

Dear Early Reader,

I'll admit it. I've been known to fall down a binge-watching rabbit hole or two or...well, maybe it's best not to count. But I definitely watched the entire first season of *Stranger Things* in one day, and I canceled plans more than once so I'd be home to watch *Big Little Lies* the moment it aired.

So when I first started reading *Lies You Never Told Me*, I knew I'd found my binge-reading match. It has forbidden love, dark secrets, shocking betrayals, and enough destruction to keep you totally hooked. But it also has strong friendships, grand romances, and characters you'll really root for. Pair that with Jennifer Donaldson's snappy dialogue and talent for weaving twisty, unexpected mysteries, and this book is impossible to put down.

As the story opens, Elyse and Gabe couldn't seem more different from each other. Quiet, shy Elyse has just been unexpectedly cast as the lead in her Portland high school's production of *Romeo and Juliet*, and outgoing Austin native Gabe is contemplating the unthinkable—breaking up with Sasha, his beautiful, popular girlfriend.

While their parallel narratives might seem unrelated, Gabe and Elyse have something in common: both make the mistake of falling for the wrong person, and they both fall *hard*. Once they're pulled into these intoxicating relationships, there's no turning back.

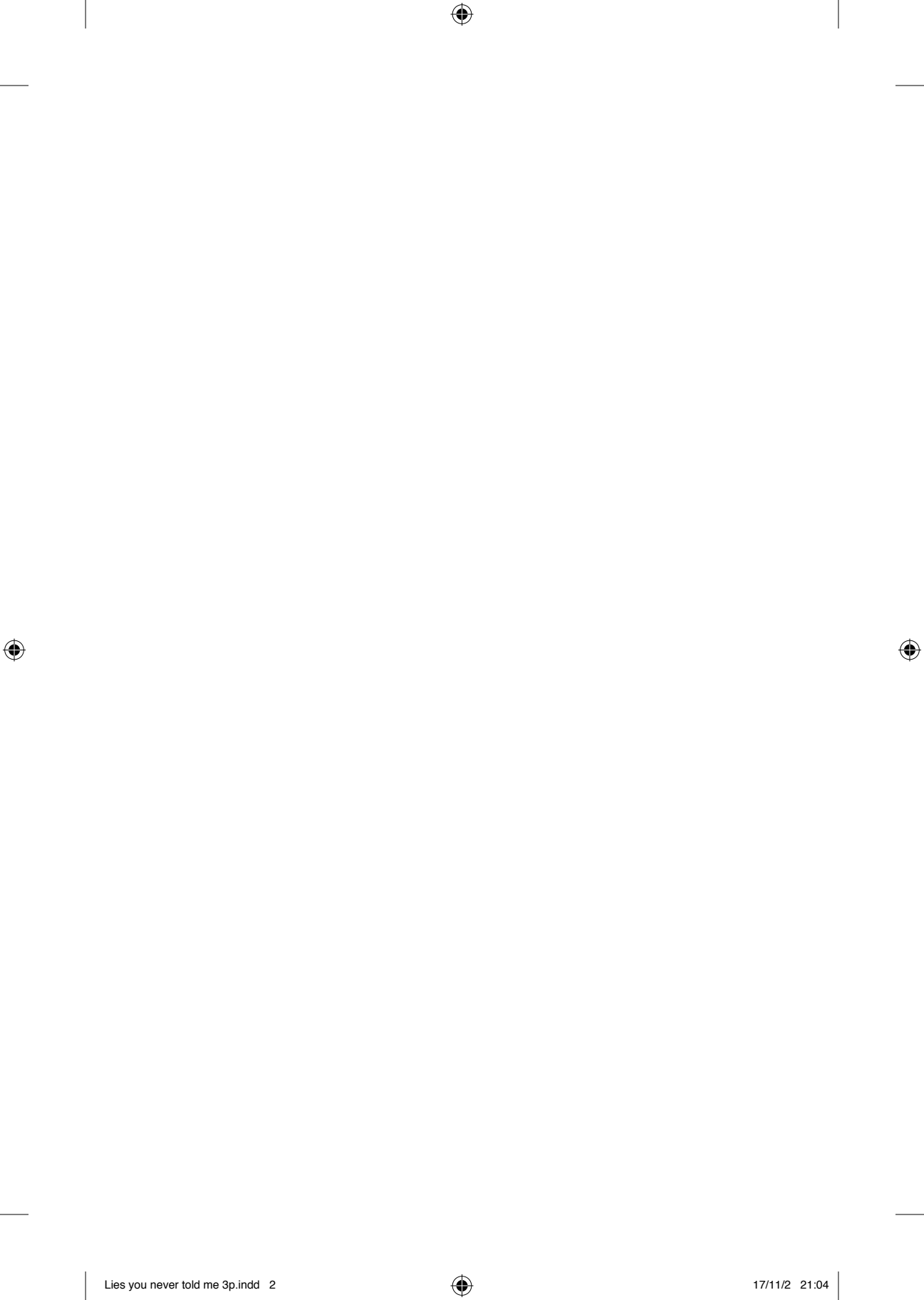
I don't think I'll spoil anything when I say that Gabe and Elyse discover how one wrong choice can lead to a spiral of unforeseen consequences, hurtling them toward a confrontation that not everyone will survive.

Jennifer Donaldson totally delivers with an ending you won't see coming, and the shocking revelations along the way will keep you flipping the pages until you get there. So here's my advice to you: Change into sweatpants, order takeout, and read this book in one night—one very dark, twisted night.

All my best,



Julie Rosenberg
Editor, Razorbill Books



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Jennifer Donaldson

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A NOVEL BY
JENNIFER DONALDSON





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the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any
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**LIES
YOU
NEVER
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ME**



ONE

Gabe

Storm clouds clot the edge of the night sky, stained purple from the city lights; but somehow, right over the yucca-fringed yard, the stars are still visible. I spot Orion there at the center of the sky. It's the only constellation I can consistently pick out: the belt, the sword, the stars dripping away like blood. On the horizon, lightning flutters.

It's late September, the Austin air dense and heavy. I sit in my swim trunks, dangling my feet into the pool. The flagstone patio, the carefully tended native plants, and the high-end bourbon in the monogrammed glass tumbler next to me all belong to my girlfriend. To Sasha. Sasha, whose parents are out of town. Sasha, who's swaying down the path from the house with a wooden tray of snacks, in a black-and-white bikini and a pair of flip-flops.

"Need another drink?" She holds up the crystalline decanter, waving it enticingly.

"Still nursing this one," I say, taking her in. Her long, muscular legs. Her flat stomach and gently rounded hips.

"Lightweight," she says. Her blue eyes sparkle as she pops the stopper out of the heavy bottle and takes a huge swig. "Aren't you getting in?"

"I like to get used to the water first," I say, splashing my legs up and down a few times.

"Oh yeah?" She sets the bottle down on a patio table with a heavy clunk.

"Yeah."

Without warning, she launches herself straight at me. At the last moment she vaults over my head, coming down in a cannonball right in front of me. A wave of cool water washes over me, a shock in the heavy night air. I shake out my hair, laughing, as Sasha surfaces.

"You're gonna get it now." I slide into the water and push off the side. She shrieks and swims away. I launch myself across the pool, my stroke clumsy but strong, my heart racing.

She lets me catch her. I slide my arms around her narrow shoulders, and every cell in my body wakes up with a jolt at the feel of her body against mine. Her skin looks so pale next to my light brown complexion. The strings of her bikini top press hard against my chest. She slides one of her long, smooth legs between mine, and my mind goes silent. Smiling, wordless, she reaches behind her neck and pulls at

the knot of her halter, slowly tugging it free. Her bikini top flutters away and lands on the surface of the water, a black-and-white lily pad drifting aimless around us.

"Sasha," I whisper. It's not my first glimpse of her small, perfect breasts. We've messed around plenty of times, in the backseat of my car, in an empty bedroom at a house party, anywhere we can find privacy. But we've never done this so openly, without worrying about time or exposure. Shielded by the foliage, we are open to the sky above.

And then the phone rings.

Sasha's eyes go wide, her mouth flinching into a tight-lipped scowl. "They can leave a message," I say, but she ignores me. She gently detaches herself from my body and wades back to the side of the pool, not even bothering to cover her chest with her arms as she climbs out.

She scoops the phone up from the tray on the patio table, where it glows green between a bowl of tortilla chips and a plate of prepackaged cookies. The citronella torch gutters as she moves near it, the orange light leaving deep shadows across her face.

"Mom," she says.

I swim toward the stairs, my stomach tight. Suddenly the idea of Mrs. Daley hovers over the backyard: her strained smile, her perfect red nails, the way she taps her foot. Sasha's parents are lukewarm about me, at best. I'm not sure if it's the mediocre grades, or the fact that I'm a Chicano skateboarder dating their very white daughter—never mind that I grew up in the

same bougie neighborhood as them, never mind that my mom's family has been in the U.S. for generations. They're old money. They could find any of a hundred reasons not to like me.

The dreamlike mood of a moment earlier starts to dissipate. I suddenly realize the clouds have rolled in overhead. Orion is gone, the sky glowering and low.

Sasha still hasn't covered up. I can see gooseflesh along her arms as I climb out of the pool, in spite of the warm air. I pick up the towel hanging on the back of a deck chair, try wrapping it around her, but she pushes me away.

"How's Aunt Patty?" she asks. A ring of black surrounds her eyes where her mascara has smeared. She pauses, her eyes flickering quickly toward me and then away. "What? No, Gabe isn't here. Yeah, I *promise*. Jesus."

Something in her face changes. Her mouth goes slack for one quick second, and then tightens to stone. She takes a few steps away, muttering into the receiver, so low I can't make out what she's saying. My fingers knot anxiously at my sides; I absently pick up the tumbler of bourbon and sip from it. But the biting, burning thrill of the alcohol is gone. Now it hits my stomach like acid.

