

# LYING *in the* DEEP

DIANA URBAN





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# PROLOGUE

## NOW

I didn't realize there'd be this much blood.

Yeah, he'd said there was blood all over the room. But I thought of how my mother would always huff and say things like, "Oh, Jade, you got ice cream all over yourself." I'd glance down, expecting to be covered in chocolate goo, and there'd be this one lone dribble trailing down my shirt. Everyone always exaggerated these kinds of things.

But nope.

Not this time.

This time, there was literally blood *all over the room*.

A sea breeze rustled the curtains hanging from the wide-open French balcony doors, and even though I'd just been out on the top deck, I shivered, goose bumps coating my arms like a rash. I took another step into the suite to get a closer look, still gripping the cabin doorframe as though it could anchor me to a reality in which my best friend was still alive.

Well, ex-best friend.

That ship had sailed months ago.

Red slashed the ruffled white sheets, most of the blood pooled on the left side of the bed, like that's where it started. Like that's where she'd been stabbed. Smears of it angled off to the right, toward the balcony—had she been dragged?—and there were

even some maroon flecks on the ornate opaque room divider at the foot of the bed, separating the bedroom from a small living room area. One of the beige armchairs—the one closest to the balcony—hadn't escaped the splatter.

Smudges streaked the balcony's stark white doorframe, too, the door open, ominous, like a gaping void before the endless sea.

The buzzing in my ears drowned out the voices behind me in the hall—yelling voices, frantic voices—and I thought of the blood staining my own shirt's hem. I tugged my jacket closed, hiding it . . . praying they wouldn't think I did this.

After all, there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell she'd survived.

There was so much blood, too much blood, and the way the balcony rail was coated in it . . .

But then a thought crossed my mind, a thought that made me falter back a step, that made bile rise in my throat and shame burn my cheeks.

Yet I couldn't help but think it.

*That spoiled, selfish brat got exactly what she deserved.*



## THREE WEEKS EARLIER

Oh, for crying out loud. I could count the number of times I'd ever left California on one hand, and now here I was in the bustling port in Amsterdam, waiting to embark on Campus on Board, surrounded by chattering classmates, a.k.a. potential new friends, about to set sail on the greatest adventure of my life for an entire semester, daydreaming about murder again.

There was no stopping it. Every time there was the tiniest lull in my day, my mind would snap to vengeance. Murderous vengeance. It was getting exhausting, honestly.

It'd been two months since the love of my life, Silas, dumped me for my best friend, Lainey.

Via text message, no less.

He'd been spending the summer interning at her dad's pharmaceutical company in Boston, and yeah, putting an entire country between me and them might strike you as a recipe for disaster. But I never in a million years imagined it'd end that way, let alone at all. Silas and I had fallen in love at first sight, like that cheesy stuff that happens in the movies, but *real*. It happened the first Friday of freshman year, when my new roommate Lainey dragged me to a frat party, wild and wicked, determined to break my lifelong sobriety streak. We'd been clutching red Solo cups filled with God-knew-what in the corner of some packed living

room that reeked of cheap beer, tittering over the tequila she'd snuck in in a flask, like that somehow made us fancier than everyone else.

For no reason at all, my gaze had flicked over her shoulder, and there he was on the staircase. Arms crossed, sans beverage, leaning against the wall as he scanned the packed room, tall, tan, and lean, with this sharp jaw and thick, sideswept chestnut hair. Not a moment later, his sparkling hazel eyes found mine. Like fate.

I had no clue Silas was Stanford's newest baseball star, no idea he was destined for the MLB and the fame and huge contracts that came with it. All I cared about was how his lopsided grin turned my insides to mush, how everything else in the room seemed to disappear, even Lainey, even the bass blasting from a speaker perched on the windowsill next to me.

He was my first everything, and then, after nearly two years together—two years of cheering him on from the bleachers, of clinging together beneath his bedsheets, of planning a future together—all I got was a stupid text.

I'd memorized it. Memorized every word, searching for meaning in the letters, hunting for some logical explanation.

**Hey Jade, it's over. We haven't been working for a while. I'm with Lainey now and it's not up for discussion. We're both blocking your number, so don't bother trying.**

Brutal, I know.

As for Lainey, my supposed BFF . . . she'd totally iced me out. No text, no DM, nothing.

We'd been roomies since freshman year, though let's be real—

as the daughter of one of America's wealthiest pharmaceutical tycoons, she could've easily snagged a fancy off-campus loft. But she wanted a "normal" college experience—and what Lainey wanted, Lainey got—so she wound up in the dorms with me. I was as "normal" as it got: a broke nerd raised by a single mom in rural California who only managed to swing Stanford on scholarship.

We'd instantly glommed together despite the differences stretching between us like a chasm—me, eager to bust from my shell, a loyal confidant, a motivating study partner; she, a magnet for attention and an easy flirt, the way she'd flash her radiant smile and make you feel like the sun was shining at night. She was stunning, because of course she was, with her silky platinum hair, eyes blue as the winter sky, rosy high cheekbones, and rosier full lips. Forget the money—Lainey could steal your heart just by breathing, charm you with a glance, convince you of anything. She could get whatever the hell she wanted, even if she didn't already have it all.

Apparently, that included the love of *my* life.

Hence, murder. Lots and lots of daydreaming about murder.

Poisoning Lainey's tequila might do it, though shoving her off her dad's penthouse balcony would be way more gratifying. I imagined sneaking up there as she stretched on a lounge chair sunbathing, her smooth, creamy skin tanning like my pale, blotchy skin never could. I imagined chucking her phone so she'd scramble to the edge and watch it sail twenty stories down. I imagined pushing her so hard, she'd flip over the rail, legs tumbling over her head. I imagined her shrieking the

whole way, and moments later, the satisfying spl—

“Oh my actual God, why am I not getting *any* signal right now?” The tall boy waiting in line behind me brandished his phone every which way, tearing me from my blood-spattered thoughts. “It’s not like we’re in the middle of nowhere.”

“Maybe it’s a dead spot?” I suggested unhelpfully, tugging my thick, dark curls into a low, messy bun so it’d stop whipping in my face in the unseasonably cool breeze.

“But this is our last chance to have cell service till the first port.” As though he could reason a signal into existence. “Gah, this is gonna be torture. Can you believe we only get fifty megabytes of internet a day? That’s nothing. How do they expect us to get any homework done? Scoot up, by the way.”

The person ahead of me had moved up a lot. “Oh, sorry. Jet lag.” And homicide.

I slung my backpack onto my shoulder and scooted up my two heavy suitcases. Embarkation seemed like a bajillion-step process after getting zero sleep in two days. After this check-in line, we had to wait in another line to drop off our luggage, then yet another line to board, then—you guessed it—another line to register inside. I hoped I’d have enough time before lifeboat training to scope out my room, though at this point, things were looking bleak.

“No worries,” said the boy. “You didn’t fly in *this* morning, did you?”

“Yep, I did.” My scholarship covered Campus on Board, but no extras like hotel stays, so I decided to fly in the same day as embarkation. Naturally, my flight from Sacramento to New

York was delayed four hours, so I missed my connection to Amsterdam, rebooked to a later flight, and soared over the Atlantic in a state of sheer panic. Extremely on-brand for me.

