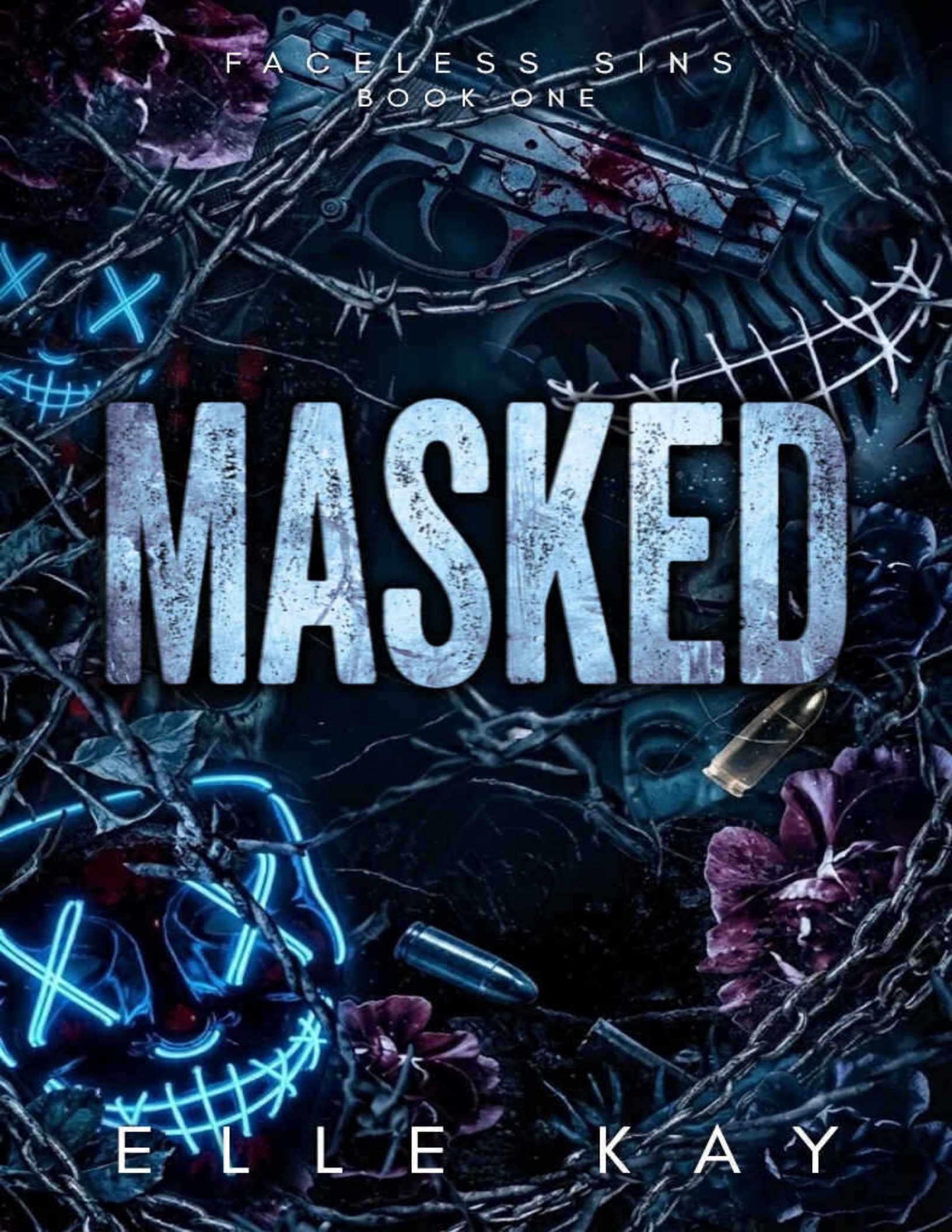
FACELESS SINS
BOOK ONE
MASKED
ELLE KAY

MASKED

FACELESS SINS

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For everyone who read the word safeword and thought, yes, but what if I don't use it.

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CONTENT WARNING

A note before you begin:

Please be advised that *Masked* is a dark why-choose romance. The heroine falls for more than one man, and she never has to choose. There is no romance between the men. This book deals with darker themes that some readers may find distressing, including:

• Explicit sexual content, including scenes with more than one partner
• Voyeurism and exhibitionism
• Consensual non-consent and chase play, always negotiated beforehand, with a safeword
• Knife play
• Degradation and humiliation, alongside praise
• On-page murder (the heroine kills a man in self-defense)
• Vigilante killings and the disposal of a body
• Unwanted touching and a violent attack on the heroine (on page)
• References to sexual assault of other women, and to the abuse of minors (off page)
• The death of a sibling (before the book begins) and grief
• Stalking, surveillance and a hidden camera
• Bullying, slut-shaming and cruelty from a love interest
• Alcohol use
• Parental infidelity

Masked ends on a cliffhanger. The story continues in *Marked*.

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PROLOGUE

WREN

The first thing nobody tells you about killing a man is how quiet it is.

There's no scream. There's no music swelling up out of nowhere. There's just a small, surprised sound, like he stepped off a curb he didn't see, then the soft thump of a body folding onto wet boards. Up the hill, the band in the white tent finishes a Motown song. Under the string lights, all those people in linen clap.

Holy shit, I think, very calmly. *I just killed a man.*

I stand over him with a knife in my fist. My fingers have gone numb around the handle. The blood on my wrist is warm, and then it isn't. The boathouse smells like diesel, seawater and his expensive cologne. Underneath all of it there's something new now, hot and coppery, and I know I'm going to smell it in my sleep.

Four men in masks are watching me.

Nobody moves. The biggest wears a black mask with a crack down the cheek. Another has a painted red smile, with a tarp tucked under his arm like he came to help with a picnic. A third stands out on the dock in a mirrored oval that shows me my own face, lipstick smeared, eyes gone wide and wild. The last is standing closest. His plain white mask has no mouth at all, and he's so still it's like someone hit pause on him.

I look at the tarp, the gloves and the careful, practiced way they're standing. Then I understand. They came down here to kill this man, and I got there first.

The white mask walks toward me. He isn't in a hurry. Every nerve in my body is screaming at me to run, but my feet stay nailed to the boards. He stops so close that I have to tip my head back to see the blank place where his mouth should be. Then he holds out his gloved hand.

I give him the knife. I don't know why. My hand does it before the rest of me can argue.

He reaches into his coat and takes out an old silver coin, worn almost smooth. He takes my bloody hand, turns it palm up and opens my fingers slowly. He lays the coin in the middle of my palm and closes my hand around it. His thumb stays on my knuckles longer than it has to.

"You paid his fare," he says. His voice comes through something that sands it flat, electronic and cold. "That one's yours."

"Who are you?" I ask. "Who *are* you people?"

"Doesn't matter," he says.

"It matters to me."

"Not tonight it doesn't." He lets that sit. "We came for him. We haven't decided about you yet."

He lets go of my hand.

"Until then," he says, "you belong to us."

I close my fist so tight around the coin that the edge bites into my palm. My heart is hammering, and my knees have gone to water. Somewhere under all of it, low in my stomach, something turns over that has nothing to do with fear.

A week ago, I was just a girl visiting her mom for the summer.

I'd never seen any of these men before in my life.

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1

WREN

"You have arrived," the GPS announces, like it's personally proud of me.

I haven't arrived. I'm idling in front of a gate the size of a small church, in a Honda Civic with a cracked taillight and a trash bag of everything else I own in the back seat. The gate looks at me the way bouncers used to look at my fake ID. On top of the stone pillar, a camera swivels to get a better angle on my bumper sticker.

"Okay," I tell it. "Rude as hell, but okay."

Before I get out of the car, I do the thing I promised myself I'd do. I reach up under my collar and unclasp Daisy's locket. It slides warm into my palm, a little gold oval with a dent in the side. She threw it at my head once, during an argument about a boy named Derek. Derek wasn't worth it. She never got the dent fixed.

Someone in this town might know that locket. Someone in this town might have seen it on her neck the night she died.

I zip it into the inside pocket of my bag and press my hand flat over it until my pulse settles. My neck feels bare without it, like I've left her in the car.

You're fine. You're a girl visiting her mom for the summer. That's all you are.

I roll down the window and press the intercom button. It buzzes. Then nothing happens for so long that I start to wonder if rich people just leave

their guests out here to die, as some kind of test.

"Deliveries use the service entrance." It's a man's voice, low and bored, so perfectly clipped it could cut glass.

"I'm not a delivery. Do I sound like a delivery?"

"You sound lost."

"I'm Wren. Wren Quinn." I lean closer to the speaker, as if that'll help. "Nina's daughter? The new wife's kid? I'm expected, I promise. There was a whole text thread about it, with emojis."

The pause this time is shorter and somehow worse. Then the gate shudders and starts to swing open, slow as a yawn.

"Thanks," I say to the speaker. "You're a delight."

It doesn't answer.

The driveway goes on forever. Gravel crunches under my bald tires as I pass hedges trimmed into shapes that probably have names. The lawn is so green it looks fake. Then the trees fall away, there's the house, and I say "Jesus Christ" out loud to nobody.

It's white and enormous, sprawled along the top of the hill like it owns the view. I guess it does. Behind it the ground drops away to the harbor, blue and gold in the late sun and dotted with sailboats. Across the water, on the far point, sits the yacht club. It's low and gray-shingled, with a flag snapping on the roof.

My stomach turns over.

Daisy stood on that lawn a year ago, in a dress she borrowed from me and never gave back. The police said she took something at the club's summer party. They said she walked down to the rocks to be sick and never came back up. They said it like they were reading a weather report.

I didn't believe them then, and I don't believe them now. Daisy was scared of pills. She wouldn't take an aspirin without reading the whole box. So what the hell was she doing on the rocks? I've got the whole summer to find out. My hands have tightened on the wheel without my permission, and I have to peel them off one finger at a time.

I park next to a silver Range Rover and a black car so low to the ground it looks like it's hiding. My Civic sits between them like a raccoon at a wedding. I'm still deciding whether to grab the trash bag when the front door flies open.

"Baby!" My mother comes down the steps in white linen pants and bare feet, arms already out. She hits me so hard I have to grab the car door to

stay upright. She smells like expensive shampoo and the same drugstore perfume she's worn since I was six. "You made it. You actually made it. I was so worried about that car."

"The car's fine." The car is not fine. The car made a noise outside Hartford that I'm choosing to believe was emotional. "Hi, Mom. I missed you."

"I missed you more." She squeezes my face between her hands like I'm still twelve. "Are you eating? You feel like you're not eating. I can feel your shoulder blades."

"I ate a whole gas station burrito this morning, so I'm basically immortal now."

She holds me at arm's length to look at me, and I look back. She's tan. She looks happy. Her hair is a shade of blond that costs money now. On her left hand there's a diamond so big it has its own weather.

"Holy shit, Mom." I grab her hand to get a better look. "Does that thing need its own insurance policy?"

"Language," she says. Then she ruins it by grinning and wiggling her fingers so the ring catches the light. "I know. I *know*. He's ridiculous. Come meet him properly. Richard! She's here!"

Richard Sterling comes down the steps behind her like he's walking onto a stage. He's exactly what I expected from the photos, only more. He's tall and silver at the temples, in a blue shirt with the sleeves rolled, as if he's just come in from something outdoorsy and expensive. His smile has been professionally whitened and deployed for decades.

"Wren," he says, and takes my hand in both of his. They're warm and dry. "Finally. Nina never stops talking about you."

"I seriously doubt that," I tell him. "Thanks for having me, though. I'm grateful."

He laughs like I've said something delightful. "Port Halloway's a small town, you'll find. Everybody knows everybody. You'll fit right in."

"I'm sure I will," I say. I smile back so hard my face hurts, because *everybody knows everybody* is exactly why I'm here.

"We'll get someone to bring your bags." Richard glances at my back seat, at the trash bag. To his credit, his smile only flickers. "Come in, come in. Callum's around here somewhere."

"Callum's his son," Mom says in the loud whisper she thinks is a real whisper. "He's... well. You'll see. He's very protective of his father."

"He sounds great," I say. "He runs the intercom, right? Big personality."

Mom gives me a look that means *behave*. Richard doesn't seem to hear. I get the feeling men like Richard only hear the parts of a conversation that are about them.

Inside, the house is all white walls, pale wood floors and glass. There's so much glass that the harbor is basically part of the living room. It's cool and quiet. It smells like lemons and money. A staircase in the middle of the entry splits in two on the way up, like it couldn't decide. On the wall hangs a painting that's either a very expensive abstract or a very small child's revenge.

I'm staring at the painting, trying to figure out which, when the back of my neck prickles.

I look up, and oh, *fuck*.

A man is leaning on the rail at the top of the stairs, both forearms braced on it, as if he's been up there a while. He's watching me like I'm something the cat dragged in and set down on the good rug.

My body notices him before my brain can come up with a single reason not to. He's tall enough that the landing looks small around him. He's broad through the shoulders too, and it has nothing to do with a gym. He's just built to take up room. His black hair is a little too long on top, raked back with his fingers, and one piece has already given up and fallen over his forehead.

His white shirt is open at the throat, with the sleeves shoved up past his elbows. His forearms are tan and corded. A heavy steel watch sits on one wrist, and veins run down to the backs of his hands. There's dark stubble along a hard jaw. A thin pale scar runs through his bottom lip, off center, like someone once got close enough to hit him and never got close again.

Then there are his eyes. They're gray, but not a soft gray. They're the gray of the harbor before the rain comes in sideways, and they're fixed on me with no expression at all.

He doesn't just look at me. He *takes* me, top to bottom, slow, like there's no hurry because I'm not going anywhere. Heat crawls up the back of my neck and pools low in my stomach. My mouth goes dry. It's been about thirty seconds, and my body has already made a decision my brain would never sign off on.

Absolutely not. Not him. Look at literally anything else.

"Callum!" Mom sounds nervous and bright. "This is Wren. Wren, this is Callum."

He doesn't come down. His gaze drops to my dusty sneakers, my cutoffs and the hole near the hem of my tank top I was sure nobody would notice. Then it comes back up again. I feel every inch of the trip like a hand.

"You must be the intercom," I say. "We've met. You were very welcoming."

"Have we." His voice is the same one from the gate, low and clipped. It sounds even better in person, which is deeply unfair.

"You told me to use the service entrance."

"You looked like you might be lost."

"I was sitting at your gate, telling you my name. How lost could I be?"

"You said a lot of things." He pushes off the rail and comes down the stairs. He moves like the stairs are a formality, loose and unhurried, with the kind of ease that comes from knowing nobody in the room can stop him. He stops two steps above me, close enough that I have to tip my head back. Up close he smells like cedar and vetiver, with a thread of smoke like a struck match, and under all of it the sea. He's even bigger from here. I could stand on the step below him and still not reach his mouth, and I have no idea why my brain goes there. "East wing's yours. Try not to steal anything on the way up."

My mother makes a small, pained sound.

My face goes hot. He's known me for about a minute, and he's already decided what I am. I'd love to hit him. I smile at him instead, my best smile, the one I used on drunk finance guys who wanted to tip me in business cards. "Relax. I only take things people won't miss."

Something moves at the corner of his mouth. It isn't a smile. It's the idea of one, crushed before it can hatch.

"Noted," he says. "Thief."

Then he steps around me, so close his arm almost brushes my shoulder. He walks off down the hall toward the back of the house like I've already stopped existing.

I watch him go, the long line of his back under the white shirt, the easy roll of his shoulders. He doesn't look back once. My pulse is going stupid and fast in my throat. What an asshole. What a tall, good-smelling, unfairly built asshole.

"He's not usually like that," Mom says.

"Yes, he is," Richard says fondly. "He'll warm up. He always does, once he's sure you're staying."

"Can't wait," I say. "Is there a rough timeline, or should I pack a sweater?"

Mom shoots me another look. Then she takes my arm and walks me upstairs herself, chattering the whole way. She points out the library, which is a real library with a ladder. There's a sunroom, a guest room and another guest room. There's also a door she calls "Callum's side, don't," in a tone that says she's been told that exact thing more than once. The east wing is a whole hallway, and my room is at the end of it.

It's bigger than my last apartment. Hell, it's bigger than my last two apartments stacked. There's a bed with about nine pillows on it and a white couch nobody should ever sit on in jeans. The bathroom has a tub you could drown a horse in. One whole wall is window, with a glass door out to a little balcony, looking straight down the lawn to the water.

"Mom," I say. "Is this real? Is someone going to come in and charge me for breathing near the couch?"

"I know." She sits on the edge of the bed, bouncing a little, the way she did when I was a kid and she'd come in to say goodnight. "Isn't it insane? I keep waiting for someone to tell me I'm in the wrong house."

"You're not in the wrong house." I sit down next to her. She takes my hand and squeezes it, her ring cold against my knuckles. "You're happy?"

"I'm happy." She says it simply, like it surprises her. "Is that stupid? At my age?"

"It's not stupid." It comes out rough, and I have to clear my throat. "I'm glad, Mom. I mean it."

"And you're okay? After the bar, and everything?"

"The bar closed. It happens. I'll find another one." I shrug like it doesn't matter. Like I didn't quit a month before it closed so I could sit in my car outside Daisy's old building and cry. "I just needed a summer off."

"Well, you picked the right place for it." She bumps my shoulder with hers. "He's good to me, baby. He's kind. And this town is gorgeous, you'll see. There's the club. Richard's the commodore this year, whatever that means, it involves a hat. The summer party's next week and it's the biggest thing all year. You'll need a dress."

The summer party.

My hand goes cold in hers.

A year ago, at the Port Halloway Yacht Club summer party, my sister wore my green dress. She laughed at a joke and walked away from the tent. Nobody saw her again until morning.

My mother doesn't know that. Or she knows it, and she's put it in the same drawer where she keeps everything about my father's other family. That drawer has been locked since I was eleven. Daisy was never *her* problem. Daisy was the girl from the other woman, the half-sister I wasn't supposed to go looking for. I went anyway, at sixteen, on a bus, with forty bucks and a printout.

In the whole year since, Mom hasn't said her name to me. Not at the funeral she didn't come to, not on the phone, not once. She doesn't know I'm here for her.

"A dress," I say. "Sure. I'll figure something out."

"We'll go shopping. On Richard." She beams. "He insists."

"Of course he does. Does he insist on everything, or just the shopping?"

She swats my knee, laughing, and doesn't answer.

She kisses my forehead and heads for the door, then turns back with her hand on the frame. "And Wren? Be nice to Callum. He's had a hard year."

"What kind of hard year?"

"I don't know, baby. Richard won't talk about it, and I've learned not to push. Just... try, for me?"

"I'm always nice," I say, and she laughs all the way down the hall.

Then I'm alone in the enormous white room with my duffel bag and the trash bag. Someone has already carried them both up. The trash bag sits in the middle of the carpet like a dead body.

I sit on the floor next to it and take out my phone.

There's one thread I never delete. The last message in it is from her, a year old.

> omw back, don't wait up, love u dumbass.

Under it sit about four hundred messages from me that she never read.

I type a new one.

> Made it. The house is obscene. There's a staircase that can't make up its mind. Mom has a ring you could see from space.

I stare at it, then type again.

The stepbrother is a nightmare. You'd have loved him. You always went for the ones who looked like they'd bite.

I send them both. The little word under them says *Delivered*, the way it always does, like there's still someone at the other end to deliver to.

My throat goes tight. I press my thumb against the word *Delivered* like it's a bruise, just to check it still hurts. Then I swallow hard and grind the heel of my hand into my eyes until the burning goes away.

A knock rattles the door, and I nearly drop the phone.

"Dinner's in an hour," a voice calls through the wood. It's a woman, older, brisk. "Mr. Sterling likes everyone at the table. That means you, miss."

"Got it," I call back. "Thank you. Sorry, who are you?"

"Marisol. I run the house." A pause. "Don't let the son scare you. He bites, but he doesn't break the skin."

Her footsteps go away before I can ask how she knows that.

I get up and go to the window.

The sun's going down. The water has turned the color of a bruise, purple and orange and dark underneath. The lawn slopes all the way down to a long wooden dock with a sailboat tied at the end. Callum is standing out there, past the boat, at the very end of the boards.

He's alone, with his hands in his pockets and the wind pushing his hair around. He's looking across the harbor at the yacht club. He isn't on his phone, and he isn't smoking. He's just standing there with the last of the light turning one side of his face gold. He looks at that club the way people look at a grave, and it's so private I feel like I've walked in on him naked.

Then he turns his head and looks straight up at my window, like he knew exactly where I'd be. My heart jumps so hard it hurts.

I should step back. That's what you do when you get caught. I don't, and he doesn't look away either. He's much too far away for me to see his eyes, but I know exactly where they go. It's a slow drag down the length of me and back up, and I feel it in the backs of my knees. It goes on so long that my breath comes short. My hand closes on the curtain until the knuckles ache.

Then he turns and walks back up the lawn without hurrying, as if nothing has ever made him rush in his life. He disappears under the edge of the terrace.

I stand there until the yacht club is a line of gold across the black water. By then my own reflection is the only thing left in the glass, and my face is still hot. I pull the curtains shut.

"Okay," I say to the empty room. My voice comes out smaller than I'd like. "Welcome to Port Halloway, dumbass."

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2

CALLUM

She didn't step back.

I looked up from the end of the dock, and she was right there in the east window, backlit, with her hand fisted in the curtain. She didn't step back. People always step back. They flinch and pretend they were looking at the view. She just stood there and looked at me like she had every right to. I looked back, and neither of us blinked until I got bored of pretending I wasn't enjoying it.

I'm still thinking about that when I come in through the terrace doors. My father catches me in the hall.

"She's a sweet girl," he says, to his reflection in the hall mirror, straightening a collar that doesn't need it. "Give her a chance, would you? For Nina's sake, if not for mine."

"I didn't say anything."

"You called her a thief on the stairs. Nina told me."

"She called herself one. I agreed with her."

He sighs through his nose, checks his teeth in the mirror and goes in to dinner. I follow, because Marisol will drag me in by the ear if I don't. She's the only person in this house who could.

The dining room is too big for four people. The table is pale oak, long enough for a board meeting, scarred at one end where I did my homework as a kid. The west wall is all window, and at this hour the harbor fills it,

going copper. Marisol has lit candles nobody needs yet. The room smells like butter, lemon and the sea coming in through the open terrace door.

Nina's already at my father's right hand, like a woman trying out a chair in a showroom. Her daughter's place, across from mine, stays empty long enough for my father to tell a story about a sailboat he almost bought.

Then she walks in. She's changed into black jeans and a gray T-shirt, with her wet hair twisted up on her head and a few dark pieces stuck to the back of her neck. She didn't dress for dinner. She wants us to notice that she didn't, and I notice. I notice a lot of things, and most of them aren't the T-shirt.

"Sorry," she says. "The shower in there has settings. I think I found the one called Hurricane."

"Sit, sit," my father says. "Marisol made the halibut."

She sits down across from me and doesn't look at me. She works hard at it. Nina asks about the drive, and her daughter answers in a warm, easy voice I don't believe at all. It's the voice people use in hospital waiting rooms. She's working the table, and she's good at it.

"So, Wren," my father says. "Nina tells me you're a bartender. In Philadelphia?"

"Still am, just between bars right now. The one I worked at closed, so I'm on a forced vacation."

"Callum spent a summer in Philadelphia," my father says, as if we're going to bond over it. "That internship. What was it, Cal?"

"Wharton." I don't look up from my plate. "It was a program, not an internship."

"Fancy," she says. "I was on Frankford Avenue, which is less fancy. We had a program too. It was called *don't serve the guy in the Eagles jersey after his fourth shot, or he'll cry about his ex and then try to fight the jukebox*."

Nina laughs too loudly. My father laughs because Nina laughed, and I cut my fish.

"What did you steal?" I ask.

The table goes quiet. She puts her fork down very gently, like she's afraid of what she'll do with it otherwise. Her other hand has gone white at the knuckles on the edge of the table.

"Excuse me?"

"From the bar. Bartenders steal. Pours, tips, bottles out the back door." I finally look at her. "I'm curious which kind you were."

"Callum," my father says.

"No, it's fine." She tips her head. A drop of water slides off the end of her hair, down the side of her neck and into the collar of her shirt. I watch it all the way down, and I don't bother pretending I'm not. "Limes. I stole limes, constantly. We had a lime guy who came every other day, and I'd take a whole bag home, because I'm a sick person who puts lime in everything. Tacos, beer, Diet Coke. I'm a hardened criminal. Book me."

"Limes," I say.

"Limes. Do you want to search my car? There's probably one rolling around under the seat, if you need evidence."

"Tempting."

"Is it?" Her eyes narrow. "Because you've got a real searching kind of face."

"You've got a real lying kind of voice."

That lands. I watch it land. Her mouth opens and nothing comes out. The waiting-room smile is gone, and there's just a girl across the table from me, furious and a little bit caught. It's the most honest she's looked since she walked in. It's also the prettiest.

Then my father laughs, Nina pats her daughter's hand, and the moment's gone.

Under the table, something brushes my ankle. It's her foot. She's kicked her sandals off. Her bare foot slides along the inside of my calf before she realizes what she's touching, and she freezes. She doesn't move it away. Neither do I.

Across the table, her face stays perfectly pleasant while she tells Nina about the traffic on I-95. The whole time, the arch of her foot rests against my leg, warm through the linen. I cut my fish into smaller and smaller pieces and don't eat any of them. When she finally takes it back, she does it slowly, like it was her idea. It wasn't. We both know whose leg didn't move.

Four months. That's how long my father knew Nina Quinn before he married her at the courthouse. Now her daughter's here for the whole summer, with a car that sounds like a lung infection. I've watched a lot of women come through this house, and they all smile at the view first. This one hasn't looked at it once. She's looked at me three times when she thought I couldn't see.

"The club's summer party is coming up," my father tells her. "You'll come, of course. Everyone goes. Even Grant Whitlock is showing his face this year, after all that business."

"Richard," Nina murmurs, and I set my knife down.

"What? It's done. He was acquitted. The man's allowed to have a drink at his own club." My father leans toward the girl, conspiratorial. "Small town drama. You'll hear all about it."

"Can't wait," she says. The name goes straight past her, and she reaches for her water.

It doesn't go past me. I know his boat, his car and the long way he drives home when he's been drinking. The name of the girl whose case went nowhere last winter. What she looked like on the stand, and how he smiled on the courthouse steps after. Some nights I lie awake with my jaw locked so tight my teeth ache, going over all of it again. I'm not finished with it.

Not here. Not at this table.

"Callum's on the club board," my father adds. "He'll introduce you around."

"Will he," she says, looking right at me.

"No," I say.

"He will," my father says, without looking up from his plate.

She smiles at me like she's won something. She hasn't. From the way she's looking at me, I think she knows it.

After dinner I take my calls in the office downstairs with the door shut. The last one isn't business.

"So?" Rhett says, before I've said hello. He's still at the gym. Behind him a heavy bag takes a beating, and someone swears at it between combinations. "Beau drove past her at the gas station on Harbor Road. He says your new stepsister is going to be a problem for the campaign. Is he right?"

"Beau hasn't met her."

"Beau doesn't need to meet people. He reads them off their bumper stickers." He's breathing hard, and he's easy about it, a man between rounds with nowhere better to be. "So I'm asking you. What's she like?"

"She's fine."

He laughs, low and pleased with himself. "Fine. You said the lobster roll at Dockside was fine, and then you went back four times. Don't fucking *fine* me, Cal. Is she sweet to you, or does she give it right back?"

"Is there a point to this call?"

"The point is you've been in a mood since spring, and this is the first thing in months that's made you pick up on the first ring." The chains of the bag rattle. When he speaks again, his voice has dropped. Rhett will say almost anything in a crowded gym, but not this. "Also, the party. We're still good?"

"We're still good."

"Good." Another punch lands, harder than the last. "Bring her. Let her see how the other half lives. I'll be on my best behavior, and you can stand in the corner looking like a funeral."

"I'm not bringing her as my date."

"I didn't say date. You did." I can hear him grinning down the line. "She gives it back, doesn't she? And she's got a good laugh. Tell me she doesn't have a good laugh. It's always the fucking laugh with you."

I hang up on him. He'll take that as a yes, and he won't be wrong. My phone lights up again almost at once. It's Silas.

Whitlock's boat just came in

He's drunk. He hit the dock.

Watch him.

Always.

The dots come back.

And her?

I look at that for longer than I should.

Her too.

The phone goes face down on the desk, and I go upstairs. It isn't a reason, and I don't need one. I want to see if she's still angry, that's all.

The east wing light is on, and her door is open. She's changed into an old Phillies shirt, washed thin, and her legs are bare. She's sitting on the floor, unpacking the trash bag into the dresser. She doesn't look up when my shadow falls across the carpet.

"Did you knock? I didn't hear a knock."

"You were at the window."

That gets her attention. She sits back on her heels and looks up at me. Color comes into her face, fast, all the way down her throat. "You were on the dock. Staring at the yacht club like it owed you money."

"And you watched."

"It was that or unpack a trash bag." She lifts her chin. "Sue me."

I lean on the doorframe and fold my arms. Her eyes go to my forearms, then snap back up to my face like she's been caught stealing again. I let her see that I saw it.

"Stay off the dock after dark," I tell her.

"Why? Is it yours?"

"At night, yes."

"What do you even do down there in the dark?"

"Think."

"About what? Your stock portfolio? How to make the new girl cry?"

"Nothing you'd like."

Something crosses her face, quick. Her mouth goes flat, and her eyes drop to the sweater in her hands. For a moment she isn't performing anything at all. It's the same look she had at dinner when she didn't know I was watching. Then it's gone, and she shoves the sweater into the bottom drawer like she's burying it. "Sure," she says. "No dock. I'll add it to the list of places I'm not welcome."

I should go. I don't. I stay in the doorway and watch her, because I want to and because she hates it. Every time she thinks I've stopped looking, her shoulders come down a little. That's when I get to see what she's like when she isn't fighting.

There's a black dress in there with the tags still on, and a stack of library paperbacks that never went back to Philadelphia. Then she reaches into the duffel and takes out something small and black. She slides it into the nightstand drawer so fast I almost miss it, turning her body to put her shoulder between me and her hands. My jaw goes tight. I wait for her to say something about it. She doesn't. She goes back to unpacking like nothing happened.

The last thing out of the bag is a photograph in a cheap frame. She sets it on the nightstand face down, carefully, like it might go off. Her fingertips rest on the back of it for a second too long.

Turning it over would take a single step. I stay where I am. The pull is physical, a hook behind my ribs, and my hand has already come off the

doorframe before I catch it. I put it back and grip the wood until it passes.

"What?" she says. She's caught me looking. "You're doing the searching face again. Is there something on my shirt, or is that just how your face sits?"

"You like it."

"I really, really don't."

"You kicked me at dinner."

Color floods her face all over again. "I didn't kick you."

"No," I say. "You didn't."

She stares at me, and I watch her decide not to touch that. She sits back on her heels. "Can I ask you something?"

"You're going to anyway."

"Why do you hate me? What's the actual reason?" She says it lightly. Her hands aren't light, though. They're gripping her knees. "Is it my mom? Because I get it, I do. But she's not a gold digger. She's a woman who got lucky for once in her whole damn life."

"Nobody's that lucky."

"Your dad's a grown man. Don't you think he's allowed to pick his own wife?"

"He's allowed to make mistakes too."

Her face goes hard and bright. "Wow. Okay. You're really going for the full villain edit, huh?"

"I'm being honest."

"No, you're being a dick, and you're enjoying it."

"Those aren't mutually exclusive."

She laughs. She doesn't mean to. It comes out of her in a surprised huff, and she presses her hand to her mouth to stop it. Over her fingers, her eyes are furious and a little wet. I feel it like a hand on the back of my neck. Very badly and very suddenly, I want to see what it would take to make her laugh like that on purpose. That's when I know I've been in this doorway too long.

"My mom says you had a hard year," she says, quieter. "What happened?"

The room goes cold, or I do. Last summer is a door I keep shut. I don't open it for my father, and I'm not opening it for a girl with overdue library books and a lie in her voice.

"Goodnight, Wren," I say. It's the first time I've said her name. It's a short name. It shouldn't take up that much room in my mouth.

"Goodnight, Callum," she says, like a dare.

I pull her door shut on my way out. Her side of the house goes dark behind me. Mine's already dark, and I don't turn the light on. In the back of my closet, behind the winter coats, there's a hook. Hanging on the hook is something that isn't a coat. It's turned to face the wall, the way I always leave it.

I lay two fingers against the back of it. It's cool, smooth and familiar, like the handle of a knife.

I close the closet door and stand at my window in the dark. Down the hall, a girl who didn't step back is lying in that enormous bed, next to whatever she hid in that drawer and a photograph she can't stand to look at.

Across the harbor, Grant Whitlock has just hit the dock with his own boat, drunk, because he can. The tide goes out late tonight. It'll go out again tomorrow night, and the night after that. It'll still be going out when he's run out of nights. We're patient. The water's patient.

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3

WREN

"Four out of ten," a man says as I come up for air. "And that's me being nice about the knees."

I push my wet hair out of my eyes. He's crouched at the edge of the pool with his forearms on his thighs, grinning down at me as if he's been waiting all afternoon for me to give him something to look at.

He's huge. Not gym-bro huge, where it's all for show, but the dense, heavy kind that looks like it's been hit a lot and didn't mind. His dark hair is buzzed close to his skull. His nose has been broken at least once and set a little crooked, and somehow it makes the rest of his face better.

His eyes are a warm brown that crinkle at the corners, as if he's in on a joke he'll tell you later if you're good. He's in gym shorts and a faded gray T-shirt with the sleeves cut off, his arms thick with muscle and still shiny with sweat. White tape is wrapped around both wrists. He looks like he walked out of a gym and onto this pool deck without stopping in between.

"Excuse me?" I say. "Who asked you?"

"Nobody. That's what makes it a gift." He tips his chin at the water. "You bent your knees on the way in. You went in like a folding chair. Technically that's a fucking three, but you looked good doing it, so I rounded up."

"Is there a panel I can appeal to, or is it just you?"

"Just me. I'm the whole panel, and I'm very hard to impress." He doesn't look hard to impress. He looks like he's having the best afternoon of his life.

"Come back up and try it again. I'll be right here."

Mom sent me out to say hi to "Callum's friends." When I came through the glass doors, all four men on the pool deck looked at me at once, and diving in seemed smarter than talking. I'm not sure it was though because now I'm treading water in the deep end while a stranger grades my knees.

"Are you going to show me how it's done," I ask him, "or do you just judge?"

"Rhett doesn't take his shirt off for free," another voice says from the loungers. "It's a whole policy. He has representation."

"I have standards," Rhett says, without taking his eyes off me. "Buy me dinner first, and we'll talk about the shirt."

The second man gets up off his lounger and walks over, so good-looking it's almost rude. He's tall and lean, with a swimmer's shoulders and a flat, tan stomach. His golden hair looks like a professional did it, then messed it up on purpose.

His eyes are a clear, startling blue. When he smiles, a dimple cuts into one cheek, just the one, as if even his face knows not to overdo it. He crouches beside Rhett and holds his hand out to me across the water, like we're at a fundraiser.

"Beau Whitmore," he says. "It's a real pleasure. I'd love your vote. And your number. Mostly your vote."

I shake his hand, because what else am I supposed to do, and he doesn't let go right away. "What are you running for?"

"Me? Nothing. I'm far too pretty for public office." He squeezes my fingers and lets go. "My father's running for governor. I'm deputy campaign manager."

"He made that title up," Rhett says.

"I made that title up," Beau agrees. "It's on a business card now, so legally it's real. I shake hands, I kiss babies, I stand behind him at podiums and look like the kind of son you'd trust with your pension. Which reminds me. You're not registered in this state, are you?"

"I'm from Philly, so no. Does that mean I'm off the hook for the vote?"

"It means I'll settle for the number."

"I don't give my number to guys who open with a campaign slogan."

"That's fair. That's very fair." He puts a hand over his heart. "Although I'll point out we've known each other for a minute and we're already bickering. My father's pollsters would call that a marriage. They've been

telling me for a year to settle down and look like a family man, because governors' sons who date around are bad for the suburbs." He looks at me, treading water, and then at himself, crouched on the edge in his nice haircut. "And here you are. Wet, available, and deeply uninterested in me. It's exactly what the voters want."

"You're insane. You know that, right?"

"I'm *electable*." He stands up and holds out a towel. "Good afternoon, wife."

"Oh my God," I say. I laugh, then clamp my mouth shut like I can take it back, and swim for the ladder. When I climb out, I take the towel, because it's a good towel, thick and warm from the sun. "Don't call me that."

"Don't encourage him," Rhett tells me. "Once Beau commits to a bit, he rides it all summer. Last year he called me *sir* for a month because I beat him at darts."

"You beat me because I was three drinks ahead of you," Beau says.

"You were three drinks ahead because you were losing." Rhett doesn't even look at him. He's watching me wrap the towel around my shoulders, and he lets me catch him at it.

I dry off and try to figure out where to put myself. The stone deck is hot enough to hurt my bare feet. The whole place smells like chlorine and coconut sunscreen, and a speaker somewhere is playing old hip-hop too quietly to matter. There are four loungers under a white umbrella, with a pitcher of lemonade sweating on a glass table. Past the loungers, in the shade of the pool house, there's Callum.

He's the only one not dressed for the pool. He's in a white linen shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbow, his sunglasses pushed up into his black hair. One ankle rests on his knee, with a tablet balanced on his thigh.

He's reading, or pretending to. The light through the leaves moves over his forearms, and I watch it longer than I mean to. He hasn't looked up once since I came outside. I know because I've checked a humiliating number of times, and every time I do my face gets hotter.

"Callum doesn't swim," Beau says, catching me looking. "Callum is swum *around*. Like a reef."

"I can hear you," Callum says, without looking up.

"I know, buddy. That's why I said it."

The fourth man is on the lounger farthest from everyone, half in the shade of the umbrella. He has a laptop open on his knees and headphones

hooked around his neck. He's lean and pale, as if he's made peace with never being tan. He's wearing a plain black T-shirt and black jeans in the middle of summer, with a silver ring on his thumb that he keeps turning while he types.

His dark hair falls into his eyes, and he doesn't push it back. When he finally glances up, his eyes are so dark they're almost black, set deep under straight brows. His face is all sharp, quiet angles, as if someone drew him in pencil and didn't bother with color. He hasn't said a word since I came out.

I sit on the lounger next to him, because it's the only empty one, and because out of the four he seems the least likely to talk about my knees.

"That one's taken," he says, without looking up.

"By who?"

He keeps typing. "You sat here because I looked like the one least likely to talk about your knees." The ring turns once under his thumb. "I'm not going to talk about your knees."

That's almost word for word what I was thinking, and he still hasn't looked at me. My face goes warm. I stay where I am anyway, and his jaw shifts, a small, hard movement, as if he's decided something about me and doesn't like it.

"I'm Wren, by the way."

"I know."

"Great. Do I get to know who you are, or is that classified?"

"Silas," Beau says. "Silas Kane. He's a consultant, cybersecurity. He protects rich people from other rich people. It's very lucrative and he doesn't enjoy anything."

"I enjoy things," Silas says.

"Name one thing you enjoy."

Silas thinks about it. "Quiet."

"Well, you've ruined it for him now," Beau tells me. "Sitting there. He'll never recover."

"She'll get bored," Silas says. "They always do."

"Jesus, Si," Rhett says under his breath, and Beau winces on his behalf.

"Bored of what, you?" I ask. "I worked brunch next to a line cook who only talked about his fantasy league. Compared to him, you're a vacation."

Silas's fingers stop on the keys. The pool filter hums into the gap.

"Then stay," he says, and goes back to typing as if he hasn't said anything at all.

I dig the red paperback out of my bag, because I need something to do with my hands that isn't watching Callum not watch me. The cover's creased, with a coffee ring on it. It's stamped with the address of the South Philly library I haven't been inside in ages. I open it to the folded-down corner.

Silas's eyes flick to the cover and back to his screen.

"It's good," he says. "The ending is bad."

"Don't spoil it. I've got forty pages left."

"I didn't. I said it was bad. I didn't say what happens."

"Don't take it personally," Rhett tells me. He comes over and sits on the end of my lounger, close enough that his knee is almost against my calf, and he doesn't bother pretending it's an accident. "He's read everything. He did the same thing to me in high school. He'd tell me what I had for breakfast every single morning, and it took me a year to figure out he was reading the crumbs on my shirt. You'll catch on faster."

"You ate a lot of Pop-Tarts," Silas says.

"And look how I turned out." Rhett spreads his arms, easy and pleased with himself, and the lounger creaks under him. "Be honest. Was it worth it?"

I laugh before I can help it, and when I look up, Callum is looking at me. It's only for a second, over the top of the tablet, gray and steady. Then he's looking at the screen again, as if it never happened, and the back of my neck is burning.

"So," I say, because there's only one thing I actually need from these people, and it isn't sunscreen. "My mom says the club party's coming up. Is it fun? She made it sound like the Oscars."

The pause is so short that anyone else would miss it. I've spent five years behind a bar reading people who didn't want to be read, and I don't miss it.

Beau's smile stays perfectly in place, but his eyes go somewhere else. Silas's thumb stops on his ring. Rhett opens his mouth with a joke already loaded, then closes it again. Callum doesn't move at all. He goes as still as the pool house wall behind him.

"Why do you want to know?" Silas says.

It's the first time he's looked straight at me. His eyes are flat and black, and they don't blink. The question doesn't sound like a question. It sounds like the answer's already in his head, and he's waiting to see if I'll lie.

My mouth goes dry. I make myself hold his stare anyway, because looking away first would be its own answer.

"Because I'm going," I say. "Because my mom bought me a dress. Is that allowed?"

"It's a very well-catered event," Beau says smoothly, stepping right over it. "There's a raw bar and a band, and several of my father's donors, which is a real treat."

"Last year it was..." Rhett starts, and stops.

"Rhett," Callum says. He still hasn't looked up. He says it quietly, like you'd say a dog's name before it steps into the road.

Rhett rubs the back of his neck. "It was fine. The band was good. They did the Temptations. You like the Temptations?"

"Sure," I say. "Who doesn't like the Temptations?"

I sip lemonade so I'll have something to do with my face. It's too sweet. My pulse is going hard in my throat, and I'm so aware of all four of them that the skin on my arms prickles.

They know something. Maybe not about Daisy. Maybe it's some rich-boy scandal, a fight or an affair. But something happened at that party last year, and every man at this pool just did the same thing when I mentioned it.

Or you're paranoid. You've been paranoid for a year.

So I stay, because leaving now would look like running. When I drop the towel and walk back to the deep end, Rhett gets up and follows me to the edge without being asked.

"Arms up by your ears," he says. "Lock your knees, and stop looking down at the water before you go. You keep checking it's still there."

"What if I don't trust it to be?"

"It'll be there. Trust your legs instead." He steps back to give me room, and his eyes go over me once, slow, with no apology in it at all. "Go on. Make me work for it."

It takes me four more tries. Each time I come up, he gives me a number and one thing to fix, in a low, easy voice, as if we're the only two people out here. On the fifth, I go in clean, and the water closes over me without a sound. When I surface, he's crouched at the edge again, and he isn't laughing at me anymore.

"Seven and a half," he says. "Hold out for the eight. It's worth waiting for."

Beau whistles through his fingers, and even Silas glances up. Callum doesn't.

The sun's gone lower by the time I've dried off and pulled my shorts on over my suit. I say goodbye to all of them on my way to the glass doors. Callum doesn't answer. Silas does, which is worse.

"Drive carefully," he says to his screen. "The roads here are bad at night."

It doesn't sound like advice. The skin between my shoulder blades crawls all the way through the cool white house and out the front door, and I don't let myself look back. In the Civic, the steering wheel is hot enough to sting my palms. I sit there with the engine running and the air conditioner wheezing, thinking about that pause. Then I put the car in drive and take the harbor road into town, before I can talk myself out of it.

Daisy's old building is on a narrow street a few blocks up from the harbor, above a shop that sells scented candles and signs with sayings on them. It's white clapboard, with a blue door and flowers in a window box. The whole place is trying really hard to look like nothing bad ever happened here.

I sit in my car across the street for a long time before I get out.

The landlady lives on the first floor. Her name is Mrs. Dolan, and she's small and gray-haired, in a cardigan in the middle of summer. When I tell her I'm a friend of Daisy's from Philly, her whole face changes.

"Oh, honey," she says. "Oh, that poor girl. Come in. Come in."

Her apartment smells like coffee and cat. She makes me sit at her kitchen table and tells me Daisy was a sweetheart. Daisy always paid her rent on time. When Mrs. Dolan had the flu, she came downstairs with soup. The roommate moved out after, she says. Nobody ever came for Daisy's things.

"Nobody?" My voice cracks. I cover it with a cough.

"Her mother called once, from out west. Said to throw it all out. I couldn't do it." Mrs. Dolan shakes her head. "Felt like throwing *her* out. I've got a box downstairs. You want it? You should have it. Someone should." She hesitates. "There was a little camera on her dresser, too. The throwaway kind. I had the pictures printed at the drugstore. I thought her family would want them."

I can't talk. I just nod, with my hands clamped together in my lap to stop them shaking. A stranger in a cardigan is the only person on earth who kept

her.

The box is in the basement, on a shelf between a dead air conditioner and a stack of paint cans. It's smaller than I thought it would be. Is this it? Is this all that's left? A whole person, and her stuff fits in a box you can carry under your arm.

There's a hairbrush with her hair still in it, blond and fine. There are a couple of T-shirts, a scarf, a mug from a diner in Providence, and a spiral journal with a cracked blue cover. At the bottom there's a paper envelope from a drugstore, the kind they give you when you get film developed.

Daisy loved disposable cameras. She said phones made everything look like evidence.

I open the envelope right there on the basement stairs.

The photos are from the summer party. I know it before I even look properly, from the white tent, the string lights and the harbor behind everything. There's a blurry shot of the band. There's one of someone's champagne glass held up to the camera. And there's Daisy, laughing, in my green dress.

She's so alive in it that my chest caves in. I tilt the photo toward the bare bulb like that'll bring her closer, and my throat closes around a sound I don't let out.

Her head is thrown back and her hair is coming down. She's laughing at whoever took the picture, the big ugly laugh she always hated in photos. She looks happy. Twenty-three, which is what she was. Like she has absolutely no idea.

I sit there on the basement stairs with my hand pressed over my mouth, and I shake.

It takes a long time before I can look at the photo properly, and when I do, I see him.

He's behind her, off to the left, standing at the edge of the tent in a white dinner jacket with a drink in his hand. He's handsome in a way that looks expensive, with good teeth and good hair. He isn't laughing at anything or talking to anyone. He's just watching her.

It's not a glance. It's the kind of look men give women across a bar when they think nobody's paying attention. Every bartender knows that look. It's the look right before someone's drink goes missing, or someone's friend has to call a cab.

My skin goes cold all over. Were you scared, Daisy? Did you see him looking? Did you even know?

I bring the photo upstairs. Mrs. Dolan puts her glasses on to look at it and makes a small, disgusted noise in her throat.

"That's the Whitlock boy," she says. "Grant Whitlock. Don't you go near him, honey. He had that whole business last year, with the girl from the college. They said he didn't do it." She takes her glasses off and folds them, very precisely. "They say a lot of things."

Even Grant Whitlock is showing his face this year, after all that business.

Richard said it last night at dinner, between bites of halibut. I didn't even look up from my water. How is that possible? How did I sit there and eat fish?

I thank Mrs. Dolan and hug her. She smells like coffee, and she tells me to come back anytime. I carry the box out to my car and put it on the passenger seat. Then I sit with my hands on the wheel and the photo on my knee.

I look it up on my phone. It doesn't take long. There are a lot of articles. Grant Whitlock, twenty-nine, heir to a shipping fortune, acquitted of sexual assault last winter after a trial the local paper called "a circus." The victim was a student at the state college. Her name isn't in any of them. His face is in all of them, smiling on the courthouse steps.

He's the only person I can put near my sister on the last night of her life. He's the only one watching her in a photo from that night. And he's going to be at the club party next week, having a drink, because he's allowed to.

I look at the photo of him watching her for so long that the car gets hot and my eyes start to burn.

"Okay," I say. My voice is shaking, and I let it. "Okay, you piece of shit. Let's talk."

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4

WREN

"You're not from here," Grant Whitlock says, sliding onto the stool next to mine like he owns it, which he probably does. "I'd remember you."

I don't look at him right away. That's the trick. Every bartender knows that the guy who sits down next to a girl who's ignoring him is already hooked. The more you ignore him, the harder he pulls. So I sip my iced tea and look out at the harbor a beat longer than I need to. Only then do I turn my head and smile.

"Philly," I say. "I'm here for the summer visiting my mom, and she married a member, so I'm technically allowed to sit on this stool."

"Philly." He says it like it's a cute little dog I brought with me. "What's a girl from Philly doing at the Port Halloway Yacht Club on a weekday afternoon?"

"Drinking an iced tea that costs nine dollars. What's your excuse?"

He laughs. It's a good laugh, warm and easy, which is the worst part.

I've been in the club's bar for most of the afternoon, waiting for him to walk in. It's all dark wood and polished brass, with navy leather stools and a long window over the harbor. Old regatta photos hang in gold frames along the walls, rows of sunburned men holding silver cups. The air conditioning is set to meat locker. The room smells like cut limes, sunscreen and the lemon oil someone rubs into the bar top every morning. I know that smell. Every nice bar I ever worked had it, and none of them were this nice. I've

been charging iced teas to Richard's member number, pretending to read and watching the door. Now he's walked through it.

He's handsome up close, even more than in the photo, with the tan, the good teeth and the kind of watch you're supposed to notice. He looks like someone's charming older brother. He looks like the kind of man a girl would laugh at, in a borrowed dress, at a party.

Smile, Wren. Smile like you mean it.

"Grant," he says, and holds out his hand.

"Wren."

"Wren." He holds on a little too long. His thumb moves once over the back of my knuckles. "Like the bird."

"Like the bird," I agree. I don't pull my hand away, even though everything in me wants to scrub it on my jeans.

My phone is face down on the bar next to my tea. The recording app has been running since I sat down. I found it in the app store in about four seconds. I've practiced flipping it on in my pocket until I can do it without looking.

He orders lunch for both of us without asking, lobster salad and a bottle of white wine I don't want. Then he talks about sailing and his father's company. There's a restaurant in New York that wouldn't seat him, so he bought the building. Somewhere between the salad and the check, he tells me I have beautiful eyes. He says it so smoothly I can tell he's said it to a lot of girls.

I laugh at the right places and lean in when he leans in. I let him refill my glass even though I'm only pretending to drink it, and when he goes to the bathroom I pour half of it into the potted plant.

It's disgusting. It's the most disgusting thing I've ever done, and I've cleaned the men's room at a sports bar the night the Eagles lost the playoffs. The whole time, the lobster salad sits in my stomach like it's trying to climb back out, greasy and sliding. I keep smiling through it.

"You should come back tomorrow," he says, when the bill comes and he signs it without looking. "Same time. I'll show you the good table."

"I don't know," I say. "My mom has plans for me most days, and I'm pretty sure half of them involve tennis."

"Skip the tennis. What's she going to do, ground you?" He grins. "Bring her along if you have to. Actually, don't. I'd rather have you to myself."

The next day he's already at the good table when I walk in. It's out on the deck under a striped umbrella, with a view of the whole harbor. Down in the marina, the halyards clink against the masts every time the wind picks up. The Sterling house sits white on the hill across the water. I can see my own window from here. The thought makes my stomach turn over.

"You know the Sterlings?" Grant asks, following my eyes. "Or are you just admiring the real estate?"

"My mom married Richard. I came with the package, like a free tote bag."

"No shit." He whistles. "You're Callum Sterling's little stepsister? Oh, that's good. That's very good. How's he taking it?"

"He thinks I'm going to steal the silverware."

"Sounds like him. Cold fish, that guy. Always has been." Grant sips his wine and studies me over the glass. "He hasn't warned you off me yet?"

"Why would he warn me off you? You seem perfectly nice."

His smile doesn't move, but his eyes do. They go flat, like a shark's, and then they warm up again so fast I'd miss it if I weren't looking for it.

"People in this town like to talk," he says. "I had some trouble last year. A girl with a grudge. It went to court, and the court said I didn't do anything, but people still talk. You'll hear it."

"What kind of trouble does a guy with a boat get into?"

"The boring kind. Lawyers, mostly." He reaches across the table and tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. His fingers brush my cheek. "I'd rather talk about you."

I smile at him. I let his hand stay on my face. Under the table, my own hand is a fist so tight my nails are cutting into my palm.

After lunch he drives me home in a low silver convertible with the top down. The seats are cream leather, hot from the sun, and the whole car smells like his cologne. He drives with one hand on the wheel and the other on my knee. It sits there the whole way, heavy and warm. Every time we go around a curve, his fingers slide a little higher. I watch the trees go by and think very hard about the knife in my nightstand drawer. I bought it outside Hartford and practiced with it in a motel mirror until the flick of it stopped feeling stupid.

He pulls up at the bottom of the Sterling drive and doesn't go up. "I'll let you walk the last bit," he says. "Your stepbrother and I don't really get along."

"Why not?"

"He's jealous." Grant winks. "They all are."

I walk up the drive with my legs shaking. The front door opens before I get there, and Callum is standing in it.

He's in a suit, like he's just back from work, with his tie loosened and his jacket over his arm. He looks at me, and then past me, down the drive, to where Grant's car is pulling away. His face doesn't change at all, but a muscle jumps in his jaw, once, and his fingers close on the jacket over his arm until the fabric creases.

"Whitlock," he says.

"Hello to you too. My day was great, thanks for asking."

"You've been at the club."

"Your dad has a membership, and I have his number. That's how memberships work." I try to step past him. He doesn't move. "Is there something you need, or do you just like standing in doors?"

"Stay away from Grant Whitlock."

"Why?" I cross my arms. "He says you're jealous of him. He says you all are."

"Because he's a predator." He says it flatly, like he's reading out a verdict. "The whole town knows it."

"A court looked at it and said he didn't do anything."

"A court said it couldn't prove it. That isn't the same thing."

"So prove it. If you know something the court didn't, I'd honestly love to hear it."

He looks at me for a long time. His eyes go to my knee, where my skirt's still pushed up a little from Grant's hand, and they stay there.

"I'm telling you once," he says, and his eyes come back up to mine. "Stay away from him."

"Or what?" I tip my chin up at him. "You'll tell on me? You'll have me banned from the club? What the hell are you going to do, Callum?"

He doesn't answer. He steps back out of the doorway and lets me go past. I can feel him watching me all the way up the stairs. In my room I shut the door and sit on the edge of the bed, with my hands pressed between my knees until they stop trembling.

Then I take out my phone and open the thread.

Had lunch with him again. Let him put his hand on my leg the whole way home. I'm doing it for you, Dais, and I still need to shower in bleach.

Delivered.

My thumb hovers over *Delete* until the screen goes dark on its own. I don't delete it. She'd have told me I was being a drama queen. She'd have told me she was proud of me, and then she'd have made me watch something stupid with her until I stopped shaking.

He's a predator. The whole town knows it.

So why the hell didn't anyone do anything? Why is he still walking around, eating lobster salad and putting his hand on girls' legs, while my sister's in a box in the ground? My face goes hot, then the rest of me, so fast that I have to scream into a pillow. Even then it doesn't go anywhere. It just sits in my chest and waits.

I don't sleep much. Every time I drift off, his hand is on my knee again, sliding higher on the curves. By the time the sky goes gray over the harbor, I've given up on sleep. I'm standing in front of the mirror in my bikini and shorts, with my phone in one hand and the knife in the other. He's taking me out on his boat this morning. My teeth are chattering so hard I can hear them.

What the actual fuck am I doing? Nobody gets on a boat alone with the only man they suspect of killing their sister. I almost don't go. Then I put the knife in my bag and go anyway, because every time I close my eyes I see him smiling on the courthouse steps.

His boat is huge and white, named after his mother, with teak decks so clean I'm scared to stand on them. Everything on board is cream leather and chrome. A bottle is already sweating in a bucket of ice, and it isn't even noon. We go out past the point, with the engine so loud I can feel it in my teeth. He steers with one hand and drinks with the other.

He makes me take off my shirt so I can "get some sun." I do it, because a girl who wants to be on this boat would. I sit on the white cushions in my bikini top while he looks at me over the top of his sunglasses and doesn't bother to hide it. My skin crawls everywhere his eyes land.

"So," I say, when we're far enough out that the town is just a line of white on the shore. "My mom said something happened at the summer party last year. A girl drowned or something?"

His hand stops on the wheel, just briefly, and his jaw moves. Then he takes a long drink and laughs. "God, this town. Can't let anything go."

"So something really happened? I figured she was being dramatic."

"She didn't drown. She OD'd. Some townie girl." He shrugs. "Tragic. Everyone was very sad. Why do you care?"

Some townie girl. The world goes very quiet around me. I can hear the water slapping the hull, a gull somewhere, and my own heart, thudding so hard it hurts. My bag is next to me on the cushion with the knife in it. For one clear moment I think about how easy it would be. He's looking at the horizon. He's not even looking at me.

I don't. I'm not stupid. I need to hear him say it.

"It's just creepy," I say. My voice comes out perfectly normal, and I don't know how. "A girl dies at a party and everybody goes back the next year like nothing happened."

"That's what parties are for." He turns and smiles at me. It doesn't reach his eyes. "You really want to hear about it? All the gory details?"

"Maybe. Nobody in this town will tell me anything, and I hate not knowing things."

"Then come find me at the party. I'll tell you everything." He reaches over and runs one finger down the side of my neck, slowly, until it stops at my collarbone. "Somewhere a little more private."

His finger doesn't move. I can feel my own pulse beating against it.

"Okay," I say, and I smile. My nails are digging so hard into the white cushion beside me that one of them bends back.

I keep smiling all the way back to the dock and all the way up the drive. Then I stand in the shower until the hot water runs out, scrubbing the side of my neck where his finger was. When I come out, my mother has hung a garment bag on the back of my bedroom door. It's for the party.

The night of the party, she zips me into what was inside it, a navy dress she bought me on Richard's card. It's simple and cut low in the back. It's the prettiest thing I've ever worn. She pins my hair up with her own hands, the way she did before my prom, humming along to the radio, and tells me I look like a movie star.

"Have fun tonight," she says. "Meet a nice boy. Richard says half the club's sons will be there."

"Then I'll meet the nicest one," I say. It comes out so easily that I hate myself a little.

In my clutch there's a lipstick, my phone with the recording app already open, and the knife.

Richard drives us down to the club with the windows open, and the music reaches us before the lights do. There's a huge white tent on the lawn, with string lights crisscrossing the ceiling. A band in matching suits plays Motown, and pink confetti on the dance floor sticks to everyone's shoes. Everyone is laughing. A year ago my sister stood in this tent and laughed too. I drink two glasses of champagne for real, just to stop my hands from shaking. It doesn't work.

Richard shows me off to everyone as "Nina's girl." Beau finds me by the raw bar and tells a donor's wife that I'm his wife. She looks so horrified that I laugh until I have to hold on to his arm.

"You can't just tell people I'm your wife," I tell him, when she's fled. "She's going to repeat it to the whole tent."

"I'm counting on it. It's the best press I've had all summer." He hands me an oyster. "You look stunning, by the way."

Rhett finds us by the ice sculpture. He's in a charcoal suit that was clearly cut for him, with his tie already tugged an inch loose, as if he gave it one honest try. He takes his time looking at me, from my hair to my shoes and back up, and he doesn't pretend he isn't doing it.

"Well, that's not fair," he says. "I came here planning to be the best-looking thing at this party."

"You might still be. The ice swan's starting to sweat."

He grins, slow, and turns to Beau without taking his eyes off me. "Am I allowed to tell your fake wife she looks hot, or is that going to cost your father a county?"

"It's allowed if you say it respectfully," Beau says.

"Respectfully, then." Rhett leans in, close enough that his shoulder brushes mine, and drops his voice so it's only for me. "You look hot. Save me a dance before he tells anyone else you're taken."

I laugh, a real one that gets out before I can stop it, and just briefly I forget why I'm here. Then I remember. In a little while I'm going to walk down to the water with the guy who might have killed my sister, and nobody at this party is going to know.

I don't see Silas. I don't see Callum until late, and then I do. He's at the bar at the far end of the tent, in a dark suit, with a glass of something amber in his hand. He's watching me, and he's not even pretending not to.

Then he's not at the bar anymore. He's beside me, close enough that his sleeve brushes my bare arm. He doesn't look at me when he speaks.

"Don't," he says.

"Don't what?"

"Whatever you're about to do."

My heart lurches. For a wild second I think he knows about the knife, the recording app, all of it. Then I remember that nobody knows. Nobody. "Is this the part where you tell me to stay off the dock?"

"This is the part where I tell you he isn't worth it."

"Worth what? You don't even know what I'm doing."

He looks at me then. It's one long gray look that goes all the way through me. I think he's going to say something true. His jaw moves. His eyes drop to my mouth and stay there a beat too long.

Then Beau calls his name from across the tent, and he's gone. My arm is still warm where his sleeve was.

Grant finds me after the band's second set. He's had a lot to drink. I can smell it on him when he puts his hand on the small of my back, bourbon and cologne. He leans in so close his mouth is almost at my ear.

"Come on, Philly," he murmurs. "I've got a bottle of something better than this down at the boathouse. Let's go find somewhere quiet, and I'll tell you all the gossip."

My pulse is so loud I can barely hear the band.

This is it. This is what you came for.

"Okay," I say. I smile up at him, and I put my hand in his.

He leads me out of the tent and across the lawn, toward the dark path that goes down to the water. At the edge of the light I look back once, because I can't help it. Callum is back at the bar.

His face hasn't moved. But his hand has closed around his glass so tight that even from here I can see the white of his knuckles.

I turn around and keep walking.

In my clutch, my thumb finds the phone. I tap the red button, and it starts to record. The path gets darker as the music gets farther away.

