

minutes of life left, not bad, but just in case, Isabelle inserts the charger into the wall and slides her battery in until it clicks.

“What’s up?” Raylon asks. He’s closer than Isabelle realized, standing by the leather couch, his knees bent in a way that can’t possibly be comfortable.

“Not much. Just getting ready for the interview.”

She reaches in the front pouch of the bag for the slender camera microphone, but her fingers only skim its rubbery surface, when Raylon grabs hold of Isabelle’s hand and yanks her to her feet.

“Raylon, what are you doing?” Isabelle asks, her focus still on the microphone.

“I have no idea,” he says. “Your brother’s asleep. Your parents are gone. We have the house... to *ourselves*...”

He tugs Isabelle toward the couch, and she collapses against his stomach. He brings his hands to Isabelle’s shoulders, then kisses her. They lock lips for the longest time, until he leans his head back and says, “I love you. You know that, right?”

Isabelle fingers find her boyfriend’s unavoidable six-pack under his thin sweater. “I love you, too. Where’s this coming from?”

“I don’t know. I feel like we don’t say it enough.”

“Well, we don’t have to say it every day. We’re not an old married couple, last time I checked.”

Raylon slides his index finger down Isabelle’s cheek, stopping it at her bottom lip. “Do you *want* to be an old married couple?”

She laughs, it’s all she can do. “Excuse me?”

“You barely even look at me anymore. I feel like...”

“What?” She doesn’t take her eyes off of him. “Say it.”

“Sometimes... I feel like I’m just a prop in one of your movies. Like you don’t care about me the way I care about you.”

“What are you talking about? Are you nuts? Of course I care about you.”

“You do?”

“You’re my boyfriend, Raylon. What kind of a question is that?”

He smiles, kisses her again briefly on the mouth. “I’m glad. I was... starting to wonder.”

He pulls her closer toward him, then starts pressing his lips against the side of her neck, softly at first, then a bit rougher. He cups his hands under Isabelle’s breasts.

“Hey, stop it,” Isabelle says. “Not right now.”

She tries to escape Raylon’s grasp, but he doesn’t let her leave, his lips now at the top of her chest, his hands latched against her sides.

“Raylon, I said, stop it. *Stop.*”

She pushes away from him, with all the strength she has, her palms connecting hard with his chest. He lets her go, and she falls back against the carpet.

The room turns silent. No words are said at first. But then Raylon leans forward, brings his elbows against his knees, runs his fingers through his hair, and asks, “What the hell is your problem? You won’t even let me kiss you now?”

“I’m... sorry.” Isabelle is already on her feet again, unzipping the tripod bag, looking for something—anything—to keep her occupied. She pulls the heavy tripod toward her chest and kicks out its three bottom legs. “I just don’t feel like fooling around when my brother’s upstairs and my mom could be home, literally, at any second.”

“Your mom’s not gonna come home, she just left. She’ll be gone for an hour, at least. And your brother’s fast asleep!”

Isabelle sets the tripod in the corner of the room, where she plans to shoot Jack’s interview. “If one of us had a place of our own, we could do more. But we don’t. And I can’t risk my mom walking in and seeing us having sex on the living room couch, I just can’t. Okay?”

Isabelle hopes for a laugh from Raylon, at least a smile to show he doesn’t hate her, but within seconds he’s up on his feet, his lips pursed with contempt. “You know what I think?” He takes out his phone and glances at the time. “I think this has nothing to do with your mom.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean.”

Isabelle sits on the corner of the couch. “Actually, I don’t.”

Raylon shoves his phone back in his pocket and steps toward Isabelle. “This is the second time this week I’ve tried to kiss you for longer than five seconds, and you pushed me away, both times. You’re lying, you don’t care about me. Do you even want to be with me anymore, Isabelle? Is that what’s going on here?”

She shakes her head, on the verge of laughter. “Now you’re just being ridiculous.”

“Oh, really?”

Raylon rushes forward, not even giving Isabelle enough time to take a breath, before he leans down and pushes his lips against hers, this time shoving his tongue down her throat. Isabelle closes her eyes and clenches her hands into fists. There’s nothing romantic about this, nothing stimulating. She’s turned off completely, Raylon’s slimy, wandering tongue making her want to gag, and so she bites down on his bottom lip.

He jerks his head away from hers, in a flash. Keeps his mouth open for a few seconds, like he might say something, or even shout at her, but then he wipes his thumb across the lip, revealing a slight trickle of blood.

“That’s what I thought,” Raylon says, before he grabs his jacket and starts walking toward the front door, her feet pounding loudly against the hardwood.

“Where are you going?” Isabelle asks. “You’re leaving? Seriously?”

“Good luck with your movie.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t be like that.”

Isabelle hurries to the door, just as Raylon’s opened it. She takes hold of his hands and gives her boyfriend a tender kiss on the cheek, but when she pulls away, he’s still looking down, his breaths heavy, like he’s on the verge of screaming.

“You won’t let me touch you, Isabelle. It’s been almost two months, and we still have never...” He shakes his head. “Look, I know you’re a virgin—”

“Hey,” she interrupts. “What does *that* have to do with anything?”

“Nothing. It’s okay if you’re scared. I’m scared, too.”

Isabelle glances toward the staircase, only for a second, to make sure her brother’s not sitting there listening to their every word. She returns her gaze to Raylon. “I know we haven’t had sex yet, and I’m sorry, I am. I’m just... not ready for that yet.”

“Well, when do you think you will be?”

“I don’t know, Raylon, *God*. Are you seriously obsessing over this right now? When I have the most important interview of my movie to shoot in a few minutes?”

“Most important interview? You’re talking to your brother.”

“Exactly.”

He stares into her eyes, dumbfounded.

Isabelle latches her fingers on his sweater and pulls him closer. “I want to talk about this. But first I have to finish this movie. Let me film the last interview, cut everything together, send in my applications, and then, finally, I’ll have this huge weight off my back, okay?”

“You showed me a cut of the movie last weekend. The movie works good as it is. I don’t think you even need these final two interviews—”

“I need to get this movie perfect, you understand me?” Her voice is suddenly lower, bolder. She drops her hands to her sides and steps away from him. “It can’t just be good. It has to be great. This is my shot, Raylon. Maybe the only one I’ll ever get. Everything I’ve worked for all these years has led to this movie, and this moment, and I’m not about to fuck it up because you want to get *laid*.”

Raylon stares at her for a few seconds, his mouth opening but no words coming out. “Jesus,” he finally says, and then he turns around and steps past the open door.

She moves toward him. “Wait. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that to come out so mean...”

“Whatever,” he says, walking toward the driveway. “I’ll see you later.”

“Can I call you?”

Raylon reaches his car and unlocks the driver’s side door. “Sure. But I can’t promise I’ll answer.”

Isabelle thinks about running after him, assumes Raylon *wants* her to run after him, but as he pulls out of the driveway and speeds down the street, seemingly not just out of the neighborhood but out of her life, Isabelle hears footsteps behind her, and by the time she turns back around, she catches Jack reaching the bottom of the staircase and stepping toward the

kitchen, his hair a mess, his shirt all wrinkled. When he disappears around the corner, she hears the pantry door open.

Isabelle looks outside one last time. Raylon is long gone. The air has grown even colder, and the thick clouds have turned blacker, the last glimmer of any sunshine officially done for the day. She sighs and steps back in the house.

“*Izzy?*” Jack yells from around the corner.

Isabelle reckons with the inescapable fact he’ll never stop calling her that horrible nickname. “What?”

“Let me go take a shower and get dressed. And then...”

“And then?” She waits for it. Hopes for it. Is willing to even beg for it.

“Then I’ll be ready for my close-up, Mrs. DeMille!”

Isabelle smiles, and thoughts of Raylon already slip from her mind as she closes the door behind her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Charlie

Charlie sits on his bed Indian-style, his fingers gripped against the front of the mattress. He's wearing a new t-shirt—a dark blue one with tiny white stars streaked across its top—and the gun is no longer in his grasp, not even in the room. He leans his head against the wall as Lisa continues to purse her lips, swiveling Charlie's computer chair from left to right, her posture questionable as her back keeps sinking lower and lower to the chair's bottom, her large breasts suddenly blocking her entire face.

“Are you mad?” Charlie asks.

Lisa finally sits up straight, pushes her palms together, and says, “Not really. You only pointed a *gun* at your best friend.”

“I didn't know it was you, Leese! I heard footsteps, and I... I panicked...”

“You heard footsteps outside your bedroom window and naturally, you did what any rational human being would do, and go grab a loaded gun.”

“I thought you were someone else. A burglar, maybe. It was stupid.”

She pulls her chair closer to Charlie and within seconds towers over him. She's wearing a thin green sweatshirt, her hoodie pulled over most of her head, her jeans sporting a noticeable giant hole near her left ankle. Her huge black coat rests on a rack beside his closet, gloves poking out the left side pocket. “Well, what if I *had* been a burglar? You were going to shoot me dead? I don't think it's technically self defense if nobody breaks into the house—”

“Okay, okay, *I get it*. I made a mistake. What were you even doing creeping around the side of my house like that anyway?”

“I knocked on your door! You didn't answer! I was just seeing if you were alive.”

“There’s a thing called a doorbell. I would have *heard* the doorbell.”

She finally closes her mouth, at a rare loss for words, and taps three of her fingers fast against her chin, keeping her gaze on Charlie. “Are you all right?” Lisa finally asks. “What’s going on with you?”

Charlie darts his eyes toward the window again, where he thought Jack would appear, ready to plunge his fist through the window, crawl inside, and have his sick way with Charlie again. When he saw Lisa instead, only for a second until she dropped to her knees, he tried to dispose of the gun, shoving it in the top drawer of his computer desk, but Lisa found it a few minutes later when she searched the room for the weapon, not believing Charlie when he told her he’d been holding a giant chocolate candy bar and not a handgun. He thought she might toss it right back in the drawer, or maybe return it to his father’s office, but she shoved it in her right coat pocket and said she’d hold onto it at home, her insistence unwavering Charlie never sees that gun again until he comes to his senses.

“Nothing’s going on with me,” he says. He’d been hoping he could get through one conversation with Lisa not having to answer those two inevitable questions. They seemed to pour out of her every time Lisa cornered him.

“Yeah, sure. That’s why we’ve barely hung out in months. I’ve barely seen you since Halloween, Charlie, and I’ve missed you, so much. It’s pretty sad our friendship has reached the point where I show up to your house and get a gun pressed to my forehead.”

“Okay, I did not *press it* to your forehead. Now you’re making shit up.”

She stands up from the computer chair and sits on the bed next to Charlie. She takes his hand, and he flinches, pulling it away so fast it strikes the wall behind him.

“Jesus,” she says. “You’re so jumpy. It’s me, Charlie. I’m not going to hurt you.”

He fakes a laugh, then grabs hold of her hand. “I know that. Of course I know that.”

“I’m not sure you do. You’ve been acting really weird. For a long time. And I get it, if you want some space, if you want to spend time with other friends, *new* friends. But you’ve been more alone than I’ve ever seen you. And I’ve known you since the fifth grade—”

“I’m not hearing a question here.”

She bites down on her tongue for an excessive amount of time, ten seconds that feel like ten minutes. Then: “Charlie, I’m not stupid. You’ve been acting differently. Ever since you had that date in August. What was that guy’s name? Jack, right?”

He keeps his eyes settled on hers, trying desperately not to fall apart.

“I know you said it was disappointing. That you had dinner, there weren’t any sparks, no kissing or anything. But there’s being disappointed in a first date, and there’s being devastated by it to the point of lunacy.”

“There’s still not a question,” Charlie says.

“I want you to tell me the truth. What did that guy do to you that night? Or what did he say to you? What happened to make you become so... afraid?”

“I’m not afraid.”

“Bullshit. You’ve been hiding. I know you better than anyone. I was there when your mom died, and you want to know the honest truth? You’ve been acting weirder, more sheltered, more *miserable*, in the months since your date than in the months following your mom’s—”

“Can we talk about something else? Like... anything?”

“No. Not until you tell me what happened.”

“There’s nothing to tell, Leese. I already said what—”

“Face me. *Look* at me.”

Charlie does.

“What did Jack do to you? Did he hurt you? Hit you?”

“No.”

“Was he rude to you? Did he say something mean?”

“It was nothing like that. We just... we didn’t click, and that was—”

“Did he take advantage of you, Charlie? He didn’t force himself on you, did he?”

He takes a deep breath, even though he knows he shouldn’t. The next three seconds are crucial. Even if he tells her no, the pause will tell the truth.

But why shouldn’t he tell her, his best friend? He thought he could move on, get over it, but here he is, a week away from Christmas, so terrified by goddamned footsteps that he grabbed his father’s gun. He should tell Lisa everything. He needs to tell *somebody*.

“Fine. Here’s what happened...” Charlie opens his mouth to speak, his eyes burning into Lisa’s, and she looks so ready to hear the truth and wrap her arms around him and tell him she loves him and that she’ll do everything she can to make things right.

But he can also see her eyes flickering, Lisa ready to unleash a hundred ideas the moment he tells her Jack assaulted him. She won’t give him that long hug he needs. She might not even say a word before she runs out of the house and drives off with that gun of his, ready and willing to use it the first chance she gets. She’s got a temper, and Charlie has always had the suspicion, based on the way Lisa talks about guys, based on the way she loves setting him up but never wants to ask out a guy of her own, that something bad has happened to her, too. She won’t let Jack get away with this, especially if he’s back in Reno for Christmas. She doesn’t have his address, or his last name, but Lisa will find him, Charlie knows she will. And there’s no telling what she might end up doing.

“What is it? You can tell me.” She dips her head back, the frustration clearly setting in as Charlie continues to stay mute.

He says, finally, “We were walking back to his car, and even though the date was pretty awkward from beginning to end, I wanted to kiss him goodnight. Could have been on the cheek for all I cared. Just some kind of kiss. I leaned in. Closed my eyes. I waited... and waited. And nothing happened. When I opened my eyes, he was already gone.”

She shrugs her shoulders, before she smiles. “*That’s* what’s been bugging you all this time? You didn’t get a kiss?”

“Basically, yeah,” Charlie says, briefly licking his lips. The lie is working. “I had pictured the date going so differently. I thought at least he’d want to kiss me.”

“Your eyes were closed. Maybe he didn’t even *see* you trying to kiss him.”

“No, he saw me.”

“But how do you know for sure?”

“I just do. Jack... didn’t want me.”

Lisa gives him the embrace he hoped for, even though it doesn’t feel earned, not when he’s continuing to tell her enough blatant lies to enable a vicious stomachache. He’s about ready to pull her hands down, when she does the act for him.

“That’s fine, it’s totally fine,” Lisa says, “because I know someone who will.”

He stares at her, trying to read her mind and failing. She can be so cryptic sometimes.

“You know someone who’ll what?”

“Remember what I told you on the phone earlier? That I had a surprise for you?”

He completely forgot, but he isn’t about to tell her that. “Uh-huh.”

She runs her hand through her thick, shoulder-length blond hair, which today is parted directly down the middle. “So don’t be mad.”

“Did anyone ever teach you that’s not the best way to start a conversation?”

“Yeah? Neither is pointing a gun at someone.”

Charlie puts his hands in the air, at a loss. He will never live down today’s mistake as long as he lives. “Ha, ha, ha, ha,” he says, with a phony grin. “Okay, what is it?”

“Charlie, the thing is... I’ve met someone. He’s perfect.”

“Really?” He expected a surprise, but nothing like that. “Leese, that’s wonderful. I’m so glad. I know you haven’t had a boyfriend since Peter Feldman in the seventh grade—”

“No, stupid. He’s perfect... for *you*.”

“For me?”

“His name’s Sebastian, he’s from London. He’s nineteen, a sophomore. And he’s absolutely freaking adorable.”

“Whoa, whoa, wait a second” Charlie says, standing up from the bed. “You’re not being serious. You are *not* playing matchmaker again.”

“Listen. Just hear me out.” She leans forward, bringing her feet to the carpet, as Charlie plops down in the computer chair. “I feel bad about that first date, but this guy is the sweetest thing you could ever imagine, and, well, I might have shown him a picture of you. He swooned, Charlie. He actually swooned.”

A throbbing headache has now joined his intensifying stomachache. He rubs his forehead with his index finger, trying to find a vein he can puncture. He doesn’t know whether to be embarrassed or grateful or terrified. “Where did you meet this guy?”

“Yesterday, at Starbucks. He was wearing this cute little bow tie, and I made a comment about it.”

“So wearing a bow tie automatically made him gay?”

“No. But the way he talked, the way he held himself. It wasn’t even a question. He’s not flaming or anything. He’s just... he has some *flair*. That’s the word.”

A long bout of silence ensues, before Charlie asks, “Am I supposed to be excited about what you’re telling me right now?”

Lisa keeps her smile front and center, never one to give up, as she pulls her phone out of her pocket and starts swiping her fingers across the screen. “Maybe this will help.” She presses the phone up against his face.

Charlie looks at the curly black hair first, then the thick eyebrows, and the giant dimples, and all he can say is, “Holy shit.”

Sebastian is gorgeous, his skin the perfect shade of tan, his smile so infectious Charlie’s headache and stomachache all but vanish. His blue eyes are striking, too, practically popping off Lisa’s touchscreen. Charlie has seen a lot of attractive men in his life, including Jack, the awful Jack, but this guy may be the cutest one he’s ever laid eyes on.

“I had the same reaction,” Lisa says, and then she swipes to another picture—one of Sebastian pointing at a hummingbird—and then another—one of a shirtless Sebastian standing on a beach, a tall drink in his hand.

Charlie shakes his head and pushes the phone away. “You’re killing me, Leese.”

“Isn’t he beautiful?”

“Yeah, he is. He’s *too* beautiful. He’s way out of my league.”

“But that’s not true,” she says. “I showed him your picture. That one you’ve had on Facebook since last summer. And I’m not joking when I say this—his eyes got all big, and he smiled at me like he just saw the man of his dreams.”

Charlie slumps down to the carpet, to his stomach, his eyes suddenly staring at nothing but dirty gray, so many mixed emotions running through his head he can barely think. The idea that this handsome creature could be even slightly interested in him sets off the kind of endorphins he’s only used to feeling after an hour of hard exercise. Yet at the same time his heart flutters, his brain tells him no, don’t believe the picture, and don’t believe a word your friend says, this Sebastian will only bring you more heartbreak. He wakes up hurt every day, memories of Jack still as vivid as ever. The fear, the isolation, the crying fits, the constant checking over his shoulder—they’ve increased since August, not decreased. He can chat easily with guys online, especially someone like Oliver who lives in a different state, but he’s not ready to meet a guy in person, at least not anytime soon.

He turns onto his back and stares up at Lisa. “I don’t think I can. I’m sorry.”

“Oh.” She purses her lips in a dramatic, goofy manner, looking anywhere but down.

“Jesus. What is it now?” Charlie asks, in no mood for more surprises.

“I kind of already invited you—both of us—to a Christmas party his friend’s hosting tonight.”

Everything explodes inside, from his head to his feet, all the good feelings he was trying to keep front and center slipping away. “Wait a second. You *what?*”

“Sebastian said it was going to be intimate. Not too crazy, not too many people. I know how you don’t like crowds...”

“No.

“What?”

“No way.” He jumps to his feet, yanks open the door, and walks out of the bedroom.

“Wait, where are you going? Charlie! Hey!”

He hurries toward the front entrance of the house. He can hear Lisa yelling, asking him to slow down, saying the obvious, “There’s not a second gun in the house you’re looking for, are you?” but he’s doing his best to ignore her as he stumbles to the front door. He pushes it open, then waits for Lisa to appear. When she does, her breaths coming out a little faster, her giant coat back on, he points at her car in the driveway.

“What is this?” she asks. “Are you…”

“I think you need to leave.”

“Are you having a panic attack, Charlie?” She brings her hands toward his. “Dude, relax. This is a good thing, not a bad thing. I’m only trying to help—”

He slaps her hand away. “You don’t have to. I’m fine. I’ll be just fine on my own.”

“You’re not fine,” she says. “At all.”

She grabs his hand, successfully this time, and pulls him close, all the way so his chest is slammed up against hers. His eyes only come up to her chin, so he’s forced to dip his head back.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” Lisa says. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit. I can’t help you if you don’t tell me the truth.”

“I don’t want to go to a party, Leese, that’s all. I’m not ready for a party.”

“But I’ll be there. I’ll be by your side the entire time. You need this. We *both* do. It’ll be good for us to get out, meet some new people. You can talk to Sebastian if you want, but there isn’t anything you have to say or do, okay? No expectations.”

He takes a deep breath, comforted the longer he stares into her kind eyes. The one thing about Lisa is she can be so persuasive when she wants to be. “No expectations?”

“That’s right.”

“You promise.”

“I promise.”

“And if I want to leave... if something *happens* that makes me want to—”

“Charlie, cross my heart. I swear, if anything happens, if you’re not feeling comfortable, *I’ll* grab your dad’s gun and point it at somebody.”

He laughs at that one, he can’t help it. “I’d so like to see that.”

“So you’ll go?”

He hesitates, his mouth opening but no words coming out. He wants to tell her yes, wants to make his best friend happy and give himself the boost of confidence he’s desperately needed for months. “I’ll think about it,” Charlie says. “How’s that?”

She grins, and kisses him on the cheek. “The party starts at eight, but I don’t think anyone will get there until nine or so. I was thinking we could leave around then?” She steps onto the front porch, then takes her red gloves out of her coat pocket and puts them on. “You know... if you decide you want to go.”

“Sounds good. I’ll call you in a bit?”

“Perfect. I love you, Charlie. I hope you know that.”

Of course he does; he always has. “I love you, too, Leese.”

After she drives off, Charlie shuts the door and starts walking back to his bedroom, ready to see if Oliver might have messaged him by now. But then he stops in the hallway, and stays put for a moment. There’s no reason to stare at that computer monitor any longer, no reason to sit in

that stuffy bedroom. Oliver hasn't sent another message. He moved on. The same way Charlie needs to.

He returns to the garage, the desire to clear his head now more immediate than it's been the entire day. He's not about to drive to the gym and endure a second round of cardio and weightlifting though, so instead he grabs his father's square point shovel, so unreasonably heavy with its wide steel blade, and steps into the cold again. He grips his hands tightly against the shovel's red, wooden handle and starts scooping up the snow at the top of the driveway and dumping it onto the lawn, just like his father asked him to do.

Charlie begins slowly, with little effort, but the more he thinks about what Lisa said, the more her words reverberate through his brain like an annoying sound bite on repeat, the faster and more efficient he continues to work. He puts more muscle into the task, digging the shovel's blade under the snow deeply enough to remove huge hunks of the powder with one impressive toss, and within minutes he's shoveling the snow away from the sidewalk, too.

When he finishes, he returns to the garage, his lips curling into the biggest smile, partly because he can see the front yard again, partly because he's able to escape the frigid temperature, but mostly because he already has his answer. He takes out of his phone and dials Lisa.

She picks up after the second ring. "Wow, that was fast."

He opens his car door and slides onto the back seat, his smile still not going anywhere. He keeps a tight grip on the shovel, tapping the steel blade roughly, *proudly*, against his upper chest. He can still say no. He can tell her maybe next time, or the time after that.

But then Charlie lets the shovel fall past the seat, onto the cluttered floorboard below, and when he sits up straight, so far his head makes contact with the ceiling, he says, "Fine. I'll go."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Isabelle

“Is everything all right?” Isabelle asks, as she approaches her camera and tripod.

“Fine,” Jack says. He sits in the living room, in a tall chair opposite the camera. He keeps fidgeting with the wireless microphone attached to his jacket collar. “How long do you think this is gonna take?”

She pushes the red recording button and sits across from him. “I don’t know.”

“Like ten minutes?”

“I don’t know,” she repeats, trying not to raise her voice. His demeanor has changed considerably since she saw him in the kitchen. “Are you in a rush or something?”

“Nick keeps texting me, he wants me to come over,” Jack says, glancing for the umpteenth time at his phone. “I guess the guys have some plans for me tonight. They’re not telling me what.”

She pulls her sheet of questions out of her pocket and holds it in front of her. “Well, you can meet up with them soon. I only have a few questions to ask you.”

“Yeah? How many’s a few?”

“*Jack*. Please.” She gives me a harsh, agitated stare.

“Okay, okay.”

He finally turns toward Isabelle the way she wants him to, bringing his left leg over his right and facing the camera straight on. His eyes are on Isabelle and only Isabelle, a deep sigh coming out of his mouth that tells her everything she needs to know about his state of mind. Her brother wants to be anywhere but here, it’s so obvious. But he was supposed to come home for a weekend in October and didn’t, so she couldn’t film him then. Then he bailed on Thanksgiving,

opting to stay in New York with his new girlfriend. But Isabelle's finally got him in her grasp now, and she's not about to let his irritation faze her.

"You ready?" she asks.

"As I'll ever be."

She shifts her chair forward, unable to ignore how much nicer and cleaner he looks now than he did at the airport. All that time Jack spent getting ready didn't go wasted, that's for sure. His hair is curlier than ever, generously gelled, swooping over the right side of his forehead. He's wearing a dark brown sweater over a white-and-blue striped collared shirt, his tight black jeans barely out of frame. As she takes in her brother's handsome appearance, she can't help but note he looks a little gay.

"All right. State your name, please."

"My name is Jack. Jack Pruitt."

"And how old are you?"

"I'm twenty-two."

"Good. Where do you go to college?"

"I'm currently a junior at New York University. I'm majoring in business. I have a girlfriend out there. Her name's Talia."

"I didn't ask about your girlfriend," Isabelle says.

"What?"

"Nothing. Uhh, tell me about your childhood."

"My childhood? It was fine, I guess. I didn't like growing up in Reno much. I've always been more of a big city person, and I've also..."

Jack's phone vibrates. He doesn't even pretend to ignore it. He pulls it out and glances at a new text message. "Sorry. I need to respond to this."

She sits back, not bothering to stop the camera from recording. Messing around on his phone before the interview is one thing, but during the interview? In the middle of answering a question? In the middle of a *sentence*? She taps her fingernails against the side of the tripod, louder and louder so that Jack gets the hint.

He puts the phone away. "Okay, where were we?"

"We were talking about your childhood."

"Oh. Right." He cracks his knuckles, briefly, before he asks, "Who's gonna care about my childhood, Izzy?"

"Lots of people. Your childhood is *very* interesting, Jack, for a number of reasons. First off, my film is about interracial adoption, so tell me... what it was like to grow up with a black sister?"

He laughs, and runs his hand through his hair. "I'm supposed to tell the truth? With you sitting right in front of me?"

"That's correct."

"All right. Uhh, let's see. When Mom came to me and said I was getting a baby sister, I remember being really confused. I was five, and I didn't know much, but I knew enough to touch her belly and say, but how are you so *thin*? She tried to break it down for me the best she could, that you were coming out of a different mommy, that you weren't going to look like her or me. And I was confused. Actually, more upset than confused. I liked getting all the attention whenever I wanted it, I'm not gonna lie. Still—you've always been a great addition to the family. You're passionate, dedicated. I love that you're my sister, adopted or not adopted."

She clasps her hands together, trying to keep from blushing. She loves that she has that statement on video forever. Jack has never once talked candidly to her about this issue. “That’s great. Thank you.”

She shifts herself more forward in the chair, close enough to Jack that her shoes are nearly touching his. Enough silence passes that she could let the blushing take hold if she wanted it to, if she was dumber, more naïve. But she’s interviewed enough people on camera over the years to see when people are lying to her.

“Now,” Isabelle says, “tell me what you really think.”

A confident, gracious smile on Jack’s face fades in an instant. “Huh?”

“Jack, I love you more than anything, I really do. You’re my big brother.” She pierces her eyes deeply into his. “But let’s be honest. We haven’t been close over the years. Even before you went off to college, there would be... I don’t know... *days* at a time when I wouldn’t even see you. So why do you think that is, why we’ve been so distant? Do you think it’s because of me being adopted? My skin color?”

He doesn’t say anything at first. He scratches the side of his bottom lip, then interlocks his fingers. “It wasn’t a matter of not liking each other,” Jack finally says. “Whatever distance we had over the years, it had nothing to do with you being adopted, or being black. If I had to guess? It came down to three things. We’re five years apart, Isabelle. That’s a long time, it’s a fact. When I was a senior at Galloway, you were still in middle school. So it’s more of an age gap, I’d say, than anything else.”

Isabelle nods, mostly in agreement with that assessment, although he failed to say what she assumes he’s thinking: the age gap makes her look up to him, but it obviously also makes him look down on her.

“Secondly, I kind of shut down after Dad died. That was a hard time for all of us, but I was so close to him. That was... what, twelve years ago now? And yet I still feel like it was yesterday.”

Isabelle sets the list of questions on the ground, one-hundred-percent sure she no longer needs them. She starts rubbing her palms together. “I was close to him, too, Jack.”

“Were you?”

“I... tried to be.”

“Yeah? Not like me. You weren’t even with him when he died, Izzy. You and Mom were out shopping, and I was there, talking to him for hours, and I was about to tell him how much I loved him when I saw him trip and fall to his death, right before my eyes.”

“Jack. You don’t have to go over this again.”

“You asked me about my childhood. You wanted me to sound interesting. How many people do you know had a parent die by falling over a cliff? Look, I’m sorry if I haven’t been the world’s greatest brother. A lot’s happened to us, to our family. I’ve had a lot on my mind.”

Silence fills the room. He darts his eyes toward the nearest window, while Isabelle brings her hands to her knees and says, “Tell me the third thing.”

“The third thing?”

“Yeah. About why we’re not as close as we could be.”

“Oh.” He finally returns his gaze to Isabelle. “Well, it’s the most obvious reason. We have nothing in common.”

“What? Sure we do.”

“We *don’t*. You were always interested in the arts growing up, more comfortable being isolated in the things that you did. And I liked playing sports, and going to parties, and spending

time with friends. I've lived my life, Isabelle. You've spent it behind the camera, talking to other people about *their* lives, and that's fine, I'm not saying it's a bad thing..."

She shifts her chair toward him even more, trying hard not to interrupt his words that have more truth in them than she'd like to believe.

"But you know what? It doesn't matter what we were like before, what we did or didn't do. Isabelle, you're important to me. And I do want to be closer to you. Try to be the brother I never was. Try to be..."

His phone vibrates again, and he cuts off his sentence, *again*. He reaches toward his pocket.

"You know how you can do that?" Isabelle asks.

Jack shoots a quick text on his phone, then returns his gaze to his sister. "How?"

"By letting me into your life. I feel like I know nothing about you, Jack. I've been your sister for seventeen years, and you still feel like a stranger to me."

"Well... maybe that's your fault, not mine."

Jack's phone vibrates a third time. When he reaches for his pocket, she leans forward as far as she can and slaps his hand away, more forcefully than she means to. He sits back in the chair, letting out a loud huff. "Hey. What the hell."

"We're not finished yet. There's something about your life you still haven't talked about."

He stays quiet for a moment, but then keeps his eyes on her and not the phone. "What else is there to know about my life, Isabelle? It's pretty basic, pretty normal. I'm an open book, and I always have been—"

"That's a lie," she says.

He brings his left foot down to the hardwood. Sits up straighter, like he's growing more and more uncomfortable. "Excuse me?"

She wasn't planning to bring it up, didn't even have it on her list of questions. But she hasn't talked to her brother this long in years, and she can't let the opportunity pass her by. "You've been hiding something for a long time. And I wonder if it might be the main thing that's kept us apart all these years. You not being honest with me, *or* with yourself."

Still nothing. He stares at her perplexed.

"When are you going to come out of the closet, Jack?"