"Whatever." Sasha's voice rises again, clipped and angry. She ends the call, and for a moment she stands still, phone in one hand.

Then she turns to the patio table and grabs the decanter, throwing it with all her might to the ground. Glass and whiskey explode at her feet, glittering in the moonlight. Before I

can say anything, she launches herself across the patio toward the house, stopping just under the eaves and raising both middle fingers into the air.

"Sasha!" I sidestep the broken glass and run toward her.

"They're watching us," she spits. She nods up toward the roof. Sure enough, I can see a tiny red light. A camera. "She checked the security cameras on her laptop."

Watching? A sick, slimy feeling runs over my bare skin. I tug the towel more firmly around my shoulders, feeling exposed. "Holy shit."

She grimaces. "Perverts!" she shouts at the camera. I wonder if there's an audio feed, or if she's just hoping her parents can read her lips.

I imagine her parents sitting in a darkened room, the light of the laptop bleaching their faces. Or maybe they're at her aunt's kitchen table, drinking red wine and laughing at the two of us. The whiskey churns in my gut.

I walk back to the patio furniture and pick up my shirt. It's halfway over my head when I feel Sasha tugging at it.

"You don't have to go," she says. "They're three hours away. What are they going to do, drive all the way back just to kick you out?"

I pull the shirt down over my head and raise an eyebrow at her. "Do *you* want to spend the rest of your junior year grounded?"

She snorts. "They can go ahead and try. It's not like they can make me stay home."

Typical Sasha. She's never been into picking her battles. She prefers conflict so she can show off what a badass she is.

"Yeah, I'm not really feeling this anymore. Let's just call it a night," I say. "Look, tomorrow we'll head out to the Greenbelt—get out of the house, go hiking. Steer clear of cameras."

She steps closer. "Come on, stay. We'll go up to my room. I don't think there're any cameras in there." She slides her arms around my neck. "And if there are, fuck it. We'll give 'em a show."

I gently disentangle myself from her grip. "Yeah, that's not really my thing." I pick up my skateboard from where I had leaned it next to a potted agave. Last summer my best friend Irene painted a winged eyeball across the wood. At the time I thought it looked awesome. Now it makes me think of Mrs. Daley: one more unwanted eye, spying.

"I didn't know you were such a prude," she mutters waspishly. I walk toward the gate at the side of the house.

"It's just not worth getting in trouble over," I say, reaching out to push it open. She darts in front of me, her spine whip-straight.

"Oh, I'm not worth getting in trouble over?" She's working herself up—I can see it in the sharp angles of her limbs, the jut of her chin. If she can't stick it to her parents, she's going to stick it to me.

I put my hands on her shoulders, but she jerks away. "Sasha . . ."

"No, it's okay. I guess I'm not worth the effort."

I glance up to see another camera, under the eaves of the house. Her parents are probably still watching, enjoying the little soap opera that they set off.

"You're *worth* sacrificing one stupid night for," I say. "I'm leaving now so I can still see you later. I mean, you might not care about getting in trouble, but I care if your parents won't let you see me."

She opens her mouth to say something, then shuts it abruptly. For a moment she stands there, her breath heavy, her face pale with anger. Then she grabs me by the collar and pulls me down, pressing her lips to mine.

It's rough and urgent, her tongue pushing forcefully into my mouth. I almost lose my footing but catch myself on the door frame. A part of me recoils deep inside, unnerved. She's doing this to punish her parents; this is her flipping them off, one more time, for the cameras. The idea that they could be watching still makes my skin crawl. But something about her fierceness pulls me in, too, like it always does.

She finally pulls away. Without another word, she walks back across the patio, toward the house.

Out on the street, leaves catch in eddies of wind, skimming the roadway and then lifting off to fly away. It's eerily quiet, and then I realize the crickets have gone silent. It's going to rain.

I throw my skateboard down onto the pavement and kick off. It's a relief to get away. Sasha's engaged in a lifelong war with her mom, a former debutante from an old Dallas family,

prim and tight-lipped. I don't like feeling like I'm just a prop in the melodrama.

A sliver of lightning cuts across the clouds just overhead, and a moment later the thunder snarls. I hop up the curb and off it again. I'll have to hurry if I want to get home before the downpour. I lean into the downward slope of the hill.

It comes out of nowhere: a flash of light, and then impact. I am flying. The wind streams around me, seeming for an impossible moment to buoy me up. It's in that infinite moment, caught aloft, that I understand: a car. I've been hit by a car. The headlights surround me like a nimbus, like the light that surrounds the saints in a religious painting.

Then the second impact comes as my body hits the pavement.

The first heavy raindrops splatter around me. An icy chill unfurls through my body, spreading along my arms and legs and coiling the muscles into shivering knots. I don't feel any pain—just the force ricocheting through my bones—but there's something weird about how my arm is twisted. The clouds overhead swirl and glitter, pops of color exploding in their depths now. Or is that just my vision? I try to lift my head, to get a clear glimpse of my leg.

A black shape flutters into view over me, and I struggle to figure out what it is. A bat? A kite? No. An umbrella. The patter of rain on my face ceases as someone holds an umbrella over me. The someone is hard to make out; they keep splitting, dividing, merging back together, all in the strange and shimmery air. I squint up, trying to make out a face.

A cool hand rests on my cheek.

"Shhhhh." The voice is a woman's. A girl's, maybe. "Don't move."

I stare up at her, trying to blink my head clear. The shifting world seems to be tinged with flares of sickening color now, shades of bile and blood at the corners of my vision. I hear a cell phone's key pad and then the girl's voice again. "I need to report an accident."

Lightning streaks across the sky, and in its split-second illumination I see her. She's young, a teenager. Maybe my age. Her face is thin and pale, sharp-angled. Her hair is long and dark. Then the lightning passes and all I can see is the glow of her phone against her cheek, the silhouette of the umbrella against the sky.

And then that starts to fade, too. Her voice gets farther and farther away. She's saying something about my arm, but I can't bring myself to worry too much about it. The sickly colors at the corners of my vision close in, throbbing for a few beats of my heart before I slide away into darkness.

TWO

Elyse

"'Tis almost morning. I would have thee gone," says Brynn Catambay, touching her cheek lightly. "And yet no farther than a wanton's bird, that lets it hop a little from his hand like a poor prisoner in his twisted . . . twisted . . . *shit*."

"Gyves," I say, reading off the script. "Twisted gyves."

"I don't know why I can't get that." She knocks her forehead lightly with her fist. "What's that even mean?"

"It's like a leash," I say. She looks at me, eyebrows raised. I shrug. "I looked it up the other day. When I was going over lines."

"Only you would prep for an audition by doing research," she says fondly. "Nerd."

It's Friday, early October, and the theater swarms with activity. Last week the drama department announced that East Multnomah High's fall production will be *Romeo and Juliet*,

and dozens of us have gathered for the auditions. Most of the drama club is here—Frankie Nguyen and Nessa Washington hang out in the wings, running lines, and Kendall Avery sits in the front row on one of the faded theater seats, eyes closed in meditation, which she always claims helps her “get in touch” with the character. There are people I don’t know, too. A goth girl with a septum ring sits on the edge of the stage leafing through the audition packet. And there’s a guy I recognize from the basketball team, sipping from a bottle of water and laughing in the middle of a gaggle of girls.

Brynn looks around the room and sighs. Everything she does shows just how comfortable she is with the attention of the world on her. Today she’s wearing tights printed all over with cats under a puff-sleeved dress. She looks like she’s either ready to attend a mad tea party or catch a train at Harajuku Station. If she weren’t also unbelievably pretty it wouldn’t work. Lucky for her she’s got pillowy lips and thick black waves and the innate ability to contour without the use of a mirror.

“Who are these people, anyway? They didn’t audition last year when we did *Antigone* or *A Raisin in the Sun*. Do something popular and every poser in Portland comes out of the woodwork.”

“Hey, watch it,” I joke. “I’m vying for one of those poser spots myself.”

“No way!” She frowns at me. “You don’t give yourself enough credit, Elyse.”

Brynn’s always pushing me, always telling me I should go for better parts. She was the one who got me into theater

in the first place, back in freshman year, back when I was so shy I couldn't meet anyone's eye. I don't know how she looked at me and saw actress material, but she's stood by that assessment ever since.

"Hey, everybody, welcome." The room quiets down almost immediately. A young, dark-haired man has stepped out onto the stage. His face is smooth and chiseled, his frame lean. He's wearing a button-down shirt and a pair of black-framed glasses, glinting in the spotlight.

My heart speeds up a little. I twist a lock of hair around my finger; the blond looks almost dark against my Portland-pale skin.

"I'm Mr. Hunter. I'm the new drama teacher." He smiles, revealing a dimple in his left cheek. "I know a few of you already, but I'm looking forward to meeting the rest of you. Thanks so much for coming out. Now, some of you are theater veterans by now . . ." A few people laugh, including Brynn. "But even if this is your first ever audition, don't worry. I want to give everyone a fair chance. So when you come on stage, tell me your name and what part you're trying out for. You'll start off with the monologue you've memorized, and then I'll have you read a little from the script so I can get a good sense of how you approach different characters." He claps his hands a few times. "Okay? Let's get going. Break a leg."

We sit down in the creaky old seats. Next to me, Brynn jogs her leg gently up and down. It's her only sign of nerves. She's used to this by now. She got the lead in *Antigone* last year and starred as Cecily in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

the year before, the only time I know of that a freshman's gotten such a big part. She's almost certain to get Juliet.

We watch the parade of would-be actors, some nervous and stuttering, some hamming up every line. A slouching girl with gum in her mouth starts giggling hysterically right in the middle of the "wherefore art thou" speech, and the goth I noticed before barely speaks above a whisper. But Frankie and Laura both nail their readings, and the basketball player does a surprisingly good Tybalt, pacing angrily back and forth across the stage. And when Brynn slides into the spotlight, I can feel the whole room catch its breath. She commands the entire stage, the warm glow picking up the gold in her skin. She somehow makes her Juliet both flirty and innocent, both lovesick and playful. When she comes back to her seat, I hug her with one arm, and she gives a sheepish grin.