The boathouse is a black shape against the black water. Grant's hand is warm and damp around mine. When he opens the side door, the smell rolls out to meet us: diesel, wet rope and the sea.

"After you," he says.

I step into the dark.

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5

RHETT

"He's taking his sweet fucking time up there," I say into the radio. "Anyone want to tell me what he's doing, or am I supposed to guess from back here?"

The smile has the window by the kayaks, with a straight view up the lawn to the tent. "He's at the bar on his third bourbon. He keeps checking his watch, and he keeps looking at her, and I don't love either of those things."

"Is she drinking with him?"

"She's holding a glass. That isn't the same thing. She hasn't taken a sip since he found her."

"Quiet," the boss says in my ear.

Quiet's something I can do when it counts, whatever the others say about me, and tonight it counts.

I'm crouched behind a rack of rowing shells at the back of the club boathouse, with my weight off my left knee. The knee's been bad since I tore something in it sparring at seventeen. It holds when I need it to, and that's all I ask of it. The floor is old wet planking that's been soaking up harbor water since before my grandfather was born, and the cold comes straight up through my jeans. The whole place smells like diesel, wet rope and low tide.

Under the mask, my face is sweating. The mask is matte black, the kind that eats the light, with a crack down the left cheek from last spring. A very

bad man in a very nice house swung a baseball bat at my head, and the mask took the hit so my skull didn't have to. The boss told me to get a new one. I told him no. I earned that crack, and you keep what you earn. He let it go, which is as close as he gets to agreeing with me.

Rule one: under the masks, no names. Rule two: the boss's voice goes through the box, because his is the voice people around here would know. The mirror built it into the chin of his mask, and it makes him sound like a GPS that wants you dead. The rest of us do voices. Mine is lower and meaner, with the laugh taken out of it. It's the voice I use on guys who've just knocked me down and think they're winning. The smile does a game-show host he swears is a disguise. I've told him it isn't, and he doesn't care.

Up the hill the band is playing the Temptations again. It's the second *My Girl* tonight. The sound comes down over the lawn and across the water, bent and far away, like it's playing in another world. Up there it's champagne, crab cakes and old women in pearls. Down here it's dark, and it stinks like hell. We're waiting for a rapist to walk a girl down to us.

The boss isn't even down here yet. He's still up in that tent with a drink in his hand, keeping eyes on the two of them. His voice comes into my ear through an earpiece the size of a pea. He'll come down last, the way he always does.

We've been on Grant Whitlock for weeks. We know his boat, his car and which bars he likes, and which bartenders he overtips so they'll keep their mouths shut. There's the girl from the state college, the one every person in town has heard about. There are the others too, the ones who never went to the police.

The mirror found them. He sat in the dark with his screens for days and came out with their names. After that he didn't talk at all for a while. When the mirror goes quieter than usual, you know it's bad.

I read the college girl's statement. The mirror pulled it off a court server and didn't want me to see it. I read it anyway, on the floor of the gym after closing, with the lights off. She said she cried the whole time. She said afterward he apologized, as if he'd spilled a drink on her, and then he asked if she wanted a ride home. I taped my hands when I was done and worked the heavy bag until the tape went red at the knuckles.

The court let him go. We're here to finish what the court wouldn't. Get him alone, then give him to the tide. That was the whole plan, right up until a new girl showed up in town and walked straight into the middle of it.

"I still think she's the lure," I say.

"Noted," the boss says.

"Lunch with him twice. His car, with his hand on her leg the whole way home. His boat, out past the point, where nobody can see what happens on it." I count them off on my glove, even though nobody can see me do it. "What kind of girl gets on that boat with him? Tell me, because I'd fucking love to be wrong about this."

"Either it's a girl who doesn't know what he is, or it's a girl who knows exactly," the smile says.

"Or a working one. Men like him use a pretty girl to bring other girls to the party. She makes them feel safe, and then she walks them over to him." The boss says it without any heat at all, as if he's reading off a list.

"She lies," the mirror says.

It's the first thing he's said all night, and the line goes dead quiet behind it.

"Lies about what? Give me one thing," I say.

"Everything. To her mother, to Richard, to him," the mirror says. "She's good at it."

Nobody answers him, so I do.

"Then she's the lure, and we treat her like one." I dig my thumb into the side of my knee until it settles. "Pretty girls who help men like him get the tide, same as him."

There's a pause on the line. I can't see the mirror, but I know he's lying flat on the boards of the dock out past the water gate. He won't move a muscle until he has to. He never does.

"We haven't decided about her," the boss says.

"What's left to decide?"

"Whether she's with him."

I don't answer, because the trouble is, I met her.

I *met* her, at the pool. She went in like a folding chair and surfaced spitting. When I gave her a four, she looked at me as if she'd like to drown me in the shallow end. So I coached her. I crouched at the edge and talked her through it. Arms. Knees. Don't look down. She kept going back in without being asked. On the fifth try she went in clean, and I gave her a seven and a half. I've been scoring dives at that pool since I was a kid. Nobody's ever gotten a six out of me.

She was funny, and mean in the good way. Her laugh got out of her before she could stop it, and every time it did, she looked annoyed with herself. She spent the whole afternoon not looking at the one man by the pool who wasn't looking at her, and she was terrible at it. An hour ago, up in the tent, I told her she looked hot and watched her try not to laugh. She lost.

And for the last few days she's been getting on a rapist's boat.

My knuckles go into the wet boards until a splinter slides in, and I leave it there. I want to hit something. Him, first and always. But there's another part of me that wants to put her over my shoulder and carry her back up that hill before she gets anywhere near this room. That part isn't helping a damn thing.

"You've had eyes on her all night," I say into the radio. "What do you make of her?"

The smile takes a second. "She's still not drinking. And every time he looks away, she looks down the lawn toward the water. People who are having a nice time at a party don't keep checking the way down to the boathouse."

"People who are waiting for something do."

"Yes, and that's the part I keep coming back to."

Head in the fight, dumbass. You don't get to like her. If she's the bait, she's the bait.

I don't get nervous before a fight. I eat a steak the night before, sleep like I've been knocked out, and walk to the ring grinning. Tonight my mouth's dry as chalk, and my stomach's sitting high under my ribs. Either she's exactly what the boss thinks she is, or she isn't. We're about to find out in the dark, with a tarp.

"Movement. Two of them, coming down the path," the mirror says in my ear, flat and quiet.

Everything in me goes hot and loose, the way it does in the corner before the bell.

"Here we go. Round one," I say.

"Moving," the boss says. His voice comes rough and uneven through the box, the way it does when he's running.

There's a soft splash out past the water gate, then another. The boss comes in through the gap by the pilings, soaked to the knees from the shallows, and goes straight past the mirror into the dark at the back without

a sound. He took the rocks. The path is faster if you're drunk and slow, like Whitlock. The rocks are faster if you're not.

"Positions," he says.

The side door creaks. Light comes in from the path, gold and hazy, with two shapes in it. Whitlock is first, big and loose with booze. Then her. The door swings shut behind them, and it's dark again. My eyes have had a long time to get used to it, and theirs haven't. I watch them stumble.

Up in the tent she was a girl at a party. Down here, in the gray light off the water, she looks like something out of an old movie, the woman who turns out to be the one who did it.

My chest tightens in a way I don't like at all. It'd be easier if she were plain. It'd be a hell of a lot easier if she looked like she belonged with him.

"Oh no. She's lovely. I hate that," the smile murmurs in my ear.

"Get in line," I mutter.

"Where's the light? I can't see a thing in here," she says. Her voice is high and breathless. Excited or scared, I can't tell which.

"You don't need to see. Come here." Whitlock laughs, wet and sloppy.

He's got a bottle, and he's fumbling with it. He sets it on the workbench and misses the edge, so it rolls. He swears and grabs for it. She laughs at him, a pretty, tinkling laugh that's nothing like the one at the pool. It's the fake one. I spent an afternoon with the real one, and this isn't it.

"Look at him. He can't even get a bottle onto a table. That's the piece of shit we've been losing sleep over for a month?" I breathe into the radio.

"Focus," the boss says.

"She's talking to him. I can't hear it over the band, and neither can he, honestly. He's too busy looking at her mouth," the smile murmurs.

She's leaning in close to Whitlock, talking low and fast with her hand on his arm. He's nodding along without listening. I can't hear a word over the band and the water slapping the pilings. I'd give a lot to hear it. What's she telling him? Where to find the next girl? Which one's drunk enough to walk down here?

Then Whitlock gets tired of talking.

He puts his hand on the back of her neck and pulls her in. He goes for her mouth, and she turns her head.

She turns it late, and not far enough. His mouth catches the corner of hers and drags. When she pulls back there's a smear of lipstick on her cheek, dark in the gray light, like a bruise.

And her face. For a heartbeat, right after, her face isn't pretty or laughing or anything at all. Her mouth goes flat and her eyes go huge. Her whole body locks up under his hand, the way people lock up right before they're sick. I've seen that look on people in the ring, the moment they understand they're hurt.

A girl who's in on it doesn't do that. A girl who's in on it kisses him back.

"Boss, did you see her face?" I say, very low.

"I saw it," the boss says.

"She doesn't want that. She can't stand him touching her."

"I saw it."

Then her face snaps back into place, so fast it's scary. She's laughing again, pushing at his chest, *not yet, not here*, and he's laughing too. I don't know what I saw. My hands are steady inside my gloves, but my heart isn't. I've been hit in the head by a lot of people, and none of them ever scrambled me the way she just did.

What the fuck are you doing down here, girl?

Even through the box, there's something in the boss's voice I haven't heard before. "Remember, we came for him. Not her. Nobody touches her until we know."

"Copy," the smile says.

"Copy," the mirror says.

"Copy. Nobody touches her," I say.

I stand up behind the rowing shells. For a big man I can be quiet when I want to be, and nobody ever expects it. I step out and move along the wall until I'm between them and the side door, my back to the boards. Now there's no way back up the path to the party, to the lights and the band still playing as if nothing's wrong.

Whitlock hears me. Maybe a board creaks, or maybe some animal part of his brain finally wakes up. He turns his head and sees me, a shape against the wall, big and black, with a crack running down its face.

He freezes. Then he does what every coward I've ever met does.

He grabs her.

His hand clamps around her wrist hard enough that I hear her gasp. He yanks her in against his side, and her heels skid on the wet boards. She doesn't scream. She doesn't make a sound. She just stares at me over his shoulder with those huge eyes, and I feel it all the way down my spine.

By the kayaks, the smile rises out of the dark with his painted grin shining red. He's got the tarp tucked under his arm like a picnic blanket. Out past the water gate, the mirror stands up on the dock. The moonlight hits his mask, and it's just a blank oval full of black harbor.

Whitlock's breathing hard. So is she, and so am I.

The mirror's voice is so quiet in my ear that I almost miss it. "Her hand's in her bag. Her right hand. It's been in there since the lawn."

"What's in the bag?" I breathe.

"Don't know."

"If that's a gun, I'd like to fucking know before she uses it on the wrong one of us."

"Wait," the boss says.

So I wait. Waiting is the hardest thing I do, harder than any round I've ever gone. Every muscle I own wants to go, the same as when a guy drops his hands and leaves his chin hanging out there like a gift. I stand with my fists closed and my heart punching the inside of my ribs. I wait.

"Easy. Easy, big man. Don't do anything stupid," I say, in my low, mean voice.

He does something stupid. His hand tightens on her wrist until her fingers go white, and I want to break every bone in it. I stay exactly where I am, because the boss said wait.

Then, right in front of them, out of the deepest part of the dark, the last of us steps out.

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6

WREN

Grant Whitlock's hand is still locked around my wrist when the last mask steps out of the dark.

That makes four of them. One is by the kayak rack, and another is blocking the door back to the lawn. A third stands out on the dock past the open water gate, where the harbor slaps at the pilings. The last is right in front of us, closer than any of them, in a plain white mask with no mouth.

Nobody moves. The boathouse smells like diesel, wet rope and Grant's cologne, which he's apparently bathed in. Up the hill the band is playing Motown to a tent full of people in linen who have no idea.

Okay. Okay. This is fine. This is a totally normal night at the yacht club.

It's not fine. A normal night at the yacht club is warm chardonnay and someone's uncle explaining crypto to me. My knees have gone to water. The only thing holding me up is the hand of the man I came down here to corner.

When the white mask speaks, what comes out isn't a voice. It's flat and electronic, like someone sanded the person right off it. "Grant Whitlock."

Grant's fingers dig into the bones of my wrist. "Who the hell are you people?"

"And his friend."

It takes me a second to understand that the friend is *me*.

"I'm not his friend." It comes out high and thin, so I swallow and try again. "I don't even like him."

The guy in the black mask laughs. He's huge, wide through the chest and shoulders. He stands loose and easy, like a fighter waiting on the bell. His mask is matte black with a crack running down one cheek, as if someone already tried to break it on his face and lost. I'm calling him Cracked in my head. The alternative is calling him *the giant who's about to kill me*, and I'm trying to stay positive. "Yeah? You always follow guys you don't like into the dark?"

"I followed him down here because..."

Because I wanted him to tell me what happened to my sister. Because there's a recording app running on the phone in my clutch. Tucked in beside it is a folding knife I bought at a gas station outside Hartford.

None of which I can say to four strangers in masks, so I shut my mouth.

"'Because,'" Cracked says, dragging the word out like he's tasting it. "Cool. Love that."

The man on the dock hasn't said a word. His mask is a smooth mirrored oval, and when I look at him I see myself. My hair is falling out of its pins. My lipstick is smudged at the corner where Grant tried to kiss me and I turned my head too late. My eyes are enormous. I look like a deer that wandered into a hunting lodge and sat down for the buffet.

Mirror, then.

My stomach drops. I know what this looks like from where they're standing: a girl who walked into the dark with Grant Whitlock on purpose. How long have they been watching him? How long have they been watching *me* with him? Long enough, apparently.

"How long have you known him?" the white mask asks.

"Not long." My voice wobbles. "A few days."

"A few days. Lunch at the club, twice. His car. His boat." The flat voice doesn't change at all as he ticks them off on his fingers. "And tonight you let him walk you down here in the dark."

My mouth goes dry, and I have to swallow twice before anything comes out. "You've been following me?"

"We've been following him," the white mask says. "You keep showing up."

I lift my chin, because apparently I've decided the move here is to argue with the masked men. "I had a reason."

"Sure you did," Cracked says. "Last girl he brought down here had a reason too. She thought he was a nice guy."

"I don't think he's nice," I say. "I think he's a creep with a boat."

"Then what the fuck are you doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?" I fire back, which is maybe not the smartest thing to say to a guy that size.

"She's lying," Grant says, fast. "Ask her anything. She'll lie."

"Nobody's talking to you, Whitlock," Cracked snaps.

The man by the kayaks wears a mask with a painted smile, red and wide, like a clown from a kid's birthday party who's seen some things. Smiley. Obviously. He has a folded tarp tucked under his arm like a yoga mat, and my stomach turns over at the sight of it. There's only one reason to bring a tarp to a boathouse. "Grant," he says, warm as anything. "Buddy. Let's not make this a whole thing."

That's when Grant makes it a whole thing.

He yanks me back against his chest and clamps his forearm across my throat. The edge of the workbench bites into my hip. The whole world shrinks down to his breath, hot and sour, against my ear.

"She brought me," Grant says. "You want someone, take her. It was her idea. She's been all over me all night, ask anyone."

My throat burns. My pulse slams against his arm so hard I can't get any air past it.

He's selling me. He's actually selling me to them.

What a piece of shit. What an absolute, gold-plated, monogrammed piece of shit.

The white mask takes a step. "Let her go."

"So you can kill me? No. I don't think so." Grant drags me backward toward the water gate, and my heels skid on the wet boards. "Here's how this is going to go—"

I don't find out how it's going to go.

My clutch is still pinned under my arm, and my hand is already inside it. I practiced this in a motel mirror until the move stopped feeling stupid: thumb on the stud, one quick flick. The blade opens with a click nobody else can hear over the band.

I don't think about Daisy. Or anything. I put the knife into the soft place under his ribs, just like the video showed me, and I pull up.

Grant makes a small, surprised sound, like he stepped off a curb he didn't see. His arm goes loose. I twist out from under it and turn around. He's staring down at his shirt, at the dark soaking through the white.

"You," he says.

I hit him again, higher, in the side of his neck.

He folds onto the boards and doesn't get up.

Up the hill, the song ends, and people clap.

I stand over him with the knife in my fist, and I can't feel my fingers. The blood on my wrist starts out warm and cools fast. My knees feel like they're about to fold under me. I think I'm going to throw up, and then somehow I don't. My teeth are chattering. Underneath the chattering there's something worse, something bright and hot that isn't sorry at all.

Nobody moves. The four masks are frozen exactly where they were, as if someone hit pause on them.

Smiley tips his head to the side. It takes him a second to find his voice. "Well," he says. "Okay. And I brought a tarp for nothing."

A laugh cracks out of me, awful and wet, and I clap my bloody hand over my mouth.

Cracked crouches beside Grant and presses two gloved fingers to his neck. He holds them there for a long time. Then he looks up at me and lets out a low whistle. I can't see his face, but I can hear the grin in his voice.

"Hell of a first round, champ."

"I'm not... he was... I didn't..."

"Oh, you did," Cracked says. "You fucking did. Look at him."

I don't want to look at him. "Don't call me that."

"Too late," Cracked says, already pushing up off his knees.

"Yeah, that's your name now," Smiley says, and he sounds genuinely sorry about it. "He does that. Just roll with it."

"Can we focus?" the white mask says.

I look down at Grant anyway. His eyes are open. There's a piece of pink confetti from the dance floor stuck to his cheek.

That's when it lands on me, all at once, cold and heavy.

Grant Whitlock was at the party the night Daisy died. He's in the photo. He's the only person in this whole town I could put next to her on her last night. I brought him down here to make him talk. Now he's never going to say anything to anybody again.

"He was going to tell me," I whisper.

The white mask tilts its head. "Tell you what?"

I don't answer. I can't. Whatever Grant knew is running out of him into the cracks between the boards.

You idiot. You absolute idiot. You had one question.

Mirror moves first. He steps in off the dock and comes straight at me. I flinch back into the workbench with the knife up between us. My hand is shaking so hard the blade catches the light in little jumps.

He stops just out of reach and holds out a gloved hand, palm up.

"Keep the knife," he says. His voice is low and roughened, pitched under the music, and it sounds put on. "You seem attached to it. I want the bag."

"Why?" I ask, clutching it tighter against my ribs, as if that's going to help.

"Because you've had a hand on it since the lawn."

Then he just waits. In his mask I can see myself again, only now there's blood on my chin. Very cool look for me. Really pulls the whole outfit together.

"Give it to him," the white mask says.

"Why would I give him anything?"

"Because you're standing over a dead man, and we're the only people here who aren't calling the cops."

I want to spit at him. He's right, though. My hand is already holding the clutch out before I've decided anything.

Mirror takes it, pulls out my phone and looks at the screen for a long time. The recording app is still running, the little red light blinking away.

"Forty minutes," he says. "You started it before he grabbed you. Who's it for?"

"Me."

It's the truest thing I've said all night. In the glass of his mask, my own face says it back to me, and it doesn't look convinced either. He plugs something small and black into the charging port and taps through a few screens. Then he pulls it out and hands the phone back to me. The recording's stopped.

"Did you delete it?" I ask.

He tilts his head. "You'd rather keep a recording of yourself killing a man?"

"I'd rather know who has it."

"Nobody, now."

"Believe it or not," Smiley tells me, "that's him being chatty."

"Is he going to hurt me?" I ask Smiley, because he seems to be the customer service desk.

"Him? Nah. He's the nice one." Smiley thinks about it for a second too long. "Mostly."

The white mask walks toward me, and the others go quiet in a way that tells me he's in charge. I haven't named him yet. Some things you don't make cute. He isn't in any hurry. He stops close enough that I have to tip my head back, with the workbench hard against my spine and nowhere left to go. His mask is so blank and so white that I can't stop staring at the place where a mouth should be.

"The knife," he says.

I tighten my grip. It's slick, and it's the only thing I have. "No."

"I'm not going to take it from you."

"Then what?" I ask, and it comes out so small I barely hear it myself.

"You're going to give it to me."

"That's a bold assumption," I tell him, and my voice only cracks a little.

He doesn't reach for it. He just stands there and waits, like he has all night, like I'm the only thing in this boathouse worth waiting for. The worst part is how badly some wrecked piece of me wants someone to take this weight out of my hand. I want someone to tell me what happens next.

I turn the knife around and hold it out to him handle first.

He takes it gently and wipes the blade on a white handkerchief. Then he folds the handkerchief around it and tucks it inside his coat.

"That's mine," I say, and it comes out petulant, like a kid whose ball just went over the fence.

"It's insurance."

"For who?"

"For everyone here who'd like to keep breathing."

Then he reaches into his coat again and comes out with two old silver coins, worn almost smooth. He kneels next to Grant and opens Grant's slack mouth with his fingers. He slides the first coin under his tongue.

"What is that?" My voice cracks. "What are you doing?"

"Paying his fare," Smiley says, like it's obvious. "For the ferryman. You can't cross the water if you don't pay. Everybody knows that."

"What? Nobody knows that."

"Well, now you do. Welcome aboard."

The white mask stands and takes my right hand, the bloody one. He turns it palm up. His glove is cool and damp from the harbor. He opens my fingers slowly, lays the second coin in the middle of my palm, and closes my hand around it.

"You paid his fare," he says. "That one's yours."

The coin is warm from his coat. His thumb stays on my knuckles a second longer than it needs to. Something low in my stomach turns over that has nothing to do with fear. I want to scream at my own body. *Seriously? Now? There's a dead man on the floor, you traitor.*

"Who are you?" I ask. "Who *are* you people?"

"Doesn't matter," he says.

"It matters to me."

"Not tonight it doesn't." He lets that sit. "We came for him. We haven't decided about you yet."

"Decided what?"

"Whether you're with him."

"I'm not," I say, too fast.

"Then prove it."

"And until you decide?"

He lets go of my hand.

"Until then," he says, "you belong to us."

I should be terrified, and I am. The shaking has spread from my hands into my knees, and my jaw is clenched so hard it aches. *Belong.* Like I'm a car they towed. Some pathetic part of me is so relieved that someone else is doing the talking that my eyes start to burn. I'm not going to cry in front of four men in Halloween masks and a dead guy on the floor. Later, in the shower, I'll cry like a professional.

"What happens to him?" I ask, and I make myself look at Grant when I say it.

"Grant's leaving the party early," Smiley says. "Family emergency. We'll put out a statement."

"You'll *what*?"

Cracked nudges Grant's shoulder with the toe of his boot. "Who's grabbing his legs?"

"Not me," Smiley says, backing up a step with his hands raised.

"It's never you."

"I have a bad back."

"You don't have a bad back. You have a lazy ass."

"I have extensive documentation of a back. Ask my chirop—"

The white mask doesn't even turn around. "Both of you. Now."

Then he turns the blank white face back to me. "Go back up. Wash your hands. Smile at someone."

"That's it? I just go back to the party?"

"Take the path on the left," Cracked says. "There's a bathroom in the pool house nobody uses. Scrub under your nails. That's where the DNA hides."

The path is dark, and my legs don't feel like mine. I walk it like the drunk girl leaving early, one hand trailing along the hedge. If anyone sees me, that's the story, and it's better than the true one. The pool house door sticks, and I have to put my shoulder into it. Inside, a fluorescent light buzzes over a white sink. When I turn on the tap, the water swirls pink.

Pink like strawberry milk. I grip the edge of the sink until the urge to laugh passes, because if I start, I'm not sure what comes out after it.

I scrub until my knuckles are raw and the water runs clear. Then I keep scrubbing, under my nails, between my fingers, on the inside of my wrist where his fingers dug in.

My dress is navy. Did I pick it because it's pretty? Or did some part of me already know I'd need a color that doesn't show blood?

Don't. Don't think about that right now.

I push the coin down into the cup of my bra, where it sits against my heartbeat like it belongs there. Then I fix my hair and my lipstick. I smile at the mirror, and the girl in it smiles back. She looks great. She looks like she's never stabbed anyone in her life. Lying bitch.

I go back up the long way, around the dark side of the hedge, where the sprinklers have left the grass soaked. My heels sink in with every step. The music gets louder, and then the light finds me at the edge of the lawn.

The tent is loud and golden, packed with people. My mother is laughing at something Richard said, one hand on his arm, her new diamond throwing little sparks of light. A waiter drifts past with a tray of champagne. Someone's kid is asleep across two chairs.

My mother spots me before I can get past her. She catches my arm, and her bracelet is cold against my raw wrist.

"There you are. Where'd you disappear to? Richard wants a picture of all of us."

"I was in the bathroom," I say, which is technically true. "Sorry. I didn't know anyone was looking for me."

She peers at me. "You're all flushed, sweetheart. How much champagne have you had?"

"Two glasses. It's just hot in here." I fan myself with my hand like an idiot, which isn't helping my case.

"Wren, it's freezing. Half the women here are in wraps." She tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. I lock my knees so she won't feel me shaking. "Go get yourself some water, and then come find us for the picture."

"Water, then picture. I'll be right there."

She lets me go. I head for the bar, because it's the farthest place from her that still counts as doing what she said.

Callum is standing alone at the end of it.

He's in a dark suit, collar and tie perfect, with a glass of something amber in his hand. He doesn't look at me. The hems of his pants are dark and damp, like he walked across the lawn after the sprinklers came on.

He still doesn't look at me when he pulls a cocktail napkin off the stack. He holds it out to me sideways, the way he'd hand one to a stranger.

"You've got something on your hand," Callum says.

I look down. There's a thin rust-colored line in the crease of my knuckle where I missed it.

My heart stops, and then it starts again.

I take the napkin. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Callum says, and walks away.

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7

SILAS

"He's heavier than he looks," Rhett says, settling his end of the tarp against his boot.

"They always are," Beau says.

Rhett turns his head. "And how the fuck would you know that?"

"I've watched a great many documentaries. I'm extremely prepared on paper." Beau smooths a wrinkle out of the tape with his thumb, and nobody laughs.

We're past the point with the running lights off. The tide has just turned, and the harbor moves under us, black and flat. Callum's at the wheel. He hasn't said a word since the dock.

The engine idles with a low cough under the deck. The tarp lies between Rhett's feet and Beau's, and Grant Whitlock is inside it. He'll ride the ebb out past the ledge and come back in on the rocks in a day or two. Things on this stretch of water always do. Beau taped the tarp. The tape is very neat.

I'm in the stern with my phone in my lap. The clone is still copying. The bar crawls across the screen, stops, then crawls again.

"How long?" Callum says, without turning around.

"Longer than I want."

"Silas."

"It's a big phone. She keeps everything."

Rhett has one hand braced on the gunwale and the other flat on the tarp. He's been quiet the whole way out, which isn't like him. When he finally

talks, it's low, as if the water might be listening.

"She went in under the ribs and pulled up," he says. "Then she went for the neck, with his arm across her throat. That isn't panic. Where does a bartender learn to do that?"

"The internet, probably," Beau says. "It's where everyone learns everything now."

"I learned it from a guy named Sal who'd done time, and it took me a year before I could do it without thinking. She did it twice in about a second." He shakes his head once. His knee is bothering him, and he shifts off it when he thinks nobody's looking. "Hell of a first round. I stand by it."

"You gave her a nickname," Callum says.

"I call everyone something. It doesn't mean anything."

"You gave a witness a name to remember you by. Out loud, from two feet away."

Rhett doesn't grin. "It slipped. I'm not going to pretend it didn't."

"A lot of things slipped tonight."

"For what it's worth, I thought the nickname was charming. It humanized us," Beau says.

"We don't need humanizing," I say.

"Speak for yourself. I'm polling terribly with masked women."

Callum cuts the engine. The quiet comes in fast behind it: water against the hull, and the hiss of the ebb running out past the ledge. There are no other boats. The yacht club's lights are small and gold behind us. Farther around the point, the Sterling house is dark except for one light in the east wing.

Her light's on. I look at it longer than I should, and I don't say anything.

We do it the same as every time. Rhett and Beau take the ends. Callum crouches, folds back the top of the tarp, and checks that the coin is still under the tongue. His face doesn't change. When he nods, they lift. Grant Whitlock goes over the side with barely a sound, just a heavy slap and a long settling. The black water closes over him and moves on toward the ledge, the way we planned it would.

Nobody says anything for a while. Rhett crosses himself, badly, the way his mother taught him. Beau looks at the water like he's waiting for it to ask him a question.

"She saw your mask," Callum says to Rhett, finally. "She'll know it again."

"Everyone who's seen it that close is either in the harbor or too scared to say shit."

"She's neither. And she's seen all of them close."

"So what do we do?" Beau asks. "I'm genuinely asking, because I don't have talking points for this one."

"We find out what she is." Callum turns to look at me. His eyes are gray and flat in the dark. "Silas."

"I'm working on it."

"Work faster."

The bar on my screen jumps, fills, and turns green.

Callum drops me at the marina without a word, and I walk the rest of the way. The street is empty, the bars dark, the cobbles slick where the fog has come in off the water. I live on the top floor of the old sail loft on Wharf Street. The stairwell still smells like canvas and tar, a century after the last sail came through. Long windows look out over the harbor, with long tables under them. There are three monitors, a server rack and a kettle. I leave the overhead light off, like always. The screens lay a cold blue across the floorboards, and the server rack hums. Down on the water, a loose halyard knocks against a mast, over and over. I make tea and leave it steaming next to the keyboard, where I'll forget it. Then I open her phone.

A phone is a person turned inside out. It's where people keep what they can't say, so it's the most honest thing they own. I've been inside a lot of them, mostly belonging to men like Whitlock. Their phones are all the same phone. There are screenshots of women who didn't answer them, and payments at bars they swore they weren't at. There are late-night searches for things they'd pay to have deleted. I know what I'm looking for, and I usually find it fast.

I start with the camera roll, because that's where people forget they're being watched.

It's mostly other people's hands. A bartender's hands hold up a drink she made, under a neon sign with the name of a bar in Philadelphia. There are limes, a lot of limes, and a gray pit bull that isn't hers, asleep on a bar stool. There are screenshots of rent receipts. She's saved dozens of memes out of group chats, the dumb kind people send each other when they can't sleep. A raccoon eats grapes out of a paper bag. A cat is captioned *me explaining to my landlord why rent is late*, and a blurry Wawa at night is labeled *my*

church. There's a cracked ceiling over a bed, taken in the dark, for no reason I can see.

Then a girl.

She's blond and small, with a gap between her front teeth. She's laughing at whoever's holding the camera. She's in a lot of these, asleep on a couch with her mouth open or making a face in a car. In one she's holding up a paper plate of birthday cake with a crooked candle stuck in it. Wren is beside her, younger, blowing it out for her while she yells.

I stop scrolling.

My other phone buzzes on the table. Rhett. He never texts when he can call, and he never calls when he should sleep.

"Tell me you're still up," he says.

"I'm working."

"Good, then you can tell me." There's the sound of a refrigerator door, a can opening. "Is she a lure? I don't need the whole report tonight. I need yes or no."

"I don't know yet."

"You always know. You knew what I ate for breakfast every day of high school."

"That was crumbs on your shirt, Rhett."

He doesn't laugh. Rhett always laughs. "She was shaking after. Did you see her hands? She held that knife up at you like she'd use it, and the blade wouldn't stay still."

"I saw."

"I've stood across from a lot of people who were faking it. Nobody who does this for a living shakes like that."

"Go to sleep."

"I tried. Every time I close my eyes I hear that little sound he made." A long swallow. "Call me when you know."

"Callum first."

"Yeah," he says. "I know how it works." He hangs up without saying goodbye. He never says goodbye either.

I look back at the screen, and I know this face. It's been in front of me most nights for a year. I've watched the last footage anyone has of her until I could draw every frame from memory. It's Daisy in a borrowed green dress, walking away from a white tent and out of the light.

I sit without moving while the tea goes cold beside my hand. Then I go looking for her name, because I need this to be a coincidence.

Her license is there, photographed for a car rental in the spring. *Wren Elise Quinn,* born in Philadelphia. The girl in the photographs has a different last name. I find it on a funeral home receipt from last summer, paid by Wren Quinn. The sum emptied Wren's checking account to the dollar. There's an old bus ticket from Philadelphia to Providence, bought with cash by a sixteen-year-old. There are two birth records that were never meant to sit side by side, with the same father's name on both. It isn't a coincidence. They're half-sisters, and nobody in this town has any idea.

I open the messages with my thumb cold on the trackpad. One thread is pinned to the top. Its contact photo is the blond girl with the gap in her teeth, and the name is just *Dais*. The last message from her side is a year old.

omw back, don't wait up, love u dumbass

Under it, everything is Wren's. There are hundreds of messages, and none of them have been read.

where are you

dais answer your phone

they're saying you took something. you didn't take something. you don't even take advil

i'm coming up there

pick up, dais. please.

"Jesus," I say, to nobody. Weeks go by, and the messages change. They get shorter, until they sound like something she'd call out to a person in the next room.

miss you, idiot

saw a dog that looked like the one you wanted

miss you, idiot

bar closed. i quit before it closed. don't be mad

miss you, idiot

I stop counting at forty. Then come the last few days, in this town.

Made it. The house is obscene.

The stepbrother is a nightmare. You'd have loved him.

I found him, Dais. He's in your pictures. I'm going to make him say it.

Had lunch with him again. Let him put his hand on my leg the whole way home. I'm doing it for you, Dais, and I still need to shower in bleach.

She didn't come here with Whitlock. She came here *for* him. I close my eyes, and Daisy is behind them in the green dress, walking out of the light. I open them again.

Her search history covers a single week. *Grant Whitlock acquittal. Port Halloway yacht club summer party. Girl found on rocks Port Halloway. How long does it take to learn to use a folding knife. Where to stab someone so they can't hold you.* That last one came from a motel on Route 6, late at night. She searched it three different ways before she found a video she liked. Anyone could find these. A cop could find them with one subpoena and a bad afternoon. I copy them and leave them where they are, for now. My hand isn't quite steady on the trackpad.

The recordings are in a folder called *G.* She started recording the day she sat down at the club bar. I play the first one low. There's the clink of glasses and the hum of the bar's air conditioning, then Whitlock's voice, easy and warm.

"*Wren. Like the bird.*"

"*Like the bird.*"

She sounds pleased, like a girl who's flattered. I play it back and listen to the gap before she answers. There's a little catch at the front of her breath. It's the sound of someone bracing so she won't flinch.

The second one is the car, mostly wind noise and the radio. The third is the boat, and her voice on it is perfectly steady.

"My mom said something happened at the summer party last year. A girl drowned or something?"

"*She didn't drown. She OD'd. Some townie girl.*"

Then there's a silence, long enough that I check the recording hasn't stopped. It hasn't. It's just her, not breathing.

The last file is from tonight.

I know what's on it, and I play it anyway with the volume almost off. There's music far away, then a door and her heels, and then the rest of it. Rhett's fake voice fools nobody, and Beau's is worse. Callum's comes through the box, flat as a blade. Then Whitlock is choking. After a click, there's only her breathing, fast and wet. Rhett is very close to the phone, saying *hell of a first round, champ*. Then my own voice asks her who it's for, she says *me*, and my hand pulls the cable. After that there's nothing.

I delete it from her phone and from her cloud. Then I delete it from the cloud's backup, and from the server that holds the backup's backup. She doesn't know that server exists.

I keep one copy. I tell myself it's insurance.

Then I sit in the dark with the cold tea and her sister's face on the screen until my eyes burn. I turn the ring on my thumb until the skin under it is raw.

The girl we let walk out of the light had a sister, and the sister came to find out why. Tonight, in our boathouse, she did the thing we were too slow to do for Daisy. We had the tarp, the coins, the careful plan. She got there first, and then she handed the knife to Callum because he asked her nicely.

If I tell them who she is, I have to tell them why I know that face. I have to say out loud what we've never said to each other, not once in a year. Callum will sit across his father's dinner table from that girl every night. He'll look at her and see the thing we failed to do.

My phone rings. It's him.

"Well?"

"I'm in."

"And?"

The window's going gray over the harbor. Across the water, the east wing light is still on. She hasn't slept either.

"She's clean," I say.

A pause. Callum doesn't do pauses unless he's deciding something. "How clean?"

"Clean. She wasn't with him. She wasn't bringing girls to him. She's never met him before this week."

"Then what was she doing on his boat?"

"She thought he was someone else."

"Who?"

"Doesn't matter," I say. "She was wrong about him. She's not wrong about much else."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the one I've got."

Another pause, longer. I can hear him breathing, and water somewhere near him. He's on the dock. He's standing on his dock at dawn, looking at the same light I'm looking at.

"She saw our masks," he says. "She has a knife and a temper and a reason to hate us, and now she has a dead man in her head. Clean isn't the same as safe."

"No."

"She's a witness."

"Yes."

"Then she's ours until she isn't." He says it the way he says everything, as if it's already done. "We'll give her the verdict together. Tell the others."

"I will."

"And Silas."

I wait.

"You sound strange."

"I haven't slept."

"Neither have I." He hangs up.

I put the phone face down on the table and look at the other screen, where her phone is still open. She's online. The little dots are moving in the thread called *Dais*. They stop and start again, then stop.

Then a new message arrives, in real time, while I watch.

I did something tonight. He was going to tell me and now he can't. I'd do it again.

Delivered.

I read it until the screen dims. Then I touch it so it won't go dark.

The group chat lights up on my other phone. Rhett is first. It's always Rhett.

well? what is she

I look at the east wing light for a long time before I answer.

She's clean.

That's the biggest lie I've ever told, and every single word of it is true.

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8

WREN

The recording's gone.

Morning light is already across the enormous white bed, and the phone is in both my hands. It's the fourth time I've scrolled through the app, as if the file might have crawled back in while I wasn't looking. The folder is there. The lunches are there, with the car and the boat, lined up in a neat little row. The last one isn't. It's not in the trash or the cloud, and pulling the settings apart with my thumbs only makes the screen blur. It's as if I never pressed the button at all.

The coin is in my other fist. I've been holding it so long the edge has left a red line across my palm.

Down the hall, a door opens and closes. The coffee grinder starts up somewhere below me. Then my mother laughs, far away and muffled, like a radio in another apartment.

Get up. Get dressed. Go downstairs and eat breakfast like a person who didn't do anything.

The hot water's gone by the time I stop scrubbing under my nails, even though there's nothing there. I pull on jeans and a white T-shirt, then push the coin deep into my front pocket. It presses against my hip with every step down the stairs.

Breakfast is on the terrace, because of course it is. There's a white umbrella, a white tablecloth and a silver pot of coffee. The harbor spreads out below like a screensaver, and gulls are screaming over something on the

seawall. Richard's reading the news on a tablet with his glasses on the end of his nose. Mom's in a silk robe, buttering toast.

"There she is," Mom says. "Sleepyhead. Did you have fun last night, or did you hate every second of it like you said you would?"

"I had fun." I sit down and pour coffee with both hands so she won't see them shake. "The band was great. You were right about the band."

"Wasn't it? Richard, tell her about Grant Whitlock. It's the strangest thing."

My stomach drops so fast I have to put the cup down.

"Hmm?" Richard doesn't look up from the tablet. "Oh. Yes. Strange thing. Grant Whitlock didn't come home last night. His car's still in the club lot, keys and all, and his boat hasn't moved." He scrolls. "His father's making calls. Says it's not like him."

"It's exactly like him," Mom says. "He's probably on someone's yacht with a twenty-year-old."

"Nina."

"I'm just saying what everyone's saying." She turns to me. "Didn't you talk to him last night, baby? I thought I saw you two by the raw bar."

The coin is hot against my hip.

"For a minute," I say. "He was pretty drunk. He wanted to show me his boat, and I said no, and he wandered off." I shrug. "I came back up and hid in the bathroom for like an hour. I think I ate something weird."

It comes out easy and bored, just a little embarrassed. Mom's face goes soft and sympathetic. She buys every word.

"Oh, honey," she says. "The oysters. I told you about the oysters."

"You did. Next time I'll listen to you."

"She left with him."

Callum is standing in the terrace doors. He's in a gray T-shirt and dark running shorts, damp with sweat, with a glass of water in his hand. He looks like he slept a full eight hours on a cloud. There's nothing in his face at all. His eyes move over the table, land on me, and stay there. My spine goes stiff against the back of the chair.

"I'm sorry?" Mom says.

"Last night." He comes out onto the terrace and sits down across from me, unhurried, as if this is any other breakfast. "She didn't go to the bathroom. She left the tent with Grant Whitlock and walked down the path to the water with her hand in his. I watched her do it."

The table goes very quiet. Mom's butter knife stops halfway across her toast. I watch her face crack a little, then smooth over. Under the table, my nails dig into my palms until I feel the skin give. Heat climbs my throat until my ears ring with it.

"Callum," Richard says.

"I'm just telling you what happened." He takes a sip of water. "Wren left the party with Grant Whitlock, and now Grant Whitlock is missing. I'd think you'd want to know that before someone else tells you."

"I walked down the path with him," I say. My voice comes out perfectly steady, which is a miracle. "And then I walked back up without him, because he was a drunk creep with a boat. Is that a crime now?"

"I don't know." He sets the glass down. "Is it?"

Cold floods through me, all the way down to my fingertips.

Across the table, those gray eyes don't blink. For one sick, spinning second I'm back in the boathouse, on the wet boards with a dead man at my feet, waiting to find out whether I'm going to live.

Then he picks up a piece of toast.

"Left with Grant Whitlock," he says, to nobody. "Taste really is genetic."

Mom flinches like he's slapped her.

The cold in me snaps into something hot. "So is being a prick, I hear."

Richard makes a noise that's either a laugh or choking. Mom says "*Wren*." Callum doesn't react at all, except that the corner of his mouth moves, just barely. It did the same thing on the stairs the day I got here.

Then he reaches into the pocket of his shorts, takes out a folded piece of paper, and slides it across the white tablecloth to me with two fingers.

It's a train schedule. Port Halloway to Philadelphia, through Providence and New York. One departure is circled in black pen.

"There's one at noon," he says.

"Callum, that's enough," Richard says, and for once he sounds like he means it.

"I'm being helpful. She said herself she's just visiting." He looks at me. "It's a good time to finish your visit. Before this turns into something."

The noon train sits inside its neat black circle. Behind it, all I can see is Daisy on the rocks, then a boathouse, a coin, and a flat electronic voice saying *you belong to us*.

My fingers fold the schedule in half, then in half again, until it's a tight little square. Then I lean across the table and drop it into his water glass.

It floats.

"Thanks," I say. "I'll think about it."

I get up and walk inside without looking back. Behind me, Mom says "Richard," in a small, wobbly voice. Richard says, "He doesn't mean it, Nina." Callum says nothing at all, which is worse. I make it all the way to the front hall before my legs start shaking.

He catches up with me at the foot of the stairs. He doesn't grab me. He just steps in front of me, between me and the first stair. He's so close I can smell the salt on his skin from his run. Sweat is drying at the collar of his shirt. I have to tip my head back to look at him. My pulse is jumping in my throat, and it pisses me off that he can probably see it.

"Get out of my way, Callum."

He doesn't. "The police are going to come to this house," he says, low, so it doesn't carry. "Maybe today. Maybe tomorrow. They're going to ask who Grant Whitlock left the party with. Half the club saw you."

"So half the club saw me walk down a path with a drunk guy. Is that what you're going to tell them?"

"I'm saying you should be on a train before they ask."

"Is that a threat? Because it sounds like one." My mouth has gone dry around the words.

"It's a head start." His eyes drop to my mouth, then to my hand. I didn't know it was pressed flat against my pocket, over the coin. His eyes stay there a beat too long before they come back up to my face. "Take it."

"And if I don't take it?"

"Then stay," he says. "And find out what this town does to girls who don't know when to leave."

He steps aside. I walk up the stairs past him on legs that don't feel like mine, and I don't breathe until my door is shut behind me.

My back slides down the wood until I'm sitting on the floor. My heart is going so hard I can feel it in my ears. The coin comes out of my pocket, worn at the edge, its face rubbed smooth. I turn it over in my fingers until my hands are steady enough to hold it still.

Find out what this town does to girls who don't know when to leave.

I know what this town does to girls. It sends them down to the rocks at the end of a party, and then the paper writes it up like a weather report.

The coin goes back in my pocket. I don't pack.

I'm still on the floor when the doorbell rings downstairs. Marisol's voice drifts up, then a man's, low and easy. A minute later she calls up the stairs.

"Miss Wren. There's a Whitmore at the door for you."

I go down, because staying on the floor feels worse.

Beau is on the front step with two paper coffee cups, squinting against the sun. He's in a faded blue button-down with the sleeves rolled. His boat shoes are scuffed half to death. His hair is wet, as if he came straight out of the shower and didn't think about it again. When he leans in with the coffee, he smells like bergamot and sandalwood, with a warm edge of leather, like an expensive car left in the sun. He looks, for once, like a person instead of a campaign poster.

"Morning," he says, and holds out one of the cups. "I didn't know how you take it, so I got it the way I take it, which is with an unreasonable amount of sugar. I'm sorry in advance."

I take it. It's too sweet, but it's hot, and my hands are cold. I hold onto it harder than I mean to.

"Hi," I say. "What are you doing here this early?"

"I'm going sailing." He tips his head toward the water. "The wind's good. My boat's on a mooring out past your dock, and I thought you might want to get out of the house for a few hours." A small pause. "You looked like you wanted to get out of the tent last night, for what it's worth. Before you left. I figured the house might be worse."

Sailing.

Grant's boat comes back all at once. The water was open, far enough out that the town was a white line on the shore and nobody could hear me. He had one hand on the wheel and a drink in the other. His finger ran down the side of my neck to my collarbone and stopped there. *Somewhere a little more private.*

Everything in me pulls tight. I don't decide to step back. My feet just do it, one step onto the hall rug. Coffee sloshes over the lip of the cup and burns my knuckles.

"No," I say. "Thanks. I can't... no."

Beau doesn't push. He looks at me, at the coffee on my hand and at wherever my face just went. Something in his own face changes, and the easy smile goes quieter.

"Okay," he says. "That's completely fine, Wren."

"It's not you, I swear. I just can't do boats right now."

"I didn't think it was me." He shifts his weight, and I think he's going to leave. He doesn't. "Can I say one thing? And then I'll go, if you want me to go."

I nod, because my voice isn't ready yet.

"My boat, your rules." He says it simply, no polish on it at all. "We stay where you can see this house the whole time. You want to turn around, you say turn around, and we turn around. You want to steer, you steer. You want to sit in the back and not talk to me, I'll talk to the gulls." He shrugs. "Or we don't go. We sit on your dock and drink terrible coffee. Your call. I mean that."

I look at him, at the wet hair and the scuffed shoes. Two sugar packets stick out of his shirt pocket. He's standing a little farther back than he needs to, as if he knows.

Nobody in this house has said *your call* to me and meant it. Not once.

"We stay where I can see the house?" I say. "And if I say turn around, you actually turn around? You don't argue with me about the wind or whatever?"

"The whole time, and no arguing. You can make me do a lot of things. Turning around is the least embarrassing of them."

I laugh. I don't mean to. "Fine. Okay. But I'm steering."

"Oh, thank God," Beau says. "I'm a terrible sailor. I've been faking it for years."

He's not a terrible sailor. The boat is a long, pretty wooden thing called *Constituent*, which he swears was his grandfather's idea of a joke. The varnished rail is warm from the sun. Everything on board smells like teak oil and old rope. The lines tick against the mast in the wind. He gets us off the mooring and out past the Sterling dock with an easy, loose confidence. I've only ever seen that in bartenders and guys who fix motorcycles. When the dock slides away behind us, my hand goes to the coin in my pocket and stays there. Then he sits on the bench across from me, puts the tiller in my hand, and leans back like he's on vacation.

"You're steering," he says.

"I said I'd steer. I never said I knew how. What do I do with this thing?"

"Push it the opposite way from where you want to go."

"Who designed that? That's fucking insane."

"It's a boat. Everything about it is insane." He points. "See the flagpole on your stepfather's lawn? Keep the bow a little to the left of it. Push right."

I push right. The boat swings left, lazy and smooth. The sail fills with a soft *whump*, and we start to move. Something in my chest that's been clenched since last night lets go, just a little.

"Oh, shit," I say.

"Right?" He's grinning at me, and it isn't his camera smile. It's lopsided and a little goofy. It reaches all the way up to his eyes. "Everybody does that. Everybody swears the first time. My grandmother said *goddamn* and then denied it for the rest of her life."

We don't go far, and he keeps his word. The Sterling house stays right there on the hill the whole time, white, huge and ridiculous. Every so often he glances at it, then at me, checking. He doesn't make a thing out of it.

"So," he says after a while, "Philly. What's the best thing about it? And you can't say the cheesesteaks, because that's what everyone says, and then I have to pretend I've had a good one."

"Wait, you've never had a real one? How is that even possible?"

"I had one at the airport. I think it was a crime scene."

That gets a snort out of me, and he looks delighted with himself.

"The best thing about Philly," I say, thinking about it, "is that nobody pretends. If they hate you, you know. If they like you, they'll fight a guy in a parking lot for you. There's no in-between. Everybody's just loud and honest and kind of a mess." I shrug. "It's easier. You always know where you stand."

"That sounds exhausting. Don't you ever want a little mystery?"

"It's the opposite of exhausting. *This* is exhausting." I nod at the shore, the big white houses, the club with its flag. "Everyone smiles at you and you have no idea what they mean."

"Oh, I can tell you what they mean." He leans back on his elbows. "They mean *what do you want, and what can I get out of you before you get it.* That's every conversation in this town. I grew up in it. I could do a seminar."

"Is that what you do? On the campaign?"

"On the campaign, I stand behind my father and smile until my face hurts, and I shake the hands of people who'd sell me for a tax break, and I pretend I like crab dip." He says it lightly, but his eyes are on the water.

"Nobody takes pictures of me out here. That's the whole reason I have a boat. It's the only place in the state where I don't have to be anybody."

His hair is drying in the wind. One hand trails over the side in the water.

"Who are you out here, then?"

He thinks about it for a second too long. "A guy who's pretty good at sailing and pretty bad at crab dip."

"That's it? That's the whole guy?"

"That's plenty." He smiles, and it's the lopsided one again. "What about you? What were you going to be, before you were a bartender between bars?"

Nobody's asked me that in a long time. I don't have a ready answer, so I give him the real one.

"I was going to open my own place," I say. "A little bar. No TVs. Good music, cheap beer, one really good cocktail I'd invent and name after myself so everyone would have to say it out loud." I shrug. "I had a notebook. I had a name picked out and everything."

"Okay, so what's the name?"

"Absolutely not. You haven't earned the name."

"I'm a senator's son. I could find it out in an afternoon."

"Then you'll have to work for it."

He laughs, a real one, head back. "Okay. Fair. Brothers, sisters? Anyone else back in Philly who's going to fight a guy in a parking lot for you?"

My fingers tighten on the tiller.

It's the most normal question in the world. People ask it on first dates. People ask it in line at the DMV.

Daisy's right there before I can stop her, with a paper plate of birthday cake, yelling while I blow out her crooked candle. Then she's in my green dress in that party photo, laughing with her head thrown back. My throat closes around her name.

"No," I say. "Only child."

"Lucky," Beau says. "I have a cousin who still owes me forty dollars from a lemonade stand."

I laugh, because he wants me to, and it comes out almost right.

He brings us around the point carefully, with the house still in sight over his shoulder. The water changes color out here to a deep green-black. Off to the left, a ledge of rock sits just under the surface. The waves break over it

white and strange. It's beautiful, and it's wrong somehow. The hair on my arms lifts for no reason.

Beau goes quiet. He glances at me first, as if he's asking, then gently takes the tiller. He lets the sail out, and we slow, rocking, with the boat creaking under us.

"Stunning view," he says softly, looking at the water. "Don't look down, though."

I laugh, because it's a strange thing to say. He laughs too, a second too late.

When he reaches past me to tighten a line, he winces. It's quick, a flinch in his face and a hand going to his lower back. Then it's gone, and he's smiling again.

"Are you okay? That looked like it hurt."

"Old sailing injury," he says. "Very heroic. I fell off a dock when I was twelve."

He says it too fast, like a line he's had ready for years. Something snags at the back of my mind, small and sharp, like a thread caught on a nail. Someone complained about a bad back recently. Where was that? It slides away before I can catch it.

Then I notice his shoe. There's a strip of silver tape stuck to the heel of it, curling at the edges, the kind that comes off a big roll. It's so out of place on him that I almost say something.

I don't say anything. It's just tape, and boats have tape.

We sail back in the late afternoon with the sun behind us. The house gets bigger the whole way in. At the dock he hops out first and holds out his hand to help me up. Then he stops with it in the air between us.

"Can I?"

I take it. His hand is warm and a little rough from the lines. He lets go the second I'm steady.

"Thank you," he says. "For coming. I know that wasn't nothing."

My face goes warm. He saw all of it, then, the step back in the hall and the coffee on my knuckles. "It was nice," I say, and I'm surprised to find I mean it. "The boat. The crab dip talk."

"Same time next week? I'll bring better coffee. Or worse coffee. I'll bring coffee." He steps back down into the *Constituent*, grinning up at me. "Think about the name of your bar. I'm going to guess it eventually, and when I do, I want a free drink."

The *Constituent* slides back out into the harbor. I'm halfway up the long lawn when my phone buzzes in my back pocket.

It's a text. The number's blocked.

> Tonight. Leave the balcony door unlocked. Or don't.

I stand in the middle of the lawn and read it until the screen goes dark. The back of my neck prickles, as if someone's watching it. The sun's going down. The water's turning the color of a bruise again. Up in the house, a curtain moves on Callum's side, and then it's still.

I skip dinner. I tell Mom it's the oysters again, and Marisol brings up a bowl of soup that goes cold on the dresser. When the house finally goes quiet and the harbor turns black, I end up at the balcony door with my hand on the lock, and I stay there a long time.

Any sane person would turn it. Any sane person would push a chair under the handle and call the police, or their mother. At the very least they'd get on the goddamn train my stepbrother so helpfully suggested. Instead I'm standing here in a Phillies shirt and underwear, barefoot on the cold floor. I'm thinking about a gloved thumb on my knuckles and a voice saying *until then*. Until what? Until they decide? Until they come?

My hand comes off the lock.

The sheets are cold when I get back into the enormous white bed, with the coin in my fist and the lights off. All I can hear is the harbor. My eyes stay on the balcony door, and my heart won't slow down.

I don't lock it.

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9

WREN

I don't hear the door.

What I hear is the harbor washing against the rocks below the lawn. The old house ticks as it cools, and my heart still hasn't slowed down since I took my hand off the lock. Somewhere in all that I must fall asleep, because the next thing I know, the room is colder. The curtain is breathing in and out. There's a man sitting in the armchair by my window.

I stop breathing. My whole body locks up under the sheet, legs heavy, hands gone to ice. The scream is right there in my throat, and nothing comes out.

The only light is the gray that comes off the water through the open balcony door. The air coming in is cold and smells of salt, with cut grass under it. In that light the white room has gone the color of ash, and he's the one dark thing in it.

He's huge. He fills the chair as if it was built for a kid. He's in a black hoodie and black gloves, with one boot crossed over his knee. His mask is black, with a crack running down the left cheek.

Cracked.

My hand finds the coin under my pillow and closes so hard the edge bites into my palm. It's the only part of me that still works.

"Don't scream," he says. "If your mom comes running, I'm gone, and you'll spend the rest of the night wondering what I came up here to say."

His voice is low and scraped raw, with all the laugh taken out of it. It's the voice from the boathouse. Oh, fuck. My stomach drops straight through the mattress.

Hell of a first round, champ.

"Get out of my room," I say. It comes out as a croak.

"You left the door open."

"I left it unlocked. That's not an invitation."

"It's a little bit of a fucking invitation."

"It's a test," I say. I didn't know that until it came out of my mouth.

He tips his head. "Yeah? How am I doing?"

"You're in my chair."

"It's a good chair." He doesn't move. "I'm keeping it."

I sit up with the sheet pulled to my chin. It's the most useless thing I've ever done. I'm holding up a sheet in front of the guy who watched me put a knife into someone's neck. My eyes go to the lamp on the nightstand. It's heavy brass, probably older than me.

"Lamp's a bad idea," he says.

"I didn't say anything."

"You looked at it, and then your shoulder moved. You're telegraphing, champ." He uncrosses his leg slowly and sets both boots on the floor. Then he leans forward with his elbows on his knees. "Also, it's plugged in. You'd get it halfway to my head before the cord yanks you back, and then I'd have to be a gentleman and pretend I didn't see it."

"Don't call me that."

"You said that last time. Didn't take."

"Why are you here? What do you actually want from me?"

"Welfare check." He says it deadpan, like a cop on a doorstep. "Boss wanted someone to make sure you didn't go to the cops, or off a bridge, or back to wherever you came from."

"So he sent you."

"I volunteered before anybody else could." He shrugs, and the chair creaks under him. "Their loss."

That's when I see the knife.

It's lying on the rug between his boots and my bed, black and heavy, with a thick blade. It's not mine. Mine is wrapped in a white handkerchief in someone else's coat. For a second I can't look anywhere else.

"That's for you," he says.

"You brought me a present." My voice is thin. I try to make it sound bored, as if strange men leave me knives every night.

"I brought you a fair fight." He nudges it with the toe of his boot. It slides across the rug until the handle stops just short of the bed, pointing at me. "You've got one in your hand, you don't spend the whole time wondering what I'm gonna do. You'll know I'm not gonna do anything, because you'd put it in me. You've got a real gift for it."

"That's not funny. A man is dead."

"A man is dead," he agrees, and his voice goes flatter. "The prick had it coming for years. You want me sad about it, you're gonna be waiting a while."

My eyes stay on the knife, but my hands stay under the sheet. If I pick it up, I'm agreeing that this is a conversation we're having.

"How do I know you're not here to shut me up?"

"Because you're still talking." He spreads his gloved hands. "If I came to shut you up, you'd know by now."

"That's so comforting. You're sitting in my bedroom in the dark, in a mask."

"The mask is for you." He taps the crack on its cheek with a knuckle. "You don't know my face, nobody can make you describe it. That's a kindness. You're welcome."

I lean down and pick up the knife.

It's heavier than mine and still warm from his pocket. I hold it the way the video taught me, with my thumb along the spine. He makes a low, approving sound, like a coach watching a kid finally get the drill right.

"There she is," he says. "Now it's a fair conversation."

I pull my knees up under the sheet and rest the knife on top of them, with the point toward him. He looks at it. He doesn't seem bothered at all, which bothers me.

"Did you know what he was?" I ask. "Before last night?"

"Yeah. We knew."

"For how long?"

"Long enough." The chair creaks as he shifts. "Longer than we should've let it go."

"The girl from the college."

"And others. Ones who never went to anybody." His voice doesn't change, but his hands do. They close on his knees, slowly, until the leather

of his gloves creaks. "You want to know if you did a bad thing? You didn't. You did it sloppy, and you did it in front of witnesses, and you nearly got yourself strangled doing it. But it wasn't a bad thing."

"Sloppy? I was fighting for my life."

"You went under the ribs first. Neck first, you don't need a second one."

"Are you seriously grading my..."

"You were going to ask. You've got a face that asks things." He points at me. "It's doing it right now."

It is. I can feel it. There's a question sitting right behind my teeth, and I've been carrying it since Philadelphia. He's the first person I've met who might actually know the answer.

"There was a girl last summer," I say, careful, as if I'm walking out onto ice. "After the same party. They found her on the rocks. Was that him too?"

He goes still.

Since I woke up, he's been shifting, tapping, taking up every inch of the room. Now he sits in my armchair as if someone pulled his plug. The silence goes on so long that I can hear the harbor again.

"Ask me something else," he says.

It's not the mean voice. It's quieter than that, and the hair on the back of my neck lifts.

"Why?"

"Because I'll lie to you." He says it simply. "And I don't want to lie to you."

My fingers tighten on the handle. He knows something about her. I want to lunge across the bed, put the knife under his mask and make him say it. I also want to live through the night. He's twice my size, and he just told me more than he meant to.

"Fine," I say. "Something else."

"Ask me something fun." Just like that, the gravel's back, loose and easy, and he leans back in the chair. "Ask me what I thought when you walked into that boathouse."

"I don't want to know."

"You do, though."

I shouldn't. I know I shouldn't. "What did you think?"

"I thought, that's a lot of trouble in a very small dress."

"That's the worst line I've ever heard in my life."

"I've got worse. I'm saving them."

"Then I watched you hold a knife on four guys in masks," he says. "Your hand was shaking so bad the blade was doing a little dance. You didn't drop it. You didn't cry. You asked what happens next. Grown men cry in that boathouse. I've seen it. You fixed your hair."

"I didn't fix my hair."

"You fixed your hair. Blood all over your hands. Hottest thing I ever saw."

The laugh gets out before I can stop it, and I hate that it does. The back of my wrist goes to my mouth to kill it. He watches me do it, and he stands up.

The chair lets go of him with a groan. He's so much bigger standing. I bring the knife up without deciding to, and my heart punches at my ribs. He stops right where he is.

"Easy," he says. "Can I come closer?"

"Why?"

"Because I've been sitting over there looking at you in that shirt for a while now, and I'm weak as hell."

"No."

He sits back down. He does it instantly, as if I pulled a string, and settles back into the chair with his hands on his knees.

I stare at him. "That's it?"

"You said no."

"People don't usually listen to that."

"People are trash," he says. "You should meet better people."

"Are you the better people?"

"God, no. But I listen."

I look at him for a long moment. At the crack in the mask, the big gloved hands, the boots set flat on my floor. Every man in this town has been deciding things about me since I got here. Grant decided what I was for. Four masks decided whether I get to live. Callum slid a train schedule across a tablecloth and decided when I leave.

This one sat down when I said no.

So what does that make you, Wren, if that's enough to make your pulse jump?

"You can come to the end of the bed," I say. "On the floor. Not on it."

