

# THE LAST GIRLS STANDING

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putnam

G. P. Putnam's Sons

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An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by G. P. Putnam's Sons,  
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2023

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data | Names: Dugan, Jennifer, author.  
Title: The last girls standing / Jennifer Dugan. | Description: New York: G. P. Putnam's, 2023. |  
Summary: As the only two survivors of a summer camp massacre, Sloan and her girlfriend Cherry form a seemingly unbreakable bond, but as Sloan discovers more about the attack, she begins to suspect Cherry may be more than just a survivor. | Identifiers: LCCN 2022060794 (print) | LCCN 2022060795 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593532072 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593532089 (epub)  
Subjects: CYAC: Psychic trauma—Fiction. | Murder—Fiction. | Lesbians—Fiction. |  
LCGFT: Thrillers (Fiction) | Novels. | Classification: LCC PZ7.1.D8343 Las 2023 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.D8343 (ebook) | DDC [Fic]—dc23  
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022060794>  
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022060795>

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 9780593532072

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

LSCH

Design by Eileen Savage | Text set in Arno Pro

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To Joe, for always letting me pick the movie



**THE  
LAST GIRLS  
STANDING**



# ONE

IT HAD TAKEN sixteen sutures to close the wound on the underside of Sloan's forearm.

Sixteen threads, woven in and out of her skin by careful hands wrapped in latex, while whispered words had promised, "It's okay. You're safe now." As if anyone could really know that.

Sloan remembered the way the pain had dulled down to a useless ache as the doctors worked, a pressure and tug that she knew should hurt, would hurt, *had* hurt before everything faded to a blur of sirens and lights and hospital antiseptic.

Sixteen stitches holding her together when she could not do so herself.

"Sloan," a voice said, sounding far away and underwater. Sloan ignored it, instead staring down at the puckered pink line running down her arm. She traced the scar with her finger, paying special attention to where it bit into the peculiar patch of raised skin above her wrist. Her mother called it a birthmark, but Sloan had never seen a birthmark like that before.

Not that either of them really knew. When the Thomas family adopted her at the age of four, the mark, whatever it was, was already there. Her social workers were no help, and her biological parents were long gone—a single Polaroid picture and an urgent, whispered “remember who you are” were all they left in their wake. There would be no asking and no answers for anyone.

“Sloan,” the voice said again.

This time Sloan snapped her attention to the woman sitting across from her. “Beth,” she said, matching her therapist’s tone. If you could really call her that. Beth was some new-age hypnotherapist-slash-psychic her mother had dug up when Sloan refused to talk to the doctors the hospital social worker had sent them to. She wasn’t even sure if Beth was accredited. She wasn’t even sure if hypnotists *could* be accredited.

“Where were you just now?” Beth asked, trying very hard to keep her face neutral. Beth was always trying to keep her face neutral, and it rarely worked. Sloan had never met a therapist with so many tells, and she had met a lot of them in those first few weeks after the “incident.”

Sloan flashed her patented smart-ass smile. “Here, in this chair, wondering how much more of this beautiful day I have to spend stuck inside your office.”

Beth frowned. “Is that all?”

“Does there always need to be more?”

Beth leaned back in her chair. “It would be helpful to your recovery if there was, at least occasionally, more.”

Her recovery. That was hilarious. What recovery? It felt more like a countdown from where she sat. They had been waiting and watching her for a while now. Waiting for her to snap. To break



down. To tell anyone other than that first police officer what she remembered. What it was like. What she saw. To put the few memories of that night she could manage to scrape up on display for them to dissect like a science experiment.

Her parents, Beth, and all the therapists and gurus and life coaches before her all claimed to want to “help” her process what she’d been through. They wanted to understand. But nobody could, not unless they’d been there too. Sloan glanced out the window to where Cherry’s truck sat glinting in the September sun. As if she could sense Sloan looking, Cherry opened the door and slid out, her long brown hair flipping up in the breeze.

Sloan drank in the sight of the other girl, her entire body relaxing as the person she loved most leaned against the truck with crossed arms. Cherry was safety, warmth. She didn’t pry because she didn’t have to. She was there when it happened, when everyone died except for the two of them: the last girls standing.

Sloan’s loss was her loss. Sloan’s wounds were her wounds. They didn’t need therapists or police or parents wandering around inside their heads—they had each other for that.

“You need to talk about what happened. Let me help you.”

Sloan sighed. It wasn’t that she didn’t like Beth—she did. Or that she didn’t think Beth meant well—she did. Sloan just didn’t see the point. “Help with what?” she asked softly.

“Your mother says your nightmares are getting worse. We could start there—do a longer session and try to reprocess whichever memories are affecting you most. We might be able to take some of the bite out of them. Many of my clients have had a lot of luck with this approach in the past, but you have to work with me. I can’t do it for you.”

“I’ll think about it,” Sloan said, and then they lapsed back into silence.

She was relieved when Beth’s phone alarm chimed, signaling the end of the visit. The truth was that Sloan wasn’t sure she wanted to “take the bite out” of her memories. To reprocess them or share them with anyone else. Because what she remembered most from that day wasn’t fear. It wasn’t the sticky scent of warm blood, although that remained thick and cloying even in her dreams. And it wasn’t even the pain of the cut in her skin.

No.

What she remembered most was love.

## *TWO*

CHERRY PULLED OPEN the driver's side door before Sloan was even down the concrete steps of the Smith Medical Building. It was home to an urgent care, a massage therapist, four empty suites, and, of course, Beth McGuinness, holistic hypnotherapist specializing in traumatic response therapy.

"How was the headshrinker?" Cherry teased as Sloan slid across the long bench seat of her old F-150. Sloan didn't know anything about trucks, and she gathered Cherry didn't either, given that the passenger's side door had been stuck shut for as long as Sloan had known her. The truck had originally belonged to Cherry's dad, and her mom had passed it on to her when he died a few years back. Sloan didn't know if it was a sentimental thing or a money thing that kept them in that truck. Maybe a little of both.

"Shrinky," Sloan answered.

"I don't know why your mom keeps making you go." Cherry shifted the truck into drive and slowly pulled out of the parking lot.

Sloan threaded her fingers between Cherry's and let all the

tension bleed from her body. “Probably because if I had to write an essay about what I did on my summer vacation, it would say ‘survived a mass murder,’” Sloan said, attempting to make air quotes with her free hand. “You know it freaks her out.”

“Then maybe *she* should see someone and leave us alone for once.”

Sloan liked the way Cherry said “us.” The way she always combined them into one now. Nothing happened to Cherry or to Sloan; it only happened to both of them, as if what happened that day at camp had fused them somehow.

“Oh, she does,” Sloan said, twisting in her seat. “I’m pretty sure me going was actually *her* therapist’s idea. Or maybe her guru’s. I can’t keep them all straight anymore. You’d think she was the one who had to get sewn back together.”

Cherry made a little tsking sound. “Sounds like a conspiracy to me.”

“Yeah, a real conspiracy: protecting my mental health.”

“You know I’m always here for all your protection needs.” She puffed out her chest, and Sloan smiled back at her.

“Yeah, I noticed that with the whole hiding-me-from-masked-men-with-machetes thing.”

“Oh yeah, that clued you in? Good,” Cherry said with a laugh.

It didn’t use to be like this.

The lightness, the teasing, it was new. Just since Cherry moved to town with her mother a few days ago. Now it was like Sloan could breathe again. Like there was a reason to want to smile.