He crosses his arms uncomfortably. "*What?* Are you kidding me right now? I have a girlfriend, you idiot."

A loud noise ignites behind her. The garage door. Her mother's back home already, about to walk inside any second. Still, she stays focused. "Jack, I've seen you. On more than one occasion, so please, answer me truthfully for once. Forget the camera. Forget everything. Just talk to me. Help me understand..."

She shuts up in mid-sentence, since one second he's planted against his interview chair and the next he charges toward her, nearly knocking the light equipment down with a quick swipe of his right arm. He grips the sides of Isabelle's chair with both hands and shoves his face close to hers. Jack stares into her eyes, like he's about to pummel his fist at her forehead or kick her to the hardwood floor. He looks so on the verge of doing something crazy, his lips quivering with rage, but then the sounds of footsteps echo through the house, and Jack steps away from his sister immediately, their mother dropping bags of groceries on the island. She's about to dip her hand into the first bag, when she glances at Jack and Isabelle and hurries over to the living room.

“What’s going on? You’re interviewing *Jack*, too? I had no idea!” She extends her arms toward her son. “Oh, honey, I’m so happy you’re home.”

He plasters a big, fake smile across his face and accepts her hug, keeping his focus on his mother and not Isabelle. “Yeah, me too. It’s been a long semester.”

“I went to college, too. Trust me, I know! You’ve been working so hard these past few months. My little baby.” She starts walking back to the kitchen. “Do you want me to pour you a glass of wine? I picked up a few bottles at the store!”

“That’s okay. I’m actually heading out.”

“Where to?”

“Meeting up with some friends. I won’t be back until late.”

Isabelle stays seated, watching the conversation play out as if she’s not even there, and when she sees Jack hurry toward the front door, trying to escape his sister for the rest of the night, she stands up, unlocks her camera from the tripod, and catches up to him fast.

“Jack. Hold up.”

He opens the door and walks toward the driveway, ignoring her.

“Jack, *stop!* Will you listen to me?”

As soon as Isabelle takes her first step onto the porch, a swell of cold air cuts through her. She slows down near the porch’s edge as Jack continues toward the garage.

“You can’t leave yet,” she shouts, pointing to her camera. “We’re not done filming!”

He finally spins around, his hands shoved inside his pockets. “What the hell are you talking about? I just gave you more than enough. You should feel lucky I didn’t bash your camera against the wall. *Shame* on you, Izzy. I don’t know what that was, but... I’m not happy.”

She rushes up to him. She doesn't care anymore about how she looks, about how he might perceive her. "I'm sorry, okay? I didn't mean to piss you off, but I'm just trying to understand you. I'm trying to understand *us*."

"What's there to understand? You're my sister, I'm your brother. Hooray, end of story. It's not interesting in the least, and if that's the whole plot of your movie, I'm sorry to tell you, you're not getting into those schools. You're gonna put people to sleep."

She wants to strangle him for that comment, at least pretend strangle, but she keeps her hands at her sides. "My movie isn't only about us, Jack, but you're the reason I wanted to make it. I wanted this to help me understand our differences. I thought maybe.... you know... it could bring us closer."

"And you think that can happen in the course of ten minutes? With me shoved up against a camera while you throw accusations at me?" He makes a loud clucking sound with his tongue, then starts walking, again, toward the garage.

"Jack, come on. You can't leave yet—"

"Watch me."

"But I told you! We're not done! You don't want to finish the interview? *Fine*. But I still need one more shot, or I can't use your footage. I need a shot of you in your element, the same way I've shown all my subjects in their element. It needs to be something you love doing, that you're passionate about. Something that shows the real you."

"Izzy, let me give you a piece of advice," Jack says, after he stops inside the garage. He looks back at his sister one more time, noticeable menace in his cold glare. "You don't want to know the real me."

He slips into his red Ford Mustang, which until now hasn't been moved from the left garage stall since he departed for school in August. He slams the door shut, and before she can block his path, Jack reverses down the driveway, all the way out to the neighborhood street. The Christmas lights on the houses illuminate the long stretch of road, Jack's car visible for only a few more seconds until he makes a sharp turn ahead onto Platinum Way.

Isabelle stares at the suddenly empty street, then looks back at the house. She can see her mom walking back and forth inside the kitchen, a phone pressed to her ear. She can also see her lighting kit and tripod still set up for the interview that didn't go in any way as planned. Isabelle could amble into the living room and take down her equipment. She could go upstairs and digitize her footage and spend all night trying to make her movie work. It's what she should do, she recognizes. Anyone with half a brain would tell her so.

But then she whispers, "No. You're not hiding from me, not any longer. I'm right behind you, Jack."

She stops recording, and turns the power to her camera off. She needs to retain all the life in the battery she can, since her filming's far from over.

She gets in her Jetta, pulls out of the driveway, makes a left turn on Platinum Way, and speeds through two yellow lights, catching up to Jack's car at the next red. By the time he's on the freeway, Isabelle's close behind him, her hands clasped to the steering wheel, her trusty camera on the passenger seat. She keeps her distance, about fifty yards, so he doesn't think he's being followed.

Even though all she plans to do for the rest of the night is follow her brother closely. To get her final shot, that important final shot.

And, more importantly, find some answers.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Charlie

When his doorbell rings, Charlie takes one last look at himself in the mirror, his outfit not too casual, not too formal. A thin gray jacket with a hoodie, over a long-sleeved blue-and-white checkered shirt. Charlie's put more effort into his look tonight than he has in anything he's worn in months, wanting to look semi-stylish and put together, but not sporting anything suggestive to make Mr. Sebastian think he wants a quickie in the laundry room. He examines his face one last time, to make sure there's not a whitehead or blackhead or head of any kind he forgot to pop, before he shuts off the light and walks to the garage.

He pulls up to Lisa's house barely ten minutes later—he forgets sometimes how close she lives to him, in a slightly older neighborhood between him and Galloway. He plans to step out of his 4Runner, knock on the front door, guide her back to his vehicle like a perfect gentleman, but Charlie hasn't even turned off the ignition before Lisa opens the passenger door and sits down, wearing the same outfit from earlier—green sweater, blue jeans, black coat—but with her hair up in a tight bun, not long and straight like usual.

Lisa claps her hands together, like they've just boarded a rollercoaster. “So. You ready for this?”

“Not at all,” Charlie says.

“But you're here. You're here, and you look so totally adorable.”

“Thanks. I guess.”

“It's gonna be a good night, Charlie. This night is going to change your life, I promise.”

“Change my life?” He turns the car back on. Idles for a moment, before he laughs, grips the steering wheel, and starts making a U-turn. “Yeah. *Sure* it will.”

Charlie assumes the drive to the party will be fairly quick, but Lisa pulls out her phone and gives him the directions and he ends up driving across town on the I-80 freeway and turning onto a neighborhood street with endless curves and loops that couldn't be more confusing. Charlie drives through a short tunnel, then climbs an elevated street that's decked out in Christmas decoration vomit, each and every house on both sides sporting not only bright twinkling lights but various lit statues of Santa and sleds and reindeer. Despite the music on the radio and the snow that never wants to leave, Charlie hasn't been swept up in the magic of Christmas this year, the magic of anything really, and this lavish display only continues the trend of non-believing, his desire for it to be the first week of January never more immediate.

That of course doesn't stop Lisa from turning up "Jingle Bell Rock" on the radio, biting on her bottom lip and bouncing her shoulders up and down.

"Hey, pay attention," Charlie says, turning the volume down. "Which house is it again?"

"4787 Herschewe Way. Sebastian told me to look for the house with the reindeer out front. I see three houses with reindeer. What about you?"

"I think I've counted four," Charlie says, and then he shrugs. "Oh, well. Guess we just have to go back home. You want to watch a movie or something? I'll even watch something Christmas-themed if you really, really want to—"

She latches her fingers against the right side of the steering wheel, before Charlie has a chance to turn the car around. "Don't even think about it. I don't care if I have to knock on every door in this neighborhood, we are *finding* this party."

He slows down, long enough for a yellow Porsche to whip around him, some guy honking his horn for the longest time. Charlie doesn't even acknowledge the driver, instead stays focused instead on the houses on the right, same as Lisa, for the longest time.

Finally she points and shouts, “There! Right there!”

“What?” He looks out her window. Three girls and a guy are walking up to a two-story house, one of the girls jumping over a display of eight tiny reindeer. “But... how do you know for sure that’s the party?”

“Because, stupid. That’s Sebastian!”

Charlie leans against Lisa’s shoulder and catches a glimpse of the boy as he knocks on the front door. Some girl opens it, a red plastic cup in her hand, and he follows her inside. Charlie wasn’t able to see Sebastian face, but he saw most of him from behind—short brown hair, black leather jacket, tight jeans—and already can’t hide a burgeoning smile.

“You didn’t tell me how tall he is,” Charlie says.

“I didn’t? Oh, yeah. He’s like six-three.”

Charlie leans his head back. Six-three. Like Jack.

“Okay, now you just need to find somewhere to park,” Lisa says.

Charlie slows down. Every space on the street is taken. “This is kind of a problem.”

“Why don’t you just park on someone’s driveway? It’s late. It’s not like anyone’s going anywhere.”

“Yeah, that’s all I need. To come back and find my car towed.”

“Your car’s not gonna get *towed*—”

“We might have to walk a little, Leese. It’s not the end of the world.”

He keeps on driving down the long street, which is starting to curve ever so slightly to the right. They’re at least ten houses away from the party.

“Will you just stop the car?” Lisa asks. “We’re like a mile away.”

“You read my mind,” Charlie says, and he finally pulls over to the first stretch of curb that’s available on the street. Good thing, too, since in about fifty feet there’s a giant hill that veers almost straight down. He puts the car in park. Turns off the ignition. “Jingle Bell Rock” cuts out before its final cheery crescendo.

Charlie opens his driver’s side door, but then Lisa says, “Wait.”

“What?” He closes it.

“Can we just sit here a sec?”

Charlie’s eyes open wide, and he’s forced to stifle a laugh. He can’t believe she’s actually more nervous than he is. He’s about to meet a cute gay guy, the first since Jack, the first since that night when his life turned into a nightmare he never thought would end. She’s only there to tag along.

“Is everything okay?”

“Fine,” she says. “It’s just... I’ve never been good at this.”

“At what?”

“Being myself around people. I’m either too quiet or way, way too loud, I can never find the balance.”

“That’s not true. You have lots of friends, Leese. Everybody loves you.”

“Everybody does not love me. You, maybe, but... I don’t know. I have issues.”

“What about that guy you went out with last year? What was his name? Todd? He was super into you.”

“We went on three dates,” she says, rubbing her thumb against the volume button, like she wants the happy Christmas music to come back on.

“Really? I thought it was more than that.”

“No. The third date he wanted to have sex with me. When I told him no, that was it.”

Charlie brings his hand to his chin, a truck passing by fast on his left. “*What?* You never told me this.”

“Well, I’m telling you now. It’s been hard for me to tell you anything these past few months. You’ve been so distant. Like you don’t want to be friends anymore…”

“Of course I want to be friends with you. Don’t even say that.”

He can see tears welling up in her eyes. When she moves her head to the right, he reaches for her shoulder. “Not having a boyfriend is one thing,” she says. “To lose my best friend… I don’t know what I’d do if I ever lost you.”

“Stop it.” He takes hold of her hand and jerks her back in his direction. “You’re not losing me. You think you have issues? *I’ve* been the one acting so weird. I had some things I needed to work through, Leese. That I’m still working through.”

The time feels right to tell her now, to spill the honest truth about Jack. Maybe it would be good for him, for both of them. He could finally get that emotional burden off his chest, and Lisa could finally understand why he’s been such a lousy friend.

But as hard as he tries, he can’t force the words out. He will eventually, somewhere down the line, but not tonight, not when things are taking a rare positive turn. “The thing is, you can forget the old me,” Charlie continues, as Lisa’s eyes slowly fixate on his. “The one who wouldn’t return your calls, who wouldn’t make time for you? That guy’s gone, for good. Trust me when I say I don’t want to lose you, either.”

She closes her eyes, then brings her mouth to Charlie’s hand and kisses it. “Why do you have to be gay? Why can’t you just be straight and be in love with me? We could be so happy.”

He can't tell if she's joking or not. He assumes she's joking. Has to be. "I do love you. With all my heart." He laughs, and lets her hand fall to the side. "Just... not like *that*."

She snorts through her nose and says, "It's for the best, isn't it? That we're friends? We'd never work as a couple. You would drive me crazy."

"I would not," Charlie says. "I'd be the best boyfriend ever."

"Oh yeah, it'd be thrilling. We'd spend our afternoons at the gym, and then we'd go to your house and practice shooting at people. At joggers on the sidewalk, then the mailman."

"Exactly. See what you're missing?"

"And you're messy, too," she says, kicking the loose items below her seat, like loose envelopes and broken CD cases. She turns around and says, "I mean, look at all this! Look at your back seat! You've got shirts back here. Boxes. Scotch tape. Duct tape. A shovel. Why the hell do you have a *shovel*?"

He glances over her shoulder, pissed he forgot to put the shovel back in the garage where it belongs. "I... plead the fifth."

"There's candy wrappers, a butter knife. For God's sakes, your car isn't a trashcan, Charlie. Your car is meant to be taken care of, to be cleaned at least once every five years."

"*Hey*. As you said to me earlier, you're not my mother."

He means to get a laugh out of his friend, but as soon as she locks her eyes on his, he recognizes how those words coming out of his mouth mean something vastly different than when they came out of Lisa's. He sits back in his seat. Multi-colored Christmas lights blink on the two-story house to his left. His mother always liked to deck out the house every Christmas, but she detested multi-colored lights. She always went with the simple white lights, the ones that didn't blink. She said it made their house look like a giant snowflake.

“I’m ready to go to the party now,” Lisa says. “Are you?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Charlie steps out of the car into the chilly darkness. It’s only nine-fifteen, and already this side of the street is a ghost town. He sees a young girl in an upstairs bedroom watching TV, and somebody pulling a Cadillac into a garage, but for the most part this is the section of the winding neighborhood street where people go to sleep, not to party.

Lisa takes off her heavy coat, tosses it in the backseat, and joins Charlie on the sidewalk, which is still covered in a blanket of patchy snow. They stay quiet, Lisa flashing the occasional smile at Charlie, noise from up ahead growing with seemingly each step they take. The party is bustling at the other end of the street, a group of college men standing on the front lawn, drinking beers, goofy Santa hats atop their heads. A teenage girl runs across the street screaming with hysterical laughter, and then two cars suddenly go whizzing past, like a wintry suburban neighborhood is the perfect place for drag racing. Charlie and Lisa stop before the crowded home, loud hip-hop music blasting from inside, half a dozen people drinking on the second-floor balcony. This looks in no way like the intimate Christmas party Lisa promised; this looks like a wild frat party, the kind that will end not with Charlie walking away with a cute boy’s phone number but with a bruise to the head and a gallon of cheap beer in his stomach.

“You sure about this?” he asks, hoping Lisa might run back the way they came, forcing Charlie to happily follow her back to his car and drive home and forget this late-night excursion ever happened.

But she keeps moving forward, surprisingly, shrugging in an exaggerated manner as she says, “Let’s go check it out. We can always leave.”

Charlie bites down on his tongue, not sure if he should do what she says. He knows what it feels like to want to leave—and then not being able to. He knows what it's like to be in a potentially dangerous situation and committing to it anyway, clinging onto the belief that nothing bad could, would, ever happen. There's still time. He can say he's feeling sick, or that his father's returned to Reno unexpectedly and just suffered a heart attack and is clinging on to his final breaths in the hospital and needs his son to come deliver a proper, loving good-bye.

A hundred excuses for turning back float through Charlie's head, but then Lisa walks up the porch steps and opens the front door, and two seconds later he follows her into the house.

Charlie thinks the worst as he takes his first steps inside the entrance hallway, assuming the rooms will be filled wall-to-wall with obnoxious, inebriated college students, chugging beer from a keg, dancing to the hip-hop like five-times-platinum gangster rappers, endless rounds of strip poker going on simultaneously. He pictures the kind of college party he's seen in movies, but actually, despite the crowded rooms and the blasting music, the vibe of the party is more laid-back than expected. About twenty people roam the front rooms of the house, not hundreds, and the farther back he walks, the annoying music dissipates, and the quieter melody of conversation takes hold. He maintains a close proximity to Lisa as she enters the kitchen, where people are eating more than they are drinking, one redhead at the front stuffing a chocolate chip cookie in his mouth, a girl next to him munching on sweet potato chips. When at least half of the strangers glance his way, Charlie expects them to shove him and Lisa back into the hallway, tell the lame high school kids to find partygoers their own age, but a young man emerges from the crowd, one moment completely hidden behind a bunch of girls near the fridge, the next in full view as he puts out his arms and races up to Lisa.

“I’m so happy you’re here!” he says, his accent heavy and adorable. “Lisa, I’d love for you to come meet some of my friends.”

“Don’t forget about Charlie,” Lisa says, nudging her head toward her friend.

“Oh, of course,” he says, and he steps around Lisa and extends his hand. “*Charlie*, it’s a pleasure. Lisa’s told me so much about you. My name’s Sebastian.”

Charlie is speechless at first, as he puts out his hand and lets the dapper, well-dressed British guy shake it. He’s so dreamy Charlie can feel his insides twisting and turning in ways he didn’t think possible. Sebastian has thick black hair, parted on the left and slicked back. His eyes are big and brown, almost completely circular, and the heavy stubble on his chin and neck give him a rugged quality Charlie wasn’t expecting. His black leather jacket is unzipped, revealing a tight white t-shirt underneath that’s hugging his pronounced pecks.

“It’s, uhh, *hi*,” Charlie says, and he notices Sebastian still hasn’t let go of his hand. “Nice to meet you, Sebastian. And, uhh, merry Christmas.”

He wants to crawl into the nearest cupboard and die a quick death after those impersonal, inane words spilling out of his mouth, but Sebastian says, “Merry Christmas to you, too. Would you like something to drink?”

“Oh, I’m okay right now. Thanks.”

“You sure? We have lots to go around.” Sebastian points at the kitchen island, which is filled from front to back with an impressive collection of alcohol: craft beers, red wine bottles, Kentucky whiskey, two vodka bottles.

Charlie doesn’t want to sound like a prude, but he’s been dying of thirst ever since he left his house, and plus, even a glimpse of the beer gives him a flash of that gross oatmeal stout he chugged at dinner with Jack. “I’d actually love some water if that’s okay.”

“Absolutely,” Sebastian says, and when he opens the refrigerator on the other side of the kitchen, he crouches down and reaches for a bottled water near the back of the bottom shelf. Charlie tries to look a different way, tries to peer at Lisa or any one of these strangers before him, but he can’t: he stares, in a trance, at Sebastian’s round, toned butt.

“Charlie,” Lisa whispers, and elbows him in the ribs.

“What?” he asks, innocently, his voice higher than normal.

“You *know* what.” She opens a bottle of amber ale and takes a generous sip.

“Me? What about you?” Charlie points at her drink. “Don’t go crazy, okay? I don’t want to have to drag you to the car...”

His voice drifts, when he realizes Lisa is no longer listening to him, not even looking at him. She walks across the kitchen and starts chatting up a girl near the open pantry, another senior from Galloway. He thinks her name is Vanessa, but he can’t remember for sure.

Charlie’s breath catches in his throat when he realizes he’s been left alone, so many faces to his left and right he doesn’t recognize, but then he feels something press hard against his upper back, and he spins around to see Sebastian holding the bottled water.

“Sorry that took so long,” Sebastian says. He takes off the cap, then hands Charlie the water. “It was hidden underneath about a dozen Coca-Colas.”

“Oh, you could have taken all the time you wanted,” Charlie blurts out, and then he immediately narrows his eyes, scared of what Sebastian will think he meant.

But Sebastian just laughs, grabs a plastic cup filled to the brim with red wine, and clinks the cup with Charlie’s water bottle. “Cheers. You’re a funny guy.”

“Really? You think I’m funny?”

“Yes. And I think you’re a lot more than that. Your friend was right. About everything.”

He nods his head toward a set of double-doors behind the kitchen table. “You want to go to the backyard? I know it’s cold, but it’ll be quieter, less crowded. You’re definitely dressed for it.”

Charlie peers at everyone in the kitchen. Sebastian’s right, it is loud, it is packed, at least thirty people hovering around the food and drinks. But if there’s one thing Charlie learned from his date with Jack, it’s that as long as people are around, he’ll remain safe.

“I’d actually like to stay inside, if that’s okay with you.”

“Of course,” Sebastian says, and he waves Charlie away from the kitchen, toward the center hallway. “Let’s go sit down.”

Sebastian walks ahead of him, and Charlie can’t help himself, again, as he nervously stares at the British guy’s muscled physique, so much strength in the way he carries himself. Whatever he wants tonight he’ll try to get, Charlie knows for sure.

But as he continues to follow him into the hallway, perfectly happy to find another populated room of chatty drinkers and not a staircase to some empty upstairs bedroom, Charlie briefly taps his fingers against his own impressive muscles. Four months ago they were non-existent, his chest lacking any kind of definition, his arms and legs so depressingly flabby.

But that’s all changed now. He can finally take care of himself.

And if at any point Sebastian turns on him, Charlie will be ready.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Isabelle

She keeps dialing, a second time, then a third time, her forehead pressed against the steering wheel, a slight trace of saliva dripping onto the mattress below. When she gets the voice-mail again, Isabelle waits impatiently for the beep.

“Hey, what the hell.” She sits up and shoves the phone harder against her ear. “Raylon, come on. You’ve made your point. I’ve texted you like seven times. I keep calling. Can you at least let me know you’re *alive*? Can you do that for me, please? Thank you.”

She ends the call and tosses her phone on the passenger seat, then turns up the volume on the radio. The radio host is counting down the top 100 Christmas songs of all time, and he’s on eighty-six—“The Magic of Christmas Day,” sung by Celine Dion—and Isabelle isn’t sure she’ll make it to eighty-five, the saccharine lyrics and nauseous optimism in Celine’s voice too much to take as she sits in her car all by herself, parked close to an apartment complex Jack raced into more than an hour ago. His Ford Mustang is parked along a sidewalk near the entrance, the right tires pulled up and over the curb.

She glances at the clock. Nine-thirty. Early enough to suggest Jack and his friends may leave the apartment soon and speed off to somewhere else, but certainly late enough that Jack may stay put and then come back home, uneventfully. She decides to give Jack until ten o’clock, or until number seventy on the Christmas song countdown, whichever comes first. Jack could be sleeping at Mason’s or Nick’s for all she knows, and might not even return to his car tonight.

Another ten minutes pass. Still no sign of Jack. She’s already turned the radio off, too many old-school Christmas songs in a row beating painfully against her ears. Her phone still

hasn't rung, Raylon clearly wanting to make his point long into tomorrow. But Isabelle's focus is no longer on her phone, or the apartment complex. It's on Jack's car.

Feeling more like an investigative reporter than a curious filmmaker, Isabelle slips out of her Jetta and tiptoes toward the Mustang. She stays low to the ground, glancing at the complex entrance every few seconds to make sure Jack's not stumbling outside and catching his sister red-handed.

When she reaches the vehicle, she pulls on the backseat door handle. Locked, of course. Why she thought the door might open is a mystery even to her. She tries the passenger door. Also locked. She turns around, ready to flee back to the safety of her Jetta. What might she see in Jack's car if she was able to get inside of it, anyway? What could she find to reveal hidden truths about her brother? The car's been wasting away in the garage for the last four months since Jack left for New York, and so Isabelle has more of an expectation of cobwebs than anything else. But still, she heads to the other side and slowly, her eyes narrowed, Isabelle tugs on the driver's side door. Unlocked.

"No way," she whispers.

She yanks the door open, in total shock, then sits in the driver's seat and starts digging through Jack's things. There's a coat on the passenger seat. Some dirty Kleenex on the dashboard she has no interest in touching. She peers at the backseat, which is surprisingly clean. She slides her fingers along the floor and catches some loose scraps of paper, an empty bottled water, a cherry-flavored lip balm. There's nothing out of the ordinary until she reaches inside a slim netted compartment behind the driver's seat and pulls out a tiny red notebook. It can't have more than 100 pages, but Isabelle pounds it against her chest, the game changer she's been looking for potentially in her hands. She pushes the notebook against the steering wheel. Glances

back at the apartment entrance, to be sure Jack's not on his way down. She bites down on her tongue as she opens the notebook to page one. It's blank.

“Oh, come on.”

She turns to page two. Page four. She flips all the way to the final pages. There's nothing inside. Not a sentence, a phone number, a person's name. She glances at the final page, to see if anything's written there, something Jack may have tried to hide from anyone who discovered the notebook in the first place, but it's blank, too. She almost throws the notebook against the dashboard, but she takes a deep breath, keeps her cool, and sets the notebook back where she found it.

Isabelle grabs the door handle. She's already been in the car too long. What if Jack showed up unexpectedly and found her sitting in it? How would she ever explain that? She opens the door a crack, puts her left foot on the gravel. But one last thing catches her eye—the glove compartment. There's nothing to lose, so she pops it open. The compartment is filled to the brim with endless crap, including gum wrappers, loose change, black and blue pens, a wad of napkins, plus a folded piece of computer paper sticking out the top. Isabelle grabs the paper and opens it.

She sighs dramatically, her mouth opened wide. Nothing unusual here either, only some printed directions.

But then she looks closer, brushing dirt off the page. It's directions to a restaurant, that Mexican place off Mount Rose Highway that's only open in the summer. She went there with Raylon in September, the weekend before they closed. The food was overpriced, but it was tasty, extra greasy, her enchiladas loaded with sour cream and guacamole. She didn't know Jack had ever been there. Who would he have met at Abel's? Isabelle examines the date and time at the

bottom of the printed page. August sixteenth, six o'clock. He'd driven up there at night, for dinner. For a *date*. Had to be.

She takes out her phone, snaps a picture of the directions. She's about to fold up the page and put it back in the glove compartment, when she notices the tiniest of scribbles at the bottom right. It's one word, written diagonally, underlined twice, written so small one would need a magnifying glass to see it clearly. But she holds the paper closer to her face, enough so her wide open eyes can make out the word: CHARLIE.

"Charlie?" She slowly brings the paper down. "Why the hell would he write—"

Isabelle ducks, suddenly, her palms slamming against the steering wheel, her left foot kicking the brake, as a shrill scream escapes her lips. Jack is outside, moving toward the front gates of the apartment complex, his two best pals Mason and Nick right behind him.

Isabelle quickly shoves the page of directions behind the napkins, closes the glove compartment, then kicks open the driver's side door. She steps outside and shuts the door and hurries back to her car, crouched as low to the ground as possible, not taking a breath the entire time. She doesn't allow herself to glance behind her or slow down even for a second as she stays focused on her Jetta ahead. She hears the sounds of footsteps so clearly, and for a second she thinks Jack has seen her, that he's already running in her direction and is about to rip into her for spying, but then she stops behind a tall bush and peers down the street. Jack isn't even close. He and his friends have just barely reached the sidewalk, moving extra slowly, Jack on his phone texting someone for the thousandth time today. Mason and Nick approach his Mustang and tug on the side doors, both still locked. Jack opens the driver's side door, manually unlocks the others, and the three friends share a boisterous laugh as they take their seats inside.

Isabelle lets out a satisfying breath as the Mustang's ignition turns on, Jack obviously pre-occupied with his next adventure of the night and not having a clue his sister is lurking nearby in the shadows. When Jack pulls onto the street and starts to speed away, his left turn signal already blinking brightly, Isabelle rushes to her own car, each second counting, losing her brother now a firm possibility. She gets in her Jetta as fast as she can and takes off down the road, keeping her lights turned off. She darts her eyes in every direction, her confidence waning. Jack's car has already vanished.

"No," she says, and then she pounds her fist against the horn. "This isn't happening!"

Isabelle glances down the first street to her left. Empty. Same with the second street.

She's about to make a U-turn, when she sees a car at a traffic signal ahead, its left blinker illuminated, and she unleashes a high-pitched victory cheer. She pulls up behind the vehicle, making sure not to get too close. It's Jack.

Isabelle follows him onto busy McCarron Boulevard, and she's forced to go above the speed limit when Jack moves into the fast lane. Isabelle maintains a safe speed of seventy as she maintains her distance, two lanes over and at least one car back. She has no idea what his next destination may be.

Her phone rings. She answers.

"Raylon?" she asks.

"Hey. I got your message." Her boyfriend goes into a long rant, assuring her he's still mad about Isabelle's indifference to him on the couch, but that he understands how important her documentary is and that he shouldn't have been so judgmental. Raylon asks if she's done filming and if he can come over, and Isabelle wants to lie, wants to tell him she wrapped her interview with Jack hours ago and that she's relaxing with a glass of beer at her upstairs editing bay.

Instead, she says, "I can't. I'm filming."

"You are? *Still?*"

"Yep. I have one more shot to go."

She manages a grin, since what she said is not a lie, not by a long shot.

Isabelle taps her fingers against her powered-off camera still resting on the passenger seat, and she turns on her right blinker when she sees Jack turn on his. She follows her brother away from McCarron to a turn-off onto a slim neighborhood road, one that makes a sharp curve to the left, then goes through a short, unexpected tunnel. Soon she can see a bunch of decorated Christmas houses in the distance, lots of college-age people standing on one of the front lawns.

Someone's having a party.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Charlie

Charlie listens to everything Sebastian says with caution, any Jack-like compliment given from this British stud making the hairs stand up on his neck rather than putting a smile on his face—“you have really beautiful eyes, does anyone ever tell you that?” being the most obvious and unnecessary. But deep down Charlie wants to believe the cute stories about Sebastian’s childhood in London, where he lived for many years with his painter aunt and writer uncle, and his unwillingness to come out of the closet until he moved to the United States a little less than a year ago. As they snag two beanie bag chairs at the semi-crowded but not overly loud front room of the house, Charlie can’t help but think the inevitable: isn’t it unlikely I encounter a *second* violent creep?

“I’m sorry,” Sebastian says, his head resting against the bottom of a couch behind him. “I just go on and on when I’m nervous. Enough about me. Tell me about you.”

Charlie sits up straight, his legs stretched up to a table that’s covered in half-empty beer bottles. “You’re nervous? Why are you nervous?”

“I don’t know.” He turns his head away and whispers, “I think I kind of like you.”

Charlie hears him fine, but he asks Sebastian to repeat himself anyway. He wants to hear the statement as clearly as possible.

“I said I think I like you.”

“Really? Already?” With Jack, Charlie would have melted at this line, would have let his shoulders sink and his heart go all aflutter, but with Sebastian, he tries, however unsuccessfully, to keep his feet planted on the ground and play hard-to-get. “You don’t know anything about me. You just think I’m cute.”

“No. Now, wait a minute,” Sebastian says. “You’re putting words in my mouth. I never said that.”

“Never said what?”

“That you’re cute. I don’t think you’re cute in the *slightest*.”

“Not in the slightest, huh?” Charlie asks, smiling, playing along in Sebastian’s game.

“Nope. You’re the ugliest guy I’ve ever seen. Plus you smell really bad.”

“Hey!” Charlie’s jaw drops, and he goes to slug Sebastian in the shoulder. “Take that back. You take that back now!”

Sebastian catches Charlie’s hand before it strikes his shoulder, and then he tugs him close, a completely suave move Charlie didn’t see coming. One second he was in his safe little space on the second beanie bag, and now his knees are shoved against Sebastian’s side, their hands connected, their faces inches apart. Charlie flinches, his first instinct to pull away, but then he stares into Sebastian’s eyes, and even though there are people around, and even though they just met, Charlie so wants to wrap his arms around this handsome guy and kiss his lips, feel his warmth, find solace in someone genuine.