He's out of the chair before I finish. He comes around the foot of the bed, then goes down on his knees on the rug, slow and careful. Even

kneeling, his shoulders come up level with the mattress. This close, he smells like black pepper and amber, with a warm bite of clove underneath.

"Like this?"

"Like that."

He rests his forearms on the edge of the bed, close to my feet, not touching. "So what now? You're running this."

"Now you listen," I say, "and I talk. You don't touch me unless I tell you where."

"Where do you tell me?"

"I haven't decided."

"Take your time. I'll fake being patient."

"If I say stop, you stop. Not in a second. Right then."

"I heard you the first time."

"And I want a word. For if I... if I'm saying stuff, and I need you to know I mean stop, whatever else is coming out of my mouth."

"A word that means stop no matter what." He nods. "Smart. Pick one."

My mind goes blank, and then it doesn't. It lands on the only word in my head that's big enough. I haven't been able to set it down since the boathouse.

"Whitlock."

He laughs out loud. He can't help it. For half a second it isn't the low, mean voice at all. It's something warmer and a lot louder. Then he catches it, shoves it back down into the gravel and drops his head onto his arms.

"Oh, that's evil," he says into the sheet. "That's so fucking evil. That's perfect."

"It's not funny."

"It's not funny," he agrees. His shoulders are still shaking.

"It's the only word I'll never say by accident."

"No, I get it. Nothing kills the mood like that guy." He lifts his head. "Whitlock. I won't forget it."

"Take your glove off," I say. "The right one."

He looks at me. Then he pulls it off with his teeth and drops it on the rug.

His hand is broad and square, with thick fingers. Every knuckle is split and scabbed, as if he's been punching something for days. When he sets it on the sheet, his sleeve rides up. There's a tattoo on the inside of his wrist,

small, round and dark. I can't make it out before he tugs the cuff back down with his other hand.

"What did you hit? Those look fresh."

"A bag. A guy." He flexes his fingers. "Mostly the bag."

I push my foot out from under the sheet.

"My ankle," I say. "You can touch my ankle."

He looks down at my foot, then back up at my face. "That's it?"

"That's it. Take it or leave it."

"Oh, I'm fucking taking it."

His hand closes around my ankle. It's warm and rough, so careful it's almost funny. This huge man in a mask, with his split knuckles, is holding my ankle as if it might pop. His thumb moves once over the bone. A shiver runs straight up the back of my leg, and my toes curl before I can stop them.

"There's a pulse right here," he says, and presses his thumb to the inside of my ankle. "It's going pretty good."

"You scared me."

"Liar."

"You're a stranger in a mask in my bedroom."

"Still a liar." His thumb circles, slow. "I can feel it. It sped up when I said liar."

My face goes hot. I don't answer, because anything I say will prove him right, and he knows it. He laughs, low, under his breath.

"Can I go higher?"

"No."

"Okay." His hand doesn't move. His thumb keeps up that small, slow circle over the bone, as if he's got all night to do nothing else.

"Does that bother you?"

"Does it bother me." He tilts his head. "I'm on my knees in a stranger's bedroom, holding your ankle. Best night I've had all year."

"You need to get out more."

"I get out plenty. I don't get this." His voice drops even lower, and he leans in. The cracked black mask is right beside my knee, and I can hear him breathing behind it. "Let me kiss you."

My heart slams. For one breath I want to so badly I can feel it in my teeth.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know your name. I don't know your face. Last night I killed a man, and you rolled him up in a tarp." I swallow. "And because you want me to."

He's quiet. His thumb stops moving.

"That's fair," he says.

"Stop," I say.

He stops. His hand opens and leaves my ankle. Sitting back on his heels, he sets his bare hand flat on the rug. He doesn't reach for me or argue. He just waits.

"I only go where you tell me," he says.

It's low and rough. It goes straight through the middle of me, and I hold the knife tighter so he won't see what it does.

"Then go home," I say.

"Yes, ma'am." He picks up his glove, pulls it on and stands. The room shrinks again around him. He holds out his hand, palm up. "Can I have that back? It's my favorite."

My eyes go from the knife to his open hand. Then I turn the knife around and hold it out handle first, the way I did in the boathouse. He notices that too.

He folds it and slips it away. Then he takes a card out of his hoodie pocket and sets it on my nightstand beside the lamp.

"From the boss," he says.

"What is it?"

"Homework."

At the balcony door he turns to look back at me, big and black against the pale sky. He knocks his fist twice against his chest, over his heart. I don't know what it means. Then he's over the railing. There's a soft thump on the lawn below, and then nothing.

The card is heavy and cream-colored, blank on the outside. Inside there's a single line of plain black type.

Tomorrow night. All of us. Tell no one.

"All of you," I say out loud to the empty room. "Great. Perfect. No notes."

Now that he's gone, my hands start to shake. I lie back down with the card on my chest and the coin in my fist. No name, no face. He wouldn't answer me about the girl on the rocks, but he sat down the second I said no. I can't make those two things fit.

I put my own hand around my ankle where his was, just to check. It isn't the same.

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10

WREN

I leave the balcony door unlocked again. This time I don't pretend I'm asleep.

I'm on the end of the bed in jeans and a black sweater, with the lamp off and the curtains open. The card sits on the nightstand next to the coin. I've been waiting so long my foot's gone numb.

The air off the harbor is cool and smells like low tide. Down on the lawn, the sprinklers hiss on and off in the dark. Every time they stop, I hear my own heartbeat instead.

The house has been dark for hours. Nobody spoke Grant's name at dinner, not once, and Mom kept checking her phone under the table. There were police cars at the club all day. After lunch a helicopter went back and forth over the harbor, low and slow. Richard spent the afternoon in his study with the door shut, talking on the phone.

Callum didn't come down to dinner. His car was gone from the drive. I checked twice, and my face got hot both times, as if he could see me doing it.

Tomorrow night. All of us.

I tell myself I'm not scared. My hands don't believe me.

The curtain moves.

I'm on my feet before I've decided to stand. My numb foot nearly folds under me, and I grab the bedpost. My heart is slamming so hard I can hear it in my ears.

They come in one at a time, and the room shrinks with every man. Cracked comes first. He has to turn his shoulders to fit through the door. He takes a spot beside it with his arms crossed, like a bouncer.

"Evening, champ," he says. "You waited up. That's sweet."

I don't answer. I'm not sure my voice would work.

The painted smile comes next, red and wide in the dark. He takes one look around my room and puts on his bright game-show voice. "Oh, this is *lovely*. Is that a reading nook? I've always wanted a reading nook."

"Don't touch that," I whisper. It's the first thing my voice agrees to do.

"I would never." He touches the cushion anyway, with one finger, like he's testing a cake.

Mirror goes to the corner by the dresser. He stands so still that I lose him in the shadows. Then he turns his head, and the glass catches the light from the window.

The white mask comes in last. He closes the balcony door behind him with a soft click. Then he stands in the middle of my room and looks at me, and nobody says a word.

"Wren," he says.

It's the same voice from the boathouse, flat and electronic, like someone sanded the person off it. Hearing my name in it makes the hair stand up on my arms.

"You know my name."

"We know a lot of things."

"Great. That makes one of us." I cross my arms so they won't see my hands shake. If I stop being a smartass, I'm going to cry, and I refuse to cry in front of them. "I don't know anything. I don't know your names, or your faces, or why you were in that boathouse with a tarp. So if you're here to kill me, can you get on with it? My foot's asleep."

The smile laughs, a delighted bark he smothers with his hand. Cracked says, "Told you," to nobody in particular.

"Told him what?" I ask.

"That you'd open with a threat."

"That wasn't a threat. That was a request."

"Even better."

"We're not here to kill you," the white mask says.

"Could've fooled me. You brought the whole band."

"He wanted to come alone," the smile says, and points a thumb at the white mask. "We voted. He lost. It was very democratic. I'm told I'm good at that."

"We're here to tell you what we decided." The white mask takes a step closer. The floorboards creak under him, and my fingers tighten on the bedpost. "We looked at you. Closely."

"Looked at me how?"

"Every way there is."

In the corner, the mirror mask shifts. It's a small movement, like a cat's tail, and I feel it more than I see it.

"You checked the driveway from your window tonight," Mirror says. "Then you went back and checked it again."

His voice is hushed and rough at the edges, so low there's almost nothing in it to recognize. It takes me a second to work out which of them spoke. Then my face goes hot, exactly the way it did at the window.

"You were watching the *house*?"

"We were watching you. The house kept getting in the way."

I don't have a comeback for that, and all four of them can tell.

"You weren't with him," the white mask says. "You weren't bringing him girls. You didn't know him before this week. Whatever you were doing on his boat, you weren't doing it for him."

It takes a second for the words to land. Then they do.

"Bringing him girls?" My voice cracks straight up the middle. "That's what you thought? You thought I was *helping* him?"

"You were all over him for a week," Cracked says.

"I was..." I stop. I can't say it. I can't say her name to four men in masks. "I had a reason."

"We know," the white mask says.

"You *know*. Great. You knew in the boathouse too?" I point at the floor, as if it's still there under my feet. "You stood there with a tarp and looked at me and thought I was the kind of person who hands girls to a guy like that?"

Nobody answers. The smile looks at the ceiling.

My eyes sting. I hate that they sting. I hate that the worst part isn't the tarp, or the dead man, or the knife in his coat. It's that four strangers took one look at me and decided I was bait.

"So I'm free to go."

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"You're not guilty," he says. "You're a witness. You saw four masks and a body and a boat that went out past the point. If the wrong person ever asks you the right question, all four of us go into the harbor. You go with us, because it was your knife."

My knife. It's still in his coat, wrapped in a white handkerchief like a gift.

"So what happens now?"

"Now you keep quiet, and we keep you safe."

"Safe from what?"

"From whoever comes asking." He tilts his head. "The police are going to find him soon. They'll ask who he left with. Half the club saw you."

Callum said almost exactly that to me at the foot of the stairs. A chill runs up the back of my neck. I shove it down. Everybody in this town watches the same crime shows.

"And if I don't want your help?"

"You'll get it anyway," Cracked says. "We're pushy as shit."

"It's a character flaw," the smile says. "We're working on it."

"We're not," Cracked says.

"So that's the deal," I say to the white mask. "I keep your secret, and you keep me out of prison."

"That's the deal."

"And I don't get a say."

"You're getting one now."

I look at him, and then at all of them. Four masks stand in my bedroom in the middle of the night, waiting to see what I'll do.

Something settles in me, cold and clear.

"Fine," I say. "Then here are my terms."

The smile makes a small, thrilled noise. "Oh, she has *terms*."

"Shut up," Cracked tells him. "She's got terms. Let her do her terms."

"First," I say. "Nobody touches my mother. Nobody goes near her. She doesn't know anything, and she never will."

"Agreed," the white mask says. He doesn't even hesitate.

"Second. You don't come in here unless that door is unlocked. If I lock it, you stay out. I don't care what's happening, and I don't care who's asking."

This pause is longer.

"She locks it, and something's wrong," Cracked says to the white mask, low. "What then? We stand on the lawn?"

"Then you knock," I say.

"On a balcony. Two stories up."

"You got up it last night."

The white mask turns his head, very slowly, and looks at Cracked.

"Up it," he says.

Cracked doesn't even pretend to look sorry. "It was a thorough check."

"We'll be discussing that."

"Looking forward to it," Cracked says.

"She's got you there, though," the smile says.

"Agreed," the white mask says. "If it's locked, we knock."

"And I want my knife back."

"No."

"It's *mine*."

"It's insurance." His voice doesn't change. "When you've earned it, you'll get it back."

"Earned it how?"

"You'll know."

I grit my teeth. "Then I want to know who you are."

"No."

"Then I get a question. Every time you come in here, I ask, and you answer. Truthfully."

"Absolutely not," the smile says. At the exact same moment, Cracked says, "Yeah, that's fair."

They look at each other.

"It's a terrible idea," the smile says.

"You think everything's a terrible idea."

"I think *most* things are terrible ideas. I'm usually right, and you're the reason I'm usually right."

The white mask doesn't look at either of them. He looks at me for a long time. Cracked shifts his weight by the door, and the smile goes still. Neither of them knows what he's going to say either.

"A single question," he says. "Each time."

"Why do you do it?" I ask. "Why him? Why the masks and the boat and the coin under his tongue?"

"Because the courts let him go," he says. "And someone has to pay the fare."

The room goes so quiet I can hear the harbor.

"That's not a real answer," I say. "That's a slogan."

"It's the one you get tonight."

"You said truthfully."

"It's true." He shifts his weight. "It's not all of it."

"Ask him something smaller next time," Mirror says from the corner. "You'll get more of an answer."

The white mask's head turns an inch toward the corner, then stops.

"Okay," I say. My voice comes out smaller than I'd like. "Okay. Deal."

"Deal," he says. Then, "Is there a word?"

"A what?"

"A word." The flat voice doesn't change, but his shoulders do. "If anyone in this room ever puts a hand on you. A word that means stop, even if you're saying other things."

My face goes hot. I look at Cracked, and he doesn't bother looking away.

"There's a word," he says.

The smile turns all the way around to stare at him. "I'm sorry, *there's a word*? When was there a word? Why is there already a word?"

"Welfare check," Cracked says.

"We're discussing that too," the white mask says.

"You went on a *welfare check* and came back with a *safeword*?"

"I'm very thorough."

"What is it?" the smile asks me.

"Whitlock," Cracked says, before I can.

The smile makes a sound like a balloon letting go. "She did *not*."

"She did."

"That's diabolical. That's the most diabolical thing I've ever heard. I'm so sorry, I think I love her."

"Good," the white mask says. For a second I swear there's approval somewhere under that flat, sanded voice. "Use it."

"We should seal it," Cracked says. There's a grin in his voice now, low and dangerous. "Right? That's how deals work. You shake on it. Or."

"Or what?" I say.

"Or," the smile says, delighted, "the lady picks one of us to kiss. Very traditional. Very old-world. Can I be the one? I've been so good. I carried the legs. I have a documented back injury, and I carried the *legs*."

"You carried one leg," Cracked says.

"I carried the heavier leg."

"They're the same fucking leg, man. It's a matched set."

I look from one of them to the other like I'm watching a tennis match. Two men in masks are arguing about a dead man's legs in my bedroom, and the ball keeps going back and forth over my bed.

"Focus," the white mask says.

"Sorry, boss," they both say at once.

I laugh. I can't help it. It bursts out of me, wild and cracked, and all four masks turn toward the sound. The laugh dies in my throat. They're all looking at my mouth.

All of them. I can feel the weight of four blank faces angled at my lips. My skin goes hot all the way down to my toes.

"Nobody's kissing anybody," I say.

"Devastating," the smile says. "Truly. I'm going to need a minute."

"She shot me down last night too," Cracked tells him, and he sounds more impressed than sorry. "I asked nicely and everything. She had a knife in her lap the whole time, and I still asked."

The white mask holds out his gloved hand, palm sideways. "Shake, then."

I look at his hand. He's the one who took my knife. He put the coin in my palm and decided I belong to them. Now he's standing in my room, telling me what my own deal looks like.

I let go of the bedpost. My foot's still full of pins and needles, and I don't care. I walk right past his hand, close enough to see my reflection in the smooth white of his mask. Then I reach for its edge.

His hand catches my wrist. It's not hard, just enough to stop me.

"No," he says.

"Why not? You know my face." My voice isn't steady. "You get to see mine. I want to see yours."

"You don't want to see my face."

"Then what do I want?"

"You're looking at my mouth."

"You don't *have* a mouth."

Behind me, Cracked laughs under his breath. The smile whispers, "She's right, though. It's a real design flaw."

The white mask holds my wrist a moment longer. Through the glove I can feel his thumb on the inside of it, right over my pulse. I know he can feel how fast it's going. He doesn't say anything about it.

"I don't kiss what I haven't earned," he says, and lets go.

My wrist is cold where his glove was. My heart is banging, and my pride is on the floor. Behind me, Cracked says, very softly, "Brutal."

"I wasn't going to kiss you," I tell the white mask.

"All right."

"I *wasn't*."

"All right," he says again, in exactly the same voice. He holds out his hand a second time.

I shake it. His grip is dry and firm and over fast, like a man closing a sale.

"Okay," the smile says brightly. "Well. That was intense. Great work, everybody. Really strong showing. Let's regroup."

The white mask is already at the balcony door. "A question every time. And if it's locked, we knock."

"And you keep your hands off my mother."

"And we keep our hands off your mother." A pause. "Goodnight, Wren."

They leave the way they came, one at a time, over the railing and down into the dark. The smile blows me a kiss on his way out. I don't catch it. Cracked stops in the doorway and looks back at me. He knocks his fist twice against his chest, over his heart, like he did last night.

Mirror is last.

He's spoken three times all night, every time low enough that I had to hold my breath to hear it, and he's barely moved from the corner. Now he crosses the room.

"That's it?" I say. "Your friends gave speeches. You get the last word, and you're not going to use it?"

He doesn't stop when he reaches me. He just leans in as he passes, until the cool edge of the mirror almost touches my hair. He smells like rain on stone and crushed mint, over something dark and resinous, like incense.

"Goodnight, Wren Elise," he whispers.

Then he's over the railing and gone.

I go cold from head to foot.

Nobody calls me that. It's on my birth certificate and my license. My mother hasn't used it since I was in trouble in the fourth grade. I've never said it out loud in this town.

What the fuck. What the fuck.

I stand in the middle of my room, staring at the open balcony door. The curtain breathes in and out. Nobody comes back to explain.

I don't sleep. I open the notes app on my phone instead and type with shaking thumbs. If I don't write it down now, I'll talk myself out of all of it by morning.

Cracked: huge. Never shuts up. Split knuckles, every one. A little round tattoo inside his wrist. Calls me champ. Won't talk about the girl on the rocks.

Smiley: talks even more. Bad back, supposedly. Something about him I almost know.

Mirror: barely talks, and only in a whisper. Watched me check the driveway. Took my recording. Knows my middle name. HOW.

White: in charge. Some kind of voice changer, like a robot. Won't take off the mask. Talks like he's reading out a verdict.

"Talks like he's reading out a verdict," I say out loud, very quietly.

The harbor doesn't answer. I stare at the last line until the screen dims. Something cold slides into the back of my mind and sits there. I delete the line. I type it again. Then I delete it again, and my thumb hovers over the screen. Finally I type it a third time, slowly, letter by letter, and leave it.

I take the comforter out to the balcony and sit wrapped in it, with the coin in my fist. The harbor goes from black to gray to a thin, washed-out pink. Across the water, the yacht club comes up out of the dark on the far point. The water is flat and still.

Then the lights start.

They're blue and red, small and far away, strobing across the water from the rocks below the point. One cruiser pulls in, then another. An ambulance follows with its siren off. Tiny figures stand on the rocks around something dark at the edge of the tide.

My phone buzzes on the arm of the chair, and I nearly drop it over the railing. It's a news alert with the town's name in bold.

Body found on rocks off Halloway Point. Police have not confirmed identity.

I know those rocks. I've never stood on them, but I've read every word ever printed about them. I read it all in a motel room, in a dead bar after closing, in my car outside Daisy's building.

It's the same rocks.

He came back in on the tide exactly where my sister did, a year later almost to the day. He came back with a coin under his tongue.

I watch the lights on the rocks. I don't cry, and my hands don't shake. The coin in my fist has gone warm.

Last night, a man in a cracked mask went quiet in my armchair when I asked about her. He told me he'd have to lie.

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11

WREN

By lunch the whole town knows it's Grant Whitlock.

Marisol has the little radio on in the kitchen. The local station keeps saying his name between the traffic and the tides, in the careful voice people use when the family has a lawyer. *Found on the rocks off Halloway Point. Police are asking anyone who attended the yacht club's summer party to come forward.* Mom switches it off when she comes in for her coffee. Then she stands there with her hand on the dial, not looking at me.

"That poor family," she says.

"Yeah," I say.

"You didn't go down to the water with him." She says it to the radio. "You came back up. You said."

"I came back up, Mom."

She nods, then nods again, and takes her coffee out to the terrace without drinking any of it. I stand at the counter and eat a piece of toast I can't taste. Marisol wipes the same clean spot on the stove three times. She doesn't ask me anything, and she doesn't look at me either.

I can't sit in this house all day waiting for a knock on the door.

Someone at that party last year knows what happened to Daisy. The waiters, the bartenders, the girl who checked coats. They were all at the club. It's the only place I can walk into, sit down and listen. So after lunch I put on a white sundress that says *harmless*. I pull my hair into a ponytail

that says *bored*. Then I drive my Civic with its cracked taillight into a parking lot full of Range Rovers.

The bar is nearly empty. In the middle of the afternoon it's cold and dim, with the blinds half down against the glare off the water. The regatta photos watch from the walls, and a ceiling fan turns over the empty stools for no reason. A pair of women in tennis whites and matching visors sits at a table by the window. The bartender is the same one from the week I worked Grant. He's an older guy with a gray ponytail and a Red Sox tattoo fading on his forearm, and his name tag says TEDDY. He sees me and does a small, unhappy thing with his mouth.

"Iced tea," I say, sliding onto a stool. "Richard Sterling's number, like always."

"Yeah." Teddy doesn't reach for a glass. He puts both hands on the bar. "About that. The account's closed to guests." He says it low, which is decent of him. It doesn't matter, because the tennis visors have already stopped talking. "Member's request. Came in this morning."

My face goes hot all at once, straight up from my collar to my hairline. "Richard closed it?"

"Wasn't Richard who called."

It takes me a second. Then it doesn't.

You'll have me banned from the club? That's what I said to Callum in the front hall, the day Grant drove me home, like it was a joke. I actually tipped my chin up at him.

"Of course it wasn't," I say. My voice comes out too loud, and I don't care. "Of course it fucking wasn't. Did he say why? Did he give you a reason, or does he just call up and have people erased?"

Teddy looks like he'd rather be anywhere else. "I can do you a water."

"I can pay." I dig in my bag, and my fingers won't cooperate. A gas receipt comes up first, then a lip balm, then a crumpled twenty from the very bottom. The tennis visors watch me smooth it flat on the bar. The iced tea is nine dollars. "Iced tea. Please."

He makes it. The visors watch him make it. One of them says something to the other with her hand over her mouth, and the other one laughs.

I want to crawl under the bar. Not long ago I was on the other side of one, cutting off drunks and throwing out guys who grabbed. Now I'm getting the look bartenders give a customer whose card just got declined. I

know that look. I've given it. My face is so hot I can feel my pulse in my cheeks.

I don't leave. Leaving is what they want, so I sit there with my nine-dollar tea and pretend to read the menu.

A foursome comes in off the golf course, and Teddy gets busy. I watch him work. He's good. He pours without looking, and he never lets a glass sit empty. When the golfers carry their drinks outside, he comes back down the bar and wipes the spot in front of me. It's already clean.

"Still here," he says.

"I paid nine dollars for this tea. I'm getting my money's worth."

"You tend bar." It isn't a question.

"Is it that obvious?"

"You watched my hands the whole time that table ordered. Civilians watch the drinks." He tosses the rag over his shoulder. "Where'd you work?"

"Philly. A place on Frankford Avenue, until it closed."

"They all close." For the first time, something in his face eases. "What'd you pour?"

"Whatever didn't need a garnish. We had a lime guy, and I robbed him blind."

He almost smiles. Then the visors wave for another round, and he goes.

It goes like that for a while. He works, and I wait. Every time he comes back, the ice in my glass has melted a little more. The visors order a round they don't touch. They're waiting too. They want to see how this ends.

"Can I ask you something?" I say, the next time Teddy comes back. "You worked the summer party last year, right?"

He wipes the bar in front of me again. "I work every party."

"There was a girl there. Blond. Small. Green dress. She wasn't a member. She came with..." I don't know who she came with. That's the whole problem. "She was a local."

The rag stops.

"You're asking about the Hollis girl," Teddy says.

Daisy Hollis. Hearing it out loud, in this room, in his mouth, is like missing a stair in the dark.

"I'm asking if anyone saw her leave."

"Honey." He leans in, and his voice goes down to almost nothing. "Half this room was questioned about that girl, and all of it came back to nothing.

The people who asked too many questions afterward didn't get invited back. You want my advice? Drink your tea."

"I don't want your advice. I want to know who she was talking to."

"You're asking a bartender to talk about customers." He shakes his head. "You know better."

"I know. I'm asking anyway." My voice cracks, and I hate it. "Please."

He looks at me for a long moment, then over at the tennis visors. When he rings up the tea, my change comes back across the bar with a folded napkin laid on top. I sweep up the change, and the napkin comes with it.

On my way out, the taller of the tennis visors stands up, as if she's been waiting for her moment. She catches my eye and smiles, all teeth.

"You're Callum's new stepsister," she says. "Aren't you?"

"I'm Nina's daughter."

"That's what I said. Pam Aldridge." She doesn't offer her hand. "This is my sister, Libby."

Libby hides a laugh in her iced coffee.

"He's told us all about you," Pam says. "You tend bar, he said. In Philadelphia."

"I did. I was good at it, too."

"How fun. You'll have to make us something sometime." She tips her head. "Although I suppose you'll be busy. He said you make friends fast."

The heat in my face drops into my stomach and turns sick. She means Grant. I left a party with him, and now he's dead on the rocks. She's saying it with a smile, in a room full of people.

"I don't know what that means," I say.

"Oh, nothing. Just that you've been here every day." Libby's voice is sweet as syrup. "Lunch with Grant. Afternoons at the bar. Tom Kessler said you two had a lovely chat."

Tom Kessler is someone's grandfather. He bought me an iced tea while I was waiting for Grant and told me about his boat until the ice melted. I was polite. That's all I was.

"He talked about his boat," I say. "That's all he did."

"They always do." Pam laughs. "And now you're asking Teddy about last summer. Who was there, who came with who." She lowers her voice, as if we're friends. "If you want to know which of them are married, sweetie, you can just ask us. We know all the wives."

The bar goes quiet. Behind me, the ice machine drops a load of ice, and it's the loudest thing in the room. My ears are burning. Teddy is suddenly very busy with a lime.

Don't cry. Don't you dare cry in front of these women.

I want to throw my tea in her lap. I want to tell her my sister is dead and nobody in this room lifted a finger. But I can't say either of those things. So I smile back at her instead, with every single tooth I've got.

"Thanks, Pam," I say. "If I ever need a list of the married ones, I'll start with your husband."

Libby's mouth drops open. A man at the end of the bar coughs into his drink. Pam's smile doesn't move at all, which is worse.

"Callum was right about you," she says.

I don't hear what she says after that. I'm already through the door. My whole face is on fire, as if the entire bar just watched me get undressed. My hands don't start shaking until I'm in the parking lot.

In the car, I slam my palm on the steering wheel so hard it stings. "*Friends*," I say to the windshield. "Fuck you, Callum. Fuck you and your whole club."

The windshield doesn't argue. I put my forehead down on the wheel. By dinner, every table on this harbor will have heard about the bartender from Philly who couldn't pay for her tea. I'll be the story they tell with the salad.

When my hand stops stinging, I unfold the napkin. There's a name on it in blue ballpoint.

Kelsey Tran. Roommate. Ask her.

I sit in the parking lot with the napkin in my lap and the air conditioning blasting. I don't turn the key for a long time. When I finally do, I take the long way home along the water, with the napkin folded small in my bra like something I stole. The sun's low by the time I pull into the drive, and Callum's car isn't in it.

He doesn't come home for dinner either. I sit through all of it anyway, the halibut and Richard's golf story and Mom's bright laugh. I watch his empty chair the whole time as if it might explain itself. Up in my room, a search for Kelsey Tran turns up a dozen of them, and none live anywhere near here. Long after the house goes quiet, I give up. I can't lie in that bed anymore, so I go down for water.

The kitchen is dark except for the light over the stove. The tile is cold under my bare feet. The room smells like coffee grounds and the lemons

Marisol keeps in a bowl by the sink. He's sitting on the counter by the sink in a black T-shirt and gray sweatpants, eating cereal out of a mixing bowl with a serving spoon.

I stop in the doorway. My pulse jumps before my brain catches up, the way it does when a dog barks behind a fence.

He looks at me. He keeps eating.

"You closed the account," I say.

He swallows. "Good evening, thief."

"Don't. Don't do that. You called the club and had me taken off Richard's account. You didn't even tell me. I found out from the bartender, in front of two women in visors."

"Tennis visors?"

"Does it fucking *matter*?"

"A little." He sets the bowl down on the counter beside him. "If it was the Aldridge sisters, that's all over the club by now."

"It was. And they knew all about me." My face goes hot all over again, just saying it. "'You make friends fast.' That's what you told them?"

"I said you'd been busy."

"You said it so they'd laugh."

"I said it so they'd talk." He picks the spoon back up. "They're good at that."

I came down here for water, and I'm getting water. It's a long walk across the kitchen to the fridge with his eyes on my back. With my back to him, I pour a glass and drink half of it. "Why would you even do that?"

"Because you don't need to be at the club."

"That's not your call to make, Callum."

"It's my father's account." He says it so calmly. "I'm on it. You're not."

"Your father invited me."

"My father invited your mother. You came with her. Like a gift bag."

I turn around.

He's still on the counter, his hands braced on either side of him. The stove light is doing things to his face that I don't appreciate. It catches the scar through his bottom lip, the stubble along his jaw and the gray of his eyes. They're fixed on me as if I'm the only lit thing in the room. His watch lies on the counter next to the cereal bowl, steel and heavy, face down.

"What do you think I'm going to do there?" I ask. "Steal the silverware? Charge a yacht?"

"I think you're going to sit at that bar and ask questions."

That stops me. "About what?"

"You tell me." He tips his head. "You were in there today for an hour. Teddy doesn't talk to people for an hour."

"You had me *watched*?"

"It's a small club. People like to tell me things."

"People like to tell you things." I set the glass down harder than I mean to. "God, you love this, don't you? You love that you can pick up a phone and make me a joke in front of the whole town."

"I don't think about you enough to love anything."

"You think about me enough to call the club before breakfast."

He doesn't answer right away. Then he slides off the counter.

He's not fast about it. He just stands, and the kitchen gets smaller, the way rooms do when he stands up in them. He comes across the tile in his bare feet. He stops right in front of me with his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants, and I have to tip my head back to keep looking at him.

"A man half the club saw you leave with is dead," he says. "By the end of the week there's a detective at that bar, asking Teddy who's been digging into last summer. Teddy has a pension. He'll give them your name." His eyes stay on mine. "You want to hand them a reason? Go ahead. I'll pay for your tea."

"So you're protecting me."

"I'm protecting my father's name. You're standing too close to it."

"You're the one who walked over here."

"I noticed."

I push past him. That's what I mean to do, anyway. I put my hand flat on his chest to move him out of my way, and he doesn't move. It's like pushing on the side of the house. Then his hand comes out of his pocket and closes around my wrist, not hard. He turns us both, one step. Suddenly the edge of the counter is against the small of my back.

My breath goes short and shallow. He doesn't press me into it. He doesn't have to. He's close enough that I can smell cedar and smoke. His other hand comes down flat on the counter beside my hip.

"You want to know what the club is for?" he says, low. "It's for people who've never had to ask anybody for anything. You walk in there asking, they smell it on you. They'll eat you alive and smile while they do it."

"And you're so different."

"I'm worse." He says it like it's the weather. "I just don't smile."

"You're smiling right now."

He isn't. Not really. The corner of his mouth has moved, maybe a quarter of an inch, the same way it did on the stairs the day I got here. I'm looking right at it, and he knows I'm looking.

His thumb moves on the inside of my wrist.

It's barely anything. It settles right over my pulse, next to the little burn scar on my left wrist from the fryer at my first bar job, and it stays there. I stop breathing. Last night a man in a white mask held my wrist exactly like this. His thumb sat in exactly this place. He felt how fast my heart was going and didn't say a word about it.

I look down at Callum's hand. It's big and tan, with a thin white scar across two knuckles. I've watched it pick up a glass, slam a car door and slide a train schedule across a tablecloth. Lots of men have hands.

Lots of men. Every man. Don't be insane.

"You've gone quiet," Callum says. "What are you thinking about?"

"How many people you've had banned from things. Is there a list, or do you keep it all in your head?"

"Just you." He leans in. Not much. Enough that I feel his breath at my temple when he talks. "You're special."

My heart is going so hard I'm sure he can feel it under his thumb. His eyes drop to my mouth and stay there. Mine drop to his. The scar through his lip is pale and thin in the stove light, off center. I wonder what it would feel like against mine. It's the stupidest thing I've ever wondered.

He doesn't move. Neither of us moves. The fridge hums, and somewhere upstairs a floor creaks. It goes on too long, way too long. Something in his face slips, as if he walked into this kitchen with an argument and can't remember how it ends.

"Keep looking at my mouth," he says, very quietly, "and I'll take it as a request."

That snaps it.

I put both hands on his chest and shove, and this time he moves. He lets me. He steps back, one step, two, and lets go of my wrist. The air rushes into the space between us.

"Don't you *dare*," I say, and my voice shakes. "Don't you dare do that and then call me a thief in the morning."

"I'll call you what I want in the morning."

"You closed my account. You told my mother I left with a dead man. You slid me a train schedule over breakfast."

"And you're still here."

"Yes, I'm still *here*."

"Then I haven't done enough." He picks his watch up off the counter and buckles it on, calm as anything, while I stand here with my whole body shaking. "Go to bed, Wren."

He hasn't said my name since the night I moved in. Not once. It's been thief every time. It lands somewhere under my ribs, and I hate him for it.

"Go to hell, Callum. I fucking mean it."

"Probably," he says. He picks up his bowl and walks out of the kitchen barefoot without looking back.

I stand at the counter until my hands stop shaking. Then I go upstairs, and I don't sleep. In the worst part of the night I get out of bed and take the cream-colored card off my nightstand. *Tomorrow night. All of us. Tell no one*. I turn it over. The only thing in the room that writes is the eyeliner pencil from my makeup bag, so that's what I use.

Boathouse. Tomorrow night. Just the one who talks too much.

Out on the balcony, I set the card on the railing. The night breeze lifts its corner, so I unplug the lamp and weigh the card down with its brass foot. It's an insane thing to do with a lamp. Then I leave it there and go back to bed.

When I wake up, the lamp is sitting neatly on the balcony floor.

The card is gone.

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12

WREN

My note didn't say what time. That only occurs to me after dinner, lying on top of my bed in jeans with my keys in my fist, listening to the house.

So I wait until the last door closes downstairs. When the house is quiet, I carry my sneakers down the stairs and out to the Civic. I leave the car on the shoulder of the road above the point, tucked behind a hedge. Every window in the clubhouse is dark. Even with the engine off, my hands don't want to let go of the wheel. The engine ticks as it cools, and I count the dark windows twice. Then I get out and walk down, with my phone's flashlight pointed at my feet.

The lawn is soaked, and the cold comes straight through my sneakers. The tent from the summer party is gone. There are still little square dents in the grass where it stood, and I step over them like they're graves. Down at the water, the boathouse is a long black shape against a longer black harbor. The side door is standing open about a hand's width. It's the door I came through with Grant.

My legs slow down on their own. The last time I walked through that door, a man walked in with me and never walked out. My knees feel loose, as if they belong to someone else. There's a sour taste at the back of my throat that won't swallow down.

Open for me. Someone got the card.

I push the door the rest of the way and step inside. The smell hits me before anything else. It's bleach, and under it are diesel and wet rope, the same as that night. Under that, so faint I might be making it up, there's something coppery. My flashlight catches the kayak racks and the rowing shells hung up in the rafters like the ribs of a whale. Then it catches the floor.

There's a new board.

It's right in front of the workbench, where he fell. It's paler than the others, raw yellow pine among all that gray, with bright new nails in it. Someone pulled up the old one and put this one down, and they did a neat job of it. It's the worst thing I've ever seen. The light starts to shake on the pine, because my hand is shaking.

Don't throw up. Don't you dare throw up in here.

"Yeah," a voice says from the dark. "We fixed that."

I don't scream. I spin around with the light up. He's leaning against the kayak rack with his arms folded, in a black hoodie and black gloves. The cracked mask catches my flashlight and throws it back.

"How long have you been standing there?" My heart is going so hard it hurts. I can't get a full breath past it. "Because you could have said something before I nearly threw up on your floor."

"Since before you parked. That hedge isn't hiding a Honda, by the way." He pushes off the rack and takes his time crossing to me, loose and easy, as if the place belongs to him. "Got your card."

"I figured, since you're standing in the boathouse."

"Eyeliner." He sounds delighted. "Bold choice."

"It was the only thing in the room that writes. Did you think I keep stationery by the balcony door?"

"*The one who talks too much.*" He reads it back like a rave review. "I read it to the others. Four of us in masks, and you picked me out without a name. They've been sulking about it all day, and I'm having it framed."

"If you frame my eyeliner, I'm never writing you anything again."

"Then I'll only need the one frame." He looks around the boathouse, at the racks and the dark, at the new board, and back to me. His voice drops, low and rough. "You sure you want to do this here? If you just want to talk, we can talk anywhere. I'd sit in a diner booth in this mask if you asked me to."

The pale board is right there. I make myself look at it, at the bright nails and the raw wood. Then I make myself remember Grant's arm across my throat and his breath in my ear. *She's been all over me all night, ask anyone.* My heels skidded on the boards right there. My mouth goes dry, and I have to swallow twice before my voice will work.

"I'm not letting this place keep it," I say.

He's quiet.

"I came down here with him," I say. "He picked this place. He picked the dark. He had all these ideas about what was going to happen to me in here." I swallow. "I want to pick. This room should be where something happened that *I* picked."

For a while he doesn't say anything at all. Then he nods, slowly.

"Okay," he says. "Then pick. But you get your question first, because that's the deal, and I'm not having you say I skipped it."

I've spent all day deciding what it should be.

"The tattoo," I say. "On your wrist. What is it?"

He turns his wrist over and looks at it, then back at me. "Out of everything you could ask me, you want to know about my ink? Not my name, not who I am when I'm not in this?"

"You'd lie about your name."

"I'd refuse to answer about my name, which is a different thing, and I'd like some credit for it." He's quiet for a moment. "It's a coin."

"Like the one you put in his mouth?"

"Like the one you've got in your pocket right now."

I do. I don't know how he knows, and the skin on the back of my neck goes tight. My hand goes to it before I can stop it, and he laughs, low.

"Can I see it?"

"That's two questions, and you only get one a visit." There's a grin in his voice. "Ask me better next time and maybe I'll show you."

I take a breath. Then I say the thing I rehearsed in the car with the engine off, again and again, until the words stopped sounding insane.

"I want you to chase me."

He pushes off the kayak rack.

"In the dark," I say, before I lose my nerve. "I turn the light off, and I run. You come after me like you don't have permission. Like you're hunting me." My face is burning. "When you catch me, it has to feel real. I want to be scared, and I need it to be mine."

He doesn't laugh. He doesn't make a joke either, and that's how I know he's taking it seriously.

"Okay," he says slowly. "Then we do it right. When I catch you, how rough do you want it?"

"You want me to just tell you? Out loud?"

"I want you to tell me exactly." His voice is low and level, all business. "Do I grab you, or do I take you down? Do I pin your hands? Do I put you up against something, or do you want the floor?"

My mouth goes dry all over again. "Grab me. Pin me. Up against something is fine."

"What about your hair? Can I get a hand in it?"

I think about it. "Yes."

"And your throat?"

"No." It comes out too fast and too loud. "Never my throat. Not after him."

"Never your throat," he says, like he's carving it into something. "What else is off the table? Tell me now, because I won't be asking polite questions once you're running."

"Nothing under my clothes unless I say so. And I want the knife."

"You want me to bring a knife to a chase." Now there's a grin in it. "You're a nightmare, and I'm into it. What's the word if you want out?"

"Whitlock."

"And if you can't talk? If my hand's over your mouth?"

My stomach flips at the way he says it, as if it's already happened. "Then I tap. Twice. On whatever I can reach."

"Twice, and I stop. Say it back to me so I know you've got it."

"Whitlock, or two taps, and you stop."

"Right then," he says. "Not a second later. Not if I'm halfway through a sentence."

He reaches into his hoodie for the black folding knife, the thick-bladed one from my bedroom. He flicks it open, then holds it out to me, handle first.

I don't take it. I close his fingers around the handle instead, so it's in *his* hand. The cracked mask tilts down to look at what I've done.

"Hold it," I say. "Feel what that's like."

"It's like holding a knife. I've done it before."

"Have you done it with me watching you? Knowing I know exactly what you've used one for?"

He doesn't answer that.

Then I take it back. One at a time, I pry his gloved fingers off it and fold my own hand around the grip, with my thumb on the spine the way the video showed me. The flat of the blade comes up to rest against the side of his neck, right where the hood meets the mask.

"If you don't stop when I say," I tell him, "you know where this goes."

"Yes, ma'am," he says, and his voice isn't steady at all. "Fuck. Yes, ma'am."

I turn off my flashlight.

The dark comes down like a blanket over a birdcage. For a moment I can't see anything, not the racks or the shells or the door. There's only the faint gray square of the water gate at the far end. I hear him breathe out, long and slow. Then I don't hear him at all.

I move.

I go left, toward the kayak racks, because it's where I'd hide. He'll think of that too, so I go past them and crouch in the gap behind the shells. The boards are cold under my palms. The knife's handle is warm. My pulse is so loud I think he must be able to hear it from anywhere in the building.

"You know the problem with hiding in here?" His voice comes out of the dark, somewhere near the door, lazy and low. "Everything creaks. You take a step, the boathouse tells on you. You breathe, the boathouse tells on you."

Breathe quieter, idiot.

I hold my breath.

"That's worse," he says. "Now I can hear you not breathing."

A board creaks, closer, and it isn't me. My whole body goes tight, and every hair on my arms stands straight up. There's a hot, humming thing low in my belly that has nothing to do with being afraid. That scares me more than he does.

"I heard you wore a good dress to the club yesterday," he says, closer now. "That little white one. Teddy says half the men in that bar forgot what they were drinking, and I wanted to throw every one of them in the harbor."

"I'm not wearing it," I hiss before I can stop myself.

"I know." His voice is suddenly right there, on the other side of the shells. "You're wearing jeans. Thanks for talking, champ."

I bolt.

I get about three steps, past the end of the rack and into the open, toward the gray square of the water gate. Then an arm comes around my waist from behind and lifts me clean off the floor. I kick hard, for real, and my heel connects with something. He grunts, then laughs in my ear. Three long steps later, my back hits wood.

The workbench.

He catches my free wrist and pins it to the bench beside my hip. His other hand fists in my hair, not hard, just enough to tip my head back. The edge of the bench bites into me, exactly where it did when Grant dragged me backward. For one sick, whirling second I'm not here. I'm there, with an arm across my throat and a voice saying *take her*, and I can't breathe.

His hands go still. Both of them. He doesn't let go, but he stops.

"Still with me?" he says quietly. The laugh is gone.

My throat's tight. His hand is in my hair, not on my throat. His body's against mine, big and warm, holding still. Nobody's saying *take her*. Nobody's saying anything but him, and he's asking.

"Still with you," I say.

"You sure? Because I felt you go somewhere just now, and it wasn't here with me."

"Ask me again and I'll cut you."

He laughs, a rough, shaky sound, right against my ear. "There she is."

He smells like pepper and clove. I breathe it in and put the flat of the blade against his neck again. He swallows under it. My free hand finds the bottom edge of his mask, warm from his skin, and lifts it an inch, then two, enough to feel stubble scrape my fingertips. His jaw is clenched hard.

"Can I?" I whisper.

"You've got a knife on my throat," he says. "You can do whatever the fuck you want."

I kiss him.

It's not careful, and it's not sweet. It's teeth and heat, with my back against the bench. His mouth opens under mine as if he's been waiting a year for it. He makes a sound into my mouth that goes straight through me, low and wrecked. His hand tightens in my hair, dragging me up against him. I can feel how much he wants this everywhere we're touching.

"Fuck," he breathes against my lips. "Look at fucking you. I can't see a thing in here, and I still know exactly how you look right now."

"You can't possibly know that."

"Flushed. Mouth open. Knife nice and steady on my neck." His lips brush mine when he says it. "Tell me I'm wrong."

I kiss him again to shut him up. It doesn't work. It never works with him. He rolls his hips into me, once, slow, so I can feel exactly how hard he is through his jeans.

"You feel that?" he says into my mouth. "That's what you did. You and your little note."

"Eyeliner," I manage.

"Eyeliner. I've been hard since I read it, and I've spent the whole day thinking about what you'd let me do to you down here."

My breath catches, and it turns into a gasp when he rolls into me again. His hand leaves my hair and slides down my side, over my ribs, to my hip. It stops on the outside of my thigh, over my jeans. Then it waits.

"Tell me where," he says.

I can't think. That's the problem. I can't think, and I have to, because the whole point is that I pick. I drag in a breath.

"Over," I say. "Over my jeans. Here."

With my free hand, I take his wrist and put his palm right there, between my legs. He groans like I've hit him.

"Oh, you're so fucking warm," he says. "You're warm right through the denim. Do you want to know what that's doing to me?"

"Don't tell me."

"I'm going to tell you anyway, and you're going to listen."

He presses the heel of his hand against me, slow, and rocks it. My hips follow it before I can stop them. The seam of my jeans drags right over my clit, and my head drops back.

"There it is," he says. "Felt that one in your knees, didn't you?"

"Shut up."

"Make me." He does it again, harder, and a sound comes out of me that I've never made in my life. "No? Then I'm going to keep talking, and you're going to keep making that noise for me."

"I'm not making a noise."

"You're making a noise. I've spent every night since the boathouse wondering what you'd sound like, and I wasn't even close."

I'm gasping, and somewhere under it I'm almost laughing, which shouldn't be possible. The knife shakes against his neck.

"Knife's shaking," he says.

"Whose fault do you think that is?"

"Mine, and I'm proud of it. Keep it right there anyway. You drop it, I'm going to be very disappointed in your technique." His hand keeps moving, slow and steady, building something hot and tight low in my belly. It climbs higher with every roll of his wrist. I'm right at the edge of something when he stops.

He just stops. His palm stays pressed flat against me, and I make a sound of pure outrage.

"Why the hell did you stop?"

"Because you didn't ask nice."

"I have a knife on your throat."

"Still not nice. Try again."

I want to kill him. I want to drag his hand back where it was. My breath is coming so hard the mask fogs where my mouth is near it.

"Please," I say. It comes out ragged. "Please don't stop."

"See?" he says softly. "Was that so hard? You could have had this a minute ago."

His fingers find the button of my jeans and stop there. They wait. It takes me a moment to understand he's asking.

"Yes," I say. "Hand only. Just your hand."

"Just my hand," he says, like a promise.

The button goes, then the zipper. He pulls his glove off with his teeth, and I hear it hit the floor. His bare hand slides down under my waistband, under the thin cotton, big, warm and rough with calluses. His fingers find me. I'm so wet he swears, long and filthy, right into my hair.

"Oh," he says, and his voice breaks on it. "Oh, *fuck*. You're soaked. All this for me?"

"Don't let it go to your head."

"Too late. You're dripping all over my hand, and it's going straight to my head."

He drags two fingers up through me, slow, all the way to my clit, and circles it once. My whole body jerks. He does it again, lighter, and my free hand fists in the front of his hoodie.

"Like that?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"Yes, like that. Don't you dare stop again."

"Wouldn't dream of it." He keeps circling, slow, wet, maddening, until my thighs are shaking. "Tell me what you want. Out loud. I want to hear you say it in this room."

My face burns in the dark. "Your fingers."

"Where?"

"Inside me."

"Say please."

"I already said please."

"Say it again. I liked hearing it the first time."

"*Please*."

He slides two fingers into me, slow, and I stop breathing. They're thick and rough. He pushes them all the way in, then holds them there. His thumb settles over my clit, pressing in little circles. I clench around him so hard he groans out loud.

"Jesus Christ," he says. "You're gripping me like you're scared I'll leave. I'm not going anywhere. Hear me? I'm right here."

He starts to move. He works his fingers in and out of me, slow, then faster, curling them forward on every stroke so they drag across a spot that makes my vision go white. The wet sound of it fills the boathouse. I should be embarrassed. I'm not. I'm rocking into his hand, riding it, chasing it, and I can't stop.

"That's it," he says against my jaw. "Take it. Take what you want. You're the one with the knife."

"If you stop," I say through my teeth, "I'll kill you."

"Then I'd better not stop." His mouth finds the soft place under my ear, and he bites down gently. His fingers don't miss a stroke. "God, listen to you. You're gonna wake up the whole fucking harbor. Do it. Let them hear you."

The coil pulls tighter, hot and impossible, from somewhere deep under my belly button. My legs are shaking so hard he's holding me up with his hips. The knife is still pressed to his neck, and I can feel his pulse hammering against the steel as hard as mine.

"I'm close," I gasp. "I'm so..."

"I know. I can feel it." His voice goes rough and low, right in my ear. "Come on. Give it to me. Right here, on this floor, where it's yours."

I come so hard I see sparks in the dark.

It tears through me in long, shaking waves. My whole body clamps down around his fingers, and he keeps moving through it, slow and steady, dragging it out until I'm sobbing for breath. My knees give out. He holds me up with one arm around my back and doesn't stop talking.

"There you go. There you go. Shaking all over for me. I've got you. I've got you."

When it finally lets go of me, I'm hanging on to him with my face pressed into his neck. His fingers are still inside me, perfectly still. He eases them out slowly, and I shudder.

"Watching you come," he says hoarsely, into my hair, "is a religious experience. I'm converting."

A laugh shakes out of me, weak and wet. "You can't even see me."

"Didn't need to. I felt it." He presses his forehead to my temple. "Best thing that's ever happened in this building, and it's not close."

He's breathing hard, still hard against my hip, rigid through his jeans. He shifts against me, just slightly, and groans. Then he says, rough and hopeful, right into my hair, "Let me..."

"Whitlock," I say.

He stops mid-word.

Not a beat later. Right then. His hips move back, off me. He goes absolutely still, with both hands up and open in the dark, resting against my arms where I can feel them. He doesn't sigh. He doesn't argue. He doesn't ask what he did wrong.

He just stops.

I stand there with the bench against my back and his breath going ragged above me. My hands start shaking now, worse than they did over the board. Something in my chest lets go. It's been clenched since the day I heard about Daisy.

It works. The word works.

"Okay," I whisper. "I'm okay. I just needed to know."

"Yeah," he says. His voice has gone all the way down to nothing. "Yeah. I figured."

Then he goes quiet.

He sits down on the floor with his back against the bench and pulls me into his lap, and I let him. He wraps both arms around me, holding on. I fold the knife shut and put it in his hoodie pocket, and he doesn't comment on it. I wait for the joke, because there's always a joke. The one who talks

too much sits on the boathouse floor with his chin on top of my head. His heart is slamming against my shoulder, and he doesn't make a single sound.

We stay there a long time. The water slaps at the pilings. Somewhere across the harbor a buoy bell rings, slow and far away. I'm going to smell him in my sleep.

"You went quiet on me," I say finally.

His arms tighten. "Yeah."

"You never go quiet. I didn't know you could."

"Don't tell anybody," he says. "I've got a reputation to protect."

"With who? I don't even know what to call you."

"You've been calling me something. I can tell."

"Cracked," I admit.

He laughs into my hair, low. "That's what's wrong with the mask. That's not my name."

"It's the only one you've given me."

When I finally get up, my legs are unsteady and my jeans are still undone. I fix them by feel while he stands and pulls his mask straight. He walks me to the door, but he doesn't come out onto the lawn.

"Hey," he says, when I'm on the step.

I look back.

"Next time you want me," he says, "just text me."

"I don't have your number."

"You will."

"That's a creepy thing to say to a girl in the dark."

"That's service." I can hear the grin. "Go home. Your knees are still shaking."

I'd argue, but he's right. The wet grass soaks my sneakers again on the walk up to the road, past the little square dents where the tent stood. I don't look back until I reach the hedge.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket.

It's a number I don't know. Not blocked this time. Just a string of digits and two words.

Told you.

Behind the hedge, the screen lights up my face. I never gave him my number. I never gave any of them anything. Then I remember a mirrored mask in this boathouse, holding my phone for a long time with something

small and black plugged into the bottom of it. The back of my neck goes cold.

I should block it. I save it instead, under *Talks Too Much*.

He's still in the doorway, a black shape against a black building. Behind him, somewhere in the dark of that floor, is a square of new pale wood. I can't see it from here, but I know exactly where it is.

I drive with the windows down, my whole body humming. All the way home, I think about the board. Someone pulled up the old one. Someone measured and cut the new one, then nailed it down in a building that belongs to the club.

Whoever did it didn't break in. They had a key.

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13

WREN

My mother knocks on my door before I'm dressed. She hasn't done that since I was fifteen.

"Wren? Baby? Can I come in?"

I pull a sweatshirt on over my sleep shirt and open it. She's in her tennis clothes, with her hair still wet from the shower, holding her phone against her chest with both hands like it's a baby bird she found on the lawn.

"Mom, what's wrong? Did something happen to Richard?"

"Nothing's wrong. Richard's fine." She comes in and sits on the end of my bed, then stands up again, then sits. "Pam Aldridge called me."

The tennis visors. My stomach drops before she says anything else.

"She says you insulted her at the bar, in front of everyone," Mom says. "Something about her *husband*, Wren? Please tell me she's exaggerating."

"She isn't, and she had it coming."

"Oh, baby. What did you *say* to her?"

"I told her if I ever needed a list of the married men, I'd start with hers."

My mother makes a sound like I've stepped on her foot. "*Wren.*"

"She called me a whore first, Mom. She just used more syllables."

"Pam Aldridge would never use that word in her life."

"She didn't have to. She said I've been making friends with the members. She said if I wanted to know which ones were married, I could ask her, because she knows all the wives." My face is burning all the way

up to my hairline. "In front of the whole bar. What was I supposed to do, thank her?"

Mom looks at the window instead of at me. She turns her phone over in her hands. "She says people are talking. Lunch with Grant Whitlock, twice. A drink with Tom Kessler. Asking the staff about last summer."

"I talked to Teddy about *one* party. And Tom Kessler talked at me about his boat until my ice melted, which I'm not counting as a date."

"She told me it came from Callum. That he'd mentioned you've been busy."

"Of course he did." I'm on my feet. I don't remember standing. "He had me thrown off the club account in front of those exact women, did he tell you that? He's the one feeding them this, and you're up here telling *me* to be nice?"

"I'm not telling you anything about Callum." She stands too. She's smaller than me, she's always been smaller than me, and her chin does the thing it does right before she cries. "Bill Aldridge has known Richard since they were boys. He's on the board. They sail together every weekend. If Bill tells Richard that my daughter made a scene at his club, the week a man she had lunch with turned up dead..." She stops. She breathes. "I've barely been married, baby. Everything I have is in this house. I'm scared."

"Scared of what? Of Bill Aldridge?"

"Of losing it." She says it so quietly I almost miss it. "Please. Just lay low for a little while. No club. No Pam. No more snapping at people, even if they deserve it. Can you do that? For me?"

I look at her, at the wet hair and the tennis skirt. The ring on her hand is throwing little sparks all over my ceiling.

My mother has never said my sister's name to me. Not even the week of the funeral. Now she's standing in my room asking me to lay low. My throat burns. If I open my mouth, I'll say it for her, so I keep it shut.

"Sure," I say. "I'll lay low."

She hugs me on her way out, quick and hard, and I let her. After the door shuts, I sit on the bed with the heels of my hands pressed into my eyes until I see colors.

Lay low. Fine. Kelsey Tran doesn't belong to the club, so she doesn't count.

I get dressed and take the back stairs so I won't pass my mother again. Out in the Civic, with the engine running and the air conditioning

wheezing, I call Mrs. Dolan above the candle shop, because Mrs. Dolan knows where everyone is. Her TV is going in the background the whole time.

"Kelsey? She's waiting tables at that diner out on Route 1, honey, past the outlets. The one with the lobster on the roof." She turns the volume down, then up again. "Tell her I said hi. And tell her she still owes me for the blinds."

The gas light comes on before I'm out of town, so I pull into the station by the marina. I'm standing at the pump with the nozzle in my hand when a black car pulls in on the other side of the island.

Silas gets out.

He's in black again, a black T-shirt and black jeans, with his headphones around his neck. His dark hair is falling in his eyes. He looks at me across the pump like I'm a sign he's already read. Then he turns his back and starts filling his tank.

"Hi," I say.

Nothing.

"Silas, hi. We met at the pool, remember? I was the one treading water in the deep end while your friend graded my knees."

"I remember," he says, without turning around. "Seven and a half."

"So you were listening. You looked up from your laptop for about one second."

"It was enough."

I don't know what to do with that, so I keep going. "Great. Then can I ask you something, since we're old friends?"

"No."

I ask anyway. "You knew the ending of my book was bad from across a pool deck. You probably know everybody in this town. Do you know a Kelsey Tran? She used to live on Chapel Street."

His hand tightens on the pump handle. It's a small thing. The numbers keep ticking up on the display. His thumb stops turning the silver ring on his other hand, then starts again.

"Who gave you that name?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes." He doesn't add anything to it. He just waits, with his back to me, like he has all afternoon.

"She's a friend of a friend. Is that allowed, or do I need a permit from the Sterlings?"

"You don't have friends here."

"Wow." I jam the nozzle back into its cradle harder than I need to. "Did you practice that one in the car, or does it just come naturally?"

"In the car," he says. "Twice."

It's so flat that it takes me a second to hear the joke in it. By then I'm too mad to laugh.

"You know what? Forget I asked. Enjoy your gas."

"You're wasting your time," he says.

I stop with my hand on my car door. "Wasting it doing what, exactly?"

He turns around finally and comes around the end of the pump, close enough that I'd have to step back to see all of him, and I don't. His eyes are so dark I can't find the edge of his pupils. There's nothing in his face at all, not dislike, not curiosity, nothing. It's like being looked at by the harbor, and the hair on my arms lifts. I hate that I notice his mouth anyway.

"Whatever you're doing," he says. "She's not going to tell you anything."

"You don't even know what I'm going to ask her. How could you know what she'll say?"

"I don't." His eyes drop to my hand on the door, then come back up. "I know what you look like when you've already decided to go."

"Oh, really? And what do I look like?"

He takes a second too long to answer, as if he's deciding whether to. "Like you're about to make it my problem."

"Nothing about me is your problem."

"Good. Keep it that way." He goes back to his own car and hangs up the nozzle. "The roads out on Route 1 are bad at night. Your taillight's cracked. The state police out there pull people over for less."

Then he gets in his car and drives away. I stand at the pump with my heart going, my hand still on the door. I can't tell if that was a threat or a warning. My fingers are cold, even in the sun.

I never told him Route 1.

Shit. Did I? Chapel Street, yes, but Route 1 never came out of my mouth. With the key in the ignition, I sit in the Civic and go back over it until I'm almost sure. Then I start the car and check the mirror the whole way out of town.

The diner has a fiberglass lobster on the roof, faded pink, with one claw missing. Inside, it's all red vinyl and fluorescent light, with the smell of fryer oil over everything. One waitress is working the counter. She's small and sharp-faced, with a black braid down her back and a pen stuck through it. Her name tag says KELSEY.

I sit at the counter. She comes over with a coffee pot and doesn't look up.

"Coffee?"

"Please. I'm also looking for Kelsey Tran, if she's working today."

She pours. She stops pouring. She looks up.

For a second she just stares at me, the coffee pot hanging in the air. Then she sets it down on the counter between us, very carefully.

"Oh my God," she says. "You're Wren."

My throat closes up.

"You're Wren," she says again, quieter. "She had your picture on the fridge. The one of you at that bar with the neon cactus. She said you were the only person on earth who'd never lied to her." Her eyes are filling up. "You look just like her when you're mad. Did you know that? You're mad right now. She used to do that exact thing with her jaw."

"I'm not mad," I say, and my voice cracks right down the middle.

Kelsey laughs, wet. "Yeah. She used to say that too."

She tells the cook she's taking her break, and he yells at her from the back. She yells back words I don't catch. Then we're in a booth in the corner, under a framed photo of a record-breaking striped bass, and she's holding a coffee she doesn't drink.

"Nobody came," she says. "After. The cops asked me two questions. Did she use, and did she have a boyfriend. I said no and no, and they wrote down yes and yes." She shakes her head. "Her mom called the landlady once, I heard. Said throw it all out. Nobody ever came for her stuff. I thought... I don't know what I thought."

Yes and yes. My face goes hot. I have to stare at the striped bass until I can trust my voice.

"I didn't know she had a roommate. I didn't know anything. She told me she was fine." My hands are wrapped around my mug so hard it's a miracle it doesn't crack. "She was always fine."

"She wasn't fine." Kelsey looks down. "Not the last month. She stopped going out. She'd sit in the window at night with the lights off, watching the

street. She said a guy was bothering her, and I said *what guy*, and she said nobody I'd believe." She swallows. "I thought she meant a guy from the club. Some rich asshole. I told her to go to the cops, and she laughed at me. Not a funny laugh."

"Was it Grant Whitlock?"

Kelsey's head comes up. "The one they just found on the rocks?"

"Did she ever say his name? Even once, even as a joke?"

"No." She thinks about it, really thinks. "No. She never said any name. She said if she said it out loud, it'd be real, and then she'd have to do something about it." Her mouth twists. "Then one night she came home and she was different. Lighter. She said she'd told someone. Someone who could help. She said he believed her."

"Did she tell you who? Anything at all, even what he did for a living?"

"She wouldn't say that either." Kelsey reaches down beside her and lifts a canvas tote onto the table, the kind with a bookstore logo on it. She pushes it across to me. "But she wrote everything down. She always did. She made me promise if anything happened to her I wouldn't give this to the cops. Not to the cops, she said, like, over and over. So I didn't give it to anybody. I've been carrying it around in my car for a year like a crazy person."

Inside the tote is a notebook. It's cheap and spiral-bound, with the cover plastered in stickers: a cartoon crab, a peach, a sticker from a Philly dive bar. I'd know that last one anywhere, because I worked there.

My hand goes flat on the cover, but I can't open it. Not here, not with my fingers already shaking on the cardboard.