“Oh my God, you must be absolutely dead right now. I’m Miguel Diaz, by the way?” He said it like a question, peering at me expectantly, like I might recognize his name.

Nope.

Still, I gave him a warm smile and stuck out my hand. “Jade Miller.” I was usually shy with strangers, but it was so much easier when they were super talkative. Like Lainey. It had been impossible not to warm to her immediately.

He gave my hand a little jiggle. “Do you have service?” Talk about a one-track mind.

I shrugged. “I don’t have a global data plan.”

“Oh, weird.”

Not that weird if you were pinching pennies. My cheeks flushed. “Well, I don’t want to be tethered to my phone whenever we’re at port.”

Thinking of all those port stops—eleven countries in four months!—and soaking in all those cultures made excitement rush through me like shaken soda fizzing through my veins. If anything could piece my shattered heart back together, it was this.

“The semester will be over like that,” I said, snapping my fingers. “And I don’t want to waste any of it staring at a screen. I want to be present.”

That, and I didn’t want to be tempted to Instagram-stalk Lainey and Silas at every port.

My heart clenched to think how Lainey and I had planned this trip together, huddled on our shaggy dorm room rug over brochures she'd requested via snail mail so it'd feel more real than scouring a website, dreaming of clubbing in Greece, sunbathing in Malaysia, tasting authentic sushi in Japan. This was supposed to be *our* adventure. But she couldn't possibly show her face here after what she did. We'd originally planned to room together, but when I logged into my CoB portal, my room assignment was back to pending. Plus, she hadn't bragged about CoB on Instagram in months, which basically confirmed it.

"Okay, so I totally dig this whole *Eat, Pray, Love* vibe you've got going on"—Miguel waggled a finger at me from head to toe—"but if I don't get my videos uploaded, I'm going to lose followers, so."

"What kinds of vid—"

"Skincare tips! I'm almost up to a million subs on YouTube. And that's not including Insta and TikTok—"

As he rattled off his metrics, I scanned the long line ahead of us. Fat chance I'd get to snag the bed I wanted. For whatever reason, I never received my roommate assignment, but I knew I'd have two of them, since I could only afford the small cabins with one single bed and a bunk bed. Something about bunks freaked me out; I worried I'd roll off the top or be crushed on the bottom—

My breath hitched as something familiar, so familiar, caught my eye two lines over—platinum hair coaxed into loose beach waves shimmering in the sunlight. But, no, it couldn't be . . . So many girls styled their hair that way. Though as I kept staring,

her cackling laughter dispersed in the air like a virus, turning the fizz in my veins flat. I knew that laugh, the mockery it implied. And as she turned, her sparkling grin coming into full view, I saw I was right.

There, two lines over, was none other than Lainey Silverton.

She had some gall showing up after all. As usual, she was all sleek and sharp edges, her powder pink blazer probably costing more than my tuition. She had one elbow perched on her Louis Vuitton suitcase's handle, wearing her usual bug-eyed Gucci sunglasses, her large gold hoop earrings swinging as she jabbered excitedly to—I couldn't tell. A group of chattering middle-aged couples behind her blocked whoever it was from view. I leaned to get a better look, standing on my tiptoes, gripping the handle of my suitcase to balance myself, and—*no*. My stomach dropped directly into my uterus.

This couldn't be happening. There was absolutely no way this could be happening.

It was Silas.

He was never supposed to come on this trip. How could he even afford it? Had Lainey bought his way on? Oh God. How could this be happening? How—

"Are you okay?" Miguel asked, finally noticing I wasn't paying attention to a word he was saying. He followed my shocked stare and scowled. "Oh, Christ, it's *that* girl."

I winced. "You know her?"

Miguel nodded. "Lainey, right? Yeah, she's also gunning for the student YouTuber role."

"Wait, what?" I shook my head, confused. "I thought they

picked the student assistants ahead of time. Didn't they all board a day early?" I'd applied for a student assistant role since it came with a grant but didn't get picked because I was already on full scholarship.

"Mm-hmm, but the person they picked had to drop out of CoB last minute. They're doing this super-ridiculous audition process, which, whatever—"

"Well, what the hell is she doing in *that* line?" That line was for the "lifelong learners"—grown-ass adults who wanted to study and sight-see with the rest of us college kids—but it was hard to tell them apart from the parents swarming their kids, readying to bid them bon voyage.

In fact, now that I had a clearer view, I spotted Lainey's dad nearby—Boston big-shot Derek Silverton, CEO of Sanatek. I almost didn't recognize him without his usual sports coat. Now he wore a striped navy polo shirt and khaki trousers, though his graying, dark hair was slicked back as always, his mouth set in his usual smug expression as he stared at his phone. I bet they'd spent the day leisurely sight-seeing in Amsterdam. How nice for them.

"So apparently," said Miguel, "she got one of the big suites on an upper deck. I bet she totally bribed someone. There's no other way."

I jabbed my cheek with my tongue and narrowed my eyes. Wow. She really did get whatever the hell she wanted, didn't she? And she was beautiful, charismatic, heir to a freaking fortune.

So why'd she have to take Silas, too?

It wasn't right. It wasn't *fair*. I curled my hands into fists and

wanted nothing more than to smash the glass barriers lining the dock and slice her with the shards—

“If she bribes anyone for the YouTuber role,” said Miguel, glaring, too, “I’ll flip the hell out. You know, getting that could totally put me on the map as a travel influencer. Don’t get me wrong, I love the skincare stuff, but free moisturizer isn’t exactly on par with a free stay at a five-star hotel in Fiji, you know?”

I scoffed. “Meanwhile, she could afford any five-star hotel she wants.”

“Exactly! So, wait, how do *you* know her?”

“She ruined my life.”

Miguel’s plucked eyebrows shot up, and he gaped at me. “Go on . . . ?”

Ugh, I didn’t want to get into my whole depressing life story right now. “Let’s just say, we used to be best friends, and now we’re not.”

“But why—”

“You know what?” I said, eager to change the subject. “If you want to beat her for that role, I bet CoB would love some boarding footage. All the past YouTubers boarded separately, but I bet so many people want to know what this process is like. And *she’s* clearly not bothering.”

Miguel’s eyes lit up. “Oh my God,” he muttered, like he couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought of it himself. He whipped out his phone again and started taking a panoramic shot of the pier as I stared at Silas, my chest filled with such an aching yearning, I thought it might pop.

He wore that lopsided grin of his, pointing out something

about the *Sea Voyager*—the gleaming white vessel at the end of the pier that'd be our home for the next four months. He was finally free of his arm sling—the one he'd worn most of the summer as his Instagram feed filled with photos of him and Lainey, photos I'd pored over, sobbed over, wondering what went wrong. Lainey pressed a hand to his shoulder, leaning close, probably to tell him something without her father overhearing. As Silas laughed, eyes glittering with amusement, I swallowed hard as the breakfast sandwich I'd scarfed down on the plane threatened to come back up.

Miguel tapped my shoulder. I turned, and his phone was in my face. "So, tell me your name, where you're from—"

"Gah, not me." I raised a hand, hiding my face. "I look like death right now."

He stopped recording and scanned my face, quirking a brow. "You're not wrong."

I snorted. "Thanks."

"When we're on board, remind me to introduce you to caffeine gel." He turned to the person behind him and made a cooing sound, liking whatever he saw. "Hi, hi! I'm shooting footage for the CoB YouTube channel, mind if I ask you a few questions?"

