

THE HAUNTED

By Danielle Vega

PROLOGUE

Steele House cast a dark shadow over the grass. Its broken windows were like deranged eyes, its sagging porch a weird, lopsided grin.

Maribeth stared at it, goose bumps crawling up her skin.

Don't be a baby, she told herself. It's just a house.

But it wasn't just a house. It was Steele House. Maribeth used to hold her breath whenever she had to walk past the vacant, overgrown yard. But she was almost nine now, and that was too old to be afraid of a dumb old house.

Still, she crept along the very edges of the grass, careful not to put even one toe under the shadow the house cast onto the lawn. Babyish or not, she thought if she stepped under the shadow, the house might *see* her. But this was the fastest way to get home so she walked quickly, not even looking at the house.

She was almost past the cellar, close to the place where Steele House's dead, yellow lawn turned into her house's nice, green lawn, when she heard a small, frightened "mew."

Maribeth froze, a heavy feeling settling in her stomach. She looked at the cellar. That had sounded like a kitten.

"Mew."

This time the sound was louder and more desperate, as if the kitten had heard her walking past and was calling to her for help. Maribeth chewed on her lip, not sure what she should do. It sounded like the kitty was trapped.

Just a dumb old house, she told herself again. And then, quickly, before she got too scared, she swung the cellar doors open.

No kitten came bounding out. In fact, Maribeth couldn't see anything in the pitch-black darkness.

"Mew," she heard once more. The sound echoed through the cellar.

Maribeth crouched down at the top of the stairs and reached her hand into the darkness. She was still wearing her church tights and dirt smudged up the knees. Her voice shook a little as she called, "Here, kitty, kitty. I'm not going to hurt you."

She knew only part of the story of Steele House. Some people died in there a really long time ago, and now no one would live there. Her big brother, Kyle, and his friends sometimes rode their skateboards past the house and dared each other to throw rocks through the windows while shouting, *who's afraid of Steele house now, suckers?* Only they didn't say *suckers*, they said a word Maribeth wasn't allowed to repeat. But they never went inside. Kyle was too chicken.

"Kitty?" Maribeth leaned as close to the doorframe as she could without going inside. She could see the top few steps of the cellar, but everything else was dark.

She braced herself. Just because Kyle was too chicken to go inside didn't mean she couldn't. She thought of how impressed he'd be when she told him what she did, and hurried down the stairs before she lost her nerve.

The air grew very still around her, as though the house was holding its breath.

Maribeth walked past a wall of shelves filled with old, green bottles, the labels long since worn away, and stopped in front of a wooden trunk with a broken lock. A doll

sat on top of the trunk, slumped against the wall. Its eyes had been plucked out of its face and there were gouges in the wood around the empty sockets.

Maribeth turned away from the doll, eyes straining against the darkness.

“Kitty?” she called. It smelled like wet jeans and the trailer park dogs and something gone rotten in the garbage, almost like something *lived* down here. Maribeth held her nose closed with two fingers. Her heart started beating faster.

Outside, the cellar door rattled in the wind.

I should go back, she thought. It was cold, and her skin felt itchy and shivery. She could feel something down here with her, something bad. She turned in place, but all she saw were smudged walls, and bottles, and that weird doll.

Two eyes blinked open.

“Kitty,” Maribeth whispered, moving toward the eyes. They were shiny and yellow. She lowered herself to her knees and leaned forward.

The yellow eyes blinked.

“Come here,” she murmured, reaching out her arm—

A boy’s voice drifted down the stairs. “Hey? Is someone down there?”

Maribeth’s heart sputtered. She jerked her hand away and spun around so fast she twisted her ankle. Pain shot up her leg.

The yellow eyes shifted back into the shadows.

“Who’s there?” Maribeth shouted, tears **tickling** her eyes. Her ankle hurt a *lot*, but the fear was worse. It felt like someone had grabbed hold of her lungs and squeezed. She pressed herself all the way back against the cold, cellar wall.

The stairs creaked. It sounded like someone was walking very slowly down the stairs, but Maribeth didn't see anyone there. A moment later, the scent of cologne wafted through the cellar. Her nose itched. It smelled like the stuff her dad wore on special occasions, like when he took her mom out on a date.

"What's your name?" asked the voice. It was a nice voice. It reminded Maribeth of her older brothers.

"Maribeth Ruiz," Maribeth said, numb. She tried to sound more confident than she felt. Where was the voice coming from? For some reason, she looked over at the doll sitting on the trunk. The black eyeholes stared back at her, but the doll's mouth stayed still.

"Cool name," said the voice.

Fingers curled around Maribeth's wrist. They were cold and damp, like raw chicken just out of the fridge. Maribeth looked down at the fingers, but there wasn't anything there. She blinked and there was *still* nothing there.

But she could *feel* them. They pinched her wrist and squeezed the blood from her hand.

Maribeth shrieked and took a clumsy step backward. Her hurt ankle slid out from beneath her and she hit the floor—*hard*—the packed earth chilling the skin right through her tights.

The fingers still held her arm. They twisted it back at an awkward angle so that bright flares of pain pierced Maribeth's shoulder. Maribeth tried to scream, but the sound didn't make it past her throat. Her lips trembled. The fingers squeezed tighter.

The cologne scent became sweet and strong. It clogged Maribeth's throat, making it harder for her to scream.

"You'll pay for what she did," the voice crooned into her ear.

Maribeth opened and closed her mouth, lips flopping like a dead fish. A ragged, desperate sound finally clawed up her throat, but the cellar walls were thick, and she knew no one would hear it.

Outside, the wind blew the cellar door shut.

Three years later...

CHAPTER ONE

Hendricks didn't know what pissed her off more: starting over or becoming a cliché.

Back at her old school, she'd waged her own private war on clichés. She'd had rules and everything: No burn books or mean girl comments. No clamoring to be named homecoming queen.

"Good thing I'm not a quarterback," her ex-boyfriend, Grayson, had said, brow furrowed. "You have anything against soccer players?"

"Only if you're the captain of the team," Hendricks had told him, teasing, and when he'd pouted she'd added, "Hey, I didn't know you were going to ask me out before I came up with the rules."

Which was true. Rule or no rule, everyone knew it was borderline impossible to reject Grayson Meyers. He had a gravity that drew people in. A smile that said *trust me*, and a deep, throaty voice that made him seem older and more mysterious than he actually was. Of course now, after everything that'd happened, Hendricks couldn't think about his smile or his voice without feeling a rush of shame.

Shame that she should've known better, should've followed her own rules. Shame that, really, all of this was her fault.

The backseat of her parents' car felt suddenly hot and airless. Hendricks closed her eyes, pretending she was in her closet back home. She imagined coats rustling against her cheeks, shoes pressing into her legs. The low drone of the car radio and her parents' murmured voices sounded far away, muffled by the other side of a door.

Breathe, she told herself and her lips parted, air whooshing out. She'd spent most of the last two months hiding in that closet, and it was surprisingly comforting to imagine being there now. She'd always felt safe there. But it was over eight hundred miles away. And it didn't belong to her anymore.

She opened one eye, head tilted toward the car window. Drearford's Main Street rushed past her face, blurry beyond the icy glass. People clutched their jackets closed as the wind picked up and whipped through the bare trees..

"But if we take Metro North, we should be back around midnight," her mother was saying from the passenger seat, thumbs tapping her phone screen. "One a.m. at the latest."

"Maybe we could stay overnight, just this once. The contractors could always meet us in the morning." Her father had lowered his voice, like he thought Hendricks might not hear him.

A pause, and then, "I...really wouldn't feel comfortable with that, yet." Her mother spoke softly, too, but they were only sitting two feet away. Hendricks felt rather than heard the pause in their conversation, and pictured their eyes flicking to the rearview mirror, casually, like they weren't checking on her.

She kept her eyes trained on the window, watching her breath mist the glass.

Drearford, New York, was one and a half hours north of Manhattan and nearly four hours from Philadelphia. Almost—but not quite—too far to drive in a single night. Population: 12,482. Current weather: 22 degrees and gray. Gray like the sky was sucking the life from its surroundings, leaving trees and grass and bodies of water colorless and covered in a thin layer of frost. Philadelphia—where Hendricks had lived up until a week

ago—was also cold in January, but it was a bright, glittering kind of cold. This place just looked dead.

Before she could stop herself, Hendricks pictured Grayson drinking from a bottle of stolen MD 20/20, offering it to her.

“Dare you,” he’d said, one eyebrow going jagged.

It had been their thing, sort of like an inside joke.

Dare you to go to the movies with me Friday night.

Dare you to change your Facebook status to “in a relationship.”

Dare you dare you dare you.

Hendricks swallowed. The memories felt like something caught in her throat. She reached into her pocket instinctively, fingers curling around her cellphone. But she didn’t pull it out.

Clean slate. That’s how her parents sold the move to Drearford. One by one, Hendricks released her fingers, letting the phone settle back into her pocket.

“Clean slate,” Hendricks whispered. Grayson had mostly stopped calling by now, anyway. Mostly.

The car pulled to a stop. Hendricks turned her head and saw a building on the other side of the street, hunching low to the ground, like a predator. A few cloudy windows broke up the dirty brick walls, and a flagpole stood directly in front of the main doors, flag flapping like crazy in the vicious wind. Hendricks’s eyes flicked to the left, landing on a sign:

DREARFORD HIGH SCHOOL, HOME OF THE TIGERS.

Something heavy settled in her gut. The idea of a new high school, new friends, new *everything* hadn't felt real until this second. She wanted to throw open the car door and run down the street. Let the wind blow her away.

Don't think like that, she told herself and her eyes moved to the front seat, worried that her parents knew, somehow. She tried to keep the nerves from her voice as she asked, "We're here?"

Her mom twisted around to face her. "You know the way back home, right? Two lefts and a right on Maple?"

Their new house wasn't even a ten-minute walk from here. Hendricks nodded.

"There's money for pizza for dinner, or leftover chicken in the fridge if you feel like something healthier." Her mother chewed her lower lip. Hendricks knew what was coming. "Are you sure you want to—"

"Bye." Hendricks grabbed her backpack and climbed out of the car, door slamming behind her. They'd been over this before. Her mom wanted Hendricks to homeschool until senior year started in the fall. She tried to make it seem like this was for Hendricks's benefit, that she'd have fun helping them renovate their new house but, really, Hendricks knew her mother just wanted to be able to keep an eye on her at all times. As though that might keep her safe.

Climbing out of the car, Hendricks felt a sudden pang of guilt. It was her fault they had to start over. They'd all been happy in Philadelphia. A year ago, it never would've occurred to any of them to move.

Clean slate, she told herself again.

She was halfway up the steps to the school when she heard a noise, then leaves rustling. She froze, squinting into the shadows of a large oak tree.

A boy stood beneath the branches, cigarette pinched between two fingers. He wore the standard outsider uniform: black T-shirt over black jeans tucked into beat-up black combat boots. Curled upper lip. His skin and hair were both dark. His eyes were even darker.

He jerked his chin in Hendricks's direction, then dropped the cigarette butt into the gnarled roots of the overgrown tree and stomped it out, moving back into the shadows. The smell of smoke lingered behind him.

More clichés, Hendricks thought, mouth twisting. She would've hated this place six months ago.

Now, it felt strangely comforting. At least she knew her role.

A girl waited inside the school's glass double-doors, arms hugged tight over her chest, shivering in her short skirt and thin tights.

This must be Portia, Hendricks thought. She'd gotten an email from her last night.

Hi hi!!! the email had read. *My name is Portia Russell and I'll be your guide to all things Drearford High tomorrow morning. Meet me inside the front doors at 10 a.m. sharp and I'll give you the low down on the cafeteria food to avoid and which teachers are secretly evil. (Kidding kidding!!)*

xo - P

Hendricks had never been the new girl at school before, so she didn't have any experience with this, but she'd been expecting a good-girl librarian-type. Pretty, but in a virginal way, and more likely to spend her Friday nights studying than partying.

She'd only been half right. Portia might've been dressed like a good girl—cardigan, skirt, headband holding back thick, black curls—but Hendricks could see in a glance that she wasn't one. Her cardigan was a size too small, her skirt a hair too short. Her dark brown skin was pore-less.

“Get *in* here,” Portia said, holding the door open for her. “It’s *freezing!* Aren’t you dying?” She grabbed Hendricks by the arm and pulled her inside, giving an exaggerated shiver as she tugged the door closed. “The weather has been *so* gross lately.”