"Elyse McCormick?" Mr. Hunter says it like a question. For just a moment, I freeze, my limbs suddenly senseless.

I hate going right after Brynn.

I manage to get on stage without falling flat on my face, which feels like an accomplishment in and of itself. When I'm there, vertigo tugs at my body, turning my stomach over and over. Darkness billows all around me. It flutters in the wings, it wells up from the audience and threatens to overtake me. The spotlight lands on me and I feel, for just a moment, like I've erupted in flame.

"Go ahead." It's Mr. Hunter. I can't see him, but I know he's a few rows back. His voice, coming so clear and so sure from the obscurity, feels like a tuning fork against my spine.

I find myself imagining that he's the only one there—the only eyes, the only voice, the only person in the audience. My focus sharpens to a razor's edge.

"Hi, I'm Elyse, and I'm reading for the part of the nurse," I say. I take a deep breath, raise my chin, and begin. "Even or odd, of all days in the year, come Lammas Eve at night shall she be fourteen . . ."

I can feel the change come over me as I recite the words. It always happens—or it happens when I'm focused, when I've found something in the role to love. My shoulders round forward, my mouth quirks upward into a wistful grin, and I slide into character with ease. People always play Juliet's nurse like she's silly, but to me there's something so sad about her. The first thing she talks about is her own dead child, and then she's hushed and dismissed for speaking so fondly of little Juliet. There's a whole tale of loss and longing beneath the surface, and it's treated like a joke. I feel a little anger creep into my words, and I let it come—I let it flavor the warm, loving language, ever so slightly.

I'm not like Brynn. She's been doing theater since she was seven, a tiny diva in the making. I only started going to drama club because I was looking for something to do, for a way to avoid going straight home after school. I hadn't intended to fall so head over heels in love with it. Brynn was right—there was something in me that wanted to perform, to speak loud and clear at the center of the stage. To be seen. To be heard.

My monologue comes to a close. The air on the stage is almost stifling in the heat of the lights. The nurse fades away,

and I'm just me again, awkward and exposed. My hands come together at my heart, anxious and fidgety.

His voice returns. Deep, but light, agile. He must be an actor himself. Our previous drama teacher, Ms. Harris, was an old kook, a free spirit in caftans and shawls who had us pretend to be a leaf on a tree as a theater warm-up. But Mr. Hunter exudes a kind of articulate calm; it's easy to imagine him on stage, speaking poetry to the darkness beyond.

"Thank you, Elyse. Can you go ahead and pick up that script there . . . yes, right by your left foot . . . and read from page forty-two?"

I pick up the packet, leaf through. Then I frown.

"This is Juliet's line," I say.

"I want to hear how you read a few different characters, please. Juliet's just found out that Romeo's been banished for killing Tybalt. Go ahead when you're ready."

I scan the monologue briefly, wishing I could wipe the sweat off my forehead but not wanting to smear my makeup. Juliet, caught between loyalties. Juliet, who's just now realizing the full weight of her decisions. I start to read out loud. "But wherefore, villain, didst thou kill my cousin? That villain cousin would have killed my husband."

I take her on like a mask, and I turn into someone worthy of a spotlight.

When my words finally fade, there's a long silence from the auditorium.

By now my eyes have adjusted a little, and I can just barely make him out, a faceless shape beyond the footlights. He

shifts his weight; I hear papers rustling. But his voice betrays nothing.

"Thank you, Elyse. Who's next?"

After everyone's had a chance to audition, Mr. Hunter takes the stage one more time. Now that I can see him clearly again, the spell is broken—all the intensity of his voice replaced with mild-mannered cheerfulness.

"There's so much talent in this room! I'm going to be faced with a very difficult decision in the coming days. I plan to have the casting list up outside the ticket office by end of day Monday. Thanks so much."

The room breaks into scattered applause, and then the lights come up and we're all rubbing our eyes and gathering our things. I pick up my backpack and turn to see Brynn, a slight frown creasing her forehead. She looks at me in mild surprise, as if she's just now noticed something.

"He asked me to read. What was I supposed to do?" I can't quite keep a note of apology out of my voice, even though I know I shouldn't feel bad. That's how auditions work; everyone gets a chance. Even me.

"I didn't say anything." She holds up her hands defensively. "I'm just annoyed because you were *good*. I didn't realize I was about to get upstaged."

I'm spared having to answer by Mr. Hunter, coming down the aisle toward us. He's smiling, eyes sparkling behind his glasses.

"Elyse, can I talk to you privately for a moment?" he asks.

Brynn's eyes narrow slightly. I feel my cheeks grow warm again, my pulse a staccato beat against my temple. "Um . . . okay. Brynn, I'll text you later, okay?"

"Sure," she says. She picks up her purse and slides it slowly over her shoulder, frowning a little. "Bye, Mr. Hunter."

"Good work today, Brynn. Thanks for coming out." He watches Brynn make her way down the aisle.

And then we're alone. The theater suddenly feels cavernous, the two of us huddled close together against the echoing dark. His glasses catch the light just so, and for a moment I can't see his eyes. My fingers twist anxiously around one another. Did I do something wrong? Am I in trouble already?

But when he turns to look at me again he's smiling. My throat feels dry and tight, but I swallow hard and force a smile back.

"I'm not supposed to do this," he says softly. "But I can't resist. I wanted to tell you that you've got the part."

His words don't make sense at first. I stare at him.

"What part?"

"Juliet." He grins. "Don't tell anyone else yet—I'm posting the final decisions next week. But I wanted to see your face when you found out."

My mouth falls open. I shake my head mutely.

"But . . . but I auditioned for the nurse."

"You'd be wasted on the nurse," he says.

I don't know whether to laugh or to cry. A bright, warm

feeling fills my chest. I don't want to be this easy to flatter, but hearing that he thinks I'm talented makes me realize just how hungry I am for exactly that kind of praise.

"I don't know, Mr. Hunter. I've never . . . I've never carried a lead before. You probably want to pick Brynn. She's good. And she's already done some Shakespeare; at theater camp last year she played . . ."

He's shaking his head already. "*Brynn is good. She's quite good. But she's not what I want in a Juliet. You, Elyse . . . you're really quite remarkable.*" Our eyes meet. This close I can see that his eyes are hazel, the kind that looks blue, green, gold in equal measure. For a second I'm unable to move.

"I . . . what if I can't do it?" I whisper. "What if I'm not good enough?"

"I'm not worried about that," he says. He puts a hand on my shoulder and squeezes.

It's starting to sink in, starting to feel real. The lead. He's giving me the lead. A smile spreads slowly across my face.

"You're actually serious?" I ask. "I'm going to be Juliet?"

"Yes," he says.

I can't help it. I throw my arms around his neck, squealing softly. He's taller than me, so I have to stand on my tiptoes.

"Thank you!" I say. "Mr. Hunter, thank you."

"Don't thank me. You earned it. Congratulations, Elyse. I'm really excited to start working with you." He gently disentangles himself from me.

I look up at the stage, the scratches and markings on the wood intimately familiar by now. I can almost picture myself,

limned by light, in Juliet's dress. Standing on the balcony.
Dancing at the masquerade. Dying in the crypt, heartbroken
and beautiful.

"I won't let you down," I say.

He's suddenly serious. He looks me in the eye again,
appraising, intent. Then he smiles.

"I know you won't," he says.

THREE

Gabe

“Earth to Gabe.” Sasha snaps her fingers in front of my face. “Hey, Jiménez, look alive.”

I blink slowly, coming back to the conversation. It’s a Sunday afternoon, and a bunch of us are sitting at a picnic table in a gravelly food-truck court in south Austin, sharing brisket and white bread from Reinhardt’s. Sasha’s holding court, surrounded by her friends. I’m doing my best to look like I’m paying attention, but I’ve heard this story before. Something about a girl who forgot to take the tags off her leggings for dance tryouts.

“Of course,” I say, leaning over to give her a placating kiss. She cups the back of my head a little too hard. “Ow,” I say, breaking away. “Careful.”

But Sasha just smiles. “Oh, I’m sorry. Did that hurt?”

I give her a look. It's been two weeks since the accident. I got off lucky, with a mild concussion and a dislocated shoulder. They never caught the driver who hit me. They also never found the girl who dialed 911. She'd disappeared by the time the ambulance arrived. So there's no witness, no evidence, no way to find out what really happened that night.

I'm mostly recovered, but my head is still a little foggy, and focusing is hard. And yes, it hurts when someone presses their fingers into my skull.

Sasha turns back to her friends. "So we're all out on the floor going through the group audition, and I look down and I see it." She pauses for dramatic effect. "The *tag* is still there, stuck to her ass. Like a sticker on an apple."

I take a bite of brisket, my eyes glazing slightly. The girls at the table are all eager little Sasha clones: Julia Sherwood dyed her hair Sasha-blond over the summer; Marjorie Chin's got the exact same handbag as Sasha, in a different print. Savannah Johnston and Natalie McAfee watch her closely, hungrily, and when Savannah laughs she throws back her head, just the way Sasha does. They've all heard this story. Most of them were *there* for it; they're all on the Mustang Sallys, our high school drill team. But you don't interrupt Sasha without becoming one of the people she likes to talk about.

My phone rings. It's my dad.

"I'll be right back," I say, unfolding my legs out from under the table.

Sasha watches me with narrowed eyes. "While you're up, get me an iced skinny mocha, no whip."

I nod distractedly. I hope my relief doesn't show as I walk away from them. I don't know if I can listen to another round of recycled gossip.

"Hey, Dad," I say into the receiver, once I'm out of ear-shot. "What's up?"

But it's not Dad. It's my little sister's voice that comes blaring out of the phone. "Gabe!" Vivi shouts. "Merry Christmas!"