It was a fluke they had both ended up at Camp Money Springs—two girls on opposite sides of the state just looking for a fun sum-

mer job and a way to earn some cash that didn't involve fast food or retail. They were both fresh high school graduates, and while Cherry was planning on taking a gap year to "find herself"—aka use up her friends' goodwill to couch surf her way across the country—Sloan was just trying to earn some spending money for her first semester at NYU starting that fall.

They had almost nothing in common. Cherry loved punk and grunge bands from the '90s; Sloan would die for Olivia Rodrigo and Doja Cat. Cherry was sure that they didn't need to worry about global warming because nature would heal itself, getting rid of people the way it had gotten rid of dinosaurs. Sloan thought they should all use metal straws anyway, just in case.

They shouldn't have worked, but from the second they met, painting old boats and then clearing weeds at the archery range to prepare the camp for summer, Sloan knew they were meant to be. And to her delight, so did the other girl.

*Fate*, Cherry had called it, eating slushies made from ground-down ice and cheap syrup by the fire. She had tasted like sugar the first time they kissed.

She had tasted like blood the next.

"Your mom home?" Cherry asked, pulling Sloan from her head.

She had a knack for doing that, and it was especially useful after a session with Beth—even if Sloan barely talked, it was still somehow exhausting. Like it knocked things around in her mind, leaving everything slightly off-kilter. Beth kept poking into the things Sloan couldn't remember—like that gap of time between Cherry finding her and the police arriving. It was just *missing*. Like her brain had deleted it. Like it was a detail as unimportant as the

color of the socks she had worn on the first day of school. There was fear, and then nothing, and then blood in her hair. It felt very matter-of-fact without the middle bits.

Without the important bits.

Cherry had filled her in, of course; they'd gone over it dozens of times. That was good enough for Sloan. She wished it were good enough for Beth. Sloan knew she would likely have another nightmare that night. She always did after Beth poked around in the missing places.

"Sloan," Cherry said again. "Is your mom home?"

"Yeah." Sloan frowned. "She wants me to go to Simon's baseball game later. She thinks we need 'family time.'"

"Right." Cherry sighed. "It would be nice if Allison could at least set the mandatory emotional manipulation aside after your therapy sessions. Let me guess, she turned your little brother loose on you?"

Sloan liked that Cherry called her mother Allison. Sometimes she did too, secretly in her head or when it was just her and Cherry.

"Yep," Sloan said. "It's hard to call her out on it when Simon's standing there with his big, round eyes all 'Sloany, please come.'"

"I love that 'family time' is just code for 'Cherry's not invited.'"

And it was. It was. Both girls knew it. It was Allison's latest invention to keep them separated.

Before, when they were still living hours apart, Sloan's mom had imposed a curfew even on weekends. She claimed it was because she needed Sloan in her sight after what happened; it was just a coincidence it was early enough for Sloan to visit Connor and Rachel, her former best friends, but there was never, ever enough time for her to make it to Cherry's house and back.

“You’d get over this sooner without a constant codependent reminder of what you went through,” Allison had shouted at Sloan, while clutching her latest homeopathic calming tea.

Clearly, Beth needed to work on the recipe.

Thank god Cherry had a truck and a mom who was quick to look the other way, and more often than not she’d climb through Sloan’s window at night like a stray cat that had been fed once and formed a habit.

Eventually, Allison gave up and asked Cherry to “at least use the door instead.”

It was better now that Cherry lived nearby, streets away instead of counties, an entire year for themselves stretched out in front of them ever since Sloan had sent in her deferral letter to NYU. It would be good year, a reset, a fresh start. Even the boxes yet to be unloaded from the bed of Cherry’s truck, battered and sliding around with every turn, seemed somehow hopeful.

If only the rest of the world would leave them alone.

Other people were the worst, even the ones Sloan used to be close to—especially them, maybe. They talked about Sloan and Cherry, and around them—worse yet, they wanted them to share the gory details over lunch or in an interview. They didn’t understand that Sloan and Cherry’s experience—and it was *theirs* because sometimes it was hard to tell where Sloan ended and Cherry began—was not carrion for scavengers to pick through. It was their *life*.

Even Connor, Sloan’s best friend since third grade, had tried to get the scoop under the guise of “being there” for Sloan. But Rachel, his girlfriend, was the worst, demanding Sloan “get over it already” because she was “freaking everyone out.” Sloan had

stopped replying to her texts after that. She had stopped replying to *all* their texts after that.

How was she supposed to explain that she'd hidden while someone else's blood pooled hot and sticky around her hair? How she couldn't get the smell out for days even though her mother swore the only thing she could smell was the lavender shampoo.

(That was one memory she wished her brain *had* deleted.)

"Almost there," Cherry said, as if it hurt her to be away from Sloan as much as it hurt Sloan to be away from her.

But that was impossible.

Sloan cursed the ride home for being so short—just a blink-and-you-miss-it burst of freedom between Beth's office and mandatory family time.

Cherry parked in the driveway but kept the truck running. She was quickly learning to choose her battles with Sloan's mom. Respecting their family time would mean less chance of a fight when she slipped into Sloan's room that night, curling tightly around her like a snake.

"I'll see you later?" Cherry asked.

"You better." Sloan leaned forward for a kiss—strawberry lip gloss, her favorite—and her belly twitched and ached. Goodbye kisses were stressful—being away from Cherry at all was stressful—but she didn't have a choice. She slid over Cherry's lap, knocking their teeth together with one last kiss, before hopping out the door.

Sloan walked to the house with a little wave, disappearing through the door with a frown. She tried to ignore the cold sinking feeling in her stomach that took up residence whenever the girls



were apart. It was okay. She could do this. She just had to get through the next little while.

Cherry's truck would be at the ball field, just out of her mother's sight, waiting, watching, keeping her safe from afar.

"Sloan?" her mother called from the kitchen. "Come eat!"

"Coming, Mom," she chirped brightly, pasting the perfect smile on her face.

She was fine.

She was fine.

## THREE

*THE TOOTHBRUSH WAS hard and heavy in her hand. Her fingers curled around it so tightly that it might snap, would have snapped, should have snapped, if she had been anywhere except in a dream.*

*And Sloan knew it was a dream. A nightmare, really, although Sloan knew the real nightmare wouldn't begin until she opened the door to her cabin. Until she saw the blood running in rivulets, following the same divots in the wood and grass that the rain had the day before. But she could never get that far. Not anymore. It was as if her mind was working backward, clearing out the memories from the end to the beginning, leaving her with confusing flashes of half memories—all without order or context.*

*But the dreams still came like clockwork. Every night, pinned to her bed, she relived the final moments before it all went to shit, before she opened the door. Beth had suggested that if they could break the pattern, if Sloan could get the door open before the dream ended, maybe they could make some real progress. Whatever that meant.*

*Still, Sloan hoped this night, this dream, this nightmare, would be the one.*

*If she had to open that door, she would rather do it on her own terms, in her own bed, instead of sitting on an oversize armchair in front of Beth.*

*She looked at the toothbrush in her hand, looked at the wide-eyed reflection of herself in the cabin mirror, and tried to sink all the way inside herself. Deep, deep, until she was drowning in the sensation. Until she felt fused with the body looking in the mirror, until her past and present melted together into one word, one thought: now.*

*Sloan had been in the bathroom when she'd heard the first scream, and so the bathroom was where she always started, caught in a time loop in her head every night like a rabbit in a snare.*

*She had just changed into her pink-striped pajamas. Because she knew Cherry liked them best and had been expecting, hoping, waiting for her to visit for one of their late-night talks. Cherry had made it a habit to show up out of the blue, and Sloan wanted to be ready.*

*Thus, the cute pajamas, the toothbrush heavy in her hand. They had kissed earlier, and she hoped they would again, and she'd be damned if their second kiss was going to start with stale garlic crouton breath.*