“It’s not so bad,” Hendricks said, but only because she thought it was shitty to complain about this town when she’d only just moved here.

“If you say so. You’re from Philly, right? The Walter School?”

Hendricks could hear the words *prestigious* and *exclusive* in the way Portia’s tongue curled around the name. *The Walter School*. She’d dressed down for her first day at Drearford High—boyfriend jeans slung low on thin hips, messy blond hair tucked in a topknot—but she could still see Portia studying her, weighing her assets, placing her somewhere on the inevitable social ladder.

Hendricks knew what she saw. Beneath the slouchy clothes and messy hair, she was still blond and thin and tan, pretty enough that Portia wouldn’t be embarrassed to be seen with her, generic enough that she wouldn’t be a threat.

“I’ve heard that place is *amazing*,” Portia said, hooking Hendricks’s arm with her own. “You’re slumming it here. Why didn’t your parents move to Manhattan?”

“They flip houses for a living,” Hendricks explained. “They came up here to look at an old property and decided they liked it so much they wanted to keep it for themselves. I guess they couldn’t resist the whole quaint, small town thing.”

It was the truth, but only half the truth. Hendricks was quickly becoming an expert at lie by omission.

Portia paused for a fraction of a second, something flicking across her face. “Well *this* is definitely a change,” she said. “Let’s get the tour out of the way so you can get in to see Principal Walker and get your schedule set up. The school’s tiny so it’ll only take a second. This here is a hallway, similar to hallways you may have seen in Philadelphia. You’ll find most of your classes here, or down one of two *other* hallways.”

“Fascinating,” Hendricks said, deadpan. Portia snickered.

“Right? It’s a good thing they sent me out to meet you or you’d have never found your way around.” She stopped in front of an empty cafeteria. “We eat here in the winter, at that table in the back corner, but juniors are allowed to take their lunches outside so we move to the fountain as soon as it gets—”

Portia stopped talking abruptly and rose to her tiptoes, waving. The school doors whooshed open and a line of boys in tracksuits streamed into the hall. Sneakers squeaked against the floor and deep, laughing voices reverberated off the walls.

“Hey, Connor!” Portia called, and the tallest, blondest tracksuit-clad guy broke into a shockingly wide smile and separated from the others to jog over to them.

Hendricks felt her shoulders stiffen. She pretended to study a cuticle.

“Ladies,” Connor said, brushing the hair back from his forehead. “How are you this morning?”

Hendricks looked up, frowning slightly. Normally, she hated it when guys called girls “ladies.” They either used the word mockingly or like they were reciting a line from that playbook on how to pick up women. But Connor hadn’t said it like that. His tone had

been a touch formal, and there was something old-fashioned and all-American about his crew cut and cleft chin.

Wholesome, Hendricks thought. Then again, Grayson could sound wholesome, too. When he wanted to.

Connor dropped an arm around Portia's shoulder. "Are you going to introduce me to your new friend?" he asked.

And then he was staring at Hendricks, his face so animated that, for a moment, Hendricks wondered if she'd said something hilarious without realizing it.

"Oh, hi," she said, taken aback. "I'm—"

"He's joking." Portia smacked him lightly across the stomach. "He already knows who you are."

"Ow." Connor pretended to double over, cringing. To Hendricks, he said, "Hendricks Becker-O'Malley, right? You're sort of famous."

Hendricks felt a shot of nerves. She hitched her backpack further up her shoulder. "Famous?"

"We don't get a lot of new students." Connor tilted his head. "You know, technically, you don't exist."

This threw Hendricks off guard. She said, blinking, "What?"

"I looked you up. Hendricks Becker-O'Malley is a unique name so I figured I'd find something, but you're not on Instagram, or Facebook, or Snap..."

He'd looked her up? Hendricks glanced at Portia, wondering what she thought about her boyfriend Internet stalking some other girl. The girls at her old school would've

freaked. Not that it would've stopped their boyfriends from doing whatever they wanted. But still.

But Portia's face remained impassive as she lowered her voice and said, conspiratorially, "We figured you were hiding some deep, tragic secret."

Hendricks shrugged, trying for casual. "I'm just not into social media. It...keeps you from living in the moment."

Which was a lie, and not even a good one, but they weren't getting her deep, tragic secret that easily. Or ever.

"Living in the moment," Connor repeated, like this was a sage piece of wisdom he'd never heard before. He jostled Portia's shoulder, adding, "See? I told you she'd be cool."

Portia rolled her eyes. "You just cost me twenty bucks, new girl. I was sure you were going to be some snooty rich kid, but Connor had a feeling about you."

Connor looked irrationally pleased with himself. "I should hit the showers before next period," he said. "We're all hanging after school. Want to join? We can introduce you around."

Hendricks opened her mouth, and then closed it. This all felt so easy, so normal. It was starting to sink in. No one knew about her here. She could start over again, be absolutely anybody she wanted to be.

Despite everything, she felt a thrill of relief.

But then she remembered—she couldn't tonight. She groaned and said, "I'm sorry, I can't. My parents have to check out a property in Manhattan so I'm watching my baby brother."

Connor's smile flickered. Portia stared at her. "You're going to be home?" she asked. "All by yourself?"

Hendricks frowned. "Well, yeah. Why, is that bad?"

Portia touched her lower lip with the tip of her tongue. "I wouldn't want to spend the night alone at Steele House."

A nasty shiver moved down Hendricks's spine. "Steele House?"

"Didn't you know your house had a name?" Connor asked.

Hendricks hesitated. She didn't realize everyone already knew where she lived.

A bell rang then and students spilled out of the doors lining the hallway, surrounding them.

Connor ducked his head, abashed. "Okay, now I really do have to hit the showers. Catch you at lunch, O'Malley."

He said her last name with a wink, like they were sharing an inside joke. And, with another insanely wide grin, he turned into the crowd.

Hendricks didn't realize she was staring until she heard Portia's voice in her ear, "It's okay. Everyone at school is a little in love with him."

Hendricks blinked, cheeks reddening as she pulled her gaze away. "Everyone at school is a little in love with your boyfriend?"

Portia released a short, hard laugh. "Boy and friend, yes, but *not* my boyfriend. Connor's currently unattached, although I should warn you that we're all very protective of him. That nicest guy on the planet thing wasn't an act. He's pretty much like that all the time. Anyway," she continued, jerking her chin at a door to her left. "That's Principal Snyder's office. He's expecting you. See you around."

She wiggled her fingers and turned on her heel, stepping into a classroom halfway down the hall. “Good luck,” she called back to Hendricks, and pulled the door shut behind her.

Hendricks stood for a moment, frozen, after Portia had gone.

Suddenly, the school doors crashed open, hitting the wall so hard it made Hendricks jump and jerk around, her heart pounding in her throat. Cool winter air gusted around her.

For a second she’d been so sure there would be someone there, coming down the hall toward her.

But it was just the wind.

CHAPTER TWO

Hendricks stood on the curb outside her new house, shivering in her puffy, down coat. Portia and Connor hadn't been the only ones who'd mentioned the house to her today. Everyone seemed to know where she'd moved. Everyone seemed to know it had a name.

Steele House.

"Weird-ass town," Hendricks muttered. Nothing about the house looked special. It was two stories high, with three windows, and a wrap-around porch. Only the porch looked wrong. It was newer than the rest of the house, its white paint much brighter than the siding, the green trim shiny and glossy where the shutters had already faded with age.

Hendricks hitched her backpack further up her shoulder and started up the steps. They were new too, but unpainted, splinters still jutting out of the raw wood. She pushed the front door open and heard the television blaring from the living room. Then there was a shuffling sound, and the television switched off.

"Mrs. Becker-O'Malley?" called a voice.

"No, it's just me." Hendricks kicked off her shoes and walked into the living room. Her baby brother's nanny, Gillian, was sitting on the floor, cross-legged, a pile of laundry heaped beside her. "My parents aren't back until late."

"Oh, right." Gillian folded the T-shirt she'd been holding. She was in her twenties, a junior at St. Joseph's University, but she was pint-sized and looked a lot younger. She wore an old band T-shirt tucked into thrift store Levis. Her short hair was dyed lavender and pulled back from her face in a vicious ponytail, spiky strands escaping around her neck.

“Also, nobody’s going to care if you watch TV,” Hendricks added, plopping onto the floor to help fold.

Gillian looked embarrassed. “I wasn’t really watching anything, I just wanted the noise. Brady went down for his nap about twenty minutes ago, and it gets so quiet in here. Well, mostly.”

She pulled a doll out from behind a pillow on the couch, sheepish. “This was in Brady’s room but it started, uhm, *talking* earlier? It was really creeping me out so I—”

“Hid it,” Hendricks finished, taking the doll from Gillian. “Good call.”

It had been her grandmother’s, one of the first talking dolls on the market, and she knew it was special but she’d only ever found it creepy. There were deep cracks all along its porcelain face, cutting across its mouth and nose. And the doll wasn’t smiling. Its lips were pressed together, tight, like it was hiding something.

But the worst thing about the doll was that its voice box was broken, which meant it started talking on its own sometimes.

Truly, Hendricks thought, these were the things nightmares were made of. It was like her parents wanted their son to develop a phobia.

Gillian looked around, shivering. “It’s kind of a creepy old house, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Hendricks put the doll aside and absently balled a pair of socks. “A bunch of kids at school said it had a name. Steele House?”

“Really?” Gillian raised an eyebrow without looking up. “Do all the houses around here have names?”

“I was sort of hoping you could tell me.”

“Sorry. I’ve only been here since fall semester so I’m not up on the local history yet. When do you think it’ll be finished?”

Hendricks shrugged. The house was mid-renovation. There were still heavy plastic sheets hanging over the doorways and covering the windows, and some of the drywall hadn’t gone up yet, leaving the boards beneath gaping and bare. Her parents had been so desperate to get out of Philadelphia that they’d decided to move in before their new house was even finished.

Because of me, Hendricks thought. She suddenly, desperately wanted to be alone.

“I can take it from here if you want to head out,” she said, pulling a fresh stack of laundry onto her lap. It smelled so strongly of the lavender-scented soap her family always bought that, for a second, she wanted to bury her face in the fabric and breathe. It was the first thing that’d felt familiar all day.

It took her a second to realize Gillian was talking again. “... have this pop quiz in Astronomy, which I only took because I thought we’d be, like, looking at stars and shit but apparently its mostly math. So I have to study.”

“Good luck,” Hendricks said. Gillian made a face as she stepped outside and then Hendricks heard the porch creak as she jogged down the steps. She slipped a hand into her pocket, her cell phone warm beneath her fingers.

If anything about this move had been normal, now was when she’d be texting all the people she’d left behind.

Oh my God this place suuuuuucks!

Followed by the inevitable sympathetic responses.

Come back! We miss you! Wish you were here!

Half of her wanted to take the phone out, to check her messages. There would be a few, she knew. Her old friends had tried to keep in touch after what happened, but she'd ended up pulling away. Everything felt tainted by Grayson.

She pulled her hand out of her pocket, chest twisting.

Clean slate.

She held those words in her head as she pushed herself to her feet, looking around for something to like about her new home. A plastic sheet hanging over the front window rustled, and then went still. Hendricks frowned, the skin on the back of her neck tingling. But it was just the wind.

She walked into the kitchen, eyes moving over the brand new steel appliances. It was all very modern, everything sleek and clean, the lines sharp. But the old parts of the house were still there, not quite hidden beneath the slate tile and the sculptural light fixtures. The floorboards creaked and the walls groaned and cold air leaked in from the windows, no matter how tightly you closed them. It made Hendricks think of an aging actress who'd gotten too much Botox, desperate to maintain her youth.

Water dripped, steadily.

Hendricks listened, something crawling very slowly up the back of her neck. The sound was hollow and heavy and it seemed to be coming from directly behind her. But the only thing behind her was wall.

Her dad said the acoustics in this place were weird. Old house noises, mixed with half finished construction. And then he'd shrugged and thrown his hands up, smile quirking his lips, like this was all charming, somehow.

It's not charming, Hendricks thought. It's creepy.

She went to the sink and jerked the faucet handle down. The dripping sound stopped, but now there was a smell coming up from the drain. A dank, rotten smell, like food going bad in the garbage disposal. But the sink didn't have a garbage disposal.