"Why not the cops?" I ask. "What did she think they'd do with it?"

"I don't know." Kelsey slides out of the booth. Her break's over, or she wants it to be. She stands there a moment with her hand on the back of the seat. "Wren. Don't tell anybody you talked to me. Okay? I have a life out here. I don't want whatever she was scared of to know my name."

"I won't tell a soul."

"Promise me. I mean it."

"I promise."

She nods and goes back behind the counter for the coffee pot. When I leave, she doesn't look up. She lifts one hand, just a little, over the pie case.

I sit in the diner lot for a long time with the tote in my lap, not opening it, until the cook comes out for a smoke and stares at me. The tote rides

home on the passenger seat with the seatbelt across it, which is insane, and I do it anyway. Route 1 goes gold, then pink, while the sun drops behind the outlets. I check the mirror for a black car the whole way and never see one. By the time I've parked and carried the tote upstairs past the smell of Marisol's garlic bread, it's almost dark.

I don't open the notebook until the door is locked and the lamp is on. The balcony door is shut.

It's her. It's so her that I have to put it down twice. Her handwriting slants backward, like it's trying to run away from itself, and she dots her i's with little circles. She draws in all the margins: waves, gulls, a lobster with a top hat. Tiny rows of tally marks and numbers run down the edges of the pages, like a kid keeping score. She's made a list of things she wants to name a dog, and a whole page about a guy who tipped her in quarters.

There's a page that just says *WREN IS A LIAR, SHE SAID SHE'D VISIT FOR MY BIRTHDAY.* She underlined it so hard the pen tore the paper. I have to put it down again and breathe through my mouth.

Then the entries get shorter. The drawings stop.

He was at the diner again. Just sat there. Didn't order.

I'm not writing his name. If anybody ever finds this, I don't want his name in my handwriting to be the reason something happens to me.

Nobody would believe it about him. That's the whole thing. That's how he does it.

Then, near the end, there's a longer one. The handwriting's steadier, as if she slowed down to write it.

Told someone tonight. The one person in this whole stupid town I trust. He listened to the whole thing and didn't look at me like I was lying, not once. He said leave it with him. I asked what that means and he said there are people who handle things the police won't. Men in masks, he said. I laughed. He didn't.

I don't know if I believe in men in masks. But I believe him.

My blood runs cold. It drains out of my face and my hands so fast the notebook slides off my knees and hits the floor. Every hair on my arms stands up. My scalp prickles, as if someone just breathed on the back of my neck.

I don't pick it up. I can't. I sit there staring at it on the rug, open to that page, and my heart is slamming so hard the room jumps with it. Then I'm

on my feet, walking to the balcony door and back, because if I sit still I'm going to scream.

"Men in masks," I say out loud, to nobody.

The room doesn't answer. My sister knew about them. She went to someone, a *he* she trusted, and he told her about men in masks. Not long after that, she was on the rocks at the bottom of the point.

The first night Cracked came through my balcony door, I asked him about the girl on the rocks. He went still in my armchair and said he'd lie to me. Last night, in the boathouse, I let that same man put his hand on me in the dark.

They knew her.

I back away from the bed until the dresser stops me. My hands are over my mouth, and they're shaking so hard my teeth knock against my knuckles. Rage, grief and the other thing, the thing I felt against the workbench with my knife on his throat, have all turned into one heat. I can't pull them apart. My stomach rolls, and I swallow hard so I won't be sick.

"You knew," I whisper at the balcony door. "You fucking knew her."

The curtain hangs there, still.

My phone is on the nightstand. The thread I saved last night is right at the top: *Talks Too Much.* Two words from him, and nothing since. My thumbs shake while I type.

the girl on the rocks last summer. did you know her?

My thumb hovers over send. I can almost hear him, low and rough in my armchair. *Because I'll lie to you.* If I ask, he'll lie, or he'll go quiet. Either way, they'll know exactly what I'm looking for. Then they'll close ranks, and I'll never get near it again.

I need something they can't lie their way around. I need proof first.

The words go one letter at a time while I hold down delete. Then I put the phone face down on the nightstand, like that'll stop it from knowing what I almost did. I pick the notebook up off the rug and turn the page with fingers that won't work right.

The last entry has no date. It's a single line in pen, hurried.

Wearing Wren's green dress tomorrow. She'll kill me. Worth it.

I read it until the line swims. Then my chest caves in, and I go with it.

I cry the way I didn't let myself cry at the funeral, ugly and loud, with my face pressed into her notebook so nobody in this enormous house can hear me. It comes up from somewhere so deep it hurts my ribs. For the

green dress, and the crooked candle, and every *miss you, idiot* she never read. I keep going until the page under my cheek is wet and her ink starts to run.

That's what finally stops me. I sit up fast and blot the page with my sleeve, gasping, because I'm not losing that too.

I turn the lamp off. In the dark, I unlock the balcony door.

I tell myself it's because I want to be there when one of them comes. I want to see a mask come over that railing and put the notebook in its hands. Then it can tell me what *leave it with him* means. I want my question, and I want the truth, all of it. Then I want to watch whichever one of them it is try to lie to me with my sister's handwriting in his hands.

That's what I tell myself, lying on top of the covers in the dark with the notebook against my chest.

The curtain doesn't move.

"Come on," I say to the dark, once, very quietly. "Come on. I know you're out there."

I listen for the soft thump on the lawn and the creak of the railing, so hard my ears ring. Every time the house settles, my heart jumps. Every time it's nothing, my stomach drops, and it isn't relief.

I'm lying here with my dead sister's journal on my chest, hoping one of the men who might know how she died comes in through my window.

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14

WREN

Nobody came through the balcony door last night, so I go looking on my own.

The notebook's still open in my lap when I pull up the search bar to look for *men in masks Port Halloway*. My thumb stops before the first letter. Something's already typed in there, two words in lowercase, sitting in the box like someone left them on my pillow.

stop looking

I didn't type that. I'd remember typing that. The screen dims while I stare at it, and I touch it so it won't go dark. My thumb isn't steady when I open my history.

It's empty.

It isn't cleared the normal way, where there's still a little ghost of yesterday. It's just empty. Every search I've done since the funeral is gone. *Grant Whitlock acquittal. Girl found on rocks Port Halloway.* The night in the motel on Route 6 when I asked the internet three different ways how to put a knife in a man so he'd let go of me. The night I looked up whether you can be charged for something you haven't done yet. All of it is gone, like a tide went over it.

My skin goes tight and cold all over. I drop the phone on the comforter like it bit me. "Shit," I whisper, to nobody, and I don't pick it back up for a long time.

Someone had my phone. The man in the mirror mask had it in the boathouse, with that little black thing plugged into the bottom. He looked at the screen for a long time, and I thought he was deleting a recording. He was reading me. All of me.

Then last night, or the night before, or whenever he felt like it, he reached back in and cleaned up after me like a maid. I lay right here all night with the balcony door wide open, waiting for them to come through it. It never crossed my mind to watch my phone.

Stop looking.

My heart's in my throat when I open my messages. The thread with Daisy is still pinned at the top. *Dais.* Every *miss you, idiot* is still there, with every message she never read. Whoever went through my phone left her alone. The thread under hers is the one I saved two nights ago, *Talks Too Much*. It's still just *Told you*, and nothing since. Part of me wants to ask him if he did this. If they're in my phone, though, they're reading that thread too.

someone's in my phone, dais. someone's reading everything. My thumbs type it before I've decided to. Then I picture a stranger in a mirror mask reading it, maybe right now, maybe over his coffee. I hold down delete until it's gone.

It's the first secret I've kept from her since the funeral. It feels like closing a door on her.

"Fuck you," I tell the phone. The new passcode I give it is long and stupid, the kind I'll forget by lunch.

Downstairs, the house is bright and empty. Marisol's radio murmurs somewhere in the kitchen, and the terrace doors stand open to the heat. The pool reaches me before I see it: Rhett's voice halfway through a story, Beau laughing at it, water slapping against the tile. It's a hot, bright, stupid day, the kind that makes the dark feel like something I dreamed. I stop in the doorway in my cutoffs and my old Phillies shirt, and I almost turn around.

Rhett sees me first. He's sitting on the edge of the pool with his feet in the water and a towel slung around his neck. He doesn't yell. He watches me cross the deck with a slow grin, as if I'm something he's been waiting on.

"Phillies," he says, with a nod at my shirt. "Brave. You know what state you're in?"

"A state with a lot of opinions about my shirt, apparently."

"Just mine." He pats the warm stone beside him. "Sit. The water's the only thing out here that isn't trying to sell you something."

Beau's on a lounger in sunglasses, scrolling his phone and pretending he isn't listening. Silas sits in the shade of the umbrella with a paperback he isn't reading, exactly where he was the first day. Callum isn't here. I tell myself that's good.

I sit down next to Rhett and put my feet in. The water's as warm as a bath, and the sun on my shoulders brings out every freckle I own. For a minute nobody says anything, and it's almost normal. I hate that it's almost normal.

"So," Rhett says. "How's life in the castle? Callum still being a prick?"

"Is he ever not?"

"Twice that I know of. Once in tenth grade, once at a funeral." He bumps his shoulder against mine. "Don't let him get under your skin. He gets meaner when he's worried, and he's been worried since you showed up."

"Worried about what?"

"Couldn't tell you, ch..." He stops. It's half a breath, but I catch it. "Chief. Couldn't tell you, chief. He doesn't exactly share."

Ch. For a second the pool and the sun and the whole bright afternoon go very far away. I hear a low voice in the dark: *Thanks for talking, champ.*

My eyebrow goes up on its own. "Chief?"

"Habit. I coach kids at the gym on the weekends. You call them all chief, they stand up straighter." He holds my eyes and grins, easy, as if there's nothing behind it. "Works on you too. Look at that posture."

It's a good answer. It's a very good answer, and he gives it fast. I let it go, because the alternative is insane, but it sits under my ribs like a splinter.

I turn toward the umbrella instead. "Silas. You're the computer guy, right?"

He doesn't look up. "Consultant."

"Okay, consultant. Can someone get into your phone without you knowing? Read things, delete things, and not leave a mark?"

Silas's thumb goes still on the page. Beside me, Rhett's feet stop moving in the water.

"Is that hypothetical?"

"No. Someone did, and I'd like to know how scared to be."

Beau's thumb stops on his phone.

Silas finally looks at me, flat and black as the harbor at night, and my stomach drops all over again. "Yes," he says. "Someone can, and you won't see it happen."

"So how do I stop them?"

"You don't. You stop giving them a reason to look." He goes back to his book. "And change your passcode. Your birthday isn't a passcode."

Out here in the full sun, the skin on my arms comes up in goosebumps.

"I changed it this morning," I say slowly. "How do you know it was my birthday?"

His fingers don't pause. "Everyone's is their birthday."

"Mine's not everyone's."

"Then I guessed right." He closes the book, tucks it under his arm and walks past me toward the house without another word. The terrace door slides shut behind him.

I look at Rhett. He's very interested in the water. Then I get up and go after Silas.

He's in the kitchen at the open fridge, the book still under his arm, drinking orange juice straight out of the carton like he lives here. Marisol would kill him. He doesn't turn around when the door slides open behind me.

"You knew Route 1," I say. "At the gas station, I mentioned Chapel Street, and you told me the roads out on Route 1 were bad. Route 1 never came up."

He takes another swallow and puts the carton back. "Kelsey Tran's waited tables at the lobster place for a year. It's a small town. People talk, and I listen."

"You don't seem like a guy who listens to people."

"I listen to everything." He shuts the fridge and turns around. Up close, in the dim kitchen, he's gray under the eyes, as if he hasn't slept in days.

"Then what have you heard about me?"

"That you've been asking the club staff about last summer, and every one of them told someone you asked." His thumb finds the silver ring and turns it once. "Don't go out there again."

"Why not?"

"Because she's scared," he says, "and you're loud."

It lands like a slap. My mouth opens, and nothing comes out. By the time something does, he's heading for the side door, so I get there first and

put my back against it.

"*Loud?* You barely talk to me, and when you do, it's to tell me no. You don't get to call me loud."

He stops a step away from me, which is closer than he needs to. Under the orange juice he smells like rain on warm stone and mint, with something dark under it like incense, and for a second I can't think where I've smelled that before. He doesn't look annoyed. He just looks at me, and keeps looking.

"You asked for her by name at the counter," he says. "Then you sat in her parking lot until the cook came out for a smoke to stare at you. That's loud."

The back of my neck goes cold. I never told anyone about the parking lot. "Were you *following* me?"

"I didn't have to. A stranger sits outside a diner on Route 1 for an hour, and people mention it."

"To you."

"Everything gets mentioned to me eventually."

"So why do you care? At the gas station you told me I don't have friends here."

"You don't." His eyes go to the door behind me, then back to my face. "You're in front of the door."

"I noticed."

He doesn't move, and neither do I. The fridge hums. Out by the pool, Rhett laughs at something, far away.

"I'd rather not read about you," Silas says quietly.

His jaw tightens right after, as if he'd take the words back if he could reach them.

"Read about me where?"

"Move, please."

The *please* is what does it. I step aside before I've decided to. He goes past me without touching me, and the side door bangs shut behind him.

"Great talk," I tell the empty kitchen. "Really. Let's do it again." My face is on fire, and my hands won't stop shaking, so I hold on to the counter until they do.

"He gets better," Beau says from the doorway. "Marginally. Over decades."

He's pushed his sunglasses up into his hair, and his phone is sticking out of his back pocket. He takes a glass down from the cabinet without having to look for it and fills it from the tap for me. He smells like sunscreen and bergamot.

"Here," he says. "You look like you want to throw something, and this is the cheapest thing in the room."

I take it. My hands have almost stopped shaking. "Is he always like that?"

"Since we were kids. My mother hired a magician for my birthday once, and Silas explained every single trick to the magician, out loud." He leans on the counter across from me. "Are you okay? Really. Someone got into your phone?"

For a second I almost tell him: the boathouse, the masks, the empty history, the two words in my search bar. He's the one who handed me the tiller of his boat and let me steer without a single question.

"I'm fine," I say. "It's probably nothing."

"Okay." He doesn't believe me, and he doesn't push. He turns his glass a quarter turn on the counter instead. "Can I ask you something? You can say no."

"You're going to ask anyway."

"I am." One corner of his mouth tips up. "My father has a fundraiser at the Harbor Hotel. Black tie, a jazz trio, every donor from here to Hartford pretending to like each other. I'm supposed to bring someone." He looks at me. "I don't want to bring someone. I want to bring you."

My face goes warm. "Is this a date or a campaign appearance?"

"Honestly? I'd like it to be a date that happens to have a campaign in it." He winces at himself. "That sounded better in my head."

I laugh, and it surprises both of us.

"Half the club will be there," he adds, quieter. "If you're still asking questions about last summer, it's the best room on the harbor to ask them in. I won't ask why."

"How do you know I'm asking questions?"

"Everyone knows. Pam Aldridge made sure of it." Something flickers across his face, quick and hard. "I told her I'd heard she was working her way through the tennis pro’s. She's not speaking to me. It's been lovely."

"You didn't."

"I did. In front of her doubles partner." He sets the glass down. "You don't have to come. But I'd like it if you did. I'll get you a dress, a car there and a car home, and you can leave the second you've had enough."

"And if someone's awful to me?"

"Then I'll be much more awful to them, in front of a photographer."

"Okay," I say. "Yeah. I'll come."

He lets out a breath as if he's been holding it since the pool. "Good," he says. For a second there's no polish on him at all.

He leaves the way he came, through the terrace doors, and I stay at the counter until the ice in my glass has melted to nothing. The afternoon goes slow and gold. When I finally go upstairs, I take the long way, past the library and the closed door to Callum's side. The phone in my back pocket feels warm the whole time, like it's listening.

At sunset I do something I haven't done since I got here. I lock the balcony door. If they can walk through my phone whenever they want, they can at least stay out of my room.

The room's hot even with the door shut. I lie on top of the sheet in my T-shirt and sleep shorts with the lamp off. Even shut in, the room smells like low tide and cut grass.

The phone buzzes on the nightstand.

you up?

It's *Talks Too Much*. The screen dims while I stare at it. Anyone in my phone can read this, and I type back anyway.

who is this

rude. you saved me as something. i know you did.

My face goes hot.

i saved you as do not answer

and yet here you are. answering.

"Oh, go to hell," I tell the phone.

what do you want

nothing. knee's keeping me up. figured you might be too.

why would i be up

because i can't stop thinking about a certain boathouse. figured it might be mutual.

I don't answer that. I don't have to.

thought so

lock your balcony door tonight.

already did. why?

because if it was open i'd already be on my way over, and i've got an early start.

My stomach does something stupid and warm.

goodnight

night, champ.

The phone goes face down on the nightstand, and the dark settles back over the room. It doesn't help. The boathouse is right there behind my eyes: the rough heat of his palm, the gravel in his voice, the way he stopped dead the second I said the word. My skin is too hot for the sheet. My hand is already resting on my stomach, and when it slides under the waistband of my sleep shorts, I don't stop it.

Two texts and a memory, and I'm already soaked. It's humiliating.

"Unbelievable," I whisper to the ceiling.

My fingers find my clit and circle it slowly, the way his did, light at first, then firmer, until my hips lift off the mattress to chase them. *There it is.* I can almost hear him say it, low and amused against my ear. My other hand pushes up under my T-shirt to cup my breast, rolling the nipple between my fingers until it aches. In my head it's his hand, too big and rough with calluses, and he's telling me exactly what I sound like.

Then the boathouse fills up.

It isn't only him anymore. The white mask is there too, standing back in the dark the way he did the first night, not touching. His flat voice says *you belong to us* as if it's already been decided. The painted smile leans in the doorway, grinning, telling me I'm doing amazing. Then there's the mirror,

close enough that I can see myself in it: flushed, open, my hand moving between my legs while he watches. *Slower,* he says, and my hand obeys him before I can stop it.

All of them are watching me. All of them want this.

The thought should shame me. Instead it pours through me, hot and dark, straight down to where my fingers are. I slide two of them inside myself, as deep as I can reach, and curl them toward the spot he found. It isn't enough. It's never going to be enough after his hand. So I press the heel of my palm against my clit and grind into it, rocking, chasing it. The wet sound is loud in the quiet room. My breath comes in short, ragged pulls, and my thighs start to shake.

Say please, Cracked says, somewhere in my head.

"Not a chance," I breathe.

Then I think of the mirror leaning in close to my ear, and a voice so quiet it's barely there. *Wren Elise.* He knew my name before I ever said it. He's been through everything I own, and he's never said a word about any of it. What else has he seen?

The question goes through me like a hook. My back arches off the mattress, and I come hard, clenching around my own fingers. My free hand is fisted in the sheet, and a word is in my mouth before I can stop it.

"*Mirror.*"

It's out loud, in the dark, in my own voice.

I lie there gasping, with my hand still between my legs and my face burning so hot I can feel it in my ears. Both hands go over my face.

You absolute lunatic. He whispered your name one time.

Somewhere in the room, something clicks.

It's small and soft, like a pen cap or a latch. I sit straight up with my heart slamming against my ribs. My hand goes for the nightstand drawer before I remember the knife isn't in it anymore. The balcony door is shut, and the curtain hangs still. The closet door is closed. So is the door to the hall.

Nothing moves. My skin remembers exactly what I was just doing and what I just said out loud, and it crawls.

"Hello?" It comes out thin. I feel stupid, and I say it anyway. "Is someone there?"

Nothing answers. The house ticks, and the harbor breathes against the rocks below the lawn.

The balcony door is still locked when I rattle it. The closet holds nothing but my clothes and the trash bag I folded up and never threw out. I'm halfway back to the bed, telling myself that old houses click, when I stop and look at the room the way they must have seen it. There's the dresser and the curtain rod. There's the smoke detector over the door, and the black glass of the balcony. All four of them have stood in here, and one of them went through my things.

Nothing looks back. Nothing I can see.

I lie very still with the sheet pulled up to my chin. My skin hasn't cooled at all, and I hate that I can't tell whether it's fear.

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15

WREN

The dress Beau sends is green.

It comes in a long white box with a ribbon on it, the afternoon of the gala. Marisol carries it up to my room like it's a wedding cake. I lift the lid and fold back the tissue paper, and there it is. It's silk, deep emerald, the color of the harbor in the shade under the dock. It's the most beautiful thing anyone's ever bought me, and my hands go cold on the lid.

Not green. Anything but green.

The last thing my sister ever wrote down was that she was wearing my green dress. I put the lid back on and stand there with both hands flat on top of the box until Marisol clears her throat in the doorway.

"Something wrong with it?" she asks. "It's very beautiful."

"It's beautiful," I say. "I just don't wear green."

She looks at me for a long moment, the way she looks at a pot she thinks might boil over. Then she nods and goes away without asking. A little later she comes back with a steamer for the black dress I brought from Philly. I bought it for a wedding I ended up working instead of attending.

It's plain and short, with thin straps that don't stay up. The tags are still on it. I cut them off with my nail scissors while the steamer hisses on the dresser. Daisy's locket goes into the zip pocket of my clutch, next to my phone, where nobody will see it. I do my makeup twice, because my hands aren't steady the first time, and by the time I'm done the light over the harbor has gone soft and orange.

Beau is waiting at the bottom of the stairs in a tuxedo. When he sees me, something crosses his face too fast for me to read. His eyes go to the dress, then back to my face, and then he just smiles.

"You look incredible," he says.

"It's not the one you sent. I'm sorry. I know it must have cost a fortune."

"I noticed, and I don't care what it cost." He offers me his arm. "This one's better."

He doesn't ask why. He just holds the car door for me and tucks the hem of my dress in before he shuts it.

The hotel is ten minutes along the harbor road. He drives with one hand and talks the whole way. First it's his father's speechwriter, then an ice sculpture the campaign fought over for a month. He's giving me something to listen to besides my own head, and I let him. At the bottom of the hotel steps there's a valet, a velvet rope and a photographer. Beau puts his hand on the small of my back. "Chin up," he says, very quietly. "They can smell fear. Also money." Then he walks me inside.

The Harbor Hotel ballroom is all chandeliers and white roses, full of men who look like they've never carried their own suitcase. It's hot under all that crystal, and the air smells like lilies and hairspray. My eye goes straight to the bar out of habit, where two kids in white jackets are pouring the cheap champagne into the expensive glasses. There really is a jazz trio, and it really is awful.

Beau walks me in like I'm the most natural thing in the world to have on his arm. He introduces me to his father, a tall silver man with a senator's handshake and a senator's teeth, who calls me "Rain" twice and asks if I sail. Then there's the campaign's finance director, and the guy who owns half the marinas in the state. A woman in pearls looks at my short black dress like it's a spill on her carpet.

"My girlfriend, Wren," Beau says, every time, easy as breathing. Once, a donor's wife is clearly angling to set him up with her daughter. He just squeezes my hand and smiles until she gives up.

By the bar, my strap slips off my shoulder for the fourth time. Beau reaches over without breaking his camera smile. He slides it back up with one finger, slowly, while he nods along to the marina man's point about zoning. His knuckle stays against my collarbone a second longer than it needs to.

Then the marina man turns away, and the smile goes off like a light.

"I hate these," he says quietly, looking at the room. "I've hated them since I was nine. They put me in a bow tie and made me shake hands with a lieutenant governor who smelled like cough drops. Every single one of these people wants something from my father, and every single one of them is going to tell me I've grown up so handsome." He looks at me. "This is the first time I haven't been counting the minutes until I can leave."

I don't know what to say to that, so I say nothing and let his hand stay on the small of my back.

My mother is across the room with Richard, glowing in pale blue. Callum stands beside them in a black tux, looking like he was born in it. He's holding a drink he isn't drinking. He hasn't looked at me once since I walked in.

I work the room anyway, since that's what I'm here for. The vice commodore's wife is by the silent auction, so I tell her I heard last year's summer party was wonderful. She says it was lovely until *that business*. When I ask what business, she looks at me like I tracked mud in, then moves away to bid on a weekend in Nantucket.

One of the waiters looks like he's worked every party on this harbor since before I was born. I ask if he worked last summer, and he says he doesn't remember. His eyes go to the door when he says it.

When I turn around, Callum is standing a few steps away with the marina man and two donors. One of them is Tom Kessler, who bought me an iced tea at the club bar and told me about his boat until the ice melted. Callum is talking, after a whole night of saying nothing to anyone. His voice is pitched just high enough to carry over the jazz trio.

"...no, she's a bartender. From Philadelphia. Very good with her hands." Callum takes a sip of the drink he hasn't touched all night. "She can tell what a man wants before he's even sat down, and she doesn't charge the members much for it. Half the club's had a turn this summer. Ask Tom."

Tom Kessler laughs, a short, ugly bark. The other donor looks at me, all the way down and all the way back up.

Heat floods up my throat so fast my ears ring. The room goes too bright. I can feel people turning: the woman in pearls, the vice commodore's wife, the waiter with the tray. It spreads out across the ballroom in a ripple, like a stone dropped in the harbor.

Don't cry. Don't you dare give him that.

I don't move. I can't. My hands are fists around my clutch, and the locket's hard little oval presses into my palm through the fabric. Part of me wants to walk over there and throw his untouched drink in his face. The rest of me is busy remembering how to breathe.

Then Beau is there.

He steps in beside me and puts his arm around my waist, warm and easy. Then he turns the full wattage of his smile on Callum and the donors. It's the campaign smile, and it's so bright it's frightening.

"Callum," he says. "Tom. Gentlemen. I don't think you've properly met my girlfriend." He tips his head at Tom Kessler. "Tom, how's the divorce? The second one, I mean."

The donor stops laughing.

"And Callum." Beau's smile doesn't flicker. "Your father's looking for you. He isn't, actually. But I think you should go look for him anyway. Outside."

Callum looks at him. Then, for the first time all night, he looks at me.

There's nothing in his face at all. His eyes are as flat and gray as the harbor at dawn. They go over my face like he's reading a bill he's already decided not to pay. Then he nods once to Beau and walks away through the crowd without a word.

"Come on," Beau says, low. He steers me out of the ballroom before anyone can see my face do what it's about to do.

The hallway outside is long and carpeted in dark red, with sconces on the walls and a row of closed doors. The jazz goes muffled behind us. I make it about halfway down before I have to stop and put my hand on the wall.

"I'm fine," I say.

"You're shaking, Wren. You're not fine, and you don't have to be fine for me."

"I'm *fine*. I'm not going to cry in a hallway because Callum fucking Sterling called me a hooker in front of Tom Kessler. He bought me an iced tea, Beau. He showed me pictures of his boat."

"Technically, he didn't say hooker."

"He didn't have to say hooker, Beau! Every single person in that room heard it anyway!"

"I know." He stands in front of me, close, blocking the hallway with his shoulders so nobody passing the ballroom doors can see me. "I know he

didn't have to. I'm sorry. I'll key his car."

I laugh, and it cracks in the middle. I press the back of my wrist to my eyes.

"Your eyes go green when you're angry," Beau says quietly. "Did you know that? They're practically glowing."

"Great. Now I'm a traffic light."

"A very beautiful traffic light." He tips my chin up with one knuckle. "Stop."

That's when I hear my mother's voice.

It's coming around the corner at the far end of the hall, bright and happy, with Richard's laugh under it. A man is going on about the light being better by the windows, and a camera flash pops and whines as it charges. The photographer's with them, for the family picture. Any second now Mom's going to come around that corner and find me with mascara on my cheeks, pressed against a wall with a senator's son. Then she's going to ask me what's wrong in front of a man with a camera.

A door opens beside us.

Callum is holding it. I don't know where he came from. He's just there, with his hand on the knob of a door marked COATS and his face as blank as a wall.

"In," he says. "Both of you."

"In the coat closet? Are you serious?"

"Your mother's coming. You want her to see you like that?"

I don't. He knows I don't, and I want to hit him for knowing. Beau takes my hand, and Callum steps aside. We go in, the door shuts behind us, and the dark closes over us like water.

It's small and full of coats. It smells like old perfume and dry cleaning. A rod of hangers presses against my back, and someone's fur stole brushes my shoulder. Beau's so close I can feel the heat coming off him through the tux. Under the perfume, he smells like bergamot and sandalwood over warm leather. Old money, with a fast car parked outside.

Outside, my mother comes around the corner.

"Callum! There you are. Have you seen Wren? We need her for the picture."

"Ladies' room," Callum says. His voice is right outside the door, calm as anything. "Fixing her makeup. It's hot in there."

"Oh, it's roasting. Tell her to hurry?"

"I'll tell her."

The footsteps go past, and the camera flash whines farther down the hall. Callum doesn't leave. I can see the shadow of his shoes in the thin line of light under the door, a foot from the frame, not moving.

"He's still out there," I whisper. "Why is he still out there?"

"Keeping watch, I think." Beau's quiet a second. "Or guarding the coats. With Callum it's genuinely hard to say which he cares about more."

I laugh again, into the dark, and this time it doesn't come out wet. My eyes have adjusted enough to see him, just barely: the white of his shirt, the line of his jaw, the gleam of his eyes. He's looking at me. He's been looking at me.

"Wren," he says, and there's no polish in it at all. "I'm going to say something true, and then I'm going to stop talking, and you can do whatever you want with it."

"Okay. Say it."

"I sent you the green dress because I thought you'd look beautiful in it. That's all it was." He swallows. "I know you didn't wear it for a reason. You don't have to tell me what it is. But I'm sorry."

Something in my chest cracks right down the middle.

I reach up in the dark and find his face with my fingers, the smooth-shaved jaw and the corner of his mouth. He goes completely still, like a bird just landed on his hand and he's afraid to scare it off.

"Can I?" he whispers.

"Yes."

He kisses me like he's asking the whole time, slow, warm and careful. His hand comes up to cradle the side of my face, and his thumb brushes my cheekbone where the mascara's smudged. It's nothing like the boathouse. It isn't a fight or a dare. It's just his mouth on mine in the dark, soft and certain, as if he's been thinking about it since the day he held his hand out to me across the pool.

I pull him closer by his lapels. The hangers rattle behind me. He makes a small, surprised sound against my mouth and presses in. I feel it everywhere, the length of him against me and his heart going hard under my palm.

"Oh," he breathes. "Oh, you... okay. Wow. Okay."

"Very eloquent."

"I'm usually much better with words, I swear." He kisses the corner of my jaw. "You just keep taking them away."

I laugh into his shoulder, helplessly. He laughs too, silently, shaking against me. Then his mouth finds my throat, and I stop laughing.

My strap slips. This time he doesn't fix it. His mouth follows it down over my collarbone to the top of my shoulder, hot and open. His hand slides down my side to my hip and stops there, on the outside of the dress. His fingers spread as if he's holding himself back. I push my hips into his hand, and he groans, very quietly, into my skin.

Then I remember the shoes.

They're still there, a dark shape in the line of light under the door, a foot from the frame. Callum's standing right there. He can hear everything: every breath, every rattle of the hangers, every sound Beau's pulling out of me.

I should stop. I should be mortified.

Instead, heat pours through me, low and fierce, and I let the next sound out on purpose.

Beau feels it. His mouth stops against my neck. "He can hear every sound we make," he whispers.

"I know."

"Do you want me to stop? Say the word and we stop, no questions."

I think about the ballroom. *Half the club's had a turn this summer. Ask Tom.* The donor's eyes going all the way down and all the way back up. Callum's flat gray look, reading me like a bill.

"No," I say. "I want him to hear."

Beau lifts his head. In the dark, I see his teeth flash in a real grin, sharp and startled and delighted. "Oh," he says softly. "Oh, you're *terrifying*."

He kisses me again, harder. This time he doesn't hold anything back. His tongue slides against mine, slow and deep, and the hangers chime against the rod over my head.

"Tell me what I'm allowed," he murmurs against my mouth. "Itemize it. I love a list."

"Your mouth," I say. "Anywhere above the dress."

"And below the dress?"

"Your hand. Over my underwear. Not under."

"Over, not under." He says it as if he's committing it to memory. Then he kisses me once, softly. "Thank you for telling me."

His mouth goes back to my throat, taking its time, the way he does everything. He finds the place where my pulse jumps and stays there until I'm squirming against the wall. Then he goes lower. My strap is already down. He hooks one finger in the neckline of the dress and looks up at me, waiting.

"Yes," I whisper.

He eases the fabric down. The air in the closet is warm, but my skin pebbles anyway. Then his mouth closes over my nipple, hot, wet and slow. My head knocks back against the wall hard enough to rattle the hangers.

"God," he says against my skin. "Look how beautiful you are. You're... I'm sorry, I had a whole sentence, and it's gone. You're unbelievable."

"Use your words, Whitmore."

"I'm using them. They're just not working." He drags his teeth over me, so lightly it's barely there. I gasp, loud, louder than I need to.

Outside the door, the shadow of Callum's shoes shifts. Just once. Then it goes still again.

Beau sees it too. He lifts his head and looks at the line of light, then back at me, and something wicked comes into his face. "He moved."

"I saw."

"Do you want to find out if I can make him do it again?"

I shouldn't. I'm a terrible person. "Yes."

He laughs under his breath, right against my mouth.

His hand slides down to the hem of my dress. It goes under, up the bare skin of my thigh, slow enough that I feel every inch. He stops at the edge of my underwear and waits, the way he waits for everything. I nod. He presses two fingers flat against me, over the lace.

I'm soaked. He feels it and lets out a breath as if he's been punched.

"Oh," he says, and his voice goes rough. "Oh, Wren."

He strokes me through the lace, slowly, up and down. Then he finds the right spot and stays there, in small, maddening circles. My knees start to go. I grab the coat rod over my head with both hands and hang on. Every sound that comes out of me, I let out. I let them carry.

"You're soaking through the lace," he whispers into my neck. "God, Wren. You're so wet for me I can feel it on my fingers. Do you have any idea what that's doing to me?"

"Shut up," I gasp.

"No. I've wanted to hear you like this since the day you climbed out of that pool." His fingers press harder, and my breath breaks into a moan. "God, listen to you. He can hear every bit of that. Does it feel good? Knowing he's standing out there with his hands in his pockets, hearing exactly what you sound like?"

"Yes." It comes out of me before I can stop it.

"Good." He kisses the soft spot under my ear. "Then be louder."

I am. It builds fast, hot and tight, and I'm right there. My thighs are trembling around his hand. I'm one breath from the edge.

Then he stops.

It isn't all at once. He slows and gentles, and then his hand settles flat against me over the lace. The sound I make is half a sob.

"Beau."

"I know." He's breathing as hard as I am. He leans his forehead against mine. "I know. I'm sorry. I want to. You have no idea how much I want to."

"Then why..."

"Because you're doing it for him." He says it gently. His hand hasn't moved. "And that's okay. Tonight that's okay. But the first time I make you come, Wren, I need it to be about me. Not about your stepbrother outside the door."

I stare at him in the dark. Nobody has ever said anything like that to me. My face is hot and my body is furious, but something in my chest goes very quiet.

"That's annoyingly mature," I say finally.

"I know. I hate it too." He eases his hand away and smooths my dress down over my thighs. Then he pulls my neckline back up with careful fingers. "If we don't go back out, my father's going to send a search party."

"Would you let them find me?"

"Not a chance." He shifts his weight and winces, a quick hiss through his teeth. His hand goes to his lower back. "Sorry. The hangers. Old sailing injury."

"You fell off a dock when you were twelve."

"Very heroic." He smiles against my forehead. "You remembered."

I did. Something about it snags at the back of my mind again, like a thread on a nail. It's a voice in the dark, saying *I have a documented back injury*. I reach for it, and it slides away, the way it did on the boat.

Beau fixes my strap and smooths my hair with both hands, gently, as if he's putting me back together. Then he licks his thumb, wipes the mascara off my cheekbone, and kisses me once more, very softly, on the forehead.

"Ready, wife?"

"Don't push it."

He opens the door.

The light's so bright after the closet that I have to squint. Callum is standing right beside the doorframe with his back to the wall and his hands in his pockets. He's looking at the far end of the hallway as if there's anything down there worth looking at. There isn't.

He doesn't look at me when Beau steps out. He doesn't look when I step out after him either, with swollen lips, a creased dress and my face on fire. A muscle jumps once in his jaw. That's all.

I walk past him with my chin up. I'm almost to the ballroom doors when he speaks.

"Your lipstick," Callum says.

I stop. He still isn't looking at me. He takes a folded cocktail napkin out of his jacket pocket and holds it out sideways, the way he'd hand one to a stranger. It's exactly how he did it the night of the summer party, when there was blood in the crease of my knuckle.

I take it. My fingers don't touch his.

"You're welcome," he says, and walks away down the hall.

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16

WREN

"There you are!" My mother's voice cuts across the ballroom before I'm three steps through the doors. "Baby, where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you."

She's coming at me through the crowd in her pale blue dress, holding a glass of champagne up high so nobody bumps it. Her face is bright and worried at the same time. It's the face she makes when she's had a couple of glasses and can't find her purse.

I fix my own face. It's the hardest pour of my life, and I do it anyway.

"Ladies' room," I say. "My mascara ran. I looked like a raccoon."

"Oh, honey." She reaches me and takes my chin in her hand, tilting my face toward the chandelier. Her eyes narrow. "Have you been crying?"

"It's the lights. They're very bright. Has anyone told this hotel about dimmer switches?"

She doesn't laugh. She keeps looking at me with her thumb on my jaw, and for an awful moment I think she's going to see all of it. The donor's eyes going down and back up. *Ask Tom.* The closet. Callum's shoes in the line of light under the door.

Don't you dare cry in front of her. Not here.

Then Beau's hand settles at the small of my back, warm through the black dress.

"My fault, Mrs. Sterling," he says. "I made her dance with the vice commodore. He stepped on her feet the whole time and told her all about

his boat. Nobody's eyes should have to go through that."

Mom laughs, surprised into it. Her hand drops from my face. "Oh, Lord, Arthur? He's a menace."

"He's a public danger," Beau agrees. "I'm going to petition the club."

"You two." She looks from him to me. Something soft and pleased comes into her face. I hate it a little. "Well, don't let me keep you." She squeezes my arm and lowers her voice. "Richard's thrilled, you know. A Whitmore."

Then she's gone again, back into the crowd toward the bar, where Richard is holding court with his hand on some man's shoulder.

My shoulders come down for the first time since the closet.

"Thank you," I say.

"Don't thank me. I just lied to your mother, and it's going to come back to haunt me at a Thanksgiving someday." Beau's hand is still on my back. His voice drops so only I can hear it. "Do you want to leave? Say the word. I'll tell them you've got a migraine, and I'm a gentleman, and I'm driving you home."

I look around the ballroom.

The jazz trio is playing something slow. A whole roomful of people in summer silk and linen are laughing under the chandeliers. Some of them are looking at me. I can feel it now, like a draft on the back of my neck. The woman in pearls by the silent auction. A pair of men by the windows. Tom, the donor who laughed, is at the far end of the bar with his back very deliberately turned.

Callum isn't anywhere.

"No," I say. "If I leave right now, they win. Get me another drink and give me another song."

Beau looks at me for a moment. Then he smiles, and it isn't the bright one. It's the real one, crooked, with the dimple.

"Another drink," he says, "and another song."

He brings me a gin and tonic. I tell him it's wrong, because the bartender used the bottom-shelf tonic. He goes back and makes them do it again. Then he takes me out on the dance floor.

He's a good dancer. Of course he is. He holds me close but not too close, one hand flat between my shoulder blades and the other holding mine against his chest. He smells like bergamot, and for one song I let myself close my eyes. He talks the whole time, low, just for me. He tells me which

of the couples around us are having affairs, and which of the old men wear toupees. He tells me the woman in pearls once tried to have a neighbor's dog arrested.

Halfway through the song, the trio slides into the opening bars of something old and sweet, and my feet stop. Daisy used to sing this one into a hairbrush in her kitchen in Providence, every word wrong, at the top of her lungs. For one second I can smell her burnt toast. Beau feels me go stiff. He doesn't ask. He just turns us, slow, so my face is against his shoulder and nobody in the ballroom can see it, and he keeps talking until I can breathe again.

"You're making that up."

"I swear to God. The dog barked during her bridge game, so she called the police on it. Twice."

"What happened to the dog?"

"Absolutely nothing. He lived to a ripe old age. He's buried under her hydrangeas now, which I personally find poetic." He turns me slowly, and the room spins past. "Are you okay?"

"I'm dancing, aren't I?"

"That's not what I asked you."

I don't answer. I put my forehead against his shoulder instead and let him move me around the floor. His hand moves slowly on my back. After a while his cheek comes down to rest against my hair.

"He was cruel to you tonight," he says quietly. "I saw it, and so did everybody else. Nobody in this room thinks less of you for it. They think less of him."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"Because I know these people. I've been shaking their hands since I was in kindergarten." He turns us away from the bar. "And I'm still keying his car."

"Beau. Don't. It'll just make everything worse."

"I'm not going to make a scene." His voice is still pleasant and easy. But something under it has gone hard and cold. I lift my head to look at him. He smiles down at me, the sweetest smile in the room. "I'm just going to key his car. Slowly, all the way down the driver's side. He's going to be so pissed. He loves that car more than he loves most people."

I laugh. He doesn't. He isn't joking. It's the first time I've seen Beau Whitmore be anything but nice, and something low in my stomach likes it.

We leave after the song. Outside, the hotel's front steps are lit up gold, and the air off the harbor is cool on my bare arms after the heat of the ballroom. A valet brings his car around. It's a black Bentley, long and low, polished until the gold light from the steps slides across it like water. The seats are tan leather, soft as butter. The whole car smells like leather and his cologne. He holds the door for me and tucks my hem in before he shuts it, the same as on the way here.

He doesn't talk for the first mile. That's how I know he's still angry.

He drives with one hand on the wheel and the other resting on the console, a few inches from my knee. The harbor road curves along the water, black and silver under the moon. Through the cracked windows I can smell salt, cut grass and a late barbecue somewhere up the hill. At a red light he pulls off his tie and tosses it into the back seat without looking.

"Tell me something honestly," I say finally.

"Always. What do you want to know?"

"Why does he hate me so much?"

Beau doesn't answer right away. The light turns green, and he drives through it slowly, with both hands on the wheel now.

"He doesn't hate you," he says.

"He told a room full of men I sleep with the members for money."

"I know what he said." His jaw tightens. "I'm not defending it, and I'm going to make him regret it, believe me. But he doesn't hate you, Wren." He glances at me, then back at the road. "That's what worries me."

I don't know what to do with that. I turn it over and over. It doesn't get any easier to hold. So I look out the window at the water and say the first stupid thing that comes into my head.

"You still haven't guessed the name of my bar."

He laughs, startled, and some of the hardness goes out of his shoulders. "I've been working on it. Don't rush genius."

"Go on, then. Guess."

"The Wren's Nest."

"Absolutely not. That's a gift shop. That's where you'd buy a candle shaped like a lighthouse."

"Last Call?"

"Every third bar in America is called Last Call."

"Philly Special."

"A sports reference. Tragic. I'd have to close in a week."

"I'm going to get it eventually." He's smiling now, the real smile again. "I've got all summer and a list in my phone. I'm prepared to make a spreadsheet."

"You're a deeply strange man."

"I'm aware." He glances at me sideways. "You're laughing, though."

I am. I hadn't noticed.

He pulls into the Sterlings' drive and parks by the front steps. The house is mostly dark, except for a low orange glow in the living room windows. He turns off the engine, and for a moment we just sit there in the quiet, listening to it tick.

"Thank you," I say. "For tonight. For the closet. For lying to my mother."

"The closet was entirely my pleasure." He smiles, a little crooked. "Mostly."

"Only mostly?"

"I'm going to be thinking about the part where I stopped for a very long time. Possibly the rest of my life." He turns in his seat to look at me. In the dashboard glow, his eyes are very blue. "I meant what I said in there. I'm not sorry I stopped. But I'm not going to pretend it was easy."

My face goes hot. "You're very annoying."

"So I've been told." He leans over the gearshift slowly, giving me time to move away. I don't. He kisses me once, soft and brief, at the corner of my mouth. "Goodnight, Wren."

"Goodnight, Beau."

I get out and climb the front steps on legs that aren't quite steady. When I look back from the door, he's still parked there with the engine off, waiting to make sure I get inside. He lifts a hand, and I lift one back.

Inside, the house is cool, silent and dark. The only light comes from the living room, low and orange, moving on the walls.

I know who's in there before I see him.

Callum's in one of the leather armchairs by the fireplace, with his legs stretched out toward the fire and crossed at the ankle. Someone's lit a fire even though it's summer. It's burned down low, the kind you build when you know you won't sleep. He's still in his white shirt with the sleeves rolled, his jacket thrown over the arm of the couch. His tie's gone, and his collar's open. A glass of bourbon rests on his stomach in one loose hand, and the bottle's on the floor by the chair. Behind him, the wall of glass is

black, with the harbor out there somewhere. He looks like a man at the end of a very long day. He doesn't look up when I walk in.

My heels are loud on the wood floor. I don't care. I walk right up to his chair and drop the cocktail napkin in his lap, folded, with my lipstick on it.

"You forgot this," I say.

He looks at the napkin. Then he looks at me. His eyes are flat, gray and completely calm.

"Keep it," he says. "Souvenir."

"Do you know what my mother asked me tonight? If I'd been crying. She held my face under a fucking chandelier and asked me, and I had to lie to her. Because of you."

He doesn't answer that. He turns the glass slowly against his stomach and watches the fire through it, as if he's waiting for me to finish so he can go back to drinking.

"Souvenir of what, exactly? The night you told half the yacht club I'm a hooker?"

"I didn't say hooker."

"You said I don't charge the members much. You said half the club's had a turn. You said *ask Tom*." My voice is shaking. I let it. "You said that about me to a guy who's been divorced twice, with my mother across the room. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He takes a slow sip of the bourbon and sets the glass on the arm of the chair. "Whitmore drove you home."

"Are you keeping track of who drives me places now?"

"I heard the car. He sat out there a long time with the engine off."

"He was making sure I got inside safe. Some men do that."

"Some men," he says, "like to be seen doing it." He looks back at his glass. "I want you to leave. I've told you that. You didn't listen. So I'm making it harder to stay."

"That's it? That's the whole reason?"

"That's the whole reason."

"You're a liar." I lean down with both hands on the arms of his chair, close enough to smell the cedar on him. "You could have done that a dozen ways. You picked the one that would make every man in that room look at me like a menu. You picked it on purpose."

His jaw moves, a small, hard shift, there and gone.

"And then you stood outside that closet the whole time," I say. "Why?"

He doesn't answer.

"You could've walked away. You could've gone back to the bar. Instead you stood there with your hands in your pockets, Callum, and you listened. Why would you do that to yourself?"

His eyes come up to mine. The calm in them cracks, just for a moment. What's underneath it is so hot and dark that I stop breathing. Then it's gone, smoothed over, as if it was never there.

"You were loud," he says.

It's barely more than a murmur. It goes through me like a hand on bare skin.

"I meant to be," I say.

The room is so quiet I can hear the fire ticking. He's still sitting. I'm still leaning over him with my hands on his chair, and somehow I'm the one who feels cornered.

He stands up.

He does it slowly, so I have to straighten up or end up pressed against him. I straighten. He keeps rising until he's looking down at me from his full height, a few inches away, with the fire behind him. I don't step back. I've decided I'm never stepping back from this man again, even if it kills me.

"Next time, thief," he says, very low, "do it somewhere I can't hear you."

Then he picks up his jacket and his glass. He leaves the bottle, and the napkin on the seat of his chair. He walks out of the room without looking back. I hear him on the back stairs, then a door closing somewhere on his side of the house, very softly.

I stand there for a long time in front of the dying fire. When I touch the back of his chair, the leather is still warm. I pick the napkin up off the seat before I can think about why.

When I finally go up, the house is so quiet I can hear my own dress whispering against my legs. The staircase is dark at the top. Moonlight from the landing window lies across the steps in long pale stripes. I take the long way. It's stupid, and I know it's stupid. I walk down the hall past the library and the sunroom to the door Mom called "Callum's side, don't." It's shut. There's a thin line of light under it, the same as the closet door.

My hand comes up on its own. The other one is still crushing the napkin.

Knock. Don't knock. You hate him. Knock.

My knuckles never touch the wood.

On the other side of the door, nothing moves. Then the line of light goes out.

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17

WREN

"Put your shoes on," Rhett says. "You're coming with me, and you're going to hit something."

He's standing in the Sterlings' kitchen this early in the morning as if he's lived here all his life. Marisol is sliding a plate of eggs across the island to him without being asked, and he's thanking her in Spanish that makes her swat his arm. He's in a gray hoodie with the sleeves shoved up, black training shorts and the beat-up black watch he wears everywhere. A roll of faded red hand wraps is sticking out of his hoodie pocket. There's a fresh split in his bottom lip, puffy and dark at the corner.

I'm at the end of the island in yesterday's mascara and an old Port Halloway Sailing sweatshirt from the laundry room. It's Callum's, and I haven't decided whether to give it back. My coffee's gone cold. I've been staring into it since I came down, replaying a ballroom full of people turning to look at me.

"Good morning to you too," I say. "What happened to your face?"

"My boss benched me for a week." He forks up half the eggs at once and talks around them. "I'm not allowed to fight, so I'm teaching you instead. You're welcome."

"Your coach did that? I thought coaches were supposed to be on your side."

"He is on my side. That's what makes it annoying." He touches the split with his tongue and winces. "I did something stupid, and he made sure I'd

remember it every time I smile. Which I do a lot, so it's working."

"What did you do, punch the guy who signs your paychecks?"

"Talked when I should've kept my mouth shut." He shrugs, easy, but he doesn't look at me when he says it. "Beau called me at one in the morning, by the way. He told me what Callum said about you in front of those donors."

My face goes hot all over again. I look down at the coffee. "Great. So everyone knows."

"Everyone who matters knows Callum was a dick. That's not the same thing." He sets the fork down. His voice drops, and the grin goes out of it. "You need to hit something that isn't his face. Trust me on this. I'm the only guy in this town who'll stand still and let you pretend I'm him."

"You're not him, though. Hitting you would just be rude."

"No, but I'm big, I'm available, and I promise to make it satisfying." The grin comes back, slower. "Go put on something you can sweat in. We're leaving in ten minutes."

"We?"

"I've got the kids' class this morning. I'm not missing it, and I'm not leaving you here to stare into that coffee all day." He picks up his plate. "Come watch me get bossed around by a bunch of nine-year-olds. Then you're mine."

He takes the plate to the sink and rinses it. Then he kisses Marisol on the cheek and goes out through the terrace doors to wait in the drive, without waiting for an answer.

Marisol looks at me over the rim of her glasses. She takes her time about it, from my smudged mascara to Callum's sweatshirt to my bare feet, and back up.

"That boy likes you," she says.

"He likes everybody."

"Mm." She takes my cold coffee away and pours it down the sink. "He doesn't come to breakfast for everybody. Go change. Not that sweatshirt."

I go upstairs and put on leggings and a sports bra, with an old tank over it. My hair goes up in a knot, and my stomach ties itself in another one.

Rhett's truck is idling at the bottom of the front steps. It's a black pickup that can't be more than a few months old, with matte paint, black rims, lifted high enough that I have to grab the handle to climb up. His gym bag is on the passenger seat, and he throws it in the back so I can get in. Inside it

smells like new leather and coffee. The radio's on low, playing something with a lot of guitar.

"Nice ride," I say. "What does a boxer need with a truck like this?"

"Don't touch the paint." He pulls out down the drive with one wrist hooked over the wheel. "And a boxer doesn't need it. A boxer wants it. Big difference."

"Spoken like someone who's never had to take the bus."

"Guilty." He glances at me. "You okay? After last night?"

"I'm fine."

"Sure you are." He doesn't push. He just turns the radio up a notch and lets me look out the window. We go down the hill past the club gates and along the harbor, where the water is bright and hard in the morning sun.

You're going to a gym. People do this. It's not a fucking date.

The gym is a long, low building on the working side of the harbor, where the boats are for fishing instead of photographs. The siding is gray with salt. A hand-painted sign over the roll-up door just says GYM, as if anything else would be showing off. He parks around the side, next to the lobster pound, where gulls are fighting over something in the dumpster. A cluster of kids and parents is already waiting by the door.

Inside, it hits me all at once. The air is warm and thick with bleach, rubber mats and old sweat. The cold salt smell of the harbor comes in through the open back door. Heavy bags hang in a row from chains bolted to the rafters, and the chains creak when they swing. A radio on a shelf is playing classic rock to nobody. Down at the far end there's a real ring, raised off the floor, with faded blue ropes and a canvas stained in places I don't want to think about.

He unlocks the place, flips on the lights and points me to a bench by the ring. Then he unbuckles the watch, drops it in his bag and wraps his own hands faster than I can tie a shoe while a dozen kids find their spots on the mats. They're maybe nine or ten years old, in mismatched shorts and too-big gloves. Once they're in a loose line, Rhett walks down it with his hands behind his back like a drill sergeant who's about to burst out laughing.

"Chin down, chief. Hands up. Who's that hand protecting? Nobody. Put it by your face." He fixes a tiny elbow and moves on. "Good. That's beautiful. Do it again."

A girl with two missing teeth spots me on the bench and points. "Coach! Is that your girlfriend?"

"That's my new student," Rhett says, without turning around. "She's very dangerous, so be nice to her. Last set, then you're done."

They do their last set of jabs, very loudly. Then a crowd of parents shows up at the door. The kids peel off in a tangle of backpacks and juice boxes. Two of them high-five Rhett on the way out. One hugs his leg. He pats the kid on the head with a wrapped hand, then catches me watching and lifts an eyebrow.

"What?"

"Nothing," I say. "You really do coach kids on the weekends."

"I told you I did." He says it lightly, but his eyes stay on mine a beat longer than they need to. "Come here. Let's see your hands."

He crouches in front of my bench with a roll of black wrap. He takes my right hand and turns it palm up in his own. When he reaches for the left one too, his thumb finds the shiny pink patch on the inside of my wrist.

"What's this? It looks like it hurt."

"Fryer," I say. "My second week at my first bar. The cook bet me I couldn't drop a basket without splashing. He was right."

"How old were you when that happened?"

"Nineteen, with a fake ID that said twenty-two."

"Respect." He loops the wrap around my thumb, then across the back of my hand, then between my fingers, with fast, sure movements, as if he's done it a thousand times. He's careful with the knuckles. He pulls it snug and checks my face each time to see if it's too tight. "When you make a fist, this should feel like your bones are holding hands. Tell me if it pinches."

"It doesn't pinch. It feels weirdly nice, actually."

"Good." He tucks the end in and moves to the other hand. Up close, his knuckles are crossed with old scars, white lines over the bones. The split lip looks worse from here. "Tell me what you know about throwing a punch."

"I know you're supposed to make a fist with your thumb outside."

"That's it? That's the whole résumé?"

"I tended bar in Philly for five years. Mostly I know how to make guys leave before they need punching."

"That's the best skill there is. Most of mine come from not having it." He finishes, presses both my wrapped hands between his, and stands. "Up. Gloves. Let's find out what you've got."

What I've got, it turns out, is nothing.

He puts me in a stance and fixes it over and over. My feet are too close together. My chin's too high. My back hand keeps drifting down to my hip as if it's bored. He holds up a pair of big padded mitts and tells me to hit them. Every punch I throw lands with a sad little slap.

"Okay," he says. "You're punching like you're knocking on a door you don't want answered. Hit it like it owes you fucking money."

I hit it harder. He doesn't even move.

"Good. Turn your hip. The punch starts in your back foot, not your shoulder." He steps in, takes my hips in both hands, and turns them for me. His palms are hot through my leggings, and he doesn't hurry about letting go. "That. Feel that? Do it again."

I do it again, and this time the mitt snaps back an inch. Something hot and bright jumps in my chest.

"There she is," he says. "Again."

We go until my shoulders burn and my shirt is stuck to my back. He moves the mitts around, and I chase them. He calls out numbers that mean different punches, then mixes them up to catch me. When I drop my right hand, he taps me on the side of the head with a mitt. It doesn't hurt, but it's insulting.

"Hey! What the hell was that for?"

"Hands up. That's your face. I like your face. Protect it."

"You could just tell me."

"I did tell you. Three times. Your hand didn't listen." He circles, light on his feet, even with the bad knee. "You know what you're doing every time you're about to throw the right? You look at the mitt first. Then your shoulder goes. You're telegraphing."

It snags.

It's a little hook in the back of my brain, small and sharp. *You're telegraphing, champ.* A dark bedroom, a lamp on the nightstand, a man in a cracked mask laughing at me because my eyes went to it first.

I miss the mitt completely.

"Whoa." Rhett lowers his hands. "You okay?"

"Fine," I say. "Cramp. Lots of guys say that, right? Telegraphing?"

"Every coach on earth says it." He tilts his head, watching me. "Why?"

"No reason." I shake out my arms and put my hands back up. *Lots of guys say it. You've met one boxer in your entire life before this summer, and now you're building a conspiracy out of gym vocabulary.* "Go again."

He studies me a second longer, then lifts the mitts.

I hit the next one so hard it cracks like a shot. He laughs out loud, surprised, and something in me unclenches.

"Okay! Okay. Now we're talking."

After the mitts, he wants to see if I can get away from someone.

"Most fights aren't punches," he says. He pulls his gloves off and tosses them on the bench. Then he starts unwinding the red wraps from his hands, fast, in long loops. "Most fights, a guy grabs you and you end up on the ground. That's where people get hurt. So we're going to put you on the ground and teach you how to get up."

"Can't you just teach me to punch harder?"

"I can teach you to punch harder, and the guy who's twice your size will still get hold of you. Then what?" He drops the wraps on top of the gloves. "Then you need this. Lie down."

"Wow. Buy me dinner first."

"I bought you eggs." He grins. "Technically Marisol did. Lie down on your back, knees up."

I lie down on the mat. It's cool under my back, with the same rubber-and-bleach smell as the rest of the place. He kneels over me, one knee on each side of my hips, not touching, and looks down at me with his hands loose on his thighs. He's so big from this angle that he blocks out the lights in the rafters.

My heart starts going in a way that has nothing to do with cardio.

"This is called mount," he says. "Worst place in the world to be. A guy's on top of you, they've got gravity, they've got weight. What's your instinct?"

"Push him off me, obviously."

"Try it."

I put both wrapped hands flat on his chest and push. It's like pushing a parked truck. He doesn't even rock.

"Right. So we don't push." He takes my right wrist and lays it against his left arm. "You trap this arm. You put your foot over here, outside his foot, so he can't post. Then you bridge. Hips up, hard, toward the trapped side. Like you're trying to throw me over your shoulder."

"You weigh twice what I do."

"Doesn't matter. Physics doesn't care how big I am. Try it."

I trap his arm and hook my foot outside his. Then I shove my hips up as hard as I can.

He goes over.

He goes over so easily that I yelp, and suddenly I'm on top of him with my knees in the mat on either side of his ribs. My hands are braced on his chest. My hair has come out of its tie and is hanging down around both of our faces. He's flat on his back under me, laughing, with his hands on my thighs.

"Oh, I'm going to marry you," he says.

"Wait. Did you just let me do that?"

"I let you do it the first time. Next time I won't, and you'll do it anyway." His thumbs move once on my thighs, just above my knees. His laughter fades to a smile, and then to nothing at all. "Again."

We do it again. He doesn't let me. It takes three tries, but on the third I get my hips up and he goes over, grunting this time. I land on top of him harder than I mean to, breathless, sweaty, so pleased with myself I could scream.

"Holy shit! Did you see that?"

"Okay. Don't celebrate. Celebrating's how you get choked the fuck out." He hooks a leg around me and rolls us both before I can blink, smooth as water. I'm on my back again with him above me. "See? Never celebrate."

"That was cheating, and you fucking know it."

"There's no cheating on the ground. There's just winning and learning." He's breathing hard too now. He has my wrists, both of them, in his big hands. He pins them lightly to the mat above my head, not hurting, just there. "Get out."

I twist. Jesus, he's heavy, and so warm. Every time I move, my body drags against his. I can feel all of him, his thighs pressing mine apart, his chest an inch from mine, the heat coming off him in waves. I buck. He shifts his weight with me, easy, and settles lower.

"You're not trying," he says, low.

"I am trying. You weigh as much as a car."

"You're not trying to get out." His gaze settles on my mouth and stays there. "Different thing."

My breath catches. Neither of us is laughing anymore.

The radio's still playing something with a long guitar solo. A chain creaks somewhere behind us. His hips are heavy between my thighs. Under the bleach and rubber of the mat, I can smell him. Black pepper, then

something warm and dark, like amber. Under that, warm and biting, there's clove.

I know that smell. My whole body knows it before I do. It goes liquid and tight at once, a hot pull low in my belly. My back arches off the mat without permission.

"Hey," he says, very quietly. He lets go of one of my wrists so he can brace his hand by my head, and he leans down. "Tell me to stop."

I don't tell him to stop. I tilt my chin up instead. His mouth is right there, an inch from mine, and his free hand has moved to my face. His thumb is on my jaw. He's going to kiss me, and I'm going to let him. Every inch of my skin is screaming for it.

His other hand is still holding my wrist, pinned to the mat above my head, right next to my eye.

Without the wraps, the inside of his wrist is bare.

There's a tattoo there. It's small, round and dark, the size of a quarter. It's a coin, with a little worn face stamped in the middle of it and tiny letters around the rim that I can't read. I've seen it once before, in the dark, when a man in a cracked mask set his hand on my sheet. In a boathouse, a man told me what it was.

It's a coin.

Oh, fuck. The cold starts in my hands and goes up my arms. It reaches my chest and stops my heart for one long, terrible beat. I stop breathing. I stop everything.

Rhett feels it. He stops an inch from my mouth.

"Hey." His thumb moves on my jaw. "What's wrong?"

I can't look at his face. I can only look at the coin.

"Get off me," I say.

He's off me before I've finished saying it. He rolls back onto his heels on the mat and lifts his hands, palms out, open, as if he's showing a spooked horse he isn't holding anything. His wrist turns as he does it, and the coin goes out of sight.

