

“Gripping from start to finish . . . with twists that left me shocked.”
— VICTORIA AVEYARD, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Red Queen*

the darkest corners



KARA THOMAS

author of *Little Monsters*

SNEAK PEEK!

“You’ll be up all night
tearing through the pages,
gasping through the
twists and turns.”

—Bustle.com

“Gripping from start to finish.”

—VICTORIA AVEYARD, #1 *New York Times*
bestselling author of *RED QUEEN*

“A tight, twisted thriller, full of deft
reversals and disturbing revelations. . . .

Deeply, compulsively satisfying!”

—BRENNA YOVANOFF, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *THE REPLACEMENT*

“As dark as Gillian Flynn and as compulsive
as *Serial*.” —LAURA SALTERS, author of *RUN AWAY*

★ “The tension builds all the way to the
I-didn’t-see-that-coming conclusion.”

—Kirkus Reviews, Starred

★ “Expertly plotted with plenty of
twists and turns—never mind a **truly
shocking conclusion.**”

—Booklist, Starred

★ “A cerebral mystery wrapped in **heart-
pounding suspense** . . . [for readers] who
love dark mysteries or fans of Netflix’s
Making a Murderer.”

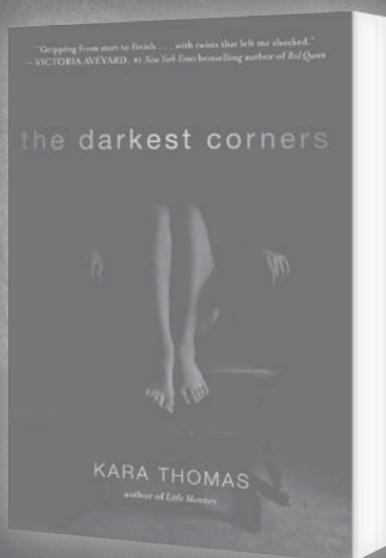
—Shelf Awareness, Starred

“Clearly drawn . . . [and] **alive until the
twisty end.**”

—The Bulletin

“Strong character development and
thrilling reveals. . . . **This novel is a
sure bet.**”

—School Library Journal



Art © 2017 by Borislav Filipovic/Getty Images

Little girls can tell
the darkest lies.

DarkestCornersBook.com

#DarkestCorners



Delacorte
Press

the darkest corners

KARA THOMAS



KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK. . . .

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2016 by Kara Thomas
Cover photograph copyright © 2016 by Borislav Filipovic/Getty Images

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Ember, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York. Originally published in hardcover in the United States by Delacorte Press, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, New York, in 2016.

Ember and the E colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us on the Web! randomhouseteens.com
Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools, visit us at RHTeachersLibrarians.com

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition of this work as follows:
Thomas, Kara.

The darkest corners / Kara Thomas. —First edition.
pages cm

Summary: When her father dies, Tessa is pulled back to the small Pennsylvania town where her life came apart when her father was sent to prison, her mother went to pieces, and her beloved older sister ran away, and where her testimony and that of her now-estranged friend Callie sent a serial killer to death row—a serial killer who may be getting a new trial as long buried secrets come to light.

ISBN 978-0-553-52145-0 (hc) — ISBN 978-0-553-52146-7 (glb) —
ISBN 978-0-553-52147-4 (ebook)

1. Serial murderers—Juvenile fiction. 2. Murder—Pennsylvania—Juvenile fiction.
3. Secrecy—Juvenile fiction. 4. Friendship—Juvenile fiction. 5. Sisters—Juvenile fiction.
6. Detective and mystery stories. 7. Pennsylvania—Juvenile fiction. [1. Mystery and
detective stories. 2. Serial murderers—Fiction. 3. Murder—Fiction. 4. Secrets—Fiction.
5. Friendship—Fiction. 6. Sisters—Fiction. 7. Pennsylvania—Fiction. 8. Youths' writings.]
1. Titles.

PZ7.1.T46Dar 2016
813.6—dc23
[Fic]
2015004181

ISBN 978-0-553-52148-1 (trade pbk.)

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
First Ember Edition 2017

Random House Children's Books supports the First Amendment and celebrates the right to read.

**ATTENTION, READER:
THIS IS AN UNCORRECTED ADVANCE EXCERPT**

CHAPTER ONE

Hell is a two-hour layover in Atlanta.

The woman to my right has been watching me since I sat down. I can tell she's one of those people who take the sheer fact that you're breathing as an invitation to start up a conversation.

No eye contact. I let the words repeat in my head as I dig around for my iPod. I always keep it on me, even though it's a model that Apple hasn't made for seven years and the screen is cracked.

Pressure builds behind my nose. The woman stirs next to me. *No eye contact. And definitely do not—*

I sneeze.

Damn it.

“Bless you, honey! Hot, isn't it?” The woman fans herself with her boarding pass. She reminds me of my gram: she's old, but more likely to be hanging around a Clinique counter than at the community center on bingo day. I give her a noncommittal nod.

She smiles and shifts in her seat so she's closer to my armrest. I try to see myself through her eyes: Greasy hair in a bun. Still in

black pants and a black V-neck—my Chili’s uniform. Backpack wedged between my feet. I guess I look like I need mothering.

“So where you from?” she asks.

It’s a weird question for an airport. Don’t most people ask each other where they’re going?

I swallow to clear my throat. “Florida.”

She’s still fanning herself with the boarding pass, sending the smell of sweat and powder my way. “Oh, Florida. Wonderful.”

Not really. Florida is where people move to die.

“There are worse places,” I say.

I would know, because I’m headed to one of them.

• • •

I knew someone was dead when my manager told me I had a phone call. During the walk from the kitchen to her office, I convinced myself it was Gram. When I heard her voice on the other end, I thought I could float away with relief.

Then she said, “Tessa, it’s your father.”

Pancreatic cancer, she explained. Stage four. It wouldn’t have made a difference if the prison doctors had caught it earlier.

It took the warden three days to track me down. My father’s corrections officer called Gram’s house collect when I was on my way to work.

Gram said he might not make it through the night. So she picked me up from Chili’s, my backpack waiting for me on the passenger seat. She wanted to come with me, but there was no time to get clearance from her cardiologist to fly. And we both knew that the extra ticket would have been a waste of money anyway.

Glenn Lowell isn’t her son. She’s never even met the man.

I bought my ticket to Pittsburgh at the airport. It cost two hundred dollars more than it would have if I'd booked it in advance. I nearly said screw it. That's two hundred dollars I need for books in the fall.

You're probably wondering what kind of person would let her father die alone for two hundred dollars. But my father shot and nearly killed a convenience store owner for a lot less than that—and a carton of cigarettes.

So. It's not that I don't want to be there to say goodbye; it's just that my father's been dead to me ever since a judge sentenced him to life in prison ten years ago.

CHAPTER TWO

Maggie Greenwood is waiting for me at the arrivals gate. She's a few shades blonder and several pounds heavier than she was the last time I saw her.

That was almost ten years ago. I don't like thinking about how little has changed since then. The Greenwoods are taking me in like a stray cat again. Except this time I'm well fed. I'm on the wrong side of being able to pull off skinny jeans. Probably all those dinner breaks at Chili's.

"Oh, honey." Maggie scoops me to her for a hug with one arm. I flinch but force myself to clasp my hands around her back. She grips my shoulders and gives me her best tragedy face, but she can't help the smile creeping into her lips. I try to see myself through her eyes—no longer a bony, sullen little girl with hair down to her waist.

My mother never cut my hair. Now the longest I keep it is at my shoulders.

"Hi, Maggie."

She puts an arm on the small of my back and herds me out to

where she's parked. "Callie wanted to come, but she had to get an early night."

I nod, hoping that Maggie doesn't sense how her daughter's name inspires a sick feeling in my stomach.

"She has a twirling competition tomorrow morning," Maggie says. I'm not sure who she's trying to convince. I know it's all bullshit and Callie wouldn't have come if Maggie had dragged her.

"So she's still into that?" What I really mean is, *So people actually still swirl batons and call it a sport, huh?* But I don't want to be rude.

"Oh, yeah. She got a scholarship." Maggie's grin nearly cuts her face in half. "To East Stroudsburg. She's thinking of majoring in exercise science."

I know all this, of course. I know who Callie is still friends with (mostly Sabrina Hayes) and what she had for breakfast last week (cinnamon-sugar muffin from Jim's Deli). I know how badly Callie is dying to get out of Fayette (pronounced *Fay-it*, population five thousand) and that she already parties harder than a college freshman.

Even though I haven't spoken to her in ten years, I know almost everything there is to know about Callie Greenwood. Everything except the thing I desperately need to know.

Does she still think about it?

"Your grandmother told me you decided on Tampa?"

I nod and lean my head against the window.

When I told Gram I'd gotten into the University of Tampa, she said that I had better think real hard about going to college in the city. Cities chew people up and spit them out.

As Maggie gets off at the exit for Fayette, all I can think is that I'd rather be chewed up and spit out than swallowed whole.

Maggie pulls up outside a white, two-story farmhouse that was twice as big in my childhood memory. We shut the doors of the minivan, prompting the dogs next door to flip out. It's almost one in the morning; in a few hours, Maggie's husband, Rick, will be getting ready to start his bread delivery route. I feel bad, wondering if he's waiting up to make sure Maggie got home okay. That's the kind of husband he is.

My dad was the kind of husband who'd make my mom wait up, sick with worry, until he stumbled in smelling like Johnnie Walker.

The dogs quiet down once we're on Maggie's porch, already tired of barking. Neighborhoods in Fayette wear their emotions like people do. The Greenwoods' neighborhood is tired, full of mostly blue-collar families who are up before the sun. The type of people who eat dinner together seven nights a week, no matter how exhausted they are.

When I think of my old neighborhood, I think of anger. Of crumbling town houses squashed together so tightly, you can see right into your neighbor's kitchen. I think of angry old men on their porches, complaining about the cable company or the Democrats or their social security checks not arriving on time.

The Greenwoods used to live in my old neighborhood. They moved a year before I left to live with Gram, which meant I couldn't run down the street to play with Callie like I'd been doing since I was six.

Maggie unlocks the front door, and I immediately smell the difference. I want to ask her if she misses her old house as much as I do.

But of course she doesn't. And after what happened in that

house, it's the type of question that will definitely make me unwelcome here.

"Are you hungry?" Maggie asks, shutting the door and locking it behind her. "I know they don't give you anything on the plane anymore. There's some leftover lasagna."

I shake my head. "I'm just . . . really beat."

Maggie makes a sympathetic face, and I notice all the lines that weren't there ten years ago. She probably thinks I'm upset about my father dying.

The Tessa she remembers would have been upset. She would have cried and screamed for her daddy like she did the day the cops broke the front door down and led him out of the house in handcuffs.

Maggie doesn't know that the old Tessa has been replaced with a monster who just wants her father to hurry up and die so she can go home.

"Of course you are." Maggie squeezes my shoulder. "Let's get you to bed."

. . .

The sun comes up the instant I fall asleep.

I really need a shower, but I don't know where the Greenwoods keep their towels. In the old house, they had a linen closet inside the bathroom. Instead of going downstairs and asking Maggie for a towel, I splash some water on my face and pat it dry with a hand towel.