"Gross," Hendricks muttered, stepping away from the sink. Her nose itched as she walked down the hallway.

She suddenly understood why Gillian had been so weird about the television. It wasn't a normal sort of quiet in this house. It was the kind of quiet that was made up of a dozen small noises. Wood creaking and faucets dripping and windows groaning from the wind.

She needed something—music or reality television or even the news—to drone it all out. She went back into the living room and started digging around in the couch cushion.

There was a sound above her.

Hendricks looked up at the ceiling, frowning. The sound had been a clear, even creak. Like a footstep.

As she stared up at the ceiling, she heard another creak. And then another. They moved from one corner of the ceiling to the other, like someone was walking down the second story hall. And then, abruptly, they stopped.

Hendricks stood, her sudden fear blotting out everything else. She told herself Gillian must've forgotten to mention that a construction worker had stopped by. Workers had been in and out of the house since they'd moved in, setting up the Internet and checking the wiring and fussing with the boiler.

Her eyes ticked off the front door. No muddy worker boots on the welcome mat, no dirty parka hanging from the hooks on the wall. She looked out the window and saw that there wasn't a truck in the drive, either.

The skin on the back of her neck began to creep. Hendricks crossed the living room and walked into the kitchen. There was supposed to be a door separating the staircase from the kitchen, but it hadn't been put up yet. Instead, a sheet of plastic blocked the way. Hendricks yanked it aside.

"Who's there?" she shouted up the stairs.

The house was silent in response.

Hendricks was very aware of the sound of her heartbeat, the way her breath seemed to catch in her throat. Slowly, she made her way to the second floor, and leaned her head against Brady's bedroom door. She could hear the soft whirr of his white noise machine, but that was all.

Then, behind her, a long creak. She jerked around.

No one there.

She stared into the shadows for a long moment, her heartbeat slowing, her breath growing calmer. And then—

BANG! BANG! BANG!

This time, the sound seemed to come from downstairs. Hendricks took the stairs two at a time and whipped open the plastic partition. She was already trying to think of what she could use as a weapon—her dad's gold club in the hall closet, the butcher knife in the kitchen—when her eyes landed on the window, and she saw Portia standing on the porch. *Laughing.*

Hendricks threw the front door open, her pulse still fluttering. “You scared the *shit*—”

Connor stood directly in front of her door, wearing jeans and a faded T-shirt instead of his track uniform. He held a basket of (clearly homemade) muffins, and his cheeks were slightly flushed, but that might have been from the cold.

“Hey,” he said, smiling sheepishly. “My mom wanted me to bring these over. Sort of a welcome to the neighborhood thing.”

He gestured to the muffins. As though Hendricks could have possibly missed them.

Portia stumbled over to his side, smile wide. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t help myself. You said you were going to be all alone in there and...” She shook her head and rose to her tiptoes, craning her neck to see past Hendricks. “Aren’t you going to invite us in?”

Hendricks stepped aside, dumbfounded, holding the door open.

“Nice,” Portia said, but in a way that seemed to mean something else. Connor shot her a look.

“It *does* look nice,” he said, handing Hendricks the muffins. “Your parents must’ve put a lot of work into this place.”

Hendricks closed the door and followed them into the living room. “What do you mean?”

“It used to be different,” Connor explained. “Nobody lived here in a long time, and it was pretty dangerous to come inside.”

Portia snorted. “Yeah, we all thought the walls might fall down on you or something. But it sort of looks like a real house now.”

Her eyes narrowed on the hall closet and she pulled it open—quick—like she expected there to be someone waiting for her on the other side.

“Looking for something?” Hendricks asked.

Portia shrugged, seeming disappointed as she closed the door. She pulled out her phone. “I thought that led to the basement.”

“There isn’t really a basement, but the storm cellar door is outside.”

“Right,” Portia said, distracted. “I knew that.”

And, again, that feeling like she was missing something. Hendricks frowned.

“*How* did you know that?”

“I told you, this place was empty for years and then, out of nowhere, your parents buy it and fix it up.” Portia hesitated, her eyes moving around the room. “Or, you know, tried to fix it up or whatever—”

The phone in her hand vibrated, cutting her off. She zeroed in on the screen again, chewing on her lip. “You said your parents were out, right?”

Another chime, this one ominous.

“Yeah,” Hendricks said. “Why?”

Portia’s thumbs flew across the phone screen, and a chiming sound told Hendricks she’d sent another message. “Some of our friends wanted to see check out your place.”

Hendricks felt a sudden sinking in her gut. “So?”

“We thought since you couldn’t come out to meet everyone, we could invite them over here,” Connor said.

His face had transformed into another mega-watt smile and, once again, Hendricks felt like the funniest, most charming person in the room.

Dangerous, she thought, and a nasty little shiver went down her spine. The ones who made you feel like the only person in the room were the ones you really had to watch out for.

CHAPTER THREE

Hendricks took a sip of beer, hoping it might calm her nerves, but the beer just sloshed around her stomach, making her feel worse. She bit the inside of her cheek so she wouldn't make a face.

She couldn't even remember who'd brought the beer. It'd just appeared in her kitchen, along with three other Drearford High students whose names she'd immediately forgotten.

"And *this* is Casey Claire," the girl beside her was saying, pointing to a blurry photo on her phone. Hendricks nodded, trying to keep her expression politely interested. The girl she was talking to was Asian and beautiful, with thick, waist-length brown hair with bleached blond highlights and eyeglasses shaped like octagons.

Hendricks struggled to remember the girl's name. It was some sort of bird. Robin, maybe. Or Sparrow.

The girl kept talking. "Casey laughs like a drunk hyena, but her mother is sleeping with the volleyball coach, so you have to be nice to her if you want to make the team."

Wren? Hendricks thought, pursing her lips. *Goose?*

"Hey, Raven! Toss me another beer!"

Right. Raven.

Raven removed a Natty Light from the cardboard box on the marble island and tossed it across the kitchen to a dark-skinned boy with thick, black hair and the kind of perfectly straight teeth people paid six hundred dollars a cap for.

Hendricks didn't have to strain to remember his name. *Blake*. He looked like a Blake. Pretty and dumb. The captain of some sports team. Baseball? Lacrosse? Raven had mentioned that, too, but it'd already slipped right out of Hendricks's mind.

He stood beside another boy, this one good looking in the exact same way that Connor was good looking. Hendricks thought they must be brothers, and her suspicion was confirmed when the boy curled an arm around Connor's neck, putting him into what seemed like a friendly headlock. If headlocks could be friendly.

Hendricks frowned, watching the two boys wrestle around her kitchen. Brothers did that, right? Or should she be concerned?

She anxiously twisted the tab on top of her beer can, eyeing the staircase that led to the second floor. She'd already checked on Brady—twice—and she knew he was fine. But all the noise still made her feel guilty.

Finally, Connor said, "Come on, Finn, knock it off!" and awkwardly untwisted himself from the headlock. His hair was mussed, his cheeks pink from the exertion. "The new girl's going to think we were raised in a barn."

Finn stumbled back a few feet, colliding with a kitchen counter. He straightened, looking sheepish. "Sorry," he said to Hendricks.

"It's okay," Hendricks said, but her stomach gave a lurch. She looked down at her hands, which were clutching her beer can like it was a lifeline.

Everyone was being totally nice, so why did she feel like everything she'd eaten that day was moving around inside of her, floating on a sea of warm beer?

Maybe it was just that it felt like things were happening very fast. It was only her first day, and already she was surrounded by people who claimed they wanted to be her friends. It seemed too easy. There had to be a catch.

A lump thickened inside her throat. Could they know about what happened to her? Her old friends had done this, too, acting too nice, like she was something that had to be handled delicately. It was one of the reasons she'd been cool with moving away. No one wanted friends that treated you like something that could be broken.

Her brain raced, wondering how anyone in Drearford might've found out. There wasn't anything online, she'd made sure of that, but Philadelphia wasn't far away. Maybe someone here knew someone from her old school, someone who'd been at the party...

"Are you cool?" Raven glanced up from her phone, frowning. "You look a little overwhelmed."

Overwhelmed. That was a good word for how she felt.

"Maybe a little," Hendricks admitted, and she tried to hide her nerves with another swallow of beer.

"I hear that." Raven slid her phone into her pocket and leaned against the kitchen counter. "I was new last year. It's the worst."

Hendricks raised her eyebrows. "You've only been here a year?"

Raven seemed so settled. Hendricks assumed she'd grown up here like everyone else.

But Raven was nodding. "My family moved up from Brooklyn at the beginning of sophomore year. The small town thing isn't really my scene, so I figured I'd totally hate it, but then Portia convinced me to try out for cheerleading. She said it would do amazing

things for my brand.” Raven lifted her eyebrows. “I’m not even kidding. My *brand*. She actually said that.”

Hendricks snorted. Raven was currently wearing a pair of ripped up jeans over black tights, topped with a little boy’s summer camp T-shirt that looked like it came from the Goodwill, and a chunky, beaded necklace. Her octagon-shaped glasses made her dark eyes look big and round.

Everything about her screamed *artist*. She was about the last person you’d expect to be a cheerleader.

“Well?” Hendricks asked. “Did you?”

“Yeah.” Raven dragged the word out, turning it into two syllables. “I did. And you want to know the most batshit part? She was completely right. Cheerleading might be basic or whatever, but it’s also *dance*. It’s creative. I...sort of love it.” A shy smile flicked over Raven’s face.

“You’re right. That is batshit,” Hendricks said, and Raven laughed out loud. She laughed like a little kid—mouth open, head thrown back, no self-consciousness at all—and it made Hendricks grin in return, relaxing a little.

“Are you talking about the cheerleading thing again?” asked Portia, appearing beside them. “All I did was make one *tiny* little suggestion. And, if I hadn’t, you’d probably be like that Lauren Groggin chick.” To Hendricks, “She performs spoken word poetry at the coffee shop every Friday night and wears a cape un-ironically.”

Raven snickered and said, “Hey, some of her poems are sort of good.”

“That doesn’t mean I want to hear them while drinking my cold brew.” Portia’s eyes twinkled. “So how are we going to help the new girl?”

It took Hendricks a second to realize they were talking about her again. “What makes you think I need help?”

Portia flicked a hand, dismissive. “Everyone needs help,” she said, which Hendricks had to admit was sort of randomly deep.

“We could use another cheerleader on the team,” Raven offered, twisting the tab of her Natty Light. “Cassidy fell last week, and she says she only twisted her ankle, but *I* think—”

But Portia was already shaking her head. “Hendricks isn’t a cheerleader.”

“Why not?” Hendricks asked. She couldn’t be sure, but that had sounded like an insult.

Portia rolled her eyes. “Ugh, no, I didn’t mean that to be bitchy. It’s just...you’re sort of weird.”

Raven snorted.

“I meant *good* weird,” Portia insisted. “Like an alien from a planet where teenagers wear a lot of oversized sweaters and forget to brush their hair but have unfairly clear skin.”

“And at least fifty percent of that was a real compliment,” Raven pointed out. “I think that’s a personal best.”

Hendricks was momentarily at a loss for words. She’d never really liked that expression before, *loss for words*, as though the words could just fall out of your head and be gone forever, but it was an accurate description of how she felt. She knew there was a normal thing to say in this scenario, and there may have been a time when she

could've figured out what it was, but for now all she could do was open and close her mouth, like a fish.

"Maybe I don't even mean weird. You're more different. Like, I can't figure out your deal at all and normally I'm really good at that," Portia said.

"My deal?" Hendricks asked.

"Who were you at your last high school? I need a cliché."

Hendricks's eyebrows drew together. "I don't think I was a cliché."

"Everyone is some cliché. Like, Raven's the arty chick, and I'm sort of the queen bee mean girl. Except I don't think I'm mean—"

"You're more blunt," Raven said, thoughtful. "Tactless, sometimes."

Portia flapped her hand, like tact was a silly, quaint idea she didn't care for. "So what cliché are you? A jock? Or, maybe, one of those over-achieving honor student kids?" When Hendricks didn't answer, Portia's eyebrows went up. "Come on, give me something to work with. Shy and deep? Moody bad girl?"

Hendricks worried her lip between her teeth. She'd never been part of a clique, never thought of herself as a cliché. She'd started dating Grayson freshman year, and then his friends became her friends, and the girl she'd been in middle school—the girl who wasn't afraid to talk to anyone, to try anything—sort of ...faded.

