

THESE HOUSES OF INTIMATE ACQUAINTANCES

A NOVEL

BY

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“The evening, without employment, passed in a room high up in an hotel, was long and heavy. Mr. Hale went out to his bookseller’s, and to call on a friend or two. Every one they saw, either in the house or out in the streets, appeared hurrying to some appointment, expected by, or expecting somebody. They alone seemed strange and friendless, and desolate. Yet within a mile, Margaret knew of house after house, where she for her own sake, and her mother for her aunt Shaw’s, would be welcomed, if they came in gladness, or even in peace of mind. If they came sorrowing, and wanting sympathy in a complicated trouble like the present, then they would be felt as a shadow in all **these houses of intimate acquaintances**, not friends.”

- Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*

“You’re keeping in step
In the line
Got your chin held high and you feel just fine
Because you do
What you’re told
But inside your heart it is black and it’s hollow and it’s cold.”
- Nine Inch Nails, “The Hand that Feeds”

CHAPTER ONE

They were not in Indiana but two hours before the car broke down. Mags had unpacked her few boxes of clothes and books from the U-Haul and, after a quick shower, volunteered to return it so her father or mother didn't have to. They were all tired, after all, worn out from the road, and defeated by sun and circumstance. Not surprisingly, her mother and father agreed, with a simple reminder to bring the GPS along. She had arrived at the site, watched as the mechanic unhooked the trailer from the Land Rover, and was lost halfway back to her grandmother's house—home now, she thought—when the engine gave a great shudder, then a little one, then clicked to silence.

She managed to coast off the road into an empty elementary school parking lot and waited it out for five minutes. The SUV was ten years old, so it wasn't the first time it had broken down. It might, however, have been the first time it broke down after fourteen hours on the road, in the worst heat wave the Midwest had seen in thirty years. Normally, it needed a little bit of cooling off, some water added to the radiator, and she would be good to go.

Mags timed it, five minutes exactly, before she climbed out of her car into the sticky August air and lifted the hood. She was not a mechanic, had no real understanding of cars or their inner workings, but she had been driving the Land Rover long enough to know that a splash of water wasn't going to solve this problem.

Not for the first time, she wished they had been able to afford to keep the new car.

She leaned against the car door and closed her eyes for a long moment, sucking in the hot humidity through her teeth. Then she opened her eyes and reached into the car for the phone.

"Hi, Dad," she said when he answered. "The car broke down."

"Just wait it out," he said. "There's water in the trunk."

She climbed back into the driver's seat and left the door open for some breeze. "That's not going to work. There's something seriously wrong with it. There's this kind of... burning smell."

Her father was silent. "Where are you?"

"Does it matter?" she asked.

"I can send a tow truck by, to pick the car up." There was a moment's pause. "And you. I'm sure the mechanic can give you a ride."

He hadn't offered himself. She knew he was busy unpacking her mother's room, making sure everything was just so. There was the eyelet cover, of course, and the fan, and the essential oils that would help calm her nerves. It had been such a long drive, after all. Such a long, hot summer. "Can *she* come get me?" she asked.

Another pause. "Your grandmother's busy, Margaret. This has been a long day for her, as well."

It hadn't needed to be. All she had to do was wait for the Louisiana invasion to arrive on her doorstep and welcome home the return of her wayward son, gone now these twenty years to New Orleans, but returned back to the Midwestern fold. She hadn't done anything to prepare, not really. The room allotted to Mags was covered in doilies and photographs of people she didn't recognize, belying her grandmother's insistence that she "make yourself at home." But Mags said none of those things.

"Or the car might be fixed before you know it," her dad continued. "Can you tell me where you are?"

"Of course," she agreed, because she always agreed. That's what she was good for, after all. She peered out the window at the school in front of her and gave her father the name.

“Sit tight,” he said. “The tow truck should be there in ten minutes.”

It was not ten minutes. Mags watched the clock tick eleven, then twelve, then thirteen. She undid the clasp in her hair, twisted the length and secured the damp mass of it again. “Catholic school girl hair,” Henry had always called it, that sloppy bun with its waterfall ends dangling over whatever barrette or clip the girls had found to get their hair up and off their necks.

Before she allowed her brain to travel down that path, Mags closed her eyes to the relentless onslaught of the summer light. Still, the sun intruded. Too bright, it burned against her, turning the inside of her eyelids pink.

The blur of the pink, the streaking against her eyelids brought back a memory, so vivid and real she tasted it in her mouth. When she was ten years old, New Orleans went through a cold snap like it hadn’t before, not in her lifetime. Her parents braved the cold to take her to her favorite Mardi Gras parade: Bacchus. The closest parking spot they could find was eight blocks away, and by block four, she felt too cold to walk. She must have whined enough because her brother ended up lifting her to sit on his shoulders as they walked the rest of the way to Napoleon Avenue.

The parade had already started by the time they found the rest of the family, but because of her vantage point on Freddie’s shoulders, Mags saw it first. And she saw it in a way she never had before. The cold air—not all that cold for the rest of the world, but 35 degrees in New Orleans was next door to blizzard—made everything seem crisp and sharp. Even the scent of cotton candy and plastic beads in the air burnt her nostrils and tickled as it went down. But the *lights*. The beautiful, gorgeous lights smeared across the night sky as the big floats rolled down the street. The streak of color, the flash of camera bulbs and beads, of streetlamps and the flambeaux swirled together in her mind, and even at ten, she wished she could capture that

moment—that happy, delicious moment—forever. Freeze it in time, to take out of a box and treasure whenever she wanted.

Her parents often remarked that after that Mardi Gras, Mags became peculiarly obsessed with cameras, but she understood the rightness of preservation, of holding on to a moment, to relive it whenever she pleased. Her mother, in particular, was so kind, so supportive when it came to her photography. At least, she had been then.

If only she could fall into that familial memory now, cradled in the crisp love of February in New Orleans. Not into the memory of last night, its sticky August heat, Henry’s palm damp against hers, his breath too warm, too wet against her ear. “Just stay,” he had whispered. “For fuck’s sake, Mags, just stay.”

“*For me,*” were the unspoken words. She resented them, both for their selfishness and for the fact that they stayed unspoken.

She opened her eyes. Twenty-one minutes now, and no sign of the tow truck. She glanced in the rearview mirror and saw her face had flushed as pink as her memory. Reaching into her purse for a face wipe, her fingers brushed her camera instead.

Edie’s face was first, of course, as she flipped through the dozens of pictures she had taken yesterday. A proper farewell, Edie had said. She had even had t-shirts made, and, laughing, forced them all to wear them. When Mags clicked to picture three, she saw the shot taken by their waiter at Café du Monde, Edie and Noah clinging to each other, Mags on Edie’s other side, smiling, and Henry at her right, sullen and silent for the camera. But they all wore those obnoxious bright blue shirts with “Margaret Hale’s Farewell Tour” emblazoned on the front and “THANK YOU, NEW ORLEANS!” printed on the back.

Picture after picture: beignets for breakfast, shrimp po-boys and muffalettas for lunch, boiled crawfish for dinner. Sunset on the levee, the bright flash of lights and beads on Bourbon Street, the darkened alleys off of Jackson Square. Henry hanging from the fence around the Mint screaming Decemberists' lyrics from the top of his lungs, and Edie and Noah dancing under the stars, right in the middle of Royal. Henry, lifting Mags over his shoulder and she, laughing so hard, tears streamed down her face. More photos, ones she took and ones she didn't, the difference marked by her presence and the quality of framing. Noah could never get the subject in the center of the frame, while Edie preferred "artistic shots": someone's feet, trash blowing by, candlelit parlors. Only Henry preferred extreme close-ups, and there was a series of them, photo after photo of Mags's face.

One, with Edie, her lips pursed against Edie's cheek, Edie laughing her wide-mouthed, squinty-eyed laugh. One well into the wee hours of the morning, where the night brushed against her skin, making it even paler than normal. One of the two of them, her head resting on Henry's shoulder as they both stared—"serious," he had said, "because this is a serious fucking occasion"—solemn and still, at the camera in his hand. And the last, before she had taken her camera back for the final shots, of Mags, standing alone, staring at the Mississippi River.

Henry was not a trained photographer, not like she was. But her critical eye noticed the quality of the image. The framing of the shot. She was in the first third of the frame with the wide expanse of the river stretching out at her side. Her hair was down, dark against her cheeks and shoulders, and she stood almost on tiptoe, as if she were going to leap, at any moment, into the calm muddiness below. As if she could fly. It was a careful shot, beautiful, one designed to make the background and the subject look, despite their plainness, rather extraordinary indeed.

She swiped her wrist at her eyes and checked the time. It was officially thirty-two minutes by the time the truck did swing into the parking lot. Mags had sweat through her t-shirt and felt her shorts sticking to the backs of her legs. But after she put her camera back in her back, she climbed out of the Land Rover and waved needlessly at the driver. He swung around so that he was on the near side of her. She read “CALEB MUELLER AUTO SERVICES” painted on the side of his truck.

“You Fred Hale’s daughter?” the man asked.

Her hand formed a visor over her eyes, shielding them from the worst of the sun. She saw that the man was on the younger side of middle-aged, with a thick head of reddish-brown hair not at all given over to gray. “I’m Margaret,” she said. “Thanks for coming.”

He smiled at her, quick and sudden, and his teeth flashed white against his smudged face. “I’m Caleb. Sorry I wasn’t here sooner. I was at a job about forty minutes away. Got here as fast as I could.”

She gave him a tired nod. “Thank you for coming so quickly. May I help you with the car?”

He blinked at her twice before he shook his head. “No, that’s okay. Get your stuff and come inside, soak up some A/C. You look like you might keel over, any minute.”

She dragged a hand across her forehead and nodded. She gathered her bag, phone, and drink while he readied his tow truck.

When he climbed into the cab several minutes later, she peeled open her eyes to look at him. “Thank you,” she said again.

He shrugged. “Nothing to thank me for. Just doing my job.” But he reached over and angled the left middle vent toward her, so that three blasts of air hit her, not two.

Mags closed her eyes as the coolness washed over her.

“I thought you was from New Orleans?” The question wasn’t really a question, but ended up anyhow. “This kind of heat can’t be a stranger to you.”

She opened her eyes but stared straight ahead, trying to find something familiar in the neighborhood in front of her. “I am,” she said. “It’s just... it’s been a long day.”

“You drove in this morning?” When she nodded, he let out a low whistle. “How long’s that drive?”

“Almost thirteen hours,” she said. Her knees felt sticky from the Styrofoam cup she clutched between them. She lifted the cup and took a long sip of cherry limeade. “We left at two a.m. Dad wanted to miss the majority of the heat.”

“Drove all night?” he asked. When she nodded, he let out another of his whistles. “You must be beat, kiddo. When we get back to my shop, I’ll get my nephew to run you home, get you some rest.”

She looked over at him with steady eyes. “Thank you, Mr. Mueller,” she said again, and wondered if she would ever stop saying it. A constant stream of gratitudes: thank you, grandmother, for letting us move into your home. Thank you, stranger, for showing more kindness than the majority of our friends. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you all.

He smiled over at her, suddenly shy, and she saw the boy this man had been, some fifteen, twenty years before. He had been handsome, was still so, for a man in his forties, working seventy-hour weeks of hard, manual labor. “My nephew’s about your age. What are you, seventeen?”

She nodded and looked out the window again. There was a sign advertising “DONUT HOLDUP” and she remembered one winter, back when they still visited Grandma Hale, going there on Christmas Eve. “Does he go to Milton?”

“Yep. Plays football, too.”

She couldn't help her wince, but didn't think this man noticed.

“I knew your dad, way back. Did he tell you that?”

He hadn't, but she nodded anyhow.

The man continued, clear he wasn't waiting for an answer. “Your dad was one of the best,” he said. “Took his school to state. Course, he went to Helstone. That's where you're going, right?”

Mags shook her head. “Milton,” she said.

She felt rather than saw his surprise at her comment. “I just assumed your grandmother would insist on Helstone,” he said.

Oh, she had, but since she hadn't been willing or able to pay for it, public school it was. The family couldn't afford private school, not anymore. Yet another point of contention between Mags's mother and her grandmother. Yet another result of the family's problems—Mags's indiscretions, they had called them—to lay at Mags's feet.

“I was at Milton, but your dad and I knew each other through church.” He paused. “That was a long time ago, but everyone pretty much knows everyone on this side of town. And everyone knows everyone's business.” That explained how he knew they were coming, then. Another pause. “Your dad had a hell... a heck of an arm.”

“He still does,” she said.

“Just... assistant coach? For high school?” He glanced over at Mags. “I thought he was a head coach or something at one of those colleges down there.”

Mags hands clenched around her drink. So everyone *did* know everyone else’s business around here. It seemed an important point to hold on to for later consumption, to pick it apart when she had the moment. New Orleans had been a big small town, with everyone knowing “your mom ’n them.” But this was an actual small town, with actual small town gossip. Mags felt her stomach clench as she thought, not again. “He was,” she said in a soft voice. “Then, we decided to move here.”

“Decided” was such an interesting word, meaning that input was given, opinions asked, clear choices made. There had been no input, not on her part. But then, she lost the privilege of giving her opinion sometime last year. She couldn’t blame them. Her words had caused so many reverberating problems, after all. Freddie had heard the one-word answer to his question—“Was it them?”—and all their worlds exploded and collided and exploded again.

“There have been some problems locally,” Mr. Mueller said, continuing to make random conversation, it seemed. “With the teacher unions. Did that make the news all the way down there in New Orleans?”

“We’ve had some local problems of our own,” Mags said. “But I haven’t heard anything about Indiana.” She followed the news rabidly, had been photographer of the school paper when she was in New Orleans and had aspirations of becoming a photojournalist. Everywhere in the country, it seemed, was having problems with the unions and the schools. But she didn’t know of any problems specific to her new home.

“Well, it’s a real mess,” Mr. Mueller said. “My sister, Sean’s mother? She’s the superintendent, and she’s always got concerns. Milton’s the center of it all, it seems.” A pause, then, “And you’ll be in the center of it now, too. She’s at her end with it.”

“Is she?” Mags asked, tired.

Mr. Mueller looked over at her and gave her a little sympathetic smile. “Your brother was All-American too, wasn’t he?” he asked, changing the subject. “I saw the game he led against Auburn, few years back. Goddamn, that boy has an arm just like your daddy’s. I always thought he was going to go pro.”

He hands clenched harder and she felt the Styrofoam begin to crumple under them. “That was a long time ago.” She eased her grip and lifted the drink to her mouth and took a long sip.

Mr. Mueller turned then and the road changed, became rougher underneath them. She felt the jolt and jostle of the bumps and one of her hands gripped the door handle for balance. Then the road turned to gravel, and they pulled around the back of a body shop.

Mags looked out the window as the truck beeped its intention to back up. Through the side mirror, she saw three men step out of the bay and blink against the sunlight.

“Doesn’t look like Sean’s back yet.” Mr. Mueller put the truck in park and turned to look at her. “Do you mind waiting for a few minutes? He’ll be happy to bring you back to your grandma’s when he gets here.”

“If it’s not too much trouble,” she said. “Thank you.”

At this eighth or ninth repetition of gratitude, his brow furrowed. “Seriously, Margaret. It’s really no big deal. We’re happy to do it. I’d bring you myself but I want to get started on your car so we can get you mobile before school starts.” Again, the sudden flash of smile,

paternal and kind, and she couldn't help it, not in the face of such kindness, and she smiled back, hesitant, but it seemed to placate him.

“Come on in,” he said, and hopped out the truck. “We'll get you something to drink, something to eat. Oh, and Margaret?”

She glanced at him. “Sir?”

He seemed pleased at that, her inconsequential nicety. “Welcome to Marlborough.”

CHAPTER TWO

After fifteen minutes, Mags began prowling the waiting room like a child on Christmas eve, looking for all the toys hidden by conniving parents. By minute twenty, she found sixteen magazines, only three of which were more than a year old, fifty-two cents in change down the back of the yellow plaid couch, a crumpled quiz for a sixth-grade reading class—the student, one Jerrica Howland, had scored 100% and a smiley face—a giraffe and elephant from a Noah’s Ark play set, and an unused moist towelette.

She glanced out the window at the shop beyond. There was no sign of any nephew, but the Land Rover was at least up on the lift, two mechanics and Mr. Mueller examining it.

After lining up her found treasures on the table housing the ancient but serviceable coffee pot, Mags grabbed her bag and stepped through the internal door to the shop. The music, which had been a subtle bass line inside the waiting room, burst into a suddenness of sound, a wailing denial of the singer’s renegade status. She smiled to herself. She couldn’t help it. Whoever had chosen the music clearly had a thing for classic rock.

Mr. Mueller looked away from her SUV. “Everything okay, Margaret? Can I get you something more to drink?”

“I’m okay,” she said. “Just a bit stir crazy is all, after the drive.” The room had begun to drive her nuts, its wood paneling becoming oppressive the more she stared at it. She pointed to the shaded patio off the side of the shop. “Do you mind if I hang out over there?”

“Of course not,” he said. “As long as you’re not under the cars, you can go wherever you want.”

She thanked him again—what was it, her twentieth time, between the ride and the coke and the donuts and chips?—and wandered outside. The patio wasn’t actually such, just a slab of

concrete with a few plastic chairs and tables in cozy arrangements of four, but someone had made an effort to make it more hospitable. There were a few hardy plants along a low-slung brick wall separating the chairs from the parking lot, giving some semblance of privacy. With the air-conditioning oozing out from the shop and the faint press of music, it was rather homey and inviting.

Mags slung her bag on the table to the right and pulled out her camera. *Click.* She snapped a shot of the brick wall, crumbling at the edges. *Click.* Another shot of the concrete slab, with the initials SCT and LFT etched sometime when it was first poured. *Click.* The solar lights, strung along the plants, as the sun began to sink lower in the sky.

She looked up and saw that the sun wasn't setting, not yet, but there was a bite in the air as if the oppressive heat was going to break into rain at any moment. Dark clouds roiled in the distance, ominous, but beautiful.

The music had changed at some point, from classic rock to Muse, of all things, and she realized that for a brief solitary moment for the first time in months, perhaps years, she wasn't accountable to anyone. No one knew where she was. No one was asking anything of her, not her parents—too twisted up in their own drama to bother much with her anyhow, and hadn't she always been the child no one need worry about?—not Edie and Noah—hundreds of miles away—and not Henry—even further withdrawn emotionally, after last night.

She was free to be herself without judgmental, demanding eyes.

Camera in hand, she zoomed up, snapping shot after shot of the sky. Adjusting the light levels, she knelt on the ground and stared hard at the initials in the concrete. Children must have drawn them, the hand shaky but deep, and she snapped three shots of the SCT initials. Something bright under the brick caught her eye and she stretched out on her stomach, right

there on the ground, zooming in further and further. Her feet kicked up behind her in time to the music, and she found herself singing along with the song, declaring she would not be forced or degraded or controlled.

When she saw it, finally, the setting sun catching it just right, she almost laughed out loud. It was a child's treasure of marbles, bright blues and greens and reds and shiny blacks. A cache to hold onto forever, immortalized in concrete just under the brick wall. She snapped several shots of them, her feet changing rhythm as the music switched from Muse to Nine Inch Nails smoothly, as if they belonged naturally together.

She eased out from her awkward position and stood, brushing off the front of her shorts and shirt as she did. When she turned, she let out a chirp of a surprise at finding the boy there.

They stared at each other for an awkward moment, his face all astonishment, hers all mortification. But she pulled herself together, put her camera in her bag, and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Mr. Mueller said I could sit out here."

The boy blinked eyes once, twice. He was tall, taller than most of the boys she knew, and even taller than Freddie, who had been 6'1 when he went All-American. Freddie had been lean, quarterback-lean, but this boy was broader, his muscles ropy but evident, every stereotype of a corn-fed Midwestern boy there in front of her. "Are you Margaret?" he asked. His black shirt proclaimed in bold red letters "MILTON STRIKERS ATHLETIC DEPT," a deep contrast to his faded and ripped jeans.

She clasped her hands in front of her to keep them from shaking. She didn't know why they were shaking. She could only imagine it was the shock of being found in such an intimate position. "Mags," she said. When his brow furrowed, she rushed to explain. "Everyone calls me Mags."

He slung a hand through his hair—darker than Mr. Mueller’s but still with that hint of auburn. She saw, then, the family resemblance: the bright blue eyes, the reddish-black hair.

“Are you Sean?” she asked.

He nodded. “Uncle Caleb said you needed a ride home?” Like his uncle, he ended his statements up, the hesitation marked with the question at the end.

“Is there any news on my car?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not good news,” he said. “Uncle Caleb can fill you in.” He gestured his thumb over his shoulder. “Do you want to...?”

“Yes.” She grabbed her bag and slung it over her shoulder. “Thanks.”

He waited until she caught up with him before he began walking, but he glanced at her before they entered the shop and she felt a flush spread across her cheeks, bright and painful. She hadn’t expected to *see* anyone, and had dressed accordingly. Drop off the U-Haul then to Target for a few supplies, then pizza for dinner. That hadn’t necessitated fancy clothes. That didn’t suggest she would meet anyone from her new school, not anyone who would know her as such. Her earlier flush of freedom faded from her and she couldn’t remember, not at all, what that rush had felt like.

She clenched her hand on the edge of her shirt and saw the dirt stains from her foray on the ground.

“You like Nine Inch Nails, too?” Sean asked as they stepped into the cool dimness of the shop.

“What?” She looked down at her deconstructed shirt when he gestured. “Oh. My brother did. I mean, they were his shirts. This part.” She gestured at the NIN at the top of her

chest. “And this.” She gestured at the words “Pretty Hate Machine” across her belly. “But yes, of course. I love Trent Reznor.”

“You *made* the shirt?” he asked.

For some reason, she blushed again. It had been an experiment late one night with Edie, and they both had attacked her mother’s sewing machine with a vengeance. The shirts they had deconstructed were too small for her now, and she tugged the hem of the shirt down over the waist of her cargo shorts. Her fingers brushed the airline belt buckle—that, too, had been Freddie’s—and she wanted to hide back behind her camera, the discovery of the marbles still bright and fresh in her mind. “My mom used to be a seamstress,” she said, and tugged on the hem of her shirt again.

“Margaret!” Mr. Mueller walked over before they had to say anything else to each other. He wiped at his hands with a rag, and she wondered if the oil stains ever came out, or if they were now engrained in his skin. “I see Sean found you.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, to which Sean gave her a sharp look. She glanced up at him and squinted her eyes, her unspoken “What?” clear to anyone with half an understanding of body language.

“I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news,” Mr. Mueller said. “I already spoke with your dad, so he’s on board with this, but we’re going to have to get a part from Indy. One of my guys was already going to head up there tomorrow, so we should get it then, no problem.”

“How long?” she asked.

“Tuesday morning at the latest.”

It was Saturday now. Her dad couldn’t miss any more practice, having taken two days off to get her and her mom to Indiana. But they couldn’t afford a rental car, and she was sure no

one had even bothered to think about those things. “No sooner?” she asked. Did her grandmother even have a car? Her Maw-Maw in New Orleans hadn’t, not ever. She had preferred to walk everywhere, even the grocery store.

“That’s the earliest,” Sean said.

She looked over at him again. He stared down at her, expression almost blank, but there was something in his eyes and her fingers itched to pull out her camera, to snap three quick shots of him so she could figure out what it was. No seventeen year old boy had that much hidden behind his eyes. Not a one she had ever met.

“Okay,” she said, and turned back to Mr. Mueller. “Thank you again.”

“Seriously, Margaret, you have to stop thanking me.” He smiled at her and she smiled back.

“Mags.”

They both turned to look at Sean, but he was looking at his uncle. “She said she prefers to be called ‘Mags.’”

The name felt childish in his mouth, and she hated hearing it from him. A word that had been so evocative of friendship, of closeness was now, in his hands, something a baby would be called.

“Mags,” Mr. Mueller said. “Sean, can you take Mags home?”

“Sure.” He turned to her. “You ready?”

She nodded. “Yes, thank you.”

“Don’t forget, Sean. Mr. Hale asked if you could stop by Mark’s on the way back so Margaret... Mags could grab the pizza he ordered.”

“No, that’s okay,” she said. “I don’t want to be any bother.”

Sean looked down at her. “It’s fine,” he said. “Mark’s is on the way.”

She glanced over her shoulder at Mr. Mueller and he gave her an encouraging smile.

“We’ll get you guys mobile as soon as we can. I promise.”

“Thanks,” she said, and smiled again before she followed Sean outside.

The heat hit her like a blast. The patio, with its shaded overhang and trickling A/C from the shop, had tricked her into thinking it had cooled off. She looked around for Sean’s car—she assumed that, like most football players she knew back home, he drove something sleek and modern, or a huge truck—but only saw a rusted red car with one black door.

But of course he walked toward it, keys dangling from his fingers, and she hurried to follow him. When he opened the driver’s door, he looked over at her as she walked to the passenger side. “You’ve got to get in this way,” he said, and when she looked at him, she saw the tips of his ears had gone pink. “That door doesn’t work yet.”

She glanced at the door and then nodded. “I’m sorry,” she said, and scurried around the front of the car. She climbed in the driver’s seat and eased around the stick shift. “What kind of car is this?”

“A ’68 Pontiac GTO.” He slid into the seat and looked down at her leg. “Be careful,” he said. “That seat has a spring that likes to pinch. On the right side.”

She lifted her right thigh and saw the spring a few inches away, closer to the door. She scooted toward the middle and her hand brushed against Sean’s. She pulled back and placed both hands in her lap, folded together. “Why this car?”

“What?” He slammed the car door shut and rolled down his window. “No A/C,” he said, and gestured.

She just stared at him.

He sighed and reached across her to roll down her window. She eased back so that no part of her touched his arm. He sighed again, louder, and pulled away. “Relax, Gown, I don’t bite.”

“Gown?” she asked, but he had started the engine and its roar drowned out anything she said.

He put the car in drive and eased down the gravel road. She felt every bump and every jostle more keenly in this car than she had in the tow truck. When she glanced over at him, she saw his knuckles gone white with their grip on the steering wheel, the slight squint of concentration in his eyes. When he eased off the gas and steered around a particularly menacing pothole, she realized he was driving with care, trying to protect the car from any further damage.

Then Sean glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and she pulled her eyes away, awkward and flushing once again. She wished she could explain it to him, how she just wanted to photograph him, try to see if she could get to the root of those bottomless blue eyes, that grim expectancy, far too old for a boy so young. When she saw the faded criss-cross of white on his knuckles, and, further up, older, dime-sized red burns on his arms, a signal clicked on in her head and her fingers itched—actually *itched*—for her camera.

Once they were on the main road, Sean finally answered her question. “It was my grandfather’s car,” he said.

“What?” It took Mags a second to remember her question. “Oh.” She leaned forward and placed a hand on the dashboard. “I see.” Under her hand, she felt the difference, the supple texture of the dashboard, well-oiled and well-loved. A quick glance around the car showed that it was being revived, bit by bit, piece by piece.

“He left it to me. He just... didn’t take very good care of it, so Uncle Caleb’s helping me rebuild it when I can afford the parts.” His glance at her was shy, and she saw the clench of his hand on the steering wheel twist a bit tighter.

“Oh,” she said again, and wondered if he was embarrassed by the sentimentality, or embarrassed by the fact that he couldn’t afford to fix the car. She pulled her hand away from the dash and placed it on her lap once more.

They were quiet for several minutes, the sound of the engine and the whistle of the breeze keeping the silence between them from overwhelming. Sean took back roads, cut through neighborhoods, went around everything except down the main highway. It was actually a beautiful drive, despite of—or perhaps because of—the shimmering heat reflecting off of everything, and she saw farm land, an oddity in New Orleans and its surrounding areas. Marsh land, yes. Sugar cane and rice, yes. But not honest to God farm land. Her fingers itched again for her camera but they were going too fast to get anything of substance.

The sun was setting now and the clouds that had threatened before now loomed ominous and real. When the first drops splattered against her face, Mags hastened to roll up the window. The wipers, at least, were new.

Sean snaked around a neighborhood, and they arrived with blinding suddenness in a parking lot with the neon sign proclaiming Mark’s to be “THE BEST PIZZA IN INDIANA!” He settled the GTO in a parking spot and the car gave only the slightest shudder. He left the engine on and they watched as the rain beat against the windshield and the wipers flicked like mad to dispel it. “It’ll blow over in a minute,” Sean said. “I’ll run in and get the pizza when it does.”

“No, I’ll get it,” she said. “There’s no reason for both of us to get wet.” And then she blushed again, remembering how she’d have to get out of the car.

Sean looked over at her with those damnable unreadable eyes, even now, in the darkening twilight, shadowed and infinite. “It’s fine. Really. If you don’t mind waiting.”

“No, I don’t mind.” She paused. “Thank you. Sean.” She added his name as an afterthought before she handed him the twenty from her purse and he stuck it in his front pocket.

The rain brushed everything silver in the twilight, and as she stared out at it, she realized it was the first time she was looking at Marlborough as her new town and not as her grandmother’s, or her dad’s. This was where she would be for the next year at least, like it or not. That realization, that moment of clarity needed posterity. Of course it did.

Without thinking, she pulled her camera out of her purse and shot three pictures through the windshield.

“What are you doing?”

She turned, camera in hand, and on reflex, took two quick shots of Sean. When his eyes widened, she lowered the camera, blushing again. “It’s just... it’s very pretty, right now.”

He turned to look out the window. “The rain?” he asked.

“No.” She pointed. “Look.”

He was quiet for a moment before she heard it, the quick inhalation of breath, that recognition of beauty, of seeing something beyond what was normally seen. “Christ,” he said, his voice soft. “That doesn’t even look *real*.”

The ground steamed, literally steamed, as the rain beat into the baked concrete. A low mist rose a few inches from the ground, and as the rain beat harder, the neon lights shimmered against it, turning the mist into a fairy land of greens and pinks and purples. Mags didn’t know if

the pictures would even come out, but they were worth taking, if only to get someone else to see an inkling of what she had seen. And now, to share that vision with another person at the exact moment it caught her eye? It was almost too intimate, with this boy she had just met.

But it had happened, and she felt she had to explain, somehow, why her camera was permanently attached to her hand. “Rain’s my favorite to photograph,” she said. “Then snow. I don’t care much for summer, usually. Except, of course, when it rains.” She smiled, somewhat shyly, when he turned to look at her.

He smiled back, also hesitant and shy, just like his uncle, and it completely transformed his face. Before, what had been austere and starkly handsome was now warm, and sweet, even boyish. The sweat-stuck locks of hair swirled on his forehead with an artistic flair. The smile revealed teeth, white and even, and a dimple in his right cheek. But those eyes, those infinite eyes had lightened and she felt herself reflected in them, as if she had, for one moment, found their source.

“What’s ‘Gown’ mean?”

And then his face smoothed out, but it had been there, that smile, and it meant something, sharing this moment with a stranger. “It’s letting up,” he said. “I’ll go get the pizza.” And he stepped out of the car without even waiting for her response.

She watched him walk toward the front door and stop as three people came through. One of them handed him a flyer while the other two stapled a flyer to the bulletin board outside the front door. Without really thinking, Mags shot several frames of Sean, accepting the flyer, of the people, stapling the flyer, of the people leaving. Then, when she saw Sean ball up the flyer and throw it on the ground, she took a zoomed in shot, trying to read the paper on the board. “STRIKE!” was the only word she could make out, in huge letters, across the middle of the page.

Sean ripped the flyer from the board, crumpled that one up, as well, and walked inside to get her pizza.

CHAPTER THREE

“All right. All right. All right.”

Then, heavy bass and vibration. Mags blinked awake and stared at the wavering blue numbers on her clock.

“All right. All right. All right.”

The blue numbers hovered 3:07. Again, the heavy bass line. And once more,

“All right. All right. All right.”

Phone. Ringing. 3:07, no, 3:08 a.m. Heavy bass line. The Decemberists. “Henry,” she said, and scrambled in her sheets for her phone. It was Henry’s favorite song, from his favorite album, and he had bought that ring tone for her, but only if she promised it remained his and his alone.

She found her phone near the foot of the bed without any idea of how it ended up down there. She scrambled for the phone on the fifth repetition, right before it slipped into voicemail.

“Three a.m.,” she said into her cell. “You okay?”

“I am fucking *grand*.” He had to scream to be heard over the music in the background.

“I am *more* than grand. I am *epic*.”

Mags sat back on her bed. Henry drinking wasn’t a new phenomenon. Henry so drunk he moved into the realm of violently happy was a rare thing indeed. “Where are you? Is Noah there? Put him on.”

“I am not my brother’s keeper,” he said. “And my keeper is not my brother.” The music in the background faded until it changed to street sounds: honks, voices, laughter, none of it Henry’s. The scratch and click of a match, the loud exhale, and the slight wavering of breath

was all too familiar, too intimate. Dozens of nights hanging with Henry in the French Quarter, stepping outside with him while he smoked. While they talked and laughed and just *were*.

“Henry?” she asked in a soft voice, still caught in that memory of then.

“I didn’t think I’d care this much, you know?” He exhaled again in a loud whoosh of breath. She could see the cloud of smoke circling his head, as it had dozens of times before.

“Fuck, I thought, ‘to hell with her. Let her rot in Indiana for all I care.’ But that was just bravado.”

She leaned against the cool of her headboard, her cheek pressed against the painted metal.

“Henry, please.”

“I’m even out with a girl,” he continued as if he didn’t hear her. “I kissed her. We made out for two hours, and it didn’t mean anything.”

She felt the sting, but she didn’t know if it was his purposeful cruelty or jealousy. Again, because she was an awful person, she was sure it was his purposeful cruelty. “I want you to be happy,” she said in a soft voice.

“But see, that’s the fucking thing, you know? Apparently? I can’t be happy without you, and you can’t be happy with me. Fucking catch 22. A conundrum. An enigma wrapped up in a riddle. You had to run a thousand miles away just to not be with me.”

She wiped at her eyes. “You know that’s not true. Henry, don’t *do* this.”

He was quiet for a long moment. “You kissed me back,” he said when she finally spoke. “Do you know what that did to me?” His voice grew louder. “Do you have any idea the kind of mindfuck you performed on me with that, Mags?”

“Henry,” she began again but he interrupted before she could finish.

“I told you I love you,” he said. “You kissed me back. Then you said you didn’t care and you moved to fucking *Indiana*.” There was a loud clattering noise and she knew he had dropped the phone.

“Henry?” she asked.

There were more indistinguishable noises and then she heard the voice: Jennifer Beltman, the girl who had hated Mags since the seventh grade for unknown, ridiculous reasons that now Mags suspected had everything to do with Henry and nothing at all to do with Mags. But there she was anyway, on the phone, ready to spout venom.

“Margaret, honey? It’s Jenn. You know, Jenn Beltman? From school? I mean, from your former school?”

Mags bit her bottom lip so hard she could taste blood. “Hi, Jenn. Can you put Henry on?”

“No, I’m sorry I can’t. He’s getting a cab.” And she laughed at something Henry said. “He’s so hilarious! Did you hear him?”

“No,” Mags said, but she had heard him, in the background, scream that he was going to let her take advantage of him back at her dad’s condo.

“You know, I’m surprised you didn’t accuse *him* of something before you left. I mean, that’s your M.O., right? So, have fun in Indiana. Oh, and public school, right?” Jennifer tsked under her breath. “Really. That’s just... that’s just *sad*, Maggie girl. I mean, I know this sounds like I’m being a bitch, but I’m not. It really is kind of sad.” And without another word, she hung up.

Mags couldn't help it. She started crying, sitting there, staring at her cell phone and Henry's picture blinking up at her before it faded back to normal. Henry had spoken the truth, of course, and like all truths, it stung with the telling.

She had kissed him back. Sometime in the middle of their escapade through the French Quarter Friday night, Edie and Noah went off to find a bathroom, or alcohol. Mags couldn't even remember. But she recognized it now as the machination it was, remembered Edie's knowing smile, Noah's brotherly pat on Henry's back. The two of them disappeared and left Mags and Henry sitting on someone's front steps, the darkened side street quiet, for the Quarter.

Henry flung an arm over her shoulders, as he had a thousand times before, and she leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder, as she had a thousand times before. And when he pressed a kiss to her head, she still hadn't seen it, hadn't recognized all of this as new, as dangerous, as unfamiliar territory because this was her last night in New Orleans, and she was spending it with her three best friends. What could possibly change now that was greater than her leaving?

"You don't have to go," he said, for what felt to be the thirtieth time that night. His breath was warm against her hair. "Your Aunt Barbie has a room ready for you. Edie would be thrilled. I... I would be thrilled. You know I love you."

She smiled up at him. "I love you, too. You're my best—" And her words were cut off when his lips touched hers, soft, hesitant.

She had let him kiss her. She hadn't stopped him because it was *nice*. Even then, even with his lips against hers, she hadn't seen it. Not really. This was *Henry*. They went to dances together to avoid having to ask other people out on dates. When Noah and Edie eventually married—and everyone knew they would—he would be her cousin by marriage.

Also, someone liked her enough to kiss her, to want her to stay in New Orleans. To want to be with her. Just, she hadn't expected it to be Henry. She never expected it to be Henry.

But then, the kiss deepened, and his mouth opened and when hers didn't, not right away, he pressed against her, his thumb on her chin, easing it down. And with the first brush of his tongue against hers, she had returned the kiss, hesitant, unsure. Her arm, caught between them, flattened against his chest and felt his heart flutter. His arm tightened and his mouth opened wider and she tasted whisky, and cigarettes, and mint gum. Some part of her wondered what she tasted like. Coffee, maybe, and powdered sugar. Vanilla from the vodka.

The kiss was nice, and warm, and lovely. She felt nice, and warm in his embrace.

And that was all.

No fire. No desire to say "to hell with it all" and stay in New Orleans. And when she pulled away from the kiss—and she had pulled away first—she knew he saw it in her eyes.

He didn't let go of her, and she didn't let go of him, caught as she was, their bodies awkward now, cooling. She didn't know how to break away without damaging something very fragile. Everything had changed in the space of a few minutes, and she couldn't handle any more destruction. Not this week.

Henry was quiet for a long time, watching her. "You knew... you knew how I feel about you, right?" he said, so soft it was almost a whisper.

Mags chewed on her top lip before she eased out of his embrace. "I didn't," she said. "I really didn't." Lies, of course, she realized now, because some part of her had to have known, had to have remembered the day she told him she was leaving. Henry's anger, the tantrum he threw, the sullen resentment, the refusal to say goodbye to her parents all clued her in to a secret that must have been years in the hiding. No, she hadn't known, not really. Not until now.

“I just... I thought... I thought we had forever.” His arm fell off of her, dead weight. “And this week, it never... it just never felt right, but now, when it’s too late...” He untangled himself from her to pull his cigarettes out of his pocket. “I just thought you knew,” he said around his Camel Light.

She watched the flame dance on the edge of his match—Henry never used lighters because he claimed cigarettes tasted better with matches—spark the end of his cigarette and the swell of life as he breathed air into the tiny fire. When he exhaled, the smoke extinguished the flame on the edge of the match.

“I’ve loved you forever,” he said, his voice so soft she almost didn’t hear him. “It feels like forever, and now you’re leaving.”

Mags didn’t know what to say. How could one ever respond to such a declaration with kindness and refusal? There was no way to respond to such a grand gesture, not without damaging everything between them, some ten years in the making.

He must have seen it, on her face, because something in him crumpled and he put his arm around her, buried his face against her neck. And because it was Henry, she put her arms around him and held him as he cried. She felt his tears against her, hot and sticky, the mugginess of the night making it all that much more uncomfortable. But neither of them let go. No matter what would change after tonight, he was *her* Henry. They had been best friends for ten years, and nothing could change that, not for her.

Henry took her hand and lifted his lips to her ear. “Just stay,” he had whispered. “For fuck’s sake, Mags, just stay.”

Those unspoken words. “*For me.*” She hated him in that moment. Hated what he was asking of her, what he expected from her, what *everyone* expected from her and she wanted to

scream, scream as long and as loud as she could with her frustration. No one, no single person on this godforsaken earth gave a damn about what she wanted. About what she needed. And she felt their selfishness keenly, felt the world closing in on her and *she* started crying, thinking about the one time anyone did anything for her—about Freddie—it had ruined his life forever.

Because he was selfish with drink and circumstance, Henry misinterpreted her tears. “I’ll wait for you,” he said against her, alcohol and emotion slurring his speech. “I promise. I love you so much, it hurts.”

She pushed him away from her and stood, trying to get some air, to get away from the press of his body and the cigarette smoke that surrounded him like an aura. “Don’t,” she said again. “Don’t you dare. Henry....”

He stumbled to his feet and shook his head. “I will.” And he lowered his lips to kiss her again.

She turned so that he brushed her cheek. “Don’t do this to me,” she whispered. “Please don’t put this on me, too.”

He pulled away of a sudden, his frustration rolling off of him in palpable waves. “Nobody put anything on you. You’re the one leaving. You’re the one who decided to go. You didn’t have to. You could stay here with us. But you have to be the martyr. Always, God, you always have to be the martyr.”

She felt her hands trembling and she wished that she smoked, at least for something to do with her hands. To keep them still. Lies. All lies. She was a selfish liar and he would never forgive her, if he knew. If he knew she was tucking tail and running, as far as she could. “I have to make this work,” she finally said. “You know that. Edie knows that.”

Henry brooded into another cigarette for a long moment. She almost turned and left when he spoke again. “Because of Freddie?” Henry asked. “That’s what Edie thinks.”

“Yes,” she said in a soft voice. “Because of Freddie.” In that, at least, she was not lying. Everything for the past two years had been because of what Freddie had done for her. The tightened finances. The whispered recriminations. The ostracizing. The fear of leaving her parents childless for an entire year. Her mother’s fragile nerves. Even when they let her father “go”—no one would call it “fired,” not publicly, anyhow—she knew it was because of Freddie, which was, of course, because of her. She couldn’t abandon them now. Not after Hurricane Katrina. Not after Freddie.

He dragged smoke into his lungs with a shaky breath. “You don’t always have to be the perfect child,” he said as he exhaled. “You can think about yourself for once in your life.”

How to tell him? How to say to someone in so much pain that it was worth it? Worth his pain to escape her own? The constant reminders of her failures. The recriminating eyes blaming her for Freddie’s departure. The fear of losing Henry’s friendship now that she knew his love. “I can’t do that to mom and dad. You saw what Freddie leaving did to them.”

He sighed. “I know. We all knew that. I just... I just hoped you’d turn into a real girl at some point, but you never will. Not Margaret Hale. No, she has to be that much fucking better than the rest of us, just so we can all feel bad.”

“That’s not fair,” she said. “Don’t do this tonight, Henry. Please. You know I love you.” And she reached out a hand to his arm.

He wrenched his arm away from her grasp and looked at her with something not unlike repulsion and even in this moment, even in this awful, terrible moment, she wanted her camera, wanted to record this face, so full of anger and rage and hurt, so that she could remember how

Henry had looked at her, just when she needed him the most. “No,” he said, and stumbled a bit as he moved away. “No, you don’t get to say ‘love’ anymore. Not to me.”

He turned and saw Edie and Noah coming around the corner. “Come on,” he said. “It’s almost one. We need to get you home.” Then he walked away without another word the rest of the night. Not even goodbye when she got out the car. Not even a hug. Not even to comfort Edie, who was crying so hard she began hiccupping. No, Mags didn’t get any of those moments, not anymore. Not from Henry.

#

She stopped crying with a sudden, violent shake and got out of her bed. It was after 3:30 but she was wide awake. She flicked on a lamp and saw the room her grandmother had allotted to her. It wasn’t much, not nearly big enough to house any of her old furniture, but since they had sold it all anyhow—“you won’t need it in Indiana,” her dad had said—it really didn’t matter. But now she noticed that while she had been at the mechanic’s, her grandmother had made her bed with her sheets from home, the bold paisley sheets she had fallen in love with in that shop on Magazine. Several of the doilies were gone and in their place, Mags’s smaller boxes with her knickknacks and framed photos.

