Nancy Paulsen Books
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, 2023



Visit us online at PenguinRandomHouse.com.

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

Book manufactured in Canada

ISBN 9780593406847
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FRI

Edited by Stacey Barney
Design by Eileen Savage | Text set in Adobe Caslon Pro

# FORGIVE ME NOT

JENNIFER BAKER

Nancy Paulsen Books

# Forgive Me Not

# PART I

## The Sentence

## CHAPTER 1

# VIOLETTA

*Days in detention: 22*

𝍸 𝍸 𝍸 𝍸 ||

Right in front of me is a TV with my crying face on it. In the here and now, I'm pretty sure I'm all out of tears. I'm over my eyes itching and having a chapped nose after constantly wiping it with paper towels from the detention center bathroom. (Fingering a tissue, I'd almost forgotten how soft something can be.) I'm dried out, but the me on-screen isn't. *That* Violetta's covered in snot, salty tears, and guilt. I don't turn away or move. I watch myself on the monitor because my family's watching me too.

My counselor, Susan, grabs another tissue from the table on her side of the couch. She offers it to me and says under her breath, "If you need a break, I can turn this off for a moment."

"I wish it were me!" screeches from the video. I force myself to keep my chin up. In the video, I make wishes out loud while more echo in my head: I wish I'd listened. I wish I'd stopped myself. I wish I hadn't invited Pascal over that night. I wish . . . a lot.

I stop fiddling with the collar of the jumpsuit Corrections gave me. The sports bra underneath pinches, and the pants

irritate my skin from the starch. They don't fold much when I move. I'm hoping I look better now. But for a second, I wonder if I *should* look like the messy Violetta.

Three weeks earlier my mom and dad stared at me as the ER doctor revealed that their number of kids had gone from three to two. *I* was okay. Scratches, a sore chest, and a mild concussion were my only injuries from the impact of the steering wheel before the airbag inflated. But my little sister was dead. Because of me.

On the TV, Violetta rubs her sleeve across her eyes, swelling the skin around them even more. My own brown eyes bore into me. She's sincere. Violetta on-screen clutches her hands together. She, *me*, asks to be forgiven for everything, not just the night of the accident, but the months before it. I regret my entire freshman year of high school, including the evening I woke up in the hospital. The Violetta in front of me apologizes for all of it.

In a way, this video is me fighting for my place in my family. Do I get to be forgiven and go home without a criminal record? Or do I serve time in confinement or . . . the other option?

Every night that I've been at the facility, I had practiced how to explain to my family what had happened. Two weeks ago, a guard sat me down and Counselor Susan explained that this was my last chance to make my case before sentencing. Just me in a room—really, a gray box—begging for forgiveness from the victims of my crime: my family. They would get to see my video, then "bestow judgment"—Counselor Susan's words, not

mine. After explaining, she set up a camera as little as a matchbook and said, "You may begin your plea."

I was going to be calm in the video. It was time for a plan, not a meltdown. There wasn't much else to do in detention, so why not mull over and over how to ask your family to forgive you for being a horrible daughter. A couple other detained girls gave me advice during meals: Don't be too serious, one said. Be *super* serious, someone else said. Bring up stories to remind your family how much they love you. Show you learned your lesson, that you don't need to be taught one. Be funny. Be remorseful. No matter what: Don't lose it!

But as soon as the camera beeped and the blinking light turned solid to record my plea, I dissolved into the screaming girl on display right now.

I can't take my eyes off the Violetta on-screen. How different she is from me now: She had hope.

"I'm sorry—sorry for everything. And I swear I'll listen and make better decisions. I promise." On the TV, I finish my plea. "*Please* let me come home" is the last thing I say, through sniffles and more snot.

The screen darkens as the fluorescents come back to life. I blink to adjust to the light. The sentencing room is stifling. One wall has a window with black glass while the others are painted indigo. A light bulb hangs above the TV. And the door next to the screen makes a horrible *ca-chink* when the bar to unlock it opens. My reflection reveals nothing once my face fades from the screen. My eyes look shrunken and dim, as if there's nothing behind them. Who could forgive me?

Because of the lights and the itchiness of my clothes, it's tough to keep my shoulders back or my head lifted. All I want to do is curl into a ball and rest.

Beside me on the couch, Counselor Susan looks like a professional in a blazer and heels, her hair in a bun, her super thin legs crossed. She smiles at me, with ruby lips and blushed cheeks, as if there may be good news on the way. She didn't see my parents after my sister's death three weeks ago, the disgust that clouded their faces, how quickly they turned away from me. I shiver and mumble how cold it is, even though it's not with the lights beaming down on me.

I jump at her hand on my shoulder.

"Violetta," my counselor says, "I asked if you were ready."

I stare at her for a moment before it hits me. My trimmed nails dig into my skin. I think I nod.

"Okay." She smiles again, but it's strained. "Would you like me to explain things once more? About what will happen next?"

I think I shake my head no. I think I blink. I think I breathe. But I have no idea, because all of this feels unreal, like I'm watching myself again. My little sister is dead. I'm here waiting to know if I'll be forgiven or not, under juvenile law. I'm one of *those* kids. The type who needs to face justice before they can rejoin society.

I've heard about juvenile offenders. My parents tsk-tsked whenever news about them came on. "Don't be like them. Be *better*," Mom or Dad said before changing the channel from the news to a cooking show or comedy. A click of the remote

erased someone else's reality in favor of something with a happier ending. Always "be better," they encouraged. Be better than the terrified teen who didn't want their parents to find out they were pregnant, so they hid their growing belly, then threw the newborn out like trash. The ones who got in fights that went wrong, way too fast, resulting in casualties. The ones who carried weapons that accidentally went off in school or in someone's hands at home—or, worse, those who used them purposely on others. Supposedly, those teens were a whole other group. Not *me*. Not *my* family. Yet here I am. One of "*those* kids" who screwed up so badly I need to be made into an example.

I must have given her some kind of signal, because Counselor Susan says, "If the light is blue, you're forgiven and you can go back to your family. If it's red . . ." She lowers her head to indicate what I should and do already know.

My chest swells, and my heart beats faster. I grip the armrest, because I can almost see a flicker of blue in the bulb. I could be forgiven. We could start over. I can be better, because I'm their daughter. I could be pardoned. I—

Red.

My hand flies to my mouth. I suck in air, needing to cough it out at the same time.

The screen crackles, and a new face blinks into view. I expect to see my parents, hear them say I'll be sent away and locked up forever, that I can go to hell, for all they care. Instead, it's my older brother, Vin, with the same eyes as me, Mom, and my sister. His tawny skin is shiny, and he bites the corner of

his lip, a gesture he makes before he says something I don't want to hear. He did the same when I asked him if he liked my boyfriend, Pascal, or if he'd please take me to one of his junior hangouts. He'd chew the corner of his lip, and right away I knew I wouldn't like his answer.

"Letta," my brother begins, "I'm sure you saw the red light." His words come in quick bursts, all jumbled, like he wants to toss them out as fast as he can. "You know what that means. However, while we as a family don't yet forgive you . . ." He hesitates. "While as a family we don't yet forgive you, we want to give you the opportunity to learn from this incident. We don't want Viv's death to be for nothing. We need you to"—he clears his throat—"repent."

These aren't *his* words. He'd never say *repent*.

"So . . ." He stops. My brother swallows hard. When he opens his mouth, he doesn't speak.

*Just say it, Vin. Say it!*

"We think it best that you participate in the Trials so that you may understand the severity of this matter. But you know you don't have to take this option."