Okay, so it's October—we're nowhere close to Christmas. But who cares? Vivi's almost six, and because she has Down syndrome her development is a little delayed. But that doesn't mean she's stupid. Who can resist a kid who thinks it's Christmas every time she gets to talk to someone she loves?

"Merry Christmas!" I boom, in my best Santa Claus voice. "What's up, kid?"

The giggle that comes through the phone line is pure gold.

"I wearing tutu!" she squeals.

"Tutu? You mean, like, you're too-too cute?" Not my best work, but she's a pretty easy audience.

She shrieks with laughter, and there's the sound of the phone hitting something. A moment later, my dad picks up.

"She wouldn't wait until tonight to put it on. I'm doing my best to steer her away from messy snacks, but I don't know how long this will last." Dad's tone is joking, but I can also hear the exhaustion in it. Turning Vivi away from something she wants to do is a serious undertaking.

"Told you you should get two dance outfits for her," I say. "One for eating peanut butter, one for performance."

"Thanks for the I-told-you-so. You'll be home by three, right? We need to be at the theater by three-thirty. Don't be late."

I hang up the phone. A moment later I get a photo. Vivi grins toothily in her pale pink leotard, a stiff ridge of tulle around her waist. Next to her is her service dog, Rowdy; she's been trying to teach him how to pirouette.

Pink. Nice. That won't show every single stain, I text to my dad.

He texts me back a crying face. I roll my eyes. Ph.D.s aren't supposed to use emojis. Neither are dads, for that matter.

I glance back at Sasha. She thinks I'm spending the whole day with her; I'd forgotten about the dance recital. I realize abruptly that my shoulders are tense, my jaw gritted, and I force myself to relax. She loves Vivi—so maybe it'll be fine. But the truth is, I never know exactly how she'll react to things.

The food court is packed with people snacking on tilapia tacos, bánh mì sliders, chipotle cheese fries, Day-Glo snow cones. The coffee cart is at the other end of the lot, in the shade of a cluster of post oaks. I order the drink from the tattooed barista and stand to the side while she disappears into the truck to make it.

I lean back against the trailer, idly thinking about how I can best break the news to avoid a shitfit. *Hey, Dad reminded me of a thing I've gotta do. I don't want to, but I'll be in big trouble if I don't. Or maybe: Come on, Sasha, do it for Vivi.*

She's so totally obsessed with you, it'd mean the world. No one ever went wrong banking on Sasha's vanity.

Then I see something that brings me up short.

There, at a table just a few feet away, is the girl who saved my life.

The sight of her rockets through my brain like a firecracker. A moment ago, I couldn't have described her with any certainty; my memories of that night are murky and shapeless. But now it's like some dark corner of my mind lights up with recognition.

She's alone, crouched over a heavy textbook. Her cheekbones are sharp, her skin wan next to a dark sheaf of hair. Her scuffed purple Keds are the only colorful part about her—otherwise she wears cheap jeans, a black tank top. For a moment I second-guess myself. It can't actually be her. The night of the accident, it was too dark to make much out, and my brain had just been through a blender. For all I know my savior was a seven-foot-tall dude in a bunny suit and I'm just remembering wrong.

I watch for a moment, take in the way her toe taps slightly along with whatever she's listening to on her headphones. Then she looks up from her book and meets my eyes, and all doubts are gone. Her eyes widen, and her whole body seems to recoil in a short, sharp gasp.

She looks away again quickly, but I'm already sure of it. It's her.

Slowly, half-afraid I'll startle her like some woodland

creature, I step toward her table. "Uh . . . hi," I say. Suddenly I'm not sure how to start. What's the proper icebreaker for meeting a person who saved your life?

She pulls one earbud out, but leaves the other in. I sit down across from her, giving a smile I hope is charming. "I think . . . I think you might be the girl who helped me after my accident a few weeks back. It was over on Briarcliff—a hit-and-run?"

"Sorry. Wrong person." She shoves the earbud back in, looks determinedly down at her book. But she's lying. I can tell. Her mouth is a straight line, but her eyes are wide and almost frightened. I reach across the table and touch her hand to get her attention.

She jerks her hand away like she's been burned. Her pencil falls to the ground.

"Sorry . . ."

"No, it's okay, just . . ."

"Here, I . . ."

We talk over each other for an awkward moment, both leaning down at the same time. I get to it first, and she snatches it out of my hand.

"Look, I just wanted to thank you," I say.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she says, clearly annoyed. "And I've got a lot of homework, so . . ."

A shadow falls across the table. I look up to see Sasha, outline dark against the sun. A few feet behind her, the Sallys are standing in a tight group, glaring at me.

"Uh . . ." I say, stupidly. My heart drops.

"Hey! I was just coming to tell you we're going to the Springs. But I see you might have other plans."

Her voice is as bright as a blade, sharp with false cheer, her lips a blood-red slash on her pale face.

"Hey. Sorry, I was just . . ."

"Don't I know you?" Sasha's talking to the girl, not to me. "You're in third-period computer lab, aren't you?"

I'm almost afraid to look at the girl. I don't want to incite more of Sasha's wrath than I have to. But out of the periphery of my vision I see her nod.

"Yeah, you're the girl that keeps throwing the curve." If I didn't know Sasha, I'd think she sounded impressed, but her eyes gleam dangerously. "What's your name again?"

The girl pauses for a long moment before she answers. "Catherine," she says.

"Yeah, that's right." Sasha turns back to me, smiling. "This one keeps getting perfect scores on the quizzes. We all want to kill her." She says it almost playfully, like it's all friendly teasing, but I know better.

If they didn't before, they will now, I think. But her words give me an idea. "Yeah, I'm in English with her. I was just asking about the homework."

It's risky. She could fact-check pretty easily, catch me in the lie. But her eyes soften a little.

"Like you'll even do the reading," she says. She brushes her hair back over her shoulder. "Where's my drink?"

"Oh . . . yeah." I jump to my feet. The barista long since called my order, and the drink is sitting there on the counter, the ice half-melted. "Here."

Sasha eyes it distastefully, then heaves a sigh. She plunges the straw in like an ice pick and swirls the cup gently. "So, are we going to the Springs or what?"

I swallow hard. "The thing is, Vivi's got a recital. I totally forgot about it, but . . . I have to go to it." I hold up my phone quickly, hoping the tutu picture will derail her a little. "How cute is this?"

Her eyes soften a little. I feel some of the tightness go out of my back as she takes the phone from me. "Oh my God, that's out of control. Look, she put a little tiara on the dog!" She shows the picture around to her friends, and they all coo and croon in appreciation.

"You should come with me," I say hopefully, edging away from the girl at the table. "It'll only be an hour or so, and then we can go to Kerbey Lane after."

Her gaze snaps up. "I'm not eating pancakes on our date night," she says, her voice frosty again.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. "Okay, then, Asti Trattoria or whatever." Never mind that a meal at Asti will clear out the last of my birthday money. "Whatever you want."

She sighs patiently, like I'm a little kid. "Of course we'll go to Vivi's recital. God, I'm not a monster." She hands the phone back to me and turns to her friends. "You guys have fun at the Springs. We've got to get going."

I finally exhale. Crisis averted. Barely.

"Thanks, Catherine. See you in class." I give the girl a wave and turn to follow Sasha.

Halfway to the parking lot I risk a glance behind me. She's hunched over her notebook again, her hair spilling down over her shoulders to hide her face. But I catch a glimpse of her eyes, wide and wary, as she watches us go.

FOUR

Elyse

"I've barely gotten through the doors on Monday morning when Brynn grabs me, sliding her arm through mine.

"The casting list's up," she whispers.

I lick my chapped lips. "Have you looked yet?"

She shakes her head. "Not yet. I was waiting for you."

It's officially my first test as a lead actor: pretending I don't already know that I've been cast.

I could hardly sit still this weekend. One minute I felt like I could fly. The next, I felt like I might puke. I kept picturing what Brynn's face would look like when she found out she wasn't Juliet. When she found out *I* was Juliet. I've been dreading this moment for two days straight.

Now I steel myself, letting my best friend lead me to the ticket office. There's already a crowd. I see Nessa craning her neck to see over someone's shoulder. The basketball player

grins widely and nudges a boy standing next to him. One girl is crying.

"You ready for this?" Brynn asks, squeezing my arm.

No. "As ready as I'm going to be," I say, my mouth dry as sand.

Brynn's eyes are bright, hopeful as she stands on her tip-toes to see over the crowd. My heart wrenches in my chest, so sharp for a moment I forget to be happy for myself. I know how much this means to her.

But before I have a chance to say anything, Frankie catches sight of me.

"I knew you'd get it," he says loudly, pulling me into an excited hug. "Your reading was unbelievable!"

I can't see Brynn for a moment, her face disappearing behind Frankie's shoulder while he pulls me close. Other people are looking our way now.

"Congratulations!" Nessa says, grinning. Laura Egan grabs my hands and jumps up and down. I can't help it; a smile blooms across my face at the sight of theirs. I've never been the center of attention before.

"Thanks," I say. "Thanks, everyone."

And then I see Brynn, standing stock-still in front of the casting list. She's facing away from me so all I can see is the back of her head. Over her shoulder I can see my name, hand-written in neat marker.

Juliet... Elyse McCormick

I scan the rest of the list. Frankie's Romeo; Nessa is Lady Montague, and Laura, Lady Capulet. The basketball player, Trajan Holland, is Tybalt. Brynn's name is halfway down the list.

She's the nurse.

I feel queasy. It's not fair. Brynn works so hard—she rehearses more than anyone I know. She's gone to every drama camp, every theater workshop, every master class she could. I don't understand why Mr. Hunter picked me over her.

I step closer to her, and the people around us get a little quiet. In the time-honored tradition of high school theater club, they are all eager for a whiff of drama. She doesn't turn to look at me; I've never seen her face so still, her expression so blank.