Mags didn’t know what had caused this peace offering, why her grandmother whom had seemed so distant, so unapproachable, had made this small concession to Mags’s comfort. It wasn’t much, but it was an effort. It was an olive branch, and Mags, with so few olive branches stretched her way, took it.

When she began unpacking, it was with a silent frenzy. Her grandmother’s and parents’ room was across the house, her room here at the back, a former parlor turned hasty bedroom for a granddaughter, but still, she did not want to wake them. She wasn’t selfish, not like Henry

claimed, and knew, despite her own pain, that this entire move was equally as difficult on her parents, and her grandmother. So she put in her earbuds, blasted Freddie's favorite NIN album, *Pretty Hate Machine*, and unpacked her entire room in less than an hour.

She had started *With Teeth* by the time she was finished, and stepped back to look at her progress. Her clothes hung in neat rows in the two-tiered wardrobe—there was no closet in this room—with everything else shoved into the three empty drawers in the dresser. The bottom, she saw, was filled with extra sheets and blankets and linens, but she didn't begrudge her grandmother this concession. It was her house, after all, and the more she prowled, the more she realized that this had been her grandmother's sitting room. Of course it had. While it wasn't the largest, it by far got the best light.

Mags arranged her framed photographs, of Edie and Noah and even those of Henry, of the four of them, of the family, before Freddie went away, all of them smiling at the camera as Freddie waved his high school diploma above his head. In those moments, her mother was smiling: at the camera, at Freddie, even, sometimes, at Mags. But those smiles stopped altogether when Freddie went away. When she blamed Mags for Freddie going away.

Mags shook her head. No. She didn't have time for this. She had to finish unpacking. It was a frenzied operation for her, the determination that she would be here, not heading back to New Orleans on the first train. *This* was her new life, and she would make the most of it.

Mags turned back to her boxes. For the larger photographs, she leaned them against the wall, not wanting to hammer holes in the wall without her grandmother's permission, and certainly not at 4:30 in the morning. Her laptop and printer she set out on the small table in the corner, and once she unpacked all of her books, triple-stacking on the small bookshelf—her Jane

Austens and Lauren Oliver's, her Shirley Jacksons and the entirety of *The Mortal Instruments* and *Harry Potter*—she felt as if she could breathe.

The final piece to mark the room as hers was her Katrina triptych, the one she won an award for last year. On the left, a picture of their house before the hurricane ravaged it that she had taken in July 2005, just a baby then, only ten, but fresh and excited with a new camera. On the right, a picture years after Katrina, in 2010, right before they tore down the house, with the cryptic spray-painted codes on the front of the house marking no bodies and the weeds overgrowing everything in sight. The middle was what they had found in 2010, a stained glass window that had exploded inward from the force of the wind, shattered on the floor. Someone—maybe the National Guard, maybe some homeless squatters—had arranged the shards of glass on the floor into a close facsimile of the stained glass window it had been.

She had submitted the pictures to a national contest, titled them “Five-Year Anniversary, a Katrina Triptych,” and had been shocked and pleased when she won best entry for the Under 18 category. The entire family had gone to D.C. to see her receive her award, and she remembered how proud they had all looked: one child named All-American, another winning national photography awards. Her mother, in particular, had beamed at anyone and everyone who came around, proclaiming, “My daughter,” with a proud smile whenever she introduced Mags. They had spent a few days in D.C. catching the sights, eating at fancy restaurants. It was, she realized, the last good moment they had as a family, because that September, she had visited Freddie at school, and the Incident happened, and their lives went to hell afterwards.

Mags suddenly hated the Triptych, wanted to destroy it, but knew it was a futile gesture. There was one hanging in the small gallery in D.C. that had hosted the award show, one housed

on the New Orleans shutters retrieved from the house after Katrina, not to mention the digital copies she had on her laptop. No use in destroying something impermanent.

So instead, she sank down on the bed—her bed, now—and watched the dark sky through the window until she heard sounds in the kitchen, and the smell of coffee. When her grandmother tapped on her door and asked if she was hungry, Mags, starved, called out the affirmative and joined her at the small, red Formica table. And when her grandmother—nearly a stranger to her because despite cards at birthdays and Christmases, despite one visit a year to New Orleans until Katrina, she knew nearly nothing about her—put down a plate of eggs and bacon in front of her, next to the plate already burdened with homemade biscuits, Mags realized that it was the first time, in *years*, that she hadn't had to make her own breakfast.

“Thank you,” she said, the gratitude again spilling from her lips because she didn't know what else to say.

Grandmother Hale looked up at her, sharp eyes keen and assessing, and Mags wondered what it was about her tone that made everyone think she was insincere. “For breakfast?” she asked.

Mags nodded, then shook her head. “For breakfast, sure,” she said. She took a long swallow of orange juice. “And... for the room. For all of this.” She gestured a hand around the kitchen, pointing at her new bedroom beyond. “I know it's an inconvenience, but—”

“Margaret, it's not *your* fault,” her grandmother said. And to Mags's surprise, her grandmother reached over and put a wrinkled hand over hers. “None of this is your fault. You understand that, don't you?”

And she hadn't, because no one had told her that, not once. Not even Freddie. So when she started crying, perhaps for the fourteenth time in three days, her grandmother said nothing.

Just wrapped arms around her and held her, silent but warm, as Mags emptied herself out. By the time her father came to get her mother's tray—she hadn't had breakfast with the family in a year, at least—Mags and her grandmother were drinking coffee and exchanging the newspaper in comfortable silence, the tears dried from her cheeks, her grandmother's expression once more solemn and unreadable.

CHAPTER FOUR

When she woke up Monday morning, Mags felt it again, that odd sense of freedom, of not being answerable to anyone or anything, not at this moment. Perhaps it had something to do with the weather. The heat had broken with the rain and she was shocked to find the weather cool and breezy, somewhere in the mid-seventies. When she had asked her father about it, he told her that was pretty much normal for August in this part of the state. She didn't remember what the winters were like from their few visits over Christmas, but she was looking forward to four full seasons of weather.

Or perhaps it was the fact that she suspended all of her social networking accounts Sunday after breakfast. When she logged on to one of them, she had seen Henry's posts first, pictures from his date with Jenn the night before. Like the slow crawl of traffic by a horrible accident, Mags looked, and looked. He had taken her everywhere sacred to them: Café du Monde, Jackson Square, the river, and in one picture, they were making out so heavily, she couldn't tell where one mouth began and the other ended.

Normally, she wouldn't even think much of it, but after the phone call, and reading the caption declaring "THIS is how you celebrate in the French Quarter," and seeing none of their pictures, she had enough. In the end, it took approximately two seconds per site. She deleted all of her accounts, one after another. Each one asked her if she was sure. Yes, she thought. Yes, I am positive. And just like that, she shed her old life.

Of course, she didn't expect it to last forever. She had some people she wanted to stay in contact with. But the *freedom* of it, of not knowing what other people were doing, of not living up to the expectations everyone had—gone only two days and already there were questions about the move, her new town, her new school—made her almost light-headed.

Then, she remembered that today was the first day of school, and all former freedom washed away to anxiety, and fear, and discomfort. She had spent an hour the night before picking through her closet because she had never, not once in her entire life, worn whatever she wanted to school.

She had been surprised when her grandmother came into her room, under pretense, it seemed, of getting linens from the dresser, but when she sat down and examined the outfits Mags laid out, she suspected her grandmother wanted to help.

“This?” Mags asked, holding up an A-line paisley print cotton dress.

Her grandmother wrinkled her nose. “Not for the first day. This is public school, not a dance. You don’t want to seem too Gown, Margaret.”

Mags started at that word again. “What does that mean?”

“Hmm?” Her grandmother picked through the clothes laid out on Mags’s bed. “Gown?”

“Yes. I heard that yesterday.”

Her grandmother gave her a sharp look. “Did Caleb Mueller call you that?”

“What? No, of course not.” She paused for a second. “His nephew did.”

“Hmm,” her grandmother said again. “There’s quite the rivalry between Milton and Helstone.”

“Helstone’s the private school, right? Dad’s alma mater?”

“And Milton’s public. But more than that. Helstone is where the professors at the university send their kids.”

It clicked for Mags. “And Milton’s where the townies go.”

“On the East side, anyway. Town.” Her grandmother lifted one hand. “And Gown.” She lifted the other. “Doesn’t matter where you grew up. If you end up at Helstone for high

school, you become Gown, just like that. Happened to your dad. Caleb grew up just around the corner. His mom still lives there. But once your dad started at Helstone, they weren't really friends anymore."

"Did they hate each other?"

"No, no," her grandmother said. "Nothing so complicated as that. They just... drifted apart."

"But I'm not going to Helstone," Mags said. "So why did he call me Gown?"

Her grandmother patted her on the hand. "You're not local. You look and dress differently than the other girls here. You *talk* differently than everyone else. It makes you stand out at Milton."

"He thinks I'm a snob." Mags looked down at the clothes on her bed and suddenly, they felt like costumes, too much like a Catholic school girl trying to play nice at the big bad public school. She shoved aside a few dresses and a pair of cigarette pants, but other than jeans, she really didn't have that much in the way of casual clothes. She had worn a uniform five days a week for nine months out of the year, and her parents hadn't had any extra money, the time, or the inclination to buy Mags new clothes for Milton. Other things had to be bought, of course. Her mom had needed a new humidifier, not to mention new prescriptions for her nerves, what with the cross-country drive looming. Her dad had needed new shirts for coaching. Freddie had needed more care packages, a Kevlar vest. Not to mention the gas for driving thirteen hours. Mags hadn't needed new clothes. Why would she? She had perfectly good clothes right here.

Her fingers trembled as she sorted through and through the pile of clothing. Nothing seemed right. Everything was marked by "Gown."

"Plus, your father was recruited by Helstone, and he turned them down."

This was news to Mags. She just assumed he had taken the only job he had received an offer for. “Why did he turn them down?” she finally asked.

Her grandmother looked over at her with eyes so like her own: dark and inky, brown almost black. “Because he wasn’t about to put any of you through another situation like you had just left.”

“Grandma, I—”

“Margaret, you’re not the only one in this family.”

She felt herself turning red. “I’m sorry, I—”

“No,” her grandmother interrupted. “I don’t mean that. I mean, you’re not the only one who had to deal with what Freddie did.”

What Freddie did, she had said. Mags stared at her. She had said *what Freddie did*, not *what you did*. “What does that have to do with Helstone?”

“For your father, Helstone seemed like it was going to be a lot of the same. Does that make sense?” Her grandmother shrugged. “And he thought maybe it was good for all of you to do something different for once.”

Mags was quiet for a long moment. “I never knew,” she said. “I just assumed.”

“Don’t assume too much, Margaret. There is a lot the grownups do behind the scenes.”

Mags was shocked when her grandmother gave her a solemn wink. She started giggling, and her grandmother smiled.

Then, all business. Her grandmother looked at the clothes Mags had laid out and, with a slight oomph of movement, stood to walk over to the wardrobe. “Cute but not too nice,” she said, and plucked out a black kilt. After a brief examination of the hanging clothes, she moved to the dresser and grabbed the first colored shirt she saw, a maroon baby-doll emblazoned

“SUNNYDALE HIGH SCHOOL” on the front. “This,” she said. “It’s you, and it’s casual enough for the first day.”

Mags should have been surprised but she wasn’t. Her grandmother had worked retail, at a high-end boutique in downtown Marlborough, for years. She was retired now, but she still dressed impeccably. But more importantly, she knew this town, and knew what was expected of the coach’s new “Gown” daughter, and how to combat that assumption. “Thanks,” Mags said, and smiled.

Her grandmother smiled back. “I have some old clothes,” she had said, and stood up. “Classic pieces. Maybe tomorrow night, we can go through them, see if there’s anything you like.”

Now, Monday morning before her first day, Mags stretched her arms high above her head before she collapsed in a groan and grabbed her towel. It was already 6:00, and if she wanted to catch a ride with her father, she would have to hurry. He was leaving at 6:15. She showered in record time and threw on yoga pants and a t-shirt for her trek back across the house. While she was grateful—it was true, she was—for her grandmother’s generosity in opening her house to her wayward son and his family, she did miss, beyond all recognition, having her own bathroom.

Hearing voices in the dining room, Mags moved toward the door. When she heard her mother’s voice, she broke into a wide smile and walked into the room. “Mom! What are you doing out of...” her voice trailed off when she saw exactly why her mother was out of bed for breakfast, for the first time in over a year.

There they all sat, her family: dad at the head of the table in front of an empty plate and full travel mug of coffee, mom at his left, chatting with their guest who was, at this moment, getting another huge helping of bacon and eggs from her grandmother.

Grandmother Hale looked up at Mags and eyed her clothes. “You’re not dressed yet?”

Mags felt herself pink, from her cheeks down her throat, as Sean stared at her once again wearing the most ridiculous outfit one could imagine, but this time, bonus, without a bra. “I just got out of the shower.” The towel on her head slipped down and she made a grab for it, too late. Her wet hair fell down her back and moistened her shirt. She took the opportunity to drape the towel over her shoulders to try to cover her chest.

Sean, of course, was dressed like a human being, wearing a black shirt proclaiming “Milton Strikers Football” in bold red letters, hair dry and brushed, but still tousled, unruly in the way that only children and teenage boys could get away with. He gave her another look with those damnable eyes and she backed up two steps. “I’ll get dressed,” she said. “Be right back.”

Mags dressed even faster than she had showered. Hair up in a sloppy bun, clothes proper enough to see a stranger before she had even had coffee, and her black low-rise Converse with the skull shoestrings Freddie had given her completed the ensemble.

“Sit down,” her grandmother said when she came back. “I’ll go make you a plate.” She disappeared back into the kitchen.

“Thornton’s agreed to give you a ride,” her dad said as he got out of his chair. He pressed an absent kiss to her forehead before he handed his paper to her mother. “I have an all-day meeting with the other coaches two towns over, something about the schedule, and I can’t bring you to school.”

It took her a moment to realize that Thornton was Sean. She had thought his last name was Mueller, like his uncle. “Oh,” she said. She turned to him. “It’s okay. I can walk to school.”

“It’s three miles,” Sean said, once again all astonishment.

Mags turned to her father, desperate. “I don’t want to be a bother.”

“That’s why I’ve asked Thornton,” her father said. “Because I can’t go halfway in one direction and then go back across town to the highway.”

“Margaret never means to be a bother,” her mother told Sean. “She tries very hard not to be, but...” she let her voice trail off as she lifted one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug.

Mags felt the heat rise to her cheeks as she scrambled. “I can take a bus.” She stood from her chair. “I am sure there’s a bus stop nearby.”

“No, no.” Her father gave his wife a kiss before he patted Sean on the shoulder. “Caleb said my car should be done tomorrow, so we don’t need to worry about Thornton going out of his way for you any more than this.”

“It’s not out of my way.” Sean’s tone was a bit sharper than necessary, and everyone turned to look at him, even Mags’s father. The tips of his ears turned pink again and he gave Mags’s mother a smile. She gave him a tremulous one back, but he had already turned back to Mags. “I’m usually dropping something off at my grandmother’s on the way to school anyhow. My mom always has something to give her. So anytime, really. It’s no big deal.”

“She lives five houses down,” Grandmother Hale reminded Mags as she returned to hand her a plate. “Just around the corner.”

“See? All settled.” Her father gave everyone a distant wave before he walked outside.

Mags slumped in a seat. “Thanks, Sean. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” He glanced over at her out of the corner of his eye, even brighter now in the morning sun.

Mags felt her own eyes so muddy in comparison, the dull brown not even copper, or rusty. Freddie had gotten their father’s lighter eyes, while Mags took after her mother and her

Acadian French heritage. The closer she looked, the more she noticed that the blue of Sean's eyes was almost turquoise in the early morning light, and her right index finger tapped against the table, just once, as if it were depressing a camera shutter. There was that thing about his eyes again. Not the color, not exactly. Not even the expression. Just a shadow, off in the distance. No seventeen-year-old boy had eyes that old.

“Are you going to eat that?”

She blinked and realized she had been staring, at Sean Thornton's eyes, for minutes, days, it seemed, as she tried to figure out what speed would best catch the sun haloing his hair, making the brown burn red. What angle would best allow the camera to get both the turquoise eyes and the tiny hairline scar tracing the length of his jaw. What shot could help her figure out this incredibly unreadable boy. If she could just have a *picture*, then she could pick it apart later, in private, so she didn't have to stare at him so goddamn much. The ones from the car were too dark to be of much use, not for this much deciphering. “I'm sorry?”

“Eat,” he said. “This?”

She looked down to see his fork poised over her admirable pile of bacon. “What? The bacon? Of course I'm going to eat it. It's bacon.”

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug, but there was that half-smile again, ghosting his lips, lightening his somber expression, his bottomless eyes. “I didn't think you were on a diet like all the other girls at Milton, but since you weren't eating it, I just wanted to check. You can't have good bacon go to waste.”

There was a long moment of silence as the three women at the table comprehended the first part of his statement. Sean cut at the three pancakes on his plate with a blithe spirit only boys—idiot teenage boys, Mags amended—possessed.

There. Just as the silence grew more awkward, he hesitated, fork cutting into his fourth bite slower than the first three. The slip of the fork from the finger and she felt rather than saw him wince. Her finger depressed her invisible shutter again. *Click*.

The silence was broken, finally broken, by a little female titter. Not terribly loud, no. And nothing crass or cruel. Just the tiniest little giggle. Mags felt something inside of her break, just a bit, at her mother's laugh. It hurt, more than anything, more than the misguided comment, and more than Sean's own growing mortification, not because it wasn't familiar, but because it was.

When Grandmother Hale cleared her throat, Sean's eyes widened as he began to scramble. "I didn't mean it that way."

Mags just shook her head. "Don't worry about it." She felt stupid in her clothes, then, her shirt too small, her skirt emphasizing her too-large hips and she wondered if she would ever stop feeling so uncomfortable in her own skin again.

"No," Sean said. "I really didn't mean it like that."

Her finger itched again for her camera, to record the utter earnestness on his face. "It's okay," she said, and it was. She wasn't upset about his comment, after all.

"No, it's not." He leaned forward, just a little. "I just meant that you didn't look like the girls at Milton." Something must have passed on her face because he winced again, visibly this time. "And you're not total Gown, not wearing that." And his eyes grew wide because he knew that brought the whole thing to another level. "I mean—"

"Young man," Grandmother Hale interrupted. "You really need to learn when to let something go."

His ears flushed pink and he nodded. "Sorry," he said, and turned back to his plate.

That word had come up again. Gown. Mags had tried to strip it away from her but there it was, proving once again that she didn't belong. But if not Marlborough, then where? Not New Orleans. Not anymore. There was nothing left for her there. Everyone and everything had made that painfully apparent.

"I need to go lie down now," her mother said, the novelty of a boy at breakfast worn off, Mags once again put in her place. Mags burned at the thought and hated herself, just a little, for thinking it. More than anything, she hated the fact that she was right.

"Yes, of course you do, mom," she said, simply and without malice. There was nothing else *to* say. When the battle lines had been drawn, they could only emotionally support one of their children. Freddie's concerns were more immediate, and threatening. Mags didn't blame her parents. She couldn't. She herself placed Freddie's concerns over her own. How could she not, after what he had sacrificed for her?

Her mother stretched across the table, trembling a bit as she reached a hand to Sean. He met her more than halfway, his long arms taking up the space so she didn't have to. He gave her trembling hand a gentle shake. "It was very nice to meet you. This is a rare treat for me, to eat breakfast at the table. I don't know if Mags told you, but I am very ill."

Mags thought impossibly of Jane Austen, and Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, her nerves that had been his constant bedfellows. Her mother's illness was the same. Taken to bed when the mess with Freddie started, and never right again, the rest of the family scrambling, always scrambling, to help defray her ever-constant nerves.

"Nice to meet you as well, ma'am," Sean said. "I hope you feel better."

“Yes,” she said. “That is always my wish.” Her mother stood and Mags stood with her, to help her leave. But Grandmother Hale was there before she was, and she waved Mags back down. Helpless, Mags sank back into her chair.

Once they left the room, the silence, earlier so awkward, was even worse. Mags poked at the eggs with her fork, appetite gone. She wasn’t surprised that Sean was the one who broke the silence, but his words, at least, were unexpected.

“My sister hasn’t touched bacon in five years.”

She glanced over at him, curious where his train of thought would eventually derail.

“How old is she?”

“Sixteen,” he said. “She started dieting at eleven. She’s not unhealthy thin. She’s not stupid or anything. But she’s so obsessed with maintaining her weight that sometimes, it’s all she talks about, and it’s all her friends talk about, and all most of the girls at school talk about, so....” He shrugged and gave her that shy boyish half-look again. “It was just refreshing, you know? To see bacon on your plate?” He ended his sentences up again, a nervous habit, Mags realized. One he must have picked up from his uncle.

Mags glanced down at the bacon on her plate. “I just... I just never cared that much.” The words fell from her mouth. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and she rushed forward to fill the silence, unable to stop now that she had started. “I mean, as long as my love of food doesn’t keep me from my love of cute clothes, I don’t really care if I’m twenty pounds outside of normal.”

“That’s a very healthy attitude,” Sean said. He reached for another pancake. “‘Normal’ is twenty pounds underweight anyways.”

Mags stared at him for a second, wondering if he had just complimented her or just committed boy-speak, that indecipherable language Edie swore teenage boys learned with the first onslaught of puberty. Who knew their mysterious ways? she would intone, her voice deep and sonorous, her fingers twinkling like *The Twilight Zone*. Who could speak to the dark and ancient horrors of... The Teenage Boy!

She felt the pain, the absence where Edie had been, her entire life. An emptiness, there, in her heart. Edie wasn't avoiding her after Henry's confession, no, but she had only texted seven times since Mags left Saturday. That was approximately a hundred times less than a normal weekend.

When Sean kept eating his pancakes, she decided it was just boy-speak after all.

Then a pause, and when he spoke again, it was in a rush of breath, as if he didn't want to lose this sudden burst of courage. "Besides, as all diets are inherently anti-bacon, and as the country is heavily dependent on the pork industry, what with the current economic recession, I've pretty much declared all diets radically and dangerously un-American."

It was the most she had heard him say in one go. It was probably the most she had heard him say at all, since they met. She got it, then, the teasing, the lightening of the situation. Whoever Sean Thornton was, whoever he imagined her to be, he understood the mortification her parents had made her suffer because of his slip-up. He saw through her desperation. He was changing the subject. And she was grateful. "Communist even," she said, and watched as his nascent smile grew wider, birthing into something even more unreadable, but at least friendlier.

"And we are loyal patriots." He lifted a piece of bacon off of her plate and saluted her with it. "God bless these United States of Bacon." When he crunched the slice, she could see his teeth flash, even and white.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mags had never seen a school so big, so imposing, and so *ugly* in all her life.

Milton took up an entire city block with just the building itself. The parking lots were on a separate block, connected with an interior street, and the football, baseball, and soccer fields expanded beyond that. The school had eaten up a large chunk of the neighborhood it sat in, and the houses around it, across the street from it, seemed so tiny and miniscule in comparison.

She craned her neck upward as Sean eased into the parking lot and she saw the smoke stacks, useless now, of course, but still there from its nineteenth-century factory days. The windows, too, were high and skinny, and she imagined that despite its ugliness, its sootiness, it received a wealth of natural light.

Sean pulled into the parking lot and she saw a group of protestors on the street corner, just outside of the school grounds. “What’s that about?” she asked.

“Oh, that?” Sean pulled into a parking spot, she noticed the sign in front of it said “SENIOR CLASS PRESIDENT.” Of course he was, she thought. She couldn’t have imagined anyone would win against this serious, earnest boy. He was high school royalty, clearly. With his good looks and athleticism, how could he not be? “They’re protesting the budget cuts.” He shrugged one shoulder and didn’t look at her. “Some teachers and staff lost their jobs over the summer, across the school district. Since this is the flagship school, they’re protesting here, I guess.”

Mags squinted across the way. “Are they the same people who gave you the flyer?”

“What flyer?”

“The flyer from the other night, at the pizza place. You...” she was quiet for a moment, embarrassed to have been caught, once again, staring at him, watching him, this strange boy and his strange ways. “At the pizza place,” she said again.

He shut off the car and the engine died with a whirr and a shudder. Until the parking lot, they had sat in silence the entire three miles, with no music (the car had no radio), no talking (there was nothing but awkward silence after their shared love of bacon), nothing but the GTO’s engine and its roar to keep them company. Sean turned to her. “Do you need help getting out?”

She blinked at him. Clearly, he was changing the subject, but again, she didn’t know why. “Help getting out of the car?” When he nodded, she shook her head. “Why would I?”

He glanced down at her skirt and then turned away, uncomfortable. “I mean, you have to climb over the shift, so I didn’t know if...”

She looked down at herself and couldn’t help her embarrassed smile. “Code of the Catholic School Girl Rule Number Six: always wear shorts under your skirt. Some things are engrained in the mind, even for Gowns.”

She expected his embarrassment. Earlier, he had seemed to regret calling her Gown, after all, so she was surprised—once again, so surprised by this strange boy—when his ghost smile grew. “Spoken like a true Gown. Always trying to instruct us poor, dumb Townies.”

The words were harsh but the *tone* was teasing and she saw the glint of humor in his eyes. Not so earnest, then, this boy. Sarcastic. Funny. She wondered if his hesitance and reserve were at all connected to the hairline-crack scar on his jaw, the crisscross on his knuckles, the faded, ancient red burns—the exact size of cigarettes, she realized—on his arms. “Thanks for the ride,” she said, awkward now, unsure of how to respond to this dichotomy in boy form.

The smile faded from his face and was replaced by his usual stoicism. “Sure,” he said, and climbed out of the car.

By the time she had navigated herself, her bag, and her skirt around the stick shift, across the seat, and through the open driver’s door, Sean was leaning into the open window of a mini-van just pulled up next to them, in a spot marked both “HANDICAPPED PARKING ONLY” and “STUDENT COUNCIL PRESIDENT.” Someone even higher up the food chain, Mags thought, and tried not to peer around Sean to see through the windows. She closed the door to the GTO and just leaned against it.

She needn’t have bothered with her politeness. A small hand reached out to push Sean aside and a girl’s face peeked through the window. “You Coach Hale’s daughter?”

The girl was lovely. No, beyond lovely. With bright dark eyes, clear skin, high cheekbones, and hair poofed out in big loose ringlets around her face, she was devastating. But she looked so delicate in that seat, so small and diminutive that Mags wondered if she were ill.

“Hey. Earth to new girl.” The girl turned to Sean. “Did you scare her off *already*? Goddammit, Thornton. Stop scaring off the new girls.”

Mags blinked, realized she had been staring again, and finally nodded. “I am. New, I mean. I mean, Coach Hale’s daughter.”

The girl grinned and waved her hand. “I’m Bess. My mom’s Principal Higgins. We’ve been waiting forever for you to come.” And then she turned to say something to the person in the driver’s seat.

When the driver’s door opened and a boy climbed out, Mags had to check her gasp. He was, perhaps, the most gorgeous boy she had ever seen this side of a movie screen. Body tall and lean, skin smooth and dark, smile wide and easy, he grinned at her and became, impossibly,

even more gorgeous. Mags actually felt her knees go a little weak at that grin. The boy juttled out his chin in acknowledgment. “Hey,” he said. “I’m Colin. You *must* be Margaret.”

Mags blushed, honest to God blushed, from her hairline to her chest. “Mags,” she said, her voice soft, and she wondered who this suddenly shy girl was taking over her body.

Sean, of course, watched all of this with his damnable, unreadable eyes.

“Mags?” Colin looked at Sean. “Mags.”

Sean shrugged, nonchalant, but broke eye contact with Mags. “That’s what she said.” His ears pinked, just a little and Mags realized there was some secret conversation happening to which she didn’t have the code.

“Mags,” Colin said again, still looking at Sean. Then a lazy smile spread over his face. “I like it,” he said. “Welcome to Milton, Mags.”

“Stop flirting,” the girl said from her now open door. “Christ already. The girl just got here. Let her get her schedule before you try your small-town Casanova bullshit on her. FYI,” she said, this time to Mags. “I hate to tell you that you’re not special, I mean, since we just met and all, but when it comes to Colin, you’re really not. You’ve got tits and hair and a face, so that’s good enough for him.”

Mags couldn’t help it. The girl sounded so much like Edie that she laughed almost on instinct.

“I’m wounded to the core by your disbelieving laughter. I mean, you’ve got *really* nice...” Colin paused and his grin grew wider. “Hair and face.”

“Hair and face,” Mags said, and pointed at them. “Up here, Romeo.”

Sean shot her an unreadable look, Colin’s grin widened, and the girl lit up. “Oh, I like her,” she said. “Someone who isn’t intimidated by my gorgeous asshole of a brother. I’m Bess.”

“Mags,” she said. “Hi.”

She watched as Colin pulled out two bright pink forearm crutches from the trunk and walked over to his sister’s side of the car. “I’ve got muscular dystrophy,” Bess called out. “Basically, Colin was like the world’s biggest womb bully, took all my strength and was all, ‘hey, bitch, that’s mine,’ and so he’s quarterback and I’m a cripple.”

“You’re not that crippled,” Sean said, and gave Bess his half-smile that dimpled his cheek and lightened his eyes. Mags watched, fascinated, at the change in his expression, the loosening of his shoulders. “Just a little bit. Don’t be so melodramatic.”

“A lot of bit,” Bess said. “Stop flirting with me, Sean. My weak little crippled heart can’t handle it.”

“Stop using that word,” Colin said. “Not around the new girl. She doesn’t know you.”

“You’re twins,” Mags said. She saw it then, when the two of them were together. What was delicate and refined in Bess was broader and masculine on Colin, but they had the same eyes, the same lazy smile, the same clear skin and high cheekbones. “God, how gorgeous are your *parents*?” she asked without thinking.

Colin and Bess stared at her for a long moment, twin expressions of surprise on their faces. Sean was the one who broke the silence. “She’s a photographer,” he said to the twins. “She likes pretty things.”

Mags suddenly blushed and looked down. “Sorry,” she said, but didn’t even know why she was apologizing.

“Sorry for what?” Bess asked. “Calling us gorgeous? Shit, I think you’re the first person besides Sean to even notice we look alike. Most are too distracted by the sadness of my March of Dimes life.”

“No one wants to pity you,” Sean said. “Stop trying to pull that ‘woe is me I’m a sad little cripple’ crap. We know you’re milking this.”

“Wounded to the *core*,” Bess said, and laughed.

Colin rolled his eyes at Mags.

Bess slipped her arms into her crutches and stood. She was at least a foot shorter than her brother, and her body seemed so small and frail, Mags wondered how she would get around at all. Then Bess walked over to her and she saw the arm muscles stretching with the effort. “My God, you’re buff,” Mags said without thinking.

Bess burst into laughter. “Now I *really* like you.” She grinned at Colin as he slung her backpack over his shoulder.

Mags saw it then, the ease and familiarity of the group. This was a scene that had happened hundreds of times, thousands. Sean’s teasing, Bess’s outrageous comments, Colin’s brotherly concern. She felt out of sorts, an intruder, a mere acquaintance trespassing on a familial, intimate scene.

And then Bess smiled at her brother. He smiled down at her. The very same moment, the sun broke through the clouds to burn Sean’s hair red and his eyes turquoise. They were all so perfectly framed that she couldn’t help it. She pulled out her camera and snapped three quick shots before anyone even noticed.

Once they did, Colin grinned and hammed for the camera, Sean went unreadable, and Bess went thoughtful. She took one more shot, obliging, before she lowered her camera.

“Photographer, huh?” Bess asked.

“It’s nothing,” Mags said before she crammed her camera back in her bag. “Sorry. I should have asked.”

Bess walked over to look up at her, the effort noticeable, as if she wanted Mags to know that it was important they stood close. “No one ever bothers to take pictures with me in them,” she said in a quiet voice that the boys couldn’t hear. “Not ever. Not when Colin’s there.”

“The sun broke through,” Mags said, still hesitant and embarrassed that she had acted on impulse. “And you three were framed perfectly.”

“Perfectly,” Bess said, her eyes still thoughtful. “Perfectly.”

Mags didn’t know if she was making fun of her, but some instinct told her no, she wasn’t. There was something deeper going on, something she didn’t quite comprehend. “I’m sorry,” she said to Bess, and then to the boys, “I should have asked.”

“Just join the newspaper,” Colin said. “Then you don’t ever have to ask. You can take pictures of whatever you want and people won’t even think twice about it.” He gave her that gorgeous grin of his. “No apologies necessary.”

“I don’t know if you’ll get in good with the editor, though.” Sean lifted an eyebrow at Bess. “She’s kind of a bitch.”

“She sure is,” Bess said, suddenly cheerful again. “But she says hired.”

Mags couldn’t help the slow smile spreading on her face. “You’re the editor.”

“Of course I’m editor. What else is there to do?” Bess lifted one crutch in an odd shrug. “I mean, I don’t even need to ask if you’re any good. Anyone who all guerilla shoots has to be good.”

“Or just rude,” Mags said, smiling wider.

Bess laughed. “I *really* like her,” she said to Sean. “Carry her books, Thornton. Be a gentleman.”

Sean started but held out a hand for Mags's bag. She shook her head. "It's got my camera in it."

His brow wrinkled. "I won't drop it."

"No." Mags shook her head, awkward again. "I just... I just don't like to let it out of my sight, that's all." How to explain to him that it was like asking him to carry her bodily across the lawn? It was too much an extension of her. She was naked without it. Exposed. Even now, her hands felt empty and her face too... revealed. Behind the camera, no one saw her. They just saw the lens. Everyone loved lenses.

"Seriously, Gown, I'm not going to do anything to it." Sean reached out for her bag again.

Bess smacked him in the leg with her crutch. "You don't understand anything, you big ox. She's a *photographer*."

Mags shuffled in place, embarrassed now at all of the attention directed to her, Colin's, Bess's, and Sean's eyes all focused on her face.

"That's like letting someone carry your helmet for you during the game," Bess said. "And, you know, you just need to ask them nicely to give it to you when you need it."

Mags's hand went to her bag on instinct, curling around it and clutching it on the bottom. "It's okay," she said. "Really. If you want—"

"No," Sean said, his eyes unreadable. "Whatever you want. I was just being polite." He turned and began to walk toward the building, Colin at his side.

Once again, she destroyed whatever tenuous amiability they had established between them, and she didn't even know how.

Bess rolled her eyes at Mags. “Boys,” she mouthed, before she turned to the building. “Come on. Let’s get to the front office before the hyenas descend.”

But they weren’t even halfway up the sidewalk before a group of students crowded around. “Hyenas,” Bess whispered to Mags, but she needn’t have bothered. They had fallen behind. The boys, with their longer legs and loping stride, were a good ten to fifteen feet in front of them. Mags had stayed back with Bess, who had shot her a grateful look.

“Who are the hyenas?” Mags asked.

Bess stopped walking and caught her breath before she spoke. “Hunter Wilson,” she said, at the squat, muscular boy with the squinty eyes and mean grin. “He hates me. I don’t know why. Lily Thornton. Sean’s sister.” She pointed at the girl with the strawberry blonde hair and Sean’s eyes. “She’s indifferent to me. The feeling’s mutual. And Bronwyn Barker.” Bess eyed Mags for a moment. “I predict she’s going to hate *you*.”

“Why would she hate me?” Mags asked.

Bess stared up at Mags, a little smile on her face. “I have no idea,” she said. “Just a prediction.”

Mags watched as the crowd fell into step around Sean and Colin. Hunter stood next to Lily but spoke to the boys, while Bronwyn fell in next to Sean and leaned into him, smiling. He looked down at her and gave her a wide smile as she chattered away at him. The change in him was almost shocking. He became a different person, talkative, friendly, his smiles easy and free. Well, everything but the shoulders. Those still held the tension, the distance, and his eyes were still dark and unreadable.

“Are they dating?” She glanced at Bess. “Do you think she’d be mad because he gave me a ride?” To Mags, that sounded a level of ridiculous even her years of experience at a girls’ school couldn’t comprehend.

“No, they’re not dating,” Bess said. “Much to Queen B’s dismay. She’s been trying to hook that fish for years now.” But when Bronwyn tugged Sean down to whisper in his ear, Bess shrugged. “Well, I mean, they’ve gone on *dates*. But they’re not *dating*.” She started to walk forward. “Come on. I suppose we have to introduce you, although I fear if I do, the corruption will settle in.”

When they reached the group, Colin turned to smile at them. “Hey, you guys, this is Mags. She’s Coach Hale’s daughter.”

“Hey.” Hunter eyed her for a moment and seemed to dismiss her out of hand.

Lily nodded, her eyes cool and unattached. “Hello,” she said, and then turned back to Hunter.

But Bronwyn made a very big deal of hooking her arm with Sean’s. “Oh, *hi*.” She smiled, wide and fake, at Mags. “So you’re the new girl.”

“That’s me,” Mags said, and shifted her bag on her shoulder.

“Was that your high school?” Bronwyn pointed to Mags’s shirt.

“What?” Mags looked down, forgetting for a moment what she even put on that morning. Right. The Sunnydale High shirt. “Oh, no, it’s not.”

“Why would you wear a shirt for a school you didn’t even go to?” Bronwyn asked. She looked up at Sean, a little smile on her face. “Is that weird? I don’t know. I just think it’s weird.”

“It’s from *Buffy*,” he said, without another glance at Mags.

Mags was surprised, honest to God surprised both that he had even noticed and that he got the reference. Of all the TV shows she expected Sean Thornton, Milton senior class president, to watch, it certainly wasn't *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. "Go Razorbacks," she said.

That got her a glance, and Sean's ghost smile widened to his dimpled little half smile, and she pinked in response because some part of her, the cognizant reader of people realized that *this* was his true smile, the half-smile, not the wide and easy—fake, she now realized, completely fake—smile she had seen earlier. She smiled back before she realized she had just made an enemy for life.

Bronwyn's eyes narrowed, but she plastered on a fake smile of her own. "Oh, right. *Buffy*. I remember now. Sean, you used to make me watch that all the time. Remember? When Lily and I would have our sleepovers at your house and we'd stay up all night?" She smiled up at him, but her eyes flitted back to Mags. "All the time," she said again.

"Bess, you need to get inside before you get too tired," Colin said. "Are you good taking Mags to the front office? I'll bring your books to first period."

"Of course I am," Bess said. "You ready, new girl?"

"Right." Mags nodded at the group. "It was nice meeting you."

"*Wonderful* to meet you," Bronwyn said. "Welcome to Milton High!" And then she tugged Sean away before he could say anything else. Hunter and Lily followed a moment afterwards.

"Do you need anything else?" Colin asked his sister.

"Arsenic for Queen B?" she asked.

Colin chuckled. "I meant your wheelchair."

"Not on the first day," she said. "I'm good."

He leaned over to kiss his sister on the forehead. “See you at first period.” Then, smiling, he leaned in to Mags. “First day kiss?” he asked.

She smacked him on the arm. “You are incorrigible.”

“Hey!” he said. “That’s an SAT word.” He winked at Mags and then broke into a run to catch up with his friends. He was even a beautiful runner, his strides even and well-placed.

“Stop drooling over my brother,” Bess said. “It’s unseemly.”

“How is there so much pretty in one family?” Mags asked. “It seems unfair to the rest of the gene pool.”

“Well, look at it this way. I got the pretty, you got the tits. Ultimately, it’s a reasonable tradeoff.” She smiled up at Mags. “So, normally, at this point in meeting a new female student who has also had the misfortune of meeting my brother, I’d tell you to go ahead and run along since I am pretty sure you’re only being nice to me to get Colin to like you.”

Mags smiled back. “I’m not only being nice to you to get at your brother.” She paused for a second, wondering if Bess would understand her humor. She took a deep breath and decided to take the plunge. “Besides, I think I’ve got that in the bag if I want it.”

Bess let out a bark of laughter. “Remember what I said? Tits, hair, and face. In that order.”

Mags *liked* her. She had made a friend, a friend so much like Edie that she almost shook from the pain of missing her. But she squared her shoulders and adjusted her bag once more.

“Hair before face, huh?”

“Hey, the boy has *some* standards.” Bess blew a lock of hair out of her face. “Okay, so one standard. But still. He’s blood. I’ve got to stick up for him against all you horribly lustful sluts.”

“I do live in a constant state of sluttiness,” Mags agreed. “But I will try my best to restrain myself in the name of friendship.”

“Awesome.” Bess began walking. “Now that we’re friends, I can start telling you all about my dream to be a female MC, circa 1985.”

Mags burst into laughter and fell into step next to her. “Born too late, huh?”

“You have *no* idea, new girl. You have *no* idea.”

CHAPTER SIX

She was ignored in homeroom. Even the teacher’s eyes glazed over as she nodded at Mags when she answered “here” to her name.

She was ignored in AP Bio II. A student turned to hand back the syllabus, but did not smile or speak to her in any other way. The rest of the period was taken up with explanations that yes, they would be dissecting fetal pigs, but no, none of them could ask about the incident from 2005, to which everyone chuckled, except Mags, who had no idea what the joke was that everyone was so clearly in on. And honestly, Mags thought as she left the classroom, which genius administrator thought having students dissect first thing in the morning was a good idea?

She was ignored in P.E. She received her uniform—a black shirt like Sean’s advertising the school’s athletic department, black shorts with the school’s name on the right leg, and a bonus pair of black sweatpants and black hoodie for the colder months—and then listened as the female P.E. teacher explained to them that yes, they would be expected to exercise, and yes, they have to dress out for gym, and even though they were going to learn archery, no, they could not pretend they were in *The Hunger Games*.

She was ignored in AP Calculus, which was okay with her since she had no idea what was going on anyhow. She had taken Pre-Calculus junior year, but now felt like the world was speeding by her. She scrambled to keep up, but a quick glance around the room at least assured her she wasn’t the only student struggling to keep her head above water.

By the time she got to English, she was so relieved to see Bess smiling and waving at her, that she almost ran to the desk next to hers. “See?” Bess said when Mags sat down. “I told you Nupur did you right.”

She had. When Bess brought her to the front office, she made Mags wait until her friend Nupur could come to help. She had taken one look at Mags's schedule and declared it "unacceptable." Then, Nupur worked her student-worker magic, switching her afternoon English AP for the morning—"with me and Bess now," Nupur said—her regular Calc for AP Calc—"you would be bored to *tears*," Bess said—and enrolling her in Journalism with the smooth and practiced air of a person getting away with, if not murder, then at least manslaughter.

"Nupur's the *best*," Bess said. "I don't even think Mrs. Castheil understands how to arrange schedules. Nupur's been doing it since sophomore year. She's hardcore."

"She's a genius," Mags said. "Except for the whole AP Calculus thing."

"It's first day insanity. She calms down and reviews for the next two weeks." At Mags's look, Bess shrugged. "I took it last year. I tested out of a bunch of stuff."

Mags glanced down at the schedule now taped to the inside of her school-issued planner. "So you and I also have Journalism together, but not history or French?"

"*Hablo Espanol*," Bess said. "And I *hablo* Chem II, which is in the afternoons. Don't worry, my white sister. You won't be alone in Euro or French."

"I've got AP French with you." Nupur slid into the seat next to Mags just as the warning bell rang. "I made sure to place us together."

"My fellow brown sister will not steer you wrong." Bess extended her hand and she and Nupur fist-bumped. "Most importantly, we are now ladies who lunch *first* lunch."

"And I put Sean Thornton in AP Euro history after his mother whined, and Bess said you're friends with him now." Nupur reached out a fist to Mags, too. "Nice on that, by the way. Most new kids don't reach all the way to the top in their first five hours."

“Of course, our last ‘new kid’ was two years ago, so you’re a bit of an anomaly.” Bess patted Mags’s hand. “Don’t worry. We don’t bite much.” She lifted Mags’s arm and pretended to chomp.