It had never seemed weird to her, before. But now she thought of it and felt a strange churning in her chest. *Who was she?* Just someone's girlfriend. And now she wasn't even that anymore.

"Of course, Connor likes you, which will help," Portia continued, lowering her voice. She glanced across the kitchen, where Connor and the other two boys were

engaged in a conversation about some sort of team sport, and said, “Connor liking you is, like, a stamp of approval at Drearford.”

She nudged Hendricks with her elbow, eyebrows wagging.

Hendricks swallowed, her eyes darting to the boys, and then back to Portia. This was the beginning of a longer conversation, and the kitchen didn’t seem like a private enough place to get into it.

Portia took her silence as a cue to continue. “In the interest of full disclosure, Connor and I dated for a few months back in tenth, before I came out. Now we’re just friends, so you totally have my blessing.” Turning to Raven, “Don’t you think they’d be cute together?”

“Blessing?” Hendricks repeated.

Raven pursed her lips, like she was thinking this over. “Yeah, I see it. Portia’s whole thing with Connor was that he was too laid back and easy-going, while she’s this crazy, mega-achieving super student, you know?”

“And, also, he’s a guy,” Portia added.

Raven cocked her head, considering Hendricks. “But Hendricks looks like she could use a little fun.”

Hendricks chewed on her lower lip, amazed that Raven—and *Portia*, apparently—had picked that up in just a few minutes of knowing her.

“My last school was pretty intense,” she admitted. Understatement of the year. “But I don’t know if I’m up for dating anyone right away. I kind of just want to...date myself.”

Date myself?

Did she really just say that?

“See what I mean? Good weird,” Portia said.

“Oh yeah,” Raven added. “She’s the best weird.”

Hendricks took another sip of beer, trying to relax.

Across the room, Connor caught her eye and dazzled a smile at her. Hendricks smiled back, but her heart gave a complicated tug inside her chest. For a second, she imagined answering Portia’s question honestly.

Who am I? I’m the popular jock’s girlfriend. I define my entire personality around him. It was so pathetic that it made her blush, even though she hadn’t said any of it out loud. Some clean slate. She pictured a rock rolling down a hill, moving too quickly, gathering mud and moss and debris—

And then slamming into a tree and breaking into a million pieces.

CHAPTER FOUR

It wasn't until her new friends had gone that Hendricks realized how long this night was going to be. It was January dark outside, not even seven o'clock, though it looked much later. The stars hadn't come out yet but streetlights winked through the trees.

She drummed her fingers against the counter. Her parents weren't going to be home until midnight.

What was she supposed to do here for five hours?

Her eyes fluttered closed. She sucked down a lungful of air and held it. She was all too aware of the sounds of the house. The groaning walls, the creaking windows...

And was that footsteps again? Or just her heart pounding in her ears?

Hendricks's eyes popped back open. For a moment she forgot how to breathe.

She grabbed a beer and Brady's baby monitor and headed out the back door.

Outside, everything was black and bright with cold. Hendricks's breath hovered in a cloud before her lips after she exhaled, and her skin grew rigid and coarse with goose bumps, but at least the noises were normal. The wind wasn't nearly as creepy when it wasn't tapping at her window.

Out of nowhere, a voice said, "Hey."

Hendricks started, her heart jack-hammering. "Who's there?"

"Calm down," the voice said. "I didn't mean to freak you out."

Hendricks shielded her eyes from the glare coming off the windows and stepped into the dark.

A guy sat at the edge of what was supposed to be a pool, legs dangling over the sides. The tarp that'd been covering the empty hole lay crumpled in the grass. His clothes were black and slim-fitting. Hipster cool, but Hendricks doubted that was the look around here. He wore his hair short on the sides and longer on top. It was a city trend, a sort of throwback to the fifties. Like Elvis, or James Dean.

Hendricks frowned, recognizing him from this morning. He was the guy who'd been smoking outside the school when she'd walked in to meet Portia. "What are you doing out here?"

He held up his hand, and she saw a cigarette pinched between his thumb and forefinger. Silver smoke curled into the sky.

"Oh." Her shoulders relaxed. "Are you looking for Portia and those guys? Because they already left."

His expression went stony. "No," he said, his voice landing hard on the word. "I'm not."

He brought the cigarette to his lips. It was too dark to see him clearly, but the smoldering, red embers illuminated a full mouth and hooded eyes.

"Then why are you here?" The question came out sounding more accusatory than she'd meant for it to.

If the boy was offended, he didn't show it. "I live just through there." He jerked his head toward the trees that separated their backyards. "This place used to be the perfect smoking spot, before you moved in."

He said this easily, but there was something going on in his eyes that made Hendricks think there was more to the story. She found herself wondering where he existed on the social totem pole of Drearford High. She doubted it was very high.

“Anyway,” he continued, his tone light enough to make Hendricks think she’d imagined the moment of weirdness. “I’ll stop coming over now that you guys have moved in.”

He put his cigarette out on the heel of his boot and pushed himself to his feet. He looked at her for a long moment. It felt like a look of pity mixed with something else that Hendricks couldn’t place. She had the sudden urge to say something to get him to stay, but all she came up with was, “Yeah.”

“What’s up with your yard, anyway?” he asked.

Hendricks chewed her lower lip. The yard was going to be beautiful, someday. Her dad had spent months planning the landscaping: a patio surrounded with trees, stone pathways twisting around bushes and flowers. The cement had been poured, the stones set, but they couldn’t start planting until spring. The pathways curled around empty plots of fresh dirt. Lights surrounded the perimeter of the pool, but there were no light bulbs and, anyway, Hendricks didn’t think the electricity out here was set up yet.

“We’re renovating,” she said.

The boy pushed the hair off his forehead. “Weird. I’d figured whoever bought this place would knock it down. Build something new.”

“Why?”

“Don’t you know anything about this house?”

“No,” she said. “Why? What’s the deal?”

“A little girl was murdered here about three years ago.” For a second it looked like he might say something else. But then he shrugged with one shoulder, seeming to decide against it.

Hendricks bit the inside of her cheek, working to keep her face impassive. “That’s fucked up.”

But it struck her harder than she thought it would. *Little girl*. She pictured Brady, all safe and snuggly in his crib upstairs. No wonder this house felt wrong.

The boy removed his cigarette and exhaled a cloud of smoke. “The guy who did it is dead now. So there’s that.”

“That doesn’t make it okay,” Hendricks said.

“No, it doesn’t.” The boy said this like it was a fact, with no apology in his voice. It made Hendricks uncomfortable for reasons she couldn’t name.

Complicated, she thought. She shivered.

“Yeah. Well, see you around, I guess.” Hendricks started to turn, then hesitated, eyes resting on the boy’s shadowy face.

She tilted her head. “Got a name?”

“Don’t bother. If you plan on hanging with Portia and that crowd, you’ll just have to forget it again, anyway.”

He tucked his half-finished cigarette behind one ear and disappeared through a gap in the fence before Hendricks had a chance to respond.

*

Hendricks heard Brady crying as soon as she got back inside and mentally pinched herself. She must’ve had the monitor’s volume turned down.

He'd been sound asleep the last time she'd checked on him. But how long ago was that? An hour? More?

How much did she suck?

"I'm coming, Bear." She pushed the plastic away from the stairs and hurried past the drywall-dusted brick and exposed beams. Brady's sobs had the raw sound they only got when he'd been crying for a while already.

When Hendricks reached his nursery she saw that he was standing up in his crib, his chubby face bright red and tear-stained. His creepy talking baby doll was jabbering away on the windowsill.

"A...B...C...D...will you sing with me?" The doll had an unnaturally deep voice that grated like rocks on sandpaper.

"Sorry, Bear," Hendricks muttered. She made her way across the room to turn the doll off. The voice petered out gradually, becoming high-pitched and strained before dying away. The sound always reminded Hendricks of someone being strangled.

"Ha-ha," Brady said, sticking out his arms for her.

Ha-ha was Brady's name for Hendricks. In this case it was also a sentence, which, roughly translated, meant, "Hendricks, take me out of baby prison and play with me."

Hendricks shook her head, sadly. "No, baby Bear, no Ha-ha. You need to go back to sleep."

Brady pointed at the floor. Hendricks followed his stubby finger and saw a ratty, hand-knit blanket at the foot of his crib. Their mother made it, and Brady couldn't sleep without it.

Hendricks plucked the blanket off the floor. “Now lie down,” she said. Brady plopped to his bottom and curled onto his side. He reached a chubby hand through the slats in his crib. Hendricks let him take the blanket. “And close your eyes.”

He hugged the blanket to his chest and clenched his eyes shut tight.

“Big faker,” Hendricks said, standing.

She rubbed her hands up and down her arms. Goosebumps covered her skin. It was *freezing* in here. She squinted around Brady’s room. Her eyes landed on the open window behind the world’s creepiest baby doll, propped against the wall. Gillian must’ve forgotten to latch it.

She pushed the window closed, snapping the latch shut with a click. Much better. From the sound of the wind outside, it was going to storm tonight.

“Go to sleep now, baby Bear,” Hendricks said, stepping back into the hallway and gently closing the door behind her.

She headed to her room to watch TV on her laptop. She must’ve dozed off after a while, because the next think she knew she was blinking into her pillow, her body heavy and tired.

She couldn’t say what it was that had roused her, but when she rolled onto her side she saw that her cell phone was lit up. Groggily, she picked it up and stared at the screen. A text from her mother:

We’re on the train! Be back in an hour. XO.

The timestamp read 10:12.

10:12? Hendricks frowned. She couldn't remember the last time she'd fallen asleep before eleven. It must've been the beer, it had left her feeling groggy. She'd mostly stayed away from parties over the last two months.

She kicked her legs over the side of the bed and stood, stretching. She needed a glass of water, and she should probably double-check the kitchen to make sure all the beer cans had been properly disposed of. She padded out of her room and into the hall, rubbing her eyes. She blinked. And then froze.

Brady's door was open, and his baby doll was lying on the floor in the middle of his room.

"Sing with me," the doll crooned in its gravelly voice. "A...B...C...D..."

CHAPTER FIVE

About seven months ago, after a late-night study session at Starbucks, Hendricks had found a single, white peony inside her car. It had been propped on the dashboard just behind her steering wheel, its petals all glowy in the moonlight. Grayson was always buying her peonies. She'd texted her old friends Fallon and Kimiko on the drive home, and they'd both been in awe.

How sweet! Fallon had written back, and Kimiko had sent six heart-eyed smiley face emojis.

It was sweet, Hendricks had told herself. But she'd felt something dark gathering at the edges of her mind, and it wasn't until she was home that she could pinpoint exactly what it was that was bothering her.

Grayson didn't have a key to her car. And the car had still been locked when she'd gotten there.

So how had he gotten inside?

Now, Hendricks's skin crawled, and a bad taste trailed down the back of her throat. The taste was like pennies, or blood. She brought her fingers to her neck, swallowing hard.

"It fell," she said out loud. The certainty in her own voice made her feel a little better. Of course it fell. Not even Grayson would drive four hours to move a doll around.

She scooped the doll off the floor and turned it off, her movements jerky. She was about to put the toy back in his room but then, thinking better of it, she opened the door

to the hall closet and stowed the doll in there instead. She hurried back to her bedroom, completely forgetting about her glass of water.

But she didn't sleep. She stared up at the ceiling, her heart racing. Shadows danced across the bedroom walls, casting shapes that shifted on the surfaces surrounding her.

It's just moonlight and clouds, Hendricks told herself. But she had the disturbing thought that there was something else there, something that skittered back into the darkness a moment before she turned to look. Her breath grew very still.

And now she could hear the wooden walls groaning around her. Wind pressing into the windowpanes, making the glass creak.

Old house sounds.

But it didn't sound like normal house sounds. It sounded deeper, sounded ragged.

Like someone breathing.

*

The next morning, Hendricks hovered outside the Drearford High front doors like a phantom. She felt gauzy and immaterial, as though the bitter January wind might blow her away.

A teacher Hendricks only vaguely recognized walked past. "Good morning, Hendricks!" she chirped, pushing through the front doors.

Hendricks started, and it took her a beat too long to say "morning," back. It was surreal. She'd been a student at her old school for two and a half years and half the teachers there still called her "Henrietta."