Whoever it was grunted something that sort of resembled *Yeah*.

My attention slid back to the happy couple. I still wasn't sure what shocked me more—how the breakup came out of left field or the callousness of it, the unwillingness to talk, blocking me as though *I'd* done something wrong. Or maybe it was how both people I loved most in this world had betrayed me so epically.

“You’re the best,” said Miguel. “So, tell me your name, where you’re from, and what your day has looked like so far—”

“I said, yeah, I *do* mind,” someone said gruffly. I glanced over at the boy Miguel was harassing, instantly getting brooding vibes from his charcoal-gray army jacket over a black T-shirt and distressed black denim. His long black lashes hid his eyes as his thumbs roved over his phone screen, but when he finally glanced up, raking back his dark tousled hair, I saw his eyes were such a deep shade of brown, they were almost black. They flicked to mine for the briefest moment before focusing on his screen again.

“I promise this’ll just take a sec,” Miguel persisted.

The sound of Lainey’s tinkling laughter floated over—apparently at something Silas had said. She flirtatiously whacked his arm before sneaking a peek at her phone. She never could stop checking her social media notifications, thriving on likes and attention, despite her claims that she hated it.

“I don’t have a sec,” said the brooding boy.

Lainey was scanning the crowd now, a hand on her hip as she took in the scene—

“Um, you literally have so many seconds right now,” Miguel said, motioning to the line. This time, the boy ignored him.

Lainey shaded her eyes despite her huge sunglasses—

“Yeesh,” Miguel bristled, back at my side. “This guy thinks he’s the shit.”

But I was too focused on Lainey to respond, or even care. Her line of sight was about to reach me—

And there it was.

Lainey stilled.

All I could see were those bug-eyed black lenses, but I knew she'd spotted me. She pursed her full lips, her whole body going stiff, and the air seemed to run out of oxygen despite the sea breeze ruffling my curls. There was no joy in seeing me—only dismay. Silas was staring ahead at the *Sea Voyager* again, seeming to say something to Lainey, something she was ignoring.

Finally, he glanced at her. I couldn't hear him from here, but I could read his lips—lips that used to roam all over me. *What's wrong?* After throwing one last bitter look my way, she said, loud and clear, "She came anyway. She's right over there."

Of course I came anyway.

I wasn't the one who stabbed my best friend in the back.

I wasn't the one who stole the love of her life.

I wasn't the one who stomped on her soul with no remorse.

And now that spoiled, selfish cow was going to ruin this trip—a trip I'd been looking forward to for *years*.

Little did I know how deep the chaos she'd sow.



As I waited in the registration line on board to get my ID card, I took in my surroundings, mouth agape—this place was way more glam than I'd expected. The stained-glass, skylight-topped atrium soared three decks above the crowded reception lobby, each level fitted with ornate brass railings and bedecked with oil paintings and bronze sculptures.

But as I made a beeline to my cabin on Deck 4, my surroundings became a blur as the way Silas had spotted me before needled my mind. Surprised recognition had filled those honeyed hazel eyes, and he'd flinched a bit, seeming to stop breathing as he soaked in the sight of me. I could swear he almost took a step toward me. But then those beautiful eyes turned cold as an iceberg as he clenched his square jaw and balled his hands into fists.

Like *I'd* done something wrong.

Technically, if I hadn't asked Lainey to get that summer internship for Silas at her dad's company, none of this would've happened. But at the time, all I cared about was making sure Silas didn't drop out of Stanford.

After he shattered his throwing elbow in a skiing accident last spring, Stanford revoked his full scholarship, since his injury wasn't baseball related. All the physical therapy in the world wouldn't bring him back to full strength. But, like me, he

couldn't afford Stanford otherwise—not without some serious financial aid.

“Dammit, Jade, what’m I gonna do?” he’d asked as we huddled on his bed, gaping at the email on his phone, eyes watering—not from pain, but from devastation over losing his future. *Our* future. We’d talked of getting married after graduation, of me starting a remote business so I could travel with him wherever he played ball. I never wanted to be tethered to some desk in a cubicle farm anyway, or take orders from some micromanaging boss with a power trip.

So this plan was perfect.

It was *freedom*.

And now it was gone.

“Don’t worry. Everything’ll be fine.” I’d cupped his cheek, wiping away a tear with my thumb.

He’d leaned into my palm. “I lost *everything* . . .”

“Listen. Everything seems terrible now, and it’s going to feel terrible for a while. But you’re strong and determined and capable, and you’ll get through this.”

“*How?*”

I dropped my hands. That, I didn’t know. Anguish clawed at my insides. I wished I could take back that terrible weekend, that I’d insisted he stay with me instead of goofing off with his buddies at a ski lodge at Lake Tahoe. But I wasn’t possessive like that, even after seeing what happened with Mom and Dad. Especially then. Trust is freedom.

I *needed* freedom.

“You can take out student loans, can’t you?” I’d suggested.

“Not halfway through like this. The interest rates would kill me . . . I’d be buried in debt forever. I’m gonna have to drop out.”

Then he’d probably move back home to Tennessee. My chest compressed. “*No*,” I’d choked out. “You can’t.”

“Well, what’m I gonna do with a history degree, anyway?” Silas never wanted to do anything other than play baseball.

“You can switch majors—”

“To *what*? I have no idea what I’d even want to do.”

I’d known for ages I wanted to be a solopreneur—to code an app, market the hell out of it, rinse, repeat, until I found a big hit. And all I’d need was a laptop. My career could blossom without ever having to put down roots, without ever feeling *trapped* like I’d felt growing up. So double majoring in communications and computer science had been an easy choice. I’d never floundered like this.

“How about sales?” I’d suggested. “You’re charming, clever, good at convincing people of things. You could probably switch to a com or econ major for that.”

“Huh.” He scratched the scruff on his jawline. “Maybe . . .”

My brain whirled, calculating the classes he’d already taken and whether they’d meet the liberal arts requirements for communications majors, whether he’d still be able to graduate on time. But that still didn’t solve those hefty tuition bills. It must’ve been so easy for people like Lainey, whose dad footed her tuition. She’d never had to think twice about it . . .

I gasped. “Oh! I’ve got it!”

“What?”

“Lainey’s dad! He’s the CEO of that massive pharmaceutical

company in Boston. I'm sure she could get you a paid internship there over the summer." I grabbed my phone.

"How do you even know they have paid internships?"

"Pfft," I said, googling, "those Big Pharma companies cough up. Yep, see? Here's their career page. They have internships in a few departments, including sales. All paid, look. 'Interns will receive competitive compensation . . .' Oh, and here, 'All interns will be considered for full-time positions based on their performance—'"

"Aw, c'mon, Jade. Intern pay would barely put a dent in my tuition."

"But it'd help. Loans could cover the rest."

"The interest rates—"

"But d'you know how good a full-time job there would pay? Lainey's dad's like, a gazillionaire. I bet you could pay off your loans in just a few years."

"Huh. Maybe . . ."

Once I asked Lainey, and she got the thumbs-up from her dad, I convinced Silas to take the gig. Biggest mistake of my life, apparently. But it wasn't like I'd done anything malicious—

"Oof!" Someone whaled into my bulging backpack, nearly whacking my skull into an ornate, etched glass wall sconce.

