

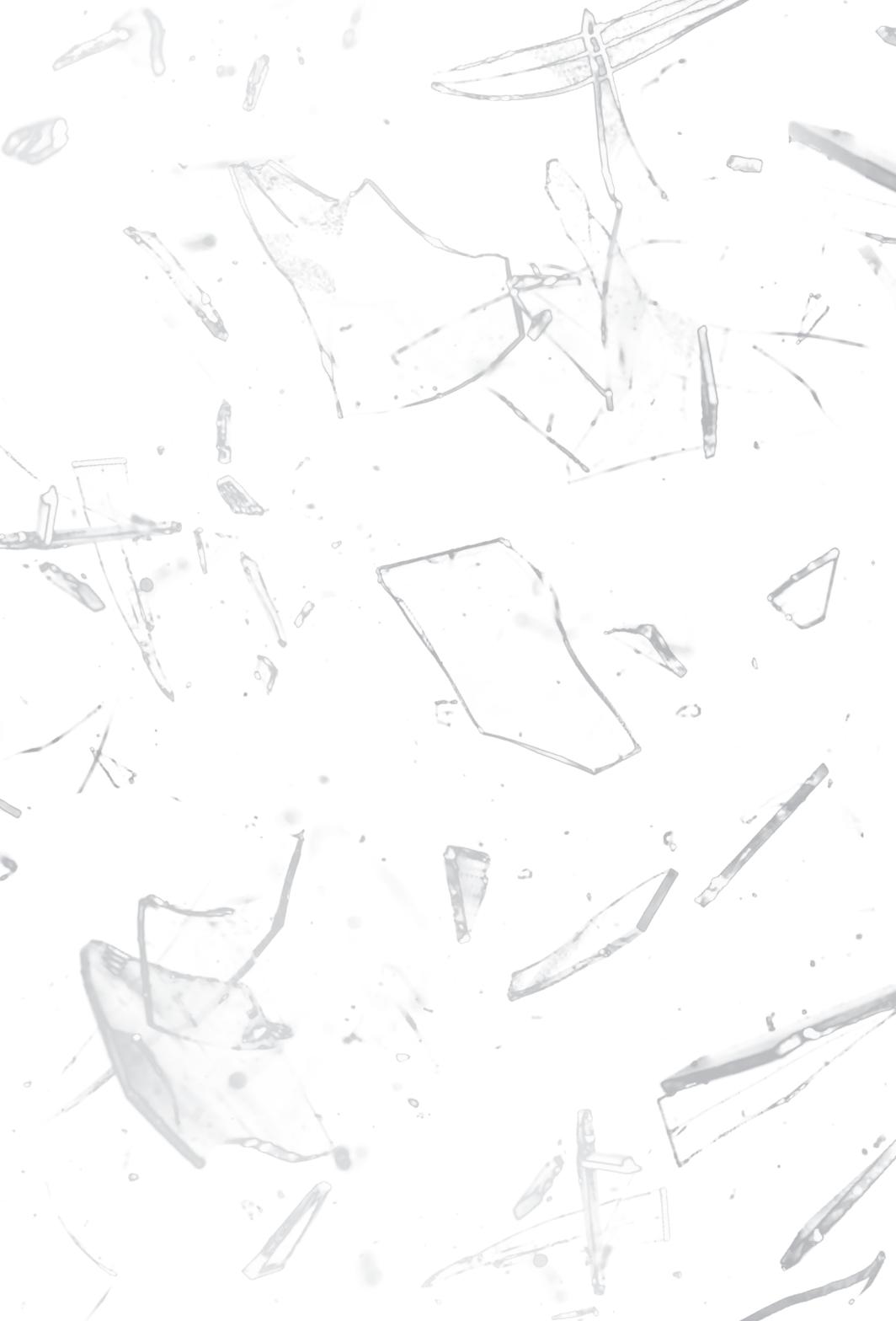
Love makes us do bad things

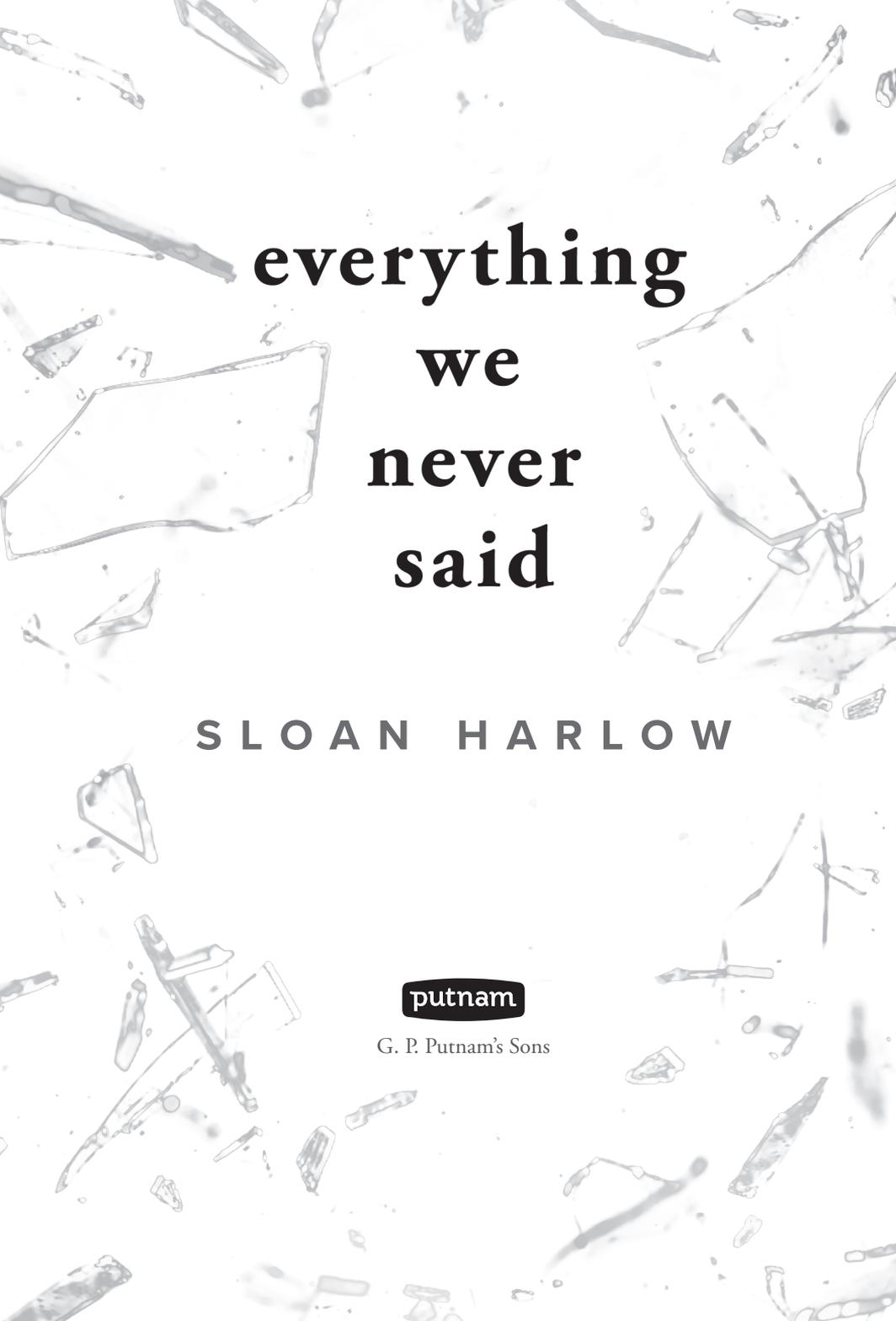
everything
we
never
said



SLOAN HARLOW

**everything
we
never
said**



A background image showing a microscopic view of ice crystals, likely from a snowflake, with various geometric shapes and intricate patterns. The crystals are rendered in shades of gray and white against a light background.