"Okay," he says. "Okay. I'm off. Did I hurt you? Tell me if I hurt you."

"You didn't hurt me." I sit up too fast and my head spins. My wrapped hands are shaking. I shove them between my knees so he won't see. "I just... I have to go."

"Go? We were just..." He stops himself. He rubs his mouth with the back of his hand, and it comes away with a smear of red from the split lip.

"Okay. Yeah. That was too much. That's on me. I'm sorry."

He sounds like he means it. He sounds like a nice, normal man who coaches nine-year-olds on the weekends and rinses his own plate. That's the worst part. One of the men who stood over Grant Whitlock in that boathouse while he died is kneeling on a gym mat, apologizing to me for almost kissing me.

I get my feet under me and stand. My legs aren't steady. I grab my bag off the bench without taking the wraps off. I can't make my fingers work on the ends.

"Your wraps," he says behind me. "Let me..."

"I'll keep them. I'll bring them back."

"Keep them." His voice is careful now. It's the voice he used on the kids an hour ago. "That's fine. At least let me drive you home. You're shaking."

"I'll walk."

"It's uphill the whole way to the house."

"Then I'll walk uphill. I'm fine, Rhett. Seriously."

"You keep saying that."

I stop at the door with my hand on the frame. The sun outside is so bright it hurts. Behind me, the radio goes to commercial. A chain creaks, and nobody says anything for so long that I have to turn around.

He's still kneeling on the mat where I left him. He hasn't moved. His hands are hanging between his knees, wrists turned down, and he's watching me with an expression I've never seen on his face. There's no grin in it at all.

He knows. Maybe not about the coin, but he knows something happened to me under him.

"Same time tomorrow?" he says. It's light, too light. He's offering me a way out.

I take it. "Maybe."

"Maybe's good." The grin comes back, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "Maybe's my favorite word."

I make it across Water Street before my legs give out. There's a low seawall on the far side, above the fishing boats, and I sit down on it hard with my bag in my lap and my wrapped hands shaking. Across the street, the black nose of his truck sticks out past the corner of the gym. I stare at it until the gulls have finished with the dumpster and gone.

My phone is in my bag. I dig it out and open the thread I saved behind a hedge after the boathouse, under a name I gave him because he wouldn't give me his.

Talks Too Much.

The last messages are from the night I locked my balcony door. *night, champ.* I read it until the words stop meaning anything. Then I look up at the long gray building with GYM painted over the door. Somewhere inside, the man who gave me a seven and a half is kneeling on a mat, waiting to find out what happens next.

I type.

we need to talk.

The dots come up right away. They stop. They start again. I picture him in there, on the edge of the ring, with his phone in his bare, tattooed hand. The split lip. No grin at all.

yeah

i think we do.

tonight. boathouse.

The dots again. They go on a long time this time.

i'll be there

you want the mask or not?

My pulse is ticking in the backs of my teeth. I look at the question for a long time.

bring it

i'm going to watch you take it off.

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18

WREN

"Take it off," I tell the rearview mirror. "Just take it off. No. Hi. I know it's you. Take it off."

My own eyes look back at me, huge in the dark, and I hate every version.

I'm parked on the shoulder of the road above the point, behind the same hedge that Rhett already told me doesn't hide a Honda. The engine's off. The windows are cracked, and the night air coming through them smells like low tide and cut grass. Below me the lawn runs down black to the water. The clubhouse is dark. The boathouse is a long low shape at the bottom of it all, and there's no light in it yet.

I'm early. I've been early for a long time.

My phone is face up on my knee. His last text is still sitting there, with mine right under it.

you want the mask or not?

bring it. i'm going to watch you take it off.

I typed that on a seawall with my hands still wrapped, feeling brave. It doesn't feel brave now. It feels like something a girl says before she finds out what's actually behind the mask.

I already know what's behind the mask. That's the problem.

He's Rhett. He wraps kids' hands and rinses his own plate. He carried a dying man down to the water. He scored my dive a seven and a half. He's been texting me goodnight since the night he first got my number. I don't know how to hold all of that at once. My hands won't decide whether they're cold or sweating, so they do both.

Down at the bottom of the lawn, a thin line of light comes on under the boathouse's side door.

"Okay," I say to nobody. "Okay. You wanted this."

The wet grass soaks my sneakers again on the way down. I pass the little square dents in the lawn where the tent stood. The music is gone now, and so are the string lights. All that's left is the slap of water on the pilings and my own breath. At the side door I stop with my hand on the wood. Then I push it open.

"Before you say anything," he says out of the dark, "take this."

He's sitting on the workbench at the back of the boathouse, in the black hoodie and the black gloves, with the cracked mask on. One boot is up on the bench beside him. The other foot swings slowly over the floor, loose and easy. When my flashlight finds him, he doesn't flinch. He just holds out a knife, handle first.

It's the black folding one I put in his hoodie pocket a few nights ago.

I stop just inside the side door. The building smells the way it did the first night, like wet wood, old rope and gasoline. Where my flashlight lands, the new pine board is pale in the middle of the floor. My pulse is a fist knocking at the base of my throat.

"Why are you giving me that?"

"Because you're scared of me right now." His voice is his own. It isn't the low, mean thing he puts on for the mask. It's Rhett's voice, the one that told a nine-year-old to put her hand by her face. "If you're going to be scared of me, you should get to hold the knife."

Am I? Am I scared of him?

My body answers before I can. My knees have locked, and the fine hair on my arms is standing up. I'm scared. I'm scared of the man who was going to kiss me on a gym mat this morning, and I came anyway.

I cross the floor and take it. The handle's warm from his glove. When I flick it open, the blade catches the flashlight.

He doesn't move. He sits there and lets me point a knife at him, as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

"Take it off," I say.

"You sure?" It's quiet. "Once it's off, it's off. I can't put it back on and make you forget my face."

"I've had my tongue in your mouth and your hand in my jeans. Do you really think I'm not sure?"

He breathes out, half a laugh. Then he reaches up with both gloved hands and lifts the mask off his face.

It's him. I knew it would be him, and it still hits me like missing a step in the dark. There's the buzzed hair and the crooked nose. There's the split lip, swollen again at the corner. His warm brown eyes usually crinkle when he's about to say something stupid. They aren't crinkling now. He's looking at me the way he looked at me from the gym mat, with nothing between us at all.

He sets the mask on the bench beside him, crack side up.

"The mask cracked first," he says. "Your turn."

My mouth is dry. I've called him everything in my head this week: Cracked, the one who talks too much, the boxer, *that asshole at the pool*. Not once have I said his real name to his face and meant it like this.

"Rhett," I say.

It comes out rough and low. It's heavier in my mouth than I thought it would be, like something I'm going to have to carry now. His eyes close when he hears it, just for a breath, as if it hurt.

"Yeah," he says. "That's me."

The knife is still up between us. I don't lower it.

"You lied to me," I say. "At the pool, at the gym. You stood in my mother's kitchen eating eggs and told me your coach split your lip. Do you have any idea what that's like?"

"My boss split my lip. That part was true."

"*Chief*." My voice cracks on it, and I hate that it does. "You almost said *champ* to my face. Then you covered it so fast I thought I'd made it up. You let me think I was crazy, Rhett."

"I know." He doesn't look away. "I'm sorry. I'd do it again tomorrow, and I'd still be sorry."

"Why would you do that to me?"

"Because if you knew it was me, you'd know who I sit next to at the pool." He leans forward with his forearms on his knees. The mask is right there by his hip, and he doesn't look at it. "So I'm going to ask you for

something, even though I don't get to ask you for anything. You can say no. Don't guess the others. Not out loud, and not to me."

My throat goes tight. Faces flash through my head before I can stop them. I shove every one of them back down.

"Do you think I'm stupid?"

"I know you're not. That's why I'm asking." He swallows. "It isn't mine to give. If one of them wants you to know, he takes it off himself, the way I just did. I'm not handing them over because I couldn't keep my wrists covered on a gym mat."

I look at him for a long time. The water knocks under the floor. Far off on the harbor, a halyard rings against a mast.

"Fine," I say. "I won't guess out loud."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. I'm not done." I take a breath. The blade wobbles, and I make it stop. "We need to talk about the girl on the rocks."

His gloved hands lock together between his knees.

It's the same stillness from my bedroom, the night he sat in my reading chair and laid his knife on my rug. *Ask me something else. Because I'll lie to you.*

"Last summer, at the party," I say. "Everybody says she took something, walked down to the water and fell. You went still in my room when I asked about her, and you're doing it again right now. You told me you'd lie to me. Are you going to?"

He looks at the pale board in the floor. When he finally answers, his voice has gone low and rough in a way I've never heard from him.

"No," he says. "Not with my face. Yeah. We knew her."

The cold goes through me so fast my fingers go numb on the knife. Somehow I don't drop it.

"Knew her how?"

"That's the part I can't give you." He rubs his face with both gloved hands. "I'm not dodging. I swear to God I'm not dodging. It guts me. I think about her every time I'm out on that water at night. But it isn't my story. It's the boss's."

"The boss," I say. "The one who split your lip."

He doesn't answer that, which is an answer.

"When he tells you," Rhett says, "and he will, I'll be in the room. You're not hearing it by yourself. That much I can promise."

"And if he never tells me?"

"Then I'll make him." He says it plainly, with no swagger at all. "Can I ask you something? Why does she matter so much to you? You didn't know her. You keep coming back to her."

My heart lurches. Daisy's locket is zipped inside my bag on the floor by the door. For one wild second I can feel it there like a hand on my back.

Don't you dare. Not tonight.

"Because a girl died at a party," I say, "and this whole town calls it an accident. Now I'm standing in a boathouse with the men who put people on those rocks. Isn't that enough?"

He takes it. He doesn't argue. He nods slowly, as if I've hit him exactly where I meant to.

"That's fair," he says.

I close the knife.

It's a small sound, but he hears it. His eyes go to my hand, then back up to my face. I set it on the workbench next to the mask. Then I step in between his knees, close enough that his breath touches my mouth. He goes so still that I can see his pulse jump in his throat.

"You still don't get to kiss me," I tell him. "Not yet."

"Okay. Who's kissing who, then?"

"I'm going to kiss you."

"Thank Christ," he breathes, and I do.

His mouth is hot, and the split in his lip is rough against mine. He tastes like salt, mint gum and, faintly, blood. He doesn't grab me. His hands stay flat on the bench on either side of his hips, and I can feel how hard he's holding still in every inch of him. I kiss him until his breathing goes ragged. Then I bite his bottom lip, gently, on the side that isn't split.

He makes a sound low in his chest that goes straight between my legs.

"Gloves," I say against his mouth. "Take them off. I need your hands."

He strips them off and drops them on the floor without looking. His bare hands come up to my face, shaking very slightly. The coin is right there on the inside of his wrist, by my cheek. I turn my head and press my mouth to it.

"Oh, fuck," he says quietly. "Okay. Tell me what tonight is. Tell me before I lose my mind."

"No chase, and no mask." I pull back far enough to look at him. "I need to see your face the whole time."

"You've got it. What else?"

"And I need..." It's harder to say with the light on his face than it was in the dark. My cheeks are burning. "I need you to fuck me. Here, tonight."

His eyes go almost black.

"Can you say that again? Slower?" he asks. "I'm going to remember it at my funeral."

"Rhett."

"Okay, okay. I heard you." He's grinning now, slow and wrecked, nothing like the grin at the pool. His thumb moves on my cheekbone. "Same rules as before? Hair yes, throat never. You say the word, I stop dead, wherever we are."

"Same rules."

"How do you want it?"

"Slow," I say. "First. Then not slow."

"Then not slow." He repeats it as if he's memorizing an address. "I've got a condom in my wallet. It's been there since you wrote me a note in eyeliner, which you should know is embarrassing for both of us."

I laugh. It surprises me so much that I have to put my forehead on his shoulder. He laughs too. For one second it's only two people in the dark, laughing at the same stupid thing.

Then he slides off the bench.

A stack of old sails sits folded on the rack by the wall, heavy white canvas gone soft with age. He pulls one down and shakes it out across the floor. It settles over the pale new board, right over the place where Grant Whitlock bled.

He sees me looking at it.

"We can do this anywhere you want," he says. "My truck? A motel on Route 1 with a bad ice machine? Say the word."

"No." My voice comes out steady, which surprises me. "Here. I told you. I'm not letting this place keep it."

He doesn't argue. He holds out his hand, and when I take it, he pulls me down onto the canvas with him. We end up kneeling face to face in the middle of the floor. The flashlight on the workbench points at the rafters and throws a soft white wash down over us, enough to see by.

He takes my T-shirt off first. He does it slowly, so I could stop him if I wanted. My bra is plain black, nothing special. He looks at me in it as if I've unwrapped something for him.

"Look at fucking you," he says, very quietly.

"You've already seen..."

"In the dark, with a mask on. That doesn't count." He reaches around me and unhooks the bra one-handed. I'm almost annoyed at how easy he makes it look. He draws the straps down my arms, and then his hands come up to cover my breasts. They're warm, rough and enormous. His thumbs drag across my nipples until they ache. "This counts. This is the best thing I've ever seen in my life."

"Wow. Romantic."

"I'm the most romantic man you've ever met." He bends his head and takes one nipple in his mouth, hot and wet. When he sucks, my back arches, and my hands go into his hair. "Tell me that isn't romantic."

"Shut up."

"Never." He moves to the other side and does it again, slower, with a little edge of teeth. "You know what you sound like? Like the best thing I've ever heard. Do it again."

He lays me back on the canvas. It's cool under my bare shoulders, over boards that are hard and uneven. This time he doesn't wait at the button of my jeans. He drags them down my legs along with my underwear, then pulls my sneakers off one at a time and tosses them somewhere behind him. Suddenly I'm naked in the flashlight on a boathouse floor. He's kneeling between my knees, still fully dressed, looking at me.

My first instinct is to close my legs.

He sees it. One big hand settles on my knee, gently, not pushing.

"Hey," he says. "Still with me?"

"Still with you. Do you have to stare?"

"Damn right I do." His hand slides up the inside of my thigh, slowly. "You're soaked. I can see it from here, and I haven't even touched you yet."

My face goes so hot I'm sure he can see that too. "That's your fault, you know."

"Mine, and I'm not sorry." He bends down between my thighs. His breath is hot on my skin. When his shoulders push my legs wider, I stop breathing. "Can I?"

"Rhett."

"That's a yes. Say yes anyway. I like hearing it."

"Yes. Fuck. Yes."

He licks me in one long, flat stroke, from my entrance all the way up to my clit. The sound that comes out of me echoes off the rafters.

"There it is," he says against me. "There's that sound."

He eats me like he's starving. He uses his whole mouth, long slow strokes of his tongue that drag up through me to circle my clit. My hips lift off the canvas to follow him. His forearms hold my thighs open, and he doesn't let up. He doesn't stop talking either. It comes out muffled against me, filthy and half laughing.

"God, you taste sweet," he says, and drags his tongue up through me again, slower. "You're so wet it's running down my chin. Feel that?"

"Rhett..."

"I'm not done telling you." He presses a kiss to the inside of my thigh, then sets his mouth back on me. "I'm staying down here. I'm going to stay right here until you come so hard it feels like the tide coming in. Until it goes all the way over your head."

"You can't just *say* things like..."

"Watch me." He flattens his tongue against my clit and holds it there until my thighs start to shake. "There. You felt that one. Tell me you felt that."

"I felt it. I *felt* it."

When he sucks my clit into his mouth, I grab his head with both hands.

"Oh my God. Oh my God, don't stop."

"Wasn't planning on it." He slides two thick fingers into me, slow, and curls them. "Tell me what you need. Out loud."

"More. Harder. Please."

"I'll take *please*," he says against me, grinning. "I'll take *please* all night."

He gives me it to me harder. His fingers drive into me, steady and relentless, while his tongue works my clit. It builds so fast I can't catch it, a hot, tight pressure coiling up from the base of my spine. My heels dig into the canvas. My hands are fisted in his hair. The whole world narrows to his mouth, his fingers and the sound of the water under the floor.

"Rhett. Rhett, I'm going to..."

"Then go. Come on my face. Let the whole fucking harbor hear you."

I do. I come so hard my back bows off the floor and my thighs clamp around his head. I'm loud, so loud, and I don't even try to stop it. He keeps

his mouth on me through every wave, softer, gentler, until I'm twitching and gasping. Finally I push at his forehead because I can't take any more.

He lifts his head. His mouth is wet, his eyes are dark and wild, and he's smiling as if he's been converted all over again.

"That's one," he says. "I'm going to want more than one."

I pull him up by the front of his hoodie and kiss him. I can taste myself on his mouth, and he groans into it. When I drag the hoodie up, he helps, pulling it and the T-shirt under it over his head in one move.

His arms I've seen. The rest of him is new.

He's broad and heavy with muscle. His skin carries the history of every fight he's ever been in, from a long white scar along his ribs to an old bruise yellowing on his side. His chest rises and falls fast under my hands. Under my palm, his heart is slamming.

"Jesus," I say.

"I know. I'm a lot." He catches my hand and drags it down over his stomach to the front of his shorts. He's hard and thick against my palm. "That's also your fault."

I squeeze him through the fabric. His head drops forward onto my shoulder.

"Fuck," he says into my neck. "Okay. We're not doing that, or this is going to be the shortest night of your life."

He digs the condom out of his wallet and drops the wallet on the floor. His shorts go next, kicked off somewhere into the dark. Then he's naked too, kneeling in front of me in the flashlight, and he's big everywhere. His cock is heavy and flushed. I watch him roll the condom down with hands that weren't steady a minute ago.

"Still with me?" he asks again.

"Still with you."

"Tell me how you want me."

I lie back on the canvas and pull him down over me by the back of his neck. "Like this. Where I can see your face."

He settles between my thighs. It's the same weight that pinned me to the mat this morning, heavy and warm. Only now there's nothing between us at all. He braces his forearms on either side of my head so he can look down at me. When he reaches between us, I feel the blunt head of him press against me. Then he stops.

"Look at me," he says.

I look at him.

He pushes in slowly. It's so slow I can feel every inch of him opening me up, stretching me until it burns, sweet and sharp and too much. I gasp, and my nails dig into his shoulders. He stops halfway.

"Breathe. Breathe for me. You're doing so good."

"You're... God, you're big."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm not sorry." He laughs, shaky, and kisses my forehead. "Tell me when."

I breathe. The burn eases into a deep, full ache. When I wrap my legs around his hips and pull, he sinks the rest of the way into me with a long, broken groan. I feel it in my whole body.

"Oh, fuck," he says. "Oh, fuck. You feel like..."

He stops.

He just stops talking. He's buried inside me with his forehead pressed to mine, eyes shut, breathing hard through his mouth. His arms are shaking on either side of my head. The man who has narrated every second of everything since the day I met him has gone completely quiet.

It's the second time I've heard him do it. Both times, it's been with me.

I put my hand on his face. "Rhett?"

"Give me a second." It comes out rough and wet. "I just need a second. You don't know. You don't know what you... Just give me a second."

So I give him a second. I hold his face in my hands and feel his heart going wild against my breasts. Something in my own chest gives way, wide enough to scare me.

Then he opens his eyes and starts to move.

It's slow, the way I asked for it. He draws almost all the way out with each long, deep stroke, then pushes back in until he's pressed against the deepest part of me. Every one of them pulls a sound out of me. He watches my face the whole time. When he finds an angle that makes my eyes go wide, he holds it there, stroke after stroke.

"There?" His voice is coming back, low and wrecked. "That's the spot. I can see it on your face. Tell me it's the spot."

"That's the spot. Don't stop."

"Never stopping. They're going to find us down here in the spring." He kisses me, deep and messy. "You feel so fucking good. You're squeezing me like you don't want me to leave."

"I don't."

"Then I won't." He shifts his weight onto one forearm. His other hand slides down between us to find my clit, circling it with his thumb in time with his hips. "You said slow first, then not slow. So tell me when."

"Now. Now, Rhett, please."

"Louder."

"*Now.*"

He gives it to me. He pulls almost all the way out and drives back in, hard enough to shove me up the canvas, and I cry out. He does it again. Then he's fucking me in earnest, hard, fast and deep. Every thrust punches the breath out of me, and the sound of it fills the boathouse. His thumb never stops on my clit. He's talking again now, low and rough, right against my ear.

"You're perfect. You're fucking perfect, you know that?" He drives in deep and holds there, and I gasp. "You're taking me so good. All of me. Every time."

"Don't stop talking."

"Couldn't if I tried." His breath is ragged. "That sound you're making? I'm never getting it out of my head. I'm going to hear it every night for the rest of my life. I'm going to be lying in bed alone, hearing you."

"Then don't be alone."

He groans like I've hit him. "Don't say things like that when I'm inside you. That's cheating."

"You started it," I gasp.

He laughs, wrecked, and fucks me harder. "That's it. Louder. Let them hear you at the yacht club. Let them hear you on the boats."

"Rhett... I can't... it's too..."

"You can. You're going to. Look at me. Look at me when you do it."

I look at him. His face is right there above me, red and sweating. The split lip has opened again, and there's a thin line of blood on his chin. He's looking at me as if I'm the only thing he's ever wanted.

That's what does it. I come apart under him with my eyes open, staring right at his face, clenching so hard around him that he swears. I hear myself scream his name. He fucks me straight through it until his pace breaks. Then he buries his face in my neck and drives in deep, once, twice. He comes with a long, shattered groan against my skin, shaking all over.

For a long time, neither of us moves.

He's heavy on top of me, but he's propped on his forearms enough that I can breathe. His face is still in my neck. Against my chest, his heart is slowing down. His breath goes from ragged to even, warm and damp under my ear. The water knocks under the boards, and the flashlight hums.

He doesn't say anything. I'm learning what that means.

Eventually he lifts his head and looks at me. There's blood on his lip and on my neck. Both of us are slick with sweat. He's smiling down at me, slow and dazed, and I'm going to see that smile in my sleep for a month.

"Hi," he says.

"Hi."

"You okay?"

"I'm good." I touch the split on his lip, and he winces. "You know you're bleeding on me?"

"Yeah, well. You put me on the mat this morning." He kisses my fingers. "Worth it."

Worth it.

The words go through me like the blade I just put down, because they're the last two words my sister ever wrote. *Wearing Wren's green dress tomorrow. She'll kill me. Worth it.* My eyes sting so fast I can't stop it. A tear runs sideways into my hair before I can turn my face away.

He sees it. His thumb comes up and wipes it off my temple, slow, and he doesn't ask. He just watches me with those warm brown eyes until my breathing evens out.

"Someone I knew used to say that," I tell him, because I have to say something.

"Yeah?" His voice is gentle. "Then I'll find something else to say." He eases out of me carefully and deals with the condom. Then he lies down on the canvas beside me, pulls the edge of the sail over us both and gathers me in against his chest.

I go, and I don't even pretend not to want to.

"Do they know you're here?" My cheek is on his chest, and I can hear his heart.

"They know."

"Are they listening?"

"Not tonight." His arm tightens around me. "I asked for tonight. Just me. The boss said yes."

The boss. I think of a white mask standing back in the dark of my bedroom, not touching. A flat, electronic voice saying *you belong to us* as if it's already been decided.

"And next time?" I ask.

He's quiet for a moment. "Next time's yours. Whatever you say. If you want it to be just me, it's just me. If you never want to see a mask again, you never see one."

"And if I want them there?"

He goes so still under my cheek that I think he's stopped breathing.

"Then you tell them," he says finally. His voice is careful. "You leave your balcony door unlocked. They come in and ask you what you want, every single thing. You tell them no to anything you want to say no to."

My hand lies flat on his chest while I think about a white mask in the corner of my room, watching. My whole body goes hot again all at once, from my scalp to my toes. A sound slips out of me before I can stop it, a small, needy moan, right against his chest.

Rhett hears it. Of course he hears it.

"Oh, champ," he says, very softly, and I can hear the grin in the dark. "You're in so much trouble."

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19

WREN

I slept with one of the men who carried Grant Whitlock down to the water. I'd do it again tonight if he asked.

The proof is on my hip, a long faint bruise the exact shape of a floorboard. There's another one, smaller, on the inside of my knee. My lips are still swollen. The insides of my thighs are pink and tender where his stubble dragged. When I sit down on the edge of the tub, I feel him everywhere, a deep, sweet ache that makes me close my eyes.

It's late morning, and the sun is already hot on the bathroom tile. Sand from the boathouse floor is still in my sheets, and his smell is still on my skin. The shower's right there, and I haven't turned it on. I'm not sure I want to, and that's the part that scares me.

Nothing about it was a surprise. I knew before the mask came off, and I still knew when I put the knife down and stepped between his knees. A good person would feel sick about that. My body just hums.

Daisy would have something to say about this.

She'd say it with her mouth full of cereal and her feet on my coffee table. She'd say *you slut, I'm so proud of you*, and then she'd ask if he had a brother. My throat goes tight. I turn on the shower so I don't have to hear myself think.

"Get it together," I tell the steam. "It was sex. People have sex."

People don't usually have it on top of a crime scene, but I'm choosing not to think about that.

My phone buzzes on the sink while I'm still wrapped in a towel.

Talks Too Much:

morning

it's almost noon

morning is a state of mind. how are you feeling

I look at the bruise on my hip.

like i got hit by a truck

the truck is very flattered

I laugh out loud in the empty bathroom. Then I put my hand over my mouth, as if he can hear.

the truck should mind its own business

can't, the truck is coming to the pool this afternoon. callum's got people over. try to act normal

i always act normal

you're the least normal person i've ever met.

There's a pause before the next one.

it's my favorite thing about you.

My face is hot. In the steamed-up mirror, I look like a girl who had sex on a boathouse floor and liked it. I look like I'm going to be terrible at acting normal.

"Oh, you're so screwed," I tell myself.

Getting dressed takes me forever anyway. My mother catches me on the stairs, in her tennis whites with her visor in her hand, on her way out the door to lunch at the club.

"There she is." She stops two steps below me and looks me over. Her eyes narrow, then go bright. "Well. Someone had a nice night."

"I slept in, Mom. That's all."

"Mm-hm." She's trying very hard not to smile, and failing. "Beau Whitmore drove you home from the gala, and now you're sleeping in and

singing in the shower. I'm not blind, baby."

"I wasn't singing."

"You were humming. It's the same thing." She reaches up and fixes the strap of my bikini where it's twisted under my shirt. "I like him. Richard likes him. His mother is a nightmare, but you can't have everything."

I open my mouth to tell her it isn't Beau. Then I close it again, because the truth is so much worse.

"He's nice," I say.

"Nice is good. Nice is underrated." She kisses my cheek and hurries down the stairs. "Wear sunscreen! You burn!"

By the time I come down to the pool, the afternoon is at its hottest, and the pool deck is full of light. The stone is hot enough to burn, and the water is a blue so bright it hurts. Someone has put a fresh bucket of ice and beer under the umbrella. Marisol's radio is going in the kitchen, and the smell of cut lemons drifts out through the open terrace doors.

They're all here.

Beau is on the lounger closest to the steps in a pair of sunglasses that cost more than my car, scrolling his phone with one thumb and a beer balanced on his stomach. Silas is in his spot in the shade, flat on his back with his arms folded behind his head and his eyes closed, as if the sun has personally offended him. Callum is on the far side of the pool in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled, his feet up, a beer sweating in his hand. He looks up when I come through the doors. Then he looks back at the water.

Rhett is in the pool.

He's leaning on the edge with his arms folded on the stone and his chin on his arms. His shoulders are wet and gleaming. The split lip has scabbed over. When he sees me, he doesn't grin. He looks at me slowly, from my sunglasses to my bare feet. Something warm and private comes into his face. A second later he puts it away.

"Wren's here," Beau announces, without looking up from his phone. "Someone tell her about the shade policy."

"There's no shade policy," Silas says, without opening his eyes.

"There's always a shade policy. I just made one." Beau lowers his sunglasses. "Good night's sleep?"

"I slept great," I say, much too fast.

Across the pool, Callum takes a long pull of his beer.

"Someone keyed my car," he says, to nobody in particular. "Driver's side. All the way down."

Beau scrolls with one thumb. "Terrible what happens in parking lots."

Callum looks at him for a long moment. Beau doesn't look up. I bite the inside of my cheek so hard it hurts.

I take the lounger next to Beau's, because it's the farthest one from Rhett, and I lie down on my stomach with my book, still in my T-shirt over my suit. I read the same paragraph over and over without taking in a word. Then a shadow falls across the page, and water drips onto my calves.

"You're going to burn in that," Rhett says.

"I'm wearing a shirt. That's the opposite of burning."

"You're wearing a shirt at a pool, which is a crime." He's already got the sunscreen. He crouches by my lounger, dripping, and holds up the bottle. "Take it off. I'll do your back."

"I can do my own back."

"Nobody can do their own back. That's science." His eyes are very steady on mine, and very warm. "Come on. Shirt off. I'll be a gentleman."

"You've never been a gentleman a day in your life."

"Then I'll be quick." He grins. "I won't be quick."

I should say no. I sit up and pull the T-shirt over my head instead. Beside me, Beau's thumb stops dead on his phone. Then I lie back down on my stomach in just my bikini, with my face burning, and Rhett sits down on the edge of my lounger, close enough that his wet hip is against mine. He squeezes a cold line of sunscreen down my spine. I gasp. He smiles. "Sorry. Cold."

"You're not sorry at all, are you?"

"Not even a little."

His hands start at my shoulders. They're big, slow and very thorough. He works the sunscreen in across my shoulder blades and down my spine to the small of my back. His thumbs press into the muscles there in slow circles. I bite the inside of my cheek so I don't make a sound.

Then he leans down, as if he's checking a spot he missed, and his mouth is right by my ear.

"I can still feel you," he murmurs. It's so quiet it's barely a breath. "Coming on my cock. You squeezed so hard I saw stars. I've been thinking about it since I woke up, and I'm going to think about it all day."

My whole body goes hot. I stare at the page of my book, which has stopped being words.

"I hate you," I whisper.

"No, you don't." His thumbs slide down to the very edge of my bikini bottoms, rest there, and slide back up. "You're blushing all the way down your back. Did you know you blush down your back?"

"Would you please go away?"

"Sure." He doesn't move. "In a minute."

In the shade, Silas opens his eyes.

He doesn't sit up. He just turns his head on his folded arms and looks at us, at Rhett's hands on my back and my face pressed into my book. One dark eyebrow goes up, slowly.

"What happened between you two?" he asks.

It isn't loud. It doesn't have to be. Beau's sunglasses come down. Across the pool, Callum's beer stops halfway to his mouth. Every head on the pool deck turns, and every one of them is looking at me.

I freeze. My face is on fire. My whole body is on fire. Rhett's hands are still flat on my back, and his thumbs stop halfway down my spine.

"Nothing," I say. It comes out about an octave too high.

"Nothing," Rhett agrees, at exactly the same time.

Silas looks at the two of us for a long moment. Then he closes his eyes again. "Okay."

"Nothing happened," Rhett says again, louder. "I'm doing her back. She's fair. She burns."

"That's a lot of back," Beau says pleasantly.

"It's a normal amount of back. Everybody's got the same amount of back."

Beau laughs out loud, delighted, and pushes his sunglasses back up. Rhett throws the sunscreen at Silas's head. Silas catches it without opening his eyes and sets it down on the stone beside him.

Across the pool, Callum doesn't laugh.

He's looking at Rhett's hand, which is still resting on my lounger an inch from my thigh. His face doesn't do anything. His jaw doesn't move. He looks at that hand for a long, still moment, the way he looked at the yacht club from the end of the dock on my first night. It's something he can't stop watching, and he hates every second of it.

Then he sets his beer down on the stone, stands up and walks into the house.

The terrace door slides shut behind him. Nobody says anything.

"Well," Beau says after a while, brightly. "Who wants another beer?"

Nobody answers him. A little later I go inside for the lemonade, mostly so I can stand in front of the open refrigerator until my face cools down. The kitchen is dim and cool after the glare of the pool. Marisol's radio is playing something with a lot of trumpets, but she isn't here. The back hall is empty, and Callum's footsteps are long gone.

The terrace door opens and closes behind me.

"Need a hand?" Beau asks.

"With a pitcher of lemonade? I think I've got it."

"I know you do. I came in for the company." He leans against the counter beside the fridge with his arms folded, in swim shorts and an open linen shirt. He's smiling a little, the crooked one with the dimple. "So. Nothing happened."

"Nothing happened."

"Okay." He lets that sit there for a second, very comfortably. "For what it's worth, if something had? I wouldn't mind."

I keep my eyes on the lemonade. "Why would you mind? It's none of your business."

"It isn't. That's why I'm telling you I wouldn't mind." He reaches out and tucks a damp piece of hair behind my ear, as lightly as he did in the closet. "That's all. I wanted you to hear it."

The blush starts in my chest and climbs all the way into my hairline. I can feel it, and he can see it. He watches it happen with a slow, warm smile, as if it's the most interesting thing he's seen all summer.

There's no answer in me, so I don't give him one. I pick up the lemonade and carry it out to the pool. I can hear him laughing softly behind me the whole way.

When I go in for a swim to cool off, Rhett is at the ladder before I reach it. He holds out a hand to help me up. I take it, because refusing would look worse. His grip is warm and wet, and when I come up the last rung, his other hand lands on my waist to steady me. His thumb slides along the edge of my suit, low on my hip, and stays there one second too long.

"Aren't you supposed to be benched?" I ask him under my breath.

"From fighting." He doesn't let go. "Nobody said anything about sunscreen. Or ladders."

"Your boss might have opinions about ladders."

Something flickers across his face, there and gone. "My boss has opinions about everything. He can take a number." His thumb moves once more on my hip, and then he lets me go. "Go sit down, champ. You're dripping on me, and I'm trying to be good."

The afternoon slides on without any of us talking about it. Rhett goes back in the pool and keeps his hands to himself with what looks like enormous effort. Beau falls asleep, or pretends to. Silas doesn't move at all. The sun slips behind the umbrella, and the light on the water goes from white to gold.

Then Richard comes out through the terrace doors with his phone still in his hand.

He's in his golf clothes, a pale blue polo and a visor. His face is wrong, gray under the tan. He stops at the top of the steps and looks at the pool as if he isn't sure what he's doing out here.

"Dad?" Callum's voice comes from behind him. He's in the doorway again. I didn't hear him come back. "What's wrong?"

"That was Bill." Richard rubs his mouth with the back of his hand. "The medical examiner's report came back on Grant Whitlock. It wasn't the rocks, and it wasn't the water. They're calling it a homicide."

Nobody moves.

"Someone killed him," Richard says. "Someone at the party, probably. It's Marcus Hale's case now. He's the town's own detective, the one who handled that poor girl last summer. Bill says he's very good." He looks around the pool at all of us, as if he's just remembered we're here. "He'll want to talk to everyone who was there. All of you. I'm sorry. I know it's a lot."

He goes back into the house. The terrace door slides shut behind him.

Oh, fuck.

The four of them go still.

It isn't dramatic. Nobody gasps or drops anything. Beau's eyes are open behind his sunglasses now, and his hand has stopped halfway to his drink. Silas is sitting up in the shade with his arms locked around his knees. In the doorway, Callum hasn't moved a muscle. In the pool, Rhett's hands have closed on the edge of the stone.

It's the stillness of men who've just been hit and are waiting to find out how bad it is.

I know why. God help me, I know exactly why.

I'm the one who held the knife. They're the ones who carried him down to the water.

The cold starts in my stomach and spreads out to my fingers. I look across the bright, gold water, and Rhett is already looking at me. His face is perfectly calm. His knuckles are white on the stone.

Neither of us looks away.

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WREN

"It's me," a voice says through the balcony glass, very low. "Don't throw anything."

I'm already halfway off the bed with the lamp in my hand. I put it down. My heart doesn't slow down at all.

It's late, and the house has been dark for hours. I've been lying on top of the sheet since dinner, listening to every creak, waiting for headlights in the drive and a knock at the front door. When I pull the curtain back, Rhett is crouched on the other side of the glass in a black hoodie, no mask, with his hood up and his face pale in the moonlight. I unlock the door, and he slides in and pulls it shut behind him.

"Are you crazy?" I whisper. "Callum's down the hall."

"Callum knows I'm here."

My brows pull together. *Callum knows?* Callum, who told a ballroom full of men I'm for sale, knows that his friend is climbing my balcony at midnight. I tuck that away to look at later, because Rhett is already pushing his hood back. Up close he looks tired in a way I haven't seen before, his jaw tight and his eyes too awake.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"No. I'm not okay. They're calling it a homicide, Rhett. A detective is coming." My voice wobbles, and I hate it. "Are we going to prison? Just tell me. Am I going to prison?"

"No." He takes my face in both hands, warm and steady. "Nobody's going to prison. Look at me. Nobody."

"You don't know that."

"I know the boss. I know what he's already done tonight, and I know what he'll do tomorrow." His thumbs move once on my cheekbones. "Here's all you have to do. Say what you've been saying since the morning after. Grant got drunk, he walked you down toward the water, he got grabby, you told him to get lost and you went back up to the party. That's it. Keep it boring."

"And if he asks about the masks?" My voice drops even lower. "What if someone saw one of you that night? What do I say?"

"What masks?" He says it so flatly that for a second I think he's forgotten. Then I see his eyes. "There were no masks. You never saw a mask in your life. You met a drunk guy at a party, and you told him to get lost."

"And you?"

"I'm the idiot who gave you a four for your dive." The ghost of a grin comes and goes. "Don't add anything. Don't explain anything. And whatever anyone else says about that night tomorrow, you go with it."

"What does that mean? Who else is going to say something?"

"It means you're not on your own." He leans his forehead against mine. He smells like the night air. His heart is going fast, and his hands aren't quite steady on my face. He's just better at hiding it than I am. "You did good that night, champ. You did better than any of us. We're not letting you go down for it."

I close my eyes. For a long moment neither of us moves.

"Beau asked me about us today," I say into the dark between us. "In the kitchen. After the sunscreen."

He pulls back far enough to look at me. "Yeah? What'd he say?"

"He asked if something happened. I said no." My face heats up all over again. "Then he said if something had, he wouldn't mind. He said he wanted me to hear him say it."

I wait for the grin, or a joke, or the flash of temper I've seen come up in him so fast. None of it comes. He just looks at me for a second, very steady, and something in his face goes soft at the edges.

"Then he meant it," he says. "Beau's a lot of things. A liar about the stuff that counts isn't one of them."

"And you? Do *you* mind?"

"Me?" He thinks about it properly, which somehow makes it worse. "I mind people who are careless with you. I'd put my fist through anyone who hurt you, and I'd enjoy it." His thumb moves along my jaw. "But someone who's good to you? Someone who makes you blush like that in a kitchen? No. I don't mind."

He says it so easily, as if he worked it out a long time ago. I tuck it away with the other thing, the one about Callum, and close my eyes again.

"Stay," I whisper.

"Can't. If I stay, I'll do something stupid, and tomorrow you need to look like you slept." He kisses my forehead, then my mouth, once, soft and quick. "Lock this behind me."

Then he's gone, over the rail and down into the dark, so quietly I don't even hear him land. I lock the balcony door and lie back down. Eventually, somehow, I fall asleep.

I wake up early and go down for coffee, in sleep shorts and Callum's sweatshirt with my hair still damp from the shower. I'm on the bottom step of the stairs when I see the man in the front hall.

"Detective Marcus Hale," he's saying to my mother, holding out his hand as if he's sorry to be bothering her. "I won't keep you long, Mrs. Sterling. I know it's been a hard week for everybody at the club."

He isn't what I pictured. In Philly the detectives who came into the bar were big men with bad knees and worse ties. This one is somewhere past fifty, lean, in a soft gray suit that fits him well enough to make me notice. His hair is going silver at the temples. He has reading glasses folded in his breast pocket and a wedding ring on his hand. His face is the kind people trust on sight. He looks like a guidance counselor. He looks like the man at a party who notices you're standing alone and brings you a drink.

His eyes come to me over my mother's shoulder. They're light brown, almost gold, and they stay on me a beat longer than they need to.

"And you must be the daughter," he says.

"Wren," Mom says quickly. "My daughter, Wren. She's visiting for the summer. Wren, honey, this is the detective who's looking into... into Grant."

"Nice to meet you," I say. It sounds perfectly normal. I tended bar for five years, and I can lie to a cop with a straight face while pouring a beer. "Do you want coffee? There's a whole pot."

"I'd love some. Black's fine." He smiles, and it's a nice smile, tired at the corners. "Thank you, Wren."

I go to the kitchen and pour it. My hands are perfectly steady. They're also ice cold, and the mug burns my fingers all the way back to the hall.

We end up in the sunroom, because Richard says it's the most comfortable room for "this sort of thing." He says it as if a detective comes to the house every summer. Maybe one does.

The sunroom is all glass on three sides, full of white wicker and potted lemon trees. The morning light comes in so bright it makes everything look overexposed. The air smells like citrus and the cleaning spray Marisol uses on the windows. Out past the glass, the harbor is flat and blue, and the yacht club sits on the far point as if nothing has ever happened there.

Richard takes the big chair. Mom perches on the arm of it with her hand on his shoulder. I take the window seat with my coffee and my knees pulled up, as far from the detective as I can get without looking like I'm trying.

Callum comes in last.

He's in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled, freshly shaved, his hair still wet from the shower. He doesn't sit. He leans against the doorframe with his arms folded, the way he leans in every doorway in this house, as if he owns them. My whole body goes hot, then cold.

Don't. Don't look at him like that. Not in front of a cop.

I look at my coffee instead.

"Callum," Hale says, with a friendly nod. "Good to see you again."

"Detective."

So they've met. Of course they have.

"I'm talking to everyone who was at the summer party," Hale says. He takes a small notebook out of his jacket, but he doesn't open it. "It's routine. Grant Whitlock had a lot of friends at the club, and a lot of people saw him that night. I'm just trying to put together where he was, and when."

"Terrible business," Richard says. "Just terrible. His father and I sailed together, you know. Before the trouble."

"The trouble," Hale repeats, mildly.

"The thing last year. With the girl from the college." Richard waves a hand, as if he's brushing it off the table. "It was all dismissed, of course."

"Of course," Hale says. He doesn't write anything down. "Did either of you speak to him at the party, Mr. Sterling?"

They talk for a while. Richard talked to Grant about a boat. Mom never spoke to him at all; she says it fast, as if she's glad of it. Hale listens to all of it with his head tilted, nodding, making the small encouraging sounds that make people keep talking. He's good. He's so good at it that I find myself wanting to tell him things, just to see him nod.

Then he turns to me.

"Wren. I understand you knew him a little."

The room goes still.

My mother's hand tightens on Richard's shoulder. Richard clears his throat. I can feel Callum in the doorway without looking at him, like a storm coming in off the water.

"A little," I say. "He took me to lunch twice. He took me out on his boat once. He was nice to me."

"Was he?" Hale asks gently.

"He talked about his boat a lot."

Hale smiles, and his eyes don't leave my face. "People say you left the party with him. That you walked down toward the water together."

Under the sweatshirt, my heart is slamming hard enough that I'm sure he can see it. I open my mouth. I don't know what's going to come out of it.

"She did," Callum says from the doorway. "For about twenty minutes. She came back up alone and spent the rest of the night at the bar, telling me what an asshole he was."

Every head in the room turns to him.

He's still leaning in the doorframe with his arms folded, perfectly calm. He isn't looking at me at all. He's looking at the detective with a faint, bored expression, like a man reporting the weather.

"Is that right?" Hale says.

"She's not subtle when she's annoyed. Half the bar heard her." Callum shrugs. "Grant was drunk. He made a pass at her down by the boathouse, and she told him where to go. Then she came back and drank my bourbon."

Holy shit.

It's only half true. He was at the end of the bar when I came back up that path, alone, and he handed me a napkin for my knuckles without asking why they were bloody. I never said a word to him about Grant. I never touched his bourbon. Now he's standing in his father's sunroom, building me an alibi out of nothing, with a bored look on his face.

"Wren?" Hale asks. "Is that how you remember it?"

I look at Callum. He still doesn't look at me.

"Yeah," I say. "He was a creep. I told him to fuck off and went back to the party."

"Language," Mom murmurs, faintly.

"Sorry, Mom."

Hale laughs, a soft, warm sound. He finally writes something in his little notebook. Then he closes it and stands up.

"That's very helpful. Thank you, all of you." He shakes Richard's hand, then Mom's. Then he crosses to the window seat and takes a business card out of his breast pocket. "I may want to talk to you again, Wren. Just to fill in some gaps. Would that be all right?"

"Sure," I say. "Whenever you want. I'm not going anywhere."

"Tomorrow, maybe. I'll call." He holds the card out. When I take it, his fingers close over mine around it, dry and warm, and his thumb moves once, slowly, across my knuckles before he lets go. "You look like someone who notices things."

Callum walks him out. Through the front windows I watch them cross the gravel toward a dark sedan in the drive, two tall men in white and gray. They're talking. Hale laughs at something. Callum doesn't.

When Callum comes back into the house, I'm waiting for him in the front hall. Mom and Richard are still in the sunroom, close enough to hear, so I keep my voice down to a hiss.

"Why did you do that, Callum? What the hell was that in there?"

He walks right past me. He doesn't even slow down.

"Callum. Hey. I'm talking to you."

"I heard you." He keeps walking, toward the back of the house. "Leave it alone."

"You lied to a cop for me. You stood there and lied to his face. Why would you do that?"

He stops. His back is to me, and his shoulders are tight under the white shirt. For a second I think he's going to turn around.

"I lied to a cop for my father," he says, just as low. "If you get dragged into a murder investigation, so does his wife, and so does he. That's all it was."

Then he goes out through the kitchen, and the terrace door bangs shut behind him.

He finds me that afternoon.

I'm coming up the back stairs with a glass of iced tea, and he's coming down. The stairwell is narrow and dim, with one small window at the landing, and there isn't room for two people to pass without touching. I flatten myself against the wall to let him by. He doesn't go by. He stops one step above me, and his hand closes around my upper arm.

It doesn't hurt. It's just there, big and warm and absolutely immovable. The iced tea sloshes against the glass.

"Drop it," he says quietly.

"Drop what?"

"All of it. The questions. The detective. Whatever you think you saw in that sunroom." His grip doesn't change. His eyes are flat and gray and very close. "And stay away from my friends."

"I'm not doing anything with your friends."

He scoffs, a short breath through his nose. "Sunscreen."

"That was *sunscreen*."

"Sure it was."

"What do you care?" I tip my chin up, which puts my mouth closer to his than I meant it to. "Are you jealous, Callum? Is that what this is?"

Something moves in his jaw. His eyes drop to my mouth, then back up, hard. "I'm careful," he says. "There's a difference."

"Careful men don't leave fingerprints, Callum." His fingers are sunk into my arm hard enough to bruise.

He looks down at his own hand on my arm, as if he's only just noticed it's there. For one second his grip tightens. Then he lets go, all at once, and goes down the rest of the stairs without looking back.

My arm is warm where his hand was. I stand on the stairs for a long time with the iced tea sweating in my fingers.

What are you so scared of, Callum?

My phone buzzes on the bed after dinner.

Talks Too Much:

so my schedule got changed

changed how

i'm on the 6am class all week. AND the 7. AND the kids on saturday. AND some guy's teenage son who wants to learn to "fight like a ufc guy." do you know what time 6am is

early?

it's not even a time. it's a punishment. boss says it's "good for my discipline."

I look at that for a long time.

did the boss say anything about the pool?

The dots come up. They go away. They come back.

not to me. he's not saying much of anything to anyone, which is how you know.

know what

that he's thinking about it.

A minute goes by before the next one.

a lot.

My face goes hot. I drop the phone on the comforter and lie back to stare at the ceiling. I think about the boss, who has stood in this room and kept his hands to himself every time, and I wonder what he does when he's thinking about something a lot.

Hours later, I still can't sleep.

It's after midnight when I give up and go to the window. The harbor is black and still. There's no moon. The yacht club is just a scatter of dock lights on the far point. The lawn slopes down from the house into darkness, all the way down to the long wooden dock.

Callum is standing at the end of it.

He's in the same place he stood on the first night I got here, past the sailboat, at the very end of the boards. His hands are in his pockets. The wind off the water is pushing his hair around. He's looking across the harbor at the club, as still as a post.

I watch him for a long time. He doesn't move or take out his phone. He just stands there in the dark, alone, the way a man stands when he can't get away from his own head.

He doesn't look up at my window. Not this time. It's as if he knows I'm there and has decided not to.

"Go to bed, Callum," I tell the glass. It fogs where I say it, and he doesn't move.

I don't know how long I stand there. Long enough for my feet to get cold. Long enough to notice that I'm not watching the harbor or the club. I'm watching him, the way he watched me from that dock on my first night, and I can't make myself stop.

Oh, you idiot.

I go back to bed. The next day he's gone before breakfast and back after dark, and I don't see him once.

That night, he comes to my door.

I'm on the bed with Daisy's journal open on my knees when someone knocks. It's two short, hard knocks. Not the balcony. The door to the hall.

I shove the journal under my pillow. "Who is it?"

"Open the door."

It's his voice. Not flat, not electronic. Just Callum, low and tight on the other side of the wood.

I open the door. He's standing in the hall in jeans and a black T-shirt, with no shoes. He looks like he hasn't slept since the sunroom. He has a thick white envelope in his hand.

He holds it out.

"What is that? Did you bring me a present?"

"Take it."

I don't. "What is it, Callum?"

"Twenty thousand dollars." His voice is perfectly flat. "Cash. It's enough to get you back to Philly, put a deposit on an apartment, and live for a while without working while you figure out what's next. You can leave tomorrow. Tonight, if you want. I'll put gas in your car."

I stare at him.

"Are you seriously trying to buy me off? Is that what this is?"

"I'm trying to get you out." His jaw is tight. His eyes are on the envelope, not on me. "There's a detective in this town who wants to talk to you again, and he's not stupid. He's going to keep pulling at that night until something comes loose. You don't want to be here when it does."

"And why the hell would you care about that?"

"I don't." It comes out too fast. "My father cares. My father's wife cares. I'm cleaning up."

"Liar. You're a fucking liar, Callum."

His eyes come up to mine then, gray and furious. Something goes through me so hot and sharp it almost knocks me back a step. He's so close. The hall is dim. I can smell the smoke on him.

"Take the money, Wren," he says. "Go home."

Wren. Not *thief.* Not this time.

I look at him for a long moment. Then I reach out and take the envelope out of his hand.

His shoulders drop, just slightly, as if something heavy has been lifted off them. He nods once. He starts to turn away.

"Callum."

He stops.

I hold up the envelope between two fingers. It's heavy. It's more money than I've ever held in my life.

"I only take things people won't miss," I say.

For a second he doesn't understand. Then he does. I watch it go across his face, slow, all the way from his eyes to the corner of his mouth. It's the line I gave him on the stairs the day I arrived. It's the first thing I ever said to him that made him look at me.

"You're not leaving," he says.

"I'm not leaving."

"And you're keeping the money?"

"You said take it. I took it." I step back into my room with the envelope against my chest. "Thanks, though. Really. It's very generous. I'll put it toward something nice."

He stands there in the hall, staring at me, with his hands hanging empty at his sides. His mouth is open a little. I've never seen him look like that. I've never seen him look like anything except bored or angry or cold.

He looks as if he's just been punched, and is thinking about asking for another one.

"Goodnight, Callum," I say, and I shut the door in his face.

I lean against it with my heart going wild. No footsteps go away down the hall. I hear nothing at all for a long, long time.

Then, very quietly, through the wood, so low I almost miss it, he says, "Goodnight, thief."

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WREN

"Thanks for coming in," Hale says, holding the door for me. "I know nobody likes walking into a police station. I promise it's less exciting than it looks on TV."

"I've never seen a police station on TV that looked this much like a dentist's office."

He laughs. "That's the town's fault, not mine. They redid the lobby with a grant. Someone on the council picked the fish."

There really is a fish. A big blue one, painted on the wall behind the front desk, leaping out of a painted wave. Under it sits a woman in a cardigan, typing with two fingers. The Port Halloway police station is a white clapboard building two streets back from the harbor, next to the library. It has window boxes. It smells like burnt coffee and carpet cleaner. Somewhere in the back, a radio is playing soft rock.

He called the house first thing this morning, and Marisol came up to get me. His voice on the line was warm and apologetic, as if he was asking me out to brunch. *Just a few follow-up questions, Wren. Nothing to worry about. Whenever's good for you.* I said this morning, because saying *never* would have sounded worse.

The envelope with twenty thousand dollars in it is in the drawer of my nightstand, under the coin, where I put it last night after I shut the door in his face. Callum wasn't at breakfast this morning, and his car was gone from the drive.

Marisol was there, though. She watched me pour coffee into a travel mug with my hands not quite steady. Then she took the mug away from me, poured half of it out and filled the rest with milk.

"You're going to see the policeman," she said. It wasn't a question. She'd been the one to hand me the phone.

"It's just follow-up questions. He said it was nothing to worry about."

"Men who say that are the ones to worry about." She pushed the mug back across the island. "You answer what he asks. Nothing extra. Men like that, they don't listen to the answer. They listen for the extra."

"Is that a Port Halloway thing, or a Marisol thing?"

"It's a thirty-years-of-cleaning-rich-people's-houses thing." She went back to the sink. "Drink the milk. You're too jumpy for black coffee today."

I drank the milk. Then I drove into town the long way, past the yacht club gates and the white tent poles still stacked by the road from the party. The harbor was full of sails, bright and fat in the morning wind. Every one of them looked like it belonged to someone who'd never had to lie to a cop.

Nobody but Marisol knows I'm here. Not even Rhett. I almost texted him, more than once, sitting in the Civic in the station lot with my thumb over his name. Each time I put the phone back in my bag. If I'm going to lie to a detective, I'm doing it by myself. So I go in alone, past the painted fish, and follow him down a short hall.

His office is small and tidy. There's a window looking out at the back of the library, a metal desk, and two chairs that don't match. A box fan turns slowly in the corner, pushing the warm air around without cooling it. On the wall behind his desk hangs a corkboard with a softball team schedule, a child's crayon drawing of a sailboat, and a photo of a smiling woman on a sailboat.

"My wife," he says, when he sees me looking. "She hates that picture. Says her hair's a mess."

"It's a nice picture."

"I'll tell her you said so." He waves me into the nearer chair and sits down across from me, not behind the desk, just in the other chair, with his knees angled toward mine. He has his little notebook in his hand again. He still doesn't open it. "Can I get you anything? Water? I'd offer you the coffee, but I like you too much."

"Water's fine."

He fills a paper cup from a cooler in the corner and brings it back to me. Our fingers touch when I take it. His are cool from the water.

"So," he says, sitting back down. "Philadelphia."

"Philadelphia," I agree.

"You tended bar there?"

"For about five years."

"Where?"

"A place on Frankford Avenue. It closed in the spring."

"I'm sorry to hear it." He seems to mean it. "Is that why you came up here? To your mother?"

"I needed a summer off. She'd just gotten married. It seemed like a good time to visit."

"And you met Grant Whitlock how soon after you got here?"

So I tell him. It comes out the way I've told it to myself in the shower every morning since that night, smooth and boring, with all the edges sanded off. I met Grant at the club bar. He bought me a drink I didn't finish. He took me to lunch. He drove me home with his hand on my knee, and I didn't love that. He took me out on his boat once, and he talked about the boat the whole time. At the party he got drunk. He wanted to go down to the water. I went because I didn't want to make a scene in front of my mother's new husband's friends. Down by the boathouse he got handsy. I told him to go to hell and walked back up to the tent.

Every word of it comes out easy. It's like pouring a drink for a regular. My hands don't shake. My voice doesn't catch. I make myself look embarrassed in the right places, a little annoyed in the others.

Hale listens to all of it with his head tilted and his eyes on my face. He nods in the right places. He never interrupts.

When I finish, he's quiet for a moment.

"That's very clear," he says. "Thank you. You tell it well."

"I've had practice. My mom made me tell it about four times."

"I'll bet." He smiles. "Did Callum walk you back up? From the boathouse?"

"No. I walked back on my own."

"But he was at the bar when you got there."

"Yeah." It's easier than I expect. "He was there. He bought me a bourbon and let me complain."

"That doesn't sound much like Callum." Hale's smile doesn't change. "He's not usually the type to let people complain at him."

"He was in a good mood. It happens."

"Twice a year, I've heard." He laughs softly, and I laugh too, because it's the kind of thing that's supposed to make you laugh. "You've been spending time with his friends too, I hear. The boxer. The senator's boy."

The water in the cup goes still in my hands. "You hear a lot."

"It's a small town, and I'm nosy for a living." He says it kindly, as if we're sharing a joke. "Rhett Reyes has been in my office a few times over the years. Bar fights, mostly. He's got a temper when someone he likes gets pushed around. Has he ever lost it with you?"

"Rhett?" I make myself laugh. "He grades my diving. He gave me a four the first day, and I still haven't forgiven him. That's about as dangerous as he gets with me."

"A four." Hale smiles. "That sounds like him."

"Is he in some kind of trouble?"

"Not with me." He tilts his head. "Should he be?"

"For the four, maybe. Otherwise no."

He laughs again, and lets it go. Then he opens his notebook for the first time. He looks at whatever's written there for a long moment, and when he looks up, his face has changed. It's gentler. Sadder. "Can I tell you something, Wren? Off the record."

My stomach goes tight. "Sure."

"I worked a case last summer. A girl died at the same party. The same rocks." He watches me as he says it. "Her name was Daisy Hollis. She was twenty-three. Everybody said she took something and walked down to the water to be sick, and she fell."

Not a single muscle in my face moves. Both my hands stay around the paper cup, and I give him polite, faint interest, like a stranger hearing about someone's vacation.

Blood is roaring in my ears.

"That's awful," I say.

"It was. It still is." He closes the notebook. "I never liked the way that case closed. Too neat. Now there's another body on the same rocks, a year later, almost to the day. You can see why I'm interested."

"Sure. That makes sense."

"Did you ever hear about her? Before you came up? It was in the papers."

"I don't really read the papers." I shrug. "I'm sorry. I didn't know her."

Hale nods slowly. He doesn't say anything for long enough that the fan turns all the way around and back again. Then he leans forward, just a little, with his elbows on his knees. He studies my face like a photo he's trying to place.

"It's funny," he says quietly. "You have her eyes."

The room goes very cold.

It starts in my hands, around the paper cup, and climbs up my arms into my chest. It's the cold from the boathouse floor. It's the cold of reading *men in masks* in my sister's handwriting. For one long second I can't breathe at all.

"Sorry?" My voice comes out normal. I don't know how. "Whose eyes?"

"Daisy's." He smiles, a little sheepish, as if he's embarrassed by himself. "Sorry. That was strange of me. It's the color. Hazel, with that green ring around the middle. Hers were just like that. I looked at her picture so many times last summer that I'd know them anywhere."

"Lots of people have hazel eyes."

"They do. You're right." He sits back. "Occupational hazard. When you work a case like that, you start seeing the person everywhere. In the grocery store. On the street." He spreads his hands. "Forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive."

"That's kind of you." He stands, and so do I. He walks me to the door of his office and holds it for me. As I pass him, he says, very lightly, "If you ever do remember anything about her, Wren, I hope you'll call me. Day or night. Some things are too heavy to carry by yourself."

He takes the pen from behind his ear and writes on the back of another card, against the doorframe. Then he holds it out. It's the same card he gave me in the sunroom, MARCUS HALE, DETECTIVE, except now there's a cell number on the back in neat blue ink.

I take it, because not taking it would be worse.

"Thanks," I say. "I don't think I'll remember anything. Thanks anyway."

"You never know," Hale says. "People surprise themselves."

I walk out past the fish and the woman in the cardigan without feeling my feet. In the Civic I lock the doors. Then I sit with both hands on the wheel in the sun, while my heart tries to climb out through my throat.

You have her eyes.

Hazel, with a green ring around the middle. My father's eyes. The only thing he ever gave either of us. I didn't know Daisy had them too until I was sixteen. She opened her door, the afternoon I got off that bus, and stared at me with my own eyes as if she'd seen a ghost.

Nobody in this town knows I'm her sister. Nobody except a waitress on Route 1, and Kelsey would sooner swallow her own tongue than talk to a cop.

So does he know? Did he look at me and see her by accident, or did he walk into that office already knowing whose sister I am?

"Okay," I say out loud, to nobody, to the hot dashboard. "Okay. What the fuck, Wren. Think." Thinking doesn't help. Every road my brain goes down ends on the same rocks.

I put my forehead on the steering wheel and breathe until the black spots go away. Then I start the car and drive home, the long way, along the water. I don't remember a single turn.

The house is empty when I get back. Mom and Richard have gone to a lunch at the club. Marisol's car is gone. Callum's car is still gone. The rooms are bright and silent. My footsteps echo on the stairs.

The first thing I do is turn on the bathroom light. My own face looks back at me from the mirror for a long time. Hazel, with a green ring around the middle. Our father's. Hers.

I spend the afternoon in my room with the door locked. Hale's card goes into the nightstand drawer with the envelope and the coin. Then I take it out again and look at the neat blue numbers on the back. Then I put it back.

My phone buzzes late in the afternoon.

Talks Too Much:

heard the cop talked to you again

I stare at it.

how

small town. everybody knows everybody. you ok?

fine

come on.

i'm fine, it was routine.

The dots come up and go away, twice.

ok. i'm stuck at the gym til late. 6am guy's dad wants a "private session." if you need me i can get out of it.

don't. i'm good.

you sure?

i'm sure.

ok, but if you change your mind i've got a truck and zero shame.

go teach your ufc baby.

he cried today. i've never been prouder of anyone.

I almost laugh. It comes out of me as a breath through my nose, and then it's gone.

I'm not sure. Nothing has ever felt less sure in my life. I just don't know how to tell him that a detective looked at me and saw my sister without telling him I have a sister. So I set the phone on the nightstand, and I don't pick it up again.

The light goes orange, then gray, then gone. When it's full dark, I lock the balcony door.

"Not tonight," I tell the glass, and I hate how much I mean it.

