

*The Ones Who
Got Away*

RONI LOREN

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chapter ONE

NOTHING CAN SAVE YOU. OLIVIA ARIAS RUBBED GOOSE BUMPS from her arms as she read the words scrawled on the sign taped under a maniacal-looking wasp painted on the wall of the gym. *NOTHING CAN SAVE YOU FROM THE STING!* More hand-drawn posters hung crookedly around the ridiculous mascot, bubbly cheerleader handwriting declaring that the Millbourne Yellowjackets were going to take down the Creekside Tigers. Some smart-ass had drawn a tiger with a swollen face and an EpiPen with an X through it.

Nothing can save you. The level of artistic skill on the cartoon should've made Liv smile. Back when she was in high school, she wouldn't have been the one making school spirit signs, but she would've appreciated the art and the sarcasm. Today, she couldn't find enthusiasm for either. Because it all felt off. The new name for the school. The weird, too-smiley mascot. Her, being there.

This wasn't the gym where it had happened. That building had been knocked down within months of the

tragedy. Spilled blood covered with dirt. A memorial courtyard was in its place now on the other side of the school. She'd taken the long way around and had avoided walking past it on her way in, afraid it would trigger all the stuff she'd fought so hard to lock down. Even after twelve years, she couldn't bear to look at a list of names that should've been in a graduation program instead of etched onto a memorial. People she'd sat next to in class. People she'd been friends with. People she'd thought she hated until they were gone and she'd realized how silly and superficial high-school hate was. Now they were just names on stone, memories painted on the walls of her brain, holes in people's hearts.

"You said you weren't in the gym when the first gunman came in."

The interviewer's calm voice jarred Liv from her thoughts, and she blinked in the bright camera-ready lights. They'd been talking about the tragedy as a whole, but hadn't gotten into the details of the night yet. "What?"

Daniel Morrow, the filmmaker putting the documentary together, gave her an encouraging nod, making his too-stylish hair flop across his forehead. "You weren't in the gym..."

Liv swallowed past the rubber-band tightness in her throat. Maybe she'd overestimated her ability to handle this. She'd agreed to it because the proceeds were going both to the families of the victims and to research that could help prevent things like this from happening. How could she say no to that and not look heartless? But in that moment, she wished she'd declined. Old fear was creeping up the back of her neck, invading like a

thousand spiders, the sounds and memories from that night threatening to overtake her. She closed her eyes for a second and focused on her breathing.

She wasn't that scared girl anymore. She *would not* be.

"Do you need to take a break, Ms. Arias?" Daniel asked, his voice echoing in the dark, empty gym.

She shook her head, the lights feeling too hot on her skin. No breaks. She needed to get this over with. If she took a break, she wouldn't come back. She opened her eyes and straightened her spine, rallying her reserve of calm, that place where she went and pretended she was talking about things that had happened to someone else, to people she didn't know, at a school she'd never heard of. "No, I wasn't in the gym. I'd gone into the hallway to get some air."

Not entirely true. She'd left the prom to sneak into a janitor's closet with Finn Dorsey. But she and Finn had never told that part of the story because he'd been there with a "proper" date, and he would've never wanted his parents or anyone else to know he was sneaking off with someone like Olivia Arias. She'd first dragged him into the closet to fight with him, to let him know how she felt about being passed over for his student-council-president date. But fighting had only stoked the fire that had burned between them back then. Young, misguided, completely inconvenient lust. They'd been rounding second base when they'd heard the first shots fired.

"What happened when you were in the hallway?"

Liv didn't want to picture it again. She'd wrestled with flashbacks for so long that it felt like inviting the devil in for another stay. Her only reprieve since that

awful year had been one hundred percent avoidance, cutting herself off from everything and everyone from back then. Letting the scene run through her mind could be too much. But there was no helping it. The images came anyway.

“When I heard the shots and screaming, I hid in the janitor’s closet.” She and Finn had thought it was some kind of prom prank until they’d heard Finn’s date, Rebecca, shout the word *gun*.

Gun.

A tiny, three-letter word that had knocked their world off its axis and punted it into a different dimension forever.

“So you never saw the shooters?”

Liv gripped her elbows, trying to keep the inner chill from becoming visible shivering, and ignored the pine scent of the janitor’s disinfectant that burned her nose as if she were right there again. She still couldn’t buy a real Christmas tree because of that smell. “I didn’t see anyone until Joseph opened the door.”

Because Finn had left her. The second he’d heard Rebecca scream, he’d bailed on Liv. He’d said something to her, but she could never recall what. All she remembered was him leaving. And in his rush to save his real date, he’d inadvertently alerted Joseph to Liv’s presence.

“He pointed the gun at me and yelled at me to stand up.” Her voice caught on the last bit, snagging on the sharp memory, bringing back that all-encompassing fear that she was in her last minutes. She’d learned to mostly manage the panic attacks that had plagued her after that night, but that moment was always the image that haunted her most—when she saw the barrel of that

gun pointing at her, the scared but determined eyes of her former lab partner drilling into her like cold steel.

“But Joseph didn’t pull the trigger?”

Liv looked down at her hands, turning her mother’s wedding band round and round. “No. He knew who I was. I... wasn’t on his list.”

“Meaning?”