Must be the small town vibe, she thought, hitching her backpack further up her shoulder and heading inside.

It wasn't just the teacher. **Half** the kids in the hall looked up as she made her way toward her homeroom. They jerked their chins at her, their hands lifting in a wave.

"Hey, Hendricks."

"Morning, Hendricks!"

"See you in class."

Everyone knew who she was. It felt like standing under a spotlight.

Oh God. Had they been *talking* about her?

Hendricks felt a wave of heat sweep over her cheeks.

"Hey, girl." Portia suddenly appeared, an arm snaking around Hendricks's elbow. She had a carton of iced coffees balanced in her other hand. "Come sit with us. I picked up Dead Guy on my way in."

"Dead Guy?"

"It's what we have instead of a Starbucks. The local coffee shop is called Dead Guy Joe." Portia made a face. "*So* gross, right? They should seriously make the owner change it. Anyway, at least they have cold brew. I didn't know what you drink so I loaded yours with sugar and milk."

Thoughtful. Hendricks smiled. "Good guess." Hendricks slid the coffee out of the tray, grateful. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Portia's eyes flicked over Hendricks's outfit, taking in her ratty sneakers and oversized fisherman's sweater, courtesy of her favorite thrift store back in Philly. Portia's eyebrow gave a subtle twitch. "By the way, I'm absolutely loving

this whole ‘I don’t care that I look homeless’ vibe you’ve got going on. *Very* street-style chic.”

Hendricks honestly didn’t know whether she was meant to take this as a compliment or an insult.

Portia wore a pair of dark wash jeans and a formfitting sweater. The silver polka dots on her sweater perfectly matched her heeled, silver booties. She looked like she had an entire wardrobe department helping her get dressed in the morning.

Before Hendricks could formulate a response, Portia was maneuvering her through the cafeteria to the table in the back corner where Raven and Connor were already sitting.

“Refreshments,” Portia announced, plopping the remaining coffees in the middle of the table. “And look who I found wandering the halls, frightened and alone.”

It took Hendricks a second to realize she meant her. “Oh,” she sputtered. “Hi!” Followed by an awkward wave that she immediately regretted.

Raven mumbled something that didn’t sound like words, only managing to lift her head long enough to grab a coffee. Connor flashed a wide grin.

“Hey,” he said. “Good party last night.”

“Yeah, thanks,” said Hendricks. She started to pull out a chair, but Portia slid into it first, pushing Hendricks aside with a hip-bump.

Hendricks frowned and tried to catch her eye. Portia was picking a piece of lint off her sweater and didn’t notice.

Okay. Hendricks slid into the empty seat beside Connor instead. That was weird.

Raven blinked, slowly, as she aimed the coffee straw at her mouth. “Mmm. Better.”

“Raven’s a zombie in the morning,” Portia explained.

“Need brains,” Raven murmured. Her eyelids lowered as she slurped coffee. “I mean caffeine.”

“Connor’s the morning person among us,” Portia said. “Don’t you get up at, like, six for crew?”

“Five,” Connor corrected, leaning back and stretching his arms behind his head. The gesture pulled Hendricks’s eyes to his biceps, where they remained until Portia cleared her throat.

“Crew,” Hendricks repeated, cheeks flaring. “That’s, like, boats and stuff, right?”

“Boats and stuff.” The skin at the corners of Connor’s eyes crinkled when he laughed. “You guys don’t do crew back in Philly?”

“Nah, we’re more into hockey.”

Connor was nodding. “Right, you’ve got the Flyers down there. I have a buddy who’s into them.”

Hendricks didn’t follow any sports, but she nodded like this was something they had in common, silently praying he didn’t ask her any follow up questions.

Connor slid his elbows onto the table, leaning toward her. “You know, I’ve wanted to see the inside of your house since I was a little kid.”

Hendricks felt her posture stiffen. “Because of the murder?”

The skin between Connor’s eyebrows creased, and a look of horror crossed his face. “That little girl? No, that’s seriously morbid.” After a beat, his grin returned. “It’s

just, my older brothers and I built this tree house out in O'Malley woods when we were kids. It's about a mile away, maybe? Anyway, you can see directly into the upstairs bedroom of Steele House from that tree house and I used to stare at it when I was real little, thinking someday I might buy that house and, like, live there." Connor shrugged and looked down at his hands. "But you got there first."

He said it like he was saying "good for you," not like he was jealous. Hendricks found herself returning his smile.

She used to be good at flirting. She hadn't had a lot of practice in the last year, but she could feel it coming back to her, like a language she'd forgotten she could speak.

"Let me get this straight. You can see *into* my house from some tree a mile away?"

She'd injected just the right amount of teasing into her words, and Connor's smile froze.

"Oh. Shit. Yeah, but, like, I'd never go there *now*. Damn." He sat up, brushing the hair from his forehead with a flick of his hand. "You might want to get some curtains though. I didn't even think of that."

"Yeah, heavy ones." Hendricks felt her nose start to wrinkle and immediately heard Grayson's voice in her head: *I didn't realize you were so forward*. A wave of shame rolled through her and she shrugged.

Connor, nodding, didn't seem to notice her sudden discomfort.

"Uhm, and maybe an alarm system," she continued, which, actually, wasn't a bad idea.

"And maybe a sign that says, *I know you're looking into my room, creeper*," Connor added.

“Or, I know you’re looking into my room, *Connor*.”

Connor raised his hands, all innocence. “I told you I wouldn’t go up there any more!”

Hendricks laughed, softly, trying to push Grayson’s voice out of her head. He wasn’t her boyfriend anymore, she reminded herself. She didn’t have to care about what he thought.

Connor glanced over his shoulder then, at the sound of voices rising up on the other side of the cafeteria. When he looked back at her, his expression had changed. His mouth was drawn into a tight line, and a crease had formed between his brows. He looked nervous.

Hendricks felt her muscles knot together.

“So.” Connor wrapped a hand around the back of his neck. “It might be too early for this.”

Hendricks frowned. *Please don’t*, she thought.

Out loud, she said, “Uhm, too early for what?”

“I’d like to ask you out on a date tomorrow night.”

Her skin felt suddenly hot. She pictured the inside of a toaster, how the filaments would glow red as it began to heat up. She imagined her cheeks looked like that.

“You’d like to ask me on a date for tomorrow night?” she asked. “Or tomorrow night, you’d like to ask me out on a date?”

“Which one are you more likely to say yes to?” Connor asked, wary.

Hendricks didn’t answer right away. Grayson’s voice drifted through her head again, *I dare you to go to a movie with me Friday night* and, with it, came the same

confusing rush of emotions that always accompanied memories of those early days in their relationship.

Shame. Disgust.

And, worst of all, *sadness*. Despite everything, she actually missed that Grayson, the one he'd been in the beginning, before everything went so badly wrong.

How messed up was that?

"I...I don't know," she said after a moment. "Can I think about it?"

Connor smiled and said, "Of course." He didn't sound offended at all. He picked up the abandoned straw wrapper from her coffee and twisted it around his finger. "Take all the time you need."

How's forever? Hendricks thought. *Does that work for you?*

From the corner of her eye, she caught Portia aiming an extremely jagged eyebrow in her direction.

Told you so, the eyebrow said.

CHAPTER SIX

Brady smushed a chubby hand into the pile of food on his highchair tray, somehow managing to wedge a single pea between his fingers. Laughing, he launched it at Hendricks.

Thwack. Right in her hair.

“Ha-ha!” he said, lifting his hands.

This time, the word translated to, “Food is boring. Time to play!”

“No, not until you finish your dinner,” Hendricks’s dad said, fixing Brady’s bib.

Hendricks didn’t know why he bothered. Brady’s T-shirt, face, and hair were already covered in mashed up potatoes and peas. Ironically, the bib was the only part of his outfit that was still sort of clean.

“Yeah, you’re supposed to *eat* the peas, Bear,” Hendricks said, finger combing her hair until a fat little pea plopped onto her plate. “See?” she said to her parents. “This is why you should just feed him with a spoon.”

“It helps with his fine motor development if he does it himself,” her mother said, distracted. She was staring into the kitchen, her head tilted. “Are we sure about the subway tile, Frank?”

“I thought you said it was classic,” Hendricks’s dad said.

“Now I’m thinking it’s a little boring.” She gestured with her fork. “What about something with a little color?”

“We have another four bedrooms and two bathrooms to get to, Diane. I think we’re going to have to live with it.” Turning to Hendricks, he added, “So. How’s the first week of school going?”

“Good,” she said, cheeks flushing as she looked back down at her plate. A pea escaped from the prongs of her fork and she stabbed it, viciously. “Surprisingly good, actually.”

“Really?” Now, her mother was studying her, a wrinkle creasing the skin between her eyebrows. Her voice sounded casual, but Hendricks wasn’t fooled. “Why surprisingly good?”

She probably thought Hendricks didn’t notice the “look” that passed between her and her dad. They hadn’t talked about it, but she figured they thought it was too early for her to start dating again.

You don’t have to worry about that, she thought.

“Did you meet anyone interesting?” her dad asked, taking a sip of wine.

Hendricks might’ve groaned, but she was in too good a mood. Instead, she flicked her fork so that the pea shot across her plate and landed in a pile of mashed potatoes.

Score, she thought.

“Define *interesting*,” she said.

Her mother started to reply, then merely pressed her lips back together and Hendricks knew she couldn’t bring herself to ask *did you meet a boy?*

She bit her lip. Was it that obvious? She kept replaying the moment in the cafeteria this morning, how Connor’s face had gotten all scrunched up and nervous

before he'd asked her out, how he'd been so cool when she told him she needed some time to think about it before giving him an answer.

She wasn't going to say yes. Yes was a bad idea on so many levels. But that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy this part, the part before anything had even happened, when there weren't any expectations. She knew that as soon as she told Connor she couldn't date him it would all be over. She had to savor this while she still could.

"You know, I actually have a ton of homework to do," Hendricks said, grabbing her dinner plate and pushing back from her chair. "You know, I should take the rest of this upstairs."

"Would you like me to bring you some tea?" her mother called as Hendricks left the room.

Hendricks had a feeling that her mother was going to bring her tea regardless of what she said, probably picturing the two of them lying across her bed and having a "serious conversation" about dating and boys. An unexpected lump rose in her throat.

"I'm good, but thanks." And then she went to her room and closed the door behind her.

Setting her dinner plate on her dresser, Hendricks grabbed her book bag and flopped onto her bed. She considered actually doing her homework, but she didn't have much, yet. Most of her teachers had told her that she should just listen to the lectures and try to follow along.

Instead, she went to her closet and dug around inside, locating a familiar, orange soccer jersey.

It was Grayson's. Or, at least, it used to be. He'd given it to her last year, after one of his friends had accidentally spilled his beer all over her at a party, ruining her shirt. Even now, after everything that had happened between them, it hurt Hendricks's heart to imagine giving it up.

She didn't want Grayson back. But that didn't mean she didn't miss him sometimes. Or, maybe not *him*, exactly, but how it'd felt to be with him. For a little while, she'd had one person who loved her more than anyone else. She'd had a person to go out with on Friday nights, and hang out with her at parties and call before she went to sleep at night. It'd been nice. She missed it. She brought the jersey to her nose and breathed it in. It still smelled woody and clean, like Grayson.

For a second—just a second—she considered what it would be like if she told Connor yes.

Where would he take her on their date? Was this the kind of place where guys took girls to old-fashioned soda shops to split a milkshake? Or did that sort of thing only happen in movies?

She shook her head, suddenly disgusted with herself. What was wrong with her? She'd *just* gotten rid of Grayson for good. Was she really sitting here with his old jersey, feeling all sad and mopey about how things used to be? Did she really want to jump into another relationship so soon?

No, she thought firmly, she really, really didn't.

She needed a distraction to keep her from obsessing. She tossed the jersey back into her closet and grabbed her book bag, emptying her new schoolbooks, notebooks, and pens onto the faded duvet.

French, she thought, grabbing her textbook. She'd study French.

Her eyes glazed over as she flipped through the book, trying to find the chapter they'd been talking about in class.

She wasn't facing the window, but she could see the gauzy curtain from the corner of her eye. The moment she looked down at her book, she was sure she saw the curtain flick, as if it had been reaching for her while her eyes had been closed. But when she jerked around to look at it directly, it was still.

Her skin crept.

There's nothing there, she thought, feeling stupid.