But how can Charlie *know* if this guy is genuine, after what happened with Jack? How can he possibly give him his full trust?

Charlie drops his hand and lets the romantic moment pass. He says, “Listen, Sebastian. I have to be honest with you about something.”

“Sure. Anything.”

“I…” He tries to choose his words carefully, so he doesn’t sound like a victim or erupt in unexpected tears, or, worse, make Sebastian so uncomfortable he walks out of the room and out of Charlie’s life forever. “I went on a date last summer. The guy was super cute, super sweet. He

was the nicest guy in the world, and he told me everything I wanted to hear, and honestly, for a brief moment in time, I thought he was the one for me.” Charlie lets his words linger, Sebastian giving him his full, rapt attention. “But then, in a matter of seconds, he turned. He *changed*. He showed me he really was.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What did he do?”

Charlie keeps his mouth open, like he’s about to say more, but nothing comes out at first. He wants to tell the truth, wants to finally tell somebody every tragic, specific detail of what Jack did to him that August night, but he really doesn’t want to scare Sebastian off or cause him to act weird in any way. “Well... he, uhh... he took me... to this abandoned—”

“Stop,” Sebastian interrupts. “Just stop, Charlie. You don’t have to say a word. I know exactly what you’re about to say.”

Charlie lets that statement sink in a little. “Wait, you do?”

“Uh-huh. I’ve been there. First week of my freshman year, I met this guy online. He was older, gorgeous, and so complimentary. He kept buying me tequila shots and I thought he was being nice. But then we went back to his place and fooled around a little. And he started taking off my pants...” Sebastian purses his lips tight, allowing the background noise of nearby conversations to build in volume, before he says, “If I hadn’t come to my senses and gotten out of there when I did, who knows what might have happened? I could have awoken HIV positive.”

Charlie stays quiet, as he immediately flashes on the secret trip he took last September to the local Planned Parenthood Health Center. He still doesn’t know a lot about gay sex, but he knew enough to be tested, since Jack hadn’t worn a condom. He was shaking the whole time—on the drive, in the waiting area, when they took a sample of his blood—and the following Monday he trembled uncontrollably when he received a voice-mail from someone at the health

center asking him to call back as soon as possible. The message was so abrupt and forceful Charlie broke down crying in the boys' bathroom and missed the beginning of his third period government class, but he couldn't stay in torment forever; he sat down in the closest stall, dialed the number, and listened to a kind, effeminate man named Adam report he was HIV negative. More tears came, these of the happier sort, because he had dodged a major bullet, one that could have affected the rest of his life.

"That would have been awful," Charlie says.

"Tell me about it." Sebastian leans farther back against his beanie bag, his elbows nestled against the hardwood floor. "I'm sorry you went through something similar. And I understand the reservations you may have about me. It's hard to trust anyone these days, don't you think?"

The front door opens behind them before Charlie can give him an answer. A girl walks in who looks like Lisa in the face, with big dimples and a porcelain skin tone, but with long brown hair instead of blond. She maneuvers around Charlie, then waves at Sebastian. "Hey, handsome," she says, and gives him a hug. "I was hoping you'd be here."

"Hi, gorgeous," he says back to her. "Olivia, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine. This is Charlie."

"Hello," Charlie says, with only a modest attempt at enthusiasm.

"Hel-lo. Wow." She bumps her fist against Sebastian's shoulder. "Isn't he a cutie?"

Sebastian grins. "Yes, I think you may be right."

"You *both* are the cutest. My God." She moves back a few steps, then takes her phone out of her pocket. "Mind if I take a picture of you two?"

"Oh..." Charlie turns to Sebastian and waits for his abrupt refusal, the same way Jack turned down that photographer at the Mexican restaurant.

But then Sebastian blurts out, “That would be fantastic,” and he immediately wraps his arm around Charlie’s shoulders and faces the camera.

“Okay, smile, you two!” Olivia snaps two quick photos as soon as Charlie looks at the camera, his grin warm and friendly as Sebastian holds him even tighter. She brings her camera down and sets her palm against the top of her chest, appearing as if she might actually swoon. “Jesus Christ, I swear, you two are the most adorable things I’ve ever seen.”

“Thanks,” Sebastian says.

“Uhh, yeah, thank you,” Charlie adds, unsure how to deal with her outrageous positivity.

Someone calls her name from across the room, and as Olivia starts walking in the other direction, she shouts, “I’ll text you the photo, Sebastian! Bye!”

“All right!” Sebastian shouts back, and he laughs as his friend disappears down the hallway. “Sorry about her, Charlie. I love Olivia to death, but... she’s a bit of a scatterbrain.”

“Scatterbrain?” Charlie asks. “What are you taking about? That girl’s the smartest person alive.”

“And why is that?”

“Because. She thought I was cute.”

“I think you’re cute, too,” Sebastian says. “Does that make me smart?”

“Very.”

“I’m glad.” He chuckles again, this one a little softer, as he pushes himself closer to Charlie. “Listen. While we were taking that picture, I got an idea. I think it’s a good one.”

Charlie’s lips curl into a smile, he can’t help himself. “I’m listening.”

“I’m going to take you on five dates. Five whole dates until either of us even *thinks* about a kiss. And each date will be something different. Coffee. Dinner. Hiking. A walk along Truckee River. These dates will be about conversation, nothing more.”

“I’m liking the sound of this,” Charlie says, and he does, even though the idea of making it through five dates without kissing this guy seems next-to-impossible.

“Me too. Because, and this is not a line, Charlie. I want to get to know you. A lot.” He brings his hand to Charlie’s leg, then softly runs his index finger alongside it.

Charlie wants to put his hand on Sebastian’s and keep it there, but he keeps his hands to himself, at least for now. “Thank you. That’s so sweet of you.”

“Can I have your number?”

The question is blurted out probably more than Sebastian intended, and for a moment, Charlie doesn’t say anything. Enjoying an intimate chat with this guy is one thing, but, at the end of the day, giving away his phone number is an entirely new, difficult step. A sharp pain strikes Charlie’s gut, and so does a sudden urge to pee, so he stands up, letting Sebastian’s hand fall to the carpet a second time.

“Sorry, I need to use the bathroom,” Charlie says, nodding his head toward the hallway.

“Oh. Okay.” Sebastian gets comfy on the bean bag chair. “I’ll just be here.”

Charlie moves slowly at first, as to not look like he’s running away, but as soon as he enters the dark stretch of hallway, he starts walking faster, hoping the little bathroom on the right is unoccupied. He tugs on the doorknob. Locked, of course.

“Shit,” he says, and slams his back against the wall. Three people walk past him, all with plastic red cups in their hands.

Charlie crosses his arms and glances to his left. The front door of the house opens again, and two guys walk in, both holding vodka bottles and wearing goofy Christmas hats on top their heads. He snickers and looks to his right, toward the kitchen. He spots Lisa right away, standing near the cluttered island, chatting up a redheaded girl who looks all of fifteen. She catches sight of Charlie and waves to him, and he waves back, as a girl steps out of the bathroom, the toilet flushing. He smiles at her and steps inside.

Charlie does his business, washes his hands, then stares at himself in the mirror. His stomach still hurts but not as bad. Mostly he wants to punch the idiot peering back at him, the guy who can't grow a pair to save his life. Sebastian may be the best thing that ever happens to Charlie, at least in the short term, and he's totally blowing it.

He runs some water through his hair, and pops a tiny zit above his left eye. He takes one last look at himself. "You're okay, Charlie. Just relax. *Relax*. Not every guy is Jack." He pauses, then says it one more time: "Not every guy... is Jack."

When he opens the bathroom door, two girls stand in the hallway waiting, annoyed, and he lets the first one go inside. He's about to turn toward the front of the house and reunite with Sebastian, when he feels a hand roughly latch onto his right shoulder.

"How's everything going?" Lisa asks, a grin on her face, her eyes big and bloodshot.

"Oh, it's, uhh... it's good. Yeah, he's great."

"Have you two kissed yet?"

Charlie laughs through his nose. "Have we kissed? Are you serious? Leese, I just met him."

"I know, I know. But he's so cute. And British! Ugh, *I* want to have sex with him."

"Okay..." Charlie says. "More info than I needed."

She kisses Charlie on the cheek, then waves him away like he's bothering her. "Now stop standing here with me and go chat up that British hottie. Go. Have fun."

Lisa has clearly been drinking, her voice higher-pitched than normal, her affection toward Charlie so awkward and over-the-top. "Sure thing," Charlie says. "But Leese..."

"What?"

"Maybe drink some water?"

"Water? Shut up, I'm *fine*."

Before he turns back around, Lisa is already back in the kitchen, enjoying another sip of her drink, chatting up some brunette girl wearing a cheesy red-and-green sweater. He's never seen Lisa so confident before, so happy. She's changed in these last few months too, so content hanging with Charlie and only Charlie in years past but never that comfortable around others, never demanding they go to parties and put themselves in potentially frightening social situations. Buzzed or not buzzed, she's clearly in her element now, able to have a good time without her best friend at her side every second.

Charlie moves past a bunch of people, two of whom slam up against him in the hallway and don't even apologize. But Charlie doesn't mind, not one bit, because as soon as he reaches the front of the house again, he spots Sebastian, still sitting on his beanie bag, not talking to some other boy, or staring like a zombie at his phone, but sitting patiently, rocking his body back and forth like a goofball. When he spots Charlie, he gives him the cutest little wave, like that stretch of time apart was too much for him to handle. He sits up and pats his hand against the second beanie bag, and Charlie nods, knowing he's seconds away from giving Sebastian his phone number and setting up their first real date. As he walks closer, he wonders how soon that date may be. Before Christmas or after Christmas? New Year's Eve is two weeks away, and he can't

not kiss Sebastian that night. Charlie can see it already, that long stretch of two weeks, with those five amazing dates of pure conversation, followed by a long, glorious make-out session at the stroke of midnight on January first. He can see it all. The end, finally, of all the pain and misery. And the beginning of something special.

He's halfway across the room, when the front door opens behind Sebastian again. Three guys stumble inside, the guy in front laughing hysterically, a second holding a half-full bottle of tequila above his head and shouting, "Who wants some shots, *bitches*?" Both guys are so obnoxious Charlie stops for a second, and Sebastian turns to look up at them, his eyes narrowed, like he wants to strangle them, too.

Then a third guy walks in, wearing a black leather jacket, blue jeans, sunglasses. His familiar grin almost makes Charlie collapse to the floor.

"Hell, yeah, I want some shots!" Jack shouts at the top of his lungs. "Count me in!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Charlie

Charlie spins around. He doesn't look at Sebastian again, and he certainly doesn't take a second glance at Jack.

In five seconds he's out of the room, down the hall, entering the kitchen. Lisa's still talking to that brunette girl, facing the pantry on the right, and she doesn't turn to Charlie as he blows past her and hurries outside.

It's not until he reaches the backyard porch, where a young couple is making out in the corner, that Charlie releases the deepest of breaths. He leans over and shoves his hands against a covered steel barbecue. He tries to breathe slow, remain calm, not faint and crack his head on one of the wooden floorboards.

"Dude, are you okay?" a girl asks behind him.

Charlie manages to muster, "I'm fine," before he heads down the short stairwell into the dark, snow-blanketed backyard. The fence before him is way too tall to climb, so he turns back around, glancing every which way for an exit. He needs to get to his car and fast, needs to get the hell out of here, but he's not about to muscle it back through the house and chance a close encounter with Jack. Why this party? Of *all* parties? He's on the verge of tears as he awkwardly paces to the right of the house in the deepest of snow. He wonders if he should try to grab Lisa before he escapes, but no—he keeps moving. Lisa's on such a high tonight he doesn't want to break it, and plus, she might try to get him to face Jack, ask him to apologize for something she hasn't the slightest clue about. He'll call her when he's safely home. Maybe ask if she can find someone else to give her a ride.

Charlie walks past a blue recycle can and a green trash can and then glances inside each of the windows. Everybody is still having a great time, no one having a clue about the frantic high school senior trudging through the snow, trying to evade the older college guy he so hoped to never see again. He moves faster and faster, wishing he could see the driveway or the street, but they're both blocked by a tall black gate, and Charlie comes to a halt. He reaches for the latch up top to open it, the same kind of latch that's on the gate at his house, and at Lisa's house too, but this one's equipped with something different—a big, threatening combination lock hooked inside of it.

He blurts out some expletives, then looks inside the house again. He can see the front area, Sebastian still seated in that beanie bag chair, tapping his fingers against the floor, his eyes constantly darting toward the hallway. A few seconds later, Sebastian stands up, stretched his arms above his head, and walks out of the room, away from view. Charlie wonders where Sebastian is going, if he might try to search for him, if they'll ever get a chance to talk again. Charlie steps away from the house and looks again at the gate. It's too tall, at least six feet. He's not sure he can climb it.

“Hey you,” someone whispers behind him.

Charlie doesn't move at first. He closes his eyes, shoves his palms against the gate.

“What a small world this is,” Jack says, noticeably stumbling through his words.

“Charlie, Charlie, Charlie. I *thought* that was you.”

Charlie finally turns around, enough to see Jack's shadow move past the recycle bin. He can barely make out his face, or his body.

But he can see the nearly empty tequila bottle in Jack's hand.

“Are you drunk?” Charlie asks, the first question that comes to mind.

“Maybe a little,” Jack says. He takes a big swig of tequila. “Or maybe a lot!”

Charlie pushes his back against the gate. “Stay away from me.”

Jack keeps walking. “Now why would I do that—”

“I said, stay the *fuck* away from me.”

Something in Charlie’s tone obviously gets the message across, because Jack stops in mid-step and crosses his arms tight, the tequila bottle dangling from only two of his fingers. A trace of light from the window drapes eerily across Jack’s face.

“You have some serious anger problems,” Jack says, with a grin. “Why are you so mad? Didn’t you have fun that night? I sure did.”

Jack keeps talking, but Charlie’s not listening, and instead he searches for the best escape route. He can try to run past Jack, but there’s little room to maneuver in this tight corridor and Jack might grab hold of him. He can try to open the closest window, too, but what if it doesn’t budge, or worse, he manages to weasel his way halfway through before Jack tugs on his legs and pulls him back out? No, the only way is the gate, which he wishes was at least two feet shorter.

“Say, why didn’t you ever call me?” Jack continues. “I know I’ve been in New York this whole time, but you could have at least *texted*, Charlie. I’ve thought about you these past few months. A lot.” Jack lets out a loud, obnoxious belch, then asks, “Have you... thought at all about me?”

Charlie can’t stand to hear another word uttered from this guy’s mouth, and so as soon as Jack takes a step toward him again, Charlie runs forward as fast as he can, leaps into the air, and latches his arms over the top of the gate. He tries to push himself up, but he struggles at first, despite his newfound muscle, despite his overwhelming desire to clear the top and drop to the

other side and sprint to his car down the neighborhood street. He kicks his feet in the air, lets out a venomous growl.

“Hey! *Hey!*” Jack shouts, sounding like he’s standing right under him. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Charlie glances back. Jack is close enough to reach out his hand and touch his gray jacket. He’s going to latch onto him any second, and pull him back down.

So Charlie swings his legs to the left, once, twice, until his feet come in contact with the glass window. He grits his teeth, releases a guttural yell, and pushes off the surface, giving him just enough air for his chest to slide over the gate’s top, and, no clue as to what may impale him on the other side, Charlie drops to the ground.

His back strikes a hard paved surface, no heavy snow to lessen the impact. He goes to take a breath, but nothing comes out. He lifts his head slightly. Tries to breathe again. The air’s been knocked out of him before, like when he slipped next to a swimming pool when he was ten and thought he was dying. He waits for the air to come, and when it finally does, he looks up at two arms banging against his side of the gate. Jack is climbing over, too.

Charlie leaps to his feet and starts speed-walking toward the driveway, and by the time he pushes past two guys getting stoned on the driveway, Charlie’s back to normal, cold and scared and delirious, but normal. He makes it all the way to the sidewalk, then turns around and looks at the gate. Nothing. No Jack. Did he not make it over the gate after all? Did he give up? Charlie glances at all the people standing outside. He doesn’t recognize a single one, but he takes a longer look at the girl walking up the porch steps; she’s wearing a pair of sunglasses, oddly, and her long and twisty dreadlocks appear familiar. As she closes the door behind her, Charlie turns in the direction of his car, not wanting to stay put for another second.

Charlie runs for the first few seconds, but his shoes collide with a patch of ice and he almost slips, barely maintaining his shaky balance before he continues at a slower, measured pace. By the time he passes the third house, he can't hear any more commotion, and when he passes the fourth, he slows down considerably. Jack isn't coming. He went back into the kitchen for more tequila or more vodka or whatever the drunk piece of shit's going to chug to the bottom of the bottle next. Charlie takes out his phone, his car visible in the distance. He scrolls down to Lisa's number and is about to call her to ask if she can find another ride home, when a text message alert appears on the screen. Charlie clicks on it, thinking it's from Lisa beating him to the punch, but it's from a number he doesn't recognize.

It's Sebastian, the text reads. I got your number from Lisa. Where did you go?

Charlie slows almost to a stop as he focuses on Sebastian's words. His thumbs hover over the illuminated letters, trying to think of what he can say, or should say.

A second text comes in: *I hope you're okay.*

Charlie musters a smile and whispers, "It is now, Sebastian..."

"*There you are!*" a voice shouts from afar. "Jesus Christ, you're makin' me run all over this goddamn neighborhood looking for you!"

Charlie catches a scream in his throat before it's able to erupt. He shoves his hand over his mouth as Jack races down the dark sidewalk, out of breath, off-balance but still on both feet, the tequila bottle no longer in his hand.

As soon as Jack takes another step toward him, Charlie bolts toward his car, not concerned about sliding or slipping or fear he might fall. Jack yells a few more things his way, but Charlie doesn't listen, doesn't even have a clue what he's saying. He keeps focused on his car, and only the car, stuffing his phone back in his left pocket as he pulls his keys out of his

right. He clicks the unlock button, twice. The car lights up, twice. His heart is pounding so hard, his pulse racing, his breathing erratic. He can hear footsteps behind him, like Jack is faster than he is, like drinking heavily all night gave Jack the edge on speed.

Charlie is almost to the back of his car, about three more steps to go, when a hand grips his shoulder and tugs him around, and then Jack shoves him up against his right taillight.

“Jack, stop it. You’re hurting me—”

“What’s gotten into you tonight? Why are you running from me? I don’t understand.” He’s still slurring his words, sounding more inebriated than he was back by the house.

“Let me go. Please.”

“I’ll let you go when you tell me what your deal is. I was trying to say hi to you back there, and you were being *rude*.”

Charlie glances left and right, in the hope that someone, anyone, is nearby to see or hear this harassment, but both he and Jack are far away from the party and most of the houses on this side of the street are darkened, quiet, everyone nearby effectively dead to the world. Charlie thinks about screaming as loud as he can, for as long as he can, but before he’s forced to, Jack drops his hand from Charlie’s shoulder.

“Dude, calm down,” Jack says. He dips his head back a little, a relaxed smile appearing on his face. “You’re so tense, Charlie. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Charlie stares into Jack’s eyes, tries to understand his next move. The car is *right here*. He’s so close to escaping.

“Then why did you come after me?” Charlie asks. “What do you want?”

Jack tilts his head to the right, his smile growing, before he puts his hand on Charlie again, not his shoulder this time, but his crotch. “What do you *think* I want?”

Charlie slaps Jack's hand away. "No. Don't you dare—"

Jack tugs on Charlie's arm, suddenly, and pulls him close. "Didn't you have fun last summer? Wasn't it just the best?"

He kisses Charlie on the lips, not in any way aggressive, but softly, smoothly, bringing his free hand to the back of Charlie's head. Charlie lets him do all of this, not screaming, not pushing Jack away, because he's waiting for the perfect moment.

"I've missed you," Jack says. "God, I haven't been able to get you out of my mind—"

Charlie swings his right arm back and sucker punches Jack in the direct center of his forehead. A loud pop sound echoes into the night as Jack lets out a pained, wimpy gurgling sound and falls ass-first against a storm drain. Charlie takes a step back, watches Jack shake his head a few times and then turn to his side.

"What the..." Jack whispers. "What... *you*..."

"Get out of here, Jack," Charlie says, as he walks around the back of his car. "Don't make me hit you again."

Charlie feels like he's about to faint as he trudges forward, Jack making more noises behind him but not sounding like he's standing up, thank God. Charlie opens his driver's side door, brings his left knee against the seat, reaches his keys toward the ignition. He's nearly all the way inside when an arm reaches around his waist and tugs him back toward the street, the keys slipping through Charlie's fingers and landing on the matt. Charlie kicks his foot back, but Jack doesn't budge, doesn't even let out a whimper, before he twists Charlie around and presses his back against the driver's seat. Charlie flails his arms into the air, tries to fight Jack off, but no matter his determination or his strength, Jack overpowers him, his weight against Charlie's chest, keeping him pressed against the seat with no way to escape.

“Stop fighting me, goddammit,” Jack says, as he brings his lips to Charlie’s neck. “You know you want this.”

“I don’t.” Charlie reaches toward the steering wheel, the glove compartment, searching anywhere for a weapon.

“Yes, you do,” Jack says, and he starts to pull down on Charlie’s jeans zipper. “You wanted it that night on the playground. And you want it now, even more...”

Charlie reaches his left hand below the back seat, past the Scotch tape, past the old candy bar wrappers. Jack starts kissing him on his neck again, his hand now deep inside Charlie’s underwear, when Charlie feel the cold wood of the shovel on his fingertips, the long stem that fits his grip so perfectly.

“I’d rather be dead than have you touch me,” Charlie says.

He knees Jack in the groin, and Jack’s eyes go wide the same time his lips curl into something pained and mostly goofy, a deep, aggravated moan radiating through the vehicle. Charlie shoves Jack to the side and steps away from the car, his eyes widened, his hands sweaty and clammy despite the vicious cold, his grasp tight against the heavy square point shovel.

“You are such a little *tease*,” Jack says, still bent over as he catches a few more breaths.

Charlie points the shovel at him like a lethal weapon. “For the last time, stay away from me. Or I’m gonna call the cops, understand?”

Jack stands all the way up, turns to Charlie, and laughs, he actually laughs. “Call the cops? For what? *Kissing* you?” That eerie grin returns to his face and he charges toward Charlie, no hesitation in sight. “Man, oh man, I’d love to see you try—”

Charlie yanks the shovel behind his back and swings it forward fast, with all his muscle, with all his might, and strikes the steel blade against Jack’s left cheek, dead on. Jack doesn’t so

much fall back to the ground but collapse like dead weight, his legs landing against the icy pavement first before the rest of him connects, his arms flailing against the driver's side door, the back of his head slamming against the left front tire.

Charlie holds his breath for the longest time, as silence ensues, the worst silence. He keeps the shovel in front of him, waiting for Jack to get back up and come after him again. But Jack doesn't move.

"Oh no," Charlie whispers. "Oh shit."

He drops to his knees, still with a tight grip on the shovel in case Jack opens his eyes and makes a grasp at Charlie's throat. But his eyes aren't open; he doesn't appear to be breathing. Charlie brings his fingers to the side of Jack's neck, below the jawline, to check his pulse. It's beating. Jack's been knocked unconscious, but he's still alive.

Charlie stays put on the cold ground, not sure what he's supposed to do. Leave him there? He could drag him to the lawn and let some unfortunate soul find him in the morning, where Jack can wake up from his long nap with a splitting headache, hung-over and nauseated, confused how he got there. But *will* he be confused? What if he remembers everything Charlie did and comes after him?

Charlie opens the door and tosses the shovel into the way back of the car, and then he prepares to kneel down toward Jack a second time.

But then he hears a sound to his left, something booming, something coming fast—a brown Kia Soul roaring down the street. As soon as he sees its high beams, Charlie grabs Jack's arms, tugs him up toward the back seat of his 4Runner, and then, with difficulty, with strain, he yanks Jack inside, all the way against the other door. Jack's feet remain poking outside an inch or two but the driver doesn't slow down; the Kia Soul goes racing by in a matter of seconds.

As soon as the vehicle is out of sight, Charlie lets Jack drop to the floor, on top of the bags and boxes and duct tape, all the miscellaneous trash he's been too lazy to pick up during the last few months. He wedges Jack's feet inside the car the best he can, and then slams the door shut.

"This isn't happening," Charlie says, before he opens the driver's side door. He sits down and turns on the ignition.

But he doesn't flip his car around, doesn't start driving. He clamps his already-sweaty left hand against the steering wheel, and takes out his phone with his right. He clicks over to his FAVORITES list, which amounts to one name, and dials the number.

When Lisa answers after the second ring, Charlie looks down at Jack's unconscious body, his legs and arms contorted in different ways, an ugly red bruise already forming on the lower part of his cheek.

"Leese, it's me." Charlie sighs, heavily. "I'm having a bit of a problem."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Isabelle

Isabelle walks out of the party house, stopping at the edge of the porch to scrub a piece of bubble gum away from her right boot. When she can't get it off, she slams the bottom of her boot against the corner of a wooden ledge and groans fiercely through her teeth. Jack is gone, nowhere to be found. She slid unnoticed past his two obnoxious friends Mason and Nick, but she didn't see Jack anywhere, not in the front area or the kitchen or the backyard. She's lost him, even though she saw him walk into the house not even ten minutes ago.

Isabelle pulls her camera out of her coat and powers it down. She wants to keep trying to make her movie, wants to keep searching for her brother, but what's the use? As she starts toward her car, the depressing thought hovers above all others: her work tonight is done.

Since she pulled up behind Jack's car near the rowdy college party, a sense of purpose has overwhelmed her like never before, her desire to learn more about her brother extending even beyond her documentary. Who is he, *really*? What makes him so combative, so distant? Why does he remain such a goddamned mystery?

Jack and his friends stayed in the car for the longest time, passing the tequila bottle around and laughing hysterically, like a trio of wild hyenas. Finally they got out of the car and walked toward the party house, and she watched Jack high-five two different people on the way up the porch. He stumbled inside the house with his friends and closed the door behind him, and for the second time tonight, Isabelle became the lonesome voyeur spying on a whole lot of nothing from the darkness of her Jetta. She settled in, planting her feet up on the dash, hoping he'd walk right back out if she waited long enough, but when she saw more people going inside

the house rather than coming out of it, she put on a pair of sunglasses, to be a touch incognito, and stepped out of the car, her camera hidden underneath her bulky coat.

Isabelle wandered into the house like every inch of the place was rigged with landmines. She didn't want Jack to see her so she remained careful in her movement, only slipping into the thin hallway when she had scoped out every face in the front living room area, most in groups huddled together, many drinking, two in the corner smoking. The only person by himself was an attractive blond guy sitting upright on a beanie bag chair. He smiled at her as she crept out of the room, but she didn't smile back, not wanting to give the hunky young man a reason to follow her. She kept her head down as much as she could without looking suspicious, pushing past at least six people before she entered a crowded kitchen area. Nobody noticed her, or her awkwardly hidden camera, as she scoped out the area.

But then she felt an aggressive tap on her upper back, and her eyes went all big, and her arms tensed up, and her body turned into a temporary statue, Isabelle not wanting to turn around and see her brother's enraged face. Two more taps followed, and finally Isabelle looked behind her. It wasn't Jack, thank God, and it wasn't either of his friends.

"Isabelle, right?" the girl asked.

Isabelle nodded but didn't say a word as she stared at the blond girl's vaguely familiar face, trying desperately to remember her name. Was it Laurie? Liz?

"It's Lisa," she finally said. "We had U.S. History together last year, remember?"

"*Oh!* Lisa. Right." Isabelle leaned up against the kitchen island, so she could maintain a wide perspective on everyone in the room. If Jack came in from the hallway or back door, she could make a run for it. "It's nice to see you. How, uhh... how are you?"

"Fine. Why are you wearing sunglasses?"

“Oh, I...” Isabelle tried to think of something, anything. “I just got dilated a few hours ago—”

“And what’s with the camera? You making another movies?”

Lisa took a sip from her drink, which could have been water or vodka, Isabelle couldn’t tell for sure, and then massaged her index finger, awkwardly, against Isabelle’s camera, which was poking out the bottom of her coat.

Isabelle hid the camera again, this time all the way under her sweater, and said, “Not tonight. No.” She turned away from Lisa for a second as three people walked in from the backyard. All tall, insanely attractive men. None of them Jack.

“Hey, I have a question for you,” Lisa said. “Do you know my friend, Charlie? Charlie Chastain?”

“Charlie Chastain?” Isabelle looked back at Lisa. That was a name she didn’t think she’d hear tonight. “Sure. He’s in my English class.”

“Have you seen him anywhere? We came in together, but I’ve lost him. His date doesn’t know where he went either. It’s like he disappeared or something.”

“Disappeared?” Isabelle shrugged, wanting to be more helpful, but not in the mood to assist a girl she barely knows to find her friend she barely knows. “Sorry. I haven’t seen him.”

Lisa shoved her palms against the island, her lips all puckered up. “Well if you do, can you come find me? I’m worried about him. I can’t imagine he’d leave me here without saying anything. He’s not like that.”

More people started piling into the kitchen, and any one of them could have been Jack, so Isabelle told Lisa, “I’ll let you know if I see him,” and walked around her before Lisa could pose any additional requests. Isabelle poked her head out the back door, where a short, rotund guy and

a tall, stick-figure girl were sloppily making out near the steps. She returned to the long hallway, trying not to gag, and glanced at two staircases, one going down and the other going up, both barricaded by medium-sized dog gates, pieces of scratch paper taped to each one with the handwritten message, KEEP OUT. She figured Jack could have been in one of the upstairs bedrooms, or maybe in the basement. Isabelle wanted to investigate more of the house, at least wander innocently into a bedroom or two, but she kept on her way, not wanting to make enemies of anyone, certainly not the person who implemented these annoying rules.

Isabelle was almost to the front of the house again when the burly Nick and the red-faced Mason appeared, Mason downing another beer as he hopped up and down on a girl's lap, Nick double-fisting half-full plastic cups and rapping something dirty. Nothing seemed to be wrong in their world, when Mason asked, the second Isabelle passed by him, "Hey, Nick. What do you think happened to *Jack*?"

Isabelle kept moving forward, as slowly as she could without looking weird or out-of-place, as the deep-voiced Nick replied, "Probably getting his dick sucked. That's what he said on the phone earlier. That's what he said he wanted tonight, more than anything."

Mason laughed, and then Nick joined in, and their voices faded as soon as Isabelle reached the front porch, her chest tightening, her disgust in her brother reaching an all-time high. He wants oral sex? But what about his girlfriend? Would he really cheat on her? Her mind kept racing about what Jack could be up to, when she discovered the stupid gum on her boot.

Another minute has passed, and the gum is finally gone, and Isabelle is now crossing the front lawn, trudging through the rough snow that never wants to melt. Another young couple races past her. This one is a guy and guy, both tall and blond, holding hands, one whispering into the ear of the other. She darts a smile their way, she can't help it.

When she reaches the sidewalk, her phone vibrates against her leg. She pulls it out to find not one but two new texts from Raylon. The first says, *Are you there?* And the second one is a maniacal ????????

Isabelle wants to remind Raylon he was the one who walked out on her earlier, not the other way around, but she also understands she can't ignore him forever. She pushes the call button, shoves the phone against her ear. One ring. Two rings.

After the third ring, Raylon picks up and says, "Finally. What the hell are you doing?"

But Isabelle doesn't answer him. She doesn't even open her mouth to speak. Lisa appears to her right, breathing heavily, walking fast across the lawn in a state of total panic. Her hands are clenched into fists; her face is all scrunched up, like she wants to scream. She makes a right turn on the sidewalk and marches in the other direction, into the darkness.