Mags laughed and pulled her arm away. “I don’t think Sean and I qualify as ‘friends,” she said. “Trust me. He’s doing this for my dad. Sean barely tolerates my presence. I mean, he calls me Gown.”

“If the shoe fits,” Nupur said.

“You *are* kind of a Gown,” Bess said. “I mean that in the nicest possible way, of course.”

“Of course,” Mags said, only slightly unsure if they were joking or not. “I would never think otherwise.”

“Did you mess with Sean in any way?” Nupur asked. “Because Lily Thornton will cut your throat if you mess with her brother. That family is *tight*.”

“Hey, remember when he liked Wendy Kolecki sophomore year? And she dumped him and told all the girls that he was a bad kisser?” Bess shook her head. “She had to transfer schools. It was like old-school Amish shunning around here, and Lily was just a freshman at the time.” Bess shuddered. “Unpleasant girl she is, but hey, I’m not about to mock a bitch for defending her family. Bitches gotta defend their families.”

“Believe me,” Mags said. “I’ve done nothing to Sean Thornton to either warrant an Amish shunning or to be called Gown.”

Bess rested her head on her arms and grinned at Mags. “Sean Thornton has called me ‘cripple’ since we were kids.”

“And ‘Legs,’” Nupur said.

“And ‘Legs,’” Bess agreed. “He’s many things in this world, but the boy’s not an asshole. You get me?”

“So... it’s a good thing?” Mags asked. “He doesn’t actually think I’m a Gown?”

“No, you’re kind of a Gown. I’m not going to lie to you. It’s not your fault, of course. You’re new. You’re not from here. Your dad went to Helstone. But if Sean thought you were *total* Gown? He’d call you Margaret.”

“Or ‘Miss Hale,’” Nupur said. “But if he’s calling you Gown, it’s like... it’s like...”

“It’s like he’s daring anyone else to try and call you that to your face,” Bess said, her voice and expression suddenly serious. “No one dared make fun of me after Sean first called me ‘cripple.’ You get me?”

“People made fun of you?” Mags asked, her voice quiet. “I really hate people.”

“Yeah.” Bess smiled, quick and bright. “Yeah, I’m not so much of a fan, either.” She reached over and squeezed Mags’s hand. Mags squeezed back.

“Besides, didn’t he drive you to school?” Nupur asked. “In the GTO, right?”

“I’ve never ridden in that death trap of his car.” Bess leaned around Mags to look at Nupur. “How long have I known Sean?”

“Your entire life.”

“My entire life,” Bess said. She turned back to Mags. “Never once in the GTO.”

“Colin would never let you ride in the GTO,” Nupur said. “It’s not safe for poor little crippled girls.”

“Now, Nupur, you know it’s because that car’s an extension of his penis.” Bess fanned herself. “My God, new girl. You rode around in Sean Thornton’s *penis*.”

Mags turned twelve shades of pink to which both girls laughed until the class bell rang.

“Good morning,” the teacher said when he walked in. “I’m Mr. Weinbacher. This is AP English. And we’ve got thirteen novels to read before we even get to the practice tests, so let’s get started, hmm?”

#

When she walked out of English, talking over her shoulder to Bess, Mags ran straight into another student.

“Careful, Gown.” Sean Thornton reached out a hand to steady her, holding onto her elbow until she found her footing again.

“Sorry,” she said as a blush burned bright on her cheeks. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

“I can see that,” he said. “Where’s Bess?”

“She’s right here.” Mags pulled away from the doorframe and squeezed herself into a little corner formed by the door and the lockers so Bess could have room and everyone would stop paying attention to her. A moment later, Bess struggled through the door.

She didn’t know why she hadn’t noticed before, but Bess *was* struggling. Her face beaded sweat and when she settled in the doorway, Mags noticed that her arms trembled. Nupur came behind her and eased around. “I’ll see you in the café,” Nupur said. “I need to check in at work really quickly.”

“Run, my brown sister,” Bess said, but even the teasing was hollow.

Nupur didn’t notice, just waved over her shoulder as she darted down the hallway.

“Where are your books?” Sean asked in a low voice Mags could just hear.

“Mags has them,” Bess said. “Right?”

Mags smiled and wiggled her fingers at Bess.

“Colin wants you to switch to your chair,” Sean said.

“Colin can go straight to hell,” Bess said. “Where is his ass anyhow? Isn’t he supposed to take over this brotherly devotion?”

“He’s getting your chair. Don’t be so defensive. You’re tiring yourself out, and it’s only lunch.”

Mags saw Bess’s face crumple. “It’s the first day, Sean,” she said, in a voice so different Mags almost didn’t recognize it. “I don’t want to be in the chair on the first day.”

“The cafeteria might as well be miles from here the way you’re looking right now. It’s the chair or I carry you. You pick.”

“I have a suggestion.”

Two sets of eyes swiveled to look at Mags and she attempted not to cringe under their regard, the steadiness of their gaze. “Ride the chair until just outside the cafeteria. Then, swap out for your crutches, have your triumph, and then, once you’ve eaten, come back, I’ll have your chair waiting for you, and Bob’s your uncle.”

“Bob *is* my uncle. How’d you know?” But Bess smiled at Mags. “Yeah, that might work.” She turned her face up to Sean. “Will that plot stand, my man?”

“It will stand.” Sean leveled his eyes at Mags. “Give me her bag. I’m going to hit her locker and swap out her books for the afternoon. Do you have more classes with her?”

“We’ve got Journalism, but that’s not until sixth period. I’ve got French at fifth.”

“The Paper’s next door to French, practically.” Sean reached out a hand. “I’ll bring these back to you in the café. Is that okay with you?”

“Of course it’s okay,” Mags said. “But I’ll happily do it.”

“No,” Sean said. “I’ve been chastised once today for failing my gentlemanly duties. I don’t feel like suffering the wrath of angry young women any more than necessary.”

There. Miniscule but there. The ghost smile.

Mags smiled back, wider than usual, and handed over the bag. “Well, I *am* from the south. I know all about how a gentleman should act. Please, let me know if I can offer you any pointers.”

Sean took Bess’s bag with a mock bow, the ghost smile growing a bit wider. “Why thank you for your ladylike concern. However did we manage without you, Gown?”

Bess leaned against the wall with a heavy sigh before she smacked him in the leg with her crutch. “All right. That’s enough. I declare the rest of the day Mags-teasing-free zone. She’s new, and she’s had more than her share of crap from you, Colin, and me. Okay?”

Sean glanced at Mags out of the corner of his eyes, the smile faded from his face. “Yes, of course. Sorry, Margaret.”

It hurt. She hadn’t expected it would hurt, the purposeful use of her name, the clear reminder that she wasn’t one of them, that she didn’t fit in with their teasing and laughter and jokes. That no matter how much they believed calling her “Gown” would make her one of them, she wasn’t. Not really.

But she had done this for two years now. She knew the appropriate smiles, the right words. She knew how to pretend that everything was fine, no, just fine, to stop the questions, to quell the glances, to transmit nothing but sunshine, sunshine, sunshine. “How does it feel to know your brother went to war because of you, Margaret?” “Jail or enlist? Those were his only two options? And why, exactly, was he arrested again, Margaret?” Or, just the worst one of all, “Really? You just *had* to tell him, didn’t you, Margaret?”

No, she had heard it all. And she now knew that no matter what she had thought, what she had believed, Marlborough was no different from New Orleans. And she *missed* home. So very much.

She got her smile on her face, only a touch too late. By the time she had nodded and smiled, Colin had come with Bess's chair. She followed behind, carrying Bess's crutches, and swapping out with her a few classrooms down from the cafeteria.

"That's the Paper office," Bess said, gesturing at the door next to them. "You can leave it in there. No one will bother it there."

"Perfect," Mags said.

Before Bess walked in to lunch, she turned and smiled at Mags. "We're by the drink machines," she said. "After you park it, come and find us, okay?"

Another bright smile. "Of course," she said. "Okay."

She parked Bess's chair in the Paper office, but when she turned, her untied shoelace was caught under the wheel. She tripped and landed face-first into the edge of the table. She had to bite her fist to muffle her scream of pain and frustration. Instead, she just sat down in a chair and cradled her hurt jaw in her hand.

She didn't want to go to lunch. She didn't want to navigate these strange waters anymore, not alone. Not without Edie. Not without the safe comfort of her camera. She just wanted to run back to her grandmother's and then maybe beyond, just keep running, running so far and long that she ended back up in New Orleans. And maybe she would keep running then, too, straight into the Mississippi and let herself float downriver to the Gulf, then out into the warm, salty sea. Maybe then she could stop hating herself for what she had brought upon them all with just one word.

Was it them?

Yes.

Are you sure it was them?

Yes. Yes. Yes.

“Do you need any help finding the cafeteria?”

She swiped her wrist over her eyes, quick as she could, before she stood to face Sean.

“No, I’m good,” she said, her smile bright and insincere. “Thanks, though.”

He walked forward, eyes squinting, brow furrowed. “Are you okay?”

“What? I’m fine.” She shifted her bag on her shoulder.

“You’re hurt.” His hand reached out, hesitant, to gesture at her chin, but did not touch her. When his hand lowered, she saw a change in him. He stood in front of her and she saw the him beneath it all, the shadow off to the distance in his eyes, the tension in his shoulders. She knew, then, on some instinctual level, the cause for the scars on his arms, his chin, the reason for his sister’s fierce devotion. This was a boy angry not at the world, but at one particular person in it. She was sure it had been his father. She wondered how often he put himself between his father and his sister, or even his mother. There was a reason for the cigarette burns on his arms, after all.

But she said nothing of the sort. It wasn’t her place, and she knew what it was to keep secrets. She knew what it was to carry them in her bones, close to her heart, in the balled curve of her fist and the strange set of her jaw. She had done the *right* thing. She had told, because she had been young, and scared, and bruised and bleeding and her brother, her fierce, protective older brother had asked,

Was it them?

Yes, she had whispered through her tears. *Yes. Yes. Yes.*

“Mags?” Sean asked. “You’re hurt.” He took another step closer to her and she saw it, the balled curve of his fist, the strange set of his jaw. “Who hurt you?”

She bit her bottom lip to keep her near hysterical laughter from bubbling to the surface. She *understood* him, without her camera. She *saw* him, and not through her lens. This strange and solemn and teasing boy, she knew him, without her camera, and she didn’t know what that meant. “I fell,” she said. And then she did laugh, but it was warmer than she expected. “See? I can’t be a Gown. Gowns are all poised and put together. I’ve got all the grace and poise of a land seal.” She gestured at her shoe. “My lace got caught on her wheel when I rolled it in here, and then I tripped. Luckily, my face and that table broke my fall.”

There, that ghost smile again. “A land seal?” he asked. “Really, Gown? That’s where you go?”

And then she really started laughing, and his smile grew wider. “Have you ever actually seen a land seal try to move? It’s more of a flopping on several tons of blubber and belly rather than a moving thing.” She tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear. “That’s about right for me. Land seal.”

“I really wouldn’t spread that around,” Sean said. “People might want evidence of the photographic kind. Do you want to get some ice for your jaw?”

She shrugged. “I’d rather eat. Breakfast seems eons ago.”

“That’s what you get for letting me steal your bacon.”

“Next time I will stab you in the hand with my fork.” She walked toward him. “So, how bad is the food at Milton?”

“Actually, not that bad,” Sean said. “As long as you avoid anything with the word ‘gravy’ in it.” He paused for a second. “Or ‘surprise.’ Or ‘special.’ Okay, stick with chicken fingers, salads, French fries, hamburgers, grilled cheese, and meatloaf, which is surprisingly good. We think there might be actual meat in it.”

“So remember to bring PB&J tomorrow. Got it.”

He turned to the door but waited for her. “So Bess made me come find you,” he said. “I really don’t like to disappoint her. She is bound to insult me using words I don’t even understand, so she makes me feel stupid *and* like an asshole.”

“I’m coming,” Mags said. “I just need to tie my shoe.” And she bent down to do so.

Before she stood up, she flicked her eyes up at him and thought she saw him watching her out of the corner of his eye. But when she stood, his eyes were riveted at the wall, reading the framed paper headlines. “Anything good?” she asked when she walked over.

“Well, there’s the one about the fetal pig incident from 2005,” Sean said.

“Really? They were talking about that this morning but no one would conveniently discuss the incident in full so I could eavesdrop.” She nudged him out of the way and stood on tiptoes to read the headline which proclaimed, “STUDENTS PROTEST FOR FETAL PIG RIGHTS IN BIO,” but the column itself wasn’t in the frame. She wavered on her feet and then his hand was on her elbow, giving her leverage and balance before she fell, once again. She turned to give him a grateful smile. “Thanks, Sean.”

He pulled his hand away from her elbow and she bounced to her feet again. “Bess tells it best,” he said as he walked to the door. “Come on. She can enlighten you.” He walked out without waiting for her.

Mags stared after him for a second, wondering, once again, what she had done to insult Sean Thornton, before she followed him through the doors to blink against the bright summer sunlight pouring through the tall hall windows of Milton High.

#

Monday, at least, ended on a high note: AP French with Nupur, Journalism with Bess and the other members of the paper staff who welcomed her and her camera with if not open arms then at least clear relief. Apparently, their photographer had graduated last year and none of them wanted to be behind the camera at anything, especially football games.

“Ugh,” Nupur said when the subject of sports came up in class. “Seriously? Could this school be any more up its own ass about football?”

“Nupur,” Mr. Weinbacher said. “Language.”

Nupur waved her hand. “Sorry, Mr. W. But for reals, right?”

“I don’t mind,” Mags said. “I’ll do it.”

“You don’t actually like football, do you?” Alex, the assistant editor, peered at Mags over his glasses. “I mean, I know your dad’s the new coach and everything, but still. Football?”

Henry had called it “Neanderball” back home, and she had laughed, because it was clever, but still, football was important to her family. It represented so much of what was good and bright about her memories of Freddie, of her dad and mom before all of this mess began so she resented, just a bit, the vehemence in his tone. “I actually do like football, yes,” Mags said to Alex. Her tone was harsher than she intended.

Actually, she loved football. Loved the press of the crowd, the smell of autumn, Freddie’s smile when he scored a touchdown and looked for her and her mom in the stands. She loved the popcorn and the hot dogs, the cheers and groans of the crowd. She loved moving in

and out of the groups, snapping picture after picture with no one paying the slightest bit of attention to her.

She loved how happy her father was after his team won a game. She loved how her mother used to go to every one of Freddie's high school games, back in the day. Run Boosters. Organize raffles. The trips they took when her father's university played nearby.

She loved football. She just didn't so much love football players.

"Really?" Alex sat back in his chair and observed her. "I would have never thought a girl like you would fall for all of that bullshit."

"What is this, Candid Camera? Seriously, enough with the language." Mr. Weinbacher leaned over the table. "Next inappropriate word gets the privilege of receiving my first detention of the new year. I've got a new booklet and everything. It's very fancy. I am itching to try it out."

"Sorry, Mr. W.," Alex said as he slumped in his seat. "Sorry, Margaret."

"Her name is Mags," Bess said. "Not Margaret." She turned to Mags. "Only take it on if you want to. You get your choice here. You're our only trained photographer, you know."

Mags just shrugged, embarrassed at all of the attention leveled at her. "I don't mind doing it," she said again. "It's no big deal."

"Good," Bess said. "Mags is our new photographer and sports columnist."

"No, I don't want to *write*," Mags said. "Can't I just take pictures?" She shuddered at the thought of a byline, of people reading the words she had written.

Bess eyed her for a moment. "Okay, you and I will write together. Does that work?" She turned to the table. "I have to go to all the games anyhow. Sisterly devotion, you understand."

Mags nodded and sank back in her chair. “Thanks,” she said, and listened as the rest of them quarreled for almost an hour about who would take credit for what. She just scrolled through the pictures on her camera and, after asking Mr. Weinbacher for permission to use her computer, uploaded them to her MacBook. She tinkered with the images of the cafeteria, half-listening as they debated their opening story. Budget cuts or the newly canceled proposed iPad program? Teachers’ salaries and the call for unionizing, or the burden of textbook costs moving to the student body? And of course, the protests. After a while, all anyone could talk about were the protests.

“It makes sense,” Alex said. “Teachers are paid for sh... nothing, after all. And then all the talk of furloughs? What do you think, Mr. Weinbacher?”

“I think I’m happy the cursing has gone down greatly in this class. I don’t know where you guys are coming from with all of this.” Mr. Weinbacher looked around his group. “iPad program is the opening story. It’s edgy, it’s fun, and it’s not controversial. Let’s try not to piss anyone off the first week, shall we?”

Mags noticed that he said nothing about whether or not he agreed with the protests. His silence seemed more telling than any words he could have said.

She, however, said nothing at all until the bell rang for Euro.

“Hey, did you get anything good at lunch?” Bess asked as they left the Paper office. “I forgot to ask.” She was using her crutches again, so Mags was walking her to Chem II before she dashed over to her last class of the day.

“I did,” Mags said. “I’ll play with them and show the whole staff tomorrow.”

“We don’t have Journalism tomorrow,” Bess said. “It’s Block A. Show them to me at lunch.”

“What’s Block A?”

For the rest of their walk to Bess’s class, she tried to explain to Mags the intricate and esoteric school schedule. Mags had assumed that all of her classes would meet every day, but no, Bess informed her that the first day was special, to meet all of her teachers. After that, the school would move to the block schedule rotation. There were more complications, involving an intense, dedicated reading hour, different levels of homeroom, not to mention special schedules for exams and assemblies.

“I don’t get it,” Mags said when she deposited Bess and her books at the Chem lab.

“We’ll sort it out.” Bess made a shooing motion with her hand. “You’ve got a minute until second bell. Mrs. Scotch is down the hall.”

Mags managed to slide into the door just as the second bell rang.

“You must be Margaret,” the teacher said, and smiled. “Glad you found us. We’ve got one open spot left. Take a seat.”

Mags turned to see the empty seat in the far back corner of the room, at the junction of the U-shape the desks formed. Next to, of course, here was no surprise, Sean Thornton.

She tromped across the room, aware that every eye was on her as she made her way to the empty desk. Bonus, the teacher waited until she was seated before she began her lecture that yes, this was AP Euro History and yes, they would be expected to read hundreds of pages a week, and yes, they would have multiple sample tests before they could even *begin* to think about taking the real test.

Mags wasn’t surprised by the amount of work required in her classes. Her schedule was intense, almost all of her classes Advanced Placement or college prep in some way. But perhaps some snobbish part of her had expected that the classes would be easier than her private Catholic

school back home. There, almost 99% of the graduating classes went on to four-year universities, with many of those on merit scholarships of some kind. Several of her former classmates were National Merit semi-finalists. She had been one herself.

“Gown?”

“Hmm?” She turned to see Sean staring at her, a bemused expression on his face.

“Practice questions,” he said. “Group work.” His eyes squinted. “Weren’t you listening?”

She shook her head, not at all surprised to see the ghost smile appear. “Come on, then,” he said. “I’ll fill you in.”

“Thanks.” She scooted her chair closer to his desk so they could share the questions. As she did, she noticed Bronwyn Barker’s eyes from across the room, shooting daggers directly at her. “Um, you don’t need to work with me.” She looked up at Sean. “If you want to go work with your friends.”

His brow furrowed again. “Mrs. Scotch assigned us to partner together. You *really* weren’t listening.”

She blushed, bright and deep. “It’s been a long day. I just... I was just...” But she didn’t know what she was “just.”

“Well, after we’re done, I’ll tell you about the ten-page paper she assigned for Wednesday.” Sean shook his head. “I guess you missed that, too.”

She stared at him, wide-eyed, until his ghost smile grew. “I’m just kidding, Gown.”

She smacked him on the arm before she could even think about it. “Jesus, Thornton. Don’t scare me like that.”

And then there it was, the full dimpled half-smile, and she found herself smiling back. Their awkwardness from lunch gone, at least for now. Maybe she was wrong after all. Maybe she and Sean were friends, despite what she said to Nupur. “Come on,” he said. “Question one is about the Renaissance.”

“Right,” Mags said. “When we all sculpt and paint and stuff.”

“You’re going to do great on the AP exam,” he said. “I’m positive that all the questions can be answered with quotes from *Buffy*.”

“Hey,” she said. “Since you’re so knowledgeable, can you tell me what ‘Block A’ is?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

It took Mags a full three weeks before she fell into a routine at school.

Bess tried to explain it to her, the complicated esoteric schedule that involved rotating classes and a reading hour and homeroom. But she had remained unconvinced until Tuesday morning when, after attending P.E. instead of Calc, she found herself writing her schedule on the back of her hand with thick black ink and consulting it, every time the bell rang.

Now, at the end of week three, she didn't have to write it on her hand anymore. Why should she? She shuffled like a zombie from one class to the next, so burnt out from a morning of Bio and Calc, that by the time she arrived at lunch that Friday, she fell into a seat next to Bess and rested her head on her arms.

"There, there," Bess said, patting her on the back. "Tomorrow's the weekend, at least, and Labor Day to boot. A full five days before you have to do Bio and Calc back to back."

"They're monsters," Mags said. "Evil, cruel, horrible monsters."

"Blame Nupur," Bess said. "She's the one who rearranged your schedule."

"Sitting right here," Nupur said. "Like, really. Right here."

Mags smiled at Nupur. "No, it's just... my brain hurts. I think it's melting. Is it oozing out of my ears?"

"That would still make you gorgeous."

She peeked up to see Colin smiling over her. "Okay, now that's officially the worst pick up line in the *world*."

"Wounded," he said, clutching his heart. He sank down in the empty seat next to Bess's wheelchair. "Got any money?"

“Seriously, don’t we have a mother who works here?” She turned to Mags. “The answer to that is, of course, yes. He just likes to steal my lunch money.” Mags had found out very early on that the twins’ mother was none other than the principal of the school.

“Bully,” Mags said. “Leave her alone. I will fight for her honor.” She grabbed a straw and flicked it toward him without sitting up. “Fight fight fight.”

Colin laughed, surprised, and threw the straw back at her. “I thought you were all quiet and shy, new girl.”

“That’s because you don’t know her,” Bess said. “At night, she does a one-woman slam poetry show down at Cauldron Coffee. She calls it ‘Hey, Man. Stop Calling Me Gown, Right?’”

“I play the bongos,” Mags said. “It is a very crucial part of my artistic expression.”

“She hosts her own pirate cable show,” Nupur said. “‘Mags and the World of Tomorrow through the Technology of Today Playing the Music of Yesterday.’”

“1930s polka.” Mags shook her shoulders, still, without sitting up. “Shake a tail feather, baby.”

Colin gave the three of them a bemused grin. “Heaven help us all. You’ve been assimilated. There’s no hope for you now.”

“Oh, go get us some lunch.” Bess handed him a ten-dollar bill. “And bring us both some fruit!” she called after him as he bounded away. “Real fruit!” She shook her head. “He eats like a teenage boy.”

“He *is* a teenage boy,” Mags said. She sat up and reached for her lunch bag.

“That doesn’t mean he has to eat like one.” Bess eyed Mags’s food and pretended to wipe drool from the corner of her mouth. “When is your grandmother going to feed me?”

“Any day you want.” Mags unwrapped her roast beef and white cheddar on homemade olive bread and smiled down at it with contentment. “She’s fed Sean Thornton what, seven mornings now?”

“Seriously, what’s it like?” Nupur leaned closer.

“The sandwich? Delicious.” Mags held it out. “Want a bite?”

Nupur wrinkled her nose. “I’m *Hindu*,” she said.

Mags pinked and lowered her food. “I am so sorry. I forgot.”

Nupur waved her hand in dismissal. “No. Riding with Sean Thornton in his sexy rusted GTO.”

“It’s like riding with a boy that loathes the very sight of you, all while in a rusting heap of a traffic accident waiting to happen. Oh, and let’s not forget the fact that the passenger door doesn’t open, so all movement in and out of the car occurs on the driver’s side.” Mags took a big bite of her sandwich so she didn’t have to say anything else for a while. Not that she needed to. After Colin delivered Bess’s chicken fingers and banana, the girls sat debating the relative benefits of dating people with crappy cars versus no cars at all.

While it was true that Sean had given her a ride to school seven out of the fifteen days they had been *in* school, any advancement in their friendship had died out that first day. When she had come to the breakfast table that first Wednesday morning to find her father gone but Sean there, eating her grandmother’s homemade cinnamon rolls, she had smiled and sat in the seat next to him. He had grunted some one- or two-word answers to her questions and then concentrated on consuming four—yes, four—giant rolls, while her grandmother watched, beaming at his appetite.

But she slid into his car that morning and noticed the spring on the passenger seat had been taped down with duct tape. “Thanks for this, by the way.”

“What?”

She blinked at his tone but felt it important enough to point it out again. “Thanks,” she said, and gestured at the seat. “For the spring.”

He shrugged but the tip of his ears pinked. “It was dangerous,” he said. “Rusted.” And then he said nothing else the rest of the ride.

Then, as if on some archaic internal calendar, he had come that Tuesday, last Friday, once again on Monday, then Thursday, and again that morning. Each time, he ate her grandmother’s food, smiled and talked with her grandmother and, when she was feeling up to it, her mother. And then they would go to school in complete silence once more.

“Most girls would choose riding in the GTO in silence over not riding in the GTO at all.” Nupur gestured a carrot stick at Mags. “Clearly, you’re doing something wrong. Fix it.”

Mags laughed. “I’ll get on that right away. Promise.”

“So, what do you think of our first issue?” Bess asked. “We did good, right?”

“We did great,” she said honestly. “The unionizing story is terrific.”

Bess preened with delight. “It was amazing, right??”

“And scary,” Nupur said. “I mean, how little are our teachers making that the entire county is thinking about unionizing?”

“Not at all,” Mags said. “It’s crappy pay for long hours.” They were lucky her father had found any job at all, she knew, and thanks to her grandmother, they didn’t have to pay rent. But it felt different, financially. Her mother’s illness for one. Their decreased mobility, for second.

“And I have to admit, I love your sports photos, Mags.” Nupur twirled a carrot stick in ranch. “I never knew cheerleading and football practice could be so exciting.”

Mags eyed her for a second, trying to determine if she was making fun of her, but when Nupur ate the carrot stick without any further commentary or glances, she realized she was telling the truth. “Thanks,” Mags said. She had stayed after school every day, waiting for her father to be finished with football practice so she could get a ride home.

That first Monday night, she took photos out of boredom, but when she loaded them into her computer, she realized they could have an entire series if they wanted. Behind the scenes of what everyone hoped would be their biggest football season yet. Last year, they had gotten one game away from going to State. This year, with the addition of her father—only assistant coach, but with years of college coaching experience under his belt—everyone was fully optimistic.

So, Mags thought, what did cheerleading and football look like before the big game? It looked like hard work: sweat pouring down Colin Higgins’ face as he threw ball after ball after ball. It looked like laughter: the cheerleaders encouraging each other as they stumbled and tripped and giggled their way through routines. It looked like earnestness: the cheerleading and football coaches consulting playbooks and notes, reviewing tapes and watching drills.

“THE PATH TO STATE,” she called it when she texted her idea to Bess who texted back, almost immediately, in all caps, “ZOMG THAT IS AMAZING RUN RUN RUN WITH IT!!!!”

For the rest of the week, Mags took full advantage of the hours spent after school waiting for her father. She photographed different pictures on different days, first from the bleachers, then, one of the cheerleaders—not Bronwyn, but another girl, tall and lanky with gorgeous blonde hair—came over to her and asked in a frank voice, “What the hell are you doing?”

They chatted for a long minute. The girl, who introduced herself as Sally, asked if Mags would take close-ups, different parts of the routine, and then share the images so they could review it. After that, she was on the field constantly, moving between cheerleading and football and then the marching band, capturing distance shots, shots up close, those in the early afternoon and then those when twilight hit. She took hundreds of pictures these first three weeks of school as they all got ready for the first away game that night, and when she tired of it, she would either sit in the stands or in the senior lounge, finishing her homework until her dad was ready to go home.

“And now,” Bess said, snapping her fingers in Mags’s face, “first big game tonight.”

“Away game,” Nupur said. “I don’t see why you have to go.”

“Because my brother’s the quarterback and my mom’s the principal.” Bess rolled her eyes before she turned to Mags. “Mom and I are driving to Jasper. You sure you don’t want to come with us?”

Her father hadn’t asked her to come. He used to always ask her to come, before. But not now. Football was too sacred to him to let her taint it now.

It had been tempting to go with Bess and Principal Higgins, but in the end, Mags shook her head. “It’s okay,” she said. “I’ve got a ton of homework to do. I’ll get everything at next week’s game. Promise.”

“You better,” Bess said. “It’s the epic battle between Milton and Helstone. Not part of the regular season, of course, but it’s a huge deal. The whole town comes out.”

“There’s a bonfire after,” Nupur said. “It’s actually somewhat cool.”

“It’s completely cool, Nupur. Stop playing like you don’t care. You so care.” Bess turned to Mags. “So, you have to come.”

“I know,” Mags said, and smiled. “I already told you. We’ve got this covered.”

“It’ll be epic. I can feel it in my sad little crippled bones.” Bess backed her chair away from the table. “Well come on, my brown and white sisters,” she said. “That was first bell. And don’t forget, Mags. You need to be at the sendoff right after school.” Bess mimed snapping an invisible camera. “Duty calls. I’ll text with locations.”

“Right.” Mags stood up and gathered her trash. “I will be there swiftly and promptly, and will take no photographic prisoners.”

Bess grinned. “That’s my bloodthirsty little girl. Honestly, I am so proud.”

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Mags had Euro last period on Block A, but it was only half full. The cheerleaders and the football players were preparing their trip to Jasper for the game, and the marching band members were gathering equipment and having last-minute practices on the field before they left for their first public performance. As Mags had seen them practice for the last three weeks, she knew they needed as much time as possible. They weren’t bad, not exactly. They just weren’t very... rhythmic.

The class seemed quieter without Bronwyn and her cheerleading cohort, and smaller without Sean. They had not sat next to each other since that first class day, and certainly had not worked together. Bronwyn had seen to that, but Mags suspected Sean had gone along willingly, especially after what she had found out about herself.

She had heard the rumors just three days ago at lunch, when she sat alone at the table, waiting for Bess and Nupur to show up. About five minutes after the bell, Bess had come zipping toward her in her chair. “Where’s Nupur?” Mags had asked.

“She had to cover for someone at work.” Bess had shook her head. “That’s not important. People are saying things about you.” Bess’s eyes had flashed with anger. “I set them straight. Don’t you worry. Only *we* get the right to call you a snobby Gown.”

Mags hadn’t known whether to laugh or cry. Laugh, because Bess was so indignant on her behalf. Cry, because it was happening again, the rumor mill. The assumptions about her and her life.

In the end, she laughed, because what else could she do? She was too tired, too exhausted after the entire ordeal back home, and honestly, if the kids at Milton thought she’d get upset about them calling her a snobby Gown, they really needed to take lessons from the entirety of the parochial system in Louisiana. “Oh yeah?” she had asked. “What else are they saying?”

“Well, of course it’s Bronwyn,” Bess had said. “She is so stupidly jealous that Sean gives you rides to school that she’s telling everyone that you think you’re better than us. That you keep saying you wish you had gone to Helstone. That this school isn’t hard enough for you.”

“Has she even *seen* me after Bio and Calc?”

“I know, right? Your hair sticks straight up.” Bess had peered up at her. “She says that you think everyone, even the teachers, are stupid hillbillies.”

“I’m from the *south*. Like, deep south. There is nothing past where I am from but water.” Mags shook her head. “Aren’t they supposed to be making fun of me? Stupid accent? Redneck family? Etcetera etcetera?”

“I think your accent’s adorable,” Bess said. She paused for a moment and seemed to suck in a deep breath. “There are other things, too.”

Mags stilled. “Anything about Louisiana?”

“What?” Bess’s forehead wrinkled. “What about Louisiana?”

“Are they saying anything about me from Louisiana?”

“No. Why the hell would they say anything about you and Louisiana?”

Mags shrugged but she felt the blush spread, across her cheeks and down her chest.

“Then let me guess. It’s any combination of the following: I hate football and stupid, ignorant, small football towns. I hate Marlborough and its stupid, ignorant small-town mindset. And corn. Can’t forget I hate corn.”

“No one has mentioned corn yet,” Bess said. “But that’s probably coming. You know how much of our local economy is agricultural now that the factories closed, right?”

“Again, I am from the overwhelmingly agricultural *south*. And my father is a football *coach*.”

“They seem to keep forgetting that,” Bess said. “I think they actually like your dad.”

Of course they did, Mags thought. Everyone liked her dad. “What else? Let’s see. Well, if they like my dad, then I must be plotting my return to New Orleans. I am trying to convince my dad to quit so he can bring me home. I am trying to convince my dad to sabotage the games so he’ll get fired so we can go home.” She got caught up in her narrative now and snapped her fingers. “Oh! And the piece de resistance, I have stolen my dad’s playbook in the night and am selling it to Helstone in a last-ditch effort to try to get enrolled there.” At Bess’s look, she couldn’t help it. She started laughing. “*Really?*”

“It is the most bullshit rumor I’ve ever heard, but... people are saying it, Mags.”

Mags laughed harder. “That was a *joke*. Are you serious? People actually believe that?”

“Not really,” Bess said. “Not anyone important.” A little wry smile crossed her face.

“Just Bronwyn and a few other members of the Bright & Shiniens.”

“Jesus, what does this girl think Sean and I *do* when he drives me to school?” Mags shook her head. “She would be so gravely disappointed in my awkward silence and his monosyllabic grunts. Hell, there isn’t even music because he doesn’t have a radio in his car. Or a working passenger side door. Or, for one brief moment last week, a passenger side floorboard. I had to ride the entire three point two miles to school with my legs tucked under me so I didn’t get any wayward pebbles thrown against my legs and get cut.” She shook her head. “Not that he said as much, mind you. He sort of grunted and gestured, and I had to figure it out myself.”

“Sean doesn’t drive Bronwyn in the GTO,” Bess said. “If they go out, he takes his mom’s car. So she sees you as this interloper who’s gotten into the sacred realm.”

Mags didn’t think there was any evidence more apparent than that that Sean Thornton found her a nuisance. He had to go out of his way to pick her up, to give her a ride. And he had to let her ride in the car he thought wasn’t good enough for his girlfriend. “A sacred realm with no floorboard.” Mags threw up her hands and slumped in her chair. “I am not interested in Sean. He is not my type.”

“He’s everybody’s type,” Bess said. “He’s a good-looking, popular football player. There isn’t a girl in this school who wouldn’t break off a piece of that hunky boy goodness.” She thought for a second. “Except me and Lily. We are his sisters.” She was quiet for another moment. “And I guess not the ladies who like the ladies, but even then, some exceptions might be made. He is awfully cute. I think it’s those blue eyes.”

“Hey, I’m the last person to deny that Sean Thornton and his blue eyes are attractive.”

Bess grinned. “So you *do* think he’s cute. I *knew* it.”

Mags rolled her eyes. “I’m a straight teenage girl, Elizabeth Higgins. Of course I think he’s cute. I also think Colin’s cute, but I’m not interested in him, either.”

“As well you shouldn’t be. My brother’s a mess, romantically.” Bess leaned over the table to look at Mags. “So you are just as vulnerable as the rest of us to the wiles and charms of teenage boys.”

For Mags, as a photographer, she found Sean’s attractiveness to be in his intensity. She wanted to find out what was behind those blue eyes. As a photographer, she reminded herself. She wanted to find out what was behind those eyes as a photographer. “Bess, he called me Gown about five minutes after we met. He stares at me as if I have insects crawling across my face. It’s kind of hard to like a boy who stares at you as if he expects you to go vampire bumpy face at any moment.”

Bess made a face. “That’s not *his* fault. I mean, you *are* a Gown. What’s a brother to do?”

“Not insult a girl he just met? Besides,” she said, shrugging her shoulders, “we have nothing, and I mean *nothing* in common except my father and a shared interest in one musical group. He is doing exactly what all of my dad’s other football players have done over the years. He’s being nice to me, in hopes that my dad will give him more field time. That’s it. And honestly, he’s not even being that nice.”

“He drives you to school. In the GTO.”

“In complete and utter silence.” Mags paused for a second. “Look, I don’t date football players. I’ve never been attracted to football players. I don’t *like* football players.”

“That’s probably the Gowniest thing you’ve ever said.”

“Twin brothers excluded, of course.”

“Of course,” Bess said. “Who could possibly hate Colin?”

“No one does,” Mags agreed.

“It would be like hating puppies.”

“Ice cream.”

“Free will.”

“America.” Mags shook her head. “It’s all bullshit, Bess.”

“You can’t tell me you wouldn’t be happier back home,” Bess said. Mags was surprised to see her expression grow grim, stoic. “You can’t tell me you wouldn’t go home in a New York second if you could. You would up and leave us tomorrow if there was a car back to New Orleans.”

Would she? Mags missed New Orleans so much it hurt sometimes, but there had been so much pain there the last two years, so many bad memories and dreams that she had been if not happier here then at least... still. Calm. And it felt better than the pain and uncertainty of New Orleans.

“You’re my friend,” Mags said. Bess nodded and opened her mouth to say something, but Mags held up her hand. “You’re my friend. I absolutely trust you. But...” she sucked in a breath. “There are things I don’t like talking about. Things...”

“You’re an introvert,” Bess said. “I get it, Mags. I do. We figured that out day one. Mags likes to be behind the camera, not in front of it.”

Mags shook her head. “It’s more than that. Things happened back home.” And it started exactly like this, she thought, but did not say aloud. Started with jealousies and rumors. With accusations and teasings. With pranks gone too far. *Was it them?* Freddie had asked. And she had said, *Yes*. “Things I don’t want to talk about with anyone,” she said instead. “Not because I don’t trust them, but because I...”

And she saw it. The light dawning in Bess's eyes. "You *don't* want to go back home," she said, her voice somewhat awed.

Mags gave her a wry smile. "I kind of like being a nobody," she said.

"Mags, what happened?"

Mags stared down at her unopened lunch bag. "Not here," she said in a soft voice. "Not today. But... someday. Okay?" She looked up at Bess. "I *trust* you. I just..."

And because she was Bess, she reached over to the table and took Mags's hand. "You tell me whenever, or never. It doesn't matter." And then she smiled, bright and wide. "I'm just happy you don't have one foot in the door. I thought you did, you know. This whole time. I thought, 'girl is gonna leave me and where the hell am I gonna find anyone who's going to carry my books?'"

Mags burst into laughter. Bess squeezed her hand before she pulled it away. "It's actually kind of nice that no one gives a damn about me. Well, before Bronwyn's gossip mongering, anyhow."

"Oh, that bitch will regret her mongering. I promise that." Bess paused for a second. "You sure you're good? I could talk to Colin, make him take care of it. He'd be happy to. He likes you. Well, not *likes* you, likes you. No offense."

Mags had shrugged. "None taken. Besides, Colin likes anything with tits, hair, and face."

"True," Bess had agreed. "But he likes your personality most of all. Want me to talk to him?"

"I really don't care what she says. Do you?"

Bess had grinned at her. “Hell no do I care what some bitchy white girl has to say. We know better. Colin knows better. And honestly? I think most of the cheerleaders know better, especially after your spread in the paper. They’re just too scared to cross Bronwyn.”

Mags had wondered if Sean Thornton knew better. She knew Bronwyn had his ear, after all, and like Iago—*Othello* was their current AP English text and she found it remarkably instructional for high school students—was filling it with poisonous whispers, treasonous half-truths. It would explain his barely tolerant attitude toward her, the way he looked at her when he didn’t think she noticed. “Well, she’s convinced her boyfriend, at least.”

“Who, Sean?” Bess snorted through her nose. “They’re not going out. I’ve told you this before. Besides, I think you’re completely misreading my white brother. Sean knows better than to listen to bullshit cheerleader gossip.”

Mags appreciated Bess’s optimism, but she knew from first-hand experience that it didn’t matter if people liked you, or were your friends. Not if the crowd swayed against you. Not if the rumors spread fast and thick, through the halls, after school, at the coffeehouse and the dances until it burst out, like static, on the internet. Fragments of your intimate, personal life exposed for everyone to see. Your brother, given a choice between jail and enlisting. Your friends, dropping away from you, not because they didn’t believe you, but because the tide had turned against you. Because public opinion swayed them to even *suspect* you may be lying.

Was it them? Freddie had asked. The clench of his fist had tightened. His jaw had set into a firm line. His eyes had narrowed to slits.

Hands and knees bruised, lip cracked and bleeding, eyes red with tears, she had nodded. *Yes*, she had said, sealing their fates with one three-letter word. *Yes, yes, yes.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Margaret?”

Mags blinked as Mrs. Scotch waved in her face to get her attention. “Ma’am?”

The class tittered, but it wasn’t unfriendly. Mags felt a blush spread over her face anyhow.

Mrs. Scotch smiled at her. “Mr. Weinbacher asked that you leave class early to photograph the buses leaving.” She lifted a slip of paper in her hand. “He just wrote for you to be released. Did you finish your practice essay?”

“Oh. Yes, ma’am.” Mags had finished it ten minutes before but found herself doodling along the edges as she had been lost in thought. She handed the sheaf of paper to Mrs. Scotch and gathered her bag. “Thank you.” She slung her messenger bag on her shoulder and ducked out of the room. But when she reached into her bag for her cell phone to check for Bess’s location, she couldn’t find it. When she tried to dig deeper in her bag, her binder slipped out of her hand and landed on the floor, scattering papers.

“Goddammit,” she said to herself. She knelt on the ground and began gathering her things. Someone walked by and gave her an odd look, a freshman, it seemed, but she waved away her offer of help.

After three minutes of searching, she still couldn’t find her cell. Mags stood up with a sigh and headed toward the Paper office. She may have left it in there after lunch. They often popped by after they finished eating to “check on my baby,” as Bess put it.

Mags half-sprinted down the hallway, her Converse silent on the tile beneath her. The sounds of school—of questions and answers, of clearing throats and scratching pencils, of keyboard typing and whispered conversations—faded as she entered the less used hallway that

housed Journalism and French. But the sound of voices grew louder the closer she got to the door, and when she heard her father's name, she stopped a few feet from the Paper office to listen.

“...hired Fred only because the Boosters demanded it. Hell, they're paying his salary, pathetic as it is. I feel for the man, what with his wife so ill.”

“What did you expect after Helstone hired Jonathan away from us? Football at least gets revenue. They're going to cut your paper, Aaron. Just wait and see.”

“We'll go online. I'm not worried about that. And at least I also teach English. It's you I'm worried about. Art will be first. Then music. Then girls' soccer and boys' lacrosse.”

Mags recognized the male voice, Mr. Weinbacher, but did not recognize the female voice. She was about to clear her throat and walk in when his next words stopped her in her tracks.

“Just wait. They're going to fire twenty percent of the school district, starting with the non-essentials. Then they will cut salary and benefits, and after they've squeezed the school dry and the parents are screaming about the declining quality of education, they'll start pushing the cost onto the kids.”

“They already pay for their textbooks, and I hear Northern made the kids pay this 'rental' fee for the computer labs. \$200 per student! There are hundreds of families out there who can't afford that.”

“Superintendent Thornton will strip this school system raw and leave the kids out to dry. She's a company man. I've said it since day one.”

Mags started at the familiar name. And all this time she had just assumed Sean Thornton was working-class like his uncle. But now she saw it, the quality of his clothes and shoes, his sister's fancy car. Why hadn't she seen it before?

"... good principal, but she has no power. Do you think she can go up against Rose Thornton and the entire school board? Right."

"What's the option, then? Unionize? They'd dissolve it immediately. We have no bargaining rights. None."

"Well, what's the other option, have a so-called 'private' blog like Jerry? He's going to get caught one of these days and they will find any excuse to fire him."

Mags tuned back into the conversation and realized the bell would ring in just a minute. She tiptoed back and then half-ran forward, making her shoes as loud as possible on the tile.