I have trouble asking people for things. I've been this way for as long as I can remember, but I think it got bad when Gram brought me to Florida. Before she turned her office into a bedroom for me, I slept on a pullout bed. There were no blinds on the

windows, so every morning at six, the sunlight streamed in and I couldn't fall back asleep.

I started sleeping under the pullout bed, because it was dark there. Gram didn't catch me for more than a month. The windows in my room have blinds now, but sometimes, when I can't sleep, I find myself crawling under the bed and staring at the bed-springs like they're constellations.

I didn't even bother trying to fall asleep last night. When I'm done washing my face I find some Listerine under the sink and swish a bit in my mouth. No reason to redo the bun I slept in. What's the point? There's no way I'll look worse than my father.

Maggie is making French toast when I get downstairs. A coffeemaker gurgles on the counter.

"Milk or cream?" she asks, gesturing to the mug she's left out for me. I don't have the heart to tell her I hate coffee.

I shrug. "Either is fine."

Maggie tilts the pan and flips a slice of bread. "I tried to get Callie up, but she's not feeling well."

I sit down at the kitchen table. I heard Callie sneak in at three this morning. I'll bet anything she's hungover. Once Callie started high school, the red Solo cups in her Facebook pictures started popping up like mushrooms.

"She's missing her competition." Maggie frowns, adjusting the heat on the stove. "But I figure I'll let her slide. It's the summer."

My muscles tense up as I realize this means that Callie probably won't be able to avoid me all day. Especially not if her mother has anything to do with it.

I called Callie every day for a week once I got to Florida. Every time, Maggie answered. Callie was either at twirling practice, or riding bikes with Ariel Kouchinsky, or finishing up her homework.

Maggie's voice became more desperate and apologetic every day. She didn't want me to give up.

Eventually my calls stretched out to once a week, then once a month. Then they stopped altogether.

This past year, Maggie called on my birthday and sent us a card for Christmas. She didn't mention Callie either time.

Three years ago, I spotted Callie in the last place I thought she'd be: an online forum dedicated to discussing the Ohio River Monster murder trial. She made only one post. It was two lines, telling the other posters to shut up—what did they know about the case, they were a bunch of wannabe lawyers living in their moms' basements. She signed off with *Wyatt Stokes is a murderer* and never came back to defend herself against the swarms of people demanding, *Prove it*.

I know it was Callie; she used the same username she's used for everything since we were ten—twirlygirly23.

I created an account and messaged her. *It's me, Tessa. I've been reading this stuff too*. She never responded.

In any event, she can't be thrilled that I'm back to remind her of the worst summer of our lives.

Maggie flops a piece of French toast onto my plate. I look up and return her wan smile. We have to be at the prison by eight.

• • •

Fayette, Pennsylvania, looks worse during the day. Worse than I remember. Maggie stops at the Quik Mart on Main Street to get gas. Half the businesses are boarded up, or are hiding behind Closed signs that are probably gathering dust.

A big part of Fayette died with the steel industry in the early

nineties. Before I was born, my father worked at a mill in the next town over. Now Fayette looks as if it were clinging on for dear life. Probably because everyone here is so goddamn stubborn. No one will let Jim's Deli or Paul the Tailor go out of business.

The people who are left refuse to pack up and leave. But with any luck, their kids will.

It takes us half an hour to get to the county prison. I don't realize my leg is jiggling until Maggie puts the car in park and sets her hand on my knee.

"Honey, are you sure you want to do this?"

Of course I don't. "It's fine," I say. "We won't stay long."

Maggie flips her mirror down and puts on a fresh coat of petal-pink lipstick. I return her tight smile, and we walk side by side to the security gate. She slips her arm around my back and doesn't pull away when my muscles tense.

Gram isn't touchy-feely. For years, every night I'd linger in the hall, watching her do her crossword puzzle in the den while muttering the answers to the questions on *Jeopardy!* under her breath. I'd wait right there, like some pathetic affection beggar, until she'd finally look up at me. She'd nod and say, "Well, good night, kiddo." And that was it.

I kind of have a thing with people touching me now. Maggie doesn't seem to notice that my reaching into my bag for my phone is really my way of trying to wriggle away from her.

"They'll probably make you leave that up front." She nods to my phone. "And hospice . . . they may not let me go in with you."

I swallow away the bitter taste the coffee has left in my mouth. I guess I should be getting sad right about now, weighed down with memories of my father. Instead, I'm curious. I wonder what he looks like, whether his skin is rice-paper thin and sunken around his high cheekbones. In my memory, he was al-

ways healthy. None of us ever went to the doctor; my mom never liked them, and my dad swore that there was no affliction a shot of whiskey couldn't fix.

I don't say anything as I follow Maggie to the security desk. A woman in a gray uniform watches us from behind a glass pane.

"Are you on the approved list?" she asks, without looking up from her computer.

"I spoke with the head of hospice yesterday." Maggie's voice is clipped.

"Who are you here to see?"

"Glenn Lowell." My voice comes out dry and raspy. The guard lifts her eyes. Takes me in.

"Glenn Lowell died this morning," she says.

Maggie's jaw sets. "How is that possible?"

"People get sick, and they die," the guard deadpans. When her eyes lock on me, pity flashes in them. She sets her pen down. "He deteriorated overnight. I'm sorry."

"Why the hell weren't we notified? This is his *daughter*." Maggie's voice rises. The people waiting on the bench behind us look up from their newspapers. My finger finds the spot on the side of my jeans that's fraying.

"His daughter deserves to see him," Maggie says. "Who is your superior?"

The guard folds her arms across her chest. Her badge says WANDA. "Ma'am, I understand your frustration, but Glenn Lowell's daughter was here last night. I wasn't aware that he had two."

"Wait." My legs have gone weak. "She was here?"

I sense Maggie stiffen next to me. Without a word, the guard flips back a page on the ledger set before her. She passes it under the glass pane. My fingers tremble as I search for her name on the page.

“She’s not on here,” I say. I go to push the ledger back, but Wanda stops me.

“Six-thirty-five p.m. yesterday,” she says. “I signed her in.”

I slide my finger down the page until I find the time. *Brandy Butler*.

In my sister, Joslin’s, handwriting.

My toes clench in my sneakers. I know it’s hers—I used to make fun of the silly way she wrote her *es*, the exaggerated dip, as if it were trying to touch its toes.

Maggie puffs up, starts arguing with the guard about needing to speak with the warden.

“Glenn Lowell doesn’t have a daughter named Brandy Butler,” Maggie says.

“It’s her.”

Maggie turns to look at me.

“That’s Jos’s handwriting,” I say.

Maggie’s lips part with disbelief. There’s something else in her expression—pity. I’m getting really goddamn tired of that today.

“Let’s go,” I tell her. “He’s dead, and that’s that, so can we leave?”

Maggie hesitates. My leg is jiggling again. She casts a look at the guard, as if to say, *Someone will be hearing from me about this*. Then she grabs my hand.

The gate beyond the desk buzzes. A guard appears with a clipboard propped on his forearm. He doesn’t look up from it as he shouts out a name. “Edwards?”

A man in a suit stands up in the waiting area, sheepish, as if he’d just gotten called to the principal’s office in the middle of class.

“Your client’s ready for you,” the guard says. Edwards tucks a

manila folder under his arm and walks past Maggie and me with a polite nod. He doesn't know who we are.

Maggie's hand tightens around mine, and I know she recognizes him too. Maybe from the documentary about the murders, *Unmasking the Monster*, if she brought herself to watch it. Or maybe she's been following Stokes's appeal, because her niece was the last of his victims and she feels like she has to.

Either way, Maggie's nervous energy transfers to me, and I know she sees what I see: the defense attorney who has been trying for the past ten years to get a new trial for Wyatt Stokes.

Wyatt Stokes, the Ohio River Monster, who is on death row because Callie and I put him there.

CHAPTER THREE

“Come on, Tessa,” Maggie barks, as if I were the one holding us up. She drops my hand, and I follow her outside.

The doors slam behind us, shutting out the darkness of the prison. The sun streams into my eyes.

Maggie is wearing the same face she had on outside the courthouse the day Stokes was sentenced to death—as if all the light had been sucked from the earth. I wasn’t there for the sentencing; Joslin, my mother, and I watched the local news from our living room so we could hear the judge’s decision. One of the camera-people got a shot of Maggie and Bonnie Cawley, Lori’s mother, on the steps afterward.

I didn’t understand why Maggie didn’t look happy; Stokes got the death penalty, just like everyone had hoped he would. Maggie wouldn’t talk to any of the reporters, but Bonnie looked right at the camera and said she’d be front row at Wyatt Stokes’s execution.

I’d heard Maggie explaining to Callie that Lori’s murder had changed Callie’s aunt Bonnie. At Stokes’s bond hearing, Bonnie

had waited on the steps of the courthouse until the guards had brought him in and she could tell him to his face that he was Satan's child. Bonnie hated the man who killed her daughter so much that she hadn't been able to go on living until she'd found out he was going to die.

But I look at Maggie now, and I know that hate isn't something you can put in a person's heart by taking away something they love. You either have hate in you or you don't; it hides in someone's body like a cancer, waiting for the right moment to come out.

I didn't realize I had so much hate in me until right now. I don't hate Wyatt Stokes for making us live in fear. I don't hate my father for being sent to prison, and I don't even hate him for not holding on for a few more hours when he knew I was coming to say goodbye.

It's my sister I hate. My only sister, who kissed my eyelids when I cried and let me hang on her like a monkey at night, taking up the whole bed with my tiny body. My sister, who protected me when my father went to jail and our mother unraveled in front of us. Joslin, who said she'd never leave me but ran away from home two days after my ninth birthday and never came back.

Only she did come back. Just not for me.

• • •

There was never going to be a funeral for my father, even if he'd died on enough notice. There's no money to pay for one, and I'm not sure who would have shown up if we'd held it in the prison chapel. Wanda? The other inmates? It's mortifying. Everyone who mattered to my father—and it was a short list, trust me—is

long gone. So I'd booked my return trip to Orlando for tomorrow night.

That was before I knew my sister is back. *Was* back. Who knows where she is now—she's had a twelve-hour head start to get the hell out of Pennsylvania.

What I can't figure out is, how did Jos know my father was dying? Glenn Lowell wasn't even her biological dad. Our mother left Joslin's father when Joslin was two; all we'd ever heard about him was that he lived in Louisiana. He and my mother had never gotten married. I never had the nerve to ask whether or not the scar on Joslin's chin had anything to do with the reason my mother left him.

Jos called my father Daddy, and there was never any mention of the Louisiana man. My dad called us both his babies, and Jos cried like I did when he went to jail for three counts of armed robbery and attempted capital murder.

I doubt that Jos found out he was dying from our mother, since I haven't heard from her in almost ten years. Gram hasn't heard from her in twice that. I'd think maybe it was Maggie who got in touch with Jos—Maggie always had an almost mystical quality of being connected to people, always knowing what everyone was up to. But she was just as surprised as I was to find out that Joslin had been to the prison last night.

And Maggie never really liked my sister anyway.