"Brynn . . ." I start. Then I realize I don't know what to say.

She turns to look at me, her eyes glistening with tears. But then all at once she forces a smile. She pulls me into her arms so I can smell the sweet vanilla of her perfume.

"I'm so happy for you," she says softly. And even though her hug is a little wooden, I know she means it.

Tears well up in my own eyes. "You should've gotten it."

"Not this time," she says. "You really did kill that reading." She wipes at her face and laughs softly. "It wasn't mine to get. But next time . . . I'm coming for you."

The rest of the day is surreal. I feel like a minor celebrity—people keep coming up to me and congratulating me. Even

people I don't know, or people who aren't involved with theater. For once I don't feel invisible. Somehow the news of my casting has pulled back a curtain and turned on the lights and now I'm on stage, watched as I walk down the hall or answer a question in class. Meg Derrick, the student body president, buys me a cup of coffee from a vending machine before English. And Trajan shoulder checks me lightly as we pass between classes, grinning widely. His gaggle of athlete friends give me the kind of appraising looks that make me blush and straighten up at the same time.

At one point I see Mr. Hunter. It's just after fifth period, and he's in the hallway outside his classroom, monitoring the passing period the way all the teachers are supposed to do. I'm not sure if I should say hi, or wave, or just scurry past as usual, but before I can make up my mind he catches sight of me. A half smile touches his lips, and he winks.

Bubbles fill my chest. I feel like laughing, skipping. But I just smile and hurry past him, remembering the way he talked to me on Friday.

You, Elyse. You're really quite remarkable.

After school I manage to extricate myself from the crowds and head out into the crisp Portland fall. The rains haven't started yet. I pass run-down bungalows with rusted chain-link fences, cars on blocks in half the yards. But even in my neighborhood, with its broken glass on the sidewalk and its weed-choked lawns, the sun is burnished gold against the deep blue sky and the trees are tall and bright and green.

My building is a sagging pink-and-gray box called the Shayla Apartments. I've always assumed Shayla was the daughter or wife or sister of some previous owner. Now the place is owned by a rental company, and the original Shayla is long gone. The parking lot is an expanse of chipped and broken concrete. The unit doors are all tightly shut, strange chemical smells coming out of some.

At mine I stop for a moment, my smile fading. Home sweet home. I stand outside listening for signs of life, hoping against hope to find an empty apartment when I go in. But I'm not surprised when I hear the TV blaring as soon as I crack the door.

My mom's wearing stained sweatpants and an oversized Mickey Mouse T-shirt. She's curled up on the sofa, her eyes vaguely tracking the images on the TV. She's only thirty-four but she looks older. Her hair is fried to an ugly calico orange from too much cheap dye; her bones jut painfully against her dry pink skin. A cigarette smolders in an ashtray teetering on the edge of the coffee table. A quick pulse of anger takes over my good mood.

"Didn't you have a shift today?" I shut the door behind me and immediately start tidying up. Celebrity gossip magazines are splayed out all over the floor, and plates of half-eaten food cluster around the sofa. A pilling, smelly afghan lies heaped on the floor where Mom kicked it off in some fretful dream.

"My back hurts real bad today," she says. She gives this exaggerated grimace, her eyes not quite making it to my face.

I was six when my mom had her car accident. I still remember the brace she had to wear to keep her spine aligned. The crash left her with pulled ligaments, broken bones, and two herniated discs. And because it was her fault—she ran a red light—there was no hope of settlement money to help with the treatment. That was when she started on the Oxy, for the pain.

It's been nine years, but she still spends half her days in a fog. I don't know how much actual pain she's in anymore; it's hard to know if she's still suffering, or if she just likes feeling high.

"Mom, you've got to keep this job." I try to keep my voice calm. Sometimes if I get mad, if I yell, Mom will set off on a whole new binge, trying to numb her hurt feelings. "There's nowhere else that'll take you."

"I know, I know. Tomorrow. I promise."

Tomorrow. The single most overused word in Mom's vocabulary. *Tomorrow I'll go to the doctor. Tomorrow I'll go to work. Tomorrow I'll do those dishes, take out the trash, eat something, change my clothes. Tomorrow I'll stop using.* I grab the cigarette in the ashtray and stab it out almost violently.

"The rate you're going, you're going to set the place on fire before we get evicted."

I stomp into my bedroom and shut the door firmly behind me. I can still hear the TV through the wall. Someone on a game show asks for a vowel. I stick the phone into my stereo dock and turn on Adele to try to drown out the noise.

My room is sparse, but comfortable. There's a small wooden desk I found on the side of the road and spray-painted teal; the cheerful yellow curtains and pillowy duvet were bought out of my movie-theater wages. White fairy lights crisscross a tall bookshelf, stacked high with all my books.

I sink down onto the bed and start unlacing my shoes. I have just enough time to shower before I have to catch the bus. There's a past-due electrical bill on my desk, and the other utilities will be along again soon. Ever since our last eviction, I've taken charge of the household bills.

Sometimes it feels like I'm juggling knives. No, not knives; sharp as they are, knives are light. I'm juggling anvils. Keeping the power on, finishing my homework on time, getting to all my shifts at work, making sure Mom eats enough. Every one is a weight that, any minute, could fall straight on my head.

Tomorrow I'll go through Mom's room, try to find her stash. Flush it. Not that it'll matter; she's got a half dozen doctors ready and willing to prescribe her more. Mom's a mess, but she's a cunning mess, good at manipulating what she needs out of people. But maybe I can slow her down a little.

I take a deep breath, rummage in my bag for my script. Sometimes you have to keep moving so you don't give up entirely. I take a minute to leaf through, scanning the lines. Mr. Hunter's words come drifting back. *You're really quite remarkable.*

But what does that matter? I realize with a dull pang that

the magic of the day has vanished. Shakespeare isn't going to pay the bills. Shakespeare isn't going to help my mom get to work on time, or help her stay clean. I throw the script onto my desk and pick up my towel. Time to get ready for work.

Because Shakespeare isn't going to get me out of this hellhole.

FIVE

Gabe

“You gonna be all healed up in time for Big Bend this Christmas?” asks Caleb Scott, picking the crust off one of his three peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. “I got a new tent. Super lightweight, good for the trail.”

It’s lunchtime on Tuesday, and we’re sitting at a cement table in the outdoor lunch area. The sun is mild in the sky, the heat finally broken. A few yards away a game of ultimate Frisbee rages up and down the lawn. Guitar music drifts aimlessly through the air from where a girl sits under a tree playing.

“Ugh,” says Irene Novak, before I can reply. She’s next to Caleb, doodling in her history textbook. She’s transformed Thomas Jefferson into a psycho clown, penciling a creepy painted leer on his face. “You guys are nuts. A week with no shower, no electricity, no cell coverage? Kill me.”

"Yeah, well, that's why you ain't invited," Caleb drawls. He's the only person I know in Austin with an actual Texas accent. "We don't need a repeat of the Enchanted Rock trip."

"Yeah, no kidding," Irene says, peering wryly over the frame of her cat-eye glasses. Her hair is purple this week, short and shaggy around her ears. "Twenty-four hours with nothing but crickets and wind. Never again."

"More like twenty-four hours with crickets, wind, and your bitching." Caleb pauses to shove half his sandwich in his mouth. He's six foot four and built like a tree trunk; the dude never stops eating. "I'm trying to get a little peace and quiet on this trip."

I know better than to take their bickering seriously. Caleb and Irene have been best friends since kindergarten. I don't know how, exactly—they're nothing alike. He's the definition of mellow, a guy whose idea of a good time is stargazing on the edge of town with his dog and a six-pack. Irene, on the other hand, keeps a running, snarky commentary on everything that happens, her hands always busy, always sketching or scrawling. The manic energy comes in handy when she's tagging street signs or stenciling pictures on walls.

"I'm down," I say to Caleb. "My shoulder's still pretty stiff, but I think it'll be fine by then. I just have to talk my mom and dad into it. And, uh, Sasha."

Irene snorts, but doesn't look up from her book. "Better find a backup backpacker, Caleb. Gabe's gonna be home for the holidays."

"Hey, I'm my own man."

She shakes her head sympathetically. "She's not going to let you out of her sight for a whole week. Especially not for Christmas. I mean, what are the holidays without an all-out screaming fight?"

"It's tradition," says Caleb.

Now I remember how they've been friends so long. They have me to gang up on.

"What was it last year? The chocolates you got her were the wrong kind?" Irene says, rolling her eyes.

"Nope, that was Valentine's Day. Christmas was the fact that he went to Midnight Mass with his family instead of taking her out for that carriage ride."

They're both enjoying this too much. "Whatever. It's not like I need her permission to go."

That *really* makes them laugh. I scowl around the table.

Ladies and gentlemen, my supportive best friends.

I've opened my mouth to argue when Caleb nudges me. "Speak of the devil."

I follow his gaze to see Sasha, eyes hidden behind her sunglasses. Heads turn as she steps across the patio. Seeing her walk toward me used to send a hot thrill through my body, crowding out every thought in my head. I wonder when I stopped feeling that way.

"Oh, great! You can ask her now!" Irene's eyes give a wicked sparkle. "Since it's no big deal, right?"

"Ask me what?" Sasha sits on the bench next to me, otherwise ignoring my friends. Her lips are etched out in perfect red lines, a nonchalant pout.

"Uh . . . well . . ." I take off my strapback hat, mess with the brim, push it back on over my curls. Irene's the one who answers.

"Caleb and Gabe here are planning a trip over Christmas break." Irene's voice is cloyingly sweet; she loves a chance to troll Sasha. I shoot her a look, but she ignores me. "They're going backpacking. You don't mind, do you?"

Sasha doesn't even look at Irene. "Obviously I don't. I already told him it was okay."

My stomach twists. It's not true—I haven't said a word to Sasha—but she can't admit Irene knows something before she does.