"Mr. W.?" she called before she even reached the door.

"Who's that?"

She burst into the room, breathless and smiling. She saw Mr. Weinbacher sitting at his desk and an unknown female teacher—Art Department, she now realized—sitting in a chair next to him. Both teachers smiled back at her. "Hi," she said. "Sorry to interrupt, but I'm on a Bess-imposed deadline. Did you find my cell phone in here?"

Mr. Weinbacher shook his head. "Sorry, Mags. When did you lose it?"

"I have no idea, but Bess was supposed to text me where she wanted me to stand." She mimed a camera in front of her face. "For the big away game send-off."

"Try going out by the south entrance," he said. "They've got the wheelchair ramp leading to the buses, so Bess likes to head out that way. She's probably out there. If I find your cell phone, do you want me to drop it at the front desk?"

“That would be great, Mr. W. Thanks so much.” She waggled her fingers at them in a wave and headed back out of the classroom.

So Bess’s breaking news story was much more concerning than they ever thought. She wondered if her dad knew how much of a financial crisis they were all in, or if he was insulated because of the Boosters. Was Coach Keegan’s salary controlled by the Boosters, too?

Mags almost tripped over her own shoes about ten feet from the south exit. Jerry Keegan, she realized. He was the one they were talking about, with a private blog. She knew how dangerous the internet could be, how very public one’s “private” thoughts actually were.

She stood in the hallway, debating whether or not to run to the computer lab to try to find his blog, to see what he was saying, when the bell rang. Class doors were flung open and rivers of students poured out of them.

Mags jogged to the exit door and burst through, blinking against the bright sunshine.

“There you are!”

She turned to see Bess waving at her from the bottom of the wheelchair ramp. “Sorry.” She let gravity propel her faster down the ramp and skidded to a halt next to Bess. “I lost my cell phone. I stopped by the Paper to see if I left it in there.” The wind was picking up and she could feel it pulling on her gypsy blouse, billowing it away from her body. At least she had worn pants that day. It was cold, entirely too cold for August. She just did not understand Midwestern weather.

“That explains why you didn’t respond to my 14000 texts.” But Bess smiled as she said it. “Come on. Let’s get this show on the road. You got Bruce with you?”

“I’ve always got Bruce with me,” Mags said, and pulled “Bruce” out of her bag.

“Bruce” was what Bess had named her camera, because it was “like Batman,” she had said. “All mild-mannered playboy one minute, then Bam! Batarang and Dark Knight bullshit!” Mags had argued for Peter Parker, himself a photographer, but Bess had waved it away. “Who wants their secret weapon to be named after the nerdiest of superheroes?” Even though Mags had argued that in fact, The Atom was the nerdiest of superheroes, Bess gave her that “you will never get a date for prom if you keep going on about comic books” look, so she let it go.

“Okay, so here’s what I’m thinking.” Bess propelled her chair forward and navigated through the throngs of students with ease. “They’re about ready. All packed up, someplace to go. But I don’t want platitudes. I want candid. Laughter. Smiling. Lifting equipment. That sort of thing.”

Mags only half-listened to Bess’s instructions because she was already framing shots. *Click*, the cheerleaders squeezed into a group hug, ten girls thick. *Click*, Colin and another boy—Hugh, maybe—giving each other a nonchalant high-five as they passed. No planning. No looking. Just a random slap of the hands as they passed.

Click. Hunter hanging out the window of the bus, laughing at two freshmen boys struggling with equipment. *Click*. The look of intense concentration on the bus drivers’ faces as they stared at a map. *Click*. Her father, nodding and listening to whatever Coach Keegan was telling him. *Click*. Members of the Booster Club, handing out sports drinks and granola bars to the brass section of the marching band.

She weaved in and out of the crowds, taking pictures before anyone noticed her there with her camera. As soon as they did, they began to ham, or preen, or look serious, but never behaving normally, as they were not three seconds before, when they had no idea a camera had

captured something real. Something worthwhile. She never understood why people wanted to smile for the camera when they could be shot smiling at someone they loved.

She found those shots—two flautists lifting their instruments over their heads in triumph, two goth kids standing in the shade against the wall, smiling despite themselves, the running back lifting the hand of his girlfriend to his lips—to be beautiful. Important.

“Come on.” Bess bumped into her from behind with a gentle nudge of her chair.

“You’re going to miss it.”

Mags didn’t know what she meant until she turned back to the buses and saw all the football players holding up their helmets. Colin and Sean, as team captains, began the chant of “Strike! Strike! Strike!” to which every member of the team joined in. Soon, there was no way to tell where one voice ended and the other began. It grew louder, stronger, a harmony of male voices calling forth with a word chilling in its social and local history. These were the Milton *Strikers*, Mags finally realized. Named so for the factory that housed their school, but before that, even, for what they stood for. Working-class triumph. The underdog overcoming Big Business.

The American dream.

She shot picture after picture, Colin, Hunter, her father, even Sean Thornton, and when the football team’s voices began to die down, the student body responded.

“Strike! Strike! Strike!”

Mags felt a chill run down her spine when the teachers and Booster Club joined in as well, adult voices added to the overwhelming sound.

“Strike! Strike! Strike!”

She took pictures of Principal Higgins, her fist lifted high, her smile directed entirely at her son. Then pictures of Mr. Weinbacher, of Mrs. Scotch, of all of her teachers joined in with the Milton High chant.

“Strike! Strike! Strike!”

Then *everyone* started in, and the cacophony was so overwhelming that Mags felt it, in her bones, vibrating up her shoulders. Her hands trembled as she held her camera and she snapped picture after picture after picture, not even framing now, just a wide sweep of the crowd. A constant stream of students and faculty and parents, chanting as one.

Then, on some unknown command, there was a roar, and everyone whooped and hollered. Her voice was sore now and she couldn't even fathom why until she realized that she, too, had been chanting, had been screaming with them. And when she turned around to look for Bess through her lens, she found her camera instead fixated on Sean Thornton.

It was her chance, finally, her chance to photograph this odd boy without him knowing. Without fear of reprisal or repercussion. She took dozens of pictures of him in just a few short minutes as she watched him chant and scream with his teammates. Gone was the intensity, the dark brooding eyes, and in their place was brightness, laughter with Colin at his side, always at his side. Joy at the utter energy of the scene before them all.

But then he turned and squinted in her direction and while she knew he couldn't know—how could he possibly know?—that she was photographing him, specifically, she still felt herself blush as they seemingly locked eyes. The smile faded from his face but did not fall. The sunlight brushed against his eyes so that he squinted and lifted his hand to his brow to shield them. She held the camera in his direction for one more breath. *Click*. And then she turned away.

“Crazy, right?”

She lowered the camera to see Bess behind her. “That was amazing. I wish I had decent video on this camera. I would have gotten it.”

“Alex got video. Don’t even worry about that. He has this whole ‘vlog’ thing.” Bess made a face and Mags laughed. “Come on. Time to say goodbye.”

It was true. The crowd was dispersing. Mags realized that the cry for “Strike!” was the sendoff, and not actually waving as the buses went. She agreed with Milton’s methods. It was a far superior pep rally than any she had ever seen.

“We have to find Colin,” Bess said. “Kisses for luck.”

“What’s that?” Mags leaned down to Bess’s chair to hear her better.

Bess just smiled up at her. “Kisses for luck,” she said again.

Mags saw that the team was receiving kisses—most on the cheek but some more... amorous than others—from several of the observers. She lifted her camera and took more pictures: of Colin and Sally, of Hunter and Lily. Of Sean and Bronwyn.

She had to admit: they made a beautiful couple. Bronwyn’s hair was the color of caramel cream and her skin only two shades lighter, its tan-bed gleam smooth and buttery. She wasn’t tall, a little shorter than Mags herself, but she had long legs that looked lovely under her black and red cheerleading skirt. Sean’s skin and hair, in contrast, were bronzed by a summer spent outside, not in tan beds. In the full sun, his dark hair revealed even more red and brown highlights than she had noticed before.

Click. Bronwyn pressed against him, hand on chest, smiling up.

Click. Bronwyn leaning forward on tiptoes, her lips searching for his.

Click. Sean turning his face at the last second—distracted by something—and Bronwyn’s lips grazing his cheek.

When she heard a chuckle next to her, she knew Bess had observed the proceedings as well. “Serves Queen B right,” Bess said. “Hanging all over my white brother like that. It’s unbecoming a lady. They’re not even *dating*. She should have some self-respect.”

“Finally!” Colin jogged toward them. Mags snapped a picture of him before she lowered her camera. “My sister. I can’t leave without my good-luck charm.”

From out of nowhere, Alex showed up, video camera in hand. “This is going to be fantastic. Bess, give your brother your blessing for the ritualistic pigskin tossing and the shaming of the neighboring local small town.”

When Colin leaned down, Bess grabbed his face and pressed a kiss square in the middle of his forehead. With his face held in her hands, she stared hard into his eyes. “Win, brother. Win this battle for your people.” She shook his face, just a little. “Free us from the oppression of high school with your warrior ways. This, I charge thee, Amen.”

“Amen,” Mags echoed. When Bess glanced over, Mags winked at her.

“Or, you know, score some touchdowns.” Colin pulled away and turned bright eyes to Mags. “Come on, new girl. Assimilate fully. Be brought into the fold.”

“I think you’re just tricking me into kissing you.”

“Well, yeah. That’s sort of the idea of the big sendoff. You hover near the girls you want to kiss you, and then you look all puppy-dog and sweet.” Colin pouted his lip and batted his eyes.

Mags laughed, but when Alex swung the camera around to her, she felt herself burn bright. “Can’t I just wish you luck and call it done?”

“It’s tradition,” Bess said. “You should see it when the girls’ soccer team leaves. Christ, you would think Milton were a brothel, so many brothers giving so many kisses.”

“Come on, Margaret.” Even now, even three weeks into school, Alex refused to call her Mags. “One kiss for posterity.”

“That’s okay.” She shook her head and backed up a step. “But I am so rooting for you. Go Strikers!”

“My brown sister.” Sean appeared from nowhere to lean over Bess’s chair and Alex swung the camera on them.

Mags sucked in the breath she had forgotten she needed to live and felt her hands tremble. She gripped the camera in her hands to steady herself and lifted it to her eye. *Click.*

Bess performed the same ritual on Sean as she had on Colin. He gave her his half smile before he pulled back. “You ready, Colin?” His eyes caught on Mags and he stared at her as he waited for Colin to answer.

Colin slung an arm over Sean’s shoulder and joined him in staring at Mags. “I am missing one essential good-luck charm and I refuse to leave before I get it.”

Alex turned once again to Mags, the small camera functioning as his eye, his ear. “Do you have a problem with our traditions, Margaret?” He moved closer to her, the camera hovering close, entirely too close.

Mags felt her hands shaking as she lowered her camera. “No, of course not. I just...” She blinked at the video camera in her face and shrugged away from it. “I just...”

“I mean, you don’t want everyone to believe all those rumors about you, do you?”

It was cruel. It was purposefully cruel, and she tried to see herself through Alex’s eyes: the interloper. The student who didn’t belong coming in to become the new paper star with the

first spread. She knew he wasn't crazy about her, but she hadn't realized, until now, that he didn't like her. And here she had thought only the Bright & Shines weren't her biggest fans. "Alex, just get the camera out of my face. Please." She shook her head and backed up further, something solid at her back. Her fingers brushed against metal. She was against one of the buses now.

Her eyes darted around and she saw Sean looking at her, his eyes unreadable, his jaw set, all traces of his smile fled from his face. Then, he turned to Alex. "You really want to do this?" His voice was quiet, serious, and it took Mags a moment to realize he was standing up for her. Him. Sean Thornton. And she remembered what Bess had said, that first day, about why Sean called her Gown, like he called Bess "Crip," or "Legs."

She was beginning to hyperventilate and she knew she had to get away from the camera before she shoved it straight into Alex's mouth.

"Ow!"

And then the world came back together and she saw all eyes turned to Alex, and away from her, and she slipped into breath again.

"I am *so sorry*." Bess backed up her chair and lifted her hands in apology. "Omigod, are you *okay*?"

"God, Bess, that really hurt!" Alex jumped up on one leg, gripping his other knee.

"What the hell?"

"My chair slipped." Bess lifted innocent eyes to Colin. "My chair slipped."

"We'll get the brakes tested." Colin slapped a friendly hand on Alex's back. "Great job, my man. Hey, can you go get some footage of the girls?" He grinned at him. "You know, getting on the bus?"

Alex nodded, smiling, before he took off.

Mags closed her eyes and let the coldness of the school bus's metal side and the shadowed space calm her.

“Hey, I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to make you do something you didn't want to do.”

She opened her eyes to see Colin standing before her, eyes worried. “It's not you,” she said in a soft voice. “I just don't like cameras.”

He lifted an eyebrow at her. “Right.” He looked pointedly at the one in her hand.

She gave him an embarrassed smile. “Video cameras, I mean,” she said. “Other people's cameras. I just... I don't like being on film.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Bess bumped Colin with her chair, far more gently than she had bumped Alex. “Christ, she looked like a trapped rabbit. Next time, take a hint and help my white sister out. My white brother got it. How come you didn't?”

Mags wanted the earth to open up beneath her and swallow her whole. It was far worse when she looked up to find Sean, returned to his further position now, observing these proceedings with his damnable unreadable eyes. “It's just the camera,” she said, and let loose an involuntary shudder. “I hate video cameras. That's it. I swear.”

“Oh.” Then Colin smiled, quick and bright. “Then in that case, you owe us kisses, new girl. It is a Milton tradition.” He took her hand and tugged her forward, back into the bright sunlight.

Laughing, she pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Good luck, Mr. Quarterback. Although I know you don't need it.” When he turned his lips toward hers, she gave his face a playful smack. “Don't press your luck, pretty boy.”

“Wounded to the core,” he said, and clutched his heart. “But now, I’ve got all the good-luck kisses I need. How about you, Thornton?” He tugged on Mags’s hand and pulled her closer to Sean. “I’ve now got physical proof that she is not against kissing football players.”

“We’ve really got to go,” Sean said, no longer sparing Mags another glance. “You ready?”

Mags felt the blush burn again, but at least this was expected. Alex felt more like a betrayal. This felt like everyday life here in good ole Marlborough, Indiana.

Sunshine, Mags thought. Sunshine, sunshine, sunshine.

She plastered a bright smile on her face and stood next to Bess.

“Goodbye, my warriors,” Bess said as she saluted the boys. “I will see you and text you many times between now and the field of battle, but really, let’s pretend like I won’t because it makes this that much more dramatic. And you.” She turned to Mags. “If you change your mind and want to come to the game, we are leaving in about ten minutes. I’ll see you when I see you.”

“I’ll see you when I see you,” Mags said.

With a thumb-and-pinky waggle near her ear, Bess’s universal symbol for “call you later,” Bess left to find her mother.

Mags, left standing, alone, awkward, switched her camera to one hand and waggled the fingers of her other at Colin and Sean. “Good luck, you guys. Remember: ‘Clear eyes, full hearts, can’t lose.’”

That, at least, got her a blue-eyed thousand-yard stare. “Come on, Gown,” Sean said. “You really can’t expect us to believe that you, of all people, like *Friday Night Lights*.”

Her smile was overly sweet, almost saccharine, and without even realizing what she was doing—the fallout from it, the repercussions that were sure to follow—she walked over, stood on

her tiptoes, and pressed a kiss to Sean's cheek. The slight press of stubble under her lips—not even visible, just starting to come forth—was rough but not unpleasant. When she pulled away, she realized three things. One, Sean Thornton smelled like sunshine, like vanilla and rain. Like *boy*. Two, he had at some point put his hand on her elbow to keep her from falling. To balance her, as she kissed him on the cheek.

And three, he had leaned down, and met her halfway.

She bounced down to her feet but kept her eyes on his face, on those eyes that radiated astonishment and something else. Something she couldn't quite read.

“You don't know me at all, Town,” she said, and then, in full knowledge that this may be the only moment in her life in which she did something almost movie-worthy, almost *cool*, she walked away without a backwards glance.

CHAPTER NINE

When Mags finally admitted to herself that she was lost, at least a mile and a half into her walk, she knew then why movies ended with the girl kissing the guy and walking away, or with the snappy repartee, the comeuppance for the snotty cheerleader or overly judgmental football player. Because once the nerd walked away in triumph, she would have to do something mundane, like realize she had no ride home since her father was currently on a bus headed to a town two hours away, her cell phone was MIA so she couldn't call her grandmother, and the one person who had ever been willing to give her a ride anywhere—well, “willing” being a very kind read of the entire Sean Thornton situation—not only was on the same bus as said father, he was also the object of said comeuppance.

It was three point two miles, door to door, between school and her grandmother's house. She had thought she was going the right way, but whenever Sean drove, he took an esoteric back way that involved complicated neighborhood streets and some innate Marlborough knowledge that came with birth. Whenever her father drove, she was reading for class, or texting Bess, so ultimately, not paying attention. It always seemed like he took a shorter way, though, and she wished she had paid closer attention.

Now, too far from school to turn back, she began to look for a pay phone.

The neighborhoods changed with the drastic shift that she had only seen thus far in New Orleans. One block was manicured and pruned, perfect sets of Craftsman bungalows lining the street while the next block showed abandoned and foreclosed homes, weeds grown over what had once been beautiful gardens, dreams of home ownership. The next block would then be even richer, more elaborate, larger homes now. Not as old as the bungalows, certainly, but still gorgeous and charming in their quaintness.

When she entered a more urban stretch, she knew she had gone in the completely wrong direction, away from school. She saw stores she didn't recognize advertising products that were clearly local. Brands of soda she had never heard of, fish fries for churches she had never seen. But there, scattered among the flyers for meat sales and fence repair, calls for protest. Calls for strikes.

Mags moved closer to see them and was surprised that some of the flyers seemed to be over twenty years old. Laminated posters calling for strikes against budget cuts for companies that no longer existed. Preserved signs that recalled the heritage of an area she was just now beginning to realize was worlds different than her own.

New signs, too, revealing grumblings about education cuts, teacher furloughs, school closures. Her father had jumped from the frying pan into the proverbial fire with his new job, and Mags knew it had been bad back home, but she never realized it had been bad enough to consider coming to *this*.

She took several pictures of the signs hanging on the light poles as she made her way down the street. No luck on the pay phone route—were there even pay phones anymore?—and none of the businesses on the street seemed to be public in any way. A few blocks down, she saw a sign for DONUT HOLDUP, and changed her course. It would be open, she thought. It would be public, friendly. If they didn't have a public pay phone, then surely they would let her use their house phone.

When she walked through the door, she was surprised and charmed by the décor. Retro 1950s diner, but even shinier, even more space-aged. She took a few quick shots as she waited in the unexpected long line: of a grid of donuts dropped into hot oil, bubbling over, of the girl

behind the counter hand-dipping the glazed into chocolate, of sprinkles pouring over the tops of the now chocolate glazed.

“May I help you?”

Mags lowered her camera and smiled at the woman behind the counter. “I’m lost,” she said. “And I don’t have my cell phone. I need to call my grandmother to get her to come pick me up. Is there any way I can use your phone?”

“I can’t,” the woman said. “It’s policy.”

“I promise it’s a local call,” Mags said. “I will literally take two seconds.”

The woman looked sympathetic, but didn’t budge. “I can’t. I’m really sorry. Store policy.”

“You can use mine.”

Mags turned to find the source of the voice was a blonde teenage boy a few down in line. Who was wiggling a smart phone at her. “Are you sure?” She ducked out of line and went to stand next to him. “I can pay you.”

The boy laughed. “What, and rob me of the chance to rescue a damsel in distress? My masculinity would never survive such a blow.” Green eyes gazed at her between strands of blonde hair before he flipped his head to get them out of his eyes.

It was a gesture so like Henry’s that she trusted him almost on instinct. That, and his uniform: unfamiliar yet familiar, prep school uniforms the same the world around. Tall, lean, blonde, smiling, his wealth written in his casual stance, his cultured accent, the quality of his shoes. Prep school for sure.

“Thanks.” She took the phone from him and dialed her grandmother’s number. She answered on the third ring. “Grandma?”

“Margaret?”

“Hi. I...” she felt the blush spread over her cheeks as the boy watched her, an easy smile spread on his face. “I got lost on the way home from school. Is there any way you can pick me up?”

“Lost? Did you walk? Margaret, it’s three miles! And what number are you calling from?”

Mags tried to remember the order of the questions. “I did walk. I think I only got a mile and a half. I lost my cell phone. I’m borrowing a phone from a boy at Donut Holdup.”

There was rustling on the other end of the line. “Your phone’s here,” her grandmother said. “On the charger. Which Donut Holdup are you at?”

Mags looked up at the boy. “Um, where am I?”

He gestured for the phone. After a second, she turned it over to him. “Hello, ma’am?” Pause. “Well, my name is Adam Bell, ma’am. With whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?” A pause. “How lovely to meet you, Mrs. Hale.” Pause. “No, ma’am, I go to Helstone.” A pause then a smile. “Well of course I know of Fred Hale. He took Helstone to State in the 80s.” Another pause and his eyes flicked to Mags. He smiled. “She’s fine. We’re at the one on Main and Chestnut.” Pause. “That’s the one.” Pause. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll get her to sit tight until you arrive.” Pause. “You as well. Bye.” He hung up the phone before Mags could speak to her grandmother again. “She’s on her way. She said not to let you wander around because you don’t know your way around town.”

Blushing again, she nodded. “Thanks.” Mags cocked her head at the counter. “I owe you one. Coffee and donut?”

He gave her a bright smile. “Absolutely.” But when they ordered, he managed to give the woman money before Mags had even finished pulling her wallet out of her bag.

“Seriously,” she said. “I wanted to thank you.”

“Eat with me,” he said. “I’m waiting for my friends and you’re waiting for your grandmother. We’ll call it even.”

Once they got their orders—coffee and a maple bar for Adam, and coffee and chocolate sprinkled for Mags—they sat at a table by the window. Mags watched as Adam added sugar but no cream to his coffee. She put lots of both in hers. She had grown up on coffee milk, that overly sweet, overly milky coffee most Cajun grandmothers made for their grandchildren when they begged, begged to drink coffee like the grownups. She was a full-fledged coffee drinker now—what teenager in this Starbucks world wasn’t?—but she still liked her coffee light and sweet.

“So, Milton, huh?”

She looked down at herself and noticed she was still wearing her lanyard and ID badge. “Educated guess. Let me try. You go to... Helstone?”

He laughed. “That’s cheating. I told your grandmother.”

“I would have figured it out with my powers of deduction.”

Adam was wearing gray pants, a navy blazer with a silver and blue crest on the breast, a crisp white shirt, a silver and blue tie—loosened, of course, because it was after hours—and although she didn’t know for certain, she would swear that his shoes were non-regulation. She knew this boy without knowing him, had gone K-7 with boys just like this, hung out with them throughout high school. He was Noah. He was Henry. He was every boy she had ever known, before August.

He ate half of his maple bar before he spoke again. "I know who you are."

She blinked. "Right. I told you."

"Actually, no, you didn't." He gestured at her lanyard. "That did. But it's a small town. I knew who you were when I offered you my cell."

She lowered the coffee in her hand and set the mug on the table. "Who am I?"

"You're the daughter of Fred Hale, class of 1985. Best quarterback we've seen before or since."

"That's not who I am," she said. "That's who my dad is."

He smiled. "Okay, then," he said. "You're Margaret. Although you prefer Mags. You went to prep school before this, all-girls' Catholic in New Orleans. Milton's your first public school. Like, ever." At her look, he shrugged. "It's a small town, Mags, and an even smaller school. It's big news when alums turn down jobs at Helstone to go work at Milton."

That made her start. "What?"

His brows furrowed. "Your dad," he said. "He got the offer to work at Helstone but turned it down to work at Milton." He paused for a moment as he watched her. "You didn't know that?"

Mags's finger tapped against her mug. "Employees get free tuition for their students, don't they?"

"Of course they do. Do you think the teachers at Helstone get paid enough to be able to afford to send their kids there?" He shook his head before he polished off the rest of his donut. "Anyway, I was part of the student review committee. I mean, just because someone works there doesn't mean their kid can actually get into Helstone, right?"

"Of course," Mags said.

Adam didn't seem to read the sarcasm in her voice. "You, however, are clearly Helstone material. National Merit, award-winning photographer, all AP classes, and that early ACT score? Of course we wanted you. But your dad chose Milton, and those teachers *really* can't afford to send their kids to Helstone." He paused. "So, what's the skinny? Why'd the Helstone Devils get the cold, cold shoulder?"

Mags had no idea her father had even applied to Helstone, much less been offered the job, even less turned down the job and her chance to go to the best private school in the tri-state area. It was his alma mater. He loved Helstone. Before their recent financial difficulties, she knew he had given alumni dues to the school, every year, had flown home for his ten, then his twenty-year reunions.

So why, she thought, did he decide to take the job at Milton? "It was a rather abrupt move," she said instead. She began pulling off all the white sprinkles from her donut and placing them on the napkin for something, anything to do.

"I can imagine." Adam leaned closer and she saw his eyes had flecks of gold and brown in them. He smiled of a sudden. "God, what's it like? Going from prep school to public school?"

She was quiet for a minute before she sighed. "It's different," she said. "I was actually surprised at how different it was."

"And Milton at that? That school's full of thugs."

She leaned back in her chair. "Really."

He mimicked her posture unconsciously. "Come on, that football team has to be 'roided up. They're *huge*."

“Corn-fed Midwestern boys,” she said. “I’ve seen them eat. Hand to God,” she said at his disbelieving look. She didn’t tell him that most of the football team would never be able to afford designer drugs. It felt... disloyal to them. There was no better word for it. And after the pep rally today, after seeing the student body, the teachers and staff, even the parents and alums chanting “Strike! Strike! Strike!” in unison, she felt kinship with them all. She had chanted along with them, found her voice grown hoarse before she even realized she had joined in.

“Well, half of them have been in and out of juvie. Take Sean Thornton. I know his mom’s superintendent and got all kinds of shit covered up, but he was in and out of trouble when he was younger.” Adam shook his head and lifted his coffee cup. “I mean, I know there was some shit with his dad,” he said when he lowered his drink, “but still.”

Mags couldn’t help it. She let out a disbelieving laugh. “You’re kidding, right? Sean Thornton. Juvenile delinquent. Christ, don’t you guys have anything better to do than gossip about the Townies?”

Adam blinked at her. “No, that stuff’s true. Everyone knows it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Mags said. “Even if it is the gospel freaking truth, it doesn’t matter. I don’t gossip. I certainly don’t gossip with people I don’t know, regardless of how nice they are to me. Okay?”

She was surprised when he smiled at her. She would have thought that would have made him walk away. “Yeah,” he said. “Okay. How about classes? Can we talk about classes?”

She nodded, suddenly tired. “Sure,” she said. “What do you want to know?”

“What are the classes like? Are you bored to tears?”

This is what Sean thought she was, she finally realized. And Bronwyn, and Alex, and even Nupur and Bess and Colin. Everyone at Milton assumed she thought like this. When they

called her Gown, they meant *this* boy, and *these* assumptions. And hadn't she been just as bad when she first started, assuming her classes could never be as hard as they had been back home?

And it wasn't meanness. He wasn't being an asshole. He was just arrogant and ignorant and full of himself. As she had been. "Considering everything I'm taking is AP and college prep, actually, I'm pretty fucking exhausted every night." She stood and wrapped her donut in a napkin. "My grandmother just pulled up. Thanks again for letting me use your phone." She put her donut in her bag and pulled out her wallet. "For the coffee and donut," she said, and dropped three bucks on the table.

At that gesture, he half-stood from his seat. "I've offended you."

She met his eyes. "Yes," she said. "You really have."

His look was rueful, his smile wry. "I didn't mean to. I really didn't."

"That's usually when people offend the most."

"Hey." He grabbed her hand, gentle, as she turned to leave, and pressed the three dollars into her palm. "Please don't leave like this."

"Why?" she asked.

He blinked. "Why what?"

"Why don't you want me to leave like this?"

He let go of her arm and sat down in his chair. "Well... I mean..." And then he shrugged and didn't meet her eyes. "Can I call you sometime?"

Mags couldn't help it. She burst into laughter. She had just insulted him, accused him of insulting her, and still, he wanted to call her? She would never, ever understand boys. Ever.

"You've got my grandmother's number in your phone," she said finally. "What you do with it is

your business.” She turned and walked away from this boy who reminded her so much—so very much—of Henry.

As she went through the doors to the parking lot, she realized that twice in one day, she had an amazing exit away from a boy who made her furious. And when she slid into her grandmother’s car, she couldn’t help her self-satisfied smile. “Hi, Grandma.”

“What’s that smile for?” her grandmother asked.

How to explain her odd little day to another person? To explain two instances of standing up for herself, after two years of being kicked in the teeth? To make another person realize that she understood something, finally, after all this time, understood something about herself? “Ever have one of those days where everything just falls into place?” Mags asked instead.

“Not for a long time,” her grandmother said. “But I know the kind of day you mean.”

“Well, that’s been this day,” Mags said. “All in all, a pretty fine day.”

“Liking Milton better, are you?” her grandmother asked as she put the car in reverse.

Mags squinted and saw Adam staring at her through the window. He lifted his hand in a little wave. She didn’t wave back. “You know,” she said, “I really am.”

CHAPTER TEN

The past two weekends had been a blur. Those first two weekends in Marlborough, she was so exhausted and behind that she alternated between sleeping, eating, and homework. The harder she worked, she realized, the more she forgot that Henry and Edie hadn't called or texted or emailed. The harder she worked, the less time she had for remembering.

But this Friday, her grandmother was apparently taking full advantage of having her granddaughter isolated away from books and computers. As they pulled out of the parking lot, her grandmother turned to her. "Do you want to go shopping?"

Margaret looked at her in mock disbelief. "I'm a teenage girl," she said. "I always want to go shopping. It's programmed into my DNA."

Her grandmother's smile was quick and so much like her son's, like her grandson's, that Mags wondered whose smile she had gotten. It wasn't theirs. She didn't have the gift of quick smiles, of sudden brightness. And it wasn't her mother's, whose smiles were sweet and slow. "Come on, then," her grandmother said. "We'll get you some more pieces for school and a real winter coat for you. That light thing you brought from New Orleans won't get you past November."

Mags blushed and slumped a little in her seat. "Oh, no, Grandma. I thought you meant for you. I can't go shopping. I..." she turned to look out the window so her grandmother wouldn't see the red flush across her face. "I don't have any money."

"Mags."

It was the first time Grandmother Hale had called her Mags. With that one word, Mags turned to her. "Ma'am?"

Again, that sharp discerning eye. "Consider it a housewarming present."

“No, Grandma, I can’t accept that. I—”

“Stop.” Her voice was sharp but her eyes kind as they glanced over at her granddaughter again. “You are my granddaughter and I will buy you clothes if I feel like it. Besides, you will freeze to death come winter if I don’t do something about it. Lord knows your mother won’t.”

“She’s very ill,” Mags said, the excuse automatic, the protestation rising instantly to her lips as it had for near two years now.

Her grandmother had seemed to start. After a moment, she nodded. “Of course,” she said. “Have you even been to the mall yet?”

It was close to six by the time they finished shopping. She had gotten a few more essentials—a couple of sweaters, a few “layering pieces,” as her grandmother called them—as well as some more casual clothes for school. But her two favorite things were the peacock bangle bracelet she found on clearance for three bucks and bought herself—she sent a silent thanks to Adam the asshole for contributing to her accoutrements fund—and the military wool coat with the bright blue lining her grandmother got for her.

“We’ll need to get you a down coat when real winter starts,” she said as she examined Mags in the dressing room. “But that’s just so flattering on you, and it will serve you well through January, at least. If it’s a milder winter, it should be good until spring.”

Mags buttoned the coat up to her chin. It was slightly A-lined, and flared out from the hips to hang to her knees. The antiqued silver buttons marched down the front, and the pockets were unobtrusive yet roomy. “I love it,” she said. And it was on sale to boot, so she didn’t feel so guilty when her grandmother insisted, yet again, on spending money on her.

“You’ve got an adorable figure, Margaret.” Her grandmother stood and, with a discerning eye honed from years of working the higher end of retail, tugged the coat and belted it around Mags’s waist. “But you have to stop wearing clothes that are too big for you.”

“I don’t do it on purpose,” Mags said. “It’s just hard finding clothes that accommodate this,” she gestured at her head to indicate her height, “and these.” Here, she gestured to her chest and hips.

“Well, your mother used to take in your clothes, I remember. Maybe we can get her to tailor a few things for you.” Her grandmother gave her that sudden smile again and nodded. “Come on, then. We are not finished winterizing you yet.”

They weren’t. Not by a long shot. They had to buy water-resistant gloves (“for the snow,” her grandmother had said), a long scarf that would wrap around her face (“this one,” her grandmother had said, holding up a blue scarf the exact match for the lining of her coat), ear muffs, a cute ski cap, and black Wellies with bright pink skull-and-crossbones on them.

As they were just walking out of the last store, a local boutique owned by the daughter of one of her grandmother’s friends, they passed a display of junior dresses, all poofy skirts and net petticoats underneath.

“Isn’t Homecoming in a few weeks?” her grandmother asked. “Are you going?”

Mags nodded. “I’m going for the paper and for yearbook now, apparently. I’ve become the official school photographer.” Not that she minded. She had been infinitely pleased when Mrs. Scotch, the yearbook advisor, had come to her to ask if she could step in and help out. Mags said yes before Mrs. Scotch could even finish asking, much to the teacher’s amusement.

“But you’re not going with a date.”

Mags gave her a wry smile. “No, not with a date.”

“But you still need to wear a dress, right?” Her grandmother was peering at a green dress on the rack. Her expression was not at all kind toward the dress.

“Sure,” Mags said. It dawned on her what her grandmother was asking. “Oh, no, Grandma. Don’t worry about it. It’s really so not a big deal. No one will look at me at all. Besides, I’ll just wear one of my dresses from last year. My junior prom, or...” she paused for a moment. “Henry’s.” She and Henry had gone to all of their dances together, and again, she wondered how she had been so stupid as to not see that Henry liked her, loved her, even.

“Hmm,” her grandmother said. “We’ll see about that.”

#

“My God, these are *gorgeous*.” Mags stared at the clothes her grandmother had laid out on the bed. A peacock tunic dress, a few adorable, full-skirted, cotton A-line numbers from the early sixties, mod color-blocked dresses from the late sixties that would look adorable with patterned tights. A tent cape with slits for the arms. “Seriously? I can have all of them?”

“When am I ever going to wear them again?” Her grandmother sat down at the edge of the bed and took one of the dresses onto her lap. “I’m too old and the body is not at all what it used to be. But you?” She held the dress against Mags’s shoulders and smiled. “They’ll look gorgeous on you.”

Mags stood and held the dress at her shoulders. “I never realized we were about the same size,” she said in a soft voice.

“Yes, well, you and Freddie get your height from my side of the family.”

It was true. Mags’s mother was petite, barely skimming 5’2, and Edie and the rest of the cousins weren’t that much larger. But her dad was about 6’0, and Freddie had been a little over

it. She was 5'9, and towered over most of the maternal side of her family. But not her paternal grandmother, she realized. Not Grandmother Hale.

She slipped into her grandmother's bathroom and wiggled into the bright blue A-line dress. The top had not-quite cap sleeves with a boat neck, while the skirt was full, accented with a cute rhinestone belt. "Grandma, I need help with the zipper," she said as she walked out of the bathroom and froze when she saw who was in there.

"Here, I can do it." Her mother gestured her over to where she sat on the bed.

Mags unfroze herself and wandered to her mom. "Are you okay? Is something wrong?"

"No, of course not." Her mother smiled. "I just heard voices and when Greta told me what you were doing, I wanted to come see." She turned Mags around and zipped her up.

"You're right," she said to Grandmother Hale. "It's almost perfect."

"A little loose in the waist," her grandmother said. "But she's more hourglass than I was."

Mags stared at herself in the mirror. The dress was gorgeous, cute and fun, sexy without being over the top. "Is it right for Homecoming?" she asked, her eyes catching her grandmother's in the mirror. "Not too Gown?"

"No, not at all. In fact, it's perfect." She smiled at Mags. "I made brownies earlier. Anyone interested in pizza? We could be wicked and bring it to the living room. One of the local channels airs the away games for Milton."

Mags turned to her mother. "Mom? Do you want to watch football with us?"

"I would love to," her mother said. "Greta, if you order the pizza, I can get this pinned and take it in for Mags."

#

Mags and her grandmother watched the entire game, from the introduction of the players to Colin Higgins leading Milton to victory. Her mother had lasted through third quarter before she pleaded exhaustion, but she had smiled, and that was good enough for Mags.

Bess had texted her during the entire game, giving her highlights in the way only Bess could. Mags read the choice bits out to her grandmother, who laughed out loud at Bess's outrageous comments. When she read, "I flipped off their 1/4back & he got mad & I said but I'm a cripple & he freaked out," she snorted but did not share with her grandmother.

After the game, her grandmother excused herself to sleep. Mags considered waiting up for her dad but knew he wouldn't be home for hours yet. Jasper was at least two hours away, and they had to round up all the equipment first. Had she been in New Orleans, she would have gone over to Edie's, or met Henry for a late-night coffee. But she wasn't in New Orleans, and her one friend here—Nupur, while nice, was clearly only friends with Mags because of Bess—was also hours away.

Mags headed to her room and realized it was the first time she had been calm enough to even think about anything outside of her new life in Marlborough. She was so busy during the day, what with the paper and all of her AP classes and just general school navigation that she had been too burnt out to think about much of anything else at all. No time to wonder what was happening on her deleted social networking sites. No time to fret over her mom, or Freddie.

But now, once she showered and calmed down enough to lie in bed, she tossed and turned for hours, remembering that Edie hadn't texted in two weeks. That Henry hadn't called or emailed or texted not once since that Saturday night. Any good will built up from her earlier good day fled from her and she started crying, full-body sobs, her fist against her mouth to muffle her sounds.

She cried for at least an hour, and then lay there, spent, so emotionally and physically tired that she couldn't actually fall asleep.

Mags stayed awake long enough to hear her father come home, quiet and stealthy. She glanced at the clock. 3:00 a.m. She swung out of bed and padded to the kitchen.

He was sitting at the table, eating a bowl of Cocoa Puffs, the box and the carton of milk both in front of him. His usual post-game ritual. But there were two spoons, and two bowls, because it used to be *their* post-game ritual. First, the three of them, Mags, her dad, and Freddie, but when Freddie went off to college, it had just been the two of them.

"Hey, Magpie," he said.

She almost started crying then and there. He hadn't called her Magpie in two years. Not since the Incident. Not in forever. "Hi, Dad," she said. She sat in the seat next to him and took the cereal he handed her. "Grandma and I watched the game on cable."

"Oh yeah?" He smiled at her, a real smile, and again, she felt on the verge of tears. She was sure her eyes were swollen but she didn't care. She let her daddy pour milk into her bowl and lifted the spoon to her mouth.

"I really like your 'Road to State' spread, Magpie. I just now got the chance to read it, on the bus back." He crunched another bite before he spoke again. "It's really good. The cheerleaders are actually thrilled you included them."

"Why wouldn't I?" she said. "You always told me they were just as important as the team."

"They are," her dad said. "I'm glad you remember that."

"I remember everything you tell me."

He gave her his familiar smile. “Course you do,” he said. “You’re my good girl.” He was quiet for another two bites, then, “You know, despite everything that’s happened, I think I like being back home. There’s something about small-town football, you know?” He glanced over at her. “What do you say? How do you feel about moving to Marlborough, three weeks in?”

She thought about it for a minute. “It’s not as bad as I thought it would be,” she said. “I mean, it’s... it’s lonely sometimes.”

“Without Edie?” her dad asked. “Without Henry?”

She nodded. “And without Maw-Maw.”

“You and your grandmother Hale seem to be getting along well.”

“I know,” she said, and smiled. “I really like her.”

“Me, too.” His eyes grew wide with mock innocence and she started to giggle. “I wish she had been able to visit more when you were younger, but once Katrina happened...” he let his voice trail off. He didn’t have to finish the sentiment. “Once Katrina happened” was a common phrase to explain almost everything in New Orleans.

“It’s okay,” Mags said. “We’re making up for lost time.” They were silent for a bit, both crunching their cereals. “Hey, Dad?”

“Hmm?” he said around his spoon.

“Did you get offered the job at Helstone?”

Her dad was quiet for so long she wondered if he had heard her question. But when she opened her mouth to ask him again, he sighed. “I did, yes. Where did you hear that?”

She didn’t mention her grandmother’s conversation some weeks back. “I met some kid from Helstone today. He said he was on my review committee.”

Her dad gave her a tired nod. “They really wanted you, Magpie. Don’t think this had anything to do with you.”

But it did, she wanted to say. All of this had to do with her.

“When your grandmother agreed to help with your mom, and when Colin and Sean came to me on behalf of the football team—”

“Colin and Sean did what?”

Her father glanced over at her. “Came to see me during my interview at Milton. They’re team captains, Magpie. They get the right to talk to any potential coach.”

“What did they say?”

Her father reached for the box and poured himself another bowl of Cocoa Puffs. “That they needed me. That they had a great shot at State, but Helstone had hired away their last assistant coach.” He shrugged. “And after I talked with Principal Higgins and she assured me the course load would be up to your standards, I thought we’d take the plunge.”

She had never, not once, considered what her dad had gone through to get the job here. She had just assumed they moved and a job had happened to land in his lap. But interviews and meetings with team captains? An entire student committee at Helstone reviewing her file? And what had she done this summer? Nothing of any consequence. Hang out with Henry and Edie and Noah, unaware that at any moment, her friendships would, once again, fall apart. “Oh,” she said, for lack of anything better to say.

Mags stood up to dump her soggy cereal in the garbage disposal. When she brought her bowl back to the table, she gestured at the box. “You going to pass me that or what?”

They finished another bowl of cereal in comfortable silence. When he got up to go to bed, he gave her an absent kiss on her head. “Love you, Magpie.”

She stood up and wrapped her arms around him, holding this moment close to her, her finger pressing against his back, just once. *Click.* “I love you, too, Daddy.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

She woke late on Saturday morning, almost at lunch time, to her phone ringing. She answered it just before it went into voicemail. “Hello?”

“I’m a goddamn cripple,” Bess said on the other line. “You think I’ve got big plans for the weekend?”

Mags sat up in bed and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “What?”

“Tonight,” Bess said. “*Ghost Adventures* marathon. I don’t know what it is about those boys but I think they are *crazy*. Mom said she’d make lasagna. Do you like lasagna?”

“Who doesn’t like lasagna?” Mags tried to focus in on the important part of the conversation. “Are you asking me to come hang out?”

“Of course that’s what I’m asking. Sleep over tonight. I am officially done with testosterone after an entire football game. Go ask your mom.”

“I don’t need to,” Mags said. “What time? Where do you live?”

Her grandmother dropped her off at the Higgins’ house for seven, and she bounded up the stairs to the front door. “Hi,” she said when Principal Higgins answered. “I’m Mags.”

“I know.” Principal Higgins smiled. “Come on in.”

“Colin’s not here,” Bess called from the table when Mags came in. “He’s got a hot date with his flavor of the week.”

“Bess.” Her mother’s voice was warning.

“Sorry, with Strawberry Sally.” Bess’s smile was wide and innocent. “What? He’s doubling with Sean and Queen B. He only does that when he’s got a new female love interest.”

“Oh.” Mags looked down at the bag in her hands. “I thought Sean and Bronwyn aren’t dating.” Her fist twisted around the handle.

“They’re not,” Bess said. “But they do go on dates.” She stared at Mags with keen eyes.

“Why do you care?”

“I don’t,” Mags said. “I’m just curious, is all.”

“Well go put your bag down,” Bess said. “I’m Starvin’ Marvin here.”

They nestled on the couch watching the marathon of *Ghost Adventures* on cable until just before midnight, Bess on one side of the “U” and Mags in the middle, a bag of potato chips between them.