There was no way Daniel didn’t know what that meant. The media had latched on to the killers’ manifesto like ants on honey. Joseph and Trevor had chosen prom night for a very particular reason. Not to take out the popular people or people who’d wronged them. They wanted to take out the *happy* ones. *If you can be happy in a fucked-up world like this, then you’re blind and too stupid to live.* That’d been the motto of their mission.

Liv hadn’t been deemed a *happy one* and had been spared. But she wasn’t going to say it and open herself up to the question of *why* she hadn’t been happy. There’d been enough speculation in the press back when it’d happened. What was *broken* with all those lucky survivors? Were they the mean kids? The depressed kids? The damaged kids? *Friends* of the killers? “Joseph and I had worked together on a project in chemistry. We weren’t friends, but I’d been nice to him.”

And he’d been nice to her. But she’d also seen part of him that would haunt her later. When she’d worried that their project wouldn’t be up to par, he’d assured her that the rest of the class was filled with idiots, jocks, and assholes, so they’d look like geniuses in comparison. He’d smirked at her and said, *I mean, seriously, someone should just put them out of their misery. Save us the trouble of having to deal with them.*

Back then, she'd already been a subscriber to the church of sarcasm and had no love lost for many of her classmates, so she'd taken his comment as such and agreed with him. Now the memory of that conversation made her sick. She'd reassured a killer that he was right. Given him more fuel for his bonfire.

"He cursed at me, told me to stay put, and wedged a chair against the outside of the door." She rubbed her lips together. "After that, I heard more shots."

"Presumably when he and Trevor shot at"—Daniel checked his notes—"Finn Dorsey and Rebecca Lindt."

Liv reached for her water and took a slow sip, trying not to hear the sounds of that night in her head. The gun going off in that steady, unrelenting way. The cries for help. A Mariah Carey song still playing in the gym. Her own rapid breath as she huddled in that closet and did—nothing. Frozen. For five hours. Only the chair against the door had alerted the SWAT team someone was in there after everything was over. "Yes. I didn't see any of it, but I know Finn was shot protecting Rebecca. You'd have to ask Rebecca about that part."

"I did ask her. I plan to ask Finn, too."

Liv's head snapped upward at that, the words yanking her out of the memories like a stage hook. "What?"

"Mr. Dorsey is my next interview."

She stared at Daniel, not sure if she'd heard the words right. "Finn's *here*?"

She barely resisted saying, *He exists?* The guy had become a ghost after the awful months following the shooting. He'd gotten a ton of press for being a hero, and the media had played up the story to the *n*th degree. The star athlete and son of a local business owner taking

a bullet for his date. But within a year, his family had rented out their house and moved out of town, running from the spotlight like everyone else. No one wanted to be that brand of famous.

Liv hadn't heard anything about him since, and he never gave interviews. She'd decided that he had probably moved to some remote tropical island and changed his name. She would've skipped town back then, too—if she'd had the funds to do it.

“Yes,” Daniel said, tipping his head toward the spot over her left shoulder. “He got here a few minutes ago. He's declined to be on camera, but he's agreed to an interview.”

With that, she couldn't help but turn and follow the interviewer's gaze. Leaning against the wall in the shadows of the darkened gym was a man with dark hair, a black T-shirt, and jeans. He looked up from the phone in his hand, as if hearing his name, and peered in their direction. He was too far away for her to read his expression or see the details of his face, but a jolt of bone-deep recognition went through her. “Oh.”

“Hey, we should invite him to join you for this part since you were both close to the same place at the same time. We'll get a more accurate timeline that way.”

“What? I mean, no, that's not—”

“Jim, can you turn off the camera? I think this will be important. Mr. Dorsey,” Daniel called out, “would you mind if I asked you a few questions now? The camera's off.”

The cameraman went about shutting things down, and Finn pushed away from the wall.

Liv's heart leapt into her throat and tried to escape. She'd avoided Finn after everything had happened, not

just from hurt, but because seeing his face, even on television, would trigger the flashbacks. But she wasn't that girl anymore. Seeing Finn after all these years shouldn't concern her. Still, she had the distinct urge to make tracks to the back door. She slid out of the director's chair she'd been sitting in. "I think I've probably given you everything I have to add. I wasn't in the gym, and my story is really just me cowering in the closet. Not that interesting—"

Her words cut off, her voice dying a quick death, as Finn got closer and some of the studio lights caught him in their glare. The man approaching was nothing like the boy she'd known. The bulky football muscles had streamlined into a harder, leaner package. The smooth face was now dusted with scruff, and the look in his deep-green eyes held no trace of boyish innocence. A thousand things were in those eyes. A thousand things welled up in Liv.

Finn Dorsey had become a man. And a stranger. The only familiar thing was the sharp, undeniable kick of awareness she'd always had anytime the guy was around. Time had only made the effect more potent. Without thinking, her gaze drifted to his hands. Big, capable hands that had once held her. When she'd known him, he'd always worn his football championship ring from junior year. The cool metal used to press against the back of her neck when he kissed her. Now he wore no rings at all. She took a breath, trying to reel in that old, automatic response to him, and smoothed her hands down the sides of her now-wrinkled pencil skirt.

Daniel held out his hand. "Mr. Dorsey, so glad you could make it."

Finn returned the offered handshake and gave a brief nod. “Not a problem.”