**everything
we
never
said**

S L O A N H A R L O W

putnam

G. P. Putnam's Sons

G. P. Putnam's Sons
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by G. P. Putnam's Sons,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by Alloy Entertainment LLC

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

G. P. Putnam's Sons is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.
The Penguin colophon is a registered trademark of Penguin Books Limited.

Visit us online at PenguinRandomHouse.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 9780593855720

\$PrintCode

Printed in the United States of America

LSCC

Design by Cindy De la Cruz
Text set in Adobe Garamond Pro and Proxima Nova

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

To all the Hayleys and Ellas in the world
and anyone else who's ever felt lost and alone

chapter 1

ella

Thick waves of rain assault my bedroom window, the lightning and thunder of a Georgia storm cracking this Monday morning wide open. I've been awake for hours, listening to the wind howl, fantasizing that a swirling gale will rip through my wall and sweep me away.

The floor creaks just outside my room. I can see Mom's shadow shift beneath the door. The wood groans beneath her feet. The sound of indecision. To knock on her daughter's door or not?

Mom leaves, her footfalls retreating back to her bedroom.

Not, apparently.

A year ago, she would have burst in, and I would have gotten an earful for still being under the covers. A year ago, her silence would have been inconceivable. But a year ago, everything was different. I've earned this silence, heavy as a stone around my neck. And with this penance, I throw back the covers and do the impossible:

I get ready for my first day of senior year at North Davis High.

Even though it feels like a different lifetime, I still remember how stressed I was on the first day of eleventh grade. No amount of argan oil could sleek away the Georgia humidity from my frizzy black hair. The cat-eye makeup that had looked so femme fatale the night before now made me look like I wanted to hold Gotham City for ransom with laughing gas.

Panicked, I had texted a selfie to my favorite person in the world with the caption **Help**.

Hayley's response had been immediate. **Are you kidding? You look hot AF. Just come over real quick, I can help your hair. Georgia summers got nothing on my straightener.**

But today?

Today, I put on the first thing my toes touch on the bedroom floor: the same jeans I wore yesterday (and the day before that, and the day before that) and a gray sweatshirt stained with last week's salsa. I can't remember the last time I looked in a mirror.

Grief has opened a canyon between me and that stupid girl from a year ago, whose greatest disasters were bad eyeliner and flyaways. How I hate her.

How I long for her.

Walking back into the halls of North Davis High, I feel like I'm not returning as Ella, but as Shadow Ella, the living ghost girl. The thought feels like a paper cut on my heart. I wish I *were* a ghost. Maybe then I could stretch across the realms and actually still talk to Hayley. Tell her the important things.

Like the fact that Albert Wonsky now has her locker. She'd groan and say something like *Please, please rescue my pictures of Pedro Pascal before my husband is drowned in anime porn*, and I would laugh and tell her, *Sorry, too late*.

I'd tell her the dent is still there. The one from when I kicked a

locker after getting a B in Latin. And so is the dent she kicked right next to it. “For plausible deniability,” she had said. “Not what that means,” I’d said back.

I’d tell her there’s still pink birthday candle wax smeared in the alcove by the music room. The one where Sawyer Hawkins and I had crouched, grinning madly as we jumped out with balloons and a lit cupcake to scream, “Happy birthday!”

Sawyer.

His name feels like a fist twisting my stomach. I can’t think about him today. It’s already too much. If I do, my rib cage will crack all over again.

Which is why this is the exact moment Sawyer walks into view. There he is, at the end of the hall, towering above Mike Lim as they discuss something that has Sawyer’s handsome face breaking out into a crooked grin.

It hits me so hard, I have to stop walking. I lean against a wall and clutch my books so tightly that the words *CALCULUS I* will probably be embossed into my sternum for days.

As if he can sense my presence, Sawyer suddenly glances in my direction. I stop breathing. For the first time since the funeral, I’m seeing Sawyer’s soft brown eyes.

Except there’s nothing soft about the look he’s giving me.