Callie and I had been friends since pre-K, but until we turned eight, Joslin was always "That sister of yours, Tessa," said with a disapproving sidelong glance. That June, Lori Cawley came to Fayette to spend the summer with the Greenwoods. Jos was about to be a senior in high school. Lori had just finished her first year at college in Philadelphia. Maggie tried to introduce Lori to girls her own age, but she met my sister when Jos dropped me off at

the house, and that was that. Joslin and Lori brought Callie and me to the pool almost every day when my sister wasn't working; they'd bend their heads together over copies of *Cosmo* and talk about the things they did with boys, and if Callie and I overheard, they'd buy our silence with giant jawbreakers from the ice cream parlor.

It was also the first summer my mother let me stay over at a friend's house. The first time I slept at the Greenwoods', Callie and I watched *Mulan* twice because we didn't want to go to sleep, our mouths white from the jawbreakers. I was having so much fun, I didn't even miss having my sister in the bed with me, like I did on the nights when she snuck out to meet her boyfriend, Danny.

The last time I stayed at the Greenwoods' was the night Lori Cawley disappeared. In Fayette, we'd heard rumors of a serial killer abducting girls from truck stops along I-70. They'd found three bodies in the previous two years. All runaways, drug addicts. Girls of the night.

Girls like Lori didn't have anything to worry about. In Fayette, we were safe from the Monster, who stalked the outskirts of town in search of the next troubled, desperate girl to accept a ride from him.

That was what we thought until the police found Lori's body in a wooded area off the interstate a day after she went missing.

• • •

"Do you want me to put on some tea for us?" Maggie asks when we get back to the house. I can tell she's being nice, that she's rattled by everything that happened at the prison and just wants to be alone.

That's fine by me. "I should probably call my gram."

"Okay." Maggie leans her back against the kitchen counter. Presses her fingers to her eyelids. When she moves her fingers, she blinks as if she'd never seen me before. She catches herself and forces a smile. "Anything you need, you let me know. Anything."

I can't ask for the one thing I really need, for Maggie to drive me to Pittsburgh so I can switch my flight to tonight, because I don't know how I'm going to make it until tomorrow.

It's two days. If you survived ten years here, you can survive two more days.

I mumble a "Thank you" to Maggie before heading upstairs. My cell phone is on the nightstand charging, where I left it. I dial Gram's house and get her answering machine. While her greeting plays, I try to figure out what I'm going to say.

I can't tell Gram that my father died before I even got to see him. She'll just feel guilty, even though it's not her fault. I hang up.

I don't have an Internet plan on my cell phone. I share minutes with Gram, even though her phone is always dead, buried in the debris at the bottom of her purse. If I'd had the chance to pack for myself, I would have brought my laptop.

I swallow the lump climbing up my throat. I saw a computer in the family room downstairs.

The top step groans under my weight, and I flinch. I don't like being in an unfamiliar house, where the slightest misstep could mean drawing attention to myself. I've learned how to avoid all the spots in Gram's house like they're land mines—the creaky third step from the bottom of the staircase, the screen door around back that desperately needs its hinges oiled.

The sound of the Greenwoods' front door slamming freezes me in place.

“Callie?” Maggie calls out from the kitchen.

I don’t breathe. I feel like I’m ten again—pissed off at Callie for abandoning me, but willing to do anything to catch a glimpse of her.

The first few months at Gram’s, I didn’t talk much. Eventually, Gram got tired of me moping; she cornered me and pulled the truth out of me, like the way my father used to chase me down and yank the baby teeth out of my mouth when he got sick of watching me wiggling them.

Gram probably expected me to say that I missed my mom or Joslin, but the truth was, I’d already accepted that they were both gone. Callie was all I had left, and Maggie couldn’t even get her on the phone with me.

“Yeah?” Callie’s voice is low, slightly husky. Nothing like I remember. There’s the sound of something being tossed onto the couch in the foyer—a purse, probably—and her footsteps fade into the kitchen.

I grip the banister. This is ridiculous. I can’t hide in the guest room for two days.

I tiptoe down the stairs. Maggie and Callie are murmuring in the kitchen. I pause in the foyer, with the sinking feeling that they’re having a conversation I wouldn’t have been invited to.

I catch pieces of it. Maggie’s voice. “. . . know it’s hard for you. She didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“We’re not a halfway house, Mom.” Callie’s voice. It’s angry.

I turn to head back upstairs. The living room floor creaks underneath me. There’s a loaded silence in the kitchen.

“Tessa, honey?” Maggie sounds nervous. “Is that you?”

Crap. I squeeze my eyes shut. “I just needed a glass of water.”

Maggie appears next to me in the living room. “Oh, of course. I’m glad you came down, because guess who’s home?”

She leads me through the archway. Callie looks up from the table. She's in a green East Stroudsburg University sweatshirt, her honey-brown eyes smudged with day-old eyeliner. She's beautiful, in a way that always made me feel like something that crawled out from a sewer.

Callie meets my gaze, the color draining from her face. And in that moment I see myself exactly how she sees me: Tessa Lowell, her embarrassing, white-trash childhood friend.

The reminder of the year of her childhood that was taken away by the trial.

Maggie looks from her daughter to me. Her eyes are red. I picture her sneaking off when we got home from the prison to have a good cry about seeing Tim Edwards.

"I'm so glad you girls finally get to spend some time together," Maggie says.

Callie snorts. "Yeah, because I *definitely* asked for this."

She gets up and pushes her chair in. She's gone before the shock on Maggie's face morphs to anger. Maggie turns to me, her expression strained.

"Tessa, I'm so—"

"It's okay," I say. "Really."

Maggie reaches for my hand and squeezes it. "I need to pick up a few things from the supermarket, if you want to come."

I shake my head and make an excuse about wanting to lie down, then head up to the guest room. I sit on the edge of the bed, palms on my knees, until I hear the front door shut. And then I hurry downstairs to the family room, where the computer is.

I've typed his name so many times that my fingers have memorized the strokes; they're ready once they find the keyboard.

Wyatt Stokes. He's not in the news often anymore, but the latest article is from last week. It's one I must have missed between

picking up all the extra shifts to make my second tuition deposit in time.

JUDGE GRANTS MOTION TO HEAR
NEW EVIDENCE IN WYATT STOKES APPEAL

I knew that he was appealing, of course. Stokes fired his first defense attorney right after he was sentenced, and replaced him with Tim Edwards. After years of trying to overturn his conviction, a judge denied Stokes a new trial, saying the first was fair enough. But Edwards said he'd take the appeal to the highest court.

This always happens, but nothing ever comes of it, my mother explained when I was worried that Stokes would get out and come after Callie and me for testifying against him. Back before I knew that, guilty or innocent, no one goes down without a fight.

I skim the article, but it doesn't say what the new evidence is. Doesn't say when the new hearing will be. It could be years; death row inmates have nothing but time. Until the day they don't.

There's a clenching in my gut, hard and furious.

Upstairs, a door slams.

Shit. I scramble to erase the article from the browsing history. I'm deleting *Wyatt Stokes* from the search bar terms when the footsteps reach the bottom of the stairs.

I launch myself out of the desk chair at the same moment Callie rounds the corner into the family room. She stops when she sees me; I picture her ignoring me, pretending I'm invisible as she flings herself onto the couch and turns on the TV.

Instead, she sucks in a breath. I think I smell booze on her. She pats at her part, smoothing down her already flat blond hair. She used to pull at it as a kid—so much that she had a bald spot for the trial.

We stare at each other. The room is small; she's blocking my exit.

Callie always had more of everything than I did. I was always the needy friend, always going without something. But I'm not going to stand here now and be the one without the balls to open my mouth.

"How are you?" I say.

"Not really in the mood." She flips the hood of her sweatshirt over her head and steps around me.

I suppress the urge to shove her into the wall. Rip out her hair. I didn't realize how angry I was at her until this moment.

I haven't fought anyone since the end of tenth grade. Some stupid kid, this boy everyone called Bobby Buckteeth, was mouthing off in social studies about food stamps. Regurgitating everything his mother had said about the women who came into her Stop & Shop, spending taxpayer money while flaunting their iPhones and designer purses and five kids.

I waited for him after class and asked if those kids deserved to starve. Maybe that woman was stuck with all those kids because their father dropped dead, or went to jail. He brushed past me, muttering something to his friend about how I was white trash. I chased him down and slammed his face into a locker.

When Gram picked me up from school, she grabbed my chin in front of the assistant principal, digging her fingernails into my skin. "Don't mistake my kindness for weakness, Tessa."

That was the moment when I realized that my mother was her daughter, after all. They both have a violence lurking under what looks like a harmless outer layer.

Callie draws her knees to her chest on the couch. She takes out her phone, obviously so she doesn't have to acknowledge that I'm still standing here.

“What do you want?” she says, when I make no motion to leave.

Look at me! I want you to put down your goddamn phone and stop acting like you weren't my best friend once.

But I don't have the balls to say that. I never have, and probably never will. I clear my throat.

“Don't give your mom shit about me being here right now,” I say. “We were at the prison this morning.”

“I know.” Callie balances her phone on her knee. The screen goes dark. “I'm sorry about your dad,” she adds, as an afterthought.

“We didn't— That's not why she's upset.” I swallow. “It's Stokes.”

Callie flinches, and for some reason, it makes me brave.

“We saw his lawyer,” I say. “The one handling his appeal.”

“Okay.” Callie drags the word out, as if she doesn't get why I'm telling her this. But I see her digging her fingers into the arm of the couch.

I shrug. “I thought you should know. It might be in the news.”

Callie's expression shifts to one I used to know well. I used to look out for that face like it was a tornado siren. Now I'm glad she's mad. I'm glad I'm the one who did it.

“Why the hell are you bringing this up?” Callie hisses, her cheeks flushed with anger.

“Because it involves us,” I say.

“Not anymore. He's *guilty*, and he's never getting out.” It's a phrase Maggie's drilled into Callie's head over the years, no doubt. She even looks like her mother when she says it—has the same flattened, defiant upper lip. I can't tell her that the article claims his lawyers have new evidence; Callie will demand to know what it is, and when I can't tell her, she'll give me one of those looks that level me.

Callie was always the one people listened to. *Eight going on eighteen*, Maggie would say. Even now that we *are* both eighteen, I feel like a stupid child around her.

“Things are different now,” I mumble.

“What are you talking about?” Callie springs up from the couch. Closes the family room door. “Do *not* tell me all those lunatics from Cyber Sleuths got into your head and now you want to take back your testimony.”

So she did get my message.

“Of course not,” I say. “But it’s been ten years. If they retest the evidence, who knows what they’ll find.”

Callie folds her arms across her chest. “Tessa. He stalked Lori and he killed her. You were there when he threatened her at the pool. Don’t you remember?”

Of course I remember. I’ve remembered it every day for the past ten years. The three of us were headed to where Lori’s car was parked. Wyatt Stokes was leaning against the chain-link fence, smoking a joint. The day before, Joslin had let him borrow her lighter. I don’t know what Stokes said to Lori, but she got uncomfortable and ignored him.

He sucked on his joint and said, “What’s red, white, and blue and floats?”

Lori pressed her hands to our backs and pushed us toward the car as he called out, “A dead bitch,” and laughed to himself all the way into the woods.

I realize I haven’t responded to Callie when her eyes flash. “I *saw him*,” she says, but I hear what she really means: Wyatt Stokes is the man who killed her cousin. Even to consider the possibility that it isn’t true is treason.

I lift my chin so that I can meet her eyes. Callie was always

taller than me. She towers over me now, though, her low-slung jeans showing off a sliver of her toned stomach.