Isabelle brings the phone down against her chest, as she hears Raylon saying, "Hello? Isabelle?"

She ends the call, and then hurries after Lisa, staying far enough behind her not to be noticed, the same way she did when she drove behind Jack. This time she remains even more safely hidden slinking along the thick trees that line the sidewalk, ready at a moment's notice to duck and hide if she has to. Lisa stops once in front of her, for all of three seconds to check her phone, and then she moves even faster, in a dangerous run along the icy pavement. Isabelle is forced to run too, trying her best to keep up with Lisa, no clue why she's following her former classmate other than curiosity, and a mysterious hunch.

She stops next to a white picket fence the second Lisa slows down near an idling Toyota 4Runner ahead. Isabelle pulls out her camera and powers it back on, and as fast as she can, she turns on the night vision filter, not to film what's in front of her necessarily, but to see Lisa

better. When Isabelle looks through the viewfinder, she notices a guy standing against the vehicle's right side, his arms crossed, his arms trembling. He steps forward, and embraces Lisa in a big, rapturous hug, tears erupting against his cheeks. It's Charlie.

"What in the hell." Isabelle crouches down behind the fence, her eyes glued to the viewfinder, the green night vision filter causing the sight before her to appear clear as daylight.

Lisa whispers something to him—"what's wrong?" or maybe "what's going on?"—but Charlie doesn't answer her. He darts his eyes in every direction, like he's psychically aware he's being watched, like he can feel Isabelle's presence. Charlie waves Lisa toward the passenger door, and before Isabelle barely has a chance to blink, Lisa gets inside the vehicle and Charlie rushes to the driver's side. Within seconds, Charlie pulls the car onto the street and makes a fast, sudden U-turn.

Isabelle stands back up, her camera pointed at the car as it speeds past her going left. She doesn't intend to follow the vehicle. She has no reason, really, to follow it. But then she sees Charlie's face again, this time in the driver's side window, the guy she barely knows but whom today she talked to in class and after school, the guy Lisa was looking for so desperately a few minutes ago, who apparently disappeared from the party the same time Jack did.

"Oh, God," Isabelle whispers, as she lowers her camera, her face stunned into stillness. She doesn't even have to look at the photos app on her phone; that page of directions to the Mexican restaurant is imprinted in her brain, along with that name she found scribbled at the bottom. "Jack went to that restaurant with Charlie. Jack... is with *Charlie*."

Why was Charlie crying? Why did he need to see Lisa? Did Jack just break something off with him? Could Jack be in the car? So many questions swirl through Isabelle's brain, but she barely has time to ponder a single one as she turns and sprints down the sidewalk. If Isabelle

loses sight of the vehicle, she'll never get an answer to any of these questions, so she moves faster and faster, jumping over a huge patch of black ice, pushing past two college girls walking extra slow.

With Charlie's vehicle nearing the end of the street, Isabelle jumps inside her Jetta, tosses her camera on the passenger seat, turns on the ignition, and flips the car around in all of five seconds, slamming her foot against the pedal and not lifting it until she pulls up to Charlie's car at the stop sign ahead. She watches him take a sharp right, and then she waits a few seconds so he doesn't think she's following him, careful not to be overly aggressive and blow her cover, but then she makes her right and stays close behind the 4Runner, her lights turned all the way off, the countless neighborhood streets winding and random enough to make her lose him if she lets her guard down.

But she's not going to lose him.

Isabelle's not letting Charlie out of her sight.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Charlie

Charlie picks up speed as he drives through the ridiculous labyrinth of a neighborhood, the seconds seeming to tick past like hours, his fingers practically glued to the steering wheel. He keeps staring at the rearview mirror to make sure Jack's not waking up, his gaze only occasionally averting to his best friend in the passenger seat who's currently pushing him for answers—and who still has no idea Jack's even in the car.

“Are you gonna tell me what's going on or what?” Lisa asks, slumped to her left side, not yet having bothered to buckle herself in.

“Sorry,” Charlie says. “I'm not sure I should've called you. But it all happened so fast. Leese, I'm scared. I'm in so much trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” She waits patiently for a few seconds, leaning her head closer to his, but when Charlie stays quiet, she shouts, “Charlie, goddammit! Tell me what's going on!”

He slows down the vehicle and pulls toward a signal up ahead. He's lied to her for so long his secrets have become a natural way of life, but Jack's unconscious in the back, and she's going to discover his body any second. The sooner he comes clean to her the better. “So you know how I've been acting weird these last few months?”

“Uh huh.”

“Ever since I went on that date with Jack?”

“Yeah, the guy who wouldn't kiss you.”

Charlie makes a right at the next intersection, not bothering with his turn signal, and heads down a slim, two-lane road. “Leese, he *did* kiss me. I never told you the whole story.”

“Wait, what?” She leans her head back. “Why would you lie about that?”

His lips start quivering, tears already welling up in his eyes, but he shakes his head rapidly, tries to stay unemotional, reserved, strictly focused on the long stretch of road ahead of him. “When we left the restaurant, we walked to this abandoned playground. It was dark out, and it was just the two of us. Nobody was around.”

Charlie’s voice drifts, as a tear falls down his left cheek. He wipes it away fast with a flick of his middle finger, in the hopes Lisa doesn’t notice it was there. A quiet sigh emanates through his slightly puckered lips, a car zooming past in the other direction, the first moving car he’s seen since he drove away from the party.

“Well, what’s wrong with that? Sounds romantic.” She opens the 4Runner’s tiny armrest console and starts fishing her fingers through a pile of miscellaneous junk until she pulls out a stick of cinnamon gum.

“It... was.” Charlie manages a brief smile. “It was *perfect*.”

“Okay, then what’s the matter?” She tosses the gum in her mouth and shuts the console.

“The matter... is he didn’t just kiss me, Leese. We hung out on the swings for a little bit and that was nice, but then, soon after, he started to hold me really tight, and not in a good way. He stuck his tongue in my mouth, first of all, and then he started getting rough with—”

Charlie keeps his mouth open, on the verge of saying so much more, but he can’t get another word out after that because Lisa goes from calm listener, mindlessly chewing her gum, to a momentary horror movie scream queen. As the unexpected shriek escapes her rounded lips, Lisa’s right arm launches back against the dashboard, the same time her back slams into the glove compartment. At first Charlie thinks she’s reacting to a person or animal he might have just mowed down without his knowledge, that in his fixation on telling his story he forgot to look for pedestrians crossing the street. But nobody and nothing has stepped in front of him, there’s

been no loud sounds of crunching bones under his tires. Lisa shoves her hand against her mouth and points at the armrest console, as Charlie makes a sharp turn onto a vacant one-lane road, then parks up next to a cemetery called Mountainside. It's barely a hundred yards wide, fully surrounded by a red iron fence, its two-door entrance gate closed and locked. A singular streetlamp blasts light over the area, including the front of Charlie's car, as well as a few of the closest headstones.

He turns off the ignition and faces Lisa. "What? What's the matter?"

"Somebody's *hand*..." she whispers.

He glances, reluctantly, at where her trembling finger is pointing. Jack's body must have been bumped around during the short drive from the party, because a few minutes ago he was completely hidden under the seat, and now his hand is poking out above the back of the console.

"Oh. Right," he says, keeping his voice down the best he can, trying so hard not to panic. "I probably should have started with that part—"

"Charlie, did you kill someone? Is that what this is all about?" Her voice has no quiet to it, instead a loud, screechy tone that's already attacking Charlie's ears.

"What? Of course not!"

She sits up, beads of sweat dripping down her forehead. "Then why is there a body in your back seat?"

"Leese. Listen to me." Charlie grabs her by the shoulders. "That's Jack."

"Jack?" She stares into his eyes, as the realization slowly, inevitably, sets in. She squints, then leans over the console, to get a brief peek at his face. "Okay. Charlie, I swear... I'm really gonna start freaking out here if you don't tell me what's going—"

"He raped me."

Lisa doesn't move at first, her pale face turning to stone. The sound of dead silence prickles his ears. The words came out so much easier than he anticipated, like a long-term illness finally expelled from his body.

Lisa leans against the glove compartment and says, a clear and unavoidable rage beginning to overtake her, "He... what? He *what*?"

"It happened on the playground," Charlie says. "He pushed me to the ground and ripped off my clothes and he... he raped me. For the longest time. Even though it hurt, even though I told him *no*..." He thought he could get through the story fine barely five seconds ago, but Charlie's tears come fast, the strength in his arms weakening. He pulls away from Lisa and slumps over, his elbows touching the bottom of the steering wheel. "And then he tried to do it again tonight. He was at the party, Leese. He followed me to my car. He grabbed me from behind, he put his hand down my pants, and so I hit him, I hit him in the face, I knocked him out cold, but it was an accident, I *swear*—"

"Oh my God," she says. Her wild eyes fixate on Jack. "You know what makes me sick? I've known it, deep down, this whole time. I *knew* this creep did something to you that night. There was something about him... in the smirk he had in that picture, the overbearing sweetness in all those little messages he sent you. He staked you out from the beginning. Saw he could get what he wanted and then toss you aside. It explains everything. Your behavior the last four months, and why you've kept your distance from me, of course, of *course*. God. I wouldn't want to talk to me, either. Because it's all my fault. This all started with me. Why did I do it, Charlie? Why did I let this son of a bitch ruin your life?"

Her arms start flailing every which way, like she might try to slam her fist into Charlie's face or pummel her elbow against Jack's chest or just destroy his 4Runner from the inside out

without any real plan. He quickly snags hold of her right arm, pulls her closer, and says, “Stop. Stop it. Don’t say that. I have never blamed you for any of this.”

“Of course you have. If you didn’t blame me, you would have come to me earlier. You would have told me the truth back in August—”

“Keeping this a secret was never about you, all right?”

She hesitates, staring into his eyes. “It wasn’t?”

“No. Please. You have to believe me. This was something I had to work through on my own. And I *was* working through it. I was finally getting better, Leese. Until Jack came to the party. Until he attacked me again.”

“He attacked you a second time. The nerve with this guy. The fucking nerve.” She digs her knees into the passenger seat, her chest leaning far enough over the center console to see Jack from top to bottom. “You hit him good, Charlie. He looks terrible. His face is all red, and swollen. What the hell did you hit him with?”

“A shovel.”

She glances back at her friend. “Jack tried to rape you again, and you hit him in the face... with a *shovel*?”

“Uh-huh.”

A tiny, malevolent smile appears on her face, as she raises her hand in the air. “Oh, that definitely deserves a high-five.”

He brings her arm back down. “Leese, stop. This is serious.”

Her temporary joy fades, in a blink. She bites down on her tongue, before she says, “You think I don’t know that? Of course this is serious. But it’s also seriously awesome you let this

guy have it. I just wish I could have seen it. This guy deserved that shovel, to his face, to his balls, and so much more...”

“Of course he does, but what now? This is why I called you. This is why I need your help. What do we do with him *now*?”

She shrugs, nonchalantly. “I don’t know, Charlie. I’ve never had to decide what to do with an unconscious body before.”

“Well, think of something, please. Because I don’t have a clue.”

“Let me see.” She stares at Jack again. “We could take him back to your house. Torture him. Make him bleed out every orifice. You said your dad’s gone for the weekend, right?”

“Leese, stop! I told you to be serious!”

“All right, all right,” she says, although Charlie senses she wasn’t kidding about the torture idea. “Let’s just dump him here, outside the car. We’re next to a *cemetery*, Charlie. Nobody’s around to see us.”

He shoves his chin against the steering wheel, letting her words linger for a moment. “It’s not a bad idea, but... I thought of that already. I almost left him back in that neighborhood. But here’s what I can’t figure out, what scares me more than anything. Leese, what happens when he wakes up in the morning and remembers what I did to him? He’ll come after me.”

“He’s not gonna come after you.”

“Of course he will! He’ll put me in my place, I guarantee you. Maybe not tomorrow, or next week, but soon, when I’m least expecting it. I’ll have to spend the rest of my *life* looking over my shoulder...” He keeps one eye on her and the other on Jack’s hand, which is still resting against the console. “Maybe I should go to the police. Tell them what he did to me tonight, and what he did to me last summer...”

“*What?* No way.”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense! I’ll tell the cops I hurt him in self-defense, that he was assaulting me. They’ll believe that.”

“Charlie. Come on. You called me because you wanted me to help you, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, let me give you a reality check. You can’t call the police.”

“Why not? Jack attacked me—”

“Jack is *unconscious*! He’s got a huge bruise on his face! You think they’re gonna believe a word of what you tell them?”

Charlie keeps his mouth shut. He can’t deny the truth in what she’s telling him.

“And what happens when he wakes up, huh?” she asks. “He’ll tell the cops anything to save his ass, and then *we’ll* be the ones thrown in jail. Is that what you want?”

“No.”

“Then drop it. Let’s think of something else.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.”

“I could call my dad,” Charlie says. “He’s not at home, but I could at least tell him what happened, maybe he could—”

“*No*. We’re not calling anyone.”

“Then what do you suggest, Leese? What are we gonna do?”

“*I don’t know!*” She pounds her fist against the dashboard. “Personally? I want to hit him in the face like you did. I want to cut off his testicles. I want to get in the back seat right now and

stick that shovel so far up his ass he won't be able to take a shit for a month." She slams her fist down a second time, this time hitting the glove compartment so hard it tumbles open.

"Leese. You need to calm down."

"Oh, yeah? And you need to wise up! This isn't the time to do the right thing, Charlie. This is not the time to be nice. That guy raped you." She stares into his eyes, for five seconds, or maybe five minutes, so long Charlie loses track of time. "That guy... did one of the most heinous, reprehensible acts someone can do to another person, and he needs to be punished."

"No," Charlie says, trying to be strong, and not buckle underneath his best friend and burst into tears again. "It was horrible what he did, *he* is horrible, but we're not punishing him. We're not gonna make this worse than it already—"

A ringtone ignites, cutting off Charlie in mid-sentence. It's loud and obnoxious, coming from the back seat.

"Oh, shit," Lisa says. "Shit, shit, shit. That's Jack's phone, isn't it?"

Charlie twists himself around and leans over the armrest console. He tries not to glance at the damage he's done to Jack's face and instead focuses on Jack's left leg, the phone vibrating in his jeans pocket. Charlie waits for the phone to stop ringing, and when it does, he slips his fingers into Jack's pocket and pulls out the phone.

He sits back in the driver's seat. Looks down at the screen. The call was from Mason, who's also left him a new text message: *Not cool, dude*. He slides the text to the right and sees two more messages, both from Nick, asking with way too many expletives where Jack went and how shitty it was for him to leave his friends behind with no way to get home.

"Are people looking for him?" Lisa asks, her voice softer, more apprehensive.

"Yeah. Two of his friends."

Charlie clicks on the home button and pulls up the Main Menu screen. He figured Jack's phone would be locked behind a touchscreen or a passcode, but instead all of his social media apps and text messages and voice-mails are here to explore. A treasure trove of secrets. He can click on anything he wants, but instead he swipes his finger to the left, over and over until he reaches the last page, one lone app located in the upper left.

Lisa shoves her cheek against Charlie's, to get a better glimpse at Jack's phone. "What are you doing? Did you find something?"

He doesn't have to answer her. Charlie pushes on the yellow Grindr icon, and as soon as the men's dating app opens, a barrage of messages, alert sounds, and red dots flood the bottom of the screen. He clicks on the Messages button and scrolls down. Jack has sent out more than twenty messages today alone, at least half of which have been responded to. But Charlie doesn't pay attention to the boys who've said something back to Jack. He pays attention to the icebreaker message Jack sent to each boy.

"Oh my God," Charlie says.

The sentence is always the same, not a single word or letter change in any of the messages: *can you believe all the weirdos on here?*

Charlie catches his breath as he scrolls down even more. He reads forty messages. Sixty. All sent out by Jack in the last few days. Some to Reno boys, some to guys who live in New York. The first words Jack posed to Charlie last August he poses to everyone else, like a programmed robot. And the responses he receives are full of gusto and comedy and engaged interaction, these young guys clamoring to get a piece of him. Jack's profile picture is still perfection after all, with his radiant smile, his sexy stubble, the top of his muscled chest exposed just enough to paint a picture of him naked in every horny young man's mind.

But the opening question on repeat doesn't bother Charlie the most. Nor does the sheer amount of messages Jack sends out, upwards of eighty a week, *every* week. He even tries to glaze over the harsh messages Jack's received, none of which he responded to. *You still haven't called me. Did I do something wrong. You bastard. Go die.* No—what bothers Charlie the most are the profiles themselves.

Charlie stops reading the messages and starts flipping through the profile of every guy Jack messaged in the past five days, Lisa still leaning her cheek against his to see what he sees. Charlie notes the similarities right away, thinks maybe it's a coincidence at first. He swipes through ten more guys. Twenty. Thirty. When the sweat starts trickling down his cheeks and his eyes start to blur, he looks back at Lisa, and drops the phone to his side. Charlie can't see his face right now, but he imagines it's reddening more and more by the second, not from any blood or from Jack's severe punches earlier, but from excessive rage.

"Leese. Every guy Jack messaged..."

"...is eighteen years old." Lisa sits back in the passenger seat. Doesn't lash out or scream again, although Charlie figures she could at any second. She rubs her fingers together, staring out the windshield. "You know they're not all eighteen, either," she adds, her voice eerie in its calmness. "You joined when you were seventeen. Who's to say he's not talking to sixteen-year-olds or younger? The guy's a pedophile. The guy is a rapist pedophile."

"I know," Charlie says.

"And he's gonna keep doing this if we don't stop him."

"I know," he repeats.

“You have a shovel in the back. We’re next to a cemetery.” She runs her tongue along her upper teeth, like she’s struggling, desperately, not to bite off something she shouldn’t. “Let’s bury him, Charlie. Let’s put him in the *ground*—”

“No. Don’t go there. We’re not killing anyone.” Charlie picks up Jack’s phone, then turns to the back seat again, the idea of all ideas popping fast into his head. “I’ve got a plan that’s far worse than death.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?” She brings her feet up to the edge of the passenger seat and wraps her arms around her legs, her knees shoved against her chin. Her new position makes her look so much younger, so much more vulnerable.

“Here’s my idea...” A mad grin takes shape on Charlie’s face. “We’re gonna scare the shit out of him.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Isabelle

Isabelle tosses the M&M into the air and tries to catch it in her mouth, but she misses, the green-coated candy falling somewhere between her feet. She quickly tosses another and this one misses too, but the third lands safely on her tongue and she momentarily basks in the pleasure of rich chocolate goodness. She reaches again into the bag, which she found stuffed underneath the passenger seat, and takes out the final M&M, the only one she's seen that's colored red. She tosses it in her mouth and returns her gaze to Charlie's still idling car.

Isabelle has been parked down the vacant street for almost twenty minutes. Her vehicle's fifty yards away from Charlie's, hidden in darkness, nowhere close to the bright streetlamp, every light in the Jetta turned off so she and her Jetta remain invisible. She keeps waiting for something to happen up ahead, like Jack stepping outside and revealing himself to be a drug dealer, or, hell, maybe a graveyard robber. Alas, she isn't even sure if Jack's in there, and she's started to convince herself he's not. Two of her fingers slide against the door handle, and she's about ready to grip it with the other three and push it open. She could step into the cold right now, go knock on Charlie's window, ask him what the hell he's doing parked next to a cemetery in the middle of the night, and if he's seen Jack. It wouldn't be unreasonable her appearing out of nowhere, since she talked to Charlie earlier and bumped into his pal Lisa at the party. She could fake car trouble and have him call AAA as she coaxes answers out of him, like why his name was on a piece of paper in Jack's Mustang, why he and Jack disappeared from the party at the *exact* same time. She sees the drama playing out in her head so clearly, like the ultimate mystery movie she could make if she ever turned to fiction again, but then, ultimately, she stays planted in her seat like a good little detective, and removes her fingers from the door handle, because the

flaw in the scenario is too obvious, too unavoidable: Charlie will see through her lies and will know she's been following him, and he won't tell her a thing.

When her phone rings, Isabelle crinkles up the M&M bag, tosses it in the back seat, and yanks the phone out of her pocket. She hopes the call is coming from Jack, that he wants to apologize for his earlier behavior, give her the final shot of her movie she needs, maybe offer to re-do the entire interview, but of course it's not Jack, it's Raylon.

Isabelle answers, keeping her focus on Charlie's car to make sure it doesn't go anywhere. "Hey."

"Hey. Why aren't you answering your phone? I've called you, like, a thousand times."

"Sorry. I've been a little busy."

"Doing what?"

"I told you. I'm finishing the movie."

"*Still?* It's almost midnight, Isabelle. I thought you had one more shot."

Isabelle leans her seat back and slams her feet against the dash. "I do. It's taking longer than expected. What are you up to?"

"What am *I* up to?" Raylon asks, with a laugh. "I'm worrying about you, that's what."

"Why?" She listens to his heavy breathing, like he's getting ready to lecture her.

"*Because.* You've worked hard on your movies before, I've seen it. But you've never been so crazy like this. You've never been this... obsessed. Hours and hours to get a shot. Your movie's due in two days! Shouldn't you be editing?"

His point isn't a bad one. She should be in her bedroom editing what she can of Jack's interview into her film, the score from *Moonlight* blasting through her speakers and keeping her focused long into the night. But it's not that simple, none of this is, and so Isabelle says, "I can

edit tomorrow, and Sunday. Tonight... I need to get a shot of Jack. Something that shows the person he is.”

“But why? Your movie’s about adoption. It’s not about your brother.”

“Of course it’s about my brother,” she says, without hesitating. “This is the first movie I’ve made that’s personal, Raylon. That I deeply, deeply care about. That’s about something sacred I hold with Jack. If I don’t understand *him*, then... I don’t understand the movie.”

Isabelle intends to keep pouring her heart out, but her voice drifts as soon as Raylon starts laughing hysterically. She sits up all the way, her mouth closing, then opening again. She’s ready to slam the phone down when Raylon clears his throat and says, “Sorry. I’m sorry.”

“What the hell are you laughing at?”

“What am I laughing at? You’re treating this movie like it’s the second coming, like it’s gonna win an Academy Award or some shit. You’re seventeen. Life will go on. Whether or not you go to film school. Whether or not this movie is good or if it sucks.”

This sounds like her mother talking. Or her career counselor. This can’t possibly be her Raylon, can it? “That’s easy for you to say. You want to be a doctor.”

“So?”

“So there’s gonna be thousands of opportunities. For *you*. There’s a difference between becoming a doctor, and becoming a director, Raylon. How many people who look like me make movies? Besides Ava DuVernay, or Dee Rees? I’m the one percent of the zero percent. I’m gonna have to work a thousand times harder than anyone else, and that starts with making this new movie the right way, the only way—”

“Do you hear yourself right now?” Raylon interrupts, his voice deeper, almost guttural, like he has a sore throat. “Like, are you listening to the words coming out of your mouth? You work behind the camera, not in front of it. Nobody’s gonna care what you look like.”

“Of course they will. And if I have any shot of getting into these schools, of making a career out of this, I have to stay focused, I have to do the best I can. And so I need to find him. I need to find Jack. I can’t lose him again.”

She can’t lose him, and she won’t, especially since she’s lost him one too many times. When he would take off with his friends in high school, Isabelle begged to go with him, said she would even pay for their lunches with her allowance money if Jack let her tag along. She thought if she kept asking, eventually he would stop on the front lawn, roll his eyes, yell at her for being annoying, and eventually wave her outside to join him and his friends for a Saturday afternoon joyride. Jack had two African-American friends, Chris and Tyrell, so the issue wasn’t Isabelle being black, and it certainly wasn’t her being a girl. So why wouldn’t he ever take her with him? Why did he have to always push her away instead of hold her close, be her friend, tell her he loved her? Was it because of his secret, the one he still refuses to make peace with?

She chased after Jack once on her bike, in the middle of fall when he was seventeen and she was thirteen, keeping up with his car for three blocks before she took a shortcut down a dirt trail toward the neighborhood park, where she liked to take a few laps around the lake. She had asked Jack if she could ride in his new red Mustang, a birthday present from their mother after he made the basketball team, and he told her he’d rather crawl into a ditch with a run-over skunk. Jack was at his harshest back then, cruel even, the way he snapped at his sister and treated her like horseshit. But she never wavered in her optimism, in her desire to understand his fits of anger and tendency to criticize, and so she jumped on her green mountain bike and raced after

him, pedaling faster the more he sped up, thinking she could stay close for miles, never backing down. She wanted to know where he went in his car, what he did, who he talked to. Who was so much more important than his own sister? He took a sharp turn, probably recognizing she was following him, and after he disappeared down one of the neighborhood side-streets, Isabelle rode down to the lake, which was surprisingly empty for a warm September weekend.

She was halfway through her second lap, trying to hold in her tears as she cut across some yellowing grass into a bushel of trees at the park's northeast corner, orange leaves falling, the sun streaming through wispy non-clouds, when she saw the Mustang. Jack was parked at the edge of a dirt lot, and he sat in the front seat, talking to some blond guy she had never seen before. Her brother had the biggest grin on his face, kept nodding his head all goofily, like everything the blond guy said was a revelatory gem. The kiss the two guys shared a few minutes later didn't come as a surprise to thirteen-year-old Isabelle, she half-expected it by the time it happened, but when she saw the tongues come out and two shirts swiftly removed, she turned her bike the other way and rode back to the pond, where she pondered, for more than an hour, what she'd seen. She almost told her mother after dinner that night, but something stopped her from doing so, fully convinced Jack would talk about his secret to his family and others when he was ready. She thought he at least might pull his sister aside one unassuming night and tell her everything, open up his heart the way she kept wanting him to.

But four years have gone by, he has a new girlfriend in New York, and he's keeping late-night dinner dates with boys named Charlie a deep, dark secret, when he shouldn't have to, when he's in the right to be with anyone he wants. He doesn't need to pretend with Talia, fake a persona with his two awful friends. He should be able to talk to Isabelle, on-camera or not on camera, and be himself for once. If her closing shot of Sharon is of the talented artist painting,

Isabelle wants her closing shot of Jack to be him sitting next to another young man, holding his hand, smiling the way he did by the park. Could that young man be her classmate Charlie? Could Jack and Charlie be a thing? Could they actually... be in *love*?

None of this makes any sense, but there are answers to be found, and she's not going home until she finds them.

"What do you mean, you have to find Jack?" Raylon asks, his voice softer than before.

"What are you talking about?"

A few seconds go by. Isabelle keeps the phone in her grip, but she doesn't utter a word.

Raylon sighs, then he asks, a touch louder, "Hello? Babe, are you there?"

"Sorry," Isabelle blurts out, finally, and then she says, in a whisper, "I have to go now."

"Wait. No, no, no. Don't hang up on me again. Tell me where you are, Isabelle. Tell me what the hell you're doing."

"See, that's the thing. I have no idea what I'm doing." She manages a tender smile, even though no one's looking. "Wish me luck, okay?"

"No. No, wait, please. Don't hang up—"

Isabelle ends the call, powers off the phone completely, and tosses it over the headrest, onto the backseat. Silence follows once again. Darkness overtakes her. She slumps down and brings her focus back to Charlie's vehicle as she reaches for more candy underneath the seat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Charlie

The plan didn't take long to finalize. It seemed so simple, and still does. First, Charlie kept a tight grip on Jack's phone and took endless screenshots of the Grindr messages, including that stupid icebreaker he sends out dozens of times a day, and the shirtless and non-shirtless photos he messages to hundreds of unsuspecting young men. Second, Charlie took shots of the angry responses sent to Jack, including one that said, *Go die, asshole*, and another that said, *If I ever see you again, I'm gonna kill you*. Clearly Jack had disappointed, belittled, assaulted, raped, way more guys than only Charlie, and so Charlie came up with a plan to put him in his place. Take him to the woods. Remove his clothes. Let him shiver as Charlie shoves the phone in his face and reveal all the screenshots from Grindr, all the pictures now in Charlie's possession. He would threaten to release every one of them on social media, and to the local authorities, if Jack ever comes near him again. Then he and Lisa would leave him in the woods, naked, humiliated, forced to fend for himself in the bitter cold. It would be the ultimate wake-up call, a turning point where Jack could finally snap out of his malicious ways, and Charlie could be able to move on, live again, feel *safe*.

"I don't know," Lisa says. "I'm not sure it's enough."

Charlie leans his head back against the driver's side window, then clenches his fists to keep from screaming. He's been waiting for her to say that. He was able to read her mixed emotions from the moment he started into his long rant a few minutes ago, outlining every detail of his perfect plan to take Jack down. It can work, every step, but Lisa has to be on board. He can't do this by himself.

"It's more than enough. Come on."

“This won’t change him, Charlie. It’ll enrage him. He’ll come after you, and me.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I do. Trust me.” She shoves her feet back on the floor and pushes her body toward Charlie’s, her intimidating figure suddenly looming over his face. “I’ve met my share of assholes, and from what you’ve told me, from what I’ve seen on that little phone of his, this guy’s different, he’s worse. He’s a monster that needs to be—”

“No,” Charlie interrupts. “Don’t say it.”

“Why not?”

“I won’t let him you hurt him. That won’t solve our problem.”

“But he hurt *you*. He hurt my best friend.”

“Let’s just stick to the plan.”

“Well, I don’t like that plan.”

“Why not?”

“*Because*,” Lisa says, so close her lips are nearly touching Charlie’s, her voice booming, her eyes burning into his. “It’s too complicated. Too hard. It won’t work, and even if it does, I’m not gonna be satisfied. I won’t feel comfortable with this guy on the loose, knowing what you and I did to him. You called me, Charlie. You wanted my advice, and to me, there’s only one way out of this mess. Now you can feel what you want to feel. And you can fight me if you need to. But the fact of the matter is, I’m perfectly willing to do what is necessar—”

The sound of a shovel cuts Lisa off in mid-sentence. It’s not much, only a brief scrape against the back door, but then there’s more: a foot sliding along the shovel, an elbow touching Charlie’s chair, a few fingers tapping the armrest console.

A loud cough echoes through the vehicle.

“Holy shit,” Charlie says, and he spins around in time to see Jack sitting up straight, his palm resting against the wound on his cheek.

“Ark... neef...” Jack appears to be still waking up, his eyes closed, his words making no sense. But then he says, “Cholly... *Charlie*...” And then his eyes open wide.

Charlie raises his hands, stunned he has no weapon close by, the shovel under Jack’s feet. He glances at Lisa, briefly. She stays put on the passenger seat, not budging, not saying a word.

“Are you, uhh... feeling any better?” Charlie asks, at a loss for what to say. “I was just taking you to the hospital. You, uhh, you fell and hit your head—”

“You hit me,” Jack says, his face a mess of redness and wounds, of dried blood caked over both his nose and his mouth. “You hit me with a shovel.”

Suddenly, Lisa opens her door and steps outside. She was just sitting there for the past few seconds, staring out the windshield, not turning around once to get a solid look at Charlie’s tormentor, and now she’s on the move. Once she slams the door, Charlie opens his mouth to scream her name, afraid he’ll never see his friend again, Lisa about to sprint down the street and away from this cemetery before Jack tries to lay a hand on her, too.

But she doesn’t leave, and why he thought she might, he has no idea. She opens the back door, picks up her black coat, then sits behind the passenger seat, next to Jack.