*Five, four, three, two, and—*

*The scream ripped through the dream exactly as it had that night.*

*Sloan had thought nothing of it at first until others joined in. Until the screaming turned to crying, to begging. Until a heavy thunk—followed by the sticky wet sound of what she had at first thought was a watermelon being split, but later turned out to be the sternum of one of the other counselors—had made her bones rattle and her teeth ache.*

*Something was wrong.*

*Very, very wrong.*

*Sloan set the toothbrush down and crept over to the tiny, frosted*

*bathroom window, just as she had that night. The rough, unfinished pine logs that made up the cabin walls scratched her cheek as she tried to pry the window back. She couldn't see anything through the cloudy glass, but maybe if she could get it open, she could make something out through the screen, even though it was pitch-black outside.*

*The solar-powered motion lights on the other cabins began to flick on, and then off, as if someone—or something—was moving from place to place. A shiver ran down her spine as the light two cabins down clicked on. Whatever it was, it was heading in her direction, getting closer.*

*And she supposed that made sense.*

*Most of the other cabins were empty, after all.*

*Next week the summer camp would be bustling full of little kids, mostly middle schoolers—but also the occasional elementary kid whose parents needed them out of the way, or high schooler working as a “junior counselor.”*

*But that was next week.*

*This week, the week Sloan learned that chopping watermelons doesn't sound all that different from chopping bodies, there was only a small group of counselors and workers. Ten, to be exact. Spread out all over the camp.*

*And somehow, even then, still trying to unjam the bathroom window and get a better look, Sloan knew that number wouldn't last the night.*

*She gave up on the window, blurry and stuck shut, even though it had worked every time before that. Sloan paused for a second to try to remember if it really had been stuck that night; she had a sneaking suspicion that was a new detail, only for the dream, her mind trying to take away even more, to hide it away where it couldn't hurt her . . . but she couldn't be sure.*

*And if she started thinking too much, if she pressed too hard, if she*

*started taking control instead of running on time-loop autopilot, she knew she would be flung back into the waking world before she even got to the doorknob. Would wake up sweaty and hot even in the cold autumn night, her sheets tangled around her like a straitjacket.*

*Sloan was determined not to let that happen.*

*Not tonight. Not again. She had to stay. She had to stay.*

*Sloan dropped to her knees when the second scream hit, followed shortly thereafter by a deep rustling sound near the edge of the cabin. She crawled to the main room, the sound of her breathing too loud and scratchy in the stillness, bordering on hysterical. The room was small, barely room enough for a bed and a table and a woodstove. Barely any room to hide.*

*Splinters bit into her skin as she crawled across the floor and up onto her bed to peer through the dusty screen of another stuck-shut window. At least this one wasn't frosted. She wedged her shoulder against the little lip of the window and got it to open just a crack, just enough to let the air from outside slip in, cocooning her in the scent it carried.*

*The breeze had transformed from something earthy and crisp to something metallic that made her stomach clench. Sloan couldn't place it, but somewhere deep inside her, every single cell in her body was screaming at her to run. Now. Go. Leave. Danger. Danger! Her primal instincts taking over as if she was more feral beast than house cat. Every muscle tensed to bolt. To save her. To escape whatever it was that smelled like that.*

*But that's when she saw the man.*

*At least she thought it was a man. She was pretty sure. He was tall, lumbering, a body in stark relief, an inky shadow beside the bright yellow of the motion light on the cabin next to hers. But the shape of his head was distorted into something odd, something pointy.*

*It wasn't until he stepped under the light, the machete in his hand stained red—god, so much red—that Sloan realized it was a mask. A crudely made monstrosity, carved out of wood and affixed to where the face of a person should have been.*

*Sloan thought it was supposed to be a fox, but it had been thoroughly distorted by the slices and gouges in the wood. This man wasn't a fox; he was an approximation of a fox, a sloppy kid's drawing come to life. An insult to arts and crafts everywhere.*

*And it made Sloan mad. If she was going to be murdered, if this was going to be her last night on this dying earth, she at least deserved a quality, clever, talented killer.*

*But no, that wasn't right. That hadn't been what she was thinking then at all. That was Real Sloan leaking in—frustrated and furious from the future—and no, no, no, no, the real her needed to pull back before she got ejected.*

*Autopilot. Time loop. "Be a casual observer," Beth had once said. "Let your memories lead the way."*

*So she did.*

*Sloan blinked, observing the man—The Fox, as she would come to call him—as he turned and started walking, walking slowly toward the cabin she was in, his head tilted to the very window she looked out of, and all that fear, all that lizard-brain survival instinct came flooding back. Could he see her?*

*Her stomach roiled as her eyes fell on the slumped shadow left abandoned on the porch in the man's wake. At first, she thought it was a pile of clothes. But it wasn't. It wasn't someone taking a nap or passed-out drunk; it wasn't any of the good things that the first days had brought. It was sweet Beckett, a college sophomore from Virginia. She could tell*

*it was him from those expensive hiking boots he never took off. A dark puddle slowly spread beneath him and surrounded him like a halo.*

*Sloan clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle a scream and then rushed to the exit, tripping over her comforter as she clawed her way past. Panic sent her careening toward the door on hands and knees. If she could get the door open, if she could just get out, she would run, far and fast. Never stopping. Never looking back.*

*She hoped Cherry would be waiting on the other side of the door, like she supposedly had been in real life, with a kiss and an outreached hand and running feet that had ultimately led them to the old canoes stacked up next to Kevin's office. They had hidden under them, had lain as still and quiet as mice while the director's blood soaked into Sloan's hair.*

*But when Sloan turned the knob, it was locked. Locked hard, as it had been in every single dream before. Sloan clawed and cried and screamed, pounding against it even as the motion light flicked on over the door.*

*Then there it was, like every time, the sight of Cherry's face in the small window, at first relieved and then confused, as his blade pushed through her, pulling up, and Sloan was hit with the realization of exactly what that wet thwack she'd heard earlier was.*

*She would never eat watermelon again.*

*And Cherry? Cherry slid down, her blood slipping underneath the still-locked door, wet and warm beneath Sloan. The Fox stood at the window, tilting his head left and right, exactly where Cherry had been a second before, and then he—*

*"Shhh, shhh, I got you. I'm here. It's not real. We're okay."*

*Sloan struggled against the body holding her down, kicking*

and screaming until the words wove into her brain and dragged her from the dream. Her eyes opened, wide and painful. Every light in the room was on, and there were so many—she had added them after her parents brought her back home, stained inside and out and still wrapped in the shock blanket she had refused to let go of during her long days in the hospital.

She clenched her fingers around Cherry's T-shirt and buried her face against her girlfriend's belly. Cherry was here. Alive. It hadn't been real. She had never been stabbed. It was okay.

It was okay.

Cherry gave Sloan a moment to pull herself together, letting her take big, gulping breaths through the open window that Cherry had slipped through.

"You were dead. You were dead."

"It was a dream, baby," Cherry, real and alive, said over and over again until Sloan stopped crying.

"You came," Sloan said eventually, when she could finally find her voice through the sobs.

One side of Cherry's mouth slipped up into a smile. "Well, it's family night, right?" she teased. "I couldn't miss that."

Sloan tried and failed to push out a smile. She melted into Cherry instead, let herself go limp in the other girl's arms, let Cherry hold her up . . . until her door swung open and tore them from the little peace they had found.

Sloan's parents took in the sight of the girls—wrapped tight around each other like two halves of a lock—and then the opened window, the tattered blankets, the tears, and they scowled. Well, Sloan's mom, Allison, did. Her father, Brad, simply shook his head and walked away.