“How can you remember what you saw?” My voice quakes. “It was dark. We were only eight.”

Callie lets out an exasperated laugh and grabs the doorknob. “I’m done talking about this.”

She whirls around to face me, and I flinch. Her face softens—or maybe I only imagined it, because now she’s glaring at me again. “Just remember that you said you saw him too. You can’t say I lied without accusing yourself of the *same thing*.”

Callie slams the door behind her. The sound may as well be the period at the end of the sentence *Wyatt Stokes is guilty*.

Two more days in Fayette.

It might as well be two years.

• • •

We begged Lori to let us sleep in the Greenwoods’ sunroom that night. Maggie had said absolutely no to our setting up Rick’s tent in the backyard. She’d promised we could camp out there some other time, when she and Rick would be home and someone could stay in the tent with us.

The sunroom was the next best thing. It made Lori nervous that a screen was the only thing separating us from the outside, but Callie insisted that nothing bad ever happened in our neighborhood. Lori relented, and we dug through the camping gear in the crawl space beneath the stairs to the basement to find me an old sleeping bag. We vowed to stay up all night and watch for bears, but by ten, we were fading, cloaked in a sun-and-chlorine-soaked bliss.

I woke up to Callie shaking me, her Cinderella sleeping bag bunched up to her shoulders.

“Tessa. There’s someone out there.”

I don’t remember being scared. I thought it was probably an animal, until we heard another twig snap. Footsteps. Callie dug her nails into my forearm. “What if it’s the man from the pool?”

I shushed her, and we peered out the screen together. Callie cried out as a dark figure skulked around the side of the yard. I yanked her through the sunroom door and into the living room, where Lori was on the couch, the television muted, a book face-down in her lap.

“There’s someone outside,” Callie said.

Lori grabbed a flashlight. Callie started to cry.

“It’s probably a raccoon,” Lori told her. “Just wait in your room.”

We huddled on Callie’s bed until Lori came back a few minutes later.

“No one’s out there,” she said. “But why don’t you just sleep in here tonight, okay?”

“Can’t you sleep in here with us?” Callie asked her.

Lori laughed. The three of us couldn’t have possibly fit in the twin bed. Lori had insisted we’d be fine in Callie’s room.

Imagine if she hadn’t? I heard my mother whisper to Maggie afterward. *Lori was their guardian angel.*

When Maggie and Rick got home from dinner and drinks at a friend’s house, Lori wasn’t in the guest room, and her bed was still made. Callie and I hadn’t heard a thing. The guest room was across the house from Callie’s room. Lori’s killer had surprised her, probably caught her asleep on the couch after the excitement from earlier had calmed down. She’d never even had the chance to scream.

Callie and I had to describe everything that happened that night so many times. Eventually, it felt like *we* were the criminals; Maggie kept reminding us that the prosecutors just wanted to make sure they were able to put away the man who'd hurt Lori. They poked holes in our testimony; they looked for places where our stories didn't match up. Callie started to cry when the assistant district attorney grilled her about what we'd had for dinner. I said Maggie had made us corn to go with our hot dogs. Callie had forgotten about the corn. Any potential hole in the story had to be plugged up; the prosecution needed us to say we saw Wyatt Stokes sneaking onto the Greenwoods' property, but they couldn't risk us looking unreliable and sinking their case.

I don't remember eating the corn now. I don't remember how the hot dog tasted or which pajamas I was wearing.

Does it even matter now if Callie and I never really saw Stokes's face? Once he went to jail, girls stopped turning up dead along the Ohio River.

Marisa Perez. Rae Felice. Kristal Davis. All strangled, robbed, and left half naked like trash off the highway, down by the river. Three girls who were so different from Lori, except for their proximity to Wyatt Stokes.

Just tell us what you saw, sweetheart. There are no wrong answers.

Every now and then another answer to what happened that night sneaks in from the darkest corners of my mind. I usually squash it like a mosquito—there's no point dwelling on questions no one can answer for me.

But now that I'm here, I can't ignore certain things any longer.

There are worse things in this world than monsters, and somehow, they always manage to find me.



JAMES SHAW

KARA THOMAS is the author of *The Darkest Corners* and *Little Monsters*. She is a true-crime addict who lives on Long Island with her husband and rescue cat. To learn more about Kara and her books, visit her at kara-thomas.com and follow @karatwrites on Twitter. 🐦



Just tell
the truth
and nothing
bad will
happen.

LITTLE MONSTERS

KARA THOMAS

AUTHOR OF *THE DARKEST CORNERS*

SNEAK PEEK!

LITTLE MONSTERS

KARA THOMAS



DELACORTE PRESS

KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK. . . .

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2017 by Kara Thomas

Jacket photograph of girl copyright © 2017 by Liubov Burakova/Stocksy

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Delacorte Press,
an imprint of Random House Children's Books,
a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

Delacorte Press is a registered trademark and the colophon
is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us on the Web! randomhouseteens.com

Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools, visit us at RHTeachersLibrarians.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Thomas, Kara, author.

Title: Little monsters / Kara Thomas.

Description: New York : Delacorte Press, [2017] | First edition. |

Summary: When Kacey moves in with her estranged father and his new family,

her new friend goes missing and Kacey finds herself at the center of the investigation.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016032457 | ISBN 978-0-553-52149-8 (hc) | ISBN 978-0-553-52151-1 (el) |

ISBN 978-1-5247-6474-6 (intl. tr. pbk.)

Subjects: | CYAC: Mystery and detective stories. | Missing children—Fiction. |

Moving, Household—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.T46 Li 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

The text of this book is set in 12.5-point Apollo.

Jacket design by Angela Carlino

Interior design by Trish Parcell

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Random House Children's Books supports the First Amendment and celebrates the right to read.

**ATTENTION, READER:
THIS IS AN UNCORRECTED ADVANCE EXCERPT**

CHAPTER ONE

They fire off a round of texts at me five minutes after midnight:

We're coming.

Get ready.

They're not threats, but my friends have a way of making even the simplest demands feel like ultimatums. *Sneak out.* I don't have a choice: if I say no, they'll make sure I'm fully aware of how much fun they had without me.

But then again, it's cold, and not the normal kind of cold. It's Broken Falls, Wisconsin, Dead of Winter cold.

No one warned me about the winters before I moved here. The books and movies are right that Christmas in Wisconsin is magical, with the barns glowing under white string lights, fresh-cut Christmas trees visible through scalloped windows.

But everything that comes after is just cruel. Wind-whipped sheets of snow so thick you can't move through them. Mornings where *above freezing* is the best thing you'll hear all day. Layers of ice on your windshield that take ages to chip off.

And February. February is just the biggest asshole.

February makes you feel like you'll never see the sun again.

My plan was to go to bed early and avoid the inevitable texts from Bailey and Jade. *Are you up? You better be up!* My friends' restlessness is in direct proportion to how miserable and gray it is outside.

Tonight, though: tonight is so clear you can count the stars like they're diamonds.

I text back: *guys I'm so tired* 😞

Bailey: *Stoooooop.*

Bailey: *We're doing the thing tonight.*

The skin on the back of my neck pricks. *The thing.* The thing was Bailey's idea; almost everything is Bailey's idea. I take a deep breath to slow my suddenly skittish heart. I could call them, tell them I'm not coming, but they'll just make fun of me for being scared.

There's shuffling outside my bedroom door. The lamp on my nightstand is on. My stepmom, probably, coming to scold me for being up so late.

"Kacey?" A tiny voice. Definitely not Ashley, whose voice carries over hill and sea. My stepmom's constantly talking, sucking up all the air so my half sister can barely get a word in.

I fire off another text to Bailey: *I can't come. Sorry.*

“You can come in,” I say. Lauren pokes her head inside the room. She reminds me of a doll: Dark, blunt bangs. Porcelain skin. Round head, a little too big for her body. We have the same eyes—wide hazel ones that prompted a particularly nasty freshman at my old high school to call me *that freaky Bambi bitch*.

I fluff out the comforter to make room for Lauren to crawl underneath with me. “You okay?”

Lauren hugs her knees. She’s wearing fleece sock-monkey pajamas. There’s something about my sister that makes her seem younger than most kids her age; she still cries when she falls off her bike and bleeds. Tonight there’s a raw pink strip over her upper lip from the cold.

“Keelie is texting me pictures from Emma’s party,” she whispers.

I want to fold my sister into a hug. Squeeze the sad out of her. Emma Michaels lives down the road—she’s been Lauren’s best friend since preschool. But Lauren isn’t at Emma’s thirteenth birthday sleepover right now, because Keelie March told Emma not to invite her.

Keelie is thirteen, like Lauren, but she fills out her leotards in a way that makes the dance dads want to wait in the car. I saw Keelie in the parking lot over the summer, when I went with my stepbrother, Andrew, to pick Lauren up from her Saturday-morning class. Noticed the way Keelie watched Andrew from the corner of her eye as she lifted her leg onto the ramp railing in a perfect stretch. Sweat glistening between cleavage that even I didn’t have. It was sweltering out; Keelie was twelve

going on twenty, staring at a seventeen-year-old boy like he was a Popsicle.

“They’re drinking wine coolers,” Lauren says. “That’s why I wasn’t invited.”

I think of the American Girl dolls still set up in Lauren’s room, arranged around a tea set like they’re waiting for a party that’s never going to happen. I know she won’t play with them because the girls at school have already packed theirs up and put them in the attic.

Those girls are thirteen and drinking. I should call Emma’s house and tell her mother what’s going on in that bedroom. Then I remember the things that went on in my house when I was thirteen.

“Do you want me to block Keelie’s number from your phone?” I ask Lauren.

She shakes her head, sending a tear down her cheek. “I just really wish I was there.”

I’m about to tell her *fuck Keelie March and those other dumb girls, you have me*, when headlights flash through my bedroom window. My room faces Sparrow Road, the outer edge of our cul-de-sac. It’s what Bailey and Jade branded the perfect loading spot for a sneak-out. And it seems that despite my texts, they came anyway.

Bailey flashes her high beams; then there’s darkness.

Lauren frowns. “Who’s that?”

“Just Bailey and Jade,” I answer, fumbling for my phone. I’ll tell them Lauren is awake. I definitely can’t come out now.

“Are you guys going somewhere?” I hear the hopeful lilt in her voice.

“No—we were just—”

Snow crunching outside my window. Bailey’s face, illuminated by the light from the phone under her chin. She makes a ghostlike *bwahahaha* noise and I jump, even though I’m looking right at her. Jade appears next to her. Adjusts the messy bun sitting atop her head and taps on my window with one finger.

I dart over and raise the glass. Bailey mashes her face against the screen, makes a pig nose. “Ready to go?” she whispers.

I cringe. Even when Bailey whispers, she’s loud.

I think of nosy Mrs. Lao next door, probably perched in the armchair by her living room window with a Sudoku book. A small wooded clearing separates us from the Laos, but in the winter, when the trees are bare, the slightest noise from our house is enough to send Mrs. Lao’s Yorkie, Jerome, into a barking fit.

Jade notices Lauren sitting on my bed before Bailey does. She nudges Bailey and flicks her eyes to me, as if to say, *What the hell is she doing here?*

“She came down here because she was upset and couldn’t sleep.” I steal a glance back at Lauren. She’s picking at the pills on her fleece pants, but beneath her bangs, her eyes are on us.