"Anyway, Christmas doesn't matter. Because we've got our own trip planned for New Year's," she says.

I turn to look at her. "Huh?"

"Yeah, remember?" She takes my hand in both of hers. "You said we could go to Houston. Hit up some clubs, watch the fireworks. Get a hotel room." She says the last part softly, suggestively, but instead of stirring my interest it sets my teeth on edge.

"Uh, no, I don't remember," I say. *Because I never said that*, I finish silently.

"You're such an asshole sometimes." She stands up abruptly. "Whatever. Have a good time in the backwoods. I hope you get murdered by hillbillies." She stalks away, her profile icy with disdain.

"What a lovely girl," Irene says, watching her go. "Are you sure *she's* not the one who ran you down, Gabe?"

"Ha, ha." I throw my sandwich wrapper down on the table. "Thanks a lot, Irene. Now I'm in deep shit."

"Oh, you were going to be in trouble no matter when she found out." Irene flips a page in her book and starts to embellish a hair-metal mullet onto a portrait of Dolly Madison. "Relax. She'll be pissed about something else by dinner."

"Great, that's a huge consolation." The first bell rings. I scoop up my books. "I'll see you guys after school."

I head down the hall toward my fourth-period photography class. I've got a whole roll of film to develop today, all of Sasha. Sasha posing with her hands lifting her hair, pin-up style. Sasha posing in her Mustang Sally costume. Sasha posing by pretending not to pose.

Then, ahead of me, I see something that draws me up short: purple Keds, scuffed along the white rubber sole.

My whole body seems to lift up, floating a little at the sight of her. She's walking away from me, but I recognize her dark hair bunching around her backpack, the way her shoulders slope. I pick up my pace, try to catch up, but she disappears into the library before I can say her name.

Hardly anyone uses the library here, aside from a few mousy-looking girls who reshelve materials during their lunch breaks. I've only been in there once, freshman year, when Mr. Doyle brought us down to try to instill in us the magic of reading. We spent the whole time sneaking up on each other in the stacks.

It's silent inside. I guess that's the idea, but after the noise of the hallway it feels almost like a tomb. Like a beige-carpeted,

industrial-metal-shelved tomb. A plump-cheeked man wearing a bow tie sits at the front desk. He raises an eyebrow at me as if to say, *Really? You, in a library?* I give him a little wave, hitch up my backpack, and breeze past as if I know just where I'm going.

Catherine's the only one there. She's sitting under a window in a vinyl armchair, her legs curled beneath her. The sunlight skims the top of her head, making a glossy halo in her dark hair. She's reading, her earbuds in again. I watch her for a second, trying to read something in her clothes, her body language, her expression. Trying to figure out something about her. I'm usually pretty good at that kind of thing—but with her, I can't. Her jeans are faded, her dark-blue T-shirt nondescript. She has a plain green backpack, no pins, no patches, no Sharpied song lyrics.

She looks like she's trying to be invisible.

Her eyes dart up from her book and widen when she sees me. I take off my hat again, squeeze the brim. "Hey," I say. "Sorry."

She takes out her earbuds. "What?"

"I said . . . I mean . . ." I take a breath. "I just wanted to say thanks. I didn't mean to freak you out the other day. At the food-truck park. I really just wanted to say thanks."

She puts her feet back on the ground, sits up straight. On guard. But she doesn't close her book or get up to go. She bites the corner of her chapped lower lip.

"I wasn't supposed to be out that night," she whispers finally. "I'm sorry I didn't stick around for the ambulance, but my dad's really strict. If he found out . . ."

"Yeah, no . . . don't worry," I say quickly. "I'm just glad you called them. I was really out of it. I could have been there all night. You saved my life."

She shrugs uncomfortably. The silence stretches out between us for a moment.

"Yeah. I mean, they never caught the guy who ran me down," I say, trying to keep the conversation going. "You didn't happen to see who it was, did you?"

She shakes her head. "I was around the corner when I heard the tires squeal. I didn't even see the car."

"Man. Oh well, I guess I'm just happy to be alive." I sit down on the chair adjacent to her. "What're you reading?"

She holds up the book. I recognize it right away; there are about ten copies of it around my house.

"*One Hundred Years of Solitude*? Cool," I say. "You should read it in Spanish. So much gets lost in the translation."

She raises an eyebrow. I feel my cheeks get warm, and give a sheepish grin. "Or so I've been told," I say. "I've never read it. My father teaches Latin American lit at UT. He named me after García Márquez."

"Gabriel?" she asks. Something about the way she says my name gives me a shiver of pleasure, like a breath on my skin. She catches the music in the syllables.

"Gabe," I say. "Yeah. I can't even read it in English, much less español. It just kills my dad. I'm more of a comic book guy, myself."

"I like comics, too," she says with a small smile. "*The Sandman* is one of my favorite series."

"Oh yeah?" I lean forward. "Have you read *The Wicked and the Divine*? It's kind of like *Sandman*. But with, like, magic rock stars." She shakes her head. "I'll bring you the first issue. You'll love it."

Her eyes light up for a split second, but then they fade again. "No—no, I can't. Thanks. I'll . . . I'll see if they have it at the city library, or something."

The warning bell rings. Two more minutes to get to class. I stand up and linger for a second, waiting to see if I can walk with her toward her next class. She doesn't move.

Almost as if reading my mind, she gives a faint smile. "I have a free period. I spend it in the library getting caught up on homework."

"Getting caught up? I've only ever seen you *do* homework. Do you ever do anything else?" I shift my weight. "You know, besides rescuing strangers by night."

Her face falls back to her hands on her lap. A lock of hair slips past her ear and hangs down in front of her, like a curtain.

"I really have to get back to work," she says softly.

Conversation over. It stings, but I give a careless shrug. "Cool. Well . . . thanks again, Cat. I'll see you around."

I force myself not to look behind me as I walk back to the entrance. But I can't get the image of her out of my mind: the fragile way her shoulders curl around her book, the slate blue of her eyes. That lock of hair, slipping free. I don't know what her deal is, but if she's trying to be invisible, she's failing—at least with me.

SIX

Elyse

"Juliet? *Juliet*. This is your entrance." Mr. Hunter looks up from his clipboard. "Elyse?"

"Oh!" I dart forward, hurrying to join Laura and Brynn at center stage. "Sorry. Here."

Out in the audience, I hear a low giggle. My cheeks burn.

We're only halfway through the first week of rehearsal, but no one else seems to be struggling quite as much as I am. We're still on book, after all. Still reading through all the scenes. It's the easiest it'll ever be. But even with the script in hand I keep losing my place. This is the fifth time I've missed my cue.

". . . where's this girl? What, Juliet!" Brynn says again in an exaggerated tone. Her eyes bore into me like she's trying to telepathically transmit the lines straight into my head.

This must be making her crazy, watching me butcher the role she wanted.

It takes me a moment to find my place on the page. "How now, who . . . um, who calls?" The words come out awkward and stilted. My tongue keeps tripping over itself.

We plow on. Laura, playing Lady Capulet, reads her words with stately grace. And Brynn is actually already off book, her lines memorized. I'm more and more aware of the glare of the lights, the eyes in the darkness beyond the edge of the stage. I don't know what's wrong with me. I've done cold reads plenty of times and done all right, but now that I've got the biggest role of my life I'm a mess.

"Speak briefly. Can you like of Paris' love?" says Laura.

"I'll like to look, if l-l-liking looking . . . no, I mean looking liking . . . I mean . . ." I trail off. "Sorry," I finish lamely.

"How did she get this role again?" It's a stage whisper, meant to be overheard. I don't recognize the voice. It doesn't matter; my gaze drops down to my shoes.

"She got the role because she's good, Kendall." Brynn spins to squint out at the audience. "And it's just a read-through, so why don't you chill?"

The room goes deadly quiet. I can feel all those eyes raking over my body, peering from the darkness. Just last week, I was eager to be seen; I was ready to step into the spotlight. Now it occurs to me that there's a flip side to that attention. Now I realize that there are people waiting—hoping—for me to fail.

"Why don't we call it a day?" Mr. Hunter stands up,

glancing around at everyone. "We've done a lot of good work today, guys. This is all part of the process." His eyes fall on the little cluster of girls where Kendall Avery is sitting. "And I expect everyone here to be supportive along the way."

"Don't let them get to you," Brynn whispers as everyone gathers their stuff to go. "Kendall's hated me since I stole a lead right out of her grasping little hands in sixth grade." She smirks. "She told me a Filipina couldn't be Orphan Annie. She was so mad when the casting list went up."

I stare down at the script. It shakes in my hand.

"This was a mistake," I say softly. I look up at her. "You should've gotten this role. Everyone knows it."

"Well, everyone except Kendall," she jokes. "Kendall thinks Kendall should've gotten it." She gets a look at my expression and softens again. "Oh, come on, Elyse, you know that's not true. Everyone fucks up their first read-through. Especially with Shakespeare. It's hard."

"You didn't," I point out.

She throws her hands out wide. "Yeah, because I've got, like thirty lines. You just choked because you got stuck in your head. After you've done it about a hundred thousand times you're going to be amazing." She puts her hands on my shoulders. "Come over Saturday. We'll do the usual."

I finally smile a little. "The usual" means ordering pizza, sharing a beer stolen from her dad's stash, and running lines all night. Except usually I'm the one helping her learn her parts.

Suddenly those eyes in the audience, leering, waiting for me to mess up, don't matter as much.

"You'd do that for me?" I ask.

She frowns. "Uh, obviously," she says. "I kind of owe you for the last, like, year and a half of doing it for me."

I can't help it; I throw my arms around her neck.

"You don't give me any credit at all, do you?" Her voice is muffled against my shoulder. But she hugs me back.