"Watch it," a girl with flowing auburn hair and bright red lipstick snapped as she maneuvered her brown monogrammed Louis Vuitton suitcase—just like Lainey's—around me.

She looked kind of familiar from somewhere but sped down the hall before I could place her. I glanced at the nearest door.

417. My cabin. I'd been standing here like a zombie, lost in my thoughts.

I unlocked the door with my ID card and peeked inside, clutching that sliver of hope I'd somehow beat my roommates here to snag the single bed.

No such luck. My roommates' belongings were already strewn across the cramped cabin, like their luggage had spontaneously combusted upon entry. No sign of said roommates, though, and the single bed was clear except for an elephant-shaped towel animal, my two suitcases propped next to it.

I picked up a sheet of torn notebook paper on the pillow.

*Hi roomie! This bed is yours. We went to  
the merch store to pick up some stuff. Can't  
wait to meet you! Xoxo Navya*

Welp, now I felt like a selfish sack of shit.

Shaking off my guilt, I dumped my backpack on the bed and took in the space. The interior room had no windows, and the bunks spanned half the wall opposite the door, a small metal ladder angled at one end. Faux granite shelves the color of toast-ed mauve separated the bunk bed from mine, which converted into a couch along the right-hand wall. A matching closet stood next to the door, which fit a small flat-screen TV in a cubby, and a tiny vanity was nestled next to the minuscule bathroom. I switched on the lights—the sink bore the same granite detailing as the bedroom, and there was hardly any counter space, but

some clever storage was built in beneath the sink and above the toilet.

Back in the cabin, the burgundy carpet and quilts, crown moldings, oil paintings above the bed, and all that faux granite gave it outdated yet regal vibes. Cramped, for sure, but nothing I wasn't used to.

Since I had a bit of time before lifeboat training after all, my nesting instinct kicked in. My roommates had left me a few hangers, two closet drawers, and one of the shelves between our beds. One suitcase had all my liquids: shampoo, sunscreen, body wash, oil to tame my thick, curly hair, crap like that. I hauled all of it into the bathroom and crammed it into a shelf.

That suitcase also had all the snacks I'd loaded up on at the Dollar Tree to hold me over on port days. My scholarship only covered tuition and housing, so I'd have to stretch my cashier earnings from the summer over the entire semester for things like excursions, and that meant eating on the cheap. I left them in the suitcase and rolled it under the convertible bed, where it barely fit.

I'd almost finished stacking my underwear in one of the closet drawers when the door burst open, and two girls squeaked, "She's here!" One of them extended a hand to me. "Hi, I'm Navya."

I grinned back, taking her hand. "Jade. It's nice to meet—"

But I was cut off by a bear hug from the other girl. "Hiiiiiii. I'm Divyaaaaa. We're gonna have a blaaaaast." She trailed the last syllable of each sentence.

"Navya and Divya," I said as Divya released me and tossed a plastic bag onto the bottom bunk. "Are you two . . . ?"

“Yep, twins.” Navya tucked her shoulder-length ebony hair behind her ears. No wonder they didn’t mind bunking. “Fraternal.”

I actually would’ve guessed they were a year or so apart—they both had similar, curvy frames and rich golden-brown skin, but Divya was a bit taller, her hair longer and her cheeks rounder than Navya’s high, defined ones, with fuller lips and a mole at one corner. Both of them had long, curled eyelashes that put Lainey’s heavily mascaraed ones to shame.

“We’re both prelaw, too,” Navya went on, “but I’m at Harvard and Divya’s at BU.”

*Boston*, I thought with a shudder. Where Silas and Lainey had torn my heart to shreds.

Gah, I hated this game my mind was playing, connecting every dot to *them*.

“I knew Harvard would never let in both of us,” said Divya, brushing her long hair with fast, frantic strokes, “so I let her have it.” She quickly tied it back in a loose ponytail that rippled in ebony waves over one shoulder, then disappeared into the bathroom.

Navya rolled her eyes. “She always says that. But I know she applied to Harvard. It’s kind of a miracle she got into BU. Anyway . . .” She reached into her own plastic bag and pulled out a white T-shirt. I recognized it as the CoB itinerary shirt—the design bore a world map surrounded by flags of the eleven countries we’d visit this semester. Students always wore these in their Instagram pics during port stops. “I got you this. A few of the YouTubers mentioned they sell out fast, so.”

“Nice, thanks! I thought the merch store didn’t open till tomorrow, though.”

Navya’s smile fell, and she threw a wary look toward the bathroom. “Er . . . Divya knows one of the student assistants who’s running it this semester and got him to sneak us in.”

“Oh, cool.”

“Yeah . . .” Her voice was strained. Maybe she wasn’t a rule-breaker like her sister. “Anyway, I took a wild guess and got you a medium; hope that’s okay.” She sized up my narrow frame.

“Totally, it’s perfect.” I took it and raised it to my chest. I preferred loose, flowing shirts anyway. Form-fitting clothes made me feel like I was suffocating. “Thanks!”

“No worries. It was twenty-eight bucks . . . ya know, just whenever you get a chance.”

Heat crept up my neck. I didn’t expect her to shell out for a stranger, of course, but I would’ve done without this shirt otherwise. Now I’d have to make do with a granola bar instead of local cuisine at an extra port stop. Still, I dug through my purse, fished out my wallet, and forked over the cash.

“By the way,” said Navya, opening a hidden shelf under the vanity, “this is where we’re keeping snacks. Help yourself—ya know, within reason, obviously.”

“Ooh, nice.” I tugged out my own suitcase, showing her my stash. “Same goes for you two.”

“Awesome—”

Divya reappeared from the bathroom clutching two of those mini booze bottles they handed out on planes.

“Oh, come on, Divya,” Navya groaned as I shoved the suitcase back under my bed. “Day one? Really?”

“What?” Divya tucked the bottles into her small beige purse. “We’re in Europe. Eighteen’s the drinking age here. It’s ridiculous that CoB limits it . . . like we’re high schoolers or something.”

“If that were true, they wouldn’t let us drink at all,” Navya snapped.

Divya opened her mouth like she wanted to argue, but I cut her off. “Anyway, we better move.” I opened the closet and stood on my tiptoes to tug out three puffy, bright orange life jackets. “Lifeboat training’s in five minutes!”



The rest of the afternoon was a blur of information as we were shunted from one orientation activity to the next.

I tried to pay attention. I knew I should’ve learned the evacuation safety protocols, the procedures for disembarking at each port, where the medical clinic was located. I should’ve laughed along with everyone else at the bubbly dean of programming, Candace Jackson’s jokes during her welcome speech in the Student Union. I should’ve been impressed by the enormous space fitting all seven hundred passengers that was as extra as it gets despite its basic name—a majestic, glittering chandelier dangled over the stage from an ornately painted ceiling reminiscent of a Michelangelo fresco, red velvet curtains draped the windows lining the balconies, and golden beams separated rows of plush red armchairs with a granite-topped table

nestled between each pair. I should've been mind-boggled by how the *Sea Voyager* seemed to defy the laws of physics to fit so much inside. I should've been excited, so excited, to start this journey.

But I kept spotting them.

Lainey and Silas.