Of course I don't *have* to, but the other option for no forgiveness—confinement at an upstate juvenile facility—isn't any better. *Is it, Vin?*

"Should you take this option, your first Trial will occur in the next week." Vin leans in, his face large and imposing. His eyes reflect as much pain as I feel right now. All kinds of rumbling moves through me as he speaks. "We do love you. You know that, right?"

The video cuts off, and my brother disappears.

I push my palms into my eyelids. I want to undo everything that's happened. But there's no going back.

*We do love you. You know that, right?* is the only part of the message that sounded like Vin. The only part where I could feel him pull me into a side hug after a fight, after I'd stomped away from his questions about why I was acting differently now that I was in high school. Why did I laugh at everything Pascal and his friends said, even when it wasn't funny? (Because my brother knew what made me laugh, and making fun of other people wasn't it.) He'd say this after catching me stumbling into my room after a night with Pascal. After I had my first, then second, then third tastes of hard lemonades or beer. After splashing water on my face and putting me to bed, Vin would say, "You know I still love you, right? Even though you're acting like an idiot."

It would've been a little better if he hadn't been the one on the video. If he hadn't had that disappointed look I can't erase, reminding me of my parents' faces after the accident.

My counselor is speaking. Her words seep in slowly as she asks the question I dread: "Violetta Chen-Samuels, do you accept participation in the Trials?"

My hands are wet. Guess I wasn't done crying after all.

## CHAPTER 2

# VINCE

*Days since the decision: 22*

Since the accident, our home has been a revolving door of people working for the city, or the state. The morning after the crash, two officers stopped by asking all types of questions: How exactly did my fifteen-year-old sister procure alcohol? Why did my parents leave the car keys where a non-licensed driver could get them? Was Violetta prone to this type of behavior? Every question was a judgment of, "How did you let this happen?" About a week ago, the rep from Detention Services became a constant presence in our home. Our assigned judicator prodded them, encouraged them that next steps had to happen sooner than later. Last week was also when we watched Letta's plea, and it wasn't pretty. (It isn't pretty to rewatch either, if I'm being honest.)

Letta was a hot mess on-screen. Her face was greasy and wet. She screeched apologies and regret. Watching her breakdown was the longest five minutes of my life. Didn't help when the judicator arrived right after, requesting a decision.

"You have three choices," the judicator said, all monotone. "You can forgive the offender so she can come home. You can

*not* forgive her so we can formally confine her in an Albany facility and determine length of sentence based on her crimes. Or you can assign her rehabilitation through the Trials; this way she'll remain detained in the city."

The judicator tugged at his striped necktie and smiled. His grin did not put anyone at ease, even if it seemed like he was trying to. "There's no sense in delaying the inevitable. You have to inform your daughter of your decision," he said.

Mom couldn't keep still. She went from rubbing an ear against her shoulder to rolling or unrolling the sleeves of her robe. Dad tried to hold her, but she didn't want to be held. The judicator glanced at me and said, "Why not have Vincent record your decree?"

Every day since the accident brought up the question of whether Letta should come home or not. How this would be handled. And Detention Services wanted an answer, preferably right then and there.

"Would you prefer she go upstate?" the judicator asked.

"We don't want to send her upstate or away, we just . . ." Mom couldn't finish and Dad didn't take up the end of her sentence like he usually did. Mom concluded with, "We want her to be okay."

The judicator had a tablet in his hand, prepped and ready. "If you choose rehabilitation, which has shown excellent results"—he held up the screen to back-up his statement—"then she can potentially return home sooner. It may be the best option for a case of underage drinking. You do want your daughter to get better, don't you?"

And that was that. In the end, I just couldn't say no to the video.

So several days ago, I sat in front of a camera on a tripod, with a slate backdrop behind me and my parents in front of me. I read the words my family was encouraged by our judicator to recite. The camera zoomed in on my face, so no one else saw how much my right *and* left legs jiggled.

Today is sentencing day. And right now we're watching my sister watch me on-screen. In the video, I glisten from sweat, but it doesn't seem like there are other signs of nerves. My parents are in the corner seated at a metal table, farthest away from the glass separating our viewing room from Violetta's judgment location. By our door stands a guard dressed in a navy uniform. Where we are is slightly larger and just as sparse as the room my sister sits in.

I'm standing at the mirror with folded arms. My breath makes clouds on the surface of the glass. Violetta resembles a mannequin, the way she stares at the TV, at me telling her what's what. She doesn't seem to be breathing or blinking, or awake at all. I press against the glass, waiting for any movement.

There's another reason I agreed to the video:

A week after the accident, literally the day before Viv's funeral, I passed Viv's empty room and peeked inside. Everything was how she left it, but Viv wasn't there. I stepped into her bedroom, and I swear I almost saw Viv tumbling past, asking if I wanted to play. But she was never, ever gonna be there again.

That realization brought me to my knees. The urge to grab

my jacket and head out to get lit one more time was so strong. I mean, I could just start fresh the next day, right? Could've called my teammate Byron and asked him to hook me up like usual instead of going to his source.

Pain pricked my chest so bad it made me realize I'd be no better than Letta if I started clean later. It didn't matter how many times Mom and Dad asked to meet Pascal but Letta, or he, refused. Didn't matter that I could *smell* the sour alcohol on Letta's breath some weekends and warned her this could get worse, quick. Didn't matter that Letta was grounded the night of the accident because earlier that week she'd come home close to midnight and mouthed off to Mom and Dad that she wanted to be left alone—more of Pascal's influence, I'm sure. Since September, Letta said things with Pascal weren't out of control, that she was having *fun* letting loose. I'd said the same thing about the pills I'd swallowed, insisting they were only for when I needed it—finals, big games, anytime I need to be *on*—nothing more than that.

A week after my sister died, I took in everything of hers. A typical seven-year-old's room, with cartoon posters covering teal walls. The half-open drawers under her bed that oozed clothes, puzzle pieces, and toy food stations. A hanging corkboard, with the red envelopes Viv saved after every Chinese New Year and some pictures of our family tacked up.

I sat back on my heels and took a deep breath. That moment in Viv's room was when I knew the sister that remained needed my help.

When my video started, I squinted to see Violetta sitting on

her hands in the darkened room. Now she has the couch in a death grip and no emotion on her face. Is she about to cry? Is she thinking about Viv? Is she hating us, hating *me*?

"We think it best that you participate in the Trials so that you may understand the severity of this matter. But you know you don't have to take this option," I hear myself say. My nails dig deep enough into my biceps to draw blood.

The video ends. I fade away from sight. In our room, my parents hold each other. My mom's eyes gleam in the subtle lights above us. Violetta looks like both of them: Dad's brown skin and wide brow with Mom's lidded eyes and round nose.

The counselor asks Letta if she accepts the Trials. That's when one tear, then another, drops down my sister's face.

My mother grabs Dad's bicep and starts rambling off questions. "Do you think this is a good idea, Albert? Maybe we should've waited? She looks too skinny. I don't—"

"Annie, our daughter needs *help*," Dad says gently. "We have to believe this will be what helps her see things have gone too far."

In the hospital, I held Violetta's hand while she took ragged breaths. Viv was dead. Thrown through the windshield when Letta braked too hard and swerved off the road. The passenger airbag deployed too late. I was so goddamn mad. I'd had the urge to yell and shake Letta, *What the hell were you doing driving?* Thankfully, I didn't do that. I sat back in the chair next to Letta's hospital bed, wondering what we'd do. Wondering if I'd be found out for my wrongs like Violetta had been for hers.

Right now, I expect Letta to try and escape. To curse or

scream or apologize some more. The glass is an unwanted barrier, but it's there, and I kick the wall under it, hard, feeling the sting through my sneaker into my big toe. I haven't felt much besides the withdrawal. This is good, this basic jab of pain.

"Hey!" the guard warns. He takes a few steps toward me.