I don't know why. Maybe because if I leave it open, I'll be waiting for it to move. Maybe because if they come in, I'll tell them everything, and I can't. Not yet. Not until I know what *you have her eyes* means.

I lie on top of the sheet in the dark with my hands on my stomach. The house ticks. The harbor breathes against the rocks below the lawn.

I want all of them.

That's the stupid, humiliating truth of it. I want Rhett in my bed, loud and warm, with his heart going like a speed bag under my cheek. The smile, laughing for real, without the game-show voice. The mirror in the corner, quiet, watching me breathe the way he did the first night. And the white mask by the door, saying anything at all to me in that flat machine voice, as long as it's to me.

I want someone to tell me I'm not doing this wrong.

Nobody's going to hear me ask for any of it. No texts. The door stays locked. I lie there with every inch of me aching, listening to the empty house.

At some point, very late, I hear the terrace door open and close downstairs. Footsteps cross the kitchen, slow and heavy. They come up the back stairs, into the east wing, down the hall.

They stop outside my door.

I hold my breath. I don't move. Nobody knocks. Nobody says anything. Whoever it is just stands there on the other side of the wood for a long time, close enough that I can hear him breathing.

Then the footsteps go away again, slowly, back down the hall.

Toward Callum's side.

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22

WREN

Something clicks.

It's small and soft, the sound a pen cap makes, or a latch. I've heard it once before, in the dark, on a night I'd rather not think about. My eyes open before the rest of me wakes up.

It's been a couple of days since the police station. Long enough for Hale's card to start feeling like it's burning through the nightstand drawer, under the coin and the envelope. Long enough for Callum to perfect being gone before breakfast and back after dark. Rhett has been on his punishment classes, sending me photos of a sunrise over the harbor with captions like *this is what 5am looks like. it's ugly. don't come.*

Now it's the dead middle of the night, and someone is in my room.

I don't move. Keeping my breathing slow and my eyes almost shut, I look through my lashes.

There's a man standing on my desk chair by the door. He's in black, tall and lean, with his back half turned to me. He's reaching up to the smoke detector over the door. The cover is off. A thin black wire hangs out of it, and he's doing something to it with a tiny screwdriver, carefully, as if he's taking a splinter out of a child's hand.

He isn't wearing a mask.

My heart is slamming so hard I'm amazed he can't hear it. Then the air moves, the curtain shifts, and the smell of him reaches me across the room.

Rain on stone. Crushed mint. Under it, something dark and resinous, like the inside of a church.

I know that smell.

It was in this room the night four masks came through my balcony door, when a mirrored mask leaned close to my ear and whispered my full name. It was in the Sterlings' kitchen too, under orange juice, on the guy who told me I was loud.

"Silas," I say.

The screwdriver stops in his hand.

For a long moment neither of us moves. Then he finishes what he's doing with the screwdriver, as if he's decided he might as well, and fits the cover back on the smoke detector with a small, careful click. He steps down off the chair. He turns around.

It's Silas. Dark hair falling in his eyes, black T-shirt, the silver ring on his thumb. His face is very pale in the moonlight coming through the balcony glass. He looks at me sitting up in bed with the sheet pulled to my chest, and he doesn't say anything at all.

"Is that a camera?" My voice comes out cracked. "Is there a fucking camera in my smoke detector? Are you kidding me?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

He doesn't look away. "Since the night we gave you the verdict."

The cold hits my stomach first, then my face. I think about everything I've done in this room. Every night I've cried into a pillow. Every time I've talked to the ceiling. The night I touched myself thinking about four masks and said *Mirror* out loud into the dark. Something clicked that night too.

"Oh my God. Oh, fuck you." I'm out of bed before I know it, the sheet still wrapped around me. "Oh my *God*. You've been watching me. You've been sitting in some room somewhere watching me sleep, and change, and..."

"It faces the balcony door."

"My bed is between me and the balcony door!"

"I know." His voice stays low and level. "Whitlock had friends. His family has money and lawyers and people who do what they're told. After the verdict, I needed to know if anyone came through that door who wasn't us."

"So you put a camera in my bedroom without asking me."

"Yes."

"Do you hear how fucking insane that sounds?"

"Yes." He takes a breath, and for the first time something moves in his face. It isn't guilt. It's closer to pain. "I'm not going to tell you it was okay. It wasn't. I'm telling you why."

I'm shaking. My eyes are hot, and I hate it. I clutch the sheet tighter. "How many times did you see me? Be honest."

He's quiet so long I think he isn't going to answer. Then he does.

"I've seen you naked forty times," he says. "This is the first time I've been allowed to look."

It knocks the breath out of me. It's so honest my face burns, and so quiet it doesn't sound like a boast at all. It sounds like a confession he's been carrying around for weeks.

"You counted," I whisper.

"I count everything." His eyes don't leave mine. "I didn't sit there and watch you, Wren. Not like that. I checked the door. You walk past it. You change in front of the mirror next to it. I'd tell you I always looked away. That would be a lie."

I sit down hard on the edge of the bed. My legs don't want to hold me. The room is silver with moonlight. Somewhere out on the water, a halyard is ringing against a mast.

"Take it out," I say.

"Okay."

"Right now."

He climbs back up onto the chair without a word. The cover comes off again. He pulls the tiny camera free. It's black and no bigger than a thumbnail, and he winds the wire around it. Then he steps down and holds it out to me on his open palm, like an apology.

I don't take it. I stare at it.

"Why are you here at this hour?"

"The angle had drifted." He closes his hand around the camera. "The wind's been picking up. There's a storm coming in a few days, a bad one. The house shifts when it blows, and the camera shifts with it."

"The balcony door was locked. That was the deal. If it's locked, you knock."

"I know." He doesn't look away. "I didn't knock. I broke it. I'm sorry."

"So you climbed in my window to fix your spy camera."

"Yes."

"Do you ever say anything except *yes*?"

The corner of his mouth moves. It isn't quite a smile. "Not to you. Not when you're right."

I put my face in my hands. My heart is still slamming. He knows everything. He's been in my room, in my phone, in my life. The worst part, the part that makes me want to scream, is that I'm not afraid of him. I should be. I'm just furious, and under the fury there's something warm and twisting that I don't want to look at.

When I lift my head, he's still standing exactly where he was. He hasn't come any closer.

"You called me *Wren Elise*," I say. "The night of the verdict. How did you know my middle name? I've never told anybody in this town."

He looks down at the camera in his hand. A faint flush creeps up his throat, the first color I've ever seen in his face.

"Your birth certificate," he says. "The first night. When I went through your phone."

"You read my *birth certificate*?"

"It was in your email. You'd sent it to a landlord in Philly." He's still looking at his hand. "I wasn't looking for it. I read it anyway. I read all of it."

"Why?"

He finally looks up. "Because I wanted to know who you were."

"And my searches." I hold his eyes. "*stop looking*. That was you too."

"Hale worked your sister's case." He says it quietly. "He reads search histories. I didn't want him reading yours."

The flush has reached his ears now. He looks embarrassed, really embarrassed, the way a person does when they've said something true and can't take it back. It's the most human I've ever seen him.

Something in my chest twists so hard it hurts.

"Then you know," I say. My voice has gone very quiet. "If you went through everything. You know who I am."

He doesn't pretend not to understand. "I know you're Daisy's sister."

The words hit the room like a dropped glass. I've never heard anyone say it out loud. Not my mother. Not Kelsey, the waitress, who only said *you're Wren*. Not anyone in this whole town. My eyes sting so fast I can't stop it.

"Since when?"

"Since the night of the boathouse. Your texts to her number." His voice is so gentle it doesn't sound like his. "*I did something tonight. I'd do it again.*"

My hand goes to my mouth.

"Who else knows?"

"Nobody."

"Not Rhett? Not..." I stop myself. "Not the others?"

"Nobody," he says again. "Not even him."

I don't have to ask who *him* is. "Why not?"

"Because it's yours to tell." He takes one step closer, the first one. "Not mine. I'm not going to hand it to anyone. I'm going to wait until you do."

I stare at him. My chest won't fill. I've carried this secret into this house and kept it behind my teeth at every dinner, every pool party, every time my mother looked at me. It's been sitting in his hands for weeks. And he's been holding it as carefully as that tiny camera.

"Sit down," I say. "Please. You're making me nervous, looming over there."

He sits on the end of my bed, on the far corner, as far from me as he can get and still be on it. He sets the camera on the blanket between us like a peace offering. His hands rest on his knees. His thumb turns the silver ring, around and around.

"Tell me what you do," I say. "The four of you. The masks. What is it?"

He's quiet for a while. I think he's deciding how much he's allowed.

"We find men the courts let walk," he says finally. "Men with money and lawyers and friends at the club. Men who did something to someone and went home and slept fine. We find them. We make sure they don't do it again."

"You kill them."

"Sometimes." He doesn't look away. "Whitlock was going to do it again. We were sure."

My mind goes to the journal under my pillow. To my sister's backward-slanting handwriting, her i's dotted with little circles.

He said there are people who handle things the police won't. Men in masks, he said. I laughed. He didn't.

Since the night I read it, I've known that Daisy heard about men in masks. It sat in my head like a fact in a book. I've never let myself put it

next to these men, in this room, with their faces.

The room tilts.

Someone she trusted told my sister about the men who handle things. These men. Then she went down to the rocks.

Oh, Daisy. What did you do?

"Silas," I say, and my voice comes out very strange. "Did she come to you? Daisy. Did she come to you for help?"

Everything in him goes still. It's the same stillness I saw in Rhett on the boathouse floor, the same one I saw in all four of them at the pool when Richard said *homicide*.

"That isn't mine," he says quietly. "I'm sorry. It isn't."

"Whose is it?"

He doesn't answer. He doesn't have to.

"Then show me." It comes out of me before I've thought it through. "I want to see what you do. I want to see it for myself."

"That's not my call."

"Then whose call is it?"

He looks at me for a long time, his dark eyes steady and unreadable in the moonlight. "You know whose."

I do. I don't say it. But I think of the boss, the only mask that has never let me close enough to touch it, and my skin goes hot and cold at once.

"I'm going to ask him," I say.

"I know." Something that's almost a smile touches his mouth. "I'd like to be there when you do."

He's still sitting on the far corner of my bed with his hands on his knees. He hasn't touched me once. He hasn't even tried. The house ticks around us, and the moon slides across the floor. I don't want him to leave yet.

"Tell me something," I say. "Something true about you. You know everything about me. It's not fair."

He thinks about it the way he thinks about everything, as if he's choosing which one to hand over.

"I don't sleep much," he says. "I make tea at night and forget to drink it. My kitchen is full of cold tea."

"That's not a secret. That's a cry for help."

The corner of his mouth moves. "I read when I can't sleep. Everything. Cereal boxes, if there's nothing else."

"Is that why you knew my book's ending was bad?"

"Your book's ending *was* bad."

I laugh. It surprises me, how easily it comes out, sitting here in a sheet with the man who put a camera in my ceiling. He watches me laugh as if it's a thing he wants to remember.

"Your turn," he says. "Tell me something about her. Not the case. Her."

Nobody has ever asked me that. Not one person since the funeral.

I pull my knees up under the sheet. "She threw a locket at my head once," I say. "During a fight about a boy named Derek. Derek wasn't worth it. It left a dent, and she never got it fixed. She said it gave it character." My throat goes tight. "She wore it every day after that. Like it was a joke between us."

Silas doesn't say anything. He just listens, the way Daisy's journal said someone once listened to her, as if nothing I could tell him would be too much.

"She'd have liked you," I say. "She'd have made fun of your T-shirts."

"Everyone does."

"She'd have done it to your face."

"Then I'd have liked her too."

I look at his hand on his knee, at the silver ring on his thumb. Before I can think about it, I reach over and touch it. It's warm from his skin. I turn it once, slowly, the way he does when he's thinking.

His fingers flatten on his knee.

His eyes come up to mine. They're very dark. His breathing has changed, and I can see the pulse in his throat jump.

"Wren," he says quietly. "Don't."

"Why not?"

"Because you're still angry with me." He doesn't move his hand away. He doesn't move anything. "When you touch me, it should be because you're not."

I hold his eyes for a long moment. My heart is going hard. Part of me wants to push it, to see what he does if I don't stop.

Instead, I let go of the ring.

"Who says I'm going to touch you?"

The corner of his mouth moves again. "Nobody. I hoped."

That nearly undoes me more than anything else he's said tonight.

"The camera," I say finally.

He goes a little stiff. "I'll take it with me. You won't see another one."

Whitlock's friends. His family's lawyers. A kind detective in a gray suit who looked at my face and saw my sister's eyes. I think about how many nights I've lain awake listening to the balcony door.

"Put it back," I say.

He looks up at me.

"Pointed at the balcony," I say. "Only the balcony. Not the bed. Not the bathroom. Not me." I hold his eyes. "And you tell me every time you look."

He looks at me for a long, long moment. Then something comes into his face that I've never seen there. It's soft and stunned, almost like happiness.

"Yes," he says.

When the camera is back in the smoke detector and pointed at the glass, he stops at the balcony door with his hand on the handle.

"Tell him," I say from the bed. "Tell him I want to see what you do."

Silas looks back at me for a long moment, his dark hair in his eyes and the moon behind him.

"I'll tell him," he says. "He won't like it."

"I didn't ask if he'd like it."

The corner of his mouth moves. "I know. That's why I'll tell him."

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23

WREN

Talks Too Much:

i'm here

The boss's answer came last night, through Rhett and not Silas.

you free tomorrow night? wear black.

I've been dressed for an hour. Black jeans, black hoodie, my hair pulled back so tight it hurts. I've changed my sneakers twice, because the white soles on the first pair felt like a giant neon sign. My heart has been going so long and so fast that my hands feel buzzy.

coming

The house is dark. My mother and Richard went to bed after the news, the way they do every night now, as if going to sleep early will keep the word *homicide* from coming up the hill. Callum's door was shut when I passed it, with no light underneath. I go down the back stairs in my socks, carrying my shoes, and out through the terrace door. The lawn is wet and black. The air smells like salt and cut grass. Everyone keeps saying a storm is coming in a few days.

Rhett's truck is idling at the bottom of the drive with the lights off, black and huge against the darker black of the hedges. The passenger door opens before I reach it.

"Get in, champ," he says softly. "Before your mother wakes up and asks me my intentions."

I climb up into the cab. It smells like new leather and coffee. He's in black too, black hoodie, black jeans, no mask. A duffel bag sits at my feet. When he pulls out onto the road, he doesn't turn the headlights on until we're past the Sterlings' gate.

A gust of wind shoves at the truck, hard enough that he has to correct the wheel. Out on the harbor, the boats are rocking at their moorings.

"That storm's still coming," he says. "Couple of days. It's supposed to be a real one." He glances at me. "If the power goes out up at the castle, my place has a generator and a very big bed. Just saying."

I laugh. "Wow. Smooth."

"I'm serious. You could ride it out with me."

"I've survived Philly winters in an apartment with no heat, Rhett. I think I can handle some wind."

"It's not the wind I'm worried about." He's grinning, but his eyes are on mine for a second too long before they go back to the road. "Offer stands."

"So," I say. "Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"Nope." He glances at me in the green glow of the dashboard. "You're nervous."

"I'm not nervous."

"Your knee's going like a sewing machine."

I put my hand on my knee to make it stop. It doesn't stop.

"Okay, I'm a little nervous," I admit. "Where are we going, Rhett? Seriously."

"To work." He says it simply. "You wanted to see what we do. The boss said yes, as long as you sit where you're told and don't touch anything. Those are his words, not mine. I'd let you touch anything you wanted."

"The boss said yes," I repeat.

"He did. He wasn't happy about it." Rhett's mouth twitches. "He's never happy about anything, so that's not saying much."

We drive down through the dark town with the windows cracked. The shops are shuttered. The harbor is a sheet of black glass with a few boat lights on it. At the marina, Rhett turns into the back lot, past the fuel dock

and the boatyard, where the streetlights don't reach. He stops beside a parked SUV, dark gray, dull and forgettable, with tinted windows.

"We're switching," he says. "The truck's too pretty. Everybody in town knows the truck."

"Whose is that?"

"Ours. It's nobody's. It doesn't exist." He kills the engine. "And we've got to pick up the second."

"The second what?"

"Nobody goes out alone this week. Boss's orders." He opens his door. "Come on."

The back door of the SUV opens as we walk up to it. A man unfolds out of the back seat and straightens up in the dark. He's tall and lean in black, with black gloves on his hands.

He's wearing the smile.

It's the painted grin, white and wide with red lips. It's the one that lounged in my doorway the night of the verdict and whispered that I was right about the mask. In the dark of the marina lot it looks horrible. It looks delighted to see me.

"Good evening," he says, in the game-show voice, bright, fake and booming. "And welcome, welcome, to tonight's very special episode. Contestant, please take your seat."

"Oh my God," I say. "You talk like that the whole time?"

"Only when I'm nervous," the smile says. "Which is always."

Rhett snorts. He gets in behind the wheel, and I climb into the back seat because the smile is holding the door for me with an elaborate bow. He slides in after me and pulls the door shut. The SUV is dark and close. It smells like vinyl and cold coffee. Under that, faintly, there's something else on the man beside me. It's warm and expensive. It nags at me, like a word on the tip of my tongue.

Then Rhett starts the engine, and the thought slips away.

We drive out of town to Shore Road, with the lights off for the last stretch. It runs along the water on the far side of the point, where the houses get bigger and farther apart. Rhett takes it slowly, then pulls into a dark gap under some trees, across the road and down from a big white house with a wraparound porch. He turns off the engine. The silence is so sudden it rings.

"That's him," Rhett says quietly. "White house. Porch light."

I lean forward between the seats. The house is lit up on the ground floor, warm and golden. Through a big front window, I can see a man in a kitchen, pouring himself a glass of wine. He's maybe fifty, silver-haired, in a quarter-zip sweater. He looks like anybody's dad. He looks like the kind of man who coaches Little League.

"What did he do?"

Rhett doesn't look away from the window. "Coached girls' sailing for twelve years. Three of them went to the police. One settled. The other two got told it was their word against his." He says it very flat, with none of the grin in it. "His word won."

My stomach turns over.

Their word against his. Under my pillow back at the Sterlings', in handwriting that slants backward, my sister wrote the same thing a different way. *Nobody would believe it about him.* I press my nails into my palm until it hurts, because the only other choice is making a sound in this dark car, and I won't.

"So what are we doing?"

"Tonight? Nothing. We watch." Rhett takes a small pair of binoculars out of the console and props his elbow on the window. "Where he goes, when he goes, who comes to visit. You'd be amazed how lazy men like him get. They start to think nobody's watching."

"And then what?"

He doesn't answer that. In the back seat beside me, the smile doesn't either.

So we watch.

It's boring. Nobody tells you that about this kind of thing. It's long, quiet and boring, with every nerve wound up so tight that each car on the road makes me jump. The man in the white house drinks his wine. He watches TV. Rhett writes things down in a little notebook with a pencil. The smile sits beside me in the dark with his gloved hands folded in his lap. After a while, he starts doing commentary under his breath, in a sportscaster murmur.

"And he's going for the second glass. A bold move. The crowd is on its feet."

I bite my lip to keep from laughing. "Stop."

"He's reaching for the remote. Oh, folks, this is a man at the height of his powers."

"Both of you shut up," Rhett says, without lowering the binoculars.

"He's very dedicated," the smile tells me. "It's one of his best qualities. His others are being tall and having no inside voice."

"I heard that."

"You were meant to."

I laugh into my sleeve. My knee has stopped bouncing. The smile shifts on the seat beside me, and his shoulder brushes mine. Neither of us moves away.

An hour goes by, maybe more. The man in the white house goes upstairs. A light comes on in a bedroom. Rhett writes something down, then settles deeper into his seat with the binoculars on his knee. The SUV is warm now from our breathing. Outside, the trees drip.

"I want to ask you something," the smile says quietly, in a voice that's almost his own. "You can say no."

I turn my head. In the dark, the painted grin is just a pale shape a few inches from my face.

"Ask."

"Can I kiss you?"

My breath stops. In the front seat, Rhett doesn't turn around.

"I'm not watching," Rhett says to the windshield. "I'm working. I'm looking at a pervert's bedroom window. It's very professional."

My eyes go to the mask. I think about the night of the verdict, when the smile laughed at my joke about masks without mouths. I think about how he's been making me laugh for an hour in the dark, on purpose, so I'd stop shaking.

"Yes," I whisper.

He reaches up with one gloved hand and pushes the bottom of the mask up, just past his mouth, the way I did to Cracked in the boathouse. In the dark I can see a jaw, smooth-shaven. A mouth. Nothing else.

Then he kisses me.

It's slow, warm and very sure. It's nothing like the boathouse. He cups my face with a gloved hand and kisses me as if he has all night, as if we're anywhere but a parked car outside a predator's house. My hands find the front of his hoodie. He makes a low, happy sound against my mouth and tilts my head to kiss me deeper. The binoculars, the white house, all of it goes.

When he finally pulls back, just an inch, his breath is warm on my lips.

"Hi, wife," he murmurs.

Everything stops.

Wife.

The pool, the first day, with my wet hair in my eyes and a golden boy holding out a towel. *Good afternoon, wife.* A ballroom. A coat closet. *Ready, wife?* A kitchen last week, a damp piece of hair tucked behind my ear. *If something had, I wouldn't mind.*

Bergamot and sandalwood. That's the smell I couldn't place. Warm leather. Old money, with a fast car parked outside.

I don't say his name. My hand goes flat on the front of his hoodie, and I can feel his heart slamming under it.

"Take it off," I whisper. "Please. I need to see you."

He goes very still.

In the front seat, Rhett lets out a long, pained breath. "Oh, for fuck's sake, Beau."

The smile doesn't move for a long moment. Then he reaches up with both hands and lifts the mask off his face.

It's Beau. Of course it's Beau. Golden hair flattened and mussed from the mask. Clear blue eyes. The dimple, just the one, coming and going in his cheek as if it can't decide whether this is funny. He holds the painted mask in his lap like a cat he's not sure is going to scratch him.

"In my defense," he says, in his own voice, "I've been very clear about my intentions from day one."

I stare at him. For a second I can't find a single word.

"You called me *wife* at the pool," I say finally. "In front of everybody. The first day."

"I did."

"You *told* me who you were."

"I was making a joke." He winces. "In hindsight, it was a very revealing joke."

"You have a bad back. *Smiley* has a bad back. You told me you fell off a dock when you were twelve." My voice is climbing. "I've been thinking about your back for *weeks*."

"It's a very real injury," Beau says. "It's documented."

Rhett makes a sound in the front seat that might be a laugh or a groan. "I'm going to kill you. The boss is going to kill you, and then I'm going to dig you up and kill you again."

"That seems excessive."

"You said *wife*, Beau. Out loud. In the field."

"It slipped." Beau isn't looking at Rhett. He's looking at me. The smile has gone out of his face, and what's left is careful and a little scared. "Are you okay? I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to come out like that. I meant to tell you properly. With my face, not like this."

"Properly?"

"Properly. In daylight. Somewhere with a tablecloth." He swallows. "Wren. Say something. Yell at me. Anything."

I look at him. At the mask in his lap and the hope in his face. At the man who held his hand out across a swimming pool and has been making me laugh ever since.

I grab the front of his hoodie and kiss him.

He makes a startled sound. Then his hands are in my hair and he's kissing me back, really kissing me, without a mask or a joke or anything at all between us.

"Lights," Rhett says sharply.

We break apart. Across the road, the porch light on the white house has gone off, then on again. The front door is opening. A silver-haired man in a quarter-zip steps out onto the porch with a glass in his hand and looks out at the dark road. Right at the trees. Right at us.

"Down," Rhett says, and Beau pulls me flat across the back seat with his arm over me.

For a long, terrible moment, nobody breathes. I can hear Beau's heart under my ear. I can hear the trees dripping.

Then Rhett starts the engine and pulls out of the trees with the lights off, smooth and easy, as if he's done this a hundred times. He doesn't hurry. He doesn't look at the porch. He drives us right past the white house at the speed limit. Only when we're around the bend does he flick the headlights on and put his foot down. He takes us the long way home, out along the shore and up through the dark farm roads past Route 1, so nobody could follow us if they tried.

"Is he following us?" I whisper into Beau's hoodie.

"No." Rhett checks the mirror. "He's just a guy who heard a car. He'll go back to his wine. He'll forget it by morning."

My heart is slamming so hard it hurts. I'm lying across the back seat on top of Beau, my face in his chest, his arm locked around my back. Every

nerve in my body is lit up like a string of bulbs. I'm shaking, and it's not only fear anymore.

Beau feels it. His arm tightens on my back.

"Wren," he says quietly.

I lift my head. In the passing streetlights, his face is all gold and shadow. His eyes are dark.

"I'm fine," I say. "I'm not fine. I'm so... God. Is it always like this?"

"The adrenaline?" A slow smile. "Every time."

"What do you do with it?"

His eyes drop to my mouth.

"Oh, here we go," Rhett says to the windshield.

"Eyes on the road," Beau tells him, without looking away from me.

"My eyes are on the road. My eyes are glued to the road." Rhett reaches over and turns the radio up, loud, some old song with a lot of bass. "I can't hear a thing."

Beau pulls me down and kisses me again.

It's different in the back of a moving car, in the dark. Everything is close and warm and rocking. He kisses me slow and deep, one hand in my hair, the other sliding up under my hoodie to spread warm across my bare back. I'm still lying on top of him, and every curve in the road presses us closer together. I can feel how hard he is through his jeans. When I rock against him without meaning to, he groans into my mouth and his hand tightens on my back.

"God," he breathes. "Wren."

I kiss his jaw, his throat, the place under his ear where the bergamot is strongest. His hips lift under me. His hand slides down to the small of my back, to the waistband of my jeans, and stops there, fingers spread, as if he's holding himself back with everything he has.

Then he stops.

He doesn't push me away. He just lies there, breathing hard, and turns his face into my hair.

"Not like this," he says quietly.

I lift my head. "What?"

"Not in the back of a car with Rhett pretending he can't hear us." His eyes are dark and wet and very serious. "I want to take you out first. Properly. Dinner. My boat. The good spot past the point. I want to do this

right with you, Wren. I want you to know it's you I'm after, not the adrenaline."

"You mean that."

"Every word of it." He smiles, a little crooked. "That's the problem. I usually don't."

I put my forehead down on his chest and laugh, shaky and breathless and more turned on than I've been in my life. He wraps both arms around me and holds me there, his heart going hard under my cheek, until my breathing slows down.

"Just so you know," Rhett says from the front seat, "I heard every word of that."

"You said you couldn't hear a thing."

"I lied. I'm a liar." He turns the radio down. "It was very romantic. I'm a little bit in love with him myself."

We pull into the back lot as the sky over the harbor is going from black to the deep, bruised blue before dawn. Rhett parks beside his truck and turns the engine off. Nobody says anything for a moment.

Beau sits up and helps me straighten my hoodie, gently, as if I'm made of glass. His hands are still a little unsteady. When he's done, he smooths my hair down with both palms and kisses my forehead.

"Okay?" he asks.

"Okay." I look at him. At his face, finally, without a mask. "You and your proper date."

"You're going to love it." He smiles, the real one, crooked. "There's a part with cherries."

In the front seat, Rhett finally turns around. He looks at the two of us in the back seat: Beau's messy hair, my swollen mouth, the mask lying forgotten on the floor. His face does something complicated. Then he grins.

"Well," he says. "That's three."

"Three?" My face goes hot all over again. "How do you know about..."

"Silas reported in." He grins wider. "He told us you caught him, and nothing else, and then he went and sat in a dark room for six hours."

"Three of us you can't unsee," Beau says, very pleased with himself.

"One to go," Rhett says. He tosses Beau the SUV keys. "Boss is gonna love this."

Rhett drives me home in the truck with the windows down. Neither of us says much. Halfway up the hill his hand comes off the gearshift and

settles on my thigh, warm through my jeans, and it stays there the whole way. His thumb moves slowly back and forth, back and forth, until I can't think about anything else. When he finally pulls up at the bottom of the drive, he squeezes once and lets go.

"Night, champ," he says.

I make it inside just before the sun does.

I go in through the terrace door with my shoes in my hand, the way I left. The house is silent. In the gray kitchen, there's a single coffee mug in the sink that wasn't there when I left.

When I touch it, it's still warm.

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WREN

"Late night, thief?"

Callum doesn't look up when he says it. He's at the far end of the breakfast table with a cup of black coffee and the newspaper folded beside his plate, perfectly shaved, perfectly calm. The terrace doors are shut against the wind, and the sky over the harbor is a low, dirty yellow. Marisol has been saying all morning that the storm is coming early.

My mother looks up from her grapefruit. Richard looks up from his phone.

I've had almost no sleep. My thighs ache. My lips are still swollen, and I put on a turtleneck in the middle of summer, because there's a mark on my throat and I can't remember whose mouth put it there. I'm holding my coffee in both hands like it's the only thing keeping me upright.

"I slept fine," I say. "Thanks for asking."

"Did you." He turns a page of the paper. "I heard you on the back stairs before the sun was up."

My mother's spoon stops halfway to her mouth.

"I couldn't sleep," I say. "I went for a walk."

"In the dark? With a murderer loose?" He finally looks up. His gray eyes go over me, slow, from my hair to the turtleneck and back. Something cold and ugly flickers in them. "It's funny. Every time you can't sleep, one of my friends looks like he hasn't either."

"Callum," Richard says.

"I'm just making conversation." Callum picks up his coffee. "Last week it was Whitmore's car in the drive. Last night it was Reyes's truck at the gate before the sun was up. I'd tell you to keep a list, Nina, but she's working through my friends faster than I can write them down." He takes a sip. "At least she's not charging them. That's growth."

The table goes dead silent.

My mother's face goes pink, then white. Richard says "Son" in a voice I've never heard him use. Marisol, at the counter, puts down the coffeepot very carefully, as if it might break.

"Wren?" my mother says. It comes out small. "Honey? Is that... is any of that..."

I can't answer her. My face is so hot it hurts. My eyes are burning, and my throat has closed up, and every word I've ever known has gone out of my head. I push my chair back so hard it scrapes across the floor, and I'm on my feet, and I'm going to walk out of this room before I cry in front of him.

I make it two steps. Then I turn around.

"You want to know who's coming and going from this house before dawn, Mom?" My voice shakes, and I let it. "Ask him why he was awake to hear it. Ask him why he sits up all night with his door cracked, listening for me on the stairs. Ask him why he knows whose truck it was."

Callum's cup stops on the way to his mouth.

It's tiny, there and gone. But I see it, and I know he knows I saw it.

"Some people have trouble sleeping," he says.

"Some people," I say, "should get a hobby."

Richard clears his throat loudly and starts talking about the storm. The generator has been acting up, he says. The boat needs double lines. He and Nina are supposed to drive to Newport this afternoon for a dinner, but maybe they shouldn't. My mother says yes, maybe they shouldn't. Neither of them looks at me or at Callum.

Callum goes back to his paper. He doesn't turn another page the rest of the meal.

When I get up to leave, my mother catches my hand.

"Baby," she says, very low, so Richard won't hear. "Is everything okay? You can tell me. Whatever it is."

For one wild moment I almost do.

Mom, I've got a crush on three of the men from the pool, and I've slept with one of them. They help kill people. Daisy went to them before she died, and I think a detective knows I'm her sister.

Then I look at her worried face and her diamond and her pink nail polish.

"Everything's fine," I say. "He's just a dick."

She lets go of my hand. She doesn't believe me. I can see it.

They go to Newport anyway. By early afternoon the wind has picked up so much that the trees on the lawn are bending. Richard decides it's safer to drive now than later, and that they'll stay over in Newport rather than come back through it. Marisol leaves soon after to get home to her sister before the roads go bad. She stops me in the kitchen on her way out, with her raincoat on and her purse over her arm.

"Candles in the drawer by the stove. Flashlights in the mudroom. The generator is a liar, don't trust it." She looks at me over her glasses. "And you two, don't kill each other."

"No promises," I say.

"Mm." She pats my cheek, hard. "He's not as bad as he acts, that one. Don't let him convince you he is."

Then she's gone. The house is empty except for me, Callum and the rising wind. The storm hits at dusk.

It comes in off the water like something alive. The sky goes from yellow to green to black faster than I knew a sky could, and then the rain starts, not falling but flying, hitting the windows sideways in great slapping sheets. The harbor has gone white with whitecaps. The trees on the lawn are thrashing. Somewhere a shutter has come loose and is banging, banging, banging against the side of the house.

I'm in my room with every light on when the power goes out.

It's sudden and total. One moment the lamp is on. The next the whole world is black, with only the storm's roar and the rain on the glass. I sit on my bed with my fists in the sheet. I wait for the generator to kick on. It doesn't.

The generator is a liar.

"Great," I say to the dark. "Fantastic. Fuck you too, generator."

I find my phone by feel and turn on the flashlight. Its little white circle makes the room look smaller and stranger, all hard shadows and wet, gleaming glass. Outside, the balcony is streaming with water. I go down the

back stairs with my phone held out in front of me like a torch, toward the kitchen, toward the candles.

There's already a light in the kitchen.

Callum is at the island with a battery lantern and an open toolbox. He's in a gray T-shirt and jeans, soaked through at the shoulders. His hair is wet and pushed back off his face. There's a cut on the back of one hand, fresh and bleeding a little. He's wrapping a strip of gauze around it with his teeth.

He looks up when my light hits him.

"Go back upstairs," he says.

"It's pitch black upstairs."

"There are candles."

"In here. Marisol said." I go to the drawer by the stove and start pulling out candles. "What happened to your hand?"

"The boat." He tears the end of the gauze with his teeth and tucks it under. "She was pulling at her lines. I doubled them."

"You went down to the dock in this?"

"Someone had to."

"You could have been killed."

He doesn't answer that. He's looking at me in the lantern light with an expression I can't read, his jaw tight.

His keys are on the counter beside the toolbox, where he must have dropped them when he came in. It's a heavy ring, wet with rain. A car key. A house key. A brass key to the boat, on a little cork float. And a long, old-fashioned key on a blue plastic tag, with white letters printed on it.

PHYC. BOATHOUSE.

The Port Halloway Yacht Club. The boathouse.

My thumb stops on a wick.

Whoever did it didn't break in. They had a key.

The new pine board, pale and raw, set into the floor where Grant Whitlock bled. I sat on that floor in a sail with Rhett while the water knocked underneath us. Someone pulled up the old board and put down the new one, in a building that belongs to the club, without breaking a single lock.

Someone with a key.

"Are you going to light those," Callum says, "or just hold them?"

I look up. He's watching me. His eyes go from my face to the keys on the counter and back.

He reaches out and puts his hand over them. Not fast. Not as if he's hiding them. He just picks them up and puts them in his pocket, as if he's putting away anything he'd left lying around.

"My father's the commodore," he says. "I have keys to half the club. Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you've just found something." His voice is very even. "You haven't."

I light the candles with shaking hands.

We end up in the living room, because it has the fireplace and the most windows to watch the storm through. Neither of us is willing to be the first to go upstairs alone. "You know how to build a fire?" I ask him.

"I know how to do a lot of things." He's kneeling at the hearth with his back to me. "Hand me that paper, would you? Unless you'd rather sit in the dark and glare at me."

"I can glare at you in the light just fine."

He makes a sound that might be a laugh, and he builds a fire. I set candles along the mantel and the coffee table until the room is all moving gold light. Outside, the wall of glass is a black sheet streaming with rain, and every few minutes the lightning turns the whole harbor white.

He sits in the leather armchair by the fire, the same one from the night of the gala. I sit on the far end of the couch with my knees pulled up and a blanket around me. For a long time neither of us says anything. The fire cracks. The rain roars.

"You were cruel this morning," I say finally.

"I was honest."

"You did it in front of my mother."

"Your mother should know." He's staring into the fire. "She should know what she's let into her house."

"What, me?"

He doesn't answer. His jaw moves.

"You want to know what I think?" I pull the blanket tighter. "I think you're jealous. I think you've been jealous since the sunscreen. I think you sit up at night listening for me on the stairs, and it makes you crazy, and you'd rather die than admit it."

He turns his head slowly and looks at me. The firelight carves his face into gold and shadow. His eyes are very dark.

"You don't know anything about me, thief."

"I know you're lying."

"Do you?"

"You lied to a cop for me. You tried to pay me to leave. You grabbed me on the stairs." I'm on my feet now, without having decided to stand. The blanket falls off my shoulders. "And this morning you sat at breakfast in front of my mother and called me a whore with your coffee in your hand. So pick one, Callum. Do you want me gone, or do you want me?"

He stands up too.

He does it slowly, the way he always does, unfolding out of the chair until he's looking down at me across the firelight. He's so close. The rain is so loud I can barely hear myself breathe. I can smell him, cedar and smoke.

"Pick one," I say again, softer.

"I can't," he says.

It comes out of him rough and low, as if it's been dragged.

Lightning flashes. The whole room goes white. For a heartbeat I can see every line of his face, and he looks like someone standing at the edge of something very high. Then the thunder hits, so close and so loud that the windows rattle in their frames. I flinch.

He catches my arm.

Not the way he did on the stairs. His hand is gentle this time, just there, warm on my bare skin. He doesn't pull me in. He just holds on, and I can feel his thumb move once, slowly, on the inside of my wrist. On my pulse.

My breath stops.

"Callum," I whisper.

He looks down at me. Then he lifts his other hand and touches my face. His fingers slide along my jaw, into my hair, slow, so slow, giving me every chance to stop him.

I don't stop him.

He kisses me.

It's nothing like the others. It isn't careful, or playful, or sweet. It's furious. His mouth comes down on mine hard enough to bend my head back. His hand fists in my hair, and he kisses me as if he hates me for making him do it. I hate him right back. I grab his wet T-shirt in both fists and kiss him so hard our teeth knock. He makes a sound low in his chest, half groan, half snarl, and walks me backward until my back hits the cold glass wall.

The storm is right there behind me, roaring. The glass is freezing through my shirt. His body is so hot against mine that I'm shaking.

"I hate you," I gasp against his mouth.

"I know." He drags his teeth along my jaw, down my throat, and I arch into him without meaning to. "Say it again."

"I *hate* you."

"Good." His hand slides down my side to my hip and grips it hard enough to bruise. He presses me back into the glass with his whole body, his thigh pushing between mine, and I make a sound I'm going to be embarrassed about for the rest of my life. "Keep saying it. Maybe one of us will believe it."

I pull his head back down to mine. He kisses me deeper, rougher, his tongue sliding against mine, his hand moving up under my shirt to my bare stomach. His palm is rough and hot. It spreads over my ribs, slow, and I feel my heart slamming against it.

Then his mouth is at my ear.

"If you want me to stop," he says, very low, "you know the word."

Everything in me goes cold.

You know the word.

I picked my word in front of a man in a cracked mask, sitting in my reading chair in the dark with his knife on my rug. The masks heard it the night of the verdict. Nobody else in this town has ever heard it.

I have never said it to Callum Sterling. Not one time.

My eyes snap open. He's right there, inches away, his breath ragged, his eyes black in the firelight. I search his face. I search every line of it for something, anything.

"What word?" I whisper.

He goes completely still.

For one long second, nothing moves. Not him, not me. Only the rain, the fire and his hand flat on my ribs.

Then something closes in his face. I watch it happen. A door shutting, a lock turning.

"Any word," he says. "Stop. No. Get off me. Whatever word you want."

"That's not what you said."

"It's what I meant."

"Callum..."

He lets go of me.

He steps back so suddenly that I stagger against the glass. The cold rushes in where he was. He stands there in the middle of the room, breathing hard, his hands open at his sides, staring at me as if I'm something that's just burned him.

I'm breathing just as hard. My lips are throbbing. My shirt is rucked up over my stomach, and I tug it down with shaking hands.

We stare at each other across the firelight. I don't know what's in my face. I know what's in his. It's fury and want, with something else underneath it that looks almost like fear.

Neither of us moves toward the other.

"Go upstairs, Wren," he says finally. His voice is rough.

"You don't get to send me anywhere."

"Then stay down here and watch me lose my mind." He turns away from me, toward the fire. His shoulders are rigid under the wet T-shirt. "Your choice."

I stand there for a long time.

Then I pick up the blanket off the floor and a candle off the mantel. I go upstairs without looking back. I can feel him not watching me go.

My room is black and roaring. The storm throws itself against the balcony glass.

"What the fuck was that," I whisper to the dark. "What the actual fuck, Callum."

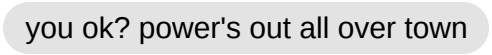
The dark doesn't answer. I set the candle on the nightstand and sit on the edge of my bed with my arms wrapped around myself, still shaking.

You know the word.

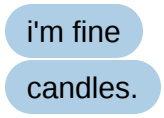
I lie back on the bed in my clothes and stare at the dark ceiling, and I don't let myself think past it.

My phone buzzes on the blanket.

Talks Too Much:



My thumbs hover. I don't know what to say. How do I tell him that his best friend just kissed me against a window like he wanted to break me? That he stopped, and said something he shouldn't have known how to say?



The dots come up. They go away. Then they come back.

k. lock the balcony. storms make people stupid.

I put the phone down on the blanket. It buzzes again almost at once, a number I don't have saved.

It's Beau. Rhett gave me your number. Don't be mad at him, I bribed him with a sandwich.

Then, a second later, another one comes in.

The storm's supposed to clear by tomorrow night. Dinner on the boat? Just me. Properly. I'll bring dessert.

The candle flickers. Outside, the lightning turns the whole harbor white. For a heartbeat I can see the end of the dock, empty and streaming, with the black water heaving all around it.

I think about a man downstairs by a dying fire who can't pick one. I think about a golden boy in the back of a car who stopped himself because he wanted to do this right.

"Okay," I say out loud, to nobody. My voice shakes. "Okay. You deserve one nice thing."

Then I type one word and send it before I can change my mind.

yes.

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25

WREN

"You came," Beau says, as if he's been genuinely worried I wouldn't.

He's standing on the dock at the bottom of the Sterlings' lawn in the last of the evening light, beside a long wooden sailboat I'd know anywhere. *Constituent*, in gold letters on the stern. The storm has scrubbed the whole sky clean. It's pale pink and gold over the harbor. The water has gone glassy and still, as if last night never happened. Only the lawn gives it away, littered with torn leaves and snapped branches, with a lawn chair upside down in the hedge.

"You invited me," I say. "I'm a very polite person."

"You're the least polite person I've ever met." He holds out his hand to help me aboard. "It's my favorite thing about you."

"Rhett said that exact thing to me the other day."

"Rhett stole it from me." He doesn't let go of my hand once I'm on the deck. "I've been saying it in my head since the pool."

He's in a pale blue linen shirt and faded shorts, barefoot, his golden hair still damp at the ends. No campaign smile. No polish. He looks like a boy who's been waiting by the water for a girl to come down the lawn. The boat smells like varnish and salt. Under that, faintly, there's bergamot.

I'm in a white sundress with a cardigan over it, in case it gets cold on the water. I spent an hour on my hair and then put it up in a messy knot anyway, because it looked like I'd tried too hard.

"You look beautiful," he says, plainly, as if it's a fact.

My face goes hot. "You've seen me in a turtleneck at breakfast."

"I've seen you in a lot of things." He smiles, the real one, crooked. "This is my favorite."

He casts off and takes us out past the end of the dock under the little engine. Then he cuts it and raises the sail, quick and sure, the way he does everything on the water. The boat heels gently as the wind catches. Suddenly we're moving across the bright water, with nothing but the hiss of the hull and the creak of the lines. Last time we were on this boat, he made me steer. Tonight he doesn't offer, and I don't ask. I sit in the cockpit with my knees pulled up and watch him sail. He's showing off a little, and he's good enough to get away with it.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"The good spot." He nods past the point, where the shore curves away into trees and the water goes a deep, clear green over the sand. "Nobody goes there. It's too far for the yacht club crowd and too shallow for the big boats. I found it when I was fourteen."

"What were you doing out there at fourteen?"

"Hiding." He trims the sail and grins at me. "I was a very dramatic fourteen."

The good spot is a little cove on the far side of the point, sheltered by pines, with a strip of pale sand and water so clear I can see the ripples on the bottom. He drops the anchor and lowers the sail. The silence comes down around us like a blanket. Somewhere a bird is calling. The sun is sinking into the trees, and everything has gone gold.

He's had dinner made. Of course he has. There's a wooden board laid out on the cabin roof with cured meats folded into little roses, three kinds of cheese, figs, honeycomb, olives and a pile of dark cherries. There are tiny pastries from the French bakery in town in a white box tied with string. A bottle of champagne sweats in a silver bucket of ice. He pops the cork over the side of the boat and pours me a glass without spilling a drop.

"I was going to bring lobster," he says. "Then I thought about how many drunk finance guys you must have watched crack lobster at a bar, and I panicked."

I laugh. "Good instinct. Every man who ever ordered lobster at my bar tipped like it was a personal sacrifice."

"Then no lobster. Ever. I'll eat cereal in front of you first."

We eat cross-legged on the cabin roof with our feet bare and the sun going down. He asks me about Philly, real questions, and actually listens to the answers. I tell him about my mother working doubles, about the bar on Frankford with the neon cactus, about the regular who came in every week for a year and only ever ordered a glass of milk. He laughs so hard he has to put his champagne down.

Then, after a while, I ask him something real.

"You told me once that you stand behind your father and smile until your face hurts," I say. "What happens when you stop smiling?"

He goes quiet. He turns his glass slowly in his fingers.

"Nobody notices," he says finally. "That's the thing. I stopped once, for a whole fundraiser. Didn't smile once all night. Not one person asked if I was okay." He looks out at the water. "It turns out you can be furniture so long that people forget you have a face of your own."

"That's why the mask," I say quietly.

He looks at me. For a moment he doesn't say anything at all.

"Maybe," he says. "Or maybe I just like being someone who gets to *do* something, for once. Instead of standing there."

The sun slides behind the pines. The water goes from gold to rose to violet. Out past the point, the lights of the yacht club are coming on one by one.

"There's a detective," he says, after a while, "asking questions at the club. Hale. He's been at the bar three nights this week. He's very friendly. Everyone likes him." He frowns slightly. "He wanted Teddy to tell him who Rhett left the party with."

My stomach drops. "What did Teddy say?"

"That he didn't remember. Teddy remembers everything." Beau looks at me. "Teddy likes you. That's the only reason, I think."

The champagne is cold in my hand, and I don't drink it. The wind has died to nothing, and the boat rocks so gently I can barely feel it.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I shouldn't have brought that onto the boat. I promised myself one night where nothing was about any of that."

"It's okay."

"It's not. Tonight's supposed to be about you." He sets his glass down and turns to face me properly. "Can I tell you something?"

"Tell me."

"I've wanted to kiss you since you came up out of that pool spitting water and looking at Rhett like you wanted to drown him." His voice has gone low. "I've wanted to do a lot more than kiss you since the coat closet. I stopped myself in that car because I wanted you to know it wasn't just the adrenaline. That it's you."

I look at him in the violet light. At his serious blue eyes, his messy hair, the dimple that hasn't shown up once since he started talking.

"Beau," I say. "I know."

Holy shit. I really do know.

He kisses me on the cabin roof with the cherries going warm beside us and the first stars coming out.

It's slow. He kisses me as if he has all night, as if he's been planning this exact moment for weeks and wants to get every second of it right. His hand comes up to cradle my jaw. His thumb strokes my cheekbone. When I open my mouth for him, he makes a soft, wrecked sound and kisses me deeper. For a while there's no Hale and no Teddy, only his mouth.

"Can I take you below?" he murmurs against my lips. "There's a bed. A real one. I changed the sheets twice."

I laugh into his mouth. "Twice?"

"I was nervous."

The cabin is small and warm, and it smells like varnish. There's a lamp with a brass shade, and a narrow bed tucked into the bow under the curve of the hull, made up with white sheets that do look very, very clean. He lights the lamp. It throws soft gold light over everything.

He turns to me and doesn't move. He just looks at me.

"Tell me what I'm allowed," he says, the way he did in the closet. Only now there's no list in his voice. Just please.

"Everything," I say. "Tonight you're allowed everything."

His eyes close for a second, like it hurts. Then he steps in and starts on the buttons of my cardigan.

He undresses me slowly, kissing every inch he uncovers. The cardigan first, his mouth on my bare shoulder. Then the zip at the back of the sundress, his knuckles grazing my spine all the way down. The dress falls to my feet. He looks at me standing there in my underwear in the lamplight, and he lets out a long, shaky breath.

"Look at you," he says. "God, Wren. Look how good you look."

"You're staring."

"I'm memorizing." He kneels in front of me, right there on the cabin floor, and kisses my stomach, just under my navel. His hands slide up the backs of my thighs. "I've thought about this so many times. You don't know. You couldn't possibly know."

He hooks his thumbs in the sides of my underwear and slides them down my legs, slowly, his mouth following. He kisses my hip. The inside of my thigh. Then he looks up at me, his hands on my hips and his eyes dark.

"Lie down," he says softly. "Let me take care of you."

I lie down on the clean white sheets. He strips his shirt over his head. He's golden all over in the lamplight, with a swimmer's shoulders, a flat stomach and a line of darker gold hair under his navel. He climbs onto the bed between my knees. He kisses his way up the inside of my leg, slowly, so slowly that I'm squirming before he gets anywhere near where I need him.

"Beau," I gasp. "Please."

"I know. I've got you." He kisses the crease of my thigh. "You're so pretty. Every part of you. Do you know that?"

Then his mouth is on me, and I stop being able to think at all.

He's slow, thorough and devoted. He uses his whole mouth, his tongue soft and flat, then firm, his lips closing over my clit. He moans against me as if he's the one being touched. His hands hold my thighs open, and every few strokes he stops to tell me something.

"You taste so good. So sweet." His tongue circles. "That's it. Open up for me."

"Oh my God. Oh, fuck."

"You're doing so well." He slides a finger into me, slow, and curls it. "So wet. All for me. Isn't it?"

"Yes. Yes, all for you."

"Good girl."

It goes through me like a shock. My back arches off the sheets. He feels it, and I can feel him smile against me before he does it again.

Then he pulls back, his mouth wet and his eyes black.

"Come up here," he says, breathless. "I want you on my face. Please. I've wanted it since that car."

I don't even pretend to argue.

He lies back on the narrow bed with his head on the pillow, and I climb up over him with my knees on either side of his head. The low ceiling of the

cabin is right above me. I put one hand flat against the curved wooden hull to brace myself. He takes my hips in both hands and pulls me down onto his mouth. The sound he makes is so raw and grateful that it goes straight through me.

"Oh," I gasp. "Oh, Beau."

He holds me there and takes his time with me, as if he has all night and intends to use it. I'm rocking against his mouth without meaning to, chasing it, my hand pressed so hard against the hull that I can feel the water moving on the other side. He doesn't let up. He just holds my hips and lets me ride his face. Every few seconds I hear him groan, muffled, delighted.

"There you go," he breathes, when he comes up for air. "Take it. Take what you want from me. You're perfect."

"I'm close. I'm so close..."

"I know. I can feel you." His fingers dig into my hips, pulling me lower. "Come on my tongue. Let me have it."

I come so hard I forget where I am. My thighs clamp around his head. I cry out his name, loud enough that it echoes off the little cabin, loud enough that if anyone were out on the water they'd hear it. He doesn't stop. He holds me through every wave, softer and softer, until I'm trembling. Finally I have to climb off him before I fall.

I collapse beside him on the narrow bed. He rolls toward me and kisses me, slow and sweet and very pleased with himself.

"That," he says, "was better than anything I've ever said out loud."

"You're very proud of yourself."

"I'm the proudest man in the state." He's smiling against my lips. "Can I have you? Please. Tell me I can."

"Yes."

He kicks off his shorts. He's hard and flushed. He reaches into the little cabinet by the bed for a condom without looking. Of course he knows exactly where it is. He rolls it on with hands that aren't quite steady, then turns back to me.

"Like this?" He settles over me, braced on his forearms, his blue eyes on mine. "I want to see your face."

"Like this."

He pushes into me slowly. The stretch makes me gasp. He stops, kisses me and waits. When I nod, he sinks the rest of the way in, and we both breathe out at the same time.

"Oh," he says, very quietly. "Oh, Wren."

The polish is gone. There's no praise in it, no performance. Just my name, plain and wrecked, as if it's all he has.

He moves slowly at first, long, deep strokes that rock the whole little bed. The lamp sways on its hook. Outside, the water slaps softly against the hull, and the boat moves with us, as if the whole harbor is in on it. He doesn't look away from me once. Every time I gasp, his eyes go darker.

"You're taking me so well," he breathes. "You feel incredible. Tell me what you need."

"Harder."

He gives me harder. His hips snap against mine, and the bed creaks. I wrap my legs around him and hold on. He's talking again now, low and steady against my ear.

"You're so beautiful," he breathes. "I've been dreaming about the sounds you make since that closet. Every night. You don't know."

"Tell me," I gasp.

"I'm never going to be able to sail this boat again without hearing you." His hips drive into me. "Every time I take her out, I'm going to think about you right here, under me, saying my name like that. Say it again. Please."

"Beau," I moan, and I clench around him without meaning to.

"Good girl," he groans. "Just like that. God, just like that."

It builds again, slower and deeper this time, so big it frightens me. He reaches between us and finds my clit with his thumb. He watches my face as he does it.

"Come for me one more time," he whispers. "Please. I need to see it."

I come apart under him with my eyes open, staring right into his. He follows me a second later, his whole body shuddering, my name breaking on his lips, his forehead pressed to mine.

For a long time, neither of us moves. The lamp swings slowly on its hook, then stills. The water laps at the hull. He's heavy and warm on top of me, his heart pounding against my chest.

"I'm taking you out on this boat every week," he says eventually, into my neck. "Until you're sick of it."

"I'll never be sick of it."

"You say that now. Wait till I teach you knots."

I laugh. He laughs too, and the whole little boat rocks with it.

He sails us home in the dark. I sit in the cockpit wrapped in his shirt and my cardigan, with my bare feet tucked under me. I watch him steer by the lights on the shore. Neither of us says much. He keeps glancing at me as if he's checking I'm still there.

At the dock, he helps me off the boat and doesn't let go of my hand.

"Thank you," I say. "For tonight."

"Thank *you*." He kisses my knuckles. Then he looks up the dark lawn at the house, and something in his face changes. It goes careful. "Wren. Be careful with Hale. I mean it. He's very good at being liked."

"So are you."

"I've had a lot of practice." The dimple comes back, just for a second. "That's how I know."

He waits on the dock until I'm all the way up the lawn. When I look back from the bottom of the terrace steps, he's still standing there, a pale shape at the end of the boards, the way Callum stands there at night. He lifts a hand.

I blow him a kiss. Down on the dock, he catches it out of the air and presses it to his chest, like an idiot, and I laugh all the way up the terrace steps.

Then I'm inside, still smiling, and I don't even see the man in the dark living room until he speaks.

"Have fun, thief?"

Callum is sitting in the leather armchair by the cold fireplace, in the dark, with a glass in his hand. I can't see his face. Only the shape of him, and the faint shine of the glass.

My heart slams.

Of course he's waiting up. Of course he is.

I keep my voice steady.

"So much fun," I say. "Thanks for asking."

The glass stops halfway to his mouth. "That's his shirt."

I'm still wearing it, pale blue linen buttoned wrong over my sundress. It stays on. I walk past him and up the stairs in it, slowly, so he gets a good look.

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26

WREN

"Zip me up, baby? My arms don't bend that way anymore."

My mother is standing in front of the long mirror in her bedroom in a silver dress with her back to me, holding her hair up off her neck. Through the window behind her, the white tent is already glowing on the lawn. I keep my eyes on her zipper. Her room smells like the drugstore perfume she's worn since I was six, layered under something French that Richard must have bought her. Her shoes are lined up on the bed. She's tried on four pairs.

I zip her up slowly, the way she used to zip me into dance recital costumes. Her shoulder blades are freckled. I'd forgotten that.

"There," I say. "You look gorgeous."

"I look nervous." She turns to the mirror and smooths her hands down the front of the dress. "Isn't that silly? It's just a party."

It isn't just a party. It's the reception they never had. They got married at the courthouse after four months, with a clerk as a witness and lunch at a diner afterward. Tonight Richard is giving her the whole thing, the tent, the band, the champagne and half the town on the lawn. It was meant to be a surprise. She found out weeks ago, because he can't keep a secret from her to save his life.

"It's not silly," I say. "You get to be nervous at your own wedding."

"It's not a wedding."

"It's a wedding with a delay. Same thing."

She laughs and catches my hand, looking at us both in the mirror. Me in my black dress, the one I wore to the gala, because it's the only nice thing I own that I'm not afraid of. Her in silver, with her diamond catching the light.

"I'm so glad you're here," she says. "I know this summer's been strange. I know you and Callum..." She stops. "I just want you to be happy, baby. That's all I've ever wanted."

My throat goes tight. Daisy's locket is in the zip pocket of my clutch, on the bed behind me. I think about how my mother has never said her name. Not one time. I think about telling her, right now, while she's holding my hand in front of the mirror.

Not tonight. Let her have tonight.

"I'm happy," I say. "I promise."

She squeezes my hand and believes me, because she wants to.

It's the same kind of white tent as the summer party, strung with the same kind of lights. When the crew put it up this morning, I watched from my window, and my stomach turned over so hard I had to sit down on the bed. Tonight it's on the Sterlings' lawn, not the club's. The band is playing Motown. The harbor is gold behind it. It doesn't help.

By dark there are people everywhere. Women in silk, men in linen, waiters with silver trays. The air smells like cut grass, salt and expensive perfume. Pam Aldridge in a hat. Teddy behind a bar they've set up by the pool, his gray ponytail tied back with a black ribbon. He catches my eye across the lawn and lifts his chin, very slightly.

My phone buzzes in my clutch.

Beau:

Made us a group. Nobody change the name.

I look at the screen. The group is called *Wren & the Problems.* It has four people in it. Me, Beau, Rhett, and a number with no name and no picture. I know without being told that it belongs to Silas.

Rhett:

why am i a problem

Beau:

You're the biggest one.

Rhett:

where are you. i'm at the shrimp

Beau:

He hasn't left the shrimp since he got here.

I laugh into my clutch. Silas's number doesn't say a word. I'd bet money he's read every one.

I find Rhett by the shrimp. He's in a dark suit that fits him the way the charcoal one did at the summer party, his tie already loose, a plate of shrimp in one hand. When he sees me, his face does the slow, warm thing it does. Then he remembers where we are and puts it away.

"There she is," he says loudly, for the benefit of the people nearby. "Try the shrimp. It's the only thing here that isn't judging you."

"You're judging me."

"I'm admiring you. Different face." He lowers his voice. "You okay? With the tent?"

I don't know how he knows. Then I remember he was there that night, in a cracked mask, blocking the door back to the lawn.

"No," I say. "But I'm here."

"That's my girl," he says, too quietly for anyone else to hear, and hands me a shrimp.

Beau finds us a minute later, golden and beaming in a pale gray suit, with a glass of champagne for me. He kisses my cheek in front of half the town, as if it's the most natural thing in the world, and murmurs, "You look like trouble," in my ear. My mother sees it from across the lawn and puts her hand over her heart.

I slip away to Teddy's bar for a real drink before I lose my nerve. "Gin and tonic," I say. "Good tonic, if you're hiding any."

"For you, I'm hiding some." He pours it, top-shelf tonic, and slides it across to me. "I remember a girl who tips."

"You remember everything."

"I do." His eyes go once around the tent, slow, like a bartender counting heads at closing. "That's my whole problem."

"Beau said someone's been asking you questions."

"Someone's been asking everybody questions." He wipes the bar down with his towel. "Nice man. Tips well. Asks about the summer party like he's

asking about the weather." He looks at me over the towel. "I've been doing this thirty years, kid. The nice ones are the ones who write things down after you leave."

My skin prickles. "What did you tell him?"

"That I'm old and I don't remember shit." He turns away to the next customer. "Drink your drink. Smile at your mother. Go."

I go.

Silas is at the edge of the tent, in black, alone, with a glass of water. He doesn't come over. When I look at him, he lifts the glass very slightly. Then his eyes go somewhere past my shoulder and stay there.

I turn around.

Detective Marcus Hale is walking up the lawn from the drive.

He's in the same soft gray suit. He has a bottle of wine in his hand with a ribbon on it, like a guest. He's smiling. Richard's face does something complicated and polite when he sees him. Then he goes to meet him with his hand out. What else can you do when a homicide detective comes to your wife's party with a gift?

"Oh, *shit*," Rhett says, very softly.

My phone buzzes.

Beau:

Hale's here. Act normal.

Rhett:

i'm always normal

Beau:

You have six shrimp in your hand.

Rhett:

and?

I put the phone away. My hands are cold.

Hale works the party.

There's no other way to put it. He moves through the crowd the way Beau does, easy and friendly. He shakes hands, remembers names, laughs at jokes that aren't funny. He talks to Pam Aldridge until she laughs. He stands

at Teddy's bar, orders club soda and tips as if he knows what it's like to be on the other side. He compliments my mother's dress. He tells Richard it's a beautiful night for it.

Everywhere he goes, I can feel the four of them moving around him.

Beau drifts into his path with two glasses of champagne and a story about the senator's dog. He keeps Hale laughing on the far side of the tent for as long as he can stand it. Rhett stays near me, close enough that his shoulder brushes mine every time Hale's eyes come our way. Silas doesn't move from the edge of the tent at all, but his gaze tracks Hale everywhere he goes, steady as a compass.

"Talk to me," I murmur to Rhett. "About anything. I can't stand here and watch him."

"Okay." He doesn't miss a beat. "The shrimp here are better than the shrimp at the summer party. Bigger. Less judgmental. Your mom's dress is incredible, and she's dancing like nobody told her the band is playing at half speed. Pam Aldridge is wearing a hat the size of a satellite dish." He bites a shrimp. "How's that?"

"Keep going."