Then, his gaze slid to Liv. His brow wrinkled for a second, but she could tell the moment he realized who she was. Something flickered over his face. A very distinct look. Like she caused him pain. Like she was a bad memory.

Because she was. That was all they were to each other at this point.

“Liv.”

She pushed words past her constricted throat. “Hi, Finn.”

He stepped closer, his gaze tracing over her face as if searching for something. Or maybe just cataloging all the differences time had given her. Gone were the heavy kohl eyeliner, the nose piercing, and the purple-streaked hair. She’d gone back to her natural black hair color after college, and though she still liked to think she had a quirky style, she’d chosen a simple gray suit for today’s interview. Something teen Liv would’ve made snoring sounds over.

“It’s good to see you,” Finn said, his voice deeper and more rumbly than she remembered. “You look...”

“Like I’ve been through a two-hour interview, I’m sure.” She forced a tight smile. “I’ll get out of your way so that you and Daniel can chat. I’m sure you’ll be able to offer a lot more detailed information than I can. I was just the girl in the closet.”

Finn frowned. “Liv—”

“I was hoping I could talk to you both,” Daniel interrupted. “May provide extra insight.”

Liv’s heart was beating too fast now. Part of her

wanted to yell at Finn, to demand why, to spew out all those questions she'd never asked, all those feelings she'd packed away in that dark vault labeled Senior Year. But the other part of her knew there was no good answer. In the end, all three of them had survived. Maybe if he hadn't left the closet, Rebecca wouldn't have made it. Then Liv would have that on her conscience.

She turned to Daniel and plastered on an apologetic look. "I'm sorry. This has wiped me out. I'd rather wrap things up here. I really don't have more to add."

"What if we took a break and then—"

"She said she's tired," Finn said, cool authority in his voice.

"It would only be a few more questions. The viewers would—"

Finn lifted a hand. "Look. I know you're doing this for a good cause, but you have to remember what this does to all of us. To the outside world, this was a tragedy. Something people discuss over dinner, shake their heads at, or get political about. To us, this was our life, our school, our friends. Asking us to come back here, to talk about all these things again...it requires more than anyone realizes. It rips open things that we try to keep stitched up. So let her go. She doesn't owe anyone more of her story than she wants to give." Finn's gaze caught hers. "She doesn't owe anyone anything."

Liv's chest squeezed tight, and Daniel turned her way, apology in his eyes. "I'm sorry. You're right. Ms. Arias, if you need to go, please do. I appreciate all the time you've given me."

He held out his hand for her to shake, and she took it. "It's fine. Knowing that the proceeds are going to the

families helps. I know you'll do a good job with it. I just don't have any more to add."

She released Daniel's hand and turned to Finn, giving him a little nod of thanks. "I'll get out of here so y'all can get started. It was good to see you, Finn."

Finn's focused attention held hers, for a moment kicking up old memories that had nothing to do with gunmen or violence or the way it all ended. Instead, her head filled with snapshots of stolen minutes and frantic kisses in the library stacks and his big, full laughter when she'd tell him her weird jokes. Before Finn had abandoned her that night, he'd saved her each day of that semester, had given her something to look forward to, something to smile about when things were so awful at home. He'd made her hope.

But even before the shooting, she should've known there was no future for the two of them. The signs had been there the whole time. She'd just been too dazzled to see them.

"It's been too long," he said quietly. "We should have a drink and catch up. Are you staying in town?"

She was. But she didn't feel prepared for that conversation. She didn't feel prepared for *him*. All those years after he'd disappeared, she'd had a thousand questions for him, but now she couldn't bring herself to ask one. This interview, the twelve-year anniversary, and seeing him had left her feeling too raw, exposed. And what difference would his answers make, anyway? The past couldn't be changed.

She wanted to lie and tell him she was heading out tonight. But she was staying at the Bear Creek Inn, the only decent hotel in their little Texas town, which meant

that was probably where he was staying, too. If she lied, she'd run into him because that was how the universe worked. "I'm meeting up with some friends for dinner. I'm not sure I'll have time."

He watched her for a moment, his eyes searching, but then nodded. "I'm in Room 348 at the Bear. Call my room if you change your mind, and I can meet you at the bar."

She forced a polite smile. "Will do."

"Great." But she could tell by the look on his face that he didn't believe her.

This was all just a formality, and maybe his offer for a drink was the same. No matter what had happened between them before the night of the dance, all they were to each other now were bad memories and even worse decisions.

She told both men goodbye and turned to head to the door, forcing herself not to look back. This place, this story, were her past. *Finn Dorsey* was her past. She didn't need anything or anyone reminding her of that time in her life, of how fragile she'd been. She'd worked too hard to lock all that stuff in a fail-safe box so that she could finally move forward. She couldn't linger here.

She picked up her pace. Her high heels clicked on the gym floor at a rapid clip.

But instead of hearing her footfalls, all she heard were gunshots. *Click, click, click. Bang, bang, bang.*

Anxiety rippled over her nerve endings, and she tried to breathe through the astringent pine scent that haunted her. *No.* Screams sounded in her ears.

She walked so quickly that she might as well have been running. Finn might have called out her name.

But she couldn't be sure, and she didn't turn back.

The faster she could get away from this place and the memories, the better.

She was not that girl anymore.