I kick it again, hoping Violetta can hear me.

The jolt to my shoulders confirms he's not kidding. "What did I say?" The guard's spit trickles inside my ear as he twists my arms behind my back. The stale scent of coffee he had earlier wafts to my nose.

"Get off my son!" my dad roars.

"Vincent!" my mother yells.

I don't look away from my sister. I don't shout at her not to accept, and I don't tell her to accept. I can't take my eyes off Letta, even as the scrape of table and chairs thunders behind me.

My sister wipes her face and says, "I'll do whatever it takes." That's when I go limp in the guard's grip. His hold loosens, and I'm on the ground. The throb in my limbs pounds through my bones, all the way to my temples.

Mom and Dad don't move to help me. They're watching Letta too.

We know that "whatever it takes" is gonna be hell.

## CHAPTER 3

# VIOLETTA

*Days in detention: 22*

𝍸 𝍸 𝍸 𝍸 II

The air feels heavier right after sentencing. It makes me drag my feet on the rocky path from the sentencing building to the girls' main facility. The girls' and boys' detention centers are like a row of broken teeth. Spirals of wire glint on top of the gates sealing us in. On the left is the girls' center. Past these gates and security mounts sits the boys' facility—larger and just as dreadful. Both facilities have athletic fields and sheds where inmates can garden year-round. The visitors' parking lot is practically two city blocks away from the girls' detention center, but it's visible from our athletic field. The staff parking lot is closer to the boys' field. I can already see guards arriving in pairs for their shifts. With their uniforms draped over their shoulders, they walk by inmates without a word or glance. Must be nice to know you can clock out of a place like this.

We barely ever see or hear anyone on the boys' side. Not until days like today, when the boys are also in lines, waiting for judgment. We all exit sentencing after learning if we're

forgiven, doing time upstate, or doing Trials, then we split up to deal with whatever else is scheduled for us that day.

Piedmont Facility is in a part of Queens I'd never been to before. Someone said we could be an island, a forgotten one. That's exactly how it feels. Endless roads and patchy fields, oak and maple trees; the Little Neck Bay divides us from the residential neighborhoods. From my cell, the trees are so far away I can only dream of touching them.

Outdoors, some of the sounds are familiar: The police sirens. The squeak of buses parking, and the *beep beep* when they lower to let off visitors. Even the shouts of inmates on the concrete basketball court is something I cling to, thinking about the times my brother, sister, and I visited the Westbridge playground or one of my brother's lacrosse games. Then there are the other sounds specific to this place: The clank of every door, the static and buzz from electrified fences. The clomping of guards' boots. The jingle of keys chained to their belts, and the click of their security cards on the same chain.

The frost and weight of the air is nothing compared to how it feels being sentenced to the Trials. I'm in a loose line with six other girls and guards in front and behind us. We're led out of one building and toward another. I'm nudged from behind.

"It's too cold for daydreaming," Eve says. Dried tears are two chalky lines down her dark-brown skin. A knit hat covers her ears and her pixie cut. Apparently, none of us are ever going to stop crying.

Serena gives Eve a quick pat on the back before stuffing her

hands into her assigned coat. Serena's neon-pink dreadlocks are tied back into two pigtails on either side of her head. With her collar pulled up, I can't see the lilac tattoo on Serena's neck. Its colors usually stand out on her beige and freckled skin.

When we came out of our sentencing rooms, Eve shrugged at me. "Nothing yet," she mumbled once we got back in line. "The *victims*"—she didn't hide her dislike for the word—"requested more time deciding if they forgive me or not."

I didn't know what to say. What *is* there to say?

But Serena was able to figure my news out. "It's written all over your face," she said. "Trials?"

A wipe of my nose was all it took to confirm it for her.

"Same, girl. Good times," Serena said with a suck of her teeth. She twirled a finger in the air in mock celebration.

Some of the other girls around me look younger, some older, and most are taller than me and Eve—including Serena, who's said she's the shortest one in her family at five-eleven. The facilities house juveniles age thirteen to seventeen. Eighteen means you're an adult and, when charged with a crime, do actual time at the upstate prison. If you're younger than thirteen, you go through a "process" where officials determine if you're old enough to be considered a juvenile. I'm fifteen. Everyone insists I'm old enough to understand what I did and that I need to take responsibility.

And I will. *Whatever it takes.*

Twenty-two days ago, Eve and I arrived at the facility on the same day in the same white bus. Serena came a week after that. Her cell is in Eve's dorm. Most of March has flown by with

me anxious about what's next. Even with a kind of answer, I'm still all nerves, wondering what I'll have to do to see my family again. While Serena and I wait to hear what our Trials are, Eve will be back here next Saturday, sentencing day, hoping for an answer. Not knowing your sentence is its own kind of punishment. The chill doesn't leave me once I'm inside the facility. It's just different now that I know I'll be here a bit longer. We're patted down to make sure nothing was brought over from the sentencing building, but it's quick—a relief, considering how these checks can go. I'm taken to my dorm while Eve, Serena, and the other girls split off with guards to theirs. Guards escort inmates to and from our dorm whenever we want, or need, to go somewhere else in the facility. No one can go anywhere alone in case, as Counselor Susan told me, "something happens." She didn't explain what that meant; she didn't have to.

My "dorm" is a corridor with cells above and below. There's a kind of common area filled with rectangular metal tables with stools connected to them. Concrete walls and military-green doors separate inmates from everything. Pipes are exposed in the ceilings. Holes appear in random places. Dents are messily filled with putty where the wall and floor meet.

My home these past weeks is quiet. Nerves and nothingness keep most of us mute in the dorm area. Some girls play cards, others sit on the floor to read by the window, and others stare outside. From here our view shows us the entry and exit of the facility, and who gets bused in and out. Right now, I see a van bringing in more girls. Even from inside, I can hear the burr of the gates opening. Since everything is limited, from TV to

the internet, I can see why watching the ins and outs of the facility is its own entertainment. What we have in real-time is the makeshift garden where some girls farm in a hut filled with heat lamps and blankets of dirt. We do have designated TV time. The movies we watch are usually cartoons or family friendly stuff—lots of talking animals and happily ever afters.

Outside of the guard station near my corridor's entrance—literally a booth where two guards sit—there are fourteen cells in my dorm. Seven are on the floor level and seven on the next level. More than half of them are in use. Glancing out the big window at the new arrivals, I wonder how many more cells are in this monster of a building waiting to be filled.

"Violet!"

Petra calls out to me from the top of the stairs. She hangs over the railing, waving both arms so she's practically a windmill. The guard escorting me is already halfway up the stairs. Mine and Petra's cells are tucked in a corner.

As soon as I take the last step, Petra wraps me in a hug. "Tell me your news," she whispers, "and I'll tell you mine."

She's buzzing; she can't be contained. She pulls away so I can see how rosy her cheeks are. Her smile reveals the slight gap between her top teeth. From day one, I noticed how pretty she is. Tall and curvy, even in the loose bottoms and top we're assigned. Her brown hair covers her face whenever she takes it out of the mandatory ponytail. We either have short hair, just past our ears, like mine now, or we tie it back.

Seeing me up close, her head falls to the side. "Oh," she

says, losing a bit of her light. I must have *Trials* scribbled on my forehead.

"We coming or going?" the guard asks with a shake of the keys to unlock my door since I left the dorm. I keep pace with him, and now Petra is by my side on our way to my cell.

"I . . . I," my voice gurgles. I swallow down what wants to come up and say, "Trials."

"Oh, Violet," Petra breathes.