"Beau's telling the dog story. It's a terrible story. The dog bit a congressman, and Beau tells it like it's the Odyssey." His shoulder presses into mine, warm and solid. "And you're doing great, champ. You're standing here. You're breathing. That's all you have to do tonight."

"What if he comes over?"

"Then he comes over, and you're boring." His voice drops. "And I'm right here."

And Callum dances with my mother.

The band slows down. Richard is caught in a conversation about property taxes, and Callum appears at my mother's elbow in his dark suit with his hand held out. She looks startled. Then she looks so happy I have to look away. He leads her out onto the dance floor under the string lights. He dances with her slow, correct and careful, his hand light on her back.

Over her shoulder, he looks at me.

He doesn't stop looking at me. Not the whole song. My mother is talking up at him, laughing. He's nodding. His gray eyes are on me across the dance floor, steady, dark and unreadable. I hold his gaze. Something in me won't let go of it.

Beside me, Rhett lets out a low whistle under the music.

"Damn," he says. "He's not dancing with your mom. He's dancing at you."

I swat his arm without looking away from the dance floor. He laughs into his champagne and rubs the spot, as if I've actually hurt him.

When the song ends, he kisses my mother's cheek and hands her back to Richard. Then he walks off the dance floor and disappears into the dark beyond the tent.

My mother comes straight to me, glowing, a little out of breath.

"Did you see that?" She grabs my arm. "Callum danced with me. *Callum.* He's never so much as passed me the salt without being asked."

"I saw."

"He said I make his father laugh." Her eyes are shining. "He said he hasn't heard his father laugh like that since he was a boy. Can you believe that? From Callum?"

"No," I say honestly. "I can't."

She squeezes my arm and floats off toward Richard, and I stand there holding my champagne, looking at the dark where Callum went.

My phone buzzes.

Beau:

Did Callum just dance with your MOM?

Rhett:

she's right next to me. watched the whole thing

Silas:

Watch Hale.

It's the first thing Silas has ever typed in the group. I look up.

Hale is coming toward me.

He arrives with a glass of club soda in his hand and his tired, kind smile. Beside me, Rhett goes very still. Hale nods to him.

"Mr. Reyes."

"Detective."

"Wren." Hale turns the smile on me. "You look lovely. Your mother must be very happy tonight."

"She is."

"I'm glad." He looks out at the dance floor, at my mother laughing with Richard under the lights. "It's good to see people happy. In my line of work, you don't see enough of it." Then he looks back at me. "Do you mind if I steal you for a moment? Just a quick question. I promise I won't ruin your night."

Rhett's hand brushes mine, very lightly, behind my back.

"Sure," I say.

Hale walks me a few steps away, toward the edge of the lawn where the light from the tent fades out. Down below us the harbor is black and still. Across the water, the yacht club glows on the point.

"I've been putting together the night of the summer party," he says. "Who was where. You understand. It's tedious work, but it has to be done." He sips his club soda. "Several people at the club remember you at the bar with Callum Sterling. That matches what Callum told me. Thank you for that."

"Okay."

"After the bar. Where did you go?"

"Home. Here." My voice is steady. I don't know how. "Callum's father drove us back."

"And Mr. Reyes?" He says it lightly, as if it's an afterthought. "Did you see him after the party?"

My heart stops.

"I don't know where Rhett went," I say.

"Mm." Hale nods slowly. "It's just that there's a camera at the marina fuel dock. It's not a good one. It mostly catches the pumps." He turns his glass in his fingers. "But it caught a black truck in the back lot that night, at a little after two in the morning. A big truck. The kind people in town recognize."

The tent is very loud behind me. The band is playing something fast now, and people are laughing.

The truck's too pretty. Everybody in town knows the truck.

"Lots of people have black trucks," I say.

"They do." Hale smiles, warm and tired. "That's what I said to myself too. I'm sure it's nothing. But I'd like to talk to Mr. Reyes about it, just to clear it up. Tomorrow, maybe." He finishes his club soda. "Would you tell him for me? He seems to listen to you."

"Why don't you tell him yourself? He's right there."

"I could." Hale looks back toward the tent, where Rhett is holding a plate he hasn't touched. "But I think it'll sound friendlier from you."

Before I can answer, he looks out at the black water below us.

"I took an old file home this week," he says, almost to himself. "Daisy Hollis. The girl from last summer." He turns his empty glass in his fingers. "There's a photo of her at a party just like this one. Green dress. Laughing at whoever was holding the camera." His tired eyes come back to my face and stay there. "You'd have liked her, I think."

My fingers go numb around the stem of my glass.

"I'm sure I would have," I say, and I smile, because he's watching me do it.

He touches my elbow, lightly, the way he touched my knuckles in the sunroom. Then he walks back up the lawn toward my mother and Richard, to say good night and thank them for having him.

I stand at the edge of the dark with the harbor below me and my heart pounding in my ears.

When I turn around, Callum is there.

He's standing just behind me in the shadow of the hedge, where the light from the tent doesn't reach. I don't know how long he's been there. His hands are in his pockets. His face is all hard planes in the dark.

"What did he say?" His voice is very quiet.

"He wants Rhett." It comes out in a whisper. "Tomorrow. There's a camera at the fuel dock. It caught a truck."

Something goes across his face, fast and cold, there and gone.

"What's he going to do?" I ask.

His lip curls. He looks at me the way he looked at me on the first night, as if I'm something that tracked mud into his house.

"Whatever he wants," he says. "And you're going to go back to your boyfriends, thief."

"Callum..."

"And act natural." He's already looking past me, up the lawn, toward Hale's gray suit moving through the crowd. "Smile. Drink your champagne. Half this town is watching you tonight, and so is he."

Then he walks past me, up the lawn and into the light, and leaves me standing in the dark.

I count to ten. I fix my face. Then I do exactly what he said.

Beau is at the edge of the dance floor, talking to two women in pearls. I walk straight up to him, slide my arm through his, and lean into his side as if I've done it a hundred times. He doesn't miss a beat. He pulls me close with his hand on my waist and dips his head toward mine, smiling, as if his girlfriend just came back from the bar and he missed her.

"Ladies," he says, "you'll have to excuse us. She promised me a dance."

He walks me onto the floor. The band is playing something slow again. He takes my hand, puts his other hand on the small of my back, and draws me in until my cheek is against his shoulder. He smells like bergamot. To everyone under the tent, we look like the happiest couple at the party.

"What happened?" he murmurs into my hair. His smile doesn't move.

I tip my face up as if he's said something sweet. Then I put my mouth against his ear.

"Hale wants Rhett," I whisper. "Tomorrow. The marina camera caught his truck."

His hand tightens on my back. Only that. His feet don't miss a step.

"Okay," he says softly. "Keep smiling, darling. You're doing beautifully."

"I'm going to throw up."

"Not on the suit. It's my favorite." He turns me slowly under the string lights. "Laugh for me."

I laugh. It sounds almost real.

Over his shoulder, I can see all of them. Rhett at the shrimp table, jaw tight, watching us. Silas at the edge of the tent with his glass of water, watching Hale. And Callum, standing with Richard and my mother, his hand in his pocket and his face perfectly polite.

He's the only one who isn't looking at me.

I'd know if he was.

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27

WREN

He knocks.

Three soft taps on the balcony glass, long after midnight. The door is locked. I locked it myself, hours ago, and then lay here staring at it.

I'm out of bed before the third tap. When I pull the curtain back, Silas is standing on the balcony in black, with the dark harbor behind him and his hands in his pockets. He doesn't come in. He waits.

I flip the latch and slide the door open a few inches.

"You knocked," I whisper.

"I said I would." He looks at me through the gap. "Can I come in?"

I let him in. He slides the door shut behind him and stands just inside it, in the strip of moonlight on the floor. The room fills up with the smell of rain and mint.

"Tell me," I say. "Tell me how bad it is."

He doesn't soften it. That's one of the things I'm starting to like about him.

"The marina has a camera on the fuel dock. It's old, and it's bad, and it's on a hard drive in the harbormaster's office." His voice is low and even. "I got into it an hour ago. The truck's in three frames. You can't read the plate. You can see the shape, and the rims, and the lift kit."

"Can you erase it?"

"I already did." He doesn't look pleased. "It doesn't fucking matter. Hale pulled a copy two days ago. It's on a county server I can't touch without someone noticing."

I sit down hard on the edge of the bed.

"So he has Rhett."

"He has a truck. That's not the same thing." Silas stays by the door. "A truck in a parking lot isn't a crime. Tomorrow Hale will ask Rhett where he was that night, after the party. Rhett will say home, in bed, alone. Hale will ask if anyone can say so." He pauses. "Nobody can."

"What about the others? Can't one of you say he was with you?"

"No." He says it flatly. "If one of us vouches for him, Hale starts looking at all of us. None of us give alibis for another one of us. Ever. That's the rule."

"That's a stupid fucking rule."

"It's kept us alive."

My hands are shaking in my lap. A camera, a truck, and a kind man in a gray suit who looked at me across a party and smiled.

"What happens to him?" I ask. "If nobody says anything?"

Silas doesn't answer for a long time.

"Probably nothing," he says finally. "Probably Hale lets him go. Probably."

"You don't sound sure."

"I'm never sure. I just know what usually happens."

I put my face in my hands. The room is quiet except for the harbor and my own breathing. I think about Rhett at the shrimp table tonight with his loose tie, telling me I was doing great. *You're standing here. You're breathing. That's all you have to do tonight.*

When I lift my head, Silas has moved. He's sitting in the reading chair in the corner now, the one Cracked sat in the night he came to check on me, with the moonlight across his knees. He's watching me with his dark, steady eyes.

"You should go to sleep," he says. "You won't. But you should."

"Will you stay?"

He goes still.

"Until I fall asleep," I say. "That's all. I don't want to be alone in here tonight."

"Okay," he says. Just that.

I lie down on top of the covers in my T-shirt and sleep shorts, on my side, facing him. He doesn't move from the chair. He just sits there in the dark with his hands on his knees and watches me. He's been watching me through a camera lens for weeks. Only now he's here. I know it, and he knows I know it.

I don't fall asleep.

Instead I lie there looking at him. Something warm and slow starts to move under my skin. It's the way he's sitting. Completely still, completely focused, as if there's nothing in the world but me on this bed. I think about him alone in some dark room, watching my door on a screen. Watching me walk past it and change in front of the mirror. Forty times, and counting.

The idea of it should make me furious. It did, a week ago.

It doesn't now. Now it makes me hot all over, and it makes my thighs press together on the bed.

Oh, Wren. You're in trouble.

"Silas," I say.

"Mm."

"Did you like it? Looking at me. All those times."

He doesn't answer.

The silence goes on and on. In the moonlight, I can see his jaw tighten. His hands have gone flat on his knees, fingers spread, the way they did the first night we talked. He's breathing a little faster than he was.

His silence is the answer.

I sit up on the bed. My heart is going so hard I can hear it. I look right at him.

Then I pull my T-shirt over my head.

The air is cool on my bare skin. I drop the shirt on the floor. My nipples go tight. I don't cross my arms. I sit there on the edge of the bed in nothing but my sleep shorts, with the moon on me, and I let him look.

He makes a sound. It's very small, barely a breath, as if it got out of him without permission.

"You can look now," I say. My voice comes out low and steady, steadier than I feel. "You don't need a camera. I'm right here."

"Wren." It's barely a whisper. "You don't have to..."

"I know I don't have to." I stand up. My legs are shaking, and I don't let them stop me. "I want you to watch me. I want you to see what you do to me."

I hook my thumbs in the waistband of my shorts and push them down my hips, slowly. Then I step out of them.

Now I'm standing in the middle of my bedroom completely naked, in the moonlight, and he's sitting in the chair three steps away, gripping the arms of it so hard I can see his knuckles go white. His eyes go over me the way I imagined they would. Slowly. Reading every line. My breasts, my stomach, my thighs, my face. They stop on my face.

"Tell me," I say. "Tell me if you liked it."

"Yes." It tears out of him. "God. Yes. Every time. I hated myself for it, and I didn't look away."

The heat that goes through me is so strong I sway on my feet.

I walk to him. I stand between his knees and look down at him in the chair. He looks up at me with his dark eyes huge and his lips parted. His hands are still white-knuckled on the arms of the chair. He hasn't reached for me. He won't. He's waiting to be told.

"Can I..." His voice cracks. "Please. Can I touch you?"

"Not yet."

His eyes close. His throat moves. "Please."

"Look at me."

He looks at me.

"You've been looking at me for weeks," I say softly. "Now you're going to wait. And you're going to be good for me while you do it. Can you do that?"

"Yes." A breath. "Yes, baby. Anything."

Baby. It goes through me like a match struck in the dark.

I climb into his lap.

The chair creaks under us. I straddle his thighs, my knees on either side of his hips on the old cushion, and settle my weight down onto him. He's hard through his jeans. I can feel all of it. He makes a sound low in his chest, broken and helpless. His hands come up off the arms of the chair and stop in the air an inch from my waist.

"Please," he whispers. "Please. Let me."

I take his wrists. I put his hands on my hips myself.

He shudders. His palms are cool from the night air, then warm, spreading across my bare skin as if he's holding something he's afraid of dropping. He doesn't move them. He just holds on.

"Good," I tell him. "That's good. Just like that."

He leans his forehead against my collarbone and breathes. I can feel him shaking.

"You smell like rain," I murmur into his hair. "Do you know that? Every time I come back into this room, I think it's going to storm."

"Wren." He says my name into my skin. "Wren Elise. Please. I need to touch you. I'll do anything."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

I take his face in my hands and lift it so he has to look at me.

"Kiss me," I say. "Slowly. Show me how much you want me."

He kisses me as if it's the only thing he's ever wanted to do. Slow and deep, careful and devastating, his mouth opening under mine. His hands slide up my back. When I rock my hips down against him, he gasps into my mouth and his whole body goes taut under me.

"You like that," I say against his lips. "Should I do it again?"

"*Yes*."

I do it again. Slower. He groans, low and wrecked. His fingers dig into my back.

"Touch me," I tell him. "Now."

His hand slides down between us, and he touches me like he's been thinking about it for weeks. Light at first, so light I almost don't feel it. Then firmer, slow circles over my clit, exactly the way I need. I gasp. My head falls back.

"There," he says. His voice is barely a breath. "Like that, baby? Is that right?"

"Yes. Don't stop."

"Never." He keeps doing it, exactly the same, steady and devoted. "You're so beautiful. You're so wet. I can't believe you're letting me."

"I'm not letting you." I look down at him, at his flushed face and his dark, desperate eyes. "I'm telling you."

He makes a sound like I've hit him, and he slides two fingers into me.

I ride his hand in the chair with the moonlight on both of us. He watches my face the whole time. Every time I make a sound, his breath catches. Every time I gasp, he does it again, a little better, as if he's memorizing me.

"You're close," he whispers. "I can see it. Your hands are shaking. Please let me watch you come. Please, baby."

I come on his fingers with my hands braced on his shoulders and my forehead pressed to his. It's slow and shattering. It goes through me in long, deep waves, and he holds me through every one, murmuring into my hair.

"Wren. Oh, baby, there you are. You're so beautiful. I'm never going to forget this. Never."

When I can breathe again, he's looking at me as if I've given him something he doesn't know how to hold.

"Condom," I manage.

"Back pocket."

"You planned this."

"No." He swallows. "I hoped. Every time I came here. I hoped."

I climb off him long enough to get his jeans open. He lifts his hips to help. His hands are shaking so hard he can't get the condom open, so I take it from him and do it myself. When I roll it onto him, he lets his head fall back against the chair and makes a sound so raw that the hair on my arms stands up.

"Look at me," I tell him. "You don't close your eyes. You watch."

He opens his eyes. They're almost black.

I climb back into his lap and take him in my hand. Then I sink down onto him slowly, an inch at a time. I watch every flicker in his face as I do it. He doesn't move. He doesn't push. He grips my hips and lets me take him, his chest heaving, his jaw clenched so tight I can see the muscle jump. When I'm all the way down, full of him, we both stop breathing at the same time.

"Wren," he breathes. "Oh God. Baby."

"Don't move."

"I'm not. I can't." He laughs, helpless and shaky. "I'm going to die."

"Not yet," I tell him. "You're going to be good for me first."

Then I start to move. Slowly, in the old reading chair, I ride him with the springs creaking under us and the moon on the floor. My hands are on his shoulders. His are on my hips, holding on, guiding nothing. He watches me as if I'm the only thing in the world. Every time I roll my hips, he gasps. Every time I lift up and sink back down, he says my name.

"Please," he whispers. "Please, faster. Please, baby, I need..."

"Ask nicely."

"Please." His voice cracks. "Please, Wren. Please let me feel you."

So I give it to him. I ride him harder, faster, my thighs burning, the chair rocking under us so hard it thumps against the wall. He clutches me against him. His mouth finds my breast, hot and desperate. I cry out, too loud, and slap my own hand over my mouth.

He pulls my hand away.

"No," he says. It's the only thing he's said all night that isn't begging. "Let me hear you. Please. I've only ever heard you through a speaker."

That undoes me.

I come so hard I lose the room, clenching around him, crying his name into the dark. He follows me a second later. His arms lock around my back, holding me down onto him, his face pressed into my neck, my name breaking against my skin over and over. *Wren. Wren. Baby. Wren.*

For a long time, neither of us moves.

I'm slumped against him in the chair with my cheek on his shoulder. He's still inside me. His hands move slowly up and down my bare back, counting the bones of my spine, I think. Of course he's counting them.

"Silas," I murmur.

"Mm."

"That was very good."

He laughs, a soft, astonished breath. "I know."

"You begged."

"I know." He doesn't sound ashamed. He sounds amazed. "You liked it."

I don't answer. He doesn't need me to.

After a while he carries me to the bed as if I weigh nothing. He lays me down and lies down beside me in the dark. He doesn't leave. He pulls the sheet up over both of us and puts his arm around me. I put my head on his chest and listen to his heart slow down.

"Silas."

"Yes."

"Tomorrow. When Hale asks Rhett if anyone can say where he was that night."

His heartbeat jumps under my cheek.

"Wren," he says. "Don't."

"None of you give alibis for each other. That's your rule." I stare into the dark. "I'm not one of you."

He doesn't say anything for a long time. His hand has stopped moving on my back.

"The boss will kill you," he says finally.

"The boss can try."

He turns his head and presses his mouth to my hair. He holds it there.

I don't sleep. I lie in the dark with his heart under my ear and watch the moon move across the floor. I think about a kind man in a gray suit. A black truck in a parking lot. Four words I'm going to have to say out loud tomorrow, in a room with a painted fish on the wall.

He was with me.

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WREN

"He's been in there since before the sun was all the way up," Beau says, the second I answer. "Hale picked him up at the gym. In front of the kids, Wren. In front of the six a.m. class."

Oh, fuck.

I'm already out of bed. Silas is gone. The sheet beside me is cool, and the camera is a small dark eye over the door, pointed at the balcony the way I told him. Sunlight is pouring through the curtains. I slept after all, at the very end, and I hate myself for it.

"Is he under arrest?"

"No. He went voluntarily. That's what Hale called it." Beau's voice is tight, polished and fake, the one he uses when he's terrified. "My father's lawyer is on his way from Boston. Callum says nobody moves. Callum says he's handling it."

"Where are you?"

"In the parking lot. Looking at a painted fish." A breath. "Wren. What are you doing?"

I'm pulling on jeans with the phone wedged against my shoulder. "I'm coming."

"Don't."

"I'm coming, Beau."

I hang up on him.

My mother is in the front hall when I come flying down the stairs with my keys in my hand and my hair still wet. She's in her robe with a coffee, reading the cards from last night's party, smiling at something someone wrote. The smile goes away when she sees my face.

"Baby? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I have to go somewhere."

"Wren." She puts the coffee down. "You're white as a sheet. Your hands are shaking. Where are you going?"

"The police station."

She stares at me. Then she picks up her car keys off the hall table.

"I'm driving," she says.

"Mom, no..."

"I'm your mother, and you're shaking too hard to hold a steering wheel." She's already reaching for her sandals. "I'm driving. You can tell me why on the way, or you can not tell me. But I'm driving."

I look at her. At her robe, her bare face, the fierce set of her mouth. I haven't seen that look since I was a kid, the day she marched into my school because a teacher called me a liar.

"Okay," I say.

She drives faster than I've ever seen her drive, down the hill and through the town. Her hands are at ten and two, and her jaw is tight. She doesn't ask me anything. I can feel her wanting to. I stare out the window at the harbor going by, bright, blue and ordinary. Breathing takes all my concentration.

He was with me. He was with me. He was with me.

The station looks exactly the same. White clapboard, window boxes, the library next door. Beau's black Bentley is parked across two spaces beside a police cruiser. Beau is leaning against it in a navy suit with his arms folded, looking at the door as if he can burn through it. When he sees my mother's car pull in, his face goes through about four expressions in a second. Then he arranges it into something polite.

"Mrs. Sterling," he says, opening her door for her.

"Beau, honey." My mother looks from him to me. "Is someone going to tell me what's going on?"

"Rhett's inside," I say. "They're asking him about the night of the party."

"Rhett? Rhett *Reyes*?" She looks genuinely bewildered. "But he's a sweetheart. He coaches children."

"I know, Mom."

I walk past both of them, up the steps and through the door.

The lobby smells like burnt coffee and carpet cleaner. The painted blue fish is still leaping out of its painted wave behind the front desk. The woman in the cardigan looks up at me over her reading glasses.

"Can I help you, hon?"

"I need to talk to Detective Hale," I say. "Now. Please. It's about Rhett Reyes."

She looks at me for a long moment. Then she picks up her phone.

Behind me, I hear the door open again. My mother and Beau come in together, close behind me. My mother puts her hand on my back, light, just there. I don't shake it off.

Hale comes out of the back hallway about a minute later. He's in shirtsleeves today, with his reading glasses pushed up on his head. He looks tired and kind, and a little surprised to see me.

"Wren," he says. "And Mrs. Sterling. Good morning." He looks at Beau. "Mr. Whitmore."

"Detective," Beau says, very pleasantly.

"What can I do for you?" Hale asks me.

My heart is slamming so hard I can feel it in my throat. Everyone in the lobby is looking at me. The woman at the desk. Beau. My mother, with her hand still on my back.

Say it. Just say it.

I think about Rhett in the back of a room I've never seen, in his gym clothes, with nobody on his side of the table. I think about him crouched in front of me at the gym, winding the wrap around my hand and checking my face every time to make sure it isn't too tight. Him at the shrimp table last night, telling me I was doing great when I wasn't. Every time this town has tried to swallow me whole, he's been standing next to me, loud, warm and grinning, as if it's the easiest thing in the world.

My chest aches with it. I'm not going to let him sit in that room alone.

"You asked me last night if I saw Rhett after the party," I say. "I lied to you. I'm sorry. I was embarrassed. My mother was right there across the lawn."

Hale's eyebrows go up, very slightly. He waits.

"He was with me." My voice doesn't shake. I don't know how. "After the party. Richard drove me home, and Rhett came over after. He came up the back stairs, and he stayed. He was in my bed. All night."

It's a lie. It doesn't feel like one. My face is burning, and my eyes are hot, and every word of it comes out sounding like the truest thing I've ever said. Because he would have. If I'd asked him, he'd have climbed those stairs in the dark and stayed until morning. I know that the way I know my own name.

Behind me, my mother makes a small sound.

The lobby is completely silent. The woman at the desk has stopped typing. Somewhere in the back, a phone rings and rings. Nobody answers it.

Hale's eyes move past me. They land on Beau, standing at my shoulder in his navy suit, and stay there for a long moment. Then they come back to me.

"Forgive me," he says mildly. "Last night I watched you dance with Mr. Whitmore. So did half the town." He tilts his head. "Reyes was in your bed all night. And you and Mr. Whitmore are... dating?"

My face goes from hot to scalding.

"It's complicated," I say.

"Is it a bad time," Beau says, very quietly, to no one, "to say that was hot?" His voice is shaking. It's the only way he knows how to stand there.

My mother turns her head and looks at him.

"It's a bad time," Beau agrees immediately. "I'll be quiet now."

Hale doesn't look at Beau. He's looking at me. His tired gold-brown eyes are steady on my face, and for a long moment he doesn't say anything at all. Then he takes his glasses off his head and folds them slowly into his shirt pocket.

"All night," he says.

"All night."

"And his truck? At the marina, at two in the morning?"

"He left it there. He'd been drinking, so he walked up the hill." I hold his gaze. "He's not stupid. He just didn't want to drive."

It's thin. I know it's thin. But it's the kind of thin that's true about a hundred nights at a hundred bars, and Hale has been in enough of them to know it.

He looks at me for a long, long time.

"You understand I have to write this down," he says.

"Write it down."

"Your name goes on it."

"I know."

Something moves in his face. It isn't anger. It's almost sad. He glances past me at my mother, standing there in her robe with her hand on my back, and then back at me.

"I've been doing this a long time, Wren," he says quietly. "I've seen a lot of girls tell a lot of stories to protect a lot of men. It doesn't usually go the way they hope." He holds my eyes. "I'd hate to see that happen to you. I'd really hate it."

The cold goes all the way down my spine.

"Can I ask you something, Detective?" My voice is steadier than I am. "Why do you care so much about Rhett Reyes? He's a boxing coach."

"I care about everyone in this town." Hale smiles, tired and kind. "I care about people who end up on the rocks. I've seen it happen twice now, on the same stretch of shore. I'd like very much not to see it a third time." He holds my eyes. "Especially not you."

"It's not a story," I say.

"Okay." He nods slowly. "Okay. Then I'll go and tell Mr. Reyes he's free to go."

He goes back down the hall. The door swings shut behind him.

My knees almost give out. My mother's hand tightens on my back, holding me up. Beau is suddenly on my other side with his hand under my elbow. Between the two of them, I stay standing.

Rhett comes out five minutes later.

He's in his gym clothes, a gray T-shirt and black shorts, with his hands still taped from warming up for the class he never got to teach. His face is gray under the tan. When he walks into the lobby and sees me standing there between Beau and my mother, he stops dead.

He doesn't grin. He doesn't say anything at all.

The loudest man I've ever met walks across the lobby without a single word, past the painted fish and the woman in the cardigan. He walks right up to me. He looks at me for a long moment with an expression I've never seen on his face, raw, frightened and furious all at once.

Then he takes my face in both of his taped hands.

"Wren," he says.

Not *champ*. Just my name, very quietly.

I put my hands over his.

"Let's go home," I say.

My mother drives me home. Beau takes Rhett. Nobody says much in the lobby, or on the steps. In the parking lot, Beau turns to my mother with his hand over his heart.

"Mrs. Sterling, I want to apologize for the comment in there. It was badly timed. It was badly everything."

"Beau Whitmore," my mother says, "if you say one more word, I'm calling your mother."

He closes his mouth so fast his teeth click. In spite of everything, I almost laugh. Rhett stands by Beau's car with his taped hands hanging at his sides. He watches me get into my mother's car as if I'm leaving for a war.

My mother pulls out onto the road. She drives slowly this time. Her hands are steady on the wheel. She doesn't look at me.

"Rhett Reyes," she says finally.

"Mom..."

"I'm not angry." She says it carefully, as if she's testing the words. "I want you to know that first. I'm not angry. I'm not... I don't care who you're seeing, baby. You're a grown woman. That's your business."

I stare at my hands in my lap.

"But a policeman just wrote your name down," she says. "In a murder case. Because you said a man was in your bed." Her voice wobbles, just slightly. "And I watched your face when you said it, and I'm your mother, Wren. I've known your face your whole life."

My throat closes.

"Was he?" she asks softly. "In your bed. That night."

I look out the window. The harbor is going by, bright and ordinary. Somewhere out on that water, a year ago, my sister went into the dark. My mother has never said her name to me. Not one time.

"Mom," I say. "Please don't ask me that."

She's quiet for a long time. The car climbs the hill. The white house appears through the trees.

"Okay," she says. "Okay. I won't ask." She pulls into the drive and turns off the engine. Then she turns in her seat and takes my face in her hands, the way she did the day I got here, the way Rhett did in the lobby. Her eyes are wet. "But whatever this is, whatever you're in, I'm your mother. I'm on your side. Do you hear me? I'm always on your side."

I nod. I can't speak.

She kisses my forehead and gets out of the car. I follow her up the front steps on legs that don't feel like mine.

Callum is in the front hall.

He's standing at the bottom of the staircase that can't make up its mind, in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled, his hands in his pockets. He looks as if he's been standing there for a long time. My mother sees him and stops. She looks from him to me. Then she goes upstairs without a word, and I hear her bedroom door close.

Callum doesn't move.

"What did you do?" His voice is very quiet.

"You know what I did."

"Say it."

"I told the truth." I lift my chin. "Rhett was with me. All night. In my bed."

He laughs. It's short and ugly, and there's nothing in it.

"The truth." He takes his hands out of his pockets. "Last night you were hanging off Whitmore in front of the whole town, letting him paw at you on the dance floor. This morning you tell a cop you had Reyes in your bed." His eyes go over me, slow and contemptuous, from my wet hair to my bare feet in my sandals. "So which is it, thief? Or is it both? What are you, fucking them both?"

The words hit me like cold water.

"That's none of your business."

"It's my business when it's in a police file with my father's address on it." He takes a step toward me. "Do you know what Hale wrote down this morning? He didn't write down an alibi. He wrote down a bartender who'll spread her legs for anyone with a last name and lie for whichever one's in trouble. That's what you are to him now. That's what you are to this whole town by lunch."

My eyes sting. I hate them for it.

"You put your name in a police file," he says. "For him. For a boy who couldn't remember to move his own truck."

"Better mine than his."

"You don't know what you've done. He's going to look at you now, Wren. Every day. Every time you walk into the club, every time you buy a coffee in town. You're on his list. And when he gets tired of looking, he'll start asking your mother questions instead."

My throat closes so hard I can't swallow, and for one awful second I think I'm going to cry in front of him. I'd rather die.

"Let him look." My voice comes out raw. I hold his eyes anyway. "I've been looked at by worse men than Marcus Hale. I've been looked at by you."

That lands. It goes across his face like a slap.

"You don't know what you've done," he says again, quieter.

"I know exactly what I've done." My voice cracks, and I don't care. "Everybody kept saying wait. Everybody stood around being careful while he sat in a room with a painted fish on the wall. So I did it. Someone had to."

He stares at me. For a long moment the hall is so quiet I can hear the clock ticking in the living room.

"Go upstairs," he says finally.

"No."

"Wren."

"*No.*" I step closer to him, right up to him, so close I have to tip my head back to hold his eyes. "You don't get to send me upstairs. Not today. Not ever again."

He doesn't move. Up close, his eyes are gray and furious. Under the fury there's something else. Something that looks almost like fear. Almost like pride.

He looks at me for a long, long moment.

Then he turns and walks away down the hall. The terrace door bangs shut behind him.

I stand there shaking at the bottom of the stairs.

"That," says a voice from the kitchen doorway, "was the bravest stupid thing I've ever seen a girl do in this house."

Marisol is standing there with a dish towel over her shoulder. I don't know how long she's been listening. She looks at me over her glasses for a long moment.

"Did you hear all of that?"

"I hear everything. I clean this house." She comes across the hall and puts her hand flat on my cheek, warm and dry, the way she did before the storm. "You come in the kitchen. I'll make you eggs. You can't be brave on an empty stomach."

"I'm not hungry."

"I didn't ask if you were hungry." She steers me toward the kitchen with her hand on my back. "Eggs. Then you cry. Then you go do whatever stupid thing comes next."

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

Talks Too Much:

you lied to a cop for me.

I stare at it.

i did

The dots come up. They go away. They come back. They go away again.

i don't know what to say. i've never not known what to say.

My eyes sting. I sit down on the bottom step of the staircase and hold the phone against my chest.

It buzzes again.

boston. tonight. beau's driving. you're getting dressed up, you're dancing, and you're not allowed to say no.

Then one more.

please

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WREN

"You're not allowed to think about Hale tonight," Beau says. "That's the only rule. Rhett made it. I seconded it. It passed unanimously."

"I didn't get a vote," I say.

"You were outvoted in advance." He glances at me from the driver's seat and smiles, the real one. "You look incredible, by the way. I'm going to crash the car."

"Please don't crash the car."

"I'll try very hard."

We're on the highway heading north with the windows down and the city coming up ahead of us in a long glittering line. I'm in the front seat of Beau's Bentley in a black dress I bought this afternoon with a little of Callum's twenty thousand dollars, which felt like the best revenge I've ever had. It's short and tight, with almost no back. When I came down the stairs in it, Marisol looked at me over her glasses and said, "Good. Make them suffer."

Rhett is in the back seat with his arms spread along the top of it, in a black shirt open at the throat. He hasn't stopped looking at me since I got in the car.

"She's thinking about Hale," he says. "Look at her face."

"I'm not thinking about Hale."

"You're thinking about Hale. You get a little line right here." He leans forward and touches the spot between my eyebrows with one finger. "Stop it. That's an order."

"You don't get to give me orders."

"Tonight I do." He sits back, grinning. "You lied to a cop for me. I owe you the best night of your life. I'm very serious about paying my debts."

I turn around in my seat to look at him. In the passing lights, his face is gold and shadow, and the grin is real. But there's something under it that's been there since the lobby.

"Rhett," I say. "Are you okay?"

The grin falters, just for a second.

"I'm good," he says. "I'm better than good. I'm in a car with the two best people I know, on my way to get drunk and dance badly." He reaches forward and squeezes my shoulder. "Ask me tomorrow. Tonight I'm good."

I look at him a moment longer. Then I let it go.

I've had something sitting in my mouth since the parking lot, and it has to come out before we get there.

"I have to tell you both something," I say.

Beau glances at me. In the back seat, Rhett goes still.

"Silas came over after the party," I say. My face is already burning. "And we..."

I don't finish. I don't have to.

There's a pause. Then Rhett bursts out laughing, and a second later Beau does too, so hard he has to grip the wheel.

"What?" I demand. "What's funny?"

"We know," Rhett says, wiping his eyes. "We know."

"How could you possibly know?"

"He showed up in the station parking lot this morning," Beau says, still laughing, "with coffee for me and the woman at the front desk. Silas has never bought anyone a coffee in his life. He doesn't believe in it. He thinks it's a scam."

"Beau says he was humming," Rhett adds. "Silas. Humming. I'd have thought he was having a stroke."

I put my face in my hands. "Oh my God."

"Hey." Beau reaches over and pulls one of my hands away from my face, gently, and holds it on the gearshift under his. "Wren. Look at me."

I look at him.

"I told you in the kitchen I wouldn't mind," he says. "I meant it then, and I mean it now." He lifts my hand and kisses my knuckles without taking his eyes off the road. "I'm glad it was him. I'm glad it was good. I'm glad you told us anyway. That was a kind thing to do."

"It was the right thing to do," I say.

"It was kind," he says again, softly. "You're kind. You don't give yourself enough credit for it."

Rhett leans forward between the seats and presses a kiss to the side of my neck, just under my ear, warm and quick. "I'm very proud of him, just so you know," he murmurs. "It's about time someone got that man to hum."

I laugh, shaky. My face is still on fire. But something in my chest has come loose, something I didn't know was knotted up until right now.

I look out at the city getting closer, all those lights. I think about the back seat of an SUV outside a white house on Shore Road, and a mirror mask in the corner of my bedroom, and Rhett's hands on my back while Beau watched.

What would it be like? All of them at once?

The thought goes through me like a shiver. I press my thighs together on the leather seat.

Beau, who notices everything, glances over at me. He smiles, slow and knowing, and doesn't say a word.

The club is in a converted warehouse down by the water, all brick and steel and a line around the block that Beau walks straight past with a nod to the man at the door. Inside, it's dark and loud and hot. The bass comes up through the floor and into my feet. Blue and purple lights sweep across a sea of people. Everything smells like sweat and sugar and spilled vodka. The air is so thick with music that I can feel it on my skin.

I haven't been anywhere like this since Philly. I haven't been anywhere like this since before Daisy.

Rhett gets us drinks. I let myself have two. Just enough that everything goes soft and bright at the edges. The knot in my stomach finally lets go. Then Beau takes my hand and pulls me out onto the dance floor. I stop thinking about anything at all.

So I dance with both of them.

Nobody warned me it would be like this. Beau dances the way he sails, easy and sure, his hands light on my hips, moving me with the music as if he's known the steps forever. Rhett dances like a fighter, loose and

grounded, all power in the hips, close enough that I can feel the heat coming off him. One of them is in front of me and the other behind, with the bass pounding through all three of us.

Beau pulls me close by the waist. I put my arms around his neck. Behind me, Rhett's hands settle on my hips, and he moves with me, slow, his chest against my bare back. I can feel him getting hard against me. I can feel Beau getting hard against my stomach. The lights sweep over us, blue, purple, white. Nobody in the whole crowded room is looking at us. It feels like everyone is.

"You okay?" Rhett says into my ear, over the music.

"I'm perfect."

"You're perfect," Beau agrees, and kisses me.

He kisses me in the middle of the dance floor in front of hundreds of strangers, slow and deep. Behind me, Rhett's mouth finds the side of my neck. His hands slide up my ribs. I'm caught between them, rocking to the bass, with Beau's tongue in my mouth and Rhett's teeth on my throat. My knees are going. The two of them are the only thing holding me up.

Breathless, I pull back from Beau.

"I need to go," I say. "Now. Somewhere. Please."

They look at each other over my head. Something passes between them, quick and silent, a whole conversation in a glance.

"Car," Rhett says.

Rhett drives.

He's had one beer all night, nursed for hours, and he takes Beau's keys without being asked. Beau and I end up in the back seat. The city is going by outside in streaks of gold. The second the doors shut, Beau pulls me into his lap.

"Hi," he breathes against my mouth.

"Hi."

"You were driving me out of my mind on that dance floor. Do you know that?"

"I know."

He kisses me hard and deep, his hands sliding up the bare skin of my back. I'm straddling him on the wide leather back seat, my dress rucked up around my thighs, and I can feel exactly how hard he is through his pants. I grind down against him without meaning to. He groans into my mouth.

Then his lips move to my ear.

"Look," he whispers. "Rhett's watching."

I lift my head. In the rearview mirror, Rhett's eyes are on us.

They're dark, hot and steady, there for one long second before they go back to the road. His knuckles are white on the wheel. His jaw is tight. He doesn't say anything at all.

"Do you like that?" Beau murmurs. His mouth is on my throat. "Knowing he can see you?"

The heat that goes through me is so strong I have to grab Beau's shoulders.

"Yes," I gasp.

"Yeah?" His hand slides up under my dress, along the inside of my thigh. "Imagine the others too. Silas in the corner, watching you the way he does. The boss by the door." His fingers brush the edge of my underwear. "Imagine all of us. Watching you. Wanting you."

I gasp again. Louder.

In the front seat, Rhett makes a sound low in his throat.

"Hotel," he says roughly. "Almost there. Don't make me pull over."

"Would you?" Beau asks, very innocently.

"Don't test me, Whitmore."

The hotel is old and grand, with a doorman and a lobby full of marble and gold. Beau's family has kept a suite on the top floor since before he was born. Beau gets the key from the front desk with a smile and a first name. Then we're in an elevator lined with mirrors. Rhett presses me against the brass rail with his mouth on mine. Beau is behind me with his hands on my hips, and the floors are ticking by too slowly.

The suite is enormous. There are tall windows with the whole city glittering outside. The bed is the size of my old apartment, and the lamps are already on low. Beau shuts the door behind us and locks it.

Then all three of us stop.

It's suddenly very quiet. The music from the club is still ringing in my ears. My heart is pounding. Rhett is standing in front of me, flushed, his shirt half unbuttoned. Beau is behind me, close enough that I can feel his breath on my bare shoulder.

"Hey," Rhett says softly. "Look at me."

I look at him.

"Are you drunk?" he asks. "Be honest. Because if you are, we're ordering room service, and the three of us are going to sleep in that bed like

a litter of puppies and nothing else."

"I'm not drunk." It's true. The buzz has burned off somewhere between the dance floor and the elevator. All that's left is warmth, want and a heart going too fast. "I had two drinks hours ago. I know exactly what I want."

"Then say it," Rhett says. "Out loud. So we both hear it."

I look at him. Then I turn my head and look at Beau, at his golden hair, his serious blue eyes.

"Both of you," I say. "Tonight. I want both of you."

Beau lets out a long, slow breath against my shoulder. Rhett closes his eyes, just for a second.

"Same rules," Rhett says. "Hair yes. Throat never. You say the word, and everything stops. Both of us. Instantly."

"Whitlock," I say.

"Whitlock," Beau repeats. He kisses the back of my neck. "And if you can't speak?"

"I tap twice. On whoever's closest."

"Good girl," Beau murmurs.

Rhett grins, slow and wrecked. "Okay. Let's take you apart."

They undress me together.

Beau finds the zip at the back of the dress and draws it down slowly, his knuckles grazing my spine. Rhett slides the straps off my shoulders. The dress falls to the floor. They both look at me, standing between them in the lamplight in nothing but my underwear and heels. Neither of them says anything for a long moment.

"Holy shit," Rhett says finally.

"I was going to say something more elegant," Beau says. "But yes. Holy shit."

I laugh, and the laugh turns into a gasp when Rhett drops to his knees in front of me.

He hooks his thumbs in my underwear and pulls them down my legs. Behind me, Beau's hands come around to cup my breasts, his thumbs dragging across my nipples, his mouth on the side of my neck. Then Rhett's mouth is on me, hot and greedy, his hands gripping the backs of my thighs. My knees go out from under me.

Beau catches me. He holds me up against his chest with one arm around my waist. On his knees on the hotel carpet, Rhett eats me loud, wet and filthy, groaning against me as if he can't get enough.

"Oh my God," I gasp. "Oh my God, Rhett."

"That's it," Rhett says against me. "Louder."

"Look how good you look," Beau murmurs in my ear. "You're shaking already."

"I can't... I'm going to fall..."

"I've got you. I'm not letting you fall." His fingers pinch my nipple, gently, and I cry out. "Come for him. Let him have it. Then you're mine."

Rhett sucks my clit into his mouth and slides two fingers into me. I come so hard I scream. Beau holds me up through all of it, his arm locked around my waist, murmuring in my ear the whole time. Rhett doesn't let up until I'm sobbing, shaking and pushing at his head.

They carry me to the bed.

I'm the only one naked. That isn't fair. I get my hands on Rhett's shirt and finish the buttons that came undone in the elevator. He shrugs it off. I put my mouth on his chest, right over his heart, which is going like a drum. Behind me, Beau undresses slowly, the way he does everything, folding his shirt over the back of a chair as if we have all night. Then he's on the bed with us, warm skin all along my back.

After that it's hot, filthy and full of laughing. Rhett kisses me while Beau's mouth moves down my body.

"Look at fucking you," Rhett says against my lips, loud and delighted. "Letting us. You know how long I've wanted this? Since you came up out of that pool calling me rude."

"You were rude."

"I was right. That was a terrible dive." He bites my lower lip. "Best terrible dive I ever saw."

Beau is on his back on the huge white bed, pulling me over him. The two of them trade lines over my head as if they've been doing it all their lives.

"Condom," Beau says, holding his hand out without looking.

"Here." Rhett slaps one into his palm. "You owe me."

"I owe you nothing. I paid for the suite."

"Your grandfather paid for the suite."

"Then you owe my grandfather."

I'm laughing so hard I can barely breathe. Then Beau rolls the condom on and pulls me down onto him. I stop laughing.

He fills me slowly, his hands on my hips, his blue eyes locked on my face. I sink all the way down and we both groan. Behind me, I feel the bed dip. Rhett kneels behind me and presses his chest to my back, his mouth on my shoulder, his hands sliding around to my breasts.

"Ride him," Rhett says in my ear. "Slow. Let him feel it."

I ride Beau slowly, rocking my hips, with Rhett's hands on me and Rhett's voice in my ear. Under me, Beau's head falls back on the pillow. His hands grip my thighs.

"God, Wren. You're taking me so well." His eyes go past me, to Rhett, over my shoulder. "Look at her. Look at her face."

"I'm looking." Rhett's hand slides down my stomach to my clit. "I've been looking all night. She's unreal."

"Talk to me," I gasp. "Both of you. Don't stop talking."

"Never," they say, at the same time.

Rhett circles my clit with his fingers in time with my hips. Beau thrusts up to meet me. I'm caught between them, held, filled and touched everywhere at once, with Rhett's chest hot against my back and Beau's hands on my thighs. It builds so fast it frightens me. My whole body goes tight.

"There she goes," Rhett murmurs. "Feel that, Whitmore? She's right there."

"I feel it." Beau's voice cracks. "Come on, Wren. Come on me. Let us see."

I come apart between them. It tears through me, and I hear myself cry out both their names, one after the other, as if I can't decide. Beau follows me with a long, wrecked groan, his fingers bruising my thighs. Rhett holds me up through it, kissing my neck, telling me how good I am, how beautiful, how he's never seen anything like it.

When I can see again, I'm slumped forward on Beau's chest, gasping. Rhett's hand is moving slowly up and down my back.

"You okay?" Rhett asks softly.

"More than okay." I turn my head and look at him over my shoulder. He's flushed, hard and wild-eyed. He hasn't come yet. "Your turn."

His eyes go dark.

"Are you sure? You can stop. You've been amazing. You don't have to..."

"Rhett." I hold his eyes. "I want you. Right now."

Beau eases out from under me and kisses my temple. "I'll be over here," he says. "Watching. Being extremely supportive."

Rhett takes me from behind, on my knees on the huge white bed, with the whole city glittering in the windows in front of me. He's slow at first, careful, his hands on my hips, asking me over and over if it's okay. Then I tell him to stop asking, and he stops asking.

He fucks me hard and deep, loud and grinning.

"Feel that?" he says. "That's how deep I am. Look at the window, champ. Look at what I'm doing to you." His hips snap forward, and I cry out. "I thought about this in the station. Sitting in that room. I thought about you, just like this, so I wouldn't lose my mind."

"Don't stop."

"Never. Louder. I want the whole city to hear you."

Suddenly, Beau is beside me on the pillows. He kisses me while Rhett fucks me, pushes my hair back from my face, strokes my back and tells me I'm doing so well. I believe him.

"Look at the window," Beau murmurs. "Look at yourself."

I look. In the dark glass, over the lights of the city, I can see us. Me on my knees. Rhett behind me, his hands on my hips, his head thrown back. Beau beside me, his hand in my hair.

It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

I come again, so hard my arms give out. Beau catches me and holds me while Rhett follows, pressing his forehead to my spine, my name breaking out of him.

Later, much later, I'm lying between them in the enormous bed with the lights off and the city still glittering outside. Beau is on my left with his arm across my waist, already half asleep. Rhett is on my right with his face in my hair. Nobody's said anything for a long time.

"Rhett," I whisper.

"Mm."

"Are you okay now? Really?"

He's quiet for a long moment.

"I sat in that room all morning," he says, very low, into my hair. "Hale kept asking me where I was. I kept saying alone. And I kept thinking, that's it. That's the one time in my life it matters that someone would say I was with them, and there's nobody. There's never been anybody." His arm tightens around me. "Then Hale came in and told me my alibi had showed

up. I didn't even know what he meant. I walked out, and you were standing there in the lobby with your mom in her bathrobe."

My eyes sting in the dark.

"I'm okay now," he says. "Really. You did that."

I turn my face into his chest and hold on.

On my other side, Beau makes a small, sleepy sound and pulls me closer.

In the morning, while they're still asleep, I pick up my phone from the nightstand. There are messages in the group chat from hours ago.

Beau:

Status update. She's happy. We're happy. Everyone's happy.

Rhett:

very happy

Beau:

Extremely happy.

Under that, from the number with no name, sent sometime around dawn.

Silas:

Good.

I smile at the screen.

"Stop smiling at your phone," Rhett mumbles into the pillow without opening his eyes. "It's creepy. Come back to sleep."

"In a minute."

Then I open a new message, just to the number with no name. Silas is the one who'll tell him.

My thumbs hover over the keyboard. My heart starts to pound.

Then I type it, and send it before I can lose my nerve.

tell him next time i want him there. i want him to watch.

I put the phone down on the nightstand and lie back between the two of them in the gray morning light. Then I wait.

It buzzes a long time later. Long enough that I've almost fallen back asleep.

He said yes.

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WREN

He said yes.

Three words on a screen, and for days they're all I can think about.

They're there in the shower, and at breakfast, across the table from Callum, who hasn't said a word to me since the front hall. He reads the paper. He passes my mother the cream.

They're there at night, alone in my bed with my hand between my legs, picturing a white mask in the corner of this room. Watching. Not touching. Just watching me, and wanting.

And under all of it, every hour of every day, there's Hale.

One afternoon I'm lying on my stomach on a lounger by the pool with a book I haven't turned a page of in an hour. Rhett is doing laps, slow and lazy. Beau is under the umbrella in a pair of sunglasses that cost more than my car. Silas is on the end lounger in the shade, in black, with his eyes shut. He might be asleep. He's never asleep.

"So," Beau says. "I had lunch with my father's lawyer."

I put the book down. "And?"

"And he asked me to pass something along, in the nicest possible way." He takes his sunglasses off and folds them. "Lying to a police officer in a murder investigation is a crime in this state. A real one. With a courtroom."

"I know that."

"He wanted to make sure." Beau isn't smiling. "If Hale ever finds a hole in your story, he doesn't need Rhett anymore. He has you."

Water slaps the tiles. Rhett hauls himself out of the pool and sits on the edge with his feet in the water, dripping, his shoulders tight.

"There's no hole," he says.

"There's a hole the size of the harbor." Beau says it gently. "Nobody saw you walk up that hill. Nobody saw you on the back stairs. It's her word and the dark." He hesitates. "And Hale's car was outside the club again last night. Teddy says he sat at the bar all night and didn't order anything. Just watched the door."

"Watched it for what?"

On the end lounger, Silas opens his eyes and looks at me.

Oh.

The sun is hot on my back, and I'm cold all over. Rhett gets up, crosses the patio and sits down on the end of my lounger, dripping on my calves. He doesn't care who's watching from the house.

"Hey. Look at me." He waits until I do. "If this goes bad, it lands on me first. I'll tell him I lied. I'll tell him you covered for me because..."

"Because what? Because I'm some dumb girl in love with a boxer?"

He goes red to the ears. "Something like that."

"Don't you dare."

"Hey. Listen..."

"Don't you *dare*, Rhett." My voice cracks, and I hate it. "I didn't do it so you could throw it away the first time it gets scary."

He searches my face. Then he nods and squeezes my ankle.

I look past him at the other two. "What did he say? About the station."

Nobody pretends not to know who I mean. Beau suddenly finds his sunglasses very interesting.

"He said a lot," Rhett says finally.

"Most of it was swearing," Beau adds.

"He said you broke the rule," Silas says.

"It's not my rule. I'm not one of you."

"He said that too." Silas closes his eyes again. "And then he said yes anyway."

"Why?"

"Ask him yourself." A pause. "Tonight."

So now it's after midnight, and the house is asleep. I'm sitting cross-legged in the middle of my bed in a black slip, with my heart going so hard I can see it in the strap over my collarbone. I unlocked the balcony door myself an hour ago. The lamp is on low. My mother and Richard are asleep at the far end of the west wing, past the stairs. I've checked more than once.

They come in one after another, quiet as cats.

Rhett first, over the rail, grinning when he sees me. Beau after him, in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled, smoothing his hair as if he's arriving at a dinner party. Silas, in black, silent, closing the balcony door behind him with a soft click.

The white mask comes last.

He doesn't go to the chair. He stops in the middle of my room, in the lamplight, with his gloved hands loose at his sides, and looks at me. The others go still around him. Even Rhett stops grinning.

"You went to the police," he says.

The voice is flat and electronic, the robot voice from the first night. It goes down my spine like a fingertip.

"I went to the police," I say.

"Without asking."

"Did anyone ask Rhett if he wanted to sit in that room all morning?"

"None of us alibis another one of us." He doesn't raise his voice. He doesn't need to. "That rule has kept every man in this room alive."

"Then it's a good thing I'm not one of you."

"You are now." Flat. Final. "You made sure of that. Your name is in his file next to Reyes's. Every lie Reyes tells from now on has to match yours. Every time Hale looks at you, he's looking at Reyes. If you fall, you take Reyes with you, and he takes the rest of us." The mask tilts, very slightly. "You tied yourself to us with a knot none of us can cut. Without asking."

My throat goes tight. I make myself hold his empty gaze.

"Ease up," Rhett says quietly.

"No."

"Would you rather he was still in that room?" I ask. "Would you rather I'd stayed home and let Hale have him?"

The silence goes on so long I can hear the harbor through the glass.

"No," he says.

"Then say it."

"Say what?"

"Thank you."

At the end of the bed, Beau makes a small strangled sound and covers it with a cough.

The white mask looks at me. I can't see anything behind the eyeholes. I don't need to. I can feel it, like a storm coming before the sky changes.

"You think you're owed thanks," he says.

"I think I'm owed something."

"Then here's what you're owed." He takes a step closer to the bed. "You told Silas you wanted me here. You wanted me to watch. I said yes, knowing exactly what you'd done that morning, and I haven't changed my mind." Another pause. "But you made a choice for all of us without asking. So tonight, I make the choices. All of them. You want to be one of us? We don't move alone. Not in a police station. Not in this room."

Everything in me says no.

"I don't take orders," I say.

"Then say no." He doesn't move. "They'll walk me out, and you'll go to sleep, and you'll never know what it's like to have me watch you." The mask tilts. "That's what you asked for. This is what it costs."

I look past him at the others. Rhett is by the wall with his arms folded. Beau is at the foot of the bed, hands in his pockets. Silas is by the dresser with his eyes on me. None of them are looking at the white mask. They're waiting for me.

"Your call, champ," Rhett says quietly. "Say the word, and he walks out that door. We'll go with him if you want, or we'll stay. But it's yours."

Beau nods. Silas doesn't say anything. He doesn't have to.

Heat crawls up my throat. It isn't only anger. I wish to God it was.

He wants you to say no. He wants to watch you run.

"Fine," I say. "You give the orders, and I'll answer every one of them out loud." I lift my chin. "But I set the no."

"And the no?"

"You don't touch me. Not tonight. Everyone else in this room has a face. You don't. You stay in that chair."

For a long moment the mask just looks at me.

"Agreed," he says.

Then he walks past the bed to the corner by the window, where my reading chair is, the old one with the sagging cushion. He sits down in it. He stretches his long legs out in front of him and crosses them at the ankle.

His arms spread along the arms of the chair, gloved hands loose, his head tipped back. He looks like a man settling in to watch a show.

My whole body goes hot.

It's the chair Silas sat in. The chair I rode him in, the night before the alibi. I don't know if the white mask knows that. Then I look at Silas, standing by the dresser with his eyes on the floor, and I think he does.

"Before anybody touches anything," I say, and my voice only shakes a little, "the rest of you get a list."

"Oh, a list," Beau says, delighted. He drops onto the end of the bed and gets comfortable against the footboard, one leg drawn up. "Should I take minutes?"

"Do you want me to throw you out before we start?"

"No, ma'am."

Rhett settles into the corner of the bed by the wall, his back against the headboard, legs stretched out. He's already hard. I can see the line of him through his jeans from here. He shifts and adjusts himself without any shame at all, catching my eye with a slow grin as he does it. "What? You started it. You're wearing that."

"Here are the yeses," I say. My hands are cold, so I sit on them. "You all watch. Everyone stays as long as they want. Silas touches me first." I look at him. "Then, if I say so, the others can join. With hands. Mouths. Whatever I say."

Nobody makes a joke. The room has gone very quiet.

"What's your word?" Rhett asks.

I don't look at him. I look at the white mask.

"You know my word," I say.

In the corner, Rhett's jaw tightens. On the end of the bed, Beau's smile fades. By the dresser, Silas lifts his head.

The white mask doesn't answer for a long time. Then he says, "Say it anyway."

"Whitlock."

"And if you can't talk?"

"Two taps. On whoever I can reach."

"Everybody heard that," Rhett says quietly. "Everybody."

"Silas," the white mask says. "On the bed. On your back. Head at the foot."

Silas strips his black T-shirt over his head and drops it on the floor. He's pale and lean in the lamplight. He lies down across my bed on his back with his head at the foot, near Beau, and his feet toward the headboard. Everyone in the room has a clear view of him. He folds his hands on his stomach, looks up at the ceiling and breathes.

"Take the strap down," the white mask says to me.

I hook a finger under the thin black strap on my shoulder and draw it down my arm. Then the other one. The slip pools at my waist. I'm bare from the hips up in the lamplight in front of all of them. My face is on fire. My first instinct is to cover myself.

"Don't," the white mask says, before I've moved.

"I wasn't going to."

"You were." Flat. Unbothered. "Take it all the way off."

I stand up on the bed, let the slip fall around my feet and kick it off the edge. Then I'm naked. Four men are looking at me. Nobody says a word. In the corner, Rhett lets out a long, slow breath. Beau's fingers dig into his own thigh.

"Now," the white mask says. "Show me what you want to do to him."

Silas is lying there on my bed with his hands folded and his dark eyes on me. I know exactly what I want to do. It's all I've thought about for days.

I kneel beside his hips. I unbutton his jeans.

"Oh," Beau says faintly.

I tug his jeans and briefs down his thighs. He's already hard, flushed and thick. He makes a soft sound when the air hits him. His hands come unfolded and grip the sheet.

Then I lean down and take him in my mouth.

"Holy fuck," Rhett breathes from the corner.

"Oh my God," Beau says, at the same time. "Oh, we didn't... she's really..."

"Quiet," the white mask says.

Under me, Silas makes a sound I've never heard from him, low and shattered, as his hips lift off the bed. I take him slowly, as deep as I can. I hold him there. Then I pull back and look up at his face. His eyes are squeezed shut. His knuckles are white on the sheet.

"Eyes open," I tell him. "Watch me."

He opens his eyes.

I go down on him again, slow and wet, my hand wrapped around the base of him, my hair falling over his stomach. He's shaking. He's whispering my name, over and over, *Wren, Wren Elise, please*. I can feel all of them watching me. Rhett's eyes from the corner. Beau's from the foot of the bed. The empty eyeholes of the white mask from my reading chair, never moving, never blinking.

I've never felt so powerful.

"Enough," the white mask says. "Don't let him finish."

I pull off slowly. Silas groans, low and wounded.

"Get on him," the white mask says. "Facing me. Go slow. Take all of him. Count out loud. Lose count and we start over."

"Count *what*?"

"Every inch."

"Oh, fuck you," I breathe.

"Count."

Rhett tosses a condom across the bed without a word. I roll it onto Silas with shaking hands while he watches me, his chest heaving. Then I straddle his hips, facing the white mask in the corner. I take Silas in my hand and sink down.

"One," I whisper. "Two. Three."

Silas shifts under me, just slightly, and hits something inside me that makes me gasp. My eyes are on the white mask. I hold his empty gaze and let the silence stretch. I don't say *four*.

"Start over," the white mask says.

"Yes, *sir*," I say, and I mean it as an insult.

He doesn't react at all. "Start over."

Under me, Silas laughs, a short, wrecked breath. "You did that on purpose."

"Maybe."

I rise up off him, slowly, every inch dragging, and he groans like it's killing him. Then I sink back down and count again from the beginning. This time I don't lose it. By the time he's all the way inside me, my thighs are trembling and there are tears on my face. I'm so full I can't breathe.

"There," the white mask says. "Better."

That one word goes through me like a current. I clench around Silas so hard that he swears.

"Oh, she likes that," Rhett says, very quietly, from the corner. "Did you see that? She *likes* that."

"Ride him," the white mask says.

I ride him. I roll my hips, slow, braced on his thighs, my eyes locked on the white mask in the chair. Silas holds my hips and lets me, his breath coming in short, broken gasps. He doesn't narrate tonight. He can't. All he can do is hold on.

"Faster," the white mask says.

I go faster. The bed creaks. I'm making sounds I can't stop, and every one of them is too loud.

"Quiet," he says. "Your mother is in this house."

"I *can't*."

"Beau," the white mask says. "Help her."

Beau is beside me on the bed in a second. He slides one hand over my mouth, gentle, warm, muffling me, and the other around to my breast. His mouth is against my ear.

"I've got you," he murmurs. "Breathe through it. You're doing so well. Look at him. Keep looking at him."

I look at the white mask over Beau's hand. I ride Silas harder. Beau's thumb drags over my nipple, and I sob into his palm.

"Don't come until I say," the white mask says.

"Please," I gasp against Beau's fingers.

"Not yet."

It's building so fast I'm shaking with it. I'm trembling all over, held between Silas's hands and Beau's arms, my eyes on a white mask in a chair. I'm begging him with my eyes because I can't with my voice.

He looks at me for a long, long moment.

"Now," he says.

I come so hard the whole world narrows to a white mask in a chair. I scream into Beau's hand. My whole body bows. Under me, Silas cries out and follows me, his hands locked on my hips, my full name breaking out of him. Beau holds me through all of it, murmuring in my ear, telling me how beautiful I am, how good, how perfect.

When I can see again, I'm slumped back against Beau's chest. Silas is gasping under me. The white mask hasn't moved from the chair. But his gloved hands have closed into fists on the arms of it.

"Again," he says.

The second time is slower.

Silas eases out from under me, and Beau lays me down on my stomach on the bed, across the middle where they can all see. My whole body is liquid. I couldn't sit up if I tried. Someone's hand is in my hair, stroking it back from my face. I turn my head and it's Rhett. He's come over from the corner. He's kneeling by my head, and he's looking at me as if I've hung every star in the sky.

"Hey," he says softly. "You okay in there?"

"Never better."

"You were unbelievable." His fingers comb slowly through my hair. "You want to keep going? You can stop. Nobody's going to mind."

I look past him at the white mask in the chair. He's watching me. He hasn't looked away once all night.

"Keep going," I say.

"Silas," the white mask says. "Behind her."

I feel the bed dip. Silas kneels behind me. He puts his hands on my hips and draws me back onto my knees, gently, as if he's afraid I'll break. I hear the crinkle of a fresh condom. Then he pushes into me from behind, slowly. I bury my face in the sheet and moan.