“Who are you?” Jack asks, his words becoming stronger, more focused. A few seconds go by. She quietly rests her coat across her knees, and doesn’t answer. “Excuse me, I asked you a question. Who the hell are—”

“Hi, Jack,” she interrupts. “I’m Lisa. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

She grins big, in a theatrical way Charlie’s never seen her grin before, her eyes squinty and narrowed, her chapped lips turning white the longer she keeps her creepy, wide smile fixed

upon her face. Charlie tries to say something, because a small part of him knows exactly what's coming, but he can't get a word out before she picks the shovel up off the floor and shoves its square blade so hard against Jack's neck that his head slams all the way against the window.

"Leese! Oh my God! What are you doing?" Charlie screams, his hands gripped against the headrest, totally helpless from the driver's seat. "Stop!"

"Why?" she asks. "You got to hurt him. Now it's my turn."

"This isn't part of my plan!"

"Oh, screw that stupid plan."

Lisa pushes the shovel even harder against Jack's neck, the center of the blade scratching the surface of his Adam's apple, as he fixes his fingers around the blade's end, pained gurgling noises escaping his closed lips, his eyes bulging wide. His cheeks start turning the darkest shade of red, but then he swats his right hand against the blade, and the front of the shovel tumbles back to the floor.

Jack bends over, the top of his head touching the back of Charlie's seat, and he begins coughing hysterically, sounding more like he has to vomit than let air out, both of his arms wrapped around his mid-section. Lisa keeps her grip on the shovel, leaning back slightly as if she expects Jack to pounce on her. She gives Charlie a fleeting glance, a worried one, before she turns her attention back to Jack.

He follows his coughing with a couple of grunts, before he grossly spits onto the floor and then sits up straight again. He could attack Lisa, at least rip the shovel out of her hands. He could start kicking Charlie's seat in a fit of rage too, but Jack stays put, his arms trembling, sweat dripping down his forehead.

He covers his hand over his wounded neck. “What did I ever...” He coughs one more time, then finishes: “...do to you? I don’t even know you.”

“Just stop,” Lisa says. “Stop pretending. Stop your bullshit. You know exactly what’s going on here.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.”

Jack shakes his head, clearly bewildered by Lisa’s words, then turns, only slightly, to Charlie, who’s watching this unfold over the headrest, like a voyeur hiding safely behind a pane of thick glass. “Your friend’s psychotic,” Jack says, before he latches his fingers on the door handle. “I’m getting out of here.”

“Charlie, lock the doors,” Lisa says.

“What?” Charlie’s still lost in Jack’s dangerous gaze.

“I said, lock the doors, goddammit.”

But it’s too late. Jack pushes open his side door and drops his feet down to the pavement. He glances to his left and right, clearly at a loss for where he is, or where he should go.

Lisa slides across the back seat, from one side of the vehicle to the other in all of two seconds. She buries her left hand deep within the pockets of her coat. “Jack, please. Get back in the car.”

“Make me,” he says. He tugs on his leather jacket and starts walking across the street.

“This is your final warning.” She buries her knees against the seat, and stops in front of the opened door.

“Your final... *what?* Shut your mouth. I don’t care if I have to walk all the way home, I’m getting the hell away from the two of you freaks—”

“Take one more step, and you’re a dead man.”

Jack stops halfway across the street. He sighs, even manages a brief laugh, before he turns back toward her, his neck now as red as his face. “Oh, yeah? What are you gonna do? Throw the shovel at me?”

“Nope.” Lisa takes a handgun out of her coat and points it at Jack. “I’m gonna shoot you in the fucking head.”

“*Lisa!*” Charlie pushes his back against the steering wheel. Shoves his palm over his mouth. Tries not to throw up, then and there. She’s got a gun. *His* gun. The one she took away from him. The one he thought she’d put in a safe place, but that’s actually been in her coat, within arm’s reach, this entire time.

His heart starts pounding fast, and the next few seconds seem to pass like long minutes, Lisa focused on Jack, no emotion in her face, no fear at all.

“Hey. Whoa.” Jack slowly puts his hands in the air. “Calm down...”

“Get back in the car, asshole,” she says.

“Lisa, let him go.” Charlie reaches for her right shoulder, but she’s too far. “Just let him go, for God’s sake—”

“Sorry, Charlie. It’s too late for that.”

“No, it’s not. You’ve taken this far enough. I just wanted to scare him.”

“I don’t know. I think he’s pretty scared now, don’t you think?” She keeps the gun pointed at Jack, not dropping her guard, not looking away from her prey. “You raped my best friend. You raped him, and you got away with it, and tonight, you tried to do it again.”

Lisa cocks the gun, and then points it not at Jack’s head, but at his crotch.

“One more step, Jack. I dare you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Isabelle

There he is. There's Jack.

He *was* in the car.

Mere seconds ago Isabelle was digging her fingers through her glove compartment to search for more food when Jack stepped out of the vehicle ahead. She rolled down her window as soon as he started talking back to somebody, but he's too far away and she couldn't make out his words. Why did he put his arms up in the air? And what the hell is he doing now, slowly inching his way back to Charlie's car like he's being summoned against his will?

"What the hell, Jack," Isabelle whispers as soon as he re-enters the car, and before she can talk herself out of it, before she can continue to stay quiet and hidden in darkness like she has been all night, she opens her driver's side door and steps into the fierce cold.

Her feet find the sidewalk, a long stretch of muddy ice that features only the occasional pockets of actual snow, and she starts walking, carefully, toward the 4Runner, her hands stuffed inside her jeans pockets, her heart pounding with each step she takes. She has no idea how Jack will react to her presence, but she's not about to back down; she's been following her brother long enough. She's going to knock on the window, say a quick hi and hello to everyone inside, and promptly learn exactly what's going on.

She nearly slips at one point, her left foot connecting with a patch of ice so slick she almost stumbles backward into a gutter, but she manages to stay on both feet, and even speeds up a little, as she moves away from the sidewalk and a series of tall, dead plants on her right and takes her first step onto the cracked street pavement. She's so close to Charlie's car, steps away from the truth, endless questions swirling around her head than desperately need answers.

But then the vehicle's engine turns on, and so do its headlights, without warning, and the driver quickly pulls out to the middle of the street.

“*Shit.*”

The headlights flash in her direction, and within seconds, Charlie, Lisa, Jack—all of them—will see her standing close by. Isabelle has two choices—keep walking toward the vehicle and demand the driver stop, or jump out of the way, fast. She chooses the latter, the smart option—the *safe* option—rushing back past the gutter and sidewalk and leaping next to the bushes as Charlie's car speeds on by. She stays face down against a mound of snow for a few dreadful seconds, then flips onto her back and watches the vehicle go past her own, clearly nobody inside noticing the other car. The driver makes a sharp right at the next street, and the 4Runner disappears around the corner.

She doesn't want to get back up. She doesn't want to do any more chasing tonight. She wants to go home, and go to bed, and figure out a plan in the morning.

But then Isabelle says, with a loud groan, “I've come this far,” and she races back to her Jetta, her feet sliding dangerously along the slippery ice three separate times before she finally makes it back to her driver's seat. Isabelle turns on the ignition, keeps her headlights turned off, and makes a U-turn.

She doesn't see Charlie's car when she makes the right turn ahead, and she still doesn't see it for close to a minute, the two-lane road so eerily empty this late at night, but then a traffic signal appears at an intersection ahead, and there's the 4Runner, idling at a red light, the left blinker turned on. Isabelle approaches the car slowly, keeping her distance, and it's not until she pulls up close to it that she wonders if she should turn her headlights on after all. Won't she look more suspicious if her car is pitch black?

The red turns to green, and Charlie makes his left turn. Isabelle stays put for another five seconds, then she reluctantly, cautiously, flips on her headlights—she doesn't want Charlie to see her, but she doesn't want an angry late-night police officer to pull her over, either—and follows his vehicle onto Mount Rose Highway.

Thankfully another car is on this wide, four-lane highway—a blue Jeep Cherokee—in the fast lane like Charlie, so Isabelle stays two vehicles behind, going only a touch above the fifty-miles-an-hour speed limit. She keeps waiting for him to turn off at each upcoming exit, but he never does. Isabelle thought he might be taking Jack home a few minutes ago, but he's going in the wrong direction. Where is headed? Is he dropping off Lisa?

The driver of the Cherokee makes a right at the next intersection, but not Charlie, the 4Runner ascending the steep highway, foreboding mountains in the distance, the last of any neighborhoods or houses in this area officially in Isabelle's rearview mirror. She continues to follow him, keeping her head low and her distance, still, at a reasonable length. If Charlie's been paying attention, he would have to know he's being followed by now, but he's not making any sudden movements, no dramatic detours. Where is the hell is Charlie going? From the little time she's spent in this south part of Reno, she's certain this is not the road you want to be on in the middle of the night, in the dead of winter, when snow could start falling, when her little Jetta could get trapped somewhere. But Jack is in that car, and something is wrong, so very wrong, and so she keeps driving, her video camera still settled on her passenger seat, her desire for the truth unwavering, no matter how late it is, no matter how long this endless chase takes.

Isabelle takes her eyes off the road for a couple of seconds to turn the heat on full blast, but as soon she glances back out the windshield, a black Suburban cuts her off, from seemingly out of nowhere, and she's forced to slow down, from fifty all the way down to thirty. She honks

her horn, and when the Suburban driver starts slowing down too, the left blinker coming on, she veers into the right lane. She can still see Charlie's vehicle ahead, although it's farther than it was before, approaching a traffic signal, the last one on the highway before the road turns into two lanes and starts ascending into tall mountains, into endless acres of forest. She speeds up more, approaching forty, as the 4Runner passes through the intersection.

The light turns yellow.

"No," Isabelle says, and she slams her foot against the pedal, despite the frigid temperature, despite the icy slickness on the road. "Oh, come on, come on."

She hits fifty miles per hour, her sweaty fingers clenched to the steering wheel, as she approaches the intersection. The light turns from yellow to red. She can still see Charlie's vehicle in the distance; she can still catch up to him. She's not hesitating, not stopping. Isabelle is going through the red light no matter what.

But then a semi-truck pulls right out in front of her.

Isabelle screams, and slams on her brakes, and when her car starts sliding over the line, into the intersection toward the truck, she feels her heart leap, her insides clench. This is it. This is the end. Her dreams of making up with her brother, of becoming a filmmaker, have been ripped away, in one quick flash.

But her Jetta does stop, halfway through the intersection, not far enough to collide with the truck. The driver honks his horn and maneuvers around her before he takes off south on Mount Rose Highway.

First Isabelle catches her breath, and second she looks in the rearview mirror. No cars are behind her, no cars are even close, so she reverses and stops behind the line.

The light is still red. It remains so for the longest time.

Isabelle rests her chin against the top of the steering wheel and peers out the windshield, at the winding stretch of road before the mountains. Charlie's car has disappeared.

She's lost him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Charlie

Charlie drives up the steep and winding Mount Rose Highway, all of his fingers clamped against the steering wheel, a heaviness mounting in his heart as the city of Reno disappears from his rearview mirror. The farther he drives the more of civilization he leaves behind, only mammoth trees on both sides. No car has passed his 4Runner in nearly five minutes.

The road suddenly veers right, away from a darkened ski resort, and he's forced to slow down when his tires roll over a patch of black ice.

"Whoa, watch it," Lisa says.

"Sorry." The word comes out in a whisper. He hasn't said much to Lisa since they drove away from that cemetery. He's kept his focus on the road before him, trying not to panic over the drama playing out in the back seat.

Charlie still can't believe Jack got back inside the car, that he didn't run fleeing down the sidewalk shouting for help. He didn't even act upset about it, sitting down next to Lisa like he had already resolved himself to his fate. Charlie picked up that duct tape from the floor and wrapped it around Jack's wrists eight times, just to be on the safe side. But even after his hands were tied, he could still try to kick him or Lisa, so when Charlie started his long drive, he waited for Jack to make his move, waited for that perverted rapist behind him to show his true colors. Instead, surprisingly, Jack kept calm, almost too calm, for the first part of the drive, occasionally biting down on his tongue or pursing his lips, not causing any fuss or saying a word, not even locking his eyes on Charlie or Lisa.

It's not until Charlie hits another patch of ice, his vehicle sliding to the left and going over the double yellow, that Jack opens his mouth.

“I didn’t rape him,” he says. “I didn’t do that.”

Lisa shifts her body close to him, dangerously close, although she can hold her own against Jack. Even though he’s six-foot-three and muscular, the six-foot, big-boned Lisa is no delicate flower. “What was that, Jack? You were mumbling. I couldn’t hear you.”

“I said, I didn’t do it. I would never rape anyone—”

She slams the handgun across his face, the weapon striking Jack’s nose so hard Charlie hears a loud pop sound echo through the vehicle. Jack lets out a pained scream and shoves his palms over his face, as Lisa shouts, “You’re a liar! You lie!”

Blood streams out his nostrils. His eyes well up with tears. This is a new, defeated Jack, one Charlie struggles to recognize. “Please don’t hurt me,” he whispers, as he brings down his tied, trembling hands. “I’m not lying. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Save your breath, asshole. You’re gonna say anything to get out of this situation, I’m not stupid. You better start apologizing, and fess up to that horrible thing you did, or I’m gonna do a whole lot more than just hit you with this gun.” She takes a deep breath, then turns to her right. “Charlie?”

He doesn’t answer her. His hands are shaking, and his shoulder-blades too, not from the cold but from his best friend’s intensity. He could never do what she’s doing. He may have knocked Jack unconscious with a swipe of a heavy shovel, but that was out of self-defense.

“Charlie? Hello?” She snaps her fingers.

“Uhh, yeah? What?”

“Where the hell are you taking us? Are we almost there?”

Charlie doesn't answer her. He doesn't need to, since he's already slowing down at the left turn to Mountain Haven Lane. The street is hidden in deep, unpaved snow, and a sudden wave of nausea hits Charlie as soon as he sees a ROAD CLOSED sign blocking the route.

"You're not seriously thinking of going this way, are you?" Lisa asks. "It's closed."

Charlie idles, glancing out his side window for another option. "We have to get away from the main road."

"Yeah, but you don't want to get stuck in a ditch. This road's obviously closed for a *reason*."

Charlie glances in his rearview mirror to see if any cars are coming. There's nobody there, hasn't been anyone for miles. But someone *could* appear, at any moment, and there's no time left to consider.

"Let's just turn around," Jack says, his tears now gone but his voice weakened, almost child-like. "We can go somewhere and talk about this, you guys. I will do whatever it takes to—"

"Keep talking, and I'll shoot you in one of your kneecaps," Lisa says, her gun pointed toward Jack's lower body. "I'll let you take your pick, *prick*. Left or right."

Jack shuts his mouth, then shoves the back of his head against the window.

"Yeah, yeah, that's what I thought," Lisa says, before she focuses on Charlie again.

He taps on the pedal. Approaches the ROAD CLOSED sign, which is bigger than he anticipated. It's way too wide to get around.

"Do I need to go outside and move it?" Lisa asks, with noticeable hesitation.

"No," Charlie says, because there they are. High beams in the distance. A vehicle about to emerge around the corner and see the suspicious turn Charlie's going to make.

"No? Why not?"

He bites on his bottom lip, hard, then floors his car forward, squinting, refusing to scream and startle his backseat passengers, as the three-tiered ROAD CLOSED sign splits into pieces the second his vehicle drives through it. Charlie braces for a painful collision, but the initial impact is so minimal he doesn't feel the slightest tremor.

He stops the car a few seconds later and watches that vehicle on the highway—a massive semi-truck—go soaring past.

“Good,” Charlie says, and speeds up again. A second obstacle appears as the road begins ascending, a yellow tractor ahead that blocks half the road.

“You see that, right?” Lisa asks.

“I do, I do. Shit.” He swings his car to the left, managing to swerve around the gargantuan tractor with mere seconds to spare, and then he slows down once he's passed it, not sure if there's a third, potentially fatal obstacle they'll have to face next.

Lisa leans forward and taps Charlie on the shoulder. “Haven't we gone far enough? Why can't we stop here?”

“We're still too close to the highway.”

“There's a huge tractor behind us! It blocks anyone from seeing the car—”

“One more minute, Leese,” Charlie says, raising his voice. He approaches thirty miles per hour, not wanting to go any faster than that, not in all this snow. “We're taking this road to the end, okay?”

“Okay. Fine.” She leans back in her seat, clearly surprised by Charlie's tone. She keeps her gun pointed at Jack. “If you say so.”

Charlie plows his vehicle through a three-foot-tall mound of snow, loses control for a moment, then corrects the vehicle the best he can. The road veers to the right, only slightly, and

then he sees it, finally: Abel's Mexican Restaurant. The building has all its lights turned off, its roof and empty parking lot ravaged with white.

Charlie brings the car to a halt a few yards away from the restaurant entrance doors, and turns off the ignition. He takes in the silence. Shakes his head. He hadn't been planning it at the cemetery. He hadn't even been planning it when he started driving toward Mount Rose Highway, but it seems so obvious now that he's here. Of course he would bring Jack to Abel's, and to the playground. Of course Jack would have his reckoning here.

Lisa stares out the windshield. "Wait. Is this the place where you and Jack..."

"...had our date," Jack blurts out. He slumps down in his seat, splotches of dry blood covering his nose and upper lip.

Lisa glances at Jack, but she doesn't strike him with the gun again. She looks at him more with pity than with anger and says, "Get up."

He doesn't budge.

"Hey. I said, get up. We're gonna take a little walk."

Still nothing.

Charlie watches his friend, the gun still in her hand but pointed the other way as she starts moving toward Jack again. He locks his eyes on Jack, watches the way he's pretending, clearly pretending, to be calm and nonchalant about all this. He's not hiding himself in that awkward position for no reason. He's waiting for her to get closer.

"Leese..." Charlie says. He looks down in time to notice Jack reaching for something on the floor. "*Leese, watch out!*"

"What?" Lisa takes her eyes off Jack for barely a second, when Jack slides his back against the window, and brings up his right foot, ready to pummel it in Lisa's face.

But before his foot connects, Charlie jumps onto the back seat, on top of Jack, and brings his legs back down.

“Get off me!” Jack screams, and he tries to wriggle his way out from under him, but Charlie’s too strong—he keeps Jack pinned against the seat, his hands pressed against Jack’s shoulders.

“Be happy to,” Charlie says, so ready to let this guy have it in both his face and his crotch. “But not until you do what you’re told.”

Jack takes a deep breath, but no words come out.

“You gonna try to hurt my friend again?”

“I...”

“*Will you?*”

The gun appears to Charlie’s left, as Lisa presses it to Jack’s forehead. “Answer the question, you dick,” Lisa says.

Jack stares into the barrel of the gun, his eyes welling up again, his child-like panic setting in for a second time. “I won’t hurt her, I won’t hurt her,” Jack says, before he leans his head to the side. “Jesus. What are you gonna do to me?”

Lisa pulls the gun away, and before Charlie has time to witness her next move, she hands Charlie the shovel, slips out of the vehicle, then appears in mere seconds outside Jack’s window. She knocks lightly before she opens the car door and presses the gun, again, to Jack’s head.

“Out of the car,” she says.

Charlie pushes away from Jack and keeps the shovel tight in his grasp as he hurries out of the vehicle, grabbing the flashlight he remembered was in the back before he closes the door. He moves as fast as he can, worried with each passing second Jack could be attempting a second

hard kick against Lisa, this one successful. But Lisa's strong, she's so scarily capable, and by the time Charlie reaches the other side of the 4Runner, Jack's slowly stumbling onto the snow-covered pavement, a difficult task with that gray duct tape still tied around his wrists.

"Please..." Jack says, his lips quivering as he darts his eyes at Charlie's, at the person Jack clearly thinks he can still reason with. "You guys don't have to do this. We can still part ways, never see each other again. I won't say a thing, I *promise*—"

"Save your breath," Lisa says. "I don't want to hear your B.S. for another second."

"I wasn't talking to you!" he shouts at Lisa, before he stares, again, at Charlie. "It doesn't have to end this way. We can forget this ever happened."

Charlie doesn't want to kill Jack. He still just wants to scare him. He still just wants to leave him naked and shivering in the woods, and despite Lisa's toughness, despite her ease with that gun and with screaming at Jack every chance she gets, he's certain he'll be able to talk her out of doing something she'll regret for the rest of her life.

"Start walking, Jack" Charlie says. He holds up the shovel higher, his thin aluminum flashlight tucked under his left armpit and turned on its brightest setting. "Do what my friend says, or do I need to knock you out again?"

"Jesus," Jack says. He dips his head, then mumbles, so quietly under his breath, "This is your last chance..." Lisa couldn't have heard it, she's standing too far away from him.

But Charlie heard every word of it. "What was that?"

Jack looks away from him.

"*What* did you say?" He takes a step closer to him. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but we're the ones with the weapons here. We're the ones who can take you down. You want to get shot? Do you?"

“Of course not,” he says, kicking away some hard snow beneath him.

Charlie stops before Jack, the only thing between them the heavy blade of the shovel.

“There’s nobody here. For miles. There’s nobody who can help you.”

Jack licks his lips, and then he whispers something that must be so hard for him to say, something that takes the utmost effort: “Fine. You win, Charlie.”

Those words sound so great in Charlie’s ears, better than the finest poetry he’s read this entire year in Mrs. Wickers’ English class, as Lisa waves Jack forward and demands he put his hands where she can see them. The three start walking across the parking lot, the only hint of light coming from a faint sliver of the moon peeking through the thick midnight clouds. Jack stays out in front, Lisa and Charlie following him close behind.

“Where are we going?” Jack asks, as they start descending the hill, that familiar hill.

A few more difficult steps, and the playground becomes visible deep within the forest trees. Charlie holds his breath as he sees the teeter-totter first, then the swings, and then that long, metallic slide.

“Where do you think,” Charlie says.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Isabelle

She's forced to slow down at least five times on her treacherous drive, her Jetta sliding more and more on the increasingly icy highway. She thought about giving up at the final traffic signal, and rightfully so—sitting for a full two minutes at that red light ensured she would struggle catching back up to Charlie's car—but turning around wasn't an option, not anymore. Despite her tired eyes and achy shoulders. Despite it being the middle of the night.

A speeding semi just passed her by, one even larger than the one that nearly took her life at the intersection, and now Isabelle is alone on the road again, the surrounding darkness overwhelming despite her headlights turned on. She approaches thirty miles per hour, the road climbing higher and higher, the 4Runner seemingly lost to her forever.

But then she sees it, out the left side of her windshield, it's unavoidable. Her headlights flash on Mountain Haven Lane only for a second, but a second is all she needs to witness the odd mess of destruction. She screeches to a stop, her car sliding a few scary feet forward again, and she makes an abrupt left turn. The broken sign is everywhere, pieces of wood flung all around the front of a one-lane street, a tractor visible in the distance. One piece of the sign severed diagonally says ROA, and another, cut through the center, says OSED.

But one sign still stands on the far right of the road's entrance, partly covered under a behemoth tree. She yanks the steering wheel to the right, turns on her high beams, and squints. The tiny sign says, in white letters, ABEL'S, a black arrow pointing north.

Isabelle grins.

She speeds up, not even blinking as she swerves around the destroyed ROAD CLOSED sign and the large tractor without the slightest hesitation. She stays concentrated on the

pavement, a newfound confidence sweeping over her like after all these hours of work, one of the last pieces of the puzzle may have finally found its proper place.

She ascends the steep road carefully, going only fifteen miles per hour, her tires sliding once again over endless sheets of ice, Isabelle struggling to keep her car steady, but then, a minute later, the Mexican restaurant appears and she catches a gasp in her throat. The parking lot is abandoned, left to rot in this fierce winter weather—that is, except for Charlie’s car parked near the building’s entrance.

“Holy shit,” she says.

Isabelle keeps slowing down, bit by bit, the lack of stars in the sky sending a gentle but noticeable shiver through her body. She stops in front of Charlie’s car and turns off her ignition. Silence permeates the vehicle. She can only hear her own breathing.

She grabs her video camera, which she hopes won’t freeze in the bitter cold, and pulls out its bag from the backseat. She replaces the battery one last time, just to be safe, and double-checks the footage remaining on her HD card. Seventy minutes. More than enough.

Isabelle turns on the camera’s night vision and aims the lens at Charlie’s vehicle, which is gloomy and stagnant, no sign of life anywhere. She doesn’t dare pull on any of the door handles and cause an alarm to go off; she keeps her right eye pressed to the viewfinder and zooms the camera through the windshield, then the side windows. The night vision illuminates the interior in all its glory, showing a mass of trash in the backseat, plus some stains on the armrest console and glove compartment, but there’s no Jack, no Charlie, no Lisa. Isabelle steps to her left and surveys the open parking lot, listening intently for the longest time. Nothing. Nobody’s here.

She approaches the side of the restaurant next, feeling more and more like a detective with each step she takes. She finds a window and looks inside. The night vision reveals a few

empty tables, chairs stacked against a back wall, but no people inside. She turns around, and finally, after a lifetime tonight of holding the camera without recording a single frame, she presses the red button and films an establishing shot of the restaurant, panning from left to right, then right to left, then zooming in on the letters that tower over the front door: ABEL'S.

She lowers the camera. Presses it against her right knee. She has no idea where this shot would go in her documentary, but this place was obviously important to her brother, and still is. It's where he met up with Charlie at least once before tonight. Maybe Jack fell in love with him inside this restaurant, and all Isabelle wishes is that she could have been there to witness it, a rare moment of Jack in pure bliss, in his essence. If she could have sneaked one dynamic shot of Jack and Charlie on their date, both of them tucked away in a corner booth of the restaurant, flirting and laughing, maybe sneaking a kiss, she wouldn't have to be suffering in this wretched cold in the dead of night, the deadline for her film mere hours away.

She walks to the north end of the parking lot, wanting so much to scream Jack's name at the top of her lungs as she nears a three-foot-tall fence covered in snow. She follows the lengthy fence to the left, stepping over rocks and boulders, her hand still clutched firmly against her camera, when she notices something on the fence's opposite side. She might not have thought to go down the steep hill and investigate where it leads, but she leans closer against the fence and stares at the familiar indentations in the snow.

Footprints. So many footprints.

Isabelle shoves the camera against her chest as she climbs over the fence and stops in front of the path. She looks through the camera's viewfinder again, tries to see through the night vision if there's any activity at the hill's bottom, any flashlights, any movement. Again, nothing.

She walks down the trail anyway, no better ideas of what to do or where to go at the moment, and the more she descends the hill, especially after her first slip that promptly sends her onto her ass, Isabelle starts to feel a strange sense of unease, like something is wrong, with her being here, with her brother being somewhere close by. She shakes out her arms, moves past the ill feeling, and even picks up speed, running the last stretch of the hill.

When she reaches the bottom, she glances back at the parking lot. It's so high up she can barely see the restaurant, and the two vehicles are no longer visible. She ducks under a tree branch, steps over a series of large bushes, and then, at the trail's end, she sees it in all its winter glory: a creepy, abandoned playground.

Isabelle steps up to a teeter-totter and brushes away part of the snow, enough to reveal the color green chipped away in small patches along the decaying wood. She moves toward a metal slide, which also appears to be dying, a huge chunk of it missing from the bottom left side, like someone tore it apart long ago.

She turns around and records a wide shot of the playground, of the swings on the right side, of the teeter-totter still moving up and down from when she last touched it. She walks forward, keeping her camera rolling, and when she points the device down, the light catches an animal's paw buried beneath the snow. At first she thinks it might be real, like something readying an attack on a poor, freezing documentary filmmaker, but she tugs her hand against the paw and pulls it up to reveal no fierce animal of any kind, only an old, forgotten teddy bear.

She films the bear, first as a medium shot, and then when she goes in for the close-up, she sees through the viewfinder something as chilling as the early morning air. The bear's button eyes have been snatched away, dark holes in their places. She shines her light on the bear's face for the longest time, until she tosses it aside and returns her focus to the matter at hand.

Isabelle points her camera toward the trees that circle the playground and marches forward, all the way up to the swings, one of which has snapped and is now dangling toward the ground. Everything is decay out here, waste and death. Why, of all places, would Jack have come down here? What possible meaning could this playground have for him and Charlie?

She's about ready to walk back up the hill, thinking she made a wrong turn somewhere and that her brother is far away from this playground of ghosts and faded laughter, when she shines the light past the swings, between two large trees, and sees more footprints.

Isabelle trudges forward, her face too numb to imagine, but her body not weak in the least, only becoming stronger with each new step she takes. She stops at a fresh footprint and shines the light along a new trail that's been made, one that goes deep into the forest.

She can still turn around, she absolutely can. No one would fault her for it either.

“Screw that,” she says.

Isabelle zips up her jacket all the way to its top and keeps her camera rolling as she follows more footprints into the ominous darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Charlie

When he first stepped foot onto the playground, Charlie stopped, he couldn't move. Lisa and Jack kept moving past the swings, Lisa's eyes still glued to his back as she kept the gun pointed at him. The playground looked exactly the same, everything still in its proper place, the snow cover making the surrounding area appear even more romantic and ideal than the place looked in August. Charlie certainly thought about dropping Jack next to that metallic slide and striking the heavy blade over his head a second time, giving his assaulter the justice he deserved in the exact place he wronged Charlie, but, alas, nothing could be done to Jack at the playground because it was way too close to the parking lot, too close to where someone could see them.

So he took in a few careful breaths, then gripped the shovel even tighter and continued to follow Lisa and Jack beyond the playground, deeper into the woods, and it's not for another ten minutes, until they've disappeared among endless massive, sky-high trees that Charlie points the flashlight sideways and finally sees something out of the ordinary on his right: a frozen lake.

"How much longer?" Jack asks, his arms trembling, his voice weaker. "It's freezing out here."

"Oh, is it too cold for you?" Lisa asks, her voice perfectly strong. "I'm sorry, Jacky boy. Would you like me to go back to the car and get you a blanket?"

Charlie stays quiet behind them, waiting for Jack to shove an elbow into Lisa's face, or at least dart her an angry look for that sarcastic comment, but instead he stops walking, all of a sudden, and drops to his knees.

Lisa moves back a step. "What are you doing?"

"Just... get on with it," Jack says. "Get it over with. Whatever you have to do."

“Really? You’re not gonna fight for your life, Jack?” She lowers the gun to her side. “Figures. All the horrible things you’ve done. All the lives you’ve ruined, including my best friend’s. You’re so far gone that you can’t even beg for your own life...”

“I said, do what you have to do!” Jack shouts, turning his head toward Lisa, spit leaking out of his mouth. “I’m sick of this shit, understand? I didn’t do anything wrong. You’re the ones making the mistake.”

Lisa kicks a rock out in front of her, not changing her facial expression in the slightest. “Do you ever actually believe the words that come out of your mouth? I’m curious.”

“Go to Hell.”

Lisa begins to snicker, tapping the gun fast against her right hip. “There he is. There’s the Jack I’ve heard so much about. You know, I don’t really mind going to Hell as long as I get the chance to see you there, too. See you suffering.”

“Your friend’s a goddamn psycho, Charlie,” Jack says, looking over his right shoulder. “Whoever this girl is, she’s not well.”

“Shut up, Jack,” Charlie says, moving over to Lisa’s side, his arm brushing up against hers. “Just shut up for once in your pitiful life.”

Lisa grins, and says, “You tell him, Charlie.”

Silence ensues after that. Jack stays put on the ground, breathing heavily. Lisa points the gun forward again, rests her index finger against the trigger. Is she really going to pull it? Does she actually have the guts to kill another human being? He didn’t think she did, in the car, on the long walk, but now he’s not so sure. Charlie can stop her. He can rip the gun away and put an end to all of this.

Lisa snickers, then pushes the gun to the back of Jack’s head. “Say your prayers, Jack.”

“No,” he says. “Oh, no. Please. *Please.*”

“Please, what? You don’t get to beg. You lost that right when you took Charlie out to dinner and proceeded to...” Her voice drifts. She takes a step back, and she laughs, a single spirited guffaw that echoes in every direction, then points the gun down toward Jack’s pants. “What is that? Is that... what I think it is?”