“I told you to use the door, Cherry. My insurance won’t cover you breaking your neck climbing the side of my goddamn house,” Allison said before she slammed the door shut behind her.

Cherry giggled. She dragged Sloan down onto the bed with her and carefully arranged the blankets over them both. “Your mother loves me.”

“I’m the only one who needs to love you,” Sloan answered and drifted off to the sensation of Cherry tracing slow circles on her skin.

She was here.

She was real.

She was safe.

## FOUR

THE FIRST TIME Sloan saw Cherry, she was all long-legged and smirky, standing next to a tall Indian boy named Rahul and a white kid named Beckett, who looked like hiking was his whole personality. Sloan had barely noticed the boys, as she was thoroughly lost in the freckles dotting Cherry's peachy sun-kissed skin. She had almost forgotten her own name, forgotten words completely, and was left blinking when Rahul introduced himself.

Sloan had arrived a day later than all the other counselors, the product of her mother insisting that Sloan stay home an extra day for her little brother Simon's birthday party. She had missed whatever icebreakers and team bonding that had happened the day before, and as she watched the ease with which Beckett draped himself around Cherry, she was annoyed about it all over again.

"Family emergency" was what Sloan had told her boss, because that seemed more mature than saying, *My mom won't let me leave until I ooh and aah over an eight-year-old cutting into his LEGO cake.*

She supposed it was an emergency of sorts because if she hadn't

stayed for it, Sloan knew she would have heard about it for the rest of her life. *No thank you*, she thought as she sent the email to her boss.

Kevin, the camp director, had been cool about it. He'd even personally shown her to her cabin the afternoon she arrived. It was a small, ten-by-twelve wooden rectangle embedded in the middle of the woods with several others just like it. It was constructed from rough pine logs, patched together with some sort of mud or cement or something, but she could still see hints of light shining between them. The roof was tin, which she supposed would bake her alive that summer, but she didn't care. It was hers, and it was private, and she could escape from her mother's prying eyes for once in her life.

The fact that she had her own bathroom was the cherry on top of the sundae. It was something she'd never experienced in her own modest two-bathroom house—her mother had declared one a “guest bath” that was basically off-limits unless you were a distant relative visiting from out of town. Which meant that the four of them—her mom, dad, brother, and Sloan—were left fighting over the other one.

Mornings during the school year were especially fun.

When the opportunity arose to spend her entire summer in the woods three hours away—in the form of a little flyer tacked up on her school's bulletin board—she had jumped at it. Sure, the camp's website was outdated and the photos looked shoddy, but Sloan didn't care.

She'd padded her résumé and cover letter with a slightly (extremely) exaggerated list of experiences that included working at the day care and summer program at the YMCA—she had attended the after-school program there until she was twelve, and that

counted for something in her opinion—and community service work. (She had to get a certain number of hours in for the National Honor Society, and if it was more “writing letters to senior citizens in retirement homes” and less “taking any kind of leadership role in the community,” well, Camp Money Springs didn’t have to know.)

The interview had taken place over Zoom, a conference call between her, Kevin, and a woman named Charla. Sloan still wasn’t sure how she was tied to the camp.

Sloan had sucked up, made sure she pasted on her best smile as she said all the right things, made them laugh, and molded and shaped her personality into exactly what she knew they were looking for, based on their reactions to anything and everything she said.

Sloan was good at reading grown-ups. She was a pro at analyzing every facial expression, every twitch up or down in the corner of a lip, the difference between a furrowed brow and a raised one. She’d brought it up to a teacher once, as if it was a special talent, and the woman’s smile had fallen. The teacher had sent Sloan to the school counselor, said so many words that Sloan didn’t understand. Sloan had to google “trauma response”—it wasn’t a part of her vernacular yet—and was relieved to read it was something that could fade. She desperately wished it would, wished that it weren’t as automatic as breathing.

Just another thing marking her as different from the other children, like the spot on her wrist or her heavily redacted birth certificate.

But the habit never left her. No matter how many years she lived with her utterly bland and even-keeled adoptive father and her overprotective, overbearing adoptive mother, it lingered. A part of

her forever. Another parting gift from her birth parents, one that couldn't be stored in the tiny box on her dresser where she kept the other mementos from that blurry, forgotten time before Allison and Brad.

As she grew, Sloan learned to again appreciate this constant cataloging of how she was being perceived and how other people were feeling. It meant she interviewed well—she conned them well—and so within minutes she was sure that she had gotten the camp counselor job.

Still, when Sloan received the offer email that listed what to bring (so much bug spray and sunblock) and when to be there (earlier than she thought, which made Connor and Rachel upset that they didn't have time to plan a better going-away party for her), her hands shook. For as much as Sloan trusted herself, adults could be unpredictable. Her mother could change her mind about letting her go. Kevin could find someone else.

Nothing was set in stone, nothing, until she was there.

The delay, even by a day for the birthday party, had felt like torture. But when Sloan set her bag down in her little pine cabin and smiled at Kevin's ruddy, sunburned face, she felt at peace, finally. She had arrived.

Sloan had no idea that when she ripped the camp flyer off her school's bulletin board, she also pushed down that first domino that would lead her straight to the most important person she would ever meet.

Cherry Barnes.

Charlene Addison Barnes, if we're being technical. Although Cherry warned Sloan once—their bodies pressed together under starlight, their lungs empty from confessing everything about

themselves and who they were outside of that perfect place soon to be overrun by children—that if she ever dared to call Cherry by her full name, she would cut Sloan’s tongue out herself. It sounded romantic at the time somehow, a secret shared in the darkest of nights. A truth kept from everyone else. It was small, tiny, minuscule even, but knowing Cherry straight down to her full legal name felt powerful. Vulnerable. No one knew Cherry like Sloan did. Probably no one ever would.

It was hot the day they met, scorching already by morning, and the sweat beaded up along Sloan’s hairline and trailed in small splashes down the bumps in her spine before getting sucked up by her moisture-wicking tank top and the elastic band of her Nike shorts. Sloan had packed carefully, deliberately. Just because she was going to be in the middle of the woods didn’t mean she couldn’t also look cute.

“The rest of the counselors are down by the water,” Kevin called. “Unpack and then get down there to help. We want to get the canoes patched and painted before the little campers get here. If there are any too far gone, drag them up to my place, and I’ll see about replacing them. We open in five days whether we’re ready or not,” he said gruffly and then headed back toward his office, the only air-conditioned place in the whole camp. The only place with real piped-in electricity instead of tiny solar panels just big enough to power a single light in each cabin.

He had barely gotten inside before Sloan heard the first notes of “Smells Like Teen Spirit” hit the speakers. It was one of her dad’s favorites, and she had been subjected to it on several long road trips, both her and her mom groaning while he relived his glory

days. Sloan turned to unpack. She hoped she wouldn't be able to hear it as well by the water.

Sloan hadn't brought much with her. There was no point. A journal, a sketch pad, a battery backup for her phone, which she was hoping she could at least keep charged enough to look at pictures of her friends when she got homesick for them, or play stupid games that didn't need Wi-Fi.

Each cabin was outfitted with an LED solar-powered lamp—which they were instructed to put outside to recharge every day before they went to work—and a sink, a stand-up shower that only ran cold, and a toilet in a bathroom about the size of a closet. She could wash her hands sitting on the toilet if she really wanted to, her knees knocking the sink and her thighs getting pinched between the seat and the shower stall.

Sloan hoped the lamp was the kind that had a little plug on it so she could charge her phone. Even if it took all the power, every day. Who needed a light bulb when she could be bathed in the glow of her iPhone at night?