She would never go back.

chapter

TWO

FINN NEEDED A STIFF DRINK, A WARM BED, AND A LONG-ASS vacation. He gratefully accepted the first from the waitress at the hotel's only restaurant and ordered another before she could leave.

“You want to add a little food to that, hon? We’ve got a great chicken-fried steak tonight with homemade white gravy and mashed potatoes. That’ll make any night better.”

Finn fought back a grimace. Nothing could improve this night except a pass-out-in-bed kind of drunk. But Janice, who’d been working there since he was a kid, looked way too eager for him to crush her with a snide comment. This was why he’d moved away from here. The whole town always wanted to *do* something for the Long Acre High survivors. But there was nothing anyone *could* do.

Even he had found himself trying to do something today when he’d seen Olivia Arias. Beautiful, quirky Liv all grown up. Seeing her had hit him like a hundred

fists to the gut. Had jolted him back to a time when what he'd looked forward to most each day was sneaking away with Liv to steal a few kisses and share a few sparring words. A bittersweet ache like he hadn't felt in longer than he could remember had tightened his chest and stolen his breath.

He'd wanted to reach for her. He'd wanted to fix things. Apologize. *Do* something to take that haunted look out of her eyes. *Do* something to show her how goddamned sorry he was for how spectacularly he'd let her down. But he'd seen it in her face. There was nothing to be done. The past was locked in stone. He knew that better than anyone. The scars were deep and permanent, and he'd left an extra vicious one on Liv.

Now this lovely woman was trying to fix it with deep-fried beef. He found his voice, the words like gravel in his throat. "Sounds great."

Her smile brightened. "You betcha. I'll get one going for you right now and bring by that second drink."

Finn laced his fingers around his glass of Maker's Mark, staring into the liquid, watching the amber light play along the ice cubes. He should've gone straight to the lake house. The interviewer had asked all of them to stay in town an extra night in case he needed more information or more footage, but Finn felt exposed here and out of place. He wasn't the kid who'd left Long Acre. And after years of undercover work, he wasn't sure he knew who the man he'd become was either. Two weeks ago, he'd killed a guy and almost gotten killed himself. Tonight, he was supposed to be the hometown hero who'd shielded his date. The shift was enough to give him whiplash.

Even his name felt like an ill-fitting shirt. He found himself forgetting to answer to it. For almost two years, he hadn't been Finn Dorsey, former high school running back and school shooting survivor, he'd been Axel Graham—employee of Dragonfly Industries, a company that owned strip clubs officially, but trafficked drugs and guns by the shit ton while the pretty ladies danced.

He'd done what the FBI had needed him to do, even though he hadn't found what *he'd* ultimately been looking for. On that front, it'd been another false trail. One of many he'd tracked down over the years. But he'd uncovered high-level criminals and turned them in. Mission accomplished, though he wasn't sure at what cost. Pretending to be a bad guy for two years, seeing all the things he'd seen, and being part of those things, had seeped into him like tainted water. He wasn't sure when or if he'd ever feel clean again. Even his boss was concerned about him. But a summer alone at the lake house would hopefully be a start—if he could ever get there. He just needed to make it through one more night in Long Acre.

He lifted his glass and drained the liquor. The alcohol turned to smooth fire at the back of his throat right as Liv Arias walked in. He stilled and almost choked on the bourbon.

Liv didn't look his way. She'd have no reason to. He'd grabbed a corner booth in the dark restaurant to do his drinking, and she was already in conversation with someone. But he definitely couldn't take his eyes off her. She'd walked in with three other women, all around the same age, and he vaguely registered that the redhead was Rebecca Lindt. The others were probably

classmates of his, too. The reporter had told him that he'd managed to get eighteen of the survivors for interviews and the mother of one of the shooters. But Finn hadn't considered that he'd be running into anyone. He'd been too focused on making sure the guy understood Finn couldn't be shown on film.

He needed to bail. The last thing he wanted to do was make small talk with anyone. But he couldn't seem to move from his spot. Liv was smiling at one of the women, a simple tilt of glossed red lips that illuminated her entire face. He remembered that smile. He used to be able to put it there.

She'd changed from her business suit into a pair of figure-hugging black pants and a simple white shirt that emphasized her bronze complexion. Her hair was pulled back into a curling ponytail, and his gaze snagged on the delicate tattoo on the back of her neck. That little detail had heat building in him that had nothing to do with the alcohol. That was the Liv he remembered. The girl who'd had a rebellious streak, the girl who'd dyed her hair crazy colors that skirted the edge of school rules, and the girl who had trusted him with her secrets. The girl who'd put up with *being* his secret.

God, he'd been such a spineless coward with her. He hadn't dated Liv publicly because his family would've had a shit fit. The daughter of the man who took care of their lawn, she was from the part of town his parents had told him not to drive through at night. On top of that, she was artsy and weird and foul-mouthed. She wouldn't have known the right fork to use at his mother's dinner parties. And she wouldn't have cared. So he'd kept their relationship hidden, and she'd put up with it.

She should've kicked him in the soft parts and told him to go screw himself. He had a feeling grown-up Liv would know what to do, based on her quick dismissal of his earlier offer to meet up tonight. She didn't look like a woman who would be walked on. Which, of course, only made him want to talk to her more, to discover who she'd become. But he didn't deserve her time. She'd pretty much made that clear, and he didn't blame her. He'd lost that right on so many levels he couldn't name them all.