The creaking sound my cell door makes when it opens or shuts makes me jumpy. I should be used to it by now. But I don't want to get used to all this. The guard leaves without a word. The minute I step inside my cell the smell of mold and old blankets hits me. There's a thin mattress, a barred window the size of textbook, a shelf lodged against the wall for a handful of things, mostly trial-size soap and shampoo and conditioner, a small sink, where I can balance a composition notebook on the edge, and the toilet in the corner, which I don't use until after dark, if possible.

Petra stands in the doorway scratching her arm. From the day I met her, she's worn only long sleeves under her uniform. But today she has short sleeves and her arms are out. I can see pink and red scars, from her wrists going past her elbows. I try not to stare. The first thing I noticed about her were her arms. Day one inside, I was led to my cell holding my provisions—clean uniform, toiletries, underwear, and socks. And there was Petra, arms straight out in front of her like a zombie, her skin wrapped in gauze.

She usually went to the nurse to tend to her wounds after her Trial. At the time, she didn't say much about what she had to do. Only that she had an Endurance Trial. Sometimes she'd say, "A lot of thorns today" before settling into bed, arms crossed over her chest like she was being laid to rest.

I'd wondered if her Trial was to hurt herself. I got the courage to ask her that on my second day. Everyone in our dorm was in line, headed to breakfast. She laughed at my question, but it sounded more like she thought I was stupid.

"*I* don't have to hurt myself," she said to me. "That's what the Trials are for."

We didn't speak again for a few days. By the end of my first week, Petra heard me crying in my room. That's when she asked my name. When I told her she said, "Nice. It's different."

Those first few days inside, I kept to myself. Mostly spoke to Eve when we saw each other at meals, class, or recreation. Eve and I relied on the frail bond of arriving together before Serena joined us. No one else had spoken to me until Petra did. When she saw me crying, I'd expected her to laugh or say something mean. She didn't do either. Recreation period had just been announced for our dorm, and she asked if I wanted to go for a walk.

Petra didn't wait for my reply, and she didn't ask if I needed time. She sauntered out of my cell and expected me to follow. Which I eventually did.

Five days in detention, and I had a friend.

Seeing Petra like she is now isn't normal for in here. Trials take place Monday through Friday, same as mandatory classes.

It's Saturday morning, and Petra is not bandaged or sad. I'm glad she's not recovering or upset, but right now I want to be in my feelings.

"You know," Petra begins, "it may not be that bad. Plus, it is your family. That may help."

A spring inside the mattress bites my thigh as I plop on the bed. "How?" I lie down, hearing the rustle of letters under my pillow. Four letters total from my Grams and my aunt Mae. Three from Pascal, one from him for each week I've been in here. I haven't responded to any of them, because what's there to say? How do I explain the biggest mistake of my life to my family? Pascal wants me to know he's thinking of me. But what I get from him are letters that read more forced than friendly, like someone made him write to me. Every time I start to think of what to say, to Pascal or my aunt or Grams, it never feels like enough.

"Well, your family may have more sympathy, for one," Petra says. "My victim's *family* actually sentenced me to my Trial, because he wasn't able to speak for himself. The guy's parents, well, let's just say they were not kind to me." It may be a tic when she rubs her right arm, tracing one of the longer scars. Petra tilts her head to the other side, and her ponytail droops. "But that's part of what I wanted to tell you!"

When I turn to Petra, the papers under my pillow crinkle again. "You're—"

"Getting out of here! Next weekend!" She sways her hips with each sentence. *"Finally forgiven!"* Her voice echoes in our corridor.

I squeeze my eyes shut, because I need a moment. I'm not mad. *I'm not.* But why couldn't we both have been forgiven today?

I'm not sure if she can read my silence for what it is: jealousy. If there's one thing I've learned about Petra, it's that she likes to fill the quiet.

"Forgiveness *does* happen. All the time, Violet. Some other girl I knew here got like a two-week Comprehension Trial as rehabilitation for stealing and totaling a car. All she had to do was roadside cleanup every day. Someone else did like a one-day Trial of garbage detail in a landfill for breaking and entering at the mall. So maybe yours will be similar. Nothing too bad, you know?"

"I didn't only wreck a car or break into a mall, Petra." I don't mean to snap at her, but it comes out like that anyway.

"Oh, I know, Violet." She squats in front of me, remorseful. "Well, there was another girl? A month of changing bedpans, after abusing her grandmother, who she was supposed to help. That girl got *way nicer* after that Trial." She puts on a big, goofy grin, with tongue out, to make me laugh.

It almost works. *Almost.*

"I'm so sorry," she says. "I just want to make you feel better, and I'm failing."

"I failed at being a good daughter, so we're in the same club. Do we get stickers?"

"Letta, I know what happened is bad."

"Bad?" I respond. "Don't you mean the worst thing ever?"

There's no getting around what I did: underage drinking,

drunk driving, and vehicular manslaughter. At my first meeting with Counselor Susan, she read off *manslaughter* as one of the charges, and I wanted to vomit. I think my counselor thought she was helping when she said "manslaughter" was better than "murder," since murder means harm was intentional. They both mean the same thing: My sister is dead. Because of me. How could I have ever thought forgiveness was an option?

I try lying down again, but the view of my ceiling isn't soothing. Peeling paint threatens to fall to the floor. The other inmates, who stayed inside all day, have their doors open, so I can see there's no difference in how little we're given: flaking gray walls, shabby beds, old smells. I want to be alone, but at the same time I like Petra. She's been through a lot and earned her release. Her smile almost makes me feel optimistic. *Almost.*

"It's bad. Yeah. But you're not the only person to accidentally—" She thinks better of finishing. As if *not* saying it will make all this hurt less.

Petra and I know what each other have done. Once we became friends I heard about her assault; it made me angry and terrified at the same time. As usual, she was in my cell trying to cheer me up, but got lost in her own memories. Describing the night of made her re-live it. She told me about the guy she thought genuinely liked her pushing her down on his bed; her torn blouse; scrambling to find something, *anything*, to get him off her; clutching a pair of scissors from his desk so tightly it made an imprint in her palm; and how much of his blood soaked his sheets. While Petra told her story her cheeks were ablaze. She rolled her neck over and over in an attempt to erase

what happened. So yes, I am happy for her forgiveness. I really, really am.

The happier Petra squatting in front of me this very moment deserves to heal in a real way.

I tell her, "Counselor Susan said to think of my Trials as 'an opportunity,' not a sentence."

Petra's laugh sounds like a sneeze. "Ugh, I know. She's my counselor too. The hell does she know?"

"So, it can get bad, then?" I search her face. "Really bad?" I want to know what's possible, what options my family may have for me. Petra named some minor offenses and Trials just now. But her scars aren't from garbage duty and bedpans. Hers are from fieldwork that she may never forget.

Petra doesn't say anything at first. She rubs her arm as if she's cold, bringing back my earlier chill.

"Be strong, girl. Sometimes people need time to forgive, like, really forgive."

"How much time did yours take?"

She slides in next to me on the mattress to show me the backs of her hands. I take in the raised skin, marks of her journey. She holds up her fingernails; they're the color of sapphire. "I can't control much of what's out there. All I can control is me, right? This is what I did for myself. My family sent it to me so I could do something to remind me I'm . . . me. Day after day for nine months."

*Nine months!*

"That's thirty-six weeks of *one* Trial. All those damn weeks of rosebushes and greenbrier. *All* those thorns I had to wade

through, *all* those spiky branches and prickles I had to crouch down in, to clear a field. And for *what*?" Petra's fingers zigzag up and down the opposite arm, like she's counting the days with every bump.

"Did you know there's actually a plant called 'crown of thorns'?" She doesn't wait for me to answer. "Every day, I waited to hear if I finally passed and showed my endurance. And now I can go home. Forgiveness is worth fighting for, Violet. It means no record for your offense. That's worth it to me because *I* did nothing wrong when I defended myself." She lifts my chin so her brown eyes lock on to mine. "I almost kissed Counselor Susan when she told me."