Sloan set her journal, notepads, and assorted pencils on the table, shoved her mostly Nike wardrobe beneath the bed, and placed her toothbrush beside the sink, along with her tube of toothpaste and Secret aluminum-free deodorant.

She had thought about bringing her makeup but then decided to forgo it. Her mom expected the makeup, required it, honestly. So worried about appearances. But this summer was about freedom. This summer, she didn't want to deal with any of Mom's expectations.

Next, she lined up her various serums and sunblocks. Just

because she was forgoing makeup didn't mean her mom's other lessons on skincare—Mom was a dermatologist, to be fair—hadn't sunk in. Her white skin was prone to burning, and her mother loved to terrify her with pictures of what sun damage in their teens did to people later in life.

Sloan slathered on extra sunblock, changed out of her sneakers and into her Nike slides—painting didn't seem like something that required heavy footwear—and then followed the winding dirt path labeled LAKE, which disappeared between pine trees as tall as skyscrapers. The sky was overwhelmingly blue through the thick branches, and she smiled to herself despite the heat. She wasn't exactly a fan of nature, but she was a fan of being *somewhere else*, and this, she thought, was the *somewhere elsiest* of all.

Sloan stopped short at the clearing at the end of the path, or rather at the sight of Cherry grinning with Rahul and Beckett. The boys had barely introduced themselves before they started running around, spattering each other with the white paint they were supposed to be using on the boats. A little hit Sloan, cold and thick, and she laughed.

But when Sloan remembered it later, the paint wasn't white; it was red.

And it was warm.

THERE HAD BEEN ten of them altogether, tasked with opening the camp. Most of the counselors were in their early years of college or about to be. Sloan, Cherry, Rahul, and Beckett were joined by Dahlia, a white college sophomore from downstate with the longest, prettiest brown hair that Sloan had ever seen; Hannah, a



Korean American who considered not keeping up with the latest celebrity gossip a moral failing; Anise, who once boasted without a hint of irony that she could trace her ancestors back to the *Mayflower*; and Shane, a quiet Black boy with an unusual obsession with cryptids, who upon meeting Sloan had launched into a speech about the Mothman's continued relevance in American history, and had barely uttered another word after. Then there were the actual tried-and-true adults: Ronnie, the camp cook, a thirty-four-year-old Black man obsessed with perfecting his own snow cone syrup recipe, and Kevin, the middle-aged camp director, who had turned his white skin various shades of red and brown due to his aversion to sunscreen, and had a penchant for listening to Nirvana and Soundgarden on repeat all day.

Literally. All. Day.

In fact, much to Cherry's delight and Sloan's distress, he had announced that afternoon that this was the only music he would authorize to be played over the camp's speakers.

Sloan had originally mistaken him for a fake hipster trying to cash in on the grunge resurgence, until she realized with a start that he was probably actually *alive* the first go-around—he mentioned being born in the late '70s.

Jesus, she thought, that was old.

Music had been on all their minds the following night around the fire as the counselors argued the merits of cottagecore versus pop versus grunge versus punk, while slurping down Ronnie's snow cones and old Gatorade that Kevin had dug up from somewhere. Cherry, in her paisley tank top with flowers in her hair, held court among all of them. Sloan, off to the side like the rest, watched, transfixed.

A lull in the conversation led to Sloan daring to suggest that clearly pop was the superior genre. She was swiftly met with groans from everyone except Hannah, the debate quickly picking up steam again. Sloan just listened after that, lost in the conversation and reveling in the fact that she had spent a full twenty-four hours *and then some* away from home.

She was thriving, content, happy. Free.

The conversation moved on, the mood light, almost giddy, until Beckett called Cherry “environmentally irresponsible” for decrying straw bans, and Cherry called him “ableist as fuck and a good little capitalist.” Dahlia tried to break it up, but they just shouted over her.

“What about you, Sloan? What do you think?” Cherry demanded. Dahlia shifted beside her—probably trying to avoid Cherry’s ire.

Sloan shrugged. “I don’t—”

“Think Beckett knows what he’s talking about on this one? Good.” Cherry crossed her arms. “Nothing we do is going to make a difference anyway. Not with billionaires and corporations accounting for, like, allllllll this mess.”

“That’s so fatalistic,” Beckett snapped. “But what did I expect from your bleached cottagecore ass?”

Cherry laughed at that. “Bleached,” she giggled, barely able to catch her breath. “Beckett’s got insults.”

Beckett smirked, clearly pleased. Despite his annoyance, he seemed to be as enamored with Cherry as everyone else at the camp.

“Besides, none of it matters anyway,” Cherry said. She dropped

in front of Beckett and leaned back. “The earth is going to course correct, just like it did with the dinosaurs.”

He made room for her between his legs, his arms circling hers to pull her back against his chest. Sloan wondered at first if they were dating. But no. That was just Cherry. She made you feel a certain kind of way, right off the bat.

Anise flicked ice at Cherry with her very unbiodegradable straw. “Are you implying that dinosaurs polluted the oceans and stuff so much that the earth created an asteroid and then directed it at *itself*? I don’t know what’s scarier, to be honest: us destroying the world, the world being sentient enough to enact revenge, or the earth being such a piss baby that it would cut off its nose to spite its face.”

“Fine.” Cherry shrugged. “The universe, then.”

“God?” Hannah asked, tugging at the gold cross that she wore around her neck. “You mean God?” Sloan hoped that Hannah wasn’t here in some kind of missionary capacity. Save the heathens in the woods from the demonic campfire stories or whatever. But no, Sloan found out at her funeral—number six of eight that she and Cherry attended—that Hannah had actually taken the camp counselor job as part of a community service plea deal after getting caught shoplifting expensive perfume for the third time. Cute.

Cherry just waved them all off. So confident in her position that Sloan wanted to swallow it whole and make it a part of her beliefs too.

“I mean balance,” Cherry finally said. “The universe will re-balance itself, somehow. It’ll course correct. We’ll all tip into global warming and get fried up until, someday, thousands of years from

now, dinosaur babies will be digging up our bones and telling stories about what assholes *we* were.”

“Wait.” Ronnie snorted, walking up to the fire with a fresh round of snacks. “Dinosaurs are coming back?”

“And they can talk?” Hannah laughed.

“It depends. Is Beckett taking away our straws?” Cherry tilted her head to look up at him, her hand skimming his now-smiling face.

Sloan was jealous, even then, but Cherry never belonged to Beckett the way she would belong to her. And somehow, Sloan sensed that, right from the start.

But still.

Beckett’s was funeral four.

The only one Sloan didn’t cry at.

“EARTH TO SLOAN.” Cherry’s voice snapped her out of her memory and left her wincing against the sunlight reflecting off the windows of Cherry’s pickup. They were at Cherry’s new apartment, ready to unpack.

“Sorry,” Sloan said, noting the slight frown tugging at the corners of Cherry’s mouth, and no, no, Sloan couldn’t stand for that. She had already ruined last night with another stupid nightmare. She wasn’t going to ruin another day, especially not a happy day like this, when the girls would finally have enough time to finish setting up Cherry’s new room.

“Where’d you go?” Cherry teased, tracing a little circle on Sloan’s thigh with her finger. “Thinking about all the pretty girls that came before me?”

Sloan smiled; she couldn't help it. Cherry was like that, could diffuse tension with a single sentence. Could pull smiles out of Sloan like she had a magnet.

"No, just you," Sloan answered.

Cherry raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? And what exactly was I doing?" She said the last part low and flirty, and it tugged at Sloan's belly in a very welcome way.

"Meeting me," Sloan said, blush creeping to her face. "Painting boats, arguing about dinosaurs around the campfire. The usual."