Once was while out on deck, watching a lecture on the life-boats; they held hands in the next group over, and Lainey kept hurling furtive glances my way. Another was when passing Lainey's door on Deck 8 as she struggled to unjam it, laughing with Silas that *of course* she already needed to call maintenance, until she spotted me and scowled.

And somehow, the impossibly spacious ship seemed more stifling than the tiny house I lived in with Mom. The threat of the happy couple's presence lurked around every corner, and jealousy spread through my veins like venom whenever I saw how affectionate they were. She was always caressing his arm or leaning in for a kiss. I was always on the verge of hurling.

I'd thought this trip would put an entire globe between us, but instead, here they were, everywhere I turned.

I finally seemed to have lost track of them as everyone gathered at the ship's stern to wave farewell to the parents who'd lingered or returned to the pier to watch the ship sail off. Navya, Divya, and I raced along the open teak promenade on Deck 9 to snag a spot, squeezing behind a massive, Roman-style bronze bust on the terrace to huddle against the railing. I took a deep breath, soaking in the crisp, salt-laced air and the sight of students crowding the lower decks. "I can't believe this

ship has enough cabins for all these people,” I said.

“I can,” said Navya, clutching her cardigan closed against the sea breeze whipping past. Divya, however, didn’t seem to give a damn about the cold—or maybe her frantic waving kept her warm. “Our room’s basically a glorified coffin.”

I laughed. “It’s not *that* bad.”

“Are you kidding?” said Navya. “I can’t even fit a quarter of my clothes into the closet.”

“It’s all in the folding. I can show you later. I’m used to small spaces.”

She threw me a sympathetic cringe. “Was your dorm at Stanford tiny, too?”

“No, God no.” The room I’d shared with Lainey seemed like a palace compared to my bedroom back home, if you could even call it that. “My mom’s house is tiny. And I mean, it’s a *literal* tiny house.”

“Wait, what?” said Divya, catching her breath. Apparently she’d heard us over her hollering. “Like a dollhouse?”

Navya swatted her arm. “Don’t be dense.” To me, she said, “Like that show on HGTV, right?”

I chortled. “Yeah, pretty much.”

After Dad disappeared, Mom wanted to go off the grid, so she sold our ranch in Sacramento and moved us into a tiny house outside the city—one hyper-compartmentalized room plus a bathroom that was basically a closet with plumbing. She took self-sufficiency to an extreme, not even willing to trust things like basic city infrastructure.

“You watch HGTV?” I teased, eager to change the topic.

Navya rolled her eyes. "Our mother's obsessed. It's on twenty-four seven."

"Nobody forces you to watch it," said Divya.

"Well, it's *right* there, all the time." Navya pushed her wind-blown black hair from her eyes.

"Did you have your own room, at least?" Divya asked, swiveling the subject back to me. I guessed the twins didn't have to share growing up.

"Eh, it was more like a shelf above the kitchen." I waved it off like it was no biggie, but really, I'd been desperate to escape. Mom couldn't afford to send me to college, and Dad would never fork over that kind of cash when his priorities were clearly elsewhere. So all throughout high school, I studied like my life depended on it.

And in some ways, it did.

I'd felt so stifled by the lifestyle Mom had stuffed us into, with her rigid rules, her distrust, her paranoia. It felt like the walls themselves would squeeze the air from my lungs at any moment.

In the end, all that studying paid off. I won the Pendant Grant, a full-ride scholarship a wealthy local benefactor gave each year's Sandy Hill valedictorian. It let me go to Stanford, and even covered CoB. Mom was thrilled I'd be going to college so close to home, though she'd tried talking me out of CoB.

But nothing could keep me from this.

"Do you have any siblings?" Divya asked.

"No," I said. "Only child."

"So you just live with your mom?"

"Yup."

“What happened to your dad?”

“Divya!” Navya poked her arm.

“*What?*”

“No, it’s fine,” I said. I’d wished someone had told *me* what happened to Dad when he vanished. At the time it’d seemed like some monster had plucked him from their bedroom window without leaving a shred of evidence behind. “When I was ten years old, he—”

The ship blared its horn, cutting me off. And as it started drifting from the pier, everyone burst into excited applause.

I reflexively joined in, grinning from ear to ear as giddiness made my fingers and toes tingle. This was it! We were officially setting sail for England, with a whole semester ahead of breathing in the sea air and seeing all these amazing countries and—

A familiar voice whooped somewhere nearby, and a prickle snaked down my spine.

I leaned over, scanning the rows of cheering students, and spotted Lainey farther down the stern. She held her phone out on a selfie stick, filming herself and Silas waving at the pier amidst the crowd, and threw him a dazzling smile. My cheeks flushed as my blood boiled. The cheering din faded to a low hum, obscured by my pulse roaring in my ears.

She was happy. No, *elated*. And it tore my heart to shreds.

Even if she’d fallen for Silas . . . even if she’d been determined to steal him . . . didn’t it hurt her to lose *me*?

But the biggest question of all—a question that made my stomach curdle to consider—was: How the hell was I going to get through this semester without literally stabbing her in the face?



After a quick break in our room to spruce up—I chose a flowy, floral dress with loose off-the-shoulder sleeves I’d plucked from a sales rack at T.J. Maxx—we filed into Sea Haven, one of the two main restaurants on the ship, for dinner. By then I was so famished and exhausted—I hadn’t slept in almost two days at this point—I loaded my plate with things that didn’t even make sense together: wild rice with penne drenched in rich tomato sauce, cocktail shrimp and chicken fingers, and a glop of something I’d thought was chicken salad but smelled an awful lot like tuna.

Sea Haven had a retro, glamorous ambience. Round mahogany tables dotted the emerald floral-accented carpet, each surrounded by curlicue-engraved high-backed chairs with matching emerald cushions. I followed Navya and Divya around one of the faux marble columns spanning the length of the restaurant to an empty table for six and collapsed next to Navya, eager to scarf this all down. Miguel stood nearby, black hair freshly gelled, filming people carrying loaded plates from the buffet back to their tables. He spotted me and waved before pointing his phone my way.

I angled my veritable smorgasbord toward him and gave an overly enthusiastic thumbs-up, then suddenly noticed who was sitting behind him, facing away from me at the next table over.

Lainey and Silas.

Because of course they were.

A wave of nausea surged up my throat, and it wasn't from seasickness. Silas was facing away from me, but I could see Lainey's silhouette; she'd only need to glance over her shoulder to spot me. Miguel must've fully caught my reaction on camera, but as the two of them huddled together, speaking in hushed tones, all I could think of was what they might be saying, how I wished I were the one with Silas's hand on my upper back, his lips a breath away from mine.

Miguel pointed his camera elsewhere, clearly realizing any footage of me was unusable.

I couldn't torture myself like this. I couldn't let them ruin this. I had to just . . . ignore them somehow. Yep, that was it. I had to just make new friends, pretend they weren't here, and avoid them as much as possible.

I glanced at Navya, and she grinned back, giving my arm a giddy shake. "Isn't this so exciting? I think it's all finally sinking in—"

"Oh my God, Navya," Divya groaned, "can you *not* say the word *sinking* for the next few months?" I laughed.

New friends.

A new adventure.

A new beginning.

I could do this.