“Can we just go another night?” I whisper.

“No,” Jade says. “Put your pants on. Live a little.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me and grins.

But when I look at Bailey, she’s not smiling. I could swear that there’s a hint of fear in her face, and for a second, I think I’m off the hook. Then: “I have all the stuff. Don’t wimp out, Kacey.”

Wimp out? I never agreed to this *thing* in the first place.

Bailey's eyes are focused on me. Daring me to say no. Her message is clear: if I come out tonight, I'm forgiven for all those times I stayed home.

Across the street, there's faint yelping. Jerome. Mrs. Lao must have let him out to pee.

I turn to Lauren. "We're just going out for a bit, okay? Please don't tell your mom. You can stay in here, okay?"

She looks down at her toes. "I won't."

A bubble of relief. I exhale. Pull jeans on over my fleece PJ pants and throw on the jacket I left draped over my desk chair. The relief doesn't last long when I see Lauren's face. Crushed.

She gives me a halfhearted wave as I pop out my screen and climb up on my windowsill and awkwardly out the other side into the cold night air. I pull the window down behind me feeling like the shittiest person ever, but I have to get rid of my friends before they wake my stepmom up and everything goes to hell.

When I'm tucked in the back of Bailey's Honda Civic, balled-up Taco Bell wrappers under my butt as I fumble for the seat belt, Jade says, "Is she gonna rat us out?"

"She won't," I say.

Bailey looks over her shoulder as she pulls away from the curb. Turns front and slams on the brakes, letting out a little yelp.

Lauren is standing in front of the car, her body illuminated by Bailey's headlights. I nearly slide off my seat. She's wearing her purple down jacket and she's waving for us to stop. Bailey and I both lower our windows.

“Can I come?” Lauren wraps her arms around her waist. “I won’t say anything. I promise.”

My heart twists. Lauren coming along tonight is a bad idea in a million different ways. “You can come next time.”

Jerome starts to bark again, obviously forgotten in the backyard. A light flips on from Mrs. Lao’s back porch.

“Shit,” Bailey says.

My stomach twists. If Mrs. Lao sees us—“Just get in the car.”

Lauren looks at the house, then back at me. “Really?”

Bailey flips her headlights off, chanting *shit, shit, shit* under her breath. I lean over and throw open the back door for Lauren. “Yes! Just get in.”

Lauren ducks and climbs into the backseat next to me. “Ride it like you stole it!” Jade hollers.

Bailey accelerates, hitting the curve at the end of the cul-de-sac. My head knocks against the back window. Lauren’s breathless, like we’ve completed a heist.

Jade lowers her mirror. Warm brown eyes winged with black liner meet mine; she’s pissed, but what am I supposed to do? They’re the ones who decided to drag me out.

I feel the cold in my hands. The vents are pointed away from Lauren and me, concentrating all the heat in the front of the car. Bailey’s eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror. I hope she can read what I’m trying to communicate: *It’s not too late. We can go back.*

But she grips the steering wheel and looks straight ahead at the road. It’s covered in packed snow, the bare trees on each side bending eerily toward the center. Lauren pales when she sees where we are. “Where are we going?”

I hesitate. "Up to the barn. You still want to come?"

Lauren picks at the pills of fleece on her pants again. Lifts her head and nods.

Bailey stops at the foot of Sparrow Hill and cuts the engine. "Let's do this."

Lauren has my hand in a vise grip. We're climbing Sparrow Hill, picking our way around the barren white spruces and trying not to slip on the icy patches of snow.

There was a time when my brand-new half sister was terrified of me. She'd sense me coming into a room and skitter out of it like a cat. Now I'm *her* sister. She won't let anyone forget that, especially my stepbrother, Andrew. *Her* half brother.

Now she trusts me enough to bring her to the creepiest place in Broken Falls—Sparrow Kill. That's what everyone calls it, because of what happened in the Leeds House before it burned down.

Jade, already several paces ahead, looks back at us, a pinch of concern on her forehead when she sees Lauren's face. "If you're scared, you can go back and wait in the car."

"So she can get snatched by some creep?" Bailey says. Something rustles past our feet. "Shit! Something touched me."

I feel Lauren's hand tense in mine.

"It was probably just a chipmunk," I say. I look down at my sister, drop my voice to a whisper. "You really don't have to do this. We can walk home."

She nods. I can see the wheels turning in her head. *Keelie March wouldn't be brave enough to climb Sparrow Kill.* "I want to."

My foot catches a slippery spot and the ground disappears

from underneath me. I fall, taking Lauren down with me. Pain shoots up my tailbone.

Bailey and Jade whip their heads around. See us on our butts. Bailey starts to laugh—a full-on belly laugh that rises into the night, skimming the tops of the trees. I start to laugh too, and then so do Jade and Lauren. We laugh as loud as we want; the nearest house, the Strausses', is more than half a mile away.

It's okay, I tell myself. We're laughing. Everything will be okay.

Jade extends a mittened hand and helps me up. Snow seeps into my socks, through the tops of my boots.

Without the moon to guide us, it's too dark to spot the barn. Bailey reaches into her bag and digs out a flashlight—one of those small ones with the name of her dad's plumbing company on it—and illuminates a shallow path for us. "I think it's to the right."

We move together, the crunch of our footsteps in sync. When Bailey stops short in front of me, I know she's spotted it.

The barn has a face. They took the door off its hinges years ago, leaving a gaping hole for a mouth. Two windows, high up, form the eyes. Those are broken, too. I know it's probably because of some kids who came up here to dick around, throw some rocks, but it's still creepy.

The house is gone, but I've seen it in pictures. A red-and-white Scandinavian-style house set behind wrought-iron gates. The scalloped windows reminded me of the dollhouse in my mother's baby pictures, the one my grandfather built her.

I never found out what happened to the dollhouse. Everyone

knows what happened to the Leeds House, though: it burned down.

What no one knows for sure is who set the fire. By the time the fire marshal arrived on Sparrow Hill, there was nothing left of the house but ash and the gnarled bodies of the five children who lived there. Outside, sitting upright on a bench, was Hugh Leeds, the children's father. There was a rifle next to his body and a single gunshot wound to his head.

His wife, Josephine, was never seen again.

The town fought for years to tear the barn down, clear the property and sell it, but without Josephine's body, they couldn't prove she was dead. So the barn stayed, belonging to the Leedses by law. They cleared the wreckage of the house and planted trees around the scorched earth.

Depending on who you ask, Josephine Leeds is still here, walking up and down Sparrow Kill, her white nightdress bloody and filthy at the hem. People call her the Red Woman, and they say she can only be spotted at night.

That's why *we're* here. To see for ourselves.

To scare the shit out of ourselves. Because what else is there to do during a Broken Falls winter?

"You first." Bailey jabs me between my shoulder blades.

Jade snorts. "Are you actually scared?"

Bailey ignores her and steps up to the entrance. Holds up her phone, casting a pale glow on the barn floor. "This is maaaaaad creepy." It comes out as if the breath has been sucked out of her.

I walk through the mouth of the barn, feeling Lauren's sharp inhale as I step away from her. Bailey, never one to be outdone, snaps out of her fear and follows me.

There's hay scattered over the ground, accompanied by the occasional glint of a condom wrapper or beer can. A loft looms on the other end of the barn, its floor beveling under the weight of its age and neglect.

The scraping of feet, and then Lauren and Jade come up behind us. "So now what?"

Bailey sits. Removes the tea light candles from her bag and arranges them in a neat row. Jade tosses Bailey her lighter and smirks. "Do we cut our palms and make a blood oath?"

"If you don't take it seriously, it's not going to work," Bailey scolds. She flicks the lighter and lets the flame hover over the wick on the first candle.

I sit next to Bailey. Next to me, Lauren dutifully lowers herself to the ground, eyes wide, and I lean over and whisper in her ear: "Nothing is actually going to happen. It's not real."

But when Jade sits, I see her shiver. Bailey catches it and raises an eyebrow as if to say, *See?*

Jade wraps her arms around her middle. "It's freezing. Can we just do this and go home?"

Outside, the wind picks up. A draft flows through the door; the flame gutters out. Bailey frowns, tries again. We fall silent, watching her finger skate across the trigger of the lighter.

Finally, a flame. Bailey's eyes are fixed on the candles as she lights them, but I see the quaver in her hand.

The last candle flickers; the flame jumps to life. Bailey sits back. A satisfied look comes over her face. She slips something out of her back pocket: a silver pendulum, a daggerlike blue crystal at the end.

Bailey'd found it in her attic while putting away the Christmas

ornaments in January. She'd opened a box of her mom's old things by mistake.

Now, Bailey inhales and holds the pendulum over the circle formed by the candles. A gust of wind passes through the barn, causing the chain to sway.

"How are we supposed to know if it's working?" I ask. "The wind is so strong."

Bailey looks at me and holds her free finger to her lips. The chain goes still; the crystal at the end of the pendulum stops swinging.

Bailey's voice comes out in a hush: "Is there anyone here?"

Our eyes on the crystal, we're silent, until:

"I farted," Jade says.

Bailey leans across the circle and slaps Jade's thigh, hard. Lauren erupts into giggles.

Bailey actually sounds angry as she glares at Jade. "You killed the energy, jerk."

"Oh, *whatever*." Jade rolls her eyes. "You're the only one who believes this garbage."

Next to me, Lauren hugs her knees to her chest. She's still in those sock-monkey pajamas. Her eyes are on the candles. I won't betray her, reveal that Bailey isn't the only one who believes this garbage. Andrew, my stepbrother, told me that Lauren couldn't sleep for days when her friend Chloe said she spotted a strange ball of light on Sparrow Road.

A gust of wind picks up. Something slams against the outside of the barn, drawing a yelp out of Bailey. Jade sits up straight, turns to the noise.

The thrumming in my body zips up to my brain. *Just adrenaline.* “It was only the wind.”

Then: the crunch of snow. The wind rises again, howling, taking footsteps outside with it. Running. Someone—*something*—running away from the barn.

Bailey jumps. “What the hell was that?” Lauren’s arms shoot around my middle.

Jade stands. “I’m going to check.”

I roll onto my knees. Jade shouldn’t go alone. “I’m coming.”

“Don’t,” Lauren cries out. “What if someone’s out there?”

“There’s more of us,” Jade says. “It was probably an animal, anyway.”

I don’t ask what kind of animal other than a human would be spying on four girls performing a séance in the middle of the night. Bailey sits back on her heels, frozen.

I look from Bailey to Lauren. “Stay with her, please?” I don’t know which one of them I’m talking to.

Jade is already out the door; I’m at her heels. “This was a stupid idea,” she mutters, picking her way through the dark. Her own feet barely make a sound on the snow. She shouts into the trees: “Hey, dickhead! We’re going.”

I pull my scarf over my face, leaving Jade to shout into the wind, and make my way around the barn to the wall where we heard the slamming. The snow is packed solid. No footprints. No animal, no human.

I make my way back to Jade. “There’s no one out here. You can stop yelling.”

The wind picks up again, nearly knocking us backward.

That's when the groaning starts. I whip around just in time to see the snow on the roof of the Leeds Barn sinking.

Lauren.