Charlie doesn’t know what the hell she’s talking about, but then he moves a little closer and he sees it: Jack’s urinating in his jeans.

“You pissed your pants!” Lisa shouts. “Oh my God, that’s so *cute.*”

Jack dips his head, the urine now soaking through the snow beneath him, and begins to cry, loudly, appearing as if he might collapse to his side.

“And now he’s crying,” Lisa adds. “Wouldn’t you know it. The rapist is a little goddamned crybaby—”

“Leese,” Charlie says.

“What?”

“It’s time.”

“I know it is.” She nods, and raises the gun again. “Trust me, I know.”

“No. I mean... it’s time to walk away.”

She looks at Charlie. Narrows her eyes, like he’s the one who’s gone mad and not her.

“What did you say?”

“Come on. This has gone far enough. We’ve scared him half to death, he pissed his pants, he’s humiliated.” He stares at his friend, hoping his words can resonate in some way. “It’s *enough.* Put the gun away, and let’s get the hell out of here.”

“No.” She shakes her head.

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t you chicken out on me now. Don’t you dare. We’re in too deep now, Charlie. We let him go free, and it’s over, for both of us.”

Jack’s sobs grow louder, his breathing heavier. He finally says, “I won’t say a word to anyone, I swear....”

“Shut up!” Lisa screams at Jack. “Was I talking to you?”

“I just... I wanted...”

“I said, shut up, you bastard! You manipulative son of a bitch!” She points the gun at him yet again.

Charlie breathes in, breathes out, trying to stay calm as he lets a rare moment of silence pass. He keeps his focus on his friend. “What has gotten into you? What are you *doing*?”

“I’m doing what needs to be done,” she says, softly.

“But why? Jack didn’t do anything to you—”

“Of course he did.” She turns her body toward Charlie’s. “The guy’s name might not have been Jack, I’ll give you that. It might have been Todd.”

“Todd?” Charlie asks, trying to follow her logic. “That guy you broke up with?”

“Uh-huh. And it might have been Seth, too, my sophomore year. You thought you had your secrets, Charlie? Oh, please. You don’t know the half of what I’ve been through. Just because I’m a little bigger than all the other girls doesn’t mean guys haven’t had their way with me, no matter how many times... I said no.”

Charlie’s face is so numb he can’t feel the tears trickling down his cheeks. Rage overcomes him from top to bottom, even as Lisa stays stone-faced to his left. “Oh my God, why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“The same reason you didn’t. Because there’s so much shame. So much anger. But I really, really thought things could be different for you, Charlie. I thought you might actually find a guy who cares about you...”

He hugs her, he doesn’t know what else he can do. He pushes his forehead against her cheek, wraps his arms around her waist, the shovel dangling loosely from his fingers. He maintains a close eye on Jack, to make sure he’s not moving, then waits for Lisa to bring the gun down, so she can hug him back, or maybe, if he’s lucky, give up this violent mission of hers and start walking toward the parking lot.

Lisa kisses Charlie on his forehead, a long kiss that doesn’t break for at least five seconds, until she brings her gaze to Jack again and says, “It would be my honor to shoot you, Jack, but here’s the deal.” She lowers her friend’s right arm, then hands him the gun at the same time she yanks the shovel from his grasp. “Charlie’s right about one thing. This isn’t my battle, between me and you. It never has been.”

And with that, Lisa walks up to Jack and strikes the shovel’s blade on top of his head.

He lets out a pained, wimpy grunt and falls to his left side, everything from his chest up immediately trembling. He pushes his fists into the snow, hangs his head, keeps crying full-speed. Lisa hit him hard, but not hard enough to knock him out.

She taps the shovel against her side and grins at Charlie. “It’s *your* battle now. Do it. Shoot the bastard.”

“No,” he says.

“No? Seriously? Take a minute. Think about what he did to you. This is your chance... to do what’s right.”

“I told you, Leese. I already told you. This has gone on...”

“...far enough. Yeah, yeah. I know. But are you noticing something, Charlie?”

“What?”

She nods at his weapon, a grotesque grin on her face. “You haven’t dropped the gun.”

He looks at it. Really analyzes it for the first time tonight. His index finger brushes against the trigger.

“I’m gonna leave you alone for a minute,” Lisa says. “Let you consider your options. Remember, Charlie. It’s not only you he raped. He’s done this to other guys, and he’ll keep doing it, no matter how much we scare him, no matter how much we think he learned his lesson. He’s not gonna change unless you put an end to this, once and for all.”

Lisa shrugs, keeps her eyes on Charlie for a few more seconds, then turns around and descends a steep, miniature hill. She walks to a circular plot of land surrounded by trees at least twenty yards away, waving the shovel back and forth through the air, and soon she starts to dig away the heavy snow, launching huge chunks of it over her shoulder and against a wide tree trunk behind her. The shovel hits dirt about ten seconds later, and she begins clearing that away next. Charlie stands watching her the entire time, the gun remaining atop his palm. She’s digging Jack’s grave.

He bites down on his bottom lip as soon as he darts his eyes at the gun again. Jack is crying even harder now, his shoulders moving up and down, all his weight pressed against his legs. Charlie sets the flashlight on the ground and then moves forward, his heartbeat increasing with every step. He stops directly behind Jack, then holds the gun proper, settles his index finger over the trigger, in the exact ways he learned at the firing range with his dad four long years ago. It feels good to point the gun at Jack, natural even, considering all the pain the guy’s caused, the immense anger, the frustrated feeling that nothing could ever be done. Well, something can be

done, the solution is right here at his fingertips, and Charlie suddenly questions if Lisa's been right all along.

The stench of the urine nips at his nostrils. Jack's sobs grow louder. Charlie glances at Lisa, who's still digging away at the dirt, her eyes constantly darting toward his like she's patiently waiting to hear a blast from the gun.

Charlie raises the weapon higher, shuts his right eye, considers the weight of what pulling the trigger would mean in this moment, and for the rest of his life.

His phone vibrates, for the first time since he left the party, but Charlie doesn't bother looking at the phone, or even glancing at his pocket, his focus remaining on Jack and the matter at hand. Charlie begins breathing faster, his mouth dry and his lips cracking, as he moves the aim of the gun from Jack's mid-section to Jack's head.

"What the hell are you doing?" he hears Lisa shout, her crazed digging coming to an abrupt halt. "Stop wasting time and shoot the son of a bitch!"

Her digging continues, as Charlie lowers his arms slightly. Should he pull the trigger? After all this trepidation, should he just do it? A tear trickles down his nose, and he didn't even know he was still crying. He smashes his lips together, breathes faster, tugs his index finger lightly against the trigger. He almost pulls it, ready and willing to fall backward from the blast, when Jack suddenly turns around and faces him.

Charlie keeps the gun pointed at him reluctantly, Jack's face such a mess of cuts and tears and stains and wounds that Charlie struggles to even look at it.

"Please..." he whispers.

"Stop. Don't look at me. You don't get to look at me."

Jack nods, and as soon as he dips his head, more sobbing commences, his eyes now closed, his mouth opened exceedingly wide. “I am so, so sorry... about *everything*...”

“Shut up,” Charlie says, trying to maintain his composure. “Stop talking.”

“I never wanted any of this to happen. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Charlie takes a deep breath, struggling to control his own tears. “I think it’s too late. You could’ve treated me with respect. You could have had a shred of decency.”

“I’m sick.” He looks back at Charlie, no sign of viciousness in Jack’s eyes, not anymore. “I’m sick... in the head... in my *heart*...”

“Of course you’re sick. Every guy on your Grindr feed is eighteen or under. But that’s the thing, Jack. It’s not just that you have a thing for young boys. You have a thing for ripping off their clothes without their consent. For manipulating them into thinking you actually give a shit about who they are, about what they want, before you grab them by the throat and push them to the ground and take it all away—”

“You’re right,” Jack interrupts, his voice louder. “I agree. I’m a monster.”

Charlie’s phone vibrates a second time. He bumps his left hand against his pocket, to make it stop. “Say that again,” he says, his eyes burned into Jack’s.

“I’m a monster,” Jack repeats. “But that doesn’t mean you have to kill me.”

“How many?”

“How many what?”

Charlie hears the shovel land in the dirt behind him, and footsteps coming near him, but he doesn’t pay attention to the noise, instead stays concentrated on Jack’s bloodshot eyes. He leans forward, brings the gun even closer to Jack’s face. “How many other guys have you raped besides me?”

“What? I... I don’t—”

“Give me a number.”

“Please,” Jack says again. “You don’t have to do this. I’ll go to a clinic. I’ll get better—”

Lisa appears at Charlie’s right, pounds her fist against his shoulder, and says, “That’s it, you had your chance. Give me the gun, Charlie.”

He doesn’t budge. Doesn’t look away from Jack. “What? Why?”

“Because you’re still *talking!* Jack is putting on a performance, don’t you see it? The fake tears. The pleading. The pissing. He’s going to do and say anything he can to make you put the gun down.” She snatches the weapon away from Charlie, then points it at Jack’s face. “Go finish digging. That’s your job now.”

“But...” He moves backward a step, as his phone vibrates a third time.

“Go. Grab the shovel. And look away, Charlie. Please... look away.”

She pushes Charlie hard, and he stumbles back, not willing to keep walking at first, but when Lisa waves the gun toward him momentarily and not at Jack, he finally follows her directions without hesitation. He walks over the flashlight, steps past half a dozen trees and goes down the hill to find the shovel and the ditch. He glances over his left shoulder, to see Lisa point the gun at Jack’s face the same way Charlie did. He’s not going to look away like she suggested. If Jack’s about to die, he can’t not watch. He brings his hands inside his pockets and holds his breath, as Lisa walks closer to the man he hates, the man he hated, the man he will always hate with everything in his heart. She leans in, says a few words to him Charlie can’t possibly hear. Jack starts saying something to her too—when Charlie’s phone vibrates a fourth time.

Charlie finally yanks the phone out of his pocket and looks down. He has two texts from Sebastian, sent in the last few minutes. The first is a short line of text: *Can’t sleep. Thinking of u.*

The second is a picture of the two of them taken at the party, Charlie and Sebastian cuddled up next to each other on the blue beanie bag. Both of them smiling at the camera, so happily, so genuinely, Sebastian's arm draped over Charlie's shoulder. Charlie only looks at the picture briefly, but in the midst of all this chaos and uncertainty, there's something about the picture, about Charlie's grin and Sebastian's tender embrace, that gives him the warmest feeling. He powers off the phone, and steps toward his friend.

"Lisa. Stop."

She looks at Charlie. "What?"

"Give me the gun. We're not going to kill him."

"Oh, don't you start with that again—"

"Let's just leave him here." He's about halfway to Lisa now, up past the smallest hill, Jack still in tears underneath her, Lisa's face taking on the blankest of expressions. "We've hurt him enough."

"And then what?" Lisa asks. "You think he'll just forget this ever happened?"

"I will!" Jack shouts from under her. "I promise!"

"Shut up!" she screams at Jack, then kicks him hard, in the face. He tumbles over, onto his back.

Charlie stops, about ten yards away from her. "Lisa, put the gun down."

"No," she says. "*No*. I'm killing him. I'm putting the monster down."

"But this is what I want—"

"I don't care what you want. Get back to the ditch, damn it! Keep digging!"

"*No*." He moves closer. And closer. He has to get to the gun. "I know you hate his guts, Leese. I hate them, too."

Tears well up in her eyes, as she continues to keep a tight grip against the gun, pointing it back at Jack's face. "We can't let him go. He raped you, Charlie. This guy raped my best friend, and it's my fault, it's my fault you two even *met*..."

Charlie takes another step toward her. He's almost within reach of the gun.

"He has to die," Lisa says, shaking her head, shoving her index finger against the trigger, her tears streaming, her whole body shaking. "This guy has to pay for what he did to y—"

Jack jumps to his feet, suddenly, before she can finish her sentence. For the longest time, he stayed put on the ground, defeated, crying, but he's not crying now.

He lunges toward Lisa, and it's then, and only then, Charlie notices Jack's hands have broken free of the duct tape, and a tiny butter knife, the one with the blue handle, the one that's been in the back of his car for the longest time, drops from Jack's fingers and lands in the snow.

"Oh, shit!" Charlie screams. "*Leese, look out!*"

Lisa turns in Jack's direction fast, but it's not fast enough.

Jack snatches the gun out of her grasp and pounds his left fist against her chest, and before Lisa has a chance to react to his powerful hit, even has a chance to take another breath, Jack cocks the gun and shoots her in the head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Charlie

The light disappears from her eyes, and everything goes quiet.

Lisa takes one more breath, as a line of blood trickles down her right cheek. She doesn't look toward Charlie, only stares forward into nothingness, before she collapses to the snow.

"Lisa?" Charlie whispers, and then he yells it: "*Lisa!*"

He watches his best friend go completely still on the ground, screaming her name over and over until Jack appears to Charlie's right and kicks him in the stomach.

The sudden movement jolts Charlie back, all the way against the closest tree, and he doubles over instantly from sharp, shooting pain, a colossal moan thundering across the forest.

Jack steps toward Charlie, as he slowly lowers the gun. "Jeez. That took a turn, didn't it?"

He punches Charlie in the face, his knuckles connecting with Charlie's left temple.

Charlie manages to take a breath, his hands not nearly fast enough to have stopped the blow, and he swallows some blood in his mouth, before Jack strikes his fist across his face a second time, his knuckles this time striking Charlie's nose.

The immense force of the second hit causes Charlie to fall to his knees, as everything around him goes completely black. He can already feel the blood gushing from his nostrils, the red geyser landing on his chin and the upper part of his jacket and shirt, but it's not like it matters anymore, he can't see a thing, and soon he'll feel nothing when Jack puts a bullet in his head, the same way he did to Lisa.

But then Charlie blinks, and Jack comes back into focus, now with his knees pressed against Charlie's legs. Jack's face is so different, like one of a ferocious animal, his eyes tightening and his cheeks reddening and his teeth chattering beyond measure. Jack stares at

Charlie for the longest time, no more hitting, no more violence, and then he leans his head closer, like he's trying to smell Charlie's sweaty odor.

"I've got you," Jack whispers.

Charlie's head hurts so much he can barely think. He glances backward, for a weapon. The shovel is too far away, over by the dirt, but something else appears.

"I don't think so," Charlie says. He reaches back as far as he can, latches hold of the aluminum flashlight, then slams it down against Jack's kneecap.

Jack lets out a loud, aggravated groan, and when he stumbles briefly to the side, Charlie manages to slip out from under him. He crawls toward the shovel, hoping Jack will stay down, maybe apologize and ask for forgiveness, but this is Jack, the one who pretended to be the man of his dreams. The one who pushed him to the ground and raped him and then pretended like the act was consensual. The one who pissed his pants and cried like a child and begged for forgiveness, like he might have had a soul, like he wasn't, in the end, a total psycho.

But his true colors have been revealed, the nightmare is here to stay, and Charlie can't deny it, despite his momentary escape: Jack still has the gun.

Charlie keeps trudging forward toward the ditch, and by the time he looks behind him, Jack is no longer on the ground, he is on his feet, charging forward, his left hand holding the gun and his right hand clenched into a pulsating fist.

"I'm coming for you, Charlie..."

"No," Charlie says. He finds the ditch. Reaches his hand for the shovel. "Get away from me, Jack!"

Jack drops back down and pins Charlie's legs against the muddy snow a second time. "Not until you apologize."

Charlie feels the gun's nozzle press against his lower back, Jack clearly ready to blow a hole through his chest, but Charlie isn't stopping, he's not giving up: he slams his hand down, grabs the shovel's handle, and swings it up over his head, toward Jack's face.

It makes contact, a loud pop sound echoing through the woods as the blade collides across Jack's chin. But the hit doesn't seem to faze Jack one bit; he leans down, snatches the shovel away, darts his right arm under Charlie, and flips him onto his back. He lets silence reign for the longest time, like he's enjoying every second of this overdue showdown, before he strikes the blade against Charlie's crotch with savage force.

Charlie's body reacts to a pain so outrageous, so unimaginable, he can't even find the urge to scream. A fierce and fiery stinging sensation rages through his groin, up his legs, all the way to his heart. Tears erupt from his eyes, and then he lets out the softest whimper. He attempts one more reach for the shovel, but Jack throws it to the ground behind him and points the gun at Charlie's head.

"You're a fighter," Jack says. "I'll give you that."

Charlie releases a series of loud coughs, before he turns to his side, points in the distance, and mutters, "You... you killed her..."

"What was that?" Jack asks. "You're gonna have to speak a little louder—"

"You killed my best friend. You *murdered* my friend."

"I did?" Jack glances behind him, stares at the top of the hill for a moment, then shrugs. "Oh. Right. Well, sorry to say, the bitch deserved it." He licks his lips, and turns to Charlie. "And so do you. Of all the guys I've had my fun with, you turned out to be the biggest disappointment."

"Jack. Please..."

“What?”

“You don’t have to do this.”

“Do what?” Jack presses his foot against Charlie’s chest.

“You don’t have to kill me.”

He releases a low and sinister chuckle. “It’s too late. I mean, look behind you. Your friend’s already dug a ditch, she dug your grave. We don’t want to let all that hard work go to waste, do we?”

Charlie turns his head, catches sight of the shovel behind Jack, and he reaches his left hand toward it, in a quick move, a surprise move, but then Jack presses his foot down even harder and says, “Your fingers scrape that shovel, and I will shoot you in the head, just like I did to that insane friend of yours.”

Charlie brings his hand back to his side. “So? What’s stopping you?” Charlie asks, keeping his eyes locked on Jack’s as he considers how to make a run for it.

“What’s stopping me?”

“Yeah. Why don’t you just pull the trigger and stop acting all tough?”

He keeps smiling, like this is a moment of total bliss, not pain, not agony. “Because. You got to have your fun the last few hours. Why can’t I have mine? I could’ve made a run for it back at that cemetery. I could’ve escaped so easily. But your friend pointed that gun at me, and I thought, okay, sure... let’s see where she takes this. Let’s see what the two of you are really made of. Of course it turned out you’re only made of incompetence, and stupidity. You should’ve shot me, Charlie, when you had the chance—”

“Oh, shut your mouth. I’m so tired of your bullshit. If you’re going to shoot me, Jack, then do it. But don’t think for one second you’re gonna get away with this.” Charlie keeps his

focus on Jack's wide, blood-shot eyes, the same time he keeps the gun in his field of vision. He has one idea left, one more crazy act left to try.

"That's where you're wrong," Jack says. "I'm not only gonna get away with this. I'm gonna enjoy killing you, and I'm gonna enjoying burying you in the ground, too. Possibly even more than that night I went inside of you..." He lets free another chuckle, his eyes flashing up toward the sky. "God, that might have been the deepest I've ever gone inside a guy, and trust me, Charlie, I've gone *deep*—"

Charlie makes a grab for the gun, fast, and he manages to touch it, his index and middle fingers quickly grazing the nozzle, before Jack yanks the gun above his head and kicks Charlie's hand away.

"Nice try," Jack says. "Okay, you've had your fun. You've done your best. But it's getting really, really cold out here, and I don't know about you, but... I want to go home." He cocks the gun one more time and rests his finger on the trigger. "Any last words?"

Charlie looks up at Jack's happy, horrid face, but only for a second, before something catches his eye. He thought he heard something a few seconds ago, a branch or a twig breaking in the distance, and now he sees movement, deep in the shadows behind Jack.

"Actually, yeah," Charlie says, as a strangely unsettling and yet also greatly promising color illuminates the darkness: a blinking red dot penetrates through the trees. "I think... there's someone behind you."

"Sure there is," Jack says. "I'm not falling for—"

Another twig breaks, and this one's even louder, because it shuts up Jack immediately, his mouth hanging open, his eyes widening.

He spins around. "Hey! What was that! Is someone there?"

Charlie leans against his left arm, narrows his eyes, tries to see the person across the way. He catches the flash of a girl's dreadlocks.

"Is that Lisa?" Jack asks, lowering his head. He takes a step forward. "You're alive? Impossible. That's *impossible!*"

He screams into the night, aims the gun at the blinking red dot, and fires.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Isabelle

Isabelle drops her camera in the snow and stumbles back a step. The blow is so immediate she can't release her next breath. There's no pain at first, only shock. Her mouth hangs open, tears already spilling onto her cheeks, as she peers down at the blood on the left side of her abdomen, and only then does colossal pain overtake her from every angle.

She brings her hand to the wound and holds it there, as she brings her gaze back to her brother. Jack is on the move, still has the gun pointed her way, and his face takes on a whole new dimension of disarray as soon as he stops a few feet before her. His eyes couldn't be open any wider, his breathing the complete opposite of Isabelle's—fast and volatile, like he's trying and failing to cough something irregular out of his throat.

He lowers the gun, only slightly, and says, "*Izzy?*"

She falls onto the snow, her hands starting to tremble, everything in her line of vision becoming darker, unfocused. She keeps her hand pressed against the bullet wound, more blood seeping out, as she takes a deep breath and continues shaking even more.

Jack pushes her hand away and inspects the wound on the side of her chest. He didn't hit the center of her abdomen, or her heart, but she's still bleeding profusely.

"*Izzy*, what are you doing here?" he asks.

He glances back at Charlie, who's up on his feet, a large shovel in his hands. He's already moving fast, not toward him and Isabelle, but toward Lisa up the hill.

"I was just..." Isabelle says, "I was trying to make my movie..."

Jack doesn't respond to her, doesn't even look in her direction. His focus remains on Charlie up ahead, who's now illuminated by the flashlight. He's dialing a number on his phone.

Isabelle reaches up and grabs her brother's hand. "Jack."

"What?"

"You killed that girl. You shot her. I saw it."

Jack finally locks his eyes back on hers. "So?" he asks, and then his voice deepens when he adds, "I was defending myself. It was her fault, not mine."

"I'm not sure that matters whose fault it was. I heard what she said. Please tell me it's not true, about Charlie. Did you really rape him? Did you actually do that?"

He doesn't blink. "Maybe. What's it to you?"

She removes her hand from his and slaps him across the face, with the little energy she has left, before she slumps down to her right side. She can't look at her brother for another second. "Oh my God. You're disgusting. Get away from me."

"Isabelle..." He grabs her arm and pulls her back toward him. "Let me help you. Let me try to stop the bleeding—"

"I said, *get away from me!*" Her shout echoes for the longest time. Isabelle keeps her focus on the darkness ahead, trying desperately not to crumble into a sobbing mess. Her camera is about five feet away, upside-down in the snow.

"Fine," Jack says. "*Whatever.*" He stands up, shoves the gun against his chest, and starts walking toward the hill. "I have to get Charlie, anyway..."

Isabelle turns back toward her brother and says, with only a modicum of strength, "Good luck. My money's on you getting your ass kicked."

Jack stops. Makes a loud clucking sound with his tongue.

He returns to his sister's side and shoves his foot against her wound. She lets out a pained, vicious scream, her fists clenching, her knees buckling. A series of quiet whimpers follow when he finally lifts his foot back up.

“Go ahead. Bleed to death,” he says. “You were never my sister, anyway.”

“Are you... are you serious?”

“*Dead* serious.” His lips curl into a big, grotesque smile. “You see that? You see what I did there?”

She brings her arm across her chest, as she manages to sit back up. She takes in Jack's bruised face, all the dry blood, the bluish gash on his forehead. “It was you, wasn't it?”

“Excuse me?”

“I never let myself think it... until night. But now it makes total sense. Now it seems almost crazy nobody suggested it before—”

“What the hell are you going on about?” Jack asks.

“You were there with Dad, on that hike in Hawaii. You pushed him off the cliff, didn't you? You killed our father.”

He doesn't say anything. Doesn't even change his expression. He stares blankly at Isabelle, for five seconds, at least, until he says, in a cold and modulated voice: “Of course I killed him. That guy was an asshole.”

Jack chuckles, like he just told another joke, and then, suddenly, he points the gun at Isabelle, long enough for her to think he might actually shoot her dead too.

But he doesn't. Jack turns around and runs to the top of the small hill ahead, swiftly disappearing into the night.

Isabelle sits up even straighter the second he's gone, and she tries to stand but can't, her wound throbbing with unimaginable pain. She knows she can't just lay here, that she'll never survive if she stays put, so she snatches hold of her camera and starts to crawl toward the hill.

When she reaches the top of it, two minutes later, or maybe three, she has no idea, Isabelle manages to pick speed, her wound that started as a sudden blow now turning into a gnawing, dull ache, everything from her head to her feet transforming into a flu-like misery.

Isabelle couldn't believe it when she saw it: Lisa standing over Jack with a gun in her hand, Charlie nearby trying to convince her to put it down. She kept her camera rolling, the night vision filter catching every gesture and movement of the three bodies before her, even though every fiber in her being demanded she intervene. She almost did, almost ran forward to save her brother's life—when he snatched the gun away from Lisa and shot her in the face. Isabelle kept filming, trying with great difficulty to keep the camera steady, as she shoved her hand over her mouth and watched Jack step past Lisa like she was nothing, like she was merely an animal he'd been hunting for sport. Enough trees littered the forest to keep her hidden as she filmed Jack and Charlie's ensuing conversation, her camera zoomed in, the night vision filter at its brightest setting as she panned back and forth between the two like it was a shot out of a Hollywood action movie. For a maker of documentaries, everything Isabelle was capturing didn't feel real, with the snow and the gun and the knife and the blood, and her brother going bat-shit on a guy she actually knew from school. She still wanted to step in, aware she'd never forgive herself if she watched Charlie get put down the same way Lisa was silenced atop the hill, but Isabelle remained crouched behind the trees hoping her brother might come to his senses and show, ultimately, a sliver of humanity. She was thinking a lot in those strained, nauseating seconds,

hearing her brother be cruel and crass in ways she never could have expected. She had no idea what Jack was capable of. She certainly didn't think he'd shoot *her*, and then leave her for dead.

Isabelle crawls all the way up to Lisa, stopping as soon as she is within arm's reach. She lets go of her camera again, catches her breath, keeps still for a few seconds, as she peers at Lisa's pale, rigid face. There's blood everywhere, on her cheeks and neck, and on the snow. She's not moving, not breathing. Lisa's gone.

Isabelle grabs her hand anyway, it's all she can do. "I'm here, Lisa. I've got you, all right? I've got you. I've got you..."

She rests the back of her head against Lisa's chest, and as she stares up into the darkness, Isabelle feels something land on with her face that is so ill timed she manages a muffled laugh.

"Seriously?" she whispers.

Snowflakes start falling from the sky.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Charlie

Charlie doesn't stop running through all the heavy snow and the sudden whirlwind snowfall until he nears the south end of that frozen lake. He's called the police by now, given his location, reported everything Jack's done to Lisa, and to Isabelle, his sister—that girl *is* his sister. The reality that he spent the last four months in a class with Jack's younger sibling would send him into a frenzy if he already didn't have so much chaos in his mind, so much cold pummeling every inch of his body. He needs to stay calm and get back to the parking lot, get inside his car and lock the doors, but he collides with the side of a tree and goes to catch his breath, when his stomach wreaks havoc from out of nowhere and he vomits into the snow.

He falls to his knees, the pain of the runny puke escaping his throat almost too much for him to handle, but he retches the last of it, and he wipes his lips with his frozen hand. He stands back up, so exhausted, so ready to call it quits right now and collapse behind a nearby bush and hope Jack won't ever find him, but his best friend's been killed and he might be next and so Charlie keeps moving, looping his way around the lake as he tries to remember the direction to go in. He reaches the other side of it, stops for another breath, still some remnants from that warm vomit swishing back and forth near the top of his throat. He sees a series of four hulking evergreens in the distance, ones he's sure he passed awhile back, and so he starts walking toward them, the snow seemingly deeper in these part of the woods than anywhere else because each step is an effort, his legs nearly disappearing under the thick blanket of white. Suddenly, he hears something behind him: deep, frenetic breaths. He continues forward, a little faster, trying to concentrate, not daring to look behind him, when something takes a bite out of his left ear.

He comes to a stop, nearly falls to his side, the pain not registering until the loud echo of the bullet whizzes past his face. Charlie ducks his head, and slams his hand against his ear, and when he brings it down, his palm is smeared with fresh blood. He opens his mouth to scream, when a second bullet zooms past the top of his head, and Charlie drops to the snow.

“Oh *shit*.”

His arms sink down into the white and so does his chin as he frantically darts his eyes back, first seeing nothing, only the lake and the dozens of surrounding trees, but then Jack appears from behind a wide boulder only a few yards away, a fiery rage on his face, the gun pointed in front of him as he keeps his focus on Charlie. He manages to keep running in all this deep snow, but then Jack’s left foot collides with a log and he stumbles, long enough for Charlie to make his move.

Jack swings the gun back toward Charlie, his aim momentarily fractured from his misstep, but by the time he’s ready to fire again, Charlie leaps into the air and collides against Jack’s side, knocking him down to the snow. Charlie pounds his left elbow against Jack’s chest as he reaches for the gun, Jack keeping his grip on the weapon tight, and they start rolling back and forth, both fighting over it.

“Let go!” Jack shouts.

“Give me the gun!” Charlie puts all his weight on Jack as he inches himself forward, trying to snatch the weapon out of Jack’s fingers.

Jack spits in Charlie’s face, and then Charlie dips his head down, like he’s going to press his lips against Jack’s, but instead he secures his teeth around Jack’s puffy nose and bites down.

Jack releases a harrowing scream as Charlie keeps his teeth clenched against the fleshiest part of the nose like he has no intention of letting go, and when Charlie tastes the warm blood on his tongue, he yanks his head up and wrestles the gun away from Jack.

Charlie rolls to his left, again and again, Jack not budging as he presses his palm against his face, blood gushing everywhere. He starts muttering into his hand, but Charlie doesn't stop to hear a word he says and instead returns to his feet, with difficulty, his balance so hard to maintain as Jack's blood mixes in with the puke taste and he's almost forced to vomit again. He gets far enough away from Jack that he could take his one chance, aim the gun, pull the trigger, end this madness for good, but Charlie pushes aside the overwhelming desire to blow Jack's brains out and takes a few more strides forward, grips the gun not by its bottom but by its front nozzle, and launches it into the air with all the strength he has left, up and over two of the closest trees, the weapon landing at the center of the frozen lake.

Charlie manages a brief sigh of relief before Jack appears to his right and smashes his fist across the back of Charlie's head. A sharp pain radiates from his eyeballs to his upper chest as everything goes black for a scary second. Charlie turns around and tries to get away, but Jack swiftly wraps his arm around his neck, immediately breaking off his air supply.

"I don't know about you..." Jack whispers into Charlie's ear, before he bites his teeth against the ear a bullet grazed mere moments before, Charlie releasing a colossal scream of his own from the searing pain, "...but I'm getting really sick of these games!"

Everything goes out of focus for Charlie, all his adrenaline diminishing fast. He tries to wrestle himself free from Jack's grip, but he can't. He tries to swing his head to the side and then down, but that doesn't do anything. He clenches his right hand into a fist and tries to punch Jack

in the face, but the fist doesn't connect. He starts to lose feeling in his legs, and then his chest, like everything is breaking down in his body one part at a time.

"Please," Charlie says. "Please *stop*—"

"Just take it, Charlie. Do what you do best. Like you did that night. Take it like a man."

Charlie drops his arms back down to the snow, and in the few seconds of consciousness he has left, he starts scrambling his hands every which way, reaching something, anything. He's about to give up, Jack keeping his muscled arm shoved against his neck, when Charlie's fingers graze the top of something sharp. He clasps his hand around it and brings it up into the air, right before he swings his arm back and smashes the heavy rock against the top of Jack's head.