But she stared at it for a while longer. Just to be sure.

It was a white curtain, made of a thin material intended to let in the sunlight. But there was no sunlight now, only flat darkness. It made Hendricks think of shrouds used to cover dead bodies. Without meaning to, she pictured bloodstains and a gaping mouth. She felt her body temperature drop by several degrees.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she considered that the curtain had been reaching for her, but that it'd had gone still again the second she turned to look at it. It was a silly, childish thought, and she was embarrassed the second it went through her head. But she couldn't unthink it.

Something shifted in the hall outside her door. Hendricks jerked around, and her hand slipped. The corner of the page cut deep into the pad of her finger.

"Shit," she said, watching a line of red appeared on her thumb. She stuck her thumb into her mouth to stop the bleeding. She didn't think they'd even unpacked the Band-Aids yet...

A single laugh sounded on the other side of her door. Hendricks's head shot up, the hairs on the back of her neck twitching.

That laugh...it had sounded just like Grayson.

But Grayson was in Philly. So that wasn't possible.

She crept across the room, easing her door open. The hall was empty. Moonlight snuck in through the opposite window, painting the fresh floorboards and giving the plastic sheeting still hanging from the unfinished walls a strange, silvery sheen. Otherwise, everything was dark.

"Mom?" Hendricks called, thinking her mother had brought up tea after all. But she could hear her mother's voice downstairs, calling for her dad to help with the dishes. And, besides, the laugh had sounded like a boy's.

The cut on Hendricks's thumb smarted. The taste of blood was coppery on her tongue. She stepped into the hall, shivering a little. This old house was so drafty. Even though she could tell that the hall window was closed, there was still a breeze rustling the plastic against the walls, snaking around her ankles.

"Hello?" she murmured, lip moving around her thumb. Something uneasy prickled below her skin. She almost expected an answer, but the hall stayed quiet.

Slowly, the muscles in Hendricks's shoulders began to relax. Maybe she'd drifted off while reading her French book and...dreamed the laugh. Shaking her head, she stepped back into her bedroom, one hand already pushing the door closed.

A voice, low and deep, said, "What are you doing here, loser?"

Hendricks jerked around, her heart hammering.

“Who’s there?” She tried to keep her voice even, but she could hear the tremor that had crept into her words. Her brain flashed to Portia banging on the window the day before. Maybe she’d convinced one of the guys at their lunch table to swing by and mess with her.

She stepped fully into the hallway now. The new floors out here were still splintery, and Hendricks could feel tiny shards of wood separating from the floorboards, pricking her toes. She heard the low hum of her parents’ voices drift up from the living room, but there was another sound beneath that. Hendricks paused, head cocked, listening.

More laughing.

Goosebumps crept up her arms. Now that Hendricks was listening for it she couldn’t deny what she heard. Someone was in her house. Someone was in her house *laughing*.

A shudder went down her back. Her eyes were drawn to the shadows behind the plastic covering her walls. She clenched and unclenched her fists and realized, that sweat had broken out on her palms.

The laughter seemed to be coming from the bathroom. Hendricks crept down the hallway, every moment expecting the floorboards to creak and groan beneath her feet. But they were new, and her movements were silent. She stopped outside the bathroom and pressed her ear to the door.

She heard voices, now. It sounded like two guys talking.

Hendricks swore, quietly, her whole body relaxing as she realized what must’ve happened. She’d been listening to a podcast about sheet masks while she got ready for

school that morning, and she must've forgotten to turn her Bluetooth speaker off. It was probably picking up her dad's phone downstairs. It did that sometimes.

Relieved, she pushed the door open and flicked the light on, eyes already scanning the sink for her bright blue speaker...

She caught sight of her reflection in the mirror above the sink, and felt her stomach drop.

Her long, blond hair had been chopped short. Spiky locks stuck straight up in some places. In others, it'd been hacked so close to her scalp that she could see spots of raw, bleeding skin.

Hendricks's chest tightened. She lifted a shaking hand to her head, cringing as her fingers brushed against a deep gash where her hair had been cut too close to her skin. Blood bubbled up beneath her fingers and trickled over her face in dark rivulets.

And that wasn't all. Someone had drawn on her face with blue Sharpie, circling her forehead, her nose, a spot on her chin.

Acne, he'd written. Nose too big. Mole.

The familiar hot burn of shame rose in her cheeks. She might've thought she was imagining this, somehow, except that she could feel the blood trailing down her skin, and the steady throb of pain from the deep gash in her scalp.

Hendricks staggered backward, crashing into the bathroom door. *He's here*, her mind screamed. It was the only explanation. He'd crawled through her window; he'd done this to her while she was sleeping. He'd always said she'd be ruined if they ever broke up, that no one would want her if she left him.

Now he'd made sure of it.

Hendricks drew in a long, sobbing breath and grasped for the doorknob behind her back. She threw it open and raced back to her room, slamming her door so hard the wall shuddered.

That's when she saw the dinner knife she'd brought up from downstairs. It was protruding from the back of her door, a single lock of blond hair dangling from the blade. Like a warning.

The scream seemed to rip out of her. It clawed up her throat and exploded from her lips, so loud that her ears were still ringing, seconds later.

Footsteps pounded down the hall. Hendricks jerked away from her door, but it was her dad who tore into her bedroom, not Grayson.

“What happened?” He was already looking around for the intruder, his mind clearly following the same path that Hendricks' had. “Is that little prick here?”

Hendricks shook her head motioned to her face, her hair.

Her father only blinked at her, frowning. “Hendricks?” he said. “What's going on?”

“Don't—don't you see what he did?”

The perplexed look didn't leave her father's face. Confused now, Hendricks spun to face the mirror hanging above her dresser.

What she saw caused the blood to chill in her veins.

Her reflection was normal again. Her hair hadn't been hacked off. It was still in a bun, a bit messier now that she'd been digging her fingers into it, but it was all there. There was no Sharpie on her face, no blood dripping down her cheeks. Everything looked exactly like it was supposed to.

“No,” Hendricks breathed, leaning closer to the mirror. She ran her hands over her face, her lips. She pulled her hair out of its bun, fingers shaking. “You don’t understand, a second ago it was different.”

Her dad was staring at her, frowning slightly. “What was different?”

Hendricks’s throat felt tight. She didn’t want to admit what she’d seen. What she’d *thought* she’d seen. It was too crazy to say out loud.

“I don’t know,” she mumbled, twisting her hair back into a bun.

Her father didn’t look convinced. Awkwardly, he said, “That counselor we talked to said stuff like this might happen, remember? Something like forty percent of people with PTSD experience auditory or visual hallucinations.”

“Jesus, Dad, I don’t have *PTSD*,” Hendricks said, her voice thick. “It was a trick of the light or something.”

“I’m just saying, I know you told us you didn’t want to talk to anyone about what happened, but maybe—”

“I’m *fine*.”

There was a long pause. Hendricks’s dad appeared to be having some sort of internal battle with himself.

The word “therapy” had been thrown around a lot over the last few months. Hendricks had told her parents that she didn’t want to sit on some old man’s couch and talk about her feelings, that she wouldn’t even know where to start, and they’d agreed to let her try to handle things on her own for a while. But Hendricks knew they weren’t so sure that was the right choice. Sometimes she wasn’t so sure herself.

“Okay,” her dad said, finally. “Just try to get some rest?”

Hendricks heard what he wasn't saying. *I'll let this go once. But if it happens again, we're getting your mother and doctors and prescription medication involved.*

She nodded, stiffly, staring at him until he backed into the hallway.

When she closed the door, she saw that the steak knife was still embedded in the wood.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The next morning, Hendricks hurried downstairs while her parents were getting ready for work. She heard their voices drift beneath their closed doors.

“Someone needs to talk to her about her anxiety, Diane,” her dad was saying.

“I just don’t know whether that should be us is all,” her mom responded. “I still think a therapist would—”

Hendricks hurried down the stairs, tuning the rest of their argument out. She didn’t need a therapist, and the only way she could think to avoid that argument was to avoid her parents completely. She grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl on the kitchen island and scrawled a quick note.

Told Portia I’d meet her before school. See you later!

It was a lie, but whatever. Her parents would just be relieved she had a Portia. She shoved the apple into her mouth and, clenching it between her teeth, she slipped into her coat and shot out the door.

The day was gray and blustery, but warmer than it had been when she first got here. Warm enough that Hendricks left her coat unzipped, enjoying the feel of the breeze against her hot cheeks.

Someone was walking just ahead of her, head hunched so she couldn’t see his face. She followed him for a block and a half before she recognized the black clothes, the retro haircut. It was that guy from her party, the one who’d been smoking by her pool and wouldn’t tell her his name.

“Hey!” she shouted, jogging to catch up with him. “Wait up!”

His posture stiffened. He hesitated, but didn't turn around.

"Are you following me or something?" Hendricks joked, bumping her shoulder into his.

He touched his arm, like her little shoulder bump had actually hurt him. His face was guarded as he jerked his chin at a rundown house on the corner. "I told you, we're neighbors. Sort of."

Right, Hendricks thought, nodding. She remembered him saying something about living in the house just behind hers.

"Maybe we should build one of those soup can telephones," she joked. "You know, like in old television shows? You connect the soup cans with strings and it's supposed to...do something."

She trailed off, frowning. He'd started walking again, his face tilted away from hers. "Yeah, whatever," he **muttered**.

"It was a joke," Hendricks said, catching up with him again. "Because everyone has cell phones now. Why would you need to build a soup can—"

"Not *everyone* has a cell phone." He hit the word "everyone" hard and cast a look her way, clearly indicating that she was being insensitive, somehow. She felt her cheeks color.

"Sorry," she **muttered**. She wasn't sure why he was being so cold or why she was apologizing. He'd been nice the other night.

She cleared her throat, trying again. "So I haven't seen you around school."

He frowned, slightly. "Yeah, I can think of about ten thousand places I'd rather be than that hellhole."

“Wow, a kid who dresses all in black and hates school. Original.”

“Wasn’t aware that I was going to be quizzed on my originality on this fine Thursday morning.” He stopped walking and turned to face Hendricks fully, his dark eyes fixed on her, searching. “Did you need something?”

Hendricks felt something thrum below the surface of her skin. She was suddenly tongue-tied. “I—I just wanted to say hi.”

He didn’t smile. “Hi.”

Hendricks chewed her lip. Why did it feel like he was sizing her up? Trying to decide whether she was worth his time?

Was it what she was wearing? She glanced down at herself. She had to admit, she hadn’t put a lot of thought into her outfit this morning. The boyfriend jeans weren’t the current style, but they were Citizens.

Grayson used to tell her he liked the way they hung off her hips. Of course, he’d also said that she should wear something formfitting on top or else it looked “sloppy.”

Hendricks had paired the boyfriend jeans with her old track sweatshirt and a pair of beat-up Vans. She hadn’t even bothered with her hair, which was still wet from her shower, and bunched in a knot on the top of her head.

They were almost eye-level. He was only an inch or two taller than Hendricks was. This close, she could see a faint spray of freckles on his nose. There was something vulnerable about them. They didn’t match with the black T-shirt and beat-up leather jacket.

She shifted her eyes away. “Anyway. I’ll see you around. Or not, seeing as you hate school and won’t tell me your name.”

She turned away from him, trying to walk fast enough to leave him behind without being totally obvious about what she was doing. She thought she felt the faint pressure of his stare on the back of her head. It gave her a strange thrill, but she didn't want to give him the satisfaction of looking back. Let him watch her walk away.

She'd managed to put half a block between them, when he called after her, "Hey! Hold up."

Hendricks hesitated. Then turned back around.

He made his way toward her slowly, not bothering to rush, which just made her feel like a spaz for speeding away from him.

He waited until they were side by side again before asking, voice low, "Was someone...screaming at your place last night?"

The blood drained from Hendricks's face.

"I—I saw a spider," she blurted.

"A spider," he repeated. He didn't sound convinced.

Hendricks searched his eyes, her heart stuttering. His expression didn't give anything away, but she felt his interest sharpen. He cared about what had happened last night. He cared more than he wanted her to know.

"What's your name?" she asked again.

He held her gaze for a beat, long enough that she thought he might answer. Then he pulled a crumpled carton out of his jacket pocket and shook a cigarette loose.

"You know what?" he said, sticking the cigarette between his teeth. "Fuck school."