I take off running, shouting: *Get out get out get out.*

A body collides with mine: Bailey. She's got Lauren by the hand. I steady myself, grab on to both Bailey's and Lauren's arms as a *crack* splits the silence. We watch as one half of the Leeds Barn roof falls, hitting the ground with a thud.

That's when Lauren starts screaming.

Bailey's voice is breathless: "We need to get the hell out of here."

I grab hold of Lauren. "Hey. It's okay. It was just the wind."

Lauren's eyes are on the barn. The sound coming out of her is shrill enough to carry over half a mile.

Jade is at our side in an instant. "Shut her up. Seriously. Or we're all screwed."

"Come on." Bailey grabs Lauren. "Let's just get her in the car."

Before I turn to follow them, I poke my head inside the barn. It's dead still, a gaping hole in the roof letting in the light of the moon. On the floor, all five candles are out.

CHAPTER TWO

When we're shut inside Bailey's car, Lauren stops screaming and starts to whimper. I take her ice-cold hand in mine. "You didn't get hurt, did you?"

"She's fine," Bailey says, starting the engine and peeling away from Sparrow Hill.

"I wasn't talking to you," I say, irritated enough to raise my voice. "That roof could have squashed you both."

Jade glares at me. "Brilliant idea. Letting her come."

"What was I supposed to do? You shouldn't have decided we should go to that decrepit old barn in the first place."

Lauren's whimpers give way to short, shallow breaths. She's hyperventilating. My stomach turns as Bailey swerves over to the side of the road and throws the car into park.

Bailey twists around as far as her seat will let her. "Hey. Look

at me," she says. She reaches back and gives Lauren's knee a shake. Her voice is gentle. "You have to stop crying. If you go home hysterical, you're going to get us in trouble."

Lauren wipes her face with the sleeve of her jacket. "I know. I'm sorry. I just want to go home."

Bailey sighs, turns forward. Puts the car in drive and pulls away from the shoulder. Lauren hiccups.

"I can't take her home like this," I say. "She's too upset."

Jade reclines her seat into my knees. Props her feet up on the dash. "She's okay. She just needs a minute. Right?" Jade turns to Lauren for affirmation.

My sister nods but won't make eye contact. She has always found my friends ridiculously cool: especially Jade, with her oversized vintage sweaters and armfuls of bangles and impeccably drawn winged eyeliner.

Jade smiles at Lauren. When she turns back around, Lauren lowers her head onto my lap, crying silently. This is just the culmination of her being stressed out—she's still upset about Emma's party, and now she's spooked from the roof collapse. And embarrassed about losing it in front of my friends.

That's what I try to tell myself. But I can't tear my eyes away from Bailey's knuckles, wrapped around her steering wheel, white as the snow on the hill.

I don't bother falling asleep once I'm back in my room, because I have to be up for work at six. Milk & Sugar, Ashley's café, opens at seven on the weekends.

Ashley doesn't look at me funny when she comes to wake me

up. Doesn't say anything about my midnight jaunt. Relief and guilt needle me as I help her chip the ice off the windshield of her SUV and let her prattle on about the storm that's supposed to hit us tomorrow morning.

My nerves are still frazzled from last night, from not sleeping, which leaves me with little patience for the way Ashley and another car at the end of our road sit deadlocked at a stop sign because they can't agree who should go first. Because people around here are polite. Like, the type of polite where if there's one piece of pie left at dessert, the person next to you will give a twenty-minute dissertation on why *you* should have it.

Just last week, Tom Cornwell, an elderly man who always orders one poached egg over toast, slipped on ice outside Milk & Sugar. I've seen people in New York threaten to sue for less, but *Tom* actually apologized to Ashley and refused the free breakfast she tried to force on him.

According to the radio, it's a record low of five degrees today, windchill minus twenty-five. I feel it in the joints of my fingers once we get to the café as I get the coffeepots going, in the ice-cold of the toilet seat when I pee quickly before we open.

The energy is off in the café when the regulars start straggling in. We're not as busy as we usually are on Saturdays, probably because of the weather. The people who do come in grumble over their coffee not being quite right, the heat not coming on fast enough as they wait for their breakfast.

Even old Tom Cornwell is pissy. He must have developed an allergy to gluten in the past few days, because he spends five minutes scolding me for bringing him regular toast. He stops

just short of accusing me of trying to kill him and doesn't drop his change in the tip jar like he always does.

Rob, the cook, screws up whatever orders I manage to get right.

Maybe it's me. I'm exhausted. The energy I do have leaches out of me; by ten a.m. I'm a puddle on the stool in the kitchen while I work on the plate of scrambled eggs Rob made me for breakfast. I can't eat without hearing the crack of the barn roof. Without hearing Lauren's earsplitting scream.

If anyone finds out we were trespassing—that we were there when the roof collapsed—we're going to be in such deep shit.

At a quarter after, Bailey strides through the front door. I should be relieved, based on how we left things last night, but the sight of her makes me stumble and overcharge the man I'm ringing up.

I feel her eyes on me as I void out what's on the register and re-ring the order. I hand the man a number to put on his table so I can bring him his omelet when it's ready. Bailey inches up to the counter as he walks away. Yawns, drags her fingers through the strawberry-blond hair that falls to the middle of her back. Her peacoat is unbuttoned, exposing her work polo. *Friendly Drugs* is embroidered on the pocket.

"Can Rob make me an egg white and spinach omelet?" she asks around another yawn.

I shoot a glance at the clock. "Yeah, but you might be late for work."

"It's fine. I'm only going in so Bridget can leave early again." Bailey stretches her arms behind her. "She can wait."

Bridget Gibson is on our Do Not Like list. It's not because

she's dance team captain and salutatorian and universally feared; it's because of Cliff Grosso.

Cliff Grosso is a year older than us. Future poster child for brain damage in the NFL. He had a full ride to Ohio State, until he rear-ended an off-duty sheriff's deputy last spring after he'd been drinking.

Bailey was in the passenger seat. Now, Bridget Gibson is dating Cliff, and whenever his name comes up in the halls of Broken Falls High, she's quick to point out that Cliff wouldn't have even been in that car if he hadn't been about to hook up with Bailey Hammond. Somehow because of this it's become Bailey's fault that Cliff was drunk and behind the wheel of a car.

I shout for Rob to make Bailey's usual and pour her a to-go cup of coffee, black. When she hears the ding of the bell in the kitchen, confirmation that Rob heard me, Bailey jolts a little.

My fingers find the buttons on the sleeve of my shirt and fiddle with them nervously. "Are we okay?"

Bailey lifts her gaze to mine. Her blush is slightly lopsided, like she was in a rush getting ready. "Why wouldn't we be?"

"I just—Lauren could have gotten us busted, with the screaming—"

Bailey cuts me off. "It's fine. Stop talking about it."

The bell over the front door tinkles. Bailey jumps again and turns to see who's come through the door: a woman pushing a stroller carrying a sleeping newborn, a toddler tugging on her other hand. I lower my voice. "What's up? You're so jumpy."

"It's called caffeine, Kace. I've had like three cups of coffee already."

Bailey steps aside while I help the woman with the kids, who doesn't know what she wants and nearly bursts into tears because of it. I want to tell her that Bailey babysits, but Bailey isn't looking at me.

The harried woman decides on a strong cup of coffee, and the bell dings in the kitchen. Rob passes a take-out container through the kitchen window and grins. "For Bailey Bear."

She wiggles her fingers at him and flashes him a smile. None of us actually knows how old Rob is, but he's got five years on us, easily. He grins at Bailey, adjusting the red bandana we all have to wear to hold back our hair.

"Bailey!" Ashley's voice appears before she does. She emerges from the back room, where her office is, the notebook she uses to make the weekly schedule tucked in the crook of her arm. "I thought I heard a familiar voice."

"Hey, Mrs. M." Bailey stands up straighter and brightens, like a switch has been turned on. She's all apple cheeks and smiles as my stepmother comes over and gives her a hug.

"Come over more, will you?" she says. "I'd love to see you around the house. You girls are always out and about."

You have no idea, I think as Bailey's eyes flick to me. "I'd love that," she says.

Ashley beams a motherly smile, then flounces off to fix the crooked chalkboard in the front window. I wonder if maybe I imagined Bailey being weird. She seems perfectly normal now. Then I remember the schedule she made Jade and me for the weekend and realize there's a party tonight.

"Hey," I say quietly, still holding her food. "Isn't Sully's party tonight?"

Bailey's upper lip twitches and her happy face folds into a frown. "You actually want to go to that?"

Of course I don't; I would rather be in bed or playing Mario Kart with Lauren and Andrew than drinking piss-warm beer in the freezing basement of Kevin Sullivan's McMansion, but I nod, because I know Bailey wants to go.

She and Jade make it a point to avoid high school parties. They always say they're stupid, but really everyone knows that's because Bailey doesn't want to run into Cliff—or Bridget, who is bold enough to hiss *go home, skank* at Bailey's back after a few sips of peach schnapps. Rumor has it tonight is going to be a rager, though; Kevin's older brother is home from college for the weekend and allegedly bringing a bunch of hot Canadian college guys with him. Everyone except the losers and mouth-breathers will be there.

I hand Bailey the food and meet her eyes.

"Okay," she says, almost looking amused. "We'll text you when we're on our way to pick you up."

I steal a glance at my phone the second Ashley starts cashing out the register for the day. Normally at the end of my workday, my screen is bloated with group messages from Bailey and Jade. *When are you getting out of work/what are we doing tonight?*

But there's nothing. No mention of the party Bailey said we would go to.

Silence is never golden with Bailey and Jade. I wonder if I'm being punished. If being ignored is my penance for letting Lauren come last night, for almost getting us caught.

On the ride home, I rest my cheek on the seat belt, pulled taut, as Ashley prattles on about dinner plans.

“I was thinking maybe Chinese, since your father’s working.” There’s a silent *again* at the end of her sentence. My dad works night shifts in a pharmacy at a hospital in the city, forty-five minutes away.

At a red light, Ashley examines her part in the mirror. Moves a piece of bottle-brown hair until she finds a pesky gray strand and yanks at it. She’s five years older than my father and has a serious complex about it.

But when I saw her for the first time, I thought, *Now, she looks like a mom.*

Here’s the truth: my actual mom sucks. She’s always sucked. Even when I was little, like really little, I could tell that she sucked at being a mom. I remember sitting at my best friend’s kitchen table for dinner, because my mother was late picking me up again, mouth watering at the buttery rolls and Tater Tots, and thinking, *This is what a real dinner looks like. This is what a real mom looks like.*

When I think of my mother I think of Happy Meals for dinner, paid for by the change scrounged up in her car, the one that smelled like cigarettes because she let her boyfriends drive it and smoke inside. I think of the surprise on my teachers’ faces when they saw how young my mom was, the hot shame in my cheeks at always being the last kid to get picked up from the after-school program.

It wasn’t all bad—especially when it was just the two of us, and we did things like drive to get Carvel at midnight in our pajamas, or sit on the living room floor and cut out all the

supermodels from her magazines, turning them into paper dolls.

I wish I could say it was my mom who ruined everything, but I was the one who changed. I grew up and couldn't stand the boyfriends anymore—the way they smelled, the way they talked to her, the way they all seemed to use my mom up and leave her in pieces. I got angry, and I took it out on her.