“Henry still hasn’t called?” Bess asked somewhere during episode three.

“No.” Mags shifted to stare at her friend. “Not once. And Edie hasn’t texted in two weeks.”

“That’s just shitty,” Bess said. “I mean, I can kind of get why he hasn’t called. Boy’s in love with you, and you up and left. But her? She’s your best friend *and* your cousin.”

“I know,” Mags said. She sucked in a deep breath. “But I haven’t called her either.”

“Yeah. It’s just getting worse, isn’t it? The longer you wait, the bigger the deal it is.”

Bess reached for the bag of potato chips between them. “What was it like?” she asked, her voice soft.

“What was what like?”

“A boy telling you he loved you.” The crunch of chips was loud in her mouth, louder than the TV, louder than the hum of the crickets outside the open window.

Mags hugged the blanket to herself, the cold night air seeping in. In August. She still couldn’t believe it. In the sixties, in August. “We always told each other we loved each other,” she said after a long moment. “All the time. Me, Noah, Edie, Henry. It was our thing. We had been friends since forever, and so we just did. But that night...”

“It was different,” Bess said.

“Yeah.” Mags looked over at her to find her eyes wide and dark in the flickering blue light of the screen. “It was scary.”

“Could you have loved him?” Bess asked.

“I don’t know,” Mags said. “I mean, I did love him. Do love him. He’s Henry. We’ve known each other since forever.” She hugged her knees to her chest and rested her chin on top. “But I don’t think he’ll ever forgive me. He thinks I was selfish.”

“No,” Bess said. “He was selfish. When *you* needed to be. When *you* needed someone to take care of you, he expected you to take care of him.” When Mags blinked at her in surprise—she hadn’t thought those things, not since that night—Bess gave her a wry smile. “No one understands the need for selfishness more than a cripple, Mags. Sometimes, I need my mom and brother to take care of me. And sometimes, they need me to remind them that it’s okay to take care of them. That this?” She gestured at her body. “Is ultimately my gig. And I’m the one who has to deal with all the consequences. That it’s okay for them to be quarterbacks or do yoga.”

“Do you resent it?” Mags asked.

“Of course I do. How could I not?” Bess shrugged. “But I don’t resent *them*. My brother...” she stopped for a moment, and when she spoke again, her voice was thick. “Colin would give me every ounce of strength he had, if he could. But he can’t, so I made him promise, long ago, that I wouldn’t hold him back.” Her smile was sudden and bright. “Goddamn, I love seeing that dumbass boy run.”

“Well, hell, what senior girl doesn’t?” Mags laughed when she got a throw pillow in her face for her comment.

“Hey,” Bess said, suddenly serious again. “When they do call? And they will. They’ll call. You let them apologize, okay? Don’t *you* do your apology thing, or be too grateful. They did *you* wrong, and you get the right to be mad about it. You get me?”

Mags shifted so that her head bumped against Bess’s. “I get you.”

“Yeah.” Bess pressed her head against Mags for a moment before she pulled away.

“Yeah, you better.”

They heard the scratching at the front door, and Bess shook her head. “See what a goody two-shoes he is?” Her voice was soft in the darkened room. “Mom’s been asleep for hours, and still, he makes curfew.”

Mags smiled and curled the blanket around her. “I think it’s sweet that he’s so respectful.”

“Hm,” Bess said. “He’s probably trying to trick her into giving him something. Longer curfew for Homecoming, no doubt.” But her face lit up when Colin came in, holding a white paper bag up like a trophy. “You didn’t.”

“Course we did,” he said, grinning at both of them. “What kind of assholes would we be if we didn’t bring you ice cream, too?” And he moved into the house, followed closely by Sean.

Mags looked at Sean in surprise. Neither boy looked like they just came back from a date. Both wore worn jeans and t-shirts, the room too dark to discern color or writing. She wondered then how formal this date had been. Then she wondered why she even cared.

“Oh, right.” Bess turned to Mags. “I forgot to tell you. Colin is having someone over, too.”

Mags wished she had remembered. She would have worn something different, other than her ratty yoga pants and her “Team Neville” t-shirt. “Hey,” Mags said, running her fingers through her hair in an attempt to untangle all the knots. “Congrats on the game, you two.”

“I thought you didn’t come,” Colin asked.

“I didn’t,” Mags said. “My grandmother and I watched it on TV.”

“*You* watched the game?” They were the first words Sean had spoken directly to her in over a week.

Mags’s brow wrinkled. “My dad’s the *coach*.”

Sean exchanged a look with Colin. “I just thought you wouldn’t,” he said, his voice softer, a bit chagrined.

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t listen to horrible, terrible, rotten, nasty rumors,” Mags said.

Sean stared at her in complete and utter silence for a moment until... *there*. The ghost smile. “Well, maybe you shouldn’t be such a football snob and come to a game now and then.”

“Oh please. You’ve had one game. One. Besides, I think you’re both forgetting my girl here is the one been taking all those pictures of you guys on the field? Every night, practically, for three weeks?”

Colin smiled and threw himself on the couch between Bess and Mags. “That’s why I brought ice cream,” he said. “Stands were at capacity last night. At an *away* game. I think it’s because of your column. So on behalf of my teammates,” he paused to rustle through the bag, “the Milton Strikers thank you.” With a flourish, he presented Mags with a little white carton, “Choc3” scribbled in black sharpie on top.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Triple chocolate,” Colin said. “We took a bet on you being a girl on the edge, underneath that calm, collected exterior.” Colin handed a pint to Bess and a moment later, a plastic spoon to both of them. “Butter pecan for my beautiful sister. Well, come on, Thornton. This ice cream won’t eat itself.”

After another moment’s hesitation, Sean sat on the couch next to Mags. He took the pint—labeled “Cookie dough”—and spoon from Colin, reaching across Mags to do so.

She eased back to stay out of his way but still, she felt his hand brush her arm as it came back across her. She folded in on herself more, trying to take up as little space as possible, overwhelmed as she was by the two giant boys on either side of her.

“Thanks for the ice cream,” Mags said. She took a bite and groaned. “Holy crap, what is this? This is *real*?”

Colin and Bess laughed, and even Sean chuckled. “That, my white sister, is Jake Malloy’s ice cream.” Bess took a bite and closed her eyes in bliss. “Local place, stays open late on weekends. Homemade ice cream, and best burgers and chili in town.”

“It’s freaking *amazing*.” Mags took another bite. “I can actually taste three totally different types of chocolate in here.”

“You’re absolutely welcome. Remember my generosity next time you accuse me of shamelessly flirting with you.” Colin settled into the nook created by the left flank of the U-shaped couch and took some of his sister’s blanket. “So what are we watching?”

They watched the show in comfortable silence for a good ten minutes before Colin swapped ice creams with Bess. Then Bess reached out for Sean’s, who handed it over without comment.

Sean didn't look at Mags. She realized that he didn't expect her to play along with what was so clearly a familiar routine between them. Too Gown, perhaps? Or just too "new girl"? Regardless, she passed him her pint, with her spoon stabbed in the middle. When he took it from her, he didn't say anything, but she saw the faintest glimpse of his ghost smile. He took a big bite with her spoon. "Christ," he said, still not looking at her. "Three entirely different chocolates."

"I know, right?" she said.

Then someone's ice cream and spoon ended up in her hand, and the ritual repeated, again and again, until all the ice cream was gone. Every last bite of it. She nestled herself further into her spot and wrapped the blanket tight around her, to her chin. Colin went off to get everyone pillows, and then they all settled on the couch, watching TV in comfortable silence. It was so much like an average Saturday night back home, watching TV with Edie and Henry and Noah that as Mags drifted off to sleep, she realized she felt warm, and safe, for the first time since she moved to Marlborough.

#

She woke from a dream of spotlights and cameras, of shaky handheld feed, of laughter, mean and raucous, to someone shaking her shoulder. "What?" She sat straight up and glanced around the unfamiliar room with wild eyes. "Is mom okay? Is it Freddie?" Then she remembered where she was, and with whom. When her eyes settled on Sean's face, she relaxed. "Sorry," she said. "Is something wrong?"

Sean shook his head. "You were whimpering," he whispered. "I thought you were having a nightmare." He was stretched out on the other arm of the U-shaped couch, but his pillow brushed against Mags's.

She sucked in a deep breath and sank back into the couch. “I always have nightmares,” she said before she could think about it. Mags turned to see Colin asleep, mouth open, full snoring, with Bess curled up next to him, like a doll. She blushed when she realized that she and Sean had fallen asleep next to each other, too, head to head, on the couch. The TV had switched to infomercials, and this one advertised that there had to be a better way to peel eggs.

“Who’s Freddie?” Sean asked.

She blinked at him for a second. “Why are you asking me about Freddie?”

“Because you asked, ‘Is it Freddie?’” He slung a hand through his hair. “Is he your boyfriend back home?”

“What?” She shook her head. “No, of course not. He’s my brother.”

She realized she had never surprised Sean Thornton before, not really, because his eyes grew wider than she had seen to date. “Your dad never said he had a son.”

“Yeah.” She found that she had twisted the blanket over and over again in her hand. “Freddie’s in Afghanistan. It’s... it’s hard for my dad to talk about.”

“Oh.” Sean gave her a surprisingly gentle look. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she said. It was, but it wasn’t, but she couldn’t tell Sean that.

“Did he play football?”

She nodded, shy of a sudden, so loathe to discuss Freddie with a stranger. But there were good things about Freddie, so many good things, and it was far enough away from New Orleans that perhaps Sean wouldn’t find out about the Incident after all. “He was All-American,” she said. “He was amazing. He had the best arm I’ve seen this side of Drew Brees.”

“Really?” Sean’s lips tugged upward at one corner, but it wasn’t the ghost smile. Not yet. “I’m surprised to hear you know who he is.”

“Okay, one? Drew Brees led New Orleans to the Superbowl, so I think he’s in line to be canonized at St. Louis Cathedral. I’m also pretty sure every Louisiana textbook has rewritten history so that he negotiated the Louisiana Purchase. Two? And this is important.” She tucked her feet under her and hugged the pillow to her chest before she stared at him with wide, solemn eyes. “I am not trying to sell the playbook, regardless of what anyone says.”

Sean actually laughed, but soft, as to not wake the twins. “I never listen to rumors or gossip,” he said. “It’s almost always entirely bullshit. If I want to know something about someone, I just ask them.”

“So ask me,” she said.

He glanced over at her, his eyes bright, even in the dim room. “Do you hate football?”

She smiled. “Of course I don’t. You can’t grow up in my family and hate football.”

“Okay, then. Do you hate *Milton* football?” He tapped a fist to his chest. “Tread carefully here. You hold my entire heart.”

She shook her head. “I don’t hate any kind of football, Milton or otherwise. Besides the fact that once again—”

“Your dad’s the coach,” he said.

“The boy listens.” She nodded. “Besides that piece of oft-quoted fact, I kind of loved the pep rally.” She grew quiet as she stared at the TV for a moment. “It was powerful.”

“Yeah,” Sean said. “It’s... it’s almost...”

“Primal,” she said, and caught his eye.

He lifted an eyebrow. “That too.” They were quiet for a long moment before he resettled himself on the couch. “So a Gown who likes Milton football. The mind does boggle with the oddity of it all.”

“I could say the same about you.”

“Of course I like football. I’m a football *player*.”

“No.” She laughed, quiet and low. “I mean *Buffy*, and Nine Inch Nails. AP Euro History. The dichotomy that is Sean Thornton.”

He shrugged and stared at the television screen. “Uncle Caleb is a closet nerd. He practically raised us after my dad...” his voice trailed off. “Anyway, he bought me comic books, action figures, took me to see *Star Wars* and *Batman* and even Chicago Comic Con once.” He turned to look at Mags and she saw his eyes lighten, even in this dark room. “But I’m a 6’4 white boy in the middle of Indiana. There is nothing else to do but play football.”

“With your shoulders? Of course there isn’t.” She rested her chin on the pillow in her arms. “I’ve been at every practice the last three weeks, though, and I’ve seen you play. I think you’re wasted as a lineman.”

“I’m too big to be anything else.”

“You’re *fast*,” she said. “And you’ve got good hands. The ball sticks to you like glue. You should be on offense.”

He glanced over at her, one eyebrow raised. “You think I’ve got good hands?”

She felt the blush burn across her body and was grateful he couldn’t see it in the dark.

“You know what I mean.”

“Why, Gown, are you teasing me?” His ghost smile was back, edging the corners of his lips, crinkling his eyes.

“To hell with you, Thornton. See if I try to give you sports advice anymore.” She smiled back at him, still blushing, but appreciating the ridiculousness of her comments.

And then there was awkward silence between them, stretching out to make her remember that she was in her pajamas, on a couch with a strange boy in *his* pajamas. Two strange boys, she amended, in a strange state for which she hadn't even gotten her new driver's license.

“What are you doing?”

They turned to see Bess blinking up at them. “Hey,” Mags said. “I apparently had a nightmare.”

“Sir Sean slayed the dragon? Excellent.” Bess sat up and yawned so wide, her jaw cracked. “Whew. Come on.” She smacked Colin on the arm and he snorted awake. “We’re missing out on fun. As always.”

“Hey.” Colin gave Mags that lazy smile that made her insides melt, just a little. She didn't like him, not in that way, but she could certainly appreciate the pretty with the best of them. “Your hair is really cute right now, all stuck up like that.”

Mags stuck a hand on her head and felt the snarl had gotten worse. “Seriously?” She turned to Sean. “You failed to mention this?”

He shrugged and gave her his half smile. “It's no worse than Bess's.”

“White boy, I've got a fro. It's supposed to look like this.” Bess nestled back in her blankets and yawned again at the TV. “Hey, did my girl tell you how she told Adam Bell to go fuck himself?”

“That is not at all how it happened,” Mags said, but both Sean and Colin had turned to her.

“You did what?” Colin asked. “For real?”

“I did *not*.” Mags turned to glare at Bess who stared at her with wide, innocent eyes. “I told him my coursework had made me fucking exhausted, but that’s not the same as telling someone to go fuck himself.”

“Curse words sound so cute in her mouth,” Colin said to Sean.

“Like a toddler,” Sean agreed. “Adorable.”

“Seriously?” Mags gestured her hand at Bess. “Can you clear this up?”

“Nuh uh,” Bess said. “Because my version’s much better. He asked for her number, too. And she wouldn’t give it to him.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Colin held up his hands in surrender. “Start at the beginning.”

Mags told the story as it was, leaving out the specific references to Sean, while Bess added her own embellishments.

“And then I left,” Mags finished, “*sans* Batarang and grappling hook.” The last was said with a glare at Bess.

“What?” Bess widened her eyes. “I like you as Batgirl and Adam as the Joker. It’s fun.”

“She’s way more Mary Marvel,” Sean said. “Not at all suited for the Bat family.”

“I can’t tell if you complimented me or insulted me,” Mags said.

“Who cares? You told Adam freaking Bell to go fuck himself.” Bess clapped her hands. “This has made my *night*.”

“Hey, why is she so bloodthirsty for this boy?”

“Helstone’s school paper won out over our paper last year in a state-wide competition.”

Sean shook his head. “He was editor, and Bess was editor. It wasn’t pretty.”

“He’s an *asshole*,” Bess said. She slumped back into her seat. “We were the plucky underdogs. If eighties movies have taught me anything, it’s that the plucky underdog always wins.”

“And gets to kiss the boy on top of a glass table,” Mags said.

“Or in the rain,” Bess said. “All sexy kisses happen in the rain. So says eighties movies.”

“Or on riding lawnmowers,” Colin added.

“Or in response to just having saved the community center,” Sean said.

“Through the power of break dance.” Mags smiled at him and was surprised when he gave her his full dimpled smile. “*Breakin’ II: Electric Boogaloo* is the classic story of the triumph of good versus evil.”

“Of the plucky underdog overpowering corporate America,” Sean said. “Really, the modern fairy tale of the American dream.” And then he stretched, arms lifted above his head. When he collapsed back into himself, he was a few inches closer to Mags.

She noticed. She didn’t know why she noticed, but she did.

“Never deny the power of break dance. Well, except you two. You’re white.” Bess yawned before she threw the remote at Sean. “Sean, you call it.”

“How many infomercials are on at three a.m.?” Sean asked. “Place your bets.”

“Four,” Colin said.

“Forty-five,” Bess said. “What? I’m an optimist.”

“Your turn, Gown.”

Mags found all three of them looking at her, expectant. “What?”

“Take a bet,” Sean said. “How many infomercials do you think are airing right now?”

She turned to look at him and the TV and then back at him again. “How many channels are there?”

“My girl wants an informed decision,” Bess said. “Smart. Very smart.”

Sean thought for a moment. “With digital? Probably close to three hundred.”

“I say eighteen.”

“My bet’s thirteen.” Sean settled into a sitting position and started the channel surfing at “1.” “Game on.”

Bess dropped off at channel seventeen, after only one infomercial, while Colin lasted until the low one hundreds, having found ten. Mags scooted closer to Sean so that they could whisper, as not to wake the twins again.

“That’s twelve,” she said as they slid past channel 145. “And honestly, how hard is it to peel eggs that there are four, *four* separate channels airing that infomercial?”

“What a mess,” Sean said. “There has to be a better way!”

She curled onto the couch again, hugging the pillow under her head. “You’ve known them a long time, haven’t you?”

“Since first grade,” Sean said. “She likes you a lot.”

“I like her.”

“Colin likes you a lot, too.”

“Colin likes anything with two X chromosomes.”

Sean exhaled through his nose. “This is true,” he said. “But I mean, he likes you because of Bess. Because you became such good friends so quickly.” He paused for a moment. “Most people do this whole ‘pity the cripple’ thing, and act like being friends with her is an act of charity.”

Mags's fingers played with the edge of the pillowcase. "I think she's the one performing the act of charity with me. She took pity on me day one. I'll never forget that, you know?"

They were quiet as they slipped past channel 156, then 157. "Is she dying?" she asked in a soft voice.

158. 159. 160. "Yes," Sean said at channel 162.

She peeked up at him, saw his jaw set hard, his eyes unreadable as always. "She's a fighter," she said.

He glanced down at her then. "She's that, too," he said. "For a long, long time."

They were quiet then, the words stretched between them, answers made, unable to be taken back. She didn't want to talk anymore. Not about Bess dying. Not about events so far beyond her control. Sean seemed to respect that and the silence grew comfortable, easier, less about pain and more about the late hour.

There was a shift on the couch and his pillow bumped against hers. 188. 189. "Hey, Gown?" 190. 191.

"Hmm?" Her eyes were heavy now, flitting open and closed at the rhythm of the changing channels, Colin's soft snoring, the weight of Sean's body on the couch next to her. The cold of the room, the warmth of her blanket and the coziness of the couch, all of it was making her feel sleepy again and she knew when she did fall asleep once more, she would not have any nightmares at all.

"Are you coming to the game on Friday?"

She peeled one eyelid open to see him looking at her, so earnest, so intense, so close she could feel his warm breath on her face. She opened both eyes. "I'm photographing it for the paper," she said.

“No, I mean, are you *coming*? To the whole game? And the bonfire after? Not just for the paper?” His sentences were ending up again. He was nervous, but she didn’t know why.

“I’m coming,” she said. “To everything. With and without camera.”

And then he smiled, his dimpled half smile, his face smooshed against the pillow.

“Good,” he said. “Make sure to wear black and red. It’s important. Especially at the bonfire.”

“Really?”

“Really.” And then, impossibly, he winked at her. “It’s a Town thing. Just trust me.”

“I trust you,” she said. “See how quickly I’m learning your ways?”

His face sobered and he nodded. “You are,” he said, and turned back to the television.
196, 197, 198.

Mags’s eyes grew heavier around 214, and she started dozing around 225. When she woke, it was to the thin sunlight of early morning. She peeked to her left and found Colin and Bess still curled asleep on the couch. She shifted a bit and looked to her right.

Sleepy blue eyes, also just opened, blinked at her.

“How many?” she asked, her voice husky from disuse.

Sean buried his head in his pillow like a puppy, rubbing his face in the cotton, before he looked up at her, a languid half-smile stretched on his face. Mags felt something, something she didn’t recognize, something she couldn’t identify, give in her chest and flutter, just a bit. *Click*.
“Nineteen,” he said. “You win.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The coffee was brewing, the biscuits were baking, and Sean Thornton was making everyone eggs by the time Principal Higgins came into the kitchen and kissed her children on the head.

“Sean,” she called to the boy at the stove. “Have I told you lately how good it is to see you Sunday mornings?”

“It’s good to see me making eggs,” he called back. “The entire Higgins clan is ruled by their stomachs.”

Principal Higgins turned to Mags and smiled. “Good morning, Mags. I’m sure the twins have told you how bad of a breakfast cook I am.”

“Well...” Mags said. “Just until you’ve had your coffee, right?”

“There was once this incident,” Bess said. “Involving salt on oatmeal, sugar in eggs, and burnt toast.” She shuddered with a delicate twist of her shoulders.

“Sean took up the slack long ago,” Colin said.

Mags just watched them banter back and forth as she sipped her coffee. It was another familiar scene, like the first day of school, but this time, she felt as if she belonged. As if she were one of them rather than an interloper, an outsider integrating herself into their personal lives.

From their conversation, she was able to glean that this was, pretty much, a standard Sunday morning in the Higgins household: Sean making eggs, Colin making coffee, Principal Higgins finding the donuts she had stashed away so they didn’t eat them in the night, Bess providing scintillating commentary about the entire cooking process. As a new inclusion in this scene, Mags had added her own touch: from-scratch drop biscuits. Her great-grandmother’s

recipe from New Orleans. They had all seemed surprised and pleased when she offered, Sean and Colin bringing her various ingredients from the cabinets when she asked. When they were stymied by the lack of buttermilk, Sean had pulled out his phone, looked up a substitution, and after several minutes shaking heavy cream in a jar, they had butter *and* buttermilk.

“Like a wizard,” Mags had said. Sean had given her a little half-smile back.

Now, Bess looked over at her, a strange smile on her face. “So, I have been meaning to ask you. Did you sleep well, down on that end of the couch?”

Mags gave her a confused look. “Sure,” she said. “In fits and starts, though. You?”

“Where did you guys sleep?” Principal Higgins asked as she tore a sour cream donut in half. “Not all of you on the couch again.” At Colin’s pointed stare away, she sighed. “What is Mags’s family going to say, with her sleeping on the couch with two boys?”

“On the *principal’s* couch,” Bess said. “God, Mom. Seriously. Like anything would happen with you two feet away.”

“I’m not worried about something happening. I’m worried about what her parents might think.”

“My parents don’t care,” Mags said. “They don’t care what I do.”

Everyone, even Sean, turned to look at her with that statement. She felt the red creep along her cheeks and she looked down at her cup. “I mean, it’s no different from back home. I used to sleep with boys all the time.”

Colin cleared his throat loudly while Bess burst into laughter. Sean said nothing, but his smile was full and dimpled.

Mags threw her face into her hands as Principal Higgins made a little noise in the back of her throat. “Y’all know what I mean, right?”

“Despite what you want?” Bess said. “That floor will not open up and swallow you whole.”

Mags flitted out one hand, palm up. “A little help?”

“Anything for my white sister. Mom, she’s got experience sleeping with boys. Sheesh. Give my girl some cred.”

Mags pulled her face away from her hands to stare at Bess. “You are *not* helping. I forbid you from speaking anymore.”

“What?” Bess gave her a now-familiar wide-eyed innocent look. “I mean, I’m sure you slept with Henry loads of times.”

“Who’s Henry?” Colin leaned forward, his chin resting on his hands. “Do we know him? Does he go to Helstone?”

“Henry’s her boyfriend back home,” Bess said.

Mags threw a napkin at Bess. “He is *not* my boyfriend.”

“He is a *boy*, and he is your *friend*. Hence, boyfriend.”

“Well, considering he actually isn’t that much of a friend right now, I don’t think he counts.”

“That’s only because he wants to be your kissing boyfriend and you up and moved to Indiana instead.”

Mags turned to Principal Higgins to find her watching the proceedings with one eyebrow cocked. “How much do you love your daughter? I mean, will you miss her *that* much?”

“Right now, or just in general?” Principal Higgins pretended to contemplate it. “Do I get a replacement daughter? Will recompense be paid?”

“*Mom*,” Bess said. “You know no one could replace me. I am one of a kind. Unique. Special. Like a unicorn with a limp.”

“I’ll give you Sean,” Mags said. “A son for a daughter. They’re worth more, right?”

“Hey, don’t drag me into this,” Sean said from the stove. “It’s not my fault you’ve got lots of boyfriends you sleep with.”

“This now counts as justifiable homicide, right?” Mags asked Colin.

“Oh, sure,” he said. “You’ve got several witnesses who can vouch that it was just self-defense.”

“Okay, children, enough hazing. We would like Mags to come back at some point.”

Principal Higgins reached a hand over and patted Mags’s arm. “Since I am pretty sure what you mean is, ‘Why yes, Principal Higgins, I do have male friends that my parents know about and we have, on occasion, fallen asleep in the same room without any unnecessary complications,’ we’ll just leave it at that?”

The buzzer sounded. “The biscuits are ready!” Mags leaped out of her seat and all but ran to the oven, the sound of Bess’s laughter trailing behind her.

She stood and waited for Sean to move from the stove so she could open the oven, but he didn’t. “Come on, Town.” She tapped him on the arm with the oven mitt. “Time is biscuits.”

“Two seconds,” he said. “We are at a very critical juncture.”

She peeked over his arm to look at the eggs in the pan, perfect yellow curds buttery and delicious-looking. “Are you... are you using *chopsticks*?”

“They are the best tool for cooking eggs.” He swirled the chopsticks around once more and she watched, fascinated, as the eggs cuddled together in faultless little clumps.

“Wow.” Without even thinking, Mags hopped up on the counter so she could see better. “How did you learn this trick?” She leaned closer and, wobbling, caught his shoulder for balance.

She felt his muscles shift under her hand and, blushing, she pulled away. “I did a lot of cooking when I was younger,” he said, his voice soft. “It just sort of stuck.”

“You should be a chef.” But the earlier relaxed moment was broken now. Her skin was bright and taut with the weight of her embarrassment. She waited as he moved his pan to the back burner before she jumped off the counter to get the biscuits.

“Actually, that’s kind of what I want to do.”

He said it so soft and so fast that Mags wasn’t sure she had heard him. But when she looked up, she found Sean Thornton looking at her, those intense eyes serious, the blue darkened. “Really?” she asked. She placed the pan of biscuits on the stove, away from the warm burner the eggs had been cooked on.

He leaned against the counter, his hands resting behind him, pushing up his shoulders. “Stupid, right?”

“What? Are you kidding? That’s amazing.” She closed the oven door and stood closer to him. His quietness suggested to her that it was a secret desire, even from Colin and Bess, who were bantering back and forth with their mother, their voices too loud to overhear anything happening by the stove. “Why do you think it’s stupid?”

Sean shrugged but his ears pinked a bit. “My mom thinks it’s stupid.”

“Did she say that? Did she say, ‘Sean, I think your dream is stupid?’”

The ghost-smile. “No.”

“Then you’re reading her wrong.” Mags reached around Sean for a plate and began placing the biscuits on it. “Trust me. Take this from a girl who wants to take pretty pictures for a living. Try justifying *that* to parents of a son who went All-American and was majoring in Engineering before...” Her voice trailed off and she lightened the tone before she could go down the Freddie road. “Anyways, I’m from New Orleans. Eating is a professional sport there, you know. I think people who can feed me are, like, superheroes.”

“Well, they’d have to be,” Sean said. “I’ve seen you eat.” The ghost smile grew wider.

She stared up at him, straight-faced. “Wow. You really are going for that asshole of the year award.”

“Hey, I’m not about to lose out for the first time in ever because you’re ‘new’ and you’ve got ‘sensitive girly feelings.’” He fingered scare quotes for most of the sentence. “I have a reputation to maintain.” Sean grabbed the frying pan in one hand and gestured for her biscuit plate with the other. “Thanks,” he said, soft again as he took the plate.

“For what?” she asked.

“For not mocking me.” Then he smiled, full-dimpled. “Well, for not mocking me about *that*.”

“Well, one day, you’ll go to New Orleans, call me when you get there, and I’ll take you to all of the best places, all the hole in the wall restaurants, the food trucks, hell, my grandmother’s house for gumbo. And then when you’re this rich and famous molecular gastronomist—”

Sean wrinkled his nose. “Please. I want to cook *food*. Not foam.”

Mags couldn't help her grin. "Sorry, so when you're this rich and famous *serious* chef, you'll say, 'That Margaret Hale. It's all thanks to her and the food tour of New Orleans she made me take. Yes, clearly, I need to give her all the money and accolades in the world.'"

Sean's face cleared and the look he gave her was something unreadable, something new. "That's a promise," he said. And then he turned away. "All right, Higginses. Let's eat."

#

They were making a last-ditch, valiant effort to finish the remaining three donuts when Principal Higgins's phone rang.

She stared down at the caller ID. "Sean, it's your mom."

He checked the phone sitting next to his plate. "She hasn't called me," he said. "It must be for you."

"Hi, Rose. Did you want to talk to Sean?" Principal Higgins stood and began walking to his office. "Not yet, but I will be in a second." She disappeared down the hallway and, a moment later, they heard the sound of a door close.

Three sets of eyes swiveled to Sean. "What? I don't know why she's calling."

"It has to be work," Bess said. "Your mom only calls mom's cell phone if it's something for work."

"Sean's mom is the school superintendent of our county," Colin said to Mags. "So it's probably something you did."

Mags laughed. "Probably," she said. "What with all of my boyfriends and that sleeping I've been doing."

Sean stared down at his phone, a puzzled look on his face. "I just got three texts in a row."

“From whom?” Bess asked. She tried to snatch the phone from his hand but he pulled it away.

“Five now. Hugh, Hunter, and a few other guys from the team.”

Colin walked over to where his phone was charging. “Seven for me. What is going on?” He pulled Bess’s phone from its charger and handed it to her. “You’ve got three.”

Mags just reached for the last sprinkled donut and waited as they scrolled through their texts. “So, is anyone going to tell me what’s going on?”

Sean looked up at her. “Coach Keegan’s in trouble.”

“What?” She leaned over to see his phone and he moved it toward her. The text from Hugh was simple and to the point. “Dude, wtf. Have u heard anything abt Coach? What’s going on??”

“What happened?”

Sean shrugged. “Nobody knows or isn’t saying.”

“Alex thinks it has something to do with a blog.” Bess looked up from her cell phone. “What kind of blog?”

Mags’s eyes grew wide as she remembered the conversation she overheard on Friday. “Guys, listen,” she began, but didn’t get to finish.

In unison, both Sean’s and Colin’s cell phones beeped. The two boys looked down. Sean finished reading first. “That’s from your dad,” he said, looking at Mags.

“Why is my dad texting y’all?”

“Because he just called an emergency meeting for the entire team tonight, and we’ve got to let the team know.”

Team Captains, Mags thought. Of course they would need to get in touch with everyone. The complicated phone tree that was football.

Mags stood and walked to her bag for her cell phone. No missed messages. No missed calls. No texts. She didn't know what she expected. Perhaps some trust after their late-night conversation on Friday after the game. But clearly not. She threw her phone back in her bag and grabbed her camera instead. "Anyone else saying anything?" She felt comfortable with it in her hands again. She snapped a few random shots of the donuts on the table, just for something to do.

She looked up to find Bess watching her, a sympathetic look on her face. "You could be our spy," she said. "You've got the inside scoop, Ace. Literally."

Mags shrugged and lifted her camera again so that she could look through the lens at all of them. "Dad doesn't really talk to me about things like this." She wondered what she looked like in this moment to warrant such a gentle look from Bess. Wide-eyed and sad. *Click*. Left out and forlorn. *Click*. A martyr, Henry had called her. Was she bringing it upon herself? Was she determining her own martyred state? *Click, click, click*.

But she never wanted to be Joan of Arc. She just wanted to take pictures and have her parents forgive her for Freddie. In the larger sweep of the universe, in light of Bess's illness, of losing Henry and Edie, of existing so unstable in this new, unknown place, her parents' navigation of their own tricky lives wasn't neglect. Not really.

"We've got to get this going."

Mags swung the camera to focus in on Colin, his serious expression, his earnest chat with Sean. *Click*.

“I’ll head home and get the phone numbers.” Sean, putting his phone in his pocket.

Click. “Gown, you need a ride home?”

Mags lowered the camera from her face. “You don’t mind?”

“Clearly I do. That’s why I offered.” Sean, despite his concerned look, his seriousness over what Henry would call “a serious fucking situation,” gave her a ghost of the ghost smile.

“Come on, then. Get your things.”

“Call me if you get anything juicy!” Bess called after them as they headed out the door.

“And I will see you when I see you!”

“See you when I see you,” Mags said, repeating what had become their usual goodbye.

“Thanks again, Principal Higgins.”

“You’re welcome, Mags. Anytime you want to come over, you just come on over.” She slipped into her right heel at the same moment she was securing an earring in her ear.

Apparently, there was an emergency meeting for all faculty and administration of Milton High.

The situation must be serious indeed. “You two drive safe.”

Mags paused for a second when she stepped outside, confused by the sleek silver SUV instead of the GTO. But yes, she remembered that Queen B—Bronwyn, she told herself, trying to break the evil nickname Bess had given to her—was too precious to ride in the GTO. Even still, she found herself going to the driver’s side on instinct, before she heard the automatic locks click on the doors and she slid into the passenger seat.

The SUV was everything the GTO was not: new, clean, and with working doors and floorboards. And radio. When Sean started the car, obnoxious pop music blared out of the speakers.

“Sorry,” he said, and reached to turn down the volume. “Bronwyn likes to mess with the radio.”

Mags shrugged and stared out of the window. She didn’t have to wonder why she cared. She knew why. She just could not fathom what Sean even saw in a girl like Bronwyn. Then she remembered what Bronwyn looked like in her cheerleader’s uniform, and mentally amended her statement. She could not fathom what *else* Sean saw in a girl like Bronwyn.

“Can you control the iPod?”

She turned to find him gesturing a silver iPod at her. “Sure,” she said, and reached to take it. His fingers brushed hers when she did and for some reason, it made her blush. She started scrolling through his music, all 160 GB of it.

They drove in silence as she moved through his music before she finally burst out with, “Really? *Styx*? This is a joke, right?”

“Who are you to judge? They are the masters of the rock ballad.”

She clicked on the *Greatest Hits* album and chose her song carefully. In a moment, the beginning strain of “Oh, Momma,” filled the car. “Great sound system,” she said, almost screaming over the music. “It was clearly meant for classic rock.” She kept scrolling through his music. “Oh, no. No, here’s one better.” Styx was cut off mid-croon and Rush began blaring “Tom Sawyer.”

Sean reached over to lower the volume so they didn’t need to scream. “I think you’re making fun of me.”

“Never. That’s a filthy lie.” She kept scrolling. “Seriously? This is a gag, right?” Kansas’s “Carry On, My Wayward Son” began.

“Are you going to stick to one song or just keep up this seventies montage?”

“Hey, the seventies montage is all your fault. There is entirely too much classic rock on here.” She scrolled back and found the song she wanted. “Okay. Here’s one we can both agree on, I think.”

A pause, then a fun guitar riff. “Hey man! Leave me alone,” Mags sang with the opening lines.

“Nice choice,” Sean said. “Although I would never connect you and Bowie. Too... Townie for you, I suppose.”

“Hey, I’m a total blam-blam,” Mags said. “Besides, this is ‘Suffragette City.’ It is only the greatest song in the history of all songs ever.”

Sean looked over and stared at her with those unreadable eyes. “You’re a contradiction, Margaret Hale. You know that, right?”

“You’re the one who can’t afford the ticket back from Suffragette City, not me.” And then she grinned at him and was rewarded with a dimpled smile back and while the thing that had loosened between them in the night loosened more, something else tightened in return. She felt it, a rubberband-snap of *something* she couldn’t explain and couldn’t, no matter if she tried, photograph for posterity and exploration. She didn’t know this, not exactly, and she wasn’t sure he did, either, because her confusion was written on his brow, and his lack of understanding was felt in her bones.

Awkward again, he turned back to the road and she turned back to staring out the windshield but there was the song between them, there was David Bowie and an SUV with a great sound system and at some point, they both starting singing. Softly at first, to themselves, under their breath, but then, with a shy glance from him and a shy one from her, they started singing louder. His thumb tapped against the steering wheel and her foot bopped in return.

And then, at a stoplight, the music crescendoed to the guitar and drums beating a heartbeat bass. Sean pounded against the steering wheel harder, and Mags's hand tapped against her leg and then the both of them, at once, sang with David Bowie: “Awww... wham, bam, thank you, ma'am!”

The laugh spilled from her lips and she smiled over at him, a full smile, the biggest she'd had since she moved to Marlborough because for the first time since New Orleans, since Henry and Edie she felt she was herself again with these people, with Bess, with Sean in this car. She was *light* again. She was *Mags* again because no one here knew about what had happened that night at the party. No one here knew about the video or the boys or her brother's righteous fury. She felt she had shaken off her stern composed exterior, the sunshine, ever eternal sunshine, in light of breakfast and laughter and a great song.

Mags looked over at Sean, expecting his laughter, too, but instead she caught him staring at her, his expression unreadable, his eyes shadowed. She felt the smile fall from her face and she darted her eyes back to the windshield. “Sorry,” she said, and reached out to lower the music. “I just... I really like that song.”

His hand caught hers on the volume control and, with gentle fingers, covered hers. “No,” he said, and turned the volume louder. “Find another.”

She did. “Head Like a Hole” by Nine Inch Nails. And another, Beastie Boys’ “Sabotage,” and then Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” And again, Vanilla Ice, and Rob Base, and Tool, and some part of her wondered how long it took to get from Bess’s house to her grandmother’s because it had been almost half an hour since they left—or longer? Mags wondered—but then they pulled up at her grandmother’s house and Sean’s phone exploded in another series of texts.

He reached out and lowered the volume, and like that, the fragile spell between them was broken.

“Seven in a row,” Sean said. “Five from my mom. I’ve got to get home.”

“Right.” Mags didn’t know how to leave this, how to exit this car, how to keep the balance between them going into school. “Thanks for the ride,” she said, in the end, as lame and ridiculous as possible. She turned to get out but paused before she did. “Bess was right. I met Adam Bell on Friday. I... I have to ask you. Do y’all really think I’m like him?”

Sean stared at her for a long moment. “Define ‘y’all.’”

“You,” she said. “Colin. The entirety of Milton High.”

“Would it bother you?” Sean asked. “If we did?”

“Of course it would,” Mags said. “He’s an asshole.”

There, the ghost smile. “And that’s why I don’t,” he said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“...take care of herself. She always has.”

“Parents are supposed to take care of children, not the other way around.”

Mags blinked further awake as the conversation came into focus. The sky outside was ominous and black, and even with the windows closed, she felt the ozone, thick and sharp, cloying against her senses.

“This is what is best for everyone. I don’t know why you can’t see that.”

Her mother’s voice, so near to her room. How was her mother awake and mobile this early in the morning?

“I think you’re being ridiculously, abundantly selfish.”

Mags checked her alarm to make sure but no, she hadn’t slept in. It was just now six. Her door was open a crack, and unbidden, she smiled. It meant her father had come to kiss her goodbye while she slept. He hadn’t done that since, well, for a long time.

“You would think that. You’ve always thought that about me.”

She began to comprehend the tone of the conversation happening just outside her door. Mags sat up and wisted the sleep from her eyes. “Mom?”

There was a pause, then, “Margaret?”

“Is everything okay?” Mags flung back her covers and shivered as the colder air hit her naked toes. “Are you sick?”

Another pause. “No, bébé. I’m fine. I just couldn’t sleep, is all.” Another pause. “Freddie called last night.”

Mags bounded out of bed and flung open the door. “Did he? Is he okay? Why didn’t you wake me up?”

Her grandmother was standing near the coffee maker, one hand on the pot handle. “He called late. Your mother didn’t want to disturb you.”

“You can always wake me up for Freddie.” Mags sat at the table and tucked one leg under the other. “Where’s dad?”

“Practice,” her mother said. “Well, planning, then practice.”

Mags nodded. Everything had changed since Sunday, since Coach Keegan had resigned and her father had taken his place. This was the third morning in a row her father was gone before dawn, and, with the extra practices and the confusion, she had to catch rides with her grandmother. Even Sean Thornton was too busy for his grandmother, she thought. And thus, inconvenient her. “So tell me everything Freddie said. Is he okay? Does he need anything?”

“Letters.” Her grandmother put a plate of French toast and sausage in front of her. There was powdered sugar sprinkled on the toast, and fresh raspberries dotting the syrup.

Mags gave her grandmother a smile, but it fell when the smile back was forced, at best, pained at worst. “Something’s wrong,” she said.

“No.” Her mother reached over and patted her hand. “No, your brother’s fine. I swear. I wouldn’t lie to you.”

She twirled the fork in her hand. “What were you and Grandma fighting about?”

The two women exchanged a look. When her mother turned back to her, Mags knew something had happened, but couldn’t, for the life of her, figure out what it was. “Your dad,” her mother said. “And his new position.”

Her grandmother turned from the table then. “Margaret, would you like milk, juice, coffee, or all three?”

“All three?” Mags asked. “I can get it, though, Grandma. It’s no big deal.”

Her grandmother shook her head. “No, Mags. No, you let me do for you right now. You do too much as it is.”

Her mother’s hand tightened on hers and Mags looked down at it. “Thank you, Grandma,” she said, interpreting her mother’s gesture as a reminder of her manners.

“Your brother said he is going to try and Skype with you tonight, so make sure you leave your computer on.” Her mother pulled her hand away and cradled her coffee cup. “Okay, Mags?”

“Of course. Did he say what time?” Mags used her fork to cut into the toast, and watched as the powdered sugar dissolved in the maple. The buttery yellow of the toast reminded her of the absent sunshine, of brioche, and she realized it was egg bread. “Is this Challah? I *love* Challah French toast.”

Her grandmother brought two glasses, milk in one hand, juice in the other. “I know. That’s why I made it. And those are the fresh sausages you like, too.”

“How I have not gained four hundred pounds since I moved in, I will never figure out.” Mags took a long draught of her milk.

“I’m surprised, too,” her mother said, “with the way your grandmother feeds you. But no, you’ve managed to keep the weight off.”

Mags lowered her milk glass and set it with a careful thump on the table. “Must be gym,” she said, her voice quiet. She was being punished, subtly, carefully, but she didn’t even know why. It had been a careful navigation over the last two years, careful realizations that her mother blamed her for Freddie. Not overtly, not explicitly, just in the little thousands of ways that, in the end, hurt worse than her mother’s actual blame.

It was a simple equation, really. Because of Mags, Freddie went to war. And her mother, no matter what she said, would never forgive her for it.

Her grandmother placed a cup of coffee in front of her, with sugar and real cream, just as she liked. Awkward now, feeling her shirt to be too small and her pajama pants too tight, Mags pushed back from the table.

A strong hand gripped the back of her chair. Surprised, Mags looked up to see her grandmother. “There are children in this world who don’t get enough to eat,” she said, her words for Mags, but her eyes only for her daughter-in-law. “In my day, we were grateful our children could eat as much as they wanted. It meant they were loved. Cherished. Safe.”

“I’m tired.” Her mother stood up from the table and smoothed down her nightdress. “Have a good day at school, dear.” And then she shuffled out of the kitchen to return to her invalid bed.

Mags stared down at the congealing syrup on her plate. “I’m not very hungry, Grandma. It’s too much for me to eat.”

“No, it’s not. You work yourself to death, and you’ve lost weight since you moved here, not gained it.” She sat in the empty chair next to Mags and looked in earnest at her granddaughter. “She doesn’t mean it,” she said in a soft voice. “She’s... she’s unwell.”

“I know.” Mags poked at her sausage with her fork. “She wasn’t like this before Freddie left.”