A few more people had settled in at Lainey and Silas's table. Okay, yeah, I was already doing a terrible job ignoring them. But the pale redhead in a form-fitting sequined number between Lainey and a cute Black boy looked awfully familiar from

somewhere, and not just from when she'd slammed into me in the narrow hall outside my cabin earlier. Suddenly, I placed her—Sheffia, Lainey's clingy BFF from high school. I'd never met her before, but I'd seen pictures on Lainey's Instagram.

I remembered showing my phone to Lainey to ask about one of her Instagram pics early freshman year; she'd been posing next to a pretty girl with long, coppery waves and bright red lipstick in front of a pink stucco wall in LA. "Is this the girl who keeps trying to reach out?"

"Ha, are you Insta-stalking me?" Lainey had teased.

I'd flushed slightly. "I like putting faces to names."

She'd snorted. "Yep, that's her. *Sheffia*." She'd wrinkled her nose like there was a turd under it and scrolled through her own phone before tapping with a flourish. "Deleted!" Lainey had been complaining about this girl for weeks. She'd blocked her number but didn't want to blatantly block her on the socials, so had to ignore her insistent DM attempts.

I'd watched the picture disappear from her feed. "Why do you hate her so much?"

"I don't *hate* her . . . She's just . . . I dunno." Lainey's smile collapsed, and stress lines creased her forehead as she gave me a wary look. As Derek Silvertown's daughter, she'd been something of an "it girl" back home, even fodder for tabloid TikTokers at times. And though we'd had a blast our first couple of months as roomies, our conversations had remained pretty surface level. Sometimes I wondered if she didn't trust me not to sell her secrets to the press or something.

I'd sunk next to her on her bed, folding my legs beneath me,

and poked her arm. “You can tell me stuff. I promise anything you say is safe with me.”

She’d given me a wobbly grin. “I know.” She nibbled on her lip a moment longer before her posture relaxed. “It’s just . . . she’s such a *user*. Lots of my high school friends were.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, they all wanted something out of me—party invites, free designer clothes, tickets to something . . . a private jet to LA.” She motioned to her phone, referring to the pic she’d deleted. “I’m just so over it, you know?”

Suddenly it made sense how we’d bonded so fast. As electrifying as her wild energy was to me, I was a balm for her. After years of people like Sheffia glomming onto her like a leech, sucking her dry, I didn’t give a damn about posh brands or fancy fashions or social climbing, and she *loved* that. So she flicked off those leeches and squished them under her shoe for good measure, and we became best friends.

Yet Sheffia had managed to latch onto her again.

“Yo.” A lanky boy with sandy curls, black-framed glasses, and a bright orange polo shirt approached the empty seat next to Divya, jarring me from my thoughts. “Okay if I sit here?”

“Sure!” the three of us chirped as Divya lifted her glass of soda seemingly from under the table. Had she just snuck in some booze? Navya frowned; she’d noticed as well.

He flopped down and whipped out his phone. “Have any of you managed to connect to the Wi-Fi?”

I yawned widely. “No.” I’d planned to figure out all that later tonight unless jet lag made me collapse first.

"I couldn't," said Navya. "Our stew said it was working, just slow, but I couldn't get it to load."

Divya groaned. "I heard it didn't work at all half the time last semester."

"Ah, well." He plopped his phone on the table. "Anyway, 'sup? I'm Tate."

The three of us introduced ourselves. "Where d'you go to school?" I asked.

"BU," he said. Oof, again with Boston. "I'm a business major—"

"Oh my God," said Divya through a full mouth. "I go to BU, too!"

"No kidding! Which school?"

"Law. And you're QSB?"

"Yup, and I'm doing a law concentration."

"Oh, nice!"

As they threw around school lingo, I dug in, remembering how ravenous I was. After a few minutes, Miguel came over and sat next to Tate. "There you are! For a minute there I thought I'd have to sit with Sketchy Bob. Hello, you!" he said to me before introducing himself to Navya and Divya.

"Sketchy Bob?" I asked.

Miguel pointed past me, and I looked over my shoulder—a middle-aged man in a gray baseball cap and matching stubble sat alone, tearing a dinner roll in half and staring at the neighboring table packed with chattering girls. "William," said Miguel. "He's a Lifelong Learner or whatever. But he's so *weird*. Everyone's calling him Sketchy Bob already. Anyway"—Miguel lit up, ignoring my skeptical look—"I see you've met my roomie." He entwined

his arm with Tate's and gave it an affectionate pat. "He's gonna help me film stuff, isn't that so nice?"

"No prob, it's good practice," said Tate. "I had to shoot a TikTok for a marketing class last semester, and I was like, what the heck am I doing?"

"You'd never made a TikTok before?" asked Navya, aghast. But when Tate's eyes settled on her, her high cheekbones went pink.

"Nah, never bothered," said Tate. "I'm more into gaming."

"Oh, I can teach you so much." Miguel stood and threw Tate's cloth napkin onto his own seat. "I've gotta grab some grub. Save my seat, boo."

"Sure," said Tate, and Miguel went to join the back of the buffet line. "I hope one of you wants a skincare routine makeover or whatever"—he waved a hand in front of his face—"because I'm drawing a line, and that's past the line."

"Oh, I'm in," said Divya as I savored the tomato sauce drenching the penne. I could basically live off Italian food. "Does he do makeup, too?"

"No clue—"

"Is this seat taken?" a gruff voice asked. I glanced up from my meal and saw it was the brooding boy who'd snubbed Miguel in line earlier. He still wore his charcoal jacket even though it was toasty inside, and his dark eyes roved over each of us.

"Yeah." Tate hovered a hand over Miguel's seat. "But that one's not." He pointed at the next seat over, next to me.

The boy nodded and sat, and immediately poked at his food as the rest of us stared.

“Hello,” Divya tried. The boy nodded again, chewing slowly, saying nothing.

I had to rub my lips to keep from laughing when Miguel sauntered back over and recognized the boy from earlier, food nearly sliding off his loaded plate as he froze. He looked utterly conflicted—this boy was objectively hot, but Miguel clearly thought he was a prick.

I was inclined to give Brooding Boy the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he was shy and hated being on camera.

Miguel’s eyes darted to the surrounding tables, but they were all full anyway, so with an exasperated huff, he took his seat between Tate and—well, whoever this boy was. “Did you see all those ice cream flavors? I’m gonna need you all to stop me. I have literally no self-control.”

I, on the other hand, started shoveling in food faster, excited by the prospect of as much free ice cream as I wanted.

“Can you all believe the size of the rooms, by the way?” said Miguel, changing topics faster than a politician. “I mean, I don’t know what I expected, but not *that*.”

The corners of Brooding Boy’s lips quirked at this, and we exchanged a fleeting look before he focused on his food again.

“Wait, is it just the two of you in your room?” asked Divya.

“Yeah,” said Tate.

“Then shut up. All *three* of us are crammed into one room.” She motioned between her sister and me.

“But your room’s probably bigger,” said Miguel.

“Mm, I don’t think so,” said Navya. “They looked pretty similar

in the virtual tour. Only the interior singles were smaller.” She’d clearly examined every pixel of the CoB website.

“Where’s *your* roommate?” I asked Brooding Boy.

He waved vaguely across the room.

So he couldn’t even be bothered to get to know his roommate at the welcome dinner, let alone speak words. Maybe he *did* think he was the shit.