"But—"

"Doesn't matter. You'll rock this."

Petra and my cell—my home for who knows how long—get blurry.

"You're gonna have bad times. I did all the time. But I figured, at least if I could be forgiven, if at some point his family could understand why what happened *happened*, well . . . things might get better. I held on to that instead of quitting and choosing time upstate with a record. The Trials are how some of us get out of here free and clear," she says. "You'll be next. And then I'll see you on the outside, okay?"

Everything about her is so strong and certain, the exact opposite of how I feel.

"I guess."

"No guessing!" she shouts in my face.

"Do you want to get us in trouble?"

"Say it! Say it with me, or I'll get louder."

I try to shush her, but there's no shushing Petra. Her energy is too big for this whole place, let alone my cramped cell. She's so much of what I'm not.

"I'll get out of here," I mumble.

"I can't *hear* you!"

Petra blocks my door. There's nowhere to run. "Say. It."

"Fine. I'll get out of here! Happy?"

"Yes!" Her grin is so big I almost smile back.

She disappears. I think this means I can take a nap before lunch, but she's back from her cell in an instant with something in her hand.

"Here you go, pretty Violet. A gift from me to you."

She holds what looks like a pen; the gel inside it is something between pink and orange. I'm surprised, since we're not allowed anything more than a golf pencil in here, but when I take it to look closely, I see it's all soft plastic. Once I take off the cap, the smell is powerful, familiar.

When I squeeze the pen, polish drips from the tiny brush tip. A drop lands on the floor, adding a bit of color to my cell.

I twirl the polish pen between my fingers. It's soothing to hold something from outside, something to remind me of home.

"We're both getting out of here. And that's that." She claps her hands.

My biggest hope is that I'll start to believe her.

## CHAPTER 4

# VINCE

*Days since the decision: 22*

I'm on my third bag of red licorice. This is becoming a problem. Whenever I move, the wrappers near the gas and brake pedals remind me of my gorge fest. After Letta's sentencing this morning, I decided I needed time alone, and some serious sugar.

Outside the 24/7 Mart, the smell of gas is heavy. The mart is a glass cube with neon lights advertising dollar deals and low (for this part of the city) gas prices. You can see the orange-and-green awning from any nearby roadway, especially once it gets dark. I'm on an afternoon sugar high that I hope settles enough for me to sleep. The mart parking lot is a nice place to be alone, though. Just me, some strawberry twists, and the slight thrum of the car's heater to combat the winds outside; hopefully, these weeks will be the last of the chill as we head into spring.

From here, it's a ten-minute ride on the expressway to Main Street and the dim sum spots my family used to go to on Sundays. There's also a jiggly pancake stall on one of the side streets that Viv dragged me and Letta to, where we wolfed down fluffy, sweet stacks. It's a few minutes more to Citi Field,

where Dad got dugout seats for the Mets game. Us praying for the minivan's AC to work faster when our bare legs touched the leather seats that had been boiling in the sun during the game. And there's the sculpture park further west from Flushing, where Viv played around the new art installations while Mom and Dad took pictures and me and Letta lounged on the grass, staring at our phones as an East River breeze passed over us. Mom and Dad offered a ferry ride, and though Letta and I begged off, Viv was willing. And sometimes there was a longer drive to visit Dad's family in St. Albans, Viv and Letta gardening with Grams and Aunt Mae, then all of us hitting up the best spot for beef patties. Scorching days brought the ice cream truck and the jingle that made Viv brush the dirt from her knees and rush out of the garden for a cone. I wasn't far behind, because who doesn't love some soft serve? Every part of my borough brings good memories turned sour, so I take another bite of licorice to try and get the bad taste out.

Scrolling through my phone, I'm reminded why I've been a ghost online. Mom says social media is the devil; I'm inclined to agree. My profile page welcomes me with posts of condolences and a crapload of emojis.

**DUDE, I'm sorry about your lil sis!**

**This is so sad, man. 😢 Does this mean you're out for the season? 😕**

**What about track championships? Vince is our ace!**

**RIP to an angel** 😇 is under a family photo from last summer.

There's also the judgy ones:

**If it were me I'd let Violetta rot in detention.**

**Vince's sis was always so quiet, who knew she was a party animal?**

The comments under those aren't any better. People agreeing that Letta should be in a cell forever or face serious consequences: **I lost my brother to drunk driving. She deserves punishment!**

I get angrier the more I scroll. None of them ask how me or my family are doing; they want to gossip. Mostly declarations, not questions. But I can't blame them. I'd be the same way if I were on the outside looking in.

There are also the daily texts from my friends Janice and Jorge. *They* ask how I am. Outside of "Okay," I haven't known how to answer either of them since I saw them at the funeral.

Then there's the texts from the guys from track and lacrosse. My teammate Byron is the most insistent, saying he's happy to connect me with Ross or just stop by with something to "mellow me out." It's how he shows support. I delete Byron's messages as fast as they come. I don't even reply with a **No, thanks**, afraid I'll type the opposite and slide right back into a hazy abyss.

*Be better than that, Vin. Be what Mom and Dad and your team need you to be right now: a rock.*

Levi's messages, on the other hand, go unread. Me caring versus pretending not to care about him is a battle I wage daily. This is another reason I need more licorice. Nothing cures heartbreak better than candy. Hell, maybe I'll throw in some peanut-butter cups to get this pity party to its height.

I toss my phone to the passenger seat. I'm planning on going

in for a fourth (fifth?) bag of licorice and water, and possibly chocolate, when a customer inside catches my eye. Really, his brown leather jacket with the fur collar does. The shine and soft look of it, plus the length, can only mean it's Ross. There are three rows of food—all junk—some beer, lots of scratch lottery tickets, and a big ole Icee machine near the entryway. Ross ducks to get something on the bottom shelf in the middle of the mart, and when he pops up again, I see his face. I don't think he can see me. But if I turn on the ignition, he'll catch me immediately, thanks to the way this junk car shrieks. Mine is one of six cars in the lot, including two at the gas pumps fifty feet away.

I'd been hoping I could avoid Ross a while longer. At least until I knew I could kick pills for sure on my own. My thumb drums against the wheel, then my right leg starts shaking. I can almost feel the pills he and Byron used to give me working their way through me, making my mind and body lighter, almost like I was floating.

The chime of classical music makes me jolt. My phone vibrates, and the screen lights up the inside of my car. I've lost track of Ross.

A new message reads, **Good to see you.**

"Huh?"

A knock on the driver's-side window startles me.

*Damn it, Ross.*

He motions for me to roll the window down. My car is a tuned-up older Ford that Dad gave me for being a good student.

A good son. Even when I saw its dents and rusty edges, I told him I was grateful. It was all he and Mom could afford.

I offer Ross the same fake grin I did to Dad. "Hey! How's it going?"

Ross extends a fist. I bump it. He rests his arms in the window, positioning himself in my space. Late winter frost lingers and seeps in, along with the smell of him, a heavy woody scent.

"Hey," he says. He's a mass of teeth, nose, and eyes. All of his features fit perfectly on his long, pale face. He glances at my back seat, then gives me the same judgmental look everyone else does. I see what he sees in my rearview mirror: the empty energy-drink cans, the lacrosse helmet, the track shoes, the mound of clothes, including my TRACK & FIELD jacket. My costume of All-American son in full effect.

I repeat a "Hey," wishing I had a curtain to hide that part of my life from everyone.

"Been a while." His words form clouds in the cold.

I shiver and zip up my coat. "A few weeks. Because of . . . stuff."