Janice stopped at his table with another drink and set down a fried slab of meat as big as his head. White gravy sloshed off the side of the plate and onto the pine table. "Hot sauce and ketchup are by the sugar caddy if you need them. Can I get you anything else right now?"

"Lipitor?"

She laughed and patted him on the shoulder. "Strapping young man like you? I think you'll handle it just fine. I'll check on you in a few."

Finn took a half-hearted bite of his food as he watched Liv and her friends. They headed to a large round booth in the corner, and the bartender brought over two giant pitchers of margaritas. Apparently, Finn wasn't the only one ready to get hammered after the day of interview questions and hellish memories.

Liv was smiling still, listening to something one of the others said, but she was the first to reach for the pitcher, and she poured her glass to the top. When she lifted it to her lips, she drained half in one go, telling him exactly how much of a facade that carefree smile was.

He lifted his glass in silent camaraderie. *Here's to drinking away the dark, Liv. Let's hope we can outrun it for another night.*



The sounds of the restaurant and her former classmates blurred at the edges, everything becoming a little more fluid, a little less crisp. Liv set down her glass, knowing that three margaritas were more than her limit. She didn't drink like this anymore. College Liv could've taken down twice this much and still been on her feet—well, before she ended up off her feet in some random dude's dorm room. She wasn't that girl anymore. And she wasn't going to let this rocky hike along memory lane resurrect that train-wreck version of herself. But dinner with these women needed a little boozy fortitude, so she'd allowed herself a few.

“Need a refill, Liv?” Kincaid asked as she poured another glass for herself, her bangle bracelets clinking against the pitcher. Somehow the woman still looked put together after a long day of interviewing, not a lock of her golden hair out of place—a Texas beauty queen if ever there was one. “We can make a toast and then open the jar.”

Liv lifted a palm. “No, I'm cutting myself off. If I drink any more, I won't be able to read what's inside that jar. Plus, I'm too old to be hungover.”

“I'm not,” Taryn said, lifting her glass and shaking it. The ice cubes caught the light, illuminating her brown skin with a disco ball effect and flashing off her dark-rimmed glasses. “If any night deserves a hangover, it's this one. I want to pretend that I'm here with friends I haven't seen in years because I missed them, and we're doing some fun little time capsule thing. Not because we had to recount the

most horrible night of our lives in traumatizing detail, mm-kay?”

“I’ll drink to that,” Rebecca said from her spot across from Liv before taking a big gulp of her margarita, somehow managing to look prim while she did it. “And I’m not sure we should open the jar anyway. Let’s just get drunk and move on. The notes inside are irrelevant. We aren’t those teenagers anymore.”

All four women stared at the dirty mason jar they’d placed in the center of the table as if it were going to detonate. Taryn had retrieved it a few hours ago from beneath the lemon tree in her mom’s backyard where the four of them had buried it the summer after senior year. None of them had reached for it yet.

Kincaid tapped a bright-pink fingernail against the worn wood of the tabletop. “We had a pact, ladies. We were supposed to open this two years ago. We’re finally all together. Now is not the time to chicken out.”

“We also made a promise to stay in touch,” Rebecca said between sips, her wry tone at full throttle. “That worked out well.”

Taryn frowned, brown eyes shifting away. “Come on, it’s not like that. We’ve...Facebooked. We’ve just been busy.”

Rebecca arched a brow like she was still on debate team and her opponent had just made a bullshit point. “For a decade? Yeah, okay.”

Taryn opened her mouth to respond, but Liv cut her off. There was no reason to argue or pretend like this was something that it wasn’t. “It’s not because we’ve been busy. We all know that.”

“We do?” Kincaid asked, looking genuinely curious.

Liv wiped salt off the rim of her glass and rubbed it between her fingers until it disappeared, not wanting to be the one to say it but knowing someone had to. “It’s because we want to forget. We say we want to keep in touch, but it hurts to remember. And what else do we do for each other but remind ourselves of the bad stuff? We were never friends in the Before, only in the After.”

Silence fell over the table, everyone looking as uncomfortable as Liv had felt since sitting down with them. The four of them didn’t have good memories together because they had never been friends before the shooting. Kincaid Breslin had been friendly with all of them on some level because she was the type to be chatty with everyone. She could talk a tree stump into having a conversation and liking her. But it was a saying-hi-in-the-hallway kind of acquaintance. She’d been head of the dance team—gorgeous, popular, and sparkling in a sphere not many could touch.

Taryn Landry had been the honor student and athlete, playing three different sports and not having time for friends besides the other jocks and her younger sister, who had been one of the victims. And Rebecca Lindt, student council president and Finn’s date the night of the dance, had been the goody-two-shoes redhead Liv rolled her eyes over, her nemesis. None of them would’ve ever been friends.

But after prom night, the four of them had ended up in a support group together. Overnight, they’d become members of the same club—a club no one would ever want to join. After what they’d been through, their differences and cliques had fallen away, leaving nothing behind but the bond of knowing no one outside the

group could ever understand them like the ones in it. They'd made a promise to keep in touch. And they'd made a pact to live their lives to the fullest to honor those who wouldn't get the chance. Then they'd stuffed those promises into that freaking time capsule, outlining exactly how they would do that.