Sawyer, the only boy I’ve ever known to celebrate month anniversaries with tiny, perfect gifts, who happily supplied us with popcorn and Sprite throughout an entire *Twilight* marathon when Hayley felt sick, who loved my best friend as much as I did . . .

That Sawyer is currently shooting me a look of such fury that I instantly feel like puking.

I knew it. *He blames me.*

I should hold his gaze. I should let his judgment sear me. It’s what I deserve, for what I stole from him. From her.

But instead, I whirl around, swallowing a sob, ready to sprint down the hall, out of school, maybe forever. But I end up slamming directly into Mr. Wilkens.

“*Of!* Easy, there, tiger!” The school psychologist stumbles back, his hands shooting out to grasp my shoulders and keep me from falling.

“God, I’m *so* sorry,” I choke out, mortified.

“No, no, Ella, you’re fine. I’m fine.” He ducks his chin, trying to catch my eye. “Hey. *Hey*. I’m glad we bumped into each other. How are you?”

I shrug, not trusting my voice.

“That well, huh?” Mr. Wilkens is usually clean shaven, but he has some scruff along his jaw. His typically bright blue eyes look smudged today, the color of bruises. Maybe he’s one of those counselors who actually cares about his students. Maybe he’s sad this morning too.

It’s a nice thought.

“Ella,” he says, “I know today is hard. And I hope you know I’m here for you.” He looks like he wants to say more, but the bell rings, interrupting his thought. “Ah, saved by the bell.” He laughs. “Don’t be late to class. We’ll talk soon, okay?”

He watches me walk away, concern furrowing his brow. It’s so kind, how he’s worried. How he wants to help. *Don’t bother, Mr. Wilkens*, I should tell him. *Save your effort and time for students who aren’t lost causes. Students who deserve it.*

Students who didn’t kill their best friends.

FOR THE ENTIRE DAY, I try to be invisible. I try to ignore the accusing glares and the soft stares of sympathy, eyes full of pity. But it’s impossible. When I walk by a crowd of girls at the water fountain, a hush falls over them. In English, Seema Patel, a girl I haven’t spoken to since

elementary school, leans over and offers me a bag of Sour Patch Kids. “Figured you could use it.”

And when I’m standing at my locker before lunch, I’m swarmed by people I’d hoped to avoid all day: the old crew. Well, what’s left of them, anyway. Nia Wiley, Beth Harris, Rachael Evans, and even Scott Logan appear at my shoulder. Sawyer’s absence is notable. But there’s no hole that can compare to the most obvious one, the size of a crater.

These are Hayley’s friends, really. Nia and Beth ran track with her, Beth and Rachael have been dating since freshman year, and Scott is like a barnacle that you can’t scrape off, no matter how hard you try—half comic relief, half arrogant teenage boy. Hayley brought me into the group, and without her here, the center won’t hold. Another week or so of me avoiding their calls and I’ll be flung off into my own orbit, which will make everyone more comfortable.

For now, though, Beth throws her arms around my neck.

“Ella, where have you been? I was so worried when I didn’t hear from you! I called you, like, every day this summer!”

Nia reaches over to gently pry Beth off me. “And, like *I* said, I probably wouldn’t have picked up either if you were binge calling me every day.”

Beth pouts, leaning back against Rachael, and Nia shakes her head, shooting me an apologetic look. “We just wanted to see how you were doing, Ella. I mean, other than the obvious.”

“Yeah, we miss you.” Rachael gives me a small smile; Beth nods in agreement. Nia elbows Scott, who’s standing behind them, frowning down at his phone.

“Yes, Ella, ditto, we’re totally here for you.” Scott only looks up from his phone for half a second.

Nia glares at him, then turns to me, her eyes softening. “Girl. How are you?”

Beth and Rachael look nervous. Scott's not paying attention. I'd take all of that over Nia's compassionate, too-knowing gaze.

"It's been tough, but I'm fine. I promise." I do my best to smile as I close my locker. "You guys don't have to worry about me. I appreciate it, I do. But I'm good."

Beth and Rachael look relieved. Nia frowns.