She's right. I'm acting insecure. Brynn's looked out for me from the moment we met, when she stumbled on me crying in the girls' room our first week of freshman year. It was a bad day. My mom's most recent boyfriend had left the night before, giving Mom a black eye as a parting gift. I didn't know anyone at East Multnomah; we'd moved that summer, and all my junior high friends were on the other side of town. My clothes were all stained and old, my jeans too short, my sweater pilling, and at lunch a junior boy had snapped my bra so hard the strap broke. I'd gone to the bathroom to fix it, but instead, I'd just collapsed over the sink, tears pouring down my cheeks. In came this girl in a pink sequined skirt and a T-shirt with a giant sloth face printed in the middle, like a fairy godmother in a Wes Anderson movie, and instead of ignoring me like three other girls had done, she gave me a hug before she even asked my name.

And that was it. I don't know why, I don't know how, but suddenly I was sharing half of her peanut butter sandwich at lunch, and following her to drama club after school, and spending my weekends at her house singing along to musical soundtracks and eating dinner with her family. She was the

one who made me audition for my first role; she was the one who coached me on speaking to the back of the room.

So why am I treating her like she's waiting for me to fail?

"Thanks," I whisper.

That's when I hear Mr. Hunter's voice behind me.

"Elyse, can I speak to you for a moment?" he asks.

My stomach dips again. I turn around to face him, expecting disappointment in his eyes. He looks serious. No dimple today. I swallow hard, my throat tight.

Brynn glances at him, then back at me. "Text me later?"

"Yeah, okay." I watch her go, my skin bristling with panic. I can hear Mr. Hunter's voice in my head, crystal clear, telling me his casting was obviously a huge mistake, that I'm not the actress he thought I'd be. I'm so busy letting him harangue me in my head I almost don't hear him when he speaks in real life.

"Are you okay?" He sits down on the edge of the stage.

"Um, yeah." I roll up my script in both hands and tap it idly against my leg. "Sorry about today, Mr. Hunter. I'll do better tomorrow."

"Of course you will. And there's no need to apologize." He leans back against his palms and looks up into the lights. "What you're doing is brave. It's hard to stand up in front of all of your peers and risk making a mistake. It makes you vulnerable. Which, for the record, is partly why I gave you the role."

I cock my head to the side. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you have a vulnerability that some of these other

girls have taken pains to hide. You really get at Juliet's . . . hope. Juliet's not stupid. She knows the risk she's running, and she still takes it. She takes it out of hope and out of love, and it leaves her . . . really exposed."

"It also ends in death," I say.

"Well, sure," he says seriously. "Everything worth doing has the possibility of ending in pain."

I bite the corner of my lip. I want to argue, to say something light, amusing. But I think of my mom fading by the day. I think of how my dad left her in the months after the accident; I think of the one postcard I got from him, written from a prison cell in Idaho. *Put some money in my commissary*, it said. It had arrived two days before my birthday. I think of the treasures I've lost over the years being evicted from apartment after apartment—the tiny diamond studs my grandma gave me, the crumbling cardboard box of secondhand Barbies I'd played with as a little kid. I think of the contours of my life, sparse and small and drab.

"Everything does end in pain, sooner or later," I say softly.

He looks up at me, his eyes flaring slightly. "Not everything." He takes my hand, gives it a quick squeeze before he lets go. "You've got something special, Elyse. You may not know it yet, but I can see it. I believe in you. And with some work, I think the sky's the limit for you."

My breath seizes up in my throat. I don't know what to say.

"Anyway, don't bolt on me because of one bad rehearsal." He rubs his chin thoughtfully. "I have an idea. Why don't

you come in Sunday afternoon? Three P.M.? We can work on some of the scenes one-on-one."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," I say quickly, turning pink. I don't want him to think he's got to put in extra work just because I'm not good enough.

"I don't mind," he says. "I'm going to be here anyway—I have a lot of papers to grade. It'll be a nice break. And I think you'll get it really fast without so many people around."

I wrap the end of my ponytail tightly around the tip of my finger. As embarrassed as I am to need extra help, the idea of getting special attention from him makes my toes squirm with pleasure.

"Okay," I say. My voice is soft, but steady again, thank God. "Thanks, Mr. Hunter."

"Great." He finally smiles. It's dazzling. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Tomorrow afternoon. I'll have to go through it all again: the snickering, the staring. The snide whispers. Another burst of anxiety hits me.

If I fail, I'll be worse than invisible. I'll be pathetic.

Almost like he's reading my mind, he gives me a serious look. "You weren't cast by mistake, Elyse."

"Now I just need to prove it to everyone else." I square my shoulders. "Thanks, Mr. Hunter. For everything. I'll see you tomorrow."

I step out of the theater with a fresh sense of determination. Between Brynn and Mr. Hunter, I'm not just going to learn this role. I'm going to own it.

SEVEN

Gabe

“Jesus, Sasha, slow down a little.” I brace myself against the dash, gritting my teeth as we hurtle through the darkness. She just laughs and turns the sound system up, Pretty Lights blaring from the speakers, the beat pulsing through my bones.

We’re on our way to Savannah Johnston’s party in Westlake. Sasha’s been particularly prickly all day. This morning, instead of going with her to the mall, I went to my little sister’s soccer game. Then I spent the afternoon doing my homework instead of running straight to her. By the time Sasha picked me up in her electric-blue Mini Cooper, she was in a foul mood.

“Scared?” she asks, a thrill in her voice.

I just look out the window at the dark shapes of trees flying past.

She doesn't like being ignored. "Fine. Be that way."

And that's when she snaps the headlights off. The road disappears out from under us. There's nothing around us, no streetlights, no houses, no stores—only rolling hills, hunched forms in the darkness.

"Jesus!" I grip my seat belt in both hands. The car vibrates as it swerves across the rumble strips at the side of the road and then corrects its course. I can hear the engine whine as she presses further and further on the gas pedal. "Sasha! This isn't fucking funny."

She laughs again. The needle creeps up the speed dial. The music is a howling, blaring chaos, thrumming against my skull. For a minute I'm back in the middle of the road, the night of the accident. I'm airborne. I'm flying, out of control, and there's time to think about how hard the ground is beneath me, how heavy and fast the car, how flimsy my body . . .

And then, all at once, the road is back. She's snapped the headlights back on. The car starts to decelerate, still too fast, but not quite so wild.

Sasha says, smirking, "This from my edgy skate-punk boyfriend."

"Did something piss you off tonight?" I ask. "Or are you just in a mood?"

The playful sparkle disappears from her eyes. Her fingers tighten around the driving wheel, the sneer on her face lingering.

"I'm just ready to have some fun," she says. Her voice is low and almost silky. It sends a chill down my spine.

My heart is hammering, but I don't want to make things worse. I stare out the window again, even though there's nothing to watch but my own darkened reflection. We sit in silence for the rest of the drive.

Savannah's house is perched on top of a hill with a sweeping view of downtown Austin.

Inside, the high-ceilinged marble entryway is packed. I see a few people I know, already jumping around to the thud of the music. Noah Delany and Paul Meyer wave at me from the sidelines, holding red Solo cups. Abhay Patel is busy at the DJ booth, adjusting his levels as he mixes Sia's "Chandelier" with some ambient electronic dance number. No sign of Caleb or Irene yet, though I know they were planning to come.

No sign of Catherine, either. But then, she wouldn't be at a party like this. I try not to let my disappointment show.

I turn to look at Sasha, only to see that Julia and Marjorie have already converged. They huddle together, whispering something and laughing. I take deep breaths, try to regain my composure, but a dull nausea tugs my stomach downward.

"Hey, Gabe." Savannah's appeared at my elbow. She's wearing a tight silver dress that looks a lot like Sasha's pale pink one.

"Savannah, you look great," I say, giving her a hug.

"Thanks." She flushes, pleased. "Can you believe how many people are here?"

"Hey, Savannah. Nice dress. Did you raid my closet?"

Sasha's suddenly there in front of us, lips pressed in a smirk. To anyone who didn't know her, her words would

sound sincere. But her eyes glint at Savannah, and I instinctively let my arm drop from around Savannah's shoulder.

Savannah tries a tinkling little laugh. I wince at how forced it sounds. "Thanks! Great minds."

Sasha tosses her hair. "Sure. Something like that."

Savannah wilts a little next to me. But then she squares her shoulders, as if steeling herself. "Come on, let's dance." She laces her arm through Sasha's.

"Get me a beer, okay, babe?" Sasha's grip on Savannah is tight. Behind them, a few of the other Mustang Sallys watch through narrowed eyes. All it will take is a word from Sasha to make them turn on Savannah.

It suddenly feels crazy to me, like Savannah's sticking her hand in an alligator's mouth. And then, with disgust, I realize I'm no different. We all act like we're honored to let her treat us like shit.

I make my way through the crowds to the backyard, which is lit with Christmas lights strung through the posts in the wrought iron fence. A bunch of people gather around the keg on the patio. Half the wrestling team is in the kidney-shaped pool with their girlfriends, chicken fighting. Natalie McAfee already has her top off. She falls off Mike Bookout's shoulders with a squeal and a splash. A little further back there's a bonfire pit. I see Caleb and Irene in the group gathered around.

Caleb's roasting a marshmallow over the flames, turning it slowly back and forth for an even golden-brown. Irene's got a charred-looking s'more in one hand, a joint in the other.

"Double-fisted partying. Nice," I say. I grab the joint from her and take a drag. The smoke washes over my nerves, smoothing out the tangles.

"You look like hell," Irene says. "What's up?"

"Sasha's in a mood." I take a deep breath. The heat of the flames laps against my skin. "She drove out here like a fucking maniac. Now she's in there torturing the other Sallys or something. I've got to take her a beer in a second."

"Is it my imagination, or is she more psycho than usual?" Irene frowns.

I shrug. "She's pissed that Savannah's having the first big party of the year, I think. It's usually at her house, but her parents have her on a short leash since the whole security camera thing."

"Did you hear she managed to get Tori Spencer kicked off the Sallys? She basically accused Tori of bullying her." Irene pops the last of her s'more into her mouth. "Which doesn't sound like Tori. It sounds like Sasha." Her words are muffled through the marshmallow.