"Yeah, everyone at school's been talking about it."

I keep my hands on the steering wheel, hoping he doesn't see my body tremble. My foot slips under the brake.

"Really sorry about Vivian, Vince. Really." He slaps a hand on my shoulder before folding it back into his jacket pocket.

"Violetta won't be back at school for a bit," is all I say.

"Figured." He sniffs the air, looks dead at me, sniffs some more. His face gets close to my lips. I open my mouth to ask

what he's doing when he says, "Ah, cheap licorice high. I know it well."

The lights from the mart spotlight him: The crispness of his leather jacket. The way his thin dirty-blond hair is mussed. I can't see his shoes but know they're nicer than nice, more than likely the newest Nike collector brand. Ross wears his family's money well. I look around for his Mustang that has an engine that roars, a painted wing, and a coat and taillights that'll blind you.

"I told you—"

"Yeah, yeah. You *told* me you were going 'straight.'" He lightly punches me and laughs. "But I get it. Life sucks right now."

He grabs the shoulder he just punched. He massages gently, then digs in, his fingers pressing through my down coat. Ross bends so his breath hits the side of my face. "You know I'm here when you need me, and even when you think you don't." His fingers work their way to the back of my neck. They're cold to the touch, which sends another shudder through me.

The night everything went to hell, Ross was close, just like he is now. The night he offered me his latest, I was dejected and rejected, thanks to Levi. I thought Levi and me were together, officially together, since we'd been *doing stuff* for weeks. My lips couldn't get enough of his, and vice versa. So imagine my surprise when the night of the accident Levi broke things off with me at Westbridge Peak. I didn't wait to hear anything after Levi said, "I can't be with you, Vin. Not the way you want." I raced into the cold, not even bothering to slam his car door

shut. That's when I ran right into Ross. The ridge along the water had a great view across from the lit-up tip of LaGuardia. Our ears rang from the zoom of the planes overhead. Ross led me to his Mustang. Told me to take a seat on the hood. "I got something. Just for you," he'd said. I stared at his empty hands. He smiled, all teeth, and opened his mouth. On his tongue was a yellow capsule. The pill's colors bled into his mouth.

"This is guaranteed to mellow you out," Ross had said with a lisp, making sure not to swallow the product.

The wind whipped through me. And I'm pretty sure that's the moment Letta's car crash happened. I ignored the feeling, though. Instead, I'd tilted my head, leaned in, and kissed him. Ross's lips were soft, but that's not what I cared about. The pill went down easy and blurred the world around me quickly. That's what I wanted, to forget the pain.

In the here and now, I gently take Ross's hands off me. This is what got me in trouble in the first place.

"I see." He knocks on the side of the door, thrusts a small packet into my lap.

"Ross . . ."

Already backing off, he says, "Take it. Don't take it. It's there if you need it. Plus, I'm only a phone call away."

It's easier to take it and go, so I do. The engine coughs and belches smoke as I reach around the headrest to back out. I try not to think about him, or his gift, as I speed off.

Once I'm in our duplex, I kick off my sneakers and rush past the kitchen and up the stairs to flush the pills down the toilet. No way I can leave them in the car with Mom or Dad

occasionally driving it now that their van is totaled. I stop mid-step when I hear, "You can't do this to her!" I stuff the Ziploc in my pocket before thundering back down to the kitchen to see Letta's best friend all frantic. Callie waves her arms while moving around my parents at the dining table.

"Callie?" I say.

"Vince!" She wraps her arms around my neck so tight the baubles on her bracelet press into my skin.

"Callie," I cough.

"They just told me about sentencing! Tell them they can't do this to her!" She lets go of me and rushes back to the table, brown hair flying, hoop earrings jiggling. I try to hold onto her so she can tell me what's happening, what she thinks she's doing. But she's short and slippery. Callie was always the more hyper of the Letta-Callie duo.

Dad's head is propped on his hand, and Mom focuses on her slice of pizza. Two large pies and a bunch of soda cans are spread on the kitchen table alongside sympathy cards. The cheese and green peppers make me both hungry and not. I'm so tired of pizza. We've had it a dozen times in the past few weeks. Mom keeps ordering like all five of us are home to devour it, like before. She hasn't cooked since Vivian died. Viv used to follow Mom around the kitchen, helping her make cashew chicken, fried Shanghai noodles, Chinese broccoli in oyster sauce. Dad's parents, my aunts (mostly Aunt Mae and her wife, Sonali), neighbors, and friends occasionally bring food. Their dishes help spice things up from all the takeout.

Callie bends so she's in Dad's face. I hold my breath at her

boldness. "It was an *accident*. She's sorry," Callie screams. "You can't make her go through the Trials."

Dad's lips disappear. He's straining to stay composed, everything about his face tight. He hasn't shaved his head or his face in a few days; gray strands pop up along his chin, super obvious against his dark skin.

Mom looks like she'll blow at any moment. I rush over to Callie and snatch her away by both arms to give my parents some air.

"They've been through enough today," I whisper to her.

Callie turns to me; her hazel eyes are so penetrating I almost have to look away.

"Violetta's been through a lot too!" She looks at my parents. "Have you even seen the holding area for them?" Her voice is as shrill as an alarm. "If you *did* you'd consider forgiving her so she can come home."

"You're not exactly innocent in this, Callie." Dad's voice is low, but there's danger in it. "We had no idea the extent of things, but *you* did. Why didn't you tell us? Or try to stop Letta? Huh?" When Dad's expectant "Huh?" comes it's usually a sign to watch out, but this time it's wobbly. He's tired. Same as Mom, and me. My hulk of a dad is a lump of sadness. He's been wearing his sweatshirt with the colored alphabet of each subway line stretched across his stomach. The sweatshirt and black sweatpants have been a constant wardrobe choice since Letta went to detention. You can tell from the cereal and coffee stains. Mom's grieving uniform is a silk robe she wears over everything. The green and gold fabric covers the blouse and

pants she wore to sentencing earlier. Mom's ivory hand is on Dad's back. We all wait for Callie's reply.

Callie and Letta are *tight*, practically twins. Back in February, I found them both hungover, hidden under bedcovers trying to block out the sun. The two of them were in Letta's bed dry mouthed, hair smooshed to a side, remnants of lipstick and eyeshadow slashed across their faces like they were in a circus. A freshman year mess. That was a total 180 from the Callie and Letta I knew who were giggly together and shy in front of others. Callie was always more talkative. She grew into the voice that's demanding my parents to explain themselves.

Callie's chest heaves steadily as she calms. "I'm sorry. I really am. But . . . she's hurting," she says.

I tug Callie to the other end of the table, away from Dad, and point for her to sit. I stand behind her, with my hands on the back of the chair. My hold on it wobbles, the usual tremors. Callie's jittery too. I can't tell if she's liable to jump across the table or not. Better to be on the safe side.

Mom wears the same gloomy face she's had on since Viv died. Practically everything droops from her eyes to her mouth permanently slanted in a frown. "We're *all* hurting, Callie. I know you're her friend—"

"Best friend," Callie says.

"*Closest* friend," Mom agrees. "Yes." She reaches between the gap of pizza boxes to squeeze Callie's hand. Their hands in each other's are so small. Callie is tanner, her fingers longer as she clenches Mom's. Callie sniffles a little, and Mom joins in.

"Callie," Mom says gently, "you have to understand that this is a family matter."

"This is the consequence of her actions. As much as we love her, she doesn't get to escape that. If we'd done something sooner . . ." Dad adds.

Mom gestures at the pizza, urges Callie to eat. "It'll make you feel better," she says.

"Eating isn't the cure to all ills, Mom," I say, to no response. It used to make her laugh when I said that.