"Ella, you know you can—"

"You heard her," Scott cuts in as the bell rings. "She's fine. Her chakras are unblocked, her aura's good, her Mercury's in retrograde or whatever. I'm gonna be late to Spanish."

Nia glares at his retreating form but doesn't push it. For once, I'm grateful that Scott's sort of a dick.

It doesn't end with my old friends. Every teacher wants to check in with me too.

Just like Mr. Wilkens, they take me gently by the elbow, their voices low, and ask me how I'm doing. What do they expect me to tell them? What are *any of them* expecting me to tell them during the three minutes between classes? All the things that I haven't been able to tell my parents or the parade of mental health professionals in the four months Hayley has been gone? I give them the only answer I can, the only answer they want to hear: "Fine. I'm doing fine."

By some miracle, time keeps moving, bringing me closer and closer to the end of the day. Even so, it feels like I'm in a rowboat, the wooden sides filled with leaking holes, each one a memory—the now-empty desk in third period, the lunch table we'd sat at for three years taken over by freshman. The ocean is churning, and I'm fighting to plug up each leak, to keep the rushing waters at bay. The waves crash and I nearly capsize, but I manage to stay afloat.

At 3:15 p.m., the bell rings.

Finally.

I'm sprinting toward the front doors when a voice stops me.

“Ms. Graham! I’ve been looking for you.” Ms. Langley, the pottery teacher, is beckoning to me from the doorway of the art room. I glance longingly at the double doors at the end of the hall, at the flickering EXIT sign, then walk over to her.

“Hi, Ms. Langley,” I say, readjusting the bag of books at my shoulder, every one of my polite Southern instincts at war with my desperation to leave.

“I just wanted to give you something real quick.” She holds up a finger, and then reappears a moment later with a small cardboard box in her hands. On the side, handwritten in Sharpie, are the words ELLA AND HAYLEY. Inside are two handmade ceramic mugs.

And just like that, the tiny rowboat that I’d managed to keep upright all day starts to go under.

“I thought you might want these,” Ms. Langley whispers, sounding nearly as sad as I feel. “They didn’t get fired in the kiln until after . . . Well, I’ve been holding on to them for you.”

“Um,” I say, blinking down into the box.

It had been Hayley’s idea to make mugs for each other. Coffee cups for when we roomed together at the University of Georgia. Hayley had been so proud when she’d shown me her design, a mug with an ornate *D* stamped into the side. *D* as in . . . *denture*. When I’d protested that I was *not* going to be drinking out of a *denture mug*, she’d held up a hand.

“Wait, listen. This is a mug you’ll use for life. I’m just preparing for the best phase of our friendship: when we’re old and senile. Think of how fun that’ll be.” Hayley’s eyes had flashed their green mischief. “Every time we see each other, we’ll be new best friends all over again.” She’d shrugged. “And you’ll have a place to keep your dentures.”

Both mugs had turned out beautifully.

I barely register saying goodbye to Ms. Langley. I exit the school in a daze, unable to stop looking down at the mugs, clinking against

each other in the cardboard box. I'd like to look away. I want to, I do. I want to chuck them into a ravine, but I know it would be like pulling out an organ and stomping on it. I somehow need these mugs to keep going.

I run my hand over the one Hayley made. There's an indent on the bottom, one she forgot to smooth. I peer closer and see little swirling lines, a pattern.

Hayley's fingerprint.

Distantly, I register that there is a world around me. Maybe some grass, a sky. Raised voices from far away.

But right now, all I can focus on is pressing my finger into that little indent.

It all happens so fast.

One moment, there are headlights in front of me, a bus barreling at my face. There are screams, the bellowing of a horn like a great dragon. My heart is in my throat, my last thought, *Protect the mugs*, and then I'm flying backward.

I don't die.

I slam back into something solid. My brain thinks, ridiculously, of a brick wall, but this wall is warm and has a heartbeat. Someone pulled me out of the way. Someone saved me.

I tilt my chin up to find myself looking into the wide, panicked eyes of Sawyer Hawkins.