“She blames you.”

It was the first time an adult had said the words. Mags looked up at her grandmother and felt her bottom lip tremble. “I wish I had never told him. I wish I had never gone to that party.”

“I wish your brother hadn’t brought you to that party, either,” her grandmother said.

Mags noticed it, the purposeful rewriting of her sentence. But her grandmother went on before she could explore it further.

“But you did the right thing, telling your brother. He was an adult. What he did afterwards was on him.”

Mags looked down at her plate again. “He put two guys in the hospital. Because of me.”

Her grandmother reached over and lifted her chin so she could look in her eyes. “He put two boys in the hospital,” she said. “Because of what *they* did *to* you. Not because *of* you.”

Tears, hot and shameful, fell down her cheeks. “Mom told you?” Mags asked, her voice pitched higher than normal. “She told you about... about the video?”

“No, sweetie.” Her grandmother’s smile was soft, sympathetic. “Your dad did.”

“I got drunk.” The words burst forth from her mouth and she started crying, silent and shaking, but not loud enough for her mother to hear in her room. Never that loud. She had two years’ experience hiding her tears, after all. “It was my fault. I got drunk and I—”

“Do you know how old your father was when he came home drunk the first time?”

Mags blinked with the sudden force of the interruption, and tried to catch up with the change in subject. “What?”

“Fifteen,” her grandmother said. She lifted a napkin and wiped Mags’s left cheek. “He was fifteen years old. There was the big Ball at Helstone—it’s their Homecoming—and he was a sophomore. He and about five of his football buddies split a bottle of rotgut whiskey they took from some dad’s liquor cabinet.” Now, the napkin moved to the right. “Lord, he was a mess. Came home barely able to walk on the two legs God gave him. And then the next morning, he was so sick he couldn’t even get out of bed.”

“What did you do?” Mags asked. “Did you punish him?”

Her grandmother lowered the napkin in her hand. “I turned on all the lights in the house,” she said. “And the television. For breakfast, I cooked him eggs, over-easy, and sausage patties. And then I cooked a lamb. Slow-roasted it. All day.”

Mags bit her bottom lip to stifle her laugh. “Did he throw up?”

“I figured that was punishment enough. I don’t think your dad touched a drop of liquor after that, until his twenty-first birthday.” Her grandmother gave her a smile. “So on any other day, at any other party, you would have had too much to drink, gone home, and woken up hung over and ashamed. Because that’s what kids do, Mags. They do stupid, idiotic things and it’s our job to protect them. All Freddie was trying to do was protect you, and to make it up to you.”

“Make it up to me?” Mags asked. “Make what up to me?”

Her grandmother’s eyes grew hard, the hazel sharpening to brown. “My twenty-year-old grandson brought his fifteen-year-old sister to a college party, and she was hurt because of it. I can promise you one thing. He will be making it up to *me* for years to come.” Her eyes cleared and she patted Mags on the hand. “Now, eat your breakfast before it gets too cold. I’ll drive you to school when you’re done.”

#

For two days straight, it was all anyone could talk about: Coach Keegan and The Big News. Mags, grateful that for once The Big News wasn’t about her, retreated into her invisible camera-wielding status through the halls of Milton and worked her way through Block A without much attention from anyone at all. It was a lonely day, however, because Bess had to go to St. Louis for medical tests—“Stupid first Wednesday of the month bullshit,” she had texted. “Be back soon.”—Nupur had to fill in at the office first lunch, and Mags had no one else to eat lunch with. Too much of an introvert to hone in on anyone else’s table, and suspecting now that Alex

would not welcome her intrusion at his table anyhow, Mags sat at their usual table, alone, with her MacBook open to the latest news on Coach Keegan. While the school had restrictions on their network, lucky for Mags they were a) mostly social networking sites, to which she no longer subscribed or cared, or b) PC blocked, and she had a Mac. Mags nibbled on the chicken-bacon wrap her grandmother had packed her while she scrolled through her news-sorting program.

Three national sites had already picked up the story, giving the details even the local papers couldn't or wouldn't reveal. Coach Keegan had apparently been maintaining an anonymous blog for well over a year, documenting the increased salary and benefit cuts for faculty, as well as the increased revenue taken in by the school system. "The money's going in," he had written, "but no one knows where it's coming out. I suspect our beloved superintendent."

That alone was enough to get him on leave, but then he supposedly violated confidentiality by revealing private conversations held between himself and students. While the blog was no longer active, several websites had mirrored it before it was disabled, and Mags scrolled through what was salvaged. As far as she could tell, the confidentiality breach was a stretch at best. They were looking for an excuse to fire him, and they had found it, any way possible.

Of course, they hadn't fired him. They had asked him to resign. Because he had agreed, and signed a waiver, he could not sue the school board. However, several anonymous blogs were now calling the Marlborough school system to arms to protest in support of Keegan's forced resignation. Even more blogs had popped up calling for unionizing, and striking.

“My family now qualifies for government assistance,” one blogger wrote. “My children receive reduced lunches at the school where I teach. I’m a single parent. What am I supposed to do? I’ve done everything right!”

“I serve better food at the schools than I can afford to eat at home,” another blogger wrote. “And you will not believe how thankless everyone is when you serve them lunch. Not the students, even. The faculty!”

Story after story, personal frustration after personal frustration, faculty, staff, even, if Mags had read the information carefully enough, administration, protesting their loss of salary, their reduction of benefits, and their overall lack of voice and representation in the Marlborough school system.

In AP Euro history, they had just read about the rise of the working classes across Europe, about the sabotage of machines, about massacres and large-scale protest movements, about the Match Girls’ Strike of 1888 namely against—here, horror of horrors—phossy jaw, a horrible disease caused by using white phosphorus for matches.

Thousands of people willing to fight and die for a representative voice in Parliament. For viable living and working conditions. And it all started with one angry voice. One thrown shoe. One salary too short, one set of benefits cut too close for comfort. Two children on the reduced lunch program. One coach getting fired for trying to stand up for what he believed in.

And perhaps, just perhaps, Mags was beginning to understand why Marlborough was so proud of its industrial strike heritage.

#

“There is a lovely even number of you in my class,” Mrs. Scotch said last period. She leaned on the edge of her desk and smiled at them. “Let’s count off. Four groups. Tara, you start.”

Mags doodled in her notebook as she half-listened to everyone else in class call out their numbers. The number calling went around the U-formation of desks, and Mags, dutiful, said her number when it came to her turn: “3.”

“Now,” Mrs. Scotch said, when the last student had said “4.” “Before we divide into our groups, your assignment. Each group will be assigned a century, each group must pick a theme, and each member of the group must pick a major social concern to cover within that century and theme. Group 1, you’re the seventeenth century. Group 2, you’re eighteenth. Group 3, you’re nineteenth, and Group 4, that means you’re twentieth.” She wagged her fingers. “Nazis are strictly off the table.”

There was a groan from Group 4.

“It’s for your own good,” Mrs. Scotch said. “Keep in mind some of the bigger themes we’ve discussed so far this semester: Labor, Suffrage, Empire, and everything else you’ve supposedly listened to. There will be a group presentation, individual research papers, and a visual component for everything. Yeah?”

The class nodded.

“Good! Go ahead and divide up. Group 1 up front, group 2 to the left—my left, Skye, not your left—group 3, to the right, and group 4, in the back.” Mrs. Scotch clapped her hands. “I want individual topics and a research agenda by the end of class, people!”

Mags gathered her notebook and shoved it into her bag before she stood up. When she looked to Mrs. Scotch's right, her left, she felt herself falter. Of course. Of course she would have been assigned a group with Bronwyn, Bronwyn's best friend, Marci, and Sean Thornton.

They hadn't been sitting together, she realized. For the first time since school started. Bronwyn must have known today was group selection and had purposefully placed them apart. She hadn't banked on Mags, however, and her eyes widened as Mags walked over.

"Really?" Bronwyn asked.

Mags shrugged and adjusted her bag on her shoulder. She looked for an empty seat but Bronwyn had cuddled the three of them close together. No matter, Mags thought. She put her bag down and went to grab a chair. By the time she came back to the group, they were already discussing which theme they wanted to cover.

"I think Labor," Bronwyn said. "It's important, it's, like, *huge* to the nineteenth century, and we can do all sorts of things with it."

Mags sat in her seat and pushed her peacock bracelet up her arm from where it had fallen at her wrist.

"That sounds great," Marci agreed, because she always agreed with Bronwyn.

Sean flashed his too-bright eyes to Mags and gave her his ghost smile. "Any thoughts?" he asked.

She shrugged again and tucked her legs under her. "I don't know." But actually, she did, because since lunch she had been thinking about the blogs and news stories, about the people who worked behind the scenes, unappreciated, underpaid. She thought about what Mrs. Scotch had said about gender differentiation throughout the centuries. About unpaid labor of women. About the plight of the domestic servant.

Mags?”

She looked up to see three sets of eyes staring at her with varying degrees of hostility, ranging from Sean (no hostility), to Marci (confused, mimicked hostility), to Bronwyn (open war declared). God, she hated that all three of them were staring at her, waiting for her to have an opinion. She had no idea how she would ever handle an entire group presentation without wanting to fall through the floor. Lucky for her, she was sure Bronwyn would never let her get a word in edgewise anyhow.

“Sure,” Mags said. “Labor sounds good.” She pulled out her notebook and favorite thick black pen out of her bag and set them on her lap. Her peacock bracelet had fallen to her wrist with her movement again, and she pushed it up with her other hand.

Bronwyn visibly rolled her eyes. “Excellent. I am so glad we are all in agreement. Now, let’s come up with ideas we want to cover. Sean, yesterday, you were talking about the Peterloo Massacre. I think you should do that. I really think *I* should cover the Match Girls’ Strike. Mrs. Scotch was like, really into it in class last week. And Marci, you should do—are you even *listening* to me?”

Mags stopped in mid-doodle and dropped her arm from her notebook. Her peacock bangle fell to her wrist and she slid it back up her arm again. “You want Sean to do the Peterloo Massacre. You want to cover the Match Girls’ Strike because Mrs. Scotch was like, really into it in class last week. You haven’t gotten to Marci’s assignment yet.”

Bronwyn blinked. Marci, because Bronwyn did, also blinked. Sean just watched her with those unreadable eyes. “Well, what’s *your* bright idea?”

Mags shrugged and returned to her doodling. Her bracelet fell again and she shoved it back up her arm with an impatient hand. When she glanced up, she noticed Sean staring at her.

Not at *her*, but at her bracelet. For some unknown, bizarre reason. When he looked up, he caught her looking, and he blushed, actually blushed, the spread of it over his cheeks and up to the tips of his ears.

“Seriously? You have to have an opinion.”

Mags turned her eyes to Bronwyn’s, met her full-on and some small, petty part of her was pleased to see Bronwyn visibly pull back. “Domestic labor,” she said.

Bronwyn wrinkled her perfect little tanned nose. “What?”

“Domestic labor,” she said again. She lifted her pen to her cheek and tapped it against her lips. “I want to do domestic servants. Scullery maids. The paid and unpaid labor of women.” She paused for a second, and then, with a quick glance at Sean, said, “Cooks. I want to do female servants in the nineteenth century.”

“That’s not important,” Bronwyn said. “Mrs. Scotch wants us to look at huge social issues.”

“Do you know how many women were employed in service in English households?” Mags asked.

“No,” Bronwyn said.

“Neither do I, but I want to find out.”

Bronwyn stared at her, open-mouthed, astonished. “But who cares about cooking or cleaning? What does that have to do with the development of Europe, or the British Empire? This is AP European History, for God’s sake, not... not... not whatever class would give a shit about people who cook and clean. That’s *women’s* work. *Housework*. It’s not real work.”

Mags understood then why Sean didn’t want to tell anyone his ambitious dream of becoming a chef. They thought it was women’s work. Work no one cared about. Work people

like Bronwyn didn't care about. But Mags wasn't going to let it go. She couldn't. For some reason, it was vitally important that she present on female servants in the nineteenth century.

"Of course it's real work. It's a business, Bronwyn. The world runs on the backs of the overworked and underpaid. It always has."

"I want to get an A on this project," Bronwyn said. "So let's do something actually important, okay?"

Mags had no idea why she was pressing this, but it felt important to her, representative of something bigger than she was. The easy dismissal of Coach Keegan for standing up for his fellow colleagues. The constant assumptions about the so-called laziness of teachers—she knew better, because she was here every evening and saw Mrs. Scotch, Mr. Weinbacher, Principal Higgins, her father at their desks or practice or school events, working, well into the night after the close of school. Bronwyn's astonishment that anything important could ever come of women, cooking and cleaning for those richer than themselves. "Do you like tikka masala?"

"How is this at all relevant?"

"Bronwyn loves it," Marci said. "It's all she orders at Taste of India. What?" The last, directed at Bronwyn.

"I love tikka masala," Sean said.

Mags turned to Sean but didn't smile. Not in front of Bronwyn. That would be unforgivable in Queen B's eyes. "Do you know why we have tikka masala?" When he shook his head, she turned to Bronwyn. "Because some English colonel in the nineteenth century decided he wanted gravy on his chicken tikka. It's not even Indian. It's English."

"But who *cares*?" Bronwyn asked. Mags realized now that she wasn't just being a bitch because she could be. She really didn't understand how something like cooking and cleaning—

domestic work, so-called ladies' business—contributed at all to the larger infrastructure of the nineteenth century. Or now. But it was real business. Important. And Mags wouldn't, couldn't let it go now that her teeth were sunk in so deep.

"I care," Mags said. "Food is a multi-billion dollar industry now. How many celebrity chefs do we have just on reality shows?"

"But it wasn't then," Bronwyn said. "Not in the nineteenth century."

"Actually, that's not true. Do you know about *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*?"

They all turned to see Mrs. Scotch standing next to them, listening to their conversation. Mags wondered how long she had been there. All four students shook their heads.

"Strange," she said. "It's a Victorian cookbook that's only outsold by the Bible. Clearly, something England cared about. Besides, as Napoleon himself said, 'An army marches on its stomach.'" Mrs. Scotch turned to Mags. "I think it's a great, original topic, and completely appropriate for a group on nineteenth-century labor. What else do we have?"

Mags bit her lip and looked down at her notebook. She resumed her doodling and tried not to smile at having triumphed, even just a little, over Bronwyn.

Mrs. Scotch cocked her eyebrow at them when Bronwyn finished detailing their group assignments. "So it's settled? Sean's doing the Peterloo Massacre, Bronwyn's doing the 1885 Match Girls' Strike, Marci, you're doing Chartism, and Mags is doing domestic labor."

"That's everything." Bronwyn smiled, nice and bright, at Mrs. Scotch.

"Okay then." She mimed pen to paper. "I need a research agenda. Let's get to work, people."

Surprisingly, they did. As much as Mags hated to admit it, Bronwyn was a good team leader. She was bright and wasn't afraid to disagree—or, surprisingly, agree—with someone if she thought it best for the group. By the time the bell rang, they had a solid research agenda, a plan to reconvene in a week to work on a plan for their group presentation, and even a few ideas toward the visuals.

Bronwyn, as self-appointed team leader, bopped up to turn in their report to Mrs. Scotch. Marci, naturally, trailed after her. Mags stood up and settled her bag on her shoulder but dropped her pen. When she went to pick up her pen, her notebook slid out of her bag. “Goddammit,” she said under her breath.

But before she could pick them up, Sean reached down to pick it up both for her. “Stop throwing your stuff at me, Gown, in some vain attempt to capture my attention.” When he stood up, his mouth curved up into a smile and there was the barest flash of dimple in his cheek.

“You wish, Town. I just like seeing you grovel at my feet.” She smiled back at him as he passed along her things. When she reached for them, her bracelet dropped and she pushed it back up with an absent hand.

There. Once again, Sean Thornton was staring, for some unknown reason, at her bracelet.

“Do you like it?” she asked. “I got it on clearance.” She looked down at the wide antiqued gold bangle on her arm. She had worn it because it matched the belted peacock tunic dress her grandmother had given her from her sixties' and seventies' stash.

“It kept falling all through class,” Sean said, his voice soft and a little distant as he looked at her bracelet, her arm, curved so protectively to her chest. “I thought to myself, ‘there it goes, again!’ and you'd push it back up.”

She felt herself flush, but it had nothing at all to do with embarrassment or shame. This was something different, something warmer, the rubber-band snap once again. “Nervous habit, I think,” she said, her voice soft, too. Distant, as this was a new realm they hadn’t explored. “I always fiddle with my jewelry. I just... I just never think anyone pays attention.”

His eyes cleared and he looked up at Mags, a new smile curved on his face. Dimpled, yes. Half-smile, yes. But his eyes were darker. Unreadable. She felt the *snap!* between them. “It’s a nice bracelet.” Those words were the ones he spoke but not the ones he meant. There were other words there, underneath. Darker. Exciting.

Click. She snapped this image in her head so she could dissect it later. “I’m glad you like it,” she said, and she smiled back at him and felt her lips stretch anew, form shapes and suggestions that were unfamiliar, but nonetheless enjoyable.

Bronwyn’s face swam into view behind Sean and Mags had never seen such an ugly expression appear and disappear so quickly on someone’s face before. Mags thought that perhaps she had imagined it, but no, Bronwyn walked over to take Sean’s hand and link her arm with his. “Come on,” she said, smiling up at him, a familiar and comfortable smile that promised familiar and comfortable—*exciting*—things. “We’ve got fifteen minutes before practice. You promised we could spend some quality time together.”

Sean’s eyes cleared and he looked down at the girl on his arm. The moment broken, Mags slipped by them and into the chaos of the hallway, without waiting to hear Sean’s answer. Not that she cared what his answer was—no, she really didn’t, she told herself—but because it wasn’t her place to be a part of such an intimate scene between a couple.

No matter what Bess said, Sean and Bronwyn were a couple. That much had become obvious.

Mags stopped short: of the doors outside as the sheets of rain crashed down on the parking lot, of her train of thought, before she could try to figure out why she would even care if they were dating after all.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mags realized that while she would never admit it to another human being, she liked her afternoons and evenings spent at school, waiting for her father to finish with football practice. First, of course, was the fact that she got to take as many photos as she wanted of all of the groups practicing—football, cheerleading, marching band, and now, volleyball and cross country—as well as those students who stayed late at school for various activities—her own newspaper colleagues, the yearbook, student government. There were definite advantages to becoming the unofficial official school photographer. She got to watch everyone and no one paid her much mind.

Second, but most importantly, she got to escape her mother for a little while longer.

It was that thought that made Mags regret her delight in staying late on campus, but her mother had changed so completely when Freddie went away: she stopped working, stopped cooking, stopped caring about anything but Freddie, her so-called illness, and her invalid bed. She didn't really read, or watch TV. She just lay in bed most day every day.

Mags's father had said once that her mother was suffering from depression, but Mags knew it was more than that. She knew that it was in part a way of punishing her for her part in Freddie leaving.

She knew, because her mother had said so.

Not to her, of course, and never in her hearing. But she had told her sister, Barbie, one night on the phone, and Mags had accidentally picked up the phone to hear her own mother say, "It hurts Margaret for me to be so withdrawn. She doesn't understand, I know. But... but a part of me is glad that she's hurt. She needs to realize what she did had repercussions beyond herself."

That had been a year ago, during the height of the version of the Amish shunning she had received at her own high school. The notes in her locker calling her a slut, the stuffed rats that would appear on her desk with the nametag “Margaret Hale” attached, all from the same set of girls, she was sure. One of the boys from The Incident had a sister at her high school, the other, a girlfriend. Their friends, with all the natural order of things in the world, fell in line.

Even that, Mags understood. In some weird, screwed-up way, she understood their anger. Her brother had put those two boys in the hospital. One, because of the injuries to his knee—sometimes in her nightmares she heard the sickening crunch of the tire iron against that bone, heard herself screaming at Freddie to stop, heard Freddie’s grunts of exertion—could no longer play football at all. The other had to be benched for a semester and almost lost his scholarship to college. While Mags found the girls’ anger misplaced—the boys *had* done wrong, as had her brother—it made sense.

What hurt the worst was how all the other students fell in line. How they ignored her. Stopped speaking to her. Stopped inviting her to parties, asking her to be in their study groups, talking to her at school. And then, the teachers seemed to pick up on it as well—not on purpose, never on purpose—but the classroom ran smoother if they called on someone other than Mags. She had already been shy, quiet, reserved. Happier behind a camera than in front of it. So when the student editor had taken away her outlet, taken away her position as photographer of the paper and given it to Jenn Beltman for senior year, she had considered speaking to her guidance counselor about getting her GED and starting college early.

But her dad had been let go, and she had been asked if she wanted to stay in New Orleans or come to Marlborough, and again, she had spoken a three-letter word that changed her life.

Mags, do you want to come to Marlborough?

Yes, she had said. Yes, yes, yes.

But now, as she walked the hallways, restless and trapped inside by the rain, she wanted to be nowhere else but home. Unfortunately, Mags didn't know how exactly she was defining "home." Did she mean her grandmother's house? Or, even farther, New Orleans? The cooler weather made her long, physically long for autumn in the French Quarter, for the crisp tartness of cool, the water drying in the air. Halloween on the horizon. Not that it would be in any way cool yet in New Orleans—it was only September, after all—but this weather was so like October in the deep south, down to the rain still pouring outside in fits and bursts, that she felt homesick.

She came across her favorite space to be on campus after hours, the senior lounge, with its wall of windows and the greenery beyond. The Environmental Club had designed it some years back so that it was feng shui, or ergonomic, or Green, *something* Bess had explained that Mags hadn't quite understood, but it was cozy and comfortable, with chairs and natural light and some green space beyond.

It was empty, of course, as it always was. Anyone else staying behind this late on a school night was involved in a club or sport. So Mags got a halfway decent hot chocolate from the vending machine, nooked herself on an oversized chair with her Macbook, and logged into Milton's network to research her Euro project.

The research was *fascinating*. Mags was surprised that so much academic work—serious work on ladies' business, she told the Bronwyn voice in her head—had been done on Victorian cooks and domestic servants. There were books after books, articles after articles on the lives of the Victorian lower class—working class, Mags reminded herself. One of the articles insisted on the term "working class" as "lower class" was derogatory and hierarchical. She looked into the Beeton person Mrs. Scotch had suggested and found that the University of Marlborough library

had a copy of the cookbook. She made a note to go there on the weekend to look at it, when her computer pinged at her.

She glanced down and saw her Skype account was flashing. Grinning, she opened it up. “Hi!” she said, waving at her webcam. “Hi, hi, hi!!”

Her brother grinned back at her. “Maggie-Moo. How’s tricks?”

She tapped her fingers against the screen. He looked even tanner than he had the last time they had Skyped, a few weeks back. But he was still Freddie: green eyes, lighter hair, quick smile. “Mom said you were going to try to call tonight. How are you? Is everything okay? What time is it there?”

“Ridiculously early. Three or four.” Freddie shook his head. “Don’t worry about that. I just got off work, so I’m still wired. You’d love the coffee here, kiddo. It would keep you awake for days.”

“How’s everything going?”

He shrugged, but his smile was still bright, still relaxed. “It’s okay, Mags. No worries. Seriously, I’m good. But I want to hear about you. Your last email said this school has finally come to its senses and named you Queen Photographer or something, right?”

Mags laughed. “Sure,” she said. “Something like that.”

“Hey, seriously, though. Are you excited to be going home?”

Her brow wrinkled. “What?”

There. Freddie’s smile faltered and she saw the confusion build in his eyes. “Going home,” he said. “Aren’t you excited?”

“Tonight?” She shrugged. “I mean, sure. I’ve been on campus forever, but...” at his look, she felt her eyes widen. “Do you mean New Orleans? When am I going to New Orleans?”

His smile flashed again, quick and easy, but there was something darker underneath it all, as if his confusion still shadowed everything. “Sorry, I guess it was supposed to be a surprise. Mom told me she... she bought your tickets for Christmas. You’ll get to see everyone, have your New Year’s Eve party the way you always did. Don’t tell her though, okay?”

For ten years, every New Year’s Eve, they had gone to her Aunt Barbie’s camp in Mississippi, the whole family. Lots of food and fireworks, TV late into the night, and of course Edie, Noah, and Henry by her side. Every year for ten years. “Oh! Sure, I guess, but...” her voice trailed off. “I haven’t talked to Edie or Henry in weeks, so I don’t know what will happen.”

Freddie squinted at the webcam. “What’s going on?”

She shook her head. “Stupid kid stuff. Don’t worry about it.”

And then her brother’s face grew serious. “Mags, whatever happens, you know I love you, right? That mom and dad love you?”

“Of course I do.” Suddenly worried, she leaned forward. “What’s wrong? Is something wrong?”

“No, goofball. Nothing’s wrong. I just want to make sure you know that.”

Mags could read her brother. She always could. She knew when something was bothering him, knew when he was hiding something from her. He was a terrible liar, certainly not capable of plastering sunshine on his face when he needed to. But he also went to war because of something he did to protect her, to defend her honor, so she felt that if anyone deserved their secrecy, their privacy, it was Freddie. “I love you, too, Freddie.”

Another quick, bright smile. “So tell me about school.”

They talked for a good twenty minutes before Mags realized the time. “Hey, I really have to run. Practice should be over by now and dad’s going to want to get home.”

“Sure thing, Maggie-Moo. I should be getting some sleep anyways. Love you.” He tapped his fingers on his cheek, twice, and she tapped her own, twice, where his kiss goodbye would have gone, were they in the same room.

“Love you.” She waited until he disconnected from Skype. She always let him disconnect first. She never wanted to be the first to say goodbye.

She closed her computer and felt a shudder ripple through her body. Again, she was reminded that everything else—the bullshit of school, the passive anger of her mother, not talking to Edie and Henry—meant nothing in the face of her brother, thousands of miles away, at war. What could compare to that? Her own life’s difficulties, her mother’s easy dismissal, her pain, her torment, was because of *this* situation, of *this* concern. A son, at war. A useless daughter, at home, to blame.

A scrap of poetry flit through her head, something they had read in English. “These heroic happy dead / who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter / they did not stop to think they died instead.”

Sunshine, she thought. Sunshine, sunshine, sunshine.

When she checked her phone, she realized it was well after 8:00. Her dad would be pissed that she was taking so long. She threw her notes and Macbook in her bag and half-ran down the hallway to the parking lot. At least he hadn’t called yet. He might still be wrapping things up.

She burst through the doors and skidded to a halt. The parking lot was half empty. Her father’s parking spot, fully so.

Mags pulled out her phone and checked again. No missed calls. She called her dad and he answered on the third ring. “Hey, Mags,” he said. There were loud sounds in the background that he had to half-scream over.

“Dad? Where are you?”

“We had to cut practice short because of the rain, so I went out with the new assistant coach to talk strategy. Is everything okay?”

Mags sank down on a bench, mindless of the wet seat. “I’m... I’m at school.”

Her father was quiet for a minute. “Didn’t you get a ride home?”

Her face crumpled and her tears fell down her cheeks. Silent. No sobbing. She could not allow him to hear her cry. “No, Dad. I didn’t get a ride home. You told me to wait for you. Remember?”

Clearly, he hadn’t, and she knew that. Her question had been rhetorical. “Magpie, I’m sorry. I really am.”

“Can you come and get me?” she asked.

Another brief moment of silence. “Honey, I would, but... can’t you call your grandmother? We’ve already ordered dinner.”

Her stomach growled in response. He had apparently also forgotten he had promised to take her to Jake Malloy’s for dinner. Sunshine, she thought. Sunshine, sunshine, sunshine. “Sure, Daddy.” Her voice was bright. “Of course I can. Have fun!” She hung up without waiting to hear his reply.

Mags started to put her phone in her bag, but instead, cupped it in her hands in front of her face. When the tears came, sudden and full-bodied, she almost couldn’t breathe. It was too much: her mom, Freddie, Edie, Henry. She could call her grandmother but tonight was her one

night out at the church: potluck dinner, book group, and bingo. And as her grandmother was currently the one adult in her life who remained constant—surprising, Mags thought, after years of not being there, she was the only one who was now—Mags wouldn't take her one night a week away from her.

On instinct, she pressed a speed dial number on her phone. She wasn't surprised when it went straight to voicemail. She was surprised when she found herself leaving a message. "I hate this," she said into her phone. "I hate every moment of not talking to you. I don't know who's to blame, Edie. You? Me? The situation with Henry? I don't care. You are my bestest friend in the entire world, and..." her voice caught. "And it's been too long since we talked and I *miss* you. More than stars. More than poboys and the French Quarter." She paused. "I just talked to Freddie and my dad left me at school. Just *left* me, without even remembering I needed a ride home. When is everyone going to stop punishing me? Edie, when?" And then, as quickly as she called, she hung up and dialed another number on speed dial.

That rang, at least, but went to voicemail very shortly afterwards. Mags sucked in a deep breath. "Hey," she said. "It's me. No matter what you think, no matter how much you hate me, you are still my best friend. And it sucks, full out fucking *sucks* not to talk to you, Henry. This is not me apologizing, because honestly? I am done with apologizing for things I didn't do, or never intended for. But it is me calling to tell you that..." she paused for a second. "You hurt *me*." She was surprised when the words burst out of her mouth. "I needed you that night and you hurt *me*. Remember that next time you blame me." Another pause. "But despite that, you are still my best friend because that's what friends do: forgive each other." Another pause. "Never mind. Just forget it." She hung up before she could say anything else.

As soon as it was done, she wanted to take it back. She hadn't wanted to be the first to call. But she felt... hollow. Carved out and empty and she had nothing left to give. Not to anyone.

Mags turned off her phone. She didn't want to deal with anyone if any of them—Edie, Henry, her father—chose to call her back. She was done being a martyr. Two years of doing for others, for apologizing, for sunshine fucking sunshine, and what had it gotten her? A mother who blamed her for the actions of her adult son. A father so used to her taking care of herself that he no longer remembered that sometimes, she couldn't. Two best friends who had depended on her far more than she ever depended on them, and when she did need them, they both fell apart.

Fuck them both, Mags thought. Fuck them all.

After settling her messenger bag across her body, she started the three point two mile trek home. In the end, three miles wasn't anything she hadn't done before. At least, she thought, it had stopped raining.

It was dark, though, and wet. Slick from the rain and puddles dotted the sidewalks. But it was beautiful, too. Cold, almost, the moon bright and full, the air crisp, like apples. Like cranberries. Mags took out her camera and began taking shots: a crumbling Victorian on Main street, night-blooming jasmine, the bright sign of Donut Holdup in the background.

Mags lowered her camera. Donut Holdup. She turned to look at the street name and realized that once again, she had gone the wrong way off campus.

What hadn't defeated her before certainly defeated her now, and she was two steps away from just sitting on the sidewalk and waiting until morning, when a familiar van drove down the road and slowed. The passenger window rolled down as the van pulled into an empty driveway.

“Mags?” A face peeked out of the window and a tiny hand waved. “What are you *doing?*”

Mags felt her bottom lip tremble as she ran over. “My dad left me on campus and I tried to walk home but I got lost again and...” she burst into tears and hated herself for it.

“Colin! Open the goddamn door already!”

The side door made a mechanical sound as it pulled away from the van and slid open automatically. Mags gripped the doorframe near Bess and rested her head against the metal. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Bess leaned up and pressed a kiss to Mags’s cheek. “The next time you apologize to me for something you didn’t do, my lips will be my fist. You got me?”

Mags felt her eyes grow wide. “What?”

“Get in the car,” Bess said. “Enough with your bullshit. We’re getting you enough sugar to cure what ails you. Have you even eaten?”

Mags shook her head and Bess clucked her tongue. “Well, that settles it.” She turned to Colin in the driver’s seat. “Jake Malloy’s?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” Colin said. The smile he gave Mags was sweet, and kind, and she almost cried again in thanks for these two people who had befriended her so easily, so completely.

“Come on, new girl. We’re taking you hostage until you laugh at least fourteen times.”

“I thought you were in St. Louis,” Mags said as she climbed into the van.

“Well, I’m back now, and just in time, it seems. Christ, I’ve always got to rescue you, don’t I?” Bess’s words were fussy, but her eyes were anxious. Mags realized what she must look like: swollen eyes, shivering with the cold, walking down the street in the middle of the night taking pictures, of all things. Getting lost, *again*, leaving school.

She started giggling. Once she started, she couldn't stop, and the twins stared at her, wide-eyed, as if she were going to go Joker on them at any second. "How the hell do I get lost leaving that school every time?"

A smile cracked on Bess's face and she exchanged a look with her brother. "I have theories," Bess said. "And only five hundred of them deal with the sad state of Geography education in the US."

"The rest have to deal with Thornton and the long way he takes when he drives you to school." Colin pressed a button and the van door began closing. "But that's neither here nor there. My ladies need burgers, fries, and ice cream, and that's a job a man can do. That's a *man's* job."

Colin put the van in reverse and waited for traffic to settle so he could back out. Mags leaned forward and rested her chin on Bess's seat. "I love you, you know. I would have never been able to do any of this without you. School, the paper, dealing with... with the fallout of everything from New Orleans."

Bess reached up and patted Mags's cheek. "I don't know what to do with you," she said. "You are a hot Gown mess who has absolutely no sense of direction." But then she turned and smiled at her, and it was sweet, and caring. "I love you, too." Her voice was soft when she said it, but Mags heard it, heard the sincerity in it. The truth.

She settled back in her seat and stared out the window, enjoying the coziness of the van as they drove to dinner, the bounce of the music, the friendly bickering between the twins. And when they went to dinner and ordered everything on the menu—pretty much everything, between them all—and settled into a quiet, private corner of the restaurant, Bess turned to her and asked, "So, what happened?"

“My dad left me at school,” Mags said. She wanted to leave it at that, but the words just started spilling out of her mouth. “My mom blames me for the fact that my brother’s in Afghanistan. My brother’s in Afghanistan because he got to choose it over jail. He got that choice because two years ago, he took me to a college party where I got drunk, four guys messed with me while I was passed out, and caught the whole thing on video. Oh, and when my brother found out, he beat the shit out of them so severely that he was arrested for it.”

Bess blinked. “Well,” she said, “I meant more of, ‘why were you walking home?’ but I guess that works, too.” She put down the burger in her hands. “Is this the thing you couldn’t tell me earlier?”

Mags swirled a fry in ketchup. “Yeah,” she said. She chomped on the fry and looked up to find both of them watching her, waiting.

Colin shook his head, his eyes narrowed to slits. “What do you mean ‘messed with you?’”

Bess shot him a look. “She doesn’t have to tell us.” She turned to Mags. “You don’t have to tell us.”

“No, it’s okay.” Mags realized that it was okay. She wanted to tell them, wanted to get it out of herself, feel cored out, clean, not empty and hollow. “They didn’t... they didn’t hurt me. Not in the way you think. They just... *messed* with me. I was passed out drunk, and they...” she looked down at the food in front of her. She had eaten her burger so quickly that her stomach almost hurt from it.

“Stupid things,” Mags said finally. She felt the blush burn on her cheeks. “They posed me with things so it looked like I had slept with them. The house’s dog. A blow-up doll. A couple of the boys themselves. Then, they took panty upshots and put their...” She looked up at

Bess to find her friend's eyes bright. She sucked in a deep breath. "Put their dicks near my cheek. Shit that stupid boys do when they're stupid drunk."

"And they taped it?" Colin asked. He sat back in his chair. "God, no wonder you hate video cameras."

Mags nodded. "It was some hazing ritual for the freshmen on the team. They had to get so many things on video. Whoever finished first got to, I don't know. Skip practice. Not have to be the tackle dummy. Get a better dorm room. Who cares? Just something stupid. Not worth anything that came after."

"They didn't know you were his sister," Bess said.

Mags shook her head. "They knew who I was. They were just too drunk to care." She sucked in a breath. "And then, I woke up because whatever they were trying to do with me, they dropped me. I fell off the chair and busted up my lip, my knees. I started freaking out. I was scared. I thought they were going to... well, let's just say that they were getting more and more creative as the night progressed. So I ran. I ran, looking for my brother, but I couldn't find him."

Colin's face grew harder. "I would have killed them," he said, "if anyone had done that to Bess."

"My brother almost did." Mags took a sip of her milkshake and was proud to see that her hand only slightly trembled. The story was getting easier, after all, with the telling of it. "They were the first ones done, so they were all crowded around, showing their teammates the video. I found Freddie, finally, and when he saw me, he flipped. I think he realized then what had happened. So pointed to the guys holding the camera and asked me—"

Was it them?

“And I said—”

Yes. Yes, yes, yes.

“And he went after them. He was angry, drunk, possibly high, and there was entirely too much rage in him. He found a tire iron and crippled one guy, beat the other one severely before the cops got there and arrested him.”

“But you had the video,” Bess said. “You had evidence. Why did they arrest him?”

“What does the evidence show?” Mags shook her head. “A drunk teenage girl and boys goofing around. They didn’t rape me, Bess. They didn’t even molest me. ‘Boys will be boys.’ But they also filmed my brother beating two unarmed guys with a tire iron. No matter what else happened, my brother crippled a boy. There’s no excuse for that, not in the eyes of the law. Besides.” Mags shrugged. “They had much better lawyers than Freddie did.”

“What happened after that?” Colin asked.

“About what you’d expect. The video at least showed my brother was upset with a reason. I think it was why he got to settle the case, got a choice between trial and Afghanistan. But my mom fell into a deep depression and quit working. Everyone in my school called me a whore and a slut and accused me of making everything up in a fit of jealousy. Unfortunately, college football’s a bit like a small town, so my dad got let go from his job, and here we are.” She was starving again, and she reached over for Colin’s onion rings. He passed them over without hesitation.

“No wonder you don’t want to go back to New Orleans,” Bess said.

“You don’t want to go back?” Colin asked. He and Bess exchanged a look. “I just assumed that... I mean, we just thought...”

Bess shook her head at him, almost imperceptible, but Mags saw it. Before she could ask, Bess turned back to Mags. “You can trust us. We won’t tell anyone.” She picked up her burger and took a large bite for emphasis.

“Of course I can. I wouldn’t have told you if I didn’t.” Mags felt lighter, freer than she had in weeks, maybe even months. Maybe this was what she had to do: confess to everyone she came into contact with. *Hi, my name is Mags, and my brother’s in Afghanistan because of me. At least, that’s what my mother thinks. Did I mention that my entire senior class shunned me for six months before I moved to Indiana?*

“Well, I’m for one glad you’re sticking around.” Colin reached for his second burger and began to unwrap it. “Your biscuits are an excellent complement to Thornton’s eggs.”

Bess wrinkled her nose. “That sounds dirty. Is that dirty?”

“Anyhow,” Colin continued as if his sister hadn’t spoken, “you didn’t have to tell us, but I’m glad you trust us enough to have done so.”

Mags peeled the batter off of an onion ring. “I just... I just wanted you to know why I’m such a freak. It has nothing to do with Milton or football or anything. It has nothing to do with any of you. It’s just hard, making friends. I’ve always been... I mean, it’s never been easy for me. I just... it’s hard for me to open up around people, so...”

“So people think you’re a Gown,” Colin said.

She glanced up at him and gave him a little smile. “Pretty much. Then this happened and everyone turned on me, so...” she paused. “And my mom blames me. I think my dad does a little bit, too.”

Colin shook his head. “How is that your fault? I would have killed them.”

Bess patted her brother's hand. "Don't you ever do something so stupid for my honor, you idiot. No offense, Mags."

"None taken. I wish he hadn't. But he did, and what's done is done." She reached for another onion ring and realized she had eaten them all. "Sorry," she said to Colin.

He gave her his lazy smile. "You can eat all my food, whenever you want."

"Oh, stop." Bess smacked him on the arm. "Enough of your crazy flirting. Be real for a minute. What do we need right now?"

Colin was already standing up. "Triple chocolate for you again, Mags?"

"Three entirely different kinds of chocolate," she said. "Thanks for listening. For rescuing me. For bacon and cheese and meat."

They smiled in unison, almost timed, the two of them both so bright, so beautiful. *Click.* "Hey, you're one of us now," Colin said. "We take care of our own."

"That also means there's no escape," Bess said. "You're stuck with us, until the bitter end."

On impulse, Mags stood and wrapped one arm around Colin. She tugged him down so that her other arm could wrap around Bess. "Thanks," she said again, her voice muffled against them as they both, once again their actions, their movements in unison, wrapped their arms around her.

It was more than comfort. It was more than acceptance. It was even more than friendship, real and nascent and true.

It was absolution.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The evening of the Milton-Helstone game was crisp and clear, and Mags felt a charge in the air as she walked through the stands, taking pictures of the Milton fans, their red and black vibrant and powerful. Mags had also dressed in Milton colors, wearing her favorite dark grey jeans—the ones with the holes and thinned patches that she had made, from overuse—a “MILTON STRIKERS FOOTBALL” t-shirt and a knee-length black hooded cardigan. She hadn’t been to a football game since... well, since The Incident, and she was surprised how much she had missed it.

She also found herself surprised that she wasn’t more upset Edie and Henry hadn’t called her back. She had turned her phone back on Thursday morning, but there were no missed texts, no voicemails, no sign that her two best friends—former best friends, she corrected, and only felt the bottom of the world fall out just a little at the thought—even cared that she had called. Her moment of weakness just proved to her what she had suspected: moving to Marlborough was the best decision she could have made.

And now, in the stands, watching hundreds of Milton and Helstone fans, of town folk come out for a high school football game, she saw the benefit of a small town. More importantly, she saw the benefit of being an unfamiliar face in a small town. The only people in the stands who knew who she was were a few of her fellow Strikers and Caleb Mueller.

“Well, hello, Mags!”

Mags lowered her camera to smile at the man in question. “Hi, Mr. Mueller,” she said. She walked up two rows and crouched in the stairway next to him. “Here to see Sean?”

“Of course.” He turned to the two women sitting next to him. “I’m sure you know Lily, right?”

She nodded and smiled. “We’ve met, first day of school. You’re Sean’s sister.”

The look Lily gave her wasn’t mean. It wasn’t judgmental, friendly, or polite nonchalance. It was... curious. Lily cocked her head and examined Mags. “We’re in different grades,” she said to her uncle. “She has a class with Sean.”

“And this is my sister,” Mr. Mueller said. “Rose Thornton.”

Mags turned to look at the woman who had Sean’s eyes and Lily’s hair. She examined Mags even more curiously than Lily had, and Mags felt herself pinking under the scrutiny. “Hi, Mrs. Thornton,” she said. “It’s nice to meet you.” She extended her hand to the woman in question.

After a moment’s hesitation, Mrs. Thornton shook it. “Hello,” she said. “You’re Fred Hale’s daughter?”

“Yes, ma’am,” she said. There was an awkward silence after that while Lily and Mrs. Thornton stared openly at her. Mags cleared her throat and stood. “Well, I need to get back to my post.” She lifted the camera in her hand. “Yearbook, paper, blackmail, yada yada...”

Twin little smiles cracked on Mrs. Thornton’s and Lily’s faces, while Mr. Mueller laughed outright. Good, Mags thought. The sense of humor ran in the family, at least. “I’m sure,” Mrs. Thornton said. “Best you run along.”

“Oh, and thanks for having so many errands for Sean to run to his grandmother’s.” Mags shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “I can usually catch a ride with him when he does. Otherwise, I’ve got to get to school at 6:30, when my dad arrives.”

Mrs. Thornton’s brow furrowed. “What’s that again?”

“In the morning,” Mags said. “Sean says he’s usually bringing something to his grandmother’s, and she only lives about five houses down from my grandmother. So I can catch a ride with him.”

Mrs. Thornton shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“Mom, he didn’t want to tell you, but he goes to check on Grandma a few times a week.” Lily turned to her mother. “He didn’t want you to think he worried.” She turned back to Mags. “He does,” she said. “She’s shown some early signs of dementia, so he’s been going by several times a week. I do, too.”

“I’m sorry,” Mags said. “If there’s anything we can ever do, let us know. We’re just a few houses down.”