Callie waves the food away. "It's fine. I'm fine. I'm sorry. I wish—"

"Things could go back to the way they were," I finish for her. I'm pretty sure we're all thinking it.

Like he's noticing them for the first time, Dad brushes at his belly and the stains on his sweatshirt. "There's no changing what happened," he says. "And life certainly isn't fair," he grunts like he wants to throw his hands in the air at everything happening around him, not just the spots on his shirt. "But everyone should be held responsible when they mess up. That's why we chose the Trials. It's not to torture her, it's to help her learn. You don't drink as a teenager. You don't drink and drive. You *don't* do what Letta did and evade the consequences. Vince would *never* have done this."

I gulp at my name.

Mom nods, and some hairs from her topknot fall into her face. When she speaks she sounds kinda like our judicator. "This method of juvenile detention has been effective since

before you were born, Callie. And," she adds, "Violetta is *our* daughter. We believe rehabilitation is what's best for her since she . . ." Mom struggles on the next words but manages to utter, "She has a problem."

Callie swallows whatever she was going to say. Instead, she asks, "Can I have some water?" I'm about to get Callie a glass when she says she knows where things are. "I practically lived here, remember?" She heads for the cupboard and picks out a mug, then fills it at the sink.

Once she's seated again, I figure it's safe for me to sit too. Except Mom gasps, and Dad starts in on a coughing fit.

One side of Callie's mug is solid yellow, so she doesn't see it. From our viewpoint, VIV is scrawled in big purple letters, along with my sister's drawing of a sun. It's a mug she made on a family trip to Virginia. Viv loved mugs and shot glasses. She'd decorated this one with a marker that wasn't supposed to fade but did. Still, it reminds us of who isn't here.

Callie's face creases in confusion. Then she turns the mug to see what we see. She drops the cup as if it's poison. It falls on the table, spilling water, then rolls off the edge. I try to catch it, but it cracks and shatters against the floor.

Mom dives for the mug, getting her knees wet from the water dripping off the sides of the table. Her robe fans out around her as she scoops up bits to save. "Maybe I can glue it . . ." My mom's words dissolve into sobs. Dad rubs his face, scratching at all the hairs sprouting across his chin and cheeks. I just stand up looking at the mess. A big damn mess.

Callie's speaking, but I'm not listening. I yank her out of

the kitchen, into the hallway, to the front door to get her shoes before she goes.

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry." She sounds like Letta did in her video.

"Go," I say.

Callie clings to my shirt, trying to get me to listen.

"I'm tired of hearing 'Sorry' from people," I say. "Sorry this, sorry that." The night everything happened, Levi had said, *Sorry, I can't be with you, Vin.*

I'm so *sick* of "Sorry."

"I didn't mean to make things worse," Callie says. "I just wanted to . . . Violetta doesn't have anyone on her side. *None* of you visit her."

I repeat my parents' words: "This is a family matter."

"I thought—"

"You thought what, Callie? That you'd stride in here and be Letta's defender? She's made shitty decisions. We've all made shitty decisions and this is the result."

Callie's grip on my shirt falters. "I thought," she says, "I was family."

I cover her hands with mine and, gently, make her let go.

"Callie. Leave."

I know Callie doesn't deserve this. Letta messed up. Letta did all this. But she isn't here. What Callie can do now is leave us be for a while. Hopefully even carry my message to my sister, so we can all move forward.

## CHAPTER 5

# VIOLETTA

*Days in detention: 23*

𝍸 𝍸 𝍸 𝍸 III

The day after sentencing, I get a crash course in the Trials—the beginning, the triumphs, the expected outcomes. Me, Serena, and another girl newly sentenced to Trials listen to my counselor give us the rundown. We're in the room used for our mandatory schooling during the week. Counselor Susan stands at the front. A whiteboard is behind her, with a projection of her presentation: "What You Need to Know about the Trials." My eyes dart from the board to the notebook Counselor Susan gifted me at our first meeting. We're not allowed to bring the study books to our cells. This offering from Counselor Susan is the only extra thing I have since I haven't received commissary funds. Petra gave me a couple of her colored golf pencils—one blue and one red. Combined they make purple, my favorite color. This helped me color-code my thoughts, including what my counselor will say about the Trials.

I was always good at taking notes in school. Only this time it's my life, not a quiz. I want to make sure I remember everything she tells us. Apparently, I'm the only one writing all this

down. The girl sitting up front and Serena stare ahead, waiting for this to be over.

This room is pretty tight for instruction, not like Claremont High School, where desks are spaced out and the walls are painted beige so it feels roomier. Here, three wide bookcases line slate-colored walls and block all except for a sliver of the windows. Tattered textbooks, donated paperbacks, some worn and some in pretty good condition, fill the shelves, along with student workbooks. Our school notebooks are stacked based on the group we're in. Detention holds two sets of classes Monday through Friday, where our instructor stuffs as much math, history, composition, and earth science into three and a half hours. Serena is part of the morning group, from nine to twelve thirty, before lunch. I'm in the afternoon batch with Petra and Eve, from one thirty to five, before dinner, at six.

If I thought the moldy smell was a lot in my dorm, it's nothing compared to how musty this room is. A ceiling fan barely circulates the air, plus the lone radiator near the door is covered in cobwebs; every so often it clangs to signal its attempt to work. I rarely feel any heat in class, so I make sure to wear a thicker undershirt beneath my jumpsuit. We sit at slim, unsteady picnic tables and on dusty fold-out chairs. There are four rows with three tables, each with scratches, markings, and old gum decorating them. During class, all the seats are filled, but today the three of us are spread out. The table I'm at jiggles when you lean on it. After it threatens to tilt over one too many times, I stuff a folded page from my notebook under the leg.

Counselor Susan raises her voice in an attempt to make her presentation interesting. With a laser pointer in hand, she moves from one side of the board to the other, letting the dot emphasize what she's saying. She seems nervous. She keeps tugging at her pencil skirt or the edge of her black blazer when she talks. I'm not a fan of public speaking either. Yet another strike against me whenever I'm compared to my older brother. The world is Vince's stage, for track, for debate, for lacrosse. You name it. But Counselor Susan's cheeks flush when she stumbles or when she clicks on the computer to move the slide forward but it goes backward. It reminds me of how much I fidget when called up to read a report in class or I had to be onstage for more than a second to pick up a certificate. Her fear makes her more real and less like an authority figure.

Serena sits at the end of my row and raises her hand a few minutes in. I try not to stare at her. The lilac tattoo peeking out from under her jumpsuit collar always catches my eye. How bright the purple and white flowers are on her freckled skin. She's chewing gum, a luxury in here, and each smack punctuates her question. "Sooo what you're saying is this all started because someone killed a kid by accident? That's why I gotta deal with this bullcrap?"

"Well," Counselor Susan begins, "yes and no. It started with an understanding that something more needed to happen to encourage a decline in recidivism for offending youths."

"Resida-what?" the girl in the front row, biting her nails, asks. From the traces of blood I see on her pale fingers, she's chewing her nails raw.

"Recidivism," my counselor says. "It means repeat offenses. We want to limit that."

An index finger in her mouth, the girl is a little hard to understand when she responds, "So why not just say 'repeat offenses,' then?"

"How about I get through this and then you can ask questions, all right?" Counselor Susan smiles so wide it takes up her whole face.

Counselor Susan brings up a slide with a timeline of the history. The Trials started twenty-five years ago because a seven-year-old Black girl was killed by her thirteen-year-old cousin when he wrestled with her. I almost drop my pencil and have to hold back a sob hearing how a kid younger than me also hurt someone in his family. And my sister is, *was*, seven too.