"Sawyer!" I gasp, stumbling out of his arms to face him. My book bag has spilled onto the school lawn, but I'm still clutching the cardboard box, mugs miraculously unbroken.

"Ella." Sawyer's panting, his face slack with shock, one hand on his chest, the other pulling at the roots of his thick hair. He takes a few steady breaths, closes his eyes. When he opens them once more, they're blazing with anger.

"Ella," he growls, "what the *hell* were you thinking? You could have

died. Like, literally *died*. If I hadn't been here, if I hadn't been watching? *Christ*."

"Why were you?" It takes me a minute to realize I've said this out loud.

"What?" He stops short, confused.

"Watching me? In fact"—I swallow—"why even save me?" Horribly, my eyes spill over. I can't pretend I'm fine anymore.

Color drains from Sawyer's face. The anger in his features evaporates, and if it's at all possible, he seems more stricken by my words than by my near miss. He licks his lips, mouth dropping open, but nothing comes out.

I want to hear his answer. A microscopic diamond of hope embedded in my stomach is begging me to stay, to listen to what he has to say.

But I don't. I can't.

I know the answer. And anything kind out of his mouth would be pity, or a mercy I don't deserve. I whirl around and walk away.

He doesn't call after me. That tiny prick of hope wants me to look over my shoulder, just once. But I don't.

And I vow to never speak to Sawyer again.

chapter 2

ella

On the bus ride home, I press my forehead against the dirty window, replaying on repeat the moment I thought I would die. The rush of headlights, the smell of burning rubber and diesel. No time to scream, to think of anything but the mugs currently clinking in the box on my lap.

Hayley, did you have time to think?

Knowing Hayley, she probably would have cracked her knuckles and said, *All right, let's see what you got.*

I still don't understand how she can be gone, while I'm still here.

And, it seems, neither can Sawyer.

What would he have said if I'd waited for his answer? Would he have told me how he *really* felt?

I know Sawyer. He's no monster. Of *course* he was going to say, *Why, yes, Ella, I am quite glad you did not become a meat smear on the pavement before my very eyes.* Even if deep down, he thinks it should have been me.

The truth is, it was so close to being me. Or least, that's what they told me in the hospital, where I had awoken with cracked ribs, a concussion, and no memory of the previous twenty-four hours.

"A trauma response," the doctors said. "It's normal." As if there's anything normal about any of this. They said I might get my memories back, but so far . . . nothing. And based on what the cops told me, I don't know if I do want them back.

It had happened after a party at Scott's house last spring, just weeks before the end of junior year. Witnesses said they'd seen me drinking a beer, then ushering a drunk, upset Hayley to my car before I got behind the wheel. We'd been driving home when I crashed my car through the guardrail just before the Silver River Bridge. They found me in the driver's seat, crumpled against a boulder on the sloped embankment above the churning water of the river.

And they hadn't found Hayley at all.

All that remained was a shattered hole in the windshield where she'd been flung from the car, her blood on the jagged glass. She hadn't been wearing her seat belt, and they told me if the impact hadn't killed her, the river surely would have. Infamous for its strong current, jagged rocks, and sudden drops—there's not one soul in Cedarbrook who doesn't know how treacherous those waters are.

So treacherous, in fact, that they couldn't even retrieve her body. They tried, of course, but with the sweep of the current, there was no telling where she'd ended up, and even their best divers were hesitant to enter the river. After a fruitless week and a close call for one of the rescuers, they called it off.

Hayley was gone, and it was all my fault. It was me who'd had the beer. Me who had driven. Me who had killed her.

The bus makes a groaning stop, and we are finally at my neighborhood.

By the time I'm stepping onto my driveway, the afternoon sun is

golden and casting long shadows on the lawn. Even with the waning light, the humidity is stifling.

The house is quiet when I step inside. A year ago, Mom would have swarmed me at the door. *Let's go over your syllabi, have you gotten the swim meet schedule yet, did Mrs. Prescott get my email?* My younger sister, Jess, would have given me a sympathetic eye roll, and not too long after, Dad would have gotten home from work, rescuing me with a quick joke that would have Mom smacking his arm, laughing despite herself.