Liv didn't remember what she'd written on that piece of paper that was all folded up and tucked inside the jar, but she didn't really care. Whatever dreams she'd scrawled on that page were silly teenage fantasies of what it'd be like to be grown up. Easily dismissed. But as much as she'd been tempted to, she hadn't been able to turn down the invitation to meet up and do this. She didn't know these women anymore, but they'd gotten her through the worst year of her life and she wasn't going to break her word to them.

"I think we should just open the thing," Liv said finally. "Get it out of the way so we can relax the rest of the night."

"Amen, sister. I'm with you. It's ruining my buzz." Kincaid reached for the jar. "Let's open it, and we can each read someone else's letter out loud."

"Wait, what?" Rebecca's blue eyes went wide, her faint childhood freckles seeming to flare in opposition. "No way. It's private. It's—"

"If we read our own, we'll edit. This is about honesty." Kincaid grabbed her napkin and draped it over the rusty metal lid. "No one outside of this group is going to share anything about the letters. And we can burn the things afterward if we want, close the past for good."

The sound of the rusted lid grinding against the glass gave Liv a layer of goose bumps, and her palms went

clammy. Visions of the night they'd buried the thing flickered through her head, dragging her back in time. The night had been humid, the scent of lemons and fresh-cut grass heavy in the air. None of them had cried. They'd been out of tears by then. They'd kneeled in the dirt and lowered the little jar into the ground together like it was some kind of religious ritual. Four lost girls making a plea to the universe, begging for the future to be better than the present, burying seeds of dreams and hoping they would grow.

Now they would see if they had.

Liv fought the sudden urge to reach out and grab the jar, throw it into the creek out back, leave that stuff buried. Her fingers curled against the table. But none of the women stopped Kincaid as she set aside the lid and fished out the pages.

Without ceremony, Kincaid looked at the names on the letters and then handed one to each of them. Liv ended up with Rebecca's. Kincaid kept Liv's.

The paper felt brittle in Liv's fingers, the blue lines of the loose-leaf faded. But when she unfolded it, the writing was still clear. Neat, looping green handwriting filled half the page.

"Liv, why don't you go first?" Kincaid suggested. "Put Bec out of her misery."

Rebecca winced at the suggestion, and Liv hesitated. "Hey, if you don't want me to read it, I won't. Seriously. It's up to you."

There was no love lost between her and Rebecca, but she wasn't going to torture the woman. These were her secrets to keep or share.

Rebecca stared at Liv for a moment, a few different

emotions flickering over her face. Bec was an attorney now, and Liv imagined she was having some sort of courtroom battle in her head, but finally she pressed her lips together and nodded. “No, go ahead. It’ll be embarrassing, but I’ll just make sure y’all drink enough not to remember this in the morning.”

Liv smirked. “That may happen all on its own. But okay, let’s do this.” She smoothed the paper on the tabletop and began to read. “On this day, August first, I, Rebecca Lindt, promise the Class of 2005 that I will not waste the second chance that I have been given, that I will honor all the people we lost by living my life to the fullest. Professional goals: I will get a law degree and graduate at the top of my class. After practicing law for a few years, I will run for political office and will fight for better gun control laws and more mental health interventions for teens. I will make a difference in the world. Personal goals: I will stay a virgin until I’m married. And I will marry Finn Dorsey in a Paris wedding. We’ll have two kids, preferably one boy and one girl, and a dog named Bartholomew, after my grandpa. I will be a good friend, wife, and mom. I will be happy.”

“Oh God.” Rebecca put her reddened face in her hands and groaned. “That was worse than I remembered. I hate you, teenage Rebecca.”

Taryn pressed her hand over her mouth but couldn’t contain the snort.

Rebecca turned and sent her an oh-no-you-didn’t look.

Taryn grimaced and lifted her hand. “Sorry. The dog name got me.”

“Not the virgin thing?” Kincaid said with a grin,

bumping Rebecca's shoulder with hers. "You really were rocking the good-girl life, Bec. You don't do things halfway."

Rebecca shrugged and took another sip of her drink. "Well, I never said I didn't go *halfway*."

The others burst into laughs at that, the margaritas and awkwardness of it all making everyone a little silly. But Liv only gave a distracted smile as her gaze ran over Finn's name again. Rebecca had never known about Finn and Liv's secret relationship or where he'd been that night before he'd jumped in to save her. Finn had said there was nothing between him and Rebecca but friendship, but clearly Rebecca had felt differently.

"Finn, huh?" The words slipped out before Liv could stop them.

Rebecca looked up, her smile faltering a bit. "Yeah. He'd been my neighbor since we were little. And after my mom left, things at home were...not great. So he'd let me escape to his house to get away from my real life. I think I loved him from fourth grade on, and I got pretty close to his family. So when he saved me at the school, I figured it was fate." She stared down at her drink, a far-off look on her face. "But I don't think he ever saw me that way. It was all very *Dawson's Creek* in my head. I just didn't realize I was Dawson."

"What happened with him?" Kincaid asked.

"We kept in touch for a few years after he moved away and I went to college, but eventually the emails stopped coming."

Liv felt a petty kick of jealousy, the old rivalry ghosting through her. Finn had kept in touch with Rebecca for *years*? But then the second part settled in. They'd been

close friends but nothing more. Maybe Finn hadn't been lying to her.