This time, Cherry's frown was unmistakable. Shit.

"Hmm." Cherry hopped into the bed of her truck and grabbed some of the boxes. She pushed them to the end, hard, before hopping back down. She grabbed one and shoved it into Sloan's arms with a terse "Give me a hand?"

Before Sloan could reply, Cherry walked off with a box of her own, leading the way into the building.

Cherry didn't like talking about camp, and Sloan supposed that made sense. What was the use of reliving the eleven days they had spent together with the others—when there were others, that is? What was the use of remembering how good it *could* have been if they had gotten to spend an entire lazy summer together instead of just under two hundred and sixty-four hours (and that was only if she counted the time in the ambulance)?

Sloan shoved the memories away and followed Cherry inside.

Today would be good. Today had to be good, even if it killed them.

## FIVE

SLOAN PUSHED A tack into the wall and stepped back to admire her work. It was the last of Cherry's posters, this one advertising an all-girl grunge group called the Hissing Kitties, which Cherry had become obsessed with these last few weeks. Sloan didn't even know how her girlfriend had gotten the poster, to be honest, since from what Sloan could tell, they were just a small local bar band out in South Dakota. The wonders of the modern internet, she supposed. Which reminded her . . .

"Did you google today?" Sloan asked.

"Nah," Cherry said as she surveyed some papers sprawled out on the bed in front of her. "There hasn't been a good headline in days." She shifted the clippings around, her eyes narrowed in concentration, before she selected one and held it up. "This one?"

Sloan studied the headline written in giant block letters—EIGHT DEAD, TWO INJURED IN ATTACK AT LOCAL SUMMER CAMP—then nodded with a small smile. "That one's definitely going back up."

Seemingly satisfied with the answer, Cherry stepped over the

cardboard box separating the two girls—it was the last one to unpack, the words *funeral clothes* scribbled across the top in messy Sharpie. Cherry seemed to be avoiding it. To be fair, Sloan had donated all of her funeral clothes the moment she stepped out of the eighth service in as many days.

Cherry took a moment to give her a kiss on the nose before she reached toward the desk and snatched up the tape beside the pile of tacks. Sloan watched her carefully put up the paper beside the others. It fit perfectly, as she knew it would, a missing puzzle piece finally found. Cherry was good at this.

While Sloan had been busy hanging garage band posters and framed selfies of them from the last few months, Cherry had been busy building a fresh mosaic to replace the one that she'd had to tear down when she moved a few days ago. Just layer upon layer of newsprint and computer paper, headline after headline and article after article of what they had been through—no, what they had *survived*—together.

It started in the upper right-hand corner of Cherry's bedroom wall and spiderwebbed out, like it would swallow the rest of the room whole if given half the chance. Like it would swallow *them* if they let it.

It was smaller than it had been at the old place. Many of the clippings hadn't survived the move and would have to be reprinted, but Cherry had worked hard to protect her favorites, laminating them with packing tape that caught the sunlight in weird ways, making them look shiny and preserved—frozen even, the way Sloan and Cherry were frozen every night in Sloan's dreams, tangled up in her memories.

Like bugs pinned to a mat for inspection.

Cherry dropped back onto her bed and studied the rest of the clippings lying around her. “These are all boring.” She frowned.

Sloan crawled up behind her. Cherry was taller by several inches, which Sloan loved, but it was all legs. When they were sitting like this—Sloan’s hands tucked through Cherry’s arms, her legs wrapped around Cherry’s torso—it felt like they were the same.

“We could try Reddit again,” Sloan said.

“No one’s desperate enough for that yet.” Cherry huffed out a quiet laugh. “Besides, don’t you still have it blocked?”

“True.” Sloan untangled herself and leaned over to see what was left. With a smirk, she held up a newspaper clipping. “What’s wrong with this one?”

Cherry gave her an exaggerated pout. “They call me Charlene.”

“You are Charlene.”

“Only very technically,” she said. “It makes me want to take a machete to my own eyeballs every time I see it in print. Maybe Dahlia had the right idea all along.”

“I doubt very much that taking a blade to the face was Dahlia’s idea at all,” Sloan said with a snort, thinking a little too hard about the girl who had stayed only three cabins down from her. She had been the first to die, according to the investigators.

It was a bad joke, a cruel joke. Dahlia was kind and gentle and didn’t deserve the ending she got. Hers was funeral seven, and for that one Sloan had cried a lot.

But whenever it got too hard, too overwhelmingly sad, Sloan just drifted back to the *60 Minutes* interview.

Both of Dahlia’s parents came from old money, which meant she came from old money too. Her parents had both wept through



their interview, her mother wailing that Dahlia wasn't supposed to be there. That she didn't *need* to be there. They said it so many times.

She didn't need to be there. She had plans for her life.

As if the tragedy of death increases with the economic privilege of the victim. *What a waste*, their faces seemed to be saying. She could have been home playing polo or whatever else it was that rich kids did during the summer, instead of reliving *Friday the 13th* in real time with a bunch of poors.

Dahlia should have been the one to live, not those other girls. Sloan had seen it in their eyes. Had paused the TV and rewound twice to make sure she wasn't wrong.

She wasn't. They were sad about their daughter, sure, but more than that, they were bitter. Jealous. Positive that their daughter had deserved to live most of—

"Well, still," Cherry said and tossed the printout into the trash. "There are worse things than a blade to the head. Like being named after your great-aunt who nobody in your family even talks to."

"Yeah, true devastation," Sloan deadpanned with a little smile.

She liked that they could laugh about it. She thought it was healthy.

Her previous therapist had been very anti-dark humor. She said it wasn't appropriate to snark about other counselors getting stabbed or make jokes about Jason Voorhees all the time. She said it was an "unhealthy" coping mechanism. That it was deflection.

That was when Sloan stopped talking to shrinks. Well, most of them.

She frequently met with Beth at her mother's insistence. It was one of the only times the girls were separated, and Sloan hated it.

But Beth wasn't *really* a shrink. She just wanted to hypnotize Sloan and talk about energies, not save her, not tell her how to feel. Beth wanted to get the door in Sloan's mind open and let her walk through it, and Sloan . . . well, as much as she pretended otherwise, she'd be lying if she said she wasn't at least a little curious to see what was on the other side. So much of that night was a blur, a haze of fear and blood and hiding, and sometimes she wanted the details back.

Cherry grabbed her laptop off the desk and did a quick search for "Money Springs Massacre." Nothing new. The news cycle had died down over the last few months, especially since the people responsible had been captured. Well, one of them anyway: The Fox, who haunted her dreams every night. The rest of them—The Stag, The Bear, and a few others she hadn't gotten a good look at—had seen fit to off themselves right as the raid had started. Cyanide pills, the whole lot of them.

But it was okay.

Sloan picked up her phone and joined in on the fun. What had started as a compulsion—at one point she had checked for headlines every hour—had eventually dulled into a quieter sort of tradition. They even had their search terms down, neatly divided to efficiently share the work.

Cherry would search "Money Springs Massacre." Sloan would search "Money Springs Sleepaway." Cherry would search "upstate machete murder." Sloan would search "sleepaway killers." If she was in a particularly good mood, Sloan might also search "Charlene Addison Barnes," printing out the photos of Cherry walking out of the hospital with her full name listed in the captions. Those were her favorite.

The newspapers hadn't identified the girls at first; victims are given protection from the media sometimes if they're pretty enough and white enough. But Cherry's mom had done a press conference. Well, sort of. More like staged a paparazzi event for when Cherry was being discharged. Cherry's mother had wanted her day. She said it was to show Cherry's strength, but Sloan suspected it had something to do with her newest performance-art installation—whatever that was—and plugging her OnlyFans, although most of the news stations had bleeped that out.