Mr. Mueller and Mrs. Thornton exchanged a look. “We will,” Mr. Mueller said. “Now go get to work!”

She waved as she headed down the stairs, but was stymied when a gust of wind smacked her hair across her cheek. Redirecting, Mags headed to the handicapped section of the stands. When she slid into her seat next to Bess, she rummaged through her bag. “I don’t know why I let you talk me into this.” Bess had insisted she wear her hair down, not for any other reason than, “Because I said so.”

“What, your hair? It looks gorgeous. I only wish my hair was as thick and as shiny as yours.” Bess reached out and tugged on a lock of Mags’s hair. “It’s like, shampoo commercial wavy.”

Mags shook her head. “It’s getting in my shots.” She found a rubber band and put it between her teeth.

Bess's hand shot out and plucked it away. "No way, my white sister. You are going to look like a girl tonight and enjoy it." She grinned. "Who knows? Maybe some cute boy will whisk you away into the woods during the bonfire."

Mags rolled her eyes. "I don't know why you think the fact that I keep my hair up is the only reason boys haven't 'whisked me away' to begin with. There's a whole personality here to contend with, Bess. I'm surly." She grimaced and bared her teeth.

Bess rolled her eyes. "I'm so scared."

Mags grinned. "If I promise to put it back down *after* the game, will you let me put my hair up and get all of the amazing shots my demanding bitch of a paper editor wants?"

"Fine." Bess shook her head and handed over the rubber band. "But you are never going to get a date to Homecoming with that attitude."

"I'm never going to get a date to Homecoming, period. It's next weekend. Let's accept this." Mags made quick order of her hair. "Besides," she said when she was done, "who are you going with?"

"Sean, of course. He asks me every year. That boy is *sweet*. I swear, I don't know why more girls aren't hanging all over him."

Mags couldn't help the little smile on her face. "Oh, yeah? You're going with Sean?"

Bess nodded. "It's one of the reasons Queen B doesn't like me, I think. Sean would rather go to Homecoming with his best friend's crippled sister than the co-captain of the cheerleading squad." Her eyes widened. "Hey! I just had, like, the most brilliant idea! You should go with Colin and then we could all go together!"

Mags shook her head. "No, I don't want your brother giving me a pity date. I'll go stag, take my pictures, and head home. Besides, he would be heartbroken if he couldn't take Sally."

“Yeah, I guess that’s true.” Bess squinted her eyes at the cheerleaders. “He’s got it bad for her. I bet you he’s going to escape to the woods with her tonight. Milton boys for *decades* have been using this shit as an excuse to get with the ladies. Unless it’s family, you don’t whisk away someone you don’t want to get with. You feel me?”

“Now, explain this to me again. What is this ‘whisking away to the woods’ thing you keep talking about?”

But the marching band started with the Milton Strikers fight song, and Mags stood up. “That’s my cue,” she said. “See you when I see you. Bye, Principal Higgins.” She waved at the administrator who had just walked up.

“Have fun, Mags,” she said, and handed her daughter a bag of popcorn.

Mags set her camera down on the walkway and, with a quick look to make sure no one was watching, slipped through the bottom rail so she was on the field. She grabbed her camera and began slipping along the edge of the grass, snapping shots of the marching band, the cheerleaders, and, when they ran onto the field, the players.

Number 11. That was Colin, while Number 35 was Sean. She got shots of both of them before she turned around to see the crowd behind her.

There was no easy shot to take, but when she looked across the way, at the sea of blue and silver on the other side, Mags decided to infiltrate enemy territory for a shot of the Milton stands.

She slipped around the posts of the scoreboard, on the walking trail leading around the field, and headed toward the Helstone stands. There, the crowd was just as raucous, just as excited about the game. Bess was right: the entire town *did* come out for this game. The stands

were over capacity on both sides, while the parking lot was filled with tailgaters watching the game on portable televisions.

When she reached the Helstone side, she caught a shot just as the team left their huddle to head to the field. The entire Milton side was on its feet, roaring “Strike! Strike! Strike!” She got a few dozen shots of the stands, of the kickoff, of the boys on the bench, her father on the sidelines.

“Now I know you’re lost.”

She turned to see Adam Bell behind her, smiling. Next to him was a petite girl, a camera in her hand. “Trinh, let’s get a shot of the Milton photographer here.”

Dutifully, Trinh clicked the shutter before she turned back to the field.

“Hi,” Adam said once Trinh was gone.

“Hi,” Mags said. She moved back to the path. “I’m not spying. I just wanted to get a shot of the bleachers.”

“No, you should stay. Come meet everyone.” He reached out for her arm, but she shied away from him. “Okay, then don’t. I’d rather have you all to myself anyways, apologize for being the world’s biggest asshole.”

She shrugged. “Apology accepted.” She turned back to the path, but Adam jogged to catch up with her.

“Hey, can I ask you a question?”

She stopped suddenly and he almost ran into her. “Why are you wearing your uniform?”

He blinked. “I wanted to ask you a question, I said.”

“And now I’m asking you one.” She lifted her camera and used the zoom to scan the Helstone bleachers. “All of you,” she said. “You’re wearing your uniforms.”

“It’s a way to show support,” he said. “We like football just as much as the Townies, you know. Maybe even more. Milton doesn’t own football in this town.”

Mags turned back to the field and watched the Helstone defense. “No,” she said. “They just own *good* football.”

Adam winced next to her. “Okay, so we’re not on our *best* game right now, but you just wait and see. We’ll be celebrating soon enough. So, can I ask you that question now?”

She lifted her camera again and got a shot of Colin throwing the ball in a perfect spiral. “Dammit,” she said under her breath. Incomplete. “What?”

“What are you doing next Saturday?”

“Photographing Homecoming,” Mags said. She turned the camera to him. *Click.*

“Why?”

“Do you want to come to the Helstone Ball?”

That got her to lower her lens, finally, and blink at the boy in front of her. “Are you asking me out?”

He smiled. “I’m asking you to come to Homecoming with me.”

“Seriously? You’re asking me to skip my school’s Homecoming to go to your school’s Homecoming, with you?”

“It’s amazing,” he said. “Everyone wears formalwear, and we have this fantastic sit-down dinner at the Kozelek House before we go to the Ball at the 1850s Pavilion. And then, there’s this after-party someone throws every year that is out of this world. Trust me.”

Gown, Mags realized. And Town. She looked across the field at the Milton side. Their Homecoming was held in the gym, and some planning committee held a town-wide bake sale to

raise enough money for decorations, punch, and cookies. Helstone, on the other hand, had sit-down dinners and rented out the most expensive places in town.

And it did sound fantastic, and part of her missed the idea of a boy asking her to a dance. Of dressing up, going somewhere fancy and having someone escort her. Before she could even say anything, he reached out and placed a finger on her lips. “Don’t,” he said in a soft voice. “Just think about it, okay? I’ll call you sometime next week and ask for your final answer.”

“Tell me why I should think about it,” she said.

“Because I am not really an asshole, I actually do like you, and I’m a little embarrassed to say that a large part of that is because you ripped me a new one—deservingly, but still.”

She couldn’t help it. She smiled. “Very deservedly.”

His smile grew. “Extremely deservedly. But you have no idea how hot it is to have a girl get all avenging angel and righteous fury on you.”

“That’s between you and your therapist, not me.” She looked across the field and saw that Helstone now had the ball. “I need to get back,” she said. She lifted her camera and zoomed in on the Milton defense. *Click*. She scanned some more, to the linemen. *Click*.

Sean Thornton was staring at her, and she could see the set to his jaw, the unreadable bright blue eyes. She zoomed in further and... *Click*.

Mags lowered the camera and squinted at the field. He was still staring. She lifted her camera, pointed at it, pointed at Sean, and then gave him a thumbs up. Even from this distance, without benefit of her zoom, she saw his face lighten, the corner of his mouth curve up. She lifted her camera again and saw him mouth, “Gown,” before he turned back to the field before the play.

She burst into laughter and turned back to Adam. “I’ve got to get back,” she said.

“They’re going to think I’ve defected.”

“So you’ll think about it?”

She looked at him, this handsome boy who wanted to take her to a dance, and then looked at her classmates in the stands, on the field. “No, I can’t,” she said before she realized that was going to be her answer. “I can’t miss Milton’s Homecoming. I’m sorry.”

Adam’s smile was tight. “A guy’s going to get ideas,” he said. “The more a girl rejects him.”

She shook her head. “You don’t get it,” she said. “This has nothing to do with you.” And she realized that was exactly why she didn’t want to go. Because he didn’t realize it had nothing to do with him. “Okay?”

He shrugged and turned back to the stands. “Sure, Mags. Whatever.”

She turned back to the path without a backwards glance. When she got back to the side of the stadium swathed in black, and red, even she was surprised by how much more comfortable it was on the Milton side. Like she belonged.

#

By the end of the third quarter, the Milton side was quiet, on edge. They were down by two touchdowns, and Helstone still had the ball.

Mags had returned to the stands, but too on edge to sit and watch the game, she had wandered along the walkway at the bottom, taking pictures of the field when she could. She was currently focused on extreme close-ups of the marching band’s brass section—the boys did fascinating things with their trumpets in between songs—which was why she almost missed the play.

She didn't hear the crowd change as much as she felt it, an electric charge in the air that came from hundreds of people tensing behind her. She swung her camera at the field and realized that a Milton player had intercepted the ball during the Helstone play. As he started running down the field, Mags followed him in the stands, snapping shot after shot after shot. She wasn't surprised by the number on his back. She had suspected, before she even looked up, when she first felt the changing surge in the crowd, that it would be Sean Thornton.

The crowd behind her was on its feet now, roaring with support, chanting "Strike! Strike! Strike! Strike!" As he neared the goal, with three Helstone players getting closer and closer behind him, Mags just held down the shutter and let the camera do the work for her, as she screamed with the crowd. "Strike! Strike!"

He closed in on the goal line. Three Helstone players tackled him. The ball bounced out of his hands on the other side of the goal line. In between this, the sequence of events became unclear. A flag was thrown. Another Milton lineman helped Sean stand, and both teams went back to the sidelines as the refs and coaches debated the course of events.

This is what they knew: the three Helstone players tackled Sean before he crossed the goal line. Sean went down. The ball bounced out of his hands. But no one could quite agree on whether the ball went over the line before it bounced out of his hands. Helstone, of course, argued that the ball was out of his hands well before it crossed the goal line. Milton disagreed.

All of Milton tensed even more behind her as the refs debated, as her father yelled at them, as the Helstone coach yelled at her father. Sean stood on the sidelines, helmet off, mud coating his uniform, in his hair, along his face, the fact that he was favoring his right arm apparent even from this distance. Colin stood next to him, the two boys watching, in silence, as the adults argued about whether the touchdown was valid.

Mags almost hit herself, comically and stereotypically, on the forehead. She ran back to her seat and pulled out her Macbook.

“What are you doing?” Bess asked, watching her with curious eyes.

“I got the whole thing,” Mags said. “The screen’s just too small to see details.” She whipped out her transfer cable and hooked the camera up to the computer.

“I’ll stall them,” Principal Higgins said, and half-ran to the stairs leading to the field.

A small crowd had begun murmuring around them, and Mags tried to shrink into herself as more and more people stared at her. But then the images finished loading—she had taken over two hundred shots of the game, she realized—and she blew up the pictures of Sean intercepting the ball and running for the touchdown.

In a few moments, a cheer rose up around her and Bess, and an older man behind her said, “Go, go, go!” and she ran, laptop in hand, to the railing.

Hands plucked the laptop from her and she turned to see Mr. Mueller grinning at her. “Go ahead,” he said. “Slip down.”

She did, collecting her equipment from him when she was on the field. Principal Higgins was already leading the refs and the coaches—her father among them—to her. “Hi,” she said, breathless and shy when they stared at her. “It’s good.” And she turned the image to them.

They were beautiful shots. Even she was surprised at how good they were when she had just held the shutter down, without aiming, without any artistry or skill. At some point she had zoomed closer, so that there was close shot of Sean’s face, shoulders, and arm hitting the ground, the mud splashing up around him. And his hand, ball in it, clearly over the goal line.

The ball was valid. The touchdown good. Milton would be back in the game.

The head ref nodded. “I agree. Anyone disagree?”

No one could. When the ref called it, the roar of the Milton fans was overwhelming. Deafening. Mags clutched her laptop to her chest and grinned at her father, who grinned back. “Good job, Magpie,” he said, before he turned back to the game.

Mags turned to see Colin right before he lifted her and spun her around. “I *knew* we kept you around for a reason, new girl!”

Laughing, she tried to wiggle out of his grasp. “I’m going to get sick!” When Colin loosened his grip, she slid away from him. “Go win this game,” she said.

“Oh, we will, now. How could we not?”

“We’d disappoint her, and we can’t have that. Not after all the trouble she went through.”

Mags turned to see that Sean had joined them, and the rubberband went *snap* between them. She felt giddy, lightheaded, and she felt on the verge of a giggle fit. “Didn’t I say you had good hands, Town?”

And *that* got her the grin, the new one, the one that was exciting and made her feel warm, in her chest, through her belly. He opened his mouth to say something, but the ref was yelling for her to get off the field and she blushed and began jogging away, her Macbook still clutched to her chest, an odd but deliberate technological embrace.

As she did, the Milton stands cheered again. When she looked up, she realized, with a sudden jolt, that they were cheering for her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“They have *never* been this rowdy.” Bess scanned the crowd with a discerning and judgmental eye. “Seriously, they act like we only won the most important game against the biggest asshole of a school, after an amazing interception by a linebacker, a *linebacker*, of all people, and an eleventh hour save by my white sister and her guerilla photography.”

“That’s pretty much exactly what happened,” Mags said.

“Oh.” Bess turned to grin at her. “Right.”

They both turned back to look at the roaring bonfire, and the hundreds of Milton students milling about. The crowd was in high spirits, and the music was so loud that Bess and Mags had retreated to the edge of the field near the woods, conveniently close to the tables full of complimentary Donut Holdup hot chocolate and donuts.

Mags had her camera in her hand, but she wasn’t taking pictures. She had when they first arrived, but when it seemed to garner her too much attention—no one spoke to her, not really, but they did smile and watch her with curious and friendly eyes—she decided that maybe tonight was the one night she might be less conspicuous without her camera. “Where is the hero of Milton, anyhow?”

“Enjoying his hero’s welcome, I imagine,” Bess said. “Can you believe Colin threw the ball that far?”

After Sean’s interception, Milton had trailed only by one touchdown. They rallied, and made two, winning the game by seven points. While Sean’s interception hadn’t won the game, it had given the team the enthusiasm they needed to get back in the game. Colin and Hugh had pretty much done the rest.

“Pass me one of those Boston crèmes.”

Mags obliged Bess, snagging a chocolate sprinkled for herself. She settled back on the ground next to Bess's chair. She shivered a bit in the night air. Her sweater, which had seemed like such a good idea in the stands, what with the press and crowd of hundreds of bodies, was no match against the increasingly colder evening. "Where's Sean?" she asked, nonchalant.

Bess lasered those sharp eyes on her. "Last I saw, Queen B and her sycophants were congratulating him for his part in tonight's festivities. Why do you care? I thought you didn't care. I thought you were all, sure, he's got those blue eyes but blah blah football players blah blah."

Mags shrugged, blushing now, grateful for the dark of the night, the flicker of the fire across the field so Bess couldn't see her. "No reason in particular," she said. "Just curious to see if he was enjoying his hero's welcome, too." She returned her attention to the donut in her hands and took two large bites before Bess spoke again.

"Hey, Mags?"

She directed her eyes up to Bess. "Don't, Bess. Not tonight." Because she knew, knew exactly what Bess was going to ask her. How could she not? It was the same question she was asking herself, and had ever since the game. Hell, Mags thought, ever since last weekend when he had given her a ride home. Bess was going to ask her if she liked Sean Thornton, and Mags, in all honesty, did not know how to answer that question. Because while a part of her denied it, denied liking a football player, a guy so clearly involved with someone else, a boy who had such an obvious problem with her from day one, still, there was that pull between them, the taut tension that tightened and loosened and she didn't know how to read it.

"What do you mean, 'Don't, Bess'? You don't even know what I was going to say. Cheeky white girl."

Mags burst into laughter. “Okay, you’re right. I’m sorry. What were you going to say?”

“I was *going* to say, ‘go get some shots of the bonfire before everyone gets too nuts and too drunk for us to get any useable shots.’ Jesus.”

“Right.” Mags stood up and brushed off the back of her sweater. “That’s what you were going to say.”

“Are you psychic? No? Then shut the hell up.” Bess grinned at her. “And get me another donut before you go.”

Mags did, a maple bar this time, before she weaved her way in and out of the crowd. She got a few shots of the bonfire itself, which was large but not overwhelming so. Nothing dangerous. She got a few more shots of the crowd, and even managed to get Colin, Hugh, and Sally to pose for a few. Mags, despite her dislike of Bronwyn and by extension, the Milton cheerleading squad, actually liked Sally, who hammed it up for the camera in hilarious ways. As she walked away, she turned back to see Colin and Sally, both smiling, leaning in for a kiss, clearly head over heels. *Click.*

“Most girls would be sobbing at a sight like that, not photographing it for posterity.”

She turned, camera in hand. *Click.* When she lowered it, Sean was still looking at her, eyes intense, hint of a ghost smile on his face. “Well, unlike most girls, I don’t cry myself to sleep at night thinking about Colin Higgins. Besides, I think they’re gorgeous together.”

“They are,” he said. “He really likes her.” There was a shadow on his cheek. A bruise. It had been a brutal tackle. But he wasn’t favoring his arm anymore. At least, not that she could tell.

“Actually, I do, too. She photographs well.” At Sean’s look, she smiled. “Most people, when they know they’re being photographed, go all fake. When they pose, it’s stiff, or silly, and

doesn't translate because it's all about them. Sally, however, doesn't try to look gorgeous. She makes faces, and poses *with* the people in the crowd, not alone."

"I don't think I get it," Sean said.

"Here." She moved closer to Sean and showed him the picture of Sally and Colin on the screen on her camera. "See?"

"Are they... are they pretending to sword fight?"

Mags chuckled. "Yep." She glanced up at Sean and found him closer than she had expected, her hair—down now, at Bess's insistence—draped over his arm. She blushed and took a step back to give him some space. "That's what I mean."

The song had changed at some point, from Kanye West to Nine Inch Nails, and the crowd began to dance, swelling together with the music, and Mags switched her camera back on and lifted it. "I wish I could get a shot from above," she said to Sean as she took multiple pictures of the crowd, the fire and flame flickering behind them. "This is amazing."

"It's sort of our 'fuck you' song to Helstone," he said. And then, after a pause, "I also remember this, the first day we met."

She lowered her camera to look at him. "You remember that?"

He shrugged and directed his eyes back at the crowd. "What would otherwise be a snotty Gown except she's lying on the filthy concrete at my uncle's shop, wearing a NIN shirt that she *made herself*, practically dancing to 'The Hand that Feeds,' taking pictures of my marble stash from about a million years ago? Yeah, it's an image that kind of sticks with you."

"SCT," she said in a soft voice, remembering the initials in the concrete. "Sean what Thornton?"

“Caleb,” he said. “After my uncle. He’s my godfather.” And then they were both quiet, watching the crowd. “Do you really want a shot from above?”

“I do,” she said. “Why, can you fly? Are you Superman? Have you been holding out on me, Town?”

When he turned back to her, his eyes were bright, even in the dark. “Do you trust me?”

And she did. She didn’t know why but right now, in this place, at this time, with this boy, she did. When she nodded, Sean took her hand—it was warm, and firm—and led her to the crowd. Then, before she could figure out what he was going to do, he crouched in front of her, grabbed her around her legs, and *lifted her*.

She hated girls who did girly things, like screech at bugs or squeal at boys. But when she squealed, she felt it was completely justifiable. “You’re insane!” she said. “I’m too heavy! Put me down!”

He looked up at her, the Sean Thornton ghost smile curved on his face. “Take your pictures already,” he said. “The song doesn’t last forever.”

So she did, dozens of them, of the crowd moving as one, as if it shared one brain, one source, one body. The music moved through them and she *belonged*, part of this group of people, this boy holding her, his arms, strong and steady around her legs. When she looked down at him, she saw he was still watching her so *click*, she took a picture of him, too.

He loosened his grip and she slid down him and found it hard to breathe, here against this boy, the entire scene too odd, too intimate, too dependent on another body and another person. He had lifted her, held her, let her down, and she had trusted him to do so.

“Did you get what you wanted?” he asked. His arms were still curved around her, not touching, not really, just not fully released from his grip.

Again, she knew the words were not what they were, the meaning underneath there and she didn't feel like she understood how to sort it out. "Almost," she said, playing the game and when his smile curved wider, she knew it was the right answer.

"Thornton!"

They broke apart at the same time, both of them coming to the sudden realization that there were people around them, perhaps watching, perhaps listening, but no, no one was, and the voice was just Colin, who smiled wide at them both. "Hey, they're here."

Sean turned back to Mags. "Go stand by Bess," he said. He gripped her arm for a second and gave her a gentle nudge. "Trust me."

And again, she did, because she didn't know what else to do. She went and stood by Bess whose eyes were bright with anticipation. "What's going on?" Mags asked.

"Whisked away," Bess said. "It's time, my friend."

"Time for *what*?" Mags asked, but she saw the crowd start to disperse, the good-natured shrieking as more cars swung onto the field.

"We won the game," Bess said. "So now Helstone is coming to fight." But she didn't look scared. She looked... exhilarated. "Tell me, how good are you at dodging bullets?"

"Dodging *what*?" But Colin was coming toward them, grinning wide, saying "Go! Go!" to Mags.

"What about you?" she asked Bess.

"I got Colin," she said. "Go!"

And so Mags started to run, turning back to see Colin pluck Bess out of her chair and head toward them, Sean and several other Milton students close at their heels. All three of them were grinning like idiots and Mags had no idea what was going on.

“Come on!” Bess said. “Run faster!”

The first water balloon flew, high and far, from the edge of the field, to land with a sizzle and pop in the bonfire. “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me!” Mags said, but she was laughing, too, and running into the woods. But she skidded to a stop suddenly, and reversed her position.

“Where are you going?” Bess screamed after her.

“My bag! Save yourselves!” She started running back to the donut table, where her bag was nestled.

“Gown, wait!” Sean grabbed her hand and held her back. “You can’t go back in there! You’ll get hurt!”

She burst into laughter and grinned up at him. “By *water balloons?*!”

He shook his head, mock-solemn, which only made her laugh harder. “I will take this bullet for you, Margaret Hale. If I don’t make it back, tell my mother... tell her I was brave.”

“No way, Thornton. I’m not letting you save the day again.” And she dashed past him, and managed to duck before a balloon caught her on the hair. She grabbed her bag, ducked two more balloons, and took Sean’s hand when he held it out.

He pulled her from under the table and they ran together into the woods, deeper and deeper, past groups of students huddling, giggling, waiting, for the Helstone kids to find them.

“How is this not illegal?” Mags asked when they slowed down. She had let Sean do all the leading, as she had no idea where they were going.

He shushed her and slowed down as the woods grew darker, the trees denser, quieter. She was sure they were further in the woods than any of the other Milton kids. “There.” His voice was a whisper as he tugged her towards a copse of trees. “No moonlight. We should be safe.”

They walked in and crouched behind a large tree trunk. Sean peeked around it and, with a satisfied nod, turned back to her. “Are you hurt?” he asked. “They... they didn’t get you, did they?”

She started giggling again, and he affected an angry face. “This is no laughing matter,” he said, his voice harsh. “There’s no coming back from this. This is *war*, Margaret Hale.”

Mags laughed harder, but at his look, slammed a hand over her mouth. She saw the edge of his mouth twitch and she doubled over, almost unable to breathe.

“We do this for the women and children,” he said. “For America.”

She was shaking and he started grinning. She pulled her hand away to suck in a deep breath. “Stop, really. I need to breathe.” She smacked his arm and her face fell as she pulled her hand away. “No,” she said as she stared at her hand, the wetness coating her fingers. “No, no, no.”

“I didn’t want to tell you,” Sean said, shaking his head. “I... I don’t have long now.” He faked a cough. “Please, make sure my mother gives me a proper burial.”

“No, there has to be something we can do.” She gripped his shoulders and shook him. “Goddamn you, Thornton, don’t you die on me! You’ve never given up on anything in your life, so *live!*”

His smile was dimpled, but full, and she realized she hadn’t seen it before, not really. Not like this. “You’re having fun,” he said. “Admit it.”

“Freely,” she said. “Why would I lie about it?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Because you seem programmed to deny it.” He leaned forward and whispered, “It’s a Gown thing.”

“Hey, you’ve got to stop that. I just saved the day.” She lifted her arm and made a muscle. “I am the *hero* of Milton High.”

Sean stood up and offered her his hand. “That you are,” he said when she was to her feet. “This must be about respect. Normally, they throw eggs. We’ve stepped up, it seems, thanks to...”

There was a rustle in the woods beyond. They both quieted and Sean took her by the elbow and pulled her deeper into the shadows.

“Do you hear it?” a voice asked, from about twenty feet away.

“No,” another voice responded, farther away. “Let’s get back.”

“Hang on. I swear I heard something.”

Mags, knowing it was a game but surprised by her own fear, moved closer to Sean on instinct. He put his hand at her waist and turned so that she was against the tree trunk, his body forming a barrier between any intruders and thrown water balloons. And while a part of her wanted to giggle at this useless show of chivalry, another part of her felt as if every nerve was on edge by the sweetness of the gesture. The nearness of his body.

He lowered his head to whisper in her ear but he was too far and speaking too low to hear, so she snaked up her hand, gripped his head, and pulled him closer. “A few more minutes,” he said. He didn’t pull away and she felt his pulse throb against her palm, his breath warm on her ear, her neck, his hand curved in at her waist, his vanilla and rain smell almost overwhelming her. She could *hear* him, hear him breathing, and when he pulled back to look her in the eyes, she felt suddenly, inexplicably older. Grown up. Her body reacting in ways she had never felt before.

This was what had been missing with Henry, she realized. This awareness of two bodies, sharing the same space. The overwhelming sense of another person, of every tiny action, of every miniscule movement. The absolute freedom and empowering strength that came with understanding how another person reacted to you.

His mouth curved, that dimpled ghost smile so intimate then, as he stared down at her. She realized her hand still cupped his neck and her thumb had traced the slight ridge of the hairline crack scar along his jaw. Over and over again, without even realizing it, the sensitive pad of her thumb caressed that little raise of skin.

His fingers tightened on her waist, pulled her closer, and his other hand cupped behind her neck, tangled in her hair.

When he lowered his mouth to hers, she stood on her tiptoes to meet him halfway.

They were a breath away, half a breath away, when a sharp whisper broke the night. “Thornton!”

Mags caught her breath and pulled back, staring up at him, her hand falling away from his face. Sean’s hand fell, too, and when it did, he closed his eyes for a brief second, his jaw set, frustration palpable.

She felt her frustration, too, felt it burn within her and wondered why she hadn’t realized before, that she wanted to kiss Sean Thornton. It seemed important that she know this information, but she hadn’t. Had she?

When he opened his eyes again, he stared down at her, silent, but... different. Surer, perhaps. A ghost of his ghost smile on his face.

Mags, without thinking, reached out and laced her fingers with his. He lifted her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

It was such a surprisingly intimate gesture that she felt it throughout her body, like the charge of ozone, right before it rained, and she stared up at him, so unwillingly break this odd little spell. His smiled curved wider now, and she smiled back, before they heard it again.

“Thornton! Where the hell are you?”

She released her fingers from his, the moment broken now by Colin’s whispered shouts. “Here!” Sean said, and turned from her.

While Sean exited the copse of trees, she reached down for her bag and, after patting it, reassured herself her camera was there.

She gave herself ten seconds. Ten seconds to close her eyes and lean against a tree trunk and try to figure out what in the hell had just happened.

One.

She had almost kissed Sean Thornton.

Two.

She had almost kissed Sean Thornton.

Three.

She had almost kissed Sean Thornton.

And so on, until she got to “ten,” and told herself that no, Sean Thornton had almost kissed her.

She sucked in a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and exited the copse of trees.

Sean was there, chatting with Colin, who flicked his eyes back to her. They widened, just for a second, but then, he started grinning. “Hey, new girl,” he said. “We won. Can you believe it?”

“Of course I can,” she said. “We few, we happy few.”

“The plucky underdog always wins,” Colin said. “The girls are already waiting for us in the car. We should get going.”

“Get going where?” Mags asked as she trailed after them.

“We won,” Colin said again.

“Yes, I know. So you said.” Mags paused. “Wait, what did we win?” When they didn’t answer, she half-ran to catch up. “What did we win?”

Sean waited for her, hand outstretched. She reached out to take it and felt it, then, Sean’s body leaning closer, felt the rubberband snap and pull and stretch. “Are you hungry?”

They were the first words he had spoken to her since they left the woods, and they made absolutely no sense to her. She turned so she could look up at him. “What?”

“Hungry,” he said again. “Are you?” His hand tugged her forward, through the woods to the opening beyond. He took her bag and slung it over his shoulder.

“When am I not?” she asked, only just realizing she had turned over her bag without a second thought.

“Good.” He laced his fingers with hers and pulled her closer, slowed down so that they walked, slow and lazy, through the thinning tree line. “Because it’s the last tradition. And we won.”

“The war?” she asked.

“Yep,” he said. “We get First Street Diner, all night. No Helstone Devils allowed. *Strictly* Milton Strikers.”

“Oh,” Mags said. “Because that’s clearly the battle to win.”

“You only say that because you haven’t had their bacon.” Sean shook his head. “Heathen.” He stopped and turned to look at her, his hand still laced with hers. “What do you

say, Gown? Pancakes and bacon? Hot chocolate? Let this Town show you how to live it up, Milton-style?"

She felt a little smile curve on her face. "Are you going to try to steal my bacon?"

"Of course I am," he said. "It's my duty. My privilege, as a wounded vet." He gestured at the water stain on his jacket. "But I'll buy you triple bacon, so you'll have to plenty for me to steal."

"That *seems* fair," Mags said. "But I feel like I'm getting tricked. There's no such thing as free pancakes and bacon."

"No, there isn't," Sean agreed. "Are you going to the Helstone Ball?"

She blinked at the change in subject. "What?"

"Did Adam Bell ask you to the Helstone Ball? Earlier? At the game?" He paused for a second. "I saw him talking to you and Bess said..."

"Oh." It felt like years ago, light years, but she nodded. "He did. But I said no."

A tiny smile curved on his face, the ghost of the ghost smile. "Yeah? Are you sure? It's a pretty big Gown event. Biggest all year. All those fancy people with their... with their..."

"Fancy pants?" she asked.

"Exactly." Sean nodded. "Very fancy pants."

"I've never been one for fancy pants," Mags said.

"*Very* fancy pants," Sean said.

"Those neither. Besides, I'm a little insulted you had to ask, Town. After all I did for the Milton Strikers today." She peered up at him. "What does this have to do with the aforementioned and, need I remind you, afore-promised pancakes and bacon?"

"I've already got a date for Homecoming," he said.

She blinked. “I know. You’re going with Bess. That’s fourteen shades of awesome.”

“I am,” he said. “We go together every year. But she never goes to the after-party. She’s usually too tired. One might consider asking someone else, without insulting aforementioned date, especially if aforementioned date were a platonic friend.”

The trees were too close then, the laughter in the field beyond too loud, Sean too close. She didn’t want to move away. She did. She didn’t. “As payment for pancakes.”

His eyes were bright, too bright, turquoise, even, in the dark night. “And bacon,” he said.

“Sean?”

“Hmm?”

“What do you expect as payment for the aforementioned and afore-promised hot chocolate?”

He laughed, and she felt the vibration of it through his arm, to hers. “This is getting into deeply problematic territory.”

“Hey, you’re the one trying to bribe me with delicious foods. It’s all on you, Thornton.”

Without any preamble, he tugged her hand and she was close to him then, too close, feeling the heat radiate off this boy who was smiling, half-cocky, half-shy, at her. She felt her chest warm, expand. “Come with me,” he said.

She couldn’t breathe with it all, so she just said those three little letters, that one word that kept getting her into trouble, again and again. “Yes,” she said.

His smile widened. “Yes?” He lifted her hand and pressed a kiss to the inside of her wrist. This one she felt all the way to her toes.

“Yes,” she said. *Yes. Yes. Yes.*

He tugged her again and they broke through the trees into the field beyond. There were still several cars parked there, including Colin's van. Mags hesitated as she saw one car in particular, a bright blue Honda CRV.

"You okay?" Sean asked.

"Fine." She blinked up at him. "Déjà vu, I think. That car just looked familiar for a second."

"Come on," Bess hollered from the window of Colin's van. "Everyone's already gone. We had to go find you." But she wasn't upset, not really, as she grinned at Mags.

"What's this 'we'?" Colin hollered back. "I had to find them. You did nothing."

Mags paused again and Sean stopped with her. "Mags?" He dropped her hand, and she realized after a second that he was misinterpreting her hesitation.

"No, no," she said. She squinted at the blue CRV again. "It's just..." her voice trailed off and she bolted, running as fast as she could across the field.

Mags vaguely heard them asking her what was wrong, but she was already past the van, launching herself at the girl just exiting the passenger side of the CRV.

"What are you *doing* here?" She was laughing and crying and laughing again as the girl in her arms started crying and laughing and then they fell over, right there in the field, still clutching each other.

"I got your message," Edie said against her, squeezing her so tight Mags almost couldn't breathe. "And there's a hurricane, so school let out at twelve and so we all decided to come to bring y'all back. It was a surprise." She pulled back and stared at Mags, a huge grin on her face. "I love you. I miss you." She pulled her close and squeezed. "Let's never not talk again."

“Agreed,” Mags said. She wrapped both arms around Edie and just held her, held her and breathed in her cotton candy smell, her sugary sweetness that was Edie, cousins so close in age they could have been twins. They had done everything together, closer than sisters because sisters couldn’t escape each other. But they could.

The past month washed away, washed away there in a muddy field in the middle of Indiana and Mags thought she would burst with the emotions spilling out of her.

“Henry’s here,” Edie said in her ear. “And there is a big tall drink of water that is eyeing us up and down while Henry is staring at him like he’s the devil incarnate. Is there something?”

Mags laughed through her tears. She pulled away, gripped Edie’s face in her hands and pressed her forehead against hers. “Just. Literally, just five minutes ago and this is the best goddamn day of my life.”

Edie laughed her full-throated laugh and the two girls extricated themselves from each other and stood. “All right, then,” Edie said as she brushed off the back of her jeans. “Boys, you can have her now.”

Mags was barely standing when Edie’s boyfriend, Noah, picked her up and spun her around. “Missed you much,” he said when he put her down. “Indiana’s entirely too far away from us. It’s lonely without you.”

Mags laughed, giddy and dizzy with the spinning. She stumbled a bit and turned to see Henry, staring at her, eyes flashing hunger and something else—anger? Longing?—before they cleared.

Her smile and laughter fell as she stared at him. He was the same Henry, of course. Same bright blonde hair, falling in his same dark eyes. Same long fingers clutching the same Camel light. Same style of shirt, even, this one declaring “FREE SHRUGS.” She had often

joked that between the shirts he bought for her and the ones he bought for himself, he was singlehandedly keeping Think Geek in business.

Before she could decide what to do, before she could determine whether she wanted to hug him or turn from him, he came over, draped one arm over her shoulders, and pressed a kiss to her forehead, as he had a thousand times before. “Heya,” he said against her.

Her bottom lip trembled. “Heya,” she said, and hugged him back. He still smelled like Henry, like cigarettes and Ivory soap, the scent of whisky still clinging to his jacket from Mardi Gras.

She pulled away first and felt his arms untangle from her, felt him separate and knew that this would have to be dealt with, soon enough. But not tonight. Tonight, she had more important things to do.

Mags turned to Edie, took her hand, and tugged her toward the group near the van. “You two will either love each other or become arch-enemies. I can’t decide which. But Edie?” She pulled her cousin forward. “This is Bess. Bess, this is Edie. My life would *suck* without either of you in it.”

“Clearly,” Edie said. “I make the world bright.”

“You got that right, white girl,” Bess said. “The world is a *shiny* place with me in it.”

“Shit,” Colin said. “There are two of them. God help us all.”

“Shut up,” Edie and Bess said in unison. They caught eyes and both laughed at exactly the same time.

“I think it’s settled,” Henry said. “They love each other. Or, they might in fact be the same person.”

“Who’s this?” Bess said from her window. “Are you Henry?”

Henry cocked an imaginary hat. “How d’ye do, ma’am.”

“Hrm,” she said, squinting her eyes at him. “I’m gonna watch you.”

He laughed, surprised. “There *are* two of them.”

Mags made introductions all around, suddenly shy when she introduced Sean to Edie, and Henry to Sean. But she did, and watched as Henry and Sean eyed each other. She realized then that Henry had seen her and Sean walk out of the woods, hand in hand. She imagined a lot of people had, and wondered, just for a moment, what that would mean come Monday.

“How did you guys know I would be here?” Mags asked once introductions were done.

“Your dad’s a local,” Colin said. “He knows about the bonfire. Trust me.”

Edie nodded. “So we came to meet you. But if you have plans already...?”

Mags turned to look first at Bess, then at Sean. Bess rolled her eyes and spoke first.

“Please. Like I’m going to keep you from your family reunion. But for reals, I want to hang with this one,” she pointed at Edie, “before she leaves. Maybe tomorrow night?”

“Deal!” Edie said. “You ready, Mags? Mom and Dad want to see you. They’re waiting up for you.”

Mags turned to her Milton friends and saw them there, standing with her New Orleans friends. All of them there, in one place, and she felt as if all the crap, all the insanity of the last two years, the last few months, died away with the joy that bubbled up in her. “Tomorrow, then?” she asked, of the group, but her eyes were on Sean.

Stoic until now, his smiles appropriate, occasionally real when Edie or Bess said something funny, Sean gave her a little hint of his ghost smile. “Sure, Gown. Tomorrow.” He walked over and handed her the messenger bag he had carried from the woods. When he did, his

fingers brushed hers and she blushed, and he smiled, and she smiled back, and when she turned away, she saw Henry staring at them, a small muscle ticking on his cheek.

They all said their goodbyes and turned to their respective vehicles. Edie clung to Mags's arm and held her back, out of hearing distance from Henry. "He's gorgeous," she said. "It's going to be hard to leave him, huh?"

Mags gave her a look, confused, but agreed. "We're just, I don't know. Sparking?"

"Full-fledged *fire*," Edie said, and laughed. "I am so glad to *see* you!"

"Me, too." Mags paused to hug her cousin once again. "I missed you so much."

"More than stars, Maggie-Mae," Edie said, her head pressed against Mags. "More than stars."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It took approximately seventeen minutes for Edie to stop talking, long enough for Mags to realize that Edie thought she was coming back to New Orleans with them. Oh, Edie didn't come right out and say it, of course. Merely suggested that "when you're home" and "once we get back," all phrases carefully articulated to hint to Mags that something bigger was going on, and Mags wasn't supposed to know about it. Not yet.

But Henry knew. He kept looking at Mags as if she would disappear in any moment, like a puff of smoke from his cigarette. He had changed over the past few weeks, grown harder, perhaps, lost some of the puffiness of youth to become leaner, more masculine. He had never looked more handsome. But Henry was still... Henry. Beautiful, dark, brooding Henry. Her best friend. Estranged, but still.

"What do you think, Mags?" he asked. "Ready to come home with us where you belong?"

Mags felt something rise in her stomach, like little soap bubbles ready to pop at any second. They expected her to come to New Orleans. To come home. Even after everything that had happened in New Orleans, they still expected it to be where she belonged.

"It was *supposed* to be a surprise," Edie said, and smacked Henry's arm. They were quiet as the GPS directed them to turn right. "But aren't you excited? I mean, your dad will still be here, of course, to finish out the year, but... oh, Mags. Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry. We thought you knew that, at least."

She hadn't even realized she started crying until Edie said her name, but the wetness on her cheeks, the tightness of her eyes, all of it led to the very simple fact that she had never, never felt more betrayed in all of her life. Her mother was leaving her. Her mother was leaving *her*,

hated living in Marlborough so much that she'd rather go back to New Orleans without her husband and daughter than stay here another day. She knew her mother would blame it on her nerves, or this, or that, but the plain fact of the matter was that she was abandoning her family, and Edie, generous, sweet to a fault Edie, could not comprehend that Mags was not coming along.

“She was keeping it secret for a surprise,” Edie whispered. “Of course she was.”

“No, she wasn't, hon,” Henry said. He seemed as shocked as Edie, but more... resigned? He knew the darker side of Mags's mother, after all, the recriminations, the scenes, the blame cast her way for Freddie's exile from society. Her mother had never stopped blaming her, not really. Maria Hale had a favorite child, and it wasn't Margaret. Mags had known this her entire life. She just never expected others to see it so officially. So suddenly. So painfully. “Mags...” Henry began, but didn't get to finish.

The GPS announced they had arrived at their destination. Mags charged out of the CRV before Noah had even had a chance to put it in park. When she walked into her grandmother's house, the screen door hit the brick wall with a bang. She bit back the apology lurking just behind her lips. No need to start this conversation with an apology. If anyone was to apologize, it better be her mother. “When were you going to tell me?” she said.

Maria Hale looked up at her daughter, and the smile fell from her face. She had been entertaining her sister and brother-in-law, more animated than Mags had seen her in years.

“Sweetie, you know this weather isn't good for my—”

“I'm your goddamn *daughter*,” Mags said. “Does that mean anything to you?”

“Of course, my angel. It means everything. But you don't want Mom to be sick, do you? This weather can't agree with me.”

Maybe she hadn't believed it. Not really. Not like faith. Maybe a part of her expected her mother to tell her of course she was staying with her teenaged daughter who needed her, needed her so desperately to be a mother. But no. Once again it was Mags versus the world, Mags always on the side of herself. All alone on the side of herself.

"But Maria, I thought..." Aunt Barbie didn't finish her statement. Even she, it seemed, just assumed Mags would come home.

"Mags is happier here with her father. Everyone knows she's a daddy's girl." Maria looked around and caught eyes with her husband. "Fred, tell them."

"Does no one even want to know what I think in all of this?" Mags whispered the words, so low that her mother almost didn't hear her.

"I want to know," Henry said from the door. Edie was with him, Noah just behind. "I think we'd all like to know what you think."

"I think..." That you are selfish. That all of you are selfish. "That it's best for me..." to be away from all of you. In a place that appreciates me. "To..." She found herself bereft of the words she needed to move on. To tell everyone what she wanted, for once in her life.

For once in her life. She had an opportunity, for once in her life, to make a decision.

"Margaret?" her grandmother asked. "What do you want?"

"I want everyone to just leave me alone," she said. She sank down into a chair with a tired sigh. "I want to go to school here, where no one blames me for what happened with Freddie."

"Sweetie, no one blames you for—"

“Of course everyone blames me, mom. I was stupid enough to almost get raped at a party, and then I was stupid enough to tell my brother about it. That’s what everyone thinks. That’s what you think.”

Her mother started crying, big cringing sobs. “That’s not what I think at all,” she said, choked through her tears. “How can you even say that?”

“I’m sorry,” Mags said on reflex, because she was sorry. That much was certain. She was sorry she had opened her mouth. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

Aunt Barbie held Maria’s hand as she sniffled her way through a handkerchief. “It’s your mom’s health, kiddo. We have to be careful.”

“I just don’t know why she can’t come with us!” Edie was crying now, too. “Why can’t she just come home where she belongs?”

Was that where she belonged? Not anymore. Not in New Orleans, not even with Edie and Henry and Noah. Certainly not with her mom, who didn’t seem to care whether or not her daughter needed her. Instead, it was what she needed from her daughter.

And that, while selfish, was the truth. Her mother, Mags realized, couldn’t help who she was any more than Mags could help who *she* was.