Half the time, Hayley was with me, in which case Mom would have fussed over her instead, overbearing as a mother hen with her chick, paying no mind that she was of a different brood. Hayley had loved it. Even when Mom had been scolding her for getting Cs.

I hear a mewl at my feet, where a little gray cat is rubbing against my leg. She blinks her green eyes up at me and meows again.

"Where's your collar, Midna? You're naked again." I balance the box of mugs on one hip and lean down to scoop her up in one arm. She purrs when I press my face into her fur as I carry her up to my room. I shoulder my door open, Midna hopping from my arm to curl up on my desk, the mugs tinkling at the movement. With a pinch of my heart, I set the box down, slide it under my bed.

That's when I notice what Midna's pawing at on my desk. I pick up the dog-eared copy of *The Coven's Secrets*, the second book in the Realms of Wonder series. A favorite of mine.

"You haven't read it yet, right?" Jess is leaning against my door frame, her green eye shadow and dark lip gloss making her striking features pop, no doubt courtesy of her best friend, Kelly, who's already a beauty guru at age fourteen. I tamp down the spike of envy at the image of Kelly giggling as she swipes a brush across my sister's eyelids.

I clear my throat.

“I didn’t even know it was out yet,” I whisper. With everything that’s happened, I’d forgotten about it completely. Something I’d marked on my calendar a year ago, eagerly awaited. I can’t remember the last time I’d even thought to pick up a book.

“No spoilers, but it’s good.” Jess shrugs a shoulder. “Thought it’d be a nice distraction.”

“Thanks,” I say, genuinely touched. The one word is all I can manage right now, but I hope she knows how much I mean it.

Jess nods. “Also.” She raises her hand, a worn purple collar dangling from her finger, bell tinkling. “It was in Mom’s monstera pot. The leaves are all squished again. She won’t be happy.”

“Girls?” My mom’s voice follows the sounds of the back door opening and shutting as Jess and I fasten the collar back on a squirming Midna. Midna has trotted off (probably to go sleep in Mom’s plants again) by the time Mom appears in the doorway. She’s been gardening. Her forehead is glistening with sweat, and she smells like the sun. But her peach blouse is still immaculate, her fingernails clean.

My perfect mother. Standing here, I feel it acutely: the gap between who I am today and who I once was—her perfect daughter.

And with the way her dark eyes are holding my gaze, it looks like she feels it too. But that sorrow? That disappointment? Yeah, I deserve it.

After a second of uncomfortable silence, Jess clears her throat.

That seems to snap Mom out of it. “Can you both come downstairs and help me with dinner? Your dad will be home soon.”

In the kitchen, my mom pulls potatoes out of the pantry and hands them to Jess while I go to the sink to wash dishes.

“So,” Mom says, looking at me. “How did today go?”

The question I’d been dreading. And have no idea how to answer. Thankfully, I don’t have to.

“Fine,” Jess cuts in. “Everyone said sophomore year is way harder,

but I think it was just a scare tactic. And Kelly's in two of my classes. In fact . . ."

I send a silent prayer of thanks to Jess as she chatters while slicing through potatoes. I pick up a sponge and start scrubbing. But Jess is done too soon, and Mom's eyes turn to me. The front door opens, and I'm saved again.

"Hey, I'm home," Dad calls.

He strides into the kitchen, arms open, his dark beard stretched into a smile. "There are my beautiful women!" He hugs Jess, kisses Mom on the head, and turns to me, his hazel eyes softening. "How you doing, kiddo?"

"Um," I say, biting my lip, and I nearly tear up at the gentle tone of his voice.

"Did you get to talk to Coach Carter today?" Mom joins me at the sink to rinse the pot of rice for dinner.

I close my eyes. Coach Carter, the swim coach. I had hoped to avoid this conversation for at least another week. I toy with the idea of lying, but honestly? I don't have the energy for it.

"No."

Jess ceases her chopping, and Dad shifts uncomfortably at my side.