"Well, some of the stuff worked out, right?" Taryn said, a hopeful note in her voice as she adjusted her glasses. "You're a lawyer."

Rebecca nodded, her expression going thoughtful. "Yeah, a divorce attorney. But I'm not the political warrior Teen Me wanted to be. I've never run for office. And I wouldn't have time for a dog, much less a husband or kids."

Even though Rebecca had a lot of be proud of, the undercurrent of disappointment in her voice was hard to miss. But Liv couldn't tell if that was Bec's overachiever gene kicking in—I'm *only* a successful attorney—or if it was something more than that. Liv frowned. "Maybe we shouldn't do this if it's just going to bum us out."

Rebecca's attention snapped upward. "Oh, no you don't. My dirty laundry pile is stinking up the joint. The rest of you aren't going to keep yours hidden." Her wry smile returned, and she rapped the table with her knuckles like a gavel. "Bring it on, ladies."

"I'll go next," Kincaid said, lifting Liv's letter. "Let's see what dark-and-broody goth Liv had planned."

Liv groaned. "To get the hell out of town. I think that's as far as I'd thought."

"Let's find out." Kincaid unfolded the letter and cleared her throat as if she were going to give a speech. "On this day, August first, I, Olivia Arias, promise the Class of 2005 that I will not waste the second chance that I have been given, that I will honor all the people we lost by living my life to the fullest. First, I will move anywhere but here."

Liv sniffed. "Told ya."

But Kincaid ignored her. "I will find a job I like that will make me enough money and give me enough time to do my photography. Then, when I get good enough, I will turn art into my job. I won't play it safe. I won't be practical. I'll live a passionate life and date passionate guys and see the world so I can take pictures of it. I promise, Class of 2005, to live the life that scares me."

Kincaid's eyebrows popped up, and Liv's heart sank as each word hit her like drops of cold rain. She could almost see her eighteen-year-old self climbing up on her soapbox and making all those declarations. That girl who was racked by panic attacks and nightmares, who had a family who didn't—*couldn't*—get it, a girl who was trying to look her fears in the face and give them the finger.

Too bad it hadn't worked out. "Boy, I certainly was dramatic."

Taryn put her chin in her hand, the dim light over the table making her brown eyes sparkle and her riot of black curls look like a halo. "I think it's beautiful. I mean, damn, I want that life, too. Minus the art part. I suck at art. But passionate guys and seeing the world? Sign me up."

"Right? Seriously," Kincaid said. "So did you get to do any of that? The travel? The guys? If it's a yes to the guys, we need to get more drinks so you'll tell us the sordid stories."

Liv laughed. "I'm definitely not drunk enough for that."

Not that there was much to tell. There'd been more guys early on than she wanted to remember. That'd been her go-to way of dealing with the anxiety that had

stalked her at college. Drink too much. Find a guy to distract her. Anything to forget what she was going through for a few minutes—even if that meant waking up with a bucketful of regret in the morning. But passionate love affairs? Romance? The things she'd imagined when she wrote that letter? She'd never had that. Not even close.

“Are you still doing photography?” Rebecca asked.

Liv stared at her melting ice cubes, absently stabbing them with her straw. “Not really. I had this project I started, but I don't know. I haven't looked at it in a while.”

Or in years.

“Was that the project with survivors of other tragedies?” Kincaid asked, curiosity lighting her hazel eyes. “I remember reading a story about you, and it mentioned that.”

Liv rolled her lips inward, a pang going through her. “Yes. It was just an idea at the time. I thought I could take stripped-down portraits of survivors of different events to show their range of emotions, their strength and vulnerability. Somehow show the world that we weren't just the one thing they'd labeled us as. I was going to donate the proceeds to the Long Acre fund.”

“Wow. I'm sure that'd be amazing,” Taryn said. “And intense.”

Liv glanced up. “Yeah. Too intense. At least for me.” She'd made it through two sessions before she'd realized she couldn't handle it. Hearing other people's stories, seeing their scars...it'd been too much, too close to home. It had set off her PTSD like fireworks. “I put the photography aside and got a job doing web design. Eventually, all my time got sucked up as I moved up the ladder at work. Now I barely have time to squeeze in a

workout, much less a hobby. I guess my just-to-make-money job became my career.” She rolled her shoulders, trying to shake out the tightness gathering there. “Photography was never going to pay the bills anyway. I wasn’t that good.”

Taryn’s expression soured. “No way. Your photos were gorgeous, Liv. Don’t sell yourself that line of crap.”

Liv took her letter from Kincaid, half wanting to ball it up and toss it across the room. But she forced herself to fold it neatly, creasing each line just so. “It’s better than admitting that I got practical, right? That I’ve become some boring nine-to-fiver—or nine-to-niner—that teen Liv would’ve hated.”

“I don’t know,” Rebecca offered. “Maybe that’s just a consequence of being a grown-up. Dreams are called that for a reason. They usually don’t happen.”

“Oh, that’s uplifting,” Kincaid said, her East Texas twang turning dry. “Put that on a motivational mug, y’all. *If you can dream it...you probably can’t do it.*”

Taryn snorted. “Let’s call Oprah. She’d love the hell out of that one.”

Rebecca gave both of the women a *gimme a break* look. “Just being realistic.”