I was thirteen the first time I said *I fucking hate you* and she said she fucking hated me too. The fights always ended with something in the house broken and both of us in tears, with her telling me she loved me and she promised to do better.

The thing is, I love my mom. But I'm starting to think it's possible to love someone and hate them at the same time.

Anyway, how I wound up in Broken Falls with the father I'd never met and the stepfamily I didn't know I had: my mom's latest boyfriend, the one I called Tattooed Douche, was so bad that I decided I would rather live in a friend's basement than my own apartment any longer.

A social worker got involved, phrases like *no possibility of reconciliation* were uttered, and phone calls were made to Russ Markham, the man I only knew by the signature on the checks he sent every year on my birthday.

Ashley welcomed me with a special dinner and a brand-new comforter set from Target; Andrew talked my ear off about my school schedule and promised to introduce me to all his friends—cross-country runners, soccer players, future Ivy League graduates, and girls who wore pearl earrings.

But I chose Bailey and Jade. Or rather, they chose me, drew me into their satellite, which seemed to orbit outside all the

usual high school drama. Who was hooking up with whom, who was lobbying to win best smile. None of that mattered to them. They seemed to have their own private world where the only things that mattered were each other.

I really thought that I could be a part of it, the day Bailey pulled up to the curb where I was waiting for Andrew after school and said, *We're going to my house*. I knew that it was an invitation to something much bigger. Two becoming three.

But three is an uneven number.

When there are three, someone always winds up out in the cold.

When Ashley and I get home from Milk & Sugar, Andrew is in the living room, hunched over his laptop. On the TV, the Netflix homepage is frozen, with the prompt: *ARE YOU STILL WATCHING WHEN PLANES DISAPPEAR?* I stop behind the couch. "That's some light viewing."

Andrew looks up at me. Rakes dark brown hair out of his eyes. That, he got from Ashley. The rest of him is his dead father, who was Korean. I'd be lying if I said that it wasn't reassuring that Andrew shares as much blood with the Markhams as I do.

Andrew looks at the TV as if he'd forgotten what he was watching. "Oh. It's just background noise."

I sit on the arm of the couch and skim the screen of his laptop over his shoulder. He's working on an essay of some sort. "What's that for?" I ask.

"Scholarship stuff." He rubs his face with the sleeve of his

thermal shirt. I imagine the bags under his eyes leaving black streaks, like mascara. “For Notre Dame.”

Andrew applied early action everywhere. He got into Madison, who gave him a full ride, and his dream school, Notre Dame—only they didn’t give him shit. They said Ashley and my dad make too much money, even though their combined salary isn’t anywhere near enough to cover four years at Notre Dame.

I nod to the laptop. “You want me to read?”

He considers it for a beat, then gives me a sheepish smile. “Yeah, if you don’t mind.”

I don’t remember when we started reading everything for each other, but I like looking over Andrew’s essays. I like feeling needed. As I settle into my corner of the couch, I feel Andrew’s gaze skirt over me. I turn to look at him. “What?”

He cracks a knuckle. “You seem on edge or something.”

A slick of sweat comes to my palms. Could he have heard us sneak out? “I didn’t sleep much last night.”

“Neither did Lauren,” Andrew says. “She didn’t even get up this morning.”

Ugh. I’m selfish and disgusting. I’ve been so busy obsessing about my friends being mad at me that I didn’t stop to think about Lauren—how scared she must have been when the roof caved in. In the middle of a séance, no less.

“I’ll read your essay later. I’m gonna go shower,” I say.

“Good. You stink.”

He says it to me all the time. It’s a running joke between us, what smells worse—his socks after a track meet, my clothes after a day standing around a bacon fryer—but as I turn to head down the hallway, I catch him watching me, still.

I'm not going to shower. I'm going to check on Lauren. I can't get her face, frozen with fear, out of my mind.

That look on Lauren's face: it wasn't too different from the way her eyes went wide when I walked through the kitchen the day my father picked me up from the airport and first brought me here. Me, an urchin with punk hair and a busted lip, pale skin. I don't blame her for being terrified. Because when people in Broken Falls heard that I was moving in with the Markhams, they had a lot to say about me.

They said that I was Russell Markham's love child from some affair he had in college and he hadn't even known about me.

That I'd been thrown out of my mom's house in Rochester, New York, for being a druggie.

That I'd gotten my busted lower lip from a stint in juvie.

That Ashley was going to make me work at her café to earn my keep.

I know that people said all of this because Bailey told me, much later. Murmured in my ear in her *isn't-that-so-funny* voice after we'd passed a bottle of Fireball between us at one of Tyrell Long's bonfires.

None of the shit people were saying about me was true, but it still hurt the way the ones I actually shared blood with—Lauren, and my father—tiptoed around me like I was a ghost. A stranger with their DNA. Lauren took one look at me and ran out of the room.

I know she loves me now, but sometimes I think Lauren was the only one who saw me for what I really am: a stranger

wherever I go. Someone with a look in their eyes you just can't trust.

I was supposed to prove her wrong. Supposed to keep her safe.

I tamp down the guilt and climb the stairs. I still feel like an intruder going up them. My bedroom is on the first floor—converted from Ashley's office, as if I didn't feel guilty enough about moving in—and there's a bathroom across the hall from my room. I don't come up here unless Lauren invites me to watch a video on her laptop.

The door to her room is shut. There's a whiteboard mounted on the outside. Scrawled across the top, in Lauren's handwriting, it says: *TODAY'S SEA CREATURE IS THE CLOWN FROGFISH*. Beneath it is a smudged blob of a thing, drawn in yellow and red.

The date on the whiteboard tugs at me. Lauren hasn't done a new drawing in four months. She's wanted to be a marine biologist since she was a little kid; her love for bizarre sea creatures is exactly the sort of thing Keelie March would sneer at. It's always made me sad, how showing enthusiasm for anything in eighth grade is supremely uncool. Like once you go through puberty you're expected to be dead inside and not care about anything.

I raise my fist and knock. "Laur? Are you okay?"

Quiet. I knock again, harder, expecting to hear her whine about how tired she is and tell me to go away. I press an ear to her door. Nothing.

I open the door slowly and slip into her room; the lights are off, and Lauren is a lump on the bed. I step over piles of clothes,

my bare foot snagging on something hard. My ankle goes sideways. I grunt and kick aside one of Lauren's pointe shoes.

I give Lauren's shoulder a shake. My eyes adjust to the dark; her face is half covered by her comforter and I move it aside. Her mouth is open slack, and she's limp under my shaking.

My heartbeat stalls out. "Hey. Wake up."

I put a hand to her chest—wait for the rise and fall. When it doesn't come, I grab both her shoulders. I yell her name, my voice drowned out by my pulse pounding in my ears.

Footsteps and shouting from downstairs: Ashley, calling for me. My stomach goes into free fall at the same moment Lauren's eyelids snap open. Her pupils fix on me, and she starts to scream.

"Get off!" The sound is guttural, as if she's possessed. "Get her OFF ME!"

The bedroom door swings into the wall; Ashley bursts into the room. "What happened? What's going on?"

I step backward, stumbling over the pointe shoe again. "I don't know—"

Lauren scrambles backward on her bed, rattling the headboard. Her eyes still have that frantic look in them. When Ashley reaches for her, she starts sobbing. "Don't hurt me!"

"Hey, hey." Ashley wraps her arms around Lauren. "You're dreaming. Shh. It's okay. You're okay."

Lauren blinks. Her expression settles into surprise; she looks from Ashley, to me, to Andrew, now standing in her doorway. Her voice sounds small and far away, like it's trapped inside a bell. "What happened?"

I swallow to clear my throat. “I think I scared you. When I tried to wake you up.”

Ashley rubs circles into Lauren’s back. “You can’t sleep all day, honey. No wonder you’re up at night.”

A light touch on my shoulder: Andrew. *Let’s go.*

Before I cross the threshold into the hall, I turn and look at Lauren, still burrowed into Ashley’s shoulder. Her eyes lock on me, her pupils enormous, as if she sees something that terrifies her.

CHAPTER THREE

Lauren won't come down to eat once the takeout arrives—she insists she's not hungry—and Andrew takes his food into his room so he can finish his scholarship essay.

I'm not too hungry either, but I don't like to waste food. I plow through my pile of lo mein and tell Ashley I'm going to do homework.

"It's Saturday," she says, as if she's embarrassed her children are such dorks.

"It won't take long," I say. "We can watch a movie when I'm done."

I shove my leftovers in the fridge and duck into my room, where my cell phone is charging on my nightstand. My screen is still empty.

I sit cross-legged on my bed and inhale. It's still early; Bailey

and Jade won't be leaving for the party until ten, at least. I suppress the itch in my fingers urging me to text Bailey and tell her about what happened with Lauren.

Get her off me.

Bailey is fascinated with Josephine Leeds and the barn. I close my eyes and think about all the stories Bailey told me about the massacre. How there are people in town who are convinced Josephine Leeds escaped alive and lived out her days in the woods, a reclusive madwoman because of her grief.

According to Bailey, some people even claim that Josephine killed her children, staged her husband's suicide, and set the fire herself before escaping. But the Leedses' closest neighbor—a man who lived three miles from Sparrow Hill—came forward and said a barefoot woman in a white nightgown banged on his door the night of the fire. She was hysterical and covered in blood; the man was so frightened of her that he wouldn't let her inside the house. The neighbor called the constable twice but couldn't reach him; by the time he returned to his porch, she was gone.

These are all stories Lauren has heard, no doubt—she grew up here, after all.

When I close my eyes, I see Bailey holding the pendulum. I hear the roof caving in. I imagine the events from my little sister's perspective and a shiver runs down my spine.

As I finally drift off, it's to the sound of the wind howling, and I can't tell if it's coming from outside or from inside my head.

. . .

Sunlight streams through my window, prying my eyelids open. It's morning.

I fucking fell asleep. I missed Kevin Sullivan's party—I must have slept through Bailey texting me that they were on their way to pick me up.

They're going to kill me.

Outside, a powdery snow is falling. I check my phone—it's a reflex by now. I never had anyone to answer to, before I met Bailey and Jade.

My stomach turns inside out. My screen is empty.

But the party.

Part of my brain shouts, *Maybe they didn't go.* I click open Instagram and scroll through pictures of the party in my feed. I don't follow a ton of people from Broken Falls, which only makes it more obvious that everyone who isn't me was at Sully's party last night.

I stop at JadeInTheShade. Jade and Bailey are standing cheek to cheek over the beer pong table. Jade's the one snapping the picture; Bailey's eyes are off on something in the distance. Full-mouth smiles. Thirteen likes.

I've always been able to sense trouble coming on—almost like a headache. There's a pulsing in the vein above my brow bone. They ditched me.

The house is silent, making the hollowness in my gut grow as I get up. Sunday is my day off.

I pad into the kitchen. There's a note on the island from Ashley.

Dearest children: Please do NOT go out today. This storm is supposed to be a nasty one. Love you!

I head upstairs, check to make sure Lauren's okay, and find her sleeping peacefully. No vivid nightmares of the Red Woman are making her scream this morning.

Guilt needles me. I decide I'll bribe her out of bed with pancakes.

I didn't know how to cook when I first moved here. Didn't understand that food was its own form of affection, that a casserole or a pie was meant to have the same effect as a hug.