Sloan remembered her own mother staring out the second-floor window as the crowd gathered around the little run-down hospital, if you could call it that—it was more of an urgent care one town over from where the attack had taken place that allowed overnights. The nearest real hospital was over three hours away, and neither girl was injured enough to warrant a transfer.

Cherry had only been kept overnight, but Sloan had stayed longer on account of her injuries—a moderate concussion and a deep gash in her arm that required sixteen stitches and an IV antibiotic. Sloan wished she could remember how she got them.

She remembered going to open the door, and she *thought* she remembered Cherry taking her hand, but then she didn't remember anything at all until she woke up beneath the canoe with her arm bleeding and a splitting headache blurring her vision. Cherry's hands had been over Sloan's mouth to keep her from screaming. There had been blood, so much blood, but most of it wasn't theirs. And then there had been lights flashing, red and blue.

Cherry had smiled and kissed her.

If Sloan could just remember what happened in the space between—

“Nothing new on my end. You?” Cherry’s words slipped through Sloan’s brain, jarring her back to the present.

“Just this incredible picture.” Sloan smiled and turned her phone toward Cherry. She had done an image search, which had led her down an internet hole, and found some random person had photo-shopped Cherry’s hospital exit to make it look like she was running from Jason Voorhees instead of running from the paparazzi.

“Cute.” Cherry smirked. “Print it.”

Sloan hit a few buttons on her phone and waited to hear the soft whirring sound of the printer coming to life before she hopped up and grabbed the scissors. The whole setup—Cherry’s laptop, the printer—it all came from a “violence victim fund,” which was supposed to go toward paying off any medical bills that Cherry had, but she and her mother, Magda, had siphoned some off the top.

They told their victims’ advocate that Cherry needed them both for virtual college, that Cherry was so anxious she couldn’t go to class on campus and had to go online. The organization was even covering the internet bill.

Except Cherry wasn’t taking online classes. She wasn’t even registered for college *before* everything went down, and she wasn’t about to start now. But they had wanted a MacBook. *The universe owes us a MacBook* were Magda’s exact words, and maybe it did. A laptop seemed like a fair enough consolation prize for narrowly escaping maniacs with machetes and axes.

Magda always boasted, “You don’t survive in this world as an artist without a little grift now and then.”

If this grift happened to come in the form of a laptop and a printer that Cherry could use to print articles and Magda could use

to post the YouTube clips and OnlyFans videos that paid the rent, well, what was the real harm in that?

Besides, it wasn't like it was their first grift.

Cherry and her mother had been on their own for a long time, and they were no strangers to relying on the kindness of others to get what they needed. If that meant the occasional fake GoFundMe—the one for their imaginary dog's dental surgery had even gone viral—or skimming off the top of the latest PTA fundraiser at the high school, then so be it.

"You're just resilient," Sloan had told Cherry that third night at camp as they lay down by the fire. Cherry had whispered stories of her childhood to her, shame keeping her voice low and sad. Until Sloan had smiled softly and said, "You're not scammers; you're resilient."

The light that broke across Cherry's face then was brighter than any fire could be, and Sloan had promised she would do whatever she could to keep it there. She was keeping that promise, wasn't she? Even now, sitting beside Cherry, trimming headlines, in the quietest part of the after.

"Oh, holy shit," Cherry yelled, and Sloan nearly cut off Jason's head when her hand slipped in surprise. That would have been a travesty.

"What?"

"They just released The Fox's picture. Look!" Cherry spun the computer toward Sloan, and a red breaking-news banner was now splashed across the CNN website. Minutes ago, it had just been the latest presidential scandal, but apparently a bunch of people in masks attacking teenagers took priority. Sloan swallowed hard and stepped forward.

For all her bravado, she wasn't sure if she was ready to see the man behind the crude animal mask. The mask let her keep things separate, like a hypothetical, like a bad horror movie she had watched once and hoped to never see again. It was just Charlene Addison Barnes running from Jason in the movie of their lives.

The man behind the mask wasn't a real human doing horrible things to sweet boys and funny girls and an adorable line cook, who Sloan now realized had tried very hard to look and act like Lafayette Reynolds from *True Blood*. (A show that Sloan was only aware of because her mother had an embarrassing crush on Alexander Skarsgård and had insisted they watch it together during forced family bonding last month.)

Sloan crept closer as Cherry clicked through, and before she could even ask her to wait, there he was.

The Fox.

Or at least, the man beneath The Fox. The lone surviving member of the group.

His cyanide capsule had been a dud, and now here was his face, staring blankly out from the screen in one of his many mug shots.

*Edward Cunningham*, the caption read.

"Girls?" Magda said, startling them both so much that they almost dropped the computer. Cherry recovered quickly and clicked it shut before turning toward her mother with a smile.

Googling for headlines, making mosaics, these were strictly *no mothers allowed*. No anyone allowed. Just them.

"Can you give me a hand? Some of those boxes you brought up to my room earlier are gonna have to go in the closet downstairs. This shithole's got smaller rooms than our last place."

"Sure, Mom," Cherry said and instantly hopped up. For all her

bravery and bluster, she was fully wrapped around her mother's finger.

STEPPING INTO MAGDA'S room felt like stepping into another world, one full of lush blankets and brightly colored scarves and veils. Cherry's mom was, to put it politely, eccentric. She called herself a mixed-media performance artist, although she spent most of her time lying around complaining bitterly about her muse, rather than really working. She was popular among a subset of patrons who liked to watch her punch paint onto a giant canvas by way of a paint-covered speed bag. In a bikini. She called it "the violence of beauty." Cherry called it embarrassing, but Sloan was mesmerized. Obsessed. She had never seen anything like it.

And if Magda occasionally lost the bikini for her OnlyFans subscribers, who could say.

"Those over there," Magda said before she dropped onto her bed dramatically and pulled a heavy silken scarf over her eyes. "I need to rest."

Cherry looked at her mother worriedly and then scooped up the first box. Sloan quickly followed suit. "She's not sleeping well," Cherry said as they carried the boxes down the stairs.

"Isn't that normal for her?"

"It's getting worse. Since everything."

"I don't think any of us have been sleeping well since then, to be fair," Sloan said, trying to lighten the mood. She hated when Cherry worried. Wanted to kiss away the divot between Cherry's eyebrows and make her feel safe, the way Cherry did for her.

"I guess." Cherry shrugged. "Did I tell you she wants to include

an homage to it in her next performance? I swear to god, if she even tries to get me to join her . . . Like, not everything is about her and her art, you know?”

Ah yes, Sloan had accurately predicted something for once. She had hoped Magda wouldn't try to capitalize on the tragedy they had lived through, were still living through. But . . . this was Magda.

“At least she's not pretending it didn't happen?” Sloan said, desperate to find a bright side. “My mom refuses to acknowledge it at all, unless it's to ground me or send me to therapy. Otherwise, we can't even talk about it.”

Cherry kicked open the closet door and dropped her box inside before reaching for the one in Sloan's arms. “Grass is always greener.” She snorted. “But I bet you'd feel different if it was your mom chanting poems about the worst night of your life in nothing but body paint.”

“Touché.” Sloan laughed. “I'll tell you what—I'll go grab that last box upstairs. Why don't you make us some tea, and we'll go for a ride? I think you just need a break.”

Cherry smiled. “Deal. Just toss it on top of these. I'll get the travel mugs ready.”