"Was she out sick?" My mom's hand swirls in the pot of rice, turning the water milky white.

"Mom," I say, avoiding her gaze, "I didn't talk to Coach Carter because I'm not rejoining swim team."

Her hand stills. Her shoulders tense. She stiffly carries the heavy pot to the rice cooker, all three of our eyes following her. All three of us waiting for her fierce reprisal.

But to my shock, all she says is "But you love swimming." She keeps her back to us, her tone uncharacteristically measured. "Since you were little. You broke a school record last year." When she turns

to face me, I'm startled at the pain in her face, the fear. "What about your future, Ella? Coach Carter said last year that scouts from all the top schools were already emailing her. Think about that, Ella. Think about—"

Dad puts a hand on Mom's shoulder. "It's only the first day back, Michelle," he murmurs.

For an instant, something familiar and razor-sharp flashes in my mom's dark brown eyes. We all feel it, Jess and Dad going stiff. But in a moment, it's gone. Deflated, Mom gives a single nod before turning back to the rice cooker in silence.

Jess resumes chopping potatoes with pursed lips, and Dad kisses my head. "Be right back. Gotta get out of these stuffy clothes." He yanks on his tie with a half-hearted goofy face, trying to lighten the mood. It only works a little. He shoots me a sad smile and makes his way upstairs.

I blink at my mom's back in disbelief.

Mom comes from a line of fierce, warrior, machete-wielding women. She used to tell the story of how her lola (Tagalog for "grandmother," so my mom's grandmother) dragged *my* lola and her siblings into sugarcane fields to hide from enemy troops in the Philippines during World War II. My lola still has some bullet shrapnel in her left foot.

I'm glad Mom never had to test her guerrilla chops, but without a doubt, this is a woman who could make a soldier cry. She's a woman who wasn't too frightened to leave all her friends and family behind to build a life from nothing in a strange land.

A woman who's currently crumpling in our kitchen, her shoulders sagging as she swallows her words.

And I did this to her. I did this to all of us. For a wild moment, I'd give anything to hear the strident cadence of a classic Mom lecture. To hear her voice raised at me for an A-minus on a World History

exam. Because that would mean that, on top of everything else I've done, I hadn't broken this family.

That I hadn't broken my unbreakable mother.

Wordlessly, Jess finishes her chopping and goes upstairs to change her clothes. I continue to finish washing the dishes, the silence stretching between my mother and me, until she says this:

"Hayley's mom called earlier."

I drop the plate I'm holding into the sink, where it shatters with a loud crash. Mom frowns at the broken plate but keeps her mouth shut, no admonishment to be careful.

"What did she want?" With trembling fingers, I pluck the shards of ceramic out of the washbasin, my heartbeat fluttering in my throat.

"You need to go over there after school Friday. She wants your help." Mom sighs. "She sounded *awful*."

Nausea rises in me, sudden and fierce. "Mom, what could I possibly . . . How can I help her?"

"She wants you to pack up Hayley's room." I don't realize I've been squeezing my fist until I feel a sharp pain. When I look down at the shards in my hand, my palm is filling with blood.

"Mom," I croak. "Please, don't make me do this. Please."

I'll rejoin the swim team, I want to tell her. I'll go to any school you want me to, but please don't send me into the den of my dead best friend's memories.

Mom turns from the stove to face me. I'm surprised to see the tinge of regret in her eyes. "Ella, she told me she can't even go inside Hayley's room." Her lips tighten. "She is all alone in that house now. She has no one else. And no one else knew Hayley the way you did. You'll know what she would have wanted to do with her things."

I can't breathe. I want to scream, *How the hell should I know what Hayley would have wanted? No seventeen-year-old discusses their own death and plans for it.*

“I can’t do it,” I say.

Mom looks sadly at me. “I know you don’t want to, Ella. I’m sorry. But you have no choice.” She opens the lid of the rice cooker, the smell of steamed rice, usually so lovely, making my stomach roil.

“Friday afternoon. Go there straight after school. She’ll be expecting you.”