I grimace. "Yeah. She's been laughing about it." Tori was trying to change one of their routines, which meant that Sasha's solo got cut. She went crying to their coach with some crazy story about Tori sabotaging her costume before a game.

Irene shakes her head. "Jesus, what's it gonna take for you to break up with her?"

I don't answer right away. The truth is, I don't know *how* to answer. Because Irene's right. Sasha's appeal has worn thin. I don't know if it's that Sasha's gotten more unstable,

or if I'm finally just seeing it for what it is—not some wild, free-spirited energy but something dark and bottomless and boiling. Something with the power to destroy.

That's when Devon Lord, who's standing on the other side of Irene, speaks up, startling all three of us.

"Man, sorry to slide into your conversation like a creep, but it's crazy that you gave Sasha that ring."

Irene, Caleb, and I turn to stare at him.

"What ring?" I ask.

Devon pulls his marshmallow out of the pit. It's a perfect golden brown, even on all sides. He blows on it for a moment, then slides it onto a graham cracker. "That promise ring, or whatever? I don't know, it looked like a big honking diamond."

"How the hell is Gabe gonna afford a diamond?" Irene asks. "He owes me, like, ten thousand dollars for the past three years of Taco Cabana trips. He's never got money."

Devon shrugs.

"Seriously, when did you hear about this?" I realize my voice has gotten loud. People are looking. I grit my teeth and try to calm down. "This is so ridiculous. Like, she had a ring and she was showing it off or something?"

"Yup. In figure drawing yesterday. She kept sort of flitting her hand around." He mimes admiring the back of his hand. "Kept talking about how romantic the whole thing was. Had some big story about how you promised to be with her forever, and you had chocolate-covered strawberries and, like, some song you wrote just for her . . ."

I grimace. "No, man, I didn't do any of that shit. She's . . . she's just messing with you."

But I can't get the image out of my mind. Sasha with a dreamy smile on her face, telling some story that makes it sound like I'm planning to *marry* her someday. Maybe doing it as some kind of joke at first . . . but reveling in the attention. Letting the story spin out of control. Letting everyone believe it. It's not exactly out of character for her.

Almost as if she's reading my mind, Irene turns to look at me. "That's the kind of shit she always pulls when something's out of her control, Gabe."

But before she can finish her sentence, I catch sight of Sasha, emerging from the darkness and into the orange light of the bonfire. Her shoulders are rigid with anger.

"What happened to getting my beer?" she snaps.

Normally, when Sasha comes at me like that, I get flustered. Normally I stammer an apology, sheepishly say goodbye to my friends, hurry to the line at the keg. But this time I can't even speak. I just stare at her.

Her expression falters a little. "What?"

"So where's that promise ring I gave you?" I say.

She tosses her hair and gives an airy laugh. "Oh, that. Give me a break, I was obviously kidding. I found a ring in Mom's safe and thought it'd be funny."

"Sure. Except Devon Lord believed you. So you're not kidding. You're *lying*."

"Devon Lord is dumb as a sack of bricks," she says. "No offense, Devon."

"Uh, taken," he says, frowning.

"And besides . . ." She puts her hand on her hips and stares at me, and even though I know I'm in the right and she is not, I feel like I'm about three inches tall. "Is it so fucking awful for people to think you might do something nice for me once in a while? God, to hear you talk, I've been telling everyone I'm pregnant or you gave me crabs or something."

Is she right? Am I overreacting? I don't even know anymore. I'm never on stable ground with Sasha. I never know how to feel.

And suddenly, that's enough of a reason to be done.

She must see it in my expression. An uncertain look flickers across her face and is gone. Her hands drift away from her hips and she shrinks a little.

"Gabe?" she asks. It's maybe the first time I've heard her sound vulnerable . . . but I don't care anymore.

I look over at Caleb. "You cool to drive, man? I need to get out of here."

"Yeah, man." He glances at Irene, and suddenly they're flanking me. "Let's get outta here."

Sasha shakes her head, lifting her chin angrily. "Don't you even think about leaving me here."

"Okay, Sasha, step aside." Irene tries to shoulder past her. Sasha swells up, her shoulders going rigid. I push Irene gently behind me.

"Stop," I tell Sasha. My voice comes out almost like a plea; I don't have energy for anything more. "Just . . . stop, okay?"

I turn away from her. I don't look behind me as we walk toward the door. I half expect her to run after me. My shoulders are tensed for it. But she never does, and we get to Caleb's beater without anyone saying a word.

I'm in a car, hurtling in the darkness. The scene shifts and I'm outside of the car and it's barreling toward me. I'm watching Sasha dance, her shorts encrusted in sequins, a white spangled cowboy hat on her head—but partway through the performance she stops and starts to strip. At first I lean forward to watch, a thrill running through me as her long limbs emerge bare and smooth. But then she's angry, her face screwing up into a mask of fury, and she's pulling out her own hair, her eyes swollen, her hands gripping long blond locks and yanking them free. Blood runs down her scalp. She steps toward the edge of the stage, and her eyes meet mine. For a moment we both stare at one another, as if seeing each other for the first time. Then she launches herself like a cat, straight toward me.

I wake sweaty and disoriented. It's pitch-black. Snatches of anxious half dream, half memory grab at me. I'm in my own room, in my own bed. My clock reads 3:42 A.M.; it's only been two hours since Caleb dropped me off.

It's half a second before my eyes adjust and I realize I'm not alone.

Sasha's sitting backward on my desk chair, her legs splayed out on either side of the frame. Her hair is tangled and loose, and her eye makeup is smeared down her cheeks. She looks

like a half-mad ghost, blood-hungry, but the smile she gives is calm and almost beatific.

"What are you *doing* here?" I sit up straight, adrenaline shooting through my veins. The darkness feels like it's crowding in on all sides. I pull my blanket up to my chest, even though I'm still fully clothed. "Jesus, how'd you even get in?"

She shrugs. "I have a key."

"You have a . . ." I shake my head. "What key?"

"I had it made a couple of months ago."

"What, did you steal mine and get it duplicated?"

She gives a soft snort, rolling her eyes. "Jesus, Gabe, you act like I'm untrustworthy. Plenty of people leave spare keys with their girlfriends."

I know something is wrong with this line of reasoning, but I'm still so groggy, so confused, I can't quite figure out what. I reach for the bedside lamp, but her voice cuts through the darkness. "Don't!"

Then she stands up from the chair, and I see that she's completely naked.

"I came to make nice," she purrs.

My breath catches in my throat. She is truly beautiful, her body powerful and delicate at the same time. But she's also truly terrifying. The angles of her face disappear into shadow. Her mouth is a tight determined line. And there's something flat and far away in her eyes.

"Sasha, this is nuts," I whisper. "My parents are asleep down the hall."

She moves toward me. Her skin glows in the moonlight. "All I want is to make you happy. You mean everything to me. I *need* you." She leans down, cups my chin in her hand.

I jerk away from her touch. "Don't."

"Oh, Gabe, come on." She rests a knee on the bed next to me. Her flowery perfume winds its way into my nose, into my throat. The sense of claustrophobia intensifies. I push her to the side, gasping for air.

Now she looks genuinely confused. For the first time a hint of self-consciousness seems to cross her features. She presses her knees together and hunches her shoulders. "What's wrong?" she asks. "Why don't you want me?"

I stare at her. I can see that the last question, at least, is dead earnest, and that's what breaks my heart: the fact that she can fight with me all night long, then break into my house convinced I'll still want her. That this will make all our problems go away.

I grope around on the ground until I find her T-shirt, then hand it to her. Silently, she pulls it over her head, tugging it down to cover the tops of her thighs.

"We're done," I say, simply.

She blinks, gripping the bottom hem of her shirt. "What are you talking about?"

"Sasha, we're done. I don't want to do this anymore. The jealousy, the arguments, the head games. It's exhausting." I angle toward her, trying to look her in the face, but she's staring out in space now. "I don't think you even love me anymore. I think you just like playing with me."

She shakes her head, still not looking at me. "No."

"Yes." I put my hands on her shoulders, trying to force her to look at me, but she wrenches out of my grip.

"Forget about it," she hisses. "We're *not* breaking up."

Anger rises up again, all my pity and anxiety and sadness swallowed whole by the rush of it. "You don't get to decide that. It's not up to you."

She smirks at me. It's humorless, hard. "Isn't it, though?"

I shake my head. "I'm done fighting." Then I lean across the bed and snap on the lamp.

Light floods the room. She recoils, squinting. Somehow in the light she doesn't seem so frightening, so unpredictable.

"Find your clothes. I'll walk you out to the front door."

For a minute, it looks like she's going to refuse, and I'm not quite sure what I'll do if that happens. Physically drag her out, kicking and screaming? I don't want to have to explain that one to my parents. I cross my arms over my chest and wait, refusing to look away. Finally, she stands up and walks over to the desk chair. Her underwear and shorts are folded neatly on the desk. I turn away as she pulls them on.

Once she's dressed, I get up off the bed and open the door softly, gesturing for her to go first. Silently, her face as still as a doll's, she walks past me and into the hall.

I follow. At my sister's half-open door, her service dog, Rowdy, pushes his head out of the crack, his tags jingling softly. *Useless dog*, I think. *Aren't you supposed to bark at intruders?* But Sasha pats Rowdy's head as she passes, and he wags up at her. Because Sasha's *not* an intruder; she's one

of our pack. And now I have to start the tricky business of extricating myself from her.

In the living room, I open the front door. She stands for another moment and stares at me. Her face is strange and affectless in the dim light.

She puts her arms around my neck and presses her lips to mine. I pull back but her arms are tight, surprisingly strong. She nips at my bottom lip before letting go of me, smiling up at me with a dark glitter in her eye.

"This isn't over," she whispers.

Then she slips through the door and is gone.