Lainey laughed right then, more of a loud crow that reverberated off the walls and made everyone at the surrounding tables go quiet as they glanced over, straining to see what’d been so funny. Though I hadn’t had time to fix my hair before dinner, her blond hair was sleek and shiny like she hadn’t just been windblown out on deck like the rest of us, and when she tilted her head toward Silas, one of her diamond chandelier earrings glinted as it caught the light from the brass fixtures overhead.

Miguel twisted in his chair to peek her way and quickly turned back. “Oh my God. I literally can’t with her.” He spoke softly since Lainey was right behind him. To me he said, “Did you know she has over a million Insta followers?”

“Yeah.” I pushed around the food on my plate, appetite gone. I used to help her snap pics for it. Each of her posts was a carousel showing at least four bloopers from the first photo. We always had to stop once we were both laughing so hard, tears streaked down her cheeks, ruining her makeup.

“And she doesn’t even have a niche or anything,” Miguel went on. Divya leaned forward to hear, failing to notice she’d fully dunked her charm necklace into her mashed potatoes. “Like, she

doesn't tag any brands or do partnerships or anything. It's all just pointless selfies. She's like a magnet for followers without even trying."

"Maybe it's because of how wealthy she is," I grumbled. "Her feed *exudes* it. People love that aspirational crap." I'd never resented it before, though. She'd always let me borrow whatever, and although I couldn't tell a Prada from a Versace, it was fun to pick through her clothes and play dress-up.

And whenever I'd strike a pose for Silas later, he'd always *undress* me as quickly as possible. I swallowed down the rock that lodged in my throat.

"Ugh, I can't stand people like that," Navya muttered.

"People like what?" Brooding Boy asked at full volume. All our eyes snapped to him, surprised he'd said anything at all.

Navya shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "Well, ya know. People who are rich and successful without even trying. I mean, it's not like she earned that money herself, right? Her parents are probably rich. She's probably been loaded her whole life. Meanwhile, I'll be working my ass off in law school forever, and I'll graduate buried under a mountain of debt."

Tate snorted. "Cheers to that."

"Interesting." Brooding Boy cocked his head, a glint in his eye.

I squinted at him. "What's so interesting?"

He shrugged. "Just how quickly people judge each other for circumstances they were born into and had no control over, no matter which end of the spectrum they're on." I couldn't place his accent—American for sure, but almost with a touch of British.

I leaned forward, perching my elbows on the table. "Well,

listen. I *know* that girl, and I can confirm she's exactly as much of an asshole as Navya thinks she is."

Brooding Boy simply stared back, a slight smile playing on his lips as he considered me.

"You're talking about the blond girl, right?" Tate leaned back to see her behind Miguel.

"Yup."

"Yeah, I thought I recognized her before." He lowered his voice even more. "I think her dad's that Big Pharma douchebag, Derek Silverton. You know, the dude who owns Sanatek."

Divya screwed up her face and shook her head, like, *How the hell should I know that?* Rightfully so—how did Tate even know that?

Tate picked up his cell again. "I wanna google it. I wish the Wi-Fi worked—"

"See?" Navya said to Brooding Boy. "Daughter of a pharma bro. I bet she'll never have to work a day in her life."

I nodded, clucking my tongue. Lainey already seemed to have quite the list of haters on board . . . and I couldn't say I hated it.

Lainey glanced over and spotted me. Her lips twisted into a scowl.

Navya gave a little gasp. "Did she hear me say that?" she whispered. Maybe, or maybe she'd recognized the annoyed sound I'd made, just like I could pick out her laugh in a packed comedy club.

Miguel swiveled again to see and immediately broke into a wide grin. "Oh my God hiiiiii, how are you?" He stretched way

back to extend a hand to Lainey, nearly falling off his chair. “It’s so nice to meet you IRL!”

She fixed a smile onto her lips and shook his hand. “You, too. You know, it’s your fault I own, like, every Ordinary product.”

“Oh my *God*, you’ve seen my reviews?” Unlike earlier, when he seemed to expect me to know who he was, he seemed shocked she did. Shocked and *delighted*, the hypocrite. “We should totally hang. I’ll follow you on Insta once I’m back on-line, what’s your handle?” As if he didn’t already know.

So he was one of *those* people—the ones who’d trash-talk someone and then be sweet as sucralose to their face. He probably figured he could siphon some of her followers if he snagged a mention.

The mysterious boy caught my gaze, and we exchanged a judgmental glance, his eyes flashing devilishly. Despite everything, I had to bite my lip to keep from smiling.

As Tate and the twins broke off into a separate conversation and Miguel focused on his phone, I wanted to ask the boy his name, but the question clung to the tip of my tongue as Lainey turned back around and Sheffia hissed, “Is that her?”

So Lainey had told her about me. Like she’d told me about Sheffia way back when.

“Yeah,” said Lainey, not even bothering to keep her voice down. Had she told Sheffia the truth about how she’d stolen my boyfriend? Or had she painted me as the villain somehow? “I can’t believe she came. It’s like she’s stalking me or something.”

Brooding Boy clearly overheard this as well—his eyes filled with pity as they flicked back to me, somehow seeming to

understand she was talking about me. Maybe it was the way my cheeks caught fire. My throat constricted, tears welling so fast my nose had to be turning bright red.

Why had the two people I loved most turned on me like this?

Before the dam could burst in front of everyone, I fled, hurtling between tables and chairs like I was navigating some obstacle course and out into the narrow hall. As I hurried to my cabin, Brooding Boy's sympathetic glance flashed through my mind.

But I didn't want his pity. I didn't want anyone's pity.

I wanted answers.



When I was ten years old, after Dad bolted without warning, Mom sold everything we owned and stuffed the rest into garbage bags she dumped on the curb. “Fill this with whatever you want to keep,” she’d said, handing me a single cardboard box. “The rest has to go.”

“But why?” I’d cried for the zillionth time, devastated Dad was gone, terrified to move away from my friends, horrified to part with even more things I loved. And nobody would explain why any of it was happening.

A pained look had crossed Mom’s face before she huffed, “They’re just *things*, Jade,” yet again ignoring my demand for an explanation. “If you can’t let go of this trash, how will you ever deal with losing anything important?” As she walked away, helplessness gnawed on my insides like a feasting shark.

That’s how I felt now as I turned Silas’s and Lainey’s betrayal over and over in my mind like a stone that wouldn’t go smooth. Abandoned yet again, with no explanation. It didn’t even make sense—they were never close. If anything, they merely tolerated each other at group outings, him thinking she was some stuck-up snob, her thinking he was a self-absorbed jock. They’d been in a constant tug-of-war over me, then suddenly took the rope and strangled me with it.

I had to get to the bottom of this.

I had to figure out what went wrong.

But first, I needed a ridiculous amount of coffee.

The twins and I swarmed the espresso machine at Coastal Cantina on the top deck at 7:30 a.m. on our first day of class. Our schedules would alternate between A days and B days, and my A days were more hectic: Global Studies at 8:30 a.m., International Marketing at 11:10 a.m., and Global Art Encounters at 3:40 p.m. I only had one class on B days—a three-hour-long Business Writing and Communications workshop in the afternoon.

“Did you get *any* sleep last night?” Navya passed me a mug, a look of concern on her narrow face. She must’ve heard me tossing and turning all night.