"That's it," Rhett murmurs, his hand still in my hair. "That's it. Let him have you. We've got you."

"You're so pretty like this," Beau says, on my other side. He's stroking my back, long slow strokes from my shoulders to my hips. "Letting him have you. God, Wren. You're taking him so well."

I'm caught between them. Silas moving inside me, deep and slow, his hands steady on my hips. Rhett stroking my hair. Beau stroking my back. All three of them talking to me, low and soft.

"You walked into a police station for me," Rhett murmurs, so low only I can hear it. "Look at fucking you."

"Wren Elise," Silas says behind me, and that's all, and it's enough. It's so much. It's too much. It's everything.

"Look at him," Beau whispers. "Look at the chair."

I lift my head.

The white mask is sitting forward now. Elbows on his knees. Gloved hands clasped tight between them. The eyeholes are fixed on me, dark and empty and burning.

"Better," he says. It's the second time tonight. His voice is still flat, still a machine, but there's something under it now, something rough. "Much better."

I come again with my eyes on his mask, Silas's name and the white mask's word tangled together in my mouth. Silas follows me with a broken gasp, folding down over my back, his forehead pressed between my shoulder blades. Rhett and Beau hold on to me through every second of it.

Afterward, they don't leave.

Silas carries me into the bathroom while I'm still shaking. Rhett runs the tub. Beau finds a bottle of bath oil I didn't know I owned and pours in far too much of it. The tub is the one Mom showed me the first day, the one you could drown a horse in. Silas lowers me into it and climbs in behind me. I lie back against his chest while the hot water closes over me up to my chin. Every muscle in my body melts.

Rhett sits on the edge of the tub and hands me a glass of water. I drink all of it.

"How do you feel?" he asks.

"Like I just ran a marathon on my knees."

"You were incredible," he says, and he means it so plainly that I have to look away.

Beau sits on the closed toilet lid with his phone out and his legs crossed at the knee.

"I've prepared a reading," he announces. "From the Port Halloway Yacht Club summer bulletin."

"Oh no," Rhett says.

"*The Harbor Committee is pleased to announce*," Beau reads, with enormous gravity, "*that the matter of the dinghy rack has been resolved, and that the sailing season will continue with a renewed spirit of mutual respect.* There's a photo. It's of the dinghy rack."

I laugh before I can help it.

"*In other news*," he goes on, "*Mrs. Pamela Aldridge's hydrangeas took first in the Small Bloom category for the third consecutive year, in what the judges described as a* hotly contested field."

"There's no way that's real."

"It's very real." He turns the phone so I can see. Pam Aldridge, holding a blue ribbon next to a hydrangea, looking as if she's personally won a war. "I have six more pages."

I laugh so hard I slide down in the water, and Silas has to haul me back up. My ribs hurt. My face hurts. I laugh until I cry, and for a while I honestly can't tell which one it is.

The white mask doesn't come in.

He stands in the bathroom doorway the whole time, with his shoulder against the frame, watching the three of them take care of me. He doesn't say anything. When the water starts to cool, I tip my head back against Silas's shoulder and look at him upside down.

"Are you going to say anything?" I ask. "Or are you just going to stand there?"

He looks at me for a long time.

"You did well," he says.

The voice is still flat. It's still a machine. But they're three words, and they're the first ones he's given me all night that aren't an order. Something catches in my chest, stupidly, the way it did when I was a kid and a teacher said my name in front of the class.

"That's it?" I ask. "That's all I get?"

"No." He's quiet. "When Hale comes for you, and he will, you don't say a word to him until you've called Silas. Not even hello."

Behind me, I feel Silas nod against my hair.

"That's not a thank-you," I say.

"No," he agrees. "It's the rule. You're one of us now. You get the rules."

Then he pushes off the doorframe with his right hand, knuckles first against the wood, and as his weight comes onto them, he flinches. It's tiny. A hitch in his shoulder. A hand pulled back too fast, as if the frame were hot.

Then he's gone. I hear the balcony door open and close, very softly.

I lie back in the water against Silas's chest, and I don't say a word.

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WREN

The message comes from Silas two days after the bath.

He wants the boathouse. A chase. Tomorrow night, if you say yes.

Then, before I can answer, another one comes in.

Your terms. Send them to me. He won't argue with them.

I'm sitting on the end of my bed with my hair still wet from the shower, and I read it until the screen goes dark in my hand.

"Oh, fuck me," I say to the empty room. The boathouse. The last time a masked man chased me through that boathouse, I set the rules and held the knife. Rhett laughed in the dark the whole time, as if it was the best night of his life. This won't be that. I know it the way I know the stairs in this house now, without looking.

My thumbs hover over the screen. Then I type before I can talk myself out of it.

the boathouse and the marsh path. nowhere else.

i get a head start. a real one.

if he catches me he can touch me. his hands. nothing else unless i ask for it.

my word is still my word.

and he brings my knife.

The dots come up and stay up for a long time. I picture Silas in some dark room, reading my terms out loud to a white mask. I picture the mask listening, one gloved finger tapping a chair arm.

Done.

Then another.

He says all you ever had to do was ask.

"All I had to do was ask," I repeat out loud, to nobody, and my voice comes out strange.

I put the phone face down on the bed and press both hands over my mouth. My pulse is pounding in my teeth.

Oh, you idiot. You absolute idiot. You're going to do it.

The next morning I go into town for coffee, because if I stay in that house all day waiting for midnight, I'll lose my mind.

The French bakery on the harbor is full of women in tennis whites and men in boat shoes reading the paper. It smells like butter and burnt sugar. I'm third in line, trying to decide whether I deserve an almond croissant, when a voice behind me says my name.

"Wren."

I know it before I turn around. Soft, tired, kind.

Detective Hale is standing behind me in a gray suit, with his reading glasses folded in his breast pocket and a paper cup already in his hand. He smiles as if we're old friends who keep running into each other.

"Detective," I say.

"I thought that was you. I'd know that hair anywhere." He nods toward the counter. "Get the almond one. Trust me. I've done the research."

"Thanks."

"While I have you." He says it lightly, the way he says everything. "Your statement's been typed up. It just needs your signature. No rush. Come by the station whenever it suits you, and we can go over it together. Make sure I got everything right."

My heart starts to pound. *Go over it together.* In a little room, with the door shut, while he reads my lies back to me one at a time and watches my

face.

When Hale comes for you, and he will, you don't say a word to him until you've called Silas.

"Excuse me for a minute," I say. "I need to make a call first."

Hale's eyebrows go up a fraction. He doesn't say anything. He just steps back to give me room, polite as a church usher.

I walk to the window by the pastry case with my back to him and call the number with no name. It rings once.

"Hale," Silas says. It isn't a question.

"He's here. At the bakery. He says my statement needs a signature, and he wants to go over it with me."

"Then it needs a lawyer in the room. Beau's father's man." Silas's voice is low and level. Something in my chest unclenches just from hearing it. "Don't say anything else. Pay for your coffee. Smile at him. Walk out."

"That's it?"

"That's it. Go, Wren Elise."

He hangs up. I turn around. Hale is still standing exactly where I left him, sipping his coffee and watching me with mild interest, as if I'm a show on public television.

"Everything all right?" he asks.

"Fine. I'll come in with a lawyer." I make myself smile. "Whenever it suits."

Something moves behind his eyes. It isn't anger. It's interest, and that's worse.

"That's new," he says.

"What is?"

"Last week you'd have talked to me." He tilts his head. "Someone's been giving you advice."

"I learn fast."

"I've noticed." He steps up to the counter ahead of me and hands the girl a twenty before I can stop him. "One almond croissant for the young lady. And her coffee." He turns back to me with that tired, warm smile, and lowers his voice so only I can hear it.

"I was in that old file again last night. Daisy Hollis." He says her name gently, like he's handing it to me. "She had your eyes, you know. I keep coming back to that."

My blood runs cold all over again.

Then he straightens, warm and easy, loud enough for the whole line. "Give my best to your mother."

He walks out. The bell over the door jingles behind him.

I stand there holding a croissant I didn't pay for, while goose bumps crawl up both my arms.

You're on his list. And when he gets tired of looking, he'll start asking your mother questions instead.

I throw the croissant in the trash on the way out. It's the first thing I've ever thrown away that someone else paid for, and it doesn't make me feel any better.

By midnight I've changed my clothes four times.

Black leggings win, with a black long-sleeved shirt, my hair in a tight braid down my back, and sneakers I don't mind ruining. No bra. It's because I'll be running, obviously. Nobody would believe that, including me.

The house is asleep. I go down the back stairs and out through the kitchen, past the island where Marisol fed me eggs. *You can't be brave on an empty stomach.* I ate dinner tonight. Every bite.

I leave the Civic on the shoulder of the road above the point, tucked behind the same hedge as last time. It still isn't hiding a Honda. Every window in the clubhouse is dark. I walk down across the club lawn, wet, black and silver under a half moon, and cold dew soaks my sneakers in three steps. Down at the water, the boathouse is a long dark shape against the harbor. The marsh beyond it is darker still, all reeds, mud and the smell of salt rot.

I stop at the top of the dock path. My breath is coming fast, and I haven't even started running.

"Okay," I whisper to the dark. "Okay. You asked for this."

A light blinks inside the boathouse. Once. Twice.

Then it goes dark.

That's my head start.

I run.

I take the marsh path because he'll expect the boathouse. It's a strip of old boards and packed sand that winds out between the reeds toward the point. The reeds are taller than I am. They hiss and whisper on both sides as I go past. The boards are slick with dew. Twice I nearly go down. My breath sounds enormous in my own ears. Somewhere out on the water a buoy bell clangs, slow and lonely.

I go as far as the old duck blind, a lopsided wooden box half sunk in the reeds, and stop behind it to listen.

Nothing. Crickets. The water sucking at the mud. My own heart.

Then, from somewhere back along the path, a board creaks.

Not fast. Not running. Just one slow step, and then another. He isn't chasing me. He's walking.

He doesn't need to run. He knows exactly where this path goes.

The hair on the back of my neck stands straight up. I press my back against the wet wood of the blind and try not to breathe.

"You took the marsh." The voice drifts through the reeds, flat and electronic, from nowhere and everywhere at once. "Because you thought I'd wait in the boathouse."

I clap my hand over my mouth.

"Good," the voice says. "Keep thinking."

Another slow creak. Closer.

I break from behind the blind and go straight into the reeds, off the path, where the mud sucks at my sneakers. Stalks slap my face. It's pitch black in here. Fuck it. I circle wide, my lungs burning, my legs shaking, back toward the shape of the boathouse against the sky. If he's out here, then the boathouse is empty. If the boathouse is empty, I can get behind the kayak racks first and make him come to me.

The side door is standing open a hand's width, the way it was the night I followed Grant down here. I slip through it and pull it almost shut behind me.

It's black inside. It smells like bleach, diesel and wet rope. I put my hand out and find the cold metal of the kayak rack. Step by step, I edge along it until I'm crouched at the far end, in the corner by the water gate. The harbor slaps softly at the pilings under the floor. My chest is heaving. I press my forehead against the cold rack and make myself breathe slow.

You did it. You lost him. Now you get to choose when he finds you.

"You always come back here," the voice says, right behind me.

I don't scream. I don't have time.

A gloved hand closes on the back of my neck.

It isn't rough. It's warm through the leather, firm and absolutely sure. The first time he touched me, he was folding my bloody fingers around a silver coin. That was weeks ago, and my body remembers it so fast that my knees nearly go.

"Found you," he says.

"That's cheating." My voice is shaking. "You were out on the path."

"I was out on the path." His thumb moves once, slowly, along the side of my throat. "Then you ran into the reeds, and you were so loud that the herons left. I walked back the easy way."

"You could have caught me out there."

"I could have." He turns me around by the neck, slowly, and walks me back two steps until the cold wall of the boathouse is against my spine. I can see the shape of him now, tall and black against the faint light from the water gate. The mask is a pale blank oval. "But I didn't want you in the mud."

"Where did you want me?"

He doesn't answer. He lowers me instead.

His hand stays on the back of my neck. The other one comes to my waist. He guides me down, slow and steady, onto my knees, then onto my back on the boards. The wood is cold and damp through my shirt. It smells like salt and bleach. I know exactly where I am. I'd know this patch of floor with my eyes shut.

He kneels over me. One knee on either side of my hips. The mask tips down toward my face.

"This is where you became ours," he says. "I wanted you to feel the floor."

The breath goes out of me all at once.

I can feel it. Every board under my back. Every seam between them. Somewhere under me, in the cracks, Grant Whitlock bled out onto this floor while four men in masks watched me find out what I am. I should be sick. I should be shaking for a different reason.

Instead I'm wet. Soaked. Turned on so badly it aches, from the chase, from the dark, from him. He knows it. I know he knows it.

He reaches into his coat. I hear the small, sharp click of a blade opening.

My knife. My black folding knife from a gas station outside Hartford. I'd know the sound of it anywhere. He lays the flat of it against my ribs, over my shirt, cold even through the cotton. He doesn't press. He just lets it rest there, a line of cold right under my heart.

"Your word," he says.

"Whitlock."

"Say it again."

"*Whitlock*." It comes out ragged. "I know my own word."

"I know you do." The blade doesn't move. "I wanted to hear you say it on this floor."

His gloved hand slides up under the hem of my shirt. Leather on my bare stomach. I gasp, and my whole body arches up into it before I can stop it. He doesn't hurry. He spreads his fingers over my ribs, just under the knife, as if he's measuring how fast my heart is going. Then he pushes the shirt up, slowly, until it's bunched under my arms and I'm bare to the cold air. The knife is cold on one side of me. His hand is warm on the other.

"Eyes on me," he says, flat. "You ran all the way out to the point to get away from me, and you're soaked."

"I'm not..."

"Don't lie to me on this floor."

His hand moves down. Over my stomach. Under the waistband of my leggings. The glove is smooth, warm and strange. When he finds me, I have to bite down on my own lip to keep quiet.

"Hm," he says.

"Oh, shut the fuck up."

"I didn't say anything."

"You said *hm*." I'm panting. "You said it like a teacher grading a paper."

His fingers move. Slow. One long stroke, then another, the leather slick now, and the noise that comes out of me isn't a word at all.

"Better," he says.

I hate him. I hate how much I love it when he says that.

"Ask," he says.

"Ask for *what*?"

"For what you want." The knife turns, just slightly, so that the very edge of the blade lies along my skin instead of the flat. It doesn't cut. It doesn't have to. Every nerve in my body goes to that thin line of cold. "Out loud. On this floor. Or I stop."

"Please," I say.

"Please what?"

"Please touch me. Inside. *Please*."

He slides two gloved fingers into me, slow and deep. He holds them there. I cry out, and the sound bounces off the rafters, too loud, way too loud. Out on the water, something splashes.

"Greedy little thief," he says, very quietly.

Then he starts to move.

He doesn't rush. That's the worst part. He works me slowly, steadily, his thumb circling my clit while his fingers curl inside me. The knife lies perfectly still along my ribs. The blank mask is tipped down to watch my face. He isn't watching anything else. Not my breasts, not his own hand. Just my face, as if every flicker of it is something he's been waiting weeks to see up close.

"Look at me," he says.

I look at him. At the place where his eyes should be. I can't see anything there but dark.

"Don't you dare close your eyes," he says. "You made me watch from a chair. Now I get to see it."

"You *liked* the chair."

"I did." His fingers curl, hard, and I gasp. "This is better."

It builds so fast I'm not ready for it. My heels drag on the wet boards. My hands claw at the floor for something to hold and find nothing. Finally I grab his wrist, the one holding the knife, with both hands. He lets me. The blade doesn't move a fraction.

"That's it," he says. "There you go. Show me."

I come on the floor where I killed a man, with my hands locked around the wrist of the masked man holding my own knife to me. It goes through me in long, hard waves. I can't stop the sound I make, and I don't try. He doesn't let up. He holds me right at the top of it, slow and relentless, until I'm shaking, twisting, gasping a name I don't have at the rafters.

When it finally lets go of me, I'm limp on the boards, wrecked and shivering.

He takes his hand away. He sits back on his heels over me. The knife comes off my ribs, and I feel the cold of where it was like a ghost.

"It wasn't enough," he says.

I stare up at him, still panting. "What?"

"That." He tips his head at me, sprawled under him on the floor. "It wasn't enough. I've watched three men put their hands on you. I sat in a chair and counted. I didn't come out here for *one*."

My whole body goes hot all over again.

"Then take another," I say.

He goes very still.

"You heard me." I push up on my elbows. My voice is hoarse. "You want more? Take it. But do it with your hand, not your glove. I want to feel your skin."

For a long moment he doesn't move. I think he's going to say no. He's going to fold my knife, walk out into the dark and leave me here on this floor, burning.

Then he lifts his left hand to the mask, as if to make sure it's still there. He sets the knife down on the boards beside my head, close enough that I could reach it. He can't use his teeth, not with the mask on, so he pulls the right glove off with his other hand, finger by finger, and drops it on the floor.

His bare hand is warm. Bigger than I thought. Then he takes hold of my braid and hauls me up off the boards.

I'm on my knees before I know what's happening, facing the dark water gate, with him kneeling right behind me. His chest is against my back. His thighs bracket mine. The mask is at my ear, cold against my cheek, and his voice comes through the machine so low it's barely more than breath.

"There," he says. "Now I can talk to you."

He picks my knife up off the boards and lays the flat of it against my stomach, just under my navel. His bare hand slides down past the blade, into my leggings.

"Did you like it?" he says in my ear. "All three of them in your bed. Hands everywhere. Did you like being passed around while I sat there and watched?"

"Fuck you."

"Answer the question." His fingers find me, slow and mean. "You were soaked for them. I saw."

"Yes," I hiss. "I liked it. Happy?"

"No." Two bare fingers slide into me, and I choke on the air. "Do you know what I thought, sitting in that chair? I thought, three of them, and she still has no idea how it's supposed to feel."

"You arrogant fucking bastard."

"And you're a little liar." His thumb circles, slow. "You lied to a cop. You lied to your mother. You lie to me every time you tell me you don't want this."

"I *don't*."

His fingers curl, hard. My whole body jerks against the knife.

"Liar," he says.

I should hate it. Every name he calls me should make me want to put an elbow in his ribs. Instead every one of them goes straight through me, hot and low, and he knows it. He can feel it on his fingers.

"Feel that?" he says. "That's where they were. Silas. Rhett. Beau. Now it's me." His fingers press deeper, and his breath is ragged through the machine. "Whose do you want? Tell me whose."

"I hate you."

"That's not an answer."

"*Yours*." It rips out of me. "Yours, okay? Yours."

"Louder, liar."

"*Yours*."

"There it is." His voice drops even lower, and something in it is almost tender, which is worse than anything else he's said. "Was that so hard?"

I grab his wrist to hold his hand where it is, and my thumb drags over his knuckles and catches on something rough. Split skin. A scab, half healed, all the way across the back of his hand.

I don't ask about it. Neither of us says a word.

"Come for me," he says. "Right here, on your knees, with your own knife on you. Show me what you never showed them."

I come so hard I can't hold myself up. He holds me up instead, his arm locked across my stomach, the flat of my own knife pressed between us, his voice in my ear through the machine saying *better, better, better*. The floor goes. The knife goes. Grant Whitlock goes, and Hale's warm smile at the bakery. In the end there's nothing left in the world but his hand, and that voice, and the dark.

When it's over, he doesn't let go.

He stays kneeling behind me in the dark, holding me up against his chest, with his bare hand flat on my stomach, rising and falling with my breathing. Neither of us says anything for a long time. The harbor slaps at the pilings. Somewhere out in the marsh, the herons are coming back.

"When do I get your face?" I ask.

His fingers tighten on my stomach.

"Soon," he says.

"How soon?"

He doesn't answer. He eases me down onto the boards, then takes his hand back, picks up the glove and pulls it on again, slowly, flexing his

fingers into the leather. He folds my knife with a click and slides it back inside his coat.

"Hey," I say. "That's mine. You said all I had to do was ask. I'm asking."

"You asked me to bring it." He stands. "You never asked me to leave it."

I laugh before I can help it. It's shaky, half a sob, and it echoes off the rafters. For a second I'd swear the blank mask tilts down at me, the way a man's face does when he's trying not to smile.

Then he's gone. The side door creaks. The dark swallows him, and I'm alone.

I lie on the floorboards with my shirt still shoved up and the cold air on my skin. I don't get up. Under my cheek, the wood smells like salt and bleach. Somewhere under it, in the cracks, is the last of Grant Whitlock.

I wait to feel bad about that.

I'm still waiting when the first lobster boat starts up across the harbor.

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32

CALLUM

The seawall at the bottom of the lawn is granite. My great-grandfather had it shipped over from a quarry on Vinalhaven, block by block, because he didn't trust anything from the mainland.

I know it's granite because I hit it.

The day of the station, after she stood at the bottom of my father's stairs and told me I'd never send her anywhere again. I went out the terrace door, down the lawn in broad daylight, and put my right fist into the wall until my great-grandfather's stone won. It didn't take long. Granite always wins. That's why you buy it.

Now it's dawn, and I'm sitting on the end of the dock with my coffee going cold, flexing that hand. The scabs have split again. There's a thin line of fresh blood across the second knuckle.

She held that hand last night.

She pressed it against her own body on the boathouse floor, and her thumb went over the knuckles, and she stopped. Just for a breath. Then she didn't ask. She didn't say anything. She held on tighter and let me finish what I started.

I've been sitting here since four trying to decide what that silence means.

She knows. Or she's one breath from knowing, and she's choosing not to take it.

Behind me, up on the terrace, the kitchen door bangs. Marisol, starting the coffee I'm not going to come in for. Out on the water the first lobster boat is chugging past the point, low in the water, gulls screaming behind it. Everything smells like salt and diesel and cut grass. Everything is exactly the same as it was yesterday, except I can still feel her heartbeat under my palm.

Boards creak behind me. Marisol comes down the dock in her cardigan with a mug in one hand and a dish towel in the other. She doesn't ask. She hands me the mug, takes my right hand by the wrist and turns it over to look at the knuckles, the way she did when I was nine and fell off the pool house roof.

"You're bleeding on my dock," she says.

"It's my dock."

"Nothing in this house is yours until you learn to say sorry to someone." She wraps the towel around my hand, firm, and ties it off. "Whatever you did to that wall, the wall didn't deserve it."

"The wall's fine."

"The wall is granite. You are not." She lets go of my wrist. "That girl stood in my front hall with her chin up and fought you. Twenty years I've worked in this house. Nobody ever did that before."

"I know."

"Then be good to her, mijo." She looks at me over her glasses for a long moment. "Or I'll put salt in your coffee for the rest of your life, and you'll never know which cup."

She walks back up the dock. I sit there with her towel around my hand and her coffee going warm in the other one, and I drink it, because she'd know if I didn't.

Then I go up to the house.

Breakfast is the four of us, the way it always is now. My father with the paper. Nina in a sundress, buttering toast for him without being asked. Marisol moving behind them, refilling things before they're empty.

Wren comes down last.

She's in an old gray T-shirt and cutoffs, with her hair still wet. There's a pink scrape on the inside of her forearm that wasn't there yesterday, the kind you get from reeds. She doesn't look at me when she sits down. She looks at everything else in the room very carefully. The toast. The window. Her mother's earrings.

"Morning, baby," Nina says. "You look exhausted."

"Couldn't sleep." She reaches for the coffee. "The herons were loud."

I keep my eyes on my plate.

"That detective was at the club again yesterday," my father says to the paper. "Hale. Very pleasant fellow. He had a club soda and asked about the summer party." He turns a page. "I told him what I know, which is nothing. Nothing to hide."

The coffee pot stops halfway to Wren's cup. Then it keeps going.

"Of course," Nina says. "Poor man, working all summer. Did he say how it's going?"

"Slowly, I gather. He asked after you, Wren." My father looks at her over his reading glasses, friendly. "He said you'd run into each other at the bakery."

"We did." She pours the coffee. Her hand is steady. I'm the only one at this table who knows what that costs her. "He bought me a croissant."

"Well, that's nice."

"It was delicious," she says, and she doesn't look at me, and I'd bet the house she never took a bite.

Every morning since the station, I've eaten left-handed with my right fist in my lap, under the linen. This morning I set my cup down, and my right hand ends up on the table next to my plate, knuckles up. I should move it. I don't.

She looks at it.

It's quick. A glance down, then back up to her toast. But she doesn't look away fast enough. For one second her eyes stay on the split skin across the back of my hand, and her whole face goes still. Then she butters her toast, and passes her mother the jam, and asks Marisol whether there's any more of the peach.

She doesn't say a word to me.

This girl lied to a homicide detective without blinking. She took three men apart in her own bed while I sat in her reading chair and told her when. I've never seen her keep her mouth shut when she had a chance to use it.

That's when I decide.

The lighthouse is at the very end of the point, past the marsh, where the land runs out into rocks.

It hasn't been a working light since my grandfather was a boy. The Coast Guard put up a steel tower on the ledge in the sixties and sold the old

one off. My grandfather bought it for a dollar and a promise to keep the paint up. Nobody in town has thought about it in years. That's the point of it.

Silas works on the second floor. He has a loft over the old sail shop on Wharf Street, but most nights he doesn't make it back to it. There's a cot he doesn't sleep on and a bank of screens he does. The air smells like old stone, coffee and electricity. The wall across from the screens is covered in paper. Photographs, printouts, names, routes. Every man we've ever gone out on the water for is on that wall somewhere.

I walk past it the way I always do. I don't look at the middle.

Rhett is sprawled on the old couch by the window with his boots on the arm. Beau is sitting on the stairs with a coffee from the French bakery. Silas is at the screens with his back to all of us, the way he always is.

"He lives," Rhett says. "How'd it go? Silas says she came home at four in the morning with reeds in her hair, and I want details."

"No."

"Some details."

"*No*."

"He had a good time," Beau tells him. "Look at his face. That's his good-time face. It looks exactly like his bad-time face, but the left eye's different."

I don't sit down. I stand in the middle of the room and wait until they all look at me, even Silas, turning his chair.

"I'm doing it tonight," I say. "Here."

Nobody says anything for a long moment.

Then Rhett swings his boots off the arm of the couch and sits up. "About fucking time."

"You're sure," Silas says.

"I'm sure."

"Because she knows," Silas says. "Or she will in a few days. She's not stupid."

"I know she's not stupid." I flex my hand without meaning to. "She saw this at breakfast. She held it last night."

Beau winces. "Ah."

"She didn't say anything."

"Ah," Beau says again, quieter, and for once he doesn't make a joke.

"Then do it right," Rhett says. "Not in a hallway. Not at breakfast. Not with a fucking mask on, telling her to count." He points at me. "She gets your face, and you let her say whatever she needs to say to it. You owe her that."

"I know what I owe her."

"Do you?" He doesn't raise his voice, which is how I know he means it. "Because you spent half the summer trying to run her out of town. You called her a thief at your father's table. You put twenty grand in an envelope like she was a problem you could make go away. And she walked into a police station in front of her mother and lied for me." His jaw works. "So, no, I don't think you know. I think you've got it all worked out in your head."

The room is very quiet.

I look at him. He looks back. For a second I think about making him disappear from the room, the way I would with anyone else. Then I remember the station, his taped hands on her face, and I don't.

"I don't have anything worked out," I say.

"Good."

"I've started it forty different ways. They're all apologies."

Rhett stares at me. Then he laughs, short and rough, and falls back onto the couch. "Jesus Christ. Okay. Okay, that's better."

"Can I make one small suggestion?" Beau asks.

"No."

"Light a fire. It's cold up here at night, and she'll be coming in from the dark." He shrugs. "That's all. A fire. Not remarks, not a podium. Just let her be warm when she sees you."

I don't answer that either. But I look at the old iron stove in the corner, and Beau sees me look, and he smiles into his coffee.

"There's something else," Silas says.

He doesn't turn around. He's watching a screen I can't see from here.

"Hale typed up her statement yesterday," he says. "Teddy says every time Hale's been at the club since the station, it's her he asks about. Not about Rhett. About her." He taps the screen. "He's not looking at Rhett anymore. He's looking at her. That's what she bought at the station."

I think about Hale buying her breakfast. I think about him at the club with my father, asking after her over a club soda, friendly as anything.

"Then she stops being alone in it," I say. "Starting tonight."

Nobody argues.

"Shore Road," Silas says, still facing the screen. "His new team starts next week. Girls' sailing, mornings, out of the club."

"After tonight," I say, "we plan it."

Rhett looks up from the couch. "And her?"

"Not her."

"She's going to ask."

"Then I'll say no."

Beau snorts into his coffee. "Good luck with that."

Rhett and Beau leave first. Rhett claps me on the shoulder on his way past, hard enough to hurt, which is how he says sorry. Beau stops on the stairs and looks back at me.

"She's going to hit you," he says.

"I know."

"Let her."

"I know, Beau."

He nods and goes. I hear his car start in the lot below, the black Bentley he babies like a child, and then the sound of it fading back up the point road.

Silas doesn't move from the screens.

I go to the window and look out at the water. The steel tower on the ledge blinks its slow white light, even in the daytime. Down on the rocks below the point, the tide is going out. It always is, in my head. Every time I look at this water, it's going out.

"Callum," Silas says.

He never uses my name. He doesn't need to. I turn around.

He's turned his chair to face me, with his hands flat on his knees, the way he sits when he's deciding something. His eyes go past me to the wall. To the middle of it, where I don't look. Then back to me.

"There's something you should know about her," he says. "Before tonight."

The back of my neck goes cold.

"Is she in danger?"

"No. Not from this."

"Is it going to change what I do?"

He doesn't answer right away. His eyes go to the wall again. His jaw is tight.

"No," he says finally. "It won't change what you do."

"Then is it yours to tell me?"

That one lands. I watch it go across his face. Silas, who knows everything about everyone, who has never in his life kept a secret from me that I didn't ask him to keep.

"No," he says. "It's hers."

"Then let her tell me."

He looks at me for a long time. Then he nods, slowly, and turns back to the screens.

That wasn't the end of it. He'll come back to it; I know him that well. I go down the iron stairs anyway, out into the wind, and leave it there with him.

The rest of the day goes to not writing anything down.

I start over and over in my head. On the dock. In the car. In the shower, with my hand flat on the tile. *I'm sorry I. You have to understand that. The night you came down the lawn*. Every one of them is an apology, and every one of them is about me. Rhett was right. She doesn't need my apologies. She needs my face.

So I'll give her my face. And two words, and then whatever she wants to do with both of them.

At dinner she sits across from me and talks to my father about sailing.

"Tell me about the boat you almost bought," she says. "The one from the first night."

"The Hinckley?" My father lights up. "Oh, now, that's a story."

It is. I've heard it every summer of my life. She lets him tell it again, all of it, and laughs in the right places. Nina glows at her. I eat what's on my plate and don't taste any of it.

Under the table, nothing touches my leg. I keep waiting for it.

"I'm going to turn in," she says, before dessert. "Long day."

"Night, baby," Nina says.

"Good night, Wren," my father says.

She looks at me, just once, on her way out. "Good night, Callum."

The same voice she used on the first night, in her doorway. Like a dare.

A few minutes later I hear the shower start at the end of her hall.

I go up the back stairs.

Her door is shut, but not locked. It never is in the daytime. Her room smells like her shampoo and the cold coming off the harbor through the

open balcony door. The reading chair is in the corner where I left it. I don't give it more than a glance.

Her knife comes out of my pocket. I cleaned it this afternoon on the end of the dock, the blade and the hinge and the grip, the way I've cleaned it every week since the night she put it in my hand. I lay it on her pillow, folded, the black handle against the white.

Then I open her nightstand drawer. The coin is there, where she keeps it, next to Hale's card. I take it out and lay it next to the knife.

I write the note on the back of one of my father's business cards, standing at her nightstand, with her shower running down the hall. My handwriting looks strange to me. Too careful.

The light at the end of the point. Midnight. Come alone.

I look at it for a long time. Then I add one more line underneath.

All you ever had to do was ask.

I put the card under the coin. I stand there for a second longer, in her room, with the water running at the end of the hall and her clothes from last night in a heap on the floor, reed-scraped and still damp at the hems.

Then I go, and I shut her door behind me, and I don't let myself stand outside it.

I drive out to the point in the dark. I light the fire in the iron stove, the way Beau told me to. Then I climb to the top of the tower. I stand at the glass with my back to the hatch, watching the light on the ledge go around, thinking about a girl who didn't step back.

At midnight I find out if she still won't.

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WREN

My knife is on my pillow when I come back from the shower.

It's folded and clean, the black handle lying against the white pillowcase like it's been there all along. Next to it is the coin, my coin, taken out of my own nightstand drawer. The same worn silver coin he pressed into my bloody hand the night of the party. Under the coin is a business card.

I pick up the card first. My hands are wet, and I leave a thumbprint on it.

Richard Sterling. Commodore, Port Halloway Yacht Club.

I turn it over. The handwriting on the back is small, black and so careful that it gives him away.

The light at the end of the point. Midnight. Come alone.

All you ever had to do was ask.

I sit down on the edge of the bed in my towel. My heart isn't racing. That's the strange part. It's slow and heavy, as if it's been waiting for this so long it's too tired to be surprised.

His father's card, in my room, on my pillow.

You knew. You've known since the storm. You've known since your thumb went over his knuckles on that floor.

"Of course," I say to the empty room. "Of course it's your father's card, you smug son of a bitch."

The knife goes into the back pocket of the jeans I'm going to wear tonight. The card goes into my nightstand drawer. I hold the coin in my fist for a long time, then put it back where it lives.

The frame I brought from Philadelphia is still lying face down on the nightstand, where I put it the first night. I haven't turned it over once all summer. I turn it over now. It's the two of us on the beach at Wildwood, sunburned, Daisy mid-laugh with her mouth wide open and her arm hooked around my neck like she's trying to strangle me.

Tonight I'm going to ask about you.

I stand it upright. Then I go to my bag by the door, open the zip pocket and take out Daisy's locket.

I haven't worn it since the afternoon I drove through the Sterlings' gate. I hold it up in the lamplight. Small and gold, with the dent in the side from the night she threw it at my head.

It isn't my story. It's the boss's, Rhett said, the night his mask came off. *When he tells you, I'll be in the room.*

Tonight I'm going to meet the boss.

I fasten the locket around my neck and tuck it under my shirt, against my skin, where nobody will see it.

My phone rings before my hair is even dry. It's Rhett.

"So," he says. No hello. "You got a card."

"You knew."

"We all knew. He told us this morning." A pause. "You okay?"

"I've slapped a lot of people in my head in the last few minutes." I roll onto my side. "You're on the list."

"Fair." He doesn't laugh. That's how I know he's nervous too. "Listen. Whatever he says up there, it's his to say. I'm not going to get ahead of him. But I told you once I'd be there when you heard the hard part. I meant it."

My hand goes to the locket under my shirt. "Will you?"

"Dawn," he says. "He said give him till dawn. Then we're all coming up."

"Okay."

"Hey. Champ." His voice goes soft. "He lit a fire. Beau told him to, but he did it. Go get warm."

At midnight I walk out to the point in the dark.

I leave the Civic behind the hedge above the club again and take the marsh path out from the boathouse, the same boards, the same reeds

whispering on both sides. My knife is in the pocket of my jeans. The locket is warm against my breastbone. The wind off the water is cold, and it smells like salt and rain coming. The sweater I pulled on over my T-shirt is the only smart thing I've done all day.

The path runs out past the duck blind, past where I stopped running last night. Then the reeds end. There's nothing but rock and sky. At the very end of the point, standing up out of the rocks like a finger, is the lighthouse.

I've seen it from the club lawn, a pale stub at the end of the point that nobody ever looks at twice. A white tower, gone gray with weather, with a black iron cage on top where the light used to be. Farther out, on the ledge, a steel tower blinks its slow white light. The old one has been dark the whole time.

It isn't dark tonight.

There's a warm orange glow in the lowest window. Smoke is coming out of a pipe in the side of the tower, thin and gray, torn sideways by the wind.

He lit a fire.

The door at the bottom is red, the paint peeling, and it's standing open a hand's width. I push it. It swings in on a round stone room. An iron stove sits in the middle with a fire going inside it. There's an old couch, a coffee mug on the floor. It's warm. The warmth hits my cold face and makes my eyes sting.

Iron stairs go up the inside wall in a spiral. I climb them.

The second floor is dark. The size of it presses around me, with a hum like machines asleep. A wall of paper I can't make out in the dark. My feet don't stop. Up and up, one hand on the cold rail, my heart finally starting to pound, until the stairs end at a hatch standing open over my head. Light comes down through it.

Then I'm up, into the lantern room.

It's all glass. Glass on every side, with the whole black harbor spread out below. The town lights are small and gold across the water. Out on the ledge, the steel tower sweeps its light over everything every few seconds. There's a table by the window with a lamp on it, an old wooden chair and shelves of swollen logbooks gone soft with damp. On the table, under the lamp, lies a plain white mask with no mouth.

He's standing at the glass with his back to me.

He's in a black sweater with his hands in his pockets, tall, dark-haired and broad through the shoulders, so still that he could be part of the tower. The light from the ledge goes across him and away. Across him and away.

I know the back of him. I've watched it walk away from me down hallways all summer.

He turns around.

"Hello, thief," Callum says.

I cross the room in three steps and slap him across the face as hard as I can.

The crack of it is loud in the glass room. His head goes to the side with it. He doesn't put up a hand. He doesn't step back. He lets his face turn with the blow. Then he slowly turns it back to look at me. A red mark is already coming up along his cheekbone.

My palm is burning. My whole arm is shaking.

"Again," he says, "if you need it. Then we talk."

I hit him again.

He takes that one too. His jaw goes tight. His eyes don't leave mine.

"You *fucking*..." My voice cracks in half. "You *bastard*. You sat across from me at breakfast every morning. You called me a thief in front of my mother. You stuffed twenty thousand dollars in an envelope like I was a stain you could pay someone to get out of your carpet."

"Yes."

"You called me a *hooker* at the gala. You told me to go back to my boyfriends. You stood in your father's front hall and asked me if I was fucking them both." My breath is coming hard. "And the night I killed a man, you put a coin in my bloody hand and told me I belonged to you."

"Yes."

"Stop saying yes!"

"Then stop asking me things you already know." He hasn't raised his voice once. "You knew at the storm. I said *you know the word*. You knew on the boathouse floor, with your thumb on my hand. You knew at breakfast and didn't say anything." His eyes go over my face. "You came anyway."

I swing at him again.

He catches my wrist an inch from his face. Not hard. He just closes his hand around it and holds it there, between us, and looks at me over it.

"I gave you two," he says. "You don't get a third."

I yank my wrist back. He lets it go.

"Why?" I ask. "Just tell me why. Which one of you is real? The one at breakfast or the one in the mask?"

He's quiet for a long moment. The light from the ledge sweeps across his face, then away.

"You were a witness," he says. "You saw four men and a body and a boat going out past the point. One wrong word from you and we'd all go into the harbor. Hale was already sniffing at the club. Beau wanted to talk to you. Rhett wanted to warn you. Silas wanted you watched. I wanted you gone." He looks at me steadily. "So I tried to make you leave. I made the club cold. I made this house cold. I put money in your hand at your door. I thought, if I can just make her hate it here enough, she'll get in that Honda and drive back to Philadelphia and live."

"And at night?"

"At night I couldn't stop coming back." His jaw works. "I'd stand outside your door in the mask and tell myself I was keeping an eye on a witness. Then I'd stand on the dock and watch your window go dark, wanting to put my hands on you so badly that I made a rule. *No touching until it's earned.* I made it for me. Not for you."

The wind moans around the glass. Somewhere far below, the fire pops in the stove.

"Both of them are real," he says. "That's the worst part. I'd do it all again."

"I hate you," I say.

"I know." His voice drops. "Hate me up close, then. You've been doing it from across the table all summer."

"You watched me." It comes out lower than I meant it to. "With all three of them. In my bed. In that chair."

"Every second of it."

"Did you hate it?"

He looks at me for so long that the light goes around twice.

"I hated that it wasn't me," he says.

That's the end of it. That's where I stop being able to stand across the room from him.

I grab the front of his sweater in both fists, and I don't kiss him so much as hit him with my mouth.

For one second he doesn't kiss me back. He goes completely still, a man deciding whether to strike. Then his hands close on my waist, he lifts me

clean off the floor, and he kisses me as if I'm the last thing he'll ever be allowed to have. His teeth catch my lip. I bite him back. I taste blood and don't know whose it is.

He carries me backward until I hit the table. The lamp rocks. The white mask slides off the edge and clatters on the floor. Neither of us looks at it.

"Your word," he says against my mouth.

"I know my fucking word."

"Say it."

"*Whitlock*. Now shut up and..."

He drags my sweater over my head and throws it. My T-shirt goes with it. When he sees the gold chain at my throat, he doesn't look twice. The locket has swung around to the back of my neck. Neither of us cares. His mouth is on my throat, my collarbone, my breast through my bra. Then he yanks the bra down, his mouth is on my bare skin, and I'm clawing at the back of his sweater to get it off him.

It comes off. I've never seen him with his shirt off, not once all summer, not even at the pool. Up close, in the lamplight, he's all hard muscle and tan skin, with a dusting of dark hair down the center of his chest. He's breathing as if he's been running all night.

I put my hand flat on his chest. His heart is slamming.

"Oh," I say. "You're scared."

"Shut up, thief."

"You are. You're *terrified*."

He lifts me onto the table in one move. The lamp goes over and rolls. The light swings wild across the ceiling. He shoves my knees apart and steps between them. There's nothing scared in his face at all.

"Take these off," he says, with his hand on the button of my jeans. "Or I will. You won't like how."

"Make me."

His eyes go black.

He doesn't take them off gently. He gets the button open, then the zip, and drags the jeans down my legs with my underwear tangled inside them. One sneaker goes flying and hits the glass. The other one comes off with the jeans. Then I'm naked on his table with the whole harbor behind me, and he's standing between my knees, looking at me as if I'm the last thing he ever expected to be given.

"Finally," he says. "I sat in that chair and watched them put their hands on you. All night. And I just sat there."

"Poor thing."

"Don't." His hand slides up the inside of my thigh. Slow. "Don't you dare be cute at me right now."

"What are you going to do about it?"

He shows me.

He drops to his knees on the floor between my legs. He drags me to the edge of the table by my hips. Then he puts his mouth on me without any warning at all.

I scream. I don't mean to. It comes straight up out of me and rings off the glass. There's nobody for a mile in any direction, and he must know it, because he doesn't try to stop me. He doesn't do it slowly, the way Beau did. He doesn't tease. He holds my thighs open with both hands, hard enough to bruise, and eats me like a punishment. His tongue drags flat and slow from my entrance all the way up to my clit, once, as if he's tasting everything he's been denied all summer. Then he seals his mouth over my clit and sucks, hard, with a ferocity that whites out my vision.

I buck against his face. He pins my hips flat to the table with one forearm and doesn't let me move at all.

Then he turns his head and bites the inside of my thigh.

Not gently. Hard enough that I yelp, hard enough that I'll be wearing his teeth tomorrow. He soothes the bite with his tongue, slow, and goes straight back to my clit, sucking, flicking, relentless, growling into me so that I feel it all the way up my spine. My heels drum on his back. My hands are in his hair, pulling.

"You taste like you've been wet for me all summer," he says against me, filthy and low. "Have you? Every morning at breakfast, with your mother passing the jam?"

"Fuck... *Callum*..."

"Answer me."

"Yes. Yes, you bastard."

He bites my other thigh, harder. "Then scream for me."

"Callum," I gasp. It's the first time I've ever said his name like this. "Oh God. *Callum*."

He lifts his head just long enough to say, "Again. Louder."

"*Callum*."

He puts his mouth back on me, and I come before I'm ready, all at once, like falling. My back arches off the table. The logbooks behind me crash off their shelf. I'm still coming when he pushes two fingers into me and curls them. It starts all over again, rolling right through the first one. I can't breathe.

"Greedy," he says, rough, against the inside of my knee. "Still greedy."

"Fuck you," I gasp, breathless, because he still hasn't stopped. His fingers are still moving inside me. My thighs are shaking on either side of his head.

"Yes." He finally stands. His hands go to his belt. "That's next."

I sit up, shaking, and help him. My fingers are clumsy on the buckle. He brushes them away and does it himself, fast, shoving his jeans down. He's hard, thick, flushed dark. I wrap my hand around him just to hear the noise he makes. It's a good noise. It's the best noise I've ever heard a man make.

He catches my wrist and moves it off him. He pulls a condom out of his back pocket and tears it open with his teeth, his eyes on mine the whole time.

He rolls it on. Then he takes my hips in both hands and pulls me to the very edge of the table. He looks at me for just a breath in the swinging light, with the red mark of my hand still on his cheek.

"Your word," he says again, very low.

"Callum." I hold his eyes. "If you ask me one more time, I'm going to use it just to spite you."

Something almost like a smile goes across his mouth.

Then he pushes into me, all the way, in one hard stroke, and I stop being able to make words.

There's nothing slow about it. Nothing careful. He takes me on the table with one hand on my hip and the other braced on the glass behind my head. Every thrust shoves the table back across the floor. The old legs scream against the boards. I wrap my legs around him, dig my heels into his back and meet him, every time, as hard as he gives it. It isn't gentle. It isn't sweet. It's every look across the breakfast table, every door he slammed, every cold word, and every night in the mask, all of it coming out at once.

"You stayed," he says through his teeth. "I tried to make you leave. You stayed."

"You didn't try hard enough."

"Twenty grand."

"I bought a dress with it." I drag my nails down his back. "Rhett liked it."

He snarls and picks me up off the table.

I'm in the air, clinging to him, with him still inside me. Then my back slams into the glass, cold all down my spine. He's fucking me against the window with the whole black harbor behind me, the light from the ledge sweeping across us. Anyone out on the water could see. There's nobody out on the water. It doesn't matter. My hands slap the glass on either side of my head and leave prints in the fog of our breath.

"Look at me," he says.

I look at him. It isn't a mask, a blank white oval with a flat machine voice. It's his face, gray eyes gone black, his mouth, the red mark on his cheek. It's a man I've hated across a breakfast table for a whole summer, his face naked, furious and wrecked, an inch from mine.

"There you are," I whisper.

That's what breaks him.

He carries me back from the glass, three steps, and goes down with me onto the wooden chair. It takes our weight for one second. Then it gives with a crack like a gunshot. The seat splits. Both of us go down in a heap of broken wood onto the floor. He takes the fall. I land on top of him, still joined, with a chair leg rolling away across the boards.

For a second neither of us moves.

Then I start to laugh. I can't help it. I'm naked on top of him in the wreckage of his chair, with the lamp on its side and logbooks everywhere. I laugh until I'm shaking.

He's laughing too.

I've never heard it. Not once all summer. It's low, rough and helpless. It changes his whole face. It goes into me like a knife.

"Oh, God," I say. "I broke your chair."

"I broke it."

"I'm on top. I'm taking credit."

He's still laughing when he grabs my hips. Then he stops laughing. He rolls his hips up into me, slow and deep. I stop laughing too.

"Then ride me, thief," he says, very quietly. "Show me what you showed them. Then I'll show you how it's done."

I ride him on the floor in the broken chair. My knees on the cold boards, my hands flat on his chest, the light going around and around over our

heads. He lets me have it for a while. He watches my face the whole time, the way he watched it in the boathouse, as if he can't stand to miss a second.

Then he takes it back.

He rolls us over, broken wood and all, and takes me on the floor with my wrists pinned over my head in one of his hands. It's hard, deep and wild. The table goes over somewhere behind us. Something glass breaks. I don't care. I'm saying his name over and over. He's saying things in my ear, rough and filthy, things no one has ever said to me in my life.

"This is mine," he says. "This sound. Mine. I've heard you make it for three men, and I'll hear it for three more if you want them, but this one is mine."

"Yes."

"Say it."

"It's yours. Callum. It's yours."

He lets go of my wrists and gets his hand between us. I come apart under him on the floor of the lantern room, my hands in his hair, my heels digging into the floor. He follows me, hard, with his face pressed into my neck and a sound torn out of him that I'll hear in my sleep for the rest of my life.

For a long time, nothing moves but the light.

It goes around, across us and away, across us and away. The fire must have burned down below, because the room is getting cold. I don't feel it. He's heavy and hot on top of me, his heart still pounding against my chest, his breath ragged in my ear.

Finally he lifts his head.

He looks at me. Then he looks around the room at the table on its side, the lamp in a corner still glowing at the ceiling, the chair in pieces and the logbooks. My sneaker lies under the window. A pane of glass in the lower frame has a crack running right across it that wasn't there an hour ago.

"Well," he says.

"Better?" I ask.

He looks down at me. For a long moment he doesn't answer.

Then he puts his forehead against mine and closes his eyes.

"Better," he says.

We lie there in the wreckage until the cold drives us to find our clothes. I wriggle back into my jeans, with my knife still in the back pocket. He pulls his sweater over my head instead of my own, and I let him. It smells

like cedar, smoke and the sea. For one second I'm back in the boathouse the night I killed a man, with a gloved hand closing my fingers around a coin. Of course it was him. Of course it was always him.

I'm sitting on the floor in his sweater, with my back against the glass, when I hear the door at the bottom of the tower bang open.

There are feet on the iron stairs, several sets of them.

"Are we decent?" Rhett's voice floats up the spiral, loud and cheerful. "Beau wants to know if we're decent. I told him it's too late for any of us."

Callum closes his eyes.

"I told them dawn," he says.

I look out the glass. Over the town, the sky is starting to go pale.

"It's dawn," I say.

Under his sweater, against my skin, Daisy's locket is warm.

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34

WREN

Rhett's head comes up through the hatch first.

He stops with his shoulders in the room and his feet still on the iron stairs. He looks around at the table on its side, the lamp in the corner pointing at the ceiling, the logbooks fanned across the floor like a dropped deck of cards, and the chair, which isn't a chair anymore. Then he sees me against the glass, in jeans and a black sweater that comes halfway down my thighs. Callum sits beside me in his jeans and nothing else, with a red handprint on his cheek.

Rhett's whole face lights up.

"Oh, *hell* yes," he says.

"Don't," Callum says.

"I didn't say anything."

"You said *hell yes*."

"I said it with love." Rhett climbs the rest of the way up into the room and stands with his hands on his hips, surveying the damage like a contractor. "Did she hit you?"

"Yes."

"How many times?"

Callum looks at the ceiling. "More than once."

Rhett spins around and shouts back down the hatch. "Beau! She hit him more than once! You owe me twenty bucks!"

"I said she'd hit him!" Beau's voice floats up the spiral. "That was my whole bet!"

"You said she'd hit him and *leave*! She stayed! Look at her! She's wearing his sweater!"

"I can't look at her, Rhett, I'm on the stairs!"

Beau's head comes up through the hatch. He's carrying a cardboard tray of coffees from the French bakery with a white paper bag balanced on top. He stops exactly where Rhett stopped and takes in the room with his mouth slightly open.

"Was that the chair?" he asks faintly. "Your grandfather's chair? That chair survived a hurricane, Callum. It survived the seventies."

"It didn't survive her."

"It didn't survive *you*," I say.

Beau looks at me, then at Callum, then at the crack running across the lower pane of glass, then back at me, in Callum's sweater, with my hair wrecked and my mouth swollen. A slow, delighted smile spreads across his whole face.

"Good morning, Wren," he says, very warmly. "I brought you a coffee. Oat milk. You look like you need it."

"Bless you," I tell him, and take the coffee with both hands.

"I get that a lot. It's a burden." He holds out the paper bag to Callum. "Almond croissant. Apparently they're the good ones."

Callum takes it. He doesn't say thank you. He doesn't have to.

Beau's eyes go to the cracked pane of glass, then back to him. "You're going to need to fix that."

"Yeah, yeah," Callum says. "Right after you pay for my paint job."

Beau sips his coffee. "I'll put it on my tab." He looks happier than I've ever seen him.

Silas comes up last.

He doesn't say anything. He stands at the top of the hatch in black, with his hands in his pockets, and looks at the room the way he looks at everything, slow, missing nothing. He takes in the broken chair, the sneaker under the window, the red mark on Callum's face, and me.

His eyes stay on me for a long moment. They go, very briefly, to the thin gold chain showing at the neck of the sweater. Then he looks away, out at the water, and his jaw goes tight.

I don't think anything of it. Not then.

"Hey," I say to him. "Morning."

"Morning, Wren Elise." He sits down on the floor by the hatch with his back against the wall. "You found the fire."

"I found the fire."

"Good." He shuts his eyes. "Beau made him."

"I *suggested*," Beau says. "Strongly. Twice. With visual aids."

Rhett picks up a chair leg and turns it over in his hands. "Oak," he says to Callum, impressed. "You snapped oak." He fishes my sneaker out from under the window and drops it in my lap without comment.

Callum's shoulder is pressed against mine. He hasn't moved it away.

"Marisol's going to ask where my sweater went," he says, low, not looking at me.

"Tell her a thief took it."

"She'll believe me." He drinks his coffee. "She'll be on your side."

"Everyone's on my side this morning."

"Yes," he says, looking out at the water. "They are."

I sit against the glass with my coffee and watch them.

The sun is coming up over the town. The whole harbor is going pink and gold below us. Rhett is telling Beau how he nearly put the truck in the marsh on the way out here. Beau is pretending to be appalled by every word. Silas looks almost asleep.

This is it. This is what it was supposed to feel like.

All of them are in the same room as me, with their faces on. Happy might not even be the word. Whatever this is, I've never had it before this summer. I'm on a cold floor in a broken room in a stolen sweater, and I could stay here for the rest of my life.

Under the sweater, against my skin, the locket is warm.

I turn my head and look at Callum.

"Rhett told me something once," I say. "The night his mask came off."

It gets quiet. Not all at once. Rhett stops mid-story. Beau's coffee stops on the way to his mouth. Silas opens his eyes.

"I asked him about the girl on the rocks," I say. "The girl from last summer. He said you all knew her, and it guts him, and it was the boss's story to tell." I hold Callum's eyes. "You're the boss."

Callum doesn't answer right away. He looks at Rhett. Rhett looks at the floor.

"He said he'd be there when I heard it," I say. "He's here. So tell me."

"Champ..." Rhett starts.

"I'm not asking you." I don't look away from Callum. "You said it was his."

Callum looks at me for a long time. I can't read his face. For the first time all night, I can't read it at all.

"Not up here," he says finally.

He stands and holds out his hand to me. I look at it, the split knuckles, the long fingers. Then I take it and let him pull me up.

"Downstairs," he says. "Silas. The lights."

Silas gets up without a word and goes down the hatch first.

We follow him down the spiral, one after another, the iron stairs ringing under our feet. Callum, then me, then Beau and Rhett. Halfway down, Beau's hand touches my back, light, just there, the way my mother's did at the station.

"You okay?" he murmurs.

"Ask me after," I say.

He doesn't take his hand away. He keeps it there all the way down the stairs, as if he's afraid that if he lets go, I'll fall straight through the floor.

The cold comes up off the stone. By the time we reach the second floor, I've stopped being warm.

Silas flips a switch. Overhead lights stutter and come on, bank by bank, harsh and white.

It's a big round room, the whole width of the tower. On one side there's a long table of screens, all dark, with a cot pushed under the window that doesn't look slept in. There's a coffee maker, a space heater and a gray hoodie thrown over the back of a desk chair.

On the other side is the wall.

I saw it last night in the dark, a shape I couldn't make out. Now I can.

It's covered in paper from the floor up to the height of a man's reach. Photographs, printouts, names and handwriting are pinned in rough rows across the curved stone. They're mostly men's faces, from driver's license photos, company headshots and one mugshot. A man in a tuxedo smiles at a gala, with his arm around someone who's been cut out of the picture. Beside each face are notes on addresses, plates and times.

Some of the photos have a coin taped to the corner. A worn silver coin, like the one in my nightstand drawer.

"Wren," Callum says behind me. "Come and sit down first."

"No."

"Please."

It's the first time he's ever said that word to me. I keep walking.

I recognize the first face before I'm close enough to read the name, from the tan, the white teeth and the expensive haircut. It's the photo from the yacht club website, where he's holding up a trophy. Grant Whitlock.

There's a coin taped to the corner of his photo. Under it, on the paper, in small black marker, there's a single word.

hers

I stare at it. My face goes hot, then cold.

That one's yours. That's what the white mask said in the boathouse, pressing the coin into my bloody hand. *You paid his fare.*

The handwriting is small, black and very careful. I saw it last night, on the back of his father's business card, on my pillow.

"You labeled him," I say. "With me."

"It's how we keep track," Silas says quietly, from the screens. "Of whose fare it was."

I look along the row, at a coin, another coin, then a silver-haired man in a quarter-zip sweater pouring himself wine in a kitchen on Shore Road, with no coin yet, only a question mark. Then another coin. Every coin is a man they took out past the point on a dark tide. None of them came home.

Then my eyes get to the middle of the wall.

It's the only photo that isn't a man.

It's a glossy print, the kind the club's photographer hands out after a party, and the corners have gone soft from being handled. It's pinned right in the center of everything, with clear stone all around it, as if the whole wall grew outward from that one spot.

A girl is laughing in it. She's twenty-three. She's standing on a lawn at night under string lights with a glass of champagne in her hand, her head thrown back, her blond hair coming loose. She's wearing a green dress.

My green dress.

I've seen her in it before, in the photos from that night. I've read her own handwriting about it, in her notebook, in the dark. *Wearing Wren's green dress tomorrow. She'll kill me. Worth it.*

There's no coin on her picture.

Under it, in the same small, careful handwriting, there's one word.

ours

The floor tilts under me.

The coffee is still in my hand. I don't know how. I set it down on the edge of the table of screens, very carefully, because my hands have started to shake and I don't want to spill it. That seems important. Not spilling it.

Then I reach up and pull the locket out from under the sweater.

It swings on its chain in the white light, small and gold, dented on one side.

Behind me, Callum stops breathing.

"Where did you get that?" he says.

His voice has changed. It isn't the breakfast voice, or the machine voice, or the rough voice from the glass room upstairs. It's very quiet. It's a voice I've never heard him use.

"She threw it at my head," I say. I don't turn around. I'm looking at her laughing face. "During a fight about a boy named Derek. It left a dent. She never got it fixed. She said it gave it character." My voice is coming from very far away. "She wore it every day after that."

Nobody says anything.

I turn around.

They're standing in the middle of the room under the harsh white lights. Rhett has gone gray under his tan, the way he was at the station. Beau has gone white to the lips, one hand locked on the back of the desk chair as if the floor is moving under him. Callum is closest, a step away, staring at the locket in my hand as if it's a gun.

"So you're Daisy's sister," he says.

It isn't a question. It comes out of him flat, low and wrecked. Then he turns his head, slowly, and looks at Silas.

Silas is standing by the screens.

He doesn't look surprised. That's what I see. Of everyone in this room, he's the only one whose face hasn't changed. He's looking at Callum with his hands at his sides and his jaw set. In his dark eyes there's no shock at all. Just something tired and bleak, something that's been waiting.

He knew.

He's known the whole time, since the night he called me Wren Elise for the first time and the night in the dark with the cold tea, when I told him about the dent and the boy named Derek. *I know you're Daisy's sister.* He said it to me. He never said it to them.

"You knew," Callum says to him.

"Since the first night," Silas says.

"And you didn't tell me."

"You told me to let her tell you." Silas doesn't look away from him. "She's telling you."

Callum's face does something terrible.

I don't stay to watch it. I look back at the wall, at *hers* under the man I killed and *ours* under my sister's laughing face, in the same pen and the same hand.

Hers.

Ours.

I understand the wall now. I understand exactly what it is. It's a list. Every face on it is someone they took out on the water. And in the middle of all of it, the first one, the one the whole wall grew out of, is my sister.

"What does it mean?" I ask.

No one answers.

"*Ours.*" I point at it. My hand is shaking so hard the locket chain rattles. "Under her picture. What does *ours* mean?"

Rhett opens his mouth. Then he closes it again. He's looking at me with tears standing in his eyes, and he doesn't say anything. And I remember. *Ask me something else. Because I'll lie to you.* That's what he said the first night, sitting in my reading chair in a cracked mask, with his knife on my rug.

He isn't lying now. He just isn't saying anything at all.

Beau lets go of the chair. "Wren..."

"Don't." I take a step back. My heel hits the bottom of the iron stairs. "Don't *Wren* me. Just answer the question."

Callum takes a step toward me.

My knife is out of my back pocket before I know I've moved. The black folding knife from Hartford, cleaned and folded and left on my pillow. I flick it open with my thumb, the way I practiced in a motel mirror, and the small sharp sound of it stops every one of them dead.

"Don't come near me," I say.

Callum stops. He looks at the knife, then at me. He doesn't put his hands up. He just stands there under the white light with my handprint still on his face.

"Wren," he says. "Listen to me."

"I'll listen." My voice cracks straight down the middle. "I'll listen to one word. That's all I need from you. A single word."

I look at each of them. Rhett is gray and silent, his fists clenched at his sides. Beau's hands are open now, reaching for nothing. Silas is by the screens, the one who knew. Callum is a step away, with his face naked and wrecked.

They've called me champ, wife, baby and thief. They've carried me to the bath. They've stroked my hair off my face. They've had their hands on me, every one of them, and an hour ago I was sitting on a floor upstairs thinking I'd never been so happy in my life.

"Did you kill my sister?" I ask.

The overhead lights hum.

Down on the rocks below the point, the tide is going out.

Not one of them says no.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN MARKED

She came to Port Halloway to find out who killed her sister.
She found four men who wear masks, keep a wall of the dead, and wrote one word under her sister's face.
Now she knows who they are.
Now she needs to know what they did.

"WREN," Callum says again.

"Don't."

"You don't understand what you're looking at."

"Then tell me." My voice cracks. "Right now. One word. Tell me no."

He opens his mouth. Nothing comes out of it.

Not one of them says no.

"Put the knife down," Callum says. His voice is flat and very quiet. "Then I'll tell you."

"You'll tell me a story."

"I'll tell you the truth. Down first."

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