And he brushed past Hendricks, heading back down the sidewalk the way he came.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Raven looked scandalized. “Hendricks, please tell me this guy you’re talking about isn’t *Eddie Ruiz?*”

School had just ended, and they were crowded around Portia’s locker, waiting for Portia to reapply her lipstick. Some kid Hendricks didn’t recognize raced down the hallway past her, and she had to dart to the side to avoid getting hit in the face with his backpack.

“Watch it, Gavin!” Portia yelled after him, her eyes never leaving the foggy mirror attached to the inside of her locker door. The boy turned in place, running backward, and cast an apologetic expression in their direction before bursting out of the school doors. Portia made an annoyed sound in the back of her throat and **muttered**, “Rude.”

“Eddie Ruiz,” Hendricks murmured, distractedly watching Portia dab at her lips, making sure she’d gotten her cupid’s bow just right. She’d never seen anyone outside of a YouTube tutorial spend so much time on her lipstick. It was hypnotic.

She shook her head and turned back to Raven. “Is that his name? He wouldn’t tell me.”

“Well, *obviously* he wouldn’t tell you. He was probably relieved to find someone in this town who didn’t already know who he was.” Portia sniffed, and stuck the cap back on her lipstick. “God, he’s probably wanking it to you, right now.”

“Gross, Portia,” Raven **muttered**, and Portia grinned, clearly pleased with herself.

“Wait, who is he?” Hendricks asked. “Why wouldn’t he want me to know his name?”

“Eddie’s from the wrong side of the tracks,” Portia explained, “but not in a sexy, eighties movie way. In a gross way.”

“He said he lived around the corner from me,” Hendricks said.

“It’s a metaphorical wrong side of the tracks. You should steer clear of him.” Raven fished around in her backpack and, a moment later, she pulled out a root beer-flavored Dum Dum. “Believe me, you don’t want his drama.”

She carefully unwrapped the sucker and stuck it into her mouth. Portia made a face and said, “Ew, where did you even get that?”

“I had a doctor’s appointment this morning.”

“What kind of a doctor hands out *candy*?”

Hendricks let them bicker. She shifted her gaze to the school doors beyond Portia’s hair, searching the yard for Eddie’s familiar black on black ensemble. But, of course, she wouldn’t see him. He’d skipped today.

I can think of about ten thousand places I’d rather be than that hellhole, he’d told her said. Well, at least now she understood why. No wonder she never saw him in school.

“That whole family is so messed up,” Portia was saying when Hendricks tuned back in. “A lot of people think Eddie is, like, some sort of psychopath. Like maybe he kills kittens and—”

“*Anyway*,” Raven cut in, giving Portia a pointed look. “Maybe we can save the Eddie rumors for another day? We don’t want to completely freak her out.”

Portia shrugged. “Whatever. She’s going to figure all this out eventually.” Smirking, she added. “Our town has some serious baggage.”

Raven rolled her eyes and said, lips moving around her sucker, “Our town is perfectly normal and boring, thank you very much. Hey, are we still headed to your place?”

“What? Oh, yeah, definitely,” Hendricks said.

Her parents were taking Brady in for his eighteen-month check-up, so the house was going to be empty when she got home. She winced, remembering how her blood had gone cold when she’d gotten the text that afternoon. She didn’t want to be alone in the house, even if was only for an hour. The events of last night were still fresh in her mind.

And so she’d invited Portia and Raven over. Problem solved.

She added, “My parents won’t be home till after six, so you can camp out until they get back.”

Please, she added silently.

“Lead the way.” Portia slammed her locker door, and the three headed for the school’s main entrance. They were the last ones in the halls. Portia had spent a full twenty minutes perfecting her lips. “And by the way, the Ruiz family isn’t our only creepy story. What about those boys who disappeared in the nineties?”

Raven blinked at her. “Huh?”

“Those boys! Come on, you know who I’m talking about. They disappeared when our parents were in high school. Didn’t you ever hear the story?”

Raven pulled the sucker out of her mouth and pointed it at Portia. “Girl, you know my parents didn’t go to high school here.”

“Oh, right. Well, my mom told me that her freshman year, three of the coolest boys in school just vanished, and no one ever heard from them again.” Portia snapped her fingers. “They were *gone*, just like that.”

Raven snorted. “Bullshit. My dad tells the same story about some guy at his high school and he grew up in Hong Kong. I call urban legend.”

“It’s *totally* true. My mom showed me her yearbook and everything. There’s, like, a whole memorial page dedicated to them.”

“Then they ran away to become contract killers or something.”

Portia rolled her eyes. “Yeah, Rave, *all three of them* ran away to become contract killers and never came back.”

Portia and Raven kept up a steady stream of casual bickering for the rest of the walk to Hendricks’s place. Hendricks felt a pang of jealousy listening to them. She used to have that, back at her old school. She sighed, thinking of it. It kept hitting her at strange times: that was all gone now.

And so she was more than a little relieved when the three of them finally climbed the steps to Steele House. At least being home meant she could play hostess. She might not have much to add to the conversation, but at least she’d have something to do with her hands.

“You guys want something to eat?” she asked, heading for the fridge.

Raven finished crunching through her sucker. “Maybe something healthy? I have to cheer tomorrow.”

Portia snorted. “Yeah, like that sucker was healthy?”

“It was from my *doctor*.”

Portia rolled her eyes and turned back to Hendricks. “So,” she said, all casual. “Did you bump into Connor at all today?”

Hendricks had just opened the fridge to grab them some cans of La Croix, but she froze, one hand wrapped around the door handle, icy air cooling the heat rising in her face.

“Uhm, just once, in the hall after Bio.” She set the cans of sparkling water on the kitchen island and loaded her arms up with baby carrots and red pepper hummus. She knocked the fridge door shut with her hip and saw that Raven and Portia were both staring at her.

Not sure what they expected, she blurted, “He said he had to do a makeup test over lunch and wanted to say hi.” A shrug. “That’s all.”

That wasn’t all, not entirely, but Hendricks wasn’t sure how to tell them about what had actually happened. The whole thing had lasted maybe three minutes, but it had been the first three minutes she and Connor had spent alone, and Hendricks had used it to officially turn down his date offer. It had been...awkward.

She blushed now, thinking of it.

After a beat, Raven rolled her eyes. “Jesus, Hendricks, put us out of our misery. Are you going out with him or aren’t you?”

Hendricks dumped the food on the island and ripped the bag of baby carrots open. She made a face. “He told you about that?”

“Connor and I have known each other since preschool.” Portia popped her La Croix open, and fizzy, grapefruit-flavored water gathered on top. She slurped it up, smudging the rim of the can with pink lipstick. “He was the first person I told about being

gay, and I was the first person he called when Finn got into that car crash last year and stopped breathing for like two minutes. We tell each other everything.”

Raven snorted. “Yeah, Connor and I have known each other for thirteen months and he tells me everything, too.” Portia shot her a disgusted look, and Raven added, “Come on, he tells *everyone* everything. The boy does not know what a secret is. Be prepared for the whole school to know everything about your entire relationship.”

Hendricks swallowed too quickly and sparkling water went down her windpipe, making her choke. She threw a hand over her mouth, tears springing to her eyes. That wasn’t good news. If everyone was going to talk about her dating Connor, what would they say once they’d heard she turned him down?

She shifted her eyes to her fingers, clenching the sides of her can, and tried to ignore the squirming in her stomach. “Look,” she started. “I like Connor, I do, I just don’t think I’m ready to date anyone yet.”

Portia rolled her eyes. “I seriously don’t get that. What, were you and your last boyfriend engaged or something? Did you exchange cheesy promise rings and swear that you’d wait for each other?”

Hendricks felt her cheeks flush. “No.”

“Then what’s the hold up? I can tell you like him, too, I’ve seen you staring at his arms. And you guys would be so cute together.” And then, eyes wide, “Your couple name would be *Condricks*.”

Hendricks opened her mouth, and then closed it again. She had no idea how to respond to that.

Maybe Portia was right. Maybe dating someone new wasn't the worst idea in the world. It could be, like, a rebound, something to keep her from obsessing about Grayson.

But it also sort of felt as if she was trading one boyfriend for another.

It was hard to know what the right choice was. Sometimes she felt a little unhinged, like she was making everything that had happened so much bigger than it needed to be. And, other times, she felt like she should be double-checking that every door and window was locked, never walking alone at night, hurrying past empty streets. She didn't want either of those things to be true.

Now, Portia was frowning at her. "Seriously, though. You never talk about your old school."

Hendricks shrugged, staring down at her La Croix.

"Your old friends, hobbies, ex-boyfriends. You know, *life*."

Hendricks felt a little sick.

Raven's eyes darted to Portia, wary. "Come on, Portia, give her a break."

"I'm just trying to get an idea of who she is," Portia continued, unapologetic. To Hendricks, "You show up here, all mysteriously in the middle of the year, and you're not on social media and you don't say anything about your old school, like, *ever*. You have to admit it's a little spooky. Are you a vampire? Have you been a sixteen-year-old girl for the last two hundred years? Do you reinvent yourself whenever you move to a new town so no one discovers your secret?"

"No," Hendricks said.

"Then what's the deal?" Portia asked.

“There’s no deal. In middle school, I had a bunch of girlfriends. I was into *everything*—sports, school plays, the newspaper.” Hendricks felt her cheeks grow warmer. “I was a bit of an overachiever, I guess. When I met Grayson...I forgot who I was for a while. He became *everything*. But no one knows who I used to be here, so I sort of thought I could start over.”

And figure out who I am without Grayson, she added silently.

It was the first entirely true thing she’d said since she moved here, and it made her feel vulnerable and raw.

Luckily, Raven cut in before Portia could add anything else and said, voice flattened, “Was that enough for you, Portia? If you don’t leave her alone, I’m going to make you talk about Vi.”

“Fine,” Portia said with a sigh. But two bright red spots had blossomed on her cheeks.

Hendricks raised her eyebrows. Grateful to have the conversation steered away from her she asked, singsong, “Who’s Vi?”

“No one,” Portia said at the same time that Raven said, “Portia’s first girl crush who she makes googly eyes at when she thinks no one’s looking.”

Portia rolled her eyes. “*Betty* was my first girl crush.”

“Okay, she’s your first girl crush who isn’t a character on a CW show,” Raven corrected.

Portia glared daggers at her, but Raven just shrugged. “What? You told me about her easily enough.”

“Yeah, after playing beer pong at Blake’s all night.” Portia shifted her eyes to her hands. To Hendricks’s surprise, the blush had spread to her entire face. “You can’t expect me to talk about her *sober*.”

Hendricks had idea. “You know, my parents decided to turn that creepy basement into a wine cellar. My dad’s sort of a collector and they have cases and cases of the stuff just sitting down there. I don’t think they’d notice if a bottle went missing.”

And I would feel way more comfortable talking about Connor if I was a little buzzed, she thought.

Portia’s eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“They don’t count the bottles?” Raven wrinkled her nose. “My parents count the bottles of this gross Bud Light Lime, low calorie crap they buy. As if I’d ever be desperate enough to drink that.”

“My parents don’t count the bottles.” Hendricks held up her La Croix. “We could make spritzes. I used to do it back in Philly all the time. You wouldn’t think grapefruit and red wine go together, but it tastes *amazing*.”

Portia and Raven shared a look. “Yes please,” Portia said.

Hendricks ducked out the back door, arms hugged over her chest to protect against the chill. The wind sighed through the trees and rattled the fallen leaves strewn across the street. It struck Hendricks as a strangely mournful sound, like the breath you took just before you started to cry. She found herself checking over her shoulder as she wandered around to the side of the house, half expecting to see someone on the curb behind her, watching. But there was no one.

The entrance to the wine cellar looked like a trapdoor angling up from the ground, the latches held shut with a chain that was supposed to be attached to a padlock but was currently attached to nothing. Hendricks's dad hadn't gotten around to ordering the padlock online yet.

Hendricks had one hand reaching for the chain when the chain *moved*, slithering between the latches, muscles thick and undulating in the dim, gray light. She heard the low *hiss* of a tongue, followed by a dry paper rattle.

She recoiled, jerking backward so quickly she nearly lost her balance. Her pulse spiked in her throat.

“Shit,” she said through her teeth, wrapping her arms around her chest. “Shit, *shit.*”

She kept her eyes trained on the snake, trying to steady her breath.