I drag Ashley's cherry-red stand mixer out from the cabinet below the kitchen island and get to work.

While the cakes are bubbling in the pan—I added two drops of red food coloring to the batter, since Valentine's Day is in two weeks—footsteps creak above the kitchen. The upstairs toilet flushes. Either Lauren or my dad is awake.

My heart taps out a steady rhythm against my ribs. This is the first time I've had Lauren alone since yesterday, when I asked her what had happened in the barn and she got upset with me. Now her eyes flick up to me as she shuffles into the kitchen, but she doesn't say anything.

"Hey, Monkey."

Lauren plops herself onto the stool closest to the living room—always the same stool, I learned quickly my first week here—and pulls the fleece sleeves of her pajamas up over her hands. "What are those?"

"Pancakes." I flip one of the hearts, realizing with disappointment that it looks more like a lumpy ass. "How many do you want?"

"None." Lauren props her chin on her hands. Her gaze darts around the kitchen, avoiding me, and rests on the window over

the sink. Outside, Andrew's dark figure is still hunched over the snow shovel.

I root around in the overhead cabinet for a plate, the edges of my pancakes browning. *What really happened in the barn, Lauren? Did you and Bailey see something?* Such simple questions.

The words are on the tip of my tongue as I set the plate on the kitchen island.

"You made them pink," Lauren says, just noticing.

I pause, one hand on the back of a stool. "Mm-hm."

Lauren squirms in her seat. Tugs at her sleeves. "Do you think we could make pink puppy chow?"

"Yeah. We could tint the cake mix, I think." I allow myself a small smile.

I cut the stack of pancakes in half and pass half on a plate to Lauren. She shakes her head. "I'm not really hungry."

I pick at the pancakes as I remind Lauren where all the puppy chow ingredients are. I set my plate aside; I'm not really hungry anymore, either. Lauren is quiet as we measure out the confectioner's sugar and cake mix, but there are shades of her usual self peeking through; when Andrew comes downstairs, hair stuck flat to his head, and collapses onto an empty stool at the island, she swats him for snatching a handful of our M&Ms.

"You're so *rude*," she says, and I feel myself thaw a bit. Lauren is okay. We're okay. It doesn't matter if my friends hate me; I have everything I need right here in this kitchen.

And still, a dark voice comes into the back of my head and tells me to enjoy it while it lasts.

. . .

An inch of snow and a couple games of Mario Kart later, my phone rings. It's Jade. My heart goes into my throat, because Jade never calls me. There's never anything so important she needs to tell me that Bailey can't get to me first.

"You guys play." I get up from the couch and leave Lauren and Andrew to battle out who gets to be Toad this round. I hit *accept call*, and Jade's raspy voice fills the earpiece.

"Is Bay with you?" she asks.

"No. Why would she be here?"

"Kace," she says. "Something's wrong."

Junior Year
March

If you're reading this, I'm dead.

Just kidding. Although if someone were to find a notebook with two golden retriever puppies on the cover, pages of my middle school anxieties inside—*What if I get my period while we're running the mile in gym and it leaks down my leg! What if auditions for The Music Man are open and I have to sing in front of everyone!*—I might just kill myself.

Anyway, I dug out this notebook because I'm going through *Some Shit*, and I guess writing about it is a healthy outlet or whatever. I'm not dumb enough to do it on a blog or something—poor Alexa Ryan blogged about how she made herself throw up every day after dance team practice, only she forgot to make it private and the other girls found it. Someone forwarded it to Alexa's parents and they sent her to a psychiatric hospital in Madison and for a while it was literally all anyone talked about.

Now literally everyone in Broken Falls is talking about me. Jade says I'm being dramatic, but the car accident and Cliff's DWI are the very definition of drama, and if there's one thing that keeps Broken Falls going, it's drama. (And Packers Sundays.) I mean really, what else do we have?

I never thought that I would be the source of BFD (Broken

Falls Drama, which also means “Big Fucking Deal,” which Jade cleverly realized). But put yourself in my shoes: the summer before junior year you make a vow to yourself to get noticed. You are tired of being Hammy Bailey Hammond, B+ student and all-around nice girl. The type of girl people call a “classic beauty,” which everyone knows is code for “you would have been considered hot fifty years ago, maybe.” So you have Jade cut four inches off the hair you’ve been growing since the third grade and spend every summer morning in front of your brother’s Tae Bo tapes until you magically have a butt.

And yet still, on the first day of junior year, no heads turn as you walk into homeroom. You feel stupid for expecting them to. And then right before lunch, you plunk down in your assigned seat during third-period local history, and then none other than Cliff Grosso sits down next to you in a cloud of Axe. He checks you out like he sees you for the first time, even though you’ve gone to the same school for twelve years. He looks at you with those ice-blue eyes and says, *Hey, ‘sup?* and you flush from your stomach to your toes, because apparently you are that pathetic. You spend half the year making small talk before the bell, pretending you don’t give a shit how he smirks at you whenever Mr. Cannobbio embarrasses himself using the term *historygasm*. With feigned disgust you watch him cycle through girls, because a nice girl like Bailey Hammond would never even *think* about the feel of Cliff Grosso’s used-up lips on hers.

Maybe I was tired of being a nice girl. Maybe that’s why when I found myself alone with him at Tyrell’s party last weekend, I laughed when he made a joke about Mr. Cannobbio and didn’t turn away when he leaned in. I decided right

then and there that I was okay with losing it to Cliff Grosso, even though everyone loses it to Cliff Grosso. I made out with him even though he tasted like Natty Ice and salsa. When he said he knew somewhere private in Tyrell's house I said no, because I would not lose my virginity while half my graduating class played beer pong outside the door. So I said, *Is anyone home at your house?* even though everyone knows that Cliff's dad doesn't give a shit how many girls he has over.

It would be like ripping off a Band-Aid, this virginity business. That's truly what I thought would happen. I didn't realize how many beers he'd actually had until he failed to slow down at a yellow light, and *bam*, rear-ended some chick who just happened to be a Broken Falls deputy.

Anyway. Now Cliff has a DWI and people are saying that he might lose his scholarship to Ohio State. And guess who everyone blames. I thought maybe it wouldn't be so bad when I got to homeroom and Meghan Constanzo rushed up to me and asked if I was okay, was I hurt? Gosh, I was so lucky the accident wasn't serious. Meghan Constanzo and I have exchanged about a total of ten words since I've known her. I smiled very politely and watched her sit back down at the table with one of her tennis friends, a senior, who glanced back at me before turning to Meg and mouthing, *Her?*

Yes, *her*. Surprise! The painfully average girl whose first kiss was with a nose-picking trumpet player was *the girl* in Cliff Grosso's car. And everyone knows what happens in Cliff Grosso's car. When I was kissing Cliff I really thought that it would transform me, or at least how people saw me. Because it's sexy when good girls do bad things. People still talk about how

epic it was when Meghan Constanzo threw up in Sully's pool after homecoming last year. Because that's the type of stuff you can get away with when you're Meg Constanzo and literally everyone adores you. I overestimated what I could get away with, I guess.

Because I'm nothing. There are girls like Meghan, who are adored, and there are girls like Bridget Gibson, who are feared, and then there are girls like me and Jade, who are nothing. People literally have no opinion on us. We're not losers, we're not *nonexistent*—people just aren't aware of us.

I want to go back to being nothing.

Anyway, Meg and her friend sounded sympathetic enough that I thought the rest of today might be okay. Then I was waiting in line at the cafeteria and Axel Schulz, who still has his scholarship to UW, collided with me. His sloppy joe slid off his tray and onto my boots, and it hit me like a punch to the stomach. *He did that on purpose.*

Words were on the tip of my tongue—*Fuck you, asshole*—but he beat me to it. “Fuck you, Hammond.”

I paid for my sandwich and left my tray at the table with Jade. I told her I would be right back, nothing happened, I was fine—and marched over to the lunch monitor and asked for the bathroom pass. At the table by the door, Axel looked at me and laughed with his friends. “Too bad Cliff couldn't find out if the carpet matches the drapes.” I caught someone else saying *hammered and nailed*, which is the term the football guys use for what is essentially date raping.

When I got to the bathroom I wet a paper towel and dabbed at the oily orange spot Axel's lunch had left on my Ugg. And

I thought, *God, please let there be someone in this school who doesn't think I'm a life-ruining whore.*

And then I went to local history—I thought about skipping it, because I still had to sit next to Cliff—and it turned out he hadn't even shown up for school at all. The bell rang, and then out of nowhere this girl walks in. Messy white braid with the ends dyed purple, wearing Vans with strange shit scribbled on the sides, and just sat in Cliff's empty seat. She didn't even ask where she should sit or say, *Hey, I'm new* or anything. I thought, *Who the hell even is this girl?*

And then something clicked—a snippet I'd caught earlier in the week, someone saying that Andrew Kang's stepsister was coming from New York to stay with his family. I hadn't even known that Andrew had a stepsister, and I thought I knew everything about Andrew Kang. Everyone knows everything about everyone around here. People had been talking about the stepsister for the past week once they heard she was coming. All anyone cared about was whether she was hot, because God forbid someone be interesting first.

Anyway, I watched her in the seat next to me—the one Cliff usually occupied—and studied her scrawling inside the cover of a notebook. I couldn't catch what she was writing, but when she saw me watching, she stopped and sat staring straight ahead.

And I thought, *Interesting.*

I watched as Mr. C stopped by the Weird Girl's desk and murmured to her quietly. She nodded, and Mr. C smiled at her and turned to tell us to shut up, he had to explain our quarter project.

Immediately Bridget Gibson piped up from the back of the

room and asked if we could work with partners. When Mr. C said no, she started whining: “You *said* we’d get to do at least one partner project.” Then the class started rumbling in agreement, and Mr. C flushed like he feared mutiny and told us to knock it off and open our textbooks. But Bridget was relentless. She actually pouted. “But you *promised* we could do something with partners.” Because that’s how Bridget is: she thinks everyone owes her something, even some poor son of a bitch who’s stuck making thirty grand a year teaching a bunch of assholes.

And Mr. C caved just like that. “Fine. But this isn’t an in-class project. You have five minutes at the end of the period to find your partner, and then everything is done on your own time.”

Bridget smiled victoriously and linked pinkies with Alicia Rivera in the middle of the aisle. A crop of sweat slicked up on the back of my neck. *Partners*. Not a good day to find a partner. I figured I’d tell Mr. C I wanted to work alone, and then I remembered Andrew Kang’s stepsister sitting next to me.

When Mr. C wrapped up the lesson and told us to find our partners, I lingered in my seat for a bit, aware of *her* amid the chaos of scraping chairs and bodies. She was looking out the window, flipping her bottom lip with her thumb.

I tapped on her desk with my pen to get her attention. “Wanna work together?”

She twirled her pen between her fingers, looking too depressed to bother sizing me up. “Yeah. Okay.”

There were tears in her eyes. I knew then that this girl was going through some shit too.

“I’m Bailey. Are you okay?”

“Kacey,” she said. “And no. Not really.”

I felt Bridget’s eyes boring into my back, and I thought about how Kacey had saved me from the humiliation of working alone. *I’m not okay either*, I wanted to say.

Maybe we were meant to find each other today. Maybe we’re the Not Okay Girls, and we’re supposed to save each other.