The boy's name is LeVaughn Harrison. Even at his age, he was considered developmentally sound enough to understand what he did wrong, and a grand jury decided he should be tried for murder. This caused an uproar. Some argued he hadn't been vindictive, that it was an accident, while others insisted the girl's medical examination revealed injuries worse than an accident would account for. A year after her death, when LeVaughn was fourteen, a jury sentenced him to life in prison.

My counselor clicks to images from news clippings. The side-by-side photos of LeVaughn and his cousin are black-and-white photocopies, making their skin even darker, so some of their features are hidden. But I can still see how young they are. The seven-year-old girl has four puffy braids sticking up from her head. Her eyes are dark orbs staring straight ahead.

The boy has pouty lips and his nose is a rounded nub at the end, like mine and my mom's. The photos feel like mug shots. They don't look like children; they look like ghosts.

My counselor plays a one-minute video of people encouraging government officials to take cases like this more seriously.

In the video, a woman dressed as professionally as Counselor Susan leans into a microphone. "Reform needs to happen," she says. "Real reform. How do we know a kid at this age can understand the repercussions of their actions when sent to prison for murder? Studies show . . ." And so on and so on. Appeals were made by the boy's family members all the way up to federal courts. The boy's life sentence held, but people in office agreed something needed to change.

Per Counselor Susan, "When an investigation was conducted by the Federal Department of Corrections in conjunction with the Bureau of Detention Services, they saw how much money was spent simply to house inmates for years on end, on top of all the time spent in courts. All this was brought to Congress, who helped create this new form of juvenile justice nationwide."

"Is that how most decisions are made in this country?" Serena asks.

Counselor Susan doesn't answer. She goes to the next slide, with a list titled CONSIDERATIONS. I scribble this down too.

Before the Trials, she says, many juveniles couldn't afford legal representation and got assigned public defenders or dealt with bias in the court system, especially Black and Brown kids. Serena and I glance at each other in recognition of what's been

obvious from the moment we got here. I've noticed how many more girls who are inmates look like me, compared to how many guards and counselors look like Counselor Susan and dictate our every move.

Counselor Susan tells us that juvenile reform programs weren't given enough funding to survive or work on a wider scale. There were no guarantees that repeat offenses wouldn't happen. And at the same time, there was the question of how juvenile inmates could support the economy. Trials were developed as a way to try and respond to these needs.

"The goals are less kids on the street doing harm, so they don't grow into adults who cause harm."

Serena pops a small bubble before asking, "Okay, so where do the victims come into play?" Her arms are crossed. She looks skeptical and I can't blame her. This is a lot of information. I've filled up two pages with: history, considerations, LeVaughn and his cousin, speeches for and against how LeVaughn would live his life. Mostly, it sounds like adults pushing what they think we need to hear, rather than talking to us.

"I'm glad you asked, Serena." Her next slide says VICTIMS at the very top. "Think of what we do now as similar to a court but not. Say the victim is pressing charges against you, the offender."

"Thanks for that," Serena says.

"Sorry. *An* offender. The victim decides to press charges, and you—I mean, the offender—is taken into custody." The red dot circles the word CUSTODY. "Then a judicator serves as a kind of liaison assisting the victims, helping them understand

what options are available to them. That means three choices." Counselor Susan uses the laser to underline TRIALS, CONFINEMENT, FORGIVENESS. "From there, the victims make a decision on what fits the situation, and then you—I'm so sorry, I mean, *the offender*—is sentenced to one of those three options.

"For confinement, the judicator and the Bureau will decide a fitting time at a long-term facility, and will work with the victims to ensure that's acceptable based on the offense. In the case of Trials, the victims pick the category, there are several. However, I won't be getting into all that. Then a judicator, with the help of the Bureau, creates the Trial in conjunction with the victims, based on the category and the offense. Us counselors, could be considered your defense team, because we're here for you. The victims make all decisions alongside their assigned judicator. This includes how your Trials are measured."

"Do people ever get forgiven?"

The red dot lands on the nail biter's face. "All the time!" Counselor Susan says a little too enthusiastically. Petra is the only person I know who's been forgiven, yet that wasn't from the start. It was a hard-won forgiveness.

"Speaking of forgiveness." The board gleams with SO YOU'VE BEEN FORGIVEN, along with a yellow smiley face. "This is the good news for you. As I said, forgiveness happens all the time. Your Trials are pass or fail, and it depends on how many you have. It could be one." She holds up a finger to illustrate, as if we can't count single digits. "Or it could be several. Your job is to show your dedication to forgiveness."

"Forgiveness" is the biggest word on my page. It's in all caps

and I underline it twice. I linger on the word and the possibility. It's not impossible. Petra said so. This is what I'll have to cling to. And maybe Counselor Susan can help me make this a reality.

"Yeah, okay, but how brutal are the Trials?" Serena chimes in.

"Girls, that's not what this is about. The Trials aren't meant to be brutal *at all*. Remember that being here"—my counselor's pointer stops on each wall to the ceiling to the whiteboard behind her—"is not about incarceration it's about *rehabilitation*, a reset. Consider the Trials a do-over.

"Crimes have been committed. And comprehension of why these things happened as well as ensuring no offenses happen again is the goal here. And with that—" A pie chart fills the whiteboard: 89 percent success rate in reducing juvenile recidivism throughout the country since the initiation of the Trials. This stat brings a grin to my counselor's face that isn't forced, the whole front row of her teeth show and they're as white as her blouse. Another adjustment of her blazer, and she says she's done.

"Any other questions?"

A pop of gum and a raised hand signal Serena's latest question. "Sooo, what happens if you don't finish the Trial. Like," Serena chews before finishing as if this helps her think. It's just like the *click click click* of my counselor's pens whenever she pauses before answering during our meetings. "Like if you quit the Trial. Then what?"

The upper half of Counselor Susan's body does a little shake

before she points at Serena, almost like she's won a prize. "I'm so glad you asked that!"

We wait for a new slide, but Counselor Susan doesn't click for one. The laser pointer doesn't highlight something else we need to know beyond the success statistics lit up in front of us.

"Quitting a Trial means the victims, along with their judicator, decide if they'd like to forgive you regardless and expunge any record of your crime after a short probation. Or pursue confinement. Unfortunately, confinement means—"

I rest my golf pencil and repeat Petra's words from yesterday to myself: *You have a criminal record.*

My nail digs at a leftover patch of old gum. Probably one from Serena from another day. "What happened to the little boy?" I ask.

"What little boy, Violetta?"

"LeVaughn. The one who started all this." It's hard to believe a seven-year-old girl's death forced a whole new way of "justice." I know kids have helped initiate change before. But this boy was only two years younger than me. By now, he's a grown man. Does he get to live out his life like normal, or as normal as life could be after you've killed someone? Did his family ever forgive him for roughhousing, or is he still sentenced in prison? What I really want to know is: Is he okay?

"I'm sorry to say, he died."

Serena whistles. "Damn, that's a sinister mic drop."

I almost pound the table. "*Died!* Of what?"

"I don't know. He passed away about twenty years ago. I believe he was eighteen at the time."

Shutting off the projector, Counselor Susan stands a bit more confidently, with her thin arms at her sides, or maybe she's just relieved to be done. The red glow of her laser pen disappears when she announces, "Ladies, your respective Trials will be during the time you usually have free. And you'll still have to attend class in preparation for testing in June." Counselor Susan almost scolds us with a wag of her finger. "Just because you have Trials doesn't mean you don't get an education. It's incredibly important."

Picking up the nub of my pencil, I circle LeVaughn's name over and over. I have to find out what happened to him. I just have to.

The Trials were born as an *option*. I know my sister's death is my fault. There's no arguing that. The question is: What comes next? Because she's not here, my family gets to decide. And they've decided I need to be reformed.