Charlie hears a low whimper from behind, then collapses into the snow, shoving his hands against his throat as he takes in a long, satisfying breath. He coughs, then spits out a mix of something red and yellow, but he doesn't stay put for long, is already turned around in a matter of seconds to see Jack on his back, another cut on his face, this time a huge gash in the upper part of his forehead.

"Son of a bitch," Jack says.

Jack sits up, looking in the wrong direction when some of the blood oozing from his forehead drips into his left eye, and Charlie's given enough time to approach Jack again, on his feet, towering over him now, and before Jack even has time to look at the man standing before him, Charlie strikes the rock across Jack's face a second time, the rock colliding with his jaw. More blood bubbles up inside Jack's mouth, as Charlie maintains his grip on the rock, its heavy weight and sharp edges making it the perfect weapon.

"Stop this!" Charlie shouts, still trying to catch his breath. "I don't want to fight you!"

Jack brings his arms down, and for a second Charlie thinks he's finally giving up, but then Jack lets out a revolting laugh and swings his leg into the air, the bottom of his foot connecting with Charlie's chin.

Charlie stumbles back a few steps, all the way until his back strikes the closest tree, everything from his waist up on fire, nausea setting in again even though Charlie has nothing left to throw up. He watches, helplessly, as Jack returns to his feet and latches his left hand against Charlie's throat and his right against Charlie's crotch, Charlie attempting one pathetic swing at Jack's side that barely collides with his hip.

Jack squeezes his right hand, and Charlie sticks out his tongue, gagging from Jack's tight grip. When he puts more pressure against his neck, Charlie's tongue goes back inside, and his head tilts back, his latest struggle trying to release another breath. He slams the rock against Jack's shoulder, this time with more force, but then it slips through Charlie's fingers and he's left with nothing to protect himself.

"How dare you do this to me," Jack says, his face an explosion of red, his bloodshot eyes peering deeply into Charlie's as he keeps him locked tight against the tree. "I barely even remember you. I barely even remember the sex. You think I raped you that night? Well, get over it. I was just trying to show you a good time."

Charlie strikes his fist against Jack's chest, but it doesn't faze him in the least. "I can't... I can't breathe..."

Jack's grin grows even bigger, and then he leans in close and whispers, "Don't be sad, Charlie. It's not as if you're the first one I've had to put down."

The words invade Charlie's ears, but they don't register at first, they can't. There's so much to unpack from that statement Charlie forces himself to stay alert, not drift into blackness.

“What did you say?” Charlie manages another breath, with difficulty.

Jack nudges his forehead against Charlie’s, and, their lips so close to touching, Jack says, “One or two have come after me. Or at least... they tried to. You know what? I say, let them. Cuz it’s all about the thrill for me, Charlie. It’s all about taking what’s mine.”

Jack drops his right hand from Charlie’s crotch, but only for a second, before he returns the hand under Charlie’s jacket and shirt and starts digging it toward his underwear.

“You’re psychotic,” Charlie says.

“Psychotic? No way. I’m just a guy who likes to have his fun. Who likes the sweet virgin boys best of all. If that makes me a psycho, then so be it.” Jack’s icy fingers slide across Charlie’s underwear, at the front, then at the back, as he sniffs Charlie’s hair. “Looks like the past is about to repeat itself. Oh, Charlie. Your mom would be so disappointed in you.”

Charlie’s eyes lock onto the dark sky, and all the falling snow. Everything goes dead inside. Jack remembered, he actually remembered that story he told about his mother. Suddenly Charlie doesn’t feel the pain anymore, can’t even feel Jack’s touch, as Charlie’s right hand in barely a second becomes a clenched, shaking fist.

As Jack opens his mouth wide and comes in close for a wet, unwelcome kiss, Charlie says, “Actually, Jack... I think she’d be cheering.”

Charlie pummels his fist at Jack’s Adam’s apple, with all his might, with the utmost precision, and Jack’s hands immediately fall away, from Charlie’s underwear, from Charlie’s neck, right before he emits a thunderous succession of deep, colossal coughs. Charlie leans down and catches his breath, keeping his gaze on Jack to make sure he doesn’t come near him again. He stumbles forward, trying to make a head start for the playground and the parking lot, Jack hopefully staying put for once, but of course he grabs Charlie’s arm and swings him back toward

him, and the next second Jack's hands are clamped around Charlie's throat as he charges forward, Charlie forced to come along with him, past more trees, at least ten long steps taken until Jack lowers his hands and strikes his fist across Charlie's left temple, sending him out of the snow, away from the forest, Charlie's back connecting hard with the edge of the frozen lake. Before Charlie can release a new scream of his own, Jack's on top of him, coughing uncontrollably but still in command, his eyes bright red, his face turning a dark shade of purple, as he punches Charlie a second time, across his mouth, then shoves his hand over Charlie's face and darts his thumb toward Charlie's left eye. Jack applies more and more pressure until Charlie sinks his teeth into Jack's index finger, and in the time Jack releases a sad yelp and flicks his hand in the air, Charlie sits up, a whole new force of strength overtaking him, and he swings his arm forward, his clenched fist not colliding with Jack's neck this time but his crotch, and as soon as Jack falls to his side, trying and failing to let out another breath, the sound of something cracking erupts from underneath. Charlie ignores the sound, stays focused on twisting himself around and getting away, the falling snow whipping around him, the safe ground past the lake within reach, and he pushes himself forward, tries to stand up, but he's not fast enough, a hand latching against his and bringing him back down. When Charlie's chest lands on the ice, more cracking ensues, a diagonal break in the ice directly to Charlie's left. Jack lets go of Charlie, but then he secures his palms to the back of Charlie's head and slams it against the ice, and he goes to do it a second time when Charlie rolls out from under him and punches Jack in the ribcage. Jack falls on top of Charlie, and the second Jack shoves his hands over Charlie's cheeks, Charlie does the same to Jack. Charlie pushes harder and harder, Jack opening his mouth wide, revealing bloody teeth, broken teeth, until Charlie lets go and collapses on his back. More cracking ensues, so much cracking, but Charlie ignores the troubling sounds underneath him and jumps on top of

Jack, lifting Jack's head enough to punch him in the face again and again, no plans to ever stop. Charlie catches sight of the handgun, about twenty yards away at the lake's center, but he doesn't go after it, he doesn't need to, he has Jack exactly where he wants him.

"This must be so hard for you," Charlie says. He grabs Jack by his hair and thrusts his head back down against the lake. "You had more strength than me, that night on the playground. But not now. Not anymore."

He slams Jack's head down one last time, and the cracking noise of the ice erupts loud and clear.

"You spineless bastard," Charlie continues. "I wanted you to be the guy for me. I could have loved you. With all my heart. And you know what? I think you could have loved me, too."

Jack finishes a long succession of coughs, before he looks up into Charlie's eyes, grabs him by the shoulders, not roughly, almost tenderly, and says, "Keep dreaming."

The ice breaks apart, in a complete circle around the two of them, and one second Charlie's sucking in a cold breath of the winter air, snowflakes landing on his tongue and his teeth, and the next he's rolling fast to his left, scrambling to reach the edge of the lake, the blizzard snow pummeling every inch of his body to the point where he can't see the water, or Jack, or the best route to safety, but somehow his knees strike a patch of dirt and his fingers wrap around a tree branch, wide and flat. He pulls himself away from the lake, and when he turns back around, he waits for Jack to leap out from the veil of stark white before him, but he doesn't.

Charlie stands up straight, his whole body trembling from the pain, and the cold, and the adrenaline that won't quit, but the heavy snowfall finally dissipates, at least enough where he can see the tiny black dot in the distance. He takes a step forward and squints. It's Jack, moving fast

across the lake, not running exactly but stomping forward, his right arm already out in front of him reaching for it, even though it's still ten yards away. The gun. The *gun*.

“Shit,” Charlie says, but at least the sight of Jack racing for the weapon gives him the last bit of energy he desperately needs. The fierce winds don't help Charlie as he starts to move again, away from the lake and into the trees. He refuses to look back as he runs through the deep snow, racing forward for at least two minutes before he climbs up a tall hill and finds a path of fresh footprints. He picks up even more speed and runs another two minutes, maybe longer, before he trips on the teeter-totter and lands face-first on the side of the playground. He takes a quick moment to survey the area, to see that metal slide up ahead, and the swings, and even the teddy bear, which isn't covered in snow at all but sitting on top of it, like the ravaged stuffed animal has been patiently waiting for him.

He trudges up the final hill, this one the steepest at all, and he keeps waiting for the gun to go off behind him, a bullet to bite him not in the ear but in his neck this time, or his back, or one of his legs, but nothing touches him, the parking lot, finally, within his sights. His pain is immense, from the freezing blizzard, to all the punches he's taken, but he keeps going, he can't stop now, moving faster up the last part of the hill until he sees his 4Runner parked next to the restaurant. He climbs over the tiny fence, and slows down considerably. He slides his hand into his pocket, pulls out his keys, and unlocks the car, Charlie never having been so happy in his life to hear that obnoxious beeping sound.

He opens the driver's side door, sits down, turns on the ignition. He fastens his seatbelt tight. When the door swings shut, and silence finally returns to his world, Charlie grips the steering wheel, with all of his fingers, but he doesn't turn it, doesn't slam his foot against the pedal; he starts to sob, uncontrollably. He closes his eyes, and opens his mouth wide, and at first

no sound comes out, his hands trembling, the weight of the past few hours creeping up on him in a way he can't stop. Charlie feels the tears coming fast, like a dam about to burst, and he unleashes a mammoth scream, right at the windshield, and despite the pain all over his body, despite the shaking and the nausea and the headache and his heart beating out of control, a sense of catharsis takes hold of him. He's reached safety, finally. Jack won't be able to lay a finger on him ever again.

But what about Lisa? What about *Isabelle*? Charlie opens his eyes, and looks out the windshield, toward the hill and the playground. Lisa's dead and gone, but Isabelle could still be alive, and he just left her there, didn't even try to save her. If she weren't so deep inside the forest, and if he wasn't so exhausted, barely able to sit up, he'd go after her, try to save her life, but right now, there's only one way to save poor Isabelle, and that is to get help, fast.

So why aren't the police here yet? He called the police. He told them the location. How long ago was that? Ten minutes? Fifteen? And they're still not up here yet, there's still no sight of even one lone cop car, so Charlie slams his foot against the pedal and pulls the steering wheel to the left and drives away from the restaurant, across the snow-covered parking lot. At first he struggles to find the exit, but as he reaches the parking lot's center, he notices the sharp bend in the road ahead, and the steep mile-long hill that leads down to Mount Rose Highway. He speeds up a little, but when he does, the tires hit a patch of black ice, and Charlie's vehicle suddenly slides to the left, a loud, red buzzer igniting on his dashboard.

"No," Charlie says, pulling the steering wheel hard to the right. "Oh, come on."

Charlie pumps the brakes, which doesn't help matters at first, forcing the back tires to careen even closer to the edge, but eventually his car swings back to where it was, Charlie finally correcting himself, the buzzer stopping as he slows down and continues more cautiously toward

the road ahead. He glances in his rearview mirror. The restaurant is so far away, as is the fence, and within seconds Charlie's out of the parking lot completely, onto the slick road ahead covered with even more of the black ice. He slows down to fifteen miles per hour, wanting desperately to go faster, the main highway so close, the end to this madness a minute or two away, but sliding off the road into a ditch isn't an option. He begins to descend the hill, his fingers clasped to the steering wheel, his foot riding the brake, as he stays focused on the road, peering only forward and not to either side, but then something catches his eye, something emerging from the trees on his right, and at first Charlie thinks it's an animal, it's a wolf or a coyote or a bear ready to give him one last obstacle, but it's not an animal, it's Jack, of course it's Jack, standing on the side of the road, breathing heavily, bent forward, his face a horror, his rage undeniable. He lifts up his hand, reveals the gun, and points it at the windshield.

"Oh my God," Charlie says, and without a moment's thought, he moves his foot away from the brake, and slams it against the pedal.

His vehicle accelerates, Charlie's head bashing back against the headrest, his car barreling not toward Jack but down the center of the road, Charlie having no intention to mow Jack down, his only intention to get past him. He waits for the bullet to strike the windshield, but it doesn't, and Charlie breathes a sigh of relief when Jack stays put at the road's edge, the gun still pointed at the car, but Jack not firing, not unleashing the last of the bullets on Charlie's car in a way that seemed inevitable. Jack appears in his rearview mirror, about to join the restaurant and the fence and everything in that godforsaken forest as Charlie's haunted memories, no longer a current reality, but then, as Charlie continues down the steep hill, his tires sliding the faster he goes, he sees Jack walk to the center of the road behind him, still with the gun aimed high.

Jack fires.

Charlie ducks his head, out of instinct, but the bullet doesn't go through the back windshield, only hits the left side of it, leaving a small dent but no major damage. Charlie presses his foot against the pedal hard and goes even faster, approaching forty, his tires sliding over the black ice, Charlie trying, and failing, to stay on course.

Jack fires again.

The bullet hits the back windshield, this time on the right side, not going through, not coming close to Charlie. He pumps the brakes as he reaches the halfway point down this winding stretch of road, the turn to the right about five seconds away.

Jack fires again.

Charlie screams as the back windshield shatters, a gust of cold air slamming against him, but, thankfully, no bite of a bullet. He continues to keep his head down as he veers the steering wheel to the right, the tires sliding but not overly so. He makes the final turn, away from Jack, away from that gun that should have stayed tucked away in his father's office drawer forever. Charlie glances in the rearview mirror. Jack is so far away now, a tiny speck in the distance. Charlie's made it. He's gotten away. There's no more harm Jack can bring to him—

Jack fires one more time, and Charlie's back left tire explodes out from under him, the car careening to the left, out of control. He yanks the steering wheel to the right, the turn in the road so close and yet so far, as he closes his eyes and whispers a single word, the three remaining tires striking a huge patch of black ice: "*Mom.*"

Charlie's car lifts into the skies and comes crashing down to Earth, the driver's side window shattering, Charlie's left shoulder colliding with the upper hand-rest, before his whole body slams against the ceiling and the seatbelt jerks him back down to the seat. The car starts flipping, over and over, over and over. Charlie grips the seatbelt for dear life as his body tumbles

every which way like clothes in a dryer, and when the front windshield explodes, he shuts his eyes again and pushes his lips together and dips his head down to his chest as far as it will go. The car continues to flip down the road, the glove compartment breaking off, an assortment of glass smattering against Charlie's face and neck. When the vehicle makes its final turn and lands upside down, the seatbelt snaps him back so fast his forehead strikes the steering wheel, and everything goes black.

Seconds pass. Maybe minutes, he doesn't know.

He manages a soft breath in a world of darkness, then a deeper one, the taste of blood on his tongue. He coughs. Shoves his palms together. Starts to blink. Footsteps are coming closer.

Charlie unbuckles his seatbelt, and his chest collides with his car ceiling, which is now the floor, his legs sprawling backward as he tries to push himself up. He's finally able to see the driver's side window, which is completely shattered, and open, the echo of the footsteps growing louder. Charlie can see his hands in full now, tiny pieces of glass sticking out of them, and as soon as a new revolting wave of pain pummels him from every angle, he starts to push himself out of the car, not waiting for the achiness and the stinging sensations to die off, not waiting for Jack to reach the side of the car and grab him by the throat.

But Charlie's only halfway out the shattered window, his legs still sliding against the car's ceiling, when Jack appears to his left, gun in hand, his face still covered with the same fiery rage he had when he first emerged on the street. He keeps coming at Charlie, not slowing down until he reaches the side of the car. Charlie manages to make it all the way out, but then there's nothing left he can manage, his legs coming to rest on the icy gravel, his elbows colliding against the side of his chest. He wants to stand up, wants to make one last run for it, but his energy and strength are gone.

Jack stops, and points the gun at Charlie's chest. "I always win," he says, no delight in his voice, no emotion. "Haven't you learned that by now?"

He's inclined to agree with Jack, since he's right, he's won, there's nowhere left for Charlie to go, no chance of defeating the big, bad monster before him.

But then he hears it, so faint in the distance, the greatest noise that's invaded his ears all night—the echo of sirens.

"No," Charlie whispers. "That's not gonna happen."

"Of course it will." Jack's index finger slides over the trigger, as a smile spreads across his face. "Bye, bye, Charlie."

Charlie stays silent, staring not at Jack any longer but at the barrel of the gun, one more breath escaping past his puckered lips, as Jack pulls the trigger.

The quietest click sound follows, then a gasp. Jack pulls the trigger a second time. A third. Nothing happens.

A rush of police cars and ambulances appear down the street. Charlie sits up, with difficulty, with immediate agony, and whispers, "Sorry, Jack. You can't hurt me anymore."

Jack continues to stand still, even though a swath of blues and reds start to cover the white blanket of snowfall before him, even though the first cop car is already approaching fast. Jack throws the gun at Charlie, and it strikes the pavement mere inches above his head, and when Jack spins around, clearly readying himself for a run back into the trees, a cop shouts, "*Hands in the air now!*"

The vehicle stops to the right of Charlie, and a red-haired cop points his gun at Jack, who immediately puts his hands in the air. "I didn't do anything!" Jack yells, and then he nods at Charlie. "It was him, officer! *He* has the gun! He tried to kill me!"

“*Shut your mouth! Keep your hands up!*” The officer keeps his gun pointed at Jack and grabs hold of him.

Charlie keeps an eye on Jack the best he can, but then three more police cars and two ambulances pull up beside him, and the next thing he knows, two additional officers hurry outside, one of them retrieving the gun from the ground. Charlie doesn't say a word about Jack, only tells the officers about Lisa and Isabelle, that they're down past the restaurant and deep inside the forest, and within seconds, two of the cop cars and the ambulance continue up the hill, the same time Charlie's hoisted to his feet and taken over to the closest vehicle. A huge sense of relief flows through him, now that's it's finally over, but then someone gets shoved up against the same cruiser, Jack suddenly standing three feet away. They stare at each other, their eyes burning into the others with unwavering spite, until they're both yanked back around and forced to face the officers before them, all three of them pointing their guns at Charlie and Jack.

“All right, now you can talk,” the second officer says, his curly black hair blowing in the wind. “Tell us what happened.”

“He tried to kill me, *that's* what happened!” Jack screams, pointing at Charlie. “He took me out here to—”

“Don't listen to him, officers!” Charlie shouts over Jack. “This man raped me! He raped me, and he tried to do it again tonight, and then he shot and killed my best friend—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” The third officer, overweight and balding, puts his left hand up, the other hand clenched tight against his gun. “One at a time!” He nods his head at Jack.

Jack shoves his back against the cruiser and says, “Officers, I never saw this guy in my life before tonight. He pursued me at a party, and then he smashed a shovel over my head, and

when I woke up, I was in this forest, duct tape over my wrists, a gun pointed at my face. He was going to kill me, officers...”

“He’s lying,” Charlie says.

“You, quiet!” the same officer shouts at Charlie. He nods again to Jack. “Go on.”

“I didn’t go crazy,” Jack says. “*He* went crazy. He shot some girl in the head, a girl I’ve never met before, and then... wait for it... he shot my sister, too.” His jaw drops, and he dips his head back, and then Jack begins to cry, an outrageous fake sobbing that Charlie sincerely hopes these cops will see straight through. “She was my world. She was my... *everything*. And this guy put a bullet in her chest right in front of me.”

“Is this true?” the redhead cop asks Charlie.

“Not at all.”

“Well, what’s your story then?”

Charlie looks to his right, at the edge of the parking lot, where one of the two cop cruisers starts heading back toward them.

“This man took me on a date four months ago,” Charlie says, pointing at the top of the hill. “Up there, at Abel’s. He bought me dinner, and he took me on a walk, and then, when no one was around, he pushed me to the ground and he assaulted me, he raped me.”

“Not true,” Jack says, shaking his head. “He’s making this up—”

“Quiet!” the bald officer says to Jack.

Charlie sighs. “I didn’t report it. I didn’t say a word to anyone. But then tonight, I bumped into him again, and he tried to rape me again, and so, yes—I defended myself. I hit him over the head and, by accident I swear, I knocked him unconscious.”

The cruiser stops on the other side of the street, and Charlie notices someone in the back seat, her head pushed against the side window, as a paramedic from the nearby ambulance rushes toward the car.

“And that’s where I made my mistake,” Charlie continues. “Because I didn’t call 9-1-1 right away. I felt like you guys would rather believe him, and not me, and so my friend and I took Jack out to the forest, back to where he assaulted me the first time, to leave him there and teach him a lesson, to scare him, but not to kill him, we were never going to kill him—”

“That’s a lie!” Jack shouts. “They were trying to kill me the whole time, they absolutely were—”

“Shut up!” the same officer says, and he points his gun at Jack’s hip. “Don’t make me say it again.”

All the guns startle Charlie, to the extent he can’t believe he’s so lucid and articulate as he gives his little speech. He glances back at the vehicle across the street. The side door has opened, and the passenger is stepping out, a paramedic helping her take her first few steps. She walks toward the ambulance, in the direction of Charlie and Jack.

Charlie says, “Officers, my friend and I, as I said, were simply trying to scare him, in the hopes he wouldn’t come near me again, but then he took matters into his own hands and killed my friend, and shot his sister. And before he went on to beat the hell out of me, he admitted to raping other guys, lots of guys, and killing at least two of them.”

Jack starts laughing, he’s actually laughing, as he closes his eyes, stares down at the pavement, and says, “This is so completely ridiculous. He’s lying. This guy... he’s a total lunatic... he’s one-hundred percent...”

“...telling you the truth,” Isabelle says to Jack’s right. She steps forward, with difficulty, a female paramedic attempting to escort Isabelle to the ambulance. But Isabelle comes to a stop beside Jack and Charlie and says, to the officers, “Every word Charlie just said about my brother is true. Jack’s the one who is lying.”

Jack leans his head back, looking like he might scream, before he darts his eyes at Isabelle, and says, “Shut up, Izzy. You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The paramedic keeps pulling Isabelle toward the ambulance, but she waves her aside again, and says, “I saw him shoot the other girl, before he shot me, too. I heard him admit to raping Charlie. My brother boasted about it to his face. And then, and *then*...” Tears well up in her eyes. “He admitted to killing our father.”

The three cops now have all their guns pointed at Jack, no longer at Charlie, as Jack takes a step toward his sister. He brings his hands to his pockets, and says to her, so delicately, confidence overtaking him even at this most fretful moment, “Prove it.”

She stares back at her brother, no sign of fear on her face, as she whips her video camera out from behind her back and says, “Gladly.” She hands the camera to the officer closest to her. “I filmed everything. It’s all there. The shootings, the confession. All of it.”

The officer examines the camera, before he hands it to a fourth cop who just showed up on the scene. “Take this. Keep it in a safe place.” And then he waves Jack forward, puts the gun in his holster, takes out a pair of handcuffs, and says, “Turn around, and put your hands behind your back. You’re under arrest.”

“I’m under... *what*?” Jack asks. He glares at his sister, his eyes narrowed, like he wants to strangle her. He turns around and pounds his fist against the car. “No, wait! This is bullshit!” He points at Charlie. “You should be arresting him, not me!”

The cop steps toward Jack. “I said, put your hands behind your back now!”

Jack hesitates, like he won’t comply, but then he dips his head and brings his hands close together.

“Sorry, Jack,” Isabelle says, still standing close to her brother, the paramedic trying and failing to motion her toward the ambulance. “I tried to get footage of the real you all night.”

The cop snaps the first cuff against Jack’s left hand. Jack peers at Charlie, his face turning red again, his lips cracked and bleeding.

“Turns out I did, in the end,” she continues, her voice trembling, sounding like something between sadness and triumph. “I got footage... of a monster.”

The second cuff comes toward Jack’s right hand, and then it happens so fast, so unexpectedly—Jack elbows the cop behind him, snatches the gun from his holster, and aims it at Isabelle’s face. “You little *bitch*,” he says.

The other two cops raise their guns, but they’re not fast enough, Jack already nestling his index finger over the trigger, and Charlie, wide-eyed, doesn’t hesitate a single second, even though he barely knows her. He sprints forward and leaps in front of Isabelle, as a bullet escapes the gun and takes a chunk out of Charlie’s shoulder.

Charlie hits the ground hard, blood spattering against the snow, his head smacking against Isabelle’s feet.

Jack takes a step forward, clearly unfazed by Charlie’s heroic act, as he keeps the gun aimed at his sister, his finger about to pull the trigger a second time, but it’s no use; the gun falls from Jack’s hands as the cops behind him promptly put him down, firing five bullets, ten bullets, into the back of Jack’s chest, his arms swinging every which way, the surprised, crazed look on

his face eventually turning into one of eerie serenity. He drops to his knees, takes one last look at Charlie, then falls to his side.

Charlie tries to sit up but can't, the pain in his left shoulder more excruciating than anything he's experienced all night. He doesn't even dare look at the wound, only at the scene playing out before him, as two of the cops walk over to inspect Jack's body, a third officer removing the gun from the ground.

"Charlie," Isabelle says, standing above him. "Oh my God. You saved my life."

He tries not to scream from the shoulder wound, which feels like a hundred bees are stinging him all at once. "Trust me," he says. "You saved mine."

A male paramedic drops to Charlie's side and inspects his wound, but Isabelle brushes him aside to give Charlie a warm embrace. She leans against his good shoulder, wraps her arm around his back, kisses him on the forehead, and whispers, "Thank you," before the female paramedic pulls her away, puts her on a stretcher, and wheels her into the back of an ambulance.

Charlie stays on the ground for another minute as the man before him inspects his injuries and a second ambulance roars up the slick, icy street, and he has nothing to do but look up at the sky, the falling snow still coming down, like it might cover him completely before he's able to budge an inch, but then another person appears to his right and he's suddenly lifted in the air, more pain attacking him from every angle as he's carried to a stretcher of his own and hauled inside an ambulance on the other side of the street. It's warm inside, almost calming, no more snow to be seen, but there's no way to see his best friend either, no way to extend a final goodbye to Lisa, so he begins to cry again, his dear friend gone, his heartache immense, but his spirit, somehow, still intact, and when the first sign of sunlight streams through the vehicle, he's able to utter three simple words before he slowly, inevitably, drifts away: "It's finally over."

SIX MONTHS LATER

CHAPTER THIRTY

Isabelle

“William. Douglas. Pressman.”

Isabelle shuffles forward, her feet in pain from the annoying high heels, her black cap constantly becoming tangled in her dreadlocks. She releases a loud sigh and then bangs her fist against the staircase railing, confused why she agreed to do this. She’s never felt so much like cattle in her life.

“Kathryn. Amy. Proctor.”

As she takes another step up toward the black stage, she remembers how weeks before, when she still hadn’t committed to a cap and gown, or even the desire to come within fifty feet of this packed auditorium bright and early on a Saturday morning, her mother had taken the time to convince Isabelle that despite a high school graduation ceremony’s tediousness, with its overlong speeches and lofty well-wishes and endless stretches of time dedicated to watching people you don’t know collect diplomas that aren’t really diplomas, that still, a ceremony like this one was tradition, a staple, a worthwhile symbol for the end of high school and the beginning of the rest of your life.

“Scott. Stuart. Prosky.”

She reaches the top of the stage and sees the young man directly across from her, a talkative know-it-all from her AP Government class this past year, walking to a properly dressed elderly woman to collect his fake diploma. Isabelle shoves her hands against her hips, then looks out on the massive audience in the stadium seats, probably a thousand people all waiting for their child’s shining moment, and she wonders where her mother and aunt and uncle are seated. They’re out there, she knows they are, probably close to the stage since her uncle’s eyesight isn’t

the greatest. But Jack's not sitting with them. He's not in the bleachers ready to cheer on his baby sister. The sting of his absence, even in such a stupid ceremony like this one, surprises her.

“Isabelle. Morgan. Pruitt.”

She stays still at first. Barely anybody claps. There's no loud roar from afar, no family members chanting Isabelle's name. She feels a nudge from behind, a finger poking her back, and then she finds herself on the stage, faking a smile, even waving despite the lack of enthusiasm coming from anywhere in the room. She stops in front of a tan middle-aged man she thinks is one of the local news anchors. He hands her the diploma, takes a quick picture with her. The whole charade is over in all of ten seconds, and Isabelle starts walking down the steps, back toward her seat among the alphabetized graduating seniors of Galloway High.

As she walks along the center aisle, she tries to shake her overwhelmingly dismal state of mind. It has nothing to do with the graduation itself, nothing to do with the lack of enthusiasm when her name was called. It has nothing to do with her future, which is set in stone, at least for the coming four years, and it has nothing to do with being single again. She doesn't know what it is. Could it be her reluctance to kiss her high school years good-bye? Could she actually be getting sentimental for once?

She shakes these questions as soon as she looks back again at the fifth row of graduating seniors, where she saw him earlier, she's certain she did, at the ceremony's beginning. Where the hell is Charlie?

She takes her seat in a row toward the back, stuck next to the smelly Scott Prosky and the eternally quiet Amanda Puck, as the announcers on stage begin reading off the Q last names. There can't be too many of those, Isabelle hopes, but she still has a long way to go until Z.

Isabelle slinks down in her seat. She can't possibly sit here for another thirty or forty minutes, listening to unfamiliar names called out while she kicks the ground and twiddles her thumbs. She sees a student sneak in through a cracked-open door to Isabelle's right, immediately waving to some friends before she sits down a few rows up. The door starts to close, but it doesn't stop all the way, giving her the out she needs. A few adults nearby might glare at her for leaving the ceremony early, but what are they going to do? Force her to stay at Galloway for another year? Plus, she could really use a cigarette.

She climbs over the five pairs of legs next to her in such a clumsy, undignified fashion part of her thinks she'll smack her head against the ground and pass out before she makes it to the exit door, but finally she pushes past the last of them—Timothy Purl, who she spoke to at a party once freshman year, then never again—and quietly tiptoes her way through the open door. A few adults and two young children stand at a concession stand ahead, but otherwise, this area is mostly empty, the exit doors to an outdoor seating area visible to her left. She keeps moving, and puts on her large pair of red-framed sunglasses, ready as ever to escape the exceeding stuffy auditorium.

The air is surprisingly warm this early in the morning, the sun's rays blasting down against Isabelle the second she steps foot on the cement. The sky is clear blue, with only the faintest wisps of half-formed clouds. She walks to a long stairwell on the side of the circular building, stopping a few steps down as she takes out a cigarette and her new gold lighter, the one her smoker cousin Zach already gave her as a graduation present. Isabelle lights her cigarette and takes a deep puff, and as soon as the smoke enters her lungs, a euphoric calm flows through her, the calm she's needed since she first woke up. She takes a second puff, gazing out at the crowded parking lot ahead, when a voice from her left says, "Hey, can I bum one of those?"

Isabelle's first instinct is to keep her box of cigarettes hidden and tell this guy she's fresh out, but the voice resonates. It's Charlie, sitting on the cement ground, his back pushed against the top step of the stairwell, his arms resting on his knees. He's also wearing the formal black gown, but the cap is nowhere in sight. He waves to her, excitedly, almost child-like, as if their relationship has been strictly innocent, with no drama at all. She can't get over how different he looks, with his blond hair now stretching past his shoulders, his face so much fuller, with strong cheekbone definition and stubble on his chin. For the longest time Charlie always looked younger than his age, like he should have been a grade or two under hers, but now he looks older, not eighteen but closer to twenty or twenty-one.

"Of course you can," Isabelle says. She points down. "Care if I join you?"

"Not at all," he says, and after Isabelle sits next to him, she hands him her lighter and a second cigarette.

"Needed to get some air, too, huh?"