“Mags is better off staying put,” her dad said. “It’s her senior year. She doesn’t need to be uprooted again.”

Because her father was right. She had started putting down roots, finally, in a new place that didn’t know about New Orleans. Didn’t know about Freddie or any of the problems back home. “Edie, I love and miss you so much,” Mags said. “Being without you has been a constant ache in my heart for a month now. But...”

“But you’re staying here, aren’t you?” Edie began to cry harder and her tiny body shook with the force of her sobs. “Is it because we haven’t talked? If so, I’m so sorry. Please forgive me.”

“No, I swear, it’s not...” no matter what she did, she was going to upset someone, was going to become upset on her own. No matter what, she couldn’t make anyone happy, regardless of what she did. If she went to New Orleans, she would be miserable. If she stayed in Marlborough, Edie and Henry would be miserable. And maybe her Dad and Grandmother Hale.

“What do you want, Mags?” Henry asked her. He walked over and took her hand in his. “What is it *you* want because I know I, for one, want *you* to be happy.”

“I...” She felt her bottom lip tremble as she stared at Henry, selfless once more, caring only for her well-being and mental health. “I want to stay here.”

“Then stay here.” His eyes grew a little bright but he didn’t cry, not Henry. Not her rock. The past few weeks melted away and he was there for her, for the first time in forever, it seemed, and that meant everything. “Because you’re happy here. And that’s all that matters.”

Mags swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand and composed herself. No matter what, she needed to compose herself. She needed to be the grownup now because her mother was sobbing, Aunt Barbie was comforting her, and Edie was a wreck. Someone needed to put them back together. “Mom, it’s okay. I want you to do what you need to do.”

Her mother sniffled and looked up at her. “My health has just... been so bad, Maggie. You know that. And a winter? An honest to God winter? I’ll never survive.”

“I know, Mom.” Mags forced a smile to her face and felt her fingernails bite into her palm, harder and harder and harder until she was sure blood was forming on the skin. “Do you need help packing tomorrow?”

“No, sweetie,” Aunt Barbie said. “We’ve got it.”

“Excellent,” Mags said. “Then I’m going to bed.” She walked back to her room with as much dignity as she could muster before she closed the door and broke down. There was something to be said for abandonment, and the abandonment of her mother was worse than Henry, worse than Edie. Worse than anything she could even imagine. This was abandonment on a massive, massive scale, and Mags didn’t think even she could get herself out of this.

#

At 5:00 a.m. she still wasn’t asleep but the rest of the house finally was, after hours of mumbling and murmuring. Aunt Barbie and Uncle Rob were sleeping in the spare room, and Henry, Edie, and Noah were all piled in the living room. No one had bothered her, not even tried to sleep on her floor. Normally, Henry or Edie, or both, would sneak into her room and stay with her to talk all through the night. But they didn’t even try, not this time.

But perhaps they would be awake, at least. On impulse, she sent a text. “Need a friend, if U R around.”

After a moment, her phone buzzed. She checked the text and found, “What R U doing awake? Come to the backyard.”

She threw on her Catwoman Converse, grabbed a sweater, and stepped outside. The quiet of the neighborhood, the soft pre-dawn of the morning, all of the scents and smells of a nighttime moving into day assaulted her as she moved toward the dark shape at the end of the patio.

“Hey,” Henry said, his voice rough with lack of sleep. He gave her a little smile. “Lucky I was in the neighborhood.”

“You never sleep,” she said, and sat down next to him. The flash of the match flare lit Henry’s face orange before the smoke swirled around his head. “How is it you never sleep?”

“Because I nap all day. It’s the sleep of champions.” He lifted his arm and she snuggled in next to him, his hand wrapped on her shoulder. “I’m sorry your mom’s such a bitch.”

“Hey, she’s still my mom. Watch it.” She turned and inhaled deep the smell of Henry. Such a familiar smell, since they were kids he had always smelled spicy, like cinnamon, or clove. “Are *you* mad at me?”

“Honestly? I got over mad a few weeks ago. It’s more just embarrassed. That’s why I couldn’t call you. And then you deleted your Facebook and Tumblr accounts, and I thought for sure that was about me. Selfish, huh? Shit, Mags,” he said, and took a deep drag off his cigarette, “can anyone not be an asshole to you?” He exhaled loudly, the sound almost whistling through the pursing of his lips.

“I missed you. I just... I can’t be what you want me to be.”

“I know that.” He squeezed her shoulder. “But I can be what you want me to be, and that’s what we’ve always been. So tell me. What’s going on?”

They talked well into the morning. She told him about Bess, about school and Bronwyn’s jealousy, and even Freddie. But when they got to her mother, she was characteristically silent. “I just can’t, Henry. She’s my mom. You know? I can only be so mad at her.”

“I can be plenty mad at her for you,” he said. “We’re leaving today. She wants to be gone as soon as possible, and the hurricane jogged east. So we’re in the clear.”

That was her punishment, for causing a scene. She was going to have to be without everyone a day sooner than she thought. To have just gotten Edie and Henry back only to lose

them again was going to break her even more, into tiny bits and pieces. “We’ll Facetime,” she said finally. “And you can tell me everything going on with you.”

The house was coming alive behind them, the noise of people waking, toilets flushed and refrigerators opened. All of those morning sounds that lead one to breakfast and wakefulness. “Nothing going on with me that being friends with you again wouldn’t cure,” Henry said. He stabbed out his cigarette in the grass and put the butt in his little growing pile. “But as long as you’re okay, I’m good to go.”

Was she? Even with the Bright & Shiniies and her mom and Sean, “Yeah,” Mags said. “I am.” She smiled wide. “Of course I am.”

#

She wasn’t.

She had lied to Henry, to her dad and grandmother, to her mom when she left. She lied to Bess when she called and ignored Sean’s absence of texts. She spent a week in her pajamas and no one gave her any flack for it. She simply was, for lack of a better word, mourning. Her dad went into her room every morning for a week, asked her, “do you want to go to school today?” and when she said, “not today,” called in sick for her.

Every afternoon, he brought her homework. She completed it, handed it back to him, and repeated the cycle, every day and every night, for a week. But by Saturday, when he walked into her room at noon, the tone changed.

Her dad sat on the edge of her bed. “There’s a party at the Thorntons’ house today. We’ve both been invited. Get your swimsuit and get dressed.”

“Not today,” she said, as she had said for five days in a row.

“Too bad. Your time of sloth is over. Out of bed, into real clothes, and be ready in fifteen minutes.”

“You don’t understand. I don’t feel well.”

“You feel fine.”

“I feel like shit, Dad.” And she did, like she would keel over if she tried anything complicated like walking, much less smiling and swimming with other people.

“You feel fine. Your mother didn’t die, Magpie, and she didn’t divorce us. She went home to convalesce. There’s nothing else to it.”

How to make him understand that it felt like leaving? Felt like dying? Seven days without her mother and she was mourning as if her mother did die. And perhaps she did, the version she had in her head of her mother. That version was dead. She was never going to get it back, and that, more than anything, pained her. How could her mother leave her? She was seventeen, for Christ’s sake. She had Homecoming next weekend, even if she didn’t have a date to the dance proper, she still had to go. And her mother had abandoned her.

“How come you didn’t make me go to school but you’re making me go to a party?” she asked.

“Because you should *want* to go to a party. That’s how I know this is depression and not sick. You’ve been sad enough. Come on.” He patted her three times on her knee before he stood up. “You’re going to have fun today if it’s the last thing you do. And if you don’t? You’re grounded.”

“You’re going to ground me if I don’t go to a party and have fun?” A little smile grew on her face at the preposterousness of the proposal.

Her dad smiled back. “I will do exactly that. So get dressed so we can shake a tail feather. Or eat barbeque. Or something.”

He turned to walk out but she jumped out of the bed and hugged him before he could leave. “She’s always blamed me for Freddie,” she said in a soft voice.

He hugged her back. “She has,” he said, his voice just as soft. “But no matter what, it’s not your fault. Okay?”

And like that, a weight, a final little pressure weighing on her chest and stomach, lifted, and she felt its baby wings as it stretched and flew away. “Okay,” she said, and for once, believed it. It would be. Okay. It finally would be okay.

But still, that one little word nagged her.

Was it them?

Yes, she had said. Yes, yes, yes.

Later, when Mags thought back to this moment, she realized that she had expected the bright lights and stares that had found her then were soon to find her again. Even here. Even in Marlborough. She didn’t know *how* she knew, some women’s intuition, perhaps, or just a sense of the tide turning. But when she left for the Thorntons’ party, she felt it creep along her neck and throat. Something was coming. Something huge. And she didn’t know what it was.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“...disappeared for a WEEK! What do you expect me to do?!”

Mags just barely tuned Bess back in to hear the end of her tirade. “Dad told you I was sick.”

“But what kind of sick keeps you from texting? Did you break your hands?” Bess lifted Mags’s left hand. “Looks fine to me.”

“Bess, look, I...” Mags sucked in a breath. “It was bad. I was an awful friend for not calling you, but...”

“I thought you left.” Bess’s face crumpled a bit and she squeezed Mags’s hand. “I thought you left to go back to New Orleans without saying goodbye.”

“Oh, God, Bess, I would never. It’s just... my mom left.”

“Left your dad?”

“Not like that.” Mags shook her head and sank down into a seat next to Bess’s wheelchair. “More like, left Indiana. We just happened to be here, too.”

“Jesus. That’s awful. Do you need a mom? Because mine loves you.” Bess squeezed Mags’s hand again before she pulled away. “I’m sorry. What can I do?”

“Forgive me for not calling?”

“Of course. I just... I don’t know if someone else will.” Bess nodded over at Sean who was sitting with Bronwyn by the pool slide, smiling and laughing. Other than telling her “hello” when she showed up at the party, he hadn’t spoken to her since she arrived. “I think he thinks this is about him. What happened in the woods that night, anyhow?”

Mags looked around them at the party, full of seniors and their parents, and even some of the teachers from the district. But more were suspiciously absent, apparently did not come out of

protest that the superintendent was throwing parties, even out of her own pocket, while the teachers were hearing words like “cut backs” and “furloughs.” “We almost kissed,” she said as she watched Sean across the pool. He stiffened a bit, as if he knew she was looking at him, but did not turn her way. She wanted to get a shot of him like this, his brooding jaw, his heavy eyes. The nerd in her compared him instantly to Kon-El, Superboy, who was so full of anger that it exploded inside of him. This was what she had turned Sean Thornton into. Made him remember a part of himself that maybe was better left unremembered.

“What?!” Bess smacked her on the arm. “Are you serious? Why didn’t you tell me? No wonder he freaked out when you didn’t come to school.”

She almost didn’t hear Bess when the music grew louder. She moved closer to her friend. “I was still trying to process it but then everything else happened and I kind of... forgot.” For lack of a better word, she had forgotten the incident in the woods until she saw Sean again. Maybe not forgot, not exactly, but definitely pushed it to the back of her brain. Dealing too much with her mother and Henry had caused her mind to protect itself from worrying about even more things she couldn’t control. But now, here in sight of Sean...

“He is really conscious of being abandoned, you know.” Bess shook her head. “And I mean, let’s not forget about Lily. She is going to tear you a new one if she thinks you hurt her brother.”

“What is the deal with that, anyhow?” Mags asked. “Do you know why he...” she let her voice trail off, suddenly worried by her question. Maybe it wasn’t right to ask about his scars, his possessiveness over his sister.

“Has no one told you yet?” Bess asked. She turned in her wheelchair and winced a little with the movement. She began to cough, deep wracking coughs that sounded like a tear in her side.

“Are you okay?” Mags asked.

“Just a little touch of pneumonia, that’s all,” Bess said.

“A *touch* of pneumonia? There’s no such thing, Bess. Seriously,” Mags half-stood. “We need to get you inside.”

Bess put a hand on her arm. “Outside’s better,” she said in a quiet voice. “Inside is too cold. Out here, it’s nice and dry.”

It was, a nice breezy dryness that belied everything Mags had ever come to believe about the summer. Marlborough’s weather was so different from the muggy heat of New Orleans that she felt like an amphibian coming on land for the first time, gasping for desperate air.

“It’s not a big secret or anything,” Bess said. “About Sean and his dad. He got into some real trouble when he was younger. His dad was *awful* to him, used to... used to beat him, put out cigarettes on his arm. He would get in between the dad and Lily, sometimes even Mrs. Thornton, and that would just make the dad madder.”

“What happened?”

“Sean got into fights at school, the usual. And one day, a cop paid attention. Came to the house, saw what was going on, and arrested the dad. He’s still in jail, you know. It’s been hard for Sean.”

Mags looked out across the pool and this time, caught Sean looking at her. Those bright blue eyes were almost hidden from this distance, but all the same, she saw him looking at her. So she tried. She raised her hand in a wave and waggled her fingers. Then, just on faith, she

pulled out her phone and texted him. “Sorry, Town. Not u, but me. It’s been a bad week. Talk later?”

She watched him get the text, watched the little smile spread on his face, that true smile, the Sean Thornton half-smile that brought out the dimple in his cheek. He looked up at her, one eyebrow raised, before he texted back, “Sure, Gown. Whatever u say.”

She couldn’t help *her* smile and felt at least, she salvaged something, a friendship, perhaps, but maybe the interesting Something More that was happening between her and Superboy over there.

“What *is* that?” Bess asked, cutting through her reverie.

The sound had grown louder. When the music cut off with a sudden quietness, the words outside of the gate were audible. “Strike! Strike! Strike!”

At first, Mags thought it was a group of football players doing the Milton fight song, but she realized all the football players were there, and they were as quiet as the rest of the guests, listening to the words outside of the gate.

Sean stood and moved toward the gate. After a moment, most of the students followed him. Outside of his gate, in a huge crowd, were all the absent teachers, holding signs, chanting “Strike!” and converging upon Mrs. Thornton’s house.

“What are they doing?” someone asked next to Mags.

“They’re protesting,” she said, and pulled her camera out. It was instinctual more than anything, to take photos of such a group. She began snapping as one of the teachers moved forward.

It was Mr. Weinbacher, their newspaper teacher, the one Mags had heard talking about strikes just two weeks before. “Rose Thornton!” he called out. “When are you going to answer our demands?”

“Where is she?” Mags asked Bess.

“I think I heard that she stepped out to get more ice,” Bess said. “She’s not here!” she yelled at the group.

Mags’s father hushed her. “Let us handle this, Bess.” He walked forward. “Rose isn’t here. This is not the time or the place for this, Jim.”

“Of course it is. Having a huge party while the rest of us are considering food stamps to make ends meet? You’ve got to be kidding me. What are you doing here, anyhow?”

“Her son’s here! Why don’t we ask him?” Someone yelled out the accusation from the crowd and Sean’s face grew angry.

Mags walked over to Sean. “You’ve got to do something. Speak for your mother.”

“I can’t do that,” he said. “I can’t get involved in this.” But after a moment, he yelled out, “This is my *home!*”

“And your home is housing a bunch of traitors!” Mr. Weinbacher said. “Sean, look around you. These people are taking on the jobs of two or three teachers in order to fire people. How is that fair?”

“Did he get fired?” Mags asked Sean.

“This week, he was let go. Not fired.”

Mags imagined it didn’t matter. “Sean, you have to do something. You’re the voice of your mother in this situation. You—”

“Sean, you’re eighteen. You’re old enough to have an opinion about this. What do you think?”

“I think you’re all invading my house! Go home!”

The crowd roared at that moment and Mags saw it, saw someone lift a bottle and aim it at Sean. She didn’t think about anything other than the fact that she had pushed him forward, she had made him move into the line of fire. She threw herself at Sean to push him out of the way just as the bottle made contact with her head. There was a loud pop, a bright light, and she thought, I’m hit, and then she thought, what a ridiculous thing to think, and then she felt arms around her, warm arms, strong arms before she felt nothing at all.

#

“Mags?” a voice asked, hesitant.

Mags blinked her eyes open and saw a fuzzy shape in the corner. There was a steady beeping and a sense of whiteness, of coolness wrapping around her. Her vision cleared, and she saw Sean. “Where am I?” she asked.

“You’re at the hospital. You have a concussion. They hit you pretty hard with the bottle.” Sean moved closer and gave her a little half smile, pained, sympathetic. “I am so sorry.”

He looked so sad, and she thought that this was another time when a woman was hurt and he couldn’t stop it. Poor Sean, she thought. He was forever trying to save us and we forever hurt him because of it. “Why are you sorry?”

“Because that bottle was meant for me. And…” he paused and turned to grab a bag in the corner. “You dropped your camera. When you fell.”

He took it out like a baby, cradling the neck and back, and showed her the broken lens, the cracked case. She felt tears burning her eyes but she refused to let them fall. Not here. Not now. It wasn't the real concern, was it? "Oh well," she said. "It's just a thing, right? Totally replaceable." With what money? she thought. It was an expensive camera, from their better days. She had babied that thing for years, keeping it perfect and clean, and now... the tears burned her eyes again but she couldn't let him see them fall. Not now. Not over a camera, when his home had been invaded.

"I'll replace it," he said. "I'll get you a new one. A better one."

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "It's not your—"

"No," he said. "I—"

"Margaret?" a voice asked from the curtain.

They turned to see the doctor and her father standing there. "Hi, Daddy," she said.

"Are you okay, Magpie?" her dad asked.

"My head hurts," she said. "What happened?"

"You've had quite the scare, young lady," the doctor said. "How are you feeling?"

They went through a series of tests, following fingers with eyes, asking ridiculous questions about who was president and what year it was, and told her she had four stitches running along her right scalp and temple. He assured her it shouldn't leave a scar. Mags shrugged; she wouldn't even admit to herself that it worried her, the prospect of having a scar on her face.

"When can I go home?" she asked.

"Tomorrow," he said. "I'd like to keep you in for observation, if that's okay. See if you feel like you're going to throw up, or dizzy, or confused."

“Okay,” Mags said.

“I’ve got to finish some paperwork, but I’ll be just down the hall, okay? Thornton’s offered to say with you.”

“That’s fine, Daddy. I’ll be fine.” She didn’t feel fine. She wanted her mother. Had never wanted her mother so badly in her life. But her mother was 700 miles away and she was here, instead, in a hospital gown with a boy watching her with intense eyes.

Her father stepped out with the doctor, leaving her alone once again with Sean, and the television.

The five o’clock news was on. And Mags saw her own face on the screen.

“I was going to tell you,” Sean said. He seemed apologetic only in the way someone slightly aware of her phobia of cameras would be. “But someone was filming and called the news. They’re using it to argue against the teacher strikes. Anytime a kid gets hurt, they get upset.”

“I can’t...” her voice trailed off as she watched herself get hit with the bottle, again and again on the screen. But what was after the bottle was even more fascinating. Sean Thornton, wrapping his arms around her, lifting her so she didn’t fall to the ground. Sean Thornton, yelling at the group, “She’s just a girl! You’ve come here as adults and hurt a girl! Are you happy now? Are you happy?” And the group just melted away after that, embarrassed, humbled, the fight taken out of them.

No one knew who threw the bottle. Just a person in the crowd. She and Sean watched as the news anchors argued that it wasn’t one of the teachers but instead, just a hanger on, or one of the students. It didn’t matter. The damage was done.

“Why did you do it?” Sean asked her after he turned off the television. She had watched herself get hit three times. And that was enough. He stood when she gestured for him to turn it off, and walked closer to her bed when he did.

She pulled the sheet higher on her chest, her hands clutching it so tight, her knuckles felt swollen. “Because I brought you into the danger,” she said. “I made you go forward and talk to them. I shouldn’t have done that.”

He was quiet for a long moment, then, “Well, it’s the bravest thing I’ve ever seen a Gown do.”

She felt the anger rise, then, bright heat inside of her gut as she comprehended his words. He was *teasing* her, after this. After all of this he had the audacity to *tease* her. “How can you? I’m in the hospital and you say that?”

His face fell, the little half-smile melting away. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Well, that’s how it sounded.” Deep down, she knew her anger wasn’t for him. She knew it was for this stupid situation, for the embarrassment and fear of being on television, even, if she was to be fair to herself, a little bit him. But not entirely.

“Mags, I’m sorry. I just...” he paused. “I thought you liked me.” He pinked around his ears and she knew how embarrassed *he* was, then. “I thought you liked me because... I mean...”

She couldn’t. Not here. Not while in a hospital gown with stitches on her head and her face, God, her face on the evening news. “I didn’t do that because I *like* you. I would have done it for anyone. I put you in harm’s way. It was my responsibility to get you out of it. I don’t like you that way, Sean. That’s not why I did it.” She just wanted him to go away, go away and let her live in this moment in which she was hurt and scared, with a concussion and a scar. Why did he not just go away? What did she have to do to get him to leave her alone?

“Mags, I just... I like you, too, and, after what you did. I mean, that was the most selfless thing I’ve ever seen anyone do, and...” his voice trailed off. “How could I not love someone for protecting me like that?”

The anger rose in her gut and she felt it burn the back of her throat. Sean and Henry and Edie and all of them expected too much from her. Why did everyone think declarations of love were enough? Why couldn’t they let her be? Just be alone and not bear the weight of all of this... need? “Well, I don’t love you. Why does everyone keep saying that to me?”

It hit him like a fist, or a cigarette in the arm. His face grew hard and she watched his pain become visible, palpable. “Do you have so many people telling you they love you that it bothers you? Don’t you care that I have feelings for you?”

“I just...” why couldn’t they all just leave her alone? She was on the *news* for God’s sake. On the goddamn news. And there was nothing she could do about it, no way she could protect herself and everyone wanted something from her. “Can’t you just go right now, Sean? You’re... well, you’re offending me, talking of love while I’m lying here, and I’m...” on the news and exposed. How to tell him how exposed she felt, and to talk about her feelings on top of it?

“Fine.” His hurt eyes belied his hard expression and she saw it, the shell he put around himself. “I’m so sorry my feelings *offend* you. Thanks for everything, *Margaret*. Enjoy your fifteen minutes of fame.” As he walked out, he paused by his chair. He leaned down, placed her broken camera on the seat, and said, “I’ll still replace it. I know you’re poorer than you pretend. I’m good enough for that, at least.” Then, only with those cruel words—and hers, too, she reminded herself—between them, did he leave.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

At first, it wasn't worse than the New Orleans Situation, but it was damn close.

Mags came home to dozens of phone calls, hundreds of texts, from people she had never even met before, all wanting to know about what happened, and why, and if she had a political agenda. They kept saying that over and over again, the reporters: political agenda. Did she have one? Is that why she put herself in harm's way?

She wanted to scream at the situation, tell everyone that she didn't put herself in harm's way. She put herself *accidentally* in harm's way, to try to push Thornton out of it. Or maybe part of her thought they wouldn't hit a girl. That if she were in front of Sean, then whoever was throwing the bottle would stop, realizing what was happening. But no. The bottle was thrown. The situation was done.

But then, the video went viral.

People from freaking *New Orleans* began calling, and then major news networks—although the ones with certain political agendas of their own were suspiciously absent, she thought. And when someone dug up the story from New Orleans, it was all over the news: Girl Who Cried Wolf versus Girl Who Got Hit by a Bottle. No one had believed her in New Orleans, just that she was an underage girl at a party with her older brother, told said brother she was attacked, and said brother went, according to one website, “apeshit crazy” and beat the snot out of the guys. Since she was seventeen, her name should be withheld, but the images made it not matter. Everyone knew who she was, and while the news channels wouldn't say her name, they said her brother's. It was everywhere. She couldn't hide from it.

She tried, of course. Monday morning, she refused to go to school but her father wouldn't let her skip again. "The worst thing you can do is *not* go to school," he said. "Better just to get it out in the open and be done with it."

She disagreed. Mags thought the worst thing she could do was show up and have everyone looking at her, everyone staring at her, not even the benefit of her camera to protect her face from the stares. She held her camera in her hand—mourning it, she realized, more than she even mourned her mother's leaving—before she took out the SD card and threw it in the trash. There was no fixing it. It was gone, forever. This thing that had been such an extension of herself, this machine that made her whole, was absent from her life. Even the camera on her phone or the compact digital she had wouldn't be the same. Bruce was gone.

She grabbed the compact digital from her desk before she left for school and checked her appearance one more time. They wanted to call her a Gown on the school's gossip sites? Fine. She was going to dress how *she* wanted to dress, Gown and Town be damned. So she wore the peacock tunic dress her grandmother gave her, her hair in a Katniss braid around her head and down her shoulder, and her peacock bracelet on her arm. A pair of clunky Mary Janes completed the outfit, and she felt powerful, in that way only good fashion and a great outfit could make one feel. If she was going to be a Gown, she would be a Gown the best way she knew how.

Thornton wasn't there to pick her up, of course, but her dad drove her to school. She paid attention this time, in case she ever had to walk home again. Watched the rain from the previous night cuddle together in puddles, in corners of drains and collected on low-lying street corners. She paid attention to everything, from the moment they left the house to the moment

they turned into the street for school. It was for that reason she saw the news crews outside of Milton, and the huge crowd of protestors around the main entrance.

“Hell, no! We won’t go!” they were chanting, loud and in sync. She reached for her camera and winced as she realized it wasn’t in her bag, that Bruce would never be there again. Instead, she grabbed the compact digital and took a couple of quick shots.

“Maybe you shouldn’t go,” her dad said, his voice solemn. This wasn’t what he wanted for her, after all. They had moved from New Orleans to *escape* notoriety, not embrace it once more.

“No, I’m here. Let’s do this.” She got out of the car and headed for the main entrance, leaving her dad to go through the teachers’ entrance on the side of the school. As she moved closer, she realized that the chant went from protest to cheering. They were cheering. *For her.*

“Margaret, what were you thinking when that bottle hit your head?”

“Miss Hale! Miss Hale! What is your stance on the protests? Do you side with your former principal?”

“Former principal?” she asked before she could help herself.

And then she saw who was in front of the door, no, *chained*, to the front door of Milton High School. Two beautiful twins, Bess and Colin Higgins. “Superintendent Thornton!” Bess screamed at one of the cameras. “How could you let your teachers face these economic challenges?”

“What happened?” Mags saw Sally and grabbed her arm. “What’s going on?”

“Principal Higgins was fired over the weekend for letting the teachers protest without reporting it,” Sally said. “Bess and Colin have joined the protest *in* protest. It’s a mess, Mags. A real goddamn mess.” She winced when she saw Mags’s stitches. “How are you?”

“Yes, Miss Hale. How are you feeling after your ordeal this weekend?”

Mags ignored the cameras, squeezed Sally’s arm in thanks, and moved to the door. She noticed it got quieter as she moved closer, and even Bess stopped screaming long enough to watch. “Bess?” she asked, as she stood in front of her friend. It became so quiet one could hear the drip drip of the leftover rain sidling down the drain pipe. Everyone was waiting to see what she would do, and the cameras burned her with their attention. Everyone was watching her once again, and she couldn’t handle it, couldn’t deal with the publicity but this was a *situation*, something bigger than herself. Something she believed in. If they were cutting teachers, then they would eventually cut her dad. And if not him, someone like him. It just wasn’t fair.

“What do you say, my white sister?” Bess asked.

Mags moved to the door, turned around, and screamed, “Save our teachers *NOW!*”

The crowd went nuts. The protestors screamed their support, the anti-protestors screamed obscenities and other choice phrases at her, at Bess, at Colin and the dozens of other students and teachers at the front door, but it was too late. Mags turned to Bess and said, “Let’s not give them a reason to arrest us. Peaceful protest.”

“We are peaceful,” Colin said.

“No, we need to sit.” Mags looked at Bess. “On the ground, I mean. The rest of us.”

“That way the cripple is prominent,” Bess said. “I like it. It works, O devious one.” She turned to the group and yelled, “Hey! We are peaceful protestors! Let’s do Dr. King proud and sit this one down!”

Like one, the crowd listened to its de facto leader and sat in front of the school doors. When Mags tried to count them, she realized there were at least a hundred people protesting, if

not more. They grew quiet in an instant, and with that, the counter protestors began screaming louder.

“Get the hell out of the way!”

“Let my kid go to school and get an education!”

“Let them talk,” Bess said. She coughed again, those great deep wracking coughs from the day of the party. Her pneumonia, it seemed, was not getting any better.

And then, there was an explosion of voices once more. Mags looked up to see Sean Thornton making his way to the front of the protest. The news crews were thrusting microphones and cameras in his face, asking him if he planned on joining the protest against his mother.

Sean met Mags’s eyes and she saw the pain in them, the boy torn between doing what was right and doing what was expected. No one expected Sean to join the protest. No one had asked him, she bet, because no one assumed he would go against his mother. But there were, according to the reporter who kept yelling statistics, 50% of the teachers fired, resigned, protesting, or just let go as surplus *across the district*. That was a huge number, and Superintendent Thornton was in part responsible for it. This affected Sean’s education as much as it affected anyone else.

“Bess, Colin, don’t do this,” Sean said as he stood in front of them. “Your mom can get her job back.”

“Sean, man, don’t do *this*,” Colin said. “Fight with us. See how we are? Just a statement. Come on, man, you know better. This is *crazy*.”

“Please, Sean,” Bess said. “I’ve been out here all night, and I’m tired and wet.” Mags hadn’t known Bess had been out all night in the rain. “Get your mom to come out here and talk to us. That’s all we want.”

“I can’t make promises for my mother,” Sean said. “This is her business, not mine.”

“But it is your business,” Mags said. “It’s all of ours. We are the district’s *students*. That means that it owes us an explanation. To us, to our parents, to the taxpayers. How do we expect to get a good education if half of our teachers are gone? If our principal is gone?”

“This means something, Sean,” Bess said, before she started coughing again. “This means...”

Before she could finish her sentence, Bess’s eyes rolled back in her head and she fainted.

#

For the second time in a week, Mags was at the hospital. And for the second time in a week, a protest was disbanded by the health of a teenage girl. Bess passed out, went gray, and would not wake up. Colin, Sean, and Mags rushed her to the hospital, and by the time her mother showed up, the news was officially grim. Bess had done major damage to herself staying out all night in the rain, and her pneumonia had grown worse. Given that her immune system was already compromised, the doctors did not have a strong outlook.

Mags joined Sean in the hospital waiting room, as Mrs. Higgins and Colin were in the room with Bess. They were the only ones there. Sean turned to her, his eyes bright, and she understood. She walked over and sat next to him.

“I feel like this is my fault,” he said. “I know it’s not but still.”

“It’s not,” Mags said. “It’s no one’s fault. Bess has a bad immune system and she was... God, how could she stay out all night?”

“Her mom means everything to her, you know. It’s been just her, her mom, and Colin forever. Since their dad died.”

“You could do something about this. You could talk to your mom.”

“She’s not listening to me. She’s not listening to anyone but the school board. It’s not just her decision, you know. It’s everyone’s decision. People want lower taxes. How many times does that come from gutting education?”

“You do care, then?” she asked. “Fine, care. Do something about it. Protest with us. We can—”

“We can what, Mags, fight the power? Be a children’s crusade? We’re *kids*. There’s nothing we can do.” He was quiet for a long minute.

“Hey, guys?”

They both turned to see Colin by the entrance to the hallway. “Hey, what’s the story?” Sean asked.

“She’s still out.” Colin was exhausted, the bags under his eyes mocking his usual energy and spirit. “Visiting hours are over. My mom’s going to stay but I’m going to head home and get the car. Can I get a ride, man?”

“Of course,” Sean said. “Mags, you, too?”

“Me, too,” she agreed.

They were all silent on the way to Colin’s house. There was nothing left to say, it seemed. Mags thought that perhaps the boys were too caught up in their own heads to think to discuss Bess’s condition, until Colin said, “I *told* her not to stay out all night. God, she’s so stupid sometimes. I can’t get over her.”

“She believes in this. Your mom got fired.”

“Mom wasn’t fired. Mom resigned. The rumor got out that she was fired.” Colin leaned forward so that he was in between the seats, closer to Mags and Sean. “This is all bullshit, Mags. Isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” Mags said. “I don’t think so. I think this is bigger than all of us now.”

“Man, do you remember when the worst thing we had to think about was whether the Helstone kids were going to win the diner on bonfire night?”

The bonfire seemed months ago instead of little over a week. Mags knew what he meant, though. “She’s going to be fine,” she said to Colin. “Go get some rest, and we’ll all head back in the morning.”

“I’m going back tonight. I’ll call you guys as soon as I hear something.” And then, in an uncharacteristic move, Colin leaned forward and kissed Mags on the forehead. “She loves you, you know. She’s never had a friend like you.”

Mags felt her eyes burn bright with her tears. “Same here. How can I not love her?”

Colin put an arm around Sean and squeezed in that man-hug way: half hug, half pounding of the back. “Thanks, man. I’ll call you soon.”

Mags waited as the boys got out of the car and Sean walked Colin to the front door. They spoke quietly, then shook hands, and hugged. A real hug this time, two friends comforting each other on the scariness of the world. Colin said something as Sean was turning to walk back, which Mags, too far away, didn’t catch. But Sean looked at her through the windshield as he responded, and smiled his little half smile.

When he got back in the car, she asked, “What was that?”

“Colin was just reminding me of something I said at the beginning of the semester.” He put the car in drive and pulled away. “You hungry?”

“I am,” she said. “But it’s late. Is there anything open?”

“First Street Diner is open all night, and they have the best chili spaghetti this side of Ohio.”

“Chili spaghetti? Now you’re making fun of me.” They had eased back into their relaxed banter now, the patter of their relationship easing back to normal now that Bess was in the hospital. Something about her illness broke the wall between them, and they were tentatively stepping around each other, trying to feel their way into a new conversation style. “Besides, wasn’t I promised pancakes and bacon?”

“And chocolate milk, I think. Come on.” He leaned over and bumped her with his shoulder. “I’m buying.”

#

“This is absolutely the best bacon ever,” Mags said as she crunched into a slice. “The United States of Bacon indeed. I can’t believe this stuff.”

“And real maple syrup for the pancakes. I told you I wouldn’t steer you wrong, Gown.” He was quiet for a moment. “Sorry,” he said, his voice and eyes haunted, apologetic, remembering the conversation in the hospital.

Mags winced, remembering her behavior. “Sean, look, I—”

“I almost forgot,” he said. “I’ll be right back.” He slid out of the booth and headed to the front door.

Mags watched as he pulled a box from the trunk and walked back in. “What is that?” she asked.

“Your new camera,” he said. He presented the box to her as if it were a treasure, and it was, to her.

But she refused to take it. “No way, Thornton. I can’t take something like that from you.”

“Your dad paid for most of it,” he said. “Seriously, he did. I chipped in a bit because it was my fault yours died.”

“How much did my dad pay for?” Her hands couldn’t help it. They moved of their own accord to the box in front of her and caressed the sides.

“Enough so you shouldn’t feel guilty.”

But she did, the moment she saw the camera. “Sean, this is a really expensive camera! You can’t give me this!”

“It’s fine,” he said, and pinked at his ears. “Seriously, just take it.”

She knew that he had more money than she did, but even so, this was a gift that came with expectations. “Sean,” she began, but he didn’t let her finish.

“You jumped in front of me,” he said in his quiet, serious voice, and again, she was reminded of Superboy. So serious, this boy. So concerned. “You may have saved my life. We don’t know. Just take the camera. Please. I dropped your other one when I... when I grabbed you to keep you from falling. So it’s my fault it’s broken. Besides,” he said, lightening, “your dad helped pick it out. He said it was an early birthday and Christmas present.”

“I’m sure it is,” she said, and a “sorry your mom left us” present, too. Mags put the camera aside and smiled at Sean. “Thanks,” she said. “Really. Thank you.”

His dimple popped out in his cheek as he smiled back. “You’re welcome.”

“Hey! Margaret Hale! Look!”

They turned to see a group of students about their age, Helstone kids from the look of it. “See?” one said, and showed her his shirt. “We’re protesting, too!”

All of the students were wearing shirts that said, “SUPPORT OUR TEACHERS.” Mags grinned and waved back. “Brilliant!” she called out to them.

“Brilliant!” they said back, as if it were a battle cry, before they sank into their booth.

When she turned back to Sean, she found him thoughtful, his eyes darkened with shadows.

#

“Thanks for the ride,” she said as they pulled up at her grandmother’s. “And the pancakes. And the bacon. And, I guess, the camera.”

Sean laughed, a soft chuckle that belied his size. “You’re welcome. For all of it.”

“I feel bad. I don’t have anything to give you.”

“Hey, you gave me an excuse not to think about Bess for a while.”

That wasn’t true, not exactly, since they spent most of their dinner talking about Bess, Mags asking questions about when they grew up, what Bess was like as a kid. She was not at all surprised to find out that Bess was a pepper even then, and that she got into trouble more often than not for her smart mouth and sassiness.

“Well, I’m just glad that...” Mags paused, unsure of how to say what she was thinking. “That she convinced you,” she said finally. “To go to the cops about your dad.”

“That’s Bess,” he said. “Always sticking her nose in everyone else’s business.” But the humor wasn’t there this time. It was more reminiscent, thoughtful. She was certain he was telling her exactly how happy *he* was that Bess stuck her nose in his business.

“What time can we go tomorrow?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Let me text Colin.” He pulled out his phone and frowned. “That’s strange. Colin’s called six times.”

And she felt it then, the foreboding, the eternal sense of dread she felt the day they evacuated for Hurricane Katrina. The night she told Freddie about the football players. Everything she had ever felt bad in her life she felt come back to her in that moment and she said, “No.”

But he didn't hear her. He called Colin back and she watched as his face crumpled. She wrapped her arms around him when he reached for her and she held him as he cried. But still, a part of Mags couldn't cry because she couldn't process, not yet, that one of her best friends had succumbed to her illness. Bess Higgins, her dearest friend in Marlborough, was dead.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It was a bright autumn morning the day Bess Higgins was buried, which seemed appropriate given how Bess would have responded. “Damn *right* it’s bright and shiny,” she would have said. “This is my goddamn *funeral*. Respect.” The thought stayed with Mags the entirety of the funeral, and she couldn’t get Bess’s voice out of her head. She commented on everything: the flowers (“suuuuper tacky”), the eulogies (“that bitch didn’t even know my name at school!”), and, of course, her own outfit (“my mom has *excellent* taste for a principal”). Mags moved through the funeral in the fog caused not only by grief but also by the conversation occurring in her head. Bess, it seemed, even in death, would not be quiet.

It was only after they headed to the cemetery and the thunder clouds began to roll in that Mags realized, “Bess is gone,” and began sobbing. She held on to her father’s hand so tight she could not distinguish where one set of fingers began and where the other set ended. She had too much loss on her plate, too much to deal with in one young life: Freddie, her mother, now Bess. While the first two weren’t dead, the loss of them felt as such. But at least she would see them again. Bess, the moment her coffin went into the grave, ceased her prattling and whispered to Mags, “Goodbye, Mags my girl. Take care of Colin and Sean for me, my white sister.”

“Margaret, we’re going to pay our respects to the Higgins now.”

Mags looked at her father and could not begin to fathom going to the Higgins house. How to talk to Mrs. Higgins? How to look at Colin? How to see all those memories of Bess—the photographs on the walls, the couch where they had such a fun sleepover?

“Coach, I’ll take Mags, if that’s okay.” Sean came behind Mags and put a hand on her shoulder. She almost melted back into him, she wanted to escape so badly.

“Yes, of course. We’ll see you there.” Her father hugged her, too tight, it seemed, but she imagined all fathers would hug their daughters too tight today, and then he walked away.

“Want to get out of here for a bit?” Sean asked.

“I thought you were going to the Higgins’s,” she said. “Where is it we’re going instead?”

“For a ride,” Sean said. “I just need to get my head on straight before I...”

He looked good in a suit, the dark fabric contrasting nicely against his black-red hair and his bright blue eyes. She herself was wearing a black A-line dress, something Bess had approved some weeks before as they went through potential Homecoming outfits. Mags wore it in honor and memory of her friend. Then she thought, what a stupid thing to do.

“Let’s go,” she said to Sean. “Wherever you want.”

“Wherever you want” ended up being “a long drive through the country,” and Mags wished she had brought her camera, especially when the skies opened up and the rain began pouring down. She thought, “Bess would love this,” and then, it got darker, and the rain came down heavier, and suddenly hail began beating the top of the GTO.

“I’m going to pull in over there,” Sean yelled over the noise of the rain and hail. “We need to get out of this.”

There was an abandoned farm and an old barn just about a few hundred yards to the right. Bess had told her about it, she thought, the place where teenagers would go and have parties. But it was quiet, and out of the rain, and when they pulled in, Sean shut the car off. Raindrops still scattered on top of the car, but they leaked in from the roof of the barn, and didn’t seem intent to destroy as the others did.

“Are you—” She didn’t get to finish her thought, because Sean leaned over to kiss her.

She felt it, the press of his lips, the earnestness of the hand on her chin, moving along her jaw to clench in her hair. When he pressed harder, she opened her mouth to him and felt his head tilt to gain better access to her. God, she thought, I can feel this in my toes, and then, my toes are actually curling, and then, she couldn't think about anything at all.

He twisted in his seat to lean closer to her, and his elbow hit the horn. They both jumped back at the sound, and then, both began laughing at the same time.

“Bess says hi, and it's about time,” Mags said, and then, the tears she hadn't allowed herself began to fall, finally.

Sean tugged her, rearranged his seat and her until he could hold her, hug her, comfort her. But when she climbed onto his lap, that was all Mags. She felt his hands at the back of her knees, and when she stared down at him, she realized his eyes went dark when he was happy, and when he wanted something. When he wanted something, in this case, seemed to be her. “Is this okay?” she asked.

“You're kidding, right?” Sean gave her a little smile. “You realize that I'm a teenage boy and you're the gorgeous girl I've had a crush on since the first moment I saw you.”

“Really? That day at your Uncle's?”

He pinked around his ears. “Actually, I saw a picture of you when your dad came for his interview. And I think it was then.”

“*Really*. That's very interesting.” She ran a hand through his hair and felt his hands tighten around her knees. “Does this feel disloyal?” she asked. “To Bess?”

“No,” he said. “Bess wanted us together more than anything. You know that, right? This would have made her overjoyed.”

She started crying again and he held her close, wrapping both arms around her waist and positioning her so that she sat on his lap instead of awkwardly straddling it. She rested her head on his shoulder and sucked in a deep breath. “What does this mean, exactly?”

“Well, this means that we’re going to honor Bess by not going to Homecoming.”

“She would have hated Homecoming. Under the Sea. Who the hell thought of that outdated 1990s theme, anyhow?”

“Indeed,” Sean said. “And we’ll have to tell your dad you’re dating one of his players.”

“Oh,” she said. “Are we ‘dating’? I thought we were just making out in your car.”

“Oh, no, we’re dating. But let’s not even think about what my mother will do. Remember, you’re the incendiary who started a revolution and dragged her son into it.”

Mags laughed. “Indeed. I can hear her now. ‘*That* girl?’” She sobered a bit. “Wait, dragged her son into it?” She pulled off his lap and sat in her own seat. The beat of the rain still staccatoed on the roof of the car. “Are you supporting us now?”

“Mom and I had a long talk,” Sean said. “And she agreed that we had a point, the students. That it’s our education, and if we were worried about the effects of letting the teachers go, or furloughing them, then maybe she should listen to us.”

“And Bess died,” Mags said in a soft voice.

“That, too,” Sean agreed. But that’s not everything. That’s... a part of it. But not everything. Besides, this has gotten huge. Kids from Helstone caring what happens at Milton High? That’s something that’s never happened. You did that.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“No, you really did. You brought it out in the open.” He gave her a little embarrassed smile. “I know it happened in the worst way possible, but you did.”

And it had happened, in the worst way possible. She had lost Bess, it's true, and she would never get her back. But she had gained something in return: a promise, a small sliver of light that would protect those she and Bess cared about.

“Revolutions still happen,” Mags said. “That’s hard to believe.”

“It’s not that hard,” Sean said, and pressed a light kiss to her lips. “Clearly, if one has met the persuasive Margaret Hale.”