“Hardly,” I said. Despite not getting a wink of sleep in almost forty-eight hours, my first night on the *Sea Voyager* had been restless as the ship creaked and groaned in the waves, those sounds drowned out by Lainey’s words playing on loop in my mind.

*It’s like she’s stalking me.*

But after backstabbing me like she did, I’d assumed she wouldn’t come on this trip. I’d hoped to put an entire planet between us for a whole semester. Heck, this trip was *my* idea. I was the one who told her about CoB to begin with, way back in the beginning of freshman year. I’d seen an ad for it in high school and knew no matter which college I went to, I wanted to study abroad in this program, even if I had to burn myself out fundraising to afford it. I’d literally been looking forward to this for *years*. And she *knew* that.

None of this made any sense at all.

I had to talk to Silas next time I saw him. We used to be so open with each other . . . not that we'd been very conversational; most of our alone time was more of the physical sort. But maybe he'd at least explain himself.

"Girl, hit me up next time," said Divya, sipping her machine-brewed cappuccino. "I've got some stuff that'll knock you right out." Navya pursed her lips; if our kindly stew, Julia—who'd already tried teaching me how to make towel animals—found her stash, it could mean expulsion. But before she could retort, Tate and Miguel ran into us, and we all scarfed down breakfast burritos before heading to class.

Global Studies was the only class all students were required to take, so it was a big lecture in the regal Union. It was pretty surreal going to class in a room that resembled a European opera house. I spotted Sheffia in the back, looking perky with her shiny curled tresses and red lipstick, despite the early hour. But Lainey and Silas must've had this class on their B-day schedules.

The five of us split up afterward—Navya and Divya had some ethnic studies class, while Tate, Miguel, and I found shady spots on the top deck under a canopy next to the swimming pool to get our first homework assignment out of the way before International Marketing. There'd been a ton of fascinating classes to choose from, but since I was double majoring, I didn't have room for electives, so I opted for those that'd help fulfill my communications course requirements at Stanford.

"She's kinda hot," Tate suddenly said in a low voice, nodding at someone over my shoulder. I twisted in my seat to look. There was Sheffia again, sitting alone at a nearby table, arms crossed as

she sulked at the glistening pool water, her pink tote bag on the chair next to her, like she was saving it for someone who was a no-show. “Either of you know her?”

I nearly rolled my eyes. “Her name’s Sheffia.” The only other thing I knew was how she’d clung to Lainey like a cobweb Lainey had tried swatting away, and had somehow spun a new web to tangle her in. Tate stared, awaiting more intel, but I gave a small shrug. “That’s all I got.”

“Well, someone ought to tell her that shade of lipstick is way too dark,” said Miguel.

“Huh. I think it’s cute,” said Tate.

“You *would*.”

Tate frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Miguel quirked an eyebrow. “Oh, honey, just look at your idea of fashion.”

Tate glanced down at what he was wearing—a navy-blue CoB sweatshirt and jeans—looking perplexed about what else he should be expected to wear.

The three of us had International Marketing next, so we headed down to the classroom on Deck 6 together, and my heart spasmed when I spotted Lainey in the back row. She pretended not to notice me, and her smooth jawline clenched as she stared at her notebook.

While Miguel sashayed right over to suck up, Tate scowled alongside me. I didn’t know much about him yet, but as far as I was concerned, he was basically my new best friend.

Though our professor was enthusiastic, I couldn’t concentrate at all—I kept wanting to leap from my plush armchair, race to the

back row, shake Lainey by the shoulders, and demand to know why she hated my guts, why she'd stolen everything from me.

By the time class was over, I felt like I'd been buried in wet sand; having a nemesis was exhausting. Eager to replenish, I plodded back to the Cantina, picked the most carbolicious dish I could find—linguini alfredo and a hearty roll of bread—and plopped myself down at a smaller table. I'd never had a huge group of friends before, preferring one-on-one conversations . . . or in Silas's case, make-out sessions. But now I was meeting tons of new people even more quickly than my first week at Stanford.

Soon after I dug in, I noticed someone brush close to my table and glanced up to see Brooding Boy. He wore his gray jacket again, but this time had a red T-shirt underneath instead of black. Somehow that made his eyes look even more like dark pools of ink.

He'd stopped in his tracks when our eyes locked, and a strange sort of spark zipped through me.

"Uh . . . hi?" I said hesitantly. "You wanna sit?"

"Thanks, but I just finished, actually," he said. "Heading to my next class now."

"Ah."

"Yeah." He gave me a little wave and started toward the door.

"I'm Jade," I called after him. My cheeks warmed, and I bet they were turning pink.

He paused again. "Like the green rock?"

"Uh, sure. I guess." When most people commented on my name, they correlated it to my eyes; I'd inherited Dad's light

green irises. Sometimes that made it hard to look in the mirror.

He considered me, rubbing his lips together like he was trying to suppress a smile. "Felix." With a nod, he turned and left.

"Huh," I muttered. What an odd person.

Suddenly, a girl dropped a notebook near the opposite entrance, making a loud slapping noise.

And that's when I noticed Silas, sitting alone at a table next to the door.

He bent to grab the notebook for her and nearly sent his laptop flying since his wired earbuds were still plugged in. But he managed to avoid disaster, laughing at his moment of clumsiness. The girl apologized profusely, though she was chuckling, too. When she rushed off to join her friends, he adjusted the laptop and kept reading, munching on a sandwich.

My stomach lurched at the sight of him, his thick brows furrowed in focus, subconsciously flexing his left arm like he was stretching it. I wondered if it still hurt from his injury last spring.

Just a few months ago, I would have hurried over and wrapped my arms around him from behind or launched myself into his lap for a deep kiss. It somehow seemed like both yesterday and a lifetime ago.

I scanned the room for Lainey but didn't see her or her bestie Sheffia anywhere.

Now might be my chance to catch him alone.

Deserting my lunch, I inched toward him, my pulse racing a million miles a minute. He didn't notice me until I clasped the back of the chair opposite him, and his eyebrows shot up.

"Hey," I said as he plucked the buds from his ears.

"Uh . . . hey." His eyes darted every which way.

"Listen, I don't want this to be weird—"

"I don't think—"

"But I just wanted to talk—"

"—this is a good idea—"

"What do you think you're doing?" a voice snarled behind me. I whipped around. Lainey was standing there, clutching a tray of food.

"Lainey, I just want to talk." My voice came out shaky and pleading, and I wished I could suck the words back in and try again. I hated sounding so desperate.

"Why can't you leave us alone?" She spoke so loudly, people at neighboring tables turned to stare.

Mortification burned my cheeks. "Why are you being like this?"

Lainey slammed down her tray, soup sloshing over the bowl's edge. "Just leave us alone. That request should be enough."

I glanced at Silas, silently begging him to be reasonable, but he merely stared down at his sandwich, unwilling or unable to even look at me—I couldn't tell which. "Silas, please," I said, but he refused to look up.

"Don't you dare," Lainey persisted, tugging my wrist, pulling me away from him so hard it hurt.

"Ow—"

"Just go!"

I stifled a cry in the back of my throat and turned on my heel,

fleeing like I had at dinner last night, feeling more helpless than I'd ever felt in my life.

I had to find another way to talk to Silas.

But how the hell was I supposed to get him alone if she was always freaking *everywhere*?