"Yeah. I can't stand it in there." Charlie takes a drag on the cigarette, then starts coughing, almost immediately, and slams his fist against his chest. Isabelle looks on with a smile, as he clears his throat and keeps smoking regardless. "It's like having to sit through the world's most boring movie," he continues, "except it's four hours long and there's nothing to look at but the backs of people's heads."

"Tell me about it. It's like having to sit and stew in Hell for a while."

Charlie laughs through his nose and takes another puff. "Speaking of movies, I never asked what film school you got into."

“AFI. It’s pretty chill. It’s on a hillside overlooking L.A.” She crosses her arms and rests her elbows on her knees. “What’s cool is that I’m not the only black girl who got into the director’s program. There’s *three* of us.”

“Really? That’s fantastic.”

“I know, right? I always assumed I’d be the only one.” Another drag. She inhales even deeper. “Where are you going? Someone told me you were going to Europe?”

Charlie doesn’t answer her right away. A grin flashes across his face, as he glances at the parking lot in the distance. “Yep. London.”

“I didn’t look at film schools overseas. What college did you get into there?”

He darts his eyes back at hers, and scratches the side of his neck. “I’m actually taking a gap year, a forever gap year, I guess, since I don’t plan to go to college. I’m gonna find a job, do some traveling. I don’t know about you, but... I need to get away from here.”

“Oh, trust me. I feel exactly the same.” She moves a touch closer to Charlie. “That takes guts. To go all the way to England? Live all by yourself? I could never do that.”

“I’m not going by myself.”

“You’re not?”

“No. My boyfriend graduated college last month. We’re making the move together.”

She takes off her sunglasses and studies Charlie’s face, like she’s seeing it for the first time. “*What?* I didn’t know you had a boyfriend.”

“It’s pretty new. We didn’t become official, I guess, until February. His name’s Sebastian. He’s the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“That’s great, Charlie,” she says, and she means it. “I’m happy for you.”

“You are?” He drops his cigarette on the cement and stomps it out with his black dress shoe. “Even after everything I did? After everything that happened?”

When she sat down next to Charlie, she didn’t think the subject would come up. She thought they might share a few pleasantries before she finished her cigarette and wandered back inside the auditorium, and so she’s caught off-guard, her mouth hanging open for a few seconds, no words coming out. Finally, she says, “I don’t hold any grudges toward you, Charlie. It’s still not clear to me, after all this time, exactly how it happened. How it got to such an extreme state. I do think you and Lisa played a role in my brother’s death, but... you also saved my life. My brother fired a gun at my head, and you jumped in front of me.”

Charlie doesn’t say a word. He purses his lips, staring down at the steps before him.

“You barely even knew me,” Isabelle continues. “*Nobody* would have done that. Not a single person in the world would have done what you did. So yes, I am happy for you. And no matter what you go on to do with your life, I will always want what’s best for you.”

She can see tears welling up in Charlie’s eyes, so she flicks down her cigarette and grabs his left hand, and holds it, for the longest time. They sit in silence, not looking at each other, taking in this unexpected moment, silence still permeating the outside area.

Finally, Charlie whispers, through his sobs, “I’m *so* sorry...”

“Charlie, please... it’s not your fault.”

“Whether it is or it isn’t, I want you to know...” He wipes a tear from his cheek, then presses his chin against Isabelle’s right shoulder. She lets him. “...that I’m sorry for your loss. And I wish none of it would have happened.”

“Jack was sick,” Isabelle says. “He was a bad person who got what was coming to him.”

“But he was your *brother*.” He lifts his head back up, still struggling to get his words out. “God, I wish I had never gone on that date with him. I wish I hadn’t gone to that party—”

“Charlie. Stop.” She keeps a tight grip on his hand and, finally, faces him again. “You’re going to Europe. I’m headed to L.A. This might be the last time we ever see each other.”

“I... I know that.”

“And I can’t walk away from you thinking you’re gonna keep beating yourself up over this. It’s not fair to you, to blame yourself. And it’s not fair to me, either, because we both know, deep down, if this hadn’t happened with you, it would’ve happened with another guy, on another night. I believe that.”

“But how can you be sure?”

“Because. He had darkness. In his heart. In every fiber of his being. He chose to rape you, and attack you, and he chose to die that day. It had nothing to do with you or me. That was *all* on him.” She starts to tear up too, as soon as she says, “And I’m sorry, too. About your friend. She was the innocent one in all this. She was just trying to do the right thing.”

He finally stops crying. His face turns almost stoic for a second. “Lisa *was* trying to do the right thing. Because she loved me. But... I don’t know. The more time that passes, the more I reflect back on that night, I think she had some darkness she was dealing with, too. More than I ever could have imagined.”

“What do you mean?”

He licks his lips and says, “Nothing. It doesn’t really matter anymore. She’s gone. Lisa’s *gone*. And there’s nothing I can do to change that.”

Charlie shoves his palms over his eyes. He takes a deep breath through his nose, then exhales through his mouth, Isabelle gripping his hand even tighter.

“Promise me something, Charlie,” she says.

“What?”

“Promise me. That you will live your life, with no regrets, and always look forward, never back. Can you do that for me?”

He nods, as he wipes the last of his tears away. “I promise. At least... I’ll try.”

Isabelle lets go of his hand. Glances at the front of the building, where some finely-dressed adults are now standing, cameras in hand, all waiting for their graduating seniors to come racing out of the building in droves.

“*Anyway*,” Isabelle says. “I should probably get back inside. Try to find my family.” She begins to stand up, but then Charlie pulls on her arm. “What? What’s the matter?”

“I, uhh...” He dips his head and shrugs. “Nevermind. It’s nothing.”

She turns toward him, her eyes narrowed. “No. Tell me. What’s on your mind?”

He sits up a little straighter, then takes a phone out of his pocket. He grips it in his left hand, then tosses it to his right, back and forth a few times, before he says, “Since what you said is true, that we’ll never see each other again, I was wondering...”

“Yes?” She can already guess his question, there’s no doubt about it.

“Would you take a picture with me?”

She snickers, loudly, she can’t help herself, but then she sits back down and shoves her head next to Charlie’s, as he turns on the camera app and holds the phone up high. Isabelle doesn’t smile at first. It almost feels wrong to be smiling for a photo next to Charlie, a mere six months since their night of unimaginable horror. But then Charlie grips her hand this time, and lean his head toward hers, and she can’t help feeling this quiet, tender moment marks the beginning of the rest of her life. Isabelle smiles, finally, and so does Charlie. He snaps the photo.

Charlie brings the phone down, and they both look at the picture, at the perfect light from above hitting their faces, and their goofy grins. “Jeez,” he says. “We look like a couple.”

They both burst out laughing, long and hard, Isabelle leaning forward gripping her belly, as Charlie leans back and brings his hands to his sides.

“Us? A *couple*?” Isabelle asks through her loud chuckles. “Can you even imagine?”

“I know, right? Sebastian would be so jealous.”

She lets out a final laugh, before she leans her head back, stares into Charlie’s eyes for a few seconds, and gives him a soft kiss on the cheek.

“Okay. I better go.” She stands up and heads toward the side entrance door. When she opens it, she looks back at Charlie and asks, “You coming back in?”

“Nah,” he says. “I think I’m good. Take care, Isabelle.”

She stands still, wanting to impart some final wisdom, or at least leave him with something memorable he can remember her by. Instead, she says, “Same to you, Charlie,” and heads inside the auditorium.

When the door slams behind her, a pain grows in her stomach, something sharp and unpleasant, the feeling that someone important to her life is leaving it forever. But she returns to her seat, next to Scott and Amanda, and concentrates on the stage, where the announcers are finishing up the Y names, about four people in a row with the last name Young taking their long overdue bow, and her pain subsides as soon as Raylon reaches the top of the faraway staircase.

“Raylon. Thomas. Young.”

Isabelle politely claps for her ex-boyfriend, along with a few select people closer to the front rows and one huge group in the bleachers. After Raylon takes his diploma, he rushes down the steps in a fit of total glee, and for a second she thinks he might stop in her row, give her a

high-five, or even a hug, but he keeps walking past her, of course he does, stopping two rows behind her to kiss his new girlfriend, Jada.

The final name is called about a minute later, miraculously, and then Isabelle, surrounded by so many people she'll never see again as she embarks on a brand new journey, tosses her cap into the air and lets it drop where it may, not bothering to retrieve it before she heads for the exit.

The next ten minutes feel like ten hours, Isabelle nearly getting trampled by a hundred other graduated seniors as they all rush outside, everyone wanting to get out of that stuffy auditorium and begin their summer, begin the *party*. She's forced to say hello to her family, including her mom, who wore all black as if Isabelle's graduation was like Jack's December funeral, and her aunt and uncle. She takes the obligatory pictures, both by herself and with family members, then her mother asks if Isabelle wants to go to breakfast. She would have said yes, might have even been excited for a tall plate of banana pancakes, but her phone just vibrated and she's now scanned the unexpected text.

Isabelle tells her family she has an errand to run, something important that can't wait, and so they make plans for a one o'clock brunch. She gives her final hugs, then starts charging for the parking lot, not wanting to waste this window of opportunity.

As she reaches the first row of cars, she glances back at the huge crowd standing before the auditorium, and she spots Charlie, easily, on the left side of the pavement. He's hugging someone, a total hunk of a guy who, upon him sharing a romantic kiss with him on the lips, she assumes is Sebastian. The two young men share a hug after that, and Charlie closes his eyes as the embrace goes on and on. Isabelle watches all this as she keeps taking steps backward, and when she brushes up against the first of many vehicles, Charlie turns toward her and catches her

faraway gaze. He waves at Isabelle, acknowledging her one last time, before he turns to his left and embraces an older man, probably his father.

She waves back, only for a second, then turns around and hurries to her Jetta. As soon as she reaches her car, she removes her black gown and tosses it in the back seat, then manages to pull out of the crowded lot before any significant line forms at the one and only exit. When she passes through the first signal on the adjacent four-lane road, Isabelle reaches over the armrest console, past her tripod and new over-sized lighting kit, and grabs her camera bag from the floor. She unzips it, and double-checks she has an extra battery in case the one attached to the camera goes dead during this interview; she really doesn't want to stop at home, but she will if she has to. Naturally, there are two additional batteries, even an extra mount for the tripod she recently bought. She's more than ready.

When Isabelle reaches the north Reno neighborhood, she plugs in the girl's address, not sure exactly what street she's supposed to take, and it's not until she starts weaving her way through the various dips and turns that she realizes this is the same neighborhood that party house from December is in. Her destination isn't the same place, but she still passes the street, Isabelle nudging her forehead against the driver's side window. That house is no longer crowded, no longer lit up with a thousand Christmas lights. It looks like every other house on the block, two-story and beige, no evidence of the fated reunion that took place there that night. Isabelle was only able to relay to the authorities her side of the events the night her brother died, but she later heard every detail of Charlie's heartbreaking story, and she still hasn't been able to shake it. If Jack had just gone to another party that night. If he had simply apologized to Charlie and treated him like a human being. So many ifs. Too many ifs. Isabelle isn't able to change what happened, so as she pulls up to a one-story home at the back of a court, her final destination at

the far end of the neighborhood, she forces herself to stay connected to the here and now, and especially to the future. She can't stop what Jack did to Charlie, and what he did to countless other young men, but she *can* stop future assaults. With that magical tool in her bag, Isabelle can at least begin to stop bad men from doing terrible things.

She manages to carry the heavy equipment by herself up to the front door, and when she knocks, she expects no one to open the door, her interview subject too scared to announce herself and share her story. But the door does open, and the twenty-five-year-old Gwen Stanton appears before her, a touch of subtle rouge on her cheeks, her sun-kissed blond hair up in a bun.

They share a few kind words, Gwen thankfully not running in the other direction, too scared to be on camera. Instead, she sits on a black leather couch facing the camera before Isabelle's even finished setting everything up, the lighting kit against the wall, the bulky tripod next to her tall chair.

When Isabelle powers up her camera for the first time, Gwen asks, "Do I talk to you, or the camera?"

"You'll be talking to me," Isabelle says. "Pretend the camera's not even there."

"Oh. Okay."

Isabelle takes a seat on a tall wooden chair, and drinks from a bottled water to appease her dry throat. She pushes the red recording button.

"I'm scared," Gwen says.

"Why? There's nothing to be scared of."

The woman's hands start to tremble as she brings them under her chin. "But what if he... what if he *sees* this? What if he tries to come after me again?"

“He won’t.” Isabelle takes a pen out of her pocket and twirls it around her fingers a few times. She puts on a happy face for her latest interview subject, the eighth woman she’s filmed on camera for her latest documentary, her first she hopes to be feature-length. This topic is too big and important to simply be a short film. “And if he does, I’m gonna be there. I’ll be there in two seconds to rip out his fucking throat.”

Gwen opens her mouth, but no words come out, only a brief, shocked laugh.

“All right, let’s begin,” Isabelle says, the four words she’s said to so many people before, to so many strangers, the words she plans to use from behind the camera for as long as possible, no matter the controversial subject matter, no matter any cultural shifts or political movements in the country she takes center stage in. She wasn’t able to uncover the truth when it came to her own brother, and she has to forever own up to that. But nobody’s going to stop her from going after the truth, and changing minds, and trying to make the world a better place. She wants to be so much more than a documentary filmmaker, after all. She wants to be a storyteller for the ages.

“I’m ready,” Gwen says.

“Okay. Good. Let’s go back to the beginning.” Isabelle clicks her pen and crosses her left leg over her right. “Tell me what happened the night you were raped.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Charlie

The road doesn't look familiar to Charlie. Of course both times he climbed this steep hill the sky was pitch black, full of promising stars that first time, thick clouds looming overhead the second. Now it's clear blue, no clouds at all, not even the faintest hint of an oncoming summer rain shower. The road has been repaved, the surface black and clean, new yellow markings down the center shining under the sun. And the biggest change of all comes when Sebastian reaches the top, the parking lot so crowded he's forced to park parallel to the short wooden fence.

"There's a lot of people here," Sebastian says, and turns off the ignition.

"I know." Charlie peers out the windshield, at a group of ten people or more waiting outside the restaurant's front doors. "You'd think after what happened, they would have closed this place."

"Maybe there's an event going on."

"Yeah. Maybe."

A long stretch of silence ensues. Sebastian rubs his palms together. "*So*," he says. The smile on his face couldn't be more forced, the way his pursed lips only slightly expand, his adorable dimples somehow hidden. "You sure you want to do this? I still don't understand why you wanted to come up here."

"I know you don't. I don't really understand it either."

And Charlie still doesn't. With only five days to go before he leaves for London, he could be using his Saturday afternoon to be more productive, like packing the last of his clothes, or cleaning his bedroom, or making a definitive list of all the places he and Sebastian want to visit once the plane lands on European soil. He could be spending quality time with his father too, but

they have plans to spend the day together tomorrow, driving to Sacramento to visit with relatives and pig out on sushi. Charlie's going to miss his father a lot, and he already can't wait for when he comes to visit their new pad in September.

Of all places to see one last time in northern Nevada, Abel's Mexican restaurant and the vast forest behind it seemed the most likely to avoid at all costs, but Charlie insisted, the feeling overwhelming him that he couldn't leave Reno without closure, an opportunity to kiss that tragedy good-bye for good. He still suffers nightmares, still sees Lisa and especially Jack at all times of the day and night. Sebastian has been a godsend the last few months, someone Charlie was able to confide in and share his traumatic memories with even before they started dating the weekend before Valentine's Day. In a way Charlie assumes, as he steps out of the car into the warm eighty-five-degree temperature, he wouldn't have survived these last six months without him. Before she died, Lisa blamed herself for everything bad that happened to Charlie, but that wasn't true at all. He never got the chance to show her that, in the end, she actually saved him. She brought him Sebastian.

Charlie stops next to the vehicle—his dad's gray Volvo he asked to borrow for the day—and rests his back against the driver's side window as Sebastian heads inside the restaurant. There's clearly going to be a wait of some kind, but Charlie doesn't care; he's suddenly not hungry at all, standing on the pavement where he and Jack flirted nearly a year ago, when the future appeared set to be so much different. On the drive over, Charlie thought he might suffer a panic attack, or faint, or do something wildly out of character, but an unexpected sense of calm flows through him now, especially when he looks past the fence at the steep hill.

“Fifteen minutes,” Sebastian says, as soon as his feet hit the parking lot pavement.

Charlie nods, and moves away from the Volvo. “Not bad. I was expecting worse.”

“They have a waiting area. There’s two seats open.” Sebastian puts out his hand, and waits for Charlie to grab hold of it.

But Charlie shakes his head, and says, “Actually, I’d like to have a moment out here. Alone, if that’s okay.”

“Oh. Of course.” Sebastian turns around and points at the restaurant’s entrance. “I’ll be waiting inside. I’ll take a look at the menu.”

“Perfect. Thanks, babe.”

“Don’t be too long,” Sebastian says. He keeps a smile on his face as he walks into the restaurant, leaving Charlie by his lonesome.

Charlie waits for Sebastian to disappear inside Abel’s, and as soon as he does, Charlie takes a step back and opens the passenger door. He digs his hands under the seat, and removes a tiny white box. He handles it carefully, shuts the door, then steps toward the fence, which has been painted a new light shade of brown. He walks over it, and starts descending the hill. Fifteen minutes isn’t a long time. He should probably stay close to the restaurant, not drift into an area that left him with such dread for so long. But if he’s going to find the closure he needs, Charlie has to face it head on.

His memory of the hillside was that of lush grass of the darkest green last August, but the grass is yellow now, the sharp blades in random clumps, the rest of the hill made up of human-made dirt trails that extend in every direction. Charlie takes the trail that leads to the playground, averting his gaze to his tennis shoes as to not chicken out and return to the parking lot. He can’t turn back, no matter how many terrible memories this place brings up, no matter how fast his heart may start beating or how many sharp stomach pains may overtake him. His hands become sweaty, almost slimy. Part of that could be from the strenuous walk, or from the hot temperature,

but he's under shade now, and he's only been walking for two whole minutes. He licks his lips, rubs his left hand against his plaid shorts, and steps away from the hill.

Charlie stops, when he sees the plot of land before him. He isn't sure how to react at first. Thankful? Sad? The playground is no more, only a mass of dirt with a few holes in the ground and one noticeable stretch of orange CAUTION tape stuck under a tiny rock. The teeter-totter, the swings, and the slide have all been torn out, but with nothing added in its place to improve on the eyesore then and now. At least the playground infused this forgotten area with a sense of history; now the area looks like any other part of the forest, shaped with taller-than-tall trees, cracked branches, dying bushes, and dirt that's rarely been stepped on. And in the end, that's a good thing. Because Charlie doesn't want to remember this place for the tragedy it so deeply represents. He doesn't want it to only be the source of bad memories.

He walks toward the back of what used to be the playground, where that slide was. When he closes his eyes, he can see it, the way its bottom corner kept coming for his forehead, the harder Jack pressed himself against him. Charlie turns in a slow, complete circle, in the spot his life changed forever, and he surprises himself when tears don't immediately launch from his eyes or at least well up, ready to drop at the thought of another painful memory.

"I don't really know what to say," Charlie whispers, looking down at the dirt. "I haven't forgiven you, Jack. I can't, not now, and not for a long, long time. I'll never understand what you were going through. What made you do the things you did. Why you couldn't just be good to me, or anyone else. You didn't have to be my first boyfriend, but you didn't have to hurt me. And you definitely didn't need to die." He kicks his shoes through the dirt for a few seconds, before he ends with, "But that doesn't mean I have to hate you. I swear to you, from the core of my being, I no longer hold hate for you in my heart. I won't... let you destroy me."

Charlie surveys the area one last time, wondering if he might spot that forgotten teddy bear still resting on the ground, but it's gone, it's nowhere to be found. He returns to the hill, walking ever so slowly, a sense of power growing inside him with every new step. He ascends the hill with little effort, the steep climb no obstacle for Charlie, all his time weight training at the gym having doubled since he barely managed to fend off Jack last December. He survived that night due to his wits in part, but mostly because of being able to defend himself and take the kind of violent hits nobody could ever imagine.

Of course, after that long night came to a close, Charlie assumed he might spend the rest of his life training in a gym behind locked bars. He and Lisa took Jack into the woods against his will, after all, and they fought against him, over and over again. And even though the authorities had Jack's killing of Lisa and his confession about his father on video, even though he tried to kill his sister in front of everyone at the scene, it was Charlie's gun he did the shooting with, not Jack's. When he was taken to the Reno police station to give his statement, Charlie thought hard about what he should say, about how much truth he should tell, about how well he could make the slain Lisa appear in the eyes of her mourning family and friends. He wanted everyone to know Jack was the bad guy, that it was Jack who forced him and Lisa into the woods and not the other way around. But when he took that seat, and had those middle-aged detectives across the table already seeing right through him, Charlie understood he could only reveal the truth, no matter the consequences. He detailed every second, every movement, of Jack's rape in August. Then he laid out every decision made and nearly every word said over the course of that chaotic December night—everything except the part where he held the gun to Jack's head. He wondered, in the days following, if Isabelle's camera had caught Charlie aiming the gun at Jack, if she had seen him mulling over the idea of blowing her brother's brains out, and that he'd soon be tried

for perjury and find himself locked up in the strictest penitentiary. But the questions died down in the coming weeks, from the unreadable authority figures, from Lisa's grief-stricken parents, from Jack's mother who was inconsolable through the entire process. Because Charlie kept his story the same, every time he told it. He never embellished. Never changed a detail. Lisa would have gotten in trouble, no doubt about that, but since Charlie was merely an accomplice and not the instigator in the attempt at Jack's punishment, and since he heroically saved Isabelle's life—and especially given the clear camera evidence to prove Jack's murderous ways—he never faced charges or had to sacrifice his education, his future. Somehow he had a chance to survive.

Near the top of the hill, Charlie kneels down in a tiny patch of yellow grass and holds up the white box. He peers up at the full sun, not sure if he should do this here. Maybe the street she lived on would be more appropriate. Or the last restaurant they had lunch at, which certainly wasn't Abel's. But the warm light beams down against him in the right way, and a slight breeze wafts across his cheeks in a manner so pleasing, so comforting.

He secures his fingers to the top of the box. "Leese, I'm sorry," Charlie says. "I'm sorry I was such a disappointment to you. I'm sorry I called you that night from the car, that I put you in a situation you couldn't step away from. You blamed yourself for the rape, and for putting me in danger again at the party, but Leese, I'm here to tell you, all you did was show me light. Not only for bringing me to Sebastian, who is everything I could have dreamed of, but for being the kind of friend I should never have taken for granted. You loved me in ways I was never able to love myself, and I'm so sorry I couldn't give that love to you in return..."

Charlie was able to stay collected through part of his speech, but he's full-on crying now, tears streaming down his cheeks like they'll never stop. His right hand trembles, and he almost

drops the box, but then he shoves his left hand underneath it and keeps it from toppling over. He takes a few breaths, tries to regain composure.

“I will never forget you,” he continues. “I think about you... every day. I wonder what you would be doing right now, and I swear to you, you will always, *always* stay a part of me. Thank you, Leese. Thank you for being my friend. I hope I’ll see you again one day.” He blinks another tear away, and returns his fingers to the box. “I’m sure you’ve met my mom by now. Tell her hi for me, okay? Tell her I’m still looking for that scarf she made me. Tell her Dad still can’t cook. And tell her I miss her, almost as much as I miss you.”

Charlie opens the box, and a tiny butterfly, rich in purple and bright blues and edged in black-and-white polka dots, takes flight into the air and up toward the sky. He waits for it to swoop down toward the trees, or maybe take a dive toward the grass, but it only goes up, higher and higher until it fades from his vision, disappearing up past the mid-day sun.

He wipes the last of his tears from his cheeks and stands back up, exhausted, but also stronger, relieved. What needed to be said was said. He only wishes someone was listening.

He takes the last few steps toward the top of the hill, when Sebastian appears, leaning against the driver’s side of the Volvo, his arms crossed, his cheeks wet with tears of his own.

Charlie stops as soon as his feet hit the parking lot pavement. “Oh. Hey.”

“Hey,” Sebastian says.

“How much of that did you hear?”

“Enough.” Sebastian walks over to Charlie, then leans his forehead against his. “You are the most extraordinary man I’ve ever met. You know that, right?”

“No, that’s not true. It can’t be.” Charlie manages a smile, and flicks his thumb against Sebastian’s lips. “But thank you for saying it.”

Sebastian grips Charlie's right hand and pulls him toward the restaurant entrance. "Come on. Our table's ready."

Charlie follows Sebastian up the front steps and inside Abel's, which is jam-packed with patrons, eight people in the waiting area, groups of four at most tables in the center, and one huge party of twenty or more celebrating a birthday in a separate room. As Sebastian lets go of Charlie's hand and starts walking toward their booth near the back, Charlie slows down and takes in the familiar space. Nothing has changed about it in the last year, not the jazz music playing on the overhead speakers, not the faded wallpaper. He's already spotted the waitress who waited on him and Jack and he's only been in the restaurant for ten seconds. He moves closer to Sebastian, a surprising wave of hunger striking him as soon as he takes a whiff of cheese enchiladas floating past on a tray, but something else strikes him too, out of nowhere, and he taps Sebastian on the back.

"I have to go to the bathroom. I'll be right back."

"All right," Sebastian says. "We're that booth over there."

He points at the back of the restaurant, and Charlie manages a relieved sigh when he sees it's not the same booth he and Jack flirted in. That booth is in the left corner, where a group of four, a family it appears, fights over a plate of nachos.

Charlie smiles at his boyfriend and heads to the right side of the restaurant, no struggle this time to find the men's restroom. He's forced to wait outside the door for nearly a minute as someone flushes and washes his hands, but as soon as the middle-aged man steps out, Charlie walks in, locks the door behind him, and does his business. He washes his hands in the lukewarm water and grabs two paper towels from the dispenser, when he catches his gaze in the mirror. He remembers this mirror. The mirror he studied his face in mere seconds before he first said hello

to Jack. The mirror that featured a pale, scrawny little boy staring back at him, nothing but fear on his face. Charlie wouldn't be able to recognize that version of himself anymore, because that person is gone. The person in the mirror now, with the longer blond hair and the stronger jawline and the chiseled cheekbones is still Charlie but a different Charlie, someone's who gone to Hell and back, but also someone who still has a chance at happiness, if he can let it in.

There's a loud knock on the door. Charlie ignores the banging, as he steps away from the mirror and dries his hand with the paper towels. When he finishes, he spots the trashcan in the corner. He rolls up the two wet towels into a ball, closes his right eye, aims.

Another knock.

"Just a minute!" Charlie shouts, and then he launches the ball into the air, past the toilet, straight into the trashcan on his first attempt. "Bulls-eye."

A third knock, this one the loudest of all.

"Okay, okay, I'm leaving," Charlie says.

He yanks opens the door and means to keep walking, but his chest slams against Sebastian's.

"Jeez, Charlie," he says. "You took forever."

"Oh. It's you."

"Yes, it's me. You have a problem with that?"

"No. But I do have a problem with you rushing me, Sebastian."

Charlie grins, and so does Sebastian, as Charlie darts his eyes around the corner. Nobody's walking toward the restroom, not a waiter or a waitress or a customer of any kind.

He latches hold of Sebastian's shirt. "I don't like being rushed at all."

Charlie pulls him into the bathroom and shuts the door fast. He locks the door again, this time twice to be extra sure, then wraps his arms around his boyfriend and starts kissing his neck. Sebastian doesn't do anything at first, and Charlie wonders if he'll tell him no, since this poorly lit room isn't anything close to romantic, but Sebastian kisses him back, hard, bringing his hands under Charlie's shirt. Charlie lets him. He always lets him. He trusts Sebastian with everything, and so Charlie removes his shirt, and then removes Sebastian's, and they keep kissing, the way they've kissed a hundred times before, never ones to play innocent when they're far away from home, perfectly content to take advantage of any private moment that's made available, even for mere seconds at a time. Charlie dips his tongue in Sebastian's mouth, only for a second, before he takes it out, like a tease, the sounds of footsteps emanating in the hallway.

They smile at each other, smiles that suggest this passionate rendezvous may be interrupted, but only for a short while.

"I should probably go," Charlie says. "Don't want someone giving away our table."

He puts his shirt back on and hands Sebastian's his, as Sebastian chuckles and says, "Good idea. And I did, actually, have to pee."

Charlie laughs, backs up against the door, and the two share another marathon kiss on the lips, one that's so soft and sensual Charlie weakens at the knees, he can't help himself. He opens his eyes wide, first to look at Sebastian's kind face, then to look at the ridiculous wallpaper above him, the endless magazine cutouts of scantily clad women dressed in bikinis.

"Sorry, ladies," Charlie says, bringing his hands to Sebastian's cheeks. "This one's mine. All mine."

"As long as you want me to be," Sebastian says. "I'm yours, Charlie."

They share one final kiss, and then Charlie leaves the restroom and carefully speeds down the hallway, his eyes welling up with tears again, this time for reasons he can't even pinpoint. Because he has the best boyfriend in the world? Maybe. Because he doesn't deserve that kind of love, especially when he's done some truly terrible things? More likely. But he suppresses his tears the best he can as soon as other patrons appear around him, and as a waiter walks past him holding a pitcher of margaritas.

Charlie takes his seat in the booth, where there are two ice waters already on the table, along with a basket of chips and salsa. He eats two of the chips, waiting patiently for Sebastian to return, and when he tosses a third chip in his mouth, the memory of Lisa in her bedroom always hogging the potato chips smacks him from every side. He chuckles to himself, then takes out his phone and scrolls up through his photos. He's forced to bypass the pictures from the last few months, almost all taken with Sebastian, to get to the previous year where he has a large collection of selfies with Lisa. In physics class frowning after they've both failed an exam. At Tahoe about to jump into the freezing lake. At the gym on Halloween flexing like they're world champion bodybuilders. Charlie looks at a few more, then starts scrolling back down, to recent months, to the endless Sebastian photos, as well as two with his dad, even one with an aggravated Mrs. Wickers on his last day of high school.

Charlie swipes his finger all the way to the last picture he's taken on the phone, the picture he almost forgot he took of him and Isabelle sitting outside their graduation ceremony. It's the first picture he's ever taken with Isabelle, likely also to remain his last. But the closer he examines the well-framed, perfectly lit selfie, the more obvious they both appear to be close friends, the way their shoulders are pushed together, the way their slightly grim but still upbeat half-smiles work as mirror images. Charlie never got to know Isabelle as much as he would have

liked to, but he can't deny she will forever share a small, essential piece of his heart, and he hopes, beyond all hope, she goes on to live a good and prosperous life. A happy life. Maybe he'll catch her on the red carpet one day.

He puts the phone away as soon as Sebastian returns from the bathroom, already shoving five of the chips in his mouth before he sits down. He wraps his arm around Charlie's back and joins him at the back of the booth, not afraid to get close and show a little PDA. Charlie reaches for his hand, and Sebastian takes it. They keep staring at each other, neither one having to say a word, until the waitress appears before them. It's the same one from last summer, with the bright pink lipstick, her hair now transformed into an adorable black bob.

She looks at Charlie, her pen tapping against her notepad. "Welcome back," she says.

Her words surprise him, how could they not? This woman actually remembers Charlie? After ten months? He sits up straight, keeping his grip tight on Sebastian's hand, his other hand resting against his phone, the source of so many memories, plenty of pain and regret, but also strength and purpose, and love, of course love. Charlie doesn't have a clue what his future will bring, what new memories he gets to make next, but he's going to spend the rest of his life trying to be his best self, his true self. It's all he can do.

"Thanks," Charlie says. "I'm really happy to be here."