“Realistic?” Kincaid straightened, her nose wrinkling in derision. “Screw that. We need to do better.”

“Kincaid—” Liv began.

“No. Realistic? Practical? What in the hell is wrong with us?” she demanded, her gaze alighting on each of them. “We made these promises to people. People we lost who will never get the chance to chase their own dreams. We’re not eighty. We still have time.”

“I don’t think time’s the issue,” Liv said, giving in and

pouring herself another drink. Maybe she didn't drink like this anymore, but if there was ever a time to have earned being drunk, it was tonight. "Once you're on one path, it's not easy to take a hard left. Like Rebecca said, we're grown-ups. We have bills to pay, responsibilities. Jobs. We can't just chase whims."

"Why not?" Kincaid asked, in full bulldog mode now. "Does it have to be an either/or thing? There's got to be a way to do some of both—the practical and the exciting, right? Why couldn't you pick up your photography project on the side? Or travel? Or have a passionate affair?"

Liv shifted in her seat and frowned. "It's not that easy."

"Exactly," Rebecca said with a curt nod. "And how about you wait until we read your letter, Miss Rah-Rah-Siss-Boom-Bah, before you start making battle cries for us?"

Kincaid lifted a haughty brow. "If that's a cheerleader joke, it doesn't work. I was dance team. Totally different."

"I was referring to your cheering now," Rebecca said. "And how were you *not* on cheer?"

"Dance team had better outfits, and I didn't have to trust other girls not to drop me from great heights." Kincaid flicked her hand at Rebecca, giving her the cue to read her letter. "Bring it on, lawyer. I don't remember what I wrote. But either way, I'm definitely adding 'have passionate affair' to my to-do list."

"Agreed," Taryn said. "That's going on mine, too. Good suggestion, Liv."

"Thanks," she said distractedly.

The conversation moved on. But Liv had trouble focusing on any of it. Kincaid's challenge had landed on her with a thud. *Why can't you? Why not?*

Those questions poked at that long-ago rebellious girl who thought she could do anything. And they weighed on her as the other letters were read and as the night started to wrap up. She and the other women weren't doing badly. Kincaid was a successful real estate agent, Rebecca a lawyer. Taryn hadn't kept up with sports or moved away from town like she'd wanted, but she'd gotten a doctorate in forensic psychology. More than a little impressive.

From the outside looking in, they appeared just fine. Successful, even. They'd all managed to get good jobs, make a living. But it wasn't lost on Liv that none of them were in relationships. None had started families. No one had taken any risks. And none had lived up to the women they'd wanted to be in those letters.

They were still young, just entering their thirties. But they'd already settled. They'd been given this second chance when others hadn't, and they'd settled for *good enough*, for getting by, for not making waves.

Teen Liv had been racked with anxiety and nightmares, but still, she'd craved adventure. Art.

Passion.

She'd believed she could still have it.

What did grown-up Liv believe? Want?

Did she even know?

Her attention wandered from her friends as her thoughts tangled around themselves, and her gaze lingered on a booth in the far corner. The waitress was dropping off the check, but Liv caught the profile of the

man taking it from her, the big, capable hands. Hands that never dropped the football. Hands that had once held Liv close.

Finn.

He didn't look her way, just accepted the check and fished some bills out of his wallet. But as she watched him move, something stirred in her, something old and familiar and dangerous.

Suddenly, she was back in the library, hiding from Mrs. Wentz—the eagle-eyed librarian—and trying to keep quiet. She was supposed to be tutoring Finn in history. But instead, Finn's hands were in her hair, his scent in her head, and his lips on her neck. They'd always known exactly how many minutes they had before the bell rang. They'd used every second.

As if hearing her thoughts, his gaze drifted her way. Their eyes locked, and a still quiet filled her. This was the part where she was supposed to do something. But she didn't turn her head, didn't offer a wave, didn't do what any normal, polite person would do. She just let it go on. The staring.

Let herself remember how he used to look at her. How that made her feel. There'd been steel gates between them in public, but alone, there were never any walls with Finn. He'd made her feel wanted. Dangerous. Alive.

She realized right then how long it'd been since she'd felt that brand of high, that flavor of reckless abandon. That *good*. She wasn't supposed to think of that, wasn't supposed to imagine the *before* because there was no going back. She certainly wasn't supposed to let herself entertain how things used to be with *him*. But she couldn't stop staring.

Without looking away, Finn lifted his half-empty glass in a silent question. *Drink?*

This time there was no hesitation with her answer. It was as if her body were on autopilot. She tucked her letter in her back pocket, grabbed the margarita pitcher to top off her glass, and then wished her friends a good night, saying that she needed to get some air and would see them in the morning.

She didn't look to see if Finn followed. She just kept moving forward, her heartbeat a steady thump in her ears. She stepped out onto the unlit porch that overlooked the creek behind the hotel and leaned against the railing, letting the heavy night air cloak her and the smooth soundtrack of the water and the singing crickets surround her. She shouldn't be out here.

Footsteps sounded behind her.

She thought of the words on the little rectangle of paper tucked in her back pocket, giving a little nod to teen Liv.

She was only here for one night.

Maybe it was time to keep some promises. And bury some ghosts.

Maybe tonight she wouldn't play it safe.

"Hello, Finn."