But...she frowned, tilting her head. It wasn't a snake at all, but just a chain wrapped loosely around the trapdoor latches.

She took a cautious step closer, leaning forward. Then, still unsure, she grabbed a stick from the ground and poked it.

The chain didn't move.

“Jesus,” she muttered, embarrassed. Hands still twitching, she uncoiled the chain from the latches and pulled the door open, slipping inside. It **fell** shut above her head with an ominous *thud*.

Darkness **fell** over her. Alone now, Hendricks felt her chest release, air whooshing out from between her lips. She stayed at the top of the stairs for a moment, just breathing.

This was going well. Or, at least, she thought it was going well. Raven and Portia seemed to like her.

Except...God, how could you tell for sure whether or not someone liked you? She didn't actually know what Raven and Portia thought about her. They were asking her questions. But maybe that's just because they knew Connor liked her. Maybe they were upstairs right now, talking about what a freak she was.

"Wine," she said out loud. That was her only job for the moment. Choose a bottle of wine that her father wouldn't notice missing and do her best to prove that she wasn't a freak.

The cellar was dark, with a low ceiling and packed dirt floors. Hendricks flipped the switch at the top of the stairs, and the single light bulb blinked on, filling the small room with a tinny, electric buzz.

Hendricks hesitated, second-guessing her decision to come down here alone. Even in the middle of the afternoon, with the light on and her two friends just a few yards away, this place gave her the creeps. It hadn't been renovated, like the rest of the house had. The walls were old brick, covered in a thin layer of dirt and something reddish that was probably rust but looked like blood. The stairs were the kind without any backs, so she could easily imagine someone reaching through the slats to grab her ankles. The dirt floor gave her the sense of things buried just below her feet.

And that little girl had died down here. They should've just filled the whole room up with cement.

She inhaled and started down the steps. The cellar smell seemed to intensify as she descended. It was decaying leaves, and wet dirt, and something else. Something sweet.

Cologne, she thought, her nose twitching. It reminded her of the cologne Grayson used to wear. Hendricks hugged her arms to her chest, pushing that thought away. It was just PTSD or whatever, like her dad said. It was all in her head.

She made her way over to the wall of wine, chewing on her lower lip as she examined the labels. She needed something sort of cheap, but she didn't know anything about wine, so she decided to look for the crappiest looking label she could. Crappy label meant cheap, right? Well, she hoped so. She picked up something called *Quintessa*. Shrugged. Worth a try.

She was halfway up the stairs when she heard a sound below her, coming from the crawlspace behind the stairs.

“Mew.”

She froze, the hair on the back of her neck slowly rising. She automatically shifted away from the back of the steps, suddenly certain that something was going to slither out of the darkness, grasping for her feet.

The sound came again, clearer now: “Mew.”

Hendricks relaxed. It sounded like a cat. She crept back down the stairs, her shoes kicking up little plumes of dirt when she hit the floor. The light bulb swayed a little from its chain on the ceiling, making the shadows around her seem to move.

She squinted into the dark space beneath the stairs, eyes straining.

She'd had a cat back in Philly. It was an old, fat cat named Blanche that her parents had adopted before she was born. Blanche had died when she was only nine, and it had devastated her. She remembered crying so hard she felt like she couldn't breathe.

"Kitty?" she called. She crouched beside the stairs. "Here, kitty, kitty."

Two eyes blinked open.

Hendricks flinched, her heart jumping. She couldn't see the eyes, exactly, but she could see the light reflected off of them.

She held out her hand. "Here, buddy," she murmured.

The cat crept closer, and now she could see that half of his fur was matted against his skinny body, the rest long gone. His skin was patchy and red below, stretched tight over his ribs. She felt a sudden, sharp stab of pity. The poor guy looked like he'd gotten into a fight.

"You hungry?" she asked, scooting closer. "Want me to get you some milk?"

The cat hissed, and Hendricks yanked back her hand, fear prickling up her skin. Even in the darkness, she could see the sharp points of his teeth.

"Okay," she said, voice a little softer. He was just scared. "How about some tuna—"

The cat shot forward, and Hendricks stumbled backward, falling off her feet and hitting the ground hard on her tailbone. The cat leapt at her, and she braced herself, muscles tensing as she waited to feel its claws dig into her skin—

But the cat never landed on her.

He went straight *through* her.

Hendricks's heart stopped. She jerked around just in time to watch the cat bound across the floor and disappear into the wall of wine.

She pushed back up to her knees, trembling all over. *That didn't happen*, she told herself. It was a trick of the light. Or maybe the cat knew about some hole or crevice in the wall, and it only *looked* like he'd disappeared because—

“You bitch! I'll make you pay.”

It sounded like a boy's voice, and it boomed off of the concrete walls of the cellar. Hendricks spun in place, her heart beating hard and fast in her chest. But there was no one there.

There was no one there.

Her breath was ragged, and her chest felt suddenly tight. It wasn't possible. That voice was still ringing in her ears. It had been *real*. She curled her fingers tighter around the wine bottle she was still holding.

“Who's there?” she demanded, her own voice small and trembling. Without realizing what she was doing, she raised the bottle over her head, like it was a weapon.

She waited, listening for the voice to speak again.

Suddenly, the basement seemed filled with a thousand noises. Creaking and dripping and wind whipping at the trap door.

And, below all that, *hissing*.

Hendricks turned, slowly, toward the staircase, her eyes narrowing. There was something down there. As her eyes adjusted, she could just make out the shape of something moving through the darkness.

Her palms grew sweaty, and the wine bottle slipped from her grasp, shattering as it hit the dirt floor. She leapt backward, swearing. She jerked her head up again, expecting the thing below the stairs to leap out at her, to strike—

Without warning, every single wine bottle in the basement exploded. The sound was like firecrackers or gunshots, so loud that it kept popping in Hendricks's ears. Glass shards flew at her with the force of bullets, slicing into her cheeks and arms.

She threw both hands over her head, cowering, as wine rained down on her.

CHAPTER NINE

Hendricks took the stairs two at a time, wine and blood still dripping from her hair and sweatshirt. She threw the cellar door open and crawled outside. She didn't shiver as the January air whipped over her bare arms; in fact, she didn't even feel it. She didn't feel the wine seeping through her bra, or the cuts that covered her arms. All she felt was numb.

What the hell had just happened?

Hendricks's father's words from the night before floated through her head—*something like forty percent of people with PTSD experience auditory or visual hallucinations*—and she hesitated at the front door, hand poised halfway to the latch.

Was that it? Was she crazy now?

She swallowed. The thought of seeing Raven and Portia and trying to explain all of this made her feel vaguely ill. But it's not like she had another choice.

Steeling herself, she pushed the door open.

Raven and Portia were leaning over the kitchen island, chatting happily. When they saw Hendricks, they stopped mid-sentence.

"Whoa," Raven said, and Portia's jaw dropped. *Actually dropped*, like she was a cartoon. Hendricks might've found it comical if everything wasn't so messed up.

"Oh my God," Portia said. "What the shit? What *happened* to you?"

Lie.

The voice seemed to whisper directly into Hendricks's head.

Yeah, no shit, Hendricks wanted to shout back.

“I...am in so much trouble,” she said. “I—I was trying to get this bottle of wine out and it accidentally dislodged the whole shelf. It’s a mess.”

Raven made a cringing face. “That sounds really bad. Are your parents going to be pissed?”

“Probably,” Hendricks said. But when she looked back at Portia, she saw that her head was cocked to the side and she was studying Hendricks’s face like she didn’t believe her story.

Out loud, all she said was, “Right.”

“We’ll hang some other night this week, I promise,” Hendricks said.

“You’re coming tomorrow, right?” Raven asked.

Hendricks frowned. “Tomorrow?”

“Party at the quarry. We were talking about it at lunch, remember? I’ll text you the details.”

“Yeah, sure,” Hendricks said, but she was already ushering the two girls toward the door.

“And good luck with the wine,” Raven said, waving as she headed outside.

“Yeah, good luck,” Portia added. But she pressed her lips together, like she was holding something back.

Hendricks pushed the door closed behind them. Wine dripped from her hair, seeping through the shoulders of her sweatshirt.

She walked to the pantry in a trance and fumbled around inside until she found a thick roll of paper towels. But instead of pulling them out, she just stood there, staring.

How was one measly roll of paper towels going to help anything? The entire basement was covered in glass and wine. Even if she managed to clean everything up, her dad was going to notice that *every single bottle of his wine was missing*.

Hendricks lifted a shaking hand to her mouth, breathing hard. Her mind was going a million miles a minute.

How did the wine explode? What the hell just happened?

The front door slammed open and closed.

“Hendricks!” her mother called. “Are you home?”

“Shit!” Hendricks muttered. She started to turn, but she was shaking badly, and fumbled the paper towels. They fell to the floor, rolling to a stop at her feet. Hendricks looked down, and that’s when she noticed that a puddle of wine and blood had formed around her, the red liquid staining the soles of her feet.

Floorboards creaked, and the muffled sounds of voices drifted toward her. Hendricks grabbed the paper towel roll and hurriedly swiped it over the floor, wine dripping through her fingers and staining the creases of her knuckles.

There was a screech of hinges as the kitchen door swung open. Her dad said, “Hendricks? Honey, you left a trail of something that looks like grape juice all over the—”

Hendricks heard a quick intake of breath just behind her and froze. Her cheeks flared with heat. She was too embarrassed to turn around, so she kept trying to sop up the wine.

“I—I’m sorry,” she stuttered, blinking back tears. “It was an accident, I swear, I’m *sorry*.”

The door swung open again and now her mother called, “Hendricks? Honey you have to be more—oh, honey. What on earth happened?”

Hendricks was already shaking her head. “I don’t know. I—”

Her voice cracked and, in an instant, it was like something inside of her snapped. All of the stress and horror and anxiety of the past few days was suddenly too much.

What kind of person sees cats disappear into walls? Or imagines that someone chopped off her hair? What kind of person hallucinates voices?

A crazy person, that’s who.

No, she told herself. She *saw* the wine bottles explode. And the wine was still here, pooling beneath her knees, so that meant she couldn’t have imagined it, right?

Hendricks’s hands were trembling again. She dropped the paper towel and brought them to her face, covering her eyes.

She found herself blurting, “I had some friends over, okay? I went to get us a bottle of wine, but then I got down there, and...”

She hesitated for a moment. *Clean slate*. This move was for her. She didn’t want to cause any more trouble for her parents.

And so she said, slowly, “I was trying to get a bottle from the top of the rack and I knocked the whole thing over.” She felt something inside of her lurch, and she found herself adding, “I know I shouldn’t have even gone down there, and I definitely shouldn’t have tried to take your wine, I just...I guess I just wanted them to think I was cool.”

She felt like an idiot saying it out loud. But at least it wasn’t a lie.

“Oh, honey.” Her mom reached out and squeezed her shoulder. “We know. We want you to make friends here, too.”

Hendricks looked up, tentatively, and saw her parents exchange a look. There was an edge of concern to her father's expression. Her mother gave a very small shake of her head.

Hendricks squeezed her hands into fists, her fingernails dug into her palms. They were trying to decide whether they believed her, she knew.

Please believe me.

"You knocked the *whole* thing over?" her dad asked, grimacing. Her mom shot him a look and he quickly morphed the expression into a pained smile. "It's fine. I'll...figure something out."

"Let me run you a bath," her mother said. And with that, Hendricks knew her story had been accepted. "You're completely drenched. And is some of this blood?"

"Maybe," Hendricks admitted. "There was a lot of glass."

"Take a seat first and I'll check your scratches for glass," her dad said. "Then we can clean up the cellar together. How's that?"

Terrible, Hendricks thought. She didn't want to go back down there. Ever.

Some small part of her worried it would be like what happened last night, in the bathroom. What would she tell her dad if they opened the cellar door and everything was normal? No spilled wine, no broken bottles?

She pressed a hand to her chest, horror rising inside of her like nausea. It couldn't have been her imagination. She could still hear the sound of that wine bottle shattering against the wall. She could still remember that thing moving below the stairs, and how that cat had darted straight through her.

Numb now, Hendricks followed her father out of the kitchen, through the back door, and around the yard to where the cellar doors were still propped open, revealing the deep black darkness of the room below. All the while, she felt Steele House towering above her. It blocked out the darkening winter sky, casting deep shadows onto the grass, mocking her.