If being in Magda's room with Cherry was weird, being in it without her felt downright invasive. Magda lay as still as the dead with the long silk scarf wrapped three times around her head, her lips pursed lightly. Sloan had intended to pick up the box and go, truly she had. It wasn't her fault that her foot snagged on one of the many delicate nightgowns Magda had draped over everything, which made the lid on the box slip ajar.

Magda sighed and rolled over on the bed. Guilt careened down Sloan's spine for disturbing her, and she quickly rushed out of the



room and into the hall. That would have been that, honestly . . . it should have been. It was just that there was a *rabbit* in the box.

Not a real one, although that might have been less weird, to be honest, but a crude carving made of wood. Pine maybe?

Sloan set the box on the hall table and pushed the lid all the way off, coming face-to-face with its little rabbit head. A shudder ran lightly through her as she took in its details. Its dead, wooden eyes stared up at her, and Sloan squeezed her own eyes shut.

*Relax, she thought. You're safe. You're fine. The men aren't here. This isn't theirs. This isn't The Fox's. They can't lay claim to every piece of wood transformed, even if it does look a little like—*

No, she wasn't willing to go there.

But she did want to see what else was in this box.

Sloan carefully lifted the rabbit sculpture out and found it was sitting on a pile of photographs—old Polaroids, some of their edges turning yellow, causing a fading effect that Insta only wishes it could replicate.

Most of them were of Magda looking barely older than Sloan and Cherry were now. She was pregnant in some of the photos, holding a baby Sloan assumed was Cherry in the others. Sloan reached into the box and pulled out two pictures that were stuck together. The top one was of a robust toddler running across a yard with the very same carved rabbit sculpture in her hand. Was that baby Cherry? Suddenly the rabbit didn't seem so scary.

Sloan pulled the pictures apart and winced as some of the paper backing tore, leaving little scraps of white on the one beneath. The photo was of two men, their arms slung around each other, smiling. There was something familiar about them—even if the torn paper covered half of each of their faces—something that tugged at her.

That sensation when you know that you know, but you can't quite place them. No context, just vibes.

"What are you doing?" Cherry asked, coming up the steps with two mugs.

Sloan dropped the photos back into the box and reached for the rabbit. "Uh, nothing."

"Stop going through her things!" Cherry rushed toward Sloan, practically throwing the mugs on the table as she yanked the rabbit out of Sloan's hands and shoved it back in the box, hard.

"The lid fell off," Sloan said when she finally found her voice again.

"And you took that as an invitation to go through her shit?" Cherry asked and slammed the lid back on the box. "What the fuck?"

"I wasn't going through her stuff," Sloan said, her stomach in her throat. Cherry's defensiveness caught her off guard. It was hard and cold, and Sloan had never been on the receiving end of it. This kind of attitude was typically reserved only for Allison.

Cherry stared at her for a beat and then scooped up the box herself and walked away. "Whatever."

Sloan rushed to follow her—she couldn't leave it like this—their nice tea forgotten on the table, their good day out the window. "Okay, I'm sorry. Genuinely. You're right. I was going through her stuff, I guess, but the lid fell off when I tripped, and there was a rabbit staring at me. I was just . . . surprised."

Cherry gave her an unimpressed look and then trudged down the steps.

"What's the big deal?" Sloan asked, hating every second of this.

"The big deal is that it's not yours to look through."

“I—”

“You could have—you could have broken it!” Cherry cut her off. She set the box on top of the others in the closet and then gently slid them all back against the wall. “That wasn’t for you to touch. It wasn’t *for* you.”

“Whoa, whoa.” Sloan held up her hands. Cherry had never pushed her away like this before. She didn’t like it. It made her feel sweaty-sick from the tips of her hair down to her toes. “I wasn’t trying to hurt anything. I was just looking. I’m sorry.”

Cherry shut the closet door, sighing, as if she had locked up something precious. She set her forehead against the cold wood, her back stiff and hard as she took one deep breath, and then another.

“Cherry?” Sloan stepped forward and rested her hand on her shoulder. “Cherry, what’s wrong?”

“I shouldn’t have snapped at you,” Cherry said, still not moving after thirteen long seconds—each one counted painfully inside Sloan’s head.

She was shaking then, not just a little tremble or a shiver. Sloan could feel it easily through the fabric of Cherry’s flannel shirt, and pinched her eyebrows in confusion. Cherry was the strong one. Cherry was *always* the strong one. What in the world was going on? And how could she make it stop?

“It’s okay,” Sloan lied, as if her very soul hadn’t flinched from Cherry’s raised voice. As if the idea of Cherry having things that she didn’t want Sloan to see, things that were *not for her*, didn’t make her ache down to her core. Didn’t make her want to slip off into a puddle of red, sticky things.

Cherry lifted her head and shrugged off Sloan with an almost

convincing smile as she turned. "It was just weird to see that stuff. Sorry." She leaned down and gave her girlfriend a kiss on the cheek. "I shouldn't have yelled," she added, and let her lips drift lower to Sloan's neck.

Sloan couldn't help but feel like Cherry was trying to distract her. That she was going to brush her off. At first, she let her, ecstatic that their fight was over as Cherry's hands pulled her close and danced along her hips.

But Sloan felt a tiny niggling in her chest that something was very, very off about all of this.

Cherry's lips be damned, just this once.

"What was it?" Sloan asked. "The box, I mean?"

"Nothing. Just old stuff. Brought back memories."

Sloan narrowed her eyes. "What happened to *no secrets, no lies*?" she asked. That had become their mantra. They'd sworn that if one found out something, she would share it with the other. No secrets, no lies. They were, as far as the world was concerned, as far as any future trial was concerned, one single entity. "Two halves of a whole," Cherry had said, and Sloan had liked that very much.

Cherry sighed and looked at Sloan like she had just been punched in the stomach. "Fine. No secrets, no lies. It was my dad's, alright? Now do you get why I didn't want you going through it?"

Her dad's.

Right, that made sense. Cherry's father was the one subject that the girls never spoke of. Because while Sloan's biological father was essentially a question mark, and her adoptive father not much better these days, Cherry's father had been a looming presence before he passed.

A larger-than-life character who loved big and fierce. Who loved Cherry most of all.

Who had been dead since his daughter was fourteen, which Cherry had shared between aching breaths, forcing herself not to cry because tears were a sign of weakness. And Daddy didn't allow for weakness. Daddy had raised Cherry to be strong, to be brave, to even out her mother's bad ideas and keep the ship steered straight.

It was probably Cherry's father the girls had to thank for their surviving that night.

After all, if she hadn't been taught to stay calm, conditioned to be brave and clearheaded—logical and critical, unemotional and rigid—Cherry probably would have fallen apart just like Sloan had.

"He used to . . ." Cherry trailed off, taking another deep breath and then lifting her chin, almost as if she could shake off her human emotions entirely. "He used to make these little carvings for Mom and me. He said it relaxed him."

Sloan studied Cherry's face, wanting to believe that was all it was. Still, the idea wriggled in her brain, like an unwanted parasite, that there was more to the story. No lies, but maybe secrets? But Cherry's closed-off face meant that this was going to be the end of it. At least for now.

"Let's get that tea and head out," Sloan said and smiled wide enough for the both of them, even though she didn't feel it.

She would choose to believe this. To quiet the rude theories in her head about the girl standing in front of her. She would choose to believe that the men in the photograph only looked familiar because they bore some resemblance to Cherry. That Sloan's eyes simply reacted to their shared DNA with her soulmate.

That the rabbit carving looked nothing like the fox mask she had seen that night.

“Let’s,” Cherry agreed and reached for Sloan.

A warm, easy feeling spread through Sloan the moment they touched, shoving the thought that something was very wrong down deep in her bones, where they could never find it.